

Danny Gans  
Debuts at Mirage

Las Vegas Style  
By Norm Johnson

Danny Gans was wondering what to do with the rest of his life after a brilliant future in baseball went kaput because of an injury.

Growing up in Southern California, his career goal was to become a major league ballplayer. He was a standout third baseman throughout his teens and was drafted while still in high school by the Kansas City Royals. In college, he was again drafted by the Chicago White Sox. He declined both offers.

Just before graduation, he was offered and signed a contract with his dream team, the Los Angeles Dodgers. "That was my goal all along to one day play in Dodger Blue," Gans said as he thought back to those early days.

That's when what appeared to be disaster struck. While playing in the Northwest League, he tore his Achilles heel. "That was it. I was no longer going to be a baseball player," Gans frowned. At the age of 19, he no longer had a future – so he thought.

Fortunately he did have other skills, talents that he had mostly thought of as useful in helping him pass the time. Not much more than that.

He could sing. He was also considered a funny guy to be around. Danny had one other bit of raw talent: an uncanny ability to do impressions of people and famous singers. While hobbling around on a walking cast, Gans and a teammate stopped in one night at Mitzi Shore's Comedy Club in San Diego.

"My pal said I was funnier than them (having often entertained on the team bus during minor league trips) and should give it a shot." With encouragement from family and friends, the one-time power-hitting third baseman changed direction. He put together a few minutes of "A" material (based on his experiences in baseball) and began to work Open mike nights at various comedy clubs. "That's when I began to believe I could have a career as an entertainer."

Offers to work at various comedy clubs began to trickle in. For the next few years, he was a regular act on the comedy club circuit. Danny gained a reputation as a "clean working" comic who also did great impressions. "I never really liked the clubs because of the smoke (everyone smoked in those days), and I didn't like the blue language many comics used. I'm not a prude, but I believe in working clean. You could describe me as the guy you'd like to have a beer with," Gans said.

He adds, "From the day I stepped on a stage, I've never had more than a week off unless I chose it." Soon he was bouncing around, doing theater, singing in bands and other

things to keep the money coming in and gain valuable experience. “I met my wife, Julie, about this time and we both wanted to have a family. So I kept honing my act and waiting for the big break.”

Around 1986 his father, Sid, brought him to Las Vegas to watch a master at work.

“I want you to see him because I know even though he’s in the twilight of his career, I guarantee you, all your answers will be clear tonight,” his dad said. Gans sat back to watch Sammy Davis Jr. perform. It was like magic. “After I saw Sammy, I knew my lot was to be an entertainer! I set a new goal that night. I would evoke the full range of emotions by doing all the disciplines: comedy, impressions, singing, dancing and playing an instrument.”

The “big break” came in Las Vegas in 1993 when he opened for Bill Cosby at the Hilton Hotel. Gans was scheduled to do 30 minutes. The audience response was overwhelming. As he was taking his bow, Cosby sauntered out, put his arm around him and looked at the audience. “I believe we’re looking at the Sammy Davis Jr. of the 90s,” he said, grinning. Bill turned and began to walk off stage, stopped and smiled. “Go for it, babe. I’m walking off stage. You keep going!” Gans went on for another half-hour.

“The next day, Mr. Cosby had the marquee changed to equal billing in size. From that point on, I did an hour in front of Bill, and he did an hour.” After that, Gans and his manager, Chip Lightman, made a promise to each other. The next time Gans came back to Las Vegas it would not be as an opening act or co-bill. It would have to be with his own show.

“However long it took, we were determined to wait for it,” Lightman said.

All along, Danny Gans had been building a reputation in the corporate world. For ten years he worked steady, improving the act as he got feedback from various show producers. They wanted clean comedy and music by artists who had hits. And that’s exactly what he gave them.

“I combined comedy with the greatest singers of all times, and it worked,” Gans said. He found himself booked for about 125 corporate dates a year. He also began to gain fame on television as a regular on the Fox hit, “Open House,” and had a recurring role on the CBS drama series, “Silk Stockings.” He starred as Dean Martin in the Emmy Award-winning mini-series “Sinatra,” and made his big screen debut as shortstop Deke Rivers in “Bull Durham.” “It was a little type casting, you might say,” he laughed.

December 1994 found the team of Gans and Lightman taking another gamble toward the future. The man with a thousand voices decided to do a one-man show in the 200-seat Coast Playhouse in Los Angeles. After the first week, a reviewer from Variety caught the show. “You would’ve thought my mother wrote the review,” Gans said. “It was absolutely wonderful!”

The Nederlander Organization, one of the biggest booking and producing agencies in North America, sent a representative to check out this young man they were hearing so much about. Soon he was on the stage of the 1,400-seat Neil Simon Theater on Broadway for a special three-week engagement. Nederlander offered a year's extension. He and his manager declined the offer to fulfill the goal they'd set in 1993.

Danny Gans opened as the headliner on May 16, 1996 at the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas.

Soon the Rio Suite resort on Flamingo Road was wooing him. He inked a deal to star in the Copacabana showroom. It was a wonderful marriage – for a time. Gans was drawing capacity crowds. The marriage became strained. “Even if I was happy with the Rio as my contract came to an end,” he said. “I wouldn't have stayed. I wanted to be on the Strip.”

The Las Vegas “Entertainer of the Year” signed a long-term contract with Mirage Resorts Chairman Steve Wynn and the Mirage Hotel. Wynn jumped at the opportunity to sign Gans at a time when Wynn had decided it was important to put more emphasis on quality shows.

“I'll be doing a lot more Danny Gans with an emphasis on variety. Of course, I'll continue to do comedy and impressions,” Gans explained. The band will be increased to seven musicians. More production is being added.

Danny Gans has reached the goal he set many years ago, to headline on The Strip. He and his wife of 18 years and their two daughters, Amy 12, Emily, 5, and son Andrew, 9, have settled down to living a normal life (if being an entertainer is ever normal) in a community that opened its soul to them. In return, Danny is one of the first to appear at local charity events and lend his name and talent to worthwhile community causes.

The future is bright. He just finished recording his first pop-contemporary album for Sony's Epic label and the Christian pop label Myrrh for Word Records. Award-winning producer Michael O'Martian produced the album.

“We feel the single that could possibly be a hit will be a song written by Matthew West, ‘Be Strong’,” Gans said. He has been negotiating a television series with Hollywood producer Aaron Spelling. “It'll be shot here in Las Vegas and will be loosely based on my experiences,” Danny explained. “You might say it's a modern version of ‘Make Room For Daddy’ that starred Danny Thomas.”

I've found a home in Las Vegas and I love what I'm doing,” he said. “I don't have to travel any more than I want to. I can spend more time with my family and watch Andrew play Little League baseball. What more could I ask for?”