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Featuring
Drumset

Feature: Drum Set

An Interview with Danny Seraphine

by Dave Black

Over the last two decades, Chicago's drummer, Danny Seraphine, has certainly earned a unique position in the history of modern rock drumming. With a 20 year history, Chicago's career exceeds that of most other rock bands. In its 20 year history, the group has sold between 60 to 80 million records. All 18 albums have gone gold, 16 have gone platinum and many multi-platinum. There have been 29 top 40 hits of which four have gone gold. The group is currently working on their 19th album, and I recently had a chance to talk with Danny about his impressive career.

Dave Black: Did you come from a musical family?

Danny Seraphine: No, not really. I had an uncle who played drums, so I used to watch him play at family gatherings. That inspired me to start playing. A couple of years after that, the movie "The Gene Krupa Story" came out and that really inspired me.

DB: At what age did you start playing drums?

DS: I was nine years old.

DB: Who were some of the drummers that influenced you the most while growing up?

DS: When I was a very young drummer, Sandy Nelson, Cozy Cole and Gene Krupa were my influences. I idolized Gene awhile and copied all his licks. Buddy Rich was an incredible inspiration to me and always will be. I tried to emulate him for a long time. Although I don't think that I have the hands he had, conceptually I felt that my early playing was the same as his, except in a rock and roll idiom.

As far as rock and roll drummers, I was influenced by a lot of funk drummers in the Chicago area, people that you would have never heard of. The drummer on the James Brown "Live at the Apollo" album

was an influence to me, as well as the drummer for the "Ventures."

DB: With whom did you first study?

DS: The first teacher I ever had, and I don't remember his name, was a very good teacher. I was really young and studied with him for two or three years. I then moved on to a teacher who wasn't very good and I wasn't going very far, so I went on my own for about five years. At that time I was about sixteen years old and was just playing funk, r&b and rock and roll. I wasn't playing much jazz because there wasn't a lot of opportunity.

A turning point in my career happened when a friend of mine, Walt Parazaider, who was attending DePaul University in Chicago, told me about a percussion teacher on the faculty who would be willing to take me on as a private student. I had quit high school by then and became kind of a street guy.

Walt introduced me to the instructor, whose name was Bob Tillis. He was phenomenal. He came to a club to hear me and wrote down several things that I had been playing and said, "Can you believe that you played this?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, why don't we start?" So, I became his project - his pet project. I flourished under his guidance for several years. He taught me how to incorporate jazz into my playing.

When I moved out to California with CHICAGO in the summer of 1968, I started studying with Chuck Flores. He saw where I was coming from and gave me things he felt would help take me in the direction I wanted to go. At about this time, I started listening to drummers such as Elvin Jones, Tony Williams and Jo Jones. When the band played New York, I would take a lesson on brushes with Jo Jones but never really got a chance to apply what I learned to



Danny Seraphine

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my playing. Sometime later, however, I got to do some brush playing on the seventh album.

DB: *What was your first professional break as a drummer?*

DS: My first professional break came when I was about fifteen and a half. I got a call to audition for a band out of Chicago named "*Jimmy Ford and The Executives*." At that time, I hadn't had the opportunity to play with a lot of serious musicians; I was serious about music, but everybody else was in it more for the fun. In fact, I had considered giving up because I felt I wasn't going anywhere and my playing was becoming stagnate.

It was fortunate that I tried out for the band. Walt Parazaider played saxophone, Terry Kath (who later played guitar with *Chicago*) played bass and Jimmy Ford was the trumpet player. It was a horn band, but in those days of early rock and roll, it was a great band. We played a lot of different tunes such as "*Dancin' in the Streets*" by Martha and the Vandellas and some James Brown tunes. That band was the backup band for Dick Clark's "*Caravan of the Stars*," which was a great experience.

DB: *What did you get while growing up that you feel young players are not getting today?*

DS: I think that today's players are exposed to a lot more sophisticated music and players, but I don't think they have the opportunity to test it the way I did. I think the one thing that's lacking is the club scene, due in large part to the amount of electronics, sequencers and drum machines on the market. It actually started when discos became popular. They really slowed down the club scene and live bands.

DB: *With the popularity of CD's, Cable TV and VCR's, more and more people*

prefer to stay home. It seems that a lot of people can't afford to go out to a club and pay a \$10 cover charge and a two drink minimum. Do you think that's a factor?

DS: Well, everybody predicted that there would be more entertainment available in the home but I think that drum machines have hurt drummers the most. Today you'll find more bands playing in clubs without a drummer than ever before. That really bothers me.

DB: *How do you compare today's players to those with whom you matured?*

DS: There's an amazing amount of great players around. I heard a kid that you might have heard of by the name of Jakob Armen. He's absolutely amazing! It's scary. He's seven years old and can already do the things that Buddy Rich, Louie Bellson and Steve Gadd can do. Jason, our bass player, brought him into one of *Chicago's* recording sessions and he sat in on my drums. I was amazed.

DB: *Yes, I heard him play just recently. I was also amazed. The things that he's doing are very Gadd oriented. He's got to be a child prodigy in the true sense of the word.*

DS: I think you're right. I've never heard anybody that talented at that age. He's playing with adult concepts.

DB: *How did the group Chicago get started?*

DS: As I mentioned earlier, I met Walt and Terry through a band called "*The Executives*." That band stayed together for about a year and a half and then the three of us were fired because they had other players they felt were better and more suited for the job. Their goal was to become a Las Vegas show band. So, we free-lanced around town with a local rock and roll band and made

some good money for awhile just playing cover tunes. But eventually that band started to disintegrate.

At that time, Terry wanted to move out to the west coast, play guitar and join the flower-power movement. Walt had his bachelor's degree as a clarinetist and was being groomed for a position with the *Chicago Symphony*. I was able to talk Walt into putting that on hold in order to put together a band consisting of the finest players: a three piece horn band of real serious musicians. It didn't take much to get Terry to agree to stay with the band either.

Once I had convinced those two guys to put a band together, we then set out to find the rest of the band. Robert Lamm, a vocalist and keyboardist who I had heard about, was from the south side of Chicago. Because we weren't going to have a bass player at first, we were looking for a great singer who could play organ and bass pedals. So, through the grapevine I heard about a kid from the south side named Bobby Charles. I called him up and he agreed to come audition. Walter then brought in two other horn players from DePaul University which completed the nucleus of the band - Lee Loughnane on trumpet and James Pankow on trombone. We had our first rehearsal and you could tell that it was magic. It was such a huge sound.

DB: *Was the band doing originals or cover tunes at the time?*

DS: At that point it was all cover tunes, but we evolved into original songs pretty quick. In fact, we played clubs for about a year, then started doing our own arrangements. Because of this, club owners were becoming disenchanted and began firing us.

DB: *Because you weren't doing tunes that were familiar?*

DS: Yes.

DB: What was Chicago's first hit?

DS: Believe it or not, our first hit was from our second album. It was called "Make Me Smile," followed by "25 or 6 to 4." After those two songs became hits, we released two or three singles from our first album, and all of a sudden those became hits too.

DB: What were the songs that were finally released from the first album?

DS: "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?," "Question 67 and 68" and "I'm A Man."

DB: Do you have a favorite Chicago album or single?

DS: I don't have just one favorite, but I have a few. I think the first album was a landmark album both musically and technically. It was done in an eight track recording studio. I also love the seventh album. I think the sixteenth album was very sweet tasting because everybody at that time thought we were finished. The seventeenth album, however, was the biggest record we've ever had. So, I would have to say that those few, musically, are my favorites but I really like all of our albums because we're always trying to outdo the last one.

DB: Do you find that difficult to do?

DS: Yes, but that's the challenge of it.

DB: Do you have any funny stories related to the group?

DS: Yeah, I have a funny story. It was one of my most embarrassing moments, so I may as well tell it. We (Chicago) were doing a TV special which was a tribute to Duke Ellington, and were probably the only white guys in the cast. There were all these great artists who were my idols walking around like Ray

Charles, Count Basie, Louie Bellson, Clark Terry and Quincy Jones, who produced the special. We were so honored to be there and to be included in the cast. Anyway, I went over and sat down by Count Basie and started talking to him. I was a pretty young kid at the time and was very nervous. I said to him, "Gee, I love your tune 'Satin Doll'. We used to play it and it's one of my favorite songs." He looked at me and said, "That's the Duke's song." I kind of said "Okay", slid down in my seat, got up and walked away.

DB: Was he nice about the whole thing?

DS: He was very cool. I was just so nervous that it didn't even dawn on me that Duke Ellington had written it.

DB: What medium do you enjoy playing for the most? Is it TV, records or live performing?

DS: Well, live performing would probably win out, but I love to make records too. Television is not a very creative medium. But, when I play on TV, I always get myself up and try.

DB: What's the hardest musical situation that you've ever been in?

DS: I think one of the hardest things that I ever had to do was on our first album Terry Kath had written a song called "Introduction" which had a section in it that was in 19/8 time. To play in the time signature, do fills and make it flow was a real challenge. Musically it was probably one of the hardest things I've ever done. Once I mastered that, I felt that everything else was easy.

DB: Do you think that just being a good player is a guarantee for making it?

DS: No. It never has been. The only guarantee that comes from being a good player is that you are going to

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be able to express yourself. The rest is hard work and luck.

DB: *Do you think that young people growing up in the bigger cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Dallas and Chicago have a better chance of making it than those players growing up in the smaller cities and towns?*

DS: Not necessarily. I think at one time that might have been true, but the world is becoming very small. Today, it is very easy for kids to be able to put a good demo studio and demo together, enabling them to get well produced tunes into the hands of the right people.

DB: *Does being at the right place at the right time, and who you know play a more important role in that person's chances for success than just the talent that he or she might have?*

DS: Yes and no. I think a lot of very talented people have been overlooked because they weren't at the right place at the right time, or because they didn't know the right people. On the other side, there are also people who are less talented and have gotten breaks, but didn't last very long. I think you have to be very talented in order to last in this business.

DB: *Do you think parents should encourage their musically inclined children to go into the music business considering how unstable financially many people consider it?*

DS: I think if the kid is talented and learning music, what else is there to do? If a kid wants to pursue music, that's his decision. And if he's not interested, then that's his decision also and parents should try to support that as well. I think there's a cer-

tain amount of insecurity that's inherent in any kind of artistic endeavor, whether it be a painter or a musician. I believe that you owe it to yourself to be happy. That's the main thing.

DB: *You have a daughter who is currently a percussion major at Cal. State University, Northridge. How do you feel about her going into music, and percussion in general?*

DS: Well, it's something that she wanted all along—not something I pushed her into. She told me that she wanted to play drums and mallets. I asked Remo Belli where he thought a good school would be for her to go, and he recommended California State University, Northridge with Joel Leach. I'm very happy about her decision and try to help her any way I can.

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DB: *How do you feel about electronics and the electronic age? And did you feel threatened when drum machines came out?*

DS: Well, I own a lot of electronic equipment and I'm very much into electronics with the group. At first, I'll admit that I resisted because the drum machine was an intimidating thing to me and many others when it first appeared. At first, I didn't want to know anything about it. Then, some keyboard players did some drum programming for a couple of our albums and that really bothered me. I decided I had to get involved.

So, I decided that I would go out and learn the machine better than anyone else. I devoted a year of my life to just learning midi, the drum machine and programming. Now I feel the machines are great as an enhancer and as a writing tool.

Still, there are some down sides that continue to bother me. I think bass players and drummers have been hurt most by electronics. And perhaps the bass player more than the drummer because the drummer has now been put into the midi chain. We drummers have the ability to play and trigger sounds, giving us the ability to program an enormous amount of things. But for the bass player, midi bass still hasn't come around. So, many of the bass parts that are played on a Moog Bass Machine just don't feel right to me. I miss the feel of the bass player hitting the strings.

DB: *Do you think that drum machines have had their heyday and will start phasing out?*

DS: No, they won't phase out. They're not going to go away. Drummers have to learn how to program them and I think more and more drummers are doing that. As a result, we're starting to hear more realistic programming. What many

people don't realize is that programming a drum part and doing it right takes a long time. You can't just program a 2-bar rhythm and set it off for an entire tune.

DB: *How much in the way electronic drums and drum machines have you used on the last four CHICAGO albums?*

DS: In the upcoming 19th album I only programmed one thing; everything else is live. On **Chicago 18**, I programmed everything except for one ballad on which I overdubbed drums. On **Chicago 17** there was perhaps 50/50 or 60/40 programming, and on **Chicago 16** there was none.

There are certain songs that lend themselves to being drum machine oriented, so you program those. people don't realize that it takes hours and sometimes days to pro-

gram one song. I think that the machines can be very useful and can really enhance what you are doing, but when they take over, the human touch and feel has been lost. A lot of these dance tracks that you hear just don't breathe. There's so much hi-hat, percussion and sixteenth notes.

DB: *Have you ever done studio work outside of Chicago, or have played drums on somebody else's album?*

DS: Yes, but not as much as I would like. I played on the **Maynard Ferguson** album which included the *Rocky II Theme*. I replaced the original drums because the drum sound was awful. It's a funny story. We were doing our 13th album with Phil Ramone and Maynard was recording in the studio next door and said, "Hey, could you come over and overdub some fills and crashes?" I said, "Sure, no problem." The tune was

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cut with a big orchestra and the time was all over the place. The strings were pulling one way, the bass the other and I was trying to play along. We got about halfway through the song and I broke down and stopped it. I said, "Maynard, maybe you better not erase it." He said, "Well, I already have." At that point I had to really zero in and go with the bass player on one part of the song, the horns on another, etc. It was a real challenge.

DB: *Did you get album credit for doing that?*

DS: Yes, I got an album credit. I want to add that the drummer was excellent, but whoever did the original engineering made the drums sound like paper boxes.

DB: *Who are some of your favorite drummers?*

DS: I think Greg Bissonette is a great drummer. I basically like the same drummers everybody else likes—Steve Gadd, Danny Gottlieb, etc. I think that John Robinson is a great drummer. I wouldn't say that any particular drummer influences me more than the other.

DB: *Do you feel that the forthcoming album is going to be as good or better than the previous albums?*

DS: Yes, I always think that about a new album. What I like about this one is that everyone is playing—it's a lot more band oriented.

DB: *When will Chicago 19 be released?*

DS: Probably some time in mid-May, 1988.

DB: *Is there a musical project that you've always wanted to do, but haven't?*

DS: There is, but it's kind of my secret. I can't talk about it yet because it's something I want to bring to fruition in the next few years.

DB: *Is it music related?*

DS: Yes, totally.

DB: *Is it a solo venture?*

DS: Yes, it will be solo. I don't want to leave the band, but when it takes one of its sabbaticals, I'm going to finish that project.

DB: *At this point in your career have you thought about slowing down?*

DS: No. In fact, I'm working harder now than I ever have before now.

DB: *If you had it all to do over again, would you change anything?*

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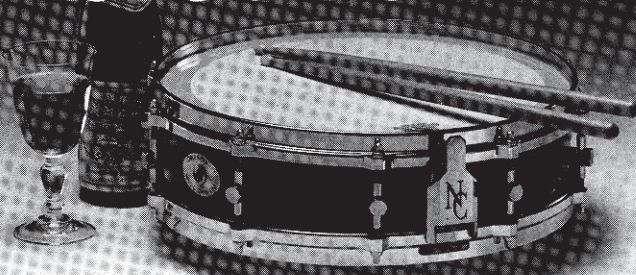
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DS: Yes and no. Bob Tillis at one point wanted me to play mallets. That intimidated me because I didn't feel that I could be the drummer I wanted to be, and play mallets too. In retrospect, I think that may have been a cop-out on my part.

I also wish that I had learned some piano so I could write more easily. That's something that I may do in the future because I have a lot of great ideas.

DB: *Have you ever wanted to branch out and play in other musical idioms?*

DS: Oh, I'd love to.

DB: *What about backing up a singer like Tony Bennett or Barbara Streisand?*

DS: That would be a lot of fun and a great experience. In fact, we just did a benefit where we backed up Belinda Carlisle and Michael McDonald. That was a fun show and I had a ball.

DB: *Outside of music, what do you enjoy doing?*

DS: I like spending as much time with my wife and kids as possible because when I'm gone, that's the downside of what we do. I also like to stay in shape by playing tennis and working out.

DB: *Where do you see the music business heading within the next ten years?*

DS: That's a tough question. As far

as technology is concerned, it's going to become much friendlier. It will also become more cost effective so that a lot more people will be able to afford it at one level of another. I also feel that bands are going to become more popular in live music. I think that it has hit a low and I feel it's going to start coming back. I hope this will happen so that all the good young players coming up will have a place to express themselves.

DB: *Thank you, Danny Seraphine, for sharing your thoughts with our readers.*

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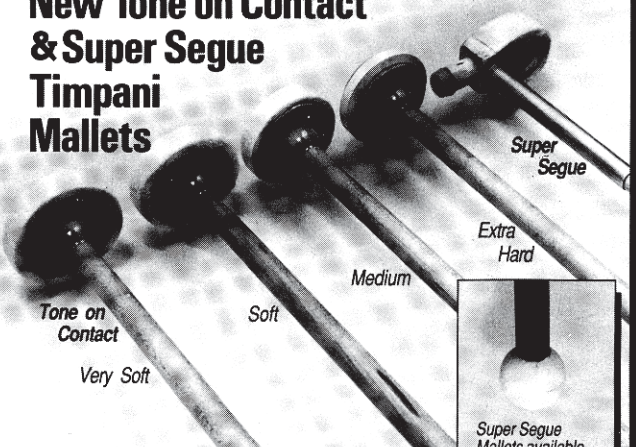
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