

MUSICAL ANOMALY - LENNY WHITE TALKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 09 July 2010 11:34 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 July 2010 19:41



Having cut his teeth as a sideman with jazz saxophonist, Jackie McLean, in the late-'60s, native New Yorker and master drummer **Lenny White** made his recording debut on Miles Davis's epochal jazz-rock fusion album, 'Bitches Brew,' in August 1969. He was just nineteen.

After making his mark with Miles, White played as a sideman with another jazz legend, tenor saxophone titan Joe Henderson, then played on Freddie Hubbard's classic 'Red Clay' LP and after that joined a Latin jazz-rock group, Azteca, for a couple of albums. In 1972, he was asked by Chick Corea to join a new electric version of the band Return To Forever. Alongside keyboard wizard, Corea, virtuoso bassist Stanley Clarke and guitarist Bill Connors (who was replaced after one album by Al Di Meola), White and Return To Forever achieved massive popularity in the mid-'70s with an adventurous amalgam of jazz, classical music and nimble-fingered prog-rock. White enjoyed a parallel career as a solo artist alongside RTF and

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issued his own rock-infused brand of fusion on albums like 'Venusian Summer' (1975), 'Big City' (1977) and 'The Adventures Of Astral Pirates' (1978). Soul music fans are more likely to know White from his producer's role for acts like Sylvia St. James, Pieces Of A Dream, Bernard Wright, Nicki Richards, Rachelle Ferrell and Tom Browne as well as his work in the '80s alongside bassist Marcus Miller in the Jamaica Boys.

Equally at home in the spheres of jazz, soul and rock, White's new album, 'Anomaly' – his first in a decade – reflects his versatility and musical eclecticism.

Recently in conversation with SJF's Charles Waring, White not only talked at length about his new album but also reflected on key moments in a recording career that to date spans forty one years.

What's the story behind your new album, 'Anomaly'?

I was not even thinking of making a record. I did a tour with (bassist) Victor Bailey and his agent said "why don't you come out with your own band?" I said "well, I'm really not that interested." He said "if you do I'd like to get you some gigs but I could do better if you have a new CD out. You haven't had a CD out in ten years." I said "yeah but I'm not really interested in going to a label and giving my wares to them and then them saying this or that." Then I said "okay, here's what I'll do: I'll go and record a three track EP and you can take that." So that's what I did and I got really into it. Then the Return To Forever thing happened (2008's reunion) and when we went out and toured I saw that there was an audience again for that music. At the end of the Return To Forever shows every night I got on the mic and said "in an era of boy bands this is a man band and we're here to take back the music." I meant it and then it became a shtick because it went over so well. After that, I said to myself, okay, I'm going to do this – I'm going to go back to what it is that made me feel good musically. I paid for this new album myself so I didn't have to worry about going to a label and having somebody breathe down my neck and say "well, this tune doesn't work with that tune." I didn't do that and that's why I called it 'Anomaly': it's not the norm.

Do you feel that you're a kind of musical anomaly yourself then?

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Without a doubt, yes. If you hear the next project that I'm doing, you'd say are you kidding me? I'm doing a Neapolitan project now with a singer from Naples. It's great. It's a challenge for me to do something that's very interesting and get you (the public) to like it and say "that might not be my taste but wow, I really applaud the effort."

Singer Nicki Richards sings on your new album. You produced her 1990 album 'Naked To The World.' What was she like to work with?

I'm helping her to develop her producing chops and she's a real great talent.

Will you be touring with the 'Anomaly' album at all?

Yeah, I'm coming to Ronnie Scott's in October. It's hard out here to tour. I'm going to do a couple of weeks in the States and a couple of weeks in Europe and try to recreate an audience again.

Going back right to the beginning, how old were you when you first started showing an interest in music?

About fourteen.

What attracted you to playing the drums?

What attracted me first was the trumpet. But then I turned to the drums.

Were there any drummers that inspired you to pick up the sticks?

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I lived down the block from a jazz club in Jamaica, Queens, called Club Ruby and they had a big window that was actually behind the stage so you could look through the window and see people playing. And it just so happened that the drum kit was set up right there. So I could look through the window and see guys playing. I got totally enamoured with it. And the drums were like sparkly colours. I said "man, I want to do that!"

So how did you break into the jazz world then?

I played in little neighbourhood bands. I played my first professional gig at fifteen and that was because one of the saxophone player's father's was a policeman and they had a policeman's benefit. We played there and they passed the hat around, so we got paid and that was my first professional gig. I got really into the music and started really listening to records.

Who did you listen to?

As a kid, I was listening to R&B records by the Drifters, the Coasters, and Ray Charles. My dad and mum played records around the house – Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Lester Young. But then I got into music myself and started to want to play the music and then when I was 17 I heard a record by Miles Davis - I heard the drummer on the record and found out that he was only 17.

Tony Williams?

Yeah. Right away he was my guy. I was 17 and he was 17 when he made that record – I said "that's what I've got to be able to do."

You replaced Airtio Moreira as the drummer in Return To Forever – how did you get the job?

I had played with Chick (Corea) on Miles (Davis's) 'Bitches Brew' session and then I had gone

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out with (saxophonist) Joe Henderson. In the band was (trumpeter) Woody Shaw, Harold Maburn played piano and Reggie Johnson played bass. And Reggie Johnson had decided that he was going to go to LA to do studio work so we needed a bass player and I went down to (a nightclub called) Slug's one night and saw Horace Silver. I heard his electric bass player play. I said "man, this guy is ridiculous, he's great." So when the set was over I walked over to the bar and I introduced myself and gave him Joe Henderson's number. I said "Joe Henderson needs a bass player – give him a call." The bassist was Stanley (Clarke).

So Stanley and I had started to play with Joe Henderson and a couple of years later Chick played with Joe and Stanley and that's when they met. So they played together in (the first version of) Return To Forever and then they went to Japan. During that time I had played with Freddie Hubbard and then I went and played with this band called Azteca. I was in San Francisco and Chick called me from Japan and said "listen: we're coming to San Francisco to play a week at the Keystone Corner but Airtio and Flora (Purim) can't make it. So can you do it? We want to do it as a trio with Stanley and myself." I said "sure, man." We played a week's worth of music that was incredible. On the last day, my friends from Santana came – including (percussionist) Mingo Lewis - and I asked Chick if he could sit in and then Chick let two guitar players sit in – Barry Finnerty and Billy Connors. So when it was over, Chick said "listen man, I want to start an electric Return To Forever – would you be into it?" I said, "oh no, because I'm out here with this band called Azteca and I'm loyal to it." So Stanley and Chick went back to New York and they asked Steve Gadd to play with them.

It took a long time for you to actually get to join the band then?

It gets deeper (laughs). So in this interim when I'm out in San Francisco and they are back in New York, I had some downtime with Azteca. Then this manager named Herbie Herbert comes to me and he says "listen man, we're starting a new band. Two of the guys would really love you to just play with them and rehearse and see if you'd be into it." I said sure, so I went to rehearsals and they loved me and wanted me to be in this band – now, the guitar player was Neal Schon, who I had known, and Ross Valory was the bass player and they were going to get Greg Rolie, who'd I'd known also. The band was Journey. So they asked me to be in Journey but then Chick called me again and said "come on man, you've got to come back and play with us" so I said okay. So I went back and played with Return To Forever.

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