MY STUDIES WITH FREDDIE GRUBER

Neil Peart

Freddie dropped into my life in the spring of 1994, when I was producing a tribute album to Buddy Rich, *Burning for Buddy*, in New York City. From the 1940s until Buddy's death in 1987, Freddie had been Buddy's best friend, so he was a welcome (and frequent) guest at the Power Station studios during those sessions.

One of the featured drummers on that Buddy tribute was Steve Smith. About ten years before, in the mid-'80s, I had worked with Steve on a Jeff Berlin album. I guest-drummed on one track, and played double drums with Steve on another. So I knew Steve was plenty good, all right. But ten years later, when I stood in the studio as Steve sat behind his kit and started playing, I saw and heard supreme technical facility and deep musicality.

When he stopped, all I could do was shake my head, grin, and say, "What happened to *you*?"

Steve laughed and gave me a one-word answer, "Freddie."

From then on I paid more attention to the strange old man (at that time in his 60s—my present age) who had been hanging around . . .

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My life has featured a remarkable number of what I can only call "serendipitous synchronicities"—finding exactly the right person at the perfect time. That gift from the cosmos has been especially true with drum teachers, from my first guide Don George, who launched me in many worthy areas of study and attention, to working with Freddie thirty years later, and ten years after that, studying with Peter Erskine. All of them gave me rich and enduring directions, all unsuspected at the time.

It happened that in 1994 the band was on hiatus while my bandmate Geddy and his wife Nancy awaited the birth of their daughter, Kyla. So I had an unusually generous

stretch of time ahead of me, which had made the Buddy tribute possible. At the same time, I had been feeling a little frustrated, "blocked," in my drumming. The pursuit of metronomic accuracy in the studio, playing to a click-track, and in concert, having to stay in sync with increasing numbers of sequencers that popped in and out of songs, had made me start to feel stiff behind the drums. I didn't like the way it felt, or sounded.

So, with time to use and nothing to lose, I decided to take a chance with Freddie. That fall, my friends Paul Siegel and Rob Wallis from Drummers Collective (at that time) found me a small studio off Wall Street, where I commenced a week of lessons with Freddie.

There was a drumset in the room, but we hardly touched it. Freddie watched me play for about five minutes, then started *talking*—and so it continued for five days. Apart from the endless anecdotes from his long and eventful life, Freddie's main topic was motion. That theme was illustrated by Freddie miming a soft-shoe dance (quite gracefully, as musicians of that era, like Buddy, could often do). Then he asked, "Am I dancing on the floor? Or in the *air*?"

Then he mimed playing a violin, and asked if the action was on the string, or in the air? Same with piano playing, golfing, bouncing a ball, and several examples of physical motion that were somewhat . . . cruder.

(The name "Mattress Annie" is all too familiar to anyone who knows Freddie and his stories.)

Freddie always spoke like a man who had grown up on the streets of the Bronx in the 1930s and '40s—because he *had*. His stories from that time were about junkies and bookies and gangsters and hookers, and every musician who played in every band of the day. And of course, the "Buddy stories" were endless—and often hilarious.

One of my favorites described Buddy picking up Freddie at his home in Encino, in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, and driving together out to Buddy's place in the desert, near Palm Springs. Along the way they were arguing about something (as being in Buddy's presence often seemed to inspire in those around him), and when they stopped at a gas station, Buddy turned to him and said in exasperation, "You know, you're really one of a kind."

As Freddie told it, about a year later they were on the same drive, once again arguing about something, and they stopped at the same gas station. That time Buddy turned to Freddie and said, "You know what? I've changed my mind. You're *none* of a kind."

Classic Buddy, and a classic Freddie story about him.

At the end of five rather dizzying days in that little studio, I wasn't sure what exactly we had accomplished—what I was supposed to have *learned*. But to my surprise, on the final day Freddie wrote down a long and detailed list of specific exercises for me to work on. Some of them were as small as holding a stick in one hand and releasing it with the thumb so gradually that it was always controlled, again and again, while others were performed at the drums, with patterns alternating from foot to foot, while a medium-tempo swing beat was divided into each of its possible syncopations (what another teacher called "disturbed accents"), to be repeated in combination with each other.

At that point, I had to wonder if I would *apply* myself to those exercises. For one thing, I was following Freddie entirely on faith—he didn't outline a direction that he was leading me toward, just gave me work to do. Would I be resolved to take time out of every busy grown-up day and practice, like I did when I was a kid?

The eventual answer was yes—I was inspired and encouraged, and it is no exaggeration to say that in the next year-and-a-half, I proceeded to learn to play all over again.

As a beginner, I had started playing with traditional grip, but soon changed to matched grip, in the fashion of the times, and for greater mobility around ever-growing drumsets. When I asked Freddie about that—whether it was worthwhile for me to go back to traditional grip—he waved the question off. "It doesn't really matter," he said, but he always demonstrated things with traditional grip, and the technique he used—and had taught to Steve Smith—was a beautiful thing to see.

I am reminded of telemark skiing—an antiquated and challenging technique of skiing downhill on cross-country-style skis. Watching another skier execute those graceful turns was so beautiful that I wanted to try it myself. (And similar to traditional grip, I never got really good at telemarking either.)

Another habit I had employed since early days was playing lighter sticks, but butt-end. That came about because I favored Slingerland Gene Krupa model sticks (probably

because he was my first drumming idol). When they broke, I couldn't afford to replace them—so I just turned them around.

That had become part of my "style" for about thirty years, but now that I didn't have to worry about buying sticks anymore, I tried playing them "properly." Soon I got to like it.

I also changed my entire physical relation to the drumset. Where previously I had believed it was better to get each drum, pedal, and cymbal as *close* to me as possible, so that I was *over* everything when I played, Freddie had shown me that it was better to maintain a more natural "range of motion," so that the sticks, and thus my arms, moved in circles. "There are no straight lines in nature," he stressed.

My throne was moved farther back, the snare raised up high (batter head equal to the navel—the male body's center of gravity, as it happens), and the ride cymbal moved to a more natural position for my right hand.

And I played and played, day after day. Years ago I saw a quote from a violinist who was asked how much she practiced, and she said, "I never practice—I only *play*." I get that, because it's the way I have always preferred to work on new things. Every day I would go down to the basement of our Toronto house and sit behind my little set of Gretsch drums (Tony Williams yellow—a present I bought in my thirties for my seventeen-year-old self).

With Freddie's exercises in mind, I just started playing, improvising around those rhythms and syncopations and seeing where they took me on that day. Another inspiring quote I picked up years ago was from a tabla player talking about practicing, "I practice every day, but only about every ten days do I really *get* anywhere."

Some days it felt like I was just going through the motions, but once in a while I would have a breakthrough, an "aha moment" for mind and body that inspired me to keep going through the motions.

Another favorite quote, from Picasso, seems deep to me: "Inspiration exists, but it tends to find us at work."

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After about six months, I invited Freddie to my home in Toronto for another round of lessons. By now I knew that Freddie's teaching required some *time*, so he stayed for a few days, working with me in the basement. One day he frowned at my antiquated pedal, and that night, after giving a clinic at a local drum store, he brought me back a DW pedal.

That too was a life-changing introduction, for before long I was using their drums as well, a relationship that has continued for almost twenty years, and led to close friendships with the good people at DW and Drum Channel.

And yes, Freddie's teaching was life-changing, and continues to nourish my playing today, almost twenty years later. As I said, I didn't know where he was leading me, but like Don George before him, and Peter Erskine after, he was giving me the tools for a lifetime's worth of exploration.

Freddie and I also grew very close as friends, sharing good and bad times as friends must. Toward the end of his life, I was grateful to be around, to help all I could.

I can think of no better closing than the obituary I wrote for Freddie after his passing.

IN MEMORIAM:

FREDDIE GRUBER

(May 27, 1927 - October 11, 2011)

Legendary Teacher of Legendary Drummers

[photo - Buddy, Papa Jo, Freddie]

Buddy Rich, Papa Jo Jones, Freddie Gruber

Born in the Bronx over 84 years ago, Freddie Gruber grew up in the gritty exuberance of New York City in the 1930s and '40s. As a young man, he was inspired by the creative ferment of that era's jazz music, and by the late

’40s he was emerging as an exciting and important new drummer. A story about him in *Downbeat* magazine in 1947 bore the headline, “The Shape of Drums to Come,” and the writer praised Freddie’s innovative polyrhythmic approach to jazz drumming. One notable highlight of those years was being the drummer in the only big band that would ever feature the revolutionary alto sax virtuoso, Charlie Parker.

In those vibrant times in New York City, the postwar boom in both commerce and artistic exploration, from abstract expressionism to be-bop, Freddie’s life intersected with many important characters in music and other artistic fields, like Miles Davis, Allen Ginsberg, Larry Rivers, and Marlon Brando. He became a close friend to the drum legend Buddy Rich, and their relationship continued right up to Buddy’s passing in 1987. In the course of Freddie’s long and eventful life, he seemed to cross paths with “everyone who was anyone”—not only in the world of drumming and jazz music, but in the entire bohemian culture of the late twentieth century.

However, like Charlie Parker and other mid-century jazz musicians, Freddie fell into destructive habits. Later, he would be able to tell about scoring heroin on a Harlem rooftop from a dealer called “Detroit Red”—better known to history as Malcolm X.

Narrowly avoiding the tragic fate of other victims of that addiction, in the late ’50s Freddie cleaned himself up and got out of town—heading west, in the classic American tradition. (Freddie only briefly encountered Jack Kerouac, but would surely have understood both his madness and his methods.)

Into the early ’60s he worked and played his way through Chicago and Las Vegas, and eventually arrived in Los Angeles. Soon he was organizing and playing in what would later become known as “after-hours

joints," and Freddie was a key player in that era's lively jazz scene in Los Angeles.

It was then and there that, almost by accident, Freddie Gruber discovered his true calling—teaching others how to play the drums. In time, he also manifested a gift for guiding those whose playing was already accomplished, leading them into higher elevations of understanding and mastery of an ever-evolving instrument in modern music.

Over the next forty years, Freddie's students included a remarkable cross-section of drummers whose playing would be heard worldwide, and who profoundly influenced the music of the times, even if their names were not widely known—among them John Guerin, Ian Wallace, Steve Smith, Dave Weckl, Mike Baird, Johnny "Vatos" Hernandez, David Bronson, Peter Erskine, Burleigh Drummond, and Neil Peart.

One early student, Don Lombardi, went on to found the Drum Workshop company, which offered percussion products of such innovation and quality that they almost single-handedly recaptured the drum-making industry from Asia back to America.

Each of those drummers, as well as many less-prominent students for whom music and drumming were equally important in their lives, came from different backgrounds and had varying musical ambitions. Many ended up playing widely diverse styles of music, yet each of them would attest that Freddie was the right teacher for *them*. It was in Freddie's nature to understand intuitively the qualities of each player's gift, and he could hear what each of them *could* be. Thus he was able to nurture the musical potential that existed in many different drummers.

As an educator, Freddie's unique gift combined that individual insight with something even greater—he had an unparalleled understanding of the

physical “dance” involved in playing the instrument, the ergonomic relationship of the drummer to the drums. That relation was as essential for masters as it was for beginners, and without ever trying to disrupt a particular drummer’s “character,” he helped each student to discover, express, and refine his own individual voice. His guidance always aimed at a graceful and natural approach to the instrument that was truly *musical*.

During that same time, in half a century of living in Los Angeles, Freddie was immersed in the city’s artistic and social life, high and low. Once again, his meandering path intersected with notable characters and celebrities, and his inexhaustible (yet verifiably true) stories ranged far and wide. All of his students would testify that a drum lesson with Freddie would always be illustrated by colorful anecdotes from his entertaining memories—from the magical time of the late ’40s in New York City, or that equally fascinating period in Los Angeles. By then he could include cameo appearances by characters ranging from musicians as various as Terry Gibbs, Johnny Mandel, Mitch Mitchell, and Jim Keltner, to cultural icons like Jack Nicholson, Larry Gelbart, and Stanley Kubrick.

Through all of those amazing times, places, and characters, Freddie Gruber’s life was fully lived, his idiosyncratic ways following his own unique and inimitable path. The meaning of “authentic” is “self-authored,” and throughout Freddie’s eventful 84 years, he was nothing if not both of those. That kind of rebellious integrity is the mark of many an admirable individual—also reflected in another dear friend of Freddie’s in his later years, the great drummer Joey Heredia. Joey also lives a fiercely independent and self-authored life and career, of which Freddie thoroughly approved.

[photo - Freddie and me]

Freddie's 82nd birthday party—
With Neil Peart, watching Joey Heredia play

Later in life, though, Freddie would have cause to echo the famous epitaph of ragtime pianist Eubie Blake (who lived to 96), "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself."

Freddie was something of a miracle of nature in that regard, too—not only surviving the ravages of a period of heroin use, but reaching his ninth decade as an unrepentant cigarette smoker. Through every day and night (especially nights), Freddie Gruber sustained a completely idiosyncratic narrative arc, answering to no one but himself—yet along the way he earned love and respect from those who knew him best. He was smart, hip, warm, and funny, and although he kept himself insulated from the intrusions of what he called "straight life"—the "real world"—he was wise in its ways, always well informed, incisive, reflective, and caustic. Those qualities made a nicely faceted set of lenses through which to view humanity, and those lenses often sparkled with wry humor and deceptively profound wisdom: "Get out of your own way," "What's the difference if you don't know the difference?" and one oft-maligned expression, "It is what it is."

Freddie never wielded that scalpeled phrase with cynicism, but as a simple acceptance of reality—like Wittgenstein, "The world is all that is the case." It is what it is.

At the end, during his mercifully brief decline, he was looked after by longtime friends David Bronson, Neal Sausen, Pam Gore, Cindy Kucik, and Edy Bronston. Many friends and former students visited to pay their

respects—reflecting what Buddy Rich once said about a party he hosted for Gene Krupa, when that other all-time drumming legend was succumbing to leukemia.

Typically, when Buddy was asked about it, he masked his generosity, compassion, and love for the man by growling, "Yeah, well—it seems to me you should give flowers to the *living."*

As a man, Freddie Gruber was loved and appreciated during his lifetime, and as a teacher, he was respected and revered—not least because he had guided so many of his students into finding their own voices on the drums.

All of those musicians will continue to pass along that fundamental and immortal language of human life, to listeners and to younger drummers, and thus Freddie's place in that divine continuum will continue to resonate forever.

He will be missed, but he is not gone.