

Billy Cobham

On The Attack

By Bill Beuttler

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Billy's back. Not that Billy Cobham ever disappeared completely from the U.S. since moving to Zurich in 1981. But with a pair of fine fusion efforts out on GRP Records (**Warning** and **Power Play**) and his first Grammy nomination (**Zanzibar Breeze**, from his latest album, is up for best r&b instrumental performance), the drummer is enjoying his highest profile since his heyday with Miles Davis and the Mahavishnu Orchestra in the early '70s.

That's what helped lure a crowd of more than 500 to The Vic one recent night in Chicago, where Cobham dazzled his faithful—including many local drummers—with his customary precisioned-and-powerful drumming, backed by his current quartet-mates Sa Davis (percussion), Baron Browne (bass), and Gerry Etkins (keyboards).

Cobham's self-penned repertoire—a mix of catchy r&b and burning Mahavishnu-like fusion—served as a launching board for an exuberant display of virtuosity, which included such tricks (gratuitous, had they not been delivered with such élan) as fierce uppercut cymbal crashes, playing with two sticks per hand, and abandoning his drumset for a turn at Davis' timbales.

We spoke to Cobham at the soundcheck for that night's performance. He is an energetic and busy man, as he would have to be with a professional life that includes touring, recording, giving clinics, composing, and studying the electronics that he's implemented in the past couple of years—all this and he's a fitness buff who makes sure he puts in at least an hour long workout every day, even when stuck in a hotel room. Cobham wastes little time in idle chitchat, but that doesn't mean he won't find time for a friend; while the interview was in progress, former Mahavishnu colleague Jerry Goodman phoned an invitation to his own late-night performance at a club across town, and Cobham promised he'd try to make it.

Bill Beuttler: The last time we interviewed you, in 1984, you were shunning electronics, and joking about sticking with the drummer's equivalent of the Model T. Now you are using electronics. Why the switch?

Billy Cobham: Well, actually I should clarify that, because what I had done was taken a hiatus, gotten away from electronics because I didn't think they worked too well. Since that interview, a lot of things happened in the field that rekindled my interest. So I started to get into it, and have moved up to the point now where my drums are being triggered by Barcus-Berry transducers off the rims, and they're triggering a DX7—quite a turnaround, and it's based on the fact that I can turn the things on and they'll work.

BB: I understand you've got your brother helping you out with the electronics.

BC: Yes, my brother Wayne is involved with the programming.

BB: Is he a musician?

BC: Sure. He's a trumpet player, plays with B.B. King—he's covered pretty much the gamut on the chitlin' circuit. He's worked with Kool and the Gang, on occasion. He's sort of like your lunch-pail trumpet player—plays with a lot of different people, reads well, does the job. But he's really started to shine in the area of computer technology and music technology. He knows the different types of software—Passport, Professional Composer, and Performer—and how to run them on the Macintosh and the IBM PC. He puts ideas together for that kind of stuff.

BB: How about the guys in your band? Where did you find them?

BC: Boston. Sa Davis, New England Conservatory; Baron Browne, Berklee College of Music; Gerry Etkins, Berklee College of Music.

BB: How'd you hear about them?

BC: Through Dean Brown, who went to Berklee and who's no longer with us.

BB: Who replaced him?

BC: No one. The whole idea is "time for Cobham not to play with guitars any more." I mean, in **my** band. I have a project right now that I'm kicking around with Kevin Eubanks. But I love the guitar so much that I feel I have to get away from it for a while, in my personal situation.

BB: Besides working with your own band and with Eubanks, are you involved with any other projects?

BC: No, and [the Eubanks collaboration] is really only in the talking stage right now—nothing's solid. I'd like to pursue it as soon as time permits. But right now the most important thing for me is to tour, and to tour as a quartet without a guitar player.

BB: In that same April '84 interview it looked like you were going to play with...

BC: The Hahavishnu?

BB: What happened?

BC: The Hahavishnu became a real bad joke. I extended myself to a point with John McLaughlin and his ideas, and I chose to really push it. It became more an obsession for me, in a way, than for anybody else, and I ended up being the one hurt most. It cost me almost a year's setback in work. I had nothing; it was the closest I've ever come to being destitute, because I lost all of the work that I could've had that summer. I made the full commitment, and I lost out because their plans apparently changed and they decided not to tell me.

BB: What sort of a change was there?

BC: The change was that they would use Danny Gottlieb instead of me. But they decided not to tell me that; they just decided to use Danny Gottlieb. At the time, I thought that it was all going to happen, so I extended myself when really I should not

have, and they pulled the string. And then said nothing; about two-three weeks after the tour started I found out from a guy who works at Paiste cymbals that Danny Gottlieb was doing the job. And I said, "Well, it's the first I've ever heard of it." I was still getting ready to go. The last time I spoke to John McLaughlin, he was supposed to get back to me with information on how I was supposed to transport my equipment. And I never heard from him again. To this day I have not spoken to John McLaughlin one note. But I know one thing—I'll never be in that situation again. I'll never play with John McLaughlin again. I can understand now why our paths haven't crossed, and also why musically it would not be to anyone's advantage for us to do anything, because the love for the music that we once had is now blocked by this dark cloud. And I don't think that it can ever be cleared up to the point where we could play and be respectful of each other as musicians again.

BB: You've been living in Europe for...

BC: This is my sixth year now.

BB: Is there any special reason that you decided to leave the states?

BC: Oh sure. I wanted to establish myself as an artist in the European theater. I felt that it would be effective for me as a touring artist. Playing in Europe is just as important to me as playing in the United States.

I also felt that I needed to slow down, that I was highly anal-retentive—things went by real fast, I got very, very lonely, and many times I would end up using things, buying material items, to cope with my loneliness. And then I wouldn't have any time to deal with the things that I bought. So I decided to go to Europe, where time is much slower. Things happen at a much slower pace, and I felt like it would be nice to enjoy what I do and what I have—not get any more things, but enjoy what I have already.

I've been fortunate enough to have done some strong tours to build up my clientele there. Now I'm trying to apply the same concept in the United States, because maybe with this four- or five-year hiatus I can adjust myself to a younger generation and really push my concepts.

BB: Do you use the same bands in both touring situations?

BC: Yeah. Since I've moved to Europe I've worked with four different versions of my Glass Menagerie concept. I worked with a small European band for one tour, kind of a Glass Menagerie thing, and that was the end of that, because I learned one lesson there—European musicians are monster players, but to play the kind of music that I play, which is influenced by my environment in the United States, I need to have people who are empathetic and sensitive to what is happening here. There's a lot of things that could not be done by the European players, which I missed, even though we had a real good time. Everything was being emulated. The European players were trying to play like American players, and I had to go back to American players so we could get the real thing happening. So I ended up with Sa Davis and Dean and Gerry and Barry.

BB: Has living in Europe influenced you as a composer?

BC: Sure. I've been able to sit down, slow down, and take a look at what's going on.

Also, with my Macintosh I can hear a lot of things. I am nowhere near a major source of inspiration on keyboard, but with the software I can really listen to the material that I write out. If something's wrong I can change it—takes [**snaps fingers**] seconds. I often say to myself, "What would it have been like for Mozart or Beethoven to have had this?" Because for me, it's a piece of cake. Things that I could never dream of writing, because I couldn't even hear it all—I would just get a mental block because it would all go by so fast—now I can hear, and I can piece together what I want. The material I'm playing now would've taken me many, many, many months to put together—and a lot of rehearsing, a lot of mistakes. You get mentally tough through those mistakes, but it's a waste of a lot of time. With the computer I'm able to do a lot of this stuff, and I only studied that in Europe; I don't know that I'd have had a chance to do it here in the United States, because my time really was not my own.

One of the things I ran away from was **Saturday Night Live**—after a while it was two days a week of rehearsals, then Saturday the gig started at 10 o'clock in the morning and didn't finish until 1 a.m. Sunday. That's pretty rough when the rest of the week you're doing a concert with somebody, jingles, making a record date here and there—you don't get a chance to really study. Right now that's imperative for many musicians—especially if they want to get out of this fusion thing and step across the abyss to something that is solid. You've got to learn computer technology. You have to know what your machines are going to do, not just play factory sounds but create your own sounds, your own ideas—your personality has to come out in the music. That means you have to sit down and go, "Okay, fine. Now when I hit 'carriage return' what does that mean, and how do I escape out of this?" You should see Chick Corea—all that stuff he's got onstage, he's constantly looking into the manuals.

BB: Do you have a new album coming out after **Power Play**?

BC: Hopefully, we'll be recording one soon; if it's accepted it'll be coming out on GRP.

BB: Do you have a rough guess as to when?

BC: It probably won't show up in stores before late spring, because GRP has really made a commitment to CDs. CDs take a while, unfortunately, because the rest of the world isn't really geared for it. But I agree that they should come out with the best possible product, and CDs helped me to get the Grammy [nomination]—vinyl records just don't make it anymore.

BB: Just because of the sound quality?

BC: I think so. If **Zanzibar** was just on a vinyl record I don't think it would have been nominated. I think the sound quality has a lot to do with it.

BB: Not your own improvement as a composer?

BC: Oh, I think the music is strong, but I think that it would have been lost in the shuffle.

BB: I've read you do 400 situps a day prior to working out in the gym. What effect does that have on you as a musician?

BC: A great example would've been last night. We played in Boulder, Colorado—over a mile above sea level. We play a very intense set, it's demanding physically—I found

that I breathed only a little harder than normal. Normally it takes a few days for anybody to get it together; that's if you're feeling okay—if you smoke a little bit, drink a little bit, but you don't work out. For the two days I was in Boulder—because I'm my own manager and I had so much business—I had to work out in the room. I didn't do 400 situps, but that is not necessarily a requirement to keeping your head together. It is important, I think, to put in a hour a day of something.

BB: What do you do, typically?

BC: I'll do pushups, situps of various types—lower abdominals, upper abdominals—stretch for half-an-hour, and skip rope for about 15-20 minutes.

BB: Do you use weights when you're at home?

BC: Whenever I can. I'll do weights about three-four times a week, and I'll play a lot of squash and racketball.

BB: Do you notice a trend in this among musicians? There's people like Bruce Springsteen, who runs and lifts; The Marsalises like playing basketball; Miles, I've read, swims a lot...

BC: He does, and he's always been a boxer. I sure hope it's a trend. It's funny—more musicians are getting into baseball games, basketball games. Look at Huey Lewis, right? Old baseball player, drafted by a couple of major league teams. Musicians go working in Europe, and the first thing they do is to pull out a basketball, get a football. I coach a young football team at home—American football's real big in Europe now.

BB: One last question. The last time we talked to you, you said, "At 41 years old I really have to start going out there and start supporting myself—doing my own projects. I have something valid to say as an artist, and I think I should take that step forward." This was right after **Warning** came out [Sept. '85]. How far do you think you've succeeded?

BC: Now I've been nominated for a Grammy. That's a very huge step. I don't care if I win, draw, or lose—whatever. Just the acknowledgement is cool, very important. The next step is to continue to build on that. And where I build it is in the marketplace as a touring entity—primarily on my own, without any opening acts or opening for **anybody**. I like the idea of being able to set up my instruments, go out there, and do my thing. If there's an opening act, hopefully it's a guitar player that sings, or a comedian, or a husband-and-wife knife-throwing act.

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BILLY COBHAM'S EQUIPMENT

Billy Cobham's equipment includes blue Tama drums with Remo heads, Zildjian cymbals (both A.'s and K.'s), and Pro Mark sticks. His setup, as always, is bigger than the standard four-piece kit. "Now I'm using two 22-inch bass drums, an eight-by-fourteen inch snare drum, and six rack toms—two floor toms, and the rack toms are 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 18 Inches. The five cymbals include 20-inch ride, 20-inch China Boy low, 20-inch crash, 17-inch crash, and 19-inch crash." His electronic gear

includes a Yamaha DX7 synthesizer, Barcus-Berry transducers, an E-Mu SP12 drum simulator, a Simmons MTM triggering device, and a Macintosh computer.