HIP-HOP HEAVYWEIGHT

THE ROOTS' HUB COMES OUT SWINGING

BY E.E. BRADMAN

For years, many musicians have criticized the drum machines and cold keyboard sounds that form the building blocks of hip-hop. They reminisce about the days when real rhythm sections tore the roof off and sweaty musicians laid original funk to two-inch tape. But others—rappers, DJs, and producers—disagree. For them, precision doesn't negate passion. The debate may never end, but Leonard "Hub" Hubbard and his band the Roots have forever decimated its parameters. →

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL HAGGARD

The Philadelphia-based septet (Hub, four instrumentalists, an MC, and a beatboxer) is the first live group to perfectly incorporate the warmth and grit of skilled musicians into hip-hop's tight pastiches. Drummer ?uestlove (a.k.a. Ahmir Thompson) may be the band's pulse, but Hub is the heart that connects ?uestlove's clean, metronomic beats to the keyboard textures, electric guitar, and staccato vocals.

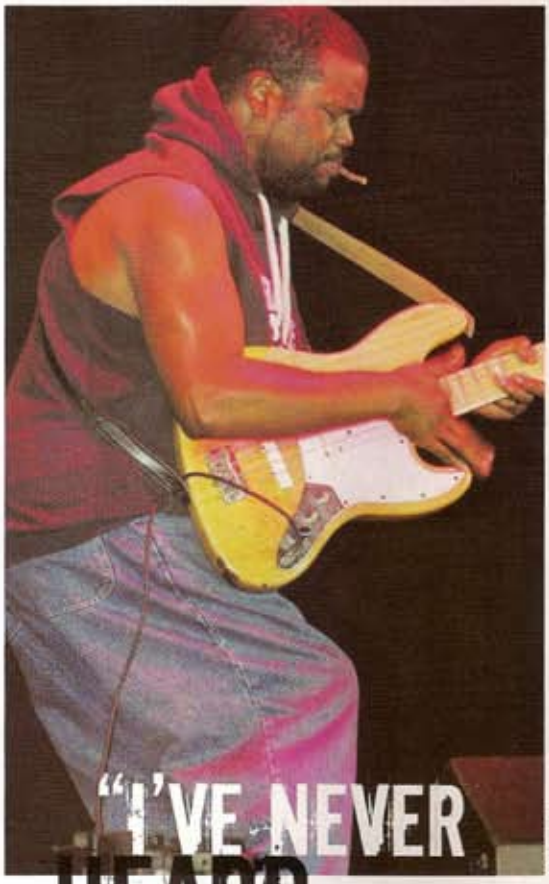
As both a musician and a person, Hub sums up everything his band represents: He's articulate, unconventional, surprising, and self-confident—and he's gifted with an unerring ear for the essence of any groove. He brings to the Roots world-class skills with street-smart attitude and supreme discipline. As he puts it, "Music is all about what you're exposed to, and I've been exposed to many different things."

Hub began studying classical piano at age eight and picked up upright bass three years later. By the time he reached seventh grade he was a composer, gigging musician, and frequent music-scholarship winner. After high school, he studied classical upright bass at Pittsburgh's Carnegie-Mellon University. His teachers included Eligio Rossi, renowned for tutoring Stanley Clarke and other Philly greats; Anthony Bianco, a member of the NBC Studio Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini; and Paul Ellison, Principal Chair of the Houston Symphony. The list of people with whom he's played—with and without the Roots—ranges from B.B. King and the Violent Femmes to Yellowman and the Delphonics.

Hub's opera and musical-theater resumé lists *Madame Butterfly*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Carousel*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The Wiz*. His recent projects include scoring the 2002 Sundance Film Festival entry *Face*. He has collaborated on the soundtracks of 1996's *High School High*, '97's *Men in Black*, and '99's *The Best Man* and *The Wood*. Hub is also a passionate educator; in fact, he was gigging and teaching summer music workshops when the Roots came calling in '93.

The Roots' raw, funky debut, *Organix*, was just a teaser for 1995's sublime *Do You Want More?!!!!!!*, which featured Hub's sumptuous upright tone. *Illadelph Halflife*, released a year later, lowered the jazz quotient; Hub brought in his electric bass for some tracks, but it was the last time he'd use upright with the Roots. Released in '99, *Things Fall Apart* remains the classic blend of the Roots' jazzy and street-tough sides; it peaked at No. 2 on the Billboard charts and netted a Grammy for "You Got Me."

The Roots have always been a great live act, so few were surprised when their turn as a backup band on Jay-Z's MTV *Unplugged* session was a critical and commercial success. Their own live album, last year's *The Roots Come Alive*, showcases Hub's beefy tone and improv skills. Where most of the band's music could comfortably be considered hip-hop, neo-soul, or jazz-funk, the new flavors of *Phrenology* rock out. The disc has earned the Roots some of the most consistent praise of their career, and they raised their profile by backing Eminem at this year's Grammys and headlining the Bonnaroo superfest in Manchester, Tennessee.



RENE COLLIER

"I'VE NEVER HEARD SOMEONE COME TO A ROOTS SHOW AND SAY THEY WISH I HAD A 5-STRING."

Onstage Hub is stocky and solid, consistently adorned with a hooded sweatshirt, baggy jeans, and construction boots. He wears his bass low and never loses the ever-present licorice stick that dangles from his lips. Hub's serious squint and close-shaven head hint at a certain stand-offishness, but his tone betrays him: Warm, even syrupy, he's the deep and steady cushion to ?uestlove's sharp, unrelenting snare. Whether he's dancing and singing over the beautifully simple line of "Break You Off" or spinning a brisk fill under "Mellow My Man" (see Lesson, page 50), he's fun to watch and a pleasure to hear. He sometimes acts out the lyrics, and he likes to accent a stop by pointing his bass skyward for a two-bar break.

Even though the Roots tear it up from the moment they hit the stage, Hub's solo is a show highlight. With the spotlight squarely on him, he works octaver and chorus effects, slowly building into a barrage of flashy harmonics before nailing George Benson-style scat and smoothly launching into the bass backbone of Chic's "Good Times." The rest of the band, lined up across the stage, shadows his moves. Hub pretends not to notice, and in one smooth motion, he wraps his thumb around the neck of his bass—a Fender '75 Jazz Bass reissue with EMGs—and slides into a fierce slap line followed by double-stops. Before you can wonder where he stores these chops when he's playing some of the sparest dance lines ever, Hub caps it all by hitting a thunderous open chord and striking a pose. The crowd goes wild as he puts down his bass and high-fives the band on his way offstage. "When I step up to do the solo thing, I take the crowd on a journey, and only I know where they're going," he says. "I can play anything I want; all they know is they've been in the pocket, grooving along, and then I'm hittin' with my thumb, playing harmonics, sliding up and down, and the pocket hasn't moved at all. Everybody else has stopped playing, and all of a sudden they realize the main thing they've been listening to is the bass."

What do you feel is the function of the bass line in a hip-hop context?

Through sampling, hip-hop includes every sound ever recorded—so as a bassist, I can play anything, as long as it's in the pocket and as long as an MC can rap over it.

Do you think loops or samples can serve as hip-hop bass lines?

That's what hip-hop is! Most great hip-hop bass parts are four bars, eight bars, or less. What makes a hot hip-hop track? Something that moves and that's repetitive, something that has space. It has to breathe. If it doesn't breathe, where's the MC going to rap? In any musical style, you have to leave space for people to solo and for a singer to sing. If you're playing roots, 3rds, 5ths, 6ths, and polyrhythms on top of it all, where's he

going to come in and what's he going to play?

How can bass players learn to play less and groove more?

It's all about the pocket. For example, in traditional salsa music, rhythmic patterns are the foundation for everything. The bass line may be only two notes on paper, but you have to swing the notes. It's not about fills; it's about playing along with the cowbell. If you don't know how to lay in that pocket, you can't play it.

How would you coach someone to develop hip-hop bass skills?

If you want to play hip-hop bass, you have to own a beat machine, you have to know the metronome, and you need some sense of rhythm and timing. But here's the main thing: You have to listen to yourself play. Record yourself playing a bass line for five minutes. If you can play something fast, then try playing it slow, melodically and groovin', and make it sound just as good as it did when you played it fast. Listen to it and hear where your playing got weak, and ask yourself why three minutes later you played a fill that messed up the pocket. Even bassists who listen to hip-hop sometimes don't understand the discipline, because once they get onstage and start feeling it, they think, The faster I play, the more exciting! But playing hip-hop is a different discipline. It's all about listening, understanding the pocket, and knowing your place in it.

How were you first attracted to bass? Was your family musical?

No one in my immediate family was a professional musician; they just wanted me to have a job with health insurance [*laughs*]. I was eight years old when I started classical piano lessons, and I tried cello in fourth grade. My teacher switched me from cello to bass after two weeks because I have a weak pinkie, which is the dominant finger in playing cello; with upright, of course, you use it along with the ring finger. My piano teacher also taught me to play melodies and bass lines on electric bass. My family let me start playing out in seventh grade as long as my schoolwork was cool; I couldn't be a C student.

What future did you envision for yourself?

I was surrounded by great musicians, and I knew I would be a musician. Growing up in Philly, locals were winning *Downbeat* magazine polls every year, and [songwriting and producing team Kenny] Gamble and [Leon] Huff, the Delfonics, the Stylistics, and MFSB all lived around the corner. They were professional recording artists making hit records—that was the standard. They always used the same musicians, so we never got to play with them, but we knew what was going on.

There were so many great black bands at the time—great musicians making popular music—and each person gave you a different feel of music and soul. Here we are in 2003, and besides the Roots, you can't name a black band that's in popular recorded music. I'm in the only black professional popular recording band on the planet! That's ridiculous. When I was a kid listening to bands like Osibisa, the Brothers Johnson, Kool & the Gang, and Sly & the Family Stone, I never thought that would happen. You look back as a black musician and say, What's down the line?

Who were some of your bass influences?

My brother, who seemed to own every record that came out. I was listening to Cream and Hendrix, Mingus and Monk. Ron Carter was doing many, many sessions. Bootsy, Jaco, Alphonso Johnson, and Larry Graham all had their own sounds.

Were you inspired by live hip-hop/rap pioneers like Stetsasonic and the Sugar Hill label's studio musicians?

I was influenced by Stetsasonic, but I was already playing Top 40 songs at proms and weddings, so the music didn't hit me as being different—except for the rapping on top. I mean, Graham Central Station was still on the radio. But Sugar Hill was a whole other thing from a musician's standpoint—that was groundbreaking.

A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

With the Roots: *Phrenology*, MCA; *The Roots Come Alive*, MCA; *Things Fall Apart*, MCA; *Illadelph Halflife*, Geffen; *Do You Want More?!!!??!*, Geffen. **With Jay-Z:** *Unplugged*, Def Jam. **With Jaguar Wright:** *Denials Delusions and Decisions*, MCA. **With Musiq:** *Aijuswanaseing*, Def Soul. **With Toshi Kubota:** *Nothing but Your Love*, Sony. **With Rahzel:** *Make the Music 2000*, MCA. **With various artists:** *Red Hot + Rhapsody: The Gershwin Groove*, Antilles; *Stolen Moments: Red Hot + Cool*, GRP.

Were you always interested in other styles?

The more you know, the more you can grow. That's something about the bass: If you know how to play it and you read music, every style is available to you. I've done everything from *Madame Butterfly* to *Little Shop of Horrors* to Hendrix, Bach, Beethoven, Stockhausen, and Tchaikovsky. I've played and studied under great musicians, like Tony Bianco, one of the best teachers in the world, who just retired after more than 50 seasons with the Pittsburgh Symphony. So I bring all that to the table.

How did you get into the Roots?

I was just helping out by filling in when the original bassist, Josh Abrams, went away to college. The Roots needed somebody for upright gigs, so . . . .

Why did you quit playing upright with the band?

I played upright on the first two albums, because that was the hip-hop sound then. But the upright isn't designed for loud stages, or at least it wasn't back then—I more or less had a microphone sitting on top of the bridge. ?uestlove's bass drum would make my mike feed back before I even starting playing. Technology has gotten better, but my upright is looked at as an expense, and I can't afford to carry it around. I'd love to bring it back, though.

Your electric sound is a little tighter now.

I used a Peavey T-40 on *Do You Want More?!!!??!*, but by the time we did *Illadelph Halflife*, I had bought the Fender Jazz I use now. I put EMGs in it, and the electronics sounded much cleaner. I could actually shape the tone, and I liked the direct sound better.

Did you play keyboard bass on some of the Roots tracks?

No. [Roots keyboardist] Scott Storch has played keyboard bass on some tracks, and that's all right with me. It's all about what's best for the track. If the track needs live bass, that's my gig—but if it needs something else, somebody else does it.

Do you ever use 5-string to cover some of the low notes usually heard on hip-hop records?

For what? To play a frequency that can be played by a keyboard? I've never heard someone come to a Roots show and say they wish I had a 5-string.

You're probably not a fan of 6's and piccolo basses, either.

If you play bass, why do you need a string that makes you sound like a guitar? What's going to happen to the tune's foundation when you play a triple-high *F*? People who play those—they can't play! You couldn't put them in a room, count it off, and say, "Play the same exact thing, the same exact way I heard my man from the Roots do it. I know you got the award last year for playing the most notes per second—but go ahead and play a pocket, the kind that's necessary for Eminem and Jay-Z."

What amps do you use for live shows?

Whatever is at the venue; I do a lot of gigs with only a DI. Back in the day, the sound onstage was produced by all the players' rigs, and that became the band's sound. That's not the case with the Roots. You hear whatever the soundman makes us sound like.

Do you use any special tools for recording?

Just the bass! When you know what you're doing, there are no tricks.

Do you and ?uestlove listen to each other closely onstage?

Ahmir doesn't have bass in his monitor. He's not playing along with me—he's just playing! Ahmir knows about 400,000 combinations of kick, hi-hat, and snare. He might get some keyboard in his monitor, but he doesn't even have vocals.

Why doesn't he want bass in his monitor?

I'm not saying he doesn't hear the bass, but it's not in his monitor. He's locking to his kick, hi-hat, and snare. He's laying down the joint; he's not playing along with the bass. I know how to play the pocket and so does he, so we're hittin'.

After hearing you play minimal, essential lines song after song, your solo is a surprise. Is it completely improvised?

Hub continued

It's rehearsed; I know what I'm getting ready to play. The audience doesn't know I'm a virtuoso—that I can play things they've never seen before. Then when I come back to playing just two notes, people have a whole different perception.

How did you develop confidence to solo for almost ten minutes?

I've known my ability for a long time. I've been playing bass and bass solos and blowing away audiences long before I joined the Roots. It has nothing to do with tricks and mirrors—you either know how to make people listen or you don't.

What are some of your educational concepts?

I came up with something I call "jazz-hop." Jazz-hop is a texture and a sound, but it's also a discipline that helps the contemporary musician get into the right frame of mind to do whatever it is they're trying to do—from production to taxes and the business. That kind of teaching and learning doesn't exist on any academic level. In some places you can learn a little about beat machines and quantizing, but there's no way for an instrumentalist who listens to hip-hop between orchestra rehearsals to explore how to be a contemporary musician. [*Hub is currently working on a jazz-hop album and a book.*]

What other projects are you doing outside the Roots?

I'm working on some film things I can't talk about yet, and I'm also negotiating a record deal with an overseas label. Last year I started to be represented by a soundtrack talent agency, and I'm looking forward to getting more of that work. We'll see what happens.

The band sounded great at the Grammys.

I enjoyed working with Jay-Z and Eminem because we gave people reference points—we're playing compositions they already know, and we're playing them better than they've ever heard them. It's one thing for us to play our stuff, but it's another when we freak the joint they've been pumping in their Jeep: "Oh, man, they're rockin' that joint—I didn't know they could hit it like *that!*" [*Laughs.*] Now they know.

The Roots have been at it for ten years. What's your idea of success?

Surviving in the music business! Seriously, I feel blessed to be a professional musician and to play for people who want to hear me play. Years ago a kid came up to me in France and told me, "You guys are the reason I listen to hip-hop music. Thank you for blessing us with your musicianship in this style."

Bobby Womack told us something I'll never forget: You're hot only for a second in this business, so do it for all it's worth. People don't think we've had that moment yet, so we have a long way before we burn out. We're still rising. **BP**

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