



# A Tribute To MARK CRANEY

by Robyn Flans

Listen to Gino Vannelli's "Brother To Brother" from his *Live In New Orleans* album, and you'll immediately get a sense of who Mark Craney was. You'll witness his passion, his commitment, his fire, his sensitivity, his force, his sense of humor, his creativity, and his sheer love of music. You'll instinctively realize that these elements couldn't have simply been consciously developed in his playing. No, these traits had to have come from deep within Craney's soul.

What listening to that track *won't* reveal is the warrior

that Mark was—the strength he had inside that came from living with major health disabilities most of his life, and ultimately not being able to do the work he so loved. Craney possessed such a strong character, and even though he suffered greatly, he would not complain.

Mark was a South Dakota boy through and through. While he made a name for himself in Los Angeles, the town always seemed to boggle him a bit. And in fact, he moved his family back to South Dakota in 1980 after five years of LA life.



like this....' and then you learn it the same way. They don't have any charts and they don't even know what time most of the stuff is in. It's kind of a soulful approach. I like it."

After Tull, there was more work with Gino Vannelli. Though his health issues began to slow him down, Mark went on to play with Tower Of Power and Eric Burdon. But destiny cut Mark's time at the drums short, and what a shame. If you listen to his work—especially with Vannelli and Tull—you'll wish there was more to hear.

We lost Mark this past November 28, after years of battling complications of diabetes. He was a unique

human being with an unusual way of looking at life and music. Everyone talks about how Mark could look right into your soul, and this is true. Maybe it was his ill health that made him particularly sensitive to others, but you didn't have to say a lot to Mark. He lived life as he played music—intuitively, with all his heart and soul.

Mark began playing at age twelve, but he never had lessons. His dad, having played a little bit, set the drums up for a left-handed drummer. Mark, being right handed, incredibly, learned a left-handed approach and continued that way. His main influence growing up was Ginger Baker of Cream. "I loved his double kick drums and his loose approach," Mark told me in our *Modern Drummer* interview in the early '80s. Then it was Billy Cobham: "Billy is an idea dispenser," Mark said. Later it was David Garibaldi, Jack DeJohnette, and Tony Williams, all of whom you can hear in Mark's playing on such memorable recordings as Jean-Luc Ponty's *Imaginary Voyage* or *Civilized Evil*, not to mention Jethro Tull's *A* and his work on Gino Vannelli's classic, *Brother To Brother*.

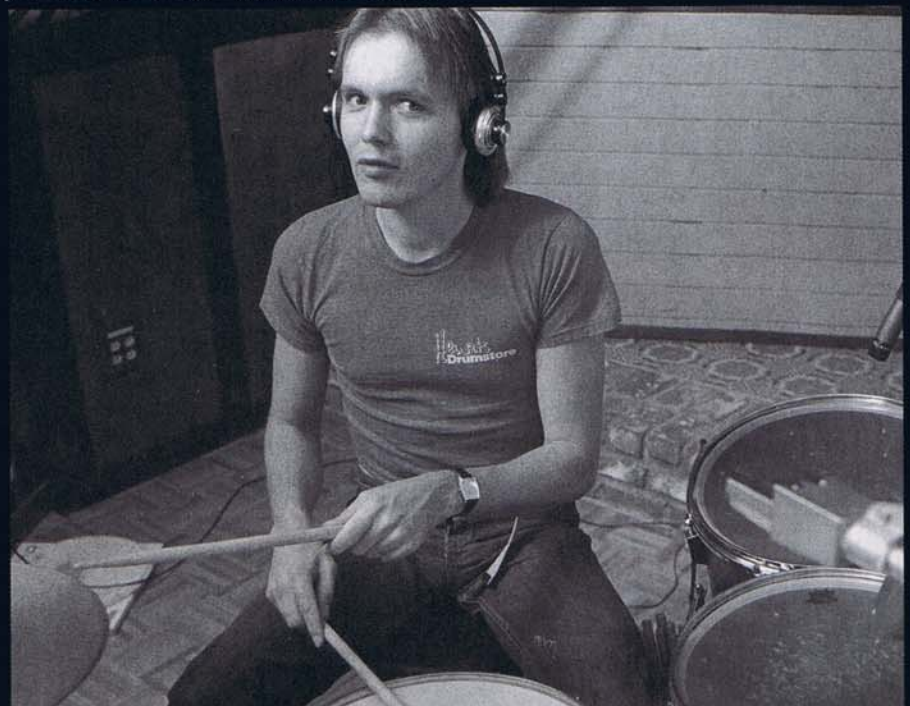
For an intimate portrait of Mark as a drummer and as a person, *MD* spoke to the great musicians he worked alongside during his all-to-brief playing career.

Mark arrived in LA in 1975, and by early 1976 he had the gig with hot fusion violinists Jean-Luc Ponty, touring and recording. In late 1976 he joined Tommy Bolin; the following year he joined The Mark Almond Band. In '78 he toured with Caldera and Phyllis Hyman, and he recorded an album with Ray Barretto and Tito Puente. Later that year he began working with Vannelli.

Then, while working on a low-budget demo with Eddie Jobson—and in his words, "Groaning about it"—the unexpected happened. Jobson was called to play on Ian Anderson's solo record, and happened to have that low-budget demo in his pocket,

which he played for Anderson. "I'm in LA with our savings dwindling," Mark recalled, "and I get the call to go to London. I was on my way the next day."

The Anderson solo album turned into the next Jethro Tull album, *A*, and Mark became part of the band for the next year. Listen to "Pine Marten's Jig" for Craney at his most creative. The drummer recalled at the time, "The song has a million twists to it. I don't know what time signature it's in. I'm fairly acquainted with odd meters, but these guys just learn it and say, 'Well, it kind of goes



## ARTISTS ON CRANEY

"I first heard Mark Craney play with Gino Vannelli, and my jaw dropped. Such speed, such precision, such power and excitement in his playing. And what a beautiful touch and sound. I was awed and humbled, yet because of that, I was also inspired to work harder on my own playing.

"Bob Dylan once said, 'The highest purpose of art is to inspire. What else can you do? What else can you do for anyone but inspire them?'

"Mark Craney inspired me."

**Neil Peart**

"'Brother To Brother' is one of the greatest drum tracks."

**Phil Collins**

"Mark Craney was not only one of my drum heroes, but also one of my best friends. I first met him in 1982, when I moved to Los Angeles.

"I had been a huge fan of Gino Vannelli's *Brother To Brother* album. Mark's playing on it was really fresh, like nothing I had ever heard before. Every track on that CD is filled with Mark's brilliance. He had the unique and natural ability to put incredibly exciting drum grooves and fills into songs without



The LA drumming community came together many times to help Mark Craney. This photo is from an event in the late '80s.

getting in the way of the vocals and the melody. He later told me—and I did not realize it before he told me—that he even snuck in some very musical double bass playing in Gino's huge hit ballad, 'The Wheels Of Life'!

"When I moved to Los Angeles in 1982, one of the first things I did was go to a club to hear Vinnie Colaiuta play, which is where I met Doane Perry. Doane told me that his friend Mark Craney had moved from South Dakota to LA. He gave me Mark's phone number, and the next day I

called him and scheduled a drum lesson. One of the first things I asked him about was the fills on 'Brother To Brother.' Mark played them over and over for me and really slowed them down so I could learn them.

"Mark and I instantly became great pals, and a few months later he needed a roommate in the house he was renting, so I gladly rented one of the rooms. Mark's sense of humor was fantastic. He always had interesting twists on every situation. He was one of the best friends I ever had."

**Gregg Bissonette**



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"To those who knew him, Mark Craney was so much more than a drummer, though he certainly did influence many other drummers with his innovative, fiery performances on records like Gino Vannelli's *Brother To Brother*.

"We were born just two days apart and both broke out of the Midwest to allow our careers and emotions to blossom. He was able to express his frustration and heartbreak over his physical problems without it becoming a 'look at poor pitiful me' conversation. He never showed one iota of jealousy that his drumming pals could go out there and play the gigs he couldn't, not to mention that he couldn't walk, run, or eat and drink what he wanted. I wonder what it feels like to have total facility on a drumset (and in life) and then have it all taken away. I suspect I wouldn't respond to that level of trauma as well as Mark did.

"The bottom line is, Mark's attributes are no doubt serving him well wherever he is now: pride, compassion, truthfulness, love, patience, forgiveness...and more."

**Billy Ward**

"Mark Craney played a very important role in my life. It was Mark's decision to

leave Jean-Luc Ponty's gig to tour with Tommy Bolin that opened up an opportunity for me to join Jean-Luc's group. In October 1976, while a student at the Berklee College of Music, I got a call to come to New York City to audition for Ponty. I went to New York and Jean-Luc hired me. Two days later I was in LA rehearsing with the band. The tour was for the album *Imaginary Voyage*, which Mark had played drums on.

"As I learned the tunes from the album, Mark's creative and exciting drumming deeply impressed me. I hadn't heard of him before, since *Imaginary Voyage* was Mark's first major recording and it hadn't been released yet. I was amazed that an unknown drummer from Sioux Falls, South Dakota was playing world-class fusion drums! I wondered, 'Where did Jean-Luc find this guy?'

"Later, when I met Mark for the first time, I was struck by his dry wit and humility. I always enjoyed listening to his recordings, especially his incredible work with Gino Vannelli.

"Thank you, Mark, for affecting my life in a significant way. I miss you and will always be indebted to you."

**Steve Smith**

"Mark did not deserve to die so young. No one deserves to suffer as much as Mark did. I share the grief with his relatives and with those who were close to him till the end. We musicians lost a very talented member of our community.

"Our paths crossed a long time ago. I was auditioning drummers for the first band that I was putting together in Los Angeles in 1975. Although he was self-taught and competing with well-schooled drummers, his playing was so special, original, and sensitive that he got the gig. He fit in perfectly with the fusion style of my band at the time, but he also had a rare musical intuition.

"Once, during a rehearsal, we started jamming on a bebop tune for fun. Mark fit perfectly, so swinging and so modern. I was really surprised. I asked him, 'Have you been listening to Jack DeJohnette?' With big round eyes he replied, 'Who?' He had never played bebop before.

"We went on the road on an intensive touring schedule, and it was a joy to see him grow and blossom so fast musically. I was glad that my gamble on Mark paid off by the interest that other artists showed in his drumming later on. The recordings on which he participated immortalize his talent and his

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## Mark Craney

passage on our planet Earth. May his soul rest in peace forever.”

**Jean-Luc Ponty**

“Dear Mark, it would be silly and terribly flat of me to imagine I could compose a eulogy for you without you somehow getting the message from across the veil. So instead of talking behind your back, I will address this note to you personally.

“There is a phrase you constantly used when we would mull over parts during the *Brother To Bother* album rehearsals. It was,

‘I’m in heaven.’ The other night, sitting silently and staring at my food, just after hearing the news about you, some patron took a bite of his buffalo burger and gasped, ‘I’m in heaven.’ I felt like going over to his table and asking the smiling gent if he wouldn’t mind pounding out a single-stroke roll with his two feet at 180 bpm while banging out a few fills on the table with his hands in three—just to make sure it wasn’t you. I wonder?

“Every time I looked at you after a solid run of a song or two, our eyes fixed, me with two thick raised brows, posing the silent

question, ‘How was it for you?’ ‘I’m in heaven,’ is what you replied. You have no idea how much octane was in those words. You made me so happy. I can’t help think of the magic you brought to my brother Joe’s garage, to my career, and to many people.

“Mark, you have endured so much, too much. But you have stored great treasures in high places, and become a star in the eyes of angels. Therefore, tonight, when I go to sleep, when I ask how it feels for you, I will expect your usual answer.

“My love to you, Mark, and blessings on your new voyage.”

**Gino Vannelli**

“I met Mark in 1975 at the Santa Monica Civic when he was first with Tommy Bolin, and he said, ‘I need you, as I don’t have a roadie.’ I valued Mark’s caring and non-judgment when it came to my well being. Mark was the most selfless, giving brother I have ever known. Through all the brilliant nights with Gino Vannelli and Jethro Tull, he would turn to me several times to ask how the show was going. He also made sure I had eaten and was looked after.

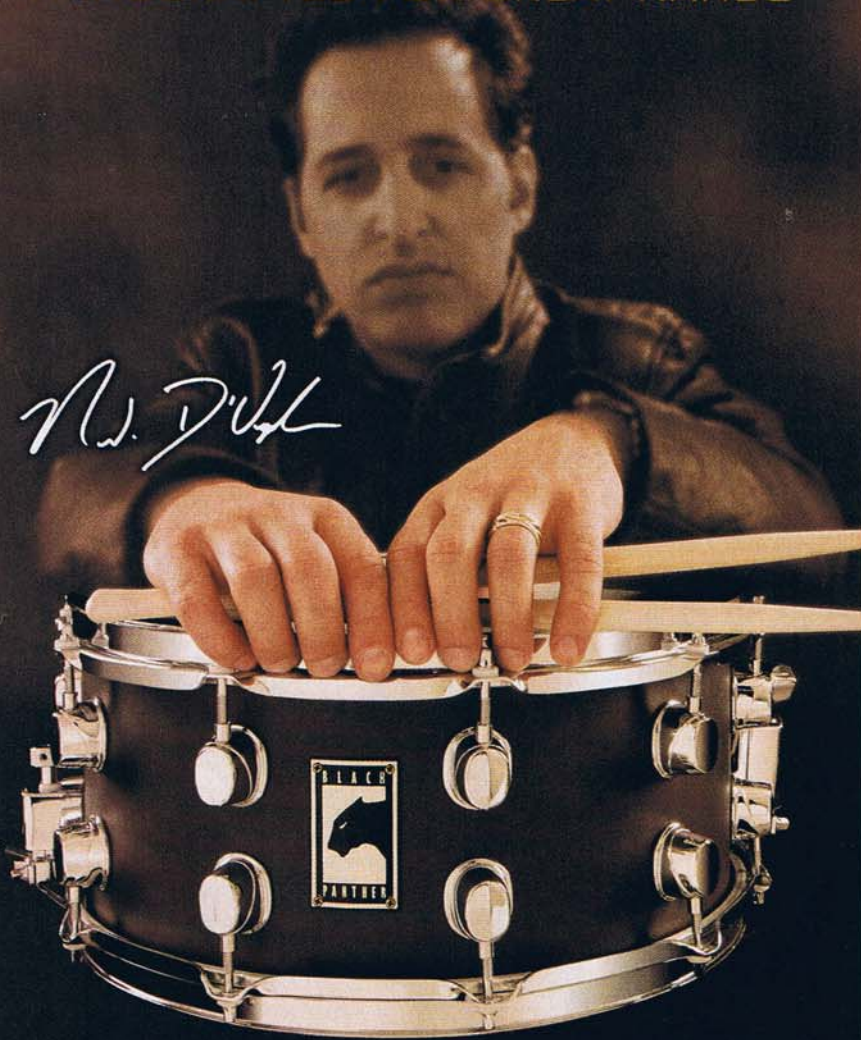
“I am sober today because of Mark. As the years went by and tours kept coming, Mark would ask why I was so negative. When he bought a big house in Sioux Falls and I helped him move, he told me to please consider quitting drinking. He also said that if I ever wanted his companionship, to please call, which I did in 1987. Mark never gave up or stopped following through on anything or anyone.”

**Jeff Ocheltree** (drum tech)

“Mark was one of the best drummers of my generation. I remember Steve Smith, Mark, and I all coming up at about the same time in the early ‘70s. If you look at the success and joy we have gotten to experience over the years, you begin to understand the frustration Mark must have fought off knowing that, but for his battle with health problems, he would have been enjoying the same. Yet he never showed that behavior. Instead, he was always trying to be positive, hopeful, and helpful to others in more need than himself. On top of that, he continued to improve himself as a drummer. What he couldn’t do physically, he made up for intellectually.

“The last time I saw him play he did something like play a 4/4 rock beat in groups of five 8th notes, all in triplets over the basic groove! I turned to Myron Grombacher, who was next to me, and

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## Mark Craney

said, 'What the hell was that?!' Myron said Mark had been working on 'counting notes'! Needless to say, we were *amazed*. All who knew Mark love him still and miss him dearly."

**Terry Bozzio**

"I can't believe the kind of courage Mark exhibited. We're talking about somebody who was extraordinarily gifted and a real natural and who played with a skill on top of his natural ability. He had an amazing amount of musical intuition.

"I had to come into the Vannelli situation after Mark, and he set it up for all of us. He

really built the foundation. And you wonder how he was able to do so much with all he was going through. If I get a *headache*, maybe it ain't gonna come out. But none of that stuff stopped him. To be able to tap into the muse with the fortitude of a steamroller, amidst all that adversity—that's a candidate for sainthood.

"I look at Mark as an example of humanity beyond all of it. And then to be as creative a person as he was, on top of all that, is staggering. I've never seen such an example of fortitude and faith and courage, in tandem with such creativity."

**Vinnie Colaiuta**

"Every so often in this life we are fortunate to meet a kindred spirit, a person who will transcend ordinary friendship and become linked spiritually...as a brother. There will be a place for them in all of life's big and little moments. They will give you faith, courage, and inspiration. And somehow, just by knowing them, you become *more*. Mark Leo Craney was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

**Myron Grombacher**

"Mark Craney came to us courtesy of Eddie Jobson [ex-UK, Zappa, Roxy Music], when Eddie became keyboard player for Tull during the recording of the *A* album and the tours in 1981. Mark had been working with Eddie on some solo projects, and so joined the Tull family too for the duration of Eddie's working relationship with us.

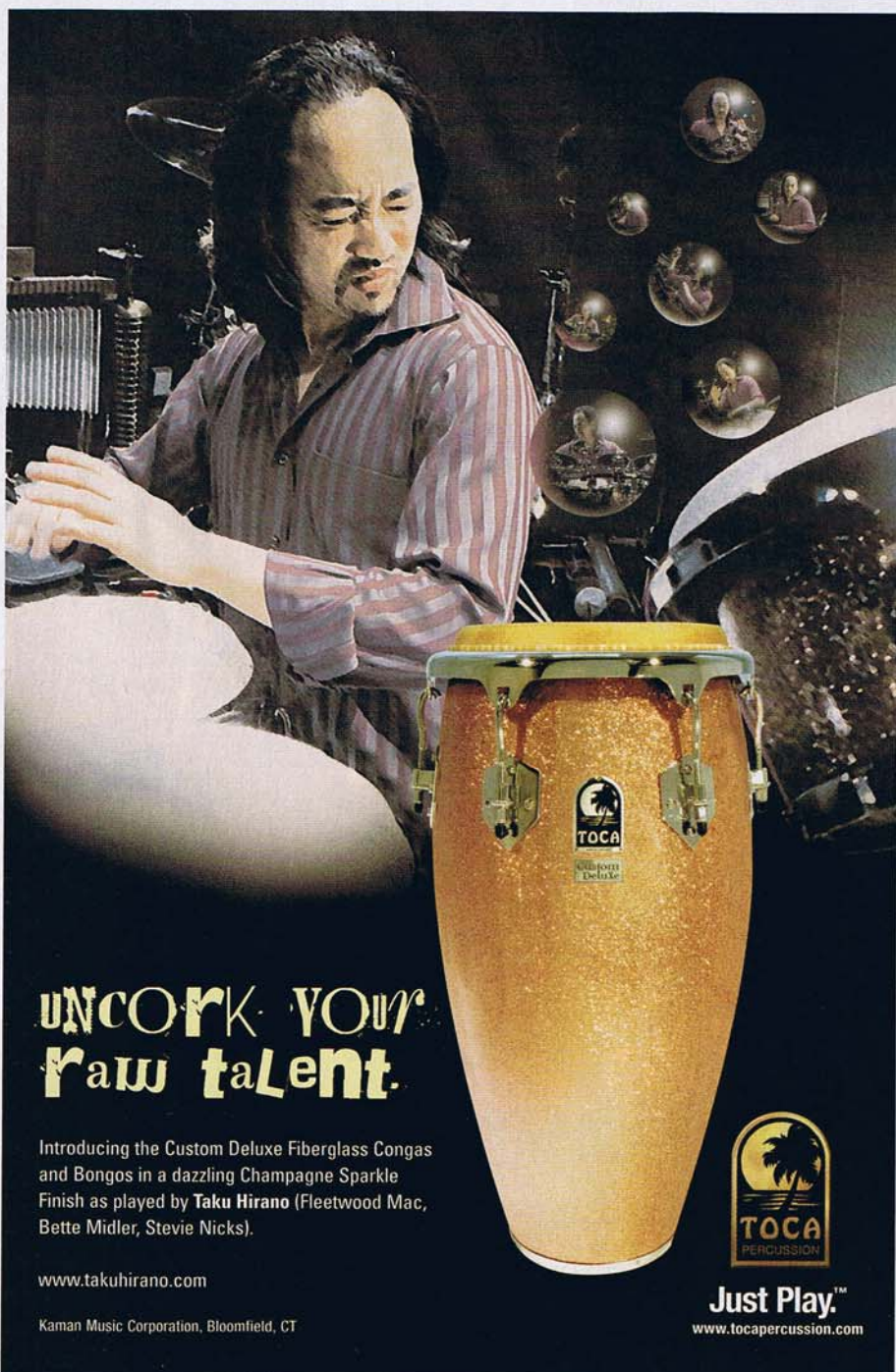
"Eddie, of course, had worked with me and Tull on tour, but not in the studio. David Pegg had never recorded with me either, and Mark was an unknown quantity as well, having come along solely on the recommendation of Eddie. To my amazement, things clicked into place very quickly. We recorded a few tracks and drafted in Tull's Martin Barre to play as well.

"Mark had an easy, confident style, and he had all the technical chops to bring into play whenever the right time arose. He was rarely stumped whenever the more complex patterns were suggested by me or Eddie.

"Mark was a very straight-ahead guy with a laconic sense of humor and a cheerful temperament. He liked a good cigar but didn't appear to drink much or do the rock 'n' roll thing.

"Mark and I kept in touch over the years, and he was truly one of the extended tribe of Tull musicians who helped me through my musical explorations over the years. We miss him greatly."

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