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HUMAIR**
DRUM ARTIST

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DANIEL HUMAIR

DRUM ARTIST

BY MICHAEL COBB

Daniel Humair is a drummer, composer and a painter originally from Geneva, Switzerland, now living in rural France. With the exception of Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins, the 82-year-old Humair has played with the most legendary musicians in jazz since the late '50s. As a sideman he has supported some of the biggest jazz acts of all time and has appeared on such classic albums as Chet Baker's *Chet Is Back!*, Art Farmer's *What Happens?* and Lucky Thompson Trio's *Memorial Oscar Pettiford*.

At 14, Humair fell in love with New Orleans jazz. He remembers how he first discovered jazz from a friend who had records. "As soon as I heard Louis Armstrong I said, 'that's what I want to do!'" Soon after, Humair joined several amateur groups, won first prize at the Zürich Amateur Festival in 1955 and became a professional working musician. In 1958, he went to Paris to play with Don Byas, Kenny Dorham, Bud Powell, Eric Dolphy, Pettiford, Baker and Thompson. Humair's work with such illustrious legends of jazz allowed him to witness the evolution of the genre. He notes, "Bebop was the main revolution because jazz stopped being for dancing and became music for listeners." About playing with such luminaries, Humair says, "When I played with Gerry Mulligan it was different than with Joe Henderson or Stéphane Grappelli or Phil Woods or Oscar Peterson. You have to have a different attitude with each of them. I only played with people who let me be free. I always tried to understand what would be the best mix. I worked so much because I have absolutely no ego as a drummer. I adapt to the situation and if it doesn't suit me, I don't go. I just go where I'm gonna have fun. And when I have fun, I do my best."

While in Paris in the late '50s, Humair began a long collaboration with pianist Martial Solal and played frequently with violinist Grappelli, well known for his work with Django Reinhardt. Humair fondly recalls other career highlights with jazz giants, "Once I had the chance to play at the Philharmonic in Nice with Cannonball Adderley, Milt Jackson, Dizzy Gillespie and Oscar Peterson. I was in heaven!" During the '60s, Humair had fruitful collaborations with European musicians. He formed a trio with violinist Jean-Luc Ponty and organ player Eddy Louiss. Together, they recorded two albums at the Paris club Caméléon, which have since been reissued.

When asked if Europeans approach jazz differently than Americans, Humair says, "No. Being American, black or white doesn't mean anything. Jazz is a totally international language. Anybody can play it if you know what it is. It's not because you're a good musician or an American that you're gonna play better; that's not good enough. You have to know the past, the folklore, that's the main thing. If you don't know Louis Armstrong, you cannot start at John Coltrane. You also need culture. If you're not interested in art, architecture, design, food, theater, you're losing a lot, you know? The best players are original, have a concept and a personality. For me, the genius of the century is Sonny Rollins. He could do anything, be creative and improvise with it. He is a situationist who plays with what he has

around him. To me that's jazz; he's a jazz creator."

In the late '60s-early '70s Humair continued to support touring American musicians and participated in Woods' famous project The European Rhythm Machine. For his work he was named "Drummer Deserving Wider Recognition" by the *DownBeat* International Critics Poll in 1970. Throughout the '70s, Humair was a sideman for Jim Hall, Lee Konitz, Johnny Griffin, Herbie Mann, Anthony Braxton and Hampton Hawes. He formed trios with François Jeanneau and Henri Texier and with Joachim Kühn and Jean-François Jenny-Clark and worked with Michel Portal, Richard Galliano, Jerry Bergonzi and David Liebman. These experiences allowed him to develop as a composer and break new ground as a drummer. Regarding the evolution of his style, Humair states, "You try to find a solution that is not too evident. You have tradition, but if you go a little bit further, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Creation is an accident. You have to take risks."

In terms of band leadership, Humair eschews typical hierarchy and prefers a collaborative process. He doesn't like leaders and believes there is too much emphasis on them today. "That's part of the problem with American jazz today; you sell people. When you go to a club and see the name of a leader and not the sidemen, I think it's abnormal because jazz is a conversation. It's like the conversation we have now, you ask me a question and I try to answer it, but I say what I want. That's jazz to me," he says. Live, he thrives on improvisation. "When I go onstage, I don't wanna know what tune we're gonna play, who's gonna take the first chorus or the tempo. We just go onstage and play. One note from the guy in front makes you respond and play. As I said, it's a conversation. If you have a role to play that's preconceived, then you're not improvising and you're not creative."

Humair has performed at major jazz festivals in America and Europe including Newport, Monterey, Paris, Berlin, Montreux, Chicago, Barcelona, Nice and Antibes. However, he finds European and American audience reactions to jazz very different and says, "I think jazz is more respected as an art form here than it is in America. In Europe when you play somewhere, nobody speaks. In America, I was very shocked to hear more noise from the bar than from the bass player. When somebody in the audience speaks too loud, I just stop and say, 'Why don't you go to the next bar if you're not interested in our work because you're disturbing other people.' The rules are different. It's a culture of respect for arts in general." And Humair is vocal about his displeasure with how the difficulties obtaining working permits prohibits the recognition of European jazz musicians. "The whole American scene can come to Europe, but you [Europeans musicians] cannot enter America without a visa. It takes 15 days to get papers to come to New York. It's totally ridiculous. That's why I don't come and European musicians are not known. I can tell you that there are monster players in Europe. I'm sorry that it cannot exist the way it should," he says.

While most of the jazz legends have passed on, Humair thinks much can be learned from their

recordings: "All the big masters are people that went beyond technique. The chops shouldn't be evident; the music should be in front. That's why I like Elvin Jones, Philly Joe Jones or Mel Lewis. They were really playing the right thing to hear at the right place. Their style lets you know who they are."

Humair believes jazz can continue and should be as elevated and respected as classical. "I think jazz should be in the same position as classical music today as a concept of listening. I think it can keep going on in festivals. Hopefully one day people can know Coltrane as well as Mahler. That would be paradise, you know?"

Dedicating his life to modern jazz in Europe has earned him the official recognition of Chevalier and Officer of Arts and Letters by the French government. Reflecting on his long and distinguished career he laughs and says, "I've had good moments and very few bad. I don't keep bad company. I don't drink, except wine, I don't do drugs and I have a Swiss watch. What can I say? I'm a serious guy!"

In addition to all the accolades for his music, Humair is just as highly regarded for his art. When asked how drumming and painting compare, he says, "When you play music you have a way of timing and phrasing so that the space is controlled. It's the same thing in painting, also an awareness of the front and the background. And I have the same attitude of improvisation. The big difference is that if you play a concert with musicians in front of people and make a mistake, you cannot correct it. Painting you do alone and you're the only one responsible for your work. If you don't like it, you don't have to show it. I can paint in a more comfortable situation, but drums allow me to be a little more adventurous."

With gigs cancelled due to COVID-19 and the global music scene essentially shut down, these days Humair spends more time painting than playing. He says, "I think I'm more of a professional painter today than a professional drummer because I spend much more time doing that. I've done over 5,000 paintings. I can paint for most of the day whereas as a musician, I only play for a few hours. Today, I prefer to watch the birds from my country house. I can afford to be selective." ❖

For more information, visit danielhumair.com

Recommended Listening:

- Daniel Humair/Pierre Michelot/Rene Urtreger – *Hum !* (Vega-Fresh Sound, 1960)
- Lee Konitz/Martial Solal – *European Episode/Impressive Rome* (Campi-CAM Jazz, 1968)
- Daniel Humair – *Drumo Vocolo: Drums for Screen no.1 (Percussioni ed effetti)* (International Music Label/Flower, 1970)
- Joachim Kühn/Daniel Humair/Jean-François Jenny-Clarke Trio – *Joachim Kühn Birthday Edition* (ACT Music, 1987/1995)
- Steve Lacy/Daniel Humair/Anthony Cox – *Work* (Sketch, 2002)
- Daniel Humair/Samuel Blaser/Heiri Känzig – *1291* (OutNote, 2020)