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# CONTENTS

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# MASTHEAD

Issue Nine, Summer 2015

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# THE THEME PARK

VOLUME THREE, *ISSUE NINE*

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I've never been to Disneyland. To this day I still feel embittered about it. Pretty much everyone I know has been at some point. But not me. The closest I ever came was a school trip to Blackpool Beach, where, for a modest fee, you can pay to sit on an aged donkey. Not quite the same as Space Mountain I expect.

So when I discovered the National Association of Music Merchants show - the largest industry conference in the world - is held less than a mile away from Disneyland in Anaheim, California, I felt like I owed it to myself to attend.

I'd been aware of the NAMM show for a while. As the name suggests, it's where the manufacturing arm of the music industry show off new products. It's that much of a spectacle that, outside the convention centre one morning, I got asked by a family of four, all of whom had Disney Resort tickets, whether this was the entrance to Fantasyland. I told them that in some ways it was.

I've been told that the major casinos in Las Vegas have no windows because it makes it harder to judge the passage of time, and therefore more likely for gamblers to continue donating their life savings to the House. It's a similar case at NAMM. For three consecutive days, I entered the exhibition hall at 9am and left what felt like an hour later at 7pm.

As you'd expect, there's a lot of press there. Everyone seems to have a camera or a microphone aimed at someone or something. After a while, this made me feel uneasy. I began to worry that our decision, as a magazine, not to do any dedicated product-based press coverage, would backfire and make us seem unsupportive or uninterested in the industry, both to the show organisers and the exhibitors alike.

The decision not to offer product based content is one we still stand by wholeheartedly. There are subtle politics that come with product reviews that we don't really want to get into. That's not to say we feel products are unimportant, because they are. Without them, it would be a lot harder to make music. It's more so that, for us, people make music truly interesting in a way that goes beyond item specifics. I hope this issue exemplifies that.

I still haven't been to Disneyland. Maybe next year. Welcome to Issue Nine of The Drummer's Journal.

Enjoy, Tom

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# KATZE

*Words by Tom Hoare*
*Photography by Anton Rodriguez*

The elevator smelt suspiciously like urine. It laboured slowly upwards – a tiny graffiti covered cage that was undoubtedly older than the combined age of the two people inside.

One of these people is me. The other is John Stanier, drummer for a band called Battles.

The first thing you notice about John is how tall he is. In a confined space, it becomes all the more obvious. He's stooped against the side of the lift with his head only a few inches from touching the ceiling. "Sorry about the smell," he states, seemingly unfazed. "It's not usually like this." I attempt to smile whilst trying not to make it obvious that I'm holding my breath.

When the elevator finally comes to a creaking halt, I follow John out into a narrow hallway, feeling slightly relieved. We stop outside a vault-like door, which John opens to reveal a room about 500 square feet in size. His kit is set up in the centre, a bit like an island surrounded by a sea of instrument cases, amplifiers and boxes.

"Welcome to Battles HQ" he gestures. "We haven't tidied up in a while. Hope that's ok."

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When Battles released their debut LP, Mirrored, in 2007, it posed a problem for a lot of critics who were trying to decipher exactly what type of band Battles were. Words like "math" and "post" rock were bandied around, as were "experimental", "electronic" and "modern." Whilst there is likely a hint of truth in each, you should be wary of latching on to any one in particular.

You could argue that Battles' music is both organic and synthetic, played by humans with instruments then manipulated to varying degrees through loops and effects. The end result is something that's incredibly fun to listen to.

Battles' critical success has been underpinned by the fact they appeal to a wide range of listeners. If you're a musicologist, or enjoy the technical challenge of analysing every second of what you're hearing, then Battles would certainly keep you busy. Because the members are multi-instrumentalists, it can often be hard to identify exactly who is playing what, and indeed, what it is that's actually being played. If, on the other hand, you wanted a record you could dance around your bedroom to, you could get away with that too.

But there is also another element which makes Battles stand out. It's not a case of John being more or less talented than any of the other members, nor the drums warranting more attention, but Stanier's playing routinely serves as an example of what truly great drumming is.

In some ways, the drum set is an easy instrument to play. A beginner can learn a single beat and be able to play along with swathes of rock and pop songs. But it's not the act of playing in itself that is difficult; it's playing with character which is far, far harder.

John is certainly one of the most stylish drummers you'll listen to. Take pretty much any track he's played on, whether it's back with alternative metal pioneers Helmet or the Mike Patton fronted Tomahawk, there is always something oddly satisfying about his playing. In particular, it doesn't seem to have any pretence. It's




Photo by: Kmeron

characterful in a way that avoids becoming a caricature. It can be intelligent, but not in a way that's alienating or obnoxious.

"I don't think I'm a particularly good drummer," John states, slouched down on a sofa in the corner of the rehearsal space. "I certainly don't hold myself up on any sort of pedestal."

**The Drummer's Journal: That's very modest of you.**
John Stanier: I'm not even a gear head at all either. Really. I have no idea how to tune drums.

**How long have you had this kit for?**
I think I got this in 1995. It's killer. They don't make it any more.

[*Eyeing the rust on the hoops*] **How would you feel about getting a new one?**
Nah, I'm going to keep this one for sure.

**Do you ever get head-hunted by companies who want you to use their products?**
Nah, not really. I'm sure if I was a better drummer I might (*laughs*).

**I read that you were born in Australia…**
That's not true. Where did that even come from? I was in band from Australia [The Mark of Cain] and I played on two of their records. I'm originally from Pittsburgh, and then I grew up in Miami.

**When you were a kid, what did you want to do?**
For as long as I can remember I just wanted to be a drummer. I was terrible in school, I have no problem admitting that. I got terrible grades.

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"I've never watched The Lord of The Rings. That's like asking if I've ever watched The Lion King."

**"You've never watched The Lion King?"**

"No! Why would I watch that? It's an animated children's movie."

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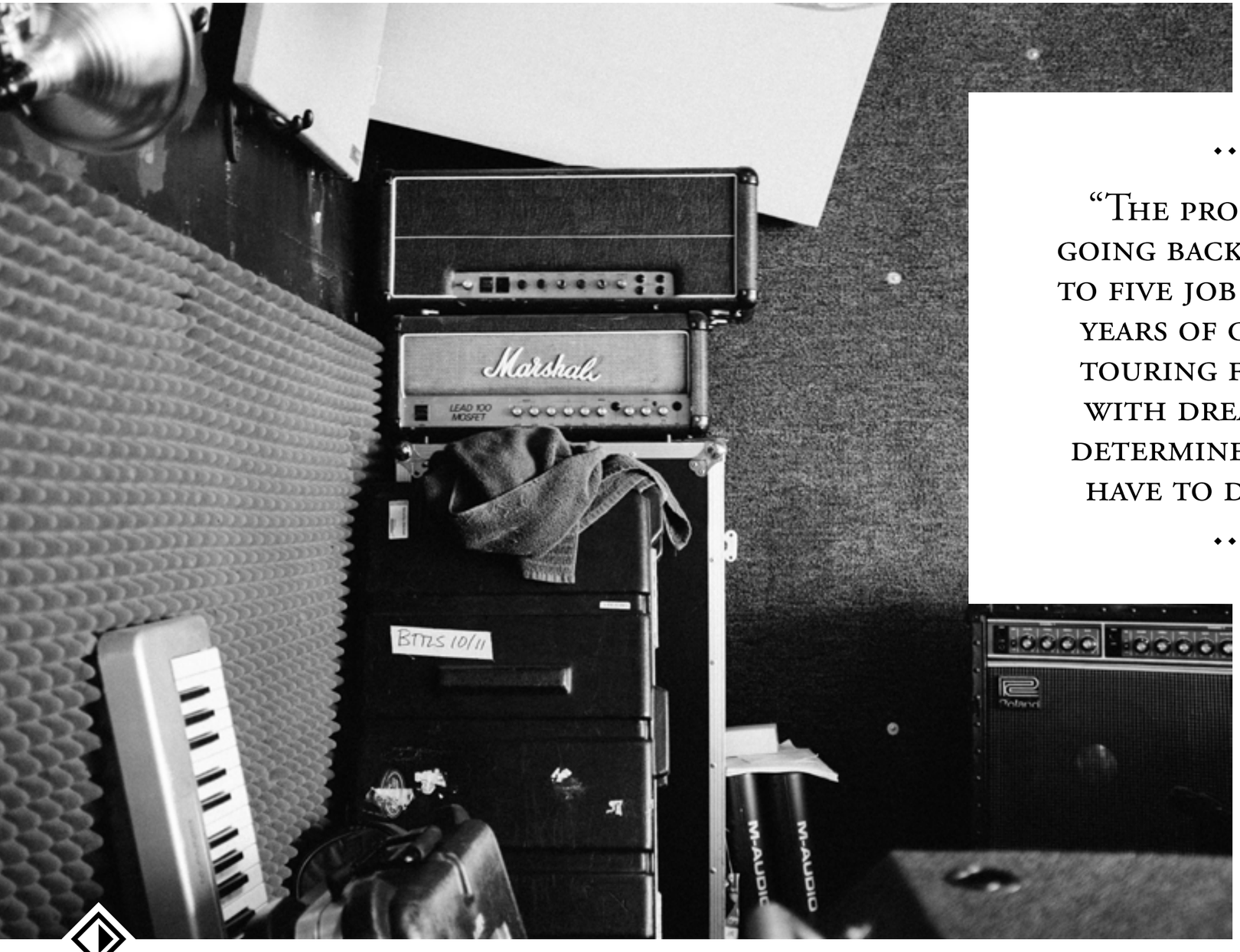
Photo by: Kmeron

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"The prospect of going back to a nine to five job after ten years of constant touring filled me with dread. I was determined not to have to do that."

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**But you still got into college?**
Yeah, I did. I was an Orchestral Percussion major for two years in Tampa. I didn't graduate.

**Why not?**
At night I was playing in this hardcore band in the city, and then during the day I was playing classical marimba. But I was just really bad and I wasn't that into it. It just became obvious that I wanted to be in a touring band. I wanted to record.

**Did you choose not to graduate or…**
You mean, "was I kicked out?"

**Yes…**
(*Laughs*) Well, the professor wasn't too happy with me. He "strongly advised" me to change my major. So I changed it to English Lit.

**How did that go?**
I don't think I lasted a semester with that. I visited New York in spring break, and then just ended up staying. My parents weren't too happy.

**What was your last nine to five job then?**
I worked as a cleaner at this catering company. So at eight or nine in the morning, I'd have to clean up after these big events that had happened the night before. I mean, I was 17, so if there was any stale booze that had been left out, I'd just drink it (*laughs*). That's pretty disgusting really isn't it?

**And then you came to New York? How would you describe the music scene here back then?**
I was well aware of all these horror stories of people moving to New York to be an actor or musician and just getting totally crushed. You'd

see it all the time. The failure rate for bands here was astronomical. Today, you still have to hustle just to pay your rent. But back then, you had to hustle to pay rent whilst not getting murdered on the subway, which was always a possibility.

**What gave Helmet the edge in that sort of environment?**
Well, with Helmet, I think a lot of the sound of that band was a direct result of living in New York. We all lived downtown, which was really drug infested with a very high crime rate. In 1989, I was in my second year of living in NYC. That year was the highest ever murder rate the city has ever had.

**Don't you currently live in Berlin?**
Yeah, I live in Berlin with my wife who is a tattoo artist.

**So how's the transcontinental commute working out, given that Battles are based in NYC?**
It doesn't really matter to me because I'm on tour all the time anyway. So I'm in NYC when I have to be here for Battles, otherwise I'm in Berlin.

**How's your German?**
Terrible.

**Can you say anything?**
No. It's a long story.

**Go on…**
Really? You're going to make me shame myself?

**Sorry. But yes.**
I have tried. Honestly. But I just never have the time to go to a class or anything because I'm always on tour.

**What about an audio tutorial sort of thing?**
I do actually have the Rosetta Stone German one. It'll show you a picture of a cat, and then have the German word for cat.

**What's the German for "cat?"**
Pauses. I don't know (*laughs*). Do you know?

**Er… I don't know. I know what it is in French. I think.**
What is it?

**Chat.**
Shat?

**Is it not a problem that you live in a country where you can't speak the language?**
Everyone just speaks English. At least, they do to me. If I attempt to speak German, I just get a reply in English anyway.

**How many air miles do you have?**
I don't know. A lot.

**They expire, you know.**
Yeah, I know.

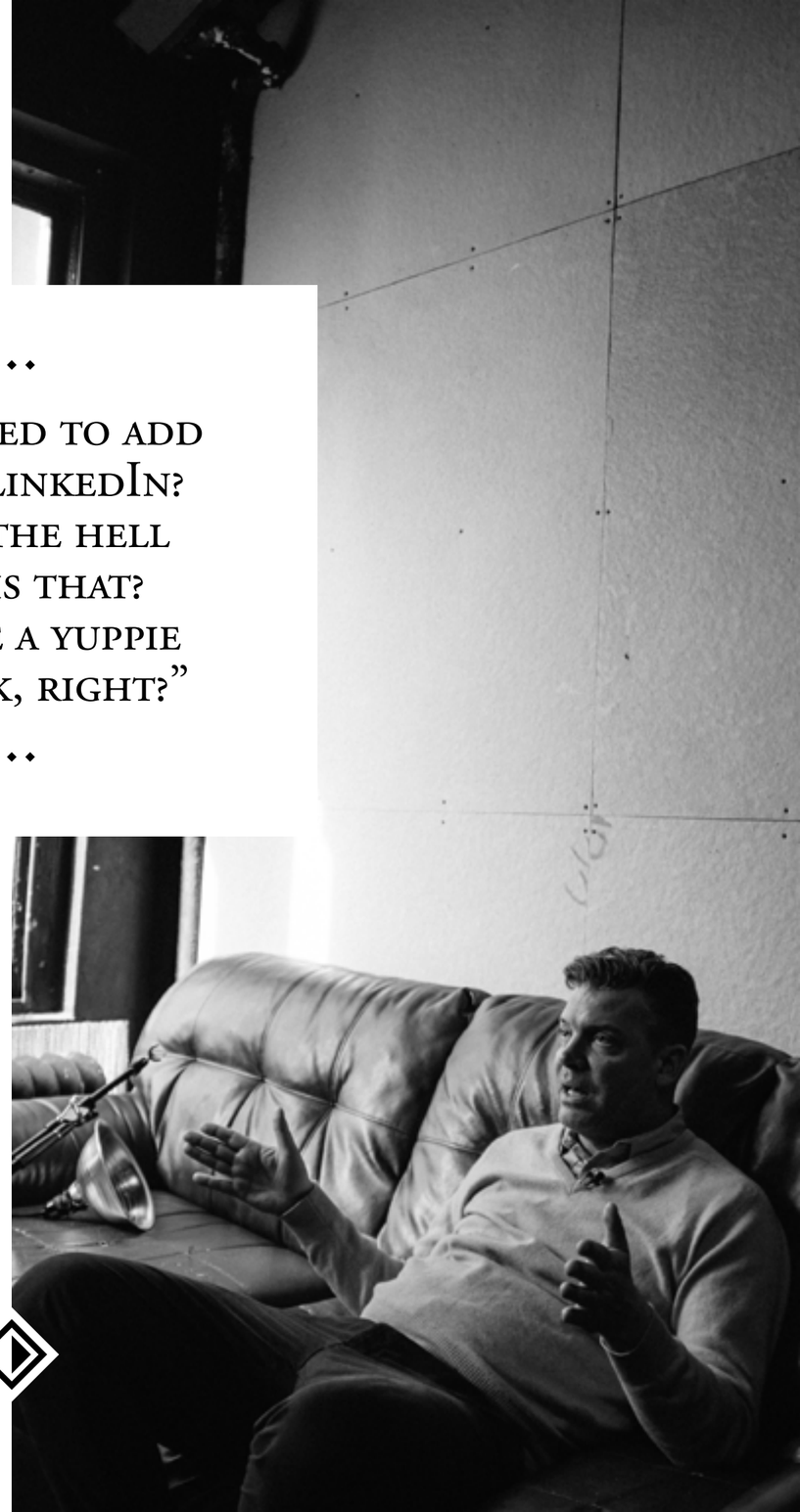
**You need to be careful there.**
Thanks.

**You mentioned earlier that your wife is a tattoo artist, right?**
Yeah.

**Do you have any tattoos?**
No, it's not my thing.

**Weren't tattoos quite a big part of the hardcore scene?**
They were. And tattooing is bigger than ever now. It's a huge industry.

**But you were never into it?**
No. It seems like half of tattoo work is covering up old tattoos, or people trying to get shit tattoos made into good ones.



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"You tried to add me on LinkedIn? What the hell even is that? It's like a yuppie Facbook, right?"

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Photo by: Kmeron

**You also got married recently, right?**
Yeah.

**Has that changed the appeal of touring for long periods of time?**
Well, since I've been married I haven't exactly done a big tour yet. But, in terms of what's ahead, no. I mean, we've been together for a long time before we were married anyway. Plus, touring has changed so much from what it was.

**In what respect?**
You're not really touring to promote a record anymore, because people aren't really buying them. Live music is where bands are making most of their money now. That's why concerts are way more expensive now than they used to be.

**Corporate sponsorship of live music has increased too...**
Right. Fifteen years ago that was unheard of. Today, I wouldn't think twice about our music being used in a VW commercial. But in the 90s I'd have been crucified for that. That epitomized selling out.

**Why have people's attitudes towards the relationship between music, advertising and corporate sponsorship changed?**
People have really short attention spans now. There's still great music and of course people still do buy CDs and vinyl, but it's marketed in a totally different away. So when a band releases a record, it's all you hear about for a week. You'll see it everywhere, all over the web. Then suddenly, it's the next marketing campaign for the next band who have a record that's coming out.

**I read that you quite like movie soundtracks?**
Yeah.

**What's the definitive movie soundtrack? Surely it's The Lord of The Rings?**
Lord of The Rings? Are you serious?

**Yeah. It's a great soundtrack.**
I've never watched The Lord of The Rings.

**What?**
I've never watched it. That's like asking me if I've ever watched The Lion King.

**You've never watched The Lion King?**
No! Why would I watch that? It's an animated children's movie.

**I cannot believe you've never seen the The Lion King.**
Believe it.

**Do people ever recognise you in the street?**
Very, very rarely. I think one of the few times it has happened was when I was at the airport and I got my excess baggage fee waived because the person behind the check-in desk was like, "dude, were you the drummer for Helmet?" (*laughs*). That's about as rock and roll as I get.

**You were in Helmet for almost a decade right?**
Yeah, it was almost ten years to the day. All of my twenties, from my 20th birthday to my 30th.

**How do you feel when you think about that?**
It was awesome, just non-stop touring. I was 21 years old, playing big shows in different countries - I have extremely fond memories of that.

**So when that came to an end at 30, how was it to be in a position where you had to start from scratch again?**
That was terrible. My phone was just not ringing with any work. Plus, I broke my wrist snowboarding so I didn't even play drums for a year. So I started DJing, just as something to do really. Before long I was DJing six nights a week. It was only when Tomahawk and The Mark of Cain started that I began to play drums again.

Photo by: Kmeron

**Did you ever think about throwing in the towel at any point?**
I was doing whatever it took not to have to get a regular job. The prospect of going back to a nine to five job after ten years of constant touring filled me with dread. I was determined not to have to do that. But yeah, there was a whole year where I was facing the prospect of not playing drums again.

**Did you consider that seriously as a viable option for the future?**
If I'm honest, no not really. I knew that I'd end up playing again. So once Tomahawk started, I got back into touring. It was in the middle of that when Battles started.

**How do you feel about social media and its usefulness for musicians? I couldn't find you on LinkedIn.**
You tried to add me on LinkedIn? What the hell even is that? It's like a yuppie Facebook, right? I'm not on Twitter or Facebook either. To me they just seem like platforms for people arguing.

**But you are on Instagram…**
Yeah. I enjoy it. Battles use all the social stuff, which is great because it's nice to see that people like what we're doing.

**What kind of things do you Instagram then?**
Selfies (*laughs*).

**Do you have a selfie stick?**
No, not yet. But I have an app which is a timer sort of thing.

**What are your criteria for taking a selfie? Are you more likely to take a selfie with a famous person? Or just a general selfie that depicts your daily life?**
Famous person for sure. But I can't stand pictures of food. I don't care about your burrito. I mean, Instagram is fun, but other than that it is just ridiculous. What's the app where people send you a photo but then it disappears after like three seconds?

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"Once I got my excess baggage fee waived because the person behind the check in desk was like 'dude, were you the drummer for Helmet?' That's as rock and roll as I get."

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**Snapchat?**
Yeah. What is that for?

**I think it's used by a certain user group to send people pictures of their genitals.**
Oh, so it's like Chat Roulette? That was such a genius idea, made by someone who just wanted a person in Nigeria to be able to have a random conversation with someone in South Korea. And it immediately morphed into dudes just masturbating on their web-cams. When we were making the last Battles record, we'd put on masks and go on Chat Roulette and just fuck with people. It's just 80% dudes whacking off. The wonders of the internet *(laughs)*.

**Would you say you're an optimist or pessimist when it comes to music's relationship with the internet?**
An optimist for sure. I think illegal downloading is tapering off because everyone just streams everything, which I suppose is better. I think Rick Rubin said that if everyone paid $20 per year, every artist on Spotify would get good money.

**Do you think that's likely?**
No, of course not. But the idea of people paying for music is certainly not lost, whether it's live or recorded.

**Steve Albini said that the internet has brought an effective end to intellectual property. Would you agree?**
No, not really. I think that's a bit of a weird idea, as it'd mean that I don't own my music. I'm not really sure how that'd be helpful.

**Can I ask you something hypothetical?**
Sure.

**Let's say you're in a cafe and you're enjoying your coffee. Then you notice the person next to you is torrenting the new Battles record. What would you do?**
(*Laughs*) I honestly have no idea. That scenario seems extremely unlikely to me. I mean, I get that it happens - illegal downloading or whatever. It's not a good thing. But I also understand that freaking out about it isn't going to help anyone's cause. Do you have any more hypothetical questions?

**You're off the hook. Don't worry.**
Wonderful.

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# THE HOUSE THAT THOR BUILT

## Swans' Thor Harris

*Words by Tom Hoare*

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It's hard to describe the fear I felt when Thor left me alone in his house that first night. I've never been quite so aware of my own mortality since a failed attempt to parachute off the roof of a house using an umbrella when I was eight.

"I'll be back first thing tomorrow morning," he said, before picking up an acetylene torch and igniting a bundle of wood inside a large cast iron stove. "The front door doesn't lock, but don't worry, you're perfectly safe."

I peer out of the stained glass window as his car pulls away.

On the porch, a solitary yellow light dimly illuminates what it can of the garden. The bones strung from the bare trees clang together like nightmarish wind chimes. The dismembered limbs of manikins are strewn throughout the yard like the aftermath of an inanimate catastrophe.

Impaled on a stick midway down the garden is the head of a large doll. Facing the street, I imagine it slowly turning to look at me. Occasionally, between the figures of shadowed wooden sculptures and leafless trees, I catch the flash of a pair of eyes. Collectively, it's enough to make me back away from the window and sit on the floor next to the stove. Apart from the occasional crackle of the fire, the rest of the house is deadly silent.

There's a baseball bat hung on a nail by the door. The handle is well-worn and slick. Unless I was mistaken, Thor didn't strike me as a guy who played a lot of baseball. Then again, I barely knew him. Our first meeting had been thirty minutes earlier when he'd picked me up from the airport.

As I stood outside arrivals, my concerns about being able to spot his '92 Toyota Camry among the sea of traffic proved unwarranted. In Oslo, a Viking driving a battered sedan might be a pretty common sight. But in Texas I get the impression it's not.

Thor is a drummer and percussionist for a band called Swans who, in 1980s New York, developed a reputation for playing abrasive, harrowing rock music at extremely loud volumes. Thor joined when the band reunited in 2010, having written them a letter suggesting they hire him. They did. And I see why.

On stage, Thor looks fearsome. In terms of sheer physicality, he has the enviable quality of being able to live up to the notoriety of his namesake. He looks like he'd be quite at home cranking a longboat across a sizable body of water. His braid and beard are straight out of eighth century Scandinavia. But appearance is

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"Dealing with major labels was a truly awful experience. And with clinical depression, that's saying something because I've had some pretty awful experiences."

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Photo by: Tim Bugbee, licensed via Creative Commons

where the warrior archetype ends. Thor Harris is probably one of the nicest and most endearing people I've ever met.

Alone at his house in Austin, however, I had yet to realise this. All I can think about is the bat and the reason for its current location. It's hard not to dwell on the notion of violent home invasion.

With the fire long since spent and unable to stay awake any longer, I crawl into a bed that smells overwhelmingly like cats.

**No Brakes**

When I wake up, there's a cat sat stood on my chest and another five asleep on the bed. Where they came from I have no idea, but I'm sure they were not in the bedroom when I finally fell asleep. Chest cat is unhappy when I attempt to move it off my rib cage, and each suggestive push only results in claws digging further into my skin. A swift bodily rotation through 90 degrees solves the problem, but disturbs some of the other cats on the bed. They collectively express their displeasure with a loud hiss, like furry, four-legged snakes.

I get up, wash and sit out on the porch. I'd thought the house, which Thor had built himself, might look less like the set of a horror film in the daylight but, in all honesty, it still looked pretty petrifying.

Not only did Thor build the house, he built nearly everything in it too. The interior, given Thor's fondness of wood, is sort of like an alpine lodge that's been uninhabited for 50 years. A layer of perma-dust covers the various instruments, amplifiers and artworks that have been pushed to the edges of the main room. The only two objects classifiable as furniture are a small desk strewn with CDs, and a sort of pedestal on which Thor's laptop sits.

The bone-clad gate at the bottom of the garden swings open and Thor strides up the crooked path with a smile. "Did you sleep well?" he asks, giving me a hearty pat on the back as he passes. "Sorry about having to leave you alone last night. I thought I'd just stay with my girlfriend, that way you could have my bed." He pauses. "You're not allergic to cats are you?"

We walk inside and Thor heads into the kitchen to make some tea. "Would you like a seat?" he offers. I look around for one, but the only place to sit is on a drum stool behind a shabby looking kit in the corner. I reply that I'm happy standing for now.

"So what do you want to do?" Thor asks, handing me cup of hot, green water. There were a number of things I was excited to talk to Thor about, but given that I'd only just arrived, I didn't want to burn him out with relentless questions. My flight back wasn't for a few days and I was conscious of overstaying my welcome. So, I opted to let Thor call the shots on what we did.

After some toast, Thor reveals he needs to bleed the brakes on his car and asks if I'd help. I


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confess that I likely wouldn't be much use and know nothing about cars or mechanics. He assures me it's not a problem.

Thor disappears round the back of his house to fetch some plastic ramps. He places them under the front wheels of the car, and then drives forward. It takes a couple of attempts with the car slipping violently off the ramps to get it right. Once in place, he produces a toolbox and shimmies under the chassis, instructing me to get in the drivers seat. I get in the car and feel it shift slightly on the plastic wedges. I have images of it slipping off again and crushing Thor beneath. I begin thinking how I'd explain such a scenario to the police. Thor, however, doesn't share my concerns for his wellbeing. "Yeah, yeah, it's fine," he shouts from beneath the car. "Solid as a rock! Ok, now press the brake."

I press the pedal and immediately hear Thor spluttering and coughing. He emerges from the car's underbelly with his face covered in brake fluid, flailing his arms around for an oily rag on the hood. "Slower this time," he coughs. We repeat the coughing, spluttering, flailing process until the brake pedal eventually feels firm.

I exit the car and Thor gets in to back it off the ramps. As soon as the car begins to move, the ramp slips from beneath the front left wheel and the car crashes down onto the road. Thor grins. "You called it."

**Neighbours**

It's turning into a nice day and Thor suggests taking a walk round the block so I can see the neighbourhood. After the car incident, this sounds like something less hazardous.

Out on the street, it's quiet and serene. Some kids are drawing with chalk on the road and, at the house opposite, several older men are gathered on the porch for what appears to be the weekend social. Thor waves and they wave back.

"Back when I moved here, this was a really poor side of Austin." Thor gestures at the houses as we walk down the street. "That's all changed now, because of gentrification, but this is probably the last area that's still as it was. I'm on the board of a local neighbourhood association which owns most of the houses around here. We only rent to low income families who are 60% below the median family income."

I look at the surrounding houses and back to Thor's. By comparison, Thor's house certainly sticks out. "When did you move here?" I ask.

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"It drove me to the brink of suicide. Those were the worst years of my life. My trip to hell and back."

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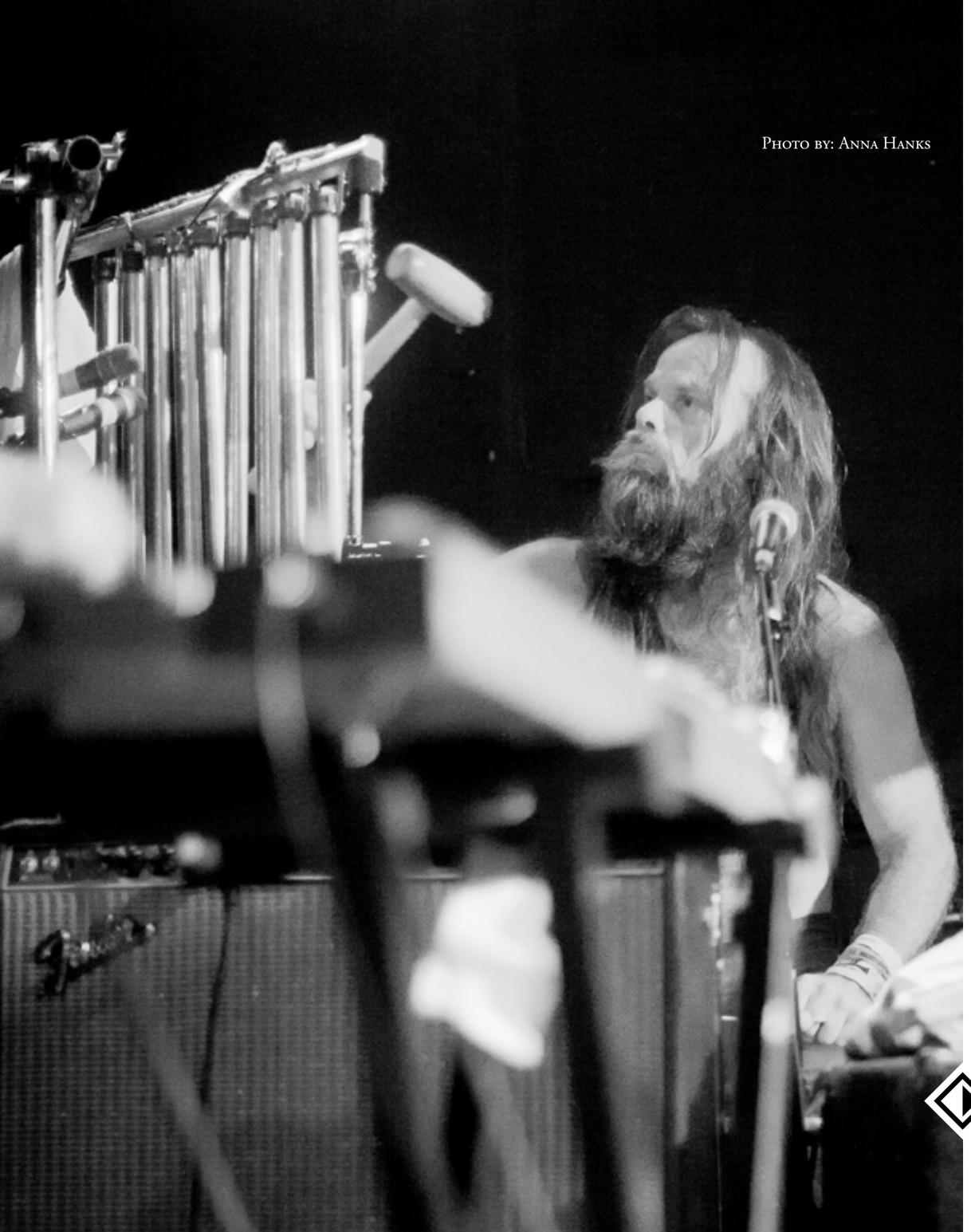

Photo by: Anna Hanks

"About 20 years ago. I was 32 and I bought my house and the land for $5000. It was pretty much a shack when I got it."

"Why did you get it so cheap?"

"The neighbourhood association wanted to sell it to someone who wouldn't flip it over for a profit. So I told them I wanted to live here for the rest of my life."

"What do your neighbours think of your house?"

"I think people like it. It's pretty wacky, which is great for burglary prevention. I mean, you saw it last night – no one's going to venture inside it after dark."

"Do people in the neighbourhood know what you do?"

"I think my neighbours don't necessarily know the bands that I play in, but they know that I'm a musician and that I'm away on tour a lot of the time. Just in the last couple of years I've been in famous enough bands where people do drive-bys and are like, 'that's where Thor lives.'" He laughs.

"But I'm not actually from Austin. I grew up in a small town in east Texas where petrochemicals are turned into gasoline. It's still like that, actually, but the oil doesn't come from Texas anymore. I have these real early memories of seeing the marching bands at football games and I remember that's when I decided I wanted to play drums. Just watching the drummers play. Rhythm seemed so exciting.

"I went to school there too. I was a terrible student. I wasn't interested in what they were teaching. I just wanted to draw. So I graduated in the bottom quarter of my class. I asked my mom if I had dyslexia and she said I didn't. She said she had me tested because I was such a bad reader. I'm still not sure I believe that."

"Did you fit in at school?"

"I did in terms of having friends, but not academically. It wasn't until I got a bit older after I'd left school that I started to feel really alienated from people. I didn't realise it at the time, but I was severely mentally ill. I had clinical depression which drove me to the brink of suicide. Those were the worst years of my life. My trip to hell and back."

**To Hell and Back**

Thor's experiences with depression are documented in a small book he published called An Ocean of Despair. Before I came to stay with him, I read it many times. It details his life at a time when his undiagnosed and subsequently mistreated battle with clinical depression became so severe that he felt his only option was to take his own life.

Depression, as a disease, is poorly represented in general. It carries a stigma rooted in ignorance, as is still common with many types of mental illness.

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"I think I became a way better drummer after I went insane because when I came back from this trip to the dark side, I felt a lot less selfish as a musician."

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Perhaps the most prominent misrepresentation is that clinical depression is simply a deficiency in character as opposed to a biological condition that can be medically treated.

We reach a crossroads and Thor comes to a halt. There's a giant sunflower painted on the tarmac. In the garden of an adjacent house, some kids play on a trampoline. Thor smiles and waves at them before turning back to me. "I refer to that time, when I was 27, as my descent into madness. I wasn't able to think a single thought without a negative one stalking it. I became sort of a shell of a person who was petrified of other people. It took me a long time and a lot of help for me to pull myself out. Now I'm able to cope with it because I'm properly medicated. I still have to take these little pills everyday and I've got absolutely no problem with that.

"I actually like talking about it because I know I came out of it stronger and with nothing to hide. I've tried to be open and honest ever since. I still get depression, but now I know how to manage it which is incredibly important.

"When I got better, I worked for the suicide hotline. A lot of people find that strange and think it would be a depressing thing to do. Occasionally, there was someone talking about suicide, but mostly it was just mentally ill or very lonely people. But it didn't make me sad, I loved talking to people and helping them. It's a subject very dear to my heart because I've been there. I know what it's like to feel trapped inside your own mind.

"It's strange to go to other countries and not see crazy people in the streets of the inner cities. It's proof that America is doing something wrong and inhumane. We leave the mentally ill to wander the streets, live homeless and eat out of dumpsters. I hope that changes in our lifetime. I love America for a lot of reasons and it's a great place to be a creative person but it's also pretty barbaric in a lot of ways. Here in Texas we still have capital punishment and barely any social services at all. Make no mistake, Texas is primitive, it's in the dark ages when it comes to social provision."

The kids on the trampoline start shouting for us to observe their trampolining prowess. Thor claps and whoops as they try to out-jump one another. On the way back to the house, he laughs and jokes about the things he used to do as a kid. I'd come to realise quite quickly that Thor was an amazingly positive person, perhaps more so than anyone I've ever met. In my head, I struggled to imagine him in a position where he was ready to throw himself off the Golden Gate Bridge.

**Housework**

At the back of Thor's house there's a workshop. It consists of various saw benches and a huge tool rack, as well as the remnants of some pretty industrial looking machinery. It was here where we whittled away the afternoon.

Thor did some "housework", which involved shifting a large pile of wood from one side of


Photo by: Tim Bugbee, licensed via Creative Commons

the garden to the other. He also cut a huge piece of timber in half with a saw and seemed pleased with the results. Not wanting me to feel left out, he also found time to teach me how to swing an axe properly, which, as far as I could gather, involved adopting a very wide stance and swinging the axe into what you were chopping with the force of a thousand suns. To take the focus away from the sharp metal object, I ask Thor a question. "So when you started out with this place, did you know how to build a house?"

"No, not really."

"But you had a go anyway?"

"Yeah. I read a few books. And my brother helped me too. But I did the vast majority of it by myself."

"What was the hardest part?"

"Doing the roof because it's precarious and dangerous and I did it alone. I'm quite strong, but there were a few times where what I was doing, in hindsight, was really stupid as I could have easily fallen and broken my neck."

"So did you have to get a building inspector to sign off on it?"

"Yeah. It's mostly up to code…"

"Mostly?"

"I've made a few renovations since that might not be 100% compliant. Look, I'll show you." He leads me down a small stairway that dips down from the right side of the porch. It's impressively narrow and curves down under the house to reveal a small cave like excavation. It's noticeably cold and full of cobwebs.

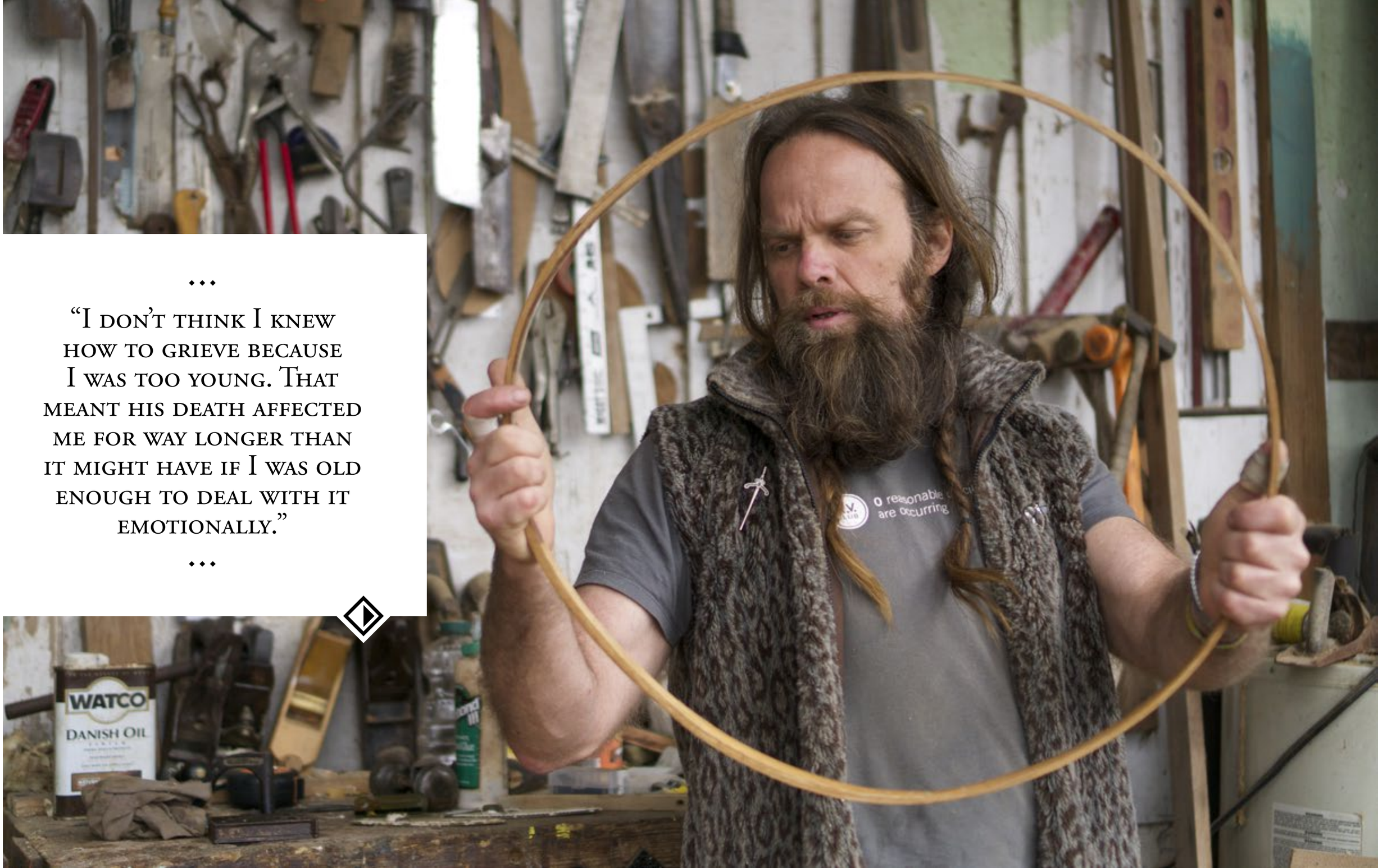
"So this is going to be another bedroom," he enthuses. I look at the small, damp, windowless space and back to Thor who is nodding happily. "I dug this out by hand," he clarifies, "but obviously it's not finished yet. What do you think?" I get the urge to scramble out of there as quickly as humanly possible, but manage to suppress my reaction into a smile and a nod.

We take a tea break from the tour and stand once again in the kitchen. As the kettle boils, I spot an old photograph of a man hanging on the wall and ask who it is.

"That's my dad," Thor smiles, "he was a brilliant mechanical engineer. He worked for a company called Ethyl who made lead additive for gasoline in the 1970s. He died of cancer when he was 48. I was ten."

I state to Thor that one of my biggest fears as a kid was a parent dying.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't think I knew how to grieve because I was too young. I think that meant his death affected me for way longer than it might have if I was old enough to deal with it emotionally. But my sister tells me he

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"I don't think I knew how to grieve because I was too young. That meant his death affected me for way longer than it might have if I was old enough to deal with it emotionally."

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would have approved of my artistic endeavours. He took me to art classes and stuff. He didn't live long enough to know how obsessed I was becoming with music, which I'm sorry about. But he was a cool dude. Everyone liked and relied on him." He pauses. "Part of my way of coping with depression is just to keep busy. Building this house has certainly helped with that."

It dawns on me that the reason there is nowhere to sit is that Thor never seems to sit down. He's always up and about. When he's not on tour, he works as a carpenter and plumber, helping out his neighbours and friends with any work they need doing to their places. He regularly makes his own instruments too, some of which he uses on stage. I ask if he prefers the instruments he makes as opposed to the ones he could buy in a shop.

"I think in general I have a view that's pretty anti-drum industry. Let's take the case of expensive snare drums. Don't get one. Just get a basic metal shell snare.

"The way drums sound has much more to do with head selection and the bearing edge rather than the composition of the shell. I've been working on drums since I was about 13. I was always rebuilding and altering them. That said, I had a tendency to make them sound worse." He laughs.

"I think I became a way better drummer after I went insane because, when I came back from this trip to the dark side, I felt a lot less selfish as a musician. In my younger days, I felt like I wanted to show everyone what a good drummer I was. Then when I was 28 and came out of this cave of depression, I felt like I didn't want to listen to these wanky, showy drummers. It's like an academic who wants to tell you how much he knows all the time. It's obnoxious. Why would you want to listen to that?

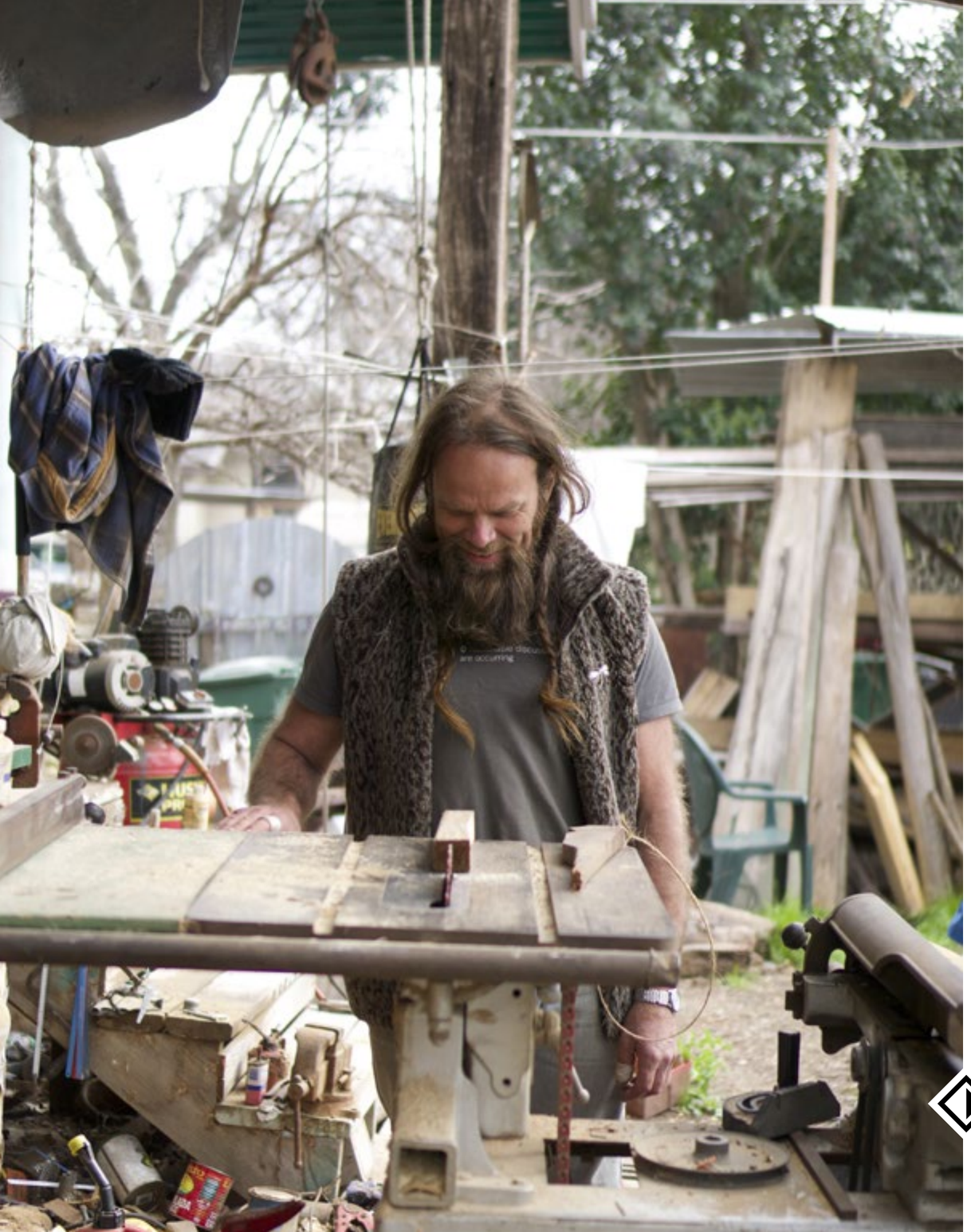
"Bill Bruford once said that when you get recorded, deep parts of your soul come through your playing. So when you listen to the recording, you may find that you're a self-absorbed asshole who was just trying to show everyone what you could do. I really agree with that."

"How do you feel about the music industry?"

"The first time I had dealings with the music industry was in the late 80s and back then it was pretty awful. It was the time of the big five, these record companies that you were always trying to impress. That's what SXSW was about. Initially, it was a music conference for the industry people to come to town and see up and coming bands. Anyhow, I was in a band and we got $25,000 from Sony Music Publishing. It was our dream come true. But suddenly, we found out all these strings were attached and that we couldn't write the music we wanted to write. It turned into a nightmare."

"And the internet?"

"I think the best explanation of how the internet has affected music is from Amanda Palmer,



who said the problem isn't how to get people to pay for music, but how to let them pay for it. Spotify and iTunes have shown people are still happy to pay for music. The down side is that they don't really take care of the artists. But the internet is still a new thing in the grand scheme of things. I certainly feel optimistic about the future, that's for sure.

"The death of the established music industry was welcome to me. Dealing with major labels was a truly awful experience. And with clinical depression, that's saying something because I've had some pretty awful experiences."

**The Shower**

That night, we go to a gig that Thor had been invited to. Some local bands are playing at a house on the other side of the city, so we cycle over on a couple of bikes Thor had fixed up. My bike doesn't have any lights which makes cycling down some of the dark suburban streets slightly perilous. En route, I ask Thor if he's a local celebrity and he says no. When we arrive at the gig, I ask the house owner the same question and he says yes. Thor spends most of the night with a large group of people around him, and it becomes quickly apparent that he commands a huge amount of respect among other musicians and locals. I like to think the reason isn't because Thor plays in bands people like, but because, at some point, he's done something to help them out. Whether it's fixing people's plumbing or letting total strangers stay at his house, he is an incredibly accepting and non-judgemental person. For that, it's hard not to respect him.

The following morning, I realise I can't put off having a shower any longer because even the cats are starting to avoid me. The shower, fixed to the outside of the house, until this point hadn't looked too appealing given that the neighbour's windows look straight out onto it. There is no privacy, just a shower head that comes out of the side of the house and a rusty grate to stand on. Given that I'd only brought a single pair of underwear (an unfortunate oversight) I was faced with the option to either shower totally naked and risk giving the neighbours cause to call the police, or shower in my single pair of boxer shorts and spend the rest of the day commando. I opt for the former.

I assume the water is going to be cold and stand naked, shivering outside in the cold morning air getting ready to douse myself. A rustle in a large shrub prompts me to make an ungainly lunge for a towel. Out springs Thor's dog, Francie, and what Francie had been doing becomes quickly apparent when a god-awful smell stings my nostrils.

It's as good a prompt as any to get this over and done with and brace for the onset of hypothermia, but to my surprise, the water's warm. I praise Thor's plumbing ability and stand under it in a cloud of steam for what feels like an age. Just in case, I keep my back turned toward the house next door and pray that Francie is the only one watching. Like

most things Thor had made, the shower looked nonconformist, but worked just as well as, if not better than, anything else.

When it was time for me to leave, I asked Thor if he had any endorsements he'd like us to mention in the article, and I was surprised when he told me that he doesn't have any. He said he'd approached a few companies but had been rejected because he wasn't signed to a major label. "Perhaps I just didn't give off the right image," he laughed.

I can't really imagine how anyone could think Thor gives off the wrong image. What is so likeable about him isn't the novel, artistic quirkiness or impulsiveness but his compassion for absolutely everyone and everything. He is incredibly sincere and honest to a degree that is uncommon. It was only after I'd left I realised just how rare that is. I don't know any of my neighbours. Thor knows all of his because he'd helped them find their home.

I asked Thor if he felt like people had ever judged him given that he's suffered from mental illness. He told me that there are two ways to be invincible - one is to have no privacy and be completely transparent and the other is to be completely private and not let anyone know anything about you. Thor is certainly in the first group – absolutely everything is public. Even his house.

Of course, not everyone is looking to be invincible, but then not everyone has gone to the brink as Thor did. To come out of something so crushing and have an outlook on life that is underpinned by informed optimism is incredible.

"I think some of the best advice I ever got was from a good friend of mine who told me not to have any darkness lurking around your own emotions. And try not to allow yourself to be ruled by any bad motivations like jealousy. I mean, we all have them, we're all human, but don't let them govern your actions." This appears to be very sound advice.

Thor's real name is Michael. He picked up Thor as a nickname whilst working in a bakery when a fellow member of staff there commented on the striking resemblance and it stuck. A couple of times, particularly when he spoke about his childhood, he referred to "a time before I was Thor." On one level I suppose it is just a nickname, but I suspect it actually represents a lot more to him than that.

The last page of Thor's book states that his experiences with clinical depression have left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"I think in general I have a view that's pretty anti-drum industry. Let's take the case of expensive snare drums. Don't get one."

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him “fearless and irrepressible.” In this respect, perhaps he is still like a Viking, which is just as well. “One thing I’ve learnt,” Thor grinned as we said goodbye, “is if someone gives you a nickname, do everything you can to live up to it.” And live up to it he does.

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Big
Mama
Thornton


THOR

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# SUCCESSION

## A Conversation with Craigie Zildjian

*Words by Tom Hoare*

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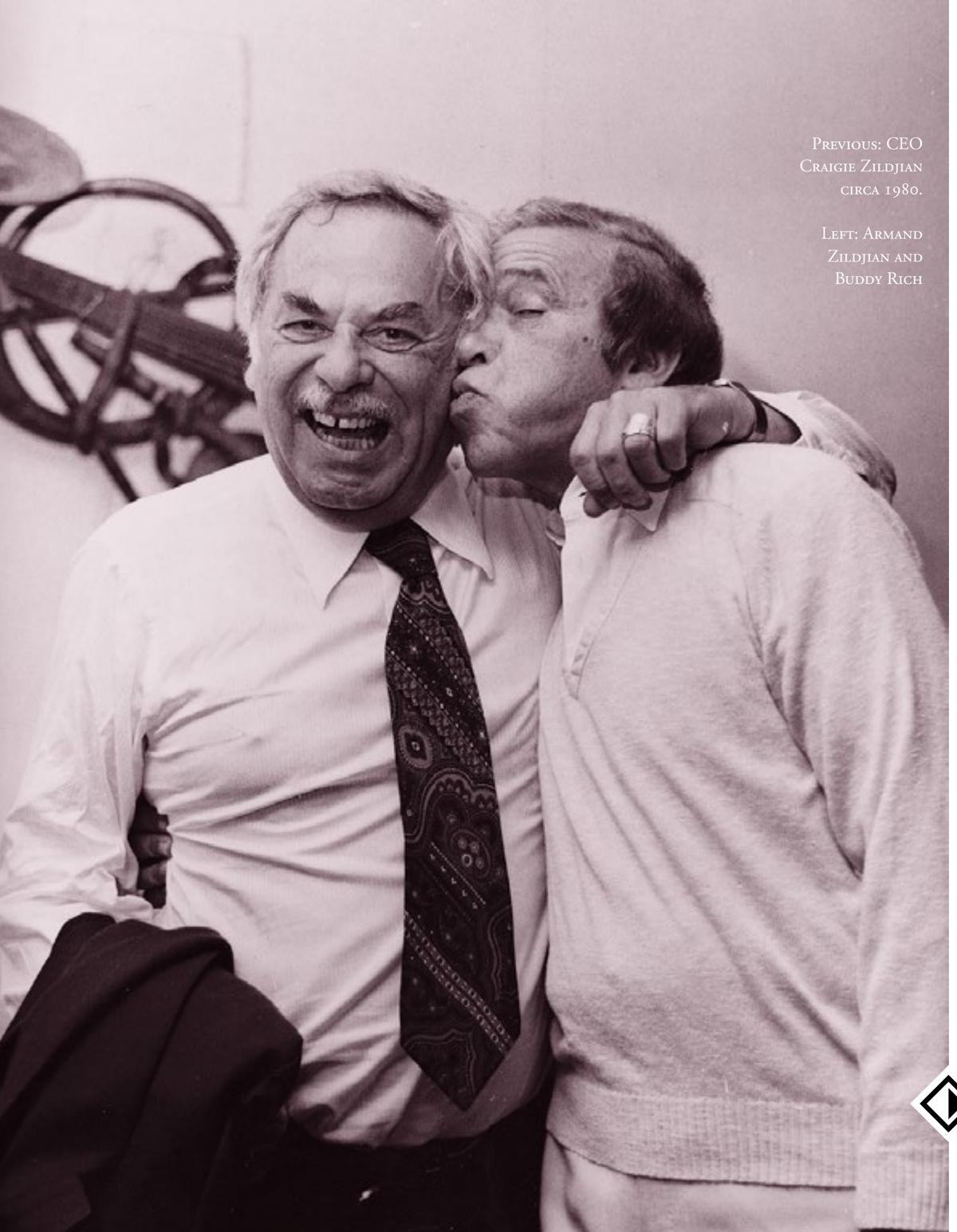
I looked at Paul. Paul smiled back. I was annoying him. I could tell.

In all fairness, Paul Francis, Zildjian's Director of R&D, handled it pretty well. For over an hour he walked me round the factory floor, cheerily explaining each stage in the process of cymbal manufacture. It was such a thorough briefing that, whenever Paul stopped speaking, I only ever had one question: "can I photograph that?"

"No," was Paul's reply. Whether it was shouted over the sound of hammering or whispered in the silence of the vaults, I asked him this question again and again. There were a couple of occasions where he drew breath, contemplating my monotonous request. I was hopeful. "No. Sorry."



Previous: CEO Craigie Zildjian circa 1980.

Left: Armand Zildjian and Buddy Rich

As we returned to the factory entrance, Paul still seemed upbeat, removing his safety glasses beneath a huge sign I hadn't noticed on the way in: "Absolutely No Cameras." "You can take a photograph of that if you like," he grins. I couldn't help but laugh.

After a brief panic where I thought I'd broken the coffee machine in the staff room, I'm introduced to Craigie, the company's CEO. She's sat at her desk which is piled high with papers. "Paul mentioned that you might want to take a few photos," she smiles, transferring piles of paper into a cabinet, "so we might as well neaten the place up a bit. What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

**The Drummer's Journal: As your Father was Armand Zildjian, you must have grown up around some of the world's most iconic drummers?**
Craigie Zildjian: Yes. That was something I was totally used to. Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich were family friends. To be able to go to Max Roach's birthday parties was great.

**Did Max Roach know how to throw a good birthday party?**
Yeah, he sure did. I remember going to one and Malcolm X's daughter was there. I treasure having those memories, for sure.

**When you were younger, what did you want to do? Did you solely have aspirations to work for the family business?**
Well, that wasn't encouraged initially so it wasn't something I expected to happen.

**When you say it wasn't encouraged, what do you mean?**
It was the male members of the family who had those expectations. My sister Debbie and I – we never did.

**What was your first ever job?**
I worked in education. I've got a Master's in Education from Boston University. Then, when I came out of college, I worked in a prison.

**In a prison? In what respect?**
In essence, everyone who works in prison is a correctional officer, but I didn't stay there long. It was tough. It's breaking up fights and things. But it certainly prepared me for business (*laughs*).

**And you've also got an MBA?**
Well, I didn't actually finish my MBA (*laughs*). I had my daughter then that took over. So I have half an MBA. But that has still been very valuable, I learned a lot.

**How did you get started at the company?**
Back in the 1970s, it was very different for women in terms of the jobs you were expected to hold. Women were secretaries. But that period, when I was in college, was also big time for women's lib. In terms of women in the workplace, it was like, "why should I hire you as a women when you're taking a job away from a man that needs to support his family?" Luckily, my grandfather, Avedis Zildjian, was very supportive. Without his encouragement, I don't think I would have made it.

**What do you think instigated that change in attitude?**
I think he wanted to see that next generation of the family come into the business. So I was brought in as Personnel Manager, which I thought was great. This was 1976.

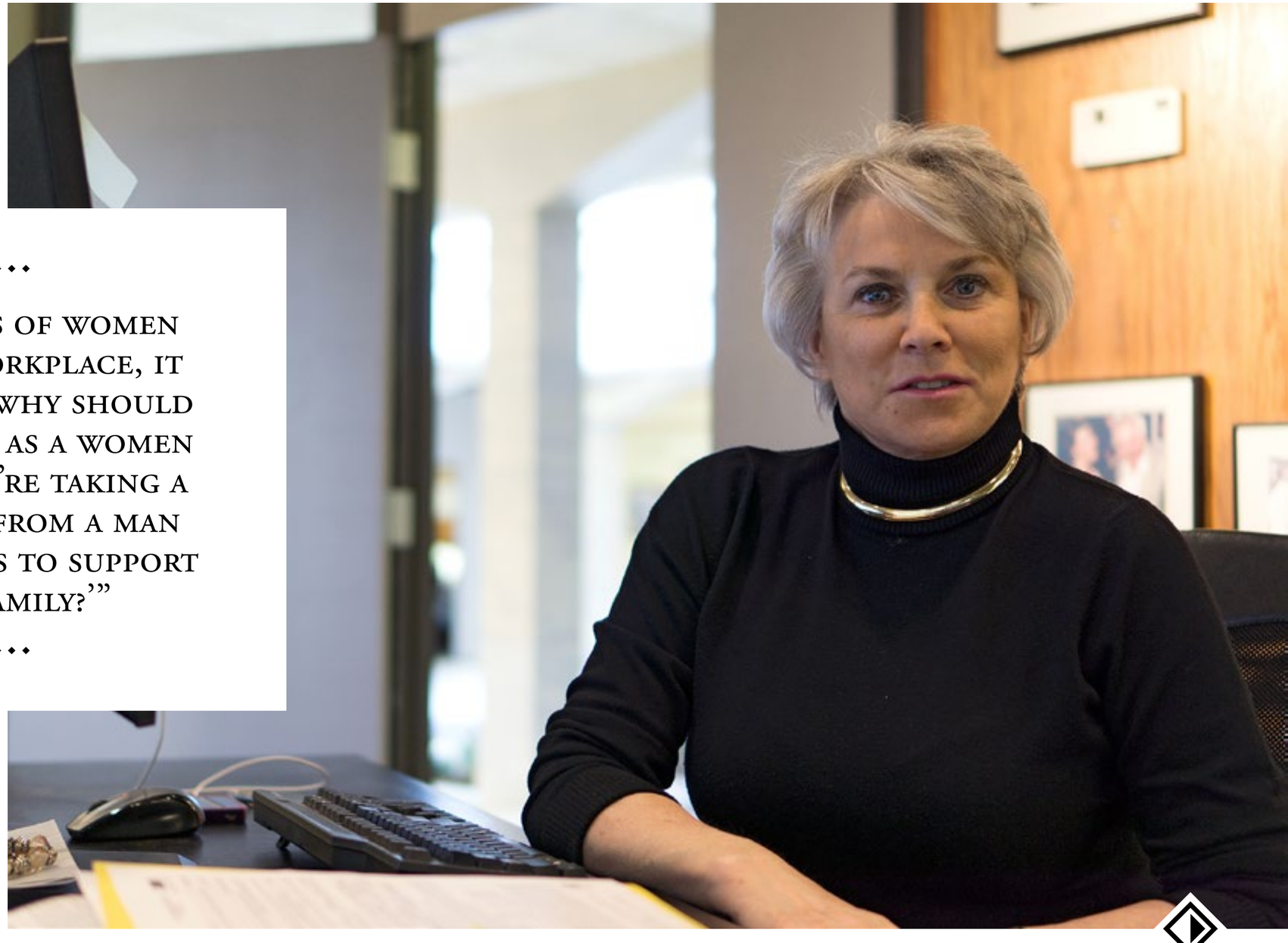
**So that would mean you were in your mid-twenties?**
Yes.

**At the time, were you absolutely sure that it was what you wanted to do?**
Yes, for the most part. But I didn't ever expect that I'd end up in a leadership position – absolutely not.

**With it being a family business, to what extent was your work driven by a personal and not just a career-based motivation?**
From a personal standpoint, I'm very proud of what the family has done. We're the oldest business in the music industry and one of the oldest family businesses in America.

**In the UK, there's been a big resurgence in genealogy…**
That's hard to do if you're from Turkey though. Istanbul was closed off from the rest of the world for a long time, and we're a non-Muslim family, which makes it harder to go back into the records. We've tried and there are little bits here and there but there's no clear record beyond a certain point.

CEO Craigie Zildjian



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"In terms of women in the workplace, it was like, 'why should I hire you as a women when you're taking a job away from a man that needs to support his family?'"

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**To what extent do you feel connected to your Armenian and Turkish heritage?**
Ultimately, my grandfather ended up coming to America because, when he was 20, he was faced with the prospect of being conscripted into the Turkish army. There was a lot of religious tension in that part of the world at that time, a lot of conflict. This was his way out.

**Have you been back there?**
To Istanbul? Yes, of course. My grandfather had no birth certificate, which was common because people were often born at home. So we went back to find his baptismal papers so he could have some sort of official documentation. I saw where he grew up, where he went to church and where he went to school.

**Your dad, Armand, served in the Second World War, is that correct?**
Yes. And my grandfather was a translator in World War One.

**Did they ever talk about their experiences?**
No, not openly. But both were very patriotic and really adopted this country.

**Does that mean you consider Zildjian an American business, or is it something that you feel is still strongly tied to its European roots?**
My grandfather was certainly very European and spoke numerous languages, and I've never felt that we're strictly an American company. The company was incorporated here a month before the Great Depression in 1929, so that was bad news. The saving grace in many ways was the American

jazz era and that's one of the things we're known for; people like Gene Krupa and Jo Jones, they propelled the company through those years.

**Is that the American Dream? To arrive in America and achieve success?**
Yes, I suppose so. Have you ever been to Ellis Island in New York? Back in 1900, it's where immigrants would have to pass through to be either admitted to the US or rejected. My grandfather came through Ellis Island. It's an odd place. There's this huge flight of stairs up into the processing hall. Getting up these steps unaided was one of the firsts tests immigrants had to do. If you couldn't make it up, you were denied entry and put back on a boat.

**I was in a café recently which had cymbals for lampshades…**
Yes, my grandfather made sconces with them.

**Do you have any cymbal themed furniture at home, or would that be a bit much given you're surrounded by them all day?**
When I first moved into my house, I did actually have some cymbals on the wall as sort of art pieces until I could properly decorate it (*laughs*).

**With all the success the company has had, you must have entertained some huge offers to sell up?**
Yes. I get them every week pretty much.

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**"You must have entertained some huge offers to sell up?"**

"Yes. I get them every week pretty much."

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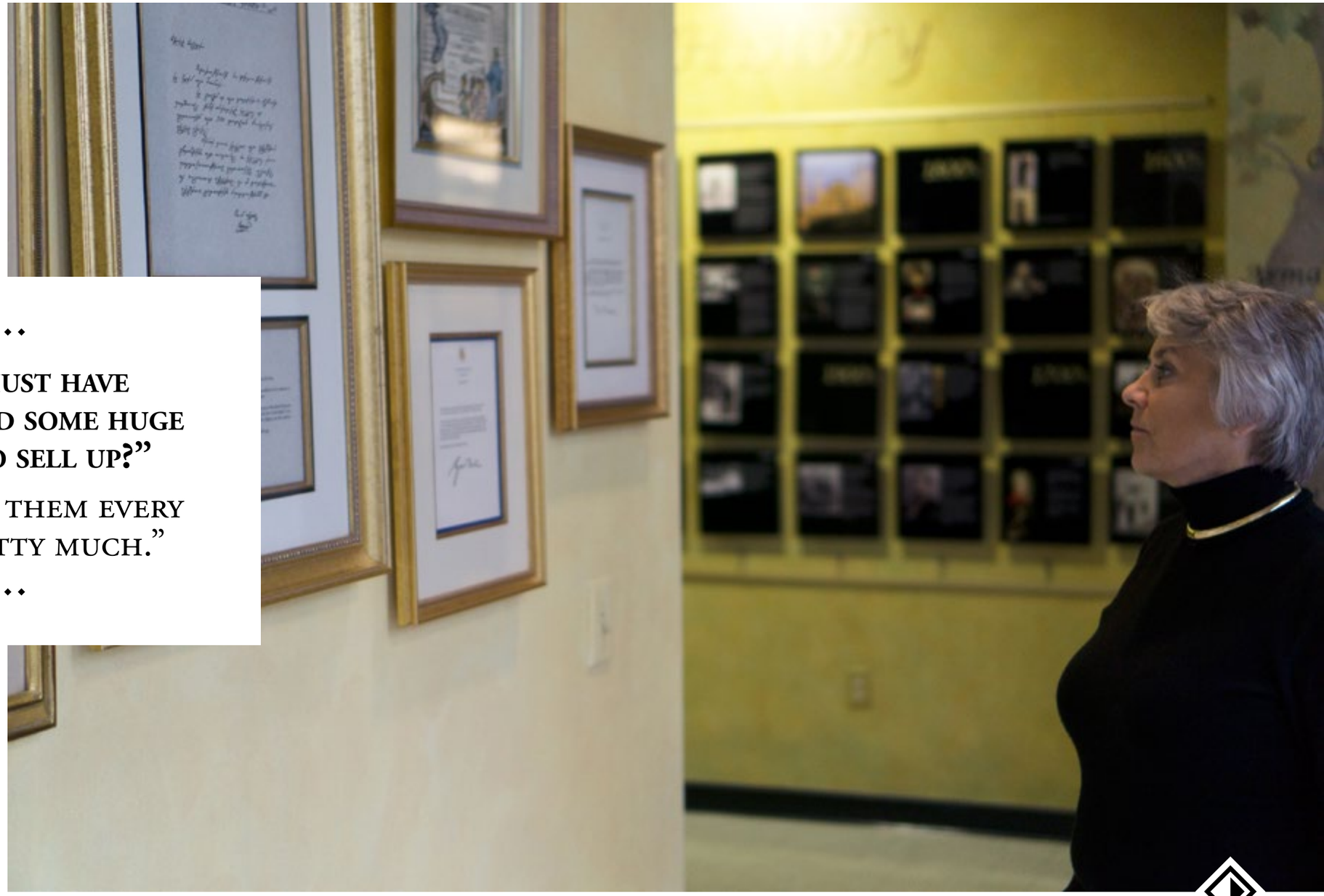




**Who is in the market to buy a cymbal manufacturer?**
Venture capitalists mostly.

**And your response is always a resounding "no"?**
Yes. I mean the brand is huge. The brand is a lot bigger than the actual company if that makes sense. It's very hard to place a value on that sort of thing.

**So you've never seriously entertained an offer?**
No.

**Can you tell me about the secret cymbal smelting process?**
What do you think?

**I think I'm quite trustworthy…**
Nice try.

**Have you ever heard of Irn Bru? It's a Scottish soft drink.**
No. I don't think so.

**In Scotland it outsells Coke. I think the only other country where Coke is outsold by another soft drink is Peru. Anyway, it's rumoured that only two people know the secret Irn Bru formula...**
I think I know where you're going with this (*laughs*).

**Is it true that you and your sister Debbie are the only ones who know the entire smelting process?**
No, there are people who know, those in the melt room for example, otherwise me and Debbie would have to be in there everyday! But, it's true that people can't just go into the melt room. Our Vice President of Operations and Manufacturing for example – he isn't allowed in there, which is quite strange when you think about it. But everyone understands exactly why that's the case, and it is the case for numerous business involved in manufacturing where they have to protect certain information for the safety of the business.

**So how many people at one time know?**
Four. I think.

**When you assumed your role as CEO, to what extent did you feel like you were under a lot of pressure?**
Each generation is supposed to try and revitalise the business. So yes, I certainly felt the pressure to get better.

**How does the family aspect play out on a corporate level?**
I think there are family businesses where everyone feels like part of a family, and family businesses where there's the family and everyone else. I would say this company falls in the camp of the former. Diversity is a plus and we've tried to embrace that.

**Economically speaking, there must have been times when it's gotten tough…**
Yeah, of course. We've just been through a huge recession but it was the same for the whole industry. For any business, it's about what you do as a team to fight that. You just have to weather the ups and downs.

Right: Head Cymbal Tester Leon Chiappini

Previous: Armand Zildjian, Buddy Rich, Lennie DiMuzio.

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"My grandfather came to America when he was 20 because he was faced with the prospect of being conscripted into the Turkish army. This was his way out."

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**As CEO how do you try and plan for that?**
You just have to remain focused. It wasn't a great time then. The war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan. I wouldn't say I was worried as such, but I really believe in family businesses, in America especially, they're big drivers of the economy.

**As CEO do you feel personally responsible for everyone here?**
That's certainly how I used to look at it. But now I'm trying to have a different perspective. Now we're more about people taking on responsibility.

**How do you choose what processes to automate?**
We only ever automate unskilled processes. So for example, it makes sense to have a robot apply the Zildjian stamp and logo.

**How much does a cymbal-making robot cost?**
(*Laughs*) I'm afraid I can't tell you that. But they're not cheap. They're all custom made.

**As CEO, can you allocate yourself holiday time?**
Well, in theory I could. But it wouldn't really be fair to do that would it? I actually never use all my vacation time.

**Do you have a staff band?**
When we have corporate functions, members of staff get together and play. Why?

**Because you could lease them out for functions and things. It could be a nice little earner?**
That's a thought.

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# MY LIFE BURNING THINGS

## BC Burnings' Guide to Pyrography

*Words by Brett Colvin &*
*Photography by Joe Boyland*

**I got started with pyrography when my shop teacher at school lent me the school's old wood burner and let me take it home.** I messed around with it a bit then stopped because I was in quite few bands and didn't have the time.

**I don't actually have a workshop.** I just work out of my bedroom. I have a desk where I do the actual burning, a rack for all the drum shells, some boxes of other drum parts, then my bed about two feet behind me. I keep it pretty clean, I'm pretty OCD about it. If it gets too messy I can't work.

**I don't think it's a fire hazard.** Well, maybe. I'll hopefully have a proper workshop soon.

**I pretty much wanted nothing to do with school.** When I was 16, I failed English in my junior year, but instead of going to summer school, I ended up joining a pretty established band and went on tour. So I had to retake English in my senior year which made things pretty interesting for a little bit. I kept playing in the band, but then they all went to college.

**I knew college wasn't for me so I just got a regular job.** I'd always wanted to have a trade. Something with wood, like furniture making. I always wanted to make my own house and furnish it myself. That's a goal I have.

**It was only a few years ago that I picked up the wood burner again.** I had an old drum kit that I'd stripped down and I had time to mess around with it. So I wood burnt it and posted it online, and it kind of took off a little bit which made me realise that people were interested in it. It was something quite new that not a lot of people were doing.

**I worked another job until October last year.** It was at Lowe's, which is a big DIY store. I'd get off work at Lowe's at about 10pm each day, then work until 5am on wood burning projects.


Photo by: Kate Darracott

**I had to quit my job at Lowe's because I had a stroke.** The doctors said it was because I was working too much. It caused me to have bad seizures, so I wasn't able to wood burn or draw because I wasn't able to keep my hands still.

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"I had a stroke. It caused me to have bad seizures, so I wasn't able to draw because I couldn't keep my hands still. I thought I might never be able to draw again."

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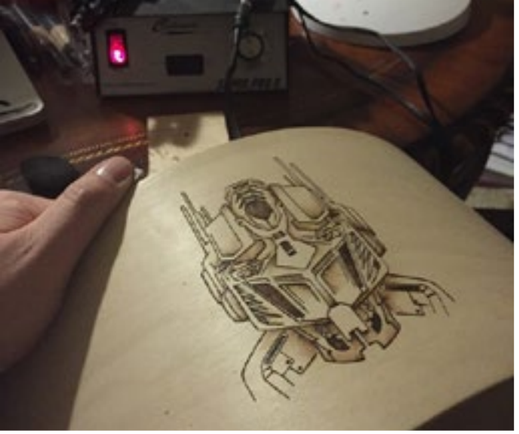
**That was what I was most worried about, my hands.** I tried burning, but my hands shook so much that I couldn't draw a straight line. It was pretty scary for a while. I thought I might never be able to draw again.

**The meds made me really twitchy but I finally got my hands to stop shaking.** The seizures were fixed with medicine. I still can't drive, which has forced me to work for myself, out of my own house.

**Starting a business was definitely scary.** I was scared of failure. "Will I get orders?" I thought about that a lot. But once I took the leap and began, it was the most satisfying thing ever. With anything you do like that, you will struggle and worry at first, but it's important to keep going.

**My first commission was a Muppets themed snare** for one of my friends. It didn't quite go as I'd hoped. When I finished it, I applied a clear coat, but the temperature dropped that night and the clear coat went white. It totally ruined the burning and the shell, so I had to redo the whole thing again. I'm glad that happened on my first one and not on some of the bigger ones.

**Surprisingly, I hardly ever burn myself.** I've done it maybe

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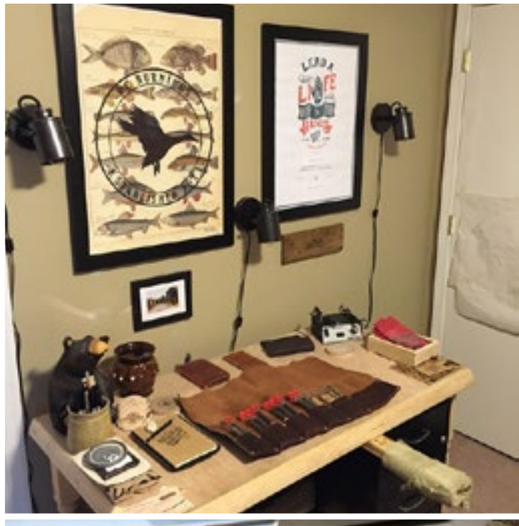
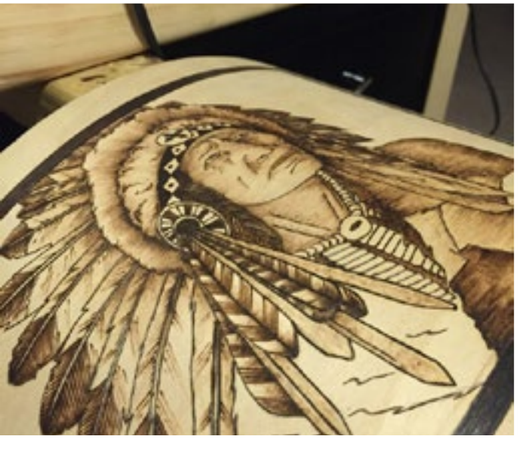



two or three times since I started. I don't actually set the temperature of the iron super hot. You can get nicer results from using lower heats. Now I'm probably going to burn my finger having said that.

**I do three of four pieces a week.** I can do a project a day if I work really hard. I'll do an initial design on paper, then I draw that design onto a shell, then I'll do the actual burn. So, by the end, I'll have drawn out the design three times. I usually just turn music on and zone out.

**I suppose I had a bit of an obsession with fire as a kid.** My twin brother and I would blow stuff up in our backyard sometimes. We lived in Virginia so we had a big garden. We would have huge bonfires and throw aerosols in them which was pretty reckless.

**If I make a mistake, it's not as bad as you'd think.** I don't really burn too deep into the wood and I work quite slowly anyway. Depending how bad an error is, I can usually just sand it. Or I use a razor blade and just run it across the surface, so you can take it down as much as you like.

**The most difficult aspect so far has been** making sure I'm doing everything right with taxes and stuff. I just want to make sure I'm doing everything right and try to learn other people's mistakes.

**The response to what I do has been great.** It's been way more than I could have hoped for. I never thought I'd be able to support myself off what was originally just a hobby. It's nice because I work at it super hard. To have that pay off is pretty special.

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Illustration by
Billy Ponzio

THE DRUMMER'S JOURNAL

AN INDEPENDENT DRUM MAGAZINE

tdj

# STEWART COPELAND

## Neighbourhood Watch

*Words by Tom Hoare*

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Technically speaking, I was trespassing. But there was a good reason as to why I was sprawled out on Stewart Copeland's driveway at 8:00am.

The previous 24 hours had not gone to plan. In fact, they'd been a total disaster. I like to think the challenges I overcame were equally as stressful as the average Jason Statham character arc. As a result, I arrived in Los Angeles in a sleep-deprived daze, roughly a day later than I had intended. By the time I got to Stewart Copeland's house, I was unsure if I would be able to speak, let alone sustain a conversation.

The sun had barely risen, so, desperate for rest, I sat down in the only place I realistically could. Before long, I was fully horizontal, using my bag as a pillow, dozing before the huge wooden gate and exterior wall of a large Bel Air mansion.

What happened next wasn't something I'd intended.

"Can I help you?" I sit up and look around for the source of the inquiry. "Up here," the voice instructs. I crane my head back and see a man, brow furrowed, leaning over a balcony above my head. "Hi…" His greeting has an underlying tone of concern. It makes introducing myself as the person who is supposed to be interviewing him at 10.30am slightly more awkward.

"You're early. Why didn't you just buzz the gate?" he asks.
"I thought you might be busy."
"I am busy."

For some reason, I'm still sat down with my head twisted round like an ungainly owl. The man on the balcony looks wholly unimpressed. "Well, come on in and we can get this over and done with. See that bell by the gate? Ring that."

"Get this over and done with." That's how I used to feel about

Photo by Federico Ugolini

going to the dentist. As the mental images I'd had of meeting Stewart Copeland with a vague air of professionalism vanish, I realise I might as well have introduced myself with a pair of outstretched pliers.

I buzz the intercom and after a few seconds Stewart's voice crackles out of a small metal box to the left of the gate: "On second thoughts, just go away."

I stand there for a second, confused. "Sorry? Hello? Stewart?" No answer. My confusion turns to frustration. I press the buzzer again. Nothing. I feel desolate. I consider whether crying is an appropriate reaction.

"Just kidding," fizzles the speaker. "Come on in."

**The Grove**

Stewart's studio is known as Sacred Grove. It's a sort of annexe to his main house in Bel Air, an area of Los Angeles which the Fresh Prince had taught me all about. Around the outside of the building, there is a sort of elevated walkway which looks out over the main gate. It was from here where Stewart had spied me asleep on his driveway.

"So you were just going to lie there?" He seems mildly intrigued.
"Yes. Sorry."
"Were you comfortable?"
"I was actually."
"I see. Do you want a coffee?"
"Are you having one?"
"I'm trying to drink less coffee. My next cup isn't until midday."
He glances at his watch. It's 9:00am. "Ah, fuck it then. You came to see Stewart Copeland the rock star, right?" He grins. I feel a bit better.

Stewart begins to tend a coffee machine in the corner, and I wander through the large square room navigating around the various instruments that populate the majority of floor space. In the centre, there's a huge desk which arcs across the studio, crammed with monitors, keyboards and consoles. A large bookcase stretches along one wall and on a small shelf near its centre are a number of awards. Several are Grammys. I realise I've never seen a Grammy award in real life and get the urge to pick one up. I look over at Stewart who is staring intently at his little red coffee machine as it dispenses a brew into a small glass cup. As a compromise, I decide to quickly give the award a little prod. It makes a satisfying clinking noise as it bumps into the others.

"Trinkets," Stewart nods.
"You're not proud of them?"
"Yes. I mean, I'm proud of what they represent."
"You mean The Police?"
"Correct."

The time Stewart spent in The Police is likely the reason many people will know of him. It's certainly why I did. On Saturday mornings whilst my dad went to Safeway, I'd go into WH Smith and read the music magazines, much to the annoyance of the staff.

For a 10 year old, interviews with Stewart were great because he swore a lot. Plus he was apparently a pretty good musician, though, in all honesty, I don't think I appreciated that as much as seeing photographs of some choice expletives scribbled on his drumheads.

**The Police**

The Stewart Copeland I pictured was the steely eyed 26 year old staring out from the cover of The Police's Greatest Hits album. The only discernible difference today is that he wears glasses and his hair is a different colour. He's retained that unmistakable

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"It takes a few years to realise that you're full of shit, that it isn't so easy without those other guys. That process takes much longer"

...

leanness, and despite his insistence that he's just "a miserable, old bastard," he shows few signs of fitting such a description.
In the grand scheme of things, Stewart's time in The Police didn't last all that long. As a band, excluding 2007's reunion tour, The Police existed for eight years. Formed in 1977, they were one of the most commercially successful bands on the planet by 1983. By 1984, the band had ceased to play and wouldn't tour again for another 23 years. Sting and guitarist Andy Summers both continued as solo artists. Stewart became a successful composer of music for TV, film and the stage.

I wondered how Stewart viewed his work with The Police compared to the work he'd done since, and to what extent he felt The Police had come to define him as a person, both from his own perspective and from that of others. So, sat at his unusually high desk, this seemed a good place to start.

"It's true that those ten years I spent in The Police are way outsized compared to my accomplishments since," he begins. "Not in terms of artistic merit, in my opinion, but in terms of what I'm know for. That's just who Stewart Copeland is to a lot of people."

"And you feel that's not accurate?"

"Well, no not really. Of course, anything to do with The Police follows me around and there're positives and negatives to that. I got my first film scoring commission because Francis Ford Coppola's son was really into The Police. But it's still taken me 20 years to get where I want to be as a composer."

"Initially, did you ever struggle with people taking you seriously as a composer?"

"Certainly the last thing a film director wants to do is hire an egotistical, difficult rock star, which I was in the eyes of a lot of people at the time. So I had to become a malleable, trained professional."

"How did you do that?"

"I started buying my clothes at GAP." He laughs. "Today, no one is calling to hire the impetuous bastard I was when I was 26."

"That's how you'd describe yourself at 26, an impetuous bastard?"

"I'd say that's fairly accurate. Back then I was uptight, I was worried about making it. Today the main difference is that I've learned which battles to fight and which ones to let go. The anger at the lack of traction, the frustration at trying to get something going, that's all gone. I'm amazed that I got away with some of the dumb shit that I did. I'm glad I don't make a lot of those mistakes anymore."

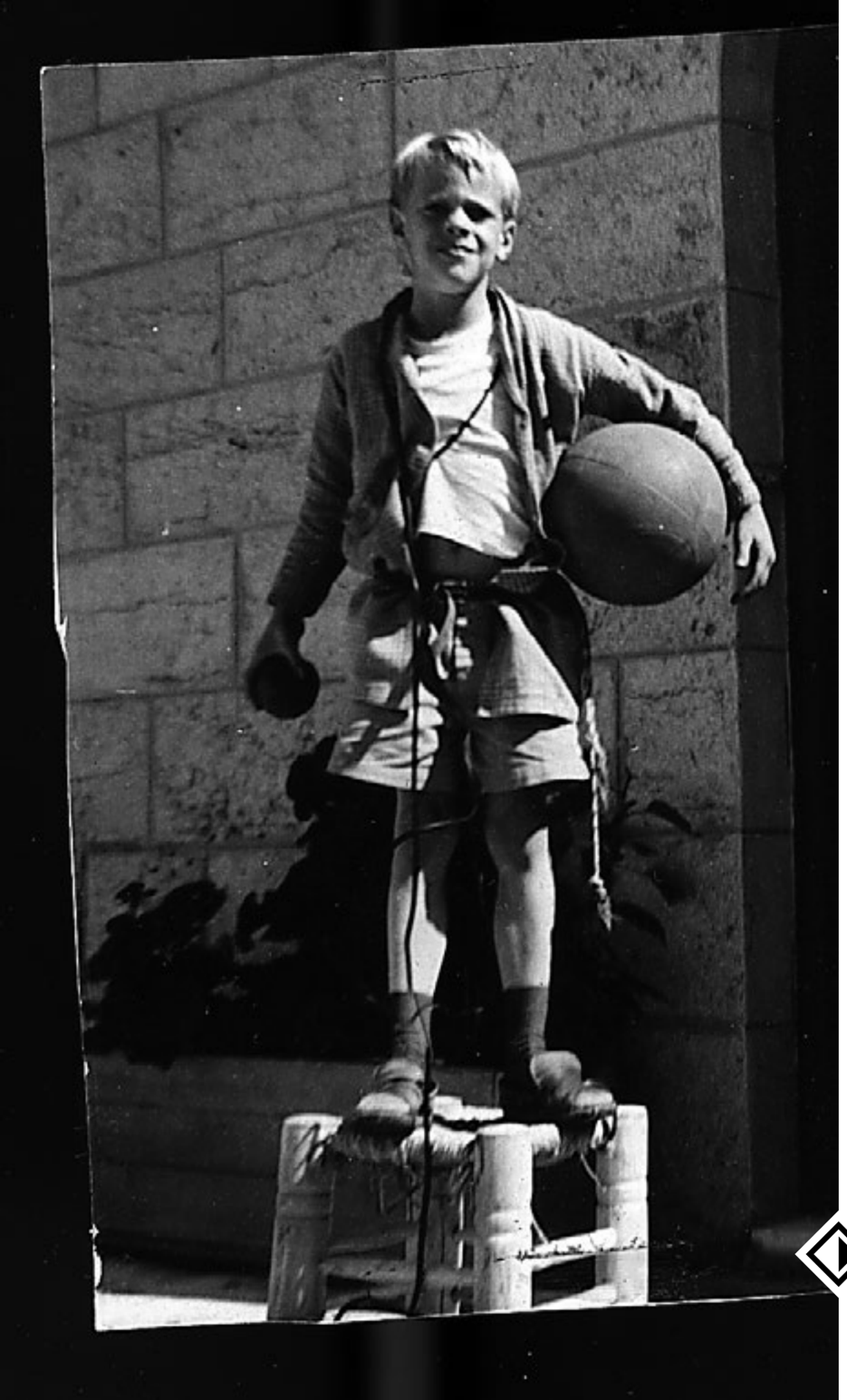
"How about as a kid. What were you like?"

"I was pretty shy really. But with all that affirmation as I got older, people telling you how great you are, of course it gives you more social confidence. Way more. Especially when you're young. But if you're in a band you have to be an optimist because the odds are so stacked against you. People always ask me, 'did you know The Police were going to get so big?' and I say, 'Yeah. I did.' That sounds like I'm being incredibly arrogant, but the reality was you just had to think like that or you'd get crushed. In our case, we got lucky, but 99% of the time, you don't. You have to be optimistic because it's what holds you together."

"How does that optimism manifest itself when a band breaks up?"

"I would say that the first feeling of any musician in a big band that breaks up is one of omnipotence. 'I don't need those guys, I just did an interview with Rolling Stone who seem real

Photo by:
Philippe Agnifili



interested in my story.' And it probably takes a few years to realise that you're full of shit, that it isn't so easy without those other guys. That process takes much longer."
"Do you ever miss it? Being in a band?"

Stewart sits in silence for a few moments. "Sure, there are times when I go and see a huge band playing a stadium and think, 'Goddamn it, that looks like fun.' I'm only human. But you've got to remember that the stadium gig comes with a lot of baggage, strings attached and two other guys." He laughs.

**The Eric Clapton Effect**

I ask Stewart if I'm correct in thinking that there was a period in the mid-90s when he didn't play drums at all. "Yes." He replies, stating that he suffered from what he terms "the Eric Clapton Effect."

"Because I was busy with composing work, I didn't play drums for a long time and all my chops pretty much disappeared. People were asking me to play but I felt like I couldn't because they were expecting the best and I knew I couldn't deliver. So it was easier to say no than to do it and disappoint them."

I ask how this ties in with Eric Clapton.

"Well, remember 'Eric Clapton is God?' I know if I was Eric Clapton, I'd be petrified of picking up a guitar because each time he does there is such as massive premise of expectation."

"Why didn't you call it Stewart Copeland Syndrome?"

"That'd be a bit arrogant wouldn't it? I just know that's how I would feel if I were Eric Clapton."

"Is that just another way of saying you were in denial?"

"Well, when you're known for one thing, it creates an avatar which hovers over your head. Like Kim Kardashian, she has a Technicolor avatar with sirens going off as she walks down the street. People have a perception of her that has been created solely by the media."

"So what's your avatar?"

"People think I'm who I was when I was 26 - a noisy little motherfucker. And I don't mind that too much. I regard it humorously."

"What is the best example where you've used that avatar for personal gain?"

"Getting free gear. Equipment and stuff."

"Have you ever gone into a fully booked restaurant and because you're Stewart Copeland they've set you up a table?"

"Even if you're super big time you can't count on that in LA. You either walk into a restaurant and the maître d' is dropping rose petals before you, or they're like, 'I'm sorry, who are you?' In my specific case, it was getting pulled over for traffic violations. For 20 years I couldn't get a speeding ticket." Stewart gets out of his chair and imitates a police officer knocking on a car window. "'Sir – do you realise how fast you were going? Licence and registration please. Oh. Mr Copeland. I see. Have a good day.'" He returns to his chair, only to immediately spring out of it once more. "But recently I got a young cop who pulled me over." He once again straightens up and knocks on the fictitious car window. "'Sir, you were doing 80 miles an hour back there. You're getting a ticket. Licence please.'" He adopts a confused look when reading the imaginary licence. "Mr Cop-e-land? How do you say that?' Since then I've had to obey the speed limit." He laughs.

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"He was an old fascist who famously suggested slipping razor blades into prisoners' cells so they could 'do the right thing' by the British taxpayer."

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Left to Right, Top to Bottom:
Synchronicity (1983)
Zenyatta Mondatta (1980)
Outlandos d'Amour (1978)
Reggatta de Blanc (1979)

Page 72:
Ghost in the Machine (1981)

"But back in the early days when we were in a Ford Transit in the UK going up the M6, we'd get pulled over by the police: "Oh, you're a band are you? What's the name? The Police? Very funny! Up against the wall!"

**The Cocoon**

In 2010, Stewart released an autobiography. The book was met with a bit of criticism from those who expected it to regale tales from his time in The Police. Instead, it focuses more on his life before and after the band. It certainly makes it clear how much work he's done since, the vast majority with great success. Much of the subject matter is light-hearted and Stewart comes across as living a somewhat carefree life, newly rich and enjoying the luxuries and opportunities that brings.

One thing that struck me was how he'd described his life with The Police as like living in a cocoon. He said the analogy came from the fact he felt totally removed from the real world, given that he didn't have to do anything for himself. There's a point where he states the feeling of being cocooned ended when The Police broke up, but given his continued fame, part of me wondered if he still felt it to some degree.

Outside, it's a glorious day. Although the studio has large windows that look out over the hills, it remains dim inside.

"How much time do you spend in here?
"Maybe 12 hours a day."
"Alone?"
"Mostly."
"Is that lonely?"
No, not really. I mean, it's how I need to work."
"Do you still feel like that's a bit of a cocoon in some ways?"

"In some ways it is. But the difference is that I can walk out

of that door and be in the house with my wife and kids. You can't do that when you're on tour. Here I have autonomy. When you're in a touring band, you don't have that. You're treated like a kid because you always have somewhere to be. Now I dictate exactly what I do."

"So when the reunion tour came around in 2007, how was it going back into that environment and having that autonomy taken away? Or was it a case of being older and wiser and therefore more tolerable?"

"I think the reality was that we'd all become more entrenched in our opinions, not more open-minded. For 20 years I hadn't had to compromise on a thing. Nor had Sting. Nor had Andy. And suddenly we were all in a situation where we had to make compromises. I think that came as a bit of a shock. And so that cocoon I mentioned, it developed another 20 layers."

I ask Stewart to explain.

"So on the reunion tour we had a Dressing Room Ambience Coordinator."

"A Dressing Room Ambiance Coordinator? That was a professional role?"

"Oh yes. Full salary, per diem, flights, hotel room, the whole works for a guy with that title. So before we'd arrive at the stadium, the Dressing Room Ambience Coordinator arrives with a truck full of satins and silks. He finds the three dressing rooms and brings in pipes and drapes, so it is no longer a cinder block room for 20 football players. It's now a boudoir, with mood lighting, tables and chairs. It's like a Casbah, and each one of us had one in our own little world."

"You're smiling! This is a joke, right?"

"I assure you it is not. In 1983, tickets for a stadium gig were 17 dollars. That's when it was Sting, Andy, three roadies, a sound guy and myself. For the reunion, tickets cost between 200 to 300 dollars, and there's a small army of people helping us."

"That's not cheap."

"No, it's not. So what do you think pays for the creature comforts?"

I can't help smirking because I'm still unsure as to whether he's pulling my leg. "Did you have a preferred ambience?"

"No, I just went with whatever. But do you see what I mean now about it being a cocoon? Each of us had a personal minder. So if I wanted a newspaper, 'sit there Mr Copeland I'll get you the newspaper.' They want us sitting there like a lightly fluffed pillow. The last thing they want is independent thought because that can be disruptive to the schedule."

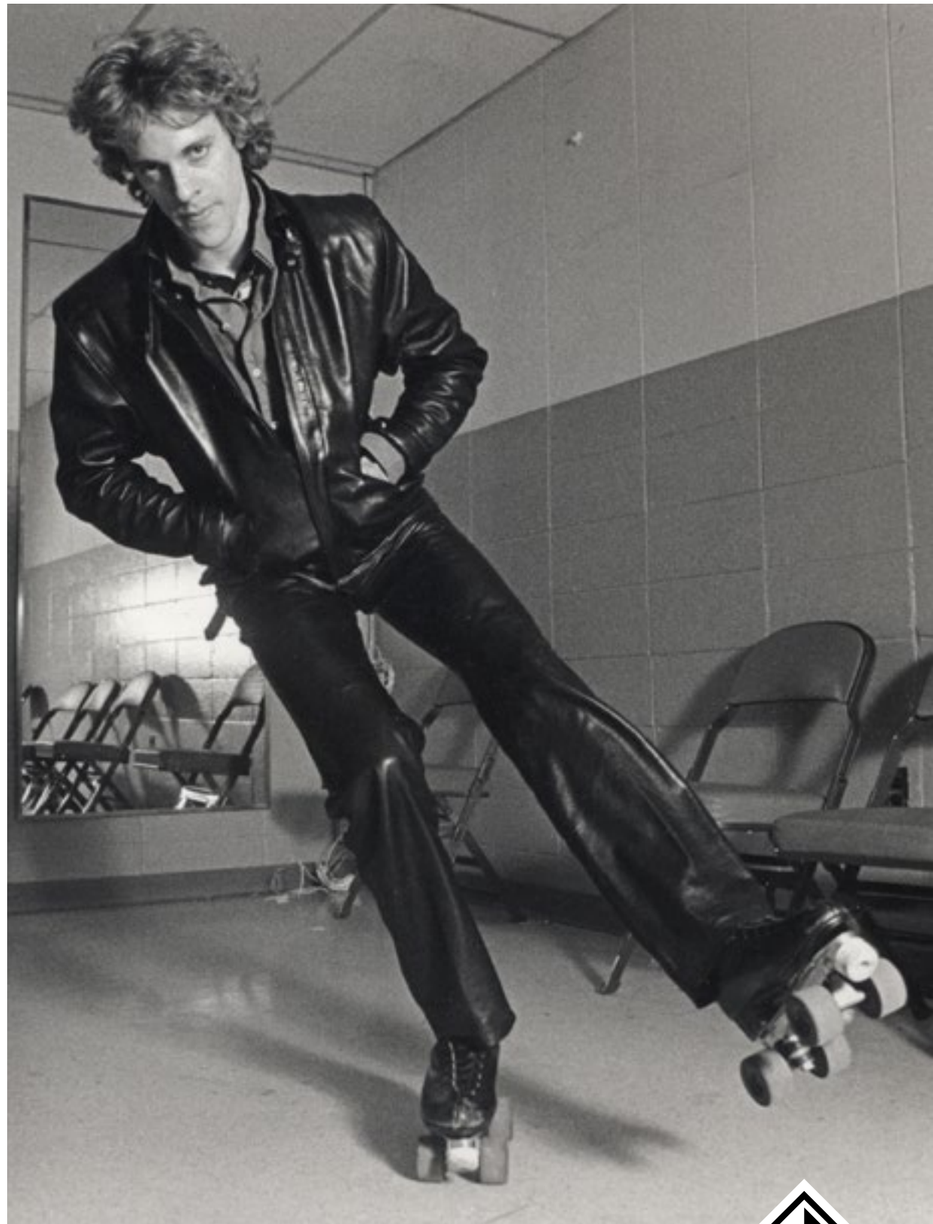
"That must be stifling after a while?"

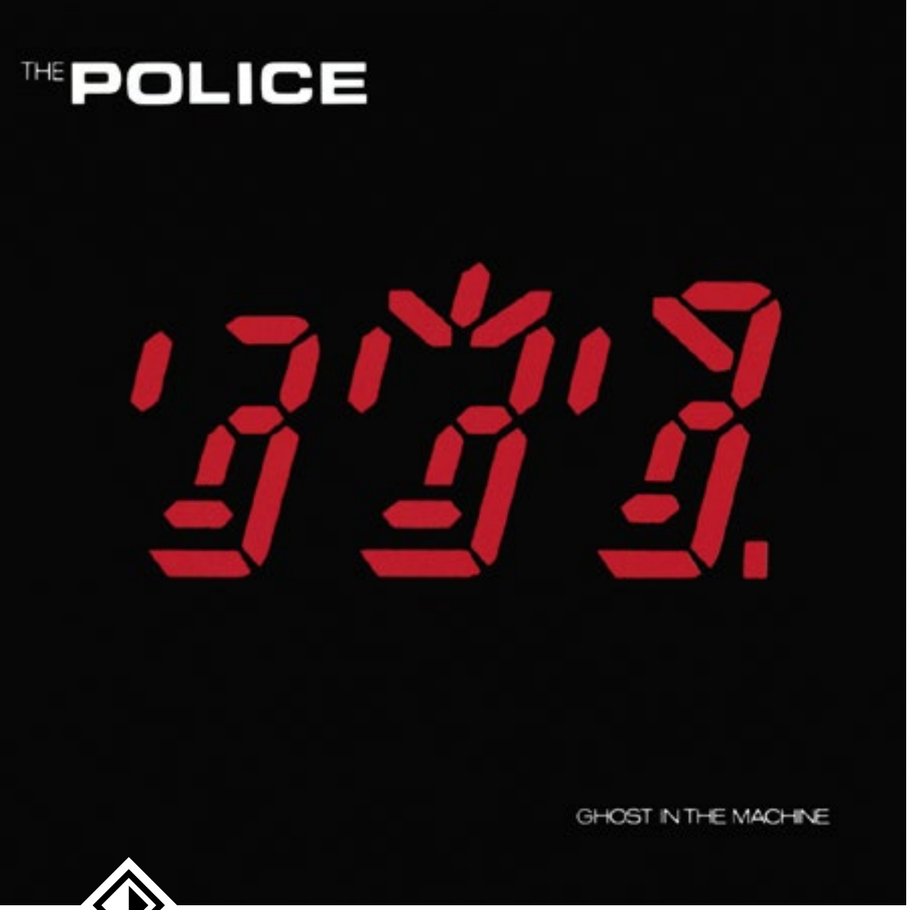
"You'd think so, but in all honesty, I didn't mind. It made my life a lot easier." He puts his feet up on the desk and leans back. "I'm all for that."

**On Success**

Occasionally, Stewart adopts a sort of deadpan stare where he could be thinking absolutely anything. It's quite intense because he looks right at you, which makes it hard to tell if he's actually engaged or just terribly bored. Hoping it's not the latter, I begin scrambling around for a question. What I settle on isn't going to win any awards.

"New sneakers?"
"Sort of. Pretty new, yeah."








"eBay?"
"These weren't, but I do enjoy a bit of eBaying.
"What's your feedback like?"
"Good. But I never sell stuff, I only ever buy things."
"Have you ever been embroiled in an eBay dispute?"
Stewart pauses, looking rather suspicious. "This is an odd line of questioning."

I laugh nervously. "Is that a yes, then?"
"No. But why do you want to know about that?"
"I just find the idea of well known people using eBay amusing really. I can't explain it." I realise that what I'd just said is potentially very insulting and try to move on quickly. "I guess the people you're buying things from don't know Stewart Copeland is the buyer?"

"No. They don't. It's not like my user name is Stewart underscore Copeland or whatever. It gets shipped to a different address then on to here."

The eBay train had derailed quicker than I'd hoped and The Mona Lisa smile is returning. I fumble around for another question but only manage to blurt out the word "polo" after spying a photograph of Stewart sat on a horse. I had intended this to be a fully formed inquiry but it simply came out like I had just learned what polo was and was saying it out loud for the first time. It's a bit awkward, so I confess that I know nothing about it, which makes Stewart smirk. He asks me if I perceive a bunch of rich bastards galloping around on horses and I reply that that's exactly how I perceive it, to which he laughs and says that I'm pretty much correct.

As a joke, I ask him whether he's better at polo than Prince Charles, to which he replies with a story about having to play directly against him on a few different occasions.

"Did Charles ever tell you he was a fan of The Police?"

Stewart snorts. "No. He did not. I think he was more of an ELO man. But I certainly met some interesting characters playing polo. Have you heard of Lord Moyne? He was an old fascist who famously suggested slipping razor blades into prisoners' cells so they could "do the right thing" by the British taxpayer. He was referred to afterwards as 'old razor blades.' Anyhow, he was the son of Diana Mitford who was, at one point, the most hated women in Britain. She was close friends with Hitler, and said lots of dubious things having survived the war about how much she still admired him." He adopts a high shrill voice of an elderly woman. "'Hitler was the most wonderful dancer you know.'"

"You heard Diana Mitford say that?"

"Well, not personally but she was known to get quite drunk and say outrageous things at family events, much to the humiliation of those around her." He shakes his head and laughs. "Some people."

**First Impressions**

"Do you know any jokes?" Stewart asks. "It usually helps with the photographs." I lower the camera. My mind goes blank.

"Actually, I've got one," Stewart grins. "What's the difference between a chickpea and a garbanzo bean?"
"I don't know."
"I've never paid $300 to have a garbanzo bean on my chest before." He pauses, awaiting my rapturous laughter. "I'll give you a second," he nods.
"…"
"Nothing?"
"…"

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"People ask me, 'did you know The Police were going to get big?' I say, 'Yeah. I did.' You had to think like that or you'd get crushed."

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"In 1983, tickets for a stadium gig were 17 dollars. For the reunion, tickets cost 200 to 300 dollars. So what do you think pays for the creature comforts?"

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"Seriously?"
"Oh wait, I think I get it."
"Really?"
"No, sorry I don't get it."
"Jesus Christ. Do I honestly have to explain it?"

As I pack a few things up, Stewart talks about how he'd bought the house and studio off a famous composer. I ask if it helps impress clients and he replies that it likely helps in some shape or form.

"When you were young, before The Police got big, what was your perception of what it meant to be successful?"

"As a kid with a rock band, I just wanted to impress everybody. My friends, my parents, the prefect at my high school, my teachers, that guy who snubbed me at a gig once; but now there's damn few people left. All my life, I wanted to impress my dad. He's gone. I wanted to impress my mother. She's gone. It took me a long time to realise that my peers don't need to be impressed."

"Did you find that trying to impress people worked? Did it make people like you?"

"No, not especially. Sometimes it just makes your personal and professional relationships a lot more difficult. I think it can alienate people."

"So how about today? Would you say your idea of what success is has changed?"

"Today, I'm just doing this because I enjoy it. And I've learned it's the journey and not the destination when it comes to creating a piece of art. This might sound a bit wishy-washy but the concert where you display it, it's kind of downhill from there. You realise the real thrill of it was the two years it took to get there. It's not about who you impress along the way. That's such a powerful motivation, the desire to make your mark, but for me it's just not there anymore. So success today, for me, what does it look like? Well, this really. Being able to do this."

"The other side of getting there isn't worth a damn in an odd kind of way. You initially asked me if I was proud of those Grammys and I said I was. Ultimately though, they don't really mean anything. But my kids do. They fill me with a desire to live and do things. Being a celebrity is totally meaningless ultimately. The tinsel and glitter you get as a rock star is just a veneer. It's not real. And it's certainly not success."

We say our goodbyes and I head outside, back onto the driveway where'd I'd been sat earlier on. I realise I can't call a taxi as the battery on my phone is dead, so I set off on the long walk back to Los Angeles. After I'd made it about 20 meters down the road, a passing car pulls over. Thinking a kind person was about to offer me a lift, I walk over, only to have the driver inform me that "this is a neighbourhood watch area" before speeding off. It makes me laugh and think that I should make more of an effort when it comes to first impressions.

I suppose I could have told the neighbourhood watch advocate not to worry as someone once involved with The Police lived nearby. Even though he might be an ex-copper, I was glad to see Stewart Copeland still wore his stripes.

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A young Stewart Copeland

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This Illustration is Beat Lab, by David Gonzalez.

# SPEED DEMONS

## The world of WFD and Extreme Sport Drumming

*By Tony Barrell*

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It all began in Nashville, Tennessee, a city that normally resounds to the twang of country and western rather than the smash-bash of competitive drumming. Suddenly, just after the dawning of the 21st century, all these earnest-looking people – mostly men – were staring down intently as they used drumsticks to play single-stroke rolls on a little circular drum pad in front of them. Meanwhile, a digital display told the story: as the seconds counted down, the number of beats started soaring – 500, 600, 700, 800 beats per minute, and more. There was no actual music playing, unless it was in the heads of these drummers, all of them determined to play faster and faster and faster, smash the record and become the World's Fastest Drummer.

GUINNESS SUPERLATIVES LIMITED

RECORD CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Boo Boo McAfee

of Nashville, Tennessee, USA did break the

Drumming record this

13th day of August 19 81

738 hours - 13th July to 13th August, 198 Details.

Editor,
Guinness Book of Records, London

THIS CERTIFICATE DOES NOT NECESSARILY DENOTE AN ENTRY IN THE GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS

The drum pad and digital display are the key components of the Drumometer, the American beat-counting invention that has made this whole contest possible. Fifteen years on, the World's Fastest Drummer (WFD) competition is now firmly established as a regular American event. But this isn't some small-time hick novelty attraction, like the cowpat-throwing championship that draws cheering springtime spectators to Beaver, Oklahoma. WFD has not only been embraced by the Guinness World Records organisation and become a fixture at NAMM trade shows, but it has gone global, spreading as far as Turkey, China, Russia and Australia.

As WFD continually finds new territories to conquer, and as more and more drummers step forward to establish incredible new records, so the debate rages among drummers. Is this speed competition – which also goes under the trademarked name of Extreme Sport Drumming – a good or bad thing? Does it have anything to do with music? Isn't it all just a bit of harmless fun? These are questions that appear to split the drumming community right down the middle.

Which is interesting, because the idea of the Drumometer actually arose from a rivalry between two drummers. Barrett Deems was a flashy white jazz drummer from Springfield, Illinois, who played with band leaders such as Louis Armstrong and Jimmy Dorsey and enjoyed the nickname of "Speed Demon". In the 1950s he played regularly at a cool Chicago jazz joint known as the Brass Rail club, where he was billed as "the World's Fastest Drummer". And the story goes that one day, some competition arrived in the neighbourhood. A banner suddenly appeared outside a nearby jazz club advertising "Buddy Rich – World's #1 Drummer". Deems quickly hit back (though with a bit of modesty and deference to his rival drum legend) with a banner reading "Barrett Deems – World's #2 Drummer".

Fast forward a couple of decades to 1975, and we find Speed Demon Deems showing off at a Chicago drum clinic, in his early sixties. Still bragging about being the fastest drummer on the planet, he suddenly had his claim challenged from the audience by a man a few years younger than him. "Oh yeah? What machine did you use?" asked the heckler. Members of the audience turned to discover that the question had come from none other than Buddy Rich.

Also in that crowd was a 19-year-old Nashville drummer called Boo McAfee, for whom Rich's question was a eureka moment. It was clearly a humorous question, because such a machine didn't exist. Nevertheless, what a great idea: a machine for counting beats that would settle all those "I'm faster than you are" disputes once and for all.

For a long time, as he explained to me recently, McAfee tried and failed to turn the idea into reality. "The technology wasn't there then," he said, "and it ended up taking 24 years to make the first Drumometer. I had several physicists and engineers working with me on it." At last, a drummer and engineer called Craig Alan helped him crack the problem. "Finally, we had a prototype" said McAfee, "and we went into mass production in 2000."

Having created their wonder machine, McAfee and Alan were looking at ways of marketing it when they seized on the idea for a regular speed-drumming competition.

Since then, WFD has gathered its own galaxy of stars – musicians who have broken the big speed records and earned the right to call themselves the quickest drummers in the world. From the viewpoint of the many fans of the contest, these drummers are heroes – champions who should be admired for achieving extraordinary things. Looked at another way, you might say they belong in the metaphorical Guinness World Records freak-show tent, together with the world's heaviest person and the world's most prolific slam-dunking parrot. I decided to talk to some of these champions, to see if I could discover what drove them, what made them tick, and what attracted them to WFD.

The first big barrier to fall, in the early days of the contest, was 1,000 strokes per minute with a pair of sticks. This was quickly achieved in the year 2000 by 28-year-old Johnny Rabb, who clocked up 1,071 beats in 60 seconds on the Drumometer – which works out at nearly 18 strokes per second. I remember reading about that feat shortly after it happened – it was the first time I'd heard of WFD – and it

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Previous: Illustration by Thor Harris

Below: Boo McAfee eats whilst attempting to break the endurance drumming Guinness World Record.

conjured a picture of a cocky young James Dean type marching into the room, laying down a magnificent drum roll and swaggering out again.

The real Johnny Rabb was a surprise – an amiable, thoughtful man who just seems to have been in the right place at the right time. Rabb revealed that it had actually taken several efforts and a bit of coaxing to achieve his record score. "Boo McAfee was not in the room at the time, but I tried the Drumometer and got a score of 892 or something. And Boo saw that and said, 'Who did that?' I said, 'Me.' Boo suggested I try again, and I got a bit higher. And with Boo's encouragement I tried to break 1,000 – and I got 1,006."

That's when the Guinness World Records people took notice, and invited Rabb to repeat the feat at a special event in Orlando, Florida, which was televised by VH1. "There was a film crew and people gathering around, and I knew that if I didn't succeed, it might not get on the TV show and I'd let Boo down. And I failed the first couple of times. But finally I broke my own record with 1,071."

Rabb retained his title for a few years, which he wasn't entirely happy about. "I was the first to benchmark it, and that motivated other people, but it took a long time for them to get past my record. It's difficult for most people to get above 1,000. People were saying, 'Why's Johnny Rabb always in this thing?' I was upset when people said they thought it was a rigged event. So I was very happy when some of the other guys came in and started beating the record."

Of course, drummers have four limbs, so Extreme Sport Drumming isn't just about fast hands. Some competitors prefer to clock up big results on the Drumometer using their feet. A Canadian heavy-metal drummer, Mike "Machine" Mallais, has regularly powered double bass pedals to smash world records – hitting scores of 1,034 beats a minute, and 13,309 beats over a grueling 15 minutes, while adoring crowds have brought the house down.

When I asked Mallais about his abilities, he talked about self-belief and mind over matter. "I can fathom a certain number of notes in a certain time, and I dictate that to my body," he said. "I just put my body through it. I push myself to extremes: I've played the drums until I puked in my mouth." A recent encounter with a bunch of Olympic athletes had been enlightening, he said. "They said they had to have a very strict physical regime, because if they're not consistent, they don't get consistent results. They told me I was the type that they feared – I'll eat the wrong foods, have really bad sleeping habits, and I'll push myself to exhaustion for a week, then not do anything for a week. But I just believe my body can do it."

Mallais gave a striking description of his approach to fast pedaling. "Once I've reached 270 bpm, I'm not really thinking about the notes or focusing on my technique. I'm just trying to feel as if I was surfing the crest of a wave. Once I'm at that point, I just stay right there. You just let the notes happen – if I thought about every note, I'd probably have a brain freeze."

Mallais' compatriot Tom Grosset may have had something close to an out-of-body experience in 2013 when he achieved 1,208 bpm with a pair of sticks, beating the record of 1,203 set by Mike Mangini, who now plays mind-boggling time signatures in Dream Theater. "I was quite stunned when I broke the record," Grosset told me. "There were all these people staring at me and cheering, and I was just standing there, thinking, 'What just happened?'"

Although Grosset has lived in Canada since he was six years old, he was born in Grantham – so this Lincolnshire market town can now brag about producing the World's Fastest Drummer as well as Britain's first female prime minister.

Still the reigning World's Fastest Drummer, Grosset recently went under the microscope for the Discovery Channel, having a kinesiologist study the movement of the flexor and extensor muscles in his arm. But he said he was more inclined to put his record-breaking achievement down to his mental attitude. "I'm very disciplined, and I take what I do very seriously," he said. "And I have this strong belief that people are more capable than they think. I believe that people can achieve great things, and it just takes a lot of determination and patience."

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One of the most intriguing WFD showmen is Eric Okamato from North Carolina, a percussionist and drum teacher who has used his extensive knowledge of rudiments, and a gift for mathematics and precision drumming, to set some mind-blowing records using multiple strokes. One of Okamoto's specialities is to divide a minute into 125 parts, using the metronome on the Drumometer, and to use double strokes with both hands to play 12 beats per click – resulting in a total of 1,500 beats per minute.

"I did WFD in 2003 with single strokes and won it, with 1,085," he told me. "And at first I wanted to pursue it like everybody else, but then I decided, 'Let these guys knock themselves out, going to 1,200. I want to do rudiments, because that's what I went to music school for.' I brought double strokes to it in 2005, and in 2007 I introduced paradiddles. For this summer's WFD I'm going to try to add nine-stroke rolls." He clocked up his biggest score so far last year, with 2,086 freestyle multiple-stroke hits in a minute – "four or five with each hand".

The contest's benign ringmaster, Boo McAfee, allows Okamoto to plough his own furrow and rack up the records. However, he is effectively a sideshow, because the grand prizes go only to drummers playing single-stroke rolls. "WFD has many outside records," McAfee explained, "including the upside-down record." (Yes, he's not kidding: the contest has really seen some topsy-turvy drumming in its time.) The official rules offer some hope for drummers like Okamoto in the future, though, saying that the contest "may open new categories... at a later date".

"WFD is popular because the single-stroke roll is fundamental, it's primal, and everyone can do it," said Okamoto. "When you start adding my thing in, it throws a monkey wrench into it!"

No matter how dedicated these contestants are, or how far they push their bodies and their minds to reach new levels of speed, their efforts are scorned by drummers who disapprove of the whole WFD ethos. Opponents of the event complain that it shows an unhealthy obsession with technique, to the exclusion of other aspects of drumming – such as groove and dynamics. Internet drum forums sometimes drip with vitriol when the subject of WFD is raised. One hopes that the online critic who said that fans of the contest "should have hot tar poured into their ears" was joking.

Away from WFD, most of these speed champions play regularly in all kinds of bands, where they demonstrate a full range of drumming skills. Johnny Rabb keeps the beat with the American rock band Collective Soul, while Tom Grosset drums in a Canadian jazz-fusion outfit called Snaggle. Mike "Machine" Mallais says he has played with more than 500 bands and notched up "an estimated 3,000 live performances". They answer their critics by explaining that they don't see the competition as the be-all and end-all, but that it can be a useful skill-building tool. "WFD definitely improved my playing," said Johnny Rabb. "To try to beat my own score, I had to get better at my single-stroke technique."

"A lot of people try to categorise WFD as a musical event," said Tom Grosset, "and it's not: it's purely technical."

And the man who conceived the Drumometer, the machine that gave birth to the ever-growing monster that is the World's Fastest Drummer contest, believes that people should just relax and enjoy the show. "For some reason," said Boo McAfee, "'the haters of WFD think we have some hidden agenda to change music. We don't: it's just good, clean fun, and we simply want to entertain people."

*Tony Barrell's new book, Born to Drum: The Truth About the World's Greatest Drummers (Dey Street Books, hardback) is available now.*

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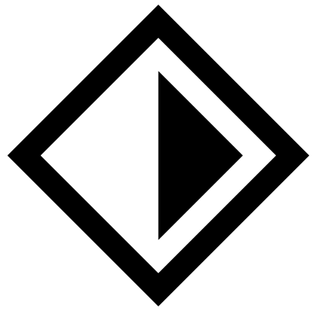

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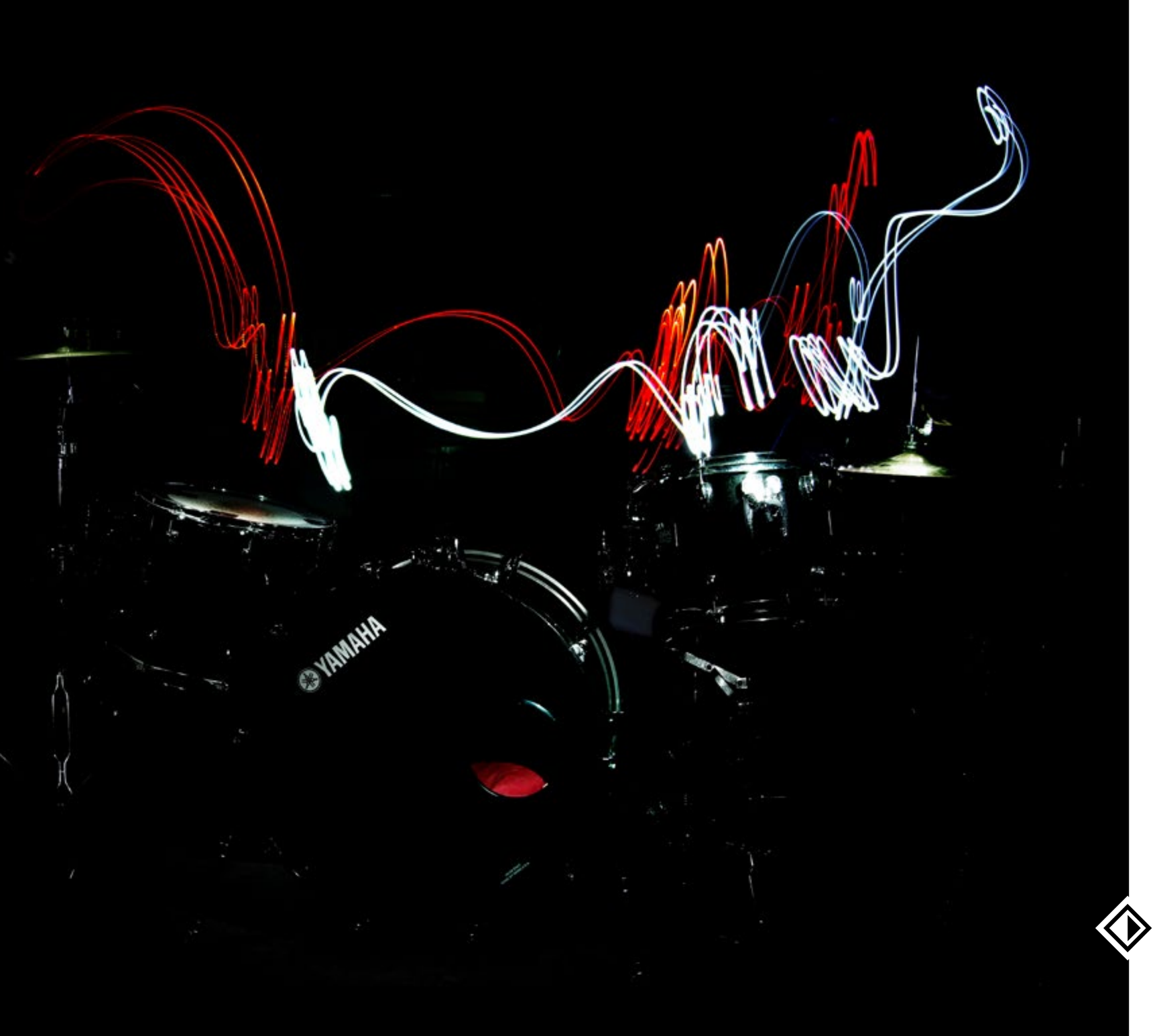

# THE STATE OF NOT TRYING

*Words and Illustrations by Ben Martin*

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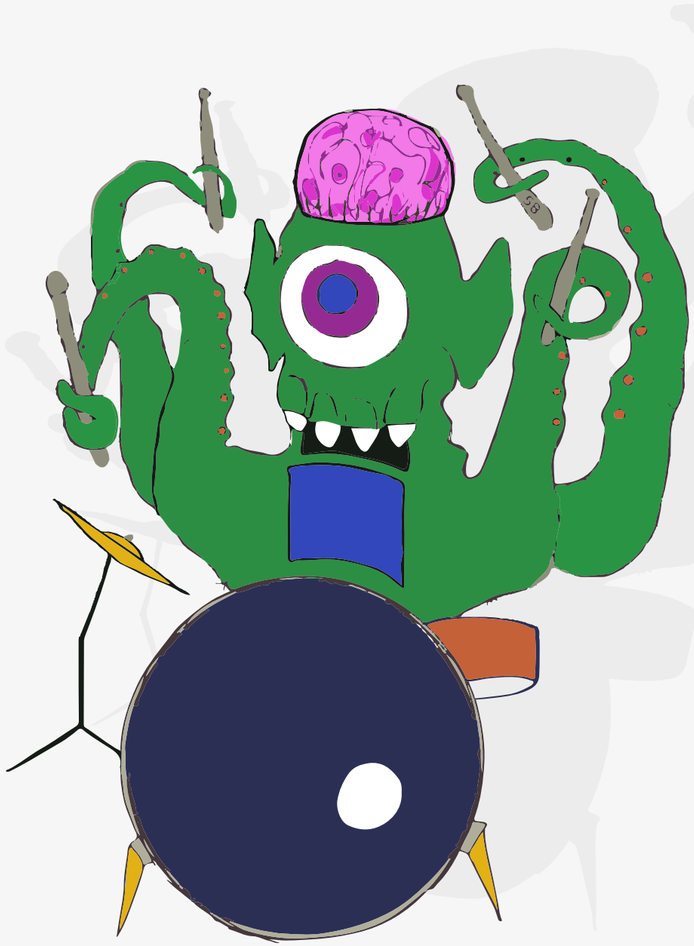
**Q.** What happens when we reach the 'edge' of our technical capability?

**A.** Creativity takes over.

We have at our disposal an instrument that is as exhilarating to play as it is to listen to. Research shows that musicians are better primed for problem-solving and, through the medium of music, we are also able to evoke higher levels of emotional reasoning in our audience.



What is the purpose of music if it is not a way of communicating the un-communicable? Music minus lyrics is a powerful non-verbal form of communication. When the mind goes about interpreting audio information, it literally re-shapes the brain (both structurally and conceptually) to accommodate this new information. Music and rhythm are a means of non-verbal mass communication akin to the concept of telepathy, where abstract ideas from one mind create new patterns of thought in another without direct communication. These patterns are of course subject to the recipient's own thoughts, beliefs and experiences.

There is, however, a problem: the more music that people are exposed to, the harder it is for new concepts to come into the foreground or for original music to evolve and break into the mainstream. This may be one of the reasons that there are so many obscure musical forms confined to smaller niche audiences.

Left-field musicians may be convinced that their technical and creative innovations are breaking new ground and challenging the norm, but reaching wider audiences is often a significant obstacle to the long term success of the artist. If musical output allows us to communicate our guttural utterances then we should indeed endeavour to rise to the challenge posed by this particular problem.

In a recent interview, Aphex Twin was of the opinion that the ultimate music would be something not created on Earth, something literally alien to our ears. Sun Ra who was of a similar (albeit seemingly far-fetched) opinion, citing his work as a channel for transmitting communications to and from Neptune in his arrangements.

Drummers periodically fall into a trap (or, at least I do), where the more we learn, the less satisfied we become in our quest to break new ground whilst representing the true subjective self in our performance.

A side effect of this exploratory journey is the potential to alienate our audience. It is a fine balance to strike, communicating self to self in an accessible and concise manner that poses as many questions as it does answers.

This brings us to the inevitable obstacle that all musicians ultimately face: how best to continue to innovate and hone our skill, whilst communicating in a meaningful and accessible way. This is, of course, essential if our goal is to communicate ideas non-verbally, without becoming so progressive that it damages the potential to reach audiences. Pink Floyd's The Wall, appears to me to be a significant and successful attempt to address this issue.

Each of us has a different style of learning and problem-solving (auditory, visual, and/or kinaesthetic). There are those who, in order to achieve our goal, seek first to understand every aspect of the process ahead of us; we might call these 'rational' thinkers due to their largely process driven approach. Then there are those who are drawn towards a more organic or freely associative style of information processing, allowing their emotional instincts to guide the next step; we might call these people emotive thinkers due to their instinct-driven approach to problem-solving. Of course we are all both rational and emotional thinkers, it is merely the confidence and familiarity we have in either path that broadly determines our approach in relation to a particular goal.

The end result is essentially the same for both parties, although their musical styles may differ to some degree. At some point, the need for technique will evaporate as a result of proficiency and practise. With time and dedication, we all will reach a point where we experience an ease of being with our instrument. The Chinese historically refer to this state as "wu wei". At this point, we are typically more adept and confident in our ability to communicate effectively without over-reliance on the perceived rules of best practice.

This state of not trying is perhaps the defining moment, when our ability to express subjective emotion through our musical performance becomes the most vivid. This state may seem counter-intuitive, but evidence suggests that it can fuel creativity.

If you think about an infant encountering an instrument for the first time, more often than not, it's something of a game. They have zero experience of musical concepts and rules. The outcome is usually chaotic, but that's not to say that nothing is happening on an emotional level. The natural tendency of a musically un-disciplined

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child exploring an instrument is to be creative in their expression within the bounds of their acquired kinaesthetic vocabulary.

One way to access this state of mind is to allow yourself to embrace mistakes in a non-judgemental and curious way. During solo practice we may find that fatigue leads to inevitable mistakes. You can treat wandering concentration as an ally rather than the enemy. Experimenting by mimicking these diversions can cultivate greater insight into our natural coordination. It might just lead to finding an easier path for your muscle memory to follow.

Another method is to force deliberate transgressions from the norm in your playing, throwing yourself off balance and taking note of how you recover. Again, these recovery patterns are an indication of your mind's instinctive drive towards taking the path of least resistance; we just have to have faith in our ability to count and recognise patterns instinctively.

Transcribing both mistakes and recovery patterns is an informative tool that inevitably leads to all sorts of new ideas and inspiration. This would require recording some of your sessions and then transcribing divergent patterns or learning them by ear.

Pushing the boundaries of creative expression can end in a collision of freedom and style, perhaps losing track of what we are "saying"; or it can lead us back to simplistic execution with a new found confidence in our ability to express that elusive emotive reasoning sometimes neglected and buried deep in our psych. Either way it's a good feeling!

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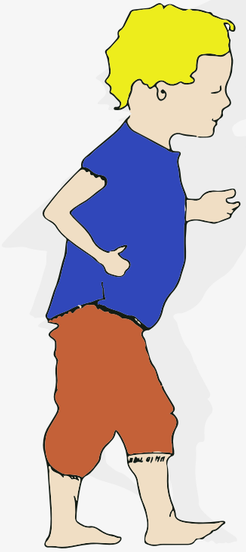

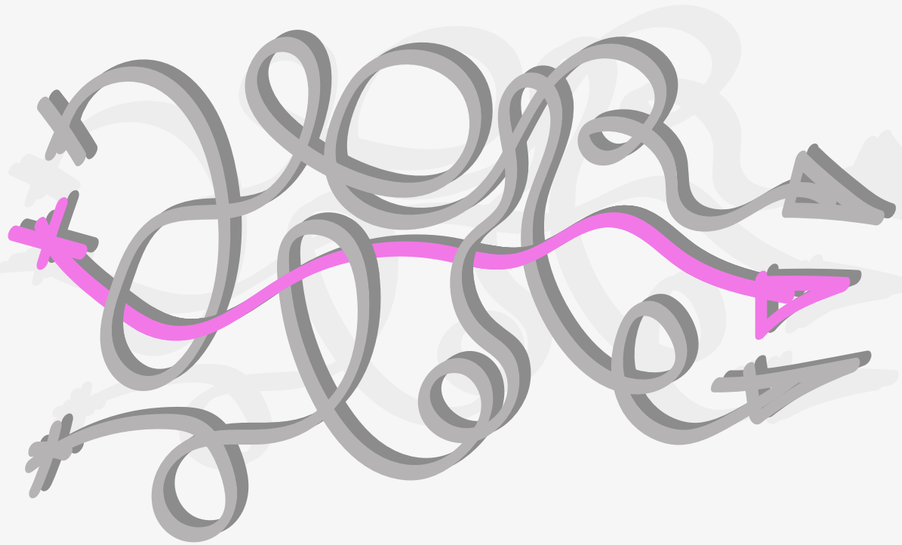

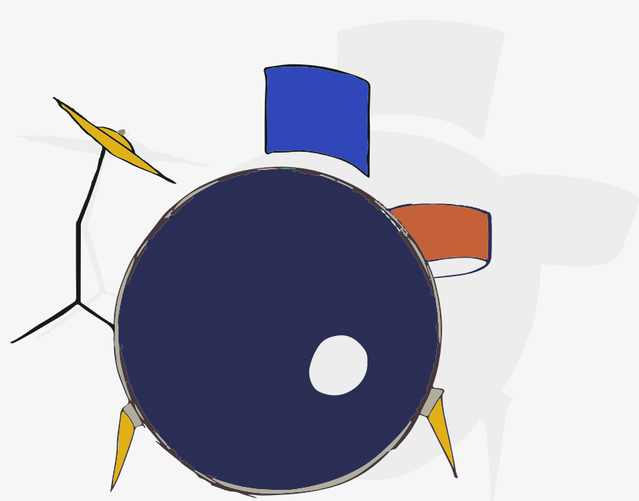

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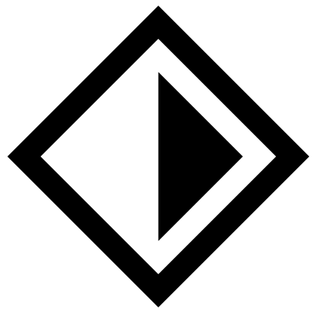

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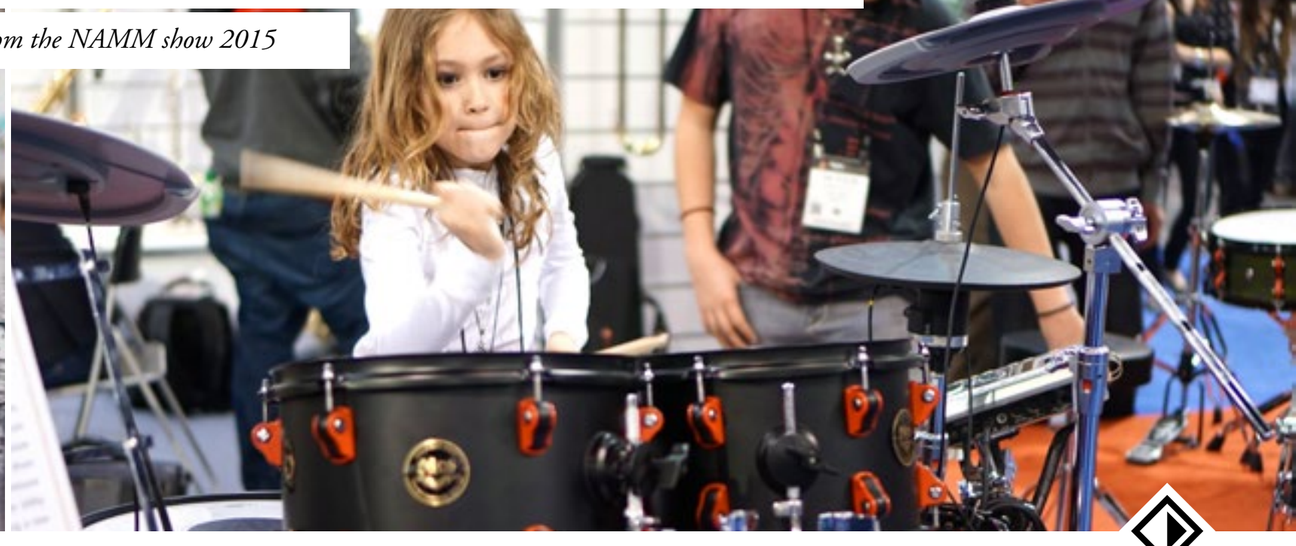
*A few interesting faces from the NAMM show 2015*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