

# W

hile working as an editor at *Modern Drummer* magazine in the 1980s, I came up with what I thought would be an easy way to interview Steve Gadd. I would just make a list of tracks he had recorded with prominent artists and ask him to describe how he came up with the drum part to each one. Making the list was easy; there were so many artists and recordings from which to choose, as he was one of the busiest studio drummers in New York. So, armed with my list and a tape recorder, I met with Gadd at a Chinese restaurant in midtown Manhattan.

# Steve Gadd

By Rick Mattingly

I quickly discovered that my idea wasn't so great. Instead of philosophizing about his approach to the drum parts he had created for classic tracks by such artists as Paul Simon, Chick Corea, Steely Dan, Carly Simon, Paul McCartney, George Benson, and countless others, Gadd attributed his inspiration to the same basic source for all of them: "I just listened to the music and tried to play something that fit," he explained.

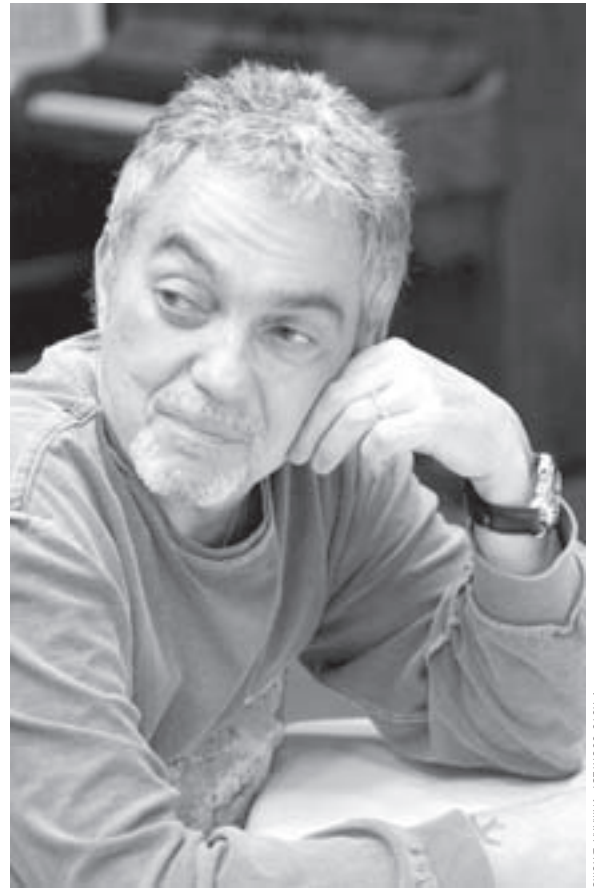


PHOTO COURTESY YAMAHA DRUMS

As a writer looking for a lot of words to fill up an article, I was frustrated that Gadd wasn't supplying me with detailed reminiscences about how his classic drum parts had developed. But I gradually came to realize that he had, in fact, revealed the "secret to his success." Like all of the best art, a seemingly simple approach resulted in something quite profound.

A short time later, Vic Firth told me of his first meeting with Gadd at a concert for which an "all star" percussion section had been assembled. "We were all going to play together on a piece in 3/4," Firth recalled. "We had a rehearsal on a Friday night, and Gadd just played a basic 'boom chick chick' through the whole thing. I thought to myself, 'This is the famous Steve Gadd everyone is so excited about?' The next morning we had another rehearsal, and Steve did the exact same thing. I

thought, 'All those people coming to hear this guy are going to be disappointed.'

"That night at the concert, Steve played brilliantly," Firth said. "Every note he played fit the music perfectly. I then realized what he had been doing at those rehearsals. Instead of coming in and trying to impress everybody with his chops, he was listening to the music and finding out where there was space for him to play and where there wasn't. By the time we got to the concert, he knew exactly what that music needed."

It sounds so simple: Just listen to the music and play something that fits. But in order to participate in musical conversations and make articulate musical statements, one must have a wide musical vocabulary from which to draw. Some of Gadd's success at coming up with memorable drum parts can certainly

be attributed to his mastery of a variety of styles, including jazz, rock, and funk, which has enabled him to work with artists ranging from jazz guitarist Jim Hall to rock guitar icon Eric Clapton.

"I love those different styles, so I did go after playing those kinds of music honestly and with a lot of love," he told me. "I didn't try to play all those different kinds of music just because of jobs that were coming in. You've got to love the music first."

Gadd's love of music goes back a long way. Born in Rochester, New York, on April 9, 1945, Gadd began playing drums at age three. "My uncle Eddie fostered my interest in drums," Gadd recalled in a 1978 *Modern Drummer* interview. "He gave me a pair of sticks and showed me how to handle them. We'd sit together and play along to records on a piece of wood."



PHOTO BY RICK MARTINIGLY

Steve Gadd on the set of his first DCI video shoot in 1983.

Trumpeter Chuck Mangione, who also grew up in Rochester, recalls meeting Gadd when he was very young. “My first memory of Steve is that our dads would take us to Sunday matinees to hear jazz groups that came through town, and we’d both get to sit in. Steve was amazing at the age of eight. He was fundamentally sound in every area of the drums.”

Gadd started formal lessons at age seven, and during his childhood he studied with Bill and Stanley Street. He also studied tap dancing, which landed him a guest spot on the original *Mickey Mouse Club* TV show. After high school he enrolled in the Manhattan School of Music in New York. Two years later he returned to Rochester and transferred to the Eastman School of Music, where he studied with John Beck. During that time he worked with Chuck and Gap Mangione, and also gigged frequently with organ trios.

After college, Gadd spent three

years in the Army, where he played in a big band. After getting out of the service, Gadd lived in Woodstock, New York, for a while, playing with a group of musicians who had gathered there that included vibraphonist Mike Mainieri. “I first heard Gadd on a recording session for Gap Mangione,” Mainieri recalled. “I remember coming away thinking, ‘That drummer was extraordinary.’”

Several of the musicians, including Gadd, formed a group and moved to New York City to try to get a record deal. “One of the members was bassist Tony Levin, who I had gone to Eastman with,” Gadd explained. “He had been in New York for a couple of years and made friends with people in the record-

ing business. He was recording and he recommended me. That led to my first jingle, and then my first record date. The thing that leads to your next thing is how well you did on whatever you just finished. There’s no secret; you just do the job. It’s honest. You don’t have managers and P.R. people to help you. You get called for something, and if you do a good job, you might get called for something else.”

When he started doing studio work, listening to playbacks was a revelation for Gadd. “When I first came to New York, I was heavily into Tony Williams and Elvin Jones,” he recalled in ’78. “I tried to play that way to the point where I would almost force

it. I was in great shape technically and approached playing like it was the last time I would ever play. The studios gave me the chance to hear that stuff back and realize how totally out of context it was. It may have been good drumming, but it certainly wasn’t good music.

“You have to see the truth in the simpler ways of playing. That was a real challenge to me. I realized that technique doesn’t mean shit if you can’t play a backbeat in a place that fits and lock it in. I had never thought about that before because I didn’t grow up playing rock. I grew up playing pop. I heard kids who didn’t have my technique, but they could lay down a backbeat that would kick ass. I started practicing playing uncomplicated things and solid time. Playing as simply and unnoticed as I could became as challenging as playing at a high energy level.”

Gadd also learned to have a positive attitude and keep an open mind—even if someone made a sug-



Mid-1980s

gestion that seemed stupid. “If someone asks me to try something, I’ll try it,” Gadd said in the 1983 interview. “You have to allow people the chance to hear what it is they’re talking about. Let them hear how stupid the idea is, or, let yourself learn that it’s *not* stupid. Either way, it works out and the job is taken care of. I’m not there to prove a point. I like to learn; I just have to let myself. One of the worst things that can happen is to have preconceptions about music before you’ve heard it.”

The New York music scene was extremely diverse in the early 1970s when Gadd arrived, and he quickly became enamored of the opportunities to play different styles of music. “It took Steve a while to adapt to all the different styles, because he was a bebop drummer,” Mainieri remembered. “In those days, Steve was the last guy you’d call for a funk date. But he had a desire to learn, and with his technical ability, once he started playing funk, it didn’t get much funkier than that.”

In a 2004 *Modern Drummer* interview, Gadd told John Riley that when he first moved to New York, he was particularly impressed with the way Rick Marotta could lay down a groove. “Having come from the background I came from and then hearing that groove, I was inspired to technically emulate the jazz guys but to put some of that stuff in a great pocket,” Gadd explained.

Gadd’s interest in combining jazz with groove led to his playing on numerous albums in the “fusion” style that was popular in the mid-’70s. He toured with an early version of Chick Corea’s Return to Forever band, but never recorded with the group. He did, however, appear on several of Corea’s solo albums over the years, including *The Leprechaun*, *Friends*, and *Three Quartets*.

“Chick’s music was always so great to play,” Gadd told me during an interview conducted a few hours after his PASIC ’95 clinic. “None of the

drum parts were written. I always read Chick’s piano scores so I would know what he was playing, and then I could pick and choose what accents I would play. I had to devise ways so that I wouldn’t have to turn pages. I’d have the first page taped to the wall to my left, and then it would go across the front of my drums and around. I’d tape it up between a couple of mic’ stands or have it hanging from cymbal stands. The pages were all over the place. It was challenging music in an inspiring way. The music just played *me*.”

In 1975, Paul Simon released a song called “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover.” The track begins with a funky, military sounding groove that, to this day, is Gadd’s best-known recording. “I used to warm up with that kind of stuff in the studio,” Gadd recalled. “I don’t remember if I suggested it or if Paul heard me doing it and suggested we try it. We would usually spend a whole day on a song and try it a lot of different ways. I enjoy working with Paul. It’s always a challenge, and it’s always *worth* the challenge.”

As Gadd’s reputation spread among musicians and producers, he started getting calls for record dates in Los Angeles. In 1977 he appeared on the title track of Steely Dan’s *Aja*

album. The group’s leaders, Walter Becker and Donald Fagen, were notorious for doing endless takes of tracks, so people were astounded to hear that the “Aja” track was done in one take, especially considering the tune’s complexity. “I was in L.A. to do something else, and they called me,” Gadd explained. “I remember hearing that Becker and Fagen had been going back and forth trying to get these tracks, and they weren’t satisfied for one reason or another. A lot of the musicians weren’t very optimistic that they were ever going to get these things done. But that day we just sort of sailed through everything and Becker and Fagen seemed to go for it. That was another session with music all over the place.”

On a trip to L.A. in 1981, Gadd played on the *Pirates* album by Rickie Lee Jones. On “Woody and Dutch,” Gadd is credited with playing “boxes and thighs.” “I got to do some interesting things on Rickie’s albums,” Gadd said. “On that track I thought it might be interesting to play brushes on a tape box, and then I overdubbed playing on my thighs.”

*Pirates* producer Russ Titleman says that Gadd’s groove is unlike that of anyone else. “He’ll play stuff



PHOTO COURTESY YAMAHA DRUMS

and all of a sudden this syncopated thing will come in,” Titleman said on the Hudson Music DVD commemorating the American Drummers Achievement Award bestowed on Gadd by the Zildjian company in September 2003. “And Steve is a tremendously powerful drummer, so there will be these explosions and unexpected, unusual drum fills. On *Pirates* he played ‘We Belong Together,’ which is one of the greatest drum performances ever recorded. It’s like this huge explosion and then this groove comes in that’s just mind-boggling.”

Although Gadd did a lot of very high-profile studio work in the 1970s and ’80s, he continued to do his share of anonymous jingle work. But he approached every session with a positive attitude. “Musically, I feel real good about the sessions I get booked on,” he told me in 1983. “I may not be asked to come up with a ‘50 Ways’ part all of the time, but just because it isn’t a drum-oriented piece of music doesn’t mean that it doesn’t call for creativity. Your creativity is part of every session, whether your part is out front or whether it’s more of a background thing. Creativity isn’t just coming up with a tricky drum part. Creativity is creating *music* with the people you’re playing with.

“I think it’s real natural for young players, when they first get into the studio, to want to do something to be noticed,” Gadd continued. “But it’s not always what you do on the drums that’s noticed; a lot of times, it’s what you *don’t* do that’s noticed. When you’re first starting out and you’ve got a space to play, you might be confused about what is going to impress people. Even though you’ve got a space where you can play some drums and really razzle-dazzle them technically, sometimes that will be less impressive than if you sort of let that space go by and play a real simple little thing. It’s better for the music. A good rule is to always think in terms of the mu-

sic first and let that determine how complicated or loud the fill is.”

As busy as Gadd was in the studios, he still made time for live playing whenever possible. For several years, his main outlet was a band called Stuff, which consisted of a revolving cast of New York session players. Chris Parker was the original drummer, but Gadd would sub for him on occasion. When the group recorded the *Stuff* album in 1976, Gadd and Parker played together. After that, they would both play together with Stuff whenever possible, such as a vintage *Saturday Night Live* appearance backing Joe Cocker.

During the early 1980s, Gadd was a member of the band Steps with Mainieri, saxophonist Michael Brecker, bassist Eddie Gomez, and keyboardist Don Grolnick. The group’s album *Smokin’ at the Pit*, recorded live in a Japanese club, is a favorite of Gadd fans. In the mid-’80s, Gadd started his own group, The Gadd Gang, with former Stuff members Cornell Dupree (guitar) and Richard Tee (keyboards), along

with bassist Gomez. The group recorded a couple of albums and did some live playing around New York and in Japan.

In the early 1990s, weary of the frantic New York pace, Gadd moved back to his hometown of Rochester. He still traveled to New York City for selected recording projects, but began spending considerable time touring with such artists as Paul Simon, Al Jarreau, James Taylor, and Eric Clapton.

Having inspired countless drummers to aspire to careers as studio musicians, did Gadd miss recording on a regular basis? “I’m a professional musician,” Gadd said. “I do free-lance things in the studio and I do touring, and I’ve always done that. I have to maintain a certain level of professionalism to do either one, and one way to do that is to not let my head get into thinking that one is better than the other. A good road job is something to cherish. I try to be challenged by whatever I’m doing, and be thankful that I’m working and making a living playing music. I’ve been very lucky.” **PN**



PHOTO COURTESY YAMAHA DRUMS

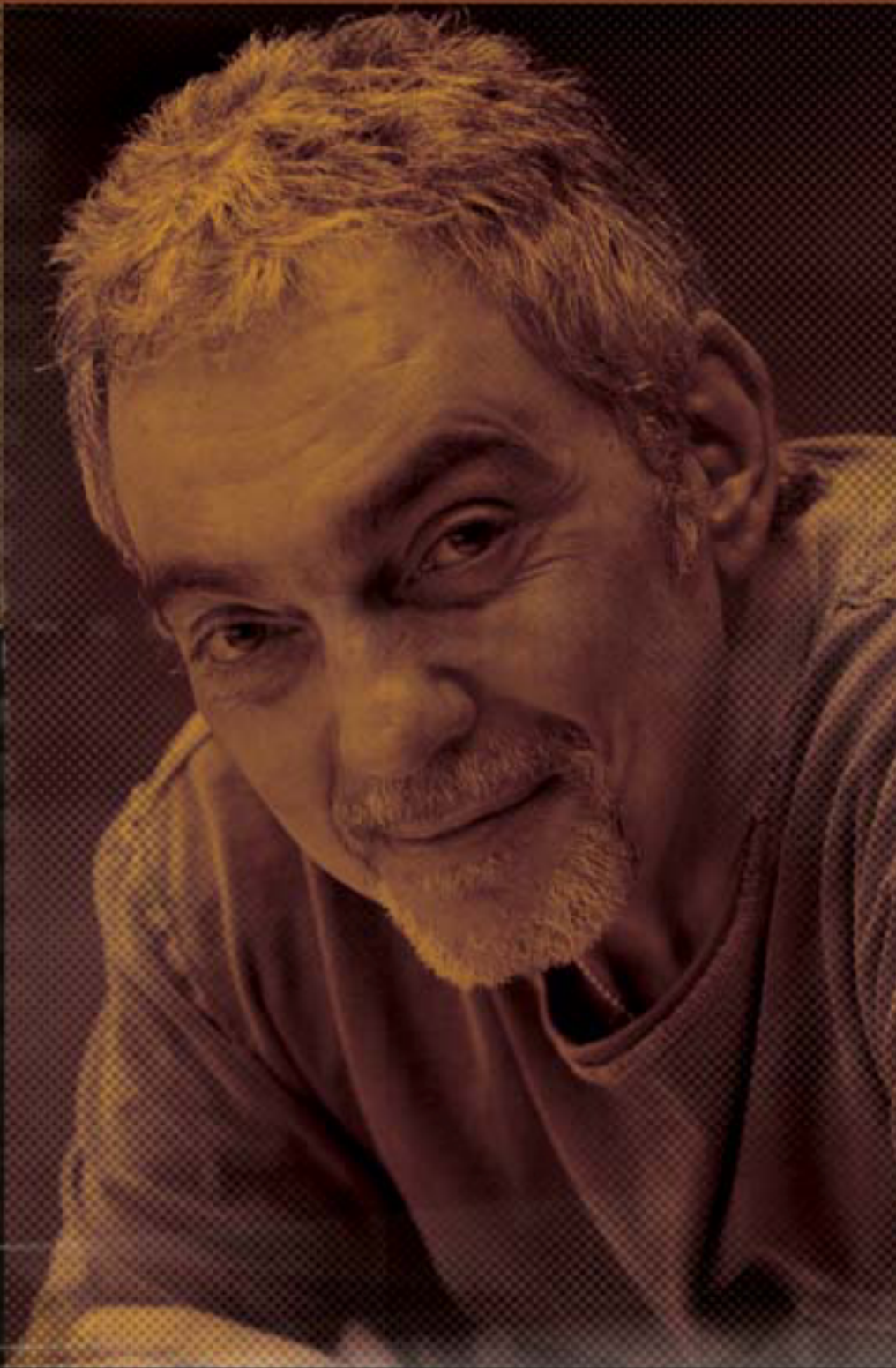
CONGRATULATIONS STEVE, ON YOUR ELECTION  
TO THE PERCUSSIVE ARTS SOCIETY HALL OF FAME.

FROM THE 1970'S TO TODAY,  
YOUR LEGENDARY RECORDINGS  
AND PERFORMANCES HAVE HELPED  
REDEFINE THE ART OF DRUMMING.

THE WAY WE LISTEN TO THE DRUMS HAS  
NEVER BEEN THE SAME SINCE YOU PUT  
YOUR SIGNATURE ON THE INSTRUMENT.  
IT'S YOUR MUSICAL APPROACH THAT HAS  
BEEN CHANGING THE WAY DRUMMERS  
PLAY FOR GENERATIONS.

WE ARE EXTREMELY PROUD OF HAVING  
YOU AS AN ARTIST, A FRIEND AND  
FAMILY MEMBER SINCE 1976.

FROM YOUR FAMILY AT YAMAHA DRUMS



STEVE Gadd

©2005 YAMAHA CORPORATION OF AMERICA • [WWW.YAMAHADRUMS.COM](http://WWW.YAMAHADRUMS.COM)

