



# In the Spot Light...

## Jamie Hess

by Andrew Kehe



Practically from the time he picked up his first pair of drum sticks some 65 years ago, Jamie Hess has never met a gig he didn't like.

Now, he might have turned down a chance somewhere down the line to play a groove for a Tibetan monostatic chanting trio, or an Appalachian clogging ensemble, but not before seriously thinking about it.

It is the experience the 69-year-old seeks, not the stardom that could have resulted. It is the joy of playing, the joy of seeing smiles on the faces of musicians he just met, because his playing made them feel better about their own.

"I've gained a reputation for being someone you can count on in a pinch," said Jamie, a valued Thursday night jam contributor and set-up volunteer for many years. "I may not play like your drummer, but I'll make the band feel good. That's all I've ever wanted.

"And if I'm out of my depth, I know others who are in their depth and I'll get them to play."

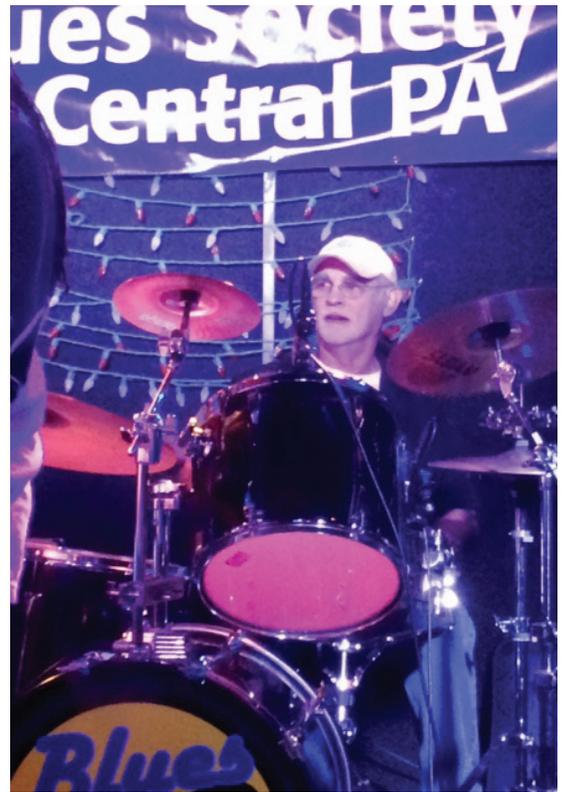
It's no wonder, then, that Jamie has traveled the country since his teenage years joyously sitting in as a drummer for hire for hundreds of bands, and finding equal satisfaction for the last ten years or so providing a studio session-drummer like back beat at the Thursday night jam.

The only difference is Jamie doesn't have to wait by the phone in his home in Colombia, Pa. to receive an invitation to play.

"I've met a lot of fun people here, made good friends here," Jamie said about the jam, which was first exposed to him by keyboardist Tom Lowry. "I've got a lot of work through it.

"I like blues, but I like all kinds of music. I like the freedom of the jam, you can put your ideas into it. This is an outlet for me to have fun, just have a good time."

As gifted as he is, Jamie never set out to be a "star" performer in the likes of a Buddy Rich, Ginger Baker, Charlie Watts of the Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin's John Bonham. His inspiration came from enormously talented studio drummers like Hal Blaine, Roger Hawkins, Benny Benjamin and Al Jackson who all worked or who still work in relative obscurity providing grooves for some of the most memorable music of the past 60 years.



He relates to the musicians who comprised the Wrecking Crew, a Los Angeles-based conglomeration of players of all types and sizes who in the 1960s and 70s produced iconic sounds for dozens of hugely popular rock, soul and R&B bands.

In his own right, Jamie is, in a sense, a one-man Wrecking Crew.

"That might be a bit much," he quickly counters. "But what they did is what I always wanted to do. Those are the guys I wanted to be like. I had this dream when I was a kid, I didn't care about being a recording artist. I wanted to be a working musician, backing up somebody good. And I did."

Jamie can fill the better part of two hours relaying stories about his travels east and west, playing weeks or months at a time at hotels, clubs, state fairs and business conventions with numerous bands playing multiple styles.

In Las Vegas, he once played a set sandwiched between sets by Garth Brooks and Bob Hope. Brooks liked Jamie so much he invited Jamie to lunch with him and Hope. Jamie politely turned it down.

"I didn't want to be away from my band."

Fill-in gigs turned to permanent ones. Still a teenager, he found himself in 1965 as the only white musician on the otherwise all-black Del Boys R&B band after accepting a call to fill in. The relationship lasted more than a year. He loved it, he said. He loved the rhythm, the groove.

So, when the British invasion was in full tilt, Jamie felt, well. . . . invaded.

"I didn't want those guys here," he said. "I liked the music I was playing. I didn't give a (darn) about British stuff."

The Beatles, I really didn't like them that much. I didn't follow them. Led Zeppelin. Couldn't have cared less. I was continually working with bands out of that realm.

"Now everybody's playing classic rock and roll. Well, I played it when it was new, it wasn't "classic," but I never really went that way much. I get calls now to do classic rock and they're doing Led Zeppelin and all the typical ones from the 60s and 70s.

"I do them now because it's my job to do it. It's a gig."

Have gig will travel?

"That's exactly right."

It's easy to overlook the fact that the man has found time to build a career in an unrelated field all these years. All the drumming and traveling and teaching drums has been weaved around a successful career as a graphic designer. Or maybe graphic designer has been weaved around the drumming. It's hard to tell.

It hasn't all gone down smoothly. Bands break up. Things can get messy. Jamie has been in the middle of a bunch of them. Commitments can waiver. Promises go unfulfilled. One in particular still resonates.

While playing in Nashville with the Indian River Band formed by his friend Stu Huggins, whom he still plays with, Jamie vowed to his extraordinarily supportive wife Madeline of now 46 years that he would return to his home in Columbia two weeks prior to the expected birth date of their daughter Kate in April, 1986.

"She was born two weeks and three days early," he said. "Yes, I missed it."

Then awkwardly searching for something, Jamie says, "I always tell her she's so impatient."

Then there were the strokes suffered in back to back years, the second one resulting in some residual nerve damage, and followed a few years later by painful rotator cuff surgery just a few years ago. The shoulder is still not 100 percent.

He feels both lucky and inspired to have dodged serious implications.

"Both of those things have brought me to evaluate life as well as drumming," he said. "So much of my recovery, both physical and emotional, was thanks to the support of my wife and encouragement of friends."

"I have, even when doubtful, always hoped to continue playing. Now I'm focusing on trying to simplify my playing, and to pick jobs and music I most enjoy."

Even now in his seventh decade of playing drums, it's doubtful anyone has taken Jamie off their speed dial.

