

NIROSHINI

STERLING CAMPBELL:
THE RHYTHMIC
FORCE BEHIND DAVID
BOWIE, DURAN
DURAN, SOUL ASYLUM
AND MUSIC DIRECTOR
FOR THE B-52'S – A
DRUMMER,
PRODUCER AND
SONGWRITER ALWAYS
CHASING THE NEXT
BIG SOUND TO STAY
AHEAD OF THE GAME.

Interview

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STERLING
CAMPBELL

MINI MAGAZINE

FROM NYC GROOVES TO GLOBAL STAGES: STERLING CAMPBELL'S STORY

Sterling Campbell's drumming journey reads like a rock 'n' roll dream, starting from his roots in the vibrant musical melting pot of New York City, to the world's biggest stages alongside legends like David Bowie, Duran Duran and The B-52s. Born into a music-loving family, Sterling was captivated by sounds from an early age, endlessly fascinated by the beats that shaped his childhood, from Motown grooves and jazz rhythms to the pioneering influences of rock and funk. His passion for music wasn't just a hobby – it was an obsession, fuelled by a childlike wonder that never faded.

At just 14 years old, a serendipitous encounter with David Bowie's drummer, Dennis Davis, changed his life forever. Dennis invited the young Sterling to a David Bowie concert, a mind-blowing experience that crystallised his desire to pursue a life in music. That night, amidst the mesmerising lights and sounds of Madison Square Garden, Sterling knew he was destined for the drum kit.

Over the years, Sterling's unrelenting drive and talent catapulted him into the spotlight. He became a sought-after drummer, known for his versatility and ability to cross genres with ease, whether it was touring with Cyndi Lauper, laying down tracks with Soul Asylum or joining the ranks of David Bowie's elite band. Despite his storied career, Sterling never lost his innate curiosity for music. This childlike fascination remains his guiding force, pushing him to explore new rhythms, sounds and creative horizons.

In the late 1990s, Sterling's journey took a spiritual turn when he became involved with Falun Gong, a meditative practice that helped him overcome personal challenges and find inner peace. His commitment to Falun Gong led him to protest against human rights abuses in China, demonstrating his dedication not only to his craft but also to his principles.

Sterling's journey is truly inspiring. His dedication to music, spanning decades, showcases a remarkable blend of talent and passion. From his roots as a drummer to expanding his role as a producer and songwriter, Sterling's career reflects a deep commitment to his craft. His tenure as the Music Director for The B-52's is a testament to his versatility and influence in the industry.

What stands out is how Sterling's enthusiasm for music remains undiminished, even after years of success and experience. His story isn't just about achieving milestones; it's about the continuous drive to innovate and push boundaries within the art of drumming. Sterling's ongoing passion and perseverance not only fuel his own creativity but also serve as a beacon of inspiration for others in the music world.

I was technically in my jungle

I was born in 1964, the fourth generation of my family in New York City and grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in Washington Heights. Our family was large – six boys in total – and I was the youngest.

The neighbourhood I grew up in was tight-knit. Everyone stuck close to the block, rarely venturing beyond its borders which meant you really got to know the families around you. I can still recall the distinct smell of those old buildings, a scent that instantly brings back memories of that time. Unlike many parts of New York in the 1970s, the buildings in my neighbourhood were never torn down, standing as reminders of those shared moments and enduring connections.

We came from humble beginnings. We couldn't afford much. My first glimpses of life beyond the block came from movies. I learned what England looked like or saw grand old buildings in period dramas that fascinated me.

Just two doors down, I spent most of my time at a friend's house. It was like an extension of home. His mom would cook us breakfast and my mother never had to worry about where I was. There was this unbelievable sense of safety back then, a kind of communal care.

When I started school at eight, my mother put me on a bus and I travelled to Harlem alone. It felt a bit dystopian – just a kid navigating the world on his own – but it wasn't a case of tough love. My mother had to work and it was simply how things were.

I was technically in my jungle. In a way, it was like being an anaconda; you learned what was dangerous and what wasn't. Harlem in those days was tough and I saw some truly hard things with no parental supervision but I never felt afraid. It was just part of the world and landscape I lived in and it toughened me, made me capable of handling whatever came my way.

My mother wasn't neglectful; she just wanted the best for me. She sent me to a good school in Harlem and that experience – growing up the way I did – made me independent. Looking back, I wouldn't have wanted to grow up any other way.

I married music with the idea of what could be...

I grew up in a household where music was more than background noise – it was a way of life. My mother filled the air with the timeless voices of jazz legends like Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday and she loved to go dancing at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. At home, she'd tune into Light FM, listening to singer-songwriters like The Carpenters. There was something so pure about that music – it wasn't political, just beautifully crafted songs that stayed with you. I'll never forget how it transported me. It felt cinematic, like it was painting entire scenes in my mind.

With five older brothers, my musical world expanded even further. They were into everything – Motown, rock, funk and beyond. I was hearing it all and I couldn't help but be open to every sound that came my way.

In the neighbourhood, it was all about R&B and soul – but then there was Elton John – this British phenomenon at his apex. Every song was a friggin classic. Most people on my block weren't listening to him but I was captivated by anything that came from beyond the U.S., especially England.

That fascination I had for England felt similar to what the Beatles must've felt toward America. It was their perception and interpretation of America... I'd find myself wondering, "Why does it sound like that?". It was so distinct, tied to a specific time and place in history. The Beatles were shaped by post-World War II Britain and that struggle, that sense of rebuilding, seeped into their sound. You can hear everything in their music – their upbringing, the food they ate, their surroundings. We'll never fully understand what shaped their sound but the music they made is timeless. It's like reading a novel from the 1800s – we only get a glimpse through the lens of one person's experience, yet we're still drawn to those stories. We still make films like "Wuthering Heights" because they speak to something universal.

That era of music was unparalleled. Pink Floyd, David Bowie, James Brown – every artist was operating at their highest level, creating songs that ground into your soul – unforgettable. It's almost surreal to think that people like Paul McCartney and John Lennon even walked the earth. They created music out of thin air, without the technology we have today. No internet, no shortcuts – just raw talent and creativity. When I compare them to musicians today, it's clear that while many are technically proficient, true artistry is rare. Artists like David Bowie didn't just create songs; they created legacies. It's like the Renaissance – we're still in awe of those creators centuries later.

These musical influences sparked a deep longing in me – a connection to music that felt almost magical. Some kids grow up wanting to be superheroes like Spider-Man... I was happy just being a fan of music, not a participant. Music was this fantastical thing to me. I had a little transistor radio and even though it didn't have the best sound, it was transformative. I remember going to concerts and in 1976, seeing Elton John – it was nothing short of otherworldly.

I didn't travel as a kid – New York was all I knew, surrounded by towering buildings. The ocean was the only open space and I would often equate music with possibility, like it was a way to reach beyond the horizon. I married music with the idea of what could be, as if it held the key to everything waiting just beyond the edge of the ocean.

I came out another person and knew the path I wanted to be on...

I was always banging a beat on cars, pots and pans and I guess my mom picked up on it and at 12 years old, for Christmas, she bought me a Telstar drum kit. I would set up records and play the drums to them.

We had 5 drummers in my building so I had amazing mentors.

In 1978, at 14 years old, I saw Dennis Davis in the lobby with a stick bag and cymbal case. Being inquisitive, I had the nerve to go up to him and ask, "Where are you going, do you play drums?". He replied, "Yeah, I'm playing at Madison Square Garden with David Bowie, do you wanna go?". He then hands me a \$19 Orchestral Seat ticket to see David Bowie's Heroes Tour – I mean, who does that? It was the first time I'd known someone like that; knowing Dennis was a bit like knowing one of the Avengers. It was very comic book, childlike stuff to me: he plays the drums and he's playing with David Bowie and I know him!

Back then, Madison Square Garden was like Wembley today – a mecca for legendary performances. You had to be someone like Elton John, Stevie Wonder, David Bowie or Led Zeppelin to even set foot on that stage. I didn't actually know David Bowie's music that well. The only song I knew was "Fame". The influential music Dennis had recorded with him, "Heroes", "Low", "Young Americans" and "Station to Station", wasn't a part of my musical vernacular.

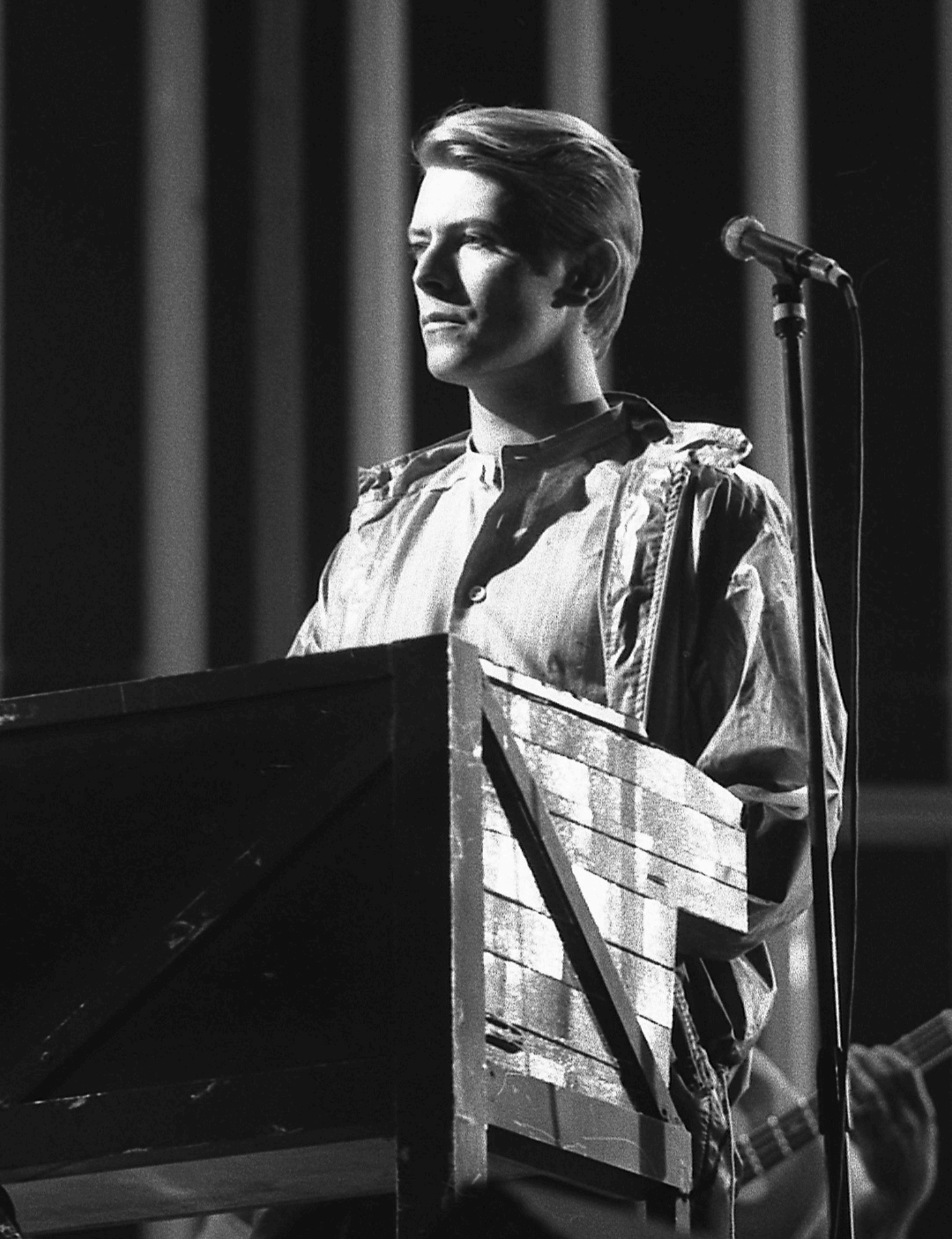
The stage looked like a spacecraft with florescent lights and it opened with a sobering, ambient piece of music from the "Low" album; Warszawa. I thought to myself, "okay, this is a force". I was blown away.

I couldn't at that time conceptually understand the crossing of genres – it was like, "you mean you can do "that" with "that". He was merging a European and Urban aesthetic – classical pastoral dissonance and electronic (krautrock) with Soul and R&B.

David wasn't just ahead of his time; he was already living in the 80s – a true visionary. It felt like watching people do cosplay, like the way fans still dress up as Luke Skywalker. That's how the show felt to me – like I'd stepped into something futuristic. In a way, I'm still there, still wielding that lightsaber.

That concert reshaped how I thought about music, how limitless it could be. The show taught me how expansive music was. I came out another person and knew the path I wanted to be on.

The timing was amazing – if I hadn't of seen Dennis at that exact moment, my life could have been a completely different thing.



DAVID BOWIE, MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, 1978

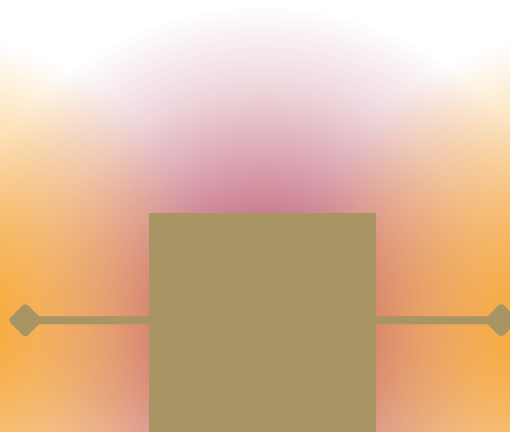
Developing my taste for bands overseas

I spent countless hours in record stores, sifting through vinyls, developing my taste for bands overseas. It wasn't as simple as it is today – back then, discovering new music was a financial endeavour. You had to fork out cash to take a chance on a record. Nowadays, everything's just a "tap away" with platforms like Spotify, YouTube and TikTok serving up music for free. If you landed a spot on "Top of the Pops" back then, it was a career milestone. Now, it feels like the mystique is gone. With these digital platforms, anyone can be a "rockstar" in an instant.



The power of music

I first became aware of the power of music in 1972. We had just lost my cousin David, my aunt's son. At the funeral, she didn't shed a single tear, her face unreadable. However later, at the gathering back at the house, Stevie Wonder's "Golden Lady" from Innervisions started playing. That's when it hit her – she broke down completely. From that moment on, whenever I hear that song, it pulls me right back to that day. It wasn't just the music I was hearing – it was the feeling behind it, something much deeper. The song carried a sense of innocence and romance but it also carried the weight of real emotion.



It felt a bit like looking over at another world, like in “Lord of the Rings”...

Suddenly, there was this whirlwind of sound, shifting from one style to another, each with its own music. When disco arrived, it was like, “what is this?”. At first, it felt unfamiliar but as I kept listening, my ears adapted and became attuned. I started noticing the distinct sounds coming from different places – Philly, Detroit, New York, Florida, Alabama – all hitting me in unique, cool ways. It made me want to create music in that style.

In Philadelphia, there was a very specific vibe. Gamble and Huff were at the centre of it, giving off an energy that felt fresh. Even David Bowie sensed it and wanted to tap into that sound.

It felt a bit like looking over at another world, like in “Lord of the Rings”, where the elves had their own special abilities. Every new sound fed off others and you could feel that hunger – hearing something and thinking, “I want that” and then shaping it into something powerful.

It turned into a clash of rock fans versus disco fans. If you didn't however keep up with the constant changes, you were left behind. Then punk rock burst onto the scene, followed by 70s post-punk, New Wave and eventually, MTV.

I was hanging out with everyone, from the tie-dye crowd to the jazz fusion guys

I started at the original LaGuardia High School of Music and Art on 137th Street, the same year the movie "Fame" came out – about our school. The teachers even took us to see it and I remember thinking, "so this is what I'm embarking on". Of course, my experience didn't quite match the movie – we weren't dancing on cars, that's for sure!

Getting into LaGuardia now is like auditioning for American Idol. Back then, I didn't have a "soccer mom" pushing me. I just walked in and said, "I like playing drums" and got in!

It was an open environment with no real boundaries so I hung out with whoever I felt drawn to. I was hanging out with everyone, from the tie-dye crowd to the jazz fusion guys. I didn't know there were social cliques and I wasn't invested in any particular scene. I just enjoyed the music for what it was and went wherever my instincts took me. There were all kinds of people, financially and otherwise. I went to school with The Wailers' son, Ron Carter's kids and Gil Evans' children – Miles and Noah Evans.

Being around such a talented group was incredible. I made friendships with everyone and it was such a special time. I got in with the punk rock scene and thought, "oh, this is cool". I was pretty naive and didn't care about their politics. I never asked them, "Why are you so angry?" – I just liked the groove, the colours, the shape, the energy. I didn't care much about the message back then. They were singing about dark themes and wanting to escape but I was just there for the vibe.

The 80s ushered in a flood of new sounds

The city was falling apart, completely bankrupt. Artists didn't have much money so downtown New York became the place to be. Bohemian types flocked to huge, abandoned warehouses, turning them into squats. This happens everywhere – these spots are prime real estate for creatives.

Back then, the art scene was booming and experimental composers were everywhere. If you wanted to hear punk rock or dance music, downtown was the spot. Everything was marinating together in that area. Early punk morphed into post-punk and then the first waves of hip hop started gaining momentum.

My friend Peter played in a punk band and they were looking for a drummer. He recommended me. I'd never even been downtown before so I was stepping into a scene that was wildly and radically different from what I knew in the 80s. Greenwich Village was part of this world – a totally different place where people had much broader perspectives – and inherited a wider view of life. Growing up, I didn't know anyone who was gay but in the Village, it was the heart of gay culture. The art scene thrived there and the singer and core members of the band were gay. We became close friends and still are today.

While I was at La Guardia, I ended up playing with five different bands, performing regularly at the famed CBGB's, the Ritz, Peppermint Lounge and Limelight with groups like Pedantiks, Urban Blight and Special Jellies. I connected it all to David Bowie – they were pushing boundaries and doing something different.

The 80s ushered in a flood of new sounds – bands like The Police, Blondie with their unique style and Duran Duran. The urban scene was raw and gritty, with artists like Basquiat and Warhol everywhere. You couldn't help but be surrounded by that energy.

MTV was taking off; electronic synthesis was huge and the sound was explosive. Every couple of years, starting in 1980, a new wave of music would emerge. It meant you had to keep up. I remember seeing David Bowie at Madison Square Garden and he gave me a glimpse of the future. That's where my head was always at. Like Bowie with Ziggy, he constantly reinvented his sound after that song, always moving on to the next thing. That constant evolution felt natural to me – everyone was searching for something new and you couldn't afford to fall behind. Even if you were a big name in jazz or rock, if you didn't adapt, you'd get left in the dust.

The British artists were masters of this. They'd take a bit of one sound, put their stamp on it and make it their own. I don't know what David Bowie or Paul McCartney were drinking but they had these incredible palates, blending everything from classical to R&B effortlessly into their music.

Songs like "Let's Dance", along with Queen, Prince and Michael Jackson's work, were like huge impactful blows. It changed the whole sonic landscape from the 70s. Suddenly, there was this brand-new sound primed for radio and MTV. It felt like the world was playing catch-up to everything that was happening in New York and London, where the art and culture were ahead of the curve.

Cyndi Lauper

In 1986, when I was 22, I was obsessed with David Bowie and Peter Gabriel. You've got to understand how huge they were – it was like Blur and Oasis for that era...

One night, a bassist saw me playing in a club and told me about auditions for Cyndi Lauper's "True Colours Tour". I auditioned and her manager came over and said, "Hey, listen, Cyndi wants to go with you". I actually said, "I'm not sure I want to do it". I was young and naive, with my heart set on working with David Bowie or Peter Gabriel. I only knew "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" – I didn't realise just how talented Cyndi really was.

Back then, musicians in New York were hustling to break into the '80s sound – everyone was scrambling to make it – and here I was, about to squander an incredible opportunity. The manager just looked at me with a face that screamed, "Are you serious? You have to take this". He pulled me aside and broke it down: this was a chance to be on a global stage. That's when I said, "Okay, I guess I should do this".

It was like going from zero to 60. One day I was playing small clubs and suddenly, I was performing in arenas – my first gig was at the Barbican! Everything shifted, even the way people spoke to me. MTV amplified the visibility of musicians back then.

Playing for Cyndi became my calling card. She didn't just perform – she made an HBO movie about the tour and a lot of people saw that.

I've come full circle now, as I'm currently rehearsing for an upcoming tour with Cyndi.

Duran Duran

I headed to England and did a stint with Cameo. Then I started playing with this emerging band called So, who were being hyped as the next Tears for Fears. They were really well-connected in London and that started getting my name around.

One day, I was staying at the Colombia Hotel when I got a direct phone call to my room – it was Simon Le Bon. He said, “Hey, I’ve heard you. Want to come on tour with us?”. I didn’t jump at it right away. I met Nick Rhodes but I was still unsure. Then I met John Taylor and we just hit it off. That’s when I said, “Okay” and joined them for rehearsals for Duran Duran’s “Big Thing Tour”. Honestly, I already felt prepared – growing up, I’d been listening to all that music and really got it. A few months in, they asked me to officially join the band. It wasn’t something I chased; it just kind of landed in my lap.

Suddenly, I’m surrounded by these white British guys and it wasn’t exactly easy fitting into their world. Next thing I know, I’m in the middle of all this A-list, high-end madness – the era of the supermodel. I’m at events with countesses, heiresses, Armani supermodels and Giorgio Armani himself is handing me a glass of champagne. I even found myself at Karl Lagerfeld’s opening. I was around people like Pink Floyd and the Stones, completely immersed in this high-society, glamorous lifestyle but I also saw it for what it was.

Duran Duran? They were the ultimate poster boys of the ‘80s. They made incredible records throughout the ‘80s and into the ‘90s.

There I was, just scratching my head, like, “how did this happen?”. It wasn’t some grand ambition of mine – it just unfolded with a simple “okay”. It was surreal. I still don’t know how I went from banging on cars to being a part of that.

Duran Duran were such a big part of the New Romantic scene – they had this way of mixing edgy fashion with these cool, futuristic sounds. Their polished music and those unforgettable, over-the-top music videos really nailed the era’s love for style and technology. They weren’t just part of the New Romantics; they pretty much defined it for everyone.

Being with Duran Duran made me realise I wasn’t really a rockstar. I just faked it, played the part.

Honestly, the timing of it all was wild. There were no cell phones back then. If I hadn’t been in my hotel room at that exact moment when Simon called – no answering machine or anything – my life could’ve turned out completely different. I stayed with Duran Duran from 1990 to 1993 and it all still feels like a crazy blur.

Nile Rodgers

Nile Rodgers was a rare figure in the 80s – a Black producer and writer who seamlessly fit into the European music scene, something that wasn't common at the time. Originally from New York, Nile stood out, navigating a space where few others like him thrived. He and Bernard Edwards embraced me early on, treating everything about music with seriousness and leaving a lasting impact.

I remember Nile reaching out to ask if I'd be available to work on David Bowie's "Black Tie White Noise" album. This was the first time David and Nile were collaborating since the legendary Let's Dance – a huge moment. I immediately said "yes". Even though it was a childhood dream, I had already experienced the highs of being a jet-setting rock star and being in the tabloids so while it was meaningful, it didn't feel like a moment where I thought, "I've finally made it".



Mountain Studios & Brian Eno

A few years after working with Nile, I got a call from David Bowie himself. He said, "Hey Sterling, how's it going? Am I disturbing you? Listen, I'm probably going to do a new record with Brian Eno. What's your availability?". Getting a call like that directly from David felt surreal – like Stanley Kubrick calling to ask, "Hey, I'm doing Barry Lyndon, would you like to be in it?".

Next thing I knew, I was in Montreux, Switzerland, recording "Outside" with David and Brian at Mountain Studios. The place was incredible, surrounded by Lake Geneva and the Evian Mountains. The whole scene felt magical. David and Brian had already created legendary works like Heroes and the Berlin Trilogy and now here I was, a part of that world.

When I was younger, I used to obsess over album credits and Mountain Studios always felt like a mythical place, like this incredible shrine – Queen had recorded there, after all. It was like how I felt about Madison Square Garden and seeing David perform for the first time – totally dreamlike.

Outside was a completely new sound for David... They set me up in a beautiful apartment just ten minutes from the studio and every morning, Brian would pick me up for breakfast. He was hilarious, full of wild stories from the '70s, about his adventures and the crazy scenes he found himself in! His stories were just as out-there as his music and we hit it off. There was something so fresh about the time, Ziggy Stardust breaking into America, David in leotards – Brian had lived through it all and had some wild tales.

The whole process was so free. Brian's approach was, "I hired you to do you so go!". I had a touch of imposter syndrome, just hoping something cool would come out of it. However, I embraced the chaos. Brian was experimental in the extreme, setting up role-playing scenarios for us in the studio. Some of David's longtime band members found that approach annoying but I was like, "Yeah, this is Brian Eno, let's get weird and experimental!".

David had this uncanny ability to take something you'd created and mold it into something completely his own. He could take any sound or idea, make sense of it, make a picture of it and fit himself into it – it was special. That talent extended beyond music – he could even walk into a room, point at a random piece of clothing and say, "Yeah, that one" and it would just work. I've seen him do the most intellectual decision making – his decisiveness, his taste, it all seemed effortless (there was no committee).

During the sessions, David didn't sing a word. Brian was in charge of pulling things out of us, while David sat nearby, painting portraits of the band. That was pretty magical in itself.

One day, Brian had us play "Baby Love" by The Supremes in our headphones, telling us to use the chord structure but not to play anything like the song. I had no idea what I was doing! Brian would hit record and we'd just go with it, letting things present themselves. Then, out of nowhere, he'd find a moment and say, "There! That's something". That's where the genius came in. He and David could hear things that most of us couldn't and their alchemy was something unique.

It was an unbelievable experience. Usually, you just come into the studio, do your bit and leave. However, David allowed me to sit in and watch the entire process unfold. David would just decide when something would "show up in his head" – that's the prodigy part.

Brian and David even printed up role-playing characters for us. We had to keep our roles secret and play in character. One of mine was: You are a musician at "Asteroid", a space-based club (currently in geostationary orbit 180 miles above the surface of the Moon) catering mainly to the shaven, tattooed and androgynous craft-maintenance staff who gather there at weekends. They are a tough crowd who like it weird and heavy, jerky and skeletal and who dance in sexy, violent styles. These people have musical tastes formed in their early teens in the mid-Nineties. Your big influence as a kid was the Funkadelics. I smoked pot at that time and took a couple of puffs and just thought, "aright, I'll see if I can sit into this!".

Brian would have this reel-to-reel tape running for 30 minutes and make notes, like, "Oh, check at 1 minute, 15 seconds". Then we'd listen back and something cool would have happened. Both Brian and David had this incredible ability to hear where the music was going, far ahead of the rest of us.

Beyond all the deep, intellectual work... the best part of it for me? We were just laughing and making silly jokes the entire time. It was a blast.

Leopard print tights and moussed-out hair

The 1980s reached its end point of leopard print tights and moussed-out hair. Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer were not cool anymore. Nirvana came along and pulled the carpet away from anything that wreaked of the '80s.



Soul Asylum

I got a phone call from Soul Asylum, a band fresh off signing their first major deal with Columbia. They were struggling with their record Grave Dancers Union and their producer, Michael Beinhorn, needed something to hit a certain level. At the time, I wasn't even sure what "alternative music" was – it was this underground thing bubbling up.

I showed up with a major case of imposter syndrome, pretending I knew exactly what I was doing. During the sessions for their debut, I kept asking, "Is this it? Does this work?". Honestly, I was winging it the whole time. Maybe that's why it worked – Grave Dancers Union became huge.

I ended up recording on their next album too which was produced by the same guy who worked with Nirvana. Then, Soul Asylum asked me to officially join the band. I contributed to their big hits, like "Runaway Train". It was a wild shift. I never fit that 70s rockstar mold, posing in pastel colours to look sexy. That wasn't me... Soul Asylum had this down-to-earth vibe – it was like Minnesota to the Mid-West! It was a whole new energy and I had to find my place in it.

One morning, I woke up in a hotel room, surrounded by cigarette butts and an ashtray that felt more like my morning coffee. I turned to the band and said, "I gotta go". They were shocked but I couldn't explain why. By that point, I was drinking constantly, deep in a spiral from '92 to '94. (It was a blur of dark dens and wild nights from '92 to '97). My soul was a mess. I'd never touched drugs before but I went down this deep rabbit hole, searching for something darker.

It hit me – a moment of clarity, like seeing a clear blue sky. I knew I had to leave. Soul Asylum wasn't happy but I had to walk away.

Embodying the three pillars

I returned to New York feeling defeated, with my tail between my legs, unsure of where to go next. One day, while walking through the park, I noticed a group of people moving slowly, like they were practicing some form of Tai Chi. Curious, I approached one of them and asked, “What are you doing?”. They responded, “Falun Gong”. I kept asking questions and learned it was a meditative practice aimed at cultivating both the mind and body. The person offered me a book. I took the book and within three weeks of practicing, I had quit everything. No substances, no cigarettes. I used to smoke two packs a day and couldn’t set foot in a bar without indulging in cocaine, acid, ecstasy and whisky. It was controlling me and I needed out. I didn’t overthink it – Falun Gong just spoke to me; it resonated on a deep level. That was back in ‘98 and now, 26 years later, I’m still sober.

It wasn’t just about breaking the addictions. There were deeper issues I had buried for years that needed addressing. Those things don’t just go away on their own – they harden and calcify over time. I had to work through them, to be real with myself and stop relying on external things to numb the pain. It forced me to look inward, to figure out what was driving me and why I felt the need to escape. That’s not easy – it’s hard to let go of the self.

I’ve seen a lot of people who, like me, didn’t want to let go of their highs, especially if they were avoiding unresolved issues. Fame makes it even worse. When you’re famous, people throw things at you – drugs, opportunities, temptations. It’s easy to lose control. I’ve watched music take the lives of so many great artists, like Janis Joplin and I’ve lost close friends to it. Music, if you’re not careful, can kill you.

When I started practicing Falun Gong, I had no idea where it would take me. China, led by the Communist Party, saw Falun Gong’s rapid growth as a threat. It spread quickly, with followers from all walks of life – mayors, police officers, even military

personnel – practicing it. (Currently there are 70 million people practicing it). The government didn’t like that and they initiated a brutal crackdown. Lives were destroyed, people were killed – but no one seemed to care; the world turned a blind eye.

One day, someone reached out to me, asking if I wanted to join a peaceful protest in China. I hesitated at first – I had to think about what that would mean, about the risk – but something inside me shifted. I couldn’t explain it but I knew I had to go.

The Chinese Communist Party is everywhere, even outside of China. They control the internet, monitor information and keep tabs on people. They even intercepted our plans to protest.

When I arrived in Tiananmen Square, I didn’t really know what to expect. Police officers and plainclothes agents were swarming the area. I should have been scared but I wasn’t. I felt calm, as though I was being guided through the moment. I didn’t even have my passport but I felt certain I was doing the right thing.

Suddenly, police cars surrounded us from all sides. I was taken to a detention centre, where I found myself facing rows of police officers – probably a hundred of them. It felt like the worst place in the world to be.

A man came up to me, demanding to know where my passport was, asking for my information. I looked him straight in the eye and said, “You have no right to do this. We’ve done nothing wrong”. It was strange – like I was watching it all happen from outside my body. Then Melissa, they beat the crap out of me – but I didn’t feel anything. I let them bring me to the ground. I didn’t resist, didn’t fight back. I just thought, “This is what’s happening now” and I accepted it. I knew I was in the right and that gave me strength. I wasn’t angry, just calm.

After some time, they decided to take me back to the hotel. They put a group of us in a van and I sat next to a young police officer. He started texting on his phone and after a while, he showed it to me. It read, “I’m really sorry about this. The CCP is really bad”. We shared a brief moment of understanding. It was an unexpected connection but one that felt strangely powerful.

When we arrived at the hotel, they pushed us out of the van and into the building. They knew they were in over their heads, dealing with an international situation. However, the people in China who practice Falun Gong – they have no rights at all. They’re rounded up, tortured, forced to renounce their beliefs. What I went through was nothing compared to what they endure every day. They are the reason I went there.

That experience was a defining moment in my life. Physically, I was bruised but something far deeper had happened. I felt a profound shift when they beat me to the ground. I didn’t feel pain; it was like I was beyond it, something metaphysical.

Back home, when I tried to explain why I had gone, that’s when the emotions finally hit me. It was hard to put into words and no one seemed to truly understand what I had experienced. During those moments in the detention centre, I was completely calm but later, trying to make sense of it all to others, I found it deeply overwhelming.

Falun Gong teaches three core principles – compassion, thoughtfulness and tolerance. I did my best to embody all three while I was in that detention centre and in that moment, it all made sense to me. I didn’t fully understand my purpose when I first went to China but after that experience, I caught a glimpse of something much bigger. It was like I had just scratched the surface of a deeper understanding. The real magic happens when you’re not separate from it – the three pillars become part of you.

Musical family tree bond

In the midst of being with Soul Asylum,
David asked if I could join him on tour, I was
already committed to Soul Asylum so I had
to decline.

Zack Alford and I went way back, all the
way to junior high. That's where our
friendship really began. We grew up
together – watching movies, listening to
music and witnessing the world change
around us. I told David he should reach out
to Zack. I knew he'd be the perfect fit.

Then there's Poogie Bell, another one of
David Bowie's drummers. He went to La
Guardia a couple years ahead of me.
Dennis Davis himself was like a big brother
to me.

It felt like we were all part of this musical
family tree bond, each connected, each
branch influencing the other.



Moments like that made it so special

David had this incredible way of creating a working atmosphere that fostered friendships – connections that have lasted a lifetime.

In the late '90s, David reached out to recruit me for the “Hours” album. Later, I recorded at Philip Glass Studio for “Heathen” (2002) and most of “Reality” (2003) with Mario McNulty who played drums on one track and also engineered the records.

The studio was just around the corner from where David lived so he could literally walk over – it was a really cool spot. There was this constant stream of amazing talent passing through the doors.

Mario and Hector Castillo (who worked on Heathen) were the house engineers. We all hit it off instantly – same sense of humour, same taste in music.

Mario's still one of my closest friends to this day. He's an incredibly thoughtful person with a unique, almost microscopic view of the world.

David really created an environment where those friendships thrived. The band members could practically finish each other's sentences by then.

The Reality Tour stands out as my personal favourite. We'd been playing together since '99 and by the time the tour came around, we'd truly found ourselves as a band. That's the kind of connection you hope to reach.

We even had this ongoing thing where we'd try to make each other laugh on stage. David, with his sharp sense of humour, never took himself too seriously. I remember one bus tour, we were somewhere in Arizona and found this stuffed jackalope – a mythical creature in the Southwest. That night, the jackalope showed up on stage. It became an inside joke, our little mascot. David even sang to it during the shows!

One time, we were playing in Las Vegas – a high-roller crowd, not your typical Bowie audience. During “Ziggy Stardust”, there's this break in the song. I stepped off the drums and got the drum tech to finish the track. I walked to the front of the stage and stood right next to David. He looked over to see who was playing, then burst out laughing. One time, the entire band did it. Moments like that made it all so special.

One of a kind...

"The Next Day" was a special project, though it came after a tough period. David had a heart attack and had to take some time away from everything. During those years, everyone just went their own way, living life as usual.

In New York, renting a studio is almost like paying rent – expensive. I ended up with this basement space, with a drum kit that was practically falling apart. One day, I get a call from David. He says, "What are you up to right now?". I told him, "I'm at the studio" and he replies, "Mind if I come by?". That was the moment *The Next Day* (2013) album began. I was the first person he called for it and we started laying down the groundwork right there in that rundown basement.

Getting that call from him was always something special. No matter how many years we worked together, I never took it for granted – I was always deeply grateful.

There was one catch: I couldn't tell anyone about the project for two years. I had to sign an NDA and keep everything under wraps. That was the last time we worked together.

When he passed, I didn't know how to grieve.

We emailed one another, just a month before he died but he never mentioned he was sick. We kept in touch after recording and when I heard about his new record being released, I emailed him to congratulate him. His last words to me were simply, "Thanks, Ster".

When he passed, it was everywhere – worldwide news. Suddenly, I was getting calls from people who wanted to hear my side of the story, to get closer to him through me. It felt strange. I'm not big on the internet (I don't even have a website) so the whole thing caught me off guard. It was in that moment I realised just how much the world had changed. Everybody had access to him, even in death and that felt odd. To me, he was just David – a normal guy who lived this extraordinary life.

Fame had come at a cost for him. He'd always tried to downplay it but the fame grew into something beyond his control. Still, he was never the "superstar" type to me. I just made a lot of jokes around him – maybe that's why I had a little mileage around him. He was kind and genuine. He'd hang out with me and the entire crew, never separating himself. He wasn't an "us and them" kind of person. He'd always join us in the dressing room and I think he liked being treated just like one of us.

I had the privilege of working with David for over 22 years. Being around him was like attending a university with the most incredible alumni. He was a voracious reader, deeply cared about human rights and always stayed aware of what was happening in the world. He was, without a doubt, one of a kind – genuine, kind and truly unforgettable.

Music Director Chair for B-52's

When I took on the role of Music Director for The B-52's, we were touring with Culture Club. The path that led me there started with a piece of advice I got from Ricky Lawson, the renowned drummer. He leaned in and whispered, "Don't lose this gig". What he meant was that music was changing – there was a sense of scarcity in the industry and it was important to hold on to solid opportunities.

By that point, I had become well-versed in programming and arranging. I wrote songs for Duran Duran and had the privilege of watching legends like David Bowie, Nile Rodgers and Tony Visconti work their magic. The music scene was shifting toward more avant-garde styles and staying relevant was key.

When The B-52's came along, it was like a breath of fresh air – a chance for "new fun". I brought my work ethic and vision, always focused on how we could keep things exciting and up-to-date. The band had been playing "Love Shack" for 20 years and while that sound was iconic, the challenge was to maintain what made them special while also injecting new elements to keep it fresh.

The members trusted me to guide the ship and I took that responsibility seriously. My goal was to preserve their unique sound but also evolve it – always pushing forward, while honouring their legacy.

Star-struck

Throughout my career, I was always looking ahead to what was next. I had the privilege of witnessing Sting and Tina Turner as they embarked on their solo journeys, recognising the unique trajectories they were set to follow. It was this same forward-looking perspective that drew me to visionaries like Arif Mardin and Peter Gabriel, individuals who consistently pushed boundaries and redefined the sonic landscape. Their ability to innovate and reshape the music world was endlessly inspiring and reaffirmed my belief in the power of staying attuned to the evolving currents of creativity.

I was lucky enough to have a brief recording session with Arif Mardin for a Christmas song and in that short time, understood why he was a legend. Arif was on the same level as George Martin – he'd been behind so many classic records. His presence and mastery in the studio were undeniable.

In 1982, Peter Gabriel released "Security", a record so groundbreaking it stands as one of the most influential albums of the past 40-50 years. He blended songs and technology in a way no one else had at the time. I remember seeing him in concert and thinking, "it's either him or Bowie I want to work with". Both were miles ahead of everyone else, always pushing boundaries.

At an Amnesty International concert, Daryl Jones from Sting's band got me an all-access pass and I ended up witnessing the last-ever Police show. The lineup was incredible – U2 and so many others.

Meeting Peter Gabriel backstage was surreal. In my mind, he was this larger-than-life, otherworldly figure. When I finally met him, he was shy and humble which only made him more intriguing. It completely messed with my perception of him in the best way possible.

That day was unforgettable. I even worked up the courage to approach Joni Mitchell, another one of my heroes. For some reason, the only thing I could think to say was, "Can I have a kiss?" – probably the most awkward thing I've ever asked! Thankfully she smiled – and then kissed me on the cheek. It was a moment I'll never forget.

Not everyone has the same path and I try not to question mine

In the '70s, my mother and I were going to the same concerts. Everyone was at the top of their game – Stevie Wonder, The Isley Brothers, Elton John and so many others. My mom had such a deep love for music and I knew that if I could write a song that got her humming along to the melody, I was on the right track. If the housewives are singing it, then you know you're onto something!



I've always believed that if I ever lost my childlike wonder about music, the enthusiasm would fade. A lot of people in the industry become hardened over time but I've kept exploring music with that same sense of curiosity. To me, it's like being a kid again, with all the toys scattered on the floor – taking the wheels off a truck just to see how it's built. I've always been fascinated by how things work and come together.

I never studied music formally. I didn't come from a "school thing" understanding "violin scores"... I've always felt a bit like an imposter in that sense. Yet, the opportunities to work with artists like David and others just presented themselves. It wasn't something I could calculate – it just happened.

When I create, I react to the music. I never know exactly how it's going to turn out – and that's okay – it has worked for me. Not everyone has the same path and I try not to question mine.

Music has never been an intellectual pursuit for me. It's always been about that childlike feeling – something that sparks my imagination and keeps me curious. That's how it has always worked for me and I'm grateful for it.

Favourite Quote

This goes to 11

It reminds me of that classic scene from “Spinal Tap”, the fake documentary, where one guy says, “Most guitars only go up to 10 in volume”. The other guy replies, “It’s a special amp because it goes up to 11”. The first guy pauses, confused and asks, “Why don’t you just make 10 the loudest?”. The other one, deadpan, responds, “this goes to 11”.

The whole thing is so absurdly brilliant. They’re Canadian guys pretending to have British accents which just makes it funnier.

It’s right in line with my love for Monty Python humor; dry, ridiculous and completely over the top. That’s my kind of comedy.



Note from founder of Niroshini Mini Magazine, Melissa Day...

Sterling Campbell's musical journey feels like a dream come true. A pivotal moment came as a teenager when he met Dennis Davis, David Bowie's drummer. This chance encounter led to an unforgettable David Bowie concert at Madison Square Garden, igniting Sterling's passion for drumming and setting him on his musical path.

From there, Sterling's career soared as he performed and worked as a songwriter and producer with legends like Duran Duran, Soul Asylum, The B-52's, Cyndi Lauper and of course, David Bowie himself. His versatility and innate sense of rhythm made him one of the most in-demand drummers but it was his openness to new experiences and his boundless curiosity that allowed him to thrive in such a competitive industry.

Looking back on my interview with Sterling, I can't help but feel that his story is almost cinematic in its scope and depth. There's a golden thread running through his life – a deep childlike curiosity and willingness to embrace the unexpected. What I admire most is how simply saying “yes” to opportunities, without resistance, opened doors that led him down some of the most extraordinary paths imaginable.

One of the most powerful moments came when Sterling recounted his experience protesting peacefully in China, as a follower of Falun Gong. His words, describing the brutality he faced were deeply moving. Sterling's courage in embodying the principles of Falun Gong – compassion, thoughtfulness and tolerance – even in the face of danger, left a profound impression on me. It's one thing to speak of spiritual values; it's another to live them, especially in such perilous circumstances.

His story of working at Studio Mountains with musical giants – David Bowie and Brian Eno – was equally captivating. Listening to him recall those moments felt like stepping into another world, one filled with creative magic and collaboration at the highest levels.

However, beyond the star-studded career, what struck me most was how down-to-earth and genuine Sterling is. His journey isn't just inspiring because of the milestones he has achieved; it's the humility, grace and unrelenting passion for his craft that makes his story so compelling. His life shows us that success isn't just about talent – it's about staying curious, embracing the unknown and most importantly, remaining true to oneself.

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Secrets of the Five Elements: Understanding Personality Through Ancient Wisdom

The ancient Chinese philosophy of the Five Elements offers a profound system for understanding personality traits and relationships. Rooted in nature, this system provides deep insights into human behaviour, enhancing self-awareness and improving interactions with others. Here, we explore the intricacies of this philosophy and how it can be applied to modern life.

The Essence of the Five Elements

The Five Elements – Water, Wood, Fire, Earth and Metal – represent different aspects of nature and corresponding personality traits. Each element embodies unique characteristics, strengths and challenges, shaping how individuals interact with the world and those around them. By understanding these elements, we can navigate relationships and personal growth more effectively.

Water: The Deep Thinkers

Water element individuals are known for their emotional depth and introspective nature. They often need time to process their feelings and ideas which can lead to profound creativity and insight. Water people excel as thinkers and innovators due to their ability to explore ideas deeply. However, their tendency to drift in thought means they may not always follow a linear path. Water individuals need the freedom to explore at their own pace and in relationships, they benefit from patience and understanding.

Wood: The Go-Getters

Wood element personalities are direct, driven and thrive on challenges. As natural leaders, they prefer to tackle problems head-on and reach solutions efficiently. Their decisive nature can inspire and motivate those around them. On the flip side, Wood people can sometimes come across as impatient or overly aggressive. They need to see quick progress to stay motivated so recognising their need for structure and swift accomplishments is key to harmonious interactions.

Fire: The Enthusiasts

Fire element individuals bring enthusiasm and excitement to everything they do. They are highly expressive, engaging and excel at communicating with others. Fire personalities are often the centre of attention, bringing joy and warmth to their interactions. However, their need for constant stimulation can make it difficult for them to maintain interest in long-term projects. To keep Fire individuals engaged, it's important to incorporate fun, creativity and variety into their endeavours.

Earth: The Nurturers

Earth personalities are the caregivers of the world, known for their empathy, nurturing nature and selflessness. They thrive in environments where they can support others, fostering harmony and cooperation. Their challenge, however, lies in neglecting their own needs in favour of others. Earth individuals often struggle with prioritising their well-being but showing them how their own success can benefit those they care for can be a powerful motivator.

Metal: The Reflective Organisers

Metal element people value structure and order, often requiring personal space to feel at ease. They are reflective, meticulous and sensitive to their environment, making them keen observers and effective organisers. Metal individuals can sometimes be perceived as distant due to their need for space and time to adjust. Understanding their desire for order and personal space is crucial to maintaining strong, healthy relationships with them.

Applying the Five Elements in Daily Life

Understanding the Five Elements can transform the way we approach both personal development and relationships. In a work setting, recognising a colleague's elemental type can inform how we communicate and collaborate with them. For instance, a Water person might need time to reflect before offering input, while a Wood person will appreciate clear, goal-oriented instructions. In personal relationships, recognising these elemental traits helps prevent misunderstandings. A Fire person's need for excitement should not be mistaken for a lack of seriousness, just as a Metal person's need for space should not be viewed as detachment. Self-awareness of your own elemental type can also guide personal growth. For example, if you are an Earth personality, learning to balance caring for others with caring for yourself can lead to greater well-being. A Wood person might benefit from practicing patience and focusing on the process rather than just the outcome.

Conclusion

The Five Elements offer a timeless framework for understanding human nature, grounded in thousands of years of wisdom. By embracing the insights of this ancient philosophy, we can improve our relationships, foster personal growth and deepen our connection to the world. Whether you identify as a reflective Metal, nurturing Earth, vibrant Fire, determined Wood or contemplative Water, the Five Elements provide valuable guidance on your journey through life.

If you need support on your healing journey, reach out to Melissa at info@niroshini.com



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