

# STEVE LITTLE

BY JOHN PIETARO

“So how exactly did you dig me up?” Steve Little asks right up front. “I’m not usually the guy the press goes after.” Though he has performed and recorded with many artists of note, from the bands of Duke Ellington, Charlie Barnet and Lionel Hampton to legendary vocalist Josephine Baker and fusion pioneers Weather Report, drummer Steve Little has rarely, if ever, sought the spotlight. A consummate professional, Little’s career, still going strong as he nears his 81st birthday, has been an adventure through genre and era, much of it spent in studios, well out of the public view.

Born in Brooklyn in 1935 but raised in Hartford, CT, Little was strongly encouraged by his family. “We were working-class but my parents pushed us toward intellectual pursuits. For me this meant music, but in those days drummers had to contend with a lot of disrespect. I couldn’t just play, I had to study the drums.”

Drawn to jazz, yet driven to understand the full breadth of his instrument, Little became a student of Al Lepak, timpanist with the Hartford Symphony. “Al had a million students—everyone in the area went through him. Joe Porcaro and Emil Richards were there too. I studied timps mainly and some mallet percussion.” Lepak, who’d started his career as a big band drummer, taught basic jazz drumset as well. What the lessons couldn’t provide, Little absorbed from the front row of Hartford’s State Theatre. “As a kid I would go early on a Saturday to see if I could cop licks from Gene Krupa or Buddy Rich! I saw so many bands—Dorsey, Krupa, Louis Armstrong. The band would play but then you had to sit through movies, newsreels and a comedian before the second set. I don’t know how many hours I spent there,” he said laughing.

By the ‘50s, Little was doing club dates and playing percussion in the Hartford Symphony, working under Fritz Mahler’s baton for a performance of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*. After a tour with Holiday on Ice, he

relocated to New York and gigs came quickly. By the turn of the ‘60s, Little held a regular drumset job with guitarist Sal Salvador’s band, providing him wide exposure, yet he sought out vibraphonist Phil Kraus to engage in advanced mallet studies.

Little’s reputation as a session player also developed in this time. “My first professional studio date was for radio comic Henry Morgan. After that, I recorded with Salvador and then Terry Gibbs in 1961. Some of the guys in Sal’s band were writing jingles and I got more sessions.” Little came to play vibes for the soundtrack of *General Hospital* as well as an array of television and film scores over the decades. “I can’t recall them all now. One went into the next.”

Live gigs continued too and in 1964 Little accompanied vocalists Eddie Fisher and Anita O’Day, then went on to sub for Louie Bellson behind Pearl Bailey. By 1966 he was in Barnet’s band and one year later performed with Hampton at the Newport Jazz Festival. One night with Barnet, Duke Ellington came into the club and sat in. He contacted the drummer shortly thereafter. “I really didn’t want to join Duke I as I was focused on the studios, but how could anyone turn THIS down? Duke was God. His compositions, and especially Billy Strayhorn’s, were very complex. This was linear music, streams of colors.”

The Ellington band was working the Rainbow Room, preparing for a tour. The lineup included famed alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges, among other star musicians. Strayhorn, however, was already very ill and passed away shortly thereafter. His crushing loss led to the celebrated album *...And His Mother Called Him Bill* (RCA, 1967), still considered one of Ellington’s most important records.

Though the position was esteemed, Little left the band shortly thereafter and returned to the studios as well as to college. But he wasn’t gone for long. “Duke called me back after trying out many drummers. The young guys all wanted to play like Tony Williams!” But this was now the late ‘60s and public taste was changing. An appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* gave Little a sense of what was to come. “Our band had some amazing soloists, but then after us the Vanilla Fudge took the stage. I watched the kids in the audience

and they were ecstatic. We couldn’t match that; it was a new day. It made me realize that we were becoming relics. I had to reinvent myself.”

Little began to listen carefully to rock, R&B and soul music rather than reject it like many of his contemporaries. He adapted easily to the call for a ‘rock feel’ in the studios, particularly for soundtracks and work with several folk singers including Joan Baez and Buffy St. Marie. And then there was a new PBS children’s series, *Sesame Street*.

“That was a great band,” Little recalls, “led by Joe Raposo, who wrote most of the charts... We recorded in one take, it was very loose.” Due to the success of the series, the same ensemble scored *The Electric Company* program as well. The jobs lasted 22 years but Little made time for performances with the Joffrey Ballet, Sarah Vaughan, Dave Brubeck, various Broadway shows and many recording dates including Weather Report’s *Mysterious Traveler* album, on which he played timpani, tom-toms and marimba.

The pulse behind the stars, Little’s career was often out of the spotlight, but fruitful. “You know it took me 50 years to be comfortable being ‘just’ a drummer. But I came to realize that playing drums is damned intellectual: it’s an abstract instrument and yet you control every aspect of the music—and make even the worst musician feel the swing, the groove. This has been a great career. Looking back, I’m glad I chose the route I did. I wouldn’t trade it.” ❖

*Little is at Symphony Space Leonard Nimoy Thalia Nov. 29th as part of Take the A Train—Billy Strayhorn’s 100th Birthday. See Calendar.*

#### Recommended Listening:

- Terry Gibbs – *The Family Album* (Sesac, 1963)
- Duke Ellington Orchestra – *...And His Mother Called Him Bill* (RCA, 1967)
- Duke Ellington Orchestra – *Second Sacred Concert* (Prestige/Fantasy, 1968)
- Ray Nance – *Body and Soul* (Solid State, 1969)
- Rebecca Kilgore – *With the Keith Ingham Sextet* (Jump, 2001)
- Keith Ingham – *Rockin’ in Rhythm* (Arbors, 2010)

## LEST WE FORGET

# VERNEL FOURNIER

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Vernel Fournier was a drummer best known for his work with pianist Ahmad Jamal, especially *But Not For Me: at the Pershing* (Argo, 1958). Fournier has influenced generations of drummers. Alvin Fielder recalls seeking him out in late ‘50s Chicago. “All the drummers would go down to The Pershing to watch him play—Walter Perkins, Steve McCall and myself, sometimes Thurman Barker and Jack DeJohnette—he was one of the top drummers in Chicago at that time and just a beautiful and caring person.”

With Jamal, Fournier primarily performed with brushes and was considered masterful; DeJohnette went out and bought a pair before he even had a drum set. However, Fielder reiterates Fournier’s words, “I’m not a brush man, I’m a stick man” and that he really learned to play the brushes during his tenure with Jamal. However, the tune on which the drums have had pervasive influence is “Poinciana”, on which Fournier uses a stick and a mallet. Interviewed in the book *New Orleans and Second Line Drumming*, Fournier said, “I just sat down and figured something out, you know and it evolved. All it is is New Orleans beats. You’ve seen the drummer in New Orleans with the

bass drum and the cymbal on top, that’s all it is.” He made it his own and “the Poinciana beat” continues to mesmerize listeners and fascinate students of music.

Vernel Anthony Fournier was born Jul. 30th, 1928 in New Orleans and started playing the drums at 10 years old, studying with Sidney Montague. He briefly attended Alabama State College before leaving to work with King Kolax, a band that Fielder described as “a pretty modern swing group at that time.” Fournier worked with Kolax and Paul Bascomb from 1946-48 before settling in Chicago. He worked with Teddy Wilson from 1949-53 before joining Norman Simmons and the house band at the Bee Hive on Chicago’s south side, where he accompanied an array of leading soloists including Lester Young, Ben Webster, Sonny Stitt, J.J. Johnson, Kai Winding and others. He met Jamal soon after that. “Ahmad is a master at knowing to draw the ultimate from a musician,” Fournier recalled in an interview with Ted Panken. “He can...bring out the ultimate, to make you sound really a hundred times better than you would normally sound. He has that gift.” On Apr. 2nd, 1959, the trio with bassist Israel Crosby was featured alongside the Ben Webster group at the Robert Herridge Theater for a film entitled *Jazz from Studio 61*. This film (parts of which may be found on YouTube and which has been released with *The Sound of Jazz*, live from CBS Studio 58, Dec. 8th, 1957), along with the aforementioned Pershing record, are fine examples of

this influential ensemble. Fournier enjoyed a long career after his time with Jamal, but never quite achieved that sort of success again.

In 1979 he moved to New York and performed in groups with Clifford Jordan and Barry Harris among others. He taught at the New School and Mannes College of Music and was sought out by many aspiring drummers. “He really had his own way of playing,” expresses Fielder. “He talked about Art Blakey most of all, but he reminds me of Kenny Clarke more than anybody else.”

In 1994 a stroke left him in a wheelchair and he was no longer able to play drums. He moved to Mississippi in 1998 to be closer to his son and daughter (another son resides in California). His daughter brought him to The University of Mississippi Medical Center where he died in his sleep of a cerebral hemorrhage 15 years ago on Nov. 4th. ❖

#### Recommended Listening:

- Norman Simmons Trio – *Eponymous* (Argo, 1956)
- Ahmad Jamal – *But Not For Me: at the Pershing / Vol. 2* (Argo, 1958)
- Frank Strozier – *The Unreleased Frank Strozier: Cool, Calm and Collected* (Vee Jay, 1960)
- George Shearing Trio – *Jazz Moments* (Capitol, 1962)
- Vernel Fournier – *Motherless Child* (Brad’s, late ‘70s)
- Clifford Jordan Quartet – *Royal Ballads* (Criss Cross, 1986)