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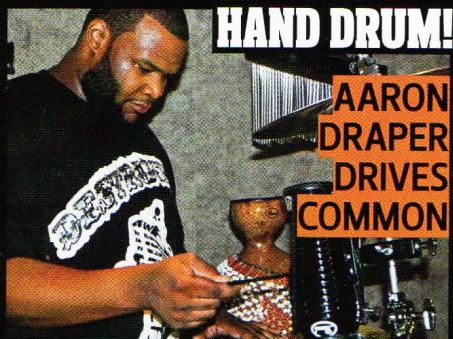
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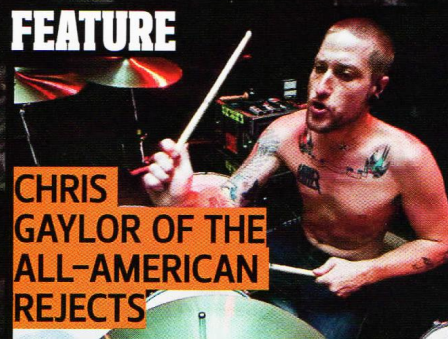
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FEATURE



CHRIS GAYLOR OF THE ALL-AMERICAN REJECTS

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Butch Norton

By Dave Constantin
Photo By Robert Downs

When Butch Norton was 15 years old, he dove headfirst into an alligator pit — granted, it was a metaphorical alligator pit, but that was the year he decided to throw in his lot as a professional musician, vowing to spend the rest of his life navigating a gauntlet of snapping, hungry jaws where one false move could mean ... a career at McDonalds. But here he is, 35 years later, sitting backstage at the Mountain Winery in Saratoga, California, enjoying a fat bowl of alligator stew — metaphorically, of course. In reality, he hasn't eaten for hours, the fast being an important part of his pre-gig ritual. Anyway, on this night, the butterflies in his gut are working overtime. In a few minutes he'll be playing his second show ever with his new instrumental rock-improv band, Buick Six, which also happens to be the backup band for folk-country superstar Lucinda Williams, who also happens to be the headliner tonight.

VITALS

BANDS Lucinda Williams/Buick Six

AGE 50

BIRTHPLACE Inglewood, California

INFLUENCES John Bergamo, Ringo Starr, Billy Cobham, John Bonham, Buddy Rich, Steve Gadd, Tony Williams, Terry Bozzio, Keith Moon

CURRENT RELEASES *Little Honey* (Lucinda Williams); *Buick Six* (Buick Six)

WEB SITES lucindawilliams.com; myspace.com/butchnorton

GEAR

DRUM Pork Pie

CYMBALS Paiste

STICKS Vater

HARDWARE DW

HEADS Remo

MICROPHONES Audix



**NAKED
COWBOY**

The doubleheader promises to call up a good chunk of Norton's percussive repertoire, which he's honed over the years playing with the likes of Tracy Chapman, Rufus Wainwright, Fiona Apple, Aimee Mann, and Tracy Bonham, not to mention his seven-year, five-album stint with the highly successful L.A. indie-rock band Eels. His drumming also graces the soundtracks of a few mainstream movies: *300*, *American Beauty*, *Shrek*, *Two For The Money*, *Dukes Of Hazzard*, and a couple of the Rob Zombie films. But it's a testament to how ruthless the pit can be that even a guy with Norton's experience still has to spill some blood now and again.

After his last tour with Tracy Chapman ended two years ago, the well suddenly went dry. "There was nothing for Butch," he says, his mellifluous, soft-rock DJ voice dropping, his eyebrows rising up under the brim of his ever-present white cowboy hat. "You know, there's the highs and the lows of being a player, and it was surreal. I put it to the universe, 'Okay, I need a gig.' But about a year and a half ago, I was not waiting for the calls anymore. I went out to

"I DO A LOT OF NAKED PERCUSSION. OR IN A DIAPER."

any little gig in town with any singer-songwriter playing the showcases. And then boom ... I got a call [from Lucinda Williams' management]: 'Drummer's leaving. We're in a bad bind. We have a week. Thirty-five songs. Are you ready?' And I said, 'Can I have rehearsal or maybe ...' Nope. No time. Norton was hired on the strength of his reputation alone, and he met Williams for the first time when they played together.

It was during the recording sessions for *Little Honey* where Buick Six was born. "It kind of was an extension of the Lucinda record," he says. "We started around there, and she said, 'You guys should be a band.'" So they jammed a bit before recording a self-titled debut album at ChessVolt Studios in Van Nuys, California, where Norton is a silent partner along with owner/sometime-collaborator

Peter Malick. "It's really cool," Norton says. "Kind of a Booker T & The MG's kind of vibe."

The evening light softens over the Santa Cruz Mountains as Buick Six takes the stage, launching into a half-hour instrumental set that takes them through a lively rendition of an old surf tune called "Pipeline," an impressive take on Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog," and a handful of original compositions. All of it, says Norton, is done in proper jam band mindset. "That's the whole idea: No practicing," he says. "It's a very free-flowing thing. I found out that the older I get, I'm playing simpler and leaving more space. I mean, I'm still doing some simple stuff [with Buick Six], but there's opportunity to use a little *chotch* ... The beauty of it and the pain of the whole thing is it could be a total disaster, which is kind of cool."

But of course, it isn't. Norton is no stranger to pushing boundaries, musical or otherwise. He had promised a surprise during the Buick Six set, and judging from his long history of shockingly inappropriate onstage hijinks (he once chased indie princess Poe around stage wearing nothing

but tennis shoes, threatening her with a banana he'd brought out clenched in his butt cheeks — no joke), it's hard to know what the surprise will be.

Turns out, it's nothing so scandalous. Halfway through the set, Norton moves from behind his drums and takes up position at a makeshift percussion rig consisting of a djembe, an enormous 30" ride, a large-diameter bodhrán (Irish frame drum) that sits on top of a washing machine basket, and, at his feet, some industrial-looking tube fitted with a 12" head — which is actually a heating duct he stole from a construction site when he was 16, reborn as a central prop in the Butch Norton side-show. Multi-instrumentalist Chet Lyster mans the kit while Norton takes a solo on the Frankenstein rig, and it's immediately clear this isn't just some backbeat goon trying out a new gimmick. The guy takes his passion for percussion seriously, going back to his Cal Arts days in the early '80s.

"I stopped playing kit for four-and-a-half, five years while I was there," he says. "I studied African, Javanese, Balinese, studied dance and movement

and sound. So I started making up all these instruments. And I have a huge collection of ethnic percussion. But my specialty is the drum set. That's always where I came from. And I do a lot of naked percussion," he says with a straight face. "Or in a diaper. I have this one piece — I wear a diaper and I come out with a big bass drum. And then I have my friend Texas Terry who is a punk rocker and she does this recitation that I wrote."

It's not easy to tell if he's kidding,

QUICK LICKS

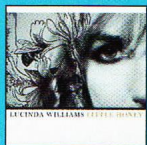
"Tears Of Joy" features Butch Norton laying down a classic 12/8 blues groove with lots of sensitivity and feel. His use of buzz strokes and ghost notes add character and subtle shadings to the spacious recording. All crashes are played gently with the head of the stick on the sweet spot of

the cymbal, and the extra-small ghost notes in the last four bars are to be performed at the lowest possible level. Note too that all sixteenth-notes are to be played swung to achieve the proper feel.

Transcription by Jason Gianni

♩ = ca. 59, swing 16ths
0:00

INSIDE TRACKS



Lucinda Williams
Little Honey
LOST HIGHWAY

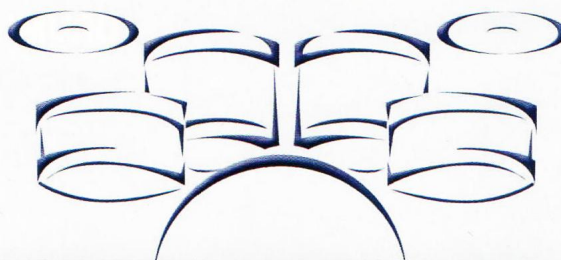
DRUMMERS BEAR a unique responsibility when backing a singer/song-writer. With bands, the song is seldom as important as the performance, and the group dynamic encourages the idea of everyone playing as one. These ideas apply less on *Little Honey* than the mission of presenting the song. Williams is a distinctive vocal stylist, with ideas about bringing out the lyric and the melody that connect directly to her vision of them as a writer. The musicians, then, have to focus on playing the nuances of the material and its interpretation. Mostly that involves holding back and following the leader. Norton does this impeccably, to the point of falling to a nearly inaudible pulse at the top of "Little Rock Star" — and when her words grow more urgent, he keeps that beat going while ramping up his attack and adding a few cymbal crashes. The more you feel the song, the better the drummer is doing — which means that even when you're not hearing Norton, you know he's delivering the goods.

By Robert L. Doerschuk

but as Lucinda Williams finally takes the stage, I can't help wondering if this upscale venue, full of middle-aged people sipping overpriced wine, is about to get an unexpected taste of Butch Norton's freaky side. It doesn't take long before that thought is extinguished, replaced by utter amazement at Norton's remarkably creative treatment of Williams' subdued, bluesy folk-rock.

Not only is Norton comfortable singing backup (something he's been doing since the '70s), he treats his 4-piece kit like an interactive art installation, constantly fiddling with the snare strainer, playing with his hands, changing out cymbals after every song, exciting a rack of chimes at key moments, even strapping rattles to his left ankle now and again for some added texture on the downbeat, but always with immaculate awareness of just what the song needs. It's proof that shock value isn't the only way to make your presence felt, and sometimes stepping softly is the best way to keep those hungry gators off your heels. ■

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