

Percussive Notes

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Remembering Louie Bellson

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Remembering Louie Bellson

With the recent passing of Louie Bellson, the music community has lost one of its finest performers and most-loved members, and PAS has lost one of its biggest supporters and dearest friends. Indeed, before there even was a Percussive Arts Society, Louie personified everything PAS would come to stand for: excellence in the percussive arts, a commitment to education and the sharing of knowledge, and a spirit of camaraderie manifested in Louie's enthusiastic support and encouragement of other drummers—especially those just starting their careers.



ing over and over to Louie's tremendous big band album *Explosion*.

He was also a good friend of my dad, Bud Bissonete. My dad passed away this past October, and Francine Bellson (Louie's wife) told me at Louie's funeral that the last public event that Louie made it to was my Dad's graveside burial and celebration-of-life service. What an honor! I know that my dad and Louie are hanging out in Heaven right now!

One of the greatest thrills of my life was getting to play a drum duet with Louie at the very first Buddy Rich Memorial Tribute concert in 1989 on Long Island, New York at the Westbury Music Fair. This fantastic event was the first in a series of many Buddy tribute concerts. Unfortunately, it was never recorded on audio or video. It featured Louie, Steve Gadd, Vinnie Colaiuta, Dave Weckl, Joe Morello, Jim Chapin, Dom Famularo, Al Miller, Steve Arnold, and Danny D'Imperio, with a great house band made up of Buddy alumni. Louie absolutely tore it up with Buddy's tribute big band!

Another great honor for me was getting to play a really fun drum trio with Louie and Dennis Chambers at the second Buddy Rich tribute concert, which was filmed, at the Wiltern Theatre a year later in 1990.

Francine and Louie were at my wedding in 1996 and they honored me several times by coming to my gigs with my jazz quintet at Cafe Cordiale near where they lived in Sherman Oaks, California. Cafe Cordiale was one of their favorite dinner/jazz night spots!

A good friend of mine named Ronnie Berg, who was 15 and had cancer, came from New York to my house in Los Angeles 1997. This

trip for him and his very supportive parents was made possible by the Make A Wish Foundation. Louie and many other members of the Woodland Hills Drum Club (including Myron Grombacher, Simon Phillips, Tris Imboden, Hilary Jones, Tony Pia, and myself) spent the day playing side-by-side drum duets and hanging out with Ronnie, who played all day and wore us all out! Ronnie passed away just a few days after his 22nd birthday, but Louie gave him one of the greatest drumming days of his life that day in 1997. Louie was all heart!

Years ago, when Louie was in his seventies, I said, "Louie, how do you do it? You have so much energy. You are traveling around the world playing with your big band and your small group, you do all kinds of great CDs with your own groups and other artists, you do clinics all over the world, and you are in amazing physical shape!" His reply was, "Well, I eat right, exercise, I don't drink much, I try to stay in good physical shape, but most importantly, I try to never let negative thoughts enter into my mind." I thought, "Wow! In the



Louie with Buddy Rich. From the personal collection of Dave Black.
Photo by Denis J. Williams

music business, with all of the ups and downs, yet the glass is always half full (not half empty) to Louie Bellson." What an incredible man, drumming hero, and role model!

God bless you, Louie!

Dave Black

The passing of Louie Bellson is not only a huge loss to the music community, but a deep, personal loss for me. As everyone knows, he was a drumming pioneer, a musical giant, and a great humanitarian. Throughout his illustrious career, he played with virtually every giant in the music world and was a renowned composer, arranger, bandleader, and educator. Aside from the accomplishments that everyone already knows, he also loved poetry and was a prolific poet himself, having written a number of poems and verses over his lifetime. He also loved to draw with pencil and pastels and, aside from Bob Hope, he and his wife, the late Pearl Bailey, were the second most frequent guests at the White House.

Louie was the reason I moved to California in 1977. When I was in high school, he was the guest artist with my high school jazz band in 1976. Even though he was offered the opportunity to stay at a hotel, he chose to stay at our house for two nights. That gesture alone says a lot about the man, and was the first indication he was someone very special. Let's be honest: Given a choice, most of us would stay in a hotel, not because of a lack of interest in sharing our knowledge and/or talent with a young person or band starting out, but because we like our own space and privacy. I don't know many people who would have agreed to stay at someone's house without ever having met him before. Not Louie. He wanted to stay with "the kid drummer," and that was the beginning of a personal and professional relationship that lasted over 30 years.

As a result of that concert, he encouraged



From the personal collection of Dave Black

me to come out to L.A. to study with him. I had already been accepted to two major music universities, but decided halfway through my senior year in high school to take advantage of his invitation. It was a big gamble for me, as I didn't know if he really meant the things he said or if he was just being kind. I'm thankful I made that decision.

Louie opened up so many doors for me. Because I didn't have a car until my senior year in college, he would pick me up at the CSUN dorms in his orange Corvette and would take me to a lot of the recording sessions, club dates, concert venues, and festivals he played during my college years and far beyond. As a result of accompanying him on those many gigs, I was introduced to Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Sarah Vaughn, Oscar Peterson, Buddy Rich, and several other well-known musicians.

Over the years, our professional lives merged and we went on to write books together. We also had our own jazz band series with Barnhouse for many years, and he recorded a few of the tunes we had written together on his CDs. I also caught the garter belt at his wedding to Francine in 1992. He was really like a second father to me in those early years. As he got older, the roles sort of reversed and I would pick him up and take him to some of the venues he needed to be at. I was honored to be able to return the favor.

Louie was one of the most compassionate and giving people I have ever met. He had an uncanny ability to make everyone he talked to, whether it was a kid just starting out or an international dignitary, feel as if they were the most important person in that room. He never said an unkind word about anyone, and he always looked at the glass as half full.

I accompanied him on many of his concerts and recordings, and was always amazed at his

patience and enthusiasm when interacting with his fans. I remember many times when he would stay until he had signed the last autograph or had taken the final picture with an adoring fan before he would leave the venue. He would freely give away drumsticks or a drumhead to a young kid or just about anyone who would ask. One of the qualities I admired most was the fact that he personally hand wrote and answered every letter he received. And, of course, he always wrote something kind and encouraging that made the person on the receiving end feel special. Over the years, I have talked to many people who framed those responses and hung them in their studio for inspiration.

There's one other story that I will never forget, as it really captures the essence of who he was. I remember going with him to one of his performances. Because he sometimes wore pants without pockets when he performed, he had no place to put his wallet. After this particular performance, a large number of people wanted his autograph and so he handed me his coat and some folded up money to hold on to. After we left the venue, a few of us (including Louie) went out for a bite to eat, and when the check came, he insisted on paying and asked for the money I was holding. To my shock, I no longer had it. When I put the money in my back pocket, I must have pushed a small part of my shirt down into the pocket along with it. When I pulled my shirt up, the money must have fallen out. I was very upset and embarrassed, but in typical Louie fashion, he simply said "That's okay. I hope who ever found it needed it." Although I tried to pay him back several times, he never would accept it.

In mid November of 2008, he wanted to meet so he could show me some things he had been working on. I met him at the Remo

facility and he showed me an idea for a new book, a new Christmas choral piece, and some snare drum solos and duets he had written. I marveled at the fact that this 84-year old man, who had already accomplished so much in his lifetime, was still so passionate and enthusiastic about creating music and wanting to share that.

I was able to visit with him again in the rehabilitation center before Christmas, prior to him going back to the hospital for the last time. We had a great visit. He was optimistic about his recovery and looked forward to going home. When I got ready to leave, I kissed him on the cheek and told him I loved him. I'm very grateful for that last visit.

It doesn't surprise me that Louie passed away on February 14. After all, that is the day we celebrate love, and so it only seems fitting that God would call home the one that not only gave so much love, but received so much in return.

Louie, we will miss you dearly, but we are thankful you left the world a much better place for having graced us with your presence.

Terry Bozzio

Louie Bellson was truly great—a representative icon of an era, a complete musician/composer/arranger/innovator/educator and "first class" drummer of all time. I would not be who I am today without his books, records, performances, and inspirational advice. He told me as a teenager, "Don't forget to study melody, harmony, composition, and arranging," and I never forgot it. He had the good looks of a matinee idol, and all the charm and charisma of a showbiz personality, but he never let those assets deter him from the integrity of his music. Nor did he let a higher education interfere with his ability to swing, groove, or burn like a natural (or should I say "super-natural"?). Instead, he took drumming to a new level of sophistication out of the dance halls and into the concert halls.

Louie never let the prejudice of the times he grew up in affect him. Marrying Pearl Bailey when he did, in a climate of shameful racial bigotry in much of America, took bravery and a spiritual connectedness and conviction few people would ever have. And speaking of spirituality, Louie was, in my opinion, a "saint," I have had many dinners and conversations with famous drummers telling stories, but never like Louie, who could enrapture us for hours without saying a bad word about anyone.

He was a generous giver and sharer of his knowledge. The last conversation I had with Louie was him giving me a lesson about a tricky little embellishment lick I had heard him do on many recordings, but never could quite figure out. He joyfully sat down at his kit and showed me, saying enthusiastically, "This is it."



From the personal collection of Dave Black