

WEB EXCLUSIVE

Bow Thayer's Jeff Berlin On His Solo Album Random Misfires

Berlin continues to reclaim musical ground and technical facility he thought he might lose forever.

by Will Romano



Jeff Berlin

Gut-wrenching may only begin to describe it. After a series of strokes in 2015, Vermont-based veteran drummer Jeff Berlin underwent extensive physical rehabilitation, forcing him to alter deeply ingrained lifestyle habits and virtually relearn how to play the drumkit.

Months upon months of grueling therapy was challenging both for the body and the soul, but Berlin's protracted healing process culminated in the drummer's first major solo work, 2018's *Random Misfires*, completed with the help of Morphine saxophonist/woodwind player Dana Colley and guitarist Pete Weiss. To hear Berlin tell it, regaining his motor skills has made him a more complete musician and composer.

Berlin continues to reclaim musical ground and technical facility he thought he might lose forever. His playing is as spritely and complex as ever, as evidenced by his work on the recently release *A Better Version of the Truth*, a studio effort Berlin recorded with longtime collaborator and banjo-wielding multi-instrumentalist Bow Thayer.

Modern Drummer spoke with Berlin about his solo material, the impact his debilitating strokes have had on his playing, and in what way his slinky, funk-ed-up rhythmic patterns have helped forge the sound of Thayer's proggy Americana *Roots Rock*.

MD: Let's start at the beginning. How long have you been playing?

Jeff: Since I was four. I've appeared on fifty or sixty records over the years. *Random Misfires* was my first foray into songwriting.

MD: What was the origin of these tracks?

Jeff: I had solo drum pieces kicking around, some of them for decades. Others came about recently in my recovery from my medical issues. Regaining fluidity with my right hand and doing some weird patterns, some I would not have done prior to my strokes, has opened up a lot of doors for me. It's a combination of old and new drum parts kind of inspired by Max Roach's "The Drum Also Waltzes." I recorded about eighteen drum pieces back in April of 2017. A lot of the pieces started with the drum parts and then I would add a bass line and try a melody on top of it. I wanted to keep the instrumentation sparse.

MD: *Random Misfires* stresses the presence of drums without being a traditional "drum record." How did you manage that?

Jeff: I remember seeing Dave Weckl way back with the Chick Corea Elektric Band. He did this vamp and slowly elaborated on an initial theme. It was moving, but there was no crazy drum gymnastics involved. It was musical. I was drawn to that, as I tend to like concise compositions. If you notice, there's no room for solos on *Random Misfires*.

MD: What drums did you use to record?

Jeff: The bulk of the drum tracks were done with an old Gretsch kit from the late 1970s. It's a 14" rack, an 18" floor tom, and 14x24 bass drum. I tune them high. Gretsch has that bark in the midrange, and if you tune them low they get lost in the mix.

MD: How did you record the drum tracks?

Jeff: For the bulk of the tracks I went into a studio in southern Vermont, Verdant Studio, and recorded the drums with Pete Weiss, who did the engineering. Others were done in my living room, here in Vermont, with two microphones. In mixdown Pete was impressed that the two drum sounds blended kind of seamlessly.

MD: How did the rhythmic pattern in "Melodican" come about?

Jeff: Really through rehabilitating my right side—my right foot and right hand. I was messing around, doing patterns between the two limbs. I came up with this little bit of melody. It extends over eight bars. The weird sound effects in that track are the Korg Wavedrum. I was just scratching the surface with that thing. There are many sounds in there.

MD: Is the ringing in "Baby Elephants" bells or guitar strings?

Jeff: My grandfather used to have a kegerator to dispense beer. It came with CO2 tanks, two tiny seamless aluminum tanks. For some reason I kept them. I thought they had a really beautiful bell-like tone. After I recorded that song, I said, "I hear an agogô bell part, but I don't want an agogô bell." I went down to the basement and devised a little contraption upon which I could suspend these two tanks using wires and a cymbal stand. I overdubbed them using a mallet.

MD: Did you write the sax line for "Baby Elephants"?

Jeff: There's four songs with sax, all played by Dana [Colley] from Morphine, the Boston-based band. I've known him for years and played with him in different settings. I wrote all the melodies.

MD: "Winged Man" is in a funky odd time.

Jeff: "Winged Man" is direct from my prog=rock DNA. It's in 17/16. That was one of the beats I've had for probably the last dozen years. I've introduced it to bass players and they would try to hop onto the 16th notes and play this busy line. They didn't seem to get it. I had to write my own bass line.

MD: What inspired the title of Random Misfires?

Jeff: I had this GMC pickup for ten years, and the check-engine light had been on for eight of those ten years. It kept telling me when I hooked up a [diagnostics device], “Random Engine Misfire.” It wouldn’t tell me exactly what was wrong, but I used the phrase “random misfire” because it tied in with what happened with my brain. It was a misfire.

MD: You suffered multiple strokes in 2015.

Jeff: August of 2015 was when I had the first minor stroke. We have some land here in Vermont, and I was hiking up the hill with my dogs. There’s this one little spot along the creek, a narrow path [to walk alongside the creek]. When I was walking I felt my whole body pulling to the right. I thought I was going to fall into the water. I pulled to my left to stay on the path. It was a weird feeling. It wasn’t painful, but it’s hard to describe. I continued on my hike but I didn’t feel right. I had band rehearsal that night with Bow Thayer, and when I was trying to do more difficult things behind the kit, it was a struggle. The following day my wife and I drove down to Pennsylvania for my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary, and I felt horrible. I got there and slept for three hours. We decided to come back up here to the hospital. They checked me in and said I had a minor stroke. I was in the hospital for a couple of days, and they gave me blood pressure medications. I do have a history in my family of high blood pressure, and I definitely had it.

MD: What happened next?

Jeff: A month later I had a show with Bow Thayer and I stayed overnight. I came home the next day and I was in the kitchen making coffee and went numb. I almost fell over. I said, “Oh, my God. It’s happening again.” I said to my wife, “Warm up the car. I’m packing a bag. We’re going.” That second round was a more significant [stroke]. Then, two or three nights later, I had another one.

MD: In the hospital?

Jeff: Yeah. In the hospital, they check your coordination each day. One day it was looking okay, and the next day I was back to square one. Living a musician’s lifestyle, you’re playing in bars, you’re out late, and there’s drinking involved. I was a moderate to heavy drinker. It was a bad habit that developed into a way of life. [The hospital] basically said that [drinking] coupled with slightly high cholesterol caused a blood clot. Back in November 2015 I decided to give up my love of great beers and bourbons. I have been sober ever since.

MD: Doctors were telling you to quit alcohol?

Jeff: They didn’t say stop drinking, or eat this, or don’t eat that. Generally they said live a healthy lifestyle. I generally do. I have an active lifestyle and I have a workout routine.

MD: How did you adjust to this experience?

Jeff: It was a real life-changer. I was using a walker. I had physical therapists come to the house. I had to relearn everything with my right hand and right foot. At some point, a couple weeks after I got home from the hospital, I had enough courage to hobble my way over to the drumkit and sit behind it. I said, "I'm just going to try to make some noise on it." I remember having to lift my right leg onto the bass drum pedal. It was like my leg was dead. I couldn't get the beater to hit the bass drum head. That was when it hit me like a ton of bricks.

MD: How did you regain your facility on the drums?

Jeff: Playing keyboards helped, and I think my chops are better in my right hand than they were before, almost. I'm a lefty, and I play a right-handed kit, open handed, like Billy Cobham or Simon Phillips. But I can't do some of the fast doubles and stuff with my right foot. I used to have a pretty fast right foot, but I'm adjusting my technique to a more heel-down, rocking technique. I'm getting pretty good at it, to where I can pull off some fancy stuff live. Because of the limitations the strokes forced on me, I have incorporated floor toms into my playing.

MD: Your physical rehabilitation was successful, you'd say?

Jeff: I'm pretty much back to normal. I feel as though I have my mojo behind the kit. There's always going to be some physical limitations, because of the nerve damage in my right leg. When I think of all the different ways this could have gone—I mean I could be in a wheelchair, I could be dead. I feel really lucky not only to be alive, but to play music again.

I've also been experimenting with different bass drum beaters. I got something called a Low Boy. Then I talked to a guy named Rich Farago, who makes something called Dynamic Beaters. The beater shaft is plastic. He has a manufacturer who uses a 3-D printer. The idea is that the beater flexes, but just slightly. When you think about how you use a stick in your hand, you have your fingers, wrist, and arm to absorb the shock. It's a beautiful fluid motion. The beater is caveman-like physics. Rich's idea was for the beater to have a little bit of give and you get a spring and a rebound. I'm waiting for him to send one of his prototypes to me.

MD: How were you introduced to that?

Jeff: I think it was a banner ad on the Modern Drummer website. I clicked on it and thought this was revolutionary.

MD: Any specific drum exercises you've done or still do to stay fluid?

Jeff: I work on playing different tempos of jazz beats, the jazz ride pattern, to develop my right hand. I do paradiddles between my right hand and right foot. I never had blazing chops, although I've fooled a couple of people into thinking I did. About 99 percent of what I do is based on double strokes and paradiddles. My single-stroke rolls are not Tony Williams-esque, shall we say. When in doubt I'll resort to a double stroke or a paradiddle or paradiddle-diddle.

MD: Are those paradiddles in "Random Misfires"?

Jeff: It's a pattern that alternates between right hand, left hand, right foot, left foot. The right hand is moving to different sound sources. The left hand, right foot, and left foot are staying the same each time I move across the kit. It's based on a rhythm that I couldn't write out if my life depended on it, but it's in 4/4.

MD: You appear on a recent Bow Thayer release, A Better Version of the Truth.

Jeff: We were doing the pre-production on it, and when I had my strokes the record was put on hold. Then we met this young bass player, Alex Abraham. He was working with us on this new material, and last spring, out of the blue, no warning, he took his own life. That sent us into a tailspin. He was a sweet guy, a talented bass player. He was twenty-seven years old. He really didn't give any indication that he needed help. His brother had done the same thing two years prior. It was the last record that Alex played bass on. Needless to say, it was an incredibly hard record to make.

MD: The stuff you've had to overcome just to release music.

Jeff: I really have no choice. I've been playing since I was four years old. It's not a hobby for me. It's what I have to do to feel complete.

MD: Is another solo record forthcoming?

Jeff: I've already recorded a few of the songs.

MD: Does the upcoming record have a title yet?

Jeff: I'm calling it Double Down. I have a song that I wrote on the piano that will be the title track.

MD: What's the significance of the phrase?

Jeff: I'm doubling down on my newfound composing skills, if you want to call them that. Also, there were times during my recovery process where I wasn't just down but double down. It's an incredible

mental challenge to have the patience to get through the recovery—just the pace of recovery. You have no choice in the matter.

MD: You've experienced a lot in the last four years.

Jeff: There's more. Four years ago, after I had my strokes, an old musician friend of mine arranged a concert in a club in Somerville. They raised about \$4,000 for me, because of the high deductible costs and me being out of work. The following year they said we should make it an annual event and pick a charity. We found these two women, cancer survivors, who go to children's hospitals with boxloads of arts and crafts. They take over a room in the hospital and invite kids with cancer and their parents and families for an arts-and-crafts day. They're called Our Space Rocks.

MD: Music as therapy.

Jeff: Little kids with cancer, they just want to have fun and not be in pain. Finding this charity was taking something that a lot of my friends did for me and turning into something for someone else.

MD: It's like a ministry.

Jeff: Yeah. [laughs] I'm spreading the Gospel of Art and Music.

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