

STUDIO BASSES OF Nashville

I N S E A R C H O F

THE PERFECT SOUND

Life wasn't always this complicated. If you owned a bass, you were a bassist.

When you went to a session, you took your bass—which was a Fender with four strings. You knew what it sounded like, the engineer knew what it sounded like, and everyone was happy. Fast forward to the '90s: it's a whole new game. There are 5-string basses, 6-string basses, and 8-string basses; active pickups, passive pickups, and piezo pickups; wood necks and graphite necks; flatwound strings, halfround strings, and

The Numbers Game

All of the bassists on our panel carry an arsenal of instruments, since no one axe will give them all of the sounds they need; the exact number of basses varies from player to player and from session to session. Mike Chapman may bring as many as six basses to a date, or he may bring just one. He explains it this way: "When I'm doing a master session, I always take them all into the studio; but when I'm doing a demo, I'll leave the others in the trunk of the car. If the need and opportunity arises, I might run out and get another bass." When a slightly different sound



MIKE CHAPMAN

'73 Jazz w/Seymour Duncan pickups ("There's a mod to the wiring so it can sound like either a Precision or a Jazz. It was my main bass until I got my fretted Warwick.")

Warwick fretless Streamer Stage II
("I got it because I love my fretted Warwick.")

Warwick fretted Streamer Stage II
Glaser fretless ("I bought a Warmoth body and neck, and Joe Glaser finished it and added the electronics.")

Carvin 6-string ("This bass is a little softer-sounding than the Warwick, so I use it on ballads.")

Kramer Ferrington acoustic bass guitar ("If you EQ it just right, it can emulate an upright very closely.")

BY DAVE MARTIN

roundwound strings; acoustic uprights, electric uprights, and electric acoustics. What instruments should a session player bring to the studio nowadays?

To find out, we spoke to a half dozen of Nashville's busiest studio bassists: Mike Brignardello (whose recent credits include Billy Ray Cyrus, Faith Hill, and Tim McGraw), Mike Chapman (Garth Brooks, Leann Rimes), *BASS PLAYER* columnists David Hungate and Dave Pomeroy, Michael Rhodes (Shawn Colvin, Mark Chesnutt), and Garry Tallent (Bruce Springsteen, the DeLantantes).

is required, Chapman doesn't necessarily reach for a new bass to find it. "I'm a little different from some of the other bassists in town who have a lot of instruments; I play my Warwick about 80% of the time. Instead of changing basses for different songs, I'll change the EQ on my bass or my preamp, or I'll change the way I play. I might move my right hand a little closer to the bridge, or a little closer to the neck." For Garry Tallent, the number of basses also varies. "If it's a client I don't know, I'll bring up to eight basses; if it's someone I know, I may bring only one." Garry might not even carry a bass. "I've used other people's," he



GARRY TALLENT

- Two '63 Jazz Bases** ("My main instruments.")
- Kramer Ferrington acoustic bass guitar** w/fretless Sadowsky neck ("I rarely use the pickup; I point a Shure SM-57 mike at it.")
- Music Man 4-string** ("It's strung *BEAD*, because I hate 5-strings.")
- Spector fretless** ("The only electric fretless I've ever owned.")
- Hofner hollowbody** ("Even though I often use the Hofner, the Danelectro gets the sound better.")
- Spector fretted bass** ("For producers who want the sound of active pickups.")
- Kramer Ferrington acoustic/electric** w/Fender neck ("I use nylon tapewound strings on both of my Ferringtons.")
- Fender Precision** ("I only occasionally record with this one. I use it more for collecting autographs.")
- Danelectro Long Horn** ("The same one I played on Springsteen's *Born to Run* [Columbia].")

admits. "But I've been playing long enough that it tends to sound like me no matter what bass I'm playing." David Hungate, Michael Rhodes, and Mike Brignardello may bring up to a dozen instruments to a session; Dave Pomeroy sometimes brings more than 20.

The best reasons for carrying multiple basses to a session are summed up by the irrepressible Pomeroy: "It's not about, 'Let me show you all these axes I have.' It's more like, 'I don't know what kind of song you want me to play on, and if I'm hearing a certain bass sound and I left that one at home, you're not getting your money's worth.' I may have been the first guy in Nashville to start bringing many more basses than the number of songs we're cutting that day. I believe every song is unique, and I try to approach each song with a fresh start. Many times that just involves picking up a bass that plays differently, or sounds different, or

makes you think differently. There's something about playing an old P-Bass that makes you do certain things, and there's something about a 5-string that makes you change your approach. Each instrument brings out different aspects of the music—and that's what it's all about."

Mike Brignardello agrees that the physical differences between basses change his style of playing. "There's a psychological thing about playing a 4-string as opposed to a 5; a lot of times I'll pick up a 5 and never even play the *B* string. It's what the instrument sounds like that matters."

Playing Favorites

Every bassist has a favorite instrument, and these players are no different. David Hungate says, "My Tyler works for just about any fretted

MICHAEL RHODES

- Sadowsky 5-string** ("One of my primary basses.")
- Washburn fretless 5-string acoustic bass guitar**
- '63 Precision** w/flatwound strings
- Sadowsky 4-string** ("Roger's basses play so much in tune.")
- '65 Fender Jazz** ("This one has a lot of character—a really distinctive voice.")
- '53 Kay acoustic bass guitar** ("A fantastic-sounding bass. Kays sound remarkable in a track.")
- Tyler fretted 5-string**
- Tyler fretless 5-string**



STUDIO BASSES *continued*

situation; probably my next-most-often-used bass is the red Precision, which I play with a pick, kind of like Joe Osborn." Mike Chapman relies on his Warwick 5-string. Michael Rhodes and Mike Brignardello both consider their primary instruments to be either their Sadowsky 5-strings or their Fender Jazz Basses. Garry Tallent also leans toward one of his Jazz Basses, and Pomeroy's Fleishman electric upright has become a signature instrument for him, along with a fretted Music Man 5.

Making Choices

So when you're sitting in the studio and you hear the next song, how do you decide which bass to pick up? There are many factors involved—but all of the bassists we interviewed talked first about the specifics of the song. "I ask myself a few questions," Michael Rhodes offers. "How aggressive is the emotional content of the tune? What other instrumentation is involved? Also, if the demo is built around the sound of a fretless, I won't want to depart from that too much." Pomeroy echoes these sentiments. "The sound of the singer's voice is a big part of it, and so is the drum sound. For example, if the song requires a lot of melodic work, or if it needs a lot of sustain, I'll use a bass with roundwound strings. On the other hand, a Fender with flatwounds is more percussive but smoother sounding; it won't draw as much attention to itself. If it's an organic, percussion-based tune, a fretless may be best—but I'm not locked into that. On a more general level, there are situations where you find that a certain bass really works, for either a particular artist or producer who really loves a specific instrument."

Who decides which bass to use on a song? The choice is generally up to the player—although the producer has the final say. "I don't think it's the producer's job to tell you what instrument to play," says Brignardello. "They hire us to do a job, and we're supposed to be bringing our brain to the table and providing our knowledge. All the producer wants is for my line to sound good, and he doesn't care how I get it. Just about the only time a producer will ask me to play something else is if the sound does not work—but nine times out of ten, he doesn't know or care what I'm playing." Chapman agrees: "Sometimes a producer asks me to play fretless, because he might be thinking of a Jaco kind of tone. But 99% of the time, it's up to me. Sometimes, I just get bored; if I've been playing one bass all day, I might pull out a different one just to keep on my toes. I may pull out a fretless and play it in a very simple style, so no one will know it's fretless. For instance, on the Garth Brooks song 'The Dance'

[Garth Brooks, Capitol], I played my Glaser fretless; I wanted a round sound, but I didn't play any of the typical fretless licks—so on the record it doesn't sound like a fretless bass."

Pomeroy's take on this question is similar. "To a certain extent, I get called to be myself, and people who hire me want me to bring what I bring to the party. At other times, I may be the new guy, and in that case they may want a P-Bass for the whole project. And some producers say, 'Just bring a fretted and a fretless—that's it.' The biggest factor for me is how long I've been working with that particular producer or artist. The longer I work with somebody, the

amp while still sending a straight DI sound. With the Fleishman electric upright, for instance, I can send one really fat signal and one really bright signal, and the engineer can blend the two. One time, however, they ran out of tracks and erased my fat sound, leaving only the thin one. That was pretty scary."

It's also important to know the sounds of the various instruments in your collection. You have to be aware of how each bass will fit into a particular mix and how it will blend with the kick drum, considering the register in which you intend to play. Here's how Mike Brignardello explains it: "In my mind, I've got all of my basses



MIKE BRIGNARDELLO

'65 Jazz Bass ("It's all stock. How can you go wrong with a '65 Jazz?")

Tyler 5-string ("Its midrange is tightly focused; it sounds like a high-tech P.")

Roscoe fretless 5-string ("I had Roscoe put aluminum fret markers in there, so when I attack a note there's almost the *ping* of a fret.")

Sadowsky 5-string

Homemade fretless 4-string w/ Warmoth body, EMG pickups, and Modulus neck ("It's made from stuff I had lying around.")

Washburn acoustic bass guitar

Elko hollowbody ("It's a copy of a Hofner. I bought it at a pawnshop on Broadway in New York.")

Vigier 4-string

Sadowsky 4-string ("It has a little more sheen than the Sadowsky 5; it's a little more high-tech sounding.")

Dingwall Voodoo 5-string ("The Dingwall is the most in-tune bass I've ever played. It takes a while to get used to it, though, because of the fanned frets.")

Not included in this photo are an MTD bass made by Mike Tobias, an old Rickenbacker, a Steinberger, and a Kay acoustic.

more he or she tends to indulge my ideas—but those people are also quicker to say, 'No, that doesn't work.'

"Another factor is how familiar people are with my methods of working," Dave continues. "For instance, these days I'm trying to use an amp a lot more—and if I can use one, that will also affect my choice of bass. If I can get two tracks on the tape, I can do more EQing on the

kind of bagged: this one is good for rock, and that one is good for ballads—that type of thing. I use that as a starting point, and then I have to use my ears to tell if I've made the right choice."

This brings up another question: How do you know if you've chosen the correct bass for a particular song? In most cases, your ears tell you; in others, the producer does. "Somebody may suggest fretless or upright on a tune where

STUDIO BASSES *continued*

I never would have considered it, and it changes my whole perspective," says Pomeroy. "And sometimes I assume the producer wants something more conventional than what he actually wants. Of course, there are times when I'll go from upright to fretless and the producer says, 'Dave, go back to the big one.'" Rhodes has had similar experiences. "There are times when I'll be fully committed to a sound, but the producer will say no. Sometimes I get caught in the act of self-will; I might be playing something I think is really cool, and the producer says, 'No, we don't want cool—just play bass.' Occasionally I think a fretless would be appropriate, but once we get into the song, I may find out it doesn't speak well enough."

Garry Tallent feels that any experimentation should be done quickly: "Never give any idea more than about three minutes; if it doesn't work right away, it's not going to work at all. You really have to get the sound as you're first showing them the part." Quickly finding the appropriate sound becomes more important when using non-conventional instruments—particularly hollowbody basses such as Hofners, and acoustic-electrics like those made by Kramer and Washburn, which record quite differently than solid-body basses.

Pomeroy concurs that "quickly" is often the operative word. "When you're dealing with multiple basses, you really, *really* have to be careful about wasting time. You don't want to make life inconvenient for everyone else. Your job is to make it sound great in ten seconds. I try not to impose my desires on a project, which requires a lot of flexibility. Sometimes you just have to shut up and play—and I can do that, too."

Getting Creative

There are times when the idea you have is ... shall we say, a little left of center. All of the bassists in our panel agree you should probably warn the producer if you have one of these flights of fancy. David Hungate says, "If I want to try a radical departure, I'll say, 'I think it

might be neat to try something weird.' That way, they know I know it's weird." Brignardello says, "If, for instance, I think a Washburn is the right bass, I'll ask if they're going for a retro thing—and if they say yes, I'll try it." Sometimes, though, the producer makes the call at the beginning. "Some producers want the sound of an active bass or

a 5-string," says Garry Tallent. "I'm not really big on those sounds—but those are the ones that pay the bills."

Upright Options

Most Nashville bassists don't usually bring an upright to a session unless it's specifically requested. Garry Tallent points out that when he's booked on a multi-day project, he may hear songs on the first day that would lend themselves to an upright; in this case, he'd likely bring one to the session on the second day. Upright basses are bulky, fragile, and take up a lot of room—but fortunately there are some alternatives. David Hungate's Carruthers electric upright has worked quite well for him. Tallent owns a couple of uprights but tends to use his Kramer Ferrington acoustic bass guitars; he feels a Ferrington with nylon strings—along with a Shure SM-57 microphone pointed at the soundhole—covers the upright sound quite well. Mike Brignardello uses a Washburn acoustic bass guitar. "It's a 5-string, but I never play the B," he says. "I got it because the 5 has a bigger body, a bigger neck ... a bigger everything than the 4. I use it when there's no chance for me to play my old Kay upright—if there's no isolation booth, or if the engineer doesn't have time to mike it up. I keep a block of foam underneath the strings, which are black nylon tapewounds. It doesn't sound exactly like an upright, but it's close enough if you're trying to do five tunes in a session."

Studio bassists carry instruments that allow them to create music to the best of their ability—although it's arguable whether the sonic differences are always audible on the finished record. Dave Pomeroy admits, "I know the subtleties mean more to me than to anyone else, but I also know I work with a lot of people who like the instruments I choose." Ultimately, the "sound" of these musicians is not in the basses they carry—it's in their hands and their imaginations. Their instruments are just the tools that make it easier to record what they can already hear. ♪



DAVID HUNGATE

Kay acoustic ("I've been playing this one a lot lately. If the producer wants an upright sound, he'll usually tell me to bring it.")

Tyler 5-string ("The Tyler works for just about any fretted situation.")

Fender Jazz

Black Fender Precision ("This one is also pretty old; I got it around 1974.")

Red '62 Fender Precision ("The first real bass I ever owned.")

Yamaha 4-string

Pedulla fretless 8-string

Danelectro Long Horn ("I use this one for tic-tac parts; I either double the acoustic bass part or the guitar part.")

Yamaha RB5000 ("The first 5 string I ever had.")

Pedulla fretless 5-string ("I once used fretless whenever possible—but now it's become kind of cliché, so I don't use it as much.")

Pedulla fretted 8-string

Hofner Beatle Bass ("Sometimes a tune just cries out for that Hofner sound.")

Carruthers electric upright ("It works really well in an orchestra situation. Since I'm not an upright player, I drew lines on the fingerboard.")

Accordion "pump bass"