



In 1967 he left a plum gig with Horace Silver to follow his heart—back home. More than forty years later, his reputation as one of the **most stylish players and most effective teachers** around has only grown.

**MODERN DRUMMER**

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# Roger Humphries

by Paul Wells

**D**uring its history, the vibrant city of Pittsburgh has transformed itself from an industrial town to a technological and medical center. Through the years, sports and the arts have been the glue that's bonded the residents together. Jazz in particular has always been strong in Pittsburgh, bearing a staggering number of legends. Art Blakey, Kenny Clarke, Billy Eckstine, Ray Brown, Ahmad Jamal, Billy Strayhorn, George

Benson, and Jeff "Tain" Watts are just a few of the important musicians who grew up in the city.

A somewhat lesser known but equally important artist is the jazz drummer Roger Humphries. Best known for his seminal work in the mid-1960s with the hard-bop pioneer Horace Silver, most notably on the crossover hit "Song For My Father," Humphries has also spent time with Shirley Scott and Stanley Turrentine, Richard "Groove" Holmes,

and Ray Charles. Since 1980, however, the drummer has been off the road, choosing to stay in Pittsburgh to raise his large family. He comes from a close-knit clan and simply couldn't imagine being absent from his children's and grandchildren's lives.

Humphries is one of the finest drummers in the bebop and post-bop tradition. *Any* drummer within driving distance of Pittsburgh would be well served to make the pilgrimage to see, hear, and meet him. Roger's playing is solidly rooted to the greasy swing of '50s jazz, but with a firm grip on the innovations of the '60s, '70s, and beyond. His groove is unstoppable,

*MD contributor Paul Wells has worked with Deborah Harry, Joe Williams, the Duke Ellington Legacy, Randy Brecker, Rufus Reid, Glen Burtnik, and Spiraling, among others. He began playing drums at the age of ten in his hometown of Pittsburgh; besides Roger Humphries, he has studied with John Riley, Kenny Washington, and Bill Stewart. Wells is currently based in New York City.*



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## ROGER HUMPHRIES



and his soloing is fiery and energized. Most important, every note he plays on the drums is *music*.

More than just being a magnificent player, Humphries has had great influence as an educator, and this is how I first got to know him. I was lucky enough to attend the Pittsburgh High School For The Creative And Performing Arts (CAPA), where Roger taught from 1980 until his retirement in 2009. I fondly remember the time I spent with him, working through method books, listening to music together, and learning about the business. I also had many of my first experiences playing with professional jazz musicians when I would sit in at Roger's various weekly jam sessions at Pittsburgh jazz clubs. I recently took advantage of an opportunity to find out more about this quiet legend of jazz, beginning...at the beginning.

**Roger:** I was born in Pittsburgh in 1944, on the North Side—225 East Jefferson Street. I come from a family of ten children, and I'm the youngest. My family was very close, and I had a wonderful life growing up. My dad's brother lived next door, and he had eight children, so it was like I grew up in a family with eighteen children.

There were a lot of musicians in my family. My cousin Theodore played piano. My father had two brothers, Frank and Hildred Humphries, and they were musicians who worked on the road. They grew up with Roy Eldridge and knew Art Blakey. And there were many other musicians in the neighborhood. So my family's background has always been in music.

**MD:** It sounds as if you weren't limited by growing up in Pittsburgh, as opposed to New York City.

**Roger:** No, and my grandmother moved to New York. Every summer we would go there and visit.

**MD:** How old were you when you started playing drums?

**Roger:** They say I was about three and a half or four years old.

**MD:** Did you take any formal lessons at that point?

**Roger:** One of my older brothers, Norman, played drums. I started being able to imitate him. I could ride the cymbal and play independent figures with the left hand. There was always music on the radio and on the record player. All of my brothers loved jazz—they would buy records with Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie. I came up hearing jazz all the time, and I started to learn the songs.

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I grew up with this stuff. Kids today don't grow up hearing jazz in their homes. If they grow up hearing hip-hop and R&B on the radio or TV, they're not even hearing real instruments. My kids and now my grandkids all hear jazz. When they ride in my car, that's all I play, so they've grown up with it.

**MD:** When did you start playing with other musicians?

**Roger:** My brother would take me to his grade school, and I would play with the band there. I was four and a half, not quite old enough yet for kindergarten.

**MD:** Tell us about seeing legendary jazz drummers like Max Roach and Art Blakey.

**Roger:** In those days, every neighborhood had bars and clubs with live bands. My brothers would take me to the Saturday matinees. I remember how nervous I was to see Max Roach! This was the band with Booker Little, right before Abbey Lincoln started singing with him. I saw him the first time at the Midway Lounge on Penn

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Humphries plays a DW kit in natural satin oil finish, including a 4x14 snare, 8x10 and 9x12 toms, a 14x14 floor tom, and a 16x20 bass drum. His Bosphorus cymbals include 14" Traditional Crisp hi-hats, a 16" Traditional Paper Thin crash, a 20" Master ride, and a 19" Traditional Medium ride with six rivets.

Avenue, and he let me sit in. I had listened to everything he did on records, so I knew all the tunes. At that time I had a nervous stomach. I was okay as long as I was playing. But when I came home, my stomach would hurt so badly that I would have to just lie down on the couch all night. The doctor told my mother that I would eventually grow out of that.

**MD:** What was it like meeting your idols?

**Roger:** They were just normal guys and were always kind to me.

**MD:** What was the first touring gig that took you out of Pittsburgh?

**Roger:** Stanley Turrentine and Shirley Scott in 1962. I got out of high school in June, and we went out west in July. I was eighteen, and it was exciting to be on the road. They taught me a lot

## RECORDINGS

**Horace Silver** Song For My Father, The Cape Verdean Blues, The Jody Grind /// **Carmell Jones** Jay Hawk Talk /// **Roger Humphries And RH Factor** This N That /// **Jimmy Ponder** Something To Ponder /// **Dwayne Dolphin** Portrait Of Adrian /// **Roger Humphries Big Band** Don't Give Up

about dynamics and how to make the music exciting.

**MD:** How did you get that gig?

**Roger:** I knew Stanley because he was from Pittsburgh. When I visited my relatives in New York, Stanley asked me to join the band because Otis "Candy" Finch was leaving. We rehearsed for a couple of weeks and then came back to Pittsburgh. I kissed my wife-to-be, Regina, goodbye, and I was off. I was excited as I don't know what! I was making my dream come true, playing the drums. It was wild.

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**MD:** How did you come to join Horace Silver?

**Roger:** Roy Brooks was leaving the band. The way I heard the story was that Horace put out word that he needed a drummer, and Max Roach and Art Blakey told him there was a young drummer in Pittsburgh. I got a call from Horace to come up to New York to stay at his crib and audition. He would play me recordings of different drummers and styles and explain what he liked and didn't like.

What was so wild about the situation was the other musicians auditioning at that same time: drummers Al Foster and Edgar Bateman Jr. were there, and [tenor saxophonist] Joe Henderson, [trumpeter] Carmell Jones, and [bassist] Teddy Smith. There were all outside the rehearsal room, just sitting on a bench. Imagine, all these guys just sitting out there waiting. And Edgar Bateman Jr. was scary—he played so much stuff, man! That was a heck of a day.

**MD:** So why did Horace pick you? What did he hear that was special in your playing?

**Roger:** It's not that I outplayed anyone or anything like that. It was just the fact that I fit with what he heard and complemented what he did. Plus I was young and he could help train me. Al Foster was young too, but he was already out on the scene in New York.

Horace wanted something new. You'd see Horace and other bandleaders do this in those days. They would disband every few years and start all over again. That would keep things fresh. It wasn't because of having a problem with anyone or anything like that. It was just a part of the business.

**MD:** What are some of your best memories of the gigs you did with Horace?

**Roger:** One of my greatest memories was our first time playing Birdland. I'd been there to see other people, but can you imagine playing there? One of the first gigs was a double bill with Stan Getz and Astrud Gilberto. The next time we played there was a double bill with John Coltrane's quartet, with Elvin.

**MD:** Tell us about the *Song For My*

*Father* recording session. Had you been playing those songs live before recording them?

**Roger:** Yeah, we had played them live, and then we went into the studio. To me that's the best way to record, because you already have a feel for the songs.

When you record these days, everyone is separated in booths. Back then, at Rudy Van Gelder's studio, we all set up and played together in the room. I was right next to the bassist, and the horns were set up in front of us. It's so much more personal when you're just using your ears and eyes to hear and feel the other musicians. The technology is great now, though. Musicians just adapt.

**MD:** The title tune on *Song For My Father* was a big hit on the radio and on jukeboxes.

**Roger:** It was everywhere.

**MD:** How did that change things?

**Roger:** It kept us working. I remember going to the French Riviera, playing the Antibes Jazz Festival. We were treated really well. The culture in Europe is

really different; they treat you with respect over there.

**MD:** They don't have the same prejudices?

**Roger:** Exactly. That was a wonderful trip—France, Switzerland, Stockholm. I met so many wonderful people who would invite us to their homes and cook for us.

**MD:** How did you travel in those days?

**Roger:** We traveled by plane and a bit by train. I brought my own drums over at that time, in hard cases.

**MD:** Tell me about the second record you made with Silver, *The Cape Verdean Blues*.

**Roger:** Like with *Song For My Father*, we had been playing those tunes already. Carmell Jones had left the band, and Woody Shaw came in. He was a hell of a player. That was his first big gig. He was a beautiful person too. We had a great relationship. Joe Henderson was cool as well—like an older brother to me, but always very quiet. We used to call him the Fastest Gun In Town—the moment the last



note hit at the end of a gig, he would already have his saxophone packed up, and he was on his way out the door! [laughs]

**MD:** How did your playing change over the four years you were with Silver?

**Roger:** Hmm...that's a good question. I think it made me stronger and more confident. I think I made progress, even with such heavy competition.

**MD:** What made you leave the band?

**Roger:** Carmell was the first to leave, then Joe Henderson. I think as young guys change and figure out what they want to do, they need freedom. Horace was like a father, but he knew his guys were changing, away from what he wanted to do. It was time for us to start doing our own thing. It was nothing personal. After I left I realized he was teaching me to be a bandleader. Not everybody wants to be a bandleader, but I'd rather draw my own pictures the way I want to see them. I have a story to tell, and the way for me to do that is on my own.

After I left Horace, I went back to

Pittsburgh and started working with people who came through town. Then I got a call from Ray Charles to audition. Edgar Willis was his bass player; he's from Pittsburgh and recommended me. At the time I didn't read music, but I used my ears. Two weeks later I got a phone call from the office to join the band in Chicago.

**MD:** How long were you with Ray?

**Roger:** About a year. After that time I realized I wanted to come home and raise my family. I remember talking to older guys in the band who had kids that didn't even know them because they were gone all the time. I come from a tighter bond with my family. I realized then that I could have my cake and eat it too—I could live in Pittsburgh and play music and be with my kids too. I started my band RH Factor in 1972.

**MD:** How did you get involved in teaching?

**Roger:** The trumpeter Harry Clark was starting CAPA, and he asked me to come down and teach. I said, "Man, I

can't teach—I have no background with it." But he said, "Just teach them what you know. Share your life with them." I taught there for thirty years. I was there every day from 12 until 3:30. It gave me the financial stability to help take care of my family.

James Johnson III, Richie Goods, Paul Thompson, Tom Wendt, and yourself all went through that school and are all professionals. I'm so glad we got to share that time together.

**MD:** As long as I've known you, you've always had a steady weekly gig somewhere, usually a jam session. I remember that on Saturday afternoons you played at the Too Sweet Lounge in Homewood. Later you played Sundays at Club Cafe and then Tuesdays at James Street Tavern.

**Roger:** It's so important to be able to build an audience. When people know you're playing somewhere consistently, they'll go to see you. They'll have something to look forward to. When it's a jam session I can invite my friends and students to play. That's how you learn to play—sitting in with more experienced people.

I've always said that my best teachers were piano players, bass players, and trumpet players. Just beating the drums has nothing to do with music. But once you start to listen to what the other players are doing, you learn how to have a conversation musically.

**MD:** How do you adjust to different types of bands? Do you change your playing from a trio to an organ group to a big band?

**Roger:** I have to be honest—I don't think about it. It's just a natural thing. It's like wearing different hats. Maybe the dynamics change, softer or louder from group to group, but I just listen and adjust. With a big band it takes longer to get comfortable with the charts.

**MD:** Who are your favorite big band drummers?

**Roger:** Sonny Payne, Louie Bellson, and Frankie Dunlop. There are others that I can't think of right now, but growing up it was mostly all about Duke Ellington's band, Count Basie's band, and Woody Herman's band.

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**MD:** Do you think about adjusting your time feel for a big band?

**Roger:** I think I'm getting better at it! Sometimes you have your mind made up and you want to put the beat right where *you* want it. But the beat does have space in it, and you have to play as a group. If you don't play as a group, it won't work. So you monitor and adjust. I don't try to fight anything, but I try to stand my ground. You don't want to play like a metronome, but the time still has to feel like this [snaps fin-

gers on 2 and 4]. As long as I know it isn't dragging!

I'll tell you something—I watch the people in the audience. Some people in the audience have damn good time. [laughs] They move their bodies, and they're solid as a rock.

**MD:** So many jazz drummers use an 18" bass drum, but as long as I've known you, you've used bigger bass drums—usually a 20".

**Roger:** One of my practice kits at home has an 18", but I just like the sound of a

bigger bass drum. I like to be able to have one drum that I can use with a big band or a small band.

**MD:** Do you use different cymbals for different situations?

**Roger:** I'm with Bosphorus now, and it's nice to have a variety of cymbals for different occasions. But the setup I use most of the time is my favorite. I may carry an extra one with me, but when you start to carry more cymbals you're also carrying more weight.

**MD:** Have you always used nylon-tip sticks?

**Roger:** Yeah, I hate when wood tips start to wear and get dull.

**MD:** One of your most recent undertakings was a large-scale tribute concert to your former employer Ray Charles. What inspired you to pay tribute in this way?

**Roger:** A while ago I played at a Horace Silver tribute concert in Los Angeles, and it got me thinking. I started thinking about Ray after he passed away. I was on my deck, listening to an album of his, and I thought, *I'm going to do a tribute to Ray Charles*, so I could let everybody hear how I thought about him. This man was a real genius—music was all through his body. Then I met a young singer named Dwayne Chandler who could sing those parts so well, and it just seemed like it was meant to be.

**MD:** Did you get to know Ray well?

**Roger:** We would all travel together on planes. I played chess with him a few times. Fred Robinson and I were the only guys in the band who played chess. I used to think about how much I wanted to beat Ray, but I didn't realize the history of Ray playing chess. He used to beat me every time!

I had a nice relationship with Ray. He treated me well, and I learned a lot from him. He had a big building in California where his band rehearsed, and I learned to be smart about business and to own real estate. I don't want to have to count on anyone else but myself. If I own property and have some revenue, I can take care of my bills. Then I can play the music I want to play. That independence is the greatest gift that I have.

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