

DENNIS CHAMBERS : *Leading The Way*

By Robin Tolleson

(Reprinted from **Modern Drummer** magazine: September 1994)

His business card features a sketch of Dennis the Menace. Very fitting, since Dennis the Drummer toys with time and fusion the way the little cartoon terror did with Mr. Wilson's head.

In a career filled with musical challenges, Dennis Chambers faced some of his biggest ones in the past year—and, characteristically, didn't break a sweat. Dennis spent the better part of last year playing with replugged guitarist John McLaughlin, torching the front line on the Brecker Brothers' "return," and touring with Grafitti and as part of Steve Khan's latest Eyewitness lineup. He may have become the biggest trophy drummer since Steve Gadd, but the quality of Chambers' playing makes the point moot. It is always a pleasure and an inspiration to hear him play.

When Chambers came out of P-Funk in the late '80s to record John Scofield's **Blue Matter** and **Loud Jazz** albums, people were amazed by his ability to burn funk and fusion, to raise the music up a notch—he had a playfulness, but he also had the roots. Since then he's been all over the musical map, in high- and low-profile spots. The **Stanley Clarke/George Duke 3** album (1990) gave Chambers a chance to throw down amazing flourishes and low-down funk, giving that band a sort of Cobham-Duke Band vibe at times. On Mike Stern's 1994 **Is What It Is**, he plays the opening of "Swunk" with great touch just on cymbals, grooving like crazy, getting nice harmonic colors. More Chambers magic shows up on Stern's **Odd Or Evens**, guitarist Wayne Krantz's **Signals**, and saxman Gary Thomas's **The Kold Kage, Code Violations**, and **By Any Means Necessary**.

Dennis didn't want to get locked into playing any particular styles of music, so consequently he's thrilled about last year's excellent jazz feature with saxman Bob Berg, **Enter The Spirit**. Dennis's jubilant solo on "Nature Of The Beast" is truly inspiring, and his brushwork on "Sometime Ago" is crisp and inventive.

Chambers is also exceptional on a Bill Evans-led live album with great personnel called **Petite Blonde**, a Jim Beard-led live project on CTI called **Chroma**, keyboardist Charles Blenzig's **Say What You Mean, The Return Of The Brecker Brothers** album, Steve Khan's **Headline** (and another soon-to-be-released Eyewitness-type album, **Crossings**), Leni Stern's **Closer To The Light** and **Like One**, Adam Holzman's **In A Loud Way**, and Tom Coster's **Let's Set The Record Straight** and **Gotcha**.

And Dennis is **all over** the stuff on **P-Funk All-Stars Live At The Beverly Theatre**, the piece of P-Funk history we've all been waiting for. (He also appears with former boss George Clinton on last year's acclaimed **Hey Man, Smell My Finger**.) Until recently it has been rather difficult to identify Chambers' contribution to Clinton's mobs—he's listed along with Terry Jones as one of the drummers on 1982's **Computer Games**, and if you dig deep enough you can find him on imports like P-Vine's **P Is The Funk**

(made in Japan by Blues Interactions). But with Westbound Records' release of **P-Funk All Stars Live...**, we can clearly hear just how technically and dynamically awesome he was in that band.

Furthermore, Dennis is on two of guitarist Carl Filipiak's CD releases on Geometric Records, **Right On Time** and **Blue Entrance**. In fact, fellow Baltimorean Filipiak appears on Dennis's own CD/EP **Big City**. (That album is available by sending \$12 and a note asking for CD2 "Big City" to Pearl Corporation CD Offer, P.O. Box 111240, Nashville, TN 37211.) Chamber's first full-length solo album was released in 1992 on Pioneer, but is only available in Japan. The disc is called **Getting Even**, and can be purchased at a hefty price through Audiophile Imports of Baltimore ([410] 628-7601). And for all you completists, Audiophile may even be able to track down a copy of keyboardist Don Blackman's **Yabba Dabba Doo** or Bernard Wright's **'Nard**—two of Dennis's first session gigs from 1981—or saxman Bill Evans' recent **Let The Juice Loose, Live In Tokyo**.

It's a Sunday night in San Francisco, and Dennis and the band Grafitti are supporting their 1993 release, **Good Groove**, at Kimball's East. In the club is a San Francisco Bay area Who's Who: Narada Michael Walden, David Garibaldi, James Levi, Tom Coster, Hillary Jones, Ray Obiedo, Kai Eckhart, Paul Van Wageningen.... Forget that the leader of the band is keyboardist Haakan Graf. He was bailing out of the dressing room so that the line of well-wishers could get back to greet the thirty-five-year-old Chambers.

RT: Can you compare playing with John Scofield to playing with John McLaughlin?

DC: John Scofield is a more soulful, more bluesy type of guy. McLaughlin is more of an edgy type of player.

RT: Are they similar in the type of instruction they give, the way they work with you?

DC: In basically every situation I've been involved with, except for Special EFX, people just give me a green light: Here's the tune, these are the accents—paint a picture.

I met John McLaughlin in Seville, Spain. He said he was a big fan and had a lot of records I'd played on. I was blown away. He said, "Hey man, we've gotta play," and smiled, so I knew something was up. Sure enough, two years after that I get a phone call and he says, "Man, are you ready to play?" I said, "Sure. What about Trilok?" [Trilok Gurtu was McLaughlin's previous drummer.] He said he was going to put that band on hold because he wanted to play electric guitar again and was trying to get hold of Joey DeFrancesco to put together an organ trio. The band is phenomenal. It's sort of like Tony Williams' Lifetime, but it's not as wild as Lifetime. It's more musical—John wrote all the music, and he wrote his backside off. And he's playing his backside off. He's one hell of a guy, very intelligent and a very giving person, too. The material, though, in the first stages of it, was pretty rough.

RT: Because of the difficulty of the compositions?

DC: Compositionally, the stuff was wide open, because Johnny is the kind of guy who can play any kind of way. Usually when you're working with somebody, they give you

some kind of instructions. But with John it's like, "We sort of have an idea, but keep it open." So when you're not sure what it is or where it's going to go, it's kind of difficult because it could change at any moment. There's more pressure because you know you have the reins and you're actually leading your own path in the music, knowing that you could change the stuff up at any moment and everybody'd follow you, and vice versa. We were cracking up on stage a lot of nights because, all of a sudden, John would start playing "Dance Of Maya" in the middle of some other tune, over the drum solo or something.

When I work with a person for a long period of time, in order to deal with him musically I have to learn how he writes and what makes it work. It's gotten tight with John, but John is a very talented person and plays all styles of music. He's a great rhythm guitarist, a great jazz guitarist, a great fusion guitarist, a great Indian guitarist. and a great classical player. So a person like that has a lot of worlds to cover and will drag any of those worlds into what you're doing. At any given moment he could bring a classical or Indian vibe into a piece—and make it work.

RT: McLaughlin seemed able to lead the band with a glance when he wanted things to change.

DC: Oh yeah, he leads the band. But a lot of times when he's glancing at you it's about stuff that he couldn't believe he played—looking back at you like, "Oh man, I can't believe I did that." He thought it was bad, and I'm thinking it all sounds great to me.

RT: Did you listen to McLaughlin when you were coming up at all?

DC: Oh yeah! I mean, Mahavishnu? Forget about it. And the little stuff he did with Miles. Anything with Mahavishnu, and then the Shakti stuff, too.

RT: Let me get you in trouble. Who was your favorite Mahavishnu drummer?

DC: Hah. Well, they both were my favorites, because they had two different styles. Michael Walden—you could tell that he idolized Cobham, but Michael was more of a groove player. That's the only way I can compare them. Billy was the innovator with Mahavishnu, playing fusion music with the double bass drums. Anybody who had double bass drums and was playing fusion music came from Billy. And the way he'd play the fastest single-stroke rolls you ever heard, or playing odd-time signatures and things like that.... Even when I talked to Michael recently he raved about Billy. The way he was talking you could have sworn that stuff happened yesterday. He could sit there and see Billy playing. To me, Michael has all the facilities like Billy, but when you hear some of the stuff like "Can't Stand Your Funk," it's more of the groove.

RT: Does John have a way of bringing out great drum performances?

DC: He's a big fan of the drums. He just loves drums. You can't play enough for him. The more you play, the more he'll just stand there and smile. He wants everything to be pierced. Whatever you feel in your heart you give in your playing.

RT: Do you use the same kit with McLaughlin as with Scofield or Bill Evans?

DC: It's a smaller kit, actually. It's a 20" bass drum, two racks, two floors, three cymbals.

RT: Did you have to work on anything in particular for that gig?

DC: No, I just played. We rehearsed the tunes and played them. That band was together for a year, and we put in four or five days of rehearsal at the beginning and went out.

RT: Was it any different for you playing with Joey DeFrancesco, since he plays bass pedals along with his keys?

DC: Yeah, it was a different thing, because when somebody rushes, usually the drummer and bass player keep it together. But if the organ player is the bass player and he starts to rush, then everything goes with it. And that's what happened with Joey. Sometimes he gets excited, and sometimes the music just goes there anyway. It just picks up and goes. So I just listened in the headphones, so I could hear him.

RT: Do you have any tips for drummers as far as working with bass players?

DC: Sometimes the bass player can't hear what's going on, so you have to just play straight 8ths on the cymbal or hi-hat until he can hear—then he can bring it back to where you are. That's if he's not a selfish musician. It seems that nowadays some bass players don't believe that they have to follow the drummer, even though the drummer's job is supposed to be to keep time. But you find some musicians who don't even listen. It's like you're playing time and **they're** playing time, and nobody's following. And that happens because with the drum machine era, bass players play with machines and think they have great time. so therefore when they play with a live drummer they don't think they have to listen. It's like the drummer's supposed to keep up with the bass player.

RT: You seem to have a wonderful inner clock, to the point where if you get a solo in the midst of a very fast section, you can slow it down completely in your head and build from scratch.

DC: I think what you're talking about is making sense of a drum solo—not just playing anything. It's just that I always believed that drum solos should start from something. You make a foundation and then build. It's like putting blocks together. If you think about it that way, your drum solos will never be boring and they'll never be the same, no matter what style of music it is. You can just play off of anything.

Whatever you start with in a solo, make that the foundation. For instance, if you're taking a funk solo, your 2 and 4 is the foundation, and if you want to play off the bass player, make that the foundation with the 2 and 4. You may want to throw a dotted 8th note on the ride—the jazz thing. And then you can dislocate beats and stuff like that; you can do all of that as long as you know what the foundation is.

With John, some of the solos I play are based around accents. If you know the accents, you just play off of them. Sometimes I'm playing an entirely different tune against his accents, and it's in time with what he's doing. That's what makes it so interesting. People might be wondering, "How can you know where those accents are when you're playing what sounds like a totally different tune?" Well, it's very simple: If the things in four, he's playing the accents and you know where those accents are. I could sit there and play six against four and just hit those accents—it's all foundation.

RT: I noticed you switching grips a lot during your set with John. Have you always done that, or are you experimenting?

DC: It just feels right. When I'm playing matched grip, it's basically coming from power. If I'm playing anything that's kind of technical, I'll switch to a traditional grip. It's because I grew up playing those two different styles. Usually if I'm playing bebop I'll just stay with the traditional grip. If I'm playing something with power, like a fusion thing, I'll play matched. With John's music, to me it's a cross between both. It's fusion music, with a mixture of all types of influences, so I'll go back and forth with the grips.

RT: You even got to play some brushes with John.

DC: That's all going back to when I used to play a lot of jazz ballads.

RT: It's a nice texture to have.

DC: Definitely. It breaks the music up from when you're playing with sticks all night. Brushes are a whole other world. There's more to it than just letting the brush swish across the drumhead. It's a whole other technique involved. Look at people like Clayton Cameron and his brush video, or Ed Thigpen. Or listen to somebody like Elvin, Philly Joe, or Papa Jo Jones—it's pretty phenomenal.

RT: Tell me about the one-handed roll you do.

DC: The stick on the snare drum is playing off the rim. It's 50% rim, 50% drum. Try to find a balance point on the stick. The butt end of the stick is still in the palm of your hand. You turn your wrist to the side so now the thumb is facing your stomach. When I come down on the drum I hit the rim, and the bead of the stick is up in the air. Then come back on the drumhead with the bead while the stick is leaving the rim. You hit the rim, bounce it down, bounce it up off the rim—clack, clack, clack, clack. While you're doing that the other end of the stick is hitting the drum, and you're getting this roll going. When you find this balancing point where you kind of get a roll going, you don't hear the stick hitting the rim anymore, you just hear the roll. When you strike down it's like rim, drumhead, then you come back up and it's drumhead, rim.

RT: That's not a Joe Morello trick, is it?

DC: Could be. Who did I see do that? I can't remember. I know I saw somebody do it and thought to myself, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's good. I've gotta do that."

RT: I love one of the other tricks you do—the one-handed fills with the kick and floor toms. It sounds like double bass drums.

DC: Yeah. Sometimes it don't come out right. [laughs] Sometimes I have to make up some shit while I'm in the middle of it. It's just single bass drum stuff with the right foot, it's just that the stuff is moving kind of fast and sounds like double bass. When you play floor toms that are low in pitch, and it's moving kind of fast, it just sounds like a roll. The mind tells you I'm playing double bass drum, along with the floor tom. It's a triplet motion between the floor tom and bass drum.

RT: You seem to love to turn the beat completely upside down, putting "1" in different places.

DC: Yeah, sometimes I like to move it, and I like to play over bar lines. But sometimes instead of having the groove on 2 and 4, you can have it on 1 and 3, and then move the bass drum away from everything. Then you can just move to that while the bass player's playing his stuff. And sometimes I just like to dislocate beats.

I really like doing it because it's something you just don't hear all the time. And I don't often get a chance to do that. Other than this band, the only time I really ever went out on it and did it was with Scofield. Usually when you're playing with bass players and start doing that, they want to go with you, and then all of a sudden you have a train wreck. But with Gary and me, I'm playing off of Gary, and Gary knows exactly where the beats are.

RT: Tom Coster's new album, **Let's Set The Record Straight**, is strong all around.

DC: That's a great record. I do a lot of playing on that. Usually when I do Tom Coster records the drums go down first into his computer. Then he'll bring in the bass, guitar, and sax after.

RT: Do you prefer recording that way or live?

DC: Actually that's a real hip way to record. Half the time when I'm tracking with somebody, people start experimenting, then you're sitting around twiddling your thumbs. Then they've got to change the charts, then they mess up...and I'm still sitting there waiting. So not doing it live can be a hip way to do it. That way I'm always doing something—I'm always playing.

RT: How did the band Grafitti come about?

DC: Grafitti is Haakan Graf's band. Gary Grainger and I were playing with John Scofield in Scandinavia, and he saw us play there. He got our number and said he would call us, but if you hear that all the time you don't necessarily take it seriously. But Haakan came to the States and called me about recording a couple of tracks. He came down and we did the thing in Baltimore. Next thing I knew he wanted to do some more recording and a tour through Norway. We did that, and the rest is history. We've been together off and on for three years now.

RT: During the Grafitti show I saw, you were doing some incredible stuff with independence, moving the left hand back and forth from the hi-hat to snare. Do you practice that stuff?

DC: I haven't practiced since I was nineteen. I'm just always playing **a lot**. I do need to practice, just to get the physical side up to the same level as the mental side. I'm always thinking of all kinds of rhythms and stuff, it's just that physically you're not strong enough to play them or pull them off.

RT: The 16th notes you were playing with your right hand were perfect, very quick and yet with a lot of sensitivity.

DC: It's just playing with your fingers and wrist. working it out between those two. It's also the Moeller technique, which is like a whipping motion. Jim Chapin talks about it. I was doing it all the time, but I never knew what it was until I saw Jim. I was trying to figure out ways to get my wrist to play 16ths real fast. For me, the best way to do it is to

incorporate some kind of rocking, whipping motion. Then I saw Jim two years ago at a clinic and thought, “Ah, **that’s** what that is.”

RT: You’ve worked with some of the greatest guitar players. Is there anyone else you’d really like to work with?

DC: I’d like to do some real playing with Chick Corea some day. James Genus and I were supposed to play with him one time, right before the Brecker Brothers. That was like the hardest phone call I had to make—to call Chick Corea up and tell him I couldn’t make the tour. But the Brecker Brothers tour was a lot of fun. Those guys are so easy to work for. They were great. But there were a lot of times when I was playing and my mind was on automatic pilot, because they didn’t want to take it too far out. It wasn’t like the old days, like the stuff that I heard them do with Terry Bozzio. They wanted somebody to just nail it, lay it down. I couldn’t stretch out so far in that band. The band wasn’t prepared to do that. In Japan we had Barry Finnerty sub for Mike Stern. and we played our asses off on a lot of the old Brecker Brothers stuff like “Funky Sea, Funky Dew.” We really took it out. Man, that was great. I had fun.

RT: Brecker Brothers was a much more serious-looking band, where Grafitti seems to be having fun.

DC: That’s what I mean. The Brecker Brothers’ tour was nice, the music was nice, but it was no fun for me to walk up on the bandstand and know exactly what I had to do. It was like you were playing parts, and that’s what the band was all about—playing parts. It wasn’t Mike or Randy’s fault. It wasn’t about taking too many chances—I could have easily stepped on the gas. But if I had done that I’d have stuck out like a sore thumb. So that’s why we were all sitting around looking real serious, afraid to stretch too much. We could have done so much with that band.

RT: What would you say is the most challenging musical situation you’ve been in yet?

DC: I did a tour with Randy Brecker, and that was some of the most difficult stuff I ever played. I think Randy Brecker’s a genius. With the dynamics going up and down, the chords, and all the textures, that stuff was pretty difficult.

RT: But none of this stuff seems to faze you much.

DC: I grew up in a jazz-fusion club. When I learned how to play, it was basically by listening to a lot of jazz, fusion, R&B, and soul music. That’s how I learned to play. I had no idea that a lot of guys were sort of specialized, like bebop drummers who were strictly into bebop. I know some people who went through their whole career with blinders on. They were in their own little world. The rockers were into rock, the jazz guys were into jazz, and the Latin guys were into Latin. The soul guys had their fingers in a few more things other than just soul music. But because of the way I grew up listening to all kinds of music, I thought that was what it was about.

RT: Did the days you played three shows a night with P-Funk help build up the stamina that you have now?

DC: I had to have that stamina **before** I did that. That kind of stamina was basically like playing in jazz-fusion clubs. When you’re playing fusion music sets for two hours every

night, you develop the endurance.

You may not like punk rock music, but the energy those drummers put out is phenomenal. They have to be in tremendous shape. So if somebody like that could figure out how to play bebop, it would be nothing for them to sit there and play for a long period of time.

RT: I was impressed by the CDs you did with guitarist Carl Filipiak, like **Right On Time**. You did some nice Latin playing on that one.

DC: When I first started working with Carl I can remember just sitting there trying to figure out what to play for the tune. Carl was just saying, "Play what you feel." So I played one of those Steve Gadd beats, like a merengue type of thing.

RT: Are you Gadd-influenced?

DC: Yeah, I liked his cowbell grooves, and how he put his snare drum sort of laid back from the rest of the drumkit, time-wise. He did that on shuffles. And I liked the way he'd build his solos and play cymbal crashes without the bass drum. Everybody always played bass drum with their cymbal crashes, but he played it without a bass drum sometimes. I just like those types of ideas. In fact, there's a track on Charles Blenzig's **Say What You Mean**, "Caravan," where I play sort of a Gadd-influenced thing. I had to sit there and think, "How would Gadd do this?" It came out pretty good.

The thing I didn't like, and it didn't have anything to do with Gadd, was how everybody for a long period of time just emulated him and tried to play and sound just like the guy, instead of just taking some things they liked from him and building from there. You look back on the '50s, '60s, '70s—there were drummers all over the place, and everybody sounded different. Everybody had their own identity and their own sound. Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Philly Joe, Papa Jo, Tony, Billy, the funk scene with David Garibaldi and Harvey Mason, Stubblefield—there were tons of them. And growing up in Baltimore, there were a lot of great drummers there.

RT: Now there are guys with their own sound, like Bill Stewart.

DC: Now there you go. Now you're talking about somebody who's totally different. He is a phenomenal drummer. He went totally against the norm. He's a jazz-bebop kind of guy—I really dig the way Bill plays. And I guess what I dig about him is that he's not trying to sound like everybody else. You can hear Tony's influences in him. but that's it. If you're going to stick your lifetime into trying to develop and play, the one thing you have to do is to try to get your own sound. If you have five or ten years of playing an instrument and all you get out of it is that you sound like somebody else...it's cute when you first hear it, but after a while it's not cute anymore.

RT: On **Getting Even**, you've got some great drum sounds. "Fortune's Dance" has a tom sound every couple bars that rocks the stereo.

DC: That was a sample of a floor tom with a few things on it from my Akai 900.

RT: Did you work on the drum sounds more on **Getting Even** than you've gotten to on other things you've played on?

DC: There's a guy named Malcolm Pollack, who works on Steve Khan's records, and

who also worked on that Wayne Krantz record. He's a drummer, he understands drums, and he's a great engineer. I met him through Steve and I remembered the great drum sounds he'd get, so I hired him to do my record. And we didn't spend a lot of time on getting sounds. I trusted him to do what he does. He just hit the toms, got levels, and did what he did with them, and that's what came out of there.

RT: How much time did you have to record it?

DC: We recorded that in two days. It wasn't a cheap record, but basically all the money went into the studio and the musicians.

RT: How did you assemble the material? I liked the mixture of composers.

DC: I'm close with Jim Beard, and he and Jon Herington are great friends. Since Jim produced the record, so to speak, he told me that Jon had some tunes he wanted me to hear. They sent me the tape and it was like, "We've gotta do these tunes." We did "Widow's Peak" for Adam Holzman's record, **In A Loud Way**, but it never made it to the record. I thought it was a great tune. It was through sitting in the studio doing his album [originally released on Pioneer] that I got to do my album. The people at Pioneer heard me on that and asked me to do one. Bob Gatzen sent me a tape of some music, and I really like his stuff. And there's a tune by a friend of mine from Baltimore, Paul Siroka, that we did when we had a band down there.

RT: Are you happy with **Getting Even** as a first solo effort?

DC: I did what I set out to do, which was not to turn it into a drummer's record. I felt like every time you hear drummer's records there are a lot of solos, and if it's a fusion or contemporary jazz record, there are going to be a lot of solos anyway. So when it's played on the radio, the only people who'll buy it are musicians. With the record I had set out to do, I had a few things where I play over the top, but it's not like I'm going nuts on it. It's a musical thing that can hopefully reach out to musicians **and** non-musicians.

Dennis's Favorite Discs

"As far as records of my own playing that I'd recommend people check out, Tom Coster's **Let's Set The Record Straight** is definitely one. Bill Evans' **Petite Blonde** record is another. Gary Thomas's **The Kold Kage** is sort of like Tom Coster's album, but a little deeper. Then there's **Stanley Clarke/George Duke 3**, and Bob Berg's record **Enter The Spirit**.

"If you listen to all of these records, you'll hear that they're all totally different from each other. **Enter The Spirit** is a jazz record with Chick Corea on it. **Clarke/Duke 3** is real good commercial music. The Bill Evans record is a live record. I also did a record with Steve Khan called **Headline**, and I have another with him coming out very soon. Leni Stem's **Like One** is also real good. I dig all the stuff I did with her, actually.

"As far as records that I use for inspiration? I really enjoy Allan Holdsworth records with Gary Husband on drums. I have **I.O.U.** and all the other stuff that Gary played on.

He's **bad**, man. I remember when I first saw him play, back in 1979, I knew there was something special about that guy. He just woke up one day and said, 'Yeah, I think I'll ride with my left.' And the new Holdsworth disc that Vinnie plays on is real nice.

"I also dig anything with Marvin 'Smitty' Smith on it, like all those Steve Coleman discs. Everything that Vinnie, Marvin, and Gary play on I'll enjoy.

"My all-time inspirational groups are still the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Tony Williams Lifetime. Even taking the Lifetime stuff alone, there's a lot to go from—**The Old Bum's Rush, Turn It Over, and Ego**, all the way up to when Holdsworth started playing with Tony on **Believe It** and **Million Dollar Legs**.

"And of course I'm always inspired by Elvin's records. The stuff he did with 'Trane—and even his own records—were pretty outstanding. I also loved what David Garibaldi did with Tower Of Power. Thank God someone finally did a video with him. It's about time they picked somebody who needed to do one, because the guy has a tremendous amount of information. It's a killin' video.

"I could go on and on about the drummers who inspire me with their records, including people like Max Roach and Art Blakey. The best I can do is mention the drummers I can think of off the top of my head, but of course there have been many others."