



Back to His Roots

As a member of the multi-platinum '90 funk-rock jam band Spin Doctors, drummer Aaron Comess had few opportunities to showcase his jazz side. But his background is solidly in jazz, from his studies at an arts magnet high school in Dallas, where trumpeter Roy Hargrove was a classmate, to his year at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and subsequent two years at The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York, where he came under the tutelage of such mentors as Jim Hall, Reggie Workman and saxophonist and New School founder Arnie Lawrence while also studying privately with Jimmy Cobb, Bernard Purdie and Victor Lewis.

It was during his tenure at The New School that Comess formed Spin Doctors with fellow students Chris Barron and Eric Schenkman. And while the band became full-fledged rock stars (they were on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1993), Comess never stopped playing jazz. "All through my 24 years of living in New York, I've consistently done jazz gigs either leading my own bands or playing in other people's bands," he says. "But it's been pretty much under the radar."

For his fourth recording as a leader, the drummer reconnects with his jazz roots while paying tribute to his drumming hero Elvin Jones. "When I discovered John Coltrane's music in high school, I was

immediately attracted to the way Elvin played," Comess recalls. "He's got such an aggressive kind of rolling, swinging style that I was just mesmerized by it. Since moving to New York City in 1988, I caught him every chance I could, maybe 10 times or more. And every single time it was just incredible. He was a guy who kept his energy flowing till the day he died, which is something to really admire."

Recorded live at Smoke with saxophonist Keith Loftis, pianist Barney McAll, bassist Richard Hammond and guitarist Teddy Kumpel, *Aaron Comess Quintet* is the drummer's fourth instrumental release and his jazziest to date. Along with the Monkish Harris' "Freedom Jazz Dance," Comess and crew tackle the imposing Coltrane anthem "Resolution" (from *A Love Supreme*) with ferocious intensity while bringing that same kind of heightened energy to the drummer's own probing composition "Africa."

"When I play jazz, I want to play it authentically," says Comess. "I don't want to sound like a rock drummer playing jazz, just as I don't want to sound like a jazz drummer when I'm playing rock. I always have a deep respect for whatever form of music it is that I'm playing."

From his genuine swing factor to his interactive instincts, he plays authentically while standing on the shoulders of the greats on this potent outing. —Bill Milkowski