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**BRIDGING
SOUND
& VISION**

BRENDAN BUCKLEY
BACK WITH SHAKIRA

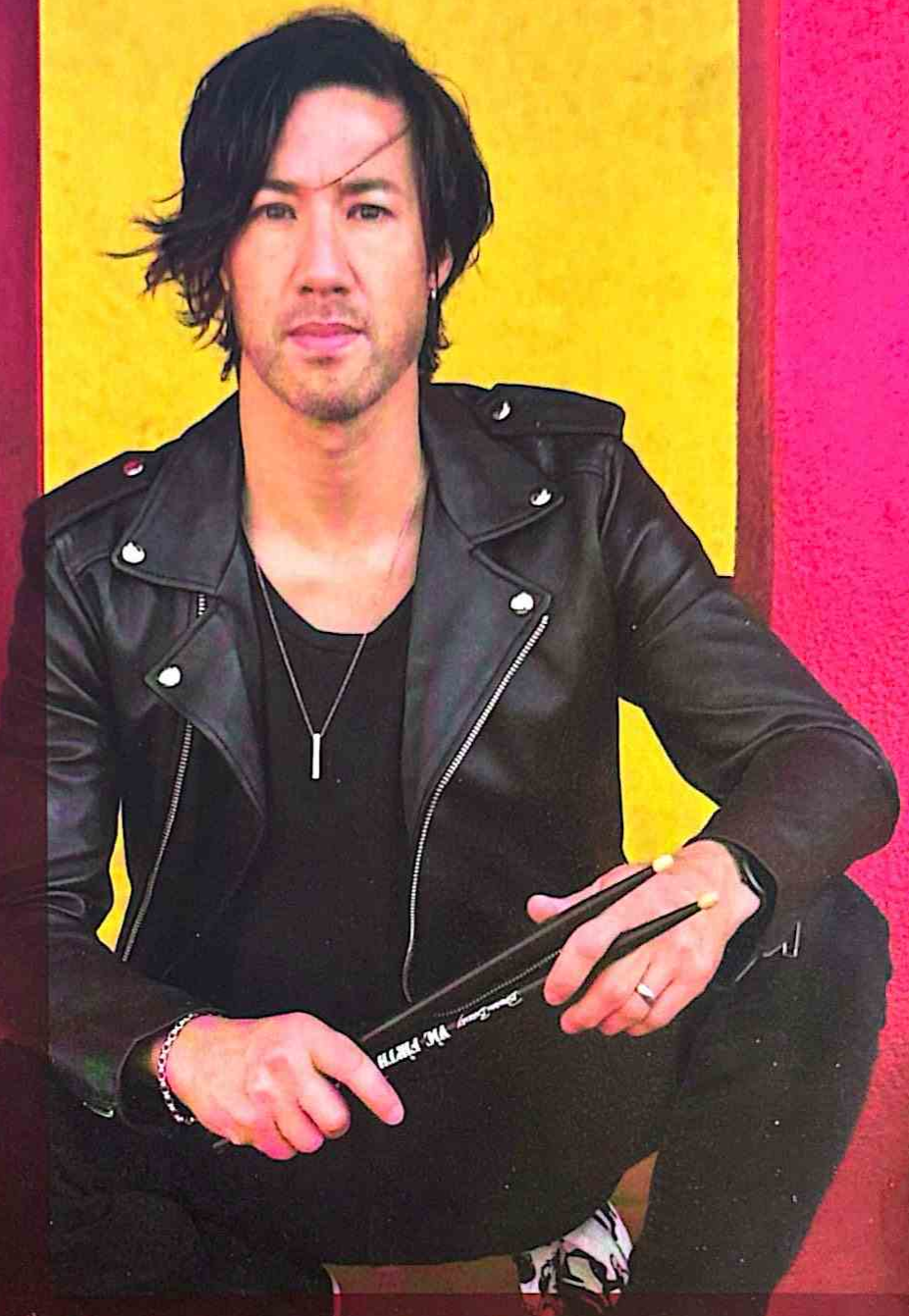
LUCY RITTER
CHAPPELL ROÁN'S STEADY BEAT

GENE KRUPA
THE SWING ERA SUPERSTAR

SHAKIRA'S

BRENDAN BUCKLEY

by David Clauro



PREPPING FOR BIG GIGS

Sometimes, the roots of success appear obvious. But behind every story, there's a moment when that person chooses to go all-in on making their passion a career. Brendan Buckley has been playing with the international superstar Shakira since 1998 and is currently globetrotting on her 2025 world tour. If that's not impressive enough, he's also played with Morrissey, Perry Farrell, Tegan and Sara, Miley Cyrus, and many others. Before all that, however, Brendan was a typical kid having fun playing drums with friends and in the school band. He wasn't a child prodigy, but he was someone who found his calling with drums through 1980s and '90s pop culture and MTV.

We caught up with Brendan as he was preparing for his tour with Shakira and took a deep dive into his journey from a suburban teen to one of the most successful and sought-after drummers in the world. As you'll read, his humility, genuine love for the drums and all musical genres, and his exceptional work ethic are huge factors that have contributed to his success.

How did a kid from suburban New Jersey end up landing a gig with one of the biggest pop stars in the world?

I grew up in a town called Mount Arlington, which is in Morris County on Lake Hopatcong. My dad is from New Jersey, and my mom is from South Korea. I had a normal New Jersey upbringing—public school, skateboarding, and sports. When I was in third grade, I took piano lessons, and in fourth grade, I joined the school concert band to play trumpet.

When I was about fourteen, I watched a lot of MTV and saw tons of drums and guitars but not many trumpets or pianos. So I thought I wanted to play either drums or guitar. The back of the school band room had a drumset that no one was using, so I would go back there and start practicing on this kit when no one was around. I took to it, and I liked the coordination challenges of it.

When I got to Roxbury High School, I joined the school band, and they said, "You're on trumpet, right?" and I said, "No, actually, I'm on drums." "Your middle school teacher said you're a trumpet player." "No, that's incorrect—I'm on drums!" So I just made a switch in ninth grade, and I started calling myself a percussionist. I was playing snare drum in the band and learning how to play xylophone and timpani. I also joined the school's jazz band. I was a D-minus jazz drummer at the time, but my high school band director hooked me up with a private instructor named Tommy Igoe. I took private lessons with him from fifteen to eighteen.

I used to go over to his dad, Sonny's, house. His dad was a big-time drummer, too. I took some private lessons with Sonny when Tommy was on the road playing gigs. So I got a crash course in drumming from the Igoe father and son team. That was all thanks to my high school band director, Daryl Bott.



Photos for this article provided by the artist

We studied everything from how to read big band charts, to rudimental techniques, classical, rock, Latin music, and everything in between.

By the time I was eighteen, I had to figure out what to do in my life. I was either going to college to study engineering or music school. I didn't know what that entailed, but I knew all I wanted to do was play drums. So I applied to several music schools and ended up going to the University of Miami. I was probably the worst drummer there when I arrived, but there were great teachers and a great student body. The entire experience was invaluable.

It's incredible to think about how much I got out of that program and the city itself. Miami is such a rich, multicultural city, and I got to jam with all these different musicians and play so many gigs. The beautiful thing about going to music school in a big city is that there are immediate opportunities to gig, either in cover bands in bars or jazz trios in hotel lobbies. I did all of that and started a bunch of original rock bands. I started doing recording sessions while I was there, too. The mid-'90s was the era of the ADAT, which was the technology that bridged the gap between real tape machines and Pro Tools. It was a bit arcane, but you could go to someone's house, set up some microphones, and record drums in their living room.

Landing the gig with Shakira was not a leap but rather a slow incline from just studying, practicing, jamming, rehearsing, and doing tons of little gigs that would turn into word-of-mouth gigs with other people. By the time I got called to do the Shakira gig, I had been doing recordings at Gloria Estefan's

studio in Miami, and a producer friend of mine, Sebastian Krysz, worked there. He was a staff engineer, and he needed some rock drums on an album for a Colombian artist who was coming to town. He asked if I would come in and do a couple of tracks. These ended up being the songs for Shakira's 1998 album, *Dónde Están los Ladrones?*

After that album came out, I was asked to be in the live band for a couple of CD-release parties. That led to getting hired to put a band together for her MTV *Unplugged* performance in 1999. I didn't realize it was going to be so big, but it wound up being a big concert for her and a huge record, and the three core members of her band today are all from that *Unplugged* concert. The guitarist Tim Mitchell, the piano player Albert Menendez, and I played that concert, and for some reason, she kept us around.

Since then, I've played with a bunch of artists, but any time she or her manager calls up, we get together.

Back in college, did you have an idea in mind of what you wanted your professional career to look like?

I don't think I had a preference. What I was searching for were opportunities to play the drums. If that meant playing in a bookstore with a singer/songwriter or going on tour for two weeks in the back of a van, I was game!

My goal was to be working seven days a week, as many hours a day as I could, whether it was rehearsing, practicing, recording, gigging, or touring. So I just looked for opportunities because I thought practicing by myself was good, but practicing with other people or performing with other people would be even

better. That would give me more things to learn and more feedback about what works and doesn't work in real musical settings.

How do you go about preparing for all these various gigs? Do you chart stuff out or are you just really good at learning on the fly?

I like charting things out. Still to this day, whether it's one song or an entire set of music, I like to sit down and write everything out with pen and paper. I feel like it helps me internalize the music and absorb it more. If I were to just put on headphones and drive around, I'm not paying attention to the same degree as when I write out the kick and snare patterns, the fills, or even notes on the structure and time signatures. Then when I go to play, it's halfway in my brain already. I don't like using charts live, though. By the time I'm performing, the charts are put away.

I like to study genres as well. For example, if I know I'll be doing a gig that involves a lot of shuffle grooves, I'll practice all different kinds at various tempos and dynamics so that style becomes part of my vocabulary and sounds more authentic.

Has that process become quicker and more simplified over time?

It gets faster because you start to see patterns within song forms, and there's familiarity with certain rhythms and fills that happen over and over. I don't have to decipher things as much as I used to.

Another thing that gets faster is you start to learn what's important and what's not important when you're writing out a chart. I used to write everything in great detail. The more you do it, the more you realize that a lot of people don't care whether the kick pattern in the verse goes "boom, boom" or "boom ba-boom."

What I focus on most is the tempo, the form, the basic groove, and any essential drum fills, transitions, and dynamics.

There might be a time when you get a call from a tour manager saying, "Hey, our drummer has the flu. We need you to fly out to Vancouver and do a show with our band tonight. Can you please do it?" You don't have

time to learn every single note. You're going to learn the basics to get through the show so it's not a train wreck.

When you do that enough times—and I've done that type of gig a lot—you realize you don't need to focus on the minutia. You need to provide the basics to make sure these songs sound great and everyone feels comfortable.

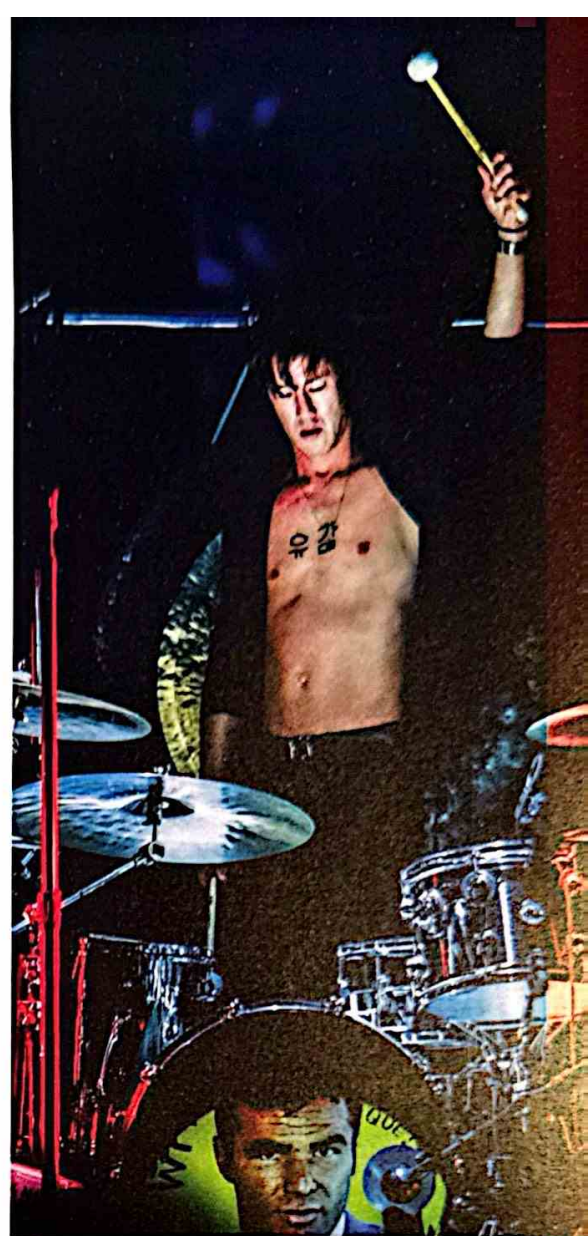
Beyond the technical expertise, your personality also has to fit in with people that you may not know at all. How do you approach going into new environments?

That's tough to answer because every situation is different. I can't say that the same thing works in every band. Sometimes, the artist wants a band of lunatics and encourages that, and other times it's very strict and behaved. Or sometimes it's very relaxed. I try to suss out any obstacles, but mostly I try to find out what they want out of a drummer.

You have to know the music. When time allows and it's not an emergency gig, I show how organized and prepared I am by not only learning the songs, but I also learn all the live arrangements of their songs. So if someone in the band says, "Oh, that's not sounding right," I can ask if they're referencing something they did in a live version at Coachella last year or if they are referencing something from their Rock and Rio set. I'll have a chart for that, too!

Personality-wise, you have to be flexible and accommodating yet very confident and commanding at the same time. Most artists want a drummer that helps them feel comfortable and confident in their performance. You want them to feel like there are no problems in the world.

Every gig has layers, and you have to cover all the bases. You have to make sure you know the material, your gear sounds good, and you're locked in with the band and the click. Then there's showmanship and stage presence. It's about figuring out what people want and like and providing that to the best of your abilities.



You've used very stripped-down setups with Shakira as well as massive hybrid kits. How are you approaching the music for the 2025 tour?

Within a two-plus hour concert, Shakira loves to bounce around from genre to genre. She loves singing rock music, ballads, acoustic stuff, world music, Afrobeat, reggaeton, and things that sound like being in a club in Ibiza. I am trying to cover all these genres as authentically as possible, whether it's playing bongos or sampling everything from the record and playing it on an electronic kit.

You've toured with a hybrid kit for a long time. Was that something that always interested you, or was it something that you learned because it was a necessity?

I've always been interested in electronics and electronic music. I'm a product of the eighties, and there were tons of synth-pop

and all sorts of things going on then. I love Depeche Mode, Nine Inch Nails, and Massive Attack. I like the sound of electronic drums as much as I do acoustic drums. However, I would never force it because I don't want to bring anything to a gig that I don't have to.

I know this is going to sound like a shocker, but I don't like big drumsets. My kind of Zen simplicity outlook toward life is that I want a clean slate if I can have one. I only add things when I think they're going to help the music or that the artist would like it.

I've been playing with Shakira since 1998. I started out playing a four-piece kit, and it grew from there because of different songs that she added to the set list or things she challenged me to do. It's partly job security, too. I don't want to be replaced by machines, so I decided to learn about them.

Now I can do any level of drum programming, running playback, or sampling. It was around 2005 when Shakira had a couple of songs where she wanted to sound exactly like the record. I got an Akai sampler and sampled the sounds off the record, and I triggered everything from an electric kit. So I had this additional rig that was only around for a few songs, and I'd have to jump back and forth. But it worked. Things just expanded from that point on.

A Shakira tour seems like a massive undertaking to plan out, especially with having to deal with multiple kits, sampling, and all that. How does everything come together?

Gradually. [laughs] If the plan is to start working on a batch of songs, I'll ask if I can get the sounds from the record, and I'll work at home on getting that aspect prepared. I'll chop up the kicks, snares, sound effects, toms, 808 drops—whatever. I'll sample more than I need, and I label everything meticulously.

Then I have to think about how to approach playing each song and map it out. Sometimes it's easier to play the kick with my left hand on a pad. It comes down to what layout is best, coordination-wise, for each song. Then I set all the levels to where I think they sound balanced.

Are you sending your sounds to the front-of-house engineer with the levels set, or do they do most of the mixing?

I try to mix everything myself. First I'll have a headphone mix, and I'll go from song A to B to C and make sure all the levels are as even as possible. If the engineer asks me to adjust something, I can easily do so. So what I'm sending is balanced already, but they'll tweak as needed.

How would you adjust your approach if you had a gig that required hybrid drumming in a small club or bar with minimal sound check, or you're using backline gear?

I've done those gigs. I am a big fan of the Roland SPD-SX. I'll have all the songs loaded on that, and I'll send two stereo channels to the PA, usually separating the low sounds and the high sounds. I split it up that way so that the engineer can mix them as needed. I can throw that in a suitcase and have all my electronic sounds with me and then rent a DW kit for the venue. If I'm pressed for space, I can simply load everything on a USB stick and rent an SPD-SX and load the sounds.

If you're playing a really small place with a really small PA you have to be careful bringing in electronics because it risks sounding like you're whacking a piece of rubber to the audience. Some percussion might be better suited for those intimate environments. If you're going to do hybrid stuff in smaller venues, your actual live drums can't be louder than the electronics. You have to learn how to balance the blend and tune your acoustic drums to best accompany the electronics so the transition between your acoustic kit and electronic pads isn't so jarring. Muting your acoustic kit with towels to make them sound more processed usually works well in those situations.

In mid-sized venues, sometimes the opposite is true, where the PA makes the front-of-house mix sound great but the vibe on stage suffers. I had an experience a few years ago when I was playing a gig with an electronic artist. We did a couple of rehearsals, and they wanted me to play all the songs just using the SPD-SX. I suggested that some of the songs would sound better using a real kick and snare because I felt it would hit the

audience a little better that way. But it was their gig, and they wanted it to be electronic. Then when we got to the sound check, the artist said, "I just don't feel it on stage. I don't feel the drums!" Stage wedges never accurately translate the energy of a band, so we ended up using a real kick and snare.

It's good to know how to utilize electronics just as much as it is to be able to play some percussion. You don't have to be an expert, but if you can competently incorporate those elements into your drumming, you'll be able to cover almost any gig that comes your way.

How do you approach being the new person in a band situation versus how you approach working with new members as a veteran to help them acclimate?

For the Shakira organization, every tour starts with a couple of people from the last tour and some new faces, either because of availability or because she just wants to try something new. That extends to crew, management, make-up artists, wardrobe, et cetera.

I want her to walk in on day one feeling confident, so I do everything I can to use my experience to make sure that every new player gets up to speed as quickly as possible. I try to give them a cheat sheet on what makes this gig work well and warn them on what will train wreck it. I always want everyone to feel comfortable and be themselves while also helping avoid some speed bumps. I've hired most of the people in Shakira's band over the last twenty-five years.

When I'm the new person, I do the opposite. I try to be as prepared as I can, and I ask questions to the veterans. I seek out all the things I'd want the person coming into the Shakira camp to know. Sometimes they have no answers for me, and sometimes they're very specific.

How long were the preparations for this tour?

It starts much earlier before I get a call. It starts with Shakira getting together a creative team to design the entire look and stage concept. I believe they started spring of 2024. I was brought in around September, and the tour kicked off in February.

MAIN DRUMKIT

DW Stainless Steel 8x12 and 9x13 rack toms, 14x16 and 16x18 floor toms, 16x22 bass drum

SNARE DRUMS

6.5x14 Ludwig Black Beauty, 7x13 DW black nickel over brass, 6" LP mini

PERCUSSION

Doumbek, LP Galaxy bongos, TreeWorks wind chimes, LP finger cymbals, Colombian maracas

CYMBALS

Sabian Cymbals 12" HHX Evolution splash, hi-hat stack (10" Mini china, 10" Complex splash, 8" HH splash), 14" HHX Groove Hats, 18" HHX Legacy crash, 10" HHX Evolution splash, 22" HHX Anthology ride, 19" HHX Legacy crash, hi-hat stack (12" Mini Hat, 10" HH splash, 12" Aero splash), 19" Paragon china, and 40" gong

HARDWARE

DW Super Rack, 9000 Series Air throne, 5000 Series hi-hat, 5000 Series double pedals

ELECTRONICS

MacBook Air, iConnectivity PlayAudio IU, Roland TD-50 module, TM-2 trigger module, SPD-30 Octapad, KD-140 kick pad, KT-10 trigger pedals, PD-125X trigger pad, PDX-8 trigger pads, BT-1 bar trigger, RT-30H acoustic trigger, RT-30K acoustic kick trigger

STICKS

Vic Firth 5AB drumsticks, Steve Gadd signature brushes, TI timpani mallets, TMBI timbale sticks, GB3 gong mallets

DRUMHEADS

Remo Coated CS White Dot snare tops, Clear Ambassador snare bottoms, Coated Emperor tom tops, Ebony Ambassador tom bottoms, Renaissance Powerstroke 3 kick batter, Ebony Powerstroke 3 kick resonant

ACCESSORIES

Canopus 20-Strand Vintage snare wires, LowBoy felt bass drum beaters, Jerry Harvey Audio I6 in-ears

TIMBALE SETUP

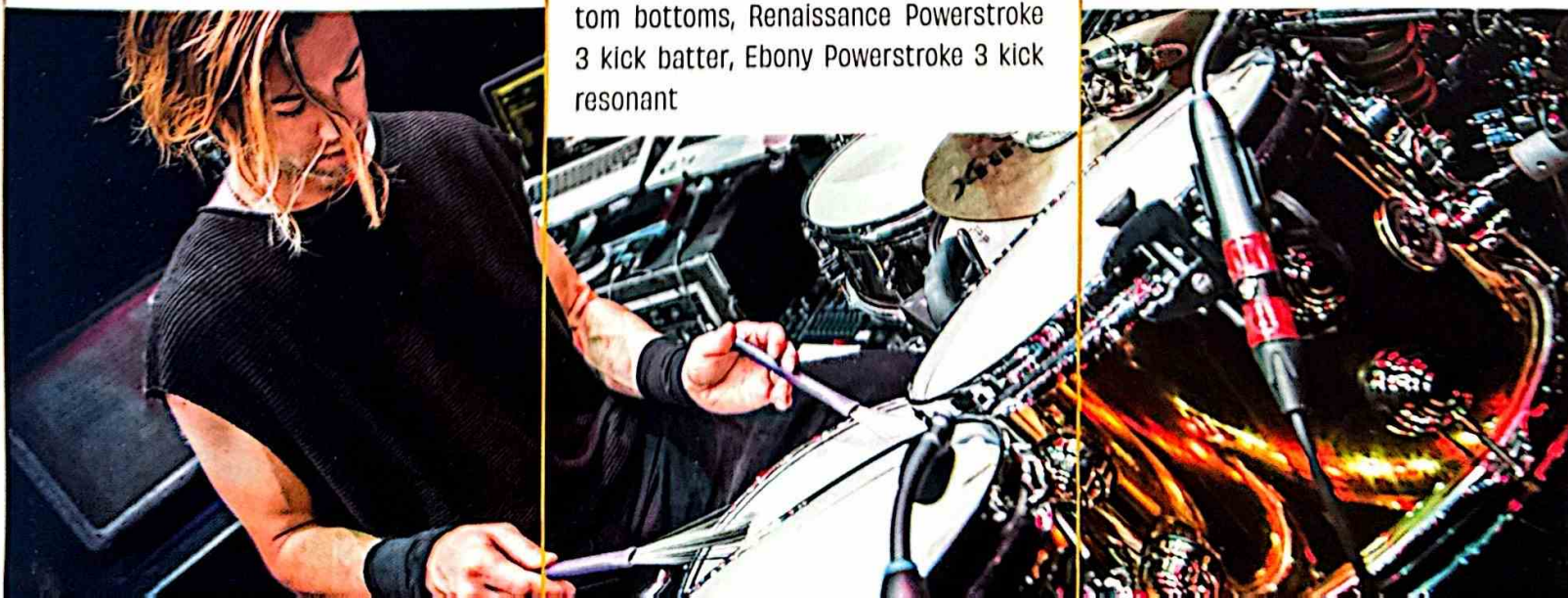
LP Tito Puente 14"/15" timbales, Stealth Jam Block, Salsa Mambo Bell, Salsa Cha Cha Bell, Sabian 16" HHX Evolution crash, Roland SPD-SX Pro multipad

B-STAGE ACOUSTIC KIT

12x20 DW bass drum, 5x14 DW maple snare, LP Richie Garcia bongos, Sabian 14" Artisan hi-hats, DW 5000 Series single pedal, LowBoy felt beater, TreeWorks chimes

EXTRA PERCUSSION

Colombian tambora, llamador, alegre, guache shaker, and guaracha guiro; LP caixa snare, merengue guiro, djembe, Brazilian surdo, and congas; Argentinian bombo leguero; Remo Egyptian riq



You narrow down a set list from maybe sixty songs down to thirty, and then you start coming up with sequences for a set list and some arrangements. You try to do a lot of that ahead of time. Then it's time to assemble the band and crew. Every department starts in its own space. For the band, we'll start in a small rehearsal space working on arrangements and then scale up to a larger rehearsal space. We work six days a week from about 10:30 in the morning to 1 a.m.

There are so many moving parts: lights, video, sound production, and staging that involves conveyor belts, trapdoors, and laser beams. We're planning for all the choreography and wardrobe changes that we have to be aware of to ensure all the arrangements hit all specific beats.

As it evolves, there are inevitably going to be changes. If Shakira can't get from here to there in time, we might need to add an extra eight measure or change the way the stage is set up. And any change impacts every department.

We can't rent a stadium for months to prepare, so it's a continual scaling-up process, changing venues every couple of weeks to bigger ones so we can start to add more elements.

Wherever a tour kicks off, are you in that city for a couple of extra days to make sure the show is solid?

Yeah, that's how most tours operate on this scale. You try to get the load-in to be a couple of days ahead of time, so you can tighten all the last loose ends. They call those full-production rehearsals. It could be two days or two weeks. You just set up in a big venue and start running the show to make sure everything is as seamless as can be.

What is your favorite stage of a tour? Is it opening night, the last night, or somewhere in the middle?

The first triumph is getting a full run-through without stopping. That feels like you just won the Olympics! Sometimes you don't get a full run-through until the night before opening night. Other times you feel like you're ready weeks ahead and every rehearsal is smooth sailing.



Once we get on the road, I want to get to the point where everything feels relaxed and smooth and all the transitions are working between songs. On smaller tours, I don't need to think that much about what we do between songs three and four. I just take a sip of water as needed and re-tune my snare or whatever. On pop tours like this, everything is choreographed down to the second. So I view it less like a twenty-five-song set and more like a two-hour experience. There's no real break because within all your breaks are things that *have* to happen.

When you get to that point of smooth sailing, what is your favorite thing to focus on? Is it the crowd? Is it just listening to what everybody else is playing?

It's the drumming! I get back to the basics where I can enjoy the act of drumming. If anything, I'm thinking about using good posture, breathing correctly, and working on my pocket to make sure every song is sitting exactly where I want it to sit.

Do you record each set and listen back while traveling?

It depends. Back in the day, I recorded shows just to see how the performance was translating. I like recording videos to see what I could be doing better, and I'll work on anything I think I can improve upon.

With all your experience, are you still critical of yourself?

Yeah, I'm hard on myself but in a way where I don't beat myself up. I'm not abusive like, "Oh, I suck!" I don't have that kind of self-talk, but I do have the self-talk where I'm like, "I think that could be better." Just being aware of areas where there's room for improvement. At the end of every year, I should be better—I shouldn't be the same or worse.

What do you do with your downtime and what do you do for self-care while on the road?

I try to be consistent with eating well. I'm not much of a sleeper, but I try to get enough sleep where I'm not deteriorating. I like to be productive on tour, so I don't feel like I'm wasting away in a tour bus or hotel room. I like to read, exercise, or go for walks. I like to enjoy every city that I'm in, so it doesn't feel like Groundhog Day night after night.

I like to warm up at the venue by playing on a drum pad or drumset backstage, doing some yoga and stretching, and maybe listening to some inspirational music, like Brian Blade.

I don't overeat. I don't eat too much before the show, and I don't eat anything after the show. I also socialize with everyone on the tour. When I get to the venue, I say hello to everyone—the camera operators, caterers, et cetera. We're all on the same team. Sometimes it's a hundred people, but I try to be on a first-name basis with everyone, and we're all here in part to put on this amazing show.

Do you maintain other writing and recording projects while you're on tour?

Always! I have a home studio, but I don't like things to feel like when I go on tour, everything else in my life stops. I might be in a different location, but I don't like to turn down opportunities to work with other musicians. So I look for studios along the way that I could use for an afternoon that have a good-sounding drumset in them. I'm fortunate enough that after a lot of years doing this professionally, I have a lot of musician friends all over the world. Even yesterday at rehearsal, the keyboardist asked if I could record some percussion on the song he's producing. We had all these percussion instruments around, so when we took a dinner break from rehearsal and everyone left the room, I recorded all the parts on my iPhone using Voice Memos, dumped them into a session, lined them all up, and it came out great! I didn't have to use a recording studio or even bother the engineer to lend me some microphones or anything. ●