

ROBIN THICKE'S KEYBOARD ACCOMPLICE
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Larry Cox

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"Music is about feeling," says keyboardist and producer Larry Cox. "It's about evoking emotion. If I'm not making you bob your head to what you hear, if I'm not making you feel what I do, then it's not music—it's just notes."

Fortunately, millions of listeners are feeling what Cox does. As musical accomplice to pop/R&B singer/songwriter Robin Thicke, he's had a hand in such smashes as "Lost Without You" and "Wanna Love You Girl." And as Thicke's musical accomplice, he's had the opportunity to work with Usher, Pharrell Williams, and Lil Wayne.

"I'm Robin's right-hand man and music director," says Cox, speaking by phone from Thicke's Hollywood recording studio, where he's working on the follow-up to *The Evolution of Robin Thicke*, the singer's 2006 breakthrough disc. "In Robin's show, I'm the second principal. I rap, hype the crowd, do sing-backs, sing a few leads. It's been a long journey from when I joined the band seven years ago."

And it's only the latest part of the journey. By the age of four, Larry was being tutored in music by his father, a clergyman and talented amateur musician. "We grew up poor, five of us in a two-bedroom apartment in North Long Beach, California—it was your usual 'hood story. We had no piano, so I learned on a bunch of small, cheap keyboards. I started playing in church regularly at age 11. I started out on piano, but then I got into brass instruments and learned how to read. And at 14, I turned professional when I produced my first gospel album."

The album featured songs by Larry's father. "He took me into the studio," Larry recalls. "I orchestrated everything and provided most of the instrumentation. It was my first experience putting it all together. We did eight songs over a couple of months—it taught me a lot about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it."

Larry studied jazz in high school, and classical music at Long Beach State. Later he taught high school music, but soon realized his heart lay elsewhere. "My main calling is performance and production," he says. "So I started touring. I did a run with Brian McKnight, and then toured with Jessica Simpson. I did music supervision and music direction on a BET show called *Comicview*. I did some work with Randy Jackson. And I teamed up with Robin."

Cox lent new soul and depth to Thicke's sound, but he says the communication was two-way: "Robin opened my eyes to a lot of things. For example, I wasn't heavy into rock and roll, but he introduced me to things like Sgt. Pepper. I was able to combine those new influences with the jazz, soul, R&B, and gospel that I brought from the 'hood and the church. It changed what I was doing."

The results are sometimes hard to classify. "I hate to say we do R&B or hip-hop, because we do everything. We're trying to take music in a new direction. We hate the copycat sound of everyone using the same loops, the same formats. We're trying to do something a bit more musical."

Inspired by vintage R&B, Cox favors warm, organic sounds, which he conjures from several Yamaha Motifs. "I started using the Motif in 2003 during a Brian McKnight tour. I fell in love the instant I heard the Rhodes sounds, the pianos, the organs. I have a Motif XS7 and an ES6 in my studio, so I use them a lot in production. There are so many new sounds in the XS7, it's ridiculous! They're all so pure-sounding, and it's easy to create new sounds from them. Many cats who tour use a lot of controllers and modules, but we're playing hard-core soul music with natural, organic sounds—so the Motif's favorites list is great for me, because I usually rely on five or six basic sounds. The Motif is just a user-friendly board."

In addition to his work with Thicke, Cox recently started a production company with his brother, Dewand Cox, whose MC name is Kampain. "We're writing songs and tracks for people, but also creating music for ourselves," says Larry. He's also producing actor/singer Keith Robinson, and collaborating with Thicke on material for the next Usher album.

"I'm just doing what I know how to do," says Cox. "And I'm so blessed to be doing this. I don't work a regular job. I get paid well to do what I love to do. I can make a mark in the world, and it's all at my leisure. It's crazy! I do want to get my PhD someday, but right now, the mission I'm on is the most important."

