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DRUM LESSONS

# Steve Smith

Travelling the world, both as band leader and featured sideman, requires not just superlative drumming skills, but meticulous organisation. Steve Smith explains to *Rhythm* how he stays on top

WORDS: GEOFF NICHOLLS PHOTOS: STEVE SMITH

**F**or the past decade Steve Smith has played Ronnie Scott's as leader of his own band Vital Information or Buddy Rich tribute Buddy's Buddies. This year Steve returned to Scott's as a featured sideman, in the trio of sensational Japanese-born pianist Hiromi, with the great Anthony Jackson on contra bass guitar.

Steve was actually filling in for Simon Phillips. "Hiromi made an album last year with Simon and Anthony," Steve explains. "The plan was for Simon to do the tour, but then he got a four-week tour with Toto mid-June to mid-July." So Steve got the call to fill in on this seriously demanding gig. "I was very impressed with Simon's interpretation of Hiromi's music. He did an incredible job of taking the written page and turning it into great music. It was a fantastic template for me to learn the music. I memorised it over a couple of months, so by the time we started playing I didn't need to read it."

Of course it helps to be one of the world's most respected, skilful and versatile drummers. But maintaining such a high-profile career over more than three decades entails dedication to more than just the music. So for this new interview *Rhythm* decided to take a different angle and ask Steve to share some of the secrets of his longevity, in

particular with regard to navigating the international jazz concert scene. You may be surprised at just how hands-on Steve has to be to stay in control of this highly demanding and yet often tightly-budgeted branch of the performing arts. It requires never-ending administration work, not to mention sheer stamina and physical graft. In this frank interview Steve reveals to *Rhythm* exactly what is involved on a day-to-day basis.

## Steve, once you've been booked for a tour, how do you proceed?

"The first step is getting the contract information from the tour promoters, whether I'm a sideman or band leader, with Vital Information, Steps Ahead or Hiromi. Some hired drummers just tell the band leader what kit they need, it goes in the rider and the promoter will hire it. But I'm very specific. So I work with Thomas Barth, A&R at Sonor Europe, and I make a detailed rider. So, for instance, on this tour I've got my exact specs at each gig: 20", 8", 10", 12", 14", 16" – I'm not so worried about the depths – and 14" and 12" snares. Then I contact Matt Connors at Remo and usually he can send heads, because I'm using CS Clear Black Dots, to the local distributor in each country. They put them on before the kit is delivered.

"In the USA we played San Diego and LA and Sonor shipped my personal West Coast kit down. On East Coast gigs they shipped my East Coast kit. Here

at Ronnie's they ship my personal kit from Germany. In Paris a backline company that Sonor works with provided them. Vital Information just played in Jakarta, Indonesia, and I got Sonor drums there and we are going to Israel, the Red Sea Festival, and they have already organised a kit for me there.

"I do more than what I see most drummers do to ensure I get the exact sound I want and I have to give Sonor a lot of credit for helping me. It's a big part of what I'm looking for with a drum company endorsement."

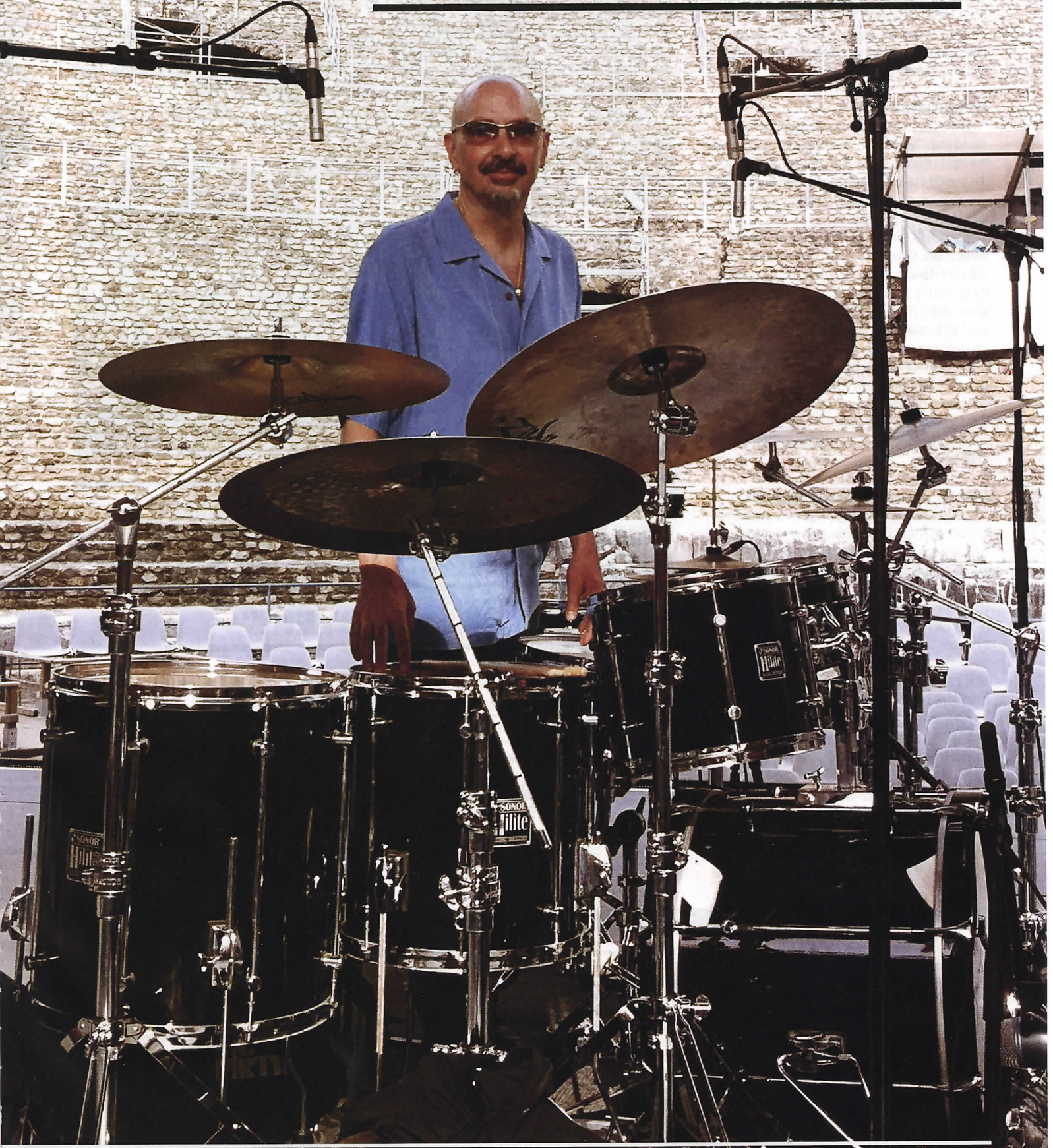
## What's your routine on the gig?

"When I arrive I always tune from scratch. I carry two sets of heads in my Zildjian cymbal bag. It's an open bag without a centre post or I couldn't do that. The heads are in case the drums turn up with old, beat-up heads, which is common, especially with rental kits. The bottom heads are usually 'original', ie: in really bad shape! And the snares are just mangled for the most part.

"I start by taking both heads off the bass drum, put a clear Powerstroke-3 on the batter and a white PS-3 with my logo on the front with a felt strip on each side. Then I loosen the bottom and top heads of the 16" floor tom and tune that and work my way up to the 8". Then the snares. I carry about 10 PureSound snare wires with me and I put brand new ones on. I take enough PureSounds so that I can leave



**"I LOVE BEING A BAND LEADER  
AND HAVING THAT ABILITY TO  
GET MY MUSIC OUT THERE, BUT  
YOU PAY A BIG PRICE - MONTHS  
OF WORK NOBODY APPRECIATES"**



those behind. It's good promotion for the company. They really make a major difference to the sound. I'm very hands-on. I don't let anyone tune my drums, I tune them to my own exact sound. I have a system that works. I get the heads so they are totally slack and then I put my hand in the middle and push down hard. Then I tighten one side at a time, just tight enough to get the wrinkles out. If I do that on both sides it's close to being in tune. Then I fine-tune all the lugs so they are pretty equal, a consistent tone all around. I don't go for particular notes, but a certain kind of melodic interval. It's a two hour-plus job."

## Do you have a tech?

"With Hiromi, the management hired a tech-cum-sound man, Tyler Soifer, who helps me and he mixes the front-of-house. With Vital Information, if I have the budget I take a sound man who also helps me. But often we don't, it's just the band. If so I'll ask in the rider for an assistant."

"As soon as the gig is over I generally start to break down. If I wait too long then somebody else will start doing it and then I'll have to go through and try to find my stuff! For example, in Croatia the drums didn't come with CS heads so we used mine and had to take them all off afterwards. I also carry my own mics and Korg Wavedrum with cables and adaptors for different plugs, my DW 9000 double bass pedal and felt strips for the bass drum heads. So I have a checklist. Most times I supervise putting it away because I have a good relationship with Sonor and I want to make sure they get the kit back in good shape."

## How do you manage your luggage?

"I carry three 50 pound bags. There's my regular suitcase plus an identical one with my equipment: bass pedal, mics, stick bag, stick holder, extra hi-hat clutch, cymbal felts and sleeves, because that's another thing they will turn up without. Which is why I have the checklist. And my third bag is for cymbals. I never carry cymbals in the [aircraft] cabin, I have too many."

## Is it risky having your cymbals thrown into the hold?

"I've never had any problems. But I replace the bag each year - they get pretty trashed. It's just a regular Zildjian bag with wheels. I don't carry a snare - I'd like to, but it's one thing too many. I carry my Wavedrum as hand luggage."

"I only fly with Star Alliance, which is United Airlines. I fly over 100,000 miles a year and so I have '1K' status. I've flown over a million miles on United and so long as I'm on Star lines - Lufthansa, United,



Steve with pianist Hiromi and contra bass player Anthony Jackson

**"A CERTAIN NUMBER OF PEOPLE WILL APPRECIATE THE DRUMS, BUT OTHER INSTRUMENTALISTS WILL DO BETTER... UNLESS YOU'RE A BASS PLAYER!"**

BMI, Singapore - I can take those three bags for no extra charge. So if somebody hires me and puts me on British Airways I'm in trouble! This is another road trick - you focus on one airline and get to be a gold member. Plus it's easy to get upgrades."

## What extra responsibilities come with being a band leader?

"It goes to another level of administration work. I can't afford a manager as that would take another 15 percent. My agent gets 15 percent and she's well

worth it, she gets me the gigs. But when it comes to booking flights and hotels I do all that. I have a travel agent for international work, in Munich, Germany. In the USA I book everything myself on United.com. I work with local promoters for hotel rooms, which are sometimes provided. So I'm in constant contact with my agent and each venue. Then I usually hire a van and a one- or two-person road crew depending on how well the tour is paying. Then there's coordinating the music, what we're gonna play! So there's a tremendous amount of work."

## VI carries rock band gear, you're not just turning up and doing an acoustic set.

"Exactly. Playing jazz-fusion is expensive and it's one reason Dave Weckl stopped doing it. When we have a US tour that has been booked well, so we can drive three to six hours a day, then we take everything with us. Bass cab, two small guitar cabs, drums and keyboards, so we don't need to hire any gear."

"I love being a band leader and having that ability to get my music out there, but you pay a big price - months of work that nobody really appreciates or understands. And it's on-going."

## You don't need to be mad to book Vital Information BUT IT HELPS...

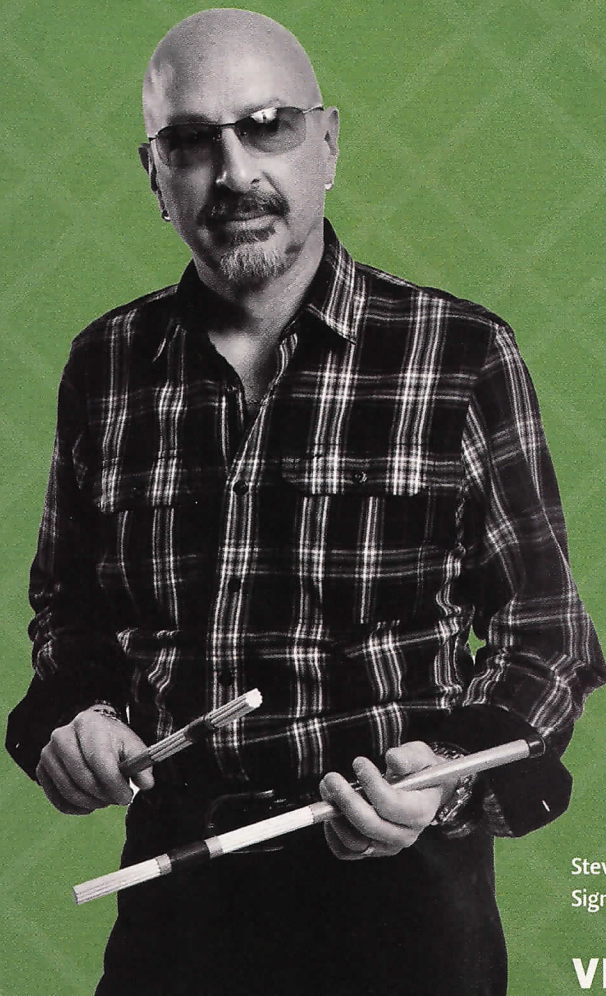
"In the mid-'90s Vital Information were touring Europe with contracts for every gig except one - a date in Amsterdam. The promoter had promised a large fee but always had some seemingly legitimate reason why he wasn't able to wire us our 50 percent deposit, which all the other promoters had. It's my practice that without a deposit I won't accept a gig, because the promoter has nothing to lose if he doesn't promote the date or cancels. But I made an exception as the money offered was so much it would help greatly with our expenses."

"As the date approached we were finding it more difficult to contact the promoter. The band all agreed to travel to

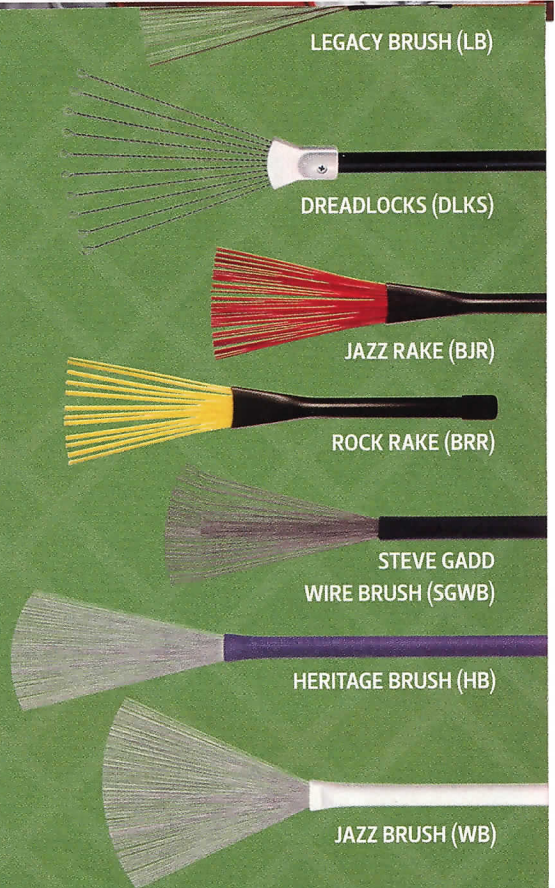
Amsterdam even though the situation seemed questionable. Of course, when we arrived at the hotel-venue no one knew anything about our concert, no rooms were booked and no one knew anything about the promoter. I finally found out the 'promoter' was a patient in a local mental hospital and a Vital Info fan! He would leave the hospital and work on booking the date from a local payphone! Of course he couldn't be held accountable for his actions, so we headed to the train station and travelled overnight to our next date, in Stockholm. It was a hard way to learn the lesson never to accept a gig without a deposit. I've never made that mistake again."



Steve works with Sonor Europe and Remo to get the exact set-up he needs for his gig with Hiromi



Steve Smith with his Signature Tala Wands



LEGACY BRUSH (LB)

DREADLOCKS (DLKS)

JAZZ RAKE (BJR)

ROCK RAKE (BRR)

STEVE GADD WIRE BRUSH (SGWB)

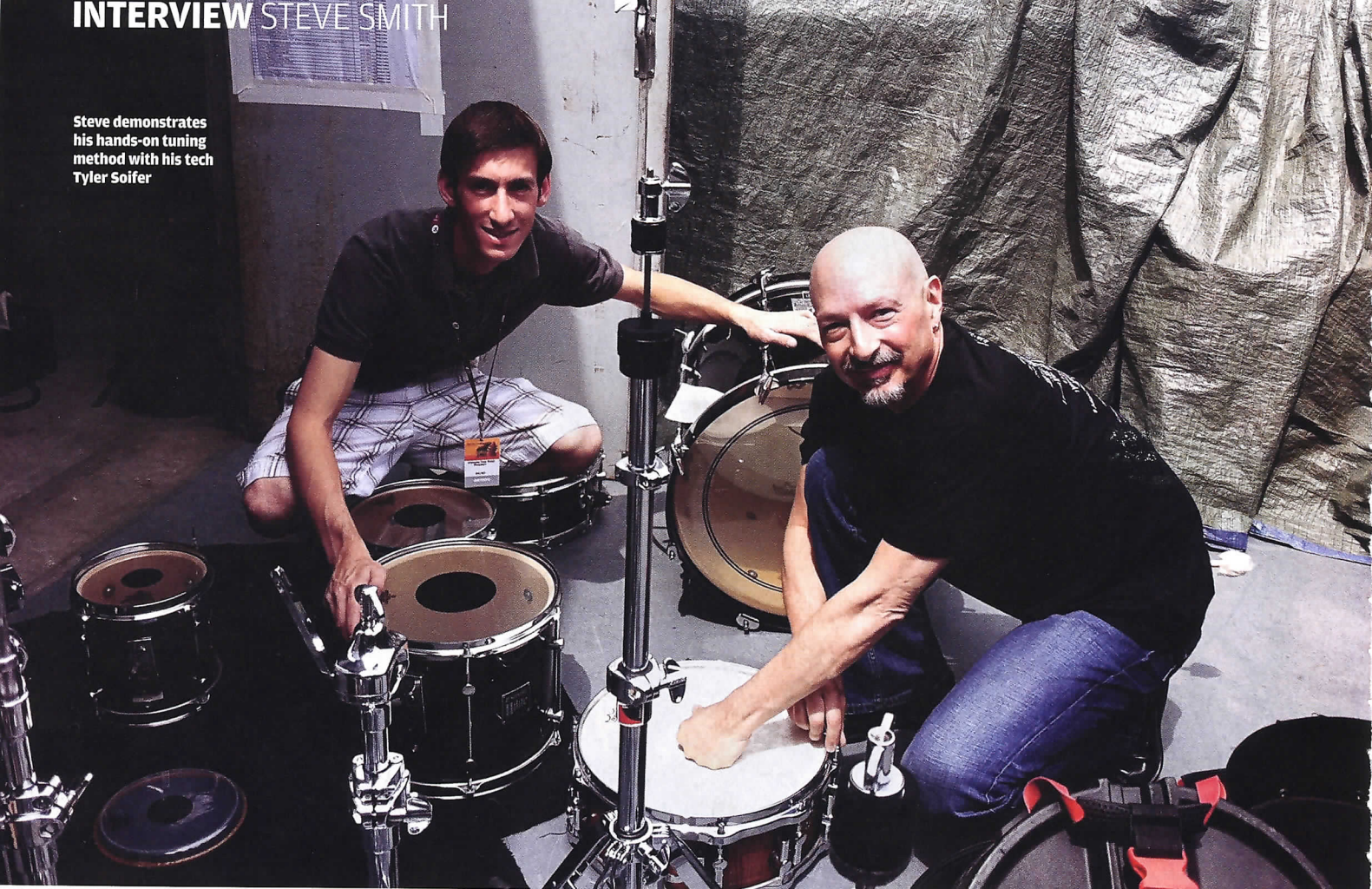
HERITAGE BRUSH (HB)

JAZZ BRUSH (WB)

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ONE PAIR AT A TIME

Steve demonstrates his hands-on tuning method with his tech Tyler Soifer



before and throughout the tour. I'm playing one day and still advancing something that's coming up in two days. Then you have to get paid and often there are little problems - they're not paying you the full amount, they're deducting this or that. And the band members are on a salary no matter what. Sometimes they make more money than I do."

### Is there enough work?

"Not enough to make a living, but enough to contribute to your living. So I still do many other things, like being a sideman and making records. I like doing clinics and they pay pretty well... it's just one person. If you look at the history of jazz drummers very few have been able to make a living with their own band. You can name them: there's Art Blakey and Buddy Rich, and I think I've run out [laughs]. Even then, if Buddy wanted a big pay-day he would play with Frank Sinatra. And Tony Williams had his own band but he would make more money playing with Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. So there is a tradition, you can have your own band, but you will do better as a featured member of another band. So I will go

### WORLD'S GREATEST DRUMMER

Steve will be appearing at the World's Greatest Drummer Show 2011 at the Warwick Arts Centre on 11 November. Alongside Steve, Brit drummers Steve Barney, Pete Ray Biggin, Jake Brown, Pete Cater, Darrin Mooney, Ian Palmer and Steve White will perform with Pete Cater's orchestra, celebrating the legacies of Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Louie Bellson, Joe Morello and Max Roach.

A concert by Vital Information NYC Edition with saxophonist Andy Fusco at the Iridium jazz club, New York, on 27 October will be streamed live - see [www.theiridium.com/iridiumlive](http://www.theiridium.com/iridiumlive). For more on Steve and Vital Information check out [www.vitalinformation.com](http://www.vitalinformation.com).

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**"I DEFINITELY MAKE MORE MONEY AS A SIDEMAN THAN PLAYING A CLUB WITH MY OWN BAND. BUT I DON'T WANT TO GIVE UP HAVING MY OWN BAND, I LOVE THAT"**

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with Bill Evans and Randy Brecker's Soulbop, or Steps Ahead. And it's a bit of a vacation, not having all the band leader responsibilities!"

### Do you also get paid better?

"Yes. Bigger venues and jazz festivals pay well. I definitely make more money as a sideman than playing clubs with my own band. But I don't want to give up having my own band, I love that. It's a question of balance."

### I suppose because jazz is instrumental you get drummer leaders, right back to Chick Webb, where in rock it's more likely the singer?

"There are a couple of examples in rock where the drummer is more or less the driving force. Lars with Metallica, as was Mike Portnoy with Dream Theater. As a drummer/band leader you can be successful to a degree, but I don't see drummer leaders as big as great piano, sax or guitar player leaders, like Pat Metheny or Hiromi, Chick Corea or John Scofield. And if, for example, you go back to the Tommy Dorsey band with Buddy and Frank Sinatra starting out together, Buddy had a big career, but not as big

as Frank. It's not that he was less talented, but it's the power of the voice. A certain number of people will appreciate the drums, but the other instrumentalists will do better. Unless you're a bass player! There are fewer bass player leaders than drummers... or trombonists!"

### What last advice would you give to a drummer wanting to make a career in jazz?

"Well, there is a misconception that you will make more money as a rock drummer than as a jazz drummer. I think there are more very good jazz drummers making a good living than there are, especially, speed metal drummers making a good living. I'm friends with a lot of speed metal drummers, their faces are out there in the magazines and their profiles are high. And yet dig below the surface of many of the double bass drum bands that are not huge, but still have a profile - those drummers in general make less money than a high-level jazz drummer. So you can make money, but you're gonna be a sideman. And you have to be very good. So that's the advice: become a *bad mutha* musician..." **R**