

Steve Smith's First Love

By Rick Mattingly

In various interviews over the years, Buddy Rich expressed his disdain for hearing someone described as a “big band” drummer, a “small group” drummer, or any other “label” that restricted a player to a particular genre or style. “If you are a drummer, it means you can play in any situation and do what’s appropriate for that situation,” he would say.

Over the course of his career, Steve Smith has certainly lived up to Rich’s definition of a “drummer.” Many fans know him best for his rock playing with Journey (with whom he was inducted into the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame this past April) and his fusion work with Vital Information. But he has also played with bebop clarinetist Buddy DeFranco, jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, rocker Ronnie Montrose, and jazz group Steps Ahead, among many others. *Modern Drummer* magazine readers voted Smith the number-one “All-Around Drummer” five years in a row in the late 1980s and early ’90s.

Smith has also done his share of big band drumming, which will be the topic of his PASIC17 clinic and his PASIC performance with the Airmen of Note big band.

“Playing in a big band when I was in my teens and early 20s prepared me to do everything else,” he says. “Keeping time that is functional for 15 musicians is demanding, and with big bands I played swing, Latin, rock, shuffles, and R&B, so it prepared me to be able to do almost anything else after that. It taught me to read, to set up the band, and it was a great training ground. If students have a chance to play in a high school or college big band, they might think it’s corny, but it can give them tools you can’t get otherwise. Look at guys like Steve Gadd and Billy Cobham, who played in service big bands, and Peter Erskine, who played a lot of big band. You can do anything after that.”

“Big band was my first musical love,” Smith continues. “I loved listening to big band records growing up. I listened to a lot of Buddy Rich, Count Basie, and Dizzy Gillespie’s big band. I got to see Buddy Rich’s big band a lot, and I also saw Count Basie’s band. I really loved Stan Kenton’s band and saw his band quite a bit with Peter Erskine and then Gary Hobbs playing drums.”

Steve’s first big band experience came while he was in high school, but it wasn’t with a high school band. “It was at a local college near Boston,” he explains. “I was recruited to play in the college band in my junior year of high school because they didn’t have a drummer. When I was 18, after I completed my first year at the Berklee College of Music, I went to a Stan Kenton camp that summer. Peter Erskine was the teacher, and he really helped me a lot in terms of focusing on the ride cymbal beat, keeping time for the band, and keeping the band unified. After that I was able to do a fair amount of big band gigs in Boston, and I ended up becoming the drummer in the Lin Biviano Big Band. Lin had played lead trumpet with Buddy Rich and Maynard Ferguson, and he’s on *Rich in London* and quite a few of the Buddy Rich and Maynard Ferguson records. That group was essen-

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PHOTO BY GIOVANNI DANOTTI

Steve Smith

Friday, Nov. 10, 5:00 P.M.

Drumset Clinic/Performance



Steve Smith with the Airmen of Note

Saturday, Nov. 11, 8:30 P.M.

Evening Concert

▶ Tap to play Video



“Pools” with Steps Ahead (featuring Steve Smith on drums and Mike Mainieri on vibes) with the WDR Big Band.

tially a Buddy Rich and Maynard Ferguson alumni band. We did a fair amount of touring on the East Coast and in the Midwest in 1974 and 1975. We even made a single for Creative World Records, which was Stan Kenton’s label. So I had a lot of experience and really loved playing big band.

“I didn’t have much opportunity to play big band after my Journey years except for an occasional guest spot with a high school or college big band,” Smith says. “And then I did the *Burning for Buddy* record that Neil Peart produced in 1993. After that I played some gigs with a version of the Buddy Rich band that was organized by Cathy Rich. I also played with a small group called Buddy’s Buddies, which had [saxophonists] Steve Marcus, Andy Fusco, and some other Buddy alumni. We made three records and did some touring in the U.S. and England. Over the last few years I’ve been playing with Bobby Shew’s Big Band with Buddy alumni who played on the original Buddy records like ‘West Side Story,’ ‘Channel One Suite,’ and all of those albums I grew up listening to. I have played with Air Force big bands around the world, but this will be my first time with the Airmen of Note.”

How does playing with a big band compare to playing with a group like Journey, who Smith toured with for six months between February and August of this year? “In order to play exciting rock, you need to play with the same kind of fire and high energy that Buddy Rich played with behind his big band,” Steve says. “But the technical part of playing the drums is quite different. When I play with Journey, I get a lot of energy built up mainly from the patterns and the sounds in the bass drum and snare drum. My hi-hat ride cymbal rhythm is important, but that doesn’t take precedent over the bass drum and snare drum. When I play with a big band, the energy really comes from the ride cymbal. The bass drum and snare drum support that and help drive it. But I went right from playing some Journey gigs to playing with the Bobby Shew big band, and playing ride cymbal with my right hand wore my shoulder, elbow, and wrist out more than playing with Journey. A lot of energy and work needs to be put into that ride cymbal for the band to be able to sit on that and be comfortable and driven by it.

“If you listen closely to the way Buddy Rich played with his big band, the ride cymbal was roaring,” Steve points out. “There wasn’t a lot of definition; it wasn’t the way we think about ride cymbal playing in a small group environment where we want to hear a lot of articulation. There needs to be some articulation, but you essentially build up a wash and a ride that can open up.” To get that type of sound, Smith will be using the Avedis model cymbals recently introduced by Zildjian. “I’ve been using an Avedis 22-inch ride with Journey and with big bands, and that’s my ride cymbal,” he says. “I have two of them, one on each side, so I can change the ride behind certain soloists and have some variety of ride cymbal sounds. I use at least two ride cymbals and a couple of crashes for the big band. The Avedis cymbals have that sound that the A Zildjians had in the ’60s before cymbals started to get heavier. That’s what everyone from Ringo to Mitch Mitchell to Ginger Baker to Buddy Rich and Louie Bellson played. They have a certain flex to them, and they have enough wash to develop that cushion the band needs.”

When Steve keeps time on the hi-hat, he says he’ll be playing in a legato, not

staccato, way. “A perfect example is to listen to the way Buddy plays the introduction to ‘Love For Sale’ on the record,” Smith says. “It’s a very legato sound. I’ve really noticed a lot of those details in playing with big bands, and what helps the band stay collected and feel comfortable with my time feel.”

Like Rich, Smith will not just be opening and closing his hi-hats with the pedal; he’ll also be using his left hand. “It’s a combination of left hand and just a little bit of left foot,” Steve explains, “and that helps you get that legato sound. You have a nice, smooth cushion to set up the time and then keep the time going when the band comes in.”

At the time of this interview, Smith and the Airmen of Note had not finalized the program, but it will consist entirely of charts played and recorded by the Buddy Rich band. “It will be a lot of the classic tunes that people identify with Buddy Rich,” Smith says. “We will likely play ‘Love For Sale,’ ‘Norwegian Wood,’ ‘Nutville,’ ‘Time Check,’ ‘Channel One Suite,’ and probably ‘Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.’ Those charts have all passed the test of time. They are still played by high school and college big bands, and they were written so well.”

Those familiar with the Rich recordings might hear some differences now and then, however. “My goal is to play the chart and to be a very functional drummer in that environment,” Steve says. “I’m not trying to channel Buddy Rich; I’m playing in such a way that you can hear the details of the arrangement. After years of listening to the Buddy Rich records and then playing along with them to learn the tunes, I noticed that when I went into rehearsals with one of the big bands playing the Buddy Rich charts, sometimes the figures on the chart are in a different place than they are on the record. I think sometimes Buddy would move the figures to where they felt more comfortable for him, but it was not necessarily what the arranger wrote. If I play those figures as written, some of them are going to sound a little bit different; they may be a little more syncopated; Buddy tended to even things out a little bit, especially if he started to play a tune faster and faster. Some of those hits that might be written on the ‘and’ of 1 ended up on beat 2.”

Those who have only heard such Rich recordings as “West Side Story” might assume that everything his band played had a drum solo. Not true. “There were a few drum features,” Smith acknowledges, “but most of the charts are actually quite short, like three or four minutes. It could be a pop tune, an original composition someone wrote for his band, or an arrangement of a jazz standard. But Buddy was a supportive musician, and he played that accompanist role very well. There were a fair number of ballads, and during some periods of the band they did some trio things. And Buddy broke ground in a lot of ways because he started his Swingin’ New Big Band in 1967, which was 50 years ago, when rock ‘n’ roll was really becoming big. We had the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* that year and Jimi Hendrix’s *Are You Experienced*, and that was around the time Buddy started that group. He was playing rock on ‘Mercy, Mercy, Mercy,’ and most of the *Buddy and Soul* album was rock tunes. And he played rock extremely well. He was really one of the first jazz musicians to play rock.”

Smith says he always looks forward to playing charts that were written for Rich’s band. “The arrangers who wrote for Buddy Rich understood swinging figures and how to put together a chart that wasn’t that difficult to play but really worked as a vehicle for big band music,” Steve says. “Those charts worked as a vehicle for Buddy, the ensemble, and the soloists. They are very well-written and a lot of fun to play.” **PN**