

Background

I was born in East Texas, in a town called Beaumont on the border of Texas and Louisiana. My father had just received his doctorate in chemical engineering and was doing his apprenticeship with the Texas Company (Texaco) in a then dirty little oil town nearby called Port Arthur. My mother detested this place so much that when she became pregnant with me she got out a map to look for another place nearby to give birth. There she found a town with a French name that translated into 'pretty mountain' only ten miles away. She made my father promise to get her there before I was born. Early in the morning on August 9th 1939 she went into labor in the middle of a thunderstorm and dad dutifully got her there in time in his '37 Ford. I exited at four a.m. Little did she know that Bob Rauschenberg and Janis Joplin had been and would be born, respectively, back in Port Arthur.

At the age of fourteen I innocently decided I wanted to be the best drummer in the world. At that time I was fascinated by Gene Krupa, his sense of time in that great solo on Benny Goodman's Carnegie Hall concert recording of *Sing Sing Sing*. A drummer's role in a band like that is building time, building the rhythmic framework the rest of the band rides on. Krupa's made me ecstatic, almost intoxicated. My family was living just outside New York City then. Krupa had set up a drum school on West Fifty-fourth Street. I started taking the train to the city every Saturday to take a lesson from him.

It turned out that I was too in awe of him to learn anything. For me, it was like sitting next to a god. All I could do was stare at him. Shortly, I left and started studying with one of the teachers who

worked at the school, a black musician named 'Sticks' Evans. Sticks was an excellent studio musician – one of those who moved around Manhattan all day playing any and everything, at the drop of a hat.

He had set up his own Saturday drum class in a basement on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. I was the only white kid. They sent another kid, Wilber, to meet me at the subway every week so I would get there in one piece. Sticks collected old Manhattan classified telephone books – the yellow pages about four inches thick. Part of his method was to give each of us a pair of very heavy parade drum sticks and not let us go home until we had each beat our way through a telephone book, until there were only scraps of paper remaining.

Fine control depends on having a great deal of strength, and this was an excellent method of building it. He gave me my hands. I was fifteen. I had to stop studying there after a year because my family moved back to Texas, but I returned the next summer and continued.

When I graduated from high school I wanted to play jazz, but my family insisted I go to college. The compromise was that I would attend Manhattan School of Music. Juilliard was their first choice, but it was obvious to me that Manhattan was the only place for a percussionist to go because Paul Price was there directing a percussion ensemble. Juilliard was only producing orchestra musicians.

My first year there I still thought I would be a jazz musician – that I was just going through the conservatory to satisfy the parental pressures. But then I

discovered and became intrigued with a whole area of music, which I had known nothing about before.

A group of composers, who were more interested timbre than melody and harmony, began to turn to our percussion ensemble to play their works. Percussion is the world of timbre. We were excellent players and excited to learn to play this new music. Thus at nineteen, I began working with composers like Harry Partch, Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison; as well as those living in New York – John Cage, Morton

Feldman, Earle Brown. These, along with Christian Wolff, later came to be known as the New York School. They were the cutting edge of American contemporary music in the 1950s.

In this process I discovered that works for one percussionist also existed and decided to learn to play them. After five years, I came out of Manhattan School a solo percussionist, an almost unknown profession at the time. I had grown out of my fascination with jazz and only building time.

M.N.

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