

Big Drum Bonanza



This past summer, I had the opportunity to experience a very unique event called the "Big Drum Bonanza," and it was probably one of the most intense experiences of my life. It was a five-day event, from July 3rd through the 7th, at the Drum Channel studios in Oxnard, California, and the nearby Courtyard Marriot in Camarillo, CA. This event was all ages, all levels, and all styles of music. Thomas Lang (drummer/producer) is the mastermind behind this incredible event, along with his superstar wife, Elizabeth. Together, they created one of the most original, and intense, 5-day boot camps ever, that left you feeling like you got your ass kicked! This event was not for the faint of heart. What makes this event so unique is the lineup! Thomas Lang was joined by other special guest instructors, including world-renowned drummers George Kollias (Nile), Jon Dette (Anthrax/Slayer), Stanton Moore (Galactic), Virgil Donati (Steve Vai/Planet X/Derek Sherinian), Chris Coleman (Prince/Chaka Khan), and Dave Elitch (The Mars Volta). Lang, along with his stellar line-up of instructors, gets down and dirty, leading daily schedules of intense, hands-on drumming, along with master classes, Q&A sessions, private lessons and killer performances throughout the week. I was there for one day, and I was exhausted, but I felt good. I felt like I just completed an intense workout! I couldn't interview all the drummers, but there were a few that I got to sit down with, and get their perspective on the event, and what it meant to be there. As a metalhead myself, I was stoked to sit down with George Kollias and Jon Dette, but first, I got the low down from the Langs, and how it all got started.

How did the Big Drum Bonanza get started?

Elizabeth Lang: We have been doing the Thomas Lang drumming boot camps since 2009. The idea was Thomas's, because he's been part of a lot of clinics all over the world. The difference is that in most camps, there is an instructor and an audience. The instructor has a kit, but the audience has a note pad. It was Thomas's idea to give everyone their own individual kit to play, so the students could actually play along with him for a really long, extended period of time. The drum boot camps are usually 3 days, 8 hours a day. When you really think about how long it would take you to accomplish 24 hours of practicing,

you really accomplish a lot in a very short amount of time. We decided we were going to try it, and we did. People loved it, so we kept on doing it all over the world. We wanted to take that camp concept and make it a little bigger, branch it out with more artists, and give more people a chance to have that experience with more artists. Drummers are a very loyal community. It is such a success this year because of word of mouth from the drummers and students, happy people, and the lineup is remarkable!

What do you want the students to take away from this experience?

Elizabeth Lang: A lot of inspiration! You can download all the music in the world but you cannot download the experience. It's rare air and you can feel it. It's not every day you will have Thomas Lang sit down with you and show you how to play the drums.

Thomas Lang

Thomas, I noticed the way you hold your stick in your snare drum hand. To my knowledge, that's the traditional style that you mostly see maybe a drumline. Can you explain why you hold your stick that way?

Thomas: Well, I used to hold it like that for many years. I actually changed my grip a few years ago because of carpal tunnel issues I had. But that was just the way I learned. My first teacher, when I was five, said, "Hold the stick like that," and that was almost 30 years ago. I like the fact that we can use a sort of traditional, historic grip, even in contemporary and heavy music, like Cozy Powell did. I was always a huge fan of Cozy Powell, Buddy Rich, and all those guys, who were all traditional players. And I like to be able to do both. There are certain things you can do with that grip you can't do with the other, and vice versa. So I use both. It's just a broader spectrum of sounds and technical abilities.

What inspired you to create the Big Drum Bonanza?

Thomas: I've been hosting my drumming boot camps for a number of years, and whenever I host a camp anywhere in the world, I try to contact local drummer friends of mine who are big name drummers to pop in, say hi, and sign some autographs for the students. Basically, give them a second opinion on what I'm teaching, and maybe teach for a few hours. I've

been doing that for a number of years now, and I've decided to elevate and take my boot camp to the next level by just bringing a whole bunch of other drummers, and giving the students the ability and opportunity to learn from not just one teacher in a super intense way, but from 5 or 6 different guys, all world-class drumming superstars, and get a really broad range of information from everybody. I personally just invite my favorite drummers, and my friends, and I try to create a camp situation that would work for me, as a student. I just call up my favorite guys, and say "Hey, do you want to come down and teach?" I'm lucky enough to have a lot of great friends in the drumming world, and everybody loved the idea and showed up. It's pretty unique that the students can take private lessons, and small group lessons, with all these guys for such a long period of time for 5 days.

What do you look for in an instructor?

Thomas: Well, I'm a rock fan, a heavy music fan, but I like to offer a broad spectrum of playing. For example, this year we have George Kollias, who is a super extreme speed metal drummer. And then we have Jon Dette who is with Slayer and Anthrax and Testament, et cetera. He's a sort of old-school drummer, who is also fast and loud. Then we have Virgil Donnatte who is a total Jazz fusion player. We have Chris Coleman who is an RnB, Gospel chops kind of player. Finally, we have Dave Elitch, who is in the Alternative rock world, and of course myself, teaching my whole thing. So we have a really broad range of players: Jazz and fusion to extreme metal, and that's what I'm looking for. I'm looking for drummers who represent their certain genre, and who are the best in the world, hands down.

This is sold out. That's amazing. What do you think sold it out? Was it the marketing, the PR, the students?

Thomas: Well, this year is the second year. The first year, people went "What the hell is a drum bonanza?" We wanted to keep it small and manageable last year. We didn't try to sell out. We didn't put as much marketing and publicity behind it. This year, being the second year, we have a lot of return customers. Plus the "Theme Song

Play

"Along" contest has grown. We've had many more entries from all over the world. That's definitely word of mouth. They start talking about how something crazy and new happened. It's also a little more publicity I think, and also the fact that the students from last year went home and said, "Guys, you have to check this out. This is insane," and showed pictures and videos. I think that made a big difference.

How's the recording process coming along?

Thomas: It's great. The album is done. Artwork is done. It's mastered and ready to go. The first album was released on my label, Muso Entertainment. For this record, we are looking for collaborations with other labels, especially in Japan. At the moment, we are negotiating a little bit, but we should have something in writing in two or three weeks. As soon as that's done, the record's out.

What can we expect for the Big Drum Bonanza next year?

Thomas: I already have spoken to many of my friends. I've actually gotten some calls from people who said, "Hey man, why didn't you call me for big drum bonanza?" so I've got a long list of people I like to mix it up a bit, so you will just have to wait and see, but it will be good!

Jon Dette

What got you into thrash metal?

Jon: I started playing drums when I was 13 years old. I got my first drum set 14. My parents were divorced, so I asked both of them thinking I would at least get one drum set. I started off with a double bass drum set. That same birthday, my brother got me the Anthrax, "Fistful of Metal" record. It had just come out. I had already been listening to metal like Judas Priest and Anthrax 3 months before my birthday. When I heard that, it just changed me. I never heard bass drumming like that before. I saw my path in drumming as soon as I started listening to that album and playing along with it. Literally, from day one I have been playing that style of music, and now I have been fortunate to be playing for some of the bands that have influenced me.

What is a highlight of being a part of the Big Drum Bonanza?

Jon: I think the highlight for me will be the drum channel. It is

something I have wanted to get into for a long time. I hope this leads into getting a DVD done later on, and drumming on an individual level as opposed to just on a band level.

How did you get involved with The Big Drum Bonanza?

Jon: There is this pesky, annoying man called Thomas Lang (laughs). I have been friends with him for several years now, and his lovely wife Elizabeth. He asked me to be a part of his Drummers Boot Camp a few years ago. I had been a guest instructor, then this came up, and I said yes. It was perfect timing! I had just gotten back from Europe four days earlier. It's an awesome experience, and I love being a part of it!

What do you want your students to take away from your lessons?

Jon: I am teaching a very specific style of music. I made it very clear that I am not a session guy. I am not a jazz player. I am a heavy metal drummer. I am an old school heavy metal drummer, and I will actually hit! It's not a technical thing. It's an attitude, and a feel that goes behind it as well. A lot of the things I am teaching them have to do with not relying on technology. If they are going to try this style of music, they can't be shy. Hit those things! The exercises I am showing them will actually help improve their speed, stamina, and endurance. They are not too happy with me right now. They are all sore this morning. It's more like a workout than a drum lesson (laughs).

George Kollias

Who are your musical influencers?

George: Thomas Lang to begin with, he was a huge influence on me. He is actually the reason why I did my first DVD, then the second DVD. I started because of Lars Ulrich back in 1989. I loved bands like Slayer, Kreator, and Sepultura. I always give a little more respect to those who worked to educate me. Let me explain what I mean. If some of my favorite drummers of the past recorded and released an album, I would buy it and would learn a few things. Guys like Thomas Lang spend a lot of time making a DVD, and offering it like real education, and now I do this too with my DVD's. I will always have more respect to those who spend a lot of their time to release a product that is about education.

What is a highlight of The Big Drum Bonanza so far?

George: The students! They are out of control! Their level is out of control. This is like professional drummers here, I am not kidding.

Everyone is super cool, especially Thomas and Elizabeth Lang, who put this all together. Where else can you hang out with the most incredible drummers in the world, and have a beer? Having a beer with a teacher can be so educational because you are talking about music, and the backstage stuff. We talk about the music business, and how things really work. It's a 24/7 school. I am very impressed with the students' level. Everyone gets it really quick. It makes my job that much easier! I would really like to be here next year. This is the coolest thing you can do as a drummer. If you haven't checked it out yet, you have to get out here next year!

What can we expect from you this summer and Nile?

George: With Nile, we have a European tour, a South American tour, then Australia, and possibly China. I will be coming out with my own album. It is actually a very fun project. I play all the instruments. I write all the songs on the album, and I sing as well. So I am very busy all the time, because this is fun for me! This is not an easy job, but it is still great. I love getting to sit home and write music, and I love being here.

The Big Drum Bonanza was, without a doubt, one of the coolest, and loudest, experiences of my career as a music journalist. If the notorious Spinal Tap "cranks it to 11," Thomas and Elizabeth Lang crank it to 12 with this camp! This experience was non-stop intensity, and everyone had drum fever. George Kollias was right. The talent of the students was absolutely remarkable. Not only did they seem thrilled to be there, but they also took a lot away from the Big Drum Bonanza. You could see how into it they were, and how excited they were to learn from their heroes. Elizabeth Lang says people came from places like Hong Kong, Peru, Japan, Singapore, Columbia, and the United Kingdom. This goes to show that everyone drums in the same language! Music unites people like nothing else in the world. It's great to see that the Big Drum Bonanza is growing like a thunderous snare drum crescendo! If people used to say, "What the hell is a 'Big Drum Bonanza?' they will now say, "How the hell do you NOT know about the Big Drum Bonanza?" I, for one, am glad to be in the know. I will definitely be back next year. I can't wait to see where the very talented power couple of Thomas and Elizabeth Lang take this event!

For more information on the Big Drum Bonanza please visit www.musoentertainment.com

Raquel Figlo