EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

"I Look at It as Fun, Not Work"

Rock drumming legend Carmine Appice talks Cactus and Temple of Blues II, a Howlin' Wolf deep dive with Eric Gales and Billy Sheehan, the urban ghost story of the "Back Door Man" video, a wrestling-themed clip for "300 Pounds of Joy," and six decades of keeping time.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Carmine Appice has been hitting drums for a living for close to six decades, and he still talks about the work like a kid who just got the keys to the studio. "I look at it as fun," he says. "I look at it as fun, you know? I don't look at it as work." The man who powered Vanilla Fudge, Cactus, Beck, Bogert & Appice and Rod Stewart's stadium years is now doing it from a studio where, as he puts it, "those drums never move," and calling up the players he once inspired to come and make noise with him.

The latest result is *Temple of Blues II*, the new Cactus album out now on Cleopatra Records, and its first video, "Back Door Man," an urban ghost story built around a Howlin' Wolf classic. On the track Appice is joined by blues guitar powerhouse Eric Gales and bassist Billy Sheehan. A second video, for "300 Pounds of Joy," is already in the works, and Appice promises it will be about exactly what the title suggests.

Paul Salfen caught up with Appice over Zoom, with Salfen in Dallas and Appice about to leave for St. Martin, for a conversation that wandered happily from green screens and Howlin' Wolf grooves to Jimi Hendrix, Rod Stewart, Captain Kirk and what to call his next book.

THREE HUNDRED POUNDS OF WRESTLERS

Salfen, who told Appice he was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, a fitting credential for a blues conversation, opened by asking whether he was happy with the record. "I'm very happy with it," Appice said. "We're just talking today about doing a new video. We did 'Back Door Man,' which was outrageous, you know, and now we're gonna do this song called '300 Pounds of Joy.'"

The concept? "I think it's gonna be about 300-pound wrestlers," he said, laughing. "So our singer's gonna be Eddie the Terrible."

Like "Back Door Man," the new clip will be assembled from performances filmed in different cities. "We're just organizing it for three of the guys in New York," he explained. The engineer who handles the mixing and editing "has a studio that has a green screen. So everybody's gonna go there and do the green screen. I'm gonna do the green screen down here. Ty Tabor from King's X will do green screen in Kansas City. And then we'll give all the footage to this guy, and he'll make the magic, you know?"

EVERYBODY IN A DIFFERENT PLACE

Salfen noted that even though people said music videos faded after the MTV era, YouTube has given them new life. Appice credited the technology. "The electronics today is unbelievable," he said. "We couldn't do this 20 years ago." On the album sessions, "everybody was in their own house, or another studio."

You would never know it from the finished videos. "It doesn't look like that, but the video, the one we did with Dee Snider, we're all playing together," he said. "We were all in different places."

The same freedom has changed how he plays. "With drums today, I can go in and play my drums in my studio. Those drums never move," he said. "I can play a track today, and tomorrow, next day, next week, I can go in and fix a drum fill I don't like, because of the electronics. And I engineer it myself. I don't need anyone to call, hey, come on over and engineer me. I learned to do it. My brother showed me how to do it."

His brother, he added, went to electronics school and spent a couple of years working tech support for Verizon in between his gigs with Dio and Black Sabbath. That brother is drummer Vinny Appice. Carmine also dropped a fun aside he had recently learned: that Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons both drove taxis in New York in the old days. "I said, oh my god, that's unbelievable."

> *"I can do a whole record in my house. I start with the drums, pass it around, make demos, and then send it out to people, and it's unbelievable." (Carmine Appice)*

"I can do a whole record in my house," he said. "I start with the drums, pass it around, make demos, and then send it out to people, and it's unbelievable." He saved special praise for his engineer and co-producer, Pat Regan. "He's amazing. We've got an amazing team. He mixes it, then we give it to the video guy, we come up with some great stories, and come up with some great product."

THE CACTUS FAN CLUB

Salfen called the guest list an embarrassment of riches. Appice agreed, and explained why so many big names say yes. "I'm blessed that I can get these kind of people," he said. "But the good thing is, because I've been around so long, I influenced a lot of these people when they were growing up. They were, like, Cactus fans. Joe Bonamassa, Cactus fan. Warren Haynes, a Cactus fan. Ted Nugent, Cactus fan. All these guys. Dee Snider was a big Cactus fan."

"It's a great feeling that I can call these people and go, hey, you want to do this?" he said. That very day he had texted Ty Tabor about the "300 Pounds of Joy" video. "I said, look, we're gonna do a video of the song you played on. Will you do it with us? He said, yeah, man, let's do it. Because it's fun now, you know?"

ERIC GALES AND BILLY SHEEHAN

When Salfen brought up Eric Gales as proof that the blues is alive and well, Appice lit up. "Eric Gales is awesome. I know him for so long," he said. The two met roughly 20 years ago on Jimi Hendrix tribute shows. "I had his number on my phone, and I said, man, I should call Eric to do this one. I called him, he said, yeah, let's do it."

There was one funny hiccup. "When he went to the up-tempo part, he didn't do anything, no playing. He sent it back, and I said, why didn't you play? He said, I thought that was for the drums. I said, no, that's for you. You and Billy got to kick ass with me." Gales sent it back again, "and he kicked ass. It was fantastic."

Then Billy Sheehan followed Gales' solos. "It was, like, unbelievable," Appice said. "That's a great thing about this thing. You get back some surprises."

> *"No, that's for you. You and Billy got to kick ass with me." (Carmine Appice)*

BACK TO HOWLIN' WOLF

Asked to pick a favorite track, Appice pointed to "Back Door Man" and "300 Pounds of Joy," then explained how the record came together. The first *Temple of Blues* was all Cactus songs, recut with players who had been influenced by the band. "And this one, I had three Cactus songs left," he said. "And I said, I want it to be a real blues album, so I went back to the roots of where we found 'Evil.'"

That root is *The Howlin' Wolf Album*, the 1969 Chess record often called the "electric" Howlin' Wolf album. Cactus cut "Evil" from it back in 1971, and according to the band's PR team it became the band's biggest song. For *Temple of Blues II*, Appice took the other seven songs he needed from that same album.

"I love that album because the drum parts are so cool," he said. "Even, like, 'Evil,' back in 1971, when we did it, the drum part was so cool, a different groove. It wasn't like boom, bop. It was like boom, boom, bop, it was really cool." He credited the drummer on those sessions, Morris Jennings. "It had such cool drum parts, and it sounded really cool. It sounded like early Zeppelin. Raw drum sound."

"So we took all those songs now, and I did it with a kick-ass drum sound," he said. "Like the opening of '300 Pounds of Joy.' The opening sounds fantastic. The sound of the drums, and the groove, which is his groove, done my way."

SIX MONTHS, ONE CLICK AT A TIME

Appice builds each track from the ground up. "I started the tracks with my click, my voice, singing the riff, and singing where the vocals would go, and then I play drums to it," he said. On some tracks, like "Moanin'," he even played the starting bass part himself, and then had to talk his bass player into replacing it. "He goes, no, the bass sounds good. I go, no, you put the bass on it. So I forced him to do it, and it was better."

"It's just a lot of fun," he said. "It takes time. It was six months to make these records."

The process reminded him of his 1990s project *Guitar Zeus*, a series of all-star guitar albums he released one at a time, including Japanese and Korean editions. "We sold a lot of records around the world," he said, but never landed a U.S. deal "before it was too late, when the record business fell apart."

Budgets have changed too. Back then, he said, he paid guitar players $2,000 to $2,500 each and an engineer $15,000. "You don't even get budgets for that much anymore," he said. On this record, "everyone did it for a

good, cheap price, or everyone did the same price." He returns the favor on the Cleopatra tribute albums he plays on. "I don't do it for the money. The money's crap. I do it to have some fun, and to hear how it ends up."

NINE MONTHS TO A HIT

Salfen observed that Appice has had enough fun for a hundred people. "Knock on wood. I'm blessed," Appice said. "I've been blessed since I started. I joined the Vanilla Fudge, and nine months later, we had a hit song. Okay, I'll take it." That hit was the band's slowed-down, psychedelic reworking of "You Keep Me Hangin' On." Then came the hard lesson. "The second album, we ruined our career with the second album."

He has a theory about why he rarely turns up on the lists of all-time great drummers. "They're always drummers with the same band for 20, 30, 40 years," he said, citing Rush, John Bonham with Led Zeppelin and Stewart Copeland with The Police. "Not a guy like me. I'm here, and then I'm there, and then I'm there, but it's only out of necessity. I would have loved to stay with Ozzy Osbourne for 20 years, or Jeff Beck for 20 years." With a grin, he added: "Not my fault. I'm easier to get along with."

> *"I would have loved to stay with Ozzy Osbourne for 20 years, or Jeff Beck for 20 years. Not my fault. I'm easier to get along with." (Carmine Appice)*

He would not pick a favorite era. "Everyone had a different thing," he said. Vanilla Fudge came first, and "we were innovating." Then Cactus, then the trio with Jeff Beck and Tim Bogert. Later came Blue Murder with John Sykes. He pursued that gig after hearing Cozy Powell had been involved, and tracked Sykes down in England while there with his brother and Dio. He ranks the trios he played in among the greatest ever: "The Cream, Jimi Hendrix, BBA, and Blue Murder." Playing with Ted Nugent and Ozzy was "a whole different thing."

And Rod Stewart? "Ridiculous. It was so big at that time. The stadiums, and number one records," he said. "In my studio, I got just a wall full of gold and platinum records, mostly Rod." He noted he had played on sessions for Jeff Beck's *Blow by Blow*, but it did not work out because he did not want to be a sideman, "so then I left, and I ended up with Rod Stewart, which was better. So knock on wood, I had a great career."

CELEBRATING ROD

These days Appice keeps that music alive with a show he calls a celebration of Rod Stewart's music rather than a tribute, at RodTheShow.com. It grew out of his singer's tribute act. After Appice sat in one night and saw the crowd's reaction, the two decided to partner and build "a real show." Together with a bandmate who played with Rod for 14 years, he said, the show has "21 years of Rod Stewart experience," and they tell stories between songs he helped create.

"Being in a band like Rod Stewart, the grooves set up the vibe of the song," he said. "So my grooves on all the songs I played with Rod, it sets up the vibe. If somebody else played, it would be totally different. That's why it sounds so much like the Rod Stewart group, when I was with the Rod Stewart group for seven years."

HAIL MARY AND SEVEN MINUTES

Salfen asked his signature question from co-host Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboys legend who caught the original Hail Mary: what was Appice's Hail Mary moment? "It's always been like that," Appice said, pointing to the moment he joined the band then called the Pigeons, which became Vanilla Fudge.

Before that, he played New York clubs where Jimi Hendrix sometimes played opposite his band. He remembered hanging out with Hendrix in an Upper West Side apartment while Jimi talked about wanting to "make it big" in the record business. "He said, what about you? I said, I don't know, I never really thought about that. I just wanted to be like my drum teacher, who had a nice Cadillac, a nice house in Brooklyn, a room downstairs soundproofed with his drums. He gave lessons. That was a good life. I didn't know anything about making it." About four years later, they both had.

Vanilla Fudge recorded "You Keep Me Hangin' On" in a single mono take, he said. "I keep saying there was seven minutes that changed my life."

> *"I keep saying there was seven minutes that changed my life." (Carmine Appice)*

As for the mindset that keeps him going: "My mind just never shuts off. It's always some ideas going on." He credits his early discipline, too. "When I studied drums with my teacher, I went through five years' worth of work in three years." His little brother watched him on TV and that started him off, he said, before adding with mock indignation that Vinny does not list him on his website as an influence. "I saw that the other day. I said, come on, man. I know the truth."

His advice to young drummers is simple: practice, and take lessons if you can. "Lessons cut it down. If you want to get to this point here, and you're at this point, take lessons, you get here quicker. Straight in line is always the easiest way." How to make it today, he admitted, is another question. "I really don't know. There's bands on YouTube I never heard of, they're selling out 20,000 people. I used to listen to the radio. There's no radio no more."

COLLECTIBLES, A DRUM BOOK AND STORIES

Will there be a *Temple of Blues III*? "It's really up to the label," he said. The next move might be a best-of combining the first two volumes, maybe with a new video. Meanwhile, Cleopatra Records founder Brian Perera, a longtime friend, has pitched a collectibles line: limited, autographed LPs of unreleased material, possibly with posters. Appice said two Cactus releases, two Vanilla Fudge releases and one with his brother are in the works. "It's fun to do these things, see the finished project, and see what it looks like."

He also wanted fans to know his classic drum book is back in print. After a run with Modern Drummer that he was unhappy with, he redid it with Hudson Music, "made everything correct, and added some new parts to it." It is available on Amazon and in music and drum stores. "This is the book that everybody went through back in the day," he said, naming Dave Weckl, Gregg Bissonette, Kenny Aronoff, and even comedian Andrew Dice Clay.

Next up is a spoken-word project, his manager's idea, to follow his autobiography. "Let's do you sitting down at a microphone and telling stories, like I'm doing now," Appice said. He can record it in his own studio a couple of stories a day. "Before you know it, I have, like, three hours worth of stories."

It still needs a name. Appice offered "Rhythm of My Life." Salfen pitched "Just in Time." Appice suggested asking viewers in the comments, then came up with one more: "How about just call it *Next*?"

CRAZY TRAIN WITH CAPTAIN KIRK

Before signing off, Appice had one more scoop. "I did 'Crazy Train' with Captain Kirk," he said, meaning William Shatner, whom Salfen has also interviewed. "I'm dying to hear it finished. I got his voice on my computer in my studio. He's 96 years old, God bless him. I hope I reach that, still able to play new stuff."

Salfen told him he still hits as hard as ever. "Well, I'm a little slower than I used to be," Appice said. Then he was off to dinner, with St. Martin on the schedule for the next day. "Let's do it again."

FIND CACTUS

Album: Temple of Blues II by Cactus, out now on Cleopatra Records

CD and vinyl: cleorecs.com

Digital: orcd.co/cactus_templeofbluesii

Video: "Back Door Man" featuring Eric Gales and Billy Sheehan with Carmine Appice

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine over Zoom, 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.
