

Harvey Mason Interview

September 25, 2005

Interviewed by: Mary Bentley

According to the New England Conservatory, Harvey Mason is the most recorded drummer in modern music. That shouldn't surprise anyone who's ever heard the seven times Grammy-nominated Mr. Mason play. Whether with the super group Fourplay, playing in a traditional trio or with other musicians from musical genres across the board, Harvey Mason is always on point, displaying his talents live, on CD, or on a television or movie score.

SmoothViews (SV): You play both drums and percussion, but you're better known for your drumming skills than for your percussion. Do you get a chance to play much percussion these days?

Harvey Mason (HM): I was always a drummer, but my first jobs in the L.A. studios were as percussionist. I honed my percussion skills during my years at New England Conservatory, where I studied with Vic Firth, the famed timpanist with the Boston Symphony. But, to answer your question, I still get to play some percussion occasionally. A few weeks ago, I did a date for Mary J. Blige playing timpani. And I've been playing timpani with an orchestra that performs in a church on Easter Sunday. The church, Faithful Central, has 20,000 members and holds its' services at the Los Angeles Forum, former home of the Lakers. I still get a chance to dabble a little bit. For the past six months, I've been practicing vibes at home in hopes of incorporating them in a live show. I presently play percussion only on "Alias," a weekly TV series. I'm also playing drums and percussion on the new "Dream Girls" movie. There's so much going on.

SV: Do you have a preference for one or the other?

HM: Of course, drums. Percussion is fun, but drums are my first love, what I've always done. Percussion is a novelty and it keeps it very interesting and I love doing it.

SV: You attended both Berklee and the New England Conservatory of Music?

HM: I went to *Berklee* for a year. I got my degree in education from New England Conservatory. I was a double major – education and performance.

SV: And then you went to law school?

HM: I went back and studied law, but I never finished. During my 40s, I went through the change of life, thinking that the world was going to crumble... I mean music. I always felt like it was a temporary thing... that it could crash and burn at any moment. Maybe that's why I played with such urgency. I also went thru a divorce at the same time.

SV: So you kind of wanted something to fall back on?

HM: Wanted something to fall back on... didn't trust myself... didn't know what was happening. [I] went through a change of life at that point and went to law school. It was a great experience.

SV: *And you also attended school for film scoring?*

HM: I went to UCLA and took up a course in film scoring. I've scored a few films. It's been fun and continues to be. I did a couple here and there. Last year, I scored an episode of "The District." I try to keep my hands in there a little bit. Variety for me is a lot of fun and it keeps things interesting. It seems like it keeps things going on.

SV: *It seems like a constant process of enriching yourself.*

HM: I keep trying to expose myself to new and exciting things. Just keeps it fresh and interesting.

SV: *Do you think that all of the education that you continually go through has anything to do with the level of success you've achieved?*

HM: I'm not going to say that it really does, but it should...maybe. It's hard to say. It should add something to the mix, but when it really comes down to it, a lot of it is musicality and where you stand and what you're doing. I don't care how much education you have, if you don't have it in pocket and by that I mean if you don't have it, a product, you're not going to be successful. Education certainly helps. I think there are a lot of factors involved. Education must be one of the factors.

You've been a professional musician since [you were a teenager].

HM: Fourteen.

SV: *Fourteen! Wow! What advice would you give today's aspiring musicians, especially given the current climate of the music industry?*

HM: To practice hard and to learn as much as you can about your craft and try to diversify. Just be ready to shift into other areas of music. We really have to be versatile. Versatility is the key to longevity. Be aware of all kinds of music, what makes it tick. Just keep your eyes and your ears open all the time, to move into fresh, new and exciting directions. That's very key to me.

SV: *You influence many aspiring drummers today. Who were your early influences?*

HM: I listened to everybody, to tell you the truth. I listened to so many drummers. I listened to a lot of music, actually. I guess my major influence now would be Quincy Jones. He's a mentor. He's great the way he just comes through from year-to-year to year-to-year. The things he's done are just so diverse. He keeps his hand on the pulse. He's like The Godfather. He's involved in film, he's involved in music, [and] he's involved in producing shows, producing records, producing movies. He stays in touch with

everybody and everybody loves him. He's the greatest. He's got to be the biggest influence at this point.

SV: I read his autobiography a few years ago. It was really an interesting read. You're right. He knows everybody. He's worked with everybody. He's amazing.

HM: Oh yeah! Exactly. I try to always stay in touch, as he's always encouraging and inspiring. I just spoke with him a few days ago and he's working on a movie score. He's the greatest.

SV: You mentioned earlier that you played a gig with Mary J. Blige. You go from genre to genre, covering all areas of music. Do different genres require different kinds of skills or concentrations that you have to bring?

HM: Playing drums in different genres does require a different thought process, but the one common factor is... it must feel good! Playing orchestral percussion primarily involves accurately reading the music. Interpretation would be secondary skill. Interpretation is the key to playing different types of music – all genres. You concentrate equally as hard but one should be aware of a genre in order to interpret it. Listening is key, but knowing the music creates comfort and that's the ticket.

SV: So, you've played with pretty much everybody. I'm not even going to list because it would take forever. Is there anyone that you haven't worked with that you'd like to?

HM: There are so many new hip hop acts that I'd love to experience working with. I've been listening to a lot of new music. Having a sixteen-year-old son does that for you. Anyone I haven't worked with that I'd love to work with? And the people I've worked with...I just love working with different people in different situations. That's what gets me real excited.

SV: I spoke with Bob James a couple of months ago and I asked him about the transition when Lee Ritenour left and Larry Carlton came in. I got his take on it and now I'd like to get your take on it a little bit. What I told him was that, as a fan of Fourplay, when I heard that Lee Ritenour left I was a little concerned because I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but when the announcement came that Larry Carlton was in, it seemed like such a logical choice.

HM: I believe so because Larry spent many years as an accompanist and playing in the studios. He's very versatile. He's played lots of different kinds of music. He slid right in there perfectly, just in time. It's worked out really well. He's a great team player, and the band has prospered ever since. He's marvelous. He's a great, great guy to be in the band. We've been very happy with him, and we didn't miss a beat.

SV: No, you haven't. Are you surprised at the success that Fourplay is having?

HM: I never think about it. We just continue to try and make the best music that we can. We enjoy making music. We're just having a great time. I guess that sort of takes care of itself. I'm happy that we're around this long. I hope we continue to be around, because it's a lot of fun. I really look forward to getting together with the great guys and playing and hanging. It's like being on a championship baseball team except you keep going fast. You just continue to play. Those guys get to stop, but we just keep going. And they're all great guys – Nate, Bob, and Larry are all great gentlemen. Nothing but fun, and I hope the ride continues.

SV: *That's a good analogy. When I spoke with Bob about the whole concept everybody at that time had very successful individual careers and then just to combine together and make this "super group"...it was unusual at the time to do that, but it worked and it's still working. You're selling out venues all the time.*

HM: Still having a ball.

SV: *That's good. I understand that you guys are working on a new CD, or soon will be?*

HM: We will be in the New Year. We all each still have our solo projects which is fun. As a matter of fact, we're doing a festival in December in Bangkok. We're the headliners and also the three of us that have solo records are going to play with our solo groups as well at the same festival. It should be fun.

SV: *Speaking of solo projects, you've got several of your own. You were nominated for a Grammy for Ratamacue?*

HM: Yes, *Ratamacue* was nominated for a Grammy, but my most recent CD, *With All My Heart*, won as Herbie Hancock's solo was voted the Best Jazz Instrumental Solo ("Speak Like a Child"). So, I've now produced a Grammy-winning CD but still looking for my first solo win. I never think about it while making music. It only surfaces when the Grammy nominations are announced.

SV: *Aside from the new Fourplay that you'll be working on next year, what's next for you? What else are you working on?*

HM: I'm working on a new solo CD right now which I hope to finish in the next couple of weeks. It's another traditional jazz "Trios" project. *With All My Heart*, which featured Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Brad Meldauh, Cedar Walton, Mulgrew Miller, Monty Alexander, Dave Grusin, Bob James, Hank Jones, Ron Carter and Eddie Gomez, was so successful, especially in Japan, that I've been urged to do another. This new project features Gonzalo Rubacalba and Stanley Clarke, Chick Corea, Dave Grusin, Eric Reed, Buster Williams, Makoto Ozone, James Genus, Jacky Terrasson and Joey Calderazza. For most of the past year, I've been touring with a jazz trio. It's been exciting as Dave Grusin and Eric Reed, two extraordinary pianists, have accompanied me. Playing in this format has really stimulated my creative

juices and I've been growing musically and having so much fun. Stanley, Gonzalo and I had so much fun on my new project that we're toying with touring as a unit next year. We're playing a trial stint in L.A. at Catalina's Jazz Club in December. Traditional Jazz forces me to stretch my musical boundaries and in doing so it's great for any music in which I might subsequently be involved. It also helps me bring fresh energy to Fourplay when we record and perform. New energy is key to keeping the music fresh.

SV: That is great. Well, that takes care of my questions. Thank you very much for talking with Smoothviews this morning.

HM: Thank you very much.

© 2005 www.SmoothViews.com

This interview is the exclusive property of **SmoothViews** and protected under The Copyright Law of the United States of America. Unauthorized copying of ANY of the content - past or present - contained on this site is a violation of that law. Please submit a written request to **SmoothViews** to obtain permission BEFORE using any of the material contained on this site.