

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Devildriver drummer John Boecklin talks slowing down, finding the space between the beats, and the small matter of ringworm...

Words: Joel McIver Images: Carla Boecklin

Modern metal differs from the old stuff in several important ways. One is that the new school take their influences from a huge melting pot of sounds, from vintage thrash and death metal acts from the 1980s, via 90s stadium rock and even prog and nu-metal groups. As a result, there's no real sub-categorisation like we had in the old days, where we could comfortably point to Megadeth and label them thrash metal, or at Iron Maiden and call them heavy metal, or at Morbid Angel and pigeonhole them as death metal. It's just not like that these days. Your modern bands, and by extension your modern drummers, have to be able to do it all. Skank beats, blastbeats, gravity rolls... It's no easy task.

Fortunately, Devildriver drummer John Boecklin is a master of pretty much everything on the contemporary heavy metal menu. Over the Californian band's five albums to date, Boecklin has delivered a mesmerisingly powerful blend of beats, specialising in devastating single and double-note fills and double-kick drum fusillades. All this sonic violence peaked on 2011's *Beast* album, an appropriately bestial slab of metal on which he laid down the drumming law in no uncertain terms.

Well, that's the back story – but when *Drummer* meets him before a London show in March supporting death metal veterans Cannibal Corpse, he tells us that he has reached something of a watershed in drumming terms. Listen and learn, headbangers...

"We've been really, really busy since June 2012," Boecklin explains. "We basically decided to create a really hectic schedule for ourselves, so we wrote an album, hit the road with Gwar for two months straight, flew directly into the studio, recorded through all of December and January and then hopped right on this tour. It's been pretty steady! We left our old label Roadrunner before their merger with Warner happened, although I think we would have been let go anyway. We're signed with Napalm Records in Austria now, and I feel much more comfortable being with a label like that, compared to being on Warner, where you'd be lucky if you had an A&R guy in your corner. I think they would have looked at our overall repertoire and we would have been put to one side."

With their new label home, Devildriver's new record – *Winter Kills* – is bound to raise metalheads' hopes for a new season of creativity. What it also holds, in drumming terms, is a new,

more thoughtful performance from Boecklin. "This time I definitely spent a lot less time worrying about speed," he says, "and more time on what I was doing between the spaces of the songs. The BPMs were more like 175, 180 this time, which makes it a slower album for us. I found it so much more fun. If the tempos are higher, it's a little limiting to what you can do."

Sure, we tell him cheekily, but fast tempos are more metal...

"Yes they are, but I think you'll find our new record is pretty metal!" he laughs. "I'm also a big fan of some of the stuff that the newer drummers are doing, like Matt Halpern of Periphery. I'm not saying that our record sounds at all like Periphery, but I definitely took a look at some more new-school influences rather than going back to Pantera like I always do, and everyone always does. I got a lot stronger on my left foot through the stuff that I came up with. It really helped with my left-foot independence."

Boecklin continues: "Basically, I'm moving forward. I had zero interest this time in doing choruses at 200BPM with double bass all the time. It's boring! I've done it. My most technical drumming was on our last album, *Beast*. Those songs are fun to listen to, but not that much fun



to play live. Sometimes it's not who I am as a drummer: I want to be more laid-back and have more fun than just seeing how fast I can play. Every album is a reaction to the last album you did, and our last one was by far the fastest stuff we've ever done, so are we going to do that again, having done it once? No. We reacted against that. I'm proud of every note of that album, though, and there are some cool songs on there."

Boecklin goes on to break down his drumming on album number six, saying: "There are three songs which were completely different for me. The opening track is completely different to anything I've ever done on the drums. It's very laid-back, but it's filled with a bunch of in-between stuff and a lot of hiccups and bounces. I wasn't blessed with the left hand for ghost notes too much: I'm not that smooth in that sense. I do work on it, but it's not something I've applied to an album yet. The second track has a really cool shuffle, which we've never done before. Not every part has to be level-10 intensity, so we try to do mellow parts, where the drums can take over, kind of like Gojira-meets-Deftones kind of metal. We're not regurgitating the same old stuff."

As per usual, Boecklin will be delivering the goods at shows this year with his trusty Mapex Orion series, which is the same set up as previous years with a couple of small exceptions. "The only recent change is that I've gone from a 16" floor tom to an 18," says the affable sticksman. "The sound guy liked it a lot better too. I don't spend too much time over on that drum anyway. I still have 22" by 18" kicks and I'm still with Meinl cymbals. I use their MB20 line, with a Soundcaster Megabell ride and a Soundcaster 13" hi-hat."

A man of Boecklin's touring experience has much to offer in the way of performance advice. "When I perform live, my adrenaline does nothing but bad things for me," he chuckles, "so I play to a click. Adrenaline makes me play edgy, not smooth, so I spend most of my time before gigs trying to pretend that I don't want to play the show that night. If I get pumped up like a football player, I go out there and I'm not in control. I'm jittery, so I really try to mellow out, take deep breaths and not think about playing. That's when I play the best. Once you get through that first song smoothly, then you're like 'I'm good!' and you start to build up more power and speed. I have to build up to it."

Does he find that certain parts of the set are tricky to navigate, night after night? "Absolutely. It changes every tour, though. I'll think I have something conquered and then that little part will come back on the next tour. Nine times out of 10, I can do it at soundcheck, but I stumble on it when I do it live. An example is the beginning of our song 'Dead To Rights,' from *Beast*, which is a pattern with your feet and your hands at the same time, and it's really fast. It's hard to play it to the click because it has a triplet feel, so it bounces around the click a little bit. All that stuff going on with your feet and your hands at the same time can be a little nerve-wracking. You're like 'My God, where am I right now?'"

REVIEWED

Winter Kills

Album number six from California natives DevilDriver is a heavy, riff-laden fest of metal at its finest. From the initial tom flurry and double-kick barrage on the album's opener "Dath Of The Abyss," it's obvious that Boecklin means business, and his incredibly precise and consistent playing throughout the whole album displays drive, feel and superb technique in equal measures. The shuffle feel of the second track "Ruthless" displays further excellent double-kick work, while the more straight-ahead "Desperate Times" sees the band adapting an almost prog-type approach, with tight unison figures underpinning Dez Fafar's menacing vocals. Standout tracks include the aforementioned "Ruthless," the slightly more laid-back "The Apprentice," and "Tipping Over Tombstones," which again features some superb double-kick work from powerhouse Boecklin. A superb album full of well-written, well-produced tracks featuring stunning drumming throughout. **NC ★★★★★**



Never fear: there's a solution. "All those mistakes I make live, I tend not to make them if I remember not to play too hard," he adds. "Even if you think you're not playing hard, you're probably still playing too hard. I backed off a little with my hands on this tour and let the feet control it a little more. That seems to have smoothed out that difficult part, although I'm sure it'll come back and haunt me sometime."

What about the fine art of rocking out? Does Boecklin have tips for us about putting on a good show for the punters? "Oh yes," he nods. "I like showmen drummers, so I always try to incorporate a little bit of showmanship into my playing, without being cheesy. I don't overdo it, though. I watch videos of myself and when I think I'm being flamboyant, I'm actually not as flamboyant as I thought I was. I keep everything open and moving as much as I can. I make a conscious decision to keep my head moving too."

Not so easy when you don't have long hair, we suggest. "Yeah! I got sick a while back of having long hair and wearing a ponytail all the time when I wasn't playing. The last straw came for me when I was crossing the street one time and some punk kid, who was about 16, rolled down the window of his car and yelled: 'Hurry up, ponytail!' I was like: 'All right, the hair comes off!'"

Boecklin has been on the road for the best part of a decade, he calculates, and is beginning to see the downside of all that high-speed, high-impact drumming. As he tells us: "I'm just now starting to see problems that I haven't seen before. I roll out my back and my thigh muscles and my hands these days, because I'm starting to wake up with little pins and needles, a little bit. As I've become a better player throughout the years, though,

I'm playing more correctly. Before, I was more about playing with the wrists and forearms, and as you get faster that can cause tendonitis. If I was playing in a rock band like Guns N'Roses or Mötley Crüe, it might be a bit easier. But with this stuff, it's not like that!"

Nowadays Boecklin wears shoes to play after several years of drumming barefoot. Why, we ask? Warning: the answer may disgust you... "I moved from barefoot to shoes a few years ago, because I got ringworm from walking around without shoes on," he says ruefully. "I had this weird thing on my arm, so I went to the doctor, and he said, 'Do you walk around in parking lots barefoot or in sandals?' and I said yes, because I had been doing a lot of shows on the Ozzfest at the time. As with most things in drums, you make the change and stick with it for a week, and I got used to wearing drum shoes. The pedals can feel weird at first, of course."

Minor hitches like a ringworm attack mean nothing to Boecklin now, who is one of the most relaxed drummers we've ever met. He signs off with a declaration that drumming should be fun, not stressful. "One of the things I definitely want to express in this interview," he says, "is that you shouldn't feel that you can't play drums just because your gear isn't set up the same way as it usually is. Like I can't play double bass if this pedal doesn't have the right tension! I've been trying to have the attitude that if my kit isn't set up quite right, screw it. That way I'm ready for any curveball when it does happen." Hats off, we say... and shoes definitely on!

DevilDriver's latest album, *Winter Kills*, is released on 26 August, and is available from www.devildriver.com.

