



Ali Jackson Jr.

Groove du Jour

For ten-plus years he was the drummer for the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, the New York institution fronted by iconic trumpet player Wynton Marsalis. Recently he took the enormous well of experience he got from that gig and others, and returned home to Detroit, where ever more musical wonders no doubt await him.

Story by Drew Schultz

Photos by Paul La Raia

"It's like coming back home, but at the same time moving forward." Although this quote by bassist Omer Avital comes from the Yes! Trio's announcement of their latest album, *Groove du Jour*, Avital's words could just as easily describe the musical philosophy of drummer Ali Jackson Jr. For Jackson, home was Detroit and a household filled with music. His mother was a classical pianist who taught him how to play and read music. His father, Ali Jackson Sr., was a jazz bassist, composer, educator, artist, and poet who performed with icons such as John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk.



At a young age, Ali Jr. was making lasting impressions on older musicians, displaying not only talent but also a drive to learn. He made early connections with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and went on to study privately with drumming legends Max Roach and Elvin Jones. Moving from Detroit to New York City, Jackson earned his degree in music composition from the New School university. He's released multiple albums as a bandleader and appeared on recordings by a diverse range of artists, including Joshua Redman, KRS-One, George Benson, Dee Dee Bridgewater, and Bobby McFerrin. He's performed with everyone from Eric Clapton to the New York City Ballet, and he spent more than a decade in the drummer's chair with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

While studying at the New School, Jackson connected with Omer Avital and pianist Aaron Goldberg, beginning a friendship that has lasted more than twenty-five years. In 2012 they released their first recording as Yes! Trio and performed internationally. Last year saw Ali return to Detroit from New York with a triumphant homecoming show at the Detroit Jazz Festival and the release of Yes! Trio's *Groove du Jour* album. The recording includes three original compositions by Jackson, including the title track, the explosive opener "Escalier," and "Claqué," which features rhythmic motifs played on the drumkit and tambourine.

Throughout the album, the trio alternates between fearless improvisation and airtight delivery of melody and groove as a unit. True to its name, *Groove du Jour* offers danceable rhythms and singable melodies while not shying away from exploratory solo sections. "C'est Clair" evolves, with Ali stirring brushes underneath a waltz cymbal pattern, fluidly sticking and comping, and then moving into a joyously unexpected Gospel-esque tambourine outro. "Dr. Jackle" moves between fierce uptempo swing and minimalist experimentation, culminating in Jackson and Goldberg trading inventive solos that display melodic ideas, time manipulation, and a wide usage of the drumkit's sonic palette. "Tokyo Dream" provides a bluesy melody that dances around the quarter-note pulse and a virtuosic drum solo. Another highlight is the cowbell interplay combined with expressive drumming on "Flow," which concludes with another mind-bending drum solo over the hypnotic bass and piano groove.

Ali Jackson Jr.'s return to Detroit provided a quick springboard into an international tour with Yes! Trio, and he was kind enough to speak to *Modern Drummer* while still on the road, discussing returning home while moving forward. Like the imagery Omer Avital's quote evokes, Jackson manages to look simultaneously behind and ahead, drawing inspiration from the past masters while continuing to use his own skills to push musical boundaries.



"You have all of these different styles and time periods that you can draw from, each with its own vocabulary, and you have specific styles of drummers within each era. Improvisation becomes all about how someone organizes all of that and becomes relevant in the moment."

MD: Your musical story starts at such a young age. What was it like being surrounded by such amazing music and musicians as a child?

Ali: As a kid, just the vibe of being around great musicians...we had great musicians

coming through my home all the time, and for me they were just people. If I were to start roll-calling people, it was some of the greatest musicians in the world, period, but for me they were like extended family. I had a huge connection with the older

generation, and I saw what the music meant to them. I just knew at eight years old that I wanted to be a musician, and it's taken me on an amazing ride. My father was a jazz musician, my mother was a classical musician, and I just wanted to be around

the best musicians possible. I've been out here a long time, and I don't play for accolades; I play for the respect of other musicians that are very serious and respectable.

In jazz music, it's always generational, and the older generations are like the leaders or the guides. I don't want to use the word "gatekeeper," but older people have more experience and more information. That's just nature. So I was fortunate to be around older musicians often, and open to the information. I wasn't biased like, "Oh, they're old so, I'm not going to listen to them; I'm doing something new." There's always a respect for the older cats, because they paved the trail.

MD: How do you feel that studying the masters before you has influenced your own music?

Ali: From my first record, I wasn't studying Duke Ellington. I wasn't studying Wayne Shorter. I might have been listening to them, but I wasn't studying them. Studying requires you to really sit with the song and to break it down to its essence. As a composer, over the years I've learned how to write things that make sense, that fit on other people's instruments, and how to write for specific people and what is in their wheelhouse of playing. What is it that they play that makes them sound good, and can you write something that fits their conception or how they like to play? For my first recording, I was heavily influenced by John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, Elvin Jones—that amazing band. That was a huge influence in how I wrote and how I heard.

Now, fast forward twenty years, and I've had the opportunity to listen to and play the whole canon of jazz. To play all of the great arrangements, to play with different masters from places like Ghana, Brazil, Berlin, London. Playing with orchestras, learning and playing the music of other members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. It's been an extremely diverse experience of music that I'm synthesizing and putting into a new context. It's new because you have a unique set of experiences, putting it into the now. I take a lot of information from all over the world, and put it into a context that's new.

MD: When you made the move from Detroit to New York, did you already have professional opportunities lined up?





Ali: Actually, I had a lot of scholarship offers, and my older cousin Carlos McKinney, a piano player, was in New York a couple of years before me in the scene. I had auditioned at all the big schools, and I pretty much was accepted everywhere, including Juilliard for classical percussion, Manhattan School, and the New School. Those were

the schools to be at in New York, and I was focused on being there.

I ended up going to the New School, but I didn't have a gig or anything. I was just going there to learn. My attitude was that I wanted to be around the best musicians in the world, and hopefully I could hang. I was just focused on trying to learn as much as

I could possibly learn with an approach of ultimate respect for the music.

MD: While at the New School, you studied with Max Roach and Elvin Jones.

Ali: Yes, for years!

MD: Can you tell us some of the lessons you learned from these legends?

Ali: I met Max Roach back in Detroit. He

Tools of the Trade

"I've been playing Yamaha drums for almost twenty years now," says Ali Jackson. "Elvin Jones introduced me to Takashi Hagiwara, the godfather of Yamaha drums. So I came to Yamaha through Elvin Jones. I use Remo Ambassador or Renaissance Coated heads, a pretty classic setup. I play a five-piece kit: 5.5x14 snare, 10", 12", and 14" toms, and an 18" bass drum. I normally play the Phoenix or Maple Absolute series. I like Yamaha for the fact that they're real consistent, and I can get my own sound out of almost every kit.

"I played Zildjian cymbals for a while," Ali continues, "but people know me more for playing the Bosphorus Master Vintage cymbals. I've used those on many recordings, and that's what people are used to hearing me play. But I'm not a super gearhead guy—I believe a good musician can make anything sound good."



Ali Jackson

music. For a jazz musician, it's not always about the technical aspects—it can be more about the spiritual things. It's about the embodiment of stories you can tell about life. But I think one of the seminal points I want people to know is that I'm a musician first. I'm not a drummer. I'm a musician who happens to play drums.

MD: What are some of the qualities that make someone a large-scale musician as opposed to a practitioner on an instrument?

Ali: For one, it's having an understanding

of the science of music—melody, harmony, rhythm. Understanding what makes a song a good composition, what is a good melody, what is good time. The fundamental things are the building blocks of good music, and you have to have an investment in those fundamentals. Having a strong understanding of theory, of form, and then moving to arranging, orchestration, quality of performance, analyzing everything you've heard to understand what makes it good or bad, using references of people of

high quality. Those are all elements of what makes someone a good musician.

Understanding the function of each instrument—the bass is functioning to play roots, or to play countermelodies based in roots while also being responsible for the rhythm. You may play good roots, but not have good time—does that make you a good bass player? Same for piano. Piano is like a mini orchestra, so how does the pianist orchestrate harmonically? How do they phrase a melody? All of these nuances are important to what goes into the science of making good music. Those things have always been important to me, especially as a younger musician. I consider listening to others as being a part of my technique. I never just looked at it as playing drums or having technical prowess on the instrument.

MD: That said, you display incredible technical prowess in your solos. Can you give us some of your own advice about improvising on the drums?

Ali: First, you have to know the song. Knowing the melody of the song, knowing all of the intricacies. I prefer to solo over the form, not just take a free solo. It may sound free, but if you listen, I'm dropping bread crumbs of the melody or of themes that are in the song. People use the term "melodic drummer." My approach is very musical, in a pure sense of the term, because the drums are just an orchestra of percussion instruments. Just because they're not tuned to specific pitches doesn't mean that they're not melodic.

There are lots of ways to approach soloing. You could take a solo based on rhythmic themes. You could take a solo based on different timbres, like the low range of a cymbal, that can be your sonic canvas. You could take a solo based on independence; you could take a solo low drums and high drums or call-and-response. You could take a solo based on the relationship between the bass and the snare, or different parts of the drumkit for different sections of the song. You could play a solo with the use of space only, being minimalist, or play a solo with the use of contrasted dynamics. You could use different kinds of grooves, and base a solo with a melodic vibe within a groove. There are lots of devices you can use, so my approach is extremely vast. And you can use all of them! Then you have musical taste and personality. That's something you can't really describe—it's based on your personal experience and knowledge.

You also have all of these different styles and time periods that you can draw from—

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Revolutionary War snare drum playing, ragtime, early jazz, swing era, big band era, bebop era—each with its own vocabulary. Then you have specific styles of drummers within each era. So you have a huge range to draw from. Improvisation becomes all about how someone organizes all of that and becomes relevant in the moment.

MD: In addition to the Yes! Trio, what are you focusing on now?

Ali: I'm composing a concerto for percussion for a symphonic percussion section, highlighting soloists from different instruments throughout the world—the pandeiro, drumset, triangle, mallet percussion. It will be about six movements that feature different percussion instruments with the orchestra in a call-and-response dialog format. Also, I just recorded a solo drum project. It's about thirty vignettes of solo drums, songs for drumset. Melodies, different grooves, tempos, timbres, different uses of the drumkit.

MD: You've done so much in your career so far. Have there ever been any "lesson-learned" moments, or times where you had to fall down and get back up to keep going?

Ali: Earlier in my career, when I was around twenty, I was asked to do a radio show in D.C. called *Making the Music* on NPR. It was with a legendary big band lineup, an all-star group. I was probably the youngest guy there, and I was playing in the drum chair. In that setting the drummer is like the quarterback of the team. We were playing Duke Ellington's "Harlem" suite, and it is very involved. There are a lot of meter changes, and it's intricate and detailed. I got the music in advance, and I was diligent in practicing, but it was a case of me just not having the experience. It's a deep thing. It's hard. You hear it all the time in sports and athleticism; you hear it in life.

It was one of those moments where I didn't have the experience, and the band was just pushing me around. They did what they wanted to do, and I didn't have the respect of the band. That's not an aggression thing, like playing louder or forcing them to follow my time—it was a confidence thing. Knowing that you have the confidence is a very subtle but very tangible thing. When someone has a certain level of experience, they're relaxed and in the moment. They've

done it a million times, so they know what they have to do to give what everyone else around them needs to be successful in what they're doing. I didn't have that, and I was let go. It was at a rehearsal, and I had my lady friend with me at the time, and I got fired off of the gig in front of everyone.

They got a great drummer, Herlin Riley, to come in the next day to do the recording. I went back to New York. I was so curious and hungry for what the difference was, I got back on a train at 6 A.M. from New York City back to D.C. to make it to the recording session the next day. I walked back in, right past all of the people who knew I got fired, and I watched the whole recording session and took notes. I knew that what Herlin had, I did not have, and my desire to be better, to improve, to gain knowledge and information, that was my goal. It's a simple word: humility. However popular or successful one gets, it's all about humility, and no one is above the music. Whatever name you put out there, the music is always at the top of the food chain. Not the musician, the *music*.



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