Zoro

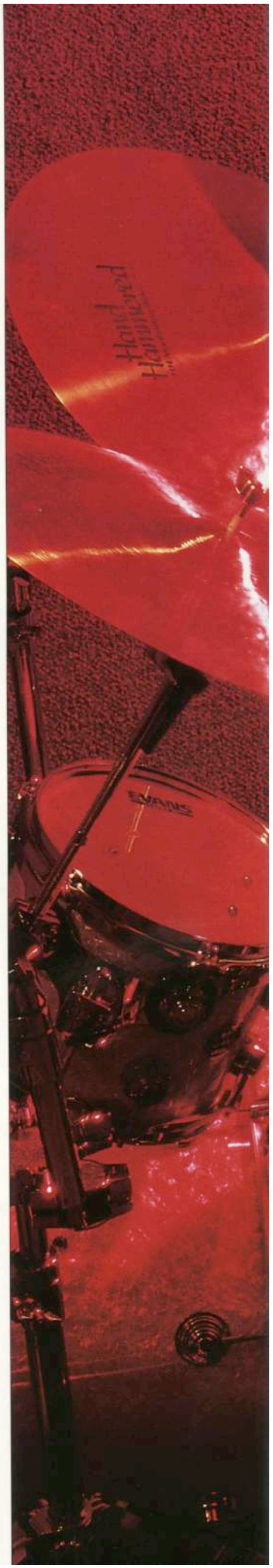
Following The Commandments

When Zoro decided he *had* to write a book on R&B, he didn't even know how to type, much less how to work on a computer. But the single-named, black-hatted drummer has never subscribed to the adage that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. His philosophy has always been that he could accomplish anything if he worked hard enough.

After all, it was this philosophy that led a South Central LA kid to world tours with contemporary R&B artists like New Edition, Bobby Brown, and Jody Watley. And it was this same philosophy that motivated him to create *The Commandments Of R&B Drumming: A Comprehensive Guide To Soul, Funk, And Hip-Hop*. Written with his friend Russ Miller and published by Warner Bros. Publications, the book is a wealth of historical and practical information, including an actual feel reference chart, written workouts, a pull-out poster of the R&B "family tree," and a CD.

"I learned so much from doing that CD," says Zoro. "It was the hardest session I've ever done, because I had to play each beat for only four bars. Some of those beats are pretty complicated in terms of single bass drum and hi-hat stuff. It's very hip-hop--

STORY BY ROBYN FLANS ♠ PHOTOS BY ALEX SOLCA

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oriented, like what I did with Bobby Brown and Jody Watley. When I recorded the CD, it would have to be *on* from beat 1. I didn't have any time to get into the groove or have a bunch of fills to set it up. That's hard to do in just four-bar increments."

Zoro credits his immense music library for the reference materials he needed to research his book. But beyond that, he also credits his collection for infusing him with an appreciation and natural feel for the R&B style. That combination, in turn, has served him in good stead over the years of his own playing career—and has helped to make him a credible authority on the subject of R&B drumming.

The first "big break" came for Zoro when his high-school buddy and partner in a disco business, Lenny Kravitz (known at the time as LA producer Romeo Blue) recommended him for a gig with the young singing group New Edition.

"I immediately bought the New Edition CDs so I would know as much as possible at the audition the next day," Zoro recalls. "I didn't know what songs they were going to play, but I knew all I could. Lenny actually went down with me and auditioned on guitar, but he didn't get the gig," Zoro recalls with a laugh. "He didn't have an amp, so he brought a *Rockman*—one of those little things you plug in—so they never really considered him. Our hope was that we would get the gig together, but in retrospect, I'm glad he didn't get it. It may have kept him from becoming what he is now. I had always wanted to be a sideman, but Lenny wanted to be a frontman, a rock 'n' roll star. If he had gotten that sideman gig, he would probably have kept on getting more gigs as a sideman from there, and he might not have gone on to become the artist he is.

"When I auditioned for New Edition," Zoro continues, "I had been playing in a club band that covered a bunch of R&B songs, one of which was New Edition's 'Cool It.' I happened to know the exact groove from the record. It was kind of a hard groove because it was a very drum-machine-oriented beat."

Zoro obviously nailed that groove, because he landed the gig. He remained with New Edition through their heyday from 1984 to 1987. "That band brings back such great memories," he says today with a smile. "I grew up loving The Jackson 5. I belonged to their fan club and I subscribed to *Right On* magazine. To me, New Edition was the Jackson 5 of the '80s. It was such a great gig. What they required, first and foremost, was somebody who could read them and understand what they were saying. Here were five kids from Boston, none of whom were musically trained, but all of whom were very musical and rhythmic. So they all had different ideas of what to play. In rehearsal, Bobby Brown would sing me a part. Then one of the other guys would say, 'I want you to do this on the hi-hat.' There were five guys to please, and I had to give everybody a little of what they wanted.

"They also wanted someone who could play the grooves authentically like the record—and at the same time catch all their dance moves. They did a lot of steps, and they loved to have the hi-hat accent their

moves and swoops without losing the groove. In playing with them, I acquired a lot of my own hi-hat techniques. I developed my left foot to open the hat almost anywhere I wanted to, while keeping the groove going, because the beat couldn't stop. They wanted someone who could play the grooves with very solid time, *and* make the music exciting, while catching all the choreography. I also had to be a politician. It was like working for five presidents! How do you make them *all* happy? You have to give each guy a *little* of what he wants, yet you can't do everything that *everybody* wants. So you have to disregard certain things here and there."

Pretty wise for a twenty-two-year-old who had only begun playing drums at seventeen. Zoro had taken it seriously, though, by studying at the Berklee School of Music. So when one of his mentors, Ralph Johnson, had been unable to work with Phillip Bailey, Zoro was ready to take the seat. He reveled in the opportunity to play with bass legends James Jamerson Jr. and Paul Jackson Jr.

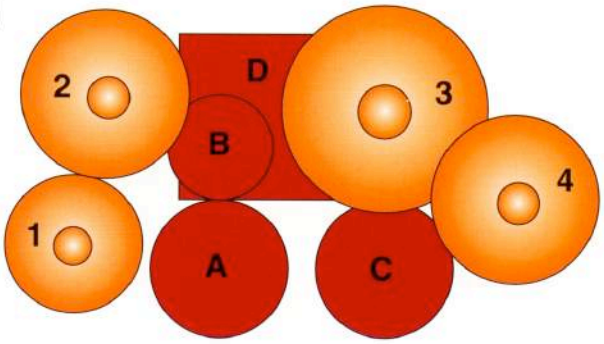
"I would sit there and study them," Zoro recalls. "Then I would ask, 'What do I need to do?' Paul would say, 'Play with the click track for ten minutes straight. Don't do a fill, don't change the beat...just sit on the groove.' So I went home and did my homework. Remaining inquisitive allowed me to learn things faster."

Zoro maintains that when you stop asking questions, you cease to grow, and that no matter what professional level you've attained, there is always something that can be learned. "There's a story at the end of my book about Steve Gadd that really describes what I'm talking about," he says. "I showed Steve a rough draft of my book about two years ago at a NAMM show, and

Z-Man's Center Of Groovity

Drumset: DW in ultra white marine pearl finish
A. 5x14 *Vintage* chrome over brass snare (or 6½x14)
B. 8x10 tom
C. 11x14 mounted floor tom
D. 16x22 bass drum

Cymbals: Sabian
1. 14" *Hand Hammered Regular* hi-hats
2. 18" *Hand Hammered* medium-thin crash
3. 22" *Manhattan* ride
4. 18" *Hand Hammered* medium-thin crash



Hardware: all DW, including their *Delta 5500TH* hi-hat stand and *Delta 5000AH Accelerator* bass drum pedal, Danmar *Zoro* bass drum beater (square felt), Grover Pro Percussion *Club* snares, SKB cases, Impact bags, HQ Percussion practice pads, LP percussion, L.T. Lug Lock *Gig Rug*

Sticks: Vic Firth *SD 4 Combo* model, Vic Firth *Rute, Jazz Brush, Heritage Brush,* and *Rock Rake* models

Heads: Evans *Power Center* on snare batter, *Genera 300* on snare side, *Genera G2* clears on tops of toms with *Resonants* on bottoms, *EQ4* on bass drum batter (with two *EQ* pillows and one DW pillow for muffling) with Evans *Retro Screen* on front

he blew me away. He started asking me all about the CDs I recommended. He was genuinely interested in learning about some of the earlier R&B guys, and in increasing his own library. It really pointed out to me what's missing in so many of the young drummers I encounter. So often I get a vibe of, 'I've done this, so I'm the cat.' Here Gadd was—he *is* the cat who has clearly done more than most cats—and he wanted to know more."

The information Zoro amassed on the Phillip Bailey gig helped pave the way for the job with New Edition, which eventually evolved into the drum spot in member Bobby Brown's solo act. Brown's first solo album didn't set any world records, but his second, *Don't Be Cruel*, exploded with songs like "My Prerogative," "Roni," and "Every Little Step."

"I totally loved that gig," Zoro says. "Bobby's show was what I would consider the last major act of the R&B era where the drummer and the band still mattered and were featured. Shortly after that came the rise of the MC Hammers and Janet Jacksons. Nothing against them, but the visual thing of the million dancers on stage made the drummer and the band appear insignificant.

"Bobby required a serious kick drum and a lot of hi-hat work. He liked the fact that I could cut loose at points where he wanted me to, but the *groove* would always be there. Being able to play with a click was important also. That's actually something I've done on every gig, including Lenny's."

Lenny Kravitz began to call Zoro in 1989, saying it was time to put together that band they had talked about during the days when they had had their disco business together.

"I always went on my gut instinct," Zoro says. "When I went with Bobby, I had no idea he would sell thirteen million records, I had no idea that Lenny would do what he did either. But I believed in those guys—as, I guess, they believed in me. They could have hired one of a million other drummers, and I could have gone with a million other groups. But I always went on my personal relationships, and on whether I believed in the artist musically.

"Lenny talked me into doing his band," Zoro says with a laugh. "He can sell *Eskimo Pies* to Eskimos. He played me

The Mark Of Zoro

Here are the albums and in-concert videos/laser discs that Zoro says best represent his drumming:

Artist	Album
Lenny Kravitz	Mama Said
Lenny Kravitz	Cold Turkey (import)
Vanessa Paradis	Live At The Olympia In Paris (import)
New Edition	Christmas All Over The World
Mandie Pinto	Count All Your Blessings

Artist	Video/Laser Disc
Bobby Brown	His Prerogative
various	The World's Greatest Artists Sing Lennon
Lenny Kravitz	Video Retrospective

and here are the albums he listens to most for inspiration:

Artist	Album	Drummer
various	Motown: Hitsville USA, The Singles 1959–1971	Benny Benjamin, "Pistol" Allen, Uriel Jones
Earth, Wind & Fire	All N' All	Freddie White,
	Spirit	Maurice White,
	I Am	Ralph Johnson
	Faces	
Ray Charles	Ingredients In A Recipe	Irv Cottler,
	For Soul	Wilbur Hogan, Bob Thompson
Chuck Mangione	Live At The Hollywood Bowl	James Bradley Jr.
Chuck Brown & The Soul Searchers	Any Other Way To Go?	Ricky Wellman
Rufus	Street Player	Richard "Moon" Calhoun
The Jeff Lorber Fusion	Water Sign	Dennis Bradford
	Wizard Island	

plus Frank Sinatra & Count Basie, The Crusaders, The Eleventh House featuring Larry Coryell, The Jacksons, James Brown, Nat King Cole, Mandrill, The Dixie Hummingbirds, Parliament-Funkadelic, Stevie Wonder, Barry White, and others.

Also check out Zoro's Web site: www.zorothedrummer.com

some demos of the *Let Love Rule* stuff at his house in Venice, California, and I thought, 'This is happening!' It was time for a change for me, and I really believed in what Lenny was doing.

"The funny thing is that he told me, 'Our first gig is going to be for two billion people.' I just laughed: 'Okay, Lenny.' But it was! Our first concert was called Our Common Future, and it was one of those 'save the planet' kind of concerts. All the acts did it via satellite, and we performed from Lincoln Center. It was televised in every country on the planet. Lenny managed to get us on the bill before the record was out, mainly because of the lyrics to a song called 'Does Anybody Out There Even Care.'"

With Kravitz, Zoro had an opportunity to infuse a little more rock into the R&B he had played so long. "Lenny wanted somebody who could play all the classic rock 'n' roll stuff," Zoro recalls. "But at the same time he needed someone who could play the classic R&B. He loved Led Zeppelin, but he loved Sly Stone, James Brown, and Earth, Wind & Fire. He also needed someone who could play with the click, because although he had a gang of vocals on his records, when we went out, only he sang. And finally, he needed someone who was able to stretch. We would take tunes out once the click section of the tune was over, and every night we would do this a different way. A song might go into a Miles Davis thing one night and a Beatles thing the next."

At the beginning of 1992, Kravitz asked some of his band to tour with French superstar Vanessa Paradis, whose album Kravitz had produced. It ended up working against Kravitz, though, when he got ready to start performing again and half his band was committed elsewhere. "It got a little weird," Zoro admits. "Lenny wanted us back, but we couldn't do it. Working with Vanessa was incredible. Of all the tours I did, hers was the most first-class in terms of accommodations, finances, and things like that. We would do one date and then have a week off and go on helicopter rides or rent boats to sight-see. Vanessa treated everybody like gold, and I was having the time of my life. As great as Lenny is, he's a very *particular* person, which goes with the artistic territory. Vanessa represented a change of environment—and after three or four years of *anything*, I've always liked a change. Plus, I loved being in France. We would stay in Paris for a month and play at the Olympia."

During that gig, Zoro's wife dropped a bomb: She wanted a divorce. The end of his marriage came at the same time as the end of the Vanessa Paradis gig. With his self-esteem shaken, Zoro's next two auditions were particularly tough. "First I auditioned for Johnny Gill, one of the later members of New Edition who wasn't in the group when I was in it," he recalls. "I really needed to get another gig to get on with my life so I wouldn't be in a dark, depressing zone. I had a lot of trouble getting into the Johnny Gill audition, but when I did, I played like my life depended on it. But I didn't get the gig. Needless to say, in any other circumstance I might have been depressed, but in this circumstance I was *devastated*. Because you never know *why* you don't get a gig, the insecurity starts setting in. It can be anything from your playing to your hair color.

"About a month later, I learned about Jody Watley's audition. I did what I always do before an audition: I prayed. I said, 'God, you know I want this gig, but *you* know what's best for me and I don't. If you can, please let me play at the top of my ability, and let the gift you've given to me shine to its fullest.' I was toward the end of the auditions, and they had already heard a bunch of other great players. But I felt like I was on fire. I really needed the gig to kick me back up again. Fifteen minutes later, Jody and her manager offered me the gig. I was overwhelmed with joy and relief. On the way home I was weeping for joy. I ended up working with Jody for the better part of a year, while the Johnny Gill gig turned out to be a two-week thing that ended up being canceled."

Zoro can now look back on that dark time in his life and know that there was a reason for all of it. The divorce, which was so devastating at the time, made it possible for him to meet his true soulmate, Renee, with whom he is now expecting his first child.

Since 1994, Zoro has been working with Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons—thanks, he says, to his comprehensive record collection. "I got called at ten in the morning by Robby Robinson, Frankie Valli's musical director. Out of the clear blue sky, he said, 'You were recommended by Eric Boseman. We're auditioning drummers today and it's the last day. Can you come down here at one?' Being a big fan of all kinds of music, I already had several Frankie Valli CDs. I loved 'My Eyes Adored You,' 'December '63—Oh What A Night,' 'Who Loves You Baby,' and 'Swearin' To God.' I was also a *Grease* freak—Frankie's cut of the title song was one of the first tunes I sat down and learned at the drums.

"I immediately went to my collection and tried to study the hits. It's not only important to have a large library, you have to *know* your library," he advises. "Every time I go on the road, I take a minimum of forty CDs and my CD player. I am *always* listening to music—in my car, on planes, in vans. I have thousands of CDs, and I *know* them, because I love music. And it really paid off to be a fan of Frankie's music. They called me three days after the audition and asked me to come down to play for Frankie. He dug it and hired me on the spot, and I've been working with him ever since.

"It was neat, too, to finally play a concert I could invite my mother to that she would really dig," Zoro says with a smile. "I totally surprised her. I didn't tell her I had the gig, I just flew her down to Las Vegas and told her I was playing with some local band. We were playing at Bally's and she was blown away.

"Frankie requires someone who can play very dynamically," Zoro continues. "There are times when I have to play ultra-quiet, because I'm right behind Frankie and sometimes the drums will bleed into his vocal mic'. In some of the smaller venues we play I have to come down about 70%, which takes a lot of control. He wants the intensity, but not the volume. At other times, he wants it slamming, so I play as hard as I did with Bobby Brown or Lenny Kravitz. It depends on the setting. I recently started using a big clear sound shield, so I can play like I need to anywhere, really.

"Everything we play is done with a click, because there are string and orchestra parts. Sometimes we'll do a date with a hundred-piece orchestra. In that setting, the violins are right behind Frankie, and if I play at a normal rock-concert volume, the concert will be a disaster. The sound techs won't be able to get a good mix, and the string players won't be able to hear. So I have to play

with the intensity, but totally light."

Zoro approaches this dynamic variety as a challenge. "I've worked on playing light," he says, "because my favorite drummers are those who play dynamically. That's what really draws listeners into the music. The drummers have somewhere to go. When they get to that chorus and they're on that ride, they've got you into a frenzy. Then they have to go back to the verse, and it's so light that you're listening intently. They're taking you through peaks and valleys, which is what music is about.

"I remember when Steve Gadd invited me to the very first concert he did with Paul Simon in Seattle, which is where I was living at the time. Richard Tee and Michael Brecker were in the band, and they were so dynamic that when they pulled the music down, it just grabbed me. Then when they got to the chorus of 'You Can Call Me Al,' it built into a frenzy and made a great impact. When I play with Frankie, I think about that."

Zoro also has to think about making stylistic adjustments. "Frankie changes his ideas often to where he'll want to revamp a song we've been doing for a long time. Lately we've been doing 'December '63' very much like hip-hop, and 'Swearin' To God' very new-jack-swingish. Then sometimes he may want to go back to the style of the record, so we have to be open and flexible. He also loves the old jazz standards, so sometimes at soundcheck, he'll want me to pull out the brushes and do 'Day By Day.' Sometimes he'll even put a tune like that in the show. Most of those songs were about the song and the singer, and I always try my best to serve the song, not myself.

"So often it seems that what people only respect are chops and the monsters who go off," Zoro continues. "There's not enough respect given to guys who just play great for the song. To me, the number-one thing about a drummer is his passion, his heart, and his unselfishness. Guys like Jeff Porcaro, James Gadson, Earl Young, Stix Hooper, Ricky Wellman, Harvey Mason, and Steve Gadd all play for the song. Others in that category are Stevie Wonder, Yogi Horton, Fred Below, Sonny Payne, Chris Columbo, Alphonse Mouzon, Freddie White, Jabo Starks, 'Mean' Willie Green, Ed Greene, Teki Fullwood, Jerome 'Bigfoot' Brailey, Dennis Bradford, and Motown drummers Pistol Allen, Benny Benjamin, and Uriel Jones."

Another reason Zoro is well appreciated on the gigs he does is that he is what he describes as "user friendly." "I show up on time, I do my homework and know the music *before* rehearsals begin, and I do my best not to make a nuisance of myself so they will *want* to work with me," he says. "I try to stack the odds in my favor. Coming from a poor family, I look at all my gigs as life opportunities that not everyone has. I don't want to take them for granted for one second. It may have been simple along the way for some guys, but with me it's never been easy. Getting the next gig has always been a challenge."

But perseverance has also been a key. "Almost anybody can be successful once," says Zoro. "But to keep coming back is *real* success. Frankie is the perfect example of that. That's why he's had sixty charted hits in his career, and why he still sells out concerts. When I was young, I read a *Weekly Reader* on Muhammad Ali and how he convinced himself about how good he was. Self-belief turns into self-prophesy and allows you to reach your potential. And when you reach your potential, that is when you're really honoring God and life itself."