

New series

Readers digest

How reading will get you the gig. In the first of a new series, **Haydn Callow** caught up with *Rat Pack* drummer Elliott Henshaw to discuss big band reading.



INTERVIEW
Haydn Callow

Featuring the music of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jnr, *Rat Pack: Live From Las Vegas* is currently having a hugely successful run at the Strand Theatre. With performances of 'My Way' and 'That's Amore', the show's crowd-pleasing appeal is undeniable, but the long-running success is due in no small part to a fantastic 15-piece band recreating the sounds of a Sands Hotel extravaganza. Elliott Henshaw is the drummer...

How did you get the gig?

"The *Rat Pack*'s actually been going for four or five years as it was touring before it came into the West End. At that time it was Matt Skelton's gig. Two years ago it went out on the road again and there was an exclusive period of four weeks where Matt would have to be there the whole time.

"I had just moved to London and Matt called me up and asked if I'd do the exclusive because he had some other work he couldn't get out of. I'd depped for Matt before, so I pretty much knew the show already. We've been sharing the gig ever since."

But how did you get to that point?

"I started off depping around the West End even when I was living in Manchester because I always knew I was going to re-locate to London. My big 'in' to the business was Mike Smith, who I got to know by turning up at BBC Big Band gigs. I grew up listening to that guy on the radio Big Band Special. When I was 16, my dad took me to Maida Vale and sat next to Mike, I couldn't believe this guy hadn't seen the parts before, it sounded like he knew what was coming up!

"Later, the band moved to Pebble Mill when I was at Salford University. They recorded on a Monday when I didn't have any lectures, so every Monday for a year I was down at Pebble Mill sitting behind Mike and that's really how my sight-reading took off. Mike was a big influence and a really welcoming, friendly guy."

Did you have to read to get this show?

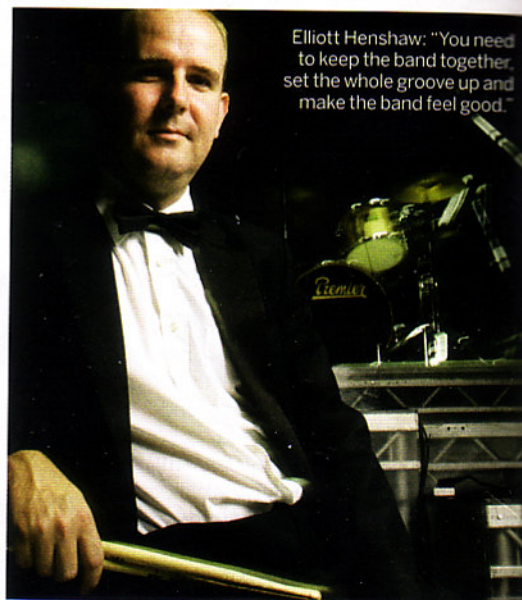
"Ooh yeah! The music's all there, all the charts are written out. For the first six months, I had the pad on the stand as a reference, but now (I'm ashamed to say) I don't even open the pad because I don't need to.

"In some ways, that makes the gig a more enjoyable experience, because it means you can start expanding and putting your own stamp on it. Once a week, I will open the pad and read through it just to make sure I keep my sight-reading chops in order."

Is it essential to be able to read brilliantly to play authentic big band jazz?

"The time and feel can suffer if you're too busy trying to nail what's on the page, but sometimes that's not important. You need to keep the band together, set the whole groove up and make the band feel good. You'll get more that way.

"What the saxophonists and trumpeters want is someone like a metronome to make it easy for them to read the phrases, and sometimes a rim click on two and four is the best thing you can do."




Elliott Henshaw: "You need to keep the band together, set the whole groove up and make the band feel good."

Are you modelling your performance in *Rat Pack* on any particular drummer or era?

"I don't like the phrase tribute band. I'm never going to be Sonny Payne, I'm never going to be Irv Cottler. I'm inspired by them, but I'm playing big band music in the 21st century. I'm trying to be myself. All my influences are coming together but I'm not trying to be Sonny or Irv, I'm trying to be Elliott Henshaw. No one said to Irv Cottler 'Could you play the gig like Sid Catlett', or 'Can you play like Dave Tough?' They just said 'There's the charts, play your thing!'"

What advice can you give to fellow drummers about reading in this situation?

"If you've got time to look at a chart then first and foremost, check basic things like the time signature and feel. Then check the geography because there's no point being able to play all the tricky phrases if you're going to the coda when every one else is at the sign. Look through to see if there are any changes from sticks to brushes, or changes in time or feel. Nail the geography of the piece as a whole, and if there's still time, find the big blocks of black on the page, something you're catching in unison with the trumpets or something that's a little tough. Try to see the whole phrase at once – like when you read a book and you read a whole word or sentence instead of individual letters.

"If you find you can't read a phrase then you need to stay relaxed. Don't worry if you're playing time and there's a phrase coming up and your mind goes blank and you just play over the top of it. If the trumpets are on it, the phrase will be heard anyway, so it doesn't need to be backed up by the snare drum or bass drum every time. A lot of times, if there's a tricky phrase it's going to crop up again in the same piece, so if I haven't had time to work something out I'll let the trumpets go for it, listen to what they do and treat it like a listen and repeat exercise. Rather than seeing notes on a page, you're hearing it musically." 

Elliott's top tips

■ Play along to a CD rather than a metronome when practising reading exercises

■ Try transcribing your favourite big band tunes as drum charts

■ For a really tough read, borrow the saxophone charts and try them on the snare!