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Cover photo by Alex Solca

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The big story in speed-metal drumming for the past few years has been the return of original Slayer drummer Dave Lombardo. Finally—*finally*—a new Slayer album is out, proving how much further Lombardo has taken his art. **by Waleed Rashidi**

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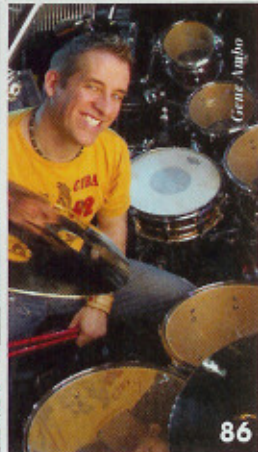
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RASCAL FLATTS' JIM RILEY

DRUMMING ON THE EDGE OF COUNTRY

With an impressive drumming background and plenty of experience, Jim Riley is the perfect choice to fuel one of the biggest bands ever to come out of Nashville.

At first glance, Jim Riley may seem like one of the luckiest individuals working in Nashville. Having known him for several years, I can tell you that his success in the drumming world has *nothing* to do with luck.

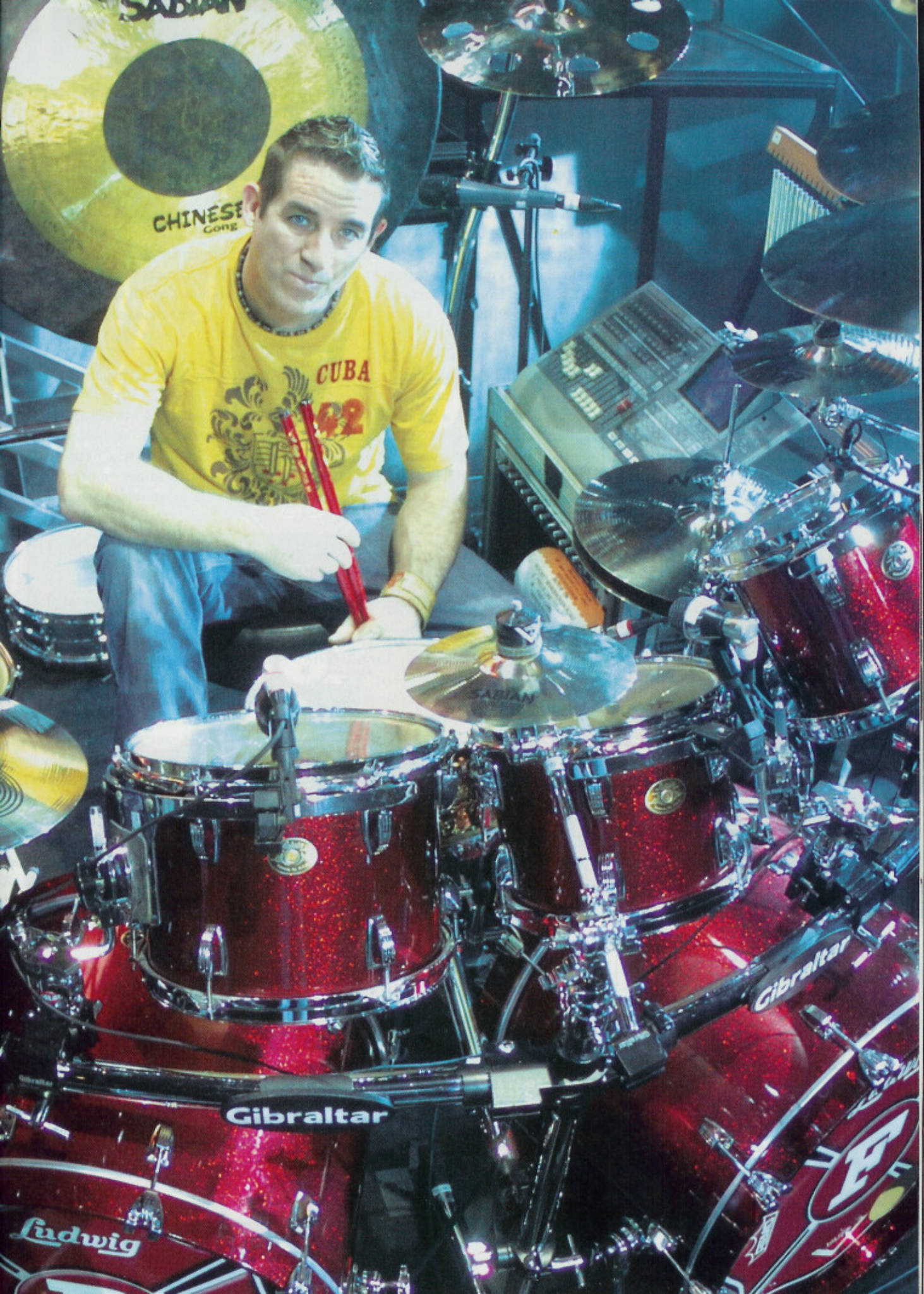
Since childhood, growing up in the Boston area, Jim has been focused on his life-long goal of being a professional musician. Having received half of his education in school and the other half playing in clubs, Jim boasts a style that's a conglomerate of rock, fusion, country, and swing. He found that he would need every bit of that diversity and a willingness to adapt in order to survive in Nashville's evolving musical landscape.

If you've been following Nashville's country music scene in recent years,

you can tell that there's a bit of an identity crisis going on in Music City. The once readily identifiable "twang" of country music has given way to a sound that in many ways bears more resemblance to Kelly Clarkson than Merle Haggard. This shift has brought in a new, younger audience to country music, and Rascal Flatts is, very simply, leading the way.

Combining elements of country and bluegrass with orchestrated pop and hip-hop drum loops, Rascal Flatts has truly taken the music beyond the Nashville city limits. Their 2005 tour played to over 750,000 fans, making it the eighth largest tour in the world. What did it take to be able to play this new style of country in sold-out arenas every night? I sat down with Jim to find out.

story by John M. Aldridge
photos by Gene Ambo



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Gibraltar

MD: When did you know that you wanted to be a drummer?

Jim: As early as I can remember, I knew that I wanted to be a musician. I mean, I would get together with kids from up the street for band practice with our toy instruments. I remember getting so mad because they wouldn't take it seriously. And that was when I was seven years old! But it was when I first saw a TV commercial for a KISS album that something just "clicked" in my head. I saw Peter Criss on a twenty-foot riser surrounded by drums and said to myself, "That's what I want to do."

MD: How old were you when you started playing?

Jim: Well, after pestering my parents for two years, they finally let me take drum lessons when I was twelve. I can remember being in my first lessons feeling like a fish taking his first swim. It felt very natural to me.

MD: What was it like for you growing up

in the Boston area?

Jim: The Boston area was a great place for a young musician to grow up. During my sophomore year in high school I got involved with Boston's Youth Symphony. Some of the people there recommended Arthur Press, percussionist with the BSO, as a private instructor. He was a great teacher, and he definitely got me ready for college. I was also lucky that my high school had a great jazz program.

MD: Being from Massachusetts, I would have imagined Berklee as your first choice after high school. Why did you choose North Texas?

Jim: Well, it was actually my band director at Natick High who turned me on to North Texas. Gerry Ash is a great jazz trombonist, and he went to UNT in the 1960s. So I checked it out and discovered that not only did UNT have a great jazz program, but probably the best all-around percussion

program in the nation as well.

MD: Were you studying legit percussion there or strictly drumset?

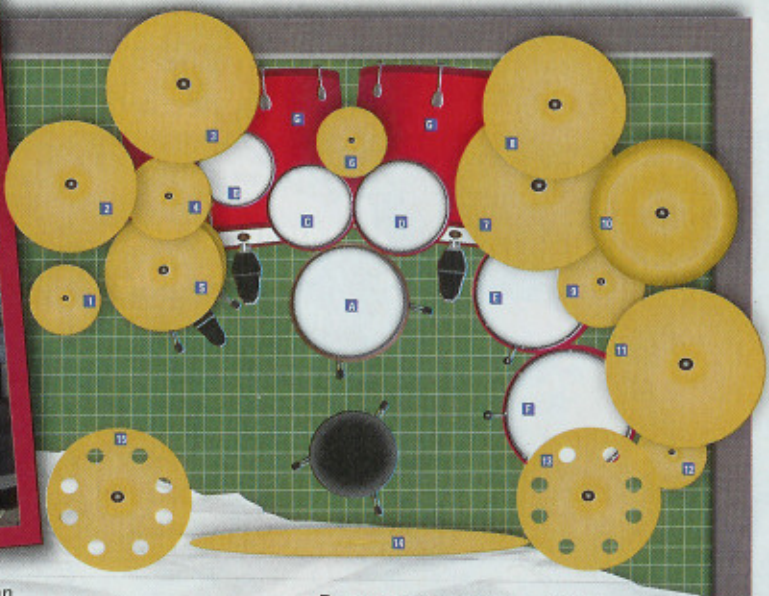
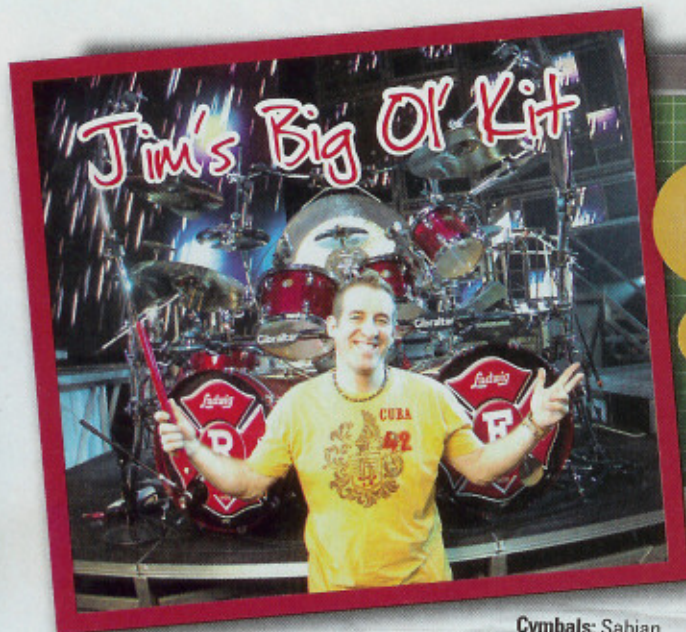
Jim: I studied everything I could! I played in the jazz bands, wind ensemble, percussion ensembles, orchestras, African ensemble...you name it, I signed up for it.

MD: Did you ever get the chance to study with Ed Soph?

Jim: My freshman year was Ed's first year teaching at UNT, and everybody wanted to study with him. At that time there were a hundred fifty percussion music majors, so I had to wait until my sophomore year to study with him.

MD: What was his approach to teaching you?

Jim: It was great. Ed was never impressed with whatever blistering lick you might have worked out. He was basically concerned with two things: musicality and technique. He broke down everything that



Drums: Ludwig in ruby red sparkle lacquer finish

- A. 5x14 hammered bronze snare with die-cast hoops
- B. 8x8 tom
- C. 8x10 tom
- D. 9x12 tom
- E. 12x14 tom
- F. 14x16 tom
- G. 17x22 bass drum

Cymbals: Sabian

- 1. 7" Radia cup chime
- 2. 17" AAXplosion crash
- 3. 19" AAXplosion crash
- 4. 10" AA splash
- 5. 14" AA Regular hats
- 6. 8" AA splash
- 7. 22" Universal ride (Ed Shaughnessy signature model)
- 8. 18" AAXplosion crash
- 9. 12" AA splash
- 10. 18" AAX China
- 11. 20" AAXplosion crash
- 12. 9" Radia cup chime
- 13. 18" Evolution O-Zone crash
- 14. 40" Chinese gong
- 15. 18" Evolution O-Zone crash

Percussion: TreeWorks windchimes

Hardware: Gibraltar Road series rack and pedals, RIMS tom mounts

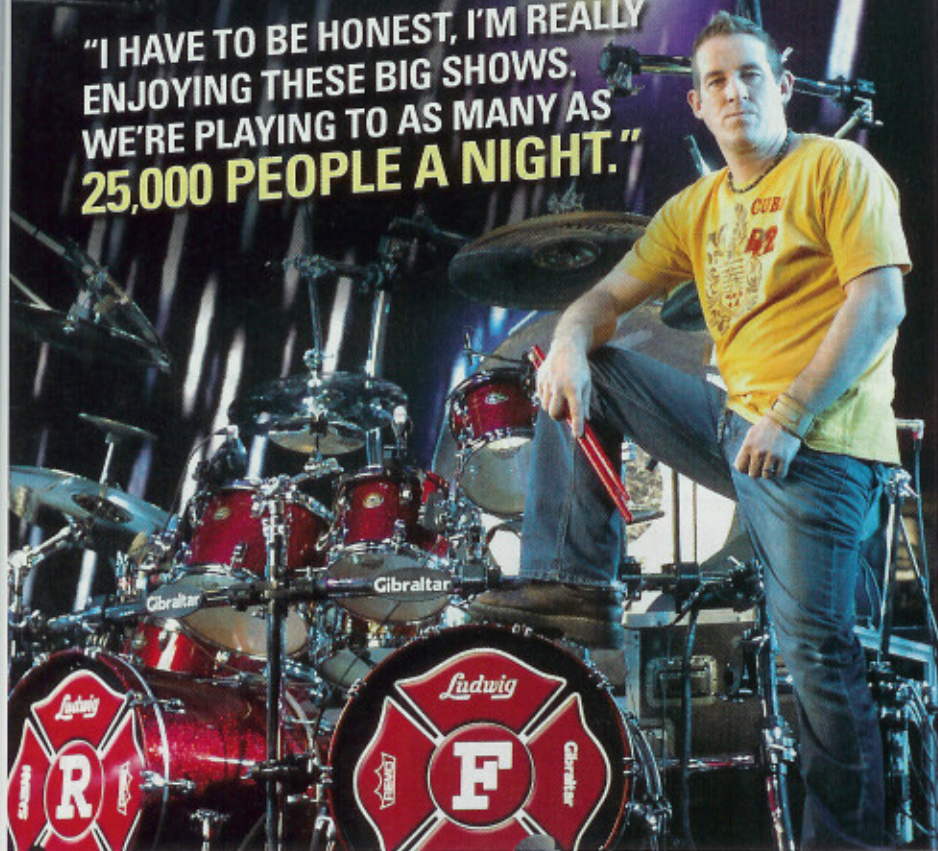
Heads: Remo CS Ambassador on snare batter, Ambassador snare-side, clear Emperors on tom batters, clear Ambassadors on bottoms, clear PowerStroke III on bass drums with Falam patch, custom logo heads on front by HeadFirst

Sticks: Vater 5B wood tip or Color Wrap, heavy wire brushes, Splashsticks

Electronics (in rack): Roland 1680 (for playback), Roland Dr. Groove drum machine

Monitors: Clark Synthesis Tactile sound unit (throne-mounted bass shaker), in-ear headphones

"I HAVE TO BE HONEST, I'M REALLY ENJOYING THESE BIG SHOWS. WE'RE PLAYING TO AS MANY AS 25,000 PEOPLE A NIGHT."



you did and made you think about why you played what you played. He also introduced me to the Moeller technique, which helped my playing dramatically.

MD: What did you do after college?

Jim: It was funny, because I had just graduated with a music education degree, but I had no intention of getting a teaching job. I had been playing a lot in Dallas and literally fell into this teaching job in Coppell, Texas. It was a great gig, but I felt it wasn't the right time in my life to teach full time. So after one year I resigned.

MD: Do you think you'll ever teach again?

Jim: When I was getting ready to graduate from college, my student adviser asked me what I thought I'd be doing in ten years. I told him that I'd be playing music professionally. Then he asked me why I was getting my degree in music education. I told him that I didn't want to be the type of teacher who learned it all from a book and then went right to teaching out of a book without first putting what I'd learned to the test in the real world. I definitely think I will get back to teaching in some form or another. Whether it be clinics, private lessons, or at a school, I feel like I'll be a better educator being able to back up my les-

sons with my professional experience.

MD: What did you do after you resigned from your one-year teaching career?

Jim: I went on the road with a Christian band out of Orlando.

MD: Was that your first tour?

Jim: Yep, and man, I was excited. They had a tour bus and dates booked coast to coast. I couldn't wait. So I headed down to Orlando, and right from the start it was a disaster. The singer was hooked on pain pills, the bus was a piece of crap. Half of the dates didn't pay and the other half got cancelled. The whole thing came to a screeching halt when the bus motor exploded in Coos Bay, Oregon. No one had money to fix it, and I was stranded up there for six weeks! But it wasn't a complete loss. On the tour I met a great guitar player named Jeff Scheetz, and he invited me to stay with him in Kansas City and work on some instrumental rock album projects.

MD: What year did you move to K.C.?

Jim: 1995. I certainly had nothing else going on, and Jeff had a studio at his house. We were making some great music, but it wasn't going to pay the bills. So Jeff called K.C. Drumworks and convinced them to hire me. My job there included

Jim Riley

building and selling their custom drums. Through working there I was able to meet a lot of people in town.

MD: Such as?

Jim: Well, for starters, the shop got a call looking for a drummer to play a country gig on the day I started working there. After all the other guys in the shop turned it down, I said that I would do it. I played the gig for two years and it proved to be my crash course in traditional country music, which would prove to be very helpful later.

The other connection that I made was with a local production company that was headed by a former drummer. He had this

finishing up at college, I was fortunate enough to meet one of Nashville's greatest drummers, Larrie Londin. He was coming to do a clinic at UNT and I remember thinking, "This dude has played with everyone from Elvis to Journey, as well as having played on literally hundreds of hit records. I've got to meet this guy."

So about an hour before the clinic I went to the hall where he was performing and introduced myself. He could not have been any nicer. We talked about drumming, he told me some stories, and then he gave me his phone number. He said, "Call me when you come to town and I'll take you to a recording session." I remember telling him

with great musicians, and I felt Nashville was the place for me to do that.

MD: Did you know anyone in Nashville?

Jim: Not really. I just loaded up my drums, my clothes, and my dog and headed to Music City. I had a friend of a friend who agreed to let me stay at his house for a few days, but once I got there his wife wanted my dog to stay outside. Even though it was April, it was still really cold at night. So the next morning I went to Boomtown Percussion. They were the mirror image of the last shop I had worked for. They built Razorback drums and were a retail store.

To this day I don't know how I pulled this off, but somehow I convinced the owner to not only give me a job, but to let me and my dog live at the shop until I could find a place! Once I had a job and a place to live, my next order of business was to hit the streets and find some gigs. This is where knowing the country standards is a lifesaver. Those two years in that club in K.C. had prepared me pretty well—that and knowing the Nashville number system.

MD: Where did you learn the number system?

Jim: Well, the system they use in Nashville is very similar to the figured bass that I studied in music theory. So going into these club gigs, I knew the songs, was singing the harmonies, and could call out the changes if they needed them. They were like, "Who's the new guy?"

MD: Sounds like you fit in pretty well.

Jim: I was meeting a lot of people and things were going great, but then the drum shop that I was working at closed down. That would have been fine, except that I was still living

there! So once again I was homeless. I didn't want to leave town because I had gigs, so I just lived in my truck for a while. It really wasn't that bad. A couple weeks later a buddy asked me if I would watch his cat for a week. He gave me the keys to his apartment, and when he came back I gave him half of the rent and told him that I was his new roommate.

MD: What was your first big break?

Jim: It was in '98, and I had been in town for about eleven months. I had been playing some gig on lower Broadway with a great bass player named Steve Ledford. He



idea that he could sell Fortune 500 companies on having a percussion ensemble perform at their corporate meetings. So he enlisted me to do some writing for them, and Sticks Of Thunder percussion ensemble was born. I'm still playing gigs with those guys.

MD: Sounds like you had a lot going on. What made you decide to move to Nashville?

Jim: Once again, I felt like I wasn't doing what I was put here to do. There was something about Nashville that had been calling me for a long time. In 1992, when I was

that I wouldn't be able to see him after his clinic because I had orchestra rehearsal, so we said our goodbyes.

I went up to my seat to watch the clinic, and Larrie was playing his ass off. But somewhere in the middle of the third tune he just fell back off the throne. He went into the coma that eventually took his life, but he went out doing what he loved. Larrie made me feel like Nashville was the type of place where a guy like me could have a career. That's what I wanted. I never saw myself as the one-hit-wonder type. I wanted to spend my life playing great music

just called me up one day and said, "I got you a gig." I asked him for what night and he explained to me that he had gotten the gig with Mark Chesnutt and that they also needed a drummer. The bandleader came and met me at a club, listened to me play, and hired me on the spot.

MD: How would you describe Mark's music?

Jim: Mark played a mix of country, Western swing, and Cajun music. My first gig was on the TV show *The View*, and I was thinking, "This is live TV, man, don't screw up." About ten seconds before we were to go on, I realized that my stick bag was nowhere to be found. The only sticks I had were in my hands. I've never held onto a pair of sticks so tightly in all my life! But everything worked out fine and I spent the next two years touring with him. That was a great band.

MD: I remember when you got that gig, and when you left it. With all of the guys who were without work at that time, what made you decide to leave such a solid gig?

Jim: Mark had scored fourteen number-1 hits in the '90s. But I just felt like I was on the tail end of a great run. And as much as I enjoyed the music, I felt like I needed to do something different with my career.

MD: How did you hook up with Rascal Flatts?

Jim: In '99 the opening act on Mark's tour was a girl named Chely Wright. Jay Demarcus and Joe Don Rooney, two of my three current bosses, were sidemen in her band. Jay loves to tell this story about when we first met in a club and that I was a total jerk to him. I remember Jay as a brilliant multi-instrumentalist who would play keyboards and sing harmony on one set, then play bass and sing lead the next. We had great chemistry right out of the chute.

So we would play gigs together during the week and back up our respective artists on the weekend. In the summer of '99 I played a lot of gigs where it was Jay, Gary, Joe Don, and me. It was at that time that they told me that they were trying to get a record deal and that when they did, they wanted me to play with them. Well, sure enough, they did get a record deal, and I left Mark Chesnutt to play with Rascal Flatts.

MD: That was quite a risk leaving an established artist for an unknown act.

Jim: Yeah, a lot of people thought I was crazy, including you!

Riley On Record

Artist

Rascal Flatts
Rascal Flatts
Rascal Flatts
Jeff Scheetz
Lucky Man Clark

Album

Live
Me And My Gang
Feels Like Today (bonus track only)
Pawn Shop
Meet Frank Blunt



iPod Faves

Artist

Sting
Living Colour
John McLaughlin Trio
Rage Against The Machine
Red Hot Chili Peppers
John Scofield
Peter Gabriel
Tony Williams
Fishbone
Level 42

Album

Ten Summoner's Tales
Vivid
Live At The Royal Festival Hall
Rage Against The Machine
Blood Sugar Sex Magik
Pick Hits Live
So
Believe It
Truth And Soul
World Machine

Drummer

Vinnie Colaiuta
Will Calhoun
Trilok Gurtu
Brad Wilk
Chad Smith
Dennis Chambers
Manu Katché
Tony Williams
Fish
Phil Gould

MD: I remember wondering just how long it would last. But I also remember going to your first rehearsal at Soundcheck Studios and being blown away by the harmonies and the radically different sound of all those influences combined.

Jim: Right about that time, a song came out called "Murder On Music Row." It was about how pop country acts like Rascal

Flatts were killing traditional country music. There was a great debate as to which brand of country music would survive in the new millennium. It turns out that both styles are still alive and well.

MD: What was the first Rascal Flatts tour like?

Jim: It was fun. Back then we were all on one bus, playing a lot of clubs and opening

for anybody who would have us. It was a great time.

MD: What's the biggest difference between that and the current tour?

Jim: I almost don't know where to begin. Now we've got six busses and ten semi-trucks full of audio, video, and lighting gear. All I can say is we have an amazing crew. I don't know how they get all that gear set up on time. It's quite a production.

MD: Are you running any tracks along with the show?

Jim: Yeah, some. The Flatts music has always used drum loops and percussion tracks. My click track is also on there, as well as some string parts and stuff like that. Syncing up with video elements on screen requires the use of a click track. I will say this: We never use any vocal tracks. All the singing that you hear on the show is 100% live.

MD: Is the entire show tied to a click or backing tracks?

Jim: No, there are four or five songs that we don't even use a click track on. That allows us to make some quick transitions.

MD: What is the difference between playing with tracks and playing with a click?

Jim: For me, there's a big difference.

Jim Riley

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Jim Riley

When you're playing with a click track that no one in the audience hears, you can lay back verses, push choruses, and basically play around the click. However, when you're playing with pre-recorded elements on a track, you can't pull them around with you, particularly drum loops. Sometimes if you don't bury them, meaning playing precisely with the click, the drums and loops will flam in the PA, and that sucks.

MD: You've gone from playing small clubs to huge arenas with Rascal Flatts. Do you ever miss the intimacy of the smaller venues?

Jim: I have to be honest, I'm really enjoying these big shows. We're at a point where we're playing to as many as 25,000 people a night on these summer shows, and I love it. It's what I've always dreamed of.

MD: How long do you typically stay out on the road?

Jim: We keep a very family-friendly schedule. Many rock and pop acts stay out for weeks or even months at a time. We don't do that. We basically play weekends. I mean, those are the best days to see a concert anyway, right? We typically leave Wednesday night, play Thursday through

Saturday, and get home Sunday morning. Once you get used to that schedule, it's pretty normal. I get off the bus just in time to take out the trash and mow the lawn.

MD: What do you do about your East and West Coast dates?

Jim: About twice a year we do a West Coast run. Sitting in the bus from Nashville to the West Coast takes about two days, so I always fly into the first gig. We usually stay out there for about ten days, so if you don't choose to fly out it turns the trip into two weeks. For me, that's just too long. On the other hand, the Northeast is more like twenty-four hours, and it seems like we're always either starting or finishing our East Coast swing in Boston. That works out great for me because I get to see all my family and friends up there.

MD: How do you approach the music? Are you required to play everything like the record, or do you have some freedom in what you play?

Jim: I have plenty of freedom to make the parts my own. A lot of drummers in Nashville don't have that luxury. The key is to make the parts your own without negatively impacting the integrity of the musical arrangement. Translation: If the band gives you some rope, try not to hang yourself with it.

With us, the creative process does not stop in the studio. That's where it starts. When we take the music on the road, it's still evolving. Fans don't want to hear you regurgitate the album. They want a unique musical experience that's still familiar enough for them to sing along, and we try to give them that.

MD: I hear you've got some double drumming in the show. How did that come about?

Jim: Jay's first instrument was drums, and he told me that he wanted to do some drumming with me in the show. So I came to him with some ideas from my ensemble and drum corps experience, and we just took it from there. It's a blast. We play a two-minute drum battle and then do some double drumming on the next tune in the show. It's been going over pretty well.

MD: How does it work being the band-leader when half of the band is your boss?

Jim: The great thing is that these guys are such fantastic musicians that it really sets the tone for the rest of the band. Let me give you an example: When it came time to hire an additional guitar player, I had to

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consider that Joe Don is a pretty great guitar player himself. So whoever else we hired had to be pretty darned good as well as complementary in style. Chemistry is always a huge factor when hiring musicians, both musically and personally. The bottom line is, if you surround yourself with great musicians who are also great people, it makes your job as leader a whole lot easier.

MD: What's with the huge drumset? I thought this was a country band.

Jim: Yeah, my current setup is a little over the top. However, if you look at my snare, 12" tom, 14" tom, kick drum, and ride cymbal, you'll see a perfectly formed four-piece drumset. Everything else is set up around that. Having said that, we're putting on a huge production, and my kit definitely fits into that. It's also fun to play.

MD: What's your take on equipment endorsements?

Jim: The main thing I can say is, play the gear you love. Drum and cymbal companies hate nothing more than a gear whore. Endorsements are all about relationships. The gear is not free. To them it's advertising dollars, and they want to see a return on their investment. In return you provide exposure for their product.

MD: What would you tell a young drummer who's itching to get an endorsement?

Jim: Be patient! Make great music, and the endorsements and other stuff will fall into place when the time is right.

MD: What other advice would you have for a drummer wanting to pursue a professional career?

Jim: Meet bass players. Now don't get me wrong, there is no other group of musicians that have more of a brotherhood than drummers. But in my experience, it's been the bass players that have been the key to getting the gig. Also, get comfortable playing with a click. Almost every session and most major live gig demands that you play with one.

Finally, be as diverse as you can be. If you want to work, you've got to be able to play all styles. I've played jazz gigs, rock gigs, metal gigs, swing gigs. You name it. I've had to pull from my experiences with all of those genres to make what I do with Rascal Flatts happen.

If you'd like to see more about Jim Riley, check out his Web site: www.jimrileymusic.com.

