

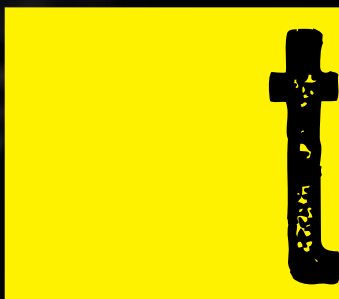
INTERVIEW

Steve Smith



BACK FOR THE FUTURE

Steve Smith is one of the most accomplished and acclaimed drum artists of this era. Here he tells *Drummer* all about discovering how the past creates a new future



words: Ian Croft images: Eekie

he dressing room beneath Ronnie Scott's club is not ideally suited for conducting interviews, especially as the room doubles as a passageway for waiters and club workers to enter and exit through. Besides the disadvantages of the room, Steve Smith is troubled with a back problem, resulting in him having to lie stretched out, full-length on the floor for all and sundry to step over or around. The lengthy sofa that is the room's only means of comfort has legendary keyboardist Tom Coster sleeping at one end and Pete Locket, Vital Information's 'special guest' for the band's three-night appearance asleep at the other end. Bassist Baron Browne and guitarist Vinnie Valentino have both exited the room in an attempt to alleviate the overcrowding.

Despite 'Professor' Smith's ailing back problems the master drummer is actually on fine form and is happy to discuss his latest DVD *Drum Legacy: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants* due very shortly for release from Hudson Music and the Vital Information record *Vitalization*.

Smith has an awesome reputation not only as a fine, fine drummer but also as a historian and keeper of the flame for all that has passed, despite his unswerving ability to push the present to new heights. Smith's forthcoming DVD *Drum Legacy: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants* is a historical trip into the deep history of jazz drumming and those drummers that picked up the torch and took the art of playing drums to new levels. Those pioneers were of course influenced by past masters and so it goes on and around with each generation discovering what came before and then taking that and bringing a new approach to the drum set, creating a continual evolution of the instrument. It has been a long process but one that Steve is more than delighted to discuss to ensure that another generation can understand and build on those foundations previously laid down by such legends as Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Philly Joe Jones, Buddy Rich, Joe Dukas and Tony Williams.





“IT WAS A VERY POSITIVE AND SPIRITUAL TIME LISTENING TO THESE GUYS AND THE STORIES THEY HAD TO TELL”

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VITALIZATION

Steve began by giving an account of the promotion and touring duties that *Vitalization* has compounded upon his bodily frame and one that Tom Coster thinks is more than partially due to causing Smith's current back problems. "Steve doesn't seem to sit still for a minute and take a breather," states the keyboardist emphatically. "For Steve, work is what drives him, but sometimes you do have to pay attention to your body and what it is telling you," cautioned Coster.

Smith, still laying flat out on the floor, laughs at Coster's genuine concern and shrugs it off as he continues "We have spent the last 18 months on the road touring the *Vitalization* record and that involved the introduction of Vinnie Valentino on guitar. Pete Locket plays on the album too and it features all original music with everyone contributing material. We incorporated some of the Indian rhythms that I have been studying and brought those to the record. There is a tune titled 'Seven and a Half' that has a time signature that in the west we would call 15/8 but the south Indian musicians count it as seven and a half! It is a lot easier to count and feel it as seven and a half. [Smith plays and counts the time onto his chest as he lays prone] We also get into some Konnakol that is the south Indian form of vocal that I've been working on with Pete and there are some funk and R'n'B tracks on there too. It was a lot of fun to create the music and we've enjoyed recreating it every night."

CONNECTED TO THE MUSIC

A further project that Smith worked on was the DVD *The Art of Playing with Brushes* that began as an idea that Adam Nussbaum had. The idea was to get a few drummers together and ask them all to play the tunes all at the same tempos and see the different approaches that these masters took.

"One of the things about brushes is that you can listen to people play with brushes but it is really difficult to understand what it is that they are playing unless you can see what they are doing. It is a very visual way of playing the drums. So, a DVD is the perfect medium for that. We pre-recorded rhythm tracks with acoustic bass and guitar and Adam and I really spent a long time preparing for it so that we could really zero in on what we felt would work best. We found tempos where someone might change from one technique to another and we selected tempos that we felt would best show how these guys used brushes. Adam called around and the drummers that ended up doing it were very into the project. Charli Persip, Eddie Locke, Joe Morello, Ben Riley and Billy Hart came down and each guy played to the tracks and then Adam and I interviewed them as to how they approached each track and each tempo after they had played. They clearly describe what they are doing and the experience was like going to church *and* going to school! It was a very positive and spiritual time listening to these guys and the stories they had to tell and the way that they approached the tracks. They were all so connected to the music and so spiritual in the way that they talked about brushes. One of the things that really came across is the depth of their musicianship. It's a great DVD to check out not only for the technique of how to play with brushes, but to gain some insights into developing the musicianship that these drummers are in touch with. There is a section titled *Words of Wisdom* where Adam really gets a lot of background from each of the players. Not only do you get seven hours of instruction, but it includes the tracks so that drummers can practise along to it, plus, it has full insights for any drummer to enjoy."

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Steve Smith
Signature model

HONOURING THE MASTERS

Back in 2006 Steve played the *Modern Drummer* festival with Jazz Legacy, a project that had grown out of his Buddy's Buddies band and at that time the producers decided it would be a good idea to have the various drummers that performed over the weekend interview each other. Smith decided that he'd like to expand upon that concept.

"I liked the idea of the drummers talking about what they do, similar to what we did with the bonus footage from the *MD* Festival and I thought that I'd like to develop and expand upon that with the *Drum Legacy: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants* project. We had not included all the tunes that we played at the *MD* show onto the DVD, as there wasn't space to do that. So, as all the tunes that we had were either dedicated too, or inspired by a particular drummer, drummers that showed the transition from swing through be-bop to the more modern jazz drummers, we decided to make it a more detailed project and it was Rob Wallis and Paul Siegel from Hudson Music that came up with the idea to develop it into a full-length feature."

Apart from some tunes that never made it onto the *MD* Festival set, Steve got to take the band back into the studio and record additional tracks to make it more complete. With that in mind, the dilemma of exactly which drummers to cover and which ones to leave until perhaps a later date was next on the agenda.

"We looked at Buddy Rich, but not in such detailed background as I'd already done so much with Buddy and his music over the years. We then really got into Art Blakey, as the foundation drummer for be-bop and then into Max Roach who was the next important step. From there we got into Philly Joe



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The sub-title of the project *Drum Legacy* is *Standing On The Shoulders Of Giants* and we really examine how each drummer is an extension of the history and the legacy and the development of what came before. You wouldn't be able to have a certain modern development had there not been what came before that and had that person not made those breakthroughs. The drumming is never separate from what's going on with the music. The entire development of jazz itself spawns the drum innovations in a very logical way, becoming more sophisticated as everybody is responding to what is going on around them.

"We chose songs that are closely associated with those drummers, for example for Art Blakey we play 'Night In Tunisia' as that song was such a big feature for Art and we worked up an arrangement that is very close to Art's arrangement. With Philly Joe Jones we perform 'Two Bass Hit' that featured him when he performed with Miles Davis. We also cover 'Three Card Molly' that was a big tune for Elvin Jones and 'Sister Cheryl' as the track of choice for Tony Williams. We found tunes that I not only loved listening to, but ones that I wanted to play."

This leads on to ask Smith how he decided he was going to cover those tunes, tunes so established that to even attempt them might be asking for

Jones, then to Elvin and Tony Williams so that people could see and more importantly understand the progression that was being made by these players. Incorporated in there is a drummer called Joe Dukas who was primarily an organ, or Hammond drummer who played for Jack McDuff and Doctor Lonnie Smith. So, we have a whole section just on organ, or B3 drumming concepts.

"We called upon John Riley to come in and interview me, as John is really one of the leading experts in the development and understanding of how our instrument has been changed and by whom. When you see this, keep in mind that we called John only two days before the shoot, so there was very little preparation and so you get to see John's true depth of insight and knowledge because the conversation and demonstration that we have is spontaneous and not scripted! Yet, it is very detailed and thorough and each

song and each drummer is very well examined. John was the perfect guy to contribute his knowledge to the project."

ASSIMILATE BEFORE INNOVATING

Throughout the DVD Smith talks about his playing and how that was influenced by the drummers that are recognised on the recording.

"I get to talk about how these drummers influenced not only myself, but also many other drummers and examine the process of assimilation; first you need to assimilate before you can innovate. For example, players like Earl Palmer, Carmine Appice, Charlie Watts, Ginger Baker, Mitch Mitchell, Bernard Purdie, John Bonham, Clyde Stubblefield, 'Zigaboo' Modeliste, who were all prime innovators of rock and funk drumming in the 1950s and 60s, came from jazz backgrounds and developed those new styles out of the jazz concepts and 'drumming vocabulary' that existed at that time.

"THE EXPERIENCE WAS LIKE GOING TO CHURCH AND GOING TO SCHOOL!"





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trouble for some? Did he find that he had to adopt an Elvin Jones mindset, or was he out to copy the tune note for note?

"I can only play as I play, but I would use the inspiration of those players to bring out what was required to show their input and how they influenced drumming at that stage in the history. We also had to think of the tunes and how they would work in the concept of a quintet in order to keep the Jazz Legacy group alive and viable. It also opens the band up to playing original material too and we play tributes to other drummers. That concept can allow the band to go on for quite a while."

Re-entering the studio to lay down the additional tracks allowed Smith the opportunity to slow down the drum parts and discuss the time, solos and fills used in the making of the DVD, something that he relished and we can only wait for the DVD to hit the stores to witness the end result. One additional feature of the DVD set is that Steve brought in Mark Griffiths, a renowned US writer that also shares Smith's passion for these legends and what they brought to drumming.

"I was very impressed with Mark's writing as he would write a bio and a 'listening list' that featured the chosen artist and ones that best showed the development and playing that these artists brought. He would find records that I'd never even heard of and I'd go out and buy them and that led me to contact him. Mark wrote the liner notes to the Buddy's Buddies studio record that we made in 1999 and we stayed in touch ever since, with him also contributing liner notes to the *Vitalization* record and the *Brushes* DVD. It was natural to have him be involved in this project and he was great at examining each of the drummers and how they learned and whose shoulders they were standing on." **D**

Drummer magazine will be running Mark's history of all the players involved in the *Drum Legacy: Standing On The Shoulders Of Giants* DVD over coming issues. The DVD should be available in UK stores by June 2007.

