

THE BRIDGE

INTERVIEW:

John Sussewell

By Rod MacBeath

John "Suss" Sussewell and his colleagues in Kokomo all played on the Desire session of 28th July, 1975, and as we'll see, they began the afternoon as replacements for Minnie Riperton at the Schaefer Music Festival not knowing what the day had in store for them. **Romance In Durango** from that session was released on the album, but none of the band was credited (not even Eric Clapton from that night received a namecheck on the sleeve). Earlier this year, John's friend, Ted McCallion, contacted Alan Fraser to check if the Searching for a Gem website had any information about a version of Desire which credited John. John said that he had such a version many years ago but lost it in a divorce. From that connection, John agreed to be interviewed for **The Bridge**, and the following exchange took place via email.

Could you give us a little of your background leading to you joining Kokomo?

I met Kokomo during their US tour in '75 when both the Average White Band and they were touring together, supporting 'Pick Up The Pieces' and "I Can Understand It", respectively. Arif Mardin of



Atlantic Records phoned me up in NYC; asking if I was available to finish AWB's US tour after the tragic death of their drummer, Robbie McIntosh, in California. Somewhere along the way, I fielded a phone call from Kokomo's Stateside office in NYC to meet them in Asbury Park, New Jersey to audition. Their drummer, Terry Stannard, left the band, opening it up for me. They hired me on the spot, since prior to them I already had toured with Donny Hathaway, Bill Withers, Esther Phillips, etc. Oddly, however, music became a passion of mine professionally when a student at both Milton Academy and Harvard University where I majored in Electrical Engineering with a Pre-med minor.

How much notice did you get of the Dylan session? Do you know what prompted him to ask for the band or how they came to his attention?

None whatsoever after Kokomo and I opened up for Chick Corea's jazz fusion band Return to Forever at the Wollman Rink at Central Park, NYC. The next thing I know is Steve O'Rourke, our manager who also managed Pink Floyd, hustling us into vans to get to the studio. Rob Stoner and I spoke about that evening on the phone recently. I think that Steve managed to get Kokomo hooked up because both Dylan and Kokomo were on Columbia Records. I also became aware later on through Clapton and Stoner that Dylan wanted to experiment with a variety of musicians who might lend a fresh approach to his music. Bottom line, however, is that while I was disappointed not seeing and hearing 'Return To Forever' backstage, I was amazed and excited being Dylan's drummer in a recording studio. Shucks, the first band I was in at Milton Academy (The Capstan Players) covered his and many tunes by other commercially released artists.

Was the band familiar with his recording methods in advance, and did you have any idea what you would be asked to play?

It goes without saying everyone knew about Dylan; his genre and unique musicality. However, I had no idea what the tunes would be. A stack of charts were given to me and each one was announced in

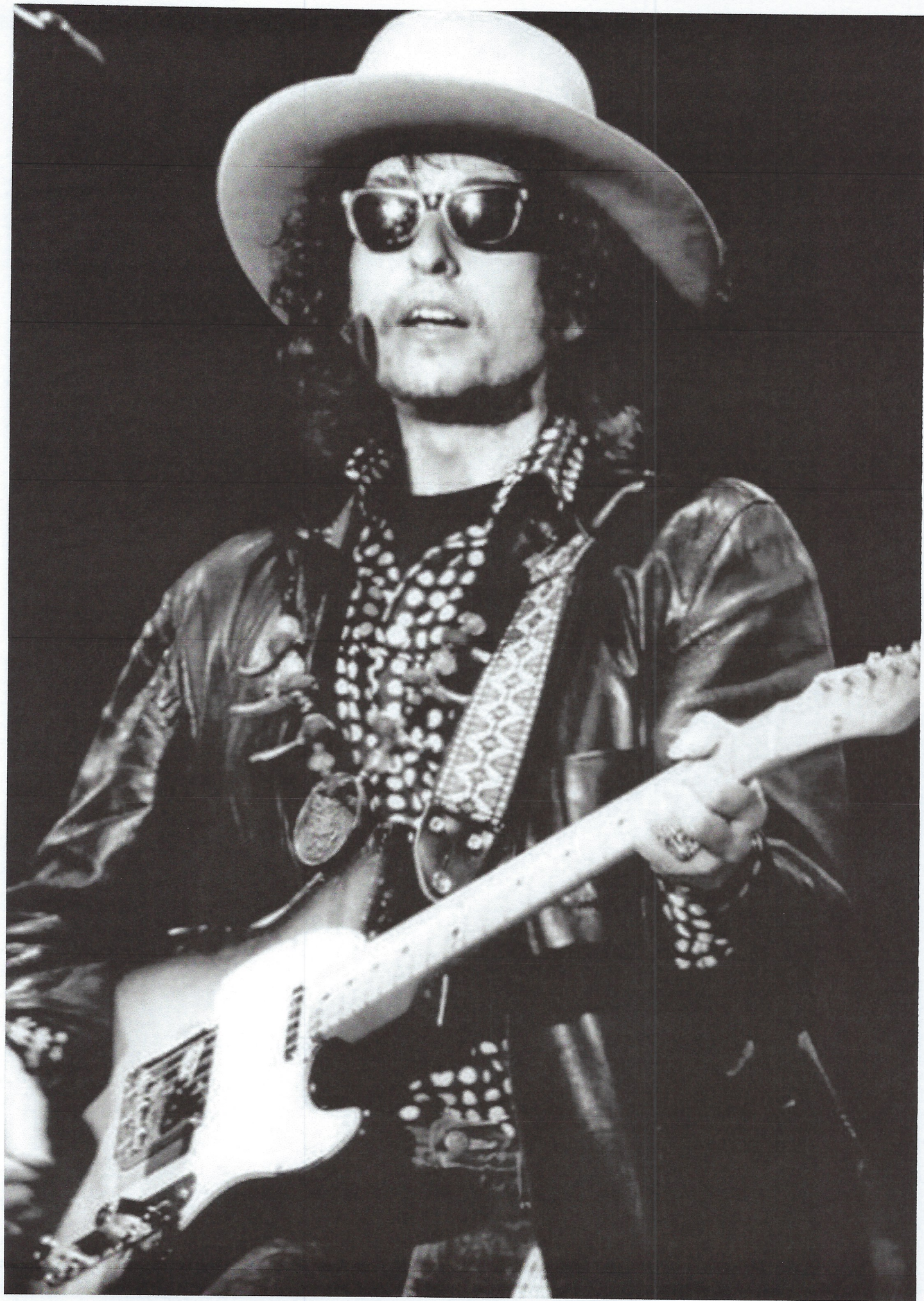
my headphones by the audio engineer. So, given my experience thus far, I knew to play the music as simply as possible while proverbially driving the bus percussively. Donny Hathaway and Bill Withers instilled those values in my heart more than others as a drummer. My association with Billy Cobham and proximity to Steve Gadd inspired me to *kick* when the music calls for it and I'm expected to. Well into the next morning, however, I remember leaving the studio crestfallen. And to add irony to anti-climax, the tunes that I recognize my signature on have been credited to Howie Wyeth. Nonetheless, I think that Bob could not make up his mind as to what he wanted to hear with so many musicians in the room... and I had to keep marking up my charts with changed arrangements, etc. He's a Wordsmith and though it's Suspected [sic] he was nonchalant being a Nobel Laureate for Literature, I'm personally happy for him.

Was he already at the studio when you arrived?

Upon arrival, I was amazed at how crowded the room was. The entrance was kind of centred, so I could see left and right wings filled with folk. Then I recognized Bob; and Eric Clapton was sitting to his right. Both had guitars in their hands and it was apparent they (along with others) had already been working on stuff. As a courtesy, I went over to greet them and was directed to head for the drum booth to my far left. It was in the far corner of the room. The rest of Kokomo were escorted to their respective places while Alan Spenner and I were positioned side by side. Thank God for that! Alan and I musically gelled like hand in glove! Bass and Drums, Baby! Rest in Peace, Alan.

What was the studio like? Did you take your own equipment?

The studio was a typical high-end environment expected anywhere... especially New York, Los Angeles or London. It was large enough to allow for the personnel, anyway. My drums were already there since my kit was being packed up in Anvil cases for shipping to London. I think I might have brought my snare drum and definitely brought my stick bag!



With twenty-two musicians listed for the session, were you all in at the same time or did some sit certain songs out?

As I indicated earlier, I got the impression that various people were already tracking, so as certain songs came up those designated to participate were up. Others would be in the room hanging out with Bob Dylan! LOL! I do recall that the Kokomo singers provided background vocals while rest of us in Kokomo on instruments played every charted tune we were directed to. I drove the bus. (I'm smiling now saying this. I wasn't smiling then.) The session was confusing... Rob Stoner and I have the same recollection. That session was the most frenetic I can recall in a recording studio... ever.

Which songs stand out in your memory?

Although I played on other tracks including **Hurricane**, I definitely remember **Romance In Durango** because I didn't play a subtle time signature change to my satisfaction. I kept dropping or adding an 8th note to certain bars based on how Bob felt like phrasing his lyric. Today I still scratch my head how I just should have stopped driving the bus and become a passenger instead. Yet somewhere down the line since then my drumming gets attributed to Howie Wyeth... even my mistakes?! I find that funny in a crestfallen way and can only say that all the bootleg releases and sloppy record (data) keeping by certain folks is at fault. Frankly, I don't believe Bob is responsible at all, some careless copyist failed to do their research. I am miffed with Columbia.

Do you recall a song called Wiretappin'?

Unfortunately, I do not recall that title. It might have been on the roster, but it's been too long for me to identify it.

Did you know any of the other musicians there, apart from your bandmates - had you met Eric Clapton before?

Of course. My NYC mates 'Chuggy' Carter, Hugh McCracken and perhaps a few other session cats who make it their business to be where they need to be in the right place at the right time.

Did Dylan speak to you directly about what he wanted, or did someone else take the lead? Maybe Don DeVito?

Other than our initial greeting, Bob never spoke to me directly. He was in his zone and I knew it. The most help was my bass mate Alan Spenner and periodic suggestions from the audio engineer. I remember Don DeVito, but I guess he thought everything was copacetic (fine, OK, cool, and groovy). Oh well... it was somewhere between nirvana and negligence for me. I honestly can't speak to how experienced or inexperienced Don was. He and I had a good working relationship though. And for that I remain grateful.

The only song to be released on the album was the second take of Romance In Durango - did subsequent takes not come together as well or did the issued take just have an energy which subsequent takes didn't?

I have no idea after all these years. However, I do remember receiving one (1) residual royalty check from Japan (Dylan's **Desire**; 2003-2004) issued by the Musician's Special Payment Fund which was a program set up in coordination between the Musician's Union and participating record labels for annual payments on releases still selling. The only way that could have happened via Columbia was if they licensed a foreign firm to manufacture and distribute the title in their region(s). Now I'm told neither Columbia (nor Warner Bros. Records) contribute into this fund. What a shame!

How did the session wind down?

I guess the session wound down when Bob and his advisors sensed a point of diminishing returns. Eric was among those who left first. Kokomo and I took the cue because we had work to do later that day getting ready for England. As for me personally, I had been working

half the night and most of the previous day. I was so much older then; I'm younger (wiser) than that now. I'm actually smiling when saying this. Correctamundo! The band had accommodations in NYC. I had my apartment in Flushing, Queens. I took a cab, got home and crashed... only to get up again and head back to the City for music supplies. I seem to recall that was my last day in America (off and on) until I returned on 1st January 1977.

Did you sign session sheets as you left or would your manager take care of that?

Yes, I did. No one seems to be able to find them now. Either that or they don't want to. That is my experience and I'm sticking to it.

What was the feeling when the band found out that they had no credit on the album?

Lousy! Columbia dropped Kokomo in the Fall of 1976. Steve O'Rourke was allegedly being pressured by his other band, Pink Floyd. So, when Steve pulled out, so did Columbia. I felt abandoned because I signed to Columbia as a band member. Fortunately, after a few gigs arranged for us locally in England, I had funds to return to the States on 1st January 1977. I just wanted to go home.

Your friend Ted sent Alan Fraser a photo of your gold disc for Desire. When did the RIAA deliver it to you?

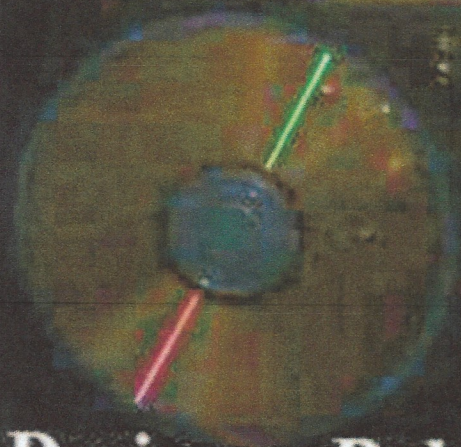
At some point thereafter I heard that I was released on the **Desire** album and contacted a firm in New Jersey to vet my credit. They required I send them the product at which point after coordinating with our RIAA, the award itself was fabricated and shipped back to me.

After Kokomo split, what happened in your career?

I was involved in other big projects – I worked with Ashford and Simpson, and "The Boss" by Diana Ross. I've always kept busy, and I'm still involved in sessions at this moment.



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Desire - Bob Dylan & Suss - CBS - 1975

Finally, what are your thoughts today on your session with Dylan?

It was the worst recording session I was in, ever – and the best. Man, it was Dylan – I didn't expect to be on that album. All I remember is recording four songs and distinctly being able to identify my style and approach to a particular song – even if I made a mistake as I did navigating a subtle time signature change in **Romance To Durango**. I really wish I still had my original vinyl that clearly mentioned my name on each song I played, but I don't. All the Kokomo guys, and Eric Clapton, were listed. Now here I am decades later sharing my story with you and your readers. It was an honour and privilege to record with Bob Dylan, as it is with any major artist or cadre of proficient artisans. To me, music is like a meal – not everyone likes the same thing. I think that's a healthy attitude to embrace since for me, no person's argument shall ever override my experience in life.

Thanks to John for his time – he's still working on various projects – and to Ted McCallion and Alan Fraser for helping to set it up. Alan has already asked on Searching For A Gem if anyone with details of an inner sleeve crediting John and his Kokomo colleagues can get in touch. If you can help, please contact Alan at his website's email address: bob-rare@searchingforagem.com

