

Les DeMerle

Transforming Jazz

By Eric Everett

Les is More! Les DeMerle is a drum ambassador whose intensity and passion as a bandleader not only bubbles up with fiery playing on CDs like "Hittin' the Blue Notes, Vols. 1 and 2" or "You're the Bop!", but also when he's describing the multitude of projects that keep him busy - and young. Les is one of the last true big band leaders with a legacy that's earned him respect from both young and old jazz enthusiasts.

In this interview, Les shares with us his early beginnings with Lionel Hampton, drumming with Harry James, blazing new jazz-fusion trails with his group "Transfusion" in the '70s, reinvigorating standards with his wife, vocalist Bonnie Eisele, and the upcoming Amelia Island Jazz Festival. Maybe "More is Les"!





Classic Drummer: Les, how did you get into drumming?

Les DeMerle: I started playing when I was ten years old. I was born in New York, raised in Brooklyn and Long Island, and schooled at Eastern Military Academy. I began studying with Bob Livingston, a jazz drummer on the scene in New York. I had the jazz bug, but didn't know what drummers to listen to, except Buddy Rich and Gene Krupa. Bob opened up my perspective to all the great players and told me that even though I was only ten, I should get out and see Art Blakey and Max Roach.

So, I started researching these guys at a young age and eventually got a break by sitting in with Lionel Hampton's band when I was 16 at the Metropole Café in NYC. My Dad said, "If you let my kid play, I'll buy the whole band a drink." Lionel said, "I don't usually let anybody play, but if you can wait until 3 am, I'll let the kid play." So, later that night, I got to play "How High The Moon" and knew all the kicks from practicing and wearing out Hampton's records. My Dad said to Hamp, "Thanks, how much do I owe you?" and Hamp replied, "Hey man

that kid can play - forget the band and just buy me a double!" That's how it started.



After working with Lionel, I went to Nantasket Beach, near Boston, and at 16 years old did a band gig. I received a lot of local press, and Armand Zildjian, whose cymbal business was in nearby Quincy, came out to hear me. After that, I got an endorsement with Zildjian cymbals

and appeared in their catalogue as an official endorser.

CD: People may not realize that you replaced Buddy Rich as drummer for Harry



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James Big Band from 1970-82. How did that gig come about?

LD: After my years playing with Lionel Hampton and the Billy Williams Review, and as a featured sideman in New York City, I signed a contract with Willard Alexander, the biggest big band agent in the city. In 1967, Willard called me and asked, "Les, are you sitting down? I just got you a gig opening up for Harry James Band with the Sound 67 band" (which then became "Les DeMerle Sound 67"). At the time Sonny Payne, Basies's great drummer, was filling in playing drums with Harry James after Buddy Rich left to form his own band. As an opening act, Harry heard my quintet every night for three weeks, and we also shared

a dressing room while playing at the Riverboat. Harry approached me and said, "Give me your card and if we make a change, I'll call you." Never in my wildest dreams did I think Harry would call, but he did. I was the link right after Buddy and stayed on for 12 years.

CD: What was it like being in the drum chair for Harry James and replacing Buddy Rich?

LD: As I got to know Harry, I learned some interesting things about him. For instance, he was only 20 years old when he joined Benny Goodman and I was 23 when I joined Harry James Big Band, replacing Buddy. I was the luckiest guy in the world to get that chair. The fact that

Harry took a chance on me at a young age and didn't go with an older, more established drummer like, say, Louie Bellson, meant a great deal to me.

I had to learn how to play like Buddy, but Harry wanted me to put my own stamp on it. One of the things I was doing at the time was playing R&B and rock aggressively, and he dug the fact that I was doing that and could apply those styles to some of his charts. Harry was also an open-minded and creative musician. He listened to trumpeters like Clifford Brown and Wynton Marsalis. When he heard me play modern and over the bar phrases, he would actually turn around and smile, unlike many big



band leaders who would put the brakes on that. He encouraged me to stretch out, and I consider myself blessed to have been able to be with him for so long.

CD: That would explain your hybrid rock/jazz playing that evolved into the groundbreaking late '60s and '70s jazz-fusion albums, such as "Spectrum" and "Transfusion". How did you launch this historic project at the time?

LD: It started actually with my first album "Spectrum" in 1969 on United Artists. It's definitely a jazz album, with a lot of fusion and songs with "fusion" in their title, like "Fusion - Pro and Con".

When I put the band together, little did I know that guys like Michael and Randy Brecker would later become superstars, along with Joe Beck on guitar, Marvin Stamm on trumpet, and others. I called the best guys that I knew, and it was my first exploration into jazz-fusion.



Even today the Transfusion albums enjoy a cult following. Recently, the rapper OC sampled my drum rhythm on the song "A Day in the Life" from the Spectrum album. Even though I didn't see a penny from OC's success with the song, sometimes 'what goes around, comes around' and hopefully people will know my name and the younger generation will go back and check out what I'm doing and hopefully like what I'm doing now. Also in '69, I moved from New York to Los Angeles and received a call to work with Wayne Newton.

CD: Besides Wayne Newton, you also worked with the likes of Lou Rawls, Manhattan Transfer, and the great Frank Sinatra. What was it like working with him?

LD: I backed Frank when I was in Harry's band and did several TV shows. It was fun, like 'Old Home Week' with Harry and Frank, when we were all together. When I do my cruise ship gigs, I always show the videos of my earlier work with Harry James and Sinatra as part of my History of Big Band Drumming.

CD: What do you think of the new school of drummers who place a great deal of emphasis on speed and technique and less about groove and style?

LD: When you have a lot of chops, it's easy to overplay and lose focus of the basics. But friends of mine like Dave Weckl, Vinnie Colaiuta, and Steve Smith know when to balance their playing and make it fit the situation. But, there are other guys who push the envelope and play wall-to-wall 32nd notes. The cats that I love are guys who have good chops, but are also musical players and composers who play for the band. Tony Williams was an innovator; Elvin Jones had such a unique and identifiable sound.

It's also the pairings and relationships with their leaders - Tony with Miles and Elvin with Coltrane, Mitch Mitchell and Jimi Hendrix. And, I like to think that my work with Harry was a similar, great

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marriage. I was able to play with him for 12 years, and it goes beyond the music, to live with these people and know exactly what they want and be able to converse musically - and that only comes from long-term relationships. Unfortunately, many bands today don't stay together for very long anymore to form those ties.

CD: Let's discuss your drum endorsements over the years. Slingerland was your first official drum endorsement, correct?
LD: Right. When I was 18, I was on the road in Chicago with a local singer named Billy Williams. "Frank's Drum Shop" was run by Morrie Laschon, who had heard of me. I always played long drum solos in the shows and Morrie wanted Don Osborne from Slingerland to come hear me play. At the time I was playing a "Heinz 57" variety kit with a Gretsch tom, Ludwig snare, all mix and match. The Slingerland folks said give us all your drums and you can walk out of the factory with a new set of Slingerland drums. I stayed with Slingerland for several years after that. I started to do my first clinics at that time.

CD: Then you went with Pearl drums and you're still with them today - after 30 years! How do you explain that relationship's longevity?
LD: They make great drums and I like to be loyal to people who are loyal to me. In the 70s, there were only seven or eight of us with Pearl at the time. Since then, the company has grown and the drums have changed, but they still make a great product.

CD: What specific Pearl equipment do you use?
LD: I play four different Pearl sets - a jazz kit with an 18" bass drum, a big band kit with a 22" bass drum in the Masters series, and two other sets I keep at home, including a late 90's older Pearl MLX kit with a 20" bass drum. Between the four sets, I can pretty much have a drum set for all the different things I do.

CD: How about cymbals?
LD: I use A. Zildjian - two 17" crashes, 21 or 22" ride, 14" hi-hats, and 6, 7, or 8" splash cymbals. I also use some Zildjian K's and flat rides.

CD: Sticks and heads?
LD: Sticks - ProMark 7A "Les DeMerle" model and Remo ambassador drumheads.

CD: Tell me about your work with your wife, jazz vocalist Bonnie Eisele.
LD: After Harry James passed away in 1983, I put together another band in New York and started to go out on the road. When I was in Chicago, I took on a 14-week supper club gig. Bonnie was recommended not only as a great singer, but had studied in Brazil and played hand percussion. I thought, "I've got to call this girl." We started working together and fell in love and have been married for 22 years. We've also recorded

11 CDs together, including a new one, "Gypsy Rendezvous", which is inspired by Stéphane Grappelli and features guitar and violin, which is unique instrumentation for a drummer. I also close out the CD with a seven-minute solo in tribute to Max Roach titled "Drums To The Max".

CD: What other recent CDs feature the two of you?
LD: When our trio records are reviewed, like "Cookin' at the Corner, Vols. 1 and 2", writers always say the CDs sound bigger than before, even though it's piano, bass, drums, and Bonnie. Because of the shout choruses and the arrangement, and the intensity of my playing, the music sounds bigger. There's also "Hittin' the Blue Notes, Vols. 1 and 2", that feature larger ensembles.

CD: So, that's where your "Little Big Band" concept comes from?
LD: Yes.

CD: I know the Amelia Island Jazz Festival is near and dear to you and Bonnie. What are the highlights of this year's festival?
LD: Composer, pianist, and jazz legend Ramsey Lewis is set to headline this year's festival, to be held October 3-10, 2010, in Fernandina Beach. The festival will present "An Evening With The Ramsey Lewis Trio" on Saturday, October 9th. Jazz singer Steve March Tormé, son of Mel Tormé, will be backed by the Dynamic Les DeMerle Big Band on Friday October 8th.

CD: Besides giving drum clinics, you've written drum instruction books and done educational videos.
LD: I wrote "Jazz Rock Fusion Vols. 1 and 2" published by Hal Leonard that still sell consistently today. I also did two instructional videos for M & K Productions. And, I may go back and record some new videos that showcase the type of styles I'm currently playing, like Latin.

CD: Your signature style is showy and visual, like standing up, hitting and bending the cymbal.
LD: The one thing that I honestly feel when people see me play is they get to hear my love for the music. I express the way I feel on that particular moment in the music. All of the stuff that people might think is showy, like bending the cymbal and striking it, came about from going for a sound and if it happens to be visually effective, I'll leave it in - because it works.



CD: How has your playing style changed?
LD: I'm going back to traditional jazz and doing brushwork similar to Jeff Hamilton's trio. It's much more mature; I just wouldn't have done

that kind of vibe when I was wild and crazy in the 70s.

CD: Great drumming memory?
LD: One of my great experiences was playing with Harry James in 1974 at the Newport Jazz Festival. I played the song "Cherokee", and Buddy's big band was watching directly behind us.

CD: How do you explain your success in an environment where making a living as a jazz drummer is a noble challenge - is it your passion?
LD: You hit the nail on the head when you said "passion". For me, I'm happiest when I'm playing and making people happy with the music. I love having good bands, working with Bonnie, and getting great gigs. The key is to stay out there and play. Also what keeps me young is teaching at my home, giving clinics at schools, and talking about the roots of jazz drumming and proper tuning to young kids. As long as I'm involved with all age groups, that's what keeps me going and when you touch someone musically, that's above the money and everything else.

For more info on Les, visit www.lesdemerlemusic.com and www.ameliainlandjazzfestival.com



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