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An Interview with Louie Bellson

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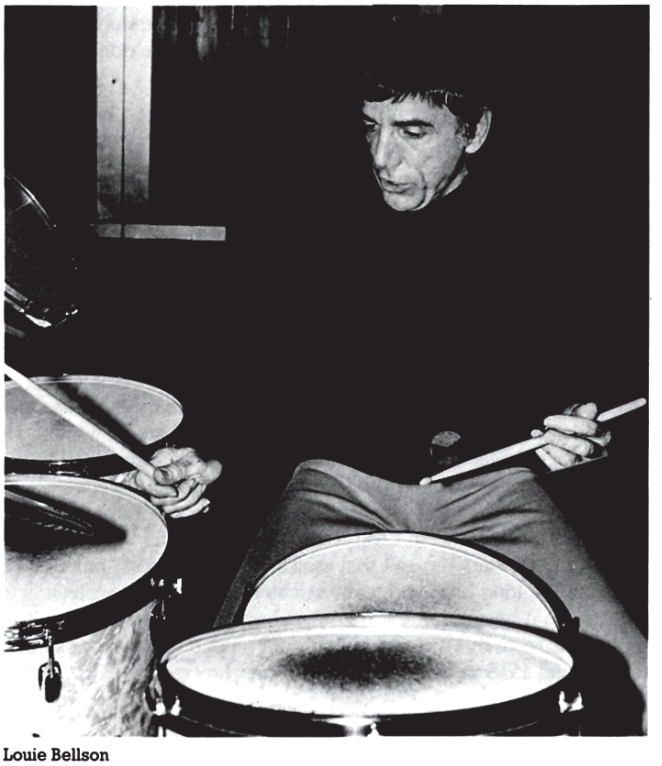

Louie Bellson

*Referred to by jazz critic Leonard Feather as "one of the most phenomenal drummers in history," **Louie Bellson** has had a history of expressing himself on drums since he was three years old. He has played and recorded with such greats as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, and many others. As a prolific composer/arranger, he has written compositions and arrangements that span a broad spectrum of music, from jazz to symphonic works. A pioneer instrumental and band clinician, Bellson has given selflessly of himself to the music education community. He is also the author of a number of books on drums and percussion.*

Dave Black: Who are some of the people who influenced you the most when you were growing up?

Louie Bellson: Well, I never had just one idol – I listened to everybody. I'll mention a group of drummers who influenced me, however. Buddy Rich and I are the same age and were brought up together, so I exclude him because we sort of agree on the same kind of players. I have to name Jo Jones first, because Jo Jones was one of the first players to come up with wonderful fluidity while maintaining intensity. He pioneered a brand new texture, a new sound. Chick Webb was another great influence. He was blessed with a great natural talent and was one gigantic player. Gene Krupa, another influence, was one of the guys who brought drums to the fore ground. He developed a great sound and really played well, in addition to being one of the greatest showmen of all times. Davy Tough was another player who really represented what I would call an excellent timekeeper. His forte was being able to play in the rhythm section and being able to blend with the bass, piano, and guitar player, and really make that baby swing. Another influence was big Sid Catlett who, in my opinion, could do anything. He could play in a small group, a big band, or do shows. I would mention Max Roach, but Max was more like Buddy and myself. The three of us were around the same age and of course it goes without saying that I respect both those guys – Buddy Rich for all the wonderful things he has done and for the great natural technique he has, and Max for teaching all of us to play more melodically. He was one of the first drummers to stress melodic as well as rhythmical playing.

DB: Over the years you have had the opportunity to play with most of our greatest entertainers. Is there any entertainer with whom you've wanted to work but haven't had the chance to yet?

LB: I've worked with Sinatra, Lena Horne, Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett, Steve and Edie, Dick Ames, Bing Crosby, and all of the comedians. The only people that I haven't had a chance to work with are some of the more contemporary entertainers, such as, Al Jarreau, Stevie Wonder, and Lionel Richie, who I think are just fabulous.

DB: Do you ever get nervous when working with the entertainers you've mentioned?

LB: I don't know whether I would call it nervous, but I must say this: when you do work with a personality like Sinatra, Lena Horne, or Sammy Davis Jr., you go into a rehearsal a little keyed up because you don't want to make any mistakes. You're dealing with the top echelon and you want to impress them. So I think what you do is concentrate a little more.

DB: How did you get the gigs with the Ellington, Goodman, and Basie bands? Did you have to audition for them, or did they ask you to join?

LB: When I lived at home in the Quad City area we had the opportunity to hear all the big city bands when they came through town. One night I went to hear Ted Fio Rito's band. The kids used

to yell and scream, "Hey – get Lou to play the drums." Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. One night I sat in and played with Ted Fio Rito's band and he offered me a job right on the spot. I told Ted that I had three or four more months left of high school and would come out and join him. I kept my word and joined him at the Florentine Gardens here in Hollywood, opening for the Mills Brothers who were the main attraction. After I had been there two or three months, Benny Goodman's brother, Freddy, was in the audience and I guess he liked what he heard. He sent me a note, so I went over to the table and he said, "How would you like to come over and audition for Benny Goodman tomorrow? He's doing a picture out at Paramount."

The year was around 1941 or 42 and Gene had just left the band. I went out to Paramount studios and they put a jacket and makeup on me, and Benny said, "You're the kid drummer, right?" He said, "Your audition is going to be while we shoot the movie." So I sat down and played a few bars of one tune with him, and he said "OK, that's good enough, let's shoot the shot we have with the quartet for the picture." I was very fortunate to make that step.

After being with Benny a year, Uncle Sam got me for three years. When I got out of the service I went back with Ted and Benny Goodman, then joined Tommy Dorsey. I stayed with Tommy for three years and then decided to come out to Los Angeles. At that time I also did my year with Harry James. During the end of that year with Harry James, Juan Tizol told me that Duke Ellington called and was looking for a drummer and a lead alto player. Frankly, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to leave Harry but I knew that joining Duke would be a great experience, so the spokesman was Tizol. We sat down with Harry and told him we had a chance to join Duke's band. Being the nice guy that Harry was he said, "Let me tell you something, the last thing I want to do is lose you guys, but for the amount of work we are doing and because it isn't everyday that you get a chance to join Ellington, go ahead and take it." So we joined Ellington and that was the start of that.

DB: Do you have any funny stories about some of those greats that the public doesn't know – things that happened that would make them seem more human than what we perceive them to be?

LB: Yes. People used to say to me, how is Duke on stage, how is he off stage? Ellington was charming. In the early days the band traveled a lot by train because Duke did not like to fly. Later on he made up his mind that he had to fly in order to make all the dates. We were flying one day and he was sitting across the aisle from me just up two seats. He turned around during the flight and he said, "Hey Scoonge, have you got any manuscript paper handy?" I said, "No, it's in my suitcase in the baggage section." He said "OK," unbuckled his seat belt, and took his jacket off. He was wearing a white shirt and he took his marker pen and drew five lines on the sleeve of his left arm and proceeded to write down six or eight bars. He turned around to me and said, "Don't ever lose those kind. You'll get off the plane, get to the hotel and say, Oh, goodness, my what were those three or four bars?"

Another very interesting thing happened when he called me back East to do a concert with the New York Philharmonic. It was just a bass player and myself in front of the orchestra. Duke was conducting his own composition called *The Golden Broom and the Green Apple*. It was 20 minutes of music for which there was no drum part. I didn't know whether to pick up a brush, a mallet, or whether to play double forte or pianissimo. Duke kneeled down to me before he gave a downbeat, and said, "Oh, the first part is in 3/4." That's all I had to go by. After the rehearsal some woodwind players came up to me and said, "Hey Lou, I guess you've got this memorized huh?" I said, "No, I've never heard it before." They went away scratching their heads. After the rehearsal I took the score and made a drum part for myself because the concert was the next day. When I left, I presented Duke with this drum part, and he said, "Don't you understand that the reason I didn't write a drum part was because I wanted one from you. It isn't everyday that you get a Louie Bellson drum part."

DB: What did you get while growing up that young players are not getting today?

LB: First of all, by the time I was fourteen years old I was already playing in clubs. I had a chance to play Tuesday nights in a club in Moline, Illinois called the Rendezvous Nightclub. Playing there Tuesday nights every week for three or four years gave me some of the greatest lessons I ever learned on playing time. In those days after graduating from high school and college, we had a chance to go on the road and play with as many as fifty bands. You had a stepping stone. Today, you're lucky if you can even get into one of the bands that you can count on one or two hands.

DB: What do you think of big bands today as opposed to when you were growing up?

LB: I think there are less big bands today because of the economic situation, but there is no question in my mind that they have become better and better. Basie's band is still very good, even though Basie isn't with them. Buddy Rich still has his big band and every time I hear Buddy, the band sounds better and better. Mel Lewis has a superb big band. I think that Mel, myself, Buddy, Woody, Basie, Maynard Ferguson, Bob Florence, Bill Holman, Rob McConnell and Toshiko Aykiyoshi have bands that are continually working. They will continue to work because they are doing something that has validity, and people dig it.

DB: What medium do you enjoy playing for the most? Is it television, records, or live performing?

LB: I like live performing. When I'm recording, I understand why we have to get separation in order to get that beautiful sound, but I still like to set-up in a live performance situation where I can get that immediate feedback from the audience. You may sacrifice a little bit in sound, but the feel and the interplay between the musicians and the audience is great.

DB: What's the hardest musical situation that you have ever been in?

LB: I would say that the most demanding thing that I have had to do was the album I did with Lalo Schifrin. The music he wrote for that album received six stars from *Down Beat*. When I walked into the studio I saw a bass marimba, seven timpani, a sound effects console, my drums, log drums, etc. I said, "Lalo, do we have a bunch of guys like Larry Bunker, Emil Richards, and Kenny Watson coming in?" He said, "No, all that stuff's for you." I hadn't touched that stuff in a long time and really sweated through that session. I got through it because of the training I had and of course Lalo was a great help, too. But it was demanding. To open up the book and start playing 15/8 right away really put me through a test.

DB: Where did you get your background in composition?

LB: It started with my Dad, and then with Roy Knapp in Chicago. In 1947, when I joined Tommy Dorsey here in Los Angeles, there was one guy I wanted to study with and that was Buddy Baker. Buddy Baker had just retired from Disney Studios where he had been a composer and arranger for 28 years. I got to know Buddy Baker through records. Herb Jeffries made an album with just strings and Buddy Baker did the arrangements. When I heard that string writing I said, "That's the guy I want to study with." Later, after studying with Buddy I got to know Jack Hayes. I got a tremendous amount of learning from Buddy Baker, Jack Hayes, and of course Benny Carter. When Pearl did her ABC Television show, the arrangers I had on my staff were Buddy Baker, Jack Hayes, Benny Carter, and Bill Holman. I used to take Bill Holman's scores apart and study them. When they wrote arrangements for Pearl I used to go home at night and study the scores. All of these guys were my mentors.

DB: Do you think being just a good player is a guarantee for making it?

LB: No, absolutely not! You've got to have more. You've got to be a great player today, but you also have to know what timing and

pacing is, on and off the bandstand. You have to know how to conduct yourself, how to arrange tours, and how to take care of yourself. If you're going to be a band leader, you have to know how to read contracts and how to negotiate. Today you are more respected if you are more versed in these types of things.

DB: Should students with an affinity for music consider choosing other aspects of business, such as music marketing or music education, instead of performing?

LB: Well, in today's musical world it's not easy to get a break. I think that if a young musician who has the ability to be a great player can do something else in the meantime in order to make a living, it is to his advantage. But he shouldn't lose sight of the fact that there's going to be a time when he can learn another aspect of the business until he gets his break.

DB: Does being in the right place at the right time, and who you know, play a more important role in a person's chances for success than just the talent that he or she might have?

LB: Breaks are important. My playing at the Florentine Gardens with Ted Fio Rito's band is a good example of being at the right place at the right time. If I hadn't joined Ted's band, Benny Goodman's brother might not have heard me play. That's what you call a lucky break.

DB: What do you think of the ability of players today as opposed to when you were growing up?

LB: I think today players have to do much more because of the wide variety of styles that they must be able to play. If you are a drummer like Ed Shaughnessy on the Tonight Show, you have a wide variety of entertainers who appear on the show who don't bring their own rhythm sections. So you've got to be able to play any style. Studio drummers such as Steve Gadd and Harvey Mason have to be able to play with any kind of personality, producer, singer, or arranger, and they have to pull it off.

DB: Jazz education has always seemed to take a back seat to the concert band, marching band, and orchestra programs. What do you think can be done to change that?

LB: I think it is happening now through the excitement that the players themselves are generating. For example, look what Joel Leach does. He has taken his band on several tours. And Ron Modell has Dizzy one year, Carl Fontana one year, and me another year. He makes the faculty realize that his ensemble is important. I think in the next few years you are going to see an upsurge there.

DB: What do you think can be done by the professional community to help encourage and support working jazz bands?

LB: First of all, when you think about the number of colleges out there and consider that every year (let's take a lower figure), there are five excellent players going to graduate from each school, we're talking about two or three hundred players right off the bat. Where do they go? They've got Basie's band, Buddy's band, Woody's band, Maynard's band, Glen Miller's band, our band, Toshiko's band, Bill Holman's band, and Bob Florence's band. You can barely count ten. In the contemporary field, they've got a lot of wonderful groups, such as Earth, Wind and Fire, Weather Report, Steps Ahead, Spyro Gyra, and Genesis. But for the number of youngsters who graduate, and for the amount of groups on the road, it doesn't even add up. They've got the tools, all they need now is a chance to get those tools in their hands and get experience on the road.

In order to give a new band a break, they have to worry about two things that are very important in order to get known: records and television. Those are our two mediums today. You can go out and do a million one nighters and keep doing them until you're green, but in order to get recognition you have to do either records or television. In order to get to that point, I felt that it was important for four or five big band leaders to get together and have a meeting with record and television executives from RCA, Arista, Columbia, NBC, ABC, and CBS and say, "Look, here's a guy who has a great band, but the only way we can give him a break is to give him a record contract or some television exposure. We have got to give at least five or six new bands every year a chance to do that. Only record and television executives can do that for them I know it's not easy to get those kinds of big executives together, but it could be done.

DB: How do you feel about the electronic age and electronics?

LB: I'm not against it. I realize that when you get a drum machine, it's a drum machine, but there is nothing in this world like a man sitting down and playing drums live.

DB: What projects are you currently working on?

LB: I'm working on another full symphonic piece which I'll probably coordinate with Jack Hayes, and another one with Harold Farberman called *Concerto for Jazz Drummer and Symphony Orchestra (premiered at PASIC '86, Washington, DC)*. I'm also working on other things for my band.

DB: At this point in your career, have you thought about slowing down?

LB: No. I don't even know what that means. I think I have learned how to time and pace myself. I have reached a point now where I take three or four days off when I don't even go near the drumset or write a piece of music. So during those two or three days I go out and sit under a tree, get with mother nature, and do something entirely different until my mind is clear.

DB: If you had it all to do over again, would you change anything?

LB: Not a thing.