

## Rhythm Feb. 1993

Matt Cameron is feeling pretty good right now. In the last year, he and his band Soundgarden have enjoyed the success of their biggest-selling album, *Badmotorfinger*, which received praise from both the underground and mainstream media and boosted them out of college radio purgatory. Despite it all, this afternoon he appears consumed by only one stubborn thought: that his band will soon rip through their final set on the last night of the 1992 Lollapalooza tour. Everything is coming to a head. Icing on the cake.

"It's been great, man." he says, half-yelling over the music blaring from the main stage, only yards away. "I'm going to miss everyone a lot. All the new acquaintances we've made. All the bands. The vibe."

Some spirited fans approach Cameron, who tends to them with genuine kindness. As they walk away, however, he offers a further insight into the moment: "I just want to go home (to Seattle). I totally miss everyone there."

He can taste it, everyone seems to. It's almost the end of what has been a long, productive tour, a moment when all the players--musicians, stage hands, bus drivers, sound people, food vendors, and, in the case of this particular tour, body piercers and anarchists--can begin to take stock, to exhale a bit.

Ready to capture the moment, the journalist leans into Cameron, tape recorder first, and asks, "How was Lollapalooza different from other tours?"

Rather than demean an obvious question, Cameron responds: "the only thing I can compare it to is doing festivals in Europe where they have ten bands in one day. It starts in the afternoon, goes all night. And there's food, and booths, and stuff set up. It's that kind of vibe that they're capturing on this tour, which the States has ever had."

The interviewer jumps in: "They're really big on it in Europe. We played this thing in Belgium, it was the strangest bill. We had Extreme, then Smashing Pumpkins, Lou Reed, us, and Bryan Adams. But people stayed and rocked. They rocked for us and then they rocked for Bryan Adams. I think their tastes are more varied over there."

Cameron has no reason to doubt it since he's come to know the teller of this tale very well over the past few months. It's Chad Smith--drummer with headlining band the Red Hot Chili Peppers--who interviewed as many of the Lollapalooza drummers as he could for this article. We wanted to look back at the most important roving cultural event of 1992 through the eyes of its drummers, and the ears of Chad Smith. In the process these musicians, who represent (whether they like it or not) the cutting edge of popular music, also gave us a glimpse of the future.

**Smith:** We should talk about some drummer things since this is a drum magazine.

Cameron: A drum magazine? That's all we need, man.

Over the course of the tour, the drummers formed a fraternity forged of mutual respect, deliberately avoiding competitive rivalries. Some even admit to it with surprise.

"When I came on board, I expected not to like a couple of bands," says Bill Rieflin, Ministry's drummer. "I heard some records, and I just wasn't interested in what they were doing. But after seeing them all a number of times, I think that every single band on this tour is a really good live band and I would happily see them any day."

That's a pretty big statement. Even though these bands are conveniently grouped under the 'alternative' banner for easier processing, their styles diverge radically, from the Chili Peppers' hardcore funk to Ministry's wall of noise.

**Smith:** So, what deep and meaningful questions can I ask you?

**Cameron:** Oh, I've got a good joke.

**Smith:** Okay, tell me a good joke.

**Cameron:** What do you get when you cross a drummer and a gorilla?

**Smith:** What?

**Cameron:** A really dumb gorilla.

Matt Cameron says the floodgates opened for him when he learned to play his first beat: Johnny Winter's 'Rock & Roll Hoochie Coo'. At the age of 17 he began to study with a teacher who opened his ears to drummers like Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, and Steve Gadd.

"So basically I started copping all of those guys," he recalls. "The rock thing faded as soon as I heard jazz drummers, because they were really musical, and not really flashy or anything. Then I started listening to a lot of punk bands, so I started getting both influences there.

**Smith:** That's like Flea's influences. He started as a jazz musician, brought up on jazz. Then he moved to LA and went and saw Fear, and it changed his whole thing. I think it's a good background to have because you get the musicality and then you get down to where the feelings are. It's so hard. So many musicians and drummers get caught up in the technique. What do you think is more important, technique or inspiration?"

**Cameron:** Well, obviously you've got to have some technique. Then if you're inspired to play music, hopefully the technique will help you to get to a different level where you can express your inspiration and do what you're hearing inside your head. I picked up on the technique stuff pretty naturally. It was a really good thing for me to learn, because I was able to go on from there. Now it's hard to tell if what I'm playing is technique or inspiration. But after you've played for a long time, it all becomes second nature. I think it takes a while for you to hit that plateau."

Wiff Smith, from The Jesus & Mary Chain, reacts wistfully to Cameron's philosophy. "I'd love to relax," he says. "But I've always tried to play like a drum machine. A lot of Jesus & Mary Cain music has been written and recorded with a drum machine, either that or drum loops. When I learned the set, I learned the drum machine parts by heart, literally. I like to concentrate a lot on making every beat count, but I would really like to play free. It'd be a lovely experience."

The mood lingers for a second or so before Wiff laughs explosively, "But I'm completely happy!"

He has good reason to be. Only months ago, Wiff was sitting several feet behind the drummer in The Jesus & Mary Chain, duct tape at the ready.

"I was drum teching," he explains. Proving that, indeed, timing is everything. Wiff noticed the writing on the wall while he was working with the band in Europe. "They'd had enough of their previous drummer, so they auditioned me--and bingo, I suddenly got this opportunity to start playing again."

And Wiff isn't alone in his good fortune. Dave Abbruzzese joined Pearl Jam just as their popularity began to erupt. As evidence of the band's quantum leap into the charts, Pearl Jam were originally scheduled to appear early in the daily roster of bands. However, after they'd played only a handful of Lollapalooza dates, sales of their debut album, Ten, rocketed. Ten may prove to be the biggest-selling album of 1992 from any of the Lollapalooza bands--it dominated the Top 10 for the remainder of the tour. Surprisingly, though, Abbruzzese was glad that his band retained their early slot on the bill.

"I think if they'd put us on last we wouldn't have taken the tour. There's no way we would ever play after you," he says to Smith, "or after Ministry, or after Soundgarden."

Maybe Abbruzzese's right, and Wiff categorically agrees. His band has had to follow Abbruzzese's band every night...

"We've got a problem with Pearl Jam playing before us. Everyone in the audience has gotten really high during Pearl Jam's set and they've exhausted themselves. For us to go on afterwards is hard work."

Countless problems, including the sensitive politics of set scheduling, are bound to crop up during a tour of this size and duration. But few of the drummers griped. Only Rieflin cited one rock concert tradition that he longed for: "I miss soundchecks, because you can work out kinks in the set and work out new tunes. You can get familiar with the stage sound, and actually work on the monitors. No fault of our monitor guy, because he's great," he adds quickly.

**Smith:** Here's a question. Are there any drumming styles that you're interested in exploring?

**Abbruzzese:** Oooh. Exploring styles? Just somebody tell me where the 'one' is. I'll show you where the 'four' is, and we'll make it happen.

**Smith:** All of the mathematics needed in drumming is counting from one to four.

**Abbruzzese:** Right, or one to two, if you just kind of do it...differently. Maybe just one. Straight one.

**Smith:** It's not one, two, three, four. It's...

All; One, one, one!

Abbruzzese: Infinity. Everything.

**Smith:** (with a fake English rock star accent) Forever.

**Abbruzzese:** Hey, come in on the 'one' with me.

**Smith:** And you always know where it is, no matter where it is. You're coming in on the one.

**Abbruzzese:** You can never be wrong. What's up with the band, though?

Restrained by the fact that this is a family paper, we won't be exploring all of the fringe benefits enjoyed by the Lollapalooza drummers. However, it's a safe bet that they each took advantage of the opportunity to listen to, be inspired by, and even cop some licks from their counterparts.

**Smith:** Have you picked up any ideas from other drummers on the tour?

**Rieflin:** It's really only an opportunity for everybody to find out everyone else's weaknesses, and to feel better about themselves, knowing that somebody else is worse off than they are!

He's joking of course. Most of the drummers reported some improvement in their playing as a direct result of the tour. Rieflin, for example, decided to use acoustic drums for the Lollapalooza tour after playing Simmons pads with Ministry for the last five years. It had been a long time since he last played acoustic drums, and he knew his technique had changed after playing on the hard surface of the pads.

"I developed a really light touch," he says. "In the process I lost all of my physical strength, muscle, stamina, force. So I began practising at least five days a week, two to four hours a day, just warming up for rehearsals on real drums, trying to build up my muscle-tone and my stamina, because the music is pretty demanding."

Abbruzzese: I get to watch all you studs, and then go back to the hotel room and try to steal some stuff from you.

**Cameron:** When we were touring with Faith No More, I was really into watching Mike Bordin play. He's got that world-famous flam that is so recognisable. I learned a left-hand ride thing from watching him on a few songs.

Smith: I noticed that you do a left-hand ride on the hi-hat on the odd-time section of 'Rusty Cage'. I love that, and you play through it so fluidly. Is there one guy in the band who writes in odd time signatures?

**Cameron:** Everyone writes naturally in odd time signatures. Kim is the king of writing in 7/4 or 6/4 or 5/4, as is Chris. Chris's take on it is more thought-out, because he has a really good rhythmic background. He can really play drums actually, whereas Kim naturally comes up with these just insanely cool weird rhythmic riffs. And he doesn't know what they are. He plays one for me and asks, 'What time signature is this in?' And I just kind of play along to it and learn it. We're not really sitting down and charting it with a piece of graph paper and trying to make all these parts fit together.

The power of revolutionary music continued to be felt in 1992. The LA riots set the mood, exploding from the TV into every living room. The suburbs were scared. So were the cities. During the confusion, Ice-T gave a number of interviews, pointing out how rap lyrics had predicted the violent reaction to the Rodney King verdict. Within weeks Ice-T's song, 'Cop Killer', became the newest scapegoat for fans of censorship. At first the rapper gave the obligatory free-speech press conference, then suddenly he pulled the record out of the stores, apparently weary of playing cat-and-mouse.

Understandably, the weight of the 'Cop Killer' controversy was felt by the artists on this tour, who might have had reason to feel vulnerable to the threat of boycott themselves. With little premeditation, Soundgarden played a ragged version of 'Cop Killer' on the fourth night which Cameron describes as "a train wreck." However, the band continued performing the song at every gig. Soon it had become the centerpiece of the show, with members from most of the other bands sitting in at one time or another, banging on drums, singing.

"I guess we did it for the obvious reasons," Cameron says. "Just to make a stupid little comment on censorship. We don't try to be heavy-handed when it comes to issues, but if we can do something musically, it tends to have that effect, which is better than standing on a soap box and babbling."

There couldn't have been a more appropriate environment in which to make such a statement. From its inception, the Lollapalooza festival had been designed to include booths dedicated to any number of progressive political and environmental groups, interspersed with the requisite food, clothing, and jewellery vendors. All this, plus the festival's most crowded sideshows: the freaks.

**Smith:**Who's your favourite freak?

**Cameron:**Let's see, my favourite freak...I like Sluggo, actually. He seems to be the most versatile. He's a very food keyboard player, he eats live bugs, he swallows swords, he picks up a glass ball with his two eyeballs. It's a sick thing.

Felliniesque. Great. But was the audience able to pry its attention away from the bug eating and intense partying long enough to hear the overt political messages that were pitched their way?

"People come out to have a good time, to see their favourite bands, and the majority just come to party," says Cameron. "Sometimes rock music might not be the right forum for that awareness to take place. I'm always really sceptical when I hear actors or pop musicians or rock musicians talking about political issues, and sometimes misinforming people. They have power, so they use it. Sometimes in really incorrect ways, in my opinion. I want people to think for themselves, and to find out for themselves which issues are important to them."

To Rieflin the number of newly-enlightened audience members wasn't the important issue. He was thankful just to see any degree of renewed political energy in the crowd.

"I think the youth climate in America the last ten years has been really apathetic," he says. "Nobody seemed to know what was going on, or wanted to get involved. I think probably now, for the first time in a long time, people are starting to pay attention. Everything is getting so screwed up. You can't hide it all anymore. It's a really hard time in America."

**Smith:**How do the drummers from Lollapalooza differ from other rock drummers?

**Abbruzzese:**I think rock drumming is a whole species in itself.

**Smith:**Well, we don't get to fly around on stage like some of the heavy metal drummers.

**Abbruzzese:**Yeah, did you see Lars? His set started on one side, he moved over to the other side, he moved over again, then he turned sideways. I had to leave. I was so bummed that I was just stuck on this riser. There are wheels on it, but I would have to pay Jimmy, my tech, at least a hundred more dollars to spin me around while we play.

It can be argued that there are clear stylistic distinctions between the drummers on the Lollapalooza tour. Yet the influence of MTV is at least one inescapable binding element, to which they must all seemingly adhere or suffer the consequences.

When asked their opinions of MTV, the drummers were understandably cautious in their opening responses. Most admitted that MTV was a great promotional vehicle for recording artists. Then came a pregnant pause. A cough. Shuffling of feet.

Abbruzzese stated flatly that he couldn't talk about it, then went on to say: "I'm a drummer. I'm not no stinking actor. You make an honest record and you want to go out and play these honest songs for the kids. And then somebody says, 'Before you go out and spread all of your honesty, you've got to sit in front of a camera and air-jam.' But I didn't play on this last record, so for me to sit down and air-jam to somebody else's drum part is weird." He pauses. "But I look good. I look damn good!"

Bring up the subject with Rieflin and he's refreshingly forthcoming: "I think it's crap that musicians are forced to express themselves in a medium that they don't really understand. So usually they put their trust in somebody who might be equally ignorant as they are about video. I really think it's bogus, because there's this whole MTV reality of chicks and cars and musicians, and, you know, if I want to hear music, I'm going to listen to records or CD's. Musicians make music. That's what they do."

It's a difficult point to counter. Beyond the compulsory packaging imposed on them, the bands on the Lollapalooza tour are made up of musicians who are passionate about their art. And if there truly is a musical cutting edge in this day and age, then it can probably be found here, within this small group of drummers. Plus, let's face it, this was the final day of the tour. SO two final questions...

### **1. What would you like to see happen in the future of music?**

**Abbruzzese:**I would hope that people would just shut up, and the music stores would take away all the classes of music and put the records in alphabetical order. Let people go buy what they want, or go pick up something they've never heard of rather than calling any music alternative, country, thrash, funk, junk..Just let music be music. Then people wouldn't judge how many records you've sold, or if you've sold out. Or how many t-shirts you've sold, or how many vigarettes you smoke, or where or not you're evil.

**Rieflin:**My hope is that everybody on the planet will develop excellent taste. And make beautiful, inspirational, joyous music. I guess my hope is that audiences will come to rock shows and actually listen. Use their ears. Pay attention to the music. That is the sincere side of the answer. I love it when you go to a show and people really pay attention to what's going on. I think really exciting things can happen between an audience and musicians when there's that kind of intensity..."

### **2. And the future of drumming?**

**Abbruzzese:** I think it's going to get freaky. I think drumming is going to go back to being drumming, music, songs, rather than the flaming sticks, tight pants, the gong with the fire around it and the spinning drum riser.

**Smith:**But Bonham did the flaming gong.

**Abbruzzese:**Yeah, but he did it first. Don't steal his gig. If I had an orange Vistalite set with circles on the bass drum, somebody would beat me up, and it would probably be you.

**Smith:**It would.