



# JUST JAZZ

BY GENE SEYMOUR

## Sidemen Shine Behind the Spotlight

**I**F THE "SIDEMAN" in jazz were a movie actor, he would be one of those perennially familiar faces whose name tends to remain just beyond the reach of your tongue. You know his sound anywhere, especially if you're paying close and regular attention to the music. But he's not the leader. Maybe he's a candidate for best-supporting actor. But you wouldn't fit him for the big prize — no matter how good he is.

Which typifies the star-hokum folklore that suffuses our culture. Some of the finest musicians alive achieve varied levels of renown in "backup" roles. Some even become leaders in their own right, especially those who apprenticed under such titans as Miles Davis, Art Blakey and Betty Carter. Others become unsung or cult heroes.

Meanwhile, one wonders when it's going to dawn on even the savviest of jazz listeners that you don't have to be a leader of a band to be a most valuable player. "It's something that can't be easily perceived if you're in the audience," drummer Lewis Nash says of what makes a great sideman. "What I do, night after night, is help the people around me play their best, and you do this by helping them relax, give them something to respond to that makes them better and, in doing this, you raise the level of their game. Within the group that's playing, whether it's a trio or a big band, the musicians respect this [process]. It's something I try to put across to younger drummers."

Those drummers had better be paying attention. Nash, at 40, has the resume to make important everything he says on this subject. The Phoenix native is one of a handful of drummers whose versatility, agility and all-pro adaptability make him one of the most sought-after session players in the music business. Betty Carter taught him how to listen to the other people in the band, a

skill that's served him well in gigs with, among others, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, Branford Marsalis, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band.

The place to see and hear Nash truly glow, however, is any gig the Tommy Flanagan Trio plays. As one-third of Earth's mightiest piano ensembles, Nash props up with the great pianist Flanagan and bassist Peter Washington with impeccable timing and imperturbable drive. His solos don't bust loose from the trio's colloquy so much as carry the conversation to a higher level. He is scientist and swashbuckler, and makes both roles harmonious.

"When you're a drummer there's something about being in an environment where you hear all the other things [in a band] constantly," he says. "You always have to react and respond to what's going on with the bass player and the piano, both of which are rhythmic and harmonic forces. You're constantly hearing the whole picture and having to kind of embellish the whole thing. And each night I try to find something new to use for embellishment." He pauses. "That way, I don't bore myself. Or anyone else."

Nash has impressed so many people with his range and depth that they wonder why he doesn't record more often as a leader. There's only one album under his name, *Rhythm is My Business* (Evidence, 1993), and he has appeared live with his own group that features, as sidemen, pianist Mulgrew Miller and violinist Regina Carter. Nash would love to lead them into a recording studio and is prepared to give them as much time and space as he gets in a supporting role. "As a leader, you're calling certain shots, picking the repertoire, deciding who solos," Nash says. "But just as Duke Ellington proved...it only helps the group when you let your people shine as brightly as they can." ■

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