

PLASTIC POP-PUNK POLITICS

He's a drummer, he's a songsmith, he's setting up a toy company and he loves Billy Bragg. Meet **Vinnie Balzano**, provider of the skanking beats with enduring punk oiks Less Than Jake.

It's good to come across a band that sees their drummer as a truly important asset. Drummer Vinnie writes Less Than Jake's lyrics, the band released an album on his record label, and even the name is derived from an old family pet of Vinnie's. The Florida ska-punk supremos have been around for over 11 years, earning themselves a particularly loyal cult fanbase. They have toured tirelessly, insisting on playing only all-age gigs where they treat audiences to a carnival of craziness involving daft costumes, comedy cover versions – which range from vintage Slayer tracks to songs from *Grease* – and the merry parping of saxophones and trombone over a sound that adds metal and hip-hop influences to the ska-punk template.

It was back in 1995 that LTJ released its debut album, *Pezcore*, titled with reference to the band's liking for Pez sweets – yes that's right, the candy triangles that you eat after they've been ejected from a plastic cartoon character's neck. The band was signed to Capitol, only to be dropped after two albums (1996's *Losing Streak* and 1998's *Hello Rockview*). Always prolific, Less Than Jake went on to release *Borders & Boundaries* on Vinnie's Fueled By Ramen label, before getting back into bed with a major label – this time Warner Bros – to release disc number six, 2003's *Anthem*. Recorded partly in a New Orleans studio (that was previously a mental hospital) and a post office, the album mixes up punk, rock, pop, reggae and ska, shot through with the fizzing energy of the band's live shows.

As with the previous albums, the lyrics came courtesy of Vinnie Balzano. Since he met singer/guitarist Chris (*DeMakes, vocals/guitar*) at school, and the pair took their punk ambitions to Gainesville, Florida, the affable sticksman has been chief wordsmith for the music that they've created. Vinnie, who quit his teacher-training course at University of Florida so he could follow the band, gives the impression of being someone who truly loves what he does. There's no whingeing about the hardships of touring, or the musician's poverty that inspired the Fueled By Ramen tag (it's the American equivalent of saying you're running on Pot Noodles because you can't afford anything else to eat). As long as he's making music with his old friends, and there's an internet connection for him to stay in touch with the

office of his record company, he's happy. With his relentless energy and do-it-yourself work ethic it's amazing that Vinnie had time to answer questions for *Rhythm* – fortunately for us, he did.


Rhythm: How did you get started as a drummer?

Vinnie Balzano: "My brother plays guitar and he's four years older than me, and where you have a guitar player there has to be a drummer. I was 13 at the time and he pushed me towards playing drums because he wanted someone to play with. You know, you go to the pawn shop and you spend about 80 dollars on a really beat-up drum kit and you bang away on it. Then once you have the band bug you want to keep that going. When my brother moved away I had to find other people to make music with so I joined lots of bands. The first real band I played in was a band called No Fraud, which was a legendary old punk rock band from Florida. Then I played in a band called Good Grief, then from that point I moved in with Less Than Jake. I've also been in some death metal bands in my time."

And you're a lyricist too – did you ever write any death metal lyrics?

"Yes I did; never stuff about Satan or whatever, more like Iron Maiden, dragons and swords, blah blah blah. To me, it's important to write lyrics as well as playing drums. Being a drummer, for me, is so much more than just time-keeping, just playing the drums, it's about the periphery too. The periphery for me is that I handle a lot of business for Less Than Jake; I run my own record label, I do a lot of design work for the band – merchandise, art direction, and so on. I really think that that's the way things should be. Being in a band is not about waiting for someone else to do whatever needs doing."

What made you decide to become a professional musician?

"As a job? That was probably around eight years ago. I decided this was pretty much a full-time thing, this was what paid my rent, and I decided to put everything into the music. It was just after we'd done our first couple of United States tours, all of a sudden we were making money, and there were crowds of kids showing up to see us." 

Interview: Jane Boxall Photography: Gavin Roberts

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What about your record label?

"The label's called Fueled By Ramen. It's been around for five years, it has bands like Fall Out Boy, who we got signed to Island records; Recover, who recently got signed to Universal; Yellow Card. There's a lot of good stuff on it."

How do you find bands to sign?

"I have an office full of people who do a lot of the work while I'm gone. I'm sort of a slave to being online to get things done. I see bands, I definitely do the A&R thing on it, but it's more than that – I do a lot of visual and conceptual things for the bands. Right now, my most prized possession is my Sidekick – it's a cellphone that can do instant messaging, check your email or whatever. It's a crazy gadget, it's indispensable. As well as running Fueled By Ramen, and doing a lot of business for Less Than Jake, I'm also starting a new company."

What kind of toys will you be making?

"The company's called Monkey Versus Robot, and it's going to make action figures as well as small capsule toys, things like that. All in limited editions, aimed at adults as well as kids."

Back to your drumming – has your playing changed much in the time you've been with Less Than Jake?

"The sure, it's gone from always feeling like a

straight up 4/4 time beat, to moving into different time signatures. It's more thought out, with more tasteful fills, more power, more precision, more refined technique."

Has that come from lessons?

"It's come from playing live. It's funny because there are only so many times that you can actually play the drums wrong before it starts to hurt your body, so you have to adjust how you play because your body tells you that you're playing wrong. You're playing superfast punk rock – you have the shoulders, and the wrists. I've not had any earth-shattering problems so far though, knock on wood."

Can you tell us about the recording process of your last album, *Anthem*?

"This time around it was a very easy process. I was very prepared before I went into the studio. We had 28 songs altogether, so I did those in three days. In some of the songs I had the whole band with me and I played live, but for some of the songs I just played on my own with no band, because I wanted things to be a bit more clean, or to really concentrate on some of the accents that needed to be right on top of the click."

You worked with Rob Cavallo, who produced Green Day's *Dookie* – how did you find that?

"It was great. I mean, Rob's part-psychiatrist,

VINNIE BALZANO

part-producer. He's very analytical in his producing process, and I'm pretty okay with that. I was going for a very natural, very room-oriented drum sound. Nothing over processed, nothing too clicky – a really warm, deep-toned, organic sound."

What kit were you using in the studio?

"I used a mish-mash of drums: Pork Pie and Premier kits, and I used a different snare on every song. That went from Modern Classic drums to Premier, DW, Pork Pie, Ludwig, Orange County. I have an Orange County drumset, I have a Pork Pie drumset – a lot of different drumsets, you know – but my best-sounding drumset was made in the UK and that's Premier. Premier drums have a really good tone, they're not too tinny, they have a really good bottom end, and the sound has a really good resonance to it."

How does the band writing process usually work?

"To give you a quick rundown on the writing process, I usually collect a bunch of ideas – little pieces of paper fall out of my sock, or I write them in a diary, or I scratch them down on a piece of paper and stick it in my pocket. I gather up all these bits of titles, choruses, sentences and words and I start to formulate what the song title's going to be first. Then I move on to writing a sketch of the lyrics, and I sit down with Chris and Roger (*Manganelli*, bass) and they play some of the chord arrangements that they've had cooking. I'll pick up my lyric pad and the sketch of the song that I had, and work around it with basic melodies. I take it to the guys and they'll transform the melody, make it a bit more in depth and add their own touches to it, and then we jam on it as a band and see what comes of it, see whether it sticks or not."

"As far as our chemistry as a band is concerned, it's always been myself words, them music. That's what makes our band a dichotomy, it has a feel of a different dimension to it."

GEAR

DRUMS: Premier – 16"x14" floor tom, 14"x12" rack, 22"x18" kick. Premier Modern Classic snare drum.

CYMBALS: Zildjian – 18" and 19" Medium Thin crashes, 20" Sweet ride. 14" New Beat hi-hats.

PLUS... Tama Iron Cobra single pedal, Pro-Mark 5B sticks shaved down to accommodate stick wrap, Premier hardware.

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VINNIE BALZANO

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➤ **Do you think it's hard to be taken seriously, as a pop-punk band? Your lyrics are thoughtful, but do you think that people catch onto them, or even really listen to them, when you're playing that style of music?**

"Sometimes and sometimes not. I mean, look at a band like Blink-182, whose first few records had totally inane lyrics, or look at a band like New Found Glory, whose lyrics are basically all about relationships. It's a weird and wonderful place, pop-punk – it's so catchy and sugary and infectious, but you can use that catchiness to pass on some intelligent and insightful lyrics. So I guess that some people pick up on it, other people are just mesmerised by the sugar rush. But you know, I don't actually mind either way. Even though I'm a lyrics person, I know a lot of people who aren't. Let's face the facts – Britney Spears' 'Toxic' would not be the Number One record in the United States if people were worried about lyrics. I'm cool with that, because I like that song too. It's catchy and it's fun, but totally disposable. But we're not talking about Bob Dylan or Billy Bragg or The Clash, dropping poetry with music behind it."

You must have a huge catalogue of Less Than Jake songs to remember?

"I think we've got well over a100 songs. If I had to play some of the older ones there would probably be some fairly foggy moments, but it wouldn't take too much to learn all of our songs again. You know, we're not talking any kind of Neil Peart – it's punk, pop and rock after all. It's really not that complicated. As a drummer I like to lay back on the drums and be very sparing on fills and not at all flash, just because I think the lyrics and the melody is what the song is, never mind me in the background mussing up the vibe."

Who would you say were your drumming influences?

"The number one drummer would have to be Aaron Cometbus. He used to play in a band called Crimpshrine,

but he also writes a magazine (*Cometbus*). He's the one who inspired me to say, 'Okay, the drummer can do lyrics and dabble in music as well as play the drums.'"

What about the best live drumming performance you've ever seen?

"It would have to be at Reading Festival and it would have to be the Foo Fighters. Taylor's such a sick drummer, it's crazy. He's amazing, witnessing that was great."

If you could decide Less Than Jake's schedule, what would you like to do this year?

"I'd really like to go down to South America, South Africa, and Israel to play shows this year. I think that would be fun."

Wouldn't a trip to Israel be a bit scary at the moment?

"Obviously there would be some aspect of danger, but the same thing could happen at home, or on the street in London. It comes with being an American and having an imbecile for a President. I really hope he's not re-elected, but there's such a grip in the United States that he probably will. I'm not going to vote for him – we'll see what happens."

What's your favourite city in the world?

"It's really too hard to say so I'm going to go with three. One would have to be Tokyo, because it's completely crazy, overloaded. Anything I want to find I can get there, from toys to clothes – I'm a big T-shirt collector. I can find any music, stuff that you can't get hold of in the States. It's one of the most comprehensive cities for collecting music, any kind of genre. New York for Chinatown – where else can you get a meal for \$3, buy crazy B-Boy belt buckles, and pick up bootleg video CDs for \$2? I like London, I've been there enough now that I know where to find the things that I like. And I'm not just saying that to kiss your English asses!" ☒

ESSENTIALS

TOP 5 TRACKS

Less Than Jake
'My Very Own Flag'
From *Pezcore* (1995)

Less Than Jake
'Automatic'
From *Losing Streak* (1998)

Less Than Jake
'All My Best Friends Are Metalheads'
From *Hello Rockview* (1999)

Less Than Jake
'Look What Happened'
From *Borders and Boundaries* (2000)

Less Than Jake
'Welcome To The New South'
From *Anthem* (2003)

TOP 5 ALBUMS

Ramones
Rocket To Russia (1977)
Drummer: Tommy Ramone

Operation Ivy
Energy (1989)
Drummer: Dave Mello

Asian Dub Foundation
Community Music (2000)

NOFX
White Trash Two Heels & A Bean (1992)
Drummer: Erik Sandin

Billy Bragg
Talking with the Taxman About Poetry (1986)
Drummer: Simon Moore

TOP 5 DRUMMERS

Aaron Cometbus
Travis Barker
Buddy Rich
Neil Peart
Uriel Jones

DID YOU KNOW THAT?...

The oldest CD Vinnie owns is *Draft Beer... Not Me* by The Belching Penguins. They were one of the first Florida punk bands to release a CD.

