

DVD Review

The Studio/Touring Drummer

Kenwood Dennard
Berklee Workshop Series
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61 minutes

Reviewed by Augusto Monk

Although Kenwood Dennard's DVD *The Studio/Touring Drummer* is presented as a drummer's instructional video, in reality it is an outstanding realization of divergent thought, inventiveness, and courage applied to drum-set improvisation. The DVD features seven chapters framed by an opening and a closing interview with Matt Marguglio, Dean of the Performing Division at Berklee College of music where Dennard currently teaches. In a most casual and self-confident manner, Dennard explains some pedagogical and philosophical principles of his approach to music making and improvisation. Crossing stylistic boundaries, he draws on past experiences interacting with remarkable players, creates concepts and techniques, and goes beyond convention. For Dennard, drumming seems, rather than merely a vehicle to make music, to be a medium to experience enlightened life.

As a significant departure from the average instructional drum video, Dennard's demonstrations on the drum-set are pieces of improvised music in their own right. Instructional drum videos commonly deal with two kinds of issues: (1) technique: an area that fascinates many drummers—whether dealing with rudiments, coordination, or dexterity, these topics are often treated as the basis for drum solo construction; (2) groove playing: often explained and demonstrated by the featured drummer in isolation followed by its application in context with a band or rhythm section. Contrary to these common practices, Dennard features the drum-set as a self-contained medium. Solo construction is shown as a platform for improvised composition, emancipating the instrument from its supporting role to a position of self-sufficiency. While modern drumming relies heavily on a single-voice construction known as *linear phrasing* (where each hand and foot plays an independent rhythm) and snare-drum rudiments orchestrated around the drum-set (such as the school of Steve Gadd and Dave Weckl), Dennard's drumming tends to be polyphonic: two, three, and sometimes more simultaneous parts define a background, a middle ground, and a foreground. Thinking as a melodic improviser, his solos borrow rhythmic elements and pitch contour from the pieces he features, most of them belonging in the modern jazz repertoire. The examples provided utilize the principles of repetition and variation, similarity/recurrence, and contrast/novelty. Dennard's background in composition shows at various levels in his drumming: he takes short phrases from the featured tunes and demonstrates them in the various registers and sonorities of the drum-set. The repetition of motives and their sensible transformation guide the listener through a path of intelligible and coherent musical discourse. Dennard clearly shows what the solo is about, and where the prominent voices are: he guides the listener through the development of seminal ideas that result in complex sections and climactic peaks.

In this compositionally informed approach to soloing, Dennard is not alone: he belongs to a stream of drummers such as Jack DeJohnette, Jeff Ballard, and Will Kennedy (to name just a few) who, from very different perspectives and backgrounds, have taken the practice of improvisation and the wide comprehensive language of modern jazz to new territories. In the case of Dennard, his approach to improvisation on the drum-set finds its origins in the school of drumming initiated by Gary Chaffee, with whom Dennard studied at the Berklee College of Music in the mid 1970s. Chaffee's methodology, which has influenced several generations of notable drummers, exploits the melodic, harmonic, and orchestral potential of the drum-set; the use of linear phrasing, rhythmic unison for more than one limb, and breaking ostinato patterns over different parts of the set constitute some of the techniques featured in Chaffee's widely used instructional books and in his playing with artists like Hal Crook, Mick Goodrick, and John Abercrombie.

Dennard mentions this application of creative drumming at several points in the DVD: he refers to his experiences working for reputable band leaders such as Pat Martino, Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Sting, Gil Evans, Jaco Pastorius, and Maceo Parker and recalls how these notable musicians have shaped his playing. For instance, flautist Hubert Laws insisted that he complement the flute's register rather than coincide with it. Similarly, Wayne Shorter's minimalist approach suggested that Dennard's groove could be part of the solo or fill, as opposed to the more common approach of generating new material for a solo. The idea of the groove becoming the solo is present in various passages throughout the DVD, providing integrity to the improvised pieces. This sense of integrity not only appears in Dennard's music making, but also in his insightful comments about music pedagogy, music learning, and musical interaction with fellow musicians and students.

Dennard's originality also manifests in his creative way of expanding the possibilities and limitations of his instrument. Although his drumming is indeed virtuosic, it materializes as innovative colours and sonorities rather than as material for technical show-off. Some of these features, such as his single-hand roll and an incredibly fast and accurate left hand, are used with a composer's mind—providing diversity in textures, supporting form, and structure. Dennard engages his four limbs, and his voice, equally. Whether singing melodies, singing improvisations, using solfege syllables, or counting bars aloud, Dennard's incorporation of his voice adds a fifth part to the composite texture. His resourcefulness and fearlessness as a music maker define Dennard as a leading figure in innovative drumming.

For those who want something new, refreshing, and ground breaking in the art of playing drums, *The Studio/Touring Drummer* is a lesson in courage. As a remarkable instance of music making, creativity, and resourcefulness, this DVD is relevant to any improviser regardless of instrument or style.