

STRIKE UP THE BAND

Rich Daniels Has Lifetime Love of Music

By Ken O'Brien, *Special to the Tribune*

AS A TEENAGER, RICH DANIELS was out of tune with his rock 'n' roll generation. As he grew up on Chicago's South Side in the 1970s, he played the saxophone, his connection to the Big Band and swing music perfected by the likes of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman.

"I was attracted to that music more so than the music that was popular during my teenage years. In their day, (the big bands) were as popular as the Beatles or the (Rolling) Stones or anything else in the last 30 years. It was not incongruous to like that music because 17-year-olds were the first ones to find appeal in that music in the '30s and '40s and make it popular."

Today, Daniels, 39, takes the melodies he loved in his youth to as many audiences as possible as a composer, arranger, saxophonist and bandleader. The Evergreen Park resident is the conductor of the City Lights Orchestra, a 32-piece band (including a full string section), which plays George Gershwin and Woody Herman, Miller and Goodman, as well as tunes from Hollywood film scores and Broadway shows. The band makes its living playing at corporate affairs and at gigs for politicians and charities in the Chicago area. It also has backed up singers such as Ray Charles, Mel Torme, Michael Bolton and Dionne Warwick and comedians Jay Leno and Rich Little.

"Our clients tell us that they are crazy about Rich Daniels and the orchestra," said Jan Schunk, a partner in Carmel Music & Entertainment, LLC, an Evanston company that has been the orchestra's exclusive booking agent for about six years. "Some of the reasons are that (they) have great versatility, provide great showmanship, have fantastic musical arrangements, are easy to work with and are very professional."

Daniels grew up as the only child of Richard and Virginia Daniels, who lived in the Wrightwood neighborhood of Chicago and belonged to St. Thomas More Catholic Church. Inspired by jazz saxophonist Boots Randolph, he began playing when he was 10 years old.



RICH DANIELS: *"My parents were not musicians. But my father loved music, and growing up I was surrounded by it in the house."*

"I felt like it was something I was supposed to do," he said. "My parents were not musicians. But my father loved music, and growing up I was surrounded by it in the house. I took a real liking to it. It just came to me naturally. The basics came very quickly to me. It was never work; it was something I loved doing."

It was all but subliminal, because at age 3 he was put to bed with Big Band or swing tunes on the family phonograph, according to his parents, who now live in Palos Park. Even so, "I didn't think he would develop the way he did as a musician," his father said. "But he surprised me."

In August 1974, he joined with 12 other teenagers to form the Back Beat Boogie Band. Members attended Catholic all-boys high schools such as St. Laurence, St. Rita and Brother Rice, where Daniels played in the sax in the concert band; girl members attended Mother McAuley High School. In spring 1975, the band landed one of its first major gigs, a fundraiser for former Ald. Thomas Keane, featuring guest of honor Mayor Richard J. Daley. (The band over the years has done many performances for Mayor Daley the younger as well).

In 1976, the group expanded to 18 pieces and

continued on other side

changed its name to the Big Band Machine; in 1990, it became the City Lights Orchestra.

Daniels, who graduated from Brother Rice in 1978, earned a bachelor's degree in music composition from the DePaul University School of Music in 1983. Daniels became conductor of the Big Band Machine in 1976 and has been the conductor of the City Lights Orchestra since its founding.

"Conducting came to me naturally," he said. "The conductor is the Elmer's Glue that holds it all together . . . The motions are sometimes important, sometimes they are just getting you to the next spot where the musicians need to look up and take notice of some information."

Chris Lay of Chicago, a trombone player, joined the group in the 1970s. Lay, a freelance musician, plays with the orchestra and helps write music for corporate events.

"Rich is one of the best people to work with in live music in Chicago," Lay said. "His depth of knowledge in general music is incredible, and he knows more songs by memory than anyone I know."

"He is a complete package," Lay said of Daniels' talents as a sax player, conductor and composer. "That is what sets him apart, and it is what makes him successful."

Jim Widlowski of Park Ridge, another freelancer, has played drums for the orchestra since the mid-1980s. "I have worked with a lot of different people, and Rich is fair and seems genuinely concerned about the people he works with," Widlowski said. "He is my boss and at the same time he is friend, and that is unusual."

As band leader, Daniels has several roles, including hiring the musicians and arranging the music. Each year, the orchestra has about 200 performance dates, 80 percent of them between April and New Year's Eve. The cost of booking City Lights depends on the day of the week, time, location and number of members required; it may range from thousands to tens of thousands of dollars, Daniels said.

The orchestra's corporate client list includes McDonald's, General Motors and the Cubs. The band also has played many functions for the Chicago Federation of Labor.

"Don't confuse what I do with Daniel Barenboim (conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra)," Daniels said. "What he conducts is

concert literature for the symphonic audience. I conduct music for the corporate shows, which requires different skills. Quick starts and stops. Making subtle changes."

In June, the orchestra was the main act for the official Chicago tribute to the late Frank Sinatra, held at the Petrillo Band Shell in Grant Park. City Lights has been invited to perform at the Taste of Chicago and, in 1995, for a welcome concert when the official 1996 Olympic Torch came through the city.

"Rich Daniels is the consummate profession-

scenes. Rich has become a conduit for bringing all sorts of help to Mercy Home."

Music is also part of Daniels' family life. In 1977, he and Kathy McNicholas performed in an all-star band with musicians from other Catholic high schools in Chicago during a concert at Mother McAuley. Both were in the alto sax section, separated by 12 chairs.

"She remembered me as this hot-shot sax player," he recalled with a laugh.

They began dating after he performed at a 1982 parish show at St. Linus in Oak Lawn in



al," said Willie Winters, program coordinator for the Mayor's Office of Special Events. "He very much understands our needs. On top of that, the band members are extremely talented musicians."

Daniels, a parishioner at Holy Redeemer Church in Evergreen Park, said the orchestra's schedule includes many events with religious overtones, including a 1997 reception in honor of the visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Greek Orthodox Church. He also likes to help Catholic causes, performing at fundraisers for Chicago's Mercy Home for Boys and Girls, an organization that serves neglected and troubled youth. Daniels has served on the Mercy Home's board of directors for two years.

"Rich is a tremendously talented Chicagoan, and I underscore Chicagoan because he believes he is part of Chicago and that he must give back to Chicago in many ways," said Mark Mroz, a spokesman for the Mercy Home. "He is truly a giving man, and he does so much work behind the

which McNicholas sang and danced. They married in 1987 and now have two pianos and four children—Richie, 9; Mary Kate, 8; Emily, 5; and Maggie, 3. Mary Kate is taking piano lessons, and Richie wants to take saxophone lessons when he is old enough next fall.

"Music is such a significant part of our lives," Kathy Daniels said. "Rich is always introducing us to new kinds of music. It brings a lot of life and happiness into our home."

Rich Daniels said he finds time to enjoy music while working in his office late into the night. Just playing a compact disc, he said, reminds him why he loves music.

"I just get lost inside the music," he explained. "Remembering every reason that drew me to this in the first place, which had nothing to do with money or notoriety or anything. It can still take me back and make me realize how valuable this can be and how much I want to pass it—the love of music—along to my kids, because it can be so rewarding."