THE DRUMMER'S JOURNAL

AN INDEPENDENT DRUM MAGAZINE

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MASTHEAD

Issue Eleven, Winter 2015/16

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THE ELEVENTH HOUR

Volume Three, *Issue Eleven*

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The other day I found a heavily scratched CD-R that had fallen down the back of a radiator. It must have been down there for about 10 years and was covered with a layer of dust that was about as thick as the CD itself.

Wary that it likely contained a bunch of Trojans disguised as low bit rate Foo Fighters mp3s, I dropped it into the CD tray of an old computer with a feeling registering somewhere between mild interest and dread. After what sounded like the implosion of the optical drive, the CD revealed itself to be a recording of a band practice from about 2004. At the time, I remember it sounding great. Now, it was more like what would happen if you sourced all your audio equipment from Happy Meals.

Perhaps it's inevitable that in another 11 years I'll look back on these issues of The Drummer's Journal and feel acutely embarrassed, though I hope not. For reasons I won't bore you with, this one came down to the wire more so than any other. It's also the issue that's worried me the most, largely because it's the first time we've ever run a feature that's directly critical of an industry that supports the magazine's very existence. See page 65 for that one.

Thankfully, all our other features - notably Kiran Gandhi, Steve Smith and Tomas Haake - reminded me that if there is a problem, you should always do whatever you can to try and address it. Now, does anyone know how to get a stuck CD out of an ancient Dell Inspiron?

Welcome to Issue Eleven of The Drummer's Journal.

Enjoy, Tom

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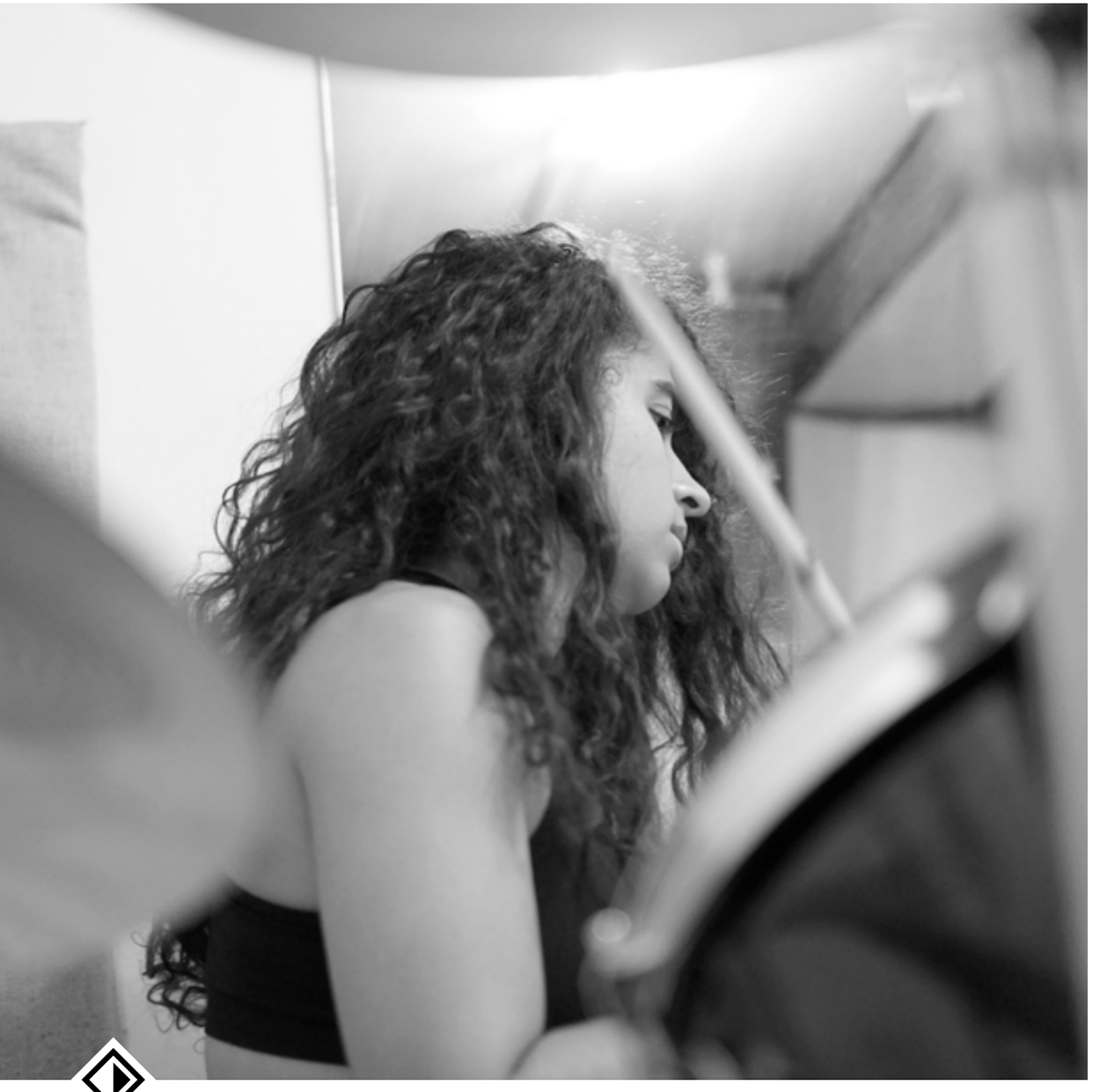
DISTINCTIONS

M.I.A's Kiran Gandhi

Words & photography by Tom Hoare



My 100m swimming badge has a cartoon dolphin on it along with the words "I made a splash." My six-year-old self almost drowned earning this futile accolade. Some bizarre cultural anomaly then dictated this badge was to be sewn onto my swimming trunks as a constant reminder of my aquatic inability.

I hated swimming. But some people were just good at it. They earned so many badges that their parents had to start sewing them to their towel because there was no longer any room left on their swimsuit. I'd hesitate to brand people who were able to master what is, essentially, a basic life skill, as overachievers. But they were overachievers. And there's nothing wrong with that.

Kiran Gandhi became a drummer thanks to a swimming aversion at summer camp, opting to hide out in the music room instead. Twenty years later, she's graduated from Harvard Business School, worked as a data analyst for Interscope Records and toured as a drummer with M.I.A. We asked her some questions about the music industry. And achievement.

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The Drummer's Journal: You were initially a Maths major. Are there any practical instances of being able to use maths in relation to the drum kit?
Kiran Gandhi: Sure. I actually did a project which looked at the mathematical reasoning behind why it's best to play a drum at its centre. Want me to talk about that?

Sure. If you explain it like you're explaining it to a four-year-old I should be able to keep up…
When you give energy to a drum by striking it, that energy is dissipated in concentric circles. Because the plane – the skin of the drum in this case – is bounded on its outside, the waves bounce back. If you hit a drum off centre, those waves come back at different times and they clash. There is a spot on every drum that, when hit, will resonate perfectly. It sounds simple in this sense, but to explain why this happens just using advanced math was pretty difficult.

You're in a unique position because you've worked within the music industries from a lot of different perspectives. Would you say your experiences have been mostly positive?
My experiences with music have been 99% positive. The reason for that is because I've been working with friends or friends of friends. That's how I've gotten a lot of work. I think music won't treat you well if you're latching onto the success of others.

Do you think the major record labels have been demonised unfairly?
This is how I see them: back in the day when

recorded music made so much money, they did take advantage of artists because they knew that no one had the capacity to replace them. But they self-sabotaged themselves by not reorganising their business models to fit with today's climate. Their PR, marketing and digital strategy is still orientated to support the buying and selling of recorded music. They're not thinking about other sources of revenue as aggressively as someone like Universal should be doing. For this reason, the very thing that made people characterise them as evil has come back to haunt them.

Going forward, what do you think needs to change?
What I like about today's industry is that every artist can find a home for their work. As a musician, sometimes all you want is just for people to listen to your stuff. Back in the day, this wasn't really possible without going down the record label route. Today, I can go on SoundCloud, hashtag a bunch of stuff and people will find it. Business entities that arise to support the arts need to hack this trend. Technology enables matching artists to fans. That's a huge deal and shouldn't be easily dismissed.

Will streaming be a long term way for people to access music?
People hate it when I say this but, as an artist, I'd never focus on making my main source of revenue from recorded music. Recorded music is now just content which is delivered to fans so people can reap money from them in other ways. That sounds kind of gross, but it needn't be. If you're putting out nice things that people can connect

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"All that is messaged to young girls is 'be beautiful, if you aren't then you're not valuable to society.' The music industry is a profound way of reinforcing this. Alternatively, it's also one way we can break it down."

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with, people will follow you and want more. That might be a live experience, a t-shirt, anything. We're in an attention economy, so when you've gained some followers - people who are actively excited about your stuff and energised about what you're putting out - that's when the money starts to come in. And much of it will come from brands. So a company might think, "Kiran has a following of all these female millennials and that's our target demographic, so let's send her our products for her to use."

Isn't that just product placement?
Again, people also get angry when I say this, but I don't think someone trying to eat off making music is corrupt. Let me give you an example. Apple hit me up; they gave me a watch and said all I have to do is wear it. Of course, I'm more than happy to. If you're making music today, there's a decent chance you own something made by Apple.

What about if you were approached by a company whose product was something that you wouldn't use?
I'd say no. You said earlier that the relationship between music and commerce is hazier than it was 20 years ago. I'd say it's the opposite; it's clearer today than it's ever been. People understand that lots of major pop songs are written by people whose job is just to write pop songs that will sell hundreds of thousands of copies. You're either doing something which involves money or you're an artist in the strictest sense and doing something purely for self-expression.

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"In terms of gender equality, we're in a dangerous place right now because, on paper, everything seems totally fine."

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To what extent is music still a relevant part of political protest?
It's hugely important. Music has the power to reinforce important ideals in people. For young women, hearing phrases in music like, "I own my own body" or, "the future is female" can be really influential. Politically, people generally don't see music as a threat. It gets dismissed as "the arts" or "what the kids are doing." Because it's innocuous it's even more of a challenge to outmoded ways of thinking. It's subtle. And when coupled with visual arts it can be an immensely powerful way to make people question norms.

MIA has a song called Born Free and the video involves swat teams assassinating young, white men with red hair. The fucked up thing is that if it was Afghani men being assassinated, people would almost see it as normal, because conflict in the Middle East is something we see on the news all the time. The whole reason I'm in the music industry is because of its ability to impact people. My feminism, a desire to make young women feel confident instead of constantly apologising, to feel conformable with their own sexuality instead of feeling awkward about it, to feel like they can have a voice in school; music is one way these things can be achieved.

Where would you say we're at with gender equality in the music industry?
In terms of gender equality, we're in a dangerous place right now because, on paper, everything seems totally fine. "Women can vote, they can work so what's the problem?" For that reason, all the subtle things associated with sexism become

harder to describe, which then makes them harder to attack. If you can't name what sexism looks like then you can't dismantle it. The treatment of Hillary Clinton in the presidential debates is a good example. She still gets asked about her clothing and what it's like to be a woman in politics instead of how she'd impact foreign policy. None of the men get asked about what they're wearing. Those sort of questions remove the ability for her to showcase her intellect.

The point is that we're so used to seeing women all dolled up and sexualised. All that is messaged to young girls is, "be beautiful all the time, be consumable all the time, and if you're not those things you're not valuable to society." And the music industry is one very profound way of reinforcing that attitude. Alternatively, it's also one way we can break it down. If we continue putting out videos where women are sexual objects, they should, at least, be countered by women who are doing dope, cool shit like MIA. Her authenticity, intelligence and commentary about political rights shows women in a three-dimensional way. It shows people that it exists. And that makes me so inspired. I want that for all young women.

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ONE THING WELL

Meshuggah's Tomas Haake

Words and photography by Tom Hoare

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Perhaps it's time you knew about Alex. He was in my class at school and was a pretty regular kid with one major exception: everyday for lunch, he ate an entire chocolate log. If you're unfamiliar with what a chocolate log is, it's a combination of saturated fat and sugar rolled into one family-sized Christmas-themed desert.

And this happened without fail. Five days a week. For seven years.

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Alongside other pressing questions about Alex's nourishment, I used to wonder why he never got tired of eating the same thing every day. Perhaps it was some kind of addiction or a strange nutritional requirement which made his body demand chocolate sponge. Maybe, and perhaps most likely, Alex just really liked the taste of chocolate logs.

I hadn't thought about this person for a long time until recently. I was sat in a café in Stockholm's Central Station watching a Swedish Yule Log rotate slowly in a glass display case on the counter. The effect was pretty hypnotizing, and I spent the subsequent train journey feeling incredibly hungry.

Forty minutes later, in the car park of a small station in Stockholm's suburbs, I was greeted by a tall, muscular man with a long ponytail, tattoos and piercings. This is Tomas Haake, drummer for one of Sweden's biggest cultural exports: Meshuggah.

Stemming from experimental metal, Meshuggah play live what most bands would struggle to piece together with editing software in the studio. Their appeal derives from a technical mastery that doesn't supersede the fact that their songs are

Image by Parth Joshi

intelligently and creatively written. It's likely why they're one of the most influential metal bands in the world today.

Playing drums in Meshuggah has been Tomas' only job for his entire adult life. He doesn't perform with any other bands or side projects. He rarely does clinics or lessons. As a person frequently revered as one of the most talented drummers alive, this is kind of unusual. "I do one thing well," he smiles, "I've never been interested in doing anything else."

The Kid

Meshuggah's studio is located on a small industrial estate between a car repair shop and a large warehouse. "I actually lived here for a year and a half," Tomas states as we pull into the car park. "We built this place so it'd have everything we'd need: kitchen, bathrooms, bedrooms, an office, a small workshop and dedicated recording and rehearsal space."

I sit in the kitchen as Tomas fills a kettle from the sink. "One thing about Swedes is that we love coffee," he grins, "but you probably knew that, right?"

I confess that my knowledge of Swedish culture consists of what I'd read in the inflight magazine, which actually seemed to be mostly about Sweden's regional airports.

"So you've never been here before?" he asks.

"No, never."

"What do you think?"

In hindsight, this was an excellent opportunity for me to say something intelligent. By his own admission, Tomas is politically astute and Sweden has been subject to a political upheaval in the last few years with the rise of the far right. Perhaps I could've commented on Sweden's utopian reputation, its famous healthcare system or the country's role in addressing the Syrian refugee crisis.

"Is Ikea still as popular in Sweden as it is everywhere else?"

Tomas takes a sip of coffee and nods, slowly swilling his cup round in a circle. "Right. Should I give you the tour, then?"

Meshuggah's studio is impressive. The first floor is essentially comprised of living and office space with the rehearsal room in the basement.

The tour begins downstairs in a small storage room where Tomas shows me his collection of snare drums. He points out a few before pulling one off the shelf and handing it to me. As soon as I take hold of it, I realise something is wrong. My arms immediately begin to shake as I struggle to support its weight. "Christ, what's this made of?" I blurt out.

"It's two-inch thick steel. A friend made it for me. It weighs more than the average luggage limit for most airlines which makes it a bit impractical to transport," he smirks. "Heavy isn't it?"

I feign composure when he takes it from me, my arms and lower back burning.

"I do like how it looks, though," he continues, placing the snare back on the shelf. "I remember one of my earliest memories is being enthralled by what the drums looked like. My parents were very religious, so I went to church a lot as a kid. The church had a drum kit and I was intrigued by it. I always wanted to sit right up front to be as close as possible."

"You must have been a pretty good kid then?" I ask, pleased the

conversation is moving away from any more potential strength-based exercises.

“Well, no not really.” He begins to grin. “When the service was over and people were leaving, I’d sneak up to the kit and hit the snare drum as hard as I could. I got into a lot of trouble for that.” He laughs.

“I stopped going to church at 13. I refused to go; it gets to a point where you either join in or you don’t. So I didn’t. I just wanted to play drums. Even before I was given a kit, I’d take coffee jars, sit in a closet and hit them with my hands.”

“Why in a closet?”

“I have no idea, but I think to some degree I still feel like that. I love playing, but I’d much rather be hidden away. I’m not that drummer who is like, “look at me!” I’ve never been like that. I’ve always been more comfortable with people not looking and listening. And that’s still true today to some degree. But you can’t be that person in a band like this.”

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“I’VE NEVER BEEN A NATURAL DRUMMER IN THAT SENSE. I WASN’T THAT PRODIGY KID WHO JUST HAD IT. NOT AT ALL.”

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The Recruit

My Lonely Planet guide had informed me that it’s not uncommon for Swedes to “appear cold or uninterested towards others.” Whilst this sounds suspiciously like a redundant generalisation, Lonely Planet assured me there is some truth in it.

Perhaps there is. But it didn’t take long to realise that Tomas isn’t like this at all. He’s incredibly passionate about what he

Meshuggah Studio Albums
Left to Right, Top to Bottom
Contradictions Collapse (1991)
Destroy Erase Improve (1995)
Chaosphere (1998)
Nothing (2002)
Catch Thirtythree (2005) *not pictured*
obZen (2008)
Koloss (2012

does and decidedly unapologetic about being so. Behind the kit his expression is one of seriousness and concentration. But in conversation, he grins and jokes frequently. He's also incredibly practical. Instead of hiring a professional management agency like most bands Meshuggah's size might, Tomas and vocalist Jens would book the band's tours, flights, hotels and buses. Everything the band does seems carefully considered and it's hard not to imagine Tomas having a large part to play in this. It's obvious that Meshuggah isn't simply about Tomas being able to play the drums in a band, it's a life's work; the growth of something from the ground up.

"Did you grow up in Stockholm?" I ask as we leave the snare collection behind.

"No. I'm actually from a small town in the far north. After I'd done my military service, I moved to another town called Umea, which is where Meshuggah were based at the time, and then to Stockholm after that."

"You were in the military?"

"Yeah. Sweden had compulsory military service, right up until 2010. Everyone had to do it."

"Sweden had conscription?"

"Yeah. As an experience, I didn't mind it at first. I was only 18 so it was quite exciting. But then I saw it for what it was and, after a couple of months, I just wanted out. I was stationed very far north and it was during a period where I'd just joined Meshuggah and we really needed to rehearse regularly. So I got our label boss to write a request for me to move down to a military base closer to where the band was based in Umea."

"What did your service entail?"

"The first thing you have to do is a test when you're 16. Every kid in the country has to do it. There's a written part designed to be a sort of psychological assessment, and then a physical component. You do cardio, weight and squeeze tests so they can chart your strength. Then they assign you a position based on your results. In terms of the actual training, you learn about weapons, how to march and that sort of stuff. Survival.

"The service used to last from eight months to a year and a half. But it's different now. Having an army of people who don't want to be there doesn't make any sense. Most people I did the service with, if bullets ever started flying we'd just hide in cover. I'm not giving my life for something like that, especially having not volunteered. With the army that Sweden has, we're not going to be able to stop or prevent anything major anyway."

"Conscription does seem like a relic to be honest."

"For a so-called neutral country it's certainly unusual. But for kids today, it's very different. You still have to do the tests, but if you don't want to take it any further you can just say no. Previously, the only way to get out of it was to tell them you were gay. They didn't seem keen on the idea of having gay soldiers. Shows how backwards it was, really."

The Carpenter

The studio has a small instrument repair room with a workbench and various tools. I drink more coffee as Tomas fixes a few things on his bass drum pedal. He disassembles and meticulously cleans it.

"Does it annoy you to know it's not working properly?"

"Sort of. It just has a few issues. I tend never to be 100% happy with things in general."

"It got to a point where I'd begun to consider the prospect of searching for another drummer for Meshuggah. That was a pretty awful realisation."

"What about your own playing ability?"

"Especially that. I'm never completely happy with it. Never."

"Can you give me an example?"

He sets the pedal down and furrows his brow. "Sure. I now play with a click to every song we do live. The click is tied into the entire show. It cues the lighting, the music, everything. But there'll be some nights where I can't lock in with it at all. Playing with a click is all about your internal clock and for me that seems to change on a daily basis. We might start playing a song and I'll feel like, 'wow, this is super fast, there must be something wrong with the click,' but there never is. It makes me really uncomfortable. I constantly feel like I'm battling with it, lagging behind or feeling like I'm being held back. I'd like to get to a stage where I can just lock into it whatever."

"Is it possible, from a human perspective, to actually achieve that though, especially if you're saying your internal clock changes daily?"

He stands in silence for a few seconds before shrugging. "I don't know really. But it does frustrate me." There's another silence. "Actually, this reminds me," he continues, gesturing at a can of oil on the workbench, "do you mind if I check the oil in my car? It's something I've been meaning to do for ages."

We head outside and he opens up the bonnet of the well-used silver estate he'd picked me up in. "There're no Ferraris in the Meshuggah garage just yet." He pats the roof of the car affectionately.

"Are you pretty handy with mechanics?" I ask.

"No, not especially. But after school I used to work in a wood shop making furniture. I didn't really enjoy it; it was just something I had to do so I could afford to play drums. But I had a few close calls. I really hurt myself a couple of times, which scared me."

I ask for specifics. He gently closes the bonnet and wipes his hands on his jeans. "I was feeding a wooden post into a cutting machine by hand. You're weren't supposed to do that as it's dangerous, but because I used this machine almost every day, I'd gotten lazy when it came to my own safety. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, there was this horrendous noise and the post just vanished. It had snagged in the machine and fired back out extremely fast. At the opposite end of the workshop, I'm talking about 50ft away, there was an older guy working on another machine. He'd just bent down to adjust something and the post had missed his head by a fraction as it had flown by. It then hit a steel plate on the workshop wall, which it cracked." He pauses. "Can you imagine if it had hit that guy's head? It would have gone straight through it. I was so shocked that I didn't notice what had happened to my own hand; it had slipped into the cutting machine when the post had been fired out and mangled my fingers. I only realised when another worker approached me and asked if I was ok." Tomas holds up his hand and waggles his pinky. "It pretty much ripped this finger off; it was hanging on by a thread.

"But that wasn't the only time." As we head back inside, he proceeds to describe how he almost put his hand down onto a

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"I was less than a centimetre away from cutting my hand in half. It scared the shit out of me. I knew I had to get out after that."

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circular saw, only realising what was about to happen when he felt the displaced air from the blade on his palm. “After that I had to go and sit down for a little while. I was less than a centimetre away from cutting my hand in half. It scared the shit out of me. I knew I had to get out after that; I’d started to have nightmares about injuring myself very badly and not being able to play the drums anymore.”

The Introvert

I’ve got vivid childhood memories of going with my family to watch a pantomime every Christmas at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle. Towards the end of the performance, the actors would walk through the audience and randomly select kids to join them on stage for the final number. My worst nightmare was being selected and told to go up on stage, and still today any sort of audience participation situation strikes fear into my heart like nothing else.

I’d been thinking about what Tomas had said about preferring to be hidden away rather than be the centre of attention. It’s a sentiment that drummers often express. In more extreme cases, feeling like you’re obscured behind the kit is a common way of dealing with performance anxiety.

We’re sat in Tomas’ office when he stands up and takes a packet of tobacco off the shelf. He pulls out some strands and rolls them into a ball, which he then places under his upper lip. “You want some?” He asks.

I decline, stating that I’m not sure chewing tobacco would agree with me.

Tomas grins. “No. You don’t chew this stuff; it just sits under your lip.”

“Is it still as addictive as smoking?”

“More so I think. It’s more difficult to quit too. Trust me, I’ve tried.” Tomas raises his hands to his face as if recalling something very painful. “Last time I tried to quit, I got to the third day and began to think I was going insane. I was sweating and shivering like I had a fever. My urine smelled terrible. I can never get past that third day. It’s torturous.”

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“Being the drummer’s drummer scares me. I’m not that person.”

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I try to offer some positive spin, but my ignorance makes it sound like a question: “At least it’s not destroying your lungs?”

“No, but it rots your gums like nothing else. You get these huge pits in your mouth. Our guitar tech has them, so he just fills them with more tobacco.” He pauses.

“I’ve had my fair share of health problems, though. About seven years ago I had a bad hernia in my lower back which compressed my sciatic nerve and that threw my right foot control out of the window. It got to a point where it was so bad that I couldn’t even play a single stroke on the kick. My foot would just swivel, instead of playing the pedal like it should.”

“You’re saying that seven years ago, you were at a point where you couldn’t realistically play drums because of severe nerve damage?”

“That’s right. Prior to my surgery, it got to a stage where it became too much to deal with. I had to take my own mattress on tour. I couldn’t lift anything. Just sitting at the kit was difficult. But even with surgery, nerve damage isn’t something you can just fix. It can take a long time to heal, if it heals at all. Luckily, mine has gotten better and my foot control has improved, but it’s still a problem and there are some nights where I can’t play properly at all.

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"There was a time when all I thought about was drums. Now I could go a year a year without playing them and it's not something that would really affect me."

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“It got to a point where I’d begun to consider the prospect of searching for another drummer for Meshuggah. That was a pretty awful realisation, not really in terms of no longer playing the drums, but more so not being a part of what it means to create and write songs.

“There was a time when all I thought about was drums. Now I could go a year a year without playing them and it’s not something that would really affect me, so long as I knew that I could play if I wanted to. I’ve talked to drummers, like Virgil Donati, where drums are the only things that occupy their waking hours. I’m not like that at all. No longer being the drummer for Meshuggah wasn’t really the issue. Even though that was scary, it was scarier to think about what it’d mean to do something else.” He pauses. “I’ve never been a natural drummer in that sense. I wasn’t that prodigy kid who just had it. Not at all.”

“Did you want to be that kid?”

“Yeah, big time. But I learned as I grew up that I wasn’t going to be. Instead, I knew I could be a very specific type of drummer.

“There are all these false rumours that we’re classically trained musicians or jazz professors. There’s no way I could do that. Meshuggah is what I’ve done for my entire adult life. This one band. And to some degree that’s why I’ve never been comfortable doing clinics because I dislike when the focus is solely on me. When we played with Metallica in Gothenburg to 60,000 people, not even butterflies. But if I was to go into a drum store and play in front of 15 kids, that makes me nervous. Really nervous. I’ve never been comfortable like that. And if I did a clinic, I don’t want to just sit there and sweat my ass off and play Bleed. Being the drummer’s drummer scares me, I’m not that person.

“Maybe it’s the same thing as hiding in the closet when I was a kid. Lots of people are fed by the gratification of having people look up to them. I’d love to be like that and have it fuel my self-esteem. But it doesn’t. Even if you came up to me after a show and told me it was the greatest show you’d ever seen, but I knew there were mistakes in there, all I’d think about are those mistakes. There’s nothing someone can say to make me feel better. But it’s only because I take what I do seriously. This band has been my life pretty much every day for the last 25 years. I wouldn’t change anything about that.”

I think Tomas Haake exemplifies more than anyone what it can mean to make music; to take pride in what you’re doing and not let other people tell you what that is worth. At the same time, he holds no superficial or romanticised notion of artistry; hard work pays off and if things go wrong you need to work out how to fix them instead of sticking your head in the sand.

Back at Stockholm station, a piece of Yule log in hand, I thought about the rarity of being able to look back over 25 years and state that you’re entirely happy with the decisions you’ve made. Perhaps it was a flippant comment, but from the time I’d spent with Tomas, I’d suggest it seemed to be a sincere reflection.

When I got back home I looked up Alex. It turns out he’s stopped eating chocolate logs and become a black belt at karate (genuinely). He said the only reason he doesn’t eat them is because it interferes with his training diet. “It was definitely an addiction though,” he laughed, “I think the longest I ever managed without eating one was about three days.”

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Benny Greb

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I/O

Audio Engineers & Etiquette

Words by Julia Kaye

Image by rhythmicdiaspora

When you start out as a gigging band, your first few gigs are usually a steep learning curve. I was 17 the first time I played somewhere that wasn't someone's garage. I remember it because when I turned up at the venue, the bouncer wouldn't let me in as I didn't have my ID. I tried to explain that I was the drummer for the band scheduled to play that evening, and that the snare drum and cymbal cases I was carrying weren't simply fashion accessories. In the end, I had to get the guitarist to covertly let me in through the cellar. After we'd played and the bouncer discovered I'd been smuggled in, I was barred from ever returning.

This was also the first occasion I'd ever sat at a kit that had been professionally mic'd up. When soundcheck rolled around, I ended up playing at a level that even the auditory system of a dog would have struggled to register because I didn't want to annoy the bar staff.

When we played the actual show, I remember the PA initially sounding like the opening scene from Saving Private Ryan, probably because the level for the drums was about 300% louder than it needed to be. This was entirely my fault. And that was how I learned to play at the same level for soundcheck as you intend to play live.

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To avoid any other potential mishaps, I spoke to a bunch of audio engineers who were only too happy to elaborate on some of the things that annoy them the most whilst at work.

They didn't hold back:

"If you break a stick, I don't have any spares so please don't be offended if I can't help you with that. I'm not a music store. The same goes for guitar strings and plectrums."

"The load in time is there because, as a rule, that's the most convenient time for you to load in. If you show up 15 minutes before doors and it's no longer possible to do a full sound check, there's no need to call me a 'fucking piece of shit', as one gentleman once felt so inclined."

"Please do not steal the house kit's hi-hat clutch, cymbal felts or wing nuts. Or anything else. Just don't steal things in general. As unpleasant as it is coiling up XLR cables after a gig, I'd rather they were there to be coiled and coat my hands with black, greasy sludge, than not there at all."

"There is a finite number of pillows which will fit in a kick drum. If you've ever asked yourself, 'are there too many pillows in my kick drum?' the answer is always 'yes.'"

"Please do not play your kit whilst I'm trying to mic it up. Think of this as two separate processes – I mic it, then you play it."

"You don't need to remember my name but please do not address me as 'sound guy.' I'm not your guy, friend."

"Please do not let me mic up your kit then proceed to move all the mics and drums around."

"When you unplug anything from an unmuted channel and it makes a heinous noise through the PA, do not glare in my direction as if it's my fault that the front row's ears are bleeding."

"Some of the other staff in the venue happen to be my friends. You don't need to talk negatively about them because they didn't immediately drop everything to serve you a drink before everyone else waiting at the bar."

"If you want a specific sound front of house, just ask me and I'll be happy to oblige. I'd much rather spend a bit of time working out what you want as opposed to finding out after the show."

"Women can mix sound too. Not just cakes. Also, my breasts do not obscure my view of the console, but thank you for asking."

"I know it's usually an accident, but you don't need to hit the drum mics with your sticks. Repeatedly."

"Please do not ask the audience 'how does it sound out there?' It's kind of massively insulting."

"Oh – you're using in ear monitors? That would have been helpful to know before doors opened."

"Contrary to popular belief I'm not actually a bitter, failed musician who ended up doing this just to make ends meet. I have a degree in this – not that I know everything – but I take pride in it. Thanks for understanding."

"This is a common one but please do not put your beer on the bass cabinet. Two reasons. First, low frequencies can make objects vibrate and move around. Second, Google 'electrical burns'."

"There's no need to complain about audio engineers at previous gigs deliberately 'sabotaging' your band's sound. I actually know those engineers you're talking about. You are not at the centre of a conspiracy. You're just not very good."

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Image by Andrew Gustar
Previous page by Rudolf Schuba

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THE LIGHTHOUSE

Musical Attainment

Words and photography by Tom Hoare

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It's early on a Saturday morning at The Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School in New York. I'm sat in a classroom full of kids who are all holding some sort of percussion instrument in their hands. At the head of the class stands Marc Wagnon, an esteemed Swiss percussionist and composer. Leaning against the wall are a series of white canes. This is where they will remain for the next 55 minutes.

The Lighthouse, as the school is also known, is unique. It's the only community music school in the entire United States for the blind and visually impaired. The class that is about to begin is percussion 101.

There are lots of excited faces as Marc instructs the students to copy the patterns he plays. Initially, there's an enormous din as everyone begins feverously striking their instruments, but after a few minutes, a pattern begins to emerge. Before long, everyone is playing in unison. When Marc calls a congratulatory halt, there is lots of uncontrollable giggling and audible delight.

In times of austerity, the music department is often the first to have its budget slashed and many schools now don't have the equipment and capacity to provide any sort of music classes in their general curriculum. To say this is simply a shame is an understatement because the evidence to suggest that music education plays a hugely important role in school curriculum is overwhelming. Kids that learn an instrument routinely attain higher test scores across the board. It's been suggested that this is because music education promotes engagement, achievement, imagination and curiosity. Students have also shown to be more emotionally developed than their non-musical counterparts, able to better empathise with other cultures.

When Marc's class was over, he kindly let us chat to the students about their experiences playing music.

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Madeline Mau [*Age 9*]: Should I do the interview in my regular accent, British accent or gangster accent?

The Drummer's Journal: Whatever you like.
[*Adopts regal British accent*] Ok then, let's proceed.

I wanted to ask you some questions about music…
If you insist.

How long have you been taking percussion classes here?
Since I was six, which was three years ago.

What do you like about it?
I get to play music and I get to associate with my correspondents.

Your correspondents?
I'm not authorised to tell you who they are. But I have a few. They store all the information I give them in vaults. And the vaults are made of gold and silver.

Vaults? Like Gringotts Bank?
Exactly. I have a dragon guarding my big vault of treasure.

How did you get so much treasure?
Well, I don't actually have it yet. But I will when I'm a singer like Demi Lovato. Do you know who she is?

Demi Lovato – she sang the theme from Frozen right?
[*Sighs heavily*] Her version wasn't as good as Idina Menzel's though.

So what instruments do you play?
Piano, violin, I don't know if I'd count drums yet.

Why not?
I don't really practise enough. I have too much homework, and also, I don't have the right equipment.

What do you like about playing music?
Music just sounds good. I like writing my own songs. I'd like to be a singer-songwriter, write my own life into songs and stuff.

Do you think it's important to learn how to play an instrument?
Yes, well, depending on what you want to do. If you want to be a musician then it's pretty important.

Well put. Would you say music has a function in society?
Basically enriching culture and stuff like that. Without it there would be no folk songs or church sermons. I think music plays a big role in people's lives, even if they don't actually realise it.

Is the world a better place with music?
Yes, because if there was no music this school wouldn't even be here. And I would not be able to contact my correspondents as often. And we wouldn't be able to make a racket.

A lot of schools have had their funding for music programs cut. What do you think about that?
That's bad. Basically, the government is corrupt.

That's quite an accusation…
It's simple really. Schools who are not being funded


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Storage

will have worse programs, which will produce worse students, and then consequently worse teachers for the next generation.

Can studying music help people do well in other studies?
It can calm you down. I suppose it helps in math because it's about fractions and stuff. I'll have to think that one over and get back to you.

You mentioned you want to be a pop star...
Yes. I want to be on TV and I want people to think I'm awesome. But importantly I want to make good music. When I get mad I write songs about things. And also, I want to drive around in an SUV accompanied by lots of limousines.

Are you in the SUV or limo?
Actually, I'm in the limo. I could arrive in one limousine and then leave in a different one.

That sounds luxurious. How would you say playing music makes you feel?
Depends on the type of music really. If I'm writing a pop song, I feel whatever emotion the song is trying to convey. But if I'm playing Chopin on the piano, I basically imagine this scenario where I'm at a concert and there's a loved one in the audience and I'm trying to convey my love for them. And I hope it makes my playing sound more emotional.

Is it important for music to have emotion?
Yes, otherwise it's just bland and boring.

How do you write a song?
I think about a topic in my life. Recently I was betrayed by a person – who I won't name – because I invited them into my club, but they didn't want to join.

The ultimate betrayal…
I know, right? This person is my nemesis slash friend. So I've been writing a song about that. But usually, I'll think of a hook first, then I'll think of a key and then I'll start thinking about the production. And I have to ask some people to help with that.

Thanks for chatting to us.
That's ok. Are you going back to Britain now?

Not right now.
Ok, well safe trip.

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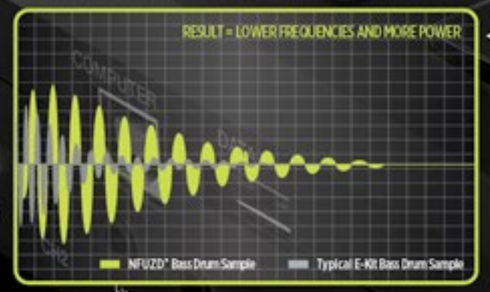

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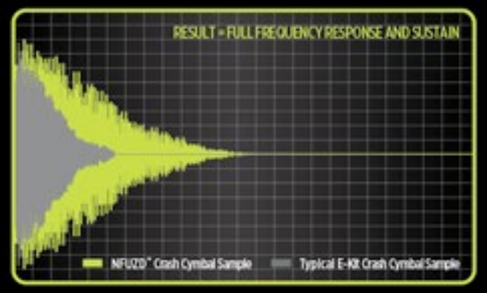

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SUCCESS. SMALL BEARS.

A conversation with Steve Smith

Words by Tom Hoare
Photography By Ellius Grace

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The Ansonia is a decadent residential building on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It was built during a period of prosperity in the late 19th century known as the Gilded Age. At this time, under the guise of self-sufficiency, The Ansonia had a fully functioning farm on its roof with goats, chickens and - the mainstay of any pastoral utopia - a small bear.

What purpose did the small bear serve? Don't bears eat chickens? Wouldn't a small bear just grow into a big bear and then potentially rampage through the building killing at will?

The sound of the Ansonia's elevator arriving jolts my thoughts back to reality. As the doors open, I'm greeted by one of the percussion industry's most respected names.

Steve Smith is someone who has long been a familiar face on the cover of drum magazines. He rose to fame as the drummer of Journey between 1978 to 1986 before becoming an infamous session musician and, latterly, a renown bandleader.

Steve is an encyclopedia of drumming knowledge. He has a deep understanding of the drum set's socio-cultural role in the development of western music. This was the kind of interview which could warrant having a covert earpiece and someone sat outside in a van feeding you information about all of his extensive achievements.

Thankfully, Steve's pretty easy going. We head up to his apartment where he perches on his sofa, pointing out local landmarks from his window.

The farm on the roof was shut down in 1907 by the Department of Health, bringing an end to the days where each resident was hand delivered a fresh basket of eggs every morning. The animals were reportedly rehoused in Central Park.

But what about the bear? Mustn't ask about the bear.

The Drummer's Journal: Is it true about the farm on the roof?
Steve Smith: I think so yeah.

Did it actually have a bear?
Er… I don't know. A bear?

[***Swiftly changing subject***] **The view from here is great.**
Right. [*Gestures at building in the distance*] Bono lives in that building over there. And Jerry Seinfeld lives in that one.

Do you have any famous neighbours in this building?
Yeah, there are a few people. The building itself has been in a few films and TV shows too. I think something with Bruce Willis and Halle Berry. But there are some expensive apartments here. I'm talking like $5 million for one of the huge ones. But this building has a wacky history.

This is now your studio?
More of an office really. I use it a bit to practise. But I used to live in here. I had one of those beds that would fold down from the wall. Space was pretty tight.

> "It really came down to my playing not being good enough, which was tough. It made me think about my own ability a lot."

Your nickname when you were in Journey was Steve "Machine Gun" Smith. Is that something you actually went by?
No, never. It came about because Steve Perry [vocals, Journey] would introduce me on stage before my solo. He'd always make something up, like Steve "magic sticks" Smith. One night, he happened to come out with Steve 'machine gun' Smith and because that night was recorded for a live record, it stuck. People still do call me that occasionally.

It wasn't some sort of alter ego?
[*Laughs*] No.

Leaving Journey must have been a difficult thing to do…
Leaving Journey? What do you mean by that?

Well, Journey were one of the biggest bands in 1985 and you went from a position of being involved to not being involved…

I didn't leave Journey – I was fired. It was a very difficult time, both emotionally and personally. I'd been in that band for seven years, made seven albums and done numerous tours. Suddenly I was out.

Were you worried about the future?
I'm a pretty motivated person. I'm not going to let something derail me from what my goals are. Ultimately, that experience inspired me to push through. It drove me to become a better musician. So, for example, one of the problems I had was that I couldn't play to a click. The back-story is that, as Journey, we'd always write music collectively in a rehearsal room, and then go into a studio to record it once everything was worked out. It was a great process. We rehearsed a lot, so we knew the songs inside out before recording them.

What changed?
Technology changed. Suddenly, we had access to tools that hadn't existed before, like drum machines and sequenced bass. So the band, minus me and Ross [Valory, bassist], went into a studio and pretty much wrote an entire record using drum machines. When it was time to record, I was essentially just a studio guy coming in to play these parts someone else had written. And the problem was that I had no studio chops; I'd never played with a click and it wasn't easy for me to do. I was bad at it. So – I was out of the band. And the first thing I wanted to do was learn how to play with a click. I just really focused on that, got really good at it, then got a lot of studio work as a result.

It was a technical shortfall in your playing?
Pretty much. There was some personal stuff too, but it really came down to my playing not being good enough, which was tough. It made me think about my own ability a lot.

In terms of your lifestyle, how did that change as a result?
I made a conscious choice to radically change how I was living so I wouldn't go bankrupt. Ross didn't and he went bankrupt because he kept living a lifestyle that was unsustainable. I deliberately downsized and consolidated all my expenses, and kept on working. I really just wanted to play jazz music and do studio work. I didn't want to play rock anymore.

Why did playing rock no longer appeal to you?
I felt like I'd done that. I realised that part of being in a group, especially at the beginning, is that you've unified goals. Everyone wants to make great songs, play for lots of people, sell a lot of records and make a lot of money. Once you accomplish all those things, I think it's pretty natural for bands to break up because individual goals are usually what remain unfulfilled. And my personal goals were to play jazz with great musicians.

Journey gave you the financial base to do that?
Right. My time in Journey meant I could afford to be selective about the work that I took, so I took the work that inspired me the most. That's a pretty good situation to be in, and I was adamant to make the most of it. I took lessons and played a lot of gigs. So in a way, finding myself no longer in that band was one of the best things to happen to me. Initially, it was hard. But it became something good. I certainly would not be the musician I am today if I was still doing that one gig with Journey. The only way you can improve is to play a lot and play different music.

How was that transition to establishing yourself as a jazz drummer? Were you worried about being typecast as Steve Smith, the rock drummer from Journey?
I definitely addressed my public perception right away. And that was very difficult. For certain gigs, I'd be billed as "Steve Smith of Journey", which was the wrong approach for trying to develop a jazz audience. Fortunately, I landed a gig with Steps Ahead and Mike Stern, so that helped boost my jazz credentials a lot.

Would you consider yourself a session musician?
No. I mean I've done a lot of sessions, but I tend not to do them anymore.

Why is that?
I made the decision to put more attention on being a bandleader and a touring musician, so I let go of a lot of session work because it's pretty much impossible to do both.

You've said some interesting things about doing sessions for pop artists…
Have I?

Yes. You said, "I approach [a session] as if I'm a painter and somebody is telling me to paint the kitchen red. I'll go in and apply a coat of red paint to the walls. I don't feel like an artist at that point, I'm just following orders." Can you talk about that?
I'd still agree with that, yeah.

Why don't you feel like an artist, though?
When you do a typical pop session, the drum parts usually have already been written. In some instances, the track itself is almost complete, the lead vocal might even be on it. My job is to come in and play what I'm told.

So it's just not appealing creatively?
I mean, it can still be creative, it's more that it's just not that satisfying. I'd rather play a live gig and try and stretch myself.

"I was fired. It was a very difficult time, both emotionally and personally. I'd been in that band for seven years. Suddenly I was out."

Did you have your own record company at one point?
I didn't own it, but I would make records specifically for a label called Tone Center. To me, those were really great days back in the mid-80s. At that time, there wasn't a lot of fusion and it had sort of tailed off. So, we made records for that audience, and they sold pretty well. I'd get a budget of 20,000 dollars, and we could make them for that pretty easily. I made about 14 albums over five years. That was a hugely creative time period. Now if I want to make a record, I have to pay for it myself. There's no record company saying, "here's 20,000 dollars."

So many people started just taking music and not paying for it, which made it not make any sense for those record companies to finance albums. When I've made records for record companies, they've given me complete artistic freedom. I don't think that's uncommon. It was like that with Journey. It was like that when I made my own Vital Information records for Columbia Records. The argument that we're in a better place because record companies no longer dictate what gets recorded is not my experience. A good record company knows who you are as an artist.

How would you summarise the impact the internet has had on your career?
For me, I'd say the impact has been pretty negative. I used to have a record company financing my albums and they'd sell well enough to allow me to make another. That's over because people aren't paying for music. I haven't seen an upside to that. Royalties go down to pretty much nothing. Even with subscription services, it's easy to hear anyone's record and not buy it. It's a joke.

Do you use streaming services?
I use the Apple one. I just started a trial on that. Not Spotify or Pandora out of principle.

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"I made a conscious choice to radically change how I was living so I wouldn't go bankrupt. Thankfully that never happened."

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I thought some of your music was available on Spotify?
Initially, I told my record company, BFM, that I didn't want to be on Spotify, but they decided that some of my music should be made available on there. We talked about it and I said it was ok. So I think it is available. A big label gets money for the use of their artists' records, and a lot of that money the artist never sees. I don't know the division of money because it's too hard to keep track of.

As a consumer, do you see the appeal?
Absolutely. But equally, I still buy a lot of music and I don't want to always be online to listen.

Hypothetically, if someone recorded a performance of yours and posted it to YouTube, would you find that undesirable?
I used to be dead against it. But now, I've calmed down about it. The main problem with people posting stuff is that the sound quality is horrible, it makes me cringe to listen to it.

Do you ever ask for things to be removed?
Occasionally if it's really offensive, yeah. YouTube are pretty good about it.

Thanks for your time, Steve.
Sure. Want to check out the roof? There's good views from there.

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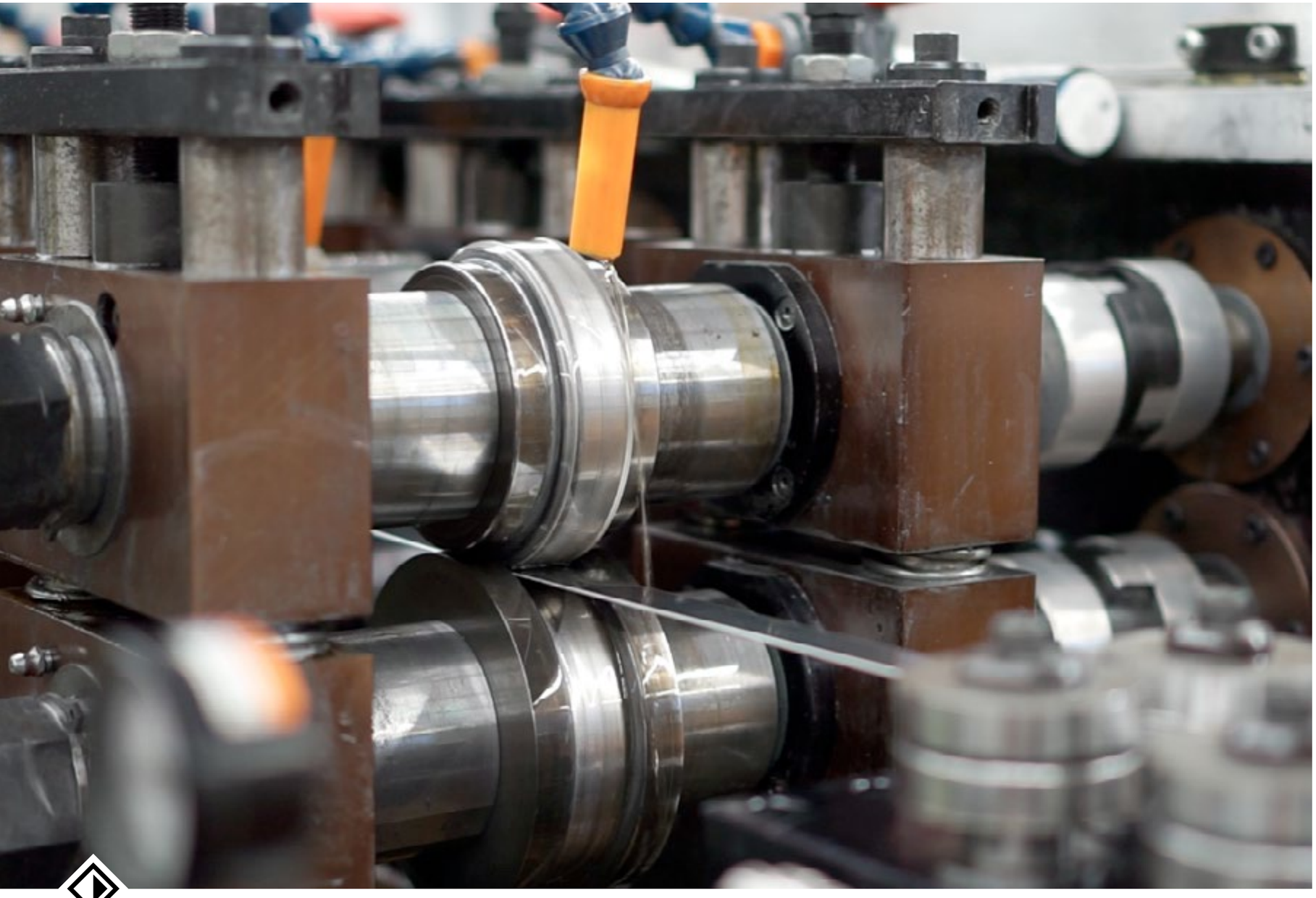
A HEAD START

How To Make A Drumhead

Words by Julia Kaye & photography by Tom Hoare



Rolling

A drumhead starts its life as a long strip of aluminium wound around a huge spool. The spool is placed upon a rotating platform which steadily feeds the aluminium into this machine. Here, a series of rollers form the flattened aluminium into a ‘U’ shape; this is to become the drumhead’s collar.

Forming

The collar is no longer a flat strip of metal. As it exits the rollers, the next process is to form the aluminium into a circular hoop. This machine bends the collar and trims it to the correct length, depending on the size of the head being produced.

Inspection

The machine operator then checks each collar for consistency on a fixture which indicates whether it's perfectly round. Though the collar is now circular, it still needs to be brazed together.

Brazing

The collar is then loaded onto a brazing machine where a small amount of solder is applied at the base of the collar. Torches then heat this portion for about 10 seconds to ensure the bond is strong.

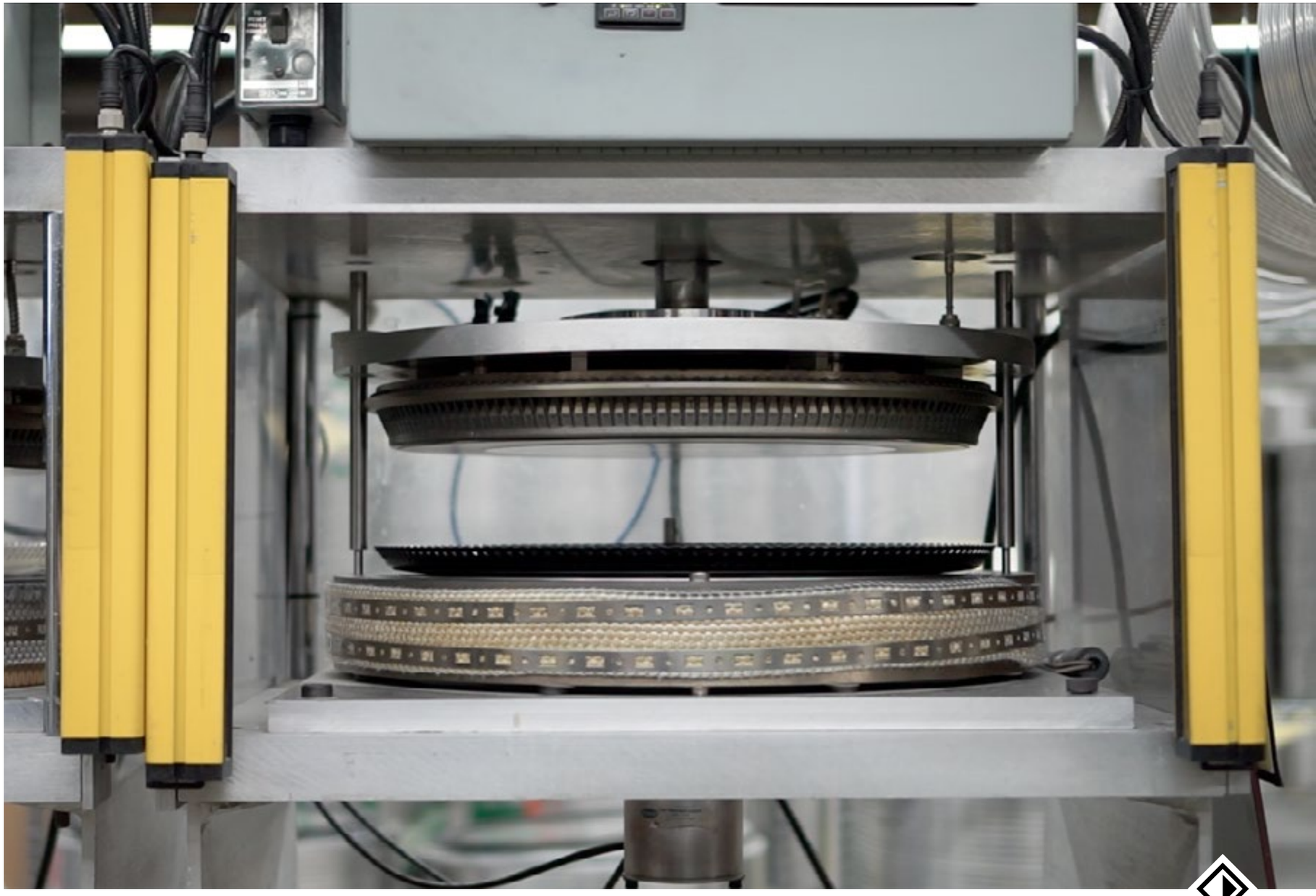
Storage

The collar is now complete. It's stored on a large wall with a tag displaying its diameter, the date and the name of the worker who added it to the wall. It will remain here until it's time to have a playing surface attached.

Bending

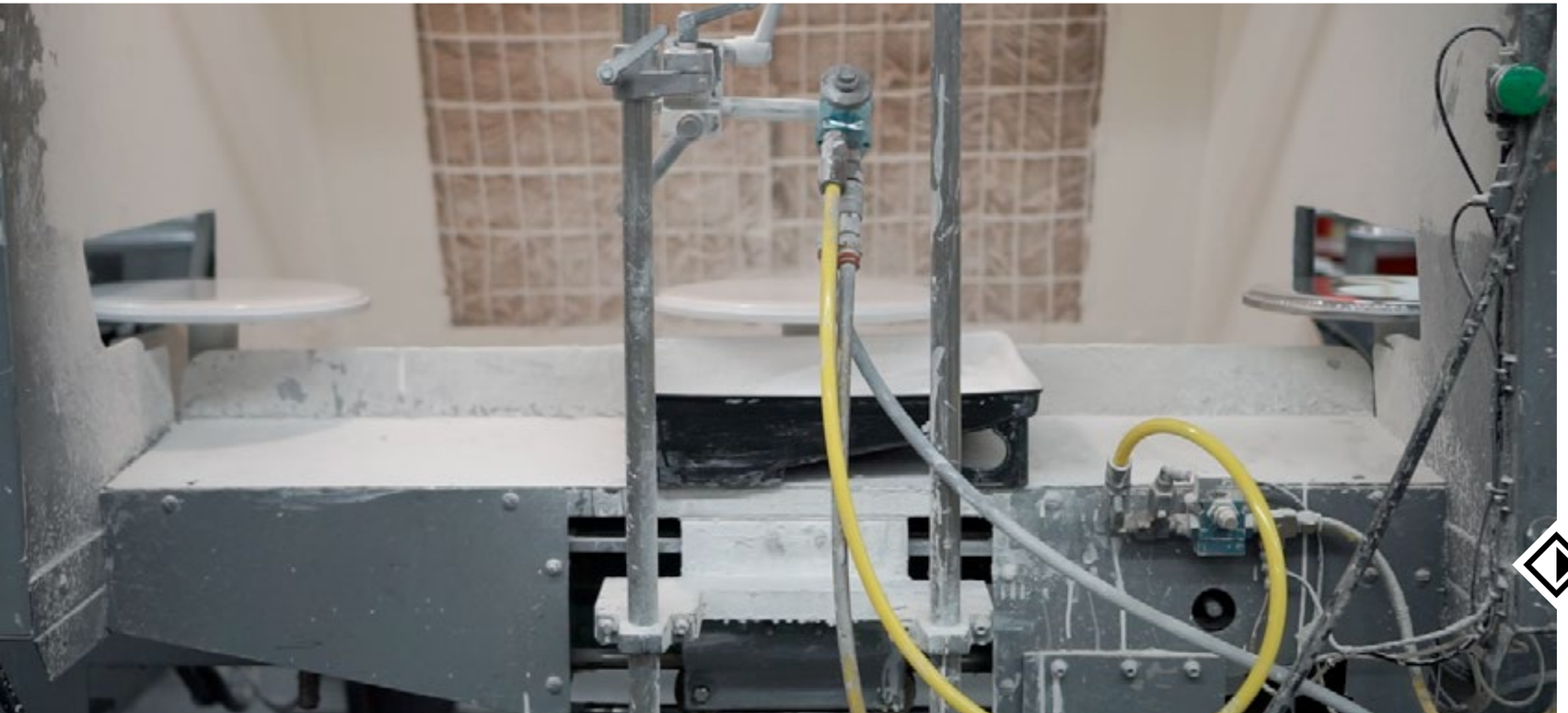
The film which will comprise the actual striking surface of the drumhead is cut to shape. An operator then takes the film and loads it into this machine which crimps and bends the film's edge by applying consistent pressure under a low heat. This process takes about 20 seconds.

In this image, the male part of the mould is the large, perforated 'disk'. A newly pressed piece of film sits below it.



Coating

The collar and film have now been combined to form the drumhead using a technique we're not allowed to show. The heads that are to be coated are then placed onto a conveyor which transports them through a paint booth.



The Paint Gun

As a head passes through the booth, it begins to spin to ensure the coating from the paint gun is applied evenly. The gun tracks alongside the head, following its passage through the booth. Upon exiting, the head passes under a set of heat lamps to help the coating set correctly. The head is then placed on a rack and left to dry completely.

Stamping

The head is then placed onto a platform where a stamp applies the company's logo. The platform rotates, allowing a worker to remove the finished drumheads and replace them with ones which are still to be stamped. The heads are now ready to be played. All that remains is for them to be packaged and prepared for distribution.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Guitar Center and Unionisation

Words by Tom Hoare & illustration by Héctor Guzmán

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Back in February 2015, an independent financial analyst called Eric Garland published an article entitled The End of Guitar Center. As the title suggests, it speculates about the financial stability of the world's largest musical instrument retailer, Guitar Center Inc.

As a company, Guitar Center is often described, perhaps somewhat unfairly, as the "Walmart" of music stores. They account for 32% of all music instruments sold in the musical instrument retail industry, with an annual revenue of $2.14 billion.

Guitar Center's corporate history, however, doesn't make for light reading. In 2007, the company was bought by Bain Capital - a private equity investment firm founded by former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Bain's roster also includes the likes of Staples, Dunkin' Donuts, Toys R Us and Burger King; relics of an era best described by Morpheus from The Matrix as "the world as it was at the end of the twentieth century."

When Bain Capital purchased Guitar Center shortly before the 2008 financial crash, the media speculated about their intentions for the company. Forbes accused Bain Capital of "acquiring a company for a minimum of cash and a load of debt, then using lean management techniques to make the company look profitable in order to sell to a bigger fish." The Wall Street Journal, Fortune and Rolling Stone also ran articles questioning the fiscal viability of Guitar Center's continuing existence in light of its huge debts, which as of 2014, amount to $1.6 billion.

Actions at Guitar Center Head Office fuelled speculation further. Since 2012, the company has appointed three CEOs, fired 42 corporate executives and been declared "in default" by the credit rating agency Standard and Poor's. In contrast, Guitar Center's official position has always been one of defiance. The company state that they're in fine financial health and a model of profitability, drawing upon a wave of new store openings to illustrate their point.

In many ways, Guitar Center are an easy target. They're seen by many as big business, undercutting independent retailers and forcing them out of business. In truth, they're not as guilty as some instrument manufacturers who have large minimum purchase quantities for their products.

The purpose here, however, isn't to speculate about Guitar Centre's future. In early 2013, certain Guitar Center stores decided to unionise in an effort to curtail what some employees felt were the realisation of unfair labour practices as a result of the company's aggressive cost-cutting measures. These practices included reducing staffing levels and negatively revising pay structure.

Guitar Center are currently on trial having been accused of violating federal labour laws which relate to the company's treatment of unionised employees. We spoke with Eric Dryburgh and Adam Obernaur, campaign organisers for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, who coordinate campaigns on behalf of unionised Guitar Center employees. Guitar Center were unavailable for comment.

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The Drummer's Journal: Why did workers at certain Guitar Center stores unionise?
Eric Dryburgh: This campaign started because workers at Guitar Center were raising a lot of issues, primarily about pay and specifically about the commission structure. Guitar Center is one of a few remaining stores in retail who employ commission based sales associates.

Sales based commission is a dying thing in retail?
Adam Obernaur: For the most part, yes. The reason is that it provides a variable to cost, whereas if you're a company paying a flat 10 bucks an hour, there's no variable cost there.

How many Guitar Center stores are currently unionised?
Eric: Currently three.

What is the problem some workers have with the pay structure specifically?
Eric: The company began creating obstacles to prevent employees getting their full commissions. As an example, in 2013, the company instituted a policy which involved pressuring employees to sell extended warranties on products. These extended warranties are known as Pro Coverage, and 30% of an employee's sales were required to have Pro Coverage attachments. If this quota wasn't met, employees would be docked a quarter of a percent off their gross sales commission. Essentially, it means for every three drum sets you sell, one of those needs to have Pro Coverage in order for you to receive your "full" commission. Extended warranties are a new phenomenon in retail as a whole; it's a push at Best Buy, it's a push at PC World.

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To be clear – the policy was to reduce commissions on goods sold if employees did not hit that 30% target?
Eric: It wasn't worded as "a reduction," but more that employees would not receive their "extra" quarter per cent in sales commissions. From a legal standpoint, a company cannot punish employees for not selling a certain product. As far as the retail industry goes, 30% is a really high target for selling extended warranty. The average in retail is well below that.

Adam: An issue workers commonly raise is that they know selling an extended warranty on certain products isn't always in the best interest of the customer, but the company's pay structure encourages them to do it regardless. Guitar stomp boxes, for example, are built to be hardy. As a guitarist, and speaking personally, I don't think those sort of products require an extended warranty. Most manufacturers will stand by their products anyway. But the fact at Guitar Center is that if you don't sell it, your pay is limited as a result.

I understand that the pay structure for sales associates at Guitar Center has changed several times in the last few years. Has this been done in a way to actively curtail what employees can earn?
Eric: Correct. The most recent change to the commissions structure was back in April 2015. They introduced a system where the base wage stayed the same, but the commission structure became based on sales per hour. This means that, at the end of the month, they add up an employee's hours and their gross sales, and divide the numbers. The employee falls into a bracket which allots them a

commission percentage, beginning at a quarter of a percent. That's incredibly low. The next bracket is a three per cent commission. To get this, you need to be selling around $60,000 worth of product per month. If you're in a store in a major city then selling $60,000 of product is probably achievable. But if you're in a store out in the suburbs, then it's going to be a lot harder. It's almost unattainable. And now there's a rumour that the pay structure is going to change it again. Whilst Adam and I can't comment on the corporate finance situation, it very strange for a company to change its pay structure this frequently. Four or five times in three years? That should be raising flags. Constant changes in pay structure create a climate of instability, which is not reassuring if you're an employee.

How did the company react when the stores decided to unionise?
Eric: Very negatively. They started a misinformation campaign and tried to intimidate workers into not organising. They told employees that the union has a $1200 initiation fee. They also told employees that if they voted the union in then it's there forever. My favourite one is, "you won't be able to talk to your store manager because everything has to go through the union first."

Adam: They also hired a law firm called Jackson Lewis, which is a very famous labor management firm. They're otherwise known as "union busters." Labor laws state that once a union is democratically elected, the employer has to then negotiate in "good faith" with the union to seek a resolution. Some employers are just like, "screw the union, we're not showing up to meetings." Guitar Center hasn't been that overt. They schedule bargaining meetings, but never actively attempt to resolve any issues. So on the surface, it looks like they're bargaining in good faith, but in reality, they're not. So the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) currently has a trial running against Guitar Center for this very reason.

What specific charges have been filed against Guitar Center?
Adam: When you're in contract negotiations, there are a lot of things a company cannot do. The charges were filed because we feel like

they've violated a number of labor laws. A large part of it has been their treatment of unionised employees and the fact they've been bargaining in bad faith.

Eric: As an example, you can't bribe employees to not be in the union. You can't retaliate or discriminate against those that unionise. A really clear form of retaliation would be giving raises to everyone who is a non-union member. It just happens this is exactly what Guitar Center have done.

And the company's response is that the charges are completely bogus?
Eric: Right. Pretty much. But I mean they have to do that if they're putting out a case like they're completely innocent. They can't be like, "well, we broke some laws, but we didn't break them all the way." When the charges were filed, the company had the option to sit down and work out an agreement. They elected not to do that and go to court.

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"Selling an extended warranty isn't always in the best interest of the customer, but the company's pay structure encourages employees to do it regardless."

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In its current format, is being a salesperson at Guitar Center a viable career?
Eric: I think it's getting harder to sustain a career at Guitar Center. A new policy the company recently created is to not offer new employees any commission on your sales during the first 90 days of their employment. That's a long time. So where do those commissions go? The company. The intentions of the company are to create an environment where staff turnover is high, and the reason is that they don't owe their staff anything. They want lots of young blood, who they can pay minimum wage and no more. Their position is, "why do we need an employee who has been here for 10 years when we can just hire someone off the street to do the same job and make as many sales." The thing is, people want to work for Guitar Center as a career. That's why the union exists. The company's position is that we just organise the angry workers. In general, workers organise because they want to work. No one joins a union unless they want to see improvements to their current job. That's something, for the record, I'd like to get that straight.

What's your personal opinion on the current financial viability of Guitar Center as a business?
Eric: I can't really comment on that because I'm not in finance. Guitar Center say they're a healthy, profitable company; anything I'd say would just be speculation.

Adam: Speaking strictly from a personal standpoint, I don't think the typical retail approach that Bain have tried to implement at Guitar Center can work in an industry as unique as musical instrument retail. That's my opinion.

Eric Garland described Guitar Center as "a symbol of all that is dysfunctional about American corporate finance management and retail in the modern age." Can you comment on that?
Eric: I think every major employer needs an Eric Garland – a total outsider who pushes their buttons, keeping them in check. He's like a consumer watchdog. I think it's interesting what he has to say.

Adam: What I found funny about that is that loads of people commented on his article about how Guitar Center was amazing, and he traced the commenters' IP addresses back to GC headquarters. His articles are very interesting, but I don't know how accurate they are.

Eric: He sounds like he knows what he's talking about, he supports his claims, he has experience in that field. Whether he has a chip on his shoulder about Guitar Center, I don't know.

In some of our interviews with current and former Guitar Center employees, one said that the working environment – specifically in relation to sales – "cannot be psychologically sustained for very long."
Adam: That's one of the main complaints we hear, and thankfully the working environment is something we can fix. If you're working at a non-union store, especially right now at the holidays, it's very testing and the burnout rate is quite high among employees. There was a time where this was a really cool job and perfectly sustainable, but corporate management doesn't seem to understand the industry and the policies they're enforcing on employees.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions about unionisation?
Eric: Probably that the union hates the company, which isn't true at all. We want the company to do well and make money. As a musician, working at Guitar Center should be a great job to have. If you're into gear and would like hanging out with drums all day and talking about them, then it's a cool job.

Adam: The leadership is somewhat disconnected from what the goals of the union actually are. We're here to support the workers and make sure GC is a successful company. We're not here to run them out of business. We want Guitar Center to succeed, and we want the employees to be happy.

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