

# relix

JULY 2009

**D**I REMEMBER THE first time that I saw the Dave Matthews Band. The band was opening for Phish at the Santa Monica Civic Center in December of 1994. I'd never heard of DMB, but by the time the band rolled out "Ants Marching"—try to remember the first time you ever heard that song—I was sold. DMB had released *Under the Table and Dreaming* a few months earlier, which began a trifecta of stellar albums over the next four years (*Crash*, *Before These Crowded Streets*). This was something of a tour-heavy (jam)band that could also deliver the goods in the studio—a rare combination.

But then came a trio of uneven albums—*Everyday*, *Busted Stuff* and *Stand*

*Up*. Those first three albums became the classic double-edged sword: Once the bar is set at a certain height, how much higher can you go? Or, for that matter, how long can you continue to maintain artistry at that level? Anything less than is met with groans.

While *Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King*, the band's first album in four years, hopefully starts a new trifecta, it definitely signals a major change in the band. More than anything, it's a clear marker acknowledging the death of founding member LeRoi Moore's last year whose saxophone left an indelible print on the band's music.

One also gets the sense that Moore's passing focused the group's collective conscious on the bigger picture. While there is often a tangle of tension and frustration that comes with any band that reaches DMB's popularity, an event like this undoubtedly forces its members to reassess priorities and values.

What's more, there's always been a deep vein of lyrical darkness to the band's music that seems, in certain ways, to foresee moments like this—or rather, how to react to them. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die," Matthews famously belts out on the early classic, "Tripping Billies."

As he tells Chris Willman in this issue's cover story, "This is my therapy, to sing about the end of the world and dance. We don't find solutions in despair—we'll find solutions in the defiance of it."

Cheers



Josh Baron



Dave Matthews Band

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"This is my therapy, to sing about the end of the world and dance. We don't find solutions in despair—we'll find solutions in the defiance of it." **pg.60**

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Phoenix emerged from the shadow of fellow Frenchmen Air and Dalt Punk in the early '00s to become one of Europe's most buzzed-about exports. After reaching an even wider audience on the *Lost in Translation* soundtrack and its last album, *It's Never Been Like That*, the group's star has continued to rise. Phoenix sits down with **Richard Gehr** to discuss the band's highly anticipated new album *Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix*.

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Few bands are as important to the indie rock movement as Sonic Youth. The experimental four-piece has survived countless changes to the country's musical landscape only to emerge as one of the most inspired—and longest running—groups in modern rock. After parting ways with longtime label Geffen, Sonic Youth signed with indie tastemakers Matador to release its forthcoming record, *The Eternal Now*, the rock heroes talk with contributing editor **Tad Hendrickson** about their latest batch of songs, working with John Agnello and how they managed to stay so relevant some 20-plus years into the game.

### 60 | **Dave Matthews Band: ...For Tomorrow We Die**

Dave Matthews Band suffered a major blow last summer when founding saxophonist LeRoi Moore died after a tragic ATV accident. While still sorting through their emotions, the surviving members of the band returned to the studio last fall with producer Rob Cavallo to complete work on their first album since 2005—*Big Whiskey and the Groogrux King*. Both a tribute to Moore (who appears on most tracks and inspired the album's title) and a look forward (*Big Whiskey* also features his replacement Jeff Coffin), the album is in many ways the group's most emotionally loaded release to date. Dave Matthews and his longtime band talk with **Chris Willman** about their fallen brother, why this is the best album the band has made in nearly a decade and what the future holds for America's biggest band.

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# ...FOR TOMORROW WE DIE ←

In the wake of founding member LeRoi Moore's sudden death, the **Dave Matthews Band** persevere to deliver not only their best album in a decade but ultimately a moving tribute to their lost brother

—  
BY CHRIS WILLMAN  
PORTRAITS BY DANNY CLINCH  
LIVE PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRAD HODGE







Reconfigured and  
proving on Matthews,  
Boyd Tinsley, Carter  
Beauford, Stefan Lessard,  
Tim Reynolds



## "We were not in the best state."

Dave Matthews is veering close to bluntness, describing tensions that had built up in the band that bears his name over the last decade, things that weren't really talked about and resolved until a year or two ago.

"Our relationships in the band..."

He is trying to come up with the gentlest possible synonym for strained.

"It's five men—at least five men—living together and trying to work together, and things can get in the way of that. We're all different people, we all have our own opinions and our own problems, but we needed to put all that away. And we did, and we were facing each other in a very different and very serious way when it came time to do this album. Our obligation to God—and whether or not I believe is not the point—is to be the best we can be at what we were made for." He describes the band's mood from the outset of the sessions as "joyful and unapologetic—like, 'This is my band. Like us or don't like us—there is no band in the world anything like us.'"

The strong personalities that make up the Dave Matthews Band talked out their differences. After the longest layoff between studio albums they'd taken yet, the pride, determination and group unity were back. Nothing could get in the way of the healthy and happy ending waiting to cap this therapeutic narrative.

Except that then, in the great tradition of if it ain't one thing, it's another far, far shittier thing, somebody died.

Most albums by veteran acts that are working out their personal or musical issues in the studio might have one dramatic arc, if that. The saga of *Big Whiskey* and the *GrooGrux King*—DMB's seventh studio album—is a definite multi-parter, dramatically speaking. Act 1 had to do with how to get the band on one page. Act 2 centered on what to do when that page had a severe rip in it—following the shocking death of sax player LeRoy Moore, the member of the quintet who arguably always carried the greatest mythos.

Chronologically, the group was midway through the creation of the album when Moore died on Aug. 18, 2008 due to complications resulting from an ATV accident on his farm weeks earlier. Although little could've been considered completed or final, not moving the recording process forward never seemed like an option given the interpersonal progress that had already been fought so hard. Anything less than full-speed-ahead might have constituted a relapse.

Moore's passing "shook all of us: What do we do now? It's still a little bit like that," Matthews figures. "At least we knew we had one thing we had to do: We had to finish the tour"—at the time, the group had put recording sessions on pause for their usual summer road work—"because he would have. Not to say I know his thoughts, but what else are we gonna do? We're musicians. And then, also, to go and finish this record that he knew was great. So all of us went back into the studio thinking: We can't fuck around. Because this one is an ode."

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This is my therapy, to sing about the end of the world and dance. We don't find solutions in despair—we'll find solutions in the defiance of it."

Dave Matthews



*Big Whiskey* and the *GrooGrux King* pays overt homage to Moore in its title, since "Grux" is an old, nonsensical nickname that some of the band members used to call each other that finally stuck to the sax player. It also plays covert tribute by being largely steeped in an awareness of mortal fragility—although you could say that almost every other collection of lyrics in the Dave Matthews oeuvre, too. (If the Old Testament writers hadn't gotten around to coining the phrase *eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*, Matthews surely would have.) The record is not only steeped in feelings about a band member's death, but also the lingering depression afflicting post-Katrina New Orleans, where the final recording sessions took place during the first quarter of this year.

"Spare a couple of tunes, lyrically, it's a pretty dark album," grants the band leader, "but I don't think that's unusual for me. There's also





Matthews channeling emotion in *Nestfile* at Vanderbilt University 4/25/09

a real joy in the performance of it. There's no real point in mourning all the sadness and suffering in the world. Whereas if you acknowledge all the things that are happening in the world and you fight them as if it's your first priority, then you still are allowed to laugh maniacally at it all and dance like a madman. And so this is my therapy, to sing about the end of the world and dance. We don't find solutions in despair—we'll find solutions in the defiance of it. All we have to do is turn the TV on or open the newspaper to see how much disaster and horror there is. Everybody needs a little ham section."

Leave it to Matthews to try solving the eternal problems of evil, suffering and theodicy with an artfully employed brass section—not to mention a recurring 30-piece orchestra, strangely liberal use of the banjo, and guitars that are (unusually for the DMB) very much hooked up

to a power source. Clearly, whatever the stages of grief were for the group, minimalism was not one of them. But *Big Whiskey* makes good use of possibly contradictory impulses. As helmed by big-time producer Rob Cavallo (whose credits include Green Day, David Cook and My Chemical Romance), is this an attempt at doing a fairly straightforward, highly commercial, ridiculously catchy and accessible mainstream rock and roll album? Or is it a slightly experimental progression into unexplored territory? Or is it really a return to an organic, eclectic signature sound that hasn't been heard much on a record since the 1990s? The answer to all of these questions, weirdly and paradoxically, is yes. Bigness befits the band, this time; after some awkward fits and starts throughout this decade, it's really the first time that they've been able to meld a fuller and, yes, brassier production approach with the





Bringing Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King to the masses, Spring 2009

rough-and-tumble live feeling that fans crave.

Of course, this could just be the whiskey talking. (The first part of that title is a command and not just a description, right?)

**Rob Cavallo** was worried. He'd flown into the band's traditional home base, Charlottesville, at the beginning of 2008, replacing another producer that they'd had a false start with. There was a meeting where the band members brought out any ideas that they'd been working on, alone or together, including a handful of tunes that had already been road-tested. They decided to chuck every one of them out. All of the new material would have its basis in fresh, full-band improv.

Good idea in theory, but Cavallo was ready to tear his hair out after the first day. "We worked on one song for like 10 hours, and we didn't really get anywhere. That night, I was thinking, what am I gonna do? How am I gonna get these guys to write? The next morning I very subtly said, 'You guys are such great jammers. But why don't we just limit [each jam] to 10 or 15 minutes?'" Rather than be insulted, band members welcomed the idea of having the producer cut things off and get them to move on any time they'd hit upon a useable musical fragment. "Sometimes we'd just be frustrated," says Matthews, "but we'd still be bashing and smashing, and sometimes we'd fall out of chaos into something really great."

The band left Charlottesville and reconvened in Seattle in the spring of '08, narrowing the 100 or so song fragments from the first ses-

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Roi was a really tough person—to live with, to be friends with, to love, to care about—because he was really hard, and he was a very tortured soul. He was a wonderful man, but so very difficult much of the time.”

Dave Matthews

sion down to 15 more full-bodied rough tracks. Of course, no one was thinking that this represented their last chance to capture Moore on tape.

So when DMB came back together in the fall for a third round of writing and recording, there was a high degree of nervousness with what its departed colleague had or hadn't left behind. "I'm not sure any of the guys knew—at the time we went back to the studio after Roi passed—if there was anything we could save that he recorded," says violin player Boyd Tinsley. "There was this big effort to find these parts

and passages that Roi recorded and incorporate them."

Notes bassist Stefan Lessard, "LeRoi a lot of times would be coming up with parts and have his back turned toward the microphone"—which seems like cause for a big, posthumous d'oh!—"so we'd have to crank up all the levels, just to hear what he was doing. But we did it, and I'm happy that we were able to capture so much."

Cavallo points out that Moore, "was such an amazing player that





## Between the Lines

Dave Matthews breaks down **Big Whiskey** and the **GrooGrux** King track by track

### "Grux"

● I loved that particular improv with Rei playing the lead and I said, "How do you redo that?" After Rei was gone, it was obvious we couldn't redo it. Then I had the idea to tie that to the beginning of "Shake Me Like a Monkey." You hear that quiet, mournful horn and it opens up your heart, because it's calm and kind. Then you step out of that mellow darkness and blast the light on.

### "Shake Me Like a Monkey"

● Of all the songs on the album, this one—in a way—is the most throwaway lyric. But it's not really throwaway, because it's like an invitation: Don't be all high-falutin'. Don't be too hip to fuckin' understand! Get off your ass and feel some shit. It's boastful. In that song, the guy's got a fuckin' top hat on, a big cane and he's stinging this song with his big platform clogs on with silver pants and a long, black coat—and he's stepping people.

### "Funny the Way It Is"

● I always thought it was so funny when I was living in Africa how whether people were trying to get to school or get to elections, they would go across the world to get their voice heard or to learn bit more about the world. Just starving, not only for food—but for knowledge, and for the right to have a voice. And it always was so strange to me then, coming to this country, pumped all over the world as the hope of all hopes, that in many cases we treat [what this country offers] with this entitled indifference.

### "Lying in the Hands of God"

● We worked up an arrangement as a band and then I went off to write the lyrics. I was like, "I nailed this one!" And I came back and they pressed the record while I tried to play the song—and it was so slow, I couldn't sing what I had written over it. It wouldn't work. So we sped up the recording, and then I sang over that, and it worked like a champion. So we kept all the squeaked music.

### "Why I Am"

● This song is definitely about death. The whole thing of "When my ghost takes me from you/you will remember the fool that I am/So don't cry, baby don't cry." The urgency of living is very present in that song.

### "Dive In"

● If you think this song sounds light, you need to listen a little harder. That may be the most directly dark song I've ever written. But I like that some people will fall hook, line and sinker into its trap, which is that it's disguised as a "We're all going on a summer holiday" song. It's got this sort of happy, smiley, joy-joy vibe—while everything is melting into a horrible nothingness. It was inspired by a great book called *The Drifted Ocean*, by Richard Ellis. As the oceans go, so goes the world.

### "Spaceman"

● I think it's a love song. But I don't think the narrator is necessarily good to go. It's a bit about addiction, maybe, but it's not blatant. It's another song—and I write a lot of 'em—that's sort of "Everything's fucked. Let's lean on the side of love."

### "Squirmy"

● Carter had a drum groove that was awesome, but he originally did it over the top of this lilting, melancholy song. And I was like, "This drum groove is too good for this song." So I took it and wrote this new song over the top of it. That is one of the most joyful songs on the record. I have the image of some strange church where you go to learn that (all you really are) is just a naked monkey.

### "Alligator Pie (Cockadlie)"

● I have a daughter named Grace and another named Stella. I was at home in Seattle, noodling on my National guitar, and my daughter came up and said "You always have Grace in songs." I said "Well, it's not really her, it's just the word grace." So she said "When are you gonna put me in a song?" So that's where that line "Daddy, when you gonna put me in a song?" came from. Then being down in New Orleans made me put it inside a story that I imagined from talking to people down there.

### "Seven"

● It's got a real swank and cockiness. Carter's drum-

ming is fucking unbelievable. There aren't a lot of people that can jump around time signatures the way he can and make it sound so effortless. Every time I listen to it I'm like, "Yeah-ahhhhh. Staff! It's sexy! I could be singing about frog spit—that song doesn't care."

### "Time Bomb"

● I like the lyrics a lot. "What if Martians fell from the sky? What would that do to God?" Certainly one would do a job on the other, wouldn't it? In both directions, I suppose.

### "My Baby Blue"

● It's a goodbye song. It's a heartbreaker. That's a hard one for me to listen to. I love the strings that Dave Campbell arranged. We had a band arrangement, and it was pretty loud. But when I wrote the lyrics, the song said "I'm not loud, I'm just big chords. Play me quietly, and then I'll make sense." Rei really liked that one. He said "Man, that's a big song—don't make it too big." And he was right, because I took everything off and just had the little guitar.

### "You And Me"

● I was sitting on a boat with my wife and kids and some friends, writing on my phone while we went across this lake. It's a nice goodbye for the record. Because there's been a lot of dark stuff, I thought that—at the end—it deserved a really straightforward song about hope.





probably 90 percent of the stuff that he played at those early stages, even before a melody was written, we were able to use, because he was so on it. We were able to use the computer to place it in the songs. And he was wonderful with concepts and analyzing the song. He could bring so much more to the table than just playing the horn. He was always saying something pretty amazing or pretty astute about the music we were making at the time. The way to really honor him and to do the right thing was not to put horns everywhere, but rather to use the horns in the right way."

Agrees Lessard: "It wasn't as if we were trying to fill in the hole. In fact, at one point, talking to Dave I just said 'Look, the absence of Roi is just as powerful as trying to fill it in with tons of saxophones if it's not Roi.' There is a certain absence of the horn on this record, but then when the horn is there, it's so huge and powerful."

In the end, all of the solo sax parts heard on the final product are Moore—with one exception, which is an Eastern-flavored solo performed by Jeff Coffin on "Squirm," a tune that wasn't started until after Moore's passing. As noted, there is a full horn section on parts of the record, but the band insists that wasn't a late attempt to replace Moore with an entire phalanx of Moores. By Matthews' account, "Rashawn [Ross, trumpet player sideman] and Roi had been working on this punchy horn section vibe, just the two of them, for a few years. So Rashawn brought that tight, pumping little section sound to the record with Jeff, who is a friend of ours who came in after Roi's accident to create another space where Roi had left one."

Matthews says that Moore's imprint on the album is deeper than just the handful of solos he left behind for it. "His musical instincts

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Not that there's anything wrong with the way we experimented with *Stand Up or Everyday*, but there was a disconnect that you're only so proud of it because you weren't there for the whole process."

**Stefan Lessard**

were really like no one else I'd ever met in my life. And [this] was already his favorite album, even though we hadn't finished. So that's the one great sorrow about this album—that he's not here for it. The whole process was incredibly genuine, which was something that Roi always talked about: 'All we need to be is honest.'

Now, that makes him sound like he's a little saint. Roi was a really tough person—to live with, to be friends with, to love, to care about—because he was really hard, and he was a very tortured soul. He was a wonderful man, but so very dif-

ficult much of the time. But he had really clear ideas about music. Even in his darkest periods, that shone through. The year or so before he died was the happiest I'd seen him in more than a decade."

Carter Beauford may have taken the death hardest, having known Moore since they were both five. Beauford and Moore were the band's personally tight, oddly complementary opposites: The preternaturally effusive drummer whose cheerful charisma belies the greatest ferocity of any player in the group, versus a famously reclusive sax player whose

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"We grew up two doors apart. I lost my best friend," reflects drummer Carter Beauford of saxophonist LeRoi Moore's passing, seen playing here with bassist Stefan Lessard. "That's something that's gonna be weighing on me for the rest of my life."





black moods seemed utterly at odds with the ineluctable sweetness coming out of his instrument. "If you got to know him, that was one hell of a guy," says the drummer. "He was a horn player, but he had a rhythmical thing going on as well. Sometimes he would blow a solo that would be so percussive that, to me, it was almost like another drummer over there. When he left us, I was like, oh my God—first of all, that's my lifetime buddy, LeRoi. We grew up two doors apart. I lost my best friend. Man, that's something that's gonna be weighing on me for the rest of my life. So it's difficult, but it's one of those things that's part of life, and you've got to suck it up and keep moving."

The effect that the death had on Beauford wasn't lost on Matthews: "So much of this is all about the loss of our friend—including Carter's performance," says the bandleader. "I swear to God that Carter played like he was trying to fight his way alone in the Alamo, he was so explosive."

Matthews wanted to challenge himself instrumentally on *Big Whiskey*, which in this case meant plugging in. It's not often considered eyebrow-raising when a rock band's frontman picks up an electric guitar, but not every group is DMB. Some fans may assume that all of the non-acoustic stuff here is Tim Reynolds, the on-again, off-again sideman who participates on this album in a big way after being absent from DMB studio sessions since the '90s. But it's actually Matthews playing lead on two tracks, including the first single, "Funny the Way It Is."

"It even had me fooled," says Beauford. "We were down in New Orleans in the studio, listening back, and I was like 'Man, Tim Reynolds is kicking ass on this one'—and it was Dave."

At the behest of Glen Ballard on 2001's *Everyday*, Matthews first tried playing electric but even after continuing it on tour, he never got too comfortable with it. Says Cavallo, "Dave and I had a conversation where I was like, 'Did you ever play electric guitar?' And he said, not often—but I'd like to, I'm not averse to it. It doesn't usually work for me." And I said, 'Let me think if I can get something to change that.' I have this one very sturdy guitar, that I actually had made, and I asked for very heavy strings to be put on it, similar to an acoustic's. Dave has a particular style that's very unique. He doesn't do traditional guitar playing—it's not his thing. That's why he has such interesting rhythms. We were calling it the spider walk, because his fingers were almost like spider legs going across the fretboard. And this guitar opened the door."

Matthews was also up for a thematic challenge. "Lyrically, I think this is my strongest album," he says. "I've written some lyrically strong stuff in the past, but I think I've been sort of inconsistent at times, and sometimes it's just been a bunch of dribble. But whether it's a light-hearted topic or about addiction or passion or friendship or loss, I think I had a standard for myself that I would not go below, and I think I managed to deliver like I haven't in the past."

The final recording in New Orleans this year had a big effect on Matthews' late-inning writing, with three of the songs implicitly or explicitly set in the city. "I don't want to paint it too pretty. There's a lot of frightening violence and the poverty-related crime down there that's just terrifyingly sad. Hopefully more songs will start bubbling up that will help tell the story of how criminally negligent we were about that city. But it's also got this resilience and hospitality and warmth and celebration. Anybody who doesn't know where to go, they should go to that fuckin' place."

**So how does** *Big Whiskey* connect to the band's big legacy? Will it be more universally embraced than the group's previous studio albums of this past decade, each of which came with some sort of attendant controversy for fans? Is it the proverbial "return to form"? Three of the band's four members seem to agree. See if you can guess who the exception might be.

Boyd Tinsley: "To me it's in the vein of *Under the Table and Dreaming*



"To me it's in the vein of *Under the Table and Dreaming* and *Crush*, of just music that sounds undeniably like the Dave Matthews Band," says Tinsley of the new album. "I'm not saying that the last four albums didn't, but I'm just saying that this album more so does."

and *Crush*, of just music that sounds undeniably like the Dave Matthews Band. I'm not saying that the last four albums didn't, but I'm just saying that this album more so does."

Carter Beauford: "We were all thinking of the same thing—getting it to have that raw feeling again, like we did the first five years. It's definitely about getting back to that old way of doing things. *Everyday* was the only record that I didn't feel I could do what Carter Beauford does. There was a reason for that, though."

"We had our backs to the wall, because we had a whole record the Internet swallowed up [the bootlegged *Lillywhite Sessions*], so we decided to have emergency time with Glen Ballard. So him and Dave put some cool stuff together, and had us pretty much play note for note what they had done. We kind of had to do that, because we needed to get that record out."

Beauford's a great apologist, but he won't have to put that humble skill set to use for *Big Whiskey*. "This particular record, probably more than any other, I was able to really get in and knock some heads." He chuckles. "No pun intended."

Stefan Lessard: "Not that there's anything wrong with the way we experimented with *Stand Up* or *Everyday*, but there was a disconnect that you're only so proud of it because you weren't there for the whole process. But there's a richness to this record I feel like we haven't had in 10 years."

"When you fall in love with a band's records, it's really hard to necessarily keep that love growing, because you've always had a record that's been your favorite. I'm that way with *The Joshua Tree* and U2. I know a lot of people feel that way about *Before These Crowded Streets*. But our fan base is such a wide variety from young to old, that those fans who are younger, whose parents are fans of ours, need a record like that, something that they can really kind of be like, 'This is for us.'"

When I pass along this last comment to Matthews, to see if he agrees, I'm surprised to sense him getting his hackles up. "For me, I can't even begin to think like that," Matthews says. "He must have planned that without me! That sounds pompous to me. I'm making the music now—I can't plan ahead for who likes it. I don't give a fuck who listens to it. If you don't want to, that's your loss. I just made a thing that I really love." He softens his tone a little: "It's all a different language, all a different way of thinking about things. But all I was thinking was, 'Get it right.'" ●