

Michael Weinrob / michaelweinrob.com

# ANTON FIG

*After 25 years playing with US TV host David Letterman, Anton Fig is one of the best-known drumming faces in the USA. Joel McIver toasts his quarter-century...*



**“If you’re playing with different artists, you’ve got to sound like you’ve been playing with them forever, right off the downbeat”**

**A**ny drummer worth his or her salt can get a lot done in 25 years, but Anton Fig has got a lot more done in that time than most of us. As well as holding down the drum stool on two massive NBC and CBS TV shows, *Late Night With David Letterman* and its successor *Late Show With...* , the South African-born sticksman has recorded sessions with a huge list of musicians. Artists as varied as Kiss, Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, Cyndi Lauper, Joan Armatrading and the Thompson Twins (the last of these in front of, er, *one billion* viewers at Live Aid) have chosen Fig to keep their songs on the rhythmic straight and narrow, and he’s recorded solo material too. With all this behind him, you might think that Anton would celebrate 25 years of American TV gold by putting his feet up, but no – when he speaks to *Rhythm*, he reveals no sign of wanting to slow down...

**Has it been a quick 25 years, Anton?**

“When I joined the band, it was, ‘Well, I don’t know how long this is going to go on for...’ You sign smallish contracts and then it just keeps going. Rather than feeling like 25 years, it felt like a couple of years, and then a couple more years, and a couple more, that kind of thing. In that time Letterman’s given me two watches – I don’t know if that’s his way of telling me to retire?”

**Is Letterman a fun gig for a drummer?**

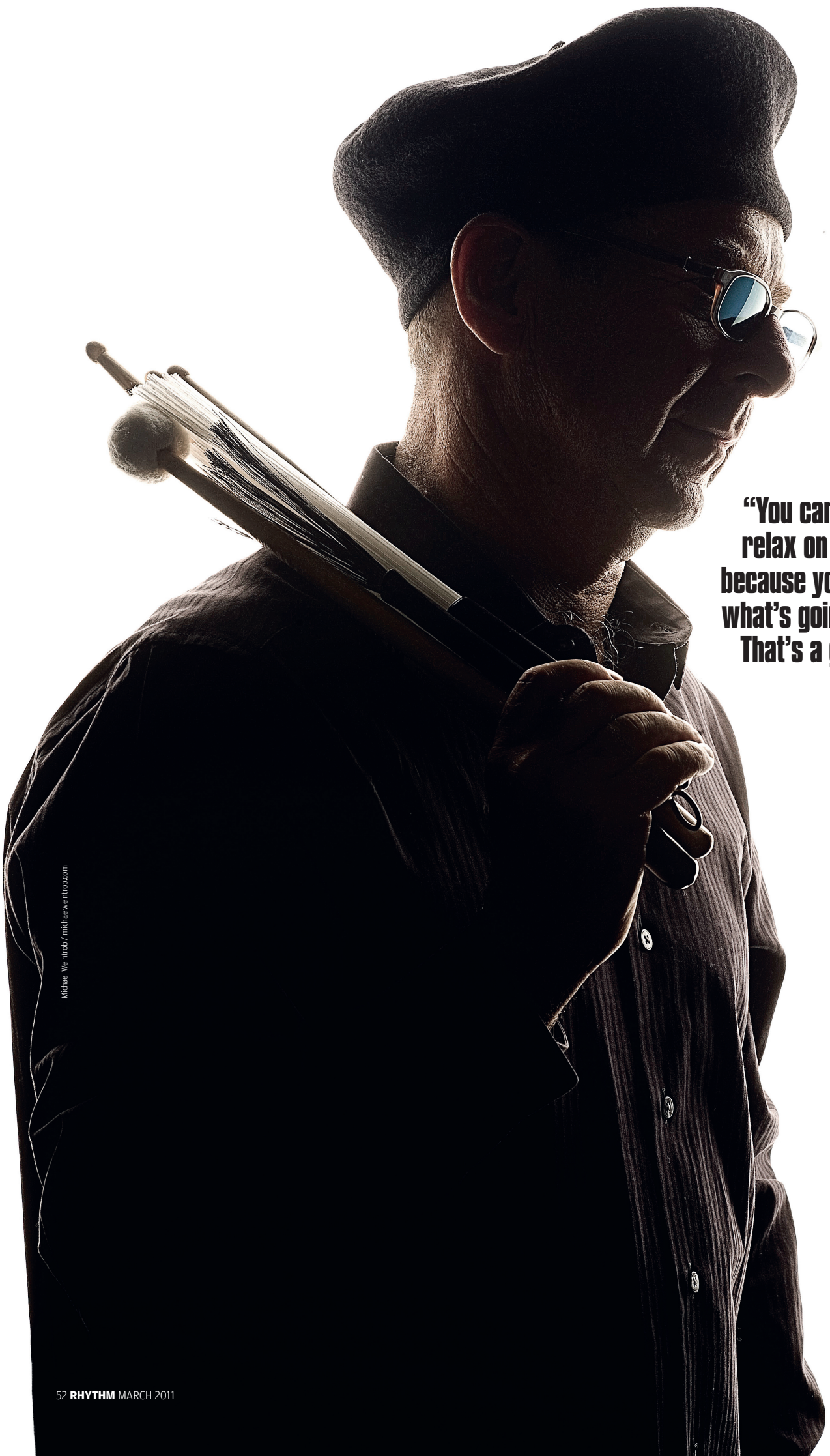
“It’s amazing, because to have a steady gig in the music business is almost unheard-of – and to have one as high-profile as this, and to get to play with a great band and fantastic guests from time to time, and have job security – it’s the equivalent of winning the musical lottery. You might win that lottery by being on the road with some huge band, but doing it while living at home with your family is even better.”

**How did you get the Letterman gig?**

“I was doing a lot of gigs in New York at the time: I’d played with Ace Frehley and Mick Jagger, and I’d also played a couple of songs with Dylan, so I was part of the scene in New York. My predecessor was Steve Jordan, and he had a couple of people who subbed for him. I remember he was away quite a bit, because he was playing with Neil Young at the time. Eventually Paul [Shaffer, *Letterman* musical director – see page 54] asked me to come in and sub on the show for a week: I knew him because we’d done Paul Butterfield’s last record together. That turned into two weeks, and then a few weeks later Paul told me that Steve was leaving the show and that they liked the way I subbed, and would I like to do the gig?”

**Is it tough to do the same job for so long?**

“It’s not, because we do a different show every day. It’s not like I’ve been doing the same show for 25 ▶



**“You can’t stop and  
relax on *Letterman*,  
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## STARS PAY TRIBUTE

Some big names celebrate Anton's 25 years on *Letterman*

### Joe Bonamassa Blues guitar maestro



"I first met Anton in 2003 when he and I were booked to play Tom Emmy's show called *Studio*

*Jams*. It was awesome. In January of 2007 Anton came out and played on my seventh solo album called *Sloe Gin*. He has been playing on my albums and DVDs ever since. I'm really honoured by Anton's friendship.

"There is a particular section on the song 'The Ballad Of John Henry' that has these chains. Most people would dial up a sample and play it on a keyboard, but Anton and Kevin [Shirley, producer] wanted to create a unique sound, so we sent out for chains and Kevin put the mics up and it's such a signature of the song. It speaks volumes about Anton's attention to detail and commitment to a

project. Congrats on 25 years at the top of the game. It honestly couldn't happen to a more talented and nicer guy than Anton, aka 'The Mynk'."

### Oz Noy Legendary guitarist



"When I moved to NYC in '96 I started playing a club called La Bar Bat. When I formed the

first version of my band, the booking agent at that club recommended contacting Anton to play drums. That was the first time we played together. We've been playing together since.

"Anton's got a completely original voice on the drums. To me it's a mix of a very strong rock groove with the understanding and knowledge of jazz - it's rare to have such a strong groove drummer that can really stretch out and have the jazz vocabulary and mix it in a way that will sound like his own. He is also super reliable and a total pro.

"Anton is a very fast learner and extremely musical and always brings his own approach to the table. His time is the most solid out of all the drummers I've played with."

### Will Lee Late Show bass player



"I first met Anton when we played together on Ace Frehley's first solo album and

Joan Armatrading's *Me Myself I* album. I remember we spent a lot of time jamming together, in between takes and at rehearsals and it was always fun.

"Anton is well-versed in so many areas of popular music and in many genres that I know less about (like African and classical). Anton has a stadium-style touch - a big sound that travels far into the distance. I've always said that voice and drums are the 'big communicators', so his type of drumming really sends a message.

"Anton, it's great to be able to count on you all these years. Here's to another 25!"

### Kevin Shirley Producer (Rush, Journey, Joe Bonamassa)

"The first time I ever worked with Anton was in Cape Town as an assistant engineer in 1982. My boss and mentor, Tully McCully, produced a few albums with Lesley Rae Dowling, who



is a great South African songstress, and after the session I saw him live at a local club, in a 'drum-off' with Simon Kirke. Anton killed him!

"I have done so many sessions with Anton, maybe a hundred, so I have great memories. The best are working with him on the Joe Bonamassa albums, especially the two we recorded in Greece.

"Anton's work ethic is unparalleled! When we recorded Joe Bonamassa's *Black Rock* album, he got off an overnight coach flight from New York to Santorini, via Athens. It was a Saturday and I wasn't going to work until Sunday, as we were in such a beautiful part of the world. Before he would even look at his room, he wanted to see the drums and the studio. We cut a track within the hour, him still unwashed in his travel boots. The song is 'Steal Your Heart Away', a cool tune Robert Plant had suggested to me that we do.

"The thing about Anton is he can still sound like a kid, with a good groove. I love music to sound young and vibrant, so I love that. Nobody else I have worked with can do that. Most

people think the trick is to hit hard. It's not! He can also be Ferrone-slick, Bonzo-bombastic or Keltner-percussive, and then jazzy or ethnic. He's amazing! So you get this great energetic take and it's still got a massive pocket. He is unlike anyone else I work with - he is my favourite drummer. And he knows it!

"Figgy, I love you. Tell Dave you need a raise, and I'll see you next week for another session."

### Duck Dunn Booker T And The MGs/ Stax Records bassist



"Anton's timing is impeccable and he has a looseness that lets the music breathe. Plus, with his easy-going personality, he makes being in the studio with him a complete pleasure. He makes it fun, not work. I learned from his personality to just stay relaxed, and be the best I can be.

"Congratulations on your 25th year Anton! Every time I saw you, you were worried about Letterman retiring - I think you can stop worrying now. All the best, it's always a pleasure to work with you, and looking forward to many more."

David Shirley, Rick Diamond/WireImage

► years. Once we get beyond the theme song, the show's completely different. It's always challenging and you never know what's going to happen. It's great: it's nice to be on your toes all the time. That said, if a drummer wanted to come in and dep for me, it would be difficult for him, because there's so much stuff that I know about - like David's natural rhythm, and how that affects the show. If you don't

**"I don't mind taking direction. If someone says, 'Can you try this approach?' I'm totally open to that and I'll be creative within their guidelines"**

know the drill it can't be written down and read, you just have to know it and have a feel for it. It's like anything, though - you get used to it, and you find ways to take it in your stride."

### The show seems to change direction on the spur of the moment.

"You just don't know what's going to happen. Dave could go off on some sort of riff and take the show in a completely different direction. We don't rehearse the show and then perform it: we rehearse the music and a few little bits of prepared comedy, but we're watching the whole show unfold as it's happening live. You can't stop and relax, because you don't know what's going to happen. That's a good thing!"

### What are the challenges of playing on *Letterman*?

"When you're playing with the different guest artists, you've got to sound like you've been playing with them forever, right off the downbeat. You don't have

time to warm up into the song. If you could rehearse a song three or four times, it would be easy to get it good, but when you have to play it out of the blue that's a little more challenging."

### Are there ever any performance errors made by the house musicians?

"Yeah, there's plenty! But we cover them up. It's

very rare that we have to redo a song. Maybe if there was horrendous feedback or something, or some other technical reason, they might redo it - but for performance reasons alone, they will rarely redo a song. You've got to get it as right as you can. There are train-wrecks from time to time, but hopefully we're able to cover them up and keep them to a minimum so they're not recognisable."

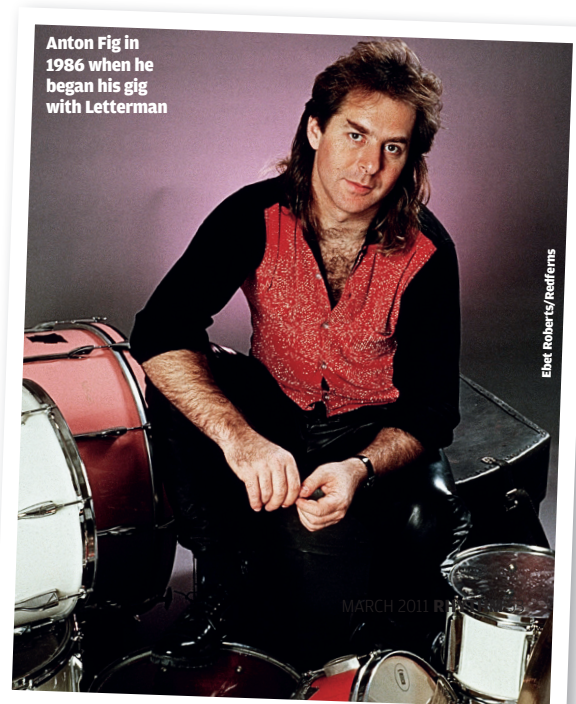
### What was it like playing at Live Aid?

"Live Aid was amazing. I was pretty new on the scene back then. I'd done a Jagger record and a Dylan record so the producer, Nile Rodgers, asked me to play with the Thompson Twins. It was a huge concert and very exciting. Madonna came and sang with us: she was pretty big then, but not as big as she became."

### You also played the Concert For New York City in 2001, just after 9/11.

"The wave of pent-up emotion that came out that night made it a very humbling experience, because the music was there to serve the event, as opposed to how it normally is when everyone comes to see the musicians.

"I felt in service to a much bigger cause, but at the same time it was a chance to play Madison Square Garden with my big heroes, like David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, James Taylor and a bunch of other people. Madison Square Garden felt like a little living-room that night, not like a big hall."

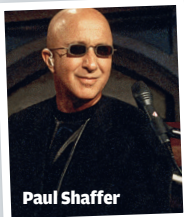


Anton Fig in 1986 when he began his gig with *Letterman*

Ebzt Roberts/Redferns

## LETTERMAN'S MD ON ANTON

Letterman musical director Paul Shaffer pays tribute to Anton Fig



Paul Shaffer

**How did you first get to know Anton?**

"It was an album for Joan Armatrading called *Me Myself I* (1980). That was the first time I played with him.

He was an all-round musician who could do everything: the producer would pay Anton just to be at the session and keep the other drummers sounding good. That impressed me very much. Then, when I was looking for a new drummer for *The Late Show*, I tried a number of guys, and when Anton came in he played so well that even the crew guys were coming over to me and saying, 'That's your drummer, right there!'"

**What other projects have you worked on together?**

"We are constantly doing studio projects together. Most recently we played on the Ray Davies project, *See My Friends*. We did a duet with Jon Bon Jovi and another with Bruce Springsteen: it was a lot of fun. Sometimes we show up at a session individually, and we realise that we're going to be playing together when we hadn't known that beforehand. We've also played together every year at the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame induction ceremony. Every year it's different. In the early years we used to have a totally spontaneous jam session at the end, with me calling tunes on the spot. This would require Anton to know the songs, and he excels at that - he knows an awful

lot of rock'n'roll, and he always knows the right beat! He's worth his weight in gold."

**What is it about Anton's drumming that makes him so unique?**

"His timing is perfect, so he feels good to play with, whether he's playing a shuffle or a straight-eight or something in between, which is another of his specialities. He finds that sweet spot between the patterns. I love a drummer who can do that. He can play any style of music and always sound authentic."

**Have you learned anything from Anton?**

"I've learned how important it is to save it for the take. You can rehearse all you like, but you need to save your energy for the take - especially if you're a drummer. Anton showed me that. You do your best all the time, but a little more than your best when the red light goes on. Anton does that."

**Do you have a message for Anton to congratulate him on his 25th year on *The Late Show*?**

"It's been a pleasure working with him all these years and I hope there are many more years of working together. Thanks for forgetting that I've lost my temper so many times over the years: Anton doesn't take it personally, and I really appreciate that."

Anton has his own Yamaha maple signature snare

**► How did you come to work with Kiss on their *Dynasty* and *Unmasked* albums in 1979-80?**

"I had a band called Spider that played around New York - we actually had a Top 40 hit - and our bass player said to me, 'I've got a friend named Ace Frehley who is looking for a drummer.' I really didn't know anything about Kiss at all. Anyway, I went and played with Ace: we didn't really talk that much, we just did some demos. Then he called me again and asked me to do his record, this was

one of Gene's books he says that I was playing on them, so I figured if it's okay for them to talk about it, it's okay for me to talk about it!"

**Your solo album, *Figments*, came out in 2002, tell us a little bit about that.**

"That record still sounds really new and fresh to me - I can't believe it's nine years ago. I loved doing it, and I wish more people had heard it because I think it's still relevant. At the moment I'm enjoying

**"When I started doing sessions there were no click tracks so you had to get the whole song in one take. People used to time the first chorus with a stopwatch"**

when Kiss all released their solo records in 1978. That is still one of the best records I've played on. Anyway, I think Peter Criss had broken his arm or something and couldn't do the next Kiss album, so they asked me to do it. I was thrilled just to be there. It was fun. They were fine: my job was just to take care of the drums while they had other things to worry about."

**Is it true that they wanted to keep your involvement hush-hush?**

"They asked me not to say anything - so I didn't say anything for 20 years or something. Eventually, a remaster of *Dynasty* came out and it actually says on the record that I'm playing drums on it. And in

producing other people, but I'll do another solo album as soon as I have the time to get 10 or 12 really good, solid songs written."

**When you are hired to do a session, are you good at taking direction about your drumming?**

"I don't mind taking direction, but I would hope that I've been asked to play because of the way that I play already. If they get you there and say, 'I want you to play like so-and-so,' you just think, 'Well, why didn't they just hire so-and-so?' But again, if someone says, 'Can you try this approach?' then I assume they want me to try that approach within my own capabilities. I'm totally open to that and I'll be creative within their guidelines." ►

# Interview Anton Fig

South African-born Anton has worked with Kiss, Mick Jagger and Bob Dylan

Andrew Lepley/Redferns

## ANTON'S KIT

### DRUMS

Yamaha: 22" or 24" bass drum, 10", 14" and 16" toms, 14"x6"

maple signature snare

### CYMBALS

Zildjian: 14" hi-hats, 22" K Custom ride, 16" and 18" crashes

### PLUS

Vic Firth Signature model sticks

### ► Which musicians are still on your dream session list?

"There's a few people who have died, who I would love to have worked with. John Lennon would have been great, and I always wanted to work with Joe Zawinul. It would have been nice to play a song with Elvis, too. Still, I enjoy playing with different people all the time. The standard of musicianship is so high now. I played the Royal Albert Hall last year with Joe Bonamassa. It was really nice, and Clapton came and played with us. He's a big fan of Joe's."

### What advice would you give our readers about doing sessions?

"When I started doing sessions, there were no click tracks and no drum machines, so you had to get the whole song in one take. People used to time the first chorus with a stopwatch, and then they'd time the next chorus and say, 'Oh, the first one was 12 seconds and the second one was 13 seconds,' and that's how they'd check the tempo. Nowadays you just set up a click. But I'm glad I learned to record the old way, when everybody was in the same room and you all had to get a good take at the same time."

### How is the role of the session drummer different nowadays?

"Nowadays, if you record one good chorus and

one good verse, the Pro-Tools guy can just fix it. I do use all that stuff myself, but I'm glad I learned to play the old way because that's the way you should be able to play. I would advise a new player not to rely on the new technology that makes everything easy. Also, they can correct all your beats with Beat Detective and replace all your sounds, but you still need to get a good sound and

a good feel - that's the most important thing. Get to know musicians and producers and do some networking, too."

### How much of your time these days is devoted to Letterman?

"One way in which the Letterman show is a dream gig is that the show is only a few hours a day - it's definitely not over-rehearsed. You come down in the early to mid-afternoon and you have a very short rehearsal, although if we play with a musical act we're expected to come on knowing the song, so we've learned it privately. We work out what

songs are needed on the show, and any other incidental bits of music that are needed. Usually the big break songs are determined while the show is on, based on what's appropriate at the time, and then you do the show and go home. So all my nights are free and my mornings are free, and we get weeks off now and then, so I'm able to do lots of other stuff."

**"They can correct your beats and replace all your sounds but you still need to get a good sound and a good feel - that's the most important thing"**

### Do you prefer to stay busy in your downtime?

"It's important to do other projects as well as your main gig, because if you just do one thing you hone yourself to be as efficient as you can be in that one gig. You'll find ways of doing that in the most relaxed, easiest way, but if you do other gigs, they will stretch you in different ways and you'll be able to bring new things to your main gig. No one project can provide everything for you. I've always been in favour of doing tons and tons of other stuff, because I think that they all help to evolve you as a musician." **R**

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