





Dan Needham

This first-call Nashville cat knows when to follow the rules, and when to bend the heck out of 'em.

Story by Michael Aubrecht • Photos by Rick Malkin

For a long time the Nashville music industry was defined—some say hampered—by an imaginary wall dividing session and touring musicians. Each side had its top-call players, but even among these rarified individuals, there were few exceptions to the rules of separation. Dan Needham's drumming is indeed exceptional, for its quality and consistency, but also for how much it's been valued by the movers and shakers on both sides of the divide. As Music City, USA, has entered the world market, the line between studio and live players has finally begun to fade, and Needham has emerged as one of the top musicians who have helped erase it.

Needham's value also cuts across multiple genres—from marquee pop artists like Michael McDonald, Peter Cetera, Vanessa Williams, Amy Grant, and K.T. Oslin to gospel greats like Charlie Peacock, Michael W. Smith, and Rebecca St. James—making him that much more of a compelling figure on today's scene. Further, his skills as an engineer and producer have increased his cachet even more. As a by-product of his sparkling career, Needham has gained a unique perspective on what it takes to be successful not only in Nashville but wherever in the world his craft has taken him. *MD* recently sat with the drummer to soak up as much of that knowledge as possible.



It was fun and perfect for my age. I learned what it meant to perform and make it through the entire set without crying.

MD: Was your father a big influence on you as a player?

Dan: Obviously both of my parents influenced me, and with my dad being a drummer, it was no surprise that I showed an interest in the instrument. That said, he took a unique approach and gave me the space to learn. If I was struggling with a particular concept, he would demonstrate the

proper technique and offer guidance. His decision to get me a drum teacher outside of the house expanded my horizons a bit.

In a lot of ways, though, my mother influenced me more. Her chordal and song knowledge taught me to think musically and not just focus on the drums. Thanks to her I played a little guitar and keyboards too. I vividly remember practicing guitar parts up in my room and her banging on the ceiling below while yelling, "That's the wrong chord!" My parents were, and still are, very supportive, but as musicians they are not afraid to be blunt about my performance or attitude. That nurturing honesty has always enabled me to maintain a balanced perspective no matter what is going on.

Both my parents also reinforced the idea that it's not just about the drums—it's about how the drums fit into the music. I really think that is one of the major things that has connected me to Nashville, because it is truly a songwriter's town. The emphasis on the song is everywhere. The rules my parents instilled in me way back then still apply today: Listen to the other musicians, don't worry about standing out, focus on the song, emphasize the artist.

They were great teachers and wonderful musicians, and my dad still gigs to this very day. They taught me to think like a musician first and a drummer second.

MD: As you got older, what path did you take toward furthering your education and pursuing music as a vocation?

Dan: When I was fourteen or fifteen I joined a Christian rock group from Syracuse, and that had a lot of influence on me. Ironically, when they were getting ready to leave

MD: You've recently returned to the States from an international tour.

Dan: Yes, I've been traveling quite a bit lately, to some interesting places like Ireland, Jakarta, and Tokyo. I just finished working with Peter Cetera, and I'm continuing to tour extensively with Michael McDonald. It's always an amazing experience when I get to play music abroad. Over the last few years the interest in the styles of music that I play has grown tremendously. Seeing what's going on musically in places like Indonesia and the Philippines is exciting, and I think China is going to be the next big scene. There's a lot of money over there, and they're willing to invest in established artists. A lot of them are taking advantage of that opportunity.

MD: What led to your becoming a drummer?

Dan: I come from a musical family. My father is a drummer, and my mother played accordion. We were from a little town in upstate New York called Newark Valley. My folks had a Top 40 band while I was growing up, and they introduced me to music at a very young age. I was always tapping along to records, and my mother had the foresight to sign me up for private lessons. At around six or seven years old, I started learning the instrument, and I continued to study it all the way through high school. My first professional gig happened when I was around eleven years old. I was in a little band called the Rushanskis with two accordions and drums, and we got paid to do little society gigs. We played polka music, ethnic tunes, some Latin and jazz stuff. It was in New York, so the music was very Eastern European influenced.

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Drums: Yamaha Maple Custom Absolute in burgundy sparkle finish

A. 6.5x14 Ludwig Supraphonic LM402 snare*

B. 10x12 (or 11x13) tom

C. 16x16 floor tom

D. 16x24 bass drum

***Alternate snares:** 7x13 Yamaha Akira Jimbo, 5x14 or 6.5x14 Ludwig Black Beauty, 6.5x14 Yamaha Paul Leim, 5x15 Yamaha John "JR" Robinson, 5x14 Ludwig mid-'60s Acrolite, 6.5x14 Yamaha Birch Custom, 6.5x14 Brady Jarrah Ply, 6.5x14 DrumCraft Aluminum, 5x12 Yamaha Musashi Oak

Cymbals: Paiste

1. 15" early-'60s Zildjian (or 16" Paiste Twenty or 15" Paiste 602 Modern Essentials) hi-hats

2. 17" Signature Dark Energy crash

3. 18" Formula 602 Modern Essentials crash

4. 22" Formula 602 Modern Essentials ride

5. 20" Formula 602 Modern Essentials crash

Sticks: Vic Firth Extreme 5A sticks

Heads: Remo Coated CS snare batter, Coated Ambassador tom batters, and Renaissance Powerstroke 3 bass drum batter

town and move to Nashville, I remember thinking that I would never want to move there. I went on to college with the intention of possibly pursuing music, but my parents wanted me to have something to fall back on. I went to a bible college in Minneapolis for a couple years, and then I transferred to [Nashville's] Belmont University.

I had transferred as a music major but later realized that a degree in music wasn't as important to my career as developing great musical relationships. I changed my degree but still pursued all the musical opportunities that the school had to offer. To this day I work with fellow Belmont grads. My degree ended up being in finance. I used to joke that it enabled me to figure out how much money I

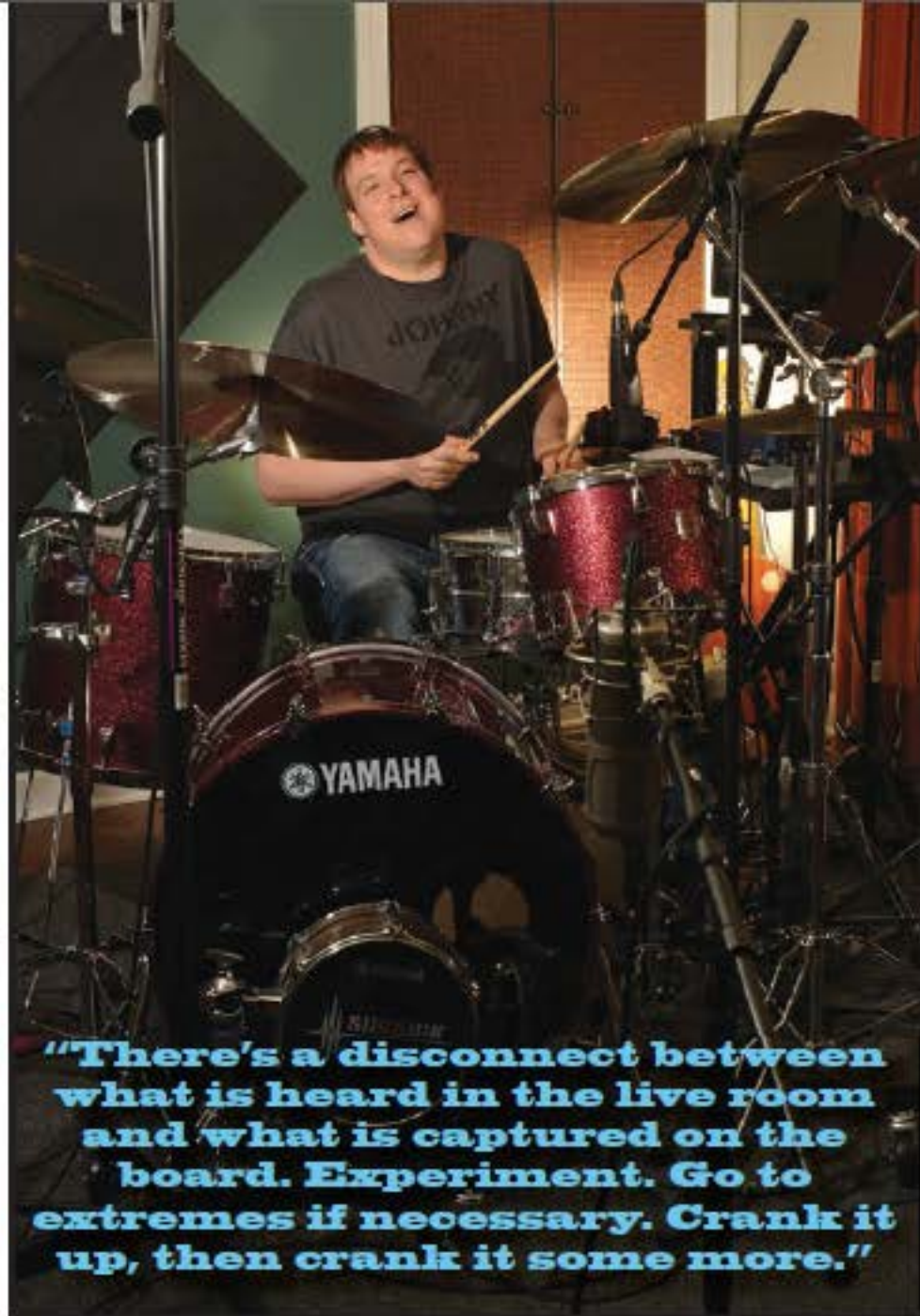
wasn't going to make as a musician. [laughs] **MD:** Did you play in the worship band at your church?

Dan: Absolutely. From very early on I was playing in church. Two or three times a week I was performing at youth group or during the regular services. Church music in a lot of denominations gives the opportunity for young musicians to develop and hone their craft in practical ways while being in a safe environment.

We had a really robust music program, and it was a totally invaluable experience just in terms of playing live and working with other musicians. The skill set of chart reading and developing the discipline of dynamics was also instilled in me there. Playing in a church in many cases is by your own free will. It's an expression of faith. When you take money out of the equation, it becomes so much bigger. Church drumming was huge and steered me in some directions that led me down the path to where I am today.

MD: Tell us how a finance graduate with a "respectable degree" became a professional musician.

Dan: I've found from speaking to other musicians that my story is a bit different from most. Most guys look back to a single jumping-off point. I built my career slowly,



"There's a disconnect between what is heard in the live room and what is captured on the board. Experiment. Go to extremes if necessary. Crank it up, then crank it some more."

from sessions to the stage. I've only been touring hardcore for the last few years—up until then it was all studio work. I graduated from college in 1993, and by 1996 I had established enough clientele to go full time into session work.

I didn't do that on my own. There were a few guys who were very instrumental in getting me connected to the business. About a semester after I graduated from Belmont, they held a gospel showcase there. My college roommate was a drummer and needed a sub for the gig. I did the job, and one of the other bands had this amazing bass player named Brent Milligan. He really dug what I was doing and happened to be working with Charlie Peacock at the time. Out of nowhere, from that connection, I get a call from Charlie, whose music I had loved listening to growing up. Needless to say, I leaped at the opportunity to work with him. That turned

out to be a real blessing.

Around the same time, Brent recommended me to a bassist named Tommy Sims, an iconic Nashville player who's worked with everybody from Sheryl Crow to Bruce Springsteen. He helped write "Change the World" for Eric Clapton, and he's also an amazing producer. When he called I couldn't believe it. Tommy took me under his wing, and for the next ten years or so I played on everything that he was doing. In retrospect, I feel that period was my real education. I got a degree from Belmont, but my musical training came from working with Tommy. Getting established in the session scene is not an easy task, and he was always very patient with me as I was learning the ropes. He knew how to emphasize what I was doing right and steer me to change what I was doing wrong. We're still together as a touring rhythm section,

and he's out on the road with me with Michael McDonald.

MD: Session drummers have to possess an extensive skill set, whether it's preparation, playing to a click, or getting along with a demanding producer. Was there a big learning curve when you entered the studio, and if so, what kinds of challenges did you experience?

Dan: I entered the session scene during a transitional period. This was the mid-'90s, so you had the early signs of digital recording and Pro Tools. The concept of playing to a loop suddenly became a big idea. Clicks had been around but were not nearly as critical as they are now. You could play around a click and people wouldn't notice. Not today. When a loop was added to the mix, you just had to know how to play along to it.

When I first came on the scene you would show up to a session with a rack of

Influences

Stevie Wonder Songs in the Key of Life (Stevie Wonder, Raymond Pounds, Greg Brown) /// **Toto** The Seventh One (Jeff Porcaro) /// **The Chick Corea Elektric Band** The Chick Corea Elektric Band (Dave Weckl) /// **The Police** Synchronicity (Stewart Copeland) /// **the Beatles** Abbey Road (Ringo Starr) /// **Michael Jackson** Off the Wall (John "JR" Robinson) /// **The Beach Boys** Pet Sounds (Hal Blaine, Dennis Wilson, Jim Gordon, Nick Martinis, Ritchie Frost)

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gear, a trunk full of percussion, and your drumkit. Oftentimes I would show up, program a loop, play the drums, and then overdub percussion. It was a methodical, three-step process. The nice thing about working with Tommy on all those big-name artists' sessions was that we could really spend the time required to find the right drum sound. Sometimes we would spend an entire day experimenting with different configurations in different rooms.

Nowadays you can't do that. Time is money and you have to be quick. For a Nashville demo session, we shoot to have six songs completed in three hours. The budgets have shrunk immensely. That said, the home-studio scene is offering ways to do economic experimentation and making the postproduction process more efficient.

MD: Being a top-call player in Music City is an amazing accomplishment. What does it mean to be a Nashville drummer in 2015?

Dan: Thank you. I must be paying off the right people. [laughs] There are a couple things that are indicative of Nashville musicians as a whole. First off, Nashville, unlike some other music-based cities, thrives on the concept of authenticity. It's all about real players, playing real music, on real instruments, in a real studio environment. Obviously technology exists to enhance that, but the main objective in Nashville is to be true to the sound. People appreciate honesty and are willing to forgo technology if it compromises the music.

The second thing is that, unlike a lot of the other towns that I've been in, this is a songwriting community. The song is king here. Everything else is in support of that. All of the sweating musicians that are cramped in these studios are pursuing the goal of creating the next hit record together, the key word being *together*. Egos are generally checked at the door. The scene doesn't seem so big. Everybody knows each other, and there is a competitive spirit, but in a positive way. The mutual respect between Nashville musicians is evident, and we're all cheering for each other. It's definitely not a cutthroat philosophy.

The vibe today is different from the old days, and there are so many genres being explored here. Sonically, Nashville is constantly expanding and is much less corporate. That gives us more freedom. My

philosophy in the studio nowadays really comes down to one thing: If it sounds good, do it. I don't care if that means miking up a Tinkertoy; do whatever it takes to create a good sound.

I do all kinds of crazy things with gaff tape and towels that looks awful but sounds amazing. I love the "What if we try this?" sessions. Many artists really appreciate that and encourage their musicians to explore the possibilities. If they believe you are personally invested in their music, they will call you back.

MD: How do your roles as a session drummer and a touring drummer complement one another?

Dan: I'm grateful to be able to play on recordings and also do live performances. Spending too much time in the recording environment can make you frazzled. Going out and performing live gives you a different perspective of delivering music to the people. In the session world you record a song and never see it again. In a live setting you get immediate feedback from the audience.

MD: You've played on so many recordings and done a variety of shows with artists of different genres. What technical differences exist for you between studio and live drumming?

Dan: This past year I experienced the collision of both worlds. We were doing a tour with Michael McDonald, and during that time I purchased a GoPro camera. We did thirty days out, and every night I set up that camera at a different spot on the stage. I shot every show. At the same time we had a sixty-track recording studio built right into the SSL console out front. Later I got a recording of the performance, mixed the songs myself, and created these videos from all the different positions I'd captured with the GoPro.

When I went back and watched them, I was shocked. Being in a studio environment, everything is clean and produced. Seeing and hearing it recorded live made me realize all the issues that sound engineers have to deal with. I could not believe the challenge that exists with cymbals bleeding into vocal mics. How do you deal with that? My perspective changed, because I realized considerations that do not exist in the studio are mandatory in a live setting. That revelation changed how I now select cymbals for a particular venue.

In the studio, anything goes. I will do whatever it takes to make the sound happen, no matter how unsightly or unorthodox. On stage, appearance matters. You can't go all out. You need a good, solid

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Recordings

Michael McDonald Blue Obsession /// **the Neville Brothers** Valence Street /// **Charlie Peacock** Everything That's on My Mind /// **Israel & New Breed** Real /// **Dave Barnes** Chasing Mississippi /// **Leogun** By the Reins

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set of drums that are tuned right and can project and translate to the room you're playing in. Tuning is also different. We tend to tune the toms a little higher than we would in the studio. I have great techs on these tours, but I'm also a hands-on guy, so I'm always tweaking. That goes for the studio and the stage. Every leg of every tour with Michael McDonald it seems that I'm changing something out just to make it more interesting and force me to think differently. A double hi-hat setup comes and goes. I sometimes use a 10" snare mounted right above my bass drum, where you would typically mount a cowbell. I love the effect that I can use it as an alternate snare or a timbale.

MD: What tips do you have for finding a great drum sound?

Dan: In the studio, anything goes, so don't be afraid. I do weird things all the time. On the session for the Israel Houghton album *The Power of One*, we were going for a classic reggae sound. I put together this odd kit made up of a kick drum, a timbale in place of a snare, a 10" snare for a tom, a crash, and a hat. We cranked the heads up, and it sounded awesome. It looked ridiculous, but it sounded amazing and added a bit of authenticity to the track.

One trap that I see newer session guys falling into is the tendency to focus all of their energies on making their kit sound acoustically amazing in the big room. The key is to understand the recording process and proper miking. I did a session today that many drummers would have walked into and said, "That kit sounds like crap." It was covered in gaff tape and towels. Yet when you walk into the control room and listen to the recording, it sounds amazing. There's a disconnect between what is heard in the live room and what is captured on the board. Experiment. Go to extremes if necessary. Crank it up, then crank it some more. The result on the playback might surprise you. I've detuned a snare drum down to the point of it being offensive, yet when you listen to it on the mic it's sublime.

MD: Budding musicians flock to Nashville every year in search of that dream gig. How can you make a living as a session drummer in Nashville today?

Dan: Beyond the obvious requirement of top-level musicianship, there is a broader perspective that I like to consider. One of the biggest things is communicating what you can deliver. When someone hires you to do a session, they want you to think about things that they're not thinking about. You're supposed to invest yourself in the process with the hope that you're going to

add something that they haven't even considered that will take their music to the next level. In order to do that you have to do your homework.

I recommend digesting an insane amount of music. Become well versed in all genres and styles. Break it down, understand it, and be prepared to play anything. When you hear the demo for a song you're about to record, there should be multiple bells going off in your head on how you could approach it. Be ready to go in several directions, utilizing all of these influences. That's where the unexpected magic happens.

Most importantly, always understand your role. That may be my biggest asset. My number-one job is to serve the song. The producer is often trying to play the drums through me. I become the conduit between the producer and the sound that the artist wants. So it makes sense that the more tools I have at my disposal, the better I can be at translating, and perhaps even enhancing, the artist's vision. I've been very fortunate to have played with some of the best in the business, and I look forward to helping them fulfill their visions for many years to come.



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