



Chip Davis

Biography

Grammy® Award winning composer/musician Chip Davis is one of the most successful innovators and entrepreneurs in music today. More than 25 years ago, he transformed popular instrumental music by introducing what has become known as the New Age music genre. By mixing pop music with classical and rock styles, he has given new life to country music and rejuvenated Christmas music with the release of his best-selling series of holiday albums. He is the creator and leading member of the popular recording group Mannheim Steamroller and is founder and president of American Gramophone, his own record company. Though Davis enjoys one of the most intriguing careers in the music business, he has largely remained an enigma.

Undoubtedly one explanation for his relative anonymity – despite having three quintuple platinum, two platinum and nine gold albums with Mannheim Steamroller – is that he's not based on the east or west coasts but right in the middle of the country in Omaha, Nebraska.

"I love creating music," says Davis. "I enjoy the fun of composition, not the challenge of whether it will sell. I make records for the joy of creating sounds that can

make you tap your feet or feel happy or sad. My goal is to make people feel something.”

Louis Davis, Jr. grew up in Sylvania, Ohio and was indeed a “chip” off the old block. His father was a high school music teacher; his mother, Betty, a former trombone player in Phil Spitalny’s All Girl Orchestra. His grandmother, also a music teacher, was Davis’ first teacher, starting him with the piano at age four. He composed his first piece, a four-part chorale when he was six, and began singing in his father’s choir for boys at age ten.

A few years later, Davis became fascinated by electronics, even building an oscilloscope from a kit. “So what did I do with it?” he says. “I analyzed sound waves. I wanted to see how sound looked.” His interest in the mathematical side of science waned, though not in science itself. He returned to music, studying bassoon and percussion. When it came time for college, he attended the University of Michigan music school, where his parents had studied and played in its famous marching band.

Though he grew up in musically and socially turbulent times, Davis says he was “completely insulated from the Sixties, not really aware of pop music. I was completely focused on classical music because I was going to play bassoon in symphonies.” He not only played bassoon in the university concert band, but he also played percussion in the marching band. While not permitted to major in both composition and performance, he took composition lessons outside the school. “I wanted to write music but universities tend to teach the avant-garde rather than classical composition. But it was a very exciting, romantic period.”

He earned his degree in 1969 and was soon hired to tour with the internationally renowned Norman Luboff Choir. “Norman was such a moving force for me musically because he was really the one who opened my mind about being eclectic. I was very, very classical before that and would never have thought of adding synthesizers.”

He also learned to play drums at the age of 23. “People think I am a drummer because that’s what they see me do in Mannheim Steamroller. I’m really a bassoonist. But I do like the idea of playing music without a music sheet.”

He traveled to Omaha for a workshop at the University of Nebraska in the early seventies. There he accepted an offer to arrange and conduct a local production of “Hair.” The show was such a success that the original eight-week commitment became six months. “But I promised myself that I’d never live permanently in Nebraska, it was too flat – and that I’d try anything, but I’d never write country music.”

After the show’s run was over, he worked as a jingle writer for a local advertising agency. One of the 2,000 musical snippets he wrote was for Old Home Bread with ad executive Bill Fries. The radio and TV commercials revolved around fictional truck driver C.W. McCall, his girlfriend Mavis and the Old Home Filler Up and Keep On

Truckin' Café. The ads were so popular (winning a Clio award for advertising excellence) that listeners called radio stations to request them as they would a pop song.

When MGM asked Davis and Fries to cut a single, C.W. McCall and the Old Home Band debuted with “*Old Home Filler Up and Keep On Truckin' Café.*” The song made the Billboard charts. They followed the single with an album. Davis dubbed it techno-country or progressive country and it surely was different – country music with French Horns and big-voiced backup singers. In late 1975, the group's second album, *Black Bear Road*, shot to #12 on the pop chart and the single “*Convoy*” written by Fries and Davis, went gold in two weeks, selling more than a million copies in two months. One of the early and rare crossover country hits, “*Convoy*” eventually sold 10 million singles and even inspired a motion picture starring Kris Kristofferson in 1978.

Ironically however, while C.W. McCall recorded nine albums and sold 10 million copies, the 27 year-old Davis – named Country Music Writer of the Year in 1976 – was returning to the classical pieces he'd written and he began to refine them. As music director at Sound Recorders, an Omaha recording studio, he would trade work hours for studio time and record his own material at night – music he called “18th century classical rock” that combined classical composition, rock rhythms, harpsichords and recorders with electric bass and synthesizers.

“I don't believe in all-acoustic and all electronic, all digital or all analog,” he explains. “My place is where they meet. Music takes place in time; it doesn't stay on a wall. But if it doesn't work in black and white, on a piano, it doesn't work. Technology hasn't changed that.”

Davis tried to sell the album that resulted, *Fresh Aire*, to mainstream record companies. He got comments such as, “Well, we really like the music but we can't sell it because it doesn't fit any category. And besides that, you don't have a group.” But they'd buy a couple of boxes for friends.

He solved the group problem by calling the “band” Mannheim Steamroller. “It sounded modern but it's a classical term. It seemed to embody what I was doing, mixing the classical with rock elements.” The “Mannheim crescendo” was named after an 18th century orchestra known for building intensity by adding layers of sound, color, texture,

other instruments and volume. The technique was designed to “flatten” the listener, so Davis jokingly referred to it as “the steamroller.”

He tackled the marketing problem with equal creativity. In 1974, he founded American Gramophone with Don Sears (who sold his share to Davis 10 years later). He distributed the albums not in record stores but in stereo showrooms. Used to demonstrate home stereo equipment, the first few hundred pressed suddenly brought orders for 20,000 more. Listeners, said, “I like the turntable, but I really want what is playing on it.”

Fresh Aire became an audiophile hit, selling from the U.S. to Japan to Germany. Then, as Davis puts it, “fans named the albums that came after it.” *Fresh Aire* (1975), an instrumental exploration of spring was followed by autumn-inspired *Fresh Aire II* (1977), the summer of *Fresh Aire III* (1979), the winter of *Fresh Aire IV* (1981) and *Fresh Aire V* (1983), a musical portrayal of Johannes Kepler’s mythical trip to the moon in 1609.

With the latter, Davis finally revealed to the public at large that he was responsible for both “Convoy” and “Toccata,” a track that has blown out more speakers than any in recorded music. “Nobody in country knew I was the *Fresh Aire* guy and nobody in the hi-fi world knew I was part of C.W. McCall. I kept it hidden because I thought it’d screw things up. But the reaction was great: You what? That’s wild!”

When Davis announced that his next project was going to be a Christmas album, the industry reaction was less enthusiastic. They noted that Christmas albums were not big sellers, were not played on radio, and were hardly a creative challenge. Davis disagreed. Infusing new life into traditional Christmas music, *Christmas* (1984) has sold more than 5 million copies, “*Deck the Halls*” became a Top 40 Adult Contemporary hit, and “*Stille Nacht* (Silent Night)” was Grammy® nominated for Best Instrumental Arrangement. *A Fresh Aire Christmas* (1988) duplicated the sales of its predecessor.

His concern for the environment is often reflected in his music, so in 1986 Davis released *Saving the Wildlife*. The soundtrack to a PBS special, the album benefited the Species Survival Program dedicated to continuing the bloodline of endangered species. A similarly inspired project originated following the devastating fires at Yellowstone National Park. Davis created a concert tour and an album titled *Yellowstone: The Music of Nature* (1989). At the outset, Davis named the Yellowstone Association a full royalty

partner. This entitles Yellowstone to a percentage of the sales, for the duration of the project. *Yellowstone: The Music of Nature* was certified gold in 1994 with sales in excess of 500,000 units. Davis' total donation to Yellowstone exceeds \$600,000 and is the largest individual contribution in the history of the National Park Service. The National Park Service honored him in 1999, along with Walter Cronkite for their contributions to the parks.

The Fresh Aire Series also continues: *Fresh Aire VI* (1986) was inspired by Greek mythology. An exploration of the nature of the number 7, *Fresh Aire 7* (1990) was awarded the Grammy® for Best New Age Recording – and became the seventh Fresh Aire album to be officially certified gold. So, also, was *Classical Gas*, a collaboration with popular guitarist Mason Williams.

In 1993, Davis released his most personal effort to date, *Impressions*, and in 1994 he was commissioned to write the broadcast theme and additional music for the Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg, Russia. The resulting album, *To Russia With Love*, prompted a tour of 11 cities across the United States.

For the 1995 holiday season, *Christmas in the Aire* became the third installment of Mannheim Steamroller Christmas albums. *Christmas in the Aire* is certified quadruple platinum and climbed to #3 on the Billboard 200.

In 1999 *Mannheim Steamroller Meets the Mouse* was released in collaboration with Walt Disney Records. It is a mixture of old and new Disney songs arranged in the unique Mannheim Steamroller way.

Mannheim Steamroller has appeared on national television broadcasts such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Larry King Live* and *CNN Showbiz Today*.

Davis recently completed the Fresh Aire series with the release of *Fresh Aire 8*. *Fresh Aire 8* is a unique double-sided disc that fully demonstrates the “Art of DVD.” The package also includes a free CD of *Fresh Aire 8*. The DVD contains an interactive game regarding the topics of infinity.

Davis resides with wife and children in a house he designed several years ago set on 100 acres located north of Omaha. “Here I can dream without looking over my

shoulder to see what everyone else is doing,” says Davis. In the living room is the piano his grandmother taught him to play on and one of the harpsichords built by his father. Family is paramount to him: “I never thought I’d enjoy being a dad like I do. It’s shed new light on the quality of life. All I want for my kids is the ability to be passionate toward other human beings, their children, their families and fully enjoy their lives.”

Today Davis remains the same unaffected small-town kid, even with such success that he travels in his private jet. “I never imagined in my wildest dreams that Chip Davis, bassoon player, would be flying in his own plane.”

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