

TROY MILLER

Amy Winehouse's current live drummer tells Jerome Marcus about his quest for musical expression

Troy Miller is a hidden gem in the crown of well-respected new blood session drummers. He's developed his impressive profile with a diverse catalogue of work across many genres, having taken the drum seat behind international artists such as Roy Ayers, Roachford and Soweto Kinch, as well as contemporary performers including Amy Winehouse, Mark Ronson and David Jordan.

Despite facing life in the fast lane, Troy is a clean-living family man with a strong Christian faith who's never fazed by the trappings of success. His passion and desire to seek solace in his work are driven by a strong urge to create good music. Whether performing on stage, carving grooves in the studio or contributing to a TV project, his musical approach is defined by a strong grounding of disciplines, beliefs and professionalism, while his improvisational and innovative skills are influenced by a deep-rooted love for jazz and groove. Humbled by the opportunity to enter the professional arena, Troy is well respected among his peers and fellow musicians and it's evident that he's wasted no time in making the transition from drummer to musician.

What made you decide to pick up the sticks?

"I started playing piano and violin when I was seven and got some classical grades, but I never used to practise enough. Then my brother got a drum kit and I tended to spend more time on it than he did. That became my world as a kid - I loved it and it quite easily took over my life."

Were you self-taught?

"I started lessons at 14 at the Junior Guildhall in London for four years and studied for a further four years for a degree. I also had a mentor, Ralph

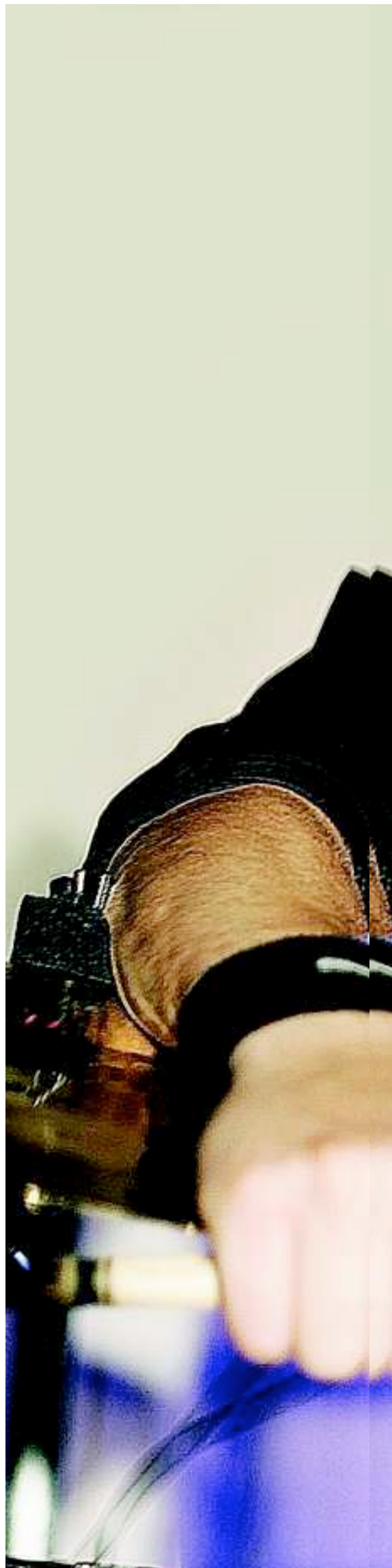
Peterson in New York. I studied with him for two years and he passed on a lot of information on professionalism and his philosophies.

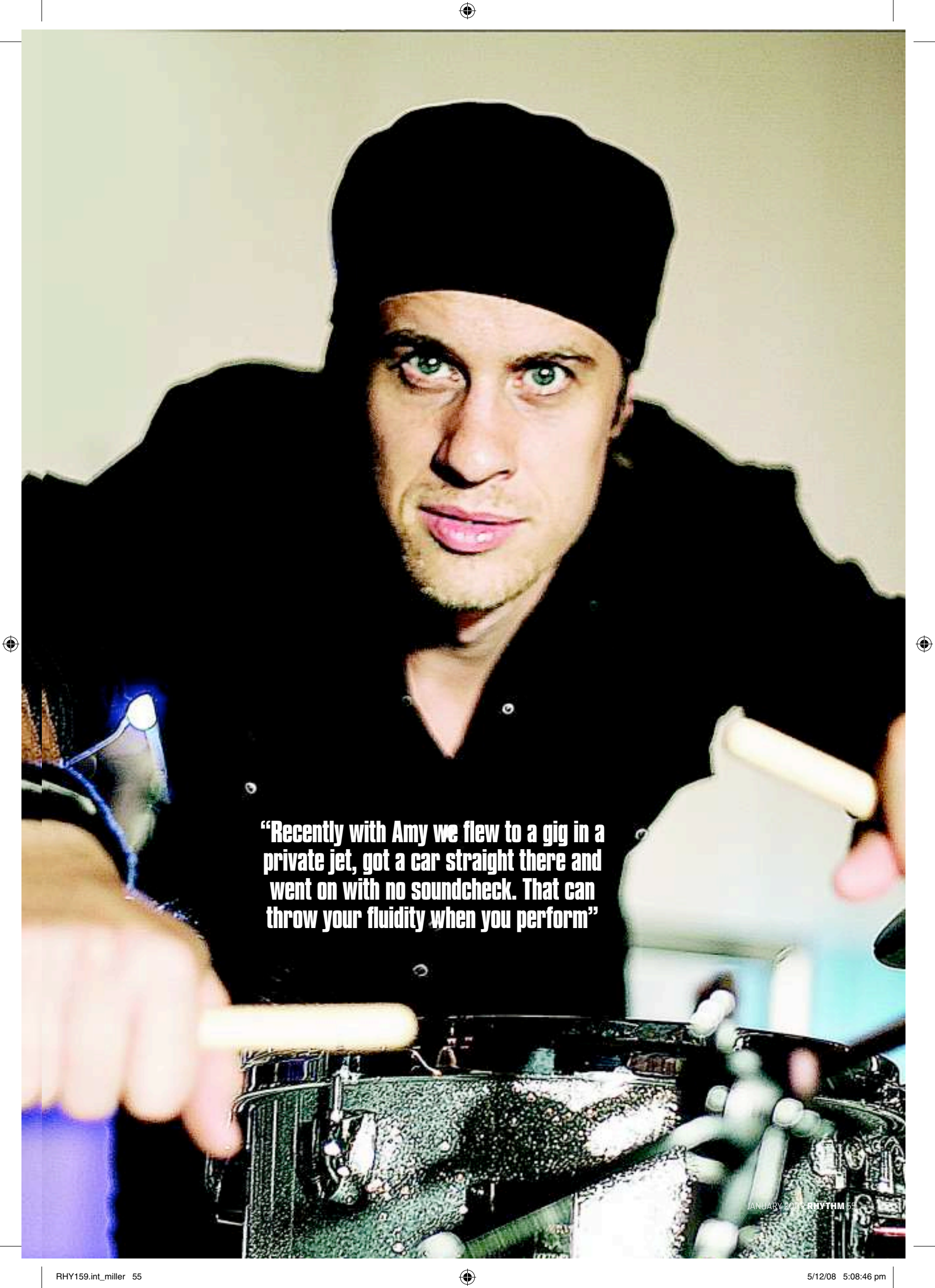
"I've always thought that the best way of learning is on a gig - that's where you cut your teeth. You start to learn to drive after you've passed your driving test. Having the information and knowing what to do with it is the key and that's what happens on the gig or in a studio. There's a famous Woody Shaw quote about learning: 'imitate, assimilate and innovate'. At music college, what you're doing is imitating musicians you look up to. The assimilation stage really only comes on the bandstand. You've got to execute it at gigs and the innovation stage comes down to injecting your personality and your unique way of expressing yourself.

"Also, never underestimate the significance of instinct when it comes to learning music - it's an important part of learning. Now I can teach that to younger players because I've been made a professor at the Guildhall School Of Music. It's an opportunity to pass on my experience."

Who are your influences and what impact have they had on your attitude to drumming?

"What's drawn me to music has been musicians, not drummers. A starting point for me were bands and artists such as Dire Straits, plus Bob Dylan and later Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter and many avenues off those guys. For drummers, there's the speciality of Jeff 'Tain' Watts, who's played an important role in my musical upbringing because of the distinct feel he brought to jazz music. That really struck a chord with me - a great combination of the late Tony Williams and Elvin Jones. The way he plays cymbals sonically and texturally is infectious and his execution is so graceful. He's also a modern drummer who's aware of new sounds but respectful of the heritage. To me, that's what makes him a ▶





“Recently with Amy we flew to a gig in a private jet, got a car straight there and went on with no soundcheck. That can throw your fluidity when you perform”

JANUARY 2009 RHYTHM 55

great drummer. Other drummers would be Stewart Copeland, John Bonham and Bernard Purdie. Not necessarily from a technical perspective, but then again, I don't listen to music like that."

You're a big fan of jazz. What was the attraction?

"I was initially drawn to the harmonic side of jazz, partly through my piano work. My first encounter with the style came through listening to Kenny Kirkland. I checked him out when he was playing with Arturo Sandoval and there was just something about that sound that really attracted me to jazz. The rhythmic aspect grabbed me and that's where my passion was directed. I have a great love for rhythm and for jazz as an American art form. The music base is basically the rhythmic element, complemented by the harmonics.

"I then discovered both Branford and Wynton Marsalis and felt an urge to look back in history to older guys such as Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Papa and Philly Jo Jones, and to check out the history because of the love I had for it. Checking out the heritage of the music gives you depth behind your playing; not just in jazz but in all genres. It was a fruitful transition. I instinctively followed my ears and found that it's flavoured everything that I've done. Even if I'm not playing jazz, the jazz element is always there. I've always called myself a jazz musician and I always will, despite playing pop gigs. I do love them, but jazz really is a staple diet for me. The process was gradual and when you're already in love with music and open-minded, it keeps everything fresh."

How did you get the gig with Amy Winehouse?

"It was through a good friend, Nathan Allen. We go to the same church and he also did the gig, but got busy so he put my name forward. I happened to know most of the guys in the band. Dale Davis, the



Troy began playing in a family band at church

expression, but with that I'd say, 'Don't play the drums, play the music.' There's a danger of letting your ego take over, but the secret is to remain humble and have a sincere sense of humility by placing the music above yourself; it keeps you from worrying too much about all the technicalities of your performance."

What do you think is the key to playing for a successful pop artist?

"It depends how you define success. Some see success as performing high profile gigs; that may be

"Even if I'm not playing jazz, the jazz element is always there. I've always called myself a jazz musician and I always will, despite playing pop gigs"

musical director, called me in for a rehearsal/audition and we took it from there."

What do you bring to the table?

"It's my natural instinct to play what the music requires, but at the same time retain part of my personality to interject into the music. That's the thing that comes more instinctively - allowing your personal expression to contribute to your playing without marring the music. It's a discipline for the two not to conflict but, with effort, you can make it sound cohesive. There's always room for personal

one aspect of it, but I view it as accomplishing musical excellence and finding your own voice. The key to success is preparation and that's so important. You have to take the whole rudimentary aspect seriously when you practise, but at a gig you need to put that aside and hopefully you've practised enough that it's innate. Realistically, there are so many other things to think about when you're at a gig. Groove, feel and time are fundamental, knowing the arrangements, and there's vibing with your fellow musicians so you deliver a collective for the music.

"You also need to uphold your integrity as a musician and as a person. Being honest with yourself translates through into the music and the relationship with your fellow musicians is greatly affected by it on many levels. It really is a large part of it, and people tend to forget that. Ultimately, have fun and it reveals itself in your performance. The other forgotten aspect is that when you perform 'live', you also have a responsibility to the audience and that responsibility doesn't fall on the frontline artist; it's all about how you deliver the package as a whole unit."

TROY'S KIT

DRUMS

Yamaha Maple Absolute in Silver Sparkle: 10"x7½" and 12"x8" toms; 14"x14" and 16"x14" floor toms; 14"x7" snare; 22", 20" or 18" bass drum

CYMBALS

Sabian: 14" HHX Groove hats; 19" HHX

X-treme crash; 21" Vault Crossover ride; 17" HHX X-treme crash; 18" HHX Evolution O-zone; 18" AA Rocktagon crash

PLUS

Pro-Mark sticks; Evans heads; Roland SPD-S sampling pad; ACS in-ear monitors; Audix mics

Do you have a pre-show warm-up routine?

"Apart from my own warm-up routines of rudiments and hand exercises, one thing that's personal to me is that I pray before every gig. The spiritual aspect is really important to me, like being thankful every day for being given the opportunity to share the talent that God has given me. Having that spiritual aspect gives me purpose and direction, with the strength to deal with success and face any challenges."

What lessons have you learned from being on the road so much?

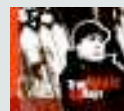
"If anything, it's taught me how to remain focused and stay positively composed. There have been daunting situations; I remember recently with Amy Winehouse, we flew to a gig in a private jet then we were met with a car and went straight to the gig, out of the car and on stage with no sound check or time to adjust the drum kit - just count off the gig and give it 110% in front of a 90,000 audience. Stuff like that can really throw your fluidity when you perform."

Are there any artists you dream of working with?

"Mark Knopfler is a strong contender because I was brought up on his music. On the jazz front, there's Kenny Garrett, Sting (I just love his song-writing), great drummers such as Keith Carlock, Abe Laboriel Jr, Vinnie Colaiuta, Manu Katché and musicians such as Jason Rebello, Christian McBride and Branford Marsalis, who I have played with previously but would very much like to play with again." **R**

www.troymiller.net

GOING SOLO



As well as his various session and live gigs Troy has also managed to find the time to record his first solo, *40 Days*, a fresh sounding jazz record that sees Troy playing not only drums, but Wurlitzer and Hammond organs too. The album is available from his website or from iTunes.