

# CREDITS

## THE ROOTS OF ROCK DRUMMING

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# FOREWORD

The story of this book is as much (or more) about “the ones that got away” as it is about the drummers who we were fortunate enough to be able to talk to. Giants like Chris Colombo, “Panama” Francis, Connie Kay, Gary Chester, Benny Benjamin, Al Jackson Jr., Zigaboo Modeliste, James Black, Clyde Stubblefield and Jabo Starks all played a key role in setting the tone for generations of drummers, and could not be included in this book for one reason or another.

But where we may not have had the opportunity to interview any of these giants, there are points along the way where just about all of them are referenced by the drummers who we did get together with to help us tell this story. It is my hope that reading and watching the interviews in *The Roots of Rock Drumming* will make you curious enough to delve deeper into the evolution of rock drumming—and rock music in general—than you may have up until now.

The styles that came to be known as “rock’n’roll” and “rock” developed directly out of the African-American “jump blues” and gospel music of the post-World War II era. The overarching influence in jump blues—the small-group, shuffle-driven, blues-drenched music of the late ‘40s and ‘50s—was Louis Jordan, with Chris Columbus his most important drummer. It is important to see that rock’n’roll did not spring out of thin air, but was a product of African-American artists like Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry, who simply redirected the R&B they had always played and pointed it toward a teenage market; and white artists like Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Buddy Holly, who had grown up listening avidly to blues, rhythm and blues, and gospel. In many ways, the distinctions between these African-American styles and “rock’n’roll” were marketing conveniences. Elvis would have been the first to admit it, and in fact freely did.

The point about the influence of the gospel music of the black Baptist church on rock, rhythm and blues, and on all American music—from jazz to pop to country music—is something that cannot be overstated. In many ways, the rhythmic feels associated with all American popular music and much of jazz, as well as the singing styles associated with American music, are drenched in gospel singing. If the reader comes away from this book a little bit more curious about how this dynamic worked, and goes back to discover Bessie Griffin, the Soul Stirrers, and Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes, then we will have accomplished something very important.

**Paul Siegel**

**New York City  
June 2013**

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Roots of Rock Drumming*! The genesis of this project goes back to the early 2000s, when Paul Siegel and Rob Wallis at Hudson Music partnered with Steve Smith to create a documentary that would tell the story of rock'n'roll drumming and its origins. To bring this story to life, they began interviewing many of the great drummers who played on pivotal rock records from the 1950s and '60s. An incredible amount of raw material was collected over a three-year stretch, but as can sometimes happen with long-term projects of this nature, schedules changed, priorities shifted, and the documentary was eventually put on hold.

Around the same time period—and totally by coincidence—I had begun my own exploration into the origins of American popular music. Initially, the goal was to understand more about the classic drumming styles I was playing with my band, Royal Crown Revue. But once I began meeting the pioneering drummers who had created these styles, I realized that their incredible contributions had for the most part been forgotten or ignored. It became my passion to share their stories with drummers of today, as well as the many innovations they created on the drumset that most of us unknowingly reproduce every time we sit down to play.

When I relocated my base of operations to New York City in 2010, I began spending more time with Rob, Paul, Steve, and Hudson's senior drum editor, Joe Bergamini. Within a very short time, we realized we had a mutual fascination with the subject matter, and when they asked if I would be interested in coming aboard as editor, I accepted immediately. *The Roots of Rock Drumming* was back in business!

Rather than release a full-blown documentary, it was decided that we would present the project in book form, accompanied by a DVD that included clips from many of the original interviews. In trying to organize and present the enormous amount of raw material that had been gathered, we first had to step back and ask ourselves a series of questions:

## **Why present this material in the first place?**

The simple answer to this question is: "This is where we all come from." Just about any style of contemporary drumming that incorporates a steady backbeat—including pop, funk, metal, country, hip-hop, reggae, and gospel—can trace its roots to the early rock of the '50s and '60s, and to the work of these innovative players. Our message to drummers of today: If you want to be a better and more creative player, then it behooves you to learn about your musical past.

Another of our goals in presenting this book was to preserve a legacy that is quickly disappearing. Since we first conducted these interviews a decade ago, a handful of our subjects have passed away. In the not-too-distant future, all the creators of this music that is so much a part of our everyday musical lives will be gone. As such, we felt it was important—imperative, really—to document these drummers' lives, and get the story "from the horse's mouth."

## **How do we define the term "roots" as applied to rock drumming?**

By rock's "roots," we are referring to a period of American popular music that began at the tail end of the 1940s. If you listen to recordings from the period, you can hear certain jazz and R&B drummers beginning to add rhythmic innovations that made the resulting music distinctly different from every pop style that had come before. These innovations included: a) a heavy backbeat on two and four that lasted all the way through a song, b) a "flattening out" of the swung eighth-note pulse that had been at the core of all popular music since the early part of the 20th century, and c) a style of playing fills that was based in sixteenth notes (as opposed to triplets), and that resulted in a cymbal crash on beat one (as opposed to beat four). Records that included these innovations were some of the first to be termed "rock'n'roll."

By the mid-1960s, rock drumming had diversified in an incredible variety of ways, with many players laying their own individual feels and vocabulary over the basic feel. Although these branches of the tree were often given different titles—"rockabilly," "soul," "funk"—they all maintained the same basic rhythmic elements that we associate with rock (backbeats, straight eighths, etc.).

## **The Interviewees**

In deciding who to interview, we started by listening to the records that included the technical innovations described above. Then we set out to find the drummers who had played on these recordings, and ask them in detail about their experiences. In addition to gathering some great stories, a big part of our mission was to analyze each player's particular style; and to gain a better understanding of why they made the musical choices they did on these iconic recordings. Toward that end, Steve developed a basic set of questions that we tried to ask every interviewee: Who were your influences? What inspired you to play differently than the drummers who came before you? What were some of the challenges you faced in recording the new style of rock'n'roll? Were you influenced by other rock drummers while you were making your mark?

We were also interested in finding out how each drummer defined himself: Did he consider himself a "rock drummer" first and foremost, or some other kind of drummer (jazz or blues, for example) that just happened to play rock? By posing a similar set of questions to all the interviewees, we were able to unearth some common themes about rock that proved to be fascinating, sometimes surprising, and generally awe-inspiring!

Overall, we tried to keep our primary focus on players whose important contributions were made (or at least began) from the early 1950s through the mid-'60s. It was our feeling that once rock music had come through the late-'60s revolution known as the "British Invasion," it

had graduated to a new phase and moved beyond its “roots.” This post-Beatles age had already been documented extensively, while comparatively little attention had been paid to the early years that were the focus of our attention.

When viewed as a whole, the players represented in *The Roots of Rock Drumming* reflect the incredible diversity that defined rock as it evolved during the 1950s and early '60s. The lineup includes drummers who worked in just about every important music center in the U.S. and U.K. (New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Nashville, Memphis, Chicago, Muscle Shoals, Las Vegas, and London); drummers who came out of a wide variety of backgrounds (jazz, blues, big band, and country); drummers who worked with many different artists, and drummers who were associated with a single band; drummers who were highly educated chart-readers, and drummers who were self-taught “street cats”; drummers who made their mark in the studio, and others who did so by slugging it out on the road.

Despite the range and diversity of our list, we were somewhat limited in our abilities to include everyone we would have liked. This had to do with a number of factors, such as: who was still alive when we began conducting the interviews, and who was willing to give us access (sadly, this is why neither Ringo Starr nor Charlie Watts is included, even though we would have loved their thoughts on this topic). Also, it's important to remember that the information in the book is based on events that occurred fifty or sixty years ago. Therefore, despite our best efforts to fact-check all claims made by our interviewees, some of the information herein might be considered disputable.

Once the interviews were edited, we chose to categorize our drummers into four distinct groups: the Pioneers, the Innovators, the Stylists, and the Commentators. It should be noted that not every drummer on the list fits neatly into one of these categories. Some—particularly those who made their mark in the studio—continued to push the envelope musically and remained influential over many decades.

In closing, I'd like to say that over the last year or so, it has been an absolute honor to work with Steve, Rob, Paul, and Joe. I want to thank them for their passion, their respect for music history, and their commitment to seeing this project through (not to mention their patience for my many missed deadlines). I'd also like to thank the interviewees, for taking the time to share their stories, their knowledge, and their wisdom. For me, participating in this project is one small way I can offer my gratitude for what they've given all of us who want to rock!



**Daniel Glass**

**New York City**

**June 2013**

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## ▶ ABOUT the VIDEO ▶

*The Roots of Rock Drumming* got its start in the early 2000s when I was nearing completion of my research for what was to become one of the first Hudson Music DVD projects, *Drumset Technique/History of the U.S. Beat*. I had discussions with Paul Siegel and Rob Wallis about making a documentary movie about the transition in music that occurred in the late '40s/early '50s that gave birth to rock'n'roll, and the largely unknown (and many times uncredited) drummers who developed early rock drumming. It was a story that hadn't been told and we felt it would be interesting to the drumming community. Rob and Paul decided to go ahead with the project.

I developed a template of questions to ask each drummer so we could cut from one to another and have different drummers answer the same questions; in this way the drummers could tell the story from various perspectives. Paul Siegel, Rob Wallis, and I compiled interview footage from 2001–2003. When we finally stepped back, looked at what we had, and started to begin the work of assembling a documentary, we found that it would be cost prohibitive to make it the way we originally envisioned because of licensing fees (for historic video footage and song usage) and the editing time that would be involved. As we all got very busy with other projects, *The Roots of Rock Drumming* was literally put on the shelf.

In 2012 we revisited the project. We settled on the idea of having the interviews transcribed and then edited for a book. Drummer/writer/historian Daniel Glass was engaged to edit the interviews. Daniel is extremely knowledgeable about the early years of rock'n'roll, and was highly motivated to take on the assignment. In fact, in the early 2000s Daniel was conducting his own interviews with drummers from the early rock'n'roll era and some of his interviews have been incorporated into the book.

Video is included with the book to give the reader a sample of the filmed interviews. Because of time constraints there are only short clips of the drummers' interview footage. If you are interested in viewing the unedited footage—which I highly recommend—it is available for instant download at [RootsOfRockDrumming.com](http://RootsOfRockDrumming.com) I feel the interview footage is priceless. Do take the time to watch these interviews unfold and hear each drummer tell their own unique story.

**Steve Smith**



Look for this icon throughout the book – tap it to play the video interview!

## **The First “Rock” Drummers**

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the drummers that played on early R&B and rock’n’roll records were actually jazz drummers. In those years jazz drummers were playing on recording sessions in diverse areas of the U.S. Many of these drummers played on rhythm-and-blues sessions, and they also played on recordings of a new type of music that would soon be called rock’n’roll. Because rock music was in the early stages of development, there were no rock drumming specialists or drummers that identified themselves as rock musicians; it was too soon for that. From the early 1900s up to the 1940s, there was mainly one type of drumset drummer: the jazz drummer. Let’s explore what transpired in U.S. music and culture that laid the the groundwork to get us to circa 1954 and the beginning of rock’n’roll drumming—and the drummers that identified themselves as a new kind of player: a rock drummer.

## **The Original Drumset Players**

In the second half of the 1800s, drummers in settings like vaudeville and pit orchestras started experimenting with a new invention: the bass drum foot pedal. The use of a foot pedal allowed one drummer to play bass drum, snare drum, and miscellaneous percussion all at the same time. The “trap kit” (as it was often called in the early years—short for “contraption”) evolved hand-in-hand with jazz, and by the 1920s, jazz music was the style most widely associated with the drumset.

## **U.S. Roots Music**

Outside of jazz, most other types of music that existed in the early 1900s did not utilize a drumset. Blues and country music, for example, were acoustic forms that developed in rural settings. Gospel singers in churches used percussion in the form of hand-clapping and an occasional tambourine. And boogie woogie, a form of music that is important to the history of rock’n’roll, developed as a solo jazz piano style.

## **We Need a Drummer!**

By the 1930s, however, the growing popularity of jazz—in the form of big band swing—inspired musicians who played in a variety of styles to add a drumset player. A great example is Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, one of the pioneers of a style called Western swing. Wills’ vision was to bring the power and danceability of the big bands into the country setting. As there was no precedent for drumset playing in country music, however, Wills employed drummers with a background in jazz. Throughout the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50, this pattern would repeat itself for many U.S. roots music styles like blues, gospel and country. In all these settings, the drumset was added because it provided a more commercial sound and a stronger dance feel.

## **Bebop**

During the 1940s, jazz had progressed from swing to bebop, where the focus was on instrumental prowess and no longer on what the swing musician held sacred; getting the people on the dance floor and keeping them there. The bebop musician’s credo was being able to fully express themselves emotionally, technically and intellectually through the music, which soon turned their audience into listeners, witnessing a creative act, instead of being active participants by dancing.



**BOBBY MORRIS**

**Born: June 30, 1927 in Wilno, Poland**

**Interviewed by Daniel Glass in Las Vegas, Nevada, on June 27, 2000**

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**T**he life of drummer Bobby Morris reads like a classic pioneer tale. A New York immigrant who cut his teeth playing bebop on 52nd Street, in 1950 Morris jumped at the opportunity to “Go West, young man.” His destination was Las Vegas, a sleeping giant in the middle of the desert that consisted of a mere five hotels and a population of thirty thousand.

Once in the new frontier, Morris quickly used his exceptional drumming skills to establish himself as one of the top guns in town. By 1954, he had hooked up with Louis Prima, a former big band leader who, along with wife and partner Keely Smith, was trying to redefine himself in the wake of swing’s demise. Backed by Morris and a crew of crack Vegas regulars, Prima assembled a sound that incorporated a raunchy mix of Italian folk songs, tight vocal harmonies, blaring tenor-sax riffs, and explosive backbeats. Almost all of Prima’s signature songs, which include “Just a Gigolo/I Ain’t Got Nobody,” “Oh Marie,” and “Jump, Jive, an’ Wail,” were rooted in a particular shuffle groove of Morris’s design. The now legendary “Prima shuffle” gave the band its own signature, and allowed it to rock as hard as anything being released at the time.

Today, Louis Prima’s legacy may be less renowned than other artists who bloomed during the earliest years of rock, but his impact during the mid-to-late ‘50s is undeniable. The Prima band reigned supreme on the airwaves, at the hottest nightspots across America, and appeared regularly on major television shows like “The Ed Sullivan Show.” Indeed, many of the drummers interviewed for this project listed the “Prima shuffle” as an important element in their own understanding of what makes music “rock.”

Outside of the eight-plus years he was with Louis Prima, Bobby Morris has enjoyed a stellar career that includes stops at the Capitol Records building as a rock’n’roll session man, a stint in the Bill Haley spinoff group the Jodimars, and a clinic tour of the Far East playing alongside none other than Buddy Rich. After more than sixty years as a sideman, bandleader, and booking agent, Bobby’s story is as rich as that of his adopted home, and offers us extraordinary insight into Sin City’s role as an indelible part of American music and culture.



***Let's start with some basic information. You grew up in Brooklyn?***

Yeah, I was born in Europe, but I came to this country at age 10. I grew up in Brooklyn.

***As a young drummer in the 1940s, you got to be a part of the incredible jazz scene that was happening on 52nd Street in New York City. Can you talk about what that experience was like?***

It was a very, very exciting era. I was just 16 years old when Birdland [jazz club] opened up on Broadway, [around the corner] from all the jazz was happening on 52nd Street. At the time, I was working at the Edison Hotel with [big band leader] Blue Barron. It was very simple, corny, rinky-dink type of stuff, you know? I would head out there to play at nine o'clock, and after I finished, I would take off my tuxedo, put on my funky clothes, and run out to do the jazz thing on 52nd Street. I was playing many different clubs, often with [guitarist] Chuck Lange, [pianist] Gene DiNovi, and I think the bassist was Red Mitchell. I also played with Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, and a trio thing with Errol Garner.

About 1946 or so, I was working at the Three Deuces and we heard about this band of musicians who were coming down from Harlem. I knew [trombonist] Kai Winding well, and he was telling us that they were playing a new kind of music called "bebop." The band was Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet, Charlie Parker on alto, J.J. Johnson on trombone, Max Roach on drums, Bud Powell on piano, and Curley Russell on bass.

I was sitting back there with Kai, and they opened up with an up-tempo jazz thing. J.J. Johnson plays this incredible eight-bar trombone intro, and Kai gets up to walk out. I says, "Kai, where are you going?" He says, "I'm going to go outside and put my trombone down right in the middle of 52nd Street, so the cab drivers can run over it. What I heard just now is freaky. Nobody can play like this." [LAUGHS] Of course, later on, he and J.J. became "Jay & Kai," and did a bunch of great recordings together.

But bebop changed the whole concept of jazz. It was very difficult [to play], and it raised the level that everybody was reaching for at the time in music. Prior to that, when I was playing with Ben Webster and those guys, the time was straight jazz swing [in the style of] Sidney Catlett or Jo Jones. Bebop added these syncopated rhythms between the left hand and the right foot that complimented whatever was happening on the frontline. It was very exciting to try to do that, and like many young drummers of that period, we got influenced by it. The idea was to keep it harnessed; to use a tremendous amount of restraint and musical taste. At the time, Jimmy Chapin's book on syncopated independence became like a bible for young drummers.

***Weren't you going to the Manhattan School of Music as well at this time?***

Yes. So I was getting [home] from my gigs at three, and getting up at six or seven to go to school.

***At what point did you decide to go to Las Vegas?***

Okay. In 1950, I was hanging out at Charlie's Tavern [in New York] with all the big band guys. A man came in looking for a drummer. He said, "Who would like to go to Las Vegas?" Well, nobody knew what Las Vegas was. I said, "Well, how much does it pay?" He says, "Eighty-seven dollars a week, but I could guarantee you seventeen weeks [of work]." I was making fifty bucks a week at the time playing on 52nd Street, so I said, "Okay, I'll take it."

At that time, there were only five hotels in the entire area of Las Vegas: the Last Frontier, the Thunderbird, the El Rancho, the Flamingo, and the Desert Inn. These were only two stories high, and there were [only] thirty thousand people in the whole town.

The gig was playing with [bandleader] Garwood Van, at the Last Frontier. When that engagement ended, they brought in a ballet company from New York and told the whole band to take off, except they needed a percussion player. They gave me five percussion parts. I said, "I can't play [something] that's written for five different percussionists." They said, "Well, pick out the best things that you feel," you know? So it was myself and two pianists for this entire production.

We did that for a couple of weeks, and then it became one act after another. During this period, they brought Gene Krupa into the lounge with a four- or five-piece group. Gene knew that I was inside doing the ballet theater, and as I was passing by [the lounge] he says, "Hey, Bobby, you want to sit in?" I said, "Okay." So I sat in, and played the whole set. When the set ended and

I was going, he says, “Hey, come on, Bobby, play another set.” [LAUGHS] I says, “Gene, this is your gig. I don’t want people to get mad. They’re paying to see you, not me.” He goes, “No, play another set. I want to relax.”

So anyhow, it became a thing. He was there for four weeks, and every time I would pass through, he’d ask me to sit in, so he could relax and drink and take it easy. [Gene] and I became good friends. He was such a wonderful person, and a wonderful player. He had a projection and communication with an audience that was infectious. And that personality, you know? He was wonderful with it.

### ***What was life like as a freelancer in Las Vegas at that time?***

It was a wonderful time. I auditioned for Ted Fio Rito, a name bandleader [who settled in Las Vegas]. He was into Latin music, and I had grown up in that bag in New York, playing timbales, congas, and bongos. That was my absolute biggest love at that time. Back at the Havana Madrid [Club], we would have jam sessions every couple of weeks. I used to play mainly timbales, and there was Tito Puente, also on timbales, Chano Pozo on congas, and Chino Pozo on bongos. They called me “the American with the Cuban heart.” I played authentic—and I loved it.

So when everybody was auditioning for Ted Fio Rito, I knew Latin and I got the job. The executives from the musicians union were there and didn’t want me to get the job because I didn’t have a Local 369 card, and these other guys did. But I was exactly what [Fio Rito] wanted, so they couldn’t deny me.

I stayed with Ted Fio Rito for a couple of years. And then I joined a group, Bobby Paige and the Musical Pages at the Flamingo. [We] would go around on a revolving stage. I was playing drums and singing. One time, as we’re going around, I got the fright of my life because sitting at the bar was Frank Sinatra. Now I’m not a singer, I’m just the drummer. But they needed somebody to sing songs, you know? [LAUGHS] And it paid well. I mean, a hundred and twenty-five dollars [a week] in those days was “well.” [LAUGHS]

From that point, I started working in the house bands at the various hotels. Nobody carried a drummer in those days, so you had to play with everybody that came through town. We played for people like Sophie Tucker, Billy Eckstine, Billy Daniels... the list goes on and on.

Then I got the best job in town, playing in what’s called the “relief band.” We worked six different hotels a week, each night “relieving” a different house band when they had their off night. We would have a three-hour rehearsal every day for each different show, [and that night] we had to do a job that was equivalent to what the house band did for the entire week. Obviously, it was a lot more difficult and took quite a bit of reading ability, [so] it paid twice as much as the regular house band gig. I got to play with everybody that worked Las Vegas at the time, including the Rat Pack, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Harry Belafonte, Johnny Mathis, Betty Grable... all the big stars of the day.

### ***Obviously, your studies in New York helped you score the chair in that band.***

Oh, yes. I studied with Henry Adler in New York. Everybody studied with him: Shelly Manne, Alvin Stoller, Buddy Rich. [Henry] was really into reading, so I learned my rudiments. You know, three years of hard practice, syncopation, and whatever. Of course, the reading came in very handy for me, because I had to play a new show every single night. We would rehearse that day and have to play that night, exactly the way the [house band] were playing. So that’s what I did for a couple of years, too.

### ***How did you first get hooked up with Louis Prima?***

In 1954 I had a jazz group in Las Vegas, the Bobby Morris Quartet featuring [big band singer] Jack Prince, who was working with Harry James. We were appearing at the Sahara Hotel, at the Casbar Lounge. Louis Prima came in with a cut-down version of his big band. It was very poor at that time; he didn’t have Sam Butera or any of those people. He came in with a saxophone player that was playing violin, and a drummer that wasn’t really happening. They weren’t making very good money, [but] Louis Prima, of course, was such a great entertainer, along with Keely Smith, that he did well enough for the owner at that time, Milton Perle, to ask him back.





**With Louis Prima in the Casbar Lounge**

married, and I needed the extra money. So I said, “Okay.” He said, “Bring in your own rhythm section.” I said, “I’d prefer to work with yours, but I have an idea.” So I met with Willie and Amado and I started practicing with them. Instead of a typical shuffle with a jazz pattern on the cymbal and a two and four on the snare, I started playing a full shuffle on the snare against regular jazz time on the hi-hat, and accenting two and four. I had Willie playing a boogie-woogie feel on the piano, and Amado digging in [on bass]. Needless to say, when we started playing at Louis’s house for the first rehearsal, he just went berserk. He said, “Man, that’s it!”

So that shuffle became a thing. Louis loved it so much that he wanted to do it at all tempos. So we started doing it on songs like “The Sheik of Araby” and “When You’re Smiling”—these ridiculous up tempos where nobody had ever thought about putting a shuffle before. It required a lot of strength and effort, and I went to practice about an hour before each evening’s performance to get my hands in shape. Before the whole band would go on, Louis wanted me to go onstage and start the shuffle thing going; so I’d be [playing] by myself, while he was working the stage. Then we’d go into either “The Sheik” or “When You’re Smiling,” at a very up tempo.

***You had some pretty crazy hours in the lounge, right?***

Our shift was from midnight until six in the morning: six forty-five minute sets, with a fifteen-minute break. It’s a lot of playing, and you have no idea how difficult it was to create the power and strength it took. Louis Prima didn’t stop between tunes, so there was no pause to wipe your brow. He would just turn around to me, to change tempo and whatnot. And in the audience was every star you could imagine. It was about ten deep from the minute we started until our last set was over at 6:00 AM. The Casbar was the most happening place in Las Vegas.

***Eventually, the Prima band moved out of the lounge and into the showrooms in Vegas, right?***

Yes, we moved into the showroom and became the headline act: Louis Prima, Keely Smith, Sam Butera and the Witnesses. At that time, Judy Garland had the record for the most attendees at the Desert Inn, and we broke that. Donn Arden was the choreographer and the producer, and it was very interesting because he had us involved in the entire show. We were singing, dancing with the girls—all that stuff. [LAUGHS]

***That was sort of a low point in his career, wasn’t it?***  
Yeah. But when he came back, he brought Sam Butera on saxophone, Dick Johnson on drums, “Amado” Rodriguez on bass, Willie McCumber on piano, and Jimmy “Little Red” Blount on trombone. It was a great improvement. However, the drummer was still playing a shuffle thing with two hands on a closed hi-hat. It was okay, but it really wasn’t happening.

At that point, [my band] was alternating with Louis Prima and this much-improved crew that he had. They felt that they needed somebody on the drums that could really get some excitement going. So Sam Butera started “romancing” me, you might say. At that particular time, I was not interested because I was very happy with [my current situation]. But Sam set up a meeting between me and Louis Prima. Now, Louis is very hypnotic; I mean he’s just hypnotizing. And he said, “We’re going to be doing ‘The Colgate Comedy Hour,’ the Frank Sinatra special, and [The] Dinah Shore [Show]’ every two weeks. Plus, we’re going to record for Capitol Records.” He said, “How much are you making?” And I said, I think, a hundred and seventy-five, at the time. And Louis said, “I’ll give you two [hundred] fifty, and it’ll be extra money when we do the shows.”

Well, that was a lot of money. I was in the process of getting

They raised my drums [to] get the shadows on the wall with the double bass drums. I did “Malagueña” and different drum [features]. Later on, I did “Drumology.” Anyhow, it became a big thing. Louis and Keely became very [popular] with the recording of “That Old Black Magic.” And of course, [later on] David Lee Roth copied “Just a Gigolo” note for note—the saxophone solo, the singing, the shuffle rhythm, everything.

***How was it working with a double bass setup?***

It was enjoyable, getting with the double bass drums at that time. It opened up quite a new territory of thinking [for me]. You know, “Now you have two bass drums, what are you going to do with them?” People expect you to do more because you have two bass drums.



**Tearing it up with Louis, Keely, Sam and the Witnesses**

***What was the reaction to Prima?***

Everywhere we went in Las Vegas, we couldn’t pay for food. Maury’s clothing store would give us jackets, uniforms, whatever we wanted, just to say that we were using it.

***Sure. Well, Vegas was a very small town at that time.***

That’s right, a very small town. After the original five hotels, the next [one] built, I believe, was the Sahara, then the Riviera, the Dunes, the Stardust, the Tropicana, and so on and so forth. It just kept progressing, and so rapidly... it was insane, really. I loved it when it was a small town, because everywhere you went, everybody knew you. At that time, instead of a “buffet,” they called it a “chuck wagon.” It was not run by corporations; it was run by “the boys,” you know, and they were wonderful. They all knew you—“Hey, Bobby, have a buffet,” “Have a drink,” whatever. So it was very friendly. Now it’s a big corporate city. It’s a metropolis, and it’s growing by six thousand families a month. The traffic is getting terrible; it’s like Los Angeles.

***Talk a little bit about how the group’s popularity grew to the national level.***

As we became more and more popular, we recorded for Capitol Records. The first album was *The Wildest!* This is like a real classic album—“Just a Gigolo/I Ain’t Got Nobody,” “Buona Sera.” In Las Vegas, everywhere you would go, they’d be playing those particular tunes. Every group in the country started to emulate that shuffle, copy Sam’s tenor [saxophone] style and our kind of arrangements.

Needless to say, the group became the most popular group in the country. We started traveling—the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood, the Chez Paree in Chicago, the Latin Casino in Philadelphia, and the Copacabana in New York City. We’d set up at each of these places for about a month. We also did many television appearances; at least ten times on “The Ed Sullivan Show.” Ed would introduce as his favorite group, and every time we’d play at the Copa, he’d be ringside.

***Can you break down the so-called “Prima shuffle” in a bit more detail? It’s so distinctive.***

The idea behind the “Prima shuffle” pattern is to play the full shuffle pattern on the snare, and the standard jazz pattern on the closed hi-hat, [while] accenting the two and four on the edge of the closed hi-hat. Now you have to understand, before I came on board, Louis Prima’s drummer was playing a shuffle, but it was not the “Bobby Morris shuffle.” When I joined Louis Prima and we started this thing with the rhythm section, the great success of the group came because of this shuffle feel. A lot of people acknowledge the fact that I’m responsible for it.

***Which are some of the well-known Prima songs, in your opinion, that best represent the “Bobby Morris shuffle”?***

The tunes that best represent the feel for that digging-in style would be “You Rascal You,” “When You’re Smiling,” “The Sheik of Araby,” and “I Ain’t Got Nobody.” For a slower tempo, “Just a Gigolo,” I believe, is what really got it started. And “Oh Marie” represents that style very precisely.

***Is there a story behind “Jump, Jive, an’ Wail”? That song has become so ubiquitous.***

“Jump, Jive, an’ Wail” was actually a throwaway. We were looking for a number to fill up the album, and we had “Jump, Jive, an’ Wail” lying around. It wasn’t really the style of the group; we did it just for kicks. But, my God, it turned out to be quite a thing.

***Absolutely. I love the way the whole song kind of jerks along with those little off-beat accents. Where did that come from?***

It was something that we all sat down and worked out the arrangement of. I think accenting certain parts of it was probably very effective. I’ll tell you very frankly, I was very surprised when I heard [later on] the Gap picked it for what became a very famous commercial. When I first heard it, I said, “My God, that’s us!” [LAUGHS] And of course, they played it so often, all over the world. It just became like the biggest commercial; we still [get] residuals on it. It’s very nice to be remembered financially, you know? [LAUGHS]

***What I notice on a lot of those Prima tunes like “Jump, Jive, an’ Wail” is that you play that “Prima shuffle” on the verse, and then in the solo section you hit that backbeat hard, in a real kind of rhythm-and-blues style. Where did that come from?***

The idea behind the “Prima shuffle” pattern is to accent the two and four on the edge of the closed hi-hat, to get the feel. A lot of drummers don’t understand that. I do the same exact thing when I go up the big [i.e., ride] cymbal, okay? I’m not playing just two and four [on the snare], I’m playing all the eighth notes in the pattern, but I’m accenting the two and four on the rim. This is what made it so difficult [to play]. The easy thing to do would be to just play time and accent two and four. But to get the feel, the full pulse of it, I wanted to play the shuffle and accent at the same time.

***So you are kind of bashing on the two and four...***

I’m bashing on the two and four.

***On those bashing sections, it’s hard to hear exactly where you’re keeping time. Is that the hi-hat or the ride?***

This is very interesting. The cymbal that I used on all the recordings, you would not believe where I got it. Sam Butera’s brother, Little Joe Butera, used to be a drummer, and one time, he hid a cymbal in his backyard—[threw] it in the dirt and all. I was looking for a big cymbal, and I said, “Joe, could you help me find a big cymbal, for music?” He says, “Bobby, I threw one away in the backyard somewhere. If you’ll come and help me find it, it’s yours.” So we dug around and found it, and it was the most horrible cymbal that you could imagine; you know, weird and different overtones. So I put about fifty sizzles on it, and it got the most definite sound on two and four. I used it on all the [Prima] albums and, eventually, after years of hitting it, it fell apart. But at one time, every drummer that heard it—Jack Sperling, who was with Les Brown, and Shelly Manne—everybody said, “Man, I’ve got to have that cymbal.”

***What kind of cymbal was it?***

It was a Zildjian, but it was as funky as you could imagine. Without the sizzles, it had terrible overtones. But with the sizzles, it had just enough definition where you could [really] hear the two and four.

***During this period that you were with Louis Prima, what style of music would you call this?***

I would call it a combination of Dixieland, jazz, hard swing, and some rock.

***Would you say maybe rhythm and blues as well?***

Yes, rhythm and blues. The Prima sound was so unique and it was so different.

***Plus with the whole Italian thing thrown in there...***

That’s right. It was just a complete combination of everything and it’s hard to define, to put one stamp on what type it is. Louis Prima was a tremendous, tremendous performer. He wasn’t the most technical trumpet player, but he was very rhythmic, and he had a unique style of performing and entertaining that was second to none. It was a variety of [many] good styles of music combined into one very successful situation and presentation.

***When you see those Ed Sullivan appearances, you really get an idea of what the band was all about.***

Well, yes, it gives you a good idea. But it does not signify the preciseness of the overall impact that the group had unless you'd seen it live. I am telling you, from twelve o'clock at night to six in the morning, at the Casbar, it was absolutely packed twelve deep. You could not get into the room.

***Didn't Buddy Rich used to come see you?***

Yeah, he would sit in the audience while we're playing all those up-tempo rhythms. But I would never go over and say hello to him; [I treated him] like I didn't know him. So one night, he was sitting with Chick Keeney at the Silver Slipper having breakfast. Chick was the drummer with Freddie Bell [and the Bellboys, a classic Vegas lounge act] and a wonderful drummer from Philadelphia. I said, "Hey, Chick. How are you doing?" and Buddy grabbed my arm and says, "Hey, kid. What do I have to do, win a DownBeat poll for you to say hello?" [LAUGHS]

I says, "No, Buddy. To tell you the truth, I've heard from some of the young drummers that when they would come over to say hello, you would say, 'Screw off.' I didn't want to take that chance, because, you know, I admire you." He says, "Why do you think I've been coming in and seeing you with Louis?" And he says, and this is word for word: "You're a fucking animal. How can anybody work that hard and still be alive?" I said, "Well, I'm still alive, but thank you very much for the compliment." [LAUGHS] So, anyhow, we became friends.

***While you were with Prima, you started doing rock'n'roll sessions for Capitol Records in Hollywood. How did that come to be?***

When the rock'n'roll era came into prominence around 1956, '57, '58, I ended up working with Capitol Records in Hollywood. I was obviously a jazz player, but when we recorded our albums there, [Capitol producer] Voyle Gilmore liked my "intensity," as he called it. I would come in to Los Angeles for a day or two and record with various rock bands. At the time, the rock'n'roll was like the Bill Haley-type stuff. It was not very intricate, but it was very physical, and you had to kind of dig in. I have no idea who the artists were, but they used the rhythm section to back whoever was recording. We did the background, and they would add the voices later.

***So it was almost like a factory situation, where you guys would just come in and crank it out?***

Exactly, in different tempos and different keys, and I worked with some very good studio players. I didn't like it at all, but it paid well. After about a year or two, I just couldn't handle it [anymore].

***When you say they liked your "intensity," can you describe what that meant in more musical terms? In other words, what were the attributes of that early rock'n'roll drumming style?***

You've always got to realize that whatever amount of facility you might possess, the important thing in drumming is playing digging in to the time, and the tempo. To get the excitement going, you want to play a little bit on the edge, just a little bit on top of the edge. I'm not talking about rushing or anything. I'm talking about playing on top; the front side of the beat.

***Do you feel that Louis Prima's music was influential on the rock'n'roll scene that was coming on at that time?***

We played a type of feel that was conducive to rock'n'roll, which you could add to rock'n'roll. It had a similar kind of feel.

***Did you notice a rock'n'roll audience at your shows—a growing number of teenagers, for example?***

Yes, there were many. They couldn't sit down, obviously, because they weren't old enough to drink. But there were a lot of young, enthusiastic rock'n'roll drummers in back of me, behind the bandstand. Usually fifteen or twenty drummers trying to figure out what I was doing.

***So at these various clubs, people could walk around and watch you from behind?***

Yes, as a matter of fact. That occurred on many, many occasions. I would come off the stage, and they would ask me a lot of questions—nice kids, and I always tried to be very helpful.

***Do you think the "Morris shuffle" helped to influence the sound of rock'n'roll?***

I've been told by a lot of drummers today, that I created a feel and a style that many have copied. I was playing the same thing

as the rock'n'roll players, but with a shuffle, and it created a new sound for rock'n'roll, I believe.

***You left Prima for the first time around 1958. With things being so successful, what caused you to leave?***

I left Prima to join a group called the Jodimars, because they offered me twice as much money.

***Oh, wow, I didn't know that. We actually interviewed Dick Richards, the drummer for both Bill Haley and the Jodimars, for this project.***

I was playing drums, [because] Dick Richards was mostly singing. We had two sets of drums, and we played a drum solo together in gorilla suits. I was with them for quite a while. They were very entertaining, and very well received.

***When did you go back with Prima?***

When I [was with] the Jodimars, we appeared at quite a few places, mostly in Reno, and then we came into Las Vegas at the Sands. It was very much of a jazz audience, but we were playing rock'n'roll kinds of things. So when that engagement ended in 1959, the group kind of broke up. Louis Prima had tried three or four other drummers in that period of time, but he was not satisfied with anyone, I guess. Sam heard that I was available, and asked if I'd like to come back.

***During that second stint, you actually played at John F. Kennedy's inauguration. Tell us about that.***

In the [late '50s], John F. Kennedy was a senator; his brother-in-law was Peter Lawford. They loved [Prima's] group so much that wherever we would be appearing, whether the Moulin Rouge, the Chez Paree, the Copacabana, they would be there. After the show, I would talk to [Kennedy]. I said, "Senator, I just want to say..." and he said, "Just call me Jack."

When Kennedy became president [in 1960], Frank Sinatra became the entertainment coordinator for the inauguration. Everybody in the world was there Broadway, Hollywood, singing stars and all that. Of course, we were invited, and we performed at the inauguration. At the end of that, there was a big party up on the sixteenth floor of the Washington Hilton, on Pennsylvania Avenue. I was [playing] with a trio with Lou Levy on piano, Joe Mondragon on bass, and everybody was singing—Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis, Jr., Harry Belafonte, Frank Sinatra—my God, just everybody. Tony Curtis kept bringing me drinks, vodka and orange juice. I said, "Just two," but he kept bringing [them]. Finally, I said, "Please, no more, or I'll fall off the stool." [LAUGHS]

John F. Kennedy came up and thanked us all. And I was going to say, "Congratulations, Jack," but, because at this point he was president, I said, "Mr. President, I'm so darned happy that you're in. I'm really looking forward to very good things."

A few years later, I was playing with Eddie Fisher in Mexico City, and this fellow named Dr. Goldberg used to come around. He came every night during the four weeks we were there. I wound up getting married there, and Eddie really liked my bride-to-be, so he flew her to Mexico City. Both he and Dr. Goldberg were my best men, and each one presented me with a thousand-dollar bill. Anyhow, Dr. Goldberg invited us to his villa outside Mexico City, and we come in, and there's guys with machine guns on top of the roof. I asked him about it. He's cooking this wonderful Italian food, and he says, "Bobby, now that we know each other, my name really isn't Dr. Goldberg." Turns out he was Sam Giancana, the head of the mafia. [LAUGHS]

***When did you leave the Prima band for good?***

I stayed until '61 or '62. We were working at the Latin Casino in Philadelphia, and he and Keely split up because she caught him making out with one of the showgirls or something. [When] she left, she offered me, I think, three or four hundred a week more. Well, of course I took it, and signed a two-year contract with her. At that time I was making about seven hundred fifty a week, first-class hotels and all that. Her arrangements were done by Nelson Riddle—fantastic big band stuff—and included a medley of the stuff she had done with Louis.

***Was her deal also with Capitol?***

[It was] on Reprise, Frank Sinatra's label. The first recording was called "That Old Black Magic," and it turned out to be very successful. She used [heavyweight Los Angeles session] players like Barney Kessel on guitar, Frank Rosolino on trombone, Pete Candoli on trumpet. On percussion were [jazz drummers] Shelly Manne and Alvin Stoller, playing tambourine or whatever, in

back of me. We opened up with that shuffle, and all I kept hearing from them in the background, was “Holy shit!” I said, “What’s the matter?” I thought they were making fun of me or something. They said, “How the hell do you do that?” [LAUGHS] Anyhow, so I stayed with Keely for a couple of years, and we went back to all the same places. Unfortunately, without Louis she did not do as well, because they had a certain chemistry.

***Sure; and without her, he didn’t do as well, either.***

Right. It was not the same for either one.

***And of course, by 1964, the Beatles showed up and changed the whole musical landscape as well, which I think probably was tough.***

Right. So at that point, it was back to Las Vegas, and I joined one act after another: Bobby Darin, Eddie Fisher, Frankie Laine, Kay Starr, Tony Martin, and for a while, Nat King Cole.

***Around that time, you did a pretty incredible tour of the Far East, correct?***

While I was with Keely, I got connected with a Filipino group called the Sunspots. They were a very, very big attraction all throughout the Far East. They were playing in the lounge at the Stardust, and their manager asked me if I would record an album with them. They did some up-tempo Latin things, and a lot of rock’n’roll-type stuff—Fats Domino, Little Richard—plus a lot of four-part harmony things, like the Four Freshmen.



**Drum clinic in the Far East, 1959**

They asked me to tour with them, and the only reason I was able to do it is because I was a Slingerland artist at the time. Bud Slingerland offered to give me three hundred fifty dollars for each clinic I would do to help promote Slingerland. I averaged three clinics a week, in Guam, Manila, Korea, Okinawa, Hawaii, and all through Japan in every city we traveled to. Slingerland used me in their advertisements with the full double bass drum setup. They sent promo pictures and a thousand pairs of sticks for me to give out to the fans. I had the “Bobby Morris 5A” model. At the time, the three biggest sellers they had as far as drumsticks [were] Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, and myself.

It was great, but I had to stop with the Sunspots because Keely was beginning an engagement at a casino in Tokyo. Around the same time, Buddy Rich was leading a drumming tour of the Far East [with] Charli Persip, Philly Joe Jones, and a rhythm section. Charli and Philly Joe got busted for smoking pot. In those days, the Japanese government didn’t have to prove [you were] guilty; you had to prove [you were] innocent.

So they put them away, and Buddy needed a drummer. He knew I was there, so me and George Kawaguchi, who was the Gene Krupa of Japan, joined them on the tour. We played in front of thousands of people, and I would do drumthings with Buddy, exchanging eights and so forth. My hands were very good at the time, so I was able to keep up with him. When we finished the tour, I felt like one of the Beatles, because they love absolutely drummers in Japan. They love drum solos, drummers, whatever; it was very exciting.

Now here’s an interesting [story]. In Tokyo, I worked at a place called the Shome [pronounced “show-may”] Number Four on the Ginza, which is like Broadway. And I did a twenty-four-hour drum marathon, [where] I took on every drummer in Japan.



They'd come and play [with me], and we would exchange things. When they got tired and fell down, another drummer would take over, and then another. We kept going for twenty-four hours, and they kept feeding me orange juice, so as to keep my energy high. We were written up in the *Mainichi News*.

Altogether, I stayed out there about six months, doing clinics and making good money. It was a very historic time in my life. I met so many wonderful players, and so many wonderful people.

***When did you open your booking agency in Las Vegas?***

In 1966. We celebrated thirty years in 1996. I've booked many wonderful groups over the years, [and] I created the first "two wall" situation at the Dunes. Do you know what a "four wall" is?

**No.**

A "four wall" is where the act comes in and they pay for everything—the musicians, the culinary, the stagehands, the publicity. With a "two wall," the hotel pays for some things: the publicity, stagehands, culinary. Whatever [money] comes in, they split [with the artist], fifty-fifty.

I created that [setup] for Robert Goulet at the Dunes, and it turned out to be very successful. There was no guarantee of money, but [with] the fifty-fifty split, his income was tremendous—to such a point that Morris Shenker, the president, called me in and said, "Look, I'm so happy that I want to give you a guarantee, plus fifty-fifty on the overage." So we stayed there almost three years, and it was very good.

***Were you playing with him?***

I was not playing, but I put the band together. I had eight beautiful girl violin players, five saxes, seven brass, eleven full rhythm, percussion player, xylophone, and a drummer. I would put together all the shows.

***Didn't you also work with Buddy Rich's big band around that time?***

[In 1966], when Buddy was forming his new big band, he wanted me to come and play, because he knew I could read really well. I played all the charts—the things by Oliver Nelson, and *West Side Story*. I [rehearsed] the exact arrangement that became so famous.

***Buddy always had another drummer rehearse with the big band so that he could listen to and learn the chart, right?***

That's right, he would listen. He didn't read music, as you know; [but] he had such great ears, he would [memorize] the whole thing after a few [run-throughs]. Now, I was a very good bongo and conga player. So when we did, like, "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie," I would play bongos. I got a lot of good bits from [legendary bongo player] Jack Costanzo at that time. Anyhow, I played everything down [in rehearsal] and I was with [Buddy] for a good couple of months. [Sometimes] we'd get through with a very tough number, and we would exchange eights and sixteens [between]

the bongos and drums. After that, he'd say, "Come on up and play drums." But by then, after playing [bongos], and hitting the skin with my hands, they were like claws. I couldn't feel the sticks. I did play, but it was tough. I knew that was part of his sadistic nature, you know, but [it] didn't last too long, because after a while, there was no necessity for me. Buddy and I really became good friends over the years. I still have a couple of Rogers snare drums that he gave me when he was playing their drums.



**Rehearsing with Buddy Rich's "Swingin' New Band" in Las Vegas, 1966 (that's Buddy in the front with glasses).**

***Tell us how you became the musical director at the International Hotel, which was just opening at the time. It was supposedly the biggest hotel in the world at that time, right?***

Yes. In 1968, I was booking acts, and still playing at the same time. I became friendly with [Frank Sinatra's pianist] Bill Miller, and he asked me how I would like to become the musical director for the Casino Theater at the International. That was essentially the lounge. The reason they [called] it the Casino Theater is because the acts that were going in there didn't want it to be known that they were working a lounge. We're talking about acts such as Peggy Lee, Frankie Laine, Kay Starr—people who were [still] names at that time, but had kind of gone down from superstar [status].

Two weeks later, I got [another] call from Bill Miller and he said, "Harry James was supposed to be the conductor in the main showroom, but he decided not to do it. Would [you] like to do it?" I said, "Well, who's the first act we're going to have?" He said, "Barbra Streisand, followed by Elvis Presley, Bill Cosby, Pearl Bailey, and so on and so forth. So I got a tremendous fear, because I was never officially a conductor. I did conduct acts [from] the drums sometimes, but to stand up in front of an [orchestra] with eighty-six people, and all that..."

***Were you required to know a lot about music theory?***

I took some lessons at UNLV, and I had studied percussion at the Manhattan School of Music in New York—vibraphone, xylophone, music theory, and so forth.

***What was it like working with Elvis Presley?***

In 1968, Elvis Presley came [back] on the scene and they were priming him for a main showroom in Vegas. He had worked in [Vegas] showrooms prior to that, in the '50s, but did not do well because he was still [too] "rock'n'roll" at the time. In '68, however, his musical conception and interpretation was designed more for adults. When he came into the International, he had Ronnie Tutt on drums. I conducted, and played some congas.

***Well thanks, Bobby, this has really been a lot of fun.***

Thanks. Those are just a few of maybe five hundred stories about all the people I've been involved with since the beginning of Las Vegas, and got I've the pictures to back 'em all up!



**Bobby Morris and Daniel Glass**



**Rob Wallis, Bobby Morris and Steve Smith**