

FIG: THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS DRUMMER

ANTON



“The song always takes

AS THE LONGTIME DRUMMER FOR THE *LATE NIGHT WITH DAVID Letterman* house band, Anton Fig has elevated musical diversity to an art form. But the range Fig displayed at one recent performance was nothing short of astonishing.

Granted, the Madison Square Garden Concert for New York City, a benefit for victims of the Sept. 11th attacks, wasn't a typical gig. But could any other drummer have acquitted himself so ably accompanying David Bowie, the Backstreet Boys, Destiny's Child, Macy Gray, Eric Clapton & Buddy Guy, Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, and James Taylor in a single evening?

According to Fig, excelling at many styles is chiefly a matter of sensitivity. “All music is related,” he states. “Different styles are just a matter of nuance. Sure, if you learn, say, a few reggae nuances, you might not play the style as well as someone who grew up on it. But if you listen and study, you find that you can get by in a lot of different situations.”

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Fig honed his groove in his native South Africa before coming to the States to study jazz and classical percussion at the New England Conservatory in 1976. He subsequently moved to New York City to pursue a jazz career but quickly became an in-demand rock session player, recording with Cyndi Lauper, Kiss, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Joan Armatrading, and many others.

Fig attributes much of his success to his ego-free approach. “I'm not a blazing-chops drummer,” he says. “I like being in the rhythm section and conversing with the other players, as opposed to soloing by myself. When there's a reason to stand out and play something, I do it to the best of my ability and then recede back into the woodwork. I believe that the song always takes precedence. It dictates what you should play.”

Even Fig's new solo album, *Figments*, emphasizes song-oriented playing over technical display. “There are no drum solos, just pop songs,” he says. “I have different singers and musicians on each track. Richie Havens and Ivan Neville each sing a song. Brian Wilson sings backgrounds. Sebastian Bach and Ace Frehley play together on one tune. I produced the whole thing, wrote or co-wrote most of the songs and played bass, guitar and keyboards as well as drums. I even did the cover and packaging myself. It's my baby.” You can purchase the disc at www.antonfig.com.

On stage and in the studio, Fig favors Yamaha drums. “The Yamaha Maple Custom Absolute set I have on the Letterman show is the nicest-sounding kit I own,” he says. “The drums sound great, especially my signature snare. It's a simple, 14”x6” wooden-hooped drum with a full, heavy snare sound with lots of top-end crack. The wooden hoops give a nice cross-stick sound that isn't as pingy as some metal drums. It records really well. I got one to my producer friend Kevin Shirley, who has worked with Journey, Aerosmith, and the Black Crowes, and he tells me he makes everyone use it.”



Fig's kit includes four toms, though he sometimes uses as few as two, depending on the gig. “I like the top heads tuned medium and the bottom heads a little tighter,” he says. “But when I play clubs, I tune the heads way, way down so I can lay into them without getting too loud.”

While Fig admits that his thousands of Letterman show performances sometimes blur together in memory, certain nights stand out. Most memorable of all, he says, was the night he accompanied jazz legend Miles Davis: “I always considered him one of the greatest musicians of the 20th century. I remember thinking I should be nervous, but for some reason I felt quite calm. I played pretty well — not my very best perhaps, but not bad. Afterwards Miles said, ‘You've got a good feel on them drums.’ I've taken those words with me. Whenever I'm in a difficult situation that makes me feel down about my playing, I remind myself that I was good enough for Miles.”