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BRIAN AUGER'S OBLIVION EXPRESS "Reinforcements/Search Party"



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Brian Auger talks about the album REINFORCEMENT

As I said before I grew up listening to my elder brother Jim's jazz records. When I was a little boy I listened to his great jazz collection, and by the time I was in my teens, my idols – apart from one or two sportsmen – were all Black American musicians. I have always found that there was a certain spirit in their playing and that kind of attracted me to them. In my teen years, the first Blue Note albums were released in England, and



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I discovered Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. I loved their music and all those Horace Silver albums. Miles Davis of course was a great influence, John Coltrane and people like this, and their music really inspired me.

Most of the music of the Trinity and the Oblivion Express, seems to have gained in popularity over the years. The best thing about that is that the music has lasted over a long period. At our concerts people are still asking for the early albums and when the Acid Jazz movement started in England, suddenly a lot of young people discovered our music. They were playing it at discos in London, and a lot of young bands were attracted to what we did back in the 70's and 60's.

On the album cover of "**Reinforcements**" were all the kids from the band. I just had this idea to do something different from the normal run of covers; I had seen all the kids, and we were a very tight kind of unit. So I thought why don't we bring all those kids to the photo studio? They were all beautiful looking kids. We took some photos of everybody with their kids, and we had a great time doing it! I decided to call the album "**Reinforcements**" because the kids were the next generation. Jumping up and down, right in the front on the cover, is my son Karma at the age of five. I am holding Savannah at the age of one, and Alex Ligertwood is holding his daughter and my oldest daughter Ali. Ali was two at the time, and now has her own cd out. Karma now is a mainstay of the Oblivion Express, and has his own solo cd "Blue Groove", and has started a fantastic band, the Coryell Auger Sample Trio, with Julian Coryell and Niklas Sample, the sons of Larry Coryell and Joe Sample. Savannah Auger has been a tremendous asset to the current Oblivion Express for ten years and continues to develop a following of her own fervent musical admirers.

At concerts, people wave vinyl copies of **Reinforcements** and ask for tracks from it It's amazing. And at the time of the photos, I would have never imagined that my kids would be playing with me one day! It seems that the Reinforcements have indeed arrived. At our concerts, people chase them around with the vinyl asking, "Please, could you sign this for me... "

My wife, Ella, contributed to the cover, too. She would knit stuff without any pattern. All these jumpers were knitted for the kids and me. She started off with straight lines of color across, and gradually they would get more and more intricate. Lennox Laington is wearing one of my sweaters with the piano notes. And so we thought, maybe we have enough to dress everybody – and so everybody ended up wearing one of Ella's sweaters. Really cool. That's one of my favorite covers actually.

The album was made in 1975. I transferred my family to San Francisco in the same year, and the band. So that was probably the last time I did something in England. We recorded at Trident Studio, and a funny story that I remember – I mean a lot of the things we had already written, we brought to the studio – I did one track called "**Future Pilot**" that comes from traveling in the US. Where some airlines gave the little kids that are traveling a badge that said "Future Pilot". So that conjured something up: "I'm Your Future Pilot / I can fly you to your dreams".



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“**Plum**” was a great track, too. That was the nickname for Alex Ligertwood’s wife at that time, he used to call her “Plum”.

“**The Big Yin**” – you have to pronounce it in a Scottish accent to get the real effect – was a tribute to Robbie Macintosh, the original drummer for the Oblivion Express, who became the original drummer for the Average White Band, and who tragically lost his life while playing with that band in Los Angeles. We always called him the Big One because he was so powerful a drummer in the band and a fantastic groove player.

“**Brain Damage**” – now this is a funny story: The engineer on the album was a real Cockney guy. One of the last things we recorded was “**Brain Damage**”.

This was a sequence of chords that Alex Ligertwood and Jack Mills had brought to the studio. They said, “ Listen to this, Auge, tell us if it’s any good”. – “Sounds good to me”, I said. “Why don’t we just jam one. If the take is any good we keep it otherwise we just roll over it and do something else.

I had no idea that “**Brain Damage**” was also British vernacular for something great at that time; either that, or it was “Brill”– short for “Brilliant”. Having realized that the engineer thought the take should be saved, we listened and decided to keep it. He then asked me what title he should write on the tape box. I told him that we had no title for the track. He then said, “Well then, I’m gonna write Brain Damage on the box.

We never managed to come up with a better title for the tune!

The other thing that I remember trying to do was trying to put a chorus effect on the Rhodes piano. And there was nothing in the studio that would do that at the time. And the funny thing about British sound engineers is that they always come up with some amazing formula to solve technical problems. This guy said, when we mix the track I can put a chorus on the Rhodes for you. So I asked, how are you going to do that? He went over to the 24-track machine where the two reels of tape go around. If you needed to get inside the machine to alter anything, to zero it up or whatever, you could lift the tape platform up at an angle, so you could see inside and get in there with a screwdriver. So, he lifted the table up like that, and then he taped a glass ashtray on one of the reels. He taped another ashtray not in a direct line, but like in an off-position onto the other reel. Then, we ran the track and transferred the results onto another track on the same reel of tape. And because one tape was struggling uphill and the other went racing on downhill, with the weight of the ashtrays, it put the thing slightly out of phase, and it created a chorus. At the end of the track we fade off because one of the ashtrays slipped, and you can hear the chorus getting wider and wider.

Around 1970 Moog started to produce a monophonic synthesizer, the Mini Moog. Unfortunately it could only play one note at a time, and it always seemed like a ridiculous toy



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to me. It was just a tiny keyboard, but you could create all sorts of great new sounds with it. I thought it worked really well for the melody of “**Brain Damage**”. Modern polyphonic synths create their sounds with two oscillators, but the Mini-Moog had three! It has made a recent comeback because of the depth and richness of its sounds.

“**Foolish Girl**” was a tune by Clive Chaman, the new bass player. Barry Dean had left to marry a lady in Florida. Clive had worked with the Jeff Beck Band earlier and was a great player, very groove-oriented. We all sang harmony in the back. That tune has a kind of Stevie Wonder feel to it, I think.

Also, there was a new drummer named Dave “Squeaky” Doyle – as he was nicknamed – because he had this incredible high pitched voice, but nonetheless he was a great groove player and a good guy.

On a video that I made, in Italy actually, I use one of these handheld keyboards that were popular in the Eighties. We were at a festival in Viareggio, and they decided to make a video of “**Night Train to Nowhere**”, as the RAI TV wanted to run a video of that tune. In the background there was that huge carnival going on. So I thought there is no way that I can drag my Hammond Organ into the street. So I used the Korg handheld keyboard at that time, which I actually used on the recording itself.

(Andrea Jonischkies; taken from an interview with Brian Auger in July 2009)

Editor’s Note: In the following years, 1976 and 1977, the American Contemporary Keyboard magazine voted Brian Number One Jazz Organist in the World.

Brian Auger talks about album SEARCH PARTY

When I called it “Search Party” I was thinking of the name of the band at the time, the name of the album should have been “Planet Earth Calling”. But the guy who did the cover was the same guy who had created all the art for the Fillmore West, all those amazing posters. It was a guy called Alton Kelley.

“ I had asked him if he would do the cover for me, and I did not want him to change what it looked like - which would have been rather complicated... (Laughs) And the cover is fantastic, I think – with the words Search Party and the arrows pointing North, South, East, West and the globe of the world in the background. So I simply left it like it was and began to call it the Search Party album, although the main track is “**Planet Earth Calling**”. At that time, I was beginning to realize that throwing literally millions of aluminum cans away every day every year was so wasteful, it seemed to me, this must obviously have some kind of effect on the environment. We can’t go on like this. This was just a pre-thought. At that time I had no idea that Climate Change was going to be a big deal in the 21st century. But it seemed to me that things were already out of control. So the idea of the album was, “ “ If there is anybody out there in space, here we are, Planet Earth is calling you.”



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“**Red Alert**” was another track on it.

“**Sea of Tranquility**” was named after an area on the Moon. In 1965 the Ranger 8 Spacecraft crashed there after sending back thousands of photographs of the Moon. Later, it was the landing site for the Apollo 11 astronauts.

Then I wrote a composition for the NASA Voyager Probe. Voyager had just gotten outside our solar system after being launched several years before which sparked my imagination. I had a mental picture of this space probe traveling through space and going past Saturn, going past all the planets while beaming back data. That was Voyager 2; my track is “**Voyager 3**” which is going even beyond all that. And I particularly like Ho Young’s guitar solo. It is almost like a telstar signal, the way that he is playing the guitar, like he is beaming it back to earth. This was the basic theme for the track.

I wrote “**Golden Gate**” to bring us back to earth. I used to go over the Golden Gate Bridge every day, and that was always a beautiful thing. I remember being in the studio really late, finishing off those tracks, and then driving back across the Golden Gate Bridge. Dawn was breaking on one side, and the moon was still up. And the sun was coming up on the other side from the east, an amazing picture. You come out of San Francisco driving North on the 101, and the first town on the other side is Sausalito. We mixed the album in Sausalito. Right next to the Golden Gate.

When I came to the States to live there I first lived in Tiburon which was about 2 exits up from the bridge, the exits are Sausalito, then Mill Valley, then Tiburon. We lived there for a year while we were looking to buy a house. We found one in Larkspur which is another exit up. So it wasn’t far away from the studio where we cut the album.

The album was nominated for a Bammy, (a Bay Area Grammy), as “Best Rock Instrumental Album”. BAM or “Bay Area Music” was a free bi-weekly music magazine for the musicians and culture of the San Francisco music scene. The magazine presented the Bammy Awards in a special ceremony every year for bands living in the Bay Area community.

The album was also on the Radio and Records Charts at No. 3, with Miles Davis at Number 2. R+R was a big trade magazine in America at the time. You can imagine that I was delighted about that.

I think “**Planet Earth Calling**” was the best Hammond Organ solo that I had managed to get down up to that time. It was more like me playing live, and the reason was because we played it live in the studio. I said, “I can’t play this by putting a back track down, we have to play all this together. We set the drums up on a live wooden floor and rehearsed the number and then we let rip. I was very pleased with the results.

The drummer, Dave Crigger did a phenomenal job. He really listened to what I was playing. Also our guitar player, Ho Young Kim, came up with another of his tremendous solos.



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After Herbie Hancock's Headhunters disbanded in the late 70s, I was lucky enough to have Paul Jackson and Mike Clark as my rhythm section. Paul Jackson's tune "Black Octopus", was recorded in my garage during a rehearsal.

All the other tracks were cut with various rhythm sections, but they were all with Ho Young Kim on the guitar. A monster player, he came over with his family from Japan. His dad had escaped from North Korea earlier on. He was an engineer and had brought his family to Yokohama, and from there they came over to the States. Ho went to college in the US. His mom was our Number-One-Fan actually, a sweet lady, and she would come to our gigs when we were playing in California.

Ho was just a remarkable player, and he must be even better now. I think he is more of a jazz player, and he can play rock as well. He has a distinctive sound and a distinctive style. And I never heard anybody on guitar swing any harder than Ho Young. He is just unbelievable. I met him because Paul Jackson and Mike Clark called me one day. They lived in the Bay Area at that time. They said, "Hey Brian, come over to the city, to this address. We are just having a jam session, and we want you to meet this guitar player. That turned out to be Ho Young. We played through a lot of jazz stuff and R&B stuff, and I was incredibly impressed with Ho. One of the nicest guys as you could ever meet.

Mitch Tubman was another friend of ours. I had seen him sing with a couple of bands and I told him that I had heard that tune "**I'm Gone**" and said I'd like to record that classical Blues based tune. I think my voice is pretty dry when I listen to it now. I think maybe we could have doctored it up a little bit, but there it is. Alex Ligertwood happened to stroll into the studio at one point when we were recording. I said, "Hey Eck, I'm just doing some background vocals. Would like to help me with it?" And he said, "Sure". He had gone from the Oblivion Express to Santana at the time having been made an offer he couldn't refuse!

In 1978 I went out to play the "Live Under The Sky" jazz festival in Tokyo. Tony Williams had called me, and asked me if I would play keyboards for him. I said, "It would be my honour". And so "**Red Alert**" was a tune I played with Tony. It is on one of his albums, and I particularly liked it. He congratulated me on doing my version of it, because for our version I used a synth for the melody and it really gives the sense of "Red Alert" thing – it has got very angular chords to play over... you know, a great tune.

Before the **Search Party** album I went back to London and recorded with Jools again. That album "Encore" (which has a version of Future Pilot from "Reinforcements" on it) and another album called "Happiness Heartaches" are owned by Warner Bros, but I could not get Warner to sell me the masters, although they were doing nothing with them. Which is a shame because "Happiness Heartaches" is the last album I made for a while with the Oblivion Express. Also, Lenny White, the former drummer for Miles Davis and Chick Corea's Return To Forever, actually came and played drums on the whole album for me. Dave Dowle had got very homesick, and he and his wife decided to go back to England. That left me without a drummer to do the album, so I called Lenny.

On the **Search Party** album I had a quote by Sri Chinmoy – "I do not compete with the world, I only compete with my own ignorance". The deeper I get into Music, the more relevant that quote becomes.



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Usually, I do have a natural skepticism against people that sell religion for money, but that quote simply appealed to me. I learned those things while being out there on my own and trying to develop my music. A lot of people get very upset when somebody plays better than they do. It is really funny but there is a lot of jealousy that goes on, but I never felt that music is a competition. To me it's a communication. I try to present myself and my ideas in a way that other people can enjoy them whether they are musicians or not.

Music's always been a passion of mine and when playing Live, I try to give the audience 150% of my spirit and energy. It is not for some special market, it's not that I want to be a millionaire, I just want to be a good musician and I want to have a band and an atmosphere in which I really can continue to develop my skills. That is about it.

(Andrea Jonischkies; taken from an interview with Brian Auger in July 2009)

Tracklist:

CD 1: „Reinforcements“

1. Brain Damage
2. Thoughts From Afar
3. Foolish Girl
4. The Big Yin
5. Plum
6. Something Out Of Nothing
7. Future Pilot

CD 2: „Search Party“

1. Planet Earth Calling
2. Red Alert
3. Sea Of Tranquility
4. Voyager 3
5. I'm Gone
6. Golden Gate
7. Black Octopus (Bonus Track)



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