

PAUL SHAFFER

The Soul of Late Night TV

by Jon Regen

“A piano decays, but an organ sustains,” Paul Shaffer tells me, recounting his earliest exposure to the sound of the mighty Hammond B-3 organ. “Feeling that for the first time as a small child – the sense that you had the power to sustain a note as long as you wanted to, was amazing. Then, when you get into the drawbars of a Hammond organ, it’s like a metaphor for the universe in all its cosmic splendor. The possibilities are *endless*.”

Shaffer, the legendary keyboardist, bandleader, and impresario, has been a household name in television for over a quarter century. From his signature stylings as David Letterman’s right-hand man for the past 27 years (as of this issue hitting the stands, he and Dave passed the 5,000 show mark), to his razor-sharp musical direction for the yearly Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony and countless other productions, Shaffer has proved, night after night, that he’s far more than just a TV sidekick – he’s a master musician with a keen sense of history. From bebop to hip-hop, he can cover it all, and groove hard while doing it.

On the eve of the release of his new memoir *We’ll Be Here for the Rest of Our Lives*, we reconnect at New York City’s famed Ed Sullivan theater to delve deep into his remarkable musical career.

I was taken by many of the musical memories in your book, especially those detailing your first encounters with the Hammond organ. It’s an experience that resonates with so many keyboard players.

It sure was an early fascination, and of course, it was tied in to the sounds that I’d heard as a kid on the radio, and on my dad’s records. Things like Ray Charles’ organ, and Del Shannon. But it was that *sustained* sound – an organ never decays until you pick your finger up. Just discovering that was powerful. Of course, now you can do those things with synthesizers. But in its day, the Hammond organ was as amazing as any synthesizer. It has a human sound as well, because of the tonewheels inside. I don’t know what the magic of a tonewheel is, and I don’t want to know. It’s

too much knowledge for a human!

On the *Late Show*, you constantly seem to be energized by the music, whether it’s a young band performing on the show, or you playing and leading the band. New and old music alike seems to inspire you, regardless of the genre.

That’s absolutely true, and it probably has to do with the eclectic musical tastes of my parents and their initial influence on me. My mother was in many ways, quite a cosmopolitan and up-to-date woman, but she had that old-fashioned side that said, “My kid *will* be musical. He’ll learn the piano and have *golden hands*.” I may not have come through on the “golden hands” part, but the other parts, I did, because that’s what she insisted on. My mother always had music playing in the

house. Rachmaninoff and Chopin were her favorites, and Broadway tunes as well. And on the weekends, my dad would play different jazz vocalists. He also played Oscar Peterson and Ray Charles. It was pretty funky.

So it was learning by osmosis – soaking up all the different sounds in your house?

Yes. There were lots of different styles in my house. My parents liked pop music, so I learned the standards of the day. *Their* songs. I was attracted to that. I liked learning songs, but I never felt compelled to write them. Now everyone knows that writing is where it’s at for so many different reasons – but for me, just playing was enough. I don’t know why, but I was fascinated by songs that were *already* written. [Shaffer has struck veritable gold with the two songs he

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Shaffer's pride and joy: the Hammond B-3 organ originally owned by James Brown.

has written: the Late Show theme, and the disco classic "It's Raining Men," which he co-wrote with Paul Jabara. —Ed.]

The late, great jazz organist Jimmy Smith is known to be one of your biggest musical influences. Did jazz seem like something you might have considered pursuing at one time?

Well, yes, it did. But rock reached me. Rock was totally of my generation, and I could understand it. Jazz was beyond me, and still is. I'm a fan, but I can't call myself a participant, although I've been in a position where I've been able to play with so many of the jazz greats.

I remember seeing you play John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" on the show years ago.

Right. And I'm thinking about Miles Davis' and Dizzy Gillespie's appearances on the show. And the honor I've had to play with McCoy Tyner a number of times. I attribute my ability — I mean, I'm not *quite* able to hang, but I can certainly be in the lounge — to my apprenticeship with my mentor, [guitarist] Tisziji Munoz. I talk about him in my book. He was a spiritually-oriented jazz guitarist and a disciple of John Coltrane. For some reason, when I met him, he sort of took me under his wing and I became his apprentice. Anything I know about jazz, I know from him. He's the one who showed me how chords can open up and become more sophisticated than just the triads in rock music. I got quite the education in traditional and free jazz from him. I still enjoy playing with him to this day.

Do you still go out to hear live music these days?

Absolutely. I don't get the chance as much as I used to, but I certainly enjoy going to see people like [renowned jazz organist] Dr. Lonnie Smith. The live music I like to check out is often more of a jazz nature,

When you get into the drawbars of a Hammond organ, it's like a metaphor for the universe in all its cosmic splendor.

and I like taking advantage of the fact that I'm in New York City, where jazz can still be heard. Unfortunately, primarily by listeners *not* from this country. [Laughs.] Fans from other countries are more loyal to American jazz music than even we Americans are.

What about when hip-hop and rap artists play the *Late Show*? Do you enjoy listening and sitting in?

Of course. I think all of us in the band get a kick when we get the chance to play with a hip-hop artist, recreating sounds that, often, they might have created on a computer — recreating them with *live* instruments, and giving that live energy to those same parts and sounds. Often times, the artists get off on it. They're used to playing or singing over tracks, and don't realize their music could work in a totally different way.

Do you have a standing invitation to the musical guests on the show that you and the band will play with them if they want you to?

Yes. We recently played with Weezer — they were nice enough to ask us to play with them on both of the nights they played the show. That was a lot of fun.

What percentage of bands that play on the show these days are running tracks behind them?

Almost all of them. Weezer was actually one of the exceptions — they went all the way live. But almost all of the musical acts these days play to *some* kind of pre-recorded element.

Even the rock acts, who do it with their

background vocals.

How do you feel about that?

In the case of something like background vocals, it certainly does make acts sound better, and it does so more easily. Today's audience seems to need to have the sound of a live performance be the same as the recording it's based on. In my day — I sound like an 80-year-old — but in my day, we used to have music variety shows like *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*, where acts would come on and just *totally* lip-sync. So what are we complaining about? At least these acts today do it half and half.

As you look toward the future, what are the things you still want to accomplish?

I have two ambitions these days. I want to learn how to play the pedals on the Hammond organ, and I'm *getting* there. I'm closer than I ever was before.

What kinds of tunes do you play to woodshed your pedal technique?

I play the blues, and walking bass. Lots of things. I was playing "Please, Please, Please" by James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, today.

And your second ambition?

The other thing I want to do is to learn how to sight-read. I can arrange, and I *can* read, but I can't sight-read and play on the spot.

I know the feeling!

It's nothing but putting in the time and practicing. [The late jazz and blues organist] Jimmy McGriff once told me the same thing about playing the organ pedals. He said, "People ask me how I did it. I put in the time." So that's what I'm gonna do. ☐

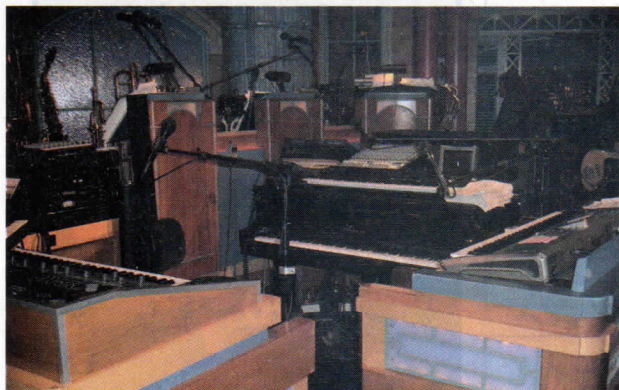


Anchored by Hammond B-3, vintage Kurzweil 250, and Baldwin grand piano, Paul Shaffer's keyboard rig is easily the most recognizable and impressive multi-keyboard setup on TV. For an up-close look, flip to "Geek Out" on page 66, and get an exclusive video tour from Paul himself at keyboardmag.com/video.



PAUL SHAFFER'S KEYS TO THE LATE SHOW

Paul gives us a full interview on page 26, and gives you a video tour of his keyboards at keyboardmag.com/video.



Behind Paul's station sits a small rack of gear. *Top to bottom*: Mackie 1202VLZ Pro mixer, Sony CD player, AudioSource stereo preamp, E-mu Vintage Keys and Vintage Keys Plus modules, and Roland JV-2080. The cabinet on which these sit hides a miked Leslie 145 for the B-3. To its right you can see one of the Bose L1 speaker columns Paul uses for monitoring.



To the left of the K2000 atop the piano sit Kurzweil PC2R and Roland JD-990 modules. The JD-990 is the rack version of the JD-800, which used to sit where the Fantom-X7 is now. Yes, that's an old-school phone, and yes, it gets used on the air.



Oberheim OB-Xa – one of the most desirable vintage polysynths – above Kurzweil K250, the original sampling grand.



A Mackie 16-channel Onyx mixer brings it all together. It sits behind a Kurzweil K2000 V3, atop Paul's Baldwin grand piano.



Minimoog Voyager sits diagonally between the treble end of the K250 and Paul's gear rack behind him.



The view from the most coveted chair in TV keyboard playing: Paul's Hammond B-3 organ and Roland Fantom-X7.

ALL PHOTOS BY JON REGEN