



FREE CD INSIDE AUDIO PREVIEWS \* LESSONS \* PRACTICE W/ THE PROS

GENE HOGLAN  
THE ATOMIC CLOCK

YAEI'S  
LOVE PROJECT

YAMAHA  
DTX 900 & MULTI 12

# DRUMHEAD

WWW.DRUMHEADMAG.COM

# MATT CHAMBERLAIN



JOHN  
RILEY  
LENNIE  
DIMUZIO  
MIKE  
LUCE

November - December 2010 | NO. 024  
\$6.99 US | \$7.99 CAN



# Gig From Hell

BY BUTCH NORTON



The year was 1978, and I was in a band called Savory. We were an eight-piece horn band that had been climbing through the ranks since my high school days, landing the gig in Shipwreck Kelly's Lounge at the Airport Marina Hotel, Burlingame, California. We had arrived.

We were playing six nights a week in our custom-made cream-colored satin suits, polyester large collared shirts, puka shell necklaces and 5-inch platform heels. We played all Top 40, rock, pop, blues, funk, R&B, disco-dance music of the day. I could finally quit my day job!

We had been playing steady for about three months when a gentleman by the name of Gary Raffanelli sat down to watch us play. He pulled the guitar player aside during one of our breaks and proceeded to praise the band for its high level of musicianship. Gary went on to explain that he was one half of a Vegas act called Gary & Sandy's Common Ground (a show act along the lines of Donny & Marie meets Sonny & Cher meets Steve & Eydie meets Barry Gibb and Barbara Streisand), and that he was looking to "pick up" a new rhythm section. Their gig was going to start in a few weeks with the first show being a two-week run in the showroom of the Thunderbird Hotel on the Vegas strip. He only wanted the bass/drums/guitar/keys of the band. This meant we would have to bail on the horn players and lead singer, our best buddies since high school, leaving them without a rhythm section, and possibly screwing them out of the gig at the hotel.

I was 20 years old and the allure of Vegas was intoxicating: I voted yes.

We all decided (the rhythm section) that this was an opportunity

that could not be passed up. We told our buddies of our great opportunity. They felt betrayed and didn't want to talk to us ever again. It made for some great shows over the next two weeks while we rehearsed during the day with Gary and did our Savory gig at night.

We end on a Saturday night and leave straight after the gig for Vegas.

It's the middle of summer and we pull into Vegas at 10 a.m. The temperature is 108 degrees, but we're all so excited that the heat does not dampen our spirits. Gary takes us over to The Thunderbird, where we're going to perform that night, and we walk into the showroom to see where we'll be playing for the next few weeks. The billboard outside reads: "AFTER 18 YEARS THE CHECKMATES WILL BE CLOSING WITH THEIR LAST PERFORMANCE EVER, TONIGHT!" Now, The Checkmates were one of the top acts at this time on the strip. They were an all black high-energy R&B, soul, funk 15-piece outfit. We were the complete opposite: milky white, sensitive, play by the chart, note-for-note kids backing a duo with a noticeably "augmented" top-heavy bleach-blond female singer.

This was the first sign of things to come.

Gary shrugs it off and says that the agent told him this was the best place for us to start: a built-in audience!

We go to our motel and Gary checks us in, or at least tries. It seems that his credit card is being denied. He comes back out and asks Sandy if she could pay this tab until the agent fronts him our money. Concern set in. We haven't been paid anything yet; everything was done on a handshake and a promise. We were told that after our first show, our first week of pay would be given to us in cash. None of us had any money.

We get into our flea bag motel and take a nap until show time. Six p.m. rolls around and we head over to the showroom. I'm about to bring in all my gear when The Checkmates' manager approaches and asks me what I'm doing? I explain that I'm going to set up my kit. He says that's not the deal. I have to play on the house kit. I say, "That's cool, can I check it out?" The kit has seven toms, 10 cymbals, a snare drum with duct tape holding the snares onto the shell, and hasn't moved since the drummer from The Checkmates first brought it into the lounge in 1960. The heads are black from never being changed, and all the pedals are caked with grease and dirt. I take a deep breath and succumb to the task at hand.

Since this is The Checkmates' last night, they're only going to do two shows. They go on at 9 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. We will do three shows, 10:30 p.m., 1 am and 2:30 a.m.

The Checkmates go on and I'm blown away by their set: super high-energy, powerful, standing room only. The crowd does not sit down throughout their entire







show, and the drummer pounds the crap out of his kit: it sounds PHENOMINAL!

Then: "Ladies and gentleman please give a warm welcome to Gary And Sandy's Common Ground!"

The room is completely empty. There is not one person, not even waitstaff. I can barely make the kit work, and our shit is so lame that I'm actually glad that no one is in the room (this is the first time we've heard Sandy, all the rehearsals in San Francisco were just with Gary). We plod through our show. The Checkmates come back for their last show, and it's as awesome as the first one. We go back out to the same empty room. During our last show, at 2:30 a.m., there were six people in the audience. Most notably was a couple that argued throughout our entire set about the lousy service in the casino, very Vegas.

At the end of our night, the agent (whose name is Gig) comes up to congratulate us on our opening night (he was my first introduction to heaving amounts of chest hair mixed with huge amounts of gold chains/medallions and a dash of diamond encrusted pinkie rings) telling us how we "killed it," and how much he and the staff loved our show. I was now concerned for my future in Las Vegas.

We had told Gary before the shows to make sure he asked the agent for the "advance" on our salary. Gary went to Gig and got a check for half our pay. He told Gary

that he could cash the check at the bank tomorrow, and the balance would be paid the next day at the show. We were pissed, but anything was better than nothing at this point. Next morning, we go to the bank with Gary, because we're starving and haven't eaten since the afternoon before, and the teller says the check is no good, insufficient funds. We are LIVID. Gary says this has "never happened to him before with this guy," and proceeds to get on the pay phone (no cells in those days). Gig apologizes and tells us all to come over to his "pad" and he'll pay us in cash. We go over to his apartment complex and wait in the van (it's 116 degrees) while Gary goes in to retrieve our cash.

He comes out, cash in hand, and all is right with the world. But wait, Gig tells Gary that there's been a slight change of plans. Last night was not just The Checkmates' last hurrah, but also the CLOSING NIGHT OF THE LOUNGE AT THE THUNDERBIRD! Gary tells us that this is just a slight snag in the plans, and that Gig is going to shuffle some of his acts around so we can move into the Flamingo lounge four days later. AFTER FOUR DAYS? What the f\*ck are we going to do with no work and a measly \$100 in our pockets? Sweat, piss, moan and hang out in places that have air conditioning, that's what.

Well we finally get into the Flamingo and it goes a little better. We play four shows a night for two nights, then Gig tells us that they need us over at a newly renovated

lounge off of the strip in the old part of Vegas. We have three more days off before moving to the new venue. We have been paid nothing since our first \$100 and now we're out of money and patience. We tell Gary we're not doing the next show until we get the FULL amount of money we've been promised. It's been ten days of being held hostage. We were guaranteed \$100 a day, work or no work. We are now owed \$900. The next day comes and no money. The next day comes and no money. The next day comes and we're told that the gig at the new place is being postponed for a few more days. I call my mom, collect, and ask her to please wire me \$50 so I can fill my van with gas and get us out of there. She obliges and I get over to Western Union, collect the cash, and go back to the motel to load up my comrades. It feels like we're escaping from prison. We don't even tell Gary until we're about 250 miles away from Vegas, and then we call him from a pay phone to give him the news that we've split.

Three weeks pass; we're back home with no work. I get a call from Gary apologizing profusely and telling me that it would be a shame for us not to capitalize on the hard work we've put into this show. He is coming back to the SF Bay Area and wants to keep us rehearsing for a few weeks because there is an opening slot at Harrah's in South Shore, Lake Tahoe. He's played there for years and knows the owner "blah blah blah blah beg beg beg beg beg." Being the young gluttons of punishment that we were, we agreed to rehearse ONLY if he paid each of us \$25, in cash, up front before each rehearsal. He agreed. We rehearsed five days a week for three weeks. The gig never materialized and Gary kept coming up with alternate scenarios, but it was evident that this was never going to happen. We pow wowed on the phone and voted to quit, for good. I called Gary and gave him the news to start looking for a new rhythm section.

A week later I get a call from Gary, frantic, "We are booked, and I am standing on the stage of a new club in the Poconos. We open next Monday." It's Wednesday afternoon and Gary says to call the guys, get them on board (he'll pay us \$150 a day, guaranteed!), load up my van and start driving across the country. If we leave immediately we could be there by Monday afternoon ("You guys can take shifts driving and be here in a jiff"). I'm very impressed and dumbfounded by Gary's lack of reality. I explain to him that his loss of mental faculties is astounding and, "We've told you we're done". He says, "YEAH, I HEARD THAT, BUT I GOT US A REAL GIG!"

Just for shits and giggles I call the other guys. They can't believe it. I call Gary back later that night and told him good luck. ✨