

ENCORE



BILL SUMMERS SUMMERS' HEAT BY SHEILA ANDERSON

Ever the raconteur, percussionist and noted conguero, Bill Summers is a fascinating man who freely shares his knowledge. A brilliant musician, Summers is in a league of his own. He plays over 300 axes, from traditional African instruments to pop bottles, and is one of the first musicians of his background and generation to break through in funk and jazz.

Growing up in Detroit, MI, Summers was exposed to a variety of music. "I listened to a lot of jazz: saxophonists Coltrane, Parker, Ammons, Turrentine and lots of piano players," he recounts. Coming up, he and his brother built a large music collection that included records from Cuba, Trinidad and Brazil. Fascinated by the rhythms that were embedded in the music, Summers learned "where to place it to create certain melodies and sing to it. It was mathematically laid out and scientific." His knowledge of music and history garnered the reputation of an ethnomusicologist, although he admittedly holds no degrees. "People ordained me these things. I don't ordain them myself." He proclaims, "I'm so Black, I'm Blacker than Black! I'm a Buddhist, I'm an Orisha priest. *Everything* is OK with me." According to drummer Mike Clark, who replaced Harvey Mason when he left pianist Herbie Hancock's fusion band, the Head Hunters, Summers was "responsible for making the percussionist a regular and well-paid guy. He's an extremely sensitive percussionist—a natural musician: he started playing saxophones plus he's a classically trained pianist." In addition to The Headhunters (note: post-Hancock, the space in the group name disappeared between "Head" and "hunters")—which has been nominally led by Summers and Clark since Hancock's departure—Summers' leader credits include two highly-acclaimed groups: Bill Summers and Summers Heat and the award-winning Latin jazz group Los Hombres Calientes. He's also frequently worked off the bandstand in film and television, notably on the film score for *The Color Purple* and the

television mini-series *Roots*.

At age five, Summers' mother enrolled him at the Detroit Conservatory of Music, where he studied piano, composition and theory for five of his ten years there. But in the 12th grade, after an unpleasant exchange with a teacher, he quit school. Summers recalls, "I did learn, but it became an exercise in racism and intelligence." The final straw occurred when he'd taken the sheet music for the Ray Charles version of "One Mint Julep" and declared he wanted to play it. His then instructor handed the music back to him, dismissively stating: "When you learn the classical music I'm teaching you, you'll have time for this other stuff." Angered, Summers realized she had some disdain for Black music "from the ghetto," which he loved. "I was insulted by that (and) was so pissed off I never went back." His father told him to get a job. The first was at the Detroit Motor Company, and then the Detroit Race Course where he worked as a busboy and where he circuitously placed some bets and won the daily double. The payoff was huge, so Summers quit. The timing proved serendipitous. He moved to the San Francisco Bay area and enrolled at Merritt Community College in Oakland, where he met fellow students Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, founders of The Black Panther Party. In his subsequent enrollment at UC Berkeley, Summers met Hancock, already a popular and well-established musician.

It was in 1973, when Summers joined the Head Hunters—with Bennie Maupin (tenor, soprano, saxello, bass clarinet, flute), Paul Jackson (bass guitar) and Harvey Mason (drums)—and appeared on Hancock's commercial breakthrough, the jazz fusion masterpiece, *Head Hunters* (Columbia). Of the four tracks, "Watermelon Man" was the only one not written for the album; it had appeared on Hancock's debut recording, 1962's *Takin' Off* (Blue Note). But Hancock and Mason reworked the tune, which Summers breathed new life into with his intro/outro using what would become his signature "bottle" technique sound. *Head Hunters* was the first jazz recording to sell a million copies and remains one of the best-selling jazz albums of all time. But Summers quips, "I got NO royalties from it!" He regrets, too, that the "bottle" is on the album credits. "The real name of the instrument is (he sings) Hindewhu; it's onomatopoeic—it's a dulcet pattern." He continues: "'Little People,' don't call them pygmies—that's what

Europeans call them. That's like the 'N' word, OK? They are Ba-Benzélé; they're Babingas. They have different ethnic groups that live in the forests...they don't cut down trees and make drums, but they do sing and play those little flutes." He says, "I learned it from them." As to the *Head Hunters* album, which the Library of Congress has listed as one of the 500 most important contributions in American Music History, Summers exclaims, with pride, "It's a magical kind of sound that I did in several movies, one being *The Wiz* with Michael Jackson."

With Hancock's blessing, The Headhunters (under the co-leadership of Summers and Clark) ventured out on their own to produce two standout albums on Arista: *Survival of the Fittest* (1975) and *Straight From The Gate* (1977). Over a half-century later, the group remains at the forefront of jazz and funk and have recorded more than an additional half-dozen albums. In addition to Summers and Clark, current members include stalwarts of the New Orleans music scene, including NEA Jazz Master Donald Harrison (alto), Kyle Roussel (keyboards) and Chris Severin (bass). As to Summers' ability as a natural-born leader, Clark says, "He's a kind of guy you can put in a desert with nothing, and he'd find a few musicians and have them working in a week." He is also fearless, Clark adds, recounting a time when they went to an Australian zoo: Summers had taken his shekere with him, but before he had a chance to play it, a kangaroo snatched it away. Unfazed, Summers chased down the kangaroo and took it back. Now that ischutzpah!

For more info visit theheadhunters.band. Summers is with The Headhunters at Iridium Aug. 14 and Quantum Leap Festival at Borghese Vineyard Aug. 17. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Herbie Hancock—*Head Hunters* (Columbia, 1973)
- The Headhunters—*Survival of the Fittest* (Arista, 1975)
- The Headhunters—*Return of the Headhunters* (Hancock-Verve, 1997-98)
- Los Hombres Calientes—*Vol. 3: New Congo Square* (Basin Street, 2001)
- The Headhunters—*On Top: Live In Europe* (BHM Productions, 2007)
- The Headhunters—*The Stunt Man* (Ropeadope, 2023)

LEST WE FORGET



STEVE GROSSMAN AFTER COLTRANE COMES GROSSMAN BY JEFF CEBULSKI

The late saxophonist Steve Grossman, who passed away in 2020 at age 69, was considered by many to be the most influential—and, perhaps, the best—of the post-Coltrane generation of saxophonists, which includes the great tenor-soprano heavyweight Dave Liebman, a fellow Miles Davis alum and frequent collaborator of Grossman's in the '70s groups of Elvin Jones. It was Coltrane's longtime drummer Jones who actually crowned Grossman with an implied "greatest" title. The story (via bassist Gene Perla, Grossman's former musical associate, including in Jones' bands) is that Jones, during an interview, said something to the effect of "after Coltrane comes Steve Grossman."

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Grossman was able to transcribe Charlie Parker solos at age 10. He was a Coltrane impressionist at 16, a Juilliard student at 17 and a Miles Davis session participant at 18. Usually playing soprano, at 19 the prodigy became a step-in for Wayne Shorter during the *Bitches Brew* period, eventually settling in during the *Jack Johnson* sessions and performing in the 1970 bands featured on *Miles Davis At Fillmore* and *Black Beauty: Miles Davis At Fillmore West*. He is also credited on *Live-Evil* (1970), *Big Fun* (1969-72) and *Get Up With It* (1970-74). The '70s provided the heyday for the sax wunderkind. In his obituary on Grossman, "One That Got Away," Detroit writer Mark Stryker (via pianist and blogger Ethan Iverson) pointed out a particularly intense Grossman soprano solo during "Satsuki" on trumpeter Terumasa Hino's entrance into fusion, *Alone Together* (Takt/Columbia, 1970). After his stint with Davis, Grossman was part of Perla's select crew to perform and record several fine albums with Jones, including the often riveting *Live at the Lighthouse, Vol. 1 & 2* (Blue Note, 1972).

Says Perla, "I consider him on par with Charlie Parker in terms of control, knowledge,

understanding...[he] could play any tempo, all the notes." Yet, Grossman was both a wonder and a mystery to most, unfortunately fueled by what Neil Young calls "the needle and the damage done." Perla spent significant time loft-shedding with Grossman, the noted keyboardist Jan Hammer and Perla's best friend, drummer-percussionist Don Alias. Noting their compatibility, the bassist and Alias decided to form a new trio, Stone Alliance, with the saxophonist. The group's repertoire was '70s eclectic, with much of their stage power coming from Grossman's horn attack. The band recorded its eponymous first album (1976) for Perla's new PM label and went on a tour of Latin America and Europe. Momentum was building, and it was just a matter of time before a major label snapped them up. But it didn't happen, possibly because Grossman's peripatetic nature stopped the momentum. According to Perla: "Part of that tour was two weeks [planned] back-to-back, at Ronnie Scott's in London and some gig in Scandinavia. Steve was on fire, man...Well, Steve didn't show up to London. I

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