

association.

Praise is not what I have for Bill—just respect and sorrow since he died. I'll never forget him and that grin he had. I miss him today.

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*Gary Smith (The successor to original Chase drummer Jay Burrid appeared on the group's second album, "Ennea." He has since worked with such lights as Vic Damone, John Gary, B.B. King, Survivor and Joe Williams.)*

Dennis Johnson and I played together briefly in a group I formed in Phoenix. The group didn't stay together, but he and I developed a musical kinship and hoped to play together again. That opportunity arrived when Jay Burrid left the Chase band.

I was playing with a rock band called Six Pound Smile in The Crown Room, at the top of The International Hotel (now known as The Las Vegas Hilton), where Elvis was headlining, with Gladys Knight and the Pips performing in the lounge. We used to see the ladies line up outside Elvis' penthouse, and Elvis would watch us from a bussing station in the Crown Room, but that's another story.

Dennis was by now a member of the Chase band and suggested I audition. I flew to Chicago on a Monday we were off, not wanting to cost my band work, and played with Chase. Bill was phenomenal, and the guys were great. Jay was there, and other drummers were waiting outside to audition. After a lengthy session with the band, everyone seemed enthusiastic, and I was told to expect a call. It came down to Willie Ornelas and me, and I got the call on the following Friday to join Chase in the studio that Saturday, at CBS Studios in San Francisco. My Six Pound Smile bandmates were disappointed, but understood when I had to leave on short notice. Willie landed on his feet, becoming the drummer for the Sonny and Cher show.

After we finished "Ennea," I moved to Chicago and began touring with the band. I'll never forget the first three gigs. The first two were tuneups at small venues in college gyms. After the second night I started teasing the guys, saying "So, this is the Big Time?" No one said a thing.

The third show was the U.S. Marines' Toys for Tots Concert in Frankfort, Ky., and we were the headliners. I was asked to go out and make sure my drums were set up properly, and when I got onstage, I saw the huge hall filled to capacity, more than 20,000 people. I grabbed and held onto one of my cymbal stands to steady my nerves. The band came out behind me, and just before Bill counted off the first song, "Open Up Wide," they all turned to me and said in unison, "Hey, Gary, this is the Big Time!"

There were many great experiences, and some very risky ones. On our way to South Africa, we refueled at Idi Amin's Entebbe Airport in Uganda, the scene of the incredible Israeli raid to free hostages just a few years later. We were ushered off

the plane by, and walked a gantlet through, Ugandan soldiers, bristling with ammo and automatic weapons, looking very unfriendly.

Our tour of South Africa included a bush flight into Swaziland, where we went on safari. It was fantastic. When we played Cape Town, doing two "standing room only" shows, we were served lobster and champagne between shows.

I was feeling no pain at the second show, and actually came out from behind the drums and fronted the band for a short while, exhorting the people in the willing crowd to clap their hands.

We also toured Japan, where our concert at Budokan, Tokyo, was televised nationally. We were met at the airport by about 200 reporters, with their flashbulbs going off, and beautiful Japanese girls brought each of us a bouquet of flowers. We had five Top 10 hits in Japan. We had the honor of performing at the Newport Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall in 1972. We followed the great Bill Evans Trio and the ingenious Elvin Jones Trio. On yet another trip to New York, we were guests at the 14th Annual Grammy Awards, where we were nominated for Best New Artist, alongside Bill Withers; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Hamilton, Joe Frank and Reynolds; and the winner that year, Carly Simon. We also played the first rock concert at Radio City Music Hall, a Benefit for the Environment.

Unfortunately, and perhaps prophetically, we had a number of dangerous incidents on small planes, including a "touch and go" on an iced runway at Palwaukee Airport in Wheeling, Ill.; "side slipping" onto a runway at a closed college airport with visibility less than 200 feet; narrowly missing an outdoor movie theater screen on takeoff; stopping just short of a 60-foot drop onto a freeway on an aborted takeoff; and other equally hair-raising close calls.

I was lucky to have left the band before the tragic fatal accident that took the life of the incomparable Bill Chase, his bandmates, pilot and copilot. I rehearsed with some of the members that recorded "Pure Music," and Bill asked me to stay on, but I reluctantly decided against continuing to play with the band.

Fate was kind to me that day.

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*Jay Sollenberger (The former Stan Kenton trumpeter reminisced about his days with the Chase group with trumpeter-arranger John La Barbera at an International Trumpet Guild symposium in 1997.)*

**John La Barbera:** Are there any trumpet tips you picked up from Bill that you'd like to pass along?

**Jay Sollenberger:** Well, he always warmed up. Sometimes not for very long, but he'd always play one high note to make sure he had it before he went onstage. That's because he started each concert with a cadenza solo. He'd start improvising and playing a little bit higher, and when he was ready, we'd kick off the tune.