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JOSH FREESE

A Year In The Life

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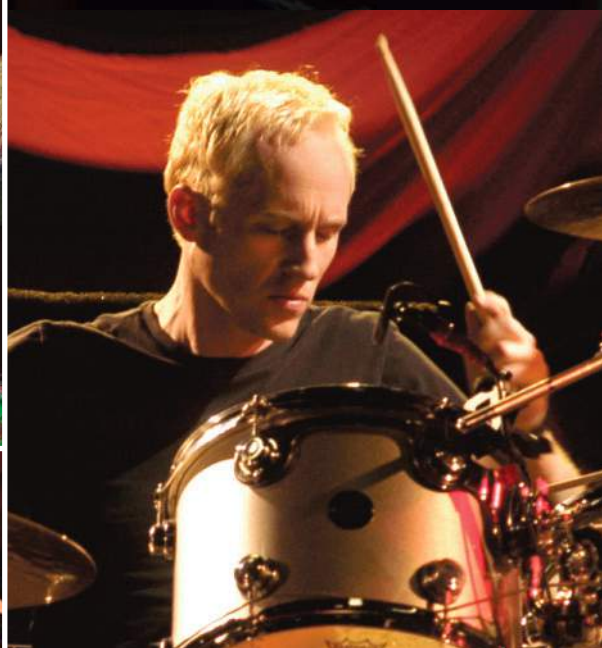
By day he lays down seamless tracks for tomorrow's pop megahits. By night he blasts out aggressive, cutting-edge beats with A Perfect Circle. In between, he plugs away at his own twisted punk rock platters. And when he's not doing all *that*, **he's the man who Weezer, Devo, Sting, Paramore, and nearly everyone else calls when they need a drummer to save the day.**

FRESE

That Josh Freese has so deeply lodged himself in our consciousness as *the* guy to call, for any number of musical situations, is a true achievement. But what might be most fascinating about Freese's career is that he's done it while being his own man. The complete opposite of the cliché studio chameleon who can blend in with the musical furniture, Josh imbues his playing with boatloads of personality. And not chopsy, scene-stealing personality—though he's certainly capable of that—but rather soulfulness and the kind of unpredictability that draws attention to a particular musical passage, not just to the drummer. It's a rare skill, one made even more remarkable by the fact that Freese has exhibited it since he was quite young, elevating the music of veteran players twice his age and setting an example for the rest of us for how it's done.

The other important part of the puzzle is that Freese is just plain fun. The music industry has certain archetypes, and Josh gleefully destroys them every time he releases one of his solo albums, uploads another DIY video to YouTube, or poses for a photo. You really don't need to get very far past the cover of his 2000 album, *The Notorious One Man Orgy*, to pick up on the fact that Freese has no intention of taking himself too seriously—after all, how tough can a guy look while holding a doughnut and a cup of coffee and wearing an argyle sweater under a plaid sport jacket? Clearly, it's not fan-boy adulation that Freese is after with his own music, just our presence at his party.

Perhaps the best example of Josh's healthily skewed view of the rock life can be found in the self-propelled publicity efforts surrounding his 2009 album, *Since 1972*. The drummer thought it would be fun, and hopefully raise awareness of the album, if he offered the LP in a selection of progressively expensive packages, including versions that comprised his taking fans out to lunch at P.F. Chang's and on tours of Disneyland, and writing and producing songs and videos about them. Freese nearly went nuts following through on his promises while



keeping up his already insane freelance schedule, but we're happy to report that he survived, and even came out of the madness with a brand-new EP to share, appropriately titled *My New Friends*.

In early 2010 we came up with the concept of trailing Josh for a year as he went about his job of being drummer to the stars, getting regular updates on all happenings in Freese Land. The idea was that after twelve months we'd report back to readers what it's really like to be working at the absolute top of the game in the modern music industry. A funny thing happened on the way to the interview, however. Even though the period between June 2010 and May 2011 was a typically active one for Freese, including recordings and live work with A Perfect Circle, Sting, Weezer, Devo, Paramore, and Michael Bublé, the well-publicized collapse of the record industry has left all musicians—even those as successful as Josh—unsure of where they'll be professionally in the coming years. Therefore much of our discussion with Freese focused on this new reality and the implications it has, not only for first-call drummers but for all of us trying to make a buck or a name for ourselves as drummers.

When we last spoke with Freese, he was touring South America with Paramore, replacing recently departed drummer Zac Farro and enjoying a bit of a change of perspective....



MD: So what's it like playing with Paramore?

Josh: First off, the band is *really* popular right now, and they cater to a younger crowd. On tour in South America, every time we landed at the airport or left the hotel, it was like Beatlemania—kids jumping on the van...real teenage hero-worship stuff.

Plus this was the first time I was in a band where I'm old enough to be their dad. I've always been the young guy, whether it's in Devo, the Vandals, A Perfect Circle, Weezer.... I have to bite my tongue when I start telling stories about, like, Warped Tour '95, which seems like yesterday to me. They're like, "Oh, yeah, I was in fourth grade then...." After a while I was thinking, *I'm like some big shot here—I'm going to enjoy this while I can!* [laughs]

MD: Does the age difference translate to the playing at all?

Josh: It was a very easy situation for me to slip into. You never know with these things. There are bands I play in where the guitar player's great but the bass player lags, or the bassist is great but the guitarist can't play 8th notes to save his life, and it makes it tough. With these guys it's a breeze. They all play really well, including drummer Zac Farro, who left the band recently. Some people who see them on MTV might be like, "Aw, come on, man," but there isn't a weak link in the band. They play with a click live too, and they play really well with it. And physically it's been fun for me. There are a lot of parts going on, and it's pretty nonstop. They gave this old man a good workout.

MD: You recently told us you're feeling more inspired about playing drums than you have for a while.

Josh: Some of that has to do with feeling like I want to reinvent myself somehow. I find that I'm not being inspired by the same bands I've always listened to; I'm wanting to get into something new, whether that's playing drums or.... I feel like talking about this is walking on dangerous ground, like I'm setting myself up for something....

It's not like I want to start a bebop band. But I've never really made a record that features the drums at all.

A YEAR IN THE LIFE

Even in a down music-industry economy, Josh Freese's calendar is pretty darned full. Here's some of what the drummer has been up to over the past twelve months.

MAY 2010

- **Live gigs with Weezer**
- **Recording sessions with Richard Marx and Italian superstar Zucchero**
- **Corporate gig with Sting in Dallas**
"The day of the gig, Stewart Copeland was in town rehearsing with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. I hadn't played drums in four days, I hadn't played with Sting in eight months, and we were only getting to practice during soundcheck. And Stewart's on the side of the stage with his arms folded. Earlier in the day Sting was messing with me: 'You know, Stewart's going to be there.' But after a while I was like, 'He's one of my favorite drummers ever, but I have to not care. What's he gonna do, grade me? Is my life going to be over because I blew a fill?' It's not worth it to give yourself a heart attack."

JUNE 2010

- **Weezer gigs**
- **Late Show With David Letterman, Colbert Report, and Live! With Regis And Kelly TV appearances with Devo**
- **Sessions for Ricky Martin's new album with producer Desmond Child at Bob Clearmountain's studio**
- **Interviews for *Since 1972***
- **Sessions for Dynamite Walls with producer Paul Fox**
- **Wiring done for home studio in Long Beach, California** "Hopefully soon I'll be able to start doing sessions for people there. Up to now I've worked on my own stuff all over the place, wherever I can go in quickly and cheaply. I might be set up at a friend's studio doing tracks for some other project, and we'll finish up and I'll go, 'Listen, can you give me *five minutes* on my hard drive? Lemme do two takes.'"

JULY 2010

- **Devo show at Hollywood Park Racetrack in Inglewood, California**
- **Touring Midwest, East Coast, and Canada with Weezer**
- **Sessions for new Kelly Clarkson album**

AUGUST 2010

- **Devo dates, including Lollapalooza in Chicago** "The second we went off stage at 5:50, I ran in my Devo outfit across the street to my hotel, peeled the wet clothes off, jumped in the shower, and in fifteen minutes was in a cab to the airport, where I had a 9 o'clock flight to L.A. because the next day I had a Weezer gig at like 3 P.M. in Huntington Beach."
- **Weezer gigs at Reading and Leeds Festivals in England**

SEPTEMBER 2010

- **East Coast Weezer dates**
- **Vandals gig**
- **Recording for producers Howard Benson and Scott Cutler**
- **The Tonight Show with Weezer**
- **Tom Weir soundtrack session**
- **Mixing *My New Friends* EP**
- **Rehearsals with A Perfect Circle for first shows in six years** "We rehearsed in a little room in North Hollywood. We did it in bits and pieces, rather than cramming, since the shows weren't until November. I've held A Perfect Circle dear to my heart for many years."

OCTOBER 2010

- **More Perfect Circle rehearsals**
- **A Perfect Circle plays *Jimmy Kimmel Live!***



NOVEMBER 2010

- **3-week Perfect Circle tour** "We played three nights in five different cities, and each city was pretty close to L.A., so in between I'd come home, sleep in my own bed, take my kids to school.... I had my fourth child, Lucy, on a day off between shows in L.A. and Seattle. We'd planned to induce labor on that day."
- **Gigs in L.A. and San Francisco with Weezer**

DECEMBER 2010

- **Session with the Dwarves** "One of my favorite bands of all time. We did what might be the best song I recorded all year, 'Fake ID.'"
- **Sessions with the Calligraphers**
- **Weezer shows in Colorado, Boston, and New York**
- **Got a vasectomy** "This was on Terry Bozzio's birthday, December 27, which I remember because I used to be such a fan boy when I was a kid. I filmed the whole thing. The doctor and I hit it off when he told me he likes to film his family vacations and edit them himself; all we did was talk shop about cameras and editing software. So he was down for my weird art film."



JANUARY 2011

- **Starting Paramore rehearsals**
- **Soundtrack session for Mark Isham**
- **Weezer gigs in Chicago**
- **A Perfect Circle rehearses new songs to be released this year**
- **Sessions for Michael Bublé** "I played on his last couple records, including the hits 'Everything' and 'Haven't Met You Yet.' I'm really proud of that stuff, because I get pigeonholed as this hard-hitting alternative rock drummer, but I like playing really quietly."

FEBRUARY 2011

- **Paramore South American tour** "I read a thing online where some kid goes, 'That's amazing that they got Josh Freese to go with them to South America! He's unbelievable, even though he's, like, *old*.' I'm like, 'I'm old! I actually got a kick out of it.'"

MARCH 2011

- **Paramore South American tour continues**
- **Publicity duties leading up to April release of *My New Friends***
- **Devo shows**

APRIL 2011

- **A Perfect Circle recording sessions**
- **Weezer shows**
- **Rehearsals for upcoming Perfect Circle shows in May**



JOSH FREESE **drums
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JOSH FREESE
DEVO, WEEZER



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JOSH'S SETUP

The DW Collector's series kit Josh put together especially for the studio shots in this feature includes a 10x13 tom, 12x14 and 16x18 floor toms, and an 18x20 bass drum, plus a 5 1/2x14 aluminum snare. The Paiste cymbals are, from left, 14" Signature Dark Crisp hi-hats, a 19" Dark Energy crash Mark I, a 21" Twenty series ride, and a 17" Signature Full crash. The DW hardware includes a 9000PB single pedal and a 5500TD hi-hat stand.

The kit's wonderful graphics were created by Freese's son Hunter. "He does these really involved drawings," Josh explains, "so I let him take a Sharpie to this old set I had. They look really cool."



Freese also provided the following run-down of the different setups he uses for his main gigs. (The live photos in this feature are from a Perfect Circle concert.)

Devo: 22" bass drum, 12" and 13" toms, 16" floor tom, 14" snare; 14" Dark Crisp hi-hats, two 18" Full crashes, and 19" Full crash (all Signature series)

Sting: 22" bass drum; 10", 12", and 13" toms; 16" floor tom; 14" snare; two 6" Rata toms; 14" Dark Crisp hi-hats, two 18" Full crashes, 19" Full crash, 21" Dry Heavy ride, 8" and 10" splashes (all Signature series); double pedal



Vandals: 22" bass drum, 12" tom, 16" floor tom, 14" snare; 14" Signature Dark Crisp hi-hats, 21" Twenty or 22" 2002 series ride, 18" Signature Full crash, 19" Signature Full crash; double pedal

Weezer: 22" bass drum, 12" tom, 16" and 18" floor toms, 14" snare; 14" Signature Dark Crisp hi-hats, two 19" Signature Full crashes, 21" Twenty series ride; double pedal

A Perfect Circle: 22" bass drum, 10" and 12" toms, 16" and 18" floor toms, two 14" snares; 14" Signature Dark Crisp hi-hats, 18" Signature Full crash, two 19" Signature Full crashes, 21" Signature Dry Heavy ride, 21" Twenty series ride, 20" Signature Thin China on top of 20" Signature Full crash; double pedal

Freese's heads of choice are Remo, including Coated Controlled Sound snare batters and Clear Ambassador bottoms, Coated Emperor tom batters and Clear Ambassador bottoms, and Powerstroke 3 bass drum batters and Ebony Powerstroke 3 front heads. His sticks are the Vater Josh Freese Player's Design H-220 model.

I've got this record out now, you know, sort of following through on all that publicity stuff from the last album. But I'm already working on my next record, and I'm thinking of it being more...progressive, for lack of a better word. Maybe it'll be an instrumental record and focus on me playing the drums. Maybe it'll have "real" musicians playing on it instead of just me doing the guitar parts. And that's real exciting for me.

You know, it's been years of me saying no to doing things like the Modern Drummer Festival—number one, because I'm super-busy. But also out of insecurity, because I've got that just like anyone else. I've always felt weird about putting myself on the spot. Especially in a room full of people who are there to just see you—not your band

or to see you play with someone else.

MD: There's nothing to hide behind.

Josh: Right. But I had a conversation with Liberty DeVitto and Dom Famularo at this book signing a couple months ago, and Liberty was telling me how Dom had helped him when he started to do more clinics. And Dom was like, "You should be out there doing this stuff. I'll tell you what I tell everybody: You just gotta put your big-boy pants on and do it." And I was like, "You're *right*—I have to stop being a baby or being so insecure about what people might think."

You know, I'd go to clinics as a kid and see people who would just blow my mind, and because of my own insecurities I'd think, *I'm not going to blow anybody's mind, so why should I do it?* I mean, I've loved Vinnie Colaiuta since

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JOSH FREESE

I was eleven years old, and even though I know I have some of his influence in my playing, I'm not Vinnie. But maybe when I do a more drum-centric record, that'll be something that works as a jumping-off point in that kind of setting.

So I am more inspired these days. In the past, when I've been really busy doing freelance stuff, I've sort of rested on my laurels—I've always taken pride that I never, *ever* warmed up, for instance. But now I've been taking a practice pad with me on tour and playing for a half hour before I go on stage. It really feels good, and I feel like I'm not being a lazy jerk.

MD: That doesn't seem likely.

Josh: Well, it's not a matter of being busy; I just feel like I've got these great opportunities. Who am I to say no to the Modern Drummer Fest or Drum Day L.A.? I basically need to get off my ass, is what I'm telling you. [laughs]

I recently flew to Seattle to record with ex-Fastbacks singer/bassist Kim Warnick's new band, the Calligraphers, with Stone Gossard, who's one of my best buddies in the world—such a great

musician and a great spirit. Stone's always on me, like, "You writing music?" "Well, I've been busy...." "Man, you gotta be writing music! Just pay for the engineer—I'll let you use my studio for a week, do whatever you want, stay at my house." He's always getting people off their asses, which I love about him.

MD: When we've gone through your calendar over the past year, sometimes you've mentioned doing a session for producers like Howard Benson, Tom Weir, Brendan O'Brien, or Matt Squire, but you don't always immediately recall the name of the band the session was for.

Josh: All these producers I mention are super-talented guys and easy to work with. When Howard Benson or Brendan O'Brien or Rick Rubin calls, I don't go, "Well, who is it for?" and then decide whether I'm going to play. It's like, this is what I do. These guys know they can count on me, and unless I'm on the other side of the world, I'm going to do it. Or unless I have some major problem with the artist—which

has never happened—they know they can count on me to be professional and do my stuff and make it easy on everybody. I kind of show up no matter who it is.

I feel very grateful and blessed to be in a position to have these guys call me and allow me to make a living playing drums. And even if it isn't a great artist, the fact that I'm playing and I'm seeing friends of mine in the studio, and I'm having to learn the song.... Even if it's not a great song, I'm having to rise to the occasion quickly, and that's all great experience.

MD: You're so busy that there must be times when you have scheduling conflicts.

Josh: Usually I can plan far enough ahead that there aren't conflicts, but sometimes I just can't do a show if I've already made a commitment. It's especially hard with Devo, because they were one of my first favorite bands ever. Whenever I can't do a Devo show I feel like my wife is running around town going on dates with some other guy. I feel territorial about it. As I grew up, no



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matter what, whether I was in my jazz fusion stage, my punk rock stage, or my Frank Zappa phase, I always loved Devo. So having to sit stuff out with them is a drag.

MD: Do you have an idea of what your average fan is like? For instance, who are the fans who bought the higher-priced packages of *Since 1972*?

Josh: That's a good question. I've worked with so many different kinds of artists. There are sort of dark alternative rockers who know me from A Perfect Circle and Nine Inch Nails, and then there are people twenty years older than me who love Paul Westerberg or Devo. The guys who bought the expensive *Since 1972* packages were pretty much split between drummers and other types of musicians.

As far as the drum community, I'm not sure who my fans are. I think some of them border on the drum geek guys, but then I think some of the drum geeks think I'm too much of a rock 'n' roll drummer to be any good, or I'm not enough of a full-bore chops guy for

their taste.

I've come to wonder not only who my fans are but who I am in that respect, because I flip-flop between doing some bonehead punk thing and loving it and being on stage the next night with Sting playing delicately. These days I find myself watching YouTube clips of Weather Report for the first time in fifteen years, so it's not just about the Descendents or the Circle Jerks for me right now. Actually, right now I'm huge into Jaco Pastorius, just getting into his whole thing. Aside from revolutionizing electric bass, he was such a character, which I guess is part of my fascination. I've read his book a few times, and it's really sad and interesting and inspiring.

MD: Speaking with you about the *Since 1972* special-package takers, it's clear you're still in touch with your inner fan boy.

Josh: I think so too. Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo said to me, "Josh, your personality is perfect for what you're doing." Because not a lot of people could say with a straight face,

"I'm taking you on a personal tour of Disneyland, and then we're going to go to Sizzler for dinner, and then I'm gonna give you a haircut and we'll get drunk!" [laughs] It really is who I am. Part of me is like this total Peter Pan. I think a lot of musicians, especially rock musicians, do have that not-wanting-to-grow-up thing. The only part that has made me grow up is that I have to answer to my kids. So I can't just be a *complete* freak; I've had to tone down some of my creative traits. And hopefully my kids won't hear these records until they're teenagers anyway.

MD: On the other side of the spectrum, you played on Michael Bublé's big hit "Haven't Met You Yet."

Josh: On some of the stuff I play on, I don't like the way I sound. But I think it's important to be able to pat yourself on the back sometimes. That's one track that I listen to and really love the way it sounds. One of the reasons is because it's a shuffle, and it can be tough to make shuffles feel great. They're the one thing you can't learn out of a textbook. When I

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started playing with Sting in 2005, one of the only songs I was freaked out about playing with him was "If I Ever Lose My Faith In You," which has a real nice shuffle to it. Vinnie plays on the record and it sounds beautiful. And I'm wondering: Am I going to be able to make it feel that *expensive*? But Sting told me I completely nailed the feel on it, which made me beam.

Back to Michael Bublé, early this year I spent a couple days recording with him at the Capitol Records studio, for his upcoming Christmas album. It was the first time in a while I'd been nervous

about a session. We cut live with a forty-piece orchestra, and I'd never done that before. These days, 90 percent of the time it's just me and a producer with a Pro Tools rig, and we can go over it as many times as we want. But here we were going for takes with the full band, background singers, Michael singing.... Everyone's on the clock, and they're all super-pro one-takers and sight-readers. If I mess up in the last chorus, I've got sixty people looking at me: "Drummer!" I'm not the star on this session. Lots of cases I walk in and they go, "Ooh, we got Josh Freese." Here I'm one tiny

piece of this huge puzzle. If I mess it up, I mess it up for everybody and I cost them a lot of money.

MD: Over the past year we've talked a lot about the changes in the music industry and how they affect freelancers like you.

Josh: In the last year or so in the studios I've definitely felt the effect of the record business collapsing, between the economy and people getting music for free and no one buying records. There aren't really budgets for recording anymore, and I've seen the amount of my work in the studios shrink a bit. As a freelance drummer and a father of four, it can be scary sometimes. If I'm not working as much, what about the guy who normally works half as much as me?

I've been fortunate my whole life; I've always waited for the phone to ring, and it always has, which is great. But there have been times when I've thought maybe I should be more proactive. That's why I've been trying to think of interesting ways to kind of reinvent myself. Plus I like to be optimistic and look at the situation as inspiring—like, people need to figure out how to do it on their own now. If you can scrape up some money to get a laptop and some crummy microphones, if the content is there and you have the means to record it decently and get it out for people to hear, you're making opportunities for yourself.

I get emails from kids all over the world: "I want to come to L.A. and break into the studio scene...." And when I answer them I try to be optimistic and give them some words of wisdom and encouragement. I think what it comes down to is that hopefully you started playing the drums because you got off on doing it. Hopefully it wasn't just to make money. I mean, no one's guaranteed a job in music just because you're good or because you went to music school. I've probably spent more money in a month making this new record and hiring a publicist and getting it printed up than I'll ever make back from it. And at one point I thought about this like, *Why AM I doing this?* Well, I'm doing it because I love doing it. It's what I do.

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