

# BECOMING THE SONG

Since the '70s, David Sancious has been the keyboardist of choice for some of the world's greatest recording artists.

He made his name as a member of Bruce Springsteen's original E Street band, providing the virtuosic piano flurries that lent so much color and drama to the Boss's early sound. That would have been enough to enshrine any player in the sideman's hall of fame. But Sancious went on to perform with such musical giants as Aretha Franklin, Eric Clapton, Santana, and Jeff Beck. And for decades he's been an on-and-off member of both Sting's and Peter Gabriel's bands.

This year, both gigs are definitely on: Sancious is currently on the road with Sting, and after the tour ends, he'll start rehearsals with Gabriel.





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“I’ve been playing with Sting and Peter Gabriel for about 25 years,” he says. “In some ways, these tours feel like coming home. But at the same time, it feels different, and not just because we all look different! Both those artists like to update their music. You’re always taking a new look at the material.”

David grew up in a family of music lovers in Asbury Park, New Jersey. “Our house was like an FM radio station,” he recalls. “Part of the day would be classical, and then someone would walk in and put on some other kind of music. No one ever said ‘This is good music and this is bad music.’ As a result, I was hard-pressed to find any music that I couldn’t find something to like about or learn from. It was a fantastic environment for being exposed to music.”

David’s mother was his first music teacher. “She was a schoolteacher by profession, but she loved to play when she had the time. Classical was her favorite form of music. Meanwhile, I got a love of jazz and blues from my father. I also had two older brothers. One loved avant-garde jazz, and the other loved folk and rock-and-roll. And I was on the receiving end of all of it!”

Sancious is a longtime Yamaha keyboard player. These days he plays two Motifs: an XS and an XF. “The Motif XS is the only instrument I have onstage with Sting. I can do absolutely everything with it. I’m not triggering other sounds — everything comes from the Motif, thanks to its multitimbral capabilities. For Sting, the sounds are mostly organic-sounding: acoustic and electric pianos. Hammond organs and cathedral organs. Mallet percussion. All sorts of string sound: pads, pizzicatos, big ensembles, small chamber sounds. It’s amazing what you can pull out of that one instrument.”

David swears by the feel as well as the sounds: “The Motif has the most realistic acoustic piano feel available. It’s well built and it travels well. It’s proven very reliable over the years. It’s just a brilliant design.”

Sancious remains the best sort of virtuoso: the kind who knows when virtuosity is appropriate, and when it’s better to play with restraint. His solo records — both the jazz-fusion discs he recorded in the ‘70s and the solo piano recordings he’s issued in recent years display the extent of his keyboard skills. But he insists that both his ornate solo work and understated accompaniments spring from his love of musical composition.

“Hearing great compositions and being inspired by them is what made me get involved in music,” he states. “Some of the earliest pieces I remember hearing were compositions by Beethoven and Mozart, and later, great jazz composers such as Duke Ellington. That music was the incentive for me to play. Later, over the course of learning my instruments, I acquired other skills, like soloing.”

That respect for composition informs David’s sideman work. “It’s usually most musical to keep the focus on the song itself,” he says. “The song isn’t a vehicle for you to display your talents. It’s not there to show what a great soloist you are. The song just exists. It has its own life without anyone lending their particular skills, other than enough basic ability to simply play the song.”

And when more virtuosic playing is called for, Sancious says, the song itself can provide the inspiration. “For example, a lot of the parts I came up with Bruce would be inspired by something in the lyric, or the sound of one of his chords. It’s essential to get into the character of the song. I think of it as a kind of musical ‘method acting.’ You have to totally believe the song. You have to become the song.”