

BRIAN AUGER BIOGRAPHY



For over forty years, Brian Auger has been a musician's musician. Jazz pianist, bandleader, session man, Hammond B3 innovator, and key player in the rise of jazz/rock fusion, Brian has done it all and then some. An incredible gentleman with one of the most varied careers in music, he has incorporated jazz, early British pop, R&B, soul and rock into an incredible catalog that has won him legions of fans all over the world.

Auger's unique musical career started at a very early age. Growing up in London during World War II, his family's house had a player piano, and, at the age of three, "this thing fascinated me, with a pair of pedals. You put a piano roll in it, you pedaled, and, as you pedaled, paper was drawn across this grill, with corresponding holes in it for the 88 notes," Brian remembers. "After a while I noticed that I was able to recognize the patterns in all the notes... I began to copy the notes [and] I was actually able to copy these melodies."

The Auger family's home was bombed in 1944. "We were actually very fortunate, because the house was absolutely ruined, plastered, but none of us were hurt," he recalls. Evacuated to the Leeds/Valley area for nearly two years, he lived with another family, and, as fate would have it, "they had a piano, and I would play it a little bit on there. When I got back home the thing that really grounded me was when I walked in the room, there was my piano." Once home with his family, Auger became the entertainment for the neighborhood. "I used to have little concerts. We had a bay window, and my friends would all sit on the window sill, so I would play with all these little piano rolls, you know, and, and have these little concerts." Aside from entertaining the neighborhood kids, Brian remembers "I began to see the movement from one key to another. I could hear a tune on the radio and immediately sit down and play it. I knew all the pop tunes."

As a child of eight or nine, "I was invited to all sorts of parties, and, since we were broke, people would pass a hat around and give me the money." But aside from playing the British and American pop tunes of the day, Brian's ears lit up when he started listening to his older brother's record collection with names like Count Basie and Duke Ellington. Auger's brother also gave him an old radio, and he was able to hear American jazz played over Armed Forces radio.

Brian could see patterns in jazz compositions, which helped him later as a composer. Auger became fascinated with the various jazz piano men that were making an impact on jazz. "Bill Evans was much more about texture and feel and harmony—harmony was really the thing that attracted me... I found that I loved to listen to his playing but it made me so sad". He also admired Oscar Peterson, Hampton Hawes, Victor Feldman, Red Garland, as well as McCoy Tyner and Herbie Hancock. These two elements—the technique of jazz and the heart of R&B—were what moved Brian. "I knew if I could grab you rhythmically and attract your attention I could get you to listen to something you wouldn't listen to otherwise, and you're only going to get a couple of listens before you're hooked."

With his fondness for jazz piano Brian came to an early musical decision. "When I heard those various guys I said 'this is what I want to play' and the early bands I got in when I was 16 or 17

years old, we were playing Jazz Messengers material,” he recalls. “Around this time my dad became very ill, so I thought ‘I had better get a job and help out at least until my younger sister and brother started to work’. I got a gig in a print firm...after two weeks, a supervisor said to him ‘I hear you play the piano’ and I said ‘yes’ and he said ‘I’ve got this gig in London on the West End...its just me and you’. He was a drummer. I go in and play everything, not knowing that I can only play two keys—G and C—I can play all these tunes, but I can only play them in two keys”.

The self-taught Auger only played in G or C until a trombone player visiting the club told him that each piece was written for a certain key, so Auger went home and learned them in the correct keys. “This was a huge learning experience for me, and I started to learn all these tunes in the right key and all my jazz stuff in the right key, and this moved me on to no end.” At eighteen, Brian’s club gig started to draw a number of big name artists who were touring London including Billie Holliday.

Playing in clubs, Auger won the Melody Maker jazz poll in 1964 and was now a known commodity in swingin’ London’s burgeoning music scene. Interestingly, this success in playing American music in Britain coincided with the British invasion in the US, and some jazz clubs started playing rock and roll, which also intrigued Brian. “I was kind of taken by the Beatles, it was kind of a phenomenon, you know,” he remembers. . Auger was still more intrigued with technique, however, and, in 1965, when he heard Jimmy Smith albums, he decided to get involved with a Hammond B3, an organ few British musicians could play, largely because the bulky organs were virtually non-existent in England.

Around this time, the Yardbirds called Auger for session work. Upon arrival, he said “what do you want me to do?” and they said ‘We need an intro, and also a comp throughout the tune’ and I said fine, but where’s the organ?” They looked around the studio, but “they said “we don’t have an organ”—just a harpsichord. said ‘come on, you guys, you’ve got to be joking’ and they said ‘that’s all we’ve got’ and so I did a rolling intro with this harpsichord thing, and I left, thinking these guys are nuts, I mean whose going to buy a pop single with harpsichord on it.. It went to number one, so what do I know?” The song was “For Your Love,” which kicked off the Yardbirds recording career, and also made Brian an in demand session man around London.

In 1965, Brian’s exposure got a huge boost when he got call from Long John Baldry (who had been on Beatles Christmas shows. John had seen him play in a club in Manchester with the organ trio, and asked Brian to put a band together. So Auger rounded up guitarist Vic Briggs, and John got Rod Stewart. Brian also recruited a young, mod singer named Julie Driscoll, telling John “why don’t we add Julie because there’s nothing else out there like this.” Auger was attracted to the new band because of the wide range of influences. “Julie was a range of things from Nina Simone to Motown, where Rod was a mix of Chicago blues and Sam Cooke,” Brian laughs. “Long John was straight Chicago blues or gospel, and we all sang backup on the stage for everybody else and it turned out to be a huge success.”

With this new group of musicians, it was more like a revue than an actu-al band, but what does one call it? “ If someone really played with a great deal of fire in those days, someone would say ‘that guy’s a steamer, so Steampacket became our name,” explained Auger. Sadly, Rod’s manager, Brian’s manager and John’s manager, feuded over whose label the record should come out on, so they never really recorded anything and Steampacket collapsed in 1966 after one year. However, a live concert video exists of Steampacket playing the Reading Jazz and Blues Festival in 1965, and it is truly a rocking’ experience today.

After Steampacket broke up, “what it did do was it took me out of the jazz world and made me play through such a variety of material that in the end I began to focus toward those various musical styles that really rubbed off on me,” recalls Brian. “That was the idea of the [Brian Auger] Trinity, a combination of blues, Motown and Messengers.”

In November 1967, their first album, *Open*, was released in France, and the French just went crazy. "All of a sudden we were booked at the Montreux Jazz Festival as the headliner in 1968—no rock-jazz band had ever done that, these were pure jazz festivals. Following that, we got the Berlin Jazz Festival the same year—one of the most purist of all." Despite the crowd's initial reaction being somewhat less than favorable, Auger's incredible band won the crowd over, as well as many fellow musicians. Dizzy Gillespie, who was so impressed with Brian's band he said, "hey man, you should come jamming with us." I figured he must have been kidding. I was totally in awe," Brian laughs.

The next album, *Definitely What*, was Brian's solo album and was the same year that Brian and Julie's hit "This Wheel's On Fire" went to number one in England. "That was primarily on a reel of tapes that was sent called the basement tapes, the Bob Dylan basement tapes," Brian remembers. "Wheel's was a strange song. There was an upright bass and Bob Dylan singing the piece," he continues. "Julie really liked it and I listened to it. I liked the kind of idea there except that I thought it was an album track, not a single. So we decided to go for it and so I started to mess around with this thing trying to put rock rhythms to it and a different kind of rhythmic bass. It just didn't work, and in the end I just couldn't get away from the walking bass. " The frustration in trying to find the proper bass track led to some experimentation. " Let's treat it as a jazzier thing, then, almost as a march, let me just think of it as a kind of a march, put it down like that," Brian recollects. " So I put the backtrack down with a piano over the organ on it and some mellatron strings. When Julie added her extraordinary vocal, all of a sudden it was like 'wow, this is really psychedelic man'." Psychedelic it was, and the hypnotic effect Brian was searching for helped propel the tune to hit status all over Europe as well as the U.K.

After the success of "Wheel's," the Trinity obtained a large following, particularly in Britain, with Julie being the lead vocalist. Her soulful voice and mod look, made her the "it" girl of the moment. And with Carnaby Street in full gear, Julie's voice and vibe made her one of the poster girls of the mod years.

Streetnoise, the third album, was done in 1969 in preparation of Auger's first US tour which was "a musician's dream, especially if you're a jazz [or R&B] musician, I never, ever, you know, imagined that I would be coming over to play in America," Brian fondly remembers. Creating their own works, along with a take on the Jose Feliciano version of "Light My Fire," it all fell together: To this day it is considered one of the Trinity's finest albums, and contains a number of stand out tracks including a take on Richie Havens' "Indian Rope Man," Miles Davis' "All Blues," Laura Nyro's "Save the Country" and "I've Got Life" from the musical *Hair*.

The euphoria of the American tour soon dissipated, however, when the manager's mismanagement dealt Auger another blow upon returning from the U.S. "We went back, I said to Giorgio [Gomelsky] 'where's my accounts' and he handed me a bill for 5,000 [UK] pounds—' you know I could have bought a couple of little houses for that so that was the end of it for me'." He did one more album with the Trinity called *Befour*, recorded without Julie, which came out in 1970. Julie decided she'd had it as well as she needed complete rest after the trauma of the Gomelsky fiasco, and her promising career never recovered. Brian wanted to continue with cutting-edge music and , as he recalls, "I just needed to put people around me who wanted to go that way, and so the Oblivion Express started up in 1970." Versatile Jim Mullen asked to be the guitar player and Barry Dean was selected as bass player, with Robbie Macintosh (who later found fame with the Average White Band) as the drummer. Brian initially did the vocals, but 'my voice never held up night by night' so we asked Alex Ligertwood to join us as lead singer. "Alex is such an incredibly powerful, amazing singer," Brian continues.. "He was a friend of Jim's and Jim told me about him, and so we decided that we would ask Alex if he would come down and sing with us and see what happened, you know, and that was it." He joined up in '71, after Oblivion had already done one album, *A Better Land*, so Ligertwood's first album as vocalist for the Oblivion Express was *Second Wind*.

The band collapsed suddenly when Alex moved to Paris where his wife preferred to live, and MacIntosh was hired by AWB. "I was broke and I thought, I've got to go out to Europe, man," Auger remembers. "We had an agent out there, and I called him, and he said, 'sure, yeah, and we will get dates together for you.' All of a sudden we got, Godfrey Maclean on drums and Godfrey asked if he could bring conga Lennox Laington to rehearsal. When I heard Lennox I immediately hired him."

Jack Mills appeared, and "Jack wasn't as strong a solo player as Tim Mullen, but his rhythmic playing, his rhythmic ideas were just tremendous, and he fit straight in." Brian continues. So all of a sudden we went out to play and I was just wondering what the hell was going to happen, and the band was smokin' and the groove was like, whoa, this is outrageous." The new line-up of Oblivion Express rolled into the 1970s, cutting Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues," as well as originals "Light On the Path" and "Happiness Is Just Around the Bend" on the Closer To It album in 1973. Believing in his music, Brian contacted his agency to see if they could book a tour of America.. They could, and Brian went into credit card debt to finance it. "I scraped together the fare and went out there and RCA put the record out, "Brian laughs at the sheer ballsiness of this move. "Jeff Franklin, my agent at ATI, played it and went 'this is incredible, man', we'll give you a tour.' He said 'look, I can get you a tour in a jazz club in about six cities in the States on the East and West Coast.' I said 'I'll take it, whatever it is I'll take it' and then I went to RCA and they were less than enthusiastic. They said 'we don't know what kind of music this was, but in the jazz clubs you'll never sell any records. Don't do it! ' I decided I'm just gonna bypass the record company and I'm just going to do the tour."

They hit Cleveland, and the Closer To It album broke on its own. "A local RCA rep, Billy Bass, went down to the radio station WMMS in Cleveland and goes, 'this is the best piece of product on the whole label, man', " Brian laughs. "He gets them to play a cut, and eventually they're playing it every 15 minutes. It becomes a hit on the jazz and R&B charts at the same time. Then [Frank Mancini] the head of national promotions for RCA turns up one night and I said to him. 'Frank what are you doing here man, you'll never sell any records out of a jazz club, you know.' He said "well, I know, I know. What kind of music is this, I think you had better come and meet the business affairs people on your way back when you finish the tour and let's kind of have a talk."

Closer To It was followed by Straight Ahead, which also landed on both the R&B and jazz charts. The Express opened for Herbie Hancock's Headhunters,, ZZ Top, Led Zeppelin and others, bridging rock, jazz and R&B genres, and sometimes did straight R&B gigs. "I got a boost in '75 when Ligertwood rejoined for the Reinforcements album. Oblivion Express kept rolling through most of the 70s, until the group finished touring in 1977. In 1976 and '77, Brian was voted the Number One Jazz organist in the world in Contemporary Keyboard magazine, largely behind the strength of his live playing with Oblivion Express. Visiting London in 1977, Auger invited Julie Driscoll to do another album again, and thus the album called Encore, (1977) and one more with Julie followed. After a year off, he did Planet Earth Calling after being approached by Head First Records.

From 1979 to 1983, Brian settled in California and took it easy for a while, taking music courses at Marin College and San Francisco State. It also gave him an opportunity to spend more time with his family, playing occasionally in local clubs. "People weren't knocking the doors down at the time because punk and disco had suddenly come in, you know, and "anything that smacked of jazz, you can forget it," Brian remembers of the dreaded disco era. In the mid-80s, however, Brian toured Europe again, especially Italy and Switzerland, and released Keys to the Heart in 1987.

Brian would have been content touring Europe occasionally, but fate intervened once again. In '89, he got a call from Eric Burdon (of the Animals), who "sounded like the Steampacket days all over again, you know, 'I need someone to put a band together'," he recalls. Brian hoped that they "could update some of the arrangements and make it really like a great modern band and really nail everybody" but grew dissatisfied after four years because Burdon wanted to stick to

Animals music. During those four years, though, Auger was able to tour the whole world (even going behind the Iron Curtain). His son Karma joined the band when the drummer quit two days before a European tour. Karma, working as a drum tech, was the only person around who knew the all the material, and Burdon as kind enough to give him the drum chair.

In 1993, Auger decided to leave Burdon and concentrate on his own music. In the mid to late 1990's, Auger formed his own family version of the Oblivion Express, with his children Karma on drums and Savannah performing, as the lead vocalist, along with a bassist Auger has selected. Before releasing Auger Rhythms. His first career retrospective, Brian toured Europe, where he drew large crowds at several jazz festivals, including a two night gig at the famed Montreux Jazz Festival. And for fans in the States, Brian and the revamped Oblivion Express have started touring all over America at clubs and festivals as well.

So the career of this most incredible man has come full circle. In so doing, Brian is always amazed at the undying affection his fans have for him and the body of work he's created in nearly forty years of recording and touring. "It always amazes me," he laughs. " We'll be playing in some small town in Europe and a small club or town hall. We'll be loading in and doing sound check and I'm always a bit nervous that no one will show up. Then the sun goes down, and suddenly the hills are alive with the sound of my B3, and fans come out of the woodwork. Many have the old albums they want autographed."

There is no one on the planet quite like this amazing guy who still comes to a gig ready to play, and not just walk through a set of oldies, but inject his music with the fire and passion that only a true original brings to the bandstand or studio. Brian Auger is a true original, and we are fortunate to have him and his musical legacy as a vibrant part of today's music scene.

Tom Vickers