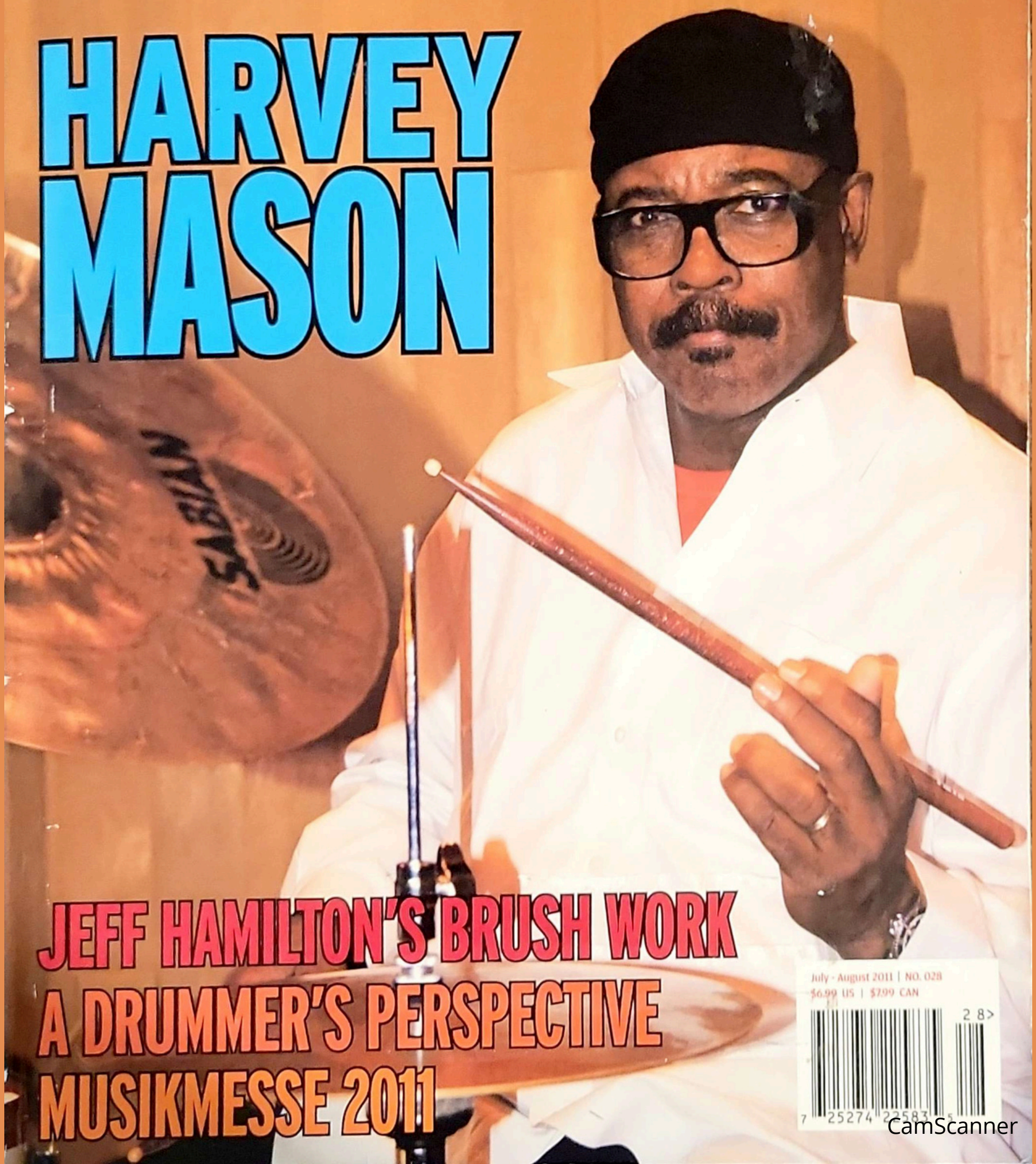
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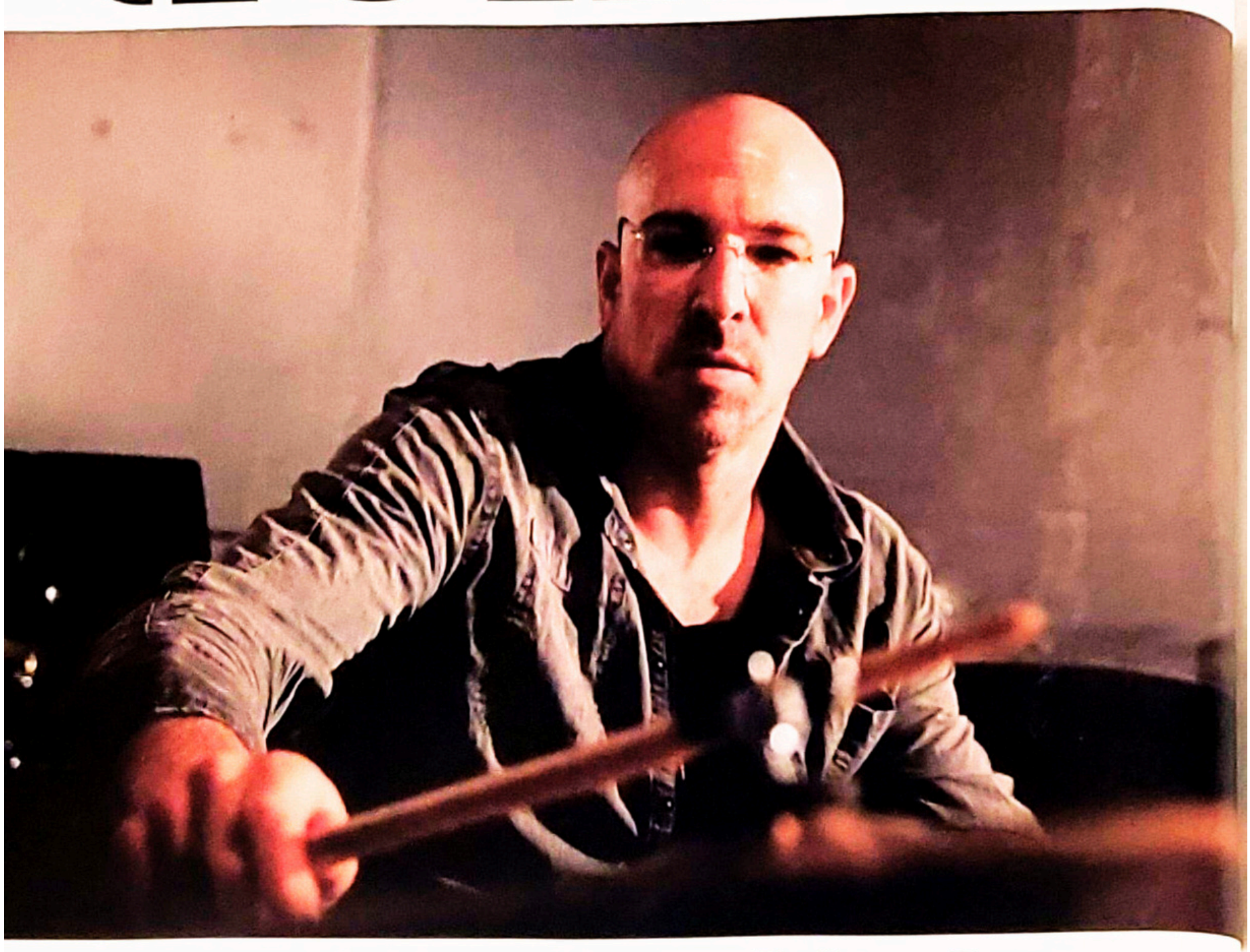
A DRUMMER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ties that bind

interview by kelly king · photos by isaac heckert

The ties that bind: a phrase that is commonly used without realizing how deep it goes. The theory of many religions and philosophies states that we are constantly connected by our actions and lives to numerous others, our paths intersect and become entangled with those in whom we come in contact. Whether your role is child, parent, spouse, friend, coworker: you have a connection to others. The music business, like many other vocations, is not only about having the skill set required, but also how you relate to others. The phrase "plays well with others" is a double entendre in this scenario.

One drummer who personifies this in a myriad of ways is Los Angeles based Ty Dennis. Ty comes to percussion through genetics, and has made a successful career fulfilling the role of a great drummer as well as handling the sometimes precarious business relationships with modesty and grace. Those who work with Ty will tell you that he is the type of drummer who can handle a difficult artist just as well as a close friend. True music insiders will tell you that there are a lot of amazing musicians out there, but not that many of them make you feel just as comfortable off the bandstand as on it. If you have an energy that brings others to a better place musically and emotionally, you will become a very busy musician.

fortunate son

To say that Ty Dennis was born to be a drummer is not much of a stretch. The son of an accomplished jazz drummer in California, Ty, from birth, was immersed in music witnessing an accomplished musician (his father) on a daily basis. Ty gravitated to the drums. And though he was never pushed, he was always allowed access to the knowledge that only comes from someone who knows the instrument inside out. It was a little like growing up in a percussion department. Whenever there was a question, it was answered. Even more importantly Ty could learn by seeing the physicality of the instrument and feel the way the groove was affected by the placement of the beats. His father exposed to him to the great jazz drummers of the time, and he learned the history of the instrument.

Ty's dad studied with drum guru Freddie Gruber and passed his wisdom along to the fledgling drummer. The standard drum curriculum was passed along to young Ty including: *Bass Drum Control* (Collin Bailey), *Syncopation* (Ted Reed), *Stick Control* (George Lawrence Stone), and the Carmine Appice books (*Realistic Rock*, etc...). Ty recalls, "My dad exposed me to the greats like Jimmy Cobb, Billy Higgins, Paul Motian and too many others to name. He had a real insight into aspects of playing that propelled my playing forward. He showed me different ways to place the fulcrum. It effects where the pocket sits." As he grew older, Ty did the usual school band thing and then started playing in garage bands at 15. It wasn't the normal classic rock fodder. In addition to challenging classics like Rush, the youths were tackling Scofield tunes and the like. Dennis even went as far as tracking down Chad Wackerman, who was living in North Hollywood at the time, and convinced the famous drummer to give him lessons. Ty recalls, "Chad was so incredible. I'd loved his playing with so many artists, but must admit I was crazy about the Holdsworth stuff. In the lessons Chad would write out charts for me and explain concepts like metric modulation. He revealed a lot of drumming mysteries to me."

By 21 Dennis had a four night a week cover-band gig but felt that something was missing. He packed up his things and moved to LA in '95. He remembers, "I knew that I could keep doing the four night a week thing forever, but I had to leave and do my own thing. I didn't want to get stuck doing that. It's easy to do. You start making money and then you don't ever leave. I made a conscious decision to leave that comfortable situation. If you're really serious you gotta go for it. The saying is 'Preparedness Meets Opportunity.' I lived by that. It's what kept me going."



adventurer

Upon landing in LA, Ty began playing with a series of different original bands as a hired drummer. Getting paid for rehearsal, gigs and sometimes both, his aim was to meet and play with as many quality people as possible. Ty states, "Those people I played with either led to a better gig or put me in contact with a better gig. It's all related." The first band was an independent band called Insulated. It was the whole band experience, complete with self-promotion. Dennis was paying his dues and states that he is still really proud of the album he recorded with the band. The second band for the drummer was quite an experience. Dennis remarks, "I was in this band called Elephant Ride, whose record was produced by Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones. He had heard the demo and asked to work with the band. It was quite a moment for any rock fan. It was a Pearl Jam-esque band. That band was on Sony and we were on salary. We played around LA a lot. The name changed a few times, but that experience was great for me."

opening doors

Around this time Ty began immersing himself in the recording world doing a lot of demos. Dennis proclaims, "Recording is a great teaching tool. It's very humbling [laughs]! You not only learn what works on a track, but also how to get different drum sounds and how to please the artist. Nowadays almost everyone has a home studio, but when I first moved to LA we were recording at real studios. Not only did you feel some of the pressure of the clock, but you also were working with engineers and producers who really knew their craft. I paid attention and learned a lot from that environment." Dennis was doing a lot of recordings around this time with a bassist friend of his. The bassist got the gig with The Motels and recommended Ty for the gig. Ty recalls, "There weren't a lot of live gigs with The Motels, although they did have a loyal fan base. The real attraction of the gig for me was the fact that they had this amazing studio and they were very into recording. The tunes were very diverse. One song would sound like [Tom] Petty and the next would sound like [David] Bowie. I was playing an acid-jazz

groove one minute and then country bluegrass the next." Clearly, Dennis was passionate and tenacious in his pursuit to earn his bones as an LA studio drummer. Yet another bassist (Angelo Barbera) would recommend Ty to Robby Krieger (Doors guitarist) for his solo band. The band played clubs and always had an interesting set list. Ty states, "My advice to every drummer is to make friends with bass players. The great ones are few and far between. They'll take you along for the ride. Angelo helped get me in with Robby. We played about 25% of Robby's original rock/fusion stuff. It was the kind of thing that Cobham would play with Mahavishnu or what Tony Williams did with Lifetime. It was really fun because I would rock out, but also get to utilize all the wild, fun stuff that I had worked on when I went through my early period of falling in love with the drums." When you start playing with a rock legend like Robby Krieger you're fast on the heels of your own personal heroes. In Ty Dennis's case this would literally happen, in a very unexpected way.

stepping in for stew

When Ray Manzarek and Robby Krieger of The Doors decided to reunite in 2002 (rounding out the lineup with Ian Astbury of the Cult, Stewart Copeland of the Police and bassist Angelo Barbera), Ty assumed that it was time for him to focus on other endeavors while Krieger was busy. Ty states, "This newly reformed version of the Doors was kind of like a super-group with the other guys that were in the band, but it was definitely focusing on the Doors material. There was a lot of excitement because it had been so many years since those guys had played and toured together. Heck, I was excited to see them! I was doing a few things to keep busy and then I got a call to sub a rehearsal at SIR that Stewart couldn't make. I already knew Robby and Angelo; I met Ray and Ian. This is where the whole idea of 'preparedness meets opportunity' came into action.

"Luckily for me I knew all of the Doors material from playing in Robby's group. I didn't have to try to cram on the material. I could go in and focus on making it feel right and having a good time. It was a blast! I remember playing 'Riders On The Storm' and it was surreal that I was playing with these guys. I told the manager to call me if he ever needed me again. A couple of weeks later I got a call from him at 11 p.m. and he said, 'can you be here in an hour? Stewart can't make it today.' My gear was already setup for a session and I couldn't get to it. He said, 'No problem. Stewart's kit is here. You can just play it.' I walked into SIR and sat behind his green sparkle Starclassic kit. I remember that the cymbal set up felt really weird to me. I got to rehearse Stewart Copeland's gig on his kit—that is a dream come true! I can't say enough great things about how much I love Stewart Copeland. I used to go out to my parent's garage when I was a teenager and play to *Synchronicity*. That stuff is ingrained in my soul."

Dennis was asked to fill in for Stewart on a couple of live tapings for radio and TV. "For whatever reason, Stewart and the band decided to make a change," Ty continues. "The manager called to offer me the gig. I remember getting the call in my office and telling my wife. I was kind of stunned, in a good way. I didn't have much time to think about it because a week later was the band's first gig in LA in 20 years [February of 2003] at Univeral Ampitheater [now Gibson Ampitheater]. It was a great moment. My parents came up for the gig. My dad is a drummer, so it was a real moment for us to share that." Dennis is still holding down the drum chair in Manzarek-Krieger (as the band is now called) and doesn't take this position lightly. Ty comments, "I'm following both John Densmore and Stewart Copeland. Those guys are both legends. That could get inside your head, but I made the conscious decision from the beginning to not copy their styles. You have to play certain signature parts and put out the right vibe because that is what the music calls for, but besides that I just do my thing. I know that part of the reason I got the gig is because of that. Ray liked the way that I approached the gig with a more rock attitude. He wanted somebody who plays strong. That confidence comes from doing a lot of auditions. Years ago I used to copy every little thing, every nuance. I noticed that the guys who got the gigs were the ones who went in and played the gig their way. They didn't try to be a clone. They put their own personality into it. Not in a way that they changed the feel of the music, but in the sense that they weren't afraid to be themselves and let the chips fall where they may. Don't try to be something different for every gig. Be you and apply what you do to the situation."


One sad fact of the music business is that it's not always the best person suited for the gig that gets it.

Dennis attributes his many years holding this drum chair to "pleasing the guys. I truly care whether or not I'm giving them what they want. Every so often I'll ask them to see how they feel about what's going on. After all of this time I can count on one hand the things that they've asked me to do.



For example, Robby likes the beat in the middle or on top: I can't get too Bonham-y in this band, it's not appropriate. They have a jazz mentality so they're not hung up on exact parts. There is no micromanaging. My goal is to make them sound good, not to focus on myself. If I mess up I just try not to make the same mistake twice. It's also important to not to be lazy. Don't just phone the gig in. Obviously there is a personal side as well. Just being pleasant and to not bring any drama to the situation. Be professional. Know the songs, show up, be a decent person. That's all it takes."

break on through

Dennis keeps himself quite busy when not on the road with Manzarek-Krieger doing sessions and other band projects. For almost ten years Ty has been a part of the Chicago-based band Firebug. He describes the group as having a classic rock vibe and heavy feel. Dennis relates, "Juliette [vocalist] really likes old-school blues singer/songwriters. She writes that way and brings it in to the band. The combination creates an interesting sound. It's very '70s Zeppelin/Pink Floyd."



The newest venture for Dennis is doing drum tracks via Internet. Dennis declares, "Technology has made it available for anyone to access top quality studio musicians. If some guy is sitting in the outback and wants a pro drum track but doesn't have access to a professional studio or drummer, he can contact someone like me and get the session done just the way he'd like it. All of this without paying for flights, hotels, etc. For a musician like myself it makes me not so reliant on other people for tours, sessions, all of that. I can be the captain of my own ship to a certain extent. There are a lot of people doing it now. Guitarists, vocalists, even whole bands are utilizing this opportunity. As a husband and father it makes things nice for me. I can put the kids to bed and then drive over to the studio and lay down some tracks. I get to have the best of both worlds. One sad fact of the music business is that it's not always the best person suited for the gig that gets it. You have to have the right look or know the right people. Sometimes it's sharing a vice that gets you somewhere. If you want to be smart and take care of your family, you have to diversify yourself in this business."

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