

Drum Machine



FROM THE RAT-A-TAT-TAT ON HIS FATHER'S LAP TO BANGING OUT LED ZEPPLIN AS A TEEN, JOHN DE WAAL HAS EVOLVED INTO CALGARY'S BUSIEST JAZZ DRUMMER

By **MARTIN MORROW**

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Talk about imprinting. One of John de Waal's earliest memories is of sitting in his father's lap in front of a drum kit, clutching the drumsticks in his tiny fists. Fast forward four decades and de Waal has become Calgary's busiest jazz drummer.

When he isn't laying down a silky backbeat for the vocal stylings of Cheryl Fisher or Vivianne Cardinal, he's putting his own stamp on a classic Gene Krupa solo with the Prime Time Big Band, or teaching tomorrow's percussionists how to flay those skins at his popular Bridgeland studio.

"I guess I found my passion early," says the slim, silver-haired de Waal. His pursuit of that passion has taken him everywhere from a stint at the legendary Montreux jazz festival in Switzerland to concerts with the likes of Rosemary Clooney, Marian McPartland, and Red Skelton.

By his own count, the in-demand drummer plays as many as 150 gigs annually. That's when he isn't giving lessons to upwards of 60 students a week, or attending workshops and conferences across Canada and the U.S. And there are good reasons why he's a wanted man.

"John's the greatest guy to have on a gig, he's there for you 125 per cent," says Cardinal. "He's always upbeat and reliable," adds veteran saxman John Reid, who has played with him innumerable times. "And I've never seen a guy set up and tear down his equipment so fast!"

De Waal's got rhythm in his blood. His late father, Ted, was a weekend drummer who had a regular gig playing Stampede square dances for close to 30 years. When John started showing interest in the old man's sideline, Ted encouraged him. "My father borrowed a drum set from a friend," he recalls, "and I began bashing away in the basement, playing along to Beatles records."

The love of jazz didn't kick in until he entered St. Francis Senior High, where he and his musician buddies met band teacher Charles Liegerot, who turned them on to the virtuosity of giants like Duke Ellington and Woody Herman. "He had all these big band charts and these great records," remembers de Waal. "So we started a jazz band." For a time, de Waal led a schizoid musical life, also learning to play classical timpani with Mount Royal College's youth orchestra while thrashing out Led Zeppelin covers with a rock 'n' roll bar band. In 1976, a scholarship to The

Banff Centre to study under Canadian composer and bandleader Phil Nimmons shifted his focus squarely to jazz.

"I guess it was inevitable I was going to lean toward jazz," he says. "The jazz players were more serious about their craft than the rock musicians, but they didn't look down on pop music like the symphony people."

Not long afterwards, de Waal started his own music school, again with his father's help. "I'd been teaching for Yamaha and my dad offered me a commercial bay in his building (the de Waal Block) so I could open up my own place."

Today, what was initially a one-man operation has grown to become the de Waal Music Studio, with eight instructors teaching as many instruments. It's still housed in the same brick-and-sandstone building off Edmonton Trail, which has been in the family for three generations.

Being his own boss leaves de Waal free to play as much as he likes. That includes dates with his own quintet, featured at this year's Calgary Jazz Festival, and Prime Time, the 20-piece big band led by Dave Jones and featuring such local jazz stalwarts as Pat Bervilleau, Eric Friedenbergh and Al Muirhead.

He's also done well by the current boom in

JAZZ MAN: John de Waal has been working the beat since childhood



female jazz singers. "Lately, I've been working a lot with female vocalists," he says. "I'm that type of player that is receptive to what a singer does, I don't get in the way." He played on Fisher's debut CD, *Slow Hand Jazz*, produced by his mentor, Tommy Banks, and is a mainstay of Cardinal's vocal workshops at Calgary's Beat Niq club and Camp Horizon. "Being a singer, you're putting your heart and soul out there for everybody to look at," he says. "You need all the support you can get."

While de Waal has backed plenty of star vocalists over the years—Clooney, Jay Clayton, Sheila Jordan—there's no question who his favorite singer is. It's his wife, Mari Jo, an elementary school teacher who sings in her spare time. "We both really love jazz," says John. They met in the early 1980s at, naturally enough, the Calgary Jazz Festival, where John was playing with a quartet and Mari Jo was a volunteer.

The couple's pet project for the last few years has been the restoration of the historic de Waal Block. De Waal estimates renovations to return the 90-year-old building to its original state have cost around \$1-million. The upper storey now contains seven loft-style apartments, while the ground floor has retail shops and a restaurant, Il Sogno. De Waal has moved his studio to the sound-proofed basement to keep those novice drum-

mers from driving diners and tenants crazy.

For all his experience, de Waal still considers himself a student too, and regularly travels to workshops given by such luminaries as Jeff Hamilton and Maria Schneider. "When you're a jazz player, you're always learning," he says. "There's always somebody better than you who sends you back to the drawing board." De Waal also stays up on the latest in educational methods and keeps a wide array of jazz literature in his studio.

Colleagues like John Hyde, head of Mount Royal's jazz program, consider him an invaluable resource. "Whenever my students need music books," says Hyde, "I get them to go to his studio. He's really trying to advance the study of jazz in this city." He also services percussion instruments at local high schools.

Still, you won't hear de Waal banging his own drum, so to speak. It's been up to his pals to celebrate his efforts. Six years ago, his best friend, and former booking agent, Peter Mauro, began the John de Waal Music Scholarship at St. Francis High school. Every year, two \$1,500 scholarships are given to students admitted to university music programs. Brigida Battistessa, Music Director at St. Francis says: "The scholarship gives the kids a sense of where they could go, a lot view music as a hobby. John is world-class, and has shown the students that music can be mainstream and not a frill." ■