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Shakira's BRENDAN BUCKLEY

Joe Chambers

Yamaha's A Night In The Pocket

CONTENTS

Photo by Nicolas Geraldin

BRENDAN BUCKLEY,

NOT JUST PLAYING PATTERNS WITH SHAKIRA

Brendan Buckley is one of those drummers who has created a long career by playing with big name artists around the world, and lesser name artists regionally, yet you might not even know his name. You are just as likely to see Brendan in stadiums with Shakira as you are in smaller venues with local acts. His career started with Elsten Torres and the band Fulano de Tal. He has played with artists such as Damien Rice, Tegan & Sara, and Miley Cyrus, and he has held the gig with international sensation Shakira for over 27 years. He toured with Morrissey for the past 3 years, played in Perry Farrell's solo band, and worked with several Asian superstars including Jeff Chang, JJ Lin, and Leehom Wang. Brendan brings to every gig exactly what the music needs, and his devotion to authenticity in playing South American, Caribbean, and Arabic musical and drumming styles is amazing. As he says, "I'm not just playing patterns."

From his involvement in the Miami music scene earlier in his career, he brings a deep knowledge of Latin music and drumming to the table. And as a longtime Los Angeles resident, he has joined the rotation of first call LA drummers. We discussed his early life growing up as a drummer in New Jersey, the decisions surrounding him becoming a professional musician, the life-changing experience of going to the University of Miami's Frost School of Music and navigating through a career in music while holding prestigious gigs with Shakira and others.

Photo by Nicolas Geradin

MD: How did being a drummer from New Jersey influence your career choice and path?

BB: I am a very proud Jerseyite. I'm from Mount Arlington, which is a small town on Lake Hopatcong. I grew up there, and my parents still live in the same house where I grew up. I love it there, and I go back a couple times a year to visit.

I've always loved music. When I was a kid, I took piano lessons and played trumpet in the school band. In the mid 80's, I was super fascinated with MTV. I watched music videos all the time. I started going to a lot of concerts in both clubs and stadiums. I went everywhere that I could hear live music. I saw concerts almost every weekend, and I fell in love with music and particularly the drums. At the age of 13, I started playing the drums. There was a drum set in the back corner of the band room at my middle school, and no one was using it. During breaks, I would just fiddle around on it. When I was 14, I bought a used Pearl Export drum set from my classmate's older brother, and I started practicing in my parents' garage. Throughout my formative years, all I would do was practice, go to see live shows, watch MTV, and play in the school band. I formed a little garage rock band, and at a certain point I asked my band director (Darryl Bott) to recommend a drum teacher. He invited his friend Tommy Igoe to come and teach at my high school, and I started studying with him when I was 15. That changed my trajectory. Tommy was a great teacher for me because he was very challenging. After our first lesson he said, "Next week I want you to come back with three things: a book of manuscript paper, I want you to buy some kind of metronome (preferably a drum machine that we can use to practice), and I want you to get a subscription to *Modern Drummer* because I want you to be in touch with the drum community and what's going on currently and historically". The fact that you and I are doing a *Modern Drummer* interview today is a full-circle moment for me. I continued to study with Tommy throughout high school, and it was fantastic. When I graduated from high school, I went down to study at the University of Miami: Frost School of Music.

I've always loved music. When I was a kid, I took piano lessons and played trumpet in the school band. In the mid 80's, I was super fascinated with MTV. I watched music videos all the time. I started going to a lot of concerts in both clubs and stadiums. I went everywhere that I could hear live music.

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MD: What kind of things did you study with Tommy?

BB: We did a lot of rudimental stuff. He has a routine called The Lifetime Warm-Up which is a series of rudiments that you go through. You add a new rudiment every week if you can handle it. He directed our percussion ensemble and the marching band drum line, so I joined those. He taught me jazz so I could play in the big band. We listened to a lot of Buddy Rich and Nick Ceroli and did a bunch of reading and big band playing. We also worked on bass drum syncopation stuff. He had me playing rock beats with all the different variations of bass drum patterns. This was between the ages of 15 to 18. We started adding a little bit of jazz-fusion, some Latin music, and things like that.

MD: Did you go to the University of Miami right out of high school?

BB: When I was 17, I started checking out all sorts of music schools. I applied to a half-dozen music programs, and I wound up choosing the University of Miami: Frost School of Music. I moved down there when I was 18, and that began my second chapter in studying music. That was a whole different world. I was surrounded by all these different teachers, influences, and cultures. More than anything, the student body is one of the best things about going to a music school. Of course, it's the teachers, the bands, the curriculum. But it's also about learning from the other students your own age. You're all learning together and sharing music with one another. I learned so much from my peers when I was there. It was like a giant laboratory for me. I still stay in touch with many of the people that I went to school with. It was awesome.

MD: What were the discussions like with your parents when you told them that you wanted to go to college as a music major?

BB: What a great question! My parents are both music lovers, but they had no interest in me becoming a musician. They liked me having hobbies. They liked that I played the drums, they liked that I studied piano, and things like that. But they also liked that I played baseball and other sports. All these things were hobbies. My mother is Korean, and she had a vision of me becoming a doctor, lawyer, or an engineer. I was good at academics, and I got good grades, so I was on that path. When I was 17, I had a discussion with my parents. I explained to them that I envisioned the next few years of my life as me going to a college, taking a whole bunch of courses, and trying to get A's. However, while taking those courses, all I was gonna be thinking about was 'where can I practice the drums?' That was going

to be my obsession whichever school I went to. I knew this was going to happen. Therefore, knowing that this was going to happen, maybe I could go someplace where my goal was actually *to practice the drums*. To my parents' credit, although they had no idea what I was talking about, they said, "OK, give it a shot for one year." They encouraged me to find a college where I could go and practice the drums. I applied to all these music schools, and I went to Miami. After one year, I came back and said, "I really like this, can I try it for one more year?" So we tried one more year, and then one more year, until I graduated. For my mother, this was very hard to understand, but she saw that I was serious, so she supported it. It was hard for them at the beginning because I was living on saltines and making 25 bucks a gig. They were concerned. I'm sure they thought, "What's going to happen to our poor child? He's made a bad life choice." However, I was happy, so they stuck with me, and I really thank them for that. They had faith in me.

MD: What would you tell other young drummers who are faced with those decisions today?

BB: I would tell them that you only have one life to live, and you should pursue your passions and your interests. That's important. However, keep in mind that it's very difficult. Whatever you choose is going to be a difficult road.

MD: Especially in the arts.

BB: Yes. You must be prepared for the difficult road. If you're willing to take that road, and all you want to do is play drums, that's great. I'm glad you've figured that out. But you NEED to realize that it's gonna be very hard. It's not a fair road, and it's not a steady road. If you can come to grips with that, and that's OK with you, then you'll be all right. The other thing I would say is to avoid incurring lots of debt along the way. That's the big problem when people talk about music schools. You study music at college, and you come out with $100,000 of debt, and you're playing $25 gigs for the next 10 years. You're never going to pay off your debt. So, if you want to travel and go to a conservatory and study music, go ahead do these things, but do them without incurring lots of student loans or credit card debt. If you're thinking "I'm just going to put all this on a credit card and pay it off later," you're going to be slave to that debt for the rest of your life.

Photo by Nicolas Geradin

After our first lesson he (Tommy Igoe) said, "Next week I want you to come back with three things: a book of manuscript paper, I want you to buy some kind of metronome (preferably a drum machine that we can use to practice), and I want you to get a subscription to Modern Drummer because I want you to be in touch with the drum community and what's going on currently and historically".

MD: What did Tommy tell you when you were 17 and asking him these questions?

BB: I had no idea after studying with him for 2 1/2 years if I was good or not. So, I asked him after one lesson. I didn't want to put him on the spot, but I said, 'I am interested in studying music and becoming a professional drummer. Do you think I have what it takes? Please be honest with me. If I don't think I have what it takes, just tell me right now. I can take it.' He laughed and said, "Do I think you *could* be a drummer? Yes. Do I think you *should* pursue a career in music? No." He continued, "I'm saying that to your face now, so you don't pursue a career in music and then get mad at me when it's difficult. Yes, you *could* be a drummer. No, I don't think you *should* be a drummer. But if you *still* want to pursue a drumming career after me telling you that, then go for it!" His father was a great jazz drummer named Sonny Igoe, and even his father told him not to become a drummer. Tommy told his father, "No way dad, I'm doing it," and he did it. It's almost like you need someone to say, "Please don't do this," and you try anyway, which is much better than having a bunch of people puff you up with "*you're perfect, you're amazing, you're the all-star,*" and then finding out that it's A LOT harder than you thought.

MD: When you got to college, what were your first impressions?

BB: My first impression was, "Holy cow! How did all these other drummers get so good so young?" I was around guys my own age that already sounded like Jack DeJohnette, and I was still barely understanding Art Blakey. I remember everyone was listening to Jon Christensen (the drummer from the European Keith Jarrett quartet) and I couldn't even find beat one. Everyone at school that was my own age sounded like they had been playing for 12 years longer than me. It was crazy. But it lit a fire under my ass. I knew that I really had to catch up because I was way further behind than I had initially thought. It was proven to me that I needed to practice, so I started practicing four to five hours on weekdays, and 13 hours day on the weekends. For my entire first year of college, I had no life. I didn't see a movie, I didn't watch a TV show, I didn't do anything! I just went to school and practiced. The summer after my freshman year, I spent the whole summer practicing every


Photo by Chris Cornejo

day, all day long. I made a long list of things I had to work on every day. And I practiced for 12 hours a day all summer because I felt like I was so far behind my drumming peers at school. I think that was a good experience for me.

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MD: What type of stuff were you practicing during that summer?

BB: I needed to learn how to play in more of a small group jazz setting, as opposed to big band jazz. I came there with more of the big band style of Buddy Rich, but I needed to learn how to play more bebop and slightly freer avant-garde jazz styles that I was not hip to at the time. I was starting to learn about more of the fusion drummers and listening to those types of bands. I was practicing a lot of reading, a lot of chart reading, and developing the chops to play the drum set at different volumes. I was getting into David Garibaldi and all the ghost note accents and syncopations. I was listening to a lot of Dennis Chambers, Vinnie Colaiuta, and Dave Weckl. I was just trying to decipher what was going on because when those guys played it sounded like another language, and I didn't know how they were executing that stuff. I was transcribing a lot of Philly Joe Jones at the time and trying to learn how to play his phrasing because I was super into him. I was starting to dabble in Tony Williams and Elvin Jones and watching how they were (kind of) breaking the rules of jazz playing when they were playing so freely. And on top of all that, because I was going to school in Miami, I was trying to learn a lot of Latin and world rhythms. I (incorrectly) thought that if I knew a Bossa Nova, a Samba, and maybe a Mambo, I knew enough. At school, I realized that every country had dozens of rhythms that you could learn, and there were dozens of countries. I would play with friends from Venezuela, and they would show me some rhythms, and I could barely find beat one. Then I would talk to my friends from the Dominican Republic, and they would show me something else. My friends from Cuba and Brazil were showing me cool things and I became absolutely fascinated with all the different rhythms from all their countries, and how to learn them first on hand percussion, and then how to adapt them to the drum set.

MD: That sounds like quite a summer. What music were you listening to?

BB: When I was younger and in high school, I loved *everything* from the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Police, and Led Zeppelin. I liked The Beatles, I listened to a lot of heavy metal and punk rock music. I liked The Cure, grunge music, and I was into Alex Van Halen.

At college, it was a whole other world. Anything with Steve Gadd, especially *Breaking Away* by Al Jarreau. But honestly, anything Steve Gadd plays on is a masterpiece to me. I saw James Taylor play live once with Carlos Vega, and the band was so good that I went home a fan. Their *Live* album with Carlos Vega is a ridiculous record. It is a master class in tasteful drumming, sound, feel, and taste. The drumming on that record was everything that I wanted to be. I was a gigantic Bill Stewart fan and I love those first two John Scofield records that

he played on. I saw Brian Blade play with the Joshua Redman Quartet, and his drumming made me jump out of my chair. I can't think of many jazz drummers that make me jump up and scream, but his drumming did that to me. He's so passionate and good-spirited. I'll listen to anything Brian Blade plays on. There are three Chick Corea acoustic records with Brian and Christian McBride, and I especially love the second one. The musicianship is so high, and the communication is so elevated. In the end, he's not even *playing* the drums, he's *dancing* on the drums. Tony Williams on Miles Davis *Four and More* is one of the boldest statements of drumming I've ever heard in my life. His drumming on that album is so inspirational. Dennis Chambers on John Scofield's *Blue Matter* and *Loud Jazz* is just incredible! I loved Vinnie Colaiuta's drumming on Sting's *Ten Summoners Tales*. And Omar Hakim's drumming on Sting's *Dream of the Blue Turtles* was big for me.

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Omar was a major influence on me. Think about it, he played with David Bowie, Weather Report, Chic, Madonna, and Sting. I always wondered how he was juggling all those genres? I actually bumped into Omar a couple years ago. He and I were just hanging out backstage at a gig, and I was trying not to fanboy him. About an hour into our conversation, I broke down and admitted, 'Dude, I'm actually a huge fan. I had your VHS tapes, I tried to sit like you, I tried to move my arms like you. I wanted to be you.' He was very nice about it.

MD: Did you have previous exposure to Latin-American and Caribbean rhythms before getting to college?

BB: Yes, Tommy gave me a crash course. To his credit, he tried to squeeze in as much as he could before I went to college. But being a 17-year-old kid, you can only learn so much in one year. Then, when I moved to Miami, I was hanging out with the people that actually grew up playing those styles of music. They would show me that "*this* is how we do it where we grew up, and *this* is how we play that style of music." That is a whole other thing. They had a different swing and a different way of interpreting certain subdivisions that was fantastic.

MD: And more authentic.

BB: Absolutely! On top of all that, I was also studying orchestral percussion. That meant lots of timpani, marimba, and a ton of "simple" things. We spent a lot of time learning how to play the triangle, and the tambourine, how to play crash cymbals, and all these different techniques that orchestral guys use. I was into it. I wasn't one of those *"I'm a drum set player"* guys. I really wanted to learn the right way to play a triangle and the right way to play crash cymbals. There were fantastic orchestral percussionists at U.M. that would blow my mind with four-mallet marimba stuff and xylophone passages.

MD: What was your major? Were you a percussion major, a jazz drum set major, or a music education major?

BB: I managed to carve my own way through the music program

Photo by Nicolas Geradin

by double-majoring in music education and jazz performance. I think they invented that major for me because I got into the school as a music education major, but they saw that I wanted to take a lot of the jazz courses. I don't know if the University of Miami is still this way, but at the time, if you became friends with the professors and the Dean of music, every semester they would ask what you wanted to work on next semester. And if they could squeeze it into your curriculum, they would do it. Towards the end of every semester, I would go in with a list of courses that I wanted to take the next semester, and they would say, "As long as you do *this, this, and this*, then you can take those other classes." That was how I was able to study orchestration, big band arranging, and jazz theory.

I wasn't one of those "I'm a drum set player" guys. I really wanted to learn the right way to play a triangle and the right way to play crash cymbals.

MD: Who were your teachers there?

BB: U.M. had a lot of great teachers. My first teacher was Steve Bagby, who was a fantastic jazz drummer and a super hip dude. He was great for me because he really taught me to chill out.

Photo by Paul Davies

He was one of those teachers that would put on a record, and we'd just listen to music. I would be asking him to show me some exercises, and he'd say, "Relax, we're going to listen to some music today." At the time, I really needed a person like that in my life. I had another drum set teacher named Steven Rucker who is still a good friend. He was very well-organized and logical about studying. He'd say, "This semester we're going to work on A, B, and C. Next semester is D, E, and F." He had a full curriculum for all four years, and he was great for that. There were so many other teachers there that really helped me out too. There were orchestral percussion teachers like Ney Rosauro, Harry Hawthorne, and Scott Deal. And then there were all the graduate students and upperclassmen. If you were not a jerk, they would take you under their wing and say, "Check out this record," and "Let me show you this cool thing I'm doing with my high hat." It was a great environment to learn if you were open to it.

MD: What was the stuff that you learned from your peers at school?

BB: Mostly, just checking out new (to me) music. There were only so many CD's I could buy in one year, and there was always some guy who had the coolest music that I'd never heard before. At school, friends hipped me to a lot of world music, drummers from Africa, drummers from Bulgaria. There would be a CD that someone would tell me to check out, and my mind would explode. That was the biggest thing. There was always a style of music, a time signature, or an approach that I had never heard before. Even with music from the past, someone would say, "If you like this guy, do you know this guy?" Tracking drumming and music backwards through the history of drumming was always a learning experience. Another thing was learning about the *timeline of drummers*, and who influenced who. That was very important, and that came from my peers.

MD: When you were at school, what did you see as your post college career path?

BB: I had no plan. I was kind of living month to month. I knew what I needed to work on, but the main thing I thought about was that I must play all the time. Every day I *needed* to be practicing, rehearsing, jamming, performing, or going out and watching my friends play. I knew I needed to be doing that all the time. That was my mindset. I had to have sticks in my hands,

be listening to music, or be going to see a great drummer play, every day! Through that obsession, by the time I was a junior at school, I was already working seven nights a week in Miami. I'd study all day long and I would do different kinds of gigs at night. I was doing cover band gigs, jazz quartets, backing up singer-songwriters. That was my transition into being a professional. It wasn't like I went to school for four years, then I graduated, then I started to learn how to be a professional drummer. From the time I was a freshman, I had started performing at night, started making connections, and started learning what worked on a gig, what didn't work on a gig, how to get hired, and how to get fired. I was learning all that while I was a student. By the time school was over, I had extra time to work. It wasn't like, "Oh, I have to start working." It was, "Oh, now I have even more time to rehearse, jam, see other drummers play gigs, and do recordings." It was a good transition for me.

My career began by working with my classmates at different gigs around town. By the time you're done with school, hopefully you've made enough of an impression on the local music scene that you get calls for bigger gigs and/or sub work. If you have impressed the elder statesman drummers in town to cover for them and not fall flat on your face… then they'll think of you in the future when they have three shows on a Friday, and they can't do them all. That is the professional network of drumming. Having other drummers who are busy think of you when they need someone to fill in for them; that is almost everything. I still get work through professional drummer friends of mine who call me up to say, "I've got a conflict. Are you available the first week of September to cover for me?" In return, you can do the same thing for someone else. It just gets passed around. There's a drum brotherhood, a large circle of people that are all trying to keep everyone working.

MD: There are no "little gigs," but what was the first gig that came your way that *felt* like a "big gig"?

BB: That's a great question. Back in the day, if I had a gig at Barnes and Noble on a Saturday afternoon, I felt like, 'This is going to be *the one* that makes it for me.' I was so excited to play with anyone. But when I graduated from school, I was working with a singer-songwriter named Elsten Torres and his band Fulano de Tal. They were signed to BMG, so immediately after college I had a record deal, and we recorded an album. We started touring right away, and like every musician knows, being in an original band can be a slog. We didn't just become Guns 'n' Roses overnight. We toured and slept in the back of our van. But we were happy just writing, rehearsing, performing, and opening for other artists. It was so much fun.

This was the mid 90's, so indie rock was at its peak, and I was seeing so many great bands and meeting cool drummers all around the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Mexico. I also had one foot in the recording scene in Miami. I knew a lot of great engineers and producers that would bring me into different projects to play one song on this album and three songs on that album. I was slowly learning how to *not sound terrible* on recordings. I mean… I could play the drums, I could play to a click track, but somehow, I would listen back and still sound like garbage. I had to learn how to sound *good* under microphones and learn how to groove a little better to a click. Just "playing to a metronome" is not grooving. I had to *learn* how to do that. Back then, I would nail the click, and I'd still sound super terrible, so I had to learn how to make it groove. I also had to learn which snare tunings and cymbal sounds worked in different environments.

I (incorrectly) thought that if I knew a Bossa Nova, a Samba, and maybe a Mambo, I knew enough. At school, I realized that every country had dozens of rhythms that you could learn, and there were dozens of countries. I would play with friends from Venezuela, and they would show me some rhythms, and I could barely find beat one.

About a year after I graduated, I was at a recording studio and the producer got a phone call that they were looking for a new rhythm section for Julio Iglesias. The producer asked me if I would want to audition and I said, "Absolutely!!!" Other than Fulano de Tal, that was the first big gig I got offered. I auditioned and got the gig and started touring with him and his Miami all-star band of great players. I was filling in for a drummer named Lee Levin, who was one of my favorite drummers in Miami, so I was subbing for a local drum legend. I had to learn how to use samplers, triggers, sequences. I was using in-ear monitors for the first time. There was a big crew, and I knew that I could learn a lot. I did that gig for about six months and then I got a call to record an album for Shakira. I did her album *Dónde Están Los Ladrones*, and that became the gig that I have been doing ever since.

MD: Since you have had many Latin music gigs like Fulano de Tal, Julio Iglesias, and Shakira, how deeply have you gotten into learning Latin music?

BB: Living in Miami helped a lot because I had so many friends that were from the Caribbean, South America, and Central America. My musical friends would invite me to be part of their


Photo by Paul Davies

groups. You would think it would be the opposite. "*Get this Irish Korean drummer from New Jersey away from us! He is the furthest thing from what we need.*" But surprisingly, they would invite me to jam with them. They would tell me, "Play this rhythm. This works for this song," and they would sing or show me a rhythm that I would imitate. That was how it started. Many times, I couldn't even pronounce the name of whatever I was playing. But they would sing something, and I would just play it, and keep doing that. I would try to remember where beat one was while I was playing, and that's how I learned.

MD: I'm sure how that's how they learned in their cultures as well.

BB: That evolved into *what to do if someone changes the pattern and* learning different rhythmic variations. It wasn't like I just went and read a bunch of drum books. It was more like survival, and *what do I need to play to make it through this gig?* That is actually a much better way to learn because everything is a lot more appropriate.

If you just learn Latin rhythms from a book, you don't know what works and what tends to piss off the conga player because you're playing his part. Playing with percussionists is a great experience in "how to be empathetic to what's going on around you." You become conscious of not stepping on anyone's toes. Music is subjective, and everyone has an opinion. You might learn a rhythm that works with one guy on one night, and the next night you play with another guy, and he hates that rhythm and likes it better when you play *this*. You're learning that vocabulary is a very fluid, open, and flexible thing. You learn to be sensitive. For example, one guy might like quarter notes, another guy likes eighth notes. This guy likes subdivisions, and that guy likes downbeats. This guy likes low sounds, and that guy likes high sounds. You start to learn that it's not cut and dry, it's not black or white. It's whatever works for the situation with those people on that night. There's a lot of trial and error, so you've got to have the opportunity to try… and make errors.

MD: So how did you land the Shakira gig?

BB: I was slowly building relationships with different producers and engineers at the various recording studios in Miami, and one friend of mine was an engineer at Gloria and Emilio Estefan's Crescent Moon studio. He called me up one day and said, "There's a singer from South America coming in and she wants a rock drummer on her next record, so I thought of you." I went in and set up. It was just me, the engineer, and the producer. They played me a demo of a song, and an hour later a girl walked in and said, "Hi, nice to meet

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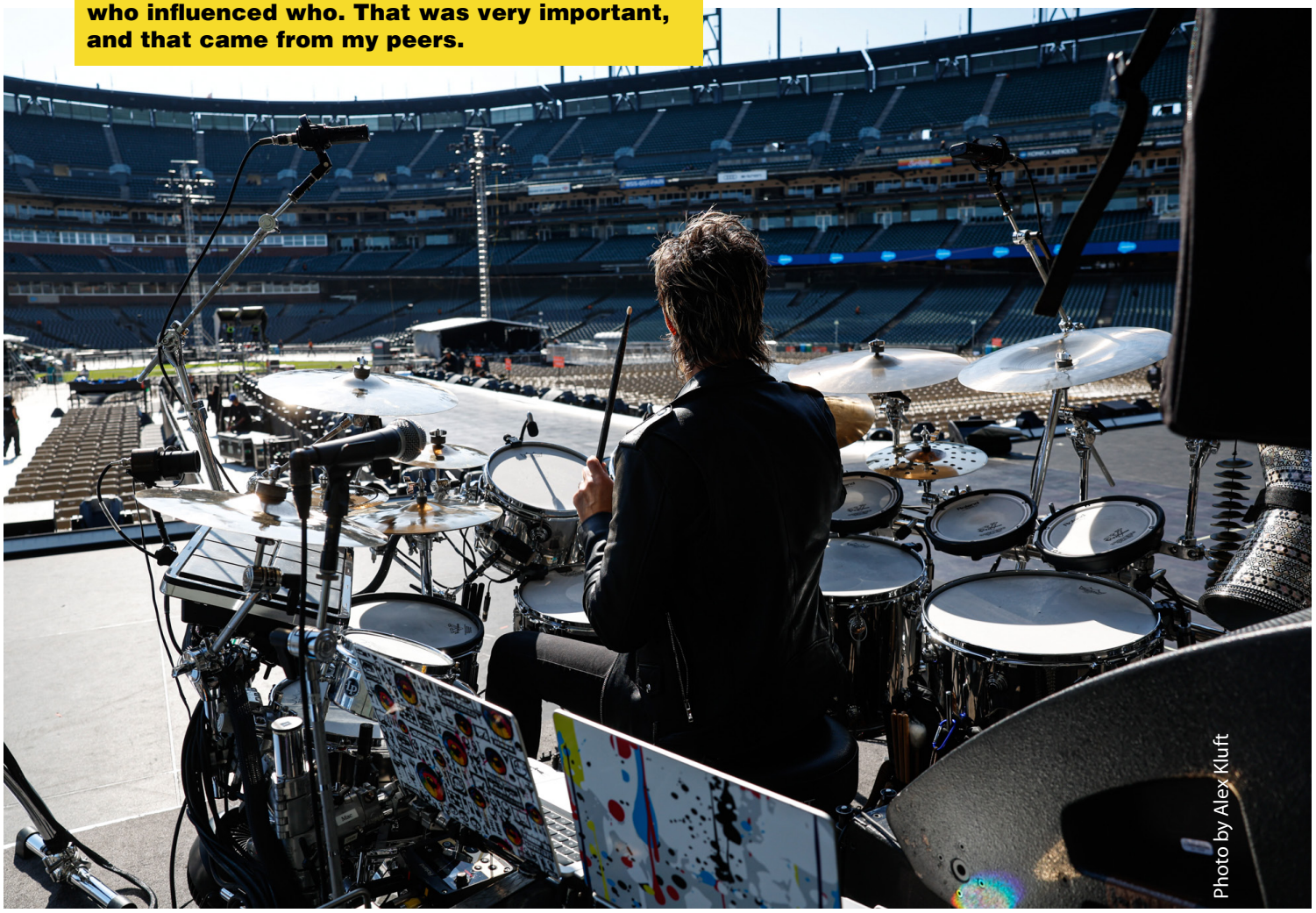

Photo by Alex Kluft

you, did you learn the song?" They asked for my opinions on a few parts, and we played it down two times. They said it was great, and asked if I wanted to come back and do another one tomorrow? That was Shakira. She already had one hit album in South America at that point. I wasn't super familiar with her music, but some of my friends had her first record. I came back the next day and we did another song; I came back the next day we did another song and came back the next day for another song. It was a great experience. I think everyone was having a lot of fun and it was going in a direction that everyone liked. They were trying to capture this kind of Latin-rock-pop-hybrid thing. The engineer's name was Sebastian Krys, and the producer was Luis Fernando Ochoa. I really enjoyed working with both of them. Shakira was great too. She had cool songs, and she really wanted rock drumming on her songs. She would say, "I want this one to sound like Led Zeppelin, this one should sound like Radiohead, this one should sound like Blur, and this one has a Rolling Stones vibe." She had certain approaches that she wanted, and I was into all that music anyway. When the album came out, since I had played drums on the record, they asked if I would like to play some live shows with them too. I agreed, and that became the nucleus of the band that she still has today.

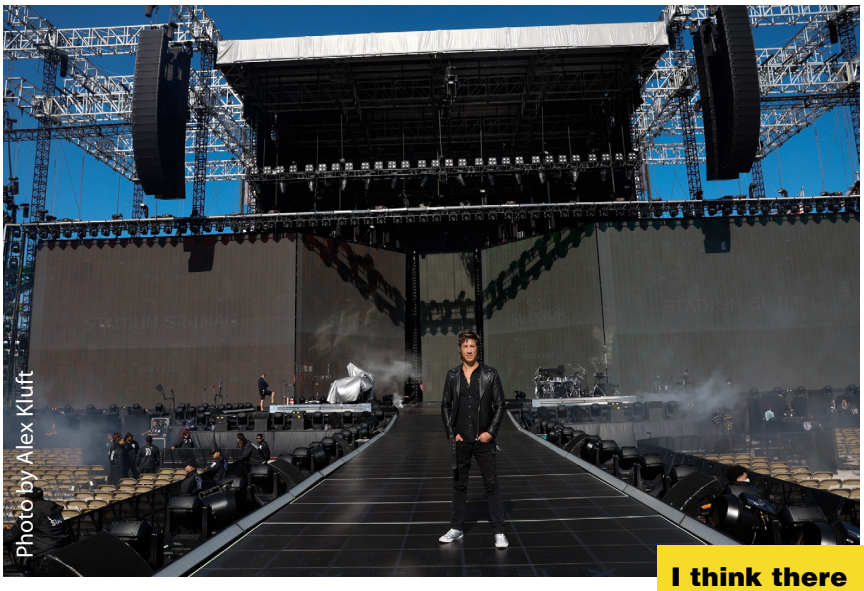
Photo by Alex Kluft

MD: How do you learn tunes?

BB: I have different ways of learning tunes depending on the amount of time I'm given. My preference is to schedule some time to sit down with headphones and a stack of blank paper to listen and chart out the music. My charts are fairly extensive. They look like big band charts with bar numbers, tempos, all the stops, hits, dynamics, accents, and everything. I write out the beats for the different sections of the song, and if I think the fills are very signature, I'll write out the actual fills going into each section. Step two is to take the music and the charts to the drum set. I read the charts down while playing along with the music with some headphones. My next step is playing along with the music without the charts. Next, I play the entire tune with just a metronome without listening to the music. If I can still play the tune correctly top to bottom with only the BPM, and without looking at the chart or listening to the song, I'm pretty much ready to go. If not, I go one step back to see what's happening and check my problem spots. Then I go back again and try to play the tune from memory with only the metronome. Once I can play the song from top to bottom with just the BPM, I feel like I have it in my body. But I'll usually go one step further. If I'm going to perform live with this artist, I like to go to YouTube and check out live versions of the song. I'll make notes of how the live versions are different. 'Do they play it faster live? Do they double that guitar solo? Do they do all these crazy accents in the third verse?' Then I go back and write all those things down in my charts. So, I'll have two versions on the same chart. I'll have the studio version, and I'll have my notes for the live versions. It's all right there, so then when we rehearse for the first time, I have the studio version in my body and mind, and I know what they do live in case they want to do that instead. That way I'm never caught off guard. That's my learning process in a nutshell.

MD: How did you go about fusing Latin, rock, and dance music drumming for Shakira's music?

BB: I think there are certain consistent through-lines in my playing. I always focus on the time, the groove, the accuracy, and being authentic to the styles. Those are things I try to keep constant. I don't want to sound like a chameleon, I want there to be a consistent *through line* in my playing. The things I change are sonics. Maybe certain sounds work better for certain styles. Those are things that I can change while keeping a consistency going on in my approach. It's essential to know authentic approaches for each style. If you're going to play rock, what does rock sound like? And what does rock *really* feel like? If I'm going to be playing disco, I don't want to play it like a rock drummer. If I'm playing EDM four-on-the-floor music, I don't want to play it like a rock drummer. I'll still have the same feel, the same approach, and the same musicality, but I'll try to authentically give the music and the arrangement what it asks for. Those are things I think about. And a lot of that comes from knowing styles, knowing tunings, and knowing the sonics of each style of music. It's the same thing with Latin music. I don't play Latin music like Led Zeppelin or AC/DC. I play it like Latin music.

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MD: How much percussion is on your drum set, and how many percussionists are in the band with you?

BB: In the early years of Shakira's band, I was just playing a rock drum set with a cowbell and a timbale. At that time, we had a percussionist who had his own "enormo-rig." Over the years, I have added more percussion elements. And for the two most recent tours, we didn't use an extra percussionist. Currently, it's just me. I play (almost) everything. Our Cuban violinist covers a

few odds and ends. But really it all depends on the songs and the setlist.

If I could just show up with a kick, snare, and hi hat, I would do that. However, I need to add things depending on the songs. For some songs, I might need to hit electronic triggers. For some songs, I need to play a doumbek or a cajon. For a couple songs, I need to play bongos. Because of those needs, I start adding instruments, and it starts looking like Guitar Center up there. But it's all because of what is asked of me from Shakira and the musical director Tim. If they want me to play a certain instrument on a song, I just juggle whatever is feasible based on how many limbs I have and how much can I cover. My drum/percussion rig changes for every tour.

My goal is to be A+ on every percussion instrument, but if that's not possible, I just try to be suitable. Sometimes, I get together with a few talented percussionist buddies for some "refresher lessons" to keep me up to date on how to play more authentically.

MD: As a drum set player, how do you approach playing hand drums?

BB: Yes, I am a drum set player, but at the University of Miami we all played hand drums. It was part of the school's curriculum.

I enjoy being hip to salsa music. It is important to me to not just play patterns. I even took salsa dance lessons. I wanted to make sure I knew how to play the cowbell parts and feel the music. You can learn patterns, but you're not really learning the music.

I think that is unique to that school. Every drummer that goes to U.M. must learn how to play African, Cuban, and Brazilian hand drums, and we had to learn how to play all the orchestral instruments as well. You got that vast array of approaches at school. After graduation, it was up to you how much you wanted to continue playing percussion. Some guys might think, "I'm done with that, I'm going back to my four-piece drum set." Other guys continued playing percussion.

Something that was very interesting about going to University of Miami was, by having drum set players and hand drummers mixed in the same class, we always jammed together. It is a lot easier to have a drum set player and a conga player on a gig, then to have two drum sets on stage. Playing percussion was a great way for drummers to play together. For one gig, another guy could be the percussionist and you could be the drummer, and you could swap for the next gig. We did that a lot at the U.M. It was very common. You can be a drum set player that also plays orchestral and hand percussion; then you add electronics and programming, and it becomes this universal approach to playing drums.

MD: Talk about playing with percussionists, the do's, and the do not's.

BB: There are different approaches, and you learn by trying different things. Some work better, and some don't. I love the counterpoint of two musicians playing together. For example, in the case of two drum set players, if the other drummer is playing a straight four-on-the-floor groove, I often won't play the same beat because then it's just "two guys doing the same beat" and there's no counterpoint. In that example, I would immediately play around what the other drummer is playing. Maybe I'll do something on the offbeat, maybe I won't play kick or snare, maybe I'll only play the toms, maybe I'll play on the rims of the drums, maybe I'll turn my snares off, maybe I'll turn the beat upside down, maybe I'll displace it, whatever… There are so many things you can do to *not* double what the other person is playing. Sometimes doubling the other person can work, but (to me) that's not as interesting as having two musicians do two different things.

I think that opinion comes from the percussion world. In a salsa band, you have a guy who plays congas, that's his job. You have a guy who plays timbales, that's his job. You have a third guy playing bongos and cowbell, that's his job. The singers will play maracas and claves, that's their job. You put all that together and it sounds like a freight train. All the different parts and different frequencies playing different syncopations, that's what makes it funky. It's the same thing with Brazilian music. You've got the guy playing the surdo, a guy playing the pandeiro- tambourine, you've got a guy playing the tiny drum called the tambourim, you've got someone playing agogo bells, and you've got the guy playing the Brazilian snare drum called the caixa. You have all these people covering the different subdivisions and elements that make it so funky.

Photo by Nicolas Geradin

Of course, when you see Ringo Starr and Jim Keltner play together and they double each other, it sounds fantastic. But I normally prefer to do the "counterpoint thing" where one guy does one thing, and another guy does the opposite thing. Then it glues together into this beat that neither one of them could do

by themselves. The sum of the parts. I like that approach, and I've always tried to use it when I'm playing with percussionists or other drummers.

MD: How long have you been in Shakira's band?

BB: 27 Years.

MD: How has Shakira's gig evolved in those 27 years?

BB: It's evolved because it's grown in its appeal. When I started, she was a pop artist in South America, and she was really into singer-songwriter pop rock music. That was the approach. For that album, she only sang in Spanish. And the next album was half English; it was her crossover album. That was a big step going from Spanish pop rock music to becoming a crossover English-Spanish pop rock artist. Then she started adding more elements of Latin music, Arabic music, African music, dance music, reggae, ska, reggaeton, and all that stuff, and she became more of a "world artist." That's when we started playing in Africa, India, Lebanon, Egypt. We could play everywhere. She has always kept her Latin and her rock roots, but she is continuously adding new elements, styles, languages, countries, and genres. Now it has grown to be eight times what it was when I started.

MD: When Shakira incorporates a new musical element, let's say Arabic music, how do you learn to incorporate that authentically?

BB: That has happened. She'll do a new Arabic song and I will immediately go and start studying Arabic percussion like, doumbek, riq, different frame drums, tambouras, and things like that. I study the rhythms and instruments. How do you hold them? How do you play them correctly? What are the names (and variations) of the different rhythms? I listen to a lot of authentic players, percussion ensembles, different artists, and I kind of delve into the music. Then I listen to her song to see how much of it is an old school-folkloric vibe, and how much is more of a hybrid-pop version of that music. Chances are, it's going to be more of a modern pop approach with a little taste of traditional elements, so I don't have to go "full in," I can simply bring in a few stylistic elements. That's normally what I do. I did that with Arabic drumming, I did that with Andean folkloric drumming and South American drumming, and I did that with Spanish flamenco drumming. She'll come to me and say, "I would like to add this sound," and I'll say, "OK, give me a couple of days." I'll study and come back with (hopefully) all the necessary basics. I don't fool myself into thinking that the basics are enough. I just know that I'll have enough to start rehearsing. Then I work on it throughout the rehearsals, and hopefully it sounds top notch by the beginning of the tour.

MD: In the 27 years, what musical ingredients that she has brought you have been the most challenging?

BB: Nothing sticks out as being more challenging than another. I guess it's because I'm always a student and I'm always learning. For this tour, I'm playing salsa timbales on a song. I haven't done that in years. I moved from Miami to LA in 2004, and my timbale chops really went downhill. So, when I was asked to do that, I had to start shedding to get that up to par again. I turned to a buddy of mine named Richard Bravo for a timbale refresher course. He's one of my favorite Latin percussionists.

Several tours ago, I had to learn how to play a South American rope-tension barrel drum called a bombo leguero. That was fun. Learning how to play authentic cajon (not singer songwriter unplugged cajon,) and touring through Spain and getting into folkloric flamenco cajon was a fun challenge for me. Learning how to play Arabic instruments was a challenge. I don't fool myself; I'm never going to be the *Vinnie Colaiuta of the doumbek*. I just want to be able to hold my own and play them correctly. I remember a Shakira tour where I started learning tabla for one of her songs. But that's a 30-year journey! You don't learn tabla in a week. That probably would have been the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. But fortunately, they hired a real guy to play tabla and I didn't have to do it.

If you do that, then you're really internalizing the music and you're not just learning patterns out of a book. You're learning the history and the songs of that genre of music, and that's important to me.

Photo by Chris Cornejo

MD: What musical approach appealed to you the most, causing you to really go down the rabbit hole?

BB: I liked learning all the different kinds of cumbias. In Colombia, they have a style of music called "vallenato" which is a coastal dance music that's a lot of fun to play. I enjoy being hip to salsa music. It is important to me to not just play patterns. I even took salsa dance lessons. I wanted to make sure I knew how to play the cowbell parts and feel the music. You can learn patterns, but you're not really learning the music. There are people who grew up listening to those songs. It's in their bodies. I don't think I'll ever get to their level, but I want to get close. Salsa music is not just something you study for a week. I have played

with a lot of Latin artists over the past 30 years. When I first step in, I always get the same funny look. I'm sure their wondering how this Irish-Korean drummer knows how to play some of these rhythms, or how he knows this particular salsa song from 1978? But if you really want to play a style of music, you need to learn the repertoire. I mean, if I were to do a rock cover gig in New Jersey, there are certain songs that I *must* know to play that gig too.

MD: I always refer to them as the "tribal language" of a style of music.

MD: Yes, in every style of music there are the standards. If you do piano trio jazz gigs, there's a certain group of songs you must learn to just be able to do that gig. When you sit in on a salsa gig, there are certain classic songs you need to know. It's important to learn the catalog of classics from any style of music. If you do that, then you're really internalizing the music and you're not just learning patterns out of a book. You're learning the history and the songs of that genre of music, and that's important to me.

MD: Why did you move to LA?

BB: I moved to LA in 2004 for several reasons. At the time, we had just done a Shakira tour, and half the band was from LA. So, I had these great friends that were fantastic players, and they were living in LA, and they would encourage me to come out to the west coast more often. Another reason was because I was very into recording, and all my favorite studio drummers were in LA, and they were all recording at studios in LA. I would buy these great sounding albums, and I would look at the credits: where was it recorded, by which drummers, and who was the engineer. And it was always a session guy from LA, in a studio in Hollywood. There was this tug that was telling me to move to LA and live in that water for a while. So I moved to Los Angeles on my 30th birthday.

Photo by Chris Cornejo

A lot of times, you just do a good job and allow your reputation to knock on doors for you. I'm not very good at asking for gigs. I'm always hoping that when I do a good job, somebody will think of me for the next one...

MD: What was it like to move from one musical scene to another mid-career?

BB: I think it was a good challenge and a good change for me. When I was living in Miami, I was trying to be a carbon copy of the LA drummers that I loved: Jeff Porcaro, Carlos Vega, Vinnie Colaiuta, JR Robinson, Matt Chamberlain, Abe Laboriel Jr., Josh Freese. Those were the guys that I was emulating in my Miami career. But I wanted to see if I could take my B minus Miami version to Los Angeles and actually play amongst those guys. When I moved there, I fortunately knew a bunch of musicians already, and that was important! I had a lot of friends who had a lot of friends who had a lot of friends. I went to many parties and jam sessions and watched a lot of other people play. I went to LA thinking I wouldn't have a gig for approximately two years and that's OK. But it was about two weeks before I started working. Then, it was just a roller coaster ride. That was my experience.

MD: I know you also did some gigs with Morrissey's band. How did that come about?

BB: I got a phone call from Morrissey's musical director. He said, "We're looking for a guy who can start playing with us, and your name came highly recommended. Would you like to join the band?" I said, "Sure, when's the audition?" And he said, "No audition. If you're free, we'd love for you to come down to the rehearsals." That's how it started, and I played in that band for three years. It was great because I was already a gigantic Smiths fan. I didn't want to admit that to anyone, but I already knew most of the songs. It was great band, fantastic music, and it was such a fun experience. I got that gig because, a couple years prior, I did a tour with a band called Tegan and Sara. The MD of that band is a very popular musical director in LA named Kris Pooley. He was the one who told the Morrissey camp to call me. Apparently, he said, "I worked with this guy on the Tegan and Sara tour, and he'd be a perfect choice for the Morrissey band." A lot of times, you just do a good job and allow your reputation to knock on doors for you. I'm not very good at asking for gigs. I'm always hoping that when I do a good job, somebody will think of me for the next one, or the next one, or the next one. LA is filled with amazing drummers, so you can't expect to get every gig. It's just not possible. You can only hope to be one of the twenty or so drummers that they think of for a gig.

MD: Did the three-year Morrissey gig interfere with Shakira's gig?

BB: No, she had taken several years off from touring. This is actually our first Shakira tour in seven years. She's a mother, and she is super successful, so she tours when she wants to. When I started with her in 1998, we worked constantly. Tour, rehearse, record, do TV shows, shoot music videos. It was a non-stop gig. Around 2011, she had so much success that she started to allow herself to take pauses. She would take a year off between tours,

If you make someone else's job easy, they will want you back, and if you make their job hard, they will never want to work with you again. The whole idea is to make other people's jobs easy.

which turned into a year and a half, which turned into two or three years, and then seven years off between tours. I've never tried to fool myself into thinking that the Shakira band is going to be the only thing I'm going to do for the rest of my life. I've always juggled many gigs, big and small, and I let my musician friends know that I'm interested in doing their coffee shop gigs, their three-song demos, big or short tours, whatever… I'm into it! And thankfully, I've been fortunate enough to do a lot of great things in between all those Shakira tours.

Like I was told years ago, a music career is tough, and longevity is even tougher. The best way to have longevity as a drummer is not to attach yourself to only one artist, because at any time that artist might decide to "go in another direction," take a break, or they might want a different flavor (of drummer,) or the artist might retire or lose popularity. Most things in life are not permanent.

MD: How have you dealt with those aspects of your career?

BB: The future is impossible to predict. All you can do is prepare. I don't like to waste money, and I'll consciously put some money away for the "lean times." If I have a high paying gig, I don't go out go out and buy couple of Lamborghinis. I put some of that money away for when I don't have as big of a gig. I think it's important to keep a fairly medium-to-low overhead and not spend above your means. And I also try to diversify what I do. I record drums both in professional studios, and at my own home studio. And I often do that while on the road too. If someone sends me an e-mail saying they need drums by next Friday while I am out on tour, I'll find a cool local studio, and go and track the drums and e-mail them my tracks to meet their due date. I like to teach also. I do seminars, in-person drum lessons, and Zoom lessons. I'm not beating down doors to become everyone's go-to educator, but I do love teaching. I make sure that, when I'm on a gig, I'm always thinking about what do I do when that gig ends, either during one of the tour breaks, or when the tour wraps up at the end; what am I going to do next? That doesn't mean that I call every single friend of mine to bother and pester them into hiring me. I just like being in the mix. It's nice to have a lot of friends, peer groups, and musician buddies that are doing the same thing as you. That camaraderie never hurts.

MD: I know you have done a Modern Drummer Rig Rundown But has anything changed in your set recently?

BB: I design a drum set for every gig. It's specific to the gig, and specific to the set list that I'm playing. The Morrissey kit was different than the Perry Farrell drum set, which is different from the Tegan and Sara set. They're all designed to play the songs in that set list. But they all start from the same place: kick, one rack tom, two floor toms, main snare drum, hi-hat, ride, two crashes, and maybe a side snare. Every drum set starts with that. Then I take away or add elements depending on what else I need. If you look at my current Shakira set, you'll see the same thing, and then you'll see that I started adding other elements including a second rack tom, a bunch of Roland pads, and a couple percussion instruments. It quickly starts to look like Neil Peart world, but it's not. It's basically a Bonham set up with additional sounds to hit for certain songs.

MD: What are some of the records that you have played on that best represent your playing?

BB: I produced an album for singer-songwriter named Michael Miller called *I Made You Up,* and whenever I listen to that, I'm really proud of the drum tones and the songs. I produced a record with a band called the Volumen Zero called *I Can See the Brite Spot from Here,* and we recorded 15 songs in one day because of their budget, and I'm pleasantly surprised with how good it came out. I was in a band in LA called Pedestrian, and we recorded an album called *Ghostly Life,* and I really like the drums tracks on that one. There are a bunch of Shakira hits like "Whenever, Wherever" and "Inevitable" that I played on, and it's still kind of fun when I hear them in a supermarket. I also played on a bunch of Asian pop records, and they came out pretty cool. It's all up on my website (the discography).

MD: How did you get into the Asian pop world?

BB: One of my dearest friends is Craig Macintyre, who plays drums for the Goo Goo Dolls. He recommended me to a Taiwanese artist named Leehom Wang for one of his Chinese New Year gigs in Las Vegas. Leehom's musical director called and asked if I would fly over and read down 2 1/2 hours of music-charts. I did the concert, and afterwards they were impressed with how easy the gig went, so they asked me to do a couple more events. They would randomly call me up to do a gig in Shanghai, a gig in Beijing, and a gig in Taipei. Each one went well, and the manager and the musical director told me that they managed a bunch of artists, and that they would like me to come over more often and play with some of their other artists. So, I started flying to Asia all the time to play with their different artists (JJ Lin, Jam Hsaio, David Tao, Jason Zhang.) It was so much fun! I got to learn more about Asian culture. I mean, I'm half Asian (Korean,) but I didn't know a whole lot about China, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. I did those gigs from around 2009 to 2014, and then again in 2018-2019 with Jeff Chang.

Hopefully, when you do a good job, someone will ask if you'd like to do another one, and another, and another. If you make someone else's job easy, they will want you back, and if you make their job hard, they will never want to work with you again. The whole idea is to make other people's jobs easy.

For more information on Brendan Buckley go to

www.brendanbuckley.com

Photo by Nicolas Geradin