

# The Britain/Moore Duo

## Journey Through Our Little World of Rhythm

BY KAREN PARKO

In 1986, friends Mat Britain and Dan Moore decided to embark on an artistic adventure together—despite being separated by about 2000 miles and six states. Still on that musical journey, the Britain/Moore Duo will be performing on Saturday at PASIC 2001.

The two met at Wichita State University in Kansas. Britain was working on an undergraduate degree and studying steel pan. Moore was working on a master's degree and focusing on marimba. They played together in an extracurricular percussion group formed with several fellow students—a group that infamously advised its unconventional drummer, Matt Wilson, to play more “normal.” When a WSU Steel Band recording came up one tune short, Britain and Moore spent a lunch break putting together a pan/marimba duet to fill out the set list.

After graduation, they went their separate ways. “We ended up in different regions of the country,” Moore says. “I was surrounded by the gorgeous mountains of Montana, and I felt tremendously isolated. Out of the blue I phoned Mat, who was living in Ohio. We found that we both were searching for an artistic endeavor.”

They decided to get their pan/marimba duo back together and book a tour in the Northwest. Britain laughs, “I flew to Bozeman to play this tour, and after I got there we started working out what we would play. We loaded Dan's Mazda with equipment and drove around the frozen Northwest for two weeks. It surprised both of us that the tour turned out to be so successful.”



Mat Britain

Moore and Britain began spending summers working out new material in Britain's Cincinnati crash pad and playing local venues. They went on to book tours in various parts of the country. In 1993 they released a CD titled *Cricket City*. Events in their lives—cross-country moves, a marriage, new jobs, a baby, a doctoral dissertation—created some gaps in their schedule as a duo, yet they have stayed together for fifteen years, and are now working on a long-overdue second CD.

Moore offers an explanation for the duo's longevity: “I think the main reason the BMD is still here is that we made an artistic commitment. We're friends, but the duo isn't based on friendship. If it were, it would be too easy to walk away when things get a little rough around the edges.”

Britain agrees, “The BMD is something we've chosen to focus our creative energy on. Something that we believe in. Something that makes up musically for some of the gigs you have to take to pay the bills.”

Comprising steel pans, marimba, and

percussion, the duo originated as a strictly acoustic enterprise but has evolved into a mix of acoustic and electronic sounds. The transformation of the BMD was more often fueled by necessity rather than by a desire to set trends.

“From the very beginning,” Moore says, “our combined sound had a certain thinness. Not a huge problem initially, but as our repertoire and expectations began to grow, so did my desire for a fatter, more contrapuntal sound. I knew that a change in my approach to the marimba was needed—not necessarily new techniques as much as a different way of thinking about techniques that already existed.”

That meant, for example, thinking differently about what notes to play when reading a jazz chart. Moore explains, “Rather than focusing on the 3rd, 7th, and color tones of a chord, I had to spend a good deal of time becoming reacquainted with roots and 5ths—the notes most often snubbed by vibes players. I started listening more to bass players and to rhythm sections, and thinking about how the players interacted with



Dan Moore

each other.” Moore developed a rhythmic and easily identifiable style that elegantly combines bass lines and comping patterns with harmonic and melodic material.

“There is really nothing new here,” he points out. “This is what Leigh Stevens, Gordon Stout, and Keiko Abe have been doing on the marimba for years. The difference is that I'm using these same techniques to play music based in

improvisation. The improvised nature of our music makes it possible, even necessary, for me to be able to change comping patterns on the fly. Recycling the same patterns throughout an entire tune would be simply too boring for both listener and performer.”

Britain remembers playing along with those patterns in the early days. “Watching Dan do that night after night and knowing that he was creating this stuff out of thin air used to scare me to death.” Those fears have long since subsided, and the duo exudes a relaxed confidence and obvious enjoyment in the music they play.

As Moore refined his playing technique, he began to think about ways to extend the sonic capabilities of the marimba. “In the late ‘80s,” Moore says, “I became very interested in electronics. I used a malletKAT with the duo for a while, but decided I preferred having an acoustic instrument as the basis of my setup. I had just about given up on electronic percussion when one of my students, David Barr, showed me some of the work he was doing with drum triggering. We stuck a KAT trigger under one of the marimba bars and hooked it up to an Alesis D4 drum module. I lightly tapped the bar and a thunderous, booming floor-tom sound nearly took our heads off. A sinister smile came across my face and I thought, ‘This is it! No more fighting to be heard above Mat’s pan.’ From that point on I was looking for ways to incorporate electronic percussion sounds into our performances.”

The D4 provided a way to translate the acoustic energy of a marimba bar into an electronic signal that could activate sounds via MIDI—not only the percussion sounds of the D4, but any sound from other MIDI devices. “I always had in the back of my mind the idea of triggering bass sounds,” Moore says. But in 1993, the interface between marimba and MIDI was less than ideal. “At the height of all this lunacy I had two D4s with twenty-four drum triggers glued haphazardly to the lowest two octaves of the marimba,” Moore recalls. “Set-up took hours. If I connected anything incorrectly, the results were quite surprising.” To get the bass sounds he had envisioned, he initially used commercial bass patches. Today, all the bass sounds are sampled and designed specifically by Moore for use with the MIDI marimba.

The BMD spent considerable time discussing the pros and cons of using electronics. Moore recalls, “I had tested the idea of using MIDI triggers on the bars and was considering purchasing a K&K MIDI system, which could’ve turned out to be nothing more than an expensive mistake. The K&K—an amplification system and MIDI-controller utilizing pickups—was designed to work with the sustaining characteristics of the vibraphone. The K&K people didn’t even want to sell me the first system because they couldn’t imagine how it was going to work on a marimba. And Mat was pretty much opposed to the whole electronics thing.”

Britain admits he was not excited at the prospect of adding the electronic component to the duo on a permanent basis. “We argued about it a lot, but Dan had the ball and he ran with it. Now, of course, I think it was a great idea,” he laughs.

Moore forged ahead with the K&K system, adapting it to fit his vision of the MIDI marimba. He placed the pickups under the lowest thirty-seven bars of the marimba, adding dimensions to the BMD’s performances that would not be possible with a solely acoustic instrument. Moore and Britain are careful not to allow electronic wizardry to overshadow the duo’s acoustic sensibility. Moore quips, “We spend thousands of dollars on electronic equipment so that we can sound more acoustic.” Moore’s MIDI marimba setup includes a Yamaha YM-4600 marimba with rosewood bars, a K&K MIDI/amplification system, a Yamaha DTX, an Alesis D4, an E-Mu ESI4000 sampler, various vintage sound modules, and a variety of signal processing and amplification units.

Throughout the evolution of the duo, Britain and Moore have maintained a short list of trusted advisors. They include Dave Samuels, Andy Narell, and James Campbell. Moore comments, “Mat and I were in the Wichita State Percussion Ensemble that performed at PASIC in 1983. On that concert, Andy and Dave played a pan and marimba duet. We were totally knocked out, so when the opportunity came to do something for the steel band recording, we jumped at it. After that we maintained contact with Dave and Andy, taking lessons as we could, and being coached by them off and on over the years.”

Britain remembers, “Once we had a lesson with Dave in the lobby of a theater where Spyro Gyra was playing a concert. We just pulled up to the front door after the concert, set up, and played until the crew finished loading out. Jim Campbell was the first person to shell out money for our CD. And none of these folks were shy about telling us what we needed to work on.”

For their PASIC 2001 performance, the BMD promises to continue their tradition of redefining themselves. Like most percussionists, Britain and Moore are collectors of instruments, sound effects, musical quotes, rhythms, stories, licks, soundbytes, you name it. Britain says, “The first part of the program will be taken from our new recording, *Little World of Rhythm*, and should give the audience some insight into the BMD. Dan has sampled quotes and comments that have been made about the duo during radio interviews, broadcasts, and concerts over the years. He also has samples of well-known (and lesser-known) people that pop up from time to time throughout the program, providing sort of a running commentary.”

The musical component of the program also represents their eclectic tastes. “The idea behind *Little World of Rhythm*,” Moore says, “is that, to percussionists, the concept that we are living in a global village isn’t anything new. To us, the world is a very small place united by rhythm; we have the ability to move quickly and easily from the rhythms of Cuba to Japan, and West Africa to Western Europe. You will hear many of those musical influences in this concert.”

Britain and Moore are enthusiastic about performing at PASIC. As Moore puts it, “Percussionists are fortunate to have an organization as large and as active, and that has a membership with such diverse interests as PAS. Mat and I are really looking forward to the concert; we think the duo will have something to offer anyone who attends.” PN

