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## Dave Matthews Band Rock's New Edge

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*Dave Matthews Band pushes  
the envelope of acoustic rock*

# SO MUCH TO SAY

*By Andy Markham*

**C**HARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA, is a college town, and a major one at that. It's a stretch of exquisite horse country for the Virginia gentry; it is Mecca for those who worship all things Jeffersonian (Jefferson designed the university and founded the town); it is home to those celebrity ranchers (Sam Shepard, Sissy Spacek, Jessica Lange) who predated the recent star-studded exodus to Montana. And, most germane here, it's where Dave Matthews and his band got started. "Isn't it great?" he asked, when I told him I grew up an hour or so outside of the town. "It's got so many interesting edges to it." He is probably referring to the fact that, in spite of its modest size, there is a considerable breadth and depth to the place—the boho class sits next to the professional, the academic next to the rustic next to the redneck. Such a setting may



at least partly explain why Dave Matthews' music sounds (and the band looks) so eclectic. At any rate, it is a great place, and even after the band's first two major-label records, *Under the Table and Dreaming* and *Crash* (RCA), put them in a position to live where they please, they all continue to make their homes in Charlottesville.

For Matthews, it was a circuitous route to central Virginia. Born and raised for the most part in Johannesburg, South Africa (with a brief stint in England), he grew up listening to his parents' records—classical music and American folk, mostly, as well as the Beatles and other, all-pervasive artists of that era—with the almost inevitable detour in his teen years into heavy metal. "In my defense, I have to say that I never out-and-out rejected the music I grew up listening to, but metal just really appealed to me at that time," Matthews says with a self-deprecating laugh. Upon graduating from high school, he headed to New York for a time but ultimately followed his family down to Charlottesville; his parents had lived there before he was born, and after his father died his mother decided to move back.

By this time Matthews was listening a good deal to XTC and was, in his words, "heavily into Gabriel," a phrase that has an odd, if oddly appropriate, note of religious fervor to it. To pay the bills, he tended bar and continued slogging away at his own music. Matthews says that he and the other members of the band all ran in very different circles and eventually just sort of stumbled upon one another. In 1990, they arrived at the current lineup—Matthews handling guitar and vocals and almost all of the songwriting chores, Stefan Lessard on bass, Boyd Tinsley on violin, Leroi Moore on saxophones, and Carter Beauford on drums and percussion. It's a heady, pleasing mix for sure, and it's already generated more than a few sound-alikes. Each player adds his own strong voice to the fray, but maybe the most immediately striking band mem-

ber is Carter Beauford, the gum-smacking drum monster. Forty-eight but looking to be perpetually about 20, Beauford played jazz and worked what session scene there was to be worked in Charlottesville before hooking up with Matthews, and he is one of the most dazzling and musical drummers working in popular music right now.

While Matthews says it was really just by happenstance that the band came to its current instrumentation, he has from the outset stated that he wanted to see how far he could take an acoustic approach in a popular format. This does not appear to be a page torn out of Keith Jarrett's anti-electronics manifesto or anything, though Matthews counts Jarrett as an influence and an inspiration. "We leave ourselves open so we can experiment with things like distortion or other electronic textures—we're definitely not purists," he says. "But, yeah, we're always trying to see how far we can

push things. It's maybe not as well-covered territory as in electric music. Some people might look at the violin or the acoustic and think, 'Oh, more sing-alongs about peace and freedom,' so it's healthy, I think, to shake that perception up."

The first peep I ever heard from Dave Matthews was the very fine and lyrical opening instrumental section of "Satellite," from *Under the Table and Dreaming*. It sounded like it might be one of the happier collaborations between Robert Fripp and, well, someone with a sense of melody, but that was not the case. "Satellite" (which Matthews says grew out of an exercise) was, to me, the premier song on the record. It was the first song that got pushed, but it quickly gave way to more upbeat, immediately graspable songs like "What Would You Say" and "Ants Marching," only resurfacing much later, after the band had established itself. In any case, with the huge success of

DANNY CLINCH



**Sax player Leroi Moore, violinist Boyd Tinsley, bass player Stefan Lessard, drummer Carter Beauford, and Dave Matthews.**



*Under the Table and Dreaming*, songs like "Satellite" have opened up many people's ears to sounds and harmonies pretty far outside the usual pop-music formulas, and the strong showing that *Crash* has made pretty much guarantees that the band will not be tossed on pop music's pile of sophomore carcasses.

It's refreshing to see such a good band flourishing in the strange world of the music business. Listening to Matthews' songs, you might be cognizant of a clear influence here and there (the opening phrase of the verses in "Jimi Thing," from *Under the Table*, for instance, is essentially note for note the same as U2's "Sunday, Bloody Sunday," and there is the above-mentioned King Crimson resonance), but what you are hearing is still its own thing, on its own terms. In our interview I make the observation that so many artists now seem almost hamstrung by what has come before—even good, considerable talents, like Adam Duritz of Counting Crows, or Tori Amos, are so obviously standing on the shoulders of prior giants that their music sounds permanently derivative. Matthews calls into question my citing those particular artists, but he does volunteer that from his own perspective it is hard sometimes to avoid direct influence or to see where the line between homage and rip-off is drawn. It may just be the draggish by-product of this generation of musicians being so besotted with information: it sure seems like there is just plain more of everything—more subgenre, intracategory action; more product; more attitude and anti-attitude—than ever.

But in the face of all this, Matthews makes music that is both exuberant and distinctive. Even the criticisms I have heard from the unconverted are testimony to this: "He sings sort of country, but the music is, like, funk or fusion or something. . . ." People get told so often that music must be this one thing but not this other that they start to believe it.

"Do it yourself" has been the credo for independent-minded artists of every stripe, and it's become a well-told component of the story of Dave Matthews and his band. From the start, theirs was a very homegrown effort, a cottage industry that has grown exponentially. Long before they ever got signed, they had a robust merchandising interest—hats

and T-shirts galore—and they also recorded and released a live record, *Remember Two Things* (350,000 copies sold to date), under their own auspices.

*Remember Two Things*, which contains tunes that appear on both subsequent records, sounds somewhat like a dress rehearsal for *Under the Table*, which they recorded with Steve Lillywhite (XTC, Peter Dinklage, Talking Heads) over a span of two months in New York. After completing *Crash*,

by increased visibility in the media and the emergence of festivals such as H.O.R.D.E. The movement has moved aboveground. I postulate to Matthews that while these bands are not really all that similar to one another musically, there are reasons why they tend to get lassoed together. Part of it, of course, is an extension of the romance and fellow feeling that the Grateful Dead engendered—it has become a kind of commonwealth. And at least partly it is

***"I tend to think of the guitar more the way you'd approach a drum, where you think percussively, almost like each string is a different skin."***

which took about three months to track with Lillywhite at the helm once again, Matthews is voluble on the whole recording process. "There's always the question of which do you prefer, which is more enjoyable: recording or playing live? They're so different," he says. "The tools are the same in both, but the process itself is very much like the split between film acting and stage acting—recording tends to be a much more self-conscious process by its nature. We try to minimize that [self-consciousness], especially on the new record, where we didn't use any click track and we played in a circle so we could keep eye contact going and just feed off each other. But still a lot of it is done in bits, and you're always aware of that in the back of your mind. Whereas on stage, especially after you've put the songs through the recording process, you know them inside and out and you can stretch a lot more, sort of mine them a little deeper."

Matthews and company hustled for several years before they got signed to RCA, honing their skills and refining the songs while playing on the same Son-of-Deadhead circuit that bands like Blues Traveler, Phish, and Leftover Salmon have been playing forever. For Matthews and many of these other bands, all of whom have impressive reputations as live performers, the returns on the considerable dues they've paid have been handsome indeed. We briefly discussed this phenomenon—exemplified not just by strong record sales but

because they place playing over posturing. They stretch out on stage, and they tend to do it with (sometimes illegal, sometimes beatific, sometimes both) smiles on their faces.

After punk transmogrified into new wave and hard rock congealed into corporate rock, jam-oriented music—played by musicians who listened to altogether too many different sorts of music, opted not to write about all the things society and/or your parents were to blame for, and unapologetically liked all things passé—seemed to go the way of the dodo. Alternative music sang (and still sings) of ennui and animus through the same clenched teeth, and almost all the people involved seem very solemnly convinced that they are poets. Matthews is gracious and equanimous about these notions, and far less editorial—he sticks to his own side of the story: "Especially on this record [*Crash*], I was more conscious of trying to have the lyrics be more inviting or inclusive," he says.

But the bands mentioned above (and others of their ilk) proceeded apace, operated independent of the hype machine, and bided their time until they became groovy again. Which they clearly have. "We just try to have no boundaries," Matthews says. "For example, on *Crash*, I think there might be an even wider range of mood in the songs than on the first record. On the first record we already had a very strong idea of what all the songs should sound like, and at the same time we



reined ourselves in a little—for example, there were some really beautiful solos on the songs that we would delve into for the live show, but then we thought maybe that was a bit indulgent for our first record. Too much information. Whereas on *Cush*, the knowledge we had gained made us a little more dangerous. I don't know, there are maybe good and bad elements to that. We were more confident and felt like we could take a few more of the kind of liberties we take in the live show, so you get songs like 'Cry Freedom' on the one end of the spectrum and 'So Much to Say' on the other, or even 'Proudest Monkey.'" I point out that this last song has been the one some critics have pounced on as emblematic of a problem with the record in general: that it's too long and unfocused, too self-indulgent. Matthews laughs, especially at this last, dread phrase—the timeworn barb of every logy rock critic in creation—and his laughter is surely meant as pointed comment.

Matthews' assessment of the new record—"It's way more aggressive, way more sexy, way softer, and way louder"—seems like a fair one. It's not a stylistic morphing from *Under the Table*, but it's a more vivid exploration and variation of the same themes, and the production is more sophisticated. There's even some electric guitar work, added by Tim Reynolds, who worked with Matthews early on. "A lot of the time we brought him in to double some of my parts, fatten up the sound in places," Matthews says. The radio-friendly "Too Much" sounds like a slightly cheeky reworking of different funk quotations (it sounds at times like David Bowie's "Fame" played at 45 rpm) and gives us this useful phrase: "traffic jam, got more cars than a beach got sand." A couple of the songs seem too much in a hurry to get from transition to transition—to my ears, "Tripping Billies" or "So Much to Say" lack sufficient connective tissue between verses and choruses. The title track is strong and intimate, a good example of Matthews' attention to detail as a songwriter, to the voicings used, the images employed. He doesn't take the easy way out.

Matthews is disarming and very openhanded, though a little less expansive, on the subject of the good old guitar. "I am the least technically oriented person you can imagine," he says. "In

JOHN HENNINGSON



A VH-1 recording session in London.



terms of things like theory, even, I have a profound ignorance. It's just my hands and my head. A friend of mine, David Harris, who's played with Dionne Farris and some other people, is somewhere between amused and amazed that I really don't know anything about scales or even about other guitarists." But even though Matthews is a bit fuzzy on fundamentals, such things as counting the strings from south to north, his live performances show a lot of motion on the neck, a lot of interesting and intricate

changes that he has worked out. He's able to pull off some fairly high-grade split-hemisphere stuff, simultaneously singing and playing these altogether different lines and phrases. In other words, it's not all barre chords and I-IV-V stuff.

According to Matthews, these guitar parts don't grow exclusively, or even primarily, out of harmonic considerations. "I tend to think of the guitar more the way you might approach a drum, where you think more percussively,

almost like each string is a different skin," he says. "So on one string you might be going [*he imitates a talking drum*], and another string is droning in a steady, straight-four type of pattern."

This kind of polyrhythmic approach reflects a South African influence, although not in the direct way that you might expect. "Unlike America, not everybody in South Africa plays guitar, so I didn't come up jamming with a lot of people; there wasn't really a music community," Matthews says. "I mean, obviously, there are communities of musicians, but none that I had access to or felt I had access to. So to some extent, my style developed in a vacuum. For example, on a song like 'Crash,' which is a very simple song, all the parts grew out of the guitar. Since I write on the guitar, I tend to picture in my head what everyone will be doing, so the march that Carter does on that song is a direct reflection of the figure I was playing on the high strings when I showed it to him—obviously it's in more capable hands now. But that's how I get it done a lot of times."

Whatever the genesis or the rationale, the result is thoughtful, distinctive guitar work and songs that are well crafted but are also allowed to breathe a little. "Most of my strong influences aren't necessarily guitarists," Matthews says. "I mean, Frank Zappa was a great guitarist, but I really admire his ability as a composer, first and foremost."

Just enumerating the artists Matthews professes to admire—Zappa, Waits, Gabriel, Jarrett—it's heartening to think that somebody with such tastes could do so well, actually get heard. And, again, there's no secondhand quality to the music. It appears to be true that mediocrities tend to imitate, and the larger talents just out and out steal. The trick is to steal from the better stores, and to steal from all of them. ■

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