

# Bill Summers Lives Life to The Beat of His Many Drums

By Dean M. Shapiro

**O**ver a long musical career stretching back to the early 1970s, Bill

Summers has performed with a literal Who's Who in multiple genres of music. These include jazz, Motown soul, Latin rhythms, and others, and he has performed on numerous movie and TV soundtracks and commercials.

He has even fronted his own namesake bands over that period. Still, as an ethnomusicologist, he has made a specialty and a passion for his instruments of choice – authentic African percussion.

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That specialty has led him to be chosen as music coordinator for the upcoming world premiere of “Le Code Noir,” an outdoor historical drama tracing the path of slavery in Louisiana in the early 1800s. The story is told through the experiences of a young woman born into bondage in Haiti and brought to New Orleans by her owner. With his expertise and vast knowledge of African drums and other handmade instruments from African cultures, Bill will not only be performing but also selecting the other musicians and coordinating the musical portions of the production.

Co-written by the late Mark Sumner and Tommye Myrick and directed by Myrick, “Le Code Noir” will be performed from October 13-15 in the historic Congo Square section of Louis Armstrong Park. During the Antebellum era, Congo Square was a place where slaves were brought by their owners on Sundays, and they were allowed to socialize and perform in traditional African dances to the music of African-style drums and other hand-held instruments.

“I’ve been researching Congo Square for about 30 years, and this is a superior production,” Bill said. “So, I’m ensuring the instruments are authentic African percussion instruments played in Congo Square. I’m ensuring they don’t have certain things on them that would label them as modern African instruments.”

In addition to himself, Bill has lined up Titos Sampas, a master drummer from the Congo who now resides in New Orleans. Other drummers will include Judah Mason, his brother Shaka Zulu, Luther Gray, and his Bamboula ensemble, and more to be announced as the event draws closer.

“Congo Square is a special place for me,” Bill said. “It was the birthplace of most of what’s popular in modern music.

Born in Detroit to parents who migrated from New Orleans, Bill studied at the Detroit Conservatory of Music for ten years, learning classical piano. He explained, “My mother did some research and was told that the best instrument for my brother and me to start with would be the piano because you’re playing with both hands. All ten fingers, unlike a horn, where you can only play one note at a time. But I didn’t like it.”

Instead, young Bill was fascinated by percussion instruments, and he started buying them when he was 12 from the money he earned on his newspaper delivery route. Around the same time, he became interested in the flute, and because his father couldn’t afford to buy him one, Bill made one of his own with a piece of pipe into which he drilled finger holes. “When my dad saw it, he went to the store and bought me a real one,” Bill recalled.

“So, I started my professional career as a woodwind player, playing sax and flute,” he continued. “And since I could play percussion, people hired me because I could do more than one thing.”

Living in Detroit during the early Motown era, Bill recalls going to a local bowling alley featuring live entertainment. Seeing some of the genre’s iconic recording



stars onstage further sparked his interest in popular music.

Scheduled to graduate high school in 1966, he was a few credits short, and he ended up dropping out. While working at a Detroit racetrack, he hit on a daily double that paid well above his earnings. “I threw the dishes I was washing in the air and quit the job without even collecting my last paycheck. Then I got a plane ticket to San Francisco,” he recounted.

On arrival in the Bay Area, he stayed with relatives in Oakland while attending a junior college that admitted him despite not graduating high school.

From there, it was on to the University of California at Berkeley and a fortuitous meeting with a man who would become one of the most influential people in his life: jazz keyboardist Herbie Hancock.

“I had a group called Bata Koto, and we opened for Herbie,” Bill said. “After I played, he asked me if I wanted to sit in with him, and I did. From there, I landed a job in the group now known as the Headhunters. I played with them for about 20 years, and we recorded the first platinum jazz album in history.”

Through his affiliation with Hancock, another priceless connection came about: with Quincy Jones. As he recounted, “I got a call from Quincy who asked me to score music for the ABC series ‘Roots,’ which I did and shared in an Emmy Award. And the next thing I did with Quincy was a movie called ‘The Wiz,’ with Michael Jackson and Diana Ross. After that, I scored music for ‘The Color Purple’ with Danny Glover and Whoopie Goldberg.”



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Quincy Jones and Bill Summers



Bill Summers and Mike Clark

But Bill's success story doesn't end there. Returning to Detroit while the Motown era was still in full swing, he hooked up with Harvey Fuqua, a renowned Motown producer and former lead singer with the popular R&B group The Moonglows. Under Fuqua's direction, Bill was sent to New York City to play in a recording session and perform with that group at the Apollo Theatre. While at the Apollo, Bill was invited to perform with a rising young singer who went on to fame as Bobby Womack.

All told, over a long career, Bill claims

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about 700 recording credits on singles and albums on which he's been featured. His Wikipedia entry lists between 50 and 60 names of world-renowned musicians with whom he has performed and recorded. He has played on some of the most prestigious labels in the history of the recording industry, including Prestige, RCA, and Fantasy.

When told that he had enough experiences with famous musicians to make for an interesting book, Bill replied, “It's already in the works.” A manuscript he drafted is being fine-tuned by the editorial staff at the University of Mississippi Press before announcing a publication date. Over the years, Bill has self-published

several instruction manuals on percussion instruments.

This is just a fraction of what Bill Summers has accomplished throughout his stellar career. But he's not finished yet, even at age 75, when many other musicians hang their instruments up. He continues to be inspired by New Orleans, his family's ancestral home, where he has lived and been a fixture in the music community for the past 30 years.

“Music has always been an integral part of my life and that of my family,” Bill mused. “It's been part of our education, and I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had and those who made them possible.”



Chameleon Band



Ile Ilu Ana

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