Billy

Few drummers can say that they have experienced the highs and lows of being a professional player more accurately than Billy Goodness. For the last two years, Billy has held the drum chair for one of the brightest new stars in country music, Ricky Van Shelton. Ricky and his band have played just about everywhere in the last two years, from obscure Texas dance halls to the New Orleans Superdome, with virtually every show bringing in capacity crowds. Performances on nationally televised broadcasts such as the *Country Music Awards* haven't hurt either. But the rise to prominence that Van Shelton and company have enjoyed is not taken for granted by Billy, who has done his share of paying dues.

"In high school I was in a rock band that played tennis court dances, where we actually played on the courts. We also put on our own gigs at church halls. We would put up posters to get people in to gigs like that," Billy recalls fondly. "Later on, while I was still in high school, there was this real hot band in town called Sweet Feeling, and I wanted to play with them real bad. I heard that the drummer might be leaving, because he had just gotten married, so I went to their gigs every weeknight. I was playing on the weekends with another band. I would just sit there and memorize every single thing they were doing. Some of the guys thought I was too young, but the sax player, Danny Lebate, saw how interested I was in playing with this band. Finally, after I just kept showing up, Danny came up to me on a break and said, 'If you want to audition so bad, come up next set and play some tunes.' When I went up, he said, 'You know the tunes, you call 'em.' I called three or four of their original tunes so they could tell I really had studied their stuff. I learned a big lesson: Persistence pays off."

Born and raised in Rochester, New York, the young Billy Goodness found marching bands fascinating—especially the drummers. "The thing about marching band drummers that impressed me," says Billy, summing up his first encounters with the drums, "was that they never had to stop playing. I liked that." Billy participated in several school bands and orchestras without the benefit of formal study, but it never slowed him down. "In a way, I did have *some* training," he says, "because I had taken piano lessons when I was about six. When I went to the drums, I could read the books from what I had learned taking piano lessons."

Some people are reluctant to discuss what it took to reach the position they now hold. But Billy will be the first to tell you how he hung in there—with no apologies about it. To support himself when drumming didn't always make ends meet, he'd do whatever odd job he could to pick up extra money. Billy quips, "I've done a lot of crazy things. I drove a school bus for a while, painted apartments, taught, delivered pizzas—whatever I could get."

Billy maintains that family and friends are essential for the support and encouragement they can provide when the chips are down. He readily credits many people for the position he is currently in. He also believes that positive mental attitudes are the cornerstones to success in the music business, no matter what your individual endeavor may be.

With all the high-profile performing he does today, Billy still cites one of his greatest personal highlights as being the first time he ever heard his own playing on the radio for a jingle he cut. "Another bright spot was when I did some production on some tracks for a guy, and then ended up producing his album and doing all the arrangements—skills I was later able to use on my demo tape," Billy recalls.

Growing up in Rochester, Billy had the good fortune to be exposed to drumming great Steve Gadd, who was also a native of that city. Billy found Steve's playing inspirational. It spurred him on, where many drummers would put away their sticks in discouragement after witnessing such mastery. After rising to the top of the list in Rochester as both teacher and player, Billy felt it was time to look to a bigger city. "I had been gigging since I was 15 and was working at Dynamic Studio as a drummer/producer. I had already done a bunch of demos and jingles, and had produced other people. I realized I had to go somewhere else to do what I wanted, like playing on master sessions for albums."

At a clinic in 1985, Billy had a conversation with Roy Burns, who encouraged him

Goodness

by Michael Lee Briggs

to visit Nashville to check out the scene and to look up Larrie Londin. Larrie, in turn, promoted the idea of Billy moving to Nashville and getting a job until things came together for him. "Larrie told me that the union hall was a good place to meet players. So the last day I was in Nashville, I went to the union hall and heard music coming from inside. The country act Dave & Sugar were in there auditioning keyboard players. I went in and sat on a couch to watch. On a break, I went up to some of their people and told them I was thinking about moving to Nashville and was looking for a situation. I gave them my resume and tape and left town the next day. Right after that, their drummer gave notice, and they happened to have my tape and resume in hand." One week later, Billy received a call and took the gig with Dave & Sugar, and moved to Nashville to take up residence there. "My wife Valerie and I were engaged at the time," says Billy. "She had given me the money to visit Nashville. There is no way I could have achieved what I have without Valerie's support. My family life is very important to me. I'm very domesticated."

Billy continued to play with Dave & Sugar until he heard about Ricky Van Shelton from his friend Tommy Wells, who had cut the tracks on what was to be Ricky's first album. Tommy wasn't available to travel, so he told Billy about the job and recommended him to Van Shelton's people—which was enough of a reference for them. Billy's ability, talent, and personality helped to create a great working situation for all involved.

As with most dedicated drummers, Billy believes in the value of technical development to achieve a proficiency that allows unconscious execution of the music. As a teacher, he encourages his students to practice with a metronome or to use the songs on the radio to keep time while practicing redundant rudiments, to help keep things fresh. Billy relates, "I'm into songs, not just the drumming. If you were to walk into my house you'd see that I have a lot of 'drumming' records, but nine times out of ten you'd hear pop music coming out of my stereo. There are over 800 albums in my house—not counting CDs and cassettes. I've always listened to the *song*—from Broadway shows to country to rock—although I do listen to the technical stuff too."

Billy also focuses on the "feel" a drummer establishes when working with other players. He cites Steve Gadd, Gary Chester, Jeff Porcaro, Hal Blaine, and Bernard Purdie as influences that helped shape his attitude regarding "feel" drumming and direction.

About his practice philosophies, Billy says, "I would never sit down with a record and try to pick out that 'exact lick.' What I would use is *Stick Control* and *Advanced Techniques For The Modern Drummer* to help develop coordination. I would never practice slow and start speeding up, like in high school when they teach rudiments and call it 'open to closed.' It was always my opinion that the drummer's job was to keep the time straight, so you shouldn't practice speeding up because then you'll speed up when you play. I would practice things at different tempos, but I'd set the metronome to one tempo, practice, and then stop and reset the metronome to a different tempo. For set playing, I would practice along with records to get the feel and structure of a song. I'd always play my own fills, and I encourage my students to do that also. I also tell them to play with a variety of different styles—and not to listen just to the drummer, but to hear what everybody has going on!"

Even though he works with a highly visible artist like Ricky Van Shelton, Billy always has time—or makes time—to talk drums with anyone who has a question for him. His consuming passion for drumming gave him a solid playing foundation, while his positive, upbeat personality and enthusiasm shines through in his playing. Being the consummate perfectionist, Billy demands a lot from his equipment and endorses Pro-Mark drumsticks, Tempus drums, Sabian cymbals, Evans drumheads, and RIMS by PureCussion.

With six Top-10 hits and four Number-1 hits on the Country Music charts in 1988, there would seem to be few hurdles left for Billy to clear. But he hasn't got time to relax; he is perpetually in motion. When he isn't on the road, he plays with other artists and pursues his fascination with production in the recording studio. "I've always loved recording," says Billy, "especially when you have a good song to start with. I record at this little studio near my house with my rock band or just do drum and keyboard stuff on my own. In the studio not only can I be a drummer, but a vocalist, a composer, an arranger, and a producer too!"