

THE DRUM THING

DEIRDRE O'CALLAGHAN



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PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

This book is dedicated to my brother Peter

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INTRODUCTION

I love the rhythm section. Drummers are underrated and underappreciated. They are the leaders even though they sit at the back. They are a band's foundation. They express the intuitive rhythm we all have inside us, connecting us to our primal instincts. They also display respect and restraint, managing time with intelligence and skill.

I grew up in Cork, Ireland, as part of a large family that loved music: reggae coming from one room, hip hop or Neil Young from another. The radio in the kitchen was always tuned to some Irish station playing god knows what. There were also programmes my father always listened to, which featured all the old Irish rebel and folk songs. To top it off, my sister, who was studying music at university, had a giant tape deck in our shared bedroom from which she played classical music, blasting out Rachmaninoff, Sibelius and Mahler at midnight. As a result, my taste in music has always been eclectic, but one constant is that I've always been drawn to the rhythm section.

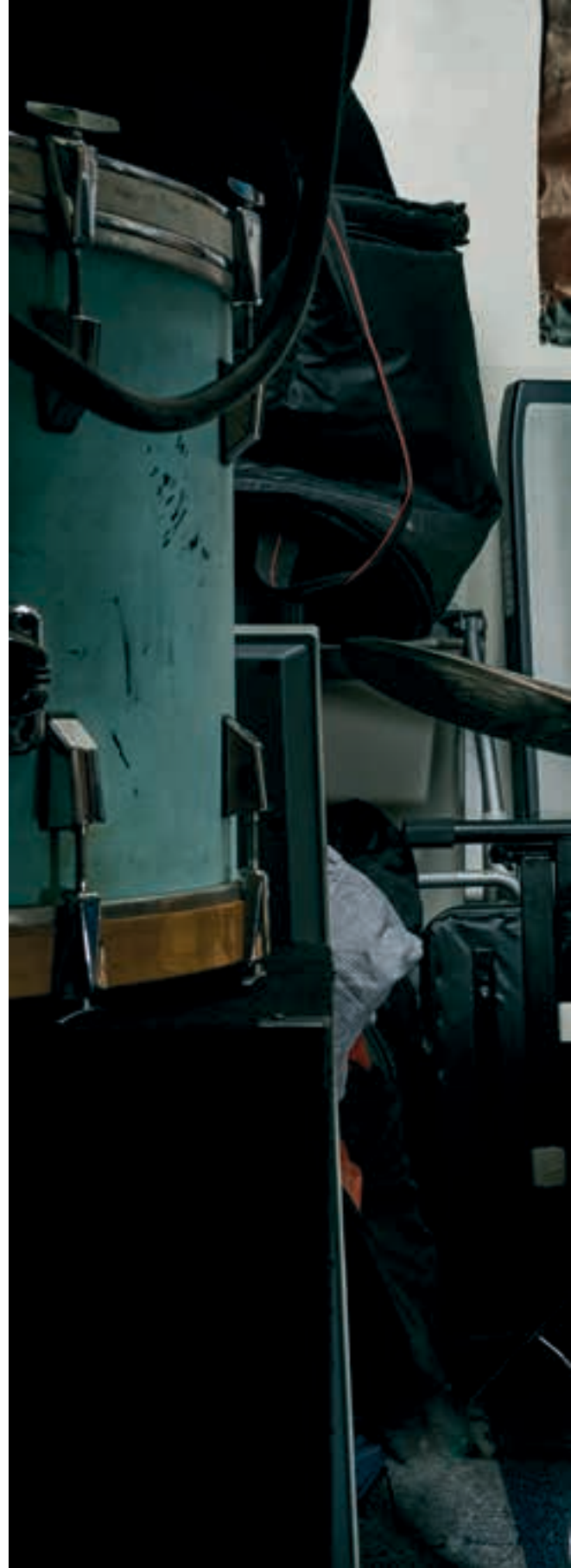
Some say rhythm is medicine; drumming has been compared to an addiction, a form of meditation and a language in and of itself – a way of communicating. Playing an instrument is like storytelling, and the whole personality of a musician is translated into how they play. As a photographer, I love watching a drummer perform – the sheer physicality of playing this kind of instrument. To me drumming is almost like a dance, and the idea of capturing this energy and rhythm really appealed to me. This was something I wanted to explore by creating a book which tells drummers' stories, not only in pictures, but also in their words, to find out more about what drives them, both as musicians and as people.

I feel very privileged and honoured that all these musicians welcomed me into their homes, studios and lives over the past several years so that I could document and share their stories. As I was preparing this book, I spent a few weeks in Ireland listening back through the interviews, hearing about how they got started, why they chose their instruments and the journeys their music has taken them on. Certain phrases and pauses took me back to where I had been sitting in the room and reminded me of what it felt like on the day of the interview. I hope that this book evokes those moments, not only through my pictures but through the words of the drummers themselves.

Deirdre O'Callaghan

ZACH HILL

Death Grips / Hella. Photographed in California





THE MAN OF BROADCAST HISTORY

Peavey

rtk

AQUARIAN

... NEED TATTOOS... I Don't





Just thinking about the universe humbles me. Thinking about space, about the ocean, about atoms – thinking about all these things inspires me. When I'm playing, my mind is clear of the things that are normally eating away at me or doing unhealthy things to my mind and my body. Playing takes me

away from that. I definitely would have gone on a different path without it, one not nearly as good.

I have a hard time talking about music because I play music. It's my whole language and I play to express things that I can't verbalize. I'm slightly a masochist by nature in a lot of ways. Playing, I want it to

be biting me, grating on me while I'm doing it. It's like I'm concentrating so hard that I'm not concentrating at all. I want to be overtaken when I'm playing and then that's the time in my day not to think about other things and let something else in, let my body host a different type of energy through playing the drums.





PATRICK CARNEY

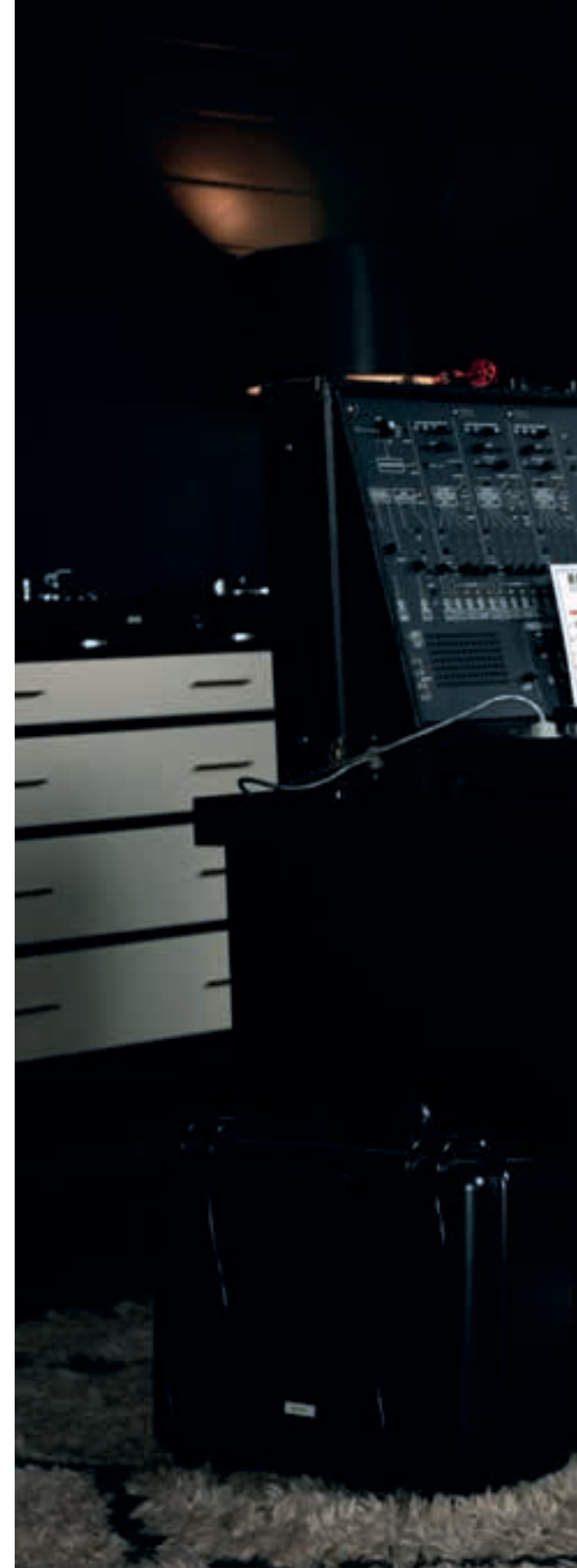
The Black Keys. Photographed in his home studio, Tennessee

To me a good drummer is someone who has an unpredictability going on. Anybody has the capacity to be a great drummer; it's just about finding the right people to be a great drummer with. When I play with Dan [Auerbach, lead singer and guitarist for The Black Keys] I consider myself a good drummer, but when I play with someone I've never played with, I consider myself to be average or below. You learn how to play with certain people.

My favourite recording experience ever was in Muscle Shoals [Sound Studio]. Dan and I liked being isolated and the engineer that we hired from San Diego brought out the recording equipment. I used his old Gretsch kit. We just set up simple, minimal mics. We started from scratch and wrote fifteen songs in twelve days. We'd go to the studio and stay there until midnight. When we came out of there, for the first time ever I felt like we'd captured something completely off the top of our heads and really special. I don't think we even realized what it was until a couple of months later. There's an energy in that room – most studios are dark, but that's the darkest studio I've ever been in. There's no light in there. It's just like a cave. When I had this control room built, I wanted it to be the opposite. Because I've been working in basements my whole life, I wanted to have a view of the outside. But it works there. When you want to focus and not be distracted; I think that's part of the key to recording. Keeping the distractions to a minimum. It's the hardest thing to do.

The thing about drums is people take the instrument for granted. The drums are maybe the least appealing instrument to most kids, but they're the most important in making something interesting. There's nuance to the instrument that changes the entire dynamic of a song. I'm constantly thinking about drums and how they work. I'm also frustrated constantly by the instrument, which is the whole fun of it. I've been playing for maybe twenty years and I still feel like if I played them every day for twenty more years, I would still be just as frustrated. There are endless possibilities and there are endless fills and there's endless little things. It's like golf – you can golf forever and still suck, and drumming is the same but in a good way; it keeps it interesting. That's why people golf until they're dead, because they're constantly searching to improve.

I usually take two weeks off from playing the drums [before going on tour], because then when I go back out on tour, I will have forgotten what I was doing before and I'll approach most of the parts in a slightly different way. What makes it more interesting to me is that there is constant evolution of forgetting and relearning. I'm not competitive with drumming. It's this magical, weird thing. It's the only thing in my life that's like that and I don't want to ruin it by putting too much pressure on myself.







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DISTRACTED ME”**

AHMIR ‘QUESTLOVE’ THOMPSON

The Roots / D’Angelo / Elvis Costello / Al Green / Jay Z / The Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon. Photographed at home, New York





I got introduced to jazz as a punishment. I had deceived my older cousin into buying me a 45 of a song that my parents wouldn't allow me to have. I asked them for it, and they said, 'No, we don't like that song, that song is dirty, you're not getting it.' And after about three weeks of plotting and scheming, always missing the song when it was on the radio, trying to record it ... It was a song called 'Juicy Fruit' by James Mtume, who was the percussionist for Miles Davis. It seems harmless by today's standards ... All of Miles Davis's musicians were heavy jazz cats but in the mid-'80s they all wanted to get paid, so they all did regular pop music. This was one of his breakthrough singles and Notorious B.I.G. sampled it for his first single, 'Juicy'. But I was twelve at the time and I didn't understand double entendres. I really thought, maybe it's about a stick of gum, Juicy Fruit. Stupid me! I thought it was about candy. I didn't know it was a metaphor for sex.

One lesson I learned is that whenever I lied or did something deceitful in my family, karma would always pay me back twice and I'd always get found out, so very rarely did I ever try to go that route. So they found out, and my punishment was that I had to listen to jazz. They forced John Coltrane on me, literally. They were like, 'No more rap music, no more Prince ...'. This was '83, a very important breakout year. It was the year I discovered Prince, the year I discovered The Time, the year I really discovered hip hop. I'd started buying a lot of street records, which my somewhat strict Christian household frowned upon; so to exorcise these demons I had to sit and listen to Coltrane's *My Favorite Things* at a very loud volume.

When news broke that one of the torture methods that was being used on detainees in Guantanamo was blasting music, I got a letter from a lawyer saying, 'Stop the government from using your music.' I found out that my song was one of the fifty songs they blasted 24/7. And I was just like,

wow, isn't it funny: when I was a kid, something as beautiful as John Coltrane was used as punishment on me and now, some twenty years later, something as well-intentioned as The Roots' music is being used as torture. It's weird.

My highlight of all time was playing in Prince's living room. I'm on drums and Prince is on bass and Sheila E. is on percussion, Frank McComb is on piano, and the jazz singer Rachelle Ferrell is singing. And then in walks Stevie Wonder and he's at the keyboards. And I'm thinking, am I actually sitting here? Not only am I sitting here playing Stevie Wonder's music with him, but there's one point at which Prince shoots Sheila a look – and he whispers, almost like they are saying, 'Can you believe this?' So I stopped, which is weird because why would you ever want to stop that magic moment of playing with all your musical heroes in Prince's living room, having this intimate jam session? I think I was like seconds away from having a breakdown, but Prince had such an elaborate chocolate fondue display that it distracted me. I was like, wait a minute, am I really walking away from playing one of my favourite Stevie Wonder songs with all my ...? Oh my god, fondue! To be in this jam session playing the songs of the people that I practised to for so many hours as a kid was very overwhelming. Very magical.

My father instilled practice in me. I didn't go outside and play; I had to come home straight from school, put in about two hours of practice every day and then do my homework and then eat, and then be in bed by ten o'clock – every night, without fail. Keeping me off the streets kept me alive because between the two households that I grew up in, and counting the thirty-plus childhood friends that I had, I'm one of three people not in jail or dead. Of the other two, I know that one went to college and has a family; the other one's struggling a little bit – but it's almost like a victory if you're not dead or in jail, that's a win.

CHRIS 'DADDY' DAVE

D'Angelo / Maxwell / Robert Glasper Experiment / Mos Def (Yasiin Bey) /
Adele / Kenny Garrett / The Drumhedz / Mary J. Blige. Photographed in California
'Time is going to be there whether you are thinking about it or not. So it's more
about embracing it and having fun with it than being scared of it'

