

Celebrating Elvin Jones

by Stephen Gullette
cover photo by
Michael Tracy

Unless one has been oblivious to the original American art form of jazz, Elvin Jones' name will be immediately recognizable when viewing a list of drumming greats. Elvin's drumming has been the spiritual pulse for many celebrated and groundbreaking recordings. This September 9th he turns 75. Still, Elvin Jones continues to play music with the same untiring energy and originality he has maintained throughout his career. His skill has been noteworthy since the earliest days of his career. Consider a 1955 *DownBeat* interview in which Miles Davis comments on his favorite drummers at that time. Miles says, "My five favorites are Max, Kenny Clarke, Philly Joe Jones, Art Blakey, and Roy Haynes. Elvin

Jones, the brother of Thad and Hank, is another drummer who plays real good." There's Elvin at 28, before the Coltrane years, already mentioned in an impressive group, ready to build on Max Roach and Art Blakey, ready to step up and fill the stylistic niche after Philly Joe Jones, ready to free the role of the drummer, ready to be Elvin.

People remember it when they see Elvin play--he's known for his legendary live shows. I, for one, will never forget a recent performance at Comstock Concert Hall kicking off the University of Louisville School of Music Jazz Week on February 18, 2002. The Jazz Machine lineup consisted of sax-

ophonist Pat La Barbera (whose name you'll probably recognize from his Buddy Rich years), trombonist Delfeayo Marsalis, pianist Carlos McKinney, bassist Neal Cain and, of course, the man himself on the skins. Particularly memorable was Elvin's mallet work on his toms at the beginning of "Doll of the Bride." Elvin prefaced the piece by saying he was trying to replicate the effect of Japanese taiko drummers. His ability to capture the spirit of an ensemble group of taiko drummers in a jazz context was quite impressive.

I met Elvin and witnessed the sound check, concert and clinic over a two day period; I was therefore able to form my own opinion of this icon on a personal level. The easiest way to describe my impression of Elvin? He is his music.

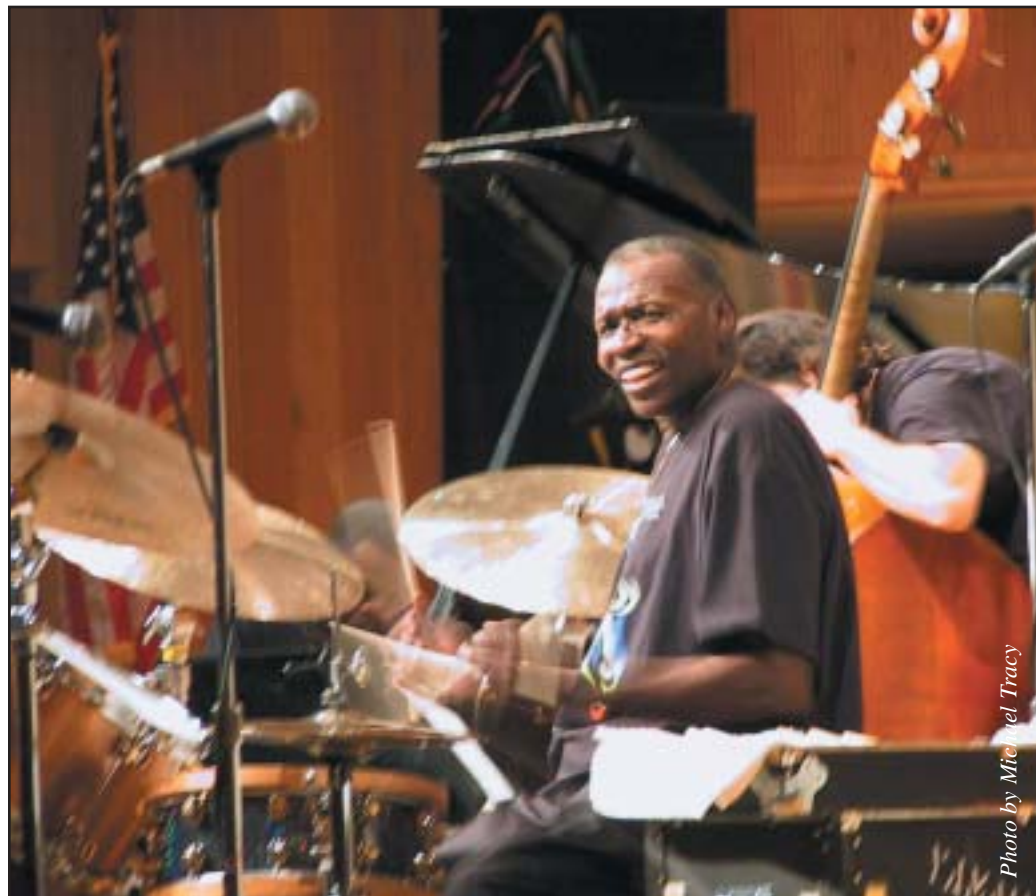


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When you hear Elvin play, you're meeting Elvin. He's projecting who he is. He's having fun when he's behind his kit, yet he's serious; he's conscious of the effect of his playing on the rest of his group, yet he plays with such concentrated intensity and improvisational skill that it's as if his purpose is a stream-of-conscious connection from himself to his band to his audience. Elvin once said, in an October 1969 *DownBeat* interview, "Music is a way of life, it's everything. I play drums and that's what I believe I was born to do." Watching Elvin play is witnessing someone being truly alive. And then, when you meet Elvin face to face, you still sense the grandness of his skill and his history, but he'll never let you feel any less comfortable than you would at home with your own family.

What follows is a collection comprising bits from my conversations with Elvin, questions asked by those at Elvin's drum clinic and items I found in my own research. So here's Elvin--always funny, always creating, always innovative and distinctive. *Always Elvin.*

Background

On September 9, 1927 Elvin Jones is born into a large musical family. He is the youngest child of ten in Pontiac Michigan. Sometime around the age of 13, he decides he is going to be a drummer.

Vintage Drummer: "Seeing how so many people have trouble deciding what they will do with their life, it is very interesting to me that you seem to have made a decision that you were going to play drums and you never turned back."

Elvin: "I just knew drumming was what I wanted to do . . . the rest was just practice."

Vintage Drummer: "Your family was a good environment for your musical growth?"

Elvin: "Yeah, they all put up with me making a lot of noise."

And make a lot of noise he did. Elvin's press biography reports he "...got a practice pad, some sticks, a Paul Yoder method book which he learned backwards and forwards, and listened to all the drummers he could, including Sid Catlett, Buddy Rich, Jo Jones, Chick Webb, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Dave Tough, and Kenny Clarke."

In addition to his family, another positive local influence was his high school band director Fred N. Weist. "He was a consummate musician," Elvin says, "He could pick up any instrument and play it. He showed me that you could treat a



Photo by Michael Tracy

drum like an instrument. He showed me that you could get sounds out of a drum—rather than just hit it."

Elvin served in the Army from 1946 to 1949. After the Army, Elvin played with a long list of musicians over the next ten years. A short list includes: Charles Mingus, Bud Powell, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, Tommy Flanagan, Kenny Burrell, Yusef Lateef, Billy Mitchell, Art Farmer, J.J. Johnson and occasionally Charlie Parker. These years of playing prepared Elvin for the groundbreaking work he was about to begin with John Coltrane.

Playing With Trane

Elvin worked with John Coltrane from 1960 to 1966. He replaced Billy Higgins in the group. Elvin says he's thankful Billy stayed around to help acclimate him to the music and the group. Billy was a big help in the transition between drummers, especially since the band was to start recording what would become *My Favorite Things* a couple of weeks after Elvin joined.

Elvin has nothing but good things to say about those years with Coltrane. He says, "Right from the beginning to the last

time we played together it was something pure. The most impressive thing was a feeling of steady, collective learning ... If there is anything like perfect harmony in human relationships, that band was as close as you can come.” This was an environment where Elvin was able to thrive. “Coltrane to me, at least after my brothers, my mother and father, was the best teacher I had. The communication was there, the rapport was there. If anything, it was a relationship of mentor and pupil” (Down Beat March 27, 1975).



A fine video performance of the John Coltrane Quartet exists via the Jazz Casual television series of the early 60's. Elvin told me he has high regards for Ralph J. Gleason—the respected Rolling Stone magazine critic who hosted the 1963 “Jazz Casual: John Coltrane” program. Elvin said Ralph was a man of character that he respects for giving so much to music and for not backing down when it came to defending art. Significantly, very few of Coltrane’s live performances survive on video. This performance is an excellent 30 minute show capturing the energy of Elvin and the group on tape. The band plays three tunes: Mongo Santamaria’s “Afro Blue,” and two of Coltrane’s own “Alabama” and “Impressions.” This video documents the rhythmic drive and skill Elvin brought to the quartet. Plus, he’s playing what appears to be a white satin Gretsch round badge kit—a beauty.

Drums

Elvin’s drum sizes have been the same for years now. He has a 12 x 8 and a 13 x 9 on top of an 18 x 14 bass drum, with 16 x 16 and 18 x 18 floor toms. He currently plays

his signature series Yamaha snare which is a 14 x 7 with wooden hoops. Elvin sounds great on his Yamaha kit. However, if you’re like me, when you think of Elvin you always imagine him behind those great Gretsch drums of the 1960's.

U of L Clinic Question: “With everyone in the world wanting a Gretsch round-badge kit, and you having been with Gretsch, how many of those kits do you think you have?”

Elvin: “Let’s see, I was with Gretsch for about 23 years. And I’ve given away sets here and there to drummers that needed sets, but I guess I’ve probably got about 25 of those sets.”

Clinic: “You’ve given away sets?”

Elvin: “Yeah, every now and then I’ll come across a drummer who can’t afford a set, or needs a better one—and I’ll give him a set.”

Clinic: “What kind of cymbals do you like to use?”

Elvin: “The kind that stand still and let me hit them [laughs].” Elvin has endorsed Zildjian cymbals for years.

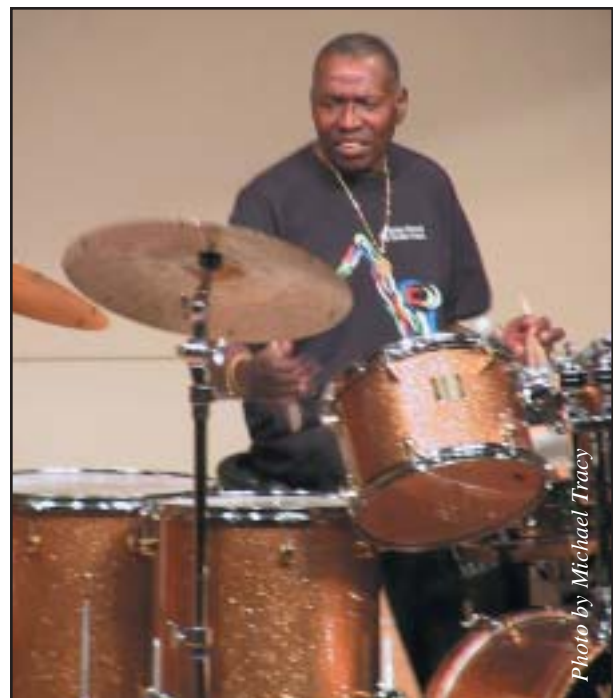
Vintage Drummer: “When did you start endorsing Yamaha?”

Elvin: “I was with Gretsch in the beginning. Then I was with Tama until they dropped me. Then, I just wasn’t with anyone for a few years. I then started talking with Yamaha. And, I’m glad to endorse their drums, because they make good drums.”

Playing

Clinic: “I’ve noticed that you use your hi-hat cymbal to accent more than you do to hold down a pattern with it.”

Elvin: “Yeah, I don’t really hold down any pattern with the hi-hat. I see it as an instrument, and I use it to accent the music, rather than just close it on 2 and 4.”



Clinic: “Where did your use of polyrhythms come from?”

Elvin: “I think that mainly came from my drum corps days in school. I would be playing my part and really paying attention to what the other parts were doing at the same time. I would say it had something to do with hearing those rhythms happening at once.”

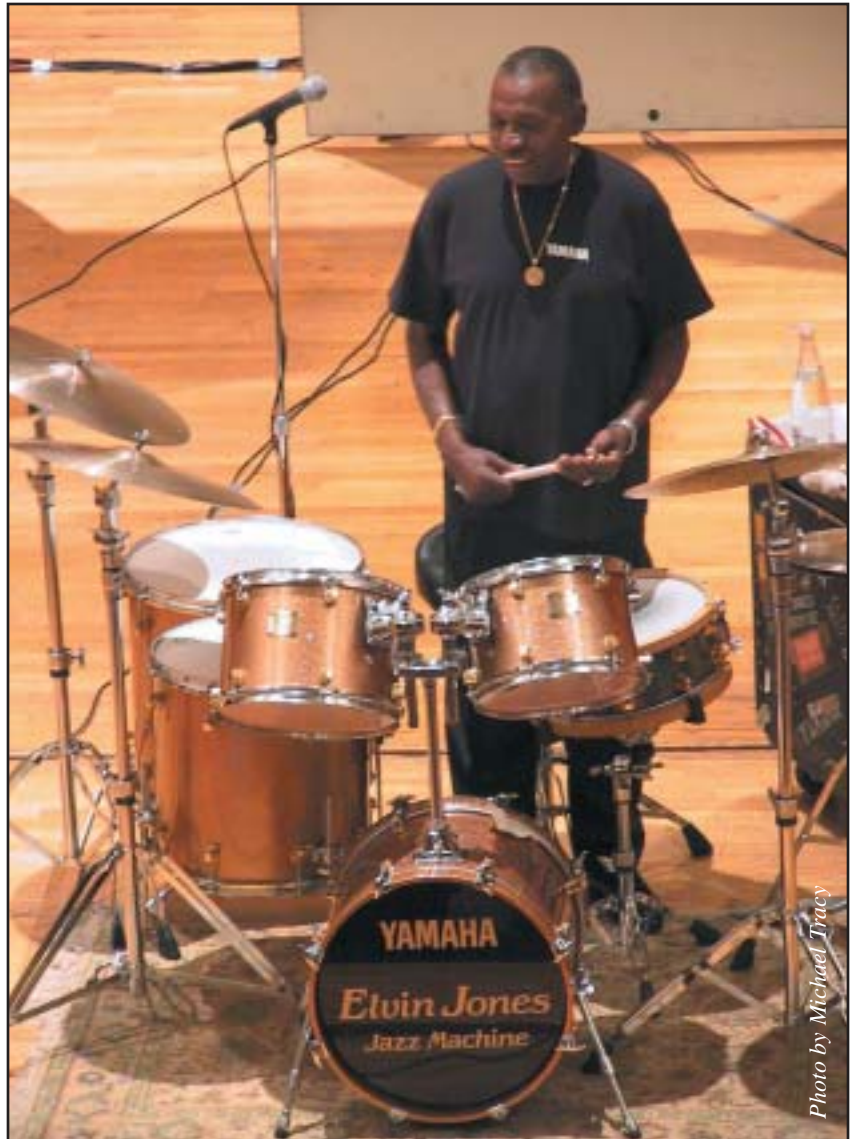
Clinic: “You played on so many historical albums. Do you have any albums that you think best represent Elvin Jones—or one album that’s your favorite?”

Elvin: “I don’t really have any favorite albums, and I’ve been Elvin Jones on every album I’ve played on [laughs]. Now, I do think my playing has gotten better over the years, so I would say my later work is better than my early stuff.”

Peers and Passion

I got the chance to talk to Peter Erskine this past April. We spoke some about Elvin Jones. He passed on this story that captures the essence of Elvin's character. As the story goes, Elvin breaks a stick at the end of a clinic. A young boy approaches Elvin and asks, “Mr. Jones, can I have that broken stick?” Without hesitation, Elvin barks at the boy, “No!” and turns away from him to lay the broken stick with his others. The boy stands frozen. Without hesitation, Elvin turns back to the kid—a new pair of sticks in hand—and says, “You can have these.” Elvin offers the sticks along with a smile. It is this type of gesture, along with his musical ability, that makes it easy to nod your head in agreement when Peter Erskine says, “As far as I’m concerned, Elvin Jones is the best thing that ever happened to drumming.”

Similarly, as Elvin ends the U of L clinic, he motions a boy from the audience to come on stage. Elvin gives him a pair of



sticks and wraps his arm around the child’s shoulder for a photo. In my mind, I can still see the kid smiling and Elvin smiling with him. There’s a child-like similarity in both that reminds me of Elvin’s final words at the clinic: “There’s not any other place I’d rather be, or anything else I’d rather be doing.” Before leaving, I asked Elvin if he had any regrets about choosing the life of a drummer. He said, “No, I don’t see that I could have lived any other life than the one I’ve lived. I don’t have any regrets.”

In preparing to write this article, I contacted Joe Morello to see if he would comment on Elvin. He obliged and said, “Elvin is one of the great drum stylists, a nice person and a good human being. He’ll go down in the books as one of the best drummers ever.”

What’s left for me to say?