

DRUMscene Magazine Issue 78 (Oct/Nov/Dec 2014), pages 72-73

TONY FLOYD

There's not a drummer in Melbourne that doesn't know or know of Tony Floyd! In fact his reputation as both a highly respected teacher and a very accomplished player reaches Australia-wide.

He's one of the country's most versatile players, but his roots have always been in the Jazz idiom.

Tony's career took off in 1985 when he began recording and touring with one of Australia's finest performers, Vince Jones. Since then he has played or worked with Things of Stone and Wood, Ruby Carter, The Black Sorrows, Men at Work, Deborah Conway, Merril Bainbridge and Mark Seymour to name a few.

I recently caught up with Tony to talk about the broad career that has made him one of the most highly recommended players for both Jazz and Pop alike...

The drums were appealing to me because they were big and loud! Like most kids I wanted to play a big and loud instrument. My parents were not musicians or musical as such but my Dad was an avid Jazz fan so there was a lot of good records in the house when I was young. I have two sisters and I was listening to their popular music and then a lot of the Jazz classics as well. A key figure for me growing up was Mauro Perez; he was my teacher from the age of 12 until I was 16. For me it was one of those classic student-teacher relationships where things just seemed to click. He taught me to read, he took me through show tunes and just a lot of different of styles! I felt with Mauro that I had a very strong background in lessons. At school there was a Jazz band I was involved with so things began to click between private lessons and high school. The lucky and key moment for me was when I was 19: Vince Jones heard me play and I was invited to join his band. It was a pretty heavy Jazz gig at the time and I did that for the next 2 years.

You recorded two albums with him also?

Yes - 2 albums with Vince. When you're young like I was and doing a gig like that, it leads to so many other things. Joining Vince's band lead to so much other work within the Jazz scene in particular.

Was it a challenge at that age working with such a high profile Jazz artist?

Oh yes! It was an amazing group of musicians at that time: Steve Hadley, Gary Costello, Dale Barlow, Ian Chaplain, Ray Pereira on percussion – I felt like I was thrown in the deep end with that band. To be honest, as a 19 year old, I was not ready to play with musicians of that calibre but it was a great learning environment – they taught me a lot. Vince was great too, he'd get me around early, before rehearsals and go through and talk

about music – what Tony Williams was doing – or Philly Joe Jones. He had a soft spot for drummers and how they sounded.

Was it always in the forefront of your mind to just be a Jazz player?

I'd like to think not! Because I loved Jazz so much as a teenager – and even then into my 20s playing with Vince, I kind of became a Jazz snob. Really I didn't even consider playing any other music. But then I started playing some Rock/Pop music with some other great musicians and I realised, "I don't know how to play this music". I was really out of my depth! It was odd I was getting along great just being a Jazz player and then I'd go and play in the Rock/Pop scene and I was terrible! When Things of Stone and Wood came along, I actually quite Vince's band and started playing a lot less Jazz. I wanted to concentrate on another side of my playing. I guess since then with all the gigs I've done with either The Black Sorrows or Missy Higgins or any other Pop artists, I've been working on getting better with the other side of my playing. I'd like to think that I'm a drummer that can play both styles. I don't think of myself as just a Jazz player. Joe Camilleri was quite important in my music career as I played with The Black Sorrows for 17 years. Joe was another great teacher. He always told me that he liked the fact that my background was as a Jazz player and he always encouraged me to use aspects of Jazz dynamics in my playing with him but he was also very serious about, "Make sure you can play a solid groove. Make sure you can play imply as well." I think for a lot of Jazz players it can be hard to pull back and play things more simply.

I would imagine it's a very different mindset that's required for each setting?

It is! To play more simply doesn't mean the playing is easier. So many things have changed in my playing and my perception of music. I find it so much harder to play the simplest of things more often than I do an improvised Jazz gig! They are different headspaces but both very challenging.

These days is your career more evenly spread between two genres?

These days it is. In any given week I'll go from playing Bennett's Lane Jazz gigs to more commercial working situations. It's hard to make a living playing just in the Jazz scene and so this weekend I'm playing with The Eurogliders, which is an 80's Pop band! That's another challenge for me because I had to learn how to play some of their programmed parts which are heavily drum machine based – so need to play true to that style.

Can you talk about some of the projects you're involved with currently in the Jazz scene?

A lot of Jazz playing I do these days is with Rob Burke, Tony Gould and Nick Haywood and that's a quartet where we've done 3 albums together. We do regular residencies at Bennett's Lane and I love that band – it's a project that's been going for more than 15 years and we play music that we love! We love each other's company! I've always found

in the music scene that if you love the people you play with it makes the music better itself. That project, as a band, is true to a lot of things I believe and aspire to in Jazz – risk taking – adventure – trying to capture melodic playing – a lot of that band is very open but we do play melodic tunes as well. During the Melbourne Jazz Festival this year I played with a group called Hunters and Pointers. We did a CD that was recorded 23 years ago! It's crazy but that's a special band. Ben Robertson, the double bass player – we're both roughly the same age and we've been playing together as a rhythm section for almost 25 years, and to get to play with Graeme Lyall, John Hoffman on trumpet and Tony Gould – they're such incredible players! We're friends and we also try to play music where it sounds like we're friends, I guess. I'll be back Vince later this year and he's such a great singer! He's had great drummers over the years: Simon Barker, Andrew Garner, Tony Buck – all my favourite Australian Jazz drummers have played with Vince, so it's an honour to play with him again!

Being a teacher and highly regarded by your students, can you talk about the lessons you impart to your students in relation to Jazz?

As we talked about before, I was a Jazz nut as a younger player, and then realised I had to start playing modern contemporary music – which is totally in reverse to how most of my students come to me today. One of the things I try to do is to spread that love of music and the understanding of players, the history of music and the knowledge of tunes to the players I teach at Monash (University) and Box Hill (Institute). Learning about Jazz has a lot to do with learning about players. You have to learn about Miles Davis and John Coltrane, Oscar Peterson, Sonny Rollin – and all the musicians that played with them – Jimmy Cobb, Philly Joe Jones, Elvin Jones – right through to the greats like Eric Harland and contemporaries like Bill Stewart. In Jazz you have to do your research and history about the players. Where I guess the difference with the Pop scene, and what I love about it is, you learn and research bands! For example, with John Bonham you research and associate him with just Led Zeppelin, whereas within Jazz you'd associate Elvin Jones with lots of different musical groups! I would encourage all students that by studying, playing and just having Jazz under your belt as well as everything else, it helps your overall playing style and hopefully your career!