

## LEWIS NASH

### *Finessing That Beat*

By Paul Blair



**A**S A YOUNGSTER GROWING UP IN Phoenix, Lewis Nash did a little drumming, yes - but primarily in school bands and other local groups specializing in funk and R&B. Even as a broadcast journalism major at Arizona State University, he'd given little thought to the idea of making music his profession. So exactly what turned this son of the Southwest into one of New York's (and the world's) most admired and most in-demand percussionists?

"During my first couple of years in college, I really didn't know much about jazz history or the great jazz players," he told an interviewer, recalling that the only albums remotely connected with jazz in his own collection at that point were those featuring Ramsey Lewis, Quincy Jones and Grover Washington Jr. "The turning point came when one of my instructors found out that I'd never even *heard* of Art Blakey or Max Roach or Tony Williams." That academic made sure that Nash had the chance to hear favorite recordings by these and other notables. "I was told that my groove and feeling were already there. So maybe that's why people would deal with my lack of knowledge in other areas and just give me information."

As his sense of historical awareness grew and his drum chops developed, Nash welcomed any chance to back visiting stars passing through Phoenix: Sonny Stitt, Art Pepper, Barney Kessel, Lee Konitz and the like. Encouraged, he took a chance and moved to New York in 1981; toured with Betty Carter for four years; subsequently did lots of playing in groups led by Ron Carter, Branford Marsalis and J.J. Johnson; then spent a full decade as Tommy Flanagan's drummer.

Get Nash talking about some of his past employers and you're in for an extended and

insightful treat. He has tales to tell about Betty Carter's encouragement of young musicians (and the awe he felt when he saw how she could hold audiences in the palm of her hand); about playing for the first time with Oscar Peterson; about sight-reading unfamiliar big band arrangements during a Joe Henderson recording session; and about the lessons he's learned over the years, on bandstands and off them, from masters like Hank Jones, Jackie McLean, John Lewis, Milt Jackson, Sonny Rollins and Clark Terry.

On any of the with-Lewis-Nash recordings already in your collection, you can surely find much to admire about this drummer's work in support of his bandmates. For example, a favorites list might include his finesse with sticks, brushes and mallets throughout *Dedicated To Diz*, a 1992 live date credited to Slide Hampton & The Jazzmasters; and his deft, almost telepathic accompaniment on an uptempo 1993 Tommy Flanagan track called "Let's." Drummers can be - and too often are - the loudest and most distracting individuals on any bandstand. Lewis Nash never is.

These days, Nash is much in demand as a clinician and private teacher. He's also a member of Juilliard's jazz faculty. Yet he's unwilling to lay back, preferring instead to stay busy and accept performance and recording jobs with those artists whose work he likes, no matter where in the world those commitments take him. Heading off to Japan at press time, Nash said he hadn't yet decided who his pianist for his Vanguard week would be, noting that he tends to be quite picky when it comes to filling that chair. Already slated to play with him on those six nights, though, are saxophonist Steve Wilson, trumpeter Jeremy Pelt and bassist Peter Washington, his teammate for several years in the Flanagan trio.

For a musician who's contributed to at least 300 albums for other leaders, there are surprisingly few recordings available under his own name. After one 1989 project later issued domestically by Evidence, he didn't record again as a leader until *It Don't Mean A Thing*, a 2004 trio date for the Japanese M&I label on which he's heard with Washington, vibist Steve Nelson and pianist Jeb Patton. A follow-up entitled *Stompin' At The Savoy* (again on M&I, with Nelson and Washington) came out a year later. "Since these are imports," he notes, "they're somewhat pricey. But I'll probably have a few copies of each along at the gig."

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**Lewis Nash leads his hand-picked quintet at the Village Vanguard on June 20-25.**