

A life less ordinary

Rock on Robbie

By Barry Wright

TKO Gold DJ Robbie France is more than just a rock'n'roll wannabe - he's a rock'n'roll 'I've done that!' He played drums in rock band Skunk Anansie and with German supergroup Alphaville, Rod Stewart has recorded one of his songs - and as well as being a top Costa DJ, he has his own record label.

Most people with so much musical and creative ability have a family history rooted in culture. Well Robbie's closest performing relative was his grandfather who used to play kettle drums on the back of a camel in the Africa Corp.

However his family had an eclectic taste in music. "My dad was a Frank Sinatra man, my mum loved Shirley Bassey, my big brother loved the Beatles, my middle brother loved John Mayall, our next door neighbour (Mr McNish), was a Jamaican who relished Caribbean music... you get the picture. It was a household bound together by music."

With all of those rhythms and sounds in his head Robbie left his native Sheffield and emigrated to Australia where he studied at the National Academy of Rudimentary Drummers of Australia under tutor Harry Hebler. Asked why he took up drumming, Robbie explained that he had been hitting things ever since he could crawl.

"I had played drums in the Scouts, Cadets and Salvation Army bands. When I arrived in Australia I had a talent for football, but rapidly learned that it was considered a girl's game, so drums it was!"

Travelling round Australia, he formed bands and met with other musicians. One of these groups was jazz fusion outfit Carnival who performed at the Oz Jazz Festival and supported guitar legend John McLaughlin. During his travels he met up with a man who was to become his mentor and idol David Bentley.

Bentley, writer of 'In a Broken Dream' by Python Lee Jackson featuring Rod Stewart on vocals, taught France how to 'look at the music', step out of himself and 'to

play the damn things' (the drums). Little did the drummer from Sheffield realise that 20 years later Rod Stewart would record a song co-written by him.

In 1982 Robbie France left Australia and returned to the UK where he joined British heavy metal band Diamond Head and found himself as a 'green, rather naive kid from Brisbane who was suddenly on stage in front of 90,000 people baying for metal!'

Robbie cites the band's appearance at the 1983 Monsters of Rock Festival as one his best and most memorable live moments.

During his time with Diamond Head he became recognized as an extraordinarily talented drummer, and after their unfortunate demise Robbie performed at his first drum clinic as well as taking Andy Parker's place in the hot seat of one of the world's most under rated rock acts UFO. Because of the impact of the initial clinic Robbie France found himself in big demand. He has subsequently held clinics all over the world, normally on behalf of Avedis Zildjan Cymbals.

At the same time he set up a teaching studio in Richmond upon Thames, alongside session musician Gary O'Toole, where many of the world's most recognised rock drummers passed through their doors. Whilst teaching Robbie was also recording and touring with many of the major bands of the time, such as Ellis Beggs and Howard and Wishbone Ash. Everybody wanted a bit of him and he would literally drop his tour bag and welcome a pupil through the door.

Ellis Beggs and Howard (Robbie's favourite of his bands) had major success in mainland Europe, but unfortunately this success did not translate to the UK. Frustrated and unhappy the band split. Robbie lamented: "We were masters of all we surveyed... and then the sun went down!"

"Look at the videos on YouTube now, you'll see an incredible band, with an indomitable spirit, doing what they do best...playing

kick-ass music. Shame it didn't last."

Following the eternal cycle of touring and recording Robbie felt too drained to commit to any more touring or recording work. He subsequently upped sticks and returned to Australia where he put together The Gab, a band he had been dreaming of forming for many years. They played improv orientated jazz and featured the Australian saxophonist Ralph Franke. The Gab was loosely based as a tribute act to two jazz greats Elvin Jones and John Coltrane.

At this time he also returned to his youth playing with arguably Australia's first guitar pioneer Tim Gaze. With the Tim Gaze Band he recorded the soundtrack to 'Band on the Run', one of the most popular surfing movies ever made. This album is still available. Asking Robbie if he himself was a surfer, given that he was hanging around with a number of the world's best, he explained in his own inimitable fashion: "I was offered lessons by all the guys on the film, including world champ Wayne 'Rabbit' Bartholomew. Unfortunately I'd seen Jaws. Didn't go in the sea after that for 18 months!"

After this sojourn in Oz and with his batteries recharged he returned to the UK. The move was primarily to promote The Gab, but before long he found himself in the hot seat of an up-and-coming group called Skunk Anansie. Whilst with them he wrote 'Weak' which appeared on the debut album 'Paranoid and Sunburnt' (co-produced by France) and reached number 20 in the charts. This track was subsequently covered by Rod Stewart for his 1998 album 'When we were the new boys'.

After his time with Skunk Anansie Robbie joined German supergroup Alphaville recording and touring with them until a severed Achilles tendon put an early end to his drumming career. The heel problem left Robbie France without his career of choice, but being a man of many talents he fell back on radio broadcasting, a skill that he



TKO Gold DJ Robbie France

learned in Australia. This time though he was broadcasting far from the surf and BBQs of Brisbane - as he found himself in much demand in Poland of all places.

Asking Robbie how he ended up DJing in such an unusual place he explained: "When I joined Alphaville it was necessary to be near Berlin. I moved to Poland to be around them and I fell for a Polish girl...whom I ended up marrying." She is the mother of Max, Robbie's eight-year-old son and 'the light of his life'.

He added: "Piotr Welc is a friend of mine. He's a popular radio DJ in Poland and he asked me to do radio shows with him and the rest as they say is history!"

He remained in Poland for two years, learning the language, before itchy feet set in. In 1998 Robbie France moved to Mazarrón in order to concentrate on writing his first novel 'Why Four', an international romp involving the world's most famous rock star and an unholy alliance between two of the world's most powerful men. The book will be published in online in installments, with the first part due out on the week commencing August 10.

He also co-owns Pulpo Negro Records and recording

studios with Tim Oldfield, producing albums by the likes of Second, Renochild and Blue Aliens Temple. As well as investing his time in the studios, he can also be heard on TKO Gold seven days a week, where his wit, love of life and profound knowledge of all things musical make for essential listening.

Pressing him for his opinion on who are the current movers and shakers in the drumming world, he explained that from 1975-1990 drummers and the drumming world reinvented itself, and that it was arguably one of the best ever periods to be a drummer as the rule books were being re written. He currently feels that there is no one at the moment that has the same impact and vision that many had during the golden years.

On top of his most well-known achievements Robbie France can also lay claim to over 1,000 TV, radio and commercial credits, eight documentaries, and four movie scores. There are a host of videos featuring at his drumming prime with Ellis Beggs and Howard, Diamond Head or his tutorials.

But it's his thoughts on music which stand out for me. "It's beauty walks across party lines, across cultural barriers, haunts the soul...and if not heard on a regular basis? You get withdrawal symptoms."

PS. It appears that after many years the irrepressible drummer is returning to the stage, with local supergroup The Costa Calida Allstars. That's how fluid things are in the life of Mr France!

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Robbie France (far right)

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