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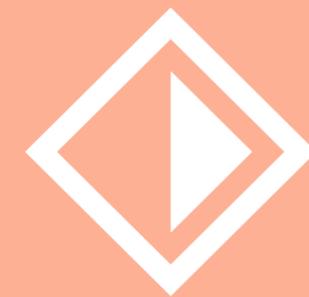
AN INDEPENDENT DRUM MAGAZINE

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Benny Greb

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MASTHEAD

ISSUE THIRTEEN, SUMMER 2016

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CELLAR DOOR

VOLUME FOUR, *ISSUE THIRTEEN*

♦♦♦



Over the years, it has been suggested that “cellar door” is one of the most satisfying phrases in the English language. Purely in terms of its sound, it rolls off the tongue. It’s easy on the ears. JRR Tolkien once called it the most beautiful combination of words language has to offer.

In a similar sense, a phrase I’ve recently found myself saying over and over is “Issue Thirteen.” Unfortunately, I’ve discovered it is not quite as pleasant to say as “cellar door.” It’s awkward and ungainly. The Drummer’s Journal has indeed become a teenager in a very stereotypical fashion.

Thirteen is a lucky number in Italy, but everywhere else it seems to represent the exact opposite. Musically speaking, the most striking significance of 13 seems to be the unwritten law among metal bands by which it becomes the default title of their 13th album.

I’m not really one for superstition. But as a magazine, I think we have begun to feel a bit uncomfortable in our adolescence. When I sit down to write these editorials, I often find myself feeling a bit fidgety because there is no single reason as to why the issue has ended up as it has. Instead it feels like a lot of different reasons.

Take Ralph Nader for example. It has taken us 12 issues before we profiled an individual who is a marching percussionist. That’s 84 articles, or, put another way, about 120,000 words all devoid of anything relating to drum line. When I realised this, I suddenly felt very narrow-minded.

I feel like each issue broadens our own horizon slightly, shedding light on a subject or person that I know little about. Even this issue’s more recognisable names – Josh Freese and Benny Greb - are fitting examples. My first impressions turned out to be radically different

to the ones which were left when the interviews were over. In both these cases, this was a very good thing.

Recently, I was flicking through an old iPod and came across a metal band I’d never heard of. I’ve no idea how they ended up on there, but the band was called Cellador. I remember thinking there was something nice about the band name but I wasn’t sure what it was. Now, I’ve only just realised.

Should they ever release their 13th album, I know exactly what they should call it.

Welcome to Volume Four, Issue Thirteen of The Drummer’s Journal.

Enjoy,
Tom



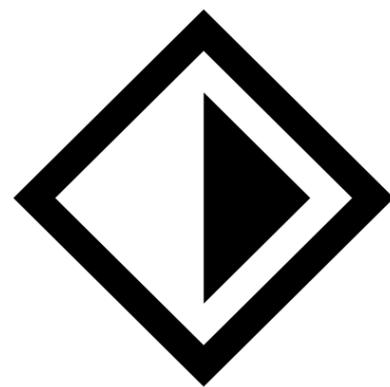
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LIVE
FOR LIVE
MUSIC

BYOS' RALPH NADER

Words & photography by Tom Hoare

IN STEP





In 2002, a movie called *Drumline* was unveiled to the world. It followed the story of a college kid undergoing the apparently tortuous process of trying to make it in his university's prestigious marching band.

Back then, the concept of marching percussion to my puny, adolescent brain was too much to conceive. I remember watching that film and having absolutely no clue what was happening. Culturally, the idea of drumline was so far removed from my own surroundings that I dismissed marching bands as one of those odd things that Americans like doing, along with the likes of canned cheese and the banjo. And I thought of it in that context for a long time.

Ralph Nader was the person who made me drastically reassess this standpoint. Along with fellow drummer Harvey Thompson, he founded performing arts duo BYOS [Bring Your Own Style] and has been flying the flag for contemporary marching percussion as an art form in its own right.

Ralph is an incredibly talented drummer. Remember when you tried to learn a basic stick trick and then gave up when you found out it's actually pretty difficult? Well Ralph was the guy who practised it about 1000 times and then never looked back. BYOS' appeal is rooted in combining the showmanship and creativity of show-style marching bands and the musical discipline of a drum and bugle corps.

Ralph is a pretty unassuming guy by most accounts. He's ceaselessly motivated, constantly grinning and ever optimistic. But his skill as a drummer probably makes him one of the most outrageously talented

people I've ever met. He was headhunted by Disney to lead out their daily Disneyland parade. Prior to that, he marched with The Blue Devils, one of the world's leading drum and bugle corps. Who better to finally dispel some misconceptions about marching percussion?

♦ ♦ ♦

The Drummer's Journal: I don't know a great deal about marching percussion. I hoped you'd be able to help with that.

Ralph Nader: Sure thing. What do you want to know?

Let's start with you. You're originally from Brooklyn?

That's right. I lived in a public housing project called Albany Houses. Everyone knew I was a drummer from day one. Like a lot of people, I just started banging on pots and pans as a toddler, and eventually I got a toy kit, then an actual drum set when I was five.

How did your neighbours feel about that?

[Laughs] In public housing, you have neighbours above, below and on every side, so the police were always getting called on me. My mom then enrolled me in the Jackie Robinson Steppers Marching Band.

The Steppers are a community band?

Right. It was an after school program and it kept me



out of trouble. I practised Monday through Friday and on the weekends we performed. It meant my mother didn't have to worry too much, especially as she was single parent out working and trying to make ends meet. But my mom knew that I took drumming very seriously. I spent about ten years in that marching band. Growing up, it was my livelihood.

How old were you when you joined?

It was super intimidating because it ranged from ages 7 to 18. As a seven year old, I was real nervous about that. Thankfully, I was welcomed with open arms. That's what sparked that interest in wanting to pursue rudimental drumming as a career.

How did you know it could be a career?

It came in little spurts really. When I was young, we'd do certain gigs that we'd get paid for, especially when I was a teenager. We featured in a movie called... [long pause] I've forgotten what it's called...

You were in a movie and you've forgotten which movie?

Yeah... I just can't remember [laughs]. It was about a princess in New York...

I can't believe I know this but was it Enchanted?

Yes! That was it. I can't believe I forgot that. I was also in another movie with The Steppers called Our Song. It was a pretty big movie. As an experience, that's what made it click that we were performers as well as musicians. Do you know who Russell Simmons is?

Russell Simmons?

He's a huge hip hop icon, a real mogul.

Did he co-found Def Jam Records with Rick Rubin?

That's him. He always had us performing at his house in The Hamptons for all these celebrities, and just seeing their response to our performances, I knew then that we had something good.

Did you work for ABC News at some point?

Yes, I did. I went to school at Hampton University in Virginia and I studied in broadcast production and journalism. After I graduated I was working at the local ABC News station as a production assistant. I was doing camera work, lights and teleprompter. It was great.

How did you end up getting headhunted to perform at Disney?

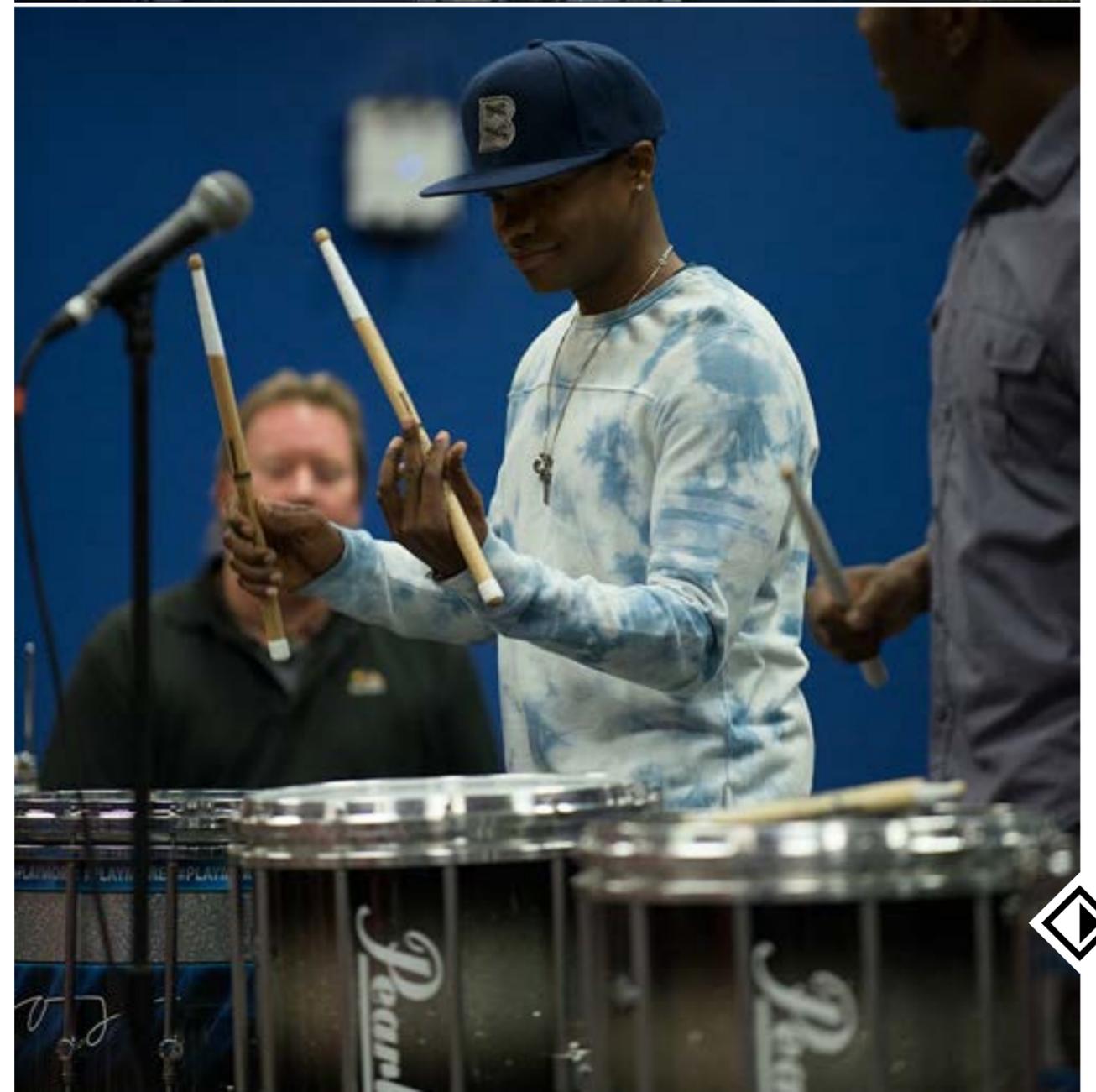
They emailed me. They said they'd seen my videos on YouTube and that they'd like to incorporate that type of drumming into their parades out in California.

Was it a difficult decision to leave that job at ABC?

Absolutely. It was a leap of faith more than anything. But the idea of being a performer was too tempting to pass up.

People might know you for BYOS. How did that project originate?

I'd always be making up these licks backstage and a friend asked me to write them out. I put a few on Facebook, and gradually people started following, and it began to slowly grow. It wasn't until my BYOS drumming partner, Harvey, who's the drum instructor at North Carolina A&T, got an opportunity to tour in Germany with the reggae band Seeed, and he asked if I was available to join. So Harvey and myself got



...
“JUST GO FOR IT.
DON'T LET PEOPLE
YOU DON'T KNOW
TALK YOU DOWN.”
...



PHOTO BY CARLOS GOETHE
RALPH WITH SEED, DORTMUND 2014



together and we were able to bust out 23 videos in 23 days, and that's what gave us our jump-start as performers in our own right.

Can I ask you a couple of things about working for Disney?

Sure.

When I saw the parade, everyone is smiling and having a great time. But as it's your job, do you ever have those days where you really don't want to smile for a bunch of people?

Well, music is influential. A certain tone of a song can really alter your feelings. And just to be in costume, in bright colours with these amazing drummers, it's kind of hard to go in with a bad mindset. But, sure, if something is bothering me before work, I try and leave my problems at the door. I'll just be like, "Alright, I'm at work, I'm performing in front of families with kids, why be upset about something?"

What exactly are 'show-style' marching bands?

There are variations but, generally, show-style bands perform during half-time at their college or high school football games. Their main purpose is to provide an entertaining experience for the crowd. Typically, they'll learn new music every week. It derived from the south and historical black colleges and universities.

How is that different to a drum and bugle corps?

Drum and bugle corps can spend three months polishing one show usually for a competition like the DCI [Drum Corps International].

The DCI is the governing body of drum and bugle corps?

DCI is an organisation, yeah.

And the DCI put on a competition in which all the top teams compete?

Right.

Is there a rivalry between drum corps and show-style bands?

In a really general sense, show-style people think drum corps is boring because they don't do anything except stand still and play. Drum corps think show-style are performing tricks to hide the fact they can't play well. BYOS was one way for me to bring these two things together. Musicianship and showmanship.

You marched with The Blue Devils which is a drum and bugle corps. They compete in the DCI right?

Correct. That whole experience really fine-tuned my playing. It's intense.

How do the competitive aspects of playing in that sort of band sit alongside the musical ones?

There are two different sides of competition I've learned from. One is like, "Ok, we're going to go to the parking lot and battle face to face." That's what I grew up with. But when you're on the football field in full marching uniform, no one knows who you are as an individual. You're part of a huge field production. You have to know your role and play everything as clean as possible. You are a team in this sense and you're getting judged on how well you perform.

How important is showmanship?

I think showmanship is a huge factor when it comes



♦♦♦
“NO MATTER WHO YOU
ARE OR WHERE YOU’RE
AT, YOU CAN BE A PART
OF SOMETHING AND BE
APPRECIATED BY OTHERS.
I’M NOT INTERESTED IN
DOWN TALKING ANYONE.
I ONLY WANT TO BUILD
PEOPLE UP.”
♦♦♦



to a performance. It adds an extra layer to what you're performing. It adds the cherry on top. You still want to execute what you're playing really well, but, at the same time, you need to keep your audience's eyes interested. Showmanship can grow you as a player. Sure, sometimes it can get too flashy, but as a performer it's important to still have fun.

Do you think that marching percussion gets the recognition it deserves?

I think it's starting to, and what really helped with that was the movie *Drumline*. A lot of people have their own reviews of it, but the one thing it did do was put sticks in kids' hands. They saw percussion in a movie theatre and thought, "This is actually cool." Also, anyone can do it. All you need is a pad and some sticks. You don't have to be part of any organisation or need specialist equipment.

Is there a stereotype around marching percussion?

It's starting to break that stereotype of being something a band geek does. It genuinely seems to be a bit cooler now.

Did you have a formal music training?

No, sir. I've just been doing marching percussion from the last 20 years. And through doing that I learned how to read and write music.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Focus on the fundamentals. When I was younger I was so eager to learn everything. I spent so much time on YouTube. Just focus on the basics at first: stick heights, interpretation and sound quality.

Have you experienced any negativity stemming from having a sizable online following?

If you're going to put yourself out there on a social platform, you cannot be afraid of criticism. Just go for it. Don't let people you don't know talk you down.

What were you hoping to achieve with BYOS?

With BYOS, it created a social platform that anyone, no matter who you are or where you're at, can be a part of something and be appreciated by others in the community. I'm not interested in down talking anyone. I only want to build people up.

What drives you to keep going?

You spend all these years learning how to play: middle school, high school, college and drum corps. Then, when you age out, what happens to all those skills you've learnt? Life takes over. You need a job. And that's why a lot of people quit. To me, that's like saying, "Ok, we're going to learn the alphabet but after school you'll need to stop using it." That's ridiculous. Why stop doing what you love? That's why I wanted to continue with my passion and it's only been beneficial.

♦♦♦

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“YOU SPEND ALL THESE YEARS
LEARNING HOW TO PLAY, THEN
WHAT HAPPENS TO ALL THOSE SKILLS
YOU'VE LEARNT? LIFE TAKES OVER.”

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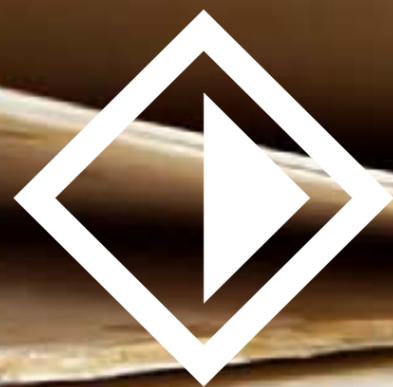


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JOSH FREESE

INSERT COIN

...

Words by Tom Hoare



As a kid, I once went to the United States on holiday with my parents. It's a trip that now exists as a series of fleeting and incoherent memories. I remember snapshots of being in New York and seeing the Statue of Liberty, the Chrysler Building and the Empire State. I can vaguely recall standing in front of The White House in Washington D.C., before attempting to climb on the Lincoln Memorial. I saw a rattlesnake in Texas. I remember being in a motel room - I've no idea where - and flicking back and forward between the Disney Channel and those Televangelist sermons where the pastors try and get people send them cash. Fantastical programming.

My most vivid memory, however, was none of these cultural and historic marvels, but a departure lounge at Dallas Fort Worth Airport.

Here my Dad bought me a copy of DRUM! Magazine. On the cover, there was a picture of Josh Freese wearing a putrid yellow and pink suit, holding a doughnut whilst grinning like a maniac. I had no idea who Josh Freese was but I was sure he was unhinged.

Two decades later, I'm sat in a diner in Long Beach, California. Across from me sits Josh. "This is a bit of a nostalgia trip," he smiles, looking around the cafe. "I used to come here 25 years ago before I got married and had kids. This is a famous place in Long Beach. It's been here forever."

Like Rob Lowe or Elijah Wood, Josh seems immune to ageing. He has the same blond hair

and perma-grin that he's sported on pretty much every magazine cover I've ever seen him on over the last two decades. Which is a lot.

Josh Freese is the music industry's answer to the Ghostbusters. Anytime someone needs a drummer, he is the person answering the phone. His talents can be heard on blockbuster movie scores, obscure seven inch punk singles, the albums of pop singers, cult bands, not so cult bands, outright musical abominations and some of the most iconic artists of the last 40 years. "There's a reason that, when I set myself up as a company, I called it 'Drum Escorts Ltd,'" Josh smirks, "and it's not because I'm escorting you by the hand."

◆◆◆



Our Drummer Is Sick

“It’s not like I woke up one day and said, ‘I’m going to be a session drummer.’ It just sort of happened. When I first started playing, I put on records and played along to them because, for me, that was way more interesting than playing rudiments on a pad. I left school in tenth grade. I remember really wanting to go to Berkley Music School but there was no way that was going to happen. When I was 16, I started getting the opportunity to make records and go on tour. Since then I never looked back.”

♦♦♦

“I MIGHT HATE THE
PRODUCER OR HATE THE
BAND - OR BOTH - BUT
THE MONEY IS GREAT SO
I’LL DO IT.”

♦♦♦

“Not even once?”

“Every once in a while I do still wonder, ‘Should I have gone to Berkley?’ Shit, maybe I’ll go there now.”

“I’m sure they’d have you as a faculty member.”

Josh snorts loudly. “I don’t think they’d be thrilled at that. But I wouldn’t trade all the things I learnt on the job as a youngster for anything. Hanging out with people twice my age, travelling the world and having to take care of myself. That’s a different sort of education.

“I often get asked about how I became a session drummer, but I had no plans other than wanting to play drums and being determined to make that happen. It started out with friends saying, ‘Our drummer is sick, can you come and record with us?’ It was all very informal.

“It never even registered to me that people thought of me as a session guy until one day, I was chatting with a friend who said, ‘Congratulations on coming second in the best studio drummer category of the Modern Drummer Readers Poll.’ It was only at that moment I thought, ‘Holy shit, am I a session drummer?’”

“How much work had you done by that point?”

“I’d gotten a small rep around LA as a good drummer and being easy to work with. I realised early on that people just want to be able to depend on you. I know people who are great drummers but they’re flaky and that’s why they don’t get hired.

“That said, you can’t just be a nice guy and expect that alone to get you work. A long time ago, I remember hearing someone say, ‘Josh Freese only gets hired because he has funny stories.’ And I’m like, ‘Maybe that’s one of the reasons, but you

can’t show up, tell a bunch of jokes and then just suck at playing the drums.’ If that was the case, people would just invite me out for a drink after the session.”

Y U No

In 1998, Josh joined Guns N’ Roses. At the time, the band were in a sort of no man’s land, attempting to record a new album in the midst of various lineup changes. Despite this, they remained one of the most commercially successful rock bands around.

“How old would that have made you when you joined Guns N’ Roses?”

“I was about 27.”

“For a 27 year old, that must have been a dream gig?”

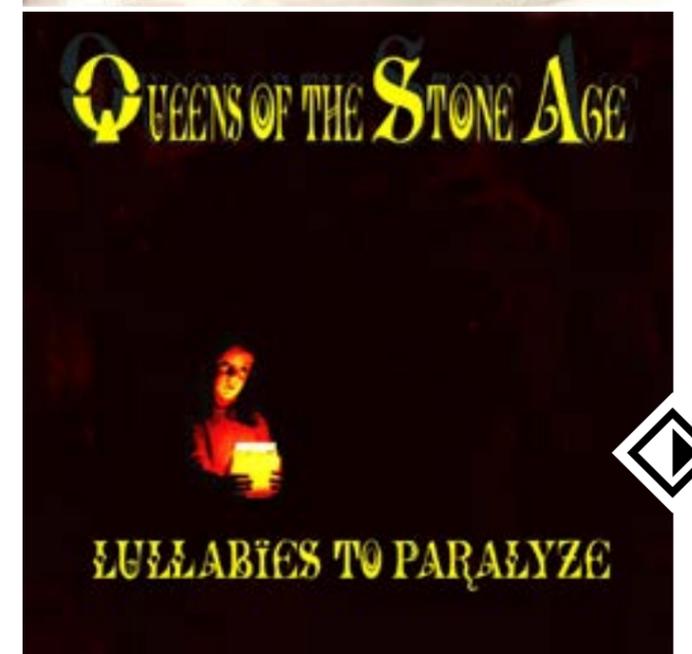
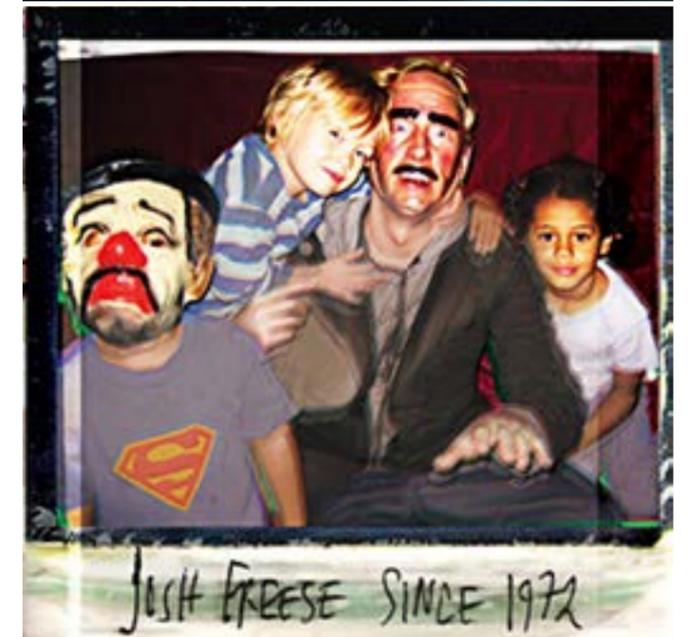
“Absolutely.”

“But it didn’t work out?”

“I had a two-year contract with them. I chose not to re-sign after those two years were up.”

“Was it out of the question that you could have put in a few years with them and then have retired at 35?”

“Technically, that wouldn’t have been out of the



question. But as to why I left..." Josh pauses as if he's selecting his next words carefully. "I always liked Axl [Rose] and we got on well. I spent a lot of time in the studio with them, but after two years of exactly that, I realised that's how things were likely going to continue.

"At the time, I was also doing lots of other projects. I'd made a Chris Cornell record, I was working with Devo and with The Vandals. In the meantime, I was starting what would become A Perfect Circle with Maynard [Keenan] from Tool. Guns N' Roses were so big it was intimidating. I was sceptical about that part of it. They were like this giant jumbo jet sat on the tarmac waiting to take off, but A Perfect Circle was this little sports car saying, 'Jump in and let's go!'

"That was preferable to the potentially enormous payday Guns N' Roses could have given you?"

"It wasn't like I was broke at the time. Yes, I wasn't a multi-millionaire like Axl, but I was still doing ok. It was more about gratification, and that's what A Perfect Circle offered." He pauses. "Put it like this, by the time A Perfect Circle had made a record, booked a tour and gotten a record deal, Guns N' Roses were still sat in the studio working on that same record.

"I got involved with them at a weird time when they were trying to figure out their next move. That said, if I'd reached the end of my contract and they'd immediately gone out on tour with a new record and come home filthy rich, yes, I would definitely have felt like I'd messed up. But

that's not how it happened. I certainly don't have any regrets about it. I actually saw Axl last week for the first time in 16 years. It was great to see him."

I had wondered why Josh, as a person who has done so many gigs, had never chosen just to play with one band. It's not like he hasn't had the opportunity to do just that because Guns N' Roses are far from the only example. I read Josh a heavily abridged list of popular bands and recording artists he's played for:

"The Offspring, Queens Of The Stone Age, Weezer, Sting, Devo, Bruce Springsteen, The Replacements, Katy Perry, Michael Bublé, Selena Gomez, Avril Lavigne, Miley Cyrus... Isn't the continuation of just one of these gigs is an entire career in its own right?"

Josh smiles like I have grossly misunderstood the very fabric of his existence and gestures to the waitress that he could use some more coffee.

"Let's say I did have one band that just made me tonnes of money, I'd probably want to do something else even if that was the case. Aside from having multiple sources of income, I like the variety of playing music with different people in different situations. Maybe if I was the drummer for Muse, I could say, 'Ok, I'm successful enough where I don't have to do anything else except concentrate on my band...'"

There's a lengthy pause. I await the final nail in the coffin which will close out this particular line of enquiry.

"Being in just one band," Josh says with a grin spreading across his face, "I honestly fantasise about that sometimes. I'm only human."

Everything In Between

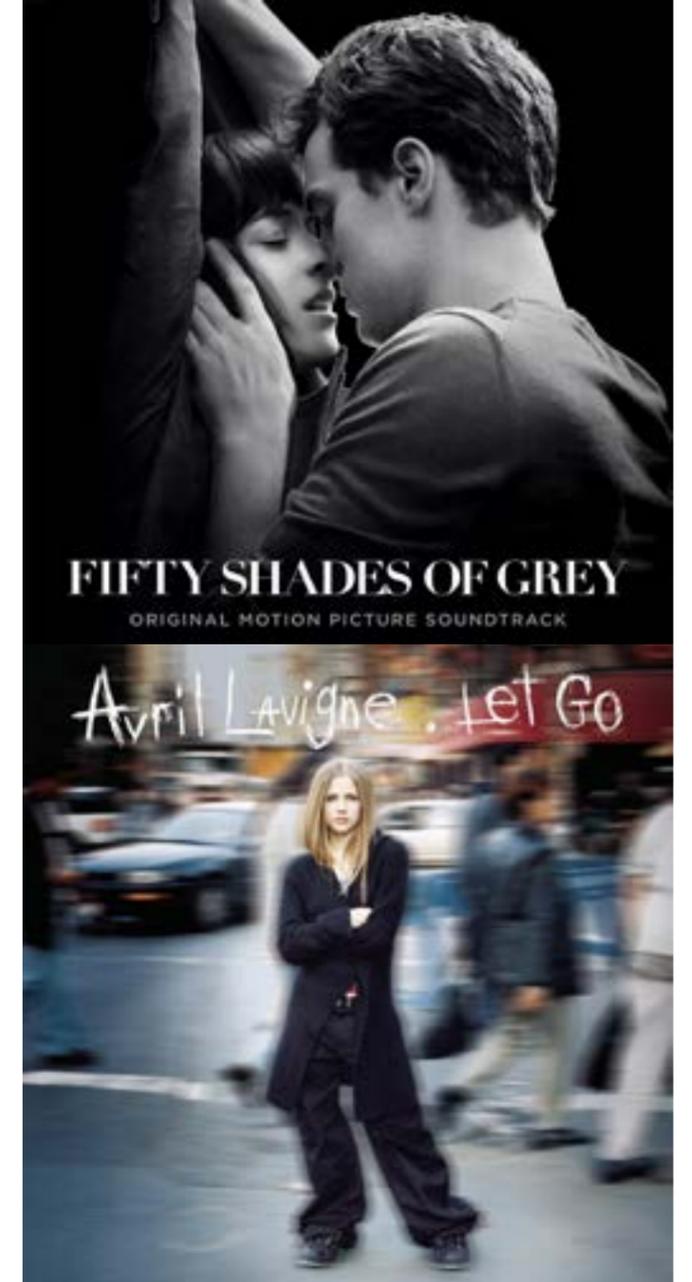
It's almost unfathomable just how many records and tours Josh has undertaken. What is also impressive is the variety of projects he's been involved with. Some are instantly recognisable. Others have never seen the light of day.

"How do you decide on whether to take a job?"

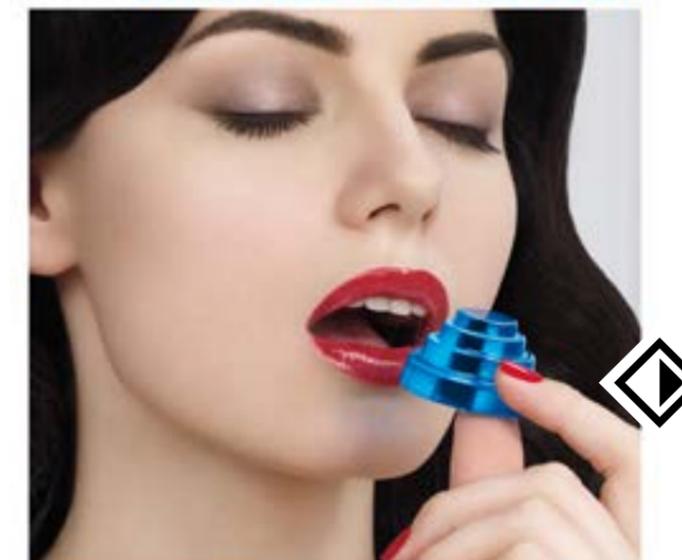
"I don't have this strict decision-making policy. I might hate the producer or hate the band - or both - but the money is great so I'll do it. If it's only a day of my time then why not? Do I want to go on the road for six weeks with some shitty band, playing the same songs over and over? No way, I'll go nuts. Knowing I get to leave at 10pm and never hear those songs again is brilliant. You guys get what you want, I get what I want, and we all go back to our lives."

"Artistic integrity isn't necessarily a pre-requisite?"

"With the recording side of it, I've worked with people I really admire and people I couldn't care less about where the music is horrible. And everything in between. I feel like I crossed the integrity line a long time ago. I don't only do cool indie projects. I've played on Disney records and for American Idol people. To me, that's part of the



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“I FEEL LIKE I WASN'T THE GUY
WHO WAS IN THE TRENCHES. I
WASN'T IN THE VAN, SCHLEPPING
GEAR AROUND AND DOING COKE
WITH DAVID BOWIE.”
◆◆◆



job and I'm lucky that I get to do it. I always tell people, especially younger drummers, even though I don't say yes to everything anymore, I used to. If someone calls you for a session where the music is questionable but it's only going to take a day of your life, just go down there and get the experience. I've got so many cool jobs by doing shitty sessions. Maybe the engineer that day is a guy that can hire you for a cool project he's doing next month. Only recently I was working at a studio in Hollywood recording drums for some film. The music wasn't interesting in the slightest. But when I was leaving, I ran into my friend Brendan O'Brien who has produced all the Pearl Jam records. He was with Brandon Boyd, the singer from Incubus. We've never worked together but we sort of knew each other so we got chatting. They said, 'We're here making a record together but we actually need a drummer. Want to play on a few tracks?' So I got a whole album's worth of work that will be really enjoyable off the back of something that wasn't."

"How did you go about setting a rate for sessions?"

"Like a lot of people, when you don't have any leverage, you have to start low and that's what I did. And if you keep doing well, you can start to up your rate."

"What I started doing when I was younger was charging people per song, because I could get stuff done pretty quick. I'm not rushing through like, 'Next song, next song!' But there are times when I've listened to a song two or three times, made a little chart, and got it pretty much first take. When that happens, I'm like, 'Are you sure?"

Let me do another take where I play ride cymbal in the chorus and I'll give you some more fill options.' I want the producer to feel like they're getting their money's worth!"

"When the recording industry stalled, what happened to your rate then?"

"For a long time, I should have been upping my rate as I built my reputation but I never did. When we reached the point when record budgets were shrinking, I just kept my rate the same. It means, by today's standards, I'm being paid well."

"Do people ever ask you to work for free and would you do it?"

"I still hear this all the time: 'Hey! We're doing a session but there's not a very big budget. Is that ok?' If it's a friend or a band I love then, sure, I'll do it. Otherwise, it's a no."

"I read that's it's your policy in the studio that it's right first take or it's free. Is that true?"

"That's funny. That's like some shit you see in McDonald's. But no, it's not true. That'd put a lot of pressure on me, especially in the studio. I'd lose a fortune." He laughs.

Yellow Boiler Suit

Many people know Josh for his work with Devo. In a certain light, Devo are a band that occupy

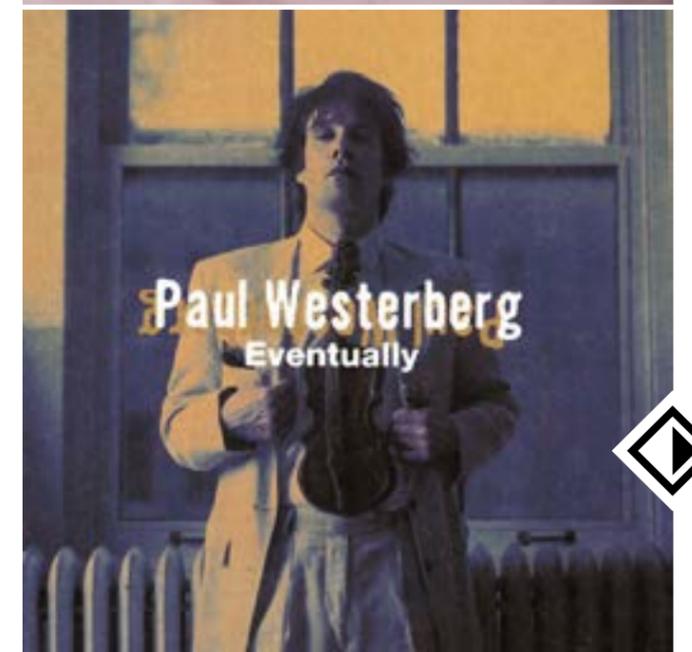
a unique place in the history of popular music because, at the risk of paraphrasing, they were fantastically weird. If you're not familiar, envision five white guys in yellow boiler suits wearing flowerpots on their heads playing discordant and often jarring music. A lot of their output was culturally scathing and satirical. The name Devo was taken from the idea that humanity itself has begun to devolve. Thanks to a recommendation from David Bowie and Iggy Pop, they secured a recording contract in 1976 and became a band with a devoted cult following. They are truly a great band.

Josh joined Devo in 1996 after the band reunited following a hiatus of a few years.

"When Devo first appeared on the scene, is it a fair estimation to say they were seen as a bizarre novelty act?"

"Yes. I think the cool people got it, the same way some people get a small time TV show when it first comes out. But the mass population were like, 'Wait - is this a joke?' The first time I saw them was on MTV, in suburban Orange County when I was eight. They were quite big by this point. I remember thinking, 'Are they actually a real band?' It was catchy and strange; they were like a cartoon. As I got older, I realised that these guys are dark, they're fucked up, really sarcastic and bitter. Then I really got the heaviness of their whole thing."

"They were one of the first bands that came out that no one knew how to classify. In high school



you would have gotten your ass kicked for liking Devo. The jocks were like, ‘What the fuck is this? Are they fucking gay? What’s wrong with those guys?’ They didn’t like it; it freaked them out because they had no idea what was going on. People in the music scene were like, ‘Well, they’re not exactly rock and roll, but it’s not punk.’

“Devo were a total misfit band. There was an element of giving everyone the finger, but lyrically, whilst everyone else is yelling about how they’re mad at the government, Devo were much more subtly subversive. They opened the door for a lot of other bands that people also didn’t know how to identify: Talking Heads, Blondie, The Ramones and the New York Dolls. No one knew what to call them.

“I’ve got to do a tonne of great stuff with Devo, but I feel like I wasn’t the guy who was in the trenches with them. I wasn’t in the van, schlepping gear around and doing coke with David Bowie. I wasn’t there for that. I came in and got to go, ‘Let’s play Lollapalooza!’ It’s funny. It’s the same with The Replacements who are one of my favourite bands. I’d never say, ‘I’m the drummer for The Replacements.’ I just say I work with them. It’s the same for Devo.”

Comment Thread

“As a drummer, do you feel like an artist?”

“Not really. I know some drummers wouldn’t be

too happy with me saying that. Even when people refer to singers as artists, I still feel a bit like, ‘Wait, he or she is a singer in a rock band, is that really an artist?’ David Bowie was an artist. I grew up thinking artists have to have an easel. But then I realised that the great thing about art is that it can be anything you want. One person could agree with you, another thinks it sucks, and that’s exactly what’s great about it. But as a drummer, do I feel like an artist? Not really.”

Josh still writes and records a lot of his own solo music. He talks it down and makes jokes about how no one ever buys it and that it’s just a labour of love. I’m not sure that’s strictly true, but I wondered how Josh felt about his own identity as a musician given that, in many instances, the only indication of his involvement in a project is his name in the liner notes.

People can spend their lives trying to carve out their own identity as a performer. Some people achieve it and some don’t. But when part of your job as a studio musician is to do exactly what is asked of you, is not having your own musical identity a plus?

I wouldn’t hesitate to class Josh as an artist. It takes an incredible level of skill and adaptability to do what he does. Prior to meeting Josh, I had no idea he’d played on a lot of records I listened to whilst growing up. In this sense, reading through his discography was quite a strange experience. I couldn’t decide whether not knowing Josh Freese played some of your favourite records is a compliment or potentially offensive. Somewhere

JOSH FREEZE, SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

PAGE 21

CHRIS CORNELL: EUPHORIA MORNING (1999)

JOSH FREESE: SINCE 1972 (2009)

QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE: LULLABIES TO PARALYZE (2005)

PAGE 22

FIFTY SHADES OF GREY SOUNDTRACK (2015)

AVRIL LAVIGNE: LET GO (2002)

DEVO: SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY (2010)

PREVIOUS PAGE

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: HIGH HOPES (2014)

KATY PERRY: TEENAGE DREAM (2010)

PAUL WESTERBERG (1996)

OPPOSITE

GUNS N’ ROSES: CHINESE DEMOCRACY (2008)

THE OFFSPRING: SPLINTER (2003)

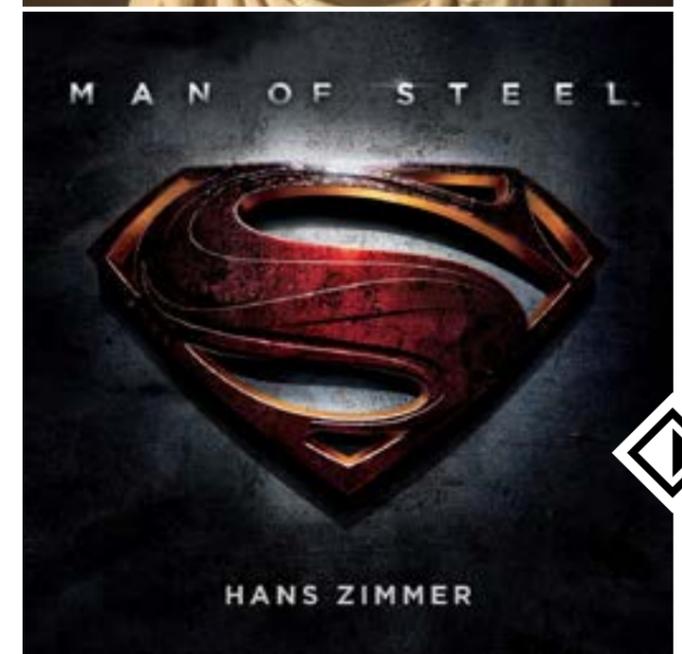
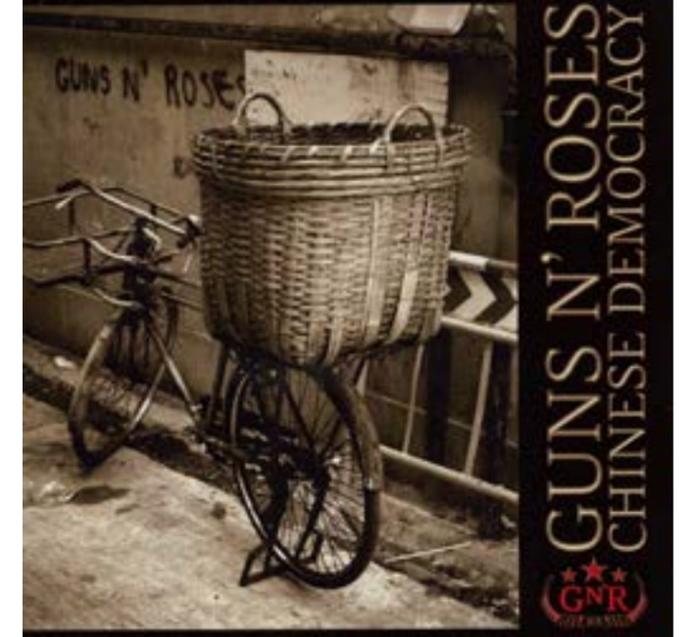
MAN OF STEEL SOUNDTRACK (2013)

NEXT PAGE

THE VANDALS: FEAR OF A PUNK PLANET (1990)

SOUTH PARK: CHEF AID (1998)

A PERFECT CIRCLE: MER DE NOMS (2000)



in the murky depths of a YouTube comment thread, I remember reading: “The impressive thing about Josh Freese is that you can listen to a record and not know it’s him.” I asked if he agreed.

♦♦♦

“I STILL FEEL LIKE I’VE GOT SOME INTEGRITY LEFT AND I’VE WORKED WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE NONE AT ALL. ZERO.”

♦♦♦

“My whole life I’ve gone back and forth between being really flattered by that, and then feeling weird about it. In one sense it’s the highest compliment. There’s something to be said about playing on a Katy Perry record; I’m not there to show off and make people say, ‘Check out how killer the drums are!’ I’m there to stay out of the way. I was working with a producer once who told me, ‘On this song, I don’t want anyone to even notice the drums.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah that’s fine, whatever you want.’

“But I’ll be honest. I get flattered whenever people say, ‘Oh, I heard this awesome song on the radio - is that you playing drums on that?’ And then even if I say that it isn’t me, they’re like, ‘Really?

Because it sounds like you.’ Sometimes I think, ‘Wow, do I have a sound?’ Even though they got it wrong, I still take that as a huge compliment. I’ve had people say to me, ‘Josh, I heard this drummer the other night who was totally ripping you off.’ And I take that as a compliment too. In those situations, I feel like, ‘Thanks for thinking I have a sound because that’s what’s hard to achieve.’”

“In that respect, how have you measured your own success?”

“When I’m working with Sting, and I’m out at his 1000 acre estate, that’s something I could never have achieved for myself really. He wrote some of the greatest songs of the last 40 years. It’s hard to go, ‘Maybe I could do that too.’ For me, my success is the fact that I grew up worshipping Devo and The Replacements, and dreaming of being in those bands one day. And I’ve played drums with both of them for years now. The singers of those bands, I remember meeting backstage for the first time and being scared to death and now they call me just like any of my other friends do. I’ve been made a few offers to join bands that have gone on to make tonnes of money and it honestly doesn’t bother me because I make a comfortable living doing what I do and I’m happy. If I was worried about rent or unable to pay medical bills then maybe I’d be like, ‘Why didn’t I join Blink-182 when they asked me?’ Or, ‘Why didn’t I join the Foo Fighters?’ Fuck it, it wasn’t supposed to happen.

“I still feel like I’ve got some integrity left and I’ve worked with a lot of people who have none

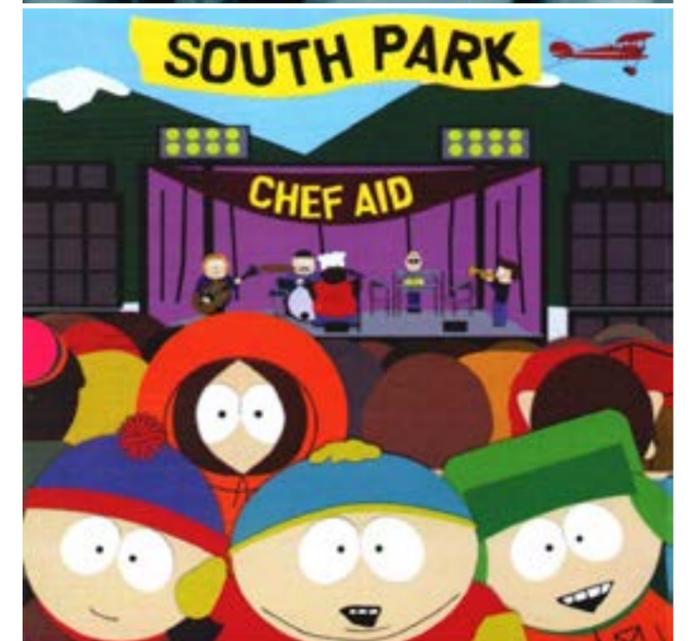
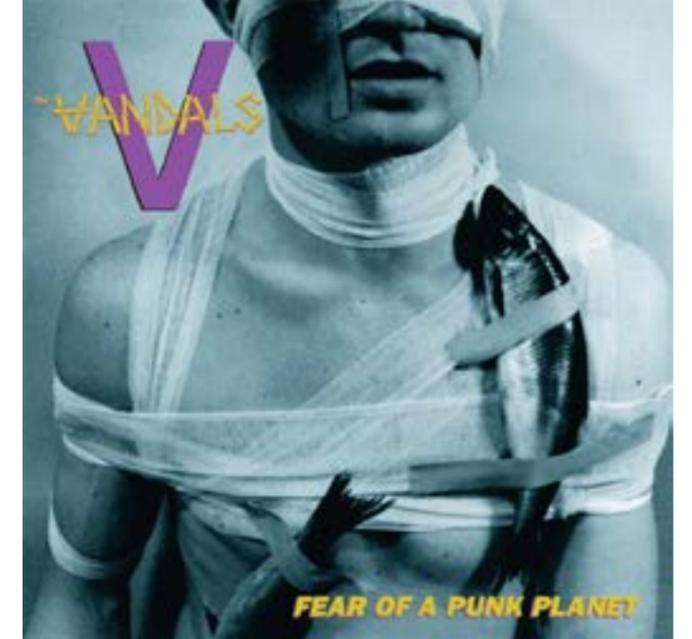
at all. Zero. Some people talk shit about me and say things like, ‘I can’t believe Josh played drums for Good Charlotte or Avril Lavigne.’ When you see an actor do a big, dumb film for a bunch of money, what you don’t always see is that they then do three little indie films for next to nothing. I’m making a Dwarves record at my house for free this weekend. I don’t usually work weekends when I’m at home, even when people offer me good money. That’s not why I’ve done this all these years. You’d be surprised how often I meet people and they don’t want to talk about Sting or Guns N’ Roses, they want to talk about The Vandals or Devo. I get so much more respect for being in The Vandals than I do for playing on Michael Bublé records, even though the level of success is wildly different.”

Josh leans back in his seat and puts his hands on his head. “I don’t know, maybe I’m just talking a lot of shit. What do you think,” he asks, “am I full of it?”

I don’t get a chance to answer. Josh’s phone begins to buzz on the table. He answers it. It’s a call about a gig.

Josh Freese isn’t full of it. It’s obvious why a lot of people have time for him. He genuinely cares about what he does, even when at times it might seem like he doesn’t. He said it best, “People just want to be able to depend on you.” There’s a lot of truth in that.

♦♦♦

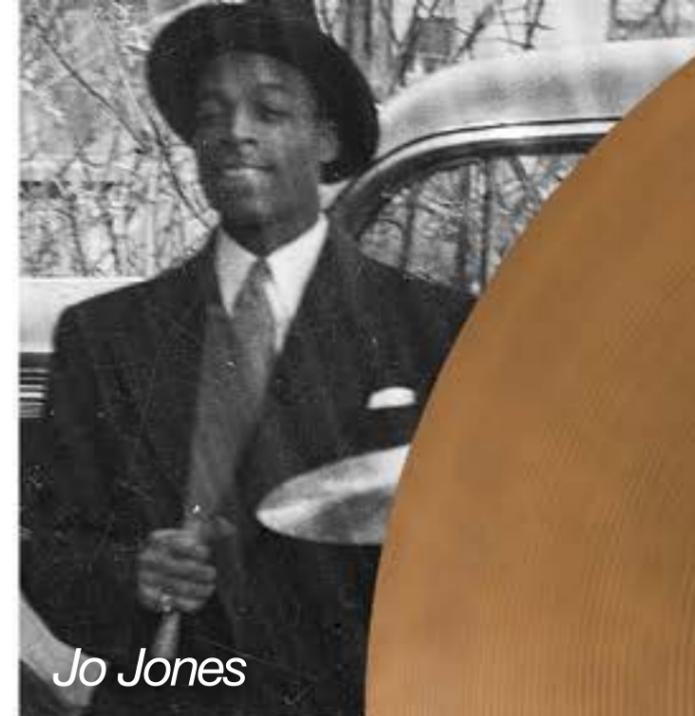




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WITH MODULATION

TORTOISE'S DAN BITNEY, JOHN McENTIRE & JOHN HERNDON

Words by Tom Hoare

♦ ♦ ♦



Listening to a Tortoise record is always a bit of an exercise in expecting the unexpected. I've always felt like they could write a great soundtrack for a surrealist TV show about a detective attempting to solve odd (but not overly severe) crimes in a gritty urban environment whilst under the influence of a potent hallucinogen ©.

Tortoise's second album, *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*, opens with a song that's 21 minutes long and has no real discernible verse, chorus, vocal or bridge. If there was a sliding scale that went from 'no sounds' to 'all the sounds', then Tortoise's music would be somewhere towards the 'all the sounds' side. Rhythmically intriguing and sonically diverse, it helped birth what became known as post-rock – a term any band labelled as such will refute with stoicism.

That's not Tortoise's fault. In a uselessly vague sense, post-rock became a genre which marked a down-tempo shift from the pop-punk inspired GUITARZ and DRUMZ theme which rock music, at the time, was gravitating towards. Instead, Tortoise specialise in the manipulation of sounds, tempos and rhythms in ways which can range anywhere from cerebral to James Brown.

As a band of multi-instrumentalists, we spoke to the three members who, at one point or another during a live show, sit behind one of the drum sets and percussion rigs the band have on stage.

◆◆◆

The Drummer's Journal: What is the function of a drummer?

[Silence]

John Herndon (Above): I think that depends on what the context is. Obviously, time keeping, but not all drummers necessarily are...

Dan Bitney (Middle): ...Good at keeping time [Laughs].

Herndon: Some drummers just don't function that way. I don't know really when I think about it. What do you think, John?

John McEntire (Below): I'll go with that.

Herndon: If you're talking about trap set drummers, in a lot of pop or rock bands they're just there to keep the beat. In terms of jazz or blues, I'd say there are instances where someone is playing to do more than just keep time and add texture to the music.

Do you get the impression there is a general sense of inferiority among drummers as being musicians? Bill Bruford once said there was...

Herndon: Hasn't he retired?

I think so.

Herndon: Well, that says a lot about that statement [laughs].

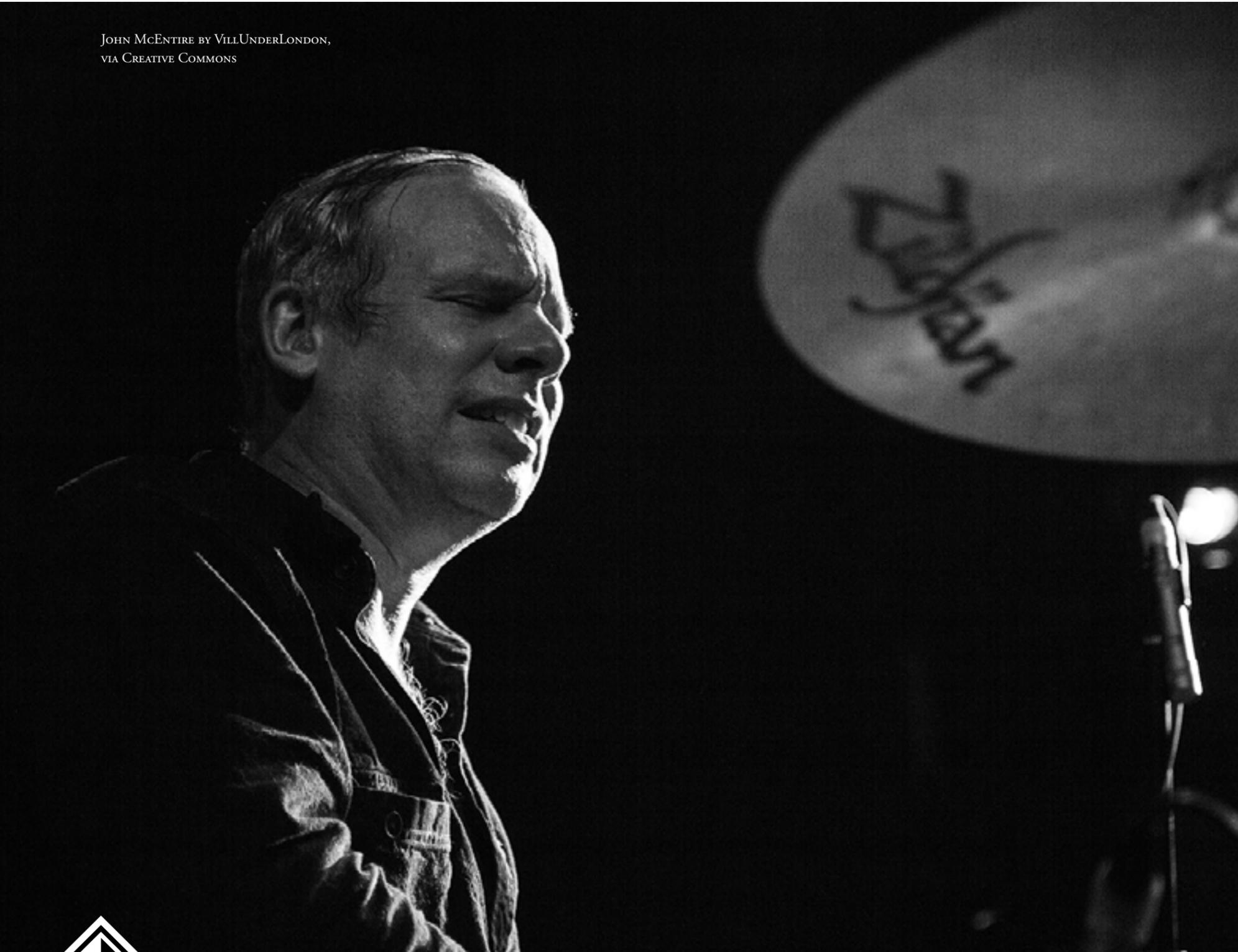
When I learnt to play the drums, I never felt like a genuine musician. And I think a lot of it had to do with the fact I couldn't read music...

Herndon: Reading does not determine whether you're a musician. That said, our soundman, who is an excellent drummer, does enjoy reeling off drummer jokes from time to time.

Bitney: I'll second the not reading music thing. It doesn't matter.



JOHN McENTIRE BY VILLUNDERLONDON,
VIA CREATIVE COMMONS



Can we talk about the idea of composition on the drum set. Is it an instrument you would compose on?

McEntire: I feel like we've composed by having two drum kits interacting in order to create a song. It can certainly be a springboard, for sure.

Bitney: Yeah, I'll do things where I rip off rhythms and rework them with drum machines and then bring them to these guys. I would struggle to imagine that other rock bands write in front of the drums, there's certainly not many that do.

I know you do a lot of production work. Are there any differences in approach when it comes to creating digital rhythms as opposed to acoustic ones?

Bitney: For the digital stuff you can just be sat in your bedroom trying out pattern ideas. That's what I do at least.

Herndon: Whenever I write, I always hope that people will bring me something else too. It's never like, "This is what it is, play it like this." I'm always open for people to mess with it. Programming fills with a drum machine is something I find pretty tedious, but it's easier than setting up a kit and a bunch of mics to record some ideas. Programming is super limiting in some senses because you're just inputting data with your fingers. The flip side is you can mess with stuff like percentage of swing, which can be hard to do as an actual player. You could maybe copy it if you heard it, but it's harder to do some things like make a snare drum hit fractionally late, that kind of stuff is easier to manipulate on a computer.

Bitney: Kit is more expressive, right?

Herndon: Well, not necessarily.

McEntire: I feel like, on a drum machine or sampler, the nature of the sound you're working with is going to be hugely important as to how you go about creating whatever it is you want to do. If you have



a sample bank with 1000s of different sound possibilities, it can send you in 1000 different directions. Whereas if you just sit down at the kit, you kind of have the instrument's parameters already defined for you. Not that either is necessarily better.

Herndon: With a sampler you can rip a piece of paper and that can be a snare hit or whatever noise you want it to be. I think it's super interesting to write with a sampler because, like John said, it's a whole different set of possibilities.

If you take popular music, say the top 40 over the last 20 years, do you think rhythm is getting less diverse?

Herndon: No, I don't think so. I think it's gotten loads weirder really. You turn on the radio today and it sounds like the Swamp Thing programmed something from his underwater cave [laughter].

Bitney: Also there are only about five crews writing everyone's jams.

Herndon: You mean like how The Wrecking Crew used to churn out hits back in the 1960s? That's not really a new phenomenon...

Bitney: Oh yeah. And Muscle Shoals did something similar. That was the studio at the edge of the farm field in Alabama, right? Tonnes of people recorded there.

Herndon: Right. Muscle Shoals, Motown and The Wrecking Crew all put out a lot of music in the 60s and 70s.

Bitney: It seems like, back then, a hit song could come out of almost anywhere. People seemed to draw upon wider influences, especially in popular music. I remember there was a Latin craze and reggae was a really strong influence for a while. Today, I think I hear outside influence less, so maybe it is more homogenous nowadays. Saying that, I don't really listen to the radio that much.

Herndon: I do hear a lot of pop music now because I have two kids

who listen to a lot of songs that I otherwise wouldn't have known about. I think there is some really cool, interesting stuff going on. They always want to listen to hip-hop stations, and I find it super interesting to hear. The latest Rihanna record has some great rhythmic stuff happening on it, but it strikes me that it's likely drum machines. Cool sounds, though.

Is there a hallmark that would separate a good drummer from a bad one, or is it just a matter of taste?

McEntire: There're plenty of people that wouldn't really be considered great drummers who I really like a lot, so I don't think there's much point in assigning a value to something like that.

Herndon: I would agree with that.

Bitney: Me also.

That's the first unilateral agreement then?

[Collectively]: Yeah.

Herndon: I gotta say though [pauses] you can tell a shitty drummer from pretty far away [collective laughter]. But I agree with John really, I think it's just a matter of taste.

McEntire: To be honest, some players who are considered to be the most proficient aren't my favourite to watch or listen to.

Herndon and Bitney: Absolutely.

You'd agree then that there's a big difference between technicality and musicality?

McEntire: Absolutely. For sure.

Herndon: At the risk of sounding like an old man, I think chops are for kids. I don't want to hear people playing insane chops. I understand why people find it fun, but for me personally, it's kind

♦♦♦

“YOU TURN ON THE
RADIO TODAY AND IT
SOUNDS LIKE THE SWAMP
THING PROGRAMMED
SOMETHING FROM HIS
UNDERWATER CAVE.”

♦♦♦

of like going to the circus where you think, “Wow! Look at that!” It’s more of a spectacle. It’s not something I aspire to or would ever want in my music.

Bitney: It’s all vocabulary; to learn about stick control is to learn how to communicate. It’s just whether or not you want to sit there talking shit or actually say stuff. It’s a language, so whether you’re going over the top or not is the key for me.

How do you approach writing drum parts for Tortoise when there’s more than one drummer?

Herndon: Being in the studio can be kind of weird with three drummers who are multi-instrumentalists, because when we’re writing, it gets to a point in the writing process where it’s like, “Ok, who is going to play the drums?” [Laughs] I think we’d all just prefer to be sitting behind the drums, to be honest.

[Collective murmur]

Why is that?

Herndon: Because drums are the number one instrument!

[Raucous laughter]

Bitney: It’s tricky when your role isn’t defined, though, and in this band we don’t really have pre-defined roles. The songs are created and when it comes to performing, you might be playing bass or vibraphone, even though you might not have necessarily been the person who played it on the record.

Herndon: I think we’re all pretty passive when it comes to putting down a drum performance on a recording. We’re all just sitting there waiting for someone to be like, “Ok I’ll give it a go.”

McEntire: I think it’s a really positive thing because all three of us can try different things, different styles of playing.



JOHN HERNDON BY VILLUNDERLONDON,
VIA CREATIVE COMMONS



Bitney: Sometimes the drum tracks are made up of a combination of different people.

Herndon: Someone will play on the first bit, then Dan might play on the bridge, then John on the last part or whatever. But we don't always have two drummers going. For a little while, I was thinking, "What if we all just had little stations with a drum kit and keyboards," like three little pods on stage, then I was like... that's absolutely ridiculous.

It'd be like each person has a musical bento box?

Herndon: Exactly. If it was easier to do it then maybe, but in reality, it just means hauling a bunch of crap around that you might only use for one song.

Are you ever preoccupied with the idea of getting better as musicians?

Bitney: I'll go home and I'll do improv gigs, it's not like I'm going to go home and [pauses] hit the books.

[Laughter]

Herndon: I think playing as many instruments as you can helps. Unless it's bass. I'm just kidding. Or am I...? What about you, John?

McEntire: I can't really play anything else.

Herndon: Sure you can.

McEntire: Honestly. If I wanted to work something out on a keyboard I could sit there and spend a bunch of time doing it, but I don't have the facility to do it quickly. I can't play guitar at all.

Herndon: That's my situation as well. I'm less good at the other instruments than anyone in this room. I'm playing these really rudimentary keyboard parts on some songs, and I thought I was

going to have an aneurysm trying to learn how to play them.

Did any of you study the drum set in high school or college?

McEntire: I took private lessons and then I went to college as a percussion major. But that only lasted one semester.

Why did it only last a semester?

McEntire: When I got there I realised that I absolutely didn't want to be a classical musician.

What made you realise that?

McEntire: When I went, I didn't have any idea what it was all about. It's totally different situation when you go to a prestigious music school with all these kids who've been playing violin since they were about four. It's a totally different world. I just wanted to play in punk bands.

Herndon: John did a lot of rudimental drumming - drum corp - and was seriously good at it. He was a champion – an actual champion! [Chuckles] Seriously, though, he was in the McDonald's All American High School Band, which is a very prestigious position to get to.

That must have taken a lot of dedication. What did you enjoy about that?

McEntire: I don't know really, I liked all the technical stuff and all the rudimental playing.

Herndon: He really loves Pataflafla.

McEntire: It's true. [Grins] I don't know why. Maybe it was because, every year, you'd have these goal posts to aim for, so it'd be like, "Ok, I'm going to learn this solo." I enjoyed figuring out how I was actually going to go about doing that.

Herndon: I took private lessons through high school, but I didn't go to college.

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“IT'S ALL VOCABULARY; TO LEARN STICK CONTROL IS TO LEARN HOW TO COMMUNICATE. IT'S JUST WHETHER OR NOT YOU WANT TO SIT THERE TALKING SHIT OR ACTUALLY SAYING STUFF.”

♦♦♦

DAN BITNEY BY VILLUNDERLONDON,
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♦ ♦ ♦

“I ACTUALLY GOT
DROPPED BY BOTH OF
THOSE TEACHERS BECAUSE
I WASN'T COMING
PREPARED FOR LESSONS.
INSTEAD, I WAS DOING
COCAINE AND GOING TO
A CIRCLE JERKS SHOW
EVERY WEEKEND.”

♦ ♦ ♦

How did you feel about lessons?

Herndon: Great. When I lived in Los Angeles, I studied with Murray Spivack – he's a big Moeller technique guy, and I studied with David Garibaldi too, the drummer from Tower of Power. But I was the same as John, I just wanted to play punk rock. I just wanted to go to hardcore shows, so I wasn't banging the

books as much as I should have been. I actually got dropped by both of those teachers because I wasn't coming prepared for lessons. Instead, I was doing cocaine and going to a Circle Jerks show every weekend. But I genuinely enjoyed the lessons, though.

Bitney: I came out of punk rock, and learnt by just watching and listening.

If you went back and could do it again, would you do it differently?

Bitney: Yeah, I think I would. Learning stuff like stick control would have helped me massively. But before I started doing improv, I didn't really need to

know how to do a press roll. I was probably pretty ignorant back then really. I wish I'd made my invention, though.

Your invention?

Bitney: Yeah – flat hats.

[Groans from Herndon and McEntire]





Flat hats?

Bitney: Right. They're hi-hats except they're totally flat.

Herndon: Hasn't someone already done this? That dude. I think he's called Future Man. He plays a sort of midi controller guitar that makes drum sounds and has all this other weird stuff. He probably has flat hats.

This sounds a bit like piano key necktie territory...

Bitney: No! Flat hats are the future. Just you wait.

Herndon: Well, if they're good enough for Future Man, maybe you're right.

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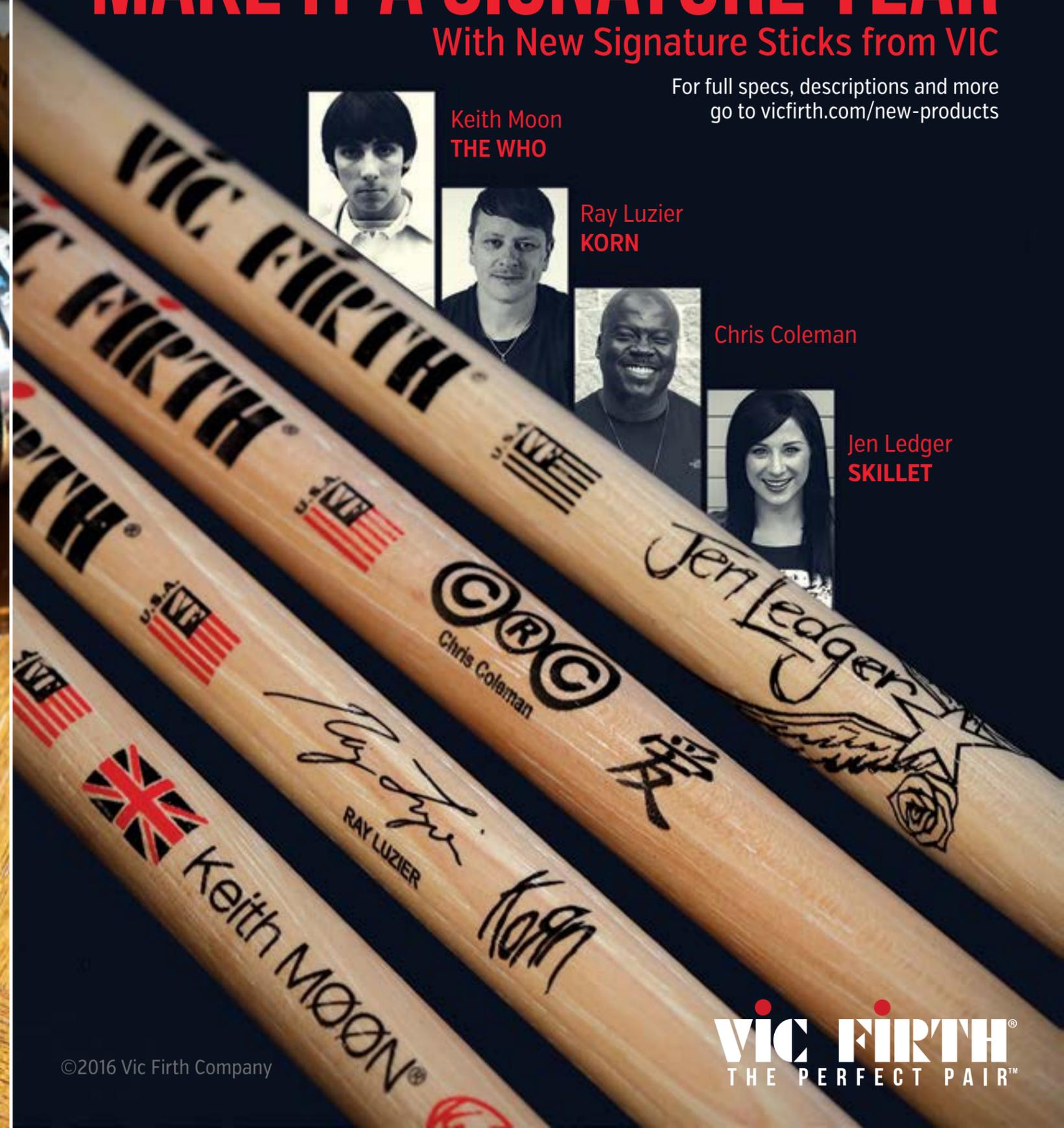
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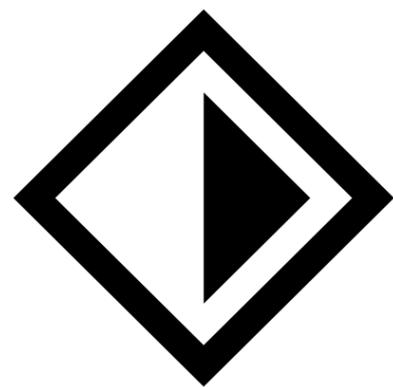


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BARN FIND

A CONVERSATION WITH
BENNY GREB

Words and photography by Tom Hoare

...



This is not how I'd imagined it. I'm stood before the old colonial house with a feeling of intense trepidation. The front door seems securely locked. A little sign on the porch reads "No Vacancies." The shutters on the windows look painted shut.

It's still cold. There's snow on the ground. The trees, which densely cover the surrounding 287,500 acres, lurch back and forth in the wind.

My phone was now little more than a paperweight. I wish I'd brought the road atlas.

Even if this place was inhabited, I already knew how the conversation was going to unfold:

"Hi. Is there a Mr Greb staying here?"

"Who?"

"Benny Greb."

"No."

And that would be that. I could get back in the car, drive until the fumes in the tank expire and simply adopt the freezing tundra as my new home. *No time like the present.*

"Hi. Is there a Mr Greb staying here?"

"Who?"

"Benny Greb."

"No..."

Oh god. It's happening. It's actually happening. Panic.

The elderly lady behind the desk calls after me as I turn to leave.

"Sir...!"

"Yes?"

"Are you here for the camp?"

"Yes!"

"You're a day late."

"Yes. Sorry about that."

"We have no rooms left."

"That's ok."

"Are they expecting you?"

"I think so."

She looks at me, pausing in contemplation. "Walk round the back. You'll see a barn with red doors next to the river. In there."

The barn was dead silent. Given there was supposed to be 30 drummers inside, the trepidation set back in. *Perhaps they've all frozen to death.*

The first door I tried was locked. I'm convinced the second one was not actually a door but simply a door handle screwed onto the wall of the barn. The third door, however, opened, expelling a rush of hot air.

Inside, I can hear Benny but not see him thanks to the long black curtain drawn across one-half the room. I peek through it and I can see people sat in chairs. Benny is stood at the front.

There was something vaguely cultish about this sight. People had travelled great distances to spend three days in this secluded barn in the rural American northeast to listen to the teachings of a person they admire intently.

Benny has become renowned among drummers as a person who is very good at explaining things that are difficult to explain. He lays out the often mystifying, intimidating and frustrating aspects of what makes learning a new skill difficult, in a way that borders on enlightenment for those willing to listen. But unlike an actual cult leader, Benny's beliefs aren't rooted in baseless mysticism. He's the real deal.

Learning a new skill, or trying to refine an existing one, can be a hugely frustrating process, especially when everyone has an opinion on what is right and what is wrong. At times it can also be incredibly disheartening; to put time into something and have little to show for it. Importantly, everyone who has ever attempted to learn an instrument has been here.

◆◆◆

**"I WANTED TO BECOME
THE BEST DRUMMER
ON THE PLANET. IT WAS
ONLY LATER I REALISED
THIS GOAL MADE ME
VERY UNHAPPY."**

◆◆◆

Think of Benny as a cobbler, except that instead of fixing shoes he's fixing your existing frustrations and limitations with the drum set. In this sense, you could give Benny a pair of shoes where the soles have been worn so thin you are convinced that they are utterly useless, but Benny will hand them back shining and as good as new. Benny specialises in teaching people how to learn.

◆◆◆



The Drummer's Journal: You're from a place in Germany called... I'm not sure I can pronounce this properly...

Benny Greb: Give it a try.

Augsburg?

Yes, Augsburg. But I grew up in Aystetten, that's a little harder to say.

"Aystetten ..."

[Sounding unconvinced]...That'll do. It's a tiny village. Not a big music metropole. But I had a very sad childhood. It's difficult for me to talk about.

Oh, really?

No, I'm just kidding [grins]. Well, saying that, I didn't actually have the best time at school. I couldn't wait to get it over with so I could go home and play the drums. I wasn't a bad kid, but lots of my teachers told me I was lazy and undisciplined. And I began to believe them. Pretty much all I did back then was go to and from school, eat, watch Star Trek and play the drums.

Which Star Trek?

The Next Generation. But when I look back on it now I think I was having an identity crisis [laughs].

Because of Star Trek? I suppose there are a lot of different identities in that.

Not so much because of Star Trek. It's quite strange to explain. I think it's because I was really into drumming as a kid, and when I began to get better at it, school just didn't care about it at all. It wasn't important there. It was only when I went and studied music later that being interested in the drums began to count. Suddenly I was a good student when I wasn't before. It was a role reversal. This skill that hadn't really mattered suddenly began to matter.

You knew you wanted to be a drummer?

Yes. Absolutely. I always loved drumming. Even from an early age.

Although I was very young, I remember feeling that I wanted to pursue it. I also remember thinking, 'This is going to be difficult; this isn't something that happens overnight.' I also realised that, after watching Buddy Rich and Steve Gadd, it was possible to achieve some sort of mastery at this instrument. Realising that was actually achievable was important for me.

You actively wanted to be among the best?

When I was 17, yes. I wanted to become the best drummer on the planet. It was only later when I realised this was a goal that made me very unhappy.

In what way did it make you unhappy?

Because how do you actually do that? How do you measure being the best? You can't, because it's not something that's in your control. To have goals that are not in your control is frustrating because other people can take them away from you. Competition is always dependent on other people. If you're into competition and you want to succeed, it's necessary for others to lose in order for you to win. So I realised the idea of being the best is just stupid. I needed another goal to aim for. I decided to be the best Benny Greb I could be, and that's still my goal. All I can do is the best I can with what I have.

What drove you to keep on getting better?

Because I felt like I sucked and I wanted to find solutions for myself. I got very frustrated with people saying that music is talent-based, that you either have it or you don't. For a long time, I wondered if I even could get better if I didn't have this natural talent people said was so important. When I found out that's all bullshit, I felt a little more in control. Anyone can do it.

How do you go about balancing studio work and teaching work?

I really am a maniac about time management. I don't have many books, but all the ones I do have are about efficiency.

...

“I WONDERED IF I COULD GET BETTER IF I DIDN'T HAVE THIS NATURAL TALENT PEOPLE SAID WAS SO IMPORTANT. WHEN I FOUND OUT THAT'S ALL BULLSHIT, I FELT A LITTLE MORE IN CONTROL. ANYONE CAN DO IT.”

...



Sorry, I know it's a massive stereotype but I have to say it...

That this is a very German thing to do? It's just because I want to make sure I do things right, which for German people is very important. But for me, it's also important to decide what the right thing to do actually is.

What made you pay so much attention to efficiency?

It's simply because I was never particularly good at how to use my time. I always felt very frustrated because there was never enough time to do anything great, whether it was human relationships or musical projects. For me, there can't be success without fulfilment, so I always want to take care of that.

You seem to give yourself a hard time...

I always try to work on myself harder than I work on my job, that way I can keep a healthy balance. This is a constant struggle, it's not something you achieve and then suddenly everything is fine. It's something you always have to keep taking a look at.

Did this happen because you felt like you weren't doing things right a lot of the time?

I've always felt the pressure of being my own brand and my own boss. The best part is there is no one telling you when to start and when to stop. The worst part is there is no one telling you when to start and when to stop. It's a huge responsibility and you can mess it up in both extremes. For me, I would push myself too far. I would say, "Ok, if I do this another hour then maybe it will be better." Then I found I didn't give enough time to my private life, I didn't give enough time to my health and I didn't take care of other people that well.

Was this pressure coming solely from yourself?

When I went to Hamburg as a young musician and tried to make it, I was lucky enough to be earning money by playing music, which was a huge accomplishment at first. But after a while, I realised it wasn't making me happy. I wanted to be able to express myself, and

for me, that meant being able to do my own stuff and grow as a human being. I knew I didn't just want to play cover gigs. I don't want to bash cover bands because they're great and I love hearing a good cover band, but I knew it wasn't what I wanted to do.

I feel like this is some quite serious introspection considering you've said previously that you don't tend to take yourself too seriously...

This is one of my guiding posts: I take the art form and discipline of learning and mastering an instrument very seriously, but I don't take myself very seriously.

Are you deliberately self-deprecating?

It's a European thing I think. In America, it's often viewed as bullshit.

You've read a lot about the human brain. What's the most interesting thing you learnt about it?

Science is great because it's always better to deal with reality rather than assumptions, and science is the closest we can get to reality without being tricked by misconception. I found that whenever I thought I was stupid or lacked talent, it wasn't because I was stupid, it was because I'm a human being. I took a lot of comfort in learning about learning. It made me realise that it was my approach that was wrong, and if I change it, suddenly I can be more effective and feel better about what I'm doing.

That sounds nice but can you give an example?

A prime example is when you get a feeling like, "I'm so stupid, why can't I do this?" This is because of the difference between the cognitive mind - which is the actual intelligence needed to understand the task at hand - and your muscle memory. Your muscle memory needs repetition. To your mind, the task might be simple, you may understand it perfectly, but you still might not be able to do it. This is what makes you feel stupid. Understanding it takes time for your muscles to get used to a particular task helped me a lot.





Does this mean natural talent isn't really a thing?

There are some instances where people pick up certain tasks faster than others. Culturally, human beings are very diverse, but, genetically, we're not different at all and you can learn any skill someone else has learned. There was a school of brain science that divided people up into different groups of learners, so you might be good at using your hands or you might be a thinker, but it's been suggested recently this isn't really true.

The problem is that I'm too lazy to read about all this stuff.

I am too. That's why I love audio books.

This next one is a question you've probably been asked it a lot...

No, I don't take my clothes off for money anymore.

Ah. That's a shame because it might have made a nice hidden extra on your next DVD.

I'm not too sure it would.

How is the drum set used to convey human emotion?

I'm not talking about our complex emotions like sadness or joy, but more like energy levels. Does something sound heavy, or is it unsettling, or is it relaxing? These are all things which can be achieved with timing.

How does that work biologically?

Alertness and relaxation can be directly linked to heart rate, and they both have a lot to do with expectation. If you really want to take it apart, imagine you have an appointment with someone. This person you're meeting then tells you they're going to be ten minutes late. You'd likely be slightly disappointed, right? You were

there, you were waiting. It's a sort of deflating feeling. But if this person had called you 30 minutes early and said, "I'm already here and waiting!" you'd probably feel a bit panicked. In this sense, time does alter your emotions. When there is a beat and a tempo, your brain becomes a pattern-seeking machine. It's making predictions about what will happen next based on what has happened previously. And when these predictions are challenged, that's when you're like, "Oh – what just happened there?" It's just on a much more subtle level.

♦ ♦ ♦

“TO HAVE GOALS
THAT ARE NOT IN
YOUR CONTROL IS
FRUSTRATING BECAUSE
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TAKE THEM AWAY
FROM YOU.”

♦ ♦ ♦

How do the drums influence music in a way that it then has an actual effect on someone listening?

The strength of the drum set is to create time and groove, and when any other instrument does it, even a bass guitar or a singer, they use the same principles that a drummer would use: pulse, time and form. These things can move people physically – dancing is a good example. Whenever a guitarist makes a stadium dance, the guitar playing will have percussive elements that would usually be associated with the drum set. Whenever you have music like bluegrass that doesn't have a drummer, the arrangement is already

so percussive that there's no space for a drum set because they're doing it themselves. The drums are just one musical instrument and they have certain strengths just like any other instruments. Physically moving people is one.

Can we talk about improvisation and repetition and how they are linked?

Repetition is a very powerful thing in music. There is no groove and no form without repetition. Repetition is an incredible structure



machine. When we look at great composers, there is a lot of repetition to establish time.

I still don't understand. Explain like I'm five.

[Speaks slowly] When I see drummers playing drum solos or grooves, I sometimes feel, "I wish they would have played that idea again," or "I wish this was structured a bit more." If you listen to great improvisers, it's not chaos; they don't just vomit out ideas as soon as they come into their head. They create form. And that's the difference between jamming and great improvisation. Improvisation is having an idea and structuring it. Repeating a phrase or an idea can make it more powerful, more important; it can create and release tension in the music. And in people.

I heard you say, "Simple things can be the hardest to play." Again, like I'm five, please.

Often, people think it's the other way round. We tend to value things based on the difficulty level it takes to play it. For me, I would value how artistically difficult to play it is. For people who pride themselves on playing very fast, they often get insecure when playing a very slow or very soft groove, because they don't have certain qualities like staying calm and confident even though you're not playing many notes. It's the same with language. Some people just have to talk all the time and they feel insignificant if they can't lead the conversation. The other way to think about difficulty is to think about the act of saying sorry to someone. In terms of the movement of your vocal chords, "sorry" is not a difficult word to say. But, emotionally, it can be incredibly difficult to say to someone depending on the circumstances. We focus so often on what we are we playing, but the how and the why we play something is where music happens.

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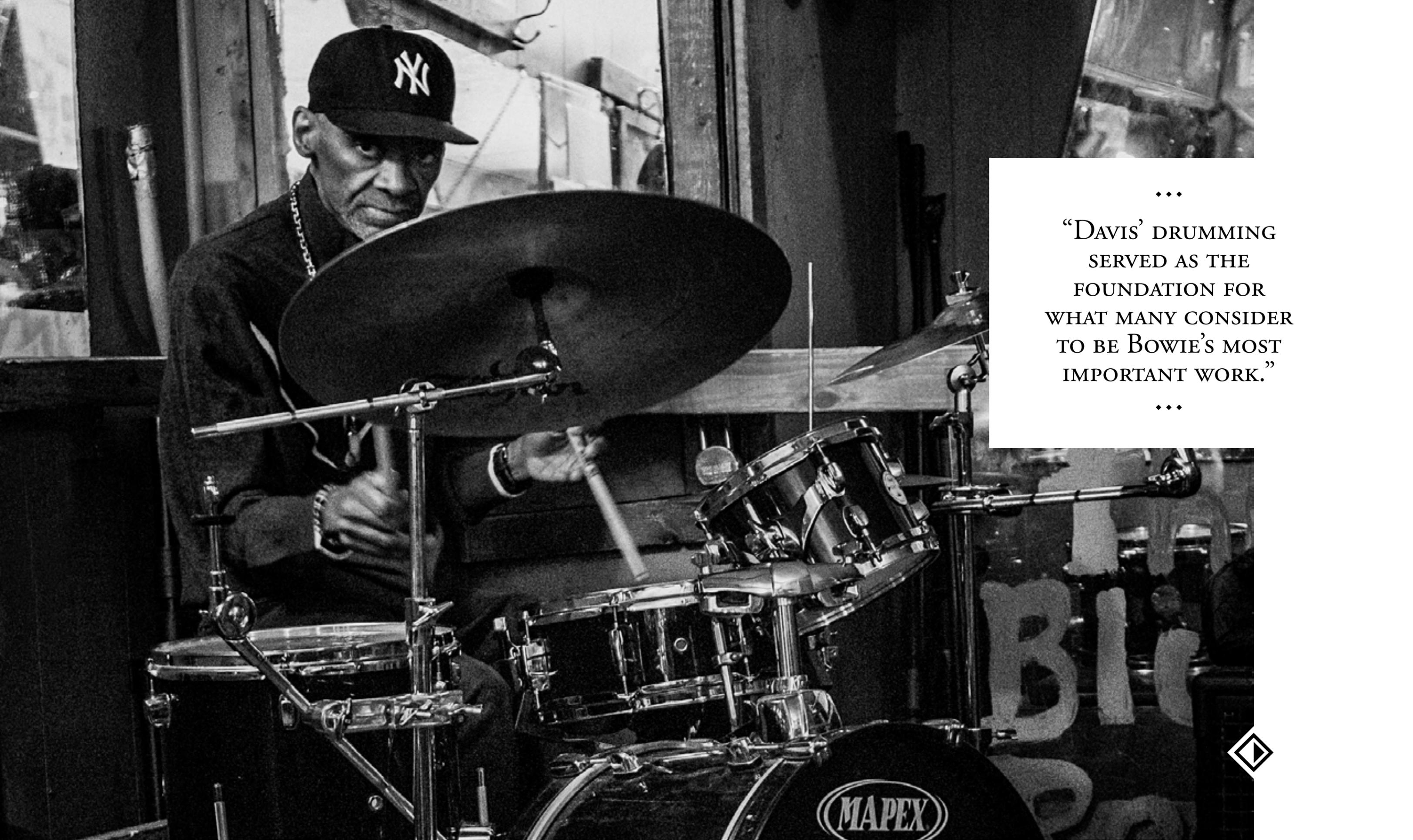
DENNIS DAVIS

BOWIE, BENSON AND BEYOND

♦♦♦

Words by Joe Wong

Photography by Michael Baumann



♦♦♦

“DAVIS’ DRUMMING
SERVED AS THE
FOUNDATION FOR
WHAT MANY CONSIDER
TO BE BOWIE’S MOST
IMPORTANT WORK.”

♦♦♦



2016 has been a year rife with the loss of artistic luminaries. On April 6th, the drumming community lost a particularly influential visionary, Dennis Davis, to cancer at the age of 66.

Davis was born in Hell's Kitchen, New York City, in 1949. After experimenting with trumpet and trombone, he began playing drums at age 11. Although he was largely self-taught, Davis benefitted as the student of a neighborhood school with a robust arts program. As a teenager, he had opportunities to see many of his favorite drummers: Art Blakey, Max Roach, and Elvin Jones. Roach and Jones would soon become mentors to Davis, introducing him to the propulsive conception of swing known as "tipping".

After high school, Davis was enrolled into the Navy and shipped to Vietnam where his riverboat "got blown up a couple times," and he "saw lots of horrific shit." Upon returning stateside, he went absent without leave, an infraction that resulted in a court-martial and four months in the brig. Although he was assured by the powers that be that this offense would limit his ability to work or leave the country, Davis soon began an incredible, decades-long touring and recording run with several of his generation's most forward-thinking artists.

Davis began working with Roy Ayers in 1972, first appearing on his Red, Black & Green album. Drawing equally from Clyde Stubblefield and Elvin Jones, he makes his presence felt with a driving, funky backbeat

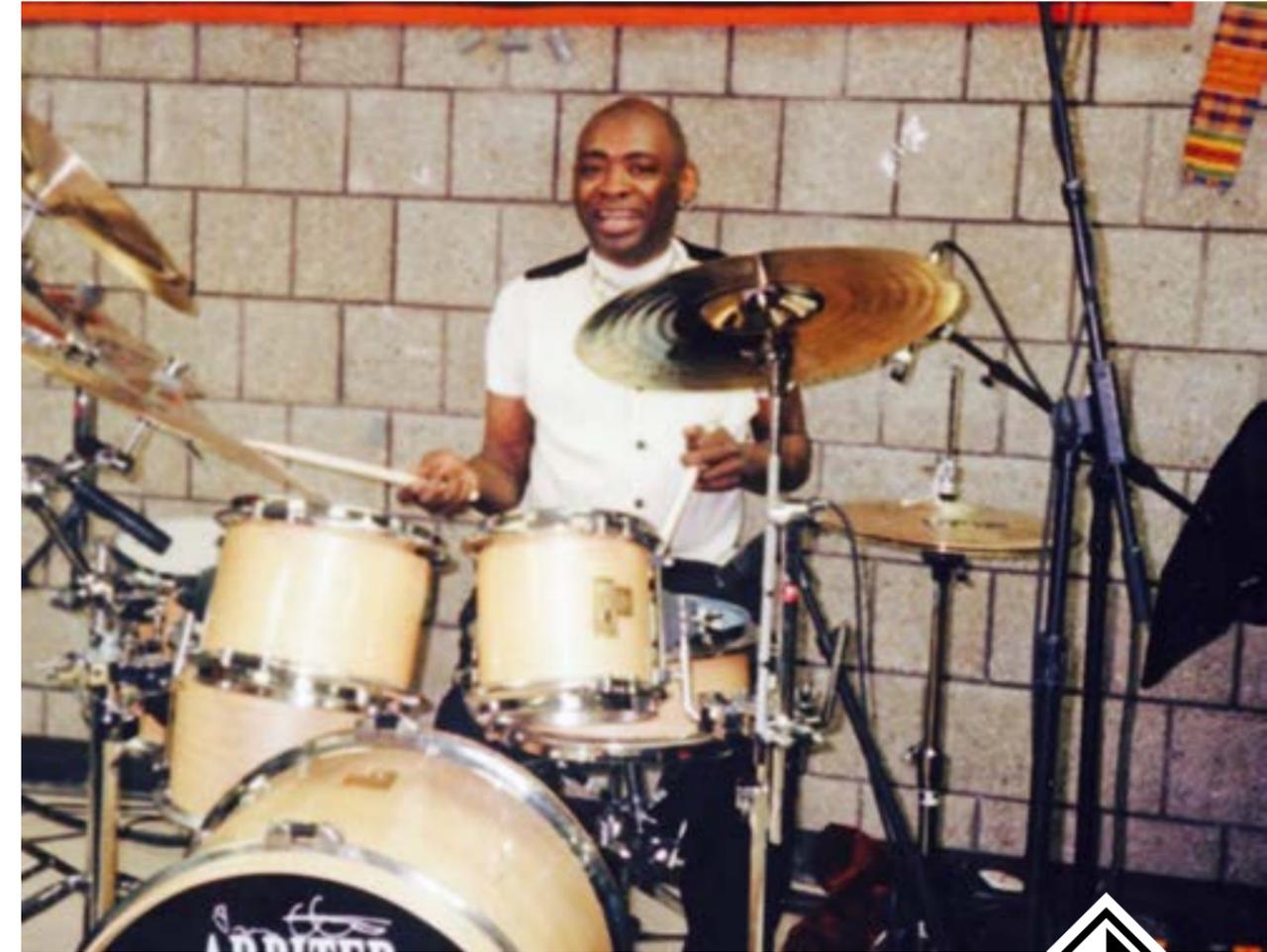
infused with a deep sense of swing. As a result of his exemplary work with Ayers, Dennis was quickly in demand, creating landmark albums with George Benson, Iggy Pop and Stevie Wonder. He is perhaps best known for his collaboration with David Bowie. Beginning with 1975's *Young Americans* and ending with 1980's *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)*, Davis' drumming served as the foundation for what many consider to be Bowie's most important work. Bowie described his process at this time as particularly freewheeling and spontaneous. In an interview with *Uncut*, he characterized Davis as fundamental to the success of his albums, "a powerfully emotive drummer... The tempo not only 'moved' but also was expressed in more than 'human' fashion."

Davis is survived by his wife, Chie; his six children; and a timeless, unimpeachably great body of work.

I spoke to Dennis shortly before his death. We discussed his childhood in Chelsea, NY; his tenure in the military; his creative partnerships with Ayers, Bowie, and Stevie Wonder; and his underlying artistic philosophy.

You can listen to that interview, in full, by clicking the green button to the right.

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TAP TO LISTEN



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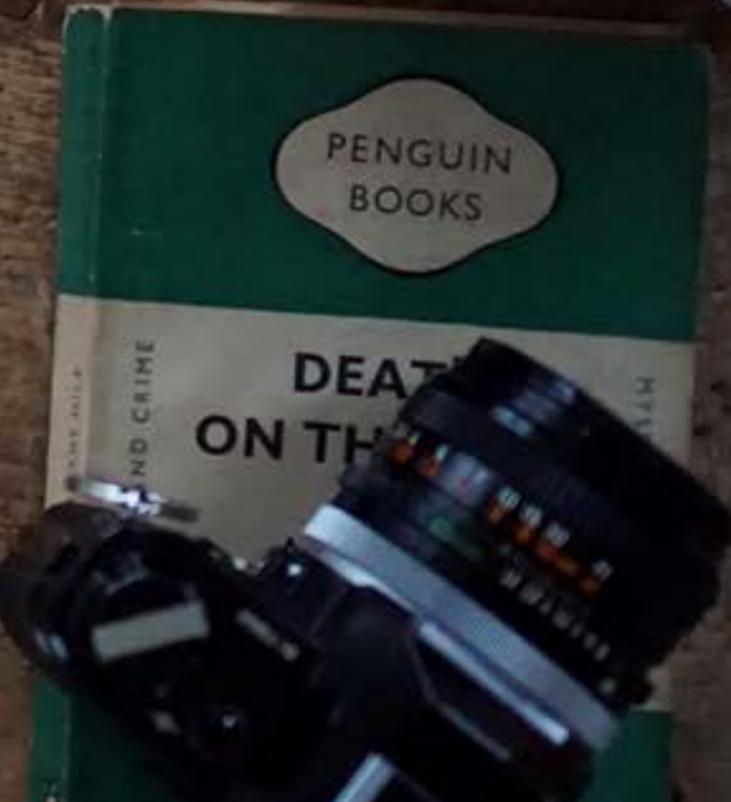


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PROCESS ARCHITECTURE

WORKING IN A DRUM WORKSHOP

Words & photography by Tom Hoare

In our first issue, we interviewed DW founder Don Lombardi. At the time, he invited us out to tour the factory in California. It sounded like a fun thing to do. So, four years later, we eventually took him up on the offer.

♦ ♦ ♦





PLIES

There are many different materials and techniques which can be used to build a drum shell. Here, plywood is being used, but it isn't like the kind you get at your local hardware store which costs about as much as a large coffee. Instead, it's made from scratch by layering thin pieces of wooden veneer.

These veneers are glued and pressed together to form a ply pack. Each ply pack consists of an inner, an outer and a core. The packs are then cut to size several times, each cut more precise than the last. When the ply pack meets the appropriate dimensions of the intended shell size, it's rolled up and put into a size specific press, which forms it into a circular drum shell. Combining different veneers offers different tonal qualities.

Those thin strips in the first inset image are reinforcement hoops for the maple shells. Reinforcement hoops add additional strength and definition to the shell. They're slotted inside the shell just below the bearing edge and pressed into place. Not all shells require reinforcing; birch, for example, is sturdy enough as it is.

LEFT: VENEERS. INSET (TOP): REINFORCEMENT HOOPS. INSET (BOTTOM): ROLLING THE PLIES.





SANDING

This is the sanding room. It has a specialised air filtration system that prevents the air becoming too dusty. When it's not lunchtime, it's very loud in here. Sanding helps prepare the shells for staining, lacquering or painting depending on which finish is to be applied. The bearing edges of the shell (the contact points for the drumhead) are also cut and sanded here. This is what is happening in the inset image to the right. To his left, just out of shot, is a large granite slab which is perfectly level. If you place the bearing edge face down onto the granite slab, you can shine a light down into the shell; if any light escapes from in-between the granite slab and the bearing edge, you know the bearing edge isn't completely level.



FOLLOWING PAGE: DUST FILTRATION







TIMBRE MATCHING

This is John Good. You can think of John a bit like the drum industry's equivalent of a pole vault champion: he's devoted his life to continually raising the bar.

John has a few different desks. But wherever he sits, he talks about drums like he's describing a fine wine. His knowledge about drum shells and how to build them is so vast it's hard to fathom. He can often be found sat on a mezzanine above the DW factory floor, gently tapping drum shells and listening to them resonate.

Depending on the construction, each shell will produce a fundamental note when gently struck. The difference in sound between different shell types often isn't as subtle as you might think. This lets John group shells with the desired sonic properties together. He calls this timbre matching.

FOLLOWING PAGE: "THE TAPSHELL PLACE"





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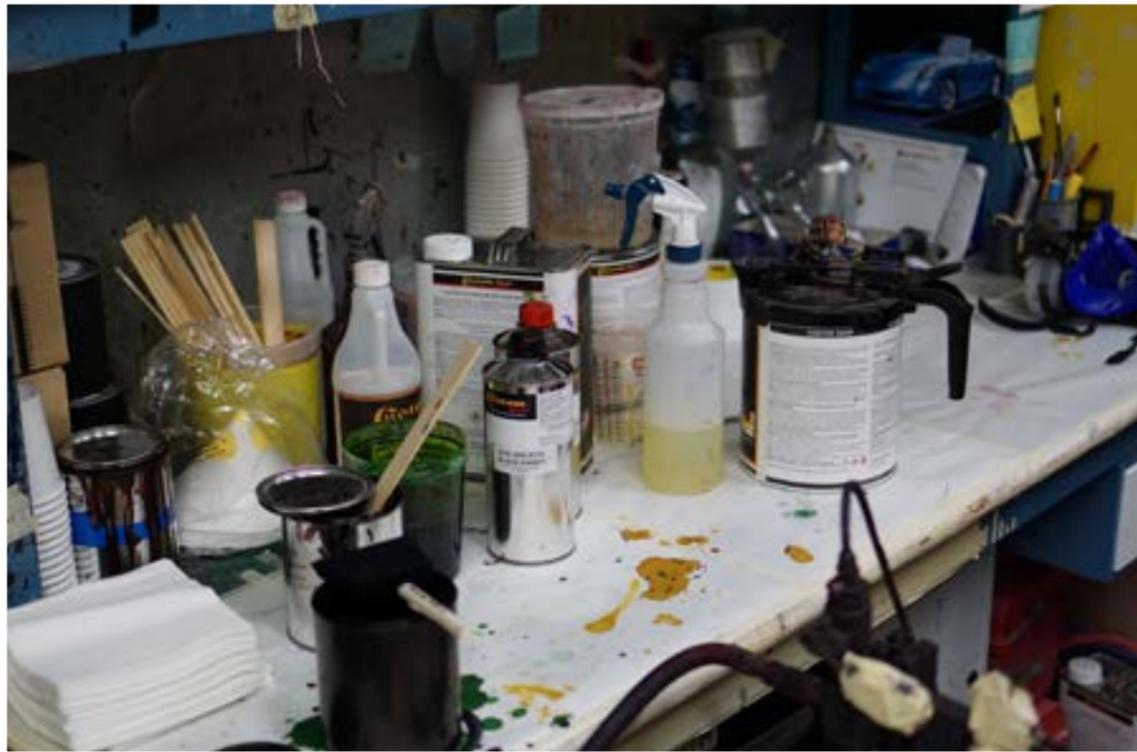
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PAINT

The paint booth is small and not a place for claustrophobes. Here, the custom paint colours are mixed by hand. It's a bit like watching alchemists at work, especially when the paint they're mixing is golden. These guys can operate a paint gun with such smoothness it makes Sean Connery's portrayal of Bond resemble a bumbling Donald Trump.



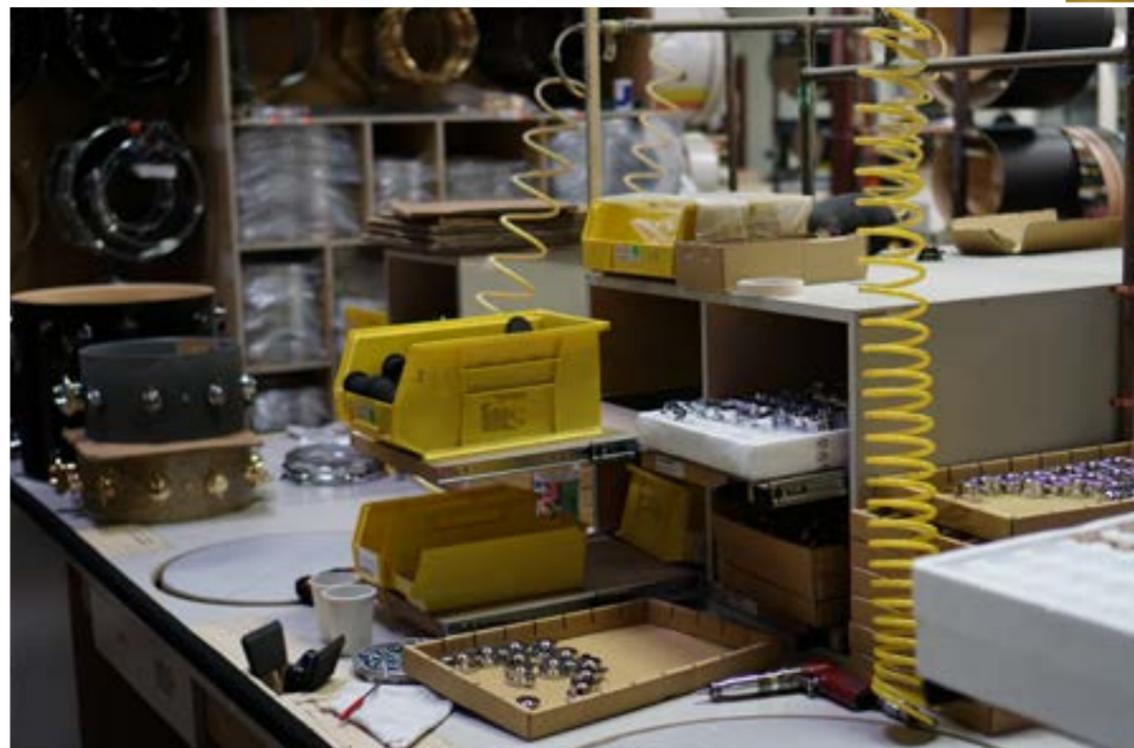
FOLLOWING PAGE: MIXING PAINTS





ASSEMBLY

Final assembly, as you might have guessed, is where the shell is adorned with all its fittings. Lugs, tension rods, suspension mounts, hoops, heads, spurs and snare mechanisms are installed here. The screwdrivers used for much of this are driven by compressed air to make this less time consuming. Things like the lugs are stored in these little brown trays in painfully neat arrangements that make them look a bit like confectionery.



FINAL CHECK

This is where the finished kit has one final check before it's boxed up and shipped out. The kit gets a light clean and a bit of a dusting. The lights are incredibly bright making it easier to spot any blemishes. The circular plates the kit is inspected on rotate, which makes the whole process a bit easier.

If one of the industrial rolls of bubble wrap broke loose, it would result in a scene a bit like the beginning of Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark where Harrison Ford is chased by the giant bolder.







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WORKING TITLE

BLOC PARTY'S LOUISE BARTLE

Words & photography by Tom Hoare

♦♦♦



In 2005, Bloc Party released their debut album, *Silent Alarm*, to widespread critical acclaim. It was one of the first occasions I can remember where the national press almost unilaterally devoted column inches to praise the performance of the drummer, Matt Tong. It probably helped that the first 60 seconds of album opener *Like Eating Glass* is an absolute master class in tasteful instrumentation, where the drums set the tone for what is to follow for the next 54 minutes: relentless feels.

If this reads a bit like a nostalgia trip then I could easily be guilty of that. But I feel secure about the fact that eleven years on, *Silent Alarm* still stands up as being among the best albums of that decade.

Bloc Party spent the next ten years releasing music that tended to pitch the opinions of critics and fans against one another, before entering a hiatus in which there was a bit of reshuffling.

This is where Louise Bartle comes in.

◆◆◆

The Drummer's Journal: You're a Londoner?

Louise Bartle: Yeah. South-west London. I don't know how well you know it?

Honestly... I barely know it.

Ok then, so South-west is probably specific enough.

You have a degree in playing drums...

Technically, yeah, I do.

Why technically?

The main thing it gave me was a chance to do music full time. And I met a lot of cool people.

Do you feel like you still could have got to this position by just going it alone?

I definitely wanted to study drums specifically. Looking back on it, I perhaps took more from what I was doing outside of the school. Experiences like going to jam nights and meeting people was valuable because they were the people who actually helped me get some work.

I read you joined Bloc Party after they'd spotted you on YouTube...

That's sort of true. There was a little guidance involved. That doesn't make it sound as magical though does it? It wasn't like they came across me out of nowhere. I had a bit of help.

Is using YouTube something your college said you should do to market yourself as a drummer?

Sort of, but I didn't really listen to them on a lot of that stuff. You can't just sit on Facebook and expect people to hire you. You need to actually go out and play. For me, I wasn't doing it in the hope of being asked to join a band. It was more just to provide some sort of evidence so people could see I could actually play. I'd also done some pop session work. The biggest one was probably with Selena Gomez for Radio One. She was actually really nice.

How long did the Bloc Party process take?

I met them, went to the studio and auditioned, then just waited to hear back really. There was a lot of waiting. It all started last March 2015, and I found out I'd got it in May. Then I had a few months to prepare. I just loosely wrote the songs out in a really basic sense and learnt them like that. There are 30 songs that we rotate now, so it was intense learning those.

Did you read any reviews or other things people have written about the band?

Of course. I still do. I had to do a lot of my own research about the band. I just wanted to know about them. I missed that whole thing when *Silent Alarm* came out because I was still in primary school. I was in year six doing my SATs! Going back and listening to it, it's easy



to see why people consider it to be a ground breaking album. I'm a bit gutted that I missed that time period. But at the same time, it might have made me view this whole thing differently.

In what respect?

I have a lot of respect for the band, but I'm glad it's not in an obsessive, weird way, like if I'd have been this hardcore Bloc Party fan that suddenly was playing drums for them. When I first met Kele [Okereke], he asked if I was familiar with the older stuff. I was honest and I said, "I know it but I'm not overly familiar." I think he thought that was a good thing, instead of me being like, "Yes! I know everything about everything you've ever done!"

How long did it take to learn all the songs?

In the end I had about three months to learn all the material, and that gave me time to develop a relationship with it. At first, I just listened to it and I just felt excited about the prospect of playing it live. Initially though I just started listening to it for enjoyment then began learning it, because I wanted to soak it in.

Did you ever feel fleetingly worried about joining a well-established band?

If I'm honest, I was worried about it. I've liked bands where key people have left, and it's like, "How is it going to be the same band if this person is no longer in it?" My main concern was that I didn't want anyone to feel any negative feeling towards me, I just wanted to do my best and play the parts and just treat the whole thing with respect.

And that is what's happened, right?

I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I want to respect the past but also bring something new and hope people like it. It is a weird thing to do, for everyone. It must be weird to Kele and Russell to have new members. They've been on the road with two different people for the last 10 years, that's obviously going to be a bit of a gear change. But I think it's been going well enough and everything seems to be gelling nicely.



BLOC PARTY, L-R: KELE OKEREKE, LOUISE BARTLE,
JUSTIN HARRIS, RUSSELL LISSACK





♦♦♦

“I WAS WORRIED ABOUT IT. I’VE LIKED BANDS WHERE KEY PEOPLE HAVE LEFT, AND IT’S LIKE, ‘HOW IS IT GOING TO BE THE SAME BAND IF THIS PERSON IS NO LONGER IN IT?’”

♦♦♦



You were in a Channel 4 drama called Skins, in which you also portray a drummer...

[Sounds suspicious] Yeah...

In that show, does your character crudely threaten someone with a drumstick?

Yeah, I do. I was only 16 at the time as well. I remember reading the script and being like, "This is quite intense. Do I really have to say that on TV?"

Can you remember the actual line?

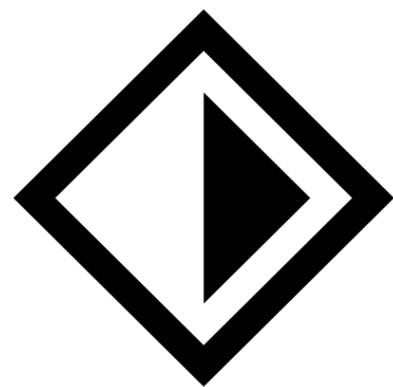
Yes. It was, "Touch my kit and you'll get this [drumstick] down your throat and this one up your arse."

Excellent delivery.

I'm not even actress. And I know it was only one line. But it was fun.

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