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CHRIS LESSO

Life Through Rhythm

By Mark Griffith

Chris Lesso is a renaissance drummer: bandleader, sideman, clinician, teacher... His studies with the great Dom Famularo and the legendary Jim Blackley have helped him form a great foundation for his drumming and his teaching. Chris' playing with his band Modus Factor, Cirque Du Soleil *Cavalia*, and his touring with Wild T and the Spirit (led by guitarist Tony Springer,) shows his forward looking yet grounded drumming approach, and his up-coming book will help any student become the best version of themselves that they can be.

MD: Your new book is called *Life Through Rhythm*, what does that mean?

CL: Simply put, it's believing in who you are, taking it to 2.0. Excellence. But it's really more than that. My new book and my podcast are both called *Life Through Rhythm* and they focus on the fact that everyone has a voice, so let's bring out that voice and release the confidence that your voice can help you create within yourself.

The first chapter is called "Your Escape Velocity" and it discusses how you use most of your fuel to "just" blast off. Another concept that I talk about is called Wrong and Strong. That deals with not being afraid to make mistakes. I have a chapter called "How You Move is How You Groove" which discusses body language and movement at the drums. The "Language of Drumming" chapter is about breathing, being able to speak what you play, and being solid on the grid. I have an important chapter called "The Rhythm of Practice." I could write an entire book on that. "The Rhythm of Practice" discusses the inner-meditation and the outer goals of practice, and just the art of practice in general.

MD: I often talk to students about HOW to practice. I think that's an overlooked yet vitally important subject.

CL: I agree! The entire book is tied up in the final chapter "Living LTR Every Day" which deals with longevity. That chapter also deals with aligning your drumming movements with nature, stage fright, disappointment, and presents it all in a way that shows how you can play drums until you are 105 *and beyond*.

MD: What is your musical background?

CL: I started playing music by studying classical piano, but I was obsessed with drums. However, the piano gave me so much that I would tap into later. Early on, I didn't have any drum teachers, so I

wound up doing and learning a lot of stuff the hard way. When I was 19, I sought out Jim Blackley and Dom Famularo

MD: Jim Blackley was a legendary teacher, and unfortunately most drummers (outside of Canada) don't know about him. I was introduced to him by (another great Canadian drummer) Terry Clarke, but I never got to study with Jim. I am studying both of Jim's books (with some guidance from some of his students) what was that like?

CL: He was like a Freddie Gruber or a Jim Chapin type of figure. Like a Yoda of drumming. His wife would always greet you at the door with a cup of tea. He just looked right into your soul. He was big into deleting things, focusing on less, and not chasing your



tail. The interesting thing about Jim is that there is a shelf-life of about two to five years of studying with Jim. At some point he calls you, and in his great Scottish accent he says, "Hello lad, do you have a pen, here is the number of a great piano teacher named Brian Rudolph, he's expecting your call, that's what you need to do now." And it wasn't because you had done anything "wrong" it was sort of a graduation. It happens to every one of Jim's students.

MD When you studied with him did you work from both books?

CL: Yes, the rolls book, and the second giant jazz book. I can still feel him, he was very special. Then I started with Dom, and he

became my mentor-hero-teacher. He came to a small town in Canada and did a drum clinic when I was 17. Dom and Jim Blackley are the seeds of *Life Through Rhythm*. Victor Wooten is another important figure to me. He is as close as it gets to *Life Through Rhythm*. But there have been different drummers whose work and words have really resonated with me.

MD: Who?

CL: Billy Cobham, Benny Greb, and Steve Smith. I also did a *Life Through Rhythm* podcast on Vic Firth, he really exemplifies what *Life Through Rhythm* is.

MD: Vic Firth is an important man in this industry, and there are (*I'm sure*) some young drummers who don't even know that he was a GIANT and a legendary musician. To many (*I guess*), he's just the name on a stick. Peter Erskine told me in his Legends interview (for his Legends book,) that the Boston Symphony would sometimes tune to Vic. Former BSO bassist Buell Neidlinger told Peter that the entire orchestra built its pitch upon Vic's intonation. There could not be a bigger tribute to Vic's ear, musicality, and the role of the timpani (and, by extension, the drummer) in a "band."

CL: WOW... That's amazing! We should just stop right there.

MD: Yes, that's a pretty cool little (maybe not so little) fact. But please keep going about your development.

CL: After Jim and Dom, I became interested in the tabla and Indian music. I knew Steve Smith was studying Konnakol, but I wanted to feel the drums and get the rhythm in my hands, so I started studying tabla with a guy in Toronto. Then I went to India to study Tabla. I discovered the language of rhythm, and the wider view of rhythm as a voice. Drums are an ancient power. Sure, the drumset has been around for only 100 years or so, but the drums themselves go back thousands of years.

MD: I sounds like you and I both believe in the greater power of the drums?

CL: Absolutely. I have a student who is a retired military officer, and he suffered from a lot of PTSD from his years in Afghanistan, and his drum studies are helping him with his PTSD.

On my podcast I have all sorts of guests. All of my different podcasts are about the drums, but they go beyond drumming. I have had David Rutherford on. He was a Navy Seal, and we talked overcoming fear and anxiety. I had Mark Bowden on, and we analyzed the body language of drummers like Neil Peart, Stewart Copeland, and Tony Williams.

MD: Stylistically, where are you coming from as a drummer?

CL: Carter Beauford, Jojo Mayer, Simon Phillips, Tony Williams, and Lars Ulrich are my

big five.

MD: Does all of that come out in your band?

CL: My band Modus Factor is a combination of world rhythms (Indian and African) and electronica, so I am heavily influenced by everything that is included in those. But overall, I love any music that is pushing the bar and exposing who YOU are. If something doesn't have that spirit or spark, I'm not really interested.

MD: I see that you play open-handed, do you play open-handed all of the time?

CL: Yes, 100% of the time. I fell in love with it when I saw Dom playing at KOSA. I love the feeling of it, and I love the body language and the mindset of open-handed playing. Of course, seeing Simon Phillips play open handed is inspirational, but also seeing Steve Gadd, David Garibaldi, or Kenny Aronoff do it once or twice a set is really inspirational too. But I also like the "weaker side" and the "split down the middle" approach too.

It was amazing when I would teach it to young students who were already playing cross-handed. At first, I thought that I could have been messing them up. But then I saw their brains just flip the switch, and I knew it would be OK.

MD: After hearing your record *The Picasso Zone*, what more can you tell me about your band Modus Factor?

CL: I'm really proud of Modus Factor because of two reasons. First, it's something that I conceived and put together. I picked the musicians in the band because they sound like themselves. And second, it's challenging because I am the "worst" one in the band. The other guys in the band really push me to shoot for the next level because they are that good. I first heard about that idea from Victor Wooten. He said, "Strive to always feel like you're the worst one in the band." It's meant with a bit of humor, not that you're literally "the worst" (which is negative and kills confidence.) Instead, to feel like you really have to deliver 110% and pull all of your potential out, by surrounding yourself with A-players.

It really all comes down to Bruce Lee for me. His book was called *The Art of Expressing the Human Body*. He wanted to see who you were through your motions. He invited people to bring themselves into the martial arts. He really broke down the traditions of his time. That's what I am trying to do with drumming.

MD: Be like water, right? (A common Bruce Lee expression.)

CL: That's it!

Check out Chris's Modern Drummer profile page at moderndrummer.com

