

Danny Gans voice-hops over
to his own theater at the Mirage

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By Bobbie Katz

If you're still wondering if dreams can come true, just ask Danny Gans.

The singer/impressionist – who can voice-hop through some 100 personas in a single evening – has been drawing crowds and acclaim at Las Vegas resorts for the past four years.

For an entertainer, it doesn't get much better.

But for Gans, it does. On April 4, he opens a 10-year run at his new self-titled theater at the Mirage resort. This month, he saw the release of his first CD, sung in his own voice. And this summer he starts taping a sitcom based on his life for TV uber-producer Aaron Spelling.

It's a like...well, a dream. Made possible, of course, through hard work.

"Luck is when preparation meets opportunity," the 39-year-old performer says of his good fortune.

And the former L.A. Dodger – albeit briefly – has been preparing for quite some time.

Frequent Vegas visitors are familiar with Gans from his long-term gigs at the Stratosphere and, more recently, the Rio, where he closed in December.

His diverse vocal repertoire includes some 300 personalities, running from Michael Bolton and Al Pacino to Sammy Davis Jr. and Regis Philbin. The result is usually a showroom full of laughter.

His latest career step brings the so-called "Man of Many Voices" to the Strip in the 1,260-seat Danny Gans Theater.

"When [Mirage owner Steve Wynn] offered to turn one of the [resort's] ballrooms into a theater, I felt like I had won the lottery," Gans says.

Wynn recalls how he first tapped Gans for the Mirage, "One night, Mel Brooks and his wife, Anne Bancroft, came to town. Mel said to me, 'I have to see Danny Gans; all I hear about is Danny Gans.' So I made reservations for him and Anne. The next day, I asked them how the show was, and they responded that they had loved Danny, that he was a beguiling and wonderful entertainer. Danny had taken the Rio to the place that Siegfried & Roy had taken the Mirage. The prospect of having him in the same place with Siegfried & Roy made our mouths water."

Gans says anyone who has seen him perform will see a show on opening night at the Mirage that is 30% different from his closing night at the Rio. As always, the show will continually change – Gans will vary the personalities based on who’s hot and who’s not or simply for the sake of giving the audiences something different every couple of weeks.

But the biggest change will be the addition of four musicians and “and a ton of production,” particularly enhanced sound and lighting systems.

Patrons can still expect to see Gans’ signature pieces, such as “The 12 Months of Christmas,” a parody of “The 12 Days of Christmas,” in which he summons the voices of such stars as Clint Eastwood, John Travolta, Andy Rooney and Pee Wee Herman; his bit on the Apollo Theater, in which he portrays notables like Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Louis Armstrong; and his tribute to Sammy Davis Jr., his show business idol.

It was Bill Cosby, for whom Gans once opened, who dubbed the multitalented Gans “the Sammy Davis Jr. of the 90s.” For Gans, the comparison was especially touching.

“Early in my career,” he says, “I had been doing stand-up comedy in little clubs, which I didn’t like because of the dirty humor and late hours. I was confused about what direction I wanted to take when my dad flew me to Las Vegas to see Sammy Davis Jr. When I saw him perform, I was in tears because I was so blown away by his talent. He did a dramatic piece, impressions and even got behind the drums. It was then I knew that I wanted to be a variety performer.”

Actually, Gans started out with no plans to be an entertainer at all. A promising athlete, his boyhood dream was to play third base for the Los Angeles Dodgers. While still a high school student in Torrance, he received a draft offer from the Kansas City Royals, but an injury forced him to decline.

After entering college and turning down a second offer, this time from the Chicago White Sox, Gans signed with the Dodgers and planned to settle down for a long, happy run.

So much for making plans. During his first season on the field, he collided with another player, and the severe ankle injury permanently derailed that career.

While recovering in his hospital bed, Gans had what he came to see as a spiritual experience. He felt that God spoke to him through his hospital roommate who told him, “God would not be taking baseball away from you if there wasn’t something better.”

With the encouragement of family and friends, Gans shifted his focus from baseball to entertainment. Having done impressions since his youth, he traveled on the road for 15 years working at his craft and, in the process, became one of the most sought-after performers on the corporate-convention circuit.

Then, in 1995, Gans did a limited run of a one-man show on Broadway in a theater owned by the prestigious Neiderlander family. When the Neiderlanders offered him a

one-year extension, everyone around him felt it was a great opportunity. But Gans was an absentee father, and though he talked to his wife, Julie, and their three children, Amy, Andrew and Emily every day, he had been averaging 238 days a year away from home. He made the decision to go home.

“One day, my daughter Amy, who was 7 at the time, drew a picture titled ‘The Gans Family,’” Gans recalls. “There was my wife, my three kids and the dog. Where was I? I was the face in the airplane window above them all. It was then that I knew I had to come off the road.”

Luckily, shortly afterward, Vegas happened. In March of 1996, Gans opened at the Stratosphere and became the proverbial overnight hit. In January of 1997, he moved over to the Rio to similar acclaim, which he hopes to repeat at the Mirage.

“I really feel all this is happening for me because of the prayers of my friends and family who realized that I made a commitment to stay home with my family, that they came first,” Gans says. “And that I feel that God honored the fact that I put my family first, that I was doing what He wanted me to do.”

It is with those sentiments that Gans recorded his new inspirational CD, “Brand New Dream,” which he worked on for two years. There are no impressions on the album, only Gans in his own voice with song and message.

Recorded on Epic Records for the mainstream market and Word Records for the Christian market, the album is produced by Michael O’Martian, who’s worked with such stars as Amy Grant and Michael Bolton.

“It is a wonderful release to record as ‘Danny,’” Gans says. “This is who I am. These songs, what I’m singing about, really mean everything to me. I’ve always done my own voice in my show, but that wasn’t what the show was all about. Now I’ll be singing songs from the album in my show.”

As for the TV sitcom, Spelling came to Gans’ show and was so impressed by what he saw that he offered the performer a sitcom based on his life. Gans’ only condition was that it be filmed in Las Vegas so he didn’t have to travel back and forth to L.A. and be away from his family again.

Though a writer has not been chosen yet, Gans came up with the storyline, which he describes as a modern “Make Room for Daddy.”

What is it that Gans ultimately wants to achieve? “I want to continue to sell out at the Mirage,” he says. “If nothing else happened in my career other than that – if the CD only becomes songs to add to my show and the sitcom doesn’t fly – if people leave my show feeling better than when they came in, that would be fine with me.”

Starting April 4, Danny Gans will perform nightly, except Mondays and Fridays, at the Mirage resort. Tickets are \$67.50; the first eight rows are \$90. For more information and tickets, call (800) 963-9634.

Bobby Katz is a Las Vegas-based writer.

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