

BILLY COBHAM

Have Drums, Will Travel

By Bill Milkowski

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Trying to track down Billy Cobham is no small task. The man is constantly on the move. Over the past year he's popped up in so many diverse settings that it's hard to keep tabs on him.

One week would find him in New York City, laying down strictly in-the-pocket grooves with the Boss Blues Band, a Stuff spin-off featuring Eric Gale, Cornell Dupree, and Richard Tee. Another week might find him in Europe playing an acoustic trio date with Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter, or in Japan with the Gil Evans Big Band. At other times he could be found out on the road with his own four-piece jazz-rock group, Glass Menagerie, or out touring with Bobby & The Midnights, a solid rock outfit fronted by Grateful Dead co-founder Bob Weir.

And when he wasn't holding clinics at universities across the States or attending drum company trade shows around the world, you could probably find Billy Cobham at home. But to do that you'd have to travel to Zurich, Switzerland, where he's lived since 1981.

True to form, Cobham is on the move again this year, juggling several projects simultaneously. The first couple weeks of 1984 saw him in Los Angeles, where he was laying down tracks at Cherokee Studios for the forthcoming Bobby & The Midnights follow-up album (this one to be released on Columbia instead of Arista). From there it was on to New York City for a brief business stop before taking off a few hours later for Paris, where he joined John McLaughlin in rehearsals for the new Mahavishnu Orchestra. The 1984 edition of that landmark band will feature a few new faces—Miles Davis sideman Bill Evans on reeds, Swedish phenom Jonas Hellborg on bass, and John's fiancé Katia LaBeque on keyboards. They'll go into the studio for Warner Bros. this month and embark on a world tour in June.

But Cobham's agenda doesn't end there. Another Bobby & The Midnights tour is already being scheduled, and he also plans to go out with a new version of Glass Menagerie, this time featuring European musicians instead of Americans. And there's a major video project in the works, a television series titled **Billy Cobham's World Of Rhythm**, to be broadcast in Europe.

Add to that list his many commitments on the clinic circuit, and you've got one busy man. But Cobham wouldn't have it any other way. He thrives on diversity and seems wide open to new ideas. As Cobham himself put it: "For me, if you lose that element of being able to learn things every day...be able to have an open mind...then you might as well give up playing."

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Bill Milkowski: Tell us about the upcoming Mahavishnu tour.

Billy Cobham: As much as I know is that the material we will be playing will be, I suspect, a lot of stuff that we'll put together as a group as opposed to the old Orchestra concept, where 98 percent of all the material was John's. I think there will be more input this time, so it'll be interesting to see what comes out of it. John talked about the idea of hopefully working with a singer...maybe somebody like Bobby McFerrin. But we'll see. I know that the bass player is real good—Jonas Hellborg from Stockholm. He's a very eager young fellow, and he's got a lot to say. He made a couple of albums in Europe where it's only him on the records, and you wouldn't believe it's only him—that four strings would do all that. It's like he's the next Jaco [Pastorius]. In fact, it's a step beyond, a little bit more complicated than Jaco. It's exciting to see him play.

BM: And the others?

BC: Well, Katia is a wonderful keyboard artist. And I want to try playing some keyboards myself. And Bill Evans, who will be the reed player also plays real good keyboards and writes nice stuff, so his input will be exciting. There will be at least five of us with John and myself with the idea that John is going to be playing that new Synclavier guitar synthesizer.

BM: Have you ever played with Bill Evans before?

BC: No, but I've watched him this past year. In 1983 I got a chance to tour Japan with the Gil Evans band...the same tour that Miles was on, so I saw Bill there, and he sounds great. He's a lot more mature now than when I first heard him. But then, on the other hand, I didn't hear enough of him. Every time he would start something, the bottom would fall out because Miles would change the tune. There was just never enough time for Bill to really develop something before it was on to the next thing, which is in a way also musical. It's not an argument for or against the concept. It's just another way of doing things. It keeps everything off balance in an interesting but musical way. But Bill's just a great player, and I like his vibe. We played some racquetball together in Japan. He's into sports; I'm into sports. I like the feeling of him; I like the feeling of all the people involved.

BM: Any apprehension about billing it as the New Mahavishnu?

BC: No. As a matter of fact, I just said New Mahavishnu myself because the only two people from the original band are John and myself. I understand that now it's going to be called the Mahavishnu Orchestra. But to me, names never made a difference anyway. We'll just have to see how it turns out. I do have some ideas about how I would like to play in the band and the direction of the band. I'm excited by doing it. I think it's a very logical step. I've been ranting and raving about it for about a year-and-a-half before all this started. Originally, the idea was to try and get everybody from the original band together. But we talked about it, and it was decided that we should go this route instead. Actually, I don't even know what [former Mahavishnu bassist] Rick [Laird] is doing, except I know he's become a fantastic photographer. And I know that [violinist] Jerry [Goodman] is out in California somewhere, but I don't know what he's

doing. And, of course, [keyboardist] Jan [Hammer] is doing a rock & roll number now. After all these years he seems to be set up pretty well in that genre. And he didn't appear to be that interested in doing this thing anyway because he feels it's a bit too jazzy for him. So I'm told. But that's okay too. I mean, everybody's got their ideas about the way they see themselves. I honor that.

BM: It's been 10 years since the Mahavishnu Orchestra broke up. Have you been in touch with John at all during that time?

BC: Off and on. We did a tour in '79 with Jack Bruce and Stu Goldberg. Never recorded a note, but it was fun. And I did an album with him prior to that [**Johnny McLaughlin, Electric Guitarist**]. But we haven't done anything together since '79, so this would be the one.

BM: So there's no tension between you, no hard feelings about the breakup?

BC: No problem here at all. That's why I'm looking forward to it. It's a logical step for me because it just projects my kind of concepts. It gives me promise of music that will be challenging to me. Not that I have anything against the music that I've been playing or the people who I've been playing with. But there are different levels of players and music. And there are some things that just won't come through with certain people. They may lack the chops mentally as well as physically. So in those situations I've had to feel and figure out ways to play, which has been school for me...to fit in as best I could on that level of some of the people that I've worked with, to try and make what we had work as music on a team level. It's been a valuable learning experience for me because I eventually want to do a lot of teaching, and I think that is a very important tool for teaching—that concept of team playing. It's helped me a lot in my clinics and the artist-in-residency programs I've been involved with over the past 10 years.

BM: Let's talk about clinics. What is it you try to get across in that short period of time?

BC: I try to show people how to play together. And the first thing I talk to them about is the utilization of rest; how to play the spaces, how to take one note and make it count for a thousand. And how to think about things; to stop and really think and listen, how to listen to the count-off at the very beginning of the tune. I mean, these things are very boring for most musicians. To talk about that is like...“Come on, man. You puttin' me on!” But most cats today really don't listen. I see it on sessions, myself included. You set up a click track and ask the guitar player to start the tune, and he comes in so much on top of the beat that it would give such an edge that the whole band would just start rushing. No one is really listening to where you're counting. They're not in tune to each other or to the click. Instead, they've already got it in their minds where the click is, and **bam!** they just start at that tempo. So I try to break those little things down. And as simple and boring as they may seem, they end up being major elements in how you play. I mean, if you can't start properly—if you can't start where you're comfortable and where the producer wants you to be with the time—you've already lost the gig.

BM: So you stress mental preparation?

BC: Definitely. Just knowing where the feeling is, having a real strong sense of where the feeling is and being settled. Then the next thing is to get everybody to be in

agreement with where the time is set. Not easy. Everybody has his or her own concept of the time. And consciously or subconsciously they are not willing to give up their concept of where the time is at. And I think that is a major reason why a lot of people turn around and look at the drummer. It turns out that nine times out of 10 it'll be... "Drummer's not keeping good time." But what it really is, the **band's** not playing together.

BM: Have non-drummers begun to regard the drummer as something other than a mere timekeeper?

BC: Yes, but in different ways. Some of them have become dependent on machines and are now looking at drummers as being some kind of specialists. They've gone the other way. Instead of thinking of drummers as perfunctory, they now think of them as being too esoteric. It's like... "I don't need **that** now. I'll just set the machine up. It'll do everything, and I won't have to worry." The truth is, most non-percussionists have poor time by themselves. They couldn't stand up there like Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie and play and keep time. Or Freddie [Hubbard] or McLaughlin. That, to me, is very, very important. The guitar players that stick out to me are the ones who can stand up there by themselves and do a number—Joe Pass, George Benson, McLaughlin, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, to some degree. I think [Carlos] Santana can do it. And why I choose Santana is that he has a sound, a tone. He plays with a quality that is simple but extremely effective—sometimes more effective than the heavy note players and pickers. And he has good time. He plays with a tremendous amount of feeling, and you instantly get the idea. Then there are other cats who just play lots and lots of notes, and their time is absolutely ridiculous. I mean...poor. Another fantastic timekeeper is Paco De Lucia. He has impeccable time. He can play not only metronomically but with an amazing amount of feeling as well. It's not a gift, really. The cat sat down and figured out what he wanted to do, the direction he wanted to go in, and he just mapped it out. Then, anything else he puts on top of it is like jam on a jelly sandwich, you know? It's already there. Everything is secured; he's got his foundation, and he's just floating right along. He takes his chances, but he has that foundation. I always preach at clinics that you should have a rudimentary procedure of things that you could fall out of bed and play. You know that this is going to work. You may not be warmed up, but you know that when you pluck the string that this thing is going to work. No question. That means you've done your homework. But a lot of cats that I've played with don't do that. They rely on licks, on certain things that become passé, and it becomes boring because it stays in the same place all the time.

BM: Are there any non-percussionists coming up these days who have done their homework and are more time-conscious?

BC: There's a keyboard cat who came out of Poland named Wladislaw Sendeci. He split the country with his family and now has asylum in Switzerland. And let me tell you, the boy can **play**. No doubt. In fact, the first time he did a thing with me, I thought it was Herbie. And there's a bass player in Hamburg named Michael Hauser—just smokin'. I want to do a two- or three-week tour of the States sometime this year with them. It would just be a nice change of pace for me. It's nice to play with some people who are unknown. They play harder, especially if they're coming from Europe,

because they have something to prove. The cats from here, when they go over to Europe, they're fatted calves, generally, in a musical sense. They're going over there with the idea: "Show **me** something. I'm coming from the place where it's all happening, man. Now, what are **you** gonna show **me**?" But, I'll tell you, there's some people over there who can play, and it would be a mistake to think that you've got some kind of advantage over them just because you come from the states.

BM: Do you have an idea that down the road you might become a music teacher?

BC: Yes, and it scares me. Because I feel that when that day comes, I won't be playing anymore, not the way I would like to be playing. I would've resigned myself at that point to not playing, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that. I don't know when I ever will be ready for it. So I guess that if I ever take on students, it would be more like apprenticeships rather than a classroom situation. I believe that the experiences you've had are your best teachers to see what went wrong. I learned how to write that way, being with such special people as Hubert Laws, Ron Carter, Jimmy Owens, Roland Hanna, Tom Mackintosh. These were the members of a band that I was a part of called the New York Jazz Sextet, back around 1967. I was in the Army at the time and was commuting back and forth between Fort Dix in New Jersey and gigs with this band. And these were some crotchety ol' guys. Old from the standpoint of experience. And these guys wouldn't give me a break. But they never told me not to bring any material in. They always looked at everything that I wrote, and they would always be on my back if it wasn't right. So I never made the same mistake twice. It was that kind of learning experience. I loved that so much, that these great veterans would at least take the time to play my stuff and critique it. Feedback like that is always an important thing in any group.

BM: What is the status of the television show you're working on?

BC: It's not done yet. We did a thing called **The World Of Rhythm**, and it incorporates the likes of Cheech & Chong, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Michael and Randy Brecker, Tom Malone, Howard Johnson, Herb Geller, Louie Bellson, Gil Evans. The idea was to show how to work as a team through rhythm section playing, how you can acquire the same goal. So we showed different types of rhythm sections and showed how they try to come to the same point by working together. We showed Louie backing the big band; we showed Gil conducting the big band in his own unique way. And Gil came up with a real interesting statement about having the band always border on vagueness but never quite falling in. His bands are always tight, but still vague. Kind of tight, but loose. That's the way his music is. Louie's style is just the opposite. Everything is cut and dried and straightahead. Anyway, on the show, Louie and I play a duet together with the band, featuring about 35 minutes of drum soloing. Then I worked with Herbie and Ron in a trio format, which I really loved. We played some gigs together toward the beginning of last year, and the funny thing of it is, we were about to work on a project together, just to play purely acoustically in concert halls with a minimum of sound reinforcement. I thought we could do it, then along came **Rockit** [Hancock's dance/video hit], and **poof!** there went the concept. So that ended that. But maybe it'll work out in the next few years. I enjoy playing with Ron and Herbie so much that I would still love to do it.

BM: Speaking of **Rockit**, what do you think of the technological innovations coming into the realm of percussion?

BC: I'm interested to a degree, but I haven't bought any electronic drums. I never got involved with the Syndrums because I thought they were too one-dimensional. Now with the Simmons stuff, they're really making a concerted effort to try and change the whole position of the drums. I think it's valid. But for me, I still feel like I'm playing the upright bass of the drum world when I play. So many people now have these electronic drums, and they can play their rolls just by turning up the sensitivity level and lightening the touch. I like doing it manually. I like my Model T Ford. Instead of investing in electronic drums, I like the idea of learning more about the development of drum heads so as to make the drum project better. I like the idea of learning how the shell reacts to certain kinds of stick sounds to the head. That, to me, is more multi-dimensional than any electronic possibilities. I like the acoustical physics of position with the drum set.

BM: What music, other than jazz, have you been listening to lately?

BC: A lot of different things. I listen to the Yes album, primarily for sound of recording. I listen to Kajagoogoo and Van Halen, primarily because I've been mentally set up within the last few months with the Midnights, listening for certain kinds of sounds and certain kinds of textures that are used in rock & roll. I feel more at home and knowledgeable about the different kinds of sound that I'm hearing now, and how to deal with them, how to cope with them, and why I feel they're there. For instance, on the latest Bobby & The Midnights recording session, the producer, Jeff "Skunk" Baxter, asked me to tune down the snare drum. I normally have my snare drum pitched up high, that pingy kind of snare sound you'll hear from the Police or Yes. With Baxter, he likes that dark sound. A lot of people call it the L.A. fat snare: big, tubby, real dark sounding. That was a real learning experience for me. So I've been listening to that L.A. fat snare on things like the Michael Jackson album [**Thriller**]. And a lot of people call it commercial and put it all down, but there's really a lot of information in the simplicity of that sound. There's a tremendous amount of information there that is being passed over by cynics and critics. People say things like, "If the masses like it then that means the musician is selling out." Yet, to me, it seems very logical that if you play something that everybody can get up and go "That's it!"—I like that. There's a lot to this so-called commercial music sound, and it's passed over by many, many people who happen to be in a critical position, who happen to write a lot of the columns for jazz. And I feel that has a lot to do with why jazz is not moving forward in a way that it could. I think jazz musicians, especially, are very sensitive individuals who have a tendency to go with the flow, myself included. I've made that mistake, and I will make it again, probably. I look at Freddie [Hubbard]. He's had some incredible albums that sounded great, then he's had some albums where I don't understand what's going on. They have no direction, to me. I know he's searching, but for what? I listen to this stuff, and the only thing that hits me is that he's searching for a pot of gold. But you can't have a pot of gold without a foundation. And I don't choose Freddie as if he's the only cat doing it. I have the same problem.

You have to have some foundation. You can have one cat who has access to the

bank vault, has the key, goes in, but collects the wrong kind of money. A lot of us in the jazz syndrome do that. We let our education, our knowledge of what could be, take over what should've been a simple situation. It takes us right out; we build and build on top of this simple thing, adding too many colors. Next thing you know, what might've been a Rembrandt is now your average Greenwich Village painting that everybody sees every day. It's now average because too much has been added to it. The secret is, you have to figure out what **not** to do and know what will not work. That's why with the Mahavishnu Orchestra, we're now in a situation where we may have too much. We have all these minds, we could overload the circuits.

That's what happened with that **Spaces** album. There was Chick [Corea] and McLaughlin and Miroslav [Vitous] and Larry Coryell all playing at the same time. That was in the early '70s, at a time when it seemed that everybody needed to be heard. And when a musician needs to be heard, especially when he's knowledgeable and knows all the scales in the world, it all comes out. It's a bitch, man. You gotta retrain yourself, then, to learn how to play the spaces. And that's basically what I've been doing since I did the last interview in **down beat** [1977]—learning how to play spaces. Not easy. It's like the school of higher learning on about eight planes above. I play a lot more spaces now. I play more like a horn player. I like to tune the drums, generally, to the main pitch of the band and of the tune that we're playing. And I like to use some kind of melodic hook to tie into the solo. Now I feel that the solo has to have a hook, something that I can go back to, just to keep everybody interested in what's going on.

BM: So you are constantly reevaluating your own playing and always open to new ideas?

BC: Absolutely. It's really important that I be that way. Otherwise, I've lost before I start—I'd get stale—because I'm also a person who doesn't like to play music all the time. I don't believe in the concept that you have to practice every day, that you have to be top notch every day. To me, that's like lifting 500 pounds every day, getting in training for a tournament that never comes around. You get bored after a while. You get stale. You want to get away from it. So you do, and you just end up getting fat and all the muscle turns to nothing. Then you've really got a problem. But if you go away from it in a healthy way with a healthy attitude, you'll always come back with more ideas, just from the things you've accumulated subconsciously. You need air to breathe once in a while...a chance for your brain to regroup. And that ultimately affects the way you see music the next time around. So when I come back after not having played for a while, my playing has another face. **db**

BILLY COBHAM'S EQUIPMENT

On the tour with the Mahavishnu Orchestra this summer, Billy Cobham plans to use his Tama Artstar setup—two 22-inch bass drums, an 8-inch snare, and four rack toms, starting with an 8-inch and going up to 20-inch. His cymbals will be A. Zildjians—22-inch ride, 22-inch swish, 20-inch crash-ride, 17- and 18-inch crashes, and 14-inch New Beat hi-hats. The microphones will be either Sennheisers, Electro-Voices, or AKG's. In the studio the microphones would be Neumanns.

Billy explains the various uses for the three kinds of sticks he designed with Pro-Mark: “The 717 is my Sarah Vaughn stick, my trio stick. It’s real light, gives me lots of ping, and I can stay out of the way with these sticks. The 808 is my general purpose stick. It’s a very powerful stick, used mostly for big bands. But for rock & roll I use the 767 sticks. It’s a fatter stick, yet it’s not as heavy as the 808. But this stick gives me more spread of tone. It’s size allows me to get more stick on the drum, so I can get that fat projection.”

Billy uses Remo heads. “I’m using a new head that Remo puts out. It’s a black version of the [smooth Ambassador] white head, but the texture is different. I used them on a gig we did earlier in the year with the Midnights. I was using two bass drum heads on each drum, and it sounded great. You get all this boom, but it cuts down the overtone enough so that you get that kick back to make you feel secure. You get a big, fat sound. That way you don’t have to play so hard, which I really like a lot. Remo puts out some interesting little ditties that sort of upgrade the sound and quality of the bass drum. The drums are starting to sound like an instrument, and I’m not having to beat the drums into submission every night. So that a radical improvement. Normally in rock & roll they set the microphone levels so low that you have to beat the drum hard. But rather than just pounding and pounding away, I’m more interested in controlling the overtones of the drums, especially the low-end drums like the bass drum. I want to be able to hit them and not have to hit them as hard to get sound back at me. It’s quicker and cleaner, and I end up saving energy in the long run. That helps me a lot. I like the drums to sing out without having to use too much effort.”