



GUMBO DRUMS

By John MacCalkies

JET-SET DRUM SUPREMO IDRIS MUHAMMAD WAS BORN IN NEW ORLEANS, 1939, AND IS PART OF A LINEAGE THAT INCLUDES FELLOW CRESCENT CITY TUB THUMPERS ZUTTY SINGLETON, BABY DODDS AND ED BLACKWELL. WHAT THOSE EARLY INNOVATORS FOSTERED WAS A MUSICAL APPROACH TO PERCUSSION, EMPHASIZING THE DRUMS' NARRATIVE CAPABILITIES, AN ALERTNESS TO MELODIC COMPONENTS. THE SYNCOPATED MARTIAL BEATS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRADITION OF SECOND-LINE STREET TROUPES INFLUENCED MANY NEW ORLEANS MUSICIANS EARLY ON. LEO MORRIS (AS MUHAMMAD WAS ORIGINALLY KNOWN) WAS NO EXCEPTION—HIS FIRST PROFESSIONAL GIG, AT AGE 10, WAS FOR A CARNIVAL PARADE:

"I had three brothers who played drums, but at Mardi Gras they were all busy. And when a guy came to our house looking for a drummer, I was the only thing left, so he begged my mother to take me with him. Next thing I knew I was on the back of a decorated flat bed truck playing with these older guys. I knew most of the songs because I'd heard them a lot; they were just Dixieland. Much to my surprise, since I'd had such a good time anyway, the guy paid me ten dollars. I gave five dollars to my mother and then gathered all my friends and took them to the movies, since it was only twelve cents a show. I knew then I wanted to be a musician!"

At 15, Idris worked with Art Neville in a band called the Hawkettes, who coined the "Mardi Gras Mambo", still used today as the theme for Fat Tuesday celebrations in New Orleans. In the mid fifties he recorded with Fats Domino and Larry Williams (of "Short Fat Fanny" fame), and thereafter backed a plethora of R & B acts, several of whom had roots in Chicago, including Jerry Butler, Dee Clark and Curtis Mayfield.

"You're living in a town with a lot of history, man!"

Idris laments the recent loss of Mayfield, as well as two other friends—Nat Adderley and Grover Washington. "I did a lot of roadwork with Curtis and the Impressions. I remember we were rooming together on a drive back to Chicago from Philly. He had just bought a beautiful blonde Gibson guitar and lay in bed strumming these rhythms and came up with the lyrics to 'People Get Ready,' while I played brushes on a shoebox."

Washington's sudden demise was preferable to the protracted debility of Mayfield and Adderley: "Grover came to New York to do this Christmas show, finished, went to the dressing room, leant down to tie his shoe and then he was gone."

Idris never imagined living beyond 40 himself, having had several road accidents while touring with Jerry Butler. Not sure whether he is yet adequately prepared to meet his maker, he intends to wind things down before too long "I'm gonna stop while I'm ahead, go fishin', smoke Cuban cigars, live in a warm climate and drink Diet Coke."

But he maintains a crushing schedule, commuting between New York and Austria where he lives with his wife, former Crystal, Lala Brooks. His visit to Chicago this week straddles dates with Michael Brecker in Japan, organist Rueben Wilson in New York and Bobby Watson, Hilton Ruiz and Gary Bartz in New Orleans.

Despite the demand for his services from instrumentalists like Pharoah Sanders, John Scofield and Joe Lovano, Idris attributes much of his style to experience alongside singers.

"I was Sam Cooke's personal drummer and worked with Roberta Flack in the seventies. I always look for rhythms that fit behind the voice out front and contribute to what they're doing. I learned that in New Orleans, because I was told that though the drummer is the boss of the band, if anything goes wrong, he's the first person everyone turns round to blame. The trick is, play in such a way that the rest of the band never has to look back at you."

Idris' grooves are seamless, but they put a definitive stamp on proceedings, laying back on the beat while goading the music forward. Fans of his playing have included Sly Dunbar, Art Blakey and Max Roach: "I was playing with the Paris Reunion Band once and Max played opposite and would sit close and watch me. I asked Joe Henderson 'Why is Max checking me out, what does he see in my playing?' Eventually Max came to me and said 'I don't get how you place that bass drum different every night, that stuff is so slick it should be canned and sold in the supermarket!'"

As house drummer for Prestige in the early seventies, Idris cut many sides with Hammond, the quintessential acid jazz axe, but his versatility has meant that his patent is still pending in the era of retrofit fashion. "Though I did write the drum book for all forty-three songs in the Broadway musical 'Hair,' I had about nine subs for the gig, including Billy Cobham, Alphonse Mouzon and Bernard Purdie," he says. "But the producer kept complaining certain things would be different when I wasn't on the gig, so he paid me to document the parts."

Idris Muhammad performs February 12 with organist Chris Foreman and guitarist George Freeman at the Elbo