Interview 8: ER

Place: Skype to Los Angeles

Date: 18.08.2014

Transcription begins: 00:00:02

Transcription ends: 01:26:44

Recording ends: 01:27:18

TA-ER-1 FAMILY & MUSICAL BACKGROUND

INTERVIEWER

00:00:02 B.B. Okay, we’re all fired up here so you can go right ahead.

E.R.

00:00:05 E.R. Okay, good. The ‘ten thousand hour’ theory has come under fire as of late. I didn’t read the book .... (it was Gladwell ...) so I have very little background on it but I’ve become familiar with the notion. As I mentioned in the book, one day I was sitting in the hot-tub and just for fun decided to try to calculate the number of hours in terms of practice as well as professional playing time, and somehow it seems like I forced all that cumulative experience into this 10,000 hour paradigm; it seemed to roughly fit (yeah). But let’s look at it as not so much a specific bench-mark but just the idea that in the practice of anything that requires some level of skill, be it sport or music, the person who has put in the time has a much better chance of succeeding. Just an example off the top of my head; the football players or soccer (right), as we call it here, who do all the exercises running around cones and such – they don’t, of course, run around cones when they’re on the field but that experience and practice manoeuvrability allows them then to express themselves during the course of the game. [...]. So in the case of drumming, let’s say; if we play something and all of a sudden we hear an accent on the cymbal and we’d like it to be a particular Zildjian cymbal [laughs] that happens to be located on the left side of our drum set up and as we play something we finish off on, let’s say, the less opportune hand, then all of a sudden, in an effort to reach that cymbal, we don’t stand nearly as good a chance of reaching it in the time that we anticipate or might wish for. The drummer who has put in enough time practicing (uh-huh) automatically will do a combination of stickings in such a way so that he or she gets there with no problem which then takes one mental preoccupation out of the equation (sure, sure.) So ... yeah ...

INTERVIEWER

00:03:53 B.B. Is it possible to be creative without such a level of skill or competence? (Oh, sure) You know some people point to Ringo Starr as being one of the most creative drummers in some respects because he changed so much. Was that a product of serendipity and luck and right-man-right-place-right-time or was it the ten thousand hours? I don’t think he probably had the ten thousand hours for example.

E.R.
E.R. Maybe not. My first instinct was to answer well Paul McCartney was probably [laughs] the driving force for much of that but ... I’m no Ringo expert, but when they first appeared on Ed Sullivan my jazz (yeah) snobbishness ... I actually did think “wow, how would they sound if Elvin was playing with them?” [both laugh] and they would have sounded like a mess! (Yeah, sure). Watching Ringo from the perspective of now, and the way he would play beats on the floor tom as opposed to on a hi-hat, and I don’t know the historical precedent for that, but it strikes me as a particularly brilliant solution to a time-keeping task, if you will. *(I was going to say 'problem' but task is good. Because problem-solving is much associated with creativity, of course).* So he instinctively came up with something that in hindsight we would say, wow, that was the perfect beat. 10,000 hours ... let’s put it this way. 10,000 hours is not required for either creative expression or excellence. 10,000 hours gives you a lot more in your toolbox to be much more versatile (sure) which then opens up more creative avenues.

INTERVIEWER

B.B. Absolutely. I think that nails it pretty well; I like that. There was something else you had, too, about the role of the drummer, and we might just dwell on that for a second. I think the two words you used were ‘accompanist’ and ‘enabler’ which are two good words for what drummers do. Is there any creativity attached to those roles, and if so where might it lie? Tricky question?

E.R. No no no; not at all (okay). Completely creative, because in the role of accompaniment where it applies specifically to the drum set, the drummer is faced with an infinite number of choices that he or she can make. Ringo playing on a floor tom as opposed to playing on a hi-hat; Harvey Mason on *'Chameleon'* anticipating the snare backbeat with that 16\(^{th}\) note syncopation as opposed to just playing on two and four (mmm); two examples that come to mind (right). The relative dynamic of the various parts of the kit to one another, the relative dynamic of the whole of the kit to the rest of the ensemble ... erm, you know when I was trying to do some recording work here and in LA when there was a bunch of it to be had and I would talk to some of the guys in the biz - not drummers - and very often John Robinson’s name would come up as someone who knew how to come up with a part, and these are the kind of projects where they are recording the thing over and over and over again, and he didn’t fall prey to the jazz drummer’s thing of “I’m going to, or I must, play it differently every time”. He would hone that part, perfect it, and craft what was not only a creative drum part but a very reliable drum part for the song (right, right) and so that’s a form of creativity that to my mind is very highly developed, yet at first glance may not fit our expectation of “oh, that’s a creative part”.

TA-ER-2 CHOICE AND CONTROL

INTERVIEWER

B.B. Yeah, I understand. That looks at it nicely. You mentioned choice there and selecting from possible options and the guy maybe who’s put in quite a lot of his 10,000 hours is broadening his options and his choices that are available to him. So how important to you is it, to your creativity, to have choice and control over what you play?
E.R.

00:09:35 E.R. It’s been said that the most important part of a pencil is the eraser [laughs] [...] so a lot of the creativity comes from, let’s say, a seasoning, of knowing maybe the best option, a note-to-self “don’t try that one again” (right, right). When I was younger, I always felt the need to mark a recorded performance ... insecure ... a little bit like a dog needing to (I know) mark the spot. We were listening back to a take of Mike Manieri and the thing is grooving along and then I did one of these doey things that I felt were like, my ‘signature’, and I remember Mike Manieri turned to me with just a very disappointed look and said “Why did you do that?” (Laughs). I became confident that my mark is just in, you know, attributes of touch, or however I played the subdivisions, and that was signature enough and the song was more important (yeah, sure). And that’s the thing that a lot of pop drummers, if I may use the term, or rock drummers seem to get so well. So for example Levon Helm, when I watch him it strikes me as a perfectly played drum part. There is nothing outstanding drumming-wise except for the mere fact that it feels so damn good. It’s just the right thing. So part of the hours, whether it’s 10,000 or not, serve I think to inform the developing musician what’s best for the music (sure, sure).

INTERVIEWER

00:12:00 B.B. I think what I was getting at with choice and control is that when you move out of jazz, you know, one way out here to rock or one way out here to (name’s classical composer with whom E.R. has worked) or one way out here to the movies, there are different constraints in terms of choice selection. You know (yes), some things you can choose, some things you really shouldn’t go near. Do these constraints impact upon your creativity? As you walk into the Hollywood studio, do you feel somehow “oh, today is not a creative day” or the toothpaste jingle “oh, today is not a creative day". Is creativity pertaining to the genre?

E.R.

00:12:44 E.R. No, I’m energised by the constraints.

INTERVIEWER

00:12:47 B.B. Yeah, plenty of people are. So if you were an artist and I said to you only use the colour blue, you’d find that attractive?

E.R.

00:12:56 E.R. Yes ... and part of it is kind of just craft. It’s the intrigue of the challenge of “what’s the best I can do this particular task?” (uh-huh). For some reason I’m reminded of when I work with graphic artists, and generally that puts me slightly in the role of either client or producer, let’s say (right). My general instinct is to choose an artist based on the trust that I’m going to like what they come up with, and I very really send them back to the drawing board (mmmm). It would only be to modify something if there is a particular need or call for something that has to function in a certain way. So I would rarely go “Nah, I don’t like that”. As someone on the other side of the equation .... I mean it’s a little like [...] Seth MacFarlane recently did this movie, a comedy in the Wild West, he had Joel McNeely, wonderful writer, do the score and Seth did not ask for any temps, there was no demoing involved, and it was pretty much they went to the scoring stage ... wow, it was a surprise ...
because he trusted who he had brought into the larger creative whole, and he was able to let go. So part of the creative equation often has to do with the other side; if people are willing to trust the practitioner.

**INTERVIEWER**

00:15:15 B.B. Yup, that’s interesting. Trust and sharing are two qualities that have been very much identified as essential to creativity. But just a nail you down a bit further, let’s take a musical aspect, let’s say repetition. Now you have a jazz sensibility; repetition kind of moves in some ways in another direction. Let’s say you’re playing with [names famous rock group with whom E.R. has played] and you’re on a tour and you’ve kind of nailed the parts. Is there a sense in which that repetition negates creativity? Is it possible to be creative night after night in these stadium tours, let’s say, with part-playing?

E.R.

00:16:01 E.R. Yeah, I believe so because I would always … when I was doing it there would always be something just slightly different in the contour leading up to maybe an ensemble thing, something like that, so I can get … I’m one of those guys that easily amuses himself [laughs], so I can get pretty interested in some minor aspect. But it’s an interesting point and it came up yesterday because I’m doing this […] Concerto for Drum Set with the […] at the […] (great) in two or three weeks’ time. There are two cadenzas. Those form, to be honest, the bulk of the Concerto part of it. It’s a great piece, it’s to be honest kind of densely written and because of the relative volumes of the drums to orchestra plus the manoeuvrability of the orchestra, you know (yeah) it’s a very large boat and I’ve just got to paddle (mmm). I can’t do the usual [snaps fingers and sings to demonstrate] kind of ensemble things that I might enjoy with a big band or a very fleet-footed small group, so the cadenzas become important. My instinct has always been to “okay, we’ll see what happens”, but I’m actually kind of pre-writing the cadenza in a little more traditional concerto sense (yeah) because I don’t want to risk playing too long or too short (absolutely) and I want to get the good stuff in! [laughs] (that makes a lot of sense!) [both laugh]. So I’m not going quite as far as our good friend Neil Peart, you know, playing the same damn thing over and over again (right) because that’s not interesting, but at least shape-wise I am mapping out sort of what I want it to be, so I don’t just go off on a ‘whatever’ and then all of a sudden two minutes in I’ve got to wrap it up (yeah, I understand) … You know, it’s not a jazz club! [both laugh].

**INTERVIEWER**

00:18:42 B.B. Funnily enough when you do have choice and control with your own bands and you could play pretty much anything you wanted to play because you’re directing the music - you may have written the music at that point - how do you decide what to play under those circumstances? Let me just refer you to something you said about ‘finding the horizon line’ I think was your phrase and ‘shaping the music’. Could you expand a little bit on that?

E.R.

00:19:17 E.R. Well, this is something I got from you [laughs] […] and it’s kind of, and I hope you’ll understand, it’s an anti-drumming concept for lack of a better term. You had decided at a certain point that you were going to kind of refocus your, let’s say, emphasis or your drumming creativity
into this … when I say anti-drumming, not meeting the expectations of the drum dolts or geeks (right) but also finding another path by means of the drum. So basically, following your lead of establishing a creative drum expression by honouring things other than the obvious creative drum expression. Does that make sense? (Yeah, I think so). I trust this sounds familiar to you? (No, that makes sense, absolutely). So the creative impulse does not need to express itself in virtuosic flights of fancy, it does not need to express itself in anything so apparent; in other words it may be so creative that people don’t even … the listener’s not even aware it’s going on. Which is I think a very creative way to do things. We can call it Ninja creativity (yeah).

INTERVIEWER

00:21:18 B.B. I remember once playing in a quartet and we were all set to improvise, all four of us, and my contribution to the piece of music was silence throughout. Tacit throughout! [brilliant!]
Which of course had an enormous effect on the piece of music much to the amusement of … [you just gave me goose bumps] much to the amusement of the other three participants who then awarded me 25% of the publishing royalties! [Both laugh][…]

E.R.

00:21:55 E.R. Years ago I went into a jazz club in Washington DC. The artist was a guy named Bob Mover a saxophone player […]. Paul Bley was playing piano. We got there in between sets: I didn’t hear any of the first set. The band gets back up on the bandstand, and Bley is just … sitting there, and let’s say it was an eight minute tune … he didn’t play a single note until about six minutes in, and the tension … and of course there is a visual component because you’re aware that someone is there, different from a recording, so the visual component added an element of tension … when is this guy going to do something? (yeah) And so it made it quite delicious when he did play. The silence is … that’s fantastic …

TA-ER-3 CREATIVITY AND SELF

INTERVIEWER

00:23:10 B.B. Turning now to how you think about yourself … do you consider yourself creative?

E.R.

00:23:17 E.R. Yeah […] In other words, I’m not the smartest guy on the block but … I feel like a person who is compelled to find the solution to any given challenge or problem. I don’t like to give up, so … whether it’s these fucking computers, or [laughs] a door that is not closing properly or something (yeah) … I get intrigued by the challenge and I get interested and I just want the damn thing to work (sure, sure) [laughs]. […] If we equate creativity with some measure of honesty, this makes you occasionally the … I won’t say the least popular but … This started happening a few years ago [unintelligible] plays a piece of music, it’s horribly overplayed, it’s to notey, annoying, all the musicians are high-fiving each other going “yeah, yeah” (I just missed the ensemble …what ensemble are you talking about or don’t you want to tell me?) This has happened on a few record dates (okay, fine, it doesn’t matter) … some kind of quote unquote “jazz” thing. And were listening back and I’m sitting or standing there and after all the high-fiving and self-congratulations I say “I’d like to ask this
one question”. “Yeah, what?” “Why would anyone want to listen to this more than once?” and then
usually they are “oh, yeah…” They never thought of that (yeah). So for me, and it’s not just a
recording craft question, it’s an aesthetic one: is what we’re doing worth a repeat visit? And I think
any good piece of art should be. Now some art is so wrenching to experience, in a good or bad way,
that it’s hard to listen to again. I have some recordings that I’ve only listened to once because I
almost can’t bear to go back to them even though (mmmm) I intellectually appreciate how good they
are (mmmm. Yeah, it’s interesting). I’m not sure if there is an emotional component there or what ... I
think we’ve all experienced that with certain films. Wow, it’s great, but I can’t imagine wanting to sit
through that again (yeah, yeah). For me the repeatability of the experience is a pretty good ...
(measure?) measure, yeah; for me that kind of qualifies or quantifies it (yeah) [...].

INTERVIEWER

00:26:47 B.B. Do you know what motivates you to be creative? Where does your creativity come
from? [...] You’re kind of built like this in some way? I guess; maybe that was an early appeal of jazz
perhaps. The sense that people were living on some kind of an edge.

E.R.

00:27:18 E.R. My first instinct to be honest is, and I think it’s partly why you and I both became
drummers ... I don’t know you psychologically that well, but in my case there is a definite want of
some measure of control (yeah). When I play very open, just as you played by not playing, by being
tacet, the general obvious response would be “how selfless that is; why, you’re so generous to the
music”, but in reality I see that as we’re being completely manipulative or we’re the string-pullers
because we’re determining the outcome with far greater results (yes) than if we just play in parallel.

INTERVIEWER

00:28:11 B.B. Absolutely, and isn’t the drum kit and enormously powerful beast with which to do
that? (Exactly) [...] Instantly change everything [laughs]. Drummers change everything.

E.R.

00:28:27 E.R. Yes. A bad band ... well, that’s the old quote ... a bad band with a good drummer will
still sound pretty good but a good band with a bad drummer is sometimes hard to sit through.

INTERVIEWER

00:28:40 B.B. Can we deduce from that lovely little epithet that there is something about drummers’
creativity or drummers’ understanding of creativity that might be different from pitched-instrument
musicians’ understanding of creativity?

E.R.

00:28:57 E.R. I think so (me too) in part because ... and I’ve used this expression before ... it’s real-
time architecture (uh-huh). The best advice I ever got from [...] was “always compose when you
play”. (Yeah, lovely). It’s a playground. To use the word ‘sandbox’ again, you know, we can ... every
piece of music we play is this marvellous three-dimensional spatial (yes) universe, however big or small that might be, or dramatic, or non-dramatic, it’s filled with those possibilities. So even ... I mean, a 28.5 second breakfast cereal commercial doesn’t give you a whole lot of elbow room (right!) but still there are some choices, albeit far less than a larger-form piece (yeah).

INTERVIEWER

00:30:28 B.B. Talking about, which weren’t really, communicating, how important to you is it that other people consider you creative? Is that important, or not?

E.R.

00:30:38 E.R. .... Only important to the extent that they’re listening, if ‘other people’ would mean the other musicians I’m working with. If they are listening, then they are tacitly acknowledging the creativity and we get a better result. I did a project with [...] and [...] [...] He booked a hotel ballroom in [...]. The same night there were two or three other events that were a lot louder than this trio. I felt bad because the guy had spent the money and the audience turnout wasn’t that great, but [...] came to me near the end of the rehearsal and said “it doesn’t matter what I play. It’s having [laughs] no effect [on the project leader]”. Here’s a guy, and this is useful in our discussion, here’s a guy that, typical of a lot of guitarists and pianists, practises and plays so much alone that they don’t know how to open themselves up through the collaborative or interactive experience. In that case, you know, he’s probably got more than 10,000 hours but it’s to his detriment. So let’s redefine the 10,000 hours. If that doesn’t include a healthy combination of performance experience and collaborative experience (absolutely) then ... If he wants to be another Segovia, great; 10,000 hours in the practice shed will be terrific. But even then if he hasn’t played in front of others ... [.... 00:33.13 – 00:37:24 Two stories about others with whom the participant has not performed were irrelevant to the topic and have not been transcribed]

INTERVIEWER

00:37:24 B.B. Looking a little bit about composing and writing, could you tell me something about how and why you came to that? Many drummers don’t. [...] Was there something lacking about the drum kit that couldn’t contain your creativity? That might be one aspect of it?

E.R.

00:37:51 E.R. I just had seen that if you were a musician, you composed (uh-huh). I always remember composing whole things, every time I walked to school, in my head, you know, I could hear all the polyphony ... sometimes I would recreate an album, just sing the whole album as I walked ... other times I’d just be fantasising about writing something. I don’t possess the mechanical skills to do it anywhere near the level of my fantasy, so I had to content myself with what I’m able to do (yeah). Composing takes a tremendous amount of mental discipline ... there are rules of polyphony and harmony ... I got a lovely gift from [...] years ago. I’d asked if I could study with him. He said no. I said “Why?” He said “I want to keep our friendship intact!” [both laugh] (right, good answer). He gave me a gift of Bach Chorales [...] and inserted inside was a full piece of paper with two words from the top corner all the way down; voice-leading, voice-leading, voice-leading, voice-leading, voice-leading, voice-leading, maybe 1000 times. If you’re writing for a multitude of musicians, there are three ways to go about it. You learn the craft and you write everything that needs to be written. You have the inspiration and
you have an orchestrator flesh out all the mechanical (yeah) parts. Or you get a commission and you
show up with a couple of ideas on two dinner napkins, and then “okay everybody, let’s make
something out of this” and that can be a legitimate form of creativity.

**INTERVIEWER**

00:40:41 B.B. I was more interested really in the ‘why’ rather than the ‘how’; […] and we had touched
on control and of course there is an aspect for we drummers, and I’m only really giving you my view
which I should not do really, is that it enabled me to control the kind of audio environment that I was
going to be heard in [ah]. In a way you can design a suit that is most comfortable to you, there’s an
element of that.

**E.R.**

00:41:08 E.R. That wasn’t … *(didn’t enter your thinking?)* … not quite, no; almost the answer is like
why, why not? I like melodies. Sure, the trio I had with what I call my [… ] trio with […] and [… ]; I think
I felt almost a responsibility to write something *(yes, if your name is at the top I felt that too, yeah)*.

**INTERVIEWER**

00:41:50 B.B. Was it connected in any way with the idea of finding your own voice as a musician? […]
I think somewhere in the book you mentioned that […] was quite instrumental in getting you to find
your own voice and talking about that a bit?

**E.R.**

00:42:10 E.R. Writing-wise he was not all encouraging *(no)*, he was dismissive. [… ] The thing that
really got me into writing besides the occasional tune or being a member of a band and realising that
here was a chance to earn some publishing money, was when a friend of mine asked me if I’d like to
write music for a theatrical production *(yeah, I remember this)*. I jumped at the chance. So the ‘why’
is a little bit connected to the ‘how’ for me, in that if I get a commission I immediately start to hear
some ideas. Otherwise I’m not brimming with ideas and my schedule’s been such that I haven’t set
pen or pencil to paper in quite some time *(right, right)*. So the creative act in terms of organised
music, in terms of writing, let’s say, for me depends on a little bit of external push.

**INTERVIEWER**

00:43:26 B.B. Where do you stand on the old hoary one about can you be creative on your own in a
room with no one else listening? In other words, is there an element of communication necessary in
this creativity? Has someone got to hear this, otherwise how do we know you’ve been creative?

**E.R.**

00:43:48 E.R. Good question. Bill Evans was asked that … there is some video interview, I think it’s
his brother poses questions, and he answered if he were playing in a closet by himself or playing on
a stage, for him the performance would be the same *(uh-huh)*. And when I’m practising this cadenza,
for example, I’m having as much fun or more playing it in the solitude of my studio than I anticipate
I’ll have … […] I mean it is just part of the gig, I have to do it. I’m having more fun just kind of working on it (yeah). So creativity is definitely possible in the solo environment. It doesn’t pay the bills though so you have to … [laughs] [get out and about] … Sorry to bring that up … (that’s always in there!). That enables us to be more creative in other realms; there’s a practicality to it … I mean Stravinsky, if I understand this correctly, he didn’t wait for flashes of inspiration, he had a composing schedule (yeah). Every morning… (yeah, I’ve heard the same thing. If you wait for inspiration you’ll starve to death!) [Laughs] … you won’t get much done … When we talk about the constraints energising a certain creative impulse, the constraints of a particular piece of music or timeframe (it focuses the mind).

TA-ER-4 CREATIVITY AND COLLABORATION

INTERVIEWER

00:45:53: B.B. How about creating with others collaboratively? Collaborative creativity … You know we drummers pride ourselves on … being able to get along, to motivate, to enable, to enable others sometimes to create. […]. How does collaborating with others determine your understanding of creativity?

E.R.

00:46:27 E.R. I guess in a larger more universal sense everyone is creative every day of their lives if they choose to be open to receiving the other (yes, yes) and sometimes the more creative act is truly listening, which I’m not good at … Half the time when I’m talking to someone, you know, like everyone else, I’m formulating what I’m going to say next (yeah, of course yeah). I like the sound of my own voice; actually now I’m beginning to hate the sound of my own voice (yeah, of course yeah). I like the sound of my own voice; actually now I’m beginning to hate the sound of my own voice [both laugh]. Yeah, collaboration allows for bigger things to happen let’s say (mmm); opera, film … these are the more collaborative (yeah) and larger art forms. Before there was film there was opera – Wagner [indecipherable] this is the shit, you know … and it is amazing, the energy of so many people, not always working in a unified sense, but somehow if someone has the ability to rein all that energy towards some sort of goal-line, whether it is a common goal or not … and so a Steven Spielberg, say, excels and revels in that creative atmosphere (oh, yeah) he needs that … If you just left him alone with a word processor or a sketch pad … nah [Both laugh]. I’m not demeaning what he could do there, but here is a guy that needs a canvas that requires a lot of parts.

INTERVIEWER

00:48:39 B.B. If one talks to quite a lot of drummers, as I’m doing, you quite often come across the idea of the drummer and the leader. So there’s the leader of the band […] and the drummer often feels his creativity is collaboratively created with this guy, and this guy … there’s a mutual exchange, isn’t there? The drummer provides a lot to the leader, but the leader in return enables and creates the […] context in which the drummer can be creative. So, many times you’d be surprised how much you’re talking to drummer A and he’s telling you about the creativity of bandleader B […]. [Drummer A would speak of leader B as being a helpful force or a pain in the ass?] Oh no, a helpful force; [oh okay] occasionally a pain in the ass but broadly speaking a helpful person who gave drummer A the creative context; the place in which he could be creative. So there’s usually a sense of gratefulness to that sometimes difficult bugger at the front of the band somewhere; in my case perhaps Robert Fripp
right], a difficult ornery cuss, my kind of [names principal leader for whom E.R. has worked] probably.

E.R.

00:50:12 E.R. Exactly; and with that friction sometimes these guys intuitively ... you know, I guess

‘Machiavellian’ would be an apt word ... they like to lay fireworks and gasoline all over the place (laughs) and toss a couple of matches into it — “okay, let’s see what happens” (right, yes). That’s not my personality, and more and more when I’m working with leaders I enjoy the leader who trusts my choices and lets me do my thing (of course); they concentrate on the bigger picture, but don’t provide too much direction (sure, sure). [...] I think when you get to a certain age it’s just like ... a lot of times they’ll go “oh, I’ve never thought of that, that’s a good idea” (yes, yes interesting). When I do these orchestral concerts with [...] it’s almost all brushes. For much of it it’s so subtle what I’m doing that it’s fairly unremarkable, but every once in a while I may shape something just a little different, and I’m always watching him, but I’ll instinctively look up and I’ll see him smile (laughs) and I enjoy that because he’s done all the writing and he’s conducting and I’m pleased that he enjoys that thing. So I guess we could say the important part of the creative process, I think, is acknowledgement or recognition (that’s interesting) by one of the collaborators. (You have communicated creativity to people, that’s right). Right, and no acknowledgement would then ... in other words, I think we could say Bill that, at least in the nature of the work we do drumming, we are not 100% self-reliant in terms of what we come up with creatively or how we gauge the effectiveness of it.

TA-ER-5 CONSIDERATION OF CREATIVITY IN OWN WORK

INTERVIEWER

00:52:57 B.B. Indeed not. [...] I did ask if you would be able to pinpoint areas of your own work [...] where you felt particularly creative and that you could somehow [...] pick out for me three things that you thought were as creative as you get, no matter how you value that, or how you define that [...].

E.R.

00:54:50 E.R. One thing that really comes to mind was a recording with Bob Mintzer’s big band. [...] I always mix up the album and the song; one of them is called [...] and one of them is called [...] [...]. [...]. The reason I like it, and I think this may address a larger thing; as much as I love small group playing and the creative moments in that are just very ... I feel most creative I think when I play in trio with [...] and [...] because it’s so anti-drumming (uh-huh) ... every single cymbal pulse starts to carry a lot of meaning (yeah), [...] we did a very nice arrangement of the old tune Wichita Lineman (oh right) [...] (I know it well). It was just a little brush idea that I came up with that sort of combines this little Jimmy Webb motif for flutes and piano with something that I heard Chico Hamilton play years ago, so the Jimmy Webb thing cadences [sings to demonstrate] and Chico Hamilton would have [sings to demonstrate] played over the bar line (yeah). I always liked that, I always thought that was a very cool thing and that’s not something I’ve heard other guys do. So, in that case, even though it’s a trio it’s a very ensemble moment. So my most creative expression, just by these two examples at least (mmm), are completely in the context of an arrangement or, in a more academic sense, a constrained structure. So I think my most creative work is within a framework. In other words, if, like “okay, Peter, the stage is yours (yeah) play a drum solo” and partly because of all the toxic
associations we have about drum solos [...]. So that’s two examples, erm ... and then one that’s erm
[...] let’s say with [...] The one thing that comes to mind let’s say, it’s a simple pattern that I play on
[...] where instead of playing a ride pattern which is [sings to demonstrate] or doing the Billy Cobham
offbeat [sings to demonstrate], I had [sings to demonstrate] so I played everything but the downbeat
(right); the three 16ths after the downbeat. That always seemed ... that’s kind of cool (yeah), like my
one contribution to the drum beat lexicon. I peaked at 24! (yeah!) [both laugh].

INTERVIEWER

01:00:00 B.B. So in all these examples, something was different for you at the end of this. You’d
somehow understood something about the music in a way that you hadn’t understood it before? You
played it in some way ... or something new had emerged from this moment of self-defined creativity
or you’d learnt something that you might be able to take on to some other thing? [...] All of those
things maybe ...

E.R.

01:00:42 E.R. My first impulse Bill to be honest is no; my reaction was just “that was pretty cool”.

INTERVIEWER

01:00:47 B.B. Uh-huh; that’s a very modest evaluation of your most creative moments if I may say so
[both laugh].

E.R.

01:00:54 E.R. Yeah, that’s all ... I just sort of did it and went “yeah, that’s pretty cool!” (uh-huh, okay).
That’s as far as I’m willing to go with it (yeah, I understand). I think in a larger sense the people that
appreciate or enjoy whether it’s a sense of touch or just the amount of space and even in those
cases, without engaging in false modesty, it’s really an emulation of what I like most about the
drummers I’ve enjoyed listening to (mmm). I start off each semester with my students saying we can
do a year’s worth of lessons in about 30 seconds if you’re interested (laughs) in the secret; just play
what you would like to hear next (yeah, it’s a great line). You can’t play what I would like to hear, or
you think I might want to hear next, you don’t know that, and I can’t presuppose or waste my time
worrying about what Steve Gadd might want to hear next when he walks into the club that I’m
playing. I don’t know (sure).

INTERVIEWER

01:02:04 B.B. There was a question earlier ... I think I brushed up against the idea of how do you
select what you’re going to play, and there’s the answer, right there (yeah). You play what you want
to hear next, that’s the answer that question (yeah). It’s a really nice answer too, really succinct.
(Rare for me!) (laughs).

INTERVIEWER
01:02:29 B.B. I've just got two; I've got [...] I've got [...] and was there a third one you were just talking about?

E.R.

01:02:35 E.R. [...] Oh yeah I know it, I have it. Just for a few bars I go onto the cymbal pattern; it's on the restatement of the melody at the beginning (uh-huh). Yeah, it's no big deal. [...]. The [...] challenge was always to play something that wasn't typical (yeah, same in King Crimson too). [...]

One time, I think I mentioned this in the book, I said to [the band leader] “I think this would be fun, instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, let’s just set up a groove” (yeah) and he said “well, let me hear it”. So I started playing something kind of simple, and he waves me to stop and goes “what’s fun about that?”! (laughs) [...] Get off your ass and play something original.

TA-ER-6 CONSIDERATION OF CREATIVITY IN WORK OF OTHERS

INTERVIEWER

01:03:50 B.B. [...] Could you point to three drummers living or dead whom you consider world-beating, nuclear-level creative; as creative as you get?

E.R.

01:04:12 E.R. Elvin Jones. [Laughs] (funny, his name comes up a bit!). I bet it does. In part because well, he was a whirlwind of not only creativity, a whirlwind of polyrhythmic expression, but stylistically it’s almost impossible for me to find a lineage that you might find with most other drummers. I mentioned once to Chick Corea, I said Tony Williams was like a gift from the moon, I think I said, and Chick said well, I know what you mean, but [...] there was a laboratory of sorts in Boston and there were two drummers he mentioned, guys I’d never heard of, but I actually met one of them a couple of years back - he works for the Post Office - I forget the names of the two gentlemen but they would get together every few days, and okay, today we’ll set the drums up backwards, or today will do this or today will do that (uh-huh) [...] but Chick, having come from the Boston area, felt that that there was some lineage from these guys to Tony to beyond, but then Chick raised the rhetorical .... white elephant “tell me where Elvin’s style comes from” and Elvin talks about Shadow Wilson (uh-huh) ... probably Jo Jones and then even Philly Joe, undoubtedly some Max but ... not only the triplets but the dynamic shape of the way he played on the kit (in between the cracks, as they sometimes say) well, not even that, but something a little more ... just the soft to loud and the loud to soft, and I sometimes wonder if it was just the way the drums were recorded, that some drums seemed to leap out a little more than others. It might be the case, because the floor tom always seemed to be a little softer, because they only had that one ... (yeah that’s interesting, I hadn’t thought of that).

INTERVIEWER

01:06:55 B.B. Another nice line you used about Elvin - I think it was you - about him trying to sound like 300 drummers at once? (yeah) that’s a lovely idea too (yeah, that was me). He succeeded! (The African drum choir incarnate) yeah.
01:07:11 E.R. The other two names that come instantly to mind; Mel Lewis, even though his choices were almost never outrageous but they were always perfect. The contemporary equivalent to Mel Lewis would have been Carlos Vega (uh-huh) in that it just seemed like everything they played was just kind of perfect (interesting) and there’s a wonderful creativity in that. And then Paul Motion (yeah, yeah) because he was kind of outrageously … he was the closest thing to an abstract painter (yeah) […]. He thumbed his nose at convention in a much more interesting way to me than a guy let’s say like Han Bennink (mmm) who certainly flouts convention but (there’s something of the circus act in there, isn’t there?) A little bit. So those would be my three candidates.

INTERVIEWER

01:08:27 B.B. You’ve got Elvin, Mel, Carlos and Paul. You have to kick one out for me.

E.R.

01:08:35 E.R. Okay; I’ll kick Carlos out unfortunately […]. [… I felt Bernard Purdie also took whatever […] … whatever was happening with R&B he codified it and did a thing in the delivery of it (yeah, yeah) that I never heard before or since. Maybe I’ll put Bernard in there, instead of Mel.

INTERVIEWER

01:09:21 B.B. A possible way of defining this is … was drumming different from the time before they were to the time when they weren’t?

E.R.

01:09:32 E.R. Put Bernard instead of Mel; Mel was definitely a lineage (yeah he was, yeah) sort, although his solutions to it were brilliant … he came out of Shelly …

TA-ER-7 REFLECTION ON THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH TO ENACT CREATIVITY

INTERVIEWER

01:09:45 B.B. And we all know that pinning this stuff on one person is difficult because we’re all part of this massive family that’s sort of bumbling along in some way, not entirely sure of what we’re doing at any particular time, borrowing begging and stealing from everybody, and that’s fine … that’s just how creativity works, there’s nothing wrong with at all. You’ve been around for a while […] and you’ve seen a lot of changes in the drum scene. Is there anything that’s happened to make creativity more or less possible you think? […] Is your job easier now or harder? […]
01:10:54 E.R. Music making’s easier but it’s less often in terms of going into the recording studio …
that ritual is something I experience with far fewer frequency. So that’s changed.

INTERVIEWER

01:11:11 B.B. I suppose I’m steering you towards automation; computers and automation. Music technology … is that making anything easier or harder?

E.R.

01:11:25 E.R. In the old days you could never fix a drum part (right) [...] Now you can actually, you know, with the cutting and pasting and editing possibilities move one thing slightly to the left or right. That’s pretty great, because you can have a terrific performance and just one thing misfired, or one of the other players didn’t quite hit something, let’s say in the last chord … that’s an easy fix. So the creative energy in a recording session … let’s say we’re doing a trio recording, and on the last chord the bass player came in a little early or late, and instead of worrying about shall we re-cut that, the engineer just fixes that [snaps fingers] and we go to the next tune (right). To fix little bugs doesn’t impede the arc or flow of, let’s say, the creative energy of that day (excellent). At the same time, if I get called to do a project, we are recording to tape, there’s going to be no fixing … I love that. I love the commitment that is required by everyone in the room (I like that too), the attention level is just a little bit sharper … (yeah, I think we listeners instinctively know that).

INTERVIEWER

01:13:10 B.B. The opposite end of that is of course when you listen to some math-metal drummer with three bass drums playing ridiculously computerised. You know that the hand of God has separated you from him, that science has come in the way there between whatever he could do, which might have been great, but he’s been computerised to death and there is no humanity left in the performance. It’s the exact opposite of that.

E.R.

01:13:37 E.R. Right … all the pioneering work that drummers have done in terms of metric modulation, superimposition, and then you know like the mind-blowing stuff which Weckl and Vinnie did which then led to … when I hear what Chris Dave is doing now I’m fascinated by it, I appreciate it intellectually. Do I want to hear it again? No, I can barely make it through a whole performance (yeah, yeah). I get it, it’s amazing (can I leave now?) yeah, exactly [both laugh]. If I go somewhere where the drummer is just playing brushes all night but the shit’s swingin’ (mmm) you know, I’ll stay all night. [...] When we are younger we might put posters of Ferraris on our dormitory wall, or photos of a swimsuit model we get off on and all that stuff and maybe when you get older it’s not quite as interesting (sure). I don’t know whether that’s a universal in drumming or in all art [...]. We like what we like.
B.B. Tell me a little bit about performing in public and audiences, these funny people on the other side of your drum set. There are some people out there called the public. How do you see these people, this audience in respect of your creativity? Are they a help? Are they a hindrance? Are they essential partners in co-creating some sense of creativity?

E.R.

Depending on the lighting, half the time you can’t see them, and if you can see them you’re watching some jerk checking his iPhone. It’s fun when they like it, I enjoy playing for people, it’s a part of the equation of playing music in public and it’s gratifying when someone likes it, but actually a weird thing happens to me, Bill, when I play. A lot of times by the end of the concert the last thing I want to do is say hello to anybody. I want to hide away (uh-huh) and so if the audience liked it, or didn’t even, doesn’t affect my perception of what happened on the stage (yeah, yeah). I’m not that … I don’t really give a fuck about the audience. You can quote me on that (okay).

INTERVIEWER

B.B. So a couple of thousand people in a tent in Germany digging [...], obviously (oh, it’s so annoying just the thought of it) [laughs] ... quite a level of communication going on there. It is different … but you may say that has very little impact upon you ...

E.R.

I think if you’re playing music that has a fair amount of kinetic or actual energy … if the audience responds in kind, sure, then there’s something bigger than the sum of the parts going on (right); there is an excitement level, and with a good band, the band will focus (yeah) a bit more. They get very like … alright, we’re really in the zone. But for a lot of the music I play, the stuff that’s at the softer dynamic level, if the audience is very quiet and you sense that they’re listening (that’s another pleasure) that’s helpful. (It’s helpful and it’s another pleasure, yeah, that’s interesting.

INTERVIEWER

B.B. Do you … so those are some of the things you like (sorry, I do care about the audience) no, no, I understand, those are some of the things you like and dislike about performing in public. But supposing there was a decree from the White House tomorrow which said you are not allowed, you are longer licensed to play in public - you could still play with your friends, you could still play at other people’s houses and stuff; maybe even make records - but there is no public performance any more for E.R. Would that be a real sadness? If I put it that way round maybe you think it’s slightly differently ...

E.R.

Yeah, that’s a good point. I would miss it. [...]

INTERVIEWER
B.B. I think I see drumming as a social inter-reaction between me, other musicians and an audience (yeah. It’s fun when it’s swinging and you happen to look out and people have a smile on their face, it’s fun. Okay, point well taken!) [...].

TA-ER-9 REFLECTION ON MEANING AND CHANCE TO ADD

INTERVIEWER

B.B. Just five minutes; we’re nearly there. Some reflections; given everything you’ve said so far about creativity in your work, is there anything that you don’t think we’ve covered? Just something that came up briefly; do you think there is anything special about the way drummers construe creativity in music performance as opposed to other musicians? [...]

E.R.

A lengthy story about the lateral thinking of war time mathematicians has been omitted. A drummer does not have the means at his or her disposal of melodic expression, excepting of course we have implied melodic [...]. Therefore, we are the one member of a collaborative that’s [indecipherable] improvising group. [...]. Therefore we function in a very different manner of shaping harmonic movement, of implying melodic content, of inferring (very good) things which we do not expressly play on our instrument because it’s not in the traditional sense a tonal instrument, you know (right). [...] So I think the drums are unique and it gives the drummer and interesting form of power or influence with the other instruments in that regard, because we don’t meddle in those areas (very interesting; very succinctly put). [...].

TA-ER-10 PARTICIPATION IN THE INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER

B.B. [...], is there anything else you think “why didn’t this guy Bruford ask me that thing that was so obvious that he should have asked me” that I’ve now forgotten to ask you? [...] Maybe we’ve covered a lot...

E.R.

01:24:39 E.R. I think we did. I think the questions are all excellent; several unexpected ones ... (good) which were very fun (good; we like unexpected!) yeah ... and you got me thinking, I’m grateful for that, and for your attention and honouring me by including me. I can’t wait to read the results. [...]

B.B. I just want to thank you a million, I really very much appreciate it.

01:26:41 Transcription ends.

01:27:18 Recording ends.