

Pete Sears of Jefferson Starship

Rock musicians not all alike

By Suzanne Barnes
Gazette entertainment editor

Rock musicians spend all their time off stage taking drugs and indulging in wild orgies with groupies — right?

Wrong, at least in the case of Pete Sears, bass and keyboard player with The Jefferson Starship, which is scheduled to perform tonight at 8 p.m. at the Five Seasons Center.

Although he admitted that he "used to smoke a lot of marijuana and take other drugs," Sears told The Gazette in a recent telephone interview that "the odd beer is fine with me now."

"I haven't smoked or taken drugs in six years," he said, adding that he now wants to be able to feel all of his emotions and know that the feelings are real.

What about the groupies? Sears' groupies now consist of his wife, Jennette, and 2-year-old son, Dylan. But he recalled an earlier time — he started performing in London in 1964 — when female fans would "start screaming and tearing their clothes off. They didn't know who you were, but when they saw you walk out of a TV studio, they figured you must be somebody."

"Groupie thing" starting

"This band doesn't have that image," he said. "We get older

Yipes in concert at Five Seasons

The rock group Yipes will be the opening act for Jefferson Starship at tonight's concert. The previously announced Rory Gallagher canceled his appearance Friday. Yipes is known for its album, "Yipes," which includes the singles "Out in California," a satire on West Coast life, and "Russian Roll," a satire on the Kremlin.

Tickets to the concert are available for \$8 in advance and \$9 at the door. The Five Seasons Center box office opens at noon today.

people that enjoy the band — but," he conceded, "we are beginning to get the groupie thing."

The beginning of "the groupie thing" Sears attributes to the appeal of drummer Aynsley Dunbar, one of two new members of Starship. He joins Paul Kantner, rhythm guitar and vocals and one of the co-founders of Jefferson Airplane; Craig Chaquico, guitar; David Freiberg, bass, keyboards and vocals, and Mickey Thomas.

Thomas, best known for his "Fooled Around and Fell in Love" (recorded with Elvin Bishop), re-

places Grace Slick, former Airplane-Starship lead singer.

What happened to Grace?

"Grace had a serious drinking problem," Sears answered quietly. "When she had too much to drink, there was a drastic change in her personality. It made it difficult to get along with her musically. She would sing flat and not come in at the right times."

Association ended

But Grace did make an attempt to overcome her problem. And the other members of Starship were patient. Sears recalled the July 1978 incident that ended their association:

"She hadn't been drinking for quite a few years on stage. She was really trying hard to kick it and we had some good tours."

But the good tours brought pressure for another album. And another album meant more tours. The group eventually went to Germany to perform.

"We did a gig on the Rhine River," Sears said. "Things were going quite well before that."

"Grace was sick, really sick, and couldn't go on stage. The promoter announced that to the audience."

The audience, which had been sitting in a light drizzle all afternoon, was told they could have the money for their tickets back or return when the Starship could reschedule the concert.

"Blazing Inferno"

Sears said, "I think the promoter was a bit shady. You know, advertising bands without actually booking them."

The result: The audience began to riot.

"Bricks were thrown, and rocks and bottles. They were getting gasoline from their cars. The stage was a blazing inferno — it looked like a war."

"We lost all our guitars, every single instrument and amplifier."

After the melee was over, the band took their bus to their next concert. Grace flew.

"She turned up drunk and proceeded to abuse the audience," he recalled. "It was a very sad thing to see, a real breakdown. The audience didn't know or understand what was happening. They probably thought we were a punk rock group or something. She was just so upset."

The group broke up with Paul Kantner and Grace doing solo albums. Sears played some blues piano on one of Grace's albums and did another with Rod Stewart.

Starship album

It wasn't Sears' first recording session with Stewart. He also was involved in "Every Picture Tells a Story," "Gasoline Alley" and "Never a Dull Moment."

The Starship eventually regrouped with the new lineup. It currently has a new album, "Freedom at Point Zero," that's beginning to climb the charts steadily. "Jane," a single from that album, is on the same upward swing.

Sears' wife wrote the lyrics for "Awakening" and "Fading Lady," two more singles from "Freedom," and co-authored "Just the Same" with Chaquico.

In spite of new members, is Starship the same?

"We've lost our San Francisco acid rock image," Sears said. "We're trying to cut down on time between numbers. There's none of that shooting up all the time with everyone stoned on acid."

"Airplane fans may prefer the old group," he continued. "But everyone that's coming to see us, well, their reaction is just great."

The band doesn't use any special effects during their concert appearances, other than a good lighting system. Sears said that "a moog synthesizer sets the mood — a science fiction type mood," and then the band comes on.

"We come on stage and we could be either great or bad, it's new music. We can be better some nights than others, but we can't sink below a certain point unless everything goes wrong."



The Jefferson Starship, which will appear in concert at the Five Seasons Center tonight at 8 p.m., is made up of, from left, Pete Sears, Mickey Thomas, Craig Chaquico (rear), Paul Kantner, David Freiberg and Aynsley Dunbar.

Al Downing doesn't ask to hear rockets

By Joe Edwards

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — "I don't want to hear rockets," big Al Downing says about his new career in country music. "Just an occasional boom."

After forays into disco, rock 'n' roll, rhythm and blues and gospel music, Downing has become one of the few black singers in country music.

Downing, 39, has had two songs reach the Top 20 of the country music charts in the past year — "Mr. Jones" and "Touch Me."

His success has triggered comparisons with Charley Pride, country music's No. 1 black star.

"People say, 'You're trying to be another Charley Pride,' or, 'I love Charley Pride and you sound just like him,'" said Downing, a blue cowboy hat and shiny brown boots enclosing his 6-foot-3, 275-pound frame.

"It's not my intention to be another Charley Pride," he said. "We're different; his voice is light and mine is real booming. I write all my material and I don't think he does."

The genial Downing, who lives in Spencer, Mass., has encountered no prejudice in the mostly white country music business.

"I've been to Louisiana and Alabama, all those places, and all colors come up and hug me. I think if you are sincere in your music, color has nothing to do with it."

Just four years ago, Downing had a No. 1 disco hit in the United States and Europe, "I'll Be Holdin' On." But the record company associated with it folded and he never made a penny off the song.

"Disco is too much of a rat race," he said, explaining why he's no longer doing that style music. "If you have one hit but don't have two or three more, you're forgotten in two months. And the market is flooded with people. I've got to have room to breathe."

Al Downing



Not long after his disco hit, he was in a recording studio clowning around and singing country music. A record producer liked it and Downing began cutting country songs.

"All my life I've been wanting to get into country music," Downing said in an interview over breakfast before taping the "Hee Haw" syndicated television show. "But I never could get anyone interested in me as a country artist."

In the 1960s, Downing was primarily a rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll singer. Prior to that, he sang gospel music with members of his family. All told, he's been singing professionally for 25 years.

"It's been a long, hard pull all the way," he said. "In a way, I'm glad I didn't have success early. I would have come up with a Cadillac and fancy suits and spent all that money for nothing."

"Now, I don't need that to realize I'm successful. I can sit back and enjoy it rather than go out and live real high. Anyhow, I'm a Capricorn and we're successful later in life."

"Eating 10-cent hot dogs and working seven days a week taught me to be humble and take nothing for granted. Music has been an education; it's taught me a lot."



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