

DRUM!
PRESENTS

TRAPS

THE ART OF DRUMMING

Lenny White

Return To
Forever
Reunion

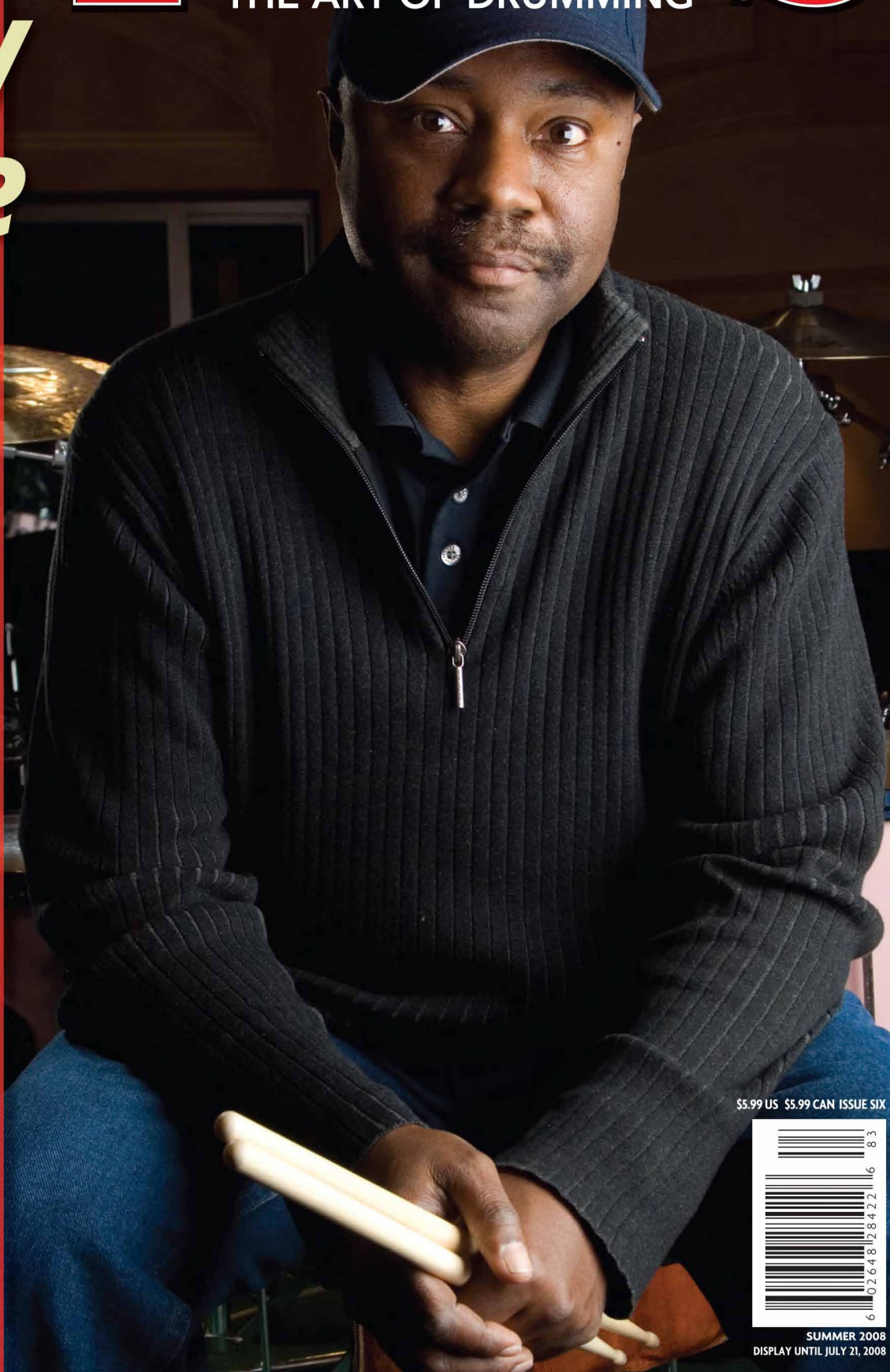
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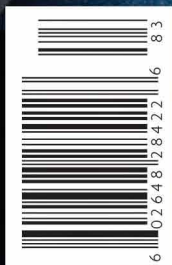
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SUMMER 2008
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CLOSING THE CIRCLE

BY Bill Milkowski

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Robert Downs

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After taking numerous side trips into straight jazz, funk, & dance music, one of the founding fathers of jazz fusion drumming reunites with his renowned partners in Return To Forever



CHAPTER ONE RTF (SLIGHT RETURN)

In the basement of his New Jersey home, located just minutes from Manhattan across the George Washington Bridge, Lenny White is showing off his bicep. “Feel this,” he says, making a fist and flexing his left arm. It is rock hard and bulging, like Schwarzenegger circa his *Pumping Iron* days. Not bad for a guy who is closing in on 60 (he’ll be 59 on December 19 of this year). “Now feel this,” he says, offering his right bicep for inspection. It is half the size with none of the musculature of that

mighty left bicep. “Rotary cuff surgery,” he explains. “I had orthoscopic back on September 20. They didn’t replace the shoulder; they just went in there and cleaned it out. All the muscles in my right shoulder atrophied and I’ve been trying to build it back up for the last four months. I had nothing ... zero, man. I couldn’t play for 30 seconds on a pad it was so bad. And so I’ve been getting it back gradually.”

The shoulder injury, however, didn’t prevent White from flying to Los Angeles the previous week to participate in rehearsals and a group photo session in preparation for the much-anticipated Return To Forever reunion tour (June 1–August 10 in the United States and Europe). And his RTF bandmates – Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke, and Al Di Meola – barely noticed any difference in his playing. “I hadn’t played in four months,” he explains. “My first playing since the surgery was when I went out to L.A. and did the thing with Return To Forever. But it was like riding a bike, man. And it was great just to go and play that music again. Just to get an opportunity to reinvestigate something that you did before – that’s exciting.”

At the time of this interview, White still had a few more months of physical ther-

apy before embarking on a whirlwind 2008 summer tour with Return To Forever. Given the demanding nature of those pulse-quickening, chops-busting RTF scores from the ’70s, he’ll need to be in peak condition to cut all the intricate, stop-time unison lines and intense, precision fills around the kit that defined the band (and a genre) more than 30 years ago.

For fusion fans, the prospect of Return To Forever getting back together again after all these years (the group disbanded in 1976) is akin to a Beatles reunion, and for the past few decades seemed about as unlikely. Corea was the lone holdout in recent years. While Clarke, Di Meola, and White had been lobbying for an RTF reunion, the three were unable to persuade Corea to take up the cause, until now. “I think there are a lot of reasons why it got resolved,” reflects White. “You know, iron wears out ... eventually. And I think it just got to a point where Chick realized, ‘Hey, man, why not?’”

While the individual members had been busy carrying on with their own respective bands and undertaking various creative projects on the side, White





sensed a Return To Forever reunion might have larger implications than just four brilliant virtuosos getting back together to play “Hymn Of The Seventh Galaxy,” “Song To The Pharaoh Kings,” and “The Romantic Warrior” once again. “It seemed like the right time for this,” says the lefty drummer. “I think the circumstances now warrant for something to happen, an event that would hopefully galvanize the creative end of improvised music again on a grand scale. And this Return To Forever reunion could be that event. The synergy of these four guys getting back together and doing it, I think, can really make a spark and cause people to say, ‘Wow, maybe it’s cool to play this music again. Let’s do this!’”

With the exception of the Mahavishnu Orchestra (whose original members – John McLaughlin, Billy Cobham, Jan Hammer, Jerry Goodman, and Rick Laird – are still very much alive and kicking, though existing in different orbits these days), Return To Forever is the last of the Mohicans from the golden era of fusion (roughly 1969–1977). As White notes, “Weather Report can’t get back together because Joe Zawinul’s not here, unfortunately, and Jaco [Pastorius]’s not here, unfortunately. Tony Williams is not here anymore, so there won’t be any Lifetime reunion. Miles Davis is not here anymore. And I don’t know what’s happening with John [McLaughlin] and Billy [Cobham] regarding any possible Mahavishnu reunion. But maybe this RTF reunion could even jump-start that, you know?”

“I’m looking forward to playing that music again with those guys,” White continues. “I listen back to some of the live versions of some of the stuff back in the day and there were some real deep things there. My brother took some footage in ’74 and ’75 of that band, and one of the segments is us playing ‘Green Dolphin Street,’ and it’s killing! It’s jazz! The rhythm section is definitely coming from that place, and the band is also flexible enough to take it into this high-energy realm of fusion. And of course, all these years later we’re individually better players on our instruments. We’ve all gone through so many different experiences in music and in life since then. We’ve grown, and that’s bound to be reflected in the music. So now it will be interesting to see how we interpret the old tunes from 30 years ago.”

CHAPTER TWO JAMAICA BOY MAKES GOOD

Growing up in the musically rich environment of the Jamaica district in the borough of Queens, a long subway ride away from bustling Manhattan, White was immersed in jazz from an early age. “My dad was a real big Lester Young fan,” he recalls. “He was in the Army with Lester Young, though Lester was a little older than him. But musically, he went from Prez [Lester Young’s nickname, bestowed by Billie Holiday] to John Coltrane. Those were his guys, along

with Count Basie and Duke Ellington. And so I got an education in this music by listening to his records.”

In a regular Sunday ritual at the White household, family and friends would get together to eat and sit around listening to jazz records. “My father and his friends would debate on who was better,” White says. “Was Sonny Stitt cleaner than Bird? Was Clifford Brown faster than Diz? And I would take all that in. But at the same time I would listen to the music of my generation on the radio. That’s where I heard The Drifters, James Brown, The Coasters, Martha Reeves And The Vandellas. Later on it was Marvin Gaye and all the Motown stuff, The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley and Frankie Valli. I listened to all different kinds of music coming up.”

Between the ages of 12 and 13 White acquired two things: his own drum kit and his first case of puppy love. “Her name was Antonia and she said her dad was a musician,” he recalls. “They lived nearby on Mexico Street in St. Alban’s, the next neighborhood over from Jamaica. At some point I asked her, ‘What instrument does your dad play?’ and she told me he played saxophone. So I asked what his name was and she said, ‘John Coltrane.’” Antonia, sometimes called Syeeda by her Muslim mother, Naima, was five years old and fatherless when Naima met Coltrane. Antonia and her mother took Coltrane’s name a year later when Naima and John were wed in 1955. In 1959, the same year they moved to St. Alban’s, Queens, Coltrane would name one of his tunes from his *Giant Steps* album, “Syeeda’s Song Flute,” after his stepdaughter.

In his earliest years of playing, White naturally gravitated toward playing left-handed on the kit. “The story is that I was born left-handed and then when I went to school they switched me around and made me write right-handed. Today

I eat left-handed, talk on the telephone with my left hand, I throw right-handed, bat right-handed, shoot baskets right-handed. My brain is wired to do all those things and to play the ride cymbal with my left hand. Billy Cobham plays like that, so does Carter Beauford. But every once in a while I will switch over and play something right-handed, even though you have to reprogram your brain to do that. My brother has some film footage of me

“Philly says to me, ‘Yeah, Len, you sounded ... something.’ So after I picked my face up off of the floor, I had to think about what he meant”

playing one of Stanley’s tunes with Return To Forever back in the day called ‘Lopsy Lu,’ and I’m playing that beat right-handed. And I also play brushes right-handed, so go figure.”

By 1965, at age 15, White began playing drums professionally. “There was a place down the street from my house called Club Ruby,” he recalls. “My first band played there and they passed around the hat. That was the first time I made money playing music.” A year later, a veteran keyboard player named Weldon Irvine came from Virginia to settle in Jamaica, Queens and soon became a mentor figure for White and other young, aspiring players around the neighborhood, including saxophonist Bennie Maupin and trumpeter Charles Tolliver. By 1966, they banded together to participate in a Jazz Interactions competition, vying with

other young bands for the opportunity to play for a gig at Art D’Lugoff’s famous Village Gate in the heart of Greenwich Village. A group called The Jazz Sumaritan – which included bassist Clint Houston, saxophonist Steve Grossman, pianist George Cables, and a gifted young Panamanian-born drummer named Billy Cobham – won the ultimate prize. When Cobham left to join the Horace Silver Quintet, White replaced him in the Jazz Sumaritan. And when he wasn’t gigging with that promising young outfit, White honed his drumming vocabulary by jamming with friends.

“We used to have jam sessions in George Cables’ basement,” he recalls. “That was one of the advantages of living in Queens. We all had basements, which gave all the young guys a place to get together and play and work their stuff out on their instruments. That’s what I’d do when I was like 15, 16 years old. Instead of having parties where you ask your mom and dad if you could have people come over and listen to records and dance and stuff, guys would come over for these jam sessions. We’d fix the basement up like a nightclub and we’d just play. My dad had a coworker who was a cousin of [tenor saxophonist] Albert and [trumpeter] Donny Ayler, so they’d come by to play at these sessions. And then [tenor saxophonist] Syl Austin was a big family friend, so he’d drop by too. So it was a really cool neighborhood scene.”

During this time, White also began picking up work with Weldon Irvine. “One of my first gigs with Weldon was backing [R&B singer] Millie Jackson,” he recalls. “And man, I had never played anything like that before. But Weldon said to me, ‘Listen, just play on the hi-hat, play backbeat and you’ll be cool.’ And he was right.”

While attending the High School Of Art & Design in Manhattan, White got his first opportunity to see John Coltrane perform. It turned out to be a memorable experience for the aspiring musician, providing one of many musical epiphanies to come. “I was 16 years old and I took the subway by myself into Manhattan to see Trane playing at a ‘Titans Of Tenor’ show at Philharmonic Hall [February 19, 1966]. He was there with Sonny Rollins, Coleman Hawkins, Zoot Sims, and Yusef Lateef. Trane had his *Ascension*


band with Rashied Ali and J.C. Moses on drums, Alice [Coltrane] on piano, and John Tchicai on alto sax. And I'll never forget, man – after the concert it was like I was walking on air.”

The following year, one of White's hipper friends at school turned him on to a record by Miles Davis that registered with him deeply for a very specific reason. “It was *Seven Steps To Heaven*,” he recalls, “and it just so happens that the drummer on that album was 17 years old at the time of the recording [May 1963]. And I was 17 years old at that time. So right away I figured, ‘That’s who I got to be like.’ It was Tony Williams. And when I heard him play on that record, I heard all the drummers who came before him. I heard Max [Roach] and Art Blakey, Elvin [Jones] and Louis Hayes and Philly Joe [Jones]. But I also heard the future of where drumming was going to go. I heard the history, the present, and the future of drumming all combined into one guy! And I said, ‘Whew! That’s my guy!’ And from that point on I listened to every Miles Davis record I could get my hands on, old and new.”

White remains steadfast to this day in his admiration for the late, great drummer. “Tony Williams is a genius, man,” he says. “My affectionate name for him is God Drums. Ron Carter is God Bass, he’s God Drums. He was the closest thing to being perfect in the sense of playing the whole kit and taking what he played to such a great, high musical level. There are a lot of people who are very proficient at playing the drums and playing great. Buddy Rich was truly amazing at what he could do with the drum kit. But just from a musical standpoint what Tony played, to me, transcended drums. And there was so much technique in what he did. You could listen to or watch one of his solos and have enough of a technique lesson to last you for years. To watch Tony Williams and hear the music that he played in a solo or what he played within the music – it’s just untouchable.”

He’s quick to point out that Williams’ influence is still felt today. “It’s just amazing the effect he’s had on drummers. Tony made such an impact from ages 17 to 22, during the five years that he was with Miles. The influence that he had over the drums during those five years is like Jimi Hendrix with the guitar or John

LENNY WHITE’S TRAPS



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Coltrane with the saxophone. And then when you think about what he did after Miles, with Lifetime, it’s just incredible.”

As a young developing player finding his own way in the music, White got the rare opportunity to hang with and absorb wisdom from several master jazz drummers on the New York scene. “Roy Haynes, Pete LaRoca, Philly Joe Jones, and Buhaina [Art Blakey] all let me sit in on their gigs when I was like 17, 18 years old,” he says. “They told me certain things that helped shape how I look at the music and how I play the music. And there’s a big difference from listening to an album of theirs, or now looking at a video, and actually talking to and interacting with your heroes. These guys shared their knowledge with me, and I’ve always felt connected to something larger because of that.”

He cites a memorable case that took place at New York’s most hallowed jazz club, the Village Vanguard. “Buhaina was always great to me, really a champion, and he let me and Steve Grossman sit in with the Jazz Messengers one night. So we played and thought that we were do-

ing great. But then on the break I go back into the kitchen at the Vanguard where all the musicians hang out after the set, and there’s Philly Joe Jones. So hero number one is letting me play his drums and hero number two is in the audience listening. And Philly says to me, ‘Yeah, Len, you sounded ... *something*.’ So after I picked my face up off of the floor, I had to think about what he meant by that.”

Shortly after that humbling experience, White was back at the Vanguard playing with Freddie Hubbard. “Now, Freddie was complaining that I was playing too loud during the set. But on the break I go back in the kitchen and Philly Joe’s back there again, and he says to me, ‘Yeah, Len! Now *that’s* what I’m talkin’ ’bout! Man, I used to make Miles’ lips bleed, I played so loud.’ So I was vindicated, you know?”

And these kinds of reactions and interactions with guys who were my heroes are the things you just can’t pick up by learning the music from the records. It places you in a whole cultural context. It’s why I feel jazz is part of my heritage rather than just a musical style.”

CHAPTER THREE BITCHES BREW & BEYOND

In 1968, at age 18, White began gigging with the renowned alto saxophonist and Blue Note recording artist, Jackie McLean. “Through playing with the Jazz Sumaritans and sitting in with different people I had gotten somewhat of a name around town,” he says. “Jackie had called my house and talked to my mom and dad about me playing in his band. I was still going to school and living at home with my parents, so my dad would take me to the gigs after a full day of working his job. And he’d sit

there through the whole gig. After we finished playing he’d take me back home. The next morning I’d wake up and go to school, he’d wake up and would have to go to work again. That was our routine for a while.”

McLean’s band included bassist Scotty Holt, pianist Harold Mabern, and trumpeter Woody Shaw, who was fast building a reputation as an outstanding improviser and composer in his own right. And hovering over White during his tenure with McLean’s band was a sense of inevitability of where it might lead. “Everybody kept telling me, ‘Man, Tony played with Jackie, and from Jackie he went to Miles. And Jack DeJohnette played with Jackie, and from Jackie he went to Miles. So you’re going to play with Miles next.’”

White explains that it was actually another colleague of Davis’ who eventually tipped the trumpeter to White’s playing in the summer of 1969. “It just so happened that I played a gig in Queens at a place called the Afrodisiac with Rashied Ali, and there was a trumpet player on the gig who I used to see all the time with Miles. His name was Dion. And on the break he said to me, ‘Man, has Miles ever heard you play?’ I said no and he said, ‘I’m going to tell him about you.’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, yeah, right, sure, whatever.’ And sure enough, I got a call from Miles shortly after that gig to come over and rehearse at his house.”

In the company of Chick Corea, Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette, and Wayne Shorter, White rehearsed just one piece at Davis’ house on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. “I brought a snare drum and Jack had a snare drum and a cymbal. We went through the first half of ‘Bitches Brew,’ and when we were through Miles said, ‘Okay, be at Columbia studios tomorrow at 10:00 A.M.’”

For the next three days (August 19–21, 1969), White and a crew of a dozen or so other musicians recorded what would become *Bitches Brew*. The sessions were essentially an exercise in abstract collective improvisation with Davis directing the proceedings like some kind of sorcerer stirring a big pot. As White recalls, “During the session we’d get a groove going and then Miles would point to John McLaughlin or Chick or Bennie Maupin or someone and stop the band, and that person would play for a while until he’d start up the whole band again. It was an experience, man.”

“It freaked me out, man. I was like, ‘Wow! I finally got my name on an album and it’s with Miles Davis!’”

White had worked in two-drummer situations before in Queens, so playing alongside fellow drummer DeJohnette was no problem. Percussionists Don Alias and Jumma Santos were also on the session for those three days and, in fact, on the second day White switched places with Alias on “Miles Runs The Voodoo Down.” As he recalls, “Miles wanted to have, like, a funk beat on that piece and I started playing all this slick stuff because, you know, I’m a Tony Williams fan and I’m playing with Miles Davis so I wanted to show off my stuff. But I out-thought myself. Instead of just playing a simple beat, I was overplaying. And Miles pointed that out to me in no uncertain terms. He said, ‘No, no, you ain’t gettin’ the chicken.’ So Alias sat down at my drum set and said, ‘Miles, I got this beat that might work,’ and he plays this simple kind of funky New Orleans beat. And that’s what ended up on ‘Miles Runs The Voodoo Down.’ I wound up playing percussion on that song instead of playing drums. And I learned a

valuable lesson from that. I learned that you can’t outthink yourself, that you should just do what somebody asks you to do, what’s needed and wanted. Don’t try to do more than that.”

White was in San Francisco working with vibraphonist Buddy Montgomery (brother of Monk and Wes Montgomery) when *Bitches Brew* was released as a double album in the Spring of 1970. It was his first recording and he was thrilled to see his own name prominently listed among his heroes. “As a kid, I always wanted to see my name on an album cover,” he says. “In fact, on the back of one of my Dave Brubeck records where it lists the personnel – Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond, Eugene Wright, Joe Morello – I added ‘and Lenny White’ in pen, because I just wanted to see my name on an album cover.”

“So when *Bitches Brew* finally came out I went to a record store to see it. Unfortunately, the guy was closing down but I really had to see it so I knocked on the window and said, ‘Please, can you just

show me the album cover?’ And he held the album cover up in the window and right away I noticed that the names in order were Miles Davis, trumpet, Wayne Shorter, saxophone, Lenny White, drums. I’m the third name on there! And it freaked me out, man. I was like, ‘Wow! I finally got my name on an album and it’s with Miles Davis!’”

Around this same time, Tony Williams Lifetime was beginning to make an impact on the burgeoning jazz-rock scene with its slash and burn, proto-punk approach to the traditional jazz organ trio (with the young British electric guitar sensation John McLaughlin, and Hammond B-3 veteran Larry Young). Williams had left Davis’ band in February, 1969, after recording *In A Silent Way* and three months later (on May 26 and 28) recorded his groundbreaking debut with Lifetime, the aptly-named *Emergency!*, which was released in the early fall of 1969.

White had seen this volatile new band play at Slug’s on the Lower East Side a few times before their debut record

came out. "Lifetime was already happening around the same time that *Bitches Brew* was being recorded," he remembers. "There were bands that pioneered that direction earlier. I know Cannonball Adderley was doing some electric stuff and I know that Gary Burton and Chico Hamilton and other bands were exploring in that same area. But it all crystallized, to me, with Lifetime. And when I heard that band it was like, 'Whoa! You got to be kidding me! What is this?!' Because it was such a new and different sound. It had the inclusion of these rock and roll-type influences, but it was still jazz. They were still playing straight-ahead stuff and they were swinging and burning, but then John would break into a guitar solo with a grungy rock sound and they would head off into these freak-out jams. But at its core it was still an organ trio, which is straight-up jazz. So all this music was fusing together and it was so powerful. When I saw them play at Slug's, it changed my life. I mean, I was completely blown away. That band turned everybody's heads around."

In October 1969 White was given his first opportunity to play a gig with Miles Davis' working band. "Miles liked the way I played and he wanted me to sub for Jack DeJohnette for a week in Boston. Jack's wife, Lydia, was going to have her first child and he wanted to stay home with her, so Miles arranged for me to be there." But the next night (October 10) Davis was shot by a mysterious gunman while sitting in his Ferrari in Brooklyn and the gig was cancelled. "So my opportunity to play with Miles on the road never happened."

Shortly after that missed opportunity, White recorded with pianist-composer Andrew Hill in November 1969. The tapes were shelved by Blue Note Records and forgotten, only to be rediscovered 32 years later and ultimately released to widespread acclaim in 2003 as *Passing Ships*. In January 1970 White played on another jazz classic, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard's *Red Clay*, which featured a stellar cast of Herbie Hancock on piano, Ron Carter on bass, and Joe Henderson on tenor saxophone. According to White, Hubbard had originally called Tony Williams for the session but Williams couldn't make it and recom-

STANLEY CLARKE

"He was in the city all the time. He had that vibe." That's Stanley Clarke recalling his first encounters with drummer Lenny White in New York City. "It was the late '60s, early '70s when I met Lenny for the first time. I think I was playing with Horace Silver at Slug's, and I believe Lenny came to the show.

"Funny, but at the time, me being young, I was new to the ambience of the city's night life, the drugs. I was 19 or 20. Lenny was 19 going on 40. We hung out and became friends instantly. In a lot of ways he was like a big brother to me, me being from Philly. There are many stories of Lenny saving me from the perils of the big city," Clarke laughs. "One time, when I was playing with Joe Henderson, a guy pulled a gun on me. I was so pissed, Lenny put his hand over the gun to stop everything. He later scolded me, saying, 'That guy could've shot you!'"

It was during such trying and adventurous times that Clarke and White built a partnership that found musical expression with Return To Forever. It's a partnership that's stood the test of time. "It was a funny situation," he remembers of those early days. "When we started doing the full electric thing, I think Chick wanted Steve Gadd in the band. But I thought Lenny was a better choice. I used to talk to Chick about Lenny, telling him, 'You got to get Lenny. You got to get Lenny!'"

When he talks about playing with White, Clarke is just short of effusive. "Out of all the drummers I've played with Lenny has been the most musical, the one who understands the language of the music," says the bassist. "There are drum-



mers who are tremendous technicians. [With RTF] Lenny could do some of that Billy Cobham stuff, but Lenny's playing was the most musical of them all.

"The way that Lenny approached the 'Medieval Overture' on *Romantic Warrior* – you look at the way Chick wrote it, [and] the way Lenny played it – they are two different things. Chick wrote it that way so we

could read it, but Lenny played it so it would sound better. You could have another drummer play that part and have it never sound like Lenny made it sound. Lenny gets it naturally. It's really cool. Jack DeJohnette is like that; Tony Williams was like that. With Lenny White, I don't feel like I'm playing with a drummer but with a musician."

By JOHN EPHLAND

mended White. For that CTI session at Rudy Van Gelder's legendary studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, White brought along an old oil can bass drum that was made by a mutual friend of Steve Grossman and Elvin Jones. "It was the drum I had used on *Bitches Brew* and I was planning on using it for *Red Clay*," he says, "but when I set up my drums in the studio and hit that oil can bass drum, Ron Carter said, 'No man, you can't use

that. It's too resonant, you're not going to hear the bass.' So Rudy goes over and gets this 26" bass drum that has a painting of a moonlit lake on the front head. And I hated it. I didn't listen to that record for years because I hated the way I sounded on it. Years later I learned that [drummer] Gus Johnson had set that bass drum up for Rudy at his studio, so there's some history there, I suppose. But I still hated it."

CHAPTER FOUR BIRTH OF A SUPERGROUP

Around late 1970 or early 1971 White met a gifted young bass player from Philadelphia whose career would become indelibly linked with the young drummer from that point forward. “I was playing with Joe Henderson at this point and Reggie Johnson was playing bass in the band, but he decided he was going to move to California so suddenly we needed a bass player,” White explains. “Well, I walked into Slug’s one night to see Horace Silver and heard this guy

playing electric bass who was killer. When the set was over I introduced myself and learned that his name was Stanley Clarke. So I said to him, ‘Listen, Joe Henderson needs a bass player, would you give him a call?’ And I gave him Joe’s number. Stanley called Joe and got the gig, and that’s when we first started playing together. And since that time we’ve had a lock up for the ages.”

Clarke and White first recorded together on Henderson’s *In Pursuit Of Blackness*, recorded in May 1971. The following

a week at the Keystone Korner?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, sure, why not? I’m already out here.’ So we played and it was unbelievable. Stanley played acoustic bass, Chick played Fender Rhodes and I played drums. We played all of that music from their first album and on the last day, Sunday, Chick invited two guitar players up to sit in, Barry Finnerty and Bill Connors. And it was really killing. I actually have tapes of that night.”

The kinetic energy of that last electrified night at the Keystone Korner

“Back when we were recording *Bitches Brew*, Miles asked me did I want to play with Jimi Hendrix. He said, ‘Man, I can set you up,’ but I passed on that one too. Jeez!”

year, White got a call from percussionist Coke Escovedo to join Azteca, a new Latin-tinged fusion band forming in San Francisco. The group also included trumpeter Tom Harrell, saxophonist Mel Martin, future *Headhunters* bassist Paul Jackson, and guitarist Neal Schon. “Clive Davis signed us and premiered us at a convention in London,” says White. “That was my first time being out of the country and I’m thinking, ‘Well, I’m going to be a big rock star now.’”

Shortly after Azteca released its self-titled debut in 1972, White got a call from pianist Chick Corea, whom he had known from the *Bitches Brew* sessions and who had a successful release himself that year in *Light As A Feather* with his new band, Return To Forever (Stanley Clarke on bass, Joe Farrell on sax and flute, Airto Moreira on drums, and Flora Purim on vocals). “Chick says to me, ‘Listen Lenny, we’re coming to San Francisco and Airto and Flora can’t make the gig. Can you do

sparked something in Corea. As White recalls, “After that gig, Chick said, ‘Listen, man, I want to have an electric Return To Forever and I want to get Bill Connors and I want to know if you want to do it.’ But I said, ‘No, Chick, I’m actually doing this thing with Azteca and I think I’m going to stay and do this for a while.’ So Chick went back to New York and got Steve Gadd to work with the band instead of me.”

Azteca’s second album, *Pyramid Of The Moon*, was recorded in late 1972 and by the time it was released in 1973, White was ready to make another move. “At this point I’m still in San Francisco but commuting back and forth to New York. And I find out that Herbie Herbert, the famous manager, was putting a new band together with some of the guys from Santana. It was Ross Valory on bass, Neal Schon on guitar, and they asked me to come in and play a rehearsal just to see how it felt. So the three of us got together

and hit it off and it was great. I have tapes of that too. They were also going to bring in Greg Rollie, who I knew from Santana, to play keyboards. So they said, ‘We love the way it sounds. Would you want to do this band with us?’”

But fate would intercede. “Then Chick called again and says, ‘Listen, man, we’d really like for you to join our band.’ So I said okay and went back to New York to play with Return To Forever. If I had stayed there in San Francisco, I would’ve been the drummer with Journey, but they ended up getting Ansley Dunbar to play drums instead, and then later Steve Smith. And the rest is history.”

With White supplying his muscular backbeats and Bill Connors providing the distortion-laced guitar lines to the newly electrified edition of RTF, Corea and crew reached out to a young generation of fans with challenging music that had one foot in jazz, with rhythmic intricacies and harmonic sophistication, and one foot firmly planted in the rock camp, with sheer bombast and high energy.

This more volatile lineup yielded *Hymn Of The Seventh Galaxy* in 1973, and when Al Di Meola replaced Connors in 1974 they took the energy level up a notch on *Where Have I Known You Before*, which included White’s composition, “The Shadow Of Lo.” This even more potent outfit followed up in 1975 with the Grammy Award-winning *No Mystery* and in 1976 with *Romantic Warrior*, which was easily their best-sounding album, yet turned out to be the group’s swan song.

“After Return To Forever broke up, Joe Zawinul called and asked me to join Weather Report,” White recalls. “He said, ‘Listen man, Jaco asked me to call because he really likes your playing, and we need somebody to play.’ [White had played on Pastorius’ self-titled debut on Epic, which was released in April 1976]. And I was very cordial about it and said, ‘Joe, I’m very flattered that you asked, but I was just in a band and now I’m trying to get my own stuff out there.’ And he was cool about it.

“So I didn’t play with Weather Report, I didn’t play with Journey, and in fact, back when we were recording *Bitches Brew*, Miles asked me did I want to play with Jimi Hendrix. He said, ‘Man, I can set you up,’ but I passed on that one too. Jeez!”

CHAPTER FIVE SOLO FLIGHTS

Before Return To Forever split up, White had already released his own debut as a leader in 1975 on Nemperor Records. *Venusian Summer* was a highly ambitious undertaking that featured a sprawling all-star cast, including Hammond B-3 organ legend Jimmy Smith and former Lifetime organist Larry Young, along with bassist Doug Rauch, pianist Onaje Allen Gumbs, White's former Azteca bandmate Tom Harrell on trumpet, keyboardist David Sancious,

flutist Hubert Laws, and guitarist Ray Gomez. A key collaborator on this futuristic project was ARP 2600 synth wizard Patrick Gleeson, who provided the eerie soundscape on "The Venusian Summer Suite," an ambient piece dedicated to the crew of the Starship Enterprise and reminiscent of the "electronic tonalities" from the soundtrack to the sci-fi cult classic, *Forbidden Planet*. The closing track of White's debut was "Prince Of The Sea," an extended 11-minute piece that included a fiery guitar duel between fusion pioneer Larry

Coryell and his main disciple, RTF's young fretboard flash, Al Di Meola.

After his exit from RTF, White continued in a hard-hitting fusion vein with 1977's *Big City*, which included members of the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Herbie Hancock's Headhunters, Tower Of Power, Earth, Wind & Fire, Brian Auger's Oblivion Express, and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, along with Journey guitarist Neal Schon and an 18-year-old Marcus Miller on bass. His next release as a leader was 1978's *The Adventures Of Astral Pirates*, a master-

ful concept album created in the wake of *Star Wars* mega-success at the box office the previous year.

By 1979 White had taken fusion as far as he could. Forming a new band, Twennynine, he delved into the burgeoning urban contemporary market with a string of three releases that reflected influences other than his jazzy roots. White scored an R&B hit with the goofy P-Funk-ish anthem, "Peanut Butter," from 1979's *Best Of Friends*, and offered an answer to Chic's "Le Freak" with his own "Twennynine (The Rap)" from 1981's *Just Like Dreamin'*.

In 1982, White took time out from his funk duties for an acoustic bop date he produced for Elektra Records that featured an all-star cast of Corea on piano, Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, Joe Henderson on tenor sax, and Stanley Clarke on upright bass. Titled *Echoes Of An Era*, it also showcased soul diva Chaka Khan in the unexpected role of jazz vocalist, delivering aggressively swinging renditions of Thelonious Monk's "I Mean You" and

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Duke Ellington's "Take The A Train," along with standards such as "All Of Me," "Them There Eyes," and "Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most."

"I first met Chaka when I was still in Return To Forever and she was with Rufus," White explains. "Later on she did a version of 'Lady Madonna' on my *Streamline* album from 1978, and we just stayed in touch. I've always loved what Chaka does. She had just put out a record with [pro-

ducer] Arif Mardin where they did a version of Dizzy's 'Night In Tunisia' [on 1981's *What Cha' Gonna Do For Me*], and when I heard that I said, 'You know what? She can sing jazz; she can improvise.' So I went to [Elektra/Musician president] Bruce Lundvall's office and said, 'Bruce, I have an idea for a project. I want to recreate Billie Holiday's *Lady Day Swings!* sessions with contemporary musicians. And I want to use Chaka Khan, Freddie Hub-

bard, Joe Henderson, Chick Corea, and Stanley Clarke.' The idea was to get all of my old employers on a project that I produced. I wanted Jackie McLean on there too, but that didn't work out. So Bruce said, "That's a great idea, do you think they'll do it?" So I called them up one by one and they each said, 'Well, if they'll do it, I'll do it.' Everybody gave me the same answer so I finally told Bruce, 'Let's do it.'"

White gave Khan a copy of *Lady Day Swings!* to listen to and Corea worked up some great arrangements for the songs that they chose. "Then Freddie and Joe just came in and played them, so it was cool," White says. "And we captured a really nice vibe on that record because we did everything without overdubs and direct to 2-track." That same all-star acoustic jazz group (sans Khan) would go back into the studio shortly after that initial session to record the two-volume *Griffith Park Collection*. By 1983 White was back on the R&B trail with his solo project, *Attitude* (featuring bassists Marcus Miller and Bill Laswell, keyboardist Bernard Wright, and singer Bernard Fowler), which followed the quintessentially '80s formula of dry synth and static drum machine sounds that worked so well for Prince. "I've been into synthesizers and machines for a long time," White says. "And I thought that with the advent of drum machines, if I didn't know how they worked and I wasn't capable of programming them that I would lose work. If this machine was going to put me out of work then I was going to learn how to operate the machine. So during that period in the '80s I learned how to program the LinnDrum and worked with that on albums like *Attitude*."

That same year, Return To Forever undertook a brief reunion tour with White, Corea, Clarke, and Di Meola. Although they worked up new material, they never went into the studio to record, and by the next year the individuals had gone their separate ways again. White would close out the '80s by focusing on his urban soul trio, The Jamaica Boys, which he had formed with bassist Marcus Miller and vocalist Michael Stevens (who happened to be Chaka Khan's brother). But in the coming decade, White was ready to reinvent himself once again.

GERRY BROWN

Following White In RTF

"There was much more of a design to the music, and Chick was very particular," says former Return To Forever drummer Gerry Brown about working with the band and its leader. "Because I was aware of the subtleties in the music and the musicianship needed, the boss appreciated those qualities, and it made him happy." RTF bassist Stanley Clarke was the connection that brought Brown to the group in 1977, replacing drummer Lenny White in what turned out to be a band makeover.

Brown burst onto the scene in a big way as part of Clarke's phenomenally fun *School Days* album the year before. And it was no surprise that the two would hook up now, given their shared history. "I had known Stanley since we were kids in Philly; he's probably my oldest friend," Brown recalls. "We were going to what was called the Philadelphia Music Academy, later called the University Of The Arts. At one point, Stanley would start going to New York, where he eventually met Lenny. They started to have a working relationship, which led to Chick's band. When he left, Chick decided on a new format, a big band kind of thing, and Stanley thought of me."

For Brown, known to many as a top-flight fusion/crossover drummer, playing big-band music was nothing new. When Corea moved into this new format it "worked out for me," he says. "In college I played in the big band, and I had some great experience two summers working up at the Catskills Raleigh Hotel. At that point, reading-wise, my chops were up, and the big band stuff was a piece of cake. What



made the situation easier was Chick, in the beginning of rehearsals, had the drum charts written out. But I wanted to see more. So I would go over to him and ask for the piano charts so I could see all the other charts. In his eyes, this was cool - 'Here's this guy reading stuff, uplifting the music.'"

Documented on the concert album, *R.T.F. Live*, as well as the studio-produced *Musicmagic*, the music was still clearly a Corea-driven project, but gone was the relatively hardcore fusion vibe, replaced by an expanded band, and a new long-form style of

composition. With help from Clarke and original member, reed player Joe Farrell, among many others, Brown emerged and thrived to help create yet another Return To Forever sound.

Looking back on those times, Brown cheerfully reminisces, "After one rehearsal, I think Chick realized something: that I had always taken the attitude in an audition or a group to never assume everything is cool. It all goes back to the charts, not to mention Stanley and my long friendship with him."

By JOHN EPHLAND

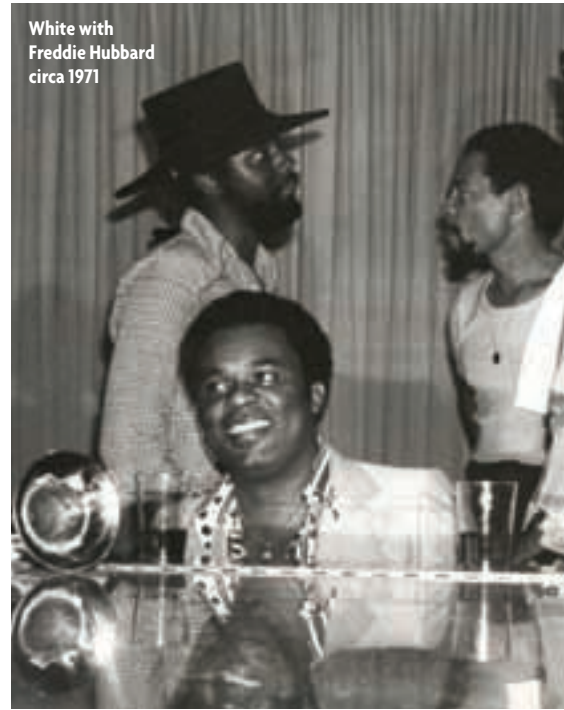
CHAPTER SIX FUSION REDUX

White returned to fusion with a vengeance in the '90s with a string of potent instrumental offerings. 1995's *Present Tense* featured guest appearances by guitarists John Scofield and Dean Brown, bassists Victor Bailey and Marcus Miller, and his RTF bandmate Chick Corea. Along with hard-hitting numbers like Bailey's "Sweet Tooth" and Corea's "Caprice" (originally written for the 1983 RTF reunion tour) it included a new hip-hop flavored

arrangement of White's "The Shadow Of Lo" from RTF's heyday. *Renderers Of Spirit* (released in 1996 with bassists Stanley Clarke, Victor Bailey, Foley McCreary, and Daryl Jones, along with George Duke and the Brecker Brothers) included the funky Brecker Brothers-ish "Ho-Cake" and Bailey's "Pick Pocket," his answer to the Average White Band's "Pick Up The Pieces." White also veered into smooth jazz territory with "Countdown 2000," though the rest of that project maintained a funky fusion feel.

He closed out the '90s in dynamic fashion with 1999's *Edge*, which featured a soulful interpretation of Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," featuring former Miles Davis bassist McCreary on lead vocals. During that time he also formed a powerhouse fusion outfit with former RTF bandmate Stanley Clarke called Vertú, which included keyboardist Rachel Z, violinist Karen Briggs, and former Poison guitarist and metalesque shredder, Richie Kotzen. Their self-titled debut on Epic Records was an ambitious fusion offering that harkened back to the grand vir-

White with
Freddie Hubbard
circa 1971



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DISCOGRAPHY

White's Return To Forever Catalog

The fusion movement emerged as sparks sputtering from the cauldron stirred by Miles Davis and his bands in the mid-'60s. Only three of those sparks were brilliant enough to sustain lives of their own. And of those three, Return To Forever is the one most often, and unfairly, overlooked.

This is true in part because the other two groups lasted longer. Equally important, both broke a little further from the old head-solos-reprise formula, Mahavishnu Orchestra, through incorporating elements of Indian music into their generally familiar Western structures, and Weather Report for not blowing so much in the post-bop fashion, except of course for Jaco Pastorius, whose instrument was the one least-often heard as a solo voice up to that point.

Still, Return To Forever, the third of these epochal ensembles, had an identity that was entirely its own and revolutionary to boot. Its first incarnation actually represented a retrenchment of sorts for leader/founder/keyboardist Chick Corea, an adventurous and sometimes abstract improviser whose conversion to Scientology hastened his decision to emphasize communication rather than experimentalism in his music. Thus, the first two albums that bore this name, *Return To Forever* (1972) and *Light As A Feather* (1973), adhered to familiar forms, with Airtio Moreira offering an airy, Latin-inflected feel in his kit and percussion parts.

Later, in '73, Corea juggled his lineup and emerged with Stanley Clarke on bass and Lenny White on drums for *Hymn Of The Seventh Galaxy*. And suddenly, the softer-edged aesthetic of the newly mainstreamed keyboard player was blown out of the water by an approach whose raw aggression was unlike anything heard in music up to that point. Rather than replicate the soaring, spiritual direction charted by guitarist Jon McLaughlin for Mahavishnu Orchestra, this disc drew its power from the rock side of the jazz/rock equation. Some of this owes to the guitar style of Bill Connors, whose performance adhered to the conventions of his instrument, established in a more leisurely way by Eric Clapton and his peers.

Truly, though, White deserves credit for most of this transition. Few albums, from any time in the LP or CD eras, begin as explosively as this one, as the drummer erupts with an intense, propulsive energy that was virtually without precedent in the catalog. In just a little more than three minutes on this title track, he unleashes a flurry of kick accents, syncopations, and rolls, whips restlessly from hi-hat to ride and, when Connors builds to a screeching peak in his solo, plunges into a blizzard of fills that seems to be yanking the tempo impatiently while actually anchoring it artfully – and all the while, whether on snare or cowbell, the backbeat is there, targeting these ecstatic flights not so much for the head, or even the soul, as for the body.

Throughout *Hymn Of The Seventh Galaxy*, then, the RTF experience was more orgasmic than cosmic. Seemingly spent on that first cut, it revives in the extraordinarily powerful backup that White offers toward the end of the solos on "After The Cosmic Rain." It's back again on track three, "Captain Senior Mouse," where Corea and Clarke play with White's beat, briefly shifting the emphasis to yank his 2 and 4 to 1 and 3 before introducing the theme of the tune.

RTF returned a year later with *Where Have I Known You Before*, which featured a new guitarist, Al Di Meola, and a shift in emphasis from Rhodes electric piano to synthesizer in the keyboard part. These moves had the unintended effects of tying this album a little more to the period that defined it, in effect dating its sound, while slightly tweaking the rhythm.

Clarke and White still cook, but "Vulcan Worlds," the first track, locks into an almost disco-inflected hi-hat pattern during the head, with the bass pushing toward the thumb-pop era. From this point, the music winds through keyboard reveries, some not very spontaneous funk, another distressing disco lapse on "Earth Juice," and other tame interludes. In this context, "Beyond The Seventh Galaxy," a nod to the feel of the preceding album, allows White to shine briefly again, though less persuasively through repeating and somewhat toning down what had come before. Di Meola's playing, more advanced and less elemental than that of Connors, measures the price paid at this juncture for a more sophisticated, less-electrifying dynamic. With *Where Have I Known You Before*, RTF takes a step down from its peak, where every note seemed urgent and necessary, toward the noodling that would become the genre's burdensome legacy.

With *Romantic Warrior* in 1976, the lineup continues its journey away from its raw but fiery genesis. Corea's synthesizer has advanced significantly to integrate its emerging technology and broadening tonality into a more integrated blend of improvisation and composition. Often this confines him to playing written parts or sitting out for a while, as in the down-tempo but intricately arranged title cut. When he can, though, White plays within more tightly arranged boundaries – but this only elevates White's performance to a particularly ferocious level. The very title of track one, "Medieval Overture," evokes the prog-rockist flummery of the era, an impression reinforced by the 12-minute length and labyrinthine structure. And try to listen to "The Magician" without imagining the dancing dwarves of Spinal Tap. Still, White attacks each metrical shift deftly and, when things open up in 4/4, awakens his early RTF persona for a brief but exhilarating sprint, reminding us not only of RTF at its peak but also of the promise of the entire genre at its birth.

By ROBERT L. DOERSCHUK



Hymn Of The Seventh Galaxy, 1971



Where Have I Known You Before, 1974



Romantic Warrior, 1976

tuosity and majestic sweep of *Romantic Warrior* – a portent of things to come.

In May 2004 White and fellow drummer Mike Clark (from Herbie Hancock's Headhunters) unveiled New Brew, a superstar fusion ensemble with two drummers, two bass players (Stanley Clarke on upright, Victor Bailey on electric), Kenny Garrett on alto saxophone, Eddie Henderson on trumpet, George Colligan on keyboards, DJ Logic on turntables, and Robben Ford on guitar. Their one showcase gig at B.B. King's nightclub in Manhattan was a spontaneous flow of provocative, cutting-edge sounds inspired by the collective improvisation of Miles

“At this point I can do what I want to do with the drums, but I still practice”

Davis' *Bitches Brew* session. Unfortunately, nothing more has come of this promising venture to date. "We did go in the studio," says White, "but we didn't finish that project. We only did three cuts, so we have to go back and complete that. But it's sort of on the backburner for now."

The following year, White teamed up with fusion guitar pioneer Larry Coryell and former Weather Report bassist Victor Bailey to form a stripped-down, jam-oriented power trio that reveled in reconfigured renditions of classic rock and jazz tunes, including Jimi Hendrix's "Manic Depression," Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog," Albert King's "Born Under A Bad Sign," Wayne Shorter's "Footprints," and Miles Davis' "So What," along with White originals like "Wolfbane" and his intricate rhythmic puzzle, "Door #3" (both of which had previously appeared in a larger ensemble format on *Present Tense*). They debuted with 2005's *Electric* on Chesky Records and followed up in 2006 with the hard-hitting *Traffic*. Then in 2007 White coproduced *Evolution Of The Groove*, a Miles Davis remix project that sought to bring material from *Kind Of Blue*, *Miles Smiles*, *Get Up With It*, *In A Silent Way*, and *On The Corner* into the 21st century.

And now in 2008 White comes full circle, back to Return To Forever in what

promises to be the most celebrated event of the year for fusion fans. "I would hope that the Return To Forever reunion could mark a rekindling of at least an attitude of creativity – to return to forever," he says. "I know that might sound weird, but that's exactly what Chick wanted it to do, to return to forever and get to that point again, man. And hopefully, we'll go out and do what we do and people will get it."

And this time out, White plans to take an entirely different set of drums than he had the first time around with RTF. "Originally, I took out a Gretsch kit," he says. "Gretsch is synonymous with all of the heroes that played the instrument, from Art Blakey to Max Roach to Philly Joe Jones. Now I've developed a new set with Innovation Drums, which to me is the Rolls Royce of drums," he says. "I'm going to use the same configuration that I used when I first went out with RTF, which is five toms – two mounted toms and three floor toms, a little bit bigger bass drum than normal, and snare. As far as cymbals, I'll have a ride cymbal, three crashes, and maybe a China cymbal.

"Recently I had been playing one of Tony Williams' old K Zildjian cymbals, which I got from Wallace Roney. It had holes where rivets were put in there. We both listened to the cymbal and looked at videos and finally determined that it was the one that he used on Miles' *Nefertiti*. We went up to Zildjian and there's a picture there of him playing that actual cymbal. We took the cymbal back there and had them re-create it. And I had played Tony's for a while and it cracked, so we put it aside. Then the re-creation cymbal cracked. The one I'm playing now is a copy of the re-creation, which sounds great. But I'm also going to introduce a new line of cymbals that I've been developing with Istanbul called Epoch, which I'll bring out on tour with RTF.

"There are some people that talked to me about adding this or that to my kit for this tour," he continues. "I've never played two bass drums and I've never used a double bass drum pedal because I just don't hear that. In order to play these different things you have to hear that in your playing, and at this point I just don't. I never say I'll never use it, but at this point I don't hear a double bass drum pedal in my playing."

CHAPTER SEVEN OPERA & OTHER AMBITIONS

Wrapping up the interview in White's cozy practice room at home, he offers a basketball analogy in assessing his role in all the bands he has ever played in throughout his career. "I think of myself as a point guard, and it's my job to get the ball to the scorer," he says. "See, the drums are a very egotistical instrument. The drummer can always take over the band at any point if he wants to do that, but I think the music is key. When the ego

gets in the way and you overplay, there's a tendency for people who like what you do to encourage you. Drummers are notorious for that. They will invariably go up to you after a gig where you overtook the music and say, 'Man, you sounded great!' But if you play within the music, people will come up to you after the gig and say, 'Wow, the *band* sounded great.' That's more important to me. It's really important for me to be a catalyst to make all of the guys in the band feel comfortable in their groove. And when that's happening, I'm fine."

Regarding his practice methods these days, he says, "At this point I can do what I want to do with the drums, but I still

practice because you can always learn more, no matter how advanced you may become. Every time I go to see Roy Haynes I learn something. Roy is the living embodiment of jazz history

because he's played with everybody – Prez, Bird, Diz, Monk, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday. He is the most renowned, acclaimed musician that is playing today. Notice I say 'musician.' He just happens to play drums. Every drummer should go and check out Roy wherever he is playing, no matter if they're hip-hop drummers, church drummers, rock and roll drummers, or whatever. They should just all go and sit in the audience where Roy is playing and get perspective. Roy is unbelievably killing and still as relevant today as he's ever been. People are amazed that he can still play that way at age 83. But in the East when you go visit a Zen master, you sit and he tells you what to do and you say, 'Thank you, sensei.' You don't ask how old he is. You get the

information and that information uplifts you. And when I see Roy, I'm uplifted. I come there for information and to hear a master at work. And when I leave his gig, I'm fulfilled."

A couple of days after this interview, White left for a week-long tour in Russia, where he premiered his new work for double quartet featuring a Russian string quartet and a jazz quartet featuring bassist Eddie Gomez, Russian saxophonist Igor Butman, a Russian pianist, and White on drums. He had played me a sampling of the music after our interview. It was profoundly beautiful and deeply meaningful with an underlying tenderness and inherent sense of lyricism that

he may have picked up from his composing heroes, Ravel and Debussy – definitely a work to be proud of. And yet, White doesn't rest on his laurels. He's already formulating another

big concept for some time down the road.

"I got this idea of doing an album of all famous arias," he explains, "but I wanted to do it with unexpected pairings of singers and musicians, like maybe Jessye Norman and Herbie Hancock, Ornette Coleman and Plácido Domingo. I presented the idea to a friend of mine who had a label and he said, 'It's a fantastic idea, but the opera police will kill you. You should write your own opera.' And I walked out of that meeting totally dejected because I didn't know much about opera. But I started doing research on the Internet and started realizing that maybe I could write an opera, and I got pretty into it. For two years I did nothing else but work on this opera. I'd go on the road and play gigs and as soon as I came

"The jazz police have managed to ostracize fusion out of the history of the music"

LENNY WHITE

back I'd focus entirely on that. I was possessed with it."

White has already composed the music for this ambitious work, which he envisions as a performance rather than a recording. "It's a symphonic poem that flows from beginning to end and is about 25 minutes long," he says, "but I'm stuck for the libretto. That's the thing that's got me stumped. I had the story but I couldn't get the words to fit. I got with four or five different people to work on that but they ultimately found out that it was more of an ordeal than they thought it would be. So I still have this desire to create in this symphonic form."

And if you listen to some of White's albums, that would seem like a natural progression for him. "There are pieces of mine that have symphonic touches," he says. "The album I did with Stanley [Clarke] called *Vertú* has a piece I did on there called 'Dance Of The Harlequin.' I didn't write it for any drums at all; it was for violin, guitar, piano, and bass. So

that's the kind of thing I'm going for with this opera, and I'll see if I can get it done some time in the near future."

Meanwhile, White has laid the groundwork for an ambitious documentary film he plans to make on the fusion movement. He maintains that critics have unfairly disparaged the genre as "the dreaded F-word," dismissed over time by historians and all but ignored by Ken Burns in his acclaimed, ten-part documentary, *Jazz*, which first aired on PBS in 2001. And as an active participant in the first wave of that once-vital movement, he intends to set the record straight. "I know the jazz police have managed to ostracize fusion out of the history of the music," White says. "Consequently, there's a whole musical fraternity and musical movement that gets overlooked because there's not any iconic person or band championing that motion anymore. So this Return To Forever reunion might be an opportunity to champion that motion again."

Over the course of his distinguished career, White has received awards, accolades, gold records, and adulation from other drummers. But one bit of feedback still stands out for him among all others. "The greatest compliment that I've ever gotten for playing drums – and I've had compliments from Max Roach on down – came from an African guy who came up to me after a gig in Paris. He said, 'When you play, I hear my people.' And I was touched by that. That's the source. And for him to get that, to make that connection, meant a great deal to me."

While there may be a touch of Africa in White's drumming, he is also part of a lineage of American jazz drumming royalty. As he puts it, "When I play I'm trying to emulate the Holy Six, which is Elvin, Tony, Max, Philly Joe, Art Blakey, and Roy Haynes. But when it comes to playing fusion music, I'm one of the guys who started doing that, so I'm not trying to emulate nothin'. I'm just doing what we do."

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WHITE-ISMS

While Lenny White is well versed in many drumming styles, his funk influence is unmistakable. Ex. 1 is an excerpt from "Celebration Suite, Part 1" off of Return To Forever's 1973 recording, *No Mystery*. Here White solos and plays figures with the band over a driving 6/8, but in the third line he lays down a groove for two measures with his distinctive crisp backbeats. He also unleashes his favorite lick – the flam accent – in the first, eighth, and last measure of this transcription.

You can also see flam accents at the end of the second example, which comes from the RTF's 1976 release *Romantic Warrior*. Here White played a classic '70s fusion groove at drum 'n' bass tempos long before anybody had heard of that genre. Woven between his cracking backbeats you'll also notice another of his favorite rudiments – the single paradiddle – which he plays in the second line of this transcription between his snare and bass drum. And the second to last line of this example also illustrates another of White's signature sounds – fast, clean singles around the set.

By WALLY SCHNALLE

Ex. 1 - "Celebration Suite, Part 1" At 5:46

Ex. 2 - "Medieval Overture" At 1:03