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At Rock Stars

"Hey, Justin...over here!"

DAVE MATTHEWS

HE'S GOT A GREAT SOLO DEBUT AND
THE MOST DEVOTED FANS IN ROCK.
SO WHY IS HE SO ANGRY?

The Strokes

Julian on songwriting, Smurfs
& the amazing new album

The Distillers' Tour Diary

Boozing & brawling across the U.S.A.

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Thursday

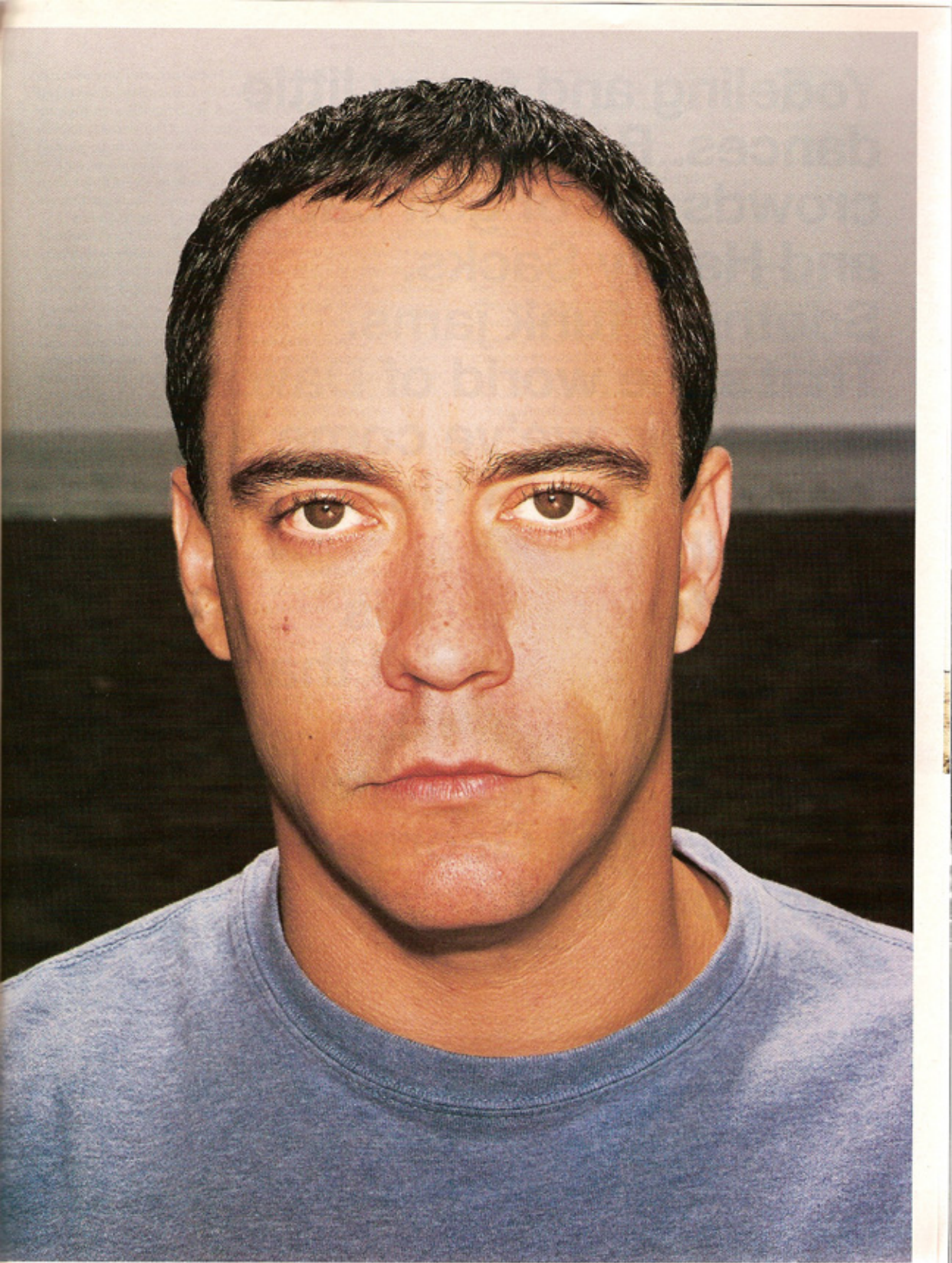
Emo's screaming heart





Citizen

Dave



Yodeling and funny little dances. Beer-guzzling crowds full of golf caps and Hacky Sacks. Soothing funk jams. That's the world of Dave Matthews we've come to know. But with his first solo album, the singer/songwriter is ready to change all that. He's mad as hell, his video is a major bummer, and he's got George W. Bush on blast

By Chris Norris

Photographs by Jeff Minton

SAN FRANCISCO, LAND OF A THOUSAND VIEWS. THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE FROM BAKER BEACH: BURNT SIENNA SLICING CERULEAN SKY. CHINATOWN FROM Russian Hill: a giddy bazaar overflowing tiered streets. And, of course, Dave Matthews from Lombard Street: pale and slouching. ■ "Oh, my God," gasps one viewer. "Dave!" ■ It's a brilliant Saturday on the so-called crookedest street in the world, where Dave Matthews is indulging my request for a tourist stroll. As we descend the stone steps, a caravan of SUVs winds its way down the street's sharply veering angles. Every other carload gives us the treatment usually reserved for the white tiger at Six Flags' Wild Safari. Eyes brighten, arms point, hands scramble for cameras. ■ "Hi, Dave!" is a frequent call. "Oh, my God!" is another. ■ It isn't like this everywhere. At awards shows, Matthews reports, "our band has long enjoyed the ability to walk the red carpet *unfettered*." He jokingly pronounces the last word like a plummy British lord. "We

can clear a red carpet in under five minutes." But here, on the day that he plays a local amphitheater, Matthews, 36, exerts a peculiar effect on sightseers. It's not Colin Farrell mayhem or Monica Lewinsky shock, but a more inviting aura that brings out tentative, often tongue-tied responses to the sudden Dave Matthews-ness of it all.

"Can we take your picture?" asks a soccer mom in a Buick Rendezvous. "There's an idea," says Matthews, gamely posing for his seventh snapshot. "Hello," says a teenage girl, desperately, pleadingly. The greetings get weirder—from the oddly formal ("Hi, Mr. Matthews") to the strangely tautological ("Are you Dave Matthews from the Dave Matthews Band?") to the flat-out goofy ("Are you guys Dave Matthews?"). Matthews fields them all in a mumbly drawl, his wry, vaguely baleful expression reminiscent of silent-film comedian Buster Keaton. He's wearing his favorite article of clothing: an off-white, open-necked undershirt from the set of *Where the Red Fern Grows*, a new film adaptation of the classic children's book, co-starring Ned Beatty and Kris Kristofferson. Matthews plays a father—a recent role for him in real life, as well. "It's a Hollywood dirty shirt," he explains. "Meaning that no matter how many times I clean it, it stays looking dirty. But it's my favorite 'cause it's so comfy."

"Hi, Dave," calls a guy in a backward baseball hat. "Hey, how are ya?" he answers. Matthews is a true global celebrity, but a puzzling one, the Seabiscuit of rock stars. He's a guy's guy who rose to prominence fronting a hardworking jam band and now leads arenas full of regular folks to transcendence. He seems to be everybody's buddy and yet a total stranger. "Dave is one of the most unassuming superstars ever," says Bruce Flohr, his longtime A&R man.

That his name applies to an individual as well as a group effort will become clearer with the release of his first solo album, *Some Devil*—a moody, slightly downcast collection of tender love songs and soaring epiphanies. But the CD won't help casual fans categorize this supposedly comfiest of artists. For one thing, the music strays pretty far from the springy, folk-funk hoedowns of his frat-party-honed quintet. Matthews' voice opens into a fluid falsetto that recalls Jeff Buckley or Coldplay's Chris Martin. And the first single, "Gravedigger"—well, it's not exactly keg-ready. A bluesy Southern gothic, the song straightforwardly recounts lives marked on different tombstones—name, birth date, death date, and the fleeting agonies in between—with a prayerful refrain: "When you dig my grave / Make it shallow / So I can feel the rain." Hacky Sack to that.

The song's video depicts lives torn by racism, war, and violence, taken from events in American history. Directed by Mark Pellington (who also did Pearl Jam's "Jeremy"), the video employs a *Sixth Sense*, Dave-sees-dead-people device, with a stubby Matthews standing in a rural graveyard having visions of epochal brutality. In this season of national triumphalism, it likely will be MTV's only clip to show a black man being horsewhipped against a tree.

"The video makes a poignant statement about our history," says Matthews. "I think it's very important, especially at times like these, that we remind ourselves of how recently, and how often, there's injustice in America, caused by America. We sort of forget that when we talk about freedom and justice all the time."

"He's a complete phony," Matthews says of our Dubya, as we continue walking. "I think everything about him is false. Now I just read around him—like reading journalists from other parts of the world covering his trip to Africa, where some of his stops never even left the airport. I'm quite convinced that he's less popular in Africa than before he went there. Which is a technique he's really mastered."

He pauses as cars creep downhill and children scamper up. "Two years ago, the European Union wasn't talking about the need to create an army so that they could counterbalance America," he says.

"That's scary. People tend to think, 'Well, the Europeans are our buddies, except we argue.' But, no. They're actually kind of serious."

"Hi, Dave," a college-age, redheaded girl calls to him.

"Hi," he says brightly. Then, looking into the distance, he muses on. "It's impossible that, 20 years from now, we'll look back at this administration and say, 'They were great.' Unless they nuke the whole world and, you know, leave no records."

"We're coming to see you tonight!" says a girl walking up the steps with her family.

"Well, I hope we do all right."

WITH RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE UNPLUGGED AND BONO ON SABBATICAL, very few social critics are rocking mainstream music these days—which, given the prospect of Justin Timberlake, activist, may be a good thing. Dave Matthews isn't running for the position, but he does have an unusual perspective. "Our audience spreads across a lot of America, but it focuses on what has grown out of the fraternity/sorority thing," he says. "We're very grateful for that system, that they wanted to use us as a soundtrack. But that doesn't have much to do with our politics."

Undoubtedly, those politics are shaded by the fact that all but one



"I know I left my copy of A People's History around here somewhere": Matthews at Muir Beach, California



member of the Dave Matthews Band is African-American—the one being bassist Stefan Lessard. Matthews himself grew up in South Africa under apartheid, privileged with a firsthand view of a government that was obviously, fundamentally wrong. This was not the experience of most other white kids in the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia, to which he relocated at age 19. And it's not an experience Matthews pressed on the revelers he led year after year in a sock-hop bacchanalia that eventually grew big enough to fill Giants Stadium.

But darkness always loomed in the background of DMB songs. Even one of their most festive exhortations, crowd fave "Tripping Billies," has a chorus that goes, "Eat, drink, and be merry / For tomorrow we die." So it's no surprise that last year, when Matthews had a little downtime in Seattle—where he'd moved so his wife could attend grad school in naturopathic medicine—some grave preoccupations emerged when he took his guitar out to the garage to write. Soon, he met with close friend and sometime DMB engineer Steve Harris, putting his ideas down on tape. He enlisted percussionists Brady Blade and Tony Hall from Emmylou Harris' band and longtime guitar collaborator Tim Reynolds. Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio dropped by for a busy day and a half, and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band played on the album opener "Dodo." In Pearl Jam guitarist Stone Gossard's studio, they recorded free of the usual democratic DMB process.

"It just seemed like a good time to do it," Matthews says of going

solo. "We'd put out an album, and I had a few songs that didn't fit the mold. And the thought of doing something that was mine was really attractive. It was sort of intimidating and enlightening." Although he has no plans to play the new songs as the Dave Matthews Band, he considers the act of writing them better for the group's long-term survival. "It seemed like this was something that if I didn't do, I'd be less able to bring something to the band," he says. "The experience made me look forward to playing with them more than ever."

"There's a confidence in Dave that started to emerge during [2001's DMB album] *Everyday*," says Flohr, who became a Matthews fan after hearing a solo coffeehouse performance in 1992 that reminded him of Nick Drake. "Now he's got the confidence to do it on his own." Steve Harris, who produced *Some Devil*, felt Matthews was finding a new muse in Seattle. "I've never seen him this focused for this amount of time on one project. It was just an undeniable force going on."

Writing lyrics for the DMB's grooves, Matthews leaned toward a vaguely impersonal Hollywood existentialism—think *Fearless*, *Grand Canyon*, *American Beauty*—where life's revelations overtake average Joes as they stand contemplating some natural wonder. Writing for himself, Matthews got darker and more personal. In "So Damn Lucky," a car accident initiates a moment of languorous clarity. "Oh, my God," begins the soft, lilting chorus. "Wait and see / What will soon / Become of me." As it happens, Matthews was in five such accidents before he even drove and lost two best friends in one wreck outside Johannesburg. "You know how things slow down when you trip at the foot of the staircase, that moment when you know you can't get your hands out of your pockets fast enough? It's the same in a car accident, when everything slows down and goes quiet."

Another kind of quietness haunts the fragile love song "Oh," which begins, "The world has lost her way again / But you are here with me." In keeping with the album's general disposition, the "you" is deceased. "I imagined a spouse, or my grandfather, sitting still, just remembering someone fondly. And they're still there with them; it's a real conversation. It's a very lonely song, but it's also hopeful."

Matthews even finds uplift in "Gravedigger," whose third character, Mikey Carson, dies young but with his dreams intact, soaring into

the hereafter on a 10-speed. "I've always been obsessed [with]—well, reasonably curious about—mortality," he says. "I'm impressed by how thorough it is. How it comes in so many packages." Having lost his father at age ten to cancer, a beloved aunt shortly thereafter, and his older sister and brother-in-law in 1994, Matthews has a pretty good idea about the packages death comes in. But he also has a sense of its ability to bring focus to the moment, the way death, as Saul Bellow wrote, is "the dark backing a mirror needs if we are to see anything."

WE MEET AGAIN IN A MISTY TROPICAL GLADE, BY THE STILL WATERS OF A BLACK lagoon. Vines trail down the bamboo poles, and drums rumble deeply in the distance as Matthews enters, in jeans and a rumpled dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and takes a seat in the darkness. Rain starts hissing on the thatched awning overhead. Soon, three musicians will board a small, docked raft and float into the water, where they will perform traditional favorites like "...Baby One More Time."

The Tonga Room, beneath San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel, spares nothing in its re-creation of Polynesian exotica—fake lightning, fake thunder, fake rain, and a crack Asian Top 40 trio you'd swear was Britney Spears, especially if you'd had more than one of the cocktails Matthews is currently perusing on the menu: the Bora Bora Horror. The Tonga Itch. The Scorpion Bowl for Two. Matthews settles on an Island Margarita, which arrives in a giant glass goblet with a slab of pineapple and a maraschino cherry speared by a tiny orange umbrella. "Look at this," he says, hoisting the festive drink. "We could be dating with this thing." When I suggest we take it to the next level with a Scorpion Bowl, he demurs. "Oh, I don't think either of us are man enough for that," he says. "I mean, that's a whole lot of man."

Matthews knows what kind of man he is, and that kind of man drives a station wagon. "I don't have the strength of character to pull off anything more edgy," he says. "I can't suddenly start pretending." He and his wife have three back home, plus a pickup truck currently moored in Virginia. He does, however, have his eye set on one last big-ticket vehicle, having seen the light in the form of the gloriously appointed tour bus owned by Neil Young. "It's real wood, with beams and pillars," he says of Young's rolling home. "It's got a sunroof and a

DAVE'S RAVES

Are you an earnest, possibly alienated, folk/rock/blues type looking for a sympathetic word and decent financial support? Then give Dave Matthews a holler. ATO (According to Our) Records, distributed through BMG, was started in 2000 by Matthews, his manager, and two other partners as a haven for just such artists. Here's a rundown of the roster.

David Gray After three albums and four labels, there was little love for this Welsh singer/songwriter's spacious, keening folk rock. But former touring buddy Matthews made Gray's *White Ladder* (a likable mix of acoustic guitar and sampled backdrops) his first ATO release. As a result, the way-catchy "Babylon" went on to rock Starbucks worldwide.

My Morning Jacket Led by singer/songwriter Jim James, these Kentucky country-rockers have done extensive graduate studies in the works of Gram Parsons and the Band. On *It Still Moves*, their third album (after a handful of releases on indie label Darfa), James' lovely, droning melodies are reverbed to the point of drugged spookiness. Live, the band crank up their Skynyrd side.

Patty Griffin A poetic folkie with a resonant alto, Griffin emerged from the Boston scene to sign with A&M during the mid-'90s women-in-rock bubble. After two well-received but little-noticed albums, her third record, the acoustic (with strings) *1000 Kisses*, was released on ATO in 2002.

North Mississippi Allstars Sons of Memphis rock auteur Jim Dickinson, Luther (guitar, vocals) and Cody (drums, piano, vocals) formed this Southern punk-blues jam band with bassist Chris Chew in 1996 and recorded two indie records. For the more eclectic *Polaris*, released on ATO this year, they added bluesman R.L. Burnside's son Duwayne on guitar.

Ben Kweller In 1996, the then-16-year-old leader of Dallas band Radfish signed with Mercury to much grunge-prodigy hype, but his group's '97 debut was a stiff. Relocated to Brooklyn, Kweller has become a clever, high-spirited pop-rock underdog. He released the solo album *Sha Sha* on ATO in 2002.

Gov't Mule Guitarist Warren Haynes played the Duane Allman role in the late-'90s-to-mid-'90s Allman Brothers Band revival, but when he formed his own band in 1994, it was markedly rougher, darker, and trippier. Original member Allen Woody died in 2000, and an array of big-name bassists (Bootsy Collins, Flea, Mike Watt) filled in on the ATO album *The Deep End, Volume 1*.

Vusi Mahlasela A South African singer/songwriter/poet, Mahlasela was a powerful voice of resistance during the apartheid era. After releasing four albums at home, he appeared on the Dave Matthews Band's *Everyday* in 2001. A compilation of his songs, *The Voice*, was released on ATO in August.



Modeling their new line of Kentucky Casuals loungewear, for the all-country man of leisure: My Morning Jacket

built-in organ in the back. It just had this effect on me. I mean, I walked in, and I was like, 'Shit.' And Neil told me, 'You're starting a family. You need to get a bus—a bus that's your bus.'"

This is a relatively recent priority for Matthews, who wed his long-time girlfriend, Ashley, three years ago, and soon fathered twin girls, Stella and Grace, now age two. He wears a wedding ring made out of pressed pennies from his birth year of 1967, a match to hers from 1973. The humble choice befits the Quaker faith in which Matthews was raised, whose famed hymn, "Simple Gifts," counsels that it's a joy to be simple and free and a joy to come down where you ought to be—although joy was not his foremost emotion in the initial stages of parenthood. "Anyone will tell you that the first three months are very difficult," Matthews says. "They started to smile just in time—just before I threw them out of the window and threw myself out after them."

Although press coverage of the band's 2002 album, *Busted Stuff*, emphasized a newly sober Dave—keying off the single "Bartender"—this was not the case. "Oh, no," he says about rehab rumors. "Fatherhood curbs drinking just fine. My kids are much more entertaining than most of my drinking buddies." He's also wary of other absolutes. "I think maybe there's a disease called alcoholism that I'm thus far safe from—maybe because I don't believe in it," he says. "I don't think it's a disease. I know some people shouldn't drink. But very often the people who shouldn't drink, drink. And the people who don't drink anymore *should* drink."

And, as usual these days, Matthews can't help but pursue this psychology to its political end: "I think a contributing factor to the moronic behavior of [the Bush] administration is the fact that...the world is very black and white to someone who once drunk his face off and enjoyed it and then turned around and said, 'That's evil.' Sometimes you end up making the same decision about many things."

THE SHORELINE AMPHITHEATRE PARKING LOT IS PACKED—A VOLKSWAGEN GTI with Phish and Zeppelin stickers here, a vintage Hummer with a satellite dome there. Inside the security gates, the venue fairgrounds are bustling with your basic cargo-shorted, Teva-wearing jammers, plus a notably fashion-forward minority. By the beer pavilion, I see a woman with long blond hair, a black-knit skullcap, low-cut hip-huggers, and a tight, white T-shirt bearing the block-lettered tribute name.

As the sun sets over the stage's giant canopy, the DMB bring out their special brand of big-tent rock. The quintet—plus touring keyboardist Butch Taylor—walk onstage to ecstatic applause. And the roar jumps another decibel as Matthews wordlessly cues the driving string rhythms of "The Stone," made ominous by Leroi Moore's elephantine baritone sax. Video screens flash between swirling indigo clouds and close-ups of the musicians; the shots of Carter Beauford show that he is, with the passing of jazz's Billy Higgins, the smilingest drummer in music. And his bonhomie is infectious. The fans sway and boogie, some raising cell phones to transmit audio, video, or both. Cannabis smoke fills the air, song requests are shouted ("#41" being a favorite), and everyone goes absolutely nuts when Moore takes a solo on a tin whistle.

Halfway through, there's a pause and an oddly tense moment. The band members look center stage, and after some invisible signal, an explosive volley opens a song that brings the breezy air of the set into something heavier and more immense. Live, "Don't Drink the Water," from 1998's *Before These Crowded Streets*, sounds more Zeppelin than DMB, a low, steady groove and octave power chord, over which Matthews sings, "Come out, come out / No use in hiding," invoking the voice of some ancient invader. "Away, away / You have been banished / Your land is gone / And given me." When the verse rises to its soaring major chord, Matthews' vocal takes on a kind of chilling gravitas. "What's this? you say / You feel a right to remain / Then stay / And I will bury you." Not everyone feels the lines' resonance with such recent

news sound bites as "You're either with us or against us" and "We must defeat the evildoers," but Matthews sure seems to. As the chorus rises to its climactic high note, he sings it not with the record's careful phrasing, but with a loud, full-throated roar. It's a stirring, if bizarre, moment—like seeing your shambling hoops buddy suddenly swoop up and dunk.

Later, I mention that the song has acquired a new ferocity. "Yeah, it's more grumpy," he says, speaking to the surrealism of singing a cold satire when our president is unintentionally paraphrasing its lyrics on TV. "It's funny when people ask me about that song—'Is that about South Africa?' And I say, 'No, it's about this country. And the last 400 years.'"

"Don't Drink the Water" is among a handful of older songs reinvigorated by the events of recent months. "A lot of them have a different air about them, because they have something new to look at," he says. "'Last Stop' is another one that's completely changed." The 1998 song

includes lines such as "If hate's the gate to peace / This is the last stop" and "Go ahead and dream...believe that you are the chosen one." Add some avant-guitar and a Che Guevara T-shirt and you're halfway to Rage Against the Machine. Like most concerned mainstream liberals, Matthews will say his main foe is fundamentalism—an increasingly popular way of simplifying the world into basics and opposites. "It allows us to think that we're always innocent and that when we're attacked, it's like attacking a child,"

he says. "It allows us to think we're somehow examples of rightness. And that everyone unlike us is an example of wrongness."

Such utterances have landed Matthews on shows like *Politically Incorrect*, whose host, Bill Maher, classifies most musician guests as "either very good or very bad." Maher also had Matthews on his HBO talk show *Real Time*. "Our standards for people on that show are way higher," Maher says. "He's a very straight shooter. And he's not saying anything that different from Howard Dean."

But in fact, Matthews may be more revolutionary than any pop musician on MTV. Raised amid a defiantly regressive South African society and government, he grew up to be that deceptively radical thing, an actual pacifist. "I'm a firm believer that peace is by far the greatest solution," he says. Then he clarifies. "[I'm] not [saying] peace can be achieved once we get rid of all the violence. I mean, peace *now*."

I say that's a tough sell these days. "Yeah, it is a tough sell," he says. "But I can't help what I believe. I'm not saying that we should lie down and allow ourselves to be pummeled. But the great people in the world who made the most powerful changes—very often they were people who talked about peace. Whether it's Martin Luther King or Gandhi or Nelson Mandela or Christ. I mean, what about 'Thou shalt not kill' don't you understand? God said *don't*. And God's a very powerful tool, especially when misused."

Slogan shouting and banner waving aren't the only ways to be politically outspoken. Sometimes all you have to do is wait for the world to change around you—or find a reason to speak. "I feel as though my daughters have given me a sense of urgency to speak my mind and to form somewhat educated opinions," he says. "I owe it to them."

One of the lovelier songs on *Some Devil*, "Trouble," with its starry, shimmering sound and blinking, reverb-drenched guitars, is as hushed and expansive as something off *Joshua Tree*—era U2. It's a kind of prayer, but a complex one, to a two-faced god, something that must be bargained with, something that gives and takes. "I confess you came because of me," sings Matthews. "Trouble, get behind me now / Trouble, let me be."

As an ideological statement, it's a familiar one: conflicted, a bit guilty, undogmatic, hopeful—in a word, *liberal*. But as a song, it's something more: haunting, ancient-sounding, and mysterious. Like love, fatherhood, or looking toward the future. It ends with the refrain, "Pray your mercy shine on me / Pray your mercy shine." ■

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