

DVD Diary:

The making of Steve Smith: Drumset Technique and History of the U.S. Beat

The original idea for this educational DVD started around 1995 when my playing started to take on a new ease and my thoughts about being a U.S. Ethnic Drummer started to mature. I was also inspired to work on a new educational project by all the drummers that attended my gigs and clinics and for years have been asking me to put out a new video on hand and foot technique.

In 2001 Rob Wallis and Paul Siegel from Hudson Music asked me to film an instructional DVD, a project that would be conceived for the DVD format, not just a video transferred to DVD but a project that would be created to incorporate all the latest technology available for the DVD format. That idea interested me greatly and I knew that Rob and Paul had the experience to make the project a success. Rob and Paul produced my first two videos, Steve Smith Part 1 and Part 2, and had produced countless videos for their DCI company before selling it to Warner Brothers and starting Hudson Music. They had the chops and enthusiasm that I needed to turn my ideas into a fully realized final product. As soon as we signed an agreement they immediately started presenting me with deadlines, which was what I needed in order to "make it happen."

At that point I started to take the volumes of writing that I had on many drumming subjects, and worked on distilling them into a coherent "script" for the DVD.

Before I get into the actual diary, I'd like to give you some background info to help set this up: let's go back to 1990, the year I met Freddie Gruber. I was playing at a Zildjian Day in NYC when Ian Wallace introduced me to his teacher, Freddie Gruber. Freddie had seen my earlier DCI videos and wanted to meet me, this much I heard from my friend Peter Erskine, but Ian made the introductions at that Zildjian Day in NYC. My first lesson with Freddie happened in a hotel room about an hour later and I was hooked — Freddie had my attention and I studied with him over the next few years.

Another important part of this story is that in the late 1980s I had spent time investigating Cuban and Brazilian music. I quickly came to the conclusion that for me to play those styles of music with the kind of depth that would bring me some personal satisfaction I would have had to have grown up in those cultures. I then decided to turn my focus to the music and rich drumming tradition of my own culture — U.S. Music and the U.S. percussion instrument: the Drumset. I realized that very few U.S. drummers knew their history and traditions the way many other "ethnic" drummers from other countries did. I could talk to Cuban, African, Brazilian and Indian drummers and most of them knew their culture's history, musical traditions and folklore. I was inspired by these drummers to become what I call a "U.S. Ethnic Drummer."

I have always been interested in history and knew a lot about the history of jazz; however, I wanted to branch out and learn about all styles of U.S. music and the events in U.S. history that caused the music to happen. I researched in detail the history of the U.S. and the history of U.S. Music and U.S. Drumming. (This is an ongoing process, there is always more to learn with new historical information and perspectives developing all of the time.) The U.S. drumming style is a style I can convincingly play because I understand much about the history and the culture that caused the creation of the music, but beyond that, I've grown up in the U.S. and the music is part of my own cultural experience.

To summarize, the foundation of the content of my new Hudson Music DVD is based on:

- #1.) What I learned from studying with Freddie Gruber along with my own rhythmic concepts and technique ideas. They form the conceptual and technical principles used to play the drumset in a way that can be described as Natural and Virtuosoic.*
- #2.) Identifying myself as a U.S. Ethnic Drummer and my discoveries about the unique nature of the pulse of all U.S. Music — what I call the U.S. Beat.*

Back to the diary...

2001: Throughout 2001 I had numerous meetings and phone calls with Paul Siegel and Rob Wallis from Hudson Music about the content and form of my new DVD. I spent hours at my laptop, at home and on the road, writing down my ideas and trying to develop a coherent plan for the content of the DVD. I sent Paul and Rob pages of writing and they gave me a constant flow of feedback to help me prune and fine-tune my ideas.

January 2002: At the January NAMM convention in LA we determined that we would film the DVD in the NY area either in February or late March. I had an upcoming two-month tour with Vital Information that started on March 1st in the San Francisco Bay Area. I decided that February was too soon, I'd rather wait until I was touring with the band to film the DVD, that way I knew my chops would be up and since I wanted Vital Information to be in the DVD, I wanted to give us time to get the music smokin'.

We settled on March 26th as the date to film the drum educational segments. This was a date during the week off in-between the Vital Information West Coast tour and the East Coast/Midwest tour.

We also booked April 8th as the day we would shoot the Vital Information band segments, since we would be playing in the NY area at the time. I also wanted to include other musical examples that would require an "acoustic" band; we decided to film that group on April 8th also.

February 2002: Rob and Paul did hours of research to pick the studio and they chose Beartracks Studio in Suffern NY, just outside of NYC. By mid-February they booked the studio and the camera crew, Dan Welch, Greg McKean, Mike Bollacke and Kozmo. Meanwhile I was home preparing for my Vital Information tour, which consisted of being involved in the booking of the tour; working with my agent, Janet Williamson; working with my publicist, Michael Bloom; scheduling plane flights, van rentals and hotels; doing interviews, etc. I had my tech, Jeff Ocheltree, handle many of the details but I still end up under an avalanche of administrative duties.

While this was going on I was also practicing the Vital Info tunes, learning some Bill Evans tunes that we were going to play when he was our special guest for four nights at Catalina's Jazz Club in Hollywood, and mastering the new Gambale/Hamm/Smith (GHS3) recording we had just finished for the Tone Center label in late January. Somehow I found time to develop the content and practice my ideas for the DVD, filming myself playing and speaking in my home studio using my Sony DV camera. I found it very difficult to talk into the camera and wasn't looking forward to that part of the project.

Time management skills isn't something that I ever gave much thought to when I was younger, but when the projects pile up, it is so important to manage my time properly, but still it feels like there is NEVER enough time to get everything together.

March 2002: By the time Vital Information started our "Show 'Em Where You Live Tour" on March 1st, I had determined what the main "buttons" on the DVD would be:

- Drumset technique - Hands
- Drumset technique - Feet
- Exercises/Licks/Phrases
- Polyrhythms (which eventually developed into Implied Metric Modulations)
- The Art of Practice
- History of the U.S. Beat (with band examples)
- Solo Drums
- Vital Information performance
- Special Features (to be determined)

For the past few years I have included the History of the U.S. Beat in some of my clinics and workshops. To demonstrate the evolution of the swing pulse in U.S. music I used recordings by King Oliver, Count Basie,

Wynonie Harris, Bill Haley, Elvis, Muddy Waters, Ray Price, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Little Richard, etc. We couldn't do that for the DVD, I wanted to play all the examples live. In order to do this I needed original music, arrangements and a band. I started with Mark Soskin, the great jazz piano player who lives in NYC. We play together with the Buddy's Buddies band so I knew he could play jazz, but I asked him if he was into Ragtime, early New Orleans jazz, Boogie Woogie, early Rock 'n' Roll, Gospel, Country, 1930s Big Band Swing, etc. He assured me he was comfortable in all of those styles, so I hired him to write the music. I made him a compilation CD with examples of all the styles I wanted to cover and he then wrote original pieces of music in each style. That was quite a writing assignment, and he did an incredible job!

We needed an acoustic bass player to play all of those styles and that turned out to be an interesting search. Many of the great NY jazz bass players had never played the Rockabilly "slap" bass style, and that was one style I wanted to cover. Through many phone calls and recommendations from Mike Stern, John Patitucci and others I was led to Mike Pope. I had actually played with Mike in the late 1980s when I was doing clinics and having "local" rhythm sections join me for some playing. He had been in one of those rhythm sections in Ohio and I remembered him as being a very good bass player. I hired him about one week before the band shoot date of April 8th.

For some tunes I wanted some honkin' tenor and I knew just the player — Steve Marcus, from the Buddy Rich band. We had been playing together in Count's Jam Band (with Larry Coryell) and Buddy's Buddies, I knew Steve's background would make him the perfect Rhythm and Blues sax honker.

There were tunes where I needed guitar and for those I asked my Vital Information guitarist, Frank Gambale. Frank is known as a Fusion virtuoso but he can also play great Blues, Country and Rock 'n' Roll.

I played gigs with Vital Information on the West Coast from March 1st-March 17th, including a week at the Blue Note in Las Vegas. During that week I interviewed some drummers for another project I'm working on for Hudson Music, Legends of Rock 'n' Roll Drumming. Since these drummers lived in Vegas, we took advantage of my being there and set up two interviews. One was with Jimmy Vincent, who was the drummer for Louis Prima, and the other was Sandy Nelson, the only drummer in rock history to have a string of hit tunes with drum solos. By the time I got home to the San Francisco Bay Area on the 18th of March I only had four days for my final preparations and then I was on a flight to NYC.

Saturday, March 23rd: I arrived in NYC around 10:00pm and checked in to my hotel in the Village.

Sunday, March 24th: First thing in the morning I went to Carol's Musical Instrument Rentals to check on a vintage kit for the shoot. I had decided that for the "History of the U.S. Beat" segment, I wanted to use a kit that sounded appropriate for the music. My new Sonor kit sounds incredible, but it's a very modern sound and I wanted the drums to sound as close as they could to the drums from the early 1900s to the 1960s. I chose a 1940s Radio King set with a 24" bass drum w/calfskin heads, a 13" high tom and a 16" floor tom. I had brought along my own 1928 Black Beauty snare drum and my old vintage Zildjian cymbals.

In the afternoon I went to The Drummers Collective, where my own Sonor drumset had been shipped, and with some help from the staff, put on all new heads, set up a new Sonor Jungle kit that had just arrived, and got ready for a masterclass that would serve as a "run-through" for some of the ideas for the DVD.

Monday, March 25th: I did a two-hour masterclass that Rob Wallis filmed on his personal video camera. He observed what topics were of more interest than others to the drummers attending the masterclass. He was also able to time certain segments and give me some feedback on my presentation.

Bob Biles is the engineer that records almost all of the recordings I produce and I was able to get him to come on the road with Vital Information as our live sound mixer and to engineer the audio recording on the DVD. Bob showed up at the Collective at 5:00 pm in our rented tour van and we proceeded to load it up with all of the drums and then headed out to Beartracks to set up for the Tuesday, March 26th shoot.

With the help of our production assistants, Anthony Citrinite and Kelly Yacco, we were able to get the drums set up, get a bite to eat and check into the local Holiday Inn by midnight. I was feeling a lot of nervousness about talking into a camera and didn't get much rest that night.

Tuesday, March 26th: Bob and I showed up at Beartracks for our 9:00 am call and the camera crew had already been there for a while setting up their gear. Paul and Rob set up "command-central" in the large vocal booth, we got drum sounds, the crew adjusted the camera angles and lighting for a few hours and we were ready to go. We decided to start with the solo drum pieces since it would help me to relax. The first solo I played was the opening "Swing Pulse" solo, but part way through some problems with the cameras caused the producers to stop me. It turns out we were plagued with timecode problems throughout the day, between this and the amount of time it takes to adjust the lighting, the progress was much slower than we anticipated. Since we wanted to offer many camera angles and some switching options, a lot of time was spent setting up shots.

Eventually I played two complete takes of the opening solo and one take each of: Independence/Interdependence, Thank You Mr. Williams, 3/4 5/4, and then one more (take four) of the opening solo — just to make sure. We ended up using take three of the opening solo in the program and we put the first two takes in the "bonus" section of the DVD.

We started filming the "tutorial" sections with the Art of Practice and proceeded to Hand and Foot Technique and from there going down the list of subjects that we wanted to cover. By the end of the day, which was about 12:00 midnight, we had quite a bit of footage recorded, but we realized we were far from finished. We packed up the drums and I filmed a quick hi hat solo before the camera gear was put away.

We ended the day by loading my drums into the Vital Info tour van and headed back to the Holiday Inn for a little rest before tomorrow's drive.

Starting that night and over the next week we discussed how much more we should actually try to do. I had plans to do so much that Paul and Rob thought I would not be able to do it all and stay within the budget. We ultimately decided not to compromise the project and to go over budget and film two more days instead of just one more day. We would start with recording the Vital Information examples on April 7 and then finish that day by filming more tutorials. Then on April 8 we would film more tutorials and finish the day by filming the "Historical Band."

Wednesday, March 27th: Bob and I drove over 12 hours from NY to North Carolina on our way to the first gig of the Vital Info East Coast tour in Atlanta. We grabbed a quick sleep in a cheap motel and then carried on the next day to Atlanta meeting my Vital Info bandmates, Tom Coster, Frank Gambale and Baron Browne at the hotel. Unfortunately, as soon as everyone got in the van to go to the soundcheck, we had a huge blowout in the right rear tire! It's a good thing I have AAA!

During the next week we played gigs and drove long distances everyday. Paul and Rob sent me some rough DV tapes of the shoot that I could watch on my little DV camera. After the gigs and in the van I watched all the footage, taking notes on what takes were good, which takes were not good and formulated a plan on what to go for the next time we got together to finish the filming.

Sunday, April 7th: The Vital Info band checked into the Holiday Inn near the studio at about 2:30 am. We had played a gig in Wilkes Barre, PA Saturday night and then drove about three hours after the gig so we could at least get up after sleeping and not have to drive in the morning.

After a few hours of sleep we headed to the studio for a 9:00 am load in and setup. The first thing we planned to do was film the Vital Information band. Hudson Music's audio engineer Malcolm Pollack was there to record the band along with our engineer Bob Biles. We set up and got sounds and recorded a Funk groove that we used in the History of the U.S. Beat section of the program. Then we got right into the Vital Info tunes.

Mr. T. C. was the first tune. We played a great take but Frank broke a string at the start of the drum solo near the end of the tune. We decided to do a pickup and start the tune just before the drum solo. (We ended up using the original drum solo in the program, without the guitar, but the pickup sounded good too, so we used it as a “bumper” in the Hand Technique section.) Next was Soul Principle but we ended up not liking the first take so we tried another and it felt good. Sideways Blues and Swamp Stomp went down in one take each; the band was feeling good because we’d been gigging solid for about a month at this point. We got part way through Cranial Jam and I stopped the take because I was unhappy with something, the next take went well. The Perfect Date went down in one take but I decided to play the drum solo at the end again, just so I’d have two solos to choose from. (Again we ended up using both, we edited the second take onto the main tune but the original solo became the solo at the very beginning of the program, under the intro credits.) At the very end of Over and Out two of the cameras ran out of tape; we were disappointed because we felt like it was a great take. We played the entire song again and it turned out to be a better take! We finished up with a 1960s Rock example that we jammed up on the spot.

We all took a break as our production assistants packed up the band gear and set up for more drum tutorials. By the time I got back to talking and demonstrating for the cameras it was dark outside and we worked until about 10:00 pm — that’s why I have those bags under my eyes!

Monday, April 8: We got to the studio at 9:00 am and started right away with more drum demos. I broke down the rhythmic devices used in some of the Vital Info tunes, the Tony Williams Lick, etc. Eventually I got through all of the subjects I wanted to cover and we start getting setup for the “Historical Band.”

Mark Soskin and Mike Pope had arrived around 11:00 am and Mike got busy looking over the charts Mark had written. Mike and I didn’t know the music and Mark himself had written it all so fast even he wasn’t that familiar with it, so we were all playing it for the first time. I didn’t want to be reading music on camera so we would run down the tune and I did my best to instantly memorize it. Most of the time that wasn’t too hard, but if you watch closely you’ll see me miss a cue or an ending here and there.

We played the tunes in the order that they appear in the program, starting with Ragtime, just drums and piano. I would improvise a verbal intro after referring to my notes and then we’d go for the take. Paul was very helpful in coaching me through the intros. We added Mike on acoustic bass and recorded the New Orleans jazz tune, the two Swing tunes and the Bebop piece. We did alternate takes of all of the tunes, and it was hard to decide which take to use in the program, they all sounded good.

I think I enjoyed this part of the filming the most. We were getting near the end of filming, which helped me to relax, the band felt great and the music was so much fun for us to play.

Steve Marcus had arrived and we were getting ready to film the Rhythm and Blues piece when I suggested we use hand clappers the way the artists did on the original Rhythm and Blues recordings. We rounded up some clappers, The Hudson Valley Boys: Rob “Shuggie” Wallis, Paul “Otis” Siegel, Paul’s dad — Henry “Specs” Siegel, Anthony “Imperial” Citrinite and Kelly “Yazoo” Yacco. We used the Hudson Valley Boys on the Rhythm and Blues tune and the Gospel tune. By then Frank had arrived and we got right into Blues, Country and two examples of Rock ‘n’ Roll. I was ready to get into modal jazz and other examples using the Sonor Jungle kit, but we ran out of time and had to stop. I was tired but felt like we had accomplished a lot that day. We got everything packed up again and headed back to the hotel before we hit the road in the morning for three more weeks of one-nighters with Vital Info.

Mid-April through early-June: In between more gigs and clinics I went over all the footage and slowly edited together a very rough version of the program on my iMac, using the iMovie program. The footage was shot out of sequence, so it took some time for me to figure out how it all went together. When I finally had a program that looked OK to me, I sent detailed notes to Phil Fallo, the editor for the project, so he could start editing the tapes. During this process Paul and Rob were checking in on Phil’s progress and sending me VHS tapes of the latest edits. We would all make detailed notes and Phil would update the project. Also in June I had a couple of mixing sessions at my home studio, we needed to remix all of the

talking and music. I had Bob Biles mix for about five days and then I had Journey producer and engineer, Kevin Elson come in and mix for three days. There was so much material recorded that it took a long time to get all the music and speaking mixed.

Monday, July 15: Paul, Rob and myself spent a day at Jonathon Movers NYC studio, Skyline. I filmed some control room speaking inserts and recorded the commentary tracks. They also had me film a short hi hat tutorial.

Tuesday - Thursday, July 16-18: I had the opportunity to work with editor Phil Fallo at the Manhattan Center in NYC, fine-tuning the editing of the entire program and dropping in the new inserts. The entire team, Phil, Paul, Rob and myself, were involved in a collaborative process all contributing and developing our ideas. We got a lot done in those three days.

Late-July – Mid-August: I had lots of gigs with extensive traveling — NYC, San Francisco, Spain, Germany, England, all the while going over updated edits and ideas for the DVD by email and Fed-Ex.

Friday, August 23rd: I flew once again to NY so I could be involved in the final editing. We had scheduled this to be the last day of editing, dedicated to any last minute changes along with the addition of visuals that I had collected (with some help from John Aldridge of the Not So Modern Drummer magazine and long-time Hudson Music collaborator, Dr. Bruce Klauber) for the intro to the History of the U.S. Beat — the Formative Years. It took longer than we thought so we finished up on Monday, August 26th and Tuesday, August 27th.

Wednesday, August 28 - Wednesday, September 3: Phil worked on creating the final high quality master tapes. This is also when the bonus footage and optional camera angles were added.

Tuesday, September 3: I dropped in on Phil for one last look at the program before it went to New York DVD for authoring.

Wednesday, September 4, 2002: The tapes were brought to Brian Brodeur, Bob Forman and Jon Ratcliff at New York DVD for authoring. They got right to work dumping the video program into their computers and started the DVD encoding process, designing menus, adding the commentary tracks, creating PDF files, and programming all the DVD magic! They have about two weeks of intensive work ahead of them!

All of the people involved in the creation of this program are high-level pros who have helped me take my ideas and express them better than I ever could have imagined — thank you all!!

This is where I have to leave off. The New York DVD team is very busy programming the DVD as I write this — I need to send this in before it's too late for it to be included on the disc.

Hopefully you are enjoying this DVD and learning a lot!!

*Take Care,
Steve*