Shakin’ Baker

Still singin’ it, still wingin’ it, when he’s 64

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Fred Baker’s long and varied résumé can be construed as Renaissance man -- or salesman, like Willy Loman, the central character for whom dreams never come true in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Not that he cares how you view it: At 64, jazz musician/actor/filmmaker Baker is determined not to let anyone or anything stand in the way of his continual process of self-reinvention -- not even HIV.

It started with music. “Singing has been my avocation all my life,” Baker says. “I was a singer from the age of five, and later trained as a dance drummer.” Baker’s still at it, recently taking the stage at New York City’s Gershwin Hotel, where he is doing the hotel’s namesake justice with a Saturday night jazz series.

Another love is theater. For almost 50 years, Baker has shared the spotlight with Angela Lansbury, Faye Dunaway, Rod Steiger and other famous faces. More recently, he portrayed the contemptuous, AIDS-afflicted Roy Cohn in Arkansas Repertory Theater’s production of *Angels in America*.

But *Angels* is a two-part play, and when it came time to present the second part, Baker was replaced. The producers said that Baker had consistent trouble memorizing lines, but Baker believes that concern about his physical strength prompted the recasting.

Baker’s latest incarnation is that of filmmaker specializing in cinéma vérité. Though his documentary about surviving HIV (and other hurdles) as exuberantly as possible has been stymied by lack of funds, his enthusiasm for the project is undiminished. “It’s my cross-country odyssey,” he says, describing the myriad people he captured on camera en route from Los Angeles to New York City. “This was during the 1993 floods,” Baker says, “and people had lost everything. I saw that other people had bigger problems than I did.”

Baker is determined to remain high-spirited and productive -- with the help of friends and the love of a family that includes three children and three grandchildren. “I’m as strong as an ox,” he says proudly. “I went on every imaginable medication, including the [protease] inhibitors, which nearly killed me. They were too toxic and debilitating for a man my age. I am now medication-free and my viral load is zero.” Baker attributes his good health to a regimen of good eating and good living. That’s good living, not clean living: “I still have my vices -- smoking, caffeine and

marijuana.”

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