

(1) YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Q & A with Gabe Lapano: After the Rain and Beyond

By Andy Rasmussen, April 2021



(<https://sandiegotroubadour.com/gabe-lapano/cascades-4-cropped/>)

The Cascades in 1967: David Stevens, Eddie Snyder, Tony Grasso, Gabe Lapano.

If you recall the Cascades 1962 classic hit “Rhythm of the Rain,” it conjures a gentle scene of a quiet storm by the sea, perhaps with sand blowing on a lonesome shore. A yearning of love lost, far-flung yet hopeful. And so the song breezed by the winter of ’62, and by spring of 1963, it reached the #3 on the Billboard Pop charts (and #1 in the Billboard Easy Listening Charts). It was also an international smash, reaching #1 in Canada, Ireland, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan; #2 in New Zealand; #3 in Australia; and a top 5 hit in the UK. For a young Gabe Lapano, that gentle and cascading rhythm pitter-pattered through the transistor radio with a foreshadowing of thunder. Who would have guessed that song would have such an impact on his life, or that an amazing musical journey lay ahead? In 1963 Gabe moved with his family from Spokane, Washington to San Diego. Here, he joined one of San Diego’s most beloved bands from the ’60s: Sandi & the Accents. Followed by the internationally known Cascades (becoming their lead vocalist, arranger, and organist) and then into a career in music—producing, touring, songwriting, performing, and making hit records, he’s had a career that anyone involved in a lifetime of music would be proud.

I was privileged to be able to contact Gabe through a series of email and phone interviews over the course of a few months, and he has been incredibly insightful, helpful, and gracious during the entire process, sharing his amazing life in music.

Andy Rasmussen: First off, can you tell me about your early years growing up and your musical influences?

Gabe Lapano: I started listening to music at an early age, buying records from my favorite artists like Elvis, Fats Domino, Little Richard, and doo-wop groups from the East Coast and Midwest. I started playing piano around the age of 11 and was active in chorus from grade school until high school. Playing organ was a natural progression from piano, but it wasn’t long before I gained confidence in singing. Once I did, I kept expanding my repertoire.

Andy: Do you recall the first song you ever wrote? Your first band?

Gabe: Wow, that’s a good question. I can’t recall the first song I actually wrote, but I must have been around 15. The first band I was in was the Dominotes; we were around 14 or 15 years old..

Andy: When did you come to San Diego? And how did you join Sandi & the Accents? How were those early times?



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Gabe: I didn’t join Sandi & the Accents until around 1964 during my senior year at Helix high, the first year after my family and I had moved from Spokane, Washington. I was in chorus class with Linda Young (original singer for the Accents) and was just playing a few notes on the piano. She heard me and asked me to audition for the Accents, which I did. Linda eventually left the band, and Sandra Rouse joined, becoming their featured vocalist. I enjoyed the Accents’ musicianship and the songs they were playing. We rehearsed about once a week

The Accents in 1965: Tony Johnson, Don Lovas, Doug Myers, Don Beck, and Gabe Lapano. Sandi Rouse is front and center.

and we always had direction as to what we wanted to rehearse the next week, keeping it fresh and current for our audience. We usually rehearsed at [drummer] Tony Johnson's home or my folks' garage. It was always a fun, intense, and rewarding experience.

Andy: Sandi & the Accents quickly became one of San Diego's top bands during that time. From May 1964 to May 1966, they released five singles on various labels (Commerce, Challenge, CRC, Liberty, and Karate), all produced by Andy DiMartino. How did the band get to know producer Andy DiMartino? Did he encourage your songwriting?

Note: Andy DiMartino eventually became Sandi & the Accents' manager as well as producer on their records, eventually securing distribution for them on the Challenge label after their initial single with Commerce. He was instrumental in getting their singles released on larger labels, most notably Liberty Records.

Gabe: I just remember Frank Mannix (Accents' bassist) bringing Andy DiMartino into our circle as we had our sights set to do some recording. Andy really didn't encourage my writing as much as my wanting to contribute to the group.

Andy: The first single was "Tell Me What's on Your Mind"/"Better Watch Out Boy," with both songs penned by bandleader and songwriter George Semper of the Kingsmen. Can you tell me how that came about?

Gabe: We went to George Semper's home and listened to him play organ and sing. He played a few songs for us, and we liked the two songs "Better Watch Out Boy" and "Tell Me." I thought he was a talented organist and singer. I believe we recorded them at El Dorado Studios in Commerce, California.

Andy: Afterward, the band released the Sloan/Barri song "I've Got Better Things to Do," with your song "Then He Starts to Cry" on CRC/Charter Records. Did you happen to meet P.F. Sloan or Steve Barri during those sessions?

Gabe: I never did get to meet them. The song was brought to us by Andy DiMartino.

Andy: I noticed you penned both "I Really Love Yo," and "What Do You Want to Do (Little Darlin)" on the next Liberty Records single from July of 1965. The latter was a co-write with R. Haines, how did you meet him?

Gabe: Roland Haines was a lyricist in San Diego that showed up at my house and handed me the lyrics to the song; I wrote the music. Andy DiMartino got us the record deal at Liberty Records. Honeysuckle Music was Andy's publishing company.

Andy: The last Sandi & the Accents single happened in May of 1966, the R&B-flavored "On the Run" with another soul/pop workout titled "He's the One." They seem to have a similar beat and feel; any inspiration from them? Who were you listening to? Who are your favorite songwriters?

Gabe: The titles came from my grandmother, Cotilda Lapano. She was a lyricist throughout her life and had written songs with my piano teacher Alita Howard. Inspiration comes from many places as a songwriter. I enjoyed David/Bacharach, Ennio Morricone, Ray Charles, and Stevie Wonder. I have many favorite songwriters.

Andy: All through that time in the mid '60s, Sandi & the Accents were one of the most popular bands in San Diego; what was it like, performing with the Accents? Did you back up any traveling performers? Ever make it to LA or tour? Was there any plan of making an album?

Gabe: Almost all our gigs were in or around San Diego. We discussed an album, but it never came out. As I recall, we didn't back up any performers. The only time I really saw or heard of any other groups was at a battle of the bands, we seemed busy every weekend playing. I heard the Nomads once, they were great. I also remember Little Joe and the Mustangs; they were also great. The gigs that stood out were the ones at the Spring Valley Chamber of Commerce on Sundays. I also loved opening for the big acts that came through town and the bigger dances at the Community Concourse in San Diego.

Andy: How long did you play with Sandi & the Accents?

Gabe: I played with them up until the end in 1966. Frank and Tony embarked on their college careers [eventually joining another group, the Brain Police] and I joined the Cascades.

Andy: How did you come to join the Cascades? How was that initial experience?

Gabe: I was introduced to the Cascades by Andy DiMartino, and that's where I met John Gummo. John was leaving the group along with Ron Lynch. They both played keyboards off and on, and Ron also played sax. I took their place. The Cascades line-up at this point was now Eddie Snyder on guitar, David Stevens on bass, Tony Grasso on drums, and myself on organ/vocals.

I went on the road with the Cascades and performed at night clubs, USO tours, and concerts at home and abroad. I was still being managed/produced by Andy DiMartino at this time.

Andy: *What were your initial recordings with the Cascades?*

Gabe: “Hey Little Girl of Mine”/“Blue Hours” was my first recording as a Cascade and also the first song I wrote for the group. That single came out on Smash Records in 1967, but there were no plans to do an album with them. We also did another single on Smash featuring a Neil Young song called “Flying on the Ground.” Neil happened to stop by one of our rehearsals one night and played us some of his songs for about an hour, which we immediately liked and asked to record it.

Incidentally, while I was still in the Accents, I played piano with the Cascades on a single. Bob Lind was hot with an album and the hit song “Elusive Butterfly of Love.” We secured an acetate copy of his album and recorded “Truly Julie’s Blues” with “Cheryl’s Goin’ Home.”

Andy: *Were you involved with the Cascades during the filming of the movie Catalina Capex?*

Gabe: No, it was done prior to my joining the band.

Andy: *The first album you did with the Cascades in 1968 was What Goes on Inside. Any thoughts on that?*

Gabe: *What Goes on Inside* was my creation along with bassist Tony Grasso. We were on the road a lot during this time. We came up with a concept, so I wrote the introduction poem and gave its narration on the record. We did the entire album in three days. Kent Morrill from the Wailers contributed to the songs and sang some background vocals. Dean Torrence (of Jan & Dean) owned Kittyhawk Graphics and created the wonderful art for the album. It was our best creative project, free of any thoughts of commercialization or outside influences. We first heard the single from it, “Two-Sided Man,” in Japan during our USO tour. I give a lot of credit to Ben Beney, who did the arrangements and played guitar, plus our engineer John Guess. Andy DiMartino was our producer. We printed up about 500 copies, and Blossom Records was our self-created label. Most got sold at our gigs or used as promotion. It’s really a hard find now.

Andy: *Around this time, the Cascades did a USO tour of Southeast Asia as well as a northeastern tour. Can you tell me about them? How was it playing to servicemen and servicewomen far from home?*



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The Cascades on the USS Hancock performing in the hangar, USO Tour, 1968.

Gabe: We did a USO tour of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, followed by a tour of Guam, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines in 1968. Later that year also took us on a tour of Greenland, Iceland, Newfoundland, and Labrador. The Asian tour lasted about 45 days; the northeastern tour was a bit shorter. I really enjoyed playing to our servicemen and servicewomen. They were a wonderful and appreciative audience. It was memorable playing on three aircraft carriers—the Hancock, Constellation, and the Coral Sea. We met celebrities and stayed at the Miercord Hotel in Saigon. We performed for as many as thousands of servicemen to as few as 15 on a makeshift stage of plywood in the middle of nowhere. We were moved around on small and large helicopters and cargo planes, buses, vans, and flatbed trucks. We were mortared, got shot at, and I even got dysentery. Yet, I’d do it all again.

The Cascades have a huge following in Asia, especially in the Philippines. Not only did our album sell a million and go gold, all 12 singles were hits there. Concerts were always sold out.

Andy: *Now, these were busy times for you. Not only were you with the Cascades full time, but you also got into songwriting, arranging, performing, and producing various studio projects. One notable project was by a group called the 7 Sons, who did your song “On the Run.” Ever meet them?*

Gabe: I never got a chance to meet the 7 Sons.

Andy: *Then there was the Two Bits’ single, with “Never to Leave” and “Things Must Change.” The record was also re-released under the Poets in Motion. How did that come about?*

Gabe: John Gummoe, Andy DiMartino, and I jointly produced the Two Bits single. John and I shared the song-writing duties as Andy produced in the booth. John and I arranged the song, and I played the keyboard parts. We were just a studio production and never performed gigs. The Poets in Motion was a group that the three of us produced, with Andy taking credit—consisting of Don Perrin and his wife, “Pinky.”

Andy: *Fast forwarding a little, you also worked on an album by the Care Package (1970) that included your song "Keep on Keeping On." Was that also a studio effort?*

Gabe: "Keep on Keeping On" was a song I wrote for the Care Package album on Liberty. John and I arranged the album and helped on production. Again, Andy took full credit for the production.

Andy: *The next Cascades album was Maybe the Rain Will Fall (1969), which was the last album from them in the '60s. Maybe I'm reading too much into the title, but was there any significant meaning to the record? How did you guys get signed to UNI Records?*

Gabe: *Maybe the Rain Will Fall* was the last album this form of the Cascades recorded. Carl Storie wrote the song and performed it with his group, the Chosen Few. Our version was the first to come out and became a hit on the radio. Again, Andy got us the deal with UNI Records. I remember going to Russ Regan's office at UNI and he signed us; he really believed in the Cascades. We did the album, which he loved, and released six singles from it that I know of. While in his office that day, he played for us a new act that he had just signed from England. It was Elton John. I heard "Your Song" before the album had ever been released. Of course, it blew me away. After the album, our guitarist Ed Snyder left the band to go solo, and Lance Wakely joined the group on the record and performances.

Andy: *Around this time, Cher did a song of yours called "It Get's Me Where I Wanna Go," on her solo album. How did that come about?*

Gabe: During the last three months of 1969, the Cascades took an engagement at the Flamingo Hotel in the Sky Room in Las Vegas. We performed six nights a week, five hours a night. We were promoting our new album *Maybe the Rain Will Fall*. Sonny and Cher were headliners in the main room. One evening, after their show at about three in the morning, Sonny came in and sat down at a front row table. He was dressed in his yellow pajamas with little orange duckies on them. Between songs we got to talking and he asked us to play some original songs, as he was going back into the studio to record after the Las Vegas engagement. We played about five songs. He liked them and asked us to record them and send them to him. Over the next few days we went into a studio, recorded them and sent them on to him in New York—we didn't hear back from him for about three months. He finally got back to us and said he recorded "It Gets Me Where I Wanna Go." It was included on Cher's next album for Atco 3614 *Jackson Highway*. Nice production by Sonny Bono, and Cher sang it wonderfully. It was written by Lance Wakely and myself.

Andy: *It was around 1969 that you became involved in Denny Doherty's album Watcha Gonna Do. How did you meet him and get involved in the project?*

Gabe: I first met Linda Woodward (Denny's significant other at the time) at our guitarist Lance Wakely's home in L.A. During a conversation, she said that Denny was gathering material and rehearsing to do a solo album with ABC Dunhill, the Mamas and Papas label. I eventually played some songs of mine for Denny that I had written, along with "Neighbors," a song that Linda and I had written, which he did on the album. I also played piano on the album and arranged it. I did the arrangement for "Here Comes the Sun/Two of Us."

Andy: *After this project, you recorded a couple records under the name Kentucky Express from 1970-71. Who was involved in that? I believe this was your last project with Andy DiMartino as well.*

Gabe: The Kentucky Express albums (self-titled album and *That's Not What Lovin' Is*) were a group comprised of myself, Andy DiMartino, John Gummo, and Kent Morrill, who formed a partnership to produce concept product. Things at this time were going fairly smoothly between John, Kent, and myself. However, my relationship with Andy DiMartino was deteriorating over creative differences, and I soon left the company.

Andy: *Into the '70s, I noticed you were going in a more solo direction yet still keeping busy with producing and song writing. What projects were you doing then?*

Gabe: At that time I was doing solo work as well as writing, and performing. Linda Woodward had introduced me to producer Paul Rothschild (Doors, Love, Janis Joplin, Neil Young). I had been singing with Elly Mae Bishop in San Diego at the Red Coat Inn as a duo, performing original songs I had written. I contacted Paul, and he came down to hear us with a band I put together. He didn't like the band, but liked our singing, and got us signed with Clive Davis at Columbia Records. We flew to New York and went in the studio and cut "Back on the Road Again," with "Canadian Gold" (1973), under the name Gabriel. We met the band in the studio and cut the record the same day. The deal with Columbia didn't work out, so we wound up on Elektra Records. Paul Rothschild was very nice to work with, and I met his engineer Fritz Richmond. We toured the Elektra Records offices, met John Denver, and heard Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" for the first time. But there were no plans for an album or a tour with Elly. It was a one-time recording and release.



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The group Gabriel: Chuck Flack, Gary Rienhart, Gabe Lapano, Ricky Gilbert, David Woody.

Around 1975, after doing solo and casual work with different groups, I put together another configuration of Gabriel. We played a San Diego club called Spanky's for a while and recorded a single called "The Bump" on the Artists of America label. It was a great band, as all the players were fun and excellent to work with. We did an album with engineer Larry Owens, but it was never released. After the Spanky's engagements, I met singer/bassist/percussionist David Calderon. He had a wonderful voice, and we started a duo that lasted about a year, performing at the El Cortez Sky Room. We did that from about 1976 until about 1977 when my son was born.

Note: In 1981, Gabe moved with his wife and family to Elk, Washington, where they still reside today. He lives on a small country farm, complete with five horses, chickens, goats, and koi in the pond. He keeps busy performing and, prior to Covid restrictions, was performing up to five nights a week. When not working, he has a home studio, where he continues to write songs and work on his latest recording projects. He is currently working on a new solo project, which is set to release the Gabriel album from 1975, appropriately titled Gabriel '75. Email him at GabeLapano@gmail.com.



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Gabe Lapano today.