

DAVE PANICHI & THE BUDDY RICH TAPE: I GOT NOTHIN' FOR YOU

by Richard Cooke*

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Dave Panichi is one of the greatest jazz trombonists Australia has produced. He is also the straight man in one of the greatest unintentional comedy routines ever recorded. "I could live to be 150 and cure cancer, and I'd still go down in history as the guy from the Buddy Rich tape," he says. "I've had cats in China ask me about it. I'm never going to live it down."



Australian trombonist Dave Panichi: the straight man in one of the greatest unintentional comedy routines ever recorded...

Rich, the legendary American drummer and bandleader, isn't the only celebrity to be captured excoriating an underling: Paul Anka, William Shatner and Orson Welles have spawned famous 'scream tapes'. But none is bigger than Buddy Rich's. Larry David calls the tape "the funniest thing I have ever heard in my life," and included at least three lines from it in *Seinfeld*, which he co-created - most notably in George Costanza's tirade against hecklers ruining a date movie.

A child prodigy who began playing drums at the age of 18 months and performing in vaudeville not long after, Buddy Rich supported his family before he was ten. 'Traps,

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the Drum Wonder', as he was known, was rumoured to be the second-highest-paid child performer in the world.



Buddy Rich as 'Traps The Drum Wonder', rumoured to be the second-highest-paid child performer in the world...

"He never went to school," says Dave Panichi. "He was never socialised. All he knew was performing." It didn't take long for Rich to gain a reputation for his equally prodigious temper. His big break was the result of a fight with Frank Sinatra, who ended up giving Rich money to help the young musician start a big band. His posthumous reputation among musicians is that he was indeed a genius, but an especially prickly one. Legend has it that after his funeral an anonymous ex-band member called Rich's widow. "Is Buddy really dead?" asked the caller, and the sad news was confirmed. A few minutes later, the same man called back. "Is Buddy really dead?" he asked. "I just spoke to you before. I already told you: he's dead," came the reply. "I know," said the caller. "I just like hearing it."

"I think everyone in the band got fired at least once," says Panichi. Bass players were frequent targets, and during a particularly difficult three months the band went through five of them. He reportedly once leaned over to a fresh bass player on the bandstand, mid-song, and asked him if he was "digging it". The enthusiastic sideman replied that he was. "Enjoy it," said Buddy. "Because you're fired."

"He would reduce people to tears with his rants," Panichi says. "But I wasn't afraid of him. Really violent people don't spend ages telling you what they're going to do. They just hit you."

Playing 300 dates a year, the band spent most of its time on a bus, often travelling three or four hundred miles in a day. "If you tour with a guy for six months, it's like

knowing him for ten years. You run out of things to talk about. But our band got on fine, because there was one thing we all agreed on: Buddy. We used to call him Bernie the Chimp. One of the guys had a sock puppet of a chimp, and when he was chewing people out, he would hold it up behind Buddy and do a little show. We put banana skins on his chair a few times, but I don't think he ever realised."

Panichi, then in his early 20s, had joined the band in 1982. His moment of fame came in August 1983, after playing Disneyland. The band had an annual show there, and the 1982 affair had been strained: management had watched aghast as Rich began calling one of the trumpet players a "motherfucker" in front of a child-packed audience. "They forced him to apologise," says Panichi, "and he was furious."



Rich at the drums: the band's musical director came up with the idea of saving some of Rich's sprays for posterity...

It was around this time that Walkman-style recorders first became widely available, and the band's musical director came up with the idea of saving some of Rich's sprays for posterity. The road back from Disneyland in 1983 provided the location. Cathy Rich, Buddy's daughter, provided the opportunity. ("He never would have done it without her there. He loved to have an audience. It was all a performance," Panichi explains.) And Dave Panichi's beard provided the excuse:

Rich: Two fuckin' weeks to make up your mind whether you want a beard or you want a job. I'll not have this trouble with this band. This is not the goddamn House of David fuckin' baseball team. This is the Buddy Rich Band; young people ... with faces! No more fuckin' beards. That's out! If you decide to do it, you're through. Right now! This is the last time I make this announcement. No more fucking beards. I don't want to see it. If you guys don't want to shave it off, I'll treat you just like they treat you in the fuckin' Marine Corps. This is the way I want my band to look. If you don't like it, get out! You've got two weeks to make up your mind. This is no

idle request. I'm telling you how my band is gonna look. You're not telling me how you're gonna look; I'm telling you. You've got two weeks to make up your fucking mind, if you have any mind. [pause] There's too much freedom in this band. It's taken away. You're not going to do what you want to do but what I want to do, as long as you're takin' my fuckin' money. I'm presenting my kind of band. The image I present is what I want, not what you want. [turns to Panichi] You seem to be giving me more trouble than anyone else. Do you want to do something about it? It's up to you. Do you want to do something about it?

Panichi: I would definitely not suggest you touch me.

Rich: Then I definitely tell you one thing. You keep your fuckin' mouth shut, get the fuckin' beard off or get off the band, right now. Now what do you think of that? Now that's a definite suggestion. When you go to work tonight, if I catch the fuckin' beard on you I'll throw you off the fuckin' bandstand, OK?

Panichi: I'm not taking it off.

Rich: You're what?

Panichi: I'm not taking it off.

Rich: You're through.

Panichi: OK.

Rich: Right now. You don't tell me what to do; I tell you. You don't like it, get off.

Panichi: When and where?

Rich: Get off! Get your fuckin' clothes and get off! Right now! [to the driver] Pull the fuckin' bus over!

Panichi: Have you got two weeks' pay for me?

Rich: Have I got what?

Panichi: Two weeks' pay for me.

Rich: I got nothin' for you. I got a right hand to your fuckin' brain if you want it ..."



The Buddy Rich Big Band trombone section, pictured in London in 1984 outside the Royal Albert Hall. L-R, Mike Davis, Dave Panichi, George Gesslein...

Even though he's heard it countless times before, Panichi still laughs as we listen to the tape, admiring the ridiculous turn of phrase, the bottomless well of rage that Rich taps. "The funny thing is, I've had every conceivable reaction to it," he says. "I've had people who say, 'Good on you for standing up to him,' and I've had people who thought I was disrespectful. My main regret is that I didn't push him harder, tip him over the edge. If I'd known we'd still be talking about it 24 years later, I would have really stuck it to him. It would have been easy, too. I could have just said I was taller than he was and had my own hair, and he would have lost it," Panichi says.

"He was a weird guy. He's the only musician I've ever played with who had to get himself angry to get himself in the mood to play. I remember one time we were playing a ballad at a high school, and he hit the crash cymbal with the butt of his brush so hard he knocked it over. In the middle of a ballad, man! I watched him solo more than 700 times. He understood drama. He was a great musician, a great technician, but most of all he was a great entertainer."



Buddy Rich (right) pictured here with the singer Mel Tormé...

Rich's signature finish to a solo was a huge single-stroke roll - the simplest of drumming rudiments, just alternating left- and right-hand strokes. But no one did it faster, cleaner and with more ferocity than Buddy Rich. "I never saw him play that roll to an audience who didn't go ape-shit," says Panichi. The infamous bus tape and a typical Buddy solo, in fact, follow the same pattern: a frenzied opening; a quiet, suspense-filled mid-section, where the audience wonders if he has finished; and an apoplectic finale.

"Everyone thinks I was fired on the bus," Panichi says. "But it was just an act. He winked at me on the bandstand that same night. I played on in the band for another 18 months. And I shaved my beard off, too. On the fourteenth day."

Rich lived long enough to find out about the tape, though no one knows for certain whether he heard it. He was told about the tape's existence just before he went on stage with the London Symphony Orchestra. The exact date of the revelation isn't known, but there is a video of a Buddy Rich performance in the UK, in the mid-80s, with an orchestra. He slouches over the kit, his belly restrained by the cummerbund of an atrocious tuxedo. He looks tired, slowed by age. But the solo is brutal, even by his standards: he seems more like a boxer than a drummer. And as he eases into a relentless, cracking single-stroke roll, a look of unmistakable, limitless rage spreads across his face.