

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Preface](#)

[1 In The Beginning](#)

[Brooklyn, New York, Spring 1947](#)

[Our Gang](#)

[Saturday Morning Rehearsal, June 10, Bell Studios,
Acton, London](#)

[Sunday Morning Rehearsal, June 11, Bell Studios](#)

[Ronnie Scott's, Monday Mid-Afternoon, Load-In](#)

[Soundcheck](#)

[Showtime, Opening Night, June 12th](#)

[The Fan](#)

[2 Kids](#)

[I'm The Baby: A Conversation with Wayne Cobham](#)

[Tuesday Night Backstage, Pre-Show](#)

[Cobham and Brecker](#)

[Paul Price on Designing Cover Art](#)

[3 Miles, Mahavishnu, Montreux](#)

[Meeting McLaughlin: "Are you busy?"](#)

["He and My Dad Spent Some Fun Times Together:" The
Jan Hammer Interview](#)

[Breakups and Reunions](#)

["I Know Some Tunes:" Cobham and McLaughlin at
Montreux](#)

[The Rock and Roll Collaborations](#)

[Backstage Wednesday Night](#)

[Ronnie Scott's Bar Encounter: Mark Mondesir](#)

[4 Ronnie Scott, 52nd Street and The Left Behind Snare Drum](#)

[Ronnie Scott on 52nd Street](#)

[The Hickory House and Billy Taylor](#)

[The Jazz Head: A Lunchtime Chat with Ronnie Scott's Paul Pace](#)

[The Corner Barbershop and the Grand Opera House](#)

[Whereupon Ronnie Scott Tells Michael Watt to Fuck Off](#)

[The Move to Europe](#)

[Moscow's Le Club, the Blue Note Milano, and The Development](#)

[5 The Art Of The Rhythm Section](#)

["An Extra Breath of Air:" A Conversation with Ron Carter](#)

[Bill Bruford and Tricky Meters](#)

[He Is Always Showing Me Stuff](#)

[Mesmerized](#)

[A Flirtation with Lyrics](#)

[6 And On The Sixth Day](#)

[A Closing Night Conversation with Guy Barker](#)

[Peak Experiences and What's Left Undone](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Billy Cobham Discography](#)

[Notes](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a small number of music venues worldwide that offer a legacy and experience akin to that of a cathedral; a sacred space, with rich history, the highest standards, and the promise of a transformative experience. Ronnie Scott's, certainly the gold standard of UK jazz clubs, quite possibly the most iconic in all of Europe, welcomed me with full access and no small measure of hospitality. Several of the club's principals including co-owner Michael Watt and resident "jazzhead" and booker Paul Pace offered critical insights, while master impresario Simon Cooke enabled my smooth and efficient work time there. It was a memorable experience and I am grateful to the club's staff and management.

Bill introduced me to the band members at the first rehearsal and there would be no book without their gracious acceptance; many are interviewed in these pages. More than that, they allowed me to witness the alchemy of creation up close. It was a master class and some of those horn riffs are indelibly imprinted in my brain. As to Guy Barker, his masterful storytelling and kindness are a persistent theme of the book.

Faina Cobham dashes about before, during and after each show with whirlwind speed and makes sure the trains run on time. Thank you, Fai, for enduring my constant requests and prima donna requirements.

When I was unsure how to form the project, my friend Mark Phinney provided the final push forward on Koh Phangan, validating the idea and flying to London to provide the unique perspective of a superfan.

Iain Donnelly, fresh from the launch of his Saraswati Publishing venture in Cambodia, edited the book, tirelessly providing literary and musical guidance and forcing a focus on the reader's point of view. Paul Price, Bill's CD designer, brought his unique creative gifts to bringing the cover to life. The cover photograph is the work of photographer Ken Hunt, Whole Earth Images, who has generously allowed for its use.

Thanks to the parents, teachers and students of Soho Parish Primary School for sharing their big day, with a special tip of the hat to Pete Letanka.

I am thankful to friends and family, some involved in the *ShowGoTV* jazz streaming project, who nurtured and supported my interest in Bill's work, in jazz, and in music. Don and Stephen Shapiro, my deceased brother Jeff, Bill O'Lunaigh, Lou Borrelli and Bob Ellis, Kristi Vandembosch, Tony Berman, Nancy Balik, Erik Herz, Hardy Hemmingway, Katherine Ajk, among many others. Sebastian Wagner came to one of the shows and sparked the idea of creating a Spotify soundtrack for each chapter (check out the playlists, *Billy Cobham One*, *Billy Cobham Two*, etc.). Bill and I would never have met without Marynell Maloney's grace, charm, and spectacular Chenailles chateau setting.

Bill Bruford warned that I would be "spending many hours indoors" transcribing and organizing the tens of hours of interviews for the book. Big thanks to the interviewees who gave freely of their time without hesitation. Conversations with band members, club executives, fans, reviewers, and crew took place during the week at Ronnie Scott's as indicated in these pages. Some conversations were conducted just prior to or shortly after the shows.

The book is an oral history and I had a rich education studying the style and works of masters of the genre such as Studs Terkel. I cut my interviewing teeth years ago at C-SPAN, at *FORA.tv* and *ShowGoTV*, and during the writing of *WAR: The Afterparty*. Sharing the stories of great men and women in their own words is a grand privilege.

This book is a labor of love and a tribute to one of the world's great musical storytellers, Billy Cobham. I'll let the book speak to my thoughts of his work and his life. I am grateful for the many hours he devoted to this project and for the opportunity to learn from a master and a friend.

Thanks to all those involved in the project. I had a ball.

PREFACE

There was a domestic war in the United States, a growing 'generation gap' in the late '60s and early '70s even as the conflict in Vietnam was escalating. I was 14 in March of 1970, my brother Jeff a wise but wild role model at the advanced age of 19.

My earliest memory is of my mother Claire tying my shoes at three years old at our Legion Street, Brooklyn tenement. But my fiercest early memory was Mom raging at Jeff in our East New York, Brooklyn housing-project apartment upon finding anti-war paraphernalia. Five decades later, I can tell you exactly what one button said: "*The Great Society, Bombs, Bullets, Bullshit.*"

It was a political and cultural divide and music was smack on the front lines. Jazz, firmly established as America's popular music, had been overwhelmed by rock and roll, which my parents despised. Anti-war buttons aside, and well before music might be safely sequestered in iTunes libraries, vinyl 'records' littered teenage bedroom floors, with designs, liner notes, and musical forms aspiring to subvert the existing order. Relatively clueless, as I trailed my brother's political and musical evolution by a half decade, I could tell the degree of subversion by the pitch of my mother's voice.

"The Sad Sad World of Mothers and Fathers??!?" That *Brute Force* title was not well received by Claire, nor were Frank Zappa lyrics, or odd, loud explosions of sound taunting my parents' more civilized record collection, tucked neatly in the hi-fi stereo cabinet.

Billy Eckstine was a favorite of Mom's. As was Frank Sinatra. There was Cab Calloway, who my father hired in the '30s to

perform at his Brooklyn house party. And lots of Al Jolson, who Dad could imitate flawlessly. Some of the records did find some purchase amongst the kids. Dave Brubeck's odd-metered *Take Five*. And the first jazz album that turned my head, the breakthrough bossa nova classic, *Getz/Gilberto*.

In March 1970, President Richard Nixon was promising peace with honor in Vietnam while striking out at the Paris peace talks. But my dad Sol and brother Jeff found their own way to harmonize personal and musical differences; they took me to my first concert. The Fillmore East was Bill Graham's Manhattan rock and roll mecca, and a unique breeding ground for visual and musical experimentation. The headliner, Neil Young and Crazy Horse, was preceded by the Steve Miller Blues Band. With Miles Davis opening, and performing, among other things, the breakthrough release that is widely considered the birth of jazz-rock 'fusion,' *Bitches Brew*.

No, that's not quite right. Davis played second.

I was opening for this sorry-ass cat named Steve Miller...didn't have shit going for him, so I'm pissed because I got to open for this non-playing motherfucker just because he had one or two sorry-ass records out. So, I would come late and he would have to go on first, and then when we go there, we just smoked the motherfucking place and everybody dug it, including Bill. [1](#)

A few weeks before, William Emmanuel Cobham Junior found himself in a studio recording tracks for *Bitches Brew*, along with John McLaughlin and an astounding cast of artists who would go on to transform jazz and popular music.

I first met Billy Cobham just before my birthday in August of 2010. I was spending a good part of the summer at friend Marynell Maloney's home in France's Loire River valley. A few days earlier, just across the river in Jargeau, Joan of Arc's old stomping grounds, I was reading in an open-air plaza, sipping a glass of local wine, when three musicians suddenly set up a few yards away. They proceeded to perform an acoustic rendition of Chick Corea's *Spain*. After their shockingly good performance, I introduced myself and got their card. Marynell invited them to perform at the birthday party and I casually suggested Bill might join them. She rightly scorned the idea, a legend playing with local musicians, won't happen. But after dinner, as they played on the patio under a starry sky, he did just that on a tiny drum set. A friend of Bill's remarked, "He can't help himself."

In the years since, I have seen Bill perform in Paris, Milan, Rio, and numerous U.S. cities. As he plugged his iPad into my car audio system, he would share a never-ending stream of stories that were not only insightful, bawdy, and astounding, but also provided a unique panorama of the last half-century of American music. So, when Bill told me he was collaborating with Britain's hottest arranger, jazz trumpeter Guy Barker, to orchestrate and perform his oeuvre with a 17-piece big band at Europe's premiere jazz club Ronnie Scott's, I thought; why not hang out backstage, in rehearsals and at the bar during the six-day run and finally gather those stories. Not a biography, but an oral history exploring six decades of music, an improvised series of encounters during one special week. Talk to the greats who have played with him, club owners, music critics, friends, and family, to explore the source of Billy Cobham's musical power and joy, this jazz fusion pioneer and innovator, and discover what motivates him to continue to create at the age of 73.

Guy is calling the six-day residency at Ronnie's "a celebration of Bill's life and work in music." Billy Cobham, a guy voted year after year as the greatest drummer in the world, considered the greatest living jazz fusion drummer, one-time bandmate of Miles Davis, Randy Brecker, Mahavishnu Orchestra, Jimi Hendrix, Ron Carter, George Duke, Stan Getz, Muhammad Ali (!), George Benson, Freddie Hubbard, Billy Taylor, Horace Silver, from incarnations of the Grateful Dead and Jack Bruce to Peter Gabriel's WOMAD, the list seems endless.

Back in the chateau's expansive dining room, I asked Bill if he had any birthday advice for me. He answered without hesitation, "Live your life with reckless abandon."

I'm working on it.

Brian Gruber
May 18, 2018
Koh Phangan, Thailand