



JIMMY AND JOEY'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

The greatest B-3 players of two generations join forces on CD and onstage.

by Stephen Fortner

It's the kind of thing any gathering of fans — whether music fans or sports — daydreams about after a few rounds: What if the godfather of the whole game shared the limelight with the young lion who's taken it to a new level? And what if we had front-row seats? Of course, to get sports heroes of this type together, you'd need a time-traveling phone booth. For music titans, you need something else with magical powers... such as a pair of Hammond B-3s.

The godfather, of course, is Jimmy Smith, who at

79 shows not one iota less passion or virtuosity than when he burst onto the scene in the early '50s. To this day, he remains *the* reason anyone says "jazz" and "organ" in the same sentence, whether they know it or not. The young lion in our scenario is Joey DeFrancesco, whose superhuman chops and pure genius are matched only by his love and evangelism of the art.

As for those front-row seats, your humble correspondent scored some at a couple recent gigs in L.A. You

photo by Michael Woodall

TWO'S COMPANY

Two Hammond organs and four Leslie speakers crowded the stage at Catalina's, the famed Hollywood jazz club. At stage right was Joey's new B-3 Portable, supporting a Yamaha Motif 7 which he uses for lush string swells and, in a move that surprised some, face-melting solos on a Minimoog-style patch. "I'm all about the organ, but it's fun to experiment with other sounds, especially when Jimmy's up there on his B-3," explains Joey. "There's a Motif Rack behind me, and sometimes I play piano on it from the new B-3's lower manual. I also like to alternate a slap bass sample with the usual organ bass when Jimmy's soloing." Behind Joey are a pair of new Leslies: a tube-amplified 122XB and solid-state model 771.

Jimmy Smith's rig, just like his philosophy, was pure vintage: a slightly-chopped C-3 feeding a pair of 122s. The bottom panel was removed so we could see his pedalwork. "Here's what I know about technology," he quips. "[Legendary recording engineer] Rudy Van Gelder turned the knobs, and I played." Joey adds, "This particular C-3 is what he plays when he's in L.A., but we both use the new B-3 on the record. Hammond gave him one, and they've just been a stellar company to deal with on all levels. Whenever we need anything, it's just there."

Why two Leslies apiece? Jazz purists don't mic them, preferring that the audience hear the sound of the actual rotary cabinet, not a signal through P.A. speakers. In this situation, more is more.



Jimmy Smith's view.



Joey D's rig.

can score your own when you get a copy of *Legacy*, Joey and Jimmy's first studio collaboration, due out Feb. 15th on Concord Records. *Legacy* is a banquet, combining originals like the straight-ahead "Jones'n for Elvin" (on which tenor sax legend James Moody joins in) and the more experimental title track, along with new versions of Smith staples, notably a greased-up "Got My Mojo Workin'" on which Smith sings, as he did on his original recording of the tune in '66.

My front-row seats couldn't have been better. And after a jaw-dropping musical conversation in which Catalina's roof didn't stand a chance, the two giants made time for a verbal one, and I could have sworn I heard a bell ring. It must have been because class was in session.

Every B-3 player I've ever talked to tells a story about how they heard a Jimmy Smith song, and it was organ and not piano for them from then on. But Jimmy Smith was an accomplished jazz pianist first as well. What's his story?

JS: Part of it was that I was just sick of out-of-tune pianos! You never knew what you were gonna get in those clubs. I knew a lot of cats who carried a tuning fork with 'em and tuned the piano on opening night if they had to. The organ, it never goes out of tune.

JDF: It all began when he saw Wild Bill Davis, who was one of the only guys around using the B-3 for jazz at the time. Of course Jimmy developed a different sound, but he asked him "What would it take for me to play that?"

JS: . . . and Bill growled, "It'd take you ten years just to learn the pedals!" I was young, and at the time, his attitude was sorta like "Who are you, you little snot?" Made me mad, but I couldn't get mad like I wanted to, so from then on I tried to prove him wrong.

JDF: But Jimmy'd already been playing Bud Powell, Art Tatum, all that incredible piano stuff.

So the sensibility was already there. The blues, the bebop . . .

JDF: Exactly. It was just a matter of getting that left hand and that foot going.

JS: Tatum, Fats Waller, all the stride guys, they mixed *crazy* left-hand bass with their playing, and if you really wanna understand the jazz B-3 thing, you should check them out. Tatum owned a club in Toledo — don't ask me the year — but one time word got around that he was home. Hollywood people'd pay big money to see him play, but at his joint, you could get in free. I got on the bus and stayed at the YMCA to hear that show, and I got a seat right next to the piano. His left hand was so fast it was like a gliss, and he kept it all goin' — bass and chords — while he drank a beer with his right. Best time I ever had in my life. Didn't learn much, though, because it was too damned fast!

How did the Latin treatment of "Back at the Chicken Shack" on *Legacy* come together?

JDF: Obviously I wanted to include it, but it's *such* a classic that, in a sense, the only way to do it justice was to make it nothing like the original. Plus I just thought it would be funky like that, so we brought in Tony and Ramon Banda [24-year veterans of Latin-soul superstar Poncho Sanchez's band] on bass and percussion.

Different instrumentalists in the same band have a hard enough time staying out of each other's way; how do you two do it on the same instrument?

JS: The secret is listening. I'm up there, and Joey's up there, playing this *intense s**t*, but the fact is, our ears are a lot busier than our fingers. A lot of people show up wanting to see one of us cut the other down, y'know, "the battle of the B-3's." You don't battle somebody you enjoy playing with this much.

Live or on *Legacy*, what's the method of dividing the organ parts and deciding who does what when?

JDF: No plan, just pure listening. Not a week goes

WHAT'S IN YOUR CD PLAYER?

Joey D: Ray Charles with Count Basie, and a copy of Jimmy Smith — *Live in Israel*. Last year I bought Jimmy a DVD player, and most of the time his westerns are what's in it! He's been digging on R. Kelly's tune "Step in the Name of Love" when he's down at his manager's club, Bobby C's.



WHAT'S YOUR WORST GEAR NIGHTMARE?

Joey D: Anytime the producer or backline guys didn't carefully choose the organ, I used to run into bad tubes and lousy key contacts, and most of the time I could fix 'em. But it made the gig hellish.

YOU GOTTA HEAR THESE



Joey DeFrancesco and Jimmy Smith, *Legacy* (Concord Records)



Jimmy Smith, *Retrospective* (4 DC set, Blue Note)

by that I don't see Jimmy, if we're both home. Jimmy's manager owns a club in Phoenix where we jam a lot, and over the years, we've developed almost a telepathic connection. When it came time to make the record, we'd start a tune up. I'd play, he'd play, whatever. It was *easy*, man.

What would you say to the kid with a sampler and a drum machine, who takes little elements of classic jazz, R&B, maybe one of your licks, and puts it in a new context?

JS: [Scowls.] Man, what'd you have to go and say "drum machine" for? On [classic 1956 album] *The Champ* I kicked bass pedals, and I was mad that some people were saying I'd overdubbed them. Even that won't give you the feel of playing it all at the same time, for real.

JDF: On one hand it's good that they put those elements in there, because it makes people hear something they normally wouldn't. On the other, I don't think that should be anybody's primary mode. If you wanna learn music, man, the stuff we do is a workout. But I don't want to give the impression it's all about technique and speed, either. Music has to engage you emotionally, and I'm not gonna name names, but that's why I don't dig the sort of jazz that indulges in difficulty for its own sake. I'd rather listen to something simpler that's coming from someone's heart.

About your technique and speed, Joey. At times it's like you're playing outside the laws of physics, and still, every note is right in the pocket. I'm sure a lot of organists want to know how on earth you do it.

JDF: Move your fingers like this [holds hand in midair and wiggles all five fingers rapidly]. Now, move your hand back and forth above the keyboard, and you'll sound like me! [Laughs.] Spiritually, I'd have to say God is helping out a lot. To make more sense of it, I think it was that I met Jimmy at such a young age . . .

JS: His daddy brought him to see me when he was only seven.

JDF: . . . and I'd been listening to his stuff since before that, so it was perfectly normal to me. I thought, "this is just what you do with an organ." I also play very lightly, although I can't say for sure if that makes a difference. I'm barely touching the keys when I do those really fast runs. Other than when I do a palm swipe or something like that, I'm not leaning into the organ that hard. Jimmy plays the same way. There may be something to that

relaxation and not making unnecessary body movements, but then I've seen cats do the opposite and sound great, so who knows?

Jimmy, you lack nothing in terms of technique, but if I had to pinpoint the most remarkable thing about your sound, it's that there's this wonderfully behind-the-beat feel, almost a funk rather than a swing. I could spend 20 years trying to cop your solos and never get a tenth that nasty. It's why everyone wants to play like you.

JS: Imagine you're makin' love, and I don't mean all proper and romantic, either. That's how white people do it. [Table erupts into peals of laughter.] Seriously, though, the best jazz, blues, bebop, funk, it's an expression of sex. You can't say out loud what you wanna do, but you can say it with the instrument. The music is nothing without that energy. Now you know.

JDF: There's something to that, really. I've seen serious music students, they train rigorously, and it's almost a repressive lifestyle. Technically they can play anything, but often, there's no feel.

Take the person who's got a casual grasp of jazz organ at best, the one who thinks of Jimmy as the "percussive sound" guy. What would either of you like them to know that they might not?

JDF: I'm all over this one. Jimmy's first band included John Coltrane. The swing, the unheard-of melodic relationships, a lot of those things that make Trane synonymous with jazz . . . I researched this like crazy, and I'm convinced Trane learned from Jimmy! Most of the world doesn't realize how deep a musician this guy is.

How about you, Joey? Where would you like to grow musically from the huge expanse of ground you've already covered?

JDF: I've become very interested in world music. I'm learning more about African rhythms from my drummer Byron, and it'd be cool to have just traditional African drums and the organ. I've been listening to eastern Indian music too, and thinking about what it would sound like to infuse some of that into a New Orleans second-line thing. It seems like we haven't progressed much beyond what Miles, Coltrane, and Parker did with jazz. It's still very modern-sounding, and bands are still trying to get it right.

The closest thing I can think of to Legacy is what the world might have gotten to bear if Miles Davis and Wynton Marsalis were as good friends as the two of you.

JDF: Hey, where'd you get that? It's exactly what I've said in several interviews. Miracles can happen when you truly respect the giants who came before you. That's what this record is all about.