



ROBERTO CUFARELLI / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

BILLY DRUMMOND

BY TYRAN GRILLO

Billy Drummond took an interest in the drums as soon as he could pick up a pair of sticks. He seems predestined to have made a humble home for himself in the pantheon of the instrument, playing on over 350 recordings alongside such pillars as Horace Silver, Bobby Hutcherson and Sonny Rollins, among many others. His 1995 leader date, Dubai, was named a New York Times #1 Jazz Album of the Year. Before and since then, Drummond has contributed to projects too numerous to mention in full, including his "Freedom of Ideas" quartet, which is preparing to step into the studio. This will mark his first leader record in more than two decades, heralding a welcome return to the helm for this much sought-after musician. Most recently, he was invited by Gábor Bolla to join the Hungarian saxophonist's own quartet under the auspices of the Copenhagen Jazz Festival, where a 10-day stint culminated in two days of recording. In this interview, we check in with Drummond to get his thoughts on the past, present and future.

The New York City Jazz Record: Did you ever have a "eureka" moment with the drums?

Billy Drummond: As soon as I discovered the drums, before I'd ever played with anybody, I knew that was what I wanted to do. It might seem fairytale-ish to people, but the only person I know that knew me before the drums is my older sister, Sheila and I was just a toddler. That being said, I don't remember my life prior to playing the drums.

TNYCJR: Does that mean you took to the drums naturally or did you struggle like everyone else?

BD: It may sound like a cliché, but you could say the drums chose me, or mutual love at first sight, I don't know! Every instrument has its idiosyncrasies that have to be dealt with; that's the nature of the beast. Brass musicians, for example, have to deal with their embouchure, which is a constant struggle no matter who you are. It's a choice and depends on what you're trying to achieve and bring to fruition. So, of course, I had struggles and still do. You've got prodigies like Buddy Rich. Then there's Tony Williams, who played at a level that was quite remarkable at such a young age. But he also had an incredible work ethic and dedicated himself to emulating the drummers he loved and studied as much as he could about playing the instrument. There were a lot less options and distractions, especially during that time [the mid '50s] to keep one from pursuing such passions once they were decided on. You could focus on one thing all day. By the time he was 18, he had become one of the very greats he aspired to be. And he wasn't the only one. Think about others like Clifford Brown, who started later in life and developed rapidly. The challenges were there then and are still present today. It's hard work and most musicians have to stay up on the instrument. At least I do. If I do take a break, I'm reminded of it the next time I sit down and play. I tell all my students:

practice now while you still can before all the obligations and commitments of life start piling up.

TNYCJR: I imagine that COVID-19, though, was an unprecedented type of struggle for everybody.

BD: The rug was pulled out from under us overnight, so our livelihood suffered greatly because of that. Fortunately, for me, I teach at two major institutions for music [Juilliard and NYU], so during the school year, that kept the wolves a little farther from my door in that regard. Teaching helps subsidize my performing career and vice versa. I was able to keep my head above water, but a lot of things just vanished. I had tours, residencies, record dates and numerous gigs. When you have those things on your calendar, you plan accordingly and all of it went up in smoke. But here I am. Things are slowly coming back, but it remains to be seen what's going to happen with different variations on the theme, so to speak, of the virus. I got on a plane for the first time in July, went to Europe, did a festival, a bunch of gigs and a recording. It felt like the way I used to feel as a working musician from day to day. The travel part of it is not for the faint of heart. It was never really that luxurious, to say the least, but as musicians, that's what we have to do. We can't just play in our own back yards and expect to survive. For most of us who rely on performance, you have to get on an airplane for it to be at least somewhat lucrative.

TNYCJR: Would you say this speaks to the adaptability of those who make music?

BD: You have to go into every situation with an open mind and coalesce with everyone involved. The end result is making the music come to life. You're presenting the music. It's not about me as a drummer, showcasing my drumming. I can't do that anyway! But there are those who can wow you and still be incredible contributors, like Tony Williams. Some are more overt than others. I've flocked around drummers for other reasons, like Billy Higgins, Al Foster and many others I could name who amaze but not overtly so. It's all about musical conception, how the mind works in the moment. It gets beyond the rat-a-tat-tat physicality of all that. Why are they doing it and how did they come up with it? What are they listening to and for and how are they contributing to the big picture? They all have these audacious concepts and they bring them to fruition. And all that just by hitting stuff with two wooden sticks! It's a question of how one does it completely differently while achieving musical greatness with a distinctive sound and style.

TNYCJR: Going back to the topic of practice, how do you keep yourself sharp? Do you have a set schedule or just work it in when you can?

BD: As you mature and are confronted with more of

life's responsibilities, it becomes more difficult to adhere to a schedule. That's because you've got other stuff to do all the time. If you're planning on practicing, things can interfere. When I do, I practice the same things I've always practiced, such as the things we drummers know as "rudiments". Basically, these are combinations of doubles and singles in certain patterns. I also practice "time" because that's what you're doing 99.9% percent when playing with people. I play along with recordings, work on things I'd like to be able to do and all that. You have to stay up on these basic things to be able to bring whatever creativity that's in your mind to fruition. You need to have a reasonable

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

amount of facility to put your opinions out there. If you don't, those ideas never come out. That's what's so remarkable about the thinking process of great drummers. We only hear the end result, but you can bet they worked on the nuts and bolts to move us with the music.

TNYCJR: Who embodies that philosophy for you?

BD: Pretty much anyone who played with Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, Horace Silver, Jimmy Smith, Nancy Wilson, Art Blakey, Jackie McLean and all the others I grew up listening to. Max Roach, Roy Haynes, Jimmy Cobb, Philly Joe Jones...the list goes on. It's all good stuff that I still find today to be the top of the heap in that genre of music. But you've also got to realize that, back in those days, you never saw these guys on television for obvious reasons. The star drummer in the public eye in those days was Buddy Rich, so I was enamored with him because he was billed as the world's greatest and was more of an entertainer and a personality than some of the others I mentioned might have been perceived to be. So there he was, playing the drums and doing it really, really well. This being the early '60s, I was attracted to what was on television. It was a natural thing. You had Batman, the Green Hornet and Buddy Rich.

TNYCJR: Who were your more immediate mentors?

BD: I would have to point to my parents and my father in particular because, being a former drummer himself, he's the one who turned me on to jazz and the drums. As I look back on it now, he also had an incredible record collection. I was hearing all that music I mentioned as a youngster. I didn't even know what it was, but at that age, you absorb whatever's going on around the house. When I gravitated toward the drums, the two connected like that. Both of my parents were very supportive and encouraging of my endeavors. I was very fortunate in that regard.

TNYCJR: How have you changed the most since then?

BD: For one thing, I hope that I've improved as a musician who plays the drums and, with that, I hope that coincides with my improvements as a human being. Sometimes, I wish that I could go back and do things a little differently both on the personal and musical sides. For example, I think about being able to play with certain people I played with 30 years ago, only with the mindset I have now. When you're in your 20s, you have a whole different thing going on when you arrive in New York. There's nothing wrong with that; that's the way life is. As we grow older, we hopefully have a better understanding of things pertaining to life. I'm trying to understand by looking at things from a different perspective. You tend to do that when there's a lot less ahead of you than there is behind you. Now it's like, "I've got to get this next stuff as close to right as possible because I've got no time to waste."

TNYCJR: How does being a better person make you a better musician and vice versa?

BD: You're a human being first and foremost. You're faced and blessed with all the things that humans have to deal with. When you're a musician, especially one who has devoted your whole life to music, it becomes so intertwined with your vocation as such. As someone who has surrendered his whole life to music, music and everyday life are intertwined. You wake up in the morning and a large part of your thought process is about music: playing, rehearsing, writing, listening, all of those things. I don't think people who do certain other things for their livelihood necessarily think that

way. But we creative people think about it 24/7 and that could be a problem because there are other things we have to think about, too. Society isn't set up for creative people because we don't fit into that same foundation.

TNYCJR: How does this relate to your life as a composer?

BD: I'm working at it. One thing I could look back on and regret is that I didn't take the piano seriously when I had the opportunity to so now here I am at this age, struggling, just to put two notes together that sound listenable! I've had access to a piano for a large part of my adult life and childhood as well, but I don't consider myself a composer. I've written some tunes. Horace Silver, Carla Bley, Andrew Hill and many, many others I've had the pleasure of working with: those are composers.

TNYCJR: Have you changed at all as a listener?

BD: I've always been a listener of recordings. No one plays in a vacuum. Listening is one of the things I consider that I do well. I can't play anything if I don't listen to what's going on around me. I like to instigate and react to an action. The drummer is the de facto leader in some ways, controlling the tempo and volume, all of which can impede on or contribute to the proceedings. It's also the loudest instrument on the bandstand, at least in an acoustic setting. But beyond that, the drummers that I admire and am influenced by are great musicians and listeners and that's why they're great drummers. I could name hundreds.

TNYCJR: What is the best compliment you ever got?

BD: Compliments said to me by people whose opinion I have a great deal of respect for. Beyond that, I'd say the greatest compliment is having people hire me to play with them. They could've had anybody, many of whom are pictured up on my own wall of drummers I admire. To be hired from that pool and the many other fantastic drummers out there? There's no greater compliment. That's enough to be grateful for and I certainly am. ❖

For more information, visit billydrummond.com. Drummond is at Mezzrow Oct. 1st with Peter Zak, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning Oct. 2nd with Danny Simmons, The Jazz Gallery Oct. 28th with Jay Clayton and Smalls Oct. 29th-30th as a leader. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Out of The Blue—*Spiral Staircase* (Something Else-Blue Note, 1989)
- Billy Pierce—*Epistrophe* (King-Evidence, 1992)
- Billy Drummond Quartet—*Dubai* (Criss Cross, 1995)
- Carla Bley, Andy Sheppard, Steve Swallow, Billy Drummond—*The Lost Chords* (WATT, 2003)
- Steve Kuhn—*I Will Wait For You* (Venus, 2010)
- Stephen Riley—*Friday the 13th* (SteepleChase, 2018)

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"But there are certain records you make where you say, I really want the credit on that because... I did two albums with Jobim. The first album I did was called *Jobim* (MCA, 1972) and I really enjoyed working with this guy, it was fabulous. So, the album comes out and it says, 'bass: Ron Carter'. I said, 'what the fuck is that? I did half the album.' Nothing I could do about it. Six months went by and the producer, Claus Ogerman, called me up, 'you know, we really enjoyed the way you played on that first album.' I said, 'well, if you enjoyed it so much, motherfucker, why didn't you put

my name on it?' And he went into his lame-ass shit, 'Oh, I wasn't responsible, just following orders' or whatever. So, I did the second one too (*Urubu*, Warner Brothers, 1975) and he did it to me again."

He also cites the self-titled album by Gil Evans and *Penny Arcade* with Joe Farrell among highlights on record. Meanwhile, one of his favorite gigs, creatively, was a duo with Tony Williams. "It was a music shop out in Long Island. He was going to do a drum clinic out there. So, there's nothing but drummers in the audience, right? It's packed and they could give a fuck or less about me. They didn't care who I was. They were there to see Tony. And we just started playing, you know, just sort of feeding off each other. We did this for like 45 minutes or an hour. I had so much fun. That was one of the best gigs, creatively, I can recall."

Bushler was working with everybody, doing record dates, jingles, film scores, you name it. David Horowitz was a longtime associate and dear friend. They met in 1968 and did some records with [folk singer] Tom Paxton and others. Bushler got him into bands with Gil Evans and Tony Williams. In 1979, Horowitz started David Horowitz Music Associates, Bushler did the contracting and they were successful as a leading jingle company in New York.

Bushler appreciates being in the right place at the right time. "It was a great time. I was very, very lucky to be active in the time that I had, you know? Because there was just so much going on and there was, like, a recording studio on every block. I mean, there was God knows how many fucking nightclubs you could play at. I used to go up to Bradley's with Joe Beck and we'd go in there for like six weeks at a time. And the Blue Note or the Half Note or the Bottom Line, the Village Gate, the Village Vanguard, you know? We used to live at the Vanguard, Beck and I with Joe Farrell. That's all gone, man. There's no way for anybody to make a living as a freelance musician in New York City anymore. If there's anything I miss about the old days, it was like being on the top of the pyramid. You know? Knowing that I could play anything anybody wrote for the bass. Without ever having seen it before, I could play it at performance level the first time." ❖

Recommended Listening:

- Ted Curson—*Tears for Dolphy* (Fontana, 1964)
- Gil Evans Orchestra—*Blues in Orbit* (Enja, 1969/1971)
- Tony Williams—*The Old Bum's Rush* (Polydor, 1972)
- Joe Farrell—*Penny Arcade* (CTI, 1973)
- Joe Chambers—*New World* (Finite, 1976)
- James Moody—*Beyond This World* (Vanguard, 1977)

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ups the ante with some intensely focused uptempo dissertations. While this standard can fall into the autopilot zone, Land and company give it a verve and lilt that sidesteps coyness and facileness. The pianist is John Houston and he achieves a righteous balance of Saturday night strut and Sunday afternoon stroll.

Land died of a stroke at age 72 on Jul. 27th, 2001. While he never rose to the level of fame as contemporaries Rollins, Getz and Gordon, Land left a rich, vibrant legacy. ❖

Recommended Listening:

- Clifford Brown and Max Roach—*Study in Brown* (EmArcy, 1955)
- Harold Land—*Harold In The Land of Jazz* (Contemporary, 1958)
- Harold Land—*Westward Bound!* (Reel to Real, 1962/1964-65)
- Bobby Hutcherson—*Spiral* (Blue Note, 1968)
- Harold Land—*Xocia's Dance* (Muse, 1981)
- Harold Land—*A Lazy Afternoon* (Postcards, 1994)