

STEVE SMITH

Raga Bop Trio by Michael Dawson

Modern Drummer Hall Of Famer Steve Smith's latest album, *Raga Bop Trio*, on the Abstract Logix label, is the culmination of the rock/jazz/fusion drummer's decade-long experiments melding South Indian classical music with Western drumset sensibilities.

"I first got into Indian music in 2001, when I was hired to play drums on a tour that was organized by a tabla player named Sandip Burman," Smith says. "The music was very complex, but about halfway through the tour I started to realize that most of the tunes were in one time signature all the way through, even though the individual phrases sounded like they were in odd times. I started to see a lot of logic and beauty in the organization of Indian rhythm."

After a few years of study, which included a weeklong crash course on South Indian vocal percussion (Konnakol) and rhythm theory with the Indian drummer Karuna Moorthy, whom Smith met while teaching a drum camp in Germany in 2002, a chance encounter between kindred spirits ultimately led to the formation of the group heard on *Raga Bop Trio*. "I played a gig in San Francisco with Larry Coryell that had George Brooks on saxophone and Kai Eckhardt on bass," Steve explains. "George and Kai were both deeply into Indian music, and afterwards George asked us to join a band he was starting with tabla master Zakir Hussain called Summit. We made an album that came out in 2004, and we toured quite a bit for a couple of years.

"Prasanna, who's an accomplished South Indian guitarist, heard that I was a Western drummer using Indian rhythms, so he called me to play some gigs," Smith continues. "We played in a traditional setting, which is just a drummer and a melodic instrument, but Prasanna plays an electric guitar, which is very modern. So I was playing with George and Prasanna independently, and eventually the idea emerged to try something together. In 2009 we scheduled three days of rehearsal/jamming at my house in Oregon, and in those days we came up with all the material on the record.

"I've been incorporating Indian rhythms into the music of my fusion

band Vital Information. But *Raga Bop Trio* takes it a step further because we're using more traditional Indian raga and we're blending Western harmony with Indian melodies. All of us are stretching our boundaries to find a common meeting ground."

What follows are Smith's thoughts on playing jazz/Indian fusion in a bass-less trio, as well as some track-by-track insight.

RAGA BOP DRUMKIT

The kit I used on the album is a Sonor SQ2. It's the same kit I used at the 2006 Modern Drummer Festival with Jazz Legacy. It has a 20x20 bass drum with two Remo Powerstroke 3 heads and no muffling. Without a bass player, we wanted a big, open sound from the bass drum. The rack toms are 7x8, 9x10, and 11x12. The floor toms are 14x14 and 16x16. I used a Jeff Ocheltree 5 1/2x14 TreeBronze snare as the main drum, with a 5x12 Sonor acrylic on the side.

The head combination is based on Tony Williams' setup, with clear CS black dots on the tops and bottoms of the toms. It's a fantastic sound. I don't have the drums tuned very high on the record, but I've been tuning a little higher for live shows. You can tune these heads up higher and get a nice melodic tone that still has a lot of depth and punch.

On the first track, the main ride is a Zildjian K Custom Dry Complex II. That cymbal doesn't have much sustain, so you can really bash on it and it has a very percussive attack. On most of the album, I used a Hi Bell Dry ride. My other cymbals were a 19" Armand "Beautiful Baby" ride, 14" Armand hi-hats, 18" A Custom ReZo and 18" K Custom Hybrid crashes, and 9" K Custom Hybrid and 8" A splashes.

PLAYING WITHOUT A BASS PLAYER

The first thing I noticed about playing without a bass player was that I had to incorporate the toms more than I normally would. When you're comping behind a soloist on the ride cymbal, snare, bass drum, and hi-hat, everything but the bass drum has a lot of high end. In this group, I have to move my left hand around the toms. I'm also playing more fills and



incorporating the toms into grooves to fill out the low-end space. I can play more actively with this trio than I normally do, and it doesn't get in the way. In fact, it helps give the music momentum.

There are some songs where I play exclusively on the toms and the snare with the snares off. That's related to Indian drumming. There are no cymbals in traditional Indian music. They play tom-like sounds using high-pitched/low-pitched variations, so I'm applying that concept to the drumset.

"TUG OF WAR"

To orchestrate the syncopated melody of this song, I use a combination of a modern jazz drumming approach—where I'm playing rhythms between the bass drum, snare, and ride cymbal—and a more Indian-influenced approach where I'm using the snare and toms to approximate the shape of the melody in a high/low interpretation. I don't play the melody the same way every time, but I use the same concept of incorporating the toms and snare to match the melodic shapes that George and Prasanna are playing.

Prasanna taught this piece to us one phrase at a time, and I wrote my own chart so I could understand the phrasing of the rhythms. But I memorized it because I want to be as fluent with the phrasing as possible.

"MISS OMA"

I start this song by playing a calypso-type groove with brushes, and then I transition to sticks. I position the sticks so they're easy to pick up, and then I switch one hand at a time. I may have one stick on a music stand to the left of me, and the right stick will be on the floor tom. That way I can drop the brushes and pick up the sticks while keeping the rhythm as smooth as possible. You have to practice that move and put the sticks in a convenient place to be picked up.

This tune also has quite a bit of toms worked in to fill out the sound.

“LOVE AND HUNGER”

In this song, which uses an open ECM-style jazz approach, a lot of the focus of the rhythm is the ride cymbal, with accompaniment supplied by the rest of the kit. In a piece of music like this, I like to play spatially and keep to myself, allowing the other instruments to do what they do without trying to interact verbatim with what they're doing. Each of us is functioning independently within the tune. We're listening to each other, but each of us has a role. So I'm playing and responding, but very subtly. I'm creating a drum part that will stand on its own as an interesting piece of music. It's accompaniment, yet it's drum-set composition at the same time.

It takes a long time to develop the perspective and confidence to be able to play this way. Some people may think it's self-centered to play like that. But it's not; it's contributing an equal third to the composition. My role models for that type of playing are Jack DeJohnette and Jon Christensen, who I listened to a lot in the '70s on great ECM records like Eberhard Weber's *Yellow Fields*, Ralph Towner's *Solstice*, and John Abercrombie's *Timeless*. Tony Williams also played like this in the '60s on some of the albums he made as a sideman with Herbie Hancock and others.

“IRONICALLY”

There are two ways you can hear this groove. Prasanna is playing four over five, and my drum part is built from that. I think of it in 4/4, with each beat divided into quintuplets. Then I apply a rock groove to that, with the bass drum on beats 1 and 3 and the snare on 2 and 4. I'm aware that it's in 5/4, and I can feel that pulse. But I've been working with quintuplets for years, so it was easier for me to hear this tune in 4/4. The song does change from 5/4 to 4/4, however, so I have to keep aware of the pulse of the underlying quarter note.

My solo takes on the structure of a fairly traditional Indian drum solo, where there's an improvised part followed by a composition. I played a very traditional South Indian korvai in 5/4 to end my solo. Korvai is a South Indian compositional technique that's sort of like a bridge in Western music, which is a section that occurs only once in a tune. After we recorded the tune, I went back and doubled the korvai with Konnakol. Live, I play the rhythms while reciting the Konnakol at the same time.

“GARUDA”

I tried a lot of different ways of interpreting this tune. What I found worked best was to play it as if I were a drum loop. The repetitive beat gives some structure to the

rhythm, because the melody and the guitar parts change a lot. Fundamentally, the tune is in 4/4, although the phrasing suggests a lot of other rhythms.

During the guitar solo, I use a Tala Wand in the right hand and a brush in the left.

“THE GEOMETRY OF RAP”

I've learned a lot of Konnakol compositions by transcribing recordings, or they were taught to me by various Indian musicians. A lot of these compositions have been around for a very long time. I fine-tuned and altered them to make them my own. My choice of syllables and the way I present them is my own interpretation.

The first and last compositions are a reduction, where each phrase is the same as the one before it, but with a beat chopped from the beginning. Then I play a tihai, which is a phrase that's repeated three times.

The second-to-last composition is the most difficult one. Zakir Hussain taught me the framework, which is: 7, 7, 7, 6, 6, 6, 5, 5, 5, 4, 4, 4, 3, 3, 2, 2, 1, 1, then a 16th note and a 16th-note rest. That's repeated three times in a row. I phrase the groupings using different patterns usually played on kanjira, which is a South Indian frame drum. Those interpretations make the composition sound more complex, rather than simply stating the groupings.

I play a very straight groove behind the Konnakol, but between each composition I play a motivic pattern that gives it shape.

“MOONLANDING”

This song has a six feel, with a trancelike mood set up by the guitar. There's a collective improvisation in the middle where I mainly play on the toms. We end that section with a unison korvai. During the improvisation we're suggesting the unison figures of the korvai. That unifies everyone's approach and gives cohesion to the composition.

“DUBAI DANCE”

This is an up-tempo fusion burner. The melody and guitar parts in the head are very tightly scripted. I had to take what George had written for himself and Prasanna and figure out how to orchestrate that to support what they're doing. I'm using a fusion-type orchestration where it's snare drum, bass drum, and ride cymbal patterns that incorporate the rhythm and shape of the melody. My solo at the end is over rhythmic hits.

“KATYAYINI”

This is a duet, and it's an example of a traditional Carnatic [South Indian] drum and melodic instrument approach. I'm emulating a South Indian drum. I'm playing my toms and snare, with the snares turned off, and I'm using mallets. The bass drum and hi-hat pattern is inverted doubles, so that the right foot is playing a samba rhythm while the left foot fills in the middle two 16th notes. The left foot moves back and forth between the hi-hat and double bass drum pedal. On top of that, I'm playing a rolling melodic pattern between the toms and snare. The entire pattern creates a droning feel, and it implies a common rhythm in South Indian music.

In most Indian music, the melody starts on beat 1. So when you play a tihai, it has to resolve to beat 1. That's one of the rules of traditional South Indian music: Wherever the melody starts, that's where the tihai has to resolve. In this song, the melody starts on the “&” of 2, so all of the tihais have to resolve on the “&” of 2. It was difficult to switch gears in order to do that, and it really highlights the rhythmic sophistication and detail in Carnatic music.

For more info, go to ragaboptrio.com.

