

DUANE HITCHINGS:

A COUNTRY WRITER'S ROCK ROOTS

When songwriter/keyboardist Duane Hitchings cowrote "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy" for Rod Stewart, he had no idea the song would be a defining point in his career.

"I WAS A PLAYER FIRST," SAYS HITCHINGS. "I wrote songs, but I never took it seriously until I cowrote that song one afternoon with Carmine Appice. He was late to Rod's house, and he said, 'We've got to write a disco song in 20 minutes!' I said, 'You've got to be joking!' But we put this thing together, and Rod heard something in it. Now Rod didn't much like 'Sexy,' and I didn't like it either. But when I got my first check from that song, I thought, 'You know, that doesn't sound so bad.' And by the time the third check came in, I said, 'Dang! I'm a genius!'"

Hitchings took the scenic route to his present Nashville address. He played keyboards with many iconic artists of the '60s and '70s, starting in 1968 with guitarist Harvey

Mandel and Jimi Hendrix drummer Buddy Miles. When the Buddy Miles Express went into the studio, Hendrix himself produced.

"Looking over at the control room and seeing Jimi Hendrix behind the board—I was in awe," remembers Duane. "I also played organ on the Hendrix track 'It's Too Bad,' from 1969, which is on the Jimi Hendrix Experience box set. Jamming with him was an amazing experience. I was scared to death!"

Later, Hitchings worked with such artists as Janis Joplin, Jeff Beck, Miles Davis, Alice Cooper, Rod Stewart and his own band, Cactus, which also featured drummer Appice. Duane moved into film work in the '80s, writing themes for *Rocky IV* and *Iron*

Eagle, and winning a GRAMMY® with "I'll Be Here Where the Heart Is," from the soundtrack of *Flashdance*.

Hitchings currently collaborates with well-known Nashville writers Don Goodman, Tony Mullins, Kostas and Deborah Allen, writing songs for numerous country artists—and also for Rod Stewart's next album. "It's going to be a rock album," Hitchings says. "I'm really excited about that."

An essential part of Hitchings' songwriting arsenal is Yamaha's TYROS digital workstation. "It's a one-man band!" says Duane. "I've always wanted something like this. I don't have to wait for anybody. I can put it all together myself. Don Goodman

and Deborah Allen were over here, and they looked at the TYROS and said, 'I can't believe it—it's the ultimate songwriter's tool.' And it's simple—all you have to do is push buttons. I don't want to figure out a nuclear power station, I want to get down to writing music. The TYROS inspires me as a songwriter, and it inspires my artists—it's a nice little circle."

Hitchings' favorite TYROS feature is the built-in performance styles. "I can't get enough of them," he exclaims. "The guitar styles are sick! The jazz stuff on this thing is unbelievable. Actually, it has every kind of musical style you can imagine: There's oompah music, old English music, Turkish music. There are themes that sound like

James Bond. The sounds are phenomenal. It's got a really good-sounding EQ, and the Vocal Harmony features even make me sound good. When I go on a songwriting date, I take my laptop, the TYROS, and the TYROS speakers, and I play my demos through the TYROS. I'd take this keyboard on a big gig any day of the week."

With his rock background, Hitchings brings a different perspective to songwriting than many of the writers who came up through Nashville. "They keep asking me to do that Rod Stewart thing," he laughs. "people find out I'm the guy that cowrote 'Da Ya Think I'm Sexy,' and that was 142 years ago, but I don't mind. I did play in a lot of rock-and-roll bands and R&B bands. I love traditional

country, but right now country seems to be embracing more of a rock approach. Lynyrd Skynyrd is huge in Nashville right now—they want to hear that stuff again! They want to hear AC/DC and ZZ Top. Last year, Brooks and Dunn were getting together with ZZ Top all the time and jamming."

Hitchings just seems to be in the right place at the right time. "I haven't 'gone country,'" he says. "I'm just doing the kind of music that comes from the heart. I love it here—the people in this community are the nicest people you'll meet anywhere. And right now, country music seems to be the venue that's embracing melodies—lyrics that touch your heart instead of touching your anger. It's a very healthy musical atmosphere."