

# Sue Hadjopoulos

## MAGIC HANDS

by Steve Edge

**Sue Hadjopoulos** is a freelance, independent session and live player, a vocalist, and a songwriter. She has been voted one of the top five percussionists by Modern Drummer Magazine and has amassed a slew of gold and platinum records from her work with various rock, pop, and Latin artists. I caught up with her in May, in New York, where she was in rehearsals for a new theatrical production, an adaptation of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* inspired by the text of Gustave Flaubert, (direction, set design, and lighting concept Robert Wilson; music and libretto Bernice Johnson Reagon).

Sue, who is known for her smooth blend of pop and salsa rhythms, has worked with a variety of artists, most notably Joe Jackson, Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias, Basia, Barry Manilow, Kenny Loggins, Cyndi Lauper, Simple Minds, Rickie Lee Jones, B-52's, Toni Braxton, Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Jane Siberry, Vicki Sue Robinson, They Might Be Giants, Laura Nyro, Davy Jones (The Monkees), Mick Jones (Foreigner), and Teena Marie.



photo by Jane Pirone

Live with Joe Jackson

She fondly recounts how the late Tito Puente warned the audience he was going to retire after hearing her play a timbale solo at a Latin All Stars music show at Madison Square Garden! She currently calls New York City home.

**Sue:** I was born in Queens and grew up in Massapequa, Long Island. Other former Massapequans include Neil Diamond, Stray Cats, and the Baldwin Brothers.

**Steve:** I've read that you are from a musical family. Your dad was a drummer?

**Sue:** Yes. My father was my first inspiration. My father played trap set in the jazz/swing era, so when I was a kid we always had a drumset in the basement. It was a Gretsch, white mother-of-pearl kit. It was the style Gene Krupa used back then. Dad noticed my interest and started showing me the rudiments. He taught me how to play a double roll and basically taught me his jazz style. I do come from a musical family where my mother plays piano and my younger brother also plays drumset.

**Steve:** Did any of your family members try to steer you away from drumming or were they all supportive?

**Sue:** Well, yes and no. Let's just say that in the beginning they treated my interest in the drums as a hobby. My parents knew from experience the life of a freelance musician can be difficult and I'm sure they just wanted to protect me. They asked me to finish school and get my degree so that I would have something to "fall back on." However, when they finally realized I was serious about music and I started getting some public recognition, they were very sup-

portive and of course, now they are my biggest fans! My Dad never stops talking about his percussionist daughter! Even the bank tellers in his town know who I am!

**Steve:** So, you've always wanted to play drums?

**Sue:** Yes! Ever since I can remember! I have a family photo with my father and older brother taken at Christmas; I can't be more than 5 years old and I'm pouting because I got a toy guitar and my brother got the toy drumset I wanted for Christmas!

Growing up I used to play on Mom's pots and pans to Miriam Makeba records because her records were so percussive. I used to practice drums in the basement all day long to all my CDs and fantasize that I was at Madison Square Garden and I was backing up all the famous artists! (Well, I have played the Garden a few times since then!)

**Steve:** When did you start playing gigs?

**Sue:** I was rehearsing with my older brother who had a cover band when I was around 17. They would use me as their rehearsal drummer, but when they got a gig I got left at home and they found one of their friends to cover the drum part. One night I got my big break when they got a prom gig in a big NYC Hotel and the contract called for a 14-piece band. They didn't have enough guys so they hired me as the conga player. I only had one conga drum

back then that I bought for \$50. Nevertheless, I played the hell out of it! They got so many compliments on my playing that from that night on they used me as the drummer (and subsequently, the percussionist) of the band.

**Steve:** When did you abandon the trap set for Latin percussion instruments?

**Sue:** Fairly early on in my career for a few reasons. One, my Mom is Puerto Rican and I was brought up with Latin music and I love the rhythms. I was drawn to the timbales and that was my main instrument in the Latin bands. Two, I was astute enough to realize that there would be problems getting work as a woman on drum set. Guys didn't think a woman was powerful enough to be the backbone of the band. I would be sitting behind the drums before a gig back then and guys would come up to me and ask me if I was the singer or the drummer's girlfriend! And those were the musicians!!!

**Steve:** Is there a drummer or are there drummers that most influenced your drumming?

**Sue:** Well I have a strong Latin drumming background, so of course Tito Puente and too many others in that field to mention. When I played drums I was complimented by someone who told me my playing reminded him of Tony Williams! I'll accept that! For all around session work I love Paulinho Da Costa. However, I listen to a lot of genres from jazz to rock to classical and I am always integrating new influences into my playing.

**Steve:** Is there a particular tour or artist that stands out as a "best experience" and/or "most fun"?

**Sue:** They were all interesting for different reasons and I learned a lot from each. I think perhaps working with Joe Jackson on any project is always going to be an interesting and creative project, always challenging and innovative. He's an incredible songwriter and composer. And I am so grateful to Cyndi Lauper, who is an incredible performer I really admire! She not only taught me about stage performance and vocal technique, but taught me how to create a total stage persona from makeup to wardrobe and hair styling! I also had big time fun with the B-52s who are a very warm and fun group with a unique style. I could go on about all the others but we don't have time.

**Steve:** You've worked with Joe Jackson in the studio and on tour on several occasions, even crediting him with "giving you your start". And you worked on his CD *Symphony #1* which won a Grammy in 2001 for "Best Pop Instrumental Performance". Does Joe write your parts out or does he leave that up to you?

**Sue:** He doesn't write out parts for me. He tells me what feel he wants or what percussion he envisions for the song, but will

ask my opinion and lets me work on my own arrangements. With *Night and Day*, Joe had never used a percussionist before and we were doing a lot of Latin grooves so I had free range to create and play all the percussion parts. On the salsa songs, my background in Latin music came in handy, as I organized those Brit boys into an authentic "Latin" rhythm section!

**Steve:** How about other artists you have worked with in the studio? Do they tend to leave your parts up to you or do they have specific parts written out?

**Sue:** It depends on the project. But generally, I'm creating my own parts. If anything, there would be a lead sheet just marking time and notating breaks.

Many percussionists in Latin bands don't read music so they don't use charts. In rock and pop, hardly anyone writes charts out for anything! More likely, they will hand you a CD demo of the material. I'll listen to it and build the percussion arrangement from the ground up. Many of the artists I work with don't use percussion regularly so they don't have any preconceived notions about what they want to hear and I've been hired for my input. I prefer that to someone who already has a percussion part written in, because it gives me more creative space.

**Steve:** Do you prefer studio work, playing live, composing, theatre, or is it, as they say, "all good"?

**Sue:** It's all good and I like that I have been able to venture into all areas. I like the different challenges involved with each. However, if I had to pick only one I would say I LOVE working in the studio. I can work at my own pace, creating percussion arrangements, layering and overdubbing parts in the studio.

**Steve:** There are a lot of female drummers out there now. I visited Drummergirl.com's website and I was amazed at the sheer number of drummer girls that have signed in there. Do you think women have been accepted in all roles in the

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entertainment industry including drumming, or do you think there are still problems there?

**Sue:** I'd like to think I helped change peoples ideas about women drummers in the industry for the better. There are a lot more women players than when I started but unfortunately there are still major problems. One problem I touched on earlier is VISIBILITY.

Drumgirl.com was formed for the exact reason that most of the major drum magazines hardly ever feature female drummers unless it is a "special" female issue. Drum magazines rarely interview women players for the cover and then only the one or two major established players. The percentage of male vs. female interviews is just so disparate. It's the same with endorser advertising in those magazines. You will also see a lot of up and coming guy drummers featured, yet you see almost nothing about the up and coming women players. So that is why you were amazed to see how many women are actually drumming these days.

**Steve:** I know you endorse products for several companies. Remo World Percussion & Drums, Rhythm Tech Percussion, Paiste Cymbals, Vater Drumsticks, Sennheiser Microphones, H3 DrumStick Wax, and you use Roland Electronic Percussion and Futuresonics Ear monitors. Do you generally stay with the same set-up equipmentwise, or do you try a lot of new things as they become available?

**Sue:** My setup varies with each project. I rarely use the "latest" new gadget unless it serves a purpose. However, I did hear the Roland HPD-15 Handsonic, Hand Percussion Multipad, at a NAMM show a few years back and immediately went out and bought one because the sounds were just so good. You hit the pads with your hands like you would a conga. But generally, I am more interested to use the instrumentation that serves my purpose. As I hear the music, I start creating a list of percussion I will need to create the parts I hear. Then my tech and I start building it into an esthetic stage look. Basics for rock and pop will always be bongos, congas, timbales and various hand percussion. Electronics, miscellaneous drum set pieces, mallet instruments, specific cymbals and other strange requests start filtering in as we get further into rehearsals. By the end I have the complete set up!

On this new theatrical show I was asked to create a "windstorm". I did that with a Paiste medium light 18" China Boy struck with marimba mallets and various size REMO Spring Drums! It is fantastic. I think I would make a great foley artist!

**Steve:** How did you end up owning and playing a Deagan xylophone from 1941 on the *Night And Day* CD?

**Sue:** I always wanted to take mallet lessons and was looking for a set of vibes in the Buylines newspaper here in NYC. I never got them but saw a 3 octave "portolite" Deagan xylophone with rosewood keys and mother of pearl finish and the whole thing came apart to fit into a small fiber carry case! I don't remember how much I bought it for at the time, maybe \$200 or 250. You can see a picture of them in the inside cover of the *Night and Day* CD. They were perfect for the song *TV AGE*. I subsequently took marimba lessons from Richard Brown of the Houston Symphony Orchestra and also used Deagan Electrovibes (another dinosaur!) on tour, but I don't consider myself a mallet player by any means.



**Steve:** Do you own any other vintage equipment?

**Sue:** Yes, I also own a set of the Humberto Morales Model, Leedy timbales. They never go on tour or on gigs. I use them only in the studio. They sound fantastic. Their brass shells still give the Leedy timbale the most phenomenal sound. Every serious Latin percussionist I know has a set of Leedy's hidden somewhere in their house! I got mine from a bass player friend of my Dad who had them in his basement for years and sold them to me for \$50. They were tarnished but I took them to a friend's machine shop and he buffed them back to new!

Sue Hadjopoulos is currently working with the Kit McClure Band on a project involving research, transcription, and recreation of the music of the "International Sweethearts of Rhythm", an all women swing band of the 1940s, to further the recognition and celebration of the history of women in jazz. Members of the Kit McClure Band have transcribed historical arrangements and compositions from the International Sweethearts of Rhythm's repertoire from 60 years ago. These arrangements have been painstakingly transcribed and brilliantly performed exactly like the Sweethearts but with modern recording techniques. The resulting recording is *The Sweethearts Revisited*. For decades, women musicians have been underrepresented and discredited in the recorded music industries. Our mission is to improve musical and recording experiences for women musicians, arrangers and composers, and to make the Sweethearts' music and contributions to jazz accessible to all music fans.

You can find out more about Sue at her website:  
[http://sue\\_hadjopoulos.tripod.com](http://sue_hadjopoulos.tripod.com)