

An Interview with

Gregg Bissonette

by Terry Butz

Gregg Bissonette is a world-renowned drummer and avid Beatle fan who has recorded and toured with such diverse acts as David Lee Roth, Carlos Santana, Maynard Ferguson, Bette Midler, Joe Satriani, Enrique Iglesias, and Spinal Tap. When he's not recording or touring, Gregg conducts drum clinics world wide, and lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children.

Terry Butz: Gregg, you and I met at one of your drum clinics where you discussed and demonstrated the playing styles of everyone from Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich's big bands to Tony Williams' Jazz influence and on to today's styles by Kenny Aronoff and others. So I know you're not just a drummer, but you've really studied the history of your craft.

Gregg Bissonette: Well thanks Terry. I take a lot of lessons, and I really try to listen to new drummers that come out and new bands, and I enjoy watching drum videos of guys that... when we were kids they didn't have drum videos that you could just pop in and watch somebody play, and

photo by Alex Solca



“take the needle and scratch it back” and try to figure out what Buddy Rich or Ringo was doing. But nowadays you can just put on the video and hit rewind and slow motion and really use it as an incredible learning tool.

Terry: But then your clinic turned into an education on Ringo Starr for all the younger drummers. And my two boys, Kyle and Connor, were jabbing me in the ribs because you were giving them the same message I'd been preaching for years, about the tremendous contributions to drumming made by Ringo.

Gregg: Yeah, so many people just want to “dog” any pop drummers that don't do the “tricks”. I mean, when you come to a clinic it's either drummers that want to hear solos all the time, or people that want to hear a lot of speed, double bass proficiency, and I love all that stuff. But the reason I started playing drums is because of Ringo. You know, I wanted to be in a band because of Ringo and the Beatles. And pop drumming is my favorite thing to do. I love playing jazz, and I love big bands, small groups, Afro-Cuban music, all different types of styles of music... but my favorite kind of music is pop music with the lyrics that you can sing along. And there's no better band ever than the Beatles, and no better drummer that ever played the parts the way they're supposed to be played than Ringo.

So many drummers these days don't think about the song, they just think about playing drums only. It's all about the song, and if you serve the song the way Ringo did, you'll always be the one that people want to work with.

Terry: In your case that's entirely true. You're one of the most versatile players today. So you must be able to relate to what Ringo had to do, in terms of playing to the writing talents of three of the most versatile and talented songwriters in history?



photo by Chuck Pulin

Need Is Love where it's not all in 4/4 time. A lot of those songs had odd time signatures, 5/4 bars, 3/8 bars, 2/4 bars... Ringo had his hands full coming up with parts. Like *All You Need Is Love* where he was playing the snare drum on all four beats, or sometimes five beats, but it never sounds like an odd time piece, because Ringo smoothed it out and brought the piece together as a song. That's what's great about him as a

Gregg: It was probably both a blessing and curse for him. Because he had the greatest songs to work with, but he had the pickiest songwriters. And Paul is a good drummer, too. So who knows, on a song like *Come Together*, just exactly how much

drummer to me. He never made you think about the drums changing time signatures, just make it work for the song and listen to the lyrics. The lyrics always lead the way, and Ringo never covered them up.

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direction or input he got or didn't get from the others. It's one thing to work with a great songwriter, but it's another thing to work in a band with three great songwriters, one who plays drums himself (Paul), and another who plays and thinks rhythm guitar in his writing. Just listen to *All You*

Terry: Since you mentioned Paul's drumming, what did you think of his playing on songs like *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, *Dear Prudence*, *Why Don't We Do It In The Road*, and his first solo album, *McCartney*?

Gregg: I loved his drumming. He also plays for the song; he's a songwriter's drummer. Didn't he also play on *Birthday*?

Terry: Yes!

Gregg: When he was supposed to go to Africa to record *Band On The Run*, and my friend Denny Seiwell couldn't make it, so Paul just said OK, I'll do it myself. And he played on that entire album, and it was one of my all time favorites. Yeah, I think Paul's an incredible drummer who can fill in whenever he wants to.

Terry: When did you first become aware of Ringo, and the Beatles?

Gregg: The first time I remember them was, like many people, on the Ed Sullivan



courtesy of Mapex Drums



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Show. But then, during their final tour in 1966, The Beatles were going to be playing at the Olympia Hockey Arena. My Dad was a drummer who was playing a wedding at this hotel in downtown Detroit, and he'd heard that the Beatles were staying upstairs on Friday, the day before the show. So he went to the Food & Beverage Manager who booked him for the wedding and asked "Is there any chance you can get us close to some Beatles tickets?" The guy said "Hold on!" and he went and talked to somebody, road manager or somebody, and came back downstairs with four tickets in his hand. And he said "There you go, but it's gonna be \$24.00" and Dad said OK, yeah! Imagine \$24.00 to see the Beatles live!

So we went to see them (Saturday, August 13, 1966), and I was seven years old. And the biggest thing that I could think about was that, even though I was in a hockey arena that held fourteen thousand people, I was thinking 'I'm in the same room with these guys'. And I had the same exact feeling last Sunday when I went to see Paul at the Anaheim Hockey Arena, the Duck Pond with Brett Tuggle, one of my best friends and the leader of the Beatle band that I'm in, "The Lads". We were just unbelievably blown away.

It was a rock band. Paul had two guitar players, a drummer, himself, and a keyboard player. And it wasn't stuff that was all clicked out and played with sequencers. It was THEM playing and singing. And they rocked it. I mean they paid respect to the Beatles' songs, but they also did their own little things to add to the music. And you could tell Paul was really happy, he was really into it.

Terry: Fill me in on "The Lads".

Gregg: It's a band with my brother, Matt, on bass, the guitar player is Rocket Mashat, and Matt and Brett Tuggle on lead vocals. It started about five years ago when Brett Tuggle and I were with David Lee Roth. Brett played keys and sang high harmonies. Anyway, we'd take over these piano bars on the road and sing Beatle tunes. Everyone joined in and we started playing just for fun at birthday parties for friends of ours. Then we thought we should do this in a club, so we play a couple times a month at a club in Sherman Oaks (California). Now we're really hooked on it. We started learning new tunes and we rehearse, and we enjoy trying to play the songs the Beatles never really played live. Which was why it was amazing to see Paul come out of the chute at his concert and play *Hello Goodbye*. I'll tell you, Abe Laboriel Jr. played so great, what a great drummer. I'm honored to be a friend of his. What a great band!

Terry: One of the things you talk about in your drum clinics around the world are the musical innovations and technical skills Ringo gave us. Like the match strokes (playing two drums with two hands at the same time with identical strokes). He used it on songs like *I Want To Hold Your Hand*, *Not A Second Time*, and the matched strokes in the song *Tell Me Why* were played at an incredibly 380 beats per minute.

Gregg: A lot of drummers are really into technique, and they're not really aware that Ringo has a lot of technical skills. He didn't use them all the time because he

plays for the song and doesn't let the "chops" get in the way. But it's really hard to pull those double stops off and he does it with ease, just up there bobbing his head and doing it like he's not even thinking about it.

Terry: Did you ever hear the story of where the bobbing of his head came from?

Gregg: No, but he sure was enjoying himself up there.

Terry: That's it exactly. He said that the head movements came about because he loves to dance, and when he was playing the drums he was having so much fun it felt like he was dancing behind the drums.

Gregg: I can definitely see Ringo dancing up there, even in a *Hard Day's Night* in the scene where he goes to the club and is dancing... that's what he looked like behind the kit.

Terry: Let's cover some of the other innovations Ringo gave us. How about *Tomorrow Never Knows*?

Gregg: One of the great things about *Tomorrow Never Knows* is that there are no drum fills on the whole song. It's just a groove. And nowadays drummers are called on to record loops and not worry about fills, but here was Ringo playing loops back in the 60's.



Terry: *Come Together?*

Gregg: That drum part is an integral part of the song, and that song would still be a great song with just a straight drum part. But instead, he has a drum beat that was rhythmically melodic with the entire song. And it's a part that, when people hear that drum part they instantly know what song it is.

One of my goals is to play beats that people can recognize, just by hearing the drums. There are only a handful of them out there and *Come Together* is one of them.

Terry: *Ticket to Ride?*

Gregg: That's another one that really rhythmically and melodically parallels George's guitar part. In the 60's you didn't hear a lot of drummers playing that kind of beat with what George Martin called "big drums". Ringo really had that snare/tom/bass thing going with no hi-hat. He did the same thing on *Come Together*, leaving the hi-hat out on the chorus. And again, the double-stop fill is in there right after "She's got a ticket to ri-hi-hi..." he plays that fast, difficult, technical fill part. He's got it all to me. He's got "chops", but doesn't always use them. He's so musical.

Terry: *In My Life?*

Gregg: It's a great example of leaving things out. Miles Davis used to say that "less is more". And minimalism is something that Ringo demonstrated a lot. *In My Life* has one hi-hat beat per bar, and that takes a lot of restraint and discipline for a drummer.

Stan Lynch, the great drummer from Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers told me their song *Breakdown* used the inspiration from *In My Life*. It's the same beat, just put through a shuffle.

So he's inspired so many drummers with his taste and his musicality that it's incredible.

Terry: *She Loves You?*

Gregg: Yeah, not a lot of drummers back

then were using a floor tom as a ride cymbal, but he was playing eight notes on the floor tom at the open and close of the song. And we sure know how much we heard that later on in surf, punk, and hard rock music. We hear it a lot these days, but Ringo was one of the first people I ever knew about that did that.



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Terry: How about when he used tea towels on the drums in *Revolution*?

Gregg: I got to work last year with Jeff Lynn, who produced the Beatles Anthology, the Traveling Wilburys, and for both Paul and George. He's a real Beatle nut, and he had Ringo play on an Electric Light Orchestra tune called *Alright*, where he used the dead tom sound from *Revolution*. And Geoff Emmerick came to one of the gigs and we sat down to talk for

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two hours about Ringo's sound. He mentioned the tea towels and said they even lightly taped parts of cigarette packs to the heads, and Fairchild compressors to get the cymbals to jump out more. He was great to talk to, and every time he talked about it his eyes go all bright, big around, and excited.

Terry: What about the Latin rhythms Ringo added to Beatle tracks?

Gregg: Oh yeah, *No Reply*, *I Feel Fine*, and

The Night Before... you know Ringo loved a lot of different styles of music. He put a lot of Latin influence in, he put a lot of early Gospel styles, and Country Western influences. He was really into DJ Fontanna and the drummers of Elvis. He played what he listened to, skiffle stuff and Latin was just one of them.

Terry: I grew up playing Zildjian Cymbals specifically because of Ringo. Did Ringo have anything to do with your decision to play Zils?

Gregg: Ringo had a lot to do with that. It really wasn't even a decision. I mean, my Dad always played Zildjians before the Beatles came out, and when I saw Ringo played Zildjians, I just said, "What else is there?". So it's the only cymbals I've ever played.

Terry: If Paul called tomorrow and asked you to join his next tour, would you be up for it?

Gregg: That would be my dream gig. I would love to play with Paul. I would drop anything I was doing to do that gig!

Terry: What did you think of the experience of playing with Ringo recently and what's new and coming up for Gregg?

Gregg: I hope to work with Ringo again someday soon...It was an incredibly great experience...He is not only my favorite drummer...but one of my favorite human beings!!! What a cool guy... My brother Matt (bass) and I had the time of our lives working with him for a month!!!! As for now ... I am off to Japan for a month on a tour with Larry

Carlton...then back home for more recording work in the Los Angeles studio scene.

You can learn more about Gregg Bissonette by visiting www.spectrasonics.net/artists/gbissonette.html

Terry Butz is a frequent contributor to Modern Drummer Magazine and Not So Modern Drummer Magazine, and resides in Wisconsin, U.S.A.