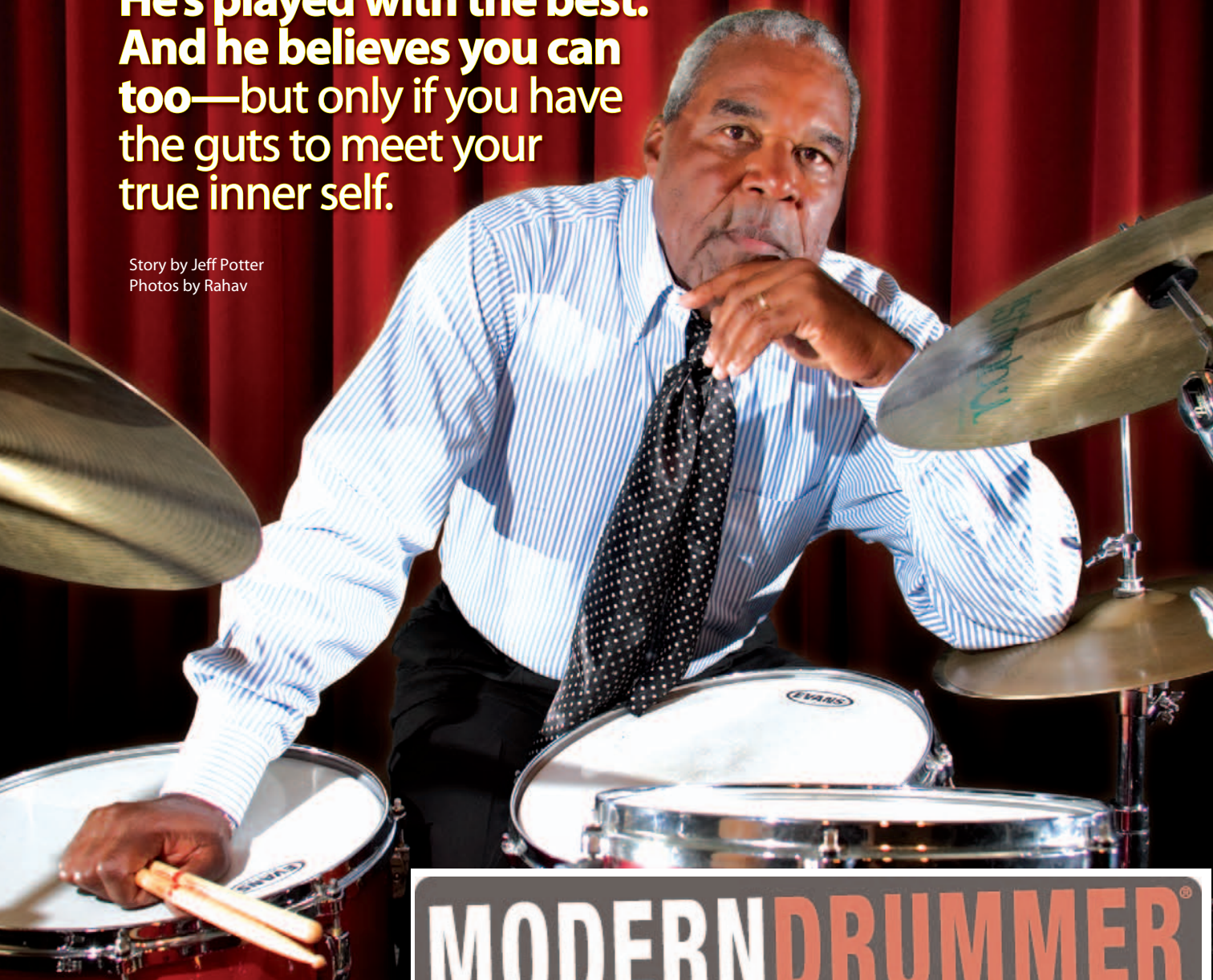


# Michael Carvin

**He's played with the best.  
And he believes you can  
too—but only if you have  
the guts to meet your  
true inner self.**

Story by Jeff Potter  
Photos by Rahav



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Should you step into Michael Carvin's drum studio for a lesson, be prepared to stand on your own two feet. There's heat in this kitchen. Carvin does not ask that you arrive as a technique savant. He does not ask that you hike the Himalayas to receive his wisdom. But if he accepts a student, he does ask one thing. "I want *them* to

law, Michael approaches each of his students in such a way as to help them find who they are. He is truly one of the great minds of our times."

But when things *do* get hairy in that studio, beware. Carvin has witnessed "grown men" scramble for the exit in tears. From the moment a student enters, the teacher scrutinizes any

If Carvin hadn't been nurtured in music, he surely would have succeeded as a motivational speaker. His animated verbal discourses are Muhammad Ali meets Tony Robbins meets boot-camp drill sergeant. "Teachers come to teach, not to hold hands," he says. "I tell my students, 'I would rather you *hate* me and be successful than love me and be a failure.' Through discipline comes freedom. I believe in that, man."

Discipline has rewarded Carvin with a playing style of precision chops fueled by spontaneity and a bold, earthy sound. Outspoken and provocative, Michael speaks with sudden shifts between severity and sentimentality, elation and gravity. He cuts a strong presence, as an impassioned man who's forged his own path through great self-determination. And he'd love to help you do it too.

The master's colorful sermons of rhythm are peppered with memorable catchphrases and pearls of wisdom. One saying in particular stands as his defining motto. "Each one, teach one" is something I've always believed in," Carvin says. "In the African tradition we have storytellers. There's a man in the tribe that passes on knowledge. And there's always one young man that the master recognizes will be the next storyteller. He will take that young man and teach him everything that he knows about the history of the tribe. That's 'Each one, teach one.' As a drum teacher, I am a 'master.' If I have accepted a student, I tell him, 'Every time you walk through that door, you're telling me one thing: 'Carvin, I'm putting my fate in your hands.'" And by you trusting me to put the fate of your music career in my hands, it is my *duty* and honor to teach you everything I know."

#### THE JOURNEY

Since the 1960s, Carvin has covered a sweeping arc of styles, which has led to recognition among a long list of jazz heavies and a productive career as a leader. Also a tireless crusader championing the drumkit as a total melodic instrument, he has explored solo performances in addition to his ensemble work, as captured on 1996's *Drum*



know what they want," he says, allowing a long pause. "I can't teach you how to play drums. But I'll introduce you to yourself. And once I introduce you to yourself, you can make all your dreams come true."

For those who survive the heat, the results are undeniable, as proven by the long roster of Carvin alumni who are now notables in the jazz world, many of them praising their mentor with devotional zeal. One such star student is MD Pro Panel member Allison Miller. "Michael Carvin is a force!" she says. "He changed my whole philosophy behind the kit." And Eric McPherson's take: "For me, Michael's influence transcended art. His influence was greatest on my life as a whole. While most teachers impose their personal approach on students as

chinks in confidence. "I say, 'Play something that you like,'" Michael explains, "And he'll say, 'What do you want to hear?' I'll say, 'What did I just tell you?' He *automatically* shuts down! Because it's that first sign of discipline. I didn't be his 'friend.' I shut him down. And I do it on purpose. Now he's beginning to...lose...it. I'm not trying to be his buddy or be a 'nice guy.' A 'nice guy' is a con man.

"Then I say to him, 'What is your dream in life?' His mind is frozen now, and I tell him, 'Every dream I've had in my life has come true.' And that's the truth. This is America, man. At this point he doesn't know what's happening to him. But that's the same thing that happens when a guy counts a tempo off. You have to make a *decision*, right or wrong."



*Concerto At Dawn.*

As his passion for teaching evolved, Carvin bloomed into one of New York City's most revered drum gurus. He dismisses the label *jazz*, but he's earned that right. To those who insist on defining a "swing" feel, Carvin responds, "I don't see 'rock' or 'jazz.' It's a beat! Check it out—it's a *beat*." The man becomes breathless while discussing the sprawling family of rhythm, whether it be bands, track stars, the Russian Ballet, Times Square bucket players, John Philip Sousa, or double-Dutch rope jumpers.

"The beat" has been Carvin's guiding star ever since his father taught him drums, starting when Michael was five. He still thrills about his drum-captain days in high school: "We marched with 110 bodies that I moved up and down the football field, taking the command of their left and right feet *from me*. That's power!"

Coming of age in Houston, Carvin learned to lay down mean Texas blues shuffles with local bands. In 1963, the go-getter stepped up to a successful decade in L.A.'s recording and TV studios, interrupted by a '65-'67 tour of duty in Vietnam. A stretch on the Motown staff in '68 and '69 further strengthened his musical muscle. "What I really learned there was sophistication," Carvin says. "Also, how long can you play that same tempo? That's the discipline. I used to tell myself, 'I'm going to play the sweetest backbeat that anybody ever heard.' I also had to put something else

## RECORDINGS

**Michael Carvin** *Lost And Found Project 2065*, Marsalis Music Honors Series, Each One Teach One, Revelation, Between Me And You, First Time, Drum Concerto At Dawn /// **Jackie McLean & Michael Carvin** *Antiquity* /// **Michael Carvin & Andrew Cyrille** *Weights And Measures*

## FAVORITES

**Cannonball Adderley** *Nancy Wilson/Cannonball Adderley* (Louis Hayes) /// **Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers** *A Night In Tunisia* (Art Blakey) /// **Les McCann & Eddie Harris** *Swiss Movement* (Donald Dean) /// **Oliver Nelson** *The Blues And The Abstract Truth* (Roy Haynes) /// **Horace Silver** *The Tokyo Blues* (Joe Harris, credited as John Harris Jr.) /// **Jimmy Smith** *Back At The Chicken Shack* (Donald Bailey) /// **Jimmy Smith** *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* (uncredited, but most likely Donald Bailey) /// **Albert Collins** *Frostbite* (Casey Jones) /// **Koko Taylor** *The Earthshaker* (Vince Chappelle) /// **Johnny Copeland** *Texas Twister* (Candy McDonald, Julian Vaughan, Jimmy Wormworth)

into it [points to his heart], because I could already play 8th notes and backbeat at eight years old. But to really *feel* it... I always had fast hands, but I learned other things at Motown. I sat and *sat* in that pocket."

Remembering those grooving sessions, Carvin recalls a subliminal presence in the Motown tracks: a person stomping quarter notes from the corner of the studio. Responding to a suggestion that it provided a "felt click track," Carvin shrugs. "To me it's just a guy stomping on floorboards." That response harks back to his youth. As a boy, Carvin asked his dad for a metronome. "But," he says with a laugh, "my father said, 'Why do you think I bought you a bass drum?' Then my father explained, 'If you're practicing to a metronome as a drummer, you're listening to another drummer to keep time for you, so you will never learn the *responsibility* of keeping time.' Once you build a man's confidence, he can rule the rest of the music. If you break his confidence, he will surrender to everything."

Perpetuating that philosophy in his teaching today, Carvin neither utilizes nor endorses the tool. "There's nothing wrong with *this* metronome," he says, pointing to his heart. "Great drummers are responsible to the music. There's a thin line. Of course you can't have bad time where a tempo starts here and ends like a fighter jet taking off. But none of us keep *perfect* time. I don't keep perfect time—not playing with human beings. There's emotion there. Play...the...music."

Despite the drummer's success in Los Angeles, a passion for jazz beck-

oned. Growing restless, Carvin said so long to security as well as the limiting anonymity of studio work. He hunkered down in San Francisco for a hiatus of shedding ("I was working on Michael Carvin") and built connections. With a growing rep, he made the move to New York and was quickly ushered around the jazz world's inner circle. Freddie Hubbard snapped up the fledgling, after which Carvin did an inspirational stint with alto sax great Jackie McLean. The new drummer in town eventually amassed a heavy résumé, over the years gigging and recording with such luminaries as Dizzy Gillespie, Bobby Hutcherson, Hank Jones, Hampton Hawes, Illinois Jacquet, Pharoah Sanders, McCoy Tyner, Ben Webster, Dexter Gordon, Jimmy Smith, Gerry Mulligan, Cecil Taylor, Alice Coltrane, James Moody, Hugh Masekela, Hamiet Bluiett, Larry Young, Pat Martino, Terumasa Hino, and Abbey Lincoln, among others.

McLean's gig offered Carvin a rare creative soul-mate partnership. "I didn't get a glimpse of Michael Carvin until I joined Jackie," the drummer says. "I didn't have a clue. Jackie immediately let me have freedom. He was the only leader I worked with that would move aside to the edge of the bandstand when he finished his solo. He came out of that jazz family that would allow the young guys to emerge: 'Who are you? Don't look at me—who are you? Let the world know it!'"

Following a robust gigging schedule and McLean's *New York Calling* LP, Carvin prodded the saxist to chance a risky leap. The result, *Antiquity* (1975), was a bold and haunting sax/drums



duet that marked a creative dividing line in McLean's career. "I played very ahead of the beat," Carvin says, "and I have a broad sound. Jackie had a razor-sharp sound, and he plays ahead of the beat. So I knew we'd have a blend, because he could cut through my thickness. After that, Jackie never made just another bebop record."

When the time finally came to move on from McLean's band, Carvin made a heartfelt prophetic promise to his comrade: "Jackie, one day I'm going to send you a drummer with my spirit."

"My second musical marriage was with Pharoah Sanders," Carvin says. "What I got from Pharoah was the ability to travel through music *spiritually*." Recalling his third "marriage," Carvin speaks in a hushed voice. "That was John Birks Gillespie, aka Dizzy. He really showed me that less is more. John taught me my *innovative* skills. He loved drummers. He was the 'Each one, teach one' of his tribe—the tribe of bebop."

Carvin recalls the exact date when, walking back from a gig, Dizzy turned to him and said, "You are one of the only drummers in my band since Kenny Clarke that I feel can play anything that I can think of."

Among the hundreds of recordings Carvin has graced, *Marsalis Music Honors Michael Carvin* is a 2006 release he led that holds a special place in his heart. The album features his arrangements of "the songs that made me fall in love with jazz." Yet, when asked to recall which career performances remain his most memorable, Carvin quickly responds, "None of 'em. That was then; this is now. I haven't played my best performance yet. Even *Lost And Found Project 2065* just came out, but it's *finished*."

That recent release, Carvin's twelfth as a leader, features a piano-less trio in a one-take, free-form outing powered by intense sonic waves from Carvin's kit. The title refers to the artist's ongoing journey. "I've just started playing the way I was playing between the ages of five and thirteen," Michael says, "because that's what I lost. What I found from thirteen to sixty-five was how to be a great drummer, to be able

to work as a sideman, to be able to read, play the book, make money, and pay the bills. Now that I'm financially free, I'm beginning to feel my five-year-old music that I never finished, that I cut off at thirteen to become a *professional* drummer."

### METHODS OF THE MASTER

Just as Carvin sees the beat as a unifying thread between musical styles and cultures, education is also an endless blood-filled artery. "I'm not teaching any of these students," he says. "This is my father. My father *loved* me. I am his child. He was my drum teacher. He didn't teach me [in order] to pay his light bills...he taught me because he loved me. You see the difference? I don't teach to pay my bills. I taught Eric McPherson since he was eleven years old. I taught him for free, got him through high school, even bought clothes for him and everything..." Carvin breaks off, and his eyes are suddenly wet. He pauses and grabs a handkerchief.

When Carvin coaxes students to let their inner drummer emerge, his methods can be surprisingly *laissez-faire*. "Everybody has different fingerprints," he says. "What does that tell me? I'm special. Now, the way I teach my young great drummers: *I don't play at a lesson*. I never played in a drum lesson. If I had a teacher that I paid who played in a lesson, I'd beat his brains out. I'm paying *him* to get better? Come on, man! Even playing to demonstrate is just mimicking! That's like you're raisin' a *dog*! A human being has his own ability to think, with his own voice. All I have to do with young great drummers is get them to really understand that they're *already* somebody and they already have a sound."

Carvin seeks to stir the imagination as well as the hands. After asking students to play a ride beat, he'll nudge them further. "I tell them this: 'What makes you laugh? Think of something funny that just cracks you up. Now play that same cymbal beat and have that thought of fun.' It will change. Because now they're not

approaching it as a lesson or a serious thing or a chore."

The increasing elusiveness of that rare state of mind allowing for openness, inner awareness, and childlike imagination is a frequent theme for Carvin. The scourge of junk food, junk media, and the mental clutter caused by the constant bombardment of technology is a recurring topic as well.

"When you didn't have everything that you do today," he says, "there were times when you were bored. And those were the days when you *dreamed*. You had time to be bored, and that's when you came to yourself. That's why you play the drums different. That's why you *think* different. You had a chance to meet yourself."

But in addition to spiritual, philosophical, and mental elements, Carvin preaches a healthy dose of bedrock fundamentals and time-honored hard work. "Do you remember how painful it was to learn how to tie your shoes? A person could wake you up right now at four in the morning, and you could tie your shoes in the dark. Why? Because your parents had you sit there until you got it right. They knew it was something you would have to be able to do. That's how I teach. If you can tie your shoes, you can conquer the world."

One "shoe tying" fundamental this teacher insists on is mastery of the rudiments. "The twenty-six rudiments are the same as the twenty-six letters of the alphabet to a writer," Carvin says. "Without them, you couldn't write a sentence. If a drummer doesn't have some working knowledge of the twenty-six rudiments, there's nothing I can teach him."

### IN THE BEGINNING IS SILENCE, AND DESIRE

When presenting solo drum performances, Carvin is keenly aware of the challenges in holding an audience's attention. He's exacting in his choice of lights and dress to create a special moment, to tell a story. Before the first note is played, he sustains a long meditative silence. "I have to take the drum part away from the audience and put focus on the human spirit," he

explains, “and the first sound from the drums has to be on such a pianissimo level that it forces them to listen to me. I find most drummers play with this attitude: *Listen to me!* But I play drums with the attitude: I don’t want you to listen to me—I want you to listen to yourself. If I take my dynamic underneath what they were anticipating, I got the ear, man. And once I get the ear, I will slowly take them on my journey. See, little by little makes big. Big by big makes failure.

“The reason why Michael Carvin students are successful in the workplace,” he continues, “is because they usually spend four to five years with me. As they continue to study with me, I keep asking that same question until they answer it: ‘What is the burning desire in your heart? What drives you?’ Once they answer it, that will make them successful. When my students

step on the bandstand as a sideman, it’s not the bandleader or the guys in the band that will drive them to their greatness. It’s the inner desire, the burning in their heart to be a great *person*. You see, a drumset is only an instrument. But a *person* is a human being. So the person has to be great, and *then* the music can be great. Before a student leaves me, we pick a group that they say they want to join, and I show them how to get that gig. And I have not missed in thirty-seven years. I tell my students, ‘You *will* pay me back, but not in money. The way you will pay me back is when you see “yourself” come in—you teach ‘em.’ Each one, teach one.”

At a very young sixty-six, Carvin continues his active teaching schedule, practices, performs, lives his music and music philosophies, produces records, and makes time to rise in the

wee hours for beloved rounds of golf. In 2006, his comrade Jackie McLean passed. For the previous fifteen years, McLean had been performing with an outstanding drummer he found via Carvin’s recommendation. His name is Eric McPherson.

Luckily, Carvin’s restless heels are now being followed by a documentary film team. The crew can’t truly capture it all, though. Ideally, to be Carvin’s proper storyteller, the cameras would have to follow many students, over many years, through many generations, playing “a beat” all over the globe and eventually finding fledglings of their own. Each one, teach one.

*Learn more about Carvin’s projects and recordings at [michaelcarvin.com](http://michaelcarvin.com). Michael welcomes communication with drummers through [teachone@michaelcarvin.com](mailto:teachone@michaelcarvin.com).*



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