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When it comes to all things percussion, Bill Schmidt is in that discussion!

By CP Christopher Peppas



If you haven't heard of or seen Bill Schmidt, it's likely because he suffers the fate of all good drummers. That is, when they're doing their job well, they tend to go unnoticed.

Drummers set their kits up in the back on most stages and are tucked away behind an array of gear. There they sit, in the pocket, setting the table with a beat that all the other instruments and vocals are carefully layered over.

All the sidemen in the rest of the rhythm section further block the audience's view of the drummer. And then, the frontman/vocalist usually parks him or herself smack dab in the middle. The drummer might as well be wearing camouflage.

Drummers, as a rule, won't stick it to you or give you the brush-off. Neither will they get all hi-hat on you. Bill Schmidt sticks to the bass-ics and has a flair for the snare which was shared to me by his friend, Tom, and his other friend, Tom.

Now that we've gotten all the puns out of the way, let's get back to Bill's story.

Bill Schmidt just loves to play drums. And he has loved the instrument since the first grade. He spent the next four years asking for a drum set. Finally, for Christmas when he was ten, his folks got him a snare and his first real sticks.

Prior to that, he had taken a couple of scrap pieces of wood from his dad's workshop and carved a pair just so he could bang out some rhythms. "I just have always liked the drums," Bill said in his recent interview.

Like just about every Baby Boomer who grew up in the 60s and 70s, the British Invasion inspired kids to put together a band and "play music covers of The Beatles, The Stones...all rock stuff," Schmidt said. He knew then that playing music would always be a part of his life.

Schmidt spent his summers in the 70s playing in a wedding band. "I didn't know what to do when they called for a bossa or a ballad," Bill said. "I just played my way through it."

Still in the mode of Classic Rock of the era, Prog Rock groups like ELP (Emerson, Lake & Palmer) and the like garnered his attention.

A pivotal point in his development as a drummer and, specifically, playing jazz came in the mid-70s when he saw Buddy Rich “Live at The Top!”

Buddy Rich was considered by most as being a Mount Rushmore of One when it comes to playing the skins. Drug addiction plagued some of his best years, but he was unquestionably the one everyone else sought to emulate.

“My jaw was on the ground,” Bill said. “I couldn’t believe anyone could play like that.” He started to immerse himself into Bebop and icons like Miles Davis and Chick Corea. “I listened to jazz for decades before I actually got to play it,” he added. “All that listening is good, but you’ve got to practice or you’ll lose your chops.”

Some fifteen years ago, Schmidt went to see a trio that included Ben Hans on drums, Michael Arnold on guitar and Hal Miller on the double bass and was totally hooked. Ben was cautioning Bill when he told him: “You gotta be careful if you catch the jazz bug,” Hans warned. “There is no cure.”

“I took drum lessons from Hans for a little over a year,” Bill said. “It was like he turned on a firehose. I learned so much. It set the foundation for the eponymous Bill Schmidt Jazz Quartet, which, in 2019, grabbed a nomination for a WAMI (Wisconsin Area Music Industry) Award.

“I still don’t know who nominated and it is an honor just to be nominated.”

Bill Schmidt is also part of Standard Issue, a trio that features Sue Russell on vocals and Jeffrey Robert Michael Stoll. They perform at Hon-E-Kor Golf Club, the barree in Thiensville, various assisted living facilities and at Ten Chimneys among other venues.

When he isn’t gigging, Bill is a regular participant in jams in Milwaukee and the West Bend/Slinger/Jackson area. He has performed on the tubs on all three of Sue Russell’s CDs in the last four years.

“I would never have known all the terrific people that I’ve met through music.” Schmidt admitted.

“I couldn’t have done this without the level of support my wife (Ann) gives me. She spurs me to go on.” The plan is for Bill to retire at the end of this year and devote more time to playing.

Do you see him now?

