

DANE CLARK

Interview and Photos by Sayre Berman

It was early in Dane Clark's professional career that he got "the nod" from one of the most legendary innovators of music...the "Sound of Surprise" himself, Dizzy Gillespie. That was in 1983, shortly after Dane graduated from Anderson University with a degree in percussion performance. Dane has been getting the nods ever since. While still in college, Dane was able to develop a solid reputation with the local recording studios. Upon graduation, he quickly rose to the position of first call drummer in his home state, Indiana. He was working on jingles in Indianapolis, recording on the acclaimed syndicated radio show "The Bob and Tom Show," doing session work with popular artists and touring, all while continuing to write songs and play his own music. In 1996 Dane got another one of those pivotal nods. This time it was from America's favorite heartland rocker, John Mellencamp. Dane has been with Mellencamp ever since, touring and recording. His impressive discography with Mellencamp includes John Mellencamp, Trouble No More, Freedom's Road and Life, Death, Love and Freedom. In spite of Dane's busy schedule with Mellencamp, he still is able to maintain a full plate of side projects... studio work, record producing, songwriting and local touring with his own band, the Dane Clark Band.





Classic Drummer: Tell us a little more about yourself...where are you from, when did you get interested in music?

Dane Clark: I was born in Anderson, Indiana in 1959. I always was attracted to music. I started playing the piano in third grade. That's when I learned how to read music, which, by the way, I will be ever grateful to my parents for pushing me in that direction. I started playing the guitar in fourth grade and the drums when I was in fifth grade. At first it was just a snare drum and I loved it! I got my own drum set when I was in eighth grade. I took lessons all through high school. I remember that I had my share of garage bands, made a lot of noise and got in trouble for it on occasion.*(laughs)*

Early on, I realized that I had natural ability on the drums, and let's face it, who wouldn't want to play something that lets them get all their aggression and frustrations out. I was most passionate about the drums. I knew I was going to be a musician, I've been writing songs since I was in the sixth grade. In high school, my classmates all agreed that I was destined to be the back-up drummer for The Who. Funny, they weren't really that far off. Here I am now with the local superstar in Indiana...I'm talking about Mellencamp, of course.

CD: When you were growing up, who were your drum heroes?

Dane: My first drum hero was definitely Ginger Baker from Cream. I would listen to the live version of "Toad" on the family stereo in the living room...what my parents had to endure! My other drum heroes would be Charlie Watts, without question John Bonham, Keith Moon, and Ringo.

While I was in college I started getting into jazz. At that point I got turned on to Steve Gadd for a while. I also got to be a big fan of Vinnie Colaiuta. During college I became immersed in fusion. I tried to be as technical as I could. I think that it was during that phase that I really honed my chops...when I heard Gadd and Colaiuta play things that I had no idea how to do. That's when I got serious...I figured out what they were doing, learned it and then tried to put my own spin on it and developed my own thing from there.

CD: You went to college on a music scholarship. What advantages do you think a continuing education provided you that other musicians without that same benefit don't have?

Dane: Yes, I have a degree in Percussion Performance from Anderson University. For me, I think the primary benefit was that I got the chance to play a lot. The university was small; I was a big fish in a small pond. I played all sorts of music and played in just about all the different bands on campus. Also, going to that school provided me with the opportunity to meet people. I wanted to get into studio work and at this university I got to meet all the folks who were affiliated with the main studios in the area. At the time, we had three main studios that recorded contemporary Christian

music. Just from being the main drummer at Anderson, the doors for me were opened to get into the studio thing. That gave me entry into the jingle thing. One thing led to another and I was a first call drummer here in Indiana. I stayed involved with the university, too. I taught there for about 12 years before I joined John's band.

CD: Describe something that happened to you that had a most profound impact on your career as a drummer.

Dane: In 1983, I had just graduated from Anderson, they invited me to play drums in a concert featuring guest performer Dizzy Gillespie. Imagine that, I'm getting to play with the guy who *invented* bebop! At this point, even though I was already out of my jazz snob phase, I appreciated fully how important this opportunity was. I remember it all so clearly, here we all are at this straight-laced Christian University and here comes Dizzy wearing a Jim Morrison type outfit...leather pants and a wild black shirt, smoking a cigar...on our non-smoking campus...just great!

During the show there was a spot for a brief drum solo, maybe eight bars. When I

was done, Dizzy Gillespie turned around, he gave me this subtle nod, smiled at me...and then turned back around to the audience and continued to play...I knew that meant he dug it...the man dug my solo. That nod, that smile, gave me such a good feeling. That single nod made me try that much harder to be successful. I got the nod of approval from a legend. That was the heaviest moment ever for me.

CD: You've been with Mellencamp since 1996. How did you get that gig?

Dane: Yes, I started in 1996. By that time, I had been the main studio guy in Indiana for at least 10 years. I already knew all the guys in the band. I had played in a side project with Larry Crane, Mellencamp's original guitar player. I had played with Toby Myers in another side project. I knew Mike Wanchic from seeing him at sessions, and I knew Kenny Aronoff, we'd trade licks...we were friends. I think it was just one other guy from Indiana, and me, plus about 20 guys from all over the world, for the audition. I felt good about my chances, I felt prepared. I knew the music cold, I knew the guys, and heck, I'm an Indiana native...I know where it all comes from!

"Love and Happiness" was the first song I was to play, there were to be three songs total for the audition. After just the first song John said, "Hey, come up here for a second." So the two of us are standing there and he said, "I think you'd look pretty good with all that hair shaved off (I had a long mop of curly hair). I said, "Yeah? I'll shave my whole body if that what it takes." I think John liked my answer, my sense of humor. A big part of being in a band is getting along with others. You need to pick people that can get along not just while the performance is going on, but also hang with back stage...on the bus. Anyway, I got called the very next day and they told me I was in.

CD: Can you tell us a little bit about the dynamics of the band. For example, when a new song is being developed, in what way do you all, particularly you, as the drummer, participate?

Dane: All our albums have taken different approaches. The last record that we did, *Life, Death, Love and Freedom*, we did with T-Bone Burnett. We cut all of those tracks in two weeks...most of them within seven days. That record was painless to make,



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I don't think we played any song more than three or four times. T-Bone would make the call when he thought we had it. Sometimes he'd take the second play and cut half of the third play in. For that record we just went in and listened to the songs, talked about it a little bit, ran it down... tried to get that lightning in a bottle.

For *Freedom's Road*, we went into our rehearsal garage, set up Pro Tools and a few mics; a mic on the kick, a mic on the snare, and one overhead mono mic. We thought we were just making demos but all the songs turned out so good, the vibe was so cool; John just decided we couldn't play these songs any better. After a couple of months mixing, that was it.

John looks at things in a very artistic manor; not necessarily the way a regular musician would...he isn't really a player, so he can look at things from a completely different perspective. He has great drum ideas...I might think something should go a certain way, but he'll test me, push me as far as he can to get something new, something different, something that he's never heard. The band is comprised of such good musicians; everybody has ideas for everyone else. I might have a suggestion for the guitar player or the bass player, and they may have great ideas for me. We're not shy about making suggestions and trying different things.

On "*Trouble No More*", we had a completely different approach. That record is all

covers, blues songs from the 1930s to about the late 1970s. I played Tabla drums, or Hillbilly Tabla drums, as I like to call them, along with a little hand drum set up and a hi-hat. On half the record I played the cocktail kit. As a matter of fact, I'm playing the cocktail kit on the entire "*Life, Death, Love and Freedom*" album.

CD: How do you attack a song that you find challenging...difficult?

Dane: John's songs aren't technically difficult at all; they really are very simple. The challenge is to come up with something unique, something different, so it doesn't sound like it's been done a thousand times...not the same old thing. This is not a band where you're thrown difficult time signatures or 20-minute overtures. I'm schooled enough in music, there aren't too many things that I can't listen to and figure out.

CD: Which are your favorite songs to play?

Dane: There is nothing that I don't like to play live...whether it is with my own band, John's band, Moby Grape...an all-star cast of thousands...anything that I play live. It is pretty hard to play in front of people and get bored with it (*laughs*). I enjoy playing an obscure blues song as much as I enjoy playing "Pink Houses". I enjoy the whole show. I might think that one show was better than another, but I enjoy them all.

CD: Can you comment on the recording process these days versus the process 20 years ago? How has it evolved and do you

think it is all for the good? What are we, the consumer, really listening to?

Dane: Even when I first got in to this band, on the 1998 record, *John Mellencamp*, we were still going for the same kind of drum sounds that were around in the 1990s. We used as many tracks as we could. I think that record was done on two-inch tape. Of course, most records now are done digitally. On the last record, we went back and did everything on a 16-track machine. The pop music today is very digitally processed. John, since *Freedom's Road*, has been trying to go back to a simpler way of recording; a starker sound, not so over-dubbed and glossy, almost like field recording. T-Bone has done the last two records and he excels at that kind of thing. John is going for a more direct kind of sound, the real thing, less digital manipulation. We've always been known as a live act, we've always excelled at the live shows so we can do this.

CD: What are your other musical projects?

Dane: I still write songs, I arrange songs, and I'm a producer, let's say I wear a lot of different musical hats. I'm working now on producing an album for Donovan. I've worked with Moby Grape, another highly acclaimed band from the 1960s. Their debut album is considered one of the greatest records of all time, my personal inspiration...that record made me fall in love with music. I've produced a record for them and co-wrote some of the songs. This project started about three years ago and now we're just about done with the legal details and we're hoping to start touring as early as later this year.

I've played with Steve Earle, John Prine, John Fogerty, Brian Wilson, Don Henley, Sheryl Crow, Sting, James Taylor, Roger Waters...to name a few. Also, there is a great country scene that's been growing here in Indiana that boasts some up and comers like Jason Sturgeon. I produced, arranged, and co-wrote his latest record that has the single "Simple Life", which got into the 50s on the Billboard charts last year. I also produced a project for Corey Cox, another new, young artist.

I've produced three of my own records on my own independent label called Dungeon Records...I don't have much light in the

studio. I also play guitar and sing with the Dane Clark band...we play my songs and some covers. I've had that band for about 10 years now.

CD: Who are you listening to now...who inspires you these days?

Dane: Ray LaMontagne, just this morning I caught him on You Tube. He sings like Joni Mitchell, how wild is that? Or maybe more like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell all rolled into one. I dig that.

I don't listen to the radio too much, they tend to play the same songs over and over, the country stations don't play the Americana type music that I like, they lean more to the commercially packaged "country music", but Ray LaMontagne is the newest person that I found that I'm fond of.

There's a lot of great music out there, you just have to dig for it. It might not be played on the major radio stations.

CD: What are your future plans?

Dane: I'm going to Europe with Mellencamp and I'm going to hopefully hook up with some artists in Paris. I'm hoping to catch up with Donovan also when we're overseas. We start the tour in Copenhagen, we'll be covering a lot of ground...it will be fun.

I haven't taught music since I joined John's band but I'd like to get back to that. I've been talking to some universities; I'd like to teach a rock and roll history course based on the music of the 60s.

Dane does it all...touring professional, session great, producer, songwriter, and teacher. Try to get out to see Dane and John and the rest of the band perform when they come to a city near you. You might have just missed them; they recently finished up an extensive tour that included stops in the USA and Canada. For their schedule check www.mellencamp.com. For more information on Dane, check his website at www.daneclark.com. You might just discover your next favorite artist...the next artist who will inspire you.



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