

Impressions, opinions, and long-lasting experiences.

John Colpitts on Carmine Appice

Rock 'n' roll, especially in the pre-corporate '60s, has always attracted some larger-than-life personalities. And in the drum world they don't get much bigger than Vanilla Fudge's mustachioed slugger, Carmine Appice, who's squeezed more fun and adventure out of gigs with Jeff Beck, Rod Stewart, and others than most of us could dream up in a lifetime.

After finding himself on an unusual gig with the *MD* Hall of Famer, John Colpitts—a prolific player whose rhythmic voice permeates many corners of the indie/art-rock world—found himself thinking long and hard about the at-times controversial musician, and he arrived at some unexpected conclusions.

My appreciation of Carmine Appice didn't come easily. Vanilla Fudge sounded robustly melodramatic, even while their instrumental prowess was undeniable. I fell prey to the fallacy of naturalism; I sought an ill-defined authenticity in my musicians, and anything that carried a scent of ginned-up showbiz and canned glamour was discarded immediately. Vanilla Fudge sounded like a repackaged version of psychedelia to my ears. It wasn't made by guys in a deranged LSD cult like 13th Floor Elevators. It wasn't Jimi Hendrix or the Beatles. The Fudge didn't even write their own hits!

In the late '80s my relationship to Carmine Appice was muted. I always lived in rural areas, so I never caught wind of a clinic. His drumming books were on the fringes of my consciousness, but I wasn't aware of Appice's wider influence. I certainly didn't realize that if I was attempting to sound like Bonham, I was actually approximating sounds from the Appice palette.

Cut to a few years later. I'm living in Brooklyn and trying to carve out a niche for myself as a performer. My band Oneida is grinding it out in the tiny clubs I still frequent. Experimental pioneers are my touchstones. Drummers like Devo's Alan Myers, Pere Ubu's Scott Krauss, and Television's Billy Ficca share space with my adoration of Keith Moon, John Bonham, Tony Williams, and Billy Cobham. Some of us remember that it was hard to see footage of vintage live performances in the late '90s, because it was either unavailable or held by a few archivists. But on our tours Oneida would sometimes stumble upon a cache of live rock videos at the homes of local bands. Wolf Eyes' Aaron Dilloway showed us a 1969 Alice Cooper Band performance; Matt Sweeney pointed to Dr.

Hook's bizarre drunken transcendence on Musikladen.

We talk a lot about technique and equipment in the pages of *Modern Drummer*, because it's important and gratifying. But it's hard to quantify spirit. It's tough to explain why musicians with self-taught technique still transport millions of people. Spirit may be an analogue to what Tom Wolfe called "the right stuff" when he tried to explain certain test pilots' ability to survive one of the world's most dangerous

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jobs. There are some really tremendous technicians out there who just do not communicate, in poet Dylan Thomas's words, "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower." So I was still trying to sort all that out when I discovered the legendary Vanilla Fudge performance of "You Keep Me Hanging On" from The Ed Sullivan Show in 1968.

I had no context or expectation before I saw the clip. The camera starts with a wide angle on the band, dressed in the late-'60s sartorial puff-pastry style that's perfectly accompanied by the three giant backlit screens of Joshua Light Show-esque pulsating psychedelic chaos. Organist Mark Stein starts a glacial, descending Hammond organ phrase. The band looks

awkward yet self-possessed. A low-angle shot on guitarist Vince Martell makes him look dwarfed by the Marshall stacks behind him, his hair an immobile helmet perched atop a florid map of facial hair. Bassist Tim Bogert seems like a professor dressed in hippie clothes, his face a rictus of pure agony during his backing vocals, his collar two talons of orange drooping down the front of his shirt. Stein wears a large white handkerchief around his neck and flails his hands widely with a giant, inappropriate (to the lyrics) smile plastered on his face. Appice might not look any less silly than the rest of the band, but he wears his red velvet jacket and untied pink handkerchief with aplomb.

The spectacle is dated, yet it's undeniably a performance for the ages. It's a rare document of a band truly embodying showbiz clichés with enough irrational commitment that they "shoot the moon" and end up landing in a place of sublimity. I watched this document for the first few moments with a dismissive laugh, but quickly this laughter turned into awe. This performance is a master class in what it means to rock.

Rock in this case is an untamed energy. It's strange; it's brutal and somewhat ham-fisted. But like the subtle ballet of a well-oiled NFL offense, there's a grace and inevitability to the performance. It points toward virility in a demonstratively abstract way. The band is singing about the agony of a confused relationship, but the members are also clearly confused. Stein's smiles and Martell's un-germane "Come on, sock it to me now!" clash with the song's content. More than anything else, this performance is a celebration of torture, or a paean to masochism. They flip the song on its head and make it absurd. But it's Appice's cymbal grabs, stick twirls, and dramatic delivery that lead the charge. I may be a drummer, but this is Appice's band, and his moment.

In Appice's new memoir, *Stick It!*, he talks about having a panic attack when the elevator operator to the Sullivan studio theater offhandedly tells him that 50 million people will be tuning into the performance. But if there's ever a moment where a band rises to a critical occasion,

it's here. Appice writes that following this performance, Vanilla Fudge's already successful debut album sells another 250,000 copies within the week. Appice, at the peak of his fame, avails himself of every willing and damaged groupie that crosses his path. To be honest, even in the context of the gag-inducing *The Dirt* or *Walk This Way*, the book is shocking and often descends into a depraved moral vacuum. It's hedonism at its darkest and most abject. We're asked to witness that now-infamous mud shark incident with Led Zeppelin at Seattle's Edgewater Hotel to an atomic degree.

As I plowed through the stories in *Stick It!* I began to wonder why this was the portrait that Appice wanted to share with us. If you wanted to find wisdom behind this master of the drums, you'd be disappointed. But you might find exactly what you'd expect from a rock demigod in a Fu Manchu mustache who cavorted on tour in the '80s with Rod Stewart in a loosely organized rabble of band and crew called the Sex Police.

There is no moral currency in playing the drums well; however, a high level of performance represents a primal energy, which is exciting, which suggests the impulse to life and, of course, sexuality. There are many ways this attraction can be exploited, and throughout the course of *Stick It!* we're shown a guy who exploited his attraction to its bitter end. Aspiring technicians and musical types might not find everything they're looking for in this book, but then again, there's that intangible Appice spirit, which is difficult to extract from a book, and which illuminates the Fudge, Cactus, and all the great bands and performances the drummer has driven over the course of his amazing career.

But I'd like to finish the thread in what I hope is understood to be a celebration of Appice and his musical spirit. Last year I spent a number of weeks at Rikers Island, teaching percussion to inmates with Amy Garapic, Carson Moody, and Matt Evans, of the percussion trio TIGUE, for Make Music New York. Rikers is just as horrifying and blandly institutional as you might imagine. It's an alien and destructive place with a chaotic energy that radiates just beneath the surface of every interaction. The Make Music New York teachers used congas and djembes, generously donated by Remo, and during our weekly classes with a handful of women inmates, tried to prepare them for an in-house performance that would launch the Make Music New York Festival. Our performance would be closed to the public and exclusive to an audience of female inmates. As the show date approached, we

were told there was a small chance that Carmine Appice would be joining us. We taught the drummers his unreleased piece "Urban Jungle" and worked hard on the rhythms and on soloing concepts.

When the day finally came and Carmine stood in front of women who had no sense of his legacy, his charisma hit the room like a wave. He leapt to his feet, started clapping out the groove, and within seconds had a roomful of inmates stomping and singing along.

It was a revelation. I was witnessing a

performer who could transform a crowd by just clapping. As a member of the djembe corps behind him, I tried to elevate my performance to attend to his magnetism. Though it's an overused cliché, he transported us. We were not on Rikers Island. We were witnessing a great performer, but we were also witnessing ourselves.

Rikers is a desolate and forgotten place where warmth and human spirit are in short supply. Appice opened the walls and brought some love into the place. This is his legacy.



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