



Photo courtesy of Drum Workshop

THE TEACHER AND THE BOOK:

A Tribute to Jim Chapin

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“Jim was the first person to codify a disciplinary system of drumset techniques which continues to challenge and enlighten drummers to this day. His incredible energy and devotion to drummers and drumming is inspiring, and it is always a pleasure to see Jim in action with a pair of sticks. He is one of drumming’s great treasures. Jim Chapin: THANK YOU!”

- Peter Erskine

It was a six hour drive from my hometown of Frankfort, KY to Akron, OH for my meeting with Jim Chapin. So, I had a lot of time to think about Jim and wonder if he were really the type of person I’d always heard he was: the energized, enthusiastic and charming guy that loves drumming. Jim would be playing music on this day with many other family members for a tribute to the music of his son, Harry Chapin. I sat down with Jim for a talk at the back of the stage. As we talked, the sound check for the show was going on around us. Jim would stop during our talk and introduce each of his sons to me as they took their turn getting their instrument levels just right or doing a vocal check. And we were deep into conversation about drumming in the ‘30s when his granddaughters took their place on stage and started singing together. Jim stopped mid-sentence and became fixed. His attention became focused and the visual reminded me of a deer who

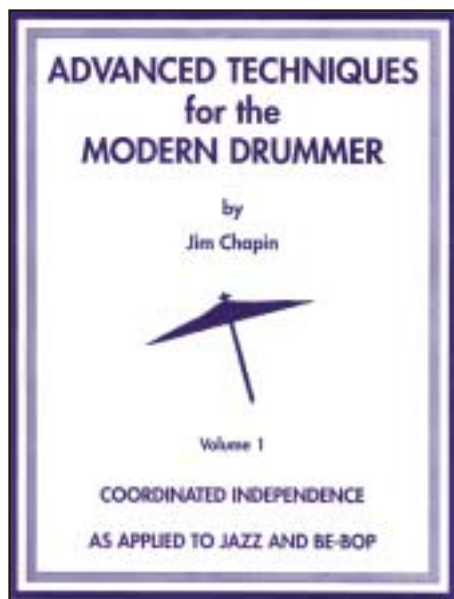
stops feeding in the field to raise its head and gaze into the woods after hearing an unfamiliar sound. He was frozen, not a word. Then, he turned back to me and simply said, “Beautiful.” And I have to admit that witnessing this honest show of emotion and obvious pride was intense. It’s a powerful thing to watch a man being overwhelmed by such a culminating moment: a man being moved to such joy by his progeny. I was thinking these thoughts as we got back to our discussion. A few moments later, he started to discuss the technique he learned from Sanford Moeller. Then he started to demonstrate the technique on his practice pad. Then, the next thing I know I had sticks in my hands and Jim was giving pointers on how to get the technique just right. And the memorable thing is that when I got things going just right, he got excited for me. “That’s it. That’s it!” he said.



Photo by Joe Johnson

Long story short: I had grand ideas of laying out for you in this article Jim's history in chronological detail, listing who he played with and when—talking about his influences and friends and laying out Jim's history for you. But the more people that I talked with about Jim, the more I came to realize that the most important moments for him are those moments just like the one I experienced there on the stage with him. He's a teacher. Giving the knowledge of the method that has been so useful for him really thrills him. And in a strange way, his life is measured by the memories of everyone who has had similar instruction from him. And there have been many, many drummers in that seat my friend. So, I'd like to focus on some of the things others had to say about Jim. He's touched each of them in a different way, and their words for and about Jim can speak greater volumes about what kind of man he is far better than anything I could organize here. Besides, there is a great site dedicated to Jim at www.jimchapin.com. There's a lot of great biographical information covering in great detail who Jim has played with and when, and you'll find a great chronology of Jim's career. There are sound recordings of Jim telling stories about the first time he saw Buddy Rich play, as well as Jim talking about Gene Krupa. The interest with Gene comes into play because it was Gene's drumming that led to Jim wanting to be a drummer. And it was Gene that Jim first approached about taking drum lessons. Gene sent him to Sanford Moeller with whom he had studied, and the rest is drumming history.

We'll also be referring to THE BOOK. Now, if you're not sure what THE BOOK is, let me just give the title here once so you'll know what everyone is referring to when they mention it. In November of 1948, Jim published a book called Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer. This book went on to become the bible of jazz drumming and coordination/independence study. Just to think



that this November will be the 55th anniversary of the book's publication should tell you something about its importance. The book is a mainstay. It was one of a kind when it was published, and teachers keep introducing it to students, and drummers keep going back to it year after year. That's why it has stayed in publication this long, making such a historical impression.

Another great internet source of Jim Chapin material happens to be on the Vic Firth website (www.vicfirth.com). There are some really good shots of Jim illustrating the Moeller grip and technique in the Cyber Lessons section hosted by Dom Famularo. Now Dom is one who has become a true friend and endorser of Jim's teaching. Appointments can be made with either Jim or Dom for private lessons in Dom's studio in New York (www.domfamularo.com).

What follows is a discussion with three friends of Jim who know him well: Dom Famularo, Frank DeVito and Joe Morello. Each of these men has known Jim for at least thirty years.

Dom Famularo

I live on Long Island, and Jim lives near me. I first met Jim at Frank Ippolitto's drum shop thirty years ago. When I went there to purchase some stuff, Jim was there along with Max Roach, Elvin and Tony Williams. They were all in the store. That was the beginning, for me, of meeting these players and getting to know more about the process. With Jim, I usually say that when

you meet Jim you step into the aura of the Chapin magic. You step into his enthusiasm, his endless continuous zest for not only playing this instrument but for studying this instrument. When we get together, Jim will ask me questions. He'll ask me what I'm doing with my feet, and he'll go home and practice these things. So, there's a lesson



Photo courtesy of PAS

there. What you have with Jim is someone who wants to show you what he has learned and what he continues to learn about this art form. When it comes down to playing styles, for me, Jim is the best 84-year-old rock drummer that I know. When he plays rock, he'll play double bass, and he'll play matched grip. This just shows his respect for a type of music that he has no relationship to because it's not the type of music that he grew up with. That is the power of his open-mindedness and of the continuation of learning. So, when you step into the Chapin magic, you're teased with it. You're teased by this great-grandfather that can go back and give you the direct history of the art form. All the players who were the movers and shakers of the art form he has sat down with on many occasions. Here he is in the winter of his life still showing the enthusiasm as if it were the spring. That is the lesson of the Chapin magic.

He'll stop anywhere. I've left him at about two o'clock in the morning in parking lots after clinics with about fifteen people around him. And he's got somebody holding the practice pad, and he's under a streetlight. When I see him the next day, I find out he was there another two hours. So, where most people wouldn't even think of that, Jim sees it as an opportunity to pass on the art form. I have seen him do this over the last thirty years in probably over twenty countries.

Jim heard Gene Krupa play live, and he was so inspired by hearing Gene play he walked up to him and said, "Listen, I want lessons, and because you're the best, I want lessons from you." Well, that would be the equivalent of someone walking up to Steve Gadd after seeing him play with Eric Clapton and saying, "You're the best. There's no doubt about it. I want you to teach me." Steve Gadd would look at you and say, "That's real nice, but I'm not teaching." Well, Krupa saw Jim's enthusiasm and said, "I'm not teaching right now, but what I'll do is I'll send you to my teacher." So, he basically gave him Moeller's number. Jim called on Moeller and basically said, "Hi, I got your number from Gene Krupa and I'm here to learn lessons. I want to be a drummer." In a year-and-a-half's time, Jim was able to master this technique and the process that Moeller was explaining simply because of Jim's analytical way of looking at things. Well, the story goes that Moeller saw Gene play many years later, and because Gene was holding his elbows out as a part of probably the showmanship of playing Moeller was annoyed—because Gene wasn't playing his technique correctly. Krupa, being the saint that he was said he wanted to learn to do it the right way. Moeller said he wasn't teaching anymore. He was too old. He told him to go see Jim Chapin. So, imagine Jim getting the call from Gene Krupa wanting to take lessons from him. Talk about the full cycle of the situation! Jim went to Yonkers to work with Gene at Gene's house. This was probably sometime in the early '60s.



Photo by Rick Mattingly

Moeller, as Jim says, was kind of a curmudgeon of an old man. He had his technique and that's what you learned. Moeller, having been born in the 1880's, had discovered this technique by having taken lessons and witnessed a lot of the soldiers playing in the old soldier's home. These guys were old drummers who were playing great. Moeller didn't invent, but he observed the whipping technique that these guys were playing. It probably wasn't even Moeller who called it the Moeller technique. It was probably people who were learning this whipping technique and began to articulate it by calling it the Moeller method. Moeller probably wasn't

even that aware of what he had until the later part of his years when he began to see the results of students like Jim and Krupa playing and getting recognition.

Jim realizes his playing isn't about his book. It's about his technique. Because of having studied with Moeller, he had this motion, and his independence came out of the technique. So, Jim's theory is to—instead of showing his book—show you the technique, so you'll then discover things on your own that will come out of your playing. I think that's the message. Learn the facility first and it will unleash things in you as it unleashed things in him. What it unleashed was his book. It had to do with the method. It's an interesting mind process.

Passion is a driving force that you cannot explain. You have to listen to it and obey it. We become slaves to our passions. It is not for us to judge anyone's passion, but if I'm smart enough I will try to begin to understand someone's passion, whether it's a passion about playing drums or whether it's someone's passion to want to study sharks. Whatever it is, I try to understand the depth of that passion, regardless of the subject matter. If I can understand that, I think I can better upgrade the quality of my life by learning from it.

What Jim has been able to capture in life and in drumming has been the fountain of youth. This is what it is to me. He loves drumming. This technique has allowed him at 84-years-young to continue playing like no other person that age has. The second thing is that he's living his passion everyday by playing drums and teaching; it's also keeping him young. So I think the fountain of youth is twofold; it's in his zest for a technique that allows him to continue doing what it is that he loves doing. That keeps him young. As I say, childlike but never childish.

Jim, you've shown me the fountain of youth not only in the technique that you have taught me but mostly in your passion for living life doing what you totally love. And with that fountain of youth, I accept the age of my years knowing that if I can have half the amount of fun that you're having at your age . . . then regarding this life game, I win.



Photo courtesy of PAS

with sons Tom, Steve, and Harry

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Photo by Billy Cuthrell



Frank DeVito

I go way back with Jimmy. When I was a teenager there was a music school called the Brooklyn School of Music. That's where I first met Jim. He had just started teaching there when I came in. Don Lamond was there before Jim. So, I first met Jimmy at the school. That was in '48. The book had just come out. I got one of them and worked on it diligently. It was way, way ahead of its time. Up to that time nothing had really been written that was so advanced. And it fit right in at the time with the transition that jazz music was making—into the Bebop thing. Drummers were playing looser.

Vintage Drummer: *I know you're the first one to work through the book.*

Well, he gives me credit for being the first one to be able to play the book. I still have that book. It's signed on the inside cover: *To my first star pupil.* I treasure that.

When I first went with him, we just sat down—there were two chairs around a table with a big practice pad on it, and there was a music stand. He said, "Play a paradiddle." So, I played a paradiddle. Then we went from there. He started to explain how I could get more power, more facility and speed—with less effort—with his sys-

tem. Jimmy is such a beautiful man; I began to feel as if he were an older brother. Back in those days, whenever you saw him he had a cigar in his mouth. He always had a cigar in his mouth and a pair of drum sticks in his back pocket. He still carries around sticks and a pad, right?

Vintage Drummer: *Right.*

We'd be outside in front of the school, after classes or whatever. And he would hold court there. There was a mailbox out on the corner. Guys would be talking to him, "Jim, I'm having trouble with my left hand." So, Jimmy would start showing the left hand technique, playing on those old mailboxes out there. People were just walking by and looking. It was fabulous.

When Gene Krupa passed away, Jim was contacted for some comments about him. Among other things, he said Gene was so important in the field it was almost difficult to talk about him. And I saw what he was getting at. And to me, Jimmy has been so instrumental and so important to the instrument and the players that he's kind of the same way.

Vintage Drummer: *When you were working on the book, were you doing most of those exercises on a pad?*

Yeah, I'd have a practice pad there and a little chair in front of me, or a table. With my right hand I'd play the cymbal beat on the pad. I'd play the left hand part on a different part of the pad or on the chair—something to get two different sounds. I practiced hours and hours that way. There's one particular page that I remember being the toughest. I forget which page it is. All of the exercises were fabulous exercises in building not only coordination but also technique, especially for building up the left hand.

Vintage Drummer: *So, you worked on it for about a semester?*

Well, I don't know how long it took. I just worked on it and worked on it. It didn't take a whole semester, I don't think. But, I did stay with it. And, I would go to sleep with it and wake up with it—literally I did.

Vintage Drummer: *It had to do a lot for your hands in a short time.*

Oh sure, it opened up a whole new world.

Jim would have done a lot more with bands and with playing had he not been so dedicated to teaching. To be turned on by other young drummers and to help them by "spreading the gospel" of the whole Moeller thing is the basis for this. He was a born educator. He was always so supportive of everyone and so encouraging. Some of the fellas weren't really grasping what he was trying to show them, but he had tremendous patience. He would really go out of his way to help all levels and all types of players. He always practiced like crazy too. And he still does. It's what keeps him going. He'll go anywhere with his practice pad to teach. He's such a beautiful human being on top of everything else. He's just a wonderful man, always positive. I know it's a cliché, but I never remember hearing him put anybody down. His personality is always up. To this day, whenever I see him, at the NAMM show or whatever, he always has that big smile.

All I've got to say about Jim is that I can't say enough about him. I love him like a brother. He's a warm, beautiful man who really deserves all the accolades and all the attention that should be given to him because he's done so much for the music community. He's one of a kind, and I hope he's around for another ten or fifteen years. His contribution is so valuable. I just wish he didn't live so far away because I'd like to spend more time with him, and take a few more lessons.

Joe Morello

I met Jim Chapin at a place called the Valley Arena. Every week they'd have big bands on a Sunday. They'd have Tommy Dorsey, Bennie Goodman and all the big bands. This one time when I was there, Tommy Dorsey was there—Buddy Rich wasn't with the band at that time—and the drummer was Eddie Grady I believe. And we watched the show, Ralph Caputo (a dear friend of mine and a good musician) and I watched the show. We were just about to leave and the crowd was clearing out. This guy gets up on the drumset and is banging around and doing all these fantastic things. We waited at the side of the stage. Finally he saw us there, and he got up and came down and said, "Hello, my name's Jim Chapin." I told him who I was. I was still in Springfield at the time. He said, "If you ever come to New York, look me up. We'll get together." So, when I went to New York a couple years later—about 1951 or so—I got a hold of Jim. So then, when I was working at the Hickory House, he'd come in about every week and see me. We'd sit in the back booth and talk about drums. He was a dear friend.

Vintage Drummer: *What do you remember as your first impression of Jim at that time?*

I thought he was very good. He had this book on coordination that had become sort of a must for all drummers. What amazes me about Jim is that he talks about this Moeller thing that I don't see as being that big a deal, but he's known for his book. And he's never talking about his book. He's always talking about Sanford Moeller. I've told him, "To Hell with the Moeller thing, play your book for the kids."

Vintage Drummer: *Jim told me a story about you, him and Buddy Rich. Do you remember it?*

Yeah, we were at this Rogers-drum-thing in a hotel. We went down to a cloakroom to play. Actually, there's a picture with Buddy and myself. Somebody took this picture. You can see Jimmy's hand on the door. He's not in the picture. And Rogers put it out on the back cover of *Down Beat*.

Vintage Drummer: *Jim says that Buddy watched the left hand techniques that you and he were using at that time and that a few months later he saw Buddy incorporating those techniques. Jim said he made a comment to Buddy, "Looks like you've been practicing that left hand." Do you remember Buddy's response?*

Yeah, he said, "I willed it."

Vintage Drummer: *How do you remember the reaction to the book when it came out?*

He's the first to come out with that coordination thing. He took tunes and played melody with his left hand. It was the first one of its kind. I would teach it now as a coordination thing.

Vintage Drummer: *Jim separates your style of playing from his by saying that he uses more of the Moeller method and you use more finger technique.*



I use more of the Larry Stone technique. I've used a combination of things really.

Vintage Drummer: *What about Jim and that RealFeel practice pad of his?*

We were in New Orleans once—Butch Miles and a couple of other drummers. We were all sitting at this big round table—Butch and his wife you know. Armand Zildjian comes over and sits down and starts talking to us because he was a dear friend. Suddenly, Chapin comes up, and he sits at the end of this round table. We're all having a nice conversation, and out comes that practice pad. Jimmy starts banging on it. He cocks his head to the right and gets this look like he's in a world of his own. We are all looking at each other like, "What is he doing?" And he's totally oblivious to what is going on. So, I said, "Jim, would you mind cooling it." The guy is incredible; he must sleep with the damn pad.

Vintage Drummer: *Anything you'd like to say to Jim?*

I love him. I think he's great. His contribution to drumming is great. And everything I've said to you I've said to him at some time.

As I finish putting this piece together, Jim's son David tells me Jim is doing clinic work in Copenhagen, Denmark and Russia. And Dom thinks Jim is now somewhere in the Balkans. And although the location may change, you can be sure that Jim is somewhere with his sticks in hand pointing out his technique to some intrigued person whose life is never going to be the same after spending just a moment with Jim and seeing the intensity of a man who is truly living a life of joy and passion. There is no faking Jim's type of enthusiasm and joy. The insincerity would be felt in a second. It's the power of Jim being completely true to himself and his inner voice that people never forget. They'll never have the opportunity to forget because, as Dom says, once they experience that Chapin magic, the moment will be a part of their mind and imagination for the rest of their days. That is the legacy of Jim Chapin.