

A CONVERSATION WITH ERNIE ADAMS

By Judith E. Stein

One of the most popular and highly regarded musicians in Chicago is percussionist/drummer, Ernie Adams. Always on the go, whether running from recording session to recording session gig to gig, or country to country, Ernie is the drummer of choice of so many musicians. Orbert Davis comments that Ernie "is every leader's wish and every composer's dream. He's a musician who brings indescribable energy, precision, dedication, knowledge, passion and expertise to EVERY performance, EVERY rehearsal --- EVERY NOTE! He is like a trusted pilot who one can be given the utmost responsibility to do the job right each and every time." In the first two years of the HPJF, Ernie performed with seven different bands on seven different stages. This year he is scheduled to perform five times in four venues as he leads his own group and sits in with four others.

And so it seemed only fitting that the Festival Committee turn to Ernie to get his perspective on the Festival and find out a little bit about what got him started in this business.

Catching up with Ernie is always a challenge since he works from dawn to dawn, but I was able to ask him some questions about our Festival and his drumming.

Q. YOU ARE IN THE UNIQUE POSITION OF HAVING BEEN IN ALMOST AS MANY VENUES AS THE ORGANIZERS OF THE FESTIVAL. WOULD YOU SHARE YOUR REACTIONS TO SOME OF THESE PERFORMANCE VENUES?

A. The Hyde Park Jazz Festival, to me is an incredible festival. I love the fact that it's in different venues around the area. Each venue has its unique vibe and sound, and the venue plays an important part in how the music is perceived. For example, **Rockefeller Chapel** is very stately, very beautiful inside, and being a large church with all hard surfaces and a high ceiling, the sound there is incredible. So I play differently. I'm not going to play as loud; I'll change my cymbals, keep things in check because sound is going to carry, and the reverb is long. I want to be sure I play appropriately. I was playing with Dee Alexander's Evolution Ensemble, and people were quiet--and it was packed--almost as if they were there in church. The vibe affected us as a group. I also enjoyed playing **International House**. It has a large stage. It reminds me of some of the festival venues I've played in Europe--the old woodwork. The building itself is a beautiful place to play. Great sound, too. Now the **Hyde Park Art**

Center—whenever I play in a museum, I try to check out the art. I like to get that vibe and become a part of the art. Miles Davis said that “art is music you can see, and music is art that you can hear.” I get a modern art type of vibe here. It affects how we play. **DuSable** has a nice American style theatre, and the sound there is great as well. **The Midway** is special because it’s such a large area. You can play strong. There are familiar faces, people I love seeing. There are always people on the grass with their champagne. It’s always something special.

Q. HOW IN THE WORLD HAVE YOU MANAGED TO GET FROM ONE VENUE TO THE NEXT TO PERFORM IN OUR FESTIVALS?

A. I'm blessed to have some great students, some guys, who are willing to help me out. This past Festival, I had to have three different set-ups. A percussion set-up that I used with Dee Alexander's Evolution Ensemble takes quite a while to arrange because it has a lot of small instruments from all over the world, including an Arabic Darbuka and Doumbek, an Indian tabla, a Brazilian pandeiro, and Cuban Bata drums. I also had two drums sets in play. My students and I set-up in one venue; I headed to my first scheduled venue and set up another kit. I would then play that first gig, race over to my second gig where the drum set was waiting, and, while I'm doing the second gig, my students would come and break down my kit from my first gig and go set it up for my third gig. This year is going to be pretty much the same thing--a lot of coordinating, a lot of different drum sets, and a lot of great young cats helping me out.

Q. GIVEN THE RUNNING FROM PLACE TO PLACE, HOW WERE YOU ABLE TO CHANGE YOUR MUSICAL GEARS AS YOU ADAPTED TO EACH NEW GROUP? WAS IT THE "SAME ERNIE" IN EACH GROUP OR A "DIFFERENT ERNIE"?

A. Any good musician walks into a situation open to what the music is and what other musicians are giving to the music and giving to him. As long as you play well and keep your mind and ears open to what is happening, the music is going to tell you what to play. And I respond accordingly. I'm a different Ernie in that I am responding to what they are giving me, and I have to play that style of music. I'm also the same Ernie in that I'm going to make sure that it grooves, has the right amount of creativity. I'm also going to try to keep the groove strong, the tempo solid, and the emotional dynamics strong as well.

Q. PHYSICALLY, HOW DEMANDING WAS THE RACING BETWEEN VENUES?

A. It wasn't that exhausting physically. You know, when you enjoy what you do and who you do it with, you don't notice time, you don't notice the energy you are putting out. You are receiving, enjoying, having a great time. Afterwards is when I go "that was easier when I was 27, not 47." But it's worth it. Years ago, when some people were coming out of a club and saw me putting my drums away, a guy said, "Don't you wish you played the flute?" An old cat stood up for me saying, "No, he doesn't; that's the price he plays to be free." This running around, setting up, breaking down—it's all worth it. This music frees me. If that's the price I need to pay, so be it."

Q. I OFTEN HEAR YOU PRAISE CHICAGO MUSICIANS. WHAT DO YOU FIND SPECIAL ABOUT OUR LOCAL TALENT?

A. Coming from Milwaukee, having played for the past twenty years, touring around the world in Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and all over the states, I really believe Chicago has some of the strongest musicians in the world. When I say strong, I mean how they *feel* the music. Chicago, of course, has a lot of blues, so the feeling of the musicians is very deep here. But it can compete with any place in terms of depth of the music and technical ability. There are some musicians here who I would put up against any other cats in the world. There are cats who played with Miles Davis, worked with Elvin Jones, guys who played with some of the greatest musicians in the world. I was at a festival where there was a jam session at the end of the night with guys from LA, New York, and Chicago. The LA cats were reading charts; the New York didn't really know the head, but would solo. The Chicago cats always knew the head and would play around the tune. They knew how to make it groove, how to make it sing, dance.

Q. WHAT WERE YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR OUR FESTIVAL IN ITS 1ST YEAR? DID THEY CHANGE FOR THE 2ND YEAR? WHAT ARE YOU EXPECTING FROM THIS 3RD YEAR?

A. I approached the first festival like a gig at a regular festival. I was pleasantly surprised at the audience, their getting into it, their knowledge. In the 2nd year, the response was even stronger, the amount of people that showed up, the diversity. I loved it. To me, that's what a

festival is all about--a celebration. I'm really looking forward to the 3rd year because audiences are going to be even stronger in terms of numbers and what they're looking to hear. Playing in 5 different groups, mine included, I'm looking to be on top of my game, but it's not about myself; it's about serving the music, musicians, and the leader well and being appropriate for each, creating from the heart and soul.

This is one of the best festivals around because you have such great musicians in one place. I know when I tour with musicians from around the world, it's great. But I've also toured with guys where we all knew the same people, knew the same streets, played in the same venues. When you play with people in your "neighborhood," there's a certain connection there. It's Chicagoans playing with each other. There's some special creating going on.

Q. YOU ARE CERTAINLY ONE OF THE BUSIEST MUSICIANS IN CHICAGO. HOW YOU BALANCE EVERYTHING?

A. I could do it better. It's not easy balancing 4 to 5 recording projects at the same time, or 5, 6, 7 gigs a week, teaching, also writing, being a husband and a friend with my wife, but, again, I wouldn't have it any other way. I think the main thing is staying focused and taking care of myself, cutting the fat, getting rid of distractions. They say, "Be careful what you ask for." I'm definitely getting it. It's busy, but I'm always trying to be respectful of other people. I balance my commitments by writing everything down, being realistic with my schedule, always making sure I have time for myself and my wife.

Q. YOU ALWAYS SEEM SO UPBEAT/SO POSITIVE. WHAT IS YOUR SECRET?

A. It's no secret. I just realize that I'm blessed to be able to play with such great musicians, play such great music for such great people. This is my passion. I'm honored. I want to give back for the gift I've been given.

Q. WHEN DID YOU START DRUMMING?

A. When I was a baby in the crib, I would always move my arms and legs to the music, but I would stop when my father turned the music off. My father picked up on this, [so when] I was three years old, and it was Christmas, there was a Ludwig Drum Set. It had a red bow on

it. Drumming was always there. My father never had to teach me or push me to practice. He would take me around the neighborhood; there were always cats in the park playing the congas. There was always music in our house.

Q. WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO MAKE A CAREER OF IT?

A. I was 15 when I played my first jazz gig in a Milwaukee club with some older cats in their 20's, 30's, 40's. My father came with me; I never got paid, but he said the experience was good. I went to school the next day, and the band director told everyone that I played my first professional gig. That's when it dawned on me that there was a possibility of me making a career of this.

Q. DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A DRUMMER OR A PERCUSSIONIST?

A. Usually when people say a drummer, they mean a drum set player who incorporates his feet along with his hands. A percussionist is usually someone who plays all the percussion instruments, including the drums. So a drummer is a percussionist, but a percussionist isn't always considered a drummer or a drum set player. I think it is good to have an understanding of both. Each requires a little bit of a different approach to the instrument, an idea of how to play each. I would describe myself as a percussionist [although] everyone knows me as a drummer, but I really do hear the drums along with percussion. Many times when I perform, I will have percussion instruments that will be part of my drum set. I like to consider myself a drummer who also plays percussion or a percussionist who is also a very good drummer.

Q. DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO MAKE A CAREER IN JAZZ?

A. It's not easy, but if they have a passion for this and they really feel it needs to be a part of their lives, they really should pursue it. And pursue it for the right reasons--for the love of music. As for making it a career, it's not easy, but I couldn't live without it, man; it gives me life!

Ken Chaney says that Ernie "always brings great musicianship, great attitude, professionalism and dedication" to his performances. If you want to track Ernie through the Festival, he starts at 11:00AM at the DuSable Museum with Ken's *Awakening*, heads his own group at the

Experimental Station in the afternoon, then moves on to the James W. Wagner Stage on the Midway to back up Dee Alexander, then Orbert Davis. Ernie ends the evening where those of us who can fit in will also be—International House for Dee’s Midnight Jam. Dee calls Ernie’s music “Tasty - Polyrhythmic - Soulful.” Check it out! You can track your favorite musicians through the schedule on Festival website: www.hydeparkjazzfestival.org .