

Story From My Early Music Days

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I wanted to be Aretha Franklin's bass player. It's why I chose to learn the bass guitar. I laid in bed after breaking my back when, working as a roofer (in 1971), a ladder had broken. And I dreamed of playing bass on R-E-S-P-E-C-T, or Natural Woman (Kennedy Center version), Oh Happy Day, I Never Loved a Man . . . anything she sang on. And in my fevered 18 year old mind, trapped in a hospital bed, Aretha in that mink on the cover of "Let Me in Your Life," and with that voice, was the sexiest thing on earth.



I wanted to be Chuck Rainey. Chuck was her real bass player, and he supported her vocals in a way I actually dreamed of. What did Chuck have that I didn't have? As it turns out, Chuck had more talent, skill and experience than I had or would ever prove to have. And he played trumpet. And he was reputed to be a very nice person.

I wanted to dislike Chuck, but he was just too good, and the music way too fine. My mentor and friend, Eddie Sticks (Sticks was Philly Joe Joe's son and Stevie Wonder's drummer), spoke so highly of him as a player and producer. His simplicity, accuracy and humbleness on bass were everything Aretha's bass player should be. So I envied him, worshipped him, really. Tried to play like him. Failed.

I was 19 years old – 43 years ago – and I got a call from Sticks, telling me to get to the studio right now for a jam session. Got over there, saw my bass amp was set up. Sticks was playing his drum set, and had added a kettle drum I hadn't seen before. Ronnie Rancifer (Jackson's, Smokey Robinson) was playing keyboards. I forget who was playing guitar. Wasn't Floatin' Houghton, but it might have been Barney Kessel (Oscar Peterson and part of the Wrecking Crew. Sticks, Houghton and Ronnie were part of the Funk Brothers).

There was also a trumpet player, a percussionist, and a drug dealer who lived in the guest house behind the studio.

I plugged in my bass, and started showing off. Sticks looks at me and tries to tell me to calm the F down while still playing his drums. If one note would be perfect, I was playing 10. If 10 were perfect, I was playing 100. I was playing pretty much every riff I knew on every part even though it made good music bad. I was being an asshole, show-off teenage boy. I was having fun, too bad it hurt everyone else's ears.

Sticks kept trying to get me to calm down and play right. Between riffs he'd try to wave me off with his hands. I ignored him.

Ay yay, yay.

We stop playing after awhile, the trumpet player comes over, and Sticks says, "I want to introduce you to someone." Shaking his head, he said, "Big Bob, I'd like you to meet Chuck Rainey, Aretha's bass player."

The world stopped. I knew how stupid I had been playing. I was embarrassed, mortified, stunned. I managed to shake Chuck Rainey's hand and get his great smile, while at the same time desperately hoping I would turn liquid and melt in to a big puddle on the floor.

It was probably the stupidest I have ever been, and now 43 years later I can only say that I learned from that experience, and am still mortified at how ridiculous I was that day. I was so bad it kind of makes me laugh now, and helps me get over myself.

As it turns out, bass wasn't even my instrument. I've proven much better (and connected to the music) on a few other instruments. I listened to Chuck Rainey, Stanley Clark, Cecil McBee, Buell Neidlinger, Charles Fletcher, Ray Brown, Taj Mahal, Chuck Demonico, James Jamerson, Cliff Hugo, Jaco Pastorius and a bunch of other guys to try to figure out their magic. Never did, and eventually I finally figured out I had to try some other instruments. I gave up my dream of playing for Aretha for her benefit and mine.

I'm happy I did, I could never play to her standards. I still love her as one can only in a budding musician's teenage boy's dreams, though. And I'm glad she had so many great bass players to help her music soar.