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Michael "Kalani" Bruno

On The Road With Yanni

• by Dave Black

If there is such a thing as a post-modern percussionist, Michael "Kalani" Bruno might just be one. Walk into his studio and you'll find instruments from every corner of the earth. There are balifones and mallet controllers, bata drums, bodhrans, and virtually every other kind of percussion instrument imaginable. These are more than just his tools of the trade; in a sense, they constitute a study of cultures from ancient rituals to the avant-garde. And besides that, Mike finds them to be loads of fun!

Bruno's career has been very diverse. He's collaborated with Max Roach on a Berkeley Repertory Theater production, and he has worked with Kenny Loggins, Barry Manilow, Chanté Moore, Vic Damone, Chita Rivera, and John Mayall. He's also appeared on a number of soundtracks and albums for Disney, Warner Brothers, Tri-Star, and BMG.

Mike has always taken his art seriously. His skills were attained through intense study both in the San Francisco Bay area (where he was born), and later at California State University, Northridge. There he studied with Joel Leach, Karen Ervin Pershing, Tom Raney, Jerry Steinholtz, and Alex Acuña.

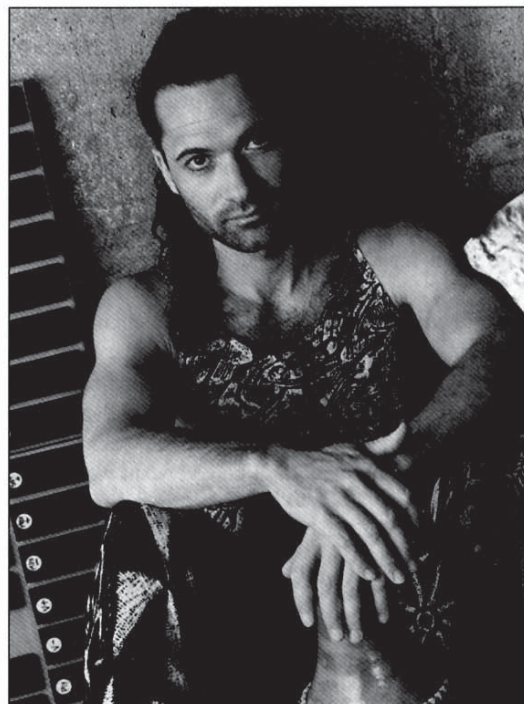
When Mike's not traveling, he spends time studying the music of other cultures, presenting clinics, and composing. His composition credits already include music for radio, videos, theater, and television. Along with all of that, he recently completed a three-month national tour with pianist/composer Yanni.

DB: How did you get the gig with Yanni?

MB: Like many of the jobs I get, the Yanni gig began with a referral from a fellow musician, which in turn led to an audition. But unlike many of the jobs I've auditioned for, I was asked to bring nothing in the way of equipment. I think Yanni was more concerned with finding someone who was interested in working with him to create parts that fit into the live show, since this was his first touring band. After a short playing audition on a couple of congas they provided, we adjourned to his studio, where we talked about his music for the better part of an hour. Yanni liked the fact that I played a wide variety of instruments and styles. I think having orchestral experience, as well as being proficient in a variety of ethnic and rock styles, helped me understand what he was looking for and, in turn, gave him the confidence to ask me to work with him.

DB: What instruments does he use, and how important is the role of the percussionist in his music?

MB: The band includes drums, bass, percussion, two violins, cello, two keyboardists, and Yanni on synthesizer and piano. The role of



the percussionist varies from tune to tune. On the up-tempo material, Yanni likes the percussionist to drive the band, so I played a lot of congas, bongos, and djembe. Some tunes, however, would require a lighter touch. For example, one particular tune comes to mind where Yanni played piano and I played an Udu drum. Other tunes are quite orchestral-sounding, so my function as the percussionist was to add color by using instruments such as piatti, triangle, chimes, whistles, and rattles.

DB: Tell me a little about the tour.

MB: Because the entire two-hour show had to be memorized, and since many of the tunes needed to be arranged, we rehearsed for about four weeks. We had a great crew. Everyone got along very well—and when you're out for three months, that's very important. We played in sixty-odd venues all across the U.S., with one stop in Canada, mostly in 2,000- to 3,000-seat theaters. I think many people came to the concerts expecting to watch a couple of guys and a sequencer, and were surprised to see nine musicians playing on a stage that looked like a spaceship from *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.

DB: When you're on tour with Yanni, how do you remain fresh and creative?

MB: When you're working with talented people, it's not hard to

stay interested. Everyone was into different styles of music, and we would all share whatever we were into. I think we all benefited. We would also try to see other acts whenever possible. For instance, I was able to see *Cats*, Tracy Chapman, and Metallica all in one week!

I also took a couple of small instruments with me to play backstage and in my hotel rooms. The pandeiro is a good one to bring along, because no matter how much you play it, you still suck!

When we were in the Ohio area, I called Larry Snider at the University of Akron, whom I had met at PASIC '91. I told him I was in town and I'd be glad to stop by and talk to the students, so we scheduled a clinic. I recruited three of my fellow bandmembers and we sneaked into one of the ballrooms at the hotel to arrange Latin and Brazilian tunes the night before. We all had a blast playing for the students, and I had a great time talking about percussion for an hour and a half.

DB: Who else have you worked and/or recorded with?

MB: I've been recording and touring with Chanté Moore, who's a wonderfully talented singer on the Silas/MCA record label. I also recently performed in London with Barry Manilow. That gig was one of the toughest I've ever done, because the percussion book also included a large amount of keyboard parts—everything from harp glisses to oboe solos and sound effects. A large amount of time was spent just programming all the splits and patch changes in the two-hour show. There must have been over sixty different setups. I used a *MalletKAT* and a *drumKAT* for the controllers, and a *Proteus 2* along with a couple of samplers for sound sources.

DB: You do a lot of composing. What prompted your interest in that area?

MB: Composing is something that happens when we use our instruments as vessels for opportunity instead of out of obligation. I think every musician is capable of composing, but I think drummers often feel intimidated because their focus is usually on rhythm and not on melody and harmony.

I had an eye-opening experience when I was working for Max Roach on a Berkeley Repertory Theater play. It was my first taste of improvisational scoring. Max composed in an avant-garde style, by only giving each musician guidelines to improvise within. For example, he might have me play an African 6/8 groove, while having the guitarist play a sporadic blues. By the end of a week of rehearsals, we were playing two hours of music without any charts. Being a part of that kind of compositional process really widened the field for me, because it validated a method for composing I found more accessible.

I find writing to be both a challenging and liberating experience. Every time you set out to compose, you start traveling somewhere you've never been before. The great thing about it is you can get there any way you want.

DB: How does working with celebrity performers such as Yanni compare to what you imagined a career in music would be like when you were in high school or college?

MB: It's very different. When I was in high school I thought someday I would be playing drums in a group like Led Zeppelin. The

music business was all quite magical to me back then. I had a more simplistic view of things. You start a band, you make a record, and you play concerts. Ha! Back then I didn't have any concept of what being a sideman was all about. When you work for Yanni or any other name artist, the reason you're in the band is to make *his* or *her* music sound good. It's really not the place for personal opinions, although I've found most people, including Yanni, to be generally very open to outside ideas and very easy to work with.

I enjoy working in a variety of musical settings. One great thing about free-lancing is that it puts you in a variety of musical situations. When in town, I might have a session in the morning, a Brazilian gig in the afternoon, and an orchestra gig at night.

DB: In your early development as a musician, what experiences do you feel were most important in getting you where you are today?

MB: I think having good teachers was, and is, important. My first teacher worked with me to develop skills that would allow me to pursue my short-term goals—a rock band, for example—while building a foundation for growth in other areas. I think your beginnings have a lot to do with how well you continue to grow. I've always been genuinely interested in “checking out” things that are new and different—but at the same time wanting to learn at my own pace and in a way that makes sense to me. That's how I stay interested.



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