

The TRAP Story

On September 6th 1997, I was catching the last wave at the beach here in Carpinteria before getting ready for my gig that night in a pizza joint on the Mesa in Santa Barbara. I had played the night before in a fun dump in San Louis Obispo and was looking forward to another funky gig with Skye Ferguson, one of my favorite blues artists here on the Central Coast. As I swam into the crest of the wave it grabbed and slammed me into the ocean bottom. No hesitation, no continuity, just wham, bam, crack! Now, three feet under water, my body floating into what seemed a time without end.

As many times as I've tried to articulate it, words always seem to pale the experience. I felt myself drifting towards an indescribable calm. If you've ever had a beloved pet or have one now, then you know what its like to experience the love in their eyes as they look into yours. I had a dog for many years, his name was Bach and we were as close as two living, breathing entities could possibly be. When Bach looked at me I could feel the unconditional love, trust, and acceptance he felt for me, there was nothing like it. If I could describe this place I was drifting towards, I guess I could say; it was like falling into Bach's eyes. And then, at the risk of sounding as if I'd completely taken leave of my senses, in this spiritual abyss through a wave of infinite space, I could see someone who was apparently holding on to what looked like a tornado, really, I know it's the epitome of *out* but.... though spinning fiercely, he seemed to be hanging on effortlessly with one hand and beckoning me with the other. Lets go, follow me, its time to go. Some years ago, a dear friend of mine passed away and though I couldn't be sure, it felt like this very same friend, this amazing energy was there to guide me on this enticing path towards a kinder, infinite world. As I moved willingly in this way spiritually, I could see my body floating in the opposite direction. Yet not completely detached, I knew I would have to drown to let go completely. There was no doubt I wanted to continue on this journey and so I opened my mouth to let the water in. I knew that this act of drowning would liberate me spirit from body. When I opened my mouth to let this happen, I felt a strong hand placed firmly in my back as I was lifted up and out of the water. Instead of the water rushing in, I took a deep breath of air. I saw the beautiful Carpinteria sky and in the blink of an eye, I was back. I was clearly disappointed, the first words I uttered were, "Oh Shit". I was placed gently on the shore, but *I was totally paralyzed.*

For lack of any other descriptive adjective, a flock of angels disguised as lifeguards, and paramedics gathered me up, body, mind, and spirit, including my splintered neck, and rushed me off to the hospital. Though divine hands clearly played a significant roll in this rescue, these precious souls served as incomparable partners.

I was still touring and recording with Jimmy Messina at the time and had just signed on to do the “World Classic Rockers” with Spenser Davis, Denny Laine of McCartney’s Wings, Nick St. Nicolas of “Steppenwolf”, Bobby Kimball of “Toto”, and Randy Misener of “The Eagles” I had a ticket for the first gig which was in Las Cruces New Mexico on that very next Friday. This was a very cool gig; we did all the hits from the various groups that we had all played with along the way, great music and really great fun to play. I never got to do one show with this band. In my forced absence, my good friend Carmine Appice stepped in to cover the gig.

I also had a ticket for Michael Martin Murphy’s Cowboy and Indian Festival in Breckenridge Colorado to perform with Jimmy Messina that Saturday. I’d do the gig Friday in Las Cruces, fly out to Denver in the morning and drive to Breckenridge in time for Messina’s gig late in the day Saturday. Man, I don’t miss juggling gigs like that, juggling egos either. Jimmy did that gig unplugged, no drums.

On my way to the hospital in the ambulance, I made several jokes with the paramedics, all of whom thought I was delusional. I told them as a drummer and that I could do four completely independent things, one with each limb. How strange that at this moment, I was merely a talking head. This had to be awkward for them believing of course that I was likely a quadriplegic and may never move again. They all laughed nervously and continued to humor me until they delivered me in my stillness to the emergency room at St Francis Hospital in Santa Barbara.

There I met the good doctor Scott Conner. If Scott were a drummer, he’d be Vinnie, enough said. He and I shared a few laughs as he explained the severity of my accident and the urgency of the imminent procedure ahead. He made me feel comfortable and confident that I would survive the ordeal even though when I asked him if he’d lost any recently, he simply chuckled. The folks in the OR were all upbeat and truly a team. I told the anesthesiologist that he reminded me of a great bass player I worked with once who was really funky. I told him I hoped he was that soulful and he told me to count backwards from 100. The operation was a six-hour affair where they took a bone from my hip and fused three cervical vertebrae, 5,6, and 7 and then merged my neck with 4 screws and a metal plate. Not exactly Frankenstein but, not exactly not!

When I woke up in the ICU, I thought I was dreaming. There were people and Angels milling around. Sometimes I couldn’t tell the difference; sometimes they were one in the same. It was surreal but too real to dismiss as anything less than the beautiful, reassuring, and calming reality it was.

After a week in ICU I was transferred to The Rehabilitation Institute in Santa Barbara. Although antiquated, an old world Spanish charm gave the sprawling adobe complex a sense of character and undeniable Santa Barbara style. It was set in the foothills overlooking the Pacific Ocean, a cool breeze and picturesque view made it as pleasant a place possible for people who were facing traumatic life changes on a daily basis.

The building was designed to contain several patient wards in addition to the various treatment, recreation, and administrative offices. My ward, the spinal cord ward had eight beds. The four beds in front were for the ladies and four in the rear, divided only by a curtain, for the men.

The rehab was indeed a safe haven, a place to heal and re-think my life. The first little while I was simply observing this new world I found myself in.

I was in a bit of a haze but as soon as it cleared, I asked a friend to bring me a pair of drum sticks and a couple of percussion toys, not that I was able to hold anything yet but, it seemed the right time to start putting my new life in motion, *motion* being the operative word. I had to look at the very real possibility that *I may never play another note*. Can you imagine this? I can't remember a moment in my life when drums and drumming wasn't a part of it.

On the other *abstract* hand if you will, in some respect, it was also a relief. What I mean is, having made a living my entire life playing drums wasn't exactly a walk in the park. The competition is stiff and the constant painstaking quest for that one big gig eventually falls away in pursuit of the rent and other pertinent matters like food.

I've lived and loved my life as a drummer in the music business since I played my first professional gig at age 12 in 1959. It was a wedding with the proprietors of the Ed-Stan Music Company, the local music store in Derby Connecticut, my hometown. I can't for the life of me remember Ed or Stan. I do however remember the music, which was awful. My Dad in addition to fixing my shirt collar and correcting my Double Windsor had to endure the tedious Ed-Stan repertoire, as did I. This night, my first real gig, was a night to remember, or maybe, one I wish I could forget. It did, if nothing else, lend credence to the old adage, how do you make a musician complain? ... *Get him a gig*. You might say; I set that precedent early.

My career has spanned over 40 years and encompassed lots of musical situations. Ten thousand gigs and ten thousand players, decades of music filled my every waking moment. I was privileged to work and many times record *as a sideman* with artists including Delaney Bramlett, Bobby Whitlock, The Beach Boys, Dobie Gray, Del Shannon, Rick Nelson and the Stone Canyon Band, Dr. John, Ike Turner, Brenda Russell, Marianne Faithful, Tata Vega, Ronnie Laws, Dwight Yoakum, Johnny Rivers, Freddy Fender and Charlie Rich as well as Jimmy Messina and JD Souther.

It's funny how we always mention all the *name* artists and not our most creative musical endeavors or friends for that matter. What's up with that? The music business has its own jive, modus operandi if you will. So many times I'll run into other players who immediately have the urge to tell me what and or who they are playing with, what they've done lately, and what they will be doing for the next six months when all I really wanted to do was to say hi.

The accident was like looking at life through a brand new lens and with what I had to face, living in the now was paramount.

With little physical prowess I held the stick clumsily in my right hand and tapped on the side of my bed. *Not bad ...* I thought. My soul hadn't been affected despite my physicality. And why would it be? Rhythm comes from a place deep inside all of us, a place no physical trauma can reach. It moves us in a positive direction mentally, physically, and spiritually.

As I tapped away I thought to ask Oscar, the aide in my ward to join in. I gave him a simple rhythm and he played along perfectly. With this little groove we had happening, a little old lady, Edith rolled in from the ladies side of the ward and said; Eddie, I'd like to play too. Knowing that she was suffering from spinal cord surgery and in constant pain I thought, why not, it might take her mind off the reality of her condition if only for a little while. Oscar handed Edith a cowbell and I asked her to play the "ands"
1 (and) 2 (and) 3 (and) 4 (and). She didn't quite grasp the concept and opted for another beat ... in the mean time, Ted, another ward mate proclaimed, Hey! I can play that part Eddie. Give me the cowbell. Oscar hesitated fearing Ted's condition being as weak as he was by way of pancreatic cancer, diabetes, recently having suffered a stroke and to add insult to injury, had crashed his motorcycle and broken every bone in his body resulting in blood clots. Go ahead Oscar; I said. Oscar placed the cow bell on Ted's chest and put the drum stick in his one functional hand, in a split second Ted had the "ands" playing loud and clear. Hey Eddie! *Don't forget about me;* said Edith, I want to play too. No problem honey, simply clap your hands in four, 1,2,3,4!
Three more incapacitated people would be hard to find, even in our rehab but we were cookin like peas in a pot!
Nurses and aides were dancing, doctors were smiling and the feeling in my ward was up and happy for the first time since I arrived, we were *alive!*

As soon as I was ambulatory, we moved the drumming into the 1:30 coordination group in Occupational Therapy. Here it began to take shape as a real and useful tool in addressing rehab goals. Social integration, regenerating nerves and impulses, focus and attention span as well as speech and memory came into play as we designed the many different exercises. Using simply musical notation to identify beats, we guided the fun we were having into therapeutic successes. Therapists from every discipline in the hospital were dropping by with patients to utilize the drum therapy as it fit into their various goals.

Libby Whaley, the director of Recreational Therapy took an active interest in our classes and began lending her expertise on a regular basis. When she felt confident that the program had therapeutic merit she brought it to senior leadership at the hospital where it was approved. From then on it was a matter of experience, trail and error and finally showing it to other therapists at conferences both regional and national.

It was at one of these conferences that I met a recreational therapist named Suzy Getty who would introduce me to the field of developmental disabilities. Libby Whaley and I showed the program to a group of recreational therapists in Northern California. Karl Perazzo joined us along with Walfredo Reyes Sr. They dazzled the audience with some pretty exceptional playing during our presentation. Suzy enjoyed our workshop and felt it may be something the kids she worked with would enjoy. She invited me to her class at a school in Pasadena. She taught one class of children ages five through twelve while her partner Seiko Niimi, a developmental therapist, taught another class ages twelve through twenty.

This was a learning experience that touched me deeply as I watched the intellectual and developmentally challenged kids play and laugh with Suzy's gentle instruction integrating the drums and percussion into existing therapeutic modalities. Suzy had the kids sit in a circle with their hands on their laps. She put a shaker in front of each one and asked them to pick it up. Shake the shaker over your head she said, now put it down on the floor and put your hands back on your lap. Pick it up and shake it in front of you and then put it down on the floor again. Now, pick it up and tap your elbow with the shaker, touch your toes, hold it behind you, wave it across, around you, tap it under your seat and so on. Prepositional concepts became a fun game that would in time result in a true learning experience for the kids. These simple concepts would apply in the typical world by giving our students more confidence and integrity. Seiko's kids were older and a tad more capable and so the instruction was adjusted to their level. That is the beauty of the program; it works on many levels regardless of the ability.

I worked at the rehab with Libby for three years, two classes a week honing our skills while traveling to Pasadena every other week to teach and learn with Seiko. In the mean time I taught a class at a place called Jodi House, a support group for Traumatic Brain Injury and also worked twice a month at Casablanca for the care of Alzheimer's and dementia. During this time I also introduced the program to other facilities and organizations serving people with developmental challenges. Many have since adopted the classes.

It's much like learning drums. Years of lessons, study with different teachers, lots of reading, writing and practice and then the gigs, lots of gigs. I now teach folks to become facilitators and always stress that once they've accomplished the basics, personal style is everything.

I've seen TRAP facilitators in many places now and have been very proud and impressed with their manner of teaching and the way they made the program their own. The way they tuned their approach and the dynamics in their execution, their own definitive pocket, so to speak.

Almost twelve Years have past since The Rhythmic Arts Project was born. Seiko Niimi and I are still working together today. She has been a mentor and friend

lending her advice and council while traveling and teaching with me all these years. I'm still in touch with Libby too on a regular basis.

Our target audience is primarily people with intellectual and developmental disabilities though we work in typical schools where inclusion is practiced. We have classes in physical rehabilitation as well as in the field of dementia and Alzheimer's. The project was created to enhance the lives of people with disabilities utilizing rhythm, drums, and other percussion instruments. The Rhythmic Arts Project is not a drum circle. We are a very serious and proven learning curve having met the standards for education in several states where we facilitate. By integrating drums and percussion into existing teaching methods/modalities, we address basic life skills such as turn taking, spatial awareness, kinesthetic awareness, fine and gross motor skills, lateral concepts, prepositional concepts, adding/subtracting, times tables, focus, memory and visual and auditory perceptions. Teaching occurs in an environment that is fun and not threatening so participants develop improved confidence and a more positive self-image.

In addition to our home office here in California we have TRAP facilitators available in Vermont, Ohio, Massachusetts, Upstate New York, Tennessee and now in Price Edward Island in Nova Scotia.

My work is delightful given the situation I'm able to create with clients, health care workers, aids, and therapists alike. It's a win; win in light of how much fun we have. This is not to say that we don't make a significant contribution, we do, it's the essence of good humor and laughter that frame and enhance The Rhythmic Arts Project. There has been much personal satisfaction in these past twelve years. The most cherished moments having enjoyed the unconditional love, devotion, and dedication shown by all the people surrounding the project. Beginning with the therapists and health care workers I encountered as a patient at the rehabilitation institute, to the many people I've met working in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Thank God, drumming is still one of the most important things in my life today. That I can play at all is a blessing and I'm grateful for the joy it brings me. It took a while to get my chops, both of them, back but now I'm having more fun than I ever did behind the kit.

Drums transcend normal logic; the inherent healing and positive qualities have enhanced something very personal to me, my own recovery.