



THE DIVERSIFIED DRUMMER

It's no secret that these can be tough times for working musicians. But drummer Dan Needham has overcome adversity via sheer talent, a positive attitude, and a multifaceted approach to the industry.

"Diversity provides stability in unstable times," says Needham, speaking from his Nashville home. "I saw the writing on the wall about the way the industry was going about a dozen years ago. I realized that besides doing sessions, it would benefit me to get into songwriting and producing, so I signed a publishing deal and got into production."

So when Dan isn't in Nashville's top studios drumming with the likes of Michael McDonald, Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Garth Brooks, CeCe Winans, Vanessa Williams, and Charlie Peacock, he's participating in songwriting sessions, or producing such artists as John Schlitt, Paul Wilbur, and The Katinas.

Dan says his production experience has influenced the way he drums. "Now when I work as a drummer, I'm more likely to think in terms of what a producer wants to hear, as opposed to what a drummer might want to play. I'm more likely to think in terms of the arrangement or the chord progression."



Central to Dan's career strategy is a well-equipped home studio with a tracking room large enough to accommodate an entire band. "Sometimes it's just more economically feasible to track in a home studio," he notes. "When I first came to Nashville in the early '90s, a budget for a Christian album might be \$100,000, and \$200,000 was not uncommon. Nowadays it's more like \$25,000. But with my own studio, clients can get great-sounding tracks economically."

The home studio also lets Dan collaborate remotely with clients. "I work with clients from all over the map. Brazil. Italy. I just did a record with a producer in South Africa. I was here doing drum tracks, and he was there with his artist, and we were all talking on Skype."

It helps that Dan is skilled in many musical styles. "Most successful session guys I know are pretty fluent that way," he says. "In one week, I may go from a Southern gospel session to a chart-reading big-band thing to a rock thing to a Latin thing."

"THE RESONANCE, THE WARMTH, AND THE ATTACK OF THESE DRUMS ARE SUPREME. AND THAT'S NOT JUST ME SAYING THAT—IT'S THE FEEDBACK I GET FROM CLIENTS."

He credits this versatility to his musical education. "My dad was a drummer, and my mom played keyboards," he says. "My mother was adamant about finding me a teacher who could teach me everything, not just rock-and-roll. I had a great teacher growing up in upstate New York named Brad Nemcek. We'd work on jazz drums, rock drums, Latin, vibes, everything. One summer I borrowed the school's timpani, and we worked on that. My mother wasn't incredibly happy about having those big tympani in the living room, though she kept some of her potted plants on them while I wasn't playing."

Dan has used a variety of maple and birch Yamaha kits over the years. These days his favorite is a burgundy-sparkle Absolute Maple. "I have a 22" kick, a 24" kick, tom sizes 10", 12", 13", 14", 16", and 18". It's an awesome kit, because I can hit any style with it. I can go from big, lush, adult-contemporary sounds to aggressive rock to jazz. They're incredibly flexible from a tuning standpoint. I can get low fundamental tones or crank them way up. The resonance, the warmth, and the attack of these drums are supreme. And that's not just me saying that—it's the feedback I get from clients. I love this kit."

Dan also boasts a large collection of Yamaha snares, though he has trouble singling out a favorite. "I love the chrome-over-brass Paul Leim Signature Snares. I have the 6.5" and the 5", and they're both brilliant. I love the Roy Haynes hammered-copper snare. The Manu Katché signature snare is fantastic. I also love the Akira Jimbo, though I don't tune it like Akira does—I tune it really low and put a couple of gels on it. You get this tight, fat, chest-punching sound like drums recorded in the '70s. And the cross-stick sound is *amazing*."

From constructing his kits to managing his career, Dan's byword is adaptability. "When I first got into the music scene, times were already changing," he recalls. "Established players were either adapting or getting bitter. I made a conscious decision to be one of the guys who wanted to change and grow, and not one of the old codgers who sat around complaining. Because you can adapt and continue on, or you can just get bitter and fade away."