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John Von Ohlen

by Paul Francis

He's one of the only drummers in history who pleased the notoriously picky swing king Woody Herman with his playing. A living guru of big band drumming says follow your heart—and the horn chart—and the world is your oyster.

Growing up in Ohio, I heard quite a bit about John Von Ohlen. The musicians that I played with during high school were always talking about this great drummer who lived in Cincinnati and was revered for his work with Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, Rosemary Clooney, Mel Tormé, Carmen McRae, and many others. I was about to start my freshman year in college when I finally decided to go and check out “VO” for myself. I made the two-hour drive to the Blue Wisp in Cincinnati and sat down right in front of John’s drums, intent on picking his playing apart. To me at the time, if a drummer didn’t have blazing chops, I didn’t have any use for him.

As the music started, I was immediately taken by the way Von Ohlen had the entire ensemble smiling and having a great time. It didn’t seem as if he was doing much, but the band was on fire. When the shout section of the first tune came around, I noticed that John would set up the band with just one or two notes instead of a blazing fill around the toms, like I was accustomed to hearing drummers do. What he might have lacked in

chops, though, he more than made up for in feel and musicality. The way he played and supported the band, there was no way the group couldn’t swing.

“The Baron,” as Stan Kenton dubbed Von Ohlen, is a musical guru. He began his journey on the piano and then played the trombone for several years before he discovered the drums. Though humble and self-effacing, VO also possesses a confidence that can be instilled only by years of experience. Now in his seventieth year, John still holds down five steady gigs a week in the Cincinnati area. The following interview finds him honest, forthright, and more than willing to impart his considerable wisdom.

MD: What made you switch to drums from piano and trombone?

John: When I was fourteen years old, I got to see that great Stan Kenton band with Mel Lewis playing drums. It was at a ballroom, and I stood right in front of Mel. They were playing all those great charts by Bill Holman and Johnny Richards, and Mel’s drumming just took me. When I woke up the next day, I was a drummer.

But I didn’t start playing drums until two or three years later, because we didn’t have the money for a set. I just stayed with trombone. A friend of mine who was going into the navy had just bought a Gretsch set, and he offered to rent it to me for \$12 a month. It was a brand-new set—cymbals and everything. I think I was about seventeen when I started on the drums, and I just taught myself. I kept playing the trombone professionally until I was about twenty-four, and then I pretty well hung it up in favor of just playing drums. I still play piano for my own amusement and

for composing.

MD: Do you think that learning harmony from playing the piano has helped your drumming?

John: I'd say to anybody who wants to play drums that it would be good if they also took up piano. The piano is the king of instruments—it's got rhythm, harmony, and melody. Most instruments can only play one line, but the piano is the whole ball of wax. If you've got that in your subconscious from playing piano, you'll hear those things when you play drums.

I'm not saying that a guy who just plays drums is not going to hear those things, but I notice it right away if a guy has played another instrument like piano. They play differently—more musically, as opposed to being “a drummer's drummer.”

MD: Many drummers learn by taking lessons and playing out of books like *Stick Control*. You, however, learned by playing along with records. How did learning to play in this way shape the musician that you are now?

John: I took one lesson from a drummer that had great rudimental chops, but I just didn't shine to that. My thing was playing to recordings. I did that for six, eight hours a day or more. When I first got on the drums, it was a real honeymoon love affair, and I couldn't get off of the things. I just kept knockin' away until it was right. I taught myself, which I think anybody could do.

I never learned the rudiments. I still don't know them, and it shows, there's no doubt about that. But you get your own technique after a while, which is not necessarily based on rudiments. I've got a pretty natural, good open roll and press roll, and that's about it.

MD: You don't discourage anybody from learning from a teacher, do you?

John: Oh, no! In fact, to me, rudimental drumming is like playing the piano and learning your scales. It's a really good way to go. I played drums without lessons, playing in every conceivable situation for so long. When I eventually got around to taking lessons and I tried to impose the rudiments on my natural playing, it just didn't work. If I

had done it right off the bat, it would have been great, but I was lazy and didn't like anything academic.

MD: I've heard you tell many a drummer to read the lead trumpet part instead of the drum chart. And I've seen you look over and read the trombone chart when you're playing with the Blue Wisp Big Band. Is that because if you can see that the lead trumpet part is higher on the staff, it will be louder and you should kick the band a little harder?

John: Right. It's like Woody Herman told me: “Get your head out of the drum part—it's a guide to insanity.” And it's true! The drum parts usually tell you what *not* to do, not what you should do.

I think it's much better in a big band for the drummer to just have the brass parts. Over at the Cincinnati Conservatory, where I'm teaching,

“Woody Herman told me, ‘Get your head out of the drum part—it's a guide to insanity.’ And it's true!”

I coach the drummers while they're playing in a rehearsal. I'm looking at the drum parts, and it's a wonder that they can play anything at all. And yet, if they had a trumpet part, they could see exactly what's going on with the band. You see the shape of the line.

MD: Let's talk about your time with Woody Herman. At that point in his career, he was known to fire drummers on the first night. What was it that made Woody keep you?

John: It might be that most drummers dig playing in small groups more than playing in a big band. My first love has always been big band. Still is. The drummers Woody had before me didn't have their heart and soul in big band like I did. I had been playing in big bands since I was a little kid, and I had the concept down. Now, playing



on that big-league level? I wasn't there yet, but he saw that I had potential, so he kept me.

MD: I've heard you talk about taking the attitude of, "I don't care what you think—this is how I play." How did you come to this realization?

John: I was in a difficult situation when I gave Woody my notice. The band had those great tenor players like Sal Nestico who could really play. They kept riding me all the time, wanting me to play on top of the beat and all this crap. I tried to do it, but all it did was make everything real nervous sounding. In fact, Woody came up to me one time and said, "I think you should lay back a little." I do know that when I started to do my own thing and not what the tenor players were telling me to do, they dug it. They actually wanted me to stay. I was finally doing it my way, not theirs. It's the only thing you can do.

MD: What advice would you give a drummer who wants to learn how to

play in a big band?

John: These days, you can't play in a big band every day. And sometimes there's not one around to play in at all. So I would say that the second-best way to learn is to play to recordings. Set up in your studio where you can play constantly, and teach yourself to play with recordings. Play what you like, what's important to you. I think you'll advance faster that way than if you try to take on all of the things that are going on nowadays.

As a professional drummer, you do need to know how to play everything. But if you really want to advance your own style, I think you should keep coming back to things you really like. Emerson said that you only need a few books in your life. I feel that way about recordings. I still play to recordings, and I play to the same ones that I did in high school.

MD: Let's talk about your technique a little bit.

John: Or lack of.

MD: It's been said that your fills sound like "sneakers in a drier." What's your approach to setting up a band? How do you come up with these crazy fills and then come out on the 1 every time?

John: It's totally instinct. I was doing those fill-ins when I first started playing.

MD: Was any of it inspired by Don Lamond?

John: Not really, because I didn't hear Don do it on records until later. It might have been some small-group drummers like Roy Haynes, the stuff he did in the early '50s. He did some off-the-wall licks. I kind of lit up to that and threw them in with a big band.

MD: How do you think those fills affect the band?

John: The best way I can put it into words is that if you're inclined to do those kinds of fills, you've got the time inside you so strongly that the band feels it. Very rarely do I throw the band off, but every once in a while I blow it. It's really funny when I do, because it just train-wrecks the whole thing, and everybody has to claw for it to get back. [laughs]

MD: How is your approach different in small groups versus big bands?

John: There's hardly any difference. I'm not a real great small-group drummer...at least I don't think I am.

MD: Yet you're playing in a small group four nights a week.

John: Yeah, but someone like [Cincinnati pianist] Lee Stolar plays the structure of the tune the same way every time. So I just treat that like a big band, only softer.

MD: You've played with some of the greatest singers in jazz. When backing a singer on ballads, you don't play brushes. You just play with your feet keeping the time.

John: It's funny how just that little swirl will make everybody keep talking. But if you don't do the swirl and you've still got that beat going with your feet, it silences the club. Not all the time, but at least half the time it just quiets the club right down. And I know if I had that swirl going, that wouldn't happen.

MD: Where did you get this idea?



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John: From a great drummer named Sol Gubin. He was one of the great unsung drummers. When I was with Woody's band, we did a double bill with Tony Bennett, and Sol was playing drums. When a ballad started, he just played 1 and 3 on the bass drum and 2 and 4 on the hi-hat, with no brushes. That pushed Tony's voice right out in front.

MD: One of my favorite recordings of yours is Carmen McRae's *Dream Of Life* album with the WDR Big Band. Do you approach backing up a singer differently in a big band from the way you would in a trio?

John: Well, in a big band you just pretty well hang it out. In fact, that's what they like. John Clayton was writing these hot arrangements, and I wasn't going to sit dead on those. I think the singers like it when the drummer is letting it hang out. That's the reason you've got a big band. On the ballads, John wanted to hear the swirl. He said, "I want to hear the smoky nightclub feel on this." So I did it at the rehearsal, but on the gig I just couldn't do it, because he had such beautiful writing in there with her singing, and I didn't want to hear that swirl clutter it up. So I just didn't do it, and I think it made the chart stand out more.

MD: Jeff Hamilton cites your brush playing and your "lateral motion" concept as a major influence on his playing.

John: Coming in from the side gets a *shhhh* sound, whereas doing a vertical stroke gets a tap, like a stick. I don't do it all the time, because sometimes I want a more pronounced brush beat. I've got different brushstrokes, like we all do.

MD: You're known as a great admirer of calfskin heads. Why do you like using them so much?

John: With the bass drum, calfskin is just ridiculous. It sounds like a bomb going off under water—it's physical. You can feel it out in the audience hitting your gut. There's nothing like calfskin on the bass drum, especially if you tune it low. Calfskin goes lower without wrinkling. If you take a plastic head and lower it, it wrinkles pretty easily. But calfskin just keeps going low.

When you first put calfskin on your drums it's like another world, but it's a

pure sound. They try to get plastic heads that sound like calf, but it's like trying to imitate water. You can't do it.

MD: A lot of jazz drummers like to tune their drums to higher pitches. What inspired you to go for a lower tuning?

John: When I was a kid I used to watch *The Arthur Godfrey Show* in the morning. It was a variety show, and they had a band. I would use two cardboard cylinders from a coat hanger as sticks and pretend that I was the drummer on the show. I'd slap the cylinders on the couch, and I think that's the sound I've been trying to get the whole time.

MD: Do you think a low tuning blends with the band better?

John: Oh, yeah! If you play in a big band long enough, you have to tune your drums low. If you don't, you're going to conflict with the horns. You need to get underneath them. If you've got your drums tuned up high, you're in the horn register, especially the trombones and saxes. And drums tuned up high don't get that good punch. If you listen to any big band drummer that's been around for a long time, they've got 'em down pretty low.

MD: You're still leading the Blue Wisp Big Band after almost thirty years. How has your approach to playing with a big band changed over time?

John: When I left Stan Kenton, I went back to Indianapolis and had time to record myself and study what I was doing. I started concentrating on trying to get the best sound from the cymbals, drums, and brushes, a hundred percent of the time. I'd go for sound instead of worrying about the rhythm or the tempo rushing or dragging and all that crap. I found that when I went for sound, my body relaxed and I got a good stroke on the cymbal. When I started playing with the Blue Wisp Big Band, I think I played better because things started falling into place.

Before I made these changes, I was just power driving. Everybody thinks that when you're with a big band you've got to play loudly, but that's not true. If you get the right feel going in your hands, especially the touch on the cymbal, it relaxes the rest of the limbs. Then you've got the whole band in the palm of your hand.

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