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WARREN

SMITH

CROSSING BORDERS  
&  
PLAYING WITH PIONEERS

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# WARREN SMITH

## CROSSING BORDERS & PLAYING WITH PIONEERS

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

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Drummer/percussionist Warren Smith's reputation is both well established and long-lived. Next May he celebrates nonagenarian status. Tuba player Joseph Daley has called him an "American cultural icon." His ability to perform at the highest level in any genre and on any percussion instrument has led to his working with everybody from Miles Davis to Janis Joplin, John Cage to Aretha Franklin, the New York City Ballet to The Fugs. He has had long time associations with Max Roach's M'Boom, Sam Rivers, Bill Cole and Gil Evans, and for decades has led his own Composers Workshop Ensemble. Even if listeners have not heard his name, they surely have heard him play. And yet he remains humble about his achievements.

Warren Ingle Smith Jr. was born on May 14, 1934, in Chicago. His father, Warren Sr., was a saxophonist; his mother Dorothy played the harp. Says Smith, "Music was all around me. My father's and mother's family, all of them were musicians." Warren Sr. performed with the Noble Sissle Orchestra in Europe and on Broadway before returning to Chicago, where he was also an instructor (among his students were Gene Ammons and Johnny Griffin) and repaired instruments. There was an endless line of musicians coming to the house for repairs, including Charlie Parker and Sonny Stitt.

Growing up, Smith picked up classical music from records and radio and internalized jazz and blues locally on the south side of Chicago. He started playing the saxophone as early as age three and, with other kids in his building including future saxophonist Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre and filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, would memorize records and then pantomime all of the parts. One night his mother packed him and his brother into the car to go pick up his father after a gig, as they often did. That night at the Rhumboogie Club, the six-year old Smith saw a light slowly blinking inside a bass drum and decided then that he wanted to be a drummer. "Looking back, I realize how lucky I was, because no child my age would have been walking into a nightclub at midnight!"

His first teacher, Buddy Smith, taught him basic reading. He went deeper with Oliver Coleman, learning how to analyze music. At Provisio Township High School in Maywood, IL, he started playing mallet percussion and his ability to read afforded him the privilege to participate in Captain Walter Dyett's summer concert band. At 14, he joined the musician's union and did his first professional job, performing with his father at the Elks Club. He's been working ever since.

Smith matriculated in architecture at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He switched to music, but, as he recalled, "seeing the difficulties people had making a living doing that, I decided to teach as a backup, so got my bachelor's degree in music education and percussion." Professor Paul Price had established the first accredited college percussion ensemble program at the university, and there Smith absorbed classical repertoire while experiencing the cutting edge of contemporary composition with visiting artists including Cage and Harry Partch. In 1956 he attended the Tanglewood Music Camp and studied with members of the Boston Symphony

Orchestra, including outgoing master tympanist Roman Schultz, upcoming tympanist Vic Firth and conductor Charles Munch. Leonard Bernstein was in residence as guest composer. Price moved on to Manhattan School of Music (MSM); Smith's UI classmates Michael Colgrass and Al Payson followed, and they would arrange for Smith's scholarship there. Smith would soon become the 31st person to earn a masters in percussion at MSM.

Payson was also instrumental in passing along the percussion chair in *West Side Story* on Broadway, and Smith was able to secure the position despite the notable absence of musicians of color in the pit at that time. This opportunity led to many more Broadway shows. Smith, trombonist Jack Jeffers and others successfully lobbied the musicians union, Local 802, to require 25% minorities in pit orchestras; the union agreed but included women as part of that 25%. Word spread of Smith's professional acumen, but he prioritized stability for his family while pursuing his music career. In New York, he started teaching right away, working with the New York City Board of Education (1958-69), first at Whelan Junior High School in the Bronx and later the "600 schools", where students deemed disruptive or unruly were placed; Smith found them at least as inquisitive and talented as any other kids. He taught at Third Street Music School Settlement (1960-67)—the longest-running community music school in the United States—and Adelphi University (1969-1973); he joined the faculty at SUNY Old Westbury in 1963, with multi-wind player Makanda Ken McIntyre, and taught there for 25 years.

In 1963, Smith bought a house in Hempstead, Long Island, where his kids grew up; he stayed there until 1980, eventually returning to Harlem in the '90s. He joined the *Jimmy Dean Show* in 1963, which led to a staff position with ABC and, soon after, started appearing on a plethora of records, including albums by organists Jimmy Smith and Jack McDuff (1965-66), Aretha Franklin's *Lady Soul* (1968) and Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* (1968). His skills as a sight reader and improviser meant that he was as much in demand in the studio as he was on the stage.

However, Smith wanted to develop his own creative ideas. He shared his first studio with Jeffers and composer (and longtime colleague) Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson on 59th Street. In 1962, Smith participated in Charles Mingus' storied Town Hall Concert and worked frequently with Makanda Ken McIntyre, appearing on *Year of the Iron Sheep* (1962). Both artists made Smith think in new ways and influenced his developing concept, especially in terms of making structure flexible. Makanda introduced him to Sam Rivers, who found in Smith an ideal collaborator. Smith also explored free improvisation with his childhood friend Kalaparusha. These musicians would all be influential on Smith's emerging music.

In 1967, he moved his studio to 151 West 21st Street, where he would stay for 30 years. He incorporated as Chelsea Performing Arts Studio WIS and established his publishing company, Miff Music. He formed the Composers Workshop Ensemble, which rehearsed weekly for decades; the original personnel: Jeffers, pianist Bross Townsend, bassist Herb Bushler and

multi-instrumentalist Howard Johnson. They released two classic albums on Strata-East: their self-titled debut (1972) and *We've Been Around* (1974). The Studio WIS bylaws articulated Smith's mission: "To foster, encourage, advance and cultivate an understanding and appreciation by the general public of music of every kind and nature." His values were also demonstrated by his actions—a mostly open-door policy at the studio complemented by his generosity. Usually there was no charge for the musicians who rehearsed there, and sometimes folks even squatted there. It became a haven for all kinds of musicians, including Gil Evans, Marion Brown and a younger generation who were given the space and support to develop. The studio had special significance for percussionists for decades. Max Roach founded M'Boom there in 1970, which was active for 25 years, expanding the scope of percussion music.

Smith joined The Tony Williams Lifetime (founded in 1969 with electric guitarist John McLaughlin and organist Larry Young) and appears on *Ego* (Polydor, 1971). He continued working with Rivers and Gil Evans, and embarked on a collaboration with Bill Cole (a specialist in Asian double-reed instruments) that continues to this day. He also played in the Broadway pits of *Raisin* (1973), *The Wiz* (1975), playwright-poet Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) and the Lena Horne revue *The Lady and Her Music* (1981), as well as productions with The Negro Ensemble Company. In 1998, Smith released a signature collection of solos, duos and a trio, *Cats Are Stealing My \$hit* (Mapleshade). In 2007, he produced a film of Thelonious Monk's music called *WIS on Monk* (Freedom Art/Miff Music), which features solo percussion performances and demonstrates Smith's uncanny ability to perform complex melodies on tympani.

Throughout his career, Smith has maintained a large archive. These unique holdings have been transferred to the Archives of African American Music and Culture at Indiana University, where they will be digitized and made available for research. He is also currently involved in planning a performance series at the historic Andrew Freedman Home in the Bronx, plus has a highly anticipated forthcoming memoir, *Crossing Borders and Playing with Pioneers*. The energetic 89-year old shows no signs of slowing down.

*The Warren Smith Trio is at Children's Magical Garden Sep. 4; the Warren Smith Q-tet is at National Jazz Museum Sep. 21. See Calendar.*

### Recommended Listening:

- Composers Workshop Ensemble — *s/t* (Strata-East, 1972)
- Max Roach — *M'Boom* (Columbia, 1979)
- Julius Hemphill/Warren Smith — *Chile New York: Sound Environment* (Black Saint, 1980)
- Muhal Richard Abrams Octet — *View From Within* (Black Saint, 1984)
- Warren Smith — *Cats Are Stealing My \$hit* (Mapleshade, 1995)
- Andrew Lamb Trio — *New Orleans Suite* (Engine, 2005)