

Aaron Comess

Story by Robin Tolleson

Photos by Paul La Raia

It's been twenty years since the **Spin Doctors** embedded themselves in the recesses of our ears with hits like "Two Princes," "Little Miss Can't Be Wrong," and "Jimmy Olsen's Blues." Turns out those gloriously grooving performances represent but one side of this well-traveled drummer's career.

With his combination of technique, intuition, and inquisitiveness, Aaron Comess has crafted exactly the type of career he dreamed of as a young drummer. As a founding member of the Spin Doctors, who are currently celebrating the twentieth anniversary of their breakout album, *Pocket Full of Kryptonite*, he savors the closeness of a band situation. As a drummer for hire with Joan Osborne, Edie Brickell, James Maddock, and New York Electric Piano, he gets to enjoy the challenges associated with high-level recording sessions. And as a solo artist, he's able to present his own unique musical vision; his recently released second album as a leader, *Beautiful Mistake*, is a breathtaking progressive, instrumental, roots-rock collection that showcases a musical approach to the kit, powerful stick work, and a strong songwriting sense.

Edie Brickell has followed Comess's drumming since the two were in high

school together in Dallas. "I love inventive drummers who sound relaxed and playful," the singer says. "I'm really moved by that, because the player takes you on a ride that you can feel isn't cliché. Aaron is a smart, thinking drummer with amazing feel and intuition—or connection—and it's a privilege to play and record with him. He's a beautiful soul, and he makes me sound better, *lots* better, than I would without him."

As a child, Comess took advantage of solid music programs in the Dallas public schools, starting on piano in first grade. Later he attended a performing arts high school, where he studied theory and played drums in big bands, small combos, and orchestras. "We were playing music every day with other musicians, having jam sessions after school and on weekends," he recalls. "I was lucky to be able to play music with people, because ultimately that's what it's all about."

Comess's first teacher, Jack Iden,

taught Aaron traditional grip and insisted that he play on the practice pad for two years to learn the fundamentals before moving to the drumkit. In high school Comess began studying with Henry Okstel, a professor at North Texas State University (later renamed the University of North Texas). "He helped me with big band interpretation and reading charts," Comess says, "which set up everything for me in terms of learning how to interpret songs, and that's what I really love to do—try to make whatever I'm doing, regardless of the style, sound great. Learning that big band interpretation—setting up sections and hits—was a great lesson early on.

"We were doing advanced stuff," Aaron continues. "Henry showed me a hundred ways to use the *Syncopation* book, and he had me doing Pete Magadini's *Poly-Cymbal Time* book. He got me into the polyrhythmic thing and understanding rhythms over the bar and





AARON'S SETUP

"I have a lot of kits," says Comess, who endorses Yamaha drums. "I always try to choose the best sound for a particular project. I've got a bunch of great Yamaha kits, which I always use live. I've got the classic black Yamaha Recording Custom series, which I bought when I was sixteen. Those drums are just incredible; the '80s Recording Custom series is like vintage now. I've used their PHX kit on recordings too, including some of my own. And I'm just about to use their new Club Custom kit on the road with the Spins. I've also got a little Gretsch kit, an old Slingerland kit, and on *Beautiful Mistake* I used my Bradys: 16x22 kick, 9x12 tom, 16x16 floor tom, plus three of their snare drums—a 5½x14 "tree trunk" model and a 6x16 and 5½x10 jarrah. I've been a big fan of their drums for a long time. I used them on all of the Spin Doctors records early on.

"The Zildjian cymbals I used on *Beautiful Mistake* were primarily a 22" K Dark ride with rivets, a 20" Constantinople, 15" A Vintage hi-hats, and a 22" Complex II ride." Aaron also uses Remo Coated Ambassador and Emperor heads and Vic Firth American Custom SD4 Combo sticks.

different groupings. But at the same time, his thing was always, 'It has to feel good. It has to sound good. It has to fit the song.' It was good being pushed hard technically, but it's also important to have somebody stress that it's all about making the music and the beat feel good."

Comess says he's always favored drummers with an organic sound and approach, like Bernard Purdie and Tony Williams. "I kind of grew up studying to be a really versatile drummer," he explains, "and I tried to model myself after guys like Steve Gadd—somebody who plays great jazz, rock, blues, whatever. I saw myself more as a guy that was going to play with a ton of people."

After a year at Berklee and another in Dallas studying with Okstel, Comess moved to New York and enrolled at the New School. One day some classmates

knocked on his practice-room door and convinced him to check out their tunes. Comess liked the band, which called itself the Spin Doctors, and he decided to join.

"We started writing songs together, and the vibe was cool," Aaron recalls. "We were immediately playing out live in New York, and at the time our approach was the opposite of other bands'. Everybody else was rehearsing all week and doing their one showcase gig a month, trying to get a record deal. We were playing five nights a week in clubs, and we'd rehearse once a month. And we didn't care about getting a record deal. We were just like, 'We want to be a good band; we want to make a living.' From playing so much, we got a big following. One thing led to another, and the record companies started coming around."

Though the Spin Doctors' debut album,

Pocket Full of Kryptonite, became a multi-platinum blockbuster, the band was unable to sustain its popularity, and about ten years ago Comess began focusing on developing his reputation as a studio drummer. "That meant really putting myself out there on the scene," he says, "playing with good people. You can take any gig under the sun, and that's cool—you've got to work. But when you put yourself in a situation where you're playing with really good people who play the kind of music you like, and you're sounding good doing it, everything else kind of falls into place. I was lucky to be working with some great people around New York. If you can keep doing it, word gets around, and before you know it you're working a lot."





In 2006 Comess released his first solo album, *Catskills Cry*, and soon after began composing the music that would become 2011's *Beautiful Mistake*. "I like to sit around and play guitar and come up with little songs," he says. "About a year ago I realized that I had the material together, and I decided to call some guys that I love playing with and do it."

Comess made demos, playing all the instruments himself, and sent them to guitarist Teddy Kumpel and bassist Richard Hammond. "I got together with Teddy a couple times to go over stuff," Aaron says,

"and then we just went in and recorded it. I love that approach to music. You get the right musicians in there that you trust, and everybody does their homework. I love to capture something fresh before you have time to know it too well or overthink it, and that's exactly what we did."

For Comess, the drum parts were never a worry. "For me the song always comes first," he says. "So before I even presented the material to these guys, I wanted to make sure that there was a song there on acoustic guitar—a melody and a form and everything—that stood on its own. Once

you have a great song, something that you feel good about, how the drummer approaches it can make it go in many different directions. But ultimately I always think of the song first. If I'm working with an artist, I want to hear them play the song bare bones before I even hit the drums. I want to hear the lyrics, the melody, the chords—kind of get the vibe of it. That's going to make me feel where I need to go sonically with the drums—what kind of snare sound to have, what kind of toms and cymbals, whether to use mallets, brushes, or sticks.... There are so many things you can do, but it's all based on where the song's coming from."

Most of the *Beautiful Mistake* tracks feature guitar solos, but Comess thinks of these sections as group improvisations. "Maybe the guitar is the main voice of that improvisation," he explains, "but the other instruments, we're all happy and having a conversation together. Even though the guitar is kind of the main thing, everybody's an equal part of the conversation. Kenny and Rich are really great at that."

Comess recorded the album at his home studio in New York City's East Village. The trio cut live over two days, then Comess and Kumpel spent another day on overdubs. "I love getting good sounds," Aaron says, "and I've got a great

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AARON COMESS

engineer, Roman Klun. We went for a little different approach on this record. I didn't want to use as many mics, so a lot of the songs are recorded with just three or four. I'm a big fan of capturing the kit the way it sounds and letting the drummer mix himself when he's playing. If you're using two or three mics, you've really got to be aware [of dynamics] when you go over to the toms.

"There was no fancy stuff, no sound manipulation at all, really," Comess stresses. "It was just about getting good sounds and the right guys—the chemistry—and having the material together and doing it in an organic fashion. There's a time and place for running drums through guitar amps and filters and crazy stuff. But for this particular project, the way I was hearing the

music, I just wanted it to be completely open and organic."

Rather than rely on postproduction to add variety to the drum sounds on the album, Comess expanded his choice of snares. "One of the records that was a huge influence on *Beautiful Mistake* was Bill Frisell's *Gone, Just Like a Train*, with Victor Krauss and Jim Keltner," Aaron says. "Keltner's one of my favorite drummers, and the approach to that record was very organic, very loose. A lot of times Jim will use different snare sounds on a track, so I tried that out on this record. It's cool to have different tones. I set up three snares on my kit for the whole record. In some cases I'd be bouncing around on all of them during the song, even within fills."

As the Spin Doctors busily celebrate the

twentieth anniversary of *Kryptonite*—they did an East Coast tour this past October and have European dates in early 2012—Comess says, "We've been having a wonderful time playing together, and the band sounds great." But at this point, with the impressive list of credits he's amassed, the drummer is clearly comfortable living the life of a musician for hire. "There's a misconception that the session drummer plays it safe and boring, but that's not the case at all," he insists. "You have to be prepared to go in there and work fast and come up with something quick. But people want something unique as well, and your job is to serve the song and bring something to it without getting in the way."

"At the same time, you've got to know when to just lay it down, and sometimes the best thing to do is the bare minimum. But even when you're doing the bare minimum, it's *how* you play it that matters. It's all about making it feel right and respecting the style. That's the thing that's so important to understand: Keep your mind open, listen to all kinds of music, respect and understand the styles. That's the stuff that's going to make people want to play with you."



The image shows the front cover of a CD titled "MODERN DRUMMER AND THE FINEST IN JAZZ SINCE 1939 BLUE NOTE JAZZ DRUMMING LEGENDS". The cover features a blue-toned photograph of a drummer playing. The text on the cover includes: "MODERN DRUMMER" in a large, bold, sans-serif font; "AND THE FINEST IN JAZZ SINCE 1939" in a smaller font; "BLUE NOTE" in a large, bold, sans-serif font; "JAZZ DRUMMING LEGENDS" in a large, bold, sans-serif font; "15 MUST HAVE TRACKS FROM THE BEST DRUMMERS OF TODAY AND LEGENDS OF YESTERDAY." in a smaller font; "FEATURES JAZZ LEGENDS SUCH AS: CHRIS DAVE, BUDDY RICH, TONY WILLIAMS, JOE MORELLO, JACK DEJOHNETTE AND MANY MORE!" in a smaller font; "AVAILABLE NOW!" in a large, bold, sans-serif font; and at the bottom, "WWW.BLUENOTE.COM", "WWW.MODERNDRUMMER.COM", and logos for "Available on iTunes" and "amazon MP3".

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RECORDINGS

Aaron Comess "Unleash the Beast" from *Beautiful Mistake*, "Future" from *Catskills Cry* /// **Spin Doctors** "Two Princes" from *Pocket Full of Kryptonite*, "Sugar" from *Nice Talking to Me* /// **Joan Osborne** "Baby Love" from *Righteous Love* /// **Rachael Yamagata** "Letter Read" from *Happenstance* /// **Chris Whitley** "Last Million Miles" from *Soft Dangerous Shores* /// **Marc Cohn** "Saints Preserve Us" from *Burning the Daze* /// **James Maddock** "Step Into the Water" from *Wake Up and Dream* /// **Bilal** "Love Poems" from *1st Born Second* /// **Saul Zonana** "Even" from *Blue Monkey* /// **New York Electric Piano** "The Modern World" from *Keys to the City Volumes 1 & 2*

INFLUENCES

Miles Davis *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (Tony Williams) /// **John Coltrane** *A Love Supreme* (Elvin Jones) /// **Bill Frisell** *Gone, Just Like a Train* (Jim Keltner) /// **Led Zeppelin** *Led Zeppelin II* (John Bonham) /// **Rolling Stones** *Tattoo You* (Charlie Watts) /// **Steely Dan** *The Royal Scam* (Bernard Purdie, Rick Marotta) /// **Stevie Wonder** *Innervisions* (Stevie Wonder) /// **Paul Simon** *Still Crazy After All These Years* (Steve Gadd) /// **AC/DC** *Back in Black* (Phil Rudd) /// **The Beatles** *The White Album* (Ringo Starr) /// **Frank Zappa** *Shut Up 'n Play Your Guitar* (Vinnie Colaiuta)

