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COVER

John Entwistle

BUSS FOR 'THE WOLF'

Robt. Jr. Lockwood

STILL IN THE BLUES

Jeff Beck

SEARCHING OUT

Eddie Condon

A RECOLLECTION

Jim Stafford

BEHIND TV'S DEAR

Roy Clark

THE RARE GUITARIST

Joe Byrd

A PRO REPLY

FREE Recording System

GP GIVEAWAY #16

JOHN ENTWISTLE

JOHN The Who's



A bass player with the Who, England's John Entwistle is often paired near the top of the progressive-rock list. The Who's sound is often associated with Pete Dinklage's lead lines.

The first meeting between Entwistle and Townshend took place when John was twelve (he's now thirty), and they began working in bands together two years later. Sometimes after the tediousness pairing, while carrying a homemade bass under his arm, John was stopped in the street by Roger Daltrey, who then and there asked him to join his group performing in a job of his' silling a night. Eventually, Townshend likes it as school was brought in as a rhythm guitarist, and later still Keith Moon worked his way onto the drummer's platform. The Entwistle method became famous as the Who was formed. It was a remarkable amalgamation, reflecting influences of such groups as Johnny and the Hurricanes, the Crickets, Gene and the Gladiators, Johnny King and the Paxtons, and the Beatles before it entered its own, new-fangled sound. Entwistle, as great and surprising, has tried to avoid the trap that inevitably came under the rubric of a "Whooped rock and roll band" by inventing LP's of his own, as well as by playing with musicians not included in the Who personnel. Solo albums include *Smash Four Head Against The Wall* (MCA, 1974), *Roger Moore Live* (MCA, 1975), *Whistle Blower* (MCA, 1977), and *And God Beg* (MCA, 1978). Demented in the personal black music, Entwistle talked about his early work with the Who, as well as his current playing with his own new band, Os.

What was the scene like when you first started playing?

I was before I was seven; my grandfather used to stand me on a chair in the local workman's club, and while I sang, he went around with the bat. My mother forced me to play the piano when I was seven, but I continued for that I could carry on teaching myself the piano and learn trumpet at school. But there were too many trumpet players, so they made me play French horn instead. Then, when I was about fourteen, I made my own beat. I never played guitar.

Why did you fashion a bass and not a guitar?

Everybody I knew played guitar, and everybody wanted bass players, and they just weren't about. When I first started playing in England there were only about four bass guitars on the market, and they were all very cheap. You couldn't buy a Fender bass or a Gibson. They were all like three very cheap-tenner basens. I think the most expensive one you could get was a Framersley's bass—a big sort of acoustic thing—and a few Hartons. I had some photographs of Fender basses, and I just looked very closely at the picture and tried to make one. I wanted a nice long bass, and so I made the neck really long—it ended up about 5'7" long. When I took it in to be finished they took the fret measurements off a Fender violin bass, and it ended up with about 7" of sharpwood with absolutely no frets on it. It had brass material for the scratch plate, the control knobs were stuck on with glue, the wire came straight out of the pickup, and it had a square neck as well. It was terrible.

What type of amplifier and guitar were you using when the Who first

formed?

When we first started calling ourselves the Who I used a Marshall 50-watt amp with a 4x12 cabinet. I had the first 4x12 cabinet that Marshall made. We sort of got forced then to make 100-watt amps by changing to Vox, who had already made one. Marshall decided that if they were going to lay on, they'd have to make a 100-watt amp. They used to make their amps with speaker material on the front, and they looked completely different. I said, "I don't like that. I want it all black," so they changed them. I bought another 4x12 cabinet, and then Pete bought another 4x12 speaker, and it went on and on and on. We had more equipment than any other band in the country—it was ridiculous. I was using a Fender Precision on the first album, and then I had an Epiphone and a Rickenbacker. Then I got rid of the Precision and got a Danish bass, which I could handle play. I played it for two minutes, and my hand got very sore. Then I had three Dan Electronics in a row because you couldn't buy the strings small enough to change properly. I only used the guitar until one of the original strings broke, and then I bought another one.

Why were you going through all these different basses?

I was trying to find something I could play. I had conversations with the Rickenbackers, but the neck warped, and it started sounding very strange, so I changed to a [Fender] Jaw Run. The first proper bass string I ever used, I had a big cabinet with guitar material on the front, and we used to carry our own equipment then. Like a van to take us to the concerts. Because we thought it was too heavy, we used to hang the 8" speaker on a nail every time we'd go to a concert, and when I played a bottom D, it would fall off the nail. So we'd have to stop halfway through the concert and hang it back on the nail. The first time I could ever play my D string properly was after I'd been playing for for about three years. I'd never actually touched the D string. I was just playing on the first three strings. And the first

ENTWISTLE

Great Bass Guitarist

By Steve Rosen

How do you actually touch the D string when you play my first 4-12 cabinet, and I was using an Epiphone semi-hollow body.

You're never using a Thunderbird now?

Yes, I stopped getting into a bit of it not using a Fender, and I found that we were playing bigger places, and it just didn't have enough bottom. I was using HiWatt amps with that Fender bass, and I was getting a nice trebly sound out of it, but there didn't seem to be any bottom in the band. The bass is very important, so I changed to Sans Colucciani just before Who's Next (released in 1971, RCA, 9003). I had this Thunderbird (see for quite some time, in fact, at the time it was in a shop being sold for me because I just couldn't be bothered to use it, but they couldn't sell it) anybody wanted it, not even for a hundred pounds, which is like \$250-300. So I said, "Oh, that, I'll take it back." I thought I might as well try it out on stage, and it was perfect, though it didn't have enough treble, and it still doesn't. It's very difficult getting enough treble; you have to turn the cable pickup right up. All the Thunderbirds are the same, they're not exactly heavy, but there's no pretense there unless you use a very "pretentious" amp like a HiWatt. Sans just got that much treble out. The Thunderbird I'm using now is a '64. It's in pretty good condition, but I'm going to start using my "Frankenbird" on stage. Once I realized Thunderbird was the bass I was going to be playing for a few years, I panicked because they stopped making them. I went to Manny's 1120 West 48th St., New York, NY 10018, and told them to buy up the whole stock, so consequently I got ten two-pick-up Thunderbirds. Some of them had harmonics, microphonic pickups, or I couldn't use them, and with the rest, I just couldn't get the action as low as I wanted. So I bought the pickups and hand-wire and bought some Moete Fender Precision necks and had some old style Thunderbird bodies built for the Fender necks to fit, and I've been using them

on stage more than the Thunderbirds. I use them for recording as well. Moete Precision necks are my favorites, those and Kluson frets. Thunderbird necks tend to be too thick down at the bottom. I got my fingers all tangled up when I go to the first fret.

You play with both your fingers and your hand?

I play with my fingers most of the time. I don't like playing with a plectrum. I use it for stuff like "Born The Spider" (Jaggy Jack, MCA, 3045) and "My Way" (Who's Next), but I'd much rather play with my fingers. I can play faster with my fingers anyway. I use all four. When I first started playing I was using my thumb, and I thought this was a bit stupid, because I'd learned the piano, and the trumpet, and the French horn, and learned to use all my other fingers, so I might as well use them. I started using my first finger, then my first and second, and then went all brought all the others in. Only about two English ten players played with their fingers at that time. Everybody was using their picks and thumb. When I see a pick it's a three-heavy combination.

What type of strings do you use?

Retained. I have to use them — I designed the Gaining thing! Pure String Labs, Chris Squire (laughs). I was looking for bass strings which vibrated properly, and I couldn't find a good D and G string on any set at all, except maybe for LaBella — they weren't too bad. But I wanted a round-wound string. I was approached by Homewood, and they said they'd make some strings for me, exactly what I wanted. So I went to the factory, and they brought out a set of their round-wound and asked what I thought of them. The D and the G didn't vibrate properly, and the D and G weren't heavy enough. So I sat there all afternoon while they made me strings with different cores, and different gauges, and different types of wire, and finally got through the E, A, D, G, and got a balanced set. And I said, "They're fine, make me as many sets as you can." They started making them



and said, "Look, we'll put your picture on the string sets, and we'll put these strings on the market." So they issued them as "Living Bass," and they've been out ever since. A lot of people use them and get the same sound as me. I wanted to get a sound like a piano, which is why I wanted round-wound strings. I found that I could play chords and get a lot more sustain out of wire wound, so that's really why I set out to get the strings done. Why did the same thing with strings for trumpet and short neck horns, though shorter scale horns don't seem to sound as good as medium or long. They don't have the same kind of harmonics happening. The Thunderbird is long scale.

What type of equipment do you use in the studio?

If I need a very trebly sound I use a Sans Colucciani with a 4-12 cabinet, but most of the time I find that we need a sort of heavy sound, so I use an 18" speaker with a Sans Colucciani. On stage, I use two Sans Colucciani stacks with Os, and two with the Wos. I use the straight Colucciani amp with a drive going through four 18's, two in a big yellow cabinet, about like a PA cabinet, and two to act as straight compensated cabinets. Then I use two other amps, one for midrange, going through two 8-12's and then an amp coming from the preamp out into the front of the next amp, with a lead cord which goes through two 8-12's, which are like 8's cabinets as well. This is so I can get the sound that still has some sound on stage. The 18's are Vega and the 12's are all the normal Sans speakers.

When writing do you use an electric organ?

I think of how hard to use the organ. Continued on page 26

JOHN ENTWISTLE

Continued from page 47

ment that out with the staff! I'm using with Gx. I'd much rather use a lot more equipment, but it means I'd probably drown the band completely out. To get more info I see an MDR, the 1000 red box. It has a reverse limiting effect, it spreads the sound out and contains it. It also doubles the volume. The only other pedal I use is a phaser, though I have quite a few other pedals at home — Wah-wah pedals, powerwoks — but I really haven't had time to incorporate them. I don't want big rows of switches all over the place. I live over the phaser all the time.

Was it difficult to coordinate your playing with the singing?

When I'm singing, I don't give him as well — obviously, I'm thinking about the words. But I had a lot of experience with it in the early days, because I was doing a lot of vocal backing at the local dance we played.

Because Townsend tends to be more a rhythm than a lead guitarist, do you have to fill in more with a second lead line as well?

Oh, yes. Pete plays rhythm and lead, and I play bass, rhythm, and lead. We just play as much as we can. Once the Who gets on stage, everybody starts playing a solo straight away. With Gx,

I've taken over a lot more lead work. Maybe if I'd been with another band I might be one of those very talented backup players, a proper bass player, really. I've never truly considered myself a bass player. I think I'm a lead/rhythm bass player. Because the Who was a three-piece, and we tried to reproduce the same sound in six pieces, I used to play most of the time with a phaser and played rhythm figures on the bass. Then, when we started doing more complicated stuff with Tommy (MCA, 1980 L), I started playing lead figures. Occasionally before that, when the guitar went off, I'd have to take over a solo and turn everything full up and go into a solo.

Do you change your instruments in any way?

Not really. When I got hold of an instrument I put a set of Kalamandiri strings on it and set the action as low as possible. I prefer playing with a very low action, but that's about all I do to it. I immediately take off the hand rest and the ballpoint cover, a thing of the distant past.

Do large protest pieces like Tommy and Quadrophenia (MCA-10099), do you try to get a particular sound for each track?

Yes. I think if you listen to my bass

Continued on page 48

JOHN ENTWISTLE

Continued from page 27

parts on their own they sound unbelievably distorted, but when you play them with the other instruments on the track, they fit. That's what comes with playing with Keith Moon. I mean, if you play Keith's drums alone, it sounds like six violas. But once you put it in with the rest it's okay. Keith must be the hardest drummer in the world to play with, mainly because he tries to hit really every drum at once. And if you try and fit in with one of his beats, you have to play like him, dippy-dippy, all over the place. It's really difficult; he doesn't play a linear set-up, so you've got to sort of backbeat going. I just try and fit in the best way with what the drummers are doing on the tom-toms and bass drum. I have to look at them all the time, so the audience sometimes gets confused. There are some shows I've done with the Who where I haven't even looked at the audience once.

Is that why you don't wear, or you can concentrate on playing, or is it just part of the image?

Half-and-half, really. I've tried wearing a couple times and really haven't gotten on with it at all. I don't think it helps with bass playing at all to move about. I think it may do with guitar, because guitarists can play a chord and let it sustain and then move or jump up

in the air and play a chord while they're up there and then come down again. But a bass player has single notes and things to play, and moving about means you have to play a single part.

Do you compose on the bass?

I used to; then I changed to composing on the piano. Now I've gone back to bass again. I do a bit of composing now on synthesizers as well.

How you found that playing piano, French horn, and trumpet has influenced your bass work?

Only insofar as it's enabled me to play with my fingers on the right hand. With piano I use both hands, with trumpet you loosen up your right hand, with French horn you loosen up the left hand, and it's enabled my hands to move faster. But that's as far as it goes.

What is a conventional low-inbred on Who's Spanish? and an floating bass on J Med Big J?

A "spiritualized bass" was just something I did on an ARP format. It was just like a driving, driving. The bass part was so simple I just couldn't be bothered to play it on bass, so I played it on synthesizers. The 4-string bass is a Raitt-influenced I have, which goes up to an *F* octave, *A* octave, *B* octave, and *C* octave. It sounds like a bass and a guitar playing in unison, which is nice.

Have you ever tried playing a fretless

Continued on page 32

JOHN ENTWISTLE

(Continued from page 37)

Epiphone Koroi for a year, and you sound like a leadhite or something — a big sort of blurred boom — you really go to the opposite extreme when you change guitars. I changed to a Gibson Fender and used full treble all the time. We found that it cut to the back of the audience as well, so you could hear what the bass was playing, instead of a blur.

Do you practice?

No, but I'm in the studio so much I don't really have to. There's something very funny about practicing bass. You can sit down in a rehearsal room before a show and get more achieved than you would sitting down for three hours practicing at home. There's something very strange about standing on your feet in a room and trying to play. You can practice notes and stuff like that, but I prefer not to know where I'm going on bass. I'd hate to know that I was going to slide up to an F#, and then play a G#, and then an A, and know exactly what notes I was going to play. I think it would hinder me. It hindered me in the beginning. I didn't know what notes I was going to. I used to get very confused. I also had perfect pitch when I started playing the bass, but the Wizard is like a constant show yourself

because the equipment sounded better, and my ears just used to go forward. We tuned sharper because it made the strings tighter and made the speakers work better. It played better with my hearing. I could never get in tune because I knew it was out of tune.

Have you ever had any staining on bass?

No, I was all picked to up myself. It was six years ago I couldn't read bass lines — I never believed, I used to guess more or less where notes and notes were. I got along okay. I used to work it out at rehearsal and in the studio. I'd sort of block off my mind and play. But now I know where I'm going, tonight. I can read, but I wouldn't dream of doing it unless we're in the studio, and we've got a very difficult number to remember. For some of the stuff at Jambo-jambo (MCA, 1999), I wrote down chord sheets, and I found it helped. You get halfway through a six-minute number, and you don't know where it's going. Suddenly you get a flat block, tonic, and G⁷-E⁷, and you've made a mistake — then the whole band has to start again. So I just use chord sheets.

Do you think people mistake your bass for Bob's guitar because the sounds are so similar?

Yes, it does tend to happen. A lot of

(Continued on page 37)

JOHN ENTWISTLE

(continued from page 37)

people in England, when "Mr. Generation" [the Generation, MCA, 2044] first came out, I thought that Pete was playing the solo, the bass solo. And for months, when we were playing it on stage, that solo would come up, and they always used to look at Pete, and after the bass solo was over they used to clap for Pete, I got a very gaffer-like sound, so if the audience don't know about the instruments they're obviously going to get confused. The ultimate thing is they automatically think it's Pete. But they can't understand why Pete just has his hands on a chord he's just strummed, and there's a lead line coming out, and they're still looking at him and saying, "How's he doing that?" I did that solo with a producer, because in those days our manager, who was also our producer, didn't think that finger recorded very well, but all the stuff I did on *Quadrupole* and *Who's Next* [MCA, 2011] was finger, and all the stuff I do on my own albums is finger.

How does the substance of your playing and rigs come from if you don't really listen to other rock players?

A lot of it comes from classical music; I play a lot of sonatas with friends and live finger. I had to always keep my hand in the shape of a chord to see I want to hit an octave or a fifth. I find it

very hard to play single notes and tell them apart. I don't really like them; they're boring. They achieve what they're expected to achieve. You can



Photo © Ken Caillat

get a rock and roll beat going, but that's not particularly exciting to play — do more than playing one and three in a walk is. I'm trying to create things to do with the bass, I just had a bearing, had designed for me, a long scale one. The top two strings are tunable to C and F in fourths, and it has a C string and a bottom B, just to widen the scale. This is made by the same people in England who made my Fenderbards. They also made a book bass for me, shaped like an excavator's arm. I just try to do new things. ■