



In Memoriam

The Percussive Arts Society honors the passing and accomplishments of those individuals who have made significant contributions to the world of percussion.

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Ronald Snider



by Lauren Vogel Weiss

Ronald Snider, Assistant Principal Percussionist of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and founding member and leader of D'Drum, a world-music percussion group, died on November 23, 2020 at age 73.

Born on August 4, 1947 in Roby, Texas, Snider discovered a passion for music at a young age. He graduated with a degree in percussion performance from North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas), where he studied with Ron Fink. Snider expanded his education in world music in 1969 when he studied under tabla master Pandit Mahapurush Mishra in Berkeley, California.

Snider joined the Dallas Symphony in the fall of 1970 and was in his 51st season with the orchestra. As a studio musician, he played on hundreds of recordings for film, television, radio, and albums. Snider was also an accomplished performer on the cimbalom, a large concert hammered dulcimer from Hungary. As a cimbalom soloist, he played on the DSO's and Milwaukee Symphony's recordings of Zoltán Kodály's "Háry János," and he appeared as cimbalom soloist with the orchestras of Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, St. Louis, and others.

In 1990, Snider founded D'Drum. "We bought some Ewe drums from Africa and needed five people to play them," he told *Percussive Notes* in a July 2015 article. "I called some friends and we started getting together once a week." The friends were John Bryant, Doug Howard, Jamal Mohamed, and Ed Smith—the original members of D'Drum.

John Bryant, an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Southern Methodist University and producer/director of D'Drum's documentary film, *Dare to Drum*, remembers the first time he met Snider at NTSU. "I was a freshman, taking a snare drum lesson with Professor Fink when Ron burst in the middle of the lesson like he owned the place. He had just been hired by the Dallas Symphony. We were best pals ever since. We played together in bands at NTSU as well as with many touring musicians at The Villager Jazz Club in Dallas."

Doug Howard, retired Principal Percussionist with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, met Snider on the day of his audition in April 1975 and began playing with him the following month. "Ron and I played nearly shoulder to shoulder for 43 years," Howard recalls. "We knew each other so well that sometimes we could finish each other's sentences, and often we didn't need words to communicate our thoughts during rehearsals and concerts. He was one of the most intelligent and creative musicians I have known, and he will be sorely missed."

Ed Smith, currently on the music faculty at UNT, SMU, and Cedar Valley College, remembers the first time he saw Snider play. "It was at Strictly Tabu, a historic jazz club in Dallas, in 1977. Ron was playing percussion with the jazz-fusion band High Rise, led by drummer Steve Houghton. I was immediately blown away by Ron's musicality and sense of orchestration using his impressive array of percussion instruments. We forged a beautiful friendship.

“In 1982, Ron turned me on to the famous Nonesuch recording of Balinese gamelan, *Golden Rain*, and my life was changed forever,” Smith continues. “We eventually traveled to Bali numerous times to study the music of the shadow puppetry and gamelan gong kebyar. Over the years, we attended so many beautiful temple ceremonies in Bali and had countless conversations about the mysteries of life as we sat on the porch, overlooking the stars reflecting in the rice paddies with frogs singing in the distance. And that beautiful, bellowing laugh Ron had will be with me forever.”

Dan Armstrong, Professor of Percussion (Emeritus) at Penn State University, remembers meeting Snider in 1974 when Armstrong, then a student at North Texas State University, was performing with the Dallas Symphony. “My best ‘Ron story’ came from a concert which featured the ‘Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major’ by Franz Liszt, where the triangle begins the third movement,” Armstrong says with a grin. “As I was heading offstage after playing in the first piece, Ron handed me the triangle and said, ‘I’m going for coffee.’ I thought it was funny until he disappeared offstage and I realized I would have to play the exposed triangle part. Fortunately, the conductor, Louis Lane, saw this wide-eyed young kid holding up the triangle and cued me on every entrance. It was Ron’s idea of a ‘trial by fire’ for the new kid! But he also helped me to relax and not take my errors too seriously, so I knew I had a friend.”

Deborah Mashburn, Principal Timpanist with The Dallas Opera and a member of the Fort Worth Symphony percussion section since 1976, remembers living in Snider’s garage apartment on Munger Avenue for several years when she first moved to Dallas in the 1970s. “He was the ‘hippest slumlord’—his words, not mine!—I ever had,” she says with a laugh.

“One-of-a-kind doesn’t begin to describe him,” relates Dan Florio, Associate Principal Percussionist with the DSO who joined the orchestra in 1996. “While Ron wasn’t the kind of orchestral percussionist who shreds Delécluse etudes or rips up and down the xylophone at warp-speed, he was the kind who never made a bad sound. He always had a keen sense of beauty and good taste, and that’s what 90% of the gig is anyway! I really loved hearing him play cymbals on [Claude Debussy’s] ‘La Mer’—always with flair and creative touches, like adding a Chinese cymbal for one especially dark note. He also made beautiful sticks and came up with ingenious solutions to problems.”

In addition to being a performing percussionist, Snider created speciality products for concert percussionists through his company, RAM Percussion. The business exhibited at several PASICS, displaying custom-made 'Ramrod' snare sticks, triangle beaters, tambourine pads, orchestral cymbal systems, bass drum stands, and other percussion accessories. "He always came up with brilliant little inventions to solve performance problems we encountered," explains Howard.

Snider also developed sound sculptures. "I first met Ron while touring with Steve Reich and Musicians, and Nexus, beginning in the 1980s," recalls Garry Kvistad, founder and owner of Woodstock Chimes. "I always enjoyed his energy, creativity, and good nature. During a brief 'in-between sessions' meeting at a PASIC, he told me about his design of a musical garden sculpture, where bells that were mounted on wires and attached to a stone base would play in the wind. Based on his verbal description, I made a set to try it out and immediately recognized that it was an amazing design that would fit nicely into the mix of Woodstock Chime products that my company makes.

"Ten years after we released the 'Woodstock Garden Bells'," Kvistad continues, "Ron showed me another design where bells floated in a copper bowl, gently striking stationary bells. We also added this design to our mix of products and called them 'Woodstock Fountain Bells.' Both of these wonderful kinetic sculptures remain among our most popular products."

During its three-decade existence, D'Drum gave many memorable concerts, performing mostly improvised music. Their first public performance was at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1992 as part of the ongoing Bancroft Concert Series, and they performed there again in 2013, sharing their special blend of world percussion. D'Drum also recorded the soundtrack for National Geographic television's Emmy Award-winning film *Lions of Darkness* (1992), as well as the PBS series "Wishbone." They performed Showcase Concerts at PASIC 2000 in Dallas and PASIC 2006 in Austin. D'Drum's final performance with Snider was a world-percussion concert celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas on September 20, 2019. (A video of that concert will be available for screening in the near future.)

"Gamelan D'Drum," by composer and drum set legend Stewart Copeland, was a seminal event for D'Drum and Snider himself. "Ron actually began the quest in 2001," Smith explains. "He asked the Balinese gamelan factory we had been

working with to tune the instruments to A-440 so that we could play them with western instruments. That vision made 'Gamelan D'Drum' a one-of-a-kind concerto."

The Dallas Symphony commissioned the 35-minute "concerto for world percussion" (as it is subtitled) in the summer of 2008. Over the next two-and-a-half years, Copeland worked with the members of the ensemble as he wrote for almost 80 instruments spread across the stage.

"It was a true collaboration," Bryant told *PN* in a 2015 article. "That's why it was so unique and so satisfying. Stewart was willing to collaborate with us, and because he was a drummer, we all spoke the same language."

What was it like to be the soloist instead of a section percussionist? "For one, we're down front instead of at the back—and we have to play all the time!" Snider said with a chuckle during a 2015 interview. "Of course, the main difference is the relationship between us and the conductor. It's very different when you're playing in a soloist capacity, as opposed to the back of the orchestra where you're pretty much always in a supportive role."

One of Snider's favorite moments in the concerto is the last part of the middle movement "when you just hear the orchestra chord and the rainstick," he said in the 2015 article. "The audience is holding its breath and waiting for that last little bit of rain to fall. It's a very nice, delicate moment."

The world premiere of "Gamelan D'Drum" with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Jaap van Zweden, was on February 5, 2011. How did the composer remember the premiere? "The journey is most of the event," Copeland told *PN* in the 2015 article, "and the concert at the end is just the punctuation. It was the two years I spent with those five *madmen* that was the adventure."

D'Drum also performed their signature concerto (this time with Josh Jennings replacing Jamal Mohamed) with the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall on October 5, 2012; with the Corpus Christi Symphony at the Texas A&M-Corpus Christi Performing Arts Center on February 21, 2015; and with the San Antonio Symphony at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts on November 13–14, 2015 (in conjunction with PASIC 2015).

Performances of that concerto became memorable concerts for Snider's percussion brethren. Smith fondly recalls the world premiere of the piece with the Dallas Symphony in 2011. "That premiere was probably my most memorable concert, too," adds Bryant. "Stewart [Copeland] was in attendance. I can't believe it was ten years ago next February." Howard fondly remembers performing it with the Cleveland Orchestra in 2012. "Playing with the Cleveland Orchestra was *really* a great honor because they're such a *fantastic* orchestra," Snider told *PN* in 2015. "They played our concerto with such a beautiful sound. The Corpus Christi Symphony played it beautifully, too. They're mostly younger players than the other two [orchestras], and they brought a sense of excitement."

How would Stewart Copeland describe Snider? "A deep font of ethnomusicology, a stern purist in the arts, and yet a player with flash panache," Copeland says. "He was a loose cruiser with exquisite timing. His route from living room to stage door to downbeat were so finely calibrated that he would stroll comfortably to his first hit with neither hurry nor dawdle. Not a second of his life was wasted. Ron could be described as precision casual.

"Dang," Copeland adds, "I wish I could be teasing him about that right now."

"Ron's creativity crossed many lines as a world-class musician of multiple world cultures, a designer of musical art, and a skillful instrument builder," states Garry Kvistad. "We also shared the love of Balinese music and culture."

"Ron was a master of sound production and taste," summarizes Dan Florio. "We were in the trenches together for 24 years, side-by-side. Laughter was the common theme of the day."

When asked for a favorite memory about Snider, Doug Howard admits there are too many to choose from. "We shared so many experiences on [orchestra] tours, especially great meals, like amazing Indian food in London or great Spanish cuisine in Madrid. But one musical highlight we shared was a concert by the great Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado and his musicians while we were in Mexico City!"

"My favorite memories of Ron are the many times he would have a broad smile on his face as he was playing," John Bryant shares, "showing his ability to be completely in the moment of the joy of making music."

“Ron Snider was truly a one-of-a-kind,” states Ed Smith, “and I’m so honored he let me in his life.”

Author’s note: I had the privilege of playing onstage next to Ron Snider and the DSO on more than a few occasions. And I had the honor of attending performances of “Gamelan: D’Drum” in Dallas, Cleveland, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio. Over the years, I took literally thousands of pictures of the ensemble and Ron gave me the nickname of “mamarazzi”—his endearing term for his own personal female paparazzi!



D’Drum (L-R: Ed Smith, Ron Snider, Doug Howard, Jamal Mohamed, and John Bryant) after the world premiere of “Gamelan D’Drum” in Dallas, Texas on February 5, 2011. (photo by Lauren Vogel Weiss)



A joyous Ron Snider (second from right) with (L-R) John Bryant, Josh Jennings, and Ed Smith performing "Gamelan D'Drum" with the San Antonio Symphony on November 14, 2015. *(photo by Lauren Vogel Weiss)*



Doug Howard and Ron Snider performing "Gamelan D'Drum" with the Corpus Christi Symphony on February 21, 2015. *(photo by Lauren Vogel Weiss)*



Stewart Copeland and Ron Snider during a panel discussion at PASIC15 in San Antonio. *(photo by Lauren Vogel Weiss)*



The Dallas Symphony Orchestra Percussion Section – (L-R) acting principal Vernon Ewan, Dan. C. Armstrong, Ron Snider, and principal timpanist Kalman Cherry – at Fair Park Music Hall in 1974. *(photo courtesy of Dan C. Armstrong)*



Ron Snider and his wife, Barbara Moser, after the concert with the Cleveland Orchestra on October 5, 2012. *(photo by Lauren Vogel Weiss)*