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GROOVE IS IN THE HEART

Grounded in the groove, Zoro is much-loved by our American cousins for his red-hot R&B drumming and his role as enthusiastic educator. Prior to his first-ever UK clinic outing, *Rhythm* has a chat with the man in the hat.

INTERVIEW: JORDAN MCLACHLAN PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES CUMPSTY

He's played with plenty of big and funky characters in his career – New Edition, Jody Watley, Lenny Kravitz and Bobby Brown among them – and LA groovemeister Zoro remains something of a cult figure in the UK. Then again, he's not one for the kind of flag-waving self-promotion or hard-nosed career decisions that would guarantee him the kind of profile that his abilities deserve. Instead Z has spent the last few years carving out a niche for himself as one of the US's most respected clinicians and drum authors, turning his back on the relentless touring that he enjoyed and endured for 20 years to spend a little more time with his family and develop something that is clearly very close to his heart.

Get Zoro on the subject of groove drumming – be it soul, R&B, gospel, funk or hip-hop – and the passion he has for the music becomes immediately apparent. He is, in the nicest possible way, obsessive about it. Not for him the athletic workouts of prog metal or the often-indulgent wafflings of jazz, Zoro is steeped in the swing, the shuffle and the hip-wiggling danceability of the groove. And he's on a mission to share his massive, encyclopaedic knowledge and contagious enthusiasm with us. Quite literally, in fact, for Zoro is at last due to embark on his first clinic tour of the UK. Something that he is characteristically vibed-up about.

Rhythm: So we're finally going to get to catch you 'in clinic', as it were.

Zoro: "Yes, I'm coming over in November and I'm really excited about it. I love going out and sharing the passion that I have for groove music with other drummers, and England's the only other place outside the US that really gets the funk thing, in my opinion, so it's something I'm really looking forward to. I've played in the UK many times but never done any educational things over there. I get so

many emails asking me if I might come over, but it's always been difficult to find the time. But it's all set now."

And the educational side of things is what you spend most of your time involved in at the moment, is it?

"I do an awful lot of educating in the US. I've done 80 or so dates this year, some of which have been clinics and some festivals – I just did the Jeff Porcaro festival in Germany and I fit in some private lessons while I'm there too. I've been doing this kind of thing for about five years and it gives me such a deep sense of gratification and fulfilment."

Why is that?

"The audiences are generally really receptive to what I do and I love the fact that the role of educator combines both the motivational side of things and, as far as what I do is concerned, also involves being a historian. I've delved deep into the roots of R&B drumming and part of what I do is tell people who they should be listening to, which albums they should get, which drummers to check out and all of that."

"I feel like a vigilante of groove. Everyone knows the big rock drummers, the Ringos and Bonhams, and jazz guys like Buddy and Max Roach, but classic R&B and soul drummers tend to get completely overlooked. And I love being in a position to give them some credit. I love it when I get emails from punk or metal kids telling me that I've switched them on to some R&B players. Y'know, these are the guys that made the world dance, but they go unsung so much of the time. We all know the grooves they played, but they're among the least-appreciated group of musicians."

How did that situation arise?

"Largely because these guys weren't credited on albums. Some labels didn't want the public to know who was on a record and artists could be very protective too. Barry White saw his musicians as the secret of his sound, he didn't want the world knowing who played on the tracks."

"I tell people who they should be listening to, which albums they should get, which drummers to check out. I feel like a vigilante of groove."



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In my books, videos and DVD (*The Commandments Of R&B Drumming*) I take drummers through which albums are important in various styles, because I think that 50 per cent of doing it right is listening to the right stuff. So I take them right back to old blues records, through all the soul and R&B things, and which drummers played on what."

You put a great emphasis on the importance of knowing the history of a style that you're trying to learn...

"Absolutely. I see any style you're learning as being about much more than just a few beats. I have around 5,000 albums, because I'm anal about stuff – if I discover a great drummer or band, I want to have everything they've done, to understand and study it. I'm a completist, I approach different styles of drumming methodically, looking at where the music came from and why, who was playing it and how and where it lead to. So when I'm teaching I cover the history and the music, then the practical exercises. It helps people understand why things are how they are and I think that's really important – it adds a depth to their playing that just learning a few beats parrot-fashion never will."

The Commandments Of R&B Drumming DVD is certainly more than a 'licks fest'.

"With the DVD I wanted to come up with something that was documentary-meets-instructional video, to get into the background to all the groove-based stuff that I love as well as show people some cool patterns and feels. That whole thing is kind of like an actor getting into the psyche of his character. As a musician it helps to really get inside the music you're playing to make it authentic."

Why does the educator role suit you so well?

"I think it's because it just feels like a natural extension of myself. For years I was 'just' a drummer, but I've always had that side of me that wants to naturally motivate others and communicate with people. I think that might stem from being a kid and growing up without a father figure. The one thing I longed for when I was young was someone to help point me in the right direction, to motivate me in things. Maybe because I didn't have that myself it's made me more determined to do it for others now. Obviously a big part of

my activities now are concerned with educating drummers, but I've also done stuff in schools which just involves telling kids that if I can come from being dirt poor, with seven brothers and no dad, pick up drums late and make a living from it, then anyone can do it."

Fill us in on a little more of your background.

"I grew up in Compton, in LA, a 90 per cent black neighbourhood and I was just surrounded by this music. Gospel, soul, R&B – it was all around me. So although I didn't start playing drums until quite late, when I was 17, I already had a grounding, in as much as I was saturated with music. And I was a DJ before I became a drummer, so I was still close to the music in that sense."

"I had a DJ partnership with Lenny Kravitz when I was 18 and he was 16 or 17. I had all the records and the gear and he knew all the celebrities so we could get in and do all these great LA parties. It was called GQ Productions – it actually got so successful that we ended up hiring a couple of guys to DJ and Lenny and me just went around in tuxes handing out our business cards. But anyway, as a result of DJing these parties I knew what filled the floor, and I guess just picked up an even greater feel for the grooves."

And soul is all about feel after all. Do drummers underestimate the level of skill needed to play soul and R&B well because such subtle concepts are involved?

"I think the biggest mistake that people make when they approach R&B playing is they think it's real easy because compared to Mahavishnu Orchestra there's not lots of fills or solos or time changes. As a result some of the stuff sounds pretty simple, and a lot of drummers just think, 'I can do that, no problem'. But if you do that you're never going to sit down and really work it out, so when you're faced with having to play one of these grooves you won't have it down and you'll realise that nailing the feel is a lot harder than you'd ever think."

"You need a lot of co-ordination in soul and R&B, and you really have to work on the separation of limbs if you're going to play the grooves right. There's stuff I do in the clinics that I practise a lot and it's still hard for me to do. Subtlety is the key to making a lot of the feels work, and

ESSENTIALS

Top 5 Tracks:

Lenny Kravitz
'What Goes Around Comes Around'
From *Mama Said* (1991)

Vanessa Paradis
'Natural High' From
Vanessa Paradis Live At The Olympia (1994)

Bobby Brown
'Roni' From
His Perogative (video) (1989)

Al McKay
'Evil' From
Al Dente (2002)

Zoro
'Super Bad' From
The Funky Drummer (2000)

Top 5 Albums:

Elvis Presley
Aloha From Hawaii Via Satellite (1973)
Drummer: Ronnie Tutt

Earth, Wind & Fire
That's The Way Of The World (1975)
Drummers: Freddie White, Maurice White, Ralph Johnson

Grover Washington Jr
Mister Magic (1975)
Drummer: Harvey Mason

The Jeff Lorber Fusion
Wizard Island (1980)
Drummer: Dennis Bradford

Frank Sinatra/Count Basie
It Might As Well Be Swing (1964)
Drummer: Sonny Payne

Top 5 Drummers:

Alphonse Mouzon
James Gadson
Dennis Bradford
Harvey Mason
Steve Gadd

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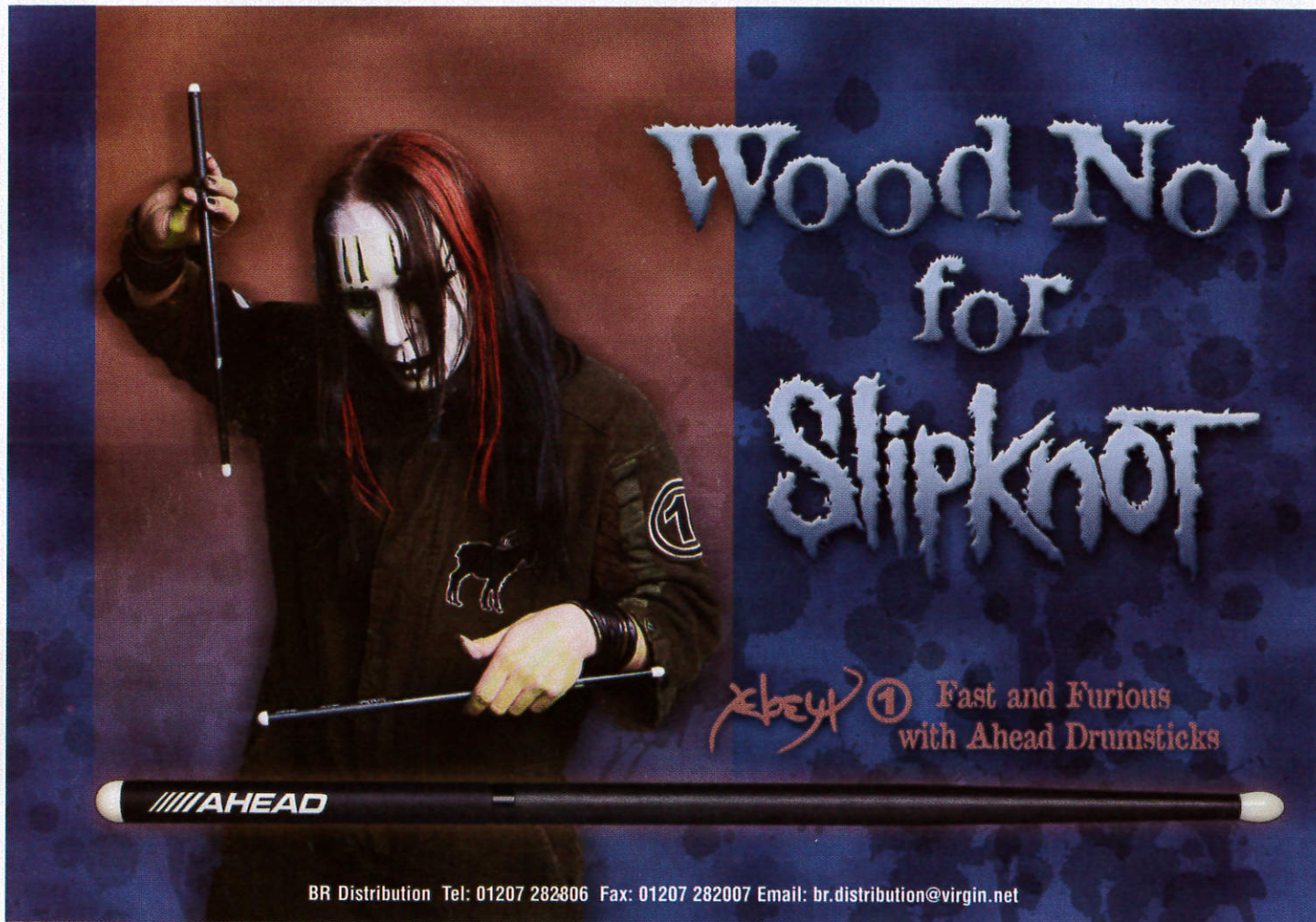
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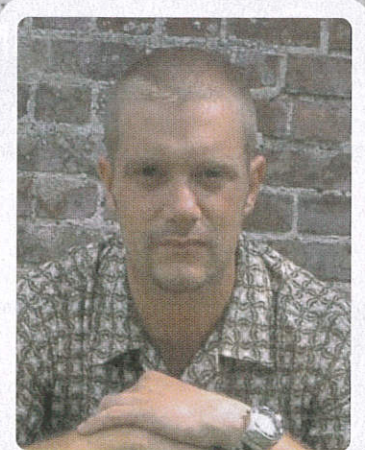



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it's not easy to grasp quickly. Great players make everything look simple, but if you start with the assumption that it is easy, it'll prevent you from ever making real progress."

Drummers must appreciate the material you've produced and the clinics you hold, because you're in constant demand. Is that partly why your emphasis has shifted away from taking the big tours these days?

"Yes, it's partly that and partly that I want to be at home more now. I have two kids and I don't want to be away from them and my wife for months on end. I toured for 20 years straight, so I've done that. And certainly, if I was trying to hustle for gigs all the time it would make it harder to do the book-writing, the video presentation, the clinics and so on.

"The first book came about when I was playing with Frankie Valli. I was teaching privately at the time and it was really my students who provoked me to do it. It turned into this burning desire to write the book, not from a monetary or career perspective, but just because I had such a passion for the music. When I get focussed on something I'm totally blinkered, nothing else exists and I get really anal about it, so I just threw myself into the book.

"The gig with Frankie was great from that point of view because for six or seven years it was a very steady gig, I had a good salary and I could pursue this project outside of the band. I didn't have to worry about getting other gigs or sessions and I could spend all the downtime we had - on planes or buses or in hotel rooms - preparing the book."

Talking of former Four Seasons man Mr Valli, he seems something of an odd man out on your CV.

"I think me taking the Frankie Valli gig took a lot of people by surprise, because I'd done New Edition, Bobby Brown, Lenny, Vanessa Paradis - all these big gigs - and then I went to work in a rather different field. But I've never done gigs based on what others might think, I've always taken things for my own reasons, because they felt right at the time. I don't tend to look at those kinds of situations and worry too much about what it's going to lead to. As it was, the gig was perfect because it allowed me to develop the book, which has lead me to where I am today. Besides, the guy has had 60 chart hits - he's a legendary performer."

What else are you currently doing in terms of playing?

"I do various sessions, but don't actively seek tours or anything. Recently I've done an album project with the Motown Reunion - I was the only non-Motown-associated player there, so it was amazing to get an invitation to play with those guys. James Jamerson Jr is on there and there will be different singers involved, including Elton John and Kid Rock, I think. It was crazy, we did 12 tunes in two days, but it was a lot of fun and a real honour to play with those guys. And I just did an album with Al McKay from Earth, Wind & Fire, which was great. I'm a huge fan of that band and I've really enjoyed working with Al."

Your reputation as a groove player has you mixing in such circles, and also got you involved with Sabian.

"I've been very involved in the development of Sabian's Groove cymbals, which has been amazing. With the 21" Groove ride, for example, we started off working towards something that, if I could only take one cymbal to a gig aside from my hi-hats, would do everything else. So we ended up with a real funky big bell, a defined stick tone for when you want to ride normally and a softness so you can crash it, too. It's a great cymbal and I'm really happy with how it turned out. The rest of the set-up is pretty simple - I've got a pair of 14" HHX Groove hats and two 18" HHXxtreme crashes. I really go for their big sound."

What about the rest of your kit?

"My drums are DW, with Evans heads on - G1 clear heads on the toms and the EMAD bass drum system heads for



"I get to do what I love. And that's something you can't take for granted. If you can do that, you've beaten the odds. You've already won."

that nice fat bass drum sound. I've been using a four-piece kit since I started with Lenny in 1989 and I think it helps me think more musically. As far as playing grooves goes, less is definitely more, and keeping to a minimum of equipment helps me focus on what sounds good for the tune, rather than encouraging me to noodle around the toms."

Sounds like you're still in love with the acoustic set-up.

"Y'know, I'm a drummer, not a sound designer or programmer, I have no desire to do that. I got into this to play drums, and although I've played with electronics and triggered stuff, that's not where my heart's at. I love playing acoustic drums and so the position I'm in now - where I can pick and choose my gigs, and fill my life with developing the educator role - is great.

"I get to do what I love. And that's something you can't take for granted. I could make much more money as a lawyer, but I'm fortunate enough to do what I really love. If you can do that, regardless of whether it ever makes you rich, you've beaten the odds. You've already won."

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