



Rayford Griffin

Drums



If it's true what they say about nothing being more dangerous than an idea that's time has come, then drummer extraordinaire **Rayford Griffin's** long-awaited first album as a leader is destined to have a ruthless impact. After decades spent lending his drumming magic to a diverse resume of artists that ranges from **Jean-Luc Ponty, Stanley Clarke** and **George Duke** to **Michael Jackson, Bette Midler** and **Patrice Rushen**, Mr. Griffin emerges from the drum riser to equally showcase his writing, arranging, drumming AND singing gifts on his phenomenal **Rebirth of the Cool**.

Much of the album was conceived and recorded in Rayford's Razoredge home studio, allowing him plenty of relaxed time to develop the material along the way. *"I didn't want to beat people over the head with an album of drum solos, odd meters and fast playing,"* Rayford shares. *"I wanted to be as musical as possible with something for everybody, and also show how drums could be a part of that without being offensive."*

That's quite a statement coming from a drummer whose concert solos have brought fellow players and lay people alike to their feet with awe, appreciation and an adrenaline rush. Griffin is a technical master who brings to his towering arsenal of drums and percussion toys an engrained knack for groove and a graceful style that is always complementary to anyone with whom he plays. *Rebirth of the Cool* completes this portrait of the artist as so much more.

The album is a decidedly personal and contemporary take on Rayford's appreciation of tradition. The heart of the music is rooted in a tangy fusion of raw funk and relentlessly swingin, jazz ("**Lids and Squares**" and "**Kings**"), but there are also songs of melodic beauty and radio-friendly panache ("**Everytime I See U**" and "**In Your Eyes**"). There are blazin, jazz-rock fusion workouts ("**Coffee**" and "**Folake**,") that will have aspiring drummers getting out there notepads. There is also a dynamic straight-ahead number ("**Jazzee Ray**") that recalls the aural signature of big band great, Neil Hefti.

Two pieces that feature Rayford singing lead are richly harmonic surprises. First is the title track, "**Rebirth of the Cool**," which sounds like a late night meeting of **Miles Davis** and **Marvin Gaye** over which Rayford reminisces on the cult of jazz cool. Then there is "**All That**," a flirtatious mack track crooned to a sexy lady who has captivated Rayford with her bewitching layers of allure. "I worked with **Manhattan Transfer** for a week or so at one point," Rayford states. *"Their sound was in my head when I wrote that one."*

Rayford's reputation afforded him the opportunity to work with the finest, most versatile names in music on this crucial debut, including percussionist **Munyungo Jackson**, guitarists **Dwight Sills, Jamie Glaser** and his brother **Reggie Griffin**, bassists **Sekou**

Bunch, Larry Kimpell and **Keith Jones**, keyboardists **Nick Smith, Deron Johnson** and **Rob Mullins**, violinist **Karen Briggs**, and horn players **Branford Marsalis, Everette Harp, "Patches" Stewart, Walt Fowler** and **Brandon Fields**, among others.

"**I know my limits and strengths**," says Rayford, reflecting on the skills he is exposing for the first time on this record. *"I'm hard-pressed to call myself a singer when I have worked with some of the best. The same goes for musicians. I can play some percussion, but Munyungo is a true percussionist. I respect people who put in the time."* Rayford has punched that clock, too.

Rayford Griffin was born February 6, 1958, in Indianapolis, Indiana, to a minister father (Reverend Thomas J. Griffin) and a mother (Geneva Brown) who was a Howard University music major, so his music appreciation started early. It was the drum solos of **Art Blakey** and **Max Roach** on albums by his late, lamented uncle, trumpeter **Clifford Brown**, that lured him to the drums. Rayford got his first drum (a field snare) at the age of 10 and played in his grade school marching band and orchestra. He got his first full set of drums (all the way from Japan) at 13.

From the 8th grade through high school, he studied with **Tom Akins**, principle timpanist for the **Indianapolis Symphony**, who provided Rayford with a polished precision on drum set, snare and tympani that would give him a lifelong edge over most other drummers. *"I used to take turns playing James Brown beats with other drummers my age, Rayford states. "They could play but didn't necessarily know what they were doing. Tom gave me a firm understanding of what I was hearing and all the technical information."* Aside from a brief flirtation with trombone in high school, drums have remained Rayford's primary instrument.

Rayford was raised on a steady diet of uncle Clifford's classics, the symphonic soul of **Isaac Hayes**, the earth blues basics of **Jimi Hendrix** and **Buddy Miles**, and the revolutionary jazz-rock fusion of **Billy Cobham** and **Lenny White** (*in the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Return to Forever, respectively*). Among the bands he played in as a teen at *Shortridge High*, Rayford found himself in *Tarnished Silver*, which also included a young **Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds, Daryl Simmons** and **Tom Borton** self-proclaimed "Earth, Wind & Fire wanna-bes." Rayford even sang lead on songs such as "Can't Hide Love" and WAR's "Slippin' Into Darkness."

During his one year as a music major at *Indiana State* Rayford studied music theory and nabbed Best Drummer honors at three competitions, including the *Elmhurst Jazz Festival*. This led to him joining local fusion monsters, *Merging Traffic*, in 1977. One of their first gigs was opening for violinist **Jean-Luc Ponty**.

In an interview for *Modern Drummer* magazine, Ponty recalled. *"As we were coming into the hall, (Merging Traffic) was playing. In fact, it was during Rayford's drum solo. Usually everybody just goes back to the dressing room while there's an opening band on. But this time, everyone stayed to watch the drum solo. Rayford had the crowd in his hand."* A few years later, Rayford's mother and older brother, Thomas, scraped together the money to send him to Los Angeles for an audition (which he nailed), upon which time he embarked on the most high profile gig of his career playing with Ponty for six years and five albums (1981-1987).

"One year we played the Santa Monica Civic and everybody I listened to growing up was backstage: Stanley Clarke, George Duke, Lee Ritenour." Ray wound up playing with most of them.

Subsequent gigs included accompanying **Anita Baker, Cameo, George Howard, Dave Koz, Jeff Lorber, Boyz II Men** and **Anastasia** and being a member of the **Stanley Clarke Band**, to name just a few. All of these gigs kept him busy but also kept him from fulfilling the dream of releasing his own project as a leader. *"I'd been thinking about doing an album since the early '80s,"* he shares, *"but I kept getting pulled into other people's projects. I'd dabble, get distracted, then two or three years would go by."*

However, after his brother Reggie Griffin moved to LA from NY, they built a home studio they named **Razoredge** (as in Ray's or Reg's Studio). This gave him the incentive and the flexibility to polish up the songs he'd started over the years, record some new ones and, finally, complete **Rebirth of the Cool**. Ray composes on piano using sequencers and synths to lay out the orchestration. *"I was surprised at how my songs have stood the test of time. They still sound fresh because for the recordings, I used all live instruments."*

Indeed, Rebirth of the Cool is an auspicious and deliciously varied debut filled with elements that will appeal to music lovers in the jazz universe and beyond. Given the level of sensitivity Rayford has provided for others, it's no surprise how richly satisfying his first outing as a leader has turned out.

Links

<http://www.RayfordGriffin.com> (website)

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Rebirth Of The Cool
RazorEdge Records
2002

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