

Clarke Rigsby and Tempest Studios

By Mike Florio



Antranik Tavitian

A40-year run in any business is certainly an achievement, but one might call a 40-year run in the recording-studio business “a miracle.” But that is precisely what producer Clarke Rigsby has done—keeping the doors open at Tempest Recording in Tempe, Arizona for four decades.

“The next 40 years?” ponders Rigsby. “Well, next week, I’m selling all this sh*t and putting my dough into crypto.”

Jokes aside, some of the most legendary names in music—including Bo Diddley, Glen Campbell, the Four Tops, and Tower of Power—have found their way to Rigsby’s unassuming studio, which rests behind his vintage home in a quaint residential neighborhood. Amongst the studio’s mix of vintage gear and modern technology is a vibe that has beckoned renowned drummers such as Peter Erskine, Hal Blaine, Jerry Marotta, Steve Ferrone, Harvey Mason, David Garibaldi, and Steve Gadd to comb through Rigsby’s snare collection and track with his mid-1980s Gretsch kit.

“I used his studio drums, which were perfectly tuned for the room,” says Garibaldi. “Clarke works fast, he really knows his gear, and he is very friendly—which makes the experience even better.”

In my experience, cultivating relationships into “mystical kinships” is a good part of Rigsby’s M.O. That’s not exclusive to drummers, but to everyone who steps over the Tempest threshold.

“I’ve got nothing but praise for Clarke,” says Gadd. “He takes care of business. And they do everything over there. His wife, Mary Ann, makes cookies [laughs].”



Steve Gadd in session.

Some of the most renowned drummers of our time have passed through Tempest. Considering you're not in Los Angeles, New York, or Nashville, how does that even happen?

That's a question I've often asked myself. There was no master plan, other than wanting to get out of playing gigs and concentrate on music. I had a fortunate experience at 16, when I was asked to play guitar at a 4-track studio in Hollywood called Criteria. In an epiphanic moment, I realized that place—and I assumed all recording studios—were only about making music with no “civilians.” I never got that little studio out of my head. I was 27 years old when I created my first little studio with the intention of helping songwriter friends, and it just grew from there.

I've been patient, because I couldn't afford not to be, and I've always tried to elevate, within my means, the quality of what's done here. Hopefully, this doesn't sound pretentious, but whether that meant educating myself about recording, different musical styles, and new gear, or just acquiring a new mic stand if that's all I could afford that month, I felt like I was moving forward. By the time these guys showed up, I felt reasonably secure in being able to pull it off, whatever it was.

You worked with some amazing national and international talents, but are there any local drummers of note you've recorded?

Every city is blessed with great musicians who are out there night after night just for the love of playing and making a living bringing some music into the world. I've enjoyed working with most of the really good players in town—the late Dave Cook comes to mind—as well as yourself, Todd Chuba, Dom Moio, Lewis Nash, Dan Tomlinson, John Lewis, Roy Cameron, Dowell Davis, Brian Fahey, and Gary Bruzzese. There is also a bunch of young guys from the great jazz program at ASU who shall, in the interest of space, remain nameless and pissed off [laughs].

Why did you load up Tempest with so much vintage gear?

If you've been aware within the last 35 years or so, you've no doubt realized every sound and every instrument now has its own accessible and affordable sample libraries. These are great tools, and I'm not putting them down, because I actually use some. But my thinking is, "If we love these sounds so much, why not go to the source?" On some soul level, I want to work with the real thing. This goes not only for drums, but for guitars, amps, keyboards, and other gear. The caveat is if you are going to use vintage tools, you've got to commit willingly to the love and suffering that comes with them.



The studio's Gretsch kit in action.

The studio has quite a snare collection, as well, and you always make great suggestions about which to use.

I've never really thought of myself as a collector, which might seem hilarious to my friends. Whatever knowledge I have about drums has come via my friends, particularly Todd Chuba, Dom Moio, and yourself. I just see snare drums as another tool at a player's disposal. I may suggest something, but I'll always defer to the player. The bottom line is if a snare is not working, it will be obvious enough as soon as we listen back. Then, there's another choice.

What is your philosophy for getting a good drum sound?

First and foremost, I work with really great drummers. Humans who have done this for years, seen it all, and understand the task at hand makes my job easy. The least I can do for them is have the tech side of things worked out so they don't have to sit and wait. This means knowing what we're going to do, knowing what's appropriate for that session, and trying to anticipate the things that might occur. On the other side of the glass, I've been in sessions where nothing is ready, and by the time it is, not only do you not feel like playing music, you've lost the will to live.

Now, you might not get paid for hours of setup and testing, but if you care about music, you do it anyway, because that's what it takes. It also means knowing something about the music you're about to record, its history, and how it sounds on record. You may choose to alter that sound, but knowing the aural history of recorded sound is really important. My number-one complaint when I visit recording schools is the lack of exposure to different types of music. If you don't know the difference between a concert bass drum and a jazz kick, how are you going to know how to record it?

As for getting sounds, it just doesn't seem that hard to me, but some guys will make it hard. I used to work at a two-studio complex, and when walking down the hall, there were a few times where I'd hear a drum soundcheck going on for days. Obviously, this had something to do with the size of the recording budgets back then, but I remember thinking, "What the f**k is going on in there?" If you're a pro, you should not only be able to hear and diagnose any problem, but also know how to fix it pretty quick. Meanwhile, before they'd finish getting the kick-drum sound, we'd made and mixed an entire record.

Do you approach jazz sessions different than rock or pop sessions?

I don't approach sessions differently, other than the choice of drums—say, an 18" kick for jazz, or maybe a 20" or 22" for pop, rock, or country. Typically, jazz kicks are often more open, and the pop stuff is more compressed and aggressive. However, Steve Gadd uses the same setup for everything, and it's always fantastic. I've said many times that we could set up a pizza box and he'll kill it.

Gadd seems to be working at Tempest often enough. How did the relationship with him start?

I first met Steve after he'd arrived in Phoenix. I'm sure the first session he did here was something [organ and trumpet player] Joey DeFrancesco put together. We've done many sessions since then. Steve asked if I'd be up for doing some stuff when he was home, and I said, "Absolutely!" These days, everyone has a studio at home, so I asked if he wanted me to help him put that together at his place. He said, "I don't want that crap at my house. I want to come hang at your studio."

When producing a session with a drum hero, is it challenging to suggest that something they're playing isn't working?

That depends on a couple of things. As you might imagine, every one of those players will know if it's working or not, so it's not necessary to point anything out too soon. I let them go through their process. If you're producing, you'll hopefully have a larger view of where things should be going, so it's incumbent upon you to make any unknown future events clear at some point. Garibaldi, Gadd, Ferrone, and Lenny Castro are used to turning on a dime to get to the best version of anything they work on. They also want everyone to be happy with the results, so you give them space to come to that. After we'd done a few sessions, Gadd and I were listening back to something, and, for the first time, he asked, "What do you think?" I said, "I think we should get some coffee."