

AUTHOR, TEACHER,
MOTIVATOR, DRUMMER

ZORO

AFTER TALKING TO ZORO WHO COULD EVER QUESTION THE POWER OF BELIEVING IN ONE'S PASSION. IN ZORO'S OWN WORDS HE'S THE LAST GUY IN THE WORLD WHO WAS MEANT TO BE SUCCESSFUL, HE'S THE LAST GUY IN THE WORLD THAT HAD A PRAYER OF MAKING IT OUT OF THE GHETTO, AND YET HE WAS ABLE TO DO IT! ZORO REPRESENTS THE HOPE OF ALL OF US WHO FEEL THE DREAM MAY BE BEYOND OUR GRASP. **BY RAY DEEGAN**

He came from one of the poorest parts of L.A yet he was inspired to realise his dream through the power of self-belief and because of his love for Rhythm and Blues.

Zoro's all consuming passion for R&B has seen him perform with some of the biggest names in the industry. His dedication and tenacity has resulted in the world's most popular book, 'The Commandments of R&B Drumming', Zoro's personal crusade to see that those who deserve it receive credit for their undeniable contribution to the craft.

Recently Zoro continued his crusade by releasing a 3 video series taking an in depth look at the history of R&B and its influence on modern day hip-hop and funk.

These days Zoro spends most of his time teaching and motivating others by presenting clinics and performing at drum festivals all over the world. I recently caught up with Zoro by phone, while in the midst of a national clinic tour in the states...

"I'm on a massive clinic tour! I've been touring straight since September 15th and I'm going right through to December 15th. This tour has been put together by all my sponsor companies but in November I've got a clinic tour with Chester Thompson sponsored by Drum Workshop."

What sort of topics do you cover in your clinic?

My clinic is a 2 hour, in depth presentation of the history of American Rhythm and Blues music! I cover

from the gospel era, starting with the African American spirituals going then into the Blues, New Orleans, into the Soul era, the Funk era and the Hip-Hop era. It's a very comprehensive journey showing the evolution of Rhythm and Blues. In fact in a few weeks I'm doing a special presentation for the Percussive Arts Society convention where I'll be playing along to tunes that best depict the grooves from each era. I'll also be talking about those drummers who invented the funky beats that made the world dance! For the PAS show we've put together a visual presentation that will include showing a picture of the drummer I'm talking about and the original album that the particular song or groove comes from.

I'm really into clinic presentations as a vehicle for motivation, education and inspiring people! It's my opportunity to teach people about the music that I love and have played all my life.

R&B music has had a massive influence on you, is it something you grew up with?

Yes! I grew up in a predominantly black area of California listening to Rhythm and Blues music! Even before I began playing drums R&B was already in my soul. I didn't start playing 'till I was 17 but by then I'd had a lifetime of listening. It was very natural for me to gravitate towards anything that had a groove!

What originally inspired you to begin playing drums?

I actually wanted to play all of my life but I grew up in a very poor family so I couldn't afford a drum kit until



I was 17. Oddly enough it was the death of Elvis that made me think more about music. I was a big fan as a kid but when he died it made me aware of just how important music was in my life!

Almost 20 years later I ended up playing with Elvis' daughter. I did some recording for Lisa Marie's album which has never actually been released, but it's bizarre that what actually got me into music and playing drums, the death of Elvis, brought me full circle 20 years later to actually play with his daughter. The unfortunate part is that Elvis is no longer around.

From the moment I started playing and had

decided that drumming was going to be my life I was like a horse with blinders on! I knew that I had found my mission in life!

From reading your book 'The Commandments of R&B Drumming' and watching your videos it's obvious that you're a well studied player. From the moment you began playing what was your approach to learning?

From the beginning and always to this day I've been a person who has thirsted for knowledge and hungered to learn! I immediately took lessons from local drummers in the area and several years later attended Berklee College of Music. I've taken lessons most of my career but more recently it hasn't been private lessons. These days I get to hang out with the worlds greatest drummers and pick their brain.

I've known Steve Gadd for fifteen, sixteen years now and know all the greats within the community so I'm always either learning from them personally, going to their clinics or buying their books and videos.

I have hundreds of drum books, hundreds of videos and now have over 3500 cd's. I actually listen to them all! My whole strategy has been to immerse myself in learning and acquire the skills whatever way I could!

Do you feel that writing the book was a natural progression?

Writing the book was a vision I'd always had. I wrote the book for no other reason then to pay homage to all the guys that never got their notoriety! In America and much of the world, I'd always felt that jazz drummers got respect, rock drummers got all the money and popularity but all the R&B drummers that everybody stole from got shoved under the rug and left out of the big picture.

The drummers of the R&B era were responsible for so many innovative grooves yet they were on the scene at a time when there were no drum magazines and they weren't given as many credits on album covers. I think people have always underestimated R&B drumming with the perception that it's easier than it is. A lot of the R&B guys are my favourite drummers so I made it my mission to bring this music out!

At my clinics it's amazing, I'll have young kids there that have never heard any of the music that I'm playing, Aretha Franklin, The Meters, James Brown... they don't know any of these artists yet they fall in love with the music instantly!

Were the videos part of the vision?

Yes, but I thought the best way to produce a great video was to do an incredible book first because that would then lay the ground work. Writing a 156 page book gave a clear road map that allowed me to bring my book to life in a 3- dimensional way.

I wanted the videos to be what I would want to see if I was to learn in depth about a particular style of music. I would want to know the complete history, see pictures of the players, learn about the philosophy of how to play and how to approach it and then actually see the performance of the style with exercises and ideas all presented in a way that's fun but serious. The videos are part documentary, part historical and part performance. I couldn't possibly cover all the material in one video so I broke it down into sub-headings relevant to the chapters I had in the book.

It made sense to divide the learning experience into 3 categories that virtually run a historical time-

line from the roots of R&B, "Soul", to Funk and then Hip-Hop which defines the drum machine, rap era of today! I kind of looked at it like STAR WARS, the trilogy (laughs) you need to see all of them to understand the whole story! (Laughs)

Who are some of the artists you've worked with over the years?

One of the first gigs I ever did was in 1983 with Phillip Bailey the lead singer from Earth Wind and Fire. I played with some great studio players like Paul Jackson Jr, James Jamison Jr, guys that were clearly more experienced and professional then me but who helped me to become better!

In 1984 I began playing with a famous R&B group in America called "The New Edition". They were like the Jackson Five of the 80's and the Boys to Men of the 80's. They were a black group with great songs, funky beats and slick grooves. After that I was Bobby Brown's drummer! I was with Bobby for 3 years and toured massively, also recording several albums during that time.

I then became Lenny Kravitz' original drummer, recording and touring with Lenny during the "Let Love Rule" and "Mama Said" period. It was an awesome 4 years; in fact I just had a recent reunion with Lenny in December because Cindy Blackman injured her hand! He called me out of nowhere and 5 hours later I was in New York! The very next night I was in Madison Square Garden playing for 25,000 people! I had to learn the whole show in one rehearsal, it was crazy! (laughs) It was a great experience to play once again with Lenny, we've been friends for 20 years and both had a vision of making it together in music. When I played with him for those 4 years that was our vision come to fruition. When Lenny asked me to join his band in '89 he was asking me to leave a gig that was super hot which was Bobby. Bobby had sold 13 million albums at that time and Lenny was nobody, he was just my friend! When I joined Lenny it was a step down but I believed in him, I always did. I loved his music and we were good friends.

After Lenny I toured with a French pop Star by the name of Vanessa Paradis. Vanessa was huge in France, and most of the French speaking world! She's a rock star, a supermodel and an actress! Lenny Kravitz produced her album and put the band together for her so that's when I left Lenny to begin work with Vanessa. I was on the road with her for quite some time therefore I never made it back onto Lenny's gig.

When I left Vanessa's gig I began touring with Jodie Whatley who is an American R'n'B pop star. I spent about a year with Jodie before leaving to work with Frankie Valley and the Four Seasons. I've been doing Frankie for the last few years and in between I've done lots of recording sessions and various stints with other artists. Last year I did 150 concert dates, 55 clinics, 3 videos, wrote tons of articles and my wife and I had a baby boy and bought a new house! It was an incredibly busy year! (Laughs) This year turned out to be just as busy! By the end of the year I'll have done close to 80 clinics and a B-zillion concert dates and now on top of all that I'm editor of a drum magazine in America called 'STICK-IT'. They've always called me Zoro, but now they call me "Zoro, man of many hats" (laughs). It's an incredible juggle because I also have a hundred students in L.A amongst everything else!

How do you find the energy to fulfil all these demands? What's your philosophy on life and drumming?

My philosophy is that I always play to my strengths! I'm a person who is one dimensional in the sense that I don't have a lot of different gifts that I do well! I'm not a handyman, I'm not mechanical, but I don't let what I can't do get in the way of what I can do! I've focussed on building my strengths and overcoming obstacles. In a nutshell I'm a good communicator! I communicate through the drums, in my articles, in my books, through e-mails, through the videos, whatever method it takes! I grew up in a poor family and my father left when I was an infant so the very thing I longed for in my life is what I've become!

I always wanted someone to become a mentor and motivator to me but I never had that! The very thing that I didn't have is the very thing I've become for everyone else!

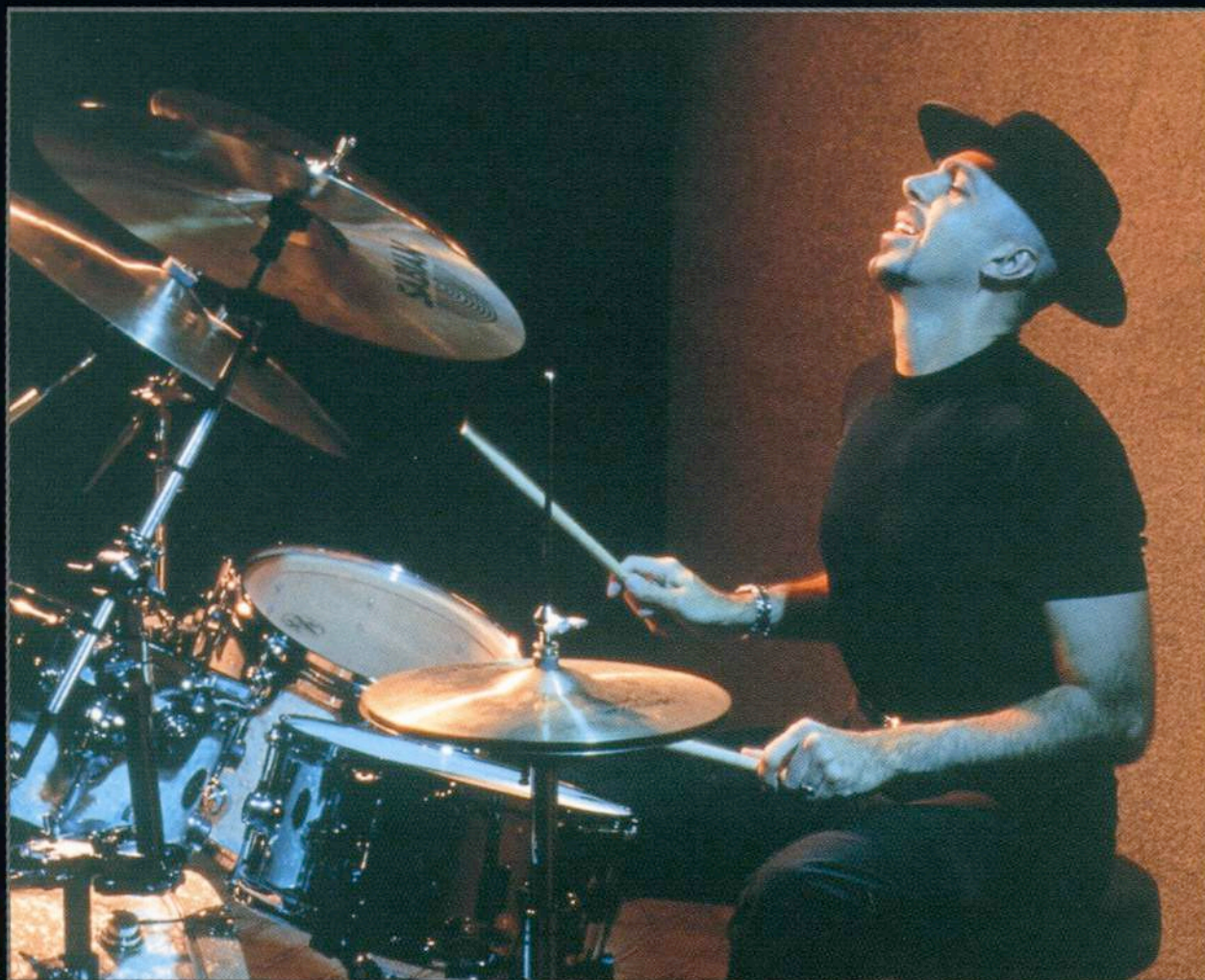
My philosophy is that I have a greater purpose, drumming is only just a part of what I do, the rest of it is about connecting with people.

I love to see the look on peoples faces when you give them a kind word or when they start believing in themselves and confidence sets in.

I'm driven by passion, which means nothing I do is done half-assed! (Laughs) I always have to put in 200% which makes everything I do really hard because I couldn't just do, for example a little drum book, it had to be like everything I ever envisioned! It means you have to work longer and harder to bring anything to fruition but then the rewards are incredible!



ZORO AND LENNY KRAVITZ



I kind of look at life through "the glass is half empty not half full" theory. We're born with the glass half empty and that means you and I are never going to have any more talent than we were born with! We'll never have any more than the day we had when we came into this world. The difference is that filling up the rest of the cup is our individual duty and account-

ability for the gift that we've been given.

Hopefully we spend the rest of our life developing that gift and developing that craft and if you have some sense of humility you share that gift with others because you realise that it is a gift and that it isn't anything you did or earned! Michael Jordan didn't give himself the gift to play basketball, he was

born with the athletic gift but he developed it!

Steve Gadd has been a friend of mine for 15 years and I consider him one of the world's greatest drummers and the world's most accomplished drummer yet he is the most humble and sweetest guy I know! He's grateful for his ability and for the opportunities he's had, he's worked hard at his craft but he acknowledges the fact that it's a gift and therefore he doesn't have an attitude about it and neither do I. Humility allows everyone to grow but unfortunately you don't see it as often today! People are so busy patting themselves on the back that they forget that the talents they have are just gifts!

I encourage everyone to develop the gift you have by investing in yourself. Spend all your money, time and energy on your passion. People waste money on all kinds of stupid things but if your passion is music and you spend all your money on books, instruments and lessons you're never going to regret it!

My mission before I leave this earth is to have affected as many people as possible in a positive way therefore giving my life more depth and value beyond my personal accomplishments.

I live to motivate and inspire; in fact I have so much to say on it that I'm writing a motivational book which currently amounts to about 400 pages on my laptop. It may take me the next 2 or 3 years to fully complete it because as always I'm taking my time to be thorough about what I want to say. The book is about coming from nothing, having a vision, having a strategy and how to go from point zero to doing music for a living!

Everything I always did was based on a plan and

a strategy and I always look at my career based on the tale of the tortoise and the hare. The hare represents the person in life who is busy showboating and gallivanting around when they have their 15 minutes of fame but they're not building anything of substance! I've been the tortoise! Slowly day by day I've invested in myself like blue chip stock. It doesn't have any super peaks or valleys it's just steadily moving up! (Laughs) Before you know it you're a millionaire!

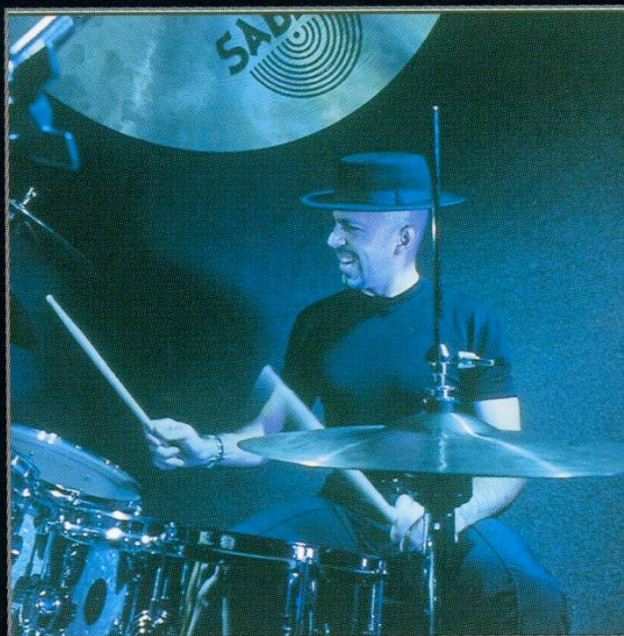
In the end the tortoise finishes first because he/she has been building a steady path of growth.

When I began playing with Frankie Valley people would say to me, "Why are you wasting time, you should be doing other gigs!" Frankie is a big pop star but he's not the flavour of the month. I told the sceptics..."I'm building something here!" While I was on a nice yearly salary with Frankie I used my down time to write the book and develop all these other things that have now taken off successfully on their own!

It's funny, sometimes you don't see the tortoise working away because the hares are all around! (Laughs)

Hype can only get you so far but when there's substance it becomes undeniable. Another part of my philosophy is to "serve the people!" With the artists I've played with I've always been their servant! I've served the song, I've served the artist giving them whatever they wanted. I've never walked into a session saying this is the way I do it and that's the way it is! If they wanted a particular sound and I needed to change perhaps the tuning on my drums then, ok! I learned that from hanging out with Steve Gadd.

Anything that you do, you should do so well that



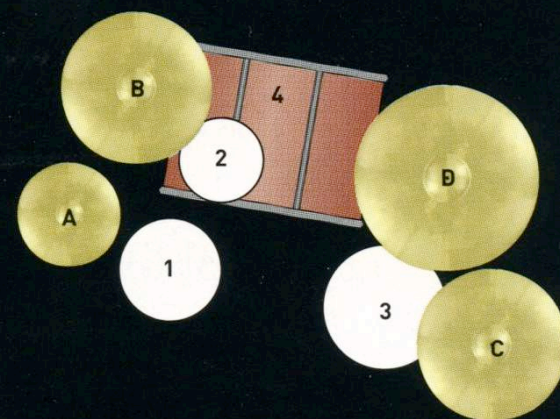
it becomes undeniable! Work on your craft so much that even if they hate...you... your ability becomes undeniable and speaks for itself. True talent cannot be suppressed and true skill and craftsmanship cannot be ignored, it's impossible!

I myself barely graduated high school and barely passed English class, but I always knew that I was a gifted communicator. I wasn't good at grammar and punctuation and all the peripheral surface stuff but I knew that I could tell a story! It's always about not letting the things you can't do get in the way of what you can!

When I began writing I didn't know how to type, didn't know how to use a computer and now the book has been voted the number one drum book in the world by Modern Drummer readers poll!

It just goes to show me that my philosophy was true and that anything is possible.

ZORO: KIT SET UP



DRUMSET: DW

1. 5x14" Aluminum, Bronze & Brass snare drums
2. 8x10" rack tom
3. 13x16" mounted floor tom
4. 16 x22" bass drum

CYMBALS: SABIAN

- A. 14" Manhattan Groove Hats (hi-hats)
- B. 18" Hand Hammered medium thin crash
- C. 18" Fierce Crash
- D. 22" Manhattan ride

HARDWARE:

All DW, including their Delta 5500TH hi-hat stand and their Delta 5000 AH Accelerator bass drum pedal

ADDITIONAL HARDWARE:

The Drum Frame

STICKS: VIC FIRTH

SD4 Combo

HEADS: EVANS

Power Center with a Reverse Dot on snare batter Hazy 300 on snare side G2 clears on top of toms and G1 clears on bottom EQ4 on bass drum batter in conjunction with 4 EQ Pad pillows inside. EQ3 on front of bass drum

PERCUSSION: LATIN

Percussion Mini-timbales, mambo cowbell, & jam blocks

MICROPHONES: AUDIX