

# DENNIS ST JOHN

## IT'S ABOUT TIME!

Photo by H.L. Volker

by Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz

The name may not be instantly recognizable, but Dennis St John was a busy boy during the sixties and seventies, touring and recording with top artists and drumming on sixteen top-10 records and over fifty Gold and Platinum albums. If you've ever heard "Let Your Love Flow" or "Spooky" or "Spiders & Snakes" or Linda Ronstadt's "Desperado" or Neil Diamond's "Forever In Blue Jeans" or "America", then you've heard just a small sampling of the hundreds of recordings featuring his playing. He has several production credits, has participated in Command Performances for the British Royal Family, and has had regional nominations for the NARAS Best Studio Drummer and Most Valuable Player awards. Meet Dennis, in his first interview *ever* for a drum magazine!

**CD:** What influenced you to become interested in drums?

**DSJ:** I was born in 1941. My father was a career Army officer, and in 1947 my mother and I were amongst the first American military dependant families to live in Germany. The German prisoners of war at my father's depot had a great Dixieland band. Every Friday I got to sit and listen to this band in the ware-

house, before they had to report back to the stockade. It was my first experience with live music and has stayed with me ever since. When we returned from Germany in 1950, we moved to Chicago, and that's where I heard my first Fender electric bass, which helped nudge me closer to music. After a couple more moves, and high-school bands in Olympia, Washington and

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I graduated in 1959. I immediately put on my Princeton t-shirt, and took my fake ID to the world famous Somers Point, New Jersey traffic circle, home of Bayshores, Tony Mart's, and Steele's Bar. I'd spend day after day, night after night listening to the legendary Jimmy Cavallo & the House Rockers. That's when I decided I'd like to be a drummer.

**CD:** Did you take lessons?

**DSJ:** Yes, and that's how I found out what kind of drummer I would become. I had trouble playing rudiments and getting up to speed, and finally my Philadelphia-era drum teacher sent me to a neurologist who discovered that I had a cervical nerve problem that caused a deficiency of speed and strength in my left wrist and arm. While I couldn't do rudiments or good rolls, I discovered I could play 'time' better than most people around. So that's when I became a disciple of the back-beat. 2 & 4 was my trademark.

**CD:** Which bands were you listening to at the time, and who did you particularly admire?

**DSJ:** It was a treat to be in Philadelphia in that era. American Bandstand was just getting started, and I could go down to the Tower Theater and catch great R&B groups like The Flamingos, The Cadillacs, The Manhattans, or great Rock'n'Roll acts like Duane Eddy and Link Wray. Very influential times for a young man.

**CD:** How did your professional career start?

**DSJ:** In 1959 I moved to Atlanta Georgia and attended Emory University. Rhythm & Blues was absolute *king* then, and while in college, started my first band St John & the Cardinals, with Emory Gordy Jr. on bass, Paul Goddard and Barry Bailey on guitars, and two great front men, The Mighty Hannibal, an exciting James Brown type showman, and Grover Mitchell who was a unique combination of Sam Cooke and Roy Orbison. We were a very successful R&B band, and in 1964 when I graduated, and fortunately none of our draft numbers were called, we decided to go at it professionally. We became the quasi-official house band at Lowery Publishing Company, and played on the Pop & Country sessions that Lowery was producing. We also did a tremendous amount of sessions for leading R&B producer Wendell

Parker, and even big Gospel choirs for Savoy Records. We were also the house band at the legendary Kitten's Korner, where we backed up many major R&B acts of the day including Rufus Thomas, Little Richard, Billy Stewart, The Coasters, The Drifters, Dee Clark and others. Our reputation started to spread, and I got call from Roy Orbison, who invited us up to Nashville to play with him at his house. It was an instant good match, and St John & the Cardinals ended up touring, and playing on many of Roy's records from about 1966 thru 1971.

**CD:** What eventually led you to Los Angeles?

**DSJ:** While at Lowery Music, many California acts came back to record with my band. Dick Dodd from The Standells kept telling me that the band should move out to California, where there would be tremendous recording opportunities for the rhythm section. Feeling that we had conquered most of the projects available in Atlanta, Emory and I decided to move to L.A. to test the waters, and Paul and Barry decided to stay in Atlanta, where they became founding members of the Atlanta Rhythm Section.

**CD:** You've crossed paths with an impressive number of artists such as Linda Ronstadt, James Brown, Kenny Rogers, Barbra Streisand, Ronnie Milsap, Sammy Davis Jr, Liberace, Little

Richard, Jim Stafford, Rufus Thomas, Tommy Roe, Otis Redding and many others. Let's look at a few more, starting with Classics IV.

**DSJ:** Those were really happy days. "Spooky" and "Stormy" were the first top-10 hits that I played on in the Atlanta era, and it was really a great feeling.

**CD:** Roy Orbison.

**DSJ:** A beautiful and exciting man to work with. Songs with amazing dynamics from whispering intros to stick-breaking crescendos... truly a drummer's gift. A one-of-a-kind voice from the whispering, rich, deep low end, to his trademark top end that's never been matched since. By the way, I introduced Roy to his future wife, Barbara, and still see his son Alex occasionally here in L.A.. Great memories.

**CD:** Paul Revere and the Raiders.

**DSJ:** My first big break in Los Angeles. Atlanta guitarist Freddy Weller was the lead guitar player with Paul Revere and The Raiders, who were considered the American Rolling Stones of their day. Thank goodness he helped a fellow Atlantan out, and got me on their album recordings, which opened many doors and was instrumental in starting my successful L.A. recording career. Also, when Freddy left the Raiders, he became a successful Country recording artist, and I ended up playing on several top-5 records with him.

**CD:** The Bellamy Brothers.

**DSJ:** Howard and David Bellamy... one of the great highlights of my career. My drum tech, Larry Williams, wrote a song called "Let Your Love Flow", which I played for Howard and David over dinner at my house. It was one of those magic moments. Phil Gernhardt, their producer, immediately booked the session. We cut it in two takes. It became #1 in every country around the World, and was the most-played BMI song of the year in 1976. The quintessential Pop record.



*St John & The Cardinals*  
Back Row l-r: fHarry Hagen, George Hurst,  
Dennis St John, Emory Gordy Jr. / Seated Front: Paul Goddard



**CD:** From 1971 to 1981, you were Neil Diamond's bandleader and drummer. What was it like working with Neil during that extremely successful period?

**DSJ:** It was outrageous. Great songs, great performances; an unbelievable visceral energy coming from the stage. We were a good band, and a proud band. We didn't come to *play* a concert, we came to *dominate*.

**CD:** There were so many classic Diamond songs, albums and projects in the '70s, from *Hot August Night* to the *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* soundtrack to *The Jazz Singer* and the anthem "America". What are some of your favorite songs and memories from that time?

**DSJ:** The two songs that were my favorites were "Holly Holy" and "I Am...I Said". Once again, they were a drummer's gift in that, *dynamically*, they

went from whisper intros to the biggest crescendos you could play. I'm particularly proud of the two live albums we cut in the seventies. *Hot August Night* (1972) is still the standard for live albums to this day. The magic of these albums is that there was absolutely no overdubbing allowed. It was honest music, and an amazing display of fire-power, hit songs, and great vocals.

**CD:** It's become common to have a percussionist or two onstage, but you were working with two percussionists 30 years ago. What was that like?

**DSJ:** In Atlanta, I used 3- and 4-piece kits. When I moved to L.A., the music was a little more complex, and being impressed by Hal Blaine's concert toms, I started expanding my recording kit. When I started with Neil, I realized that the music demanded so many different tones and sounds, and I ended up with a 14-piece kit and *still* couldn't cover

everything Neil needed percussion-wise! In 1976, I was fortunate to be able to add two great percussionists to the band: King Errisson of Nassau, who was a monster, African-style heavy-hitter percussionist on congas, timbales and tambourine, and Vince Charles from St. Thomas, who was our finesse player with steel pans, vibes, timbales, chimes, and hand percussion. It was an absolute drummer's heaven for me. Between the dynamic pounding rhythms of King, and the subtle playing of Vince, I could sit there and play straight time, and just concentrate on driving the hell out of the band.

**CD:** Let's talk about drums and drumming. Today, it's almost a given to use a click when recording. In the '60s & '70s, were there any occasions you worked with a click?

**DSJ:** The only occasion where they thought it was mandatory to use a click was doing jingles in Atlanta in the mid to late-sixties. So, I learned to play with a click. However, one day after we had completed a track, I persuaded the jingle producer to do one more take with *no* click and me just counting it off to fit the 60-second commercial. We all discovered that the feeling was a thousand times better *without* the click track! My time was good enough that I could bring a jingle in at 30 or 45 or 60 seconds, whatever was required, and that was the end of the use of the click track for me.

**CD:** Production and drum sounds have become 'rocket science' over the last few decades. How did you and the engineers approach sounds in the '60s and '70s?

**DSJ:** In the sixties and early seventies, our approach was just like the music: simple, and to the point. Particularly in the sixties, we used 3-track recorders and bounced back & forth. So 90% of the emphasis was on the performance, not the sound. It was all about *playin'*.

**CD:** As close-miking became more popular, what were some of your tuning & muffling tricks?

**DSJ:** I have two tricks that I enjoyed using. The first was one that I borrowed from the early Nashville dudes, which was turning the snare drum over and

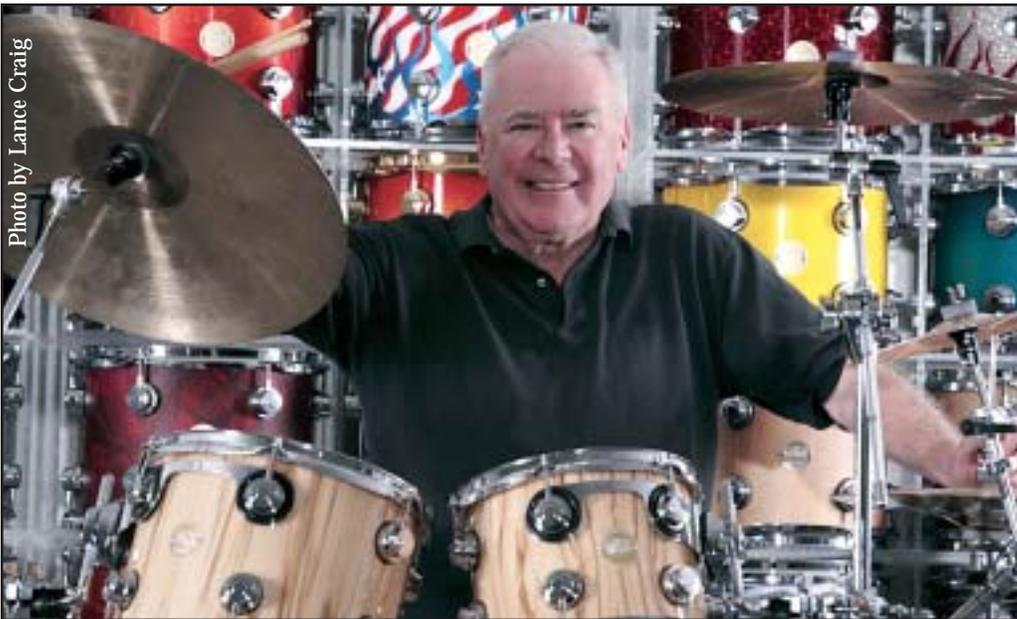


Photo by Lance Craig

using the snare side for cross-stick and brush work. The definition and crispness you get by doing this is almost indescribable, particularly for that period. The second trick: when I first started out, drummers used moleskin at the point of attack on their bass drum head. Even using a wood beater, it left something to be desired as far as definition, so I started taping wood discs to my bass drum head. To the human ear, it was a little harsh. But I found that in the studio and on stage, with the other instruments, it gave the bass drum an amazing presence in the mix.

**CD:** Most of your recorded work predates the use of sequencers and samples. What's your feeling on the perfectionism being applied to today's drumming and sounds, and music in general?

**DSJ:** Sequencers and samplers are fine for song demos, disco music, and where MIDI is obviously required. But to be honest with you, I think the digital generation has seriously damaged America's musical heritage. I work with a lot of young players in the studio, and I am just amazed that they cannot play without the support of a click track. I always turn the click off, and tell the drummer that's *their* job, that *they* are the timekeeper. But invariably, we have to turn the click back on, because they're usually incapable of keeping good time.

**CD:** What was your first kit, and what other kits or drums did you later use?

**DSJ:** My first kit was a 1959 Gretsch blue

pearl set, single rack tom, one floor tom. In '66 I bought my first Slingerland kit, and eventually became an endorser and used Slingerland throughout my career.

**CD:** Were there any unique drums Slingerland made for you, or special requests that you made of them?

**DSJ:** First of all, I would like to say that Slingerland made some phenomenal sounding drums! And their endorser support was excellent! They made my first set of concert toms, and several custom bass drums that had aluminum lining. They sounded like cannons going off! And then there was the famous 'All American' outfit, the red, white & blue sparkle kit, that was custom made for me when I joined Neil Diamond. People still ask about that kit! Slingerland also made me some outrageous fiberglass timpani that sounded great and traveled well. In the late seventies at a DCI championship in Denver, the Santa Clara Vanguard was blowing everyone away with their extremely loud, crisp sound, which turned out to be the new Slingerland Cut-A-Ways. Larry Linkin, then-president of Slingerland (who was also the CEO/President of NAMM from 1970 to 2001, and built the show to what it is today) was sitting beside me, and I asked him if it would be possible to make me a new kit using the Cut-A-Ways. He leapt at the opportunity, and we both enjoyed the end result: an outstanding looking and sounding drum kit. You can see and hear it in action in the Jazz Singer movie and soundtrack.

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**CD:** What pedals did you use?

**DSJ:** In Atlanta, I used Speed King kick and hi-hats. In L.A., I switched to a Slingerland direct-pull hi-hat, and Rogers Swiv-O-Matic bass drum pedals. I had the Rogers pedals suped-up by Rick Faucher, Hal Blaine's drum tech, and they still work to this day, 32 years later.

**CD:** Cymbals?

**DSJ:** Fortunately for me, Armand Zildjian and Larry Linkin were very close, and Larry arranged an endorsement for me with Zildjian Cymbals. Armand and I developed a nice friendship ourselves, and we had some great times sitting in the Zildjian factory sound room, listening to Lennie DiMuzio playing hundreds of cymbals for me until we narrowed them down to the best-sounding ones. It was a rare treat for anyone, and I cherish those days with Armand and Lennie very much.

**CD:** Many drummers today are savvy about their drums' edges, plies, lug mass, hoops, snare wires, heads, vents... in those early days, were there any specifications you looked for or were concerned about?

**DSJ:** Hell no. We paid more attention to how they looked, and hoped they sounded good!

**CD:** Did you have an arsenal of snares & cymbals, or any interest in collecting drums?

**DSJ:** Those were simple days, simple music, simple kits. Didn't need an arsenal, just run what I brung.

**CD:** What are your favorite drums now?

**DSJ:** I will give a nod to Yamaha, but in my opinion, DW are the finest drums made. Don Lombardi and John Good are real pioneers in this business, and it's really great to see their dreams have become a reality.

**CD:** Who are your favorite drummers?

**DSJ:** Without a doubt, my faves are Al Jackson, Roger Hawkins, Benny Benjamin, and Gene Crissman, the kings of time and feel. From the Big Band era, I love Sonny Payne and Charlie Persip, with a special nod to Wally Gator of the Lionel Hampton Big Band. Wally plays the best shuffles you'll ever hear. I appreciate many contemporary drummers, but I love the contributions of John Bonham, Jim Gordon, and Kenny Jones.

**CD:** Since leaving Diamond in 1981, you've been out of the spotlight somewhat. What have you been doing since then?

**DSJ:** Between 1977 and 1983, I herniated 3 lumbar discs, which has forced

my retirement from active playing, but I still do an occasional session. Now I've taken a new path, and been working on artist development and music production. I have a company called St John's Finishing School for Young Bands, whose successful alumni include The Bonedaddys, Rat Bat Blue, and The Uninvited, the latter two signing major label record deals. I had the pleasure of producing a 1984 music video for the Boston band Face To Face, which received strong MTV airplay and recognition for its unique technical achievements. Also that year, I produced *A Man Of Many Colours*, a signature performance piece for 1984 Olympic gold medal skater Scott Hamilton, with music and lyrics by Rick Nielsen and Robin Zander of Cheap Trick. Currently, I'm in pre-production for an album with legendary Atlanta Blues & Soul artist, Roy Lee Johnson. As soon as I finish that, I head to New York City to produce a reunion album with my good friend James Shaw, The Mighty Hannibal. Also, I'm producing a theme song for the new Homestead National Monument in my hometown of Beatrice, Nebraska.

**CD:** If you had to pick a single memorable event from your career, what would it be?

**DSJ:** The 10 days of recording *Hot August Night* in 1972 (at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles) was by far the most energetic, creative, and satisfying gig I've ever played.

**CD:** What advice would you offer to up & coming players?

**DSJ:** Surround yourself with the best players you can find, particularly the bass player. When recording, LISTEN! Don't touch your drums until you know the lyrics of the song, what the other players are playing, and how the singer is singing, otherwise you're flying blind. The old cliché is true: LESS IS MORE! And most important of all... WHEN IN DOUBT, PLAY 'FOURS'!

*About the author: Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz has been the drummer for "Weird Al" Yankovic since 1980, and is seen and heard on all of Weird Al's albums, videos, concert, and television performances. More on Jon at [www.bermudaschwartz.com](http://www.bermudaschwartz.com).*

