

## **Drummer Mag N°12 Octobre 2004 "First Anniversary Edition"**

Somewhere in the Spinal Tap-esque labyrinth of passages in the bowels of the City of Manchester Stadium is a room with dim lighting, strange wondrous odours, and intriguingly sinuous musical sounds emitting from it. It's the Red Hot Chili Peppers' dressing room. Who knows what mysterious pre-stage rituals are carried out in its forbidden interior?

Twenty feet further down the corridor is the more familiar "meet and greet" area where Chad Smith is being utterly charming to all, including his wife, some competition winners, and various backstage workers. PR duties and photo shoot concluded, Chad makes himself comfortable, and reflects on the long strange journey that has been his career in possibly the biggest band on the planet. Did he ever imagine himself as the prize interview subject he is today?

"Not at all! Not in the least!," Chad replies without a moment's thought.

"I'm always really flattered when anyone wants to talk to me about drums, or about the band, or for a magazine, or invites me to a drum clinic, that's really flattering. To be able to influence a young person to play the drums, or to get into music through listening to the music that we have made, that is really gratifying to a musician, and certainly it is to me. I'm just myself, I'm very honest about who I am, and I do make mistakes, but I don't regret anything. I think that comes through as a person, and as a musician, and through our music, and people pick up on that and they either like it or they don't, and that's their choice, but everything is real that I do, and that the band does."

The feature that shines through the Chili's music is Chad's drumming style. He plays hard, but with the delicacy of touch that inspires the vision of a master chef delicately drizzling a unique dressing over another culinary masterpiece. Chad is typically modest about his ability to help the band to create an aural soundscape that is immediately identifiable as their own.

"My favourite drummers were the drummers that played in the late Sixties and early Seventies, the players in the English hard rock and blues bands of that time. Bands like Led Zeppelin, The Who, Queen, Jimi Hendrix and Black Sabbath, they made such incredible music, and a lot of those drummers had some jazz influences in their playing. John Bonham is probably my favourite drummer, he had that real heavy style, but he had a lot of subtlety and finesse, he loved James Brown. I know he'd be freaking out if he was here tonight (The Godfather Of SOul is storming through his Chili Peppers' support set as Chad speaks).

"Playing with these guys in the Chili Peppers, they come from a funk and punk background, and that seems to have influenced my playing. I never really knew that I had what could be identified as a "style" until...well, I've been playing for a long time now, I guess it was...six or seven years ago that I realised that I have a way of playing that is heavy, but precise, a heavy style with a clean edge to it, some ghost notes in there, and some funk beats. It seems to work anyway! I try to be a better musician all the time, and it seems to work with this band, so I stick with that stuff."

Perhaps surprisingly for a player who has such a recognisable technique, Chad is unmoved by the technical aspects of his craft, preferring to spend his time on the drumming, and not on the drums.

" I haven't really changed my kit or my set up for a while now. They bring new things to me, new drums and so on, and if they improve what I do, I'll use them, but I'm not a great searcher for new sounds. To me it's the way I play the drums that is important,

and not the drums themselves, so I don't tend to go looking for the next innovation. I think there are good sounds to be made from old instruments and a lot of players are going back to vintage kits, while guitarists are seeking out those '59 Les Pauls and vintage Strats to get their sounds. I think old wood can sound really good in an instrument, I think they retain some personality in them. Elvin Jones, God rest his soul, could hit a cymbal and it rings, and when I hit it, it sounds like a trash can! It depends where the energy is coming from."

The "they" in this instance is Pearl, a company who are pleased to provide drums for Chad with which to create his percussive magic, a relationship with which he is very pleased.

"Pearl have looked after me very well over the years, and kept me supplied with equipment that is of a very high quality. That said, I am sure that all the other major companies provide kits and equipment at the top end that are excellent, Pearl is a personal preference with me because of the sound of their drums. The other major factor for me is that I travel so much, and I appreciate the service that I get from Pearl. I have always been able to get drums and parts that I've needed anywhere in the world. I've stayed with them because I am a loyal person, I've stayed with the same cymbal company, the same heads, the same sticks, I've been with people for ten, and some for 15 years. I like the integrity that they have at the company.

"The funny thing is, when you are in a position to be able to afford anything you want to play, that's when the companies all line up and offer you all the free stuff in the world, and I'm thinking, 'Well yeah, that's great, but where were you in 1983 when I had broken cymbals and only half a kit!' I don't get into the politics of all that, I'm perfectly happy...unless someone wants to pay me an extremely large amount of money to play their stuff, because I am such a whore!", and with the re-emergence of his constant sense of humour, Chad rolls around on the sofa until his laughter subsides.

The Chili Peppers' fans will be familiar with the organic sound that the band uses to convey its music to the audience, so it will come as no surprise to find that the creative process within the band is as freeform as its execution.

"It's very important that the four of us connect musically on stage, that's the basis of a really good performance for us," Chad explains.

"If we're not gelling musically, and the chemistry of our music playing together is not working, we can't work as well. I think we aim for that with every show, and our success level is pretty high, we are pretty consistent. If we get that going, then we can just lock into what we do and enjoy the atmosphere and see the smiles on everyone's faces, and the set goes by really quickly, and that's great. I always used to lock onto Flea's playing in the early days, but John (Frusciante)'s guitar playing has evolved and changed, and a lot of the later material is more melodic, and as John starts a lot of the songs, I do tend to tune into his playing more now."

"We spend a lot of time just jamming in the studio, and seeing what happens. Sometimes I will find a beat, or Flea will find a bass line, or John will get a guitar melody, and we'll just build on that and see what comes up. We do a lot of that, and I think it has a lot to do with how our music sounds. We work on everyone injecting their own instrument and their own personality into what we do. It's the chemistry that works for us. Sometimes I may be playing a beat, and Flea will suggest a change, and it's interesting the way a non-drummer hears what I, as a drummer, am making and it's maybe a way I hadn't thought of, so we'll try that. Everyone is always open to suggestions from anyone else about anything that we do. We're not at all precious about our individual input into our songs, no one comes in with a drum machine and says 'Play it like that...,' we don't do that kind of thing at all.

"I like to sound as natural as possible, and working with Rick Rubin, he's a producer who thinks the same, he likes the drum sound to come over like the drummer is there in the room with you, and the sound is powerful and up front, and I like it like that. I don't like my drum sound to be EQ'd funny, or flanged, or whatever. To me, it's that natural drum sound that stands the test of time. Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, bands like that, those records still sound fresh 20 and 30 years on. We are a rock band, and we write together, we record together, and what you get is the sound of us playing together in a studio. There are some overdubs, but the basic track is all of us together in a studio. We're not some assembled sound bits and pieces put together, we like it natural. Human, that's the work."

Through his contact with the master producer, Chad has enjoyed an opportunity to work with a variety of musicians, in fact, the players on his extracurricular CV reads like a 'who's who' across a bafflingly wide range of musical genres and styles. So, do people call up to get the 'Chad Smith sound'?

"I don't do that much with other people these days, it's usually people who know me, and know how I sound, and they want me to come along and sound like me, otherwise they'd get someone else! Because of that, I don't get a log of 'Can you play like this, or that?' I tend to get people who want me to come along and do what I do, which is pretty much all that I can do anyway! It's mainly people who have heard what I do, and that's the sound they want to have. Working with Rick Rubin, I have had a chance to play on material by Johnny Cash, the Wu-Tang Clan, LL Cool J, and John Fogerty, and these are musicians that I really admire. I don't do Snickers commercials, or shampoo jingles, that kind of thing doesn't interest me, but if it's a chance to play with musicians I like, then I'm happy to do that."

For a player who has almost redefined the words 'rhythm' and 'beats' with his style of playing, when Chad is asked for the hardest aspect of his craft he has had to master, his answer may come as something of a surprise.

"Probably keeping really strict, but feeling, time. It's finding the right tempo, and the right feeling for each song. I believe each song has the right tempo that sits right, and feels right for the musicians and vocals to do their thing with it. It's like setting out a table. You set things out really nicely, and everyone can come and sit at the table and get a good dinner, and a great atmosphere, that's what playing drums well is about for me. In the studio you do get more tries at it, but on stage you have to give the other musicians the feeling that you have, the confidence in playing your drums that lets them know they can go anywhere, and do anything they want, and they can take chances, and you are going to be right there with them. We do improvise a lot, so that trust that you get from the other musicians means you can do something special, and the crowd can feel that they are seeing a special show just for them. The same for me, I can improvise, and the band will go with me, it's not a case of the beat having to be one way night after night, we can let it go and swing how we want to, and we all have a good time. We have this musical telepathy, we know each other so well, and when John came back into the band in 1998, it really took things off, we felt that these are the four people who were put on this planet to make music together."

And is there any technical aspect not yet placed under the Smith belt?

"Oh man, loads of stuff, loads!," laughs Chad with a refreshing honesty which will come as some relief to any players who feel intimidated by his bewildering mastery of the drummer's art.

"I'm no Dennis Chambers, or someone like that. I do drum clinics, but I begin almost with a kind of disclaimer, I tell people that if they've come to hear loads of fancy fills and

super chops, they are in the wrong place. I play in a band, and I will show you what I play, and how I work, with my band, and if there's something you can learn to work in your band, that's great, that's what today is about."

Because Chad gives his entire attention to whatever activity he is engaged in, it's possible to think that we can sit and joke around and talk about drums for the rest of the night, but as Anthony Kiedis pops his head through the door to remind us, they have a show to play.

Chad runs back to the inner sanctum with the scents and music, and emerges shortly afterwards to demonstrate to the howling thousands an object lesson in laying down rock-hard beats with consummate precision, a master class wrapped up in a live show.