

A Place in Time

*Studio mainstay John "J.R." Robinson '75:
a rock-steady presence in an ever-changing industry*

by
Mark L.
Small '73

After more than a decade and a half in L.A. where many musical careers flash then fade within months, John Robinson '75 (alias "J.R.") continues to be one of the most sought-after drummers in the business. J.R.'s soulful, razor-sharp time-keeping has been the heartbeat for a good portion of the soundtrack to contemporary American life heard via radio, TV, and movies since 1978. Some of his studio colleagues refer to him as the "Hit Man" because he holds the record for playing on more hit singles than any other drummer in the recording world—including 20-year studio veteran Hal Blaine.

The roster of superstars whose gold and platinum discs feature J.R.'s stickwork is extensive and includes Rufus, Eric Clapton, Madonna, Steve Winwood, Diana Ross, Earth, Wind, and Fire, Michael Jackson, Stevie Nicks, Rod Stewart, Whitney Houston, Vince Gill, Elton John, Michael Bolton, Quincy Jones '51, Peter Cetera, Natalie Cole, and dozens more.

Raised in Creston, Iowa, J.R. was in the garage with his first band at 10. Attending summer band camps in Missouri and Illinois during his junior high school years solidified his desire to become a professional musician. After graduating high school in 1973, J.R. left the

heartland for Berklee where he studied for six consecutive semesters. He began working with various jazz groups around Boston, and ultimately went on the road with a showband called Shelter. A providential gig the band played in Cleveland in 1978 catapulted J.R. from the nightclub circuit to the concert stage and studios. One night, Rufus and Chaka Khan stopped in at Cleveland's Rare Cherry club and liked what they heard from the drums. Things happened fast, and within 24 hours J.R. was asked to join Rufus, finish their world tour, and then record their *Numbers* album.

Quincy Jones produced *Masterjam* for Rufus the following year, and liked J.R.'s drumming (Quincy also started calling him "J.R."). Quincy invited him to play on Michael Jackson's blockbuster album *Off the Wall*. When that record soared to multiplatinum status, J.R.'s stock as a session player rose with it. Hundreds of sessions with the top artists, producers, and film composers in the business followed. In 1983, J.R. and Rufus won a Grammy with for their hit "Ain't Nobody." In 1987 alone, J.R.'s drumming was heard on eight Grammy-winning songs. By now he has played on more than 25 Grammy-winning efforts.

In the weeks before we met, J.R. had spent

PHOTO BY NEIL ZLOZOWER