

Clyde Stubblefield

John Bonham

Max Roach

UnBeatable

Drummers usually sit in the back and keep the beat, but there are many who have stood out—musicians who demand our attention for their power, technique, creativity, groove, and swing. We asked some top industry folks to name their personal drum heroes and define what makes a drummer great.

By Ken Micallef

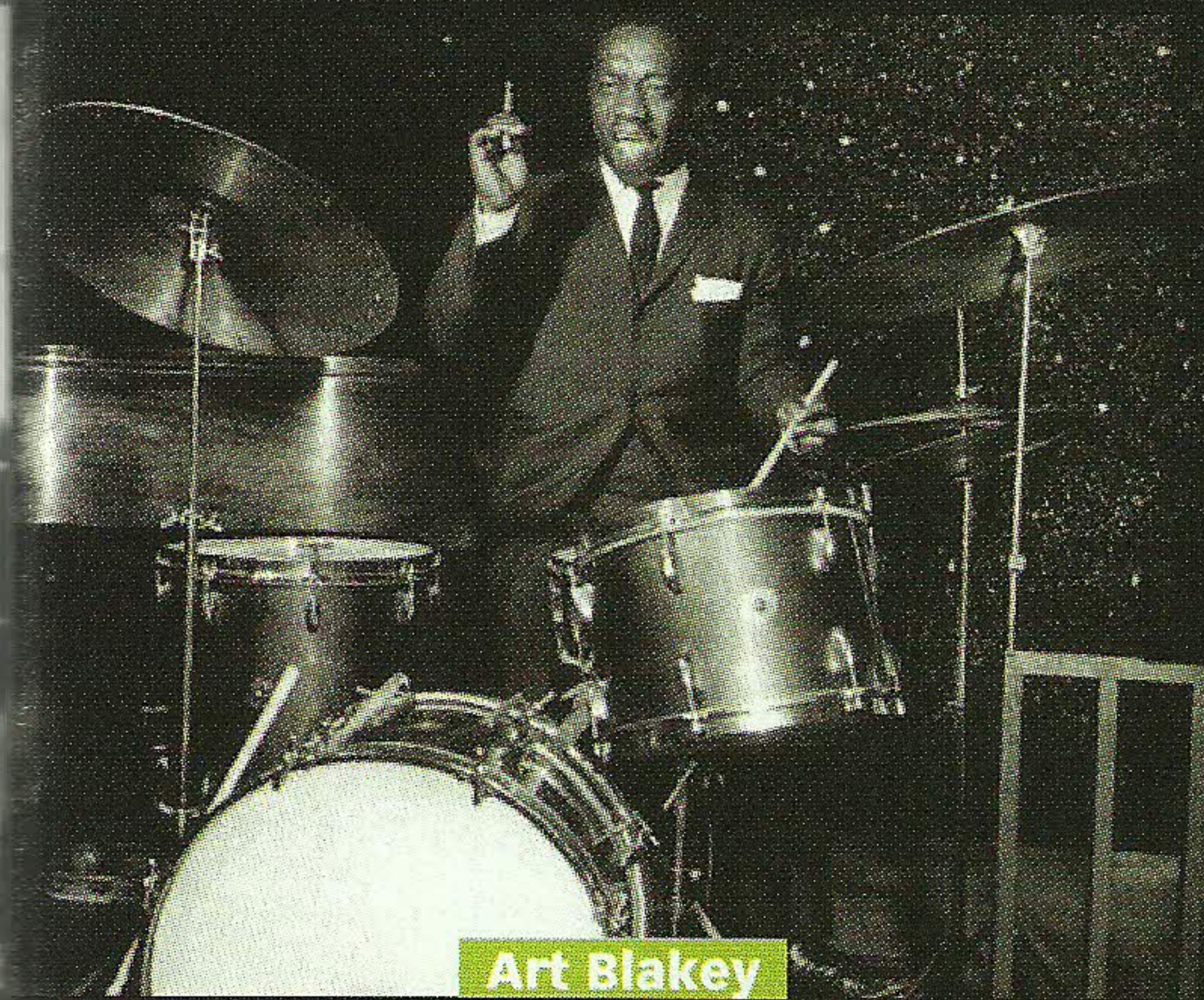
Every drummer has his or her hero, be it classic rocker John Bonham or Tony Williams for his aggressively swinging jazz. Some insist that Billy Cobham is the preeminent fusion drummer of all time, while funk fans won't leave home without downloading Bernard Purdie or Zigaboo Modeliste to their iPods. Buddy Rich is the most cited drummer among the old school, and Vinnie Colaiuta gets endless props as the man most likely to invent a new drumming lexicon. You get the picture: Get a bunch of drummers around a practice pad and the opinions are gonna fly as to who is the greatest drummer ever.

While it may be politically or musically incorrect to say so, in every drummer's heart of hearts one drummer is the reigning master supreme, the one with the fastest hands or most agile feet, the drummer who plays with such astonishing power, or the artist whose ideas are pure poetry on the set. What does it take to be the world's greatest drummer? Is power the prime prerogative (as with jazz great Art Blakey?) Or is it about the talent to create flawless accompaniment within a pop song, like Beatle Ringo Starr? Perhaps improvisation and the ability to perform under fire is most important (think Max Roach or Elvin Jones). What about stunning technical ability, ala Terry Bozzio and Mike Portnoy? Maybe your idea of greatness is embodied by James

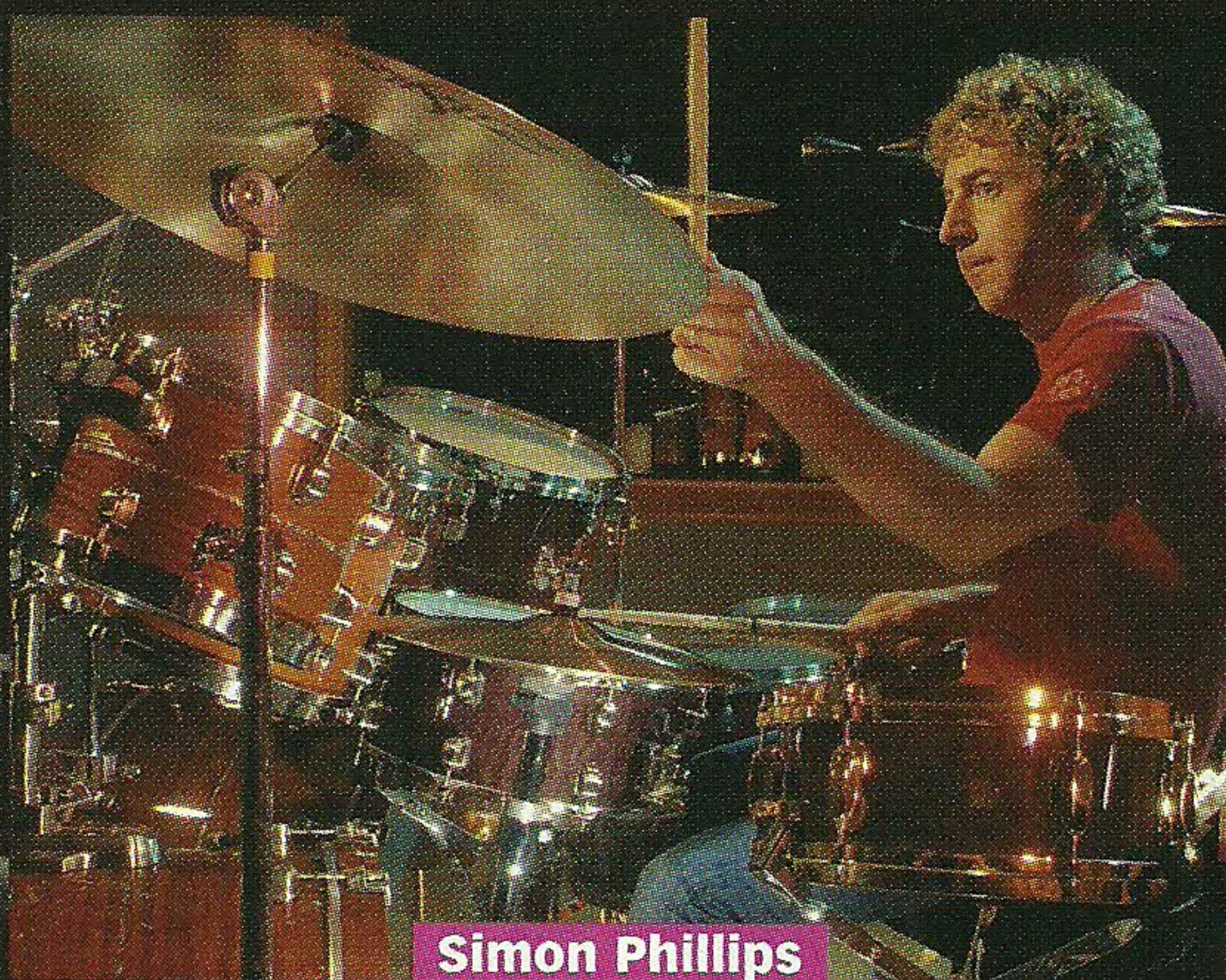
Brown's groovalicious Clyde Stubblefield, or the rock steady pocket developed by Kenny Aronoff, or the sheer madness of the Who's Keith Moon. Given these criteria, who is the greatest drummer of all time, the unqualified numero uno? *In Time* posed this tough question to a variety of drummers, educators, and industry professionals. There was no clear winner, but as you will see, certain drummers take the poll positions.

"There are only a few virtuosos," says Stanley Clarke, one of the preeminent electric bassists of all time. "Guys like Billy Cobham, Tony Williams, Buddy Rich, and Louie Bellson. These guys play great drums, but they also have a real vision. To lead a band with a weird instrument like a bass or a set of drums takes a certain type of individual. Steve Gadd and Dennis Chambers have made some great music, but they are not solo artists. Billy and Tony had that vision. And that takes a lot of courage. I really respect that."

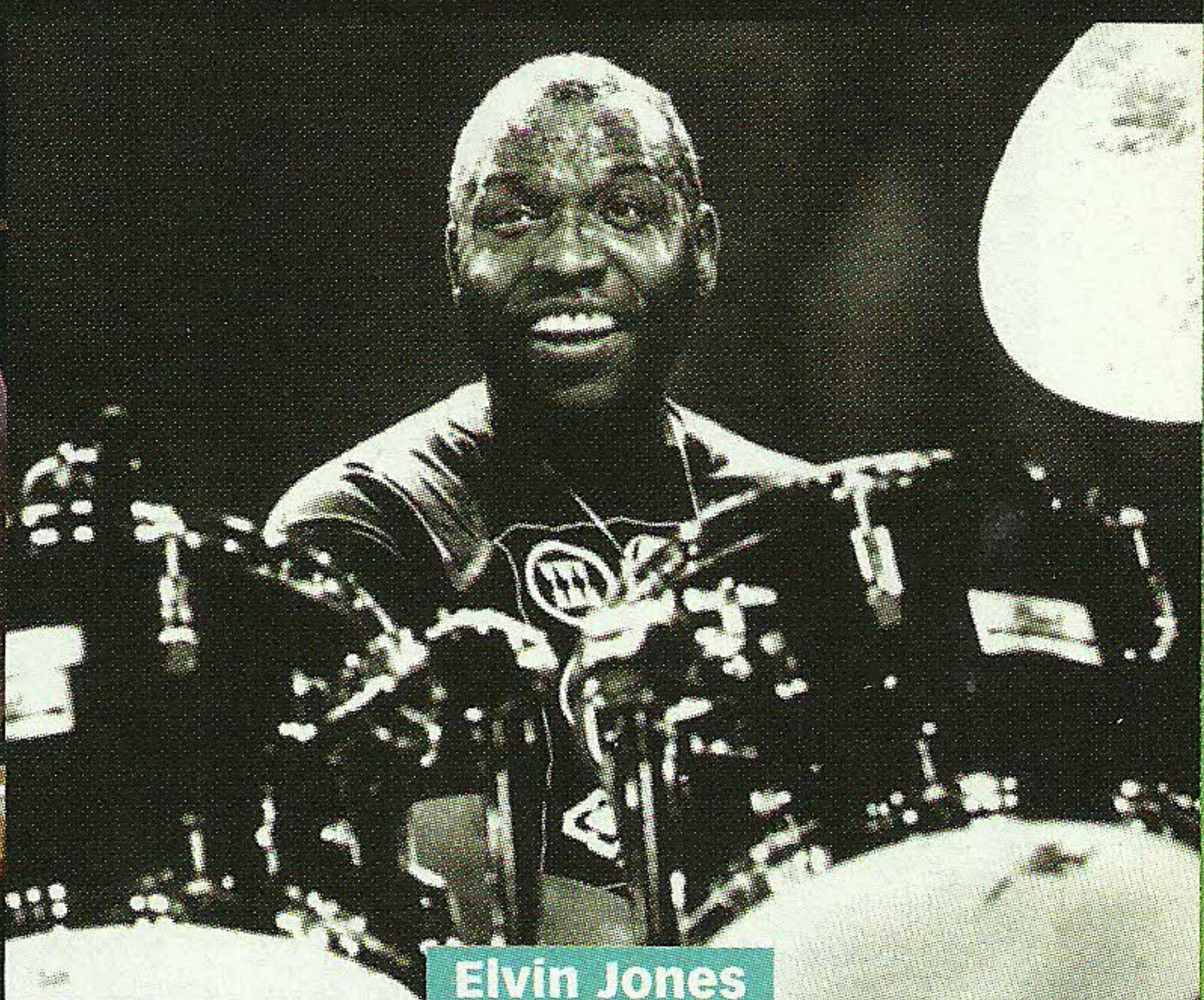
"Music is not a sport," insists Simon Phillips, who has manned the drum throne for The Who, Jeff Beck, and Joe Satriani. "It is not always a question of being 'the fastest' or 'the loudest.' It is more about being a well rounded musician with a feel and approach for whatever the music style he or she is playing. Of course I like to see a ripping technique from a player—but it has to be used in a musical way with feel and groove and attention to the musical setting."



Art Blakey



Simon Phillips



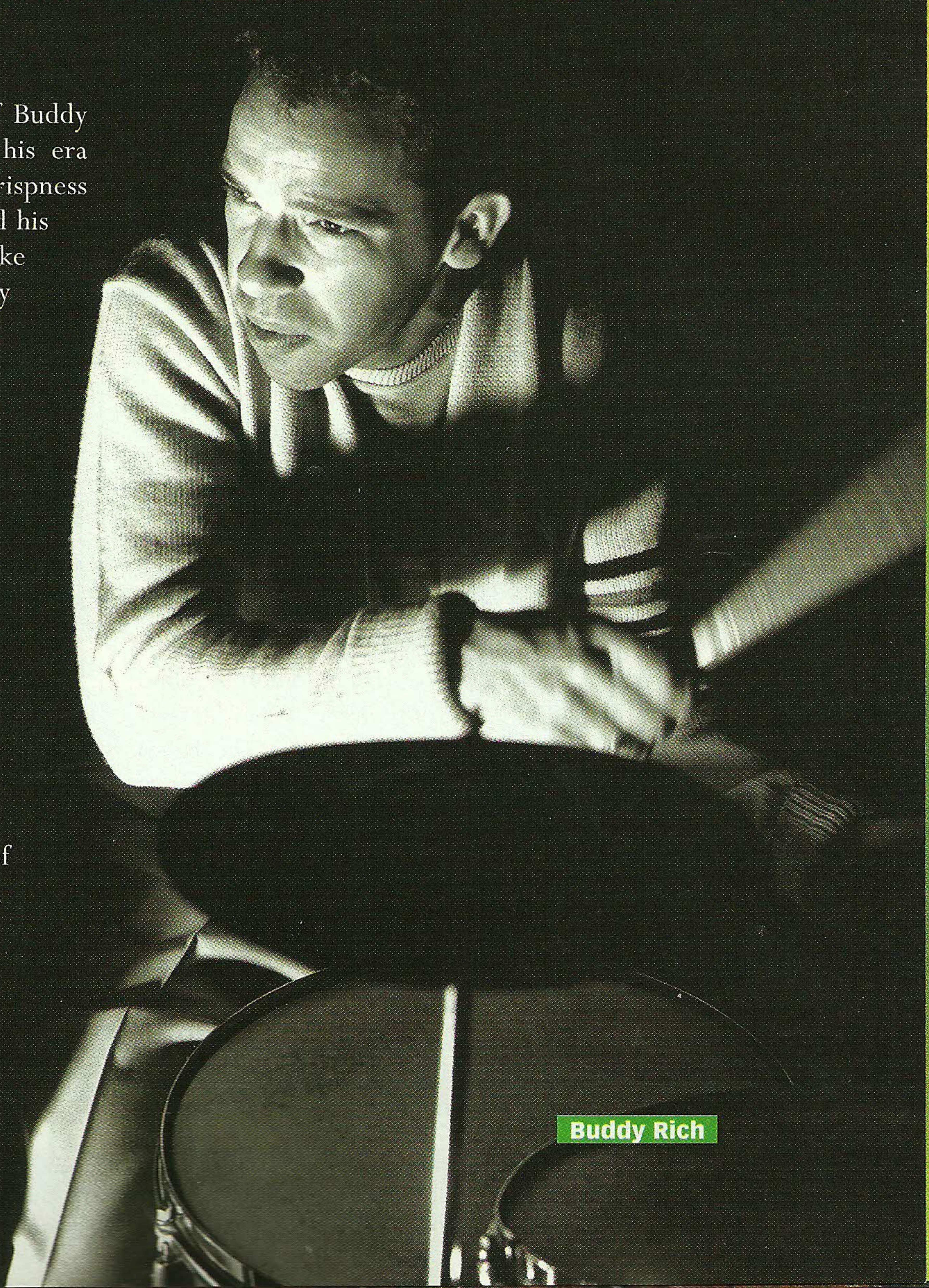
Elvin Jones

Drummers

Simon cites three drummers as all-important. Of Buddy Rich he says, "There were many other players of his era (1940s, '50s) who were phenomenal, but Buddy's crispness won me over. His swing and groove were so deep and his unfaltering technique is still to this day unmatched." Like many rock drummers of the '70s, Simon also loved Billy Cobham. "Billy had the power of a rock drummer and yet he used jazz tuning. But he made it work. He was loud, his groove was deep and he had the best mix of rock, flash, funk, and intricacy. Many rock drummers were in awe of him and yet he came from a jazz and Latin background." Finally, the great Tony Williams inspired Simon very much. "I didn't understand what Tony was about when I first heard him playing fusion with Lifetime. I had to learn how to listen to Tony. Sometimes I couldn't get what he was going for but he was so musical and so fluid. Percussion is the only instrument I know of that cannot sustain, except for the sustain of a tom tom or cymbal or a bass drum. The only way to 'sustain' is to play it—to trick the listener. And Tony was the master of this."

Today's busiest session drummer, regardless of genre, is Vinnie Colaiuta (Faith Hill, Megadeth, Sting, Herbie Hancock, Frank Zappa). Drummers are in awe of Colaiuta's reading and studio skills, his groove, immaculate technique, his innovative use of metric modulation and his innate flexibility.

"His development of the rhythmic language is second to none," says Kim Plainfield, Faculty Chairman at New York's Drummers Collective



Buddy Rich

PHOTOS: ART BLAKEY: FILE PHOTO; SIMON PHILLIPS: FILE PHOTO; ELVIN JONES: UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE; BUDDY RICH: © MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE



Neal Peart

Neal Peart “plays his parts perfectly. You can play one of his beats alone and know what song it is.”—Pearl Percussion Marketing Manager and clinician Glen Caruba

and Associate Professor at Boston’s Berklee College of Music.

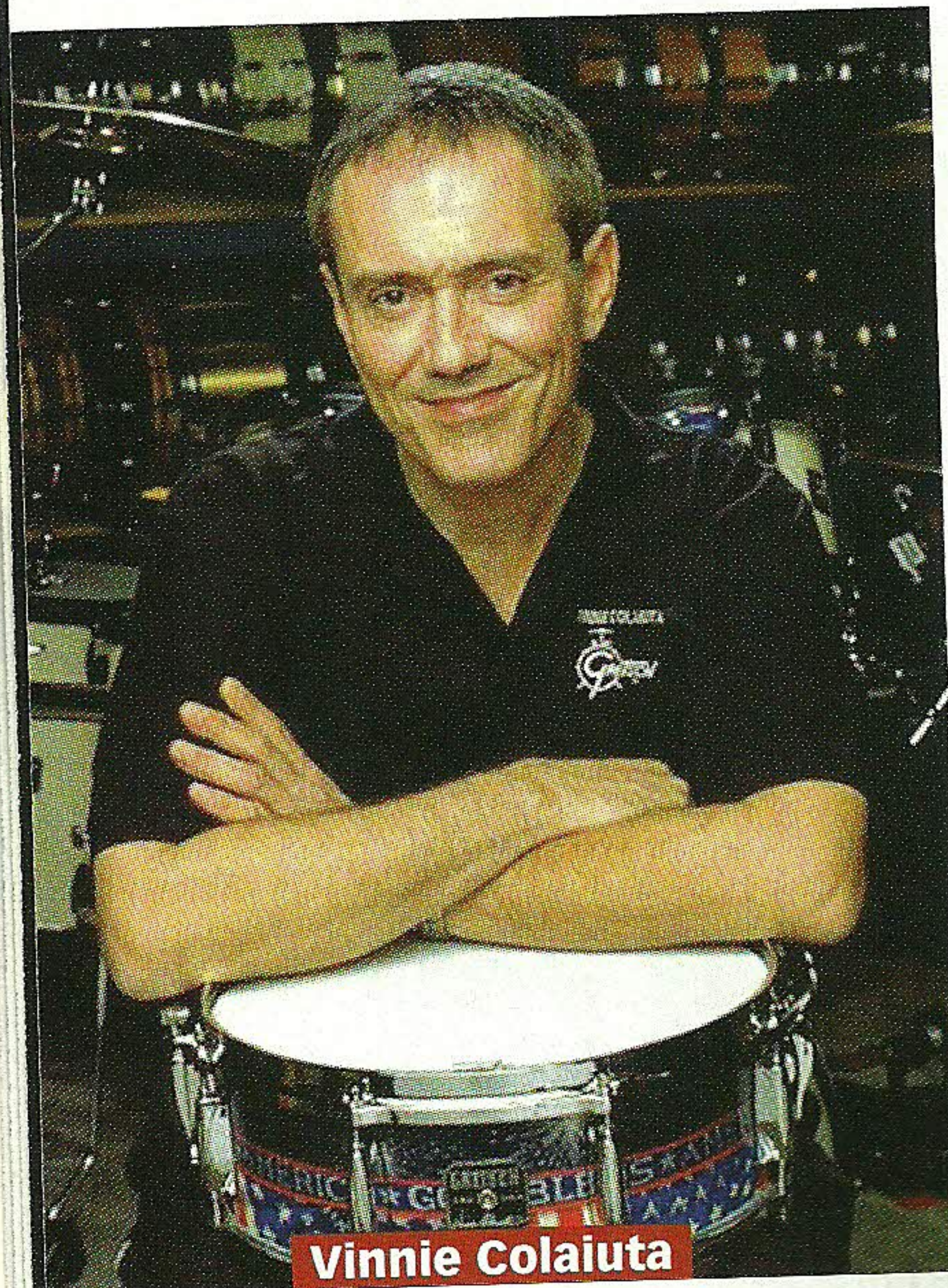
Others, like Pearl Percussion Marketing Manager Glen Caruba, have favorites within every style.

“Buddy Rich is my all time favorite. His playing was so filled with chops and precision that he set the bar for every drummer whether they know it or not. In metal, it’s John Bonham. His sound has been sampled and imitated but his groove is what made him such a special talent backing the prodigious metal icons, Led Zeppelin. Neal Peart from Rush is the obvious choice for rock. He continues to inspire so many drummers to go for the ‘big kit’ with a plethora of drums and percussion effects, and he plays his parts perfectly. You can play one of his beats alone and know what song it is. For fusion, of course, Vinnie Colaiuta—a blistering array of chops with inimitable feel.”

“My choices have little to do with technique, per se, or power,” says Paul Siegel of Drum DVD producers Hudson Video. “They have everything to do with musicality, expression, nuance, and emotion. Though it’s not realistic to talk about the ‘best drummer’ or even the 50 ‘best’ drummers, here are my favorites:

Steve Gadd, Al Jackson, Jr. (Booker T and the MGs, Al Green), Bernard Purdie (Aretha Franklin, Steely Dan), Roger Hawkins (Aretha), Joseph “Zigaboo” Modeliste (The Meters), Levon Helm (The Band), Earl Young (R&B great), and Shannon Powell (New Orleans master).”

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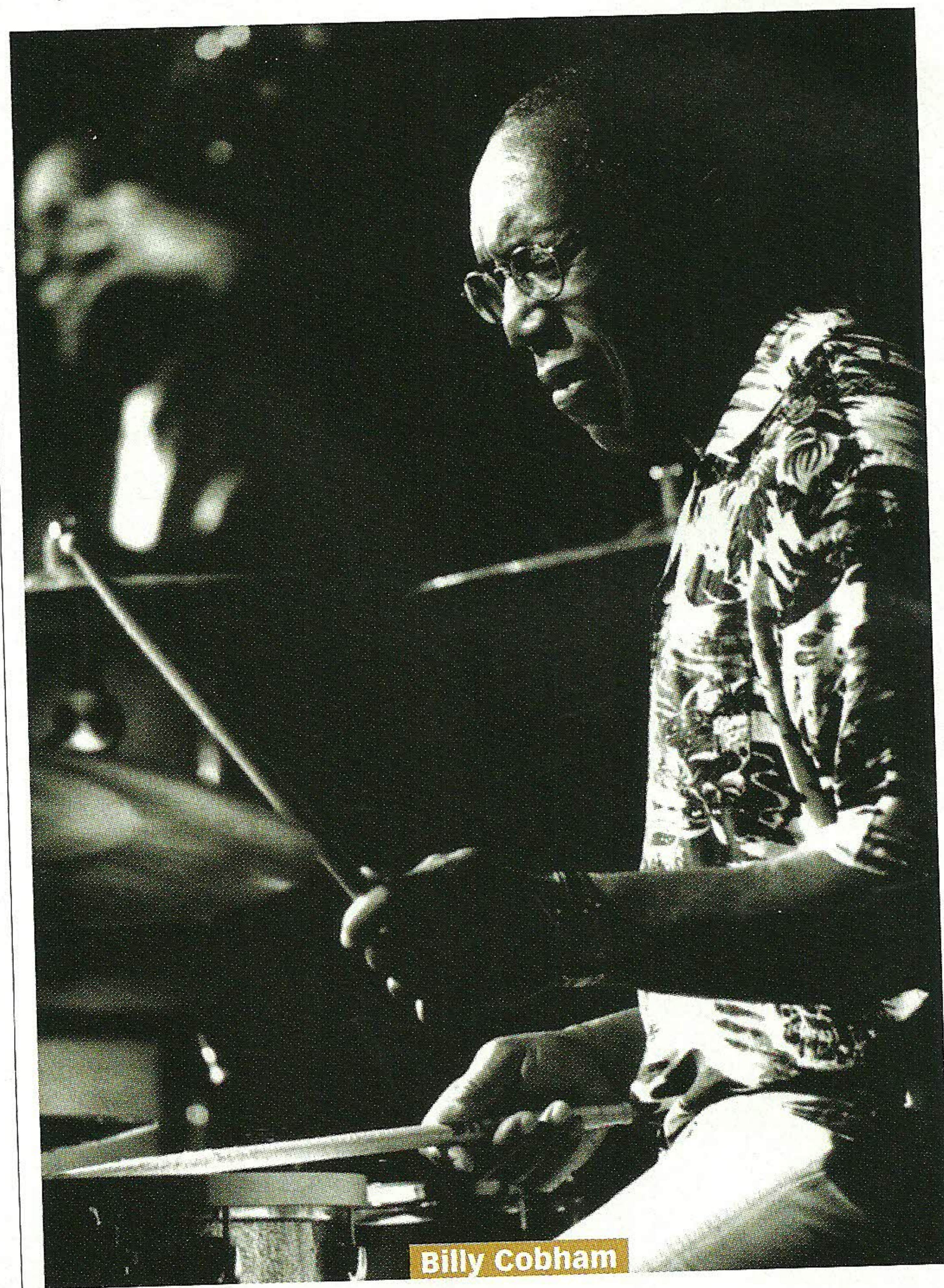


Vinnie Colaiuta

“You could indeed make the claim that Buddy Rich is the greatest drummer ever,” says Neil Larrivee of Vic Firth. “Buddy sounded like no one before him or after. And what he did to put the drum set on the map may be unparalleled. How many other drummers were regular guests on the *Tonight Show*?”

In the 1990s one drummer played with such finesse, power and creativity that he created a league of followers branded “Weckl clones.” Jazz-fusion master Dave Weckl is both a great drummer and a seasoned bandleader, a man with vision.

“I have a real problem with the labeling of ‘greatest’ and ‘best’ because this is an art form, and to me there is no such thing,” Weckl emails while on tour with Chick Corea. “We can all learn from everyone. I feel that putting the classification of a hierarchy of certain drummers is misleading and not fair to a lot of players that were burning but maybe never got recognition. I also feel that due to all the internet forums and chat rooms, that people spend way too much time ‘debating’ who’s better instead of spending the



Billy Cobham

time in the practice room, getting better themselves. In my opinion, we’d have a lot more great drummers out there, or at least more great ones to come, if that were the case.”

Practice makes perfect. As does innate talent, perseverance and instinct. The greatest drummers have all these attributes in spades. But like Thomas Edison once said, “Genius is 1% inspiration, and 99% perspiration.” So get to work on your own number one rating!

The Best Drummers

DRUMMER	CLAIM TO FAME	LISTEN TO:
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ROCK

John Bonham	Huge beat, inventive rock rhythms, long solos	Led Zeppelin: How the West Was Won (Live)
Ginger Baker	Polyrhythms and jazz-tinged improvisation, loping tom fills	Cream: Wheels of Fire
Keith Moon	Bombastic total kit involvement, pounding bass drum and smashing cymbals	The Who: Who's Next; Quadrophenia
Ringo Starr	Creativity, playing to the song, distinctive fills	The Beatles: White Album
Stewart Copeland	Reggae in rock time feel, odd time signatures, polyrhythms	The Police: Regatta De Blanc; Outlandos D'Amours
Mitch Mitchell	Groove, filling space between guitar and bass	Jimi Hendrix Experience: Axis Bold as Love; Are You Experienced?
Neil Peart	Huge kit, complex parts	Rush 2112
Ian Paice	Incredibly fast hands, seamless turbocharged rock drumming	Deep Purple: Burn, Made in Japan; Machine Head
Virgil Donati	Drummer as pure soloist	Planet X Universe
Charlie Watts	Fluid groove that plays off the rhythm guitar	Rolling Stones: Sticky Fingers; Exile On Main Street
Bill Ward	Titanic heavy metal sludge	Black Sabbath: Paranoid; Master of Reality
Bill Stevenson	Powerful punk rocker	Black Flag: Slip It In
Lars Ulrich	Arms like whips, seminal metal machine	Meatlica: Master of Puppets
Terry Bozzio	Speed, creativity, and use of electronics	Frank Zappa "The Black Page"; TerryBozzio: Nine Short Films
Simon Phillips	Progressive/fusion drummer with serious rock & roll style	Pete Townshend: White City; Jeff Beck: There and Back
Carl Palmer	Blazing single stroke rolls and orchestral approach	Emerson Lake & Palmer: Tarkus
Bill Bruford	Art rock drum icon brought jazz sensitivity with a classical approach	King Crimson: Lark's Tongue in Aspic
Danny Carey	Tribal rock rhythms, hypnotic grooves	Tool: 10,000 Days
Dave Grohl	Beat of doom, powerful fills	Nirvana: Nevermind
Vinnie Colaiuta	Master of metric modulation, session ace	Frank Zappa: Shut up and Play Yer Guitar; Sting: Mercury Rising

JAZZ

Dave Weckl	Incredible precision, odd meter displacement	Elektric Band: Eye of the Beholder
Buddy Rich	The original big band monster, incredible technique	Buddy Rich: Mercy Mercy (Live)
Gene Krupa	Passion, power, and big band groove with Benny Goodman	Benny Goodman: Carnegie Hall 1938
Art Blakey	African intensity and jazz fire; great bandleader	Jazz Messengers: Witchdoctor; Ugetsu
Philly Joe Jones	Royalty of 50s jazz, swing and grace under fire	Miles Davis: Milestones
Tony Williams	Fusion innovator combined jazz with rock energy	Miles Davis: Four and More; Tony Williams Lifetime Believe It!
Elvin Jones	Triplet feel mastery in jazz context	John Coltrane: A Love Supreme
Brian Blade	Keeper of the Elvin Jones flame	Brian Blade Fellowship: Perceptual
Bill Stewart	Fantastic articulation, expression and agility	Bill Stewart: Telepathy
Louie Bellson	Master of big band innovation	Duke Ellington: Uptown
Jeff Watts	Ferocious jazz power and technique	Branford Marsalis: Braggtown
Billy Cobham	Extending Tony Williams' innovations into the jazz rock realm	Billy Cobham: Spectrum
Jo Jones	Inventor of the modern usage of the hi hat, swing-feel titan	Jo Jones Trio

STUDIO

Hal Blaine	Massive tom fills, goliath big beat	Phil Spector 20 Greatest Hits
Kenny Aronoff	The ultimate pocket for pop and rock	John Mellencamp: Human Wheels
Jim Keltner	Studio versatility and delicious taste	Steely Dan Aja
Jim Gordon	Touch and timing, ideas and power	Derek and the Dominoes Layla
Steve Gadd	Highly developed and sensitive interpreter of wide range of styles	Steely Dan: Aja ; Chick Corea: Three Quartets
Jeff Porcaro	Plays the perfect rock groove	Boz Scaggs: Silk Degrees, Steely Dan: Gaucho, Katy Lied
Roger Hawkins	Powerhouse deep feel-good groove	Aretha Franklin Aretha's Gold

FUNK

Al Jackson, Jr	A beat that's steady as an atomic clock	Al Green: Let's Stay Together
Bernard Purdie	The funk groove of doom	Aretha Franklin: Live at Fillmore East
Jabo Starks & Clyde Stubblefield	The men that made James Brown get down	James Brown: Soul Pride: The Instrumentals
Andy Newmark	Graceful technique amid deep funk backbeat	Sly Stone: Fresh; Neil Larsen: Jungle Fever
Yogi Horton	Funk, funk, funk, funk	Diana Ross: "I'm Coming Up"
Zigaboo Modeliste	New Orleans groove merchant	The Meters: Look-A-Py-Py
Steve Jordan	Urbane funk grooves and no-nonsense time feel	John Mayer: Continuum
Greg Errico	Funk innovator	Sly and the Family Stone There's A Riot Going On
Ahmir Thompson	Contemporary hip hop and programming scholar	The Roots: The Tipping Point

LATIN

Robbie Ameen	All around Latin master and flexible feel player	Robby and Negro: Live at the Third World War
Horacio Hernandez	Popularized clave cowbell on the left foot	Michael Camilo: Live at the Blue Note
Edison Machado	The original Brazilian jazz innovator and creator of the modern samba	Edison Machado E Samba Novo
Airto Moreira	Brazilian percussionist and jungle madman	Return to Forever: Light as A Feather