

Pete Zimmer

Self-Contained Early Riser

Pete Zimmer took a crucial step at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston when he agreed to an early morning time slot for independent study. This attitude impressed his instructor, tenor saxophonist George Garzone, who began using the young drummer on gigs, and continues to do so a decade later in New York.

“The thing that made me realize that he was going to make it,” Garzone said, “was that he was willing to get up for 8 a.m. lessons. I thought, ‘This guy’s got balls.’”

Zimmer has lived up to his teacher’s evaluation. Since moving to New York in 2001, he has self-released four albums that feature himself with other rising stars. Along with building a profile as a bandleader and owner of the Tippin’ label, Zimmer remains true to the hard-bop tradition.

“Just the word bop—I don’t know if it scares people, but it sounds older,” Zimmer, 31, said shortly after releasing the album *Chillin’ Live @ Jazz Factory*. “As much as the music has been progressing—and as much as I respect that—in a lot of ways it has confused the audience. And it’s put the industry in a different direction than maybe myself and a lot of other people would like to see it go.”

Zimmer, who grew up outside Milwaukee, continues to follow the blueprint he sketched before recording his first album, *Common Man*, in 2004. He looked to standard bearers like Miles Davis and Art Blakey for inspiration, but also wanted to reflect more contemporary developments.

“We were playing fresh material while still keeping in that tradition,” Zimmer said. “I attempted to create something that could be appreciated by others besides jazz musicians or jazz aficionados.”

Chillin’, recorded at a now-defunct club in Louisville, Ky., represents a departure from Zimmer’s high-octane quintet albums that include tenor



saxophonists Joel Frahm and Garzone, and trumpeter Michael Rodriguez. The relaxed outing spotlights a single horn, trumpeter Jeremy Pelt. Israeli guitarist Avi Rothbard replaces the pianists who perform in Zimmer’s other groups. Zimmer’s light touch on his kit’s two ride cymbals and knack for blending into the ensemble are prominent. “Some drummers can feel like a lead weight and Zimmer feels more like a tap dancer,” said Frahm, who has worked with Zimmer since 2001.

Zimmer attributes his initiative in part to a seminar that Chamber Music America sponsored in 2003. One of the speakers urged artists to play a more active role in managing their careers. The seminar convinced Zimmer to release his first album independently.

“With most artists, when there’s an excitement or a buzz, initially it comes from the artists themselves,” Zimmer said. “If artists are excited about their music, they can do a lot on their own.”

—Eric Fine