

UP AND COMING

by Rick Van Horn



New Edition's



New Edition is one of the hottest acts in show business today, taking the R&B market by storm and making some crossover inroads onto the pop charts. This high-energy group, composed of five young men from Boston and inescapably reminiscent of the early Jackson 5, is currently touring sold-out arenas across the world. Providing the drive for the music behind the singing and dancing is "Zoro" [redacted], a young drummer who already has some solid experience behind him, and is now making the most of this new opportunity. Modern Drummer had the chance to speak with "Zoro" following a recent performance in New York City.

RVH: When did you actually begin touring with New Edition?

Z: January of '85. This tour will extend through December of '85. Then, we'll take a short break, after which we'll do Europe and Japan.

RVH: You're based in L.A. How did you get the gig with a group based—in fact created—in Boston?

Z: Well, it was through word of mouth. Interestingly enough, I went to Berklee College of Music and lived in Boston at the time New Edition started to become popular. But our paths never crossed. After finishing up at Berklee, I moved back to L.A., and I free-lanced for three years. In December of '84, New Edition went out there to prepare for this tour. They were looking for a drummer, and I was recommended to them because of some other things I had done, such as touring with Philip Bailey, Rockwell, and a lot of different L.A. R&B acts. So their management gave me a call. I came down and played for them, and there was a mutual affinity. Now I'm a permanent member of the band.

RVH: With a background that includes Berklee, what got you into the heavy R&B style?

Z: I was raised on a lot of different styles of music. In my family, everybody listened

to something different. My mother listened to Frank Sinatra and Spanish music, my sister was a rock 'n' roller, and my brothers were all into R&B. I lived in L.A. in a mainly black area, and I heard R&B all my life. Even before I played drums, I knew the whole Motown sound and the other R&B music. When I started to play, I had the R&B feel, even though I did a lot of jazz, fusion, and Latin things, both at Berklee and in L.A. But to be successful and make a living, you *have* to have some sort of good pop feel. I like pop, and I like R&B, so combining elements of both was my way of maintaining a level of working in the business. I still play everything that I can; if I'm in town for a few days and somebody calls me for a jazz gig or a fusion gig or a Latin gig, I'm there. I'll play 24 hours a day. I'm never too tired to take on another gig. But R&B is really where I'm putting my roots in the business. I'm planning on branching out, but a step at a time.

RVH: This current gig with New Edition seems like quite a good "step."

Z: Oh yeah. The group is getting extremely popular; it's like being part of the Jackson 5 when they were at their peak. It's really nice to be a part of a growing thing in the '80s. There really are no other teenage groups around, with the possible exception of Menudo. And most of Menudo's appeal is on the two coasts, while New Edition is popular across the country. Besides, all of Menudo's stuff is done with tracks; they don't use live musicians the way New Edition does.

RVH: The first two New Edition albums were cut almost entirely with drum machines. When you are doing those tunes live, do you try to copy the original drum machine parts?

Z: Partially. With a live show, the act has a lot of choreography, and they want the strong, straight grooves from the record. But they also want accents and lit-

tle hi-hat things on all their moves. So what I try to do is play part of the record, part of the choreography, and part of me. I'll change up the beats a little bit and put some of my personality into it. They're pretty free about letting me do what I want, as long as it's in the groove and I catch the accents.

RVH: I was surprised to see a set of acoustic drums on stage for the show, considering how electronic the original tracks were.

Z: Yeah—that's funny, because I don't use anything electronic at all when playing live. The percussionist is using a little bit of Simmons here and there, but I don't use any triggering or anything.

RVH: You have an incredibly fast bass drum foot. You're able to duplicate some of the contemporary patterns—created by machine—that feature a straight 2 and 4 backbeat with fast 16th notes on the bass drum. How did you develop that?

Z: Well, the *desire* to do that came from the fact that most drummers felt that those "machine-made" bass drum patterns were impossible to play. I've always told myself that, the first time you say you can't do something, you *won't* be able to do it. I always thought it was possible. I was pretty lucky in that I do have a fairly fast foot naturally, but then I worked on it *a lot*. I would work with a *LinnDrum* machine, programming a lot of those weird "street beats." And then I'd try to play them "live." I'd start them off at a slow tempo and try to pick apart the groove that I had made up—which would be real funky and complicated. I had practiced out of books for years, and I finally wanted to practice something based on my own concept. I decided to be the first drummer who could play like a drum machine but with feeling. I worked on the bass drum stuff all the time. I must admit that tonight the bass drum was a little slower than usual, because I had a technical problem. I use *Hard Rock* bass drum pads by Peterson

continued on page 86

Percussion, and I go through them pretty fast. Tonight, the pad was starting to wear out, and the glue was getting stuck to the bass drum beater! So the beater wasn't coming back the way it should have. But that's touring: Everything that can go wrong does, and usually when you don't want it to the most. I just keep on playing and try not to lose my momentum. When I was younger, when anything went wrong I'd say, "Forget it; the gig is ruined!" I'd give up too easily. Now, if anything goes wrong, I just do my best and keep plugging through it.

RVH: You don't have time to worry about things going wrong on this show. It's practically nonstop.

Z: That's right, and the drums are the main factor to the kids in New Edition. They know music well, but they know drums the best. They'll sit around and do "The Beat Box," making drum sounds verbally as part of that "street rap" routine. They know drums, and they know exactly what they want. They really rely on me for all their cues and accents. If something goes wrong with the kick, I usually go to the floor tom and keep the snare going, until Gary Spence, my drum tech, can fix the problem. Gary does a great job for me, especially when those kinds of problems happen. And they do happen—frequently. We were on live radio on a special broadcast from Boston recently, and on "Telephone Man" my bass drum did break. So I went right to the floor tom, the engineer EQ-ed it to sound like a bass drum, and nobody ever knew it except me.

RVH: What kind of pedal do you use?

Z: The *DW-5000* chain-drive, with a wood beater. I've tried some of the real heavy-duty ones with a lot of complicated mechanisms, but the simpler ones play faster. I've worked on my bass drum a lot, and I always work on the most complicated rhythms I can while maintaining the groove with a straight snare and hi-hat. I try to do stuff that a drum machine could do, so that we don't have to use a machine on stage. It's kind of my way of beating drum machines out of gigs. That way, when a certain kind of gig comes up, all the technique and chops I've worked on will come out, and I'll still have the groove

thing happening when that's called for. You have to have metronomic timing to do anything in pop music today, because everything is set against drum machines or click tracks. The acts want you to sound like that—right on time—which is good; it should improve everybody's time. By 1990, we should all have perfect time!

RVH: For a New Edition show, the average audience member is a 13-year-old girl. I haven't heard so much screaming since the early Beatles days. How does that affect you on stage?

Z: Sometimes the screaming gets so loud that it's actually louder than the music. And it gets ear-piercing, because the screaming gets picked up by the onstage mic's, so it's coming through the monitors as well. It can be annoying, just as far as concentrating on the music goes. But in a sense, it's fun. You really feel the appreciation for the show—the dancing and the music. I try to look at the positive side: If they weren't screaming, the group wouldn't be out here doing these shows, movies, and commercials.

RVH: You play in a very stylized Spanish costume, and the band introduced you with the nickname of "Zorro." Where did this character come from?

Z: I've always liked hats. I was on a trip to Mexico to play some Latin gigs and found this Zorro-looking hat at a bullfight. I never planned on wearing it; I nailed it up on my wall in L.A. as a souvenir. One day, I was real busy, with several gigs the same day, and my hair looked real messy. I had a lot of new people that I wanted to look alright for, but I had no time at all. So I just pulled the hat down and threw it on. Pretty soon, I got to wearing it more and more, and everyone started calling me "Zorro"—sort of as a joke. The name really got established with New Edition. When I walked into the rehearsal studio the first day, I had thrown the hat on, and I was wearing all black clothes besides. One of the other band members said, "This guy looks like Zorro." Some of them thought that was my name, and the next thing I knew, the name had stuck. So I decided to keep it as my "character." It feels good, because I do have a Latin family background, and I feel that, if I'm going to

have an "image," I want one I can feel comfortable with. I do spell my "Zorro" with one "r," just to be a little different.

Being in a show like this, you really have to be a part of the show. So I dress up; I use the Rapisarda lighted tip sticks; I try to jump into the show as much as I can. Guitar players do it; singers do it. There's no reason why a drummer can't be as "out front" as the next person. After all, the drummer is the most important person in the band: The drummer holds it all together.

RVH: I notice that you play with Beato gloves. Is that part of the "image," or are they functional?

Z: I sweat a lot—what with the lights, and the adrenaline flowing—and I play extremely hard. So without the gloves, I lose the sticks. And if I can't hang onto the sticks, there's no gig! I used to think that the gloves were just for looks, until I started playing the really heavy R&B gigs. Now I don't play anything but light jazz gigs without them. I also use *Stick Handler* tape on the sticks themselves.

RVH: Run down your touring kit for us.

Z: My snare is a Tama *Bell Brass* that just sounds beautiful. It cracks and has depth at the same time. My kit is the Tama *Superstar* series with power toms and *Titan* hardware. The rack toms are 10", 12", 13", 14", and 15", and the floors are 16" and 18". The bass drum is a 22". I have all the toms mounted with the RIMS system, and I use Duraline heads. I also use *Lug Locks* all the way around the snare—top and bottom—to hold in the tuning. If I don't, the snare is out of tune within three songs. I don't use any electronics on my kit, but I do add a pair of LP timbales for tonal color. My cymbals are all Sabians, in their *HH* series: 13" hi-hats, a 22" ride, an 8" splash, an 18" swish, and 15", 17", and 18" crashes. And I hit everything with Vic Firth *American Classic Rock* sticks.

RVH: You mentioned New Edition being a big step in your career. Where do you see that taking you?

Z: Well, I've already done a wide variety of things: everything from garage bands to the backs of pickup trucks to a cruise gig in the Bahamas to outdoor concerts with Philip Bailey, and now this gig. I'll try to do as many things as I can, in order to be ready for anything. I'm planning on a solo career in the future, but right now I'm developing myself as a drummer in the industry. An old man once told me that "success is when preparation meets opportunity." You just have to get ready for something to happen, and when your chance comes, if you're ready, you're going to go. If you're not, you're going to stay behind. I try to maintain that enthusiasm. I practice every day; I don't want to get into the rut of thinking that, now that I have a steady gig, I don't have to woodshed anymore. I've just started to scratch the surface, and if I keep going, maybe one day I'll achieve all my musical dreams. 🎸