



photo by Jim Jacobus

Joe Morello

From Four Strings to a Four Piece



by Stephen Gullette
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cover photo courtesy of Ludwig Drum Co.

The vision is always the same—*always the same*. I've heard the story so many times the scene comes to mind every time I think of Joe Morello. It starts with this overall feeling that I get for the jazz scene in New York in the 1950s. I think about all the gigs that could be happening simultaneously on 52nd Street: Count Basie, Stan Getz, Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Kenton, Duke Ellington, Thelonius Monk, Bud Powell, Mary Lou Williams, Charlie Parker, Terry Gibbs and so on. And in the crowds watching could be any number of stars: Gary Cooper, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Joe Louis, Marlene Dietrich, Ava Gardner, Sammy Davis, Jr. or Sugar Ray Robinson. And in a smoky, dimly-lit bar known as the Hickory House—the place where in 1936 Buddy Rich really got his start playing

with Joe Marsala—I see Joe Morello at a back table with drumsticks in his hands. A circle of drummers surrounds him; they've come to see and hear one of the hottest new drumming talents, a man whose reputation is taking off. Morello is talking with the guys and showing some of his licks on a folded napkin on the table. Joe wows them as they're getting a taste of what they had hoped to see. And, in my mind, as I fade away from this scene there's a glimmering, four piece, silver sparkle Ludwig kit on the stage waiting for Joe.

Joe's reputation really took off during this period when he was drumming for the Marian McPartland Trio at the Hickory House. And his talent brought Dave Brubeck to the Hickory House to see Joe. The rest is history.

THE HISTORY ACCORDING TO JOE

"I always liked percussion. So, it became very easy. My father wasn't too happy when I told him I didn't want to play [violin] anymore."

Joe played violin in the Boston Symphony when he was in his teens.

"He [Joe's father] was paying for all those lessons for all those years. I just started going for the drums. He used to say to me, 'Well, you'll never make a nickel with those sticks.' The first time I played Carnegie Hall, he came down backstage

and there was a guard that came and said, 'There's a gentleman who says that he's your father up here.' I went out and said, 'I've never seen this man in my life.' I was just joking and said, 'Sure, I'll come out and get him.'"

"My first teacher was Joe Sefcik in Springfield. He played in the theater, in Vaudeville. He was very, very good. He was a good teacher and all-around percussionist. I went with him for about three years. He really was great and became a very close friend. Then I went to see [George] Larry Stone. I wanted to see Sanford Moeller, [but] he didn't want to teach me.

He said, 'It's too far for you to come to New York.' So, I went to see Stone in Boston and was with him for two and a half to three years. Then I ran into Billy Gladstone. Again, he didn't want to teach me. He said, 'You don't need it.' I said, 'Yeah I do, I want to learn *that* technique.' I took a few lessons with him in New York. When he went to San Francisco—he was playing 'My Fair Lady' at the opera house—so, I was seeing him every night during the month off that I had. He'd come to the apartment . . . and he was great, technically. He put the whole thing together for me. It was a very relaxed way of playing. I was getting good results with the teaching. Billy was the most soft-

spoken guy and kindest little man you ever wanted to meet. He was really a gentleman. You would never think that he could play like that, but he could play. He had better chops than anybody on a snare drum—I'm not talking about a jazz thing. I'm talking about a fast single stroke roll. It was just beautiful the way he could do it. He was incredible. It was just effortless. He kept saying, 'You don't need it.' And I'd say, 'Yes I do.'"

Joe spent many years practicing and honing his skills playing with small groups around New York. He remembers getting a call when he was playing in guitarist Johnny Smith's group.

"[Stan] Kenton called me up. He asked me if I wanted to join the band for a month to sub for Stan Levey. So I spoke to Johnny Smith and said, 'Gee, I'd like to do this.' He said, 'Well you can come back when you want to,' he said, 'but get me a sub.' So, I did. I went out with Stan, [then] Marian McPartland called me at the time, she said, 'Would you want to join the group?' I said, 'Possibly.' We talked a little bit and it just so happened I got back—I think it was two days—after the thing with Kenton. And she was going into the Blue Note in Chicago, so I just got home and flew into Chicago and worked with her for about three and half years."

Others were after Joe, as well.

"Benny Goodman wanted me to go with him when Steve Allen was doing a movie and they were going to open up at the Starlight. I told Benny, 'I just don't sound good with this band.' Benny said, 'Hell the band can't keep time, we don't know what we're doing.' I said 'No, I just don't feel comfortable with it.' So, I stayed with Marian for a while, then the Brubeck thing came along, and a Tommy Dorsey thing—I went and auditioned for Tommy's band at the Café Rouge. Louie Bellson used to come in and say, 'You got to do that [referring to playing with Dorsey].' And Buddy Rich said that; he said, 'You should audition with that band.' So I did. I auditioned. And



it was during the evening. The place was crowded. I did a little drum thing, and did about three or four tunes. And the manager said, 'Tommy wants to take you out for breakfast. I went out there and he said, 'You've got the job if you want it.' But I couldn't do it because the manager was messing me up (which is a long story that I won't go in to). Tommy was really great."

"In that interim, I get a call from Brubeck; he asked me if I'd join his group. He said, 'Can you come over.' We talked, and he wanted me to sign a contract. I said, 'No, let's try it, because I might not like your group.' 'Cause, in your group you got a drummer back there that nobody can see. And the bass player you can't see. And the lighting is just on [you] and Paul.' I said, 'I don't want to play like that. You can get a machine to do that. I want to grow and I want to play—have a chance to express myself.' So, I changed the whole routine of the quartet. The reviews after that . . . it was like a whole different group. He [Brubeck] said, 'We're doing a three month tour starting in September.' This was in July when we negotiated, and he said, 'Send me a telegram and I'll send you back a confirmation.' So it was all set. Then I get a call from Tommy Dorsey's office; the manager says, 'Come on down to Brooks Brothers to get your uniform.' I said, 'I can't, I just signed with Brubeck.' He said, 'You don't want to play Birdland all your life. Look what we did for Buddy Rich.' I said, 'You didn't do anything. Look what Buddy did for the band.' I would like to have played with the band."

"So that's what happened. Twelve and a half years later I was with the group [Brubeck]. In the interim after that, I was doing a lot of work with The Ludwig Drum Company. I did a lot of clinics. As the group [Brubeck] got more popular and financially more . . . you know . . . we'd work about three months and take a month off—or every two months and take one off. During those months off, Ludwig would say to me—Bill would say, 'Won't you come to Europe and do 23 clinics?' So, I've done that two or three times, and my wife accompanied me a couple times."

"That's basically it."

THE HISTORY ACCORDING TO DAVE BRUBECK

I was able to contact Dave Brubeck as he was traveling to an engagement. We were only able to speak briefly, but this is what he had to say about Joe.

"Joe was playing at the Hickory House with Marian McPartland. I was looking for a drummer to replace Joe Dodge. Joe Morello was the first East Coast musician I had in my band. Paul [Desmond] told me I should hear this wonderful drummer. I went to see Joe. Here was this drummer who played with brushes all night. He played beautifully."

"The first night I featured him was at the Blue Note in Chicago. Joe knocked everyone out. He got a standing ovation. Paul didn't like it because Joe had played with sticks on a full drum kit. He wanted Joe to do more accompaniment stuff with brushes. Paul said, 'Joe goes or I do.' I said, 'Paul, he's not going.' So, the next night I didn't know what was going to happen. Then they walk in the door together."

Finishing our conversation, I asked Dave if he could sum up his years with Joe. He said:

"I consider him one of my best friends. He always will be."

EARLY TENSION IN THE BRUBECK CAMP

Joe remembers having to iron out a few things with Brubeck when the group first started playing.

“Other drummers that they [Brubeck] had, they would just keep them in the shadows and [the drummers] would keep time and just . . . not do anything. A drummer never took a four bar break. And the bass player never took a bass solo. So, when I went with the group, Norman Bates was the bass player; he started taking choruses and that was unheard of. Of course Paul didn’t like that, he thought he was a big star. The group used to be billed as ‘The Brubeck Quartet featuring Paul Desmond,’ so I just said, ‘Hey, let’s have some recognition here—recognize everybody on the marquee.’ That’s the way it should be. Paul had a little ego problem, but he got over it. He didn’t talk to me for about two months, but he came around.”

ON BRUBECK ENDING

“Paul was sick. He didn’t last long: he had cancer. Dave called me up about two or three months after and said, ‘Do you want to go to Mexico?’ I said, ‘No.’ I got so sick when I went there once. So, he would use other drummers every once and a while. I



photo courtesy of Ludwig Drum Co.

MARIAN MCPARTLAND

Marian was more than happy to talk to me about Joe. She has fond memories of their years playing, as well as the years of their friendship.

“The first time he sat in with me . . . he didn’t look like a drummer. He looked like a chemist or something with the crew cut, the glasses and the coat. Of course, when he played I was flabbergasted. I couldn’t wait to hire him. I already had a good drummer, but he had already left to go play with Sauter-Finnegan. This means I was

“I don’t know another drummer who could have played all those time signatures so precisely and so accurately—with so much depth of feeling”

didn’t want to travel much anymore. And I started doing these clinics. The clinics were very good. In the States, I would do maybe three clinics and then have two days off. All the plane fares were taken care of. My wife would travel with me if she wanted to. The company paid for it. And they also paid for somebody to take care of the drums. It was a joy. It was different, and I was on my own. Financially, it was very rewarding. And the quartet after a while . . . everyone got tired of it—after twelve and a half years, three and four months at a time of one-nighters.”

free to hire Joe. And then . . . I’ve never let Brubeck forget it . . . that he hired Joe away from me [laughs]. I still kid him about that. He and Paul Desmond used to come into the club. I used to say to Joe, ‘Isn’t it nice that they come in to hear the trio?’ All the time, he was planning to steal my drummer [laughs]. But Joe, he had to go because he was getting countrywide, worldwide attention. I mean, he really was very loyal, but he just had to go somewhere. We were getting awards for small group of the year. And he was getting ads [endorsements]. He won the Down Beat new star award while he was with me. Benny Goodman wanted him

to go with his group. But Joe didn’t want to do that. And Brubeck wanted him. And I think Dave was able to do all those time signature things because of Joe. Joe was able to play in 5/4, 7/5, 6/19—any number you want. He had played all kinds. He could play any time signature he wanted. I don’t think he [Brubeck] could have come out with some of these things if Joe hadn’t been there. I don’t know another drummer who could have played all those time signatures so precisely and so accurately—with so much depth of feeling.”

“Paul was very jealous of him. They wound up being friendly after a while. But it took a while because Paul was used to being the big star in the group. When Joe came along, he really did become the star in the group. He really did. And Paul—he didn’t have to take a back seat or anything—but I guess he had to share some time. Eventually they became friends. He just had to come around because there was no stopping Joe at that point. He was really raring to go. He became the number one drummer, and he got raves everywhere.”

Vintage Drummer: Do you remember any specific instance where Joe did something on the drums that just amazed you? Anything particular stand out in your mind?

“Every night. To me, he always played great. He had a great standard of playing. It was very inspiring to always be around somebody like that.”

“I remember once I was driving to the Hickory House in my car. Suddenly, a cab went by at a furious rate. Joe was in it—practicing like mad on a practice pad in the cab. I broke up. It just looked so funny.”

“Joe would sometimes be late for gigs. And he would always have these terrible excuses. I remember this one time he showed up late and said, ‘The train blew up.’ The humor was the excuse. Anytime Joe was late after that, we would always say, ‘The train must have blown up.’”



photo by Clay Greene

“There was this one show that Joe was playing with Dave. Paul and Joe got into some type of argument before the show, and Paul had been really nasty and said something like, ‘You’re the worst drummer I’ve ever heard’—or some other horrible insult [remember, Paul’s the one that got Brubeck to come see Joe at the Hickory House]. And Joe got mad and wouldn’t play the gig. They were going to play the gig without him. Joe was up in the dressing room sulking, and he wouldn’t come down to play. So, he opened up a cupboard, and (I guess they were playing in a church) he found all these ‘priestly’ robes in the cupboard. And he got dressed up with robe and hat and came down and walked onstage saying, ‘Bless you, my children.’ Of course, Dave had to laugh, and the whole place broke up.”

Vintage Drummer: What drummers do you remember Joe admiring?

“Well, he liked Shelley Mann a lot. And, of course, Buddy. And I’m sure, Roy Haynes. Sid Catlett. Jo Jones.”

Vintage Drummer: Any last words on Joe?

“I really love Joe. After being friends all these years, I love him as a friend and as a person.”

After speaking with Marian about the “priestly robe incident,” I had to get Joe’s take on what happened. Joe remembers coming onstage saying, “Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord,” and waving to the crowd. “Brubeck almost shit,” he said. “It was all a joke. Steve Foster, who was my set up man

at the time, he was with me. We were in Chapel Hill or somewhere. We were in back and . . . hey, look at these robes. And I say, ‘Hey, let’s do that.’ The kids [some group] were playing, and after them we were introduced. Dave went out, then Gene went out, and then I went out, “Bless you all.” It was just a funny thing. Dave didn’t think it was too funny, but that’s o.k.”

BILL CROW

Bill Crow played bass in the Marian McPartland Trio. Here are a few things he had to say when I spoke to him about Joe.

“I used to play around with drumming, and when Joe wasn’t using his sticks I would practice with them. I practiced his finger technique with the left hand until I got pretty good at doing it. Anytime people were talking about Joe’s finger technique he’d say, ‘Ah, anybody can do that, it’s easy.’



photo courtesy of Ludwig Drum Co.

He’d hand me the sticks and say, ‘Even my bass player can do that.’ And I’d play that roll with my left hand.”

“When people started using double bass drums in their setups, like Louie Bellson and some of those other guys, I remember the NY rep for Gretsch would come around and try to get Joe to switch over and start using Gretsch drums. They would try to entice him by offering him all kinds of drums, saying things like, ‘We can set you up with a big double bass drum kit.’ I remember Joe saying he hadn’t heard anybody doing anything special with two bass drums that he couldn’t do with one—so what would he need two bass drums for. He’d turn them down, and they’d keep coming back trying to get him to use Gretsch.”

“Once Joe got me to go to the Zildjian factory to help him handpick some cymbals. He asked me to bring a bass; he said after hitting cymbals for a while they all start to sound the same unless you have something to play them off of. So we would set up and play a little for him to try out cymbals. After that we went over to George Stone’s house to visit, and I could tell that Mr. Stone was really happy and excited to see Joe—him being a star pupil and all. At one point Mr. Stone tried to get Joe to play some with him, but Joe wouldn’t do it. I could tell Stone really wanted to play. I asked Joe when we were leaving why he wouldn’t play. He said he didn’t want to embarrass himself. He had that much respect for Stone’s playing and for Stone.”

SOME QUESTIONS FOR JOE

Vintage Drummer: The first drum solo that you recorded was “Sounds of the Loop?”

Joe Morello: That’s right.

Vintage Drummer: The title referring to the Loop in Chicago? That was on the album *Jazz Impressions of the USA*?

Joe Morello: That’s right.

Vintage Drummer: Did you go to India with Brubeck?

Joe Morello: Yeah, it was a Middle Eastern tour. What happened was we started in London. After London we went to Scotland, then back to London, then to Paris, then to Italy, then to Germany, on to Poland through the Brandenburg Gate. They had us on a midnight train. It was controlled by Communism, so we were one



photo by Clay Greene

of the first groups to play behind the Iron Curtain. We were in Poland for around ten days . . . from there we went to India.

Vintage Drummer: Did any of the polyrhythmic ideas the quartet used come from any musical ideas originating in India?

Joe Morello: That [doing polyrhythms] was very easy for me. That's why Brubeck liked it. There's nothing you could throw out that I couldn't handle. Not that I was anything special. It's just that I used to do that when I was in my hometown. I used to love to do polyrhythms. I could do maybe

three or four [rhythms at once]. Whatever I felt like doing. So, he loved that part of it. He couldn't do it with other drummers.

Vintage Drummer: Where did you start developing your finger technique?

Joe Morello: Billy Gladstone was instrumental in that. Louie Bellson used to use it a lot, but just a little differently than I did. We became good friends. When he would come to Springfield with Ellington, he'd come over to the house. Louie was a sweet guy. Buddy was very influential. I was very fortunate to work out with him a few times.

It's so strange because I never asked him how do you do anything. Some of these people have horror stories about Buddy, but I tell ya, the guy was always a gentleman with me. He always started talking drums. He'd say, "What do you think of this guy," or "What do you think of that guy?" And he'd say, "He can't do the stuff we can do."

"I can't play like you," I said.

"You can do all the shit that I can do," he said.

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photo courtesy of Ludwig Drum Co.

Joe Morello continued ...

"No, I can't," I said.

"Don't give me that humble stuff," Buddy said, "you know when you play good."

"Well, I can't play like you."

"Why do you say that?" Buddy asked.

"Well, you're too short," I said.

We'd go back to his room and start talking, and before you know it he'd come out and say, "Look at these sticks that they're making for me. Check 'em out." Before you know it we're banging on a practice pad. He had a couple of practice pads there. He said he never did [practice], but of course he did. He was a very fine technician—a great drummer no question.

Buddy used to say to me, there were a couple of drummers that just tried to copy him to a tee. He'd say, "I'd love to hear so-and-so play like so-and-so." He'd do damage to people that tried to play like him. Cause you couldn't do what he was doing. That was his thing—the way his mind worked. You could imitate the thing, if you wanted, but I think one of the reasons we got along is that I didn't try to ape him. I just did my own stuff. I just played the way I always played. I think that's probably why we got along very well. You know we can all play single stroke rolls and get the bass drum going, but it doesn't mean you're going to play like him. There are a lot of roads out there and you just play the way you feel. He was a great inspiration. And Gene [Krupa] was also when I was a young kid. People like Jo Jones, Philly Joe and Blakey—we all played together somewhere. It's like a brotherhood of drummers. Now you got kids out there like Dave Weckl, Vinnie Colaiuta—he's a great drummer, a marvelous drummer. And I remember people that go way back, like Don Lamond. He contributed so much to drumming. He changed the whole style of playing with a big band—a great, great drummer. I'll call him up and see how he's doing. He was one of the few people that was really nice to me when I went to New York. When I first went down to New York some of the guys were like, "You play pretty good," but then they didn't want you to take any work from them. It was kind of strange. And I can understand that. I've

never really felt that way. But Don was really nice. He really helped me a lot. He gave me some nice advice. And he's a wonderful guy.

Vintage Drummer: What kinds of projects do you have going right now?

Joe Morello: Well, I'm playing with my group. I have a quartet that I've recorded with. We're going to do some more recording. We'll probably play a few clubs around here in New York, probably Birdland. I don't really like the traveling thing much anymore.

I'm working on a second Master Studies book. And I want to put out my Rudimental Jazz book again . . . and then there's the New Directions in Rhythm book. I'm wanting to put that out again.

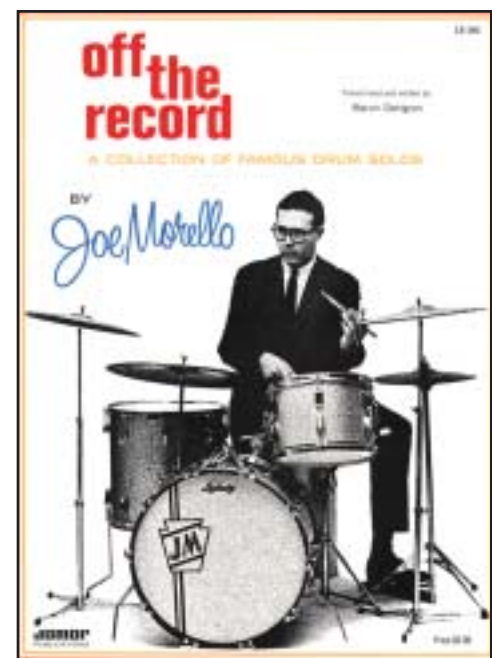
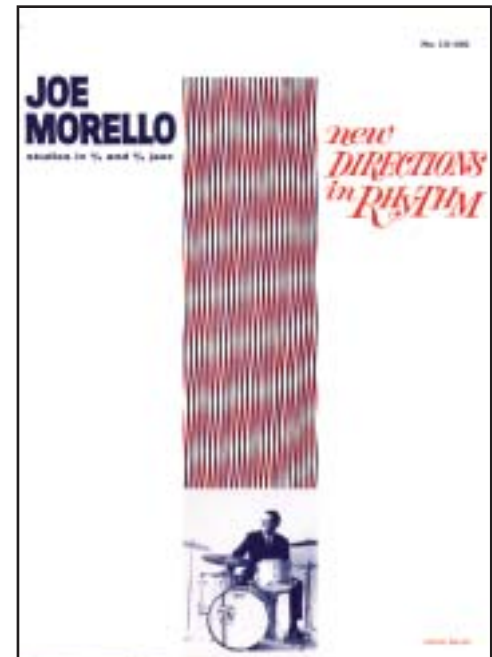
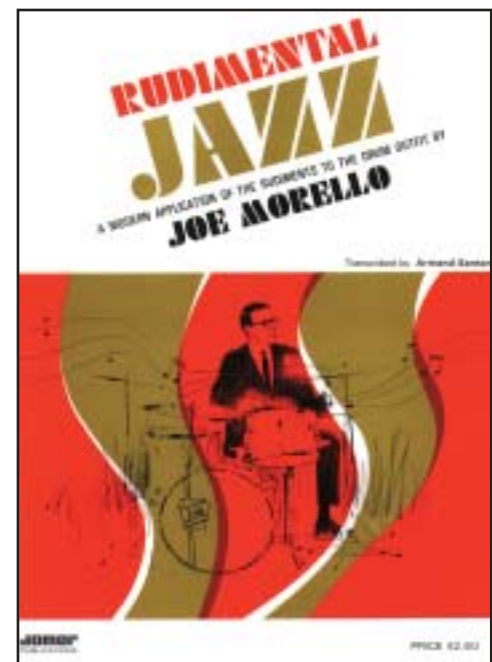
Rick Mattingly worked with Joe on the first Master Studies book. I bumped into Rick at a recent PAS event. Rick sums up the experience by saying:

Rick Mattingly: I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with Joe Morello in the early '80s when I served as editor for his book Master Studies. I felt as though I had tapped into one of the main arteries of percussion history as Joe talked about his experiences with such legendary players and teachers as Billy Gladstone and George Lawrence Stone. I was also impressed by how much Joe was respected by classical percussionists, many of whom had little respect for the average drumset player. But there is certainly nothing "average" about Joe Morello. He is one of the great musicians of all time, and as we went through the various technical exercises that made up the book, he always stressed that technique means nothing unless it is used to produce a musical result."

If you talk to many people that know Joe, these types of recollections about Joe as a person and a musician are not uncommon.

Vintage Drummer: Who's someone that you didn't get the chance to play with that you would have loved to have played with?

Joe Morello: In a small group, probably Dizzy Gillespie. Dizzy liked my playing a lot and we got to jam a couple times. He was a great player. With the big bands, I



think probably The Woody Herman Band—boy those days are gone. I would have liked to have done some of that. But everything worked out good. I have no regrets.

Vintage Drummer: How do you feel about the music scene these days?

Joe Morello: I think jazz music has always been meant for fringe audiences, not meant for the popular audiences. You could put the Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, put Brubeck and Miles Davis (if he was still around) in Shea Stadium or Giants Stadium and you'd probably get 18,000; but if you put Bon Jovi in there, in two hours you've sold out with 80,000 people. So, you can figure that out. That's the way it goes. You're mainly dealing with a bunch of kids, you know.

Vintage Drummer: What happened with you and Ludwig?

Joe Morello: The company was being sold. Different companies were after me to go, like Yamaha and all these different companies. When Bill sold the company, he said, "It's not mine anymore." He'd still appear at the NAMM show and stand in front of the tympani and talk, but it still wasn't his company. So, I said things are getting tight, business wasn't good. And the Japanese businesses were swamping everybody out. So, DW came along and they made me an

offer. And I decided to give them a shot to see what would happen. It was about seven or eight years ago. Now DW seems to be riding the wave. Everyone has their turn. Years ago it was Slingerland, Ludwig and Gretsch. Those were the only three compa-

nies. But today, there are 50 drum companies, you know.

Vintage Drummer: What's been one of the nicest kits you ever played?

Joe Morello: The Ludwig sets were real beautiful. I always liked sparkle silver because everyone was using marine pearl. It was so funny. The first night I played with Marian in Chicago, Bill Ludwig came down with a bunch of people. It's a long story, but it's in the Ludwig book if you ever want to read it. He came down with a bunch of people. And my drums were kind of old. They were marine pearl, but they had turned yellow from playing down by the seashore—a little rusty on the lugs and everything. So, what happens is . . . when I went with the company, Bill says, "Why don't we take these old drums back and

give you a new set?" And I said, "Wow"—I was amazed. And he says, "So what color do you want?" I said, "Sparkle silver." He said, "We use that for parade drums." And I said, "That's o.k., I want it." Well, two years later that drumset was the second biggest

"I think jazz music has always been meant for fringe audiences, not meant for the popular audiences"

selling: the sparkle silver. And that was amazing. Bill said, "Damn it, you were right I guess."

Vintage Drummer: Any parting words?

Joe Morello: Well, for different drummers out there, I hope their careers will be as healthy as mine has been. The profession has been very good for me, and I've tried to be very good to it. Any kind of advice for young drummers would be to keep practicing, stay with it and don't be discouraged.

Vintage Drummer: You feel pretty fulfilled having picked up the sticks after the violin?

Joe Morello: I think that was the best thing I ever did.

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