

Features

Interview with Benny Greb

"I try and make music," reveals master clinician Benny Greb about his approach to drumming. "It is really important to me – even when I'm doing a drum solo it has to be about the music."

Watch the 27-year-old German in action and it's immediately clear he is enjoying a love affair with music. It is not just about drums. It permeates his playing, but also stretches beyond his drumming – a multi-talented musician he sings, produces, plays guitar, bass and even, he says with a big grin, a bit of brass – referring to the vocal mimicking of brass instruments at the introduction to one of his clinic favourites – Grebfruit, the title track of his 2005 solo album. He's a tasty player. Greb moves with the grace, style and speed of a Kung Fu master behind the kit with a huge smattering of heart and soul thrown in the mix for good measure.



Benny in action at Drum Fest

"The jazzers say "be what you play"," he smiles. "I really want to be what I play. It's the difference between having a conversation that moves you or someone who tries to take over." While there are some drummers who like to show off flashy moves, technique and rudiments, they also forget about the music, he suggests – "It should be about entertaining. It's not just about what you can do with the drums. You see some people out there who are trying to be so clever they forget about why they are there. They are musicians after all."



And Greb is a man who should know. When not wowing the crowds at drum clinics himself, he'll often pop up to check out other drummers. "I go to concerts and clinics as much as I can," he grins. "Hey, I am a fan, too."

He talks of the inspiration he gets from other drummers, name-checking Jojo Mayer as one influence, but gets as much stimulus from playing different styles and stretching his ability in different directions. You sense he mentally clocks the good and bad, learning from his peers and honing his own act as a result.

"I just try to check out different types of music. I'm into a lot of the funk and jazz stuff. And for me there are only two kinds of music – good and bad. When I practice jazz I find I can play the transparent pop stuff much better. It helps my

overall playing."

Witness his playing and the jazz funk elements shine through, especially in Grebfruit, an infectious groove which perfectly showcases Greb's talents. A student of his art, Greb doesn't want to be held back by it. Yes, rudiments are important, he acknowledges, but "dynamics, tonality, melody and groove" come much higher up his list.

"Dynamics are so important. I want to express all the music I have in my mind and all its facets. A lot of people see drums as a loud instrument, and it can be but it depends on the drummer. Loud doesn't have the same impact if it's not set in the right context. If you know a quiet person who suddenly screams with anger it comes as a surprise and has a memorable effect. You have to give everything its own context."

When he's not playing, touring or performing at drum clinics, the enthusiastic Greb is a teacher at the Hamburg School of Music and the Popakademie in Mannheim, and is also head of the Bandcamp der Bayerischen Musikakademie Hammelburg.

He has an interesting take on playing and practicing - despite his fluid playing and the ever present smile, concentration is etched all over Greb's face when he's in the middle of a session. It's as if he is thinking about every beat, every snare hit, cymbal smash, flam, paradiddle and triplet. But it's not.

"I try not to think at all when I'm playing," he admits. "When it's a good day I don't have to think at all, it comes naturally. When I think it disturbs me, disrupts the rhythm. I don't want to think about who's watching, but I do want to feel the music. I'm not thinking about anything else. That's when it's most fun. There are, of course, nights when it couldn't happen that way. But it's best when everything fits into place naturally."

"I normally don't do clinics because I am playing with other human beings, trying to improvise, never playing the same thing. I always try to make my playing sound new, make it different to the last time I played that song. I want to interact with that audience, not go through the motions. It is almost like meditation for me."

When he returns to Germany after the latest round of clinics it will be back to one of his band projects, Jerobeam. "We are prepared for the producer to take things in another direction this time. It's exciting," he says with obvious delight at the chance to experiment and innovate away from the public gaze.

He is also writing music constantly, and plans to get involved in "more brass, jazzy stuff". Another new project is '3ergezimmer', while he has recently been on the road with the Ron Spielman Trio, Strom & Wasser, Jerobeam and early in 2007 Sabritulug - another jazz trio. Not to mention a live album, sensibly titled 'Absolutely Live' with the Ron Spielman Trio, released shortly after his 27th birthday in June. Greb says he writes music for the emotions and feel, not to showcase technique, despite having bags of it. "It's very important. It is key to what music is for me."



“ Everything is hard when you can't do it. We learn so much stuff as drummers that we tend to forget how long it took us to become good at something. ”

On practice, he says: "I don't really practice when I'm on tour because I can do what I need to with my performances. I warm up, but I don't really practice. But most of the time I'm really looking forward to getting back and practising again. Playing is not practising for me. It is a totally different approach. You practise so you can play better, not the other way around.

"I used to practise in phases. Half a year I would check out Latin grooves, another few months it would be jazz. Now I'm a lot more relaxed and just go where I feel with music and practising.

"I am lucky that I can do what I do, and people seem to like it. I try and be honest when I am playing or writing. I want that to come through. For me it's not about speed, or chops, I'm really trying to be myself."

Greb's got fast hands and fast feet, but remains modest about his abilities which have won him plenty of kudos among the drumming community, both amateurs and fellow pros. He shrugs off suggestions that his bass pedal playing is phenomenal, both in speed and control, albeit with that trademark grin.

"Everything is hard when you can't do it," he concedes. "We learn so much stuff as drummers that we tend to forget how long it took us to become good at something. But it's like life. We forget how long it took us to learn to walk, how long it took us to learn to talk and communicate. You have to take your time and work at it.

"I am always trying to improve. I don't want to look back and think that I might have stopped growing, have peaked. I am constantly looking to stretch my playing, my abilities. That's a lot of fun."

His set up, with one rack tom and three floors, allows him to play open handed and traditionally. He is clearly delighted that Meinl have given him his signature trash hats, with a 12 on top of a 14, which he loves playing and necessitates the need to be open-handed, although he has conventional hi-hats to his left. Not that it would matter, as Greb's got the hands of a magician and would probably be able to play his kit and three others all at the same time.

He has been impressing at clinics all over the world – at the annual Meinl Drum Fest, at Namm Show in Los Angeles, Drummer Live at Wembley Arena, Montreal Drum Fest and the World Drum Festival.

Drumming since he was seven he has recorded and performed with his bands Otterpost and Jerobeam, as well as recording with artists as diverse as Bobby McFerrin, Ron Spielman, Strom & Wasser and the Zappa Project of the NDR Orchestra. Despite the illustrious company he keeps, both at clinics, in performance and in the recording studio, Greb comes across as believing he has a long way to go before he is truly satisfied with his playing, which much worry some of his fellow sticksman. He also has a sense of humour and seems set on enjoying himself as much as possible in his music-making.



"That's why I'm here," he admits. "I love doing this. Why shouldn't it be fun?"

And who can argue with that?

Words: Mark Forster

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