

## ***Dave Stanoch***

Interview by Mark Powers

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*What do Herb Ellis, Butch Vig, New Kids On The Block, Bob Newhart and Timbuk 3 have in common with Stanley Jordan, Shari Lewis & Lambchop, Hiram Bullock, Martin Short and Scott Henderson?*

*They have all had the distinguished pleasure of working with drummer Dave Stanoch. Hailing from Minnesota's Twin Cities, Dave tops the call lists of many local, national and international entertainers- likely due to his ability to fit into any situation that arises. He has been the perfectly-timed 'buh-DUM-dum-CHING' behind comedians Don Rickles and Joan Rivers; the rock-solid '2 & 4' driving Freedy Johnston, Sometimes Y and Col. Bruce Hampton; and now continues to stretch traditional and modern boundaries with his improvisational jazz trio, Triplicate.*



*A student of the masters, Dave has studied his craft with Max Roach, Elliot Fine, Alan Dawson, Jeff Hamilton, Ignacio Berroa and Chad Wackerman. Now a master himself, he is fulfilling his dharma, passing on his vast knowledge, as an instructor at the acclaimed McNally Smith College of Music.*

*As a former (and probably life-long) pupil of his, I have seen and heard the passion and level of well-rounded musicianship that Dave infuses into his playing. Those characteristics followed him into our private lessons, where he drove home points that were not only technical in nature, but also personal and professional, maybe occasionally reaching meta-physical. I learned that performing and sharing music was not about merely the aesthetic entertainment value. To Dave, the world is his instrument and his instrument is his world. He approaches both with deep respect and undeterred conviction.*

*Catching up to Dave in February gave me the opportunity to find out more than I could have imagined about the diverse influences and experiences that have shaped his playing and his life.*

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**WPR:** *Dave, I have spent a lot of time studying from you, watching you perform and hearing about your approach to the instrument, but I've realized that I know very little about what has brought you to where you are right now, how and why you do what you do. Although I've always enjoyed my lessons on the most recent polyrhythm or Latin groove that has you geeked out, I want to focus instead on the rhythms inside Dave Stanoch- what makes him tick. If you could, bring us up to speed on your musical background. Any influential teachers along the way? And why the drums in the first place?*

**Stanoch:** My parents, Lois & Bruno, gave my brother John & I the opportunity to take guitar lessons when he was 10 & I was 7. I basically took the lessons because my brother wanted to and I suppose I wanted to be like him. We did enjoy music quite a bit. We would listen to my folk's records— Louis Armstrong, Pete Fountain, Jim Reeves, and the like, and soon we had our own suitcase record player and started collecting 45's. We had Beatles, Temptations, & O'Jay's records, I can recall— anything that was a good song, in our opinion, from the mid-1960's to the mid-70's. I wasn't naturally talented on the guitar at 7, but I did learn the basic laws of music and how to read it. Playing guitar, my reaction time was slow and I had trouble holding the rhythm of things, so my teacher, Wally Bramburg, suggested I pay more attention to the drums and the beat on the records I was listening to.

Around that time my brother put together a garage band with a drummer named Matt Barber. I'd listen to them practice in our basement and watch what Matt was doing. When they'd take a break and go upstairs I'd try things I saw Matt do on his drums. I remember a great feeling of satisfaction and excitement when I easily executed the first couple things I tried. I was hooked! I was around 10 by then, and my mother entered me into our school band program on the drums. My first lessons were from my band director, John Wegner, and a professional Dixieland drummer named Bob Byrnes. They gave me a foundation. It turned out I had an aptitude for it, so my folks hooked me up with a more progressive teacher, Elliot Fine, a member of the Minnesota Orchestra, and co-author (with Marv Dahlgren) of 4-Way Coordination— a bible among drummers of my era. Elliot was a Godsend for me. He helped me get a handle on many rhythmic styles and soloing concepts on the drumset. He instilled a sense of imagination in me and the ability to analyze my playing through abstract thinking. It really opened up my ability to incorporate themes and variations in my playing and have a foundation to improvise from.

At that time, Elliot's partner in writing and section-mate in the Orchestra, Marv Dahlgren, ran the only drum shop in the Twin Cities and it was THE place to hang. It was there that I met a drummer named Phil Hey, who would become another life-long mentor and friend to me. Phil turned me on to a lot of music, and also helped me understand important things like how to tune my drums, what to listen for in selecting cymbals, and things like that. He would often let me sit in at his gigs and always gave honest criticism, which helped me so much and gave me confidence. By example, he interested me in the history of jazz and contemporary music in general, which I have found adds dimension to my approach in any situation I play in. I met a lot of great players at Marv's shop, including Gordy Knudtson, who plays a major role in my recent past and present, and the legendary Eric Gravatt, whom I even got an impromptu hand drum lesson from one afternoon when he was hanging out there too. My high school band director, Dan Geldert was a driving force as well. You had to be on top of your stuff to please him and he wanted a lot of passion and feeling in the music. I got a lot of big band ensemble experience with Dan and, thanks to him, even got to play with Ed Shaughnessy and open for Woody Herman at school concerts. When I was 16, I toured Europe with America's Youth in Concert, as principal percussionist in a symphony orchestra made up of high school and college kids from all over our country. We rehearsed, recorded an album and

played Carnegie Hall in New York City before leaving on a European tour through five countries. It was an incredible experience and after that, I knew the path I wanted to follow in life.

My college years were an extremely developmental stage of my growth. I attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, specifically to study with the great jazz & studio bassist Richard Davis. I had records with Richard playing with like . . . ALL of my favorite drummers. I knew how important the drummer/bassist relationship was in a band and had a feeling that UW-M would be a good move- it was, and then some! I learned a ton about playing music and carrying one's self as a musician from Richard. There was no B.S. about him and, like Elliot Fine, he had an infectious enthusiasm that I was drawn to. I had some friends in school I played with and learned a lot from, most are still active and VERY happening players. Outside of school I encountered another legendary drummer, Clyde Stubblefield, a resident of Madison, renowned for his extremely original and funky drumming for James Brown. Befriending Clyde was great luck for me, he's a natural at what he does and just a fun-loving guy. Watching Clyde play taught me how to project a superior balance of sound and how important the inner dynamics of a groove are in relation to the overall dynamic level you're playing at. Thanks to my gifted percussion professor Jim Latimer, I was initially enlightened to this 'inner dynamics' concept by the great Max Roach, who came to UW-Madison as an Artist-in-Residence. Lessons with Max never went where I thought they would, which always reminded me how much I had to learn. The same thing happened with the great Alan Dawson, who was also coming through as an Artist-in-Residence the same year. Alan loved Elliot and Marv's concepts of 4-Way Coordination and used Ted Reed's Syncopation text as a palate to apply the concepts for developing a very musical sense of phrasing in my grooving and soloing. In those years I had the opportunity to work and play with an amazingly diverse reservoir of talent centered in Madison including Richard, Clyde, pianist Ben Sidran, Timbuk 3's Pat MacDonald, Nirvana producer and Garbage drummer Butch Vig, and even a jam with saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell from one of my favorite groups, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

After that, I moved to Los Angeles, California and tried my hand at gigging around there and studied with Jeff Hamilton and Chad Wackerman. Jeff has remained a true friend. He really helped open up my sound by getting a looser feel with more rebound in my motion and his school of brush playing is as deep as it gets. Chad helped me with advanced concepts like playing through mixed meters and using odd groupings in my phrasing. Heady stuff, but he made it seem easy. I gigged around L.A. and found myself in the Gulf Coast after awhile, living in Houston for a minute, where at least I was close to Austin and New Orleans. From there I ended up doing a cruise ship gig out of Port Canaveral, across from the Cape, in Florida. The Bahamas, Mexico and Jamaica were the places we'd sail to. I had a very professional experience there in a showband with some terrific players from New York, New Orleans and L.A. I closed a lot of gaps between what I could simply comprehend as a player vs. really deliver on a bandstand, in a believable way, by playing and reading anything that came up, every night of the week, for almost three years. I eventually went from sideman to bandleader and got a lot of things together

on the business side of playing in the process, like rehearsing a band, organizing a set, hiring and firing, M.C.'ing a show, etc. I saved a lot of money, too!

In 1990, Gordy Knudtson, a truly innovative and inspiring player/educator, offered me a position on the percussion faculty at Music Tech of Minneapolis (now known as the McNally Smith College of Music). I returned to Minnesota and haven't looked back. My family is here and I've since started my own. I'm amazingly (and thankfully) very active playing all kind of things that interest me, for and with a lot of talented people (folks can find my resume for more name-dropping!) and the future continues to look bright. I work hard at my craft and I know I'm one of the lucky ones- the world may not know my name but my validation comes in seeing my wife and son happy in my home, a busy calendar on the wall, and knowing I make it all happen with a pair of sticks in my hand.

**WPR:** *Don't think that I didn't catch the Timbuk 3 lyric reference there! But seriously, that's not a shabby list of a teachers- Hamilton, Roach, Dawson, Stubblefield and Wackerman? Definitely a solid foundation there! And you are right, Elliot and Marv are both incredibly talented and giving individuals. In addition to them, who else would you consider to be major influences on your playing?*

**Stanoch:** Wow. Well, certainly everybody I mentioned in the last question, as well as the various groups that Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane had. (takes a deep breath) The Beatles, Stones, Who, Clash, Police & Led Zeppelin. Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Muddy Waters, The Band, The Meters, Little Feat, Frank Zappa, The Mahavishnu Orchestra, Herbie Hancock, Weather Report, Earth, Wind & Fire, Sun Ra, Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Steely Dan, the Astral Project, Dr. John, Baaba Maal . . . on and on- it's endless, really. (another deep breath!) Naturally, ALL of the drummers in all of those groups, as well as Art Blakey, Buddy Rich, Sly Dunbar, Jim Keltner, Billy Higgins, Ignacio Berroa, Bill Bruford, Steve Jordan, Doudou N'Diaye Rose, the cats in Los Munequitos de Matanzas . . . anyone who brings their own thing to the table and catches my attention.

**WPR:** *Any non-musician influences?*

**Stanoch:** Oh yeah . . . I often get into another frame of mind when I play, attempting to project through the perspective of artists from other mediums that I admire from my youth. Painters, sculptors, and filmmakers figure in there- the vividness of a Michelangelo or Stanley Kubrick, the slightly out of focus smear of Monet, the abstraction of a Picasso or Eicher, the snap and grit of Spike Lee. Comedians, too- the humor & timing of cats like Richard Pryor, George Carlin and Johnny Carson. Johnny Carson was influential just because of his love for jazz, which he exploited on his television show. When I was growing up you didn't have cable & satellite and all these outlets; it was Johnny Carson, Ed Sullivan, or later "The Midnight Special" or "ABC-In Concert." That's where I was first exposed to anything I didn't hear on the radio.

**WPR:** *The nature of our business certainly tends to create some unexpected, memorable moments. Can you recall any such unforgettable, almost unreal, experiences?*

**Stanoch:** A few favorite recollections . . . jamming with Ed Shaughnessy in High School and feeling the power of his drumming; Richard Davis helping me groove like I was rocking in a cradle with the authority of his playing, and inspiring me to play above myself on the bandstand; having Clyde Stubblefield ask me to drum for HIS band so he could step out front and sing; opening for Buddy Rich and learning that he dug hearing the group; and playing opposite Ringo Starr, with Freedy Johnston, at the State Capitol in St. Paul, when hecklers drove Freedy to dive into the crowd and fight! There was pandemonium as a result, and that remains my true Rock 'n Roll moment!

**WPR:** *One of your most recent projects is your jazz trio, Triplicate. Tell us about this ensemble.*

**Stanoch:** Triplicate is an instrumental collective made up of Joel Shapira on guitars, Bruce "Pooch" Heine on basses, and myself. We write our own material and also adapt classics in the literature of jazz repertoire to our liking. The sound is a reflection of the chemistry of our musical personalities and there are no rules guiding what we'll try. We're a true band and have been at it for nine years now, which is rare in the jazz world. We've just released our second CD, Day & Age, and, I believe, could hold your attention in our live performances.

**WPR:** *Aside from supporting many artists through the years, you have also had many opportunities to take on a leadership position. When handling such duties, how do you approach your role as bandleader?*

**Stanoch:** Triplicate is, as I mentioned, a collective, but I can apply everything I've learned about bandleading to it, it just has to fly with the other members. In situations where I truly am in charge, I basically attempt to function as a facilitator- get the right cats for the gig, let them do their thing and get out of the way. I chart and maintain the course; they can look to me for direction; and I write the check at the end of the gig.

**WPR:** *What other projects do you currently have in the works?*

**Stanoch:** I'm playing again with some old Madison friends, Dave & Sue Reiss, around the Twin Cities in the reunited Sometimes Y. It is a complete 180° turn from my jazz bag. We did an album last year and are starting a new one. The Y features Dave's great songwriting and can really rock in a happy sort of way. It has 80's rock & reggae roots- the first Y LP was produced in Madison by Butch Vig, in his early period. Dave & Sue are now neighbors of mine and it seemed natural when Dave wanted to rev it back up to give it a shot. We're having fun with it. I still do lots of shows and casual gigs around town; I've done a few fun recording projects recently and I'm busy promoting the new Triplicate CD with my wife Katy. We run Rhythmelodic Records, the independent label that it was released on. I'm also still busy on the faculty of the McNally Smith College of Music and am trying to finish a percussion method book that I've been writing and

refining for eight years now! My son Louis just turned two and Katy and I are unabashedly proud!

**WPR:** *Can you create a parallel between your role as a drummer and your role as a parent?*

**Stanoch:** Hmm . . . first thing that comes to mind, with my schedule, is that as a father, I keep pretty much the same hours as a drummer/educator- up late, up early!

**WPR:** *Is Louis drumming yet?*

**Stanoch:** He likes to bang around on my drums, of course- he sees it around the house with Daddy and because I'm a drummer people give him toy percussion presents, but it's nothing we're pushing on him. What's freaky is that he's got really steady time when he dances or bangs around! He also loves to sing, which he gets from his Mama, and he also enjoys the piano and xylophone!

**WPR:** *You mentioned teaching at McNally Smith College of Music, which used to be called Music Tech. How long have you taught there?*

**Stanoch:** I'm in my fifteenth year on the faculty there.

**WPR:** *What have you taken and/or learned from that experience?*

**Stanoch:** One thing is that, to be really effective in that environment, you need to be very clear on how to break down your playing concepts into clean ideas that can translate well to the students and be useful to them. In turn, this makes my own playing easier to express.

**WPR:** *I'm sure that you have worked with players of every ability level. Can you sum up, in one sentence, the most important thing(s) that an aspiring musician needs to develop?*

**Stanoch:** The ability to be honest and truthful to one's self, exercise discipline, and not take it all TOO seriously.

**WPR:** *What is the most crucial life lesson that music has taught you?*

**Stanoch:** If you suck, nobody wants to play with you!

**WPR:** *Ouch! Alright, we want the funniest Buddy Rich joke you've ever heard!*

**Stanoch:** You know, as complicated of a person as Buddy was with his phenomenal talent and legendary temper, it's just too easy of a mark to focus on that stuff as much as people do. Considering the broader measure of a man, I prefer to remember the stories I heard about him doing things like calling people on their racism. For example- using his muscle, along with Frank Sinatra, to help their pal, Sammy Davis Jr. to walk with dignity

through the front door of the Copacabana Club in New York in the 1940's- which Sammy, or any other person of color, was prohibited from doing at that time. You know? That takes balls and I admire that.

**WPR:** *Alright, no Buddy jokes from you. Quickly- choose one and explain why: Prince or Lenny Kravitz?*

**Stanoch:** Well, you know I'm from Minnesota, so there's no contest there! They're both admirable artists, anyway. Weird coincidence: I watched those two jam with Prince's band out at Paisley Park Studio one night some years back, which was surprisingly dull until all of a sudden, they kicked into "Jailhouse Rock"! Nobody expected THAT!

**WPR:** *Rock on. Okay- Sting or Peter Gabriel?*

**Stanoch:** That's one I'd like to ask Manu Katche!

**WPR:** *Cage or Schoenberg?*

**Stanoch:** Well, John & Arnold were kind of a mutual admiration club of sorts, weren't they? Cage became more rhythmically-driven than tonally-driven in his work as it progressed, so . . . maybe James Brown copped his famous "Give the drummer some" phrase from John Cage?!

**WPR:** To wrap things up, it's shameless plug time! How can the readers find out more about you, Triplicate and your other doings?

**Stanoch:** Visit my Web site at: [www.rhythmelodic.com](http://www.rhythmelodic.com). There's info on Triplicate, my wife Katy Tessman and myself. I'll also be ramping up an area there, focused on my work outside of Triplicate, as a performer and educator, very soon.

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selected Dave Stanoch discography:

"Day & Age" Triplicate (Rhythmelodic, 2005)  
"Distant Borders" (reissue) Axis Mundi (Worldview, 2005)  
"Be Happy" Sometimes Y (JaneBear, 2003)  
"Mississippi Suite" John Ahern Big Band (Sweka, 2003)  
"Live, Cookin' at the Dakota" Larry McDonough & Offbeat (LM Jazz, 2002)  
(self-titled) Triplicate (Rhythmelodic, 2000)  
"Fall" Katy Tessman (Rhythmelodic, 2000)  
"One Fell Swoop" Sometimes Y (JaneBear, 1984)  
"Mad City Jazz" Leo Maiberger, Ben Sidran, Richard Davis, David Stanoch (Interplay, 1983)