

Victor Bailey's Bass Manifesto

nov 2009 by Bill Milkowski

FROM HIS '80S HEYDAY WITH WEATHER Report and Steps Ahead through his mid '90s stint with Madonna, two tours of duty with the Joe Zawinul Syndicate, and up to his recent stint in the Bill Evans / Randy Brecker Soulhop Band, Victor Bailey has earned his stripes as a reliable groovemeister and consummate accompanist. He stepped out from that supportive role on a few rare occasions, notably his three recordings as a leader—1989's *Bottom's Up*, 1999's *Low Blow*, and 2001's *That's Right*—but Bailey has never before played as much bass as he does on his latest solo outing, **Slippin' N' Trippin'**, his most satisfying and rewarding project to date.

"Half of my career I've been playing bass lines written by somebody who doesn't play the bass, who wrote it on a keyboard with two fingers," says the Philadelphia native. *"And it's always pentatonic minor. I'm the pentatonic minor fusion groove king. But now I'm finally getting the way that I really sound on a record. It's time to get that out there, just to establish who I really am."* Without sacrificing his signature fat groove factor, Bailey unleashes a torrent of dazzling fretboard work on **Slippin' N' Trippin'**. *"I've been practicing more than ever before to better define my style, sound, clarity, and articulation,"* he says. *"And I just felt like it was time to put my stamp on something so people would know what it is that I really do."*

On "**Lucky Punch**," Bailey unveils his unique overhanded tapping technique in which he reaches his left hand over the top of the neck to tap intricate arpeggios (Ebsus to A6#11) in combination with his right hand. *"That's a little thing I've done in my solo spots on gigs,"* he says, *"but I have never found a place to showcase it on one of my records, until now."*

The ultra-funky "**Ape School**" showcases what Bailey calls his "triplet thump," a combination of up-and-down thumbing, plucking, and left-hand slaps against the fretboard. The title track on **Slippin' N' Trippin'** is some trademark Victor funk with requisite slapping, while on a startlingly accurate rendition of John Coltrane's chops-busting "**Countdown**," he burns with sax-like fluidity on top while simultaneously scatting Trane's blistering lines as Ron Carter walks furiously underneath on upright bass. *"I transcribed a ton of Trane solos when I went to Berklee, and that was one of them,"* Bailey explains. *"I always thought it was such a beautiful piece of music, even though it's an improvisation. I used to walk around Berklee just singing it. And again, probably no one who had ever heard me on any of the records that I've done would ever have the idea that I could play a John Coltrane solo note-for-note, let alone scat along with it. But here it is."*

On an uncommonly lyrical reading of the timeless Burt Bacharach ballad "**Alfie**," Victor turns in a rare performance on fretless bass. *"I'd hardly played fretless on anything before,"* he says. *"I did play fretless on two songs with Weather Report— 'What's Going On' [from 1984's *Sportin' Life*] and 'Swamp Cabbage' [from 1983's *Domino Theory*]. Other than that, I've never been that interested in fretless. I hear so many people play it out of tune, which is one of the worst sounds there is in all of music. But for those particular tunes it just worked. I was surprised how good it sounded on 'Alfie.' I worked on the phrasing a little to get a certain expressiveness that you just can't get with the fretted bass."*

Another side of Bailey's musicality comes out on an intricate four-part vocal harmony showcase in "**Like a Horn**," an adaptation of a song that his sax-playing father Morris Bailey Jr. wrote back in the '50s. *"I'm not a great singer, but I can vocalize,"* says Victor. *"I can take a tune like that and get the story across. I can deliver the lyrics and deliver the emotion. A few years ago I was at my*

father's house in Philadelphia and had asked him for a tune for this record. Just as I was posing the question, I noticed the chart for 'Like a Horn' sitting on his couch. I thought it looked interesting, so I brought it home not knowing what I was going to do with it. I ended up adapting the lyric to 'I'm gonna play bass for you like a horn.' So it was a chance to do my vocals and do all the background harmonies."

Bailey's big production number on **Slippin' N' Trippin'** is an audacious cover of Prince's "**Kiss**," on which he methodically layers 12 separate tracks of bass to effect a full band sound. "That's all bass," he proudly explains. "The backbeat is me knocking on the wood with my knuckle, the kick drum is me turning the pre-amp on the bass all the way up and hitting the bass with my palm, and to make the snare sound I used a Shure SM57 mic to record the sound of me slapping the actual wood of the bass. The solo is false harmonics going through the distortion effect on the Zoom 607 bass pedal with just a touch of envelope filter added in. I haven't heard anybody do anything with false harmonics since Jaco did 'Birdland.'"

The Zoom pedal figures prominently throughout **Slippin' N' Trippin'** for all the distortion tones and envelope filter sounds that Bailey generates. "I was never an effects guy myself," he explains, "mainly because when I went to Berklee every bass player there stepped on a chorus pedal for solos in order to sound like Jaco. And I said, 'No, I can't be like everybody else.' So I avoided pedals for a long time. But this Zoom pedal was the first one I heard that didn't sound like any other effects out there. Zoom discontinued that pedal because nobody bought it—but whenever I play live, bass players are always coming up to me after the gig wanting to know how I got those sounds, because they're so different."

Aside from showcasing the bass like he's never done before, Bailey also plays drums on "**Ape School**" and "**If You Say So**"— although he is quick to point out, "I'm not the next Omar Hakim or anything, but I can play drums enough to put a groove down." Elsewhere on the new album, the drums are expertly handled by the likes of Hakim, Billy Cobham, Lenny White, Manolo Badrena, and Mino Cinelu.

Bailey explains that it was his recent experience of playing in a power trio setting with guitarist Larry Coryell and drummer Lenny White—resulting in 2005's *Electric* and 2006's *Traffic*—that liberated him to stretch out on the bass like he had never done before. "That trio really opened up a lot of things for me," he says. "It was probably the first gig I had ever done where I could do all of the things that I do on the instrument. Almost every gig I've done since moving to New York had a keyboard player or a guitar player and at least one horn player, so in those contexts I needed to be more of the conventional bass player in the band. But in a stripped down trio setting with Lenny and Larry there was a need for me to fill up more room, which led to me experimenting with chording, tapping and different effects. It really opened up a lot of things in my mind, and I have to credit Larry for encouraging me to put it all out there." he says. "Larry would hear me fooling around with Bach pieces and my piano style tapping technique on the soundchecks and he'd tell me, 'Man, you have all this stuff that you do that you never do it public. Play some of that on the gig.' A lot of the stuff that I do—the tapping, the chordal stuff and the triplet thumb thing—doesn't fit in most situations, particularly groove-oriented fusion things. Nobody wants that stuff on their gig. In those kind of bands, the bass solo is always over a vamp, and it's always in G minor or E minor—two things I'm really burnt on. I always wanted to be able to solo over changes or solo on a beautiful ballad but I was always told, 'No, the bass doesn't do that.' But with Larry and Lenny I was able to do those things on the gig. And now I'm really putting it out there for the first time, as if to say, 'This is who I really am.'"

Trippin' Tones

Perhaps no song on **Slippin' N' Trippin'** offers a keener glimpse into the writing and soloing mind of Victor Bailey than "**I Wonder.**" Offers Bailey, "*The tune originated with six-note arpeggio chord voicings I was playing around with, which is why the track is in 3/4. The voicings are reminiscent of McCoy Tyner, but I called the song 'I Wonder' because the movement of the chords, especially in B section, with the layered vocals, reminds me of Stevie Wonder.*" He continues, "*I had the chords for a while but none of the bass melodies I tried worked; finally my father, in his 77 years of musical wisdom, said, 'Try singing a melody instead of playing one,' and it worked.*"

Shown below is the opening 20 bars of Victor's solo. Note his trademark use of bebopstyle lines and his preference for D natural minor (or D Aeolian) in the first 8 bars. "The lowered 6th, Bb , resolves better with the coming Dbmaj7 chord," he explains. As his bop phrases move from Dbmaj7 to Dbm7, Bailey stays in Db major for the first beat of bar 13, creating an interesting tension. More hornlike moves at the end of bars 13 and 16 conclude on the Abmaj7 chord in 17. Finally, Victor unleashes a dazzling hammered line descending on the G string—utilizing a half-step below and a whole-step above the chord tones of Ab—before he slides all the way back up the string to nail the high Eb.

"My solo concept is always to try and tell a story as opposed to showing off how fast I can play. If you think of great solos like Jaco's 'Havona' or Stanley Clarke's 'School Days,' you can sing them—even the fast parts. My goal is to create a melodic statement so even if you muted all the other tracks you'd know what the changes are." He adds, "*The way I arrive there is to just keep playing until I get past the point of thinking about the chords. That usually happens when I'm not happy with anything I've done and my mind finally lets go and I can play something that's pure expression.*"

Victor advises, "*Learn the notes at a slower tempo; that's the best way to get them to really pop out up to speed. Try to find the expression in the solo—the feel is right on the beat, not slowed or pushed. Also, I find the hammered line comes out much better when I play it with my [left-hand] fingertips.*" — CHRIS JISI

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