

Who is Danny Gans?  
Las Vegas' \$100 million man!

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By Bruce Keidan

Danny Gans was a man with a plan. It was the summer of 1980, his rookie year in professional baseball. He was playing first base for the Victoria Mussels, a Dodgers farm team. The world was his oyster. He was leading the Class A Northwest League in home runs. He was 20 years old.

"I thought by the year 2000," he recalled recently, "I'd be closing in on 600 homers and the Hall of Fame."

The One Great Scorer had other ideas. Gans suffered a severed Achilles tendon when an opposing player, trying in vain to beat out an infield single, planted a spiked shoe in his heel. It was two years before Gans could walk without limping. His baseball career was over by then.

Thus did Danny Gans come to show business. Hobbling. With no formal training. Without so much as a high school talent show on his resume.

Now, nearly 20 years later, he is about to become the highest-paid entertainer in Las Vegas. Ever.

He is leaving the Rio when his three-year contract with that hotel-casino expires in December. He is moving to the Mirage, one of the more opulent resorts on the Las Vegas Strip, where Steve Wynn is building a 1,250 seat showroom for him. Gans' 10-year contract with the Mirage is worth in excess of \$100 million—putting him in the same ballpark with Kevin Brown and Mike Piazza, if not in the same game.

There is more. Aaron Spelling, the Sultan of Soaps, is sending a production crew here to film the pilot of a TV series about a husband and father who happens to be a Las Vegas entertainer: Working Title: "The Danny Gans Show."

If you have been here at any time in the three years Gans has been playing to a sold-out showroom at the Rio, none of that may be a surprise to you. If you haven't, there is a good chance you are asking yourself, "Who is Danny Gans?"

The short answer is: He's Frank Sinatra. And Dean Martin. And Sammy Davis Jr. And in a pinch, he's Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop as well.

His is Nat King Cole one minute and Natalie Cole the next. He's Anita Baker, when he so chooses. And Al Pacino. And Michael Bolton. And Dr. Ruth.

To call him an impressionist is to do him a grave disservice. He is more than a mimic. He is a comedian, a thespian and singer of sufficient talent to hold an audience spellbound without trying to sound like anyone else.

So why haven't you heard of him? Why hasn't everyone?

Because he has never had a hit song on the charts or had his own TV series—although he (along with Ellen DeGenerous) did appear regularly for two seasons on the Fox series “Open House.” Nor has he starred in a movie—although he played Kevin Costner's teammate Deke Rivers in “Bull Durham.”

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

First he tried stand-up comedy, honing his skills by performing in comedy clubs around Los Angeles and San Diego, mostly on Mondays, which is traditionally “amateur night.” He was an amateur. His experience at that point consisted of command performances at high school parties and minor-league dugouts. He learned his trade in the comedy clubs.

He also learned they were not for him.

“I never bombed,” he recalled. “I always did well. But I hated it. It was filthy. You're going on at 2:30 in the morning, and everyone else is relying on filth to be funny.

“A friend of mine had a band and he needed a singer. I said ‘I can do that.’ We played lush garden spots like Elko, Nevada...”

He took acting classes, landed some commercials, then took to the corporate-banquet circuit. He spent the ensuing decade polishing his act before “middle America, people who read People magazine... They loved clean comics. They loved music. It was Elvis' audience.

“The corporate work was so lucrative, I didn't have to pursue [anything else],” he said. “I was making the same amount of money as if I were in a movie...I'd show up the third day of an IBM conference on Maui, do my act and walk away with a huge check.

“A performer who works 40 days a year on the corporate circuit has made it. Toward the end, I was doing 125 nights a year. I never unpacked my suitcase.” Which is why he eventually quit.

“My daughter Amy, who was 7 years old at the time, showed me a picture she'd drawn,” he remembered. “It was called ‘The Gans Family.’ It showed my wife and our three kids standing on a hilltop with an airplane flying overhead. I said, ‘That's very nice, honey. But where's Daddy?’

“She pointed to the airplane. There was a face looking out of the window. That was me.” Knowing he needed to make a change in his life, he went home to Los Angeles, hired a hall and performed in concert. That risky venture paid off in a one-man show at the Neil Simon Theater in New York, where he earned rave reviews. Offered a year-long booking at New York's Brooks Atkinson Theater, he turned it down and instead accepted a three-month engagement at a tall but otherwise unimpressive Las Vegas hotel called the Stratosphere. It was closer to home.

“Everyone in the business thought I was nuts,” he said.

Las Vegas, though, was impressed. Especially the locals, who showed up week after week. They followed him to the Rio, where he has played to capacity crowds ever since. At \$99 a ticket, his is the most expensive show in Las Vegas—which is a sore point with him.

When he opened in January 1997, the Rio charged \$39.95 to see him. It raised its prices three times the first year. He complained that the locals who had been his core audience at the Stratosphere were being priced out. The Rio's management gave him a lecture on the Law of Supply and demand and offered him a share of the windfall. He turned it down, opting to become a free agent at the end of this year.

So David Cassidy will open at the Rio in January, and Danny Gans, former minor-league slugger on the verge of becoming a major entertainment-industry star, will share the marquee at the Mirage with the magicians Siegfried and Roy for two years, until they retire.

Gans' new contract gives him the right to set the price for his own show. It will be less than \$99, but more than he charged for an outdoor show he put on last New Year's Eve. A crowd of 21,000 showed up for that one. He charged them nothing at all.