

Cover Story

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A Drummer's Many Rolls

anton fig discusses success, business, and life with "the world's most dangerous bandleader."



Anton Fig's recipe for success for budding professional musicians contains four ingredients. First comes passion. "You've got to really love to play," says Fig, a member of Local 802 (New York City) and the regular drummer for Local 802 member Paul Shaffer's CBS Orchestra, heard nightly on the "Late Show with David Letterman." "That love will get you ahead, because there will be some hard times." Next comes professionalism: "Be on time; stuff like that," he says. Then there's humility. "Don't have a heady attitude about yourself." Add a dash of people skills, "Unless you're someone like Miles Davis or Prince, unbelievably talented, most of us have to network," and you're ready to play some cookin' drums for a living. Fig sums up his advice this way: "Success is a combination of luck and skill, but the harder you work, the luckier you get."

A sign that Fig has followed his own advice is his luck in landing arguably the best drumming gig in the country, one that has enabled him to play with the biggest names in the music business. When asked for a partial list of the musicians who have appeared with the CBS Orchestra, on the Letterman show or at Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductions, or whom he has worked with in session, Fig rattles off a who's who of rock: Mick Jagger, Bruce Springsteen of Local 399 (Toms River, NJ), Bob Dylan, and Paul Simon, both of Local 802. Some names stand out because of long-term collaborations, such as those with Ace Frehley of Kiss and blues musician Al Kooper, both also of Local 802. And one experience stands above the rest: "I got to play with Miles Davis once. That was a tremendous thrill because he is one of the most important musicians of the 20th century," remembers Fig.

In fact, Fig's luck stretches back to the earliest days of his career, when he was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston in the mid-1970s. He was playing in Boston with George Russell of Local 802 when the jazz composer was asked to give a performance at Carnegie Hall. The drummer for the concert was Tony Williams. Williams couldn't make it for rehearsal, however, so Russell asked Fig to stand in, and then, to Fig's delight, suggested he set up his kit for the concert, playing behind Williams, who was center stage. "So here's a young student born in South Africa, come down from Boston, and his first gig in New York City is Carnegie Hall!" laughs Fig.

At that time, of course, Fig joined the Federation, which he recognizes as giving him the financial security to back up his career. "The best thing the Federation does is get you money for your pension plan, which musicians would not have otherwise," Fig observes. "I would like to think a musician gets better with age, but the music business does not necessarily support aging musicians. It's a good thing the union collects money for people who are going to need it one day."

Crossing the T's

Fig's drumming heroes are the jazz legends Elvin Jones and the above-mentioned Williams. The qualities he sees in those two drummers could easily be applied to Fig. First, they were both sidemen for more famous bandleaders, but that did not hinder their own creativity. "They had their own sound," explains Fig. "Their technique wasn't technique for technique's sake; it was more like a vocabulary. Their style was their own language." Second, both drummers displayed the kind of determination that helped them to the top. "They both had this incredible will that comes out in their playing. You couldn't stop them," he says.

Their tenacity is exactly what Fig needs to play behind Shaffer on live tapings of the "Late Show." Letterman calls Shaffer "The world's most dangerous bandleader," although Fig qualifies that title a little--for him, Shaffer is the world's most meticulous bandleader, who demands, and receives, a high level of skill and flexibility from his musicians. "The thing is," explains Fig, "he's an incredible bandleader. I've worked with a lot of them, and they usually fall into two categories." One type of leader, Fig explains, tells the drummer he's been hired because he knows what he's doing and he's trusted to do it. Shaffer, on the other hand, is much more detail-oriented. "Paul likes to check at some point in the rehearsal everything that is happening," Fig elaborates. "He likes to isolate the drums, then guitars, whether we're doing a huge Hall of Fame show or the Letterman show. He definitely makes sure the i's and t's are dotted and crossed."

That's not to say the regular "Late Show" gig is fully rehearsed and played note for note during recording. In fact, almost every night Shaffer, who Fig says has an encyclopedic memory for songs, will throw curveballs at his musicians, calling out numbers in the middle of an interview if a guest says or does something that suggests a perfect musical accompaniment when the show goes to commercial. "We have inner ear monitors, so Paul can talk to us quietly while David's conducting the interview," Fig says. "If it's a song nobody knows, Paul may say, 'Okay, it starts with a Motown roll,' which then suggests to me the six-stroke roll in front of 'Ain't Too Proud to Beg,' by The Temptations. And then he says, 'The bass line is this, the chords are this, and the rhythm guitar plays back beats,' and he virtually talks us through sixteen bars."

This spontaneity is one of the aspects of his day job Fig enjoys most. It also means that, although Shaffer is exacting, there's plenty of room for self-expression and for Fig to develop a personal style in much the same way as Jones and Williams did. "You can take Paul's structures and embellish them as much as you want, so I don't feel stifled in the slightest," he says.

Figments and Imagination

There's an old joke about the postal worker who, on his days off, loves to go for a walk. Fig is the drummer who drums on his days off. Such is his passion for playing, that when he's not with the CBS Orchestra, Fig is busy on a number of projects. These include playing on stage with other bands, such as Booker T. and the MGs; gigging around New York as part of the jazz scene, especially with Israeli guitarist and Local 802 member Oz Noy; guesting on albums; and producing his own music.

The last extracurricular project resulted in the 2002 release of "Figments," an album of critically acclaimed, self-penned songs that Fig calls a labor of love. It took him more than three years to complete using home digital recording equipment. With so many contacts in the music business, Fig was able to get some impressive names to guest on the album, including Richie Havens of Local 802, Brian Wilson of Local 47 (Los Angeles), and bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn of Local 71 (Memphis, TN). It wasn't Fig's intention to have the album be a cast of thousands; rather, he wanted to assemble musicians who could reflect the different nature of each song. "I'd written these songs over a period of time," says Fig, "and they weren't all in the same vein. Nowadays people use Apples' iTunes to make their own compilation CDs, which are stylistically all over the place, so this is a record like that."

Fig was pleased with the outcome, and says he may produce a new album again some day. "What I've discovered, though, is once you've made the record, which is the fun and creative part, getting it out there is a completely different story." Despite Fig's position and connections, he encountered the same problem many musicians face when trying to market their music. "The major labels really have a lock on radio play. It's an exorbitant amount of money, and advertising is an astronomical amount of money, and it's very hard to do it without those things," he says. Fig was offered a release with a label; instead, he decided to market the CD himself, through his website and the Internet-based music stores amazon.com, CDbaby.com, and iTunes.

One Gig Away

Because of his own experiences, Fig understands how hard it is to break through as a recording artist as well as a freelance musician. That's probably why, when approached by less-than-household names, Fig is only too happy to lend a hand. One songwriter who approached Fig is Rick Denzien, a member of Local 341 (Norristown, PA). Denzien, along with producer David Ivory, asked Fig to play drums on some songs recorded at the Slot-1 studio in Ambler, Pennsylvania. "Anton is incredible," says Denzien. "He's very open and accessible. I contacted him and sent him roughs to make sure my music was up to his level."

Denzien notes how easy it was to work with a session musician used to the demands of bandleader Shaffer. "I'm sure the CBS gig has sharpened my skills," Fig concurs. "I've always prided myself on being able to get to the essence of something fast. I also feel that sometimes you capture the essence of something before you really know what you are doing. It's good to

catch initial things and use them in the main take."

Fig explains that his approach to a smaller project like Denzien's is the same as it is if he's playing with Shaffer, or even, say, with Eric Clapton at the White House. This attitude is another example of the professionalism that has propelled Fig to the top of his craft. And Denzien was a witness, during the sessions, to the skill and humility that has kept Fig there for some 20 years. "You should have heard him," says Denzien. "You could hear all the cool things he does in one go. His playing is amazing and really subtle."

For Fig, playing on smaller projects is a reminder of where he once was, gigging and jamming in New York City before Shaffer tapped him to replace drummer Steve Jordan of Local 802. "I'm just one gig away from being back in the pool with everybody, so I try to do all kinds of stuff just to keep myself fresh," observes Fig. "I love exploring music, and you never know what's around the corner. Just because a musician is not big, doesn't mean the music is not great, so when an opportunity to play on a project like this comes my way, I check it out."

--for more information on Anton Fig and his album "Figments," visit www.antonfig.com; for information on Rick Denzien and Slot-1 Recording, visit www.slot-1.com

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