

Dom Famularo

Interview by Sean Mitchell // November 02 2008



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There is an Italian proverb, “Chi la dura la vince,” that when translated to English means “He who perseveres wins at last.” To express oneself in a language as beautiful as Italian is to know the meaning of passion. So profound too is the fervor created when Dom Famularo takes his place behind a drum kit.

When I first saw Dom play, I honestly believe that was the day I learned what true passion was. Here was this man who stood among a crowd of a few hundred and captivated every single soul in that room. A crowd not just listening, but taking in an event everyone seemed to know would change their lives forever. As he spoke, it was clear he had never encountered an apathetic or casual listener. No, this was a man who was here not only to educate but to inspire, as if sent to be the guardian of a new era in the percussive arts. One of limitless imagination, boundless ideals and unfettered foresight. One who honors those who have gone before us, while embracing change and growth. Dom began his solo not flailing wildly as if to beat his toms into submission, but telling the story of his first born son who, at that time, had just come into the world. Gracing the edge of each cymbal with the butt end of his stick, as if to mimic the bells of some old rustic cathedral, it was so prolifically clear in that moment that Dom had a very deep connection to the experience of becoming a parent. This was passion. This was how one communicates that which can be felt but cannot be defined. As he built up to the apex of his solo, I felt for the poor guy who had to follow this Famularo fellow. But so many who have had to follow Dom onstage are blessed with the knowledge that he will always and forever be there to guide and inspire.

As much as he is a drummer, Dom is a fan of drummers. Dom's is a story not just of belief, but of knowing: Those who persevere will find that success was not the goal, it was in fact the path. Ladies and gentlemen my friend, Dom Famularo.

Dom, there is one thing I remember you telling me and since then it has always inspired me: You have never worked a 9 to 5 job in your life. How does one become a drummer full-time without ever having to take a typical "job" to put bread on the table?

I have never worked a 9 to 5 job. I've never had anyone above me to give me directions in a job that I did not live passionately for. And that's a choice that I believe we all have the ability to make. But with that choice comes consequences and challenges, but also comes opportunities. I think that one of the ingredients that you have to have is a true belief in yourself, and then you have to have courage, the courage to follow through with it. Because everyone will tell you it cannot be done.

It comes down to that sometimes you have to believe so much in what you're doing and you have to have the courage to pursue this and the perseverance which basically means that quitting is not an option. You gotta understand what that means. That means that it's just not an option. I believe so much in my vision that I will make this happen, and if it cannot happen the way that I initially see it, I'm going to find other ways to make it happen. So I might have to change my strategy a little but I never change my vision.

When somebody would argue with me about my vision I'd ask them, "Do you believe in God?" And the answer was always well absolutely. And I'd say, "Have you met God? How far would you go for your belief in God?" And they always went to the 'enth degree. I said, "Gee, isn't that funny that you have this faith and belief in something that you have no real evidence and proof of, but yet in your gut you know it's there." That's what I used as my fuel.

Let's go down memory lane. Do you remember your first gig?

I sure do, very clear, as a matter of fact. I think of it often because it was with my brothers in a band called the Seven Upbeats, which was a Tijuana brass band back in the late sixties, and it was a band that had horns in it. We began to write pop tunes and put brass behind it, and this was kind of just at the cutting edge before Chicago and Blood Sweat and Tears. We worked a lot.

Mike Rothstein was the drummer in the band and then Mike quit the band. He had other opportunities to play, so they had no drummer. Well the band used to rehearse at our house, I'd listen to all the tunes and I knew the tunes. I was twelve at the time and I had a pretty decent beat. I really didn't have much for chops or technique for big fills and solos, but I knew enough of the parts to hold that band together.

So I joined the band and we played our first performance at Baldwin High School which was the school that my brothers were going to. I was in Baldwin Junior High School. So if you can imagine being in a band and your first appearance is in front of your peers where they're gonna come by and unfortunately judge the band. The band was already a good band so when I came in it was like, Well, who is this guy? So naturally they figured I was only getting the position because I was the brother. The fact is I knew the tunes and was at every rehearsal.

Boy, I was so nervous. They actually fed us beforehand and I couldn't even eat 'cause my body was shaking so much. At that point, it was all about me; it was all about what are my friends gonna say? Am I gonna remember the parts? Am I good enough? I was putting all these levels of doubt on me, hence the result was me being extremely nervous.

We played the gig, it went great; we got a standing ovation, of course. All my friends accepted me. When I think back on that I try not to lose touch that it's no longer ever about me, it's about the audience.

How did you earn the title Drumming's Global Ambassador? Who coined the term?

That was Modern Drummer. Ron Spagnardi had pulled me aside one day. He said, "Dom, there's nobody traveling at the pace that you're travelling that's doing as good for the service of the percussion industry. You just inspire kids to play."

When I go to a clinic there are people that play drums that come by to be inspired and there are people that are thinking about starting drums. I want to continue to inspire those who are playing drums and then spark the passion for those to bring them into the art of playing drums. That increases more drummers, that helps sales, that helps in the art form, that helps the giant wave of this enthusiastic feeling that we have.

To me, it's that incredible feeling of capturing that. By doing that and traveling the world as an ambassador would do, that's kind of where that title came out. Whenever I hear that it embarrasses me and humbles me at the same time.

Tell me about the Stephane Chamberland-Dom Famularo connection. How did it get started?

Stephane came to me at the age of 17. He heard me performing in Quebec City and he came up to me--his English was poor at best--and he basically said, "I wanna take lessons with you down in New York. How you play and how you speak, I want you in my life to guide me along the path." I could sense his passion, but I said to him, "You're going to have to learn English in order to learn the nuances of me teaching you. You have to understand the language. So give me a call when you understand the language." And only because it wouldn't be fair to him to make the trip down to invest all that time and money into not capturing most of what I'm saying. So to be fair to him, this is what he needed to do.

I got a call about eight months later on from Stephane and he said, "Hello Dom, this is Stephane Chamberland. I'd like to come down and book some lessons." I said, "Stephane, your English is excellent." He said, "Yeah, I moved to Toronto for about eight months and took English lessons non-stop until I got the language down. Here I am, let's get started." So that commitment right there was extremely inspiring for me as a teacher. So he came down and made the 17 hour trip by bus each way, and stayed a few days and learned, and we made it happen. And he continued on for many, many years, and eventually he got his own car and drove down, which took him less time than the bus, but still it's about a 12 hour drive. So that level of commitment really is incredible.

And with that, Stephane has not only proven his great skills as a player, but as a teacher. We put together a studio in Quebec City which is affiliated with my studio The Wisdom Drumshed. He's proven himself as a player, teacher and clinician. He's done 40 or 50 clinics a year that I've guided him along the path--in schools around the area of course and at different retail stores throughout Canada. He has also proven himself as an author. I have a book called The Weaker Side which I had kind of envisioned the process, but I needed some assistance. With my travelling around the world I can't write every book on my own, so I have to bring people in to assist me. So I pulled Stephane in, and he is incredibly skilled with computer skills and techniques (Finale and all sorts of notation programs). So I would handwrite the ideas and go back and forth with Stephane by way of email, and he put the book together. And we made it happen. The Weaker Side came to light.

What do you do to unwind?

A couple things, Sean. First, I don't wind myself up to need to be unwound. I maintain a pace of relaxation all the time. So even though I might be under intensity of performing, that's not winding myself up, that's me exerting energy for something that I love doing. Therefore I'm able to maintain this pace year round because of that philosophy.

When I do step away from music, first and foremost is my family. I've got three wonderful boys that are just absolutely a joy and fun to be around. We learn, we go through trials and tribulations of life, and it's incredible. My best partner in the world is my wife Charmaine who is a person that always fills my skies and oceans with love. That allows me to enjoy my family and career.

That to me is where I focus my energy because it really is about my children and my family. That paves the way wherever my future will go. When you're having one big fun party all your entire life there's no need to unwind, there's only the need to enjoy the party!

Who are the players of today that strike you as being the legends to watch for in the future?

There are a lot of them. We mentioned Stephane Chamberland. I think he's absolutely one of them.

There's Ryan Carver. Ryan Carver is a phenomenal talent in the New Jersey area, not only as a player and a teacher, but his skills of notation, writing and exercise ideas are very creative and different. And Ryan is a phenomenal personality who is very focused on what his desires are in this art form, so he's another great strength and pillar of the industry.

Joe Bergamini. Joe's doing incredible teaching and Broadway shows, editing books around the globe, and is an incredible clinician himself. Again, a great person who has the qualities necessary for a leader. Being a leader is not just about being a good player. There are so many other qualities that are needed. You've got to be great at your artistic skills, at your business skills, at your education skills, and at your communication skills. These guys have that for sure.

Claus Hessler, an incredible drummer from Germany, who is just absolutely a phenomenal person and player. He's got a book that I worked with him on called Open Handed Playing (Alfred Publications), which is the concept of playing open handed where you not crossing your hands. It just brands that name that Billy Cobham started in the late 1950's of playing this way of not crossing your hands and using your weaker side as the advantage of riding. What an incredible, powerful way to approach the drum set, and I think this really is the way of playing in the 21st century. Claus Hessler is someone that has incredible facility that I think will be a leader in those four areas as an educator, business person and of course his communication skills are just phenomenal in both his language of German and English.

How does Dom Famularo define "the pocket"?

To me, music is about a feeling. The pocket is a unified feel that is then communicated to one or more people, and they can then feel and relate to that feel. It's really about the message. So the pocket is being able to play a "feel" that can be communicated so that that message can be understood. If you're playing something and it's not understood then there pretty much is no pocket. It's much like me speaking in a way and not putting all my words together, whereas you go back and try to transcribe it and you have no idea what I just said. If you don't understand what I'm saying, there's no pocket to how I spoke because the message wasn't

delivered. So the feel comes down to it. When I think of the players Steve Gadd, Vinnie Colaiuta, Jeff Porcaro, Carlos Vega or Larrie Londin, these great artists had so much feel that when they played they immediately connected with the audience to pull them into that feel. That's the pocket. And once you have that feel communicated, there's no greater high that can be given in the process.

That's why I think playing to music and playing with live bands is very important. If you're playing a tune and someone else is listening-- it might be your neighbor, or your sister, or your brother-- and they connect to that tune, you're in the pocket. But as soon as you're in that pocket and you stop and say, 'Wow, I'm in the pocket,' the pocket's gone. You can only live in the pocket if you are in the moment of the pocket and not understanding or analyzing it; you're just feeling it. It's like feeling love with my family. If I'm hugging them and I'm analyzing, 'Wow, I'm hugging my children or I'm hugging my wife,' then I'm not in the hug. Well, the hug is the pocket. If we both hug and we both feel, two people communicating, that's the pocket.

Dom, what are we going to see in twenty or thirty years from now when we see the results of the internet generation of players coming to fruition?

With the net, we have access to so much education and so many styles. Their bar has already been set so high. Where can the craft evolve from here? Where are we going? Not only has the bar been raised, the bar or ceiling has been removed. Big difference in that. Our bar was raised when we went from 78 records to 33, and we were able to have more information. Then we went to cassettes, then we went to CDs, then we went to downloadable music, so the bar kept on being raised.

There is absolutely no limit because of what the internet has given. I say things that might even sound archaic in the future: YouTube or MySpace. The internet as we know it now will be greatly changed that we will have the presence of great artists in front of us performing in these visions of holograms. We'll see Elvin Jones playing on our desk. And this will happen. That's why I'm saying the bar hasn't been raised, it's been removed. It is incredible the opportunity of information that is being given, at the pace it's being given, and at the quality it's being given to this generation. The real challenge is how to absorb it. That's the greatest challenge right now: if they can pace themselves and be truly disciplined to take this information in byte by byte. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

Talking to a 12 year old, within just a couple of months they can learn what took me five years to learn. So there's so much more valuable information. Now if they can stay focused on the cause or the message--that it's about being in that pocket to transform that message to move someone else, that it's not about "me," it's about them--if they can maintain that and keep the cycle happening with the information they're taking in to the output they're putting out.

See, what I ask for now is for this next generation to raise the standard of the quality of music. The music, to me, and the artistic expression has been challenged because we're not getting enough chord structures and enough positive message in the music.

You know, the jazz music of our time was about this feeling of jazz that came from the birth of this country America, that we offered this music from this republic that came out based on freedom. Then jazz grew out of that freedom, that improvisational freedom. We came into the Beatles in the '60s and they offered us music about love: "All You Need is Love," "I Wanna Hold your hand". These were songs that were about bringing people together. So that was the message. Now with the message that some of the music is being given, it's a message about too much violence, it's about too much negativity. They're focusing on unfortunately the wrong aspect of what you want to empower people with.

I gave the keynote speech at the Musician's Institute, one of the schools out on the west coast of California, and it was a poignant reason as it was one of the largest graduating classes. And with the parents that were there, there were probably close to 2000 people at this theatre. I walked out in front of all these people with large video screens above me focusing on my face, and I had that time to tell them about the responsibilities they have as the next generation facing this world: to give us this music that will inspire us and motivate us and bring people to a higher level of love, to bring this world to a higher level of closeness, to bring peace to the power of our music. I believe the talent is out there and I believe that they have the right information to do it. Now it comes down to, do they have the right heart and the right reason to do it? And I believe they do.

So I asked them all at that school, "I believe you can. Now do me one favor: prove me right. Prove me right, so that when my children become my age and they hear music, that I might have been just a part of that seed that was planted to create music. That my children will never know that my influence did it, but when they go out to purchase a song 20 to 30 years from now, I might have been a part of that message that was delivered well beyond my lifetime."

That, to me, is where we're going.