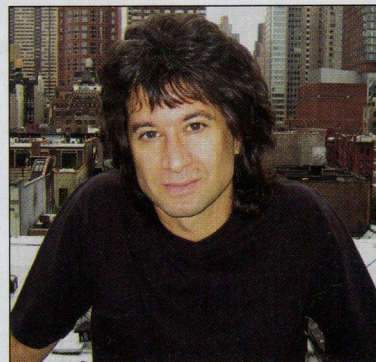


The Big Apple Beat

A New York City Drummers Roundtable

by Michael Cartellone



New York City. The biggest pond with the biggest (and also some of the smallest) fish. Have you ever wondered if gold is at this end of the rainbow? If so, you might be thinking: What's it like being a drummer in New York City? Is there work there? More importantly, how does a drummer new to town begin to pursue that work? I wondered these same things myself.

When I moved back to New York City in 2002 (having lived here for a while in the 1980s), I immediately started to network. I made some drumming friends in the community, specifically on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where I live. One day, Alex Alexander, drummer with Dido, proposed a lunch meeting of Upper West Side drummers. We met at a diner called the Time Café. (How appropriate is that?) It was an interesting mix of drummers, representing all styles of playing and different facets of the music business. Here's the roster:

Graham Hawthorne: David Byrne, and sessions that range from Aretha Franklin to Garth Brooks.

Sterling Campbell: David Bowie, Duran Duran, Cyndi Lauper.

Jim Mussen: Maxwell, Ofra Haza, Joan Osborne.

Michael Wimberly: Steve Coleman, Vernon Reid, Henry Rollins.

Benny Koonyevsky: Omar Faruk Tekbilek, Kate McGary, NY Percussion Quartet.

Alex Alexander: Dido, Ritchie Blackmore, Eminem.

Michael Cartellone: Lynyrd Skynyrd, Damn Yankees, John Fogerty.

It was immediately apparent that this was a comfortable hang. Some of the guys have been in direct competition for gigs, yet there was a feeling of brotherhood, with no egos or attitudes. Maybe we drummers are more connected to each other than we realize?

The afternoon was filled with lots of laughs, along with the sharing of advice and different drumming techniques. We talked about the obstacles that all New York drummers face: rehearsal space, cartage, and storage. Above all, there was an obvious support of each other that I daresay may not apply to other instrumentalists.

I found myself in a situation where I could get up to speed about the New York drumming scene, from the guys currently in the trenches. I asked a bunch of questions, and I happily share the answers with you. (When appropriate, I'll include my answers too, using "MC" to distinguish them from those of Michael Wimberly.)

Are you a native New Yorker? And at what age did you begin drumming?

Sterling: I'm a New York City native, and I began drumming at twelve years old.

Jim: I'm from Berkeley, California. I began drumming at twelve. I moved to New York at twenty-two.

Graham: I'm from Chicago. I began drumming at five. I moved here at twenty-one.

Alex: I was born in Cali, Colombia. I moved here at four, and I began drumming at seventeen.

Michael: I'm from Cleveland, Ohio. I began drumming at thirteen. I moved here at twenty-four.

Benny: I was born in Haifa, Israel. I

began drumming at fourteen, and I moved here in 1986.

MC: I'm also from Cleveland. I began drumming at nine, and I moved to New York City at twenty-two.

How did you first assert yourself in town? And what was your first big break?

Sterling: In the early '80s, I played in the downtown clubs and gained a lot of exposure. Then I landed a tour with Cyndi Lauper.

Jim: I stumbled onto Drummer's Collective, made friends, and played in a few bands. My first break was getting a gig with Ofra Haza.

Graham: When I first moved here, I got a

gig with Barry Finnerty. We started playing around town and I met a lot of session and jazz guys.

Alex: I practiced constantly and went on auditions. In 1985, I did a mini tour of Canada with a dance artist named Hashim.

Michael: I was at The Manhattan School of Music with others pursuing similar goals. I participated in a lot of student music activities. My break was landing a gig with Steve Coleman.

Benny: I'm still asserting myself in town! I haven't really had a "big break," I've just continued playing around New York, the US, and internationally.

MC: I moved here after auditioning for

Eddie Jobson, and I worked with him on several recording projects. The first tour I landed was with Tommy Shaw in 1987, which led to Damn Yankees.

What are you currently working on?

Michael: I'm composing for a classical/jazz cellist named Karen Patterson and working with a project called Love Machine. I'm also on a live CD with a jazz quartet called Exuberance.

Benny: I'm working on my own project of Yemenite music with Cuban/timba influences. I just recorded a CD with the group Sheesha, playing Middle Eastern tunes with many odd time signatures.

Alex: I'm on the Dido *Live In London* DVD and a new record by J.C. Chasez of N'Sync. I'm also doing shows in New York, where we perform live soundtracks to projected films.

Jim: I'm working with Ben Neill in a "DJ meets ambient vocal jazz" project. Recent gigs include The Willie McBlind Blues Band and Yale Strom.

Graham: I'm producing a New York band called The Navigators, touring with David Byrne, and musical directing for a TV series in development called *Drumgirls*, about women in world music.

Sterling: I've been working on my own project lately. I'm on the newest David Bowie live DVD, as well as the current Rufus Wainwright CD, *Want One, Want Two*.

MC: Aside from touring with Lynyrd Skynyrd, I'm finishing a "how to network in the music biz" DVD called *Measure Of Success*. On a different artistic front, I recently had a gallery showing of my paintings.

What is the most unique thing about the New York music scene to you?

Alex: There's no place like it anywhere. Everyone is cramped together and looking for a chance to get ahead. Sometimes they try to step on each other, but that's the nature of such a city. Also there is the East Coast vibe, which is very up-front and edgy. People don't like to waste time, so things move quickly and there's little space for mendacity. That's what makes New York such a challenge. You can honestly

get what you're looking for, but you have to know what it is and really work for it.

Sterling: I like the diversity of people and cultures. When musicians come to the

players. **MC:** I'm glad the subject of the Broadway scene came up. Another drummer friend of mine, Chuck Burgi, from the rock band Rainbow, is playing in the Billy Joel musical, *Movin' Out*. Theater work has become quite attractive, since it represents a steady gig with no traveling. You never know who you're going to see in those orchestra pits these days.

What is the latest on recording in New York?

Graham: The traditional way of making a rhythm track has all but disappeared in New York. Nowadays, I'm brought in after the track has largely been conceived. Usually there are loops and sequenced drum elements, which are as important to the track as the live drums will be. Live drums are added as flavor, often because someone thinks the programming and loops are stiff. Most producers have the skills and equipment to create computer drum tracks that sound like live drums. What they're looking for beyond that are things that are difficult or impossible to program.

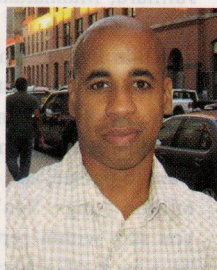
Benny: Recording gigs tend to come by word of mouth. In many ways, it's a small community. It takes time to establish your reputation, and getting started can be hard since you're competing with guys who have been here forever.

Sterling: New York is a very expensive place to live, and economics have had a major impact on the arts. A lot of studios are closing, and work has slowed down considerably. I feel it's important to verse yourself in Pro Tools, Logic, and other programs. Having your own recording setup is vital when it comes to maintaining work in the business. People are doing more online work, which enables them to record more economically.

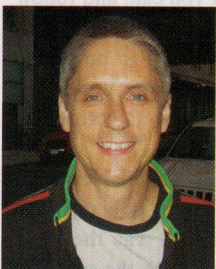
Graham: Expanding on what Sterling just said, it's true that many people are producing music, because of how cheap studio gear is. Consequently, there are more opportunities for studio work than ever, but the work is less centralized. It's very difficult to make a living, because the money is super low. Most recordings happen without record company or advertising agency backing. The artist or producer is paying



Alex Alexander



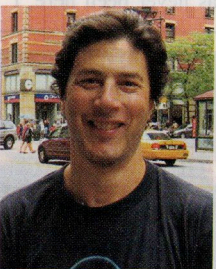
Sterling Campbell



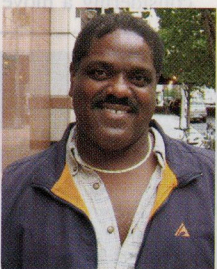
Graham Hawthorne



Benny Koonjevsky



Jim Mussen



Michael Wimberly

city—from jazz greats to R&B and rock players—it seems to have a transformative effect on their craft.

Jim: The greatest thing to me by far has always been the level of community and commitment. Drummers are offered the opportunity to learn, practice, perform, grow, share, and even falter at an extremely high pressure level, right in the face of their peers, on a daily basis.

Benny: We are the center of the music world. You can hear anything here, from the best Indian musicians to the Metropolitan Opera to Broadway. Everybody knows that when you come to perform in New York, you have to step it up a notch, so we're really lucky. You also have access to studying with all the best

The Jobbing Drummer

you out of pocket and hoping to sell the final product.

What advice would you give a young drummer wanting to pursue the New York scene?

Alex: Find a great teacher and learn everything you can. Stay clean and honest. Keep your ego in check, and don't be jaded or difficult. Listen to all types of music, not just the kind you know how to play. Show up early and be enthusiastic. *Feel* what you're playing, even if you're reading. Learn to make quick charts, and always read ahead. Keep your attitude positive.

Also, learning other instruments will teach you what a band expects from you. It also will help you better communicate your ideas to other musicians.

Jim: New York is still the great testing ground and the most exciting place to be. Whether you come here to study or to live, you are in for a treat—and a challenge. You'll need to hone your drumming skills—and your "people skills"—endlessly. Don't be afraid to learn.

You have to stay true to your dreams and hopes, no matter how tough it might get, and no matter what break you get. Success

can be as deceptive as anything else. Figure out what it is you really want, and go for it.

Michael: Have a plan! Continue your education at a school that has a great music program, such as Drummers Collective, Juilliard, Manhattan School Of Music, or Queens College.

While I agree that it's good to listen to and learn from all styles of music, when it comes to your own career I believe you should focus on the style of music you want to pursue, and not waste time doing a million things. You'll get much further if you stay within certain parameters. Don't be a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none.

Network as much as you can, and follow up with your newfound contacts. Not everyone you meet is going to help you, but don't let that discourage you. Stay focused on why you're here and what you came here to do.

MC: I'll be honest: I don't think New York is for everyone. It just comes down to what you feel in your heart. It was the right choice for me and it could be the same for any other drummer. But if someone who's considering a move has never been here, I

suggest that they take a test drive first. Come for a visit and meet some musicians. Hear some live music. Experience the energy of the city, which can be exhilarating and intimidating at the same time.

As I reread this story, I realized that most of this information could apply to the drum scene in virtually any major city. In essence, we've presented a guidebook to being a working drummer in today's climate. The best part is, all this happened because of our drummer's lunch—and *that* can happen anywhere. Get together with some drummer friends in your town. You'll be surprised what you can learn. I was.

Michael Cartellone is the drummer with southern rock legends Lynyrd Skynyrd. He was previously a member of Damn Yankees, and has performed with John Fogarty, Eddie Jobson, and Tommy Shaw.

