

# RHYTHM

she bangs the drums

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Zoro

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Cooper



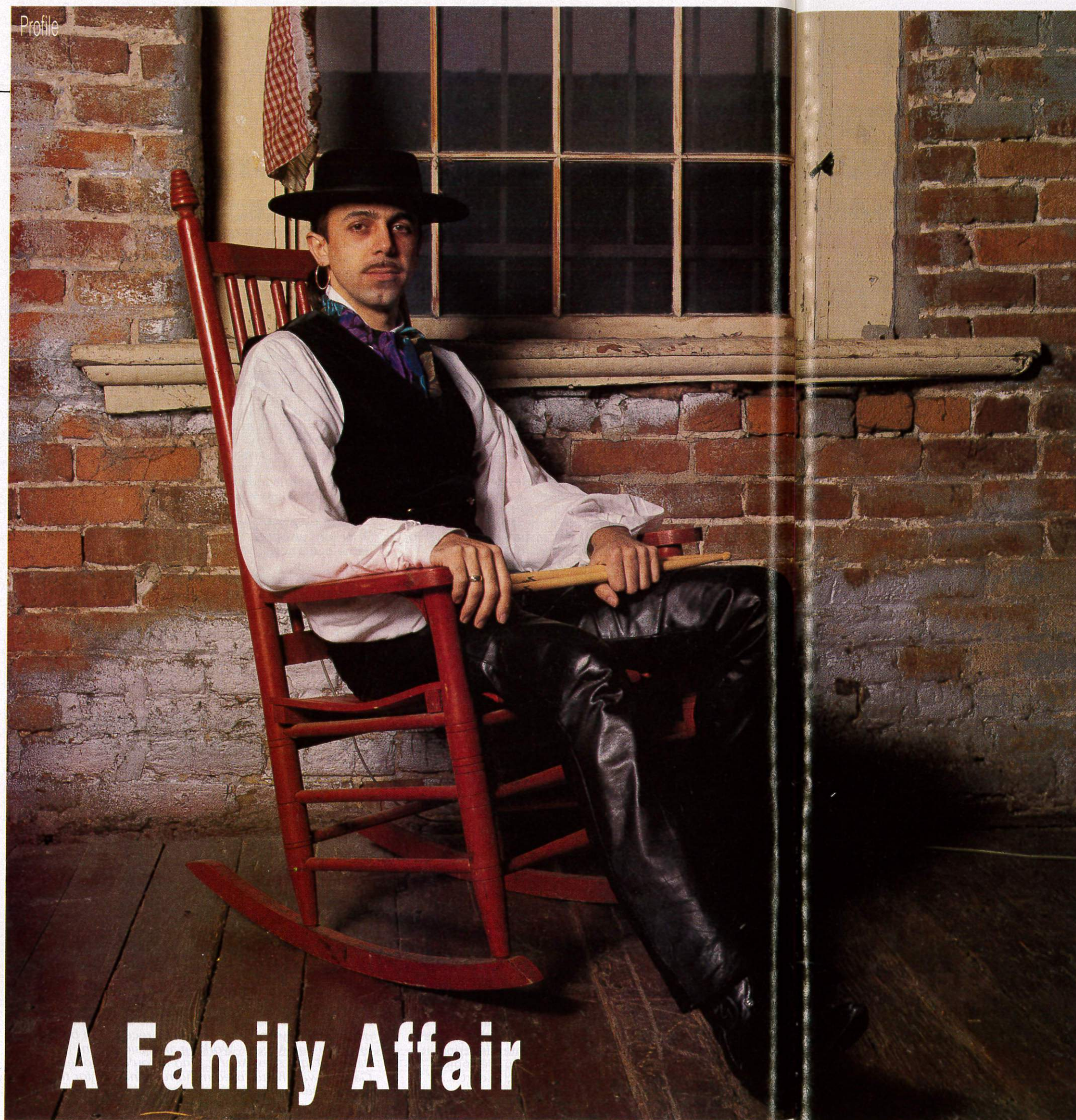
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# A Family Affair

**Zoro first made his mark with teen stars New Edition, also the launching pad for his next employer, Bobby Brown. Now he's to be found living out his childhood fantasy with long-time friend Lenny Kravitz. Simon Braund was glad to hear that the hat came before the nickname...**

**N**ews has reached us recently that, incredibly enough, there is a small tribe of Amazonian indians, discovered two months ago in the rain forest of Ecuador, who have not yet heard of Lenny Kravitz.

Already touted as 'The New Jimi Hendrix' and other such nonsense, his debut album, *Let Love Rule*, proves him to be a songwriter and musician of astonishing prowess. Self-penned (bar the contributions of his wife Lisa Bonet), self-produced and largely self-played, *Let Love Rule* flies refreshingly in the face of nineties techno overkill and stands as a rough-edged tribute to an earlier time when the song was everything. A tour-de-force of haunting neo-psychedelia with a peace and love ethos for a new generation, the less restrained among music journos have already dubbed it 'the album of the decade'. Quite predictable I suppose, but there's no denying its resolute individuality and stubborn refusal to conform to currently acceptable production values.

Obviously then, a record this personal requires a pretty special band to successfully transfer the music and its considerable atmosphere to a live performance. It would've been inconceivable for Lenny to have populated his touring band with anyone but musicians in whom he had the utmost trust. And on that score filling the drum seat was no problem at all...

**L**enny Kravitz' friendship with Zoro was initially responsible for the latter's big break as a drummer, first with teen idols New Edition and

subsequently with Bobby Brown. His current position with Lenny is the fulfilment of a mutual childhood fantasy, that of being in a successful band together and touring the world.

For Zoro the dream goes back even further, to round about the time when his goal of becoming the world's greatest chicken farmer came to a sorry end.

"Yeah, one of my dogs ended all that, it killed all my chickens, one of my own dogs! It left me with a new hobby to start, so soon after that drums came along. I started pretty late, I didn't actually start playing drums until my last year at high school, I guess I was about seventeen."

Rampant canine activity apart, switching from chicken farming to drums is still a pretty radical move wouldn't you say?

"Well I always wanted to play drums. I tried to get into school bands, fourth grade stuff, but everybody wanted to play snare drum so there were too many drummers and I never got in. I finally bought a drum kit when I was about sixteen for eighty dollars. I practised all over the summer and finally got into the school band in my final year, I was like in the stage band, the jazz band and the concert band."

Not the lofty heights that some of his contemporaries had reached by a similar age, but after starting from scratch a mere three months previously, Zoro's natural talent must be considered fairly monstrous.

"I think all I had was a good natural ability, I think it was just in me, I was always banging on things and making noise. The basic ability was there so once I picked up the sticks it wasn't hard to learn. I taught myself mostly, though I did have one good instructor called Kint Klinkinbeard..."

The Kint Klinkinbeard?

"Kint was the only guy in the area I could find who was hip. He knew all about jazz and fusion, he was a good player and he kind of took me under his wing. I used to buy lots of drum books and magazines and I learnt how to play from them."

Things moved on pretty swiftly from this point and soon Zoro was embroiled in the semi-pro melting pot of bar bands, weddings, bar mitzvahs and The Girl From Ipanema. As is usual, this proved to be invaluable experience and soon Zoro was ready for the big



## A woman in a black leather vest and chaps sits on a motorcycle on the left. In the center is a large Premier drum set with two bass drums featuring the 'PREMIER' logo. To the right, another person is partially visible on a motorcycle. The scene is set in front of a building with large windows at night.

# PREMIER PERCUSSION

Zoro

*"I was always good at talking to people and communicating, so when I learned to play drums and I realised it was a business all I did was apply the skills I already had to that. I thought: 'what's the worst that can happen to me here, someone can hang up on me or tell me to fuck off.' The best that could happen was they'd agree to*



► teach me or I'd learn some stuff from them."

Via this confident approach Zoro came into contact with Ralph Johnson of Earth, Wind and Fire. Johnson was responsible for widening his musical horizons and ultimately deciding that Berklee was the place to be.

"That was probably the best thing I ever did for myself educationally. I progressed so fast there, it had a really condensed atmosphere, a lot of musicians in a close atmosphere and a lot of exposure to different guys. It really propelled my learning."

After Berklee Zoro returned in triumph to Los Angeles, there to play with several Motown artists, sessions obtained through Motown supremo Berry Gordy's son Kennedy (perhaps better known as Rockwell). Another long-standing friend of Gordy was Lenny Kravitz, then an aspiring singer/guitarist trying to get a band together and playing at high school recitals.

"Kenny took me to this high school where Lenny was playing guitar as intermission music. That night we all went up to Berry Gordy's house and had this massive jam session. We all hit it off real well and me and Lenny decided to form a band together."

And that, barring the machinations of an unscrupulous manager and a fair dollop of naivety, might well have been it. Unfortunately things fell through, Berklee beckoned, Motown sessions came and went and eventually Zoro found himself back in LA doing a chore for Earth, Wind and Fire's Philip Bailey. Not surprisingly that upped his profile sufficiently to put him in the running for other major gigs.

"One of the first big gigs I got was through Lenny - that was the New Edition thing. They were an exact version of New Kids On The Block only black. They were the originals though, because New Kids On The Block were put together by the same people who put together New Edition."

Was there a lot of hype involved in that?

"Oh sure, there was a lot of hype but New Edition had a lot of talent as well; Bobby Brown came from New Edition so they did have legitimate talent. But there was a lot of hype because they were teenagers and there was a huge market for teenagers, the fan magazines and all that stuff. But yeah, Lenny recommended me for that. I was doing some club gigs around LA and one night I was on my way out the door when I heard the phone ring. I went back, answered the phone and it was Lenny saying: 'hey man, I got you this audition for the New Edition.' If I'd left a second earlier I would never have got the gig. I left and did my club gig, stayed at Lenny's that night and in the morning drove to the audition. Neither of us had a dime on us so we had to go with whatever gas I had in my car. We barely got there because after the audition we ran out of gas about a mile down the road."

But fate being what it is our hero won through and began a

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## Profile

four year stint with the band. Although known primarily for the rather suspect 'Candy Girl' in this country, New Edition were proverbially massive in the States and when things finally came to an end big name offers came flooding in. But in true Zoro style he decided to take a chance and throw in his lot with the departing Bobby Brown.

"When Bobby left to go solo the group weren't doing anything for about a year and a half and because we were such good friends he asked me to be in his band. I had a lot of chances to tour with other people, more prestigious names, but because we got along and I knew I'd have fun on his tour I took it. I had no idea that in a couple of years he'd be as big as he was.

"We started out, oddly enough, opening for the New Edition but by the end of the tour he was ten times bigger than them. We played all the huge places, he had a number one single and the number one video on MTV. I was in all the videos, and it was just a really great gig. Super-high exposure, a record everybody knew, a million TV shows, a million radio shows..."

But despite the exposure he never lost contact with Lenny or missed an opportunity to play with him, and by the time Lenny had found his feet as an artist in his own right Zoro found himself ready for a change.

"Lenny was always working on his stuff and he kept telling me about his music; how he was going to get this record happening and in-between tours we'd do a lot of gigs together. Finally he found the right sound and the right music, so after Bobby Brown, two days after the second tour (to promote Don't Be Cruel) ended, me and my wife flew to New York and moved in with Lenny."

Now friendship notwithstanding, it must have been difficult to walk away from something that big. Exactly why did he leave Bobby Brown when he was seemingly sitting on top of the world?

"Oh I could give you a stack of reasons this high..."

Okay, just give me a few.

"Well, I saw myself running into a pattern of just being known

as an R&B drummer - I saw that coming for a while. I had an interest in playing a lot of different styles of music. I'd built this name for myself as being an R&B drummer and I could see the day when people would think that was all I was, unless I did something else. Also, there was a lot of animosity building up within the gig itself. We'd been on

now we're on the road we know each other so well that pretty much nothing bothers us. We know about each other, what we can deal with, what we can't deal with - we just let people be themselves."

It seems strange in a way to talk about the family atmosphere of the touring band when the album was so much of a solo effort. I



Photography Virgin Records

the road for a long time and there were a lot of things happening that were unpleasant, a lot of egos and a lot of attitudes building up in the band. It was fun for a long time but I also got tired of playing the straight ahead drum machine sample stuff.

"When I heard Lenny's stuff it sounded fresh: real drums, real songs and real music. I knew it would be what we'd always talked about; having a band, making it and touring the world. It was our childhood fantasy and this time we could actually live it out. It also gave me a chance to involve my wife in things. She came with me on the Bobby Brown tour, she was like assistant tour manager. One of the things I told Lenny was that if I did the gig I wanted my wife involved so it would be a real family thing. Lenny's whole idea was to have a real family orientated thing, the whole vibe. We all lived together; when I moved to his house I lived with the whole band, him and his wife, me and my wife, all together in a big giant loft, like the hippies in the sixties. It wasn't like a bunch of hype, when we talk about Let Love Rule we mean it.

"With Lenny we were friends and we got to be a band and a family simultaneously, so that

think a lot of people, even now, see him as a fairly self-contained unit.

"Well, the only reason Lenny did the album on his own was because... well first of all I was massively on tour with Bobby so I couldn't do the gig when he was getting his stuff together. Lenny is a very capable musician, he plays drums, bass, guitar, keyboards a little bit and because he didn't know all the band members at the time he put the whole thing together. The idea of the perfect band - with the right atmosphere - came afterwards. It wasn't like: 'let me put together this solo project'. It was all he had to work with at the time, just him."

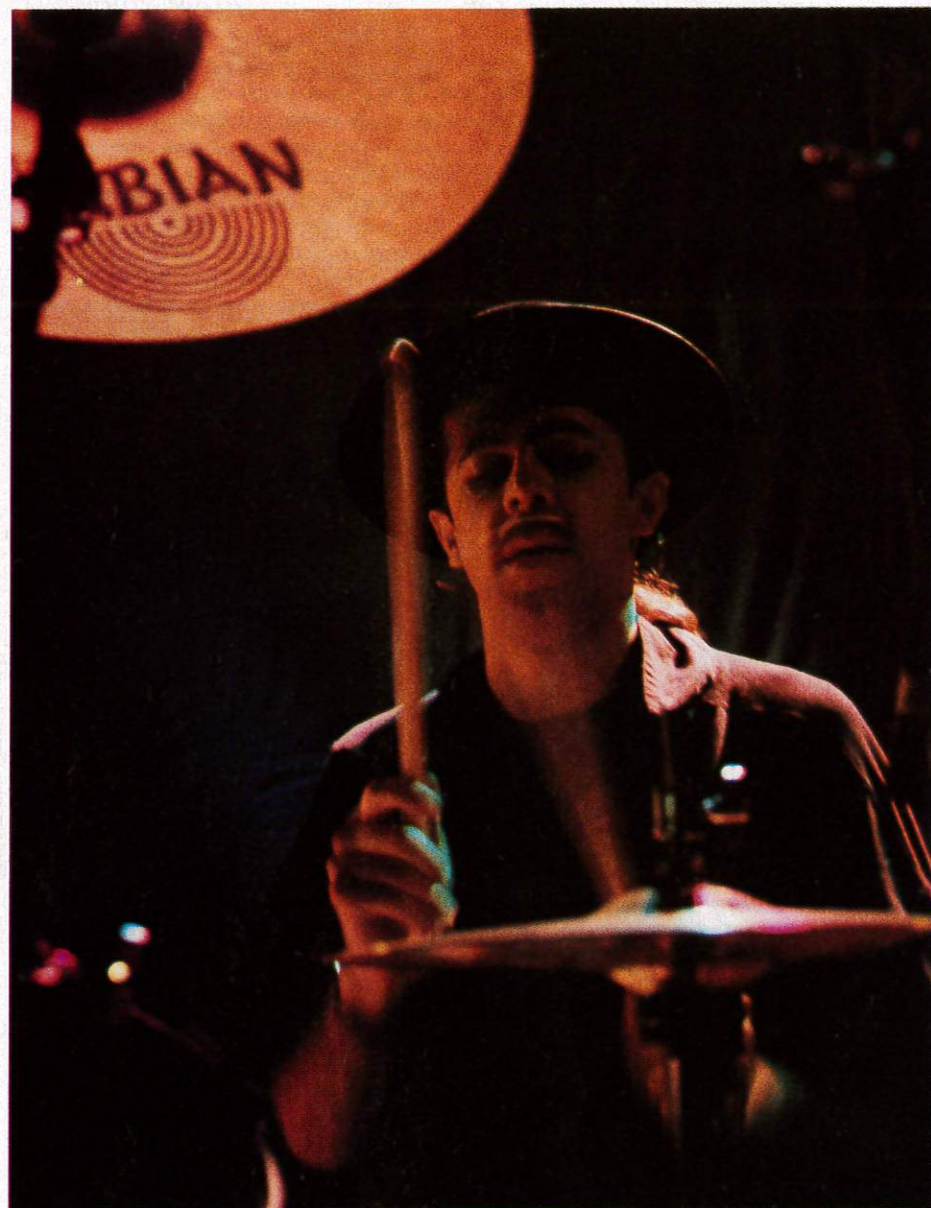
Despite the enforced nature of its creation, Let Love Rule is still an album with a very unique texture, which naturally begs the question as to how difficult it was to recreate that live.

"It was very difficult at first."

Even though it is inherently simple?

"Particularly because it's simple. The simplest things are always the hardest. We were all coming from different backgrounds musically and I think that is what gives us our edge. We weren't all coming from some garage rock band who'd all heard





Photography Simon Braund

► the same stuff. We'd all heard and played a lot of different things, so we all have our own flavour and our own edge. I play all the rock'n'roll stuff, but I still have my own twist of R&B to it: that extra backbeat, that extra black groove that's always in me no matter what I play."

Does Lenny play drums like you?

"No."

Was it a problem for you to get the feeling that he did on the album?

"At first, but what we had to do, what we all did, was to live with the record. We listened to it and learnt everything note for note. We learnt every lick, and I don't just mean basic licks, I mean every little nuance. We knew his music so well and we rehearsed it and rehearsed it until it just gelled. We got the feel of

the music, the style, the flavour and we played it that way for a long, long time, and then we started to play it our way. Playing with it, toying around with it, adding this, adding that, until it became our own interpretation. Lenny played it in the studio so it would sound like a record but live we play... live."

Listening to Lenny play on the album it sounds as if his drumming, although he doesn't have a lot of technique, really comes from the heart. Bit of a cliché I admit, but what can you say..?

"As long as I've known Lenny he's played drums – he started off in junior high. He isn't a guy who studied a lot of stuff. He studied some basics and he's not very technical but he's just a soulful motherfucker; he'll get on a set of drums and play exactly what's

right for the song. He played some of the stuff on the album without anything in his headphones except drums. I respect what he does on drums for his music. He's got good ideas, he'll come up and ask me to try this or try that and I'll listen to him because he knows what he's talking about. He plays looser and sloppier than I do. I play tighter and with more precision."

Is that a learning process for you in a way, to forget the precision you need to play with drum machines and samplers?

"Yeah, with me it was a case of learning to just get sloppy, which is something that comes naturally to drummers who don't practise a lot of technique. My thing has always been 'get clean', so I started listening to a lot of records with sloppy players and tried to put a little of that old New Orleans back porch slop on it. You know, the Mitch Mitchell thing with all the rolls and loose fills. I also stick in those easy Ringo type fills that are just classic. I admire all kinds of drummers, the simple players, the sloppy players and the guys with a blurr of chops, but I legitimately enjoy playing the way I do."

And since Zoro is in the enviable position of being exactly where he always dreamed of being and doing exactly what he always dreamed of doing, who can blame him.

"I've never gone this deeply into a band before – I've always just learnt my parts, rehearsed it and done it. This is a whole different thing. It has never been a case of just learning the tunes. This is: learn it and live it and breathe it... Become it."

Touché.

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# Only the best keeps you in the picture

Left to Right – Back: Roberto Pla, Gary Wallis, Luis Jardim, Harry Morgan  
Front: Steve Sidelnky, Robin Jones



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## Rosetti

Rosetti Ltd., 4 Tamdown Way, Springwood Ind. Est.  
Braintree, Essex CM7 7QL. Telephone 0376 550033

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