

# THIS WAY UP FOR BRIAN RAY



By Helen Marketti

Gifts from people we love and admire naturally seem to hold more meaning. We hold on to objects for years or for a lifetime because of their significance. Other gifts that we can receive come in the form of advice, a life lesson, wisdom and influence that often strike an internal core, which may pave the way for the rest of our lives.

Brian Ray had the insight by the tender age of four to recognize such a gift from his older sister, Jean. "My sister was a big influence on me," Brian remembers. "She was 15 years older than me and I remember sitting on her lap listening to records and looking at pictures of Elvis, Rick Nelson, Buddy Holly and all of the early rockers, the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Duane Eddy, Chuck Berry and so on. They all got my attention. I already had a sense as a young kid that this was where it was at."

He continues, "My sister Jean bought me my first nylon string guitar when I was nine. The first song I learned to play on the guitar was "Gloria" by Van Morrison who was in a group called, Them. I would play for my fourth grade class. I had the performer bug in me already."

Brian's music career has blessed him with one great gig after another. His talent and hard work have also taken him to where he wants to be. He was a Musical Director and guitarist for R & B singer Etta James for 14 years. He is an accomplished and talented songwriter who wrote "One Heartbeat" for Smokey Robinson. Brian has been the guitar/bass player for Paul McCartney for the past seven years and if that isn't enough he has his own band, Black Unicorn. Brian also has a new CD titled "This Way Up" which is due for release in the fall of this year.

It is always interesting to find out how the opportunities presented themselves and Brian had this to say about a piece of his inspiration and his beginning. "My stepfather, Raymond Admiral Parker was born in Lorain, Ohio. He later moved to LA and wrote for the LA Examiner, LA Times, Dick Van Dyke and Bob Hope. He was also the head writer for Art Linkletter's House Party, ghost writer for his book *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. Raymond also served in WWII and now lives in Santa Monica, five minutes from me. He just completed a documentary on his experience as a prisoner of war called *In Times Of War* which has won four awards. His writing helped to influence my songwriting and his success in that field gave me inspiration."

Playing with Etta James for 14 years began when Brian was 19 years old. "I was

right out of high school," Brian recalls. "I was in a band earning \$125 a week and we were under contract for a year. I was asked to fill in on guitar for Etta James. Her guitar player didn't show up so thinking I was just filling in I ended up playing with her for 14 years! Etta let me play with other artists too. She did so much for me. We are really close-even to this day."

Song writing inspiration can usually be drawn from "All around," said Brian. "I usually start with the title, flush that out and make it come to life. I'll come up with a title and then a guitar lick."

Brian wrote the award winning song "One Heartbeat" for Smokey Robinson. "Smokey is a real poet. He is the master of surprise. It's a giant honor that he named his album *One Heartbeat* and it was the second single off of his album." The song has received over three million airplays. When writing songs for other artists Brian takes into account the person's personality. "Some lyrics don't "look good" on certain artists-like wearing plaid pants with a striped shirt," he explains. "For a pop song you have only three minutes to say what you want-well actually less than that since there is the repeat chorus. For writing "One Heartbeat", it was a challenge to keep the intrigue going but that's what you want. You want the listener to wonder what will happen next."

Being in a band that has been called "Paul's best band since The Beatles," the tight lineup has been going strong for seven years and counting. Band members are: Paul "Wix" Wickens (keyboard),

Abe Laboriel, Jr. (drums), Rusty Anderson (guitar), Brian Ray (guitar/bass player) and Paul McCartney.

Brian had already known Rusty and Abe for many years. Rusty and Brian were neighbors, supported each other's venues and were friends. Abe and Brian had toured together in France for a few years with French artists Mylene Farmer and Johnny Hallyday.

Brian thoughtfully shares his story of how he landed a spot with one of the most famous musicians in the world. "I was still touring in France with Johnny Hallyday and Abe had left to do other stuff. Abe and I had become good friends while touring in France. One day he called me from LA and announced, "You're never going to guess what I'm going to be working on next." I asked him what was going on...that's when he said that he was going to be doing Paul McCartney's album! I couldn't believe it! I told Abe he would have to tell me everything about hanging out with him!"

"Once I got back to LA, I called Abe and asked him how things were going. So we went for coffee and he told me how amazing it was to be working with Paul McCartney. I wanted to hear *everything!* About a month or

so later I invited Abe to my birthday party. We were having dinner at a restaurant in LA and I asked him what was going on at that point. That's when Abe said they were thinking about getting ready to actually do some shows. I had just seen them on TV doing the Concert for New York after September 11<sup>th</sup>. I saw that Rusty was on guitar and I thought they were such a great band. I noticed they had a sub on bass at the time from the David Letterman band so I asked Abe if they were going to need one more guy...to float between instruments like Paul does."

Brian continues, "Abe told me that they were talking about getting another person for the band. That's when I raised my hand in the air and said that I would love a shot at that. And Abe thought that was a cool idea and I thought no more about it. But what I didn't know was that Abe went directly to David Kahne who was the producer for Paul's album *Driving Rain* and mentioned my name. So about three weeks later I got a call from David Kahne. He said that Paul was doing a song at the Super Bowl (2002) and he needs a bass player for the song and if I would be interested and available for that. *Are you kidding?!!* So David asked me to be in his office in about an hour. When I got to his office, he

handed me a Telecaster guitar and while I played, we continued talking about music. It was informal, talking about life and music. He then told me he had a good feeling about this and that he would put my name forward."

"I got a call the next day being asked

if I could be on plane tomorrow to New Orleans to do the Super Bowl with Paul McCartney! The song we played at the Super Bowl of 2002 was "Freedom" and my life had changed. After words I went up to Paul to thank him for having me along, that it was an honor for me. Later on we were all having dinner and Paul was getting ready to leave. He hugged Rusty first, next he hugged Abe and then he hugged me and said (British accent) "Welcome aboard Brian. Stick with Abe and Rusty and they'll show you the ropes."

Brian finishes, "I looked at Abe and Rusty and asked if Paul just said what I thought he just said and they nodded and grinned. I had already known the two of them before, they were my friends and now we were all in the band together!"

After that night Brian said, "I ran home, bought the right guitar, bought the CDs, stood the mic up in my house and learned all the material in five weeks as the tour would

start then. The first week I rehearsed I felt I might go down in flames because I thought I really sucked!" (laughs)

So what is it like to play in a band with Paul McCartney and watch the magic unfold? "He has a real affinity for us,"

Brian explains. "We are blessed to be with him. We work hard. He gives 100% and so do we. No one is walking through this. He has not lowered the key on any of his songs. Playing with him goes back to the very first tour...the idea of service, providing something for the audience that they haven't gotten before they came to the concert."

Playing with Paul McCartney has kept Brian on a busy train that he loves but he has had time to record his own material. His first CD *Mondo Magneto* was released in 2005. His second CD *This Way Up* is scheduled for release in the fall of this year. The CD will have 11 tracks. The title implies to life as in keep moving forward, keep moving up and improving yourself. *Whooray Records* is Brian's own record company. He uses the label for his own material.

When asked if there was any element of the music industry that he liked more than another such as writing, recording and being a road dog for touring, Brian said, "Each of these have their own aspect. I'm glad to be part of all of it. I think if I did only one of them I would get bored. (laughs) There is a long term pay off of a recording arrangement, you see the fans light up when they hear a certain song... so each element is different."

For aspiring musicians Brian has some excellent advice, "Just say "yes" to everything... even though you may think that something doesn't seem to benefit you because you think it's not enough money or you think its beneath you... say "yes" to it anyway. That's how things happen because you never know whom you are supposed to meet. I ended up with Etta James for 14 years because the guitar player didn't show up that night. The people you say "yes" to may bring you to the next place you want to be. That's how things happen."

For more information about Brian Ray please check out: [www.brianray.com](http://www.brianray.com) and [www.myspace.com/whooray](http://www.myspace.com/whooray) You can sign up for Brian's newsletter through his web site. You will receive a brief email update of what is going on with Brian's music, tours and other cool stuff.

Be sure to watch out for Brian's new CD *This Way Up*. (Fall, 2009) Please check your local area sources for music. It will also be available through Brian's web site, Amazon.com and also [www.cdbaby.com](http://www.cdbaby.com) Brian's first CD *Mondo Magneto* is also available through these sites. *Mondo Magneto* has some rockin' tunes that you won't want to miss!

Just say "Yes!"...



PERFORMING WITH BLACK UNICORN  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF BRIAN RAY



PAUL MCCARTNEY & BRIAN RAY  
GRAMMY AWARDS, 2009  
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