

THE BIG BOSSA



Darren Nillson, Nic Sheasgreen, Brad Shipley, Phil Hamelin, James McRae, Gillian Stone, Andrew Osborne and Dan Craven (photo: Marisha Devoin)



JAMES MCRAE

Marching to the Beat of His Own Drum

David Morrison

Regarding joie de vivre and sheer enthusiasm for his craft, Nanaimo musician/composer James McRae is simply irrepressible. Kicking off our chat in respect of this profile, I posed just one, two-part question: When did you start playing drums and what attracted you to them? Fifty-three uninterrupted minutes later, time constraints dictated I needed to step in and hasten McRae's passionate torrent at around the mid-90s point of his colourful musical career. I swear he took only about three breaths the whole time. "Oh, but I've only just scratched the surface!" he guffawed.

I was initially drawn to McRae not as an admired musician—in truth our respective musical tastes align only occasionally—but as a person. He's infectiously ebullient with an upbeat outlook, but also laidback, philosophical and pensive, making for delightful company. So experiencing McRae effervescently recounting his life in music was a genuine pleasure; I just sat back, let him gush forth, and listened to it unfold. Here presented in selected highlights, the story begins in the Ontarian fall of 1968 when McRae was 12-years old:

"I saved up some money from a paper route and my parents said they would match the amount I saved. So I had 100 bucks and asked around school for a bass guitar; I just wanted to play music! But this kid in school said: 'Hey, I'm getting a new set of drums for Christmas; do you want to buy my old set?' So I went to his house and saw this gold-covered set of Trixon drums that looked like space capsules—collectors' items now—and thought, 'This is great; I'm going to get these!' And that's how I started playing drums—it wasn't really a choice, but what I could get for 100 bucks! After a while I played along to records by The Who and Free, and bashed along to Creedence Clearwater Revival and Bob Dylan, thrashing away in the afternoon after getting home from school!"

The young sticksman met some kids who similarly han-

TELSTAR 1964

An archive advertisement for the vintage Trixon drum kit like the one that set James McRae on his way as a drummer.

Courtesy of Ingo Winterberg: www.trixondrums.de



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dled their chosen instruments, so jamming commenced. Later, he and three pals he retains friendships with to this day formed a progressive rock band echoing early Genesis, King Crimson and their ilk. The highlight for this musically advanced project was a New Year's Eve show to a bewildered audience at an Indian Reserve near Lillooet. Bewildered? Well, yes – as the revellers had expected a country band, not teenage pretenders to Pink Floyd's crown. But I guess this is what can happen when you name your band Country Park.

Aged 19, McRae studied drums with the late Vancouver legend, Al Weirtz, his musical direction generally beginning to shift towards jazz. Over the next few years he enjoyed spells with Latin jazz outfit Chico & the Clan, Don Hardy & the 11 O' Clock Blues Band, soul/funk singer Amanda Hughes and Canadian legend Colin James, to name a few.

A move to Victoria saw McRae driving taxis by day and continuing to play music at night. Various bands occupied his time until he convened in a band called Loose with

VINTAGE TRIXON DRUM KIT



Photo: Ingo Winterberg: www.trixondrums.de

...like the one purchased by James McRae at 12 years-old.

guitarist Marc Atkinson and bass player Scott White, both today internationally respected in their fields. The trio went on to earn cult status in Victoria, becoming festival favourites and enjoying modest success from 1992 to 1996.

In 2003, McRae relocated to Nanaimo, looking to embark upon a new musical adventure no sooner than his feet had landed in the city. Blessed with a restless creative spirit, he's ever keen to explore new sonic territory in cahoots with as many musicians as are willing, so sent out feelers with his customary gusto.

"I'm the sort of person who doesn't like to wait for things to happen or the phone to ring," he says. "I like to make things happen, take the initiative to try and get some stuff going." It was this proactive attitude that led to the piano-based jazz combo, The Brio Trio, and then, almost up to date, to an octet with a specific aim in mind. Under the banner *The Message*, it focused entirely on the music of American jazz pianist and composer, Horace Silver.

"Why Silver?" asks McRae. "For me, some of the role models put forward in jazz—typically Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane—as great as they were as musicians, were more into soloing than composition. And their lifestyles were fairly challenging, with a lot of drug use, whereas Horace Silver didn't get involved in drugs. And he was heavily into composition. So of all the role models to push to the forefront, Horace Silver is an excellent one. When he turned 80 (on September 2, 2008) I thought, 'I'll put a project together doing just his music; a lot of people don't know about Horace Silver so, yeah, let's do this!'"

Following a series of acclaimed local shows, *The Message* was put on hiatus in favour of another itch of a project McRae simply had to scratch. This band, *The Big Bossa*, follows the lead of such as Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and guitarist Charlie Byrd in thoroughly examining the work of Brazilian genius, Antonio Carlos Jobim (1927-94). If the name is not immediately familiar, then his most fa-

mous composition, *The Girl From Ipanema*, surely will be.

"As a drummer I really like the Latin rhythms of Brazil," explains McRae of his attraction to the Bossa Nova pioneer. "Jobim was an amazing composer, rightly referred to as the 'Gershwin of Brazil.' His music is highly melodic and has an uplifting, sunny vibe that I really love and gravitate towards. I first got turned onto Brazilian music in the 70s when (legendary jazz saxophonist) Wayne Shorter released an album called *Native Dancer* featuring a Brazilian singer named Milton Nascimento. It opened up the door on this music to me. So this has been a long time coming—focusing on Jobim with *The Big Bossa*—but I've had over 30 years connection to Brazilian music."

Keeping up with McRae will never be easy. *The Big Bossa* remains his main focus for now, but as last year also saw him work live or in the studio with an extensive and musically varied list of local musicians, as well as in musical theatre in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, what his next move might be is anybody's guess. On top of all this he also teaches drums at Nanaimo instrument retailer Long & Mc-

LOOSE MID 90S



Marc Atkinson, James McRae and Scott White

Quade, and part-time at the city's Blues Underground.

After our meeting concluded in tangential discussion concerning a raft of collaborative possibilities that may or may not come to fruition for this percussive ball of kinetic energy in 2010, I was left to mull as McRae breezed away to continue his day.

How ironic it is, I thought, that this blithe spirit makes his living sitting down when, metaphorically speaking, he can hardly do so for more than a few minutes! And how lovely it is, I thought, that just 100 bucks fatefully well spent has down four decades resulted in so much pleasure for thousands. To this end, long may he bash and thrash. ●

For more information about James McRae, including forthcoming live performances, please visit: www.theiconoclast.ca.