

INTERVIEW: JAZZ WEEKLY WITH DENNY SEIWELL

Paul came to town and asked a “folky” friend of mine, guitarist Barry Kornfeld to provide him with a list of 10-12 top guys that are doing the best recordings; the “first call” players. I was on that list.

So, when Paul set up the audition, nobody knew it was audition. We got a call from our registry answering service, and they just told us that I had a demo for Barry Kornfeld. I just had a cancellation, and I usually didn’t do demos but I had an open slot. I got there, and it’s not a studio. It’s a brownstone way over on the west side, looking like it’s about to be renovated. What is this?!?

I go up to the lobby’s desk in this uninhabited building. This guy points me downstairs and there’s Paul and Linda sitting in a dirt floor-basement and a ratty set of drums from SIR Studios. I say, “You’re Paul McCartney!” He says, “Yeah, I know! We’re in town and going to record an album, so we’re looking at drummers. Do you mind playing for me? No guitar or anything; just you. Play some rock and roll time for me.” I went right into my Ringo bag, and he put me through the paces of a couple of different styles. We had a bunch of laughs; he could see my willingness to do whatever he needed. He liked my attitude about it all. I then started hearing that all of the guys were getting called to do it, so I figured I’d never get it, as these other guys are great.

Three days later I get a call and it’s him! He said he wants me to do his album. I’m in shock at the time, and tell him to let me check my book!

THAT WAS THE RAM ALBUM. WHAT WERE YOUR THOUGHTS JOINING IN?

I felt like this was going to be the biggest opportunity I’ll ever have in my life.

I wasn’t a huge Beatles fan. A couple of years prior to that we were having Thanksgiving dinner with Joe Beck at the house of the jazz duo Jackie and Roy. We had some vino and they put on a copy of the brand new “White” album, and I wasn’t a fan until I heard that record; then I went nuts and went back to review their prior recordings and became a fan.

Paul McCartney is probably the best known musician on the planet. If he went into any household in the world that had teenagers, they would know who he is.

It was a little daunting. Here it was the Beatles just breaking up and here’s this guy going out on a solo career. I was actually the first guy he called to make music with after formally leaving the Beatles.

We started recording, and every day he would come in with a song. There were just three of us, Paul, myself and first Dave Spinozza (who lasted about a week) and then Hugh McCracken, who I recommended due to Dave’s scheduling problems.

Every day he came in with a song, and we’d do the song that day. It was at CBS Studios on 52nd Street. Great studio. We were booked from 9-6 like “Banker’s Hours.” He’d pay us for that, but he’d show up at 10:30 or whenever he wanted. Each day the songs kept getting better and better.

The first one was “Just Another Day”. It was complicated music; it wasn’t just basic rock and roll. Spinozza and I were looking at each other and saying “This is incredible.”

McCracken then showed up and we did "Uncle Albert" and it was all work, work, work. There was no "outside influence," if you know what I mean. We'd have a cup of tea and music from 9-6. We'd complete a track every day.

WHAT DID YOU OBSERVE ABOUT PAUL AS A LEADER OR ARRANGER THAT PEOPLE MAY NOT APPRECIATE?

There was an overall brilliance that drew you into him. Having the catalogue of material that he and John Lennon wrote, and the creativity that came along with a guy like Paul McCartney in those days was just awesome. In the studio, he really knew what he was doing. He left an open palate for me. Except for one time, he never told me what he'd like to hear. We'd rehearse, we would find our parts and when he was happy with what we found we would record.

On "Uncle Albert" he kind of slowed me down and said "I want you to find a drum part that is not so obvious a drum part that fits along with the polka a little better." That was the only time he told me to play something different than what I had come up with.

We had a great working relationship. He had actually hired two other drummers. He tried me, then Donald MacDonald for a week and Herb Lovelle for a week and then cancelled the other guys.

THE SECOND ALBUM, WILDLIFE, GOT PANNED. WAS THERE A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE ABOUT IT?

I took a vacation. Paul asked me to come over to Scotland and just hang out after the RAM album was released, and it was doing well. My wife and I show up in Scotland, and he tells me "I really miss my old band and want to play 'live' again. Do you want to form a band." I said "Count me in!"

DID YOU ASK YOURSELF WHAT YOU GOT YOURSELF INTO?

It was a little scary. Denny Laine was not a typical studio musician like I was; He was one of those guys who could play around you in circles. He had played with the Moody Blues, knew Paul and was a songwriter. It was kind of strange, but I trusted Paul.

Paul had some tunes left over from RAM and some new things he had written - we just started knocking them out. We were only in Scotland for two weeks, and then went in London to record the Wildlife album at Abbey Road. We only had a brief knowledge of the songs. When we got into the studio, five of the eight songs on that album were first takes.

Paul wanted to give the world a real honest look at a fresh new band. Nothing polished. We got the tracks down and then fooled around for the next week or two with overdubs and mixing. The tracks were done in a weekend.

Paul was trying to show the world that this was not the Beatles; it was his band, and here it is in its rawest form. Either you like it or you don't; I appreciate that.

The record did not do well because people were still comparing it to The Beatles.

After some time we added another guitarist, Henry McCullough to help play the leads when we started touring. We then started to become a band.

SO THE BAND AND PAUL WASN'T AFFECTED BY THINGS LIKE JOHN LENNON WRITING CAUSTIC SONGS ABOUT HIM

No. We knew what we were doing. We were a family, living together like an old hippie garage band. We had faith in each other. Paul was still the leader, but he wanted us to be a band, period.

THEN CAME THE RED ROSE SPEEDWAY AND THE HIT FOR THE JAMES BOND MOVIE "LIVE AND LET DIE."

We had grown into a band by that time, and we used Apple studios but also had Glyn Johns to help produce over at Olympic studio. Paul was even open to have someone besides himself to produce us. Johns is the best producer there is. But, there were some decisions that Paul wasn't comfortable with, but (Johns) recorded a bunch of those tracks for the Red Rose Speedway album, and it was a magical experience. Glyn Johns got the best drum sound I ever had in my life.

HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE GLYN JOHNS WITH GEORGE MARTIN?

Totally different. Glyn was an engineer/producer; Martin is a producer/producer.

With the RAM album, Paul would send the tracks over to George Martin, who would write the orchestrations for it. That's where his brilliance came in; writing orchestrations and sweetening the tracks.

When we were rehearsing for "Live and Let Die," Paul wrote it in almost no time at all. It was uncanny to watch him write it. We recorded it at his house on a two track, and he sent it over to Martin to come up with the orchestra for it. Before you know it he knocked out an arrangement for it.

We were up in his studio A.I.R. in London. We recorded "Live and Let Die," in and out of the studio, live with a 40 piece orchestra, in three hours time. Complete!

These days, you don't even get a drum sound in three hours! (laughs)