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# *Damn Straight*

ON *SOME DEVIL*, DAVE MATTHEWS'S FIRST SOLO EFFORT, THE SINGER-SONGWRITER AND PREMIER GUITARIST DIGS DEEP INSIDE HIMSELF AND DISCOVERS A MASTERPIECE.

BY TOM MOON



**T**HE IDEA FOR "SO DAMN Lucky," one of the most ambitious lyrical forays on Dave Matthews's first solo record, *Some Devil* (RCA), grew out of an idle after-dinner conversation. The singer and some of his friends were sitting around, discussing how time seems to freeze eerily during a car crash. "I thought it would be really neat," he says, "if you could somehow, without being too obvious about it, tell a story from that perspective." ■ As with all the songs on *Some Devil*, Matthews chose to let

"So Damn Lucky" just happen rather than force it. In this respect, the album marks a departure for the 37-year-old star, whose Dave Matthews Band have become a reliable Platinum-selling outfit and the most consistent live draw of the past decade—not to mention one of the few rock acts capable of pulling stadium-size crowds. Matthews says that after years in a cycle of record-tour-rinse-repeat,

he decided to change everything about his usual working patterns—the way he writes songs, the way he records them, how they're mixed.

With regard to the writing process, that meant getting beyond the obvious. "I didn't want to write about the wreck," he says of "So Damn Lucky," "but rather all the precious things you take for granted, and then to put that reflection in that moment when you lose control of your life."

As is his custom, Matthews tried that germ of an idea in several contexts. He began with an upbeat rock song that didn't work. Another accompaniment idea seemed more promising and even got as far as the demo stage, but it, too, was scrapped.

Then Stephen Harris, producer of *Some Devil*, came in with a basic percussion loop. "It was like this big train going along, and I worked on about three or four different themes for that. The car wreck idea didn't come until later in the sessions, when I was singing, just messing around, and the line 'Everything's different' came out. Right then, I knew that this loop was right for that song. The rest of the lyrics arrived in one of those irritating moments of inspiration you wish would come over a cup of coffee in the morning, but instead happen at two a.m. when you've got to get out of bed and write 'em down—because if you don't, though you tell yourself you're going to remember it, you go back to sleep and never remember anything."

*Some Devil*, says Matthews, was shaped by that kind of happenstance from beginning to end. The album features some of



Dave Matthews Band at New York's Central Park, September 2003

*"The whole experience of recording should involve going to places that nobody wants to confront."*

his most plaintive melodies—several sung in a falsetto that he's used live with the band but has rarely recorded—and songs that are far more emotionally direct than his previous work. Many of those grew not out of arduous official "writing" sessions but from conversations and moments

### GEAR BOX

**ACOUSTICS:** Martin DM3MD (Dave Matthews signature model), Martin HD-28V, Taylor 914C, Taylor custom baritone

**ELECTRICS:** Module Genesis Three, Gibson Byrdland, Gibson ES-135, Chet Atkins SST, Jerry Jones baritone

**AMPLIFIER:** Matchless DC-30

**PICKUPS:** Fishman Gold+ Natural II pickup

**STRINGS:** D'Addario

**PICK:** Dunlop Tortex .60mm

**STRAP:** Planet Waves leather strap

in real life, times when, he says, he was just absentmindedly strumming the acoustic guitar and along came a phrase that demanded further investigation.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

**GWA** What's different about *Some Devil*, the first studio album you've done without the Dave Matthews Band?

**MATTHEWS** For one thing, I went down roads I wouldn't even consider going down with the Band. Because in that situation, there's five people involved, and everyone has a different outlook as to what's going on, and you want to get some agreement before you go too far. This was a just very different approach. I always feel an obligation to the band, and it was fun to feel no obligation to anything except what I was working on at that moment. There was certainly a mood in the room of "Let's be reckless." Everybody was unafraid, and nobody was apologizing for trying anything. That led to a lot of unusual things within the

tracks, and a lot of depth...

I think it might take a few listens before people hear all of what's inside these songs.

**GWA** But you've made big production records before.

**MATTHEWS** Yes, but this was a different atmosphere. Stephen Harris and I did a lot of work with loops at the beginning, and then we would record versions of songs that were very acoustic. Eventually we started bringing the musicians in and figuring out things from there. The Dave Matthews Band never works in pieces like that—we record best as a live band, with the overdubs coming later. These songs all went through many more changes than anything I'd written before.

**GWA** Could you take me through a bit of how a song idea morphed in the studio?

**MATTHEWS** Take the song "Trouble." It begins and ends

with this one repeated electric guitar chord that just goes *chink-chink-chink* in quarter notes. I went in and played that over a drum loop for far too long. When you have nothing else to do in the studio, you just try stuff out and record it. All the different sections grew out of really small ideas, and then we'd sit and chop it to pieces. I was really frustrated with it; the rhythm just wasn't setting right with the words, which were different from those that I ultimately used. So on the second-to-last day, after we'd done all the vocals, I got this wild idea. We basically cut the song into pieces and threw it back into the computer. All the parts had been arrived at organically, and we were really intimate with them, but it became a different song when we







changed the arrangement. I came up with this idea of praying to misfortune, and the lyrics came really quickly. I recorded it fast, just let it rip.

That song would never have had the chance to see the light of day in the Dave Matthews Band, and it doesn't resemble in any way what it was when we started. Which is one reason you make records—so you uncover something you maybe didn't have in your awareness before.

**GWA** The chord progression of that tune is not what you'd expect from a Dave Matthews song.

**MATTHEWS** In a way it feels to me like my first country tune. Maybe it's because of the lyrics, which are so full of hardship. But there is something about it, the chords or the melody, that took it in a different direction. I hear both "Trouble" and "Some Devil" as hymns.

**GWA** "Some Devil" is another one that sounds unplanned.

**MATTHEWS** Well, we were messing around again, I was just sitting there punching on

FEELING GOOD: Matthews and Godfather of Soul James Brown



*"The acoustic is the funkiest of all guitars. There's a rawness to it, and so much room for dissonance."*

my baritone guitar, the Jerry Jones electric baritone. It was a day of messing with ideas and coming up with nothing. We'd been doing loops and stuff, and at one point Stephen Harris turned off all the machines. He was getting this kind of syrupy, big echo reverb-soaked guitar sound, and I just started playing that line. Maybe there was a little transition, a little thinking, but it came out almost entirely right there in the studio.

did. It was like, "Here. This is a song."

For a while we were puzzled by this one. We'd listen and say, "What the hell do we do with this song?" Because it's out on a limb a little bit. And there's a weird thing about it—there's so little production, it's so spare. We decided not to touch it. When you have a moment of inspiration like that you don't get in the way.

**GWA** Do you write on *(continued on page 84)*

There was a microphone— one thing we tried to do was always have a live mic just in case somebody gets an idea. I started singing: "Some angel, some devil." The bridge part is by no means the most original chord progression, but it seemed to fit everything going on around it.

The song went from nothing to what you hear on the record pretty much in less than 24 hours, for sure. In many ways the recording process on "Some Devil" was the most uncharacteristic of any on the record. There was no click track. It happened live: bang, bang, the vocals are there, and it's done. My very favorite lyrics happen quickly, and these



acoustic guitar exclusively?

**MATTHEWS** Generally, I find my inspiration on acoustic. The root of the song "Trouble" is very much in an acoustic tradition. There were times when later in the process I would let go of that—like with "So Damn Lucky," where we wanted some of the noisier guitars.

I think things happen on acoustic for me because it's so accessible. You can get up and move when you have an acoustic instrument—no wires or cables to worry about. You don't have to turn anything on. If there are kids screaming outside, you can get up and go somewhere else.

**GWA** In recent years you've done a lot of electric playing. On this album there's a considerable amount of both. Do you still consider yourself an acoustic guy? Does it even matter?

**MATTHEWS** I just tend to automatically go to acoustic guitar, but from there, once I have the songs, I'm not real precious about having them stay that way. When we talked about doing an electric version of "Gravedigger," I said I'd happily do it but only with the guarantee that no one would argue against the acoustic version going on the record as well. To me, that was important. I always liked the quietness of that first version.

**GWA** I remember reading somewhere that you were not particularly impressed with your own guitar playing.

**MATTHEWS** Most of the time I'm a little bit of a spaz. When I say that I'm bad at strumming, I mean in the conventional way people think about the guitar. Sometimes when you hear acoustic guitar, you think it has to be strum-strum, very delicate—that you have to be sensitive. I don't think like that. The acoustic is the funkier of all guitars. There's a rawness to it, and so much room for dissonance. I've taken a great deal of advantage of my ignorance on the guitar, and through my reluctance to study the rules and regulations of being a good guitarist have come up with a pretty solid, albeit simple, foundation.

**GWA** Would you say that that simplicity goes for your harmonic approach as well? One of the things I admire about you as a composer is that, even on the most rudimentary songs, the chord changes aren't the typical I-IV blues thing.

**MATTHEWS** Ah, but every once in a while that's cool. Sometimes I'm like, "OK, big boy, let's just roll through some I-IV-V. Give it a whirl, see what happens."

**GWA** How did you go about making your choices for backup musicians?

**MATTHEWS** Tim Reynolds was one I knew would be there. I truly think he's a guitarist extraordinaire and one of the most profound musicians I've ever met. Brady [Blade, drums] and Tony [Garnier, bass] I'd seen with Emmy [Emmylou Harris], and I

really wanted them on the record.

**GWA** Phish's Trey Anatasio appears all over *Some Devil*. Did you know from the start of this project that you'd work with him?

**MATTHEWS** Trey and I have sort of known each other for 10 years now. We've crossed paths repeatedly, and both of us had aired an interest in doing stuff together. When I got started with this project we realized he had a few days, a little window, where he wasn't going to be doing anything. By then I had enough tracks that were far enough along that we could make good use of his time. What I wanted from Trey was just a few moments of inspiration, really.

When we got together I just played him stuff—I think I played "Some Devil" and a couple of other tunes—just waiting for him to say, "I'd like to play on that one." Well, as we're doing that and shooting the shit, he was playing the guitar line that became the foundation of "Grey Blue Eyes." I started singing right away, and it was one of the only times we didn't have tape up and were ready to go. So we got somebody to come in with a video camera and he filmed Trey and I. Later, when we were finished with the other recordings, Stephen wrote that sort of tabla loop, which blew us away, and Trey just went in and recorded his part.

**GWA** What specifically does Trey bring with his guitar style?

**MATTHEWS** On "Grey Blue Eyes," the cleverness of Trey's form is his lack of form—it sounds like one modal chord throughout. What made it work I think was that we didn't deliberate too much about it. The song that I'm most proud of in terms of my partnership with Trey is "Save Me," which just features me and him, and Steve playing pump organ. You can feel us being comfortable together and not trying to be too clever. There's definitely wisdom in letting stuff be what it is, not trying too hard to make it bigger... There were times during the making of this album when the impulse to add had to be kept in line.

**GWA** Does this album show any growth for you as a singer?

**MATTHEWS** I think it shows I'm going a little more in both directions, the falsetto and the lower register, which I used to do just very occasionally. Again, I was concerned more with the mood than with the perfect sound. With "Grey Blue Eyes," we listened a ton to the rough vocal, and when I went back to record the final version, the lyrics were more clearly enunciated, but I tried to get the sound of the rough version, even to the point where I tried to recreate exactly where I stood the first time. We didn't want a good sound as much as we wanted the mood that was on it. The tracks dictated a lot of the vocal character.

**GWA** There's a lot of pain expressed on the record.

**MATTHEWS** You're right, and I don't know why. I couldn't be happier with

decisions I've made in my life right now. Maybe because of that, I was a little more willing to speak my heart, or to try things out, and it ended up coming out somewhat blue. The whole experience of recording should involve going to places that nobody wants to confront.

**GWA** Several songs, most obviously "Gravedigger," are very pointedly about death. It's surprising to hear it, given that we live in a culture that doesn't like having death acknowledged. It's everybody's dirty little secret.

**MATTHEWS** We pretend it's a flaw, when it's such a central part of life. It should play a huge role in every aspect of our decision making. Thinking about death is a great way to avoid being arrogant—every leader should have to be faced with his own death in a real way before making decisions about other people, before sending others to their deaths.

**GWA** So did you set out to write about death?

**MATTHEWS** If I'd tried to say what I think about death, I probably would have failed. I was writing songs in somewhat of a desperate search. When I started doing this album I hadn't written in a while, and I was not at all sure what I'd get. In fact it's a little surprising to me that there's a theme to these songs at all—that they managed to find a way out of my own confusion. I guess with this it's like death is part of the story rather than the center.

One thing I certainly worried about this time is that, in the past, I think I took too wide a path around what I was trying to say to avoid beating someone over the head with an idea or sounding preachy. This album, maybe I managed to tell stories or say my piece without compromising too much or being too preachy. Some people can say very loudly what they think and get away with it. I'm not like that. For me it comes back to being honest: If you can't believe yourself when you're preaching, you better do something else.

**GWA** At what point in general do you start to think about an album as an overall statement and not just 10 songs?

**MATTHEWS** Well, it's all the time. But I learned more about that on this album than with any other recording. With the Dave Matthews Band, the album that most characterizes this is *Before These Crowded Streets*—that album had a real cohesive quality to it, although that may have been more magic rather than a particular focus on our part. With *Some Devil*, there was one song we axed called "Cigarette Lit," which despite being a great song didn't end up on the album because it was slightly oversized; it's chest was a little too full compared to everything else. When we rejected it, I asked myself, "Am I being a moron?" Now, I'm happy with that decision. Sometimes you have to let things be what they are. ■