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## Revival meetings

Drummer RJ Spangler convenes the musical generations



MT Photo: W. Kim Heron

RJ Spangler at a recent Cliff Bell's jam session.

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By [Charles L. Latimer](#)

It's Wednesday night at Cliff Bell's jazz club. Drummer RJ Spangler's regular organ-jazz jam session is under way. Spangler sits behind his drums flanked by guitarist Paul Carey and a nervous young trombone player. Spangler calls a post-bop tune, and he wants the young buck to take the first solo. The drummer shoos him toward the microphone, assuring him the veterans on the bandstand will guide him. The cackling inside the club ceases when they start the tune. Surprisingly, the trombonist holds his own — and looks relieved when the audience applauds. Perched at the bar after the set, nursing a cold draft beer, Spangler, 53, explains why he put the youngster on the spot.

"I encourage the young cats to partake, and I really enjoy seeing the torch being passed. I see a lot of positive stuff going on, Spangler says. For young players, a jam session is a rite of passage where they learn the standard repertoire, protocol backing singers, etc. I have met some outstanding young cats from Michigan State University, the University of Michigan and Wayne State at my jam session, and have seen some of them really grow in the short time [since May] I've had the gig."

Spangler has plenty to offer the next generation. In fact, he's a sort of bridge between musical generations. The multifaceted drummer has performed on 32 albums, and he's produced 14. He's led or co-led many bands since the 1970s, including Kuumba, the Sun Messengers and the Blues Insurgents, not to mention his current projects, including the trio that plays Cliff Bell's. But he may be best known for returning to the public eye a series of Detroit blues musicians, Johnnie Bassett, Odessa Harris and Alberta Adams, in particular.

"He is the foremost blues revivalist in our town. It all stems from his passion for the music of Detroit. He certainly doesn't do it for the money," says music publicist Matt Lee, a friend of Spangler for 30 years.

Richard John Spangler — RJ to his friends and colleagues — is the size of a nightclub bouncer, but he comes across as a scholar when he discusses Detroit's vast jazz and blues history. He grew up in Grosse Pointe. At a young age, he started playing the drums. His grandfather, Elbridge G. Wilkinson, played with Bing Crosby. An uncle, Bud Spangler, played with saxophonist Archie Shepp and the heavy cats of the local scene, in addition to hosting *Jazz Today*, an influential 1970s program on WDET. Spangler's parents divorced when he was a lad, and, as he recounts the story, his protective mom wouldn't allow her boys to visit their alcoholic dad, or associate with his side of the family. Spangler and his brother tracked down their uncle to get to their dad.

"My brother Greg, who is two years younger than me, got up the nerve to call my uncle on his radio show. My brother said, 'We're your nephews.' He set up a meeting with my dad. When I finally hooked up with my dad, I found out he was really into jazz," Spangler recalls. They hit it off immediately. His dad encouraged Spangler's interest in music, and he came out for his gigs when Spangler began working professionally around Detroit.

Uncle Bud introduced RJ to former Horace Silver drummer Roy Brooks, who had then left New York to return to Detroit. RJ became one of numerous local percussionists who took lessons or otherwise learned from Brooks, and one of Spangler's first high-profile gigs was playing in Brooks' Aboriginal Percussion Choir. "Roy was a nice man. Right up to his incarceration, he supported me," said RJ, referring to the troubles — psychological issues, culminating in an assault charge — that took Brooks off the scene before the end of his life. "He would come to a lot of my gigs. When I used to go to his gigs, Roy would call me up to the bandstand to play the drums. I loved Roy."

Spangler — who was playing a lot of congas and other percussion back then — started Kuumba with saxophonist Rick Steiger in the late '70s, and around 1980 it morphed into the Sun Messengers. Playing modal jazz, old standards, jump blues and some of Sun Ra's music — not to mention South African jazz, Afro-beat and ska — the Messengers were already serving up a

world-music stew when most folks were just learning the term. But as the ensemble's popularity grew, it became more commercial, which didn't sit well with Spangler.

"I was into the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the Duke Ellington Orchestra. I love the Sun Messengers. I'm good friends with them today. They were becoming married men with children. Their idea of a good gig was playing weddings making \$200 a man. That wasn't my dream," says Spangler, explaining why he set off on his own as a drummer, bandleader and promoter.

## **RJ finds his calling**

In the '50s Johnnie Bassett was a session guitarist for Detroit's Fortune Records, performing on classic R&B sides by Nolan Strong and the Diablos, and the Don Juans. When Bassett hooked up with Spangler in 1992, at the Montreux Detroit Jazz Festival, the guitarist was only working sporadically. Shortly after, Spangler invited him to join his band.

"I was playing a honky-tonk tune. That's when RJ heard me. He was mesmerized. He said that he loved my sound. He said: 'Hey, man, next Saturday, if you're not busy, I want you to play a house party with us.' That's how it started," Bassett recalls.

With then-Detroit organist Bill Heid, they started the Blues Insurgents. Spangler landed Bassett three record deals, booked him concerts in Europe, and he played on four of Bassett's albums: *I Gave My Life to the Blues*, *Bassett Hound*, *Cadillac Blues* and *Party My Blues Away*. The guitarist's profile in the blues world soared. He hired an agent to assist Spangler, but they butted heads, so Spangler moved on in 2005.

Bassett says there's no bad blood: "RJ was very instrumental in refurbishing my career and he's still in the loop. We are still good friends and good colleagues. He's a good promoter and he's good with people. He manages and promotes better than anything else."

As with Bassett, Spangler hooked up with vocalists Joe Weaver, Odessa Harris and Alberta Adams, reviving careers that had been at a standstill, bringing them some combination of record deals, high-profile gigs and awards. Both Weaver and Harris passed away in 2006, but Spangler continues to work with and represent Adams. He also represents and plays with singers Sir Mack Rice (the Detroiter who wrote "Mustang Sally" and other hits) and Cece Collins. And that's in addition to RJ's Rhythm Rockers and the RJ Spangler Trio/Quartet and the Planet D Nonet — the latter co-led with trumpeter and longtime friend James O'Donnell. Each group has a different lineup and objective.

Of all of them, Planet D is the most ambitious, Spangler and O'Donnell's "space-age swing band," an outfit with a repertoire that includes Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams' R&B, Ellingtonia and Sun Ra's extraplanetary excursions.

Recently, Planet D released two recordings, on Eastlawn Records, a label Spangler co-founded. The EPs capture the group's diverse roots. The ballads on *Ballads, Blues & Beyond* are so soothing you'd want to cuddle up with them. Those tunes will surely put you in a hypnotic state,

but the Sun Ra ditty "Saturn" will snap you out of it, and prep you for the second album. *Blowin' Away the Blues* is a down-home, rip-snorting blowing session in which the horn players show off their chops, as do guests vocalists (Adams, Mario Rodriguez and Charles "Buddy" Smith) and instrumentalist guests (including saxophonists Johnny Evans and Keith Kaminski).

Although Spangler is a leader, the drummer is there to make the whole sound good rather than put his rim shots out front. The Nonet brings together veteran swingers, Spangler contemporaries such as O'Donnell and trombonist John "T-Bone" Paxton, with novices, such as 21-year-old bassist Noah Jackson.

"I've looked out for the generations before me, and I try to encourage the generations after me," says Spangler. "In my own way, I am a keeper of the flame. I always lead from the heart."

*The RJ Spangler Trio's organ jam session — Ralph Tope on guitar & Dale Grisa on organ — takes place Wednesdays at Cliff Bell's, 2030 Park Ave., Detroit; 313-961-2543; [cliffbells.com](http://cliffbells.com). The Planet D Nonet plays Saturday, Feb. 27, at the Tap Room (201 W. Michigan Ave., Ypsilanti; 734-482-5320; [taproomypsi.com](http://taproomypsi.com)). Other future gigs include the Planet D on March 11 at Music Hall's Jazz Cafe and RJ's Rhythm Rockers backing Alberta Adams on March 13 at Callahan's in Auburn Hills.*

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