



STEVE PORCARO **ALL THIS AND TOTO TOO**

Steve Porcaro found success early and never lost it. After serving briefly as Boz Scaggs's backing band, he and a group of young musicians christened themselves Toto and launched a long string of platinum albums, generating such classic rock staples as "Hold the Line," "Rosanna," and "Africa."

"We never played a nightclub in our lives," says Steve, speaking from his Southern California studio. "Toto never played an audition or did a showcase for the label. They saw us onstage with Boz Scaggs, we knew we wanted to be with that same record company, and it all happened pretty fast."

Steve left the band in the late '80s, but rejoined last year in time to tour with a new configuration featuring drummer Simon Phillips. (Jeff Porcaro, the group's original drummer and Steve's elder brother, passed away in 1992.) Meanwhile, bassist Nathan East fills in for the third Porcaro brother, Mike, who is battling ALS.

Steve partly credits his success to two family role models: his dad, famed session percussionist Joe Porcaro, and Jeff, who'd established himself as a leading session drummer years before Toto formed.

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“My dad and Jeff showed me how high the bar was, just how good you had to be,” says Steve. “You couldn’t just be good at this groove or that groove—you had to be a completely well-rounded musician. You also had to play well with others—and I’m not just talking about music! You have to learn a lot about diplomacy if you want to get hired more than once.”

Steve managed to follow in their successful footsteps. When he wasn’t working with Toto, he played sessions for such artists as Earth, Wind & Fire, Pink Floyd, Miles Davis, Bette Midler, the Brothers Johnson, Chicago, Don Henley, George Benson, Sarah Vaughan, Yes, Rod Stewart, Lionel Richie, Christina Aguilera, Quincy Jones, and Chris Brown. He’s also composed many hits for other artists, including “Human Nature,” a highlight of Michael Jackson’s earth-shaking *Thriller* album.

“Working with Michael was amazing,” recalls Steve. “I’d been a fan from the Jackson 5 days, and I wound up playing on all his solo albums except the last one. There was always something special about him. Everyone who worked with him sensed something bubbling underneath. We wrote a lot together, and I’m still sitting on some unreleased songs we worked on, with finished lead vocals and everything.”

While Porcaro is a gifted pianist, he’s made his biggest mark as a synthesizer player and programmer. “When I was getting started,” he remembers, “I’d look around at what other session keyboardists were doing. I had to ask myself, ‘How can I compete with David Foster, David Paich, and Michael Omartian?’ I couldn’t! I had nowhere near their talent. But I saw a niche for myself with the synthesizer, and I just went with it.”

And so began a decades-long partnership with Yamaha. Steve often relied on the Yamaha CS-80, a 200-pound synth famed for its fat analog sounds. He was also an early adopter of the company’s groundbreaking digital synth, the DX7, and even helped unveil it at the 1983 NAMM show. “I felt like we were pretty leading-edge back in those days, and Yamaha was a big part of that. I had a great relationship with product development, as well as the artist program. Yamaha’s product specialists have always been amazing, and I know that all the guys who program the sounds are gigging musicians themselves.”

Nowadays Porcaro is a fan of Yamaha’s Motif series keyboards. “I would always have the original Motif 7 under my arm whenever I ran off to do a gig,” he says. “It had all the classic go-to sounds, plus lots of stuff I’d never heard before. Now I’m getting into the new Motif XF7. It seems like a big step forward, in terms of having more knobs so it’s easier to program. It also has lots more power, so you can do things like have separate effects on different patches within a multi-sound.”

Another current workhorse is his CP5 Stage Piano. “We got it just days before we left for the Toto tour, and I’m loving it for Rhodes sounds,” says Steve. “I know that seems like a cliché, since it seems like everyone’s been doing that sound. But most of them sound cheap and cheesy, and some of the software-synth versions are just horrible—and I’m a guy who loves soft synths! But the sound of the CP5 is pretty much unsurpassed. And then there’s the feel. The action and overall playability of Yamaha keyboards are so much better than on any other 88-note synth keyboard I’ve ever played.”

And as if Steve weren’t busy enough, he’s also the composer for the FX Network series *Justified*, a recent winner of a prestigious Peabody Award. “It’s sort of a ‘wild east’ show starring Timothy Olyphant from *Deadwood* as a federal marshal,” he explains. “It’s set in places like Kentucky and Florida, and features lots of moonshiners and rednecks. Much of the score is guitar-based, Appalachian-flavored stuff, so I have Mark Bonilla, a guitarist, as my right-hand guy. It’s a very different direction for me, but I like it because I have to use my imagination so much.”

Despite Porcaro’s current success, he’s well aware that these aren’t exactly boom times for musicians. “This is a real tough business,” he says. “I tell kids, if there’s something else you can do for a living, do it. On the other hand, if you really are amazingly talented, you can succeed. My advice is to think about what will give you your best shot. Discover what’s truly unique about you, no matter what that is, and follow that.”

