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# TEN YEARS TIGHTER

## Stefan Lessard Ratchets Down The Rhythm With The Dave Matthews Band

BY CHRIS JISI

**AT** an age when most bassists are still playing along with records and jamming in garages, Stefan Lessard was already touring the world in a world-famous rock band. Now in his tenth year as the foundation of the Dave Matthews Band, the soft-spoken 27-year-old pop virtuoso could be excused if he showed a bit of attitude—yet he remains humble and enthusiastic. A big reason is DMB's latest release, *Everyday*, created in collaboration with producer/composer Glenn Ballard (best known for Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill*). The 12-track disc is a decidedly new direction for the quartet, who shun their usual acoustic guitar-led eight-minute jam tracks in favor of four-minute pop/rock songs. "The bass and drums are more focused, simplified, and groove-oriented," Stefan says. "Also, there's a bigger electric guitar presence. Dave played up to six guitar tracks on each song, including baritone guitar, which was fun to play behind since it fits so well with my 5-string."

Born in Southern California on June 4, 1974, Stefan and his family moved around quite a bit before settling in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the late '80s. Inspired by his mother, who sang, and his father, who studied composition,

PHOTOGRAPH BY KARJEAN NG





# AMPS MARCHING

flute, and guitar at Berklee, Lessard flirted with guitar. When Stefan was 14 his father took up electric bass, and within a year he followed, playing in a hip-hop/punk/ska band and in his school's jazz ensemble. Stefan's jazz interests led him to the acoustic bass and six months of private classical studies at age 16. Soon after, while playing in a Charlottesville lounge combo, he caught the ears of locals Dave Matthews, drummer Carter Beauford, saxophonist LeRoi Moore, and violinist Boyd Tinsley, who enlisted him for a band they were assembling. Lessard quickly learned to anchor the group as they ascended from cult favorites to platinum-selling rock titans.

Stefan was eager to talk about his career and *Everyday* experiences when the Dave Matthews Band visited New York to appear on *Saturday Night Live* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*. We checked in with him again at the band's Virginia rehearsal site, as they prepared for another huge summer tour.



How was *Everyday's* genesis different from past DMB albums?

Dave and Glenn Ballard wrote for 11 days, and then Glenn gave us a demo with mostly programmed parts, plus lead-sheet-style charts with chord symbols and a double staff, treble and bass clef. Glenn had charted out some of our older music, so he captured our individual playing styles on the demo, and we could hear our influence in the songs. Best of all, after years of having to come up with bass parts from scratch, it was great to have the direction and inspiration of a guide part. From there all I had to do was inject my personality through my phrasing and embellishments.

How did you record your parts?

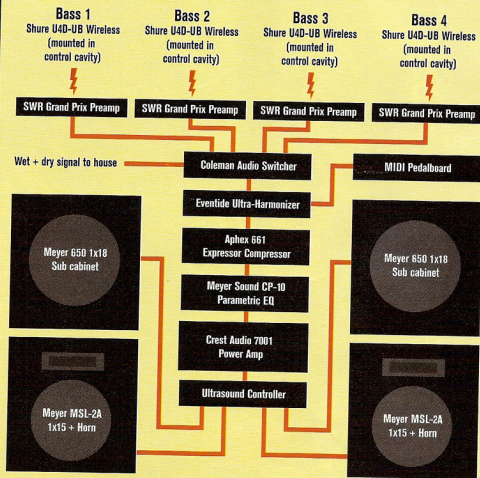
During a demo mix, Carter asked to play along to get a feel for the song, and it sounded so good Glenn pushed RECORD. So that's how we did every song: Carter would go first, playing with the demo, and then Glenn would edit together a drum track with Pro Tools. After that, I'd play along with Carter's track and the demo, which had a scratch vocal and some guitars and keyboards. I'd do about six takes, following the chart the first few times, until Glenn would say, "Okay, we have it." Then he'd cut it up in Pro Tools and get all the sweet spots. It was ideal for me playing-wise, because I could hear where Carter was pushing the limits of the demo and respond to that. The only song we didn't do that way was "Everyday," which we recorded live.

The opener and first single, "I Did It," establishes the rhythm section's support-oriented focus.

When I first played the line I had a hard time staying on those steady A's in the chorus, because I was so used to bouncing around

On ten of *Everyday's* 12 tracks, Stefan Lessard plucked his main instrument, a black Modulus Flea Bass 5-string. He used his Modulus Flea Bass 4 on "Angel," while "Mother Father" features his J. Paul Jerowski Wood Bass 5, made from 200-year-old wood recovered from the depths of Lake Michigan. He recorded direct only, with Pro Tools- and mix-added sound alterations. For the current tour, Lessard is toting two Flea Bass 5's, two Flea Bass 4's, a Warwick Thumb Bass 6 for his slide solo (with a Dunlop glass slide), and a Taylor AB2 4-string acoustic bass guitar, which he brings to play in his hotel rooms. His strings are DR Lo-Riders, .045-.125; he changes them for each show.

Bass tech Eric Porter, who has worked extensively with Les Claypool, installed a transmitter in the cavity of each of Stefan's basses for a Shure U4D-UB wireless system. The signal heads to rack units in the following path: Four SWR Grand Prix preamps (one for each of the Modulus basses); a Coleman Audio Switcher; an Eventide GTR4000 Ultra-Harmonizer with Lessard's multi-effect presets, which he controls with a MIDI pedalboard; an Aphex 661 Expressor compressor; a Meyer Sound CP-10 Parametric EQ; two Crest Audio 7001 power amps (one as a backup); and a Korg DTR-1 tuner. From there, the signal goes into two Meyer 650 Sub cabinets, each with an 18" speaker, and two Meyer MSL-2As, each with a 15 and a horn. An Ultrasound unit custom-made for Porter enables him to control the volume of Stefan's speaker cabinets individually and collectively. Wet and dry sounds go to the house system from the Coleman Switcher. Lessard was the last band member to switch to in-ear monitors—reluctantly, since it all but eliminates crowd noise and bottom-end punch. He favors the highs (vocals, violin, and sax) in the in-ears, relying on front and side monitors and his rig for the lower frequencies.



and following someone else's part. There were moments, like the bass line on "Angel" or the breakdowns of "The Space Between," when I was given some freedom—but most of the time we were locking down the songs and

having a blast doing it.

How has your style evolved?

It's changed a great deal over the past year, between working with Glenn and switching to Modulus basses, which are responsive and enable

me to play with more dynamics. In the early days I pretty much just played along with Dave's guitar and voice, and as long as my part sounded like it worked, I didn't question what the chord or even the root was. When we started adding cover tunes, like "All Along the Watchtower," I got more into playing from the changes. With Glenn charting our music and writing support lines, I've learned a lot more about harmony and groove playing.

Now that I have a greater understanding of what I'm doing, my playing has become refined. I'm focusing on playing with the kick and being as solid and root-oriented as possible, balancing

A Selected Discography  
**With Dave Matthews Band:** (all on RCA/BMG except where noted) *Everyday*; *Listener Supported*; *Before These Crowded Streets*; *Live at Red Rocks 8-15-95*; *Crash*; *Recently* (EP); *Under the Table and Dreaming*; *Remember Two Things*, Bama Rags. **With Devon:** *Devon*, *Not Lane*.

that with melodic, stretching-out stuff when appropriate. Even back when I was playing all over the neck and jumping from section to section, a part of me always wanted to sit back, relax, and concentrate on keeping the feel going. The

new songs have enabled me to do that.

*How about Carter's influence?*

Aside from brief study periods on bass, all of my musical training comes from this band. Carter is the first and only drummer I've worked with regularly, so really I'm playing with my teacher. In the beginning I'd lose the one a lot, and he would show me where my one was and then where the real one was! He's always pushing me to my limits onstage and exposing me to great music offstage. He inspires me to be a danceable bass player—to dance with his kick, snare, and hi-hat to create that James Jamerson/R&B-like motion within the groove. That's what I'm trying to do on "Everyday" and "When the World Ends."

*How does the odd-time chorus section of "Fool to Think" work?*

It's two feels layered on top of each other, like we did on "Satellite" [*Under the Table and Dreaming*], which is 4/4 against 6/8. Here, Carter's drums and Dave's guitar are in 9/8 while I'm playing in 6/4. It's been a fun challenge in rehearsals, because I'm completely on my own—it's all on me to nail it down. Dave and Glenn actually wrote "Fool to Think" last, while we were recording the rest of the songs.

*There's a Middle Eastern vibe to "What You Are."*

We always try to bring world-music elements to our sound. That song is similar to "The Last Stop," from *Before These Crowded Streets*. Both are in F#<sub>7</sub>. It's interesting how a certain key or tonality adds a distinctive style and flavor.

*Did you get to play with Carlos Santana on "Mother Father"?*

No—he cut his part in San Francisco with some of other band members. I also missed out on "Love of My Life" from Santana's *Supernatural* [Arista], so Benny Rietveld played with Carter on it. Benny's great; we played together in concert, and I learned a lot from watching him and listening to his groove concept. For my "Mother Father" part I borrowed from Benny's simple, solid approach to playing with Santana, as well as from the harmonic-minor tonality of the jazz standard "Black Orpheus."

*You hold your bass with the neck at a steep angle. Is that because of your upright training?*

Yes. Even though I played electric first, I trained seriously on upright before returning to the electric with this band. My neck angle puts my right-hand fingers in a more vertical, upright-like position, which feels natural to me. Also, seeing jazz and fusion bassists like Jaco and Victor Wooten led me to wear my bass higher than a lot of rock bassists, which gives me better access to the notes. I've actually come down a bit to my abdomen to accommodate the shape of my Modulus basses. My Warwick's had concave backs, which fit better up on the chest. I recommend raising your bass and holding the neck at an angle—but most important is to play where it feels comfortable for you.

*What's your basic technique?*

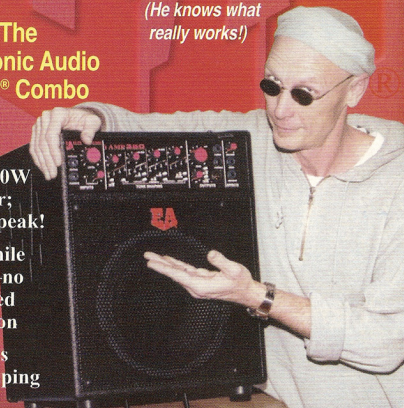
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I alternate my first two right-hand fingers for plucking, tucking the other two fingers under my hand. I use my thumb for fingerstyle chord plucking, and for plucking while palm-muting to get thumpy dead-notes. I do some standard thumb-and-pull slapping. My wrist is a big part of my technique—I often snap it back after playing a note to get a staccato, hard pluck that sounds like a slap. In my left hand, I usually hold my 2nd and 3rd fingers together, which is from my upright training. I'm trying to use my 3rd finger more, but my busiest fingers are my middle finger and pinkie.

You use false and natural harmonics on "Dreams of Our Fathers" and "If I Had It All."

That came from seeing Jaco's instructional video and watching Victor Wooten play harmonics live. I get the false harmonics using the Jaco/Victor method, which is to touch the string with my right index finger and pluck with my right thumb.

You're known to use a slide in your live solos.

I've always loved slide guitar, and there were parts in our music where I could hear it on bass. It started with "Two Step," from *Crash*: Tim Reynolds played a guitar line on the record, and I started playing it live as a solo. I also use the slide for my "Watchtower" solo. I put it on my left middle finger and use my right-index fingernail as if it were a pick. Conceptually, I'm not really thinking bass or guitar. I kick on a distortion/delay preset on my Eventide Ultra-Harmonizer, and I play down by the bridge for a sort of high-end noise effect. It sounds best on my Warwick 6, so that's what I use.

What's the story behind *Everyday's* false start?

From January to May 2000 we all wrote with Dave and started recording the material with Steve Lillywhite, who produced all our previous albums. Then we went back on the road and played the songs, but they just weren't pushing our buttons. So we decided to go a different direction and try a new producer and studio. Bruce Flohr, our label A&R man, suggested Glenn. Unfortunately, somehow most of the earlier songs—which are called the Steve Lillywhite Sessions—got leaked on Napster, as did live bootlegs. I heard the tracks, and while there was some good stuff, it's all very rough.

I much prefer the material with Glenn, because I believe a band should evolve.

Who are your main bass influences?

My dad early on, and then Charles Mingus. I used to play upright along with his records. You can hear his soul in his playing and his great writing. Bill Laswell is also a favorite; he plays and collaborates with so many different-style artists, which is a goal of mine. My initial electric bass heroes were reggae players like Robbie Shakespeare; then I got into people like Jaco, James Jamerson, Tony Levin, Marcus Miller, Victor Wooten, Oteil Burbridge, Flea, and Les Claypool. The original Headhunters opened up for us once, and Paul Jackson blew me away with his amazing groove and note choices. And as a big

world-music fan, I love what African bass players are doing—their ability to play a line that implies multiple feels.

What are your goals outside of the Dave Matthews Band?

I'd like to start farming myself out as a side-man playing other musical styles with different artists and rhythm sections. I played on an album by [blues/rock vocalist] Devon, and I just produced and played on her follow-up. I gained a lot of insight watching Glenn Ballard work, so I'd like to do more producing. Eventually I'd also like to do a solo CD. I'm fortunate to be in a great learning and playing phase right now—I feel like I'm growing every day.

See Lesson, page 64

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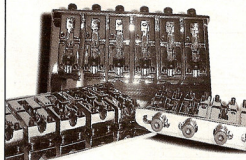
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# WHAT WOULD YOU PLAY?

**Stefan Lessard's approach** and inspirational sources may have evolved, but his deep, in-your-face ostinatos with funky flourishes are a constant—as these examples, from *Everyday* and four previous Dave Matthews Band discs, confirm. Says Stefan, "I'm a groove guy. That's where I'm happiest."

Ex. 1a shows the verse groove of "I Did It," *Everyday's* first single. Lessard sometimes plays the C accent on beat two of bar 1 up an octave. Ex. 1b contains one of the band's trademark unison licks at 1:55. Ex. 2 is from the verse of "Fool to Think." Although the song's chorus is in 9/8, this 4/4

section also retains an odd-time feel due to the placement of the bass part, lead vocal, and Carter Beauford's turned-around drum groove. For the verse groove of "So Right" (Ex. 3), Stefan uses a wrist snap to hard-pluck the E's in bar 2, creating a slap-like sound. His syncopated style can be heard in the title track's chorus, shown in Ex. 4. The influence of African bassists shows up in the last three C's of bar 1: Instead of swinging the notes as in the rest of the part, he plays them straight, creating a brief feel change that catches the ear. "That song developed out of an old tune of ours called '#36,' from *Live at Red Rocks*, which also had an African vibe."

Ex. 5 shows the bass line and climbing riff (in the second ending) of

## Ex. 1a

♩ = 108 Rock D

## Ex. 1b

♩ = 108 N.C.

## Ex. 2

♩ = 140 Bright rock Em C D G A G

## Ex. 3

♩ = 110 Funk rock Bm

## Ex. 4

♩ = 94 Swung Afro funk Fmaj7 C2 Bb2 C2

## Ex. 5

♩ = 114 Rock D

**Ex. 6**

♩ = 120  
Funk rock

A G

T  
A B

7 5 (5) 5 7 3 2 3 (3) 4 5

5 (5) 3 2 3 (3) 4 5

**Ex. 7**

♩ = 116  
Rock

A F Dm G A

T  
A B

S 9 6 7 8 10 12 10 7 10 10 3 3 5 7 5 9 6 7

**Ex. 8**

♩ = 100  
Rock ballad

C#m7 A2 Bsus4 E2 E/G# A2 Bsus4 E2

T  
A B

4 0 2 0 4 0 2 0

**Ex. 9**

♩ = 82  
Funk rock

D

T  
A B

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 5 2 3 0 3 1

**Ex. 10**

♩ = 108  
Soul R&B

Bb Eb/G Ab

T  
A B

6 5 6 7 (7)8 5 5 5 5 6 6 6 6 3 3 4 4 4 4



"Ants Marching," from *Under the Table and Dreaming*. Says Lessard, who played his Warwick Dolphin Pro 1 4-string, "I pretty much fattened Dave's guitar line for my bass part and then followed LeRoi Moore's sax in the climb." Ex. 6 shows the chorus bass line of the group's breakout hit, "What Would You Say?" (played on the Warwick 4), also from *Under the Table*. "My first attempt at a Jaco vibe," he laughs. The guitar-inspired, Warwick 4-played line in Ex. 7 is the verse groove of "So Much to Say," from *Crash*. Stefan explains the root-5-9 motion at the end of bars 1 and 2: "Dave and I use that shape all the time. It's sort of jazzy and open sounding." *Crash* also yielded the smash ballad "Crash Into Me," which rides the simple, melodic, Warwick 4-plucked line shown in Ex. 8. The beginning of the track has a brief bass solo—Lessard's first on record.

Ex. 9 shows the killer groove of "Don't Drink the Water," from *Before These Crowded Streets*. Note the ear-grabbing tritone motion of the fill on bar 2's beat three (B to F), and the lowered 3rds (F's) against the D major tonality. Stefan, who played his Warwick Thumb Bass 6, explains, "That was definitely Peter Gabriel/Tony Levin-inspired. We listen to Gabriel's *So* and *Us* albums all the time." Ex. 10 shows Lessard's R&B-heavy Warwick 6 line on "Stay (Wasting Time)," also from *Crowded Streets*. "More Jaco/Jamerson inspiration," he says.