Growing up in Ohio, I heard quite a bit about John Von Ohlen. The musicians that I played with during high school were always talking about this great drummer who lived in Cincinnati and was revered for his work with Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, Rosemary Clooney, Mel Tormé, Carmen McRae, and many others. I was about to start my freshman year in college when I finally decided to go and check out “VO” for myself. I made the two-hour drive to the Blue Wisp in Cincinnati and sat down right in front of John’s drums, intent on picking his playing apart. To me at the time, if a drummer didn’t have blazing chops, I didn’t have any use for him.

As the music started, I was immediately taken by the way Von Ohlen had the entire ensemble smiling and having a great time. It didn’t seem as if he was doing much, but the band was on fire. When the shout section of the first tune came around, I noticed that John would set up the band with just one or two notes instead of a blazing fill around the toms, like I was accustomed to hearing drummers do. What he might have lacked in chops, though, he more than made up for in feel and musicality. The way he played and supported the band, there was no way the group couldn’t swing.

“The Baron,” as Stan Kenton dubbed Von Ohlen, is a musical guru. He began his journey on the piano and then played the trombone for several years before he discovered the drums. Though humble and self-effacing, VO also possesses a confidence that can be instilled only by years of experience. Now in his seventieth year, John still holds down five steady gigs a week in the Cincinnati area. The following interview finds him honest, forthright, and more than willing to impart his considerable wisdom.

MD: What made you switch to drums from piano and trombone?
John: When I was fourteen years old, I got to see that great Stan Kenton band with Mel Lewis playing drums. It was at a ballroom, and I stood right in front of Mel. They were playing all those great charts by Bill Holman and Johnny Richards, and Mel’s drumming just took me. When I woke up the next day, I was a drummer.

But I didn’t start playing drums until two or three years later, because we didn’t have the money for a set. I just stayed with trombone. A friend of mine who was going into the navy had just bought a Gretsch set, and he offered to rent it to me for $12 a month. It was a brand-new set—cymbals and everything. I think I was about seventeen when I started on the drums, and I just taught myself. I kept playing the trombone professionally until I was about twenty-four, and then I pretty well hung it up in favor of just playing drums. I still play piano for my own amusement and

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by Paul Francis

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I've heard you tell many a drum-

John: I’d say to anybody who wants
to play drums that it would be good
if they also took up piano. The piano
is the king of instruments—it’s got
rhythm, harmony, and melody. Most
instruments can only play one line, but
the piano is the whole ball of wax. If
you’ve got that in your subconscious
from playing piano, you’ll hear those
things when you play drums.

I’m not saying that a guy who just
plays drums is not going to hear those
things, but I notice it right away if a
guy has played another instrument like
piano. They play differently—more
musically, as opposed to being “a
drummer’s drummer.”

MD: Many drummers learn by taking
lessons and playing out of books like
Stick Control. You, however, learned by
playing along with records. How did
learning to play in this way shape the
musician that you are now?

John: I took one lesson from a drum-
ner that had great rudimental chops,
but I just didn’t shine to that. My thing
was playing to recordings. I did that
for six, eight hours a day or more.
When I first got on the drums, it was
a real honeymoon love affair, and I
couldn’t get off of the things. I just
kept knockin’ away until it was right.
I taught myself, which I think anybody
could do.

I never learned the rudiments. I still
don’t know them, and it shows, there’s
no doubt about that. But you get your
own technique after a while, which is
not necessarily based on rudiments.
I’ve got a pretty natural, good open roll
and press roll, and that’s about it.

MD: You don’t discourage anybody
learning from a teacher, do you?

John: Oh, no! In fact, to me, rudimen-
tal drumming is like playing the piano
and learning your scales. It’s a really
good way to go. I played drums with-
out lessons, playing in every conceiv-
able situation for so long. When I eventu-
ally got around to taking lessons and
I tried to impose the rudiments on my
natural playing, it just didn’t work. If I
had done it right off the bat, it
would have been great, but I was
lazy and didn’t
like anything academic.

MD: I’ve heard you tell many a drum-
er to read the lead trumpet part
instead of the drum chart. And I’ve
seen you look over and read the
trombone chart when you’re playing
with the Blue Wisp Big Band. Is that
because if you can see that the lead
trumpet part is higher on the staff, it
will be louder and you should kick the
band a little harder?

John: Right. It’s like Woody Herman
told me: “Get your head out of the
drum part—it’s a guide to insanity.”
And it’s true! The drum parts usually
tell you what not to do, not what you
should do.

I think it’s much better in a big
band for the drummer to just have the
brass parts. Over at the Cincinnati
Conservatory, where I’m teaching,
I coach the drummers while they’re
playing in a rehearsal. I’m looking at
the drum parts, and it’s a wonder that
they can play anything at all. And yet, if
they had a trumpet part, they could see
exactly what’s going on with the band.
You see the shape of the line.

MD: Let’s talk about your time with
Woody Herman. At that point in his
career, he was known to fire drummers
when I started to do my own thing and
not what the tenor players were telling
me to do, they dug it. They actually
wanted me to stay. I was finally doing
it my way, not theirs. It’s the only thing
you can do.

MD: What advice would you give a
drummer who wants to learn how to
play in a big band?

John: These days, you can’t play in a
big band every day. And sometimes
there’s not one around to play in at all.
So I would say that the second-best
way to learn is to play recordings.
Set up in your studio where you can
play constantly, and teach yourself to
play with recordings. Play what you
like, what’s important to you. I think
you’ll advance faster that way than if
you try to take on all of the things that
are going on nowadays.

As a professional drummer, you do
need to know how to play everything.
But if you really want to advance your
own style, I think you should keep
coming back to things you really like.
Emerson said that you only need a few
books in your life. I feel that way about
recordings. I still play to recordings,
and I play to the same ones that I did
in high school.

MD: Let’s talk about your technique
a little bit.

John: Or lack of.

MD: It’s been said that your fills sound
like “sneakers in a drier.” What’s your
approach to setting up a band? How do
you come up with these crazy fills and
then come out on the 1 every time?

John: It’s totally instinct. I was
doing those fill-ins when I first
started playing.

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head out of the drum part—it’s a
guide to insanity.’ And it’s true!”
MD: Was any of it inspired by Don Lamond?

John: Not really, because I didn’t hear Don do it on records until later. It might have been some small-group drummers like Roy Haynes, the stuff he did in the early ’50s. He did some off-the-wall licks. I kind of lit up to that and threw them in with a big band.

MD: How do you think those fills affect the band?

John: The best way I can put it into words is that if you’re inclined to do those kinds of fills, you’ve got the time inside you so strongly that the band feels it. Very rarely do I throw the band off, but every once in a while I blow it. It’s really funny when I do, because it just train-wrecks the whole thing, and everybody has to claw for it to get back. [laughs]

MD: How is your approach different in small groups versus big bands?

John: There’s hardly any difference. I’m not a real great small-group drummer…at least I don’t think I am.

MD: Yet you’re playing in a small group four nights a week.

John: Yeah, but someone like [Cincinnati pianist] Lee Stolar plays the structure of the tune the same way every time. So I just treat that like a big band, only softer.

MD: You’ve played with some of the greatest singers in jazz. When backing a singer on ballads, you don’t play brushes. You just play with your feet keeping the time.

John: It’s funny how just that little swirl will make everybody keep talking. But if you don’t do the swirl and you’ve still got that beat going with your feet, it silences the club. Not all the time, but at least half the time it just quiets the club right down. And I know if I had that swirl going, that wouldn’t happen.

MD: Where did you get this idea?

John: From a great drummer named Sol Gubin. He was one of the great unsung drummers. When I was with Woody’s band, we did a double bill with Tony Bennett, and Sol was playing drums. When a ballad started, he just played 1 and 3 on the bass drum and 2 and 4 on the hi-hat, with no brushes. That pushed Tony’s voice right out in front.

MD: One of my favorite recordings of yours is Carmen McRae’s Dream Of Life album with the WDR Big Band. Do you approach backing up a singer differently in a big band from the way you would in a trio?

John: Well, in a big band you just pretty well hang it out. In fact, that’s what they like. John Clayton was writing these hot arrangements, and I wasn’t going to sit dead on those. I think the singers like it when the drummer is letting it hang out. That’s the reason you’ve got a big band. On the ballads, John wanted to hear the swirl. He said, “I want to hear the smoky nightclub feel on this.” So I did it at the rehearsal, but on the gig I just couldn’t do it, because he had such beautiful writing in there with her singing, and I didn’t want to hear that swirl clutter it up. So I just didn’t do it, and I think it made the chart stand out more.

MD: Jeff Hamilton cites your brush playing and your “lateral motion” concept as a major influence on his playing.

John: Coming in from the side gets a shhh sound, whereas doing a vertical stroke gets a tap, like a stick. I don’t do it all the time, because sometimes I want a more pronounced brush beat. I’ve got different brushstrokes, like we all do.

MD: You’re known as a great admirer of calfskin heads. Why do you like using them so much?

John: With the bass drum, calfskin is just ridiculous. It sounds like a bomb going off under water—it’s physical. You can feel it out in the audience hitting your gut. There’s nothing like calfskin on the bass drum, especially if you tune it low. Calfskin goes lower without wrinkling. If you take a plastic head and lower it, it wrinkles pretty easily. But calfskin just keeps going low.

When you first put calfskin on your drums it’s like another world, but it’s a pure sound. They try to get plastic heads that sound like calf, but it’s like trying to imitate water. You can’t do it.

MD: A lot of jazz drummers like to tune their drums to higher pitches. What inspired you to go for a lower tuning?

John: When I was a kid I used to watch The Arthur Godfrey Show in the morning. It was a variety show, and they had a band. I would use two cardboard cylinders from a coat hanger as sticks and pretend that I was the drummer on the show. I’d slap the cylinders on the couch, and I think that’s the sound I’ve been trying to get the whole time.

MD: Do you think a low tuning blends with the band better?

John: Oh, yeah! If you play in a big band long enough, you have to tune your drums low. If you don’t, you’re going to conflict with the horns. You need to get underneath them. If you’ve got your drums tuned up high, you’re in the horn register, especially the trombones and saxes. And drums tuned up high don’t get that good punch. If you listen to any big band drummer that’s been around for a long time, they’ve got ‘em down pretty low.

MD: You’re still leading the Blue Wisp Big Band after almost thirty years. How has your approach to playing with a big band changed over time?

John: When I left Stan Kenton, I went back to Indianapolis and had time to record myself and study what I was doing. I started concentrating on trying to get the best sound from the cymbals, drums, and brushes, a hundred percent of the time. I’d go for sound instead of worrying about the rhythm or the tempo rushing or dragging and all that crap. I found that when I went for sound, my body relaxed and I got a good stroke on the cymbal. When I started playing with the Blue Wisp Big Band, I think I played better because things started falling into place.

Before I made these changes, I was just power driving. Everybody thinks that when you’re with a big band you’ve got to play loudly, but that’s not true. If you get the right feel going in your hands, especially the touch on the cymbal, it relaxes the rest of the limbs. Then you’ve got the whole band in the palm of your hand.

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