

STUDIO SOUNDS

by Patrick Berkery

EJ DeCorte



SELECT YOUR DRUMMER



SELECT YOUR KIT



SELECT YOUR MICS



Say there's a specific drum sound you're going for in the studio. It could be something that's already on record, like the pristine thud of Mick Fleetwood's tubs on *Rumours*. Or maybe it's a sound you hear in your head—a fusion of a Steve Jordan-style high-pitched snare, a room-shaking kick like John Bonham's, a range of pitch-perfect toms a la Neil Peart, and some big, washy cymbals like Brian Blade's.

To achieve your desired sound, whatever it may be, you research the makes and models of the drums and cymbals used by the players involved, the microphones and mixing consoles employed on the recordings, the types of rooms the drums were tracked in, how the drums were tuned, and what kind of muffling was used on the snare. You try recording with exactly the gear you researched, or as close as you can get. Then you listen to the playback—and it sounds nothing like the drum sound you were after. The engineer fiddles with mic placement, you try retuning, the producer suggests a little more compression, you hit the record button again, and... it's still not making it.

In your quest to get this magical drum sound, you might have overlooked one very

important variable that has nothing to do with the nuts and bolts of gear or tech stuff. The problem might lie with *you*.

"Any engineer who really knows what they're doing will tell you that the most important thing in the signal path is the player," says the versatile session drummer Steven Nistor. "After that it's kind of a tie between the instrument and the room it's being played in."

Yes, how you play the drums in the studio is pretty much square one when it comes to getting a good sound—on any kit, for any style of music, in any type of studio setting. If you're trying to beat the sound into the drum rather than letting the drum do its job and speak naturally, you risk choking and compromising the natural tone. If you're attacking the cymbals like you would at a high-intensity live show, they're probably going to bleed into every mic on the kit and impact every effect on those mics. That's going to make for a hot mess of high-end frequency.

Of course, the kind of drums and cymbals you use on a particular session does matter. You wouldn't want to use an old Ludwig Club Date kit on a metal session, nor would you show up to play on a delicate singer-songwriter's record with a piccolo snare

that's tuned to sound like a gunshot. But what you—or the artist, the producer, or the engineer—perceive to be the right gear for the job is just part of the equation involved in getting a good drum sound in the studio.

To help break down that equation, *MD* spoke with three session aces of varying pedigrees: Nistor, a jazz-trained drummer who has recorded with Danger Mouse, noted engineer Steve Albini, famed producer Daniel Lanois, and many others; Jay Bellerose, whose unique rhythmic rumble—built around a fondness for vintage Slingerland Rolling Bomber kits and a penchant for using maracas and shakers to occupy the role hi-hats usually would—has graced many a T Bone Burnett production; and Steven Wolf, an in-demand pop-rock and R&B drummer, producer, and programmer who often tweaks and embellishes his kit work with programmed parts and samples.

While the gigs and gear might differ for these three players, all of them know what goes into achieving the proper sonics for the job at hand. It takes having the right tools—not necessarily the fanciest or most expensive ones—and the right touch. It takes knowing your role and keeping your ears, eyes, and mind open.

STEVEN WOLF Alicia Keys, Katy Perry

MD: Do you get specific requests from artists and producers in terms of what gear they'd like you to use?

Steven: Some artists and producers are really anal about that, and some really don't care. Alicia Keys is a vintage-gear nut. She has her own studio, and she's constantly picking up vintage kits and snares and cymbals. But most artists I work with aren't that informed about drum sounds. Maybe the producer is hiring me because they saw my name on a certain record and they want that sound. I'll have to explain that on a lot of records now, the mix engineers use SoundReplacer. The kick and snare you're hearing aren't necessarily just my kick and snare. There are samples that certain engineers use on everything.

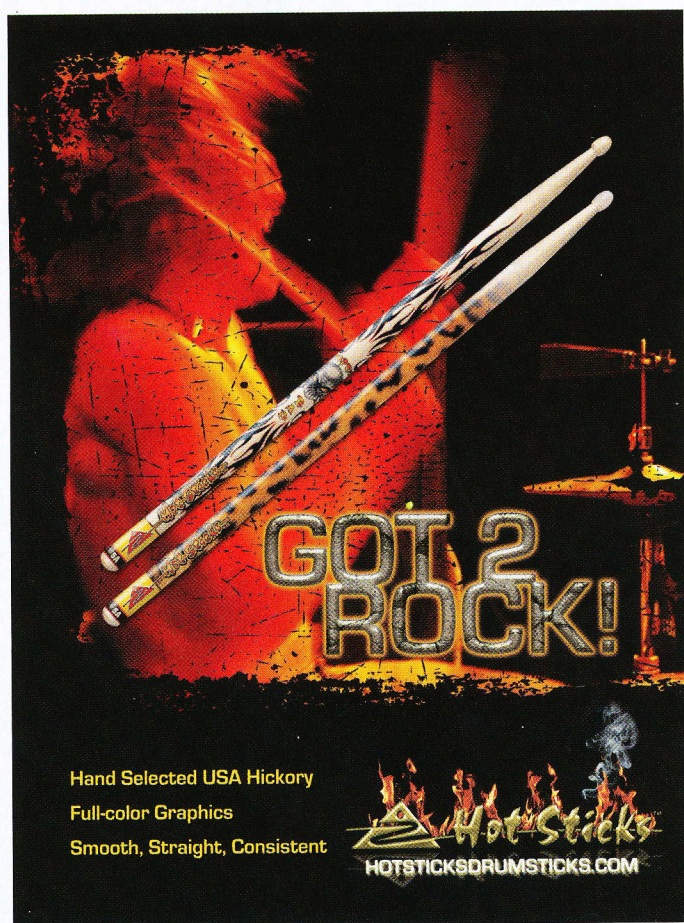
MD: Do you think it's important for a drummer to be well versed in all of those sampling options, like SoundReplacer, along with all the outboard gear that can enhance drum sounds?

Steven: Not necessarily. You're getting hired as a drummer, not a drummer-slash-engineer. I honestly never paid attention to that side of things until I started producing myself.

MD: What about the tech stuff pertaining to the drums in the room, like mics and mic placement?

Steven: It definitely can't hurt. But that's one area where I just let the engineers do what they want. I would say that on your list of what you should be familiar with, mic choices and placement should be below knowing what drums to use and how to get a good sound out of them. Generally, unless it's your own studio, you're not going to have to know that stuff.

MD: You work in a world where your drums are often comped and moved, or sampled. Is it important for a drummer playing on those



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CHRIS PENNIE The Sound, Or A Sound?



Coheed And Cambria's drummer is famously studious and hands-on when it comes to arriving at studio sounds. So, just what is Pennie thinking about when he's faced with today's infinite number of sonic choices?

How important is it to develop your own sound as opposed to exploring different possibilities for different recordings?

I think exploring different possibilities will lead you to your sound. Before capturing your playing, you do a lot of exploring and developing your playing style. You have to have a starting point, and that comes with experimenting.

I think the most important thing to remember when you're recording is that ultimately you have to commit to a sound. You could spend forever going over every possible option and wind up nowhere. It's important to have a rough outline to follow and stick to it.

Do you have certain go-to gear and tuning approaches in the studio, or is every new recording a matter of starting from scratch?

I definitely have particular gear and studios that I have gone to for sessions in the past: certain mics, kick drums, snares, compressors, rooms, recording medium—Pro Tools or tape!—consoles, etc. All these choices give me familiarity and a great starting point, because I know they've worked for me before in many different situations.

As I learn more, though, I'm more open to experimenting. I like to try different kits, different snares, cymbals, drum rooms, mics, mic techniques, outboard gear, tunings, head combinations, stick sizes, different tips on the sticks...the list goes on. It's been interesting to check out different gear and see what it sounds like compared to what I'm used to using.

I've really been into how things sound and the infinite ways you can go about capturing them. From experience I know exactly what drums, cymbals, etc., I need to use on particular tracks, and I usually do those tracks first. On the second batch of songs that require some experimenting, I'll keep the basic configuration of the kit that I had with the first batch, but I'll slowly replace and interchange components—for instance, I'll use smaller snares, swap out coated for clear heads, try different-size toms and thinner cymbals—until I feel the vibe is where I want it and it's complementing the song.

It's also very important for me to never compromise my facility around the kit. I always need to feel comfortable and confident while tracking.



For more with Chris Pennie, go to moderndrummer.com.

types of sessions to hit with consistency—same volume, same spot on the drum every time?

Steven: Yeah, consistency is definitely important for anything that's in the pop-rock realm. As someone who's spent plenty of time editing drum takes in front of Pro Tools, it's nice to just have a consistent backbeat and not have every snare hit sound different. If you're making a comp from different takes and you find this great fill, you want it at a volume and dynamic consistent with the rest of the track.

MD: When you're getting your sound together on a session, what are you listening for to make sure it's working with the rest of the ensemble?

Steven: Generally I'll just go for a good sound in the room. Sometimes I'll tune the drums to the key of the song—there aren't that many notes you can do. Usually I'll go for a root or a fifth—something that's going to sit well with everything else, especially if it's a really ringy snare or something where the toms are the main part of the groove. I'll tune them so you don't have a ring that's a constant harmonic clashing with everything else in the track.

STEVEN NISTOR Daniel Lanois, Garth Barkley

MD: Your credits run the gamut from things that are kind of roomy and sparse to records that are more produced. What drums do you use to cover such a broad range of styles?

Steven: DW just made me an amazing Jazz series kit. I tune it like a Gretsch kit—wide open, coated heads top and bottom, ringing for days. I also have a '50s Gretsch kit that I tune way low. Those are the two kits I'll bring with me, and it's basically all covered. For snare drums I have two Ludwigs, both from the '60s—a Supra-Phonic and a 5"-deep Acrolite. You can't go wrong with those. It's like a P-Bass for drums. I'll have the Acrolite tuned medium and slightly open. I'll have the Supra-Phonic way dead, with a towel or wadded-up tape on it, just mush. DW also made me a 5¹/₂x15 Super Solid. It's like a shotgun. It can do anything. That's really my go-to. Between that and the two Ludwigs, I've got it covered. You really *can* get what a producer or artist wants with two snare drums.

MD: What cymbals do you suggest for covering a wide palette?

Steven: Even if I didn't endorse them, I would say Istanbul Agop. They make such an incredible variety of cymbals. I've been into really small cymbals lately. I'm using more 16" and 18" cymbals, and they make you work for it. In the studio with small cymbals you have to know what you're going for and what you're dealing with. If it's a heavy rock song and you're using 16" crashes, you just hit them hard. If you're doing something that's a little more sensitive, like a T Bone Burnett kind of vibe, and you're riding on a 16" crash, you have to have your touch together. And you have to think: If there's a compressor hitting it, how hard is it hitting it? You have to know when that cymbal is just going to be like *whoooooosh* in the final mix.

I've definitely learned that the softer you hit cymbals, the

more work you'll get in the long run. And the quieter you play the cymbals, the bigger the drums sound. That's kind of the secret. Having that balance between hitting the cymbal softly and getting a good, solid tone out of the drums will get you work, and people will say, "Wow, you sound really good." Actually, "That kit sounds really good" is usually what they'll say. [laughs]




MD: Are there specific elements of a performer's style that affect the gear and tuning choices you make?

Steven: I'm tempted to say no. I would like to say that it's all about trying to find what's right for the song, and you read a lot about that, but I don't think it's true in an obvious way. What happens is that I'm either at Lanois' place or somewhere else, and I've got a snare sitting up there just because it was the first one that came out of the bag or whatever and we just start jamming. Ninety percent of the time, that's what ends up going to tape. To me it's more about the actual feeling in the room.

Now, there are producers who are very demanding or specific about what kind of sound they want. When I'm in those situations, those decisions have already been made for me. And so it doesn't matter how the guitar affects me emotionally. Whether you agree with it or not, they have the idea of the final picture in their head. At that point I put it in their hands and say, "How about this snare? How about this one?" I'm just as happy to do that too.

MD: Listening to the records you've played on, particularly the stuff with Daniel Lanois, it sounds as though having just

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the right touch on the kit is something you strive for.

Steven: It definitely comes down to touch. If you're hitting the cymbal as loud as you're hitting the snare drum, it's going to sound awful. And the nice thing about touch is that anywhere you go, any kit you sit down behind, it goes with you. You don't have to check it as baggage. It's what you have, and, in the end, it's what you'll be hired for as a professional. All the good guys have it. It's more out of a jazz tradition. But now more rock and pop guys know that, because you see a guy like Matt Chamberlain or Jay Bellerose—those guys know how to hit a drum.

JAY BELLEROSE T Bone Burnett, Plant/Krauss

MD: Typically on a recording session the kit sound is built around the kick, snare, and hi-hat. But your sound often seems as though it's built around the kick and everything else—hand percussion and towels over drums are an integral part of your sound.

Jay: Yeah, that's another way to darken the sound. I'm working with people who let me do that. I love really murky, dark, warm-sounding drums. And an important thing is trusting and knowing the engineer. I'm working with great engineers. Ryan Freeland, who works with Joe Henry, and T Bone's engineer, Mike Piersante—those guys really have my back. I can go as far as I want to go. And if I go too far, they'll tell me if it's not translating. There's a great communication going on with

those guys. That's a huge part of my sound.

MD: Using the Rolling Bomber drums with calfskin heads in the studio, do you have to play them with more sensitivity than you would a newer kit with regular coated heads?

Jay: I have the same kind of touch on all drums. I don't play that hard. Calf heads can be a little more delicate. Maybe I have the tendency to play a little lighter on calf heads. With these drums, the quieter you play them, the better and the bigger they sound. That's another thing that working in the studio with T Bone reinforced for me. He really loves when you play soft. On the Robert Plant/Alison Krauss record [*Raising Sand*] I was playing really light. They encouraged it.

When I would go into the control room to listen back, they'd turn the drums up. Instead of hitting hard and the notes getting more compressed and smaller, it was the opposite. You'd hit softer, and they'd turn the gain up. It'd sound like a million bucks. You really get the true tone and roundness of the instrument. It's all touch with those beautiful old instruments. Violins, mandolins—when you let the mic do the work, that's when the sound is really gonna happen.

MD: Beyond sticks, what do you use to draw such funky sounds out of the drums?

Jay: I use my hands a lot, and I try to do as much as I can in the initial pass with tambourines and shakers. Sometimes I'll play with a stick or tambourine in one hand and I'll use my fingers on a drum with the other hand. I do a lot of that kind of stuff. As far as sticks and brushes go, it just depends on what I'm

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hearing and what's going to support and translate in the track. That could be anything. It could be knitting needles—whatever is going to help pull out the right tone and sit in the track the right way.

MD: What would you suggest to a drummer who wants to capture your sonic essence in the studio?

Jay: I would say there's more to it than just me and my gear. I have a lot of help. I have the right musicians around me, and I'm reacting to that. And I have the right engineers. It's like, "How do we get the Motown sound?" You don't anymore. It doesn't exist. The room is gone, the players are gone, that time is gone. You get it when you listen to it on records. Now, I could give someone a list of what I'm using. But the beauty of it is, if they tried to use all that, it would come out a different way. I'm a piece of the puzzle. There are a lot of other characters involved.

Our Contributors



STEVEN WOLF

Select discography: Alicia Keys, *The Element Of Freedom*; Avril Lavigne, *The Best Damn Thing*; Katy Perry, *One Of The Boys*; Leona Lewis, *Spirit*; Daniel Merriweather, *Love & War*

Sound advice: "If you know what you're doing tuning-wise, you can cover pretty much anything they're going to ask for with two snare drums. A good 6 1/2 x 14 Supra-Phonic and a piccolo should do it."



JAY BELLEROSE

Select discography: Joe Henry, *Tiny Voices*; T Bone Burnett, *The True False Identity*; Robert Plant & Alison Krauss, *Raising Sand*; Allen Toussaint, *The Bright Mississippi*; Ray LaMontagne, *God Willin' & The Creek Don't Rise*

Sound advice: "The hi-hat is no longer a staple in the drumset for me. It's more a color or a special effect. That's one thing I highly encourage people to explore. It actually is a beautiful instrument when it's used that way."



STEVEN NISTOR

Select discography: Danger Mouse/Sparklehorse, *Dark Night Of The Soul*; Daniel Lanois, *Here Is What Is*; Gnarl Barkley, *The Odd Couple*; Martina Topley Bird, *The Blue God*; Sparks, *The Seduction Of Ingmar Bergman*

Sound advice: "For a drummer in a band, it's very important to make sure you're happy with the sound. For studio drummers, I say this lovingly, but it's almost none of your business. As a professional, you have to know your place."



CHRIS PENNIE

Select discography: Dillinger Escape Plan, *Dillinger Escape Plan*, *Calculating Infinity*, *Miss Machine*; Coheed And Cambria, *Year Of The Black Rainbow*; Return To Earth, *Automata*

Sound advice: "A computer that's powerful enough to run a DAW like Cubase or Pro Tools, plus a couple of mics, is all you need to get into the game. You'll start to realize right away that even with the minimal amount of gear you have, there are infinite ways to capture your performance."

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