

Standing Room ONLY

A MUSICIAN, COMPOSER, EDUCATOR AND AUTHOR, SEAN J. KENNEDY HAS GROWN TO WEAR MANY HATS

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PHILADELPHIA – Although probably not a household name to most people, Sean J. Kennedy is a drummer, percussionist, composer, educator and author who has carved himself out quite a nice niche in the Philadelphia and Big Apple of New York City areas, thank you very much. From releasing his own CDs, to performing live with such ensembles as the Video Games Live Orchestra and the Philly POPS Orchestra, to operating a private teaching studio and publishing his own drumming instructional books, one might wonder how Sean actually finds the time for all these activities... he is a Renaissance man for sure.

Article by Joe Milliken * Photos courtesy of Sean J. Kennedy 1. Sean behind the kit 2. Working with Richie Cannata 3.&4. Live with Tim Price's Jazz-a-Delic 5. Promoting Zildjian Cymbals

Originally from Prospectville, Pennsylvania, Kennedy's first musical experience was not the drums, but receiving piano lessons starting in fourth grade. "I think I wanted to do drums first, but my parents said 'learn the piano first and then you'll be able to play anything,'" Sean said in a recent, exclusive interview with Standing Room Only. "And they were absolutely correct, so thanks mom and dad! I started lessons around 1980 and did quite well playing Beethoven and Mozart, but I tended to like making up my own songs and playing popular movie and television themes songs by-ear. Once, I even turned Beethoven's "Fur Elise" into a boogie-woogie, much to the dismay of my private teacher."

For the next four years it was all piano for Sean – he didn't even own any drums – then, his eighth grade math teacher (Sr. Regina Ward) at



St. Catherine of Siena School in Horsham, Pennsylvania, gave him a pamphlet about a meeting for the high school marching band at Archbishop Wood in Warminster, Pennsylvania. "She told me to show the pamphlet to my parents but I, of course, never showed it to them. Luckily,



Sr. Regina was intuitive enough not to trust me to follow her instructions. So, she called my house and told my mother about the meeting and the next thing I knew, there I was at the meeting.”

Not being able to avoid the marching band, despite being a pianist, Sean ended up in the percussion section with a xylophone. “I wasn’t too excited about it, but we mallet players ended up in the percussion section. Up until then – I had never performed music with another human being. I played piano, but only as a soloist, so playing the xylophone with other people was pretty cool! When we finally got together with the drummers and started warming up, it was a pivotal moment in my life. I had never witnessed a drum roll live and it was at that very moment, that I got the ‘spark’ to do anything I could to become a real drummer. I’ll never forget that day.”

Sean began taking private lessons on percussion, became a leader in the high school music program, performed with community orchestras, in pit orchestras at local high schools, started rock bands in his parents’ garage and basement, played carnivals and parties... he was simply hooked and never looked back.



“Along with the support of my parents, the three teachers I had in high school are the ones who made music ‘real’ to me. Dale Brown (percussion instructor) got me involved with community orchestras and encouraged me to arrange my own music, Gary Zimarro, (band director) opened the world of jazz up to me and would get me gigs all over the local Philadelphia area in high school musical pits, and Ray Deeley, (private percussion teacher who at one time performed with Sinatra) who really set me straight – a demanding teacher that made sure I had the fundamentals on all percussion instruments.”

Sean’s first paying gig was at Gwynedd Mercy Academy High School his sophomore year, playing percussion in the pit for 42nd Street. “I was the youngest guy in the band by at least 20 years. It was a real baptism by fire – all those old, Italian guys let me know when I screwed up and making mistakes was unacceptable, even when sight-reading. I learned to read correctly really fast.”

When Kennedy graduated from high school he could site-read like a hawk, play most any style on drums and piano, improvise, and play orchestral music on any percussion instrument. “However, the most valuable lesson of all was learning to deal with people. Playing well is one thing, but getting along with big personalities is a whole other thing. If you can play well and get along with everyone – you’ll get called back.”

In the early 1990s, Kennedy began playing with a variety of rock/funk groups to expand his broadening musical vocabulary, as community carnivals, dances and parties were all part of the routine for these bands. In 1994, Sean landed a full-time playing job in Allentown, Pennsylvania (Dorney Park and Wildwater Kingdom) playing in a rock band six shows a day, six days a week. “I was finally paid as a full-time professional musician with the opportunity to meet other young musicians and share musical ideas and experiences both onstage and off.”

After furthering his music education - Kennedy received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Music Education (1995) and a Master of Music, Music Performance (Percussion, 2001) from West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania and since 1996 – he has been a middle school band/jazz band director for the School District of Upper Dublin-Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. “I instruct, conduct, organize and lead school band concerts and have included such legendary musicians in our performances as Jeff Coffin, Mike Merritt, Will Lee, Gerald Veasley, Richie Cannata, Ricky Byrd, Liberty DeVitto, John Blake, Leslie Burrs, and Tommy Campbell and Tim Price.”

Yes, indeed Mr. Kennedy has worked with some amazing artists along the way. “I’ve been very fortunate to meet, become friends and perform with some real world-class players. Mostly my connections have come about through emails, just approaching musicians after a concert, or being fortunate enough to be on the same gig with them. The music business is extremely small – everyone knows everyone. Most of the big names that I know and hang with are just regular people that happened to have mad

skills, and me being in the right place at the right time. They're all really nice guys and they like playing and teaching kids, just as much as I do."

Sean is also currently a Percussion Instructor for the World Peace Orchestra in New York City and an Adjunct Theory and Percussion Instructor at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. Also, for over 20 years he has owned and operated a private studio teaching elementary, high school and college level students, as well as adults that are returning to music after a long hiatus.

In 2013, Kennedy released his third solo CD titled *Hey! Where's My Tux?!*, recorded live at a club called Puck Live in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. His previous two releases included 2004's *Road to Wailea* and 2007's *Queen Anne's Revenge* which also featured Liberty DeVitto and Bob Mintzer. "The title came from my love of cartoons and cartoon theme songs like *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons* and *Johnny Quest*... coincidentally, one guy – Hoyt Curtin – wrote all those themes. I always thought having the job of writing soundtracks and theme songs - especially to cartoons - would be a great job.

"So, I made up a fictitious crime-fighting character of my own - a quasi James Bond-type - and every time he's called to fight crime, he can never find his tuxedo and his catch phrase would be "Hey! Where's My Tux?!" So, the tune is the theme of my fictitious cartoon and a nod to Mr. Curtin." Other musicians appearing on the CD include sax players Erin Stroup and Tim Price (Lynyrd Skynyrd, Bob Weir's RatDog), Dave Champion, Bob Wagner, John Stenger and Mark Amentt."

Other current projects for Sean include working with the Philadelphia Boys Choir & Chorale since 2005 and recently, the Philly POPS Orchestra. "The first time I played with them, at a video-taping session, The Phillies Phanatic (baseball team mascot) conducted the "Theme from Rocky" and I was on drumset – certainly a Philadelphia boy's dream come true! Maestro Michael Krajewski really put together a nice show and it was all 60's rock stuff. Playing in front of a packed house three nights in a row at The Kimmel Center's Verizon Hall is a career highlight, to say the least. Hopefully I'll play with the group again sometime in the future."

Of course, lest we forget the three instructional books Kennedy has published; *Improvising and Soloing in the Pocket*, (with Richie Cannata) *Camp Jam: Rock Solid Drumming* (with Liberty DeVitto) and *I Used to Play Drums* (with DeVitto). "At the end of July, I also have an exciting new book of percussion etudes coming out with Alfred Publishing, called *Sixty Second Solos*, which has already been lauded by Dame Evelyn Glennie."

Sean is also a performing artist for Zildjian Cymbals, Casio Keyboards, Vic Firth Drumsticks and Evans Drumheads. So, any final thoughts? "I couldn't have done any of this without the love and support of my wife Heather, daughters, Ashley, Juliet, and Natalie and my son Aidan." Editor's Note: Also watch for upcoming SRO reviews on Sean J. Kennedy's current CD release "Hey! Where's My Tux?!" as well as his upcoming book "Sixty Second Solos."