

## Heavenly Timing

Danny Gans begins a new chapter in his life at the Mirage



Jeff Scheid/Review-Journal

Danny Gans, right, gathers with his band to pray before his show at The Mirage on Tuesday.

Las Vegas Review Journal, Neon Guide

By Mike Weatherford

It's really a great story, in book form, "Danny Gans volunteers of his own career history. And why not? It's got all the ingredients for a good book. Even the Good Book. It's the story of a singing impressionist who pulled off the nearly impossible feat of becoming a top attraction on the Strip, without the name recognition of having a hit song or TV show.

And it's a story of a Christian family man who feels his success is, if not divinely inspired, then at least divinely sanctioned. The book is still to be written. But Gans tells key parts of the story in a show that reopens this weekend in a new long-term home at the Mirage, and in a new contemporary Christian album that finds him singing in his own voice. The eight-year contract with The Mirage included the new 1,260 seat Danny Gans Theatre, modeled after two of the entertainer's favorites: The Apollo in Harlem, N.Y., and the restored fox theatre in St. Louis. "It was really a fairy tale," Gans says of his rapid ascent, which began at the Stratosphere in May 1996 and continued at the Rio. "It doesn't get any better than this. The theater, where I'm sitting on the Strip, right in the heart of it all."

"Like angels with broken wings  
sometimes our brightest dreams

come falling through the sky"  
-from "A Brand New Dream"

In the past four years, Gans, 39, has created his own show-business legend of the injury that sidelined him from a professional baseball career when he was 19 years old.

That story is the title track for this album, "Brand New Dream," and will most likely be included in the Mirage revue. The show opens for a V.I.P. audience Saturday after a week of previews for Mirage employees and cab drivers.

Country singer George Strait saw Gans during his two-year stint at the Rio and encouraged him to sing more in his own voice. Strait even put him in contact with Bob Carlisle, the Christian singer whose "Butterfly Kisses" became a pop culture phenomenon.

Gans was telling Carlisle the story he usually tells in his show, of how a severed Achilles' tendon put a serious, if not fatal crimp in his professional baseball dreams. His father suggested that instead of getting a day job while on the mend, he talk to an agent about doing something with the knack for mimicry that made him "a fun guy to have on a long bus ride."

The agent arranged an audition with Steve Rossi, the Las Vegas comedian best known as half of the comedy team Allen and Rossi. When Gans went to see Rossi's show, he was surprised to find himself called to the stage as a "special guest."

"As he's hugging me, he says, "This is your audition, kid," Gans recalls. "I can't even tell you what I did," but he got the job. In telling the story to Carlisle, Gans noted, "Show business came along, and show business became a brand new dream." Carlisle said, "Hey! That's the title."

"But the thrill of cheering voices  
and the kindness I have known  
can't compare to my kids yelling out,  
'Hurray, my Daddy's home.'"  
-from "The Journey's Here at Home"

Gans was, coincidentally, singing "Butterfly Kisses" on-stage after telling audiences that he gave up a year's run on Broadway instead of being separated from his Los Angeles family or uprooting them to the Big Apple.

Gans had crafted his act at corporate conventions and trade shows, where name recognition was not a factor. Corporate banquets offer a captive audience, and all Gans had to do was fill a specific request.

"I sat down with enough corporate producers, and asked what kind of act would be a big success. They said, 'Middle America wants comedy, but they're afraid comics are going

to get dirty."

Singers tend to be an either/or proposition, excluding half of the average audience if they were to young or too old. Gans was told, "If you can be funny, be musical and appeal to everyone from the (ages of) late 20s to early 60s, you've got it."

Gans complied, crafting his impressions into the roots of the same showcase you see today. There are sentimental takes on Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn in "On Golden Pond," but also riffs on pop singers - both the ones you expect (Rod Stewart) and one's you don't (Eric Clapton).

Gans conquered the trade show circuit, but at a price. Unlike conventional concert tours, corporate dates had no routing logic. He'd be in San Diego one day, Puerto Rico the next. Longtime manager Chip Lightman booked him into a showcase theater in Southern California, where a strong Daily Variety review opened the door to a 1995 Broadway stint at the Neil Simon Theater. That, in turn, led to the offer for a full year on Broadway, with all the attendant press and talk show appearances.

But Gans chose the Stratosphere instead. He was moved by a "family portrait" drawn by his then 7-year-old daughter, which showed Dad flying overhead in an airplane, and the rest of the family on the ground.

"The picture led me to want to sit down and not travel anymore," he says. Instead of singing "Butterfly Kisses," I wanted to write my own song, so I can tell the story and say I wrote this song. So instead of going into someone else's song, it goes into a song I wrote specifically about this picture"

Gans believed a higher power influenced his decision.

"On paper, sure," he can find other reasons for his success on the Strip. "I can say the timing is great, I have a great relationship with my manager and we think alike and plan things out..."

But, he says, there's a spiritual element beyond all that. "I made a stance and said in prayer with my wife, 'I want to be a family man and put my family first in my life.' And I did that by turning down Broadway, and from the time I did that this touch has been upon my career."

And now his belief is no secret, thanks to the album that will be cross-marketed both to Christian specialty stores and mainstream record stores, along the lines of crossover performers such as Amy Grant.

Could that damage the nightclub credibility of the man who conquered Sin City?

Gans doesn't think so. He believes that people "like the fact they can take their kids to see this show and it's not some Howdy Doody, Disneyland thing. It's a cutting edge show that nobody's going to say, 'I got a cavity watching this thing.'

"It's an entertaining show, but it's a sincere guy who thinks there's more than just hard work that goes into being successful."

