



# **The Charlie Daniels Band's Pat McDonald**

**Determination, Dedication, Motivation, Inspiration**





**T**he devil may have gone down to Georgia, but he hasn't gotten in Pat McDonald's way. The drummer's journey began in the small town of St. Simons Island, Georgia, but for the past seventeen years McDonald has been the backbone of the rhythm section that powers the Charlie Daniels Band, one of the most internationally recognized groups to burst out of the 1970s Southern-rock scene, alongside iconic peers the Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and the Marshall Tucker Band. A technically proficient, powerful, and tasteful drummer whose gifts make him ideal for his gig, McDonald has nonetheless been on a path that one might say is made up of more than a little luck and good fortune.

McDonald took up the drums at the age of twelve. Early on, his life seemed typical enough—he was just a kid with a passion for an instrument. He took music classes and lessons in junior high and high school, and excelled. But just after high school graduation in 1983, Pat was diagnosed with cancer. The youngster accepted the news and began treatment. His determination and drive wouldn't let him sit still, so he joined a club band and burned the midnight oil traveling the roads of Georgia and Florida. His cancer went into remission, but in 1985 it resurfaced. Pat once again underwent successful treatment.

McDonald then attended a year of school at Georgia Southern College, where he further honed his marching band and jazz chops, and his talent eventually led him to the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. While there, he studied privately with the legendary instructor Gary Chaffee. After Berklee, McDonald moved to Florida and dove headlong into the music business, weaving in and out of various club, Top 40, cruise-ship, and jazz bands.

The drummer decided to push the envelope further by relocating to Nashville. His rearview mirror fell off somewhere along the way. Shortly after arriving in Music City, McDonald landed the gig with his first legendary boss, singer Tanya Tucker. Sessions and live work kept his schedule full. Then, in 1999, Pat got the call to audition for another household name, Charlie Daniels. He nailed it. Eight years later, after twenty-two years of being cancer free, McDonald found that the disease had returned. Short breaks in touring for treatment led, once again, to remission. Today McDonald maintains a full schedule of more than a hundred dates a year with Daniels, does session work, teaches private students, and plays with his new instrumental prog-rock side project, Fluxu8ers.

*MD* caught up with McDonald at the Georgia National Fair in Perry, one week prior to the release of Daniels' *Live at Billy Bob's Texas* CD and DVD. The band recorded it in February of 2015, a little more than a month after McDonald went through hip-replacement surgery—one more bump in a road that, despite some serious dips, continues on a decidedly upward trajectory.

**Story by Aaron Strickland**  
**Photos by Joey Tanner**



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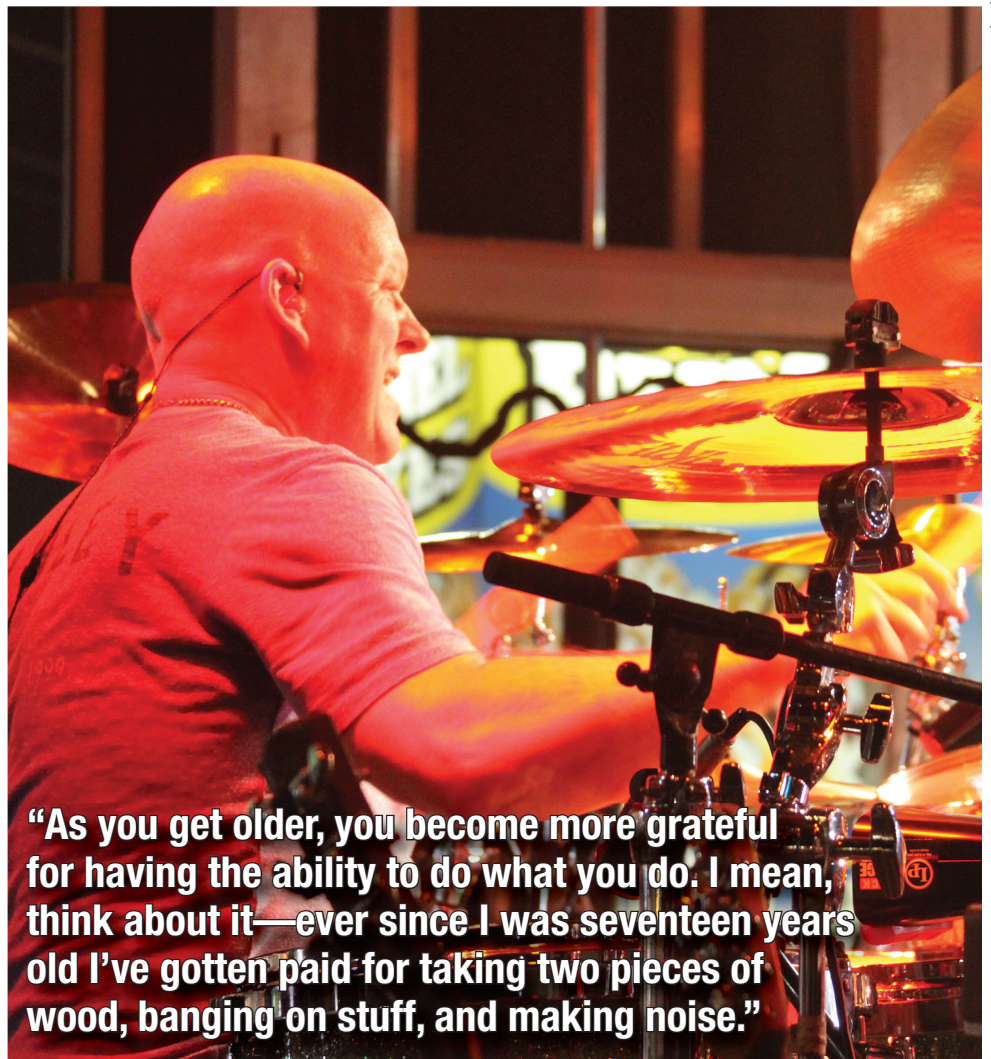
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**“As you get older, you become more grateful for having the ability to do what you do. I mean, think about it—ever since I was seventeen years old I’ve gotten paid for taking two pieces of wood, banging on stuff, and making noise.”**

**MD:** Not only have you beaten the odds by achieving a great deal of success in the music industry, but you’ve also survived cancer *three* times.

**Pat:** Drumming and music has always been my focus. Maybe it’s just blissful ignorance, but I never got hung up on the cancer thing. It was a pain that I had to go through. But I never really thought about it as something that could stop me. I just did what I had to do, because it was getting in the way of me playing drums. Maybe that was the motivation. And I’ve done that every time. As you get older, you become more grateful for having the ability to do what you do. I mean, think about it—ever since I was seventeen years old I’ve gotten paid for taking two pieces of wood, banging on stuff, and making noise. I just kept hitting stuff. One thing led to another, and I’ve ended up here.

**MD:** Did you ever imagine that you would one day play for not one, but two country-music legends?

**Pat:** Not at all, because I wasn’t a country guy. Country was always around, but it wasn’t something that made me think, *One day I’m going to play in that band.* I was more of a rock fan. I do remember going to my buddy Phillip’s house with a cassette copy of [the *Full Moon* album with] “The Legend of Wooley Swamp.” Charlie was big then. “The

Devil Went Down to Georgia” had hit. The “Wooley Swamp” riff was really cool. It kind of had that dark, sort of metal-like sound. It was a rock thing. And then there was that little rhythm figure—that upbeat Bernard Purdie thing. It really grabbed my ear.

I remember doing a gig with Charlie on St. Simons, actually a private gig on Sea Island—sitting on stage, playing with Charlie, looking across the water to the dock where my grandfather used to take fishing charters out. I grew up on that dock, and I’m 300 yards from it. Over my shoulder, about a mile away, is the house I grew up in, where I would sit in my bedroom and play “The Legend of Wooley Swamp” on my drumset along to the record. And here I am, a mile away, playing that song with Charlie. It was like full-circle, really weird—goose-bump kind of weird. A cool moment.

**MD:** You received your first cancer diagnosis just after high school graduation. How did you cope with that news?

**Pat:** I was seventeen. There again, I was probably too naive to know any better. I wasn’t, *Oh, woe is me—my life is just starting and now it’s going to be snatched away.* I had about five minutes of that, and then I went, “Okay, enough. What do we have to do?” Well, we’re going to do radiation treatments. We’re going to do surgery. I got diagnosed





on a Thursday, and Monday morning I was in a hospital with my guts cut open. Two weeks after that, I did a frat gig with my band at the University of Georgia. I couldn't even stand up. They had to set up my drums for me. I had a big white bandage on my stomach. I broke a snare head and didn't have a key or spare head. I had to use a pair of pliers to change it with my 14" floor tom head while the singer was BS-ing with the crowd. To this day, I carry a toolbox with enough spare parts to build four drumsets and a helicopter.

**MD:** What thoughts went through your head when cancer returned two years later?

**Pat:** It was more of an annoyance. The first time, I did surgery and radiation. The second time, they said I would need to do chemotherapy. That's not a club you want to have to join. It's not a picnic. Some people just tolerate it better than others. At that point I was nineteen, so I was real strong. My hair didn't fall out. It fell out more from just

genetics than it ever did from chemo. It was rough, but we got through it.

**MD:** The cancer once again went into remission and you continued your education. What were some of the most valuable lessons that you learned from Gary Chaffee during your college years?

**Pat:** The overall experience was great. I wish that I could go back with the knowledge that I have today and redo it, because conceptually I wasn't evolved enough to get what he was trying to show me. I'm always behind the curve. But I do remember one thing when I was getting ready to leave Berklee. I mentioned to him that I was thinking about stopping in New York and checking out Drummers Collective. And—this I remember more than anything—he said to me, "You've had enough lessons. You just need to go and gig. Go play."

So I went home and I got a gig with a Top 40 cruise-ship band. It was probably nightmarish to everybody I played with, because I was trying to figure out how to inject all of this Berklee-chopsy Chaffee stuff into Paula Abdul tunes. I know it was horrible. It *had* to have been. But you've got to go through that. You've got to figure out what works and what doesn't. I just took the long way around.

**MD:** How difficult was it to break into the Nashville scene?

**Pat:** Not difficult at all. I got very lucky. I'd heard that it was tough, but Nashville is so different from most other major music cities. Nashville is just about being cool. It's about the hang. I'm now considered kind of an old-guard guy in Nashville, but it's still about the hang. A lot of us moved there at the same time, and you did what you could do to help your buddies. Everybody would sub and help each other out. It's a much smaller scene than most people think. Everybody knows each other. If you get a reputation for being one of those guys who'll screw somebody over for a gig, you don't last very long there.

**MD:** As a teenager, you listened and woodshedded to Charlie Daniels' music. What was it like to get an opportunity to play for him?

**Pat:** When I came to town, I was thinking I wanted a Tim McGraw-type gig. At that point, it was all the girls—I was thinking I wanted a Martina, Trisha, Reba kind of gig. You know, one of those big-tour kind of things—how Luke Bryan, Toby Keith, and Brad Paisley are now. I got the gig with Charlie, and I thought, *Should I do this? Because if I take this gig, then I'm not going to be available when Keith Urban is looking for*



**Drums:** Gretsch USA Custom (maple)

**A.** 6.5x14 Beier Drums steel-shell snare

**B.** 8x10 tom

**C.** 10x12 tom

**D.** 12x14 floor tom

**E.** 16x16 floor tom

**F.** 18x22 bass drum

**Cymbals:** Zildjian

**1.** 14" A Mastersound hi-hats

**2.** 17" K Custom Dark China

**3.** 16" A Custom crash

**4.** 17" A Thin crash

**5.** 10" K Custom Dark splash

**6.** 20" A Custom Projection ride

**7.** 18" A Custom crash

**8.** 19" K China

**9.** 19" A Custom crash

**Heads:** Evans, including G2 Coated snare batter, Level 360 Clear tom batters, and EQ2 Clear bass drum batters

**Hardware:** Pearl, including ICON rack, Eliminator P-2000C single bass drum pedals, Eliminator H-2000 hi-hat stand, and cymbal and tom holders

**Sticks:** Vic Firth Extreme 5B wood tip

**Accessories:** LP Rock Ridge Rider cowbell, Heil microphones, Pork Pie Percussion throne, ButtKicker low-frequency audio transducer, Westone ES2 custom in-ear monitors

**Electronics:** Roland SPD-S trigger pad with custom samples written by McDonald and Nashville keyboardist Dane Bryant, Furman power unit, Yamaha 01V digital mixer (drum inputs), Roland M-16E mixer (band input submix), Crown Macro-Tech 2400 power amp (for ButtKicker), 24-channel Whirlwind snake with quick connects and fan-outs for monitor return split



somebody. Keith Urban wasn't even around then, but you know what I mean. Still, should I stay in the Broadway [Nashville] scene and look for that big audition, or should I take this? The smarter part of me said, *Take the gig.*

**MD:** How was Charlie supportive during your third bout with cancer, in 2007?

**Pat:** Like a parent. Seriously. It's a family thing here. He pulled me aside and told me, "This is your gig. I don't want anybody behind me but you. Whatever you've got to do to get well, let's do it. Whatever you need, you tell me. If you need money, you tell me. Get healthy." I'd do two weeks with him, and then they would fly me home. They would fly a

sub out to meet the band. Two or three days after chemo, you're typically run down, but I could have done a show. I might not have been 100 percent, but I could have done it. I talked to him a couple of times and told him I could do it. He said, "No, you stay home and you rest. Don't worry about it. I don't want you to overdo it."

So I'd sit for the weekend and then go back out and play. I'd do two weeks and then go back and do another treatment. I can't describe how far above and beyond he went for me. He's the real deal. There's a lot of artists out there that if you ran into them at the mall, would they even know your

name? Yeah, you play for them and you kind of hang out, but you don't *know* them. If you want to talk to your boss, you have to call management and make an appointment. I've got Charlie's phone number, and we talk all the time.

**MD:** So this gig might not have been what you perceived to be the biggest, but it has certainly turned out to be the best.

**Pat:** I've heard from so many guys over the years that I've got the best gig in town by far—musically, financially, personally. He takes care of us. Now I've been here seventeen years. I've never had any gig for seventeen years.

**MD:** Are you able to inject your jazz and fusion experience or some of the skills that you learned at Berklee?

**Pat:** Yes, a lot. When most people come and see Charlie, if they're not die-hard fans, they assume that it's going to be an hour of "Devil Went Down to Georgia" with a lot of fast bluegrass fiddle. But that's just one of many things that he does. He's always been diverse. He writes what he calls these Spanish tunes, like "El Toreador" and "Caballo Diablo," with a kind of Latin 6/8 feel. I can incorporate all of the Latin stuff that I learned, and it works. He does rock stuff like "Wooley Swamp." Then there's the bluegrass stuff like "Devil" and the train-beat stuff. And there are solo features during the show. We do this Latin-esque instrumental thing where everybody blows. That started off with everybody taking little solo breaks, but a few years ago he came to me and said, "I want you to do an extended drum solo. We'll just leave the stage and let you have it."

**MD:** You're also a single parent to your daughter. What challenges do touring and parenthood present?


**Pat:** It's really, really tough. The hardest thing is being away and missing stuff like school plays, games, birthdays—things that she wants you to be there for. That's the part where you just wonder, *What am I doing?* She's only going to turn seven once, and I'm playing a gig in Iowa 2,000 miles away, and I really want to be home for her birthday. But I've got to be out here to do this. You just buckle down and do it. She gets it and understands it, but I still get the sad and dejected look. But the cool thing is, in today's world, thank God, there are cell phones, FaceTime, and Skype. You can still kind of be there. It's not like you're gone and you don't see them for months.










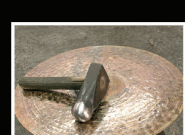


**MD:** What advice would you give to a touring musician, either on a regional or national level, who is also a new parent?

**Pat:** Stay in as close contact as you can. Make time every day to touch base with

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## Pat McDonald

them. If you can't Skype or FaceTime, at least make a phone call. I usually talk to her in the morning and then at night before she goes to bed. So I get the beginning of the day where I get to tell her to have a good day, to be strong, and to have fun. And then at the end of the day I get the recap of what happened. That keeps me going.

**MD:** What would you tell someone reading this article who may be struggling with a health issue?

**Pat:** You know the reason why you picked up the drums or guitar or whatever else you might do. You know the joy it gives you. At some point you said, "I like this." If you use that as fuel to fight whatever you've got, it will help you get through it. It did for me. Don't let that medical issue drag you down. If you look at it like, "I've got music to play; I want to be a better player," whatever issues you're dealing with are just weight that you have to carry. Eventually, you may get to a point where you can drop it. It's hanging on your back. You'll shake it. It'll fall off. Let music be your focus, and it'll keep your attitude straight. And if you keep your attitude straight, then that keeps your mind and your body straight.

I'm saying this because it's the only thing that I know, and it seems to work for me. Just look at everything like it's a bump in

the road. A long time ago, I told somebody a diagnosis like that is kind of like you're walking down a path and there's a big pile of dirt blocking it, and there's a shovel lying there. What do you do? You start digging. One scoop at a time, get it out of the way. You've got to keep going forward. Keep practicing and picking up the instrument every day. Don't focus on the bad. Focus on the stuff that makes you happy. A positive attitude makes all of the difference in the world.

**MD:** Final thoughts?

**Pat:** One of the coolest things anybody's ever said—and it's a cliché, but I kind of have a little different perspective because of the health stuff I've been through—is "Don't sweat the small stuff. It's all small stuff." Just let it happen. If you get sick, plow ahead. You're not on a timeline. Every day is a gift. If you can make a living doing what you love to do, then you don't have to work. You're totally successful. As long as you're getting to do what you love to do, then you've succeeded. It's not like if it doesn't pay off one day, then you've failed. No, you haven't. You're still alive. You're lucky to have a freakin' heartbeat. You get barraged with bad stuff, but there's still good stuff out there. Drums help me stay in touch with it.

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