



Darryl Dixon Dave Watson

Chops Horns

interview by Skip Spratt

Chops Horns – Featuring Darryl Dixon and Dave Watson
By Skip Spratt

Chops Horns, featuring saxophonists Darryl Dixon and Dave Watson, has been on the rebound. Following a stunning world tour with Alicia Keys, the duo just recorded the song “Impossible” on Christina Aguilera’s newest album. Alicia Keys’ 2002 tour ran from January 22 through November 15, encompassing 67 dates in the states and 35 overseas. She hit 13 countries in eight weeks on her European tour. The seasoned duo admits they’re looking ahead into potential tours with other acts such as Mariah Carey and Stevie Wonder, yet the next move remains to be seen.

“It’s a win-win situation. We got a chance to get out there again and Alicia got our expertise. She and the band obviously respect our experience. She has a young band full of great players. They call us the veterans. We are always on time... We’re the road dogs and we know what to do. Even the musical director would come to us for advice behind closed doors,” Dave said.

Darryl’s 15-year-old daughter Dominique has seen the Alicia Keys’ concert twice. “I fall into the category of ‘cool dad’ now. I’m hip again according to my daughter,” he said.

Presently, three trumpet players, two trombone players and one sax player complete the section at any given time.

Darryl Dixon and Dave Watson have been working together as Chops Horns since 1978, taking a somewhat unconventional path to success. They have seen the best and the worst of the music business in the past 25 years, yet they are on top once again.

The two saxophonists met in college while going to Jersey City State College (now New Jersey City University). At the time, Darryl was doing sessions with horns in Philly, demo and R & B stuff. There was a trumpet player named Marvin Daniels and a trombone player named Melvin El that he was working with at the time. They knew Gamble and Huff and the TSOP crowd but they weren’t two of the regular session guys. Later, they did some work for them here and there.

Dave was working for Savoy Records out of Elizabeth, N.J., doing gospel recordings. James Perry, a heavy gospel piano player and former classmate at Jersey City State, had gotten Dave to put a horn section together. Naturally, he went to his recent college buddies – Rick Freestat, Doug Rothhauser, Conrad Zulloff and Darryl – to assist in the recordings.

It was Darryl's proposal to have Marvin, Melvin, Darryl and Dave be one section that could cover both the gospel work in Elizabeth and the pop/R&B sessions in Philly.

The first time the four of them got together as a section was magical. It was at a rehearsal for a demo recording in Philly. Darryl and Melvin were the major arrangers for the section at the time. Darryl and Dave concede that out of laziness or some other reason, Darryl had handed out music without any articulations. Dave remembers, "We sounded like one horn. Being that we had all grown up playing the funk and had a little jazz overtone, we just happened to phrase the exact same way...It was a magic kind of thing...We knew that we were the guys to keep this section going."

They all had their own recording accounts. Marvin was working with Philly International. Melvin was working with some gospel accounts in Philadelphia. Darryl had just come back from Los Angeles where he had worked with the Funkadelics, Patrice Rushen and the Richard Pryor Band. Business-wise, they all contributed to getting the work and Chops was born.

When talking about the "feel" that certain musicians have, Darryl said it best, "I think all musicians and singers like to feel that what they are doing with their music is moving people. Black music has always moved people in a spiritual way. I think that every musician, white or black, likes to feel that they do that to people. That's what they live for. They want to move people in some way."

The talented duo talked at length about their work, sometimes echoing thoughts and picking up where the other left off. Dave is the self-proclaimed "mouth" of Chops and did much of the talking.

"Our forte was unisons. Of course, we did harmonies and all that but when we played unisons, it sounded like one horn. We play funk. We enjoy funk...Darryl and I love funk music and we love playing it.

“The attitude is that when you’re in front of somebody, you need to be entertaining. If you want to work in a pit for a Broadway show or do a movie score, you don’t want to be dancing around while you’re cutting the score. But when you’re on stage in front of people, you’re supposed to be entertaining. We move but we don’t get CRAZY. We don’t step as much as Kool and the Gang – if you remember them,” he said.

Their early influences were Kool and the Gang, Tower of Power, Chicago, James Brown – Fred Wesley and Maceo Parker. “You’d be surprised how much work we’ve gotten because we like to dance,” Dave said.

“There’s a lot of stuff you have to do to make money in this business. I work in a wedding band right now; it’s been eight years. Darryl does it too. I’ve played Bar Mitzvahs. I worked at Sears wearing a tuxedo playing at a perfume display. Guys work at the circus...As a musician, you have to do whatever it takes to make ends meet. Most importantly, when you meet someone you can have a musical relationship with for 21 years...that’s real special. We’re two happy guys. To be able to do that and have another chance at it in your mid-40s...we’re two REAL happy guys,” they agreed.

Shortly after forming as a united section, Chops landed the in-house recording contract with Sugar Hill Records and Grand Master Flash in 1979. This was the first time the section enjoyed national exposure through their recordings. The major arranger was Jiggs Chase, a well-known jazz organist from New Jersey. Sylvia and Joe Robinson, who owned Sugar Hill Records, used the same rhythm section, horn section and arranger to cut tracks for all their acts.

Despite playing on some of the earliest rap recordings, Chops Horns opted not to tour with such acts, preferring to stay in the studio. Referring to the wardrobe of early rap stars, Dave said, “We laughed...raccoon tails and shit on clothes. We’re looking at each other like ‘no, these guys aren’t serious.’ It was all a joke to us. We thought it was going to be a flash in the pan.

“I tell you now, if I would have known rap was going to be around for 25 years, I would have been out there saying ‘Hey, hey a hippit d’ hoppit.’ I WOULD HAVE LEARNED SOME RAP! We didn’t respect the medium. We were MUSICIANS and these guys were up there rhyiming...PLEASE! It was just work for us as a horn section.”

After playing on countless dates with Sugar Hill Gang Records in 1979 and 1980, things really took off the following year. In 1981, Chops Horns began a seven-month tour with the hugely successful and critically acclaimed band, The Police, featuring Sting.

“They gave us the freedom to add stuff. They loved it. We were puttin’ James Brown licks to their songs. They had been playing these songs for a long time and were used to hearing them a certain way. So we came along and added this funk element.”

While on tour in Germany just starting to work out the show on tour, Darryl and Dave found their newfound success in jeopardy. Dave told the story, “Darryl loves to write for the section. He likes to have flying horns through everything. I’m like his partner in crime. He’ll write the parts and I love to play them. We were in the dressing room, working on some horn parts to add to one of The Police songs. We heard their manager, Miles Copland, yelling and screaming, ‘What are you doing with these horn players. I thought it was a good idea but they’re killing your sound. You’ve created a monster. Andy sounds like a rhythm guitar player. You’re killing all of his colors. You sound like The James Brown Band. You guys made millions sounding like The Police...’ While he was over there yelling, Darryl looked over at me and said, ‘You know that part we were workin’ on – I guess we can FORGET that!’”

Not realizing that the duo had heard Miles Copland yelling, Sting later confronted the horn section to tell them they needed to cut back on the horn lines. Chops Horns cut what they played for them by 50 percent.

Dave reminisced, “I was just out of college, spending all this time working on getting some chops. I thought, ‘I’m at the best paying gig of my life and I’m playing dah dah dah dit – one world is enough - dah dah dah dit’. A high school kid could have played the horn parts that we were playing on this tour. Think of the name Chops. That’s a pretty ballsy name – Chops. When we came up with that name, we wanted to be able to back it up.”

“Chops has been one of the best kept secrets,” he continued. When we were traveling with The Police in ’81 and ’82, we’d hear some of the Sugar Hill and Grand Master Flash stuff on the radio. Man, we’re touring with one of the biggest rock and roll bands in the world. We’re on the radio. Does it get any better than this? As time went on, I thought it could get better if people

knew who we were. A lot of stars came to hear The Police – Billy Joel, Michael Jackson, Phil Collins . These people heard The Police with horns and said, ‘Hmm, horns are coming back.’ The next time we went to see them, they had a horn section! We got more horn players work in the early ‘80s and never got the credit for it. It was because The Police had a horn section. To make it more novel, they were white and we were black! Here comes a reggae-pop band fusing with a soul-funk horn section. It was somethin’ real interesting. They kept us for 13 months.”

It would be wonderful to hear some of Chops Horns contributions to The Police. Although they never officially recorded with The Police, they did record some tracks for the Top of the Pops show. It seems you couldn’t just lip sync, you had to re-record for that show. To their knowledge, those are the only recordings of Chops Horns with The Police.

“To this day, people keep us on the back of the track on all of the stuff we’ve done. When we first got involved with The Rolling Stones, Mick (Jagger) gave us a song that he said was going to be an instrumental. We asked if we could put a melody on it and go for it. He said, ‘Go for it on this one.’ We had flyin’ horns throughout and the song was just real powerful. They decided to put a vocal on it. It’s on ‘Undercover of the Night’ on a tune called ‘Too Much Blood.’ On the vamp going out with the song fading – the horns come in!”

Despite their efforts to bring the section to the forefront, their sound was relegated to the background once again.

Darryl and Dave feel it’s a shame that the only time you will hear the real Chops is when you check out their album “Chops” on Atlantic Records from 1984. “The real Chops is about a funk horn section having a good time. I’m not going to tell you that we have the same dexterity as the Brecker Brothers. We have our own thing...It’s about having a good time and that’s what we try to relate to in our music.”

There was a song called “All in the Same Boat” where the section tried to combine funk and reggae. The record label decided instead to push another song that sounded like The Gap Band.

Once they were touring and making some real money with The Police, they realized they wanted to invest some money in a project of their own. They

found the drawback to working with such a popular band is that you can fall into a false sense of security. Playing concerts for 250,000 can make you feel that they are all there to see you, not Sting. The stardom and popularity that Chops Horns felt made them want to record and produce their own album. In the words of Dave Watson, “and that my friend, was the beginning to the end.”

It seems that the success of Chops Horns was based on being “background guys.” In hindsight, they feel they should have remained content to be sidemen, rather than looking for a solo career so soon. “That is where we should have stayed until we started getting nationwide recognition,” Dave said, adding, “Working with Sting, performing in front of screaming kids, travelling on a Lear Jet, the limousines and the five star hotels – it went to our heads. At that age you don’t say to yourself, ‘Hey, maybe on the next album they might decide to do something else.’”

“The government took a third of our money, I spent another third on clothes and we all invested the other third into the Chops project for Atlantic Records. After the tour was over, financially, we were back where we started,” Dave said.

It was 1984 when the “Chops” album came out. In just two weeks, Chops Horns were told that their record was a flop. Dave and Darryl seem to have some credible theories on why their first album for Atlantic Records never took off. The bottom line is that it took six years for them to make all the right moves to get a major record deal that never panned out.

“We were ahead of the times. We were too syncopated. We were using the horns in a way that nobody was doing it. It’s based on rhythmic value – taking certain licks and putting them in the place you don’t expect it. We have a signature sound. That’s the best way to put it,” the duo explained.

Melvin hadn’t done The Police tour. They only took three horns – Marvin Daniels, Dave and Darryl. After 1984 and the flop of their album, the section broke up. Not only had the album been a disappointment, but also their long-time section mate Melvin died, leaving them without a trombone player.

“Our trombone player had a drinking problem which killed him. Melvin died from diabetes. He went blind and then died at 28 years old,” Dave said.

The trumpet player, Marvin Daniels, wanted to take the horn section in a different direction, so they opted to part ways with him as well. That was the end of Chops Horns' first life.

Following the break-up of Chops Horns in 1984, Darryl went to work full time at UPS and Dave took a full time teaching job. For 10 years, Dave Watson taught music at Bayonne High School with an assistant band director and a full marching band staff of four people under him. Additionally, he had an award-winning jazz band that he took to the state finals along the way. After his years at Bayonne High School, Dave went to teach at Harrison High School where he ran an entire instrumental and vocal program by himself. The two founding members of Chops would occasionally reassemble to do sessions or local gigs back in New Jersey.

“From '78 to '84, we built a solo career that ultimately flopped. It was kind of like being a boxer being knocked out for the first time. We were both a little apprehensive about getting back out there in the ring this time. We knew that we could be eaten alive again. So, we played it safe. We did local gigs and had our daytime jobs. Slowly but surely, it started eating away at us,” Dave said.

About 2 1/2 years ago, Darryl approached Dave and told him he was leaving UPS, an admittedly good, steady job. Dave was a homeowner enjoying a respectable teaching job with a pension, medical benefits and security. Darryl chose to take a lesser paying job in order to play more. Dave was not in a position to do that at the time, but Darryl planted the seed that would later take root and grow again into the rebirth of Chops Horns. That was when they decided to get together with Joe Romano and Jeff Dieterle to form the new Chops Horns.

The new version of Chops Horns was no longer an all-black horn section as it was back on tour with The Police. They remember, “These were two white horn players that liked funk but they couldn't really play funk. Now, we had to begin to write in articulations and acclimate them to our style of playing – and that happened. They enjoyed it because it was a challenge for them.”

Darryl knew one of the keyboard players from Bobby Douglas who worked in Ray Chew's band at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. The executive producer, David Rodriguez, was in the process of augmenting the band for the reopening of the Apollo after renovations. Originally, the band went up

to play for amateur night and just to sit in on a couple tunes. Ray Chews loved them and kept them on the stage, faking tunes the entire night. It turned out that Ray Chew had put together the original Alicia Keys band back in 1998. Two weeks later, Ray Chew called them to tell them that her musical director, Onree Gill, wanted them to audition for her first headlining world tour. When they walked into the audition at SIR, it was the same exact sound stage they had met The Police in 20 years ago!

Dave remembers saying, “You know, Darryl, we’re getting a second chance. We’re gonna get this gig and I’m gonna leave my teaching gig now.”

Darryl Dixon was set to go out on the road after leaving his job at UPS. Dave Watson did take a leave of absence from his teaching job, but neither Joe Romano nor Jeff Dieterle wanted to leave their teaching jobs. Another trumpet player, Fred Maxwell took a leave of absence from teaching to do the tour as well.

“Now, we are back with the same instrumentation we had with The Police – a trumpet and two saxophones – so everything’s coming around again. Lo and behold, we’ve landed another record deal, but now it’s a European label called Funk to the Max and they want us to play FUNK! (Laughs heartily) So it’s like, THANKYOU JESUS!

“We were destined to do this. It’s going to come to pass – it’s poetic justice.”

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Chops Horns are:

Darryl Dixon-Alto & Soprano Saxes & Flute

David Watson-Tenor & Baritone Saxes & Flute

CHOPS Horns Discography

Parliament-"Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome"-1977**

Quazar-"Quazar"-1978

Mutiny-"Mutiny on the Mamaship" -1979

Mutiny- "Funk Plus the One"-1980

Parliament-"Trombipulation"-1980
The Sugarhill Gang- "The Sugarhill Gang" -1980
The O'Jays-"My Favorite Person"-1980
The Sequence- "Sugarhill Presents The Sequence" -1980
Funky Four Plus One- "That's The Joint" -1981
Crash Crew- "On The Radio" -1981
Kevie Kev- "All Night Long" -1981
The Treacherous Three- "Whip It" -1981
The Sugarhill Gang- "8th Wonder"- 1982
The Sequence- "The Sequence" - 1982
West Street Mob - "Breakdance: Electric Boogie" -1982
Patti Labelle-"I'm In Love Again"-1984*
Various Artists- "Beat Street Soundtrack" Movie Soundtrack 1984*
Yellowman- "King Yellowman" -1984
Parliament- "Greatest Hits (The Bomb)" -1984
The Rolling Stones-"Undercover of the Night"-1984**
CHOPS-"CHOPS"-1984
Mick Jagger-"She's The Boss"-1985**
Bob Dylan-"Empire Burlesque"-1985
The Rolling Stones-"Dirty Work"-1986**
Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five- "Greatest Hits" -1989
Millie Jackson-"Young Man Older Woman"-1991
James Brown- "Star Time" -1991
Parliament-"Tear the Roof Off 1974-1980"-1993
Public Enemy-"Muse Sick N Hour Mess Age"-1994*
Parliament-"Greatest Hits 1972-1993"-1994
Grandmaster Flash- "Message from Beat Street: The Best of Grandmaster Flash" -1994
Various Artists-"The Best of Sugar Hill"- 1995
Parliament-"The Best of Parliament: Give Up The Funk"-1995*
George Clinton-"P Is The Funk - Family Series Vol. 2"-1996
The Sugarhill Gang- "Best of Sugarhill Gang" -1996
The Sequence- "Best of Sequence" -1996
Grandmaster Flash -"Best of Grandmaster Flash, Vol.2" -1996
Joe Kurasz-"Elements of Style"-1997
Various Artist-"Love Jones Soundtrack" - Movie Soundtrack-1997*
Holland Tunnel Project-"What Hip Hop Left Behind"-1997
Various Artists-"Sugar Hill Records Story" -1997
Holland Tunnel Project-"Stop N Listen"-1998
Dennis Christy-"I'm Alive (But I'm Not Livin')"-1998

The O'Jays -"The Year 2000/My Favorite Person"-1999
Parliament-"12 Inch Collection and More"-1999
The Sugarhill Gang & Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five-
"Showdown: Sugarhill Gang vs. Grandmaster Flash" - 1999
Holland Tunnel Project-"Holland Tunnel Project 3"-2000
Parliament-"20th Century Masters - The Millennium Collection: The Best of
Parliament"-2000
Parliament-"Get Funked Up"-2000
Mutiny- "How's Your Loose Booty?"-2000
Phil Asher-"Jazz In The House Vol. 3"-2001
Parliament and Ohio Players-"Winning Combinations"-2001
Alicia Keys-"How Come You Don't Call Me - Import Remix"-2002
India.Arie-"Voyage To India"-2002
Parliament-"Funked Up: The Very Best Of Parliament"-2002
Christina Aguilera-"Stripped"-2002
Funk To The Max-"For Promotion Only"-2002

***Certified Gold**

****Certified Gold & Platinum**

Performances

2002 Grammy Awards Show performance with Alicia Keys
2002 Soul Train Awards Show performance with Alicia Keys
David Letterman Show with Alicia Keys
Ray Chew and The Crew (Apollo Theater house band)
Sugar Hill Gang
Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five
Parliament-Funkadelic
Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes
McFadden & Whitehead
The Williams Brothers
The Five Blind Boys
James Cleveland
The Jones Girls
Patti Labelle
The O'Jays
Bob Dylan

The Police

Major Tours and Road Shows

Alicia Keys European Tour-2002

Alicia Keys Summer Tour-2002

Alicia Keys Solo Tour-2002

Lionel Hampton- 1985

The Police "Ghost In The Machine" World Tour- 1982

The Police "Ghost In The Machine" World Tour- 1981

James Cleveland- 1980

Sugar Hill Gang- 1980

Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes- 1980

Quazar- 1978

Parliament-Funkadelic - 1978

Parliament-Funkadelic - 1977

Patrice Rushen- 1977

Richard Pryor Show on WNBC- 1977

Equipment List

Darryl Dixon

Selmer Mark VI Alto Sax

Strathon Adjustatone Mouthpiece-4*

Yamaha Tenor Sax

Strathon Adjustatone Mouthpiece-5*;

Berg Larsen Metal Mouthpiece-115 over 0

King Soprano Sax

Selmer S-80F mouthpiece

Bari Plastic Reeds on all saxes. Medium strength.

Armstrong Flute

David Watson

Selmer Mark VI Tenor Sax

Otto Link 5* Mouthpiece-Medium Hard La Voz reeds

Conn Baritone Sax (circa 1935)

Rico Royal Metolite M9 Mouthpiece-Medium La Voz reeds

Selmer Mark VI Soprano Sax

Bari Okota 9 Mouthpiece-Medium La Voz reeds

Artley Closed Hole Silver Flute with B Foot

They endorse wireless mikes by AMT-Applied Microphone Technology in Livingston, New Jersey

Chops Horns are available for clinics on funk phrasing.