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A Signature Shuffle Enjoys a New Life

By DAVID SEGAL
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For bowlers the ultimate test is the 7-10 split. For card sharks it's the hot shot cut. For drummers it's the funky little miracle of syncopation known as the Purdie Shuffle.

Bernard Purdie about 1970, when he was providing the beat for top stars. Mr. Purdie is now playing drums in "Hair" on Broadway.



Richard Termine for The New York Times
Bernard Purdie, creator of the Purdie Shuffle, at the Hirschfeld Theater.

You've heard Bernard Purdie — better known as Pretty Purdie — perform his creation on Steely Dan's "Home at Last," from the 1977 album "Aja." And you've heard variations on songs by Led Zeppelin ("Fool in the Rain"), Toto ("Rosanna") and Death Cab for Cutie ("Grapevine Fires").

Created with six bass, high-hat and snare tones, the Purdie Shuffle is a groove that seems to spin in concentric circles as it lopes forward. The result is a Tilt-a-Whirl of sound, and if you can listen without shaking your hips, you should probably see a doctor.

Now the beat has a whole new life. On YouTube dozens of amateurs, aspiring pros and assorted dilettantes have uploaded videos of their attempts to teach or demonstrate the Purdie Shuffle.

But you post at your peril. A guy identified as BazyBeats was savaged in the comments section of the video he posted of his attempt at "Fool in the Rain." He slightly bungled the pattern on the snare, and dozens of angry nitpickers let him know it. Eventually he asked them to "go somewhere else with your negative, hateful, blackhearted and useless souls."

Mr. Purdie can be found these days at the Al Hirschfeld Theater playing for the Broadway revival of "Hair," which has been in previews since early March and opens Tuesday.

For Mr. Purdie, the "Hair" gig is one of those full-circle experiences that can't be planned. He worked with the show's composer, Galt MacDermot, in New York in the early 1960s, when demos of the songs for the show were first recorded. Those tracks were later refined for the musical.



Gems Agency/Redferns, via Getty Images
Bernard Purdie about 1970, when he was providing the beat for top stars. Mr. Purdie is now playing drums in "Hair" on Broadway.

At the time Mr. Purdie was a relative newcomer to the city, having spent most of his life in Elkton, Md., a town near the Delaware border. One of 15 children, he had started by banging on his mother's pots and pans.

"I knew right away that's what I wanted to do with the rest of my life," he said. "No matter what happened, I wanted to play the drums."

Mr. Purdie, who says he is 68, was sitting at a sushi bar across the street from the theater, dressed in a dark suit and a satiny white tie. He was an hour from changing into Tommy Bahama-style casual wear and climbing onto the rear of a colorful pickup truck stationed onstage, where he drums for the show.

He's an ample, teddy-bearish guy with a graying mustache, a hearty laugh and an ego that is legendarily large. For years he showed up at sessions with two professionally made signs, which he would place on music stands near his kit. "You done hired the hit maker," read one. "If you need me, call me, the little old hit maker," said the other. It was both a gimmick and a calling card, and it would have come across as pure braggadocio except that Mr. Purdie always delivered.

"He was one of the top five drummers in Manhattan back when Atlantic was recording here, when all these great independent labels were recording here," said Phil Ramone, a producer who worked with Mr. Purdie in the late '60s and went on to record Paul Simon and Billy Joel. "Purdie just had a way of inspiring confidence in everyone."

He also had a way of implying that he was finished with a session as soon as he had nailed his part, which was often before anyone else in the room.

"You'd do a first take, and he'd put on his overcoat as if he was about to leave," said Donald Fagen, the Steely Dan keyboardist. "The problem was that some of the other musicians had just become comfortable with the chords. You had to cajole him to do some other takes so everyone else could polish up their parts a bit."

Within a few years of arriving in Manhattan Mr. Purdie was touring and recording with the greats of '60s soul, funk and jazz, including James Brown, Aretha Franklin and Louis Armstrong. He is heard on more than 4,000 records.

Some of the greats, in his telling, were ornery characters. The Godfather of Soul fined him \$25 for a mistake he didn't make, prompting Mr. Purdie to quit. During a concert with Ray Charles in Chicago, when Mr. Purdie started playing a few bars too soon, Charles barked, "Don't play, drummer," into the microphone, a rather public embarrassment before a huge crowd.

“He would turn around and look at you — I always thought the guy could see,” Mr. Purdie said. “And he’d say, ‘What is your problem?’ Now, what are you supposed to say to that?”

Before the current “Hair” gig Mr. Purdie spent much of his time in different bands, one of which, the Hudson River Rats, plays a lot of private parties and clubs. He is sampled often, turning up on Beck’s “Devil’s Haircut” and most recently in “Mother of All Funk Chords,” a YouTube mash-up by an Israeli producer known as Kutiman.

A new generation of drummers, meanwhile, is keeping his shuffle alive. Jason McGerr of Death Cab for Cutie says it’s not quite accurate to call the beat on “Grapevine Fires” a Purdie Shuffle.

Skip to next paragraph “It doesn’t matter how much I practice, I will never play that shuffle like Purdie,” Mr. McGerr said. “It’s because he has an attitude that seems to come through every time. He always sounds like he’s completely in charge.”

Mr. Purdie has half a dozen theories about the shuffle’s appeal — the challenge, the energy, the versatility of the rhythm, and on and on. It’s easier for him to pinpoint the beat’s genesis.

“It comes from the train near my house where I grew up,” he said. “When I first started working this out, I was 8 years old, and I called it the locomotion because that’s what I was trying to capture: whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.”

It started as a regular shuffle, but then he began weaving in what are called ghost notes, created by lightly brushing the snare with the fingers or stick. And instead of a straightforward tapping on the high-hat, he moved his right hand up and down so that he was hitting the side of the high-hat, then the top, over and over — creating this tock-tick tock-tick sound.

As buoyant as the beat is, it can convey a lot of different emotions, as Steely Dan figured out during the recording of “Babylon Sisters,” from the 1980 album “Gaucho.”

“I guess we expected more of a regular shuffle, and he started playing something very complex,” Mr. Fagen recalled. “We were amazed, because it was perfect for the tune. ‘Babylon Sisters’ has this dark mood to it, and the beat seemed to accentuate the floating dark mood that the song required.”

Mr. Purdie said he was flattered by the versions he has heard by other bands, though if you want to hear the real thing live, you’ll have to come to “Hair.” The shuffle turns up at least half a dozen times during the show.

“You’ll know it when you hear it,” he said, “because when you do, you’ll have to move your feet.”