

David Jones - Exclusive OnlineDrummer.com Interview

By Frank Bender - July 21st, 2009

I never heard a drummer like David Jones: His playing combines spirituality with sensuality in a unique way. Thanks to the internet even the longest distances can be vanquished in seconds, so welcome to down under now.



You seem to be a very versatile player, having played with symphony orchestras as well as with traditional Indian, jazz, avant-garde or rock musicians - do you prefer a certain musical style?

David: Thank you. I have always, from a very young age, wanted to be versatile and able to excel in any musical situation regardless of style or context. Over the span of my whole career, I have always preferred to play in musical settings that have the balance between structured pieces and improvised frameworks. In simple terms, I always loved having a few guidelines and titles, and perhaps even a storyline to improvise to.

That freedom within structure is very important to my personal expression. Over the years, I have played in very, very structured musical projects, sometimes with everything totally written out “on the page“. And then other projects, where it was completely improvised, which is always very fearless and challenging, and then at the same time, often the music is a little aggressive and compositionally does not always work. Sometimes, it's just “sound for sound's sake“. That extreme side of the spectrum, I feel, can often alienate the audience.

So while there's no particular musical style I lean towards, definitely my preference is for musical environments, with beautifully structured pieces with some very open areas for interaction.

Secondly, I also prefer improvised pieces that are gently guided by a predetermined title and feeling (and even an idea of the duration of a piece). As a leader of my own projects(David Jones and friends),

I always have the aim of inviting the audience into the experience, both verbally before the piece begins, and then later involving them with vocal sounds and the deepest even body percussion. Improvisation for me is beyond style or culture, so this can definitely include music from all over the world, and all the styles that we currently play in the west.

Is there a big difference in playing with classical trained and jazz musicians?

David: Yes, the big difference is that classically trained musicians generally are very highly skilled in sight-reading and usually not as comfortable improvising or moving freely in any given musical structure. Classical musicians are usually very accurate, very humble at taking direction from a musical conductor/director, and continuously throughout their career work at developing and refining their tone, sound and projection. There's not as much attention on rhythmic phrasing and personal interpretation. In classical music, this is not usually required unless they are a soloist.

From my experience, classical musicians often feel a bit trapped by these constraints. I have a deep admiration for the discipline, humility and refinement of classical musicians. I always find that I learn so much from them all when I play with an orchestra.

Jazz musicians, on the other hand, tend to be free spirits. There's sometimes the opposite challenge of self-centeredness and personal expression. There's an ongoing commitment to bringing the new, magical and fresh to every performance, yet there can be another trap here- if someone has a great deal of technique and facility, they may rely on that too much.

Another trap for the jazz musician is to become obsessed with the one era of "jazz" music, (ie- 40s-50s, the way Miles Davis played, etc) or to be hung up on the tradition of jazz (for example, that each rendition of a jazz piece would have the same form of melody -chorus-, saxophone solos, piano solos, bass solo, maybe fours and eights with the drums, and then back to the chorus). This old way of playing the form can be so predictable and stuck. This can also create an ongoing inferiority complex. The feeling of "I'm not as good as my heroes" becomes an underlying arrogance- the flip side of feeling inadequate. There's a feeling to always have to prove oneself and be the next, great thing.

Jazz musicians also have the challenge of dealing with a musical director/leader. Sometimes, the leader could be the singer or the sax player who has very definite ideas of what style of jazz will be played and how much interaction would be appropriate. I do however feel that jazz musicians are totally inspiring in terms of fearlessness, and I have always found the interaction very refreshing. It seems that there are many jazz musicians in Australia that are particularly dedicated to creating their own music and compositions, and playing in unique ways.

Playing drums with a symphony orchestra or as a soloist - what's more difficult in your opinion?

David: My experience with symphony orchestras has been varied and wide. Often, the role is not as time-keeper but colourist. The timing in an orchestra is so flexible and fluid to the conductor's feeling of the piece, and also the consideration of physical separation of 80 people on the stage. I always suggest to the orchestra management that I set up near the acoustic basses, right side of the stage, looking from the view of the audience, near the brass. Even though I am distant to the percussion, they are usually quite kind and want to lock in with me (even sometimes requesting fold-back speakers at the back).

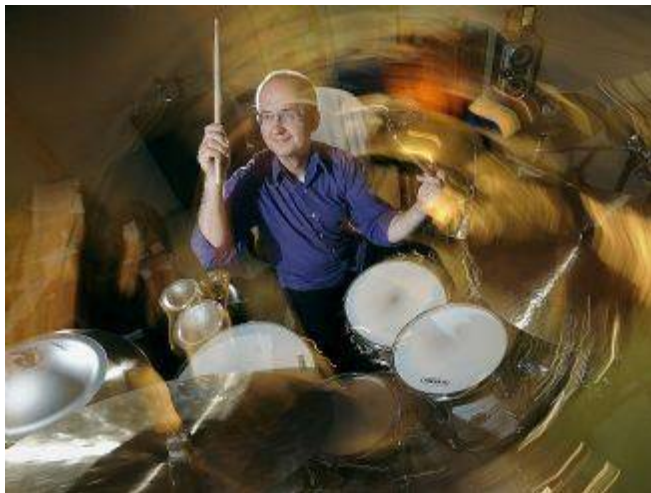
One of the biggest challenges is rehearsing tempos in the first two days, with the conductor in a certain conducting style. This can change on the day of the performance and become quite flowery and undefined. The biggest challenge I've always found is that there is no count-in and no indication of the tempo before the piece begins... so the first rehearsal is always drums-orchestra-drums-orchestra... I am always ahead!! When I listen back to my walkman recording of the first rehearsal, my biggest thought is often 'David... wait, wait wait! Don't lead!'. .

The usual conducting style is an upward pulse, not downward (an upbeat, not a down beat)... very confusing for a drummer the first time he/she plays with an orchestra... even mystifying! It all becomes reflex and then relaxing much more when you know what's going on! I always experience the

first rehearsal to be like the first day at school: 80 people I hardly know, a new conductor, everything written out and hardly any indication of tempos!

Playing drums as a soloist is of course a rare opportunity. Whether it is as a soloist with an orchestra, or completely alone, there's the responsibility of connecting with the audience. I have had this opportunity of being a drum kit soloist with orchestra on a few occasions. Three of those occasions, I was playing a piece especially written for me by Japanese composer, Toshi Watanabe. In this setting, the soloist has a lot of power and that power carries another responsibility- the responsibility to co-lead with the conductor. There needs to be clear indication that the tempos will be quite specific and that the drums may actually lead the tempo changes. I've even had to communicate very clearly to "please watch my sticks" as well as the conductor!

I personally love playing with orchestra because of the dynamics, and it always feels like a personal, internal musical victory, when no one has had to put up sound screens or baffles between the drum kit and other players. So definitely, within an orchestral environment, I treat the drums as an acoustic instrument. Having said that, sometimes the sound engineers set up overhead microphones to pick up the brush work in a larger hall. So in essence, I would say it is much more difficult to play, as an 'orchestral member' than a soloist. If I am purely playing solo, alone on stage, then that is entirely up to me to make a very beautiful, loving connection with the audience.



Many musicians are not playing for the music but for their ego first - under which circumstances can playing with other musicians be a way to transcend egoism?

David: Particularly in band situations where there is a definite leader, I need to be very cooperative and humble, especially in the case of new compositions and new ideas. I have always found recording projects for other people to be the most "character-building". The reason for this is that generally involved is a producer, a sound engineer, and also a musical director/leader who all have their own ideas of how the music overall should be played, how the drums should sound, or how I should be playing. I have always found that I need to be very flexible, tolerant, patient and malleable. I have always learned so much in putting my ego aside and adapting fully to what is asked of me. I've always learned a lot in these situations! And, sometimes it's important to be gently assertive about your needs, boundaries and ideas. Especially when it comes to the headphone mix and what I need to hear in the playback.

What instruments do you play?

David: Whatever is in front of me! Yes, really! I love playing drum kit, but even if it's a coffee tin, I very much enjoy creating sounds from lots of different sound sources. So, in other words, I am not afraid of using different percussion instruments. In fact, I love expanding the drum kit with various hand-drums, various bells and triangles hanging off cymbal stands, and especially using Tibetan and Japanese healing bowls. A real favourite instrument over the last few years has been the Hugh Tracey

Kalimbas. To have melodic content and pitched instruments alongside the drum kit completes the whole sonic story for me. Also, I then have the mixture of short and long sounds and from very high harmonics to very low tones... It feels then that I have the full spectrum to express through! It's very satisfying.

Do you use singing bowls also in a healing context?

David: Yes. Carmen Warrington, my partner, and I use the singing/healing bowls for "Sound Bath" sessions, which is a spiritual, not medical healing. The person lies down on a comfortable mattress, and we play the Tibetan, Japanese and Crystal bowls around the body in a deeply meditative state. People have had quite profound and life-changing experiences with this. They are usually one-hour session (enough time to set the intention with the person, then play for half an hour, then to gently guide them back to share what might have shifted or changed for them).

In my opinion it is possible to play music that can be entertaining and healing (in the sense of relaxing) at the same time; do you agree?

David: Yes. Music is such a powerful vehicle for expression, entertainment and interaction. At the same time, if the musician has the aim of giving an experience, particularly a spiritual experience, then music can elevate to the realm of a pure gift to all involved. I would say that music can be a gift from the Divine. It's the human soul as an instrument of the Supreme, playing through the instrument of the body, as well as through the musical instrument in front. The whole experience becomes one. There is a huge energy exchange going on... a loop energy that is set into motion in the physical realm.

Do you think special sounds can help to change one's mind?

David: Yes. Particularly through the healing bowls. These have the properties of "pure sound" and are perfect meditation instruments. Pure tones affect our brain waves and chemistry of the body, gently realigning both mental and physical states. Even if someone is not a meditator, the experience is one of deep relaxation and calm. Some people have said afterwards that they don't remember having many thoughts- such a liberating experience from the restless mind. Particularly, pure quartz crystal bowls are more than an instrument. They are sometimes referred to as "vibrational medicine." Very powerful indeed.

You are teaching drums - is there anything your students can learn from you beyond playing the drums?

David: I would hope sincerely in my heart that the students that come to me for lessons would be inspired to become better people. I've observed over the years that there are many good drum teachers who can pass on the techniques and craft of drumming. Yet I have also noticed that not many teachers guide their students into a holistic view of playing.

Perhaps it's similar to modern education, at school. We are taught lots of facts and figures, but not many practical skills of living or of human values. I believe the mentor/teacher ideally needs to guide by example and to share experience of the very human and real issues in music-making. Patience, tolerance, determination, perseverance, flexibility, cooperation, humility, self-respect... these are not usually talked about. Even practically, breathing exercises and relaxation techniques for higher performance levels are not addressed very often.

The main aim I have in teaching is to encourage the student to teach themselves. Yes, guide them to necessary skills and techniques, but beyond the drumming skills to also develop in parallel a very deep perception of sound, tone, musicality, and even more essentially, a connection with other musicians and the audience. I also communicate a lot about the energy that we deal with, which is so fundamental to human life. Life Force in Action- Meditation in Action. The Soul as a Master of Matter... Effortless mastery.



Drumming is a very archaic way to generate sound - do you think it can help to bring us in contact with the unconscious parts of our personality?

David: Yes. Just as the heartbeat drives the human body, and its pace, so drumming is a direct communication to the subconscious. It can awaken ancient memories and very deep feelings. Repetition of rhythm can induce trance-like states. Thus, it can elevate while also grounding the musician, listener and/or other participant. Drumming is a very direct and profound communication.

Please tell us about your projects.

David: Current projects include the editing of a new DVD called 'Drumming In the Zone'. This DVD will purposely be a 'wow factor' experience, as well as instructional and inspirational, through the playing and description of 'The Zone' (!).

I am also currently the drummer and percussionist for many different styles of projects. Michael Johnson, a Melbourne harpist/composer, leads a very beautiful Renaissance-flavoured acoustic fusion ensemble with flute, violin, bass and drums. I also play funk/gospel/blues band with a stunning Australian singer, Jojo Smith.

I play duo concerts with Fiona Burnett, who is one of the great exponents of soprano saxophone in the world, and the last few years I have been mounting my own concerts completely solo. These concerts are called 'Colours of the Drum' to celebrate the release of the double CD/DVD package released through ABC Records in 2008. The solo concert includes two drum kits, the larger kit, centre-stage and fully assembled, with multiple cymbals, gongs, Tibetan and Japanese bowls, etc. The smaller kit in front, is in pieces, on the ground in the form of a half-moon shape!

Over the 70 minutes of the concert (no interval), I play each individual instrument of the smaller kit, assembling as I go along. I start with the bass drum, just with single pedal and two sticks. The second musical piece is just snare drum and one brush. Third piece, I bring another part of the kit and play just the hi hat, and this continues as such until the kit is completely assembled. There is still the 'suspense' of the large kit waiting to be played. The whole show is quite theatrical and the lighting is very dramatic, yet simple. I have had great feedback from the show, especially from non-drummers who have never seen a drum kit assembled and have never heard these parts played individually as musical compositions.

How important are the AtmaSphere lyrics for you?

David: Thanks for asking me about this! AtmaSphere was a very special group for me. It was the first time I was confident to put my name in front of a band and to lead my own project. So the spiritual and meditative lyrics that we use meant a tremendous amount for me. To be honest, Carmen Warrington

has always been a very grounded influence in that band as well as in our more recent projects. She's also a meditator for 25yrs or so, similar to myself, and indicates where I might have gone too far with some of the spiritual concepts. My passion was to combine really beautifully intricate fusion music with meditation commentaries. So the nine years that the group was together was a very significant time for me. The lyrics were a big reflection of that ongoing exploration of bringing spiritual concepts to the public through music

Do you see pictures in your inner eye when you are soloing?

David: Yes I do, but they are usually very divine in nature. Whether alone or with a group, I feel the same experience- I tend to visualize light. I know this sounds esoteric, but I visualize rays of light from above- from another dimension. This is part of my ongoing practice to visualize and feel divine energy coming from the ultimate Source. I don't tend to visualize or see nature scenes like waterfalls or gardens, although sometimes if the title for the piece includes a description, I might 'feel' that, rather than see it. I tend to 'feel' colours, if that makes sense(?). And the colours are experienced as peace, happiness, joy, power, etc. It is more like seeing than feeling.

Do you compose?

David: Yes I do. Usually it is in collaboration with someone else, as I am very good with melodies but not so developed with chord progressions. If someone has been playing for 20-30years on keyboard, guitar or bass, they might have much better choices than what I have in terms of harmonizing. Their chord knowledge then can really make something of mine come alive.

My compositional skills are more in terms of structure and density of the music, so I often find that I am helping to rearrange and restructure other compositions (only when there is an invitation to do so of course!).

From a playing point of view, certainly I recognize that I am a natural composer. Improvisation at its very core is composition in real time. From listening to lots of recordings of myself from studio sessions, live performances, and even rehearsals and jam sessions, I have continued to learn so much about how I respond to other musicians and the audience. When I listen back to any recording, the best confirmation for me of musical success is that I will feel the same as a 'listener'. I hope that makes sense. In simple terms, I always listen to my own recordings as though I were listening to someone else's. With that more impartial, unattached feeling, I can make further adjustments in my mind for future performances, given a similar musical situation. It's almost like I continually teach myself in terms of dynamics, density of sounds (how many layers may be happening all at once), use of long and short sounds, space and silence, from the very impacting, complex playing right through to the very simple. I find then that composition is about choices and placing myself in the listener's point of view. Often I find I'm asking myself 'what would I like to hear'?