



## The Commodores' Ronald LaPread STILL ZOOMING

It's without a doubt, one of the most famous and funkier bass and drum combinations in the world. A quick full-kit drum roll slides into a fat sleazy bass riff, and then the first line hits: 'She's a brick... house / She's mighty mighty, and lettin' it all hang out.'

The group responsible were called the Commodores, a hopelessly addictive, six-piece soul/funk band hailing from Tuskegee, Alabama.

Legendary US soul label Motown recently released a double-CD compilation of the Commodores' greatest hits. It traces their history from their debut album *Machine Gun* in 1974, to their phenomenal worldwide success in the 70s, the subsequent departures of lead singer Lionel Richie, guitarist Thomas McClary and bassist Ronald LaPread, through to the band as it exists today, with original members Walter 'Clyde' Orange and William King, and Ritchie's replacement, JD Nicholas.

When Ronald left the group in 1986, he shifted to New Zealand, opened a carpet shop in Newmarket with his wife, and settled in Parnell. On a stinking hot Friday afternoon in March, Ronald pulls up outside the Morrow Street store in his black Pajero jeep. He walks and talks in a very smooth laidback way, not unlike *WKRP's* Venus Flytrap. We sit at a small table inside the door, and for the next two hours Ronald tells mesmerising tales of his days with one of the wickedest funk groups ever.

Legend says the band chose their name during a session in the practice room when trumpeter William King was blindfolded by the others, given

an open dictionary and told to run his finger down the page and stop on one word. They were almost called the Commodores.

The Commodores got their big break in 1970, when Motown vice president Suzanne dePasse saw the band live on one of their many trips to New York and offered them the support slot on a Jackson 5 tour — 96 dates in 110 days.

"I remember the opening night, we were in New Haven, Connecticut. The doors opened, people started coming in at 7.30, it was still light outside and they had the house lights on so people could find their seats. We had to play in that situation, at a Jackson 5 concert where everybody wanted to see Michael, and we had to stand there and waste some of their time. The first night when they said 'Ladies and Gentlemen, the Commodores,' no applause, nothing. We played and people didn't react on the first song, so we knuckled down and we played, that show was probably the best show we had ever played. It was tight, the boys were serious. About halfway through the show they turned the lights off, and the stage lights happened, and the routines were happening, and people were sitting there with their mouths open. And as we left and we were going down the stairs, they started to applaud."

At this time Clyde Orange was the group's lead singer, but the band decided, because Ritchie stood centre stage every night, he would have to take over vocal duties. Which he did, with an incredible degree of reluctance.

In 1971 the Commodores signed to Motown's MoWest label, but the band weren't permitted to write their own songs, and instead were required to record material penned by legendary Motown writers Willie Hutch and Norman Whitfield and the team of Holland/Dozier/Holland.

"When we signed with Motown we were happy to sign with anybody. To be able to put a record out with anybody, for any reason, was the first goal. In those days record companies were accustomed to cutting a record, putting a group on it, and collecting all of the money, they didn't give any of it to the artist. They had their writers, they had their producers, they had the copyright, they had the publishing company, they collected all of the money. All those hit songs the Temptations did up until the time they did 'Treat Her Like A Lady', they didn't own any of their music."

Itching to record their own tunes, the Commodores presented Motown President Berry Gordy with a two year old instrumental track, that Gordy immediately titled 'Machine Gun', and decided it would be the title track of their 1974 debut album. From then on the Commodores enjoyed a mutually successful relationship with Motown.

"The Commodores got to be one of Berry Gordy's favourites. Berry Gordy was always very diplomatic, always very nice. He would never let you think that he was the one that gave the order to stop something or do some-

thing bad, but it would always be his decision, you'd just have to deal with somebody else, so when he saw you, he could say: 'Hey! How ya doin'? What's happenin'?"

From the release of their second album, *Caught In The Act*, the Commodores went ballistic. Between 1975 and 1981 they hit the top on the US R&B Chart six times, and scored eight Top 10 hits in the US Pop Chart. The most successful songs were the syrupy ballads written by Lionel Richie, and the group's crossover success into the predominantly white pop market began to sow tiny seeds of discontent within certain members of the group — half the band wanted to be as 'black' as they could be, and the other half desired mass acceptance. Unbelievably, the Commodores ode to the "stacked" 36-24-36 women of the world was almost left off the classic 1977 album *Commodores*.

"'Brickhouse' almost didn't make the album because at that time everybody was starting to feel their oats, everybody wanted to be the writer and wanted to be the one that had the hit song. At that time we had a big thing in the group about pop music, crossover music, going white. Most of the fellas thought that 'Brickhouse' was too black and would keep us in the R&B charts."

Was Lionel the prime mover behind that way of thinking?

"Not primarily Lionel. It was William King, Thomas McClary and Ritchie, Milan and Clyde and myself, we just used to sit back and watch it and see what's happenin' and see what they did. And whatever we thought should be added to it, we put our two cents worth in. I didn't not like the slow songs but when you get on a stage you want to have a little... fire."

Did this divide the band into two camps?

"... No it didn't divide us 'cause we grew up in a competitive atmosphere. It didn't really matter who wrote the hit song, or who received the recognition, as long as it came out under the Commodores."

By late 79, Ritchie's songs 'Still' and 'Three Times A Lady' had topped both US Singles charts, while 'Easy' and 'Just To Be Close To You' had been Number One R&B hits. In even the most harmonious group, wouldn't it be hard not to feel like the main songwriter was beginning to overshadow the rest of the band?

"For me, I guess I was naive. I never thought of it as: 'Maybe he's on his way.' During the history of the group I did some production outside of the group. I did the Sugarhill Gang and I did Taste Of Honey. Those records were out and got royalties, and the royalties came back and were divided amongst the group. I thought that everybody would be like me, go out and do it, and then hurry up and come on back and do what you're suppose to here. Then he went out with Kenny Rogers and did the record 'Lady', well that sold 14 million records. He was the only writer, and he was the producer, and he was the publisher, and I'm sure that that had something to do with him wanting to be on his own. If I had had the opportunity to go out and make 28 million dollars with Kenny Rogers, I'd have given 14 of it to the group and keep 14 myself, and been happy. He didn't want to do it."

In early 81, Ritchie recorded the duet 'Endless Love' with Diana Ross. The song stayed at Number One for seven weeks, and Ritchie finally decided to embark on a solo career. Although Ronald was shocked, this event signalled the beginning of the end of his involvement in the Commodores.

"For a long time, when I first came to New Zealand, it was difficult for me to get out of the role of Commodore, very difficult. I retired in 86 and in 88 I moved to New Zealand. Ninety it was still rough for me. I was a star, it was in my blood, it was in my every move, I was a Commodore! If I tried to explain to you the level that the Commodores were at, it would blow your mind. \$200,000 a night, 96 days in a row, that's what we were making. That's a lot of money, that's a lot of power, and that's what I did for 25 years, all day long. When Ritchie decided he would leave that was the beginning of my readjustment period, where I had to find out something else about myself, what else do I do, where am I. It took awhile."

Ronald's decision to finally leave the Commodores was decided during the recording sessions for the 1984 album *Nightshift*, and nailed in place when the album was eventually nominated for a Grammy.

"There was a need to try something else. It was time to draw upon some more energies and not try to follow in the same footsteps. Everybody didn't see it like that, so it was really going to go bad. I was really dissatisfied, I didn't like the direction they chose to go in, I didn't like the decisions they made about the type of album it would be. Later we had got nominated for a Grammy, they said we have got to go to this, and I said: 'No, I don't think I want to go to the Grammys and sit up there and look like a fool if they call the other person's name. I'm gonna go home and watch the Grammys from my house in Tuskegee.' Because I didn't go and sit as a group, they didn't like it. And then when we won the Grammy, they really didn't like it [much laughter]! So that was it, it was finished. I said goodbye and I went home."

*Nightshift* featured new vocalist JD Nicholas

and, although many said the Commodores would never recover from the absence of Ritchie in the line-up, the title track was a massive hit. It was written as a tribute to early Motown pioneer Jackie Wilson and Marvin Gaye, shot dead by his father in April of that year.

"Marvin Gaye was one of my best friends at Motown. People used to say Marvin and I used to look together 'cause I had the skull hat and Marvin had the woolly hat, and they would always say: 'You two boys look just alike.' He was a big fellow too... nice though... he was real nice. After the Commodores had been in the studio for 10 or 12 hours, I would go by Marvin's studio and we'd sit up and jam until three or four o'clock in the morning. We would just have a ball."

How did you hear of his death?

"Well... I was shocked. I was sitting at my house in Tuskegee, doing an interview with *Jet*. I had the TV down, and the fellow had asked me: 'Out of all the people you know at Motown, which one do you think is your friend?', and I said: 'Marvin Gaye'. And at that time a newsflash came on the TV and said that he was just rushed to the hospital from being shot by his father. It stopped the interview and it devastated me. I couldn't do anything for Marvin."

Except for Ronald, all current and former members of the Commodores are based in America. Lionel Richie is finishing an album in an LA studio. Thomas McClary is singing gospel music in Florida. Clyde Orange and William King are still Commodores, and Milan Williams works for LA County in California. Old wounds have been healed and Ronald keeps in regular contact with each Commodore, so would he be game if a Commodores reunion was on the cards?

"I'd like to go if I could go and get with the fellas and do some rehearsing and put a record out quick, and go out on the stage and do a tour, and play on a big stage with the fellas in front of a lot of people, I'd love that! But all of the work that it takes to get to that. Whew! I don't know [laughter]."

That's not a definite 'no' then?

"Well... I have become Muslim, and I have a little concern as to playing rock 'n' roll music, party music."

Really?

"Once you know what the real truth is, you have to govern yourself and govern your ways, and live accordingly. Islam says that music should not excite a person to the point where they're up and... music should be soothing. I don't think the Commodores really played devil music, but there's a lot of temptation in rock 'n' roll."

Little Richard once said that rock 'n' roll, which can give people an amazing sense of euphoria or pleasure, could never be the work of the devil.

"I don't know. Pleasure? Euphoria? When you think of pleasure, you think of orgy, when you think of euphoria, you think of high, you think of stoned, you think of out of your mind. It is not the devil and it is not evil, but it is devilish. I did it for a long time, I had a ball playing music, doing what I did, but now I stutter when I start to go and play music, I think about it twice. It's a little bit uncomfortable. Thomas McClary is a born-again Christian also, so I'm sure he's having the same kind of struggle. Be it Allah's will, if they decide to go together and Allah wills that I go, then I'll be there, and I'll be just as devoted. Or if he wills that I don't go, I'll be here, a Persian carpet representative in Auckland."

How do you feel now about a track like 'Young Girls Are My Weakness'?

"... I am a little bit different from most Muslim because I'm not eastern. I was an entertainer and I know all of the evils of this world, I know them... first hand. If I didn't do it I sure tried it. Rock 'n' roll! I've done all of that, but with age comes wisdom, hopefully that will be the thing that will deter me from that road of evil. It's there, if I do it and I excite somebody else then I feel like I'm responsible. That's my thoughts... young girls... you know what I'm talkin' about, what it's sayin' [Ronald is grinning from ear to ear at this stage.] It was exactly how I felt at the time, but, you know, the word 'respect' means to re-look at something."

What's your favourite Commodores song?

"When I hear those songs, I go back to what was happenin' to me in those times. I think that 'Zoom' is one of my all time favourites, and 'Jesus Is Love'. 'Brickhouse' was a big song, but doing 'Zoom', I had met a girl, we were going steady, planning to get married, but she had cancer and she died. And it was... we sat there and worked it out, I don't think so much about the death, I think about the girl. And doing 'Jesus Is Love', my father passed away that year, and I played the song at his funeral. When I hear the song I think about my father a lot. Those are my most fondest songs 'cause they make me think. 'Brickhouse', I can't even think of the girl's name... but I know what I was doing."

Are you ever strongly attracted to the old lifestyle?

"In those days there was nothing like being a Commodore, I enjoyed it, I loved it, but now, there ain't nothing like being a father, with two kids, living in New Zealand. You'd be surprised at how super it is to live a normal everyday life."

JOHN RUSSELL

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