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Rob Gottfried



Drumming To A Higher Power

By: Eric T. Everett

Drummer. Philosopher. Teacher. Mystic? Meet Rob Gottfried, a.k.a. "Rob the Drummer." Rob's potent blend of drumming finesse and academic acumen is all at once inviting and intimidating. Holding a triple major in Psychology, Philosophy and Music from Quinnipiac College, he is also a triple threat to combat the forces of evil, hatred and negativity in our society.

Gottfried is additionally an active performing artist, who finds time for private student teaching and recording. Barefoot and sporting a shirt of many colors, Rob's a cerebral superhero that has delivered his transcendent, anti-drug, anti-bullying message to literally hundreds of thousands of youth across the world, and approximately 35,000 children on his most recent tour alone!

From the White House to the Rose Bowl, and D.A.R.E. to MADD, Gottfried's resume' is dizzying, with performances, accolades and testimonials too numerous to list here. It's obvious that he has an important role to play in his "100 year life-cycle" on the planet.

While many of you may have grown up watching Rob tapping polyrhythms on trash can lids for "Sesame Street" in the '70s or hamming it up in the '80s on shows such as "The Nickelodeon Network," "Kids World" or "Romper Room," Gottfried's ministry remains ever relevant. In an increasingly self-obsessed culture, today's kids need to hear Rob's message of tolerance and experiencing natural highs instead of artificial ones now more than ever.



Prime Mover

EE: I found it interesting that your father was a talented musician whom you lost at a young age. You picked yourself up, moved forward and stayed positive.

RG: My father, Murry Gottfried, played clarinet and sax in the Swing era, and was considered the "New England Benny Goodman." He played with Paul Whiteman and Bunny Berigan. He also appeared at Carnegie Hall at age 12. My father was a major guy, so I came out of that environment—my

brother plays clarinet, sax and guitar; my mother Bea, played piano, and there was always fine music in the house with the most current stereo equipment. They encouraged me to take lessons and started me off on my way. I started playing when I was two, and my first drum set was a gleaming black Camco when I was 10—from Lepak's Percussion Center in Hartford, Connecticut. Alexander Lepak was my second teacher, who also taught Joe "Skinny" Porcaro [Rob's first teacher], Emil Richards and Ritchie LePore [all first-call LA Studio Percussionists...the "Ex-Conns" as

they were known!] and the renowned teacher and player, Art Perretta [Barbara Streisand, Rosemary Clooney]. My father also played with Al Lepak. So, I got going very early with two of the finest percussionists on the planet! I then performed big band jazz through the renowned Hall High School Jazz program, and later was signed to Arista Records with Larry Young, who was part of Tony Williams Lifetime and played with Miles, Coltrane, Hendrix... We played Carnegie Hall and the Newport Jazz Festival, and Larry was able to get sounds out of his Hammond [organ] the likes of which I'd never heard before, or since. Narada Michael Walden was also a teacher, and is a good, close friend.

EE: I can see how you and Narada would totally click with the positive energy that you both bring to music.

RG: Oh yeah, I just talked with Narada recently when he was in New York for three dates at the Iridium. We communicate often, and he's a force to be reckoned with. Of course, these were life-changers...like Billy Cobham—and the relationship I had with Buddy Rich was just great.

EE: Wow, how fortunate for you to know Buddy on a personal level.

RG: When I was 16, I used to go to a club called "Lenny's on the Turnpike" outside of Boston. One night, I stuck my head in the door, and Buddy was sitting in his underwear between sets talking to his manager. I said, "Mr. Rich." Buddy looked at his manager, nodded and said, "It's okay." I'm not sure why it happened, but it did. After that, Buddy and I started a close friendship; he called me "Bobby" and would offer to do things for me like take me on his band bus with him between sets, as well as publish pictures with the two of us.

So, I was supported by lots of folks who were picking up on my self-belief.... that feeling that I had a right to be there!

The Big Questions

RG: When my Dad died during my first year of college, I began asking the important questions of life: What am I doing here? Am I supposed to just have a good time? Is there a moral imperative? Should I use the environment, and people, for my own purposes? So, the loss of that support mechanism, from a kid coming from a loving Jewish family that never lets go of their closeness and supervision, caused me to ask these

life questions, placing me on a road of wanting to know—which led to my earning a triple major in college...for the answers.

EE: What caused you to want to help others and turn outward, not inward with your talent?

RG: When confronting death and mortality, you ask those deep questions, and it took me five years to complete my higher education. Here I was, a jazz-rock drummer, playing for self-medicated audiences in clubs or private gigs. They were there for the energy, mating and getting loaded...one way or another. I felt at the time that they were not discerning—they didn't know why what you were doing was good, but it worked for them in process. I wanted to use my educational skills and deal with some fresh energy, to dig deeper, if you will, and believed that most of the time the audiences I was playing for weren't even asking the right questions, never mind not knowing the answers! I wanted an audience inquiring about what's underneath the surface of what I was doing, and wanted to share that. If you send from "deep," then wouldn't it be grand to have it received that way!

EE: Growing up, were you ever tempted to try drugs and reach a higher consciousness? Did you steer clear of that?

RG: Those things that were legal, I tried. Smoking any kind of substance was not cool for me because I had chronic bronchitis, and my lungs were really my weak point—and the example of my father dying from not being able to stop smoking cigarettes was enough to push me away from the whole marijuana movement at that time. Anything stronger, I wanted to do it on my own power and not necessarily need something else as an artificial way of changing my perception. I wanted to use natural means, that would leave you with more when you finish, not less, and I felt that the drums—which I was drawn to since I was two—would achieve that goal.

EE: in other words, you received a natural high from playing?

RG: Yeah, and I wanted to build on it. What I saw around me were a lot of the players that had the same feeling but wanted to amplify it artificially, which much of the time caused their undoing. There was a war on and a draft, and if you didn't keep it together, and keep your deferment up, you would be pulled into the service to go fight. Many

of my friends didn't return or came back not the same people they were when they left, for so many reasons. They were failing and getting wasted, fueled by the stress of the day. The stress was palpable.

Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?

EE: How did the educational door open for you? Did someone encourage you to take your positive message out to the world or did you do it on your own?

RG: During 1970-76, while I was on the road with *Oh Calcutta* and doing the gig with Larry Young, I saw people consuming too much and thought, "I can't afford that luxury." Thankfully, I was bright enough not to fall into that destructive lifestyle. It would have been the easiest thing in the world.

The big departure for me was "Sesame Street." It crystallized everything that I had taken away from my college experience. I started doing shows about what it was like to be "IN" the music, rather than only having a cerebral experience and staying separate from it, because most people don't know what it's like to be IN the zone or IN the process of making music. Very few people have that experience—maybe skiers who get into their own rhythm when there's nobody else around on the mountain and the snow is falling perfectly, or martial artists who are able to just move and rely on muscle memory without having to think about it, being totally in that time and space.

The big element is to be in the moment without thinking or judging the moment, or being aware necessarily of what you're specifically doing and having it be a complete emotional exchange, and a spiritual one, hopefully.

EE: So, how exactly did you get the gig with Big Bird?

RG: I was doing a show outside in Hartford, CT. at Constitution Plaza. That day, Joe Porcaro, Al Lepak and Art Perretta attended the show. A high-school friend, Leslie O'Brien, was working for Children's Television Workshop at the time, and she invited some representatives from *Sesame Street* to come to my show. They said, "We've never seen anything like this, would you like to do a show and help write it?" I said [dramatic pause], "Yes!"

One thing built on top of another, and

now I'm honored to go out on tour for six weeks performing 70 shows in the state of Michigan booked by the Michigan State Police.

EE: Do you think it was destiny that your friend Leslie made that connection for you?

RG: She knew what was in my heart. The fact that on that the day the Sesame Street people came, as well as Joe, Al and Art, seemed to sum it up for me. That was the moment... the path-changer. I felt empowered and realized that the more I could do television-wise, would positively benefit my live shows. It's that kind of "Eureka" moment I hope I can be for another youth along the way in my path, that changes their life forever.

It's not just music—it was something more. I was using drums as a means to an end, not as an end. Even though I was a good player, there were some issues that I was bringing up that people don't usually consider, and it's been the touchstone of these shows from the beginning: I'm using drums as the primary non-verbal vehicle of approach and getting the students to drop their defense screens and be wide open to listen to what I have to say, which are some worthwhile life lessons. Otherwise, they may never listen...never get it.

EE: "Beat Drums-Not People" is a tagline that you use. It's admittedly clever, but also resonates on a deeper level of promoting self-esteem, accomplishment and stress release for these troubled kids.

RG: A girl walked up to me last night and said, "Twenty-five years ago you came into my school. I was already thinking about playing drums, and you let me sit at your drums, and that moment, it really got me to buy a drum set and start playing. I'm now in a major band... because of you!" I've reached thousands of kids at this point, and if I can impact 100 people and change their paths, or even just one, it's been well worth it. I've saved several kids from committing suicide by being at the right place, at the right time. Percussion-wise, I've had some wonderful students through the years...Cindy Blackman studied with me at one point, and Ritchie Barshay, who plays with Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, and the like. A fine line of inspiration and sharing.

The essence of all of this is: there was somebody there for me; there's not somebody there for them, a lot of the time. Male figures are not there

according to the stats, so the problem is much more serious than when I was going to school. For these kids, I may be the only person that comes into their lives, loving what I do...and doing it very well. They may, in fact, be used to being surrounded by people who fail at what they attempt consistently, and carry the pain of that failure onto them.

Cinema Vérité

EE: What's your take on our world right now? These are certainly challenging times to be sure.

RG: To take a cultural overview is pretty scary right now. The fact that two-thirds of the world population are trying to kill each other right at this very moment—the fact that the under-30 divorce rate is sixty-two percent and the over-30 divorce rate is fifty-two percent. This means that more than half of the people that I perform for at a time don't have a father in the house, or have a stepfather that they don't communicate well with, and it sets up this whole other dynamic that help things like gangs to flourish—"We'll be your family," which is a lot different from my orientation.

I came from an upper-middle environment where people were used

to succeeding and where the divorce rates were not as high as this. For me, there were always two people there available for advice, consent and guidance. Therefore, coming out of that environment, the death of my father when I was 19 became so significant.

We are in a crisis-oriented society. People only react when they absolutely have to, rather than trying to do any kind of prevention. Parenting is about prevention. If you're going to take on the responsibility of having a child, then do it right. Parenting involves prevention for your children as much as possible, at least through when they are eighteen, and for many cultures, it's a lifetime commitment. The point is that you have to arm your children with the right tools to succeed because somebody was there to arm you—that's how I feel; I'm just trying to complete the process I grew up with. I understand, however, that very few people involve logic when it comes to propagation of the species. It's the same reason people smoke cigarettes... it makes NO Sense...but they determine they need it, that momentary "hit," even though it usually has consequences.

EE: Your inspirational message is more salient today than it ever was — it seems like you're up against more

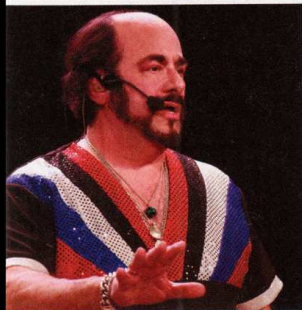
challenges and negative societal factors today than 20 or 30 years ago.

RG: The needs have gotten so much worse—people do not feel connected. A lot of people can multitask and do three, four things at a time, but the goal is to get the kind of connection to your own insides that makes for behavioral change so that you're doing proactive and productive stuff. Every two weeks, we used to have a school assembly—you never hear of that anymore. No one has the money. Many teachers do not want to release their students to go to band. Also, that second parent who might have been there to offer support and encouragement is no longer there.

We're worried at the Percussive Arts Council that new musicians are not being made. The "Mom and Pop" music stores are disappearing in favor of the "Big Box" stores. Those local "encouragers" with experience from those smaller stores are gone. Also, a large percentage of the Top 100 songs are made by people sitting in front of a computer now, eliminating the need to practice an instrument for years. Because of streaming, the record companies and artists are not getting paid.

When I'm going to schools, colleges and prisons, I'm seeing a segment of the population that wonders how

Most people don't know what it's like to be *In The Zone* or *In The Process* of making music.





The way I play the drums reveals who I am much clearer than any words.

they can get into the music business when many of those earlier methods have disappeared. So, how do young drummers get there? As my mother said, "The cream will rise to the top."

I feel like I'm a conduit, starting with changing their hearts, and then their heads. The role models for these kids and adults are few and far between. There is a great mistrust when I walk into an assembly for the first time—I'm from a whole different culture and age group. If you aren't able to capture their hearts within the first few minutes, you're done. The way I play the drums reveals who I am much clearer than any words I might use to initially communicate with them.

EE: On your anti-bullying presentation, you not only show emotions from the victim's perspective, but also from the bully's point of view.

RG: People feel greater when they squash someone who they feel is lesser; that's a certain stage of adolescence, and unfortunately, the kids often model what they see in their parents. I think what has emerged about bullying is that it used to be about survival of the fittest and naturally in the past you would

prey on the weak one. What started to happen within the last twenty years is that people started to understand that those weak ones that "need to be removed so that the herd stays strong" have feelings, too. People started to have empathy, rather than sympathy—they could feel what it's like to be on the receiving end of mistreatment. If I can get kids and people in general to feel that empathy, I have succeeded.

EE: Regrets?

RG: For my dad to not see what I accomplished, he would have been thrilled. I took a god-given gift and did something that hasn't been done before.

EE: What's your takeaway? You want kids to leave your performance feeling good about themselves – that's a tall order.

RG: I've had amazing feedback. I get emails. A lot of the kids want to talk on social media and through my own website. About 10 kids usually show up after a show...and start to "unload" their stories. I think I might fill a gap for them in many ways. It's fulfilling to me because what I'm trying to do is bring

them to my, hopefully, higher plane of consciousness of vibration. If you can do it naturally, I advise it, but it's your freedom of choice.

For example, the best time that I do a drum solo is when "I" don't do it. When I'm being played by the force that got my life started, and live in the very moment without thinking about the past, present or future, that's the best. The finest musicians like Cobham, Weckl, Donati and Colaiuta, through their own work ethic and gifts, have brought themselves to a consciousness that you can feel—that transforms you.

I think going forward the challenge for me specifically is to stay relevant. In other words, for me to be able to have the tools to effect change to stay current, because it's so much fun to watch people who are turned on to themselves. Once you've had a taste for being the catalyst or conduit for this kind of metamorphosis, it's such a win-win and a payoff, not only for them, but also for me.

May the Force be with us all. ✨

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