

GOOD VIBES

Percussionist
Jerry Tachoir talks
music, mustache

By GEOFF LESAR
geoff.lesar@goshennews.com

Montreal, Montreaux, North Sea — some of the largest jazz festival stages in the world, and percussionist Jerry Tachoir has played them all.

A Grammy nomination? He can claim two. There's also the 45 consecutive years spent as an endorsee of Ludwig-Musser, one of the most prominent producers of percussion instruments in the world.

But nothing — no accolades or recognition — can erase the failing grade Tachoir (TASH-WAH) once earned in high school marching band while moonlighting as “the mallet guy” in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

“One day, I got a call from the orchestra that they were filming the first taping of ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.’ It was a pretty big deal — television deal slash recording session — and it was going to pay me pretty well and high exposure,” he said during a recent phone interview.



There was one issue.

The school's Friday night football game, a mandatory date for marching band members, conflicted with the call.

“So I went to my band director and said, ‘Look, I gotta go do this Pittsburgh Symphony date. I can't make the football game next Friday.’ And he says, ‘Well, I'm sorry. You have to. You've got to cancel your orchestra thing.’ I said, ‘No, you don't seem to understand. This is my career versus high school.’ And he said, ‘Well, go ahead and do it, but if you do it, you will get an F.’ So on my report card, it's like band — everywhere A, A, A, A, A — and there's this one F,” he recalled with an incredulous tone more than four decades later.

Specializing in vibraphone and other mallet instruments, Tachoir will bring his quar-

ter and original compositions, many of which are written by his wife and bandmate Marlène, to the Elkhart Jazz Festival for a pair of single sets Saturday and Sunday. Although his sponsor Ludwig-Musser is part of Elkhart-based Conn-Selmer, this will be the musician's debut at the annual fest.

UNDERAGE OPPORTUNITY

Growing up, Tachoir was by most measures a prodigious player. He began studying drums beneath Pittsburgh percussionist Eugene “Babe” Fabrizi, who guided the baby-faced Tachoir through the gamut of related instruments such as tympani, xylophone, chimes, bells, vibraphone and marimba.

“Once I got into the mallet aspect of it, I

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was sold. I liked the idea that I could actually play melodies and hear harmonies and do things like that,” he said.

Employing a four-mallet technique early on, Tachoir became the go-to, first-call cat for regional ensembles, touring theater productions and civic shows in the Pittsburgh area.

All this and he still couldn’t legally turn the keys to a car.

“As a youth in the orchestra, they had to change their rehearsal schedule to accommodate me because of child labor laws and certain curfew times. We’d go on tour and I’d have to have somebody with me, a tutor, so I could get my classes in while I was on the road,” he said, chuckling at thought. “It was kind of an interesting time for me.”

By Tachoir’s own admission, he was green as grass — and a junior in high school — when first approached to fly the Ludwig-Musser flag in spring 1972. The company had a prototype marimba with synthetic bars and was searching for someone with proper chops to promote the new line.

“They needed someone to play this instrument. I was the ‘mallet guy,’ so to speak, and I got the call,” he said. “I went and I met with Mr. Ludwig and Dick Richardson (Musser president), and I played their instrument, gave them suggestions. We talked for a bit and at that time, they basically pulled out a contract and said ‘We would like you to be one of our exclusive artists.’ And we worked out a deal. It was pretty amazing.”

With the ink of the contract likely still wet, Tachoir began popping up in promotional spreads and traveling for out-of-town clinics. If a vibraphone rig was needed, he picked up the phone. Food and lodging while on the road were often covered under per diems, and other monetary payments were routinely sent his way.

Not to be glossed over, this was still a kid representing a worldwide company under the wary watch of his parents.

“That kind of was sort of an issue with my parents because they were a little bit concerned. But after meeting Mr. Ludwig and Dick Richardson, they were assured that any event they were involved with would be a classy event and they had nothing to worry about,” he said.

BERKLEE BOUND

Initially, Tachoir’s style was rooted in classical performance. During an event with fellow endorsee and vibraphonist Gary Burton (a longtime collaborator with keyboardist Chick Corea, among countless other giants of the genre), Tachoir was turned on to the improvisatory world of jazz.

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The Boston school, an elite institution for musical study then and now, left a heavy imprint on the performer. While exceptional players throughout music

superseded anything else offered anywhere. And I can honestly say that because I do a lot of clinics where I go to a lot of the universities throughout the United States and Canada and the information I got from Berklee unbelievably surpassed anything else that I’ve seen at any other school.”

THE STORY OF THE ‘STACHE

Berklee is also where he met his wife, pianist Marlène, originally of Quebec, Canada. Upon her graduation one year after Jerry’s, the couple married and moved to New York City in the summer of ’77. With few friends and a yet-to-be-established reputation, Tachoir said he struggled to find his footing in a city known as home to heavy players and hard personalities.

“The crazy thing about this time, New York in late ’70s was a very aggressive — not a great place. It was a little hostile,” he said.

It’s the place where Tachoir paid some dues and learned how a little facial fuzz could add a few years to his boyish looks.

“Man, that was the worst. I remember going to this club, Sweet Basil. I heard a lot of the bands that were playing there and they were good. I just felt very confident that my band could fit in there and play just as well, if not better, because we were doing more original stuff. And I met the club owner and he looked at me and goes, ‘How old are you?’ I think at that time I was 21, maybe,” he said.

“And I told him. He says, ‘Look, kid, why don’t come back when you get some scars, pay some dues.’ And I was really offended. So I came home and I told my wife. I looked in the mirror and I had this like little baby face, it was ridiculous. I could see what he meant. I looked like a 14-year-old kid. So I said, ‘I gotta do something to appear older, to look older.’ So I started growing a mustache. That’s the only thing I could think of. So I grew the mustache and I’ve had the mustache ever since. I’ve been dying to shave it off but my wife is going, ‘Nooooo, it’s your identity. You’ve got to keep it.’

Looking like Charles Bronson who traded his magnum for mallets, Tachoir will wear the ‘stache when he takes the Jazz Fest stage. Following their quartet performance, Jerry said he and Marlène will enter their home studio just outside of Nashville, eager to record their first album as a duo.

“Her and I have been doing a lot of duo things lately which has been really, really exciting. She’s a composer/piano player — she’s got perfect pitch. When she writes stuff, she knows what notes to write. There’s no question,” he said.

“It’s been real fun to go around and perform as a duo because it’s no hassle, you don’t have to deal with sidemen, it’s real easy to travel. When we play, we know each other so well that it just works — it’s magical.”

history have spawned from informal backgrounds, Tachoir is a vocal proponent of academic instruction. Looking back, he attempted to quantify the educational experience, coming up empty with seemingly no point of comparison.

“It was THE center of contemporary jazz improvisation, modern hip music of the world. It was a major place,” he said of the setting. “The education I got there