

Shannon Larkin and Sully Erna: Sma ckin' the Skins

RARELY DO TWO DRUMMERS—IN THE SAME BAND, NO LESS—AGREE AS completely as Shannon Larkin and bandleader Sully Erna of Godsmack. Now on tour with their latest album, *Faceless*, Larkin and Erna spoke to us during a recent soundcheck about the roots of Godsmack's brand of heavy, drum-centric hard rock.

Though Erna now fronts the band, most of his musical career has been spent behind the skins—a perspective that has definitely influenced his approach to songwriting. "To me it all starts with the drums," he says. "I'm a big fan of groove. That's what Godsmack was built on, even if I play guitar or sing. Since I've been a drummer for so long, everything is based on rhythm. I'm not the best guitar player, and I definitely don't credit myself as a great singer, but I find rhythm within it. To me, I'm just playing drum beats with my mouth or my hand."

Larkin joined the band less than a year ago, but he and Erna go way back. The two first met in the mid-1980s when Larkin was touring with his first band, Wrathchild. According to Erna, "Shannon was a strong influence on me. His style, his showmanship—it was all so inspiring, a whole different way to approach the kit." Larkin concurs: "Back in the '80s, I was a big inspiration on Sully's playing, so nowadays our styles are very similar. All he has to do is throw a riff and normally what I play, he's like, 'perfect—that's what I would have played!'"

Also central to Erna and Larkin's shared taste is their deep respect for Rush's Neal Peart and Led Zeppelin's John Bonham. "I'm attracted to the simplicity of Bonham's style, and how hard he hit," says Erna. "And Neal's playing was so tasteful, so clear and crisp and precise. It was easy to hear and understand, although it wasn't the easiest thing to play."

"I definitely worship at the Bonham altar," Larkin says. "When he died, I was at school. The principal came over the PA calling me to the office, and I thought 'oh, what'd I do now?' And my mom's waiting there—she got me out of school as if a family member had died, 'cause she knew what a hero he was to me."

The two drummers also strongly agree on another point: the superiority of Yamaha drums.

Erna began playing Yamaha in 1993 while drumming for the band Strip Mind. "I'd never played a Yamaha kit before and didn't

know anything about them—I was just excited to get a new kit! It was a Rock Tour Custom, cobalt blue—they were beautiful and sounded great. I still have that same drum set, and it's a lot more beat up now—these drums have been painted over three times, and thrown out of vans, and pretty much abused because of being on the road when I was younger—but it's still my best-sounding drum set. I like the way the toms resonate, their tightness and consistency. They have just enough ring but not this never-ending decay. The birch seems to absorb the sound just enough."

Larkin adds, "When I first joined the band, Sully came in and said, 'I'm not telling you what to do, but I'm just going to bring in my Yamaha kit and set it up in front of you.' So I played my own kit, then the Yamaha one, and I couldn't believe how much better the Yamahas sounded. The kick had great low end, feel, tone—it was just perfect. Right in the room, it sounded like it would on a record after the producer does all his tricks. The toms sounded more live than any toms I've ever hit. They really are the best drums I've ever played."

Larkin's current snare is a 14" Roy Haynes Signature Snare Drum. "That snare made it onto every song on the new record except one," he claims. "That drum has it all—crack, body, warmth, depth—it's just the best sounding snare I've heard, including some vintage ones I've used for years."

With so much in common, it's not surprising that band dynamics in Godsmack are positive. "This band is really tight; we have a lot of fun and love what we do," says Larkin. "A lot of times bands fall apart, and it's always the same thing: money, ego, drugs, or alcohol. We have none of those issues. Everybody here believes you have to have a leader, and Sully's our leader. He's very diplomatic and democratic, but ultimately he's in charge. You sometimes have to kill your ego and trust in somebody to make it all work."

"Even if I play guitar or sing, to me I'm just playing drum beats with my mouth or my hand."

