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**TAKING a  
STICK DAY**

by LIAM SULLIVAN

OUR REPORTER GETS A  
[HEALTHY DOSE]  
OF GROOVE WHEN HE  
CHECKS INTO  
**ZORO's**  
DRUM CLINIC

**I**t was a cold and dreary March Sunday afternoon in Johnson City, Tenn., but the atmosphere inside Campbell's Morrell Music was already warming up when I walked into the store and joined more than 75 players and fans waiting to see Zoro the Drummer put on a clinic. I showed up early to get a sense of the store's layout and make sure I got a good seat to watch and listen to the man known as "The Minister of Groove," who has recorded and toured with Lenny Kravitz, Bobby Brown, Sean Lennon, and others. (His mom gave him the nickname Zoro, now his legal name, after he bought a flamboyant hat on a family trip to Mexico.)

While this would be my first ever clinic, events like Zoro's hourlong demonstration happen regularly at schools, trade shows, and music stores all over the country. Clinics are a cross between a music lesson, a lecture, and a performance. It's a great opportunity for players of all ages to see a professional musician demonstrate his or her skills, philosophy, equipment, and sound; ask that musician some questions; and hang out with others who share their passion for music.

### GEARING UP

The first thing I noticed when I walked into the busy store was the four-piece kit near the back wall. It was surrounded by rows



of chairs set up for the audience. Banners showing the equipment companies Zoro endorses hung on the wall behind the kit. All of Zoro's gear was supplied by the store and his sponsors—Drum Workshop (DW) drums, Sabian cymbals, Vic Firth sticks, and Evans drum heads. All he had to do was show up, make some minor adjustments, and begin playing.

Many manufacturers sponsor educational clinics featuring the artists who use their instruments and accessories. This kind of sponsorship helps keep costs down for the fans (in fact, this clinic was free). In return, the sponsors hope that after hearing their gear in the hands of a master, audience members will be inspired to try it for themselves, while the store hopes the attendees will turn into new customers.

### STICKING TO THE PROGRAM

Zoro appeared at 4:30. After a quick introduction by Brandon Renfro, who works in the store's drum department, the drummer greeted the crowd and thanked

his sponsors and the entire staff at Campbell's Morrell. He explained that for this clinic, he'd be playing along with a selection of well-known recordings featuring other drummers—tunes he felt best represented his influences and style of playing.

It was refreshing to see that a world-renowned drummer like Zoro would play along with his favorite music, just like I did when I was learning to play drums in my parents' basement.

Zoro kicked things off with Earth, Wind & Fire's "In the Stone" from their 1979 album *I Am*, which features founding EW&F member Maurice White on



L TO R: CAMPBELL'S MORRELL MUSIC STAFF MEMBERS BRANDON RENFRO, DAVE CAMPBELL (OWNER), AND COLLIN MCHENRY



AFTER DISPLAYING  
 [HIS DRUMMING]  
 FOR MORE THAN  
 AN HOUR  
**ZORO**  
 TOOK QUESTIONS  
 FROM THE CROWD

drums. As Zoro played along to White's syncopated mix of funk and R&B, I immediately noticed things that I would probably have missed if I were watching him play on a concert stage. In this intimate setting, I saw details like his posture as he sat behind the drum kit. He always kept his back straight and never slumped over the drums; this helped him produce a lot of sound without having to pound the kit with all his might.

I also noticed that Zoro held his drum sticks with a *matched grip*—favored by most rock drummers—instead of the *traditional grip* that jazz drummers and marching percussionists often use. (In a matched grip, both hands hold the sticks the same way, usually overhand with

the thumb on top; in most traditional grips, the right hand holds the stick overhand while the left holds it underhand, usually between the thumb and index finger.) It was especially cool to see how relaxed and in control he was as he made his way around the kit to play fills and accents.

Zoro explained that he's all about the beat, and that his bass drum pedal technique is central to getting a "fat" yet tight and defined sound out of every beat he employs.



ZORO DEMONSTRATES SOME RIMSHOTS

Instead of pounding the pedal's beater into the drum, he favors a quick stroke on the drum head, which yields just as much sound. Many drummers press the bass drum pedal with the tip of their foot, keeping their heel up and their toes planted firmly down; in contrast, Zoro keeps his foot heel-down on the pedal. This anchors the foot on the floor and makes his attack smoother, since the pressing motion is evenly distributed through the whole foot rather than concentrated toward its front.

Playing along with the recordings, Zoro was spot on, not only locking in with precise timing but also capturing the feel and groove of each song. Because the tunes were familiar, watching him nail each drum fill and accent had me saying to myself, "Oh, *that's* how it was done!" His playing demystified some of those subtle playing techniques that are hard to explain or transcribe in written music.

In each of the remaining selections, Zoro demonstrated another aspect or style of drumming. He used the Meters' "Fire on the Bayou" (with Joseph "Zigaboo" Modeliste on drums) to show how to approach traditional funk. On Paul Simon's "Late in the Evening," which features a blend of African beats, Zoro played mostly cowbell and rim shots on the snare drum along with Steve Gadd's original part. Playing along with Bernard Purdie's drumming on Steely Dan's "Home at Last," Zoro focused on the half-time shuffle groove between hi-hat and snare.



After playing for nearly an hour without breaking a sweat—that relaxed posture also preserves his energy—Zoro took questions from the audience. One person asked if he could play along to another half-time shuffle groove, this one from the song “Rosanna” by the band Toto. Without flinching, Zoro sat back down behind the drums, cued the song up on the P.A. system, and began to play, following legendary drummer Jeff Porcaro’s recorded part beat for beat.

As he locked into the style of each drummer, I was reminded how playing along with recordings by a lot of different players can help you create your own style by including things you learned from each one.

Once the audience had finished asking questions, Zoro ruffled off items promoting himself and his sponsors, including T-shirts and water bottles. Finally, he moved away from the drums, stood behind the store’s counter, and signed copies of his book *The Commandments of R&B Drumming*.

Because I was there for In Tune, I also had a chance to ask Zoro a few questions one on one. A spiritual man, he says he

does his clinics to provide inspiration, motivation, and education. “With each clinic, I have a chance to inspire someone’s life with the gifts that God has bestowed on me. Music inspires, and seeing someone play in the clinic setting can give those in attendance a revelation. Each meeting is a chance to influence someone’s life and I feel blessed to be able to do that through my teaching and playing.”

Zoro spoke with ease about his life’s work as an educator, motivational speaker, and drummer. His humble yet passionate approach to playing helped him connect with drummers in the crowd, and really seemed to bring everyone in the store together. “Sharing what I’ve worked so hard at over the years with other drummers is vital,” he says. “Sharing my passion and delivering it at a clinic is my way of expressing love and inspiring them—not only to be better drummers, but better people as well.”

### THE BEAT GOES ON

As the clinic wrapped up, a locomotive came bustling through the center of this small town at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, offering its own distinctive rhythm. The sound of its horn signaled the close to what had been an enlightening afternoon of learning from one of the world’s best drummers. **T**

## HOW ZORO MADE HIS MARK

**Z**oro the Drummer grew up in Los Angeles and began playing drums at age 16. In high school, he played in the marching band, swing choir band, and concert band. He began taking private lessons and went on to study at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Mass.

One of his first big breaks came when he auditioned for and got a gig playing with New Edition, a young all-male R&B group popular in the 1980s. When one of New Edition’s singers, Bobby Brown, embarked on what would become a very successful solo career, he brought Zoro into his band.

After touring the world with Brown, Zoro started working with his long-time friend Lenny Kravitz, who would also go on to international fame. Other credits include Jody Watley; Philip Bailey of Earth, Wind & Fire; Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons; Sean Lennon; and Lisa Marie Presley. Over the years, he’s won awards both as a player and clinician.

These days Zoro is an educator whose work goes beyond giving clinics. He’s on the faculty at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn. You can learn more about him at his personal website: [zorothedrummer.com](http://zorothedrummer.com).

### GRACE NOTES

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ZORO DISPLAYS HIS MATCHED GRIP AND BASS DRUM PEDAL TECHNIQUE.

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