



SPEAKER OF THE LANGUAGE

Words: Brent Keefe Images: Eckie

THE EVER SWINGING ADAM NUSSBAUM TALKS TO DRUMMER ABOUT DYNAMICS, TIME FLOW, PLAYING SLOWLY AND THE ART OF PLAYING WITH BRUSHES DVD

Adam Nussbaum may not have the profile of a Dave Weckl or Thomas Lang but he's always working, making high-quality music with the highest-quality musicians. Since *Drummer* last spoke to Adam in 2006, he has recorded several albums, toured with artists including John Abercrombie, Bob Mintzer, James Moody and Eliane Elias, and completed the excellent *The Art Of Playing With Brushes* DVD.

Drummer caught up with Adam just as he finished recording an album with a new project featuring pianist Gwilym Simcock, guitarist Mike Walker and bassist Steve Swallow. Adam explained how the group came to be.

"It was initially inspired by Mike and Gwilym wanting to do something. I have played with Swallow a lot and met Gwilym when we were working with Mike Gibbs. I also worked with Mike two years ago on his Ropes project, which was really fantastic. We all got together initially and we all brought in some music. We did a short spring tour and have just completed an album, which should be released in 2011. There's talk of more work, which will be fun as it's a great combination of people. There are a lot of different moods in the music and we cover a lot of different territory, which makes it fun. As soon as you think it's one thing, it's not, and it becomes something else. Now it's recorded, we'll see how it's mixed and sequenced."

IN DEMAND

Adam went on to describe some of his other recent projects.

"BANN is a project featuring Seamus Blake on saxophone, Jay Anderson on bass, Oz Noy

on guitar and myself on drums, and our debut recording, on the Italian label Jazz Eyes, features a mixture of original tunes and some pop tunes and old jazz tunes that we have 'deranged,' such as 'All The Things You Are' and Joe Henderson's 'Isotope' and a really nice tune of Jay's that has an almost psycho country-and-western feeling.

"Another interesting project was with an accordionist named Simone Zanchini and a wonderful Serbian guitarist named Ratko Zjaca. Simone is incredible: he runs the accordion through all kinds of loops and effects and stuff and he's got an amazing sonic palette. It's really far out and the music was challenging and very enjoyable.

"There's also a second We Three album with Steve Swallow and Dave Liebman as it's been five years since our debut! I've done a lot of projects with Swallow this year, including a tour with a fantastic saxophonist/writer/arranger called Ohad Talmor, and we also recorded an album, *Playing In Traffic*, for the Italian label Auand."

ENERGY UP, VOLUME DOWN

Adam clearly plays in many environments, both musically and acoustically, and when questioned on advice for dealing with a challenging acoustic environment his primary suggestion is to be able to play very dynamically.

"You have to have the ability to adapt as best you can to get the sound you want. You want to be able to hear everything in the band and not overpower them; unfortunately, because so many of us grew up in the age of amplifiers, we just ask guys to turn up instead of playing softer ourselves. Most drummers now cannot play soft enough with intensity and with belief. When

you hear a guy really burning and playing softly, he's got so much more dynamic range to go, and that's something I've been trying to work on as I get older; but it's like a lot of things – you can talk about it and you can practise it but you have to put yourself in situations where you have to do it. Anyone can say, 'I can do that,' but unless you do it, you really don't know what it is to do it. I've played a few times in clubs in New York that were like piano duo rooms that normally didn't have drums, and to get into that zone and listen and try to fit into the weave of the whole fabric of sound is really important.

"It kicked my ass initially, because if you are used to dealing with a higher volume and suddenly everything has to be a whisper but they still want the same kind of power, articulation and energy, then that's challenging. It totally revealed itself to me when I first played with Stan Getz, because he had heard me playing in louder bands and then he wanted me in his all-acoustic group and he wanted what I was doing but a much softer dynamic. I wasn't used to that, so I practised everything much more quietly."

TRYING NOT TO THINK

A musician's facility can determine how consistently they can remain in their comfort zone. I wondered if there are ever times when Adam may decide not to go for something because he may not be in his comfort zone.

"Ideally I don't want to be consciously thinking about anything when I play. My first priority is to provide a sound and a flowing environment for the music and I don't really want to have to be thinking about 'Do I want to do this or that?' Most of what I do is usually motivated by the music at hand: reacting and responding to the

GEAR BOX

Sonor Maple Light Designer drums

18 x 14" Bass drum

10 x 8" Tom

12 x 8" Tom

14 x 14" Floor tom

14 x 5" Snare

DW hardware including DW strap-driven pedal and DW flat base

hi-hat stand

Zildjian Cymbals

22" original pre-aged K Zildjian prototype ride cymbal

18" K Constantinople prototype crash cymbal

20" lathed remix cymbal

14" Hi-hats thin K Constantinople (top) with Avedis rock top cymbal (as bottom cymbal)

Evans drum heads

J1 textured heads (top)

G1 clear heads (bottom)

J1 or G1 head (snare batter)

Bass drum head EQ 4

Zildjian Jazz sticks



MANY OF US GREW UP IN THE AGE OF AMPLIFIERS, WE JUST ASK GUYS TO TURN UP INSTEAD OF PLAYING SOFTER OURSELVES.

composition. There are certain credos, whatever music you play: having a good sound and feel and being supportive to the other musicians. I'm really trying [laughs] to free myself of what I know I can already play. I don't want to have any kind of predetermined agenda, and sometimes I will try something and maybe it won't work out the way I expect, but there's that old expression: "There's no such thing as a wrong note; it's the next note that validates or voids what you are trying to do." And at this point I'm willing to take the risk and see what happens, but you have to know what is the appropriate context in which that may be a viable possibility. People talk of certain bands giving you more of a 'green light' than others and you have to be smart enough to know when that is!

"My main priority is playing well with the other people, because if they are sounding good then I'm sounding good. It's not about me. I sometimes wish that I was a little more facile,

because I hear other guys with phenomenal technique and that's impressive and gives you something to work towards, but you can't let that motivate your musicality because many guys can do a lot with very little and some guys can do very little with a lot [laughs]."

AN IMPORTANT DOCUMENT

In 2007, *The Art Of Playing With Brushes* DVD was released, featuring Adam, Steve Smith and a selection of great brush artists. It's a highly enjoyable and entertaining educational resource, but what did Adam learn from the process of making it?

"I learnt that we provided a very important document. I wish we could have done it 50 years ago but I'm thrilled that it came out. It gives people a good place to start because, with sticks, you can hear what a guy is doing, but with brushes you've got to see what people do. It was such a wonderful experience being with the cats and hearing them talk about guys they were inspired by, such as Papa Jo Jones, Shadow Wilson or Vernell Fournier. Joe Morello came in and said, 'I want to be in and out of here in half an hour.' And five hours later he was still there talking and having a great time because we were

all so happy to have him there.

"It was also incredible having Eddie Locke there because he's passed away since that happened, so I'm really thrilled that he was part of it. His thing was so pure. When you check him out it's just the pure basic thing as good as it can get, and when he did it the whole room kind of froze because everyone was captivated by his clarity. Even the kid sweeping the floor in the studio looked up. It was amazing. We have all heard something like it a million times but we hadn't heard it like that.

"We know the DVD is not something that is going to sell a million copies but we've had a lot of positive feedback and, over time, this is going to be a valuable document.

I just feel a sense of satisfaction in the regard that I could give something back to this music, because I feel so fortunate that as I grew up I was able to sit next to all of these guys and many others and see them do it.

"We could do a volume two, although there are no plans at present, but what this does is it opens up the door and, ideally, if every school that has a band or a jazz group would buy it and show it as a reference tool for all of the young drummers coming in, that would be really nice.

"It was also great working with Steve Smith. He's very fastidious and was well adept at the

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video process, so he really helped me out."

LISTEN, GROOVE AND FLOW

In closing, Adam highlighted some of the weaknesses in jazz drum students, offering some sound advice.

"I think there has to be a greater emphasis on working on time flow. There are many ways to develop vocabulary but the whole thing, when working on your time, is about getting a flow – learning how to play the cymbal and make things feel good. Don't sacrifice your sound and feel to play ideas, and be aware that your

vocabulary has to enhance the message you are trying to say. Don't get too caught up in all of the independence stuff. Get your groove happening. Listen to music that has a great groove and work on being relaxed and learning how to let things happen as much as make things happen.

"Be aware of the history and of what makes good music sound like good music. Think of the music, not just the drums. Listen to the drummer, by all means, but if you listen to everybody else you will gain more understanding about why the drummer is doing what he is doing. Listen to great bass players; get into that. When you are playing the cymbal, try

to imagine that it is the bass.

"Also, appreciate those things that sound simple because simple is not easy. Learn how to play slow, because if you can play slow, that means that you can feel the space between the beats, and if you start becoming aware of that space, that can give you a little bit more breadth and width to your time. Try to practise at 60 bpm and be accurate. You can't hide at those slow tempos. Everybody wants to play fast, but fast is easy. It's like bouncing a ball after a period of time, but being able to play slow and to keep it in there ... that's different. Try practising between 60 and 90 bpm – the manly tempos, as a friend of mine calls them! Listen to Count Basie playing 'Li'l Darlin' or some of those Frank Sinatra records.

"You have to immerse yourself in the language. It's not something that is going to come out of a book. You've got to hear it. You may think it sounds old and trite but you've got to hear Lester Young and Louis Armstrong and what that phrasing and that music is all about. Check out Dizzy, Bird, Bud Powell ... Everybody talks about these guys and it's all part of your responsibility. If you want to play this music you've got a responsibility, because guys can tell when they hear you, if you have a foundation. Don't learn to play 'All The Things You Are' from Brad Mehldau. What he does with it is fantastic, but try to go as far back to the source of something as you can. This is young music: it's not even 100 years old. You've got to have it all going on, man. You just can't be looking at things with a narrow point of view."

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