

An interview with Terry Silverlight

By Patrik Andersson

A perfect 10 drummer

What education do you have?

Princeton University.

Was the choice of drums a natural decision or did you play any other instruments?

My first love was drums, but I studied piano formally all along as I grew up. Although I will not perform on piano, I have enough technical facility to accommodate the extensive work I do as a composer/producer/arranger.

What was the name of the first group that you played in?



The first band I was in was led by my brother Barry Miles which was later called "Barry Miles And Silverlight". I was 14 years old when I played drums on my first recording in 1971, which was my brother Barry Miles's "White Heat". It was one of fusion music's earliest efforts, before there even was a category named "fusion", a style of music primarily invented and developed by Barry Miles. The musicians on that record were unknowns discovered by Barry Miles who later became well-known in the jazz world such as Pat Martino, John Abercrombie, Lew Tabackin, Warren Smith and Victor Gaskin. The album became a cult favorite listened to by Pat Metheny and other musicians who were students at the time, but later became famous in their own right.

In 81 you played drums on BB & Q bands debut album. Tell us about how you met Petrus Little Macho stable?

Michael Brauer, who was the engineer for those albums recruited me for the recordings. I have another brother, Ron, who had his own band called "Silverhoof" in which Michael was the drummer. Michael was a fan of mine in those days as he heard me play with "Barry Miles and Silverlight" live and on recordings. When Michael saw that the Little Macho people were looking for a drummer, Michael took the opportunity and called me.

Were you and the other musicians hired just for the recording of the albums, were the songs and the lyrics always finished when you were to play you part and how did the recording procedure go?

I was hired just for the recording with no mention of any live work. Michael and I boarded a plane for Bologna, Italy one day in 1980 and that's where I met Fred Petrus, Mauro Malavasi who was the leader of the sessions in the sense that he made all the musical decisions and had the overall musical vision as to what all the rhythm section players should be playing, including myself. Davida Romani, the bass player who was living in Bologna contributed a lot of his ideas too and he and Mauro were in constant communication. Neither Mauro or Davida spoke hardly any English, so most of their communication with me was in body language and verbal guessing games. But, having had prior studio experience and due to my flexible and intuitive nature, we all got along instantly and understood each other clearly most of the time. Michael was very helpful with the tuning of the drums and his snare, bass drum and tom sounds were awesome. The combination of the sound of my drums (I flew my own drums over for these sessions) and the way I played, paved the way for future hit R&B records in that genre. In fact, a year later Luther Vandross called me at the apartment I was living in at the time in NYC and asked me to play drums on his very first solo artist tour. He said he had heard my playing on the "Miracles" Change record as well as the first BBQ record and that it was the best drumming he had heard to date in that style. Luther was an unknown at that time, and I was right in the middle of recording an album with the great Laura Nyro, so unfortunately I had to pass up the tour. Back to the recording, I think all the songs might have been finished but I never heard any of the melodies or anyone singing, only myself, bass, a pre-existing synthesizer part on tape, Onaje Allan Gumbs on Rhodes, and Doc Powell on guitar. Onaje and Doc flew over separately. Unfortunately, Onaje was fired and sent home after a few days. It was weird. He played great, but as far as I could tell, the reasoning behind his dismissal was that Mauro could play all those repetitive parts himself and didn't need anyone else's input as far as creating the parts, so why not play them himself and save Fred the money of hiring an extra musician. So, basically Mauro would say, "OK, here's a new song and the tempo is this and let's try some different drum grooves. The small rhythm section would play the groove, try several options, learn where the breaks and changes were in the song form, and then cut the song in one or two complete takes. Not much punching in. What you hear on those records, at least as far as the drums goes are live, complete takes. Davida punched in his bass parts relentlessly after my drums were recorded. I say relentlessly in a complimentary way. The parts Davide created by being so meticulous made for some of the most inventive bass lines in recorded history. This procedure went on for a full two weeks, one track after another. I had no idea the name of the project, the label or anything. About 6 months later back in NY, I began to hear rumors that there were vocal auditions being held at Media Sound Studios where every great singer in New York and elsewhere were showing up. It turned out the Mauro and Fred were auditioning singers to sing over the tracks I had played on in Italy. A few months after that, I was informed that those dates were released on three separate recordings, a Change record on Atlantic, a BBQ Band album and third one that I don't recall now. Before I knew it, I began hearing my drumming on several of those cuts played all over the airwaves.

How did you experience your time with the musicians in the studio, how was the working climate?

See above for that description. The only thing I can add is that there was plenty of great food all the time. We stopped each day for fabulous lunches and were treated to great dinners at beautiful restaurants. I got along with everyone and there were never stressful moments. Intense, but not stressful.

On the record with BB it says that Petrus was both producer and executive producer. What was the real difference in this stable when it comes to these matters? For sure Malavasi and Romani were the masters behind the music but did Petrus actually participated in the studio work and what was your experience about his way of working?

In brief, I think Fred was the business guy. He didn't seem to be hands-on musically, although he was certainly aware of the overall direction and obviously was one of the creators of the overall vision. But, he left all the technical aspects and particulars of the actual music making to Mauro, with assistance from Davida and a few other friends in the control room (like Rudy the saxophonist).

You continued to play drums on Change's album in 82 but then you vanished from there, why? What did you do the years after, until 85?

Periodically, I was called in to play on dates for Fred Petrus. Fred would call me at home and ask if I was available on such and such a date to come into Media Sound and play on a few songs for one of his new projects. I played on more Change songs, plus some tracks on a great album called "Zinc" and others. I was also asked by Mauro to fly back to Italy and record an album he produced for the artist "Ron" which was more of a pop effort that became a big hit over there. Fred was interested in using a variety of musicians at that time, so I was one of maybe three drummers that he rotated around with. I was the only white guy in the loop for the most part, so perhaps he wanted to be sure there was some blackness in there for political reasons. I don't know. All I know is that he loved the way I played, I made some hits for them and I kept in touch with him until he passed away. After that second Change album, Fred basically stopped using freelance studio musicians such as myself and started focusing on making Change a touring band with those guys also playing on the recordings. I was never asked to be a part of that, probably because my reputation was becoming solidified as a studio musician who didn't want to travel unless the money was outstanding, which this definitely wasn't. Fred saw me and respected me in this light and that's most likely what happened. However, he did occasionally call me for sessions anyway thereafter. I continued my work as a studio drummer and ended up playing on dozens of hit records for Billy Ocean, Tom Jones, George Benson, Freddie Jackson, Stephanie Mills, Melba Moore, lots of jazz associations plus many jingles and film work. I also continued my interest in songwriting/production and had several things recorded during that time. Please visit my Web Site at "www.terrysilverlight.com" for a full list.

Your personal thoughts about BB & Q band's and Change's music?

My experience in Italy was unforgettable and exhilarating. I loved the pretty chord changes, the openness of the production, the pads Mauro used on the synthesizer, the funky bass stuff Davida played and the memorable guitar patterns Mauro coached Doc Powell to play. I thought the music swung and I really liked the vocals when I finally heard them. It was awesome.

Your thoughts about Petrus?

I really liked Fred very much. He was always very kind to me and had a soft way about him that made me feel comfortable. He was quiet and careful about what he said and when he said it and never came off as being aggressive. I liked him.

As no picture of him is available of Petrus, can you tell me about his looks?

I have heard brief quotes about Fred from other people, but I only know him the way I remember him and the way he treated me which was kindly and fairly. Fred was a pretty big guy with a roundish head and not much hair, probably fully shaven or bald. He wasn't fat, but he was big. You wouldn't want to mess with him. If you didn't know him, he could be intimidating at first meeting.

In 85 you were one part on Freddie Jackson's marvelous debut LP? How did you get that gig and in what way did this record different from the most recent years before musically?

Barry Eastmond, who produced that record, hired me to play on it. Barry was the piano played in my own band back in 1978. He was still living at home with his parents while going to Brooklyn College and touring with Melba Moore, Phylis Hyman and others as a pianist. I got him one of his first sessions as a pianist on one of Fred Petrus' projects, probably Change. That was an important session for Barry in that he used it as a strong credit when getting his own production work. Barry quickly worked his way to the top and at the first opportunity, recommended I play drums on Billy Ocean's "Suddenly". From there, Barry called me for all of his dates.

How have you musical life been since 85 until today?

Please visit my Web Site at "www.terrysilverlight.com", but in brief I've continued to play on countless recordings, I was in Roberta Flack's band for 3 years, and I've been very active as a composer having written many jingles, songs for artists and a myriad of film composing.

Compare the musical industry now and then?

That's hard to say. Many musicians complain they don't work as much any more in the studios, but the decision I made back in the Change days not to commit to any one band or project has resulted in my being known in various circles, so I get called constantly for work. It is true that drum programming has taken away so much work from drummers. But now that people are going back to the old recordings where people like me played live drums and realize how irreplaceable that actually is, live recording is beginning to come back again at least in part.

How do you look up on today's black R&B music?

I think it's still one of the most exciting forms of music in that the songwriting and production elements are still groundbreaking and creative. It's built upon all that's come before (which I am proud to have been a part of developing from the rhythm side of things) and is still developing.

What is your point of view on music today on a whole? Are you open minded for new waves and constellations? Can the music really find new and fresh melodies in a time when everything seems to be taken and used?

I have no doubt that there is room for endless possibilities only that the people who actually run the industry, who unfortunately in majority aren't musicians at all, would stay out of things and let the talents of the musicians dictate the course.

By PATRIK ANDERSSON 2002

A great thanks to Terry for his open minded attitude and informative answers!

Interviewed on PSFS in August 2002 by Patrik B. Andersson. The interview has been edited. All rights reserved