

In a dusty parking lot 100 yards behind the stage of DeVore Stadium, where 10,000 fans await his appearance, Dave Matthews begins his pre-performance ritual. The location is Southwestern College in Chula Vista, Calif., another stop of the 1996 H.O.R.D.E. Festival, and the leader of the Dave Matthews Band is cranked. Beloved by fans for his achingly lyrical songs (and dismissed by some critics as a bland, Hootie Nation jammer), Matthews offstage is a guy neither his defenders, nor his detractors, would recognize. ♪ "I feel good!" Matthews yelps in a full-throated James Brown. He leaps and shimmies, tossing his gangly, goofy, loose-jointed frame down the narrow aisle of his tour bus.

From here, Matthews glides into an imitation of fellow H.O.R.D.E. act Lenny Kravitz, thrashing at a low-slung air guitar and tossing imaginary dreadlocks. For a moment, he's a gyrating stripper, then he's the ninja master from his favorite martial-arts movie, chopping the air, bellowing: "You have hurt my students. I will kick you hard in the intestines!"

Alex Stultz, the 23-year-old merchandising manager, barely glances up from his magazine. After nearly four years with the Dave Matthews Band, he's seen this more times than he can count. He's heard Matthews' rapid-fire repertoire of voices, impersonations, accents; he's seen Matthews' dead-on imitations of Germans, crazy professors, Brazilian exiles, stuffy Brits; and he's heard Matthews' endless stream of toilet jokes — a raft of anal-fixated japes that from a less boyishly enthusiastic 29-year-old might be offensive and weird. But coming from Matthews (whose younger sister, Jane, affectionately calls him Mr. Anus), the unceasing allusions to his bowels — and the manic, high-speed, free-associative monologues — all come off as more funny than weird. So much so that it's not hard to imagine Matthews, in another life, succeeding as a Jim Carrey-like comic. Indeed, six years after Matthews began to supplement his full-time bartender job with musical gigs, his mother is still making backup plans for him. "If this rock & roll thing doesn't work out for David," she says, "he could become a comedic actor."

That won't be necessary. With sales around 5 million (and counting) for his three records, *Remember Two Things*, *Under the Table and Dreaming*, and the recently released *Crash*, Dave Matthews' musical career is working out just fine — far better, in fact, than anyone had reason to expect, given the improbabilities of just about everything touching Dave Matthews and his band.

Five years ago, when the rest of the music world moshed to shredding grunge bands, Matthews was leading a virtually acoustic outfit: Carter Beauford on drums, Leroi Moore on sax, Stefan Lessard on bass and Boyd Tinsley on violin. Accomplished play-

## The Raging Optimism and Multiple Personalities of Dave Matthews

ers all, they blended their disparate influences — jazz, fusion, funk and rock — with the rhythmic, lilting folk music that reflected Matthews' formative years in South Africa. The band's sound bore greater affinities to '60s hippie bands like Fairport Convention than such grunge role models as the Stooges, Black Sabbath and the Sex Pistols. The spirit of Matthews' songs, too, could not have been further from

that of his rage-ridden grunge confreres. Good vibes radiate from the titles: "The Best of What's Around," "One Sweet World," "Lover Lay Down," "I'll Back You Up." But Matthews' lyrics, sung in his wafting, Sting-like croon, are more likely to limn bittersweet emotions. In the song "Tripping Billies," which has become a virtual anthem for his fans, the singer entreats: "Eat, drink and be merry/For tomorrow we die."

Music critics, for the most part, hate it. But audiences have embraced the band with a fervor that the group's multiplatinum sales only hint at. Following

the group from venue to venue, compiling notes on the ever-changing set lists, making band-sanctioned bootlegs that are traded with fellow Daveheads via the Internet, the group's fan base — mostly well-scrubbed college kids and tie-dyed latter-day hippies — have appointed DMB (along with Phish and Blues Traveler) as torchbearers for the Grateful Dead. It's a legacy the Dave Matthews Band is living up to, thanks to the strength of its live show, which it has honed during five years of relentless touring.

Back on the bus, Matthews dispatches the last of his phantom ninja attackers. Minutes later, he is facing the DeVore Stadium crowd with his band mates.

Their entrance is met with a cheer that hits the stage like a gale-force wind. "Hey, how y'all doin'?" Matthews asks, as if he's just happened upon a few friends. "We're the Dave Matthews Band, and we're from somewhere in Virginia."

With that, Matthews begins the staccato guitar figure that opens the song "Drive in Drive Out." For the next 90 minutes, the band unreels an unbroken skein of entwined sax and fiddle lines anchored by Lessard's bass, Beauford's rock-steady drumming and Matthews' agile riffing. It's a tight but improvisational sound that seems to draw this crowd of 10,000 into an intimate circle, in which Matthews is the center, the "party guy," as he puts it later, the entertainer. Only by listening to the words of "Drive in Drive Out" would you guess at the singer's ambivalence. "I hear more than I like to," he says with a growl, "so I boil my head in a sense of humor/I laugh at what I cannot change. . . . When all that I want is so badly to be/By myself again."

### II. THE RACIAL BONUS

DAVE MATTHEWS' SPEAKING VOICE IS, like his music, a weave of accents and influences, a laconic Southern drawl one moment, a precise British inflection the next. Matthews' image is equally tough to pigeonhole. His oversize T-shirts and baggy shorts say hip-hop; the necklaces (beads, shells, fossils) shout hippie; his close-cropped dark hair is too short to justify the description "brush cut," too long for a skinhead 'do.

Matthews' protean image, it turns out, fits him well. He was born Jan. 9, 1967, in a suburb north of

Johannesburg, South Africa, where both sides of the Matthews family have deep roots.

By John Colapinto

When David was 2 years old, his family moved to the New York suburb of Yorktown Heights, where Matthews' father, a physicist, worked for IBM. For one year in 1974, the family lived in Cambridge, England, before returning to Yorktown Heights.

Matthews, who much of the time brims with the potential for a joke or a laugh, grows quieter when he speaks about his father. Matthews calls him, with

HOPE YOU LIKE JAMMIN', TOO: THE DAVE MATTHEWS BAND (FROM LEFT): TINSLEY, MOORE, MATTHEWS, BEAUFORD AND LESSARD

The founder and namesake of the Dave Matthews Band took the long, painful approach to musical success. So why is he so happy?





Photographs by Robert Paul Maxwell



obvious pride, "one of the granddaddies of the super-conductor," and describes a loving and close-knit family that included, besides Jane, an older sister, Anne, and a brother, Peter. But the family peace was disrupted early in Matthews' life when his father, John, developed lung cancer. "We figure he might have got the disease from the radioactive material he handled," Matthews speculates. His father died when Matthews was 10.

This was not the only tragedy to visit the Matthews family. Shortly before the release of Dave's 1994 breakthrough album, *Under the Table and Dreaming*, Anne died, the victim of a tragic incident that also claimed her husband. Matthews asks that the details of their deaths not be published for the sake of her two children, ages 6 and 9, whom he and Jane are raising. Although Matthews has never spoken publicly about the tragedy, he dedicated *Under the Table* to Anne and included in the CD's jewel box a photograph of himself and his nephew.

Matthews says that these experiences have inevitably colored his songs. "I think a lot of the reason my choruses conclude, 'Make the best of it' — or maybe, 'Be grateful, anyway' — is because the different tragedies that hit our family were also an inspiration for me," he says. "They make me want to live now, desperately — and to try to affect things positively."

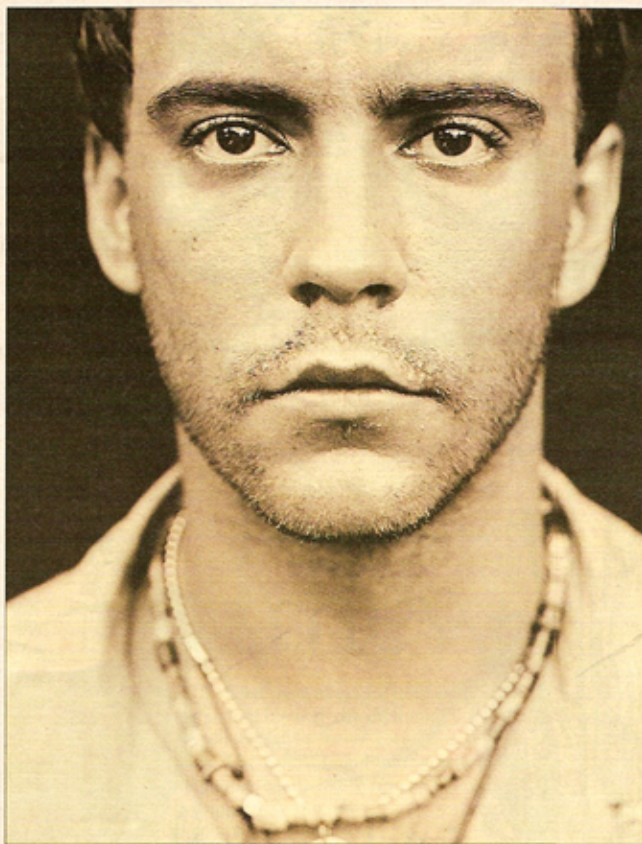
Having returned to Johannesburg with his mother and siblings after his father's death ("For family connections and support," he says), Matthews was an indifferent high school student whose antics earned him the lash at his British-modeled private school. His time was devoted not to schoolwork but to noodling on the guitar, drawing and listening to music.

"It wasn't like the rest of us, however," says Jane about her brother's passion for music. "He listened very purposefully. He knew every word to every single Beatles album." He also fell in love with the indigenous African pop music and was especially drawn to the emphasis on drums. "I'm very into percussion," he says. "That's the way songwriting started for me: imitating different folk music that I found, drumming in African — or even Irish — music, and trying to move with the guitar rather than just strumming and singing a vocal line over it." Matthews prefers to play unplugged: "Electric guitar is not as much a percussive instrument as an acoustic is. I feel at home with an acoustic because it's hollow; it's got a drum quality."

To avoid South Africa's compulsory military service, Matthews returned alone to the United States, in January 1986. Although he had become a U.S. citizen at 13, he still considers South Africa his spiritual home. He says that his mother, a painter and a former architect, helped to shape his views on South Africa's segregationist apartheid regime. "She was involved in the Quaker church," Matthews says, "and was extremely aware of the political scene and very involved. It was an integrated church and often a place for a political voice . . . to protest the government. We were brought up, very aggressively, that bigotry and racism are evil things, and they stem from fear." During his later trips to the country, Matthews himself became active in protesting the crumbling apartheid regime: "I would go back

and stay with friends, and political conversations were going on because they were all in college now. My friends would go to marches, and I would join them. It was a really interesting, vibrant time. The theater and music we'd go to see was always a voice of opposition. Going back there now and seeing the striving for freedom is such an amazing thing."

Matthews says that his later decision to enlist three black men for his band reflects, at least obliquely, his experience as a white person growing up in segregated South Africa. "I approached Carter, Leroi and Boyd because they were the most fantastic musicians I'd ever seen," Matthews says. "But if the way our band looks



"He listened very purposefully," says Matthews' sister Jane. "He knew every word to every Beatles album."

onstage — two white guys and three blacks guys all playing together — sends out some kind of positive racial message, that's a bonus."

Upon his return to the United States at 19, Matthews lived in New York. He took a job as a temporary clerk at the IBM research center where his late father had worked. Matthews did not attend college and says that his mother and sisters were not pressuring him to firm up a plan in life. "We didn't really know what he was going to do," says Jane with a chuckle, "but I always assumed it would be something fabulous."

His extended family was not so understanding. He recalls how his South African uncles used to hassle him. Matthews slips into an Afrikaner accent: "David, you've got to have a foundation." Matthews laughs. "It got to the point where they'd ask me what I was going to do with my life," he says, "and I'd just say, 'Nothing.' That'd really piss 'em off."

### III. HOME-GROWN

LIKE SUCH MUSICAL BREEDING GROUNDS AS Athens, Ga., and Seattle, the compact city of Charlottesville, Va., is a congenial place for the nurturing of bands. A college town of some 50,000, it's a laid-back city of green lawns and tree-lined avenues — a place well-stocked with music-hungry students and replete with hole-in-the-wall bars and restaurants where pickup bands spring up with all the fecundity of the local kudzu.

It was to this town that Matthews migrated, in 1986, along with his family. "Before I was born, my dad taught in Charlottesville," Matthews says, "which comes around to why we ended up there."

Though he bridle a little at the description, Matthews, who then sported a long ponytail, doesn't deny that he was something of a hippie. "I'd draw and wander, draw and wander," he says. "That's kinda all I wanted to do, was walk around. For me that was my college, just making enough money to get from one place to the next place, going back to South Africa, working temporary jobs." A brief stint at community college (where he excelled at philosophy but little else) didn't take. Vague plans to attend art school also evaporated. Meanwhile, he indulged his hearty appetite for transcendental and consciousness-raising substances. "A little dabbling in everything," he says with a grin. "Smoke a little something with somebody; drink a little something with someone else; whatever's going around. Whoever's there."

In 1987, he took a job as a bartender at a local Charlottesville bar called Miller's. The step hardly seemed one that would put him on the path to multiplatinum pop stardom. But Miller's was a hangout for local musicians who played gigs on the small stage at the front of the room. Among them were local music teacher and hornman John D'Earth, who later put out a solo record and now plays in Bruce Hornsby's band; guitar virtuoso Tim Reynolds, whom Matthews later recruited to play second guitar on his band's albums; and a fine saxophone player named Leroi Moore — a saturnine, Buddha-shaped presence who sat across the bar from Matthews on many nights. "We used to get into these weird conversations about South Africa," says Moore. "We'd mostly get drunk and talk about how evil apartheid was. I had no idea that Dave was a musician. Not the slightest idea. He was just the bartender."

"My friends in South Africa knew I played guitar because I played all the time; that's all I did," Matthews says. "But no one in Charlottesville really knew." Gradually, he let his secret be known among his new friends at Miller's: "I sat in with Tim Reynolds a few times, and I played with John D'Earth. I started to open up." One day, Matthews let everyone know that he'd also been writing songs. "It's weird," he says. "After a trip to South Africa, I cut off all my hair. Somehow that gave me the confidence to show people my stuff."

Miller's regular Ross Hoffman was among the first to spot Matthews' songwriting talents. "He was the guy who pushed me," Matthews says. "He was the one who'd say: 'No, don't smoke that pot. Finish that verse. Finish that song.' He was my musical mentor, the guy who said, 'You should do this.'"

When Matthews decided in late 1990 to put together

Contributing Editor JOHN COLAPINTO wrote about Eddie Vedder and Pearl Jam in RS 748.



a band, he approached his old customer Moore. Having joined the school band as a sax player in the seventh grade, Moore was by now one of the most respected and sought-after saxmen in Charlottesville. "He said he wanted to do this project," Moore recalls. "He wanted to make this demo. I said, 'Sure, I'm down with that.'"

At the same time, Matthews enlisted drummer Carter Beauford. Moore and Beauford had grown up as good friends on the same street in a middle-class black neighborhood in Charlottesville. In their post-college years, they played together in bands. "We sort of grew up musically," says Beauford, a cheerful man of 39 whose barrel chest and meaty arms suggest the athleticism and power of his drumming. By 1990, Beauford was playing in several bands — fusion, jazz, a swing orchestra — as well as appearing on Black Entertainment Television's BET on Jazz channel.

For a bass player, Matthews turned to D'Earth, who recommended one of his music students, Stefan Lessard, a 16-year-old prodigy and the only other white musician in the band besides Matthews. Raised in a cash-strapped hippie family that spent its early years migrating between California and Rhode Island, Lessard settled near Charlottesville when his parents became followers of Swami Satchidananda, who established an ashram nearby. Lessard lived out of a trailer from the age of 5 until he was 10. "A bunch of hippie potheads," Lessard says with genuine affection. "These are my childhood memories."

Violinist Boyd Tinsley, recruited just weeks after the band formed, grew up right around the corner from Moore and Beauford, and had studied history at the University of Virginia, where he jammed at the locally famous "hippie frat house" Sigma Nu. "Lot of brothers were doing Bob Dylan covers," says Tinsley. "Neil Young covers, Grateful Dead."

The Dave Matthews Band's first gigs were at a minuscule restaurant, Eastern Standard, down the street from Miller's. Within weeks, crowds were lined up outside the door, listening. The band then landed two weekly slots at Trax, a local nightclub, and Flood Zone, a club in nearby Richmond, Va. Now the audiences were more than 900 people a night — every night. The clubs' owner, Coran Capshaw, took immediate notice. He signed on as the band's manager and told it he wanted it to take a "different route" to success. A bearish man with a wiry head of graying hair, Capshaw is the veteran of some 400 Dead shows. He detected in DMB something of the Dead's free spirit, but, more important, he saw an outpouring of passionate devotion from fans. Capshaw set out to grow the band on similar principles to the Dead's: through a grass-roots following built on the strength of Dave Matthews Band's live show. Record labels came sniffing, but Capshaw

turned them down. Instead, he booked the band at every paying gig in the Southeast. "I doubt ICM, William Morris or CAA would put them in a frat house," Capshaw says. "I did, and I put them in resorts and at beach clubs. . . . Lots of people have an ego problem with that."

Not Matthews and the boys. He calls the band's frat days "good work." But it was also an education for Matthews in American college life. "Boy, was *that* the educated class!" he laughs, then imitates the sound of someone vomiting. "The hurling, puking, tertiary education that every good American should have."

Soon, the band was playing 200 nights a year, "three or four hours a night," Matthews says, "five or six nights a week." It often crossed paths with a band on a similar mission, Hootie and the Blowfish. "We have real respect for each other," Matthews says, "because we played on the same circuit. Our music is clearly different from theirs. But they are such nice guys, and they know the score. These are not guys who say to you, 'We are badass players.'"

The Dave Matthews Band *are* badass players, and word spread fast. "People were bootlegging our shows and sending tapes to their friends," Tinsley says. "People in Colorado knew about us [before DMB toured there]. We'd never been to Alabama before. We'd go to this place, and cars would be lined up down the road, and there'd be all these people going to this big club. We'd be sitting in our red van saying, 'Oh, my God!'"

By late 1993, Capshaw thought the band had built a big enough fan base to warrant signing a major-label deal. (The 1993 independent CD *Remember Two Things* had just been released and would go on to sell 366,000 copies.) The band's major-label debut, *Under the Table*, was released in 1994 and went to No. 11 in the *Billboard* 200, driven by the hit "What Would You Say." The band deliberately didn't release a video of the song to MTV until more than two months after the record's release. "I wanted people to be a fan of the *band*," Capshaw says, "not the single." The band's label, RCA, went along with the unorthodox strategy. "We could have sold hundreds of thousands more copies of *Under the Table* if we'd wanted to go for the fast buck," says Bruce Flohr, the label's West Coast A&R man. "But the idea was to bring along the core base of fans, then add new ones."

The strategy seems to have worked. The band's sophomore RCA disc, *Crash*, released last April, debuted at No. 2 in *Billboard* — robbed of No. 1 by fewer than 5,000 units by their old buddies Hootie and the Blowfish. But *Crash* ran afoul of some critics, who dissed the album as boomer-friendly rock. Matthews laughs off the critical backlash. "I don't really read reviews that much," he claims. "Really, really, really crappy ones — I like to read those. A guy from New York



*Newsday* gave us the best insult. He said our success was somewhere between America's tolerance for Barney and France's love for Jerry Lewis. I was like, 'At least we're up there.' I mean, that was right when Barney was *burnin'*, just tearing it up; and Jerry was still as big as he always will be in France." Meanwhile, the Dave Matthews Band sold out all 35,000 tickets for its two-night stand in October at New York's Madison Square Garden; the first show sold out in three hours.

#### IV. THE WILD DOGS

LATE IN THE SUMMER, DAVE MATTHEWS has returned home to Charlottesville to begin a rare three-week vacation. He will be flying off to St. Maarten in three days with his girlfriend of four years, Ashley.

He gets off the plane at 10:30 p.m. and an hour later is at his old stomping grounds, Miller's, where he joins his sister Jane and a few friends to watch Tim Reynolds play his regular Monday solo gig. Back in the room where Matthews tended bar for years, it seems, for a short while, as if he never left; then strangers begin to recognize him. He is approached by a string of well-wishers — including a dark-haired, black-clad girl who has been sitting along the wall, scribbling in a notebook. She slips him a piece of paper that includes a quote from Kierkegaard, her phone number and the P.S.: "You need to see *Trainspotting*. . . P.P.S.: With me." Later, out on the sidewalk, where he's weaving a bit from a string of tequila shots and some herbal stimulation shared with a friend, Matthews looks at the note, then says to Jane: "She definitely seems like an intense person with a strong mind." Then he adds with a laugh: "And a giant, illuminated sign over her head saying: DON'T COME ANYWHERE NEAR THIS GIRL. DANGER!" With that, he wobbles off into the night to Jane's house, which is nearby; his final destination: her guest bed.

Last year, in an effort to stake out his own retreat, Matthews moved into a house in the secluded foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The day after he arrives home, Matthews drives out there to check on the place. The house, a hermit's retreat, is at the end of a winding, narrow dirt road and perched on the side of a waterfall. A converted flour mill built in 1750, it comes with 65 acres and a price tag of \$500,000. He strolls around, inspecting the grounds and making plans. "I've got the design in my mind," he says, "for simple three-room cottages with lots of light, high ceilings, so that friends of mine, people who need a place, and artists, can come and live and just have a place that they can do their art and don't have to worry about money."

But Matthews is a long way from starting his artists' colony. During the past six months, he's spent perhaps two

nights here. Packing boxes sit, still full, in the mill's vast, loftlike interior, and the place has a lonely aura. The few personal touches are a set of dusty museum display boxes containing the African cicadas that Matthews collects as a reminder of his homeland. The singer's CD collection, which has not yet been removed from its packing box, offers a catalog of Matthews' influences: Pink Floyd, Peter Gabriel, the Beatles, U2, INXS, Traffic — as well as a cache of South African and other international musicians: Vusi Mahlasela, Ali Farka Toure, Baaba Maal, Abdullah Ibrahim, Juluka.

Matthews walks over to a brocaded antique sofa that Jane recently bought for the place. He picks up a guitar that leans against the wall. Alone, far from the stage and the cheers of his fans, Matthews coaxes from his melodies a melancholy that he says was often the impulse behind the songs. Between playing soulful, slowed-down versions of his hits, he talks about the price he has paid for musical success. "Sometimes I get a little afraid that being on the road — and in this separated position — that I will lose sight of some of the things that were inspirational to me when I was bartending and meeting people," he says. Matthews also says he's beginning to feel the pressure to keep coming up with hits. He plays the riff to "What Would You Say" and looks up. "See, I look at that and think, 'Where did I come up with that lick?' I've also been plagued by the song 'Recently.' I want to write another lick like that. I don't know what I was thinking. I wish I could figure it out. When I get one, I think 'Phew, I got another one I like.'"

Matthews then plays the chords to "#41," a song from *Crash* that reflects the new album's darker mood. "Remember," he sings in a voice abraded by too many cigarettes, too many days on the road, "when I used to play for all the loneliness that nobody notices now."

Still fingering the guitar, Matthews reveals that this song was written around the time that he was undergoing a messy split over money with his mentor, Ross Hoffman. "I was thinking about where I come from, and why I wrote songs and what was my inspiration," Matthews says. "And how I was now in this situation where those things that I'd done, I so loved, had now suddenly become a source of incredible pain for me. Suddenly there's all this money and people pulling, asking, 'Where's mine?' The wild dogs come out. The innocence of just wanting to make music was kinda overshadowed by the dark things that come along with money and success." Then Matthews, catching himself, smiles — and like one of his songs, he turns the melancholic moment, searching for the upside. "So it's a song about looking back," he says, "but at the same time, a song that's still adamantly looking forward and going, 'But I'm still going to carry on, regardless.'"