

# ALLYN ROBINSON

Hurricane Katrina took many things away from the highly respected New Orleans drummer. But even Mother Nature can't erase the enormous impact he's had on the city's musical legacy.

by Cleve Warren

New Orleans, the birthplace of our instrument, has produced untold numbers of great drummers, from inventors of the jazz language such as Warren "Baby" Dodds to contemporary musical ambassadors like Johnny Vidacovich, Herlin Riley, Stanton Moore, and Russell Batiste. Among the city's most revered players is Allyn Robinson, whose playing has elevated the work of hundreds of local artists, including some who were at the center of important evolutionary changes in New Orleans music.

Robinson, a true exponent of the New Orleans style of drumming, was born and raised in the Crescent City. He began playing at age thirteen and soon was performing in his high school band and with local drum and bugle corps. The drum instructor Al Doria Jr., who provided Robinson with a strong rudimental background and taught him various styles, would later remark on Allyn's uncanny sense of time, even at a very young age.

Robinson's early live experiences involved accompanying go-go dancers and jukeboxes in New Orleans nightclubs, as well as playing in a series of local teenage R&B bands. His first professional act, New Era, took him to Colorado, where he played for over a year. The group was on the brink of a recording contract when it broke up, as Allyn says, "for all the usual reasons."

The breakup turned out to be a windfall

for Robinson, though. Soon after moving back home, he wound up with what many at the time considered the gig of a lifetime, with the legendary thirteen-piece horn band Wayne Cochran and the C.C. Riders. The group bridged the gap between James Brown, Southern R&B, and big band jazz and boasted some of the most promising players on the scene. Among them were the future Grammy-winning composer Alan Silvestri (*The Bodyguard*, *The Polar Express*), saxophonist



Dick Oatts (Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Flim & the BB's), trumpet player Lee Thornburg (the *Tonight Show* band, Tower of Power), and guitarist/musical director Charlie Brent

## A VITAL LINK IN THE CHAIN Peter Erskine on Allyn Robinson

I have a tremendous feeling of gratitude toward Allyn Robinson, even though we met only briefly back in 1980. Allyn is a key missing link in the history of the time and place where R&B intersected with jazz and fusion styles.

Allyn was Jaco Pastorius's rhythm mate in the Wayne Cochran band, the group Jaco toured with pretty much up until the time he joined Weather Report. I had been listening to Allyn's drumming on the album *Cochran* since 1972, and it had a big influence on me. Aside from some Earl Palmer recordings, it was my first connection to New Orleans drumming. Something about Allyn's beat must have gotten inside my own; this is one of the only explanations of why Jaco recommended me so strongly to Weather Report after only one listen—he heard and sensed a rhythm comfort zone, in addition to the jazz chops I had, and that comfort zone came directly from Allyn's influence on me.

When Jaco and I were together in Weather Report, he never stopped talking about Allyn. There's an incredible synergy to explore concerning the meeting of the Florida beat of Jaco, the New Orleans beat of Allyn, and the R&B big band writing of Charlie Brent. I hear it as being pivotal, and the history seems undocumented for the most part.



Robinson back in the day, and today





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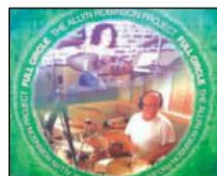
(Sea Level, Dukes of Dixieland).

The Riders' arrangements were notoriously tough, but Robinson's great groove and reading background kept him in the drum chair for four and a half years. Aside from an annual twelve-week stint in Las Vegas, the band played one-nighters year-round, including gigs with Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, Ike and Tina Turner, and Tower of Power.

Among the most notorious musicians in the C.C. Riders lineup was a young bass player from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, named Jaco Pastorius. Pastorius, who would go on to change the way we think about the electric bass via his playing with the fusion supergroup Weather Report, called Robinson one of his favorite drummers, mentioning him alongside such heavyweights as Peter Erskine and Kenwood Dennard. The duo's rhythmic connection certainly did produce some incredible grooves. Check out rehearsal performance of "Rice Pudding," for instance, available on *Portrait of Jaco: The Early Years, 1968-1978*. Robinson and Pastorius practiced together constantly in the ten months the bassist was in the band. In fact, Allyn was in the Florida hotel room where Jaco famously pulled the frets out of his bass, kick-starting a new phase of modern music.

Robinson left Cochran's band in 1975 to spend more time with his family, working day jobs and

## BRINGING IT FULL CIRCLE



After a lifetime of playing the role of the consummate musical accomplice, Robinson recently released his debut recording as a

leader, the Allyn Robinson Project's *Full Circle*. It's a showcase of the drummer's ease with all styles of New Orleans drumming, facilitated by an excellent band. Lately Robinson has also begun to lecture on the evolution of New Orleans music and the great players responsible for its development. Allyn says that his ultimate goal for the project is to accompany his master classes with live playing.

gigging around New Orleans at night. After a yearlong residency in Jacksonville, Florida, with the gospel singer and trumpeter Phil Driscoll—replacing Jamie Oldaker, who moved on to play with Eric Clapton—Robinson returned to New Orleans once again and formed the band Trick Bag with Charlie Brent and the famed Louisiana singer Luther Kent. Every major artist that appeared in New Orleans over the next five years came to hear or sit in with this incredible band. To get an idea of Robinson's absolute mastery of handling a large band with horns, go to YouTube and search for "Jazz Excursions/Luther Kent & Trick Bag 1981."

By the mid-'80s, many of Robinson's friends had moved to Los Angeles and were encouraging Allyn to do the same. The drummer decided to make the move, but despite occasional blues tours up and down the coast, little of substance was happening with his career. Discouraged,



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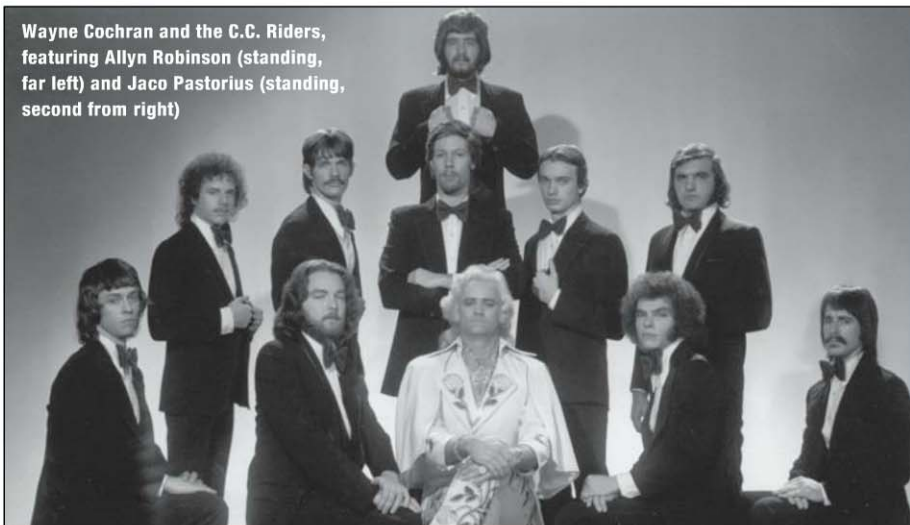
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Wayne Cochran and the C.C. Riders,  
featuring Allyn Robinson (standing,  
far left) and Jaco Pastorius (standing,  
second from right)



he went back to New Orleans for a seemingly endless series of club jobs and local recording projects.

Allyn caught a break in the early '90s, when a friend, drummer Karl Himmel, recommended him for overseas work with Dr. Hook featuring Ray Sawyer. Word of mouth about his outstanding drumming on the gig led to work with the Louisiana blues guitarist Tab Benoit, who was putting together a band for touring and recording. Six years and three CDs later, Robinson, tired of the constant grind of traveling, decided to quit the road—and begin a new chapter in his life.

For years Robinson's family recipes and expertise at cooking local dishes made him a

highly valued bandmate on the road. In 2001 he became a personal chef for a family in town, a job that enabled him to have a steady income *and* to choose the kind of music he wanted to play. Finally he was able to have a life filled with stability, a good income, and musically satisfying work. This situation lasted for four years—until August 29, 2005, the day that Hurricane Katrina hit southeastern Louisiana.

The failure of the levee system in and around New Orleans resulted in Katrina's becoming the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history. At the time, Robinson was living in the suburb of Chalmette, where 81 percent of the homes were severely damaged or destroyed. Allyn and his family were given fifteen minutes to take out anything they could carry before the floodwaters would reach them. The drummer was able to grab only a few family mementos before the water engulfed his home. All of his equipment, and nearly everything else the family owned, was lost in the course of just a few minutes.

In retrospect, the Robinsons were lucky to get out alive; more than 1,800 people lost their lives as a result of Hurricane Katrina. But like tens of thousands of other victims, Allyn's family struggled through a long and painful journey back to a normal life. One person moved by the Robinsons' plight was Peter Erskine, Jaco Pastorius's rhythmic partner in Weather Report, who helped Allyn obtain replacement equipment through Drum Workshop. It was Erskine's first recommendation after joining the DW team.

Seven years after the disaster, Robinson's stature as one of New Orleans' most respected drummers is stronger than ever. Today, on any given night, you can find Allyn playing around town with a killer local or national act. You'll be experiencing the art of a true New Orleans drumming immortal, a musical titan loved and respected by his family and his peers, and a testimony to the values of hard work, talent, kindness, and determination.

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