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Dream Theater

MATTHEW SALACUSE

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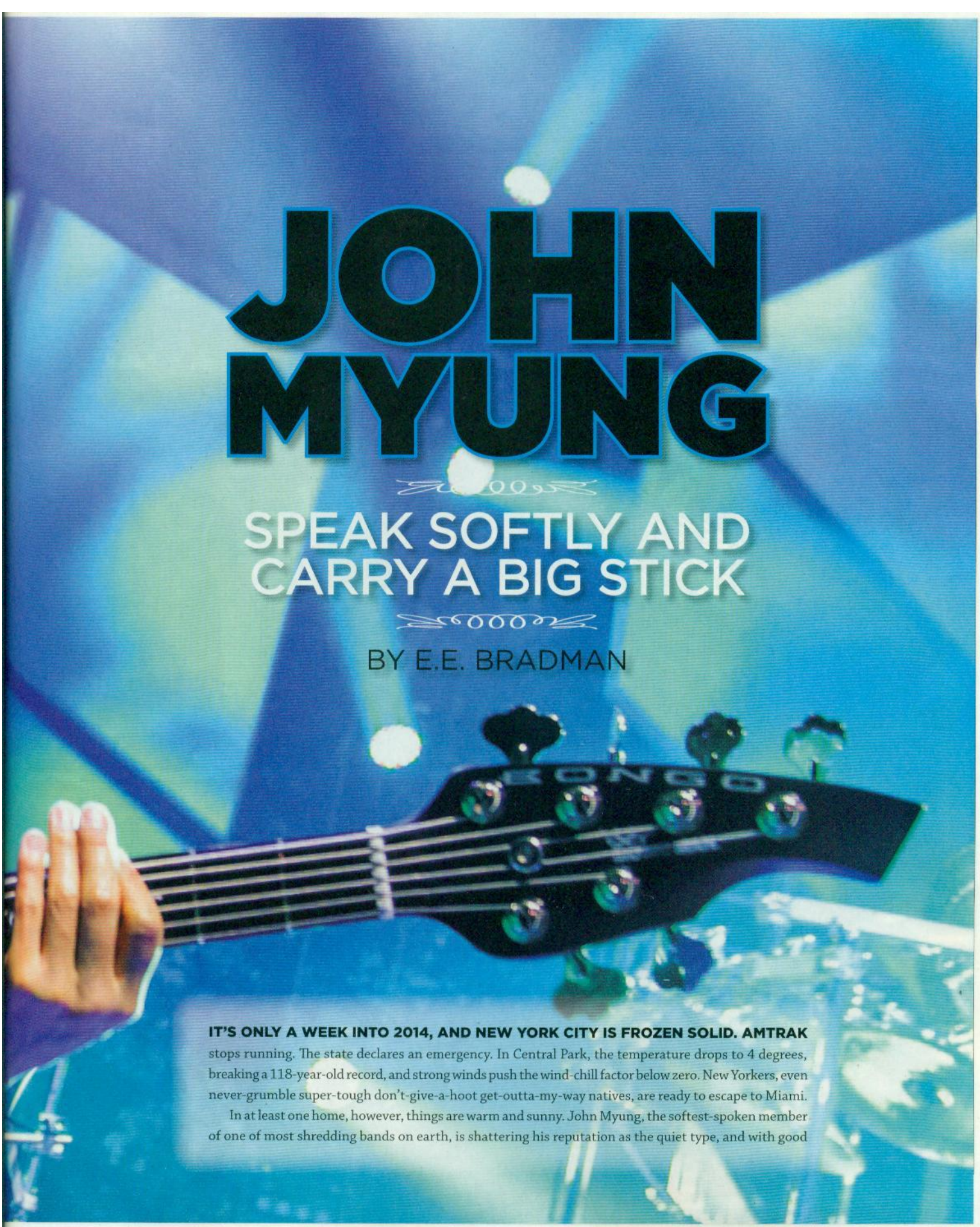
JOHN MYUNG

SPEAK SOFTLY AND CARRY A BIG STICK

BY E.E. BRADMAN



IT'S ONLY A WEEK INTO 2014, AND NEW YORK CITY IS FROZEN SOLID. AMTRAK stops running. The state declares an emergency. In Central Park, the temperature drops to 4 degrees, breaking a 118-year-old record, and strong winds push the wind-chill factor below zero. New Yorkers, even never-grumble super-tough don't-give-a-hoot get-outta-my-way natives, are ready to escape to Miami.

In at least one home, however, things are warm and sunny. John Myung, the softest-spoken member of one of most shredding bands on earth, is shattering his reputation as the quiet type, and with good

KEN SETTLE

reason. The new Dream Theater album is a return to his prog-rock roots and to the basses and tones that inspired him all those years ago as a kid growing up in Long Island. But it's not just a nostalgia trip. The album's title—simply, *Dream Theater*—also signifies a fresh beginning, a statement, and an affirmation. It's a sign of new life, and Myung is eager to talk about it.

What makes *Dream Theater* all the more fantastic is that barely four years ago, no one knew how things were going to turn out after the sudden exit of longtime drummer Mike Portnoy, with whom Myung and guitarist John Petrucci founded the band in 1985. Over the course of ten studio albums, Dream Theater had gained millions of fans—and with 1992's *Images & Words*, even a touch of commercial success—by perfecting their own mix of over-the-top virtuosity, pop songcraft, epic ballads, and crunchy metal. As acrimonious as Portnoy's departure was, the band—rounded out since the '90s by keyboard wizard Jordan Rudess and vocalist James LaBrie—went right into recording their eleventh album, the suitably titled *A Dramatic Turn of Events*. New drummer Mike Mangini played drum parts written by Petrucci, and despite the circumstances, it earned the band its first Grammy nomination in 2012.

Dream Theater, however, finds the band in rare form. Recalling prog hall-of-famers (Yes, Genesis), pop juggernauts (Led Zeppelin, Queen), Dream Theater's contemporaries (Fates Warning, Queensrÿche), as well as metal and hard-rock monsters (Anthrax, Megadeth)—and reserving a special affinity for Rush—the new album boldly announces that with its deep roots, the band will thrive, not just survive, without its founding drummer. Mangini, unleashed to contribute his own virtuosic parts, lights a new fire under his bandmates, who turn in inspired, epic performances. Fans and critics feel it, too: The album, which landed in the Top Ten in 24 countries and has been nominated for a Grammy, is already considered a highlight of the DT catalog.

For his part, Myung screams out of the gate with a new duo of custom Music Man Bongo basses and a front-pickup grunt that simultaneously recalls Geddy Lee and Chris Squire. Always fleet-fingered, Myung seems energized and up in the mix on every track, grooving with thick overdrive toward the end of "Looking Glass," laying down the law underneath Rudess's solo on "Along the Ride," and throwing down Geddy-like bass breaks underneath the craziness of "Enigma Machine." "Surrender to Reason" finds him flaunting the tone of his Ernie Ball/Music Man Bongo HS, and it's a joy to hear him stretch out while Petrucci solos. "Illumination Theory," the five-part, 22-minute album closer, contains plenty of bass-tastic highlights, including Myung's gritty overdrive and big bottom on "Live, Die, Kill," his counterpoint to Petrucci on "The Embracing Circle," and his cool runs underneath "The Pursuit of Truth," all played with the excitement of teenager who'd one day go to Berklee and then rule the world.

How was the writing process on the new album?

There was definitely a buzz in the air once all the gear was loaded in the studio, and that set the pace for the entire writing process. We visited our influences a bit, and there were lots of fun moments on this album. It's great to be able to feel that way after having spent so much time with it.

What are your favorite tracks?

"Enigma Machine," which has a lot of bass breaks, and "Behind the Veil," which has a cool bass break.

How did you get your tone this time?

My basses have a new element of fire. It all depended on how I played and how much I attacked the strings. If I want more heat in the sound, I really lay in, and if I don't need it, I back off. But equally important is that my bass tone has the round, foundational sound that supports the instruments above. It's great to have a cool sound, but is it also supporting the other instruments? Is it acting as a bass? In that respect, a really good bass sound is one of the toughest sounds to get. When you hear a great bass sound, don't take it for granted, man! There is a lot of work going on—a lot—everything from the gear to the players to the engineers.

> "The tone I have now is the best bass sound I've ever gotten on a Dream Theater album."

For example, when the bass breaks happen in "Behind the Veil" and "Enigma Machine," you get to hear the bass by itself for a moment. The tracks don't drop, and there's no loss of energy. It's just another exciting moment in the song, and then *boom*—the band kicks back in. That's amazing to me. Overall, I think the tone I have now is the best bass sound I've ever gotten on a Dream Theater album.

Which brings me to the question many fans ask: Why is it so tough to hear you during live shows? Can you hear yourself onstage?

Yeah, I'm cranking! Some of it might be that there's a lot going on. There are people who tell me my live bass tone is great, so I think part of it is where you're sitting. It also depends on which tour you're talking about [*laughs*]. On the most recent tours, I'm clearly in the mix. It might actually get a little better because of

Dream Theater (from left): Mike Mangini, John Myung, James LaBrie, Jordan Rudess, and John Petrucci

the fire element I now have.

How do you get your distortion and overdrive tones?

With the Mesa Boogie Grid Slammer and the Fractal Audio Axe-Fx II. I use the Axe-Fx for distortion that I've modeled from my old Pearce BC-1 with a Billy Sheehan mod, and it sounds incredible.

Carving out space between the guitars and the kick drum can be difficult. How do you make that happen?

On a parametric EQ, I'll push anywhere between 160Hz and 240 Hz, and on the mid-frequency side, between 800Hz and 1,000Hz. As long as the instrument itself sounds good, that EQ should work. There are so many options with the gear, but I use most of it in subtle ways, just making little tweaks.

Your outboard gear is pretty serious.

Anybody can go out and buy a rack of great stuff, but it's about finding gear that supports everything else in the rack.

What do you consider the heart of your rack?

My Demeter VTMP-2B valve pre [tube preamp]. It's just a magical piece of gear. James Demeter was telling me how he made one of these for Quincy Jones when he was recording *Thriller* with Louis Johnson, who played a Music Man. And you know what? I was at a TGI Fridays having dinner and "Thriller" came on. I listened to the bass, and I realized that that's exactly what it sounds like—a Music Man bass going through a valve pre. And I'm using Radial technology for all signal routing and things like that, which is top notch. I wouldn't be able to have the creativity that I have with my gear without the Radial stuff. It's so, *Where have you been my whole life?* Amazing high-quality.

What do you look for in your gear?

Many companies make great gear, but it was just a matter of me finding out what works best for the way I play. I have a strong right-hand style that produces a certain attack and "clack" that can either work with me or against me. There are so many options and only so many windows of time to really think about gear. On tour, it's more about having gear that's reliable every night; it's hard to be experimental. And then after the tour, boom—we're back in the studio.

What brought you to Music Man basses?

I started with Music Man and then went to Spector, Tobias, Tung, and then Yamaha—all great companies, all great instruments. But when I played the Bongo bass, John Petrucci was like,

"Man, that is the you I remember." And he was right; I feel like I'm back again. This is the energy. This is the vibe. This is why I started playing.

What's special about your Bongo basses?

I had two amazing Bongo basses for our recording sessions, and they're both a bit unique. I had a HS [single humbucker] that I was test driving for about a year—the prototype with the neck and everything. And then the other one, an HH [double humbucker], came in after the first song was written.

On the HS, I chose to have just a volume knob, without any EQ. If I want to change anything, I change it with the parametric EQ that's in my rig or have a studio engineer use the EQ in a console.

Why'd you decide not to have tone controls on the bass?

The bass is the first part of the signal chain, so I need to know it's a consistent starting point. I also realized that outboard EQs are way more powerful, so I just let the bass be the bass, and that has seemed to work for everybody.

On the double humbucker, I chose to have a volume control and a 4-way knob that changes the polarity of the pickups. That way, I get a little more color out of the pickups, which I totally love—there are moments on this record where I hear that bass, and I'm like, "Thank God I had that pickup selector in there." I had it set one way throughout the whole record. You can really hear the sound on "Illumination Theory," where there's the middle classical piece, the keyboard piece in the beginning, and then this sort of comet entering back in sonically, which lands with the bass kicking in. That's the double-humbucker Bongo. It has that Rickenbacker-ish kind of sound—it just has all these different worlds in it that you can hear on the record.

Do your Bongo basses have custom neck profiles, too?

Yes. At first, the neck was too taxing on my hands, so I started by superimposing everything on a standard 5-string neck. But I wasn't getting as much power in my left hand as I wanted; I felt like I was cupping the neck the whole time rather than being able to anchor my thumb behind it. I explained all this to Ernie Ball/Music Man, and we made the neck a bit flatter. Now I can get the leverage I need, and my hands are totally comfortable. That's also important when it comes to preventing carpal tunnel—you have to make sure the instrument is spec'd to the way your hands are built.

How do you connect with drummers and think about being part of a rhythm section?

One thing I've learned is there's no wrong or right way to play. As long as the person has an approach, and it speaks to you, it's important to morph with the approach, keep things musical, and tap into the energy between the drums and the bass. I don't have to think about it a whole lot; it just kind of happens.

You played violin before you picked up bass, right?

Yes, my mom enrolled me when I was five. I lost my passion for the instrument around 15 as I got into rock music. I would bring my violin to jams, but there's no way I could compete, so eventually, I gravitated to bass. In a weird way, I think it had an impact in terms of how I organize notes on the bass and how I think of them as shapes.

Why bass?

It had four strings and there was a need for a bass player in my neighborhood. I didn't put a whole lot of thought into it, but it definitely struck a chord with me.

Who were some of your early influences?

I couldn't wait to come home after school and play along to Black Sabbath records. When I was hanging out, we'd be listening to bands like Jethro Tull, Rush, and Yes. I remember staying up listening to Yes at two in the morning trying to figure out "Long Distance Runaround" on bass.

Once you got serious, what was your practice routine?

Back in junior high, John Petrucci and I had an unwritten rule: We didn't leave the house until we'd put in six hours on our instruments. There's a statistic saying that to really be good at anything, you have to put in 10,000 hours. Even as kids, we knew that we had to put the time in.

What was your experience at Berklee?

During the week, we'd spend each day learning, going to classes, talking about music with people we'd met along the way, and then jamming for six hours a night. After growing up on Long Island, I was exposed to all these great people from different parts of the world who were into different music, and that was a real eye-opener. It was a golden time, a great point in my life.

How long were you there?

Just a year. The idea was to go back after summer break, but the way the summer played out, we decided it would be better if we stayed home, put in the time, and got the band up and running. So we gave it a shot.

What's your practice regimen these days?

I spend a lot of my time with the instrument every day just going through basic stuff like playing scales, which helps keep my hands in shape. It's boring, but it's become a part of my life. I do it to feel centered. If I don't, I feel like something's missing.

How do you practice scales?

I see scales as interlocking patterns, and that's how I think about them and practice them. Anytime anybody comes up with a scale, I have to break it down and understand how it relates to the diatonic scale. It's also cool to play along to albums like Rush's *Hemispheres*, which is a lot of fun. There's something that happens when you're playing along to a recording: You're identifying with something you really enjoy, but you're actually playing it in real time, and it's a great way to spend time with your instrument.

You're renowned for your serious warm-ups, too.

There's no replacement for a good warm-up. To me, a warm-up is just about spending at least two hours with the instrument.

What's your warm-up routine?

I like playing scales, and I also have this mindless thing that I do, a combination of drills and riffs that don't project any sort of tonality—they're mechanical things I play as I inch my way up

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the neck. It doesn't matter what notes you play; just make sure you're playing the whole time, slowly warming up the hands. The time spent is more important than what you play. Make sure it's for at least two hours and you should be good.

How do you avoid carpal tunnel and other hand injuries?

The only reason I don't have issues with my hands is that I warm up before every show. I know that if I'm not warmed up, there's no way I can go out there and play the stuff that we do. I'm really territorial with my time before a show.

And afterward?

Once we're done, the band usually has to do a meet-and-greet or get on a bus to the next city.

What's the best way to transition from 4-string to 6?

I look at a 6-string as a 4 with two extra strings. If you want to play 6-string and you don't feel ready, just pick up a 6 and play the middle four strings. If anything, it's a bit easier because you have that bottom *B* string as a ramp to play off when you're on the low *E*. With four strings, it seems like the shapes have just started and then they stop, but with the extra strings, you can actually see more shapes within the scales. As a bass player, it just makes sense to have a 6-string. Even if you don't use those extra strings all the time, having them is useful just in terms of being able to see shapes.

"As a bass player, it just makes sense to have a 6-string."

Would you ever play a bass with more than six strings?

No, not really. If I heard anything in that range, I would overdub it with another instrument. The 6-string is a good framework in terms of having a creative instrument, so I don't see the need to go beyond that.

What about Chapman Stick and fretless?

I'm really into Chapman Stick, but it's not something I've used a lot in Dream Theater. I used a Chapman Stick on the track "New Millennium," off *Falling Into Infinity*, a while back. The intro is where it really stands out. I love the spirit of that instrument, but I haven't been able to incorporate it into more Dream Theater songs, at least not yet. Maybe there will be a side project or something that I'll do eventually, something that is more in line with that instrument where I can kind of put something together with it.

I have one fretless Ernie Ball/Music Man on tour, and I love it, but that's like a spice thing. I like the way fretless has this singing quality in terms of how the bass notes can move underneath the melody. Playing a melody on a fretless turns even going from one note to the next into a big deal, and it's a lot more expressive. I experimented a bit with fretless on the song "Hollow Years," also on *Falling Into Infinity*.

How do you find inspiration for your bass lines?

A lot of it is stuff I accumulate. So much of my everyday time with the instrument is uneventful, so it takes patience to wait for the moment when that spark of creativity strikes. Sometimes bass lines come when we're jamming; sometimes, when we're all sitting around and I'm kind of experimenting in front of everybody, they'll stop me when they hear something good. Then there's John or Jordan coming in with something they wrote, and it's pretty obvious what I have to do: support what's going on and put the right notes underneath it.

When you're writing an odd-time riff, do you approach it from a rhythmic or melodic perspective?

When I'm creating or trying to come up with something, I try to take everything I've learned, throw it away, and just react. Things just happen because that's what feels right; it has nothing to do with a number. It comes from what Henry Miller called the creative flux, a place in your mind. Afterward, you can break it down, and then you realize, "Wow, there are a lot of cool rhythms going on here."

Do you ever come up with ideas that aren't appropriate for Dream Theater?

Yes, but that's what side projects are for—to be able to use ideas that would otherwise just disappear.

What's next for Jelly Jam?

We're working on songs that we recorded here at my place about a year ago. I hope that will come out soon.

What about an instructional DVD? It's been over a decade since *Progressive Bass Concepts*.

I definitely have stuff to share, but it's really just about being able to find time. Maybe I can get it out in a couple more interviews or maybe another column. We'll see.

Would you ever put out a solo album?

I work best as a collaborator. The type of music I want to play, I can't create alone. When I'm by myself, there's no chemistry—I don't have people pushing me to get more out of myself. Being in a band is unique that way, and I'm thankful for that.

Is there a reason you don't take more solos onstage?

I'm not a solo guy. I play bass to play with people. I don't feel like I have to solo, which is why I don't.

After all these years, what are your favorite Dream Theater songs to play?

There isn't just one that stands out—it's all part of the package. We show up early at the venue and it's just empty seats and us, no energy. During a show, the place is full, and you have all these people transmitting energy. When we play the older catalog now, it's like an energy exchange. The audience is what makes it exciting to play and do what we do, and that's what makes the songs exciting—feeling and transmitting that energy.

When we first started out, there were lots of doubts and worry, but we're still here and still doing it: enjoying what we do, in a band, making music. We're about to embark on an extensive tour and see a lot of different people around the world. It's a really cool situation, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. **BP**