



Aaron Comess

His Own Spin

Interview: Mover - Photos: Dana Yavin

It was 1991... back in the day. When MTV actually played music videos, and the radio actually played new songs from new artists, and, as strange as it sounds, you could actually get turned on to some really great music and bands.

It was also back in the day when so many artists were producing hit after hit and record after record using drum machines and samples. Then along come Aaron Comess and the Spin Doctors and blow it right out of the water. Who needs a sample when you have that crack from a Brady snare? Who needs a drum machine when you've got a groove that not only can make a click disappear, it can make even someone with two left feet get off his ass and dance?

While most bands have a signature to their sound—almost always the vocalist or guitarist—consider how rare it is to find a band that is immediately identifiable by the drummer; his groove and his sound.

Well, Aaron Comess is such a drummer, and here's his 'spin' on things.

JM: When the Spin Doctors hit the scene in '91, one thing that was immediately recognizable to me, and I'm sure the world, was your groove. That signature is a very definitive and identifiable character of the band. You really had something very unique coming out of the '80s, which was a time in the industry with a lot of formula—play in these key signatures, dress this way, make this kind of video, etc., and you guys not only didn't follow that, you broke it open with something really new and original sounding. And again, a lot of that sound was built on your groove.

AC: Thanks for saying that. It's always an interesting question: How do you come up with a sound? I think it's something that happened organically. For one, I've always tried to be really open-minded musically. I've always enjoyed a lot of different types of music, and enjoyed listening to and playing a lot of types of music. I grew up in Dallas, Texas and took lessons all along. I studied jazz and got the opportunity to play in small groups and big bands, and to also have jam sessions after school with my friends. I went to a performing arts high school there, so I had a really strong community of good friends that were great musicians. We just played all kinds of music together.

Also, growing up in Texas, I got to do a lot of blues gigs, so I was turned onto that style early on. By the time I came to New York, I had had been fortunate enough to have a had a great early musical education and was ready to try to really push things forward.

JM: You also did a stint at Berklee, right?

AC: I did a year at Berklee, where I did the ten-hour-a-day shed thing. As you know, and anybody who went there knows, there are a hundred practice rooms and a million drummers there practicing all day, so you just go around and listen and absorb. Of course, I worked very hard and spent many hours on my technique, but I also made a point to spend equal time on my groove. Besides playing along with records, I would put on a clicktrack and just play a straight-up pocket for an hour and try to get to that point where you don't hear the click anymore and it just becomes like this meditation thing. I really wanted to get that in my system so I could feel really comfortable with it. I did one year at Berklee and then went back to Texas. I just wanted to get a house with some friends and gig around and do

that for a while and try to make a living on my own.

JM: And how long did that last?

AC: About a year. Then I decided to move to New York and went to the New School, and shortly after that is when I met the guys and the Spin Doctors formed. That was the first time I was in a situation where I was playing with the same group a lot. While most bands around were very much concerned with going out and getting a record deal, making a demo and doing showcases, our goal was just to play clubs and make a living playing our music. We were playing five nights a week in the city, doing three or four sets a night. There's no better way to get your groove together than that; actually being able to play every night in front of people, which adds something different to you than just being in a practice room.

JM: All original tunes?

AC: Yeah, all original music. We really stretched out and our crowd really liked to dance. So I always looked at my job as getting the crowd to dance. At the same time, as all that was going on, I was able to study with Bernard Purdie.

JM: Really. That must have been amazing.

AC: Yeah. It was great to study with one of my heroes at that point in life while I was playing in a band and developing my own sound. A few years back, Sony did a reissue of *[Pocket Full Of] Kryptonite 20th Anniversary*, and we went out and did a tour and played the record top to bottom. I hadn't listened to the record in years, when listening back to it I realize what a huge influence Purdie was on my playing at that time.

JM: It's nice when you can look back and listen to old recordings, enjoy it and see how far you've come as well.

AC: My playing has changed and developed a lot since then. At that time I was lucky to have the opportunity to play the way I wanted to play and we were a band, so we were influencing each other. But it wasn't like there was somebody saying, "Oh, you have to do this" or "You have to do that." I was lucky to have a situation where I could create a style and a sound. Though I did fight a little bit for the sound too.

JM: In what way?

AC: When we were making the debut record, we had a great producer come in named Frank Aversa, who worked

on some of the record. The first set of sessions we did were at The Power Station, where we recorded "Two Princes" and then the bulk of the rest of it was done down the street at RPM. Frankie LaRocka was our A&R guy and producer, and Peter Denenberg engineered and also produced.

JM: Frankie was a drummer too, so it must have been interesting having him around.

AC: Yeah, Frankie was great, and he was great to have around. He was a musician first so he was not your typical A&R guy. He had been in the trenches too just like us. The first time around, we were in the studio with Frank Aversa and Frankie was there just being the A&R guy. This was around 1990, '91. And we were very much a self-contained band, we did what we wanted to do; we didn't like people telling us what to do, how to look or how to play.

So we get in the studio, and we're getting drum sounds, and Frank really wanted me to use a deep, big snare. I had my sound, and a big part of the band was that cranked-up Brady snare. He was really pushing that we should use this deep snare, so I tried it, and everybody was just kind of, "You know, it's just not really what we want." Of course, now, doing lots of sessions, you always try to get the best sound for the song and for the artist you're working with, and I love that, but this was a specific thing that we felt was part of the Spin Doctors sound. So we fought for it and luckily, we got our way and it ended up being a signature part of our sound, a big part of it. You know how you are when you're young—and that's a good thing—being young and strong in what you believe in and sticking to it.

SCHOOL DAZE

JM: You mentioned going to Berklee, which leads me to ask why you wouldn't just hang in your own backyard with North Texas being right up the street.

AC: Yeah, I know.

JM: What was your reason for going to Berklee rather than North Texas, and then, after one year, your reason for leaving and heading back?

AC: Great question. Well, I'd already spent a lot of time going up there and doing gigs. I had a lot of friends in North Texas, Denton [Texas] was just a half-

hour away from Dallas. And also, my drum teacher all through high school was Henry Okstel [North Texas University].

I left for a couple of reasons. For one, I had already gotten a ton out of Henry, and two, a lot of it was my father's influence. His thought was: It's always a good idea to get out of your home city, meet new friends and have new experiences. I went along with that and just wanted to try something different. I had already done a summer session at Berklee, in between my junior and senior year and I liked it.

JM: Although you ended up back in Texas before moving to New York. Why New York?

AC: When I was in high school studying with Henry, he put it in my head early, "If you really want to achieve what it seems like you want to achieve, you should go to New York or LA." He had me make a list and write down on a piece of paper; where do you want to be in ten years? To achieve those goals, it was obvious I had to go to one of those places. I think I just gravitated to New York because I liked the energy a lot and I liked a lot of the music that came out of here. I've always been a real jazz lover, and a lot of those great records I grew up with were all recorded here and I could go see some of these guys playing and also get to study with them at the New School where I went to school for a few years.

Actually, it's funny because, the year in between Berklee and New York, I was driving up to Denton to do a gig with Roy Hargrove, who I went to high school with, and he handed me a pamphlet about the New School. Arnie Lawrence, was just starting a music school there, and I thought, "Okay, this is my ticket to New York." Because nothing would have made my parents happier than getting me back in school [laughs]. I was able to get the financial support from them for a couple of years to come up here and do that. The school was fantastic and there was so much good stuff happening; I ended up meeting the guys in the band there and so many other great musicians. It was an amazing time there and Arnie ended up being a huge influence and mentor to me, and so many of us at the time.

JM: Did you head to Berklee with the thought, "I've got four years to figure things out," while getting a degree?

AC: I did. I remember, when I got there and saw the percentage rate of people that had gone and not graduated, I said, "Oh, I'm going to be one of the few. I'm going to go four years." [Laughs] Then, after a year... So I can't say enough

about when I got out of that place, but had I stayed there longer, it would have been great, too. I think every musician, at some point, has to do that period where you go into the trenches and just live in the practice room for a while. I think most guys will tell you they did it. And that was what that was for me. And it was great.

OUT FOR A SPIN

JM: So the first record comes out, *Kryptonite* sells over five million in America and another five million overseas. Absolutely fantastic, what a debut, but I can imagine the blessing and the curse that most likely went along with that, especially with following it up.

AC: Oh yeah. Well, we honestly did not think that was going to happen. We didn't even really set out for that to happen. We never really thought a whole lot about hit songs or singles or any of that stuff when we were making the record. We had already played those songs, literally, over 500 times live before we went in the studio because we gigged five nights a week. So going in the studio was kind of just going in.

JM: No expectations or preconceived notions...

AC: We really just wanted to make a great record that showed us as a great band with four individuals as a very cohesive unit. We did a little pre-production and edited things a little bit down from the longer arrangements we did live, but we really wanted to go in and just capture what we did, which I think is why that record has a really good energy to it. But we had no idea it was going to do that well. We went out on the road for about a year-and-a-half, with very little support from Epic [Records]. They were putting all their money into Pearl Jam because the whole grunge thing was blowing up. Everywhere we went, we'd see Pearl Jam...we couldn't even find our record in the stores.

JM: Nothing worse than not having your record company behind you.

AC: It was frustrating. And we had already spent the little amount of tour support we had. We did a bus for about a month and then came back home, got back in our little red van and kept circling the country for about a year and a half. We built it up to where, by the end of that year, we were totally financially self-sufficient. We were playing packed clubs all around the country and it was fun. We had a

really strong buzz and we'd sold about sixty thousand records, which by today's standard, is great.

JM: That's for sure. But there's a big difference between sixty thousand and five million; what happened?

AC: The big turning point was, we came back to New York and had a big meeting with all the heads of Epic, our management and the guys in the band. They were saying, "Okay guys, we want you to come off the road and make a new record, there are no hits on this record." And even though we didn't really think about it in the beginning, we were starting to see and think that something could happen with this thing.

JM: They'd already written off *Kryptonite*; it had come and gone.

AC: They'd written it off. A year and a half in and they wanted us back to make a new record. We said, "We're out on the road, we're packing clubs and we're not taking any of your money. Why don't you guys put out 'Two Princes' or 'Little Miss Can't Be Wrong,' they really seem to go over well at the shows." "Nah, they're not hits." "You know what? F*ck you guys, we're going back on the road. We don't want to make another record yet. We feel like something might happen."

We decided to go back out on the road. We had this weird feeling and could just feel this buzz growing. We had a great management team, and still do, David Sonnenberg and Jason Richardson, who really believed something could happen. So we got back in the van.

JM: Great, but packing clubs doesn't give you a five-times-platinum plaque.

AC: A station up in Vermont called WEQX released "Little Miss Can't Be Wrong" on their own—back in the days when you could do that on a rock station—and it went to number one. Jim McGuinn [WEQX] wrote a letter to Richard Griffiths, the head of Epic, basically saying, "You guys would be nuts if you didn't promote this band. This is getting an amazing reaction." That's what happened.

Then they released "Little Miss" to AOR Radio, we did a video, and bam! Then Top 40 with both "Little Miss" and "Two Princes," and the whole thing blew up. They were like, "Yeah, we knew it all along."

JM: Of course they did. They always do [laughs].

AC: Yeah. So it was our own decision to keep going. That was that. What a lot of



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people didn't realize was that this was a year and a half, almost two years into the record being out that it started to happen. Then we were out on the road for another year and a half promoting it when the whole thing really blew up. And obviously, it was amazing. I enjoyed every minute of it. But we were young and it was a lot, so, there was also a lot of tension in the group—all the typical bullshit that happens. And of course, then, as you said, the obvious pressure to follow that up.

AN EPIC DECISION

JM: Which leads me to ask if you

were wary about moving forward with Epic? They were ready to call it a day, a year and a half before, and then there you are working with the same exact people who didn't get it the first time around.

AC: Well, they showed that they could do a great job when they wanted to. Once they put the machine behind you and the people react, everything comes into place. But yeah, we've all seen it enough times where bands are in a great situation and then, as soon as it turns around, the record company's not behind you. It's just the standard thing. So yeah, we were a little wary.

We took a little break after that whole run

and then we went back in the studio to make the second record, *Turn it Upside Down*. Epic was behind it and everything was cool, but it obviously didn't do as well. I think it sold about two million, which was great, but...

JM: But a flop to them.

AC: Yeah, big flop. Big flop. To us it was cool, but it was a flop to them, so of course, from there everything changed. I think I always knew...the whole time, I mean, I didn't make the mistake in my own mind of thinking that that level of success was going to last. You hope it is, and you try to do everything you can possible to sustain that, but I knew realistically, it wasn't really probable. I'm a musician, I



Every musician, at some point, has to do that period where you go into the trenches and just live in the practice room for a while.

decided from a young age that this was what I was going to do for a living. I didn't set out to be a rock star, I set out to be a professional drummer. When I moved to New York, I wasn't one of those people thinking, "I'm going to be in a band" or "I'm going to be a jazz musician" or "I'm going to be a session guy." I really liked all of that stuff, and I wanted to come up here and be in a place where all of those things were available to me. Obviously, I made a decision when I thought the Spin Doctors were a good enough band that I was going to invest a good amount of my time to that, and it turned out to be a good decision. Also, I have great parents who brought me up in a good way; so I always knew, "You're not always going to make

money like that, you're not always going to have that success." That's not the most important thing. The most important thing is to continue to grow at your craft; that's always been my goal. With that said, yeah, sure, it was a difficult period. When we went from that extreme level of success to then all of a sudden not having that; it was a little bit of an adjustment.

A SIDE SPIN

JM: Well, it did put you on the map with *that groove*, which I'm sure led to lots of calls for sessions. Did you find that you were being called for that specifically, and if so, at some

point, did you feel the need to break away from being "Aaron and the groove of the Spin Doctors?"

AC: Well, whenever I go into any sideman situation, I leave the Spin Doctors thing. I'm just Aaron.

JM: I'm sure *you do*, but...

AC: Yeah. You're right. More early on, I got a lot of, "Oh, that Spin Doctors groove," whatever. But, around the late '90s, 2000, when the band was slowing down and I wanted to get into more of this kind of stuff, I made a real conscious effort to put myself out there in a different way.

JM: Being known and recognized for something particular, how do you put yourself “out there,” in a way that doesn’t shun what actually established you?

AC: I started playing more gigs around town and working with different people. Anything that was good, whether it paid or not, I did it. I realized I had to put myself out there. Everybody knows that you have to be out there to get work. People hear you in different situations, and I wanted people to hear me outside of the Spin Doctors, to realize what I could do.

JM: Another blessing and curse.

AC: Yeah, I suffered from what a lot of guys suffer from—you get pigeonholed in a certain way. “Okay, he can do *that*, so maybe he can’t do *this*.” Or “He can sound like *that*, but maybe we don’t want him to show up and do that ‘tight snare’ thing,” or “Maybe he’s too busy or too much money” or whatever. So it took awhile to make that transition to where people knew I was around, available, and could do the job.

In fact, funny story... I’m not going to name the artist, but I was doing a record, and we were doing a song, which was a mid-tempo, funky groove. I had my Brady snare on that particular session, and the artist says, “You know, it’s really cool, but don’t take this the wrong way—it sounds a little bit too much like the Spin Doctors.”

JM: It wasn’t just your groove that was identifiable, but your actual sound—that popping snare drum.

AC: Yeah. It’s interesting, there’s no right or wrong. I think having your own identifiable sound is great. Those are the musicians I respect the most, when you hear somebody and you can point them out in a couple of beats. That’s a beautiful thing. Some guys are like, “This is what I do. This is the way I sound. Take it or don’t.” That’s commendable, too. I think what I’ve learned over the years is I’m going to be me, regardless of what my sound is. You can still have your own sound, with a lot of sounds.

JM: Speaking of a different sound, the band went through a few different changes and at one point, during the recording of *Here Comes the Bride*, you ended up playing bass on some of it.

AC: We actually recorded that in my studio over on 12th Street, right around the corner. It was kind of a weird time in the band. We didn’t really have a guitar player, so it just started with me and

Chris [Barron – vocals] at the center, getting together in my studio, doing some song-writing sessions. I’d just gotten my studio and was really getting into all that. I play a lot of instruments and I was writing a lot of the music, so most of that record was my tracks that I’d already written the music for, and then Chris coming over, writing lyrics and singing. The basis of that record was me playing everything, and then we’d bring [bassist] Mark White in to replay stuff, along with different guys that we had in the band coming in and adding or taking away. I ended up playing some of the bass because Mark ended up leaving the band for a while during that period.

JM: What other instruments do you play, and are you self-taught or did you study?

AC: Guitar, bass, keyboards, but I write mostly on guitar. I was lucky to have a good musical education when I was growing up, music theory and stuff. I never took any actual private lessons, maybe a few lessons on guitar, but I’ve just always played it. Just picked it up over the years.

A DIFFERENT SPIN

JM: Spin Doctors are coming up on 25 years. As you said earlier, your playing is different, people have come and gone, and everybody’s hopefully matured. What’s it like now when you guys get together?

AC: It’s cool. It’s all four original guys. We had a few years in the middle where it wasn’t that good. I think we’re all still the same nut-bag dramatic freaks that we always were. In some ways, all the same bullshit that was there then is still there, but I think the difference is it doesn’t really bother us as much anymore, and people deal with it better. For the most part, it’s a lot of fun, and the guys sound great. Everybody in the band is like me; we’re all lifers.

JM: It’s nice that you get to have that, and have a life outside of it as well. That balance is important.

AC: We’re all busy doing things outside of the band, so when we get together, it sounds great. And we’ve made a few *different* records; we did an original blues record a couple of years ago that came out great. Because that’s how we started out, doing a lot of Blues clubs in New York. It’s fun and it’s not that big of a deal. We go out and we do a lot of gigs in the summer and we have a good time.

I’m really grateful to have had all that experience and all that success early on, and I’m really extremely grateful that the band’s still together at this point. It’s a nice thing to be part of.

JM: Is it more like the Spin Doctors is the icing on the cake these days in that you do have a whole other career developed and established, and this is a nice bonus? Whereas a lot of people would rely on their band as the foundation and then try to get other things happening around it.

AC: Yeah, I think so. I certainly don’t rely on it. Again, I love it; it’s fun and it’s cool. But at this point, as much as I love it, and as fulfilling as it is, it wouldn’t be enough for me to just do that. There are too many other things that I like to do, and need to do. And because of that, I appreciate it all the more, being able to have both.

JM: Hopefully the other guys feel the same, and it’s something that will continue for years.

AC: I think so. As long as people want to hear us and we can stand each other, then I think it will. I don’t see any reason why it won’t. There’ll be periods where there might be more of it or less of it, because that’s the way it’s been for the last ten years. But, as long as everybody’s having a good time, and as long as we sound really good, why wouldn’t we continue?

THE DEEP END

JM: We were talking a little bit about doing some session work and playing outside of the band. Are there any gigs that you were offered that you had to turn down, but wish you could have done?

AC: Actually I had to turn down quite a few really cool gigs early on because I was committing my time to getting the Spin Doctors off the ground.

One was Chris Whitley, who called me right before he was releasing his first record. We were friends from the NYC scene and I’ve always been a huge fan of his. I hated to say no but the Spins were about to put out a record too. Luckily I got to play on a track on his final record, so that was a big thrill for me.

Another one is a pretty funny story. The Spin Doctors were starting to get a big buzz around NYC and a lot of people were trying to make us offers. We were playing mostly bars at the time, so there were a lot of shady characters trying to get in. We’re playing one night



Record: *Catskills Cry*
Song: "Future"
Aaron Comess: Drums and Composer
Tony Levin: Stick
Bill Dillon: Guitar



As soon as I had the material together for this record and decided to make it happen I called Bill Dillon... I had been on a record date in the mid '90s with him and he made a huge impression on me with his totally unique style of playing. I

called him up and he said he would like to do it, then I mentioned I would love to get Tony Levin on bass. Within an hour Bill called Tony and had him onboard and introduced me to engineer Roman Klun, who ended up doing all my solo records to date, and now we share a our studio His House - Innsbruck Studio in Brooklyn together. This will always be a special record to me and I particularly like this track "Future."

and a guy comes up to me and tells me he's a "producer" and looking for a new drummer to work with and he really liked my playing. So I say, "Okay, why don't you bring me some of your music to listen to..." This guy was just dressed *down*, kind of grungy at the time. I was only 20 so I thought a producer was supposed to be wearing a suit or something. Anyway he comes back again and gives me a CD, or maybe even a cassette of his record. I don't think I ever even listened to it but I remembered his name.

About a year later, I saw a big article about him in *Rolling Stone* on how he had worked with Bob Dylan, U2 on all these big records, and he was about to put out his own. It turned out to be Daniel Lanois [laughs]. I blew that one. But he recommended me to producer Malcolm Burn a few years later, who I ended up doing a lot of records for over the years, so it worked out okay in the end. I'm hoping one day I get the chance to see him again and we can laugh at the story.

JM: That's pretty funny. I had a similar experience, although not for my drumming. Back in '85, I was recording with GTR in Townhouse Studios [London]. I'm having lunch in the canteen one day when this guy sits down next to me; I look to my right and there's Peter Gabriel! Aside from my telling him how much of a fan I was, I asked if Jerry Marotta was there too. He said he wasn't, and then proceeded to tell me that he had mostly used this unknown French drummer named Manu Katché on the new record. I looked at him like he was crazy, "How could you use anyone other than Jerry?!" He then asked me if I wanted to hear the new record [So], which was being mastered there that day. He took me down the hall, and upon opening the door, I see this engineer hovering over the mastering console, who

looks like a disheveled hillbilly, with a scraggly beard and a rope for a belt, with a knot tied in the middle, holding up his pants. Of course, that was Daniel. The first track they played me was "That Voice Again," and that was it for me—Manu was devastating.

Aside from drumming, you're also producing and engineering. For me, having a studio for the longest time, I knew an awful lot about what was going on when I would go into a session for someone, as opposed to when I was first doing sessions. What was it like for you—the differences between when you first started doing sessions and later on, after having your own studio? How involved are you when somebody calls up and says, "I'd like you to play on my record?" There are guys who just show up and say, "Great, where's the chart, where's the tune,



Record: *Beautiful Mistake*
Song: "Past Present and Future"
Aaron Comess: Drums and Composer
Teddy Kumpel: Guitar
Richard Hammond: Bass



I wanted this record to share a similar approach in the composition, yet have more improvisation on it than the previous one. I knew right away to call Teddy Kumpel and Richard Hammond; two of my favorite musicians anywhere and two

people I already had a built-in chemistry with. I sent them demos to learn the songs, then spent some extra time with Teddy going over the material. My music is very guitar-orientated and there is a lot of weight on Teddy to carry the songs. He did an amazing job and I am forever grateful. Rich and I have been playing together for years in many situations and our *feel* just works in a special way together. The three of us then got together at my studio for a few days and played these songs for the first time in the studio. I knew it would come together in a very organic way as it did and those sessions were the start of what turned into a great group.



Record: *Blues For Use*

Song : “Gorilla”

Aaron Comess: Drums and Composer

Teddy Kumpel: Guitar

Richard Hammond: Bass



This was a super fun record to make because this line up now had a few years and many shows behind us. I was able to have the group in mind when writing the material. It is a pretty diverse record, going from acoustic-based songs to pretty heavy rock and everything in between. At one point in the writing process I was getting insecure on how to blend the acoustic songs with the harder-edged ones and Teddy reminded me that'ss what Led Zeppelin did so well. That advice was the icing on the cake for my confidence to get the record done.

let me hear it, boom, it's done.” And there are guys that want to know, “What’s your lyric about? Why did you write this song? What are you hearing?” How deep is it for you?

AC: Great question. The best situations are when you’re in there with the artist. As you know, there are so many different ways to make a record these days; sometimes people send you a finished thing with a click, sometimes you’ll go in with the artist and they will have a finished thing with a click, and then the most fun situation is when you’re in there with the artist and a few musicians and it’s coming from the ground up. Obviously, being someone that has my own studio and has done a lot of production and all that, you learn to get deep into the music and how to make those decisions.

At the same time, as you know, if you just go in as the drummer, you want to somehow have that production head, but also just be the drummer. You don’t want to make the mistake of going in there and being overbearing. So I always

try to get as much as I can out of it. My favorite thing to do, when it’s possible, is just sit in and hear the artist play the song themselves. That’s my favorite way to learn a song; just have them sit on the piano or guitar or whatever it is, so I can hear the absolute bare bones of what it is; hear the song, read the lyrics and get the vibe. In many cases, they have no idea what they want and it’s just up for grabs, and in some cases, there might be an idea of what the groove and the feel should be. I always try my best to hear it in the bare bones, but also try to look as far down the line as I can so I know what the end result might be. As you know, many times, you might first do something and then, by the time they get down there, it might not make any sense anymore. So, I try to get as much information as I can to get into the piece of music and the lyric as much as possible.

Talking about sound, to me, besides the part you come up with, the sound you choose is one of the biggest decisions to make. The drums can make or break

a track. The decision you make on your drums is such a huge part of the vibe of what a track is going to be. How the kick drum sounds, the snare, how hard you hit it, how light you hit it, everything. And the more you do, the more you learn to make quick decisions. Sometimes people love them, sometimes they don’t.

JM: Oh, yeah, we’ve all been there.

KEEPING TRACK

JM: You’ve got one hell of a discography, I would imagine you do a lot of farming out tracks?

AC: Yeah.

JM: Okay, how far do you go with regard to what information you get in the beginning, and how much you give back in the end, pertaining to choices and options?

AC: You mean if somebody sends me something?



Record: *Aaron Comess Quintet*

Song: “Africa”

Aaron Comess: Drums and Composer

Keith Loftis: Sax

Barney McAll: Piano

Teddy Kumpel: Guitar

Richard Hammond: Upright Bass



I’m a big lover of jazz and have played it since I was a kid. I have always done a fair amount of jazz gigs in NYC under the radar, but felt the time was right for me to put my own group together and make a recording. I wanted to keep the core group of Teddy and Rich, since there was already that chemistry and these guys can play anything, and I had recently met the piano player Barney McAll, now one of my favorite musicians to play with; he’s amazing and really shines on this record. I had also run into my old Dallas high-school-friend Keith Loftis, an incredibly soulful sax player that plays in a way I love. Being a guy who spent so many years in a “band situation” with the Spin Doctors, I really value what musical chemistry is and am always looking for that when putting together musical situations.

JM: Yes.

AC: Well, in a situation when the artist is not there, the more information you can get, the better. The problem that can happen a lot of times is if somebody doesn't know what it is they want. You send it back to them and it's, "Well, this isn't what I had in mind."

JM: Do you then get paid again to do something different?

AC: Yeah. I've learned that the more information you can give me about what it is you're looking for, the better. It's different when you're in a room with somebody and you can work it out and make sure that everybody's happy. But in those situations, it can be a little bit more difficult.

Usually, I'll try to give them a couple of options, especially if there isn't a lot of direction, and it usually works out fine. Rarely have I had a situation where somebody sends something back and says, "This sucks." It might be, "This is cool, but I was hoping for something like this." In that case, I'm always happy to do it again.

JM: I will usually do a second track; one that I don't tell them about. I'll do with some different things, not oddball stuff, just enough alternative bits and pieces that, should they want something else, I can offer them options. But it can be a can of worms, as I'm sure you know. Going in, setting up again and recording from scratch and trying to match sounds can be such a pain. I do a lot of farming out of tracks now, and I can honestly, sadly say, it's not that often that I get a really great, well-put-together session to play to from an artist that really knows how to communicate what they're looking for. The music can be good, but the session is a nightmare.

AC: I know, it's true. I mean, the hardest stuff is when you get no click, or even with a click, and it's nowhere near it. I did something recently like that. The artist was there, and there was click, but it was just all over the place. I didn't want to say anything, but I'm thinking, "Okay, do you want me to go with you? Do you want me to go with the click?" You just try to make it work.

JM: What did you do?

AC: I went with him. Again, these are those things that you have to negotiate in the studio. It's that whole ability to work with people that don't have a lot of

experience; something you have to learn to do as a session guy.

PRODUCING TOO

JM: Which in a way, is also being a producer to some extent, which I know is something that you're doing to the full extent as well. But before we talk about you as the producer, when you find yourself in a position like this recent session, where the click had no relevance to the track, how much of the producer role do you take with regard to somewhat taking charge of the session so that it works well and comes out great?

AC: I think it's fine to offer that kind of production in the right situation. Again, I never try to become the producer when I'm not the producer. I've seen a lot of people do that, and we all know that too many hats in a session can make things go south really quick. So, I always try to just do a really good job and have a positive vibe and be there for everybody, but remain kind of laid back in that way unless I'm asked.

At the same time, again, people are hiring you for you, so they want you to be you. But yeah, there have been situations where I might have to explain to somebody, "Well, okay, this isn't really happening. What can we do to pull it together?" And it usually works fine, because that's what you're there for. But then there are the times where you just know it's not going to be easy, like the situation I was in recently. The conversation wouldn't have even been worth having. So I just did the best I could to make the track feel good.

JM: Right, they wouldn't get it. With regard to producing, are you seeking out artists to work with or are most of them coming to you?

AC: People coming to me—they come to you because of your experience. For a while, I was doing a lot of producing, but I haven't been doing much lately. Anybody who does producing knows it's very time-consuming, and I'm just so busy with drumming and my daughter and my life, that I haven't had the time to undertake producing. I know what it means to produce, and you want to truly be there for somebody one hundred percent. I also found that when producing, I was wearing too many hats. I found myself in a lot of situations where I was engineering, producing *and* playing drums, and that's a lot. You can do it, but it's a lot.

JM: The same would happen to me, and although I could deal with it, it definitely takes away from the sole focus of production.

AC: Exactly. I have a great engineer, Roman Klun, that I now share a studio with called His House—Innsbruck, in Williamsburg, so that takes one thing out of the equation, which is liberating.

But I love producing and that experience as a producer has really helped me as a sideman too, doing sessions. Because the best thing a drummer can do, or any musician, is make the right choices. The choices you make on the drum kit can make or break a track. Even if you decide not to play, "I'm not going to play the hi-hat," or "Let's leave this snare out." We can take up so much of the space or leave so much of the space. Anybody that had the experience of producing will understand that all the more. So, that experience that I've had has been super helpful for me as a drummer, being able to always look at the whole big picture.

JM: Is producing something you aspire to do more of it at some point? Do you see yourself at sixty: "I don't want to go out and tour much anymore, I'll just stay home and produce."

AC: I think it is something I'd like to do more of down the line, when I have a little more time. It can be very fulfilling when you're working with a great artist.

JM: There are many different styles of producing. Some people are amazing with vocals and harmonies, some people are great with rhythm tracks, some people are wonderful with creating bizarre canvasses and landscapes, and some do it all... from Brian Eno to Eddie Kramer and everyone in between. When somebody comes to you to produce them, what are you offering? What is it that you bring to the table as a producer?

AC: What I try to do when I produce is, first of all, I like to get together with just the artist and really get inside the song. Make sure that we've got a good song; because, I have always come from the song school. No matter what kind of music I'm playing, I always want to make sure there's something good there before you even turn the tape machine on. So I like to get together with the artist and hear their songs. It's great when you don't have to do anything to them. When they're perfect, they're perfect. If everything's great, I don't want to touch it.



I think what I've learned over the years is I'm going to be me, regardless of what my sound is.

But in a lot of cases, I might be helping out with the arrangement, making sure it works, and making sure the lyrics are good so we get a really strong song to begin with. And then from there, helping craft the right parts, getting the right musicians to play on it, and making a comfortable setting in the studio. I like things to be real comfortable once you get to the studio. I like where you know what you're going to do. That's more my style—let's do our homework beforehand.

JM: A lot of pre-production.

AC: Pre-production. Let's get it really together, and then we go in. Obviously, things can change when you get in there, but that's kind of my way of doing it.

Although, I just did a couple of sessions recently that were the opposite. I was just in Austin doing an Edie Brickell record, and the week before that I was in Woodstock doing a Rachael Yamagata record. Two incredible artists and it was the opposite approach—nobody heard the material before we got there. It was a great group of people, and there was a lot of experimenting and taking our time; that can be a great way to do it too.

So there are different ways to do it, but normally, as a producer, I like to really get into it beforehand, although as a drummer, it's more fun sometimes to just go in from scratch, you don't know what's going to happen, and everybody's working together.

In those two sessions I wasn't producing, I was just drumming.

JM: It sounds to me like you're working mostly with singer/songwriters, and you're putting everything together. Have you worked with any artists where you're producing another drummer?

AC: Most of the things that I produce, I'm usually involved in. It seems like it's always worked that way. People will hire me and they usually want me to play drums too.

I have produced a few artists with drummers, but it's been awhile. Yeah, it was fun; it's not that much different than



Drums

Yamaha

22" x 16" Kick
14" x 5.5" Snare
12" x 9" Rack
16" x 16" Floor

Cymbals

Zildjian

15" Kerope Hi-hats
19" Kerope Crash
22" Kerope Ride
20" Kerope Crash

Heads

Remo

Kick - Power Stroke
Snare - Ctd Ambassador
Rack & Floor - Pin Stripes /
Clr Ambassador

Sticks

Vic Firth

SD4 Combo

When I go into a session, even if it's the first time I'm working with somebody, I try to make it a band.

when I teach a drum lesson. Nine times out of ten, you just have to tell a drummer to cut what he's doing way back. [Laughs]

I think drumming is a very interesting instrument. It's complicated. We've got all these things; four limbs, our mind, our heart, our bodies, and I get why you have to practice a lot just to play solid good time. You have to have a lot of ability. And I get why a lot of drummers have a hard time.

But I always tell drummers, "You have to play the drums. Don't let the drums play you." That goes for any instrument. That's what I see so often, the instruments play these people. I've learned, and I always tell people, "Just break it down and start really simple. Then anything you add,

you have to play it like it's the last note on Earth, and make sure it's in the pocket and it feels good."

JM: It's much easier to build up than it is to tear down.

AC: Totally. It really is and it really works. And it's amazing how you can see that happen to someone. It feels great when you see a guy all of a sudden sound a million times better. And almost everybody is capable of doing it.

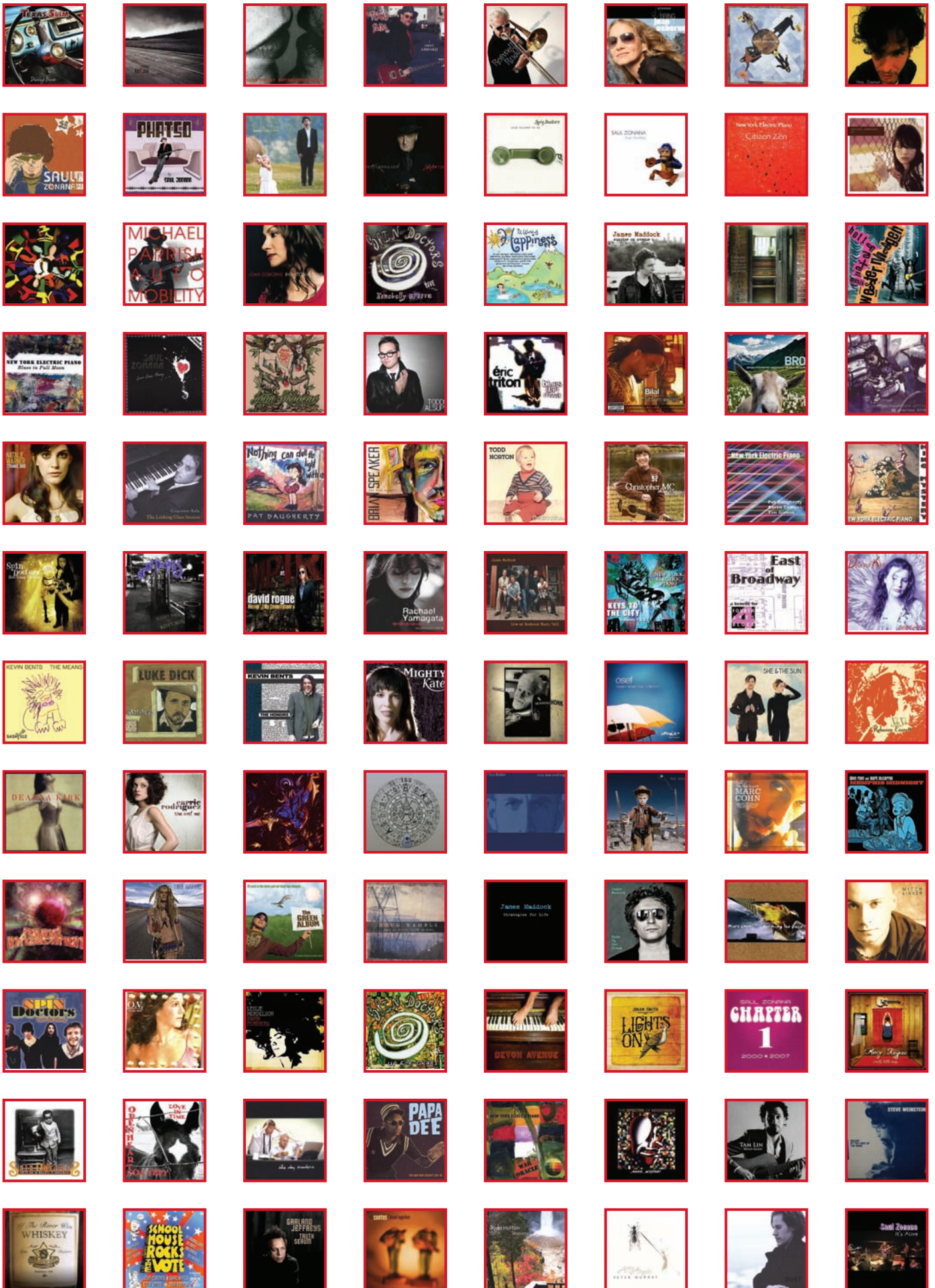
JM: And hopefully they realize it.

AC: I hope so. [Laughs]

JM: I've been in situations where I've stripped down a track and I

think the drummer is playing really well, doing a great job, but he's really pissed off because he's not playing 32nd-note kicks anymore or bombastic fills over the bar line. It's hard to sometimes get them to play for the song and not for themselves.

AC: I think we all go through it. I don't think there are too many drummers that, at some point, early in their career, didn't play too much. It's part of what we do. We all did it. We all had somebody tell us to simplify at some point. Luckily, I learned young and had good teachers. Our job is to keep time, make it feel good, and add to the music without taking away from it.



RESPECT & CHEMISTRY

JM: I think it's great that you're in a band that is going on 25 years, and have a full time job as a sideman, what have you found in each situation that helps the other?

AC: It's funny, one of the cool things about having so much experience in a band, and then also doing the sideman thing is, I've learned from both situations and I can bring those things into other situations. Like, being in a band has made me realize how valuable chemistry is. Being in a sideman situation makes me realize that most people in bands should be fired. [Laughs] You know what I mean?

JM: Boy, do I.

AC: So I try to bring that respect into the band, and I also try to bring that chemistry element into sideman work. When I go into a session, even if it's the first time I'm working with somebody, I try to make it a band. Because I think that's our job.

JM: If one of these other situations that feels like a band, could be a band, where you had chemistry and respect, would you consider joining and committing?

AC: Yeah. It would really have to be the right situation though. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have been in a band at a time when you could actually do what we did. And as hard as it was to do that, it was possible. You *could* get a platinum record.

Of course, bands can still be very successful, but just from a pure business point of view, it's really difficult for young musicians and young artists to operate in the business model that's happening today. You still have to do the same thing; you have to work really hard, go out there and do it, and be good, but it's difficult.

I don't know, I'm 46, I've got a kid, I've got a full life, I'm very fulfilled musically. I can't imagine meeting a bunch of guys and saying, "Let's start a band, guys!" But if the right band offered... You never know. If Radiohead called me, I'd join. [Laughs] But I don't know about starting something new. Never say never. Shit, in ten years, my kid will be in college, maybe I'll start a band then.

JM: That's the great thing about what we do, starting a band at 50 is totally possible.

AC: I remember when I turned 30, I thought I was old...but you realize you're never old. That's the great thing about what we do. As long as you can stay

relatively healthy, you can always do this. This is who I am. I've been this guy since I was ten and it has totally defined who I am for my entire life. And without it, I'd be pretty lost. I'm extremely lucky to have found something I love to do. I tell my daughter every day, "As long as you find a passion in life, you're going to be happy." So we're very lucky we found this.

ALL THAT JAZZ

JM: You mentioned earlier that jazz has been in your blood from early on, which leads me to the new CD, *The Aaron Comess Quintet*. Have you come full circle here with jazz, or is this just an opportunity to have some fun, catch up to the past and show, yet another musical side?

AC: I've always done a fair amount of jazz gigs in New York City and always wanted to have my own jazz group to do a recording, and the time felt right for that to happen. I felt I had the right group of players together that would work in a way I really liked. I really see it as another major part of my musical make-up even though it's one that I'm not so known for. But it's something I want to do more of now.

JM: Within the framework of "jazz," there lay many subcategories—swing, bebop, fusion, big band, free, etc., are you interested in playing all of the above or do you gravitate toward some more than others?

AC: I like playing all of it but this group is based on the early to mid '60s modern-jazz style that Miles Davis and John Coltrane were creating. Those two artists influenced me as much as Led Zeppelin, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. I also like to include some modern influences into our sound, so I leave it very open and free, but inside of that sort of 1960's-era sound. It's such a creative style of music and very fulfilling to play.

JM: There are drummers out there, like yourself, that play a multitude of styles. Some, like Steve Gadd and Simon Phillips, can play anything and never change or adjust their sound or setup. Others, like Steve Jordan and Peter Erskine will often change setups, sizes and tunings from gig to gig. Where do you fit in that scheme?

AC: I like to adjust my sound to the music I'm playing for sure. I'm always messing around with different size drums, cymbals, drum tunings, etc., to work in

the context I'm in. With this group I go for a cranked-up drum sound and vintage old K cymbals, much like an Elvin Jones or Tony Williams type of sound.

JM: As a composer on four very-different solo releases, do you have a preference for which style you like to write for most?

AC: I tend to do most of my writing on acoustic guitar and I think I'm best at a simple, organic style of writing. But a lot of it comes from the interpretation in going from record to record, or group to group. And I like to bring songs from different records into each group and make them work in that context.

JM: When it came time to do this jazz project, what went into picking and choosing the instrumentation for the quintet? For example, why piano and not vibes, why sax and not trumpet?

AC: Well again, I really love the sound of the Miles Davis and John Coltrane groups, so I knew I wanted piano, upright bass and tenor sax. I also knew I wanted my good friend and guitar player Teddy Kumpel in the group. He's kind of my right-hand man with my groups and does such a great job of interpreting my writing. So rather than a trumpet, I went with a guitar to change the sound up a bit. It also allows us to go in a different direction when we want to.

JM: As a player who can choose what he wants to put out, is there anything new and different still to come? Does Aaron Comess also play and compose for thrash metal, country or reggae?

AC: I'm already thinking ahead towards the next record. I have a group that's done a few gigs over the years called "Aaron Comess and The Air Conditioned Gypsies," which is mostly all improvisation. It's very eclectic, modern and rhythmic. Sometimes I use two drummers; the last gig we did I had one of my favorite drummers, Mark Guiliana, play with us and we had a blast. It's sort of a collective of musicians. I'm planning on having a core group, but bringing different people in. And I want to explore the two-drummer thing more with Mark and a few other guys. That can be really musical and fun when done with the right two drummers. ✱

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