

Ralph Peterson

# smoking the opposition

Ralph Peterson is this season's big

cigar among drummers, with a boxful of new records to his name and

playing credits from Courtney Pine to David Murray. Philip Watson hears

him out and rolls his own. Photo and light by Daniel Miller.

RALPH PETERSON Jr puts his feet up on a chair in his London hotel room, sips on a glass of red wine, and rolls a long cigar nonchalantly between his large chubby fingers. "It's a Bolivar Havana. It's Cuban – you can't get them in the States," he says as the smoke wafts and eddies slowly out towards an open window. "I got this one from Graham Haynes – he's my cigar man."

He looks relaxed, assured, almost statesman-like in this pose. He's lording it as someone who's clearly enjoying the fruits of his early-won success as one of the hottest new drummers on the scene, as a man in demand, a musician who many believe will be *the* next great jazz drummer. But for all this, Peterson's shaved head and his big burly appearance can give him an aggressive edge. He gets very angry about the world. He has strong opinions. Ralph Peterson has attitude.

Criticism of his music, for example, is given short shrift. "Those who want to criticise me for being what I am, or who want me to lean in one direction or away from another direction, can kiss my ass," he asserts in a rare torrent of words. Mostly he speaks slowly and deliberately, leaving long pauses.

The subject of fusion music gives rise to an unprovoked tirade against Kenny G that has Peterson literally foaming at the mouth. "It's the arrogance of people like Kenny G that annoys me the most, because cats who wouldn't even make it onto the bandstand with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers are getting off being called jazz musicians just because they can play over two chords that change every 16 bars. Kenny G doesn't play jazz, he plays instrumental R&B. But a lot of other players have capitalised on the public's ignorance as to what jazz is by claiming to be influenced by Bird or Trane or Miles or whoever, whereas they don't know two shits out of a monkey's ass about their music."

And he is understandably angry about racism in America and its music industry. "Racism has meant the role of the

drums, with its subliminal suggestions of Africa, has had to be de-emphasised. It's no coincidence that the first thing they took away from Africans when they arrived in America was the drum. But this music is an Afro-American artform and to call it anything else is bullshit."

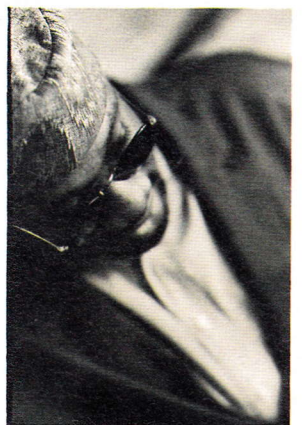
But he saves his most virulent comments for the only man ever to fire him from a job – Courtney Pine. Hired this summer for a five-week North American tour with Courtney's quartet (Cyrus Chestnut: piano, Charnett Moffett: bass), after three weeks and with the Boston gig that evening, Peterson is pulled aside and told by Courtney that he's got to make a change and that the more funk-influenced Codaryl Moffett is to be brought in as a replacement. Peterson is at pains to emphasise that he is no way bitter about what happened ("I've seen Courtney in New York since and I didn't cut him"), and that he isn't passing judgment on him, but he is clearly still angry about the way Pine handled the tour and the incident.

"A lot of musicians spend countless hours practising scales, practising solos, and then they come to the gig and want to play what they've practised. That's not what the music's about; that's not what they're doing in New York. If somebody comes along and disrupts your status quo, knowing what to do then is what separates the men from the boys in this music.

"The drag was that Courtney didn't want to discuss or even talk about it, and that gives you an idea of where he is in terms of his growth. A good leader is supposed to communicate. I wouldn't hire a man for a five-week tour and then, without warning, let him go. I wouldn't do that to another musician, and that kind of insensitivity on the human level is something that, well . . . could be worked on.

"Courtney prefers to play on top of musicians rather than engaging in a musical exchange with them and for me that's a drag, a real drag. What are we supposed to do – mindlessly follow him in music? One of the things about playing with







David Murray is that it's never a question of playing *behind* him. You know, I really appreciate musicians who call to play music *with* me; I'd rather people not call me if they really don't want *me*."

IT HAS to be said that people *not* calling Ralph Peterson has not, to date, been one of the drummer's main problems. Born in the unremarkable-sounding Pleasantville, New Jersey, Peterson's father, four uncles, and grandfather were all drummers, and from the age of three, when he first picked up the sticks, he has created a stir. Graduating through High School bands and the jazz course at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where he also studied trumpet and Terence Blanchard and Regina Belle were his contemporaries, Peterson's career has been prodigious.

Still only 28, Peterson has recorded six records with David Murray (four of them being the January 1988 DIW sessions in New York – *Lovers*, *Deep River*, *Ballads* and *Spirituals* – albums certain to become classics), three with the Blue Note young turks band OTB, two with the Terence Blanchard/Donald Harrison group, as well as one-off recordings with artists as diverse as Craig Harris and Roy Hargrove. And Peterson has gigged with countless others including Wynton Marsalis, the late Walter Davis Jr, Jon Faddis and (possibly his greatest honour) as the second drummer in Art Blakey's Messengers Big Band. He also has three albums under his own name as a result of his deal with Toshiba-EMI in Japan (distributed on the Blue Note label in the US and UK) – *V*, *Triangular* (with Geri Allen on piano) and this summer's *Volition*.

The strength Peterson brings to all these settings – be they the more straight-ahead work of his own quintet or the more wayward leanings of his work with Murray and Harris – is a great versatility, inventiveness and intensity. He looks proud, imposing, even stoic behind the kit, the only visible signs of his involvement being the sweat that pours down his face – even recently on a chilly night in Bracknell with the David Murray Octet.

Peterson plays a lot of drums and creates a lot of music. But it's always tailored, it always fits – behind Murray and altoist James Spaulding he can be fiery and ferocious, behind a teasing, exploratory solo by trombonist Craig Harris he plays cymbals alone, the time being subtly implied and stretched out. Of all his generation, no one so dynamically combines the power-punch and kick of a rolling, swinging Art Blakey with all the colours and textures of a Jack DeJohnette or a Tony Williams.

"I can hit hard – I'm a strong aggressive musician, and any instrument I play, I play that way – but I'm not loud, I'm intense," he says. "Intensity is more felt than heard." He can also be, along with Al Foster and Max Roach, one of jazz's most melodic drummers, and we discuss Roach's maxim, his stated objective: "To do with rhythm what Bach did with melody."

"Yes, that's right, and I take a completely melodic approach

to the instrument. When I was studying at Rutgers I could be as melodic on the drums as others in my class were on saxophone or trumpet. I could swing the melody and make you hear it a whole lot better."

And having formed his first group, The Vanguard Jazz Ensemble, at Rutgers at just 19 years old, Peterson has led bands ever since, his aggressive approach to his art, coupled with his granite-like self-confidence and perseverance, making him a natural leader. "I've been put in the position of a leader all my life so it's not new to me. Maybe it's because I'm outspoken, or 'overly expressive' shall we say, that I've found myself in a position where I'm saying what a lot of other people are thinking or feeling, and they tend to rally behind me."

Although the full potential of Peterson's leadership is yet to be fully realised, and as much as he deflects criticism with decidedly scatological responses, it's true that his own work has failed to reflect his exceptional talent and strong-headedness. "Chilly", "tepid", "unrealised", even "yawning" have been responses of *Wire* critics to Peterson's three albums, the results lacking originality melodically, harmonically and in concept and direction.

Usually on the offensive, Peterson counteracts with a rare show of humility. "I'm 28 years old, man, I've only just started to do my shit. Don't pass judgment after just two-and-a-half years of music-making." And he refuses to be dragged down by any perjorative neo-classical tag. "I want to make my music rich with tradition but moving forward at the same time. I'll always have a quintet in the neo-classical sense of the word, but anybody who knows anything about this music can hear the difference between my band and Wynton's. In Wynton's band the drums are supportive to the point of subservience. I'm trying to practise true group improvisation where soloing on a melody or developing a musical idea is something all the band members are active in."

And anyway, he argues, British audiences are yet to hear the two albums he has recorded with his second group, the Fo'tet; music that, with a line-up of bass clarinet, vibes, and bass is "a lot more open and gregarious musically" and will, he says, suit those who prefer his more outside work with David Murray and Craig Harris.

After this, in line with his growing spiritual awareness – for the last two years he has chanted and, like Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, been a practising Buddhist – and the examples set by such drummers as Art Blakey, Ed Blackwell and Ronald Shannon Jackson, Peterson says Africa beckons as the next and most profound source of musical inspiration.

"The facts are clear – Egypt was the cradle of civilisation and the Egyptians created the highest level of society attained by man to our knowledge so far. To be connected with all that greatness, to learn of all the African cultures that were almost exclusively drum cultures, is to learn about who I am, what it is I am, and where I came from. That must affect my music. As Rahsaan (Roland Kirk) used to say: 'You can only go as far forward as you have gone back.'"

