



REACHING BEYOND ITS COLLEGIATE FAN BASE, THE DAVE MATTHEWS BAND IS TURNING IMPROVISATIONAL STEW INTO REAL DOUGH-RE-MI

JAM+ bread

BY JEFF GORDINIER

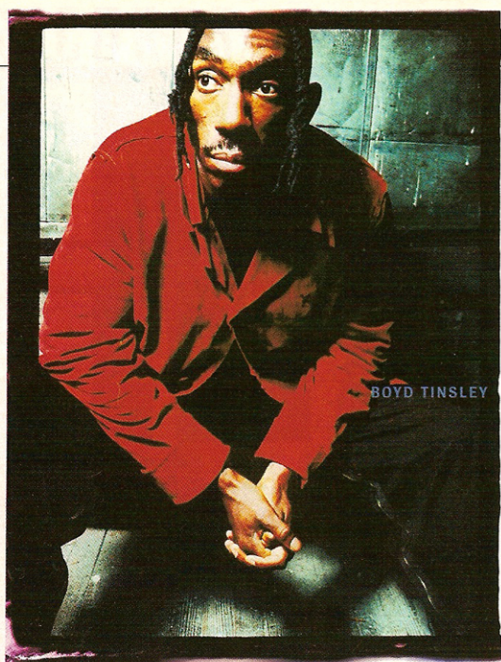
A FEW YEARS AGO, A BUNCH OF BRITISH SCIENTISTS DECIDED TO STUDY SPIDERS. They gave the spiders marijuana; the spiders zoned out even before they finished spinning their webs. They gave the spiders caffeine; the webs came out looking like messy, random wisps of silk. "But the study with spiders that I found most disturbing," says Dave Matthews, "was the one where the spider would build its web, and then the scientist would break it down immediately. I thought that was just a *terrible* experiment! The scientist who gives a spider pot, it's sort of like, well, what's the point? But a scientist that steals the soul by just constantly *destroying the dreams* of a spider?! That's really demonic."

Let's use this tale as a handy metaphor: If the spider is a band and the scientist is the music industry, your average spider doesn't stand a chance these days. The past decade is littered with the gilded cobwebs of Candlebox and Seven Mary Three, Sugar Ray and Veruca Salt—one-hit blunders who shuffled off to the bowels of oblivion faster than a flaming shot of Olostra. It wasn't so long ago that the Dave Matthews Band—an act with the most plain-wrap name in the history of rock & roll—seemed marked for the same fate. They had a hit (1998's rubbery "What Would You Say?"), and they had a shtick (sax and violins instead of sax and violence) that seemed bound to amuse the press for a brief moment between grunge and electronics.

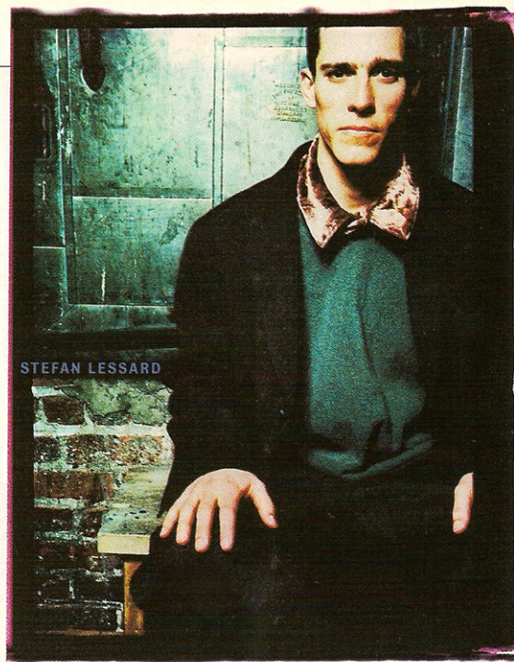
But something funny happened on the way to the K-tel compilation album. In spite of the scientists (and, yes, a fair amount of pot and coffee), the Dave Matthews Band have managed to spin a surprisingly sturdy web. Last year, on the heels of the quadruple-platinum *Cross*, RCA let the band's *Live at Red Rocks* album leak out with barely a flicker of promotion. It landed in the top 10 and sold a million copies. This month brings *Before These Crossed Streets*, a long-

DAVE MATTHEWS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY CLINCH



BOYD TINSLEY



STEFAN LESSARD

awaited collection of new songs that, "barring some tragedy that I don't know about, will debut at number one," vows Bruce Flohr, RCA's senior vice president of A&R. "There's pent-up anticipation for this record. It's like the secret's almost out and people want to get in right before the door closes." If it hasn't slammed shut already: Dates on the Dave Matthews Band's summer tour—including a colossal headlining gig at New Jersey's Giants Stadium with Beck and Ben Folds Five as the warm-up acts—sold out in a matter of hours.

Meanwhile, something has happened to Dave Matthews that rarely happens to nice, Tom Hanksian guys with short hair and a visible lack of skin art—guys who carry around little Ziploc bags full of vitamins because, as Matthews puts it, "I've got a girlfriend who wants to make sure that I stay well." Despite an image just a shade more dangerous than Richie Cunningham's, Dave Matthews has become a babe magnet. And he is openly, unabashedly grateful. "The only reason I write is because of women, I'm sure of it," he says. "My reaction to women who say 'I like your music' is much stronger than when some tight-cap-wearing frat boy goes, 'You *rauk!*' When some woman says it, I melt."

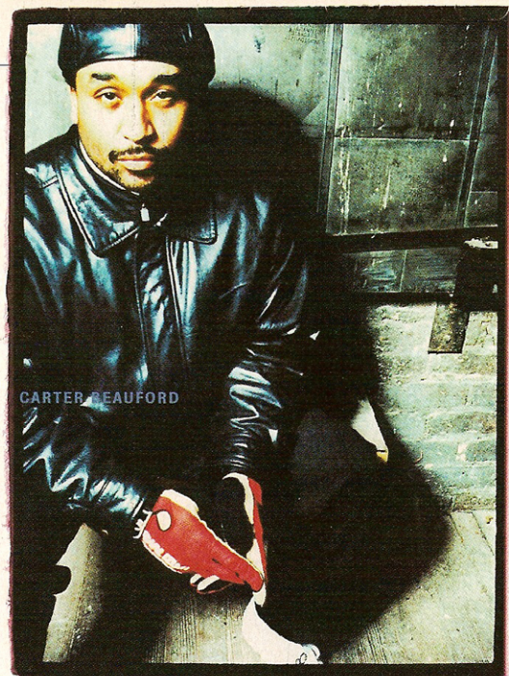
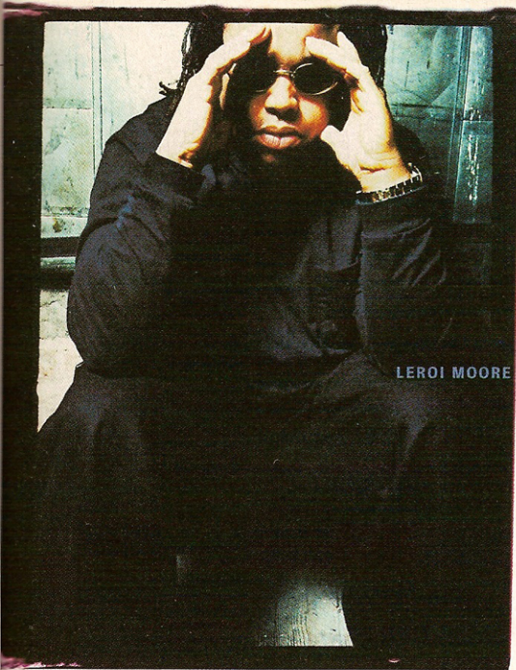
Once Matthews went to see a show by Judas Priest, those leather-clad leviathans of heavy metal. "It was a good show," he says. "Loud as hell. Packed. Sold-out. Rockin'. And about *two* women there. I mean, *just* guys. If I looked out from our stage and saw that many men, I don't know how long I could remain up there.

"Boobs are good," he says. "That may be the wrong statement, but..."

APPROPRIATELY, THE DAVE MATTHEWS BAND'S CRASH course in How to Carve Out a Long-Term Career began in a college town, the University of Virginia's bed-and-breakfast hamlet of Charlottesville. "That pink building there is where I started writing songs," says Matthews, 31, as he strolls down Water Street on an overcast March afternoon. "That far window on the right is where I used to smoke pot and write songs." He ambles around a corner to Miller's, the wood-paneled tavern where he once manned the beer taps. "This is the only place I ever had a job in Charlottesville," he says. "They used to be playing, and I'd work behind the bar."

By *they*, Matthews means the guys who became his band—four crack jazz musicians of whom he still speaks with a bartender's goggle-eyed reverence: bassist Stefan Lessard, 23, fiddler Boyd Tinsley, 34, saxophonist Leroi Moore, 36, and drummer Carter Beauford, 39. ("It would take me and 20 percussionists and a bunch of technicians and mathematicians working for *years* to achieve one song by Carter Beauford," he gushes.) The group's genesis is embedded in Charlottesville folklore: One day in 1990, Matthews, a South African expatriate, persuaded Moore and Beauford to trudge upstairs and listen to his songs. "I was like, 'Wow, this guy has something here,'" Beauford recalls. "It was an acoustic guitar doing these nice little riffs and time-signature changes, and I thought, Mmm, that's kind of juicy."

What is not the stuff of legend is the band's first rehearsal. "It was the worst crap I have ever heard in my life," Beauford laughs. "There were a few tapes that were made, and I hope those tapes are burned. Because they sucked." The group pressed on anyway, honing its Steely Dan-on-speed, *Graceland*-



goes-gaga improvisational jams while building a large and loyal following on campuses across the country.

Which is why, by the time of the band's national ascent in 1995, an easy-money trifle like "What Would You Say?" felt like more of a curse than a blessing. "I really didn't like that song," Matthews says. "It was a throwaway tune when I wrote it. So we just stopped playing it. One time we played it in L.A. RCA said, 'Please, there's gonna be industry people here, please play that song, please!' As soon as it was over, the whole room emptied. I was like, 'Wow. We're never gonna play that song again.'"

Since then, bucking the temptations of showbiz has practically been the quintet's business plan. "You lay out 10 small decisions over a band's career and whether it's using your song in the wrong commercial, putting out a cassette single so 14-year-old mall girls buy it, or being on the wrong soundtrack, those decisions can add up to one major mistake," Flohr explains. "That's all it takes to ruin a band these days." Although the group hasn't gone to Pearl Jam's reclusive extremes, it's kept TV exposure to a minimum. "We're not out there trying to become stars," says Beauford. "We're not trying to become rich. That's the key to longevity, actually." Critics can sniff, but the band's independence means that *Crowded Streets* will probably be the only chart-topping album this year that's got swirling Arabic drones, bluegrass banjos, and cameos by the Kronos Quartet and Alanis Morissette. "We were ready to do a totally different album," says Lessard. "We didn't want to play 'Crash' or 'Ants Marching' or anything like that. There's more Armageddon in this music."

Maybe, but there are times when you wonder whether the band got trapped in a jazz-fusion time warp and landed in its

own private 1975. In an era of Spice Girls, samplers, and stridently sloppy musicianship, these guys actually care about "chops." While Radiohead wow the critics with austere madrigals of alienation, *Crowded* opens with this chipper invocation: "Come and relax now/ Put your troubles down." "I'm trying to get to a point where I can sing about things that I care about without being preachy or whiny, because I hate that," Matthews muses. "Because even though there's some really great music happening, often it's just so full of 'Life is such a burden.' And especially from the mouths of the people that are singing it, it's like, 'No, it's not! Look at you, you fat cat! You can get a cheeseburger at 5 o'clock in the morning because you have so many people working for you. What's your f---ing problem?'"

Besides, Matthews doesn't have much to bitch about. After five years he still lives with his "sweetheart," Ashley, who works in the gardens of Monticello. "There were a couple of bumpy periods in there, but it's always good to shake the boat," he says. "It's going incredibly well right now. I find a great deal of stability in her. It's nice to have someone to make a home with you." Home is an ancient pine-and-brick mill that once belonged to the nephew of another independent Virginian—Thomas Jefferson. It sits on a floodplain of the Hardware River, where, if you're fond of handy metaphors, the potential for sudden catastrophe is another clue to Dave Matthews' bearings amid the fickle currents of rock in the '90s. "The water's not going to wash the place away," Matthews says firmly, "because the place has been there through many floods. I think the water will just go through it and come out the other side, and then I'll have to clean up some mud. But it's not going anywhere." ■