





# THE QUICKENING

AFTER 20 YEARS OF METICULOUSLY CRAFTING A MULTI-FACETED CAREER, BRYAN BELLER IS SUDDENLY EVERYWHERE AT ONCE. BY E.E. BRADMAN

**IT'S 12:30 ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, AND I'M TALKING TO BRYAN BELLER,** who's on his way to the helicopter that will take him to tonight's sold-out Dethklok show. Klokateers, the band's hooded helpers, will be at the door to pass out Dethklok tattoos, and bartenders will serve drinks with specially made cocktail napkins. Eight hours later, the band is scheduled to take the stage, kick ass, and accept the adulation of the thousands of rabid fans who snapped up tickets in time.

Beller's got a million things on his mind—there are albums to mix, sessions to plan, and tours in the balance—but his primary job tonight will be to make William Murderface, the bassist of Dethklok, sound good to a Comic-Con audience full of hardcore metal fans. And as anyone who's ever seen Adult Swim's hit cartoon series *Metalocalypse* knows, that's a mighty Herculean task.

Lucky for him, Beller has a skill set heavy enough to inspire a fictional character: He's a rocker's rocker





## BRYAN BELLER

with superhuman chops, ears of gold, a tone all his own, an intense work ethic, and a sense of humor that just won't quit. He can groove, he can solo, he can compose, and he's ridiculously well organized; he's a damn good writer, too. And as popular as the real Dethklok band has become—*Dethalbum I* and *Dethalbum II* are the highest-charting death metal albums in the history of the Billboard 200—Dethklok is just one of Beller's gigs. If, to paraphrase that old bumper sticker, the one with the most gigs wins, 41-year-old Beller just might be the champ.

The New Jersey native's musical journey began



**Beller onstage with Dethklok**

with five years of classical piano studies and went into overdrive after he graduated from Berklee in 1993. Beller's first gig out of school was with Dweezil and Ahmet Zappa, which began his affiliation with the L.A. "chops squad" and introduced him to Zappa alums such as Steve Vai and Mike Keneally. His next big adventure was with amp giant SWR, where he spent eight years working his way up from amp tester to artist relations guy to, eventually, vice president. As if a full-time gig and sideman work with MC5 leader Wayne Kramer and Dream Theater singer James LaBrie weren't enough, Beller began blogging



GRIFF PETERS

(a "web journal," they called it then), wrote columns for *BASS PLAYER* from 1999 to 2003, and put out his first solo album, the raw and youthful *View*, in 2003. But 13 years after he arrived in Los Angeles, Beller quit it all, fell in love, and moved to Nashville. He set the journey to music on his second album, 2008's *Thanks in Advance*, as well as an accompanying DVD, *To Nothing*. Snagging choice touring gigs with Vai and Dethklok kept him busy through 2009.

In the last year, though, Beller's career seems to have gone into overdrive. His *Wednesday Night Live*

## i INFO

**Basses** (all by Mike Lull) Modern 5, P/J 5, T-Bass 4 and 5-strings, fretless Modern 5

**Rigs** (all by Gallien-Krueger) Fusion 550, 2001RB, two Neo 4x12 cabs; MB Fusion and Neo 2x12 cab for small gigs

**Strings** D'Addario ProSteels (.045-.130) for fretted basses, D'Addario Half Rounds (same gauges) on the fretless, D'Addario ProSteels (.065-.130) for Dethklok's C standard tuning

**Effects** Roland volume pedal, Boss OC-2 Octave, Xotic Effects Bass BB Preamp, DigiTech Bass Driver, Electro-Harmonix Bass MicroSynth, Aphex Bass Exciter, Retro-Sonic Stereo Chorus, DigiTech Digital Delay, Demeter Opto-Compulator, Dunlop Bass Wah, Voodoo Labs Power Plus 2 (or G-Labs power supply for European tours)

**Studio gear** ART TubePAC, Dunlop M-80 bass DI/drive into a Raven Labs PHA-1 headphone amp into a dbx 163x compressor; SansAmp PSA-1

**Other** Patch cables self-built using the Planet Waves Pedalboard Cable Kit

## EQUIP



- Watch Bryan explain his three-finger galloping technique.
- Watch the extended version of Murderface's bass solo.
- Watch Bryan perform "Freak Show Excess" with Steve Vai (bass solo at 7:28).

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## CONNECT



CD/DVD finds him joyfully romping through his songs with an all-star band of old friends, including Keneally and Berklee cohort Joe Travers. On his new instructional DVD, *Mastering Tone and Versatility* [Alfred], Beller breaks down those subjects in a way that only someone with his wide range of experiences can. *Live at the White House* [Mermaid Holler] is a snapshot of the house concerts he does with his R&B-singing, keyboard-playing wife, Kira Small. The self-titled debut of *Brendon Small's Galaktikon* [BS Records], by the mastermind behind Dethklok, gives Beller a chance to flex his melodic metal chops; he's been in the Dethklok touring band for years, but he'll make his studio debut on the band's third album. And he's got the Aristocrats, his virtuosic rock instrumental trio with drummer Marco Minnemann and guitarist Guthrie Govan. All that time at SWR hasn't gone to waste, either: Beller is a partner in Boing, the Aristocrats' label, and he runs his own imprint, Onion Boy.

Clearly, the man has more than his share of chops, focus, and drive. Which is why, while most of us can barely get to rehearsal on time, Bryan Beller is landing in a helicopter, bass in hand, and getting ready to be mobbed.

**Where did you develop such a strong work ethic?**

It's innate. I've been this way since I was a kid. For a while I

rebelled against it, and it made me miserable; now, I embrace it as a gift because I love what I do. I love all the aspects of being a musician—the communication, the organization, the promotion, the music itself—and I just love working on it all.

**Were you this busy at Berklee?**

I wasn't a flashy player, and people weren't asking me to do stuff when I was at Berklee, so I set up my own concerts and asked people to do my stuff. In order to do that, I had to keep it organized, because there are so many moving parts. So I started making lists, which I still do today. Putting something on the list helps me choose how to focus my energy.

**What did you want to do after Berklee?**

I was ready to move to New York to be in an original blues-rock band—this was 1993, the age of the Spin Doctors and stuff like that. Then I got a call from a drummer friend of mine, Joe Travers, who was in Dweezil Zappa's band, and he got me an audition. When I got the gig, I moved to L.A., and suddenly I was that guy—the guy playing in the Zappa entourage.

**Is there a relationship between landing big gigs and having great tone?**

When you're auditioning, one of the biggest determining factors is whether you have the right tone for the gig. Before the amplifier, before the pedals on the floor, before your strings and



the pickups and the wood in the bass, there are your hands. Your hands are the ultimate tone-shaping devices, because they're the only things that are always there, no matter what gear you use.

**What does it take to get gear endorsements?**

First of all, you don't "get gear endorsements"—you, as a player, endorse the company. If you want to know how to be an endorser, get a gig. The only way that you'll ever get a deal without a notable gig is if you're a freakish technical player. Another point I can't make strongly enough: Love the gear first. If you're looking at a company because they're going to publicize you, but you're not in love with the gear, you're doing it wrong. Get your gear and your tone straight, get a gig, and then worry about the endorsement.

**What led you to use Mike Lull basses?**

I was working at SWR in 1999 when he sent in an active Jazz-style 5-string for our showroom. It was a little more aggressive in the midrange than what I was used to hearing, but I took it on a couple gigs with Mike Keneally, and everything I tried with it, my hands were just like, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" It was the instrument I hadn't even known I was looking for. Twelve years later, that bass is still my main instrument.

**You've taught at Gerald Veasley's Bass Bootcamp. What do you talk about in your clinics?**

Younger players are usually more focused on developing

technique instead of groove—but when I teach clinics, I bring it down to earth. The first time I went, we talked about tone; we looked at the signal chain, from the beginning to the end. The second time, I showed students my six steps to learning songs by ear. I'm not teaching the fireworks in my group instruction.

**What's your method for learning songs by ear?**

First, figure out the meter. If you can't count through it, you have no business learning what the pitches are. What's the time signature? Is it swinging or straight? Then decipher the pitches. What notes am I trying to hear, what key are we in, is it major or minor, and how do the notes relate to the key? Then figure out the rhythm—what's the groove? What are the accents or syncopations that make it groove? Once you've got all that, place it in harmonic context. What are the chord changes? How do the meter, pitch, and rhythm fit into the chord changes of the song? Once you've learned the line and you know how it fits into the chord changes, think about song form. Are you playing a verse, a chorus, a bridge, or what? And then finally, after all that, figure out how to execute it on the bass.

**Have the requirements for up-and-coming players changed since you hit the scene?**

Not all that much. There's more technical facility now than there was ten years ago, and there will be more technical facility



BRYAN  
BELLER



SCOTT CHATFIELD

**Beller's all-star band also features Griff Peters (guitar), Mike Keneally (guitar/keys), Rick Musallam (guitar), and Joe Travers (drums).**

ten years from now. I ask all my students the same thing when they come through the door: How well do you know the neck? Most people hang out in the first five frets, aren't comfortable on frets six through ten, but are okay at the 12th fret because there's the double dot and it's the octave. We start with exercises—I ask them to play a scale starting with the 1st, 2nd, and 4th fingers, and then I ask them to name every note in the scale. Then they move up two frets and do it again.

**Do you encourage beginners to practice with a metronome?**

If I had a student whose time was all over the place, I might tell them to get a metronome and play eighth-notes until they feel even, but I recommend playing with music. My metronome was John Bonham, and I played with him over and over again. I never practice with a metronome. It bores me. I can't deal.

**Do you emphasize theory?**

Theory is important. Know the circle of 5ths, know the keys, know your scales—you don't even have to start thinking about modes, just the basic keys and key signatures. I encourage my students to know all that stuff and apply it to the instrument



GRIF PETERS

**The Aristocrats (L-R): Guthrie Govan, Marco Minnemann, Bryan Beller**

as soon as they can. To learn about tone, play along with records. For ear training, play along with records. My practice routine is just four words: Play along with records.

**On your DVD, you tell the story of your two auditions for Steve Vai's live band, 11 years apart.**

For a gig like that, the audition booby trap is thinking you have to show them that you can do the gig. But in reality, they won't hire you unless you can, right? And there will likely be more than one person who's capable of doing so. So the decision of whether or not you get the job is based on other factors—appearance, tone, stage presence, likeability, professionalism. It could be anything. Being able to do it is a given. It's easy to forget that.

That's exactly where I was coming from when I first auditioned in 1996. In the end, I didn't get the gig because there was somebody else who was capable of playing everything exactly right and who also had some other "X" factors that were more attractive to Steve.

**Then you auditioned a second time.**

Eleven years later, I heard he was auditioning bass players, so I asked if I could audition. This was after I had recorded several records with him, gone to Europe with him, and done a live gig with him and the Metropole Orchestra. So he knew about my playing. He said, "I appreciate that and I love the way

you play, but I want to hear what else is out there." I maintained my sanity long enough to write him back and say, "Okay, that's cool. Just let me know if you change your mind." I told him I could get to L.A. on short notice. A few days later, he called and asked me to be there in two days.

I had 48 hours to learn the audition material, including a very difficult song called "Freak Show Excess." I got most of it, but there were ten seconds I just couldn't figure out. I started getting into that mindset again, wanting to show Steve I could play anything he threw at me—but thankfully, I was awake enough to realize that if I wasn't going to get this gig because I missed five notes, then so be it. It had to be about more than that. So I just made up the hackiest bullshit I could and just ran with it *[laughs]*. We played "Freak Show Excess" and one other song and it went fine, and then we jammed for 15 minutes, and that was great. I just tried to come from a place where I had no pre-conceived notion of what I wanted that jam to be. I listened and played from that space. Three hours later, he called and told me I had the gig.

**What made the difference?**

I think maybe Steve had some reservations about my stage presence and tone. I wasn't the most naturally rockin' guy onstage—Dethklok has really helped me get more comfortable with that in the last couple



TJ LAMBERT/STAGES PHOTOGRAPHY

**With Kira Small**

years. And I worked on my tone a lot in those 12 years. But as I said on the DVD, I choose to believe that it's because I approached the second audition from a different mental standpoint. If I didn't get it, life would have gone on. As a matter of fact, fast-forward five years, and Steve's going on the road right now with somebody else. Life goes on.

**Tell me more about the evolution of your tone between your auditions.**

One thing is that although I don't play with a pick, I worked up a technique that simulates the strike and the chime of a pick. I take my right-hand index finger and wind up, and then I let it fly across the string. It helps if it's a steel string on a bass that's designed to be bright, hopefully with a maple fingerboard and an ash body. Then I just let my finger fly across the string and—*chang!* Not with my nail,

just the fingertip. It will never sound exactly like a pick, but it's close enough. If I add a bit of overdrive, I get even closer.

**You're known for your bright attack, which is distinctively yours, no matter what gig you're on.**

Until a few years ago, I was chasing one particular thing—that bright, slightly aggressive Jazz Bass sound. If I'd known more, or gone faster on my tonal journey in my 20s, I might have used different sounds for different things. But I'm happy with the way things turned out. The highest possible compliment is that people recognize my sound, because at the end of the day, that's all I've got.

**Do you go for a darker sound when you play R&B with Kira Small?**

I can roll off the treble on my red Lull, play with my fingers closer to the string, and do all the right



things to make a darker sound—but no matter what I do, my hand just doesn't naturally do dark sounds very well. There are a lot of R&B bass players out there who have a natural, bright Jazz Bass tone, and that's what I go for.

**You do get some warmer tones on The Aristocrats, though.**

I managed to get a dark and chocolaty sound by getting a Lull P+J 5 that was designed to be darker, putting nickel strings on it, and then letting them die. I'm using it more with the Aristocrats now because honestly, I can play faster on it; there's less attack noise, so I can get a little smoother.

**You sound like you're having so much fun in the Aristocrats.**

We get along great, and it's a real band—I haven't been in a real band since I was 21! Playing with Guthrie and Marco is an opportunity to take a lot of things I've learned over the years and apply it at the highest level possible. There are definitely guys out there who could play faster or more out than I do in this trio, but I think the band has just the right balance of fire and earth. Marco and Guthrie are incredible musicians, and they really push me.

**So you find the gig difficult even after playing with Vai?**

Oh god, yes! The Vai gig is very challenging—Steve is very particular about what he wants, and it's your job to deliver it—but at the end of the day, there's not a lot of improvisation. He wants a very consistent backdrop so he can execute what he's executing, so in a two-hour show, there are maybe 15 minutes of improv. With we've got form, but I have to keep my ears open. Marco could do anything at any time, and you'd better hold on to your hat, because it gets nuts, fast.

**Do you consider yourself a fusion player?**

I lean toward rock fusion, not jazz fusion. Whenever I've had the choice between jazz or rock, I've always gone for rock. When I was four semesters into my time at Berklee, I could see that the next step was to learn Charlie Parker solos, and I didn't want to do it. I wanted to practice Red Hot Chili Peppers songs. I was never inspired to pick up a straight-ahead jazz record and put it in my CD player.

**How does that affect your relationship to drummers?**

I love drummers who are capable of doing all different styles, complex rhythms, polyrhythms, odd time signatures, and all the things that are required to play the complicated things that I play—but who are coming from a sense of rock, and for whom the fountainhead of knowledge is John Bonham. I can



GRIFF PETERS

always tell when I'm playing with a jazz guy who's playing rock, and I'm like [groans].

**How'd you decide to have a drummer-less duo with Kira?**

She got a gig inquiry, and she didn't want to bring a band but didn't want to do it solo, either. I had been hinting that I wanted to play with her, but she had been reluctant—we were married, and you know, the last thing we wanted was for things to be more complicated. But we decided to try it, and we had immediate chemistry. I'd been doing duo stuff with Mike Keneally for clinics, and I had worked out a way to generate percussion on bass, adding a lot of hits with my fingers, and I use some of those techniques—in a much simpler way—with Kira. We began booking gigs, doing house concerts, and we did 150 concerts in two and a half years! I do a couple of my solo pieces, but otherwise it's all Kira's original R&B music, which I love. No one asks me to play R&B, know what I'm sayin'? And I get to play the part of the guitar player, too.

**Can you imagine perhaps producing artists one day? What would you like to be doing at say, 70?**

Still working, I hope [laughs]. I don't know if I necessarily want to be a Svengali-type of guy, but I really enjoy the educational stuff. There could be a time down the road when I pass on what I know and make that my calling, which is the highest state of evolution as a musician, to be a teacher. But I'm not ready to settle down just yet. **BP**