On bass players : appeared in the June 2003 issue of Bass Player magazine.
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How do you perceive the role of the bass player in a band?

In jazz, the bass player seems now to be the fundamental time and harmony controller, centre stage as it were, from whom utter dependability is required. In Earthworks, as in many other groups, he is indeed physically centre stage. As the drummer moves more to the role of the Chief of Dynamics, and Chief Commentator, so most band members look to the bass player to define the harmony, and define the time. At a recent excellent McCoy Tyner trio gig, with an active drummer on his left, the bass player (centre stage) never wavered for a moment, caught as he was between a hurricane and a tornado. He never spoke with a loud voice, but was always clearly and evenly audible, the lynch-pin between piano and drums.

In rock, you play the root note very loudly.

How important is the bass in relation to other instruments in a band?

It's as important as the player wants to make it.

Is there a single most important element you look for in a bass player?

An ability to do the simple well, the complex effortlessly, and both imaginatively. Much like any other musician.

Perhaps an additional an ability not to get lost, particularly in heavily "substituted" jazz harmony, would be helpful. If he gets lost, there is every chance that I will--its contagious!

Do you try to first lock in with the bass player?

Who I'm locking in with depends on who's doing what at any given time. Usually I'm locking in with the guy who has the most rhythmically stable continuum, and that might not be the bass player.

What can a bass player do to make it exciting for you?

Show up on time, and then surprise me. Tony Levin, for example, liked to live dangerously, playing some tricksy stuff on different nights on different instruments---stick, electric upright, Fender electric--which I know for sure he hadn't practised...The different range of colours in the bottom makes the music sound and feel different. And he always showed up on time.

What's the most common complaint of yours?

That a player is late, and does the same thing over and over again. But fortunately I haven't met anyone like that for a long time.

What's your approach if the time gets weird?

Simplify, simplify.

Who are some of your favorites and why?

Guys with character, great sounds or both. Dave Holland, Mark Hodgson, Mick Karn, Jaco, Jeff Berlin, Eddie Gomez, Miroslav Vitous, Mike Pope, Larry Grenadier, Tony Levin, the young John Wetton, Laurie Cottle...

What kind of bass sound do you like?

If it even smells like jazz, I prefer acoustic bass. There is something absolutely remarkable about some guy wrestling with that wood and string;an instrument that is so obviously impossible to play. It's a mystery to most people, including me, how its even physically possible to do those things.. I particularly like the "forgiving" nature of its attack, so much better for the ambiguity of jazz. And, as a drummer, you have to find it in the on-stage mix---you have to go to it, and adjust your playing accordingly.

And I think audiences find the kind of heroic stamina required to play acoustic bass very engaging. Conversely, electric bass looks --and I stress the word "looks"-- too easy. I like the kind of bass sound the bass player likes--if he can get it, he'll be happy.

Who has a great sound?

All the above, and plenty of others. Happily bass players, especially acoustic ones, are taking much more responsibility for their sound now than they used to. And they needed to. Used to be that an acoustic player would just turn up and stand behind the nearest mic (acoustic player) or plug intothe nearest amp (electric player), and hope for the best. And when it was awful and he couldn't hear anything, he'd blame the sound man. Now the best players are increasingly knowledgeable about how their instrument actually sounds, and should sound, in various ensemble settings and in various rooms. Good musicians search constantly for an "indestructible" sound that will work in all contexts.

Do you have a favorite brand of electric bass? Acoustic bass?

No.

How important to you is a bass player's ability to solo well?

Not very, altho if its an improvising trio there will naturally be more requirement for the bassist to solo than, say, a rock sextet. If he has nothing to say, he shouldn't say it, and that's fine. If he has plenty to say, like Jeff Berlin, he's probably going to say it anyway.

What do you like to hear in a bass solo?

All the same thing you would want to hear in anybody's solo--pacing, drama, form,

commitment, one idea following the previous to produce a narrative shape, an oblique and novel way of re-presenting the material in the piece....

How important is personality?

Personality is extremely important--much of jazz and rock is about personalities. I'd rather hear mediocre execution of terrific ideas than olympian execution of tedious or vacuous ideas.