

## Chapter One

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Proverbs 22:6.

Some of my earliest memories are of my father returning home from his engagements. He was a disc jockey and an entertainer. When I would see him on stage sometimes with well-known entertainers, my heart would swell with pride. I thought he was the greatest, and my great desire in life was to be just like Dad.

As far back as I can remember I had wanted to play the guitar. I started playing at the age of five, and when I was six I started learning notes. By eight I was playing at school functions. By nine I was competing in state fairs. In these competitions we not only played, we had to write our own music. Because of my training, this came relatively easy for me. I won the first and second awards for my age groups in the state of Illinois.

By the time I turned twelve I was playing in groups, and I went professional at thirteen. So already at this tender age I was well on my way to following in my father's footsteps. Well, maybe not quite in his footsteps. I was offered a contract at the Grand Ole Opry, but I turned it down. Dad was angry with me for refusing it, but I wasn't interested in country-western music. I was of the now generation - I wanted to play rock.

Ours was a Christian family - a typical Southern Baptist home. Though my family was not overly religious, we always went to church on Sunday - all except Dad. He was away from home a lot. My mother and my grandmother told me

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that someday Jesus would come again in the clouds of heaven. I always remembered that, even when later I had drifted into some very worldly and unchristian habits.

At fourteen I began smoking. I saw all the others of my age group doing it, so I took up the habit. I grew up in a rough neighborhood. You will understand just how rough when I tell you that when I was fifteen, three men attacked me and Larry - one of my friends. Two of the three beat me unmercifully with a lead pipe, while the other one kicked Larry's ribs in. The last thing I remember before losing consciousness was looking over at my friend and screaming, "Oh, Larry!"

Four and a half hours later I regained consciousness. I had severe head wounds and a broken nose and jaw. My face was a mess. In the hospital for four months, I lost the reflexes in my legs. I underwent shock treatments to regain the reflexes in my legs - and also to help to overcome depression. Shock treatments, I learned, are not used just for mental illness. I began to experience frequent blackouts as one of the lingering effects of the beating. Larry's lung had been punctured by the broken ribs.

The Lord has been gracious enough to spare my life five times. That was the first time. Later I found out through the grapevine who had attacked us, but not why. Just for kicks, I guess.

After I recovered I dropped out of school and resumed my musical career. Several of us formed a group which we called the Rocking JL's. Before long a survey showed us to be number-one group in the St. Louis area.

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My father gave up his career because he had to be away from home so much of the time. He didn't adjust very well to the change from being a superstar to being a nobody, so he started drinking heavily.

I married at seventeen and became a father at barely eighteen. It's a big responsibility to be a husband and a father at that age.

Our group became very popular. We were touring all over the eastern United States, so I had to be away from home a lot. I wasn't happy about being away from my family so much, even though we were playing with some of the big stars of that time such as James Brown and Joe Cochran, who were in big-name bands. We also did USO tours.

I knew I couldn't be the kind of husband and father I wanted to be and still stay in show business. So I quit for three years, but I was not happy. Something was missing in my life. I found myself remembering the applause and the look of hero worship in the eyes of the fans. More and more I felt a need for the adulation of the crowds and for the sense of power my music gave me.

I knew I could still make people do anything I wanted them to do. I could make them laugh, cry - anything. Our group could produce any mood we chose in the audience. Never underrate the power of music. Believe me, it is very real. And the power behind the music we played was evil.

After struggling for three years with a desire to return to the stage, I decided to go back. For two reasons I chose to make a new start in California. One was my career. I thought I might have a better chance there. And the other was my children. We were expecting another child, and I wanted my

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children to have a better life than I had when I was growing up. The part of St. Louis where I grew up was very rough, and Fd had my fill of fighting. As a child, I had to fight my way to and from school every day. You had to fight or you didn't survive. Also there was a lot of racial prejudice there, and because of my upbringing I, too, was very prejudiced. I wanted my children to be different - to grow up without prejudice.

So I went to California and lived with my sister. One day a neighbor invited me to listen to a group.

"We are not happy with our bass player," he said. "He uses acid (LSD) when he is playing. By the way, do you use any kinds of drugs?"

I told him I only smoked a little pot (marijuana) once in a while. At that time I didn't see any harm in it, not realizing it could lead to stronger drugs.

"If you like our group, maybe you could join us," he invited.

So I went to hear them and was very impressed. I tried out, and they liked my playing, so I joined the group. That's how I met Perry Diller - Phyllis Diller's son. I hadn't been told that he was a member of the group before I went to hear them, because they knew I would come just to meet him. I was almost in shock when I discovered that Perry was the son of Phyllis Diller, the comedienne. Through this group I began meeting a lot of Hollywood stars and their sons. I was on top of the world! My goal in life was to become a superstar and a millionaire, and these were the right people to know. It would definitely help my career to be seen with celebrities.

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By now I had begun drinking a little. But I wasn't worried about my pot smoking and my drinking. I thought I could control them. I believed that, in spite of the fact that my father had died of cirrhosis of the liver, emphysema, and kidney failure brought on by alcohol and cigarettes. The devil knew what he was doing. He used my desire to be recognized in the music world and to be like the friends I associated with to get me in his clutches.

We formed a group which included Perry Diller and Mickey Rooney's son. We called it BAM - from Believe All Magic, the title of a book we had read. We thought it was a catchy title - BAM, right on! In three months we had a chance to play on the "Johnny Carson Show," but we turned it down because we thought we were not ready yet. Two weeks later we had another offer from Las Vegas, but we turned it down too because Perry felt they were trying to capitalize on his name. In show business it seems that everyone is trying to capitalize on someone else's name. It's a dog-eat-dog business, and Perry said that anything he did would have to be accomplished on his own merit, not on the fact that he was Phyllis Diller's son. I really admire him for that. They were going to bill us as Rooney, Diller, and the BAMs; so we could see what they were doing - using famous names to draw a crowd.

We started playing in small clubs, so we had to rehearse more. We practiced six hours a day, seven days a week. This was a strenuous schedule, so I felt the need of more marijuana to keep me going. I still thought I could control it. Pot was just something to make me feel good. We performed four hours a day, six days a week. I was getting more and

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more tired, and I tried to make up for my lack of rest by drinking beer - lots of it. I hadn't started hard liquor yet. I also began taking diet pills and speed to pick me up. I was so tired I needed something to keep me going. This was all just a temporary thing (so I thought), to help me reach my goal. I was on my way to becoming a superstar, and I wasn't going to let anything stand in my way. I was now with the right people and was about to achieve my objective in life.

In 1971 our group went on tour in the southern United States. Then the next year we thought we were ready to go international. We'd had offers to play on the "Merv Griffin Show" and the "Johnny Carson Show," but we had turned them down. Now we were ready. Our first big break came on the "Merv Griffin Show." Burl Ives was on it, Rita Hayworth - and Phyllis Diller. This came as a complete surprise to us. It wasn't our idea. We had wanted to make it on our own merit. But our agent knew people would come to see Phyllis Diller and out of curiosity to see what her son was like.

We could hear people asking, "Which one is Phyllis Diller's son?" A lot of people thought I was Perry, because I was up front and a big ham. Probably my secret hope was that someday the fans would ask, "Which one is Danny Casson?" And someone would answer, "The tall, handsome one who plays bass guitar." I didn't have a famous mother, but I was certain I could make it. Right then I thought the whole world was mine.