

John Hatton 02-16-11

Contributed by Doug Vincent
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1. When on tour, what is your favorite little place to grab food/drinks/hang with the locals, in other words, is there a little dive somewhere you can't wait to get to?

"Rotiere's" in Nashville comes to mind. The best home cookin' imaginable, and the cook always has "something special" in the kitchen, like homemade pie. Kansas City, MO? Gotta go to "Bryant's" for barbecue, only a few blocks from the old black musician's union hall where jam sessions continue to this day deep into the wee hours of the morning.

2. You've played some amazing places with some amazing people. What's one place that surprised you in a good way?

The White House soiree for the retiring Japanese Prime Minister, Koizumi Jun'ichir, thrown by the George Bush, was one I won't forget. Koizumi loves Elvis, American music and Rockabilly and was a huge Setzer fan. The Bush's were Setzer fans as well, having hired BSO for the 2000 White House Christmas Television Special. The BSO was waiting in "The Green Room" (it is my belief that this is where the term comes from), just next to the "Gold Room" where the band was to play in a few minutes, when through a side door from the "Red Room" walked George and Koizumi with huge smiles on their faces! George's smile broadened even more when we shoved Beth Curry, the foxy BU singer right into his arms! They were like kids in a candy store, just wanting to meet the band. You know, the backstage pass syndrome. Even the all-powerful want to meet the band!

3. What artist did that same thing (famous or not so famous)?

My hats' off to Brian Setzer!
That guy has inspired me to new heights of showmanship and high energy in a bag that I was unfamiliar with.

4. Do you play standard electric bass at all? If so, is there a particular reason you do, if not, how do you change your approach on Standup to emulate electric...or do you?

I started electric bass in 1961, the same time I started string bass when I was in high school. Dad was on the music staff at the Affton district, a suburb of St. Louis. I could get any instrument I wanted and take it home to practice. I had played violin since age six and was concertmaster of the school orchestra. The principal Cellist, Gary Smyth, had a rock band. They needed a bass player. My first bass was a Harmony guitar that Gary had strung up with bass strings by cutting new grooves into the bridge and nut. We played through two accordion amps. They really sounded like crap!

I told my dad that I needed a Fender bass, so I could get a better sound. So he took me to Mel Bay music, Mel's original store which is still there in Kirkwood (St. Louis is all suburbs!) Mel told us, "I'll make you a deal where we both lose money!"

The Fender was such a great bass that it promptly blew the speakers in the accordion amp, so it wasn't long before we were back at Mel Bay buying a new Ampeg B-15-N Portaflex bass amp. I was in heaven! I should have never sold that amp! And I should have never left that '61 P in my car! It got stolen right after I moved to LA in '74. Oh, and yes, I sometimes try to get the electric to sound like a string bass, but more often than not, I bring both to my gigs. It's worth the hassle.

5. For anyone thinking of getting into music in the way that you are involved, what "one piece of advice" would you leave them with?

Learn to be expert in all bags. Learn to sight read 99% perfect the first time through a chart. Get in a public school that has a great music program. Get in EVERYTHING, the band, the orchestra, the choir, the combos, etc etc. Beginners, take lessons on your instrument from a pro who will get you started right. I see a lot of Rockabilly bassists who have horrid left hand technique.

6. What is the biggest "lie" you think people associate with the life of a musician that's able to "make a living" at it?

The biggest lie is that you CAN make a living at it. In reality, the DJ's are starving the musicians out of the dance business. The young kids need to abandon recorded music (it ain't gonna happen) at dances. The death of live music started in the 70's when gradually dance clubs added DJ's on the band breaks. It wasn't long until the bands were history in dance club meat-markets. Next to go was the bar mitzvahs and following suit was the wedding business. Lately the convention scene has been infected with DJ's getting five to ten grand a night when bands are hard pressed to get three G's or even the work for that matter.

Synthesizers have decimated the film and TV recording business. Studios are folding all over the place. Capitol Records would be gone if it weren't an architectural landmark, A dear friend of mine, one of the finest drummers in LA (hence the world) lost his house to foreclosure. He lives in a converted garage with his son now. Symphony gigs are the last holdouts for live music. That's why I say, learn all bags. Two hundred bass players showed up at auditions for the San Diego Symphony last year! Marry well, you up-and-coming cats and kittens, or else practice your ass off and be the best at every style.

7. For what it's worth, I've played upright here and there doing Honky Tonk (ala Buck Owens, Merle, etc.) and it's a hellava workout.....do you do anything to stay in shape and to have energy for what you're doing? (btw, much respect, your stage presence and abilities completely amaze!)

Playing with Brian really gave me a kick in the tush! I had to work really hard to keep up with him!! My early gigs when my chops were tender were hell on my fingers. I would jam my hand into the ice chest after coming off stage. Once the adhesive tape on my fingers flew off like an arrow right into the sax section! Over the years I've toughened up, and haven't worn a blister for quite a while! Switching from steel to gut strings was an added blessing.

8. Staying in that "slap" realm, given that it's so percussive, how do you approach that aspect while playing with a drummer, do you follow, lead, or find some notes in between?

The best feeling comes when the drummer and I are playing like one person. I call it "painless". That's when you don't think about anything except making music and having fun. The pain comes when the drummer rushes his fills, plays too on top the beat or drags like a boat anchor. I wanna just go home! Like drums, the bass is best when it's simple. We've all had drummers who fill every crack. The best drummers just play solid time, then fill when necessary. Save your show-off mode for your solos.

9. Do you have a mantra, routine, or any quirky things you do before walking out on stage?

I slam-dunk chocolate and coffee.
If I can't warm up on the spare bass, I do arm lifts with a water bottle with my right arm to loosen up the shoulder muscles. If I don't it feels like my arm is going to freeze up and break off if Brian kicks off the show with a barn burner like "Trouble Train"!

10. Would your 16 year old self want to kick your ass for one particular style of music you love to play now In other words, as you've grown musically, what do you find surprising that you "like"?

When I was 16, Rockabilly was just the hicks in Nashville trying to learn rock n roll! I was into James Brown, Ike "n" Tina, Chuck Berry, Count Basie and classical music. I was a nerdy violinist, remember? Bill Haley was more refined, jazzy and cool. Odd that I thought it was the drummer tapping on the snare rim, when all along it was a slap bass! Setzer and his fans and young bands in EU did a lot to renew the love for retro, adding the modern edge, the big amps, the high energy and of course, the big hair!

11. If you were to grab a bass in a music store or walk up to a booth at NAMM and "test" it, what song/lick would you play?

There's a bass store right across the street from the LA Musician's Union, Stein on Vine. My routine there is to walk in, say hi to Gary Chen, the owner, then go over to the racks and racks of string bass and twang random scales, arpeggios and jazz licks and maybe an occasional slap or two. But I must be careful slapping because there are basses there from some of the top symphony and session guys getting repaired or tweaked. After trying out 20 or so basses, I go back to Gary's desk and buy my cake of rosin or a bass book.

I had just finished my routine and was paying for my stuff when I walked Ray Brown, who said, "Hi Gary," then walked over to the bass racks and started noodling away! That guy had one of the best basses in the world and yet he was still looking for the perfect one! Basses are like chicks.

12. What's the top song on your ipod right now?

I gotta get one of those things! I have a woodshop in my back yard where I indulge in my hobby. I always have music going. Sometimes I listen to CD's (love my Louie Prima CD, love Esperanza, love Marley..the bass lines are so cool), but more often than not, the Classical station is on. I like music that challenges me to figure out what's going on there.

13. You've played with Elvis and you've met Jamerson, what was each one like, and what's your best memory of either one?

I met Jamerson at a black night club in Motown while I was playing bass with Gene Harris, the jazz pianist. Gene's trio was called "The Three Sounds". Gene's version of "Love For Sale" made that song a jazz standard. I don't recall exchanging much more than pleasantries with James, but I do remember that he really dug playing my '61 P-bass when he sat in with the trio!

When I lived in Kansas City in the late 60's, I was the first-call bassist for shows and sessions (why did I leave?). I had played for Liza Minelli, The Righteous Brothers, Marilyn Maye and Clark Terry. They hired all local union musicians for their shows, bringing only their conductor and their charts. This is the way most groups toured at the time. Alice Cooper was on the horizon with his semi trucks and self-contained circus. When I got the call to do the Elvis show, not being a fan particularly, I bought a couple of his recent albums to get a feel for the tunes.

The show involved a rehearsal the afternoon of the gig to run the locals through the charts. It was a full big band, 5 saxes, 4 bones and 4 trumpets, me and a local drummer. Joe Guercio conducted. At the end of the rehearsal Joe said to the drummer and I, "You guys are just gonna play the 2001 theme, then you lay out for the rest of the show". I was shocked! Lay OUT?! Disappointed, too.

The band took a lunch break, and later back at the auditorium I saw Elvis and the Colonel talking by the dressing rooms. I got my two albums and my Sharpie and stood next to them waiting for an opportunity to ask for an autograph. After a minute or so Elvis turned to me and said "the nine words Elvis said to me", "You want me to sign those for you , Sonny?"

14. Who (other than yourself) has your favorite bass tone?

I love the tone of the swing era basses. No amps, just dig in hard and drive the band. When I started upright bass, nobody used amps. Big band, cocktail jazz, no matter. No amp. That's what bass should sound like. A bass. Punchy with a fast decay. The drummers who pound 4 on the floor oughta listen to Prima's drummer (and they oughta have their foot amputated). That's a big pet peeve of mine. Stadium rock bass drum in a swing band. I wanna kill!! The BASS is the 4 on the floor, all you sound guys out there!

15. Do you have any hobbies you'd care to share?? What's your passion outside of music?

I do construction work, build furniture and paint paintings sometimes. I also love to sail in my 16 foot wooden sloop that I restored 20 years ago. But the vilest addiction I can't seem to shake is GOLF!!!!!!! AAAARRRRGGGGHhhh! (22 hdcp)

16. If you could bring back a musician who i's no longer with us to p lay with, who would it be?

Spike Jones

17. What / Who got you in to bass?

My pop, a violinist, who said, "You can work your way through college if you learn the string bass." (which he had done in the 40's). I've been working my way through life on it!

18. What was the first song you learned on bass?

My first rock band was "The Marauders". Bands named themselves after cars in the early 60's (Mercury Marauder). The first song I learned on that Harmony guitar with the re-cut bridge and nut with the bass strings installed was "Walkin' With Mr. Lee". Ironically, the bass line Gary Smyth (the cellist in the HS orchestra mentioned above) showed me was exactly the same as the bass line from "Rock This Town!" My life has gone full circle!

19. What is the worst gig you can remember, and what was the situation?

Where do I begin? There are so many things that make a gig suck. The worst load-in is by far the Biltmore Hotel in downtown LA. Ask anybody.

The worst commute happened when my Suburban towing a trailer full of gear with 5 of my band mates blew a water hose just outside of Baker on the way to Vegas. AAA yanked the Suburban with three of the boys onto a flat-bed tow truck with the trailer hooked up to his hitch, me and one guy in the air conditioned cab while the other three baked with windows fully down. He drove us the last hour directly to the Venetian, and directly into the convention hall with semi-truck-sized bays to literally 30 yards from the stage. While we played the gig, the contractor had a buddy come and install the new hose.

Gigs where you freeze because there are no heaters for the band, because we are servants and slaves in so many party-planner minds.

Gigs where I forgot my ear plugs.

Gigs where you don't get paid.

20. Boxers or Briefs?

Let the ladies find out! But I have undies older than you are, no doubt.

A Badass thank you to John "Spazz" Hatton, and to member Doug Vincent for compiling the questions. For the latest on what John is up to, go to

<http://www.briansetzer.com>