



# Preston Ritter

## THE ELECTRIC PRUNES

by Daniel Pivano  
photos courtesy of  
Preston Ritter

**Daniel Pivano:** How did you get interested in drumming? How old were you?

**Preston Ritter:** I was very young, around five years old, or so. I still remember how I used to love to go see parades just to watch the drum section march by. I would actually tremble with excitement when the drums would go by! I used to hang a pot around my neck with a string and beat it with spoons, while marching around the block. My mother told me that one day a guy from the Salvation Army showed up at our front door with me, asking if I could join their youth band!

I started playing when I was about ten. Like so many other drummers did, I started out by banging on my mother's sewing tin with wooden spoons. When I was eleven, the first album I ever bought was *The Gene Krupa Story in Music*. The first songs I ever learned were "PT 109" by Jimmy Dean, *Cathy's Clown* by the Everly Bros., and *The Wanderer* by Dion and the Belmonts. My uncle, who was a colonel in the Air Force, got me my first drum. It was a Slingerland marching snare he picked up in the base PX. I would stand next to the Hi-Fi and play along with those 45s I just mentioned.

**Daniel:** Who were your first drumming inspirations?

**Preston:** My first was, of course, Gene Krupa. Then, I discovered Sandy Nelson and learned how to play his hit, *Let There Be Drums*. That was in 1962. Later, I discovered Joe Morello, Buddy Rich, Louie Bellson and so many others. I'm so fortunate because later, I became close friends with Sandy Nelson and Louie Bellson. Buddy was a friend, but not as close as the others. I regret that I never got to meet Krupa. I also met Joe Morello when he was still playing with the Dave Brubeck Quartet.

**Daniel:** Any favorite drummers today?

**Preston:** There are so many! Most of my drum heroes were and still are jazz drummers. I never really got excited about any rock drummers, even though I like many of them. I started paying attention to the studio guys, like Earl Palmer, Hal Blaine, Steve Gadd and all other studio drummers of all genres. I always preferred the big band type of drummer as opposed to the be-bop guys.

**Daniel:** When did you turn professional as a drummer?

**Preston:** Around 1963, when I was fourteen years old. I was in a great band called, "The Dantes". I painted the front head of my bass drum to look like the Beatles' logo, except it said, "The Dantes" with that drop "T" design Ringo had. We won a lot of battle of the band type competitions. The next band I joined was The Electric Prunes.

**Daniel:** When you were with The Electric Prunes, what drums were you using?

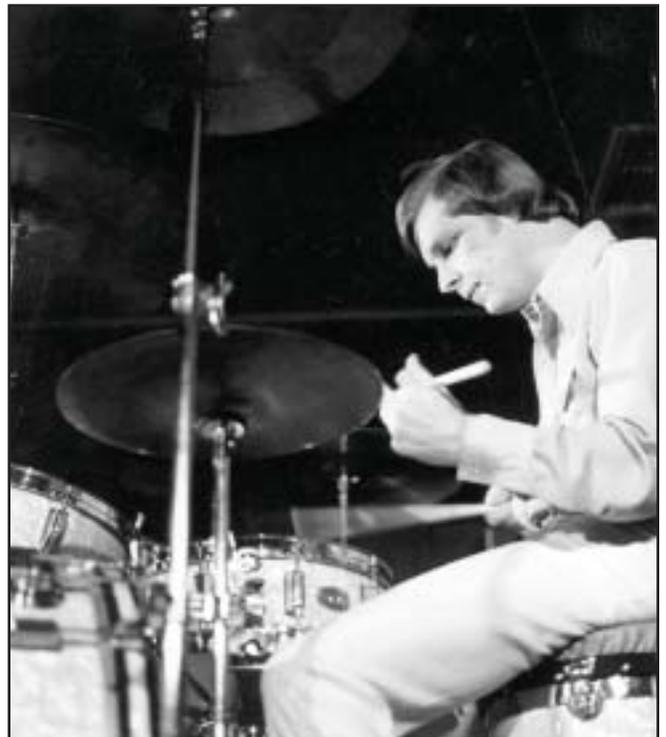
**Preston:** It was a 1962 Ludwig Super Classic set in sky blue pearl. That was the same set I used in The Dantes. The sizes were 22" bass drum, 9 x 13 small tom, 16 x 16 floor tom and the supra phonic snare. One of the greatest sets of all time! I only have the metal supra phonic snare left. The rest of the set was stolen several years after I was out of the Electric Prunes. I used that set on all the hits by the Prunes, including *I Had Too Much To Dream (Last Night)* and *Get Me To The World On Time*.

**Daniel:** Do you tune your

drums in any special way?

**Preston:** Not really. I take great care that each drum is in tune with itself. Also that the drums sound good in relation to each other with the pitch intervals, but I don't tune to specific notes or anything. I also prefer more of a jazz sound. The heads are pretty tight and all the drums, including the toms, are a bit more high pitched than the usual rock drummer would have them tuned. I like my snare to be very sensitive, with the snares responding to the lightest touch all the way up to the rim. I try to get it as crisp sounding as possible. I leave both heads on the bass drums and toms.

I try to never muffle or dampen any drum at all, except for a thin felt strip across each head of the bass drum. I never muffle the snare or toms. I've had to do so in the studios and I hate it! The drums sound like oatmeal boxes! No musical sounds at all. If





Preston Ritter with Louie Bellson



Preston Ritter with Buddy Rich

the engineer isn't lazy and knows what he's doing, nothing beats the sound of un-muffled drums, even in the studio. John Bonham is the best known drummer that believed the same way. That's how he got such a big sound. If there's no ring in the snare or toms, playing live, the sound won't get out to the audience. Especially when playing with loud amplified instruments and the drums aren't also mic'd and amplified.

**Daniel:** I heard that you didn't receive any royalties for all the recordings you did with the Prunes, is that true?

**Preston:** Yes, that is true. The original recordings by the Electric Prunes have been selling all over the world, continuously since 1967. I never received a single penny in royalties. So much for being a rich rock star!

**Daniel:** What other well known artists

have you worked with?

**Preston:** Besides the Electric Prunes, I've played with Linda Ronstadt, Dobie Gray, the Beach Boys, Neil Diamond, the Drifters, the Coasters, Barbra Streisand, the Graham Bond Organization, James Brown, Sassy Class, the Dantes and so many others I can't even remember. I also did some jingle work (TV commercials), and a few movie and tv soundtracks. Some of the television shows I've performed on were *American Bandstand*, *Dick Clark's Where The Action Is*, *Smothers Bros. Comedy Hour*, *Ed Sullivan Show*, and the *Mike Douglas Show*. I was interviewed separately on Mike's show and he plugged the drum book that I wrote, as I gave Barbara Feldon (Agent 99 on "Get Smart") an on-camera drum lesson. Bob Cianci included me in his book, *Great Rock Drummers of the Sixties*. Another book that featured an interview and photos with me is, *They Came To Play - Stories From the Early Days of Rock*, by Garret Mathews.

**Daniel:** What are your thoughts about playing drums in a recording studio as opposed to live?

**Preston:** The recording studio can get rather tedious at times. In the studio, time is money. On many sessions, I would be unpacking my drums and the producer would say, "Hey drummer! You can put all that stuff back in the cases! All we need is a hi-hat and snare drum. No toms, no cymbals, no drum fills. Just a hard backbeat on *two* and *four*." I got paid good money, but it wasn't much fun. One time I was doing this session and the producer stopped everything. He asks me if I can play more like a drum machine? I got upset and said "No, I can't! I'm a drummer, not a machine. If you want a drum machine feel, get the machine!" I packed up my stuff and left.

**Daniel:** Do you have a general overall philosophy of drumming?

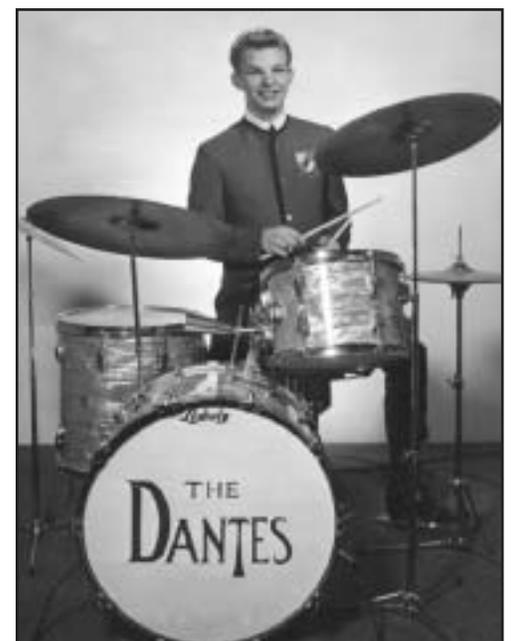
**Preston:** I hear a lot of drummers say that a drummer should just play time or find a groove and only play that. Well, there's a time and a place for that type of playing to be sure. But it bores me to hear drummers

play only grooves. Almost all of the greatest drummers in the history of drumming could play grooves, but they were known most for their solos and more busy styles of playing with a band. Another pet peeve is the drummer that says, "All drum solos are boring! I hate drum solos and you will never hear me play one!" As if they are superior drummers above playing drum solos! In most cases, I've found that the drummers who say that can't play solos very well. That's why they don't like them. I like to hear a drum solo constructed with some creative thought, dynamics, tension and release, or even melody. Tell a story with the solo, like the other musicians do with their instruments. We drummers are musicians too, not just bangers, like some seem to think.

And finally, drummers should study the great drummers that went before. I mean all the way back to the 30's up to the present. For example, some of the things John Bonham did in a rock context, like his bass drum triplets, were done by Buddy Rich all the way back in the 40s! But the younger drummers aren't aware of that. That's one of the things that I like about Vintage Drummer Magazine! Finally, we have something for younger drummers to read and get to know about the great drummers of yesteryear!

**Daniel:** Do you think taking lessons is important or not? Who did you study with?

**Preston:** My view is, why reinvent the wheel? If there is something you want to do and there's a teacher that can shorten



the learning process by showing you how to do it, why not go that route? Besides, I don't really believe there is such a thing as "self taught." We all pick things up from other drummers and copy them. So, really, all other drummers are our teachers in one way or another. A bad drummer can even teach us what not to do! Either way, we are still learning from others. No one of us is such a genius that we can create everything we do without those outside influences and ideas.

The formal teachers I had were Dick Simonian, Bob Winslow, and Colin Bailey. Among those that taught me things in person, but not formally, are Buddy Rich and Louie Bellson. I used to hang out at Louie's house all the time back in the early 70's. Louie and I became very close. Buddy and I never really got that close. When Buddy was in a good mood, it was a delight to be with him. If he was bugged about anything, it wasn't so much fun. Louie gave me one of his Rogers double bass drum kits, complete with the wood, WMP Dynasonic, all the Zildjian cymbals and cases! It's worth a fortune now.

**Daniel:** Did you study the rudiments?

**Preston:** Yes I did. Knowing the rudiments gives you great hand chops. I see so many younger drummers that have killer technique from the waist down, but no chops from the waist up! Often, they have never

studied the rudiments.

**Daniel:** Didn't you write a drum instruction book when you were very young?

**Preston:** Yes. When I was fourteen, I wrote a book later published and titled, "67 Backbeats." It is also the first rock drum instruction book ever published, or so I have been told. It was published in 1966. I never got paid the royalties for that either! I told you that was the story of my life. That book sold for over thirty years, before finally going out of print.

**Daniel:** Are there any interesting stories about some gigs you had over the last 42 years?

**Preston:** In 1974, I was in a USO show touring all the military bases in Okinawa and Korea. They put the performers on one helicopter and the instruments and equipment on another to fly to each base. Well, somehow the trap case was left behind! In it were my snare, all my pedals, stands and cymbals! All I had was two bass drums, and



*The double bass drum kit given to Preston by Louie Bellson!*

three toms. I had to play the whole show with those toms, since there was no foot pedal to play the bass drums. I had no hi-hat, snare or cymbals to use! That seemed like the longest show I ever played. The servicemen loved the show anyway! What a great audience they make. If anyone ever has an opportunity to play for them or with a USO tour, I definitely recommend it. Somehow I got through that gig and can laugh about it now. It wasn't funny at the time.

**Daniel:** You've had some serious health problems over the last few years. Anything you would care to talk about?

**Preston:** I ended up with total kidney failure. That was in 1983. The doctor told me I had less than one week to live! I had immediate emergency dialysis to save my life. After seventeen months I got my first kidney transplant, but it didn't take. It rejected and I had to go back on dialysis. I did that for over seven years, until I got my second transplant.

**Daniel:** Besides drumming and music, what other interests do you have?

**Preston:** I gave up music as a full time profession for a while and became a cop! I was an L.A. Co. Sheriff's Deputy for several years, back in the 70s. I decided to go back to music, but I had a slight detour for six years. I became a Christian missionary!

**Daniel:** How did you meet Sandy Nelson and become friends with him?

**Preston:** The first time we met was when I



For those of you that have never heard of these guys, you must have been living under a rock for the last 35 years! If YOU were under THAT rock, then hear this: The Electric Prunes were one of the biggest garage/psych bands back in 1967 releasing a string of awesome singles and two fine albums, the second one coming under much criticism. They came out of L.A. and were responsible for such punk classics as 'I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night', 'Get Me To The World On Time', and 'Ain't It Hard' were "up there" with The Chocolate Watchband, The Litter, and The Seeds with all 4 bands getting eclipsed perhaps by what was happening in San Francisco, which may have contributed to their early demise.

Flaming Groovy  
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was still in The Dantes. We were second place winners in the Teenage Fair Battle of the Bands competition at the Hollywood Palladium. That was in 1965. Ludwig had a drum booth at the fair and Sandy was in the booth signing autographs. We met, but I didn't get to talk to him. Many years later, I had a chance to get his phone number from a mutual friend. I called him and made arrangements to drive to his home outside Las Vegas. We've become very close friends ever since. I try to get over to see him at least once or twice each year. We stay in contact over the phone regularly. We are working on a drum instruction video together.

**Daniel:** Are you still playing actively now?

**Preston:** Yes, but I seem to spend more time teaching than playing in a band lately. There are a few guys that I play with regularly on various projects. These guys are some of the best musicians I've ever played with. I would like to give them

credit. Barry Nelson is a fantastic bass player. Another incredible musician I love to work with is Graham Dorsey, who plays all the saxes and bass. A great sax player I respect and work with often is Tim Burleson. And finally, one of the hardest grooving guitarists and a great song writer, is T.J. Sullivan.

**Daniel:** Anyone else?

**Preston:** I can't leave out my two daughters, Hannah and Larissa. Larissa is also a pro level drummer and a professional actress. They can both be seen on my web page. My web page is <http://home.earthlink.net/~prestonr>.

And last but definitely not least is my girlfriend, Lynne. She makes most everything I do these days possible. She's always there for me, in every possible way. She is also a drummer/musician, so she can appreciate what I do on that level as well.

