

Elliott Henshaw

The mastermind behind the 2012 Buddy Rich 25th Anniversary Memorial Concert at the London Palladium, Elliott Henshaw, tells *Rhythm* about his varied career in big band, musicals and on the road

WORDS: GEOFF NICHOLLS PHOTOS: ROB MONK

When he was 11, Elliott Henshaw saw Buddy Rich at the Davenport Theatre in Southport. "I was playing saxophone at the time and my dad actually took me to see [lead tenor saxophonist] Steve Marcus. I came out saying, 'No, I want to play the drums now.' I did not really know what I was saying. That was in 1986, and in 1987 Buddy passed away. I was lucky because not many people in my generation group saw him."

Rich set Elliott on his life path. Growing up in Wilmslow, Cheshire, and attending Salford University, Elliott gravitated towards big band drumming, with Buddy always his ultimate hero. "I grew up playing in rehearsal bands, getting my reading together," he recalls. "I used to do loads of blow bands around Manchester. And when I was at college I used to make the effort every Monday and drive to Pebble Mill in Birmingham to sit behind Mike Smith, the BBC Big Band's drummer at the time. For me he is the best reader I have ever come across. He can read anything in front of him and make it sound great. I do quite a lot of private tuition from home and most people come to me and say I want to get my sight reading together and that is predominantly from my big band experience."

WEST END CALLING

It was Mike Smith who got Elliott his first West End theatre deps. And when *Rhythm* spoke with Elliott he was performing a couple of concerts at the Cadogan Hall, Chelsea, with the *Rat Pack* show. "I used to

do it in the West End when I first moved to London in 2002, after college. I started off on tour and ended in the West End for four years. The three guys who played Frank, Sammy and Dean have now set up their own company and this year we did a week in Denmark. And we've been to Kuala Lumpur. Those gigs are great because when I started I was a Buddy Rich freak and big band was what I wanted to do."

Having established a reputation in big band and West End musicals, Elliott is keen to keep branching out. "It's funny how my career has gone. When I first moved to London and got the *Rat Pack* gig they thought of me as the big band guy. And

work around you could dip in and out of different genres. Whereas these days it is harder to be the guy who does everything, because everyone needs to work and if you get a lot of calls for a specific style, you think great, I'll do that because I have bills to pay. And so everyone thinks that is what you do and forget you do other stuff. I am constantly trying to reinvent myself. And also, for musical gratification, it pleases me if I do an orchestral thing, not that I play tuned percussion. I did a big gala TV concert with the London Philharmonia in 2012 for the 50th anniversary of James Bond and it was presented by Honor Blackman. Carl Davies conducted and we

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through that I got a lot of deps in the West End. Then I did *The Producers* for a while and lots of shows like *Priscilla*, *Queen Of The Desert* and it was, 'Elliott, he's the West End guy.' But I never liked the pigeonhole thing, my heroes are Americans like Steve Gadd and Vinnie Colaiuta. They will crop up on a small group album, big band, Latin, pop, country. And over here we have Neal Wilkinson, Ian Thomas and Ralph Salmins who will go across lots of genres. But it's harder these days to do that. Ian and Ralph are a generation ahead of me and they grew up in an era where there was so much

did every Bond track from every film."

But Elliott has never forgotten Buddy, and also in 2012, realising that 2 April was the 25th anniversary of the maestro's passing, he hit on the recklessly ambitious idea of recreating the first Buddy Rich memorial concert in London. And at the Palladium theatre, no less. "It was a dream come true and it was the hardest I have ever worked in my life," he confesses. "I was shattered at the end of it."

So how did he pull it off? "I had this idea 18 months beforehand. We'd never had a Buddy memorial concert here and



Leo Sayer asks Elliott Henshaw if he feels like dancing



INTERVIEW

ELLIOTT HENSHAW

when I went to Toby Cruse, my promoter friend, I wanted to reunite the original 1989 Buddy Rich Concert, with Steve Gadd, Dave Weckl and Vinnie Colaiuta. I've known Dave Weckl for some time and he was up for it straight away. I emailed Vinnie through his website and he came back and said when you have a date let me know. Steve Gadd was a joy to deal with. He desperately wanted to do it and tried to move heaven and earth, but Steve can't dep out anything. He couldn't get out of what he had and Vinnie was away with Sting. We tried Dennis Chambers and he was off with Santana."

But Elliott persevered anyway. "Amazingly, Toby managed to book the Palladium on the actual anniversary date night. It was a Monday and it was the only night it wasn't playing *The Wizard Of Oz*. So it was meant to be. We booked Weckl and the hard part was contacting Cathy [*Rich, Buddy's daughter*]. We needed her permission. I sent a message via the Buddy Rich fan club site and Cathy came straight back, 'Here's my number, give me a call.' She was slightly stand-offish to start with - she gets a lot of idiots and non-starters. So I wrote her a long email and said we want you to come over and present it and come on board as a producer. I said Toby Cruse is the promoter and The Palladium and Dave Weckl are booked and within a day she came back saying she was really excited. She was a lovely person and a joy to deal with, so then we went ahead."

The night saw great performances from both UK and American stars. "Ian Paice, Clem Cattini and Gavin Harrison were great.



bit more rock'n'roll, like the Shepherd's Bush Empire. And do it on a Saturday night, with six months of advertising beforehand."

CONTRASTING STYLES

Meantime, Elliott is juggling his diary between tours with three veteran singers of hugely contrasting styles. "At the start of last year Joe Longthorne decided to reform a band and I got the call. With Tony Christie

ELLIOTT'S NEW ALBUM



"I have just finished recording a big band album of my own, titled *Trying Too Hard*. I got together with an arranger/saxophonist friend called Simon Niblock and put together a band called Spice Fusion. Hopefully it will be out this spring. It is not so much swing stuff, more almost Dave Grusin or Yellowjackets inspired, but arranged for big band. There are a few Latin charts and a couple of my original compositions. The guys on it are all incredible players and you look at something like the American Gordon Goodwin Big Phat Band, it is kind of a British version to rival that."

but he made it sound expansive. Ronnie Johnson, who is Leo's MD, a legendary guitarist. He was Van Morrison's MD for 10 years. And Dave Troke on bass, who is one of the main teachers at the Tech Music Schools. It was a lot of fun, a proper old-school rock'n'roll tour.

"Leo lives in Sydney and actually that was the first tour he has done over here for 15 years. The three of us had to audition in July for the gig. Leo has a lot of stuff planned for next year - more concerts abroad, festivals, and then they're talking about America and South East Asia. I am off to Germany with Tony Christie in January. And Joe already has 50 dates in the book for next year." ■

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Ginger Baker was a nightmare to deal with - scary! John Blackwell had done one show for Cathy back in America but amazingly he was terrified before he went on."

So, when is the next one?

"Well, I've been chatting to Toby," Elliott reveals. "I'm not going to do it again unless we can nail down Vinnie, Weckl and Gadd, the dream team. Whether that ends up as a Buddy memorial concert or a tribute to the big band drummers... it is a massive outlay of money to start with, with visas, hotels, etc. The big draw to get Cathy involved was that it was on the day that Buddy died. And we got the Palladium. But the audience wasn't as big as we hoped, we didn't go public till February and the gig was 2 April, it was during the holidays so there were no students around and the Palladium was expensive. Next time we'd go somewhere a

we did a 60-date UK tour to celebrate his 50 years in the business and he toured with an 11-piece band, very much a Northern Soul line-up. He did an album called *Now's The Time* (2011), with the Northern Soul influence. No one else on the circuit was touring with that size line-up. The MD, Danny McCormack, arranged all the charts. We did a lot of Tony's hits from yesteryear which had big orchestras on them, so a lot of the art was to transcribe them for a smaller band and make them sound big without the strings, etc. But it was a massive sound on stage.

"Leo Sayer is doing 1970s/1980s pop. We just did a tour with a four piece. Again, with the right guys - Rob Taggart on keyboards who is a genius, he has two or three keyboards and must have eight pairs of hands! Sometimes that can sound cheesy,

ELLIOTT'S GEAR

DRUMS

Echo Custom Apollo 1 kit (aluminium in Diamond White powder coat): 22"x20", 10"x7", 12"x8", 13"x9", 14"x14", 16"x16"; 14"x5½" Echo Olympus snare (seamless engraved/lacquered copper); 14"x6" Echo Hybrid snare (brass/aluminium); 14"x7" Echo Black Beast (aluminium)

CYMBALS

Zildjian: 14" K Custom Session hats; 16" K EFX; 16" K Custom Dark crash; 20" K Custom Medium ride, 19" K Custom Hybrid Trash Smash, 18" A Custom EFX

PLUS

Aquarian heads; Protection Racket cases; Vater Recording model sticks; Lion cajon