



IF YOU EVER
WONDERED WHO
FUNKIFIED
SECOND LINE,
WELL, YOU'RE
LOOKING
AT HIM



Joseph "Bigaboo" Modeliste

JOSEPH "ZIGABOO" MODELISTE

BY DIANE GERSHUNY FLEMING

The New Yorker recently hailed him as “one of the greatest drummers in pop history.” Now while that may be a large proclamation to live up to, mention the name “Zigaboo” and most drummers will testify that it’s the God’s honest truth and get a bit misty-eyed. Zig’s earthy, innovative style, built from syncopated grooves and distinctive behind-the-beat melodic rhythms, has earned him a place in the hallowed halls of legendary skinsmen.



The Meters were New Orleans’ answer to Booker T. & The MG’s, and although they never achieved the same kind of commercial success as the MG’s, the “almost famous” quartet became the thing that legends are made of: cult heroes with a legion of die-hard fans worldwide and the reverence of their musical peers to boot. In their 11-year history from 1966 to ’77, the fab-four – Modeliste along with bassist George Porter Jr., guitarist Leo Nocentelli, and keyboardist Art Neville – had some heady milestones. They backed numerous legends on stage and in the studio – including Paul McCartney, Professor Longhair, and LaBelle (although it was Herman Ernst, not Ziggy, on drums on their signature “Lady Marmalade”) – and played on classic albums like Robert Palmer’s *Sneakin’ Sally Through The Alley* and quintessential sides like Dr. John’s “Right Place, Wrong Time.” Their single “Hey Pocky A-Way” made it into *Billboard*’s Pop Top 40 in ’74, and more recently *Rejuvenation* was heralded by *Rolling Stone* magazine as one of the greatest albums ever. Their grooves are some of the most sought-after samples in the hip-hop world, and a slice from “Oh, Calcutta” (a remake of a Broadway show tune off their *Look-Ka Py Py*) can be heard on the hit “1 Thing” by Amerie and is included on the soundtrack from the movie *Hitch*. At the peak of their success, The Meters opened for the Rolling Stones’ 1975 and ’76 tours – and it was quite literally on the plane home to the Crescent City that the group combusted from the pressures of fame internally and the mismanagement and greed of their support system externally.

In the early ’90s, a splinter group dubbed the Funky Meters formed with keyboardist Art Neville and bassist George Porter Jr., and they recorded and toured extensively for over a decade. But the original amalgamation of four was kaput seemingly forever.

FUNKIFY YOUR LIFE. Folks not fortunate enough to have witnessed the forefather’s indigenous funk firsthand back in the day could still get an earful thanks to a plethora of reissues on Sundazed and Rhino. But to ever hear the band live again? Many who were familiar with the band’s explosion and later implosion knew that it would take an act of God – or the New Or-

leans Jazz & Heritage Festival's founder and CEO Quint Davis – to put the pieces back together again. There was a valiant reunion attempt in 2000 at San Francisco's Warfield Theatre, orchestrated by a group of friends and fans, but it was short-lived until the 2004 reunion at the Jazz Fest. Finally, in the latter part of 2005, with their crowned prince of the skins holding forth in the back, the group reunited and rolled through Boston, Las Vegas, San Francisco, and New York, weaving their way through three decades of classic material – from “Sophisticated Cissy” and “Hey Pocky A-Way” to “Look-Ka Py Py” and “Africa” – with the greatest of ease. This latest tour offered a glimpse and a promise of more to come (if they can get the business plan in place).

“Using the facilities he had,” Modeliste reflects, “that is, the New Orleans Jazz Festival, Quint approached me about January of last year about doing a Meters reunion at the Festival in May. That went well, and then after that, they wanted to put together some dates. I’m the type that, I’ll believe it when I see it. You get it together, let me know, I’ll be happy to be a part of it. Before the Katrina disaster, we had a bit of a skull session in New Orleans with three members to put some dates together for the remainder of 2005. Then Katrina came, and any plans we had for anything more were affected. But it’s not often that you get a chance to put a band back together with all the original members still living. So that was an opportunity I thought I couldn’t pass up. Plus, I was going to play with the band I learned a great deal from. So it was two-fold for me: a good opportunity to get back out there and to work again as The Meters, and it was also a handsome endeavor, and I really enjoyed myself.”

YOU’VE GOT TO CHANGE (YOU’VE GOT TO REFORM). So what made the difference this time in the way the band approached the material, in the success of the shows, and in the fact that they’re all enthusiastic about doing more? “I thought that everybody had a chance to focus on their personal preparation and to focus on their music. I felt like everybody was into it and wanted it to be successful, and that was a little bit different than the first time. The first one we did in San Francisco, even though it started off beautiful, it got to the

“IF YOU HAVE A BITTER TASTE IN YOUR MOUTH ABOUT THE BUSINESS, HOW CAN YOUR MUSIC BE 100-PERCENT SWEET?”

ZIG’S RIG

INFOGRAPHIC BY RICK EBERLY

DRUMS DW Collector’s Maple

- 1 22" x 18" Bass Drum
- 2 14" x 5.5" Snare
- 3 10" x 8" Tom
- 4 12" x 9" Tom
- 5 14" x 11" Floor Tom

CYMBALS Sabian

- A 13" AA El Sabor Hi-Hats
- B 16" Medium Thin Crash
- C 20" Hand Hammered Power Bell Ride
- D 16" Hand Hammered Extra Thin Crash

Zigaboo Modeliste also uses **Evans** heads, **Vic Firth** sticks, **Impact** cases, and **DW** hardware and pedals.



point where we didn’t spend enough time together nurturing our craft. I think it went down pretty good, I just don’t think it was relaxed enough. Even these shows that we just got finished doing, the more we did, the more relaxed we was becoming.”

Through the recent mini-tour, the quartet stayed focused on the music all the while learning how to groove together, tour together, and be together – again. Granted, it wasn’t as if they hadn’t kept company with each other over the last 30 years, but it had been a considerable amount of time since they had performed over two hours worth of material on stage, over the course of multiple dates. “It was a fact-finding mission about how we was going to approach our music again, and I think it was robust and grooving harder than a lot of these bands that I see on TV. I think it was fascinating that everybody was keeping focused on the music. Rehearsal was minimal

because there was an error getting us together. When we got to Vegas, we rehearsed about an hour and that was it. But I thought we did accomplish a lot: We got back to playing a lot, and like anything else, you have to do it a couple times to get it to a maximum level. By the time we got to San Francisco, I thought it was picking up steam and getting better and better. In New York, it was just over the top! I think The Meters is a phenomenon. People are going to find out sooner or later that this was the hardest grooving band in the business. The great part about it was that every show was getting better and better, but we haven’t even scratched the surface of the excellence I know this band can actually deliver.”

METER STRUT. With eight albums worth of material to cover, it was a challenge for the band to hone down a manageable amount of songs to cover over the course of the mini-tour – many of which they hadn’t played together in more than 25 years. “Quite naturally, we had to abandon some of them. It became about trying to figure out what songs to successfully do without rehearsal and what songs *not* to do without rehearsal. But improvising is the way we do it. Everybody knows the basic song structure – there’s a solo here, one interlude here. We

might switch to another song on the set list if it seemed like coming out of a particular song may give it even more life and make it more colorful. Since we only have four pieces, it gives us a lot of space to venture into different areas with different songs."

Because of the reputation they've earned as a musically adventurous and instrumentally spontaneous group, it's not surprising that The Meters often get lumped into the category of "jam band" – in fact, they were included in last year's Bonnaroo jam band festival spin-off, Vegoose, in Vegas. But Modeliste is quick to dispel any similarities with bands of that genre. "This is not a jam band," he emphatically points out. "We don't jam! I don't know who put that phrase together. This is a band that has a lot more texture and lot more definition. Jam bands from what I've seen are just that: jamming and trying to do the impossible with the possible. I don't have nothing against that, I just don't want anybody to categorize us that way. There's a big difference. We're a groove band, everybody dedicated to do one thing: 'Get that groove, baby!'"

TALKIN' 'BOUT NEW ORLEANS.

Growing up in New Orleans, Modeliste was exposed to its multicultural rhythms at an early age. The city's rich musically ethnic diversity – magnified thanks to a booming pre-Katrina tourism industry –

"I WENT OUT TO SEE THE ROLLING STONES AND THE WAY THEY WERE LIVING. I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT! THEY'RE MUSICIANS, AND THEY HAVE ALL OF THIS? DO ALL OF THIS?"

was pervasive and a main revenue stream (along with food, architecture, and a whole lot more). Seemingly, there was music everywhere, from the "second-line" street parades (jazz funeral parades honoring the dead) to the clubs, or right in his own neighborhood, which was brimming with musicians.

"Well, my story is just like everybody else that plays drums. My family used to take me to different events where they had live music when I was around seven. Right away, it was like a virus. I caught it, and it made me want to get more involved in music. I just started beating on a lot of different things around my momma's house, and my mother and father just noticed that I had some talent. They started buying me drums and it was on! I had a few formal lessons, and I played in the marching band in high school. Plus, I was going on gigs trying to learn how to play at night and go-

ing to school in the day. I wasn't gigging that much so it didn't interfere with my school, but I remember from at least eighth or ninth grade I was playing some gig somewhere – frat parties, proms, gigs other than in bars. You had to know how to play a little bit of straight-ahead jazz, calypso, mambo, bossa novas, standards, rock and roll, surely you had to know how to play blues and funk. I was playing with guys in their late twenties, thirties – some of them in their forties. They brought a lot of experience my way, and it helped me a lot."

TRICK BAG. Having a well-rounded playing palette was only part and parcel of what set Modeliste's style apart. He describes it as a "collage of second-line rhythms, funk rhythms, Afro-Cuban rhythms, Mardi Gras rhythms – all mixed up together. The way that the music was structured back then, the drums was not doing enough. Drummers were supposed to be felt and not heard – that was the slogan back then. I thought if you're playing the drums, you got to be speaking and people got to hear you. The way that I think about the mechanics of drumming and the rhythms that I hear, I try to use that and put my own flavor on it. And I always improvise from the beginning to the end."

Not surprisingly, Modeliste found his biggest mentors right in his own backyard – players ranging from Joseph "Smokey" Johnson, James Black, David Lee, Eugene Jones, and John Boudreaux. "People from my area who were outstanding performers were the players I first had access to. You draw from your surroundings. Then I started hearing people like all the James Brown drummers, recording genius Al Jackson Jr. of Booker T., Steve Gadd, and James Gadsen from the 103rd Street Rhythm Band. And the high priest Elvin Jones. He was the master! That was the man I admired for what he did with drums and his style. The way he played was just incredible. Earl Palmer was a high priest too. He set a precedent and was one of the most successful drummers ever to leave New Orleans. Him and Hal Blaine had some of the most record dates than anybody in the '60s. I also love Charlie Watts, Jack DeJohnette, and Jim Keltner – he's a bad cat!" >>

Groovin' With Modeliste

GEORGE PORTER JR.

They're often considered one of the quintessential rhythm sections in New Orleans music – or perhaps in funk. Period. Whether backing numerous roots, rock, and R&B artists or in their own amalgamation of The Meters, the dynamic duo of Zigaboo Modeliste in tandem with bassist George Porter Jr. wove complex rhythms and layered a mighty earthen groove both sturdy and compliant for all that lay above.

Porter's own career has spanned over 30 years and includes stretches with Robbie Robertson, David Byrne, Harry Connick Jr., and Tori Amos, working with some fine drummers including Russell Batiste Jr. (Funky Meters), Johnny Vidacovich, and Manu Katché.

With these latest run of Meters reunion dates, the two came together again to re-create the magic. So how was it working with Zig after



all these years? "We are re-setting the lines and the way we talk to each other musically," Porter explains. "In the past, we just knew where

each other was at all times. I didn't have to think about it. Today, I have to listen more, but that is my job, to make the drummer's groove a pocket. But Zig is Zig. There's no special techniques, just great hard grooves. And that makes my job easy.

"When you talk about Zig, it's what he brings to the table. He doesn't overplay, and he doesn't underplay. He just always seems to have the right amount of what's needed for the piece of music being played. I'm not sure if there's any way better to say that. Anytime that I've ever played with him, I've never walked away wishing that he had played something else. Without trashing all the other drummers out there I have to work with, they all bring something to the table ... and a lot of them like to play like Zig. The only thing is: Zig built the table."

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