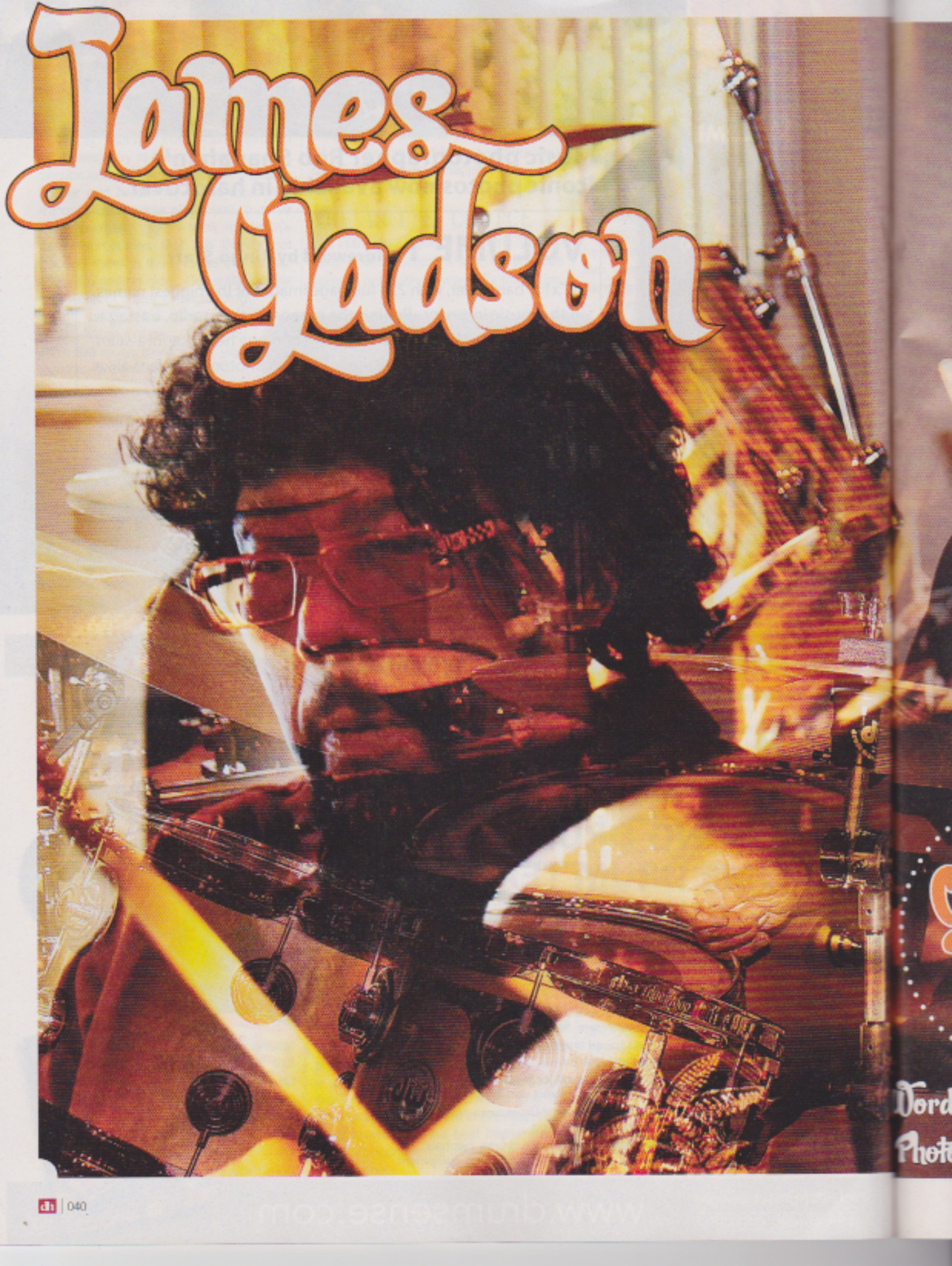


# James Gadson







## The Groove Starts Here

Words By Rich Mangicaro  
Photos By Richard Pierce

James Gadson is one of the most recorded drummers in the history of R&B and popular music, appearing on over 500 gold records and hundreds of Motown sessions. A true iconic timekeeper, James is one of those drummers that even if you don't know his name, you've heard him play on some of your favorite songs. Working with everyone from Marvin Gaye to Norah Jones, Aretha Franklin to Justin Timberlake, Paul McCartney to Beck, Gadson's prolific livelihood easily spans six decades. His performances on Bill Withers's hits "Use Me" and "Lean On Me," or the Jackson 5's "Dancing Machine" remain some of R&B's most revered drum tracks.

How many times have we heard Cheryl Lynn's mega-hit "To Be Real": arguably the biggest hit of the disco era. Or Diana Ross's "Love Hangover," and danced awkwardly while trying to look cool? Okay, so I'm talking about myself, but that's Gadson we're dancing to. The great Jeff Porcaro, when asked about his right-hand technique, simply quoted "Gadson." Steve Jordan also names James as a major influence. More recently, indie champion Beck featured James double drumming with Joey Waronker, and incidentally, both Gadson and Waronker appeared on Paul McCartney's album *Chaos and Creation in the Back Yard*. Currently working on his upcoming solo release featuring his infectious feel, original songwriting and unexpected lead-vocal skills, James Gadson is launching yet another chapter in an already remarkable and inexhaustible career.

**Rich Mangicaro:** James, I think it's interesting that you first started playing drum set at age 21. You were already involved with music as a singer though, correct?

**James Gadson:** Yes, but I also played in drum and bugle corps when I was young, back in Kansas City, Missouri. My father was a professional drummer but he didn't really want me to go into music. He bought me a cornet and I played that in high school, but it wasn't my thing. I liked to sing, even at a young age. I sang in various groups, including a doo-wop group called The Carpets, who got signed to a record deal, but my mother wouldn't let me go on the road! Then when I was 17, I joined the Air Force, which was good for my disciplinary needs. Unbeknownst to me, the whole time I was in the service, my brother had learned to play the guitar and had a working band. When I got back, he let me in the band and at first, I sang lead. The bass player left the band and the drummer also played bass, so he took over that chair and that's when I began playing drums. I had to get it together pretty quickly though, so I practiced all day. We got some gigs, that helped too, and ended up traveling to Florida. There was something about that place, so I stayed there for about a month and I subbed for a drummer in a nightclub there. That drummer ended up telling The Midnighters about me and I traveled to Nassau for our first gig.

**RM:** Hank Ballard and The Midnighters?

**JG:** Yeah. I didn't even have a hi-hat yet! Just a kick, snare and rack tom and played the shuffles with just that. Hank Ballard liked my singing and he used to let me open up the show. He wanted to take me to Motown, because he knew Berry Gordy. I ended up on a year tour with him. However, the schedule was crazy and honestly, they used to drive real fast and it scared me—even turned the car over a few times, so I was just nervous. They used to call



me The Cobra, 'cause I never slept! But, they were great players and I learned a lot 'cause they were into Coltrane, but we'd play all kinds of different styles.

**RM: Was Elvin Jones a big influence on you at that time?**

JG: Yes of course, but working with that band really helped me develop my double-time shuffle. I also think they liked me over other drummers because I wasn't fancy. I played time and kept it simple—I just played what they wanted. After a while though, I got tired of the road so I went back to Kansas City and ended up playing in a club on a cocktail gig, which is where I learned to play and sing all the standards. At that time, organ trios were becoming popular, so I began playing those gigs. They really helped me with my jazz organ

chops. I ended up meeting the great organ players: Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff and Jack McDuff. In later years, I played on Steve Wilkerson's record, which also featured Joey DeFranco.

**RM: What brought you out to California?**

JG: I had some friends from Kansas City who had traveled out there with their vocal group. One night, I saw them on "The Dean Martin Show" and I thought, "Wow—they'd become famous." They called me and said, "Come on out!" Kind of like a dare, actually, so I did. When I got there, I found that I couldn't play their pop style of music, so it didn't work out with them, which hurt me. But it was the best thing for me, really. I had been playin' jazz gigs—fast bebop stuff where the tempo was up here [taps out very quick swing pattern].

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**RM: Is that where you developed your right-hand technique?**

JG: In the course of that, yes. But the pop and R&B thing still eluded me. I then got the opportunity to play with a cat named Charles Wright and probably got fired about five times! I just couldn't get that stuff at first, and he said, "Just play time; just quarter notes and no fills." I did that and it helped me learn the style. Because he had me playing straighter, I tended to get bored. So I added 16ths on the top and I think that's how I began developing my own thing.

**RM: Aside from your jazz roots, do you recall who were your earliest R&B influences?**

JG: That goes back to the doo-wop stuff: Clyde McPhatter of The Drifters, Billy Ward & The Dominoes, The Coasters—all those guys in the early '50s I really liked. I think because I was a singer first and learned from doo-wop, when I began playing drums I innately had a certain sensitivity for singers. I later found out that this was a huge advantage with the folks who were hiring me.

**RM: Absolutely, and not just feel but also dynamics and phrasing.**

JG: Right. I knew how they breathed, so that was a plus for me. The first hit recording session that I played on, when I came to California, was by a band called Dyke & The Blazers, called "Funky Walk." At that time I was into James Brown's drummers, so I tried to mimic them on that track. By that time, I was in the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band and the leader, Charles Wright, didn't like that we were makin' hit records somewhere else. But, we had more freedom to do what we wanted outside of that band. One of the things we agreed on when I joined 103rd St. was that I could be one of the lead singers, but it was kinda out. One time, we were on the road opening for







I'd stay up all night and be ready the night before a session, 'cause they'd have everything written out, and in detail too.

The Temptations and their hit "Loveland" is one I sang lead on and co-wrote—of course, didn't get any credit for that either. When we did it live, he would put the horn section in front of me and the audience couldn't see me singing.

**RM:** Man, that is cold. That kind of thing seemed to happen a lot back then.

**JG:** Yes, it did. I wrote a thing called "What Can You Bring Me," which he ended up changing the rhythm on. Well, I just found out last year that Robert Palmer ended up havin' a hit record with that song—and I didn't even know. I found out because I was getting BMI checks when somebody had sampled somethin' from it. Back then, I didn't know much about the business.

**RM:** How did you meet Bill Withers?

**JG:** I met Bill through Charles at a Watts Band rehearsal. We became friends, and later on, after leaving the Watts band, I went on the road with Bill, supporting his hit "Ain't No Sunshine," which was produced by Booker T. Eventually, the rest of the Watts rhythm section joined us. Bill had begun working with Ray Jackson on some things beforehand, so for his second album, we all played on that one.

**RM:** Talk about coming up with the grooves on "Use Me."

**JG:** I was experimenting; you can tell it is has some jazz overtones. I was playin' around with that groove one day and the bass player came up with a riff, off of what I was playing. The 16th note hi-hat thing was kind of the catalyst for the rest of that groove. Also, the groove on "Kissing My Love" was something I came up with, when the original shuffle idea wasn't workin'. There's more to the story

about the development of those songs, which I won't get into now. I talk about it in my upcoming book that I'm working on.

**RM:** Can you tell us a little about your book? Is it an autobiography?

**JG:** Yes, I'm writing it. It's about my life and my experiences in the industry. I tell stories about my time, both in and out of the studio, about all the great players I've worked with and how I came to be a studio musician.

**RM:** Great, can't wait to see it! Back to Withers for a second, how many records did you do with Bill, and what drums were you using at that time?

**JG:** I did three records with him and quite a few television appearances and tours. Camcos and Ludwigs were the drums I was using. After the first recording, the Camcos got stolen so I went back to using the Ludwigs that I used with the Watts Band. We used to rehearse all the time on the road and that's how "Use Me" came about. I was experimenting with rhythms and we'd play off each other. As time went on though, I felt kind of threatened, because it was becoming more apparent that Bill wanted to go in a different direction. Right around that time, I got called to work at Motown studios in LA and started meeting all the cats that I'd been admiring and listening to! I noticed that they were all reading charts and my reading wasn't quite where it should be, so I began getting some books to work on.

**RM:** What kind of books did you work from, and did you teach yourself?

**JG:** Drum rhythm books. I can't remember the names of them, but because I played trumpet in high school, I already knew the





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basics of reading—I just needed to get my chops up. I'd stay up all night and be ready the night before a session, 'cause they'd have everything written out, and in detail too. I would have to read those charts 'cause some producers did read, some didn't, and I wanted to be prepared. Often times they would end up tellin' me what to play anyway.

**RM:** What was it like working on Marvin Gaye's "I Want You" and the Jackson 5's "Dancing Machine"?

**JG:** On the Marvin Gaye situation, it was a 9 a.m. call and the music was late. I felt strange sitting around doing nothing and getting paid, so I started playin' a groove, like "Boom. Boom. Boom, boom, boom." You know, quarter note, rest, quarter note, rest, three quarter notes. The bass player, Chuck Rainey, started grooving with me and the producer came out, yellin, "Keep going, keep going!" That's how that tune started out. Now on "Dancing Machine," actually a mistake saved me. I added a bass-drum rhythm to what was already written, and when the producer, Hal Davis, heard what I played, everything got quiet. I thought, "Uh oh, I'm in trouble." I just knew they were gonna fire me. Instead, he said, "Hey, can you do that again?!" And that mistake kind of became the signature lick!

**RM:** You also worked with Diana Ross on "Love Hangover." Was this also recorded at Motown?

**JG:** No, that was done at Paramount Studios. Hal Davis also produced that, and often times, he liked to get away from the Motown studios...and get away from the writers! But, in general, working at Motown was really great for me; I learned so much. We were doing three sessions a day and I was so busy in the studio. I

was fortunate that I didn't have to go on the road, which suited me at that time. I learned how to overdub there. I began getting calls to overdub drums on something that had already been recorded. The production was already final, but they just wanted another drum feel. But also with Motown, we'd be tracking all day, and many times the sheet music didn't even have the name of the artist on it. I'd often find out later who it was, and these were Union dates! But the whole thing of naming who played on what track was not always accurate—that's a whole other thing.

**RM:** So, you began getting hired to do what you do, rather than to just play the drum part. Would you say this is true?

**JG:** Yeah, I think so, although they really wanted to produce me as a singer, because of the single "Loveland." At this point, I was more focused on drumming, as I'd become discouraged as a singer. One of the first hit records I played on was for The Miracles, after Smokey Robinson had left the band, called "Do It Baby." Freddie Parren produced that record and they had already tracked drums with a 16th-note thing in the groove, but it wasn't the feel he wanted, so I ended up on that. After that, I did a lot of stuff with Freddie, when he became independent. Some of the big records we did together included "I Will Survive," Gloria Gaynor's big hit, "Heaven Must Be Missing An Angel" by Tavares, "Reunited" by Peaches & Herb, The Sylver's "Boogie Fever," "Shake Your Groove Thing" and many more.

**RM:** You also worked with Ray Charles. What was that experience like?

**JG:** That was great—he was magnificent. Many times it was just the two of us in the studio. He'd ask me to take him over to the



drums and he would mic the drums up himself. He knew how to get himself from the drums to the control room, and his console was in Braille. He had total control. I saw him do a transfer from 16-track tape to 24 track. It was impressive to watch him work. He would ask for certain things when we worked, but mainly it was a feel thing that he wanted from me.

**RM:** You did a lot in the disco era, spanning mid to late '70s, but things changed in the early '80s with the advent of the drum machine. You have an interesting slant on that...

**JG:** Yeah, one of the LinnDrums, I was told, was me. They had sampled me and loaded my sounds into the chips for that machine and I eventually found this out from the repair guys out in the [San Fernando] Valley, who worked on LinnDrums. I also had guys come to me and say, "Hey, I did a session with you last week." But it wasn't me, I knew that! I remember Herb Albert saying to me that I needed to learn programming, but at that time, there was confusion between the Union and drummers regarding using drum machines. In the '80s, a lot of us felt our work threatened due to artists using drum machines in place of live drummers.

**RM:** When did you see it turn around again?

**JG:** It was in the latter '90s. What happened was Bobby Watson, the bass player from Rufus, came by my house one day and asked me if I wanted to go to Japan; I said yes immediately. I started going to Japan 'cause they really liked my work on the records they heard, and they loved live music over there. Of course now, music seems to be coming full circle. Take Adele for example, her songs inspire other artists to cover her songs, like what used to happen in the past. Music seems to be going back to that live sound and using live drummers.

**RM:** It is great to see music come back around to such an organic thing and see young musicians embracing vinyl again. Talk about your work with Joe Cocker and sharing the drum chair with Jim Keltner.

**JG:** That was for his *Hymn For My Soul* album, produced by Ethan Johns. It was a big record in Europe and I got to work there, after that release. Jim and I tracked at the same time for some of the tunes. Jim has been very helpful to me—especially introducing me to some of the companies I endorse. At that time, for the Cocker session, I was using my old Pearls [1973 Pearl drums w/out the bottom heads, used on many of the Motown and disco hits James played on, also used on recent albums for both Beck and Paul McCartney].

**RM:** Taking the bottom tom heads and the front bass-drum head off the drums, how do you remember that starting?

**JG:** I think it was an EQ thing. They had me take the heads off to get a more direct, drier sound. I think it was also so they could add what they wanted, later on.

**RM:** Your style of drumming, backing up so many singers over the years and being a lead singer yourself, is quite unique. I feel this is an important aspect of your playing. From your early years with Withers to today's artists, you've displayed wonderful sensitivity. I highly recommend our readers check out Justin Timberlake's "(Another Song) All Over Again," a ballad you played so beautifully on.

**JG:** Thank you, he's a fantastic singer. I think because I sing myself, I can feel their phrasing more easily and also feel where they take their breaths, which is important. For Justin, when he played the piano and sang, I could tell what would fit and compliment that. Take Aretha Franklin for instance, I think the reason many of her early records were so great was because she played when she sang, and the musicians could relate to that. But because I'm a singer, I think it's really helped me as a drummer. There's a certain physical aspect of singing that I think drummers also share. Like using breath as a gauge to avoid tensing up. Breath control is very important.

**RM:** So very true and I'm glad you stated that. Most of our favorite musicians know the importance of being relaxed when they perform. You know, today's up-and-coming drummers have so many tools with which to learn from, and I see many

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young drummers with incredible chops and facility. But how many of them can really groove?

JG: That's true and there's a place for that. You see this with some young drummers, really incredible players, but how many of them can pocket? I've even gone to concerts where the drummer was so busy, I didn't even know what the singer was singing. I'm not sure how he got away with that.

RM: Yes, and it seems with that, some of the *soul* of the music gets lost. What would you say to young drummers when it comes to having a good pocket?

JG: I think having chops is great, but I think you need to learn the very basics of what rhythm is. That's what drumming is—it's about rhythm. Learn the basics, not just the mechanics. Listen to the feel of what the drummers are doing, not just their technical stuff. For me, because I came from a jazz background and when I was introduced to R&B, I had to learn a whole other way of playing. The most important part of it was pocket. That's what I got from Charles Wright. It was very basic, simple patterns. At first it was boring, but I got the vibe of it and that was the lesson.

RM: I remember one time I asked Jeff Porcaro about the great groove he did on that tune "Georgy Porgy," off their first album. He said he tried to model after how you play. His right hand reminded me so much of yours. He was definitely inspired by your usage of 16th notes within a groove. Did you know this?

JG: That's so nice, no, I didn't know that. He was incredible, just a total natural.

RM: You worked with a very interesting, current singer/songwriter names Amos Lee, which also featured Pino Palladino on bass.

JG: Yes. Oh man, he's phenomenal—truly a great artist. I've never seen anybody like this. He gets into a character and actually *becomes* that character—so authentic. I highly recommend everyone to check him out. He's bad. Also, working with Beck, he's another really talented cat, very adventurous and creative. We did a bunch of stuff in different time signatures and he's always thinkin' outside of the box. He plays many different instruments and his song ideas were very, very interesting. In some ways, similar to working with McCartney: just extremely creative and inspiring. Paul knew what he wanted before we even went in; we had to be on it right away. Paul is very quick-witted. I got to ask him how he came up with his song "Yesterday," and his answer jokingly was, "Well, yesterday, she had nice legs." It was like that.

RM: What's coming up currently, that we can look out for?

JG: I did a record with Sweet Pea Anderson, from the band Was, Not Was, produced by Keb Mo, so that's coming out. Also, I heard an interview recently that Questlove did, speaking about the upcoming album by D'Angelo and I played on some of that. A few months ago, I did some work on Kelly Clarkson's Christmas album as well. [As we're rapping up this interview, James gets a call from Ziggy Marley's management, to do his next record, as well as a call from Corinne Bailey Rae.] I'm also working on my first solo record and doing a lot of singing and playing. Now I'm trying to figure out how to play for *me*. When I'm writing, it's different 'cause I'm a singer first. So some of the signature grooves that I may be known for, I'm now trying to figure out how they might fit in my music. And, I'm finally working on a book about my life in the music business. I'm excited to be writing and to do my own thing. ✨