

# ROY HAYNES

A robust 78, one of the greatest drummers of all time still riffs up a storm and wows fellow musicians

BY SAM STEPHENSON

YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD of Roy Haynes, but you have almost certainly heard him. In nearly 60 years as a jazz drummer, Haynes has appeared on some 600 recordings, many of them classics. With Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie on 1951's stirring "Night in Tunisia," that's Haynes popping the drums, cymbals and metal rims. With Sarah Vaughan on "He's My Guy," Haynes' nimble swing complements her satiny voice. With Thelonious Monk on "'Round Midnight," with John Coltrane on "Dear Old Stockholm," with Lester Young, Bud Powell, Miles Davis, Stan Getz, Ray Charles and Chick Corea—on one historic recording after another, Haynes propels the music with an incomparable blend of spontaneous expression and sympathetic restraint. He is the "father of modern drumming," says the guitarist Pat Metheny. Haynes, says Corea, is a "national treasure."

But he's no relic. Now 78, Haynes has averaged more than 50 live performances a year over the past three years, playing in Paris, Rome, Tokyo, Istanbul, Madrid and many U.S. cities. He released a new compact disc this year, *Love Letters*, which *Village Voice* critic Gary Giddins described as "borderline miraculous," marked by "heedless joy" and "unbridled enthusiasm." Even Haynes is a bit surprised by all his energy. "When I was in my 20s," he tells me, "I couldn't even imagine that I'd be 78 years old and still playing, performing and innovating like this. I read something recently where somebody said I was pushing 80 years old. I stepped back and said, 80? It's hard for me to believe."

Though Haynes has played with legends, and their music was often revolutionary, he remains largely unknown outside the jazz community. That is partly because of America's curious taste for celebrities and fads, but also because of the way jazz history emphasizes stars and frontmen and overlooks sidemen, especially drummers and bassists. Then there's the appealing myth of the solitary artist, which Haynes does not fit. He may play in four-limbed flurries with more activity and intricacy than any drummer before him, but his real art is communication. "The thing that sets Roy apart from other musicians is that he listens so well," says the pianist McCoy Tyner, who played with Haynes in bands led by Coltrane in the early 1960s. "He teaches you to listen carefully and to respond accordingly, to put things in perspective, not to simply go out for yourself. He can do this in a quiet fashion accompanying singers or with those loose, powerful

polyrhythms of his that are so magnificent."

These days Haynes works primarily with two bands. One has stars in their 30s and 40s such as trumpeters Roy Hargrove and Nicholas Payton, bassist Christian McBride and saxophonist Kenny Garrett. The other has four up-and-comers in their 20s. One night at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago, after the young quartet played a blistering version of the Parker tune "Diverse," Haynes staggered up to the microphone in a faux daze. "Daaaaaamn!" he exclaimed to the cheering crowd. "These guys are hot, aren't they?" The musicians grinned. Haynes pointed to a wall-size poster of Parker (who died in 1955 at age 34) behind the stage and said, "You know, if Charlie Parker were to walk into this club right now and see me here playing with these guys who are 50 years younger than me, I think he'd smile. He'd dig it."

Haynes, who has a shaved head and is not tall, has the lean, muscular body of a flyweight boxer and looks decades younger than he is. When he walks, he springs forward on his toes, and standing or sitting, he sways, shifts and squirms, restless as a kid. His laugh is robust and warm, and his mind is quick and can be challenging.

One July day, my friend Ward Hendon and I drove Haynes in our rented Taurus from Albany, New York, to a jazz festival 30 miles away in Saratoga Springs, where he would perform. Hendon, a New York City attorney who doesn't usually hang out with musicians, attempted small talk while we were loading the car, asking Haynes if he'd remembered to bring his drumsticks. Haynes seemed flabbergasted: "What? Do I have my drumsticks? What do you mean? Would a painter forget his paintbrushes? I don't understand?" He muttered in mock disgust at his decision to ride with us, and for the next half-hour ribbed Hendon. "Jeez, man, come on, can't you come up with anything better than that? Did I remember my drumsticks?" Finally, Hendon blurted out, "Look, man, rookie mistake!" Haynes roared with laughter, satisfied that he'd at last provoked an honest expression.

That night, after Haynes walked off the stage to a standing ovation, he approached Hendon. "Noooooow you know where my drumsticks are," he said with a wide grin.

Haynes' directness is of a piece with his art. "Roy stays on the edge and that keeps him young," says bassist Ed Howard, 43, who played with Haynes for 15 years until 1997. "He never lets up. He's always pushing boundaries, challenging you, liv-

ing in the moment. He changes you musically and personally. He strips away your self-consciousness and makes you comfortable with possible embarrassment. He prepares you for anything that might happen. Some nights onstage he'll just take the microphone and give it to you and tell you to talk to the audience. You have to always be on alert."

Haynes is one of the few musicians still performing whose origins touch the very roots of jazz. Growing up in the Boston area, he played in bands as a teenager before landing his first major gig in 1945 at age 20, in New York City, with Luis Russell's big band. Russell had worked with the jazz pioneers King Oliver in the 1920s and Louis Armstrong in the 1930s. "Luis seemed impressed, and he believed in me," says Haynes. "I'll never forget one thing he told me. He said, 'Anytime you get lost, just roll.' That's when I learned there isn't a definite time with the music, just space. You didn't have to play only time signatures, you didn't have to hit the high-hat [cymbals] on two's and four's every time. You could be looser with the rhythms. But I also learned you had to have control and swing. Luis had a 17-, 18-piece band, and I had to have control to keep the band together."

Roy Owen Haynes was born in the Roxbury section of Boston in 1925, the third of Gustavus and Edna Haynes' four children, all sons. His parents had moved to the area from Barbados in the West Indies. His father worked for Standard Oil Company and liked to tinker with cars. His mother was a deeply religious churchgoer who did not allow secular music in the house on Sundays. Haynes' oldest brother, Douglas, served in the U.S. Army in World War II and died less than a decade after coming home. Another older brother, Vincent, who was a photographer, football coach and civic leader in Roxbury, died this past June at age 82. Haynes' surviving brother, Michael, 76, has been senior minister at Roxbury's landmark Twelfth Baptist Church since 1964 and served three terms in the Massachusetts state legislature.

Haynes was introduced to music early. "My father sang in a choir and played organ," he says. "We had an organ in our house when I was growing up. As a kid I was banging on everything around the house until I got a set of drums. I also studied violin, but I was a natural drummer, as they said in those days. My older brother Douglas was not a professional musician, but he was a student of music and he knew a lot of musicians. In the late 1930s he was a roadie for Blanche Calloway, who was Cab Calloway's sister." Douglas introduced Haynes to one of his heroes,

Count Basie's drummer Jo Jones, when he was still a teenager. "Jo's drums on the Basie record *The World is Mad* turned me on. When I heard it, I really knew *that's* what I wanted to do."

In 1947, at 22, Haynes left Russell's band and moved on to legendary saxophonist Lester Young; after two years, he briefly played with Bud Powell and also Miles Davis before joining up with Charlie "Bird" Parker, with whom he played for three years. "Roy was different," saxophonist Sonny Rollins, 73, recalls of the early years. "He was able to accompany Parker in the most wonderful way. He had his own sound and his own methods. I remember one night in particular when they were opening at some place in Greenwich Village opposite Art Tatum. It was the great Charlie Parker and the great Art Tatum on one bill." Haynes remembers the night. "That was at the Café Society in 1950," he says, adding: "Billie Holiday sat in with us. Ray Bolger was there and sat in with us too. He was the Broadway dancer who played the Scarecrow in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. He performed a few soft-shoe numbers while we played. Can you imagine?"

Those were jazz's golden years, before rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues splintered the audience, a period of constant innovation that gave rise to, among other things, bebop. Haynes was in the forefront. Traditionally, jazz drummers had been relegated to rote timekeeping—*ding-chicka-ding-chicka-ding*. But Haynes, along with other drum pioneers such as Jo Jones, Sid Catlett, Kenny Clarke and Max Roach, helped free the drums. Haynes extracted the rhythmic qualities from melodies and created new drum and cymbal patterns—*ding-chicka-pop-snap-chicka-tick-boom-ding*. Rather than using the cymbals as mere decorative accents, Haynes made them central to his rhythmic approach. His unique sound earned him the nickname Snap Crackle.

Haynes' work in the late 1940s and early '50s—heard on tunes such as Lester Young's "Ding Dong," Parker's "Anthropology," Powell's "Bouncing with Bud" and Davis' "Morpheus"—inspired a generation or two of artists. "Roy may have been the first avant-garde jazz musician, in terms of his freedom with the rhythms," says the drummer Billy Hart, 63. "He was so far in the future, way ahead of his time, but he was natural and traditionally grounded too."

A measure of Haynes' free-spiritedness is that in 1952 he *turned down* the drum chair in Duke Ellington's band, perhaps the most influential jazz orchestra in history. "I was with Bird and we'd just finished playing a concert at Carnegie Hall, which

was a double bill with Duke. I was living in the President Hotel on 48th Street, and Duke called me there. We just talked about a lot of things, my music, his music. But this new music was happening at the time, and I knew that if I went with Duke's band, there would have been some problems with some of the older members who weren't so hip to the new thing. Duke himself could deal with it, I'm sure, or else he wouldn't have wanted me.

"From then on," Haynes continues, "I would run into Duke at different parties and restaurants, and he would always remind me that I didn't join his band. He would make a joke of it. I thought it was so beautiful that he would do that. I remember one time I saw him in Washington, D.C. back during the Johnson administration. One of Johnson's secretaries was into jazz, and she would have these parties at her house. One night I was arriving at a party as Duke was leaving, and he mentioned it then too—that I didn't join his band. It must have been nearly 20 years later. So, that respect and that love, I felt like I was a part of Duke Ellington's thing, even though, you know, I wasn't."

Haynes joined Sarah Vaughan's band in 1953 and stayed with her for five years. An expressive musician can sometimes be stymied accompanying a singer, but Haynes fine-tuned his improvisations. "Sarah sang the slowest ballads of any singer, so I had to be patient," says Haynes. "But I also love lyrics and I love beautiful melodies, so I enjoyed listening to her while I was playing." Haynes' work on Vaughan's classic 1954 albums *Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown* and *Swingin' Easy* are masterpieces of complementary drumming. "The first thing Roy gives you is a sense of taste," Tyner says. "Even when he's giving you those loose, free rhythms that are so extraordinary, he's still listening to you and being tasteful and lyrical. It's awfully hard to describe how he achieves that balance, but I wouldn't be surprised if he learned how to do it while he was accompanying Sarah."

DURING HIS YEARS with Vaughan, Haynes bought a duplex in Hollis, Long Island, where he and his wife, Jesse Lee Nevels Haynes, raised two sons and a daughter. All three, now grown, still live in that same duplex with their respective families. (Haynes moved to another home on Long Island after his wife died in 1979. He has not remarried.) The middle-class nature of Haynes' family, like that of his parents, disavows the stereotype of the tumultuous, dissipated, often tragic lifestyle that is so much a part of jazz mythology.

But Haynes has been one of the hippest cats in the suburbs. From his father he inherited a taste for fine cars and custom-made clothes. Today, he owns a 1974 Brickland, a 1990 custom El Dorado, a 1998 El Dorado and a 2001 CL 500 Mercedes Benz. "My first car was a convertible Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight that I bought in the early 1950s at the same time Miles Davis bought his first car, which was a Dodge convert-

ible," he says. "Miles and I used to race our cars through Central Park at night with our tops down. I remember Miles used to tell girls"—he mimics Davis' famous hoarse whisper—"Me and Roy Haynes, we like to race around Central Park smashing up our cars.' It was a wild, hip time." In 1960, *Esquire* ranked Haynes as one of the best-dressed men in America, along with Fred Astaire, Clark Gable and Cary Grant.

Haynes left Vaughan's band in 1958, and his work over the next decade was documented on dozens of influential recordings. By now, he had mostly dispensed with bar lines—the musical measurements that dictate a song's structure—and interacted with his band mates even more freely. Previously, drummers generally waited until the end of 16 bars to play a "fill," a pattern of drum figures. But Haynes would put a fill anywhere. "Before Roy, you could always distinctly hear the break when a drummer switched from keeping time to improvising a dialogue with the other musicians," says drummer Victor Lewis, 53. "Roy blurred the border. It was revolutionary. To be able to play as freely as Roy without disrupting the flow—while actually swinging like hell—is walking a fine line. He found a way to do it better than anybody else."

Another uncanny Haynes feat is to project his sound without being loud. His percussion seems to well up from all corners of a room. That may be difficult or impossible to hear on recordings, but seldom fails to impress musicians who share the bandstand with him or hear him live. "What Roy has as a musician is a very, very special thing," says drummer Jack DeJohnette, 61. "The way he tunes his drums, the projection he gets out of his drums, the way he interacts with musicians onstage: it's a rare combination of street education, high sophistication and *soul*."

As it is with many innovators, the initial reception to Haynes was mixed. In the spring of 1958, while he was playing with Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot Cafe in Manhattan, saxophonist Johnny Griffin took Coltrane's place in the band. Griffin, who would move to Europe in 1963, remembers his first time playing with Haynes. "The band was cookin', but Roy was busier than most drummers back then, and I wasn't used to it," Griffin, 75, says on the phone from his home in France. "Coming off the stage one night, I said to Thelonious, 'Man, your drummer here, doing that ding-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling-a, don't you think your drummer is a little bit too busy back there?' Thelonious just looked at me. Then he finally said, 'Hmmmm, if you don't like it, you talk to him yourself.'"

"I went out back and found Roy," Griffin goes on. "I said, 'Roy, man, you know, this ding-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling-a. Don't you think you might be just a bit too busy, man?' Well, Roy just blew up on me. He went off. He said, 'Why, I played with Charlie Parker, I played with Lester Young, I played with Bud Powell, I played with Sarah Vaughan, I played with all these cats and nobody ever complained about my playing.' I said, 'I'm sorry, Roy. Please forget I said anything.'"

A few nights later, Monk, Griffin, bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik and Haynes were in the kitchen in between sets, and Monk, an oracular figure known in the jazz world as a man of few words, revisited the subject. “Thelonious started rubbing his chin whiskers like he was going to say something,” Griffin recalls. “He sat back and kept rubbing his whiskers. Then, he said, ‘Hmmm, Johnny Griffin ain’t scared of Roy Haynes.’ That’s all he said. We all looked around at each other. Then, we all broke out hysterically laughing. It was the funniest thing.

“Once I got used to what Roy was doing, I realized how wonderful it was,” Griffin says. “He was completely different from anybody else. The slightest idea of anything on the bandstand would set him off on a different rhythmic and percussive course, but he always swung so damn hard. It was quite beautiful, and Thelonious loved it. He would say, ‘Roy is like an eight ball right in the side pocket.’”

“Haynes defines the Monk experience,” says Hart, recalling the live recordings that Haynes made in Monk’s band (with Griffin) in 1958, released as Monk’s albums *Misterioso* and *Thelonious in Action*. “He shared Monk’s vision for both tradition and originality. Roy’s improvisations on those records are true genius, so lyrical, so melodic, but also so advanced. It’s like he could see into the future. If you take the music he made with Monk and add the music he made with Coltrane and Chick Corea in the 1960s, you’ve got the whole range of American music history wrapped up in one man, Roy Haynes. That much genius . . . it’s hard to imagine. I normally don’t talk like this, but I mean every word of it.”

HAYNES’ INFLUENCE has reverberated through several generations of drummers. The novelties that confounded Johnny Griffin nearly five decades ago have been rubbed smooth by familiarity. The marvel is that the septuagenarian Haynes still wows cutting-edge musicians. In 1997, he cut short a vacation in Barbados to fill in for Tony Williams nine days after Williams died at age 51. The gig, slated for the Catalina Bar & Grill in Los Angeles, was going to be canceled. But when Haynes agreed to fill in, the trio’s other members, pianist Mulgrew Miller and bassist Ira Coleman, decided to play.

Jim Keltner, an L.A. session drummer for 35 years, attended the performance with Charlie Watts, drummer for the Rolling Stones. “Charlie and I could not believe our eyes and ears,” says Keltner, 61. “It was magical. I was focused on Roy, and I noticed that he wasn’t playing the high-hat at all, . . . just playing ride [cymbal] and snare [drum]. It was so free, so mesmerizing, just watching him be so loose and relaxed. I’d never heard a trio play like that in my life. You wish that people who don’t know anything about jazz had been there. It was very powerful.”

“It was one of the greatest musical experiences of my life,” says Miller, 48. “I had never played with Roy before, and I was a little apprehensive, but after the first eight bars of the first tune I just smiled and said to myself, ‘This is going to be all right.’” Coleman, 47, adds: “It felt like we were dancing

up there. I’ll never forget how visually present Roy was. He kept constant eye contact with us, as opposed to a lot of other players who close their eyes or sink into themselves. He was looking at us and smiling at us the whole time. It meant, ‘I am listening to you, I hear you.’”

ROY HAYNES is receiving some of the acclaim due him from a wider audience. In 2002, he was honored with two nights of tribute concerts at Lincoln Center in New York City. This past March, Haynes’ 78th birthday bash was held at the Blue Note, the famed Manhattan jazz club. Flowers and gifts filled his dressing room. Many notables showed up—pianist Cecil Taylor, drummer Andrew Cyrille, saxophonist Joe Lovano. Also present were Haynes’ grown children: Graham, a cornetist, Craig, a drummer, and Leslie Haynes Gilmore, a legal secretary. Her son, Marcus Gilmore, then 16, played a drum solo as his grandfather stood offstage smiling proudly. “That was my best birthday present,” Haynes says.

Musically and physically, Haynes seems to resist the passage of time. Backstage at the jazz festival in Saratoga Springs, singer Cassandra Wilson quizzed him about his diet and exercise habits, wanting to know how he stayed so fit and vibrant. Haynes, sporting a visor and dark sunglasses, only mentioned a ten-speed bicycle that he rides “once in a while.”

When I ask Haynes about his music, he is hardly more forthcoming. “My music grows, but it doesn’t change,” he says. “I try to find ways to sort of fit the atmosphere whenever I am playing. To me, music is music. I go by the feeling of what I enjoy and what I like to do. I try to stay fresh. When leaves come out on the trees each season, they are new leaves. They are the same leaves, but they are really not.” Haynes pauses. “That’s all I’ll say. I’m not the kind of person who likes to analyze, analyze, analyze. I mean, you are sitting here with a guy who has been playing this music for 60 years. Man, that’s something, you know?”