



Linda Kay Lund

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JOSE MEDELES

Whether pounding out rock grooves with **the Breeders**, staging solo mega-percussion performances, or running his unique one-room drum shop, the busy all-rounder is always working, and always learning.

by Patrick Berkery

Jose Medeles knows that parting can be such sweet sorrow, whether it's leaving the family behind to go on the road or letting go of cherished vintage gear. When Medeles and fellow drummer Scott McPherson (Beck, She & Him) opened Revival Drum Shop in Portland, Oregon, last year, they loaded the store with many of the vintage and exotic drums, cymbals, and percussion curios Medeles had accumulated during trips around the globe with the Breeders, Donavon Frankenreiter, and others. Jose knew entering the retail game meant having to part with prized possessions. But it didn't make the process easier.

"It's extremely difficult to unload my own stuff," Medeles says with a laugh. "A customer once asked me if there was anything I really liked. I had picked up a beautiful ride cymbal in Israel—an old 22" A from the '50s. So I took out that ride and put it on a kit for him. It sounded great, and he said, 'Okay, I'll take this.' I paused and said, 'Do you mind if I play it one more time before you take it?'"

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Medeles uses a Leedy 14x28 bass drum from the 1930s, a Slingerland 7x14 Radio King snare drum from the '40s, a Ludwig 12x15 marching drum from the '40s that has been converted to a floor tom, a 22" Zildjian A cymbal from the '50s, a 22" Istanbul Agop ride, and 15" Zildjian A hi-hats from the '50s.

But don't cry for Jose. He still has plenty of his funky finds. Some of them adorn Revival's walls, like a spinning chime from São Paulo. Others can be found on the ragtag kit—in all its dented-cymbal, coiled-spring-as-percussion glory—that plays a starring role in the 2008 documentary *Meaning And Rhetoric*, which chronicles Medeles's preparations for a solo performance.

The drummer's treasures also feature prominently on three percussion-only solo albums comprising pieces that range from meditative atmospherics built around vibes and incidental white noise to serious-as-a-heart-attack drum-set solos. Medeles prefers not to categorize his solo work, but he'll do so if asked nicely. "If I had to call it anything," he reflects, "I'd say experimental—but just for the sake of having to. To me, it's soundscapes... I keep that idea in my head."

While some of these drum pieces feature jarring transitions and others are fairly static, upon listening it's difficult to

get a handle on how much of the music is improvised and how much is composed. "When I'm putting these pieces together," Medeles explains, "I have an outline.

Then I'll improvise part of it when it feels correct. I'll hold my breath and see what happens. It's just feel. It's more of a sub-conscious thing."

Jose says he takes a similar approach to his solo gigs, during which he performs on a modified kit. "Each performance is a little different," he says. "During a recent show, I focused on micro-sounds—really quiet triggered and amplified sound sources. It's always evolving. I'm challenging myself to come up with something different. It's nice to try something and see what sticks—especially in the heat of battle."

Medeles has studied and played with Stephen Hodges, who's known for his funky, creaky-sounding percussive accompaniment with Tom Waits. Jose readily admits being influenced by Hodges' kitchen-sink approach. "I'm a huge Tom Waits and Stephen Hodges fan," he says. "I played in a drum troupe of his called Stephen Hodges Big Drum. That was really something."

And even though Medeles's solo work is more likely to be labeled art than rock, the drummer is equally at home supporting more rootsy music, as he does with the Adolescents' Steve Soto. Medeles played on the singer/guitarist's solo record and toured with him, supporting the L.A. punk legends X. "Steve's stuff is very Americana, different from where I'm coming from," Jose says. "And every night I was surrounded by guys like James Achor, an amazing guitar player, and Veikko Lepisto, the stunning upright bass player, who were both with Royal Crown Revue. I'm making music with all these great people, and I'm learning all the time."

Singer-songwriter Donavon Frankenreiter provided yet another unique experience for the drummer. "I wasn't familiar with his music at first," Medeles says. "But I listened to his first album and found it really cool. I hadn't done anything like that before in a live situation, that kind of laid-back Curtis Mayfield thing. I ended up touring with him for two years."

Given Medeles's drumming schedule, you might wonder who's minding the store when he's out of town. "We hired Neal Morgan, who plays with Joanna Newsom, to cover when Scott and I are out," Jose says. "Joe Plummer from Modest Mouse even offered to help out. Plus Scott picks it up when I get tired, and vice versa—because it is a lot of work; it's not just hanging out all day, playing drums and listening to rad music. And, knock on wood, we're open seven days a week, and we haven't been closed one day since we opened. I'm proud of that."

