• DAVE WECKL: STYLE AND ANALYSIS •

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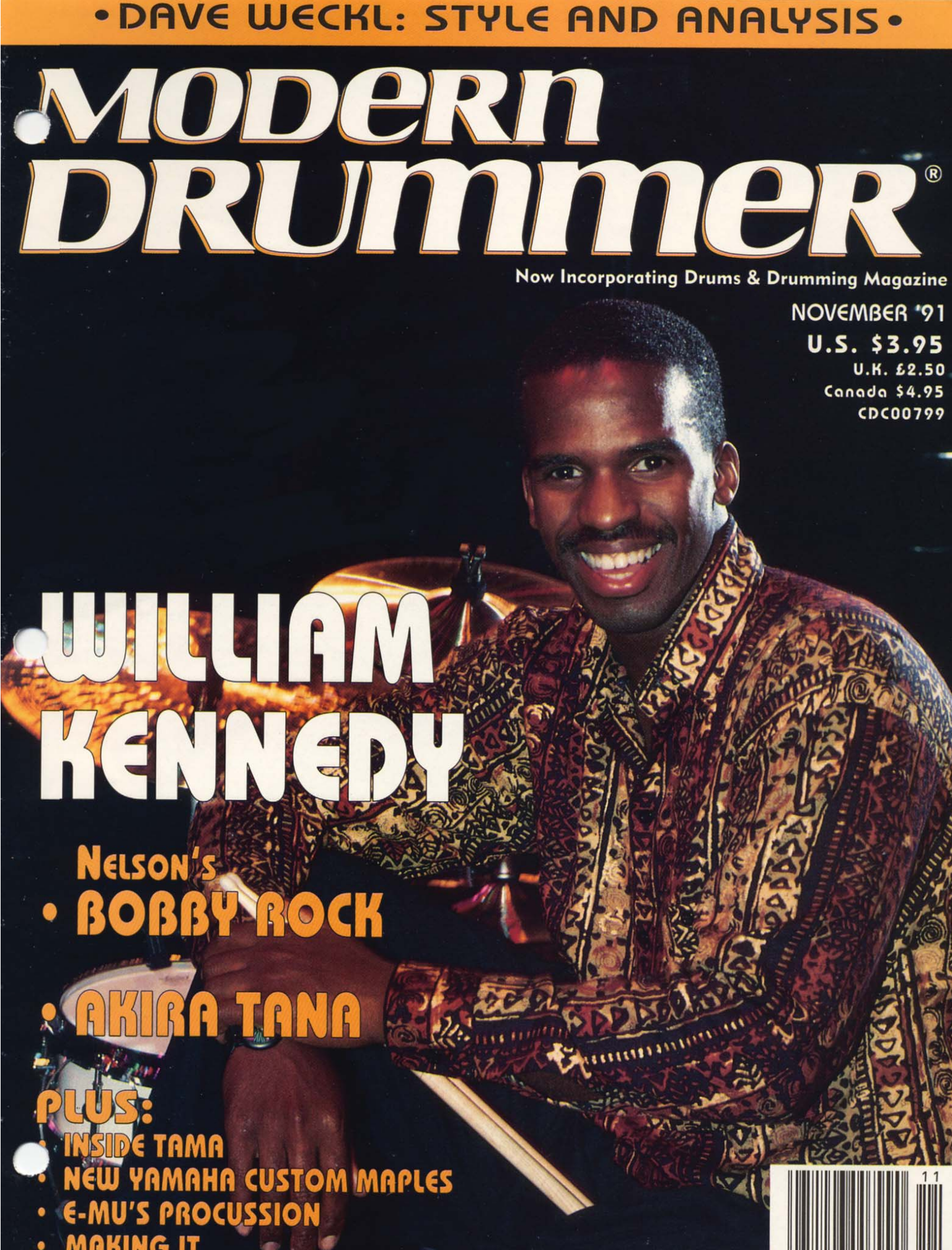

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Dave Black

Host Of This Year's PASIC And Much More

by Robyn Flans

I first heard Dave Black's name over ten years ago, in an interview with Louie Bellson. Louie said it was "kids" like Dave who were the future—touting him as someone interested in all aspects of the percussion field, including writing and composing.

Well, Dave Black is now, at age 32, a widely published composer/arranger who has written for the bands of Louie Bellson, Sammy Nestico, Bill Watrous, Bobby Shew, and Ed Shaughnessy, and is the recipient of consecutive ASCAP Composer Awards. In addition, he has also received two Grammy participation/nomination certificates: one for his contribution as a musician on Anita O'Day's album In A Mellow Tone *and the other for his contribution as album-track composer on Louie Bellson's* Airmail Special.

Along with Louie and Henry Bellson, Dave is the co-author of Contemporary Brush Techniques. *He is also co-author, along with Sandy Feldstein, of* Alfred's Drum Method, Books 1 & 2, Alfred's Beginning Drumset Method, *and* Alfred's Beginning Snare Drum Duets.

According to the Percussive Arts Society's Bob Schietroma, Black was chosen to host this year's PAS convention because of these accomplishments—in addition to his organizational skills, his role as an educator, his industry contacts, and the fact that his position as Instrumental Music Editor at Alfred Publishing affords him the time to coordinate this seemingly awesome task.

RF: When did you become interested in percussion education?

DB: That happened during college. I was a performance major, and performing is what I always thought I would do. But things started changing in the music business around 1980, and I started to realize that in order for me to be able to survive, I'd have to become more diversified. I had always been interested in composing and writing, and the situation prompted me to develop those skills. Composing also gave me another outlet with which to express myself. Drums are wonderful, and I enjoy performing very much, but it's basically an accompaniment instrument. I also had harmonic and melodic ideas inside that I wanted to express. So it all worked out for the best.

RF: As involved in education as you are, what do you see lacking in the system today?

DB: Kids today don't have the advantages that I had. I had a junior high band director and a high school composition teacher who were tremendous inspirations. What we had in junior high school, most high schools and colleges didn't have. Our band director had the budget to buy a full set of timpani and a full array of mallet instruments. He was the kind of teacher who was there at 6:00 in the morning to work with the students until 7:00 at night. He made sure all his drummers and percussionists could play mallet instruments and timpani, and he emphasized ear training, so we had to learn key signatures and composition. We had to study conducting and all the things that—unfortunately—most junior high kids don't do. Most drummers say, "Gee, I don't like this, I just want to play drumset," but I said, "Gee, I really like this." I tried to soak up as much as I could.

I think another thing kids are missing now is the opportunity to hear live music. When I was growing up you could go to a club for $5 and hear an abundance of music, which was an education in itself. Most of the clubs now charge $15 at least, and many have a two-drink minimum. How can a junior high school kid deal with that?

RF: Has your emphasis always been jazz?

DB: Yes. The first records I bought in junior high were a Benny Goodman record, a Nat King Cole record, and the soundtrack to *West Side Story.* I never really bought Beatles albums or any of that kind of thing. Chicago was my favorite group back then, but I didn't get into Blood, Sweat & Tears, America, or Queen until I got into college. I was pretty single-minded, and it wasn't until I really became more mature that I saw some musical value in all that stuff.

RF: So who are some of your heroes?

DB: As I said before, my junior high band director, Mr. Weems, and my high school composition teacher, Gordon Gustin. And when I was 16, Louie Bellson came into my life. My high school had a jazz band called the Starliners that was directed by Joe Carley, a retired Air Force clarinetist. We had an annual concert called a Swing-in, where we'd have guest artists. Louie Bellson happened to be the guest artist my last year in high

school, and that night completely changed my life. When Louie was asked to do this concert, Joe Carley told him that he could either have a hotel room or "stay with the kid drummer." Louie's response, of course, was, "I'll stay with the kid drummer. That way we'll get to hang out." Of course I was ecstatic—until Joe Carley told me that Louie and I would play a tune together on which there would also be a drum battle. Then I was scared to death!

When the time came, I picked Louie up at the airport and he stayed with my family for three days. Here we had one of the most famous drummers in the world in our house, and he was just like part of the family. We were all so excited. We got a letter from him about four days after he left, thanking us for our hospitality. I was going to write him a letter, but my little sister beat me to it. About a week later, he wrote her back. We kept writing, and for some reason, something clicked.

I had never planned on coming to California for college. I lived back East, in Maryland, and by my junior year of high school I'd already been accepted to the University of Miami. Half my relatives lived in Dallas, Texas, so my other choice was North Texas State University. But after about six months of friendship, Louie said, "Why don't you come out to Cal State Northridge. Joel Leach has a great jazz band out here. Besides, I live in Northridge, and you can study with me." I graduated high school in June at 18 years of age, and I was on a Greyhound Bus to California in August.

Two other influences—as far as drums go—would be Joel Leach at Cal State Northridge, and Sandy Feldstein, with whom I have co-authored a lot of books and who has also been instrumental in helping to open a lot of doors for me. And I have to mention my parents, because it was really their support that allowed me all the opportunities.

RF: What was the chronology of your performing and writing careers?

DB: I finished college in 1981 with a performance degree, and I wanted to get out and play. I went out on the road for three years, doing some cruise-ship stuff, working with entertainers like Tony Bennett and doing Broadway-type shows. I had started doing some writing; I think I had one thing published at the time.

I got to see lots of the world and I got to work with a lot of people I admire, but eventually I got tired of being on the road. I was also getting the itch to do more composing and writing, so I quit the road and I started concentrating on that.

RF: How did you actually get into the book writing?

DB: I started at Alfred Publishing in 1985. I was working in marketing at that time; now I'm the instrumental music editor. Alfred had published my first stage band chart in 1980, so I knew Sandy Feldstein at Alfred and I just kind of fell into it. My first collaboration on a book was with Louie Bellson and his brother, Hank. They had written a brush book, and because of the nature of brushes, trying to come up with a way to describe and diagram the different movements so that a novice could visualize them and do them was proving difficult. As a result, the book had been sitting around for several weeks. I told Sandy I'd like to see it, so he let me take it home. I was able to come up with a way to make it work, and I also added three other chapters to it.

> "Some people have this terrible misconception that if you're going to be in music, you're either going to play or you're not. I don't think they realize there are a lot of other options."

The way the *Alfred's Drum Method* books came about was that Sandy had wanted to update the Haskell Harr book for many years. Haskell Harr published the *Haskell Harr Method* in 1937. Roy Burns updated it 20 years later, and Sandy said he wanted to update it again.

RF: The ads say it's a new method. What new material was added to it?

DB: We took a book that was 50 years old and updated some of the concepts. We tried to keep the look similar but explain things in a different way. The one thing that is very different is that we took what we taught in each lesson and combined those things in a combination study, including full-length solos. When we taught five-stroke rolls, we'd put in a Sousa march that incorporated five-stroke rolls so a student could see how all the concepts fit together. We did the seven-stroke roll section over completely to try to simplify the explanation.

RF: After you got more involved with writing and composing, were you worried that you would stop getting calls to perform?

DB: Not really. I believe that everything goes in cycles, and that's what I tend to do. I tend to jump into something, go at it 110% until I've exhausted that possibility, and then go on to the next thing. I had traveled and played for so many years that I wanted to take time off to write and compose. Then as that started going, album projects started coming up. It really worked itself out.

RF: How did the album work come about?

DB: I met a marvelous writer by the name of Gordon Brisker. He had his own band and also did a lot of contracting for other things, which is how I got to work with people like Anita O'Day and Jerry Hey. I had reached a plateau on the writing stuff and said, "Okay, now it's time to get back into some playing."

RF: So you *did* miss playing?

DB: I'm trying to say this without sounding egotistical: I do enjoy playing, but I enjoy playing with a certain caliber of musician and in certain situations. You have to weigh what you get out of something. Instead of playing a wedding for people who aren't really paying attention to the band and getting paid $50 for a four-hour date, I would rather write an article that paid $100 and that would be read by thousands of people. It would still be utilizing my creativity. I would rather devote my time to writing a book or a composition—unless it's an album date or a real fun jazz gig.

RF: What instruments do you write for?

DB: My field of writing is for stage band, so the instrumentation is basically five saxes, four trumpets, four trombones, and a rhythm section.

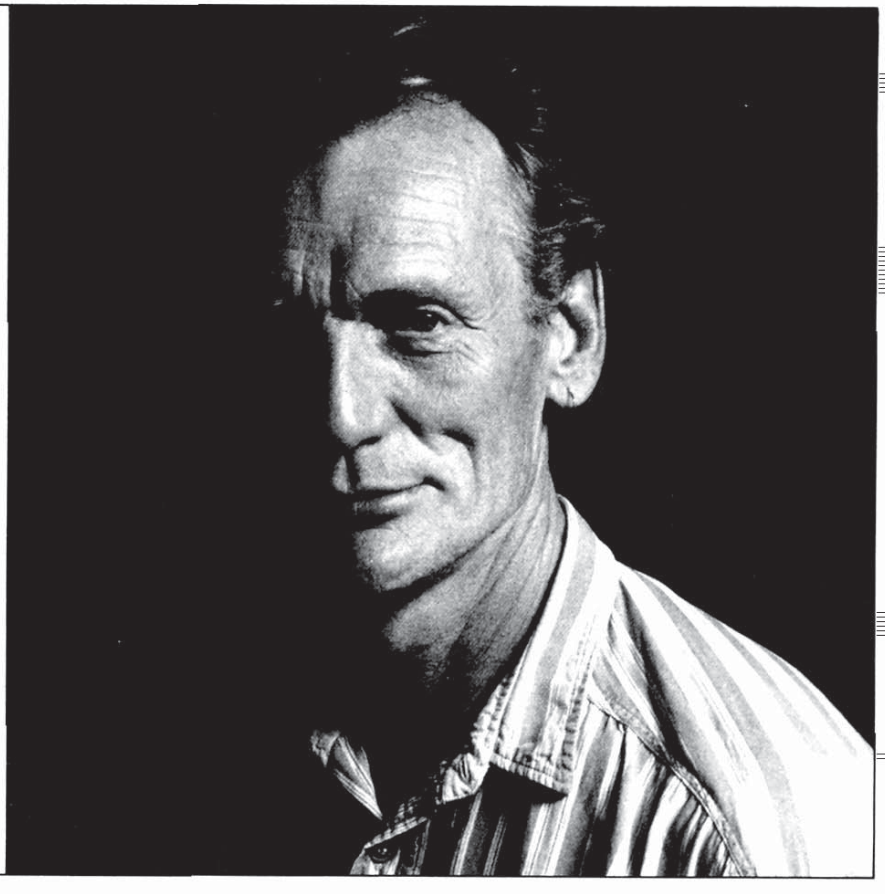
RF: When you write for that kind of instrumentation, how extensively do you have to know those instruments?

DB: I don't know how to play all of them, but I know their characteristics, their ranges, and their breaking points—where certain notes or passages are difficult to play. It's a lot of fun and I think it has helped me to become a better musician. When I play a chart now, I appreciate how what I play on the drums affects everything else and how everything comes together to make the tune happen.

RF: Can you explain a bit about the workings of composition writing—how a work gets published and what the financial possibilities are?

DB: Some pieces are commissioned by a specific junior high, high school, or college group. Perhaps they have an exceptional alto or trumpet player they'd like to feature, so they hire me to write something that would feature that particular player.

Because I am under contract to a certain publishing company and have been writing for publication for the last ten years, I automatically write two or three things for them every single year. I, or Louie and I, write the composition, and then we get a 10% royalty on every copy that's sold. The tunes are published, and then promotional albums of the tunes—along with what they call a score brochure, which is a short blurb about the composition—will be mailed out to 35,000 band directors around the world. Then, hopefully, those directors will order it for their spring program or whatever.



RF: If someone were interested in doing this, how would they get started?

DB: There are a lot of universities with classes in arranging and orchestration. I did a lot of that at Northridge. If I had an idea for a combination of instruments that I wanted to hear, I would write out those four bars and take it into a jazz band and have them run it down so I could hear what it sounded like.

There are also arranging books: Don Sebesky has one, Sammy Nestico is coming out with one, and Dick Grove has one. There are a lot of private instructors that teach composition. For me, most of it just stems from listening to everything I can get my hands on. That is the best way to learn. I still buy records constantly—Latin, pop, classical, all kinds—to see how different people orchestrate things.

RF: What have been some of your highlights?

DB: There have been so many. The first tune I had published...the first book I had published...the first major album I did. Playing the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games was a wonderful experience. It was just marvelous to walk out in front of 200,000 people and know that another 200 million or so were watching. It was tremendous being able to hang out with some of those athletes before the games had even started. Within the course of the next two weeks, some of those people became international celebrities.

Recently, the two Grammy nominations were thrilling because that's something you always look at as a kid as something you want to be a part of. You never know whether you're going to get that opportunity or not. That was a tremendous thrill.

Writing-wise, Louie's *Airmail Special* got the Grammy nomination this year. I wrote a tune called "In Roy's Corner" with Louie and Sammy Nestico. Sammy is one of the biggest all-time writers there is; Basie's sound has been attributed to him. He has published over 700 compositions for young bands; one of his charts was the first chart I ever played in junior high school. To be able to co-write a tune with the undisputed king of writers and arrangers and the undisputed king of drums was a thrill I can't even put into words.

I think one thing I enjoy now more than anything else is working with younger people. Since I've gotten over some of the insecurities of the business and have been able to do some things, I enjoy being able to put back into the system what I took out, even if it's just talking to young people and trying to keep them motivated to continue doing what they want to do.

RF: With all of your accomplishments, what other goals do you have in the music business?

DB: I've driven myself pretty hard to get some of the things that I've wanted. One of my insecurities has been whether or not I would ever get to do those things, so I wanted to work hard to make sure that I did. But I also wanted to do it at a young enough age to enjoy it. It was kind of sad for me when Henry Fonda got his Oscar at 70-some years of age and then died two months later. He had worked a lifetime for that and didn't have time to enjoy it. I've tried to push myself, and I don't regret that, because I've gotten some things under my belt and can therefore relax.

But at 32, I'm now trying to see what other directions I would like to go into. What I've talked about doing for the last couple of years is starting a non-profit organization for musicians and entertainers who are having a difficult time getting started or who become discouraged. It would be like a job-placement service where people can come in and get ideas about what they can do in the business. Some people have this terrible misconception that if you're going to be in music, you're either going to play or you're not. I don't think they realize there are a lot of other options open to them in music.

Of course, I want to continue doing what I'm doing now, but I'd like to expand. From a compositional standpoint, I'd like to start writing for strings. I'd like to get into TV and movie writing. As a player, there are a lot of people I'd love to work with, like Tony Bennett and the Manhattan Transfer. I'd like to do some work in the pop field and I'd like to do some producing. I'd like to keep busy and keep growing.