

Ray LeVier

Living The Dream

Interview: Mover

Photos: Mike Dwyer, Diana Van Campen

It took me a few minutes to recall, and then it came back to me... "I remember Ray. I judged a drum-off competition that he was in quite a few years ago." Then I recalled a bit more... that I had gotten into an argument with some of the other judges because I was the only one that voted Ray the winner. It wasn't that the other judges didn't necessarily feel otherwise, but they did feel that giving it to Ray, made it look like he was going to win out of sympathy. Well, that simply couldn't have been farther from the truth; regardless, Ray got second place.

What struck me next was, "Man, as if this kid doesn't have enough to battle, he also has this kind of prejudice to deal with too!" And that was the last time I thought about it and Ray, for quite some time.

Until walking through Greenwich Village one night and hearing, as usual, some amazing playing coming from The 55 Bar on Christopher Street. It could have been a number of great players—Keith Carlock, Dan Weiss, Tony Mason—so I popped my head in the door and saw Ray tearing it up.

How pleased I was to see and hear him playing, which not only solidified the feelings I had back at the drum-off, but also solidified that Ray was able to rise above and beyond anything in his way; proving that no obstacle was going to come between him and living the dream!





I was just trying to shoot for the moon, knowing that if I hit the mountain, it would be acceptable.

JM: Let's talk about your new record. Is it a jazz recording like your prior release?

RL: No, it couldn't be more different from my last record. [Laughs]

My last project was with Mike Stern and John Abercrombie on guitars, Joe Locke on vibes, Francois Moutin on bass and Dave Binney on sax. I admire those guys in a huge way musically and it was really great to be able to work with them. The idea was to use guys with names as to attract attention to my solo debut as a jazz artist. I got some really nice reviews and a nice feature in *Jazz*

Times magazine. All around good feedback so I guess it worked out pretty well.

JM: What a great line-up, did you play live or tour at all?

RL: No, we didn't, it was primarily a studio project first and a chance to just get my name out there as a drummer. They had their own separate projects, gigs and tours happening, and I felt I didn't want to step on what they had going on as name players.

JM: You just said this new record

couldn't be more different than your previous one; how so?

RL: Well it's definitely a left turn from my last project. It's a rock record that gives homage to some of the bands that I listened to growing up.

Before I found jazz, which wasn't until later when I went to college really, I was very much influenced by a lot of classic rock and music from the '80s growing up. I guess it's a stew of what just came out of me emotionally at the time.

All the songs were written, produced, arranged, performed and sung by me. It's the first record that

for the most part I'm really doing everything myself from conception to completion.

JM: I assume you're starting out by programming the basics, and then various steps to further the recording process?

RL: For the writing, I started in Ableton using mostly all MIDI instruments, and from there I iron out the form and get the song closer to how I want it. I like to work my ideas out in Ableton because it flows quicker for me. With Ableton I can sketch ideas in *clips mode* in real time and get

instant playback, as opposed to the linear style of a Pro Tools session of beginning to end of song.

Once I'm satisfied with what I have I'll then bounce each track into Pro Tools. When I'm happy with a specific instrument, I'll print it and print the track to audio and start adding all the plug-ins and stuff, otherwise I'll print it temporarily anyway just for functionality and replace it later.

JM: How much are you using MIDI, as opposed to real instruments?

RL: There's some marimba and vibraphone parts that I recorded as audio and drums of course, but there were a few instruments that I wanted to replace the MIDI on cause it just wasn't cutting it sonically.

JM: For example?

RL: Mainly the guitar and bass parts. The record has a lot of MIDI on it—synth pads, basses, pads, pianos, drum loops, etc., sounds which I spent some time on and ultimately ended up keeping but I didn't have an authentic guitar sound at my disposal and for a rock recording, the guitars are a huge part of that sound I was going for and hearing.

JM: That's when you bring in a live player or players.

RL: Yeah, I asked my friend Rich Tozzoli to lay down some guitar parts. We've been partnering and writing music for television for many years now. He's a talented composer/engineer who also happens to be a badass guitarist and really knows how to dial in great guitar sounds. He's mixed for guys like Al DiMeola and Ace Frehley so when the time came it was a no-brainer to ask him to re-track the guitar parts. He also did the final mixes, which I'm really happy with.

JM: How about the drums, what was the process there?

RL: For the drums, I recorded very rough but specific parts during the writing phase, just to keep things moving along so I wouldn't get bogged down creatively. Most of the time, just programming MIDI drum parts knowing all along that they'd get

replaced. I wanted to track the drums at a studio with a big room sound rather than my studio. I get really good drum sounds in my studio, but I wanted that big room sound that I just don't have at my place. All but three songs were recorded at another studio.

JM: Seeing that you're working in MIDI and all, I'm assuming everything was done to a click.

RL: Oh yes, definitely. Also, it just makes editing so much easier down the road, especially if I'm unsure about certain sections of the songs in terms of production and the final shape of the song. Most of the time I never have a definite idea during the writing process and editing continues all the way up to the final mixes. This way I can tweak the production of the song whenever. I like to work to a grid because it's easier to do edits quickly; I've learned from past experience that it kills my flow if I get stuck in editing land.

JM: Where did you end up tracking the drums?

RL: At the Clubhouse in Rhinebeck, New York. It's an amazing studio with a massive selection of great mics, a Neve console, and an awesome live room to track drums in. It's a nice, relaxing, upstate, country vibe and really conducive to feeling creative. I've recorded there a few times with Rich and eventually became good friends with Paul Antonell, the owner. I immediately fell in love with the place and the tracks were sounding so ridiculous I knew I wanted more reasons to go back. [Laughs]

One session in particular, Neil Dorfsman just happened to be there hanging out and engineering.

JM: Nice guy to have around, especially when tracking drums.

RL: Yeah. I got really nervous that he was there on the other side of the glass, but he was such a beautiful cat that I forgot all about his credits as an engineer. He was cracking jokes and just having a good time. He was a nice mix of calm, funny and serious all at once and made everyone feel relaxed. We got to talking about

my project and when he showed a genuine interest in it I asked him if he would be willing to engineer the drum tracking sessions. Neil engineered the session with Mike Dwyer, who's the first call intern at the Clubhouse. He's a Pro Tools wiz and really helped me out a lot with post production; getting the rough mixes together for Rich to finish before mastering. Mike is also playing some guitar parts on a couple tracks.

JM: You also mentioned that you sung on the record.

RL: Yeah. I sing all the lead vocals, the harmonies, and created choirs as well.

I sang multiple passes of as many different octaves as I could to create a choir of forty or so different voices for some songs. I used Ableton's looper, just layering and layering voices till I got the result I was looking for.

JM: Is singing something new for you?

RL: I've always liked to sing and I've done backups on some gigs and recordings, but my focus has for the most part has always been the drums.

JM: What was it that made you take singing more seriously?

RL: Well, I started taking voice lessons with Judith Farris in Manhattan. I don't know why, but I just really wanted to sing more, and also wanted to do it correctly. She's helped a lot of people on Broadway to project without straining or hurting your voice and her lessons are very unique. She's a person who really knows how to crack into you with no bullshit and expand what you were given. She was saying, "You should be doing more with your voice, you have a really good instrument." She instilled confidence in me to do it.

It's not just about singing with her; it's about how you carry yourself as a person and how confidence translates into your performance life and personal life. A lot of her coaching has helped my drumming as well. She teaches strong work ethics and working hard and that just resonated with me.

JM: Was there a specific reason for doing a vocal record?

RL: I don't know. I was going through a breakup with my girlfriend at the time and it all started coming out like emotional vomiting [Laughs]. Actually, a lot of the songs were unfinished ideas I'd been working on and after the breakup they just started coming out of me.

JM: I'm sure that must have been very therapeutic.

RL: It's like, that's what we do as musicians; you have to take those negative situations and turn them into something creative. Take the pain and make something good come of it. I guess it was a good excuse to start writing and singing my own songs.

JM: You wouldn't be alone in that there are many who say that's when you write the best—when you're going through something painful.

RL: It just flowed out of me in a big way and I just kept writing until it was finished. That's what I've always done is try to use that negative energy to turn lemons into lemonade. Pain has a way of bringing out the creative honesty and I think that ideas naturally tend to come from more of a sincere place during those emotional times.

JM: What are some of the themes and topics you wrote about?

RL: There are songs about heartbreak and unrequited love of course; songs about what's happening in our society today. I kept watching the news about the Dakota Access Pipeline and how the Indians are continually cheated out of their land. It bothered me so much to see these people getting maced and shot at for just trying to peacefully protect the land they owned and loved, only to be taken away by big oil corporations. I felt emotional about it and I wrote a song called "Soul Reason."

There's a song called "Plight of the Hero" about the plight of the hero—where he can't let anybody get close to him out of fear of losing them... it's also the double meaning of the codependent who always feels they

have to do something for somebody. I knew someone who was a real codependent and I saw that dynamic of always being like the hero, the champion—this person who's always, "Oh no, I got it."

Another song came about when I was at a yoga class one morning and the guy says, "Make sure you look in the lost and found to get the rest your stuff because we're clearing out the box." I thought, "Lost and found—that's a cool concept for the record." Like, when you really lose yourself, that's when you get some real deep clarity as to what it's all about. That's been a theme in my life and it really resonated with me so I ended up naming the record *Lost and Found*.

SISTER ACT

JM: So, let's go back to the beginning and get the basics out of the way: How old were you? What hit you first: drums, music, other instruments? Early influences... How, where and why did it all start?

RL: First, my father's a highly-accomplished pianist, as is my aunt Barbara, my dad's sister—they both went to Juilliard. My dad played in the Navy band in Charleston, South Carolina, where he met my mother, who was a blues singer; they fell in love and she eventually moved north to marry my dad and here I am.

Piano came first; my father sat me down at the piano and we did a few lessons when I was about six or seven...

JM: Did you take to it?

RL: I don't know. There was nothing in my brain that went, "Yes! Instrument!" It was more of, "Okay dad, thanks for the lesson, I'm going to go play in the yard now." As a kid, I took to riding my bicycle mostly. I got really into bicycle motocross and would race in competitions when I was nine. I always liked to play outside as a kid and didn't like the idea of being trapped in a room practicing.

JM: Well, you certainly took to drums. How and when did they come into the picture?

RL: My sister is a classically trained pianist and started playing piano

around seven or eight and was taking a lot of lessons, but then one day she decided, "I don't want to play piano anymore, I want to be a drummer!" My dad said, "Alright" and got this used red sparkle Slingerland kit. She played it for one day and then said, "I don't think I like drums, I think I like the piano more." After that, this kit was just sitting around. My dad would use it for rehearsals at the house and it became the gig kit—that if his drummer didn't have a kit, he could use it. At that time, I didn't really notice the drums at all.

One day I was in the basement at my grandmother's house, where the kit eventually ended up; I had nothing

to do, so I thought, "I've got some drums. I'm going to pull them out and start banging on them." I pulled them out, started banging on them and my grandmother wasn't too happy, "Alright that's enough," because of course, I didn't know what the hell I was doing [laughs]. I asked if I could bring the kit home to my house, which was with my mom, and once there, I learned one simple, basic rock beat...that's all I could play.

JM: How did you pick it up?

RL: The kid down the street was taking drum lessons and that's where I learned my one and only beat; he showed me. He was playing along

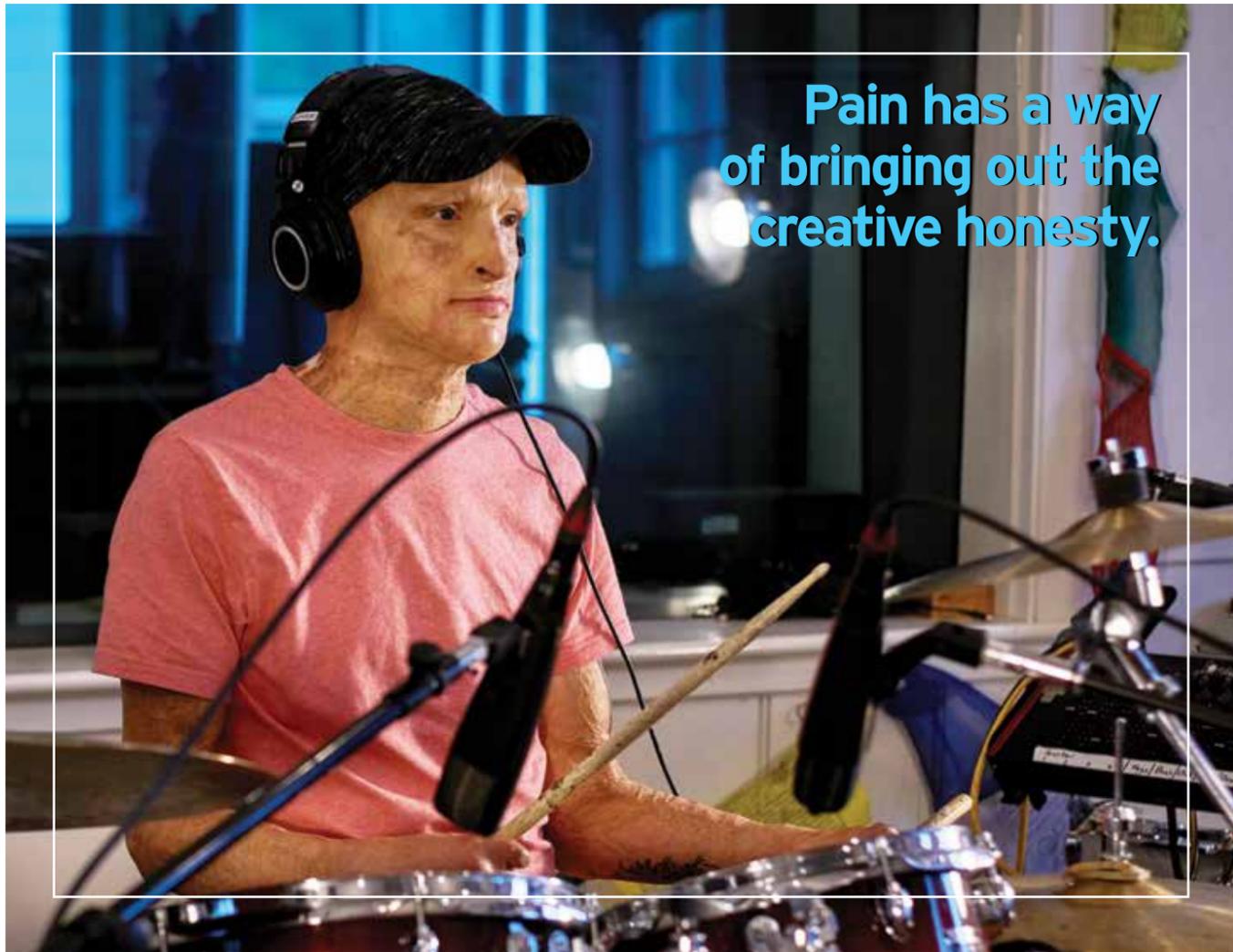
to records and I saw that: "Wow! How do you do that?" That's where the fascination clicked in—seeing him playing along, playing the same beat as the music, "That's amazing!" The power of drumming, you know, the consistency of how you have to hit the drums and everything—it all of a sudden came onto my radar...I started playing that beat and everything clicked, like the pieces of the puzzle came together.

I was only playing for a month or two, and then I got burned; I got caught in the fire.

AM I DREAMING?



When you really lose yourself, that's when you get some real deep clarity as to what it's all about.



Pain has a way of bringing out the creative honesty.

JM: If you don't mind me asking, what happened and how old were you?

RL: I was 12. There was a chicken coop in the backyard of the property where we were living, and we were camping out in it on the weekends; it was a chicken coop that we turned into a fort.

We had just gotten back from a vacation on Long Beach Island and we went to sleep with a candle burning on the wall. I was tired, so I was the first one to go to sleep, and my brother and friends were hanging out and staying up a little later.

JM: Do you actually remember what happened?

RL: Not really. I had a dream that I was walking on the beach. I dreamt I was back at L.B.I., down at the Jersey Shore, and the fences on the way to the beach encircled me—I'm trapped inside these fences.

The sand started getting really hot, I'm jumping up and down, and the sun's getting really hot, and then everything's getting hot.

JM: You're dreaming this, but...

RL: That was me literally standing in the fire, but still sleeping.

They said it was miraculous that I even woke up because, with smoke inhalation, you never wake up. You don't die a horrible burning death of "Ahhhh, I'm burning to death," you just never wake up.

So here I am, having this dream, and next thing I know I hear somebody say, "Put your hands over your eyes and mouth" and then I'm out in the grass and someone's rolling me around. It was my brother's friend TR Baron who was a little older than us, and it's a good thing that we got him to camp out with us that night because no one else was around. Fortunately,

his father was a volunteer fireman so he went right into: "Okay, I've got to save this guy." He woke up, ran out and tripped over my brother; then my brother panicked and he just ran... he thought he would get in trouble because the place was burning. He thought he was the only one in there, so he was going to run into the woods for a little bit and then come back later and see what happened.

JM: He didn't realize you were still in there.

RL: No. He didn't know I got caught in the fire. And, you know, it was a hard thing for him later—that he should have been there to protect his younger brother.

Nonetheless, TR went into action, grabbed me and rolled me on the grass. Then he went up to the house and banged on the door; my mother looked at the back and saw the

whole backyard just lit up and called the police.

JM: And you're still on the grass...

RL: Yeah, and I think I'm still dreaming—I think I'm at the beach. TR said, "Stay here, don't move!" I'm sitting there and looking at a tree, thinking, "How does a tree grow on the beach? I don't get this. Trees don't grow in sand." That's all I could think of: "How's this tree growing in the middle of the beach?" I was in the middle of this field, but thinking I was still at the beach.

JM: You were in shock.

RL: Yeah, I was in shock, but my mind is thinking and trying to figure out where I am. I got scared. I'm at the beach and wondering how I got here, and all I can think of is, while I was sleeping, they put me in a car and somebody drove down to the beach. I'm trying to figure it out.

JM: When did it hit you?

RL: I started touching myself, because I felt weird. I touched my arm and it felt crinkly, and it hurt when I touched it. That's when I went right into thinking, "Oh my god! Something's wrong. I'm f*ck*d up. Something really bad has happened." I don't know what; all I know is I want my mommy.

The next thing I know, my mom's there and I'm saying, "Am I okay? Am I okay?" "Yeah, you're fine!" She really didn't know, because I had a really deep tan and it was dark out, so she thought I was okay. She didn't realize the extent of my burns.

A police officer was the first one on the scene and they were worried about my brother because he was nowhere to be found. They thought he died in the fire. We had actually dug a basement in this chicken coop; a six-foot basement that you could stand up in. They thought maybe he fell into the basement. They put the fire out, but they couldn't find him anywhere. Then early that morning, he came back.

JM: What happened next?

RL: They rushed me to the Valhalla Burn Unit in Westchester, and I spent six, almost seven months there going through reconstructive surgeries and

day-in-and-day-out torture sessions. Lots of scraping dead skin off, and then they had to cover it up. I was burned a couple inches above my navel, so the whole bottom half of me was fine for taking donor skin in order to graft the skin back up top. I guess what kills you is infection, and your temperature going through the roof, so they had to keep me iced all the time and keep me drugged up obviously. It was six months in the hospital...for a twelve-year-old, that just felt like an eternity!

They finally let me go home, just for sanity reasons. My mom became my nurse, because there were parts of my scalp that were still not grafted, and parts of my back too.

THE CALLING

JM: I honestly cannot imagine what you must have gone through, but it must have felt so good to finally get home.

RL: When I got home, the Slingerland red sparkle kit was sitting there, and I just went right to it and sat down, and wanted to play so bad.

JM: Wanted to play...

RL: Yeah. Back to when I was in the hospital; for my birthday or something, my dad asked, "What do you want?" I said, "I want a drum set." And he said, "Alright, fine. I'm going to set it up right here [in the hospital room], and when you go home, you can play. We'll figure it out." Well, the nurse hears this and pulls my father aside and says, "You know, he's having a hard time, it might not be a good idea to get his hopes up about playing drums. You know... holding sticks." My father just says, "You don't know my son" and walked away. Dad told me he cried on the way home. I'm sure he cried more than once, you know.

Then, once I was home, I had another birthday coming up and my dad got this new drum kit—a Maxwin, by Pearl. A total entry-level kit, but I didn't care, I just wanted a proper kit, so that's what I got. And I was really happy to have that shiny new kit.

JM: Were you actually able to play?

RL: Well, this hand [left] was just a mitten. However, the right hand had

a better grip and I could hold a stick there, so for a while I would just play with my right hand—coming down off the hi-hat for the backbeat on two and four.

My right hand is as you see it, so I could hold the stick. I went right back to playing the basic beat. But, the left hand was a problem: "How am I going to hold a stick with the left hand? Okay, let's put the stick here," and I would duct tape it.

JM: Ouch. Not that you hadn't suffered enough...

RL: Yeah! My fresh new skin was like tissue paper; I would bleed. But, all the bleeding and the healing, and the bleeding and the healing, eventually toughened up this area. And I didn't care, all I cared was, "I'm playing the drums, I don't care if I'm bleeding."

Then, one day, I found this glove in a parking lot; it was like this weird padded Kung Fu glove. I picked it up and threw it on my backseat. I'm driving along and saw this thing on my backseat, and thought, "Oh yeah, the glove!" It dawned on me—you know, you tend to have an inventive mind when you have to figure things out. For example, [Ray picks up his coffee] I can't pick this up with one hand, I've got to use two. You have to relearn all these things.

Anyway, I saw the glove and thought, "Screw it. I'll just do to the glove, what I do with the duct tape. Instead of having to go through this whole process of cutting off the duct tape from my hand every time I'm done, I'll duct tape the glove and stick my hand in it." That worked really well. It was totally functional and it allowed me to hit hard without pain and I started to play in some bands during my time in high school. The only problem was that it felt like a dead fish—there was no bounce, nothing. But it really helped to strengthen all these muscles, especially to be able to play a double, because each stroke...

JM: It's all in the wrist.

RL: Yes, every stroke came from the wrist.

JM: Was it a choice to play traditional

grip, or is that the only way the stick works for the left hand?

RL: It's the way this hand worked with the way the stick would sit in there. I can do matched grip, but it doesn't feel as good as this.

SCHOOLING

JM: Were you just playing on your own all the time or did you seek out anyone to study with?

RL: I played as a self-taught drummer for a minute, but the guy that I started studying with and where most advancements as a drummer came from was with Sal Larocca. I studied with him for many years and he really helped get me to a very high level, to the point where I wanted to eventually pursue drumming as a career and go to college.

JM: What did he have you working on?

RL: A lot of rudiments, which really helped to develop my hands. For starters, I was expected to know all the original 26 rudiments and then a lot of variations. His lessons were demanding but very beneficial for building my playing and reading skills over time. He insisted I learn how to read, which came in handy down the road. Lots of books for developing my hands like Ted Reed *Syncopation*, *Stick Control*, Charley Wilcoxon *Rudimental Swing Solos*, the *N.A.R.D. Book*, *Master Studies* by Joe Morello. Groove books like *Realistic Rock* by Appice, *Future Sounds* by Dave Garibaldi, all four *Patterns* books by Gary Chaffee, *Four Way Coordination* by Elliot Fine, way too many books to list them all. I got to the point where I just couldn't get enough and became obsessed with finding new books to go through.

The lessons consisted of warming up with rudiments, reading, groove study and playing good time, working on different styles and feels, soloing ideas, working on trading fours, eights and so on.

He was a very thorough teacher and demanded a lot from his students. He would also make playlists of tunes and that really helped me with learning songs and song forms. His approach was kind of like Alan Dawson and Morello when it came to

learning the rudiments and applying them musically to the kit. Sal would always talk about playing the music and making it swing and feel good. I really trusted him and really needed his blunt and honest feedback at the time. He made it clear I had to put in the hours if I really wanted it. I continue to practice very hard even today as my schedule allows. I enjoy the process of practicing and I'm always trying to expand my playing and ideas. It's a never-ending journey and can be frustrating or satisfying depending on how you look at it.

JM: It's very obvious, the time you put in, were you also listening to any guys and/or getting into music that interested you?

RL: Yeah, I was going out all the time and checking out lots of bands. I really dug the Screaming Headless Torsos with Jojo [Mayer]. Lost Tribe with Ben Perowsky, I'd go to the 55 Bar frequently to check out Mike [Stern] because he always had amazing guys with him like Ritchie Moralez, John Riley, and Ben. Rodney Holmes and his band knocked me out. Not only can he play his ass off but he is a talented composer as well and that aspect inspired me to eventually start writing my own music. I took some lessons with Jojo, Tommy Campbell, Marvin "Smitty" Smith; I studied at the Drummers Collective with the late Kim Plainfield. I'm super grateful I had the chance to be his student.

I started listening to a lot of drummers; I was just trying to shoot for the moon, knowing that if I hit the mountain, it would be acceptable. I continued with Sal for many years and he was turning me on to guys like Tony Williams, Buddy Rich, Vinnie, Steve Gadd, Billy Cobham, Max Roach, Philly Joe, Art Blakey and Elvin, to name some. I would try to play and reproduce what I was hearing and try to get some crumbs of ideas into my playing. My mentality was: I can do this. I just have to work really hard and I'll get there eventually.

JM: Shoot for the moon... you chose drummers that would equate to shooting for another galaxy!

RL: [Laughs] Yeah, there are certain things that no drummer can do that Buddy did. And Vinnie, he's just a freak! But to aim high for those goals is what I think really helped me to achieve what I wanted, and what I was hearing.

And musically, I really gravitated toward jazz fusion at the time because of the technical aspects of drumming in that style. But I was always interested in lots of genres and not just one or two.

JAZZED UP

JM: From a basic rock beat to jazz fusion...

RL: Well, at first I was listening to rock and metal, but then I went over to someone's house one day, and the guy said, "You're a drummer, who do you listen to?" "Metallica and Anthrax," and he goes, "Ah, whatever. Man, you should listen to some jazz fusion, that's great stuff." I'm thinking, "Fusion! That's a cool word I've never heard. What is this fusion?"

JM: And what did you find out?

RL: I went to a record store and asked: "Have you heard of fusion? Do you have any?" "Oh yeah! Yellowjackets, Weather Report..."

JM: That's a good start!

RL: Oh man, I went home with *Black Market* [Weather Report] and one of the early Yellowjackets records, and it just blew my whole world open. Then, from there I just started seeking out fusion and found Steve Gadd, I found Vinnie Colaiuta, Dave Weckl, Steve Smith, Dennis Chambers... And then it's an incestuous thing where, "Okay, Steve Gadd's on this jazz record. I don't know what this record is, I've never heard of this artist before, but if Steve's on there I want to hear it," you know. That's the way it sprouted out into discovering all these things. I found my way into jazz going through the back door to study jazz and go to school.

JM: The same here. I bought so many records because of the drummer and often times had nothing to do with the artist or the music.

You mentioned earlier; going to college.

RL: Yes, I felt the need to go to college and study jazz: "If I'm going to be a drummer, I'm going to be the best schooled drummer I can be. And be a musician, not just some guy that swings sticks." That was my idea and reason for going to college.

JM: Where did you study and was it all that you expected?

RL: William Patterson; I didn't graduate, but I did three years of BA in Performance. They have a great program there. When I was going there, Rufus Reid was one of the directors on the staff—he was my instructor for ensemble a few times—and it was just an amazing experience. While I was there I studied with John Riley and Horace Arnold and these guys really exposed my weaknesses. Horace would play

piano while I played drums to teach me about comp'ing; John would always write out things he'd be transcribing for the DCI videos for guys like Weckl and Simon at the time. He showed me how powerful transcribing could be for my playing. He was like a drumming dictionary and could write out licks from Tony or Elvin or anyone I was checking out. Their work ethic towards the music really impressed me, and their playing of course, but I also learned about the "hang" and how important that was for musicians.

JM: You mentioned studying with Sal Larocca, which sounds like a wonderful experience, and then going to college for music and drums, but I have to ask; Any obstacles along the way? Aside from that nurse in the hospital, anyone ever say or imply, "Sorry kid, it's not going to happen."

RL: The only thing that happened was something at Patterson. I asked one of the head guys in charge of the jazz department, I can't remember his name, something like: "So, what do you think? Do I have what it takes to be a jazz drummer?"

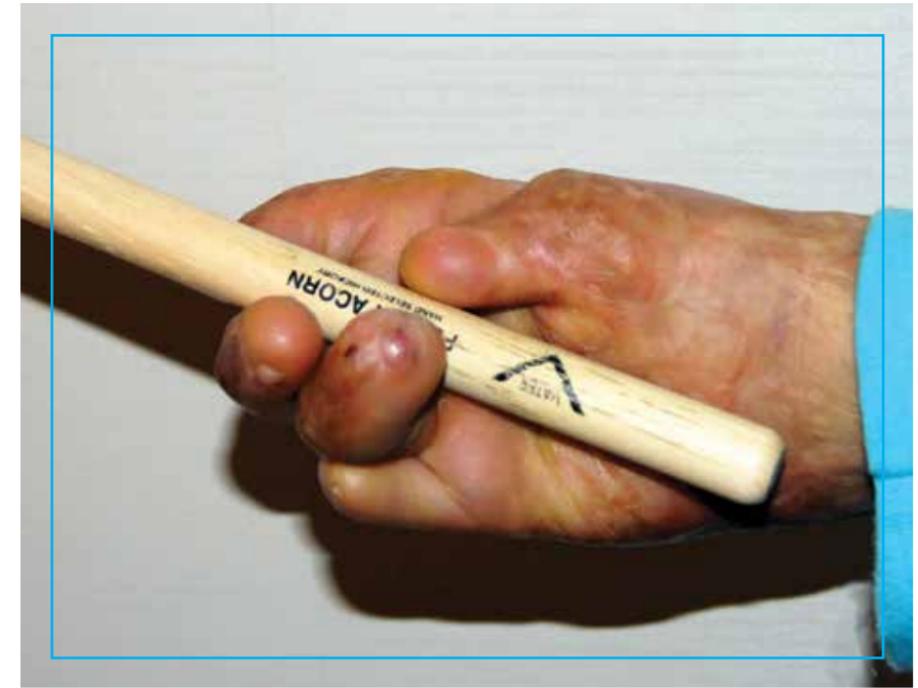
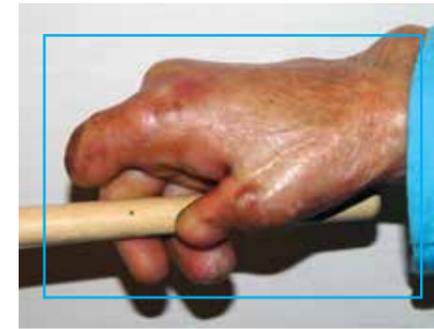
JM: And you're expecting to hear something encouraging...

RL: Yeah, "It's a hard road, but if you practice... you're going to have a shot." Instead, he said, "Well, there's a lot of young lions out there that are really hungry... You might get some cocktail gigs and stuff like that, but..." He shot me down.

After school, I went down to get my car, and I'm crying, "F*ck that guy. What the f*ck does he know? Nobody's going to tell me what my life is going to be like," and it just got me angry and made me want to dig even deeper.



**Where there's a will,
there's a way...
you'll find it eventually
as long as we don't give up.**



The human body is miraculous;

That's my forte: I'm stubborn and if I want to do something, nothing is going to get in my way. That was the fortitude I had in music and in life. That's what the accident gave me. The fire gave me a gift. "I didn't die, I'm alive. Alright, I can do anything I want. The worst is over." It was that feeling of: I escaped death and I can do this, I know I can.

BAND-IT

JM: Having seen and heard you play, truer words could not be spoken. You mentioned finding and wearing the glove in a way that enabled you to play, and yet, the few times I've seen you, you've not used a glove, but rather elastics as a way of holding the sticks and controlling the notes. When and how did that happen?

RL: Elastics! That sounds much cooler than rubber bands. [Laughs] I should mention Keith Crane at this point who I also studied with; I took lessons with Keith for a couple of years and learned so much from him. He really helped me with my time playing and grooving to a click. He was the one that said, "You seem like you really want to do this. You might want to think about getting an operation on your left hand to

hold a stick." He said that and I immediately thought, "Ahhh, no." I was just so done with hospitals. I felt like a guinea pig being prodded and poked...no more.

But, I thought about it and thought about it and eventually admitted to myself, "I am serious about this, and I do want to be able to hold this stick without a glove." It was a hard decision, but eventually I got the operation and I'm so glad I made that choice.

JM: What exactly was the operation?

RL: Basically, this [left] thumb was there, but it was kind of stuck into the palm with all the skin.

JM: Skin healed over and all stuck together.

RL: Exactly. So, they pulled this thumb out. I came home and I could hold the stick, but I tried playing and it kept slipping out of my hand, "This ain't gonna work." Then, I saw a rubber band and thought, "Wait a minute." I put the rubber band around the stick and then around the back of my hand; I let go of the stick and "prrrrrrrr," I got a buzz, and when I grab it again, it goes right back in and stops. From there, I fine-tuned it where I took wig glue and coated the

stick with it; because the stick would want to barrel roll and start slipping away—the glue would keep it from rolling around. It gave me a real firm grip to the point that I don't need the rubber band...or better yet elastics [laughs], if it's not a hard-hitting gig.

JM: And you can still use the stick in different ways...

RL: Yeah. I choke up on the stick at different points: for doing a rock gig, I choke up and I go back on the stick. But, I've found that place where the sweet spot is, where I can get a lot of power out of the stick and I can still get the buzz, and also play doubles comfortably. The human body is miraculous; it does its thing and it just adapts. These hands have been like this way longer than not; most of my life now. Nothing feels weird for me at all, this is completely normal, and so my technique and everything is really very natural for me and for what I do.

JM: Speaking of feeling, when I'm playing a double-stroke or a French roll, I can feel it in my fingers and in the bouncing off my palm, how many strokes are there. What are you feeling?

RL: I can feel all that too, but more

it does its thing and it just adapts.

in the web between my thumb and finger, where the stick sits. It's very accurate. There's a lot of feeling in these hands. Actually, there was an issue with this thumb, which was oversensitive—a nerve that I had to beat into submission over the years.

JM: Whatever it takes to play.

RL: Yeah, you do what you have to do. I wanted to drum so bad, that I didn't care. I didn't care if it hurt on every stroke; you're going to do something you want to do.

Speaking of doing what you want to do, I don't know if you've heard that Mike Stern had a bad fall tripping over some debris while hailing a cab and broke both arms.

JM: Oh yeah, I heard all about it.

RL: Well, months later, when he started playing again, he had a hard time holding the pick in his right hand, due to some nerve damage. I got a phone call from him late one night, "Hey Ray, I'm playing the Blue Note this week with Chick [Corea]. I got this glove that I Velcro a pick to but it's not working very well. I dropped my pick last night and it freaked me out. What's the stuff you use to help you hold onto your sticks?" So, I told him about the wig glue I use. The

next day he called me on the way to the Blue Note thanking me for turning him on to the glue. It really helped him out. I was thrilled that I could help out someone I've admired for so long and that he came to me for help. I saw Mike later on and he said, "Hey man, I mentioned you in an interview in *Downbeat* about the glue. Thanks, you saved my ass bro." Man, I was touched beyond words to say the least! But my point is—where there's a will, there's a way...you'll find it eventually as long as we don't give up.

JM: I've seen lots of different sticks out there on the market, in the way of bigger gripping areas or even multiple ridges to grip, have you tried any of those?

RL: No, I'm using the Vater Fusion Acorn, it's close to a 5A I think. They make really straight and consistent sticks. I'm really happy to be with them, so major shout-out to everyone there at Vater. Like I said, I can do matched, but traditional just always felt right. When I do jazz gigs, I don't use a rubber band because I'm switching from sticks to brushes and back and I have a little bit of glue so it's just sticky enough...if you try to pull that stick out, it's not that easy.

FOR LIFE

JM: You mentioned your drum studies before, rudiments and all, and of course, now you're playing professionally; I assume you're still practicing and learning.

RL: That'll be a lifelong process. I think anybody that wants to pursue the art of drumming knows you're never going to learn it all. Someone like Steve Smith, who's one of my heroes, in that he's the guy that he still practices like a kid in light of his already astonishing career as a drummer. There's nothing more inspiring than that!

JM: Every time you see him he's got some new trick up his sleeve.

RL: Yeah! He's always got his sticks in his hands, he's always better. I've had the honor of meeting Steve a few times; I kind of stalked him [laughs].

JM: How so?

RL: I saw him backstage at a drum festival; he was warming up, and, "Oh my God, I've got to meet Steve." So, I went into his dressing room, and he looked up with this look of, "Who the hell are you and why are you in my dressing room?" I think I said, "Oh! Mr. Smith, I just wanted

to say hi. You're one of my heroes. Have a good show" and that was it. Then I saw him again at some gig and he remembered, "Oh, you're that guy!" Then I saw him again and, "Oh, yeah. Hey, what's your name?" We slowly got to meet and know each other. The guy's just amazing because he's always practicing.

JM: There's no other way to get that good. Even Vinnie has sticks in his hands all the time.

RL: Exactly. I've always loved practicing. There were days where I would sit there for eight to 12 hours; I didn't want anything else in life. I didn't want a girlfriend. I didn't want to go out and hang. I just wanted to stay home, be alone in my room and do my homework on the drums; try to figure this and that out.

I started, really started studying when I was 16, 17, 18—I was really ramped up to study, and study hard, because I knew I wanted to go to college. Once I knew I wanted to do it, that's when I started to put in many hours; that's all I wanted.

For a good two or three years I did eight to 12 hours a day and it really paid off. I also knew I started late in the game and felt I needed to practice really hard to make up for lost time.

I think every drummer has a certain peak, where they go from one place to a really high level, within anywhere up to the three or four years, depending on how much time they put in. I mean, you can't say enough for experience.

JM: I agree and that goes for on and off the kit.

RL: Life experiences and all that stuff shape who you are as a drummer. I feel like that's coming into play now.

As I get older, those things season you and give you your sound. You become more of who you are in life from what you've learned, loved and lost. Or more accurately, lost and found [laughs]. All of that shapes who you are because it's you; the instrument is just the plumbing, if you will, of what's happening internally.

ONE TWENTY

JM: You've played with some great artists. Do you ever find yourself in the position of thinking or feeling that you have more to prove than the average drummer that could be on the same gig?

RL: Nobody's ever made me feel like: "Prove yourself to me," but I've always had it in the back of my head that I'm going to give 120% just in case. I can't afford to give just 100%, it has to be more than that. It's always been my mentality of going the extra mile.

I never wanted to be *that* guy: "Ah, he's not really cutting it." My standard was always: "I don't want to be the not-cutting-it guy." I want to be somebody who's always prepared, can read the charts, does his homework and is a nice guy. All those things are really important. As you know, it's not just being a drummer. I remember you saying something about the 22 hours with the band and two hours onstage.

JM: Yeah: The two hours a day onstage are easy, it's the other 22 hours in the day that can be the tough part.

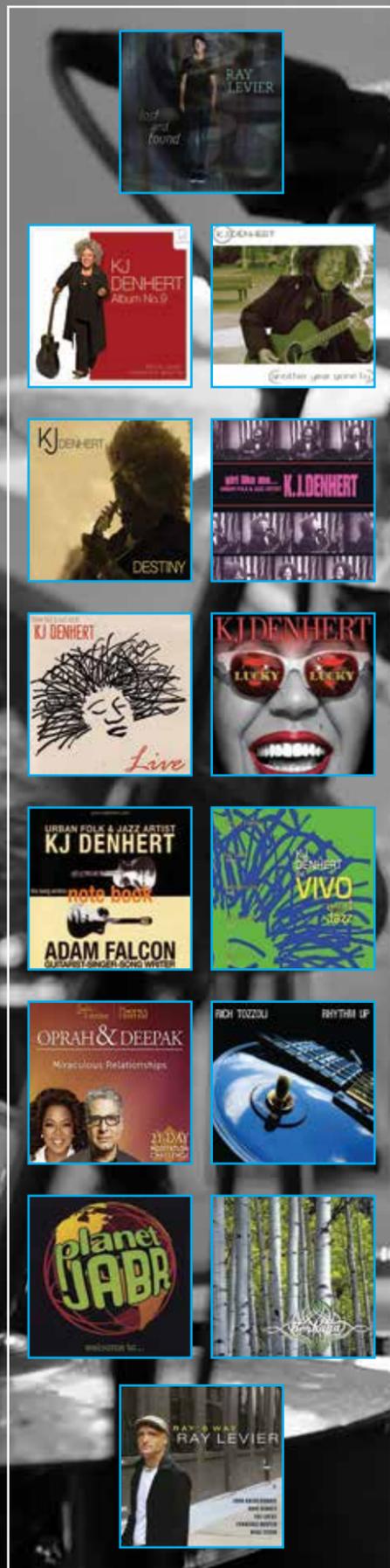
RL: Yeah. It's how you get along with people. And that's all throughout life. If you're a dick, nobody wants to work with you, whether you're a drummer or a CEO or whatever.

TAKE A SEAT

JM: The artist you're most affiliated with is KJ Denhart, which is quite longstanding. How did that come about?

RL: Oh man, I met KJ back in '95. I had just moved to Fort Lee, New Jersey, to be close to Manhattan—I had a dog, a car, and a drum kit that I had to carry around, so living in Manhattan didn't seem like a smart idea financially or geographically. I found this one-bedroom apartment close to the city and was just there practicing every day. I bought a 6' X 6' Whisper Room that I had in my apartment so I could practice without destroying the neighbor's ears.

Anyway, I met this guy, Freddie Pastore, a bass player that was in



TRACKS
01-02



My mentality was:
I can do this.

I just have to work really hard
and I'll get there eventually.

PHOTO: ANTHONY JOHNSON

this band with a singer-songwriter named Jen Levy. KJ was friends with Jen and was helping her out; Jen had some nice tunes, but needed some help and KJ was a little more seasoned as a performer.

So, I met KJ, and she really loved my playing and asked for my number. We started talking, and she told me that she had her own band but already had a drummer, but if she needed someone at some point, she'd let me know.

Out of curiosity, I went to one of her gigs. I saw this drummer, and he was good, but immediately I knew, "Oh, no. This is my gig." It was just, "I'm here and I'm feeling this, and this cat is not." And it wasn't an egotistical thing. I just really felt, "I want to play with this woman; she's amazing!" She had great tunes—a mix of funk meets jazz, meets a singer, songwriter, with pop sensibility; all the things I'd been working on stylistically at the time. Just a really nice sound, with a great voice and her guitar playing is really funky and natural and swinging and grooving.

JM: Sounds like a dream gig.

RL: It is.

JM: But, she had another drummer... what did you do?

RL: I ended up doing a couple gigs with her when her drummer couldn't do it. Then one day she just called, "You know, the drummer's not working out. Would you like to play in the band?" Twenty years later, here we are.

JM: I'm sure she caught a vibe and your interest from the first time you showed up.

RL: Once I went to see her play and I started listening to her music, I asked, "Do you have any CDs? Can I learn your music?" Then I went home and just did my homework—I learned her stuff. When the time came to play with her, I was prepared.

JM: Obviously you were the right fit.

RL: Yeah, I grew up musically with her. I really feel like she's a sister at this point.

JM: You tour quite a bit with her and go to some really interesting places.

RL: Yeah. We've been all over the world; Egypt, Nepal, Italy a whole bunch of times. We go to St. Barts every year—16 years we've been going there; playing at the Baz Bar, in Gustavia, right in the harbor.

JM: I can think of worse places to play [laughs]; sounds like an all-round ideal situation.

RL: It is. She's family. Actually me, her and [bassist] Mamadou Ba; we're the core unit and there's a synergy and a vibe and a friendship there that is... well, you heard the band—there's a "band sound."

I guess it's just something that develops naturally over many years of playing with the same people. There's a built-in energy that we have. The same energy that made Ringo great with the Beatles, and Charlie Watts great with the Stones. It's amazing to be in a band for so many years and to have the synergy, the friendship and the camaraderie—it's a good feeling!

SLACKING OFF

JM: Do you ever find that you're cut slack?

RL: Because of what happened?

JM: Yes, on and off the kit.

RL: I'm sure, sometimes, but that's none of my business or where my focus is at. Of course, everybody has a perception on most things, including what happened to me. Sometimes, I get pulled over [speeding] and maybe they let me go because, "Oh, look at this guy, obviously a lot of shit happened to him. He doesn't need a ticket; let him go." I use that to my advantage [laughs].

In terms of playing; like I said, it's perception on the other person's part. Maybe Mike [Stern] saw me and thought, "Wow! I feel something for this guy because of what happened to him," but at the end of the day, if you're not cutting the gig...nobody's going to sabotage their own sound to be with somebody that can't play. And again, that goes back to me giving it more than 100%—to make sure that I can keep that at a minimum.

JM: When it comes to doing clinics and master classes... I would imagine that it's not just about playing—but perseverance, facing adversity, overcoming obstacles...

RL: Correct, it's more about the big picture. Yeah, I've done clinics in the past and would really like to do more. I'd like to fall in with the right people to make those things happen more down the road, but I've been self-promoting my own clinics in music stores like Sam Ash and Guitar Center for now. It's a mix of playing, teaching and inspiring people through example. I get so much out of it; it really makes you focus on: what I'm going to play, what I'm going to say, and how I'm going to say it. You know, being very concise about what you're doing and what you are saying. It forces me to look inward about: what do I want to get across to people about this instrument. Drumming has really helped shape who I am as a person and has given me so much joy and happiness.

JM: I know exactly what you mean. For me, it's easy to play and do the Q & A, but what I find most difficult is trying to convey just how much I love drums and drumming. It's hard to express the amount of joy that I get from playing drums. It's such a big part of my life; music is my life.

I would imagine it must be the same for you, maybe even more so in that; yes, you survived the fire, so drums didn't save your life, but they became your life, in that they gave you something to live for.

RL: Yeah. Music is such a healing thing, and drumming not only gave me a will to live, but gave me a will to excel at something that I know I'm good at. This is what I really try to convey when I speak to people at clinics.

JM: And best of all, to make a living doing what you love.

RL: Absolutely! We're so lucky that way to be drummers. I just try to keep things simple and have gratitude for everything that comes my way. Or doesn't [laughs].

KJ Denhert



What do you remember about the first time meeting Ray; your impression of him as a player and person?

KJ: Ray always had an easy groove and a sense of humor. He made you feel comfortable about his injury and as a player, I found it pretty easy to stay with him.

When did you actually consider him for the permanent seat behind you?

KJ: We met working for another singer/songwriter Jen Levy. I had my own band and Dan Hickey was playing drums, I was thrilled until the band They Might Be Giants decided Dan was their man. Then, another great NY drummer, Swiss Chris, did a number of shows and recorded my second album with me. I remember inviting Ray to check out my band at the Bitter End, and he made some comment about my band being a bunch of studio musicians. I remember laughing in my head; I was always building bands based on one thing—songs I liked.

I think Ray started subbing at my residency at Groove in The Village, and I even played Arthurs for a while before Ray suggested The 55 Bar. These are some old New York gigs now, and even then, the beauty was that we got to play a lot and regularly. The 55 was the one that cemented Ray and me and Mamadou Ba, who was with me on bass since the beginning.

We played so much that we took on a kind of swing that is part me and part Ray, and the steady part driven by Mamadou Ba.

What does Ray bring to the table as a player (live and in the studio), band member and person in general.

KJ: Ray has literally been like a brother to me. With twenty years and tours, and sixteen years spending almost a month each year on tiny St. Barths, we became a family—a couple of times we had to room together. Ray is good natured and was quite the adventure seeker, especially in the early years.

How have the twenty years with him evolved, musically and personally.

KJ: In some ways, to stay musically bonded, we drifted in and out of personal closeness. We all used to have parties and see each other a little more often than now. As non-music things in our lives changed—marriages, relationships, homes, pets and vehicles—the personal rhythms of our lives changed, but the

commitment to the band was there and the history on stage shone strongest through the music.

We had some great times, especially in Italy playing in residence at Umbria Jazz eleven times between 2006 and 2014. When there are no charts—and there weren't—we were each adding to our own palettes individually and the songs grew organically within us individually and as a group. I tried to write music that featured the individual strengths.

Playing every day for ten days, twice a day, you can build something amazing; try that over a period of years and you can have something completely unique, and I think everybody realized that. I tried to make it the best experience possible having stopped being a side player after that gig that Ray and I met on.



On a more personal level it's about working hard on my dreams, whatever they may be. I look at drumming and life like a game I'm always trying to win at. Never a power trip where it's power over a situation or anything like that but more about power into everything we come up against in life and try to always learn something new, hopefully becoming a better person because of it. There's never been a doubt that I'm not doing the right thing with my career. I mean, there are doubts in terms of like, what's the next step, that type of thing, but they're all internal, personal things about getting to a better place as a musician and a person.

PRODUCTION

JM: Again, the big picture. Aside from drumming, you're also discovering other things in music.

RL: Yeah, I really enjoy the production side of things as well. It's important to me to expand my horizons beyond drumming.

JM: It always interests me to speak to drummers about production. When you say that you're producing, and you want to get into more production; what is your role as producer? Because it really is very different from person to person.

RL: Well, when I say production, it's not necessarily producing other bands; although I'm totally down for that... One of the things I realized was: I don't want just to be a drummer. I wanted to learn theory and harmony, and learn how to play other instruments like the vibes, marimba and piano. I can't play chords on the piano but through MIDI, I can write them all out as long as I have the understanding of theory. I use matched grip for the mallets and again using the wig glue on my left mallet for a better grip. I also created a Y mallet for the left hand that plays a third on the bars and the right can hold two mallets to play chords.

Producing for me is more geared toward television—writing and recording TV tracks and moving fast in my studio. Since working with Rich over the years I've learned to get a

good first take and move on quickly without ever sacrificing quality, of course. Writing TV cues is all about tracking fast and moving on without overthinking things. I think of it as on-the-spot composing, or what I like to refer to as a ROMA Jam [Right Out of My Ass]—playing with confidence as if I just came off a three-month tour.

JM: When you say for TV; mostly coming up with snippets and segments...

RL: Yeah, having a formula like ABAB, with some breaks and the stinger at the end. It's a lot of fun because we hand out these cues to the audio houses, so nobody's on our back saying, "I need this or that." We just do a little bit of everything; give them some hard rock, quirky jazz, ambient stuff, frontier music for an Alaskan show...we're doing new music all the time. It's all about volume, because it's pennies on the dollar. It's just a few seconds, so it's whatever they give you per second for music going on underneath a dialogue. It's taken a long time for my checks to even amount to anything, but it's a lot of fun because I get to stay home—I can track in my underwear if I want and nobody's telling me what to do. [Laughs] It's nice. Each day is different, so it's a lot of fun.

It's not like I'm the producer, standing there, telling the bass player what to do. Though I do that sometimes—I put in my two cents with KJ's band. When Rich and I work, it's a lot of 50/50 in terms of writing and just helping each other along.

I wouldn't mind doing more producing in terms of producing bands and artists—I'm learning more as I go along and still becoming a better musician. I'm really working on writing music, and I have to approach writing in the same way I approach drumming—put in the hours of practicing, listening and learning.

SKATING BY

JM: How about outside of music? I wouldn't be surprised if you told me you're into skydiving or skeet shooting.

RL: Well, funny you should ask.

[Laughs] Four years ago I started skateboarding; that's something that's become a passion of mine.

JM: What a coincidence that all three start with SK [laughs]. I loved skateboarding when I was a kid. I've got a bunch of friends in L.A. trying to get me into surfing. I'd really like to and I know I'd love it, but I have an extremely strong aversion to sharks.

RL: Yeah, that's the one thing about surfing—I don't want my feet dangling down there... I'd rather take a slam on concrete [laughs] than...

JM: Feel a nibble [laughs]. What got you into skateboarding?

RL: I was just in a store one day and found myself looking at a skateboard, "Why not? It looks like fun." I wanted a skateboard since I was kid, so I threw it in my trunk and just started skating in the parking lots. Then I started watching videos and man, next thing I know I'm obsessed with skating and learning all these tricks. I've got a friend who owns this massive warehouse on his property and inside he built a 12-foot-deep wooden bowl—it goes from 7 feet into a 12 foot. This guy's almost sixty years old and skates his ass off. I go there pretty much every Saturday for sessions with him and my friends and feel that skating has really helped my drumming.

JM: Really, how so?

RL: Because when you drop into a skate bowl, it's like the same thing as dropping in on beat one—you've got to commit every part of your fiber to what's happening right in the moment.

JM: "Dropping in," meaning you're on the edge of the bowl and about to take the plunge?

RL: Yeah, you just drop in and you're go from 0 to [swoosh] flying along, and if you let your concentration lapse, there are consequences. You have to be really confident while staying right in the moment. It's very similar to music and drumming in that way. It's definitely a confidence builder. I try to find things outside of drumming and music that enhance



I have to approach writing in the same way I approach drumming—put in the hours of practicing, listening and learning.

the whole picture. Skating does that for me.

I also started riding horses not too long ago, and that's the same thing—you really have to be right there and you have to be really sensitive to what's happening. This horse can feel a fly land on its leg, so it knows if you look to the left or if you look to the right, it feels your weight. It's a very hypersensitive animal, so you have to be right on point, the focus has to be there. You're riding this thing like a motorcycle, but it's a living, breathing creature, and you're giving it input. There are cool similarities with music and animals.

STILL JAZZED

JM: Let's get back to the new record. Are you going to be promoting it

with some gigs and maybe a tour... what's on the agenda?

RL: Well, I'm not sure how much I want to support this record doing live gigs, but we'll see. I just hope people dig the record that do listen to it. I'm working with a company called Cyber PR to get all the social media aspects together and doing as much as I can with distribution online. Of course, I would welcome anyone who wants to know what's happening—they can sign up for my newsletter to stay informed.

JM: Will it be a tangible CD or the digital route of downloading?

RL: It's going to be mostly download. It doesn't really make sense to have physical CDs, people are just going to use them as coasters anyway [laughs]. I'll probably press a few

though; it's good to have CDs for people who do want something more tangible.

JM: You mentioned the new record was rock, is it a new direction that's going to replace playing jazz?

RL: Not at all. It's a side project. I'm already writing and planning my next jazz project for late 2018 or early 2019—more of a jazz, funk, fusion thing and maybe vocals on a couple tracks too, we'll see. There's that world and then there's this world, and I like to juggle both.

I feel really blessed to do what I do as a musician, and make all different kinds of music for different circumstances. There's a lot of joy that we get out of what we do that lots of people just never get to experience. As you know, you've

Drumming not only gave me a will to live,



but gave me a will to excel at something that I know I'm good at.

traveled the world and you've played in front of thousands of people.

JM: There's nothing like it.

RL: Where else can you go to work and every few minutes, people stand up and clap and cheer: "Great Job!" [Laughs]

JM: It's all part of the big picture.

RL: It really is. Producing, recording,

touring with KJ, writing, practicing and getting to the next level as a drummer, and as a human being.

Each year, as you get older, things take on different meanings. Things in your life now mean something entirely different than they did in your twenties.

JM: That's the beauty of it. It's not always pleasant, but I do look forward

to those enlightening moments that force things to change, or derail you and put you on a whole new path.

RL: Exactly. That's the concept of lost and found. It's when you get derailed, or lost, or hurt; that's always when the light comes in.

JM: To quote Leonard Cohen: "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." I couldn't agree more, but I'm pretty sure you had that from the beginning. There are most, that had they gone through what you went through, would not have persevered: "Oh, pity me."

RL: I've never been that person. Honestly, on the contrary, that shit pisses me off. If anybody ever comes to me with that, I'm like, "Don't do that to me man! I don't want that. That's your shit. That's not my baggage, that's what you're dealing with."

I had to learn that at a very young age; people looking at me with aversion or whatever—it's not my stuff, it's their stuff. My parents have been really great in that way: You have to be okay with yourself, you have to know where you're coming from, and you have to be your true north. You have to know, that things happen to you, and you have an inner compass that's there for you.

JM: You have to navigate to where you want to go.

RL: Yeah, for lack of a better word.

As a 12-year-old, I was forced to look and got to see some pretty deep concepts that maybe made me grow up faster than I needed to or wanted to, but I don't have any regrets. I really don't. Regardless of what's happened, I feel blessed. As they say: The joy is in the journey, and I'm having a good time.

If I could do it all over again, would I choose to be burned? Probably not, I don't know. Maybe I wouldn't have all the insights or gratitude I now have about life. But, being that is what happened and here I am—I'm living my dreams. I really am. I'm blessed. How many people can say that? *

WEBFOOT

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