

Wood & Steel

Dave Matthews
The New Signature Model

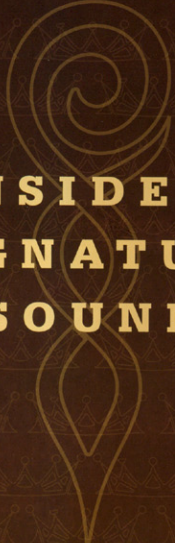
Spring Limiteds
Koa, Imbuia,
Blackwood & Walnut

Nugent at NAMM
Rocking the T3

QUALITY
Taylor
GUITARS



Dave Matthews



INSIDE A SIGNATURE SOUND

One of music's most distinctive voices talks about his intuitive approach to playing and the inspiration behind his new signature model.

By Jim Kirlin

Photo: C. Taylor Crothers



Photo: C. Taylor Crothers

It's been nearly 20 years since Dave Matthews recruited a talented pool of instrumentalists from Charlottesville, Virginia to help flesh out the song ideas he'd worked up on his acoustic guitar. In short order, the Dave Matthews Band would boldly brand their unique musical imprint on the world. A propulsive, polyrhythmic stew of progressive Americana, their sound was earthy yet intricate, jazzy and funky, informed as much by the sounds of African pop music as it was by American genres.

At the core of the band's signature sound was Matthews' distinctive acoustic guitar playing. Never a fan of open, "strummy" acoustic sounds, his percussive style featured closed chords that incorporate two- and three-string shapes and a lot of string

damping. ("Using as few strings as possible – that's what I like to do," he said in a recent interview with *Acoustic Guitar* magazine.) Matthews' elliptical rhythmic patterns blended repetition with odd time signatures, creating an exotic and hypnotic presence within his songs. The band built outward from there, weaving in drummer Carter Beauford's fusion-fueled syncopation, saxophonist LeRoi Moore's soulful horn lines, Boyd Tinsley's spirited violin work, and bassist Stefan Lessard's fluid grooves, with Matthews' lilting, pliable vocal melodies helping to evoke complex and visceral moods.

On stage the band thrived, as their arrangements and jammy interplay projected an exuberance that captivated crowds. A massive fan base was built through a grassroots

approach to touring, and the band has consistently been one of the most popular touring acts in the world for years. It's fair to say that DMB helped fuel a resurgence in acoustic roots rock in the mid-1990s, and inspired a fresh generation of young fans to pick up an acoustic guitar.

The funny thing about Matthews as a player is that, despite being very active with both hands and pulling off the difficult feat of playing in odd time signatures and singing over those lines, he has long been surprisingly self-deprecating about his guitar chops, confessing his lack of by-the-numbers technical proficiency. Yet, by pursuing an intuitive approach to playing, he has managed to accomplish something that many highly skilled technical players rarely do:

develop a sound that's truly his own.

"I've never really looked at other people's guitar playing and said, 'Wow, I really want to know how to do that,'" he said in a *Wood&Steel* interview back in 2001. "I think it's a combination of the fact that I'm on my own trip and don't really think of myself as that much of a guitar player, and that I never compare my guitar playing to other people's playing. If I did, I think I'd never have the courage to get up on stage. Whatever level of style I have, however I've developed it, it's been somehow inside-out."

Based on a more recent conversation, Matthews still feels the same way. He called in from Padua, Italy before a show in late February during the band's European tour and talked about his playing style and his Taylors, which have been reliable

musical tools for him for well over a decade now. His first one was a 714.

"I was initially drawn to it because I liked the way it felt," he says. "I liked the size of it, the shape of it, and the feeling of the neck. The sound cut through really well in our band, but it also had a really genuine, wonderful acoustic sound."

Matthews later bought a 914ce off the wall at Dusty Strings, an acoustic music shop in Seattle, Washington, where he was living.

"I always feel like an idiot when I pick up a guitar in a music store because I don't have lots of licks to wait on," he says. "I'm not a great craftsman at the guitar. But I picked up the 914 on the wall and really fell in love with that particular guitar. So I took it home with me, and it stayed my number one."

Matthews currently has his main 714 (he has several) set up for a more specialized acoustic voicing. It's strung in a raised baritone, or high B, tuning, in which the guitar is high-strung (with the octave strings from a 12-string), and then tuned like a baritone (BEAD#B), only an octave higher. (Check out the songs "Stay or Leave" from his solo album *Some Devil* or "You Never Know" from DMB's *Busted Stuff*.)

"I liked the way Nashville tuning sounded, and then I thought I would try it B to B to bring it down a little bit," he explains. "I wanted to hear that sort of high, crisp sound that an acoustic has. The 714 sounds really great like that."

Meanwhile, the 914ce has taken on a great road-worn look, especially above the soundhole, from Matthews' aggressive playing style and years of mileage as his primary stage guitar. I asked him how the guitar has changed over time.

"I think sound evolves, and maybe if I was more pompous I'd say it's more agreeable, but it still has a wonderful feeling," he says. "I've had the guitar refinished, but the scar is still there. I didn't want the scar taken away because that sort of makes me attached to the instrument more. I tend to have a loyalty to material things that I get attached to, whether it's my shoes or my guitar. I'll just go to it no matter what."

Having a good guitar technician also helps.

"Craig, my guitar tech, works it over a little bit and tunes it up for me, and then I think, how have you lasted so perfectly, and then [I realize] it's being treated like a sports car by someone other than me, and I just take it out for spins and beat it up inappropriately. The 914 is a guitar that is consistent — my sound guy is always like, 'That's a great guitar; it sounds great for you!'"

For the band's seventh studio album, *Big Whiskey* and the *Groogrux King*, the group enlisted producer Rob Cavallo (Green Day, Goo Goo Dolls, My Chemical Romance), Cavallo and the group got together in early 2008 to begin working on material. The desire was to create a true band record, which the group felt they'd strayed from in making their previous several albums. By design, these writing sessions were organic, spontaneous, and highly collaborative, with everyone freely injecting ideas. The best musical sketches were selected to be fleshed out for

the album. Tragically, LeRoi Moore passed away in August of that year, as a result of complications from an ATV accident, before the album was completed. Wanting the record to incorporate LeRoi's musical voice, the band worked with the tracks he had recorded.

The word "Grux" in the album's title refers to a nickname that several of the band members had for each other, including Moore.

"If something was awesome, they'd say it was 'the GrooGrux,'" Matthews said in a documentary about the making of the record, "The Road to Big Whiskey," which aired last year on the Fuse network. Because LeRoi means "the king" in French, the band thought Groogrux King had a good vibe. Matthews says the album title sounded like a fairy tale set in New Orleans, which is where the record was recorded.

When Matthews was approached about doing a signature Taylor model, the 914ce was his natural choice. He also wanted to customize the inlay design to pay tribute to his fallen friend. He liked the "Cindy" fretboard inlay scheme on his original 914ce, so he chose to blend some of those inlay designs with other elements that he sketched out by hand. Matthews' sketch drew from the album's artwork, particularly the cover, which he had hand-illustrated himself.

"It was great fun," he says. "When I was younger I did a lot more [drawing], but as I got more into music, that took a smaller and smaller role in my life, so it was fun to bring it back."

The cover illustration depicts an elaborate Mardi Gras celebration with a central image of a head with a face resembling Moore's, wearing a crown that's missing one of its jewels in the top.

"I did a few different faces," Matthews says. "I guess in part of my mind I was thinking about a character of LeRoi, although I think it was more that it happened simultaneously when I was trying to do sort of a Mardi Gras float, and this big face came out of it. So, really, the middle of it was the start, and then I just carried on and on, going crazier and crazier, trying to get it done in time with great help from another guy."

The crown element was carried over as an inlay on the signature model, located between the 11th and 12th frets, incorporating ball-pointed joints with one ball partially missing in memory of Moore. The word

"Grux" is inlaid between the 13th and 18th frets. The headstock inlay also was developed from a sketch by Matthews.

Though he didn't request the "relic" treatment to mimic the pick wear in the top of his original 914ce, Matthews did request that the signature model be shaded to match the patina that had developed over time. An aged toner was used to give it a slightly deeper golden hue.

Big Whiskey has proven to be one of the band's most popular releases. Critics called it one of the band's strongest efforts to date, it reached certified platinum status in sales, and it was nominated for two Grammy Awards: Best Rock Album and Album of the Year. The album bears another noteworthy distinction: Matthews lays down a few guitar solos on it. I asked him if working with Rob Cavallo coaxed his playing in a different direction that might linger beyond the record.

"I think so," he reflects. "I mean, I enjoy singing, and I guess in a way soloing is kind of like that. It takes me a little while to construct a solo, and maybe if I spent more time on it I would do it more. I sometimes will write a melody on the guitar but like it so much I'll steal it for my voice."

"In an environment like a studio, where you're trying to create a song, at least the way I view it, you're working on one performance," he elaborates. "In that situation I have the courage of a hundred men — put a guitar in my hands and I'll come up with a solo. It's a lot of fun. Sometimes I do it as a joke and sometimes I do it more seriously. But theoretically, if I can sing, I can play a guitar solo, and with practice, it could become something I could do spontaneously, I suppose, although I'm not inclined toward that. With *Big Whiskey*, I would always tell Rob, 'Tim [Reynolds, who also played guitar on the record] could come in and play, and then we'd have a choice of some quality stuff!' And if it was just me and Rob, he'd say, 'No, you just play something!' And there would be trickery. He'd say, 'Put something there now so we can have something and then we'll look at it, and later on we can get Tim!' [If the solos] worked out really well, then we'd keep them."

Solo or no solo, Matthews knows what he needs out of his guitar when he writes.

"It has a job to be percussive, so I'm always drawn to acoustic guitar, and it has a job to have the



Photo: C. Taylor Crathets

presence of an orchestra — not have more notes; I don't mean to say that I've got lots of different parts — but maybe it's more simple...I'm usually trying to bring some other mood out of a guitar more than I'm thinking of what a real guitarist would do. And I think rhythm, but as a drum more than as a guitar, which...I guess a guitar really is a drum with strings attached to it."

Despite his self-effacing comments about his playing, Matthews seems perfectly content with his

unorthodox approach and the authenticity it brings to his music.

"I have a relationship with the guitar that is unique," he explains. "I'm not saying that to be humble, because I think it's just the way I approach my instrument and what purpose it serves for me. I'd always rather make a new, strange sound with the help of a guitar, or put some wrong notes together in a very simple way, than I would like to practice my scales." **WIS**

The Dave Matthews Signature Model

Inspired by Dave Matthews' 914ce, the DMSM is an Indian rosewood/Sitka spruce Grand Auditorium. A custom fretboard inlay blends elements of the popular "Cindy" inlay, which graces Matthews' 914ce, with a design that pays tribute to the band's longtime sax player, LeRoi Moore, who passed away in 2008. Based on a sketch that Matthews provided, a crown inlay between the 11th and 12th frets honors Moore, incorporating ball-tipped points with one ball partially missing in his memory. A nickname of Moore's within the band, "Grux," is inlaid between the 13th and 18th frets. The headstock inlay also was developed from a sketch by Matthews. The guitar top was shaded with an aged toner to approximate the patina Matthews has on his older 914ce. Each DMSM comes with a custom guitar label and a certificate of authenticity, both personally signed by Matthews. The guitar is in stores now. For more photos and complete specifications, visit taylorguitars.com.

