

Pop Talk: Matthews battles to get it right on the stage and in life

by *George_Varga*

There are two good reasons why Dave Matthews, one of the most consistently uncompromising artists in or out of rock, rarely submits to interviews. He doesn't need to and doesn't like to, so why bother?

DAVE MATTHEWS - 'In playing or writing music, I find a satisfaction in solving a puzzle,' says Dave Matthews. CNS Photo by Jerry Rife. "Generally, it's along the lines of 'What's your favorite color?' or 'What brings you to Boston?'" he said from a recent tour stop in North Carolina with his group, the Dave Matthews Band (or DMB for short).

"Because of what it is, 'rock journalism,' like much of the other mainstream media, is an attempt to sell an oversimplified, nicely packaged vision of the world that will be palatable and easy to travel, when the truth is far more confusing. I can assure anyone that gets their news from the mainstream media that there's a far more inspirational, complex and breathtaking world out there than the one portrayed to us in general by the purveyors of information."

The inspiration and confusion of everyday life make Matthews thrive, on and off stage. His success as the leader of one of the few bands anywhere that can consistently fill stadiums and large outdoor venues has made it even less necessary for him to speak to the press.

But he spent 75 minutes discussing a variety of topics, including music, the perilous future of albums and his ongoing efforts to help U.S. soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan obtain better medical care.

Matthews, 40, thought carefully about each question that was posed. Much like his band's concerts at their freewheeling best, his responses were very much in-the-moment, yet also carefully considered and articulated.

More often than not, those subjects were related to his genre-leaping band. Despite the fact it has never had a Top 10 hit and has no "image" to speak of, DMB has been one of the top-earning concert attractions of the past decade, grossing \$57 million on its 2005 North American tour alone.

This success has been fueled in large part by the group's emphasis on jazzy extended improvisations and constantly changing set lists, which make every concert unique. That DMB has fared so well for so long seems almost subversive, in a good way.

"Yeah, I do feel like that sometimes, that we were fortunate to come up at a time when what we do has been belittled by the mainstream industry," Matthews said. "Overall, we've had a fairly good critical acceptance, and certainly from our fans. But when we go back to that term ... 'jam band,' (people) put it on the shelf without giving it a chance.

"When I look out past the first five rows at our concerts and the faces in the crowd are younger, it (shows) that what we're doing is honest enough that people can look past the labels ... I'm not saying 'honest' about what I'm singing, although I hope I'm that way, but in how we present ourselves. We don't play anything that we don't feel is essential and honest."

That sense of conviction has been a staple of DMB's music almost since its inception in 1991 in Charlottesville, Va. Matthews moved there with his parents when he was 18, fueled by his refusal to heed the call when drafted to serve in the South African military and enforce apartheid.

It was while working at a popular bar in Charlottesville that he befriended two future DMB members, drum dynamo Carter Beauford and saxophonist LeRoi Moore. Violinist Boyd Tinsley and teen bassist Stefan Lessard joined soon thereafter and the group's fusion of rock, folk, jazz and World Music was born.

Matthews speaks with great admiration about his band mates and DMB's two touring members, keyboardist Butch Taylor and trumpeter Rashawn Ross. But the group's proud leader is a harsh critic of his own work.

"I do think that it's really always going to be a battle to try and get it right," he said. "So I attempt to survive it and come out not too humiliated by the experience, which is weird because I know that, generally, it's a very positive thing. But I think that I judge myself fairly severely.

"At the same time, I have the tendency to delegate responsibility, which is part of what the greatness of the band is - that we all give away responsibility - although I struggle with the idea of how successfully I'm participating. And it's just rock 'n' roll is what the bottom line should be. So I should let it go, but I can't be anything but what I am ... If this is what I do, then I have to do it well."

Matthews recently released a new solo single, "Eh Hee," along with a video (which he directed himself). A live version of the song appears on his new album with guitarist and longtime collaborator Tim Reynolds,

"Live at Radio City."

Yet, while DMB has sold more than 35 million albums worldwide since 1994, Matthews isn't losing sleep over the apparent impending demise of the album in an age of iPods, ring tones and legal and illegal music downloading.

"Music will survive," he said. "It's how it is communicated that will change."

What won't change is Matthews' devotion to the social and political causes he believes in. Since June, he has spearheaded a petition drive on behalf of U.S. veterans that has so far been signed by more than 25,000 people.

It reads in part: "Supporting our troops entails providing them with the complete, timely and excellent care for injuries they sustained during their military service, at the very least. Providing this care is a moral obligation for our nation and should be our highest priority at home."

With characteristic self-effacement, Matthews downplayed his involvement. "I'm not in the forefront, I'm just speaking my mind ..." he said. "It's my belief I will remain always and forever a pacifist who believes - although I may, in many eyes, be wrong - that we're all victims of war."

Because if there is a presence of the devil, it makes itself known most profoundly when men murder men and see the only solution as murdering more. All we can do is hope that, somehow, out of that chaos, out of that insanity, will bubble a moment of clarity.

"It's a mistake to think peace is the absence of war, rather than the presence of sanity. I believe more and more that war is the absence of sanity."

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