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LIKE THE DETROIT WHEELS and the Righteous Brothers, the Young Rascals were raised on rhythm & blues, and during the sixties, they played out their influences as blue-eyed soul. The Rascals were the most successful of all these groups. Above everything else, they were known as hot musicians, and their drummer, Dino Danelli, was one of the best in popular music. In his native New Jersey, he was a legend. There he got his first taste of the rock & roll life. His home town, Jersey City, faces east, and any musician knows that to make it on the East Coast, you have to cross that river to New York City. The kind of joints Dino worked up and down the coast fired his determination, and he plotted the course. He was barely into his teens when he made that river crossing.

As a Rascal, Dino became a pop star and was a joy to watch. With his head switching from side to side, his sticks twirling off the backbeat, Dino used showmanship to add impact to the groove he laid down. Applying a jazzman's sense of discipline to a rock & roll spirit, he drummed the Rascals into rock history. “Good Lovin’,” “I’ve Been Lonely Too Long,” “People Got to Be Free,” “You Better Run,” and “Groovin’” are all songs that sound as fresh today as they did the first time I cranked them up on my radio, over fifteen years ago.

During the fall of 1981, Steve Van Zandt recorded his album, *Men without Women*. It was my pleasure to be a part of that project. In support of that album Steve put together a band, called them the Disciples of Soul, and began to tour. He had Dino on drums.

Around Christmas 1982, Little Steven and the Disciples of Soul played the Jersey shore. It was great to see and hear Dino once again. Backstage before the show I asked him if he still twirled his sticks. He told me he thought it was a corny thing to do; audiences were so much more sophisticated these days. "Nah," I said. "I think it would be great—it's part of you!" He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

The Disciples played a smoking set. Near the end of their performance, Steve introduced each band member, saving Dino for last: "On drums, the legendary Dino Danelli!" Not missing a beat, Dino turned his head and suddenly sent those sticks twirling. The place went crazy.

MAX: You once told me about how you used to lug your drums on the train from New York to Jersey to play gigs when you were a kid. Let's start there.

DINO: That's going back to when I first began playing drums. I was living at the Metropole [the famous jazz club on Seventh Avenue and Forty-eighth Street in New York City], where I first started to get a reputation as a drummer. But the first band I played with, even before my Metropole days, was King Curtis's band. I used to sit in with him and his band at a place in New Jersey called the Banker's Club. The Banker's Club was located in Union City, just across from lower Manhattan. The joint used to have an amateur night on Mondays and Tuesdays, and I used to go up there with just a pair of sticks and sit in with King Curtis. We'd play "Drum Boogie" and some other Gene Krupa songs. I got to go up there every week. It was great. It was my first introduction to being in a band. King was a real nice guy. He was always pulling for the guy who was trying to learn and make it.

So you hadn't been in a band before that?

No. I got a funny story that went down even before my Banker's Club days. I had a nightclub when I first started playing, around '58. Underneath our apartment house in Jersey City were these coal bins. Well, I cleaned out the bins, shingled the place up, and called it Dino's Casino. I built a little stage and set up a speaker, and I'd play my drums to a record on the hi-fi. Kids used to come from the neighborhood and sit and watch me play.

It started to get really popular. After a while kids would bring booze and girls, and it became a club. They'd call me up, and I'd tell

them what time the first show was. There were two shows a night. I wouldn't charge anybody; people would just come and hang out. And musicians would show up: saxophone players and other horn players. It was really great. I was twelve years old and it even made the newspapers. The police raided and padlocked the place because there was liquor and everybody was under age. I got closed up. It was on the front page of the *Jersey Journal*. From Dino's I went to another place in Union City called the Transfer Station. It was the seediest place around. Nothing but truck drivers and slutty girls. That was great, you know. I met a hillbilly band just up from Tennessee whose leader was a guy by the name of Ronnie Speakes. That band was into playing or copying Elvis Presley-style rock & roll. What happened was, their drummer was leaving and Speakes asked me to join. I had never played rock & roll, but I joined them anyway. They brought me down to Tennessee with them. There I met one of the best drummers I ever heard in my life. He was a cripple, paralyzed from the waist down, so he had a special hook-up on his bass drum pedal so his leg would be higher than normal. He would play his highhats and would hit his elbow on his knee, and that would set off his bass drum. He'd leave out certain beats and just hit his bass drum, but always in the right spot. Bobby Coleman was his name. He showed me all these fantastic fills and a lot of rock & roll things that I never heard of before. Things like heavy backbeat, a very sparse bass drum, lots of syncopation. Bobby Coleman and Speakes introduced me to rock & roll roots.

When we came back to the New York area, we got a job at the Metropole. The Metropole was turning into a rock & roll place in the afternoon, but they still played jazz at night. Before this, I used to go to the Metropole and stand outside and listen to Gene Krupa play. He used to play there almost every month. I must have been eleven or twelve years old.

The Metropole used to leave its doors open to entice people to go inside. The front of the club was pretty much all glass, so I could stand outside and watch the whole show for free. When I got the gig with Ronnie Speakes and we began playing the Metropole, the people at the club remembered me. We'd play in the afternoon, and I'd stay around for the evening shows.

The people who ran the Metropole took a liking to me. I was like their adopted son, and they let me live upstairs in one of the dressing rooms. Being at the Metropole so much, my goals got bigger than just playing in Ronnie Speakes's band. And then one night I met Gene Krupa. We got to be friends, and he'd take me into his dressing room between shows. He'd always lie down between sets because he had heart trouble. But we'd talk, you know. He knew I really wanted to make it as a drummer. Just listening to him talk about the old days with Benny Goodman and the others was fantastic.

Did you ever get to sit in with Krupa's band?

Never sat in with Krupa's band, but I sat in with Lionel Hampton's band.

When the Young Rascals came out with "Good Lovin'," your publicity people made a big deal out of you playing with Hampton.

*"Then one night
I met Gene Krupa. . . ."*

It made good copy, I guess, but I only played with Hampton's band for two nights. It was just a jam, but it was great playing with a twenty-piece band.

I think the real turning point in my life was when I went down to New Orleans. The music scene there is so alive and figured so heavily in the creation of rock & roll. I had never experienced that funky kind of music before. I never slept. I took in all that street knowledge, and it changed my musical outlook. I stayed in New Orleans about a year.

When I went back to New York, I put together a rhythm & blues band called the Showstoppers based on the things I'd heard down in New Orleans. We traveled around the Midwest. Nothing spectacular, just a real good show band. After that band broke up, I moved back to New York and the Metropole. This was about 1964 when the Twist was happening at the Peppermint Lounge. That was *the* club at the time. I used to go over and listen to Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks with Levon Helm on the drums. That's when I met Felix Cavaliere.

Felix had heard about me, and I'd heard about him. He was supposed to be a happening organ player, and he'd heard that I was one of the best drummers around. At this time, a singer named Sandy Scott was in town looking to put together a band to take to Las Vegas. So Felix and me and a couple of other guys went with her to Vegas. When we were out there the Beatles hit with "I Want to Hold Your Hand." We didn't know what the hell to think of it. I knew something was happening that was going to be real big, but couldn't put my finger on it. Felix and I made a deal that he was going to go home and put together a band like the Beatles, and I'd continue playing with Sandy Scott until he called me to come home. The Beatles gave us the idea and the urge to strike out on our own.

Did you know any of the other Rascals then?

I'd met our singer Eddie Brigati when one of the bands I was in played the Choo Choo Club in Garfield, New Jersey. He used to live around the corner from the joint. He'd come up on the stage and sing a couple of songs with whatever band was playing. We struck up a good friendship and said maybe we'd put together a band some day. He had already known Felix. Eddie was the brother of David Brigati, who was in Joey Dee's band. Felix was in Joey Dee's band too. That's where the connection to Felix comes in. Gene Cornish was playing guitar with his band at the Peppermint Lounge, as was Joey Dee's band. He met Felix and Eddie and struck up a friendship with them.

I was still in Vegas, so one day Felix called me up and said, "I got these two guys and they're really good. You should split Vegas and come home now." So I went back and the four of us got together at Felix's house in Pelham, New York. We must have learned about twenty-five songs in one night, all the current Top Forty hits. We came up with the name Young Rascals at the Choo Choo Club. One night we were playing there and someone said, "You ought to call the band the Little Rascals." We said, "Rascals, yeah; well, why don't we dress up like rascals?"

I remember the first time I saw the group was on the sixties TV program, "Hullabaloo." You guys played "I Ain't Gonna Eat Out My

Heart Anymore” and you came out with knickers on. Did you ever feel weird wearing them?

Oh yeah. The first Brooklyn Fox Murray the K show we did was really weird. We came out on stage and got laughed at—*until* we started playing.

The Rascals were discovered at a club called the Barge in East Hampton, Long Island. How did you get that gig?

We were playing the Choo Choo, and these two guys who were opening this new club, the Barge, had heard about us. They liked us and hired us to play the Barge on Monday and Tuesday nights. Ahmet Ertegun, the head of Atlantic Records, as well as other record people who summered in the Hamptons, came in to hear us simply because the Barge was the happening local club. We signed with Ertegun and Atlantic because Ahmet had the best rap. He heard “Good Lovin’,” and that was it.

“Good Lovin’ ” wasn’t an original Rascals tune, though. How did you find that song?

Felix and I used to go to a record store up in Harlem, and one day we came across “Good Lovin’,” “Mustang Sally,” which Wilson Pickett cut, and a few other records. We learned them and then changed them around so that they became our songs. A lot of people think “Good Lovin’,” which was originally done by the Olympics, was our first record. It wasn’t. We had “I Ain’t Gonna Eat Out My Heart Anymore” out first, but that tune only made it to around number fifty on the charts.

The cymbal part for “Good Lovin’ ” was a tricky bit of business.

Well, that was a combination of “What’d I Say” and some New Orleans riffs.

Were you being managed by Sid Bernstein at this time?

Yeah. Sid came out to the Barge, and heard us, and we signed with him. A week later we met Ahmet and signed with Atlantic.

Remember at the Beatles concert at Shea Stadium in August 1965, they flashed on the scoreboard THE YOUNG RASCALS ARE COMING?

(Laughs.) Yeah, that was Sid's idea. Sid, who promoted the show, told us all to be there because something was really going to surprise us. We were in the dugout. We had no idea what he was talking about. Then the scoreboard lit up with that line and fifty-five thousand people saw it. Then Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manager, came over to Sid and started choking him! (Laughs.) "Get that fucking thing off the board NOW! Get it OFF!" he was screaming.

What did you think of Ringo after you saw him perform?

I liked him. He had great style; I never saw anybody play the way he did. I liked his simplicity. That's why I like Charlie Watts, too.

Were the Rascals' arrangements spontaneous, or did you work things out?

Both. Felix and I always had a magical thing. There were times when I thought out in advance what I wanted to play, but most of the time, it just happened. One of the good things about the Rascals was that we had unlimited studio time; it was in our contract. Any time we wanted to rehearse or fool around, Atlantic would cancel whoever else was in the studio for us, so we could go in there and jam and come up with lots of material.

The songwriting started after "Good Lovin'." The first song I think Eddie and Felix wrote together was "You Better Run." I remember that the bass drum part I came up with for that record was really strange. It was a fast bass drum. And that was thought up in the studio just fooling around.

Rhythmically you were doing things that a lot of other bands at the time weren't, like you went from the straight four to a shuffle on that tune.

That was the jazz thing. Felix was into jazz too. He was very into Jimmy Smith. He also learned a lot from a guy named Carl Lattimore, but he had Jimmy Smith down pat. I got a lot of stuff from a guy named Willie Davis, who drummed for Joey Dee. Actually, I stole a lot of stuff from him. He'd play a solo and jump up on his seat. He had incredible showmanship.

When I say "Good Lovin'," what's the first thing that comes into your mind?

The Barge. Playing the Barge night after night with the kids going wild. "Good Lovin'" was the classic Barge song. That summer was the best summer of my life. We all lived across the street from the club. We had beautiful, rich girls all over the place. Max, it was like paradise! (Laughs.)

What about "People Got to Be Free"?

Jamaica. Me and Felix down in Jamaica. We were on vacation down there and Felix wrote it then. You know, we got a lot of heat because

of that record. Atlantic said it was too political and that it went against the grain. They didn't want to release it but we stuck to our guns, and it turned out to be the biggest record we ever had. Basically, the song was a reaction to the bullshit things that were happening in the sixties.

On "It's Wonderful," you can hear that sixties psychedelic approach.

We were stretching out a bit, being influenced by what the Beatles were doing. To me, that stuff never came off right. I know I wasn't comfortable with it. It didn't come from us, and it wasn't the way we were used to making records. See, the whole era was changing. The guitarists were coming into the spotlight, and our music had always been organ-based. Probably that's one of the reasons why we did things like "It's Wonderful," with tapes and things to stay current. That's when each of us started looking different ways, anyhow. It was kind of the beginning of the end.

What was the last record the original Rascals made before the band broke up?

Search and Nearness was the last Rascals album we all made together. Felix and I went on with the Rascals after that, but Eddie had split. There were no hits on that record. It was over by that time. It started at the beginning of that album, and by the end, we had disintegrated totally. We were just showing up and doing our parts and going home. I wanted out at that point too. My ego was just as bad as theirs. I was adding fuel to the fire, I'm sure. It's sad, but we all were ready to go on to new musical things. It got to be such a formula. I know I got bored. So Felix and I said, "Let's do a couple of jazz albums." Columbia Records was interested. Atlantic was becoming disenchanted with us. So we went over to Columbia and made the *Peaceful World* album, a jazz-oriented record. We got all these great players, great jazz legends to play on the record. The album didn't really work.

Was this when you began getting into art?

I was always kind of into art, but not really until I could actually afford it. I was making steel sculptures, twenty feet high. I had a duplex apartment with a big airy garden, and I was doing all my work there. It was a very expensive type of art. At that point I was looking forward to quitting the Rascals and becoming a full-time artist.

You were often involved with the illustration of the Rascals' album covers.

The *Once upon a Dream* album was the best album cover. For that record I did sculptures that represented the dreams of each guy in the band. It even won a graphics award.

That's what made me think I could go into art and make it without any problems, not knowing that to make it in art is a lot harder than making it in music. A rude awakening for me! When the Rascals split up, I went over to Germany and was just going to get into being an artist and not play music ever again. I stayed in an art colony for five months, but I missed music too much. I couldn't stop my hands and

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feet from moving whenever I heard a song on the radio.

After the Rascals broke up and you returned from Europe, what happened?

Gene Cornish and I produced a Canadian group called April Wine. We did an album with them that went gold. But that didn't do us any good in the States. It didn't matter, though, because I wasn't ready to be just a producer. I still had the drums in my system. So we came back to the States and started a band called Bulldog, which was a very short-lived thing. We had a Top Forty hit single, "No," but the band wasn't meant to be. A couple of guys were into drugs, a couple of guys weren't. We split up after an album, and Gene and I started Fotomaker. Fotomaker was a good band, but in 1978 it was out of its time. It was pop music, very Beatles-oriented, very English. We were on Atlantic, and just as we started to write and develop a sound, the money ran out.

There was talk some time ago that there might possibly be a Rascals reunion. Would you like to see that happen?

Yeah, because I'd like to see a live album of Rascals music, which is something we always wanted to do. I would like to have it for myself. I think the best of that music still holds up very well. I've got some years behind me now, and today, I see the beauty of that band where I never did before. That's why a reunion would be good. And who knows where it would go?

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Singles

WITH THE RASCALS

- "I Ain't Gonna Eat Out My Heart Anymore" (January 1966, Atlantic)
- "Good Lovin'" (April 1966, Atlantic)
- "You Better Run" (July 1966, Atlantic)
- "Come On Up" (October 1966, Atlantic)
- "I've Been Lonely Too Long" (March 1967, Atlantic)
- "Groovin'" (May 1967, Atlantic)
- "A Girl Like You" (August 1967, Atlantic)
- "How Can I Be Sure?" (October 1967, Atlantic)
- "It's Wonderful" (January 1968, Atlantic)

WITH LITTLE STEVEN AND THE DISCIPLES OF SOUL

- "Solidarity" (1983, EMI America)

Albums

WITH THE RASCALS

- The Young Rascals* (1966, Atlantic)
- Time Peace/The Rascals' Greatest Hits* (1968, Atlantic)

WITH LITTLE STEVEN AND THE DISCIPLES OF SOUL

- Men without Women* (1982, EMI America) (only on "Under the Gun" and "Bed of Fire")