

> TIME MACHINE

JOHN JR ROBINSON: A CAREER RETROSPECTIVE

BY RICH MANGICARO



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I've known John Jr Robinson for a while now. Four years ago, I had the distinct honor of signing him to his Paiste endorsement agreement. Ironically, this was one of the last major achievements that I enjoyed while working with the Swiss cymbal company, because shortly after that, I moved on from my career there to pursue my playing and writing full-time. Now, after all these years and most ironically, I'm once again experiencing an honor when DW asked me to interview John for his article in Edge. John and I have become good friends over the years and while we're colleagues in this business, I never lose sight of who this man is...and I'm continually humbled.

Very few musicians have achieved what John has. Since he began his recording career back in the late 70's, John Robinson has played on more hit recordings than just about anyone in the history of popular music. Just naming a few of them – "Rock With You", "We Are The World", "All Night Long", "Back In The High Life", "Change The World" – these songs are household titles... without even naming the artists. And the list goes on...and on. We sat down recently at DW to have a conversation about his big decision to leave the drum company that he was with for 28 years, why he did this and basically try to review his massive career, all within an hour! Through the magic of the Internet, you can find that interview on DrumChannel.com, by the way. You may find some little gems that don't quite translate here in print. Don't worry – we kept it clean!

Rich Mangicaro: John, this is a major change for you and I know, one you thought very carefully about. When I found out, it seemed to make sense to me.

John Robinson: I think the natural evolution of me being with DW is coming full circle because when I was a kid, I was playing maple, American drums. It's great to be welcomed and made to feel like family, right out of the gate.

RM: And they're right around the corner from your house!

JR: It is...I can roll outta the rack and in twenty minutes, I'm here!

RM: Before we get into your history, I want to address this change. You had a long association with your previous drum family and I'm sure many would like to know how you came to this decision. I know you're a very loyal guy and take your relationships very seriously.

JR: You know, being with one company for almost 29 years and then leaving, is like

a divorce. You get used to certain ways things are done and of course, I made a lot of great records on Yamaha drums. But, as life progresses and changes, both companies and artists grow and change and it was time for me. With DW, the question was how was my personality and soul going to come through with these drums. I just did a gig this past Saturday with David Foster for the Andre Agassi Foundation in Vegas and I had that Christmas morning anticipation. I got to sound check an hour early and hardly had to do anything to them...they just sounded amazing almost right away. On that gig, I was playing with Lionel Richie, Macy Gray, Tim McGraw, Daughtry and Cherise, so there was this huge variety of styles and everybody said that I sounded better than ever.

RM: You know, I've known both John Good and Don Lombardi for a long time and have enjoyed watching their success. You've known them as well for some time, right?

JR: Yes...I've known John for a long time and as you know, when you walk into his office, it's filled with beautiful, raw shells and different exotic woods. I'm a wood guy so I just love that. We're the same age, have similar concepts and we both like football! Everything translates into these drums. It's been really nice to exchange ideas and then realize that we're on the same page.

RM: So you're originally from Iowa. What was it like growing up in a small town? Was there any kind of a music scene?

JR: I was young so the scene was my Dad would wail on me when I didn't practice piano! He was very musical as was my Mom and both my Grandfathers as well. I also have cousins that play but I was the one who was crazy enough to try to make a living out of it. Mom taught me what Swing was, the concept of it and pointed out examples on recordings. What got me though was a 45 I had of "When The Saints Go Marching In", from a film about Red Nichols featuring Danny Kaye. I was 7 and I played that over and over and wore it out. That led me to my first drum set when I was 8. It was a 1940's Ludwig kit, no Toms, just a snare, bass drum, hi-hat and old Zildjian cymbal. I wasn't even holding the sticks correctly but I played a swing beat, right away.

RM: Were you in school music programs?

JR: Eventually. When I was 10, I met a guitar player through my parents and we had a duo

that played and opened for older aged bands. I studied snare drum and also sang in church, which I think helped with my drumming. Then in Jr. High, there were two drummers ahead of me, a few years older and I finally got the chance to play. I made a lot of mistakes reading the chart but the band director, Dick Bauman thought my feel was much better than the other two guys and I finally got my reading together. Then during High School, I played in bands and went to Jazz band camps during the summers. That's when I met Ed Soph. At that time, I was trying to decide whether to pursue a career in music or basketball...I had an offer for a basketball scholarship but finally decided that I wanted to make a career of music. It was Ed who inspired me to choose the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

RM: So, who was else was at Berklee when you were there?

JR: Whew! In Gary Chaffee's class was Steve Smith, Kenwood Dennard and Vinnie Colaiuta! That class was intense.

RM: Would you say that Gary was your predominant influence?

JR: Actually, it was Alan Dawson. I was very fortunate to get 6 months in with Alan. I think between my Ed Soph education and Alan's, it's all melody-based. With Ed, he changed me from a toe bass drum player to a heel-down player. That took a couple of years to do.

RM: For melodic reading, was it with mallets or piano?

JR: It was mallets and at that time, I wasn't allowed to use piano as my minor instrument and I was distraught about that. I wanted to have piano under my belt, but at that time, mallets were what they viewed as the way for drummers to learn melodic reading. But I did end up studying with Dave Samuels and we became friends and did gigs together as well.

RM: So you were giggin' all the time during Berklee?

JR: Always. Although there weren't many gigs at that time, I began playing around town. Also, there was only one studio at Berklee at that time and I ended up getting asked to replace some drum parts on some music-minus-one stuff and I didn't even know what a click was! They pulled up the

photos by Rob Shanahan

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track and I played to it. It must have went well, because they asked me to come back every week at that time to work with them and I became the studio drummer. There were a couple of "famous" drummers at that time, that will go unnamed that I replaced, who couldn't play to the click.

RM: As you know, John – it's not something that every drummer can do well. Not only to play with the click, to lock with it, but also to play musically with it.

JR: Well that's it. I think then, I realized that I wanted to be a studio drummer. My plan was to get through Berklee and then move to New York. I was in my 3rd year and then left to just focus on working.

RM: Is this when Rufus found you?

JR: I was in a band called "Shelter", touring around the Northeast and Midwest and one time, in Cleveland, Rufus came with Chaka into the club we were playing. At the end of the set, they asked if they could sit in with me. By the end of the night, that entire band was up on stage with me and we did an entire set...and it was smokin'! Four weeks later, I was in Los Angeles and in that band.

RM: So you began touring with them?

JR: They were on an international tour and my first gig was in Hawaii! That's where I met Danny Seraphine! I had always idolized Danny, with the Midwest connect, the Chicago records...now we're golfing buddies!

RM: So did you record with them right away or was there touring work first?

JR: We toured for about a month...I finished out their '78 tour, before I went in the studio with them. I ended up doing quite a few records with them.

RM: Your drum part for "Ain't Nobody" is really great...I've heard you talk about that in some of your clinics.

JR: Many think it was a programmed part, but it was me playing that groove. It's a very robotic part, which is what we were going for. It was a big hit for them.

RM: And that was around the time period when you met Quincy Jones?

JR: I had met him before that, but he then came in to produce one of our records. Not long after that, I got the call to work with Quincy on Michael Jackson's "Off The Wall" record.

RM: Did you have any idea of what you were getting into, at that time? It seems like that record was Michael's transition between his Jacksons era and his solo superstardom.

JR: And Quincy is the great master of that. He really brought Michael

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to the enormous place. The timing of all this was amazing. All the players on that album were stellar including my old band mates from Rufus and Paulinho Da Costa on percussion. That record changed history.

RM: It seems that it changed your career... you've been working constantly since. Since space in this article doesn't permit to thoroughly cover your discography, although what article would, I love how you've organized your recording credits by year, on your website. I recommend our readers to check that out. It's quite incredible.

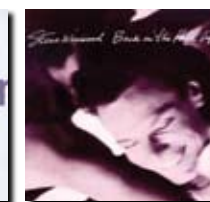
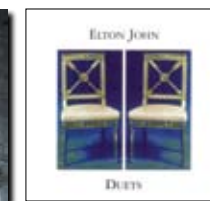
JR: Man, I'm trying to remember 'em all. I'm still trying to organize and catalog it all. I still haven't figured out Asia or Europe!

RM: One has to wonder whether you ever had a social life back then. Tell me about a typical day, when you were recording so much. You were doing 3 sessions in one day. Was this also when cartage services began to take affect?

JR: Exactly. I had Rufus' roadie helping me. I had heard storied then about Steve Gadd doing this type of schedule too. It was typically a 10am, 2pm and a 6pm. Sometimes, we'd even have an 11pm hit too. Those were the hay days of recording and LA was just flowering. That's why I loved Jeff (Porcaro) so much...he was very kind to me when I came to LA and we found ourselves sharing the load on many records. Now, our industry's changed so much that there are very few record dates anymore that feature a rhythm section, playing live, like back then. I still get called for that, especially for film soundtrack sessions, but it's the reason why I and many other guys have built studios in our homes.

RM: John, will all the great hit records that you've played on, do you have any favorites?

JR: Well, Steve Winwood's "Higher Love" and "Back In The



High Life" were both incredible and they allowed me to do what I wanted. It's very rare that we get to do that and producer Russ Titelman really gave me the freedom to express. That whole record was great.

RM: John, what would you say to young players out there, given the current state of our business, who are trying to get in and make something for themselves?

JR: I just wrote a curriculum for Berklee about this. I've always had some kind of home studio so I feel it's always important for drummers to control their own destiny. I say always collaborate and co-write with others. Log your ideas and learn electronics... not just electronic drums but learn a pro-tools rig, know your Mac and know how to mic your drums and learn what mics work best for what drum. I also wanted to say something about my new association with DW. My new drum set is extraordinary. Working with John and this company is so exciting and when you hear their drums and see what goes into it all, there's no question why they're the leader. **dw**

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY:

- 2009 Barbra Streisand: The Concerts
- 2004 Peter Cetera: You're the Inspiration: A Collection
- 2002 Quincy Jones: Ultimate Collection
- 2002 Celine Dion: Unison / Celine Dion / Colour Of My Love
- 2001 Bonnie Raitt: Nine Lives-Remastered
- 2000 Mariah Carey: Rainbow (Bonus Track)
- 2000 Babyface: Collection of His Greatest Hits
- 1999 Dave Koz: Dance
- 1999 Clint Black: D'Lectrified
- 1999 Chris Botti: Slowing Down the World
- 1998 David Foster: Touch of David Foster
- 1998 Randy Newman: Guilty: 30 Years of Randy Newman
- 1998 Luis Miguel: Todos Los Romances
- 1998 Joe Cocker: Greatest Hits [EMI]
- 1998 Steve Perry: When You're in Love (For the First Time)
- 1998 Bette Midler: Bathouse Betty
- 1997 Stanley Clarke: Bass-ic Collection
- 1997 Ladysmith Black Mambazo: Heavenly
- 1997 Joe Cocker: Across from Midnight
- 1997 Boz Scaggs: My Time The Anthology (1969-1997)
- 1997 Vonda Shepard: Vonda Shepard
- 1996 Karen Carpenter: Karen Carpenter
- 1996 Neil Diamond: In My Lifetime
- 1996 Disney: Music from the Park
- 1996 Rufus & Chaka Khan: Very Best of Rufus Ftg Chaka Khan
- 1995 Peter Frampton: Frampton Comes Alive II
- 1994 The Temptations: Emperors of the Soul
- 1993 Elton John: Duets
- 1992 Wilson Phillips: Shadows & Light
- 1992 Manhattan Transfer: Anthology: Down in Birdland
- 1992 Kenny G: Breathless
- 1992 Mike Oldfield: Tubular Bells II
- 1991 Rod Stewart: Vagabond Heart
- 1991 Jeff Lorber: Worth Waiting For
- 1991 Patti LaBelle: Burnin'
- 1991 Robbie Robertson: Storyville
- 1991 Tom Scott: Keep This Love Alive
- 1989 Aretha Franklin: Through the Storm
- 1988 Rubén Blades: Nothing But the Truth
- 1988 Glen Fry: Soul Searchin'
- 1987 Michael Jackson: Bad
- 1986 Steve Winwood: Back in the High Life
- 1986 Bob Seger: Like a Rock
- 1985 David Lee Roth: Crazy from the Heat
- 1984 Laura Branigan: Self Control
- 1984 Fee Waybill: Read My Lips
- 1984 Peabo Bryson: Straight from the Heart
- 1981 Herb Alpert: Magic Man
- 1979 Rufus: Numbers