

## STEVE JOHNS BIOGRAPHY

*“Man, does he swing—and he has one hell of a good time doing it”* – Chris Thompson, *All About Jazz*.

For over three decades, drummer Steve Johns has been a major presence on the jazz scene, collaborating with many of the music’s most renowned practitioners. Artists from all points on the musical spectrum have consistently sought him out because they know his musicianship, versatility, deep commitment to his craft, and enthusiasm will enrich any performance. Leaders such as Nat Adderley, Stanley Turrentine, Larry Coryell, Randy Brecker, Ronnie Cuber, Jimmy Owens, Dr. Billy Taylor, Benny Carter, and Sonny Fortune appreciated the fact that, no matter what the gig, from the world’s greatest concert stages to the smallest clubs, Steve brings the same total commitment, utmost professionalism, and pure joy at making music. He is also a total musician, who continues to expand his musical horizons by studying piano and trumpet.

Steve Johns was born into a musical family in Boston in 1960, and began playing drums at the age of nine. His mother, Goldie Tyler Johns, was a songwriter, and three of her brothers were saxophonists, including the legendary Jimmy Tyler, who was Steve’s primary influence and inspiration. It was Jimmy who encouraged the youngster to study formally with Alan Dawson, and his three years with the master percussionist and educator enabled him to make rapid progress. While attending Natick High School, Steve played in both the concert and jazz bands and earned chairs in both the district and state jazz ensembles. After graduating in 1979, Steve continued his studies at the New England Conservatory of Music where he received a thorough grounding in classical percussion from Vic Firth and Fred Buda, while playing with such local jazz greats as James Williams, Miroslav Vitouš, Jeff Berlin, and Mike Stern. At NEC he met his wife-to-be, Debbie Keefe Johns, a fine saxophonist in her own right. In 1982, Steve made the move to New York, quickly establishing himself as an inspirational player at home in any musical style. Over the ensuing three decades, Steve has worked in every conceivable setting, from big bands such as the Gil Evans and the Count Basie orchestras, to accompanying singers like Jessye Norman, Helen Merrill, Diane Schuur, and Dakota Staton, to more experimental settings such as the Thomas Chapin Trio and groups led by Marty Ehrlich and Mario Pavone. He has toured worldwide as the regular drummer for Sonny Fortune, Benny Carter, Dr. Billy Taylor, and many other luminaries. His five-year tenure as a member of Taylor’s trio brought him wide exposure, including 75 performances for the pianist’s NPR program *Jazz at the Kennedy Center* with such guests as Wynton Marsalis, Nancy Wilson, Milt Jackson, and Randy Brecker.

Steve has appeared on over seventy albums by Leon Thomas, George Russell, Thomas Chapin, Dr. Billy Taylor, Houston Person, John McNeil, Sonny Fortune, Peter Leitch, Gary Smulyan, and Bob DeVos, among many others. In addition to his work as a sideman, Steve is also a member of the collective group Native Soul, and has been co-leader on recording projects by that group (*One Mind*, 2012, American Showplace, *Soul Step*, Talking Drum Records), as well as on an album with saxophonist Peter Brainin (*No Saints, No Sinners*, Playscape).

In addition to his extensive credits as a player, Steve has long been active as an educator. While with the Billy Taylor Trio, he took part in over a hundred lecture/demonstrations throughout the U.S., and has regularly served on the faculty for educational programs at the

University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Long Island University, Montclair State University, the Litchfield Jazz Camp, the Vermont Jazz Center, and Jazz House Kids. Steve and Debbie co-direct the JCC Thurnauer TeenTown Jazz Program in Tenafly, NJ, which has featured such guests as Larry Coryell, Bernie Williams, and Jimmy Owens.

Steve and Debbie's musical talents have been passed directly to a new generation. Their son, bassist Daryl Johns, while still a teenager, has already made his mark as one of the most highly touted musicians to burst onto the scene in recent years. A highlight of Steve's career was the 2015 release of his CD aptly titled *Family*, on which Steve, Debbie, and Daryl were joined by guitarists Dave Stryker and Bob DeVos.

The consummate team player, Steve Johns has always managed to retain his own singular sound and distinctive musical persona while serving the common purpose of any group he is with. "One thing I love about jazz is having the freedom to express your own style," he told once told *Star Ledger* jazz writer Zan Stewart. "I knew from a young age you have to have your own voice."

#### **WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING:**

“. . . Johns has developed into a significant jazz drumming stylist. . . Every stroke is meaningful and has a definite purpose. It was positively exhilarating to hear and watch Johns throughout the live Turning Point Cafe set. . .” --David A. Orthmann, *All About Jazz*, 7/29/10.

“The crackle and thunder that Steve Johns creates at the drum kit tells you why he's been a favorite of so many jazz aces - among them pianist Billy Taylor, trumpeter Randy Brecker, guitarist Bob DeVos, and saxophonists Stanley Turrentine and Sonny Fortune.” – Zan Stewart, *Star Ledger*, 5/23/08.

“Steve Johns, on drums, provided the songs' rhythm and heartbeat. . .”--Nancy Stetson, *Naples Daily News* (FL), 1/15/05.