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Wonder Man



Ben Bridges (left) has played with Wonder for decades—most recently in Boston on November 11 and (here) in Philadelphia on November 16, 2014. Here in Maine, Bridges is a software engineer at Tyler Technologies in Falmouth. For the set list of the Boston concert, visit: portlandmonthly/2014/12/portmag/Wonder

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INTERVIEW BY CODY E. MARCROFT

Your timing's good," says Ben Bridges. "Just today, I returned home after doing live performances with Stevie Wonder in Boston and Philadelphia."

From 1975 through 1992, Bridges was a sideman for Wonder, ringing his rhythm guitar on hits like "Sir Duke," "Ribbon in the Sky," and "Do I Do." Touring and recording as a member of his backup band, Wonderlove, Bridges has traveled the world with Motown's most recognizable artist.

Because he's one of us—he lives in Falmouth, sharing the same marsh with Maine Audubon—yet still in demand creatively, Bridges was invited to play in two shows as part of Wonder's 12-city "Songs in the Key of Life" tour.

His wife Nancy cast Maine's spell on him. "Her family's been vacationing in Ogunquit for decades," says Bridges. "I came with her on one of those trips—my first time here." Far from Wembley Arena, London; Electric Lady Studios, New York; and Yokohama Stadium; Tokyo, Maine stood out as dif-

ferent. "I'd been to many places in my life, but Maine left a strong impression."

You know Stevie Wonder the man. Who is he?

After a concert, Stevie notified the band that as a thank you, he was giving everyone two extra days in the hotel so we could relax and enjoy Hawaii a while longer. I'd brought Nancy. When we learned the hotel offered a sunset dinner cruise, we decided we'd do it that evening. Around midday, the phone

rang. It was Stevie. He asked what my wife and I were doing, so I told him about the dinner cruise. "That sounds like fun. Do you mind if I join you?" Now, we're talking about Stevie Wonder, the international superstar. When he said he'd be joining us, I expected bodyguards and a small entourage, but no. It turned out to be like a double date. We met in the lobby.

Who was Wonder's date?

One of the singers who came with him.

When did you first meet him?

I'd just come out of rather intense musical training in college [Temple University]. Stevie was looking to replace one of his guitarists. Michael Sembello, a Philadelphia guitarist who was a member of Stevie's band, heard about me and extended an invitation. The day he and I met, we played guitars together for a few hours. It just clicked. The next day, he and I took the train to New York City. That afternoon, I auditioned for





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ISN'T THAT...

Stevie—a terrifying four-hour live audition with Stevie and his band. I somehow hung in there. I was hired on the spot. My life literally changed overnight.

What happens during a four-hour audition?

It was an entire playing experience. We started and the hours flew by. Some of the songs we did had already been released on other records. Others were songs he and the band were working on, and [still others were] things he'd write on the spot. That happened a lot. If he had ideas, he'd start working with the band right then and there.

In Boston recently, you and Wonder played songs from *Songs in the Key of Life*. What's your favorite memory from making that album with him in 1976? "Love's In Need of Love Today" has a lot of background vocals on it. I was in the control room the night those vocals were laid down, and Stevie laid them down himself. I was the only one there that night besides the recording engineers and Steve. It was late at night, and I was sitting there on the couch between the two main speakers. I had the best seat in the house! Just to hear that come out of nothing. Those vocals were *not there before*. He laid them all in there flawlessly, like he already knew exactly what he was going to put in. One by one, he laid them on top of each other—this rich harmony that supports the song's melodic line.

Take us closer.

It was the 20th anniversary [1983] of Martin Luther King's "March on Washington." Stevie wanted to be there, and he invited me to go with him. So his small entourage and I went with him. We did the walking and marching, and then he was going to give a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. He asked me to play guitar with him on a song that hadn't yet been released, a song called "Rise." I knew it, but I didn't know we were going to do it. He'd arranged for a rental guitar to be brought there. So, he and I did the song in front of all these thousands of people. It was kind of terrifying—the stage was mobbed with speakers. Afterward, he gave me the guitar as a gift. I still have it.

What's been the biggest disaster in your career?

It was at a certain recording session in New York. I won't name the artist—it wasn't Stevie—but this person is a household name. It was a terrible experience—a lot of yelling and

bullying of the whole band by a person who knows nothing about music. I gave them the tracks they wanted, but there was no joy in it. I never worked for them again.

Come on, who was it? We won't tell.

It's actually a person who's in the news right now, so I especially do not want to mention the name.

Tell us about a pleasant encounter, then.

Bob Dylan was virtually responsible for an event in Texas called "Night of the Hurricane." Reuben 'Hurricane' Carter had been put in prison, and Bob Dylan and others who believed him innocent were trying to get him released. This was a benefit concert. We all flew down on one plane. Stephen Stills. It was quite the trip, for a young guitar player to be there, seeing all these celebrities at one time on a chartered flight from L.A. But it's the kind of a scene where you have to be cool. You can't just run around bothering celebrities.

No wonder you love Maine.

Oh, yeah, my life is totally different now. As a guitarist, I think I'd done everything I wanted to do at that point in my life. After 17 years, I was perfectly fine to stop touring and get back on a normal cycle.

I don't know if it's me individually, but I have a very curious mind. I've realized there are other things. I like computer programming, I like golf, I play other instruments now, and there are plenty other things going on in life beyond music and the guitar. I wanted to pursue those things.

After leaving the band, Ben Bridges lived in New Jersey and Pennsylvania before moving to Maine to begin a new job as a software engineer with Tyler Technologies in Falmouth.

"When we moved here, we spent the first four years renting a house on Cousins Island, just steps from the edge of a tidal inlet. What a wonderful experience it was to live there, watching the changes the tide brings and the seasonal birds coming and going.

"Maine is a very clean, hassle-free way of life. The people I work with are not contrived. They're not the cosmopolitan, jaded people you'd run into in New York or any other large city. My relationship with people I know here is much more basic, down-to-earth, and I appreciate that." ■

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