ENCORE



HAEYONG MOON

ROY MCCURDY

STRENGTH, POP & SNAP!

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

Drummer Roy McCurdy belatedly celebrates his birthday (Nov. 28) as the featured artist in the Christian McBride Quartet's residency (Dec. 1-6) at the Village Vanguard (along with saxophonists Jaleel Shaw and Nicole Glover). Says McCurdy, "Christian knew my birthday was coming up, and invited me to come to New York and celebrate it with him!" Not just any birthday, but the drummer officially becomes a nonagenarian. McCurdy has long lived and taught in the LA area, and he hasn't played NYC since 2011, which was at Carnegie Hall with his employer for 30+ years, vocalist Nancy Wilson.

"Roy McCurdy has always been one of my all-time favorite drummers," says McBride. "And he's been swinging hard on the West Coast all these years with the same strength, pop and snap he had playing with Sonny Rollins and Cannonball Adderley in the '60s and '70s. I feel there's a large contingent of the New York jazz community that has been dying to see him again—especially at some place like the Vanguard. We played together last year in LA and I just *had* to ask him to play the Vanguard with me this year."

McCurdy and vocalist Wilson knew each other through the drummer's other long association: eleven happy years (1965-75) with Julian "Cannonball" Adderley. "Cannonball loved to talk to the audience and educate them about the music," McCurdy recalls. "Maybe that came from his time as an educator in Florida." The pedagogy has evidently worn off, because McCurdy has just finished a long stint (from 2010) at USC, where he taught drumming—but he still works regularly with private students at the Pasadena Conservatory.

The drummer grew up in Rochester, NY, home of the Eastman School of Music, a proximity that proved fortuitous. After starting on percussion at age 10, he studied with Eastman drum teacher Bill Street (a charter member of the Rochester Philharmonic) from age 16 to 18, all the while beginning his jazz career on gigs with trumpeter Roy Eldridge and alto saxophonist Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson at the city's Cotton Club. "Rochester was a hotbed for jazz at that time," McCurdy remembers. "There were several clubs, including The Pythodd Room." That club, opened in 1942 by the Colored Knights of Pythias and Grand United Order of Odd Fellows (GUOOF) benevolent societies, gave a lot of musicians their start, including the Mangione brothers and bassist Ron Carter, who met McCurdy there. "I've known Roy McCurdy for many, many years and we have had many, many gigs together," Carter says. "His time has always been impeccable, the sound of his cymbals very easy to play with, and the sound of his snare drum—perfect for me."

In 1960, when McCurdy was 24, he replaced Albert "Tootie" Heath in the Art Farmer/Benny Golson Jazztet and basically hasn't stopped playing since. That gig led to the years with Cannonball, but McCurdy also had mutually-rewarding stints with Rollins, Betty Carter, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, the Mangione brothers, even Blood, Sweat & Tears. That's McCurdy on BS&T's *Brand New Day* (ABC, 1977) and Betty Carter's magnificent *Inside Betty Carter* (United Artists, 1964), and on an estimated 200 other albums, including nineteen with Cannonball and seven others separately with Nat Adderley. "I had the best career," McCurdy says. "I got to play and record with the best people." McCurdy speaks fondly of his favorite recording with Cannonball—the album *Mercy, Mercy, Mercy!*. "In a way it was the beginning of the electronic era, right there," he notes. "Joe [Zawinul] brought the song into rehearsal, and we liked it and tried it right away. We had no idea it would become a huge hit. Joe was playing a Wurlitzer then, I think, and the Fender Rhodes came a bit later."

A little-known fact about the famously loquacious Adderley, McCurdy says, is that he had his own late-night TV talk show in LA. *Ninety Minutes Starring Cannonball Adderley* ran on KNBC for thirteen episodes in 1972 and 1973. "That show is what got us to Los Angeles," McCurdy says. "But by the time we got out here it had already been canceled. It was too good."

Saxophonist Bennie Maupin worked with McCurdy on Sonny Rollins' *Nucleus* (Milestone, 1975). "Roy is just one of those people," Maupin says. "When I was a new transplant to LA from NYC, Roy was always right there for me. We spent a lot of time together and our families became close. He's an amazing guy and a great teacher. And here he is continuing after so many decades of work. Roy has a real sensitivity—it's just a gift that he has, kind of like Roy Haynes. It's finesse with power and that takes impeccable control."

Jon Mayer first played with McCurdy in Cannonball's band, circa 1975 (the year Cannonball passed away), and then later with Nancy Wilson, as well as on at least three of the pianist's trio albums. Says Mayer, "He's always swinging and burning, listening and responding. He was my way into the music. So solid and such amazing feeling, plus he's a fantastic sight reader. He was the perfect drummer for Nancy Wilson."

Several musicians point to McCurdy's devotion to physical fitness. "He showed me how to work out in the hotel room," Mayer recalls. McBride agrees. "Mr. McCurdy is the shining example of what happens when you take care of your health," he observes. "This man is almost 90, but he looks like he's 40."

Asked which bass players he's liked to play with, McCurdy offers a long list. "I love Ron (Carter), of course, and all the bassists who worked with Cannon, including Sam Jones, Walter Booker, Herbie Lewis and Victor Gaskin. And Rufus Reid is great too—all those kind of guys."

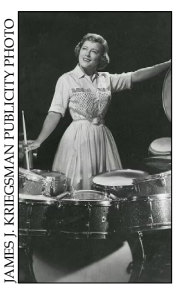
McCurdy has had a happy life, and it's outlined in a soon-to-be published biography, *Roy McCurdy, Set to Swing: A Life Behind the Kit* (University of North Texas Press) by Sharon Eisenhour, sure to be full of stories from a long and rewarding time behind and around the kit.

For more info visit pasadenaconservatory.org/about/faculty/roy-mccurdy. McCurdy is at Village Vanguard Dec. 1-6 (with Christian McBride Quartet). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Art Farmer/Benny Golson Jazztet—*Here and Now* (Mercury, 1962)
- Sonny Rollins—*Now's The Time* (RCA Victor, 1964)
- Cannonball Adderley Quintet—*Mercy, Mercy, Mercy! (Live at "The Club")* (Capitol, 1966)
- Nancy Wilson—*At My Best* (ASI, 1980)
- Count Basie & The Kansas City Septet—*Mostly Blues…and some others* (Pablo, 1983)
- Jon Mayer—*Nightscape* (Reservoir, 2008)

LEST WE FORGET



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VIOLA SMITH

DOING WHAT YOU LOVE UNTIL THE WHEELS FALL OFF

BY MARILYN LESTER

Unlike many female musicians of the 20th century, lost in the mists of time in the male-dominated world of jazz, drummer Viola Smith prevailed, perhaps partly owing to sheer longevity. Smith, born on Nov. 29, 1912, died on Oct. 21, 2020 at the age of 107—and active until the end. Dr. Sherrie Maricle, drummer/music director of the DIVA Jazz Orchestra, notes that Smith "deserved to be on a drumming pedestal with all the greats of her era. I'm thrilled history is recognizing her contributions to the drums and jazz."

Featured on the cover of the Feb. 24, 1940 issue of *The Billboard* magazine, Smith was billed as "America's Fastest Girl Drummer." She was known for sitting behind a distinctive, huge drum kit that included two large bass drums and multiple tom toms. "Viola was an icon of swing, power, determination and passion," Maricle adds. "She played the instrument with stellar technique and creativity." Smith was also a charismatic personality and no shrinking violet. Over the course of her career, Smith also appeared in film (*When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 1942, and *Here Come the Co-Eds*, 1945); on TV (*I've Got a Secret* and five times on *The Ed Sullivan Show*) and on stage in Broadway's original production of *Cabaret*.

A native of Mount Calvary, WI, Viola Clara Smith (née Schmitz) began drumming in the 1920s when her father—who operated a concert hall and tavern in nearby Fond du Lac—assembled his eight daughters into the Schmitz Sisters Family Orchestra (later, Smith Sisters Orchestra). The sixth child of the group (all of whom learned piano), Viola defaulted to drums when her older sisters claimed the instruments she preferred. The enterprise was so successful the band toured the Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) circuit of vaudeville and movie theaters, and they also appeared on the highly-popular radio talent show *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* in 1936, leading to a year-long national tour as part of an all-girl revue sponsored by the program. In 1938, Viola and sister Mildred (clarinet, saxophone) started the all-female Coquettes, eventually disbanding in 1942.

During World War II, with men drafted to war and women taking on male jobs, Smith wrote a legendary article for *DownBeat* entitled "Give Girl Musicians a Break!" She wrote: "In these times of national emergency, many of the star instrumentalists of the big name bands are being drafted. Instead of replacing them with what may be mediocre talent, why not let some of the great girl musicians of the country take their place?" Terri Lyne Carrington, one of today's foremost drummers, who additionally serves as artistic director of the Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice, observes, "Viola Smith was a pioneer for all of us that followed, not only as a female drummer but as a female band leader as well. It's never been easy for women to be counted in male-dominated space, but I would imagine that it was even more difficult during her time to overcome the industry promotion of novelty that so often happens with female artists."

Smith moved to NYC in 1942, the recipient of a summer scholarship to The Juilliard School. She

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