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Mannheim Steamroller founder feels personal link to band he created

Group brings popular holiday show to town

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
Thursday, December 9, 2010 - 12:01 am

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Quiz time: What group is the No. 1-selling Christmas music artist of all time, with more than 27 million Christmas albums sold, while also being awarded 16 gold, seven platinum and four multi-platinum albums?

The same band took its name from an 18th-century musical technique and the city in Germany where Mozart lived. One of two touring Mannheim Steamroller Christmas shows will perform Wednesday at the Embassy Theatre.

Mannheim Steamroller is the brainchild of composer Chip Davis. He created the group in the 1970s as a way to get his music — a unique blend of classical, jazz, rock and synthesizers — to the record-buying public via his own record label, American Gramophone.

Early successes

The group, which is credited with establishing the New Age music genre, first gained success by releasing an album called “Fresh Aire” in 1975, followed by several successful volumes.

Beginning in 1984, Mannheim Steamroller released a string of tremendously successful Christmas albums (and tours). The group's total record sales in all music genres surpasses 40 million to date.

Davis no longer performs on tour, however, because of injuries suffered in a traffic accident. He instead focuses on writing and recording music and producing the tours from his home base in Omaha, Neb.

The upcoming show at the Embassy will be more of a musical experience than a typical show, Davis said in a telephone interview.

“The way I’ve constructed it is, of course, the music is the driving force,” he said. “But then everything else hinges on that, like the lighting is synchronized with certain parts of the music.

“There’s a lot of video content and slides and different things that match up with certain feelings that are going along with the music,” he said. “The audio experience is a combination of not only the live musicians and the orchestra, but also special effects that are pre-recorded. It’s kind of an all-encompassing ... experience.”

Personal connection

Because Davis is hands-on in all aspects of Mannheim Steamroller, from composing the music to creating the live shows to marketing, he feels a personal connection to the project, especially the music.

“Each song is kind of like having a child, you know,” Davis said of making his music. “Once you get each one done, they all have kind of their own personality. I’ve composed all the pieces that I’ve ever written ... here at my house, so it’s all very personal to me.

“I do all the instruments for the most part myself, with the exception of if I have something specialized, like a long violin solo.

“Once I get it all done, I get it to the point of being in record form,” Davis added. “But then to do live performance — and, as you know, we have two companies of Mannheim out, plus the Universal Grinchmas that’s going on simultaneously — I have to have a number of schooled musicians that know the repertoire pretty well.”

Healing therapy

Davis also recently created a music-therapy system called Ambient Therapy, which takes relaxation music and combines it with natural sounds.

Ambient Therapy helps people heal who are recovering from various forms of illness and is used by Mayo Clinic, Wake Forest and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, as well as the National Intrepid Center of Excellence, a new facility in Bethesda, Md., that treats service men and women who have traumatic brain injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder.

“We get great feedback from them,” Davis said of patients who’ve heard Ambient Therapy. “Some of the typical things I’ve heard from very critically ill people is



More Information

Concert

What: Mannheim Steamroller in concert

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Embassy Theatre, 121 W. Jefferson Blvd.

Cost: \$28, \$48 and \$68. Tickets available at the Embassy box office, Ticketmaster outlets, www.ticketmaster.com and 1-800-745-3000.

Listen in

To hear audio excerpts of our interview with Chip Davis of Mannheim Steamroller, go to www.news-sentinel.com and click the Entertainment link and then on this story.

that it takes them away. It reminds them, particularly the nature algorithms ... of their childhood.

“It’s also great as a pain distracter, helps keep pain away,” he said. “We’ve done some pain tests with it. ... We see them without ambience being up around an 8 or 9 (on a pain scale of 1 to 10), and, with ambience, they can be down like around 4. It does have a definite impact.”

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With all his success with his music, Davis is most satisfied he has passed along his love of music to his three children, continuing a music legacy that has spanned several generations.

“I’ve written pieces for each one of my children,” he said. “I’m a third-generation musician on both sides of my family. My mother played in the NBC Symphony in the ‘40s, and my father played in the big service bands like the Glenn Miller era. And both of my grandmothers were piano teachers.

“So, now, to see my kids — I had my grandmother’s piano restored sitting next to a harpsichord my father built — to see my kids sit down and play the instruments (is really satisfying).”