

Rhythm 1995

It's Saturday the 20th of May, Cup Final day, but football is the last thing on my mind. I'm in the Kensington Hilton hotel with Rhythm lensman James Cumpsty and Ian Croft, one of the organisers of the event we're here to cover, and although the match is on the telly we don't even notice as Rideout scores the winner for Everton. No, we have far bigger things to worry about than a piffling game of football.

It's all too easy in this job to become desensitised to meeting one's heroes, but the prospect of spending a weekend with the four stars of Drums In The Bush carries with it an exhilarating and refreshing sense of awe--these people are all bonafide superstars in one way or another.

The schedule seems simple enough; today we take photos and do an interview with the four drummers; tomorrow there's an interview with Radio One which I've been permitted to sit in on, and then it's off to Shepherds Bush for the gig itself. It all sounds unproblematic, but with four of the biggest names in percussion in the world in the same room, I can't help thinking that something's got to go wrong. And then there's the fact that at least one of them takes great delight in giving journalists a hard time...

Initially the arrangement was that everyone would meet in the bar in order to become acquainted before getting down to business. Everyone, however, has turned into me alone. James has gone to hire a conference room to use as a studio, while Ian has had to drive home to get a vital peice of hardware he forgot. I'm not on my own for long though, as the first two drummers arrive along with IMP's Pete Crispin, Ian's co-organiser.

Bernard 'Pretty' Purdie is looking exactly as he should; were he wearing anything else he just wouldn't be the same man. The jacket, the tie, the hat, the smile...Oh yes, this, you must understand, is the funkiest man who ever lived, and I've never felt as cool as I do sitting at the same table as him.

Next to the ebullient Purdie, David Garibaldi seems more than a little laid back. As Bernard flamboyantly answers my facile (but long pent up) questions about Aretha Franklin, the Beatles and the 4,000 sessions he's reputed to have played on, the ex-Tower Of Power groove scientist listens without comment, allowing himself the briefest of smiles now and then. Images of David Carradine in Kung-Fu come to mind every time I look at him--giving away nothing, but full of wisdom. I have to stop myself from laughing.

Next to arrive is the Chili Peppers' Chad Smith, who is of course wearing shades. While this would be deemed more than a little passe were it anyone else, Chad's mad so it doesn't matter. He's also incredibly tall; I tell him he's bigger than he looks on telly and he looks at me in a 'Yeah, right' sort of way.

And then Ginger walks in. Instantly he's the centre of attention. He radiates that rock'n' roll aura that no-one seems quite so able to generate any more. He looks like as legend, he even smokes like a legend. He and Bernard, going back a long was as they do, get on particularly well, and the bar reverberates to that weird fraternity that only drummers seem to have. I am, in a word, starstruck.

James returns having set up he 'studio'. It's in a part of the hotel under construction, a fat that Chad finds particularly amusing as a bannister comes away in his hand. The four drummers seem a bit reluctant to have their pictures taken under these rather bizarre (but undoubtedly R'n'R) circumstances, but hey, put a camera in front of Chad Smith and Bernard Purdie and try and stop them enjoying themselves.

After the photo session it's back to the bar for the most out of control interview I've ever conducted. It becomes apparent that getting anyone to stay on subjects such as Drums In The Bush, music, drumming or anything else along those lines is going to be nigh impossible as Chad opens the proceedings.

"Let's talk about cricket. I want to talk about cricket," he says. Fair enough, we'll talk about cricket.

"I still don't understand what a test match is," says David.

Ian Croft (who has returned, with multi-clamp) is more concerned with keeping things in the drumming vein than I am. "Not now, guys. It's like the World Series."
"It's like a test of power, if you like," adds Ginger, flicking a monumental stack of ash from his fag.

I can't resist asking the assembled Americans why the World Series only applies to America.

"Yeah, it's not like your World Series where just you play..." Ian laughs.
Ginger finishes his sentence: "...And then declare yourselves champions."
Mock offence is taken, although Chad has to admit that we have a point. "Yeah, if all the different countries played then it would be a proper World Series," he concedes.

"Then the Cubans would win," points out David, drily.

"C'mon David, you're supposed to be helping me," Chad pleads.

"Drums In The Bush is a drum test match," says Ginger, at last coming round to the subject of the day. Taking this opportunity to do my job, I ask whether everyone really sees it like that--a contest.

"No way! Are you kidding?" exclaims Chad. "If the kids are coming to see a chopfest, they should go to a Dennis Chambers clinic."

"We've purposely avoided all that," adds Ian.

Okay, so no-one's out to prove their technical excellence, but are they perhaps going to be trying to outfunk each other?

"Against Bernard? Are you nuts!" cries Chad. Bernard whoops appreciatively. "Whenever I've done these things, drummers in general seem to be less competitive than other musicians," Chad continues. "They hang more, it's more of a club, there's more camaraderie. Guitar players and other musicians, their coolness thing is chicks and stuff, but with every drummer I meet there's always a bond."

Ginger sums up his feelings on the matter: "It's because our job is to make the other musicians sound good. A band is only as good as its drummer."
Pete Crispin enters the conversation: "This is the first event like this that IMP have ever done; we're going to follow it up with a guitar one, and I really don't think there'll be half as many people attending, with the same size venue and the same calibre of players."

"Drummers are a load of weirdos," states Chad.

"It's the only chance they get to be together in a room without being ridiculed," Ian enthuses. "I've put on clinics all over the world and drummers are much more passionate

about this sort of thing than anyone else."
Why?

"Because we're not threatened; we generally know what we're good at or what we're not good at. It's a passion, it comes from the heart."

Now I've got them talking drums, I don't intend to let them stop. I ask how everyone's planning to approach tomorrow's show.

"Personally, I'm going to look on this more as a performance than a clinic," claims Bernard. "My thing is that I think a lot of energy is going to be there, and people don't know what to expect, yet they're expecting the best of everything. So I'd like to keep the energy flowing, and for me it doesn't mean that I have to play for 45 minutes. I have fun with what I do, so I give a little bit, ask a little, take a little, move it around, but prepare them for the next thing. I think that the high is going to happen throughout, and everyone is going to end up doing their own little thing. I feel really good about it."

Chad's modesty stops him from going into quite the same depth. "I think the only reason they brought me here with these guys is to be in the company of three of the legends of drumming. I must only be here for comic relief, so I'm going to tell a few jokes, play my little funk things and pas the baton on to Ginger."

So what's Ginger going to be doing?
"Dropping it."

"Oh no, now we're talking about relay!" Chad cries, throwing his hands in the air. I ask Ginger again how he's going to be approaching the big day.
"Fucked if I know."

Er...right. David, Drums In The Bush clinic or event?

"I'll probably do some of both. I'll probably talk about some of my playing philosophy. I'll play a lot, but then I'll also teach a few things about what I do. Ultimately that's all you can do--tell people what you do. We can't really talk about it too much, we've just got to do it. I don't think we want to send a message of competitiveness, that's certainly not what we want to leave with people."

And then the conversation returns to sport and the interview rapidly degenerates. We all head for the Japanese restaurant next door. Food is eaten, drinks are drunk and a good time is had by all. Unbelievably, I have to talk Chad out of going to bed straight after dinner. A bit of emotional blackmail along the lines of, 'If you don't stay up until the bar closes at lease, you'll totally destroy my faith in rock'n'roll' soon sorts things out and he makes it until about one o'clock in the morning. I remind myself that he does have a gig the next day, and consign my 'trashing hotel room with rock star' expectations to the fantasy bin.

Sunday. The day. Drums In The Bush day. I have a hangover. The first thing on today's agenda is Radio One. The young journalist who doesn't know what he's let himself in for tells me it's okay to tape the interview. The piece is apparently not actually about the event, but about how drummers in general seem to be getting the short end of the stick, what with Oasis, the Stone Roses and Skunk Anansie all having got rid of their respective backbones recently. If I thought Ginger was funny with me, this guy must wish he hadn't been born.

"I've done my bit, I'm going to get stoned now," snorts Ginger, minutes into the interview. "Can I just say that you're the worst reporter I've ever met. I hope that's instilled you with confidence for the rest of the interview." I can't help feeling sorry for the hapless journo, but to his credit, he gets more talk of drumming out of them than I did.

"Chad, do you think drummers get bad press?" he asks.

"Absolutely. For the Red Hot Chili Peppers it's always been that we don't really play, we're just the guys that jump around with socks on their dicks," replies Chad, unintentionally expanding on the issue. "The press don't look beyond the entertainment value of the band, and therefore we weren't taken seriously for a long time. But people that know our music and take us seriously are the sort of people we want to like the band."

"Bernard, how do you think drummers are treated by the press and other musicians?"

"Well, well, well," says Bernard, sinking back into his chair. "In most instances they get the shaft. We've been getting the shaft for many, many years. I think the first thing that happened that gave us an opportunity to be out front was looking at guys like Sid Catlett and Gene Krupa; they opened the door for us to be out front. And the guys that you see here in this room, we've all stuck our foot in our mouth; we've also known that we are band leaders; we also know that without us those bands would have sucked."

"David, do musicians recognise that a drummer's as important as anyone else?"

"The drummer is the second class citizen of the band. When you go into a recording studio, the most important part of the record is the drum track, and the drummer gets to do his part once while everyone else gets to spend three fucking hours overdubbing all these old parts and everything else, and then they expect us to come in and do everything first or second take. There are millions of stories about drummers who lost their gig in the studio because they weren't doing it fast enough. So each one of us can sit here and tell you the different ideas of ours that have appeared on all these different records."

And then the journo loses it a bit and asks one of the dumbest and most out of context questions I've ever heard. "What you you think of Ringo Starr?"

"Whaddya mean what do I think of Ringo Starr?" retorts David. "He's a great guy."

The Shepherds Bush Empire is a suitable extravagant venue for today's extravaganza. After a surprisingly painless soundcheck the doors are opened and the crowd let in. There are a few familiar faces around" Harbans Srih, Steve White and his brother Alan (who's just joined Oasis, ironically) Owen If, Peter Lockett, Kevin Morris, Carol Steele (over here with David Letterman), Mark Mondesir...

First on is Bernard, accompanied by whizzkid bassist Mike Mondesir--I have to say that this is what I've been looking forward to most of all. Taking the stage like a king, Purdie gets busy; he struts, he jokes, he gives it that Southern style until you can smell it in the air. His vibbe is definitive, and he rolls effortlessly through every style in his arsenal: funk, swing, latin, a blues feel... the Purdie shuffle. Andyone who hasn't witnessed the Purdie shuffle played by Purdie himself hasn't properly witnessed the Purdie shuffle.

What's surprises me is his technical ability. I'd always assumed that Purdie was all about feel and that his technique was very much secondary, but clearly he's never been given the chance to truly burn in the studio. The way he moves is incredible, and his hands and feet articulate every nuance as if he was born to do this. The house is brought down, and this is only the first act...

Before David goes on, I ask Pete Crispin to explain to me the corporate thinking behind Drums In The Bush. IMP (International Music Publications) are the distribution company who deal with, amongst others, DCI videos in this country. "Mainly the whole thing is so

people will come down and have a cracking good time," he says. "But I also want people to realise that these videos are available, and that the guys who do them are serious about them. They are very educational, and actually hearing it from the horse's mouth is going to do them the world of good. And if that's what Chad Smith, Ginger Baker and the other two think, then I'm sure all other drummers will feel the same way."

David approaches his set from a different angle to Bernard. Whereas the latter didn't claim to be giving anything more than a breathtaking performance, David's going to try and teach us something. After handing out loads of pairs of sticks, he begins by explaining the basic philosophies behind drumming and rhythm in that hypnotic, dry voice, and then he starts building. He takes his wide-eyed audience through several groove and fill ideas, each as tasty as the last; I don't think there can be one person in the place that doesn't understand what he's doing. This is consummate education as we're taken through what feels like ten years of tuition in less than an hour.

The end result is a solo using all of the bits and pieces he's previously explained. It's a latin-fusion type thing, but for once the syrupy nature of the music doesn't matter--David has connected, and now that you feel like you know him, he could play the spoons and it would still sound awesome.

Chad Smith takes a very simple and very effective route to drumming nirvana--he beats a zillion shades of crap out of his kit. As well as accompanying DAT's of the two Chili Peppers classics 'Give It Away' and 'Suck My Kiss', he also premieres a new track off the forthcoming album ("That's the psychedelic mess we've gotten into"). And he doesn't just play this stuff as it is on the record, he absolutely pulverises it. 'Give It Away' is particularly impressive, with some unbelievable fills and beats phatter than a fried lard sandwich...with butter.

He's a big man, and I wouldn't want to be his drum kit. He doesn't just hit cymbals, he reaves his way through them; he hits them so hard and so fast you don't even see his sticks make contact. And of course, Chad being Chad, there's also a healthy dose of comedy, but it's probably best not to go into that.

This is indeed the powerful side of funk, and something of a surprise highlight to those who have never seen him perform before.

In the break before Ginger takes his turn, I manage to grab Steve White. A happy man indeed, Steve found out only hours ago that Stanley Road, the new Paul Weller album, went straight in at number one.

"Obviously the usual faces that you see at drum clinics are not here today," he shouts over the din. "Maybe the drumming's a bit too musical for them. Bernard Purdie was absolutely wonderful. Three of my absolute heroes--Bernard Purdie, David Garibaldi and Ginger Baker--and Chad Smith was a revelation, he was absolutely brilliant. And today we found out we're number one as well; what a nice way to spend our new found knocking-Take-That-off-the-topness."

Weller himself is actually here with Steve, and I bump into him in the bar. What on earth is he doing at a drumming event?

"Well, I'm here to see Ginger mainly, and Bernard," he replies. Of course. But, much as he's enjoying himself, he does have one complaint. "Steve should be playing too. He's the best drummer in the world, isn't he?"

"I haven't played drums in this country for more years than I care to remember, so I'll just welcome myself back by playing some drums." Ginger Baker is here and surprisingly lucid.

"Basically, my religion is time, and time is four." And that pretty much sums up what Ginger does for the next three quarters of an hour. Wicked tribal rhythms, weird jazz licks and thundering bass drums, all with those little idiosyncrasies everyone knows so well. He shows us a little pattern he learnt recently, a sort of exercise in time. He asks us whether we want him to play or talk. He pays tribute to Phil Seamen: "Without a doubt the greatest drummer this country has ever produced." He's a geezer.

Although some have said that Ginger is an odd choice to headline, by the time he's done it all makes sense. Were there a Hall Of Fame for British drummers, he'd be up there with Bonham and Moon. He may not be the most contemporary or hip player of the four, but he's certainly the most revered.

To finish, all four drummers take the stage together for a brief but deeply intense quartet workout. This is where the point is proven--drumming is a universal language to such an extent that four players from totally different backgrounds can get together without rehearsal and make the coolest, funkier noise. I can't even begin to describe it, except to say that it worked, right off the bat. An atom-splitting finale to a nuclear-powered day.

Apres gig, the feeling backstage is congratulatory and somewhat euphoric. Ginger has found himself a corner in which to do his thing, Bernard is hugging and shaking hands with everyone, David is talking more than he has all weekend, and Chad looks wasted. Wasted but happy. There are plenty of people around, and it's obvious that the day has been a great success.

The first person I manage to pin down for comment is Chad Smith's wife. "Drummers are a really wild bunch," she says. "My husband was as goofy and wild as he always is. My first sexual experience was to Cream, so Ginger was really cool too. Yeah, it was great; drummers are great."

Bernard is fair bursting with excitement when I catch up with him. He's been meeting people and signing magazines since he left the stage, but it seems like he's never going to slow down.

"I think it was absolutely fabulous," he gushes. "It really put the icing on the cake. Not only did you have four entirely different people, but you had one whole thought, one main theme, and it worked. Everybody was happy. The theme was fun."

And who should turn up at this point but the wonderful Carol Steele. Hobnobbing with the stars or what?

"I'm more than a spectator because for me, it's like coming and getting food, you know?" smiles Carol. "I'm over here doing some gigs, I'm in England doing my thing, and then I hear that these guys are going to be here. It's like going to a gas station and getting a fill-up. I gotta work tomorrow, and I'm ready to work now. I'm a gut player; I have my technique but I'm not a heady player, I've never had my head in books, I'm not that kind of player. So I just come, I'm open, and now I'm filled up."

Bernard continues: "How do you describe joy? Just super...all over..." Uh oh. "I'm too tired to think right now. I enjoyed myself immensely just watching and listening to the others."

Chad joins us. How's it going?

"Great, I got a glass of wine, and I'm feeling a lot better now than I did before. I really enjoyed Bernard's section of the show; it was very informative, very funky, it was really cool. I think that set the whole thing off really well. I thought Ginger was hilarious. And

David's was real clinic; this guy can do that like no one else--I found myself mesmerised by his whole thing, and all the kids were like, 'Wow!'"

"You should have seen their faces," says Bernard. "I was at the back and I had to walk up and down the aisle, I had to, nobody was moving, they were mesmerised. Dynamite!"

And speaking of David ,here he is now. David, talk to me.

"It was a great day. There were a lot of different playing styles. From beginning to end it was really cool, you saw four unique people, which is what's supposed to happen with music--you're not supposed to have all the same drummer. It was really great to show people what you can do with the instrument. But everyone complemented each other at the same time, it was very musical, everyone used a lot of the same principles to make their music work."

Drums In The Bush turned out to be exactly what as intended by both the organisers and the musicians involved. This wasn't, as Chad said, a chopfest of any sort, because the four drummers were chosen for the heart behind their playing rather than the head. The inclusion of Garibaldi added enough of a clinic vibe to cater for anyone there hoping to be fed some information, and it make an ironic break from the mindblowing cerebral underload of the rest of the day. Drums In The BUsh was all about music in the truest sense; people came to get funky and that's exactly what happened. It was even better than the World Series, whatever the hell that is.