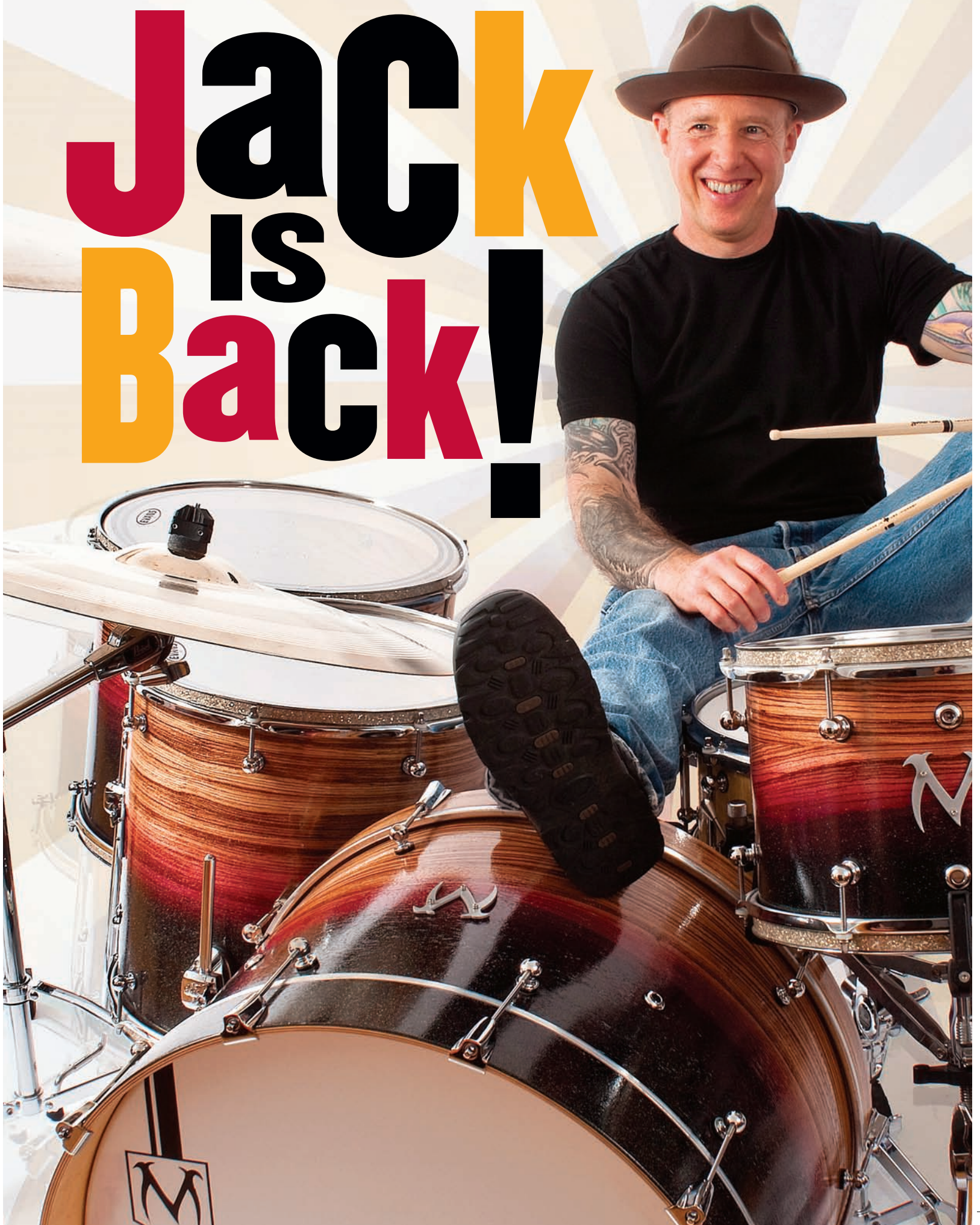


# Jack is Back!





**HAPPY DAYS.**  
Jack Irons kicking  
back on his new  
Masters Of Maple  
kit. Photograph by  
Tamarind Photography.

# THE ORIGINAL SPARK BEHIND PEARL JAM AND THE RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS ERUPTS FROM A DECADE OF DARKNESS TO REIGNITE ROCK. AND THIS TIME, IT'S PERSONAL.

**BY PATRICK FLANARY**

► An outage had robbed Joe Strummer of sufficient vision to roll a joint backstage.

Someone had cut the power at The Bachannal, a live-music dive crammed into the sprawling lot of a northern San Diego strip mall, and The Clash's former frontman couldn't decide whether he should stay or go. A local singer named Eddie Vedder stepped in with a flashlight — working nightclub security paid nothing, but afforded him rare moments like helping a rock legend self-medicate in the dark. Eddie's light also revealed the presence of drummer Jack Irons, fit and tattooed, the only band member who'd bothered to show for soundcheck that evening. ► ► ►

# Jack Irons

“So there was this kind of hour-and-fifteen-minutes in the dark where I really got to know Jack,” Vedder laughs, recalling the two-decade-ago incident. “And then we became friends and that ended up being pretty fortunate for both of us, but probably more so for me.”

For all the influence Jack Irons would inflict on the direction of modern rock music, the drummer had already attained underground rock star status by the time he was backing Strummer’s club circuit. Irons had founded The Red Hot Chili Peppers in 1983 with three friends from high school in Los Angeles. As far as Peppers fan Eddie Vedder was concerned that night, Jack was bigger than Joe.

## INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS

The Red Hot Chili Peppers pioneered an abrasive funk-metal fusion that would breed countless imitators over the next couple of decades. But the band almost fell apart when it suddenly lost two of its founding members; Irons left following the death of guitarist Hillel Slovak in June

1988. Yet here Irons sat backstage in San Diego, a year after the loss of his closest friend, with a long-haired surfer dude he’d eventually hook up with Pearl Jam.

Vedder and Irons spent the next several months bonding on the basketball court in the drummer’s L.A. neighborhood. Irons’ greatest assist, however, came in 1990 as a casual business tip to Vedder: Give this tape a listen, Irons told him. The demo contained some instrumental songs from a Seattle group looking for a drummer and a vocalist. At the time, Irons couldn’t commit to another band. But by handing over that cassette to Vedder, Irons provided the key piece to what would arguably become the biggest rock group to ever emerge from the Seattle scene.

Irons would join Pearl Jam several years later, just before the group released *Vitalogy*, the third in a streak of best-selling albums following the success of *Ten* and *Vs*. In late 1994, Irons replaced the ousted Dave Abbruzzese and introduced a drumming style previously unknown in rock and roll, one that emphasized worldly percussive rhythms and unfettered experimentation. Irons would record three full-length albums and spend three years on the road with his PJ brethren. And then he would abruptly depart the biggest band in the world.

“When I left Pearl Jam in ’98, I wasn’t in a good place,” Irons recalls. “Honestly, the way I felt, the last thing on my mind was music. Music is, I believe, something you do when you’re feeling strong. I pretty much had to kind of give up my career to get my life together.”

## OFF HE GOES

Vedder leads the Sydney crowd of 12,000 in a roaring chorus of “Happy Birthday” during the show’s encore, and then provokes an onstage pie fight. It’s just hours before Jeff Ament’s birthday, and the PJ bassist takes the cream dessert right between the eyes. The pie makes the rounds before winding up in the hands of Jack Irons who, true to form, exhibits an endearing moment of team spirit when he slams the rest into his own face. He then launches into the subtle tribal tom assault of “Who You Are.”

“No one plays like him,” Vedder says. “There’s some kind of wild card, the way he hears things and the way he plays things that’s completely his own.”

The performance would be one of Irons’ last. By the end of March 1998 the Australian tour was done, and so was Pearl Jam’s drummer. “I just wasn’t well enough to carry on,” Irons remembers. “You’ve got to be fairly healthy to go play for 15, 20, 30,000 people four or five times a week. You can’t start to come unglued. There’s thousands and thousands of people counting on you to do your job and to do it well. I just couldn’t do it at the time.”

## Irons’ Setup



### DRUMS: Masters Of Maple (Lavender Storm Fade)

- 1 22" x 16" Bass Drum
- 2 14" x 6" Snare drum
- 3 12" x 9" Tom
- 4 16" x 16" Floor Tom
- 5 18" x 16" Floor Tom

### CYMBALS: Zildjian

- A 14" A Custom Mastersound Hi-Hat
- B 19" A Custom Rezo Crash
- C 21" A Custom Rezo Ride
- D 20" K Light Flat Ride (with rivets)
- E 18" A Custom Rezo Crash

Jack Irons also uses **Pro-Mark** 737 sticks, **Remo** heads, **Pearl** hardware and **Pearl** Powershifter Eliminator double pedal.

Irons was 35. The demands of touring far from home had triggered something inside him, something painfully familiar to the anxiety condition he suffered following the death of his best friend ten years earlier. The traveling, the venues, it was all now out of the question. Jack Irons had to get out.

“When I was diagnosed [with bi-polar disorder] back in my twenties they said, ‘When you get to your forties you might be able to turn a corner with this kind of a thing.’ And I think that’s very accurate. I had to learn to decipher sort of what was real and what was in my head. And that took time.”

Irons abandoned music until 1999, when he rediscovered inspiration while vacationing with family in Greece. As soon as he stepped off the return flight, he threw together a home recording studio, complete with an assortment of drums and percussion collected from around the world. The married father of two spent five years tinkering with his first solo record, 2004’s *Attention Dimension*, an hour-long kaleidoscopic journey of drum compositions and guest appearances from former bandmates, including Vedder on “Shine On You Crazy Diamond.” Irons had reached a place in his mind where he could hear the drum music his soul was finally allowing him to create.

Today, at 48 and on the eve of his second solo album’s release, Irons is pumped for a return to the stage — physically, mentally, spiritually, he seems stronger than ever. And he’s ready to invite the world back in. With the release of *No Heads Are Better Than One*, the drummer-composer is announcing his intent to move on.

“I want to go rock again,” Irons laughs, a grin stretching across his boyish face. “I’m excited about just being behind the kit again and simply enjoying the day, watching a movie, and playing drums.”

## RED HOT

The beautiful kit beckoned nine-year-old Jackie Irons from the L.A. music shop’s front window. Maybe when you’re older, his dad told him. “He didn’t think I was ready to take it on seriously,” Irons says. But then came an offer at 13 that would redirect the course of Irons’ life during the mid-’70s. Junior high classmate Hillel Slovak invited Irons to a birthday party, and within a year the boys were inseparable.

But something was missing from this brotherhood: instruments. So Slovak picked guitar; Irons picked the drums. The budding beatmaker took lessons until he was 17, but preferred to bang away to his Zeppelin and Who albums at home.

During junior high school, Slovak and Irons teamed up with Alain Johannes, a guitarist since early childhood, and

the boys formed Chain Reaction. The band played mostly Kiss and Queen covers, but soon wrote its own songs under the moniker Anthym. The group lacked a solid bass player, so Slovak convinced his friend Michael Balzary to step up. Anthym took second at Fairfax High’s 1978 Battle Of The Bands competition. An acting student named Anthony Kiedis began to introduce the group’s appearances. Meanwhile, Balzary’s wild stage antics had earned him the nickname “Flea.”



**THE HEAT IS ON.** The original Red Hot Chili Peppers (L-R) Flea, Hillel Slovak, Anthony Kiedis, and Jack Irons, waiting on their drycleaning backstage at First Ave Nightclub in Minneapolis, January 1987.

But it wasn’t until a few years after graduation that The Red Hot Chili Peppers were born — a fluke 1983 performance featuring Irons, Slovak, Flea, and Kiedis rapidly attracted an L.A. following, and EMI soon signed the funky foursome. Before the group ever made it to the recording studio, Slovak and Irons decided to part ways and join What Is This (formerly Anthym), their project with Johannes.

The duo’s exit from The Chili Peppers left Kiedis and Flea scrambling to replace their guitarist and drummer just in time to record a debut. The original RHCP lineup would reunite in 1987 for a single album, *The Uplift Mofo Party Plan*, which contained the mesmerizing “Behind The Sun” and the aggressive rally-call anthem “Fight Like A Brave.”

“I learned a lot, actually, about listening to drummers and watching them play from working with Jack,” says *Party Plan* producer Michael Beinhorn. “That was one of the first experiences I had working with someone who really was into how the performance felt.”

“The Chili Peppers at the time, they were a different band,” Irons remembers. “We were sort of that wild energy — full-on 100 percent energy went into every song. It wasn’t necessarily about playing dynamically or playing a song, per se. We were like this four-piece rhythm machine that just wanted to rock really hard and do what we did.”

# Jack Irons

That particular machine forever broke down when Slovak died of a heroin overdose. The loss of his closest friend led Irons to leave the band for good.

By the time a newly formed Red Hot Chili Peppers broke through on MTV with its explosive interpretation of Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground," in the summer of '89, Irons had long moved on. He recorded an album with Joe Strummer and embarked on a tour later that year. It was then that Irons first crossed paths with Eddie Vedder during that dark hour backstage in San Diego.

By this point Irons was a wanted man in the business. But in 1990, when former Mother Love Bone members

Stone Gossard and Jeff Ament invited Irons to drum for their new group, he passed. At 28, Irons was engaged and expecting his first child. He couldn't abandon his family, and had just formed a new rock band, Eleven, with his friend from What Is This, Alain Johannes. Plus, entertaining the idea of moving to Seattle on a whim didn't work for a guy whose income depended on constant session gigs.

So just before he hit the road to support Redd Kross, Irons handed Vedder the demo tape that would turn out to be the symbolic conception point of Pearl Jam. Irons' wife called to tell him that Vedder had left California. He'd joined that Seattle band, the one with that cassette. He'd written a song called "Alive."

Vedder speculates what might have happened if not for Irons' suggestion: "I probably would have been the assistant manager at a Longs Drugs, or a folk singer. I don't know. But when I look back on my life, that was the critical juncture."

**"NO ONE PLAYS LIKE HIM. THERE'S SOME KIND OF WILD CARD, THE WAY HE HEARS THINGS AND THE WAY HE PLAYS THINGS THAT'S COMPLETELY HIS OWN."**

**—EDDIE VEDDER**

## JOINING PEARL JAM

Following the firing of drummer Dave Abbruzzese in August 1994, Pearl Jam fittingly reached out to Irons, who accepted and moved his family from L.A. to Seattle. The group entered the studio as Neil Young's band the following January for a fast and furious four-day session. The output spawned a pair of records: *Mirror Ball*, a critically-underrated grunge masterpiece, and Pearl Jam's companion EP, *Merkin Ball*. Within a couple of weeks, Irons joined the band for its *Vital*

### JACK IRONS' SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

1984 <i>Squeezed</i> <b>WHAT IS THIS</b>	1985 <i>What Is This</i> <b>WHAT IS THIS</b>	1987 <i>Uplift Mofo Party Plan</i> <b>THE RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS</b>	1988 <i>Abbey Road EP</i> <b>THE RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS</b>	1989 <i>Earthquake Weather</i> <b>JOE STRUMMER</b>	1989 <i>Violent Opposition</i> <b>KEITH LEVENE</b>
1990 <i>Mercurotones</i> <b>THE BUCK PETS</b>	1991 <i>Awake In A Dream</i> <b>ELEVEN</b>	1995 <i>Thunk</i> <b>ELEVEN</b>	1995 <i>Mirrorball</i> <b>NEIL YOUNG (WITH PEARL JAM)</b>	1995 <i>Merkinball</i> <b>PEARL JAM</b>	1996 <i>No Code</i> <b>PEARL JAM</b>
1998 <i>Yield</i> <b>PEARL JAM</b>	2004 <i>Attention Dimension</i> <b>JACK IRONS</b>	2008 <i>Spinnerette</i> <b>SPINNERETTE</b>	2009 <i>Fino+Bleed</i> <b>DIE MANNEQUIN</b>	2010 <i>Nobody's Daughter</i> <b>HOLE</b>	2010 <i>No Heads Are Better Than One</i> <b>JACK IRONS</b>

# Jack Irons

ogy tour. "It is a very kind of democratic gang, so his input was not just rhythms and drums, but songwriting and arrangements and all kinds of things," Vedder says.

During the short stint between the two U.S. legs, Pearl Jam began to roll tape on *No Code*, a deliberate departure from the group's accessible rock-radio sound. Unlike the Pearl Jam drummers before him, Irons employed hypnotic concoctions of rapid rolls and African beats unknown on any grunge rock record. Powerful yet reserved, his tribal tom thunder explores every inch of studio space on songs like "In My Tree" and "Who You Are."

"That beat was inspired by something I heard from a Max Roach performance," Irons explained of "Who You Are." "I don't recall the tune, but he could play with so much independence that it was amazing. So I tried to come up with something that I could do based on that inspiration."

As Vedder recalls, "Jack's ability to push and pull on either side of the beat — he could make it a little more extreme than it almost seemed possible."

And Irons reproduced every bit of it live. Yet he hadn't anticipated the intense touring lifestyle he was about to encounter with Pearl Jam. "When I was in The Chili Peppers, it was clubs and small theatres. We were playing 45 minutes to an hour," he remembers.

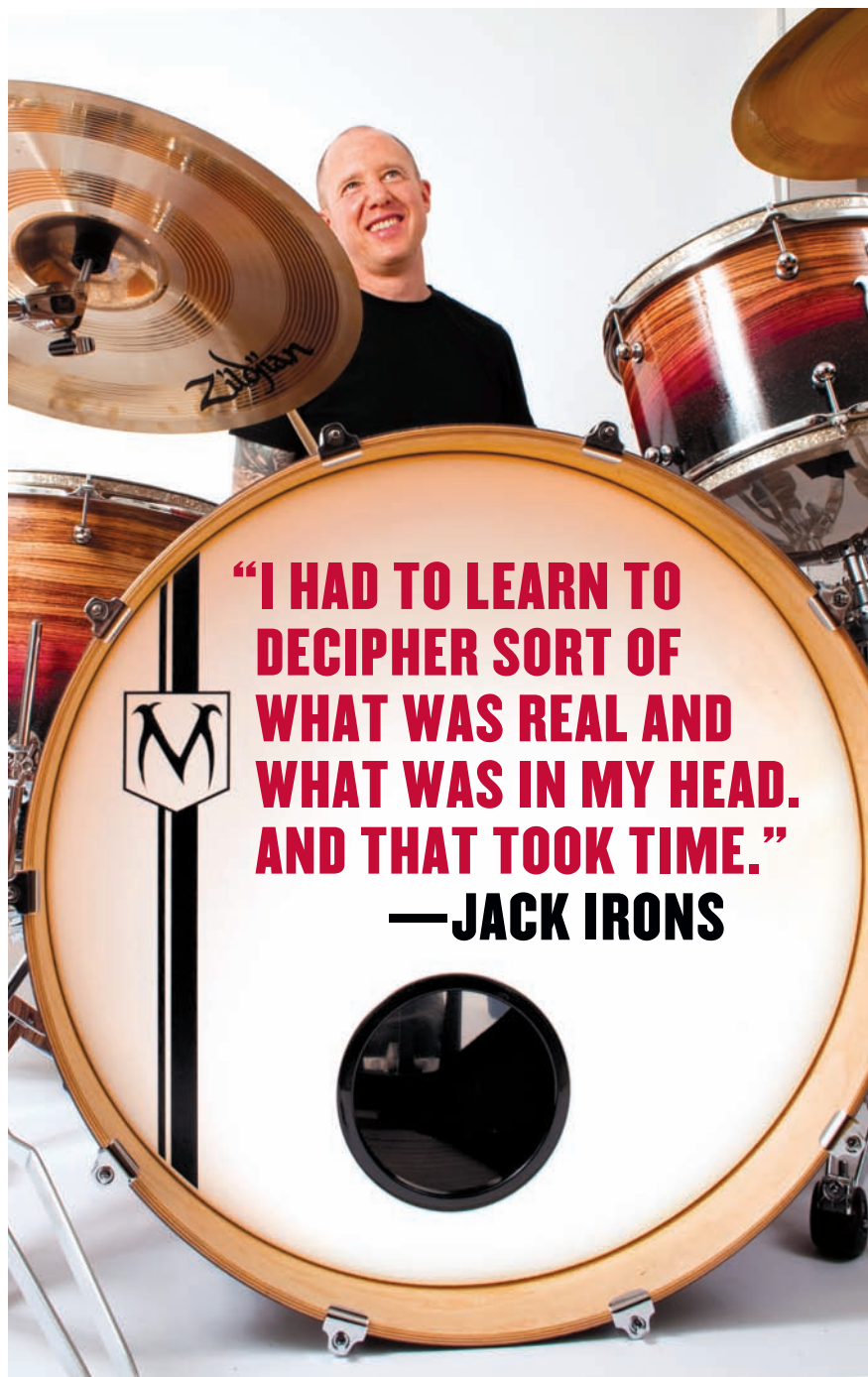
Buses, schedules, fame, adoring throngs — all of it followed Pearl Jam as the band hopped continents and sold more records. Things were about to get more difficult for Irons. Since the band publicly condemned and refused to play Ticketmaster venues, the '96 *No Code* tour stopped in only 11 American cities. That meant extended time overseas for Irons, then the only father in the group. When Pearl Jam returned from the road, the band spent much of 1997 recording *Yield*. An Australian tour followed.

Vedder says the band met Irons' unexpected resignation in March 1998 with love and support. "As upsetting as it was at the time — it's not like I could have more respect for the guy — but I've always respected that decision," Vedder says. "Because it's one thing to be completely devoted to music and feel it in an organic way and to be pure about it. And then it's another to be in a big band playing big shows and big tours and big records. And working with the machinery of rock and roll, and keeping a big band afloat business-wise, and all that. It's a balancing act, those two things. And it's completely understandable if it seems difficult for someone who's so purely dedicated to the art to have a hard time with the other side."

The band quickly recruited Soundgarden's Matt Cameron to play the *Yield* tour's American leg. Four albums later, Cameron remains Pearl Jam's drummer.

## RENAISSANCE MAN

Little has been heard from Irons in the 12 years since his exodus from the public eye. In 2003 he rejoined Eleven bandmates Johannes and the late Natasha Shneider to record what would be the group's final



**"I HAD TO LEARN TO  
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AND THAT TOOK TIME."**

**—JACK IRONS**

Photograph By TAMARIND PHOTOGRAPHY

album. The following year Irons completed his solo debut, *Attention Dimension*, and most recently guested on records by Spinnerette, Die Mannequin, and Hole.

“Almost all the songs start with the drums,” Irons says of his approach to making *No Heads Are Better Than One*. “I start playing and all of a sudden I get an arrangement. I have really no idea where it’s going.”

The result is spontaneous mood music crafted with the tools in Irons’ percussion arsenal of shakers, cowbells, a steel drum, and whatever else is at hand. The most unusual instrument he plays on the album sounds more like the strings of a guitar: the Zudong, made by the Australian-based Rungo Drums, fills out the psychedelic “Love is All We Want.” Irons also plays Pearl, Ludwig, DW, and Slingerland drums on *No Heads*, but has since embraced Southern California-based Masters Of Maple as a new endorser.

Irons’ second DIY document further proves its maker’s strength as a one-man drumline. Tighter and more cerebral than its predecessor, *No Heads* revives the spirit of Buddy Rich on “Doubloons,” a song that highlights Irons’ rapid double-stroke snare work and thorough tom pounding. Backward synthesizer loops and metallic beats fuel “Psy-Fi Disco,” while “Sonic Tonic” features a gentle bell that only punctuates the speed of Irons’ roiling tom-and-kick pattern. On “Nothing Opens Everything,” one of the album’s finest compositions, teenage son Zach contributes guitar and Johannes supplies his vocal and Turkish guitar, flute, and saxophone expertise.

Dave Krusen, Pearl Jam’s original drummer and *Ten*’s beat supplier, says he admires the spirit and style of Irons’ latest album. “Whatever he’s doing, he puts his stamp on it,” says Krusen, “which to me is the sign of not only a great drummer, but a true artist.”

*No Heads* could be Irons’ solo-album swan song. Arranging, recording, producing, mixing — it all consumes time that would be better spent performing, he says. While he hasn’t yet scheduled any shows, Irons says he’s practicing two or three times a week with a new combo that includes bass player/producer Greg Richling of The Wallflowers and up-and-coming singer/songwriter Jon Greene. “Playing with people is better, there’s no doubt about it,” Irons laughs. “I’m 48 now. I’ve spent a lot of time in the lab, so to speak, and now I realize how much I miss playing with other people. That’s really nice, to really feel that way.”

Irons last took the stage in May 2007 when he joined former bandmates Vedder and Flea in Hollywood for a set at Hullabaloo, which benefited the bassist’s nonprofit Silverlake Conservatory Of Music for low-income students. Pearl Jam’s leader recalls performing that night with the man who handed him that fateful cassette 20 years ago.

“It was beyond the beyond,” says Vedder. “It was completely invigorating. And we had actually talked about doing some more later on that year. Physically, I couldn’t do it. Otherwise, I would’ve. So maybe that door is still open.” □

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## Fast Irons



**JACK IRONS' NEWEST SOLO EFFORT,** *No Heads Are Better Than One*, is an always-interesting follow-up to his last release, 2004's *Attention Dimention*. This new record proves to be another great showcase for his drumming and a trove of memorable songs. Not surprisingly, Irons has let his creativity direct these songs rather than try to conform to some corporate music template. Drummers, take special note: This disc's for you.

### "Doubloons"

This one begins with a fast-and-funky drum groove that's a bit reminiscent of Clyde Stubblefield's classic groove on James Brown's "Cold Sweat." Both share a displaced snare on the & of 4, but rather than omit the bass drum on the next downbeat, as Stubblefield did, Irons plays it, though he consistently adds drags and fills to keep the part evolving. He then launches into a fiery rudimental solo that has lots of 5-stroke rolls and drags that he spices up with open hi-hat accents and tom hits. I notated the solo to indicate his probable stickings. Irons is playing slurred tap rolls throughout this section, meaning that the rolls flow without interruption from accent to accent, sounding like a one relentless roll. After hearing this, I'd bet Irons has a couple of dog-eared copies of Charlie Wilcoxon's snare books lying about.

### "Right Between The Ears"

Irons plays several interesting grooves for this song that are worth checking out. At about the one-minute mark he plays a single-stroked sixteenth-note hi-hat pattern with accents on 1 ah 2 & (3) e 4 e. He spices this up by adding triplets here and there, most likely with a sticking of RRL (or RLL). Following this, he plays a variation on a soca (soul calypso) groove that'll also prove useful if you find yourself playing in a steel drum band. His pattern plays off-beat accents on (1) ah (2) & that are played on the snare then the toms in alternate measures. He plays a tasty hi-hat opening before the snare on 4 and adds a China cymbal accent after every other one. He follows this with a groove that features snare notes or cymbal crashes placed on the & of 2 to give the section a quasi-Latin feel.

### "Doubloons"

♩ = 138

Intro

Slur Rolls

R 1 l r r L r r l l R l l r r L r r l l R l l r r L R l l R l l r r L r r l l R l l r r L R l l R l l

R 1 l r r L r r l l R l l r r L r r l l R l l r r L r r l l R l l r r L r r l l R l l r r L R l l R l l

R 1 l r r L r r l l R l l r r L R l l r r L R l l r r L R l l r r L R l l r r L R l l r r L R l l r r L R

### "Right Between The Ears"

♩ = 112

0:55

1:27