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His Voyager group references drum 'n' bass, avant-garde, Indian classical, future fusion, and well beyond. Add to that the hundreds of recordings he's played on, the multiple jazz legends he's supported, and his singular playing style, which has influenced legions, and it becomes crystal clear why he's considered among the most crucial musicians of his generation.  
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# DOMINION

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## AN EDITOR'S OVERVIEW

# Why Do You Do It?

**A**mong my responsibilities each month at *Modern Drummer* is writing un-bylined parts of the magazine—captions, feature deks, cover heads, that sort of thing. This month, as I was putting together the contents page, I noticed something interesting: there were no “band” drummers in the features section, meaning, no one whose playing career revolved solely around their work with one group or instrumentalist, or within one genre. It got me thinking about all the other drummers whose success has hinged on their ability to contribute in a multitude of settings, or to a *mix* of styles, and how and why they cultivated that ability.



Jim Esposito

Over the years you’ve no doubt read many a pro drummer or *MD* columnist espouse the importance of learning as wide a range of styles as possible. Even for players who largely came to prominence with one act, immersing themselves in multiple genres reaped big rewards. Think about, say, Danny Seraphine with Chicago, or Stewart Copeland with the Police, or Danny Carey with Tool.

It seems unlikely that any of these drummers explicitly plotted their particular road to stardom. Did Seraphine shed big band just so he could join a “horn band” like Chicago? Nah, rock bands with horn sections didn’t exist when Danny was young. Did Copeland imagine making history by mashing together punk rock and reggae music? Hard to imagine—punk and reggae didn’t develop until well after Stewart first picked up the sticks. How about Danny Carey and Tool? Well, I don’t think any of us saw *his* style coming.

No, the reason all these drummers were able to absolutely kill it with their respective bands was because they’d followed their own diverse interests as they were developing their voices on the kit. And not because it made “sense” at the time, but because it carried meaning in and of itself. Then, when they finally met the right fellow musicians—BAM! The stars aligned, and we all were gifted with groundbreaking art.

Back to this month’s featured drummers. None of them can be neatly pinned to one particular employer—or even one type of employer. We can ponder elsewhere whether this is an actual trend, and if so, why it might be. For now there’s plenty to learn just by exploring each of their individual paths toward self-expression.

A couple months ago in this column, I asked readers to think about how they could make their own way in the music industry. Perhaps it’s even more important to ask ourselves *why*. We can all work our butts off with the aim of becoming “employable.” But without intellectual curiosity and a muse on our shoulder, aren’t we just going through the motions? Success in the music industry is hard enough—besides a paycheck, exactly what is it that we’re getting out of all this? What does the path to self-discovery teach us about ourselves, and about the world around us?

The time for self-reflection is always now.

**Adam Budofsky**  
Editorial Director

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- Shannon Forrest, Toto

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-Chad Cromwell

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## Acoustic vs. Electronic Drums



**"Electronics have come a long way, but they still have their shortcomings. You have to accept them for the instrument they are. I believe there are no samples that will sound better than my Sonor kit."**

**Danny Carey**  
December 2019 Modern Drummer

### Do you agree with Danny?

The raw drum sound is what makes them *human*. What makes our music *human*. The tone and touch of the drum is so important! Even in a metal context the drummer's feel works off how he approaches the drums. Tone is something drummers work on for years to master.

**Jordan Bernacchia**

I believe electronics are their own instrument, much like acoustic guitars vs. electric. There's no way an electronic drum on its own is going to move air like an acoustic, and vice versa. E-drums are

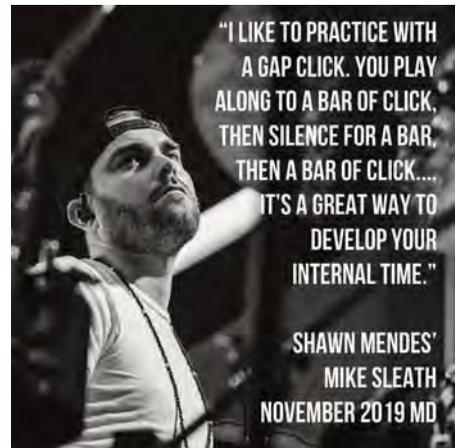
their own instrument, and you either embrace that or play acoustic drums. I used to play shifts in several casinos on their Roland TD-30 kits and learned that inside out. The older cats who didn't embrace the technology eventually fell off the circuit, no pun intended.

**Bill Ray**

It's strange to [compare] e-kits vs. acoustic kits. They are two different instruments, for two different purposes. One can't replace the other. But if you want to learn how to play the drums, do it on a responsive one: acoustics!

**Vincent from Normandy Drum Studios**

## Tips on Improving Time



### How do you work on *your* time?

Fred Dinkins' great book *It's About Time*.

**Bruce Hammer**

I always had a natural internal time. What made it more powerful was playing Indian classical music.

**@zenmasterrp**

Playing at 20–30 BPM.

**Brad King**

Sixteen beats, click sound only on beat 16. Stole this from Jochen Rueckert and his awesome instructional videos.

**Reed Stewart**

## Music School: Pros and Cons



### Have you had mostly positive experiences in music school, or negative ones?

That's why I dropped out of New England Conservatory after three weeks. Full scholarship. Never regretted it.

**Tony Mangurian**

I never related to a quote so much in my life.

**Owen Norsworthy**

One hundred percent worth it, if you find the right school.

**Calvin Reid**

I agree. I did three years of music school and hated every minute of it. Almost quit playing altogether.

**K.C. Cox**

It's what you make of it, and sometimes "sink or swim" helps you find your way.

**Joe Bush**

If you find inspiration in other music areas (theory, history, pedagogy, etc.) then you will enjoy your time. My experiences in music school have taught me practice efficiency, developed my musicality, and increased my passion for my craft.

**Josh Hartwell**

I went to Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers in the late '80s as a jazz performance major. It was phenomenal! *Definitely* wasn't like *Whiplash*. My drum teacher/mentor/friend was the incomparable Keith Copeland. And all the other instrument professors were equally encouraging and supportive. School is not about what you are taught on a day-to-day basis; it's about what you absorb from the greatness of talent in your teachers and peers around you.

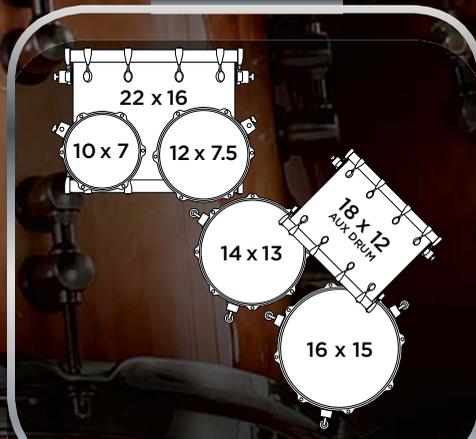
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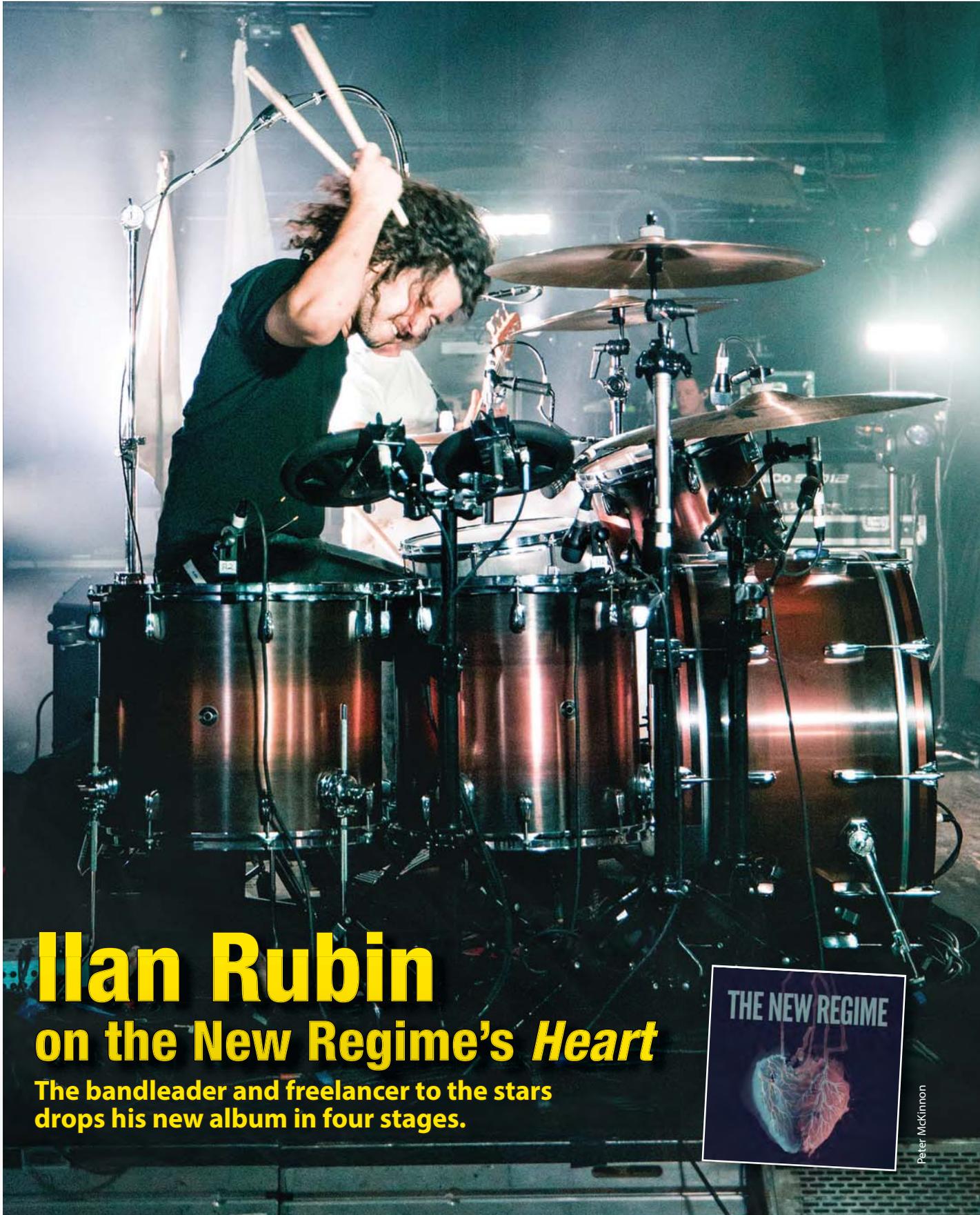


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# OUT NOW



## **Ilan Rubin** **on the New Regime's *Heart***

**The bandleader and freelancer to the stars drops his new album in four stages.**



Peter McKinnon

As usual, Ilan Rubin plays every instrument on the latest release by his longtime New Regime project. *Heart* is the first of four EPs that will make up the *Heart Mind Body & Soul* full-length, due out later this year. Tracked at the Sonic Ranch Studios in Tornillo, Texas, the new music is at turns anthemic, synth-pop ambient, and power-chord crunching. And like previous New Regime releases, it comes across not as a mere vanity project, but as a fully formed expression of Rubin's aesthetic.

When he takes the New Regime on the road, Rubin exchanges his drummer's hat for that of singing and guitar-slinging front man. Meanwhile, Nine Inch Nails and, most recently, Angels & Airwaves enlist his drumming skills as touring demands.

**MD:** How did you track drums on *Heart Mind Body & Soul*?

**Ilan:** I brought in demos and muted the drums and recorded over that. Usually I track to a click and then pile everything above it. But you get a different feel when you're playing to music as opposed to the metronome.

I'm still battling with how important the click is. It's essential in terms of editing, but something is lost when everything is on the grid. A lot of emotion and energy can be conveyed by slowly speeding up as music gets louder or slowing down when the music turns mellow. When you record to a grid, all that's gone. You can play a bit behind the beat or ahead of the beat, but so much of my favorite music has very noticeable time changes. And it adds to the excitement. What's funny is that people emulate meticulous tempo mapping, rather than just playing and letting it happen naturally.

It also affects live playing, because so many people play to tracks. There's nothing wrong with that, but then you're a slave to tempo. Don't get me wrong; playing with Nine Inch Nails, everything is on a click, and that band performs with more energy than anybody. But I grew up listening to a lot of live music, particularly by the Police. You can feel the energy when somebody just counts off a song based on where their adrenaline is in the moment. That's been lost, unfortunately.

**MD:** How does this all manifest in the New Regime?

**Ilan:** I'm somewhere in the middle. I've had the band as a three-piece for the last few years because that gives me more freedom to improvise on guitar or extend sections. I'm not interested in recreating what's on the album,

but I do want to make sure that the vibe comes across as it's intended. I usually [increase the tempo] to what feels best in the live element, so it's not so rigid. There are key elements in the show where I'm able to spread my wings a little bit as a guitar player and as a band.

**MD:** How did it feel to track drums in a large professional studio as opposed to a home studio?

**Ilan:** The Sonic Ranch studio complex has a few studios, but one studio has three distinct rooms: one is wood, there's a stone room that's very lively, and there's a carpeted room that's dead-sounding. There were two or three songs where I wanted a very dead, dry drum sound, in which case we set up in the carpeted room with very minimal miking. I was able to play very softly and let the gear do the work. Overall, I had the luxury of being able to pick and choose where I wanted to record and what gear to use. It was just a great experience.

**MD:** Did you use programming on some tracks?

**Ilan:** Yeah, using Pro Tools, Battery, and the Nord Drum 3P. That may be disappointing to drummers, but sometimes it's liberating to go for a more electronic vibe and not have to think about the drums, to have a hybrid sound. So there's drums on some tracks that have electronic drums in the verses and a real kit or a hybrid of the two elsewhere in the song. It's whatever the song demands.

**MD:** What advice can you give to drummers who want to take the leap to being a front man?

**Ilan:** They must really want to do it and take it seriously. It's one thing to say, "Hey, I want to sing and write my own songs," but fronting a band performing live is a completely different thing. And it depends on what kind of show you want to put on. I want to present an energetic show and put forth that energy as a front man.

It also depends on what kind of music you're playing. You must put in the time and develop whatever it is that you want to do. Obsessing over other instruments above and beyond the drums is why I got into guitar, bass, piano, and all these things, and the final piece of the puzzle to be able to do everything myself was singing. Then I became addicted to writing music. A lot of growth and evolution had to take place. I feel like I've fairly recently come into my own as a front man.

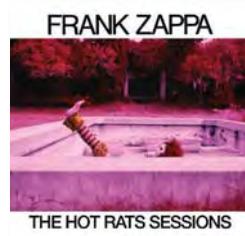
**Ken Micallef**

**Ilan Rubin plays Q Drum Company drums, Zildjian cymbals, and Vater sticks.**

## More New Releases



**Polica**  
**When We Stay Alive**  
(Drew Christopherson and Ben Ivascu)



**Frank Zappa**  
**The Hot Rats Sessions**  
(Jon Guerin, Paul Humphrey, Ron Selico)



**Muse**  
**Origin of Muse**  
(Dominic Howard)



**Molly Hatchet**  
**Battleground**  
(Shawn Beamer)

## Grace Potter's Jordan West

The multitasking musician puts several of her well-honed skills to work on the road with the soulful rock artist.

Since leaving her native Fort Wayne, Indiana, for Los Angeles, California, Jordan West has drummed with the likes of Seal and Andy Summers of the Police. But she really met her match in her current gig, on tour with another singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist and L.A. transplant—Grace Potter. West, who released the single “Ten Feet Tall” in October, has a lilting, soulful voice and writes multidimensional pop that’s right in sync with Potter’s sound.

The two share an entrepreneurial spirit as well as an artistic one. West composes and records music for television and created a series of video drum lessons for Reverb.com, while Potter founded and runs Grand Point North, an annual music and arts festival in her home state of Vermont. “We have a lot in common—we’re even both Geminis!” West says. “Musically I think we’re on the same page about a lot of things.”

**MD:** You started out playing jazz, while Potter came from the jam band scene—both genres with an improvisational nature. Does that inform the way you play together?

**Jordan:** Definitely. Grace loves outer space (in real life and onstage—she’s a huge Trekkie) and we go there often. I think one of my strengths as a player is being willing to let go and really commit to a moment, for better or for worse. Some of my favorite times during shows are when we don’t know what’s going on and everyone is just creating a feeling onstage, in that moment, that will never happen again. Sometimes Grace will get on the talkback and give us a vibe to go for or hits to play, and it’s really fun to hear it all come together. I’ve learned that it’s important to me to have room to improvise. I like to be able to stretch and experiment.

**MD:** What kind of prep did you do before heading out on this tour, and how helpful was it when you actually got on the road?

**Jordan:** From the start, this gig was one of the most intense I’ve ever played. The music is energetic and truly 100-percent live—no click, no backing tracks. Just the five of us onstage giving the best performance we can.

I’m hitting the drums really hard, and after our first two shows (and a few pulled muscles and sprained ankles), I

realized I was not physically in shape enough for what the show required. We play two-hour sets a lot of the time, and I’m singing quite a bit throughout, so I picked up swimming and interval training to help my cardio. My brother is a personal trainer, so he’s also been helping me with weights to strengthen my muscles and protect from injury.

Practice-wise, it took a lot of time to get the vocal parts down without sacrificing any of what I’m playing on the drums. During the weeks leading up to our first gig, I was practicing four or five hours a day, focusing mainly on the vocal/drum coordination and playing with power.

**MD:** Singing while drumming can be perilous for staying on key or in time. How did you master it?

**Jordan:** I started singing when I was twenty-one. At that point, I’d already been playing drums for ten years. So it never felt as difficult as it seemed like it should’ve been, because I had a lot of muscle memory that I could rely on. I think that was helpful.

I also did it all the time. I sang lead in my band, and at our first show it really didn’t sound great. But after a year of playing shows, the improvement was crazy. Even though it’s scary, getting out and doing it in front of an audience is the best practice.

For the Grace gig, I repeated and repeated things. It’s actually a lot harder for me to sing backup than it is to sing lead, because I’m not singing the melody, and my focus is on blending and following Grace. I started by singing along with the recordings—no drumming, just hearing the parts. When I went to do it while playing, some of it didn’t work, so I sang random notes and words when I could and tried to lock in.

Don’t worry about being perfect. Just try to get your brain to realize you should be doing something at that specific time. Once your body and mind get used to the timing of things, it will become easier to focus on the right note or the right word. But at first it’s going to sound really strange and terrible for a while. Once you get it into your muscle memory, though, it’ll stick for good.

**Meredith Ochs**

**Jordan West plays Ludwig drums, Zildjian cymbals, and Roland and BOSS electronics.**

### Also on the Road

**Pat Oakes** with Cursive  
**Ira Elliot** with Nada Surf  
**Jay Weinberg** with Slipknot  
**Nigel Olsson** with Elton John  
**Barry Alexander** with Jonny Lang





# Mapex

## Black Panther Design Lab Versatus System

Reimagining every element of the drumset to maximize tone and versatility.

The Design Lab is what Mapex dubbed its group of drummers, engineers, and designers who contributed ideas and opinions on ways in which the drumset could be improved to maximize its sonic potential. The best results of their tests were incorporated into what the company believes is the pinnacle of drumset construction: the Black Panther Design Lab series. This series comprises two models, the Cherry Bomb and the Versatus, with the former delivering vintage-style warmth and controlled punch and the latter providing classic tone and utmost versatility. We were sent a complete Versatus system to get a feel for how encompassing these drums truly are. Let's dive in!

### The Shell Specs

The Versatus system is designed to be modular, so that you can create several different configurations to suit different musical applications. Included are a 16x22 bass drum, a 12x18 auxiliary bass drum/tom, 7x10 and 7.5x12 rack toms, and 13x14 and 15x16 floor toms. The shells are a mixture of maple and mahogany, with the plies getting progressively thicker as the drum diameter increases. The bearing edges also change, as do the number and location of internal maple tone rings.

Smaller rack toms (8" and 10") have 6-ply shells with 45-degree edges on top and bottom and no internal rings. The 12" tom has a similar shell but a tone ring is added on the batter side only, while the 13" tom has the tone ring on the bottom side only. The 14" floor tom is also 6-ply, but it has 60-degree edges and tone rings on both sides. Larger 16" and 18" floor toms have 8-ply shells and both tone rings. The 12x18 bass drum/tom has a 10-ply shell, 60-degree edges, and no rings. The 22" bass drum has tone rings placed

on both sides, and there's a third ring placed in the center of the shell to help minimize standing-wave reflections.

The Versatus kit is available in a handful of satin, gloss, and veneer finishes, which are organized into three levels according to their impact on the shell's natural resonating pitch and length of sustain. Natural Satin and Satin Black stains are said to have the least effect on shell resonance while also allowing for the lowest fundamental note possible. The gloss lacquers (Transparent Copper, Rose Burst, and Piano Black) dampen the shell a little bit and raise the fundamental slightly. The Peach Burl Burst and Gold Sparkle Burst finishes have a high-gloss lacquer atop an extra ply of exotic veneer, which collectively has the greatest dampening effect and highest pitch.

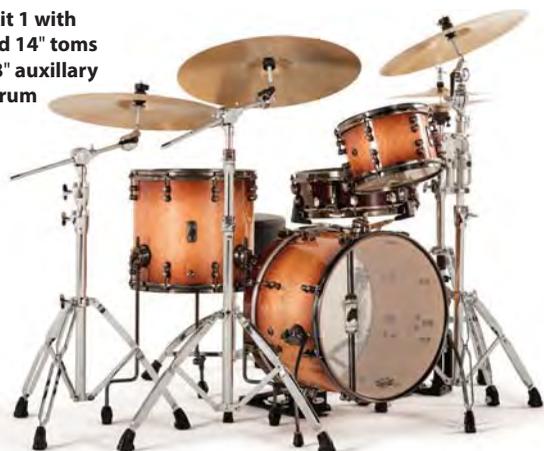
### Hardware Innovations

The two most significant hardware innovations incorporated into the Design Lab kits are the angle-adjustable Soniclear Attenuation System (SAS) floor tom leg and the Magnetic Air Adjustment Tom Suspension

(MAATS). The new floor tom leg has two drum key-operated elbow joints at the base that allow the angle to be adjusted from 90 degrees to vertical. The theory is that the straighter the leg, the faster the decay. Each floor tom comes with one SAS leg and two static 90-degree legs. All three legs feature Sonic Pedestal feet that allow the steel posts to float on a rubber spring to minimize sustain-choking vibration transfer to the floor.

The MAATS tom mount is a completely reinvented system that incorporates magnets (Magnetic Force Adjustment) to control or open up drum resonance based on how much of the drum's weight is being distributed to the magnets. The mount also has a vertical-moving Acoustic Resonance Gate that allows you to lengthen or shorten the sustain time of the drum without affecting the tone or feel. Mapex includes MAATS mounts with every rack tom, and they are sized to be compatible with the receivers found on most cymbal stands and drum holders. If you're a fan of feature-laden hardware, Mapex has done everything imaginable with the MAATS tom

**Split Kit 1 with 10" and 14" toms and 18" auxiliary bass drum**



**Split Kit 2 with 12" and 16" toms and 22" bass drum**





The complete Versatus system

mount and SAS floor tom leg to give you utmost tone control and adjustability.

### To the Studio

All the design tweaks and innovations incorporated into the Black Panther Design Lab Versatus system would be meaningless if the sonic results weren't exemplary. Thankfully, these drums lived up to our expectations, in terms of providing open, warm, and versatile tones suitable for any playing style and musical situation.

The 22" bass drum came with a Remo Powerstroke P3 Renaissance batter head, which is my favorite model. The underside dampening ring and textured surface reduces just enough high overtones to emphasize punch and warmth without killing all of the resonance. The front head is the new Powerstroke Felt Tone, which has a built-in felt strip that floats underneath the film to provide classic-style dampening without affecting how the head seats on the bearing edge. Those heads, combined with the drum's 60-degree bearing edges and the additional center SAS tone ring, created a fat, deep, and warm bass drum sound. This sound could be easily transformed from a big, resonant marching-style tone when tuned medium to a controlled, punchy smack when tuned just above the wrinkle point. Noticeably absent in sound were the loathsome high-frequency flutter echoes that often plague open, double-headed bass drums, thanks to the center SAS ring, which helps break up the sound waves as they bounce around inside the drum.

The 12x18 auxiliary tom/bass drum, which

came with an Emperor Clear batter and Ambassador Clear bottom, was my favorite piece of the Versatus kit. It came equipped with three legs and brackets, as well as vintage-style gullwing spurs, so it could be set up as a standard floor tom or as a bop-type bass drum. Also included is a simple detachable lift bracket that affixes to the wood hoop and provides a solid metal lip on which to attach a pedal. The wood hoop is cut out at the spot where the bracket attaches to ensure that the chain and footboard of the pedal have an unobstructed path. The front side of the drum has a triple-flange hoop, which I assume was added to allow clearance for the legs when the drum is used as a floor tom. This shallow 18" drum can be cranked super high for an Elvin Jones-type "boink" or detuned super low to a deep, resonant 808-style tone. And when used as a tom, its thunderous but punchy tone blends seamlessly with the racks and floors.

The 10" and 12" rack toms came with single-ply Ambassador Clear heads on top and bottom, while the 14" and 16" floor toms had 2-ply Emperor Clear batters. This combo allowed for a smooth transition from the faster, sharper sounds of the small drums to the deeper, fatter smack of the floors. I was able to get a wide yet balanced spread among the four drums by tuning them in fourths, with the 16" tuned quite low (B) and the 10" tuned just below the choking point (E).

The MAATs tom suspension system, which was a lot lighter than I anticipated due to being fabricated mostly of aluminum, not only provided infinite position options and held the rack toms in place without choking

the sustain, but the length of the notes among the four drums could be closely matched by adjusting the distance between the magnets in the mount. The effect caused by adjusting the magnets was subtle but noticeable. And it was nice to be able to shorten the length of the 12" to match that of the 10" without having to resort to dampening the drumheads, as the latter impacts not just sustain but also timbre and feel.

Similarly, the adjustable SAS floor tom leg provides some resonance control when positioned straight versus angled. I heard about two seconds less sustain coming from the floor toms when the legs were set completely straight. This subtle but significant tone control will come in handy when using these drums on loud, booming stages or in studio situations where close mics are picking up every last detail of sound.

All in all, the Mapex Black Panther Design Lab Versatus lived up to our expectations as a high-end, high-quality one-kit-does-it-all option. You could set up the entire system, with the 18" auxiliary drum positioned as a remote bass drum, for an ultimate studio kit that's ready to take on any project that comes your way—from bebop to metal. Or you could parse it out into several smaller configurations, whether it's a tight 10"/14"/18" bop setup, a basic rock 12"/16"/22" three-piece, or a classic Steve Gadd/Vinnie Colaiuta-style setup with all four toms and the 22" bass drum. Either way, with a Versatus system in your possession, your sonic palette will be pretty much complete.

**Michael Dawson**

## PRODUCT CLOSE-UP

# Sabian

## HHX Complex Series

Dark and rich cymbals for fast, explosive attack and short, sweet sustain.

The HH series is Canadian manufacturer Sabian's original recipe for the classic hand-hammered Turkish cymbal sound, which the company has a direct connection to via founder Robert Zildjian. All HH cymbals are handcrafted from B20 bronze and are available in natural or shiny ("brilliant") finishes. They exhibit dark, vintage-inspired sounds that fit a wide variety of genres, dynamics, and playing styles.

The modern-leaning HHX series was introduced in 2001, displaying more intense hammering techniques to add darker and more cutting tones to the catalog. This past year, the subtler HH and more aggressive HHX hammering concepts were combined into one subseries: the HHX Complex. These new offerings comprise 16", 17", 18", 19", 20", and 22" Thin crashes, 14" and 15" Medium hi-hats, and 20" and 22" Medium rides. Let's take a closer look to see how well the different production styles gel.

### The Design

All of the HHX Complex models share the same basic design. The medium-sized bell is steep, raw, and heavily hammered with deep, tight markings. Conversely, the bow is more gradually sloped, lightly lathed, and extensively hammered with soft, wide markings.

The primary difference between the HHX Complex crashes, hi-hats, and rides is the weight. The crashes are very thin, soft, and flexible, while the rides and hi-hats are heavier for a firmer feel and tighter articulation.

### Thin Crashes

All six HHX Complex crashes are quite thin and loose, so they open up easily at all dynamics and feel soft and supple whether smacked with a quick blow or coaxed with a gentler touch. They're a bit breathier, darker, and more controlled than comparable HHX Thin crashes, which have more pronounced midrange overtones. The

Complexes also have a flashier attack, trashier sustain, and faster decay. The smaller 16" (\$279.99) and 17" (\$299.99) HHX Complex crashes have a tighter and shorter tone that makes them ideal for quick, punchy accents and lower-volume situations while still giving off a nuanced, complex, and musical tone. The hammered bells have a much softer and more integrated sound than standard bells that also contributes to the cymbals' overall softer, darker timbre.

The 18" (\$329.99) and 19" (\$359.99) HHX Complex crashes are a nearly perfect blend of gritty attack, saturated sustain, and quick but smooth decay. I imagine these two models getting tons of use for all types of recording and live playing situations. They're dry but not one-dimensional, lush but not washy.

In addition to producing massive, dramatic accents, the larger 20" (\$379.99) and 22" (\$449.99) HHX Complex crashes could double as thin, vintage-inspired rides or washy crash-rides. The 22" requires a stronger stroke to bring to full voice, but there's a range of useful





**HHX**  
Complex  
Thin Crash  
17 7/8 cm

and balanced tones to be explored at lower dynamics, too. The 20" paired perfectly with the 18" for situations requiring a classic two-crash cymbal setup that can cover a wide range of dynamics and musical styles.

### Medium Hi-Hats

The 14" (\$464.99) and 15" (\$509.99) HHX Complex Medium hi-hats comprise a medium-weight top over a heavy bottom. They're designed to produce a solid, tight foot "chick," a dark, articulate closed sound, and a fat open sizzle. They're fairly chunky, weighty hi-hats, but they responded quickly and cleanly, and they had a more nuanced and expressive tone that I usually only get with thinner options. The extra hammering effectively removed any lingering or metallic

overtones, which gave these HHX Complex hi-hats a very satisfying acoustic sound that translated to recording very well. The 14" version would be ideal for all-purpose use, while the 15" size had a deeper growl, denser attack, and wider spread.

### Medium Rides

Both HHX Medium Complex rides are thick enough to produce a clean, sweet "ping" while still possessing a rich and deep wash. The 20" (\$379.99) opens up a bit quicker than the 22" (\$449.99) and has a higher overall pitch. But both versions sounded expressive and nuanced at lower volumes, and both were big and bold in louder situations. The hammered bell tones were much darker and softer than they are on

other HHX models, and the overtones emanating from the bow were deeper and free of midrange hum. Aside from traditional bebop or super-aggressive metal, you could cover any gig or session that comes your way with one of these two HHX Complex Medium rides.

If you're looking for some classic yet modern-sounding hand-hammered cymbals to serve a wide variety of needs, check out these new HHX Complex models. Sabian even put together a three-piece prepack (\$929.99) comprising 15" Medium hi-hats, a 19" Thin crash, and a 22" Medium ride. That would be a great place to start.

**Michael Dawson**

# ddrum

## Dios Maple and Bamboo Snares

Ultra-affordable yet high-quality plant-based options for everyday use.

The Dios series was originally ddrum's maple-only offering. The line has since expanded a bit to include a shell pack and snare with a gorgeous zebra wood veneer and snares made from steel, bronze, and bamboo. We got our hands on a trio of new snares to review: 7x13 Satin Gold and 6.5x14 Satin Black maple, which were added to match two of the most popular Dios shell-pack finishes, and a unique 6.5x14 made from ten plies of bamboo.

### 6.5x14 Satin Black Maple (\$279)

This classy, timeless-looking drum features an 8-ply shell made from North American maple finished with a deep, satin-black paint. It came outfitted with 2.3 mm triple-flange steel hoops, but die-casts are also available as an upgrade.

There are ten double-sided tube lugs with bullet-shaped shell mounts. The throw-off is a smooth, silent lever-style option that extends perpendicularly from the shell when disengaged. Drumheads include a single-ply coated batter and a clear, ultra-thin single-ply bottom.

The bearing edges are cut to 45 degrees

from the inside and have a 30-degree counter cut on the outside. This profile allows for maximum sensitivity and articulation while bringing the apex in a bit from the edge to ensure flat, even drumhead seating. Standard twenty-strand snappy wires are held in place via black grosgrain straps, which are a subtle but welcome upgrade from stiff plastic strips or metal wires. The tension rods come with black plastic washers, which help maintain consistent tension and make the tuning process feel smoother.

This 6.5x14 snare had a clean, open, and articulate sound across a wide

tuning range. All I needed to do to kill the overtones to get a tighter, punchier response was drop on a 1.5" piece of tape or gel. But you could run this drum wide open if you prefer snare tones with noticeable pitch bend and sustain. The overtones are prominent while not being overbearing or out of balance. If you were just starting to build up your snare collection, this would be a solid choice for an all-purpose deep maple drum at a minimal investment. This size Dios maple drum is also available in Satin Gold, Emerald Green Sparkle, and Red Cherry Sparkle finish.





### 7x13 Satin Gold Maple (\$249)

Aside from its dimensions and finish, this 7x13 Dios Satin Gold maple snare is identical to the 6.5x14 model. The gold finish gives it a bit more visual panache while still having a classy, universal look. Given its smaller diameter, this 13" drum sounded expectedly more comfortable and cracking at higher tunings, but I was a bit surprised by how much air it moved and how much punch it packed at lower tunings. The overtones were more controlled than in the larger version, even in the often-troublesome middle tuning register. I could probably lean on the 7x13 Dios maple for almost any playing situation, which makes its killer price point all the more appealing. Satin Black, Red Cherry Sparkle, and Emerald Green Sparkle finishes are also available in this size.



### 6.5x14 Bamboo (\$499)

The 6.5x14 Bamboo model snare is built from an 8 mm, 10-ply bamboo shell, and it comes with die-cast hoops. The rest of the features, however, are the same as the other drums': ten bullet-shaped tube lugs, 45-degree edges with a 30-degree back cut, a perpendicular lever-style throw-off, grosgrain snare straps, plastic tension rod washers, and single-ply drumheads. Bamboo is a notoriously strong yet flexible plant that's technically classified as a grass.

Given the lower density of bamboo, I expected this drum to have a very open but somewhat thin tone. Yet it proved to be quite powerful, punchy, and tuneful. It was my favorite of the three Dios snares we reviewed for tight, articulate funky sounds. It also maintained focus and fullness when detuned for a deep, chesty smack. The middle tuning range had the most overtones, which could be used to your advantage if you want a snare sound that occupies more sonic real estate without being muddy. The overtones are also easily dampened out with a little tape or gel for a more focused but still lively sound. Adding die-cast hoops to this bamboo drum was a wise choice by ddrum, as they help focus the pitch while also thickening up the attack of rimshots.

If you're looking for a snare sound that's just a little left of center, with a resonant yet powerful tone that has a little more bite than maple or birch, bamboo might be your thing. Check out an extensive tuning-range demo of the 6.5x14 Dios bamboo snare, as well as the 7x13 and 6.5x14 maples, at [moderndrummer.com/gear](http://moderndrummer.com/gear).

**Michael Dawson**



**GEARING UP** ON STAGE  
AND UP CLOSE

## Smashing Pumpkins'

# Jimmy Chamberlin

Constructed in 2003, this Yamaha Birch Custom Absolute Nouveau kit is one of Jimmy Chamberlin's most cherished possessions. Compared to the maple kit that he has also played on the road, Jimmy says birch complements both his playing style and the band's music. "It's not as loud and broad as the maple," he says. "But for the way I play and the phrasing I do, it seems to fit the music better. I've always played maple with the Pumpkins, and I've always played birch with my jazz bands, but as the stage volume went down and we started using in-ears, I thought I'd use my most musical kit. The birch has a little more control, and a little bit of a carved-out mid-range, so you're not competing with guitars as much. It has a nice sweet attack on top and warm low end."

Although the visual component of Chamberlin's kit wasn't a top priority, it meshed with the band's current stage setting well. "I only have a few kits, so it's either yellow or custom painted," he says. "I care about optics, but I'm not overly concerned about them. It's a good-sounding kit, which is why it's on the tour. The fact that it fit in with the other design elements on the stage was a bonus."

Chamberlin's signature snare remains one of his favorites. "It's such a great utility drum; it really works in any situation," he says. "I've used that snare on straight-ahead jazz gigs where the front row is three to four feet from the drumset, and I've used it to play big arenas and outdoor shows. I have yet to find another drum that versatile."

Wanting dark, rich cymbal sounds, Chamberlin elected to use

Istanbul Agop. "It's amazing how musical they are and how little effort you have to put into playing them to be heard," he says. "There's a lot of history in the Turkish sound, yet they still sound very modern."

"Before it was almost like the cymbals were one instrument, and the drums were another," Chamberlin continues. "Now I'm playing a complete instrument where both are married together. When you have a sonic palette that you're comfortable with, you can challenge yourself to make decisions that are outside of the box because you're not hampered by conventionality from an instrument standpoint."

Also included in Chamberlin's cymbal setup is a DW cable hi-hat that was recommended by his drum tech, Vic Salazar. "I was a bit skeptical because I'm a very hi-hat-centric player and thought the feel would be different," Chamberlin admits. "I don't find there's that big of a delta between the cable hat and the straight hat. It's a little noticeable; the slight latency in the hat is kind of better for me because it keeps my playing less on top."

Needing a versatile drumstick for touring, Chamberlin chose the maple Vic Firth Modern Jazz 4s, which is similar in length to a 5B but lighter. "I got sick of switching to 7As when I would play a jazz gig and then go back to 5Bs and 5As for rock gigs," he says. "I road-tested the Modern Jazz 4s during Smashing Pumpkins rehearsals and found them to be extremely musical—and I wasn't breaking any. Additionally, because of the maple grain structure, they open up the cymbals a little more than hickory or oak."

**Drums:** Yamaha Birch Custom Absolute Nouveau with custom yellow lacquer

- A. 5.5x14 Yamaha Jimmy Chamberlin signature steel snare
- B. 12x14 tom
- C. 8x10 tom
- D. 9x13 tom
- E. 16x16 floor tom
- F. 16x18 floor tom
- G. 14x22 bass drum

**Cymbals:** Istanbul Agop  
1. 14" 30th Anniversary hi-hats

- 2. 12" Traditional splash
- 3. 21" Traditional swish with six rivets
- 4. 16" Traditional Thin crash
- 5. 18" Traditional Paper-Thin crash
- 6. 10" Traditional splash
- 7. 20" Epoch crash (used as ride)
- 8. 18" Xist Ion crash
- 9. 12" Traditional hi-hats
- 10. 8" Traditional bell over 20" Xist Power Brilliant China stacked on 22" Traditional Trash Hat
- 11. 20" Xist Ion crash
- 12. 8" Traditional splash

- 13. 26" gong
- 14. 7" closed mini hi-hats (mounted off bass drum) comprised of Turk splash (top) and Turk bell (bottom)

**Drumheads:** Remo Emperor Coated snare batter and Ambassador Hazy snare side, Emperor Yellow Coloritone tom batters and Ambassador Clear resonants, Yellow Coloritone Powerstroke P3 bass drum batter (with Remo Falam Slam Double patch) and custom graphics Ambassador front

**Hardware:** All Yamaha except for a Drum Workshop DWCP9002 double pedal (with Yamaha BT950 beaters) and two 9502LB remote cable hi-hats

**Sticks:** Vic Firth Modern Jazz MJC4, Steve Smith Signature TW12 Birch Tala wands, GB1 gong mallet

**Microphones:** All DPA except Neumann overheads, Shure Beta 91 inside kick, AKG on hi-hats, and a Shure talkback

**Accessories:** SledgePad bass drum dampener, Kelly SHU FLATZ kick drum mic system, RTOM Moongel, Gorilla Snot drumstick grip enhancer, JH Audio in-ear monitors, Shure wireless body pack, RoboCup drink holder, On-Stage accessory tray

**Interview by Brandy Laurel McKenzie**  
**Photos by Abbey Wright**







# In the Studio with Nashville Performer and YouTube Success Story Harry Miree

Story and photos by Sayre Berman

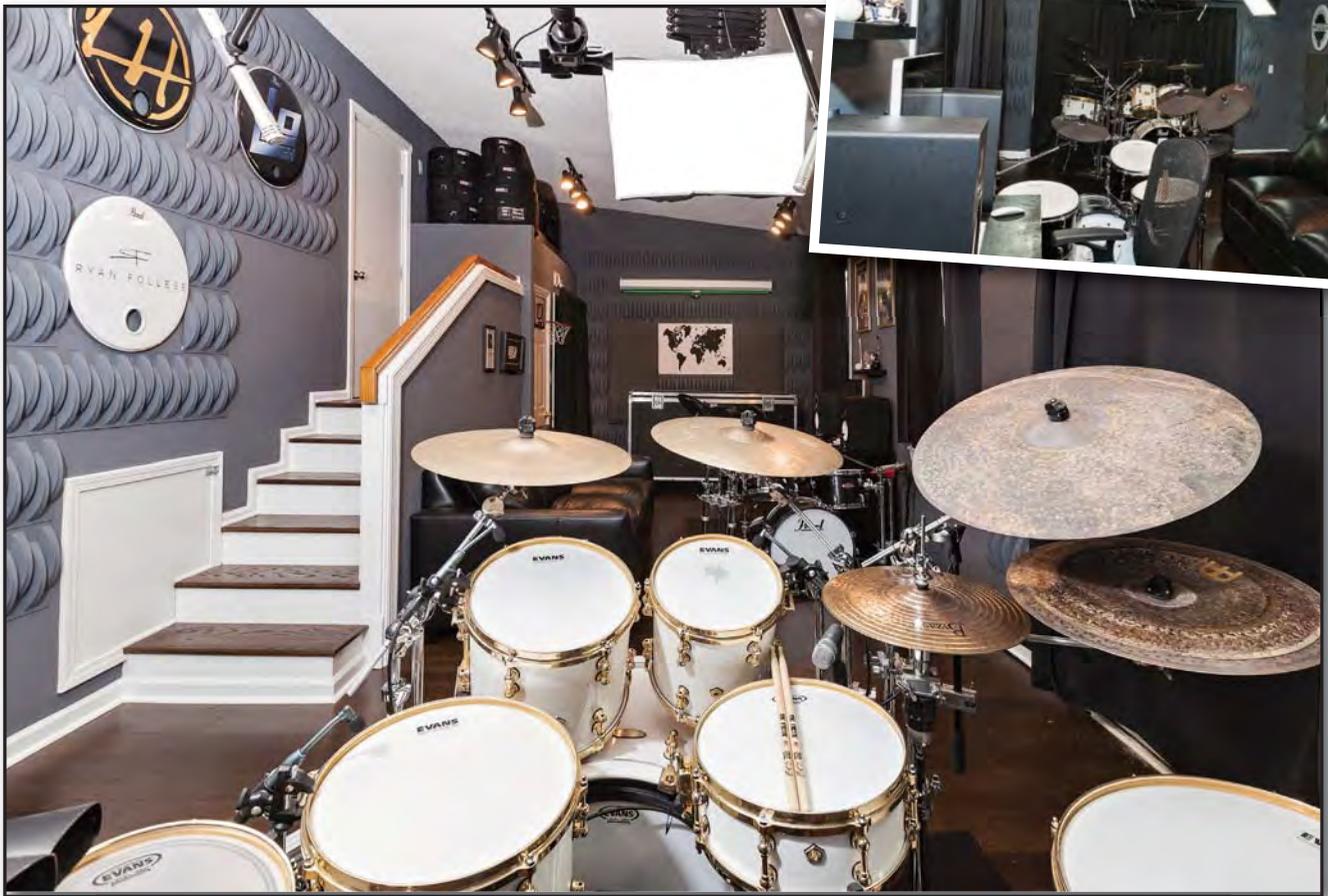


If you've perused YouTube in search of drum-related videos, you've likely stumbled upon one of Harry Miree's informative and humorous offerings. Occasionally instructional but mostly providing insight into the business of making music, Miree never ceases to enlighten and entertain his viewers as he explores topics from understanding sideman financials and endorsements to alternatives to the cajon and setting up open-handed. Miree graduated from Berklee College of Music when he was twenty-five. While he was at Berklee, his band Boom City got a record deal, which required extensive touring. "I had to make a choice," Harry says. "Do I travel the world, or do I stay and get a college degree? I ran this by my professor Rod Morgenstein. He answered, 'Dude, we'll be here if you decide to come back...go!' I went and—big surprise—the band went down in flames. I returned to college with my head hung low, graduated as the official class geezer of 2013, and rolled straight to Nashville."

In a short period of time, Miree was a regular on the country music scene, touring with Brinley Addington, Joey Hyde, Levi Hummon, Clare Bowen of the hit TV show *Nashville*, Ryan Follese, and LoCash. We met up with Miree at his home studio in Nashville to dig into a variety of topics, beginning with his unexpected success as a YouTube personality.

**MD:** How did the idea to start your YouTube channel come about?

**Harry:** This ties in to the very first interaction I had in Nashville. I was talking to the cashier at the first coffeehouse I found, and I remember him saying, "Yep, I'm a drummer. I moved here from Chicago a few years ago, but I'm still looking for a gig." I asked him, "Is there somewhere I can go to hear your playing?" He gave me some non-answer, like, "Well, I'm on this demo on this one guy's Facebook page, but it was recorded on an iPhone and my drumheads were old." The more I met fellow drummers in Nashville, the more I'd hear some version of that spiel. I promised myself I'd never be that dude. I decided to make a point to define what it sounds, feels, and looks like when Harry Miree plays the drums and make it easy to find on the Internet. I then paid a



friend \$30 to point a camera at my drumming for five minutes. I liked [the result], so I kept it going, and that decision has paid off every day.

**MD:** How do you decide on video content?

**Harry:** Originally I intended my channel to be 90-percent playing and 10-percent talking, but I've noticed that my most viewed videos are the ones of me yapping away. It turns out there's very little

interest in watching me wail away on a bunch of cover songs. That was an unexpected message from my audience. So now I try to balance the talking and the playing. And sometimes I'll just talk.

**MD:** Your videos are entertaining and informative. What's your process?

**Harry:** Each video is scripted, so I know exactly where each cut is going to happen. No clip is longer than about twelve seconds. I have a remote clicker in my hand that operates the camera. I might start off saying, "Dudes, something crossed my mind today," and I'll click the camera off and think, *Can I do that better?* If so, I'll redo it. I'll refer back to Evernote, which is where my scripts live, to see the next line, which might be, "Let's go into this recording studio to see if we can make tens and tens of dollars!" All told, it takes about four hours to shoot what will ultimately be a twelve-minute video. But keeping each thought to a sentence or less makes the editing so much easier. Then all that's left is the technical work of editing.

**MD:** How long does it take to edit a video?

**Harry:** I'm glad the answer to this has changed over the years—I shudder thinking about my video-making pace in 2014. The first video I ever made that got some real visibility was called "5 Tips for Drumming Like Carter Beauford." I made that video in less than a day. I woke up at 10 A.M., scrambled for ideas until 11, outlined the Beauford idea until 1, shot the drumming snippets until 3, shot the talking snippets until 7, ate Tostitos while editing until 2 in the morning, and finally uploaded and passed out on my desk at 4.

Cramming videos at that pace on top of touring made me unhealthy and unhappy. So now I take my time. When I shot "The True Financial Life of a Side Musician," I gave myself a day to script it, a day to shoot it, a day to edit the talking, a day to massage the audio, and a day to get the pop-up visuals just right. On some level, it's a bummer that it takes forever now. But it's the only way I can

## Miree's Studio Gear

**Drums:** Pearl Masterworks 6-ply birch drumset in Arctic White finish with gold hardware (5x13 and 4x10 snares, 10x10, 10x12, 10x14, and 16x16 toms, 18x22 bass drum)

**Hardware and Percussion:** Pearl ICON rack, Demon Drive and Eliminator pedals, 1030 series stands, and Horacio Hernandez signature cowbells

**Drumheads:** Evans Heavyweight and EC Dot snare batters and Orchestral 300 snare bottoms, UV1 tom batters and Resonant Black tom bottoms, and EMAD Coated bass drum batter

**Cymbals:** Meinl Byzance, including 14" Spectrum hi-hats, 22" Relic ride, 18" Sand Medium crash, 18" Sand Thin crash, 16" Extra Dry China stacked on an 18" Dark China, 10" Trash splash stacked on a 12" Dark splash, 10" Dual splash, 10" Vintage splash, and 22" Traditional China

**Microphones:** Shure Beta 56A on main snare, SM57 on auxiliary snare and cowbells, Beta 98AMP on toms, Beta 181C on hi-hats, SM81 overheads, and Beta 52A and Beta 91A mounted inside the bass drum on a Kelly SHU suspension system

**Recording Rig:** PreSonus StudioLive 16.4.2 console, Logic Pro X software, and Yamaha HS8 monitors

ensure quality without destroying my personal sanity while also playing 130-plus shows a year.

**MD:** How do you decide what topics to cover?

**Harry:** I think I've got a fifty-year backlog of topics by now, so I'm constantly curating the top ten based on what's most exciting to me. The topics are reflections on my life as a drummer and whatever's actively speaking to me in my professional life that I can pull back the curtain on.

At the time I made the cajon video, the bogus concept of forcing drum machine music onto cajons was nagging at my brain the most. Now that I'm starting to do more and more session work, I've become fascinated by this insider culture of the Nashville recording studios, so that topic's starting to rise on my list. Basically I'm just asking myself: *Is there curiosity about a given topic, and do I have a*

move really quickly here. Aside from the pressures of the insane market, I had specific drumming stipulations. No loading up or down stairs. No tight spaces that would make filming cumbersome. No low ceilings that would hinder my lighting options. And no duplexes.

When I finally walked into the bonus room of this house in the West End of Nashville, I knew it was the one. This room spoils me with direct driveway access, high ceilings, non-parallel surfaces, lots of depth for camera and recording equipment, and even an amusing history of having previously housed the bands Delta Saints and Sol Cat. As an added bonus, it's changed my life to be able to rent out some of the bedrooms to tenants so I know I have some dough coming in whether the gig side of my life is feast or famine.

**MD:** Any crucial gear?

**Harry:** I keep the gear down to the bare essentials, so there's nothing



*point of view about it?* If yes, then I've got to make it happen.

**MD:** What topics can we expect next?

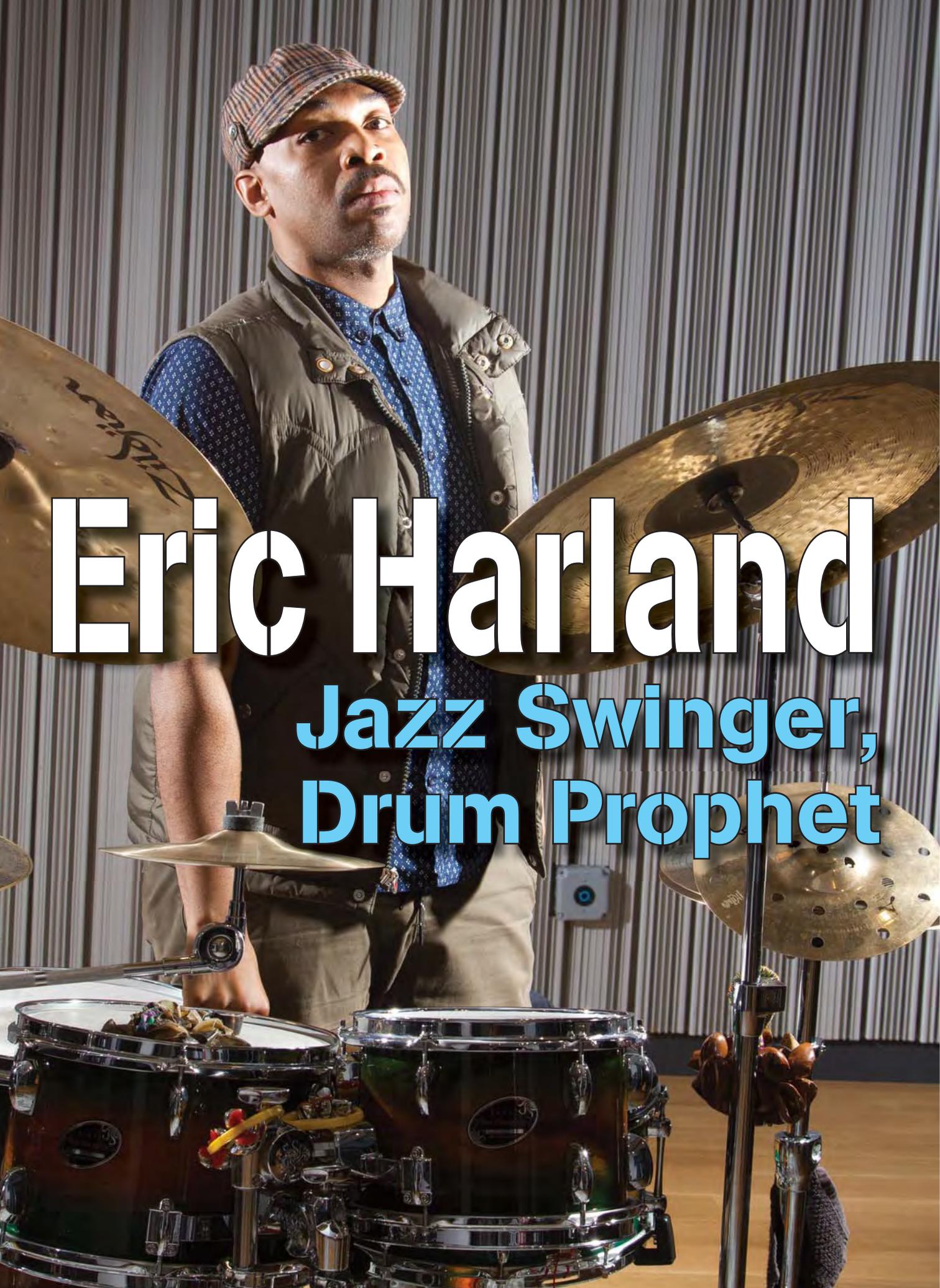
**Harry:** I'm psyched about a few things right now. One is a discussion on how being savvy with electronics has become essential to drumming. Modern gigs that don't require Ableton Live or at least a sampler are pretty rare in my neck of the woods. I have another video in the making about how I chart music. I'm also planning a video about my auditioning experiences here in Nashville. There's a funny culture to that world, too.

**MD:** How'd you pick this particular house and drum room?

**Miree:** Buying a house in Nashville felt like having an extra full-time job for the six months it took me to find the right place. Good houses

exceptional in terms of microphones, monitors, interface, and lights. My room's persona kicks in when you look at how that gear is implemented. For example, there are no mic stands anywhere. Thanks to inspiration from Brad Paisley's drummer, Ben Sesar, whose overheads are mounted to an exposed pipe coming out of a wall, I mounted a Pearl rack bar to my wall so the overhead mics can hang over my drums without taking up floor space. All the close mics are mounted directly to my drums or hardware rack. My soft boxes hang from pantographs in the ceiling. I also took some inspiration from the drum room of O.A.R.'s Chris Culos and used MIO acoustic tiles to unify the look and sound of my walls. Keeping the gear footprint small like that gives the room a minimalist feel that I totally love.





# Eric Harland

Jazz Swinger,  
Drum Prophet

**The Texas native has played on hundreds of albums, recorded multiple soundtracks, performed with jazz royalty, and led his own incendiary projects. He's accomplished all of this by hyper-analyzing the most basic of musical ideas, and applying what he's learned to some of the most exploratory music of our time. Come along as we go deep with a true modern visionary.**

Story by Ken Micallef • Photos by Gene Ambo

**E**ric Harland possesses an exceedingly high level of technique, and has had invaluable live and studio experiences. But the trait that perhaps best exemplifies his art is flexibility. How else to explain a discography that crisscrosses genres, rhythms, and approaches so boldly and effectively?

Harland's performances on highly lauded recordings like Stefon Harris's *Black Action Figure*, Terence Blanchard's *Let's Get Lost* and *Wandering Moon*, Ravi Coltrane's *From the Round Box*, Dave Holland's *Pass It On* and *Prism*, McCoy Tyner's *Land of Giants*, and Charles Lloyd's *I Long to See You* and *Passin' Thru* have been praised throughout the jazz community. You can also cut to the here and now with any of Harland's solo albums under the name Voyager: *Live by Night* (2010), *Vipassana* (2014), and *13th Floor* (2018, on his own GSI label), and find equal enthusiasm for his gifts.

Among Harland's most satisfying settings is his Voyager group, which features tenor player Walter Smith III, guitarist Julian Lage, pianist Taylor Eigsti, and bassist Harish Raghavan supporting his wide-ranging compositions. The group's latest, *13th Floor*, dazzles with high-velocity performances. "Fast 5" is built atop layers of kinetic, intertwining rhythms that scorch the senses like the Le Mans race set to music. Harland

strikes everything in sight here, within a sizzling pocket that is equal parts drum solo and impervious groove. "Contrast" begins with a semi-recognizable ride cymbal beat, leavened by Eigsti's piano chords; Harland nails snare drum jabs like



machine gun fire, solos flying while he maintains a jazz pulse. "Dark Horse" is all blistering snare drum accents as gentle chords keep the song earthbound. The title track is no less heated, its ominous melody powered with nervous rhythms, like a funeral march disturbed by a stand-up comedian.

And then there's his recent album on the Newvelle Records label, *Supa Nova*. A true solo drumming album, *Supa Nova* finds Harland accompanying himself with electronics that create various moods over which he blazes. Harland imbues "Leaving" with riotous breakbeats, issues scattershot rudimental flurries and drum-and-bass ideas in "Stratum," plows through the interstellar sludge in "The Challenger (1986)," creates a hypnotic African melody-infused world in "Mbalax," and goes mad over the chirping electronic sounds of "D.A.R.E."

An ordained minister, Harland comes from a spiritual Houston, Texas, family. After graduating from the famed High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, he landed a full scholarship to Manhattan School of Music, where he met many of the musicians who would help launch his career.

Currently recording out of his GSI studios on the label of the same name, Harland can also be heard on forthcoming albums by pianists Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Taylor Eigsti; tabla great Zakir Hussain and sitarist Pandit Niladri Kumar; pianist Jason Moran and keyboardist James Francies; tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III and keyboardist BIGYUKI; and another tenor great, Chris Potter, with keyboardist James Francies.

## Beyond Rudiments

**MD:** Your drumming projects a sense of calm. Even when playing intricate rhythms, you're relaxed. And like the great multidirectional jazz drummers Rashid Ali and Jack DeJohnette, you place the pulse over the entire kit, not only on the cymbal. Is your style based in the multidirectional approach?

**Eric:** Exactly. That's always been a critical point for me, to be all-inclusive on the set. It wasn't preplanned. It always felt natural. Like when I work with students, I sometimes feel the biggest problem is those who have no relationship with the instrument. If you don't have a relationship with the instrument, you're not going to have anything to say. A relationship as in understanding physically how their body relates to the drumset.

**MD:** Beyond rudiments?

**Eric:** Yes. Just the basics, the way that you sit at the drums, for example. How you understand the sound of the cymbal. That's always been my problem with learning drumming from books. Books represent a very standard, observational approach to the instrument. Like, you have cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, and toms. Now here are some patterns that you can play in between them to create a sound. That's what you're supposed to get from a book. But when I watch the greats of our instrument, you can tell by the "sonicness" of their sound that instead of always thinking about volume, they think velocity. In the studio world, velocity is where volume meets compression.

**MD:** Velocity, as in speed?

**Eric:** I understand velocity as pace, the rate of motion. So when you think about it, pacing introduces your communication through the instrument. If you haven't had enough experience relating to the instrument, then it will be hard to convey your own biological rhythm through the instrument.

**MD:** How can drummers understand that?

**Eric:** You have to go back to basics. Coming up, I'd sit at the drumset and use all four limbs to play simple quarter notes and simple 8th notes or, if possible, 16th notes, develop that and synchronize those notes. I wanted to develop muscle memory so that my body could understand everything simultaneously, so my left hand could understand what my right hand was doing, and my right hand and my left hand could understand what my right foot and my left foot were doing. It was about the communication between the limbs so I could ultimately communicate effectively.

**MD:** You wanted to achieve the same velocity on all four limbs?

**Eric:** The velocity was more about being able to convey the pace I wanted. When you see me play, my mind is going a hundred miles a minute, but I remain calm. It comes across that way because I've spent time sitting at the instrument doing these basic synchronizing patterns, so that my muscle memory is consolidated. The more you practice, the more your body can feel comfortable to regurgitate whatever you've practiced.

The biggest challenge to learning



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something is that the brain and the muscles have to be on the same page. Drummers practice so much, and often while sleeping is when the marriage between the muscle and the brain occurs. It's the moment when consciousness is born. In a relaxed state the body can work on things that it needs to work on without being present for something else.

### To Speak, to Drum

**MD:** Give us an idea of some of those things that you would practice.

**Eric:** First is the idea of synchronizing everything, playing quarter notes, 8th notes, 16th notes, on all limbs simultaneously. Other things would be trying different patterns on different limbs and seeing where the marriage between the two falls. What I was doing was introducing these concepts, the marriage of the brain and the muscles and whatever they have to do to figure that out. The brain is like a tape

machine or a recorder; it does the work for you.

I might try something in seven. Even though I'm counting seven, it never felt natural *per se*. I'm counting 1 2 3 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 1 2 3 4, and trying things on the drumset. Even though I understand and can mimic the patterns with three and four or introduce different textures, I would also spend time playing completely free. And drilling home all these buried rhythmic patterns into my mind. I was hearing two worlds at once, and I never knew if I was going to be able to [unify them], it happened on its own. You need the muscles to be loose within a structure, yet still be solid and precise. All that was happening at once.

**MD:** How did that occur?

**Eric:** I had these pinnacle moments where I began to understand. Then I took it a step further. If I can establish a point where I can play free within the structure, then a muse

comes in and you get these other points of awareness. It's all about evolution and growth. Then the communication aspect hit me and I realized, that's all that speech is. When you're speaking to someone, if you listen to the rhythm of the conversation, it's a structured rhythm, but you're able to use it at different times because of one aspect: you have to breathe. You have this breathing element that's occurring as you're speaking. That goes back to the velocity of your own pace and your natural conversation. That's your personal birth rate that you've learned since you were a child, and you've developed words and synthesis based on things that you felt attracted to, or things you wanted to adopt. That brought the drums to a deeper level of communication for me. "Why don't I practice playing what I speak, and then mimic that with my limbs, playing the patterns that I use when conversing with someone?"

**MD:** You mimicked your own speech in your

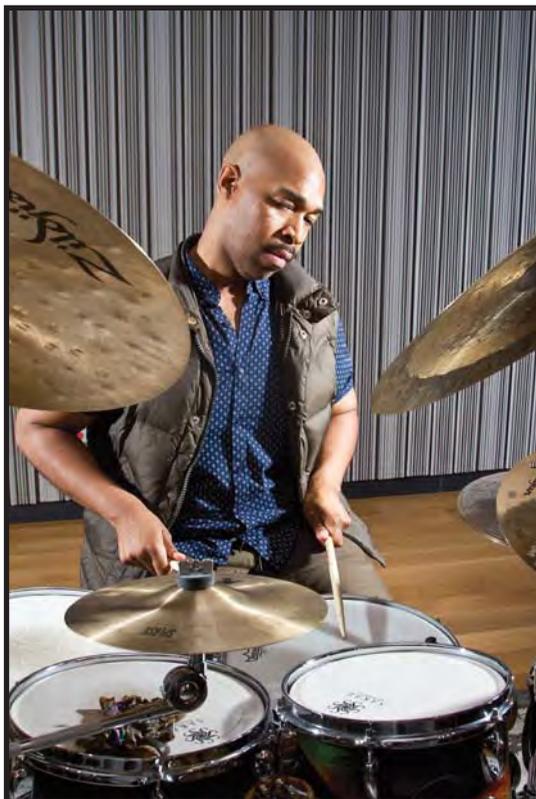


drumming?

**Eric:** Exactly.

**MD:** Did you do this for twenty minutes, twenty hours?

**Eric:** I don't believe in exhausting yourself when it comes to conceptual ideas, because a concept is not something that you're going to master in a day. It takes time to develop. Say you're trying to build speed and strength—that's the workout aspect of the drums. If I want to play faster around the kit, I would be on the drums in two-hour increments. Growing up, my friends and I would push our bodies to their maximum resistance. We'd do as many pushups as possible, to where our arms couldn't move, and then we tried to see how fast we could play the drums. Our bodies had to figure that out. In the meantime, we're still practicing and getting stronger. You get to the point where you don't get tired. This



also involves the breathing aspect and learning how to play in a way that is a natural form of communication. I rarely get tired, because my body is speaking in its normal rhythm.

**MD:** How do you incorporate breathing with drumming?

**Eric:** It's just the natural respiratory response of your body. Just paying attention to the rhythm that we naturally use when talking. And that introduced two things [to me]: it made me aware that it's okay to appreciate the space in between notes. And I learned more about my body and how breathing is necessary. It's not any deeper than that.

**MD:** Where did you learn this?

**Eric:** You go through periods when certain things click and make sense. While playing with saxophonist Greg Osby, it was interesting to hear the way that he would phrase on his instrument. He was unique. He played with a sense of freedom. He's hearing the harmony, but he's not bound by it. He gave a different spark to the jazz

music that I listened to or played in college. It influenced my approach to the drums. It's like watching a flag on a pole. Without the pole the flag would just be wandering. I like the idea of that and seeing all the possibilities around it.

**MD:** What else did you pursue?

**Eric:** I wanted to learn how to play in odd meters. If I was going to play in 7/4, I would reference everything from a long seven, which you could say is 7/2, then the standard 7/4, then 7/8, 7/16, and depending on how slow the 7/2 was, I could probably get to 32nds based on this rigid scale of seven. I understood the different values and how they placed on top of each other. But then I also displaced; playing 7/16 in my right hand and 7/4 on my left foot grounded me. And understanding the concepts of speech and breathing, I could take [odd meters] to certain places. If you're playing in seven, the way the note value moves in 7/16 and 7/32 is fast, but it still fits; it will always line up on the 1 eventually. Within the time frame there are all these rhythms you can hit, and still with the concept of breathing. It has to be something that you practice and practice and practice until you understand completely what it is, then it

becomes second nature, and you don't have to count anymore. I had to spend many months doing just that. Then I would do it in five, nine, eleven, and thirteen. I wanted to be fluent in all these situations.

### Tabla Tunes

**MD:** Your playing is reminiscent of that of a tabla player, in how you put this stream of unbroken information all over the drumset. Tabla comes out of Konnakol, which is a spoken language. That's similar to how you describe coupling speech with drumming. How did that affect your work with Zakir Hussain?

**Eric:** It was confirmation from day one. The first album we ever did together was *Sangam*, a live recording with Charles Lloyd. We literally walked in and Zakir said, "We don't really know what we're going to do, so let's float." We trusted, and it was beautiful. Then, I didn't know a lot about Indian rhythms and ragas and how Indian musicians are required to understand rhythm vocally before they can touch an instrument. [But] the spoken rhythmic aspect was in my playing by the time I played with Zakir back in 2004.

**MD:** It sounds like you've worked through

various levels of rhythmic awareness.

**Eric:** You go through periods of understanding, when all you want to do is display what you've learned to show people what you can do. Then you mature into understanding what's needed in the moment. That's probably the biggest part of my musical growth: understanding all the information that I'd practiced and shedded and all the music I'd learned, and being able to use it wisely.

If a certain band only needs me to groove, then groove is the structure. It doesn't mean I can't challenge myself to find something interesting to play within that groove. I recently finished the Masters of Percussion tour with Zakir, where he introduced a different raga to me every night. It was challenging because I had to grasp the raga in a short span of time. These were critical points that were going to start and end a cycle. But everything in between was groove, communication, developments on a theme, like, "Now we're going to play backwards from ten to one." Because Zakir is so strong, all I had to do was listen and stay out of the way.

**MD:** You're recording with pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba's trio. He's a master of Afro-Cuban



## Eric Harland

rhythms. How does your language change with his music?

**Eric:** My first instrument was piano. I began with piano at four and drums at five. Now I sit at the piano and play what I hear. And Gonzalo's first instrument was the drums. That's why he's so percussive and has such a wide range of rhythms. The tricky thing about Rubalcaba is that since percussion was his first instrument, he writes out drum parts. He writes out exactly where to strike a drum or a cymbal in his music. Coming from High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, every drummer had to go through the percussion ensemble. Working with Gonzalo, I was able to tie certain tones to the drums. I could create points based on the harmony he played in a song. And he created harmony off tones I played on the drums.

**MD:** That sounds challenging.

**Eric:** It was only challenging on the first day of recording. I was definitely sweating. I couldn't go in and play from the space I normally play from; I had to literally play what he wrote.

### Chops Busters

**MD:** I imagine that at Manhattan School of Music you went through all the drumming and percussion books, but you're not a huge advocate of learning from books. Beyond putting different rates for different note values on different limbs, what did you do?

**Eric:** I wanted to develop speed. So I had to synchronize motion. Basically I was trying to push my arms to be as fast as possible.

**MD:** Did you use a metronome?

**Eric:** The metronome puts the concept in your mind. It doesn't put it in your feelings. It doesn't put it in your body. The only way you're going to do it is like a track runner: you have to get out there and run, but you also have to introduce resistance so that your body can push past the resistance. So instead of playing drums, I would play on surfaces that gave me absolutely no resistance. The problem with rebound is that it compensates for a lot. So think of the rebound of the stick hitting the cymbal or drum. It's like bouncing a basketball. So you're learning how to guide the bounce between the two.

**MD:** Did you play on pillows?

**Eric:** Pillows or carpet, if I could find it. Air drumming is good, because there are certain muscles that even when I'd hit a pillow there would be an end point. When I'd play the air there was no surface. So that was more of a full arc of motion, which also developed muscles in my arms more than if I would strike a surface that restricted my arm.

**MD:** Don't you need an actual contact point?

**Eric:** No. It's like a golf swing. They say within the golf swing that if you don't follow through with the swing, the club impacts the ball differently. It's almost like you have to swing as if the ball is not even there. If I don't have a surface, then I achieve something so that when I do play the drums, even though I hit the drums, I [incorporate] a different range of motion.

**MD:** How did you build hand strength and dexterity?

**Eric:** I definitely dealt with the basic, rudimentary concepts of singles, doubles, and after that, different versions of the natural flow of motion that happens on the drums. Then paradiddles, double paradiddles. But the main concept of what happens on the drums is singles and doubles. Then introduce triplets in one hand or, if you can, quadruplets in one hand, the technical aspects of which I still work on. You understand the sound of the drum and how your body relates to that sound.

What's most important is the sound I'm getting from the drum and how that sound is going to affect the musical situation. If the sound has a little too much twang or ring or overtone, in a jazz setting that frequency can clash with the bass. Some people use Moon Gel and some people use gaffer's tape on the snare drum.

### Where's the 13th Floor?

**MD:** Would you describe your drumming with Voyager as linear?

**Eric:** Definitely. My role in Voyager is a linear approach, really pulsating down one lane so that the band can maneuver around what I'm doing.

**MD:** On Voyager's latest album, *13th Floor*, was "Teller (Aquila)" entirely improvised?

**Eric:** No. "Teller (Aquila)," which I've also recorded with Aziza, is a pattern based around five. But I also play off the melodic sequence. I love the original Branford Marsalis group with Kenny Kirkland, Jeff

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## Eric Harland

Watts, and Robert Hurst; they knew that if you want to get into something challenging rhythmically, you need to introduce an equally strong melody consistently so that listeners clearly hear the difference. It's all about synchronization within the band. "Teller" leads to "Aquila," using the pattern of "Teller" to morph into another strong melody.

I wanted to get away from the standard approach to playing songs—five solos just to get back to the head. We're in a new day where there can be more unification within a band's approach in how you play as one. A solo doesn't always have to be this one thing; you can solo within the collaborative solo that happens within the band. That's always been my concept, because then you don't bombard the audience. And you're always paying attention because you never know who's going to interact with your solo.

The best accompanying experience I've ever had was when I played with McCoy Tyner. I'd never heard a piano player that knew how to accompany a drum solo like that. He understood when I was trying to build tension and release; he knew exactly what chord to play, according to the song and its emotion.

**MD:** What are you playing in "Fast 5"?

**Eric:** I was saying earlier you can have something in 5/2, 5/4.

**MD:** It feels like 4.

**Eric:** That's the thing, 5 and 4 are the same thing. It depends on how you manipulate the space. You can go anywhere that your mind can creatively fit within that space. If you start with a metronome at a very slow tempo, you can squeeze many rhythms into that space. "Fast 5" is a Walter Smith song. The way he approaches the melody is more based off of 5/8, and then Taylor and Harish are holding it down like it's in 5/2. So in between 5/8 and 5/2 I get to dance between playing in 5/2, 5/4, 5/8, and 5/16 in how I approach the rhythm, while also using that concept of breathing and space. They were creating around me. In this tune one or two guys hold it down, synchronize playing the simple pattern, and then I shape and color around everything.

**MD:** In "Contrast" you're playing very intensely at a low dynamic level. What's the secret to that kind of control?

**Eric:** That goes back to stamina and developing that type of technique, which comes from practicing finger control. Using fingers is a more finessed way of manipulating the rebound, because in order to play that fast and not get tired, you want to switch between hand positions. We

have the standard three sticking positions: American, French, and German grips.

**MD:** Which do you favor?

**Eric:** You have to do all three because they all focus on different muscle tensions in your hand. The secret for me is not getting tired. I alternate between all three grips, because when one muscle gets tired, I move to the next grip.

**MD:** In your Zildjian Vault Performance video you discuss different head treatments. In the song "Dark Horse" it sounds like you're striking a cymbal on a snare drum.

**Eric:** Yes, exactly. I put a cymbal on the snare drum sometimes or place an extra drum head on the snare drum head so I don't have to retune the snare drum. If I already like the [sonic] placement of the snare drum, I can take another snare head and cut off its rim, and throw that on the snare drum. It lowers the pitch of the snare drum about five notches. So instead of the drum being high and bright it becomes a darker sound, but you still benefit from the bounce of the tuning. Tuning has a lot to do with the drum's sound, but it also affects the head's pressure. If the head is tight you can get a quicker snap. Adding another thin head on top, you still get the tightness of the snare drum head. It's just sitting on the snare drum head. I do it with the toms too. If I want to tune the toms really tight and tense but I still want to get a lower sound I do the same thing. And then I can maneuver around the kit super fast.

**MD:** On "13th Floor," your drumming sounds like fingers on a tabla drum, the way the rhythm evolves in a constant spiral. You create energy at a low dynamic level.

**Eric:** That's a progressive harmonic cycle that repeats. I like to watch horror movies. I like how in horror films the music being created is just to build suspense, and it doesn't have to resolve. It's enough for it to create that moment; it offers an audible frame of view to which you can interpret whatever you want. It doesn't have to lead you somewhere that you may not feel like you want to go. That's the concept of "13th Floor." You can still find optimism on "13th Floor," a number always associated with something fearful, but the emotion is up to you.

**MD:** Your first album was *The X Field* with guitarist Rodney Jones. Was that your big break?

**Eric:** Yes. Rodney was my student combo director while I was at Manhattan School of Music. He wanted me to record two albums with him. That was the first time I realized you can make money playing, because we did two records back to back and he took



time for each record. But more than that he put me in prime placement. The album included Kevin Hays and Greg Osby. I'm a young kid, but I'm going to play with these cats who've already made names for themselves. That's how I met Greg Osby, and

that became my first touring band. Then Steve Coleman called me for work. Working on that one album introduced me to the whole scene.

**MD:** What's your advice for maintaining a successful career in the music business?

**Eric:** Don't get lazy. Relax as much as you want, but don't get lazy, meaning don't cheat yourself out of an experience; always be open to every possibility. A lot of musicians turn down certain things because they're not up for the challenge of learning something new. The success in my life has always come from things where I had no idea what I was doing. It needed to be that way so I could gain experience. If life is about being experiential, you have to go out there and do it. Even if you suck, the thing is that everybody loves a comeback story. If you get out there and you fail, that's even more pressure to live up to, but you did get the opportunity. If you suck you'll get another chance to do it better.

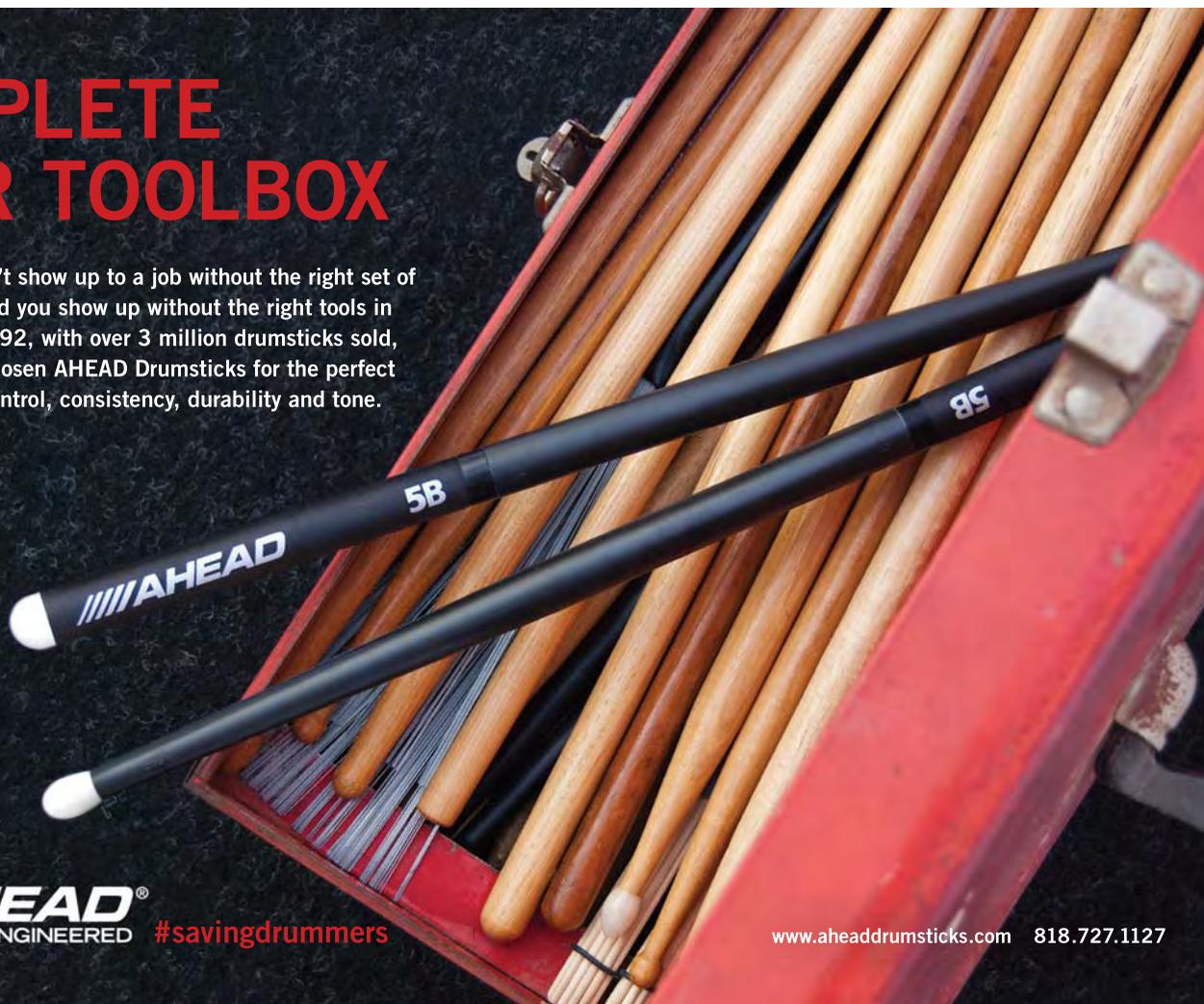
That's the best thing I felt about listening to albums by great musicians. It's the arc of what they achieved. Every time they were dealing with different beings conceptually, and they'd bring in different ideas. Think about the times when Miles Davis's chops were dead-on and other times you can tell he seems like he's not feeling it. You've got to stay in the process. Stay in the flow so that these opportunities are continually there for you. Just don't get lazy.



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# The Drummers of *David Byrne's American Utopia*

Story by Jeff Potter • Photos by Matthew Murphy



Percussionist Mauro Refosco has toured regularly with David Byrne since 1994, so he was well accustomed to expecting the unexpected from the iconic rock/pop experimenter. But this time, Byrne's phone call was different.

"At first I literally didn't understand what he meant," Refosco recalls. "He told me, 'I want to do a tour where nothing is set up on the stage. Can you figure out how many drummers would be needed to cover that?'" It finally sank in when Byrne clarified, "Everyone's going to be wearing the drums." In Byrne's vision, multiple drummers—and his entire band—would be totally wireless and in constant choreographic motion while performing the music from his latest album, *American Utopia*. Band on the run indeed.

With the collaborative input of Annie-B Parson (choreography/musical staging) and Alex Timbers

(production consultant), *American Utopia's* staging evolved into an exuberant, kinetic tableau that both parallels and enhances the music. Over the course of an hour and 45 minutes, Byrne's identically silver-suited, bare-footed twelve-person ensemble creates a visual/sonic pulse that escalates into the ecstatic. The show previously enjoyed a successful 150-date 2018 world tour that is now playing an encore limited run on Broadway at New York's Hudson Theatre.

In a hybrid rock concert/theatrical event, Byrne explores the themes of his latest solo disc, contemplating human interconnections in a world of anxiety, joy, and confounding contradictions. Also included are choice classics from his solo and Talking Heads catalog, including the hits "Burning Down the House" and "Once in a Lifetime."



The mobile musicians—drummers Refosco, Gustavo Di Dalva, Daniel Freedman, Tim Keiper, Stéphane San Juan, and Jacqueline Acevedo, along with keyboardist/musical director Karl Mansfield, guitarist Angie Swan, electric bassist Bobby Wooten III, and backing vocalists Chris Giarmo and Tendayi Kuumba—lend an alternate spin on Byrne's album. But it's the six drummers who are most instrumental in the music's reimagining.

The original album tracks included drumming by Joey Waronker and Brian Wolfe with percussion by Refosco, plus programming by Brian Eno, Airhead, and Koreless. The live show's drummers have managed to respect those tracks while endowing an alternate sonic canvas, fueled by an organic, breathing groove that can flat-out rock, funk it up, or venture into Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean influences. The vibrant results can be heard on the recent live Broadway cast album and on the EP *The Best Live Show of All Time*, featuring six cuts recorded on tour. A DVD from the Broadway residency is also in the pipeline.

Dancing percussion ensembles are certainly not new. They hark back to the very roots of many musical styles, from African ceremonial circles to Brazil's samba schools and New Orleans' second lines. But employing this folkloric format—with its inherent world-rhythmic influences—in a highly contemporary rock/pop canvas yields enthralling and timely results in *American Utopia*.

For the international drummers at the pulsing heart of this ambitious show, expert execution of the music was merely the first requirement. In addition, they would be carrying wieldy harness-mounted instruments and switching between a wide array of hand and stick-played percussion instruments, all the while navigating choreographed

footwork and contributing vocal harmonies. Yet, in all said categories, this ensemble has succeeded wildly.

Following Byrne's phone query, Mauro Refosco mapped the *American Utopia* album's drumset/percussion/programming parts to determine the amount of live players that would be needed. Byrne gave Refosco his blessing to recruit six drummers. "I met with the drummers and presented my idea and vision for each of them," says Refosco. "But I also gave them the liberty to incorporate whatever elements they thought would be right for the music. Everybody did their homework and returned with their own input."

The core of the drum ensemble features traditional drumkit pieces distributed among players as well as a battery of international percussion instruments.

"I figured that three players would cover the drumset parts: the snare, bass drum, toms, and hi-hat," says Refosco. "And three players would do the percussion: congas, bongos, shakers, and others. That was the general rule." For weight considerations, smaller drums were chosen that could provide adequate punch, including a 12" Pork Pie snare mounted alongside a closed hi-hat and a horizontally mounted 16" single-headed Pork Pie bass drum that's played with various mallets. "The microphone is inside the drum, really close to the head," says Refosco. "The head is very loose, almost to

the [point of wrinkling]. Pete Keppler [sound designer] gets an incredible sound, like a regular 22" rock 'n' roll bass drum."

In addition, mounts had to be devised for instruments not traditionally played in that manner. "The most difficult was the surdo virado," says Refosco. "It's a surdo that's played on both heads. To mount that in a way that wouldn't break the resonance was hard. Mark figured out how to use a bar that goes through the drum without touching the shell; it floats in a way that keeps the resonance and is fairly economic on the harnesses. And we use Rototoms for 'Burning Down the House.' Mounting those onto harnesses was tricky."

"Initially there was that issue of our backs and all of that," laughs Tim Keiper. "One of the challenges was just trying to figure out how we were going to carry all these instruments. The rehearsal process was like boot camp because we were rehearsing eight hours a day. The drum tech, Jerry Johnson, and production manager, Mark Edwards, were totally involved in that process. There was a whole toolshed thing going on at rehearsals: cutting pieces of metal, attaching things, and making ongoing adjustments for weight and balance."

Refosco adds, "For the beginning rehearsals, I requested that we have a yoga teacher to guide us in building core strength. One of the choreographers helped us with an exercise routine and yoga



tips. Through the year, we developed the stamina and muscle to withstand the whole ordeal. Towards the end of the tour, we *definitely* all got stronger. [laughs] And now, on Broadway, we have a physical therapist on call so we can fine-tune our bodies."

Quick to acclimate was Gustavo Di Dalva. As a former member of the popular percussion-centric Brazilian ensemble Timbalada, he drew from deep experience in simultaneous drumming/dancing.

## Meet The Percussionists

**Mauro Refosco** settled in New York from Brazil in 1992. He has toured and/or recorded with Red Hot Chili Peppers, the Lounge Lizards, Dirty Projectors, and Thom Yorke's supergroup, Atoms for Peace. He also leads the percussion-centric band Forro in the Dark. A long-term associate of Byrne's, Mauro acted as the percussionists' music director for *American Utopia* and recruited the five other drummers. His comments on each follow their profiles below.

**Daniel Freedman** was featured in *MD's* Dec. 2013 issue. He has drummed with Angélique Kidjo, Sting, Wynton Marsalis, Jason Lindner, Anat Cohen, Omer Avital, Avishai Cohen, and many others. His latest, critically lauded album on Anzic Records is *Imagine That*. "Daniel has such a wide vocabulary. He brought an

element to the ensemble: he has punch. When he plays, it feels good."

**Gustavo Di Dalva** began playing with iconic Brazilian star Gilberto Gil at age sixteen and continued that association for twenty-two years. He's performed at numerous major festivals, including the Umbria Jazz Festival, the Montreal Festival, and the North Sea Jazz Festival.

"He can play any percussion instrument at a very high level of skill and precision, and he's really aware of what the music is asking for. He's our encyclopedia of rhythms."

**Stéphane San Juan** has performed with Caetano Veloso, Elza Soares, Amadou & Mariam, Deodato, João Donato, Jane Birkin, Manu Dibango, Marcos Valle, and

others.

"Stéphane has studied percussion all over the world. As a drummer, he has a natural balance of all the elements, which comes from years of studio experience and learning from different musical environments. Originally from France, he's also lived in London, Bangladesh, Mali, and Rio de Janeiro, and we're lucky that he now resides in New York City."

**Tim Keiper** has worked with a wide variety of international artists including Matisyahu, Salif Keita, John Zorn, Imogen Heap, Cyro Baptista, Vieux Farka Touré, and Dirty Projectors, as well as theatre innovators Lin-Manuel Miranda and Julie Taymor. He can be heard on Ali Farka Touré's Grammy-winning album, *Ali and Toumani*.

"The way he plays drums is so musical. He's not a showoff

drummer. He doesn't bash; it's very melodic."

**Jacqueline Acevedo** has toured and/or recorded with jazzmen Jeremy Pelt and Nicholas Payton, and with her mentor (and father), drummer Memo Acevedo. She drummed with mariachi group Flor de Toloache, Becky G, Erin and Her Cello, and Amazonas, and coleads the Latin-jazz big band Manhattan Bridges Orchestra.

"She possesses incredible stage energy. It's contagious. Besides being a great all-around percussionist, she can dance, sing, and awe the crowd."

Kudos also go to **Davi Vieira** for playing on the world tour (succeeded by Jacqueline) and **Aaron Johnston** (succeeded by Stéphane), who performed during the tour's first three months.



"Coming from Bahia," Mauro explains, "Gustavo has that really strong sense of percussionists playing together; the music from Bahia is usually a drummer and three or four percussionists, with each one playing a very specific part. Whenever we had any doubts about the parts working together, we would say, 'Gustavo, what do you think?'"

Jacqueline Acevedo credits her dance training for helping her adapt. "I naturally dance while playing. I move in a way that

feels natural to me and the beat I'm playing, but that's not always possible with an instrument strapped on like a Christmas tree," she laughs. "Annie-B has captured David's movement. I've never seen anyone move like him—it's enthralling! When you're playing familiar rhythms to unfamiliar choreography, it's definitely a different beast. It's like learning them all over again in someone else's body. But that challenge forces you to be even stronger as a player, to

lock in to the music and in step with fellow players even more."

Once physically acclimated to the harnesses, the drummers adjusted to the redistribution of the album's drumset parts among multiple players. Stéphane San Juan notes, "As compared to playing a regular drumkit, we don't use the foot; we don't have pedals. It required new independence to play as a 'drumkit' divided by three people and make it happen as one—and



The American Utopia cast, from left: Daniel Freedman, Mauro Refosco, Jacqueline Acevedo, Gustavo Di Dalva, Angie Swan, Stéphane San Juan, David Byrne, Tendayi Kuumba, Karl Mansfield, Tim Keiper, Chris Giarmo, Bobby Wooten III



at the same time do the choreography and singing as well. For example, when you only play the bass drum, to have strong, solid playing on the bass drum with the mallets—it's a different feeling from what we're used to. You're really focusing on being as solid as if you were on the drumkit; it's a different relationship with the body. After a while, your brain understands that it's only one thing. It's very enjoyable now, and I think all of us will progress and evolve when we go back to our regular instruments."

As the "boot camp" found momentum, a silver lining of enhanced possibilities was revealed. "If you distribute the drumset part and give just the bass drum to one person, there are a lot of nuances that you can get with just one drum," Refosco explains. "You can be more meticulous about the part. For instance, you can be very specific about how to hit—play more in the center or more to the side if you want an open tone, or

you could mute with your hand. There are all these elements that you cannot achieve with a regular drumset as opposed to what several players playing specific drums can achieve. We found that it frees you up."

Once beyond the physical hurdles of carrying their instruments and learning choreography, the collective drummers' groove connection fell into place with intuitive ease. "One thing that helps is that everybody here is used to playing in percussion ensembles and folkloric settings," says Daniel Freedman. "So handling one piece of the puzzle is not something that is strange to any of us. Having had that experience, you're naturally listening to everybody and finding a balance. Even though it's two or three players forming a 'drumset,' we're all still percussionists who have played with other drummers a lot. And everyone knows about the restraint of leaving space and not musically stepping on

someone else."

The dynamo drum engine now brings Broadway audiences to their feet nightly. As the six gradually emerge from behind a beaded silver curtain and weave across the stage synced in sound and movement, the rewards of their dedicated work are palpable: audiences not only hear and feel the groove, they see the groove and revel in it.

"It's now to the point that it feels kind of strange when you play a regular gig," laughs Refosco. "You miss that freedom of movement."

## DAVID BYRNE ON HIS UTOPIAN DRUMMERS

Throughout his decade and a half leading Talking Heads, followed by an illustrious solo career, singer/songwriter David Byrne has somehow managed to successfully straddle rock, pop, and the avant-garde. Here the

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The six percussionists switch between numerous percussion instruments including 12" snares, 16" bass drums, tom-toms, cymbals, conga, bongos, timbales, talking drum, timbau, surdo virado, Rototoms, repinique, pandeiro, berimbau, bacurinha, cuica, caxixi, shekere, cowbells, wood blocks, claves, and more. They use Vater drumsticks and play instruments by Pork Pie Percussion and the Brazilian drum makers Instituto Tambor and Contemporânea.



multimedia innovator comments on *American Utopia*'s drummers.

"They're an incredible group. Sometimes I have to pinch myself. They're amazing players who have such a *depth* of knowledge—not just in their abilities, but also in their knowledge of percussion, drums, and groove. It's unbelievable. It comes into play because they're all expected to play lots of different instruments. They don't think in terms of, 'Oh, I'm a conguero; *this* is what I play.' They might be playing congas on one song, then on the next song they're handed a pandeiro, and on the next, they're playing a snare drum. They all play a wide variety of instruments and play them well. That's extraordinary and also a testament to their open-mindedness.

"Some years ago, I tried working to purely electronic drums—loops and samples—in performance. And I found that you hit a ceiling as far as excitement goes. Everything works, but there's still a ceiling. You hit it and that's it. [laughs] The stuff won't respond any more than that.

"So I thought, *I'm going to go back to*

*live players if I can afford it.* Yes, the live performance is different from the album. Sometimes on a record, when you really want to bring attention to, say, the lyrics, some electronic percussion leaves that space for the listener. But with *live* players, they live and breathe. The performance breathes and responds.

"I think what the audience perceives is not just the music, but they also perceive this human cooperation. And that's especially evident with the drummers. When it's a samba school or second line or drum line, you have this effect from people doing something that takes a certain number in order to produce the groove. It's not like any one of them is playing it and the others are embellishing. It's a kind of machine that needs all of the parts, and they only work when they're all doing what they're supposed to be doing; then it produces this incredible swinging groove.

"So the virtues of the human cooperation are evident. This makes a social and political statement beyond just being musically enjoyable: it says something about how people

work together. And audiences intuitively—without anybody saying it—perceive that. And there's an incredible joyfulness in seeing that happen in front of their eyes. It goes beyond the technical stuff and the specifics of the music; it really has to do with human cooperation."

## MIKING ON THE MOVE

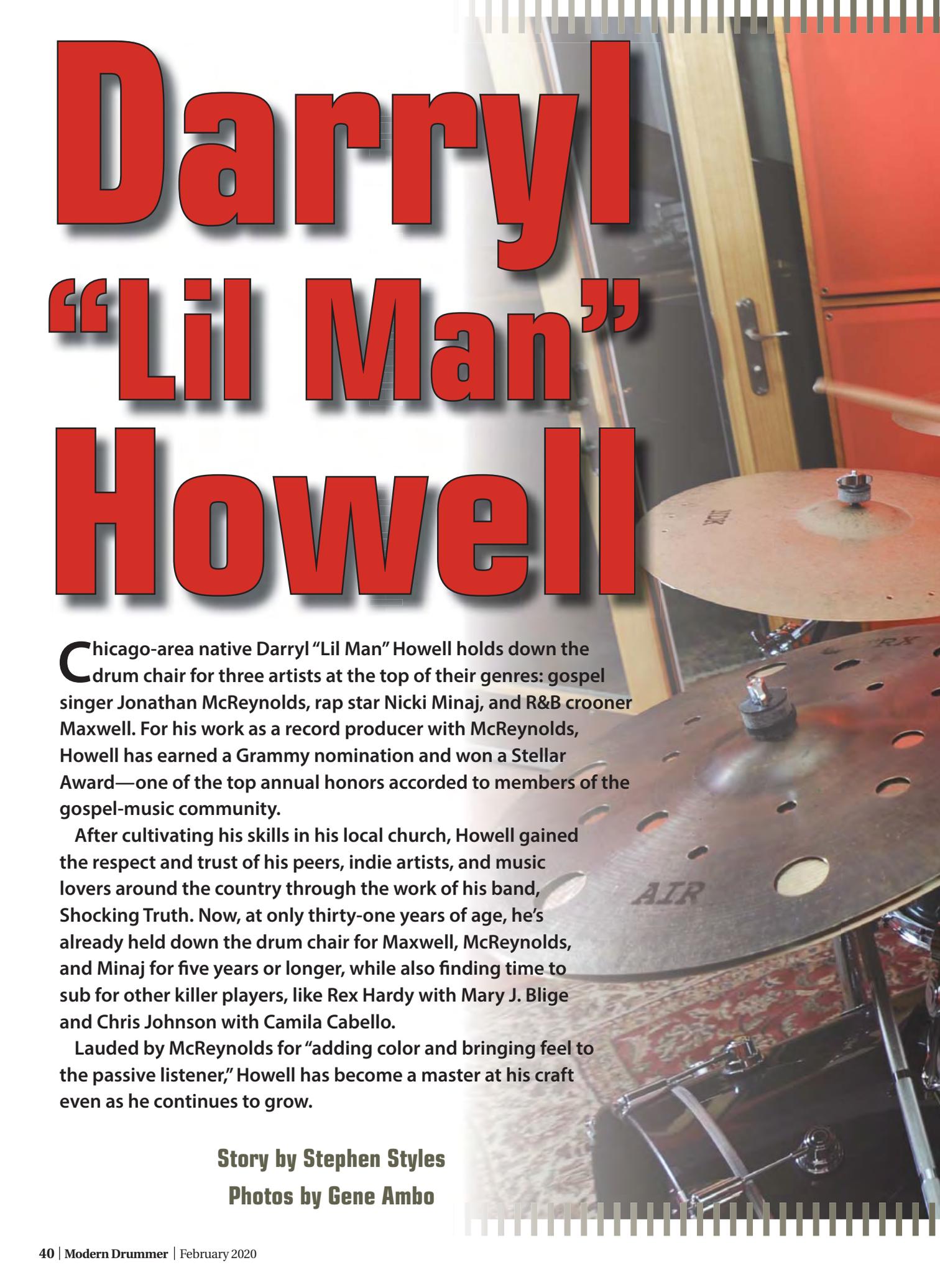
Sound designer and front-of-house engineer Pete Keppler has enjoyed a long association with David Byrne. The drummers of *David Byrne's American Utopia* unanimously praise him for faithfully capturing their mobile instruments within a state-of-the-art rock concert mix.

Working closely with the drummers, Keppler experimented with microphones that could best accommodate their constant movement while proving durable.

"The only thing I really missed was overhead mics," says Keppler. "On a normal drumkit—which we lack—they provide an ambience, an air and softness that enhance the sound. I tend to lean on overheads with a good drummer because they really know how to tune and balance their sound. The overheads give you a more organic vibe, which I prefer. To help offset the lack of overhead mics, I asked the drummers and their tech to keep all but the bass drums as open and unmuffled as possible, and to try lighter-weight heads on the snare drums, etcetera, to keep some 'life' in the sound. To a certain extent, all the open vocal mics on the stage give me what an overhead mic would. The only problem is that nobody on that stage ever stops *moving*. [laughs]

"Every drum, excepting some hand percussion, had to have at least one microphone and a transmitter mounted to it, because the players change drums from song to song, and we didn't want transmitter cables being plugged and unplugged. We wanted each drum to have its own channel in the mix. The challenge became finding a system with mics and mounts that were light and small enough to work in a mobile situation. So I experimented with mics that I wouldn't normally use, and some I hadn't previously known about. We had one very happy accident. The first mic I tried in the 16" bass drums—an Audix D6, which hasn't been a go-to for me—worked incredibly well. In audio, I often find that there are products that they *tell* you are designed for one purpose and seem to work quite well for something else."





# Darryl “Lil Man” Howell

**C**hicago-area native Darryl “Lil Man” Howell holds down the drum chair for three artists at the top of their genres: gospel singer Jonathan McReynolds, rap star Nicki Minaj, and R&B crooner Maxwell. For his work as a record producer with McReynolds, Howell has earned a Grammy nomination and won a Stellar Award—one of the top annual honors accorded to members of the gospel-music community.

After cultivating his skills in his local church, Howell gained the respect and trust of his peers, indie artists, and music lovers around the country through the work of his band, Shocking Truth. Now, at only thirty-one years of age, he’s already held down the drum chair for Maxwell, McReynolds, and Minaj for five years or longer, while also finding time to sub for other killer players, like Rex Hardy with Mary J. Blige and Chris Johnson with Camila Cabello.

Lauded by McReynolds for “adding color and bringing feel to the passive listener,” Howell has become a master at his craft even as he continues to grow.

**Story by Stephen Styles**

**Photos by Gene Ambo**



**MD:** Music director and keyboardist Omar Edwards [Jay-Z, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna] describes you as having an impressive work ethic. He discussed the fact that you often put in hours of extra work outside of band rehearsals, running tunes again and again. What's behind that approach?

**Darryl:** I do it to keep up. When you're on tour, if you're keeping up musically you won't have to overcompensate by hanging out and kicking it because one thing isn't right. I figure if everybody else got it perfect, then it might take me a little longer, but I'm going to just outwork everybody.

I don't want to depend on talent. If I want to be able to live life and think about other stuff, then arrangements and music on a tour need to be automatic, in my blood, and flowing out of me. If I've got to do it that

many times to get it to that level, so be it. I might be dealing with other things when I'm trying to be focused on playing a show from night to night. I need to know it so good that I can be dealing with whatever and the music is the least of my worries. My focus needs to be that and *only* that for that period of time, because life happens. When it's time to focus on music, I focus on that. When the rest of the band goes home early, I need to stay. Because tomorrow I don't know what can happen. I might have issues or a family situation, or I might have to be on the phone a lot, but when we run the music, I'm going to know it already.

Also, you want to sound good to your peers. Them sounding good pushes you, and then you want to push them. Preparing for a tour, all you do is listen to the music you're going to play for the next three

months. But when you love music, you're going to get tired of listening to that so much. After tour rehearsals are over or the tour is done, it feels good to listen to music again. I'll put my thing on shuffle because now that tour music is committed to muscle memory. It's in my spirit at this point. Anywhere I am, I'll always remember it because I played it those thirty extra times after rehearsal or when I came in early. I've gone to sleep to the music while everybody else was hanging out. I'm a good multitasker, but I don't know if I'm a great *music* multitasker. With production I need to be. So if I get the live part down—that's making me a living right now—I can venture and still create and not worry about other music being in my head, because I know the show. I put in the extra work on the front end so that I can have





## Howell's Setup

### Drums: DW

- A.** 10x16 Collector's series maple Ballad snare
- B.** 4.5x14 Collector's series stainless-steel snare
- C.** 6.5x14 Collector's series maple Edge snare
- D.** 10x10 Performance series maple tom with HVX shells
- E.** 16x16 Performance series maple floor tom with HVX shells
- F.** 18x22 Performance series maple bass drum with HVX shells

### Cymbals: TRX

- 1.** 18" CLS series Thunder crash
- 2.** 15" X series DRK hi-hats
- 3.** 19" X series crash
- 4.** 19" stack: AIR series Thunder crash on top of an MDM series crash
- 5.** 20" NDK series crash-ride (used as a ride)
- 6.** 20" MDM series crash

### Hardware: DW 9000 series

### Sticks: Vic Firth 1A, X55A

**Heads:** Remo, including Emperor Vintage Coated snare batters, Emperor Clear tom batters and Ambassador resonants, and Powerstroke P4 bass drum batter

**Electronics:** Roland SPD-SX multipad, RT-30HR dual-zone trigger on main snare, and two BT-1 pads

**Percussion:** LP cowbell, mounted woodblock, and mounted tambourine

that freedom.

**MD:** How does that process continue once you're on the road?

**Darryl:** I'm real hard on myself. I've got a grading scale where there's little things that to the band don't sound like I messed up, but that I know I missed. I listen back so I can correct any mistakes, so the next night I don't make that same mistake. I might make a *new* mistake, but it's not going to be the same one from the night before.

Either you keep getting better or it's nothing. Even if it's something simple like a fill I played that the guys liked and said, "Keep it." What if I don't do it the next show? Maybe it wasn't in the arrangement, so it's not going to make or break the show, but I make that hard on myself because they liked it and I forgot. So say I did it Monday and they liked it, but I forget to do it Tuesday. Wednesday I *cannot* forget to do what they liked that I did Monday. It has no effect on the show, but it affects me and my

guys that I'm playing with night to night, because they liked it.

**MD:** Are you recording yourself every night?

**Darryl:** I get the house mix every night in Dropbox within two hours of getting off stage. That's how I'm able to tell those little mistakes. Most bands that I'm in, especially Maxwell's band, we used to listen on the bus ride to the next city every night. We'd listen to the show because those guys all want to sound good. They want to kill it every night. That's what made me a better drummer, just critiquing myself to no end—"That's too much hi-hat, that's too much ride...don't play 8th notes here, just play quarters..." that kind of thing. I never want to grieve the listener.

**MD:** Can you talk a bit about preparing for tour rehearsals? How much do you know about song selection or other details before leaving home?

**Darryl:** Music is always last, especially with an artist like Nicki. When they first called me,

I got an email with over a hundred songs because she had so many features that year. She was brand new. There was stuff that went viral and stuff that fans wanted to hear. Then the list goes down to sixty. Mind you, this was 2011. At the time we were an opener, so it was only a forty-five-minute set. So the list goes down to twenty and then sixteen—four acts. You learn that music, but as they cut the list down you have to dump those songs out your mind and focus on what's left.

**MD:** But you'd already invested the time to learn that material?

**Darryl:** Yeah! And if they call and say you're not doing a certain bunch of songs, that's what it is. Later down the line, if they put that song back, you already know it—because it's going to come back.

But the time-wasting thing is real. We can put a whole show together, and Nicki can come in after having listened to it at home, and she might not feel the same and might



want to scratch it. The songs may not be scratched, but the order may be different, or we may have to take out an intro. The songs are going to stand alone. But that jars your mind a whole other way when you switch up an order, because you're memorizing things in this particular space.

So it's about never getting comfortable. But before you leave home, there's not a lot you know about what's going on musically. All we can do is run what we have, run what we know, present it to her the best way possible, and either she asks for minor changes or she'll say scratch it. Minor changes are always a win versus scratching it. It's tough.

But again, before leaving home, there's not much you're going to know—especially in that genre of music. They've got to see how stuff is going to feel; they might have new records coming out that we've never heard. Maxwell is famous for coming into

rehearsal...we're playing all this stuff, and he plugs in an aux cord with a track for us to hear, because he wants to do a different version of a song and he's just vibin'. By the end of the night we're expected to have it or come in the next day and at least have the spirit of what he just brought to play. You never know much. All you can do is study what they have.

**MD:** Are there other changes that happen once you're out on tour?

**Darryl:** Sometimes. Especially when you're going through a particular artist's city that you know has a feature. Chances are they're going to come out. For example, we were in Long Island doing "Monster." Kanye's verse is twenty-eight bars. One time Omar came in the talkback like, "Lil Man, 'Ye is here. He's gonna do his verse."

**MD:** Wait, so you found out about that the day of?

**Darryl:** I found out onstage! [laughs] It was,

like, three songs before his song. And we didn't plan for this man to come, so now there's all this brain-wracking going on. If you know the pattern to the song, you've just got to count the bars until he's done. I knew "Monster," but we'd never played his verse, so it's like, "Okay, is there a special drop in the verse?" It's like you know it, but you don't. Hip-hop is a lot of drops and breaks—out on the hi-hat, or out on beat 3 on the kick drum.... It's complicated.

**MD:** There's a perception that with some major stadium or festival shows, with twenty to forty thousand people in attendance, the band is sometimes just used as a stage prop to be seen but not heard. How much is everything the band plays really heard?

**Darryl:** That's up to the artist and the front-of-house guy. There's an artist I've heard about who doesn't like cymbals. So if the drummer just has to have the cymbals, that becomes a conversation between the

artist, the musical director, and the front-of-house guy to say, "Bring the cymbals down in the mix." That's what turns a six-hour day of rehearsal into a fourteen-hour day of rehearsal. Because you literally end up A/B-ing every piece of music, where you go onstage and play it and record it, then go out into the front of the house to hear what it's going to sound like to the audience, and you keep doing that. That's up to the artist. They might say, "Take all the drum stems out and just let 'Lil Man' play it," because they like the live vibe. As the drummer, it's your job in that situation to sound-match as closely as possible, but the mix is out of my hands. In my experience, especially on hip-hop and pop shows, the live band is normally mixed right under the stems.

**MD:** Sometimes your schedule takes you through all three of your main gigs in a short amount of time, or with overlap. What's that like, and how do you switch gears mentally to play each show?

**Darryl:** I just had a run like that. The Nicki tour was happening in February and that whole time Jonathan McReynolds was on his tour. They were getting ready for the second half of his Make More Room tour. So all through February, March, and part of April I was with Nicki. The last few weeks of Nicki's tour, I was on the bus doing programming, arranging, and setting up Jonathan's new show for the second half of his tour. I was making sure they were straight for rehearsal, because I'm working with that group even though I'm not going to touch a drum for another month.

After sending them [material] to rehearse with the drummer who's filling in for me, I listen back to what they're doing, because I'm making the arrangements but not committing to memory. I'm just working off the list of what they need. It's like, "We need an intro, we need an outro, and we need sound design for this," and I'm just putting it together, knowing that I'm going to have to hop on that tour for the last two weeks.

Fast forward, I finish the tour with Nicki and fly to the States and go straight to rehearsal. I flew into Atlanta for a one-off show with Maxwell. I landed on Friday, rehearsal was Friday night, and then the show the next day with Maxwell, who I hadn't played with in months. So it's rehearsal Friday, show with Maxwell on Saturday, and then another show in Atlanta with Jonathan on Sunday. That part just worked out by coincidence. Mind you, I'm doing this jetlagged and all. But this is where all that muscle memory kicks in, from when I first got the Maxwell gig and was drilling that music in my basement. It

never leaves you. Coming from Nicki's tour and having to go straight to playing with Maxwell, I just put the music on repeat and listened to it on the plane, and it was there.

**MD:** What about gear? Does your setup change depending on the gig you're playing?

**Darryl:** The cymbals change the most. The drums are more on the mixing engineer. But I'll say this: Maxwell and Jonathan both have very soft voices, so my approach to playing with them is more accompaniment than stomping. Sometimes with Maxwell the

groove gets good and the vibe is like a block party, where you want to get aggressive. But I still have to consider his voice. His falsetto and his regular tone, it's different from a rapper like Nicki or even Camila, who's belting out pop ballads. It's more soulful R&B.

The drum setup sticks more than the style and the dynamics. Sounds and sizes might change a little bit, but not much. With Nicki I play an 18" gong bass drum. With Max I'll take that away because I don't need to knock that hard. With Nicki I might have

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## Darryl Howell

some nasty, trappish 12" and 13" hi-hats, whereas with Max I'll use 14s on one side and maybe a set of 15s on the other side.

Also, with cymbals you've got loud ones or you've got soft ones. With drums there's loud and soft ones, too, but so much of that is controlled by your playing style. You can't manipulate cymbals as much. With Jonathan I had cymbals that were cool for churches and the House of Blues. With Nicki I already have my stuff out there for bigger stages. With Max they know what sizes I like for backline, and I just deal with it like that. In terms of drumheads, usually I like coated heads on Max's gig for more control and uncoated heads for everything else.

**MD:** How about electronics?

**Darryl:** It's the same idea. The sounds may change, but not my setup. For example, on Max's gig I have a trigger just for chimes, and I use it a lot for transitions, but I don't need that sound on a rap gig. I still use the same gear, but I have a Nicki backup, a Camila backup, a Maxwell backup, and so on. But overall my station is my station.

**MD:** As a Christian musician, what's it like moving through the diverse environments you work in and finding time for that part of your life?

**Darryl:** The routine might change, but the



worship doesn't. On the road I'm only responsible for a few things—lobby call, soundcheck, and playing the show. There's really no excuse for not being able to connect, because on the road I don't have the same amount of distraction. There's so much dead time, especially overseas, because it's seven hours ahead.

It's not about the environments changing. The environment is going to be

the environment. With Jonathan, I'm grateful to have that extra accountability and the opportunity to worship while we play the show. In that situation, it's expected that you can connect spiritually. At the same time, on other gigs I've seen people smoking their weed and lifting their hands to worship music and I'm with it! [laughs]

So every day I'm talking to God like I'm talking to you. When I wake up it's, "Lord, thanks for another day. I need help with this; thank you for this." I'm myself everywhere I go, and I've learned people will respect you when they see you're consistent. Sometimes you end up having an effect on the artist. Maxwell knows he has a bunch of church guys in his band. We'd been listening to Andrae Crouch's "Let the Church Say Amen," and one time Max heard it. Later we were onstage and he started singing it, and it ended up being a part of our show every night. People in the audience were standing up and rejoicing. It was cool.

**MD:** That sounds like church at a secular concert. Can we talk about how you started and your experience coming up in church?

**Darryl:** First, both of my parents are music lovers. From the time I was a toddler I beat on everything. My dad had a band as a kid, but no one in my family plays drums, writes music, or sings. They saw me being rhythmic and kept it around me. The church I came up in, my pastor's mom babysat me. My mom

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## Darryl Howell

worked with the pastor's wife, and she was looking for a babysitter. My pastor's wife was like, "Take him over to Mother Reed's house," and she started taking me over there. So from six months to five or six years old, every single day I was with the Reed family, who were a very musical family.

From what I'm told, I was a good mimicker. Someone could tap a rhythm 1-2-3, and I'd tap it right back. They bought me a little drumset and put it next to the main drummer at church. They would let me play every Sunday during service. Everybody was trippin' out that this little dude was like three and could keep a beat. This family that was keeping me, there were ten of them. They were church people. All they did was sing. They had an organ at the house, and for them it was normal. They saw the gift of music in me, too, and my parents were supportive. The church was musical and had really good choirs. Church gave me discipline and respect for simplicity. Even to this day, I can still hear Vanessa Beatty saying, "Stay in the pocket."

**MD:** How about formal training? Did you take lessons or participate in school bands?

**Darryl:** I never really took lessons. I remember Teddy Campbell was preparing to do a session at my church, Reed's Temple. I was probably in about fifth grade at the time. He saw me sitting there by the drum and asked me if I knew my rudiments, and I told him I didn't. He wrote me out my first rudiments. I think it was the paradiddle, the flam, and the five-stroke roll. He wrote the notes and the sticking pattern and told me

to practice on my pillow at night. That was my first interaction with rudiments.

I went to Thornridge High School, and the band director, Mr. Eanes, helped reignite that again. By my junior year I was confident in playing the rudiments and implementing them in my playing. I didn't want to play in marching band and symphonic bands. I knew I wanted to play the drumset and stuck to doing that for the most part outside of school.

**MD:** Practicing back then, were you counting?

**Darryl:** I was kind of counting because I was counting in church songs or counting sixteen bars with Mr. Eanes. With my father being a James Brown fan, I got a good understanding of the importance of the "1" and the whole funk thing and what makes that accent special. But I wasn't counting quarters, 8ths, and 16ths. I was more playing to records and practicing songs and trying to visualize the sticking and see how it could fit within a piece of music.

**MD:** You've got a unique sound regardless of what style you're playing. How did you develop that?

**Darryl:** If someone asked me to give them a certain vibe and named a drummer from here [Chicago], I could do it because I was close enough to study so many of those players who went on to bigger things. But you can't make a career off doing that. That's why I thank God for the internet, because I was able to listen to more than just the guys from Chicago. I was able to find Brian Frasier-Moore, Lil John, and Chris Dave,

whose playing is smart and at the same time has this recklessness to it. I wanted my playing to have balls and have that same type of thing, where it was disruptive but also in the pocket.

**MD:** What are some of the milestones of your career so far?

**Darryl:** Madison Square Garden in 2016 with Maxwell. The Garden is such an iconic place, and I'd never even been in that building, let alone played with a headlining artist. My mom and my sister came to that show. I played Soldier Field with Camila Cabello opening for Taylor Swift, and my dad and my mom came. That was big for my dad to see my onstage where the Bears play, seeing as he's a Bears and Walter Payton fan. It was cool because he's not graced to come to other types of shows with foul language, nor is my mom. Any of those shows where my family has seen that this music thing they weren't so sure about, but that they were supportive of, that it kinda worked out...that's always big.

Another was when we did Lincoln Hall in Chicago with Jonathan and they presented me with my Stellar Award for Producer of the Year, and I was able to give that to my parents. And the morning and late-night TV shows have been big. Growing up in Chicago, we used to collect tapes when we knew someone from here was going to be on TV playing behind a certain artist. So to be doing that myself now, it might not seem like much to some people, but it's a big deal to me. I'm grateful.



## Some Things CAN be Controlled

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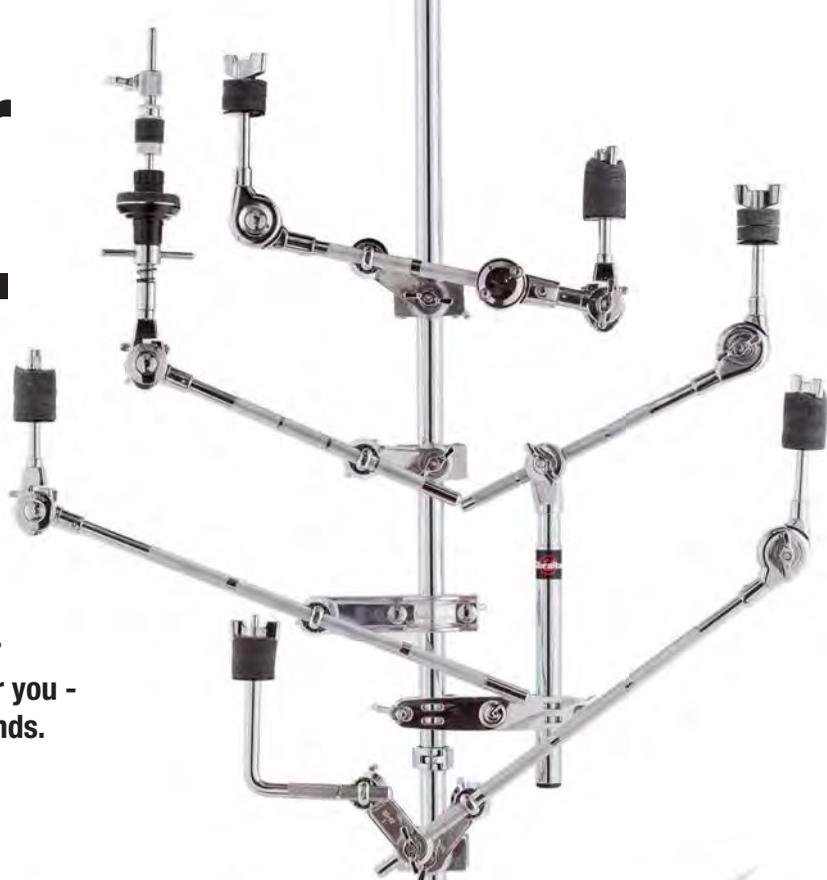
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# Joel Taylor

**His résumé reads like a drummer-fantasy list: Allan Holdsworth, Al Di Meola, Joe Sample and the Crusaders, Banned from Utopia, David Foster, Brian Bromberg, Gloria Estefan, Stu Hamm, Jon Faddis, David Sánchez, Oz Noy, Hendrik Meurkens, movie soundtracks, solo recordings, and gigs around Los Angeles—and all over the world.**

**P**ossessing a clean, clear, punchy style that he can adapt to any environment, Joel Taylor is one of the most in-demand drummers in Los Angeles, a city full of great drummers. An L.A. resident since 1984, Taylor has seen the fat times and the lean, and he's navigated the city's musical and political scenes with a good-natured attitude that keeps his phone ringing and his gig book full.

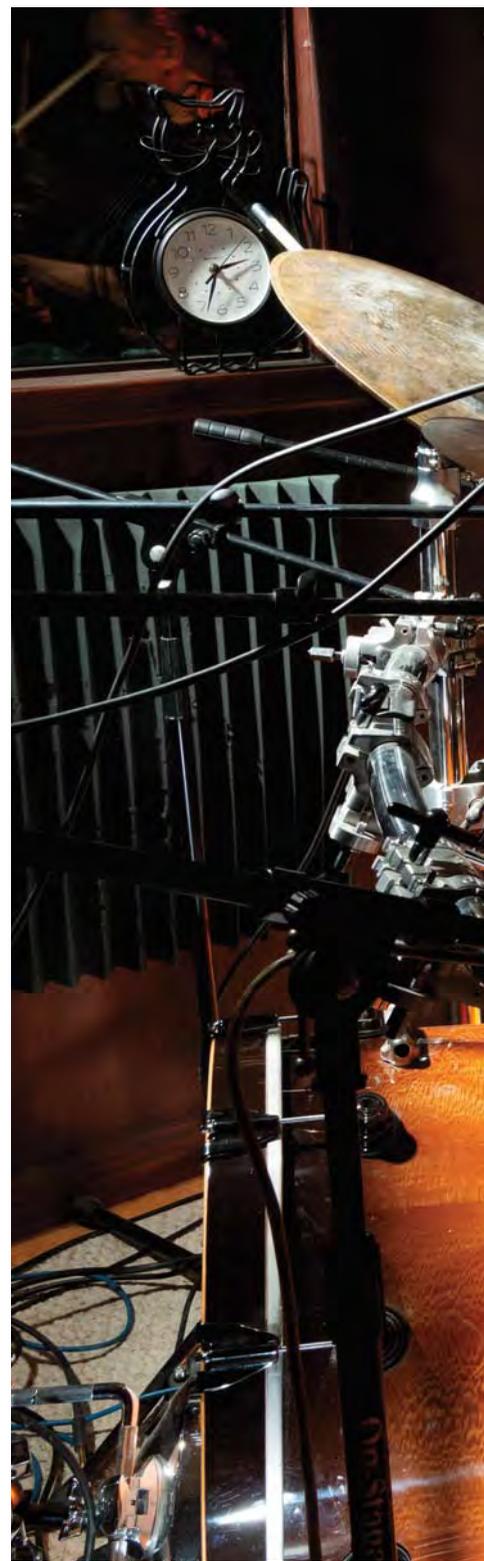
Taylor possesses immaculate chart-reading skills and proficient technique in any style, yet his drumming is loose and flowing, the result of years of experience playing jazz, funk, pop, Afro-Cuban, fusion, and R&B, both live and in the studio.

He also leads his own groups, the Brig Band and the Vintskevich-Taylor Quartet, and works regularly with Doors guitarist Robby Krieger's Jam Kitchen—as well as in a King Crimson tribute band. Running a home studio also pays dividends for Taylor, equipping him for almost any gig imaginable.

**MD:** You've recorded everything from *Guitar Hero* to Gloria Estefan at your home studio, Jackalope Studios. What else happens there?

**Joel:** I track for composers and producers from around the globe. I work a lot with one particular film composer from Santa Monica, Kenny Burgomaster. He's the coleader in my jam band, the Brig Band. Kenny composed the soundtrack for the *Jonas and Hannah Montana* TV series, and the *Frenemies* and *Wizards of Waverly Place* movies, all of which I've played on. I've done a ton of Kenny's movies. For *Gran Torino*, I played a martial snare drum part any time the lead character picked up a shotgun. I did four takes and that was it. Clint Eastwood [the film's director] asked me to play the snare drum parts after he heard me playing with his son, Kyle, who was the composer on that movie. Clint has a home studio in his house, so that's where we cut it.

**MD:** How has having your own studio helped you get work in L.A.?



**Story by Ken Micallef**

**Photos by Alex Solca**



**Joel:** Guys know that I can turn it around fast and get great sounds. They don't have to pay for studio time. I don't really charge that, but I do charge for recording and engineering time. But it's definitely helped because the live session scene these days is not so alive. Everybody does it in-house. When I moved to town in 1984 there was a ton of studio work, but now I maybe do a dozen sessions during the year with a full

band. I probably do forty to fifty sessions a year here at the house.

### **Gloria Estefan**

**MD:** Did you work with Gloria Estefan at your home studio?

**Joel:** I tracked drums for her new record at my studio. She tracked the album in Brazil with a producer, Mauricio Guerrero. I replaced some of the drummer's takes from

the Brazil session. Everything was finished on the tracks they sent but the drums. I had to sync with the bassist, who had locked with a different drummer. In the end, I think they retracked some of the bass parts.

**MD:** Was there a click?

**Joel:** Yeah, I tried to nail the click but make it feel good with what was already there, and come up with the right parts in the Brazilian style, which I'm very familiar

with. We played some sambas, baiões, and the samba variation partido alto—a funky samba.

**MD:** Were her vocals in the tracks?

**Joel:** Yes, they were. When I got sent the tracks, I didn't know who the artist was. I started listening to this voice. It sounded familiar. One of the tracks was labeled "Gloria," and I put two and two together.

**MD:** Does everyone in L.A. have a pro studio with a control room and a live room?

**Joel:** Not everyone does, but I do. Gary Novak had one; he was sharing it with an engineer. I think Vinnie Colaiuta records in his house sometimes. But Vinnie is still doing tons of sessions down at Capitol and United Recording/Ocean Way Recording/EastWest.

## David Foster

**MD:** What did you record with David Foster?

**Joel:** That was a fantastic experience. I worked with him for five years, between 2001 and 2006. I was in Brian Bromberg's band for many years, and Brian was doing a bunch of stuff with David. JR Robinson and Vinnie were Foster's first-call. I became number three. We backed up Josh Groban, Michael Bublé, etc.; we

kind of broke in the new singers Foster was producing. And we backed Foster when he played piano.

**MD:** How did you land that gig? And what did he want from you in particular?

**Joel:** Bromberg recommended me. Foster handled a lot of different artists. There might be ten different singers that would come up, and we'd back them in Las Vegas, L.A., etc. David was looking for a drummer who had a lot of styles together and could sight-read anything. And number one with Foster is time—his time is ridiculous. He's like a perfect metronome, so if you waver, it's over.

I remember once we were playing one of his funk tunes, "Got to Be Real," when he gave me a little eyebrow nod. I'm looking at him and he plays behind my snare, basically telling me, "Pull it back." That's the only time he ever had to do that. I got it right away. He was a real stickler for time. He expects you to read a chart down the first time with no mistakes.

## Allan Holdsworth

**MD:** Describe your Holdsworth experience.

**Joel:** That was an amazing experience. I played with Allan on and off for ten years. We recorded something about ten years

ago; I don't know if it's ever going to see the light of day. For that project Allan had two different rhythm sections play the same five tunes—Jimmy Johnson and Gary Husband, then bassist Ernest Tibbs and me. It was maybe in 2006. Then Allan shelved it. He'd call me: "Man, you sound amazing on this. But I want to redo my guitar parts." He wanted to release a double album of both rhythm sections playing the same tunes.

**MD:** Did he complete the project?

**Joel:** Nobody knows if he ever replaced his guitar parts. I know his rhythm playing is on there. But then he passed away. The tapes are in probate. Nobody knows what's on them. So we've been talking to his daughter, and if there is finished product in there that we could put out, then great. But nobody really knows.

**MD:** How did you get the gig?

**Joel:** I was teaching at Musicians Institute in 1994 and playing in [bassist] Jeff Berlin's band. Jeff asked me to play a Holdsworth clinic. Jeff wrote out a couple of Allan's tunes. One was "Water on the Brain," which Chad Wackerman played on the original version of. It had a lot of odd meters. I sight-read the chart, and we just jammed for the rest of it. We went for a drink across the street on Hollywood Boulevard after, and



Allan invited me to be in his rhythm section, as Chad was going out of the country. It was that quick. Then I got the Yanni gig, and that was on retainer so I couldn't pass it up. I did that for a couple of years. Then I rejoined Holdsworth, until 2007.

**MD:** What demands did Allan place on the drummer?

**Joel:** He was absolutely the nicest leader ever. He would never tell you what to play. The hardest thing was learning the tunes, because the forms were so difficult and they modulate all over the place. It's like a lot of his forms are through-composed. Often you don't solo on the same form as the head, in a traditional jazz sense.

From my years playing trumpet, I can hear the basic notes in his harmonies and melodies. So I transcribed his music not from a drummer's perspective, but from a musical perspective, with the harmonies and the bass parts. I learned more from the chord structures and the forms of his compositions. I certainly can't hear all of those harmonies, but at least I could write down the bass parts and the harmonies I *could* hear. That really helped to understand the forms.

If you're listening to Allan's music as a drummer, you can't tell that there are modulations everywhere. When I started learning the harmonies and especially the bass parts in his music, I realized, *It's modulating here. And this is the same sort of progression, but in a different key.* So it really started to open doors for me, just looking inside his music. After that, I checked out what all the different drummers had played originally. And then we talked it over. Allan said, "I want you to play like Joel Taylor." He helped me find my voice. That's the best any leader can do.

## Then to Now

**MD:** When did you arrive in L.A. after attending Berklee?

**Joel:** I came to L.A. in '84. At first I played all the weekly jams. I took a top-40 gig and a theater gig. My first break was with Brian Bromberg, a great bassist and a longtime friend. I'm on many of his records. I've been playing with him thirty-some years. Tom Brechtlein was his drummer then, but he

couldn't make some gigs. Brian and I were supporting composition majors together at Dick Grove School of Music. I did one of Brian's gigs, and then he asked me to join his group. That was my first break, and then from that I got exposure around town and people would come out to see me. It started snowballing from there.

**MD:** Next gig?

**Joel:** After that was Justo Almarino from the band Koinonia. I learned about Latin-jazz playing with those guys. That was probably '89, a few years after Brian. Then keyboardist Rob Mullins gave me work. I was playing and recording in those bands

simultaneously.

**MD:** You've also recorded a lot for Guitar Hero and Rock Band. L.A. soundtracks would seem to be great work but hard to break into.

**Joel:** It's all word of mouth; there's no auditioning for soundtrack work. How I got into the Guitar Hero circle: I met Toss Panos, who plays drums with Draco, a Puerto Rican artist. He got the call for it, but he couldn't do the date. Guitar Hero had an awards ceremony, and they wanted the guys who played on the tracks to play the gig. Gregg Bissonette played on a lot of the early ones. They called a film composer, Lyle Workman,





who played on many of the first Guitar Hero tracks. He knew me from playing with Allan Holdsworth and from Toss, and I got the gig.

I met the composers who were doing Guitar Hero, and since I had my own studio, it worked out well. I did that for a couple of years; they'd send me a track a day. I'd transcribe every tune verbatim and tune the drums exactly the same as the original tracks. I tried to replicate the same heads they used, what kind of drums and cymbals used.... It was a ton of work, but it was fairly lucrative. A lawsuit ended the whole thing. The stuff I played on sold three billion dollars' worth of merchandise. Unfortunately, it was a nonunion gig, and before the union had a scale for video game soundtracks, so we didn't receive any backend special payments.

**MD:** What's your current workload like?

**Joel:** Besides playing around town and studio work, I also colead a jazz band in Russia, the Vintskevich-Taylor Quartet. We play the International Jazz Province Festival in Russia every year. I've been doing the gig for twelve years, also backing their artists, and they've asked me back every year.

We've made four records as the Vintskevich-Taylor Quartet. It's straight-ahead jazz but with a Russian influence. I also have a residency at the 1881 Bar in Pasadena, a jazz gig where I employ friends from around town. And there's the Brig Band, a jam band. We recently recorded an album, *Alive & Plugged*. We play regularly in Venice, California. Danny Carey, Kirk Covington, and Robby Krieger often sit in. I'm on another forthcoming album from Robby Krieger's Jam Kitchen. And I'm on the faculty at both the University of Redlands and Cal Poly Pomona.

**MD:** If you came to L.A. now, would you still have the opportunity you had in the '80s?

**Joel:** No, there are a lot fewer gigs to be had these days, and the talent pool is a lot bigger. That limits the number of available gigs. I was lucky to come out here when I did. These days I'm working as much as a leader as I am as a sideman.

**MD:** To what do you credit your sense of flow and relaxed feel?

**Joel:** Probably just confidence. When I was a kid I did tons of rudimental stuff, and when I studied with Gary Chaffee and Alan Dawson

while at Berklee, Chaffee drilled me on odd-grouping stickings, etc., and Alan had me interpret Ted Reed's *Syncopation* dozens of ways and do his rudimental ritual.

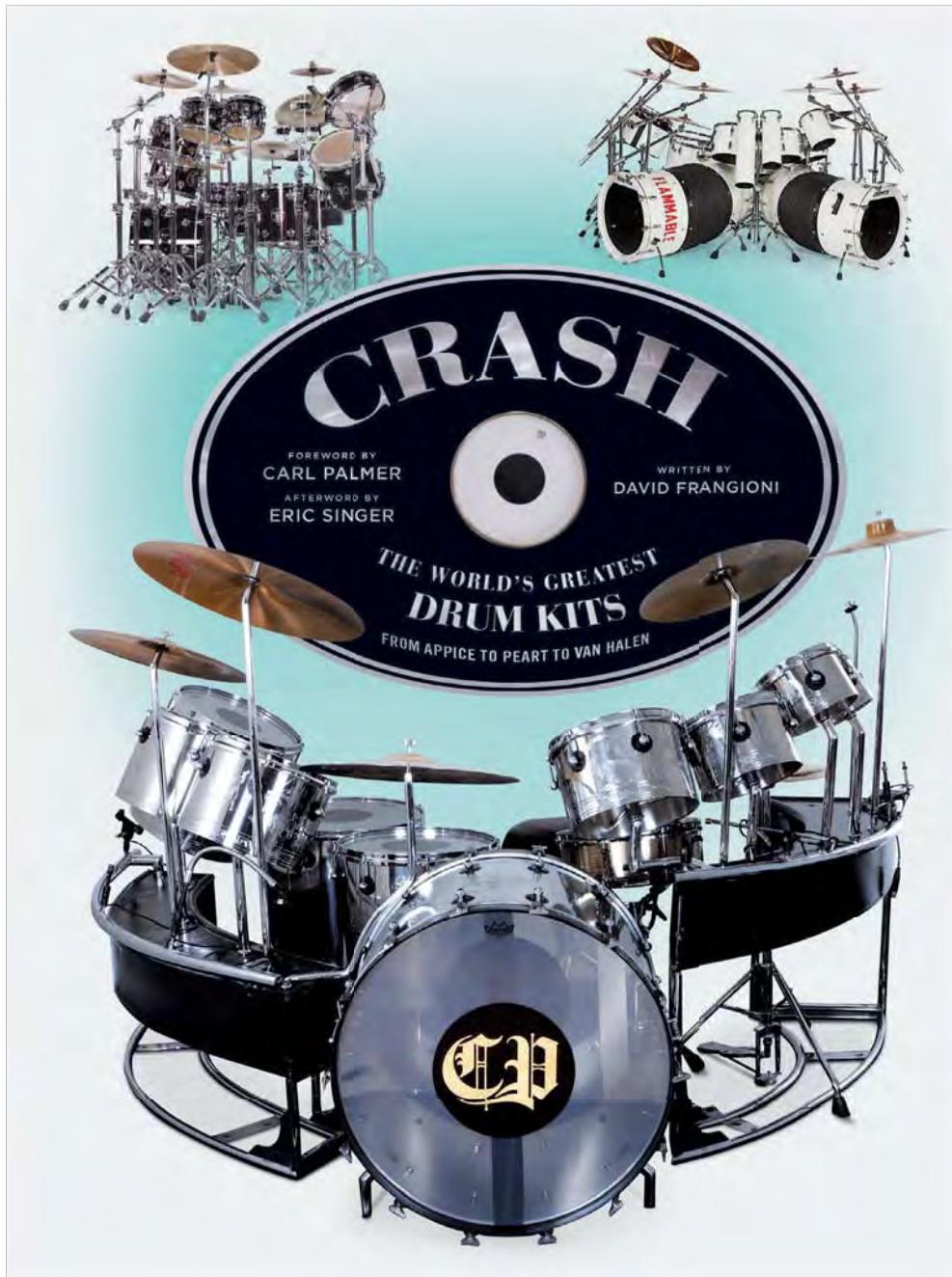
But generally, it comes from experience. When I was twenty-seven, I didn't sound at all smooth. I probably had more chops then, because I practiced all the time. But the experience of playing in a lot of different situations gives you the confidence to relax. If you're not confident, you're going to feel hyper, and that may affect your breathing. When I'm on the bandstand, I'm not thinking.

If I have a forte, it's my ears and that I immerse myself in the situation, in the music that's happening in the moment. I'm trying not to think, just play music. I've had so much experience over the years that I can feel relaxed even if it's a pressurized environment.

**Joel Taylor uses DW drums and hardware, Zildjian cymbals, Vic Firth sticks and brushes, and Remo heads.**



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# Chris Vatalaro

## Man on the Move



Saying that the world is his stage doesn't come close to describing the drummer's career. The New York-bred, London-based player is like a musical, modern-day James Bond, globe-trotting from country to country while supporting cutting-edge artists and established stars alike.

In 2019 alone Chris Vatalaro toured and recorded with alt-rocker Trixie Whitley; saw the release of two soundtracks he played on, *Yesterday* and *Wild Rose* (on the latter he also appears on-screen); and took on the rolls of percussionist and musical director on composer Philip Glass's "Tao of Glass" 360 video, a theater piece performed at the Manchester International Festival. As we went to press, 2020 was looking busy as well, with tours in Australia, Germany, and elsewhere already booked.

A one-time student of Steve Gadd, Vatalaro's virtuosity and diversity are highly regarded in the music industry. Yet despite his success, the man remains remarkably humble, and is quick to credit others. *MD* caught up with Chris just as he'd returned home from a tour of the continent.

**MD:** The interplay between you and Trixie Whitley as a duo is amazing live. Is the show heavily rehearsed, or intuitive?

**Chris:** Trixie is a fantastic rhythm player. She's coming from a dance background, she can play drums, and her guitar playing captures an entire groove on its own. When we rehearse, it's in order to figure out how to augment what she's already doing. She also grew up doing quite dense electronics, and that's the flavor on her new record, so I'm handling some of that onstage. The interaction and balance between essentially live stuff and electronic song forms is something that I have a bunch of experience with at this point.

**MD:** In some instances you use a stripped-down kit—snare, bass drum, cymbal—with an electronic pad for toms and various other sounds. Your personal "sound" is like the best of both worlds, combining the organic and the digital.

**Chris:** I first played drums in the '80s, and it seemed like the whole world was just MIDI drum sequencing or trying to play acoustic drums like sequencers. So I quickly gravitated to listening to players from before that era, just because it seemed like more fun. By high school, I got into layering digital sounds live in a budget kind of way: plugging my drums into a used Alesis D4 drum machine and blasting those sounds through a keyboard amp. It's twenty-five years later, and I'm still essentially doing the same thing. Except now I don't have to carry a rack of stuff, just some pads, a MIDI controller, and a converter, and the laptop takes care of the rest.

To get away from just playing straight samples, in a typical set I'll mix it up. So the pads might be playing straight samples, trigger bass lines, or set up conditions and parameters for the kick and snare triggers—for instance, additional layers or effect sends. I've learned that integrating electronics in this way can be both subtle and absurd, but somewhere in there is music. I still have the basic acoustic sounds of kick, snare, and hi-hat if required.

**MD:** You've played with a wide range of acts: Antibalas, Imogen Heap, Leo Abrahams, Sam Amidon, Mark Ronson, Philip Selway.... How do you prepare for such a diversity of genres

and artists?

**Chris:** I listen to and enjoy lots of music! Also, I try to understand where the artists are coming from and where they want to go sonically and emotionally in the abstraction that is music. Nowadays it's really easy to access a lot of recordings, and there's this danger of devaluing everything. But the way in which performers are interacting with the sea of knowledge varies. Some folks are very eclectic in their tastes; some folks are deep into very specific things. We live in a time when both dispositions are part of our culture, so for me it's been best to develop a respect for how vast the landscape is and how beautiful ideas can be within that. Everyone brings their own intelligence to their sound, and they come with totally different biases and value systems. If you can't respect that and maintain good and inquisitive humor, then you shouldn't be on the gig.

**MD:** What new projects are coming up?

**Chris:** I've been working on a project with my friend John Dieterich [Deerhoof] a few days a year for the past few years. I'm excited about the music, as it's the first original stuff I've worked on in ages. We did a bunch of improvising and then composed songs around those ideas. I ended up playing a lot of percussion and vibes.

Aside from that, Sam Amidon is working on a new record, Imogen Heap is touring, and I'm doing another bit of touring playing theater music by Philip Glass, a show that we premiered last July.



Anton Coene

**MD:** This year you were also involved in two major motion pictures: *Wild Rose*, and *Yesterday*, whose soundtrack was recorded at Abbey Road Studios. How did those opportunities come your way?

**Chris:** When they cast Jessie Buckley in the role for *Wild Rose*, director Tom Harper made a bold decision to have her sing the songs live as they shot the film. So I was brought in at an early stage to help her work up some country style. I don't know much about country music, but the dramaturgical idea wasn't to be a super slick Nashville band. The idea was to play like a stomping Glaswegian band—Glasgow is a fantastic place to play on tour, by the way. When the opportunity came to participate in the filming, I took the job because it was a great band and because Jessie is such a special singer and an understanding storyteller.

In the case of *Yesterday*, I was called in much later in the process. The music director, Daniel Pemberton, was working alongside Adem Ilhan, a great all-around musician

whose album I worked on a few years back, and who played bass on a Philip Selway tour with me. The movie has this surreal premise that no one can remember the Beatles except for one guy, and he tries to record all of their songs from memory. So we went to Abbey Road and recorded vaguely remembered versions of a bunch of Beatles songs.

**MD:** What was the experience of tracking at Abbey Road like?

**Chris:** Abbey Road's Studio 2 is a great place to play drums in. It's shaped a little like a high school gym or something. It has pretty high ceilings, but it feels awesome to hit the drums in there. There's a very peculiar sonic focus, and it's easy to tune the drums. The pianos and bits of the signal path also feel familiar, like, *Oh, yeah, I've heard this before*. I'm used to working in a variety of cool lo-fi situations, but it's a real treat to be in a very hi-fi one. I got super into using tea towels and chamois [to muffle the drums], for the hell of it. It's easy to get reverent in these

places, remembering the playful spirit and technical innovations those bands and engineers created day in and day out.

**MD:** What's your advice to young drummers as far as navigating the ins and outs of today's musical landscape?

**Chris:** My goal was never to be super proficient or competitive; it was to be able to take my skills to different places and play with friends. Getting to that point meant ear training, working on rudiments and classic feels, and figuring out how to incorporate things I was interested in within professional applications—without fear of it falling flat the first few times. But it could be different for other folks. My main piece of advice would be to find people who you respect to curate some listening for you, especially older people. Records can teach so much, but they're too easy to find—and too hard to find.

**Bob Girouard**



# The Power of Silence

## The Tasteful Drummer's Secret Weapon

by Dylan Wissing



As drummers, we spend so much time developing technique, expanding our musical vocabulary, and obsessing over the components of our drumset. All of that is important and essential for playing the instrument well. But it's equally important to develop the ability to closely listen to the music to make appropriate, artistic choices in regards to which role the drums should play in the song—if any.

Grammy-winning producer, songwriter, and musician Dave Tozer has worked with Kanye West, John Mayer, and Justin Timberlake, and he produced John Legend's massive hit "All of Me." I spoke with Dave about the role that drums play in a song from a producer's standpoint, and the effect that their absence can have. We discussed three scenarios that a drummer might encounter that emphasize the power of leaving space. These are songs with no drums, songs where the drums enter partway through, and songs with intermittent dropouts.

### Songs Without Drums

There aren't any drums in John Legend's "All of Me." With the song being such an iconic hit, I wondered if it was always intended to have such a sparse arrangement or if they ever tried it with a drum part. "On that particular song, it did not happen," Tozer explains. "With certain songs, there's a loftiness that hangs there when you don't put percussion on it. To me, [percussion] can kind of bring it down to earth sometimes."

This is a key point to emphasize. Although I'm assuming that almost anyone reading this article will agree that drums are super important, we have to keep in mind that they're not always needed. The fact that "All of Me" was one of the biggest hits of 2014 demonstrates that the listening public doesn't demand drums on every song.

### Entering Later in the Arrangement

Next, Tozer and I discussed "In the Air Tonight" by Phil Collins. The drumset part in that song is a masterful display of taste, technique, and artistry, and we're still talking about it thirty-five years after its release. Yet we don't hear a note of live drums until almost four minutes into the track. The impact of its classic entrance fill is enhanced further because the drums have been silent for more than half of the song.

Tozer says, "That song is a great example of the weight and loftiness I was referring to on 'All of Me,' with those dark chords and [Roland] CR-78 drum machine before the fill. Everybody anticipates that part, and it's such a big tension release when the drums come in."

How might you incorporate the lesson of "In the Air Tonight" into your own playing? Let's say you're working on a new song and have a really cool fill that you're sure will be the centerpiece of the drum part. Examine the arrangement to see if there's another point to enter rather than right at the top. Would that fill work as your entrance into the second verse? How does it sound if you drop out at the bridge and then use the fill to explode back in to the solo section? Another classic technique is to have the drums stop playing in the third verse and then come back in for the outro choruses. Oftentimes drums sound more powerful when they seem to come out of nowhere.

### Dropouts

Dropouts are short periods of silence within a beat or arrangement. They can be as brief as a single 8th note, or they can last a couple measures. These devices were first employed back in the early days of drum machines and sampling in the 1980s. "I was heavily influenced by hip-hop as a kid," says Tozer. "And one of the things that style of production brought to the table is [the concept of having] the drums cut out in the middle of a verse to highlight a line."

This production style happens naturally while creating an arrangement in a DAW on a computer screen. But Tozer applies these same techniques onstage in his role as musician and musical director. "It's interesting, directing a band and having rhythm sections do that," he says. "As a drummer, you're still performing as you always would, but you're thinking about the arrangement more like how you would hear it on a recording."

When applying this concept to your own playing, approach the song as a producer would. Focus on the big picture, and examine the impact that removing small bits of your drum parts could have on the overall arrangement and feel. When the drums are unexpectedly silent, your ear immediately focuses on what the vocals or other instruments are playing.

Be aware that you'll need to be extra vigilant about not rushing or dragging during the dropouts. Spend time in the practice room working on it, and record yourself to make sure the drops and entrances are sounding clean. Also, it's a good idea to let your bandmates know when and where you're planning to drop out. Some musicians freak out if the drummer suddenly stops playing, so avoid causing a train wreck onstage by giving everyone a heads-up beforehand.

Your goal is to create the perfect part, whether that involves an incredibly dense performance throughout, sitting out entirely, or something that falls in the middle.

### The Sound of Silence

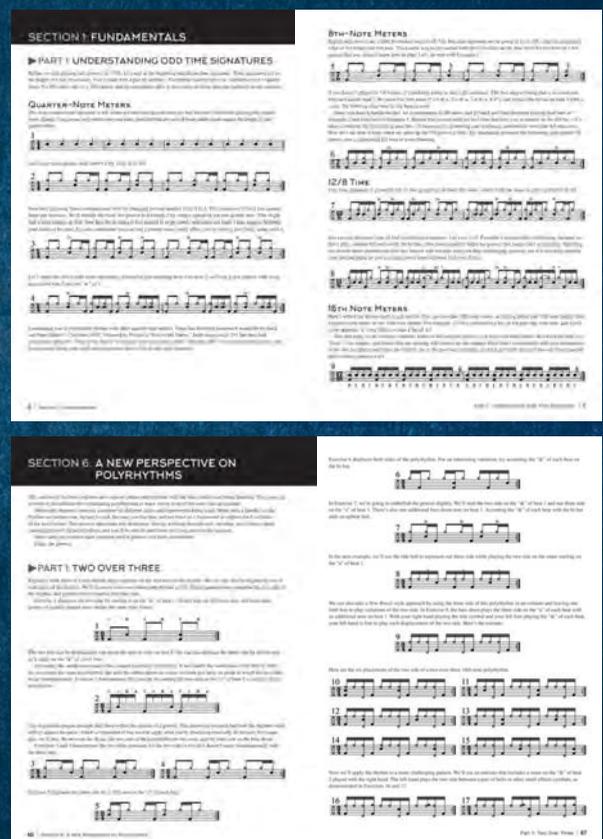
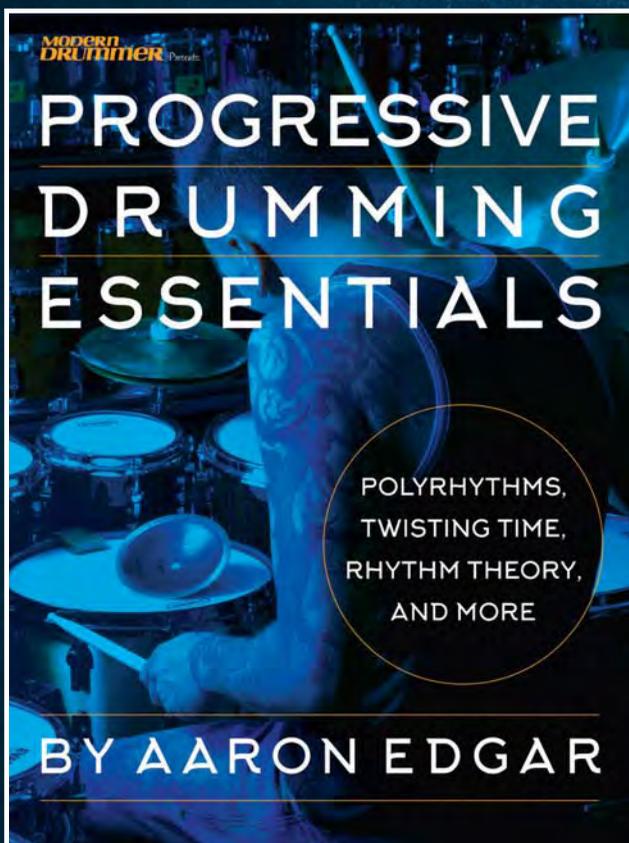
How you incorporate silence and space into your playing ultimately comes down to one thing: listening. When you're creating your parts, analyze the song from top to bottom so that you understand the overall arc of the composition and the emotional impact that the drums should bring. Experiment to discover if your parts are adding value or if the song would sound stronger without them.

Your goal is to create the perfect part, whether that involves an incredibly dense performance throughout, sitting out entirely, or something that falls in the middle. "I would say that being compositionally oriented as a drummer is really a great thing to think about," says Dave Tozer. Every song has different rhythmic needs. Just don't forget about the emotional impact of some strategically placed silence.

Dylan Wissing appears on albums by Drake, Eminem, Kanye West, Alicia Keys, and Jay-Z, as well as commercials for AT&T, Citibank, Reebok, and Banana Republic. He's a *Modern Drummer* Reader's Poll Nominee (Studio) and lead percussion instructor at [musicsschoolonline.com](http://musicsschoolonline.com). For more information, visit [dylanwissing.com](http://dylanwissing.com).



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# Improvising with Flams

## Three Ways to Develop a Creative Flow with Basic Rudiments

by Mike Alfieri

Improvising is a spontaneous compositional process. As drummers, we can rely on conceptual techniques like theme and variation to change and develop what we play in the moment. Presented in this article are different ways to build ideas based on flam rudiments. Many of these ideas are distilled from the playing of the modern jazz greats Ari Hoenig and Dan Weiss.

### Combine Them

To start, let's combine a flam tap with a flam paradiddle to create a longer musical motive.

1

IR RrL LIR LIR RrL rL LIR RrL RrL LIR

### Splice Them

Rudiments can also be spliced together. Example 2 is half of a pataflafa and half of a flam tap. The flam tap portion turns around the lead hand in measure 2.

2

rR L RrLIR R rL R LIRrL L

### Chop Them

You can also truncate or extend the rudiments to develop new phrases in odd meters or odd groupings. Example 3 contains flam taps in 7/8. The pattern can be analyzed as a measure of flam taps in 4/4 with the final tap omitted or as a measure of 3/4 with an extra flam tacked onto the end.

3

IR RrL LIR RrL rL LIR RrL LIR

### Additional Examples

Examples 4–8 show some additional possibilities.

4

IR LIR RrL rL RrL LIR

5

IR RrL LIR LIR RrL rL LIR RrL RrL LIR

6

IRLIRRrLLIRR rLRrLLIRRrLL

7

IR R RrL L L IR R RrL L L

8

IR R R LIR R R L rL L L RrL L L R

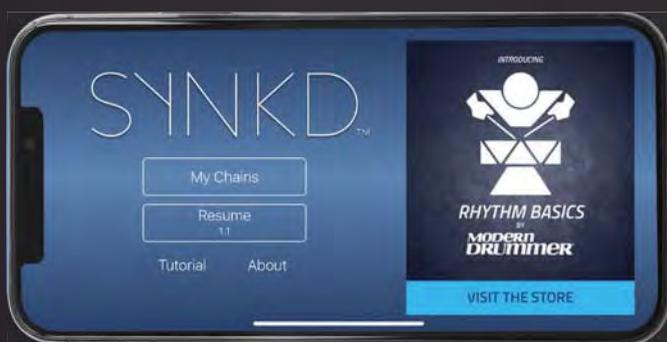
Exploring flam rudiments in this manner will lead you to discover interesting new phrases to apply to your playing. One orchestration idea to try is splitting the hands between different instruments on the kit, such as the hi-hat and snare. That position will inspire new grooves that have an extra layer of perceived complexity. To you, the hands will flow together as one cohesive pattern, but your audience will hear them more as separate voices speaking independently of one another. Have fun!



**Mike Alfieri** has a bachelor's degree in music education from the Crane School of Music and a master's degree in jazz studies from SUNY Purchase. For more information, visit [mikealfieri.net](http://mikealfieri.net).



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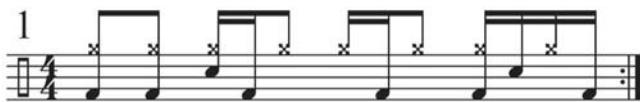
# Rhythmic Design with Your Eyes

## How to Discover New Ideas via Written Notation, Part 1

by Aaron Edgar

We've all felt stuck in a creative rut at one time or another. One of my favorite ways to break away from my usual playing habits is to take whatever I'm working on and write it down on paper. That process transfers the rhythms from more abstract physical sensations and sounds to static graphic representations. Breaking context in that way allows me to analyze the relationships of the notes from a different part of my brain. Once I do that, it's easier to rearrange and modify the patterns into new ideas.

Example 1 contains our source material: a simple, familiar groove. Feel free to use a favorite beat of your own if you prefer.



One of the easiest ways to shake things up is via displacement. Let's start with the bass drum. Leaving the hand pattern alone, shift the bass drum part in 16th-note increments. That will give you fifteen new versions of the original groove. The best way to do this is to write out the hand pattern sixteen times, and then write in each shifted bass drum rhythm underneath. The next two examples show a couple of the displacements that I liked best. Example 2 pulls the bass drum rhythm back by five 16th notes, and Example 3 pushes it forward by six.



Some of the displaced beats will sound awesome, while others will sound bad. It's useful to write out and play through the whole spectrum, though. When you learn to recognize what types of interactions connect with you from a visual standpoint, you'll develop a more intuitive feel for how to shake things up when you want to reimagine stale, familiar beats in more interesting and creative ways.

Let's look at one of the displaced versions of Example 1 that probably doesn't sound so great at first. The kick drum has been shifted so that it starts halfway through the measure.



Even with this choppy-sounding beat, all is not lost. Adding a kick note on beat 1 goes a long way to making it sound more musical.



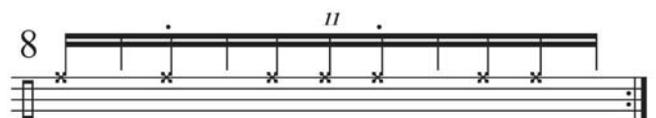
Modifications shouldn't be saved only for the variations that you don't immediately like. Even the patterns you enjoy can take on a life of their own when you add embellishments and dynamics. Example 6 modifies the ride cymbal pattern over Example 2 to better complement the new kick/snare pattern.

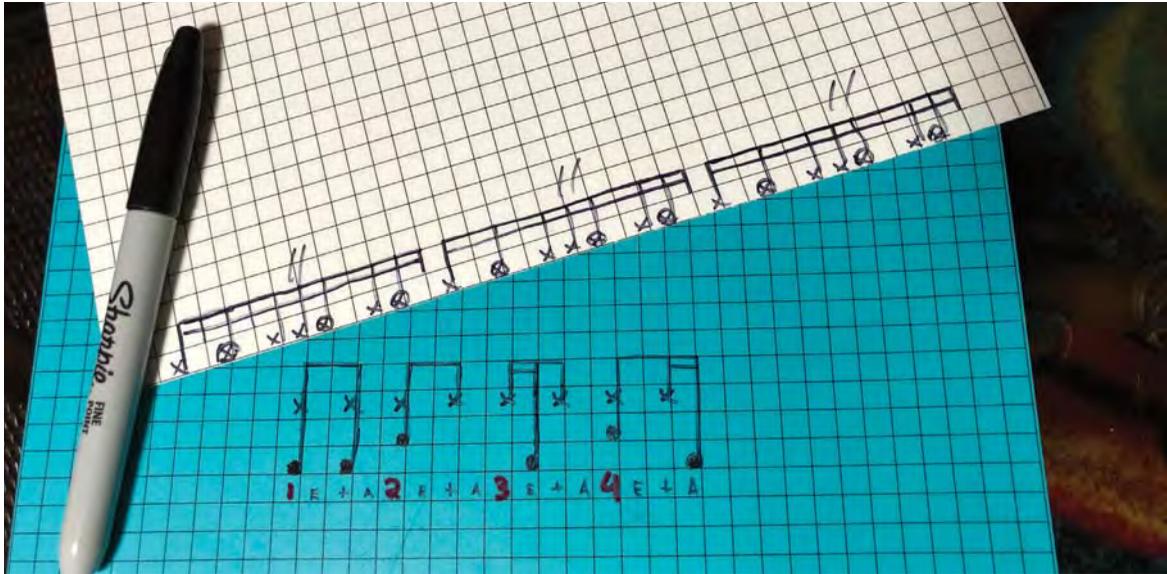


I've found that by going through this process of physically writing things down on paper, the new beats are partially learned before I even try them on the kit.

### Thinking Outside the Box

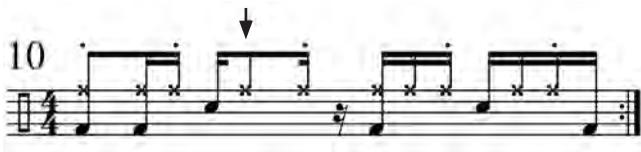
To really shake things up, you can explore rhythmic ideas in a modular fashion with graph paper. Start by notating a beat on graph paper so that each vertical line corresponds with one note of a chosen subdivision (for example, 16th notes). Then write a counter rhythm on a separate piece of graph paper. Having the counter rhythm on a separate sheet allows you to shift it from one subdivision to another beneath the original beat. This lets you see how rhythms interact quickly without having to write out each variation separately. We'll use this concept to explore how an eleven-note cymbal rhythm (Example 7) interacts with a funky kick and snare pattern (Example 8).





By sliding the eleven-note rhythm across the bar, you can see how the accents interact with the kicks, snares, and spaces of the primary beat. You'll find a lot of interesting rhythms this way.

Example 9 begins with both rhythms starting on beat 1. Examples 10–12 show a few displacements of the ride pattern. (The starting point of the eleven-note pattern is indicated with arrows.)



To kick things up further, experiment with two- or four-bar phrases so that you can see how the counter rhythms fit within longer timeframes. Next month we'll apply this visual approach to metric modulation.

**Aaron Edgar** plays with the Canadian prog-metal band Third Ion and is a session drummer, clinician, and author. His latest book, *Progressive Drumming Essentials*, is available through Modern Drummer Publications.



# On Preparation

## Being the Most Responsible Musician in the Room

by Andrew Marshall

One of the most oft-repeated pieces of advice professionals give to aspiring musicians is to prepare. Prepare for the audition, for the rehearsal, and for the gig. Practice your instrument daily so that you can be ready for any musical situation. But the advice usually ends there. How much preparation, exactly, is enough? How many hours should you practice? When do you know if you're really ready for an audition or a gig? I've found that the answers to these questions can be hard to pinpoint. It's sometimes difficult to predict what will be expected of you once you're in the room with an artist or a band.

One possible answer—and the mantra I've tried to live by—is “be the most prepared person in the room.” I've found myself in many gig situations where it seems that most of the band doesn't really know the forms, tempos, and endings. They're “hearing” their way through songs, guessing at transitions, and listening intently for the drummer to help them through the ending.

Ironically, oftentimes the more highly skilled a musician is, the more they believe they can just rely on their ears to get them through music in rehearsal or on a gig. And that may be true in some situations, and more true for some instruments than others. Indeed, drummers often do need to be the most prepared person in the room. It's up to us to drive the bus, so to speak—to count off songs at the right tempo, to shepherd the band through clear endings, and to dictate song structures with clear fills and groove changes.

I was once called for a gig where I met the band in the morning, ran the set once, and that night played a concert that was

**“Rehearsal time is precious, and technological puzzles can derail an entire day. Trying to figure out why MIDI devices aren't communicating with each other while the artist is in the room is not a situation you want to be in.”**

videotaped. My preparation had to be rock-solid—there was no room for error. Sometimes running the set once is a luxury—indeed, there are many stories of subs being called in to arena pop tours at the last minute, maybe getting a two- or three-song soundcheck, and then playing the show in front of 20,000 people that night. In touring situations like this, there just isn't time to get the entire band and crew into a rehearsal room so that one musician can rehearse the set, especially if a tour is underway. That musician just has to show up and nail it.

So what does true preparation entail in the real world? The first thing I do with any new artist I work with is learn as much as I can about them. What's their vibe? If you're replacing someone, how



did that person play? Did the artist like their style—or not? Who are the artist's influences? Finding the answers to these questions will help you choose an approach to the gig. Some artists want to hear exactly what's on the record, some artists want the band to get creative and come up with new live arrangements, and some artists fall somewhere in between. The more you can find out ahead of time, the better.

When it comes to the music itself, true preparation is knowing it inside and out. When the artist or bandleader calls a song, you should be able to sing the melody immediately without a second thought. Don't be the one caught saying, “How does that one go again?” when a new song is called in rehearsal or on a gig. By that point, it's too late. You're out of the moment and in your head, thinking about how the song goes instead of just playing music.

Really knowing a song goes beyond its two or three grooves, or the four chords in the chorus and the four chords in the verse. It's knowing the melody, the tempo, how long the sections are, if there are extra bars anywhere, if there are any special hits or breaks, which sections (if any) are open to improvisation, and how it begins and ends.

In pop situations, the beats can be extremely specific. You often need to know fills note-for-note, kick drum patterns, and hi-hat licks. I learned this the hard way, by having artists tell me to go home and review kick drum patterns that I hadn't thought were important. By the time you're in rehearsal, the gig might be the next day or a few days away, and you've used up all your shedding time. You don't want to get home from a ten-hour rehearsal and

have to stuff a bunch of kick drum patterns or fills into your head when you need to be fresh for another rehearsal the next day. It's always best to have those things worked out beforehand. If you're asking yourself, "Will I need to know this?" the answer is usually yes.

When rehearsing a pop show, you're expected to remember any new information about changes to grooves, forms, and patterns—quickly. Sometimes an arrangement changes completely in rehearsal and what you were playing on the acoustic drums before becomes a bunch of extremely specific samples, or vice-versa. This happens in situations without electronics too, of course. These types of changes become extremely hard to retain if you're unsure about basics like song structure. Good preparation frees up the mental space to execute new musical developments until they become second nature.

For me, writing charts is the best way to learn music inside and out. I write out the form, any specific grooves, and any breaks or hits. Then I'll put the recording of the song into my DAW and loop the intro and first verse while I play them with the chart. I add sections until I'm playing the whole song with the chart. Finally, I turn the chart over and play through the song without it until I can play it without thinking about the form. This is a systematic way to make sure you're not missing anything and that you're not just relying on your ears to guide you.

This type of preparation has become even more paramount to me in recent years in electronic situations, where it can take many hours to make sure all the technology is in order. If I'm playing with an artist who wants to hear a lot of the sounds that are on the record sampled and played live, a lot of that work has to be done ahead of time.

Rehearsal time is precious, and technological puzzles can derail an entire day. Trying to figure out why MIDI devices aren't communicating with each other while the artist is in the room is *not* a situation you want to be in! If you're dealing with drum modules, pads, MIDI, and/or computers, iron out as many of the technological kinks as you can at home. When you come into rehearsal and plug in all the cables, it's best to not have to spend hours troubleshooting. Granted, problems with technology are often unavoidable, and it's always a good idea to budget extra rehearsal time in these types of situations for any issues that may arise. Some things are just out of your control—all the more reason to take care of the things that aren't.

In short, preparation is the mark of a true professional. It's often the difference between getting called back and looking for a new gig, and matters just as much as (and sometimes even more than) how well you play. Doing your homework will communicate to the artist and band that you're dedicated to executing the music at as high a level as you can and that you value their music and your place in it. Ultimately, it will result in more successful and honest art, because it will allow you to bring emotion to the music instead of

staying trapped in thought about what section is coming next. When you walk out on the stage, all sorts of variables and challenges can arise that you didn't anticipate. The music shouldn't be one of them. If you're nailing the songs, the rest will fall into place.

**Andrew Marshall is on tour with Billie Eilish. He was featured in the September 2019 issue of *Modern Drummer*.**



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[mairdrums.com](http://mairdrums.com)

## Bitmi

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[bitmishop.com](http://bitmishop.com)



## TRX Cymbals

### CRX Deacon Packs

Deacon cymbal packs are developed for church music programs and are available in Classic (dark) and Xtreme (bright) series. The Old Testament pack includes 14" hi-hats, a 21" ride, and an 18" crash with bag. List price is \$499.99. The New Testament pack includes a 10" splash, a 14" stacker, and a 16" crash. List price is \$199.99.

[trxcymbals.com](http://trxcymbals.com)



### Future Sonic In-Ear Monitors

These monitors offer three fitting options and feature a 13 mm voice coil, a dynamic transducer, TrueTimbre response, 32 ohm impedance, and proprietary armature and crossover-free technology. A 50" standard cable and a waterproof clear case are included.

[futuresonics.com](http://futuresonics.com)



## Slug Percussion Triad Pad

The Triad Pad is said to provide maximum protection from beater damage and to increase beater punch while diminishing high frequencies. The patented vented design features a felt Duro-Disk impact pad mounted on a triangular .01"-thick polycarbonate film badge with permanent adhesive backing. The Triad Pad provides a punchy and deep bass drum tone and can be paired for double pedal setups. List price is \$14.95.

[slugdrums.com](http://slugdrums.com)



## Zebra Drums Thread Locks

Thread Locks prevent the loosening of tension rods and eliminate metal-to-metal contact between the hoop and tension rod to facilitate smooth tuning. Thread Locks are simple to install and have a low-profile, discreet look.

[zebradrums.com](http://zebradrums.com)

## Soundbrenner Core Smart Music Tool

This four-in-one device is available in lightweight polycarbonate or stainless steel models. It can be worn as a watch or positioned on the chest, leg, and upper arm. Features include a 7G ERM vibration motor, dual OLED display, capacitive touch sensor, and controls to customize tempo, time signature, subdivision, and accents. The magnetic twist tuner attaches to any steel parts, and an internal microphone picks up surrounding sound to display decibel levels. The Core can receive push notifications, including text messages and incoming calls, when connected to a smartphone.

[soundbrenner.com](http://soundbrenner.com)





## Schagerl Drums Antares Snare

The Antares snare, available in 5x14, 6.5x14, and 8x14 sizes, features ten solid-brass tube lugs and a .7 mm brass shell with 2.3 mm triple-flange brass, black nickel, or chrome-over-steel hoops. The Trick multistep strainer allows for precise tension adjustments, and the shell is undersized at the top and the bottom to create a timpani effect. The drums are available in raw, raw lacquered, dark vintage, and custom dark finishes.

[drums.schagerl.com](http://drums.schagerl.com)



## Simmons SD1200 Electronic Drumkit

This mesh-head set includes a 12" dual-zone snare, two 8" and one 10" dual-zone toms, and a 6" kick. A 12" two-zone crash and a 14" triple-zone ride with a choke function are also included. A variable pedal controls the 12" dual-zone hi-hat, and an optional expansion kit allows users to add another dual-zone crash and floor tom. The sound module includes 764 sounds and has a large, full-color graphic LCD screen and Bluetooth MIDI and USB connections. Additional features include dual-layer, tension-adjustable mesh heads, and a hex rack with die-cast mounts.

[simmonsdrums.net](http://simmonsdrums.net)



## RETAILER PROFILE

# Hawthorne Drum Shop McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania

Of all the drum retailers we've profiled, Chris Hawthorne is the first proprietor to volunteer that his store is "kinda dirty." He's not inaccurate. Hawthorne's warehouse spot, located in a nondescript building just across the Ohio River from Pittsburgh, is a little grungy. But you're not visiting his by-appointment-only shop to eat off the concrete floor. You're going there to check out the dozens of vintage kits, snares, orphan drums, and cymbals he also has for sale online, where Hawthorne estimates he does about "99 percent" of his business. So while not a traditional drum retailer—no set hours, no signage, no storefront, no heads and sticks—Hawthorne has quickly become a respected vintage drum dealer in the few years he's been doing business, and we wanted to get his story.



**I was never really a gear guy.** I had the same kit for probably a decade. Then I put a thing on Facebook that I was looking for a Vistalite kit. I had a Tama Starclassic at the time. A guy responded that he had a black Vistalite kit. It was in really nice shape, we did a trade, and that was kind of it for me. It was a different type of playing and a different type of vibe playing that instrument as opposed to what I had before. From there, I traded [the Vistalites] for something else, bought this...bought that...then all of a sudden I have all these drums. That's how it started. It was an accident, to be honest.

**I got married and we were living on the top floor of an old Victorian house some friends owned.** They let me have a room in their basement, and that was like the beginning of my shop. Kept all my drums down there, worked on them down there. I was working a job at a local non-profit. It was a good job; I liked it. But I thought it

would be really cool if I could somehow support myself selling drums. I didn't really have a plan aside from getting out of student loan debt. And a couple of years ago, I found myself in a position where I had enough inventory and low enough bills that I could quit my job and start doing it.

**A question I get a lot is "Where do you find everything?"** I find it where everyone else does: Craigslist, places like that. There's really no secret. Occasionally people reach out and say, "Hey, I'm looking to sell this..." which is really nice, because it makes it a lot easier on me. Yesterday I drove a couple hours down to Altoona to scope out a kit. Later on today I've got to go to Akron. That's about two hours each way. I've driven as far as Scranton a couple of times; that's about five and a half hours away.

There have been a couple times where I've driven a few hours



**Owner/operator Chris Hawthorne adheres to a business model of simplicity.** "I've always been a person that likes simple things," he explains. "Come see what I have. I can answer all your questions. You can sit behind the kit and play. It's a very simple business model." Hawthorne does, however, estimate that more than half of his customers are European. "They buy online. They don't have a lot of vintage American drums over there."



**“There are times when I’m overwhelmed with all the stuff I have to clean up and get out,” Chris Hawthorne says. “But I’m all caught up now. I joke with friends in the business that when you get bored you buy more stuff to have something to work on.”**

### Shopper’s Tip

“The number-one thing you want to figure out first is what you’re using the kit for. What venues are you playing? What kind of footprint are you looking for? You may love the sound of a kit, but it could be too big for the places you’re playing. And if you’re touring, are you going out with a drum tech? Because a lot of the hardware on these older drums needs to be taken care of. It’s also important to know how much you care about looks. I have a couple of Pearl fiberglass kits. And they sound *incredible*. But they’re not flashy. So you want to figure out if you’re more into sound or into looks.”

for kits and just ended up leaving. It’s not very often. You have to make some assumptions. How does it look in pictures? Are there bottom heads on the kit? If there’s not, the shells might be out of round. There’s a lot of factors to take into consideration. After I’ve thought those things through, that’s when I decide whether something is worth the drive.

**You’ve got to know what to look for when buying drums.** You’ve got to know what market prices are. I’ve got to think about my margin, and what shipping is going to be. It can be an overwhelming thing for people. I have it figured out now down to a science. But there’s a lot of risk, spending \$1,500 for a kit. Sometimes that kit will sit for a year; sometimes it’ll sell in three hours. There’s a lot of factors that go into how to make a purchase worthwhile.

**I love projects and kits that need work.** Those are typically the things that you can make the most money on. It’s really fun for me to see something that comes in a mess, and then when it’s done it’s in

real nice shape and ready to play—it has new life. But that can kind of give me trouble sometimes. You get into a project and then you realize, *This is not worth what I paid for it.* Stuff that needs parts—I’ve got a ton of parts—or cleaning up, I can handle. If the bearing edges are shot, unless I get the kit really cheap, I try to avoid those types of drums.

**If I saw Pittsburgh as a place to do a classic retail shop for vintage, I’d probably do it.** The city doesn’t seem to have the type of customer base to support what I do here. Pittsburgh Drum Exchange is a few miles away. It’s a proper store with cymbals and heads and all that. So we already have that. Drum Factory Direct is in town. They have literally everything you could ever want. I’m not interested in selling a bunch of sticks and heads and all that. It’s just me. I clean all my drums and detail them. I pretty much run the operation from the bottom up. Hiring a bunch of people and working with customers—it’s not something I see as a viable option for me right now.

**Patrick Berkery**



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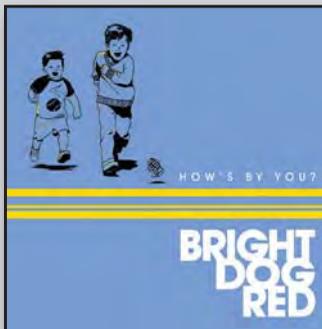
# CRITIQUE

## RECORDINGS

### Bright Dog Red *How's by You?*

**Jazz that draws on psychedelic, electronic soundscapes, improvised hip-hop, funk, and more.**

On their second album, the Albany, New York, collective Bright Dog Red presents a seamless blend of seemingly disparate influences, creating a post-modern melange that ranges from the familiar to the surprising. Cool bass and drums swing a groove that morphs into a lazy backbeat with an MC over the top, while trumpet



smears lead toward exploratory synth sounds. And that's just one song. It may sound like a lot, but throughout the album the group holds together and is consistently interesting with their thought-provoking, toe-tapping, boundary-defying music. Key to the group's inner workings and flow is drummer/manager **Joe Pignato**, who studied with the legendary Max Roach, among others. Displaying taste, groove, and sensitivity, Pignato provides an admirable foundation for this inspired music, adding drama, abstraction, and color when necessary. (Ropeadope)

**Martin Patmos**

### Leprous *Pitfalls*

**The sixth album by the Norwegian progressive band not only exhibits outside-the-box thinking, it questions the very definition of the box.**

The shifting moods and anguished lyrical themes of Leprous's latest studio entry stem from vocalist/keyboardist Einar Solberg's struggles with anxiety and depression. Such emotional depth and musical diversity demands rhythmic facility and articulation, and drummer **Baard Kolstad**, a former street musician and the 2012 winner of Roland V-Drums World Championship competition, is up to the task. Kolstad performs dance-y hi-hat-centric patterns in "I Lose Hope," commands various percussive textures via two snares in "Alleviate," whips the music into a fine frenzy on "At the Bottom" and "Distant Bells," powers through odd-time synth and guitar lines in "By My Throne," and performs with jaw-dropping flourishes on "Foreigner." Hardcore Leprous fans might be flummoxed by the lack of unmitigated metal here, but ultimately the combination of symphonic rock, electronica, Eastern modalities, pop balladry, and what seems like mathematically designed grooves delivers a satisfying payoff. (Inside Out) **Will Romano**





## TAKING THE REINS

### Gold Dime *My House*

**ANDRYA AMBRO's new album with her post-punk trio is the first tour de force of the drummer/vocalist's fifteen-year career.**

*My House* (Fire Talk) is deeply inhabited, strange, and clearly the result of sustained attention and inspiration. The album shares space with the '80s work of Sonic Youth, Laurie Anderson, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, but unlike some of those predecessors, Ambro's drums are presented without effects or processing. While each song has its own sonic blueprint, her toms (with a few exceptions) are tuned low with limited resonance, and her snare rattles like a dry gourd husk. The result is a driving rumble that dovetails seamlessly with Ian Douglas-Moore's bass and John Bohannon's guitar. Ambro's experience with African drumming inform her compositional process. We spoke to the drummer about the recording.



**MD:** You once said, "For me, singing and drumming are one and the same. The singing informs the drumming and vice versa."

**Andrya:** I studied West African music in my early twenties. I went to Ghana for a month and studied drumming along with taking private lessons in New York City. Within that specific West African drumming culture, all beats are taught with an accompanying song. I'm using the word "accompany," but the song is more integral to the beat than just a supported melody. This really opened things up for me. The voice is just another rhythmic appendage within the grander dance the rest of your limbs are

expressing.

**MD:** Were any concepts related to West African-style singing/drumming at play significantly in any particular songs on the new album?

**Andrya:** Consciously, no;

unconsciously, definitely. I start most songs with some swung rhythm, then I sing with it, and then the two intertwine. I did this with "Hindsight II," "La Isla de Vaso," "ABC Wendy," and "Boomerang," although "ABC Wendy," "La Isla," and "Boomerang" are more straight 16ths, less swung grooves.

**MD:** Tell me a bit more about the song "Hindsight II."

**Andrya:** Sonically I had the Velvet Underground's "Hey Mr. Rain" rattling around in my head. Regarding the drums, I wanted something simple. Perhaps I was channeling [VU drummer] Moe Tucker, but I wanted it to swing and drive a bit more.

**John Colpitts**

## MULTIMEDIA

### *The Buddy Rich Show* (2 DVDs)

**A welcome surprise among the glut of posthumous Buddy releases.**

In February of 1982, three pilot episodes of *The Buddy Rich Show* were taped in the hopes of launching a TV series. Like many an aspiring pilot, it was shelved and forgotten. Now released for the first time, these episodes capture Rich's fifteen-piece band blazing through choice arrangements from his repertoire.

What makes the videos exceptional are the band's team-ups with iconic guest artists: Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Mel Tormé, Lionel Hampton, Woody Herman, and Ray Charles. Highlights include tenor giant Getz's take on "The Dolphin" and Uncle Ray injecting a soulful flavor into the festivities. And intermittently, Buddy chats it up with his guests.

This is late-era Buddy, at age sixty-four, five years prior to his death. But he's swinging *hard*, attacking the kit with youthful defiance, spraying sweat all over his oyster pearl Ludwigs. There are ample Buddy spotlight moments, including his snare-punishing solo in "Dancing Men" and, of course, his astounding signature *West Side Story* solo feature.

Ultimately, the tapes are a testament to Buddy's tireless professionalism. Audiences were always guaranteed an electrifying set helmed by an ageless leader who gave his all. (\$35, DrumChannel) **Jeff Potter**



### *The Art of Phrasing on the Drumset Volume II: 4/4 Sixteenth Notes* by Alex Cid

**The author tackles the hidden engine of improvisational creativity: variation in phrasing.**

While speed and limb independence command more attention from young drummers, there is perhaps no single skill that enables players to embellish rhythms more than facility in phrasing. Operating under the assumption that musicians cannot deploy ideas in real time that they have not explored in practice, Cid fills this book with variations on 16th-note combinations in order to help learners diversify their fills, enhance their accentuation, and retain patterns that will allow them to improvise in a variety of musical situations.

Walking players first through basic 16th-note fills, gradually implementing flams and 32nd notes, and finally adding more complicated triplet, slur, and buzz-note exercises, *The Art of Phrasing on the Drumset Volume II* successfully spans a wide range of difficulty. While some drummers might balk at the notion of working through an entire book devoted to what essentially amounts to increasingly complicated exercises in phrase variation, this book holds a key for those drummers who feel they've plateaued in terms of expanding their musical vocabulary. (\$18.53, alex-cid.com. Price includes 46 downloadable audio files.) **Keaton Lamle**



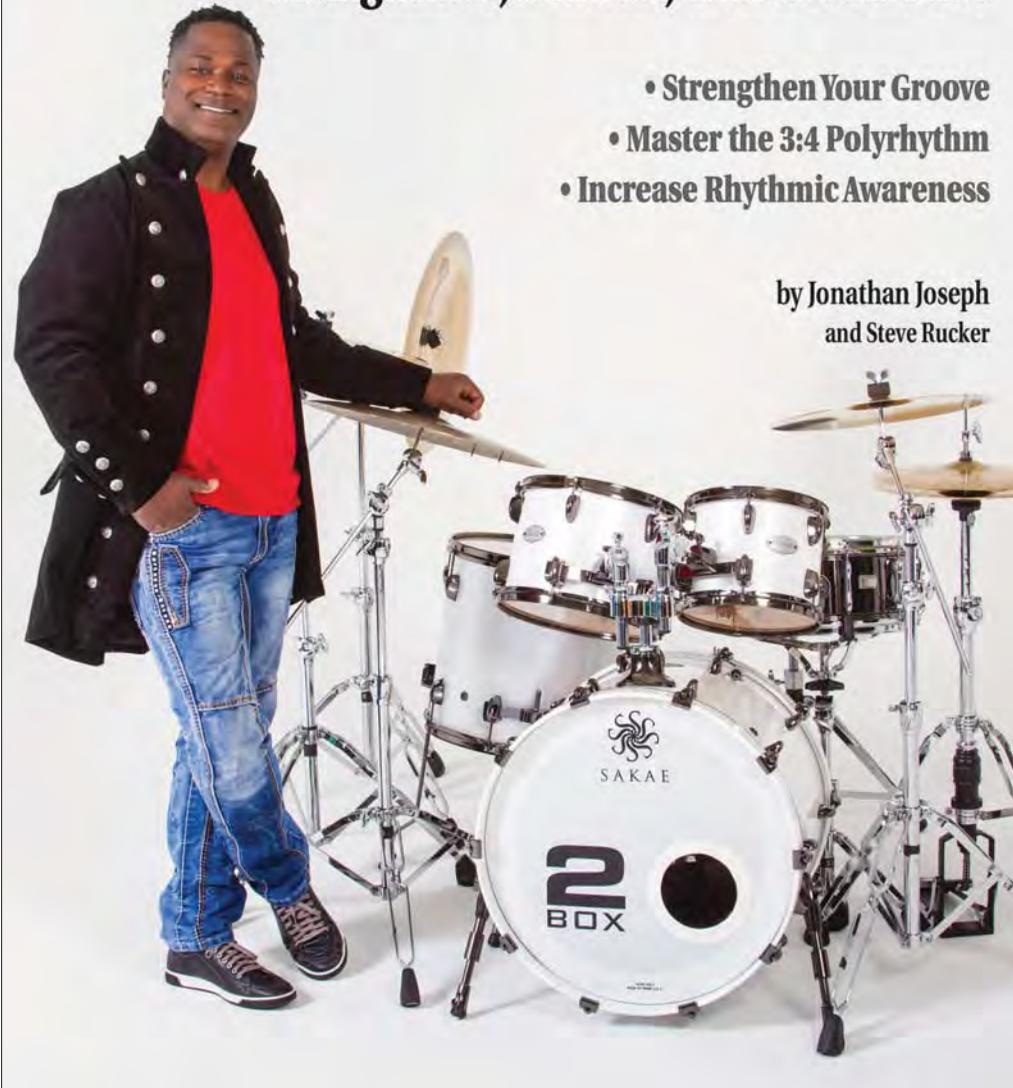
MODERNDRUMMER Presents:

# Exercises in African-American Funk

## Mangambe, Bikutsi, and the Shuffle

- Strengthen Your Groove
- Master the 3:4 Polyrhythm
- Increase Rhythmic Awareness

by Jonathan Joseph  
and Steve Rucker



### Chapter 4: Half-Time Shuffle-Funk

In this chapter, we move the backbone of the shuffle groove over to beat 5. What this does is transform the shuffle into a half-time, triplet-based funk groove, which we'll call "shuffle-funk." The Pacific shuffle, made famous by the legendary R&B drummer Bernard Purdie, is one version of this type of groove.

The first hand pattern contains no ghost notes. The grooves become more and more dense as we add ghost notes. As in the previous exercises, the ghost notes should be played extremely soft. The primary focus of the groove is on the bass drum and the backbeat.

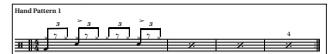
As mentioned before, it's very helpful in your practice to alternate between a simple groove and the more difficult exercises. For instance, you can switch between each line of the exercises and this traditional mangambe groove.



Although these exercises are written with six-note triplets for consistency, you might also conceptualize them as six-note triplets. That interpretation would put the backbeat on beats 2 and 4 of a bar of 4/4. So Hand Pattern 3 would look like the following.



As before, we'll start with a simple hand pattern and gradually add ghost notes. Practice the exercises between 70 and 120 bpm.



Here are some exercises that use Hand Pattern 1 with different bass drum variations.



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### Chapter 6: Bikutsi

In this chapter, we introduce the African rhythm known as bikutsi. Bikutsi is a musical genre from Cameroon that features the 3:4 polyrhythm. It has roots in the traditional music of the Baka people, who live around the city of Yaoundé, along with various elements of the pop-rock idiom.

The characteristic rhythm of the bikutsi is a grouping of triplets in a four-note pattern. Elements of this chapter are directly related to Chapters 1 and 2. If you aren't clear on the 3:4 polyrhythm, please review those chapters.



Here's an example of a bikutsi-pop drummer rhythm.



By moving the snare accent to beat 3, we can create a simple bikutsi shuffle-funk pattern.



Here's a shuffle-funk variation with the bass drum on the first beat only.



We can also open the hi-hat where the accents occur.



Here's the same variation with the bass drum on the first beat only.



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Written by renowned drummer Jonathan Joseph (Jeff Beck, Joss Stone, Richard Bona) and University of Miami director of drumset studies Steve Rucker, *Exercises in African-American Funk* is designed to introduce musicians who've studied jazz, R&B, rock, soul, and blues to a concept that applies West African rhythms to various genres.

The series of exercises contained in the book guide you through a fusion of African and American elements. On the American side, we have shuffle and shuffle-funk. On the African side, we have the rhythms from Cameroon known as mangambe and bikutsi. Mastering these exercises will strengthen your groove, provide you with an understanding of the three-against-four polyrhythm, give you an awareness of the second partial of the triplet, and introduce you to a fresh new way to hear and feel music.

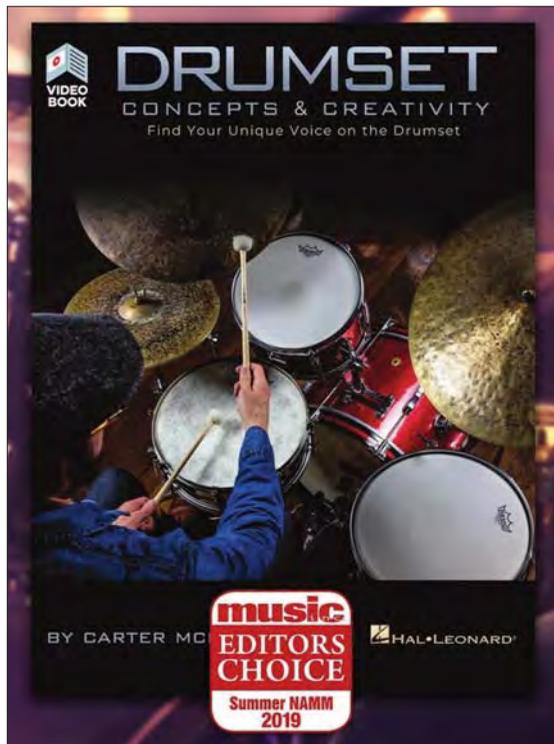
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# Carter McLean's *Drumset Concepts & Creativity*

The Broadway mainstay has written a method book that he refers to as a “multivitamin for your ears, hands, and concentration.” **Keith Carne, MD** contributor and drummer with the band We Are Scientists, finds an immediate place for the program in his own workouts, and speaks with the author for some background and guidance through it.

It was shedding the Rudimental Ritual that finally got me to hunker down and learn my rudiments. Well...almost. At that point I was already in college studying jazz music, and had been playing drums for some years. The Ritual—which was popularized by John Ramsay's book *The Drummer's Complete Vocabulary: As Taught by Alan Dawson*—sets the rudiments over a samba foot pattern. It falls somewhere between percussion piece and extended warm-up routine, and like all other pieces of quality drum literature, it got me excited to examine something I'd somehow glossed over.

That was fourteen years ago, and I've continued to use the Ritual as a starting point during extended practice sessions ever since. Yet I've never been able to memorize it. When it comes to rudimental study, I tend to get lost in the alphabet



soup of names and stickings; I don't remember much after paradiddles, doubles, flams, and rolls. (And isn't everything else just a combination of those fundamentals anyway?) So it's not surprising that when I play the Ritual, I wind up thinking more about how to actually play many of the combinations than dynamics, cleanliness, groove...*musical* considerations.

I never realized how much the strain of remembering rudiments got in the way of my musicality until I began working through *Drumset Concepts & Creativity*, a new book from Carter McLean. Like Mr. Ramsay's book, *Drumset Concepts & Creativity* centers on an expansive piece of drum music that gets the blood flowing and kickstarts rhythmic ideas across the drumkit. McLean calls his exercise the Kaleidoscope, and even though it can function as a warm-up, I hesitate to describe it that way.

After all, McLean admits that he doesn't find much use for that kind of drum music. "I've never really warmed up," McLean tells *Modern Drummer*. "I think because I play so much and I'm always working on stuff at home or teaching, my hands are always there...I'm never worried that they're not going to work."

He describes the Kaleidoscope as a "multivitamin for your ears, hands, and concentration." Essentially, it's an accent study that provides a process for playing and hearing phrase groupings over time and polyrhythms. Players begin by accenting every 16th note for two bars, then displace those accents one 16th note at a time: every second note (accenting downbeats, &'s), then every third (1, a, & of 2...), every fourth (every downbeat), and so on until you only accent every



8th stroke. After completing a full round of the accent phrases, you add foot patterns, beginning with quarter notes on the hi-hat and ending on a three-over-four pattern between the hi-hat and kick. After you can make that groove (and this exercise can *really* groove), you swap out different stickings. When you get all the way to the end, the exercise resets as 8th-note triplets.

McLean, a player with a deep pocket and startlingly clean articulation, is probably best known as the principal drummer for *The Lion King* on Broadway. He's been working a lot with acclaimed jazz/funk guitarist Charlie Hunter too, and on that gig he gets to explore musical ideas he can't work out on a rigid gig like a Broadway show.

No matter the musical context, McLean understands the importance of clarity in both playing and communication. This

## Study Suggestions

**It's not a warm-up, but it can be!** It's much more than a warm-up (and if you play it start to finish it's quite long). But it gets the blood flowing to your hands *and* feet (something many warm-up routines neglect), and playing accent phrases in five and seven gets you thinking about landing on lesser explored parts of beats and measures. In the phrasing video, McLean talks about breaking from conventions—not hitting a crash on 1 by default, for example—and the Kaleidoscope exercise is a perfect way to go through the possibilities in an organized way. Start your practice routine by playing through some of it, and you'll set a tone early that will help you consider where else a crash might go.

**The Kaleidoscope should groove and feel good.** Above all else. Don't move on from an accent grouping until you can hear the groove in it. This will make applying it to a musical context much more fluid.

**Try your own stickings.** McLean suggests taking the Kaleidoscope further by playing it with different stickings after you can make it feel good using alternating singles. He suggests using doubles and RLL. You can try out other sticking combinations, too. I applied paradiddles and RRL to the exercise and really liked those stickings, especially when spread across the kit.

**Use some of the simpler rudiments as stickings.** I may have just spent much of the review seemingly hating on rudimental study, but it is possible to find an expressive voice using them. Jo Jones

composed most of his solos this way, and they're incredible. But much in the same way that we don't use stock phrases from the 1950s in conversation (when was the last time you heard someone say "golly" or "gee-whiz" unironically?) we should update our vocabulary on the drums.

**Prioritize stickings.** Rather than making your way through the whole piece one sticking at a time, explore each accent grouping with all three stickings before moving on to the next.

**Replace the accents** on the snare with other textures (a tom or a cymbal) or other fundamentals (a flam or a buzz). Maybe even try replacing the snare accent with a rest, or a kick drum for a new foot component.

**Flip the feet.** McLean's exercise utilizes a three-over-four foot pattern, with the hi-hat playing quarters and the kick playing dotted eighths. Flip them around so that the kick outlines the four and the hi-hat outlines time in three.

The later part of the exercise sounds really cool when you play it very, very slowly. When you begin playing three-over-four with your feet, try to keep it flowing and feeling precise at 35 BPM.

"Being relaxed is always beneficial," says McLean. "Nothing good comes from anxiety. Be comfortable with making decisions, regardless of what people think, and stick with it. This is in music and in life. Sit down, state what you want to do very clearly, be able to back it up with a lot of proof, and you're in a good position."

is why he has become a respected educator in recent years. He describes his aesthetic on the drums as "honest," and it's easy to understand what he means when you hear him play. In his grooves you can hear the intention on every single drum simultaneously. When he plays phrases that stretch over barlines, they make musical sense, and it's usually easy to track the path that leads back to the downbeat. Musicality is inherent in his playing.

McLean's honesty extends to the way he describes his book as well. "I didn't want [the book] to be a bunch of weird exercises mashed together," he says. "The whole book is actually a very simple concept. Honestly, once you look at it and get it in your head, you don't even need the book anymore."

As someone who's spent about six weeks with the Kaleidoscope, I can vouch for that. (Though I was grateful to have the book as a visual guide for the first month, especially when the phrases get squirrely and extend over barlines and require lots of coordination.) This ability to forget about the printed material and allow the music to unfold logically is what makes the Kaleidoscope such a valuable educational tool. It's what separates *Drumset Concepts & Creativity* from other thoughtful, helpful pieces of drum music that also seek to bolster your coordination and musicality (like the Ritual). The process of working this exercise out doesn't cloud your consideration of music. It deepens it. After all, McLean believes musical consideration should be paramount, even if your focus in the practice room for the day is technical.

"It's *emotion* you're trying to convey, not technique," he maintains. "Once you start talking technique and stickings, the music side of things is gonzo—you're doing math. I'm always trying to keep music in the forefront. That's why the Kaleidoscope Exercise ends up grooving if you play it correctly."

"I don't think about rudiments; I think of things like phrases," McLean adds. "Whatever the sticking is to get the *music* out is what's happening. Ninety percent of the time you're either playing a single or a double anyway."

*Drumset Concepts & Creativity* comes with about three and a half hours of supplemental video material, most of which is taken from McLean's "Four Hands Drumming" web series. In them he unpacks big concepts like phrasing, practice, groove construction, and tuning, among others. He deals with these topics practically, dispensing knowledge that is both useful and immediately applicable without getting lost in technical or conceptual weeds (such as, don't mess too much with the tuning on your bottom head after it sounds pretty good).

McLean even leaves his musical flubs and stutters in the final product. He begins one segment with a disclaimer: "I haven't warmed up today. You guys are going to see me make mistakes..." and the fact that we do is pretty refreshing. It's yet another way that McLean is honest with us.

"I wanted [the videos] to be real," McLean says. "People make mistakes. I don't want it to be exactly perfect and quantized. That to me doesn't feel good. All those little variables are what make people sound like them. If you quantized Bonham, Gadd, and Jim Keltner, they'd sound like crap. It's all of that weird little lope kind of stuff they add to their playing that makes it cool."

"When I sit down I'm not trying to prove anything to anyone," McLean says. "I'm not trying to show off technique or that I can groove this way. I'm just sitting down and playing what I feel. I don't have anything preconceived. I really trust my gut."

*Drumset Concepts & Creativity* gives us an organized process for beginning that difficult work for ourselves, so we can learn to do the same.



# Steve Gorman's *Hard to Handle*

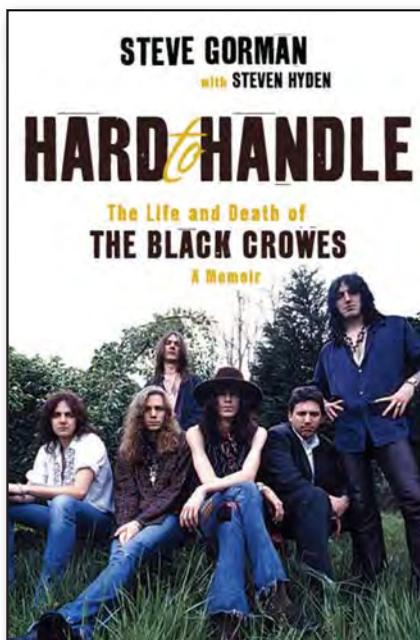
Just three of the Black Crowes' dozen-plus members lasted with the band from beginning to end, and two of them were brothers Chris and Rich Robinson. The third, drummer Steve Gorman, nearly didn't survive the sessions for the Crowes' 1990 debut, *Shake Your Money Maker*. As he details in his excellent deep dive into the band's dysfunction, *Hard to Handle: The Life and Death of the Black Crowes* (written with Steven Hyden), guitarist Rich Robinson wanted to replace him with a session drummer after just one day in the studio.

Cooler heads like producer George Drakoulias prevailed, and in fairly short order Gorman transformed himself from a guy who couldn't play to a click into the hard-grooving backbone of the band. As Gorman's drumming evolved, so did the Black Crowes. Just A/B the workmanlike swagger of *Moneymaker* to the disciplined, soulful pocket Gorman and the band achieved on 1992's *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*. It's sonic proof of what two years on the road can do.

"1990 was the year of the greatest growth any band could have," Gorman says about that rapid-fire evolution. "We made a record that was way better than we were, and then we hit the road, playing clubs, then arenas opening for Aerosmith, Robert Plant, and Heart. It got edited out of the book, but the significance of the Heart tour was that we figured out how to be a real good band in big rooms. We didn't even try to perform. We literally had open rehearsals for 45 minutes in arenas because their audience didn't care."

"By the time we were making *Southern Harmony* in December '91, there wasn't any conscious thought to 'We gotta make this groove.' If we were in a room together, we just sounded like that."

Driving the southern-fried band wasn't the only area in which Gorman was gaining expertise as the Crowes made their ascent. Navigating day-to-day life with the Robinson brothers, especially



singer Chris Robinson, helped Gorman become a master at compartmentalizing the highs and lows. There's one instance after another in *Hard to Handle* of Gorman employing that coping mechanism just to make it through a session, soundcheck, or bus trip. Without those compartmentalization skills, Gorman likely would've become one of the many casualties to pass through the Crowes' ranks.

"I look at it like I was literally tailor-made to be the guy that could handle being in this band for as long as I did," he says. "I had moments with Chris that were horrific and really disconcerting. And then a week later, we were in another city—you're always in another place—so it was like, 'Well, that was Hamburg. Now we're in London. It's okay now.' You do whatever you have to do to tell yourself it's okay to still be having fun here."

"Life in most bands, especially in the Black Crowes, is a constant set of choices. 'Do I fight this battle or not?' With the brothers,

everybody had to make those decisions around the clock. 'Am I going to add gas or water to this fire?' That's what every day in that band was. It doesn't take long before that's your normal. And then you get onstage and you have those great nights, and you get out of the studio and you're feeling good, and it's like, 'I can't get this feeling anywhere else.'"

While there's definitely less drama in Gorman's life these days, there's plenty to keep him occupied. In addition to the release of *Hard to Handle*, Gorman's post-Crowes band Trigger Hippy released its second album, *Full Circle & Then Some*, in October and will be touring into 2020. Gorman also recently launched a new syndicated weeknight classic rock radio show, *Steve Gorman Rocks*, which is being carried by more than two hundred stations. His move to rock radio follows a decade-long stint doing sports talk, including his *Steve Gorman Sports* show, which ran nationwide for nearly five years on the Fox Sports Radio network.

For a self-professed "lifelong sports idiot," the jump from drums to talking about the NFL and college basketball wasn't too big of a stretch. "I did a lot of radio for the Black Crowes," he says. "By the late '90s, when sports talk was taking off, I'd go do the rock station, and there'd be a sports station down the hall. And I'd always go, 'Can I sit in with them, too?' I'd usually get [in radio voice] 'A guy in a rock band thinks he knows about sports!' So I'd go sit in and they'd always be blown away. Whatever city I was in, I had a memory about a local team."

"The old show was *Steve Gorman Sports!* Now it's *Steve Gorman Rocks!* I guess my next show is *Steve Gorman Politics*. . . . maybe *Steve Gorman Home Repair!*" [laughs]

**Patrick Berkery**

**Gorman endorses Sugar Percussion drums, Paiste cymbals, Vic Firth drumsticks, and Evans heads.**



Trigger Hippy, from left: Nick Govrik, Amber Woodhouse, Ed Jurdi, Steve Gorman



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## Idles' Jon Beavis

While on a recent tour opening up for the scorching British punk band, A Place to Bury Strangers' **Lia Braswell** got to experience the awesome power of the drummer on a nightly basis. Here she reports that his energy is fed by his bandmates' sincere respect for one another, allegiance to their fans, and hunger for unexpected magical moments on the road.



Esmé Bones

If there's one thing that Brighton, England's Idles is renowned for, it's a commitment to community. The band takes pride in their reputation for bringing audience members onstage to dance with them, jumping into the crowd with their instruments (and in their underpants), and selling their own merch as soon as a show's ended.

The bandmembers have been doing anything but relaxing since their debut album, *Brutalism*, came out in 2017. For the past year and a half they've been on the road

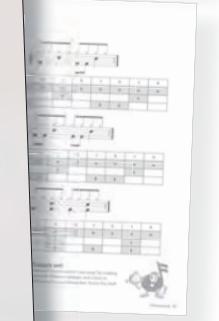
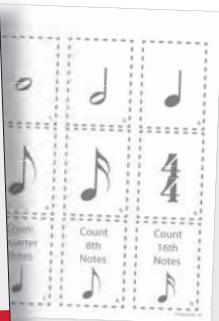
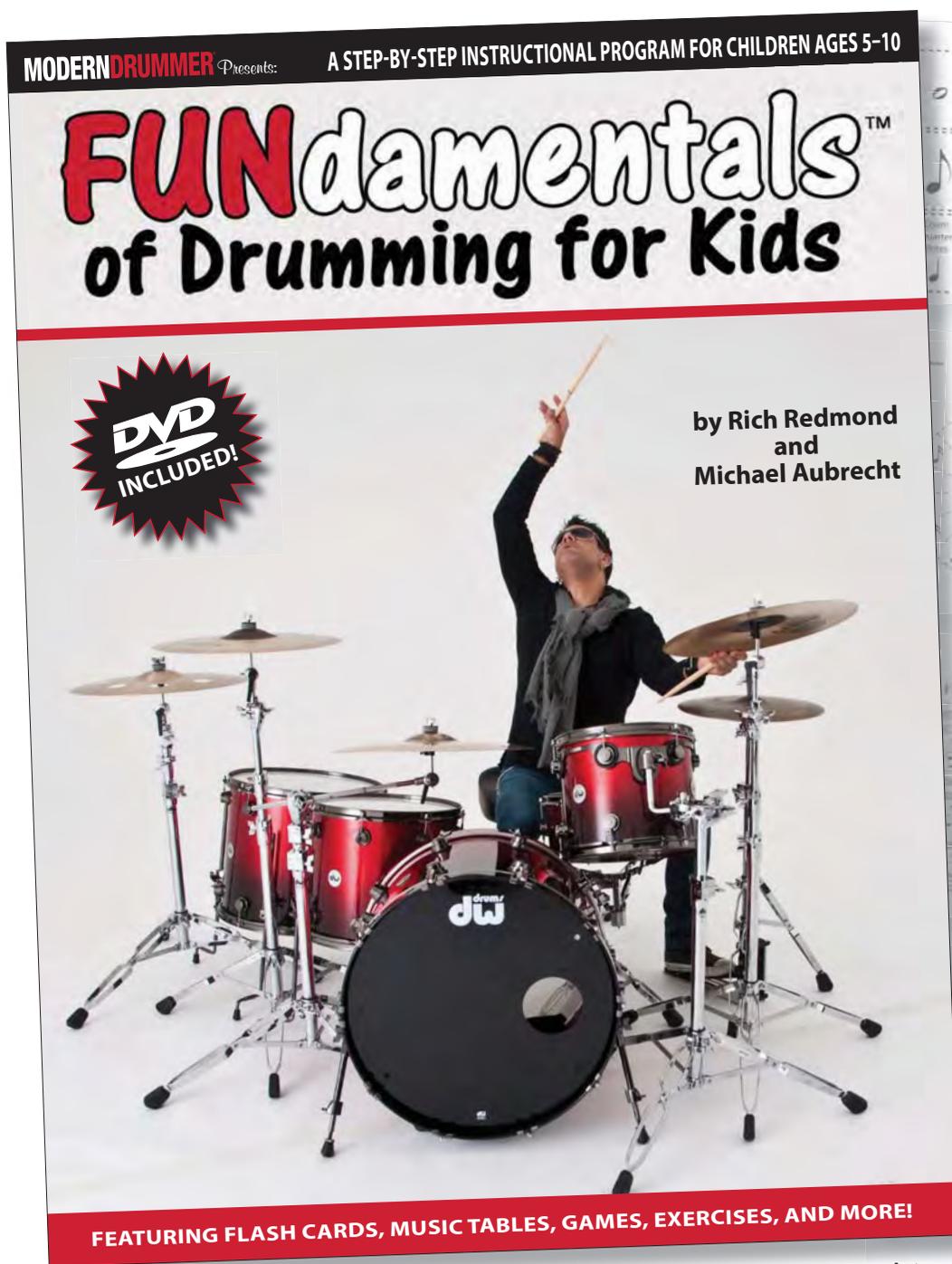
nonstop behind their sophomore album, *Joy as an Act of Resistance*, during which they found themselves either driving from city to city or squeezing in studio time on their days off. Now their third album, *A Beautiful Thing: Idles Live at Le Bataclan*, has just dropped, a raging document of a band in complete simpatico that gives credence to their insistence that keeping each other company around the world has been one of the most gratifying aspects of their career choice.

Jon Beavis has been playing with Idles

for eleven years now, providing some of the most riveting and idiosyncratic drum beats on the scene. Beavis's style and intensity are truly captivating—not even a venue in Brisbane in the middle of an Australian summer—without a working air conditioner—could stop him from bringing his full force to the show.

Between performances, when the band has the opportunity to wander around whatever city they're in, Beavis says that they make sure that their time is well spent,

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## Jon Beavis

whether getting drinks in Reykjavik (“Don’t buy alcohol there,” he advises, “because it’s crazy expensive”), trying out different deep-dish pizzas in Chicago, or going on a strictly ramen diet during their visit to Tokyo. One particularly memorable meal in Japan’s capital city was at a restaurant that clearly shared the band’s sense of community and civilized courtesy. “We had to knock on the first door to get in,” Beavis recalls, “then you have to crawl through an Alice in Wonderland–sized door where, again, you have to crawl on your hands and knees in order to get through to the restaurant. Then as soon as you get in, the whole restaurant cheers you and has a drink to every new person who walks in. Even when you’ve sat down and you’re having your meal, when someone walks in, you’re like, ‘Hey!’ and they’re like, ‘Hey!’”

Fans seem to feed off the band’s attitude. A handful of them attend as many shows as they can, keeping in touch with each other and reconnecting at various venues. One fan has made it to nearly every Idles show. “I don’t understand how he does it,” says Beavis, “but everyone in the crowd now knows him, and they all share their stories, which is great.”

There’s something admirable about musicians who not only share

their vulnerabilities with their fans but with one another. Being with the same people “nearly 80 percent of the year” is potentially exhausting, but Beavis insists that they’ve learned how to maintain a healthy amount of space, communication, *and* party time on tour. While Jon likes to spend their brief breaks taking short walks around the venue, he strives to have quality experiences with each of his bandmates. “There are five of us,” he says, “and we bounce in between people during the tours. That’s definitely helped. I’ll hang out with someone for the first week and then with a different person the next week. Everyone is very understanding of mental awareness. If you’re not feeling [like] yourself, before you even have a chance to say it, somebody will already ask if you’re feeling okay.”

This sense of commitment exists both on and off stage. Whether enduring a hectic schedule—like fitting four festival shows in two days, followed by an international flight to start another tour—resolving car troubles, or catching a few hours of sleep whenever possible, they never miss a gig. And according to Beavis, the mutual appreciation between band and audience was heightened when Idles played Glastonbury Festival last year. “I remember seeing people’s faces. They were reacting to music how I reacted to music when I was thirteen, when I didn’t think about what people would think of me. It was such a warm reaction. Grown men and women smiling—proper grin smiling—or they were having a little sob over a song. To just look out and see these people going, *I’m enjoying this, I’m going to let my emotions overcome me*, that’s such a nice thing.”



### Road Gear

Jon Beavis uses a Yamaha Live Custom Hybrid Oak kit, 6.5x14 Yamaha Recording Custom Aluminum and Ludwig Hammered Brass snare drums, a Yamaha FP9500 series bass drum pedal, Zildjian cymbals (14" Mastersound hi-hats, 18" and 20" K Dark Thin crashes, 21" K crash ride), Vater Extended Play 5B sticks, Gibraltar hardware, and Protection Racket cases.

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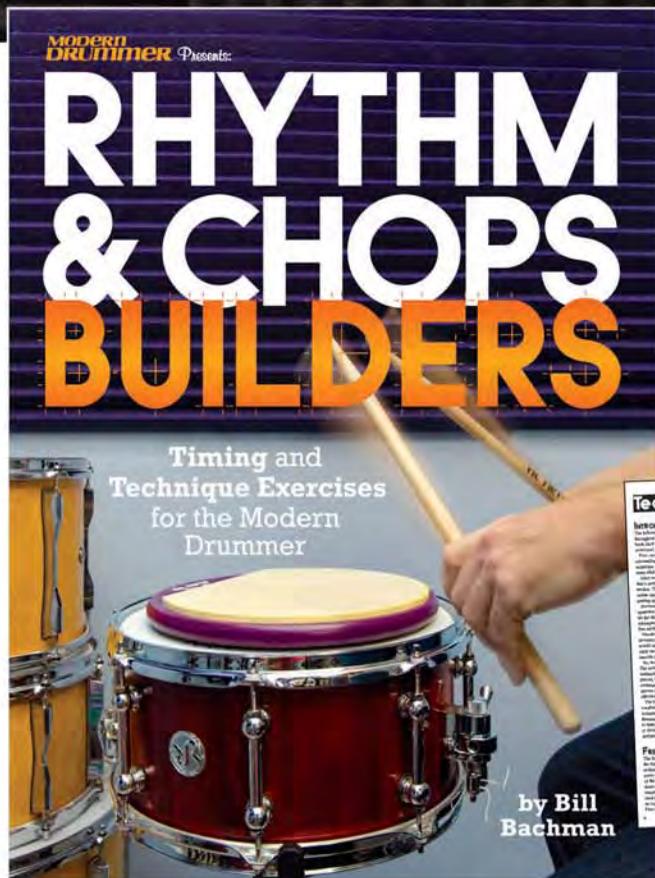
Ludwig

TAMA

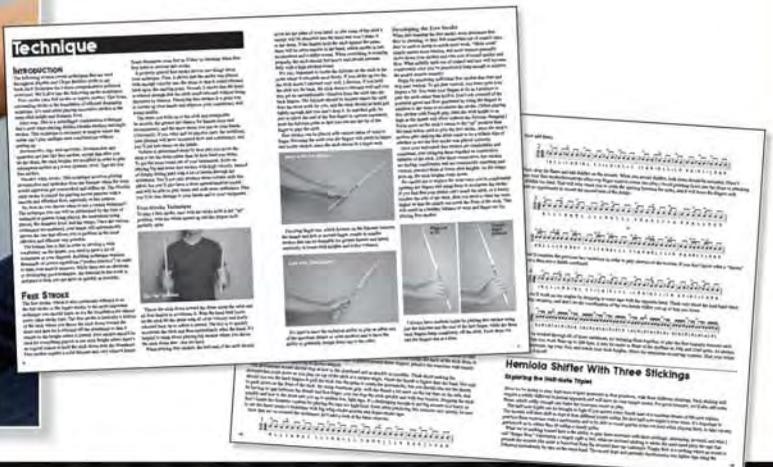
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# IN MEMORIAM

## Robin Tolleson

For forty years, the *MD* writer epitomized the role of drum journalist.

The drumming world lost one of its finest writers this past June 24, when Robin Tolleson passed away suddenly in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Tolleson, who had been a *Modern Drummer* scribe since 1979, suffered a heart attack while performing at the city's Downtown After Five concert.

Tolleson hailed from San Francisco, then moved to North Carolina at age eleven. That, according to his daughter, Millie, gave him unique perspective artistically speaking. "My dad always seemed torn between the two cities, and he used to talk about 1967's Summer of Love, the band shell at Golden Gate Park, and groups like the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin and Big Brother & the Holding Company, and Jimi Hendrix. But at the same time, he loved the serenity and beauty of North Carolina."

Tolleson's majoring in journalism in college was a key factor in developing his writing excellence. Actually, says Millie, "It was a second choice [after music school], which among those who knew him at the time signaled that he had a genuine flair for writing about music and musicians."

Some of Tolleson's more recent *MD* features include Ani DiFranco's Terence Higgins (May 2019) and his cover story on Anderson .Paak (August 2019). According to Millie, some of his personal favorite interviews included one with Tony Royster Jr. and the two he conducted with the late Ginger Baker.

Among Tolleson's strengths were his abilities to converse knowingly with players across the genre spectrum and relate to people of all dispositions. "Robin was a giver," offers his wife, Jocelyn. "He was the executive director of the Hendersonville Community Music Center, where he outreached to several institutions, including



Robin playing with Asheville-based band the Secret B-Sides at Orange Peel, Summer 2016. Below: Robin plays a festival in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1970s.

Stephen Houseworth



Jocelyn Tolleson

the Boys & Girls Club, and exposed young people to his love of music and those who played it, [kids] who otherwise would have little or no access to the performing arts."

"He was always listening to some kind of music," adds Robin's son, James. "Stylistically he was all over the map. Very often I had no idea who or what it was, but it was always good! An ongoing project, sadly still unfinished, was his 'Spinterview' series, which combined snippets of his favorite interviews with the artist's music.

"As a family man," James continues, "there was none better. When Millie and I were toddlers, he would constantly video and audiotape us. After his passing, the outpouring on Facebook really exemplified how much he impacted everyone. There was no better listener than him. His calmness and understanding were attributes exclusive to a very few nowadays. He truly respected not only artists, but people from all walks of life. In all, my dad loved what he did."

**Bob Girouard**



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## BACK THROUGH THE STACK

I think of myself still as a student. I'm still learning. We're all just beginners.

I really like that Lol Creme and Kevin Godley album *L*. The L stands for learner's permit in England. And that album is so far above what everybody else is doing, yet they're still learning. I really admire them.

For every set of goals achieved, new ones come along to replace them. [Coming up], after I would achieve one goal it would mean nothing. I think it's human nature not to be satisfied with what you were originally dreaming of. You've got to have something to replace it.

Neil Peart

*Modern Drummer*, April–May, 1980



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