CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 6
I. EARLY DAYS 8
THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD 9
DRUM CORPS 11
MUSIC AND ART HIGH SCHOOL 13
THE ARMY 15
II. SESSION DRUMMER & TOURING SIDEMAN 17
CTI RECORDS 20
INTERVIEW WITH RON CARTER 27
MILES DAVIS 30
DREAMS 34
III. MAHAVISHNU ORCHESTRA 36
THE INNER MOUNTING FLAME 39
ODD TIME SIGNATURES 46
BIRDS OF FIRE 46
DOUBLE BASS DRUMS 55
BETWEEN NOTHINGNESS & ETERNITY and *THE LOST TRIDENT SESSIONS* 56
THE END OF MAHAVISHNU 58
INTERVIEW WITH JOHN McLAUGHLIN 59
IV. COMPOSER & BANDLEADER 62
SPECTRUM 62
CROSSWINDS 74
TOTAL ECLIPSE 77
INTERVIEW WITH RANDY BRECKER 83
A FUNKY THIDE OF SINGS 86
THE 1980s: *WARNING, POWER PLAY,* AND MORE 88
THE 1990s AND *COMPASS POINT* 97
THE ART OF THREE 101
DRUM 'N' VOICE 101
RECENT ALBUMS & PROJECTS 102
COMPOSING MUSIC 103
TRAVEL, LEARNING, AND PLAYING 105
MUSICIANS 107
THE BUSINESS OF MUSIC 110
V. OTHER PROJECTS & RECORDINGS 112
VI. COBHAM'S CONCEPT: EQUIPMENT, TECHNIQUE, CLINICS 124
EARLY CAREER: NEW YORK DRUM SHOPS & FIRST DRUM SETS 124
CYMBALS 126
FRIENDS & MENTORS 128
TUNING 130
THOUGHTS ON TECHNIQUE & PRACTICE 130
OPEN-HANDED PLAYING & SETUP 134

TAMA DRUMS, DRUM CLINICS 135
ART OF THE RHYTHM SECTION RETREAT 137
COBHAM'S KITS 140
VII. COBHAM'S INFLUENCE 152
Dennis Chambers 152
Gary Husband 152
Simon Phillips 154
Narada Michael Walden 155
Will Calhoun 157
Steve Smith 158
John Riley 162
BIBILIOGRAPHY/SOURCES 166
DISCOGRAPHY 166

Billy Cobham Crosswinds Project performance, Brno Jazzfest, Czech Republic, March 20, 2019. (Photo by Igor Zehlctk/Alamy.)

EARLY YEARS

William Emanuel Cobham was born on May 16, 1944, in Colón, Panama. His family built and sold congas and steel drums throughout the Caribbean, his mother was a singer, and his father played piano. Cobham lived in Panama until he was three and a half years old. Although he moved away at a young age, he carries memories of his young childhood there. “The impressions were real and dramatic,” says Cobham. “I came from a minority family who worked hard to survive. I don’t know who (in my family) got the bright idea to leave Panama, but I thank them for that. If I was there after three-and-a-half, probably the best thing that would have happened to me is that I would be communicating in Spanish. But because we left and went to New York, I didn’t get that opportunity, which I feel bad about. On the other hand, it’s not the spoken word so much as the intent that the individual uses as body language. In other words if you arrive in New York and are not a great verbal communicator yet have a sense of what you'd like to accomplish in your new social environment you will most likely survive as a contributor to the social environment in which you live..”

The drums were always a part of Bill’s life; he started playing around the age of three. “The musicians in my family made timbales, steel pan, and congas. The Black community in Panama spoke Spanish, but they were mostly Nigerian or Malian, from Western Africa, and they were working laypeople. You could find them mostly in Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and St. Lucia—mainly the islands that were colonized and controlled by the British centuries earlier—and they would come to work work on the building of the Panama Canal, and they would bring their music.”

While the family was involved with music and instruments, Bill did not absorb a lot of the local music in Panama, both because of his young age and because his father, while a musician, never kept a piano in the house. William Sr. had an older brother, Edwin, who was the organist at the local church in the Black community of Colón. Many families there involved their eldest sons in the church, and Cobham’s family followed suit. “Uncle Edwin studied music and became very good at it,” says Cobham. “My grandfather would not allow my father to study music. He had to study mathematics and science. Why? This was all a status thing having to do with concepts put in place through British rule. Fundamentally that’s what was happening with the Black community down there, they came to work on the locks. The oldest son was given to the church, and the second son had to go to work to help support the family.”

Bill’s father, although he wasn’t permitted to study music, learned quite a bit of it anyway by watching and listening to his brother. “(My father) had this gift to observe and see what was happening—even though he wasn’t supposed to be doing that; he was supposed to be studying mathematics and everything his father asked of him. He completed his studies, but then when no one was watching, he would study with his older brother in the room with the door closed—not playing the piano, just watching. So that was his gift, except for one thing: He only saw and remembered everything in one key! (laughs) So, every tune my father played was in the same key, but he had this amazing book of knowledge in his head; he could play anything you wanted on a dime, (but it was all in) like F sharp. And he could tune the piano.”

Cobham’s father, while a lielong music lover and hobbyist, made a living with his mind. "He was always thinking about numbers, and it enhanced his ability to make a living,"

says Bill. "He was a statistician for a hospital. That's how we got (to New York); they needed somebody. He had this gift that he could remember anything. If the hospital needed to buy bedsheets or linens, he never had to write anything down. That became a problem for the hospital because they didn't understand that he had this photographic memory; after forty-something years, they couldn't get rid of him because he knew where everything was, and nobody else did! (laughs)"

When the elder Cobham decided to move his family to the United States in search of a better life, he took a huge risk on the unknown, like thousands of other immigrants. Bill's brother Wayne, seven years his junior, wasn't born when the family left Panama, yet he knows the history. "We have relatives that helped build the Panama Canal," says Wayne. "We have relatives that worked on the Army base in Panama. Dad had his family over there (in Panama), and he wanted to come over, like everyone else, to a better place in the United States. Before he could come, he had to get a job. He was making something like ten dollars a week. He had to be sponsored first. There was a Panamanian friend of his that had to sponsor him so he could come over. Dad worked his ass off, whatever he was doing, at, you know, ten dollars a week, until he had a sum of about $300 in his bank account. Once he had that money in his account, he was able to bring his family over. They had to go through Ellis Island and all that, like everyone else, and they settled in Brooklyn."

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

After emigrating to the U.S., Billy Cobham's family lived at 89 Chauncey Street in Brooklyn, New York. They stayed at this address from 1947 to 1957, then moved to Queens (Cobham was thirteen years old at the time). Cobham's memories are of a vibrant, multicultural community filled with music.[1]

"89 Chauncey Street, between Lewis and Stuyvesant Avenues, was across the street from Robert Fulton Park (named for the guy who created the steamship), where I played stickball with my friends," recalls Cobham. "Holy Rosary Catholic Church was down one more block. When (you went) across Stuyvesant Avenue, towards East New York, the next block over was made up of Puerto Rican families. Where I was living was a combination of Trinidadian, Barbadian, and Panamanian families. *The Amsterdam News* was on Fulton Street. It was like our own little town. We had a newspaper, and we had St. John's Hospital on Atlantic Avenue. At the head of Robert Fulton Park, there was a gazebo, and in the summer, every Saturday morning, there was a gathering of conga players and other hand drummers. I never even thought to go over there, and I never asked—but I didn't have to. They played so loud (that we easily heard them in our home). You could hear these guys all the way to downtown Brooklyn! They were just playing for all they were worth, playing all these different patterns. But when the Dodgers left (Brooklyn), we started to try to figure out how we were going to get out of there, because there was no baseball team anymore—my family were avid baseball fans."

A lot of jazz was played in the Cobham home. "There was this big Crosley radio in the living room," remembers Cobham. "It looked like a Wurlitzer jukebox, with a 15-inch woofer that hit the floor, and it was all tubes. The Crosley also had a short-wave band, so we could listen to music from home (Panama). It made the whole apartment sound like a studio. I had no choice but to listen to 'Robin's Nest' on WNEW or Billy Taylor on WLIB. Billy was on from about five in

1 For further reading on Cobham's childhood and career, refer to *Six Days at Ronnie Scott's* by Brian Gruber (2018), available digitally from Hudson Music.

was *the* musician. He was the glue. He played drums, he played violin, he played bass—so he *knew* (laughs). He played the synthesizer like a guitarist, and he had a special groove, which was a nice touch because of where he came from. The groove out of Prague is a different kind of groove. Yet it relates to everything that happens in the West. And how he would pull things together! He had the facilities; I mean, those tempos we were playing at, you had to build up to that; you couldn't just walk in and do it. The fact that we were playing that way was probably my fault more than anyone else's; I still didn't have an understanding as to how to control the tempo. But with Jan, it became a definite race all the time; there was challenging competition, but out of it came some great music and great times."

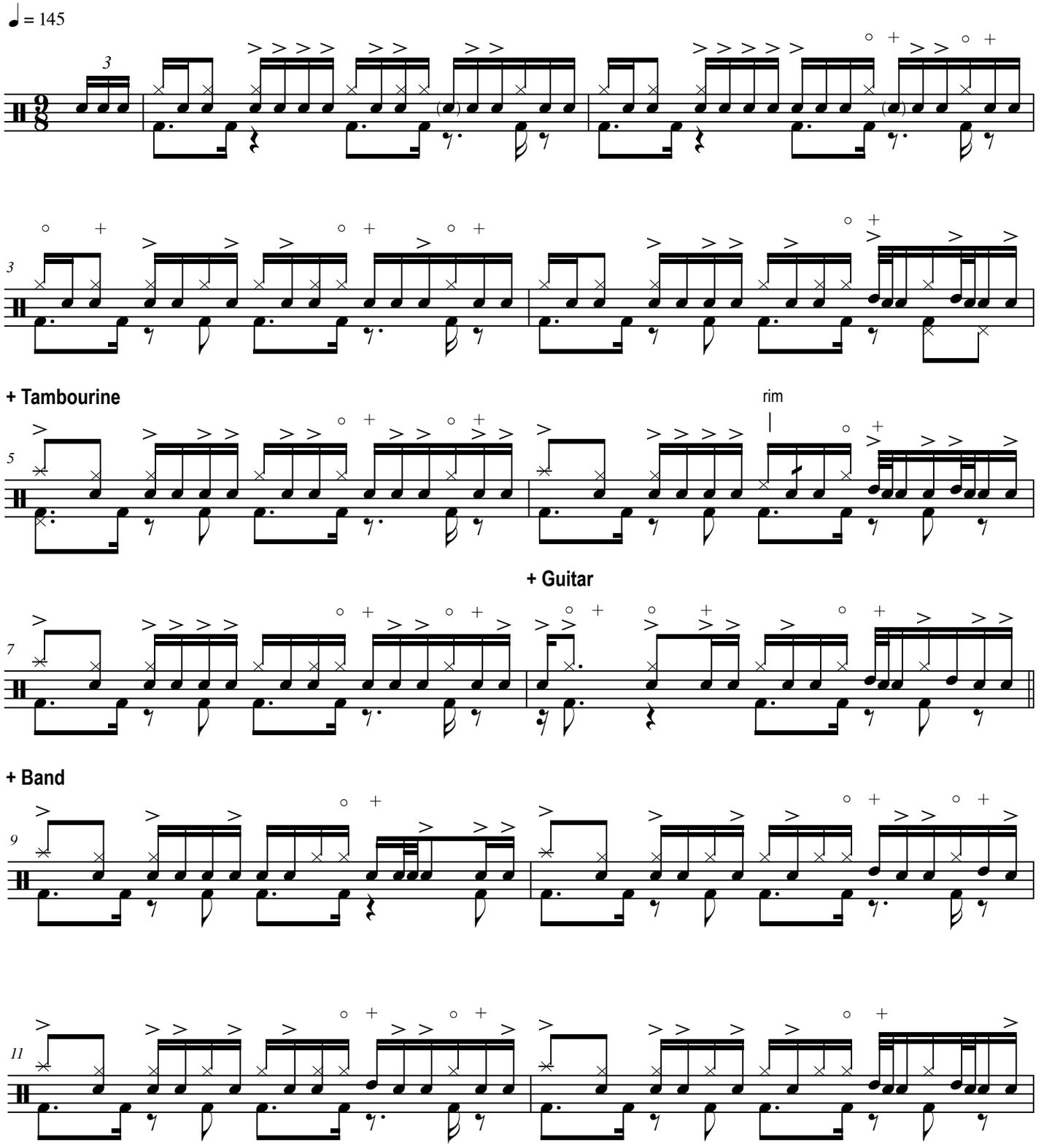
THE INNER MOUNTING FLAME

The Mahavishnu Orchestra's first album, *The Inner Mounting Flame*, was recorded on August 14, 1971, at CBS Studios in New York. Bill was still using a standard-sized setup with just two rack toms, one bass drum, and one floor tom at the time. Were there grand expectations for this group to go out on the road and revolutionize the music world? Not so much, says Bill. "I hadn't played with John or Jerry before, I didn't know who Rick was," Cobham recalls. "But the band sounded good—and that was about it. Soon we were opening for Big Maybelle or Champion Jack DuPree or somebody like that." At an early gig at Brown University, the group was introduced as an "East Indian" band, with the audience expecting traditional Indian music—until they let loose with their first chord played at about 140 dB! In terms of popularity, Cobham insists the band was playing for itself, not for recognition, and was just as happy playing Café Wha? in New York City as a hockey arena like the Spectrum in Philadelphia: "'We've got a gig at the Spectrum.' 'Oh, really? That's great, man. The band is growing.' 'Yeah, a little bit.' We'd just do it. It was about what happened on the bandstand," says Bill.

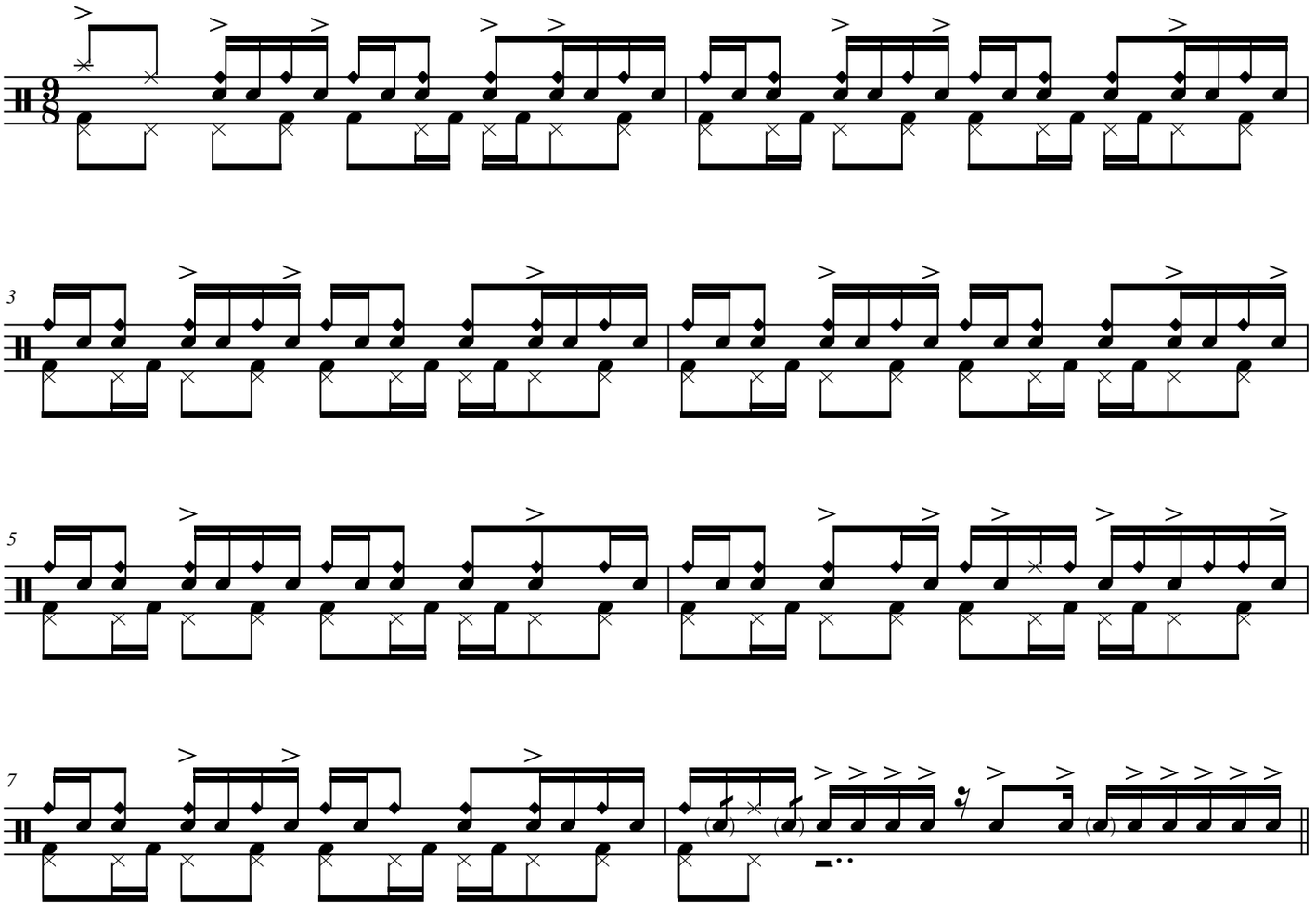
Mahavishnu played live quite a bit before they recorded anything, so the music was well-developed by the time they went into the studio. "We didn't record until we played," says Bill. "That was key. We couldn't just walk in (and record) because nobody was reading. Jerry's not reading; I mean, there are notes, but nobody's going to sit down there and read that stuff, so you've got to play it through, and work out the kinks, and get the forms right, and all of that."

“Vital Transformation” - Mahavishnu Orchestra - ***The Inner Mounting Flame*** **(1971)**

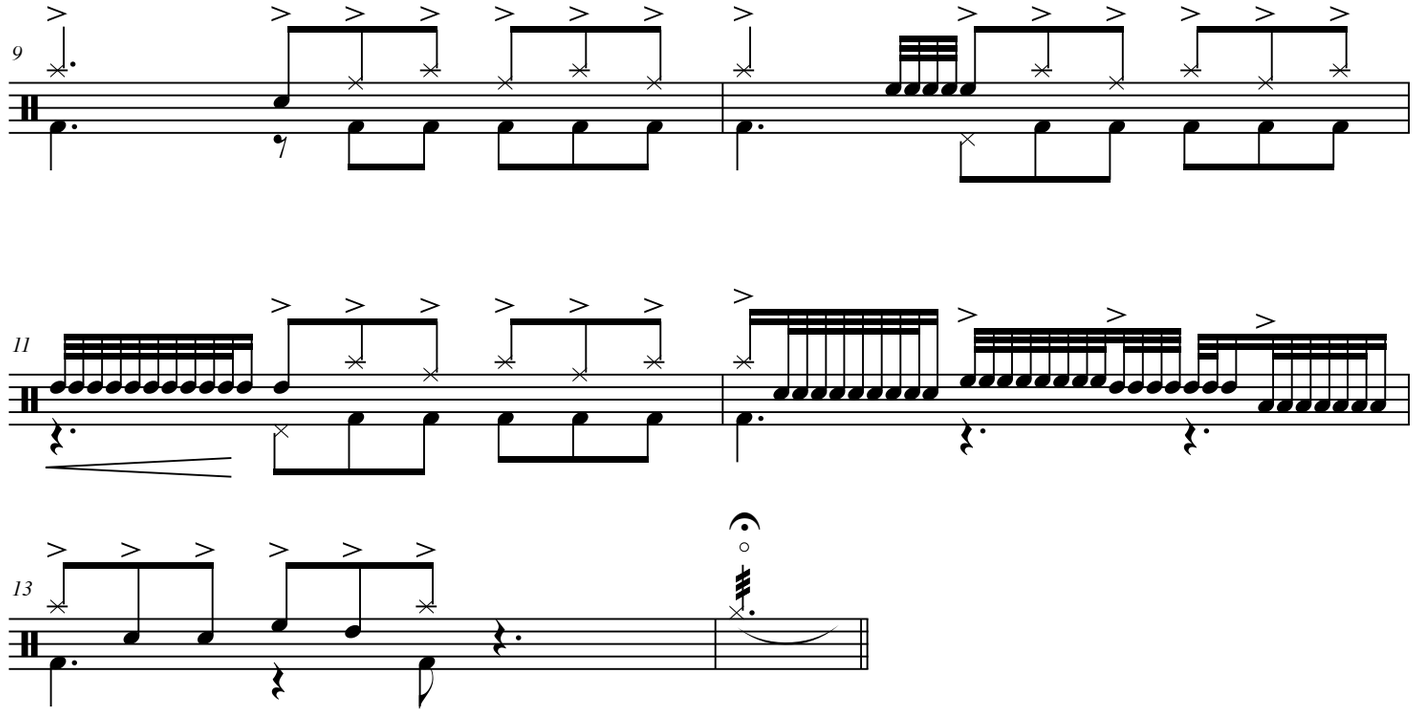
(Ex. 1) On this defining fusion classic, Billy sets the tone with a driving drum intro in 9/8. His playing is dense, yet rock solid. Check out the way his groove supports yet creates tension with John McLaughlin’s guitar melody. This first section of the tune plays with 9/8 with a truncated 5/4 kind of feel, with a couple of backbeats in each measure and a sixteenth-note structure of inner notes to the groove. (0:00)

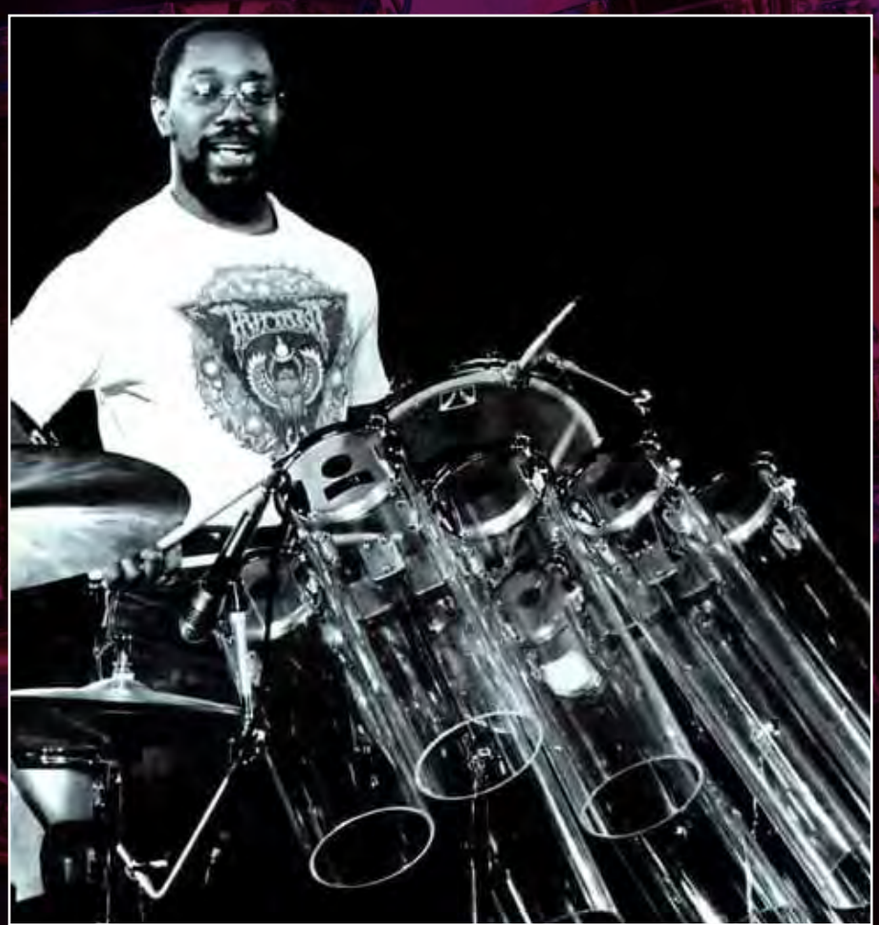


(Ex. 2) Moving up to the bell of the ride cymbal, Billy keeps up the intensity as he sets up the band to switch into a 3+3+3 feel, which has the effect of feeling like a slower tempo. Using a musical device that would become a signature, he fills long spaces with incredibly accurate single-stroke rolls that maintain exacting time. (0:42)



B Section





Top: Cobham in 1979 at a recording studio in West Orange, New Jersey, with his triple bass drum Tama setup. The session was for Jack Bruce and Friends, with David Sancious and Clem Clemson. Note the three different-sized bass drums, and piccolo snare on the far left. Cobham's China cymbal seems higher, and his ride lower, than in other photos.

Bottom: For a time, Cobham used a set of Tama octobans. The eight drums were tuned to a diatonic scale.