

THE VOICES  
IN MY HEAD



# THE VOICES IN MY HEAD:

*A story of triumph over tragedy  
and beating the odds in Vegas*

*by*  
Danny Gans

*with*  
R.G. Ryan

*Stephens Press ✕ Las Vegas*

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# PROLOGUE

Summer was clinging to August the way a frightened five-year-old clings to his mother on the first day of school. In short, it was hot. Made even hotter by the fact that I'd just finished fielding ground balls from my dad for a solid hour out in the heat. I was exhausted, and my face hurt where one had gotten away and caught me on my right cheek. It was the only one, but still, I shouldn't have missed it.

Tomorrow was another day.

My hair slick with sweat, I stood very still and very tall with my back pressed against the closet door where we kept all of our equipment. My dad carefully stretched out the tape measure to see if I had grown since the previous measurement. I shifted my eyes to look at his face hovering so close to mine. I loved that face. It was the face of a comic — he could always make me laugh. But he could be harsh, too, and often was when I didn't live up to his expectations.

I loved my dad and wanted nothing more than to make him proud of me. I felt the words forming in my mouth, "I love you, dad." But I didn't say it. I should have, but I didn't.

It wasn't the typical routine of a dad who scratched marks on the wall of his son's bedroom to casually track

his growth. This was very business-like, because this was serious business. We were partners, my dad and I. When I was seven we had put together a ten-year plan and had followed it rigidly every day since. It was a plan that had been meticulously designed to take me from being an ordinary, run-of-the-mill kid to being the best major league baseball player to ever play the game.

Of course if anyone else had heard my dad and me talking about it, they probably would've thought we were crazy. Funny thing is . . . we actually believed I could do it.

Leaning in to check the exact measurement, my dad nodded his head silently, smiled as if pleased with my progress, made a mark on the wall and said, "All right, Danny Boy, let's hit the scales."

I was twelve years old and the ten-year plan was right on schedule.

"Expect second best of yourself and that's exactly what you'll get." I can still hear my dad's voice over the crack of the bat while he hit me ground balls.

"Is Danny Gans gonna be the best there ever was?"

Whack. Another ground ball.

That was 1969 and he was the first Voice In My Head.

To this day I still hear my dad's voice, along with the other 200 or so voices I do in my show.

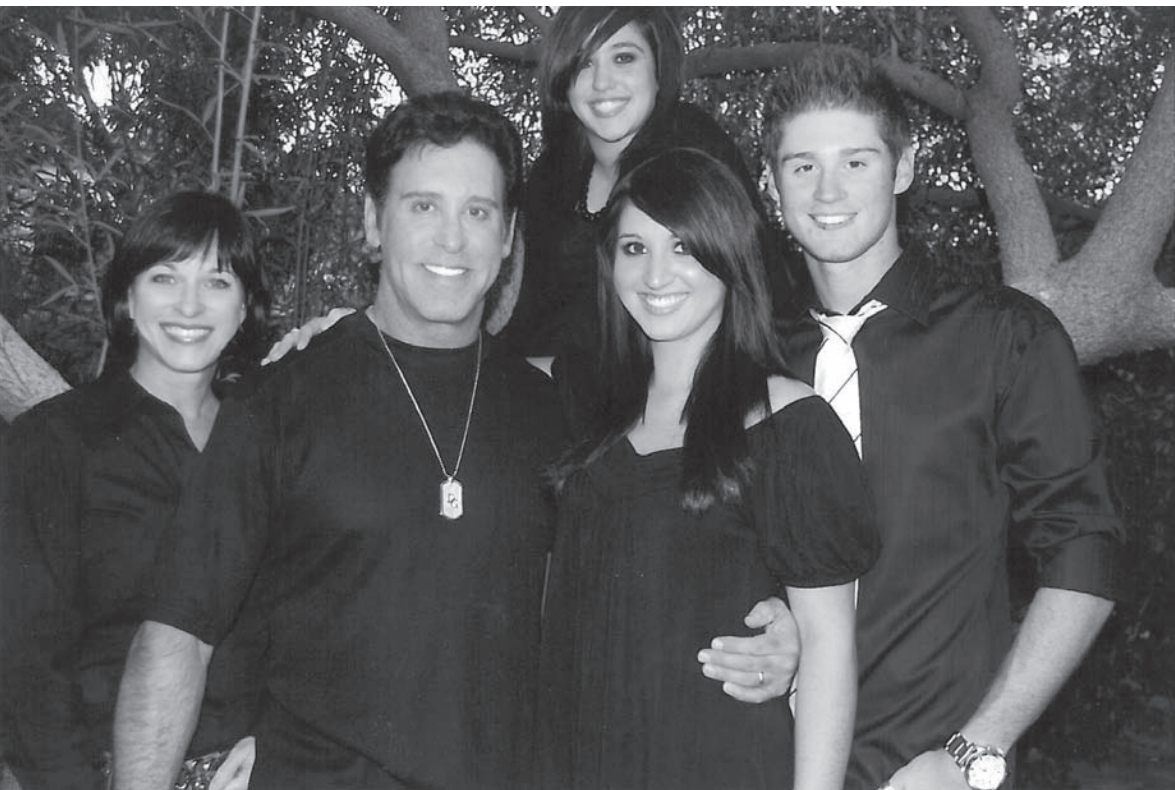
I hear him encouraging me as an entertainer, as a father, and as a man.

This book is the story of my journey from being a major league baseball prospect to Las Vegas' Entertainer of the Year.

It's a story of tragedy and triumph.

A story of dreams lost and dreams reborn, coming true in ways that I never could have imagined.

I am Danny Gans, the “Man of Many Voices,” and this is my story.



*Gans family Christmas card, 2008.*

# FOREWORD

We find ourselves at present in a place we never imagined being as we share these words in honor of our wonderful husband and daddy, who went home to be with our Lord the day after this book was completed.

Every chapter covers a time span where God unfolded His loving plan for Danny's life and career. He opened doors that no man could open and He closed doors no man could close. God presented opportunities, which laid out the path that Danny faithfully followed, and it was a blessed life because he always put God first.

As you read, you will come to know a man of enormous integrity, faith and passion; a man dedicated and purpose driven in pursuit of his dreams and God's plan. He honored the gifts God gave him by constantly perfecting his craft and never taking those gifts for granted. He worked tirelessly to give the audience his very best as they were always his primary concern. It was most important to Danny that the people leave each performance with smiles on their faces, feeling lighter and happier for having spent ninety minutes with him. The cheers, applause and standing ovations they gave in return were his ultimate reward and source of greatest satisfaction. Without the support of countless fans

throughout the years, from corporate conventions to Broadway and finally to Las Vegas, there would not have been, “The Man Of Many Voices.”

Although a quiet man, he was an energetic spark in our family—a family to which he was totally devoted. He could turn any situation around into a funny moment and lighten our moods with his whacky sense of humor. With his love of storytelling, he was constantly creating fun new memories for us, holding us captivated with his own often-hilarious interpretation of events that had occurred. We were a built-in audience who loved every minute . . . and so did he. We were, and always will be, his biggest fans!

He valued our opinion on new ideas or jokes he was writing for the show. One of his frequently asked questions was, “Tell me if you think this is funny.” If our response was less than hoped for he would say, “Come on, that’s funny! You don’t know anything. The audience will love it.” And they almost always did.

In sharing his story, Danny hoped people would find inspiration from his life’s journey and accomplishments. He always said, “It’s not the goal that is the prize, but the journey taken to achieve it.” . . . and oh, what a journey it was!

We dedicate this book to our loving, wonderful and talented husband, daddy, and man.

We were, we are, and will always be, “The 5 G’s.”

—Julie, Amy, Andrew, Emily,  
and, of course, Daniel.

## SID AND ALTA

I was in my dressing room recently, walking through my regular pre-show routine, I imagined the people filing into the theater and following the ushers to their assigned seats. People from every walk of life; from all over the nation and many countries around the world; people who had paid good money to see Danny Gans. It struck me that there is a lot of history stretching between where I started and where I am now, and in order for anyone to really understand my story they need to first know Sid and Alta Gans, my mom and dad.

My parents were entertainers at a time when the Second World War cast a long, dark shadow over our nation. It was a time when people desperately needed something to lift their spirits. With all the upheaval in the world, you wouldn't think that it would have been a great time for music in America.

But it was.

Every major city, and even some not-so-major cities had supper clubs and dance clubs where big band legends like Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington,

and Benny Goodman laid down the soundtrack for an entire generation.

Some of the bands were just bands, but many of them had singers and my mom, Alta Rae, was one of the best. I remember hearing her sing around the house when I was a kid and as I got older I would frequently think how great it would have been to actually be in the audience listening to her sing with a smokin' big band behind her. Man, that would've been something . . . her beautiful voice and amazing good looks, she would've had every guy in the audience eating out of her hand, and every woman jealous.

Had she not done so much performing as a member of the US Army, I'm not sure she would have chosen show business as a career. But her musical success in the service seemed to roll over into civilian life and she never looked back. I remember asking her once whether she had any regrets, anything she would have changed. Her eyes got a faraway look and she smiled. "I always thought it would have been fun to go to New York and do musical theater." I've secretly wondered whether she really had a passion to become a famous singer or if she just wanted to be a mom.

From the time he was a kid my dad, Sid Gans, dreamed of being a professional baseball player. At Brooklyn College he was a standout first baseman who eventually signed with the St. Louis Browns (now the Cardinals) and was sent to one of their minor league teams. He played first base, had a great batting average and was well on his way to success. But the thing about

being an athlete, especially in team sports, is that things happen unexpectedly — good things and bad things.

It was just another day, just another game. A batter stepped into the box and hit a pop fly off the first pitch. Both the catcher and my dad charged after the ball and neither saw the other coming. One minute dad was a professional baseball player with a bright future, the next he was on the ground with a mangled shoulder! Unfortunately, they didn't have the innovations in physical therapy in the early forties that we have now, so even with extensive rehabilitation, he developed severe bursitis.

His career was over.

Dad was down, but he didn't stay down. He just kept repeating what he would preach to me years later, "Ya gotta believe." And he did . . . he believed in himself. It wasn't easy. His dream of being a professional baseball player had ended and after spending many agonizing weeks wondering what was left, he realized he had an extraordinary ability to make people laugh, so he became a comedian.

There was no "quit" in my dad.

Back then entertainers didn't have a personal agent. Every city had one agent who handled all the talent coming through. Really, though, it was the club owners who called the shots. Even if you had a two-week contract, you could be legally terminated at any time solely at the discretion of the club owner.

In his early to mid-twenties, my dad was working at clubs in Chicago, New York, and Detroit. He was a comedian first, but he also sang and danced — a real

all-around entertainer. An agent booked him in New York for two shows a night. The first show didn't go well and the club owner pulled him aside and told him if he didn't have a better second show, he was gone.

At the time Dad drank and partied hard, but never before a show. The bad news from the club owner left him feeling so desperate he went over to the bar and sat down.

The bartender took one look at him and said, "Man, what's wrong with you?"

"I'm really nervous because I need this job, and the owner is going to cut me if the second show doesn't go over big."

The bartender poured a shot and shoved it toward him. "Sounds like you could use a drink."

My dad took the drink, downed it and the bartender said, "Let me fix you one more."

One thing led to another and he got pretty drunk. When the second show rolled around my dad went out and just killed the audience — they loved him. From that point on he believed that in order to be funny he needed to drink before his shows.

Years later, after Dad had retired from show business, he was asked to do a routine for a fundraiser at our high school. He went out on stage without having had anything to drink, did his act, and the audience went crazy. He walked off stage, the applause still ringing in his ears, barely choking back the emotion. He found an empty stairwell, sat down on one of the steps and started sobbing.

In remembering that night he told me, “I spent twenty years of my life thinking that alcohol made me funny, when all along it was me. I was funny without the booze!”

Dad used to say, “Alcohol and drugs might give you a moment of courage, but you have to find out who you are on your own. Don’t let what happened to me happen to you!” It was a message he reinforced continually throughout my youth.

My mom and dad weren’t nationally famous, but they worked consistently and made a decent living. One week in 1946 they both wound up working in Detroit — Dad was headlining at the 5100 Club and my mom was singing with a band at a club down the street. Each club had two shows a night in exactly the same time slots, which, of course made it impossible for the two of them to ever connect. But as fate would have it, the organizers for a big convention bought all the tickets for both shows at the club where mom was working and requested one performance in the earlier time slot. When they finished, mom, along with the band members, decided to go down the street and see the show at the 5100 Club.

My dad’s show was structured so at some point he’d leave the stage and go into the audience to talk to the people, sort of make them part of the act. That night he was doing his talk-to-the-audience thing when he turned around and saw my mom. Rita Hayworth was a big star in motion pictures at the time and from photographs I’ve seen, she and mom could’ve been twins. Sid took one look at beautiful Alta and was a goner. He

gradually worked his way over to her table, started talking to her, and after a few minutes turned around to the audience and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to the future Mrs. Gans." Of course everyone laughed at the joke, but two weeks later they were married in Ohio. And that's no joke!

The new Mr. and Mrs. Gans teamed up right away and put together an act that allowed each of them to shine — Dad telling his jokes and Mom singing. They hit the road and after five years their travels led them to Los Angeles, because Dad thought there might be a chance to get into television. TV, however, demanded a particular type of material and my dad's comedy just didn't play well to a television audience. Mom and Dad both began to sense that maybe the time had come to get out of show business, especially my mom, who, by then was anxious to start a family.

After they had been in L.A. for a short time, Mom read an article in the newspaper about home sites that were being developed in Torrance and how veterans could get great loans. Since she was a veteran, they got a loan and bought one of those homes — a three-bedroom, two-bath house with a detached two-car garage . . . the "American dream."

Around the same time my dad met someone who worked for Emerson-Dumont, a company that supplied televisions, radios, and record players to major furniture and department stores.

"Listen, Sid," the man said. "If you ever want to take a break from show business, you should consider being a salesman. With your personality you could make a lot

of money . . . way more than you'll ever make in show business." So, while their house was under construction, my dad tried it and was so successful he quit show business.

With the house and newfound financial stability, Dad and Mom started talking seriously about starting a family.

Dad was resolute. "I want two kids, a girl named Peggy and a boy named Danny — who is going to be a major league baseball player."

My dad the prophet!

It wasn't long before my sister Peggy joined the family, followed four years later by me, Dad's little baseball player.

Some of my earliest memories are of Dad playing baseball with me. In fact, I have pictures of me in diapers with a glove on my hand, which would explain why throughout my childhood everybody called me Danny Baseball. Not Danny Gans, but Danny Baseball. I even remember a few teachers calling, "Danny Baseball?" at the beginning of class when they took roll. When adults would ask me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I'd reply, "I'm going to be the greatest baseball player who ever lived."

Not, I want to be, but I'm going to be.

My dad used to say all the time, "Danny Boy, there are a lot of kids who want to be a major leaguer. But you can't just think about getting there, you also have to think about how great you're going to be . . . ya gotta believe!"

Over and over he told me that getting what I wanted was about how hard I was willing to work and how much I was willing to sacrifice. When other kids were going to the movies, I was in the batting cage working on my swing, fielding ground balls in the infield, or wearing out the grass in the outfield running wind sprints.

Every evening when dad got home from work we'd practice in the street in front of our house. In the summertime the neighbors would come out and sit in their front yards to watch the show. I'd be out there for hours with dad hitting groundball after groundball. Even though I was only a little seven-year-old kid I was like a vacuum — nothing could get by me even when he'd hit it as hard as he could.

That's when we started the ten-year plan.