

Special Salute to **the** Independents

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DAVE MATTHEWS

on what's wrong with radio and what's right with his label, ATO

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A look at **ENHANCING YOUR CD**

BONUS: Creative marketing ideas

Michelle Shocked regains her music and launches a label

Unlocking the secrets of 5.1:

how to record, mix and monitor in surround

Plus: tips for buying gear intelligently

In the studio with John Alagia:

PRODUCTION SECRETS OF

JOHN MAYER, O.A.R. AND JASON MRAZ

PLUS:

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IRVING BERLIN'S
"White Christmas"



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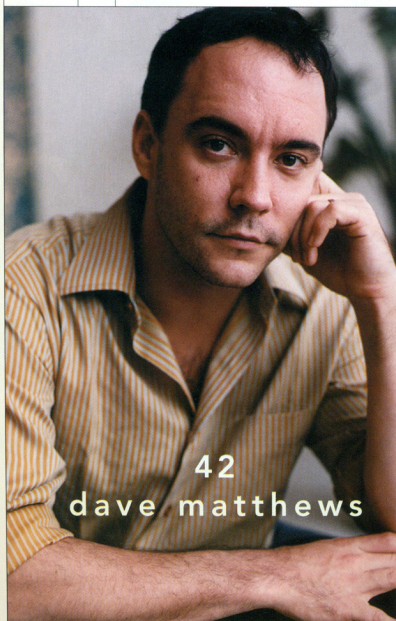


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DAVE MATTHEWS

& His Label ATO Records

by RICHARD CHALLEN



IT'S WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 25, 2003, and in eight hours Dave Matthews will be onstage in Central Park, playing to more than 100,000 people. And he's a little nervous. "I'm always a little nervous," he clarifies politely. "I mean, there's no reason to be, but I still am." A strange sentiment, considering the Dave Matthews Band has probably played well over 2,000 shows since their formation in 1991. Stranger still, this will not be their largest crowd to date, at least according to the man himself. "I think the biggest was probably a show down in Brazil, or maybe Jazz Fest," he offers. Regardless, it's a far cry from their first N.Y.C. gig, a four-in-the-morning slot at the famous CBGB. "I remember the first time we ever played [in New York]," Matthews said during a news conference promoting the concert. "We had three people in the audience with shaved heads and pierced everythings."



Lest one forget, DAVE MATTHEWS was an independent artist—

and a highly successful one at that—long before RCA, VH1, and AOL (the corporate sponsor of the Central Park show) came calling.

Crisscrossing the East Coast numerous times over, the Dave Matthews Band built a sizable, largely college-based following in the early '90s through their wonderfully eclectic, highly charged live shows. Released after more than two years of nonstop touring, *Remember Two Things* sold over 500,000 copies on the band's own Bama Rags label, an astonishing number for a self-manufactured release. Such financial solvency meant DMB could negotiate a lucrative deal with RCA, retaining the rights to their independent albums and merchandise even as 1994's *Under the Table and Dreaming* received the major-label push. "RCA is an investment for the future," Matthews told me during a 1995 interview, "but Bama Rags shoots straight up into our hands. Up to this point, it's certainly been a larger source of financial income for the band."

Then again, as Matthews himself admits later in this article, being on a major label does have certain advantages. Dave's first solo album for RCA, *Some Devil*, arrived in stores the day before our conversation, and by week's end it will have moved 469,000 copies, nearly the entire total sales of *Remember's* independent run. Aside from *Live at Luther College*, an "official bootleg" from one of Matthews' acoustic shows with Tim Reynolds, *Some Devil* marks the first time the singer-songwriter has appeared on disc without his DMB partners. It's also his first studio effort to miss the No. 1 position on the *Billboard* Top 200 since 1996's *Crash*, kept from the top by the release of OutKast's double album, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*. And one suspects Matthews couldn't be happier. "The OutKast record is the best album of the year," he says, in the same awestruck tone he uses to rave about Béla Fleck or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. "They're so far ahead of what the rest of us are doing."

That same genre-be-damned acceptance is just as evident in the construction of Matthews' own label, ATO (According To Our) Records. Started with the help of his manager (Coran Capshaw) and two friends from the band's early days



DAVE MATTHEWS *SOME DEVIL*



(Michael McDonald and Chris Tetzeli), ATO hit the indie-label jackpot on its very first try when the company's initial release, David Gray's *White Ladder*, produced a Top 40 hit in "Babylon" and went on to sell more than two million copies in the U.S. Since then, ATO has signed a diverse and uniformly excellent roster of artists, ranging from jam-band foundations Gov't Mule and North Mississippi Allstars to power popsmith Ben Kweller and critically acclaimed singer-songwriter Patty Griffin. None of them outsell their boss, but that's never been Matthews' intention anyway.

Dave's Essential Songs

1. Paul Simon—*American Tune*
2. Joan Armatrading—*Willow*
3. Willie Nelson—*Crazy*

"To build a small record company from the ground up would be such a fun venture," Matthews said in 1995 when asked about his plans for the future. "And I hope we can help out bands that are either too quirky or too eclectic or too left-of-center ... Because the more power we can get for ourselves, the more power we can get for other bands like us. Maybe, if nothing else, we can take a corporation as large as RCA and inspire some respect."

In our earlier interview, you were talking about your reasons for signing a major-label deal, and one of them was a desire to play in places like Italy, Australia and Brazil. Eight years later, it seems that decision has paid off well.

Yeah, and to a degree I think we've had quite a few advantages being on RCA. But I also think we haven't gotten as far as some people think. We've managed to carve out a niche here in the U.S., but a lot

of that is due to our touring and persistence. And I think our growing popularity in South America, as well as Canada, comes from the movement of people from

"I think one of the mistakes people make when forming an independent label is to say, 'OK, we're gonna start this company,' and then, after they start it, go look for artists."

here to there. But we only have a cult following in the rest of the world. And I think that's because we haven't toured over there as much as we have in this country.

So, while I am certainly grateful for the many things RCA has given us, I also like to take the lion's share of the credit for our

popularity in America. And that's because we don't follow: In the career of this band, we've never followed the models of anyone else. And that's made it difficult for RCA to get us across to people. But it's been easy for us to get ourselves across, because we don't have to fit into a can.

In the mid-'90s, a lot of other Southeastern bands experienced great success with major labels—Hootie & the Blowfish, Better Than Ezra, Sister Hazel—but they couldn't sustain their popularity. Yet you've not only thrived, you've expanded. I mean, the Dave Matthews Band is one of the three or four biggest-grossing touring acts in America right now.

You mean we're not the biggest (laughs)? Holy cow, I'm only joking. I'm not too aware of what everyone else is doing. But, I think there's been a combination of things behind our success: Our music translates pretty well into both small and

ATO RECORDS



David Gray



Patty Griffin



Gov't Mule



North Mississippi Allstars



Amanda



Ben Kweller



Vusi Mahlasela



My Morning Jacket

IMAGINE having a record label's entire attention fixed solely on you. It's a label built of seasoned representatives from every aspect of the industry, from management, to touring, to actually being an artist. And they're dedicated to making your record a success. It may sound like a pipe dream, but it's exactly what David Gray experienced in 2000 when he was signed by the brand-spanking new indie ATO Records (According to Our Records). ATO was formed by RCA artist and star Dave Matthews, longtime Dave Matthews Band road manager Michael McDonald, DMB manager Coran Capshaw and associate Chris Tetzeli.

Though the four longstanding friends had been considering starting a label together for some time, it was stumbling upon Gray's sublime, infectious *White Ladder* that set ATO truly in motion. "We found out through a mutual friend that David Gray had this independent album out, and David was someone who, in our camp, was always a big, big favorite. He's set the bar for us pretty high as far as the talent and quality of artist we're going to go after."

McDonald adds that Gray's success "reinforced our belief that if you put a

good songwriter in front of people, those people will buy it. That's been our philosophy and what we've continued to do in signing other acts to the roster." Along with Gray, ATO's roster includes Patty Griffin, Gov't Mule, Ben Kweller, North Mississippi Allstars, My Morning Jacket and Vusi Mahlasela. "Overall, we give them a hell of a lot more focus and time," McDonald says. "Where we set ourselves apart from the masses is that we will take the time to build something and continue paying attention to it. Each act is a much bigger percentage of our roster. We go into signing acts with the belief that we've got to be able to kill for every person we put on here. When the right artist comes along, you've got to get it done."

With McDonald and vice president Tetzeli handling the day-to-day affairs of the label, and Matthews and Capshaw working as partners, ATO's artists are benefiting from a wide range of industry experience. "With Chris' experience from the management side of things and my experience from the road, dealing with labels and going to radio ... everyone's experiences have really complemented each other well," McDonald states. "We

get involved with more than just selling records. We don't get involved in writing songs or styling artists or forcing people to put a hit song, whether they wrote it or not, on a record. We sign people who have a really strong grasp on their careers and on the direction they want to go. We try to foster that through selling records, and through our experiences in touring and the relationships we've developed. I feel like we've developed a level of trust with people."

ATO uses several marketing strategies for their artists, but there's one, proven by Matthews' phenomenal grassroots success, that seems most important to McDonald. "I sound like a broken record, but the emphasis on touring has proved to be undeniably important." In addition to touring and radio promotion, ATO uses the burgeoning street team philosophy to promote artists. "What better spokesperson for an artist than a genuine fan? You can't argue with a real fan."

ATO plans to take things as they come. "We'll grow and sign more [artists], but I feel like our philosophy is to grow out of necessity and not for the sake of growing. Each project is so vital to us." ■

large venues, and our commitment to each other has always been at the very top of our priorities. Regardless of how this band's career has been interpreted by the press or the industry or critics, we've never answered to any of them.

The early critical opinion of DMB was pretty dismissive, but lately many of those same publications have come around.

Yeah, there's always potshots, though. I really don't pay attention to critics, 'cause there's no real point. I don't understand the decision to become a critic, having to label music you don't like, or having to become opinionated about things ... I don't know. It seems like such an alien career. I mean, if you didn't like the last 10 albums we've made, you're probably not going to like our next one. And yet, I find some critics just relish it! They can't wait for our next album! They're making up quotes while they wait (laughs)!

Really, the only opinions that deserve attention are the opinions of our fans—because they're our livelihood—and, especially, the opinions of the five of us. That's been the focus all along.

I think we're all trying to create something out of love. Not every trip to the studio is a piece of pie, but that's the focus. We want to make something we all love, and that focus has given us a certain amount of longevity.

And none of your albums sound exactly like the other, yet they all sound like "the Dave Matthews Band," albeit at that particular point in time. And while your solo album starts off reminiscent of DMB, it develops its own identity as it goes along. You begin to notice the difference without the other four members.

Yeah, I agree it's very different. I don't think I brought the same thing to this situation that I bring to the band, because the whole experience was different. Writing with a band, a song may take a completely different character turn from where it starts to where it finishes. And the way we construct songs and the way we perform them affects things.

(Pause) When we play and record together, there's a volume to it. And it was interesting for me to discover my solo album doesn't have that giant quality, which I think the band possesses. A good band has a sort of "A-team" quality, meaning there's a lot of muscle in our band. (Long pause) It's hard to say. It was very, very different working alone. And I enjoyed the experience, but it made me want to go back into the studio with the whole band.

See, I didn't take one-fifth away from [DMB] to go and make this album, to say,



"Without the band, this is what I sound like." I didn't want to record an album of songs I could've done with the band. Although I see there's a similarity—I understand what you're saying about the first couple tunes on the album. There are certain progressions and qualities that maybe aren't as far off from the band as the later songs.

[With *Some Devil*] I was specifically going in directions where I felt I wouldn't go with the band, whether melodically or lyrically. I think working alone made for an album that reflects a little more solitude; if I'd made a band album instead, I don't think it would've had the same lonely quality this one has. Because I would've done it with other people, right? **A good example is "An' Another Thing." It's a spooky, falsetto-driven song, and it would have never fit in on a proper Dave Matthews Band album.**

There's been versions of that chord progression floating around for the last eight or nine years. But I think that's the final one. (Pause) Yeah, that's a great example. Though it's been floating around for a long time, it never did attract the attention of the whole band. So I was really happy

Dave's Essential Songwriters

1. Bob Dylan
2. Bob Marley
3. Lennon & McCartney
4. Willie Nelson
5. Patty Griffin

for that particular song to find a little venue to appear.

During the recording, I just sat down to a click track and played the guitar and sang. That's the first take. We built everything else around it. Then we were faced with the question of how to finish it, lyrically. Eventually we just said, "No. It's already finished." There's a couple mumbled lines in there, but I think the performance says enough about what the song is about. I think that was a real magic moment. It may be the best vocal performance I've ever done.

Speaking of "floating chord progressions," a lot of early DMB songs started from a single riff or chord line, then slowly worked themselves into full-fledged compositions over a string of soundchecks and live performances. Has that process changed substantially over the years?

Well, for the first four years of our existence,

all we did was write songs and play. We never recorded anything. Since then, we've recorded six studio albums. The amount of writing changes. The way you develop songs changes. I think it's inevitable, unless you're doing exactly the same thing as before.

But there's still some similarities. Many songs used to come out of extensions of existing songs: An idea going out of a song would be improvised around until it became a song of its own. That kind of thing still happens a lot, or at least the possibility is there. There's also an element—which was present in the early days, as well—of bringing a finished, or half-finished, song to the table. I think there are many different directions we go.

In the beginning, it was essential that our main writing technique be writing from the stage. When we started, we had maybe 10 songs, and then we toured every day of the year for four years. So that was the only place where we could write, because we were onstage every day! I couldn't go, "Well, let's sit down and write for a week." We didn't have a week. *Everything* had to happen onstage, because if we weren't onstage, we were asleep or driving.

Now, thanks to the fact that we don't tour every single day, to write *only* from stage would be ludicrous. We have different venues for writing now. New ideas aren't only allowed to come out onstage anymore. And, while that method isn't dead, there are other places where we can write as well.

Probably the most drastic departure from your original writing style came with the album *Everyday*, the bulk of which was co-written with Glen Ballard.

Well, here's what happened. The band had been in the studio for five months, bangin' away and making—I think—some of the best music we had ever recorded.

You're talking about the Lillywhite Sessions. Yeah. But the process became *exhausting* because there was no progress, and yet we were still coming back every day. We started thinking, "What are we doing? Why are we playing these tunes over and over again?" It became this heavy blanket over the whole session, to the point where we said, "Let's just get out of here. I don't want to be here anymore. I don't give a fuck about this music." And it's not because it wasn't good. And it's not because we didn't love it. You know, you might love pepperoni pizza, but eat that breakfast, lunch and dinner for a month and a half and you will *puke*. So that's what the Lillywhite sessions turned into. We'd all go to the studio and none of us would even want to go inside.

In hindsight, I think that situation



Boyd Tinsley and Dave Matthews

"There's so much great music out there, and if you turn on the average radio station in America, you're not going to hear any of it."

shows how committed this band is. The vast majority of partnerships, when faced with that kind of thing, would probably blame themselves. I think a lot of bands would not be able to survive that. They'd blame each other. When, in truth, it had *nothing* to do with the band. You can listen to the music and tell: We were *slammin'*. We were *killin'* it. It had everything to do with the place we were, the environment, and the mood of the room we were in. It was sorta like blowing up a balloon with two holes in it. "What are we doing here? I know how to blow up a balloon, but this is ridiculous." "Well, keep trying." It was Carter [Beauford, drummer] who said we needed to leave. We needed to do something else.

And, certainly, *Everyday* turned out to be a completely different experience. I think all of us would agree, it's a *slammin'* record. It's real different, but lyrically it's as good as anything I've done. And musically, working with Glen was a great deal of fun, especially the speed of his ability to move a creative process along. The intention was to go in and write three or four more tunes, then blend those with the Lillywhite sessions. But Glen and I were having so much fun that we went on this writing spree. Then the band came in about a week

and a half later, and we recorded this stuff really quick. There was very little time with the band sitting in a circle playing, so the result was absolutely different. I think the songs from *Everyday* that we've been playing live have our character on them now. But I never apologize for that record. It was a different album for us. And it wasn't a "Dave Matthews Band album" in the same sense. But we're all real proud of it.

How much fallout was there with Steve Lillywhite over those sessions? He hasn't produced an album for you since.

No, but how many bands work with the same producer every record? And Steve has *never* done as many records with any other band. Really, we realized we needed someone we weren't especially comfortable with. There's a part in the relationship between artist and producer where we want to *impress* you. And vice versa. Whereas, that would've been our fourth album with him, and the ambition to impress ... (pause) we should've realized it sooner, maybe on *Before These Crowded Streets*. Because that was a great collaboration with Steve, and the album, in many ways, is the band's crowning achievement with him. And I think it's our best album in many ways. But we should've had the wisdom to make *Crowded Streets* the last one we did with him.

You know, if we sat in a room with him, we'd get on superbly—and we have. It's not that we're no longer friends. It's not that we don't respect each other. It's just that working together will never be the way it was on the first three albums. **As far back as our 1995 interview, you were discussing the idea of signing other**

artists to Bama Rags, your independent label and merchandising company. But it took some time for ATO Records to happen.

Well, I thought that was a good idea then. I never thought it was a bad idea, actually. And then my friends—my manager [Coran Capshaw], Michael McDonald and Chris Tetzeli—all wanted to do a similar thing. But we waited. I think one of the mistakes people make when forming an independent label is to say, "OK, we're gonna start this company," and then, *after* they start it, go look for artists. For us it was different. Once we thought it might be a good idea, we said, "Now we have to *prove* it's a good idea by finding someone who needs the support of a record company." Otherwise, you're just making something unnecessarily.

So, our feeling was, "Let's create a demand for us by supporting someone. And then we'll build a record company around him." I think it's accurate to say we built ATO around David Gray—and we had to prove ourselves to him before he would sign with us. We had to argue our way into his confidence. Then, once we had him, we took that on as our method. With every artist following that, it's been a similar process.

For instance, we just signed a woman from England named Jem. We had to argue our way into her confidence, too. And she's gonna be *ridiculous*, in my opinion. From where I'm looking, I'd be really surprised if she doesn't kick the doors down. She's a *monstrous* songwriter. And we had to do the same with Patty Griffin. *I've been a big fan of hers for years.*

Likewise. In the eyes of songwriters, she's been at the top of the heap for a long time. Maybe not so much in the eyes of the industry. When you think about it, the music industry—like the movie industry—is obsessed with mediocrity. And critics are obsessed by mediocrity, too. I mean, if you don't fall into a fashionable, hip mediocrity, then you have no chance. Every once in a while, someone balances neatly between originality and average, and they get raves. But very often it's people like David Gray or Patty Griffin—artists with such undeniable quality—who get screwed by the industry. And it's only because the industry is run by artists of spin, rather than people who care about music. There's an emphasis on looks or fashion, very temporary things. As a result, people with something more profound and long-lasting to offer are often overlooked. One only hopes that if they do get completely overlooked, they can still bubble up to the surface later on.

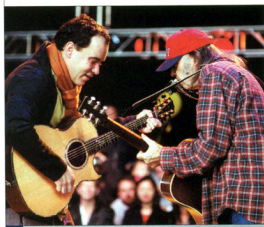
Is that the philosophy behind ATO?

Well, I think so. That's certainly my feeling.



James Brown on stage with DMB at Madison Square Garden

That's what I think is important. But I'm not alone in running it. There are also wise people out there looking for brand-new, fresh stuff to put on ATO as well. But my focus will always be to turn people on to these overlooked artists. Because there's so much great music out there. And if you turn on the average radio station in America, you're not going to hear *any* of it. You might hear a touch. It's always an inspiration if OutKast or Eminem or Patty Griffin comes over the radio. You can tell!



Dave with Neil Young

You're listening along, and then all of a sudden you hear something great that jumps out at you!

It reminds me of a story I heard. A guy I work with told me one radio station didn't want to add "Gravedigger" to their rotation, because it made somebody at their station cry. That's just funny to me. Wow, someone had such a real reaction to the music that you don't want to play it.

And they wonder why radio listenership drops every quarter.

Yeah, the Internet is gonna destroy it. Radio is run by spineless people who want to make the advertising buck and don't care about anything else. It may pay them in the short term, but in the long run,

they're just gonna sink into the murky mud. It hasn't happened yet. But there seems to be a great deal of crumbling going on. Everything's changing ... Think about what happened to the radio of the '50s and '60s, and how it became the FM radio of the '70s. Back then, you could hear John Denver, Paul McCartney, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross, and Led Zeppelin in a row. Now, you might get jail time for playing that (laughs). And yet, the people programming radio right now were probably listening to those kind of stations in the '70s. But they've forgotten what a pleasure it was to hear Carole King and Bob Marley right next to each other.

It seems like people in the industry who love music have been replaced by people who only care about the bottom line.

Oh yeah! That's why I think it can't maintain itself. An industry that doesn't care about what it's making is only a money industry. And what is a money industry? There's nothing there. There's no commerce, no exchange. And I think we're watching the disintegration of the record industry right in front of us. It may be frightening to the songwriter and the recording artist in some ways. But they're the *only* thing that can survive! Because they're the only part of it that matters.

People want to listen to music. It's been around forever. It's been around longer than language. And it will always come out the other end, even if it's in a changed form. The A&R man and the record company president should be worried for their jobs. If you're performing and writing, you're not the one whose job will be lost.

You're the irreplaceable part of the company. Exactly. You're what the entire company is based on. Even if it pretends to be based on something else. ■