JAZZIZ

Billy Drummond: The Writers' Drummer

by TED PANKEN 08/03/2022

Billy Drummond dips into the songbooks of Carla Bley, Jackie McLean, Tony Williams and Stanley Cowell on his first album in 26 years

One of the signal releases this summer is Billy Drummond's *Valse Sinistre* (Cellar Live). It's the drum set master's first leader date since 1996, when Criss Cross issued his third leader date, *Dubai*, a no-holds-barred yet highly disciplined recital on which Drummond guided the flow for saxophonists Chris Potter and Walt Weiskopf and bassist Peter Washington on repertoire by Dewey Redman, Pat Metheny, Billy Strayhorn, Irving Berlin and the participants themselves. Released in the pre-streaming heyday of CDs, *Dubai* made a contemporaneous splash (*New York Times* critic Peter Watrous selected it Best Jazz Album of 1996) and it continues to have legs — in 2017, *Modern Drummer* cited it in an article of "50 Crucial Jazz Drumming Recordings" over a 100-year span.

Like *Dubai*, *Valse Sinistre* — which includes compositions by Carla Bley, Stanley Cowell and Frank Kimbrough, all Drummond employers during the past two decades, as well as Jackie McLean, Grachan Moncur and Tony Williams — reflects the leader's capacious taste and encyclopedic frame of reference. Here, though, Drummond, a 1959 baby whose selected web discography includes 160 sideman appearances since *Dubai*'s release, helms a virtuoso band comprised of two Gen-Xers (saxophonist Dayna Stephens and bassist Dezron Douglas) and Gen-Z pianist Micah Thomas.

During the first week of July, I visited Drummond at his Essex County, New Jersey, home, which boasts six audiophile sound systems, a well-organized multitude of CDs and vinyl, and memorabilia and ephemera that includes numerous photos of heroes and colleagues and a K Zildjian cymbal signed by Tony Williams. After an hour of chit-chat and an entertaining turn-the-tables blindfold test framed around a compilation CDR with various tracks of another drum idol, Billy Higgins, we got down to the business at hand.

You call this band Freedom of Ideas, reflecting, as you write in the liner notes, the attitude and operative aesthetic of the Miles Davis Quintet with Tony Williams. What's the gestation for the project?

I've been putting together bands for about 20 years. Many people have come in and out, as I don't have enough bandleader work to keep a constant personnel. It's mostly one-offs at places like Smalls or Smoke. So I try to get who I can get — that I like. I always try to get Dezron, who I call "the voice of reason" because he

always has interesting ideas or suggestions. We met in 2011 when Eric Reed assembled a band that played the music from Clifford Jordan's *Glass Bead Games*.

These guys are all open, all bandleaders, doing their own records and playing with people in their peer group. I might not even be their first choice of someone to call. I'm from another time — the people I was hanging with back then were my age. They can go any direction, which I want to do. They all write. They all have great ideas. They prop me up, because I don't know what they'll do when they play. I like to ring a lot of different bells. I'm open to most anything, if I want to do it and feel I'm up to the task. I know my limitations. I know what I'm capable of. Some things I may not think I'm capable of, but I want to try anyway.

Two pieces — "Little Melonae" and Grachan Moncur's "Frankenstein" — reference Jackie McLean.

Dezron brought in "Little Melonae" at the last minute. He went to Hartt [School, at the University of Hartford] — he's one of Jackie's people. I love Jackie McLean. If I want to give people an example of what I think jazz is, I'd play them something by Jackie — *Capuchin Swing* or *New Soil* or *Jackie's Bag*. My dad had those records; I grew up with them.

Micah Thomas' "Never Ends" is vibrationally in the room with Andrew Hill, who you played with for a while.

Micah brought in three or four pieces. We could have done any of them — I chose this one. The melody is straight up and down, not swung, though the rhythm section is loosely swinging behind it. The last 4-bar time signature vamp repeat is more of a blues sound. Micah takes all those elements and throws them into the way he interprets the changes in his solo. Dayna, too — he's hinting at the melody. I have to ask Micah if he was thinking about Andrew. Micah was my student at Juilliard, though I wasn't teaching him anything — we played and listened to music and talked. He's very accomplished, has his own thing, and I'm sure it will develop into something different. He studied with Frank Kimbrough for most of his time at Juilliard, and Frank — who loved Andrew — turned me on to him. Frank loved a lot of the people I'd worked with — Carla and Steve Swallow, Andrew, Stanley Cowell.

Do you see connecting threads between those musicians?

Very individualistic. Like the greatest of all the people in the improvised music world, they're immediately recognizable by their sound, their musical stamp. They're unique. Maybe they could tell that I was interested and willing to participate with what they do. You don't necessarily aspire to play with people like that. As you're growing up, whatever you're doing, somehow you encounter their music and then you're hooked.

Before I got to New York in 1988, I didn't belong to any one camp. There was nobody to tell me, "Don't listen to Lee Morgan because that's old" or "Don't listen to the Art Ensemble of Chicago because that's not happening" or "Don't listen to … ." Basically, I was just soaking it all up, and I was left to my own devices to make my own decisions about what I liked. Jan Garbarek? Yeah, he's not Hank Mobley, but I like it. And I love Hank Mobley, too! I just wanted to play, and I wasn't trying to make any firm decisions about what group I'd be identified with. I've never been part of any particular clique. I've dipped and dabbed in all of them. My attitude was: If I can do it, if I'm up to the task, even if I'm not up to the task, let me try to play with Horace Silver; let me try to play with Marty Ehrlich. Why not? I like it all.

The title track, "Valse Sinistre," is by Carla Bley, who you played with frequently. How did she find you?

I have my suspicions that it was Steve Swallow, because Swallow and Steve Kuhn are like brothers, and I'd been with Kuhn for years. I'd never played with Swallow, though. I didn't even know him. But I got called in 2000 to sub for Victor Lewis in Carla's band, 4X4, for a concert at the Knitting Factory — it was Lew Soloff, I think Vince Herring and Craig Handy, Gary Valente on trombone, Will Boulware on organ. Victor is one of my idols. He can do anything — David Sanborn, Oliver Lake, Dexter Gordon. I had a couple of Carla Bley records, but I wasn't well-versed in her music. They sent me the music, I learned it, we rehearsed — and did the concert. After that, she invited me to play with her big band.

Now, I'm not a big band drummer, but her band is completely different than Basie or Ellington or Thad Jones-Mel Lewis. There's people who can go in and out of a big band drummer's mentality, like Lewis Nash. I've never been a guy that could catch this hit here, set this up — though I do that to a certain degree, playing on records by all these people who write. I always want to play what I want to play. Most big band drummers got typecast into that's what they do, like Butch Miles or Sonny Payne.

Carla wrote “Valse Sinistre” for an opera by Leonora Carrington that never came to fruition. We played it on one of the tours in the small group. I fell in love with it, and I told Carla, “One day I’m going to record this.” So when the opportunity came, I called Carla, and she gave her blessing. It’s her chart, though we approached it with a different feel.

David Raskin’s ballad “Laura,” from the Otto Preminger movie, is an interesting selection for a drummer’s record.

I love the movie, *Laura*, and that theme goes throughout it in different ways. To me, it conjures up film noir. I felt that song is like the Mona Lisa or something. Don’t add anything. Don’t take anything away. It says what it says — that’s it. I didn’t want to play solos. I wanted just to play this song, as if I was singing it — like Frank Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald or Jeanne Lee with Ran Blake, which is a great version.

Have you played with many singers over the years?

Not that many. I guess the best-known singer I’ve played and recorded with most is Sheila Jordan. She’s born the same year as my mother, in 1928, so we have a bond. My mom died when I was 20, so I didn’t get to know her as an adult. I would have loved to invite her over, fix dinner, talk and have a glass of wine — have that kind of relationship. I did with my father, who died when I was 35.

Your father got you onto the drums, I gather.

Yes. When he died, I’d moved to New York, played with the people who were his heroes, like J.J. Johnson and Sonny Rollins. I could tell him, “Guess who just called me?” “Really?!” He was a semi-professional drummer who stopped playing shortly before I was born and became a law enforcement officer. But he had a great record collection. He didn’t have his drums anymore, but my grandmother gave me a drum and then he showed me how to hold the sticks.

He was born in 1925, the same age as Roy Haynes and Max and Philly Joe and Elvin. He loved those guys, but he worshiped Chick Webb and Big Sid [Catlett]. He carried himself like a jazz guy. He had a vibe. Sonny, J.J. and Max all carried themselves a certain way. I made that connection when I saw Max Roach for the first time in 1979. “Ladies and gentlemen, Max Roach,” curtain opens and he

walks out to the drums — not arrogant, but confident. He carried himself like “I am.” It reminded me of my father and uncles and the African American men in my neighborhood that had done OK. They had a house and a family. They had made it, so to speak … not that anybody was rich. The neighborhood was called Warwick Lawns [in Newport News, Virginia], and it was the first residential neighborhood built for colored families.

You grew up around several people who became prominent musicians — the Wooten Brothers, Steve Wilson.

We all lived in that neighborhood as kids. It wasn’t necessarily jazz when we would, quote unquote, “jam” in each other’s garage or our house or whatever. We were playing music we liked from the early ’70s, Kool and the Gang, Larry Graham and stuff like that, but also new music that wasn’t necessarily commercial, but had the same instrumentation — electric bass, electric guitar, keyboards, drummers with a lot of chops. Fusion music. We were drawn to that because it was the next level of virtuosity for the instruments that guys were playing in soul bands and R&B bands. Mahavishnu and Return to Forever were new. These were jazz guys who’d moved on to this other thing, probably based on the fact that most of

them were Miles Davis alumni — McLaughlin, Chick, Lenny White, Billy Cobham, Wayne Shorter, Zawinul, Tony Williams Lifetime. We were drawn to that. If a guitar player could play, and let's say he was into Ernie Isley and Hendrix, and then he hears McLaughlin or Al DiMeola or Allan Holdsworth — WHOO! Then that leads them … . That's how that worked. I'd grown up in a household where my father was playing hard bop, so I was drawn to that. All that stuff was going on at the same time. Nobody thought one was hipper than the other. A lot of those people were totally into the other thing. But that was cool, too, because they were really good at that.

When did you start to play in bands?

I was playing in bands from the time I was 8 or 9. Soul pop bands with the people in my neighborhood. At the same time, I'd started taking formal snare drum lessons with a drum teacher, a guy I just spoke to last week, named Wynn Winfrey, who had me studying out of the classical snare drum books. Then I started teaching for him because he had so many students. I was 14, teaching beginners.

How did Andrew Hill find you?

Andrew came to the Vanguard a few times when I was working with Bobby Hutcherson, which is how he knew about me, I think. A few years later, I went to Sweet Basil, where my good friend Tony Reedus was playing drums with Andrew. Joe Henderson and Charles Tolliver, who I'd played with, were at the bar, so I immediately struck up a conversation with them. On the break, Andrew came up and they introduced us. He said, "I heard that you like my music." I don't know how he knew. Sometime long after that, he called me out of the blue and asked me to participate in this gig at the Knitting Factory, which included Marty Ehrlich and Scott Colley, who I'd played with in other situations. I had a lot of Andrew's Blue Note records — *Black Fire*, *Point of Departure*, *Judgment!* and *Andrew!!!*, the stuff he did with Bobby Hutcherson — so I followed what Joe Chambers and Tony Williams and Roy Haynes and Billy Higgins and Elvin Jones did on those records. That set me up to come in and be able to at least acquiesce to the situation.

I saw an interview where you said you weren't a big transcriber, but you copped.

That's it. I didn't write it down. At Juilliard, one prerequisite to passing is doing a jury at the end of the year, and on the list is transcribing solos that your teacher

gives you. “Joe Green, I want you to transcribe the solo that Billy Higgins takes on ‘Our Man Higgins.’ Write it out. Be able to play it.” I did it more aurally. It might not even have been the whole solo, but just the things that spoke to me. “Wow. I like what he did there. What is that?” Then I’d pick up the needle and play it over and over until I figured out what it was. Certain people were easier for me, because I didn’t have the facility. Philly Joe Jones was too difficult; Buddy Rich, too difficult. Max Roach I could relate to because it was melodic. Al Foster I can relate to because it’s melodic. Elvin was more about the vibe, the feel. Nobody can play like that, not really, but we all have to do our little facsimile imitation, because you have to be able to emote that aesthetic when someone hands you music and says, “I’m hearing like an Elvin-ish kind of thing.” You know what that means right away. It doesn’t mean Buddy Rich. It doesn’t mean Ed Blackwell. It’s very specific. But in that specificity, it’s broad.

Why the big gap between the new record and Dubai?

People love that record. I was influenced by some of those drummer bands that didn’t have a piano — Jack DeJohnette; Tony Williams on the first Lifetime; Elvin, who had those bands with Dave Liebman and Steve Grossman and George Coleman and Joe Farrell; Max Roach with Billy Harper and Cecil Bridgewater; Paul Motian with Charles Brackeen and David Isaacson; Old and New Dreams with Dewey Redman and Don Cherry.

I tried to get a record date. I knocked on some doors, and doors slammed in my face. Nobody was interested. I gave up. I was like, “OK, I’ll just do my bands and have some fun playing and play with people I want to play with.” Then [trumpet player] Jeremy Pelt contacted me and asked if I wanted to record my band for Cory Weeds’ label. We’re good friends; I’d worked with him a lot and did two records with him. I’d also done a record for Cory with Sam Dillon, a tenor player who was my student.

You’ve described pianist Stanley Cowell’s “Re-confirmed” as a deconstruction-reconstruction-reimagined interpretation of “Confirmation.” You recorded it on his Steeplechase album Reminiscent, *the second of your three albums with him.*

Stanley would look at a song and reimagine it from the inside out. That cat was brilliant. I had worked with Stanley when Charles Tolliver reunited the Music

Incorporated band that he'd had with Jimmy Hopps and Cecil McBee in the 1970s — with me playing drums. That was a thrill, because I grew up with that music in the '70s, when a lot of records were coming out on Strata-East, ECM, CTI, Muse, Xanadu. You didn't know what it would be, but you bought them because it was the cats! After that, I played with Stanley again in Charles' big band. My first record date with Stanley was in 2014, with Jay Anderson on bass, a great musician with tons of experience. We'd done a bunch of records for Steeplechase as bass player and drummer, and I guess Nils [Winther] figured we would be a good fit with Stanley.

You said that Jackie McLean defines for you what jazz is. What's your sense of what jazz means to your students?

I believe that you have to live in your own time. If you're 18, 19, 20 years old, your world is completely different than my world was at that age. When hip-hop emerged, I was already a grown man. I never really was attracted to it, or rap. That's not to say it's good or bad. But that was the soundtrack for a lot of the younger drummers as school-age people. My soundtrack was the music I heard in my parents' house. My sister was playing Gil Scott-Heron. My dad was playing Jackie McLean. My mom was listening to Nancy Wilson. Me and my friends were listening to Graham Central Station, plus Mahavishnu and stuff like that. Elvin Jones doesn't have any rock and roll influence in his being. Maybe some kind of like old R&B that's more based on a shuffle. Philly Joe Jones doesn't have any rock and roll. He played R&B and all of that. But, see, Tony Williams is influenced by The Beatles, because of his age group — he was a teenager when The Beatles emerged.

So I turn my students on to what I know about, and I don't force it on them. Some of them don't get it until later. I didn't really get Connie Kay until I was in my 40s. One of my friends did not get Billy Higgins, and some of my students were like that, too. For them, he's not doing anything overt — and they didn't see him play. See, we got the chance to see Billy play. It would change your life. It felt good no matter what. It wasn't, "Look at me." A lot of drummers now are "look at me" drummers. They'll play something to get you to respond, or, "look at how complicated … ."

Well, you were never a look-at-me drummer.

I was never a look-at-me drummer. I wanted to be a New York jazz drummer. That meant playing in New York with jazz people. I wanted to be Billy Hart and Al Foster and Billy Higgins. I associated Higgins with New York, even though we all know he came to New York with Ornette Coleman from Los Angeles. But I just think of all those Blue Note records. That's New York. That's Higgins, Joe Chambers, Jack DeJohnette, Billy Hart, Al Foster. These are New York jazz drummers to the bone. And they played with everybody. The first Lifetime record, *Emergency,* has a Carla Bley tune. I asked Carla how that came about. She said, "Well, Tony and I knew each other and he'd come to me and go, 'You got any tunes?'" He played on Mike Mantler, her second husband's record, *Movies*.

I didn't come here with any expectation. I came with money saved up from doing a gig with a Top 40 band called The Squares. We were playing five nights a week for dancers. We learned two songs a week. I was singing and playing the drums, playing songs off the radio — Duran Duran, Huey Lewis and the News, Prince, The Pretenders, Billy Ocean. When I had enough money to pay rent for one year, I decided to come, and I could go back if I didn't make it, which is what I thought would probably happen. I thought: I'll have a great time; I might meet some people; I'll get to see a whole bunch of people play that I always dreamed of playing with. But it worked out the other way.

They say everything happens for a reason. Sometimes I tend to believe that. I prepared myself slightly financially, and I guess I was prepared musically, because I jumped into some musical situations. People threw me a bone, gave me a chance, and I didn't sink. I swam a little bit. Boom, that's what happens.

– ***Ted Panken***