

A Music Lesson of Memory
By John Bryant
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While I was in college preparing myself to become a professional drummer, I received some of the best advice of my musical career in only eight words. I was playing drums with the North Texas State University 1 O'Clock Lab Band, a privileged position in what has always been, and still remains the undisputed best big band in collegiate Jazz.

The leaders of one of the most celebrated professional big bands of the time, The Thad Jones / Mel Lewis Orchestra, were coming to Denton, Texas, as guest Artists featured in concert with the 1 O'Clock Lab Band. It was the Fall Concert in 1972 and I was excited beyond description. I had always been a devotee of Buddy Rich before going to college – his unrivaled technique and musicality had overwhelmed me, almost to the point of comparing every other drummer to him. But upon arriving at North Texas I became aware there were other great jazz drummers with plenty to offer, like Tony Williams, Elvin Jones, Art Blakey, and also, Mel Lewis.

Mel Lewis was a universe away from Buddy Rich – subtle, understated, unpredictable – his speed and technique on the drums were not comparable. BUT... his ability to swing and *play the MUSIC*, immediately caught my ear. It was as though he knew how to avoid the obvious way to play the drums and instead come up with a way to state the subtext, just as how a great music score in a movie will find a way to tap into an emotion not delivered in the scene. He just knew where the best places were to insert his unexpected statements without drawing attention to himself, all the while drawing a dynamic map that pointed the way for the band to go. He stood apart, and confidently away from convention, as though he did not need any instruction from the composer as to what was best for the music – even if the composer was Thad Jones. I, along with many others, was transfixed on this sneaky way of playing the drums.

They were to arrive and rehearse with the band the day before the concert. Thad Jones, the incredible trumpet playing veteran of the Count Basie Orchestra, and now hugely respected composer/arranger/conductor, walked into the room and immediately lifted the room up a hundred feet with his huge smile and confidence - this was going to be an incredible

experience. Even with the fact that I would not be playing, I was extremely excited to just sit behind Mel Lewis and watch his genius be unveiled.

But where was he? I was waiting for him with his book of music, the drums, and an eager desire to see him play.

Thad informed the band Mel had missed his plane, then looked at me by the drums, and with that big grin let me know it was now my responsibility to sit in for Mel. Well, that was just alright with me. A few years later, I would get the same look from Paul McCartney when his drummer didn't show and I happened to be in the vicinity of a similar bolt of lightning. Another story about being in the right place at the right time.

So, I got to play the rehearsal, doing my best to play the part of Mel Lewis, staring at the drum chart, trying not to miss anything. Funny thing, the chart did not help me much in sounding like Mel. I sounded like me trying to find something that kept skipping away from me. Didn't matter. It was pure Heaven just having Thad Jones conducting and helping me to think I was doing a good job. It was a wonderful rehearsal.

The next day at 1 O'Clock, I was back with the band and Thad, again waiting for Mel with his book of music, the drums, and my excitement to do his bidding and watch his genius unfold. See his secret sauce, watch his ways, and hear his sound up close.

Soon he arrived, walking in, stepping up on the drum riser, inspecting the scene without saying a word. I introduced myself as the drummer with the band and that I would be there to see to his needs.

"It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Lewis - here is your music on the stand."

Then it happened. Without saying a word, he took the music folder off the stand and dropped it on the floor. He turned to me, looked me in the eye and said those eight words that have remained the best advice of my musical career as a drummer for the past 50 years.

"The first thing you do: memorize the music!"

I then witnessed him *play* the music, not reading a note. Now I could hear the difference, feel the intent, see the point. I never forgot it.

Of course, reading music is a wonderful and helpful skill, sometimes absolutely necessary, and always emphasized with the strictest of certainty by the Jazz educators at U. of North Texas. No doubt, it is easier for a drummer to memorize their part than the other musicians who have to know keys and execute melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, but sometimes the circumstances don't allow anyone the time to memorize.

But it's like Brother Ray Charles used to say to the band in rehearsal after we had first read a new chart: "Now that you have seen it, this time don't read it – play it!"

Even in the realm of classical music where reading music is a challenge at the highest level, the soloists featured in a work with an orchestra, such as a piano or violin concerto, will nearly always have the piece memorized. That's because they know if they can close their eyes and read the notes in their heart, that will always be the best performance.

Many think the drummer's main responsibility is to keep the tempo and play with good time, as though the other musicians are not capable of it on their own. If ever you find yourself around musicians like that, find another band. The most important contribution a drummer can deliver is to help the band and the music feel comfortable. As the other musicians are working to sing or play the correct melodic and rhythmic notation, in tune and with the proper intention, it is the drummer who should be constantly supporting them with what the music is trying to be. That means interpreting and translating the space within the notation. Thankfully, that information cannot be written down.

Buddy Rich could not read music.

Thank you, Mel Lewis, for choosing not to.