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Nathaniel Kunkel

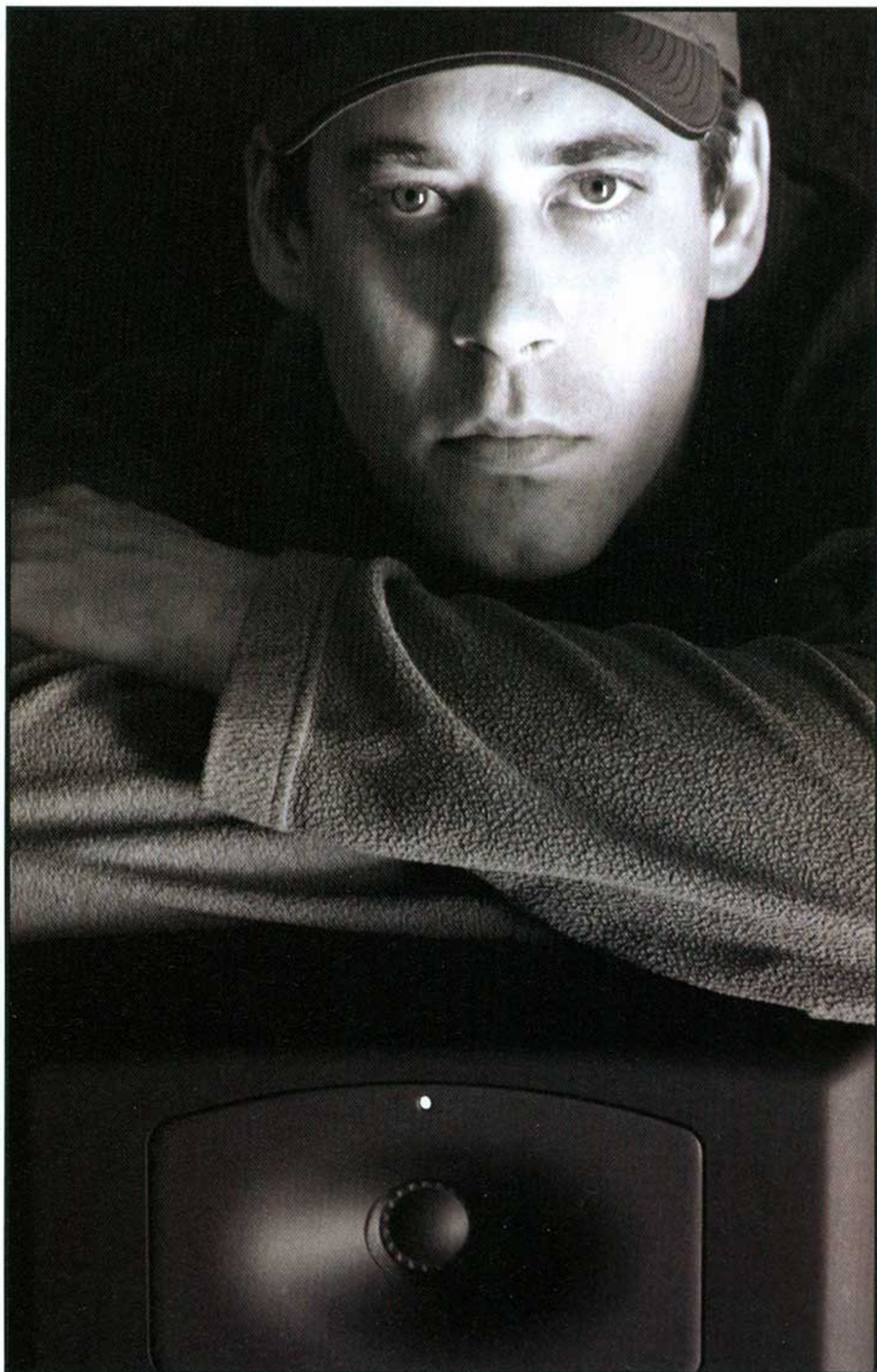
Tips From The Other Side Of The Glass

by Billy Ward

In a field where most of his peers are almost twice his age, Nathaniel Kunkel, at thirty-two, is already a first-call recording engineer. He got an early start. When Nathaniel was just twelve years old, recording legend George Massenburg took him under his wing. The young apprentice learned well. A small selection of musicians Nathaniel has recorded and/or mixed includes Sting, Graham Nash, Jackson Browne, CSN&Y, Fuel, Good Charlotte, Lyle Lovett, and B.B. King.

Today, Nathaniel calls his own studio "Studio Without Walls" (www.studiowithoutwalls.com). It's a full-on setup of the highest quality, and it's completely portable. He can go into a hotel room and make an amazing-sounding recording.

Nathaniel has a child-like exuberance and obsession with engineering, and, like all great engineers, truly loves music. I met him over ten years ago, when we co-produced a demo that led to nowhere—except our friendship, which I wouldn't trade for all the tea in China. Of course, like all *cool* people, Nathaniel is a drummer as well. (He plays a seriously nasty shuffle.) He's also the son of one of my all-time favorite drummers, Russ Kunkel.



MD: How did you get into engineering?

Nathaniel: I met Jeff Porcaro in the studio and I honestly thought to myself, "There is no way that I will ever be as good as *that* guy on the drums." And then I met some engineers and thought, "I can do this as well as *any* of those guys." [laughs] So, really, I chose a path where I thought I could excel the most.

MD: What really turns you on when you're working a session?

Nathaniel: When I don't have to put the vibe in it, when I don't have to make it groove, you know? What's fun for me is when I only have to do the classical description of my job: "Capturing the performance." When I have to manufacture a performance, which is sadly becoming more and more often, that's no fun.

MD: So you're saying manufacturing a performance involves using technology to move notes around in a drummer's performance?

Nathaniel: Yes. And sometimes it's drummers that play *in* time, too. [laughs] Making records with Lyle Lovett taught me that when you have a bunch of musicians on the floor, they respond differently from when they play alone and overdub to each other. Lyle's rule of thumb is, if it's going to be on the final track, we should have it all happening on the floor when we're cutting the track, with the exception of the horns or background vocals—and maybe we'll even cut that live, too.

He's right. Musicians respond to each other with what they're doing and what they hear in the smallest, most subtle ways. If they're good musicians, their response will bring so much more to a piece of music than any amount of editing I could ever do. There's no way that even the most brilliant producer's vision could encompass all the little individual things that real musicians do.

So I really get off when all I have to do is get good sounds and create a good environment for someone to work in. I make sure they can hear themselves, and then *they* make the music. That's the fun part. That's the gravy.

MD: As a drummer, when I'm doing a session, I often feel like I'm just witnessing a song as it develops in front of me.

Nathaniel: Well, I think that has to do with your skill level. I think what makes us capable of having that perspective is the

years of experience we've had doing this. I'm sure there were many times earlier in your career where all you were thinking was, "Oh my God! Let me not forget to not push the beginning of the bridge."

I don't really have to work at the engineering part of my job. Pretty much any sound that I can think of, I can make happen. So I'm able to *experience* the sessions now more than ever before. Earlier, I was worried about pulling everything off. Now I know which things matter and which things aren't as important.

For instance, something might be going wrong—like a buzz or something—where greener engineers will stop the take from going down. But I know that what the musicians are playing at that time is something that I *can't* re-create in an edit. That buzz is something I *can* get rid of later on. Don't stop a take.

MD: You seem qualified on every technical level. How important do you think fundamentals are in music?

Nathaniel: I think they are *very* important.

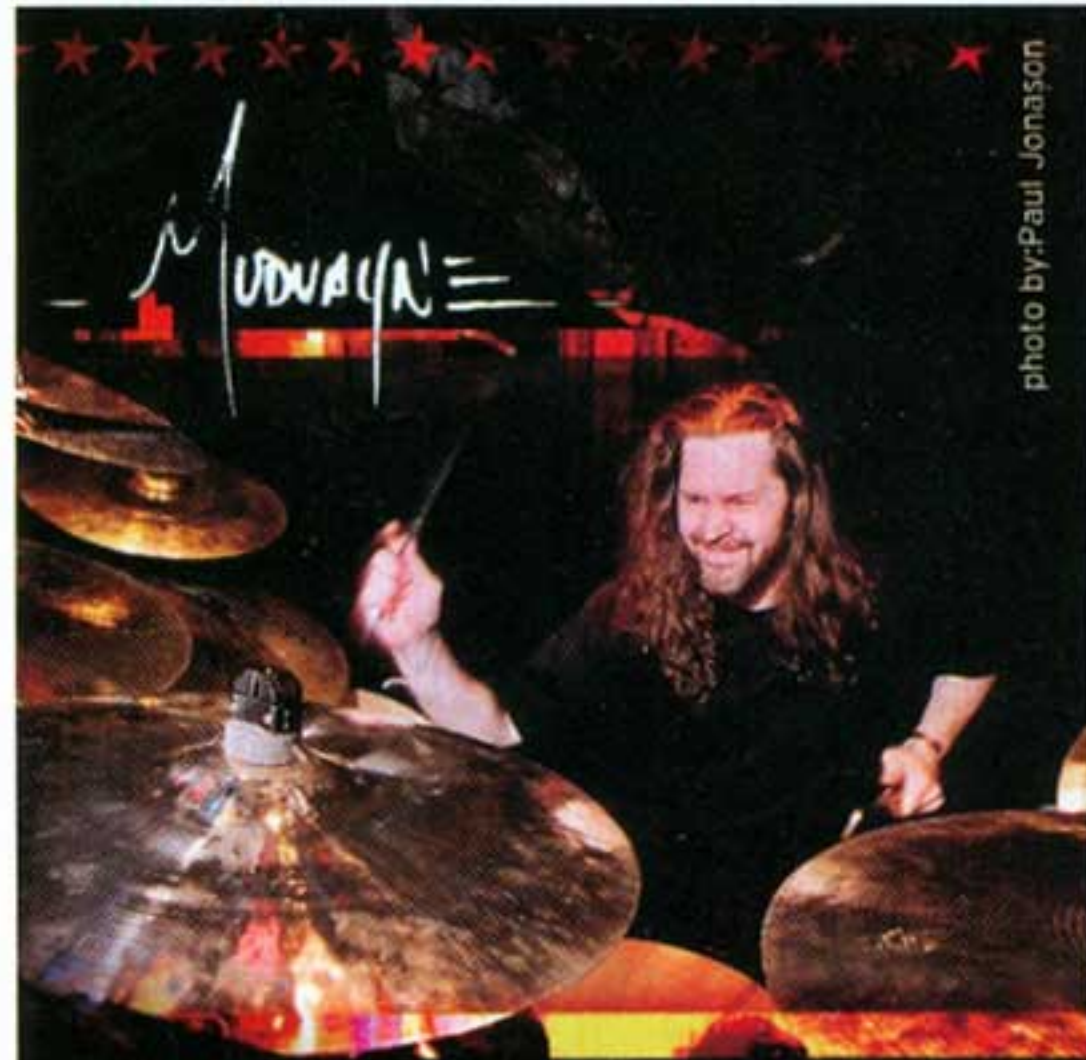
MD: Yet some musicians don't really play "right," though they sure play beautifully.

Nathaniel: I've noticed that some musicians are particularly great during the beginnings of their performances, and that's why it's so critical to get what they do right away. Right out of the gate, they'll give you what you're looking for. I mean, as soon as Ry Cooder sits down, he'll play the perfect intro to a song. But the odds of him playing that again are very slim. He'll continue playing great stuff, but he'll never play *that* again. A great musician's "first read" on something is usually one where you get an emotional read.

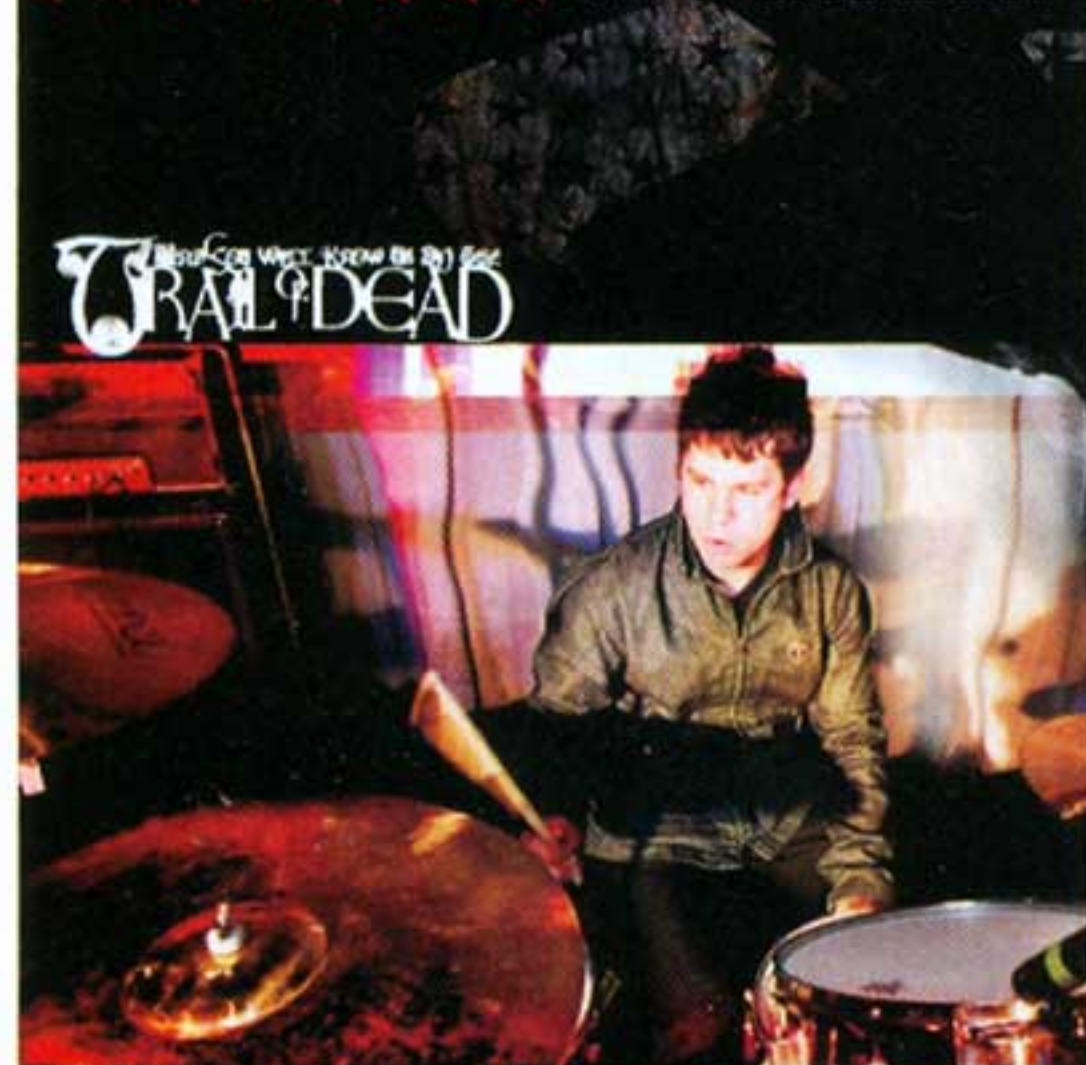
MD: Your anticipation and attention in the studio is excellent.

Nathaniel: George Massenburg told me, "Pay attention all the time." Doing a great mix is really easy. Having fun in the studio is really easy. Finding cool sounds is really easy. But paying attention to everything that's going on all the time is the hard part. You have to really pay attention to every single thing that happens everywhere; every single button that gets pressed... every patch that gets made... every performance. You have to *really* focus on everything that goes on in the room.

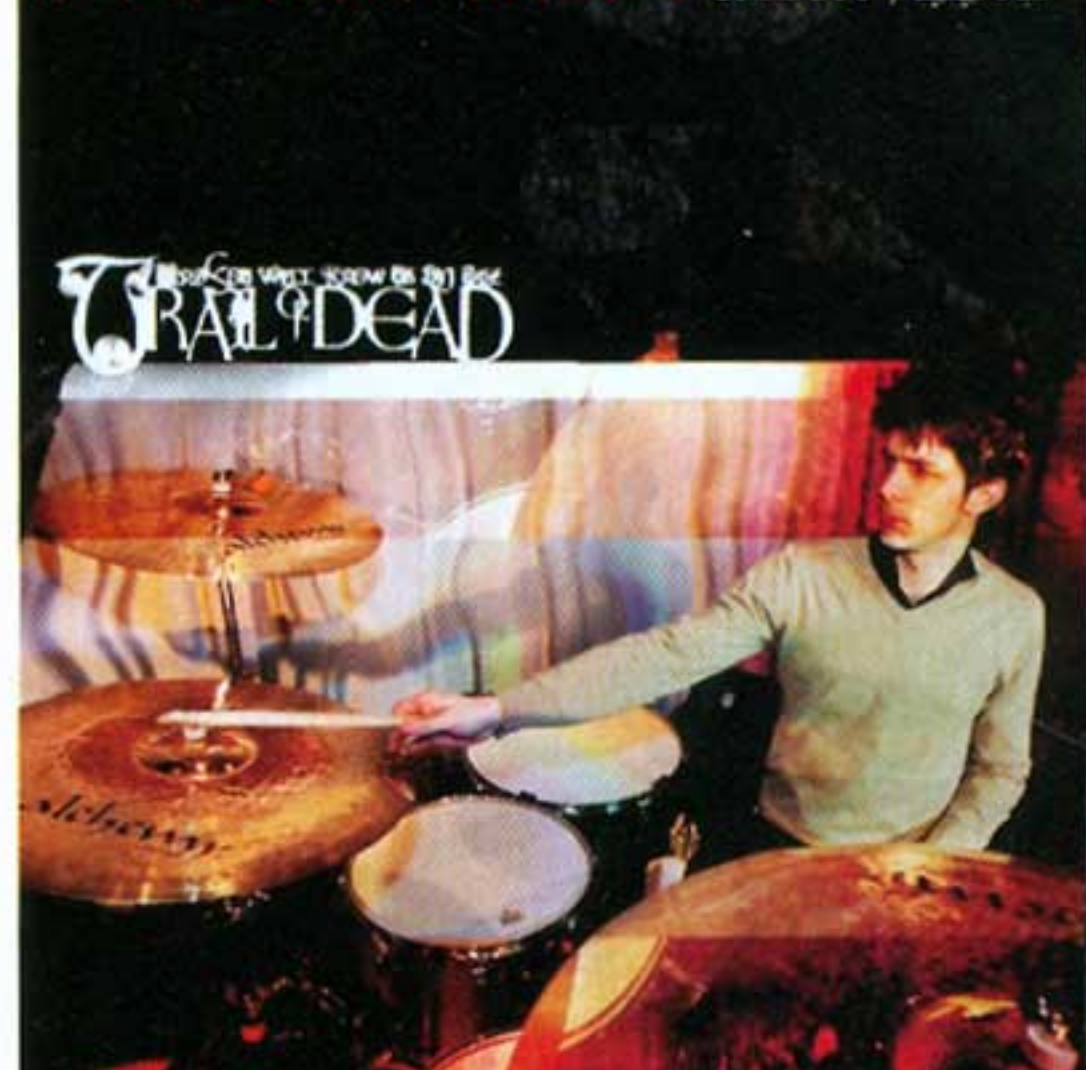
The thing is, from my drumming experience, I really know what it's like to be on the other side of the glass. There's nothing



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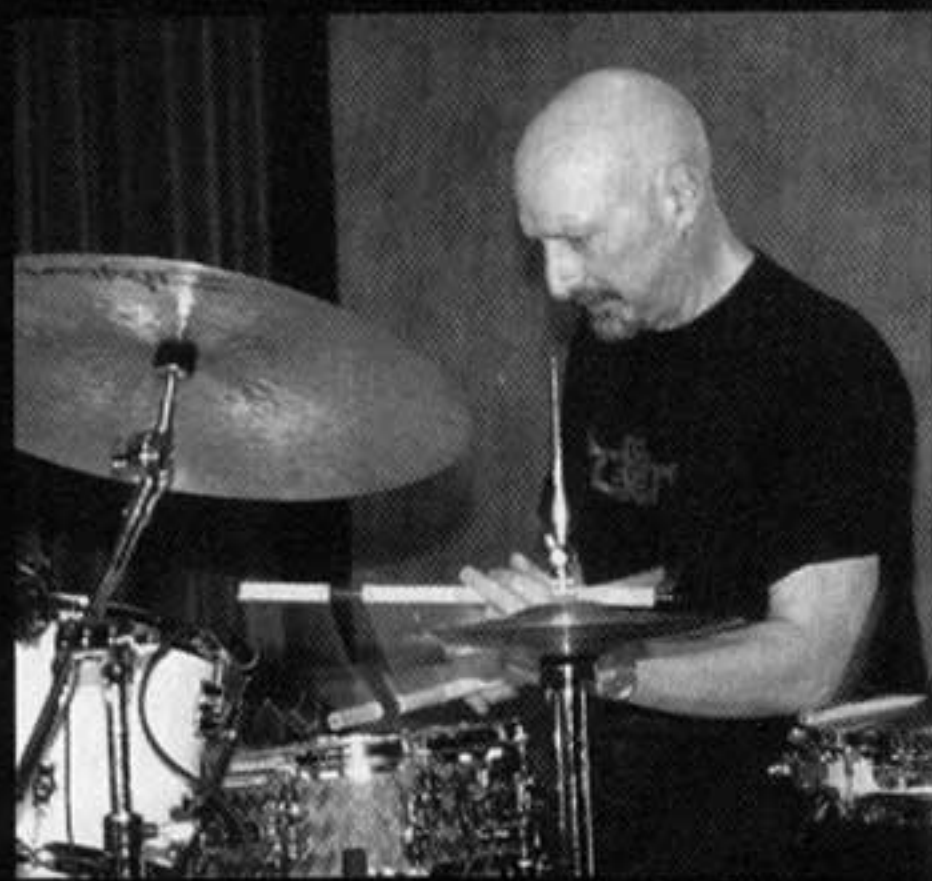
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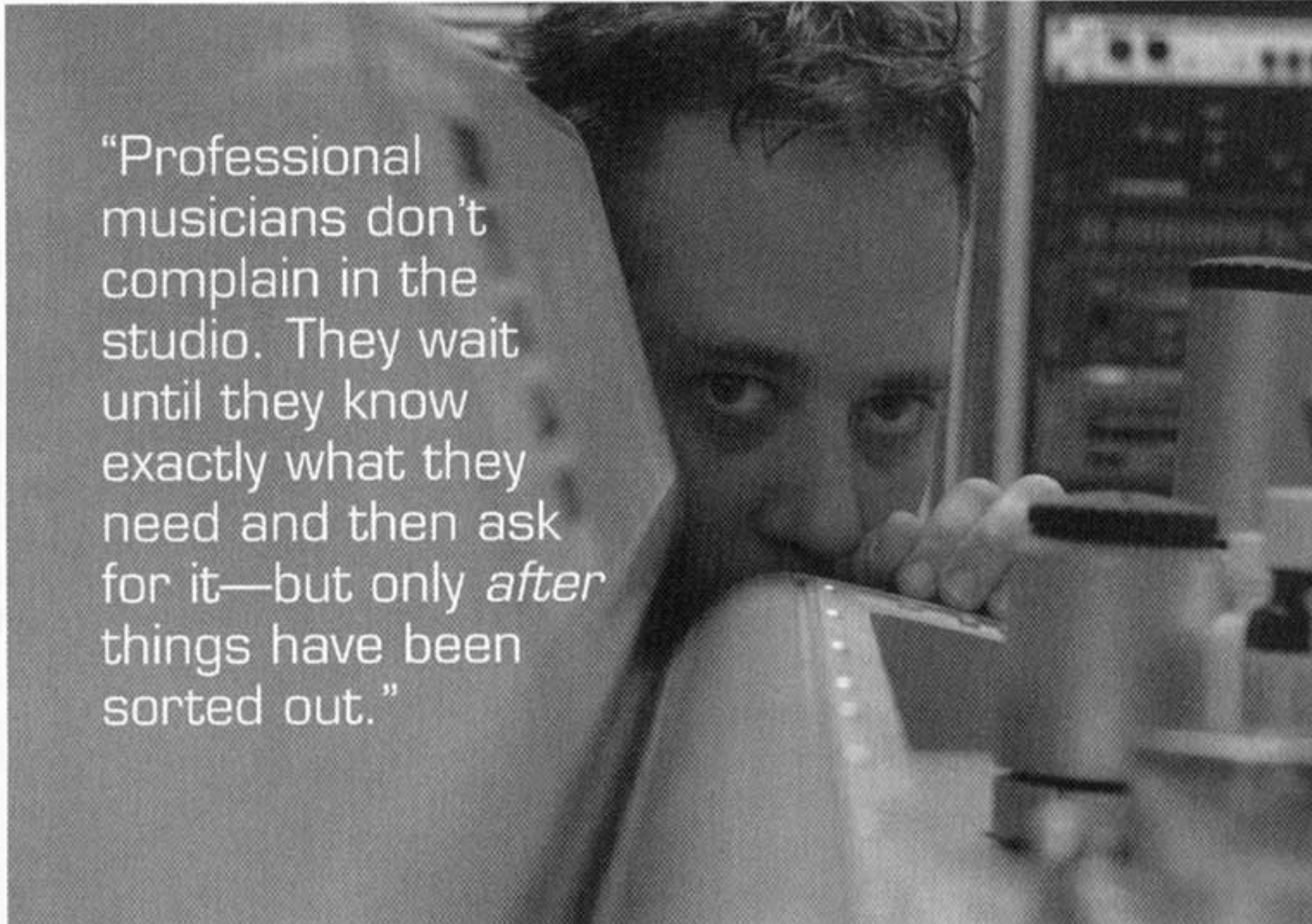
worse for a drummer than finishing a take, hearing absolute silence, and watching people in the control room talk for three minutes. Then finally somebody leans into talkback and says, "Let's do it again."

MD: That's the *worst*.

Nathaniel: Sometimes they talk in there for twenty minutes!

MD: And as a drummer, you're wired. Your heart is pumping. That can mess with your confidence.

end of the date, I'll go out into the room and say, "Really great session," and only then will a pro mention something. For instance, I remember my dad saying, "Can you check my headphone mix before tomorrow? All I've had in my headphones is lead vocal." He had just cut five songs for Lyle Lovett. You know what I mean? And I was like, "Dude, you kidding me? I'm so sorry." And he said, "Yeah, something's broken on my mixer. It's okay. Lyle's the lead guy. But it



"Professional musicians don't complain in the studio. They wait until they know exactly what they need and then ask for it—but only *after* things have been sorted out."

Nathaniel: Yeah. I'd like to interject something about the B.B. King session you and I just did. It was a session with all really heavy guys on it, and those kinds of sessions are the easiest to do. It's the amateurs that make recording sessions difficult.

The single most focused piece of advice that I can give to an amateur drummer wanting to give a pro performance in the studio is to never complain about anything. Professional musicians don't complain in the studio. They wait until they know exactly what they need and then ask for it—but only *after* things have been sorted out. They have the experience to know that it takes time for things to shake out on a session. They also know what the priority is, which is getting the best performance out of the star artist. If you see engineers scrambling in the control room and trying to get the headphones right for B.B., then clearly this isn't the time for the guitar player to say, "My cans suck too!"

I've done sessions before where, at the

would be great if I could hear the bass tomorrow." That's a great example of professionalism and just making it happen in the studio. But when I walk in and it's a bunch of green guys? Well, that's when I'm nervous. With pros, I know we're outta there in three hours.

So, again, I'd recommend drummers be friendly and do their job the best they can. Interrupt with a problem only if you absolutely cannot overcome the obstacle in front of you.

MD: What drummers have left you with positive recording experiences?

Nathaniel: I can think of many drummers, and each one has a bit of a different bag. Vinnie [Colaiuta] is without question one of my favorites. Josh Freese can drive a rock 'n' roll rhythm section in a way that nobody else can. And my dad has skills that I've not seen any other drummer pull off. He can play that really Ringo-y sloshy thing with a pocket, and he can also play variable tempos with singer-songwriters and make it

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sound like the tempo isn't moving—even though it is. It's amazing.

I also really miss Carlos Vega. He was unique. He had chops and he understood rock 'n' roll, but he could really put a Latin spin on things with a very deep sense of pocket. And of course I miss Jeff Porcaro. I treasure a drumhead that he signed for me. I've never seen a drummer play with that much *wisdom* before or since. Also, nobody can play like Little Feat's Richie Hayward. He's the most underrated drummer in the world. "Fat Man In The Bathtub"? I still don't know how he does that.

MD: What other do's and don'ts do you have for drummers in the studio?

Nathaniel: Don't play when there's talking going on in the control room. Sometimes the talkback mic's aren't set up yet, and the only live mic's are on the drums, so drummers can be helpful with communication between the control and the studio. You know, lean into the snare mic' and say, "Hey, Lee's got a problem over there," or something.

MD: I also consciously try not to corrupt sessions with my hyperactivity, tapping on things.

Nathaniel: Yeah. It's delicate, like when the highly recommended bass player brings in some music and says, "Dude, listen to this!" And it's on in the control room and it's terrible—a totally wrong vibe. What do you say to that?

MD: Maybe say, "Nice arrangement."

Nathaniel: "Man, that outro was smoking!" [laughs] Don Grolnick had a list of things you can say, like when you're backstage and you don't know what to say. Like, "Man, that was timeless," or "I don't know how you do it," or "You must be really proud of yourself." How about simply, "Wow." [laughs]

MD: What advice do you have for drummers who are going out to buy gear for their studio?

Nathaniel: I think the biggest thing is the lie that digital recording gear will make a professional recording. Now there are Yamaha digital recorders, Pro Tools, and many other brands, and it all pretty much sounds the same. On the other hand, microphone technology, interface technology, wiring technology, microphone preamp technology—this is not a black art, you know? Inexpensive microphones, inexpensive converters, inexpensive power supplies,

Nathaniel Kunkel

all this inexpensive stuff makes inexpensive-sounding recordings. It really does.

That B.B. King record we did together is a case in point. Those were the right microphones and the right mic' preamps, which were turned up so that the meters were moving. And what did I do? I added a bit of top end on the snare mic' and maybe some 20K on the overhead mic's. When mixing, I never turned on the hi-hat mic'. Never turned on the snare mic'. Never turned on the room mic's. Never turned on *any* of the extra kick microphones. I mean, that was one really good-sounding drumkit!

We used the overheads and one kick mic' on the B.B. record. It was just a good drumkit miked with some really good microphones, plugged into really good mic' pre's and plugged into Pro Tools, ya know? I didn't get in the way.

So if your idea is to record at home, I would buy the simplest, highest-quality thing that you can afford. My favorite drum microphones are the DPA 4011s. [Note: These are small-diaphragm condenser mic's also known as B&K 4011s.] They are versatile. I think the Shure Beta 52 is a kick-ass microphone. Of course, put a 57 on the snare drum. I use 414s on the tom-toms, but I've also used the Audio Technica ATM25s.

A lot of the time I don't use tom mic's at all!

Put whatever you want on the hi-hat. If the hi-hat is wrong, then play it differently. A great drummer will have the hi-hat sounding fine in the overheads. I set up my dad with some DPA 4011s or a couple of Audio Technica pencil mic's, a Beta 52 for the bass drum, a 57 for the snare, and some ATM25s for the toms. And they all go straight into a Yamaha O2R and straight to tape. That setup works fine.

I feel problems begin when you use too many microphones—two snare microphones, fifteen mic's on the drumkit, etc. To me, drums sound great when you simply bring up the overheads and bring in the bass drum mic'.

Here's a trick for recording drums: A good, cheap way to get a great room sound is to find a distant room, preferably a bathroom or garage, and place a mic' in it. Then, when mixing, move that distant track slightly forward so it's lined up with the other tracks.

MD: To help with the phase.

Nathaniel: Fix the phase and you've got that John Bonham big sound. You'll never have to buy compressors. I mean, it's not worth it. Don't buy anything that you know

you will throw away when you get more money. Buy two great mic's and be done, if that's all the money you have. Don't buy eight microphones that suck.

People need to trust their ears more. If you're setting things up in your studio and you don't like the way they sound, find out why. For good mic' placement, get on your hands and knees and listen to where the kit sounds good. Then put a mic' there.

MD: Any tips for amateur drummers?

Nathaniel: Listen, listen, listen. Have your chops down that comply with your musical tastes, but only use the ones you need based on what you *hear*. Sometimes Jeff Porcaro would only play a ride cymbal if that was all that was needed. Smart cat. In general, a drummer can play less than he thinks is necessary when making a record.

While they were recording James Taylor's "Fire And Rain," they were rehearsing in a house that had nearby neighbors, so the musicians had to play quietly. And *that's* why my dad played brushes on that song. If they hadn't been rehearsing quietly, they would never have realized how groovy the brushes were on that song. Sometimes the craziest things lead to great music.



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