



DRUMMING
BOP To
POP

"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED WITH EVERY ASPECT of what you can do on the drum set," says New York-based drummer Allison Miller. Given her resume, that open-ended attitude is hardly a surprise.

Miller has worked with some of the leading lights of jazz, including Dr. Lonnie Smith, Marty Ehrlich, Myra Melford, and Mike Stern. But she's equally at ease accompanying singer-songwriters such as Ani DiFranco, Brandi Carlile and Natalie Merchant. "I just finished up a two-month tour with Brandi," says Miller. "And the very next evening I had an instrumental jazz gig with my own band."



Does she find it difficult shifting gears like that?

“Not really,” she shrugs. “I didn’t feel rusty at all. I used to have a harder time making the adjustment, but now switching styles has become natural for me. I don’t know if it’s maturity, but it doesn’t seem to be an issue.”

Allison has been drumming since age ten. “I was very serious about it right from the beginning,” she recalls. “I was one of those fortunate ones who knew what they wanted from a very young age.”

By that point, Miller was already playing piano. “The piano experience definitely influenced my drumming,” she notes. “For one thing, it taught me to appreciate the form of a well-written song. It also opened up my ears. Obviously I gravitated to the rhythmic side of music, but piano made me aware of melody. I’ve always heard drums in a melodic way. When I’m playing improvisational gigs or soloing, I never hear rudiments or drumming technique—just melody.”

Miller started out as a fan of R&B, soul and funk music, smitten by Prince and Earth, Wind & Fire. But her allegiance shifted to jazz once she started studying with Walter Salb, a leading drum teacher in her native Washington, D.C. She started playing jazz gigs, was featured in *Downbeat*, and graduated from West Virginia University with a Bachelor of Music Performance degree.

“When I moved to New York City, I was only playing jazz,” she remembers. “Roy Haynes and Ed Blackwell ruled my world. Tony Williams and Elvin Jones were huge influences, too. I don’t think I listened to one mainstream record between the ages of 18 and 25. But then things started changing for me. Probably the best break I got was getting called to audition for Natalie Merchant. I got that gig, and then I started spreading my wings in different ways.”

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Whether she’s performing a big mainstream show or an intimate jazz gig, Miller plays Yamaha drums. “Yamah drums are the best drums made today. They’re incredibly consistent, and they always have a beautiful, resonant tone. I have an Absolute Birch kit and an Absolute Maple kit. Those two woods are very different, yet both kits sound warm and round, but never wimpy—they’re hefty and strong. I also feel Yamaha makes the best hardware. It’s sturdy, but not too heavy, and it’s the easiest hardware to manipulate, as far as getting the exact cymbal position or the right tension for the bass drum pedal.”

Miller’s favorite snare drums are also Yamahas. “I use a Roy Haynes signature snare, which is amazing for both jazz and more mainstream music. I love its old-school muffling system. You don’t need gel or tape or fancy heads with built-in rings—you just turn the little dial. And when I played with Ani DiFranco, we added a second snare, a Paul Leim signature, tuning it down and using an old head to get that Al Green studio sound. It sounded so good that the production manager nicknamed it ‘Catnip.’”

Allison tends to use her birch kit for jazz and her maple kit for mainstream and rock, but not exclusively. “I just try to go with what’s right for the music,” she says. “Sometimes I mix and match. Maybe I want a big 24-inch bass drum, but not the big toms, so I’ll put in the 12-inch birch rack tom.”

There are several constants, however: Miller always plays a four-piece kit. She always prefers a floor tom with legs. And she’s obsessed with optimal drum tuning. “I’m very particular about that,” Allison says. “I have to tune my drums differently for every situation.”

Not that she’s complaining. “I just love playing different types of music,” Miller says. “You have to approach each situation differently, but from the same personality. I like switching it up every once in a while. There’s something very fulfilling about playing all different types of music.”