



Creating space for music between the notes

Adam Bowman's drumming style has him in demand from dance classes to European tours – not to mention the Juno nominations

BY ANDREW VOWLES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

As a sessional musician for some two decades, Adam Bowman says he's never had trouble filling his days.

Early last year, Kitchener singer-songwriter Alysha Brilla received a Juno nomination for her adult-contemporary album "Rooted" that featured Bowman on percussion. That was their second Juno nomination: Brilla was nominated in 2015 for "Womyn" – the same year that Guelph's Eccodek, also including Bowman, received a nomination in the world music category.

Partway through 2018 came a call from Toronto singer-songwriter Elise LeGrow, who wanted the Guelph-based percussionist for her trio headed to Europe in September for a two-week tour opening for British singer-songwriter Rick Astley.

That opportunity led to the trio opening later last

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fall for eight Ontario dates on a tour by Toronto musician Royal Wood.

In between, Bowman played regular gigs ranging from anchoring Saturday night dance concerts with the Hot Fiyah funk band at Toronto’s Orbit Room, to accompanying weekly modern dance classes and running bucket-drumming sessions in Guelph. Some days, he figures, he might spend 12 or more hours behind the drums.

But last May brought a change of pace for Bowman and Georgia Simms, his wife and artistic partner – the arrival of their daughter, Frankie – short for Francesca. As Bowman says, “It makes you consider how you spend your time.”

He deliberately scaled back his commitments last summer, saying no to a few touring opportunities and gigs. The European tour in late September was his first major outing in a while – and one that brought unexpected validation from Astley himself.

Bowman was still a preteen in Elmira when the British pop rocker first hit the charts. Bowman recalls a road trip when he and his cousins tortured his uncle with incessant replaying of Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up.” Decades later, there he was in Europe, watching Astley, who had retired for nearly a decade to focus on his family, drawing on his soul roots in front of sold-out crowds: “He’s writing music as a father and a husband.”

Call it a turning point for an in-demand sessional drummer described as a listener, thinker, jobber, perpetual student of music and a go-to percussionist for artists ranging from modern dancers to varied funk, jazz and R&B musicians.

It’s a few days before Thanksgiving, almost a week after that European tour during which Bowman celebrated his 40th birthday. In the living room of their townhouse near downtown Guelph, there’s not a drum in sight. Almost as an afterthought at the end of the evening, Bowman offers to show off his practice kit, tucked at the foot of the basement stairs near the laundry room.

From the turntable behind Bowman, a saxophone hums “Where or When” from an album called “Ellington Indigos,” a 1958 collection of jazz standards by Duke Ellington. “Interview music,” Bowman quips. “I don’t play a lot of this music. It’s just beautiful. The feelings are so clear. It’s a time period that I romanticize a lot. The emotions are so clear. It’s removed from the current time.”

Removing himself from the current time is almost an occupational necessity. He says it’s a challenge for him to listen to ambient music without analyzing what he’s hearing. At times, he deliberately chooses something more obscure – say, Chinese folk music whose arrhythmic compositions are played with traditional instruments. “It takes me out of having to be a professional musician and gets me back to the reason I chose the music profession. I love music. I get back to that clear connection of ‘This is beautiful.’ ”

Music is more language than skill, says Bowman. “Drums can be bombastic and loud; you can drive the point home. They always portray drummers as Neanderthal, knuckle-dragging meatheads. Drummers are seen as not introspective. I blame Animal from ‘The Muppet Show’ and Bam-Bam from ‘The Flintstones.’ ”

A reluctant soloist, he adds, “I don’t play drums, I play the song. I hope when I play with people, that’s what they want: someone who is going to play their music, not the drums.”

To see what he means, you need go no further than the third-floor dance studio on Quebec Street in Guelph used by a variety of groups. His dance class gig came soon after he arrived in the city a decade ago and connected with Guelph Dance co-founder Janet Johnson about her youth classes.

Today he accompanies Imageo Artworks classes run on Thursday nights by Simms; Wednesday mornings, he returns for a similar rehearsal with Dancetheatre David Earle.

As Simms, 37, leads adult dancers through their exercises one evening, Bowman sits alert but relaxed, waiting for her glance and murmured count to begin pulling improvised rhythms and sounds from a set of congas, a West African djembe and a digital hand-percussion pad. Bowman likes one of Earle’s signature lines: “Dance is an emotional response to rhythm expressed physically.”

That emotional response runs in both directions, says the drummer: “As musicians, what we do is invisible. It’s intangible: you hear it but that’s all. As soon as you put it to dance, you get a visual representation of what you play. It’s like when wind pushes up dust. The wind was invisible, but you can see how it behaves and reacts.”

What often matters most is what he doesn’t play. “It’s about leaving space for the dancers to move in, so they can dance in the music as opposed to on the music,” says Bowman. “Space is everything. That’s where the music is, not in the notes: It’s the space between the notes.”

Understatement and economy of movement define Bowman’s presence behind a drum kit. Clearly, he’s aware of his self and his space – an awareness that



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has likely been honed through his weekly practice of kung fu, led by Guelph sifu Robin Young upstairs in the same Quebec Street studio.

Bowman says martial arts and percussion both focus on efficiency of action – and not just in the body but also in the mind. To silence the “nattering voices” that can begin to chatter in his head before a gig, he relies on a three-step mantra from Bruce Lee’s book called “Tao of Jeet Kune Do.”

The late movie actor and martial artist was writing about his own field, but his ideas for mastering technique apply almost anywhere, says Bowman. Stripped to its essentials, the process centres around deliberate relaxation, including the critical Step Three: treating a performance not as a potentially stress-inducing endpoint but as just another chance to practise.

For Bowman, that came in especially handy during an international TED 2018 event held last April in Vancouver, where LeGrow had been invited onto the program.

LeGrow asked Bowman and Burlington guitarist Jeff Eager to perform a short set from her 2018 debut album, “Playing Chess.” Custom-built for an audience of 2,000-plus, the event theatre went on forever. “What a place. You’re surrounded by people at the top of their game. You sit around and watch people do well. The bar is set very high.”

It seems insecurity is an occupational hazard for many artists – not that you’d know it from observing Bowman at work. Still, he knows about the “nattering voices,” a topic that surfaced this past fall during a book launch at Silence in downtown Guelph for “Bass Line Continuum.” It’s self-published by Jason Raso, Guelph bassist and frontman of an eponymous “funktet” whose members include Bowman.

For the launch, Raso asked Bowman to play moderator, a natural role for the percussionist who offers insights and tidbits from a seemingly encyclopedic store of musical arcana, all without talking down to

his audience. Before discussing the book, the duo played a couple of tunes – Raso on bass, Bowman slapping out the rhythm with his hands on a cajon, or wooden box drum.

Raso’s book is mostly about bassists, but it contains a short universal chapter about staying positive and getting past self-doubt. Musicians and artists often put up a front to mask insecurities – a huge paradox bordering on hypocrisy, says Bowman.

“All musicians talk about sensitivity and vulnerability. You need to make music with feeling, but don’t talk about your feelings.” Denying those sides of yourself is like denying something of your humanity, he says.

Bowman has taught drumming classes in area schools, including teaching at-risk kids. He began with traditional instruments, but the thought bubble he could see above some of those young heads – “Here we go, another thing I’m not going to be good at” – made him shift tactics.

He began bucket drumming, using sticks and plastic pails to layer up rhythmic soundscapes. He now leads high school bucket drumming annually through a community arts program in Guelph. A year ago, figuring that what worked for kids might also appeal to grown-ups, he founded FunkBucket, an adult drumming program using found percussion.

Referring to those at-risk youngsters, Bowman says, “They lack an identity. I would have been that kid without music, especially with cuts to arts programs. I was not a straight-A student.”

Growing up in Elmira, he says, “I didn’t feel like I fit. I was a musician growing up in a hockey town.”

It didn’t help that his dad had been a track star at Elmira District Secondary School, and that his dad’s coach was still there when Adam reached Grade 9. “They were very excited when this other Bowman was coming to EDSS. They were very disappointed when they found out I was looking

for the music room.”

In a way, he’d been looking for the music room since kindergarten, and even before. Bowman likes to say he didn’t so much choose the drums as they chose him. He grew up tapping along with his mom’s record collection – Michael Jackson, Prince, lots of classic soul and R&B heavy on bass and drums. In high school, he played in various ensembles from concert band to musicals. “I found my identity,” he says.

After studying music at Humber College, Bowman found his way back to Guelph, a progressive town where he could connect with artists both at home and in Toronto. An early connection was Guelph saxophonist Brent Rowan, a former Humber classmate. They’ve since played together with various ensembles; Bowman now helps mentor musicians in the New Horizons program for seniors run by Rowan.

Besides bringing patience and commitment to the program, says Rowan, “he

thrives on showing people how to better themselves musically.” On stage, he adds, “Adam is rock solid, he fills the role of the drummer solidly. A while back, we talked about being busy with lots of projects and conflicts between gigs. I said: ‘Adam, this is your problem for working so hard, being so conscientious and doing a good job. If you were a crappy drummer, you wouldn’t have this problem.’ ”

During the past decade, Bowman has played with numerous artists, ranging from jazz ensembles at Manhattans in Guelph to funk dance nights at the Orbit Room in Toronto. He hooked up with the Jason Raso Funktet in Guelph in 2012. A concert by the sextet at the River Run Centre’s Co-operators Hall last fall was anchored by a Raso-Bowman rhythm tandem.

“I think of Adam as remarkably consistent,” Raso says. “I can venture off and know he’ll be there. He’s a really strong

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Raso also credits the percussionist as a deft arranger, pointing to syncopated rhythms in "Stone Cold Liberation," a tune on the group's 2017 CD recorded live at Waterloo's Jazz Room. "He's good at finding spots to let the tune breathe a bit."

Bowman played on Eccodek's "Singing in Tongues," nominated in 2015 for a Juno for world music album. Rowan had recommended Bowman to Andrew McPherson, Guelph-based leader of the world-electronic fusion group.

"His sense of groove was so obvious, and I like his professional approach, his openness to creativity and collaboration," says McPherson, who says Bowman's performance dynamics on stage make him a great wingman. "He's a great performer. He looks great on stage and really plays to a room."

Brilla says Bowman was an obvious choice for her recent albums. "He's such a tight drummer, especially for my music which is very rhythmic. I'm very invested in beat and rhythm," says Brilla. She says his distinctive beat creates a "pocket" for her to perform, as in her Bob Marley-inflected song "Rescue."

"He's always really present, he's aware he's on stage. Not only is the band musically talented, but they're also good show people." Not to mention another quality: "It's always important that they have no problem taking instruction from a female leader."

An orchestrator, Brilla writes all the band parts, including the percussion, but she appreciates Bowman's interpretations. "Adam changes something up. He finds ways to bring his creativity."

LeGrow calls Bowman a "grounding presence" who's able to lead or follow intuitively. "He has a lot of swagger in his playing. If you have swagger, you don't need to play a lot of notes. A lot of people play too many notes to demonstrate their prowess. You need space to create movement," says LeGrow.



Adam Bowman with his wife, Georgia Simms, and daughter, Frankie.

PHOTO BY DAWN BOWMAN

The Astley tour dates last fall in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark drew capacity audiences of 1,000 to 2,000 people. One of Bowman's favourite venues was the Admiral's Palace in Berlin, a restored 1920s theatre. During one concert, guitarist Eager saw the drummer pause to pan around the room with his phone camera, clearly taking in the moment.

"You're looking at 2,000 people looking back at you, which can be intimidating on stage," says Eager. "He tries to see who's engaged and watching. It's not about ego but about connection. We might as well be playing a coffee shop with 25 people."

From funk ensembles to modern dance class: How does Bowman adapt to so many varied styles and sounds? "Those are probably the two most varied things I do – a packed, late-night, crazy club on College Street in Toronto to this beautiful, meditative and ultra-artistic, ritualist experience up in the studio," he says. "The point for both of those things is to make people dance, play something that moves people physically and emotionally."

He doesn't think about compartmentalizing himself or his art in the vein of "this is how I play when I play with dance class, or this is how I play when I play with Jason Raso or Alysha Brilla. I try not to put things in little boxes, it's more confusing. I try to

think: 'What can I say on any given day that feels appropriate?' It's more authentic to play one way, to play like me."

Looking into 2019, he has prospects for recording and performing with various artists, although he doesn't necessarily know what's coming next. But that's OK, says Bowman. That was another affirmation from observing a rejuvenated Rick Astley in the fall. "There's a great amount of trust required to navigate this lifestyle," says Bowman. Quoting an old line, he adds, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. I really believe in that."

Featured last year on an hour-long American podcast called "Working Drummer," Bowman said, "Like anything in this journey through a life in music, things seemingly fall out of the sky and are almost seen as inconsequential in the moment, and they evolve into something that is so much greater than what it seems at first glance."

Take those dance classes: A decade after he arrived in Guelph, he married the dance instructor. "We got married at the university arboretum under an oak tree," he says. The couple wrote their own vows. He wears his paternal grandfather's wedding ring, and Simms wears Bowman's mom's original wedding ring, given after his parents had new rings made for themselves.

Eager, who was best man at the couple's wedding, says, "We're not just performers. How does music fit into our lives? What's so attractive about him is his security in his life and his art. Having a family didn't change that. He's found a good balance in life."

Bowman always figured he'd be happy if he could make a living from playing music every day. That dream came true – but it's not as if he wants to spend every minute of every day behind the drum kit.

"I've taken a page out of Rick Astley's book," he says. "That's my measure of success: to pay the bills and play music I believe in, with people I admire and respect as human beings and artists. That feels like success. That's the barometer. I always feel full when I finish a project and lay down at night."

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