

an exclusive interview with

Morris “Arnie” Lang

by Michael Gilbert

Who do you think of when you want to remember some of the most influential drummer's in the world? Who do you think of that would have been successful since the 40's and 50's? Who was one of the most influential innovative snare drum developers in the world? Who is a member of The Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame? Who is a graduate of Juilliard's School of Music? This man exemplifies class, and is a consummate gentleman. His achievements in the percussion world are well documented. Here is the biography in short form:

Michael Gilbert: What does it feel like to have been a student of Billy Gladstone? Why did you search for Billy as a teacher?

Arnie Lang: I am eternally grateful to have been associated with Billy. He was, of course, a great player, but in addition, a warm gentleman. He reminded me of Fred Astaire. Thin, lithe, moved gracefully, humble and in my case, very giving to a nineteen year old student.

I did not “search” for Billy. The opportunity just fell into my lap. I was nineteen years old, a student at Juilliard studying with Saul Goodman (I had studied with Morris Goldenberg while in my last year of high school). A friend of mine from school, Harold Farberman (who is now a conductor), got the job in Radio City, replacing Billy. Yes, Billy was fired from the job. The management of Radio City wanted to “up-date” the orchestra, and Harold was hired to play drum set replacing a stand-up snare drummer and a separate bass drum and cymbal player. They saved one salary and gave the orchestra a more “contemporary” feel. I suspect that there was an “age” factor involved as well. Billy was past middle age, and although very dapper and elegant, he was no longer a teen idol. I think that if it were in the present day, there would be a basis for an age discrimination suit. Just an aside, when Moe Goldenberg made the switch from radio to TV he was required to wear a toupee.

Harold was the first of my friends to get a real job, and he invited me to come down to the Hall to see the set up. Although Harold was officially hired, Billy was working that last show. I think that they were doing Ravel's Bolero, and used a bunch of extra snare drummers. The musicians would hang around in the basement between shows, and I was introduced to Billy. He had a drum pad and we started to play around. He watched me play, and immediately pin-pointed all of my physical problems. I was already a pretty good snare drummer, playing snare drum with the City Ballet Orchestra and a full scholarship student at Juilliard, but although only a teenager, had muscle strain and backaches.

This led to a three year relationship. I did not take a weekly lesson, but when I did have a lesson, it was two to three hours long. For one thing, Billy didn't have anything else to do. Although he was very well known among drummers, he had been at Radio City for so many years that he was out of the commercial scene. Also, music was changing, and there was more call for drum set players, rather than a stand-up snare drummer.

The lessons were really interesting. I already knew how to read well and was also studying with other teachers, so Billy and I worked on tone production and refinement of the stroke. (He once said, "Get a beautiful sound even when you are just knocking on a door"). It took some six months before I could hit a single right hand stroke - perfectly controlled, with a smooth motion. We never, in the three years, read a page of music. All of the instruction was conceptual and very little manual training. There were no exercises to practice, and no books to go through.

His teaching method was something of a problem if you were trying to learn basics. It was only for someone who already knew something about the craft, and wanted additional refinement. It also required a lot of time before you actually "got it". I was in a good position, in that I was studying with Saul Goodman, learning a lot of orchestral repertoire, and had the time to work with Billy as well.

Billy's instruction was instrumental in me getting the New York Philharmonic job. I was just one young student in a large class of stars, and Goodman barely noticed me. We were working on Scherzade in the percussion ensemble class, and I was just sitting and listening while the older students were playing. Goodman was satisfied with the person playing snare drum and he wheeled around and picked me out of the group to try the part. I guess that I played well, because Goodman looked over his reading glasses, noticing me for the first time, and said, "You have been practicing". I had not told him that I was studying with Billy. He was a very competitive fellow, and proprietary with his students. Only after we had played together for many years in the Philharmonic, did I tell him about Billy.

It is not well known, but Billy was an excellent xylophone player as well. He also played timpani, piano, and trombone. After one of my lessons, he played a recording of himself on xylophone with small band accompaniment. It was an old 78 (before the advent of "Long Playing" records). Although I only heard it that one time, I still remember the fluidity and excellence of the playing. I have been trying to get a copy of that album, but no one seems to have heard of it. Chet Falzerano, a huge Gladstone fan and collector, sent me a tape copy of a live radio broadcast with Billy playing a xylophone solo - no, I didn't imagine just how good he was!

After he lost the job in Radio City, he went through a bad patch economically. He had invested a lot of money in developing the new snare drum after the association with Gretsch was terminated. It lasted from 1937 to the start of WWII in 1942. I do not know the exact reason that Gretsch did not continue the association after the war, but I do not think that the Gretsch/Gladstone venture was a commercial success. It was an amazing technological advancement involving at least two patents and many innovative ideas, but for the time about double the price of a good comparable drum.

He had a steamer trunk full of parts in his small, but very elegant apartment on Sixth Avenue at about 52-53rd Street. He had a little Dremel drill press on the kitchen counter where he actually assembled drums. He didn't actually make the parts there, as they require some heavier machinery. A machine shop, somewhere in New Jersey, actually made the parts. He just did some assembly in the apartment.

To compound his stroke of bad luck, his young and beautiful wife, a Rockette, contracted cancer and subsequently died. Besides the expenses involved in her illness, they lost the one salary coming in. He worked for a while as an assistant to a manual organ repair guy, repairing the "percussion" stops in organs. He even had to move out of the city into an inherited house in New Jersey. I was just a kid, so I did not hear many of the details of this period, but he eventually got a job in the road company of My Fair Lady. He wrote me one letter about some new ideas for inventions that he had, but I had just gotten into the NY Philharmonic, got married, had a kid, and we lost touch.

When you come to think of it, he sold some fifty drums over a ten year period. That comes out to five drums a year. Even though they were quite expensive for the time, he did not make much money. I paid \$175 for my drum in 1950. The best commercial drum was about \$50, and just for some prospective, my weekly salary when I got into the New York Philharmonic in 1955, five years later, was \$125 per week. The price of the drums jumped to \$250 then, and finally \$350 by the early 60's.



M.G. You are a graduate of Juilliard School of Music, correct? What was the one thing that you feel you got of attending Juilliard and would you recommend the school to others and why?

A.L. In a Conservatory, so much depends on the teacher that you had. Again, I was very lucky to have stumbled onto Saul Goodman. He was a brilliant and very experienced performer and teacher. He became my mentor and subsequently my friend and partner. Although he retired from the Philharmonic over 25 years ago, his energy, his spirit and sense of musical

excellence, still inspire and infuse everything I do.

Juilliard was very exciting in the years that I attended. The vets had just come back from WWII, and were going to school on the "GI Bill of Rights". They were older than the average college student, and had a world of experience, and a desperation and focus that most young kids lacked. That class produced some of the best percussionists in the country.

Buster Bailey - NY Philharmonic (Hall of Fame)

William Draft - LA Philharmonic (Hall of Fame)

Mickey Bookspan - Philadelphia Orchestra

Arnold Goldberg - NY City Ballet

Ronald Gould - NY City Ballet

Ellyn Jones - San Francisco Opera

Freddy Begun - National Symphony

Arthur Press - Boston Symphony

Roland Kohloff - NY Philharmonic

Robert Matson - Cleveland Orchestra

Robert Prince - Hollywood composer

Richard Simon - Dallas Philharmonic

and others in the pop and show fields

Many of these people became teachers as well as performers. As far as conservatories - come to study with me at Brooklyn College!



M.G. What made you want to duplicate Billy Gladstone's snare drums, Arnie? How did you get the project going?

A.L. I had always loved the drum that Billy made for me. I used to sleep with it beside my bed when I was in college. Way back, when I really didn't understand too much about it, I knew that it was something special.

The joke is, that I was not the snare drummer in the NY Philharmonic, but played cymbals, general percussion and associate timpani to Saul Goodman. Buster Bailey (and subsequently Chris Lamb) was the snare drummer, but I would drag out my Gladstone when I played second snare in Bolero or doubled in a Shostakovitch Symphony. Listen to the recording of Bolero with Bernstein and Masure - when the second snare comes in.

I have always been a "tinkerer" and love to work with my hands. My dad was an electrician, although he did not want me to go into his business. About eleven years ago I was fooling around in a machine shop on Saturdays, I was making orchestra bells and some other projects. I had become friendly with the owner, and casually asked if he could make some drum parts. He said, I don't care what they are for, if you are willing to pay for them, we will make them". I gave him a tube lug, a key, and a top rod from my original Gladstone and told him to make ten of each piece. In a few weeks the few parts showed up, along with a bill for \$600.

Although I only had a few of the pieces, at least I knew that it was possible to recreate the parts. We then "reverse engineered" the pieces. That is, got the specs from the original parts, rather than working from plans. As far as I know, all of the original plans and molds have been lost, so I had to have all of the molds and stamping made. Every part on the drum is special, except for the hoops, and conform to the original specifications.

Once I knew that it was possible to reproduce the drum, I needed to raise some money to finance the project, so I offered 50 people a gold plated drum for \$500. Half down and no guarantee of a delivery date. People were very trusting, and soon the edition was sold out. I still had not made a complete drum, and had a lot of development to do. Unfortunately the owner of the machine shop became very ill. It was a very small operation, and without his active participation, things went quickly downhill. He could not work, but was able to set me up at a machine and I physically learned how to operate a lathe and milling machine. I drilled out the butt ends and had real hands-on instruction.

It took almost two years to complete the edition. A young percussionist left a message on my machine, "Do you think that the drum will be finished before I die?" I replied to her machine, "How old did you say you are?" Amazingly only two people backed out. One died in the wait, and the other had a lead on a Black Beauty and needed the deposit money back (he later re-ordered a Gladstone, and had to pay much more than the \$500.) All fifty are proud owners of the replica.

M.G. What do you feel are Lang Percussion's greatest achievements in the percussion world? What are your personal greatest

achievements, and why? What contributions to the percussive arts do you want to make, now and in the future?

A.L. I have never been involved in “achieving” anything. I have always been in music for the fun of it. I love to play. Who else has the thrill of having 3000 people watch you run around on a stage hitting things - and getting paid to do it? How lucky to be involved with great people, and in a situation that sometimes allows you to be part of a great performance. I have always done things for my own satisfaction. I have never thought of great achievements, but have written, played, taught, and made stuff, for my own ego gratification and because the project interests me. If, in the process, some of it rubbed off on other people, that is all to the good.

I have written books mainly to teach myself, or in response to a need or void in the market. My latest book, “Etudes in Small Percussion” is in its second re-write, and will most likely be published by my good friend at Carl Fisher, Sandy Feldstein. I started my own publishing company in 1975 because I felt that there were many valuable pieces not being published because of the limited market for contemporary music. I bought a tabletop printing press, taught myself to use it, and had the publishing company on the top floor of my house in Manhattan. I started making rattan mallets in the basement because the big companies were only making mallets with plastic handles. I made a replica of the old Leedy wide bar orchestra bells because the stuff that the big companies were making did not come up to the old standards. I imported Saito mallet instruments from Japan because they made me a special line and produced better instruments than the current manufacturers. We were the first to introduce height adjustment on all of the instruments. I am now working with Sabian, trying to get them to produce orchestral cymbals comparable to some of the best instruments in my collection.

M.G. How would you talk to new aspiring drummer’s in today’s youth movement?

A.L. Really love what you are doing. There are ups and plenty of downs, but go for it if it makes you personally happy. Listen to every kind of music and learn from everyone.

M.G. What do you think of the musical abilities of most of the rock and roll drummers of today?

A.L. As in every period there are the good, the bad, and the ugly. I don’t personally feel that today’s drummers are better or worse than in the past. The educational opportunities and the materials are more extensive, but it still takes that desire and passion to do it right. The past has produced a lot of great players, we don’t talk about all of the mediocre ones, and today will produce its share of memorable and influential people as well. Looking at the past we only see the figures that have endured, but there were many work-a-day players out there. I think that there are many younger players who will continue to make great music, in every field, into the future.

M.G. What drummers do you hold in highest esteem, and why?

A.L. A drummer has to grab me emotionally. There are so many that I admire for different reasons, but the people that I love have to speak to my heart and soul. Of course, Billy Gladstone and Saul Goodman. Billy for his inspirational playing and inquiring mind and personality, Goodman for his sense of excellence, drive and ability to communicate. Billy Cobham for opening ears and mind; Art Blakey for that gut wrenching time and intensity; Billy Higgins for his sensitivity and touch; Ed Thigpen, that most quietly threatening drummer; Charlie Watts as the simplest and most honest rock drummer (and my wife loves the Stones); Buster Bailey and Walter Rosenberger who are personally so unlike me, and yet the best section mates; David Weckel who gave me so many hours of pleasure with the band “French Toast”; Gordon Gottlieb who is the most fun to play with and one of the most creative people that I know; Dennis Chambers who is that octopus that grabs you by the crotch; Bernard Purdy who makes me want to eat southern fried chicken. A new favorite, Wilfredo Reyes III, who I played with last summer at the Kosa Festival - the clave king. Of course Danny Druckman, Chris Lamb, and Roland Kohloff, my pals at the NY Philharmonic, who week after week, produce the highest level of great sounds.

M.G. Any parting messages for want to be drummer’s.

A.L. Work harder than anyone else. Work because you enjoy the process and it satisfies you - money will come to you, although there are a lot of easier ways to make money. People always look up to musicians. They think that musicians represent the best part of their youth that they gave up for the “real” world.

What wealth of knowledge! What a life! This can all be there for each of us, aspiring drummers, teachers! It is the simple beauty for the love of drumming that makes the story even better for all of us. There is a chance for greatest, happiness, and just being a great human being! One of the best! Mr. Arnie Lang