

DIZZY HEIGHTS

Words: Sam Pert Images: Eckie

Being launched into the crazy world of commercial success could be enough to bolster anyone's ego. Alex Reeves reminds *Drummer* of how to stay grounded and inspired through the madness

Looking back over the past year or so, Alex Reeves cannot help but laugh – and with good reason! His passion for rhythmical expression, his commitment to musical authenticity, and an infectious enthusiasm to understand the evolution of his craft have earned him a heavy schedule indeed: regular work with reputable artists such as Earl Thomas, Paddy Milner and Ezio, residencies in Ronnie Scott's and the Lionel Hampton in Paris, countless sessions and tours around Europe, and getting to play Beatles songs with Paul McCartney are all testament to his reputation and versatility.

Add to the above a call from chart-topping hip hop/dance sensation Dizzee Rascal, and you would forgive him for believing the hype. However, a healthy sense of humility won't

allow Alex Reeves to admit that he has made the big time.

"It's an amalgam of stuff that's happened over my life. People talk about the moment you make it. There's a long period of time over which you feel you might have achieved *something* but there's no moment. But I've gotta say, man, if I was to look at the history of my playing, I'd say 2009 was the one!"

However you measure success, the time it took Alex's playing to attract attention was impressive by anyone's standards. Starting relatively late, at the age of 16, he immediately threw himself into a relentless practice regime under the guidance of teaching legends Pete Riley and, later, Bob Armstrong. Both teachers obviously instilled a great deal of discipline in the young Reeves.

"If you're going to have lessons with Bob Armstrong, you need to take a few years out to accomplish what he has to teach you. He doesn't care what's happening in your wider life; if you come in making excuses, you're out! Likewise, Pete Riley opened up doors and opened my mind to things I would never have discovered without him.

"I would spend five or six hours every single day in the practice room: an hour on technique, an hour on jazz, an hour on Latin, an hour on funk, an hour on rock, and it was exhausting. I'd find that when I went out that night, I'd have nothing to say! I had needed to absorb myself in it so deeply. But once I had accomplished that bank of knowledge I could move on to using the other things that took up the day to inform my playing."

"THERE'S NO POINT IN JUST LEARNING WORDS AND SENTENCES; YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN HOW TO REACT TO SOMEONE WHO'S SITTING IN FRONT OF YOU – THAT'S WHAT CONVERSATION IS AND IT'S EXACTLY THE SAME WITH MUSIC."

Listening With Your Heart

Although hard work has undoubtedly paid dividends to Alex's musicianship, he clearly believes that there's more to being a musician than great technical ability.

"I always think that, as a musician, when you play you're a true representation of your own personality. You draw upon the experiences of your life. Most of the top session guys in the world are not employed because they're technically brilliant, necessarily, they're employed because they're musicians. As a drummer, I'm always going to be a sideman – the guy who hopefully augments what somebody else is doing. Most successful musicians are those who don't think within the confines of their own instrument. They're informed by many things outside of the instrument – first and foremost the message of the song. Then there are the vocals, the guitar solo, the piano solo, the melody, the harmonies, and so on."





GEAR BOX

Drums: Sonor SQ2 Vintage
Maple – White Marine Pearl Wrap
22 x 18" Bass drum
13 x 6" Maple snare with inner oak ply
10 x 5" Force 3007 snare
10 x 2" Jungle snare
12 x 7" Rack tom
15 x 14" Floor tom
18 x 17" Floortom

Cymbals: Sabian
16" and 18" HHX Evolution Crash
13" HHX Evolution Hi-hats
12" AA Mini Hats

Zildjian
20" Constantinople
18" Remix Ride

Meinl
Gen-X Hats combination

Electronics: ddrum triggers on bass drum and snare drum running in to a Roland SPD-5, triggering sounds from Ableton Live (MacBook Pro)

Cases: Protection Racket

Heads: Aquarian

Bass Drum: Full Force (batter)

Snare Drum: Satin Finish Medium

Toms: Studio X

There is one drummer in particular for Alex who embodies this philosophy of playing. "Ringo was the man for that kind of thing. Despite what some people say, he was in the greatest band ever and he stamped his own personality on those songs without getting in the way. He very rarely played the drums for drums' sake: he played for the sake of the music. Whatever people are supposed to be listening to in that tune, that's what he's listening to. So the approach I would like to have in my life is one that is entirely informed by the message of the song."

Knowing the most appropriate way to communicate that message, it seems, is a subtle balance between intuition and musical vocabulary.

"There's no point in just learning words and sentences; you've got to learn how to react to someone who's sitting in front of you – that's what conversation is and it's exactly the same with music."

Self Expression

Keeping those lines of communication open with fellow musicians and friends plays a big part in staying at the forefront of things. In Alex's case, it was an old Cambridge connection, Hal Ritson of The Young Punx, who had been working with Dizzee Rascal and who had been asked by Dirty Stank Records to direct a string of gigs including the *Radio 1 Live Lounge*

session, a performance on Jools Holland and, more recently, the *BBC Electric Proms*. Hal went straight to Alex:

"We had just two or three days of proper hard-core rehearsal with almost no breaks because we had never played any of it before. The first day we rehearsed all day and then took our stuff over to Dizzee's studio and set it up in preparation for the *Live Lounge*. This was the first time we had met him, but we played for another three hours and it sounded fantastic – ready for radio, everything just slotted in.

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"But just as we were ready to go home, Dizzee sat down on my kit, started playing and we were there for another two hours! The guy is brilliant, man. He expresses himself in the same way in everything that he does. You know, since DJ Kool Herc mixed together and extended the drum breaks from two identical tunes, and words were placed over the top, rap has always been about rhythm. So it's really quite natural for [Dizzee] to be sitting at a drum kit and playing, actually, really interesting rhythms. The approach that he has, and the approach I believe

everyone should have, is to always approach your instrument as an enthusiastic amateur. Like, if you're still excited about just hitting a floor tom, you're on to a winner!"

Reinterpreting Rap

With hip hop being such a melting pot of everything that has come before, an impressive knowledge of the evolution of modern music stood Reeves in good stead for the job.

"At the *Electric Proms* I had to be everything to everyone. Since rap is fundamentally vocals and rhythm, the drums are so important, not just what you play but the speed at which you play it, the sound etc. The kit that Sonor provided me with had three snare drums and three sets of hats; each one I could hit in a different way to coax the sounds that were needed out of it. The beats I played weren't really straight, they had the feel and influence that Dizzee had when he was creating them in his bedroom. That stuff isn't easy to interpret on a drum kit with four limbs."

The sheer scale of the *Electric Proms* performance would have been enough to intimidate anyone.

"It was at least a 16-piece band plus the choir, plus the string section. The big challenge was that none of that gig was to tracks or clicks, so I had to count stuff off at exactly the right tempo and not waver by a beat per minute either way. If the bass player was ahead or the strings were

Notation

Holiday 2nd Verse Groove

Two staves of music. The top staff is a drum set notation with a snare drum (S) and a ride cymbal (R). The bottom staff is a bass line rhythm with eighth and quarter notes. Both staves end with repeat signs.

Bass line rhythm

Play out section (after snare build)

Accents on ride bell

Drum set notation on a single staff showing accents (v) on the ride cymbal. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes with 'x' marks above them.

Dirty Cash (1st half of tune)

Drum set notation on a single staff showing a complex rhythmic pattern with accents (v) and 'x' marks. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes.

R L R R

Dirty Cash (2nd half of tune)

Drum set notation on a single staff showing a complex rhythmic pattern with accents (v) and 'x' marks. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes.

R L R R

Imagine 89 BPM

Two staves of drum set notation. The top staff shows a steady eighth-note pattern with 'x' marks. The bottom staff shows a more complex pattern with accents and 'x' marks.

Fix Up Look Sharp

104 BPM

Drum set notation on a single staff showing a simple rhythmic pattern with accents and 'x' marks. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes.

L rL

behind, I had to stay right on the groove. Hal [Ritson] was really hot on this stuff; the guy's a taskmaster for sure, but it's the right way to do it.

"If Dizzee is dragging and needs a kick up the arse, I need to pick it up half a beat and that's impossible with a click. Hal wanted this gig to be different from a traditional pop gig in several ways. Keeping it organic helps each night to be different, creative and raw in a way."

Ultimately, it comes back to the intentions of the artist. Alex clearly has a great deal of respect for Dizzee Rascal:

"He is so professional and so good at what he does, it's a bit frightening. When he's in the room and you're playing, you've got to have your A game on. He knows his own music inside and out, so he knows when it doesn't sound right and he knows why! When we rehearsed 'Brand New Day', Hal was experimenting with some augmented ninth chords or some crazy jazz weirdness on the Rhodes, and Dizzee just stopped 50 musicians and said, 'Woah, woah, what's goin' on 'ere? Is that jazz? I hate jazz! Sort it out.' It was so funny."

Adaptation

The ability that Reeves has to adapt to the musical situation leaves little wonder that he is currently so in demand. Hard work and



Alex's kit

receptiveness to the ocean of information and experience out there have undoubtedly enriched his musical and artistic vocabulary. So much so that it's difficult not to feel lazy around him. Alex's relentless passion for learning constantly informs his approach to the drums. The answers aren't just in your typical 'drummer's drummers' either but in a sympathy for timeless artists with inherently musical souls such as Sly Stone, Prince and Stevie Wonder.

"[Stevie] is one of the best drummers. You don't hear drumming like that. I challenge anybody who's reading this to take down and really play like Stevie Wonder. The way he plays is beautiful, it's art."

However much practice you get, however many different styles of music you listen to, there will always be more for you to discover. The key, says Reeves, is to stay inspired.

"That all comes together. Everything you do informs something else; nothing is a waste of time. It's about being who you can be and playing the way you feel, which is not an easy thing. As long as you let your own personality flourish in what you do, that's where the music lies – within yourself – you've just got to find it."

The Alex Reeves Way

When Alex got the call to play a fully orchestrated live set for Dizzee Rascal at the BBC *Electric Proms* he was expected to be able to play a very wide range of styles. Many of the studio arrangements of the tunes were dramatically changed and embellished, which meant developing new drum parts for most of the tunes. It took three weeks of rehearsals for the first live concert. Here are four examples of how Alex reinterpreted an entirely electronic and sample-based genre...

'HOLIDAY'

The original track is all electronic, so we ended up entirely reinterpreting it. We started with an amazing acoustic guitar and vocal introduction (by Guthrie Govan and Vula), playing the main synth rhythm, then kind of doubled that riff on electric bass and drums for the first half of the second and third verses. It pushes the rap along beautifully, I think.

For the play-out (originally a hard house beat at an increased tempo) we decided on a Latin section approach to give the tune an acoustic feel and augment the message behind the song. I settled on a kind of Songo rip-off with loads of fills.

'DIRTEE CASH'

Stevie V's 1989 'Money Talks' original of this tune

sampled all sorts of old funk beats – the 'Funky Drummer' break is probably in there along with a load of mushy samples that have probably been taken from the vinyl, then smoothed over with a Roland 909 drum machine. When Dizzee and his producer sampled it in turn, it contained all of this and more, making this beat an approximation. Note the four-on-the-floor bass drum in the second half of the tune that drives everything towards the end.

'IMAGINE'

This was the last tune of the set for the *Electric Proms* and so it needed to be pretty special. It starts with a very sparse drum groove (the beat shown here but without the hats) and a flute melody, and the beat continues through to the outro of the tune. It was a really interesting one to do as I had to recreate exactly what was on the original. I used a set of really unusual closed hats to cover the trashy white noise of the first two bars, then the regular Sabians to play the second two bars. The broken beat in those second two bars is very hard to get machine-accurate!

'FIX UP LOOK SHARP'

We required a MASSIVE sound for this so we put the original samples (Billy Squire's 'The Big Beat') on to the bass drum and snare drum and we also had Simon (Bettison – percussionist) to play a little mini kit on it too. I wanted to make each beat sound massive, so I flammed on two floor toms and hit the living daylight out of my kit. Beautiful!

