

CASSELL THE BEATMAKER PLAN B

AWARD-WINNING BRITISH HIP-HOP DRUMMER AND PRODUCER CASSELL OCCUPIES THE DRUM THRONE FOR THE STREETS AND PLAN B. HE FINDS TIME IN HIS BUSY SCHEDULE TO TALK ABOUT HIS LOVE OF DAVE WECKL, MIXING STYLES AND HOW IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GROOVE...

WORDS: CHRIS BURKE PHOTOS: PRESS

It's fair to say that Plan B has had quite an impact on British music in recent years, his skillfully lyrical blend of soul, pop and hip-hop drawing critical acclaim and awards like moths to a flame. Indeed, the artist known by his mum as Ben Drew took home three gongs from this year's Ivor Novello awards for his most recent album, *The Defamation Of Strickland Banks*.

In his all-conquering march to pop glory, however, Plan B has a secret weapon. A man who can claim a reasonable stake in those awards, having had an integral role in writing the album. And one whose self-awarded title of 'Beatmaker' is fair, given his contribution to British hip-hop by way of live drum kit-playing and production duties down the years. Born and raised in Plan B's backyard, London's Forest Gate, Cassell The Beatmaker recalls an early interest in the drumset: "I remember at five years old playing and destroying my toy drum kit that I got for Christmas. From 11 years old I decided that playing

drums is what I wanted to do as a career."

By his early teens he was making a splash with respected London-based jazz/funk fusion band Quite Sane, sharing the stage with no less than The Roots and James Brown.

"My first band were called Sound Vision, which we named after the bass player's amp!" he relates. "That band only lasted a few months before I made a band with two of my best school mates. We went on to expand the members and called the band Quite Sane. We were heavily influenced by Chick Corea's Electric Band. I remember hearing Dave Weckl and being totally blown away.

"I have so many influences and they are not all professional drummers," he adds. "I learn and still am learning from so many musicians. If I had to name a few they would be Dave Weckl, Dennis Chambers, Steve Gadd and Bernard Purdie."

Encouraged by his family, Cassell acquired his first kit - a black Premier Royal five-piece kit: "I loved that kit and played it as much as I could, which drove my sister and neighbours nutty!"

Winning a business development loan from the Prince's Trust, Cassell was able to set up his own production studio, in which he was able to hone his musical and production talents away from the kit.

"I started working as a writer/producer when I was about 16 years old. I produced a lot of hip-hop, reggae and r'n'b. I mainly produced for artists or groups who wanted my particular sound."

He began working with UK hip-hop artists and singers he met through drumming residencies at London clubs such as The Apricot Jam. Such residencies are notoriously challenging drum gigs, but Cassell proved more than equal to the task.

"What helped me as a residential drummer was that I had knowledge of playing drums in a lot of different styles: funk, rock, hip-hop, reggae, Latin," he reveals. "Also the ability to learn song arrangement quickly really helped. Sometimes I would have to play for seven different artists in one show and they all required a different style or approach to their music. I suppose the main difference to performing a show with a touring artist is that your set-list is gonna be

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pretty much the same for the amount of time you're touring, where the Apricot Jam changed artists and songs every show."

From Plan A to Plan B

British hip-hop luminaries such as Roots Manuva and Rodney P all benefited from the Cassell touch, and the Beatmaker went toured for six years with singer-songwriter Keziah Jones, headlining festivals around the world. More recently he's signed a publishing deal with Sony, and he's been giving back, too - sharing his knowledge and skills with local community teaching workshops. But, not satisfied with all this, the clearly workaholic drummer scored impressive drumming gigs with not only Plan B but also The Streets.

"I got a call from Mike Skinner while I was recording an album in Germany with [British rapper] Akala," he explains. "I went to rehearsal and jammed two tracks with the band and then went to the pub with them, and after that Mike offered me the gig. It was a great moment as I was always a big fan of The Streets."

"I WANTED TO BE THE BEST DRUMMER IN THE WORLD. NOW I JUST WANNA BE ONE OF THE FUNKIEST GROOVE PLAYERS"

As well as massive tours with Plan B, Cassell is signed up to work with Ben on his next two albums. Just how did Cassell come to be so integrally involved in the writing of the *Strickland Banks* album?

"It was all very old school," he recalls, "mainly four musicians in a studio just jamming out tracks. Very much like the musicians did in the earlier days of Motown. Ben would come in with his guitar and sing songs and ideas, we'd all add our parts, while making up the arrangements and literally record the tracks in less than three or four takes. Then the backing vocals, strings and brass were added later. I normally base the kicks and snares around the bass parts and vibe with the vocals to add the rolls, thrills and general drum arrangement."

CASSELL'S GEAR

THE STREETS DRUMS

Premier Series Elite five-piece Purple Sparkle Fade kit and hardware: 22"x20" bass drum, 14"x7" hammered brass snare, 13"x5" hammered brass snare, 10" quick tom, 12" quick tom, 14"x14" floor tom, 16"x16" floors tom

CYMBALS

Zildjian: 8" K splash; 9½" Zil Bel; 14" A Zildjian Quick Beat hi-hats; 16" K Custom EFX & 16" Dark crash remote hats; 18" K Dark Medium Thin crash; 18" FX Spiral trash; 20" Crash of Doom; 21" Z3 Mega Bell ride

PLUS

Ddrum triggers; Akai MPC 1000; Rhythm Tech shaker; Remo coated Pinstripe heads

PLAN B DRUMS

Premier Series Elite five-piece Purple Sparkle Fade kit: 22"x20" bass drum; 14"x7" hammered brass snare; 10" quick tom; 14"x14" & 16"x16" floors

CYMBALS

Zildjian: 14" K Constantinople hi-hats; 16" K Constantinople crash; 18" K Constantinople crash; 20" Crash of Doom

Cassell has plenty of advice when it comes to recording drums across the whole spectrum of drumming gigs, too: "When recording for most commercial projects I've always found that simple, solid drumming works the best. I always think of it like a plane taking off - build up the drum part like an upwards slope and gradually add rolls and thrills. You don't always know what is going to be added later to

none, but could Cassell do a rock or metal gig?

"I definitely embrace all styles of music as you can mix styles and patterns," he says. "When I played with Keziah Jones it was very Afrobeat influenced and I used these beats for hip-hop. Playing in a band for me is like taking on an acting part in a movie. So if I'm playing a rock gig I will listen to some of the great rock drummers and copy their drum patterns and fills using my own feel to make it my own."

Having worked with so many talented musicians and artists, Cassell has had plenty of opportunities to learn. What's the best bit of advice he could pass on?

"It's very important to have a grasp on the business side," he considers. "If you want to do this work and survive financially you have to be flexible and make sure you get paid. That's why I do different things within the business: producing and writing in the studio, touring live or teaching workshops. I've even played drums for theatre productions. Saying that, some gigs are just good to do for your profile or playing, so you have to weigh up the odds."

All of which leaves us with just one question: what ambitions does this hugely accomplished drummer have left to fulfil?

"Basically my main ambition is to continue to enjoy my career as a musician and hopefully leave my stamp. It would be a great honour for me to have drummers use how I play to influence and help them develop and create their own style, just like I have from countless greats." **R**

the track so the drum part has to make you want to nod or dance from the get-go. It has to have feel and groove - this doesn't always mean playing strict to the click, more using the click as a reference. Some of the greatest tracks written are not drum machine perfect but the vibe and the feel are spot on."

Asked about areas of his drumming he'd like to improve upon, Cassell laughs: "There are loads. As a drummer I always want to push myself more and play with even more groove. At a young age I wanted to be the best drummer in the world. Now I just wanna be one of the funkiest groove players, that can still pull out some impressive tricks, but is all about the groove. I'm always trying to improve on that."

Obviously his hip-hop credentials are second-to-