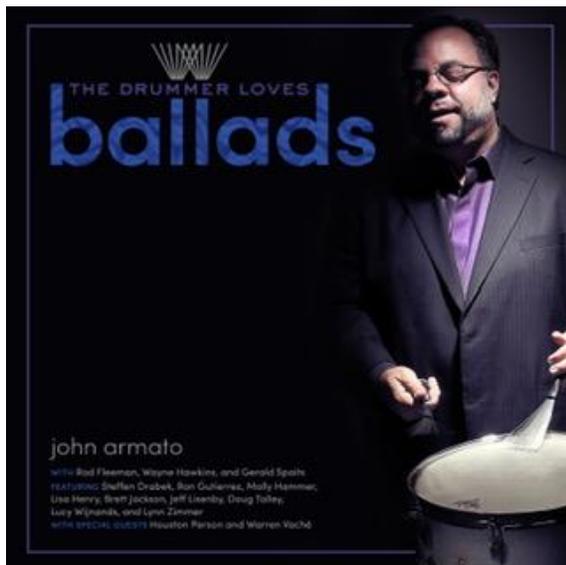




Review Fix Exclusive: John Armato Talks ‘The Drummer Loves Ballads’ And More

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Review Fix chats with drummer John Armato, who details his new album, “The Drummer Loves Ballads.”

Review Fix: How did you get involved in music?

John Armato: Music was a constant desire. I can’t recall a time when I wasn’t drawn to play drums. My folks played great records in the house and I was begging for lessons as early as I can recall but no teacher would take students under the age of eight, so I had to wait. My first lesson was one week after my eighth birthday.

Review Fix: What’s your creative process like?

Armato: Half vision, half discovery. I tend to get a pretty firm vision of the core idea early on, and usually quite quickly; I had the notion of an album titled [The Drummer Loves Ballads](#) not long after the experience I describe on the album actually took place, back in 1981. But I’m a believer in following wherever the idea leads. So, when I

began work on the album (planning began in late 2016/2017) the concept had been in place literally for decades. But as we actually began assembling tunes and players and going into the studio all kinds of things emerged organically: What if this tune had a string arrangement? What if we did that tune as a duet? What if I actually told the story behind the album as a sort of film-noir prelude? That thing we just did for fun? Let's keep it! And so on. The core idea never wavered, but we constantly improvised not just the music, but the construction of the album itself.

Review Fix: What inspires you?

Armato: I believe creative people are meaning-makers. We look for patterns, common threads, and significance. I think art, music included, is – for many creators – a means of making sense out of the world around us and our experiences in it. I love ballads, but I wasn't inspired to simply string a few tunes together and call it an album. I was inspired to tell stories, both literally through the three narrative interludes on the album, and musically through the selection of tunes themselves, that not only celebrated ballads as a form, but the people who make them. Telling those stories became cathartic for me. The entire album is really an act of gratitude.

Review Fix: What makes the drums special?

Armato: Drums are primal and are perhaps, second only to the human voice, the oldest instrument in history. They are a pulse: feet walking, hearts beating, wings flapping. And there is an actual physiological relationship between drums and people – there's a reason we tap our feet and dance to a great groove. Repeated rhythms, or ostinatos – whether the firing of the engine in my dad's old VW Beetle, that 8mm film sprocketing through the projector in grade school, or the Number 1 train clicking and clacking out of the 72nd Street Subway station – can put me in a trance-like state.

But I'm also fascinated by the ways drums whisper and sing. Especially with ballads, we drummers get to go beyond just striking something. We can scrap, rub, and swish around the instrument. I love those sounds.

Review Fix: Why ballads?

Armato: I think it's connected to my emotional baseline, honestly. I'm melancholy by nature. I'm a sentimentalist and a romantic, nostalgic and reflective. These are the moods that fuel ballads and vice versa. Just before I released *The Drummer Loves Ballads*, I put together a list of "[49 Truly Fine Ballads](#)" with personal commentary and links to share with anyone who wanted to sign up for updates about the album. In the introduction I wrote:

"Ballads come in a lot of flavors: torch songs and siren songs; laments, prayers, and meditations; sad soliloquies and wistful dialogues; songs of remembrance, romance, or regret. Some are great to slow dance to and others better just to drink to. Some are meant to lift you up and others come hold your hand when you're down. Most tell a story, and many go to some dark places. As a matter of fact, while ballads can be a lot of things, I don't think I've ever heard one that jumped for joy. That's what other kinds of music are for."

Review Fix: What have you learned from some of the talent you've worked with?

Armato: Oh man. What haven't I learned? I could talk about what every one of the 39 different musicians, engineers, producers, and designers and other folks who helped make this album taught me along the way. Actually, I did in a way – it was important to me that the album website include not just full credits but actual bios of each person who had a role along with my personal observations about them, so that's all there for people to see.

But I can cite three big common themes, reminders and lessons here from my entire musical life but especially from the making of this album: First, keep learning *how* to listen. Musically, certainly that means being in the

moment and really learning how to be generous in the way you support what the other players are doing. But in technical terms, when you make an album you have to learn how to listen to the raw takes, versus a mix versus a mastered track and so on. My ears really opened up throughout this process.

Second, be prepared but not rigid. This goes back to my thoughts about vision and discovery. As a first-time leader in the studio, I knew everyone was going to be looking to me for guidance. So I prepared intensively. I knew what we were going to track when, what the road map was for each tune, what I wanted to do stylistically on each tune, who was going to be featured at which moments, and so on. But I also knew that you don't bring in first-class players to dictate to them. So my vision was always just a starting point for collaboration. And sometimes we made dramatic changes, but we made them together. My original vision for recording *Poinciana* just didn't work, so we killed it entirely and then revisited it in a whole new way in a later session. You have to be prepared to do that if you want the creative work to really live and breathe and reach its greatest potential.

Third, feeling *always* trumps precision. I should start by saying, of course, the goal is always to attain excellence in both feeling *and* technique. But, going for "perfection" can be a trap, and especially in a genre like jazz, and ballads in particular, if you have a take that *feels* great, but has a technical flaw or two in it, and another take that is technically seamless but emotionally flat, go with the one that feels great. It can sound very "jazz-cat-hipster" to talk about "vibe" and "feel" and "groove" and so on, but that's ultimately what the music is all about. If it doesn't feel good, nothing else matters.

I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that a tremendous amount of my thinking on these subjects has been deeply, deeply influenced by John Cushon. John is a dear friend of nearly 40 years, an international recording and touring artist, fellow drummer, and the producer of *The Drummer Loves Ballads*, though he would prefer I say consultant. When we aren't buddies sharing belly laughs, he is the "master" to my "grasshopper" (for those who still remember "Kung Fu"!)

Review Fix: What does music mean to you?

Armato: It is my great comfort, and it is my white whale. It touches me and tortures me.

When I take it in as a listener, music is a never-ending source of whatever I need at the moment: solace, excitement, provocation, celebration, reflection, you name it. I can turn to Brahms or Pat Metheny or Paul Desmond or Bob Seeger or Tower of Power or Buddy Rich or Charles Mingus and there it is: The things that cannot be said, but only played or sung or felt that I need in that moment or that reflect who I am in that moment.

When I make it as a player, it is a pursuit that sometimes profoundly exhilarates and that, candidly, sometimes profoundly disappoints. Sometimes you catch the whale. Sometimes you don't. It's the constant striving for both mindfulness and self-improvement. And it just never ends. There's a great quote, attributed to the master bass player Victor Wooten, I believe, that says "Music is like counting to infinity. You never get closer to the end, just further from the beginning."

Review Fix: How would you describe your sound to someone who has never heard you?

Armato: Well, I can tell you what I *hope* my sound is. First and foremost, I hope it is swinging. Then I hope it is soothing or exciting depending on the mood of the music. And I hope it is a soundscape, not just a flurry of notes; in other words, I try to play so that there is a bed of rhythm, or a wash of rhythm, or a field of rhythm – pick your metaphor – that the rest of the music can just sort of sit on top of. I'm in love with the ostinato, the trance, the clave, the repetition, the groove that drums provide. I hope when people hear me, they smile and sway just a little bit and sit back for a comfortable ride.

Review Fix: How are your live shows different from your studio work?

Armato: Well, this album is my first outing as a leader, so it's hard to say. My career until now has been as a sideman, so live shows have been a reflection of whomever the leader has been. If *The Drummer Loves Ballads* gets traction in live settings, it'll be time for vision to meet discovery again. We'll see.

Review Fix: What inspired your latest single?

Armato: I really didn't think in terms of singles when putting the album together but the overwhelming feedback from early listeners, before the official release, was that "The Shadows of Paris" is one of the real shining stars of the album. It looks like it's getting the most interest from radio programmers as well. It's a Henry Mancini tune that was written for the Pink Panther movie "A Shot in the Dark."

We took an especially "mysterioso" approach to it while keeping the French Café vibe alive. Lucy Wijnands is an extraordinary young singer with an irresistibly sophisticated voice who, I think, is at the forefront of the appeal of the recording. But there's also a wonderfully layered richness to the arrangement. The late Jeff Lisenby added a beautiful accordion track to the tune. Rod Fleeman has an exquisite acoustic guitar solo. A full string section comes in late in the tune (courtesy arranger Paul Roberts). The German classical and jazz master Steffen Drabek provides a wonderful viola interlude. And the tune ends with a French spoken word recap of the lyrics by Carol Bar, as if the young mistress who is the subject of the song has gotten older and is reflecting on her time "in the shadows."

For me, there was just a haunting quality to the tune that invited an almost cinematic treatment. I couldn't resist trying to build it into something especially poignant and beautiful.

Review Fix: What are your goals for 2021?

Armato: Catch my breath from the five-year journey of making this album! I want to do whatever I can to promote and market *The Drummer Loves Ballads* successfully. But otherwise, this is a rejuvenation time period for me.

Review Fix: What's next?

Armato: Time will tell, but I've been creating my whole life, as a musician, writer, and designer. But this is the biggest project I've ever undertaken for myself. It was exhausting but addicting. I'm not positive what form the next creation might take, but I want to continue to create at this scale now. I do have a vision for a second album, but it is still incubating, and the discovery phase will have to wait for a bit.

Review Fix: Anything else you'd like to add?

Armato: One of the things John Cushon said to me repeatedly while we made *The Drummer Loves Ballads* was "You can only control what you do. You can't control what others take away from it." He is SO right. Some of what I set out to do with the album is very contrary to the prevailing winds of the music business. We created it to be a unique full-album listening experience. The album is at its best when you listen in sequence, straight through, with one tune melding into the next. There is a narrative arc that depends on that sequence and a holistic listening, but that goes against our current culture of singles, and shuffling, and playlists. I can't make everyone listen to it the way I want them to, but I do think those who take it all in like an old-fashion LP will be rewarded for doing so. I think it's good for us to slow down, focus and surrender to a piece of art on its own terms.