

Photo: Alex Solca

No Holding Back!

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yamaha all access

It’s hard to believe that the spectacular success of the Dave Matthews Band began with a shy conversation.

“I always used to see this ponytail-wearing kid when I’d gig with Secrets, this jazz fusion group I used to play with,” recalls DMB drummer Carter Beauford. “We never talked until one day in 1990, when he came up and said he’d always wanted me to play on one of his songs. I heard three or four of his tunes, and I was blown away. It wasn’t complex music, but the way he played and sang was so unique, I knew I wanted to be part of it.”

And then everything clicked, right?

“No!” laughs Beauford. “The first couple of rehearsals sounded like absolute crap! But after a while we started to develop our chemistry. We began playing our first four or five tunes for free at after-hours parties. People started to dig them and spread the word. Meanwhile we were rehearsing, getting tighter, writing new tunes. It just all came about for us — with a lot of work.”

Beauford isn’t kidding about the “work” part. The unique bond between the Dave Matthews Band and their audience has everything to do with the group’s intensity and conviction in concert, the sense that they are holding nothing back.

The fans’ dedication simply mirrors that of the band. Perhaps more than any other drummer in a current mega-platinum band, Beauford has free reign to follow his muse. Never restricted to simple, repetitious patterns, the Charlottesville, Virginia, native gives his Yamaha Recording Custom kit a thorough workout every night. His fire and virtuosity reflect the impact of a defining moment in his life: the Buddy Rich gig he attended at age three.

Beauford, now on tour with his bandmates in support of the group’s latest release, *Busted Stuff*, recently spoke with Joe Testa of Yamaha Drums about that unforgettable night, other influences, and the explosive style they helped shape.

What do you remember about that first Buddy Rich gig?

“First of all, I remember how excited my dad was. I knew there was something special going on. But when the band came out, all I could focus on was Buddy. I barely knew what was going on — I still don’t today! — but there was just something special about the way he played and conducted the band. His movements and the sounds that came out of his drums captivated me and inspired me to play drums. After that night I started pounding away on everything, trying to imitate Buddy. I was gluing Popsicle sticks together, beating on everything I could find.”

So your folks recognized your enthusiasm right away?

“Absolutely. My dad was a great man. He knew right off the bat that this was something I would stick with, so he went out and got me a kit. The rest is history.”

Were there other musicians in your family?

“My dad was a trumpet player. My mom played piano. My brother played bass. Later my younger sister played piano and flute, and then our younger brother took up sax. Everyone played an instrument and sang. There was music in the house all the time, every day.”

What kinds of music?

“My dad played jazz, and my mom always played gospel records, like Mahalia Jackson and Shirley Caesar. At some point I broke away into the music kids my age were getting into: the Beatles, the Dave Clark Five, the Monkees. And on the funk side, there was James Brown and Sly & the Family Stone, and then there was the whole Motown thing. I was just trying to take it all in.”

There don’t seem to be as many innovative and influential styles today as when you were coming up.

“I think that’s true, and it’s kind of scary. Sometimes it seems like the real music is being pushed aside. It’s being cheated. I see more cats getting into the music business trying to become stars. You mention, say, a scale, and they look at you like you’re crazy. But there are always a handful of cats out there trying to keep it real. And as long as there are at least a few of them, there will be something real for people to listen to.”

At what point did you start studying jazz seriously?

“When I got into high school and college, partly because all my peers were into it. I was studying Tony Williams, Jack DeJohnette, all the cats. And then came the fusion thing, with Return to Forever and so forth. A lot of the bands I played with in the late-’70s and early-’80s had a lot of fusion to them. Disco and punk rock were happening too, and we had to do all sorts of gigs to make the money. But we still incorporated fusion and jazz elements, even on the strictly moneymaking gigs. Jazz-fusion will always be with me. It will never leave.”

What did you take from Tony Williams?

“He totally changed the way I approach tunes. The first time I heard him, he was doing the straight-ahead thing with Miles. But later, when he played in Lifetime, I noticed how he wasn’t just keeping time but playing melodically throughout. Tony’s playing erased the boring notion of drums just keeping time for everyone else in the group. Any musician should be able to keep time! Drums should be more than just that. I could never play like Tony, but I try to speak melodically the way he did.”

Any other crucial influences?

“David Garibaldi from Tower of Power and Clyde Stubblefield from James Brown’s band. Their styles are totally different, but they share the idea of laying down a funk thing backed up by hi-hat rhythms and ghost snare notes. They taught me how to

play outside the groove and dance a little more. Steve Gadd and Dennis Chambers are two more cats who have mastered that style of playing.”

What can young players learn from old-school players like them?

“I use the analogy of baking a cake. You have to learn the basic ingredients. If you don’t have those, you’ll never have a nice-tasting cake. Never. It doesn’t matter what instrument you play — you always have to go back to the influential cats who invented those ingredients. Study them. Critique them. See if you can figure out what made them great. Once you understand that, then you can start to develop your own flavors and spices. But until you get those basic ingredients in your musical cookbook, you will always have a sophomore sound. You need to learn the recipes the older cats laid down before you can bake something new.”

Should every drummer have a firm foundation in the rudiments?

“Well, there are a lot of cats who never use that stuff and are still great, but I still recommend that all musicians learn the fundamentals of their ax. For drummers, that means learning those rudiments. Get your chops happening. Always strive for perfection. It’s also important to play as many gigs as possible. Practicing in your basement is good, but that’s the only place you’ll ever play if you don’t

learn how to work with other cats. You need to have that hands-on experience in order to make the whole thing work.”

You get to cut loose more than a lot of current rock drummers. How do you balance freedom and control?

“It’s all about feel. Everything I play is based on what I hear from the other guys and what I feel about what

they’re playing. Sometimes it doesn’t work. Sometimes it does. But it’s always about feel.”

Do the guys ever say, “Dude, chill out?” Do they ever ask you to hold back?

“They never do, but I’m quite hard on myself that way. When I catch myself doing more than is required, I shut it down myself. For example, since I’m so used to playing with a percussionist, when I’m not playing with one, I sometimes try to add those parts, and the result can be overkill. I’m always watching myself.”

The story is that your latest album, *Busted Stuff*, sat on the shelf for a long time.

“We first recorded the music two years ago with producer Steve Lillywhite. Unfortunately, we weren’t in the best space as a band to write and record at the time. The energy was a little bloody and ugly. We needed a musical and scenic change, so we decided to take those tunes on tour. They were well received, but there were still traces of bad energy from the studio, so we decided to put the songs away. Don’t get me wrong — I always loved the tunes, and I thought they were recorded well. But we didn’t want that energy to be released.”

Then what happened?

“Then Glenn Ballard came along, and he co-wrote and produced the collection of songs that became *Everyday*. Meanwhile, someone stole the incomplete *Busted Stuff* tunes and posted them on the Internet. That ticked us off because they weren’t finished. The meal just wasn’t cooked, and you don’t serve people raw meat unless they ask for it! So we decided to finish those tunes the way they should have been done with Steve Harris producing. And in the end, everything turned out really cool.”

What comparisons can you make between the way those three producers work with drums?

“Steve Lillywhite is a great producer with definite opinions about drums. He would move them exhaustingly from room to room, trying to get the sound he heard in his head. The only problem was that it wasn’t always the sound I wanted for a particular tune. It was cool that he thought about the drums so much, but he didn’t recognize the fact that you sometimes have to follow a drummer’s signature sound. With both Steve Lillywhite and Glenn Ballard, it sometimes felt as if the producer was deciding my

sound for me. Steve Harris, on the other hand, allowed the drums to sound like my drums. Putting a bunch of effects on your instrument — or any other sound that just isn’t you — can be disrespectful to the player and the instrument. Sometimes you have to speak up and say, ‘Let’s not tamper with this particular sound.’”

How long have you been playing Yamaha drums?

“I got my first Yamaha kit in 1978 because my hero, Steve Gadd, used them. I still play a black Recording Custom kit because of him. But then I found out why he played Yamaha. Their sound is easy to listen to. They’re easy to tune, and they stay in tune. I’ve played some drums that made me feel half-dead at the end of the night, because the drums have beaten me up, instead of me beating the drums. But when I finish a gig on the Yamaha’s, I have a sweet taste in my mouth and energy to spare.”

How did you arrive at your particular combination of drum sizes?

“It evolved from the beginning. I really dug the multi-tom kits of drummers like Harvey Mason, Billy Cobham, and Lenny White back in the ‘70s. Melodic toms always seemed fascinating and cool to me. They looked cool, too, though after I matured a bit as a drummer, I realized it was more about the sound than the look.”

Do you tune them differently for live and studio work?

“The tuning is pretty close for both, though we try to get the drums to ring a little more in the studio. Back in the ‘70s, the thing was to muffle your drums to the point where they sounded like cardboard boxes. That’s not the style anymore. I guess we try to get as much ring as we can without it being overbearing. We want it to sound as live as possible, but with that studio spice to it.”

How can parents encourage their kids in music like your folks encouraged you?

“Introduce the kid to the things you think they may be interested in, but don’t push them. Pushing kids into piano or drums lessons can turn them off to music permanently. Let the kid have fun with it! My dad never forced me to do anything. After he saw my eyes sparkling at that Buddy Rich show, he just put



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a drum kit down in front of me and let me do my thing. He encouraged me, but he let me make my own choices.”

Anything you’d like to add?

“Yes. For all you students out there: The thing to do is practice, listen, and check out as much live music as you can. Put yourself in as many live playing situations as possible, in as many styles as possible. That’s the best way to grow as a musician — and as a person. Put all those things together, and you have



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CARTER’S YAMAHA KIT

Black Recording Custom kit

- BD-922YT 22 x 18 bass drum
- SD-655RH 14 x 5.5 Roy Haynes Signature Copper snare drum
- TT-908Y 8 x 8 tom
- TT-910Y 10 x 9 tom
- TT-912Y 12 x 10 tom
- TT-913Y 13 x 11 tom
- TT-914Y 14 x 12 tom
- FT-918Y 18 x 16 floor tom

Hardware:

- AC-910 open multi-clamp (with arm and swivel)
- CH-740 cymbal holders (3x)
- CH-745 cymbal holders (5x)
- CHH-920 closed hi-hat holder
- CS-945 cymbal stand (5x)
- CSAT-920 tiered cymbal attachment
- CSAT-924 open multi-clamp
- DS-1100 hydraulic drum stool
- RS115-4 rack pipe
- RS130-5 rack pipe (2x)