DOWNBEAT

Jazz, Blues & Beyond

RUDRESH
Mahanthappa

Exploration, Identity
& Affirmation

CORY HENRY
Jazz Meets R&B

Fall/Winter
Festival Guide

DRUM SCHOOL:

Mark Guiliana
Keeping Pulse

Roy Haynes
Transcription

Master Class
by Jerome Jennings

Pro Session
by Billy Jones

Drums Plus 1 : Equal-Partner Duets

The concept of a duo recording is not a new one. However, the project that I have been conceptualizing for years and that has finally come to fruition with the release of my new CD, *3's A Crowd* (Acoustical Concepts Recording), is novel in that each track places the drums in dialogue with only one other instrumentalist.

The challenge for me was to raise the drums from its traditional role of accompaniment to that of equal partner to the other voice. With this freedom comes the responsibility to musically and artistically shape the form of each composition.

Communication and empathy became the threads that are the essence of the project, an empathy supported by the presence of long-time friends, musical colleagues and, now, recording collaborators. Allow me to take you on this conceptual and artistic journey of elevating the role of the drums and bringing this project to life.

First and foremost comes experimentation: sitting behind the drums, taking stock of the hundreds of sounds you have at your disposal and working with the drum kit while trying your best to discard preconceived notions and limitations on your creative thinking. You must unclutter the mind, release judgments and begin improvising with the vast palette of textures and techniques formed at the intersection of the instrument's potential and your knowledge.

I've always found this exercise to be both a lot of fun and enlightening. Soon, your brain starts to catalog each sound and remember how you discovered it, allowing you to call on it when the moment is right. This might take some time, but once you master this approach, choosing what sounds you want happens in a fraction of a second. When engaged in this exercise, always think compositionally, letting one idea connect to another. You will notice that you begin to create motifs and phrases, some of which can turn into a complete musical composition.

Deciding precisely which implements to use is what I call choosing your "color tools." This goes well beyond the function of timekeeping. Examples of color tools include the obvious (drumsticks, brushes and mallets) to the somewhat more obscure: for example, hot rods (thin dowels bunched together that create a sound between drum sticks and brushes) and brooms (straw from a broom bound together in two sets).

JOHN VANORE

Billy Jones

In the world of fine art, sometimes the artist will just put the brush on the canvas and start painting, letting the brush lead the way, just going with the flow. We can take this same approach when sitting behind the drums. Experiment with this approach until you get comfortable with the process, then start improvising. You will notice motifs and themes developing. Try connecting these motifs and develop them first into simple phrases, then longer phrases. Assess the style and direction in which you're headed, and start to develop these ideas into a composition. But try to think song-like. Remember, you're not just a timekeeper, you're a spontaneous creator.

I started this kind of experimentation back in music school, where I would get togeth-

er with like-minded musician friends, including guitarist Jimmy Bruno (now a world-renowned jazz recording artist) and bassist Vince Fay (now an in-demand session player in New York City) and play jazz standards, but soon we would move into experimenting by thinking of and adapting sounds as textures, shapes, colors and so on. We were all reaching for different sounds, whatever we could coax out of our instruments, which would turn into a fun, productive and wonderful learning experience.

The Making of *3's A Crowd*

Drum tuning was an important consideration for this recording as the exposure of the drums as a co-melody voice made demands

beyond the traditional role of timekeeper and accompanist. The implements (drum sticks, brushes, etc.) I selected were influenced in part by which instrument I was paired with on a particular track to support the kind of intimate communication the project called for.

Given that the album was recorded on both the East and West Coasts, my producer, John Vanore, was able to conceptualize a mic technique that could work in different studios, enabling us to convey the identity of the music and the intimacy of the drums, in kind of a cinematic way, capturing the music as if one were watching the duos being recorded. Matching the drum sounds at the different studios was crucial. This was particularly challenging since I used a different set of drums on each coast.

Of course, a huge consideration was deciding who I wanted to record with and what qualities I sought to bring to such a unique project. The players had to be creative, top-notch artists who could take up this challenge with integrity and an open mind.

Once I decided on the musicians, the next step involved logistics, namely, working on the availability of the players, since each track entailed a separate recording session. This became a bit of a scheduling challenge, and though it took more than one year to complete this project, it all worked out beautifully.

Track 1, "3's A Crowd," George Young, alto saxophone: Here, I really wanted to complement the timbre of the alto saxophone so I decided to use the brushes, but I played them as if I were using drum sticks. Though this track was written out, it afforded plenty of space for improvisation. Listen for the back-and-forth improvised conversation between the alto sax and drums in the middle of the tune.

Track 2, "Song For Meg," Tony Micelli, vibraphone: I used brooms on this track since they give more of a dense sound than brushes, but a sound softer than drumsticks. This track is in 3/4 time and is rather light and airy. A highlight of the tune is the improvised

section that features the vibes and the drums at separate times.

Track 3, "The Call," John Vanore, trumpet: Since this tune is basically a series of trumpet calls, I used the hot rods, as their percussive sound seemed to match well with the timbre of the trumpet.

Track 4, "John Cage Scared My Dog," Mick Rossi, piano: Based on John Cage's concept of "chance art," Mick and I totally improvised this one. When improvising a track for a project like this, the players have to be cognizant of the tune's length/duration. This took complete concentration, intense listening and deep communication between the two players.

Track 5, "For John And Elvin," Gary Meek, tenor saxophone: This track is dedicated to the late great tenor saxophonist John Coltrane and his wonderful drummer, Elvin Jones. I chose to use drumsticks on this cut to complement the timbre of the tenor sax and to try and reproduce the excitement that those two iconic artists generated when they played together in a duo setting.

Track 6, "Just Above The Clouds," Kenny Stahl, flute: The rhythmic nature of the Latin feel on this track called for brush-

es used in a staccato fashion, while maintaining an equal balance in texture and dynamics.

Track 7, "Gone Now," Tyrone Brown, bass: Dedicated to our late friend and colleague, world-renown jazz violinist John Blake, this is a very interesting piece. It was fully written out and contains a number of different time signatures throughout. I was the only one to improvise on this tune. My goal on this tune was to not make the different time signatures a distraction for the listener, and I think we accomplished that.

Track 8, "Monotony Of Hazards," Stu Reynolds, bass clarinet: On this track, the combination of the timbre of the bass clarinet and my use of yarn mallets on the drums deliver an exotic flavor. Both of us improvise at different times throughout the piece.

Track 9, "Chant Of The Soul," Scotty Wright, vocals: This is an emotional and moving piece that was completely improvised. The connection we had on this track was like a conversation from our souls.

Track 10, "Ellie's Dream," George Genna, piano: This tune is special to me. I wanted to capture my dog Ellie's sounds and movements when she is dreaming. When you listen to the track you can hear the brush swishing on the snare drum's head like the sound you hear when your dog kisses and breathes into your ear.

Life is for learning

The well-known adage "life is for learning" is extremely relevant to the creation of this challenging duo project. The experience working in this intimate setting has enhanced the relationships between all of the musicians who participated. As for myself, it has awarded me the opportunity to grow as an artist and a person.

Hopefully, you now have some insight into how I conceived of and recorded the *3's A Crowd* duo project. To create this kind of project, hone your skills on your instrument, think outside the box and record with great musicians who you can trust musically. But most of all, have fun and then go for it. **DB**

Deciding precisely which implements to use is what I call choosing your 'color tools.' This goes well beyond the function of traditional timekeeping.