

## **Interview of Marc Dicciani for Planet-Drum Webzine (Italy) May 2010**

<http://www.planet-drum.com/interviste.asp?id=443>

**by Leonardo Rizzo  
(English Translation)**

### **When did you start playing the drums? Did you attend any school?**

My grandparents all came to this country from Italy, and my mother and grandfather loved and played music, so I heard a lot of music in my house when I was a kid. I grew up in Philadelphia, and remember as a little boy that I was always attracted to the drums. My parents bought me a set of toy bongos when I was about 10 yrs old, and I played on them all the time. I got what many would consider a late start playing an instrument - my first drum lesson was at the age of 15. I was very fortunate that my uncle played saxophone and knew of the best drum teacher in the city, a man named Paul Patterson. I tried out for my high school band and was placed on the tenor drum (not a very respectable position in my school band). After a year, I was moved up to snare drum, and then in my 4th year of high school I was accepted as one of two drummers playing the drumset in the jazz band. The thing I remember most about those years was how long and hard I practiced and how badly I wanted to become a drummer. I auditioned to go to college at the Philadelphia Musical Academy (now The University of the Arts) because they had a terrific jazz band, which was known as one of the top college big bands in the country. When I first auditioned I was rejected and they said I had to wait a year before I could audition again. But, I pleaded with them and they allowed me to try again a few months later. I was accepted this time, but barely, and put on probation, having to go to summer school for some preparatory courses. If I earned at least a 'B' I would be accepted to start in the Fall...I worked very hard and earned two 'A's'. The school didn't have a jazz degree at that time, so I studied classical music and percussion in school from members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and continued to take drumset lessons on my own outside of school. There were lots of great musicians in that college, like bass player Stanley Clarke, and drummer Gerry Browne, and I remember jamming, playing, and practicing all day and night, every day of the week.

### **What are the main experiences that you had in your musical career?**

While I was still in college I was hired to be the house drummer at the biggest night club in the Philadelphia area, a place called The Latin Casino. Every week, a different celebrity music entertainer performed there and I had the chance to play with many well-known singers and groups - the Temptations, Frank Sinatra, Natalie Cole, Sammy Davis Jr., etc. One week, a young singer/dancer by the name of Ben Vereen came in to perform at this club, and he had a drummer on tour with him. Ben had just finished a few shows on Broadway in New York (Hair, Jesus Christ Superstar, Pippin) and brought in a lot of new charts. But, the drummer couldn't read and so I was asked to play the charts during the rehearsal so the drummer could memorize them. Ben liked the way I played, so he hired me after the rehearsal and asked me to go on tour with him. He only had a few concerts booked and wasn't sure what would happen after that and he couldn't

promise me anything past those first gigs. I was young and wanted to get out on the road, so I took the chance. I ended up moving to Los Angeles and touring with Ben for next six years. During that time I also did some gigs with many other top entertainers and musicians, and also played lots of sessions for TV, film, and records. Most importantly, I got the chance to see the world and play lots of drums. Since coming off the road, I've played with a lot of jazz musicians like Randy Brecker, Jon Faddis, Pat Martino, Jimmy Bruno, Grover Washington Jr., Tom Kennedy, Robin Eubanks, Stanley Clarke, Kurt Elling, and even some rock musicians like Steve Vai. I've been touring with singer Ben Vereen and we've recently performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Nashville Symphony, Honolulu Symphony, Long Beach Symphony, and the National Symphony Orchestra. I've also been doing lots of drum clinics at colleges and universities around the United States and also in many parts of the world including Japan, South Korea, Chile, Canada, Mexico, Great Britain, and The Netherlands.

### **Are you teaching now? What kind of subjects?**

I've been teaching at The University of the Arts in Philly for about 15 years now. I have taught courses like Music Business and Music Careers, and directed some ensembles including a bucket drum group. But what I really love teaching the most is drums. For me, teaching drums at this level has forced me to research, analyze, and study in order to better understand how to play the drums. I've also been on a bit of a personal mission to disprove many old-time drumming myths, especially about technique, and to get drummers to really think about what they're practicing and why.

### **It's always difficult to practice proficiently...any tips about that?**

I think there are two reasons it's so difficult to practice proficiently...the first is that when you practice correctly it may not be a lot of fun, because you should be working on things you either can't do at all, or don't do very well. The second reason is that drums are so much fun to play that it's easy to become distracted and just start playing the things you already do well - because it's more fun (I know it is for me!). A good practice routine focuses on improving all of the little things that go into making what we do better. You have to have very specific goals. In other words, although your overall goal of practicing should be to become a better drummer, your specific strategy should be all of the small things that you need to improve in order to become a better drummer.

Because all of our time is so limited and it's hard to find sufficient time in the day to practice, it's very important that we spend our time practicing the things that will do us the most good. For example, I never ask my students to practice the rudiments, unless they want to be a professional rudimental drummer. Rudiments aren't necessarily bad for you, it's just that there are so many other things to practice to improve your technique, control, sound, and musicality, that I don't think rudiments are as useful as other things. But, if you have 12 hours-a-day to practice, then playing rudiments for 30 minutes shouldn't bother you. I also see some drummers who play the drum pad too much...it's not an instrument. Although it can help to isolate and identify certain things in your technique that need improvement, it doesn't help with so many other important things like tone, touch, musicality, groove and feel, improvisation, and styles.

### **What do you think are the main qualities a drummer should have nowadays?**

I think drummers should develop a very wide variety of skills - not just on the surface-level, but deep down understanding and ability through dedicated and focused study and practice. Of course, technique, touch, feel, musicality, the use of technology, and the ability to know and play many different styles of music and drumming are all very important. I define musicality as the ability to know that, although you're playing the drums, you're playing music with musicians. Sometimes, drummers spend so much time practicing alone that they don't develop enough musical awareness and sensitivity to playing music with others. I believe that knowing how to play lots of styles (not just beats and grooves, but really knowing styles of music and styles of playing), is also critical to developing as a musician and drummer. An example of this is learning numerous Afro-Cuban styles of drumming, not just so that you can play that style in performance, or in a recording session, but so that all of the elements of that style help to 'inform' and 'influence' everything else you do as a drummer. The more styles you listen to and know, the more influences you can draw from when you play, and the more effective you are in developing your own signature sound and unique voice on the drums. Also, regarding technology, it's important for drummers today to have skills in playing with loops and backing tracks, both in the studio and live playing situations. This doesn't mean just playing with a click or metronome, but listening to a loop or backing track and know what to play, and how to play with it. When I speak about qualities needed to become a professional, I also include personal qualities that are often as important as the musical ones...dependability, responsibility, professionalism, a good attitude, and a great ability to get along with others.

### **Do you suggest, after a formal education, to focus on a style or it's always better to listen to and practice all kind of styles? I mean...sometimes you can hear that it's better to do one thing properly instead of 20 badly. What do you think about that?**

As I mentioned above, I think it's important to study all of the styles of music and drumming, because this knowledge helps you to develop your own 'voice' as a drummer, in addition to building respect and understanding of the global world of music and drumming. Once you've studied in this way, then you can apply it to whatever style of drumming and music you choose, but I believe it's good to have your own unique voice that is developed through having many influences in your music. Again, how you choose to apply this knowledge is completely up to you. The great drummer Smitty Smith says... "A lot of musicians shut off a certain period or style of music. I embrace all music - as a result, I have more of a range that I can draw from."

### **Do you suggest to practice different styles even if you don't have the chance to apply what you've learnt on a live situation?**

Again, styles help to inform and influence your playing and musicianship, whether or not you ever play that specific style in a concert or a session. The great drummer Tony Williams once said... "Sometimes you don't realize how much good something has done for you until years later ." So I say, don't shut anything out and don't turn anything off...keep and open mind about learning and the joy of playing all musics.

### **Any suggestions for anyone interested in becoming a pro drummer?**

Be patient...whether you're playing as a professional or just for fun, you'll probably be doing it forever; so relax and enjoy the ride. My own goal was never to make a LIVING in music, but to have a LIFE in music playing the drums. I feel very blessed to be able to play drums every day and enjoy it so much. I also believe that there is no such thing as 'talent' as it relates to being a professional drummer...I define 'talent' as the ability to 'get by'. There's no room in the professional world for someone who wants to just 'get by'. To me, real talent is finding out what you love, and having the belief in yourself to follow your dream, and the dedication and commitment to work hard at it. There no secret to becoming a pro drummer...practice smart, play hard, and love it...all the rest will take care of itself.

### **Any endorsements?**

I'm very fortunate to work with incredible people at great companies that make the best products in the drumming world! I'm an artist/clinician for Yamaha Drums, Sabian Cymbals, Regal Tip Drum Sticks, Remo Drum Heads, Latin Percussion, and MONO Cases, and I write for *Modern Drummer* and *In-Concert* magazines. I can be contacted at [mdicciani@uarts.edu](mailto:mdicciani@uarts.edu) or through my web site at [www.dicciani.com](http://www.dicciani.com)