

A lot of people don't like headphones, don't use them, but if you're in an enclosed booth, you almost have no choice.

"What I'll do is use one headphone and take the other off, or half-way off. In one ear I hear the headphone mix, in the other, myself: the natural sound of the drums. I really wish I could take the phones off completely."

For a jazz player in the studio for the first time, "the main thing is to get the sound in the headphones as comfortable as possible, so you're not thinking about the fact that you're isolated. After that, just try to play the way you always do—don't let being in the studio dictate how you play. In this music, everything depends on how you react. If you've got a sound-quality problem—say the bass is too tinny—or a balance problem, it just throws off your whole thing. You can't relax and play music. So get the headphone mix straight with the engineer right away."

Get your recorded sound straight, too—don't blindly trust the engineer. "Are the drums too far down in the mix? Too far upfront? This isn't pop, where the drums are mixed way upfront. Usually we'll play one song, then everyone'll go into the control room to listen while the engineer fine-tunes. The key is to get all the instruments balanced as close to life as possible. After that,

what goes to tape is pretty much the final product. Especially if you're going direct to two-track, where there's no room for multi-track mixing."

Sonic matters in hand, you can get down to playing. "Every bandleader's got different things that make him feel comfortable, his own little things he might ask. So with that in mind, I spend a lot of time working not just on chopbuilders and rudiments—though I do those too—but on musicality."

Sounds great, but how do you practice musicality? For Nash it's a matter of a hands-on, take-it-apart ransacking of jazz drumming history. "I'll put on a big band record and ask, 'How did Sonny Payne, how did Sam Woodard, shade, or kick, or do this particular thing here?' 'Why did Chick Webb set up this horn riff with that particular fill? Or play a complicated fill here and nothing but a bass-drum bomb there?' 'The trumpet player's using a mule and the drummer's switched to that cymbal—why? What I'm listening for are color, shading and dynamics: Those are the things that make music sound great, and that free you up to offer a completely different lick with maybe just a slight difference in touch."

"Recording, you need to be able to get to whatever it is the leader wants, and fairly quickly. You need to have enough knowledge so that if you try something and they say, 'No, let's try something else,' you can give them something else." You need to be able to translate *ragne requests into specific licks*. "Suppose a leader says, 'I want this piece to have a funky feel, but not two and four. And I don't want it busy...'" Lewis laughs: "People ask all kinds of stuff. For that one, I might do something like this"—and he sits down at the drums to play a spare, rolling, very funky New Orleans-ish 4/4.

While he doesn't have to be as multitalented as a pop or jingle drum—*[sunt'd on page 77]*

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[From page 77] mer—"In this music, people want you to sound like you"—Nash does need to adapt. "Say I know that a certain piano player tends to rush. What I'll do is play fills that hold it back." He plays a swinging dotted-quarter-note pattern on his ride cymbal but hits the snare loud on one and four: "See how that sits it right down? Whereas if you play eighth-note upbeats with someone who rushes, it's going to rush him even more."

An adept reader, Nash is given drum notation about half the time; otherwise, he works from a lead sheet or with no music at all. At the other extreme, he's sometimes asked to sight-read right to tape—for instance, on Ron Carter's score for the TV movie "A Gathering of Old Men." "Sight-reading doesn't scare me. It can actually be fun"—an adrenaline rush where you're simultaneously reading, playing and hearing the piece emerge.

"I could probably do half my sessions without any reading. But for that other half, it's crucial. I can get to the studio knowing that whatever they put in front of me, I can play. People come in with tunes whose form isn't 32 bars of 8-8-8-8; it's 15 bars of this, then a bar of 2/4, then a bar of 7/4... If you can't read, there's no way you can just sit down and play that." For non-reading drummers with a terror of notation, Nash knows only one cure: "Find yourself a good teacher—especially if you want to use it for work."

The most rehearsal Nash remembers getting for an album is two four-hour sessions; for most jazz recordings, "one four-hour rehearsal should be enough." Actual cutting rarely takes more than one six-hour day—two at the most, and two or three complete takes per song is more than enough. "What happens when the leader's still not happy after three takes? 'Then,' says Lewis, "there is nonverbal communication."

Despite its brevity, or because of it, the jazz session can be exhausting: "You can't really relax, you're always conscious of time. I probably have more fun playing live. But I bet that if jazz record budgets were big, like pop budgets, recording would be more fun. You wouldn't have to worry about getting this done right now. If we had a week...wow, I've never had that."

"But we've gotten so used to doing it this way, if we had a whole week we probably wouldn't know what to do with it!"



LEWIS NASH NAILS THE SESSION

Getting jazz drumming onto tape: a new star explains how

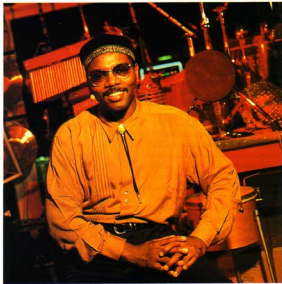
By Tony Scherman

AFTER A FOUR-YEAR STINT WITH Betty Carter, 18 months with Branford Marsalis, concert tours with Sonny Rollins, Art Farmer and Tommy Flanagan, and a stack of three dozen albums with Flanagan, Don Pullen, Clark Terry, Ron Carter and lots of others, Lewis Nash has emerged as one of the best young drummers in jazz. Though he's just released his first album as a leader, *Rhythm Is My Business*, the biggest part of Nash's business is as a hired gun, a freelancer who can be counted on to swing a small jazz group with fire and subtlety. He tours constantly, but more and more of his calls are for recording sessions, and at 32 he's a grizzled studio hand. How does a master craftsman tackle the job of playing drums in a jazz session?

"Nowadays," says Nash, "in order to get the best sound separation, everyone's in booths and we depend on headphones. That is a big difference—the biggest, really—from live playing. I'm dealing with the same challenges as live: Interacting with the soloist, hooking up with the bass player. But getting the same immediacy as onstage can be really difficult."

"A lot of what happens in jazz requires physical closeness: just being able to hear the natural sounds immediately, without having to depend on an electronic signal.

And making eye contact, not having a wall in the way. In the studio, you just don't feel physically close to the other players. Plus, the sound is different: You don't hear that way onstage, right up in your ears like that.



Photograph: Jennie Miles