

black moods seemed utterly at odds with the ineluctable sweetness coming out of his instrument. “If you got to know him, that was one hell of a guy,” says the drummer. “He was a horn player, but he had a rhythmical thing going on as well. Sometimes he would blow a solo that would be so percussive that, to me, it was almost like another drummer over there. When he left us, I was like, oh my God—first of all, that’s my lifetime buddy, LeRoi. We grew up two doors apart. I lost my best friend. Man, that’s something that’s gonna be weighing on me for the rest of my life. So it’s difficult, but it’s one of those things that’s part of life, and you’ve got to suck it up and keep moving.”

The effect that the death had on Beauford wasn’t lost on Matthews: “So much of this is all about the loss of our friend—including Carter’s performance,” says the bandleader. “I swear to God that Carter played like he was trying to fight his way alone in the Alamo, he was so explosive.”

Matthews wanted to challenge himself instrumentally on *Big Whiskey*, which in this case meant plugging in. It’s not often considered eyebrow-raising when a rock band’s frontman picks up an electric guitar, but not every group is DMB. Some fans may assume that all of the non-acoustic stuff here is Tim Reynolds, the on-again, off-again sideman who participates on this album in a big way after being absent from DMB studio sessions since the ‘90s. But it’s actually Matthews playing lead on two tracks, including the first single, “Funny the Way It Is.”

“It even had me fooled,” says Beauford. “We were down in New Orleans in the studio, listening back, and I was like ‘Man, Tim Reynolds is kicking ass on this one’—and it was Dave.”

At the behest of Glen Ballard on 2001’s *Everyday*, Matthews first tried playing electric but even after continuing it on tour, he never got too comfortable with it. Says Cavallo, “Dave and I had a conversation where I was like, ‘Did you ever play electric guitar?’ And he said, not often—‘but I’d like to, I’m not averse to it. It doesn’t usually work for me.’ And I said, ‘Let me think if I can get something to change that.’ I have this one very sturdy guitar, that I actually had made, and I asked for very heavy strings to be put on it, similar to an acoustic’s. Dave has a particular style that’s very unique. He doesn’t do traditional guitar playing—it’s not his thing. That’s why he has such interesting rhythms. We were calling it the spider walk, because his fingers were almost like spider legs going across the fretboard. And this guitar opened the door.”

Matthews was also up for a thematic challenge. “Lyrically, I think this is my strongest album,” he says. “I’ve written some lyrically strong stuff in the past, but I think I’ve been sort of inconsistent at times, and sometimes it’s just been a bunch of dribble. But whether it’s a light-hearted topic or about addiction or passion or friendship or loss, I think I had a standard for myself that I would not go below, and I think I managed to deliver like I haven’t in the past.”

The final recording in New Orleans this year had a big effect on Matthews’ late-inning writing, with three of the songs implicitly or explicitly set in the city. “I don’t want to paint it too pretty. There’s a lot of frightening violence and the poverty-related crime down there that’s just terrifyingly sad. Hopefully more songs will start bubbling up that will help tell the story of how criminally negligent we were about that city. But it’s also got this resilience and hospitality and warmth and celebration. Anybody who doesn’t know where to go, they should go to that fuckin’ place.”

So how does *Big Whiskey* connect to the band’s big legacy? Will it be more universally embraced than the group’s previous studio albums of this past decade, each of which came with some sort of attendant controversy for fans? Is it the proverbial “return to form”? Three of the band’s four members seem to agree. See if you can guess who the exception might be.

Boyd Tinsley: “To me it’s in the vein of *Under the Table and Dreaming*



“To me it’s in the vein of *Under the Table and Dreaming* and *Crash*, of just music that sounds undeniably like the Dave Matthews Band,” says Tinsley of the new album. “I’m not saying that the last four albums didn’t, but I’m just saying that this album more so does.”

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Carter Beauford: “We were all thinking of the same thing—getting it to have that raw feeling again, like we did the first five years. It’s definitely about getting back to that old way of doing things. *Everyday* was the only record that I didn’t feel I could do what Carter Beauford does. There was a reason for that, though.

“We had our backs to the wall, because we had a whole record the Internet swallowed up [the bootlegged *Lillywhite Sessions*], so we decided to have emergency time with Glen Ballard. So him and Dave put some cool stuff together, and had us pretty much play note for note what they had done. We kind of had to do that, because we needed to get that record out.”

Beauford’s a great apologist, but he won’t have to put that humble skill set to use for *Big Whiskey*. “This particular record, probably more than any other, I was able to really get in and knock some heads.” He chuckles. “No pun intended.”

Stefan Lessard: “Not that there’s anything wrong with the way we experimented with *Stand Up* or *Everyday*, but there was a disconnect that you’re only so proud of it because you weren’t there for the whole process. But there’s a richness to this record I feel like we haven’t had in 10 years.

“When you fall in love with a band’s records, it’s really hard to necessarily keep that love growing, because you’ve always had a record that’s been your favorite. I’m that way with *The Joshua Tree* and U2. I know a lot of people feel that way about *Before These Crowded Streets*. But our fan base is such a wide variety from young to old, that those fans who are younger, whose parents are fans of ours, need a record like that, something that they can really kind of be like, ‘This is for us.’”

When I pass along this last comment to Matthews, to see if he agrees, I’m surprised to sense him getting his hackles up. “For me, I can’t even begin to think like that,” Matthews says. “He must have planned that without me! That sounds pompous to me. I’m making the music now—I can’t plan ahead for who likes it. I don’t give a fuck who listens to it. If you don’t want to, that’s your loss. I just made a thing that I really love.” He softens his tone a little: “It’s all a different language, all a different way of thinking about things. But all I was thinking was, ‘Get it right.’” ●