

Playing with Beatle Paul

By John Bryant

Thursday, April 29, 1976. My phone rang, and it was a good thing I was home to pick up the receiver and hear an actual voice. I didn't have one of the newly developed phone machines by Radio Shack to take a message, not to mention a 21st century iPhone.

"Haayy Jahhhnn"

I recognized the drawl of my good pal Steve Howard, one of those slow talking, fast thinking Texans. We had previously met five years earlier in Denton at North Texas State University, now University of North Texas, where we were enrolled as students at the prestigious collegiate mecca of Jazz. I had arrived in 1970 as an eighteen-year old drummer from Virginia with hopes to study and play with great musicians and find professional opportunities.

Steve plays trumpet, and as musicians always do, we created personal and musical ties that bind by introducing one another to other musicians, both on campus and off. The importance of this ritual cannot be overstated – an introduction is usually an endorsement - *yes, I make music with this person, and so can you*. It's a job interview in disguise, and if all goes well, you end up playing together, hanging out, trusting each other, and creating a friendship that is based on the mutual intent to keep the cycle going.

After a few years at NTSU, we each headed in different professional directions to make the most of these connections we had developed. Steve moved to New Orleans, where he soon began playing and recording with some of the musical legends of the Big Easy: people like Doctor John, Patti Labelle, and Allen Toussaint. It was Toussaint who would provide Steve with that life changing kind of introduction all musicians yearn for.

I had abandoned my college education to tour with the Paul Winter Consort, but then I got a call from Ray Charles based on more NTSU connections – but that's another story.

After a couple of years with Ray, I returned to Dallas and formed a new band named Pyramyd, and Steve would drop in periodically to play with us. But on one occasion he was in town staying at a hotel for a few days in preparation for a tour he was about to embark upon. That's when I received that real-time phone call - a single request packed with all the ingredients necessary to excite a musician.

"I need a ride to a rehearsal. Would you want to pick me up and check it out?"

The year before, Paul McCartney had been drawn to New Orleans to record a new album and had asked Toussant about horn players, and Steve was also by his phone that fateful day. And if recording on the "Venus and Mars" album with McCartney wasn't enough, it got even better for Steve. McCartney had last played in America in 1966 with The Beatles, and he had finally decided it was time to come back to tour America for the first time after the breakup of the greatest band in the world in 1970.

Short of the Beatles getting back together, Wings Over America was the tour that all American Beatle fans had been waiting for. Since the "The Breakup", McCartney had been performing with his new band all over Europe, but just as with his first conquest of America with The Beatles, he was not going to attempt his "second coming" with Wings until they hit full speed.

The accompanying album, "Wings at the Speed of Sound" went to the top of the charts, it's arrival heralded by the trumpet of Steve Howard. "Silly Love Songs" was a huge hit, and nobody, including Paul, could imagine hearing it live without the sound of the horn section. The tour would begin at the Fort Worth Tarrant County Convention Center on May 3, 1976, with only a few days of rehearsals to prepare.

The musicians in Wings were all veteran rock stars in their own right. The drummer was Joe English, and though I only knew of him through the new Wings album, I immediately loved his playing and was excited to meet him. Drummers are like that. I would argue that we, more than any other instrumentalists, bond with each other and can't wait to share our goods. Guitarists are notoriously secretive and jealous, not to mention singers and their insecurities. But drummers are not like that, and we revel in celebrating our uniqueness with other drummers. I knew that Steve knew, and he would make the introduction.

I picked up my old friend at the hotel in Dallas where the band was staying and we made our way to Fort Worth. A few miles before arriving at Will Rogers Auditorium where the sound and lights would be fine-tuned, I happened to look over to the next lane and was shocked to see a burgundy Cadillac being driven by Paul McCartney with wife Linda by his side. My God! This was a real Beatle! My first time ever to see in person one of the four musicians who had inspired me to pick up the sticks and hammer out a living in music. And it was going to get better than this!

Our cars pull up to the back stage entrance at the same time. Steve gets out; Paul and Linda get out; I hang behind, not wanting to wake up from this dream, only wanting to observe it unfold. I follow at a distance as Steve, Linda, and Paul exchange greetings and proceed to the stage where the bright lights are being tested and positioned. I turn left and go to a dark corner, thrilled to simply become the fly on the wall and witness the feast being prepared.

This didn't look like the Beatles – Paul had a different bass (not his famous violin shaped Beatle Hofner). A woman was at the keyboards, the drums were not Ringo's

Ludwig drums, and there was a four-piece horn section. It didn't matter. At the helm would be the Voice and the Bass from the records that I had played along with as a teenager, at that time imagining myself as Ringo, before eventually defining who I would become as a musician.

As the musicians were warming up, I noticed the drums were unusually silent. I looked around for Joe English, but the drums were waiting for him, too. Then I noticed something very peculiar. Steve and Paul were at the front of the stage talking with some concern on their faces. Back and forth they went.

Then it happened - just a simple gesture, but one forever burned into my brain. Steve pointed in my direction and Paul looked at me. Then the unthinkable - Paul and Steve started walking towards me. I came out of the shadows as Steve started to introduce me to Paul.

"Paul, this is my friend John, and...."

Paul interrupted Steve's Texas drawl by greeting me with an extended hand and a bouncy, Liverpudlian accent.

"Hi John - our drummer couldn't make it today, and Steve tells me you played with Ray Charles. If you feel like bashin' some, we'd love to have you play with us!"

Stunned, I don't remember what I said, just that I headed for the drums up on the riser. As I sat behind them, the others in the band noticed, introducing themselves with cheery greetings all around. First, Denny Laine of the Moody Blues, then Jimmy McCullough, a great British guitarist. Next came Paul's wife, keyboardist Linda McCartney, with an especially warm hello.

This was all thrilling, albeit tempered with my fear that Joe English would walk through the door at any moment, wanting to know who in the Hell had taken his rightful place behind the kit. Nevertheless, when Paul assumed the position and grabbed his bass, I sat up straight and grabbed Joe's sticks.

Straight away Paul launched into a Chuck Berry song. Of course he would start with a rocker to break the ice and help a new musician feel comfortable. After that I can't remember specifics, except that we didn't do any Beatle songs. I was at least hoping he would call "Silly Love Songs", since that was the current hit for him. It had been playing non-stop on the radio, and I felt I knew it well enough to give it a decent go, but it didn't happen.

We played a few more standard rockers, pausing between songs for the techs to adjust the sound or lights. At some point Paul handed his bass to Denny Laine and picked up a guitar. I was reminded that not only was Paul a great guitar player, but he could have also commanded the drums if necessary.

I remember very specifically that at a certain moment in the middle of one song, I went from feeling like an intrusive outsider to experiencing a flush of confidence. "Yes", I said to myself as I thrashed these drums as though they were my own. "I belong here. I deserve this. I am doing exactly what life has expected of me all along."

But I quickly shocked myself back into reality with the thought that Joe English might stride onstage at any moment. I was breaking a Cardinal Rule among musicians - you do not touch another's instrument without their permission. It was periodically interrupting my euphoria - I couldn't get it out of my mind, so on the next break between songs I stepped away from the drums and sat on the edge of the drum riser, thinking I should leave well enough alone and scrape my winnings off the table.

But no! In a minute, Paul was looking at me like he was hurt that I had retreated.

"Come on!" he seemed to say with a gesture. "Get back on that kit and let's play some more!"

Cardinal rules be damned! Joe who? I jumped back on the drums and returned to my newly discovered destiny of playing with my idol. As we ran a few more songs, time stood still for me. Wasn't it just last night when I saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show and subsequently declared my purpose in life?

A few songs later Paul took off his bass and declared that we were done for the day. I climbed down from the drums and began to say my goodbyes to the musicians I had just met and express what a thrill it was for me. They also seemed to be excited for me and slightly mystified by what had just happened.

I don't remember saying anything to Paul, but Linda McCartney made it a point to come to me and say goodbye, served along with compliments for my playing and a hearty handshake. Maybe she understood better than anyone what I had just experienced. She, too, must have known well this feeling of, "How did I get here?"

I left the building, started my car, and pointed it towards Denton - I had a gig there that night with my band Pyramyd, but sadly Steve wouldn't be able to make it. He had bigger fish to fry. Oddly enough, it was back to where these fateful introductions were born. "Get back to where you once belonged", aptly states Paul's song, "Get Back", from his final performance with The Beatles on the Abbey Road rooftop.

As I made my way, I was still floating on a cloud thinking about what had just happened. I think I had been driving about 15 minutes when it *really* hit me.

I HAD JUST PLAYED WITH A BEATLE!

My hands started shaking. I felt light-headed. I was so overcome I had to pull over to the side of the freeway and stop the car to process it all. Looking at my watch for the first time I realized I had been playing with Paul for a couple of hours. I had no idea that much time had passed. Intime, the rush slowed down, and a peaceful calm came over me. I got on the road and headed back toward normalcy. It was time to get on with my real life of meeting the day-to-day challenges in my chosen career, but now armed with an experience that would always be there to bolster my resolve whenever I needed it.

In 2012, lightening struck me a second time with the other surviving Beatle, when my great friend, Gregg Bissonette (another NTSU connector) introduced me to Joe Walsh. I played an album release party at The Troubadour in Los Angeles with him, and Ringo sat in and played my drums while I played percussion next to him. But that, also, is another story.

The way introductions work is miracle of life – you rarely see them coming, and never know where they might lead. The same circle of musicians at NTSU who introduced me to Steve also led me to Ray Charles. Paul and the rest of The Beatles had always idolized Ray, and that credit, along with Steve’s endorsement, was enough for him to bring me into his hallowed circle, even if only for a few hours.

Along with owing a huge debt to Steve, there was another person I met that day who made it complete. Thaddeus Richard was a sax player from New Orleans on the tour. His father was Renald Richard, another musician and a good friend of Ray Charles. Renald and Ray had written one of Ray’s many hits, “I Got A Woman”. Thaddeus took the only picture I have of my special day with Paul. It was one day in a small world.

Thursday April 29, 1976.



