

THE CAPTAIN AND TENNILLE

STORIES about the remarkable career of the Captain and Tennille usually contain the terms "fairy tale" and "fantasy come true." In its outline, their story indeed is that. Consider: in the fall of 1973 the Captain (Daryl Dragon) and his fiancée (now wife) Toni Tennille were earning their living playing small club dates around Los Angeles. They went into a studio to cut a demonstration record of a song Toni had written, *The Way That I Want to Touch You*.

When they couldn't interest any record company in their work, they decid-

ed to spend \$500 to press copies themselves and send them to local disc jockeys. It was an unusual but hardly unique solution to a situation faced by other groups with local followings. The result was an L.A. Top Ten hit, and it generated enough interest to get them a record contract with A&M. The single they made for their new company, *Love Will Keep Us Together* (also the title of their debut album), blasted its way to number-one song in the country, was certified Gold by the RIAA (sales in excess of one million copies), and won a Grammy Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences as Record of the Year. That single was the start of a solid, bright, new musical career.

But even in fairy stories, the hero (or heroine) doesn't spring out of nowhere and reach the happy ending without doing some hard preparatory work. The Captain and Tennille have impeccable musical credentials, and their experience and background are so impressive that the real surprise is that they couldn't find a record company to sign them in the first place. Daryl, son of the conductor Carmen Dragon, had been an arranger and keyboard player for the Beach Boys for seven years. (It was the Beach Boys who gave him his nickname, Captain Keyboards, in hon-



William R. Eastbrook

The sentiments may be sentimental, but they are real

By Penelope Ross

The Captain and Tennille, winners of this year's Grammy award for Record of the Year, are shown above with presenters Joan Baez and Stevie Wonder during the February telecast.

ed to spend \$500 to press copies themselves and send them to local disc jockeys. It was an unusual but hardly unique solution to a situation faced by other groups with local followings. The result was an L.A. Top Ten hit, and it generated enough interest to get them a record contract with A&M. The single they made for their new company, *Love Will Keep Us Together* (also the title of their debut album), blasted its way to number-one song in the country, was certified Gold by the RIAA (sales in excess of one million copies), and won a Grammy Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences as Record of the Year. That single was the start of a solid, bright, new musical career.

of the sailor's cap he habitually wears.) Toni Tennille, composer, actress, singer, and keyboard player, was *really* unique—she was (and to date still is) the *only* woman ever to play with the Beach Boys, touring with them as pianist and occasional back-up vocalist during 1972. She had also sung on Elton John's "Caribou" and worked with Bruce (I Write the Songs) Johnston after he left the Beach Boys to launch his solo career.

Prior to her entry into pop music, Toni and a collaborator had written *Mother Earth*, a musical revue about ecology, which got rave reviews at the South Coast Repertory Theater in Los Angeles. The reviews aroused the interest of other producers who wanted

to do the show. So Toni, who describes herself as "naïve at the time," signed with a producer in San Francisco—only to discover she had also signed away artistic control. "When he insisted on inserting unacceptable material, I left the show."

Now Toni reflects that her experience helped her to learn not to be so trusting in business. More important, *Mother Earth* was her introduction to Daryl Dragon. Or, as Daryl put it when asked if they had met on tour with the Beach Boys, "It wasn't an on-stage romance. It was an on-tape romance. I was approached to do arrangements for *Mother Earth* and asked to hear the music first. I was sent a tape of Toni singing the score and just followed that voice to San Francisco." Toni added, "It was really special that he liked my music. Daryl won't work unless he likes the music."

IT would seem that when the couple left the Beach Boys in early 1973 to form their own group (the two of them plus Chris Augustine on drums), there should have been some record-company interest in their music. But even without records they quickly worked up an impressive following in their club dates, a fact of which they are quite proud, since they both believe it is a direct outcome of their approach to performing.

Toni, who does most of the talking on stage and in interviews, explains: "It is our philosophy that every night we would do the best we could, no matter how many people were in the audience. That way, if anyone liked us and told his friends, they could be sure of seeing a good show, even if we were only playing to six people. We just took a chance on building our act that way. We started at the bottom in the San Fernando Valley, where we did four sets a night, six nights a week, and developed an audience. We had people sign cards if they were interested in knowing where we were playing next, and we ended with a list of two thousand fans who followed us!"

So why couldn't they get a record contract? Toni recalled: "It was the fall of 1973, and, if you remember, there was a vinyl shortage and companies just weren't signing new acts. We did send the record around, but we had no manager and just couldn't walk into offices with our demo." Even the Beach Boys, who had their own label, were unwilling to take a chance. "Daryl took the single to Carl Wilson, but they were going through some hard times with Flame, the only group they had signed, and the whole label seemed to be in trouble. Carl told us to come back to them if we ever got some action

on the record on our own. Dennis [Wilson] really liked it, and now he's one of our biggest fans. But at the time they weren't interested. I don't blame them. It was business."

In any case, the lack of interest in 1973 disappeared in 1974, along with the vinyl shortage, and they went to A&M, probably the ideal company for them and their music. Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss may well have been fascinated by the parallels between the couple's career approach and their own start in the music business. (Alpert couldn't get his band a recording deal either, so he and Moss pressed and distributed their own records, then took it one step further by starting their own label.) More important, the Captain and Tennille make A&M's kind of music—an up-tempo hybrid of rock and pop that is melodic enough to be middle-of-the-road but at the same time has enough emphasis on the beat to attract younger listeners.

In performance the Captain and Tennille display some really dazzling musicianship, together playing a total of eight keyboard instruments. Toni uses a grand piano, an electric piano, and a mini-Moog synthesizer on which she works bass lines, singing all the while. Daryl has chosen to stay in the background, playing clavinet, organ, vibes, and ARP and Moog synthesizers and leaving most of the spotlight, the talking, and all of the singing to his wife.

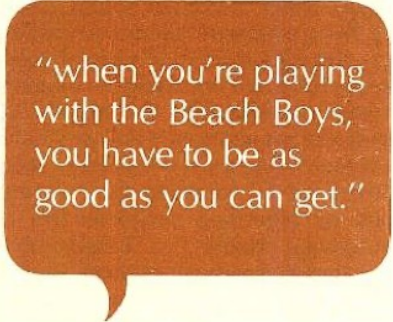
They seem to know how to heighten the innate differences between them to help the show. Toni is naturally voluble, filled with energy and Southern charm (she's a native of Montgomery, Alabama). In contrast to her effervescence, Daryl is dour and deadpan and says little. But he can still let loose with his own funny one-liners when he has the chance, most notably when he moves to the piano to give a demonstration of his great musical love, boogie-woogie in the Fats Domino tradition. Events sometimes conspire to make him more silent than he would like: "People always ask me why I don't talk more, and I would, but they keep forgetting to turn on my voice mike."

IN live performance, the Dragons do a wider range of material than they have yet recorded, moving from country to pop to rock. Although their melodies are generally simple—both their own and the numbers they do by other composers—their arrangements are intricate enough to keep the interest level high. It's an approach they may well have developed in their work with the Beach Boys.

Another trait they display on record also reflects the ideas of their old

group—keeping the music in the family. Their first album lists Louisa, Melissa, and Jane Tennille (Toni's sisters) as singing background harmonies. The four girls sang together as children and, as Toni says, "It's lucky we all have different vocal ranges so we can sing four-part harmonies." Then there is Daryl's brother Dennis, who engineered and mixed the album and who also played drums on one song. He didn't join them on the road, they said, "because Dennis gets a little excited drumming and it's hard to hold him down when he's playing with us."

SUCCESS has brought a few changes for the Captain and Tennille. They have already released a new album, "Song of Joy" (reviewed on page 00), and have a manager at last. He has booked them on major tours, opening for such disparate attractions as Mac



"when you're playing with the Beach Boys, you have to be as good as you can get."

Davis, Freddie Prinze, and the Beach Boys (which may give Daryl his chance to play *Help Me, Rhonda* once again). The venues are huge halls and arenas, which necessitated expanding their group: they added Melissa and Louisa Tennille as back-up singers, Melissa's husband Andy on percussion, and Gary Sims as guitarist and bass player. Daryl expressed some regret about abandoning their tightly knit trio, but observes that, "When you play huge halls, you need extra people. Especially when you're playing with the Beach Boys, you have to be as good as you can get."

Beyond that, Toni is trying to encourage Daryl to join her more in the spotlight and perhaps make his stage singing debut. "Daryl wrote an answer to *The Way That I Want to Touch You*, called *She Wrote This Song for Me*. When he sang it for his parents, they just sat there and cried, it was so beautiful." The sentiments may be sentimental, but they are real.

The Captain and Tennille seem to have hit on a formula that can please audiences and themselves as well. Daryl sums it up simply: "People want to hear happy music these days." It looks like the combination of "happy" and a high degree of professional polish will take them where they want to go. □