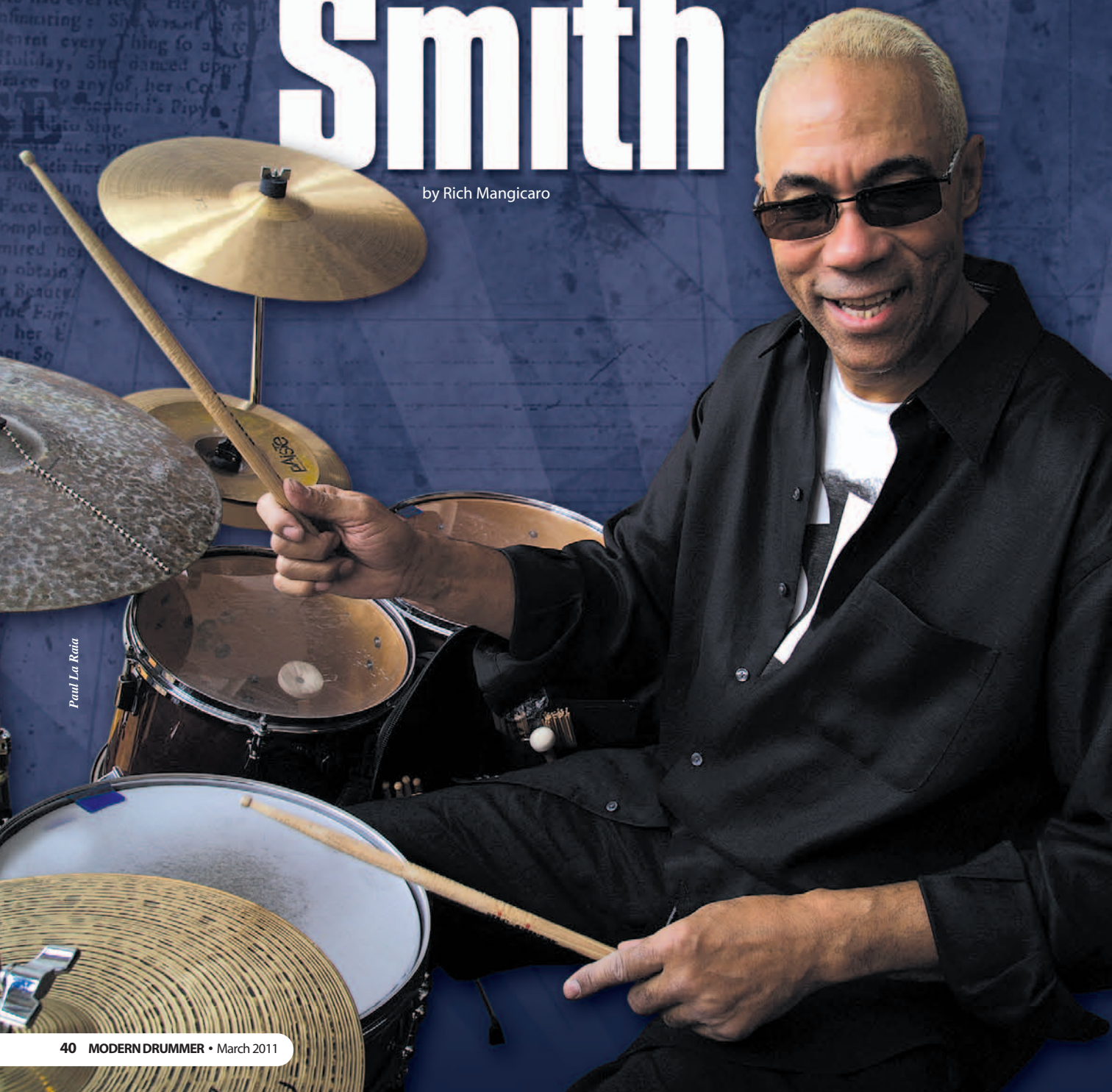


Tony "Thunder" Smith

by Rich Mangicaro



Paul La Raia

Lou Reed's sensitive powerhouse traveled a long and twisting musical path to his current destination. He might not have realized it at the time, but the lessons and skills he learned along the way prepared him perfectly for Reed's relentlessly exploratory rock 'n' roll.

Tony "Thunder" Smith has held the drum chair with Lou Reed, one of the most important figures in rock 'n' roll history, longer than any other drummer has. Coming of age on northern California's fertile early-'70s multicultural music scene, Smith was a member of the popular Latin crossover bands Azteca, featuring guitarist Neal Schon and percussionists Pete and Sheila Escovedo, and Malo, led by Carlos Santana's brother Jorge. Smith subsequently landed important fusion and R&B gigs with Jan Hammer, David Sanborn, and Stacy Lattisaw, and continued to spread his musical wings with French superstar Serge Gainsbourg and proto-punk singer Nina Hagen.

In the mid-'90s, when Lou Reed began working on his studio album *Set The Twilight Reeling*, Smith heeded an unexpected call to immediately trek to New York from his home base in Boston—

less Reed calls for his studio and performance needs.

MD recently sat down with Tony at a tiny French café in New York City to learn what it's like to consistently be there—head, hands, and heart—for an artist of such conviction and invention.

MD: What was your first meeting with Lou Reed like?

Tony: I got to the studio and Lou had me sit down and play along with a record. Talk about being put on the spot! I played for about two minutes, and then he stopped the record and said, "Now, this is the type of drumming I like." He then asked everybody to leave the studio, so I started walking out. He said, "No, not you!" We went out on the patio and started talking business. That was the beginning of our fifteen-year working relationship.

MD: Playing with Lou is basically a singer-songwriter gig, right?

Tony: Definitely. Lou, like many

also about how singer-songwriters structure songs rhythmically—or, say, when they want more intensity without changing the volume?

Tony: Yeah. You're the engine, and if they go off a bit you're the one who has to hold it together. You must tailor your playing for that artist. And it's got to be interesting. Sonically you make decisions that complement the song and the artist's style. This can include varying from the traditional drumkit, blending various percussion sounds, creating a hybrid setup, or even just playing different parts of the snare drum. Many players don't think about all the different pitches across the snare; there's a whole world to be explored, even within that one area. And it's the same with other parts of the kit, even extending to playing the stands, the rims—they're all sounds that can either fit in with the music or distract from it. They're all choices, and making those choices correctly can keep us working.

MD: Many songwriters gravitate toward certain grooves. How do you keep it fresh and musical?

Tony: You can vary the accents slightly within the grooves, just to give each groove its own thing. Sometimes they're so similar that it's a good idea to record your

"Bassist Fernando Saunders recommended Tony to me during a record we were working on. I was looking for a certain thing, and Tony came in and did it perfectly. Tony is a very sensitive drummer—really smart and stylistically sound. He pays attention to the vocal in the song, and he's got the power and chops to back it up. He's also a great guy, and that doesn't hurt." —**Lou Reed**

as in, "Book the next available train!"—to lend his electronic-drumming expertise to the recording. Fifteen years later, Smith is still the man who the notoriously rest-

singer-songwriters, has his own way of playing time, of phrasing and expressing dynamics. When you learn to follow the singer, it prepares you for anything.

MD: Besides their time sense, is it

playing in rehearsals and keep a copy with you on an iPod for reference, until you have it ingrained in your brain. Once you have it, then you don't need that.

Also, program your tempos on

something like a Rhythm Watch, and keep that next to you on stage to take the guesswork out. Of course, you can have all the tempos programmed and approved by the artist, and then they might change them at the show, depending on the vibe. In those cases you just go with it, but at least you're prepared.

MD: When you first started working with Lou, what were some of the challenges?

Tony: I began working with Lou while recording *Set The Twilight Reeling*. He had built a studio in his house. We were going to record the basic tracks live with the drums recorded via MIDI. The overdubs, vocals, and cymbals were to be done in another

studio. The challenge was to get the Roland TD-7 kit to sound like a live, cutting-edge acoustic kit that didn't lack the sound and feel of a real kit. We accomplished that.

MD: How has your playing changed since working with Lou?

Tony: My playing has become more vocal oriented. A lot of the rhythms for Lou's songs come from his vocal stylings, and these become the groove. Once the band's parts support these vocal stylings by letting them breathe, the songs orchestrate themselves. I've always been a rhythmic player; I feel that my fluidity and melodic side have grown.

MD: What's your favorite aspect of playing his music?

Thunder's Drums

Drums: Pearl Reference series in scarlet fade finish, including an 8x10 tom; 14x14, 16x16, and 18x18 floor toms; a 5x14 snare; and an 18x22 bass drum. Other snares include a 5x14 Brady leopard wood, a 7x14 Pearl Mahogany Classic Limited Edition, and a 6x14 Paiste Spirit Of 2002.

Cymbals: Paiste, including 14" Signature Dark Energy Mark 1 or 15" Giant Beat hi-hats, a 10" Signature Reflector splash, an 18" Signature Mellow or 17" Dimensions prototype thin crash, an 18" Giant Beat Multi or 18" Dimensions prototype medium crash, a 22" Twenty prototype ride, 20"

and 22" Signature Heavy Chinas, a 20" Twenty China, and, stacked, a 10" Dark Energy Mark 1 splash, a 11" Dimensions Power splash, and a 12" Signature splash

Heads: Evans, including Genera Power Center snare batters and Hazy 300 bottoms, Genera G2 tom batters, a clear EQ4 bass drum batter, and an EQ3 front head

Sticks: Vic Firth AS8D

Electronics: ddrum triggers and Clavia instruments

Tony: There are many, but if I had to pick one, it would be that Lou is always evolving and changing. He's always trying new rhythms and bass lines and changing the chord structures. It's like Lou, with the band, is stripping the song down and then rebuilding it. It's a fun and challenging process.

MD: He's a rock icon, and as a founder of the Velvet Underground he's had far-reaching cultural influence, inspiring important people in fields beyond music, such as art and politics. Consequently you've found yourself in some interesting situations, like meeting the first president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel.

Tony: Lou is a longtime friend of President Havel. He'd been invited to lunch, and he wanted the band to be there. That's when I had the pleasure of meeting the president. He took us on a tour of the presidential palace and then led us to the ballroom. He reaches on the shelf for a remote control. I ask, "Where's the TV?" President Havel says, "No TV—this is a controller for the lights, given to me by the Rolling Stones!"

About a year later, President Havel was to be the honored guest of President Clinton. When Clinton asked him who would be his choice for the entertainment, he requested Lou Reed. Imagine...now I'm in the White House. I got the tour, and after we finished our concert I got a hug from President Clinton. *What?* But really, the most fun is just the camaraderie we all have playing together in this band—that's the real fun, and it's why I got into this business.

MD: In 2004 you joined the staff at the prestigious Berklee School Of Music. In the classes you teach, do you cover different styles, or do you specialize in certain areas?

Tony: All styles, but I focus on certain things like double bass and funk drumming. I also teach a drumset class for non-percussionists. That's a really great class where I help other instrumentalists connect rhythm with melody. With a lot of them, their rhythmic sensibility needs work, so I help them understand how to utilize subdivision and how to break down rhythms to better understand how they line up with the melody.

The thing I noticed teaching these types of classes was that a lot of accepted instruction techniques stop at the 16th note. Why? What about the 32nd note—how do you count that? You know, when you count 16th notes, you count, "1-e-&-a,



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2-e-&-a...." I find that only a small handful of students know how to count 32nd notes. It doesn't matter what language you speak—you've got to be able to count the note's subdivisions. When I've asked my students why their teachers didn't give them this information, they've told me their teachers' teachers didn't give it to them.

MD: So how *would* you count 32nd notes?

Tony: "1-a-did-e-&-a-did-e, 2-a-did-e-&-a-did-e...." It's eight 32nd notes per quarter note. So if you know the mathematics, it eliminates the guesswork. A nine-stroke roll, for example, would be "1-a-did-e-&-a-did-e, 2." It's easier to visualize quickly. If you know this, it becomes much easier to figure out the longer figures, rolls, etc. Knowing this helps musicians play a lot tighter and, rather than trying to *feel* difficult figures, it helps them count them.

MD: Who taught that to you?

Tony: My teacher Sam Ulano. He's one of the masters of all time. He's over ninety now and still teaching. I highly recommend that all the readers check out Sam's website, samulano.com, and learn about him. A lot of what I learned with him has helped me with the odd-

time thing, playing rhythms over rhythms, and independence. When I break it down for my students, it's really fun to see the light-bulb go on above their heads. And hopefully it helps them understand how to play difficult figures easier.

MD: Do you find that some of your students come to you for lessons after searching out some recordings you did years ago?

Tony: Man, if it weren't for my students at Berklee, I wouldn't have a lot of those old recordings.

One of my students found a bootleg DVD of a live show I did with John McLaughlin in São Paulo...they're always finding stuff that I don't have copies of. It's great.

MD: Since you started at Berklee, what would you say is the biggest thing that's changed your own playing?

Tony: Patience and trying to leave the ego at the door. It's a lesson for us teachers to know how to keep this in perspective. The students will already know who you are and what you've done—you don't have to sell yourself to them. Rather, you must connect with them and come from a place of exchange rather than of superiority. Yes, you have to be the teacher, but with today's students, many times they're already far ahead of the students of years ago, with so many learning resources at their fingertips. Chances are, you, as a teacher, will also be learning from them, just as long as you're open.

MD: With today's technology, students have so many distractions, from Facebook to texting to tweeting. How do you keep them focused?

Tony: I try to keep them challenged. I may give them something difficult to

RECORDINGS

Jan Hammer Oh, Yeah? /// **Jan Hammer Group** Live In New York /// **Jeff Beck With The Jan Hammer Group** Live /// **John McLaughlin With The One Truth Band** Electric Dreams /// **Serge Gainsbourg** Live At Casino De Paris, Le Zénith De Gainsbourg /// **Pat DiNizio** Songs And Sounds /// **Lou Reed** Perfect Night: Live In London, Ecstasy, Live At Montreux (DVD), Spanish Fly: Live in Spain (DVD)

INFLUENCES

Miles Davis all (Jimmy Cobb, Tony Williams, Philly Joe Jones, Elvin Jones, Billy Cobham, Jack DeJohnette, Al Foster, etc.) /// **Peter Gabriel** So (Manu Katché, Jerry Marotta) /// **Sting** all (Manu Katché, Vinnie Colaiuta, Omar Hakim, Kenwood Dennard, etc.) /// **Prince** all (Prince, John Blackwell, Sheila E, Michael Bland, etc.) /// **John Coltrane** A Love Supreme (Elvin Jones) /// **Tony Williams Lifetime** The Collection (Tony Williams) /// **Tower Of Power** all (David Garibaldi) /// **Allen Smith Quartet** Cornucopia (Omar Clay) /// **Don Grolnick** Hearts And Numbers (Peter Erskine, Steve Jordan) /// **Fun Lovin' Criminals** Come Find Yourself (Steve-O) /// **Stevie Wonder** Fulfillingness' First Finale (Stevie Wonder) /// **Jimi Hendrix** all (Mitch Mitchell, Buddy Miles) /// **The Rolling Stones** Black And Blue (Charlie Watts) /// **Sly & The Family Stone** Essential (Greg Errico, Andy Newmark) /// **Kirk Franklin** Hero (Shaun Martin, Terry Baker) /// **Mahavishnu Orchestra** The Lost Trident Sessions (Billy Cobham) /// **Michael Jackson** all (Ndugu Chancler, Jonathan Moffett, John "JR" Robinson, Jeff Porcaro, etc.)

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work on and they'll go, "No way." Then they'll find themselves working harder to prove to themselves that they can do it. Some of the students, though, come in and are already killin'—but there's always something we need to focus on and refine. That's the fun challenge of being a teacher and the advantage that we have from our professional experience.

MD: Can you give a specific example of a profound experience you had with a student?

Tony: One time I asked a really talented student to play a half-note triplet. He did it fine, so then I asked him to make it funky. He was like, "No way." So I put on James Brown's "The Payback." At first he didn't hear it, but I broke the groove down for him and I could see the lightbulb go on. He then could see how the half-note triplet applied and how that groove could work in other situations. So I had

taken someone with tons of chops and turned him on to a new way of listening. Very exciting. The beauty of simplicity and giving them more confidence in reading—that's what I try to achieve. This type of stuff is the teacher's payoff.

MD: So what's coming up for you?

Tony: More work with Lou, of course. I'm also almost finished with my home studio, and I'll finally get to recording my own material. I've always been the sideman. I'm excited to do my own thing now, to do some singing and get the music down that's been in my head for so many years.

Rich Mangicaro is a freelance writer, musician, producer, and educator who has performed with Glenn Frey, Joe Walsh, Jackson Browne, Michael McDonald, the Tubes, and Billy Idol. For more with Tony Smith, go to modern drummer.com.