

PICKUP STICKS

Billy Cobham was the most technical and disciplined drummer to ever stay in the pocket. His precise rhythms would not only usher in the era of jazz fusion but would help the genre stay grounded and funky. **Miles Davis, John McLaughlin, George Duke,** and even **Souls of Mischief** all have Cobham and his masterful stickwork to thank.

by Dan Frio

Seated behind a drum kit, Billy Cobham doesn't look like a man easily rattled. With barrel-chested poise and commanding posture, and a headband of Japanese script fixed around a shiny, shaved dome, he looks part professor, part judo instructor. But his return to the United States for some shows at Bay Area jazz institution Yoshi's has got his nerves crackling. "It's intense here, man; there's a lot going on," he says, relating the flight from New York to San Francisco, the last leg of a journey that started in Bern, Switzerland. "It wasn't babies screaming or anything like that. But people just couldn't get comfortable. You can feel the intensity here, the level of concentration and focus on everything. Personal problems. Anything."

If game recognizes game, then Bill Cobham is an intimate friend of intensity. The force and focus of his playing established him as a master drummer for the generations and a composer of smart, visceral '70s funk music. Breaking in with jazz artists like Horace Silver and Shirley Scott in the late '60s, Cobham muscled into the new decade with a thunderous, fast, and fluid approach to the drums. He played a short but pivotal role in pushing Miles Davis into his experimental electric period, and later formed the contentious rock-jazz fusion of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Out on his own for the latter half of the '70s, Cobham married fierce technique to the sweaty, Sly-and-Stevie syncopated funk of the era. And through ambitious compositions, Cobham also redefined the expressive potential of the drum kit.

He wasn't the only towering drummer of the day, of course. Steve Gadd emerged as a monster player and studio master, fluent in Afro-Cuban rhythms, straightahead jazz, and deft, odd-meter funk. David Garibaldi was cooking up the East Bay grease that made Tower of Power an enduring ensemble, while Lenny White and Jack DeJohnette were deconstructing the previous half century's jazz canon. Tony Williams ruled a planet uniquely his own. White, DeJohnette, and Williams had all played with Miles Davis and had gone on respectively to Return to Forever, Directions, and Lifetime, among other projects.

Even rock drummers like Carl Palmer of Emerson, Lake & Palmer and Neil Peart of Rush were dazzling large audiences and inducing fan worship with big kits and big chops. But few married precision, power, and funk strut quite like Cobham. His compositions "Red Baron," "Stratus," "The Pleasant Pheasant," and "Panhandler" are genre classics, inspiring interpretation by artists ranging from Jeff Beck to DJ Shadow and Souls of Mischief.

Few could match his blazing single-stroke rolls that cascaded down the toms, stopped to dance on the snare for a few accents, then resolved in a flurry of deep, double-kick-drum bombs that knocked the horn player's ass into the next solo section. All on top of the beat, all synced to an internal atomic clock.

And then as the 1980s loomed into view, with Olympian respect among peers and godlike deference among fellow drummers, Cobham up and split. Felt he needed a break to clear his head, get some distance from his playing and history, and get some career perspective before returning to New York.

That was thirty years ago.

Miles to Mahavishnu

Bananas. That's what Billy Cobham remembers most of his years as a toddler in Panama. Well, drums too, but he remembers bananas stacked high on the docks as his family left Panama aboard a passenger ship bound for New York, where they settled in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Music was always in Cobham's cards. His father played piano in local combos and hung out with cats like Dexter Gordon. Mother sang, grandmother played guitar, and his brother played trumpet (and is still an active player today). His cousins, whom he'd watched build drums back in Panama, and the local *congueros* in the park fueled his early percussive leanings. But Count Basie drummer Sonny Payne sealed the deal, offering a view of life behind the kit. "I was hooked when I saw Sonny play with a fifteen-piece band," Cobham says. "He was on *Ed Sullivan* or some musical show, and this cat did some things that were just beyond understanding. He made that band soar, man. They just levitated." A great, flashy showman, Payne tossed and twirled his sticks, all while propelling the band with a thunderous kick-drum pulse. The image stuck. "There was a visual circus aspect to [Payne's] playing, but more important was that he lent support and played in such a musical fashion while doing all that. His foundation was so solid that the band could just do anything. They knew he was there."

Payne, along with drummers like Buddy Rich and Louie Bellson, would figure prominently in the young drummer's development. But Cobham says he never fixated on any specific drummers. Instead he keyed in on ensembles, large and small, and the whole sound of the Basie and Ellington bands or Miles Davis's early quintets.

In high school, he joined a drum and bugle corps, began studying the rudiments, and developed a foundation of precision and discipline. He considered the path of classical percussionist, studying marimba, xylophone, and music theory, until realizing he didn't connect with the orchestral instruments quite like the drum set. After serving three years in the U.S. Army Band from '65 to '68, Cobham started gigging with New York heavies like Horace Silver, Stanley Turrentine, Shirley Scott,

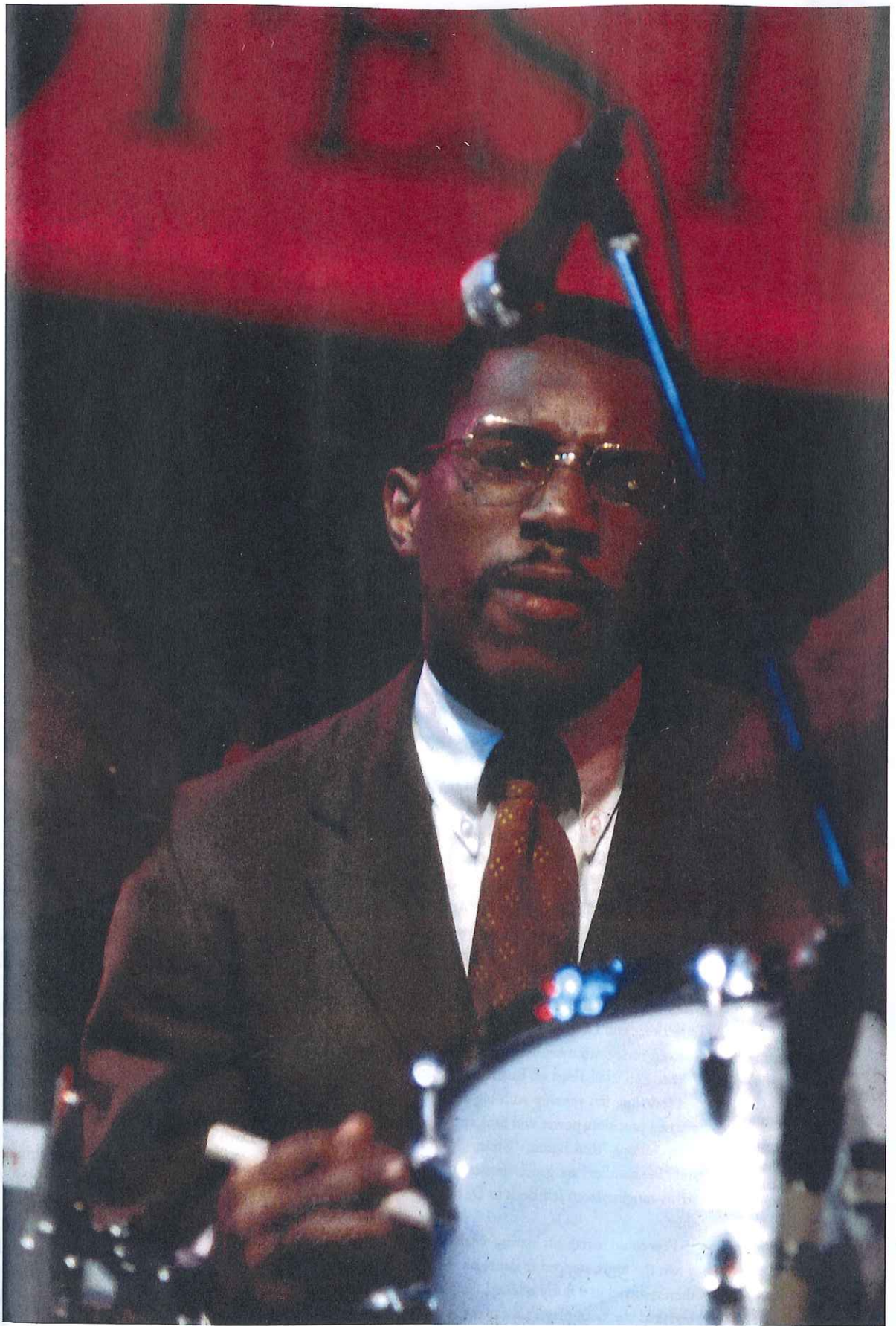
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and Kenny Burrell, and was active on jazz sessions around town. But as the decade turned, Cobham got deeper into the backbeat. Cobham joined New York band Dreams and anchored its horn-heavy rock sound, connecting with bandmates and future collaborators—trumpeter Randy Brecker, saxophonist Michael Brecker, and guitarist John Abercrombie. But a chance meeting with drummer Jack DeJohnette changed Cobham's course for the rest of the 1970s. DeJohnette was leaving Miles Davis's band and wondered if Cobham might like to replace him.

After Miles checked out Cobham on a gig, the enigmatic trumpeter invited him to the sessions that evolved into Miles's *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* record—and also parts of *Bitches Brew*. During a break in the *Johnson* sessions, the English guitarist in the studio threw out a riff and Cobham dove in. "A large part of [opening track] 'Right Off' was a jam that started with me playing a weird kind of shuffle," says guitarist John McLaughlin, who with Cobham later co-formed the Mahavishnu Orchestra. "Billy jumped right on it, and we hit a groove. Miles came running into the studio and went on to play one of the greatest solos on record. From this meeting, I really wanted to work with Billy on a more permanent basis."

Cobham declined an offer to tour with Davis, opting instead to remain in New York and focus on Dreams and some work with Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter (a project that later evolved, sans Cobham, into Weather Report). He and McLaughlin also began developing the ideas that became Mahavishnu, a band that almost single-handedly forged a genre both beloved and reviled.

Inventing the Genre

Now forty years later, the Mahavishnu Orchestra continues to inspire intrigue and loathing. Depending on whom you talk to, the group either bridged a new world between disparate musical forms (rock and jazz), or unleashed bands of musicians rich in technique but bankrupt of soul or inspiration.

Mahavishnu's players had prodigious talent, heads full of jazz, and righteous notions to redefine rock music. In McLaughlin, the band had a leader with singular focus, an instrumentalist probing Eastern modes and playing half tones that listeners were only beginning to hear. He was also the band's "frustrated drummer" and suggested that Cobham add another kick drum to his kit. "I've loved drums for as long as I can remember," McLaughlin says. "If I hadn't fallen for guitar, I would've taken up drums. I wanted Billy to get more power, and I figured that with two bass drums, he would really kick me and the band along." Cobham balked at the idea, saying that he didn't have a clear concept for

it. The idea wasn't new. Some rock and jazz drummers had been using two kicks for years. They worked great for big-band drummers who could set up horn figures and solos with explosive little bursts. Cobham played with the idea for a bit, and started writing drum parts with propulsive double-kick-drum shuffles that sounded as though you'd lost your footing inside a cavalry charge. He's been carrying around two bass drums ever since.

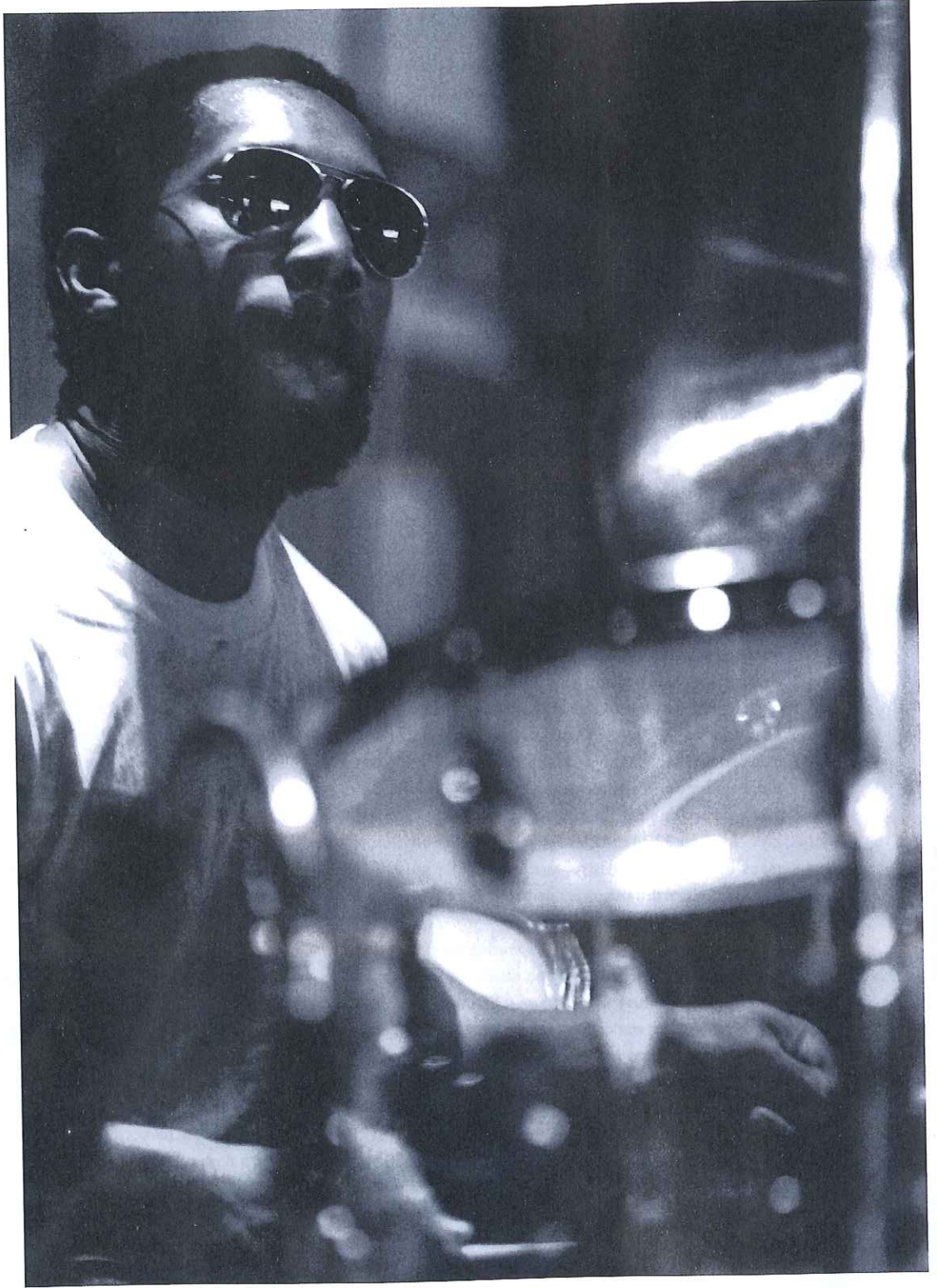
The original Mahavishnu lineup burned out on each other after only a couple of years and two landmark records (and a third "lost sessions" release). McLaughlin would carry on with different players for a few more albums, but the original group's impact was profound. They'd invented fusion, a code word for their groundbreaking improvisation (or pretentious indulgence, as some allege), and cleared the way for bands and artists like Weather Report, Stanley Clarke, Yes, and Emerson, Lake & Palmer.

Cobham meanwhile had redefined a drummer's role. He would simmer under a soloist, push and build tension, then erupt in volcanic displays of volume and dexterity. His dense and intricate patterns blurred the lines between leader and follower. In Mahavishnu, the driver might change in any given measure of the song. "I present myself through the drums, and they reflect what I'm about, who I am, how I feel," Cobham said in an interview with William F. Miller. For this article, I ask Cobham, "Away from the drum set, are you as explosive and cerebral, soulful and gentle, as your playing suggests?" He says, "Could be."

Making Their Shoulders Drop

After an acrimonious split from McLaughlin and Mahavishnu, Cobham hurried into the studio with session players like the late guitarist Tommy Bolin, bassist Lee Sklar, fellow Mahavishnu alumnus and keyboardist Jan Hammer, and legendary jazz bassist Ron Carter to record his 1973 solo debut, *Spectrum*.

From the ripping double-kick shuffle of opener "Quadrant 4" to the no-worries lope of closing track "Red Baron," *Spectrum* is a head's classic. Its sophisticated writing and arrangements, distilled from Cobham's Miles and Mahavishnu experiences, are woven through with the era's party-funk spirit of Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder, and Parliament. Cobham was surprised to learn that *Spectrum* was getting airplay six months after its release. A conscious effort to connect with listeners on a physical level had paid off. "I knew I was awarded, in a backhanded way, a popularity by being associated with Mahavishnu that I could have never gained on my own," he says. "Mahavishnu had a com-



plexity about it that I didn't feel a need to duplicate. What it didn't have, that I felt I owned and contributed, was the groove. I felt it would be nice to make the groove—the funky part—much more dominant, while adding a taste of Mahavishnu's pyrotechnical side."

Cobham followed up *Spectrum* with 1974's *Crosswinds*, a more ambitious record that explored Latin feels and ambient, textural pieces (like the infinitely ambling "Heather"), while still anchored by slamming funk tracks like "The Pleasant Pheasant." Later the same year, *Total Eclipse* followed, the third in a remarkable solo run. It opened with "Solarizations," an eleven-minute suite that reignited some of the Mahavishnu fire, before leaping off into horn- and guitar-heavy *Spectrum*-style workouts, including the standout "Moon Germs."

However, no matter how much "jazz" Cobham wrote into his compositions, he aimed to make people move. "People are into simplicity," he says. "They're into what makes them feel good. People want to dance. They don't dance in 7/4 [time signature] in the U.S. If you can grab people with something that they feel comfortable with, you notice that their shoulders drop. They feel real comfortable, and all of a sudden they're just tapping and humming along." For the next five years, Cobham continued to drop technical funk bombs like *Life & Times* and *Inner Conflicts*. The more tepid *A Funky Thide of Sings*, while still featuring fine playing, lacked compositional fire and previewed an inspirational drought to come in the '80s.

But those first several records represent an unparalleled run for a relatively unknown "jazz" musician, particularly a drummer/bandleader. Time has proven them to be respected and sought-after classics of the genre. "All I could do was take my best shot and hope I got over with my musical concepts," he says. "I believe I had the element of surprise on my side, as not many in the record industry were prepared for me as a front-line artist, since drummers are generally not expected to make hit records."

When not writing, recording, or touring his own material in this period, Cobham made hay on sessions and gigs with artists like guitarist Larry Coryell, bassist Stanley Clarke, even the Brothers Johnson, working "wherever, whenever." One particular job demonstrated an ear for new talent. Producing a demo for a friend in New York, Cobham liked the young guitarist on the session enough to invite him to join his band. "Billy pretty much discovered me," says jazz guitar great John Scofield. "I was about twenty-three, twenty-four, just playing around Boston. John Abercrombie had just left Billy's band, and then I joined. It was my first big-time gig. We were playing big concerts to rock audiences, on fusion packages with groups like Weather Report and the Headhunters." Scofield later played on *A Funky*

Thide of Sings, turning out a blistering performance on the staccato funk and stabbing horns of standout track "Panhandler."

Cobham later tapped Sco to join the band he formed with keyboardist George Duke. Duke and Cobham had crossed paths while the former was playing in Frank Zappa's band, which opened some shows for Mahavishnu. The drummer and keysman shared an affinity for brainy, progressive funk. "We were a fusion band with a definite urban feel," Duke says of the Cobham/Duke Band. "We wanted to display all the technique we possessed, but build the music on urban grooves. No one was doing that at the time." Duke says Cobham could envelop a band at will and drive it to new levels. "He taught me that the rhythm section could be more than just timekeepers and accompanists. As a result, I've always preferred drummers who were a little wild and rhythmically explorative, not afraid to take chances. Billy also had that ability to make odd time signatures swing. There's no drummer on the planet quite like him."

The Cobham/Duke Band, which also included bassist Alphonso Johnson, hit the road and released the classic *Live on Tour in Europe*. But the band's run was cut short as both Duke and Scofield became sought-after collaborators and bandleaders in their own right. "Standing next to Billy [onstage] was awesome," Scofield says. "To actually stand there and feel it, and think, 'If this guy dropped a stick, it might go through my skull.' But that's the thing about Billy. He's the kind of drummer who would never drop a stick."

Scofield later saw firsthand the drummers that Cobham influenced. Only a handful, like former Parliament funk shredder Dennis Chambers, could match Cobham's level and still add something unique, he says. The rest just sounded like clones, all flailing speed and blunt trauma, but with all the subtlety and precision of a putty knife. "Most of the good drummers I've played with are smart," Scofield says. "They don't try to play like Billy."

Blame It on the Village People

As the '70s faded out of view, the constant cyclical pressure of writing, recording, and touring began to wear. With several very good records in his portfolio, Cobham should have been buzzing with a flush solo career. But a bigger breakthrough eluded him, and his frustrations with the business grew. "I didn't understand how to work with the production and marketing staff at Atlantic, and wasn't able to establish a business rapport with those in positions to make decisions in my favor," he says of his record

company dealings back then. "I didn't have a manager, which made me vulnerable, and I just fell through the cracks by missing opportunities and misinterpreting the playing field." He regrets not being better educated about the mechanics of the business, and says he lost quite a bit of money due to ignorance of publishing, recording royalties, and performance payments. "Please also understand that no one in this business offers lessons in Music Business 101 for free," he adds. "Everything has its price, and the two routes to learning both have their pitfalls."

In 1980, disillusioned and burned out, Cobham opted for a change of scenery. Thought maybe he'd spend six weeks in Europe, then return to New York with revitalized purpose. But he found he liked the European pace and took a particular shine to Zurich. It was a place he could learn more about himself as a person, not just as an artist, drummer, and musician. "Actually, around 1978, I began to feel that the music played in the States was no longer attractive to me," he says. "Groups like the Village People were successful with cover songs of classical pieces and things like 'In the Navy.' Looking back, that scene was the deciding factor to [move] my life to another part of the world. I wanted to better understand why people are so easily duped into accepting a particular dogma, set by a few, as the direction."

Cobham lay low in Europe, still recording solo material, but mostly enjoying the life of a contributor and collaborator. Ironically, one of his first gigs after relocating was with American guitarist Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead, in his side band Bobby and the Midnites. Even today, the pairing sounds odd on paper, but not for those familiar with Weir's percussive, swaying rhythm style. It wouldn't be Cobham's last travel in the Dead orbit either. More than a decade later, he'd reinterpret the California band's songs as a founding member of Jazz Is Dead. He also anchored the drums as a member of Jack Bruce and Friends, an all-star lineup led by the former Cream bassist and jazz aficionado. Cobham says he enjoyed letting someone else drive for a change: "I didn't feel as if I was enjoying the experience [of leading bands] for many years. I had so much to focus on that there was never enough time to meditate on what was happening, what had happened, and where fate might direct me from those points."

By 1985, he picked up his prolific recording pace with the release of *Warning*, followed by records like *Power Play*, *Picture This*, and *Incoming*. But this period is marred by inconsistency, and a fascination with new digital recording technology that overshadowed songcraft. The records sound pristine and demonstrate remarkable sonic clarity. But the compositions drift uncomfortably deep into the emerging smooth-jazz format of the day, a hallmark of Cobham's then label GRP.

It wouldn't be until the early '90s that Cobham would re-center and recapture his mojo, largely through newfound inspiration

from African, Afro-Cuban, and Asian rhythmic explorations. He also started playing jazz again. These days, you're likely to find Billy Cobham smacking a *batú* or *dun dun* onstage at a European festival, or maybe leading his band Culture Mix through a fiery version of "Stratus." He might just as easily be seen sizzling along in a trio with old friends Ron Carter and Kenny Barron.

In the last decade, Cobham has moved fluidly through many forms including small jazz combos, midsize ensembles, Afro-Cuban material with Asere, and African/Yoruba vibes with Okuta Percussion. He worked on Peter Gabriel's *The Last Temptation of Christ* score and has been a featured performer at Gabriel's WOMAD festivals. "I like the idea of multiple musical platforms, being able to express myself comfortably within more than one musical environment at a time, and with minimal need for adjustment," he says. "I find the transitions from one to the other easy and seamless."

It's been a long six-week break since Cobham came to Europe thirty years ago. He now lives in Bern, what he calls "a slow-moving town that allows me to contemplate life at a speed that I can control." It's a better quality of life and leads to better ideas, he says. He doesn't envision ever living in the States again. With a healthy career in Europe and still steady demand among American fans, Cobham has plenty of places to play on the world map.

And though rediscovery of his material by Souls of Mischief, Massive Attack, DJ Shadow, and other contemporary producers has raised his profile a bit, he hasn't yet been besieged by young heads asking about bpm. Unlike many old-school funk masters, Cobham is at peace with sampling. "It's an art form within itself, and a good thing if expanded upon," he says. "I hope the success of the music forces some to go back and see from where the ideas of their idols have come." He says the royalty checks are also easy to live with. And although a fan of sampling (he's currently exploring ways to incorporate it into his own playing), he admits he doesn't have much time for hip-hop. "But I don't dislike it, either," he clarifies. "When it's good, it's good."

Being an instrumentalist, Cobham locks into the groove more than lyrical content, but he still gives it up to a couple of old-school MCs when asked to name his favorite hip-hop artists: "Ice-T and LL Cool J." Name-checking two of the true-school innovators of the art form, MCs no less, somehow sums up the essence of Bill Cobham: master drummer; accomplished composer; classical music aficionado; OG funk purveyor reprised in the sampling era. "I feel it's important to keep an open mind and work where the musical collaborations feel most comfortable to plug into," he says. "I believe that if people genuinely want to work together, they will come together to support each other under the banner of music." ●