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EDG: What should be in every touring tech's toolbox?

SR: Great question. I tour with a fairly large road case filled with a multitude of things ranging from cleaning products, tools, such as a cordless drill and soldering iron, spare drum and hardware parts, cables and whatever will get the job done. However, oftentimes I'll get to work at a television show, and for one reason or another, my case won't be with me, so I'll have to grab just the things that are most crucial. Usually that's a drum key, gaff tape, a small selection of tools and my flashlight because I'm often working in the dark.

EDG: Is heavy-duty hardware overkill or a must?

SR: It's certainly not overkill. Everyone I've worked for plays just a little harder live than they do in rehearsals. Seeing double-braced, heavy-duty hardware hold its ground is a comforting thing. For me, it takes less effort to secure heavy hardware to the drum riser and leaves me with less to worry about.

EDG: Which parts should always have spares?

SR: In my toolbox, I always have a selection of snare wires, tension rods, drum keys, cymbal stand wing screws, snare string and tape. I also keep a couple of different manufacturers' hi-hat clutches, snare strainers and bass pedal parts. It's a good idea to have a little of everything handy if at all possible.

EDG: Are sizes relative to each drummer, or are they dictated by sound and venue size?

SR: I have never been in a situation where drum size was determined by venue size. In some cases, drummers use what they have for years, like Mick Fleetwood. Or with Jimmy Paxson, who I happen to be working with now on the upcoming Stevie Nicks tour, he chose drum sizes that best suit the music.

SR: I can only say that being well rounded is the key. The more you know about everything happening relative to the gig, the better. When it comes to monitor mixes, I've found it best to act as a communication conduit between drummers and monitor engineers. Oftentimes, however, it can be best to just stay out of the way.

EDG: What are some tricks to ensure the identical set-up night after night?

SR: This is a tricky one because there are some secrets I can't give away. I will say that, for me, it's important to sit behind the drums and get a sense of the spatial relationship between all the drums and cymbals. Also, it's important to take note of any strange angles. The slightest rotation of a snare drum stand can really throw players off. In some situations, detailed measurements are necessary but most of the time, marking on the drum riser (a.k.a. spike marks) will generally ensure consistent placement each night.

Steve Rinkov began his music career as a drummer in Southern California. From there, he moved to Seattle, where he opened a small, but well-known drum shop in the area called The Drum Garage. His first experience with teching began in 2000 when he joined the Lenny Kravitz camp and worked for Lenny on the “Lenny” record. Soon following, Steve toured with Fleetwood Mac on their very successful “Say You Will” tour, not only working with Mick Fleetwood’s elaborate set-up, but also joining Mick on drums for several songs each night. In 2004, Steve leched for both Taku Hirano and Teddy Campbell on the road with Bette Midler, and this year he’s been in the studio with Matt Cameron and the boys from Pearl Jam on their upcoming CD release.
EDGE: Who inspired you to get started and who keeps you going?

Carl Allen: Oh boy, well, there’s so many. With respect to drummers, I tend to believe that we all have what I would call our “Fab Five.” These are five people that as a drummer, you really identify with, and for me, that would be Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Roy Haynes and Billy Higgins. Spending countless hours around all of these gentlemen, every time they would play, it was about just being in the moment, and it’s about the way that they were able to live their life experience through their instrument. That being said, there are others who also inspired me in terms of the way that they would play. You know, people like Bobby Hutchinson, McCoy Tyner, Joe Henderson and Freddie Hubbard. Every time they played their instrument, it was the most important time of their life.

Mike Clark: Well, my father was a drummer, and he had a hell of a jazz record collection. So, even before age three and four, they would put me in the front room in a bassinet down by the record player, so my brain had absorbed all this Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis. I started playing when I was four. My father brought his drumset down from the attic, and I was a natural; I started playing and it made sense, and it swung right off the bat. I remember doing it; it was kind of a tom-tom type of solo, and it wasn’t like a little kid just banging things—and I’ve been playing ever since then. And I could name off all of my heroes, which is almost everybody who has played jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, and blues. There are very few people that I don’t like and that haven’t inspired me in some way. Personally, Herbie Hancock has inspired me tremendously—to be different and to not play what everybody else is playing. I was playing along the lines of Elvin and Tony and Philly Joe [Jones]—not that I could play like those guys, but along those lines.

And when I met Herbie, he just sort of said, “I don’t want to hear that. I know all those guys real well: Tony’s my best friend. If I wanted them, I’d call ‘em. I want you to do something different.”

Billy Kilson: I would say in the order of Lenny White, Tony, and Philly Joe. Those are the guys that brought me to Boston. I started playing when I was sixteen, so when I heard Lenny White, I said, “Oh my God. I definitely want to play drums for sure.” So I quit playing football when I heard Lenny White. And then when I heard Tony, I thought, “What the hell is this?” Then, I get to Boston, and I hear Philly Joe. And those three guys, I would probably represent jazz playing. They’re like the corners of the triangle—Lenny represents the fusion funk side, Tony represents the jazz fused with the fusion stuff, and Philly Joe represents my traditional side. But what gets me up to play drums everyday, what gets me up night after night, day after day, studio session after studio session—bar none—is my teacher, Alan Dawson. This is going to really sound strange, but I listen to Rachmaninoff’s “Preludes” a lot. I also listen to some of the new metal stuff, like Crisis and the Metallica stuff. I’ve just been re-introduced to Joni Mitchell and Donald Fagan stuff, and definitely a lot of hip-hop stuff, like Jill Scott.

Gary Novak: Being involved in a lot of different types of music, I have a lot of different inspirations. I would say lately, what’s really getting me back into playing would be listening to older Keith Jarrett records. I like a lot of piano trio music, ‘cause it’s an open format for jazz musicians. When you get three guys, the freedom is the most wide open. You can go in many different directions; you’re not dealing with more minds that have to be in the same place. Also a bunch of these early ECM records, with Keith, Jack DeJohnette and Gary Peacock. That’s some of the greatest music that’s ever been recorded. Keith Jarrett is a modern day Mozart.

When you listen to people like Keith, it can almost make you feel like quitting because he’s so unbelievably great that it’s hard to even relate. I also listen to a lot of Bill Stewart. A lot of the music he gets involved in, aside from his great playing, is the stuff I’m really into. It’s pretty conceptually cool, and they’re taking chances in an environment musically where taking chances are really frowned upon. So, what’s been keeping me going lately is just listening to some of the more revolutionary music of the early ’70s and some of the younger guys now that are at least trying to do the same thing.

Billy Ward: Louie Bellson was the first clinic I ever saw. I was nine years old. My drumming hero list then expanded to include Buddy Rich, Ringo...really everybody. Nowadays, it’s not so much “who” as “what” inspires me, and that is a great song or piece of music. Sometimes, if I haven’t played for a couple of days, I forget how much fun drumming is!

EDGE: Well, as is the case with so many genres of music, jazz is divided up into these sub-categories. There’s straight-ahead bop, and there’s swing, and cool jazz, and the stuff that Miles initiated. If you had to encapsulate jazz into one specific category or give someone just one jazz record to exemplify the genre, what would that be?

CA: One of the things that jazz is, and I say this very tenderly, is the freedom of expression. But when we talk about that, there are still certain boundaries. I think that the foundation of this music is a feeling, and that feeling is swing, that defines or separates what jazz is or what it isn’t. But it’s also about improvisation. I would easily say Kind of Blue. With Coltrane I would easily say A Love Supreme...and there’s the other stuff. There’s the big band stuff. One of my favorite records would be Thad Jones/ Mel Lewis Orchestra Presenting Joe Williams. And that’s something completely different. What Joe brings to the table is...
MC: I think I’d give them *Milestones* with Philly Joe Jones and God, that’s a hard question because there’s so many. I think that one captures most of it, most of the jazz feel and the jazz language. It’s what swinging is all about. I’m not saying that it’s full of inventions like some records are, but it encapsulates jazz history. I see a lot of people playing jazz now, and the swing quotient is not happening, but they have tons of technique. Most of us have the instincts to be able to swing or we wouldn’t be playing drums, so I don’t really buy into, “This guy can swing,” or, “This guy can’t swing.” If someone practices a bunch of technique, then they should really practice swinging and really knowing how to lay that quarter note, and how to get nasty with it. And I can think of some drummers that come to mind right now that can really lay a nasty pocket up in there, and stack all kinds of stuff up against it. To me, the primary thing is the quarter-note. Being able to swing and really lay it in there. And in that way, there is no such nonsense, like, on top of the beat, behind the beat, in the middle of the beat, you just swing or you don’t.

BK: This is true to form for a jazz musician; we hate categorizing the music. If I was to give something to my mother-in-law, who probably never listens to jazz, the first thing I would lay on her would probably be *Kind of Blue*. I see it as a true representation of the old be-bop, the new sounds—there were new harmonies that were introduced in that music that we take for granted today when we hear all music post-Fifties. And for the listener, it’s easier on the ear. It’s the biggest selling jazz record today, so it’s easy to pick *Kind of Blue*. And for the jazz musician that is serious about playing, I would pick that too, and then I would pick *A Love Supreme* with [John] Coltrane. The performance on there, that’s the quintessence. It’s unbelievable. It’s hard to pick any other albums.

GN: To me, it’s an era more than a record. It’s that whole era of 1963 through 1972. That’s when they, really, in my very humble opinion, took all the basics of be-bop, and they took that repertoire and started to loosen it up a little bit and not be so regimented about structured bar lines or form. Music at that point really started to take its foundation and then knock walls down. So they had the ability to improvise over form, but at that era, form started to become less important. So it was really, truly improvised music.

BW: I would say swing is my pick for jazz “DNA,” but I’d rather not break it down like that. For example, which rock style is the most revealing—hard to tell. Louis Armstrong is a great start for listening to jazz, but my very first jazz record was [Dave] Brubeck. Most folks get into a new music form by listening to something “in the middle” like Brubeck, and then we become explorers and seek out what happened before and after our first experience.

EDGE: Which other genres of music have affected your playing or your style?

CA: Oh man, first and foremost, gospel music. I grew up listening to gospel music and my mother was a gospel singer for as long as I can remember. And I grew up playing in church, and that music was everywhere around us. But also, the thing that influenced me was just early R&B stuff. Well, maybe not so early, but ’70s R&B and soul music from the ’60s. All of that being said, I grew up in an era where musicians could actually play and sing, and being able to program something didn’t constitute you being a musician. Not to say that there’s something wrong with that, but I was just from an era in which, if you were a singer, you really had to be able to sing. And you weren’t really considered a singer unless you could bring tears to someone’s eyes. But, those styles of music were very influential for me. And I think the backbone behind all of these different genres is the feeling of the music. Because whether it’s gospel, or whether it’s some old Sam Cook, or whether it’s Parliament and Funkadelic, or whether it’s Miles and Funk Williams, the thing that is the common link between all of these styles of music is the feeling. The feeling that it gave you when you listened to it; it gave you the ability to take you somewhere else. You can listen to this music and it can take you somewhere else.

MC: “Soul music” in the ’60s hit me right smack between the eyes—and every offshoot of that, pre- and post-Motown, all of the Staxx stuff…Also, I lived in Texas and I had a hell of a blues background as a child. I played with many, many, many famous blues cats before I was even eighteen because I worked in this club where they all used to come through. It wasn’t like I was in their band, but I’d back them up for a week at a time, and so I really learned how to play the shuffle.

BK: When I was working with Dave Holland, my wife introduced me to Rachmaninoff. One of the very first preludes that I like—it’s sort of like a five over four kind of figure—but it sounds like triplets, and it feels so even. And if anyone knows anything about Dave Holland’s music, we’re playing a lot of odd-meter stuff. Elvin would say that he wouldn’t hear time as like this up-and-down, left-or-right kind of thing. If you look at the clock, the time would start at the twelve and then slowly move around, and then the twelve would be one, and there’s no one, two, three, four in between that. There’s just one, go around the clock, and there’s one again. That’s what kind of turned me on. You can hear those influences definitely when I played with Dave Holland, and you can hear a lot of hip-hop influences, too. And more recently, I’ve been playing with Chris Botti. You’ll probably hear more of the metal or the Joni Mitchell influences now.

GN: Playing jazz is definitely more about perpetual motion; you need to keep thinking forward. And sometimes, when you’re playing eighth note music, it’s kind of in the middle of the beat. You’re not thinking rushing, you’re not thinking really laid back, it’s in the middle. And sometimes that concept doesn’t necessarily work for playing jazz; it sounds like you’re holding the band back. I think I get a little heavy-handed, and a little bit too in the middle of the beat, instead of on the top end of the beat sometimes. But that’s just from being infiltrated by one style of music more than another. You know, your roles are very different in those two different elements. When you’re playing vocal music, you’re supporting a lyric and a poem and a story, but in jazz, the music is the story and the journey is the story. In rock, it’s almost like classical; you play the music as written. You’re playing a song, you’re playing a part,
and you have to play it with conviction. In jazz, if you played it that way every night, you’re not playing jazz.

BW: Everything. I like what John Cage once said, “If you want to hear music, go to your window and open it.” Sometimes, the horns honking in Manhattan at rush hour sound like an Ornette Coleman record.

EDGE: Jazz is said to be one of the “true American” art forms, but it’s also been lovingly accepted overseas. What’s been your experience from audiences overseas?

CA: Well, it’s always been a great experience, particularly in Asia, more specifically in Japan. You know, that’s one of my favorite places. When you go there, they’re knowledgeable about the music, they respect the people who play it; and from a business perspective, they treat the musicians with a great deal of respect.

MC: First of all, it’s great that they know who we are (The Headhunters) and know our history. Let’s put it this way—no matter how high you are on the food chain, they know who you’ve played with and they know what you’ve done. I think maybe because of the classical background, they’ve learned to listen deeply. They can hear the conversations between the musicians inside the music. Not that the American audiences can’t, but it’s kind of hard when you’re playing jazz to people who have the mentality of the Spice Girls or something.

GN: Well, there’s absolute truth in everything you just said, in the sense that it is one of the true American art forms. And it definitely has died off in popularity in the United States over the years. I also think that has to do with a generational gap and people that are interested in seeing music that they’re in awe of. I also believe that when kids today go to see music, they actually want to see something that they believe that they can do or understand immediately without any effort. I just think that the younger generations have such an instant-gratification mentality these days. If they can’t imagine themselves being able to do that, they don’t want to be involved in it, because it’s something that might be beyond their reach.

MC: Well, I think African-American music, along with the African-American experience, speaks from an observer’s point of view, and all of the cause and effect related to that situation rippled right through the artform like a rock in a pond. You throw a rock in a pond, and you create a wake. So, that same effect probably kept it, and is still keeping it, under the radar. I also think the music is emotionally rich and really deep, so you have to dig down.

GW: I’ve heard for the last twenty years, you know, “It’s on it’s way back, it’s on it’s way back,” but I don’t know about that. But, I do see that there is a serious fuse going on between jazz and hip-hop. Like, if you listen to some of the Jill Scott stuff, you can hear her influences, like Joni Mitchell. But then some of the harmony that’s going on with some of this hip-hop stuff, even Dr. Dre’s, you hear a lot of the jazz influences and they’re using more and more of the jazz musicians these days. And maybe there’s a new sound comin’. Who knows? Everything has its cycle. Duke Ellington and Count Basie, they were the Jill Scotts, or whatever, of the ‘30s and ‘40s. In every club, people were dancing to that music. A year or so ago, I remember seeing this MTV Unplugged thing and it was LL Cool J, and he had live musicians... it was hot. And I think with drummers, it’s kind of fusing the two. Maybe jazz itself will go away in that sense, or it
GN: Listening to jazz is too challenging. At this state, music is to not think anymore. People want to turn on music when they’re at work...when we were kids, we used to listen to music all the way through and not do anything else. Put the headphones on, and stare at the corner and listen—it was an auditory experience. It wasn’t something that had multi-media attached to it.

BW: Well, maybe it hasn’t. Maybe hip-hop hasn’t finished growing. I guess we’ll see. I’d like to add that a pursuit of jazz is incomplete without a total love and embrace of the great blues musicians and rhythm and blues music that beautifully exploded out of the U.S. this last century.

EDGE: Why do you feel jazz is so closely tied to education in this country?

CA: Well, I think that’s happening for a number of different reasons now. I think a big part of it is that the jazz scene has changed quite a bit. There are fewer opportunities to play. There aren’t as many people leading bands as there were, say, twenty years ago. When I first came on the scene, I would get calls to join a band, you know, whether it was Dexter Gordon’s band or Monty Alexander’s band...people who were touring, who were recording, who had an existing identity, as opposed to just someone who had a gig this weekend. I think the other thing is that, because the whole concept of improvisational music is really starting to reach people at a younger age, a lot of the universities are forced to create programs. When I first started college, I started as a classical percussion major because there was no jazz program there. And then I transferred to a school where I could study jazz. But now you have other programs around the country, like at Berklee in Boston. This is what schools are starting to do to try to keep their enrollment up.

GN: A lot of jazz music is harmonically in depth. Each measure of music has different harmony structure, and for the people that have had very little musical education, that can sound cacophonous, you know, arrhythmic or inharmonic.

BW: Why not? It’s a beautiful, complex artform. I’m assuming you mean it’s being taught in universities...or do you mean smart people dig jazz? [laughs]

EDGE: Rock and pop music are so heavily rooted in two and four and kick and snare, yet jazz is obviously more centered on the quarter note and the ride cymbal. Please talk a little bit more about that relationship.

CA: More so than being between the ride cymbal and the hi-hat, I would really focus in on the ride cymbal. The thing that I’ve discovered is that every drummer’s ride cymbal pattern has a shape to it. And when you listen to Billy Higgins, or Art Taylor, or Elvin Jones, whomever, Mel Lewis, you will hear that their ride cymbal has a different shape to it. But what you will also hear is the other limbs helping to support that cymbal. So, in other words, you can’t just play ride pattern A and think that pattern B, and C and D are going to work necessarily, because pattern A has a certain thing to it that has to be supported by the other limbs. So, it’s really about understanding the shape of the ride cymbal, and then from there, seeing how to make everything else fit within that. It’s a conceptual thing.

MC: I think all music owes a huge debt of gratitude to the blues and the people who invented it. That’s where it came from. To me, that’s the bottom line. But yeah, I think pop music definitely revolves around a backbeat, the kick and the snare, both which are easy to feel right away. It’s instant gratification, instant contact. As soon as you hit the bass drum and follow it with a backbeat, you’ve pretty much said it all right there. Whereas in jazz music, it’s really the ride beat. A lot of people think it’s kind of a mental thing about where to place it, but it’s really a definite blues-like feeling—the difference is the bass and the drums. The time is based on the bass player and the ride cymbal. It creates a different, lighter feel. And also there’s room with the cymbal. The cymbal is the kind of instrument that spreads. There’s room to draw one inside of the music as a listener, and there’s room inside that cymbal beat for the musicians to have a conversation with each other.

BK: I’ve boiled it down to a couple of simple things. If you listen to funk, if you listen to rock, and even with jazz, everything is coming from the bass. Everything. The pulse, the sound. But it’s more of a half note. In hip-hop it could be a whole note that could hold over a bar and a half. So it’s coming from the bottom. All that sound and all the pulse in funk, rock and pop music is all coming from the bottom. Hence, the pulse is coming from the bass drum. The backbeat, if you will, is coming off the snare. When you’re playing jazz, we New Yorkers say, “tipping.” And when you’re tipping, the bass player is going to start walking quarter notes, sometimes it might feel like eighth notes, depends on the tempo. And so, the ride cymbal is where the pulse is coming from. Now the snare, that backbeat, has moved to your left, to the hat, now. And the bass drum is more of a filler to enhance the time, not where the time is stemming from. So my pulse is coming from my ride, and my snare is ghosting, and my backbeat is my hat. That tells the band exactly where you are. Now, when I’m doing the pop stuff, I’m gonna smack the hell out of that snare. And that’s where you’re going to hear the beats.

BW: Yeah, the ride and the hat are, in jazz, what the kick and snare are in rock. It’s generally a more fluid feeling in the time, with a different emphasis. In jazz, you can kind of mess with the time, but usually the feel remains constant throughout a piece or solo. In rock, you freely mess with the feel, but the time has to be cement, fixed and unmoving. Of course, this is a generality; there are exceptions.

EDGE: How can drummers better understand that concept of improvisation?

CA: I think the key is through study. You have to listen. Part of my whole mantra about what I’m all about was really based out of a conversation that I had with Dizzy Gillespie. It’s to move forward with a sense of tradition. And Dizzy taught me that all great art was created with a sense of moving forward, but with a sense of understanding what has already taken place, ‘cause you have to understand the legacy that you’re building upon before you can even begin to contribute.

MC: I’d say just start trying to play standard tunes with your friends, and just start trying to listen to the jazz drummers and somehow copy or mimic what you think they’re doing. And once you
put a little dent into that, maybe apply that type of understanding to all of the music you play. That’s what I did with Herbie Hancock. I just applied my jazz understanding and language right inside of the funk. I played from the inside out. I listened carefully to what everybody was doing, like you would a jazz player taking the solo, and even if I was just playing time, even now, I’m still coming from that place. I’m a conversational drummer.

GN: Improvisation is different as it applies to different instruments. A drummer, in a jazz setting, is an accompanist—until he gets the solo thrown at him. You’re not dealing with harmony, you’re dealing with rhythm. And as a drummer, you need to really pay attention to the other instruments in jazz and see what it’s about. It’s a whole lineage thing when you get into improvising on the drums, because every twenty years, it completely revolutionized itself. The one guy that I think would be the leader in the pack would be Roy Haynes. He was the first guy in the late ’40s and ’50s to stop using the hi-hat on two and four all the time. And he started loosening patterns up and not playing one all the time, playing groupings of fives and sevens and nines, and all that weird stuff that Vinnie [Colaiuta] and [Steve] Gadd picked up on. And Elvin and Roy started all that stuff with Tony Williams. But they went back from a lineage of understanding. The ’50s be-bop style jazz, and in the ’60s, started getting a little looser, but when you have all that knowledge and history behind you, it all kinda comes into play. So being an improviser takes a lot of homework. You have to check out a lot of different styles to make your own voice. It’s one thing to just be into that whole 60s-era sound, but not everybody’s into that format. If somebody calls you for another kind of style of jazz, you need to be relatively acquainted with that, too.

BW: Improvisation is much like a word game that we all might have played when we were five years old. Play one of your favorite grooves or beats and then go away from that groove and do something with your toms or cymbals. Remember in your ears what you just did as you go back to the groove for another couple of bars. Then go away again and add a little something to it. Try to have each new thing reflect what happened before. Now you are improvising. I personally enjoy it and feel more creative when I limit things—like no double strokes allowed. Or, I’ll limit the number of drums so that when I leave the groove, I have to play either the snare or one tom. If you are truly going for it, playing what your ears are asking for, then you will inevitably make a mistake. At this point, you can stop and practice the varying stick options for that pattern that threw you off. And now you’ve just added a personal lick or pattern that your ears asked for!

EDGE: How do you generally tune your kit? Is it the traditional way where it’s a little tighter? Talk about that a little bit.

CA: One of the things that I learned early on through just talking to different drummers is that each drum has its own character. So you have to intimately get to know the instrument itself, but it also depends on the acoustics of the room and the style of music. My basic concept is, if I’m playing straight-ahead, acoustic jazz, I tune the bottom head tighter than the top head. The reason for that is just basic physics. The sound is going to come back to you quicker when you’re tuning the drums at a higher pitch. There’s also less miking when you’re playing that kind of music, as opposed to something a little heavier.

MC: I tune my bass drum to a G. I use two heads on everything, and I have an 18” bass drum, and I tune it right around there somewhere. I tune the rest of the toms-toms sort of high, like a jazz sound. I always enjoyed the sound of Billy Higgins’ toms-toms, or Elvin and Tony. I don’t pick exact notes on the tom-toms, but I kind of do with the bass drum—and yes, sort of a tight, high sound. I have a funk set, and I use the same toms-toms. I just bring them down a little bit, and I use a 25” bass drum that I tune really low.

BK: I tune lower than most jazz drummers. And some jazz musicians, you know, at the beginning it drove them crazy, but I got a big compliment from James Moody. I did a gig with him a few weeks back, and the way I tune the drums, he said, “Man, I love the way these drums sound. They sing, and they have a lot of body.” And this is no slight against jazz drummers. They tune really high, and I probably tune it closer to a funk, hip-hop tuning because those are my roots, and that’s what I feel more comfortable playing. And when you say tuning, man, this takes me to DW. There’s no other drumset on the planet that is so easy to tune. That’s what brought me to you guys. And they will stay in tune, and the resonance, how they react. I don’t change the tuning between genres now at all, and that’s so important to me.

GN: Tuning for a lot of my favorite jazz drummers, like Roy Haynes, or even the new guys like Bill Stewart and Brian Blade—everything’s tuned up. It’s kind of bouncy and boingy and overtone-y. Maybe it comes from Philly Joe, one of the greatest drummers ever to have lived. But I think a lot of it may have come from calfskin heads. Back in the day, everything would tighten up when it got cold out and that would become the sound, you know?

BW: There are no rules, other than hopefully using your ears. Some might like the toms to be extremely high or low. Many jazz drummers like to have the toms and bass drum sound similar, so the bass drum might get tuned higher to be played as another punctuation point within the flow of the cymbals.

EDGE: I’m guessing the bass drum sound you go for with jazz, with traditional jazz, is more open?

CA: I use a 14x18”, or sometimes a 16x18”. What I have found with the DW bass drums is that their sound is so much deeper and so much more versatile, that with an 18” I can tune it up or tune it down and use it for everything. You know, I’ve used some 18” bass drums on big band gigs and recordings, and you know, and the engineer’s like, “Man, I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

MC: I use the traditional jazz sound when I’m playing jazz with an open bass drum. Every once in a while, I make a record in the studio and there’ll be a drumset there and the front head is off or something and you sort of have to play it. So, not all of my records accurately represent my sound, but when I play live, that’s what I do.
CURRENTLY EMBARKING on a high-profile arena tour, sharing the stage with none other than the legendary U2, Kings of Leon are more mainstream than they had ever dreamed. From VW ad campaigns to the Billboard charts, the band’s new release Aha Shake Heartbreak is striking a chord with music fans everywhere. Drummer Nathan Followill talks about the band’s inherent classic rock sound, their ability to transcend being labeled and what it takes to rock a set of pink drums.

EDGEE: What’s it like having this record blow up on you guys? On the last one, you did a fair amount of touring and you got a good fan base going, but this one seems to be taking you to the next level. How does that feel?

Nathan Followill: We really don’t pay that much attention to it because we’re so busy, but it’s always better to be surprised than to be disappointed. But we’re definitely really surprised about this record.

EDGEE: How’s life been on the road with U2?

NF: They’ve been nothing but professional. Everyone from the guys that load us in, all the way up to their manager, all the way to Bono and the rest of the band—they’re all amazing! They could easily just give us a tiny little corner of the stage and stick us up there just to kill time while their fans file in, but they’re really cool, really pro. We’re up in Seattle right now, and two nights ago, Eddie Vedder got up there and sang a song with us in his hometown, and the crowd went insane. So, that right there just lets you know the kind of band that these guys are—that they let the opening band have a special guest on that’s gonna get the place going crazy. So yeah, they’ve been great.

EDGEE: What were some of your earliest musical influences? Kings of Leon have a timeless, classic sound, even though you have that modern edge. I’m sure you guys hear the term “classic rock” often. What inspired you?

NF: Man, I think we were inspired by the fact that there really was no inspiration in the beginning, you know? We grew up sheltered, in a sheltered household, our dad being a preacher and all. We couldn’t listen to rock and roll or anything like that. So, I think the thing that helped us out the most was that it comes from a pure place. It comes from something natural. We didn’t hear a band and say, “Wow, we’re going to recreate that and be our generation’s version of that.” So I think it helped us out, the fact that we just did it the way we felt it. And luckily for us, people think it’s classic and pure, and that’s wonderful. We’ll take that any day of the week.

EDGEE: You’ve played small places like the famous Roxy Theatre here in Los Angeles, and now you’re playing massive venues with this U2 tour. Do you have a preference—large versus small?

NF: Well, I don’t know. We’re pretty easy to please. The first couple of shows in the arenas were pretty tough because of the sound, you know? We’re not used to that. Especially going from a club full of 500 sweaty kids to a place that seats 20,000. So, it kind of threw us for a loop at first, but now, you know... we’ve been doing our own one-offs in between the shows with U2—which is another thing that’s unheard of—the fact that they’re letting us do our own shows. Stick us in the 20,000 seat arena, or in the basement, we’re just going to plug in.

EDGEE: You’re in a band situation in a unique way with your family—getting into creative arguments and dealing with the politics of being in a band. How does that play out when you’re dealing with your brothers and family members in that way? What’s that dynamic like?

NF: Most bands that have had their siblings are known for their arguments and their blowouts, but I don’t know. When you look at it, we’re really the only things that each of us have on a consistent basis. And you know, we have our little fail-outs, we have arguments, but at the end of the day we’re looking forward to seeing each other at Thanksgiving and Christmas, so nothing can be too big to make us pissed off enough where we won’t talk to each other for five years, or break up the band or anything like that.

EDGEE: So, after picking up the drums in church, how did you develop the skill of playing drums and singing at the same time? That’s also not easy to do.

NF: Church, too. Yeah, when I was about nine, I’d say, there was this kid that went to church school with me, and he could tear up a piano. And he was, like, eleven, but we were kind of both in the same boat in that we picked up an instrument at a young age and were able to play it a lot better than we probably should have been able to. But that’s really where it started. He would play the piano and sing, and I would play the drums and sing, and we would just sit there and write horrible, horrible songs and sing ‘em. But, looking back on it now, it’s kind of cool. It definitely helped me out with my profession.

EDGEE: So, what made you decide to go with a pink drum kit?

NF: To be honest with you, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a pink drum kit before.

EDGEE: So you’re just going for something a little different.

NF: Yeah. I mean, I look like Grizzly Adams here. I don’t think anyone’s going to question my motives for me playing a set of pink drums if I look like I just bit the head off of a squirrel, you know?

EDGEE: What advice do you have for any young drummers that are trying to get started in a rock band and make it big in the music business?

NF: Do what you feel. Don’t try to play the drums like this person or that person. Don’t try to model your career after this person or that person. At the end of the day, you’ve got to live with yourself and your band, and you get tired of a CD eventually if you listen to it too much, so just be original. Don’t be scared to be original. It’s better to fail doing what you think you should be doing than to succeed and be miserable and not sleep at night because you think you sold out.
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EDGE: How long have you had your roots planted in Nashville?

Chad Cromwell: I came here in the fall of ’90, ‘cause I’d actually just finished a Jackson Browne tour, and I came here to live.

EDGE: Where were you before?

CC: Memphis. I was in Memphis, but I was commuting basically between L.A. and San Francisco all the time, workin’ out west. Because at that time, in the late ‘80s, mid-to-late ‘80s, I was really involved with Joe Walsh, and Jackson, and Neil Young. Primarily, it would’ve been Neil and Joe Walsh. So I was, like, ping-ponging between record projects and tours with Joe and Neil.

EDGE: How has the scene changed in Nashville over the years since you’ve been there?

CC: Well, it’s undergoing a really wholesale change right now. And what I’m noticing is that the boundaries, musically, seem to be shifting back toward artist singer-songwriters. Not necessarily to just be traditional country, but there’s evidence of even traditional country sort of making a comeback, as well as the sort of edgier singer-songwriter artists. For example, Miranda Lambert’s record, if you listen to that, you’re going to hear elements of Texas, like Texas Blues Shuffle stuff, you’re going to hear kind of a pop vibe and you’re going to hear traditional country. It’s a really interesting mixed bag, and my take on that is that the young artists are just bringing their influences to the table. And their influences can mean anything. And I’ve always thought of country music as like the white man’s blues, you know? And it seems like right now, that sense of country is beginning to kind of make its comeback. And then there’s the generation that are just as likely to buy Ashlee Simpson records, they might go and buy Miranda’s record and get exposed to a whole different bag altogether. And you’re talking about polar opposites in terms of production style and songwriting and that whole thing. Just the whole method is completely different.

EDGE: Have you consciously positioned yourself as a country-tinged rock or blues type of player, or is that where you have just naturally gravitated?

CC: Well, my recurring theme seems to be that I find myself working with singer-songwriter guitar players. There’s a lot of that in my life. I’ve got Neil Young—that’s a prominent role in my life. Mark Knopfler—prominent role in my life. Joe Walsh—prominent role in my life. Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt, let’s see—who else? There’s also Vince Gill. These are all singer-songwriter guitar players. And either I have a language that they understand, or vice-versa. I’m not quite sure how that works but it’s not so much about the drumming thing, it’s more about the song thing. It’s more about interpreting songs.

EDGE: So you attribute that to chemistry?

CC: Yeah. It’s definitely a chemistry and a conversation, a musical conversation, that has to happen, and is deeply rooted in rhythm and blues. Being raised in Memphis throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s, my school, in fact my teacher, was Jim Stewart, the guy who started Stax Records.

EDGE: But Staxx is more an R&B thing?

CC: Absolutely. Full-on R&B, yeah.

EDGE: Where you come from is definitely a different flavor from where you’ve ended up.

CC: Absolutely, absolutely. But the thread that goes through it all is still about songwriting and songs, and interpreting songs with a kind of feeling about them.

EDGE: So, how do you get gigs? Is it word of mouth, or do you actively contact artists you’d like to work with?

CC: Mainly word of mouth. All the resumes in the world will maybe get you in a door to meet somebody, but the way it really happens is if you do a great job for somebody who then says, “Man, you oughtta check this cat out. He’s happening,” or, “He might be right for your thing.” And then after a few years of that, you finally build up enough of a reputation to where people begin to get an idea of what you can do. And maybe it can be applied to several different genres, and not just one, you know. And that’s what I have been blessed with. One day I’ll go and play on a soundtrack to a film, and the next day I’ll be doing some hard-core blues date with somebody, and then the next day it’ll be Vince Gill, or Leanne Womack, or you know...I guess I never know from day to day what I’m gonna walk into. I’ve seen it all. I mean, from a pop-drumming standpoint, I should say, I’ve seen it all. I just did this instrumental record with Chuck Lavelle. Chuck is one of the original keyboard players in The Allman Brothers Band. He also had a band called Sea Level back in the ‘70s. He’s been with The Rolling Stones now for, like, twenty-five years I think. Hammond, Wurlitzer and piano, that’s his thing. He’s a brilliant musician. And so I just did this jazz record with him. I’m not a jazz player! But what I can do is I can interpret songs. I can bring something that I don’t even know how to technically explain to you, but it’s just this organic, cellular feel. And I can morph that into many different things.

EDGE: Would you say that you played “jazz”, or that you did your interpretation...
CC: I did my interpretation. I would never in a million years profess that I can play be-bop. As much as I’d love to, man, you know, that’s not me. I mean, I’m a fan of it, but only from a safe distance. That’s not my genre as a player.

EDGE: Are you into jazz?

CC: As a fan, yeah, I love it. But that’s such a completely different discipline and technique. My thing is that all my patterns are built from the bass drum up, okay? And, like, in a be-bop kind of approach, as you well know, the bass drum is actually more of an accent than the actual fundamental groove.

EDGE: Well yeah, in jazz, the groove comes from the ride cymbal.

CC: Absolutely. It’s all ride cymbal with accents. And that’s just not at all what my forte is. But, man, do I love listenin’ to it. I just love listenin’ to all those guys, like, [Ed] Thigpen, Elvin [Jones], and all those guys back in the day. Buddy Rich—all those guys. You know, there’s just too many to count. Absolutely astounding musicians.

EDGE: Well, you’re taking a break, but you’re currently on the road with Mark Knopfler. Getting back to songs, how much emphasis do you place on replicating drum parts? I’m imagining you have to cop a ton of Dire Straits classics.

CC: I try to honor the parts that those guys wrote for those records, because there’s a feeling at the time those songs were recorded. And so, for example, when I play “Sultans of Swing” with Mark, that’s a very kind of jazzy-feeling track from the drum-kit. And it’s very on top of the beat, and very sort of light in style, lots of fills and a lot of movement in the kit. And that’s not my thing, really, but I took it upon myself to try to honor that feel because it plays a large role in the way the song sounds. And if I were to change the tack of the groove on that song, it would change the way Mark is able to sing it.

EDGE: Talk a little about playing with Neil Young.

CC: Well, playing with Neil to me is the ultimate soul music for white men. And the reason I say that is I did two records with him. I did the Freedom album, with a song called “Rockin’ In The Free World” on it, and then I did this record called Neil...
It's not so much about the drumming thing, it's more about the song thing. It's more about interpreting songs. ...It's like, "Alright, this is not about crafting a record here, man. This is about taking a picture of a song being born."

Young and The Bluenotes prior to that record.

EDGE: That was his blues record, right?

CC: Yeah, kind of a blues, big-band kind of a thing, with his obvious signature on it all. But yeah, just a blues record essentially. But, the thing is with him, he is the most “in-the-moment” cat I have ever worked with in my life. And we’re just in the middle of a project right now together—and I had forgotten, because it’s been almost fifteen years since we’ve been in the studio together—but it suddenly came rushing back to me and it’s like, “Alright, this is not about crafting a record here, man. This is about taking a picture of a song being born.” I mean, right out of the gate, you know? And to just get as much of the gold dust as it’s coming out as possible, and being happy and willing to live with the mistakes that come along with it. That is deep soul shoutin’ for a musician, man. You know, just hangin’ it out there.

EDGE: When you’re being a chameleon and you’re changing the style of play, how does your gear and your set-up transition? For example, how do you change your set-up live versus studio? And how do you do it according to each artist’s needs and what you need for that particular gig?

CC: Well, to give you an analogy, if I were going to go and do a be-bop session, assuming that I could do that, then I probably wouldn’t send a 22” kick drum and a 10”, and a 12”, and a 14” and 16” floor tom. I’d be more likely to send a 14x20”, 8x12” and 14x14”. You know, a little trap set that speaks to that style of playing and that type of music. And so, on a broader scale, every time I start a project with somebody, I try to get as much insight into what we’re gonna go for as I possibly can, ‘cause I’ll cast a drumset specifically for that artist. And I do that all the time. I mean, I do that on country records; I’ll even cast different drumsets for different country artists based on their vibe. One artist may be a really, really hard rockin’ vibe, where another artist may be incredibly inside and wanting something that has almost more to do with sound effects than with just a backbeat drumset. So, you know, everybody’s got their special needs. And Mark’s thing, for example, we built a kit with an older, traditional kick drum vibe. I went to a 14x22” kick drum for the backbone set because the last record that we did, really sort of was recorded in the tradition of ’70s style recording, you know? Like The Band, and from that era, and we even cut the record at the Shangri La studio right there on Pacific Coast Highway at Zuma Beach. And then I got involved with DW, well it’s ten years ago now, and all of a sudden all these new opportunities for me sort of came along. And so, I’ve fallen into a thing where one day it’ll be an Edge snare drum, the next day it’ll be a solid shell 7x13”, you know? Just different kinds of approaches to snare drum than traditional, old-world methods. But what I’m leading up to is the VLT kit....

EDGE: [laughs] You’re answering my questions before I get to ‘em, but keep goin’....

CC: We’re playing for performances. So with that in mind, if I send out an 18x22” rock’n’roll kit, there’s no way sonically you’re going to be able to reproduce what I did on the Shangri La record. So, I built the kit up so that I could cover everything from ’70s style recording, including “Sultans of Swing,” or the new Shangri La record. Or if I needed it, I had the time configurations and cymbal configurations that would allow me to be playin’ “Money for Nothin’” on one song, full-on blazing rock’n’roll on another song, and even jazz.

EDGE: So from jazz to heavier stuff, what do you look for in a snare drum?

CC: The snare drum. That’s the drum with the most personality, so that gets a little tricky for me [laughs] because this goes back to early ’20s Ludwig Standards or Black Beauties. And they sort of became my language on snare drum. And then I got involved with DW, well it’s ten years ago now, and all of a sudden all these new opportunities for me sort of came along. And so, I’ve fallen into a thing where one day it’ll be an Edge snare drum, the next day it’ll be a solid shell 7x13”, you know? Just different kinds of approaches to snare drum than traditional, old-world methods. But what I’m leading up to is the VLT kit....

EDGE: [laughs] You’re answering my questions before I get to ‘em, but keep goin’....

CC: Well, I’m gettin’ ready to. I’m gonna go with ya because, I’m tellin’ ya, I’m your poster child for VLT drums. They’re my sound. And that’s been a quest for me. You know, I’ve had some great kits from DW, and I mean you guys have been great with sortin’ me out. But man, when I got a hold of the VLTs it was just like, “This is me. I want to make noise about VLT.” And the snare drums, I don’t know what’s up with that, but they’re unbelievable. And I’ve been using two kits on Mark’s tour,
one of which is the big backline set, and then I use a smaller, jazzy kind of set for a whole different part of the show. And the VLT is on that small kit for the whole set. And then recording, I’m using VLTs all the time. It’s the first time I played a snare drum that gave me back what my old ’20s Ludwigs do.

EDGE: Interesting, because the Ludwig snares, the Black Beauties, obviously were a brass shell.

CC: That’s right.

EDGE: And VLT is a ... 

CC: ...maple shell. But there’s something in the feel of it. It’s the way when the stick lands on it, and the grace notes, and all the stuff that I do with a snare drum, you know? Because I’m a backbeat style player, sound is everything. I need options, you know? And it inspires me to play in different ways. And when I got a hold of the VLT drums, it got me into a place that made me want to go down a different path. It wasn’t like, “Oh that’s different. Well, that’s kind of interesting. Well, I don’t know if I can use that very often, but, you know, I’ll reach for it occasionally.” And consequently, I’ve got like 40 snare drums.

EDGE: We talked about some of the Staxx stuff early on that influenced you, but the backside of that question is, what influences you today? Do you listen to a lot of music?

CC: I do. Not quite as much right now as I’d like to, mainly because I’m a father, you know? And if I’m not workin’, then I’m bein’ a dad. So, listening to music basically centers around what they’re into listening to now, you know? So, when I’ve got the radio on, I’m hearing a lot of hip hop, and I’m hearing a lot of Ashlee Simpson. I’ve got young ones, nine and twelve years old, and so they’re into stuff that I might not necessarily reach for. But if I’m listening for my own pleasure, I seem to be listening to a lot of Miles Davis and Oscar Peterson right now... which is not my genre, but it’s like, “Man, this feels good to listen to this.” It gets me in a good place. And

I’m kinda waiting on my rock’n’roll buzz. There’s just not really much going on right now that’s killin’ me.

EDGE: What do you see yourself doing next? Do you look beyond the projects that you’re working on at the moment?

CC: You know what, this has been a very, very interesting time for me in how all this is coming together. I’ve gone through a real spiritual awakening right now as a musician, as well as a human being. And that would probably end up being a whole ‘nother topic to discuss another time, but musically-speaking, man, I don’t know where I’m headed. And that’s kind of been the constant theme throughout my whole career. It’s like, if you would’ve told me in 1985 that I was going to live five years later in Nashville, Tennessee, and start playing country music, I’d’ve told you you were out of your mind. And I totally dig livin’ here now. There’s some really cool stuff happenin’ in this town. I never expected to be back in the studio with Neil again, and here I am. Right in the middle of a project in my home town.

EDGE: Is this a whole new record you guys are working on?

CC: It’s a whole brand new thing. He just came [and] it was a very heavy experience over this past week. We got into these sessions and I’m really kinda on the edge right now of really needing to chill for a while. I’ve been pushin’ too hard. I get off of this tour that I’m fried from, and I’ve got Neil waiting on me to start recording. Well, I jump in the studio with Neil, and we’re recording these songs like mad, you know? Let me tell you—we cut the track, thirty minutes later EmmyLou Harris is comin’ through the door to sing background vocals and an hour after that, string players are arriving to do the strings. It’s, like, insane. And so, you know, where do I see myself in the future? I have absolutely no idea. I just know I’m gonna go into it with both eyes wide open and I’m gonna play my heart out. And if I can’t play my heart out—forget it!