

## DB In Depth

### MIKE RAY

#### A Different Kind Of Drum Hero

by Kevin Winard

**H**eroes come in different shapes and sizes. For the drumming community, when one mentions a “drum hero,” they’re usually referring to someone like Steve Gadd, Dave Weckl, Vinnie Colaiuta, Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Neil Peart...the list goes on and on. But there are different kinds of heroes—mentors, humanitarians, father figures, and the friend who always gives of himself unselfishly. Mike Ray is such a person.

In fact, Ray is an unsung hero. Forty years of teaching (close to three thousand students), many years of donating his services for free to junior high and high schools in the Santa Barbara area, and working with local hospitals and rehabilitation centers using drumming as therapy prove that Ray is a man who knows how to give.

When you walk into his Santa Barbara store, Mike’s Drum Shop, you’re immediately made welcome. Mike is always there to help out a friend, give advice to aspiring players, and above all give great deals on drums! Make no mistake about it, he’s a businessman who has created a very successful career as a teacher as well as a music store owner. But what makes Mike and his shop so special is not only his thorough knowledge of drums and equipment, but his enormous caring spirit.

DB had the chance to sit down with Mike and ask him about his life and career. But as soon as the interview was finished, he had to race over to a local junior high school and do what he does best—teach. What with running a business, teaching all week, going to schools early in the morning before he opens his shop, and running ten to twelve miles a day, this is one busy guy!

**DB:** Let’s start from the beginning. What prompted you to take up the drums?

**Mike:** When I was six years old I started out on the trumpet and played for about a year. I had to practice in the closet in my room in order to keep the noise muffled—and every thirty minutes or so I had to open the door just to get some air! Also for my age, my lips were bigger than the mouthpiece, so I was always ripping my mouth and my lips kept bleeding. After a while it became a real pain in the neck.

I went to my parents and said that I really wanted to play the drums. I then went to the band director and he told me, “You’ve got good rhythm.” So I dragged myself up to the concert bass drum—because of my size—and played it, just keeping time, and the vibration I got was phenomenal. I said, “Man, I like this!” and decided right then and there to stick with drums. Then I started taking private lessons. I never had to be told to practice, because I loved it so much.

**DB:** Who were some of your drumming influences?

**Mike:** My favorite was probably Shelly Manne. Just hearing him play that wicked rock feel on the *Peter Gunn* theme hit me. Plus he used to have a club in Los Angeles many years ago, which was a great place to see players. Of course, I also loved Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Ed Thigpen, and Art Blakey. Then in later years I got into Steve Gadd, Dave Garibaldi, Bernard Purdie, and so many others. There isn’t really one particular person, I learned from all of them.

**DB:** What was your first drumset like?

**Mike:** My first drum was an old Ludwig snare with a calfskin head that my parents bought me. After about a year I told them that I wanted a full set, and they said that when I was old enough to hold a job, I could buy it myself. In the meantime I got a wooden box and made a makeshift bass drum out of it. I used a hinge, a couple of springs, and a wood dowel wrapped with handkerchiefs to make a beater, and then I put two pie pans together with a piece of wood to make a hi-hat. I also had another pie pan that I used for a ride cymbal. That was my first drumset.

During this time I also started my own gardening business. I would go to the bank and deposit all of the money I made every week in order to save up for a real drumset. I did that for three years. I then went down to Drum City of Hollywood and Roy “Pop” Harte, the owner, said that they had a set for me. It was Fred Astaire’s drumset that was used in the movie *Daddy Long Legs*. I took the money I had made from my gardening business and bought that set.

**DB:** When did you start playing professionally?

**Mike:** I started doing gigs when I was around fifteen. I was playing R&B and swing. At sixteen I also started the first drum corps in the Santa Barbara area, The Moose Lodge Youth Drum Corps. While in high school I started a band called The Royal Blues. After high school I was in a band called The Pendeltons, which was a surf-rock band. I was also booking the band, along with several other bands, and was managing that band as well. We did quite well playing frat parties. We would play day and night.

I have to tell you that booking those bands was a real pain. I had to deal with all of the whining and last-minute cancellations. I really have to hand it to agents. But it was a really valuable experience, and what I learned helps me today in my

everyday business dealings. It also taught me not to let things get me down, to take problems one at a time, and that everything works itself out.

**DB:** How did teaching come about?

**Mike:** When I was sixteen I was doing a gig, and some parents came up to me and asked if I taught drums. I asked them why and they said that they liked my style and the way I played. I had a good foundation from studying with Henry Brubeck, who was Dave Brubeck’s brother and a great jazz drummer, so I decided to do it.

For the first couple of years I taught at Bonnie Langly Music, stressing reading and hand technique using the Roy Burns/Lew Malin finger technique. I taught about twenty students during that time. After that, I taught at La Londe Music; I was there for the next seven years. While teaching at La Londe, I was playing musicals and weekend gigs, and I also got a job at General Telephone Company as a central office installer. I worked there for eight years. Between everything going on, I worked an average of eighteen to twenty hours a day.

In February of 1968 I opened Mike’s Drum Academy and Music Shop. I was selling guitars, pianos, band instruments, and of course drums. After about six years I changed the name to Mike’s Drum Shop and just concentrated on selling drums and percussion. In 1976 I created Mike’s Drum Corps, and we became state champions in 1984.

**DB:** So before you opened your music store you were holding down three jobs. How did you manage that?

**Mike:** I would work at General Telephone from 8:00 to 5:00, teach from 6:00 to 8:00, and then do gigs at night until 1:00 A.M.—and play weekend jobs. I got married at twenty, and my wife and I didn’t have dinner together for the first nine years we were married. Thank God she understood. She knew how much I wanted to reach my goal of having my own drum shop.

**DB:** Why did you want to have your own place so badly?

**Mike:** I would go into different music stores to buy equipment, and the way I was treated as far as bad attitudes, paying full retail, etc. made me want to have my own place. I swore that if I ever had a store of my own, I would treat people the way I would want to be treated.

So I started my own shop, and I’ve been in business for thirty-three years. It wasn’t easy, though. For the first two years I had my store, I was still working at General Telephone. I had a couple of my students run the store during the day. Then I would show up after work and do the retail and teach lessons.



The crew at Mike’s Drum Shop. From left: Joe Fink, Alan Strubing, Mike Ray, Craig Thatcher, Steve Cooley, Barry Birmingham, Chuck Villa.

**DB:** How many years have you been teaching?

**Mike:** Forty.

**DB:** How many students would you say you've taught?

**Mike:** I would have to say around three thousand. My students' ages range from eighteen months to a hundred ten years old.

**DB:** How do you teach an eighteen-month-old baby the drums?

**Mike:** When a baby is first starting out, he doesn't use a pair of drumsticks, he uses his hands. What I do is sit the baby on the drum throne and have him tap on the floor tom. The baby learns quarter notes, 8th notes, and so on. After about a month, I teach the baby how to hold a pair of sticks, and just transfer what he learned with his hands to the sticks. Soon he'll begin to grasp what a single-stroke roll is, the different types of drums on the instrument, and the value of notes.

From two and a half to three years of age, I teach them how to read music. Then at about age four, I have them playing drumset to Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers or something like that. It's important to get the kids playing music as quickly as possible. When they're five, I have them writing out their own charts.

**DB:** That's amazing. Do you have a particular philosophy regarding teaching?

**Mike:** My philosophy is that students should enjoy what they're doing above all else. Reading music is very important. I also have an adage that says, "If you can say it then you can play it." The thing with students, especially when they're younger, is that they want to learn things the quickest and easiest way. But sometimes that means they're doing things incorrectly. Play the rhythm the way it's supposed to be played. If it's a flam, play a flam. If it's a groove, then make it groove. If it's 1, e, &, ah—don't play it like a shuffle. It's very important that a student understands the value of the notes, the value of time, and how to listen to music.

**DB:** Name some of your former students who have gone on to have successful careers.

**Mike:** There are some students who have done really well. One of them was Tony Moreno, who went on to play with Flora Purim and Airto, Jimmy Messina, and Les McCann. Then there was George Pendergast, who was with Dishwalla; Mark Davis, who was with Ugly Kid Joe; Randy Guss from Toad The Wet Sprocket; and Bucket Baker, who played drums for Kenny Loggins and Boz Scaggs. And there are many who have played with various local bands over the years. I should also mention a fantastic jazz drummer named Tom Rainey, who went on to perform with many jazz greats in New York and throughout Europe.

**DB:** Who is currently on your teaching staff here at Mike's?

**Mike:** I have Barry Birmingham, a former student of mine, who has been teaching here for twenty-three years. He's holding out for that gold watch [smiles]. I have Craig Thatcher, a wonderful teacher and player. He is also currently the drummer for Christopher Cross. Finally there's Joe Fink, who is originally from Chicago. He's been with me for about a year and a half. He's a great addition.

**DB:** What's the average number of students taught here?

**Mike:** We average between two hundred thirty to two hundred forty students every week.

**DB:** Mike's Drum Shop has always been known for great clinicians. Can you give us a list of the people you have brought to your shop?

**Mike:** Buddy Rich, Louie Bellson, Peter Erskine, Shelly Manne, Airto, Ed Shaughnessy, Marvin "Smitty" Smith, Les DeMerle, Tommy Aldridge, Dave Weckl, Roy Burns, Van Romaine, Glen Sobel, Tris Imboden, Dave Garibaldi, Luis Conte, Jerry Steinholtz, and others. Also, all of the clinics I host are free. I never charge.

**DB:** Why is that?

**Mike:** Because it's just the way I am. I feel like giving something back to the community. As long as they are going to support me, I am going to support them. I can't see charging a customer who spends thousands of dollars a year in my shop ten or twenty dollars to see someone play. To me that's ridiculous. I want it to always be free. It's the least I can do for these people doing business with me.

**DB:** On February 1, 2000 you changed locations after thirty-two years. Why?

**Mike:** I needed more space. We only had a thousand square feet and only

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—Mike Ray

two rooms for teaching. In the new store we have almost three thousand square feet. We have two buildings and two showrooms, and I built four studios that have stereos, television sets with VCRs, cassette recorders—everything the teachers and the students need to have a productive environment.

Now instead of only having ten to fifteen sets in the store, I can have forty to fifty, so customers can sit down and play a variety of choices and sounds. It's been one year since we moved our location, and the response has been fantastic.

**DB:** You also have an impressive collection of vintage drums.

**Mike:** It was probably about twenty-five years ago when people started coming in with old drums, saying that they stopped playing or for whatever reason wanted to get rid of them. The collection started growing from there. People brought in everything from Civil War drums to Radio Kings. So now I probably have around fifty snare drums and two dozen sets of drums that date from the early 1900s to the late '60s. I let people play them and enjoy these gems, but they'll never be for sale. The reason being is that it's always been a dream of mine to someday open a drum museum.

**DB:** So what's new on the horizon for Mike's Drum Shop?

**Mike:** For starters, I have a Web site, [www.mikesdrumshop.com](http://www.mikesdrumshop.com). We sell all of the products that I carry, plus we have bios on our teaching staff. I'll also be presenting master classes on the site with guests like Airto and Aaron Plunkett, among others.

**DB:** What do you think makes Mike's Drum Shop stand out among all of these mega music stores? For me it has always been a sense of community.

**Mike:** That's exactly right. We're a family. I try to be everybody's brother, dad, and best buddy if I can. If a customer has a problem, then we have a problem. If you need something fixed, we'll fix it. If you need bearing edges recut, drums recovered, pedals fixed, we do that. I have a wonderful staff that does all of that. Alan Strubing does the bearing edges, and Gary Mitchell, Austin Beede, and Steven Cooley do repairs as well. I also have to mention Chuck Villa, who has been with me for eleven years. He aids in running the shop. Years ago, Pro Drum Shop in Hollywood would use Valley Drum to do the bearing edges and repairs for their customers. Now that Valley Drum has closed, they send the work to us. I feel very honored to be a part of that.

One thing that has allowed us to withstand the test of time has been our customer service. We rent drums, with the customer having the opportunity of buying them or not buying them. We have people that come in five or six times to check out a set. We want them to feel comfortable.

There's no pressure to buy, and you can stay as long as you like. We're here to help; we even go out to their house and set up the drums for them. Our main goal is to make everyone feel at home.

**DB:** How did you become involved in your volunteer work?

**Mike:** In 1975 I went to La Colina Junior High School to work with the band. Then some other schools found out about it and hired me. Back in the '60s and '70s money was tight for schools. They didn't have the budget for things like that, so I just said that I would do it at no charge. It's now been about twenty-nine years that I've been doing this. Currently I work with about seven different schools in the area. I've also done work at retirement homes, preschools, churches, and the YMCA.

**DB:** You are busy! What's a typical day like for you?

**Mike:** I get up at around 6:00 A.M. and go to my first school and teach between 7:30 and 8:15. Then I go to another school at about 10:30. I'll then go home and do my workout, which is a ten- to twelve-mile run. Then I go to the shop. Some days I also teach at another school at 3:00, then come back and do private lessons, which includes about thirty to forty students.

**DB:** I understand that you've also volunteered at hospitals.

**Mike:** In the late '80s I started volunteering my time at the Santa Barbara Rehabilitation Center and Cottage Care, working with people who had brain injuries, strokes, heart attacks, and drug dependencies. I get a lot of



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satisfaction from it. Just seeing somebody smile when you come in the building is a good feeling. A person can be lying there, upset or in pain, and by playing a tambourine on their foot you make them light up like a Christmas tree. That's worth all the money in the world.

**DB:** You're so busy with the shop, teaching, being married, having raised a family—what drives you to do all of this?

**Mike:** Well, I think that God gave me a gift and I'm just passing it on.

**DB:** You mentioned earlier that you run ten to twelve miles per day. How long have you been doing that?

**Mike:** Thirty-seven years. I was extremely heavy in my twenties and decided that I wanted to get in shape. My wife's uncle was going out for the Police Academy. He called me up to go to the track and said he needed to run two miles. I thought, I can do that. Well, it just about killed me. So I bought some track shoes, and in about eight years I was running marathons.

In the 1970s I was rated eighteenth in the nation for the most miles accumulated in a year. I logged over three thousand miles. Then I ran twelve years consecutively without missing a day—I was trying to go for *The Guinness Book Of World Records*. But then I heard about a guy from Kenya who already did it for twenty. After twelve years I made a conscious decision to miss a day. My wife told me, do it or else! [laughs] But I still work out six days a week.

**DB:** Through your teaching you've helped a lot of kids stay off drugs.

**Mike:** Yes. If they're young, it's usually not a problem. But some are sixteen or seventeen, and if they come in and smell of alcohol or smoke, then we help them by talking to the parents. We explain in a respectful way that their child isn't performing up to par and that there may be a problem. We try to help them here as much as we can. Sometimes they just need someone to talk to. Maybe it's not drugs, maybe it's their family members, friends, or school. We let the kids know that we're all in this thing together and that we must all get along as brothers and sisters. We're here to help each other.

**DB:** Do you see drumming as a healer?

**Mike:** It's a *big* healer. I really believe that if we took three hundred drums to the Middle East and gave each opposing country a hundred fifty drums and had a big drum circle/love fest, that would accomplish more than all of

the so-called peace negotiations. Drums are the center of the world. Just feel your heart.

**DB:** What would you say is your most rewarding moment as a teacher?

**Mike:** There isn't one specific moment, but I would have to say that having a student come back after many years and having me teach his son or daughter is a wonderful feeling. Even if they don't continue playing, people have said to me that what they learned about self-discipline, self-respect, and life, they wanted me to pass on to their children.

**DB:** What would you say is your saddest moment?

**Mike:** Probably the saddest moment was when my friend and former student Tony Moreno took his own life. He was trying to get off drugs and was taking medication for some problems he was having. He was such a proud man that he wanted to do it on his own. He needed to be with friends at the time, but it just didn't happen. I just wish we could have held him and let him know that we were there for him.

**DB:** Do you see yourself as a mentor?

**Mike:** Gosh, I don't know. I feel very blessed to have taught so many wonderful kids and made so many friends. I have a loving family and a great staff. I guess "mentor" might be a term for what I've done, but the most important thing is to let these kids know that you're there for them whenever they need you. That's how I benefit, by seeing them smile and being happy with themselves.

**DB:** Do you think that you'll ever retire from teaching?

**Mike:** No. My wife has been a real driving force in my life, and she'll be retiring in four years. I want to spend more time with her, so I'll be taking on a partner in the business. The partner will run the business side of things, but I'll still teach.

**DB:** Do you have a philosophy for living?

**Mike:** I don't really have a philosophy. I just try to give back to the community the gift that I was given. I mean, if I could reach one kid a day, that would be all I would ask. I do know that drumming communicates to people in a way that no other instrument can.

The one thing I would say, however, is that life is precious. I don't know how much time God has given me, but I want to make every day count.

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