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Brian Smith: A band of his own

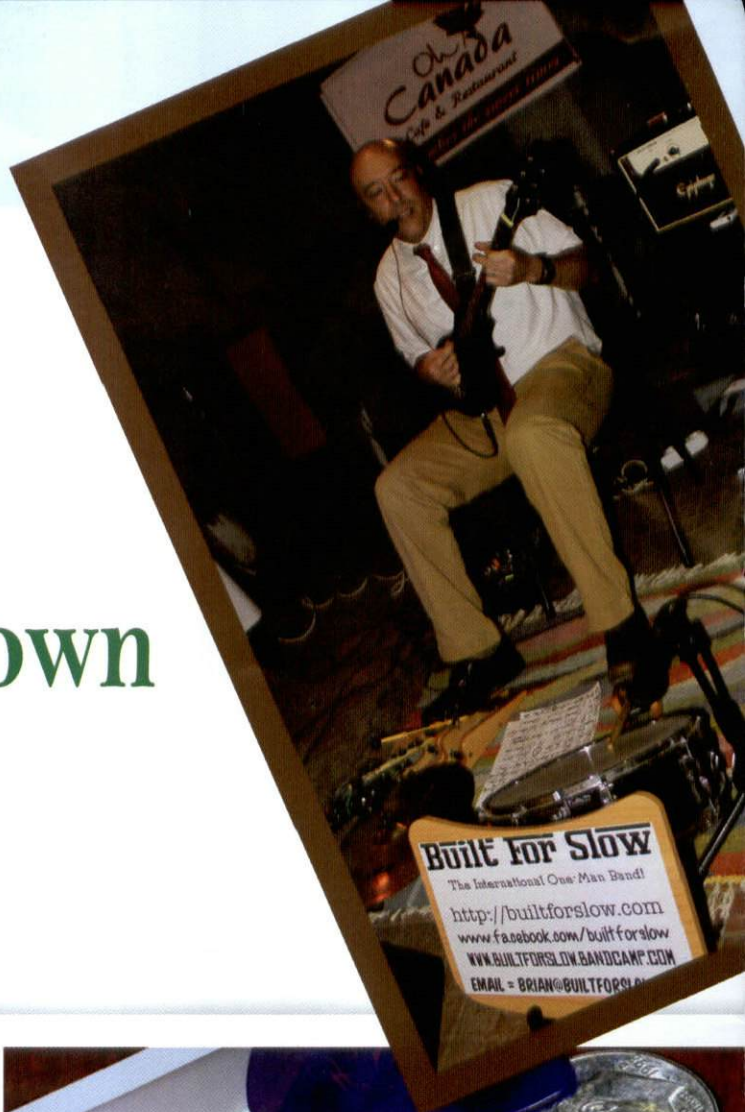
Mahlet Fasil

In late July 2012, soon after Brian Smith arrived in Addis Abeba with his family to work at the International Community School (ICS) – “because I wanted to work at a truly international school and I wanted my children to be in a place where they could be with kids from everywhere” – he was slapped in the face by a particular aspect of life in the diplomatic capital of Africa, which he found rather hard to manage: driving. Now he recalls it with a stint of self mockery how terrified he was when he drove through the chaotic *Mesqal Square* in the heart of Addis Abeba for the first time. “I think I peed my pants a little.” But it didn’t take him long to acquire the skills required to navigate through the city he came to love. “Now, nothing bothers me too much when I drive”, he told *Addis Standard*. “I can dodge goats and taxis without any problem. The only trouble I have now is I drive too aggressively in other countries. I broke several [traffic] laws this summer in Paris because I drove like I do in Addis.”

But as much as exporting his roadside manners from the land he calls home for at least one more year to wherever he sets his feet, he brought with him to Ethiopia a unique performance - a one man rock band.

Brian, a practical “One Man Band”, is no stranger to dealing with what may come for others as too much at once: “I sing and play guitar while playing foot drums. When I say foot drums I mean a small drum kit (bass drum, snare, cymbal, tambourine, and cowbell or shaker) played with the feet.”

Although Addis Abeba is not well acquainted with his types - not to our knowledge, and he too lacks the certainty

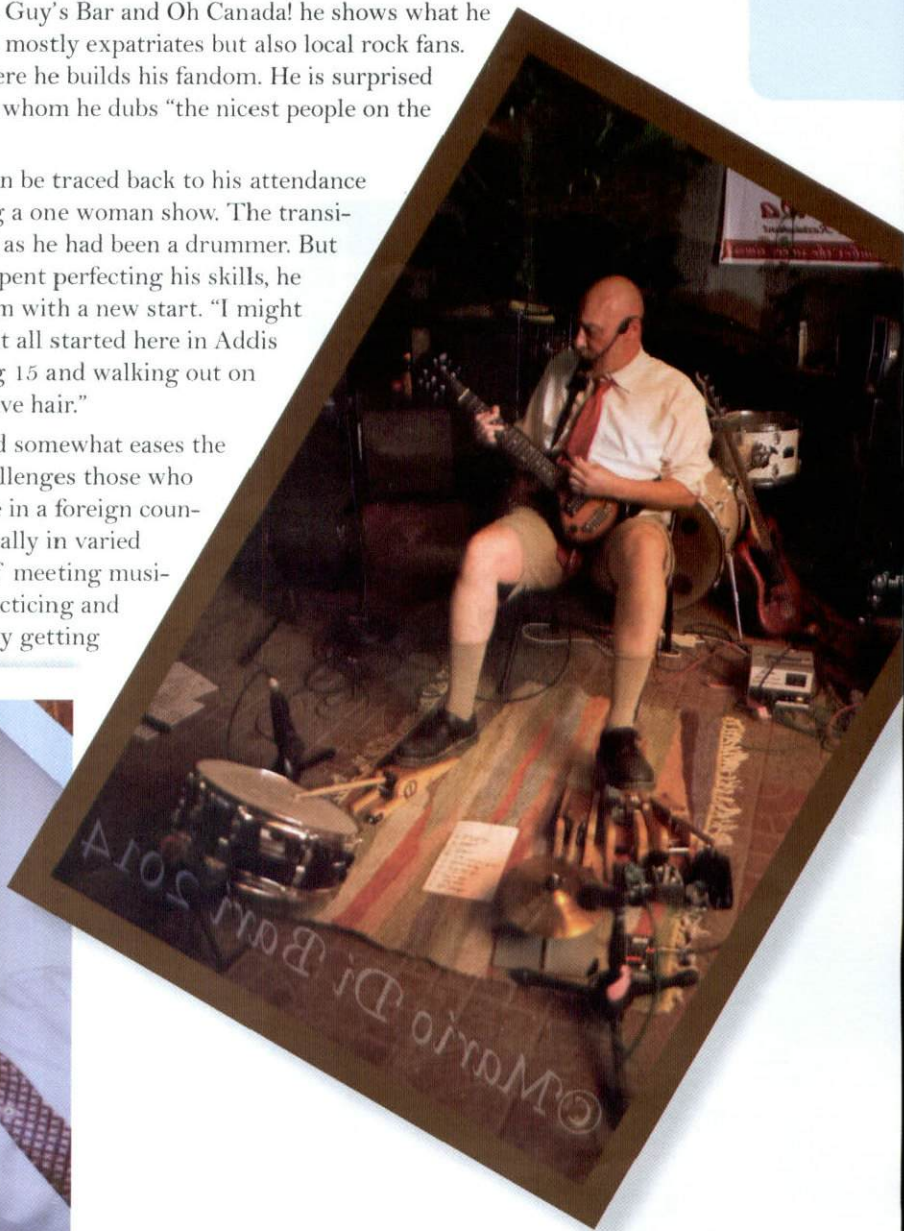


to label himself “the only” – he has been doing it for more than 30 years. But in Addis, he hasn’t seen anyone else “perform under my definition of ‘one man band.’”

When he appears on stage, most favorably in Guy’s Bar and Oh Canada! he shows what he loves doing best to an assortment of audiences mostly expatriates but also local rock fans. The facebook group ‘Magnetic Rockers’ is where he builds his fandom. He is surprised by local enthusiasts of his alternative music, whom he dubs “the nicest people on the planet.”

The genesis of his grand experiment can be traced back to his attendance of a blues performer, Molly Gene, giving a one woman show. The transition to foot drumming was not difficult as he had been a drummer. But notwithstanding all the years he had spent perfecting his skills, he credits Addis Abeba for providing him with a new start. “I might have found my niche, and I can say it all started here in Addis Ababa,” he confides, “It’s like being 15 and walking out on stage all over... except I don’t have hair.”

For Brian, being his own band somewhat eases the practical strains that often challenges those who try to adjust into a musical life in a foreign country alongside working professionally in varied sectors. He doesn’t have the problems of meeting musicians that could otherwise accompany him, practicing and performing in a continuous fashion. “I still enjoy getting



together with other musicians and making music but now I don’t have to rely on others to perform my music. I can sneak out to my little practice room when I have a minute so I really don’t take up a lot of family time with rehearsal,” he says. Now off on his summer break in Essen, Germany, “I will be starting to perform again in September so look for shows on my website www.builtforslow.com”. And what will he have achieved when he finally left Ethiopia a year from now? “I will have been able to perform for some of the nicest people on the planet.”

