

James Pankow

Biography

The influential trombonist and composer for the jazz-rock group Chicago, James Pankow was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on August 20, 1947. He ended up playing trombone by accident (the other, "cooler" instruments had been distributed). Following the move to the city of Chicago, Pankow fell in love with the horn, even playing it during three years with braces.

One of nine siblings, Pankow's musical interests were encouraged at Notre Dame High School by Father George Wiskirchen. After graduating, Pankow won a full scholarship to Quincy College, but later enrolled at DePaul, where he was recruited into "The Big Thing" (later Chicago) by woodwind player Walter Parazaider.

Once in the band, Pankow's talents shined. A creative player with a sharp sound and a great range, Pankow was the best of the Chicago's horn players and possibly the best trombonist since Bill Watrous (though some feel David Barger from Blood Sweat & Tears played rings around Jimmy). The early Chicago records feature Pankow soloing on the small-bore King 2B, and many of his phrases and patterns are incredible (particularly on "Hanky Panky", "You Are On My Mind", "Mother", "A Hit By Varese" and "The Approaching Storm"). As Chicago drifted into power ballads in the 80s, Pankow switched to a signature model silver Getzen (now a collector's item), and has more recently been playing a Yamaha.

As great a trombonist as he is, Pankow's major contribution to Chicago may be as a writer. His brass arrangements are legendary, and his compositions include the huge hits "Make Me Smile", "Just You 'n Me", "Searching So Long", "Old Days", "Alive Again", "Bad Advice" and "Show Me A Sign".

Personally, Pankow seems to be one of the most available of the group. In interviews, he is hilarious, profane, and insightful by turns, and always seems to be in a good mood. He's also physically fit and can be described as short but muscular. He seems to have been interested in martial arts. Brown-haired and mustachioed (with the occasional beard) early on, he has now gone white, clean-shaven, and close-cropped, though he sometimes dyes his locks back to brown. His antics on stage are as legendary as his brass arrangements (he often dresses to display his biceps), and he's one of the few in Chicago who has a stage presence equal to the members of Earth Wind & Fire on this current concert tour. In the late 90s, there were reports that Pankow was anxious to try acting, and every now and then, rumors surface about a Pankow-penned book on Chicago.

Sources reveal Pankow has been married twice. The first, to Karen (for whom he wrote "Just You 'n Me") lasted 20 years, and broke up about 1993 (a Pankow tune called

"Here With Me" on the infamous Stone Of Sisyphus project acts as a bookend). He has recently remarried, and become a father again - a prospect he obviously relishes. Pankow's brother John Pankow is an actor.

Almost 60 and still going strong, Pankow seems to love playing even to this day, and is sorely missed by fans on the rare occasions he can't make a concert.

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