

# new colors for david gray

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Singer/songwriter David Gray has never shied away from change. After cutting his teeth in punk bands as a teenager in Wales, he about-faced into a simple voice-and-guitar style. But after three folk-flavored albums, Gray decided to expand his palette with keyboards, drum machines, and samples on his latest release, *White Ladder*.

## SOMETHING CLICKED.

CRITICS AND A MODEST CORE of fans had embraced Gray's acoustic albums, but *White Ladder*, released on Dave Matthews' According To Our Records label, made Gray an international star. His performances are as emotionally committed as ever, only now he electrifies arenas rather than pubs.

Gray offers no simple explanation. "I'm committed to being utterly noncommittal on the subject of what makes a good song," he chuckles. "I'm as mystified now as when I started. I'm no closer to understanding the difference between the ingredients of a really great song and a mediocre one."

As Gray's music incorporates new colors, David has gravitated toward composing at the keyboard. "I find that something quite different happens when I write at the piano, as opposed to the guitar," he notes. "The guitar has more of a rhythmic side, whereas the piano lets you use the space between chords, especially when you leave them hanging with the sustain pedal." Onstage, Gray plays a Yamaha DGT7 digital piano. "It looks and feels like a real piano," he says. "The action seems more genuine, with a more realistic feel than other weighted-key controllers I've tried. It just feels good."

Gray's songs spring from his instruments. "I always begin with music and rhythm," he says. "Eventually something catches my ear, and I start looking for other progressions that go from there. Then I search for a melody within the chords. If something starts to happen, I'll go over it a few times to remember it, and then look for some other good moves. Only then do I start thinking about writing an actual song with lyrics."

Sometimes the process yields fast results. "For example," says Gray, "I sat down with a keyboard playing a weird

little string pad, laid a couple of chords over it, and 'Please Forgive Me' was finished in about 45 minutes."

Yet David doesn't subscribe to the conventional songwriting wisdom that the best tunes always come quickly. "Inspiration is a dangerous thing," he suggests. "It's not necessarily something you can trust. I've written songs in a half-hour thinking that the fact that they came to me in a flash made them fantastic—only to realize a few days later that they were awful. On the other hand, I came up with the 'White Ladder' chord sequence 10 years before I recorded it. We were just messing around with loops and sounds one day, and I realized my old idea fit over them perfectly. So that song came in a flash, but its moment only arrived after 10 years. And 'Babylon'—probably the best known of my songs—sembled itself in a very unspectacular way over a couple of weeks as I was working on other things. It just completed itself without me noticing."

Will Gray continue down the path of sonic experimentation? "Absolutely," he says. "There are parts of me that would love to do a simple record with, say, piano, acoustic guitar, and a double bass. But right now I'm restless to get really hands-on with sound. I've been listening to all sorts of great records lately, like weird European ambient dance music full of odd noises that sound like a rustling leaf in an elevator shaft or someone banging a metal cable. I'm really interested in bands that turn music on its head by using samples and such—groups like Radiohead, Flaming Lips, Massive Attack. I'm not sure what's going to happen to my writing until I get into the studio again, though I know I want to go even further in the direction that *White Ladder* started to go in. It feels like there is new terrain to be had. And bloody hell, music could use a little more of that!"

YAMAHA