

Interview with Steve Smith for BATTERIE magazine (France)
By Xavier Ottavioli
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The original version of the interview before it was translated:

1. You have been the drummer of Journey between 1978 and 1985, the « golden period » of the band career. What remember do you keep of this experience?

The years that I played with Journey were a valuable learning experience for me. The way the band wrote music was for the five of us to jam and rehearse and fine-tune our ideas into songs. I still use that writing technique today with the bands that I lead. I got a lot of practice playing on pop/rock albums and learned the art of rock drum drumming and of how to produce an album. I also learned a lot about the music business by observing how our management conducted business. And finally I am very proud of the music that we created; the music still lives on today.

2. Being in a world-touring band is a very unique position for a musician. Do you sometimes regret to have left the band to become mostly a sideman?

I do not ever regret leaving the band. I have had many opportunities over the years to play with Journey but, with the exception of recording *Trial By Fire* in 1996, I always decide not to continue playing with the band. The work that I do now is very satisfying and is exactly what I want to be doing musically.

3. Vital Information is your own project. Do you consider it as a real band?

I don't know what your definition of a "real band" is, but I do consider Vital Information a real band. I look for band members that are great players and that are also great composers. I need the band members to contribute writing and co-writing so all of the members feel part of the music and the direction. I always have the final say on the musical direction but I have band members that I enjoy playing with and I like their musical direction. Vital Information is not a democracy but most bands are not when you examine them below the surface!

4. You haven't done a new Vital Information since 2007 (Vitalive! was not a real album). Do you plan to do another album with Vital Information?

Again, I don't relate to your idea of a "real album." *Vitalive!* is a real album which I recently re-released, the album originally came out in the late '80s. When I re-released *Vitalive!* I did not consider it to be our latest release.

Vital Information does have new live and studio albums that will be released in 2012 and 2013. Starting in early 2012 we will release a series of albums to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the first Vital Information album. We prepared for the first Vital Information album in 1982 and recorded it in January of 1983.

I now have two versions of Vital Information that I record and tour with. The basic group features Tom Coster (keys), Baron Browne (bass) and Vinny Valentino (guitar). The second version of the band is called Vital Information – NYC Edition, which features Baron Browne, Vinny Valentino with Mark Soskin (keys) and Andy Fusco (sax), Andy and Mark are from my group Jazz Legacy and we all live in New York City.

5. Recently you have played in Paris with the piano player Hiromi. Is it Simon Phillips that has called you to replace you for this gig?

Hiromi had Simon play on her album but he could not make all of her tour dates because he is also committed to touring with Toto. Hiromi decided that she wanted me to fill in for Simon on her summer tour. Her manager called me in January of 2011 to see if I could make the tour and I made it a priority to be available to play. I was happy to be able to play with her for the summer tour. I have her albums and have seen her play live before and I think she is a great talent. Now that I know the music Simon has called me to sub on a few dates but the original idea came from Hiromi because she had decided that I would do a good job with her music.

6. How is it to play with her?

Hiromi is one of the best musicians that I've ever played with. She is an amazing improviser and composer. When we play odd-time or in 4/4, her command of rhythm is profound and her melodic inventiveness is superb. Also I must mention that Anthony Jackson is the bass player with this trio and his playing is fantastic and he is a pleasure to play with.

7. What is your opinion about Simon Phillips work on the Hiromi album *Voice*? You two playing are radically different...

I am very impressed with Simon's interpretation of Hiromi's music on the album *Voice*. He did an amazing job of taking the written page and turning it into great music. He created a fantastic template for me to learn the music. I also think the album has some Simon's best work. I'm a fan of his and I have rarely heard him improvise and solo as much as he does on *Voice*.

Our playing is different but it's similar enough that we can both "own" that music. Hiromi is looking for a drummer that has a big "rock-fusion" sound, can play very complex music and can improvise with the language of jazz.

8. Generally, what is your attitude when you have to replace another drummer? Do you try to reproduce what he has done before, or do you do your own stuff?

When I'm called to play music that has been recorded by another drummer I start by learning exactly with they played. Once I have that starting place I can then decide if I want to make some changes to the parts. Many times the drum part that was originally recorded is an integral part of the composition. For example, when I play with Steps Ahead and we play the tune "Pools," I stay very close to the parts that Peter Erskine played on the original recording. What he played is appropriate and it works. When it comes to the improvisation, then I am free to introduce more of my own ideas. This philosophy makes sense. It's the way I approached Hiromi's music and when I hear people play music that I have recorded with other artists, whether it's Jean-Luc Ponty or Journey, the drummers playing that music today stay close to the parts that I originally recorded on the albums.

9. The foundations of your drumming comes from jazz. Do you consider having studied this style of music gives you an advantage?

There is no doubt that having a background in jazz is an advantage when it comes to playing all other styles of music. The drumset is an instrument that comes from the USA and the early development of the instrument itself – bass drum, snare drum, rack tom, floor tom, hi hats, ride cymbal and crash cymbals -- and how to play the drumset, all comes from jazz. Therefore, all other playing styles were originally developed by jazz drummers: blues, gospel, country, R&B, funk and

rock 'n' roll. If you do the homework you will see that it's not a matter of opinion but a matter of fact. Today there are drummers that specialize in each genre but in the early years the drummers that first recorded in those genres were all jazz drummers that were doing studio work.

If you come up with a jazz background then it's easier to see the common rhythmic thread that connects all of those different genres, and it's the swing pulse. The swing pulse is the innovation of U.S. music and it still lives today and makes all the difference between music that is simply "in-time" and music that "grooves."

There are other advantages that most musicians share that come up with a jazz background. They have studied music and have learned a common language, which is necessary so they can communicate with other jazz musicians. Generally they can read music, therefore they can learn new music very quickly. They can play with a wide range of dynamics and have worked with musicians that are much older than they are. Playing with older musicians is one of the best ways to learn to be a good musician. These are all skills that translate very easily to other styles and will give you an advantage over musicians that do not have a jazz background.

10. Jazz was very creative during the 50's, the 60's, and the 70's. Do you think that there are still doors to open?

Jazz was very creative during the years that you mentioned but I find it important to point out that all genres of music were creative during those years. When record companies became more in control of the music, and simultaneously musicians became less connected to the roots of music, a gradual decline in creativity has infected all music. But even throughout the decline of creativity of music in general, there has always a select group of musician, in every genre, that have kept their creativity and are able to develop their ideas without the support of record companies or popular success. Most of today's young jazz musicians are good examples of that idea.

There are some amazing young jazz musicians that are currently playing today, from Hiromi on piano, Julian Lage on guitar, Josh Redman on sax to Esperanza Spalding on bass. As far as I'm concerned, most of the best young drummers of today are mainly the jazz drummers. Some of drummers that I find incredible and inspiring are Bill Stewart, Ari Hoenig, Mark Guiliana and Eric Harland.

These musicians have absorbed the tradition of jazz and have added new and exciting sounds, textures and vocabulary to the language of the drumset. All of these drummers play with other highly developed musicians and their creativity and innovations are an organic result of the music they play. Developing new drumming ideas within the music is the same inspiration that has caused the evolution of playing styles since the beginning of the drumset. For example; Papa Jo came up with ways of playing the hi hat that swung the Count Basie Big Band, Kenny Clarke came up with snare drum and bass drum phrasing that complimented the bebop improvisations of Dizzy Gillespie, Elvin Jones and Tony Williams came up with new ways of playing time that freed up the music of their bandleaders John Coltrane and Miles Davis, and Billy Cobham innovated bold new directions in drumming in order to play the music of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Being inspired by the music to create new drumming ideas will never go out of style and will always be a valid way to “open doors.”

There are other players in genres other than jazz that are adding some great ideas to drumming, such as Jojo Mayer, Gavin Harrison, Todd Sucherman, Damien Schmitt and Keith Carlock, but I think you’ll find they all have some roots in jazz.

11. You are a very versatile drummer. You have played with famous pop and rock stars but also with a lot of great jazz musicians... It seems that you can almost play every kind of rhythms and grooves. What is your secret?

Becoming a good musician and a versatile drummer is a step-by-step, long process, but it starts with a love for music and an open mind. I had a lot of good drum training in my early years. I learned proper hand technique and practiced the rudiments for sticking flexibility. I learned coordination and jazz vocabulary at a very young age. Going to the Berklee College of Music was a key in my musical development, both in the classroom and being able to play with very good young musicians after hours.

I’ve been fortunate to have great teacher/mentors such as Gary Chaffee, Alan Dawson, Pete Magadini, Zakir Hussain and Freddie Gruber that have all contributed to my growth. I have worked tirelessly on improving my playing, keeping up with developments that were not part of my world when I started, such as playing to clicks, samples and computers. Plus I’ve examined the history and development of playing styles on the drumset, which is documented on my DVD *History of the U.S. Beat*. I listen to, and enjoy many styles of music. I ask a lot of

questions and stay open to input with all of the musicians that I play with, they have been my best teachers. And I've had a lot of playing experience, and there is no shortcut or substitute for that.

12. According to you, is this extreme versatility the reason why a lot of people call you to work with them?

The versatility is the reason I get many different types of gigs but when an artist calls me to play on a project they usually want a specific skill that I have. When I get called to play on a rock album they call me because they usually perceive me as a rock drummer and want that side of my playing. They don't care that I can play jazz. When a jazz artist calls me they see me as a jazz drummer and they want that side of my playing, they don't care that I can play rock. Many times I work with artists that live somewhere in-between. For example Hiromi demands a very wide range of my playing, she wants the jazz and rock sides combined. This comes very naturally to me. That is also the way I approach Vital Information and it's similar when I play with Steps Ahead, Mike Stern, Randy Brecker or Bill Evans; they want the history of jazz, rock and funk in one player.

The other side of my playing that is being developed is incorporating rhythms from India into my playing. I've learned the rhythms by studying konnakol, which is the south Indian vocal percussion art-form. By playing with some of the best Indian musicians, and musicians that blend Indian music and jazz, I've been able to develop ways to play the Indian rhythms on the drumset.

13. The music business is in a complete metamorphosis. Do these changes affect your own business? How?

The main change for me is there is more emphasis on playing live and less on recording. Because people steal music the business of selling albums is in very bad shape. Playing live is more important than ever when it comes to surviving in the music business. I used to have record companies asking me to make albums, that ended about six years ago. Now if I want to make an album I have to finance it myself and I will probably not sell enough CDs or downloads to pay for the making of it. But I need to make new albums in order to continue touring.

14. Pop producer all use virtual drums in the studio. On stage, many artists use sequences that are played with Pro Tools. Do you think things will work out or that it will be worse and worse? Are you worried about that?

I'm not worried about that because I have focused on being a drumset artist and following my own direction that is outside of the pop world. I also play with other people as a sideman and they call me because they want a drumset player, not a machine. Unfortunately, I think the machines and the virtual drums are here to stay, which means less opportunity of drumset players, especially in the pop and hip-hop genres. When it comes to jazz, the artists want to play with great drummers. If you are a good jazz drummer you can make a living, but you must be a very good musician.

15. Do you think that the musicians will take the power back?

No. The musicians have created the current situation to a great degree. Songwriters that made demos using computers is where this all started. By making demos rather than working with creative musicians they have taken away a lot of the creativity from the current drummers. Journey never made demos, we jammed on the music and wrote the music together. If you go back to the '60s & '70s and look at the history of rock you'll find that the main ingredients of a good drummer is they could keep time without a click (no bands used clicks in the studio until the mid-80s), play with a great feel, and create interesting drum parts for the song. Think about Ringo, Mitch Mitchell, Ginger Baker, Keith Moon, John Bonham, Hal Blaine or Bernard Purdie to name a few. I don't think there were songwriter demos of the tunes they played on, they had to create great parts in the moment. In today's world, if there are real drums on a song they have probably been overdubbed, which means most of the creative work on the song has been completed. The songwriters and producers have already come up with the drum parts, the session drummer does have to make the drum part come to life, but this is a different art-form than the days where the drummer came up with the drum parts and then recorded them in the studio.

16. Everybody knows that today, it is almost impossible to make a living only by playing the drums. Most of the musicians must diversify their activities. Is it your case?

I make a living with a balance of playing with my own bands, playing with other artists and doing clinics.

17. Next to your career as a musician, you are very involved in the teaching of the drums (educational DVDs, clinics). Is it something that you particularly love to do? Do you think of it as a mission?

I don't see it as a mission but I do enjoy passing on what I've learned over the years. Because I've studied music I have the language to talk about music in a way where people can understand the ideas that I'm communicating. I am comfortable teaching, making DVDs and doing clinics, it's fun for me.

18. You often meet young drummers when you do clinics and master classes. What are the problems that you observe the most in their playing, and in their way to understand the music?

That is a very good question and I will mention a few observations on this subject. From my perspective I feel most young drummers play with poor hand technique. I think it's because they start on the entire kit and do not focus first on learning to play only the snare drum, which could help them develop good hand technique. They also tend to play too loud all of the time. I think that is because they have not experienced the concept of playing for the acoustics of the room and playing with acoustic musicians. I grew up playing in rehearsal rooms and clubs with acoustic musicians: acoustic bassists, pianists, saxophonist, trumpet players, etc. You can't play too loud with musicians like that or they will fire you.

I can understand why many of the young drummers of today are not aware of dynamics because much of the music they hear is all one volume. Also they see videos of bands where the drummers are playing hard, using exaggerated large movements on the kit. And finally they are reading interviews with drummers that talk about how hard they hit the drums and they read ads where manufacturers claim they cymbals and drums are the loudest on the market. I'm sure the manufacturers are glad young drummers have bad technique and are playing hard, that way they buy more heads, sticks and cymbals! With my technique, which has become very refined over the years, I never break a stick or cymbal and my heads last a long time. And I can say that is the same with other drummers who have refined their technique like Jojo Mayer, Dave Weckl, and Steve Gadd.

As for feels, young drummers are generally uncomfortable with the shuffle. Owning the shuffle is a key to playing with a great groove. I also notice that they are not aware of internal dynamics, they are not

thinking about the volume relationships between the bass drum, snare drum and cymbals, which vital for have a great over-all drumset sound.

Hopefully as a young drummer matures they will be exposed to a wider view of music. Once they have a perspective that there is much more to music and drumming than a one-dimensional approach, they can expand their concept and develop a wide range of dynamics, techniques and feels.

19. I have notice that during your carrer, you have collaborated with tons of guitar players, including Larry Coryell, Ronnie Montrose, Frank Gambale, Scott Henderson, Mike Stern, Dweezil Zappa... Are you a guitar fan ? Maybe a frustrated guitarist?

I'm not a frustrated guitarist but the guitar is a popular instrument so those guitar players have the ear of the public and, for many years, the support of record companies. The guitarist you've mentioned have styles that incorporates rock and jazz and my style is similar, that is why I've collaborated with these musicians, because we speak either the same language or a language that is very similar. They know that I will be able to play their music and add something unique to it.

20. Are there still some musicians with whom you dream to play with? which ones?

There are always good players that I would enjoy playing with from Herbie Hancock, John Scofield and John McLaughlin to some of the younger players like Josh Redman and Julian Lage. I see Roy Haynes whenever I can and I think one of the reasons he still sounds so great -- he's 86 years old -- is that he played with the older generation when he was young, played with his own generation when he was middle-aged, and now he mainly plays with the younger generation. He calls his band The Fountain of Youth! Roy is a great role model.

21. You play with Sonor drums. Not a lot of drummers are endorsed by this german company (Phil Rudd, Russ Kunkel, Tommy Clufetos, Tomas Haake amongst others...). What do you like in those drums?

I don't agree that not a lot of drummers endorse Sonor drums, in addition to the drummers that you mentioned, some of the best drummers in the world endorse Sonor including: Jojo Mayer, Gavin Harrison, Jack DeJohnette, Jeff "Tain" Watts, Paco Sery, Benny Greb, Adam Nussbaum, Rene Creemers, Wim de Vries, Danny Carey, Glen

Kotche and Chris Coleman. I've been playing Sonor since 1977 and consider them the best sounding drums made. I also like the hardware and the way the kit feels when I play it. The people at Sonor have been very good to me through the years and when I'm touring they organize kits for me all over the world.

22. Do you still trying new equipment? Is there some good innovations that you have notice?

Sonor has released my signature snare drum, which is an amazing sounding instrument. The drum is made to my specs and has a very heavy metal shell, which gives the drum a deep, resonant tone, plus it has a vintage look as it uses lugs from the '70s. I'm also enjoying the Korg Wavedrum, which I've incorporated into my setup. It's a very creative and inspiring instrument and I've been able to find many uses for it, especially the model called the Oriental Wavedrum. I'm using a new Zildjian ride cymbal called The Renaissance, which was designed with Zildjian and Adam Nussbaum. The cymbal has a great feel and is perfect for straight-ahead swing and funk/rock.

23. What are your next plans?

Over the next two years I'll be doing a lot of touring with my two line-ups of Vital Information in support of our 30th Anniversary. I'll also be doing some more playing with Hiromi, continuing to study konnakol and playing with various Indian musicians. As usual, I'll be doing some clinics and drum camps passing on the torch to the younger generation!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "S" at the beginning.