

Bobby Vega 08-01-09

Contributed by Kennan Shaw
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After watching Bobby Vega playing at a small club, a good friend of mine, a fantastic singer and guitarist I have the pleasure to work with on occasion, turned to me during a break in the show and said "You used to be good."

Pretty much all I could answer was "I used to think so too!"

Bobby Vega is that good.

“Put-the-bass-away-work-at-the-gas-station” good. He’s so good that his “Bass Player TV” (<http://truefire.com/bptv/>) segment was voted “Favorite” in the Bass Player Magazine Reader’s Poll in 2008 and again in 2009. His wide array of technique, his “human cartoon” personality, and his deeply funky playing make him one of the most respected bass players amongst other bassists in the world.

He’s worked with funk pioneers Sly Stone, Cold Blood, and of course Tower of Power, but he’s also worked with Paul Butterfield, Lee Oskar, Jefferson Airplane and Starship, Etta James, Joan Baez, Santana and many others encompassing many different genres of music. As he’s said: “It’s not a “style”; it’s a “groove”. And this ain’t a “Hobby”, it’s my whole life.”

This interview was a long time in the works. Initial Emailed "20 Questions" went by the way-side. As I got to know him better, the questions changed. As I became his friend, the stories got better and better. The first part of the interview took place in his car on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, the second part, in his office at EMG Pickups in Santa Rosa. Bobby's has been a lifetime spent deep in the heart of the Music Business, and the inherent cynicism usually found there runs headlong into Bobby's naturally effervescent personality. He is extremely generous with anyone who's curious about his knowledge and experience, but has little time for those who are just looking to cop his style. "

Bobby is starting what he calls the "second phase" of his life. It's all about connections, and being visible and accessible, through education and the benefits of "new media". The way I see it, the more "Bobby" we all get in our playing and our lives is probably good for everybody.

Bobby Vega.

First things first; fill us in on your new website, and any other new projects you have coming up.

I have to get some projects out; otherwise I'll be living in the projects!
I have a website (www.bobbyvega.com) I'm going to start putting things on; I'll be playing different basses, different gear, answering questions, consulting, lessons, sessions, artist of the month, Kennan of the month, and "Ask Bob", hopefully a humorous Q&A kind of thing. And downloads and music, and people we should know about, other bass players, other musicians, so their music is available on my web site.

So getting a hold of you for lessons and just in general, that would be through the website?

Yes. They can reach me through the website,(www.bobbyvega.com) or MySpace (www.myspace.com/bobbyvegabassman), or EMG Pickups, at bvega@emgpickups.com,

I'm available for lessons but I have to figure out the right price point, because of these difficult times.

What kind of stuff are you doing at EMG?

Umm...I'm doing, let's see...hold on; I'm going to read the card; "Bobby Vega, clinician, education, promotions." I don't want to let anything out ahead of time because I don't want it to be a lie, but that's what the card states right now. "Read the card!"

Tell me about the X pickups you're working on with EMG.

They're the new line. They're a fast pickup and respond to your touch. Lots of headroom...very musical...

this shit's happenin'!

So, there's three kinds of EMG X pickups you're working on?

They're available now; they're winding them as we were speaking. There are the 'JAX Alnico's', there's some Ceramic JX's, and the Jazz Vintage JV X's for Jazz bass. And PX's and PJX's are available.

So what are the differences between the three models?

To me, the Alnico's have a sweet low end. The JV X's have 'rods' (standard pole pieces), the Alnico's have 'bars'. When a string is in between the magnets ('rods'), to me, when you bend it, it gets louder. There's this kind of motion; it moves in and out of the magnet field even though you're in it. With the bar, it's a different trip. What I dig is (playing bass with JV X pickups), it has a more dynamic shift you can apply to it than this one does (playing Alnico X). It can follow you. I want that. See; you can hear every note and everything is clear and even. You shouldn't run from that, you should embrace it, and you know...pimp, control you're...Basses! (Laughs)

But, they're very musical.

That's the thing; it's great to have choices, so we can figure out how to use the bass so it doesn't use you!

Talking to you in the past, you've talked about producing a line of parts and bridges. Do you still have plans for your own line?

I do, and that's what I want to start doing because I think throughout all the years of my experience, I've learned what a lot of things can do, and what they're used for, and maybe I can help some people dial in sounds that they want to get to without them having to sacrifice money and time. It's a dream, but hopefully, I'll be able to do that.

You talked about producing; I'm curious as to what kind of producer you are; 'floating colored balloons'; or 'No white food in the control booth'?

It depends on who you're working with, and most important is actually the song, if that's what we're capturing, going after a song. It's almost like having a Christmas tree and hanging ornaments on it; you see what you've got and then start minusing, or see where it needs help. It might need more on one side, but you're not trying to fill it up, you want to make it have some depth. You try to make the person you're recording have some dimension or some depth.

How about an Instructional DVD?

I'm going to work on that right away; that's going to happen sooner than later. I think that the people that I'm working with want me to do that first.

Available in October!

Have you thought about the format at all?

Yes, it's going to be short, to the point, it's going to be with a pick, then some stuff with fingers, then some stuff with thumb; 'Pick Fingers Thumb'. I'm going to keep them down where it's not a bible, it's not Alex Haley and 'Roots'; where it's so long you want to slice yourself open. I can't tell you how much stuff it's going to be but I'm going to try to do it so you can have a series of these versus running out of things, or having too much on one DVD.

What is your Practice Routine like?

I just…start playing. I’ll start out on a lick, and then I’ll play patterns, and then I’ll play Major and Minor. I used to play with a lot of different guitar players, and so what happens now, since they’re not around, now I play their parts. I play my rendition of all the songs that are all in my head or that I hear, when I practice they all come out. A lot of people think I’m just wasting my time practicing like that, but it’s more keeping up the dexterity and fingers and stretching and playing with a pick versus running scales. I use every finger, and I play chords and I stretch and work on positions. I know there are a lot of people talking about metronomes and drum machines, and you know what? Use them all people, drum machines, metronomes, pigs ducks, frogs, chickens…

There are some strong differences of opinion between strict practice routines and the ‘just be musical’ crowd.

Whatever works for you! Right now, it’s like politicians; you don’t have to go vote for anybody. You know; ‘give me some of that, and some of that. I’m gonna take some Stu, some Jeff, gimme some Marcus, some Stanley, Brian Bromberg, Duck Dunn, Chuck (Rainey), it’s all there. You’re not gonna get shot or go to hell. It’s like playing with a pick; if it doesn’t work for you, don’t do it. I started playing with a pick because I couldn’t do it with my fingers. I can’t go “Dododododo” with my fingers. “What is Hip” with my fingers.

And don’t forget a cup of Rocco Jaco & Larry & Victor too.

How long have you been playing with the pick?

Ever since I started. The guy who really got me was a guy named Camille D’Coeur who worked at Don Wehr’s Music City, and was a guitar player. He started when there wasn’t even slinky strings, he used to put Banjo strings on his Telecaster, so he could bend the strings and stuff. And this guy was really really really super funky.

Every Bobby Vega story starts with…

(Interrupting) “That mutha…”?

I was going to say “Bobby Vega, played with Sly Stone at 16”.

Oh yeah.

But what was before that? What brought you to the bass?

It was an accident. I was hanging out with my friend Denny Widler and Andy Klingler, and Vern James, and I had a cassette deck that my mother had just bought me from Emporium with “Born on the Bayou” and my friend Denny Widler said “Man, I play in a band”, and I said “Wow really? My Uncle has a guitar; would you like to borrow it?” He said “why don’t you come down and play bass on it?” I said “No, man…” and he said “Why don’t you come on down?” And that’s how I started. Just like that. I didn’t know what end was what, or anything. I was always very interested in playing music, I had wanted to but never…that started the ball.

So you jumped in the pool to see if you could swim? Did you take any lessons?

I took one lesson, from this bass player named Dave Dunaway, who was a really great bass player. It was at Super Music owned by Bruce Day who passed away who played bass for Pablo Cruz. I went in and said “Well, y’know, say you’re in H, and you wanted to get to J and W…” and he goes “There’s no H, there’s no J, there’s no W.” I went “Oh shhii, er…well…what if you want to play “Somebody to Love”? He took the bass and went “Doodoodoodoodoo…” and I went “Oh shhii…” and gave him \$3.75 and ran out the door, and never took another lesson. It just terrified me that somebody had that much command and power over the instrument being that close in a small room. Freaked me out. That was the last lesson I ever took.

What I did was, I used to hang out at music stores, and I used to go to concerts, “Soul on Ice” at Winterland with James Brown, The Black Expos at the Civic Center to see Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles and all those other people, Sly and the Family Stone used to practice in our neighborhood, and I just saw a lot of music.

Did you come from a musical family? Was there a lot of music at home?

The way I was brought up, my mother and father split up when I was a baby. Before kindergarten we went to live with my grandmother and grandfather, so it’s me, my mother, my two sisters, my aunt, my uncle, my grandmother, grandfather and my dog in a two bedroom house, in a black neighborhood. Upstairs, my aunt was a ‘Soul Sister’, so it was all soul music. Downstairs, my uncle was a surfer, so it was Led Zeppelin, Fat Mattress, Mott the Hoople, T-Rex, all that, Jimi Hendrix and Blind Faith and all that stuff. It was the best of both worlds.

I used to go to the Fillmore on Fridays’, which was the Carousel Ballroom, on Van Ness and Market. On Saturday I’d get up and go to the Family Dog, which was Chet Helms place, and I’d go wash the floors, and I’d see soundcheck, and I’d get a pass for Saturday night. My first really big major concert, rock concert, was Altamont. Altamont Speedway. The Stones thing.

What were your impressions of Altamont? What do you remember about that?

I remember that when Santana started playing, all the girls had clothes on, and by the time Santana stopped playing, all their tops were off. It was like King Kong, very primitive, primal…the first band that ever had this really primal effect on the audience where everybody would just be swaying and moving, and the next thing you know clothes would be coming off and people’d be getting high, with those jungle kind of rhythms; percussion and the bass, the guitar playing melody lines; it was just really powerful. It was really cool. Hypnotic.

You've worked with some big name artists. What have been some of your best sideman gigs, who were the best bosses?

You know, I never really looked at them as 'bosses', once you look at them as bosses you're kind of out of the gig. You were there because they wanted you to play not because they wanted you to kiss their ass. So if they were your boss it was kinda 'Hey! This is really nice!' and (brakes squeeling) you're outta there. I think I was very fortunate because a lot of people I used to pay to go see I ended up playing with, and that was really cool. A lot of times the gigs didn't last a year, the longest I think I ever stayed with a band was Etta James, and that was like six years.

One of the coolest guys I remember was Frank Zappa. Ray White got me and Harvey Hughes — he was a drummer — used to work in Cold Blood, got us an audition with Frank Zappa, and that was really cool. We flew down to L.A., went to his studio, started playing, played for about an hour, and Frank goes 'Hey man, do you read?' I go 'no.' and he goes 'Tell you what; you learn how to read and you got the gig.' But I didn't think about learning how to read, and then we ate lunch, he cooked lunch, and he was just really cool and nice, and then he gave me 'Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar', 'Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar Some More', and 'Sheik Yerbouti', and I'd never heard any Frank Zappa music even before I went down there I didn't listen to any. I used to work at a psychedelic poster shop in San Francisco, all I knew about Frank Zappa was that he was sitting on a toilet, and they took a picture of him. So when I got home, and I played the albums, I thought 'Damn. Did he do this on purpose?' And that was my Frank Zappa story. I thought he was really cool.

Everybody else, they just stories and experiences and whether they were cool, good or bad they helped you build character, and that's how you get your experience and playing style, because usually stuff sticks with you after the gigs over, where it permeates and soaks in. Because while you're playing the gig, you're just trying to learn it. You really don't have a grasp of it, you're trying to get it, at least when you're starting to develop something. That's the hardest part of being a sideman is; how much to go? How much am I supposed to add on to that? Sometimes now, just to get outside myself, I'll have a shot of Tequila — not to get drunk — but just to loosen up and go 'fuck it'. But I know the tunes. Now I can get outside myself and now we can actually play music by having a conversation by waiting to hear what's going to happen the next time around.

I wanted to ask you about the Tower of Power gig; what I want to know is, when you were doing the gig, how much of what you were playing was you, and how much was Rocco's stuff? It's a pretty iconic bass chair; how did you approach that?

Scared as a mutha...umm... A long time ago, when my son was born - he's thirteen now - I had named him Rocco, because I didn't want to name him Jaco because it was too sad a story, and to me, Rocco is the Power in Tower. You take Rocco out, and there's no more Power in Tower. God bless 'em all, but that's the truth. I saw Rocco and said "Rocco, I just had a baby boy and I named him Rocco." He goes (raspy voice) "Yeah, I'm really flattered Bobby, but if you really meant it, man, you'da fuckin' named him Francis."

I've always been a big fan of Tower of Power, I never learned any of their songs, and one day I get a call from David Garibaldi and he says "Hey Robert, Tower's looking for a bass player, I'm gonna put your name in." I said "Oh. Okay...yeah, alright." Then Jeff Tamelier called me up and said "Hey Bobby, Tower's looking for a bass player and I recommended you. Why don't you come in for an audition," "Oh. Okay." So anyway, I had some pictures that I had taken of Rocco, and I asked Jeff to pass them along to Rocco, and he said "Hey Bobby why don't you just come down to the studio?" They were doing "The Oakland Zone", and they were working at Herbie Herbert's Studio. So I went down there. So I go to see Rocco, and he says "Come on man, walk with me", so we went down the stairs and he says "Hey man, this gig's gonna be really good for you." I said "What are you talkin' about?" "I'm fuckin' sick man, goin' in the hospital." I said "Man, I can't play like you", and Rocco said "Yeah, I can't play like you either."

The stuff that they gave me to learn was like, the demos without the horns, for that stuff. Some of it...want to hear any of this?

Yeah, sure!

(Bobby plays a CD with drums, bass, guitar, keys, and a scratch vocal.)

How much of the material did you learn? You probably had to re-learn

everything after the horns came in…

I didn’t learn anything! And no rehearsal! Listen to this;

(A demo track is playing with no clearly discernable “One”)

(Laughing) The hard part is; where does the “BooDooDoot” come in? After an hour and fifty minutes…the Matrix is what it is, and there’s a “BooDooDoot” in…in every box!

How much of what you were playing was dead-on Rocco lines and how much was you?

No! That’s the whole thing, that I did the feel. Then the note choices, what I did is when I learned a song, I learned the hook lines of it, and then the feel. Like, every night, Rocco doesn’t play the same thing in Tower of Power. That’s his band, and he’s jammin’. It’s his gig. You know what I mean; whoever’s gig that is, it’s Rocco’s gig. You go to see him, and he’s playing things different ways depending on how he feels. And yes; there’s a template, but, you never know where he’s going to. But “BooDooDoot” is gonna be in there!

So I imitated the feel, or the sound. What I really dug from Tower was “Bump City” and “What is Hip”. So Bump City, Clean Slate, What is Hip, Soul Vaccination, and Get Your Feet Back on the Ground. When I heard that, it’s like “Oh sh…!” That to me was Tower of Power, so I tried to imitate that. That sound and that feel. Because he’s right. There’s imitators, but you can’t do what he does. If you can get past that point, and you’re freer, you’ll do a better job.

So what was the step between Rocco taking you aside and saying ‘this gig will be really good for you’, and you getting the gig? Did you actually play with them?

No! That was one of the weirdest, outset experiences of my life. I get a call, and David goes "Look Robert, whoever does the stuff the best is gonna get the gig. So we're going to send you some stuff, and you pick out three tunes." So I said "okay", and I locked myself in a room for two weeks, eight hours a day. And I learned "Soul with a Capital S"; the intro song they were doing, "Can't You See (You're Doing Me Wrong)", and "What is Hip". So those are the three songs that I auditioned with, and I learned them with all of the horn parts in mind, and what happens is that when I went to audition, there wasn't any horn. I was just... I was sitting in the control booth with the bass in the center channel with the bass speakers, and Emilio was there, and Jeff was on the couch over there, and Dave was in the other room and the keyboard was in the other room and Larry was kinda singing, and Emilio is looking at me like "Okay go!" In a recording studio. So there wasn't drums here and me watching this and then him playing...

Learning the song... you see people on YouTube all the time playing along with the song, and that's really great, but learning them that way, then playing them with a band, then playing them with THAT band, is a totally different experience. The first time I ever played, after I finally got the gig, I played my first gig which was at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles, it was like being put in a slingshot, being pulled back as far as the slingshot will go and then they let you go and you're going "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!". Cause, man, they're not messin' around. "Three Four BANG".

The first gig, we're on stage... I was in Canada the night before, with a band I had, so at four o'clock in the morning I was chasing the promoter, I got the promoter and paid everybody about 5:30, 6:00 in the morning, got a car, went to the airport, from Canada to San Francisco with my bass, I had gout, so I had a gout boot on and they had to wheel me around in a wheelchair, from there I went to Los Angeles, hotel, and then soundcheck at the Greek Theater at One O'clock. That was my first gig with Tower. So I get to the Greek Theater, and the gear's all set up and there's Rocco's "Workingman's" rig, when he was using SWR stuff, And they're like "Okay go ahead and plug in" and I get plugged in and the next thing I know, comin' in from Stage Left, there's Rocco. "Oh shi..." I thought, "oh" so I get all my stuff down and get out of the way, and Rocco soundchecks.

So... I'm going... I'm cryin'... I'm tired, I've been up since forever, and there's Rocco... so they finish soundcheck, and Rocco walked away so they said "okay Bobby get up there". So I hopped back up there, I got my Gout Boot on and I put my stuff back up there playing through Rocco's rig, and here we go. Emilio say "Hey Bobby, what do you want to do?" and I said "I don't care."

He says "What do you want to do?" and I say "It doesn't matter."

Then he says "Come here. Look, we've done this without a bass player before. It really doesn't matter. So we can do this without a bass player."

I said "Oh! Uh, "Soul with a Capital S", and he says "Okay, ready? Horns? Dave, hit it, two three four..." and BAM! There were no rehearsals. I didn't rehearse once with them. We'd go over stuff at sound check, they'd go "learn this one", and then we'd be at the Fair, and there's be everyone, eating cotton candy, chewing on a pig foot, watching us practice, run over a tune we were going to do. That was it, that was the only rehearsal. "Okay we're outta here."

What kind of tour was it?

They're family oriented, so they'd be out for two weeks at the most and then home, so that was good. They work really, really hard for their money. Man, that's an hour and fifty minutes of intense music. The bass and drum chair, you're constantly shovelin' coal. You don't stop. Even the ballads are intense. If you lose your concentration, you'll mess up, and you'll get the worst "stink-eye"! They're like the R&B Soprano's; they'll kill you just lookin' at you! But that was the best, the most prestigious "Bass chair" that I've sat in.

The other hard bass chair to sit in was Jack Cassidy's bass chair. Jefferson Airplane, or Starship, there's a lot of "Jack Heads". With Rocco, it was like Jaco and Victor Bailey (ed. Bailey took over for Jaco in Weather Report). There was a lot of pressure, a lot of people looking at you. Every night there were three to five guys sittin' there goin' "How come they called you? You got some big shoes to fill." I'm like "Hey man, I'm not tryin' to fill his shoes." After the gig some people were like "Wow man, that was great" and other were like "Hey man you missed a note..." Here! You do it. "You missed the lick in "James Brown". An hour and fifty minutes of "BooDoodoot"!

But you had to know that going in!

No! I didn't think about any of that stuff! Because if I thought about it, I wouldn't have taken the gig I'da been so nervous. That was the thing not thinking about that stuff, trying to not think about that stuff. It was hard enough hangin' with those guys (Tower). That's a tough room.

But you survived!

Survived-ish! Ish! Rocco came back in four months. I think I helped him get better.

A Bad Ass thank you to Bobby Vega and also to member Kennan Shaw for compiling the questions. For the latest on Bobby, please visit...

www.bobbyvega.com