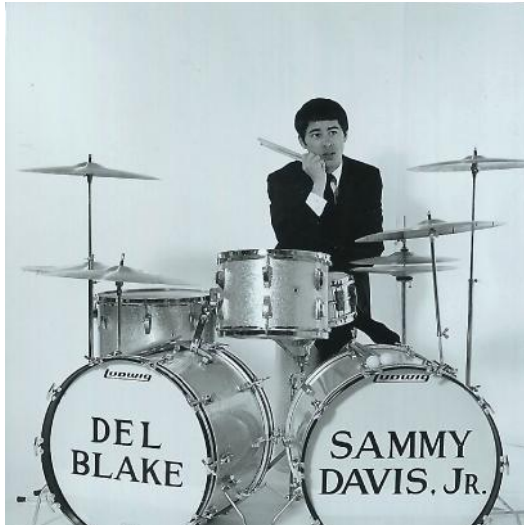


# Del Blake: “The Greatest [Unknown] Drummer in the World” or “Obsessive Compulsive Drummer”

By Stephen Boudreaux, Jan 6, 2020 [sboudreaux@arkansas.net](mailto:sboudreaux@arkansas.net)

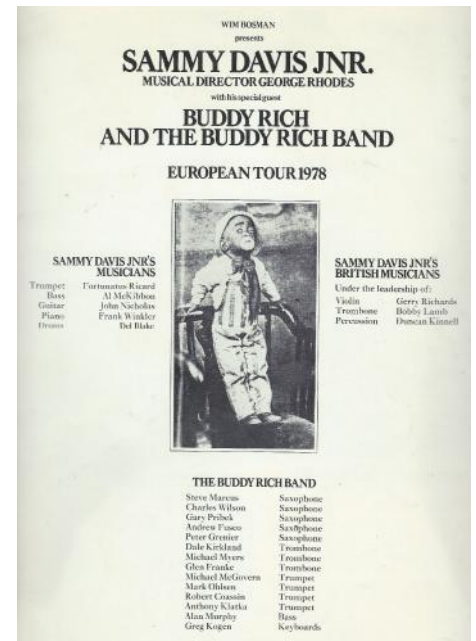


In 2019, if you Googled “Del Blake” or “Del Blake Drums” nothing comes up...literally nothing save for two Facebook entries I personally made a year or so ago. In our modern world of social media and everything-Internet, one would think that you would get a hit, a photo, a wedding pic, a something. But nothing. I have known Del Blake for over twenty years. We would spend time at least once per month over that span having lunch or a visit over the phone or email about mostly drums and drumming. But sometimes just life things, too. Of all the stories I extracted out of Del, there just HAD to

be record of that online somewhere connected to his name. I mean...there was just too much. Even if most of his fanfare happened pre-Internet, there is no excuse for there not to be a recorded history of a guy who accomplished so much. What made Sammy Davis, Jr., proclaim during a high profile concert at Carnegie Hall that Del Blake, at age 27 was, “The Greatest Drummer in the World!” while at the same time being on tour with Buddy Rich who was almost universally known as “The Greatest Drummer in the World?” Surely Sammy could have suffered the wrath of the temperamental Buddy Rich over a statement like that.

Del Blake passed away quietly on November 4, 2019 at the age of 76. Having no heirs, the family entrusted me to scour through his personal effects to see if there was anything notable. After just one day shuffling through the papers and collectables, it is clear to me that Del Blake did not live a quiet life and there was not only a corroboration for stories I had heard, but there was so much more to his story than I knew or, obviously, was revealed online. A story that needs to be told.

I am not certain which trait fascinated me most about Del Blake; His brilliant command of rudimental and set drumming or his tenacious and tireless work ethic. When he and I were first introduced, it was under the auspice of Cisco (network routing) Training. Del had immersed himself into the world of networking and became, by the time of his retirement, a master instructor for Cisco Systems and named top instructor in the world at a time. I was general manager of the company where Del was training and it was nearly two years that we had worked together before I even knew he had any background in drumming. Revealed to me at a social gathering at Del’s home in the late 90’s, his fiancé at the time said to me...knowing I was a moderately successful regional drummer myself, “Did you know Del plays drums, too?” At first, I was taken aback. I quickly tracked Del down and asked why he never told me that he was a drummer. His response went something like this: “Oh, I used to play drums but it was dominating my life. I went through too many relationships that always took a back seat to my practice



time. I would practice 6 to 8 hours each day and people just didn't understand, so I gave it up about 15 years ago, sold all my stuff and here I am in the technology business!" Del's fiancé quickly interjected, "Del played with Sammy Davis, Jr.!" That was it for me. I KNEW at that moment that if Del had been hired by Sammy Davis, Jr. (a fine drummer himself), then he HAD to be one of the top players in the world at the time. Right then and there, I challenged Del to pick up the instrument again and come play with me. He refused at first and his fiancé agreed. Del, although most likely not properly diagnosed, suffered from some form of extreme Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). If he even touched a pair of drumsticks again, there was a fear that he would go right back to spending 6 to 8 hours each day pursuing perfection or some end-goal that leaves little time for anything else...including Cisco training or worse, relationships. I've personally never had that problem so at the time I didn't understand the issue. The only thing that mattered to me was hearing Del Blake play drums. I NEEDED to know. While I did not have a work ethic to be great or perfect, I did have a burning desire to mind-share with a drummer that had been at that 'Major League' level. So I stayed on him...for weeks.

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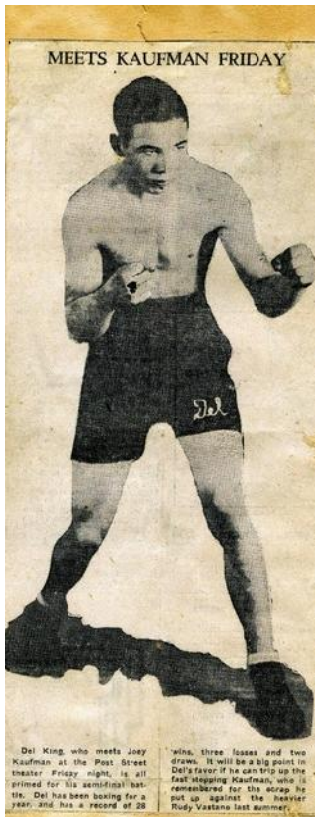
Del was an only child to a single mother, Lorraine King, growing up in Spokane, Washington. Not much is known about his father, Shigenobu Fujino. The couple was wed and tried to make do under internment in Seattle, WA because by early 1942, all native Japanese were systematically rounded up by Executive Order 9066 in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor that previous December. The order authorized the removal of any or all people from military areas "as deemed necessary or desirable." The military in turn defined the entire West Coast, home to the majority of Americans of Japanese ancestry or citizenship, as a military area. By June, more than



110,000 Japanese Americans had been interned including Lorraine and her new husband. Starting at the Puyallup Assembly Center where they were wed, the couple was subjectively noted<sup>1</sup> as an interracial marriage between the Caucasian Lorraine and her Japanese husband and were ineligible for release under the new guidelines. While all the internees were moved to the general Camp Harmony, the couple was held back and ultimately would be relocated to the Minidoka Relocation Center in Jerome, Idaho. The internment would last until December 1944 and in November of that year, Del Blake was born prior to the couple's opportunity to return to Washington.

Most of us drummers that start out at a young age eventually latch onto something that drives us. Oftentimes, it is a hero or idol that astounds us with flash and brilliance and the goal is to get to their level someday. The vast majority of us never make it there...or even half way. Some have family or friends that either encourage us or influence us with drums subjectively or music in general. Del Blake was no different than a typical kid exposed to drums.

Del's mother, Lorraine, had actually been a professional blues and jazz singer during the later days of the roaring twenties and the days of Vaudeville and had a nose for music. Known by a handful of playbills found in an almost-overlooked folder as "Lorraine King, Girl Blues Singer and Entertainer" and Featured with Sid McNutt and His Rhythm boys in 1941... "Lorraine King is Coming Again! Don't Miss this Lady with the Wonderful Voice!" She was a legitimate star in her circles.

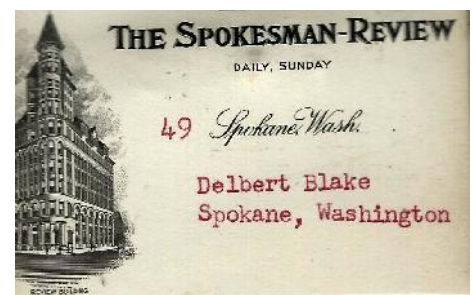
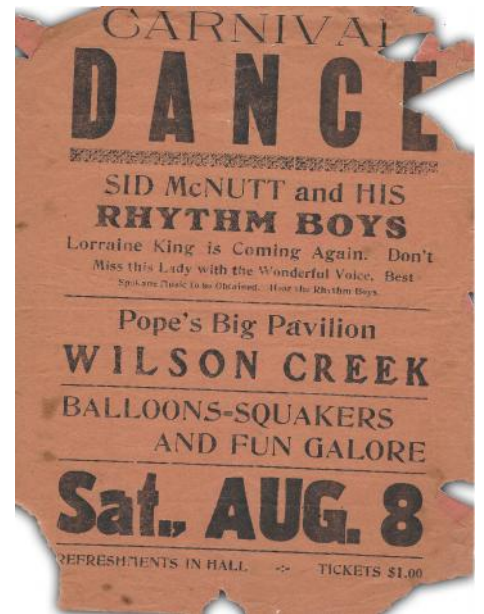


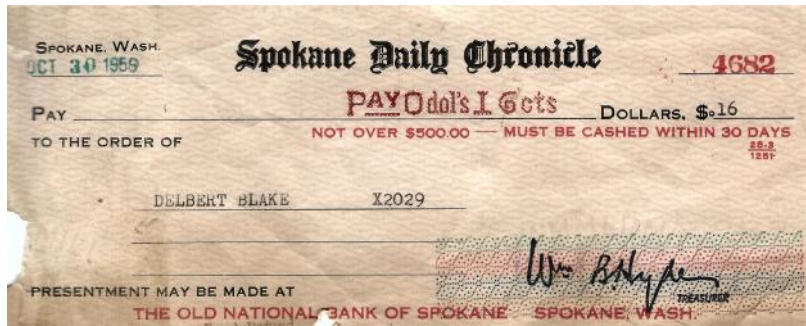
Lorraine had a brother named Delbert (Del) King who, by age 17, was a young, promising boxer feared among his opponents in and around the Spokane, Washington area. Del King was stricken by an infection under his arm and died rather suddenly at age 19. It is certain that Lorraine named her own son after her brother. From a little research, the men in the King family were known boxers in the Washington region going back to Del King's uncle Walter King, Sr. and as many as 7 other cousins and uncles in the Spokane and Clayton, Washington townships. One might ascertain that Del Blake might have gotten some fighting spirit to succeed by the presence of a family of fighters and his position as an only child of a single mother.

When Del was four-years-old, his mother had noticed he had artistic qualities and thought it would be a good experiment to have Santa Claus bring him a drum set for Christmas that year. Young Delbert was literally beside himself and took to the instrument right away. Unfortunately for him and his mother, the

drums were cheaply made of card paper and Del accidentally fell into them and, "Smashed the whole lot!" But the seed was planted.

Lorraine held a simple job at a local grocer called Valley Low Cost Market in Spokane and was not able to afford to buy another set of drums for young Del, but that was no deterrent. As Del grew older into his pre-teens, he decided to take on THREE paper routes with the regional paper, The Spokesman-Review. It might have been around this time that Del's grit and determination started to develop. Over the next few years, Del had become an award-winning Chronicle Junior Dealer with the paper and earned enough money to buy drumsticks, practice pads, private lessons and eventually a complete drum kit.





Nearly \$1000.00 worth of gear and lessons by age 14. That was 1956...a lot of money in those days for certain. Especially if paychecks were \$0.16 each!

Once Del was able to secure a snare drum and eventually a full drum kit, there was a slight problem: Lorraine was only able to afford a high-rise apartment in Spokane, so Del

couldn't bang about at any hour. While much time was spend on his practice pad, when he wanted to play his drum set or snare, Del would pack his drums and set them up at a local rock quarry where he could play as loud as he liked. Getting a lion's share of reverberation off the quarry walls might have lent itself to later experiments in the studio, but there is where he was able to get his licks in without complaints from anyone. When it was inclement weather, Del was given permission by the quarry owner to set up his drums in an onsite shed so that he wouldn't miss any practice time.

First official lessons began at age 14 with Clark Evans who had just opened his own music shop in the valley area where Del and Lorraine lived. While a freshman at West Valley High School, Del started in the Cadet Freshman band, but before the year was up, his director moved him to the senior band. A move that had not been done prior. His director at West Valley was Dean Rowbotham and eventually Del would morph into the teachings of local drum guru, Howard E Robbins, who was formerly the drummer for Stan Kenton's world-renown band. A quite fortunate thing for young, influential Delbert. Robbins would ultimately in 1961 found the Percussion Naut Patriots fife and drum corps, but Del Blake was ahead of that schedule. Other notable alumni from Robbins' teaching is Glenn Symmonds who moved into the Spokane area in the early 70s. Symmonds was the drummer for Eddie Money.



**Mike Stefanowicz**

It was during the course of these next two years to 1959 that Del discovered the true art of rudimental drumming. The local VFW sponsored a State Rudimental Drumming Competition each year in Yakima, Washington and Del entered and took the title in his first try. While there, Del met Mike Stefanowicz who was a former National Snare Drum Champion from Connecticut who had relocated to Washington and introduced Del to the Eastern method of rudimental drumming.

Mike's publication on the subject was being distributed around Western high schools attempting to introduce the methods beyond just the Eastern United States. No person west of the Mississippi River had ever won a National Snare Drum Champion title. That would change.

In his pursuit, Del would become a relentless correspondent with Stefanowicz and others including John Dowlan of Philadelphia, who was a 5-time National Snare Drum Champion himself and considered by many at the time to be the “best in the world at the craft.” Dowlan would become a member of the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame since 1987 and is unofficially credited with institutionalizing the backsticking technique around 1938 as a way of improving the left hand strength and coordination. Dowlan had been instructing the United States Air Force



**John Dowlan**

Drummers and would use his progressive techniques on the talented airmen. It was said that he was a “relentless learner and a relentless instructor always driving to find innovative ways to improve and progress.” Del Blake would send taped recordings of his playing to Dowlan and ultimately prepared a Dowlan penned piece for his own national championship run. I cannot imagine that someone of Dowlan’s stature in the rudimental community having the time to treat all correspondents in the same way, but it appeared that he and Del Blake might have exchanged dozens upon dozens of recordings. Keep in mind, Del was still a high school student at the time...



As Del Blake was perfecting his rudimental chops, he was also lending his ear to some of the famous drum set drummers that were dominating his record player. 1959 was still in the early stages of Rock and Roll with Elvis Presley being drafted into the US Army in 1958 leaving a “void” being filled by the likes of Buddy Holly. But the Rock and Roll bug was out. However, the Big Band and swing era was as

strong as ever with the aforementioned Buddy Rich fronting his own bands and leaving all drummers before and after in his wake. The drum set was no longer just a sideman instrument by this time thanks more, in part, to the first to take it to the stage front -- Gene Krupa. Del Blake was fascinated with Gene Krupa more so than Buddy Rich. Del would often speak of Gene’s flawless approach to the chart. While acknowledging that Buddy Rich had more speed and power, it was Gene Krupa that romanticized Del Blake to the drum set and big band arrangements. Louis Bellson also caught Del’s ear for his musicality and for his ground-breaking use of double bass drums in his setup. Del would ultimately employ the double bass drum arrangement once he entered the professional ranks as both an instrumental tool as well as a keen way of



**Gene Krupa**

doubling up on advertising space! Del was smart to emblazon his own name on his right-side resonant drum head and the name of his employer on the left-side resonant drum head in bold, simple letters that could be



**Louis Bellson**

clearly seen from afar. A trick that was rare for the time but first employed by Louis Bellson while he was with the Duke Ellington band around 1952.

Del Blake's fascination with Gene Krupa might have also been a keen indicator of things to come in Del's life. Whether driven by his own need to be perfect, by the examples of relentlessness given to him by the aforementioned John Dowlan, the fighter instinct required to see things through to an end by his own uncle and cousins in the boxing world, or an actual obsessive compulsive condition, Del Blake literally had a one-track mind. As seen in this early photograph of Del sitting on the armchair focusing intently on the Gene Krupa record on the player completely ignoring his girlfriend on the chair. One might infuse a thought into her head, "What does it take to pry this boy away from that music so he'll pay attention to me?" She wouldn't be the only one. Del Blake's drive to be at the top of his game would cost him relationships along the way much to his own chagrin.



He admitted it later in his life and would prove to be a single regret. Del would often spend many of our lunch dates digging at me about how I was able to manage being a musician, raising a family, having a "day job", playing sports, and being able to hang with friends where Del was really only able to do that ONE thing...whatever it was. My response always seemed to be, "Well...I am not really great at any of those things, so maybe we sacrifice perfection for balance." It was that balance that he missed, but he just wasn't wired that way. Even as a high school kid.

By the end of his time at West Valley High School, Del had won two State Rudimental Drumming Championships: one in the Junior category and one in the Senior category when he was technically not even old enough to qualify for that level. During his Senior campaign, Del was additionally awarded "Best Overall Drummer" for the competition and beat out an



**Del Blake age 16 with the drums he bought with paper route money**



**Del Blake age 14**

older US Army soldier that had won the award previously in Rhode Island three years in a row. For his Junior solo competition, Del Blake was given a Superior Rating and high drum award in all of Eastern Washington after having only taken drum lessons for nine months. While still in high school, was the first ever Junior member of the National Association of Rudimental Drummers, The Guild of American Percussionists, and the American Drum and Bugle Corps Association despite not even being part of a corps. During both years, Del Blake had been awarded a position in the Foresters' Robin Hood Band that presented itself in the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena, California. The Robin Hood Band was a showcase for the top 50 high school musicians in The United States, Canada and England. Del had scored the second highest marks of all the musicians in those three countries. Del Blake's graduation photo caption read, "Del Blake-most talented. See you in Carnegie Hall!" (see page 12 below)



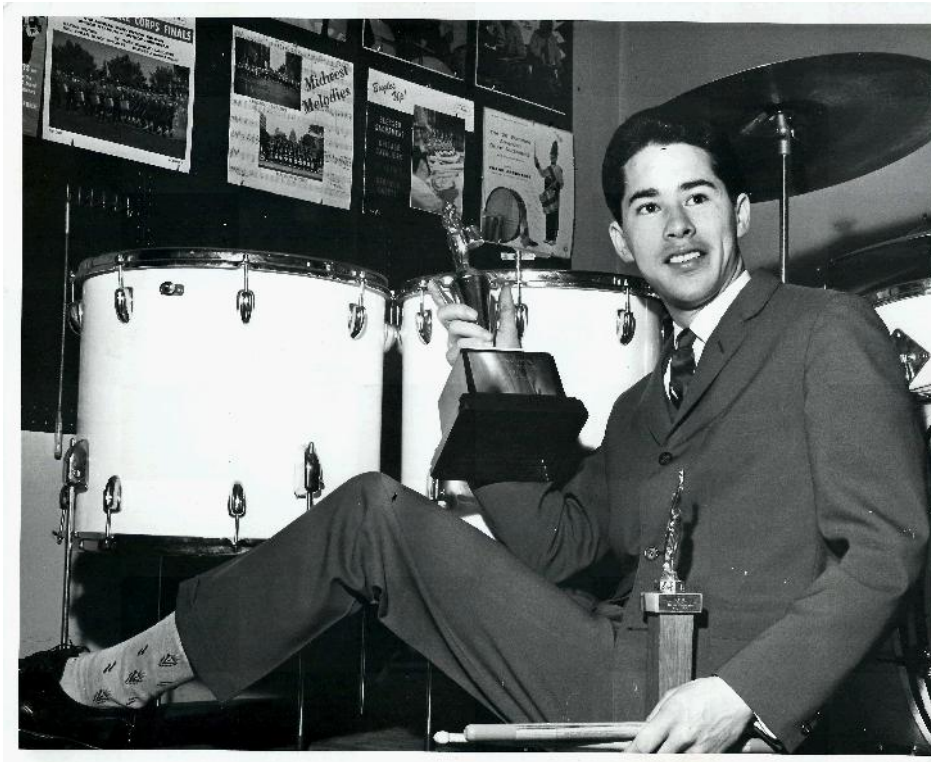
**Del Blake (right) West Valley HS pep band 1960**



**Prior to HS State Competition 1959**

By the time Del was ready to enroll at nearby Gonzaga University in 1962, he was driven more than ever to reach the pinnacle of the rudimental drumming world. During his freshman year, Del had submitted an entry in a national Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Rudimental Drumming contest and placed in the top 10 in North America and was the only Western post (Post 2713 out of Seattle, WA) to even enter. In those circles, there was only really one major competition that determined the “best rudimental drummer” in the Americas. It was the National Rudimental Drumming Championships being held in Philadelphia, PA, that following April, 1963. The contest is the oldest of its kind in North America and rudimental drumming and competitions dated back to 1776 and were always held in the East up to that point. The competition was also an invitational so each participant was hand selected by a review board. The board, made up of former champions and professors of the art at Eastern colleges and universities, were well aware that true rudimental drumming was historically rooted in Eastern states and there had never been a winner that hailed West of the Mississippi River, nor were there likely to ever be any serious candidates. Del Blake was NOT invited to compete despite his record in High School and accolades from Frank Arsenault who was the Senior US Snare Drum Champion proctoring the Northwest Music Conference when Del Blake won his state titles.

The persistent Del Blake wrote the officials of the event...practically “blowing them up” as it might have been in modern terms of correspondence...to the point that the officials reluctantly allowed him to enter the competition. They didn’t take him serious though and placed him in the competition most likely to appease him or to get him off their backs. Once in, Del Blake wasted no time getting mentally prepared. In this invitational competition, each competitor is challenged by the judges to perform two of the 26 Standard Snare Drum Rudiments randomly selected along with a solo of his choice. In prior competitions in Del’s experience, the contestant was able to prepare two selected rudiments, but in this case, the contestant must be proficient in all 26 as the selections were sprung at the moment of performance. Most of the other competitors (about 20 invitees) were members of Eastern Drum and Bugle Corps and/or students of renowned instructors who are connected to the competition or are judges of the same. Del Blake was entered as an “unattached” competitor and most likely, would not receive much favor from the Old Institution. Knowing the odds were against him, Del did not believe that he had turned in an award-winning performance and had actually become violently ill immediately following. Most likely due to the stress he had placed on himself prior. When the scores were announced, Del Blake had done what no other before him had accomplished. He, from West of the Mississippi and unattached to a Corps, took home the title of National Rudimental Drumming Champion, 1963.



**Del Blake with his National Rudimental Drumming Champion trophy, 1963**

Having achieved his goals in rudimental drumming, Del decided to forgo the remainder of his studies at Gonzaga University and pursue a professional music career. In 1963...where else would you go but New York City? Eager to get into any field of entertainment, Del Blake smartly accepted an entry position as a page at NBC which was the largest of the networks in the early 1960s. The entertainment that was scheduled from show to show was all live featuring some of the greatest acting stars and musical acts of the time...and their bands. This was a critical time for the young page to try and get tips from touring drummers on how to not only improve skill, but also get work in that industry. Del was lucky (or plucky) enough to bump into (more than once) Robert "Bob" Rosengarden who was a successful studio drummer and was employed by NBC from 1949-1968 drumming for Steve Allen, Johnny Carson's Tonight Show, and was bandleader for the Dick Cavett Show (ABC). Bob had recorded with Duke Ellington, Quincy Jones, Miles Davis, Gerry Mulligan, Barbara Streisand and even Jimi Hendrix it was told among many others. Maybe it was Del's charm, but most likely his proficiency why Bob Rosengarden recommended him for his first professional drumming job with the house band at the Concord Hotel and Resort in upstate New York's Catskill Mountains about an hour and a half's drive north of Manhattan. The Concord was notable as a vacation destination for the swankiest of New Yorkers that wanted to get away from the big city but not go too far. The entertainment was always World Class with the likes of the aforementioned, Barbara Streisand.



**The Concord Hotel Ballroom**



In the book, It Happened in the Catskills: An Oral History in the Words of Busboys, Bellhops, Guests, Proprietors, Comedians, Agents, and Other Who Lived It, Robert Towers wrote: “Streisand came up on a Friday night [August 9, 1963] before she made “Funny Girl.” The William Morris Agency said, ‘Look, you’re getting her for \$500. Later on you won’t be able to buy her for anything.’ She came up—a little girl in a gunnysack dress with a big voice. She tore the place apart.” Not a bad venue for a first professional drumming gig for the still only 21-year-old Del Blake.

Sat. Aug. 10  
TONY MARTIN

Sat. Aug. 17  
TONY BENNETT

Sat. Aug. 24  
ALLEN & ROSSI

Fri., Aug. 9  
BARBRA STREISAND

Sun. Sept. 1  
SOPHIE, JOE E. & HARRY

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As Del was getting settled into his frantic role of bouncing from resort room to resort room backing the famous and not-so-famous, he received another call from Bob Rosengarden. Bob said that crooner, Buddy Greco was looking for a drummer. Greco was quite literally one of the renowned Rat Pack during his time in Las Vegas. He got his professional start as a pianist, singer and arranger for the Benny Goodman Orchestra and spent four years during World War II touring the world from 1942 to 1946 performing for troops overseas as well as in the US. Buddy Greco started his own recording career in 1947 for various artists and released his first single, "Ooh! Look-A There, Ain't She Pretty" which landed at number 15 on the US Charts. Other Greco hits over the years were "That Darn Cat", "The Lady is a Tramp", and "Mr. Lonely". Greco recorded more than 34 albums as a leader through 1998 and remained active until his death in 2017. He was as demanding bandleader, but he was desperate for a drummer and Rosengarden's recommendation carried massive weight. Almost immediately after a formality audition, the Buddy Greco band went on tour around the world with Del Blake driving the band from behind his newly minted Ludwig drum kit. The band made stops in Capetown, South Africa; Paris, France; and London, England, where the band performed for Queen Elizabeth at the Royal



**Buddy Greco, 1968**

Albert Hall. While on the road with Buddy Greco, Del was literally in “never stop learning” mode. He continued to make improvements to his playing and quite actually would learn signature licks and styles of all the contemporary drumming greats. Del also used the touring opportunity to discover world percussion methods, styles and equipment that would come in great handy later on.



Buddy Greco (second from left) and Del Blake (right)

By 1967, the band would take up residency in Las Vegas at the famed Sands Hotel. At the property, Sammy Davis, Jr., had also taken up residency and the bands would stagger shows nightly. When the Buddy Greco show would end, Del Blake and some of his other bandmates would rush over to the Copa Room where Sammy Davis, Jr., was performing and catch as much of his show as they could. Ultimately, there was a camaraderie built between the outfits. And as Del put it, “The Sands Hotel was the coolest, hippest, place on the Earth at that time with over 3,000 guests hanging around just to catch a glimpse of Frank

Sinatra, Dean Martin, Buddy Greco, and Sammy Davis, Jr., and we were right in the middle of it all making it happen.”

<https://youtu.be/25FZcb8COI4> Buddy Greco recorded Live at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas in 1967 with Del Blake on drums.

From the early 1930s well on into the 1980s, most all musicians were members of a Musician’s Union. Del Blake was no exception. A performer literally could not work on the Las Vegas Strip or in New York or in Los Angeles without his union card. Among Del’s folders, there was an interesting clue about how the Musician’s Union might have controlled the working environment.

The addendum posted here is an “Official Percussion Equipment Doubling Schedule.” It appeared that the Union wasn’t getting enough, so they decided to double the rate scale if you used something outside of your primary instrument... i.e., if you played drum set (category A) and wanted to add Horses Hoof or an African Log Drum (category N), then you would be subject to the doubling scale. If you knew Del Blake like I knew Del Blake then he would have had issue with this clause! (More on that later...)

Around 1969, many of the musicians in Las Vegas were notified that a Musician’s Union strike was settled in Los Angeles. Many of the performers who were mostly from the Los Angeles scene originally, quickly gave their notice to return to LA where

**OFFICIAL PERCUSSION INSTRUMENT DOUBLING SCHEDULE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE JULY 1, 1972.**

Any letter Category may serve as the player's basic instrument with any other letter Categories to be charged as doubles at the prevailing scales. Suspenders yobals will not be charged for when played in conjunction with any other percussion instrument for which a charge has been made; but when it is the only percussion instrument played, it will be charged as either the player's basic instrument or a double as the case may be. Players will not be required to provide instruments of unusual size as determined by local standards.

**INSTRUMENT CATEGORIES:** (Any instrument not named will be classified by the Local)

A. DRUM SET - Consisting of Bass Drum (s), Snare Drum, Hi-Hat, Cymbals, Tom-Toms, two (2) Wood Blocks and Two (2) Cow Bells.  
NOTE: This definition is subject to the removal or amendment of Article V, Sec. 42, paragraph B of the Local Bylaws.

B. TIMPANY

C. XYLOPHONE

D. ORCHESTRA BELLS

E. VIBRAMORP

F. MARIMBA

G. CHIMES

H. CROTALES (ANTIQUÉ CYMBALS) - Chromatic

I. GONG - Maximum Diameter 30"

J. CONGA FAMILY - Conga, Quinate, Tumba

K. BONGOS and/or TIMBALES including COW BELLS

L. SNARE DRUM (except in Drum Set) - including Concert Snare, Field Drum, Parade Drum, Piccolo Snare Drum, and all Tom-Toms excluding Roto-Toms.

M. LARGE SPECIAL EFFECTS GROUP - Maximum of three (3) per instrument charge.

1. Bell Tree
2. Bass Drum (except in Drum Set)
3. Piatti - Hand held or Bass Drum mounted
4. Hi-Hat (Sock Cymbals and Stand) - except in Drum Set
5. Temple Blocks
6. Roto-Toms
7. Marching Machine
8. Wind Machine
9. Thunder Device
10. Tuned Automobile Horns

N. Small Special Effects Group - Maximum of six (6) per instrument charge except for two (2) Wood Blocks and two (2) Cow Bells when used in Drum Set (Category A) or Cow Bells when used with Timbales.

banjo	Wood Blocks	Flex-A-Tone	Finger Cymbal
uvil	Bulb Horn	Bicycle Bell	Train Whistle
bell Plate	Triangle	Gairo	Pop-Gun
iron	Duck Call	Castanets	Sandpaper Blocks
bird Whistle	Cuckoo	Marsacas	Dooy Bell
cat Whistle	Factory Whistle	Buddhist Cup Gong	Brake Drum
leigh Bells	Ratchet	Sistrum	Tin Can Shaker
ind Chimes	Chains	Shakers	Squash Box
ire Bell	Horses Hoof	African Castanets	Air Horn
tip's Bell	Flower Pots	Play Blocks	Cow Bell
ish Board	Dog Bark	Tuned Pipes	Tube
icycle Horn	Blank Gun	Water Drum	Vibra-Slap
GO-GO	Ocarina	Kazoo	Cabasa
ms	Mark Bell Tree	Clavinet	African Log Drum
aves	Alarm Bell	Slide Whistle	Temple Bells
ubuki Blocks	School Bell	Slap Stick	Key Tree
usel Bells	Boing Box	Police Whistle	Bean Bag Ash Tray
ight Bell	Lion Roar	Klaxon	Jaws Harp
			Bird Coll

Any or all: QUICA, PANDERO, BIRAMBAG, AFRICAN TALKING DRUM  
 TABLA R. STEEL DRUM (S) T. SWISS HAND BELLS V. KOREAN BINDING GONG

**1975 Union Percussion Instrument Addendum**

there was more opportunity in the higher-paying film and television industry that was growing exponentially. It was during this time that the drummer for Sammy Davis, Jr., followed suit back to LA. Having watched and heard Del Blake performing with Buddy Greco over the previous year, members of Sammy's band asked if Del could fill in and pull double duty. Del would perform with Buddy Greco in the early slot and then rush over to the Copa Room and perform Sammy Davis, Jr.'s show. It couldn't get much better for the workaholic Del until Sammy announced that he was leaving Las Vegas and heading out on a tour. Sammy asked if Del Blake would take the job on the road which, of course, Del should. That meant he had to give notice to Buddy Greco. Del met Buddy in the foyer of the Sands one afternoon and said, "Buddy, I gotta talk to you. Sammy has asked me to join his band on the road. I'm giving you my two-weeks' notice." At that moment, Buddy Greco...being of Italian descent and temperamental to boot, grabbed Del by the shirt collar, slammed him to the wall and then the floor, choking him violently while shouting, "You ungrateful \*\*\*\*! After all I did to break you into the scene, you \*\*\*\*!" It was settled though and Del took off on the road with Sammy Davis, Jr.

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Sammy Davis, Jr., was one of the top entertainers in the world from his start in Vaudeville at age 3 all the way to his passing in 1990 at the age of 64. Best known for his membership in the famed, "Rat Pack" which included Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Peter Lawford, Bing Crosby, Marilyn Monroe, Angie Dickinson, Juliet Prowse, the aforementioned, Buddy Greco and others who formed as casino-circuit friends at the home of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall who were considered their predecessors. Davis, Jr., was an African-American singer who had hits such as "I've Gotta Be Me" in 1969 and a number one Billboard hit in "The Candy Man" in 1972, converted to Judaism in the early 1960s finding commonalities between the oppression experienced by African-American and Jewish communities through humor and verbal essay. He was a frequent comedic-element star in movies such as the Rat Pack infused "Oceans 11" and "Robin and the 7 Hoods". In 1966, he had his own TV variety show, titled *The Sammy Davis Jr. Show* and quickly earned the nickname, "Mister Show Business". <sup>2</sup>



**Sammy Davis, Jr.**



**Del Blake (far left) with Sammy Davis, Jr. and Bill Cosby (on bongos)**



Del Blake with Sammy Davis, Jr. Live at Carnegie Hall

There were many highlights during Del's time drumming for Sammy Davis, Jr. Of course, the big one to note was the engagement at Carnegie Hall on February 27-28, 1970 that made his high school graduation photo prediction come true. The 27-year-old Del Blake was the highlight moment of each show even according to Sammy himself. Sammy, a fine drummer, was so fond of Del's playing that he gave him a lengthy drum solo section along with a vocal/drum duet medley. Later in the tour in San Juan, Puerto Rico's "Club Tropicoro" a reviewer noted-

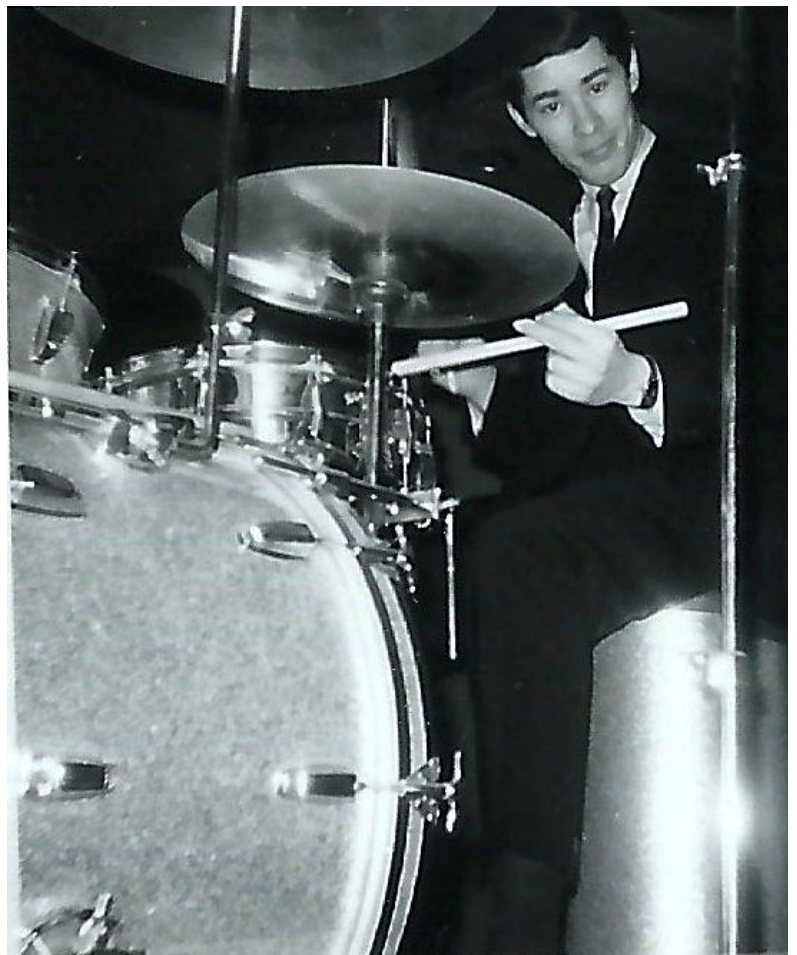
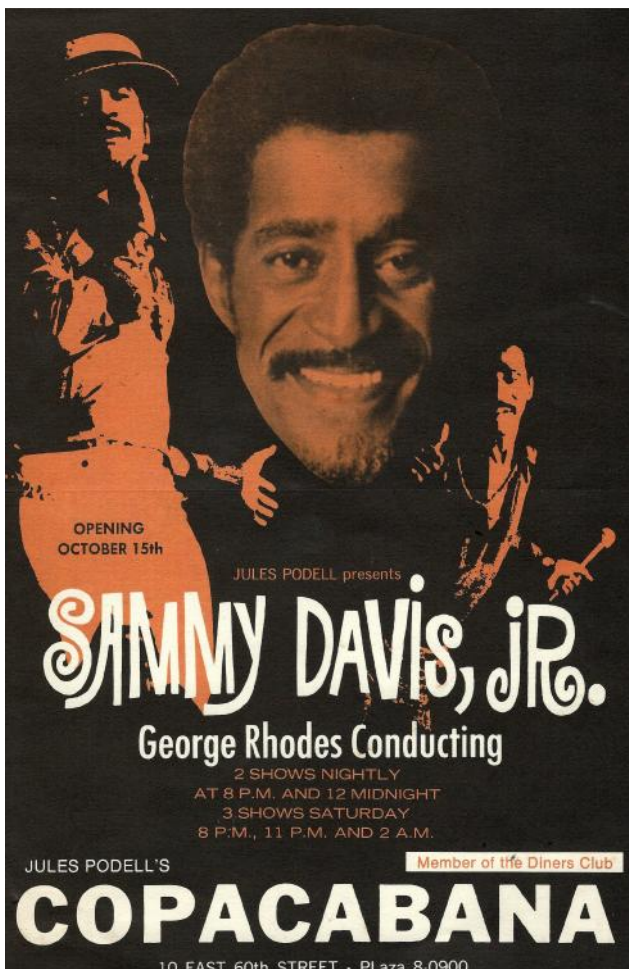


**Sammy Davis, Jr. on drums**

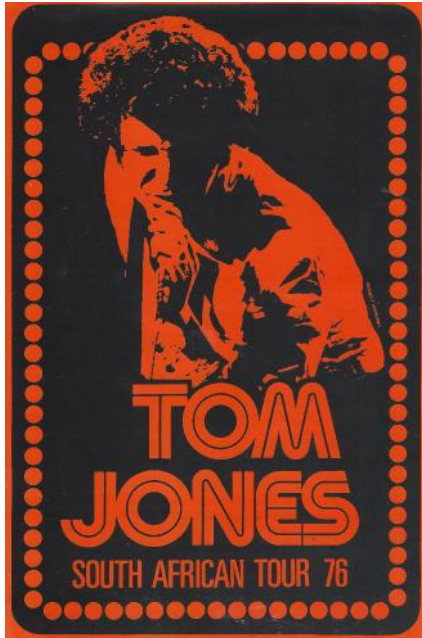
"Dressed in buckskin and wild plaid pants he is his old colorful self. Dangling the microphone almost to the floor, he picks up the sounds of some refreshing tap dancing. Once segment he shares with Del Blake on the drums and the orchestra remains silent. Sammy imitates playing the guitar, bass, etc., to the sole accompaniment of Del's drums. Del takes over midway in some of the finest drumming expertise we have EVER seen."

Still another reviewer of a later show mentions the segment subjectively as well-

"With only Del Blake on the drums, he sings 'I've Got You Under My Skin', 'What the World Needs Now' and 'Falling in Love'. There's a little scat singing (bringing reminiscences of the great Ella and Scat Man Carruthers), followed by a skillful imitation of a bass fiddle. Sammy leaves the stage to percussionist Del Blake, who does his thing beautifully, with a very rare innovation of pounding all of the skins with his bare hands."



Del worked for Sammy Davis Jr., for two full touring seasons before moving on to work as a sort-of “free agent” initially out of Las Vegas, but ultimately headquartered in Los Angeles. Del landed a world tour option with Tom Jones that featured a headlining tour of South Africa in 1976, performed with Englebert Humperdink, Connie Stevens, Connie Francis, and a host of others.



Throughout his travels, Del would begin to collect percussion equipment from all corners of the world. Shakers, cowbells, hand drums...literally all sorts of bells and whistles. These would come in handy when Del had relocated to Los Angeles. He was proficient enough and recommended to land recording spots on a number of television show soundtracks that were popular during the early 1970s: “The Rockford Files”, “Hawaii 5-0”, “The Tonight Show”, “Mission Impossible”, “TJ Hooker” and the “Bing Crosby Show” among a hundred others. Given that there were plenty of drum set players in Los Angeles such as the legendary Hal Blaine of the studio group, “The Wrecking Crew”, there were not necessarily a plethora of percussionists that could authentically handle those duties especially with the volume of work required. Del realized this opening and put his name in for jobs to operate percussion rather than compete with the Hal Blaine’s of the

city. Given Del Blake’s penchant for proficiency, he quickly mastered many of the required instruments including the mallet percussion like marimba, vibes, and xylophone, but also all of those other elements of Latin and world percussion... timbales, bongos, djembes, talking



drums, tambourine, shakers, and so on.

Del took his percussion expertise on the road as well with the likes of David Benoit who was a world-class jazz piano player as part of the Los Angeles Modern String Orchestra. Another gig put his percussion rig with Johnny Fourie’s Sound Department. Fourie, a virtuoso jazz guitarist was once the house player at legendary Ronnie Scott’s in London performing with the likes of Bill Evans, Stan Getz, Freddie Hubbard and Sonny Rollins. Del’s work with Fourie gave him another shot at a tour of South Africa. After one show in the country, the national paper wrote a review of the Sound Department show where each player was noted for their prowess, but more than

An Evening with...

*David*  
**BENOIT**  
Concertmaster  
Bill Henderson  
and  
Vocalist Arnold McCuller  
Produced by Seth Marshall III

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**The Musicians**

**THE DAVID BENOIT QUARTET**

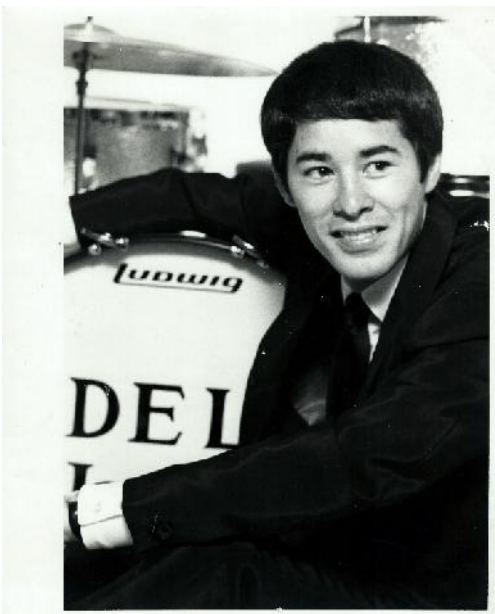
David Benoit — Piano, Conductor      Wade Short — Bass  
Jimmy Fox — Guitar      Tony Morales — Drums

**MEMBERS OF THE L.A. MODERN STRING ORCHESTRA**

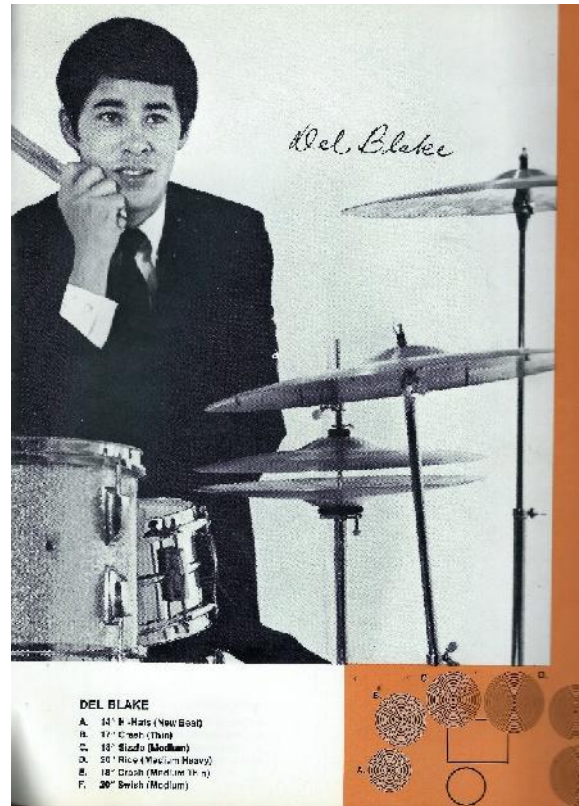
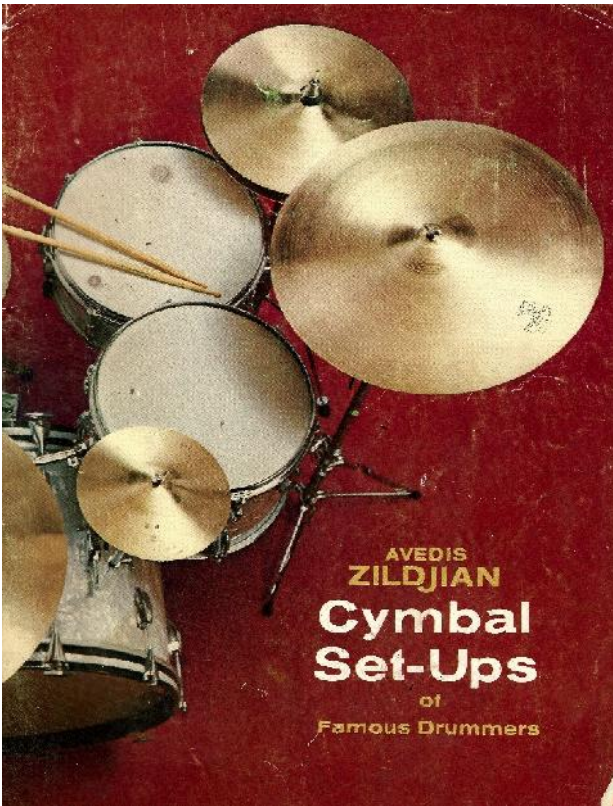
<b>Violins</b>	<b>Viola</b>	<b>Brass</b>
Pamela Henderson (Concertmistress)	JIM ROSS Brenton Banks	Jeff Bunnell Nolan Smith Doug Wintz
William Henderson Gina Kronstadt Jerome Webster Mardi Dicterow Bob Lozin Meg Zivahl	<b>Celli</b> Larry Corbett Suzie Katayama	Sidney Muldrow
	<b>Percussion</b> Del Blake	<b>Woodwinds</b> Steve Carr Doug Norwino

equal attention was given to Del Blake and his keenness with his percussion rig. Noting his infectious humor and his fast and flowing approach to each song using, among other things, "two knee-high drums, cowbells, soft drink cans filled with corn, a giant gong, a range of pots and pans...one brimming with water." I mean...who travels with this stuff?

When back in LA, Del was never out of work and driven more than ever. He picked up gigs with Mel Torme, The Count Basie Orchestra, an East Coast tour with The Woody Herman Band and more dates with Tom Jones. He supported such diverse stars as Rich Little, the ice skater Peggy Fleming, Valerie Bertinelli, Phyllis Diller, Ann Margret, Barry Manilow, Mitzi Gaynor, Jack Benny, Pearl Bailey, Vikki Carr, Shriley MacLaine, Milton Berle, the Osmonds, The Lennon Sisters, Burt Bacharach, Don Rickles, Liza Minelli, Marilyn Maye, Jim Stafford, and Debbie Reynolds whose personal note to Del said, "You have a marvelous talent and I know you will always be successful in this crazy business! Thanks for being so crazy and such fun!" Del Blake was literally the drummer to the stars.



In the 1969 Zildjian guide to the cymbal set-ups of the most famous drummers in the world, Del Blake appears...



Throughout the 1970s, Del Blake would become a regular on call drummer and percussionist not only for his proficiency and professionalism, but also for his wit and humor. As introverted as it might seem someone with Del's discipline and focus, he was quite funny and quick with a line. Never did we share a lunch together over our two-plus decades where there wasn't plenty of laughter...







**Del Blake (center with marching bass drum) with Tony Orlando and Dawn**

In the early 1980's, Del started experimenting with electronic recording equipment, electronic keyboards and drums as well. Most of the equipment was shunned by traditional studio and road musicians as faddish, but Del embraced the coming technology and began to find ways to incorporate it into his arsenal of drums and percussion. This fascination with electronics and the elements that make it work would come in handy a decade later...



**Del Blake in his home recording studio in the 1980s**



Despite getting the work he had dreamed of and fought for his entire life, the intensity of the preparation and workload was taking its toll. Del's obsessive compulsive work ethic was costing him relationships with loved ones and ultimately a couple of marriages. When a man is driven to practice as many as eight hours in a day...every day...along with the work schedule of studio time, regional and world tours as well as residency shows, there is not much room for a wife or girlfriend...or really anything else. Del came to realize this apparently pointed out to him by a loved one he lost and regretted. That's when he decided to quit drumming...cold turkey. Sold all of his top-of-the-line Ludwig drum kits, most all of his Zildjian cymbals and most all of his percussion gear. Del said it was probably over \$100,000.00 worth. Much of it secured through professional endorsement agreements with those companies, but still...

Free from living up to his own expectations in drumming, Del Blake was ready to tackle a new career in the emerging technology of Networking. Del began to put the same sort of obsessive intensity into learning the detailed inner workings network Routing and Switching CPE and was able to transcend his knowledge of recording equipment to develop a natural aptitude for the science. This is where I come into the story: In 1998, I was General Manager of the Northwest Arkansas branch of a regional IT firm called, Custom Microsystems, Inc. My primary duties were sales management and general employee oversight. In November of that year, we hired Del Blake to head up our Cisco Systems training primarily for Wal Mart associates and the Arkansas Army National Guard. Our company agreed to get Del trained and licensed as a Cisco Certified Instructor through Global Knowledge Network, Inc. At the time, there were very few Cisco Certified Instructors in America, if not the world. The minimum rate for instruction on the topics was roughly \$900.00 per day. Del would start right away after his certification and work under the guidance of Global Knowledge Network on behalf of our firm. At one point, Del had become so proficient and effective as a Cisco Certified Instructor that he was awarded the "Top Cisco Instructor" in the world.

It was about two years into our working relationship that I discovered, as mentioned above, that Del Blake had once been a drummer. It just didn't make sense to me that in all of our previous conversations that the subject didn't come up. I mean...Del KNEW I was a drummer myself and generally when folks have a dialogue early on in their relationship, they attempt to find things in common. Del avoided the discussion most likely to avoid falling back into a routine of obsession. It was

weeks... nearly every day that I tried to convince Del to come to my home and drum with me. And it finally happened. I would play a basic drum groove and Del would just start improving and soloing over it. For nearly six hours we played and I remained in awe. He could flawlessly execute signature drum “licks” from all of our favorite famous drumming idols: Gene Krupa, Steve Gadd, Buddy Rich, Louis Bellson, Max Roach, Jack DeJohnette, etc. It had been fifteen years since Del had played drums professionally (or at all) and he had some muscle atrophy, but all the knowledge and placement and skill was still there in its entirety. From that day forward, Del and I would meet regularly to talk about drums and drumming. I did not realize that Del had an obsessive compulsive problem with this and I apparently didn’t care. I just wanted to hear...I wanted the WORLD to hear Del Blake drum. He was brilliant and proficient and it seemed criminal to have his talent silenced. Even (so I selfishly thought) if that was at the expense of personal relationships. I would come to have regrets later on, but in the meantime, the cat was back out of the bag.

In early 1998, a drumming friend had asked me to join a local Scottish Bagpipe outfit called the Ozark Highlanders based out of Fayetteville, Arkansas. I was not good at the style nor did I feel like I had the time or the patience to get good at it. Scottish Pipe Band Drumming is a very distinctive art and very difficult to master. It requires “forgetting” much of modern learning and taking on more of the art of the nearly ancient drumming style...loose hands, light touch, odd notations, and the whole feel of it all accompanying a horribly annoying and loud instrument like the bagpipe. However, when I invited Del to get involved, he not only embraced it, but was determined to repeat his championship form from his youth. Del would dedicate hours each day mastering the technique and bought every book, video and DVD on the subject to learn every in and every out. He traveled to Kansas City, Missouri, to just watch Scottish Pipe Band Drumming competitions so he could get mentally prepared to compete himself. Then...if his dedication was not already cemented in our perception, Del Blake bought a plane ticket to FLY TO SCOTLAND just so he could study from the great domestic legends of Scottish Pipe Band Drumming. Those whose lineage came from the great Alex Duthart who is sort of the Godfather of the discipline and meeting Jim Kilpatrick in England to get literally schooled: “Jim is a nineteen-time World Drum Corps Champion. Fifteen of these titles have been won as a leading drummer. This also includes winning the



**Del Blake practicing the art of Scottish Pipe Band Drumming**

World Drum Corps Championship for a record breaking eleven years in a row between 1988 and 1998. Jim’s move into the solo drumming arena proved to be equally successful. He has smashed every record in the books by winning the RSPBA World Solo Drumming Championships no less than sixteen times. He is also the current holder of the Champion of Champions title, a title he has won three times.



**Jim Kilpatrick**

Another record Jim holds is that of being the only leading drummer ever to win the 'Grand Slam', which consists of winning all five major drum corps championships in one season in 1991. This run coincided with him actually winning 10 major drumming championships in a row over three seasons between 1990 and 1992.”<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.jimkilpatrick.co.uk/jimkilpatrickmbe.htm>) There was no better to learn from in order to accomplish mastery.

Del had often hinted that his goal was “in the next 3 years to win the World Championship.” I didn’t doubt him at all. At first, we would practice together, but I could not keep up. He moved much too fast for me and I just didn’t have the drive, the patience or the time. He worked with a young recent University of Arkansas graduate, Michael Eagle, who would eventually move on to become a World Champion himself as well as an instructor for Scottish Bagpipe Drumming and other rudimental disciplines out of New York.

Del worked tirelessly at becoming the best Scottish Pipe Band Drummer he could be over the next few years. All the while, he was amassing a new collection of drum and percussion equipment as if to make up for lost time. He would send me an email with a photo of a drum or questions about equipment that he knew I was more current with and the next thing I knew, he had ordered the piece online. Nobody really knew how much equipment there was until Del’s passing. Just days prior in the hospital room, Del had asked me to, “Take all my drum equipment. They won’t know what to do with it. Use it. Sell it. Donate it. Whatever...” I knew of the items I had helped Del select; a couple of drum sets, pedals, cymbals and a particular Gaelic Snare. I had NO IDEA about all of the percussion he had been ordering over the years. About three days after Del had passed, his niece received a package from Amazon with some African clay pot percussion piece that Del had most likely ordered from his hospital bed...



**Michael Eagle and Del Blake with the Ozark Highlanders**



Del and I fell out of touch with each other for about a year or so around 2008 and the following year Del asked me to meet him at his home. When I arrived, he had a half dozen paper grocery sacks to give to me. When I looked inside, they were full of piano study books. Hundreds of them. Del had decided to master the piano! Of course, Del was already proficient as a mallet percussionist and had been able to play piano prior, but in this instance, he was looking to rise to the level of a master performer. I just physically shook my head...

Over the past few years, along with his push towards mastering the piano, Del was working to share his drumming talent with local youth by sitting in with Al "Papa Rap" Lopez of Springdale, Arkansas, who has a group called "ArkanSalsa" and is a motivational musician and speaker through his One Community organization (<http://www.onecommunityar.org/>) that shares a multi-cultural togetherness message to all members of the community through music and, in particular, percussion. Del was also putting together his own group to perform at, among other places, a new nursing home facility playing jazz and "standards" to folks that knew that music best. The best part was that Del was pushing to work with younger musicians to try and expose them to the art and style of jazz and big band charts in an attempt to keep that art form alive.



**Al "Papa Rap" Lopez**

Del Blake was an infectious personality and despite his accomplishments and achievements, was always most interested in learning from and uplifting those around him. It started from a very early age as witnessed by this recording of Del Blake at age 4 with his mother by his side singing Happy Birthday and some other selections to his grandfather. His dialogue at age 4 was mature and giving... doing his best to make sure his mother was happy, his grandfather was happy and that everyone listening was "OK". I don't believe that ever left him.



**Del Blake, recording at age 4 in 1947**

Del will be missed by those that knew him and it's a shame that more people did not even know about Del Blake before his passing, but here is a hope that this brief story can enlighten others of a great man with a great talent who was obsessed to be the best, but compelled to make people happy with music and his laughter.

Every memory was a good one...every lunch date...every practice pad session...every "Hey, Stephen, could you come over and help me set up my drums for me? I have some new toys to show you!" session. He was always complimentary of our playing even when he had to know that most of us paled in comparison. Del Blake had every right to be bitter. Having been born into literal captivity as a mixed-race minority, raised an only child to a single mother who had not much more than her love to offer, and up against all odds in a music industry that is unforgiving, Del still made it to the top. Winning championships when he was told he had no chance, getting gigs with the biggest of stars when they were usually reserved for LA insiders, and finding a way to make others happy and appreciated even when he was dying in pain.

There is so much more to his story that I, or most any of us will ever know. While I should maintain regret over dragging Del out of his drumming retirement, I don't. Yes, I am sad that it might have

caused some strife in his relationships again, but the joy he brought me and so many others by sharing his music and passion for drums and percussion was a gift. What I do regret is not spending more time with him by being "too busy" to have another lunch date or a practice pad session. I regret not changing the subject to HIM when I knew he was sick. He insisted on asking me about my day and about my music projects. He never wanted to talk about himself. He should have and I regret not digging more out of him.





**Del Blake and me 2018**

1. [Camp Harmony: Seattle's Japanese Americans and the Puyallup Assembly Center](#) by Louis Fiset
2. <https://youtu.be/oGwKSWKEvGY> Del with Sammy in a super corny TV show duet.
3. <http://www.jimkilpatrick.co.uk/jimkilpatrickmbe.htm>