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# Butch

The Ultimate Percussion Cocktail



**A**fter spending an hour on the phone with the drummer for the eels the following fax came over: "David, thanks for the interview! For the record, my name is Jonathan Norton. I am a drummer called "Butch." Our name, eels, is all lowercase. I love America and hamburgers. Have a great holiday, Butch." While he doesn't say it outright, it's implied by both the note and our conversation that Butch and the band eels are out to have a whole lot of fun on the music scene.

**W**ant an example? After winning a Brit Award last year (the equivalent of a Grammy here in the States), Butch and lead singer "e" found the perfect place for it—holding an Alan Abel triangle mounted over Butch's crash cymbal. "The Brits didn't take that too well," he says. "They thought we were mocking them, which of course we were. That was the whole idea behind that because they're too damn serious."

Butch's laissez-faire attitude towards success in the music business is a bit surprising, especially considering the buzz that has been building around him and the inventive way he combines percussion and drumset in the eels. And he has paid the price for his ability: Butch has worked hard at his craft to get it to where it is today.

Hailing from a family of dentists and teachers—his description—Butch fell in love with the drums at the age of six. "My parents still don't understand where I got the musical thing from. Neither of them are musical," he says. "They're all still freaked out." They were ultra-supportive, though, allowing Butch to stay up and watch Buddy Rich whenever he

would appear on *The Tonight Show*. They also put up with the cacophony of '70s rock that the burgeoning drummer listened to, with drummers Ringo Starr, John Bonham, Keith Moon, Ginger Baker, and Charlie Watts. There were also players like Tony Williams and Billy Cobham, whom Butch got to see firsthand a number of times around the San Francisco area where he grew up.

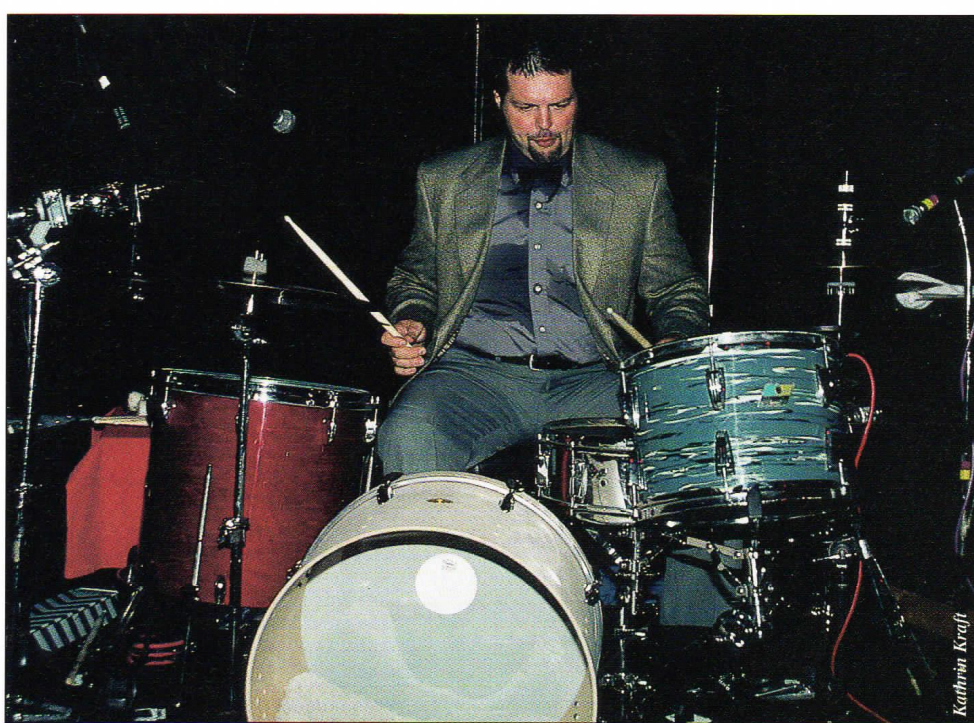
Outside of the rock and jazz world, Butch found symphony orchestra music to be stimulating. It was Anthony Cirone, from The San Francisco Symphony, who ultimately encouraged him to pursue music as a career after a summer workshop taught by Cirone, Charles Dowd (whose book *Funky Primer* Butch uses to this day), and Joe Sinai, who taught a class in orchestral cymbals. This was during the late '70s, and Butch admits with a slight laugh, "I was a horrible student. I was playing Top-40 at night and I wasn't as focused as I could have been. Even though I wasn't focused, Cirone said to me, 'Even if you're not going to be a classically trained guy, keep playing drums.'"

At the end of the workshop, Butch

was asked to play an extremely difficult cymbal part taught by Sinai. "It was a bitch of a cymbal part," he says. "There's no way I could play it correctly, but I did it the best I could." As Butch was standing around after the show with his mom and Cirone, the eighty-year-old Sinai came up and *blasted* him for his poor performance. As Butch remembers it, Cirone suggested that he listen to the message, but ignore the messenger. "He told me, 'Keep following the path that you need to follow.' That made a huge impression on me at the time, and that was a turning point. I said, 'Man I gotta get back and find out more about some of the serious stuff.'"

With that new attitude, Butch moved down to Los Angeles and enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts to get a bachelor of fine arts in percussion. He started to study ethnic percussion with John Bergamo, and literally stopped playing drumkit. "I concentrated on all the great stuff that was there," he says, "a lot of the ethnic stuff, which is where I got most of the hand drum foundation that I have today." Butch started to concentrate on tabla, then discovered





African, Balinese, Japanese, jazz, and experimental music. He also got into music for dance, and he accompanied dance productions and wrote music for dance students at Cal Arts. "I tried to hang out with as many female dancers as I could, really," he jokes. "That was pretty much my goal."

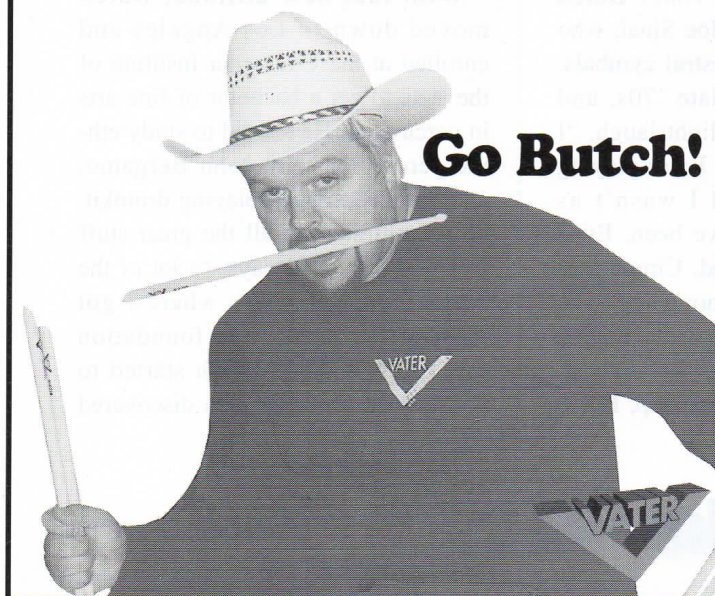
Those dance sessions enormously influenced the way Butch plays today. "Dance

started making me aware of my body," he explains, "how it relates to the drumset choreographically. I started to think about how I moved around the drumset. I became more aware of posture and a whole bunch of different things related to movement. It really started me thinking, opened my eyes, and changed up my drumset a lot."

That said, it was the percussion experi-

mentations at Cal Arts that really broadened Butch's perspective. "I stopped playing drumset because I was looking for something beyond drums," he says. "I knew there was something that came before drumset, and fortunately I was aware of percussion and the role it played in the drumset. That really started opening my eyes to how much more was out there,

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how much more I needed to learn, and how much more I wanted to incorporate in my drumset playing with other sounds and percussion."

After a couple of years at Cal Arts, Butch opted out to concentrate more on playing. He landed a job as the head accompanist for the dance school, which enabled him to continue to take lessons at school and perform in Cal Arts ensembles. He also started playing casuals and wedding gigs with a Los Angeles-based band, September. Though he had put his Top-40 drummer hat away when he got to Cal Arts and started to study intensely, he admits the cover band dates before and after school were fun. "I paid my dues, but those were great times," he says. "I got a lot of things out of my system, and I learned how to appreciate what I'm doing now. I was playing six nights a week, four and a half hours a night, to two or three people, watching the Monday Night Football game while I was playing on autopilot."

This was the middle '80s, and while it seems that nearly every other drummer in the world was turning to something electronic to tweak their sound, Butch stayed



acoustic. "I had a hard time in the '80s because I did not and *would* not get into electronics," he urges. "I do not own any piece of electronic equipment, other than a metronome. Everything I buy or acquire is

acoustic in nature." Part of that dedication to authenticity, he adds, comes from his own likes and dislikes when he goes to see a band. "I have this thing: I like to see musicians hitting or playing an instrument and hear the sound coming from the instrument, as opposed to pads."

That dedication to "real" sound has led Butch to find ways to alter drum tones with his own hands. "With a small kit, there are so many sounds you can make on a real drum or real instrument by manipulating it," he says. Counting twentieth-century composers John Cage and Harry Partch as influences—they would take an instrument like a piano and change its tone by placing paper clips between the strings or marbles on top of them—Butch constantly plays the mad scientist behind the kit. "That's how I think of the drumset. Sometimes I tape a piece of plastic on my snare drum and it'll change the sound, or I'll take a tom-tom and throw a towel over it, or I'll take a jingle from a tambourine and attach it to a tom."

That philosophy of acoustic and found sounds fits in perfectly with the concept that e has for the eels. "For me, eels is

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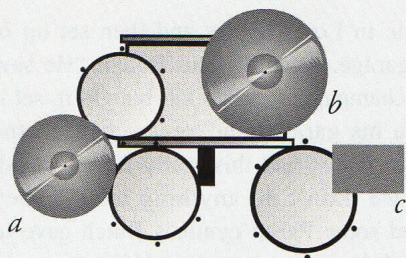
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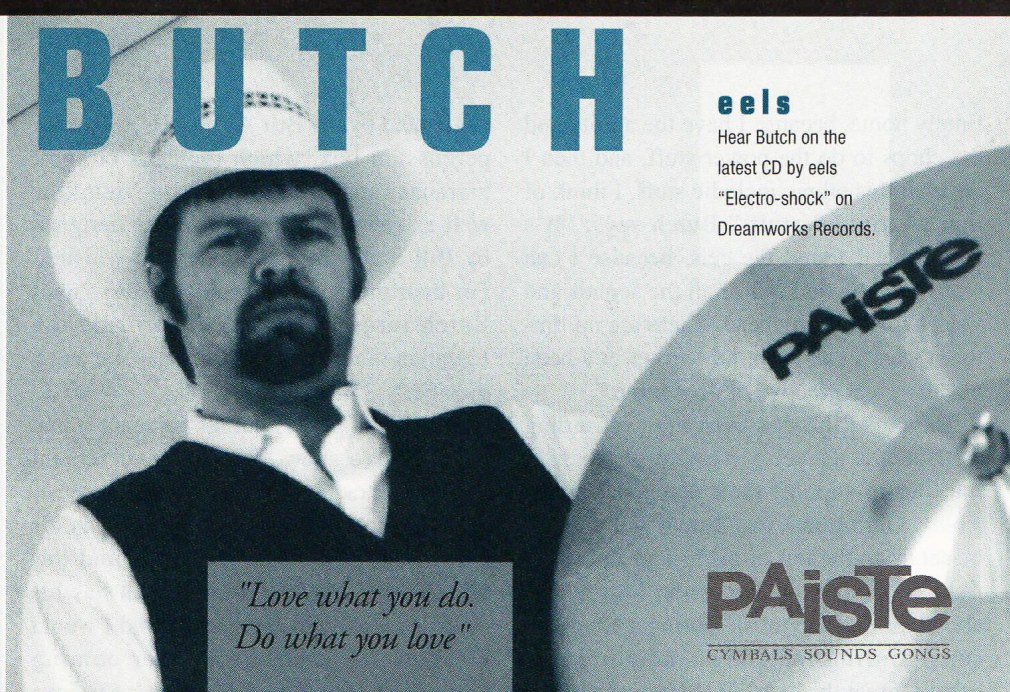
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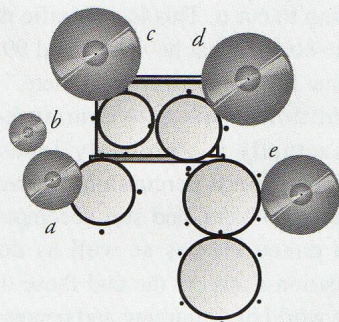
## eels

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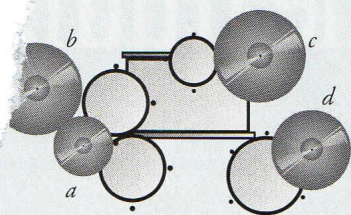
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## abe

### kd lang

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finally home, because I have the ability and the chops to do the power stuff, and then I have all this ethnic melodic stuff. I think of that as 'tinkly' stuff," Butch says. "It's lucky that I found the eels, because I can really explore and utilize all the sounds and voices I hear in my head. There are no limits to what I can do in this group. It's been a really great creative outlet for me."

The outlet that has been *most* rewarding for Butch is the eels' live show, especially the tour to support their debut, *Beautiful Freak*. During that tour Butch had a djembe set up to the left of his hi-hat, and to his right was a box of percussion instruments above his crash cymbal. During a couple of songs during the show, including the band's breakthrough hit, "Novocaine For The Soul," he would play with his hands. "I would play the snare with my right hand and then I would do the bass tones with the djembe with my left hand." The kit also included a 16x20 Ludwig kick drum, a Remo plastic-head tambourine with a single row of jingles, plus a djembe he used as a floor tom, two sets of hi-hats, a crash cymbal, a triangle, and a finger cymbal.

On the tour to support the band's latest offering, *Electro-Shock Blues*, Butch has altered his kit a bit, including a Slingerland 14x20 *Radio King* kick, a 1976 Slingerland *Buddy Rich* 5x14 brass/chrome snare, a '70s Ludwig 9x13 tom, and a 1982 Gretsch 16x16 floor tom. He also plays 15" Paiste 602 medium hi-hats and a *Paiste* 18" power crash, as well as the Alan Abel tri-

angle held by the Brit Award. He's kept the percussion box, which includes bongos, maracas, and tambourines by Meinl, as well as sleigh bells, a *Bell Helix* designed by Bill Saragosa, and some bird whistles. For their promotional acoustic radio shows Butch turns to tabla, a Remo riqq (an Egyptian tambourine), some shakers, and a djembe.

Though he gets to put his personal stamp on their live show, Butch's involvement during the tracking of eels albums is somewhat limited. As he says, the band is e's brainchild: "He is the master behind this whole thing, and he pretty much has his definite ideas. This is his child and I would be like the surrogate mother coming along." On the *Beautiful Freak* sessions Butch was asked to overdub the snare and ride cymbal on the title track, he and then-bassist Tommy played along to a guitar and vocal track for "Not Ready Yet," and the whole band completely recut "Mental."

On *Electro-Shock Blues* e had again completed much of the album in between a number of family crises and the tour to support *Beautiful Freak*, although Butch had an opportunity to co-write the song "Hospital Food." "I went into the studio one day and said to play him some grooves," Butch explains. "I played for about an hour, and then he pieced the song together off my drum tracks."

"Hospital Food" and much of the rest of the album was recorded with a '60s Slingerland kit e bought at Black Market

Music in Los Angeles and then set up in his garage. According to Butch, "He saw this champagne sparkle kit, bought it, set it up in his garage, and never changed the heads. It just had this really funky sound, and we didn't do anything to it." They added some Paiste cymbals Butch gave to e, and then got to work tracking a couple songs with just one overhead microphone.

For Butch the challenge in being a part of the eels is much more than just coming up with a part for a song. "The challenge for me is to help e achieve his vision. That's what the deal is in this situation. In other situations, with other bands I've been with, I might have more of an active role or less of an active role to a certain degree. He comes in with ideas and things that are set, and I'll play along with them. I might take them in a different direction, but the way it works is if it doesn't fit his vision, it ain't going to cut it. This is a specific thing where he knows what he wants, and 99.9% of the time I'm completely right there."

In addition to his eels commitment, Butch (actually it's probably Jonathan Norton) plays in a percussion duo and a reggae/calypso band, and still accompanies modern dance classes as well as doing select session dates. In the end those dates keep the world of drumming and percussion new for him. "I'm at a point where it's *all* fresh," he says. "I have a perfect setup right now with my career. I'm a very lucky guy."



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