

## FENDER PLAYERS CLUB DANNY GATTON

The story of Danny Gatton is not your typical guitar-slinger tale: no supergroups, no hit records, no world tours, and no household-name recognition; only a belated recognition of his virtuosity very late in his career, and then mostly by peers and critics but not by the music industry or public at large.

For those who've appreciated his recordings, his talent spoke for itself: a stunning ability to fuse jazz, rockabilly, country, blues and rock into an alternately twangy, explosive, and shimmering style uniquely his own. Gatton's command of these styles earned him the nickname "The Humbler" from fellow guitarists, and yet his unassuming persona was in marked contrast to this moniker.

Born in 1945, Danny Gatton started playing at age nine, joined his first band at 12, and in 1959 at age 14 joined the Washington, DC band that would become his main group of friends and provide his musical influences for the rest of his life: the Offbeats. Though this band broke up in 1967, Gatton continued playing with various members in other groups, and they eventually reformed in 1980 as the American Music Company. Gatton did a brief stint in Nashville in the late '60s, where he was influenced by guitarist Lenny Breau, but returned to Washington, DC, spending much of the '70s playing extensively with bands including Danny & the Fat Boys, and Redneck Jazz Explosion. Gatton's parents were supportive and helped finance and distribute the Redneck Jazz Explosion's albums on their own NRG label.

In 1978 Gatton was asked to play on western-swing-rock artist Commander Cody & the Lost Planet Airmen's album *Flying Dreams*, which led to a job as guitar picker for country singer/songwriter Roger Miller beginning in 1980 and lasting for a year and a half. Gatton was still involved in the Washington DC music scene, and while still with Miller's band he joined up with rockabilly artist Robert Gordon in DC. After a year or two with Gordon, he took a hiatus but then later formed a band called the Drapes, playing a variety of jazz and soul styles.

It was during the Gordon and Drapes eras that Gatton began drawing serious notice as the premier guitarist in the DC area, and he decided to "make his move," getting some management and recording his first solo album, *Unfinished Business*, released in 1987 on his mother's NRG label. It was a bewildering array of musical styles, which attracted the attention of a major label, Elektra, who offered him a contract. It was also around this time, in 1989, that *Guitar Player* magazine named Gatton "World's Greatest Unknown Guitar Player." He recorded the instrumental album *88 Elmira St.*, released in 1991 to critical acclaim and a Grammy nomination but disappointing sales; it featured blistering licks on songs such as the Beach Boys' "In My Room," Danny Elfman's "The Simpsons," and Gatton originals such as "Blues Newburg."

He recorded a jazz album for Blue Note (Capitol) called *New York Stories Volume One*, released in 1992. His 1993 Elektra follow-up, *Cruisin' Deuces*, was a mix of originals and classics including "Harlem Nocturne," "Mystery Train/My Baby Left Me" (from Elvis' Sun Sessions), and Paul Anka's Buddy Holly tune "It Doesn't Matter Anymore," and also featured vocals by Rodney Crowell and Delbert McClinton.

Despite a U.S. tour (his first and only), as well as appearances on national TV playing with David Letterman's and Conan O'Brien's bands, the second album also failed to chart and Gatton was dropped by Elektra. For reasons still unclear, although he was rumored to have been suffering from depression, Danny Gatton took his own life at his home in Newburg, MD, on October 20, 1994.

-- Barry Houlehen