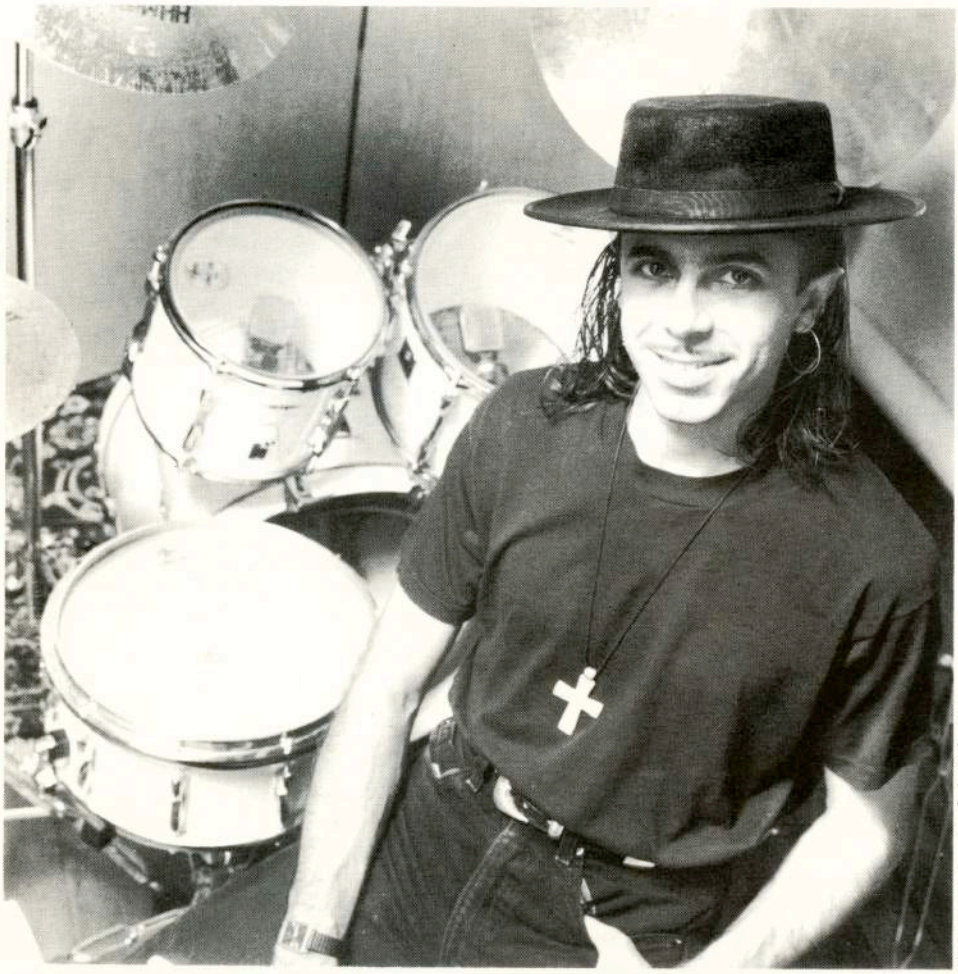


Photography *Michele Salmieri*

Zoro THE DRUMMER

Having just finished a sellout tour with Bobby Brown, Zoro takes time out of his ever busy schedule to talk with RHYTHM about drumming, astrology, the direction of music in the '90s, the world's atmosphere, and chicken farming. *Interview by Vanessa Vassar.*

ATTENTION TO DETAIL is a dying art. Let's face it – in a world of pre-programmed music, microwave dinners, mindless sitcoms, and polluted cities, many of us are guilty of "assembly line attitudes" . . . paying less attention . . . not really putting out the effort.

In light of this I suppose what most impressed me about Zoro was the intense precision with which he seems to lead his life. Not just with respect to drumming, but in everything – from musical direction to business to life goals to concern for our (depending on how pessimistic one is at the moment) pretty screwed up world.

This, of course, carries over to his latest project, the "Our Common Future" Concert put on to raise money and awareness in order to preserve air quality, the ozone layer, rain forests – basically a lot of deserving causes that will benefit everyone.

Now, I must admit that I had quite a bit of background information going into this interview since Zoro had put together and sent to me one of the most impressive press packets I've seen to date. In keeping with his image, everything – from the cover to the stationary (nice, personally written letter) to an international newsletter to press clippings – carried the black and silver "Zoro" logo. It was Zoro talking about drumming . . . Zoro's show biz tips . . . Zoro the Gemini . . . Zoro at NAMM . . . Zoro speaking out against drugs . . . This guy was obviously no slouch. Add to that several follow-up phone calls, a video of MTV/talk show band clips (with Bobby Brown), a relentless eagerness to talk about his work, and some excellent footwork (bass drum technique, that is) – and you've got yourself an interview. Who was it that said persistence and (once again) attention to detail don't pay?

So just who is this be-hatted man anyway? Well, when I caught up with him in the wee hours of the morning in New York, he had literally been putting an exhausting amount of time and energy into his latest effort with the Lenny Kravitz Band and the "Our Common Future Project," having just finished the Don't Be Cruel Tour with Bobby Brown. It's taken him ten years to get to where he is now, so let's start at the beginning . . .

"Basically I started playing drums when I lived up in Oregon in a small town. My family moved there from Los Angeles when I was around 11 or 12 and my whole lifestyle changed. I was a city kid living in the country. Before I was gonna be a drummer, I thought I was gonna be the world's greatest chicken farmer. I was totally into raising chickens and living the whole farm thing. But when my dogs destroyed my chicken farm that's when drumming started coming in.

"So I moved back down to L.A. after I graduated from high school and started playing the R&B scene, trying to get my name out there. I then realized that I needed some more serious musical training in an environment that I was not going to get in L.A., and I got that at Berklee School of Music.

From there, it was back to L.A. and the first meeting with Lenny Kravitz.

"Lenny is like my best childhood friend. When I moved to L.A., we started playing music together, and he became one of the reasons I got where I am now. It was one of those destiny things with New Edition because when I got the gig I was just about ready to leave the house to do a local club gig and Lenny called me and said 'Hey, there's a chance for you to audition for New Edition.' So the next day we go to the audition without having a chance to listen to any of their music. We didn't have any gas money so we just had to chance it. Turns out after we left the audition, I ran out of gas about a mile down the road – so if it had been a mile further, I wouldn't have made the audition. It was just one of those things that was supposed to happen. They called me the next day for another audition. Finally, I got the gig."

It was at this point that the image of

"Zoro" came into being.

"It was something that was very unplanned. When I first started auditioning, I was always wearing this bolero hat and this nickname 'Zoro' started to come about, just sort of as a joke or whatever. So during the first days of rehearsals with New Edition, a couple of the guys from the band said, 'Hey Zoro, why don't you try doing something like this?' They just kind of said that as a nickname, and I never told them any different because I was just glad I got the gig so you can call me what you want.

"As a result, with New Edition, the nickname really came into popularity – they would introduce me on stage by the name of Zoro and I never really thought about it. Then I started realizing that after the show, everyone remembered my name but they didn't remember the names of the other guys in the band. So I thought, 'Well, that's kind of weird, that's kind of different. Maybe this thing's really a good idea.'

"As it started to happen, I thought about it in the business sense, and always promoted that. Of course, I couldn't even feel confident with the name Zoro if I didn't feel that at least I could play. Being a serious musician is always first. You know, I could have been 'Bozo the Drummer' and it would have worked, just because it's different and it's something that you remember. If they can't remember your name, they're not gonna call you."

And call him they did, landing his next big gig with Bobby Brown and moving on to a #1 hit ('It's My Perogative') on the MTV charts, Pop charts, and Pop Album charts, as well as an extensive tour. Of course, it wasn't exactly that simple. Having had his own share of difficult times has brought Zoro to where he is now – being known as a hard hitter with an incredible groove.

"I play all drums real hard because when I was younger, I got fired from a couple of gigs for not being a strong enough player and it kind of pissed me off. I told myself I'm never gonna get fired again for not being strong enough.

"So I went through this whole physical thing about learning how to play real strong but not thrashing and banging – just strong attack and being real serious when you lean into a drum. At the same time I would try to work on playing real quiet which can be hardest thing in the world to do with the same flexibility that you can at a normal volume and keep it real hard through the whole thing – make all the attacks at the same hard volume and everything just as clean.

"But being fired from a few gigs is just part of the negative experiences that I've had. (laughs) I've gone through having tendonitis for almost a year back when I was at Berklee College of Music practicing my life away. Part of the problem was that I wasn't doing any stretching so I created this tendonitis from overplaying. I went to the doctor and learned that I couldn't play for a long time, so during that time I really learned what to do physically with stretching exercises. Now it's just a whole part of my playing ritual. But, the important thing is that I've learned how to turn these negative experiences around to work for me."

Achieving his sound, whatever the situation might be, has definitely been hard work. Hard hitting was only the beginning; creating a right sound on a blockbuster tour like the one with Bobby Brown really called for some serious thought and talent. But even the most planned out situations can have their mishaps . . .

"At first we were triggering all the drum samples and stuff and then at some point along the tour something happened and we weren't able to use the equipment for a minute – it was like a technical problem – so for a few gigs we went with just straight acoustic drums and everybody liked it because you get a tighter sound. With triggers you get the sound off the record and everything, but from night to night, you know, certain things wouldn't work well. I mean, in general it worked cool, but there's a lot of little tasty things that don't come out with the triggering.

"I prefer 'real' music in a sense that . . . OK, when I was growing up listening to drummers, what got me into drums was the different styles of music that I listened to. Everybody had their own sound, their own style, their own groove that made them special. It was real, it was coming from their heart, from their soul. Their personality was just projected on drums. Now the guys are growing up and looking into commercial music, pop music, and they're listening to a lot of stuff that's just drum machines so it's not really coming from a person. You know, once it's programmed, it's just there. There are still many great drummers, but a lot of pop music is just machines so you're not really hearing a particular guy's style. You're hearing just a straight groove programmed to work for that tune.

"We're entering an era where literally anybody can be a star. If it continues to go the way it does, which I don't think it will, we're at the point where anybody can buy a drum machine and a little four-track recorder and a little keyboard and potentially come up with a tune and make a hit record.

"Which is kind of a good thing, more people are musically interested. But what happens is you get a lot of people who aren't really serious musicians who are like going for it, who are like, 'Well, I can make it,' or whatever. Then you get a lot of 'jive' music. And now all the young guys are learning how to program drum machines more than they're learning how to play. I think a drum machine is a really great tool for a drummer, and you can do some amazing things – I've ▶

Photography *Chris Mackie*

learned a lot of stuff in my playing with it. But, at the same time, I still want to be a drummer."

Zoro's own beginnings were a bit different from this "just get a drum machine and program it attitude." He recounts, "I didn't start playing drums until my last year of high school – I was a real late starter – and the teacher made me play bass drum. I worked a lot on my snare rudiments 'cause I really wanted to play snare, as all kids do; nobody wanted to play bass drum. But anyway, I thought he really hated me because I thought that he stuck me with the bass drum like 'OK, you're gonna play the bass drum and all these other guys get to play the snare.'

"But it turns out that he thought I had better time than anybody and he explained to me that the bass drum is a very important instrument and without the bass drum most of the rest of these people can't keep the groove. So he made me feel kind of important by playing the bass drum, even though it was dorky looking. I decided to play it with the attitude, 'OK, cool, I'm gonna keep the groove.' So with drumming, the bass drum has always been my favorite.

"But, you know, I don't play double bass, because I think there's a lot that can be done with single bass. Double bass just ends up being too busy. There's a lot of cats that utilize their double bass incredibly, but I think there's a lot of things you can do groove-wise with the single bass, plus I love playing the hi-hat so much, open and closing things, I can't do that with the double basses.

"With the snare drum, I've worked a lot on hand coordination and technique too – in most of the music I play it's just a real groove thing, laying the pocket two and four or whatever the groove happens to be."

Of course, mastering the basic acoustic drums takes quite a bit in and of itself. In any case, education is one thing that Zoro is quite adamant about, especially when it comes to learning from the masters.

"I'd basically recommend any kind of education you can get. I'd like to give lessons too because every time I give lessons, it kind of teaches me to go back and improve my own basic skills. The good drummers are the guys who learn the basics and refine and improve them to get them tighter. But many young guys don't want to do anything basic when they first start – they just want to play some serious chops or whatever. Then they find out five years later that they gotta go back and clean them up at a slow speed.

"Probably my favorite all-time group is Earth, Wind and Fire. Without a doubt they were one of the strongest groups that I think ever hit on record, also backing it up on stage. EW&F had an incredible way of laying a groove because they had percussion stuff

overdubbed and you couldn't tell what was what – they were masters of having a million parts on record and never sounding busy.

"I enjoy all of Chick Corea's era – you know the jazz thing, the fusion thing, and all the progressive work that he's done. Then of course, Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, Steely Dan, and some of Gino Vanelli's old stuff was just incredible. There's still a lot of cats I'd like to take lessons from like Dennis Chambers, Peter Erskine, Stewart Copeland, and Tony Williams. These are drummers who play from their soul, who've got a good groove sense and a good technical sense and independence coordination – stylists who play tasty things. There are guys who can play

outrageous jazz and guys who can play outrageous funk and guys who are masters at Latin. I'd also like to work with some drummers who play more ethnic stuff, African, Indian, stuff like that. There's so much more to learn. It's just endless."

A few cups of coffee later in our conversation, Zoro concedes that the music isn't the only aspect that's "endless" when you're involved in the music industry. His voice takes on a new edge as the conversation turns to politics, money, managers, and the like . . .

"I originally started out with a love and joy for music; then I learned as I was getting into it that it was a business so I treated it as such. There was always something political going on that was real disturbing to the whole groove of the music.

"Managers . . . money . . . egos getting in the way. The most important thing to learn is how to play good music and really make it mean something and to let the ego drop. 'Cause as soon as you let the ego drop, then you can let the real you come out instead of the masquerade party. Everybody acts as though they're at some masquerade ball and nobody's letting themselves out, you know it's just a certain vibe.

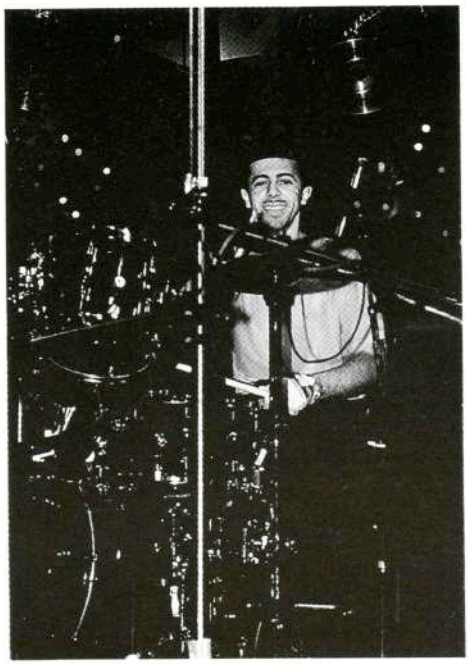
"You know there's so many things that just go down in the business aspect of being a musician, although I've learned to do business very well and when I do business, I mean business."

Sound a bit cynical?

"Well, you have to be pretty hardcore about it because the musician is always the person in a musical situation who's taken advantage of. I've mostly done all my own managing and stuff because there's a lack of people who're willing to manage an individual musician. If you're just an individual musician trying to work your way up and you haven't actually made it yet, that's not a lot of inspiration for managers. I learned that being a good player is just *not* enough.

"You have to get a plan. You can't just go into this thing blindly. If you're very serious about music and making it, you gotta have some plan of how you're gonna get there – how you're gonna get people to listen to you and how you're gonna improve your skills, how you're gonna network your contacts – you know, the whole thing.

"I look at success in being a musician like a point system. None of these points guarantees success but they better your chances of attaining it. A lot of people say, 'Well, you were lucky to get that gig.' But it seems more like the harder you work, the 'luckier' you get. I believe in God as the one who's made all my goals and dreams come true and made all things possible. Plus, you gotta have faith in



yourself. It's a point system. The more things you do in certain areas, the more points you get and the better your chances."

I couldn't help but be curious about this point system thing – I asked Zoro to elaborate.

"Personality is an important thing, and attitude – lots of guys have lost gigs because of an attitude. You gotta have a personality that people like and an attitude that people want to work with. You have to have confidence, faith, and patience which are like three of the hardest things. Especially the patience part when you're like really itching to do it and you're not there yet.

"Also, you gotta be very organized and professional because once you start getting real busy, your time is a major factor. The more of those things you have together, as well as the talent, education, image, whatever – the better chance you got of making it."

Lots to say for such a young guy. How about this topic of age?

"People have preconceived thoughts of how good you may be at a certain age. I thought about it more when I was younger because I hadn't really been playing that long when I scored some pretty nice gigs, and I didn't want to tell people that I'd only been playing for three years or two years or whatever because it's like they'd kind of trip out on that and think, well, maybe I wasn't experienced enough.

"Now I don't really care about it – I play like I play and I have a lot of experience and I have a lot yet to experience but I don't think about it as much. When you're young and you haven't played a long time, you really don't want to advertise the fact before they hear you.

"It's not just age that's difficult though. I've noticed that many things throughout history have been blamed on the drummer groove-wise. Now, I believe that the drummer is the one who holds the fort down, the one who locks the groove, but I also believe you can only be as good as your weakest member. I mean if a drummer's laying down a serious pocket and the bass player is out in La-La Land, there's nothing you can do to make that bass player groove.

"You know Buddy Rich had a great concept. He used to make his band rehearse completely without him. It's very difficult, because if you can rehearse a big band number without a drummer it just shows how good you are. So if everyone can keep good time without the drummer, when you've got a good drummer, you'll have an amazing groove and you'll have an amazing band.

"At the same time it's good to be open to new things. Well if something hasn't been done a certain way, so what? Well, OK, so it hasn't been played this way. So what? Let me try it. It's better to leave a trail than to follow one.

"When I'm really playing hard and it's real, I feel something take over spiritually in the groove sense, sort of like beyond me. But that's not really special since anyone who loves music and really feels it will feel the same thing. Hopefully, the whole band can experience it together."

At this point I couldn't help but wonder if this spirituality in drumming would be the end all for Zoro . . .

"You know when I first started I thought that drumming was the only thing I would ever do. But now I know that there's other things that I want to experience and enjoy – like life itself.

"There's a lot of other things I'd like to do artistically. Maybe go into production, get into non-drumming type things. Anything that's creative or in art; movies, comedies, photography, books. There's a certain parallel between all the arts; drumming can be exactly as photography and acting can be exactly as drumming it's just that it's different art forms.

"And eventually I'd like to get back to the lifestyle that I enjoyed as a kid in Oregon – just raising chickens and getting a little closer to nature and God, which is why I was so excited about this Our Common Future Concert. It's important because it's a chance for me to do something big with my music that's important to other people rather than just myself. Whatever I can do makes me feel like 'Wow, I'm not just a drummer. I'm doing something for the world in a small way.' It's an awareness raising time for the whole planet; the ozone layer, the rain forests in the Amazon being destroyed, the chemicals, the toxins, the water poisoning, air pollution, trash – the whole thing. Nothing else is as important as our planet and we're destroying it.

"We need to know what to do to help now, because if we don't do something, all the world's greatest drummers aren't going to matter, neither is anything if there's not going to be a place."

It's now three cups of coffee later and I guess you could say we're both a bit exhausted. I ask if there's anything else he'd like to add. He pauses for a moment . . .

"I'd like to say something about music in the '90s . . . We're reaching some kind of turning point I believe that each decade makes some changes; the '80s' music was definitely not like the music of the '70s, nor was the '60s music like the '70s. The '80s were definitely the drum machine, straight vamp songs era, there weren't a lot of great, great songs.

"But I think the '90s are turning around. Different music is going to come out and I think music it's going to revert back to more drummers playing drums. I already feel and see in the industry that people want real drums. You know, a ballad just doesn't sound good all the time with a drum machine, there's no character, no personality, no depth.

"What happens now is you get artists that get a record deal and the guys in the band aren't very experienced, so then they get a hit record over night 'cause they're thrown on somebody's tour and they've never been out there. So the quality of the concert is not very good. All of a sudden, where's the show? Where's the musicianship? Where's the dynamics? Where's any of the stuff you're yearning for? It's not there.

"And also because of the big move that's happened with videos in the last decade. Videos look great – you've got all these different scenes with all these different cuts and it looks larger than life. Then you go see that act in concert and all you're seeing is a concert. People are used to looking at this video and they become bored. So maybe the concert's not nearly as exciting as the video or musically they're not coming across because of the lack of experience.

"What I like with Lenny's band is that when we record, we're all in the studio recording at once, feeling it all at once. Because you know now people record and don't even know half the guys that are on the record. It becomes real sterile. So it's definitely got to change in the '90s. I'm sure all the electronic stuff will still be there, but I think there's a need for a little more soul from people – people are gonna demand it. Advances are great, but everything's gotten so technical that some people are beginning to wonder where the reality is in anything.

"I guess my goal is to express myself musically without any restrictions financially, without any restrictions technically – just self-expression at the highest level."

So just who *is* the real Zoro? He described himself to me as "just a cat who loves music and who loves to laugh." Well, after the interview, a two page thank-you letter, and three follow-up phone calls –I wouldn't describe him as a typical Gemini although he *does* confess to having a split personality. After associating with Zoro over a period of time, I've discovered no conflict of direction in his work or in his life. No, I'd be more inclined to simply describe him as an incredible drummer who's mind and playing might very well be much sharper than the sword his namesake once carried. ®