



# ZORO'S 7 SECRETS TO DRUMMING SUCCESS

AFTER BACKING SOME OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, ZORO — EDUCATOR, CLINICIAN, AND SIDEMAN-TO-THE-STARS — HAS PENNED HIS MAGNUM OPUS. REALLY, WE JUST WANTED TO TALK TO A SUPERHERO.

BY  
ANDREW  
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**M**usic books come and go. Mostly they come. We barely have room in the office for the avalanche of lesson packs, DVDs, workbooks, even cheesy thrillers with drum-playing protagonists. Let's make something perfectly clear: *The Big Gig* is not a method book. It's also not one of those behind-the-scenes tell-alls that belong on supermarket checkout aisles. And it's not a collection of half-baked ramblings and reminiscences. ▶▶▶

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"I think the book has a broad appeal because it's framed around the principles it takes to succeed at anything," Zoro says on the phone from his home in Nashville. Today is a rare day off from his teaching at Belmont University, so he's managed to squeeze in an hour to talk shop before he picks up his two kids from school and takes them to see a matinee of *The Hunger Games*. The movie is for the kids but Zoro wants to see his friend and former employer Lenny Kravitz in the role of Cinna.

"It's in the same way that Michael Phelps' book [*No Limits*] could appeal to people who aren't reading it to learn how to swim — they're reading it to learn how to achieve greatness at something," he says. "Drumming is not my main purpose. It's just the conduit."

Seldom photographed without a bolero or bowler hat and a nattily placed scarf, the self-styled Minister Of Groove can't *not* make an impact ("Promote your own individuality and stay away from cookie-cutter mentality," p. 148). It's a look that brings to mind a pool-hall hustler who would sooner put a blade between your ribs than talk about playing behind the beat. So it's hard to reconcile that visual with the humble, upbeat, and chatty dude on the other end of the line. But as he makes abundantly clear in *The Big Gig*, being a good guy is part of the job description for first-call drummers — and the Z man has backed some of the biggest, including Kravitz, Earth Wind & Fire's Phillip Bailey, boy-band New Edition, and a gazillion one-hit wonders and one-offs in between (anybody remember Nu Breeze?).

Normally a font of positive mojo, at the moment Zoro's railing against the glut of music-business books out there

— what he describes as brochures stretched to 60 pages. "I've got a whole closet full of books like that," he says. "There's no substance, nothing's thought out, they don't tell you anything. And it's like, 'You charge \$20 for that?!'"

Zoro is still decompressing from the monumental task of finishing a book in his not-so-abundant spare time. Consisting of 15 years worth of observations painstakingly collected while navigating the music industry, *The Big Gig* is not a companion piece to the drummer's other books, *The Commandments Of Early Rhythm & Blues Drumming* and *The Commandments Of R&B*, the latter cowritten with swing drummer and DRUM! columnist Daniel Glass. "It's not like I'm making a living by writing the book; I'm making a living doing all my other [drum-related] things," he says. "Sometimes I'd wake up at 4:00 in the morning and I'd get these ideas and I'd go, 'Oh, man, I gotta get these ideas down right now or I'll lose them.' So I just grinded it, man."

Despite the author's earlier comments about broad appeal, *The Big Gig* specifically targets aspiring sidemen. All you future Josh Freeses, Kenny Aronoffs, and Tommy Igoes ... the someday Max Weinbergs, ?uestloves, and Ed Shaughnessys. "You don't need to be a star if you enjoy what you do," he says. "I spent my life just playing behind people. I didn't have to be the front guy being worshipped by the crowd. I just enjoy playing a supportive role."

For a second we think the drummer-author has lost it. American society conditions us to be shot-callers, top dogs, and quarterbacks, not playing second banana. But for Zoro, those kinds of narcissistic trips are not the norm for the majority of working musicians, the very people he wants to

reach. "Look at all the people that play instruments in the world," he says. "Most of them would love to play for somebody famous. They aspire to be in a band to play behind. *That* is really what they want to be — a sideman. A small proportion doesn't want to be in a band, but the majority wants to play behind a great artist."

Without giving away all *The Big Gig's* best bits, we decided nothing less than a thorough vetting of Zoro's strategies contained in the book's 400-plus pages would satisfy our inner skeptic, so we took him to task on a handful of topics.

## 1. SKILLZ THAT PAY BILLS

For every devil's-advocate "what if" we threw at him, Zoro had an easy rebuttal. What if, for example, a reader wasn't buying *The Big Gig's* emphasis on the importance of site reading? *Pffff!* Zoro isn't saying play Zappa's "black page" with no mistakes. "The bottom line is learning how to read at least rhythms. And understanding how to understand rhythms and subdivisions and patterns would then open up the whole world of knowledge to you that wasn't available and you didn't have access to before," he says. "There's no way that knowing how to read is going to make you a worse player. All it's going to do is make you understand music in a way that you wouldn't have previously understood it."

With all the apps, DVDs, and free YouTube lessons out there, there is almost no excuse for not being a so-called "schooled" drummer, Julliard tuition fees be damned. But the point of *The Big Gig* isn't any specific technique; it's about refining the ones that help you do your job. Take Zoro's heel-down approach, an increasing rarity in today's pop and rock drummers. "I don't bury it in the head for the most part, because then what happens is you're dampening the sound and you're not getting a full, round, whole tone," he says. "And I'm into making the drums sound as big, round, fat, plush, and beautiful as possible — that's really about your tone and how you attack the drum. And it's also much easier when you're playing at low volumes to play with heel-down rather than lifting your whole leg up only to come down quietly. For me, it's not so much heel down versus heel-up; it's the sound that I get."

Zoro's technique doesn't have to be your technique. Every player, no matter what style of music he or she is playing, is faced with technical hurdles. "It doesn't mean you have to be a chopsmeister," he adds. "Sometimes because you're just playing a few notes, people will think, 'Well, he's not using a lot of technique,' and that's not true. Any good drummer when they make it look effortless it's because they put a lot of time into it and there's technical requirements of every instrument to make it have fluidity and sound smooth."

## ZORO'S SETUP

**DRUMS** DW Collector's Series (Ruby Glass FinishPly with gold hardware)

1 22" x 16" Bass Drum

2 14" x 5" Brass Snare Drum

3 10" x 8" Tom

4 16" x 13" Floor Tom

**CYMBALS** Sabian

A 14" HHX Groove Hats

B 18" HHX Extreme Crashes

C 21" HHX Groove Ride

**PERCUSSION** LP

D Mambo Cowbell

E Mini-Timbales

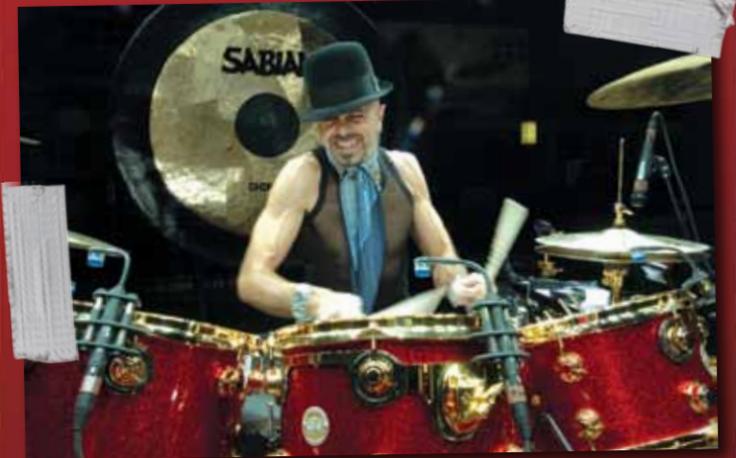
Zoro also uses DW hardware (5000 series single bass drum pedal and hi-hat stand; 9000 series snare/cymbal stands and throne), Evans drumheads, Vic Firth Zoro signature sticks, Audix Microphones, and SKB Cases, Samson Zoom Digital Recorder, DrumART bass drum head graphics.



Infographic: JOSH SUKOV

Photograph: COURTESY SABIAN

## ASK ZORO: CURES FOR COMMON DRUMMER CONUNDRUMS



**Q: I haven't heard anything since the audition. How long do I wait before following up?**

**A:** I would wait at least a few days and even a week in most cases. However, the bottom line is this: If they really want you they will get a hold of you.

**Q: I know my parts, so why do I keep getting red light fever?**

**A:** Nerves and just a lack of experience. Most of it is mental and learning how to relax and not over-think the music is the key.

**Q: Even though I'm playing exactly what the chart says, the musical director's cues are contradicting what's on the page.**

**A:** The chart is only a guideline. Just like a movie script, sudden changes can happen all the time and you must learn to disregard the chart and pay attention to what's going down live and make note of all the new changes.

**Q: The vocalist (i.e., my boss) is all over the place. Do I try and complement what she does or just stay out of her way?**

**A:** I would just try to serve the music to the best of my ability knowing that the song is always king.

**Q: The MD told me to "give it that Al Jackson Jr. feel." What does that mean?**

**A:** Al Jackson Jr. was the house drummer for a hugely successful record label in Memphis in the '60s and '70s called Stax Records. It's imperative to do your homework and learn who are the great drummers of music history. Al was a great groove drummer who played on many great hit songs, which is why many producers reference him.

**Q: My bass drum foot is injured. Do I play through the pain or hire a sub who is awesome but may not be that familiar with my employer's style?**

**A:** Unless it would cause permanent damage to my foot I would personally play through the pain. I would only call in a sub if absolutely necessary, and if I did I would try to help them prepare for the gig so they can do a good job.

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One of the most enjoyable parts of *The Big Gig* is in the "Paying Dues" section describing bar mitzvahs, corporate events, and other gigs from hell. "That's the labor-intensive part where you develop the craft," he says. "And the patience, the endurance." We all want to take the shortest path to the top, and *The Big Gig's* objective is to expedite that journey. At the same time, the author suggests that vaulting to fame is a mixed blessing. "There's something you learn in the process of the grind," he says. "There's a lot of musicians today that have sort of bypassed that thing, and so outside of playing whatever the music they're playing or the artist they're playing for, they don't have a wide range of colors in their easel. They've got a lot of drumming ability, but they've got no music ability because they haven't played in enough working bands to be familiar with the standards of every genre."

## 2. LIVE TO GIVE

The drummer who would become Zoro grew up underprivileged in Southern California. There was never any money for lessons or drum set equipment. He scrapped and saved until he got a used kit, shedded his tail off, and got a scholarship to Berklee by the time he was 20. After two semesters, he returned to Los Angeles for the summer break only to stumble onto his dream gig backing Earth, Wind & Fire's Phillip Bailey.

By the time fall semester rolled around, the idea of a diploma lost its luster. Zoro isn't one to half step, but he's never had regrets about bailing on school. "How can you have any regrets if everything panned out the way you wanted it to?" he says. "I'm not bagging on people who get their degrees; it's just a path that didn't include me. It was one of those things where the reason I went to music school is to get a career in music and my career started before school was done."

You might wonder why a successful drummer is eager to jump into a whole new field. Why give away your hard-earned wisdom to someone who might not appreciate it, or worse, apply it better than you? As a teen, Zoro was a big reader and used to go through every book that could help him navigate the industry. "For years and years I was looking for something that could teach me How do you do this?" he explains. "I never could find what I was looking for, so I had to be the guy who ended up writing it."

After attending the energizing give-and-takes of his clinics, where students walk out feeling like they can crush anything, the reasons for Z's latest venture become clearer. "I'm motivational by nature," he says. "So these things just emanate out of me and it's always been like that. So [writing the book] wasn't like, 'Let me do this so I can have a whole new clinic.' I was teaching *Big Gig* strategies in little pamphlets and handouts at colleges and universities where I would speak or play or perform. So it was just an extension of what was already happening."

## ZORO: GREATEST HITS



*Christmas All Over The World*  
NEW EDITION  
1985



*Mama Said*  
LENNY  
KRAVITZ  
1991



*If Six Was Nine*  
(bootleg)  
LENNY  
KRAVITZ  
1991



*Let Lenny Rule*  
(bootleg)  
LENNY  
KRAVITZ  
1991



*Cold Turkey*  
LENNY  
KRAVITZ  
1991



*His Prerogative*  
BOBBY BROWN  
1991



*Vanessa Paradis Live At The Olympia In Paris*  
VANESSA PARADIS  
1993



*The World's Greatest Artists Sing Lennon: A Tribute*  
VANESSA PARADIS  
LENNY KRAVITZ  
1991



*Al Dente*  
AL MCKAY  
ALLSTARS  
2006



*Home For Christmas*  
BARLOW GIRL  
2008



*Let Love Rule 20th Anniversary Deluxe Edition*  
LENNY KRAVITZ  
2009



*The Minister Of Groove*  
ZORO  
2010

### SAMPLES



*Zoro Drummer Pack*  
2010



*KitCore Deluxe*  
2010

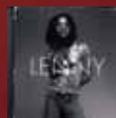


*Zoro KitPack*  
2010



*DrumCore Deluxe*  
2010

### DVDS



*Lenny Kravitz Video Retrospective*  
LENNY KRAVITZ  
1992



*The Commandments Of R&B Drumming*  
ZORO  
2002

### BOOKS



*The Commandments Of R&B Drumming*  
ZORO  
1998



*The Commandments Of Early Rhythm & Blues Drumming*  
ZORO AND DANIEL GLASS  
2008



*The Big Gig: Big-Picture Thinking For Success*  
ZORO  
2012

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Playing behind Lenny Kravitz on his *Baptism* tour in Europe, in 2004.

But *The Big Gig* is the product of something deeper than taking the message to a broader platform. For Zoro, it's a duty. As a person of faith, neglecting to share all that has benefited him in his life would be morally wrong. But Zoro isn't proselytizing and it's not necessary to read the book in religious terms (the hundreds of inspirational quotes sprinkled throughout come from sports figures, political leaders, scientists, etc.). If anything, *The Big Gig* is a Zorofied grab bag of New Age mantras and old-fashioned business sense. "I was compelled to share these stories to inspire others because in doing that it wasn't just a journey of self. If it's a journey of self, it's an unfulfilling journey. But to serve other people, that's where your purpose comes from, and joy comes in having a purpose."

### 3. SPARK CREATIVE FIRE (WITH DIVIDENDS)

All the artistic brilliance in the world won't mean squat if you can't make a living from it. "That requires the merging of art and commerce," he says. Harnessing social media, following up on contacts every three to four months, marketing, publicity, and booking your own travel, are taken for granted. It all comes down to self-management.

Hustling night and day as they do, sidemen don't usually have managers. The ones who do, Zoro says, are going to have amateurs who do more harm than good. Managers usually go for headliners where they can make real money. Given the sideman's place on the food chain (and pay grade), the reason for doing it all yourself is obvious: No one else will. "I've found that nobody else is more interested in my success

than me," Zoro laughs. "As much as I'd like somebody to care as much, nobody cares as much about us but us."

As for the idea that self-promotion is crass? Zoro has three words for you: Get over it. One thing the Z has noticed with a lot of musicians is a false sense of pride causing musicians to think that it's uncool to promote yourself because, after all, you're an artist. "I think that's a bunch of jive," he says. "You wouldn't see Ford going, 'Oh, gosh, guys, I don't think we should run that ad because it looks like we are promoting our trucks.' This is a business exactly as much as theirs is, and we have the need to make a living just as much as the next guy."

### 4. INTEGRITY AIN'T NOTHING ... IT'S EVERYTHING

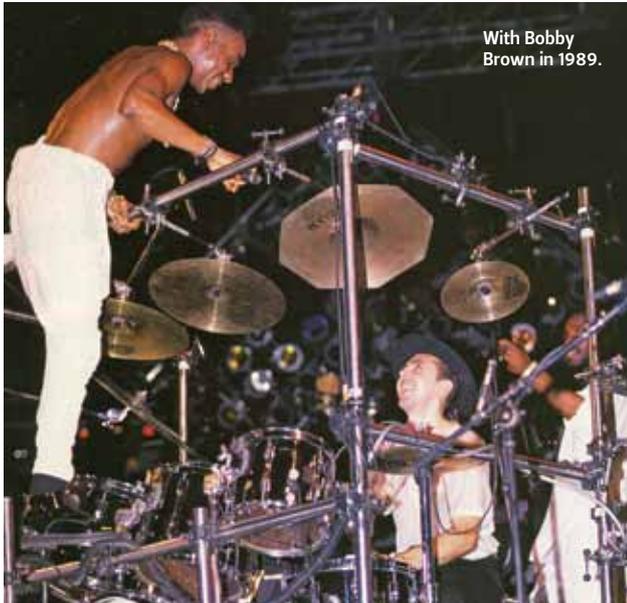
While motivational books can be infuriatingly vague, Zoro shows the depth of his industry savvy in "The Art Of Business" section, where he talks royalty rates for demos versus official recordings, various types of endorsement deals, and other small-print arcana that can trip up less seasoned cats. Bottom line: If you're not getting paid for the stuff you spent 12 hours a day practicing, then you're wasting your time. Without resorting to bone-dry legalese and mind-numbing detail, it's the kind of useful information that not only adds to your bank account but will show a future employer you didn't just fall off the turnip truck.

But that street goes both ways. The professional conduct you expect should be reciprocated. Z mentions a particularly nefarious practice about insecure players who deliberately hire inferior subs because they're scared someone better

# ZORO'S 7 SECRETS

might take their job (see sidebar). “That happens all the time, guys doing that,” he says. “It’s absolutely 100 percent critical that you get an equal or better-than player than yourself to fill in.”

You’ll never hear Zoro railing at what a bitch karma is — not in *The Big Gig* and not when we pick his brains about a time when he simply could not believe he didn’t get a call back. In the early ’90s he tried out for a super-trendy pop-funk band that, for whatever reason, he didn’t end up getting. “Well, I find out not long afterwards, the tour got cancelled.” Much to his surprise, he landed the drum chair with boy-band New Edition instead. So, what initially looked like a failure was a blessing in disguise. “It’s [the gig] that kept me working for the next two years.”



With Bobby Brown in 1989.

**“THERE ARE RISKS INVOLVED IN ANY FORM OF CLIMBING UP THE LADDER, AND SOMETIMES YOU LOSE THE GAMBLE.”**

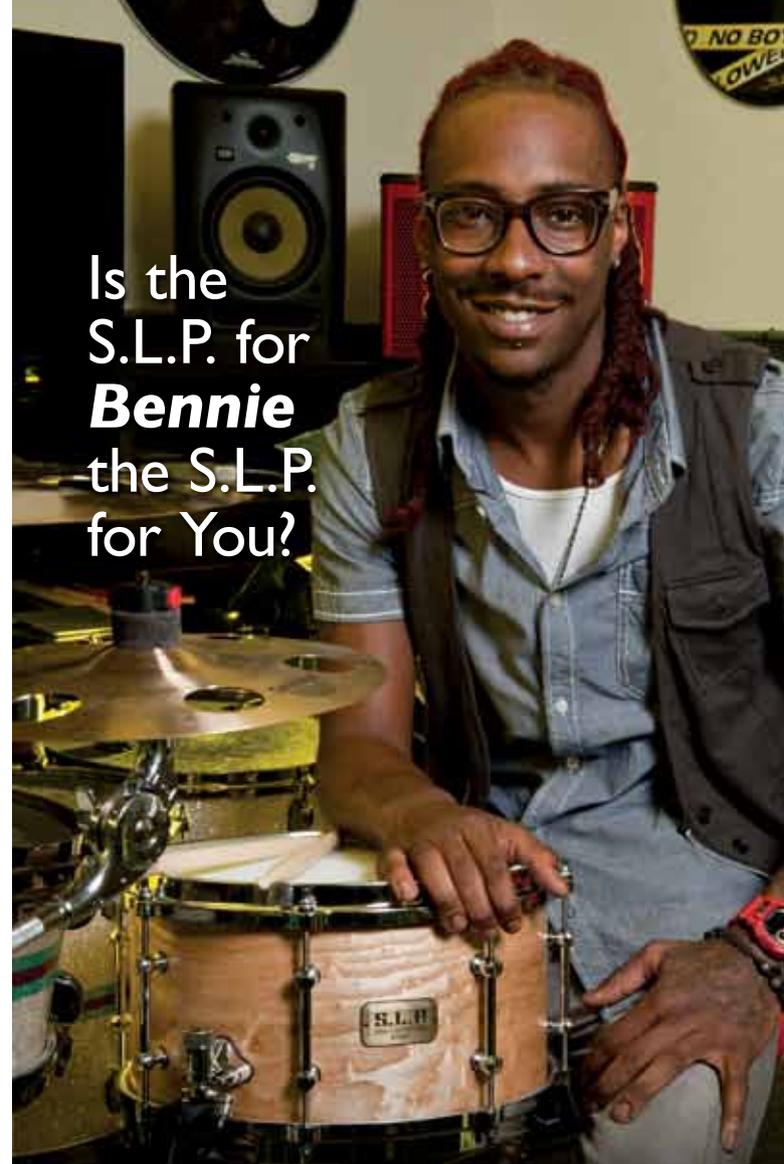
## 5. MEANS TO A GOLDEN END

We had to ask about thinking long term because even a dream gig can’t last forever. When do you ask for more money versus moving on? Zoro expounds on this area with great zest in the “Compensation” part of “The Art Of Understanding” section. Today, however, the topic gets him going all over again. One thing Zoro learned was to never demand things from people. It just doesn’t work.

Let’s say the gig pays \$7,500 a week, but you heard it paid \$10,000 to other drummers. Z says to wait until much later before negotiating, “when you realize you’re indispensable.” If and when you do broach the subject, never give ultimatums. “When you present it to people in [a respectful] way, they’re less likely to get pissed and want to fire you on the spot. Nobody likes being held over a barrel. Diplomacy is the key, because we’re in an industry wrapped around celebrity. With modeling, acting, sports, music — those four specifically, I think — there’s a long line of people that are ready to take your job. That’s easy to forget once you’re on the job because you forget how hungry you were on the outside. There are risks involved in any form of climbing up the ladder, and sometimes

Photograph: COURTESY ZORO

## Is the S.L.P. for Bennie the S.L.P. for You?



The new Sound Lab Project from Tama is eight great snares, each with its own clear identity. Making a choice ain’t easy. Bennie Rodgers II’s selection? The G-Maple LGM137. “*The 7 x 13 G-Maple has quickly become my go-to snare for all genres. I can tune it for anything... deep, cranked, you name it. Plus it looks amazing. I’m rocking with the S.L.P. series!*” Which S.L.P. will do it for you?

### S.L.P.

SOUND LAB PROJECT

LMP1455  
Classic Maple



LGB146  
G-Bubinga

LMB1465  
Power Maple

**TAMA**.com



# ZORO'S 7 SECRETS

you lose the gamble, and sometimes you win the gamble. And, and if you're going to gamble, you have to set yourself up to deal with the outcome either way."

## 6. VISION QUEST

Everything in our conversation with Zoro comes back to writing, a solitary discipline he likens to performing a drum solo. Citing Harvard studies, he explains that 90 percent of the time, people who had the greatest amount of success at anything wrote out first what it was they wanted. He still has a piece of paper from when he was 16 where he scrawled out that he wanted to be a writer, a speaker, and a drummer — not necessarily in that order. Although barely having graduated from high school, it didn't stop him from writing books. That, Zoro says, is because vision is more powerful than anything. "Vision coupled with action," he adds after a beat. "There's a big difference between a dream and a delusion; a delusion is just wishful thinking; a dream has legs to it."

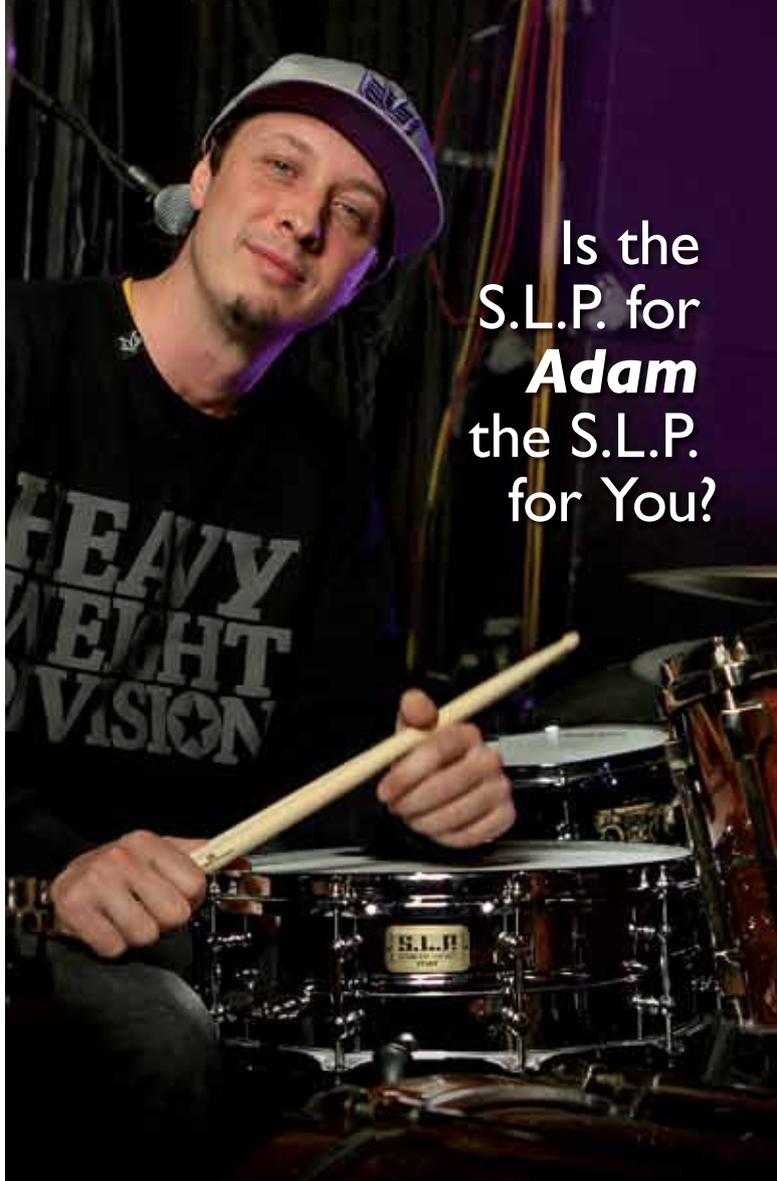
## 7. LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

One of the most salient points in *The Big Gig* is the importance of living in or near a major music market, i.e., New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, Las Vegas, or Miami. Zoro was based in Los Angeles for the majority of his career before relocating to Nashville. "The major music centers are still the same basically and so it's hard to get certain relationships developed unless you end up in those markets. In order to engage in A-level gigs with A-level producers, you have to develop those relationships in real time. How would you get to record for them if they don't know you? You've never had lunch with them or played with them? It's always going to come down to your personal skills and your ability to deal with people."

The emphasis on location may seem quaint these days, when musicians regularly swap music files over the Internet. Zoro is no Luddite, but he thinks online music technology is only a starting point. Moreover, YouTube has become saturated with musicians who feel they have to stand out with gimmicks like the treadmill video from pop band OK Go and Jessie J's impromptu performance in a New York subway station, or worse, create personas such as Tila Tequila.

Zoro's image may strike some as a shtick, but the way he arrived at it seems almost preordained. It goes back to a bolero-style hat he purchased from a gift shop at a bullfight he attended as a kid. The hat hung from a nail on his bedroom wall for years because he liked superheroes, but it was also kept there as a tribute to his mother's Mexican heritage. One day he was having a really bad hair day while getting ready for an audition with New Edition, so instead of throwing on a ball cap he wore the bolero. "They didn't even ask me my name at the audition," he remembers. "They were just like, 'Yo, Zoro, check this out.' And I just began wearing it a little bit more and more since that day and then it just kind of grew on me."

As far as Zoro is concerned, though, a "spirit of excellence," where you develop your craft to its highest high level, is the only marketing tool you will ever need. "If you've got a great touch, a great tone, a great sound, a great attitude, and a great spirit when you play, people will spread your name like wildfire and then you won't have to come to people with hype because hype doesn't do anything for you." ▣



Is the  
S.L.P. for  
**Adam**  
the S.L.P.  
for You?

The new Sound Lab Project from Tama is eight great snares, each with its own clear identity. Making a choice ain't easy. Adam Deitch's selection? The Super Aluminum LAL145. "This snare has the crack I need to cut through my 8-piece funk band **Lettuce**, and can be heard clearly through all the subsonic frequencies of **Break Science**." Which S.L.P. will do it for you?

### S.L.P.

SOUND LAB PROJECT

**LST1365**  
Sonic Steel



**LST1455**  
Vintage Steel

**LBR1465**  
Black Brass



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