

six days recording with Stephen Curtis Chapman, completed a live taping of "Comic Relief," a few episodes of "Murder, She Wrote," and played with an all-star lineup at the 40th Anniversary of the Playboy Jazz Festival. He also signed on for Barbra Streisand's international tour which opened in London April 17.

With the big gigs comes big pressure. In talking with him, it is apparent that J.R. has always thrived under pressure. This fact combined with his unique abilities and charismatic personality, keep him on the short list of the producers, artists, and contractors who are spinning out gold and platinum records in southern California's studios.

People knew I'd played in Rufus and assumed I was black. I don't think race has any bearing on musicianship.

Your initial encounter with Rufus and Chaka Khan is one of the classic, fairy tale "discovery stories." Do you think that kind of thing happens much today?

I pray it does, but I think discoveries happen more by recommendation today. I remember being in Boston playing clubs, and if a famous musician walked in to listen, I would find myself over-playing. When I would pack up my drums that night I would feel really bad about over-playing because I knew the cat would not call me. I was playing with an eight-piece soul/show band in Cleveland, just after leaving Berklee. We were at a huge, 3,000-seat club which had one of those lightboards that flashes messages. I looked up and it read "Welcome Rufus and Chaka Khan," and my heart started beating faster. When they sat in the front row, I got even more paranoid, but I remembered not to over-play. They asked us if their whole band, except their drummer, could sit in to play with me. We did a bunch of Rufus tunes, and I thought I was in heaven. They asked me to come to their soundcheck at Cleveland's Front Row Theater the next night to play some more.

We played again and it was burning. I could see their drummer fading behind the speaker cabinets. He was their second drummer and

had only been with them a short time. Incidentally, he and I are still friends to this day. After we played, they told me I was in, and we figured out the logistics of getting me moved to L.A. to rehearse and then join the tour.

What do you think attracted Quincy Jones to your playing?

When Quincy produced Rufus and Chaka Khan, he had the option of using a studio drummer, but he wanted to use me. I think he liked the fact that I listened to him, I had song sense, my playing was understated, and my time was strong. I also think he was attracted because I am a Berklee alum as he is. He'd been using Ernie Watts ['65], Neil Stubenhaus ['74], Abe Laboriel ['72], and a lot of other alumni.

What did you pick up from working with him so closely on several hit albums?

I learned about producing and about the business. Quincy says that a producer is like a casting director. You cast the right people around you to make the record successful. For instance, on "We Are the World," he cast Greg Phillinganes on piano, Louis Johnson on bass, and me on drums. That was the rhythm section which cut the tune—after we kicked 50 cameramen out of the studio.

Did you know Neil Stubenhaus when you were both students at Berklee?

Yeah, we played the same showband circuit in Boston with different groups, and did some jamming together as did most of the young players from Berklee. Now 21 years later, we are close friends. When I get calls for sessions and I'm asked who I would like on bass, Neil is my first choice. I work with bassist Abe Laboriel a lot, too, probably once a month. Abe and I have a lot in common—spiritual things as well as ideas about the industry.

What Berklee faculty members had an impact on your musical development?

I was a performance major with drums as my principal instrument. I couldn't choose piano as my secondary instrument, so I took vibes with Dave Samuels. He got me into Gary Burton's four-mallet technique, but I found it was giving me blisters which interfered with my drum playing. Dave and I became good friends and have since worked on gigs together.

I studied drums with Alan Dawson at Berklee. He is a legend and an incredible player. I wasn't from an urban area with a jazz scene as he was; I used to love to go into my lessons just to hear him talk. During my lessons, he would play vibes and I would play drums. He got me singing rhythms out of a syncopation book and