

Total Groove!

A Conversation with Drum Legend Steve Gadd

Steve Gadd is one of the most respected drummers of all time. Equally at home on stage or in the studio, comfortable in all styles from intricate jazz to the simplest pop, Gadd brings impeccable taste, feel, and musicianship to every project he graces. No wonder he's been the drummer of choice for Paul Simon, James Taylor, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Steely Dan, Barbra Streisand, Eric Clapton, Carly Simon, Chick Corea, Frank Sinatra, and countless other artists.

Yamaha recently celebrated their thirty-year relationship with Gadd by releasing the limited-edition Steve Gadd 30th Anniversary Drum Kit, a fastidious replica of the custom Yamaha kit Steve has used on countless recordings. It incorporates a number of Gadd's signature innovations, such as a mix of maple and birch shells and the use of a high 10" tom.

Gadd lives in Rochester, New York, the town where he grew up. But when we tracked him down, he was in New York City, rehearsing with Paul Simon for an upcoming album and tour.

How old were you when you decided to become a drummer?

Well, I never really decided—I always just did it. I started drumming when I was three. I don't remember making any conscious decision—it's just what I knew how to do.

Were your parents musicians?

No, but they were music lovers. And my uncle was a drummer—he showed me how to hold the sticks. My parents were very supportive. They bought me records to listen to and took me to hear a lot of great drummers.

Which ones made an impression?

Gene Krupa. Buddy Rich. Louis Bellson. Elvin Jones. Art Blakey. Joe

Jones. Philly Joe Jones. Max Roach. I got to hear all those guys.

You started out playing jazz. What prompted you to focus on pop and rock drumming as well?

Well, jazz guys play a lot of notes, and pop music is often simpler. When I got to New York after being in the Army and graduating from school, I got a chance to hear a lot of other younger drummers. They were playing more groove-oriented music. That challenged me and gave me a new awareness. I remember hearing Rick Marotta, who's a very deep-pocket player. I realized that what sounded very open and simple and un-technical was actually very challenging to play, because it was about putting every note where it felt good. It was an eye-opener.

Was there a particular record you worked on that marked a turning point toward that more simplified style?

It was a process, not an event. And it's still a process. Even now when I play jazz, I think more in terms of a basic groove. Not necessarily a repetitive beat, just coming up with a groove that feels right.

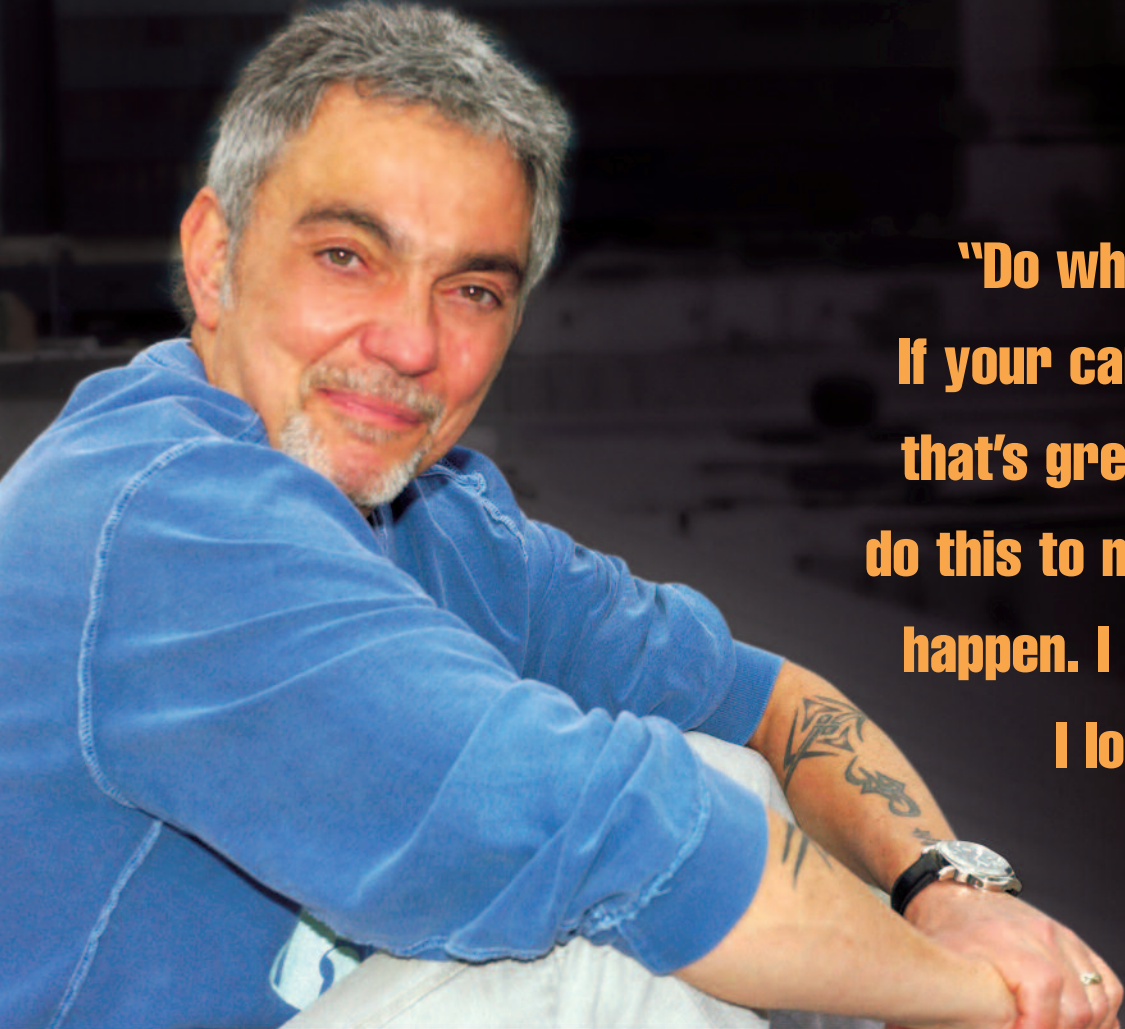
Some of the work that established your name was incredibly innovative for its day. It seems like you got to collaborate with artists who afforded you a great deal of creative leeway.

It depended who I was working with. Some people didn't want a lot of busy stuff. At the same time, I was able to play with jazz guys who did want busier things. I didn't get locked into any particular category. As far

as coming up with innovative ideas, that's not just about me. It's always a group effort involving the artist, the producer, and the other musicians. You want something that's good for the song and also interesting. Basically, you're trying to pull a rabbit out of the hat.

How has your gig changed over the years?

The types of gigs I play have changed. The venues tend to be larger—fewer clubs, more concerts. There are a more situations where I play alone in the studio, overdubbing my part. But there are still a lot of sessions where everyone plays together. Sometimes it's both. I recently did a project with Al DiMeola where John Patitucci and I played together, but Al and [pianist] Barry Miles had already recorded their parts to click.



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that’s great. But I didn’t
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You’ve played Yamaha drums for thirty years.

Yes—ever since I went to Japan thirty years ago. Yamaha was supplying my drums, and I got to meet Hagi. [Takahashi Hagiwara, who spearheaded Yamaha’s drum division for many years.] They approached me—no one had ever done that before! So I asked for a few changes in the way they were putting drums together. For example, Yamaha’s hardware was always good, but they used to have a metal rod going down the middle of the bass drum to support the tom-tom rack. There were internal tone controls too. I wanted all that stuff taken out, and I wanted to start with a 10" tom instead of a 12".

What does the smaller tom provide?

You can loosen up a small drum and make it sound big and deep. You can also tighten it up so it speaks with a high pitch. But you can’t get a 12" drum to go that high without choking up. It was one of the things I’d discovered when I put together my previous kit. That process taught me a lot of things. I learned the difference between one- and two-headed toms, and decided I like two-headed ones. I learned you can make small drums sound big. I realized I liked having two floor toms on one stand. I’d settled on a configuration of 10", 12", 13", and 14" toms, and I also had 15" and 16" toms I could add if I needed them. I was able to put together all sorts of combinations. So Yamaha built me a kit just like that.

Has that setup changed much over the years?

Much of it stays the same, but there are ongoing changes. For example, years ago I played all birch drums, but now I use a maple bass drum with birch toms. When I first started, I didn’t even know what the drums were made of—

I just liked the sound of the Yamaha’s Birch Recording series. But at some point I had a chance to play shells of various woods side by side, and I realized I like the bottom of the maple. So now I almost always use a maple bass drum, birch toms, and a steel snare.

Why steel?

I’ve always just liked steel snares. When Yamaha wanted to make a signature steel snare for me, I wanted consistency, a big tuning range, and a simple setup. That’s exactly what they did. And if it’s not broke, why fix it?

Yamaha just issued the 30th Anniversary Steve Gadd Signature Drum Kit.

Yes. It’s based on my custom kit. I love what my kit does, and they’ve done a good job recreating it. I’m happy about the 30th Anniversary Kit. I like the way it looks. I hope people like the way it feels.

What have you learned about getting great sounds in the studio and onstage?

I just try to get the drums to sound good acoustically, and trust the people I’m working with to do the rest. I don’t get involved with miking at all. Obviously, we mike everything at big shows. But when I do clinics, I like there to be more of an acoustic feel, with less coming back to me out of the house so I can better control things dynamically.

Do you notice any consistently good or bad habits among the young drummers you encounter in clinics?

I don’t think of it as good or bad—I’m just glad they’re interested. For my part, I just try to share the idea of using the drums to play music.



To create something that inspires the musicians. I like clinics to be a big hang, not a performance. I’m there to be with them as a fellow musician, to demonstrate things, answer questions, and be supportive. I try to address whatever scary questions come into young people’s heads when they’re trying to enter the field and make a living at it. I always say, do what you love. If your career happens, that’s great. But I didn’t do this to make my career happen. I did it because I loved it. I was just lucky to love it enough to keep doing it until people wanted to check me out. I can’t guarantee that will happen for everyone. But if I can do it, you can do it. If you love to play, and if you think about music the way I have, I guarantee you’ll have a great time.

Of all the records you’ve played on, are some especially close to your heart?

I don’t think of it that way. I try to do my best on everything. Sure, some records became more popular than others, and I’m proud of the fact that people have heard them and liked them. I loved the stuff I did with Paul Simon. With Chick Corea. With Eric Clapton. But I did lots of great music along the way. Maybe some of it wasn’t so technical, and maybe my parts didn’t especially stick out. But they were all challenges, and they all taught me things, so I like them all. I’ve had a good ride. It’s nice to be a drummer.