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KING DAVE



The reluctant acoustic guitar hero talks about his fascination with rhythmic patterns, his first soloing sessions, and crafting *Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King*.

BY DAN APCZYNSKI

Photos by Jay Blakesberg

The stage is set at the 2009 Outside Lands music festival in San Francisco's sprawling Golden Gate Park, but the namesake and front man of Saturday night's headliner, the Dave Matthews Band, prefers not to think about it. "I don't dwell too much on where we are, just try to get it right," Matthews says. "I'll think about it afterwards—quickly if it goes well and longer if it doesn't." His sincerity makes it almost too easy to accept his humble position, and the win-some/lose-some perspective makes for a fair enough assessment from someone who has had a year like Matthews—his band's new album, *Big*

Whiskey and the GrooGrux King, was certified platinum just over 12 months after the passing of dear friend and DMB saxophonist LeRoi Moore (the intended "king" from the album's title).

The band's evening set is drawing a throng of devotees who have already begun reserving their spots at the main stage by early afternoon. Backstage, Matthews picks up a beautiful Taylor acoustic (with fretboard inlay of the word "Grux" and a king's crown illustration from the album's liner notes) and says, "It's funny, because I always think, 'Why does *Acoustic Guitar* magazine want to talk to me? That

guy is a guitar player. I just hold onto it so I have something to do with my hands.'"

And with that, it's clear that Matthews isn't giving himself enough credit. Even apart from his immense musical catalog—including seven major-label studio albums with the Dave Matthews Band, a pair of live acoustic albums with guitarist Tim Reynolds, one Grammy-winning solo album, and a rapidly growing selection of live DMB recordings available on CD and the band's website—Matthews' guitar playing is every bit as remarkable and unique as one might expect from one of popular music's most

legendary figures. His deft rhythmic sensibility and unorthodox fretwork (often characterized by two- and three-string shapes played up the neck with heavy-string damping) are matched only by his second-nature songwriting ability and his modest and intelligent (and slightly frenetic) demeanor. If his ability to give his bandmates the room they need to shine and the evident value Matthews places on camaraderie (both musical and personal) are not the stuff of royalty, they're at least characteristics of a truly great (and yes, humble) bandleader.

As the following conversation illustrates, Matthews has much to say about what he needs out of his guitar to serve both the wall-of-sound band setting and more intimate writing and performance situations. Focusing on rhythmic licks and chords turned "inside-out," Matthews serves the song, the groove, and recently, the memory of his departed band mate, above all else.

An acoustic guitar, when amplified, can be a monster to tame—I can't even imagine what it must be like in a huge outdoor venue like this. How do you deal with that?
MATTHEWS Well, we've had a lot of practice. The sound crew has worked in a lot of different places—arenas are more chaos even. I think that I play aggressively enough so that I

have a bit of an advantage. There's nothing worse than a wizened acoustic guitar sound—strummy-strum-strum—there's nothing more ineffective than that.

You do tend to favor rhythmically interesting lines and riffs over straight strumming patterns. When you sit down to write a guitar part, what are you thinking about rhythmically?

MATTHEWS I guess, and it may be a flaw, that I think about rhythm more [than anything else]. I'm always wanting to find something unusual. I've started to try and write more traditionally, but for whatever reason, I tend toward trying to find something that sounds more like a pattern to me. I have a tendency to start with a lick or a rhythm, trying to imitate other instruments more than the guitar. I don't know if it ends up sounding like that but that's sort of what I'm trying to do—try to make a sound like there's a drum there and then there's sort of some other melodies driving it. Using as few strings as possible—that's what I like to do. If I could just have one string, I think that would be perfect. I suppose I could take five of them off, but that would be admitting defeat.

When it's successful, what does that kind of rhythmic imitation sound like?

MATTHEWS On the new record there's one song that doesn't have drums and it has a real groove to it. [Example 1, from "Baby Blue"]. It's got this feel to it that, when I play it, makes me want to dance. It's not a rock song but it sort of drives itself. So that's what I mean.

So what do you do when writing a song that has drums on it?

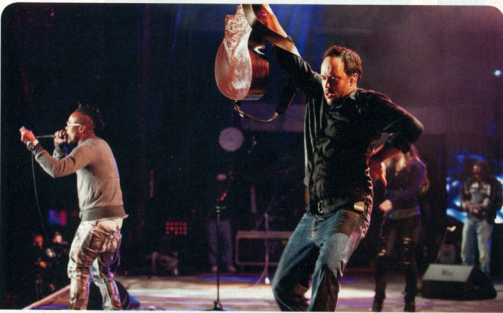
MATTHEWS Sometimes I write specifically because I know Carter [Dave Matthews Band drummer Carter Beauford] will be able to bring the strange rhythm out. In a song like "Seven," I was writing that one, all the while knowing that Carter would be able to play that, make it clear. But still what I'm playing [Example 2] makes it like a march already. And then Carter plays it—I like the way he plays because he can make something that's an odd time sound perfectly reasonable.

On that same tune, the vocal melody kind of floats freely on top, almost as if it isn't really anchored to the odd time. What is your approach to working two parts together?

MATTHEWS I'm being lazy at the moment—I let [guitarist] Tim [Reynolds] carry it a lot when I'm singing. I guess if I wasn't lazy, I could learn to play that lick and sing easily at the same time. There's a looseness about the way that some licks are delivered that I can manage on some songs, but on that one I haven't yet—I have the luxury of someone to cover it for me. I played it on the record but having Tim there to cover it—except when he's soloing, then I jump in—makes a big difference. I don't feel obligated to be a killer guitar player, I guess.

But you don't always excuse yourself from sections like that, right?

MATTHEWS One song that I had to play [and sing] together on the record is "Spaceman" [Example 3]. I had to learn to be able to sing and play at the same time so I learned how to talk over it while I play it. I like songs where it's more like a puzzle, rather than everyone's going, you know, [strums the guitar evenly]. Which is great, I mean people that can do that and really pull it off, and there's a lot of them,



Matthews onstage at Outside Lands 2009 with will.i.am and Fergie of the Black Eyed Peas.

Ex. 1: Intro riff from "Baby Blue"

that's awesome—but I love, you know, when you watch those guys in the little cars in the parades, the Shriners or whatever they are. I find them impressive. Or synchronized swimming, people that can fall together, acrobats or circus freaks. So a tiny musical version of that is fun for us. That also keeps it interesting while we're up there so we're not having to kill ourselves trying to remain interested.

I understand that wasn't the only musical challenge you had to deal with while making this record. Is it true that you played some guitar solos?

MATTHEWS I did—this is the first record [producer] Rob Cavallo made me play guitar solos on. I was like, "Why don't you play 'em? Why doesn't Tim play 'em?" And he's like, "You play 'em."

What tunes are you soloing on, and how did you feel about being in that position?

MATTHEWS I did "Funny the Way It Is," "Dive In," and a solo on "Squirm," which is more just like a wall. I just sort of went with my heart, which was probably playing ninth chords and trying to find something that sounds nice and then trying to remember it. I just want to make a pretty sound. [Soloing] was very different for me. But I don't mind—in that situation there's no consequence, in a way, except what you end up with. I guess he was trying to tell me that if you can sing a melody, you can play a melody. Which is true, but I'm incurably lazy.

It's funny to hear you talk about how you're lazy, or that you don't consider yourself a guitar player—when you play your acoustic shows with Tim Reynolds, it's just the two of you onstage and you really have to hold it down. How do things



change for you when you're in that situation?

MATTHEWS It's actually kind of liberating—I trust him musically and we have a little bit of an intuitive relationship and there's a real joy. I like the wrong notes as much as the right notes, so if I'm singing that gives him a chance to go [all over the place]. But then I also have a freedom because it creates so much more space.

How do the songs themselves change when you move them into that acoustic setting?

MATTHEWS There's certain songs that the band stopped playing, but then Tim and I worked them out and brought them back. When we worked them together we realized, oh, you don't really need to cover everything, you can just take a little segment of the wall that you made on the record, or the wall that you want to have when you're doing it live, and just cover little tiny pieces of it and spread

Ex. 2: Bridge riff from "Seven"

3-3-3 5-0-5-0 1-1 3-3-3 5-0-5-0 1-1

Ex. 3: Verse riff from "Spaceman"

2-6 6-7 0 2-0

2 5 5 7 3 2



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it out and you just have a different interpretation. Sometimes, for whatever reason, it's bigger with just two guitars and on occasion it's bigger just with my guitar.

What are a couple of those tunes?

MATTHEWS A tune like "Tripping Billies" [from *Crash*], I think, can be bigger just with me playing it. And certainly, when we first did "Baby Blue," Roy [saxophonist LeRoy Moore], who was alive then, fell in love with it. He was saying to me, "Be careful of this song, because it's so big that you can make it sound smaller by [trying to play] it big." But the excitement of playing—you want to feel like you're trying to play Beethoven or something. The song is great and it's really a big sound

with the whole band beating away at it, but it just sounded more pompous. When it's just acoustic guitar it just sounds big—for me, it sounds like you're a little kid and the music is just coming in on you. When you succeed in making something tiny really big, it has that sort of other worldly or bigger-than-I-am kind of feeling. I don't believe in God but the one thing that transports me in sort of a religious way is music, when it works really well. Not that music's my religion, nothing weird like that—but it's the place I get the most noisy comfort.

One of the things that weighs heaviest on Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King is the fact that LeRoy Moore passed away before

it was finished. How did you go about composing around these lines that Roy had already recorded?

MATTHEWS We had played a lot of these things with him, the feels, so we had those recordings of him playing, like to "Seven" and to "Lying in the Hands of God." We jammed on ["Lying in the Hands of God"] forever and we had him playing all these different lines. I recorded a vocal over the arrangement, and with a little adjustment here and there, we turned him back up to hear what he was doing and it was like a duet almost. Another one that we had pieces of him on was the song "Why I Am." We tried to do these spontaneous improvisation things with no rules—we're sitting there and whoever starts making a noise, everyone joins in. So that particular noise was just horrible, and you could hear the frustration. But then at one point, just for whatever good fortune, we all landed on this [groove]—it's like "My Sharona"—and Roy loved that so he was playing on top of it, a couple of great lines. So, we had really aggressive stuff of him that we did pull out and put in spots, but it was over a piece that he played on. So it wasn't like we wrote the song around him, we just took pieces of him that really worked.

Wanting to have Roy as a real musical presence on the record required that we had to hold onto a lot of those early tunes. We could have done more but there were some that I had to put on the record for different reasons. "Baby Blue," he was in love with that. And "You and Me" was a song that, right when I started, Roy loved, so that was on there.

The verses on "You and Me," it sounds like it's just like a double-stop. Are you just playing two strings on that?

MATTHEWS Yeah, I just do a thing like this [Example 4]. And then I do a lot of my same chords up around here—my little cheating chords which sound like little thirds a little further away [Example 5].

Those are some cool chord voicings.

MATTHEWS I think it was from watching my friend who went to study the League of Crafty Guitarists, or whatever they are [Robert Fripp's Guitar Craft program]. He would have all these funny ways he'd hold his hands to play but then of course it's a different tuning [Guitar Craft's "New Standard Tuning," C G D A E G]. I used to go, "Wow, that's cool, the way he holds his hands," but then I tried it and I was like, "Oh, it's really different." I really find it harder or more laborious to play barre chords than to turn them inside out. I don't like difficulty. I prefer not to have it.

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In 1996, *Acoustic Guitar* magazine quoted you as saying, "I am the least technically oriented person you can imagine. In terms of things like theory, even, I have a profound ignorance. It's just my hands and my head. I don't really know anything about scales or even other guitarists." Can we get your reflection on that quote, 13 years later?

MATTHEWS Oddly, I have a very similar opinion of myself. I can see it in other people, proficiency. And I don't think it's laziness. I think maybe I say that all the time. I have a very specific relationship with my guitar at this point, maybe it will change. It does not require incredible dexterity and it's really—it's a tool to write with. I still feel that technical proficiency and a deeper knowledge of the guitar are available to me, but haven't required my attention for what I'm doing. I'm very fortunate that I'm surrounded by some great musicians and that if I have an idea, that they can understand it and say it probably a lot bigger than I could by myself. I want to make something with my voice and the guitar, and I don't really want to be a master, although I envy it when I see it in other people. It's just not what I'm interested in right now. I think that's pretty accurate—you can probably just put that back in. AG

WHAT HE PLAYS

- **ACOUSTIC GUITARS:** Dave Matthews tours with 17 guitars, including backups. His primary acoustic guitar is a Taylor 914ce, of which he has a few. He also uses Taylor 714's, Taylor W65 12-strings, and Veillette Gryphon high-tuned 12-strings.
- **ELECTRIC GUITARS:** Fender American Deluxe Stratocaster. Jerry Jones baritone. National Reso-Phonic Resolectric.
- **STRINGS:** D'Addario EXP17 medium-gauge .013-.056 phosphor-bronze (six-string), with a .059 substituted for the .056 on the guitars he keeps in dropped-D tuning. D'Addario EJ39 medium-gauge phosphor-bronze (12-string).
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Fishman pickups. Matchless DC-30 single-12 combo amp. Radial JD6 six-channel DI. MXR Micro amp. MXR MC-401 Line Driver. Boss DD-6 Digital Delay.
- **PICKS:** Dunlop Tortex .60 mm.

Ex. 4: Verse riff from "You and Me"

Swing (♩, ♪, ♪)

Ex. 5: Chorus chords from "You and Me"

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