

JIMMY PAXSON

UNDER THE RADAR NO MORE

STEVIE NICKS' STICKMAN ISN'T A NEWCOMER AND HE'S NOT AN OVERNIGHT SUCCESS. HE'S AN L.A. DRUMMER WHO GOT THE GIG BECAUSE HE'S JUST THAT GOOD.

By Rich Mangicaro. Photo by Rob Shanahan.

The underdog. We love rooting for them. But when we look further into their history, we find these 'overnight success stories' have already accumulated credits, have spent years schlepping on the road and have paid their dues – ten times over. Thus is the case with Jimmy Paxson. When I first met him, I had heard of his mother, Jazz keyboardist Sunnie Paxson. When I dug further, I found an astounding lineage of talent.

Rich Mangicaro: Jimmy, I was intrigued when I learned about your musical family. What was it like to grow up in such a creative environment?

Jimmy Paxson: My dad was always blazing on the drums and I watched him play all the time. He never sat me down and said "Well son, this is how you..." It was more through observation. He would have me play along to all these great Jazz records while my Mom would have me listening and playing to Stevie Wonder, Herbie Hancock and whatnot. She is really artsy and helped me get in touch with the emotional side of drumming.

RM: What was it like when you first got to LA?

JP: Well, first thing I did was called a few drummers that I hoped to study with, finding their numbers through the Musicians' Union. I left messages for Vinnie, Jeff Porcaro, Gregg Bissonette

and some other cats. Gregg was teaching at the time, so I studied a bit with him, which was great. Later, I met Joey Heredia and he hipped me to Murray Spivack, who ended up reworking my entire approach.

RM: Let's talk about Murray. I think there are many drummers who don't even know about him. Seems to be more of a West coast thing...

JP: Studying with Murray was the greatest thing I ever did for my drumming. In the beginning, he said to me "Play like you play and practice like I show you. What I teach you will creep into your playing and the change will take care of itself." It was a whole different way of holding and controlling a stick. Lot's of emphasis on up-strokes, down-strokes and things like the mechanics of a flam. Learning the up-stroke itself was the biggest breakthrough and it is the one thing I see missing from players that are struggling with technique.

RM: Jimmy, explain a bit more about the 'up-stroke'?

JP: The up-stroke is a delicate release where the hand naturally drops, putting the wrist into motion and a stroke happens on the way up. For example, the leading hand of a 5-stroke roll would play the first 2 strokes on an up-stroke and the 5th would be a down-

stroke...three strokes from one up & down motion. It's just a more efficient way of playing.

RM: Makes complete sense. While you were studying with Murray, what was going with you professionally?

JP: There was a jam session at a LA club and I met Chris Chaney there. Chris later introduced me Gary Novak and honestly, a lot of what I've accomplished as a drummer stems from their early support. Later I ended up subbing for Gary with Robben Ford. It was my first actual tour... and a serious crash-course. From there, I went on to work Ronnie Montrose, which turned into a gig that lasted, on and off for years.

RM: What was the gig like with Ronnie?

JP: It was great...all instrumental music. The hard part was that I knew I needed to establish myself in more of the mainstream music world. Strangely enough, it was around that time in '99 when I got an unexpected call from Alanis Morissette's tour manager asking me if I could leave for Venezuela immediately. At first, I thought it was someone playing a joke on me but actually Gary was leaving the tour with short notice and Chaney recommended me to take over. It was an interesting position to suddenly be in, to say the least. Alanis was one of the warmest

individuals I'd ever met and I'm happy to have been there.

RM: Jim, being thrown into such a situation, how do you learn to nail it, on-the-fly like that?

JP: I follow these five steps: 1) Listen to the tune. 2) Make a chart. 3) Play to the tune, with the chart. 4) Play to the chart, without the tune. 5) Play the tune, without the chart or the recording. My goal is that when it comes time to play, I don't need to reference anything.

RM: So, how did Stevie Nicks find you?

JP: On a break from touring, I came home and my cartage guy, Ross Garfield-owner of Drum Doctors, had heard that Waddy Wachtel, Stevie's bandleader, was looking for a drummer for her. Ross recommended me, for which I'm eternally thankful.

RM: Along with learning all the songs, I know that you're great at focusing on the right drum sound for the gig. How did you apply that to the Stevie audition?

JP: I am a firm believer that bringing the right sound for any situation is key. I knew from learning Stevie's music that I wanted the snare tuned way down into that Mick Fleetwood/Russ Kunkel/Stan Lynch zone. Ross has an old 7x14 Tama bell brass snare that I rented a few times and we both agreed it would deliver. At the audition, I hit it once and everyone noticed. That IS the sound for Stevie's music and she heard it right away. To achieve this now, I use a DW 8"x14" Edge snare that just sounds unreal.

RM: When did you find out you had the gig?

JP: I was on the road with Edgar Winter and I didn't hear anything from them for 3 or 4 days. In an airport, I noticed a missed call from Waddy. His message said: "Ah, Jim, it's Waddy Wachtel. Listen, I don't know what to tell ya... but, you got the gig. Welcome to the family. Hope you're not doing anything for the next year or so!" That was about 5 years ago.

RM: Wow! How did it feel, getting that call?

JP: Incredible. I've had other big gigs but that call was life changing. I had about 3 weeks of back-to-back work in Europe with both Sophie B. Hawkins and Edgar so I had no choice but to learn all the songs in hotel rooms and actually got home only the night before the first rehearsal.

RM: So, without the kit to learn the tunes, how did you prepare so you felt ready?

JP: I transcribed pretty much note for note what Mick, Russ Kunkel and Stan Lynch played and pretty much slept with headphones on. I had some pads in my room...that, with a lot of determination, I got through it. When I got home, I entered what I call "Camp Waddy!"

RM: How is it playing with Lenny Castro?

"My goal is that when it comes time to play, I don't need to reference anything."

JP: Playing with Lenny is effortless... he's simply the deadliest percussionist there is - period. His feel and choices are second to none and we quickly became real close, both on stage and off. I thank God for every moment with him and on top of playing all those great songs, Stevie gives us a big solo every night. With Lenny, you never know which direction it's gonna go. For example, one night he may play his entire solo on his gong bass drum and a cowbell... other nights, he may use his entire rig. We both look at our solos as a place to be spontaneous. We have a set ending worked out, but other than that, it's wide open.

RM: Who were your influences that helped you learn to construct a good solo?

JP: Tony Williams' Lifetime "Believe It" record is THE drum bible. Also, there's a live solo with Steve Gadd and Ralph McDonald on a Grover Washington Jr. video, which blows my mind. Any Dennis Chambers or Simon Phillips open solo and finally, John Bonham on Led Zeppelin's "How The West Was Won". These are all huge for me.

RM: Jimmy, working for such diverse female singers, how do you adjust your playing to fit their varied styles?

JP: I try to get acclimated to where they lay the cadence of their vocals, in relation to the beat - their way of feeling the groove. Then, I connect with what they're saying, lyrically and emotionally and convey dynamically what's needed from there. It's all about the subtleties.

RM: That's so true. So, what's happening currently for you?

JP: For a while, I was working with Georgia Todrani, who is one of Italy's most iconic singers. Recently, I've been doing some one-offs with Johnny Rivers, who hits include "Memphis" and "Secret Agent Man". Other recent projects include CDs with A Fine Frenzy, Sharon Little, The Casualties Of Jazz, Julian Coryell and I recently did an eclectic tour opening for Loudon Wainwright III, with my girlfriend, singer/songwriter Jenni Alpert.

RM: Jimmie, your drum collection is really a drummer's playground!

JP: I'm a bit of a collector. DW has really raised the bar over the years on drum quality. I have quite a few of their kits, including Stevie's favorite, a VLT Gold Glass finish set. I am also a junkie for old classic American drums, as well as import mahogany drums from Taiwan and Japan. Regarding cymbals, everyone at Paiste is like family to me and I use a combination of their lines. For drumheads, I use Evans and my sticks are Vic Firth.

RM: Talk about your studio a bit?

JP: My room is a recording/rehearsal space...I operate both Pro Tools and Logic. The room is about 20' x 40' with a 16' ceiling and I do a lot of sessions there. I have an extensive drum collection, including some cool, vintage kits and tons of percussion stuff, so it's a one-stop shop.

RM: Jimmy, what would you say to players who are trying to make something happen for themselves, especially given our tough economic situation?

JP: **WORK ON YOUR TIME AND BE PREPARED!!** With the Internet and all the available resources, the knowledge is out there to be absorbed 24/7. Like they say, 'practice at home'. Once you get on a gig, if you're lucky enough to have people to lean on, know that they'll only carry you so far before you're expected to stand on your own. Always support the music first and know the boundaries...then know when and how to step out without being musically distracting. The pressure is immense, but if you love music and you play for the song, that's what it's all about. You never know when the call is going to come in so just keep growing...and keep going. 