

Studio Legend Chris Parker Returns to His Roots

By Mark Griffith

Who can *Tell Me* (or us) about drummer Chris Parker? Bob Dylan, Donald Fagen, Paul Butterfield, The Brecker Brothers, Stuff, Joe Cocker, Boz Scaggs, Linda Ronstadt, Aaron Neville, Lou Rawls, Elvis Costello, Patti Austin, Bryan Ferry... and the list goes on and on. They have ALL requested Chris' groove and musicality. But now session legend Chris Parker is telling us all about returning to his roots in jazz as the leader of a swingin' jazz trio with three records under their belt, including the outstanding new *Tell Me*.

MD: How did you get started?

CP: My dad had a huge jazz record collection, and he played drums. I listened to his records constantly! I played trumpet and baritone horn for 12 years starting in elementary school in Chicago. I played drums in jazz and swing groups, and I played percussion in orchestras, and I would play along with Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie records all of the time.

I have three brothers that play drums, Tony, Eric, and Nicholas. Tony and Eric live in the Woodstock area. Eric was on the road with Steve Winwood and Ian Hunter. Tony played with Laura Nyro after I did, and my youngest brother Nicholas played with Randy VanWarmer who had a hit or two, and now he writes music for video games.





Marie Shelto

After high school I moved to New York to go to art school, then I answered an ad about joining a band in Woodstock, NY. I joined the Paul Butterfield band after Phillip Wilson left. I had listened to a lot of blues like Leadbelly, John Lee Hooker, and Muddy Waters, and was really prepared to play blues with Butterfield. But he informed me that he wanted to go in a different direction, that's what became Paul Butterfield's *Better Days*. I also began doing records with people in Woodstock at Bearsville studio.

MD: What other drummers were in Woodstock at the time?

CP: Of course, Levon Helm was around, Billy Mundi, from Zappa's band, Howie Wyeth was a great left-handed drummer (and pianist) that played drums on Bob Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Revue* and *Desire*. Donald MacDonald who played with Tim Hardin on *Bird on a Wire* was there. Steve Gadd moved to Woodstock for a bit, but I didn't know him then. Wells Kelly was the first drummer in Orleans, a nice guy and a terrific drummer. He was a really loose and comfortable drummer with a great feel.

MD: Wells was a great drummer. Those first two Orleans records sound more like Little Feat than the later Orleans music. When did you leave Woodstock?

CP: By 1974, I had played with everyone that was up there, I had heard that things were happening in New York City. I was rehearsing with Howie Wyeth in a gospel

band for a gig in Woodstock at the Joyous Lake, at the last minute our bass player literally disappeared. My girlfriend's older sister had met a bassist who had just moved from Miami to play with Dreams. That was Will Lee, and he came up and did this gig with us. From our first note, Will and I were totally locked in, Will told me that I should move to New York City, and the rest is history. When I moved to New York City, I kept one foot up in the Woodstock area, and I kept going up there to do records. Will started slipping me in on sessions in NYC, and tons of work started happening. Will Lee and I

have been playing together for the last 50 years!

Grady Tate was my idol. I started doing demos with songwriters, live gigs, and subbing for everyone. There were a lot of great drummers working and doing sessions around town: Bill LaVorgna, Grady Tate, Buddy Saltzman, Billy Cobham, Alan Schwartzberg, Bernard Purdie, Yogi Horton, Mel Lewis...

I was so honored when Grady asked me to play on his vocal record *Master Grady Tate* in 1977. For a long time, everything I heard that had a great feel turned out to be Grady Tate playing drums. Whether it was on Broadway with Lena Horne, playing funky with Quincy Jones on *Smackwater Jack*, or swinging with Kenny Burrell. Whatever he was playing, he was supportive and music friendly. He was cool and had a great attitude towards all music, and his feel knocked me out. For a while a lot of jazz guys were trying to straighten out their eighth notes and be more rock-friendly, and many of them sounded uncomfortable, but not Grady, he made ALL music sound good.

MD: What was Bill Lavorgna like?

CP: Bill was larger than life, and his playing was bigger than life. He would play BIG fills going into the bridge like Gene Krupa would do. There was no subtlety with Bill. He was Liza Minelli's drummer, but sometimes he would just conduct, and he hired me to play drums. We did the *Concert for the Americas* in

that I didn't even make the first Brecker Brothers record, except for the single "Sneakin' Up Behind You." Harvey Mason made the rest of the record. I was already a huge fan of Harvey's, he's still one of my favorite players. Harvey has a light touch and funky foot. That was a big moment for me, I realized that I had to get my playing together, so I started practicing and reading everything. It didn't matter if it was a drum part or a trumpet part. I knew I had to get used to seeing different rhythms, odd bar structures, and different forms. I went back to records that I had grown up with Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Count Basie. But I listened from a new perspective. I tried to imagine what Duke Ellington handed Sam Woodyard, what Basie gave to Papa Jo, or what Dizzy conveyed to Mickey Roker? I wanted to figure out how *those* drummers created their parts, by the time we made the next Brecker Brothers record (called *Back to Back*.) I was ready, or at least as ready as anybody could be.

MD: Fortunately, this exact period is captured on a newly released CD called *The Brecker Brothers Live at the Bottom Line*.

CP: I could play from my heart, and I could get a good feel, but listening and learning this new music through reading charts was an adventure. Randy and (eventually) Mike were writing some really challenging stuff. Eventually, Mike and I moved into a building in the Bowery together because my girlfriend and I made too much noise tap dancing. I gave Mike a set of drums made up from my spare drums, it was a 24" bass drum, Gretsch toms, and a couple of different cymbals. He tuned my bass drum wide open— hearing him practicing was like hearing things for the first time. We would practice together all the time. He was a great drummer and could play all of the Elvin stuff.

MD: How did you become the drummer in Stuff?

CP: I met Gordon Edwards on a jingle date, (I think for Delco batteries) he had a band called Encyclopedias of Soul. They would play the late set at Mikell's until 4:00 in the morning. Everyone ended up at Mikell's for the late set. Jingle people and record people would come in and ask what you were doing tomorrow morning?

MD: Which would be in (about) four hours.

CP: Yup, I got a lot of gigs that way.

MD: How did Encyclopedias of Soul evolve into Stuff?

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Miami together with Lalo Schiffrin and Quincy Jones.

After I moved to New York, Don Grolnick, Steve Khan, Will Lee, and I had a band called the Carmine Street Band that worked around in the clubs. That was what became the first Brecker Brothers rhythm section. Mike and Randy Brecker started coming around, and they invited saxophonist David Sanborn, and Sammy Figueroa to play percussion. That became the beginning of the Brecker Brothers Band. In 1974, Randy Brecker started writing all this new and really hard music. In fact, it was so challenging

CP: After we got done with the jingle date, Gordon turned around and said, "You sound good 'Stuffy,' why don't you come up to the club tonight?" "Stuffy" was a term of affection if Gordon didn't know your name. I went to their gig, and there was no drummer, but there were some drums on stage. Gordon invited me up to play on "Rainy Night in Georgia," I knew that song, so I played what I remembered from the recording. The band was Cornell Dupree on guitar and Richard Tee on piano, Gordon playing bass, Charlie Brown on saxophone, and Queen Esther

and make it groove, that's how it started.

MD: Who was supposed to be the drummer that night?

CP: It was actually Herschel Dwellingham's gig, but he never showed, I didn't meet him that night. He was on Weather Report's *Sweetnighter*. At the end of the night Gordon says, "You keep doing your homework Stuffy," and he asked me what I was doing the following night, and from then on, I was the drummer.

MD: When did the Encyclopedias of Soul become Stuff?

CP: Once Esther and Charlie were phased

Mangione record *Alive!* with Steve and Tony Levin. I introduced myself and helped him with his drums. We started talking and became friends and I invited him to a Stuff gig. According to Gordon, he had already subbed, and they didn't like him. But it *must* have been somebody else because I can't imagine him sitting in with Gordon, Richard, and Cornell and *not sounding great*. There's also an interview with Gordon and he talks about the first time that Gadd hit his snare and Cornell and Gordon looked at each other and knew that was "it." At some point, Gadd



Morrow was the singer. They were all smiling as I went to leave the stage, but Gordon stopped me and asked me to play another tune. We played Stevie Wonder's "We Can Work It Out." Again, I started to leave, and Gordon blocked me. Then we played "That's the Way of the World," Jimmy Smith's "Back at the Chicken Shack," and some King Curtis tunes. I just played what I knew from the records, I knew the current hits, I listened to the radio all the time, so I just fell in. I didn't play anything jazzy, I tried to play simple

out, Eric Gale came in. We were able to get crowds playing instrumental stuff. Since Gordon was always calling people Stuffy, people started to say, "Let's go let's go hear the stuff." Gordon was insistent that the band was not going to be called "the stuff," it was just going to be called "the stuff," because Encyclopedias of Soul wouldn't fit on club marquees.

I ran into Steve Gadd at the Village Vanguard playing with Joe Beck and Joe Farrell. That was the first time I'd heard Steve. I'd been aware of the Chuck

came and checked out how I was doing the gig, what tunes we played, and the vibe. Then I went on the road with the Brecker Brothers, I sent Steve as a sub, and they immediately fell in love with him, *how could they not?*

MD: When and why did the double drums start with both you and Steve Gadd playing with Stuff?

CP: When I went on the road with the Brecker Brothers, I couldn't do some gigs and Steve subbed. I remember Gordon saying, "I can't take this anymore I want

both of you to do the gigs." That was fine with us, so we set up two sets and that was that. We started doing it with double drums and it was magical. We never discussed a part or what to play, we never discussed a single thing, it all just all fell together organically.

I had played drums with my three brothers, who all played drums, and my father plays drums. We had drum sets throughout the house and we were all always playing together. My mother played piano, and my fondest memories are with five drum sets going while my mother is playing "Willow Weep for Me." All of us were bashing like Bonham and my mom turns around and screams, "What about brushes?"

MD: Now things are making sense! I am fascinated by playing double drums, and you have done a lot of it. There is a John Tropea live record with Steve and Rick Marotta playing double drums that (along with the Stuff records with you and Steve Gadd) is one of my Bibles. Although you and Steve never talked about playing together, how did you approach it?

CP: That's a great record! We thought about serving the music. Richard's left hand, Cornell's rhythm playing, and Gordon's bass playing made it easy. Everybody was very respectful of the others musical domain. Gordon didn't want to get in the way of Richard's left

hand, and Richard didn't want to get in the way of Eric or Cornell. Stuff was very democratic and respectful, that was reflected in the personalities. I was the youngest guy in the band, and everybody was very nurturing to me, it was almost paternal. It was great to hear and play with another drummer of Steve Gadd's

We were trying to tell the story and hit the arc of the song even without hearing the lyrics. It was always about representing the arc of the story to present a comprehensive picture of the song.

caliber, I admire what he does and the absolute conviction that he has in everything that he does and plays.

MD: You and Steve have a very complimentary approach; how did you approach things differently?

CP: He had the drum and bugle corps and rudimental influence. I wasn't as adept at those things as him. I always think more about textures and shading more than paradiddles. I just never thought that way, the rudiments are very important, and I really admire his technique. But the more we played together, the more I admired

his conviction and his approach to the song. We shared that approach. In Stuff, we played instrumental versions of music like "Will it Go Round in Circles," "You are So Beautiful," and "Ode to Billy Joe." We were trying to tell the story and hit the arc of the song even without hearing the lyrics. It was always about representing

the arc of the story to present a comprehensive picture of the song.

Throughout my career I have done a lot of double drumming gigs. Rick Marotta and I played double drums on tune called "Mr. Butterfat" on the David Sanborn record *Taking Off*.

When I started the Boz Scaggs gig in 1978 and 79, Boz had Jeff Porcaro playing drums, but Toto was really starting to take off, so Jeff didn't want to do the Boz tour. Boz insisted that Jeff start the tour because he had played on "Lowdown" and "Lido Shuffle." Jeff Porcaro and I did



Deborah Chesher

Saturday Night Live together with Boz and he asked if I would be available for the tour. But Boz wanted Jeff to come out for the first month so we could play double drums and I could learn the gig, it was phenomenal! We both rented kits from SIR, and we each rented an extra 14 x 22 bass drum. Our bass drums had the front head off and we put the two drums facing each other and put a mic in between them, creating a deep 28 x 22 bass drum for each of us.

MD: Were you and Jeff doing the parts that were overdubbed on the *Silk Degrees* stuff like the hi-hat parts on "Lowdown?"

CP: Yes, I think there were some parts that we talked about on "What Can I Say?" that were overdubbed too. While we played together, I really studied how Jeff played those songs because I wanted to keep Boz happy after Jeff left. I consciously tried to "become" Jeff Porcaro for that gig. He had that same conviction as Gadd, and there was going to be tire tracks across your back if you went in another direction. I was just trying not to get that "over the top of the glasses look" from Jeff. His big glasses softened his demeanor a bit, but if he looked over them, his eyes would really bore into you. His dad had the same eyes, and the same look.

I also played double drums with Ringo while I was playing with Bob Dylan. That is another unforgettable double drumming experience. Ringo and Barbara were in the South of France vacationing, and he came to a Dylan show. I was traveling with enough spare drums to put together a second kit so I asked him if he would do us the honor of sitting in. We set up both kits, and after our opener Bob brought him out. He sat in for the whole show. Ringo was hearing the songs fresh, and he came up with these great parts. That "being a lefty playing a right kit" creates a unique thing in his playing. Even though "Highway 61" was basically a quarter note shuffle, Ringo was doing stuff on the ride cymbal and the "and" of three on the tom, all while playing the back beat on the snare and looking at me like, "Of course, what else would you play?" It was such an honor. He came a second time at that same venue, and he showed up at another gig in France, always asking, "Can we do it again?" By the end of those two weeks my jaws literally hurt because I was smiling so much. I was having a great time just hearing Ringo's approach to Dylan's songs. I don't know who was smiling more, Ringo, Bob, or me.

MD: How do you adapt to playing with percussionists?

CP: There are so many different approaches to playing percussion. I'll play with Manolo Badrena, Mino Cinelu, Café, or Ralph MacDonald completely differently. In general, I'll play a lot less, very dynamically, with a lower volume, and create a thinned-out part. But it all

There is a few others like Jeff Mironov, John Tropea, David Spinozza, and Buzzy Fieten, but there aren't many great ones. It's really important for drummers to lock in with the rhythm player. If the bass player is just playing roots, you can depend on the guitar player to create the motion. Whether he's doing the Motown "chinks" or playing a pattern— when he's



depends on the percussionist and what he's doing. If he's playing 16th notes or a pattern, I want to make that work and not duplicate what he's doing. I recently played with a percussionist with so many chops, I just played quarter notes. If a percussionist is playing a pattern on congas, I want to stay out of the way and make sure my bass drum is not getting the way of the low drum. If he's playing shaker part or something like that, I'll play much less on the hi-hat, or maybe not play the hi-hat at all. I want the whole to sound cohesive and not muddy.

MD: What was it like to lock in with one of the great rhythm guitarists ever, Cornell Dupree in Stuff?

CP: For rhythm guitar there are the greats like Cornell Dupree and Nile Rogers.

strumming a pattern, he's really dictating what you're going to play on the high end of the groove. If you subdivide or abbreviate according to that— THAT is what makes a great groove. That's what Tony Thompson, Nile Rogers, and Bernard Edwards had in Chic.

MD: In 1993, you even produced the last Stuff record called *Made in America* (A Remembrance of Richard Tee.) Although it doesn't have Richard Tee, that is one of my favorite Stuff records. What can you tell me about that?

CP: Thanks, that is a good record, we even played one my tunes. It was a real labor of love, I did a lot of work to make that happen. But it's not the same without Richard.

MD: What are some of your favorite Stuff

records or tunes?

CP: There are a lot of great tunes and playing on those Stuff records. Cornell's tune "Subway," Eric's tune "How Long Will It Last," Gordon's vocal on "Love of Mine" Richard's singing on "Need Somebody to Love," and his gospel piano on "Do You Want Some of This?" It was always a thrill to hear the band play some of my tunes like "Sometimes Bubba Gets Down." I actually wrote "You're a Great Girl" with Steve in mind, I wanted a fill that ended on the "e" of one.

MD: You did *Saturday Night Live* from 1986 to 1992, and did a record with GE Smith, TV is a whole different thing, what can you tell me about that experience?

CP: You always had to be ready to play NOW! You had to be on your toes, and open to any suggestions. That band was always fun with GE, T-Bone Wolk, and Dr. Leon Pendarvis. The band spent Thursday doing pre-records and doing some music for bits. Amazingly, many of the comics on the show always wanted to play

a great jazz drummer? We all know how it can *sometimes* sound when R&B, rock, or fusion drummers try to play jazz. It often sounds like someone playing "at" the music, from the outside in. But you avoided that and are playing from the inside out.

CP: Wow, thanks! There are actually two other records before this new one, the first one is *The Chris Parker Trio*, and then we did *Blue Print*. My trio is with pianist Kyoko Oyobe, and bassists Ameen Saleem or Michael O'Brien.

I had a desire to create that evolution. I felt pretty represented playing in a lot of genres, from the fusion of the Brecker Brothers to funk with James Brown, playing R&B with Ashford and Simpson, hip-hop with Salt 'n Pepa, to folky pop with Laura Nyro and Tim Hardin. But I grew up playing jazz and putting jazz groups together. So this has been less of a transformation, and more of a return to my roots. I wanted to honor the music and the drummers that I grew

many times and he's a great player, but he's a wonderful teacher! He has this gift to be able to patiently encourage you and admonish you at the same time, his observational skills are unmatched, and he's so patient.

MD: When you were returning to your roots as a jazz drummer, what kind of speed bumps did you encounter along the way?

CP: Probably the same as anyone else. I worked on my traditional grip, keeping the ride cymbal consistent and at the same dynamic while playing more dynamic comping patterns on the snare drum or between the snare and the bass drum. That's hard to do, and even harder to do correctly. It's easy to "fudge" it by playing quarter notes or turning the time around. Another speed bump was my tendency is to hit rim shots on the snare drum. I drove Rudy Van Gelder crazy on an Esther Phillips record, to the point that Rudy taped a big piece of foam on my thigh so that even though I was trying to hit a rim shot, my hand would hit the foam. Speed bumps are learned habits, and sometimes we need to break those habits. I had a lot of technical speed bumps, it's easy to play from your heart, but if you don't have the facility through rudimental work, and if you can't sing what you are trying to play, or hear it in your head correctly, it's just not going to sound good.

MD: How did you adjust your sound to play small group jazz?

CP: I used a different kit, I tuned much more open. I also chose different cymbals. I have a vast collection of cymbals and looked for the right ones that spoke to each tune. I used lighter sticks and focused on playing much more dynamically.

With R&B backbeat type music, you want the snare drum to be the focus, like Al Jakscon and Roger Hawkins. I altered that and rebalanced the way I approached the drums. A lighter touch helps the ability to create more texture. If you're playing softer you let the microphones do the work and you're able to create much more of a palette of colors.

I relate things to art because I'm also a painter. I relate drumming to painting, creating a perspective and putting things in the foreground. I think of creating a background, shading, what time of day it is, and where the shadows are coming from. All of that translates instantly into what's happening in music and how to

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drums: Phil Hartman, Dana Carvey, Mike Meyers, Dennis Miller, and some of them were actually pretty good.

MD: After *Saturday Night Live*, I kind of lost track of you, what did you do after that?

CP: I toured with Bob Dylan for four years, which I actually started doing during *Saturday Night Live*. But I had two young children at home, and I wanted to stay close to home for them. That's when I put together that last Stuff record. I started playing jazz with Japanese pianist Akiko Yano, who is a wonderful artist, and I put bands together like Joe Cool, Toph E and the Pussycats (with Ralph MacDonald and Will Lee,) East Coast Meeting, and now my jazz piano trio.

MD: Your new trio record *Tell Me* sounds like a 50's Blue Note record, and you are playing with complete conviction and authenticity. When I first heard *Tell Me*, I actually thought I had put in the wrong CD, because I had an (incorrect) assumption of how it would sound? How does a funk-fusion-studio legend (like yourself) reinvent himself or evolve into

up listening to such as Roy Haynes, Art Taylor, Philly Joe, Ed Thigpen, Jimmy Cobb, and Joe Morello. All of that music, those drummers, and especially the guys that played with Monk like Frankie Dunlop, Ben Riley, Art Blakey, and Shadow Wilson— that music is in my core, I grew up with it. So I assembled a great piano trio, I started writing new tunes and arrangements, and I started practicing a lot!

MD: What did you practice?

CP: Different comping patterns, different figures to play while playing the ride cymbal, playing brushes, and focusing on dynamics. I have stacks of books: Wilcoxon, Podemski, Paul Humphrey wrote a great book. I can't say I've been through the entirety of any of them, except *Stick Control*. Peter Erskine's books are wonderful, and John Riley's books are great. I've seen John so many times in clinics, I love his demeanor and how he focuses on what you're doing with the stick while you're playing. The way he communicates is amazing. I have seen him play with the Vanguard Orchestra

relate to it.

MD: How has your early training in playing a melodic instrument affected the way that you play the drums?

CP: A lot. Knowing where the melody is, what the what the roots of the chords are, how the arc of the song works harmonically— It helps to know where the song is going, where it resolves, and where it poses a question harmonically. Playing trumpet and euphonium, which is written a whole register down, has really informed a lot of things that I play. If somebody gives me lead sheet, I can follow what's happening harmonically as well as rhythmically.

MD: How do you compose?

CP: It's different all the time, I'll play something on piano, or make voice memos on my phone. I might create a bassline first. Sometimes I'm just walking in the street, and I hear a slice of conversation going and the cadence sticks my head, that becomes the cadence of a rhythmic idea. Sometimes I go to my practice room with my regular set which has five (or so) melodic sounds, and I'll do some exercise from one of Peter Erskine or David Garibaldi's books. I'll start practicing and something will come out of a little rhythmic or melodic thing on the drums. Sometimes I even sit down and write lyrics.

MD: Your briefly mentioned tap dancing earlier, do you tap dance, and has that had an effect on your drumming?

CP: My girlfriend (now ex-wife) tapped, and we used to jam. I played brushes for her and then she would keep time for me, we would trade fours or eights. We used to go to tap shows and hear Sandman Sims, Jimmy Slyde, and all these great dancers. Tapping is a very special thing, it's definitely the origin of brush playing. I actually did quite a few gigs with tappers Honi Coles and Brenda Buffalino. Steve Gadd, Roy Haynes, Steve Ferrone— all those guys tapped. There was a night in Mikell's where Steve Gadd, Steve Ferrone, Roy Haynes, Grady Tate, and me were all

tapping, doing time steps and buck and wings.

MD: When you were doing session work around New York City what kind of snares were you using back then, because as I understand it, most studios had their own bass drums.

CP: Many places had a bass drum which was good, but nobody had hardware, snares, or cymbals. So you had to bring a trap case.

MD: How about toms?

CP: Not many places had toms. If you went to Associated, the toms still had the same heads that Buddy Saltzman played.

calf heads that sounded really nice.

MD: What kind of snare drums were you using back then?

CP: I had I had a Ludwig Pioneer brass, and I had a 1920s Chrome over Brass Ludwig Super Sensitive. That was my main snare for a long time, I used a Zildjian Mini Cup Ride like Grady's. Later I got a Gretsch kit with 20" bass drum and Pearl fiberglass concert toms. When Steve Gadd saw my toms, he said I'll do you one better, I'll put bottom heads on mine.

MD: Did you have your Gretsch bass drum and the Pearl concert toms before Gadd?

CP: I think so.



Sometimes the top heads would be covered with duct tape. There were some really bad sets. Things finally changed with Yamaha drums. They made such an affordable set that sounded great. Studios paid the 5 or 600 bucks to have a set that everybody could play. Automated Studios got a Yamaha kit, the Power Station always had a good Ludwig set that Tony Thompson played. The Record Plant didn't have anything really good, Sound on Sound still has a Gretsch set that sounds great. National Edison had one really nice bass drum from the 40s with

MD: Chris Parker is one of the nicest and most modest drummers I've ever met, and that comes through in his drumming and his music. It is no doubt that other drummers, and other musicians love to play with him. But now, the conviction and authenticity found in his jazz playing and recordings has taken him to an entirely new level. *Tell Me* more indeed...

Check out Chris's drummer profile page, at modern drummer.com

