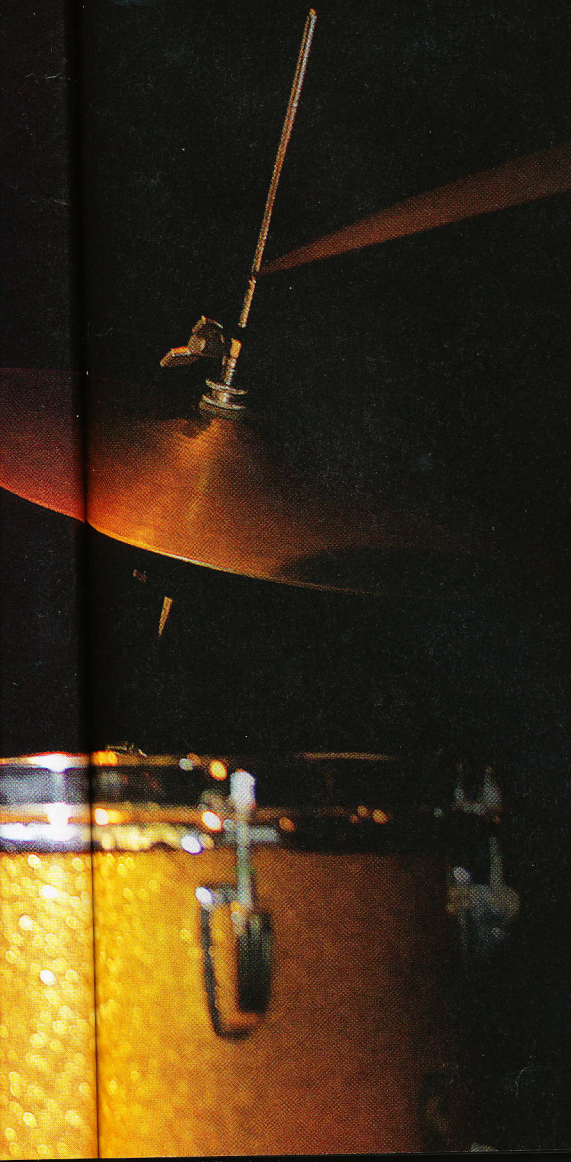


Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings'

Story by Patrick Berkery
Photos by Paul La Raia

Homer Steinweiss

How a wise drum teacher, an unusual neurological condition, and a deep obsession with classic soul and funk combined to make for **one of the grooviest young drummers on the scene.**



You don't really think "modern" drummer when you come across Homer Steinweiss. The Dap-Kings timekeeper is a throwback, possessing a sound, style, and work ethic similar to that of legendary soul and R&B house drummers of the '60s, like Pistol Allen and Uriel Jones at Motown or Al Jackson Jr. at Stax.

You most definitely *do* think "funky" drummer upon hearing Steinweiss's work, though. For nearly a decade, the New York City native has been laying it down in the tradition of those aforementioned drumming giants, for Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings, the funk/soul/R&B ensemble whose fan base and musical scope have expanded with each new release—as have Homer's skills.

Steinweiss's feel on the group's early single "Genuine"—a repetitive James Brown-style funk song—is totally appropriate. But you can hear that Homer and the Dap-Kings were still trying to reconcile their roots with their

creative aspirations. Drop the needle anywhere on last year's *I Learned The Hard Way* album, however, and you'll hear a band and a drummer who've found their own thing. The grooves maintain their slippery stutter, but Steinweiss supplies a smoother foundation for Jones's brassy voice, the soaring horns, and the sweet background vocals.

"The group started out kind of like a funk band—playing James Brown-style stuff with a little bit of soul," the thirty-one-year-old Steinweiss says. "And since high school I considered myself a funk drummer. But the more we traveled and listened to music, the more the collective taste of the band widened.

"I really started to develop my skills as a drummer when we went on the road," Homer goes on. "I had some natural talent; I'd been practicing and had played with a band. But I didn't actually get to be able to play with chops and hold steady grooves until I was on tour for like a year. Then I felt like a different drummer."

While playing with the Dap-Kings occupies much of Steinweiss's time, it's hardly his entire workload. Homer serves as the house drummer for many artists on the Dap-Kings' label, Daptone, in addition to co-owning his own soul- and R&B-rooted label and studio, Dunham Records and Dunham Studios.

And since the producer Mark Ronson used the Dap-Kings on Amy Winehouse's 2007 breakthrough album, *Back To Black*, Steinweiss has become an in-demand session drummer, recording with Sheryl Crow, Al Green, Cee Lo, and most recently on Ronson's own cut-and-paste masterpiece, *Record Collection*.

Amazingly, Steinweiss has been keeping this busy pace for the last year-plus while suffering from the neurological condition focal dystonia. In layman's terms it means the brain isn't telling a muscle or group of muscles what to do, resulting in undesirable muscular contractions. In Steinweiss's case, his right foot was affected to the point where it simply wasn't able to work the kick pedal. So he bought a double pedal, kept his hi-hat clamped shut, and began using his left foot as his primary kick foot.

"It's something that happened over a long period of time," the drummer explains. "Every once in a while my right foot started feeling weird. I kept practicing, and it just was not getting better. It got to a point where I was doing sessions and gigging all the time, and one day I just said, 'Guys, I can't work right now—my right foot feels weird.' I bought a double bass pedal, stuck it on there, and within a week I

was back at it—no one noticed. I'm kind of shocked that it worked. I'm a left-foot drummer now."

MD caught up with Steinweiss as he was resting both feet during some rare downtime before the Dap-Kings' pre-Christmas Australian dates.

MD: Using your left foot on the double pedal and keeping the hi-hat closed, don't you miss the kicks where you open and close the hi-hat? That's a foundational element of a lot of soul and funk drumming.

Homer: Yeah, I miss that every once in a while. But honestly, I like things being taken away. When I sit down at a drumset and I don't like the way something sounds, I just remove that drum.

That's just part of my thing. I'm a minimalist. Taking away that element of my drumming makes a lot of other things open up. I feel I had gotten into this habit of opening up the hi-hat every time I would go into a fill, just to make some noise. I think through my fills a lot more now.

MD: What do you do with your right foot?

Homer: For a long time it was just this sad little right foot that didn't do anything. Now it's starting to get some of its skills back. So I basically have been learning just a couple of really subtle double bass things

where I'll be like, "ba-boom-boom," but using the left and right on the "ba-boom" instead of doubling up on the left.

MD: Do you intend to get back to using your right foot on the kick?

Homer: I don't know. This style is really feeling good. Even the guys in the band say, "Ever since you went to the left foot, your time got better." I've thought about doing a double bass drum thing, with two different tones. I've thought about turning the drumset left-handed and playing completely open, so I can open the hi-hat with my right foot. But my right foot is such a weird thing. It's hard to say if and when it will be better.

MD: What are your roots as a drummer?

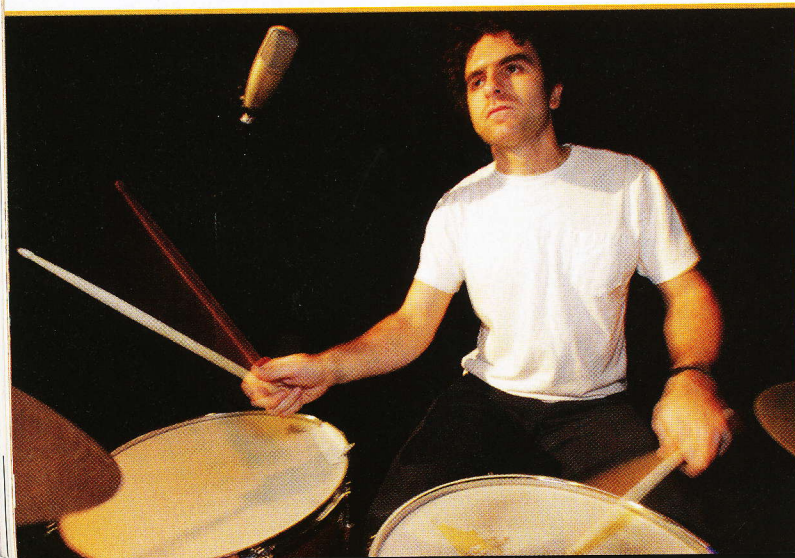
HOMER'S SETUP



"I use vintage Ludwig kits," Steinweiss says. "The one in the picture is from '62 or '63. Not sure of the model, as I think it's a bit of a transition drum for Ludwig. My studio kit is a Ludwig Club Date, with a 20" bass drum, a 12" rack tom, a 16" floor tom, and a 14" Acrolite snare. My cymbals are all vintage '60s Zildjian A: 14" hi hats, 18" crash, 20" ride. My hardware includes a Ludwig flat-base cymbal stand, a Pearl snare stand, a Yamaha hi-hat stand, and a DW 5000 double bass pedal. My sticks are Vater Cymbal Stick series with teardrop tips—best sticks ever—and my heads are Remo coated Ambassadors on top and clear Ambassadors on the bottom. My cases include a custom Glenn Cronkhite 20" leather cymbal bag and XL Protector Classic series hard cases."

INFLUENCES

Booker T & The MGs "Green Onions" from the album *Green Onions* (Al Jackson Jr.) // **James Brown** "Mother Popcorn" from *It's A Mother* (Clyde Stubblefield), "Sex Machine" single (John "Jabo" Starks) // **The Beatles** "A Day In The Life" from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Ringo Starr) // **Sly & The Family Stone** "Underdog" from *A Whole New Thing* (Greg Errico) // **Betty Harris** "There's A Break In The Road" single (Joseph "Zigaboo" Modeliste) // **The Band** "Up On Cripple Creek" from *The Band* (Levon Helm) // **Eddie Bo** "Hook And Sling" single (James Black) // **Cream** "Strange Brew" from *Disraeli Gears* (Ginger Baker) // **Bill Withers** "Use Me" from *Still Bill* (James Gadson)



HOMER STEINWEISS

Homer: My parents are both musicians. When I was around nine or ten they said I should play an instrument, and they asked what I wanted to play. I wanted to play the congas. So they got me a conga drum and I took a couple lessons, and that was kind of the beginning. Around ten or eleven I decided I wanted to play the drumset, so my parents got me lessons with this guy who had me on the pad doing things like paradiddles for a year. Then I took lessons until I was around fifteen with Matt Patuto [author of *Drum Set Systems* and an *MD* contributor]. Through him, I learned how to play drumset, and my parents eventually bought me a Pearl Export kit.

MD: And you grew up in Manhattan, where it's kind of hard to have a kit in your house.

Homer: Exactly. My parents owned a brownstone at the time, and we put the kit in this big room on the second floor. It was so loud in there, and I didn't know how to tune it. I thought, *This is going to be a disaster*. But we lived right next door to this famous

crazy artist, Louise Bourgeois, and she supposedly was inspired by the sound of my drums, so we really didn't get any complaints.

MD: Were your influences taking shape then?

Homer: My first big drumset influence was probably Dave Grohl when I was in seventh or eighth grade—I was Nirvana all the way. Soundgarden, Nirvana, all those guys. I'd bring the records to Matt and say, "Can you teach me how to play 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'?" And he'd say, "I'll teach you this, but you also have to learn *this*," and he'd make me buy *The Best Of Booker T & The MGs* and learn "Green Onions" or something. Just learn how to play "boom-whack, boom-whack" without playing any fills. Looking back on it, he hooked me up.

MD: So you were already gravitating toward R&B and soul at a young age?

Homer: I think so. I remember really specifically learning "Green Onions" during my formative drumming years and thinking, *This shit is badass*. Matt would give me James Brown tapes, all

this stuff. So by the time I was fourteen, I was trying to learn Meters and James Brown drumbeats. I was playing "Cissy Strut"...I probably still can't play that beat correctly, but I figured it out. I learned the "Mother Popcorn" beat, learned all that stuff on the snare drum and started doing those ghost strokes all the time. I was absorbing all that stuff in high school, listening to it day in and day out.

MD: You apply the ghost-stroke feel to some of your 16th-note patterns on the hi-hat, like on "If You Call" from *I Learned The Hard Way*.

Homer: Yeah, it's my favorite thing to play. You hear it on a lot of old James Brown and Joe Tex records. I could play that all day.

MD: You achieve a really crisp old-school drum sound on the records you play on. Is that a combination of the kit you're using, your touch, and the mic placement?

Homer: I like to think of it that way—that synthesis of the drumset, the way that I play, and the way the mics are placed. I would say the drumset would

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probably be the least important thing. I love vintage drums. I love my '60s Ludwig kits. But some of these records are not necessarily recorded on old drums. They're recorded on drums we think sound good. We put the mics in the right place, and I just play.

I like to think that I have a tone on the set. We usually use only one or two mics on the kit, so I have to balance everything. It has to be balanced to a place where they're not going to tweak the levels or the general volume of the bass drum or snare drum.

MD: Even though some of the work you've done with Mark Ronson is a little more "on the grid" in terms of the production, as far as your role goes, is he still just capturing you playing drums in a room?

Homer: Exactly. We're at my studios, he's got a few mics up on the kit, and we're just recording, mostly straight to tape. But then he'll do a lot of additional production. He's adding a lot of stuff afterwards. I'm not exactly sure how all those songs [on *Record Collection*] were finished.

MD: Did you have any idea of how the songs were going to end up sounding in terms of melody?

Homer: Actually, no. A lot of times we were just trying to develop a really cool rhythm-section part that left space for a melody. In that case you've just got to play as badass a rhythm track as you can and hope it works with the melody.

MD: You're clearly a well-versed student of the soul, R&B, and funk genres. Beyond absorbing the music, have you spent a lot of time evaluating what's different about certain drummers' styles, guys like Al Jackson, Pistol Allen, and Zigaboo Modeliste?

Homer: Definitely. I love the way Al Jackson didn't play any bullshit on records. He just played badass grooves that everyone could dance to. The Motown guys, it was just crazy the way they played and the sound they got on those records. Then the New Orleans thing was a huge influence on me because of Zig and the Eddie Bo records with James Black; it came from that second-line/jazz tradition.

Rock 'n' roll drumming was also a

huge influence. Even though I'm a soul/funk drummer, the musicality of the way Ringo Starr played was a huge influence on the way I play. Even though I'm always playing soul beats, I'm thinking, *What would Ringo do right here?*

MD: You do a nice job of fusing the simplicity of Al Jackson's backbeats, the busy-ness of the James Brown stuff, and that real funky swing Zigaboo has.

Homer: Thanks. I try to be an amalgam of those different styles. There's something unique I pull out from each, and I try to form my own thing from that. I remember Phillippe Lehman, who owned Desco Records [home to Steinweiss's pre-Dap-Kings band the Mighty Imperials], said, "You know, if the Meters covered all the James Brown songs and James Brown covered all the Meters songs, it would be awesome." So I think about that. How can I mix these two styles up?



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