

StudioTalk

with Geoff Dugmore by Jason Buchanan



Geoff Dugmore has been session drumming for a significant number of years and has seen him play for some of the best including Rod Stewart, Robbie Williams, Tina Turner and Dido. Having performed on a total of twenty-one, No.1 hit songs throughout his career, Geoff shows no signs of losing that edge that has made him sort after by musicians and producers worldwide, and has not limited himself to just session drumming, but has also Produced, Engineered and been the Musical Director for a string of projects. Mixdown spoke with Geoff this month to quiz him about the art of recording drums.

Being a drummer as well as an engineer/producer, what do you believe is the hardest thing about pulling an exceptional drum sound?

I don't believe there is really anything difficult about getting a great drum sound in practice. It's all about knowing what you want to hear. By that I mean defining the sound of the drums your looking for any given song. If you have that sound in mind it's about choosing the right drums and cymbals and as with everything, getting the sound right at the source. Over the years I've discovered that certain drums record better with mikes set in certain ways, for example with Gretsch drums the higher away from the toms you get the mikes (within reason of course) the more low end you get off them and if you combine that with getting the mike's pointing at the middle of the drum then it's even better... of course this doesn't always suit the playing style of every player but with a little experimentation you can get the desired effect. Of course if your looking for a big sound and your in a small dead sounding room then you have a big problem but common sense would tell you to go to the right studio for the right sound. I don't believe that you must stay in one studio for every aspect of recording but a great tracking room is all you need to get a great sound to carry on the rest of the work on the song.

How do you combat the issues relating to tuning drums and what is involved in this process to achieve the best results?

These issues have been dissected for years. Again your ears are one of the best instruments

you have so use them and trust them. I guess as a general rule of thought the top head is a little tighter than the bottom but I'm not afraid to use some good old gaffa tape on toms if the song dictates. With snares I started using a cigarette packet filled with sugar with gaffa tape around it and rest it on the hoop and head of the drum. When the drum is hit it bounces up and falls back down again so creating a natural gate if you like without killing the natural sound of the drum. The other major issue surrounding the set up is tuning. I pay great attention to getting the drums in tune with the track. Why is it that every other instrument must be in tune and not the drums. By that I mean the drums should be tuned to the key of the track... you would be amazed how much difference that can make to a song. If the song is in the key of A and your playing your fills with an F sharp chord it's gonna sound really funky! Trevor Horn was the guy who got me tuning drums. We were recording *Downtown Train* for Rod Stewart and after the first run through he turned round to me and said it sounds great but your toms aren't in tune with the track... sort it out. So I tuned them to the track and the rest was history as they say.

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How do you usually attack miking up the kit?
I like to listen to the kit in the room walk around get a feel for the player and his sound. You can't always just go for the same thing every time... that would be an injustice to the song and the artist you have to interpret all the aspects of what's needed for any given song. Again as an overview I usually end up with 421's on the toms a 57 on the snare top and a 57 at the sound hole of the snare, I'm not a great one for mike's under the snare I don't believe it brings enough to make a significant difference. If the drum sounds right at source you can get everything you need from those two mikes. Kick drums I

use a 47 and a 421 slammed up at the head for the front-end attack (if I can't get enough attack then sometimes I put a coin on the batter head of the drum where the beater strikes and that gives more attack) with the 47 at the front head for low end. I've been using the SE Electronics Gemini mike recently about 3 feet from the drum and that has been giving me some fantastic low end, almost sub vibes. In general I like to respect the kit as an instrument in total so whenever possible I don't like to isolate the kick drum with blanket tunnels and that sort of thing. I like to use the old Bruner ribbon mike's for overheads they give a warmer sound and seem to blend in more with the rest of kit.

I really liked the 5-P plan. Can you tell us a little more about this concept and how important it is for both artists and engineers/producers when working in the studio?

Well for me it developed a long time ago. Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance. Actually it started as proper planning prevents piss poor performance but I decided to shorten it some time ago. It is really just as it says... get your idea's and planning together before you start... that way it cuts down on time wasting and in this budget conscious age, it prevents wasting money which ultimately benefits both the artist and the record company.

You have worked with Bob Clearmountain previously. What kind of thing does working with producers like Bob teach you in regards to production ideas and techniques?

The speed at which they work. You can be doing what you might consider a warm up take but they already have the sound and you catch it in two takes. That's something I have really learned. The magic happens in the early takes so record everything from take one even if the artist thinks it's just a warm up. More often then not these are the takes you end up going with because they have that magic of not really thinking to much about the track but just playing the song.

You have mentioned that you will come armed to the studio with 15 snares and an arsenal of cymbals. What kind of snares do you prefer to use and what different timbres and tones can you get from using different snares?

PPPPPP !!! I come to any session with the mind of if you leave something behind that's what your gonna need. Always be prepared. Take everything you have as you just never know. As for snares, well every one has a different touch. For example if your doing Geoff Dugmore hip hop track then I tend to use a little 10" wooden snare made by Brady it's a soprano snare but then if your doing a rock track I might use a brass snare by DW but if I'm doing a ballad then it's an old Rodgers snare, wooden with lots of tape on it. None of it is rocket science it's just common sense. It's all about listening and understanding the song I think maybe that's something you only really learn through experience.

As a Session player, how much creative input do you give and is there very a clear idea as to the expected outcome of the track as a I can imagine that the drums would usually be the first thing that is tracked?

Well the drums these days are usually the last thing on there. The track is usually pretty much finished so your coming in to play on top of everything else that's already there. The parts are mostly pretty defined but there is always room for personal expression. I like to think that people get me in to play on something so I bring a bit of me to the party. You find the sweet spot and play to that. The producer usually has been listening to the song with the same drum programme for some time and has got used to that so when you move away from that it's a bit scary for them. You have to be confident and know yourself when something is right. Your there to do a job of playing drums and providing the groove for a song. You instinctively know when it's right so have your say, because the guys behind the desk hire you because they know that your gonna tell them when it's right."The world of music is a very insecure place and if your confident and know when it's right for the song they are gonna trust you but by saying that you have to be confident that it's right. You can't cheat the artists or producer or yourself or your gonna be found out very quickly."

How much pre-production is involved before

Geoff Dugmore Discography

Drumming & Musical Director

Natalie Imbruglia *Forthcoming LP*

Dido *No Angel LP US 2 / UK 1*

Robbie Williams *Life thru a Lens LP UK 1*

Rod Stewart *Downtown Train single*

US 1 / UK 10

Stevie Nicks *Other Side of the Mirror*

US 1 / UK 3

Nick Carter *Now or Never US 2 / JAP 1*

Production credits

Deborah Harry LP *Debravation tracks*

Ian McNabb LP *Ian McNabb*

Artist, Writer & Co-Producer

Brutal Beats *Brutal Beats (Sampler CD)*

Ibiza Uncovered TV show music

Live Tours

Robert Palmer *1995/1996 UK & Europe*

Stabbing Westward *1994 US Tour*

John Paul Jones *2000 UK Tour*

you go into the studio to do a session? Do you get given demos, charts, arrangement sheets etc.

9 times out of 10 you have no idea what's gonna come at you before you go into the studio other than a brief outline of what the artist is like.

You have to listen talk and learn quickly what everyone is looking for. If I have the chance I like to get the artist to send me a CD of everything they like from Gypsy Kings to Mahler as I find it gives you an insight into where they are coming from and you can then translate that into their music and play more for them. Having said that you are in a position where you have to satisfy the artist the producer and the A&R man and yourself so finding that is not always an easy task but again at the risk of sounding boring listen to what everyone has to say and play with all your heart for that place. You can't cheat anyone in this biz.

What is involved for you when doing a sample CD?

I had been badgered for years to do a sample CD but had shied away because I hadn't come up with an idea that was unique. I was recording a record one-day and playing some Zeppelin grooves when someone said you should do that stuff as a sample CD. Well that was it. The recording part was the easy bit I spent 1 day at Townhouse Studios 2 and recorded about 150 grooves and then spent the next year on and off compiling it and getting the edits just right etc. The right sounds are vital without that you have nothing to work with. I recorded it pretty much flat on the desk but spent time getting the sound right at source. I used the usual suspects for mic's 421's 57's, a D-12 on the kick and a D12 about 4 feet above the kit, it sounded amazing. The only bit of outboard gear I used was in the compiling part of the process I used a fireworks processor for the weird loops and that was it.

You have performed on many, many albums of which 21 have gone to number 1. What is it you believe that makes a great album and what makes a great song?

What makes a great album is a moment in time when for whatever reason everything falls into place the feeling between the musicians the environment the sense of the world and where that's at, at the time the season of the year when a record is released in relation the music so many factors the songs of course. What makes a great song who really knows it's just that feeling of knowing it's right it's gut feeling it's instinct if you start to think about it you've lost it just do it. As for being aware again I don't study it I just am lucky to get to work on records by artists that have a great amount of talent and we just go and make a record that we all

What is on the cards for you in the coming months?

I'm just finishing off an album for a new artist called Jack Henderson (Rufus Wainright/Norah Jones) a serious album for the 25 plus age group a real story of life as it is for people in this day and age a very mature record that I feel will touch a lot of souls and make a awful lot of sense to a lot of people. I played on the forthcoming Natalie Imbruglia album, which is always great fun working with her. I have been in Paris doing pre-production for an album for a French artist called Axel Baur also. Who knows maybe a trip to OZ !!!!!!!!!!!!!