



# Russ Kunkel: *Drumming for the Song*

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In the early '70s, a new generation of acoustic-oriented artists changed the face of popular music. But Crosby, Stills & Nash, Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Jackson Browne, and James Taylor shared more than superb songwriting skills: They all relied on drummer Russ Kunkel.

Kunkel's lyrical playing and unhurried groove animate such classic albums as Taylor's *Sweet Baby James*, Mitchell's *Blue*, and Browne's *Running on Empty*. Russ also put the rhythm in tracks by Bob Dylan, the Bee Gees, Steve Winwood, Stevie Nicks, Linda Ronstadt, Kenny Rogers, Bob Seger, Simon & Garfunkel, and many other artists.

Kunkel explains his unique affinity with songwriters: "I *listen*. I try to understand the singer's point of view and see if I can enhance it, as opposed to thinking, 'I'm the drummer, so I play a beat and everyone follows.' Sometimes I don't even hear a place for drums on a song. Maybe it just needs some motion, but not necessarily

a whole kit. Joni Mitchell's 'Carey' was like that—just a simple conga part."

Russ also attributes his success to being in the right place at the right time. Born in Pittsburgh, Kunkel moved to California in his teens. His band Things to Come worked at the famed Whisky-A-Go-Go on the Sunset Strip, where they opened for touring acts such as Cream, Traffic, and the Byrds. "After that," recalls Kunkel, "I started doing song demos for \$15 each. The songs were being showcased, not the musicians, so I started to become aware of the importance of songwriting. I started trying to play exactly the right amount, and never too much."

Meanwhile, a musician acquaintance recommended Russ to producer Peter Asher, who was about to start recording *Sweet Baby James*. "Peter came down and heard me and hired me," remembers Russ. "If he'd heard someone else, it could have been Jim Keltner or Hal Blaine instead." And such iconic

drum parts as the spacious fills on "Fire and Rain" might have been very different indeed.

"It was elating that James became so huge," reflects Russ. "It was unbelievable to be part of that. At the same time, when you're on the wave, you're not thinking about being on the wave. You're just riding it."

The wave crested memorably in 1973. "I was in New York working with Peter Asher after *Sweet Baby James* came out," recounts Russ. "I got a call saying, 'Get your drums and get down to CBS studios—George Harrison and Bob Dylan are doing a session and they need a drummer.' As I was setting up my drums, George and Bob were sitting around smoking cigarettes. I put on some headphones, and it was like being in a dream. I closed my eyes and said to myself, 'That's really Bob Dylan and George Harrison. How lucky are you?'"

After that, the pace seldom let up. Kunkel's discography is immense. He's amassed many production credits, including a string of hits for Jimmy Buffett. He still tours regularly, most recently with Lyle Lovett. And he's just started a company called Chateau Beach Entertainment. "Our first project is an album called *Rivage*," says Russ. "It's European-style lounge versions of some of the big hits I've played on over the years. We also plan to sign other artists, and even do an active clothing line. We'll also be importing specialty wines from Bordeaux." He chuckles. "Our motto will be, 'If it's not fun, we're not doing it!'"

For the last three decades, Kunkel has played Yamaha drums. "The drums are just amazing," says Russ, "but Yamaha drums are as good as they are because the people behind them are as good as they are. They really care about the people who play their instruments, and they're always there. They're family." Kunkel's main kits are recent-Vintage Maple and Birch Customs, though he also relies on several older Yamaha sets. "I use the snare drums that came with the kits, though I also like Dave Weckl's two-strainer snare. I like Steve Gadd's drum a lot, too. Also, Yamaha is about to come out with a new line of snare drums that will be amazing. I've never come up with my own signature snare, because I don't *need* to—there's nothing I need that I can't get from the choices I already have. When I tour, I take one of my own kits, but I often go out for shorter gigs where it doesn't make sense to fly out all my gear. But no matter where I show up, the set always sounds phenomenal. Any Yamaha kit off any rental floor is like that. It's a testament to how good the drums are."

Yet Kunkel's most important gear remains his ears. "When other drummers ask me how to get into the studio business, I say, 'You have to listen. If you listen, what's needed will become apparent. And if you have no ideas, maybe that's because there's nothing for you to do!' Never do what you *think* someone wants you to do, because that kind of second-guessing never works."