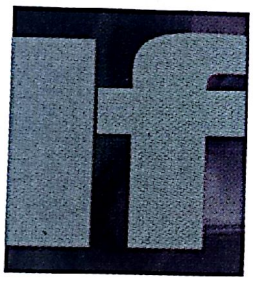
Maverick Minimalist

Bill Laswell Takes Bass Deep Into The Future—One Dub Ostinato At A Time

By E. E. Bradman

Photograph By Ira Cohen



If there is a border that bass will not cross, Bill Laswell doesn't know it. Since his breakout moment on Herbie Hancock's 1983 mega-hit "Rockit," the New York visionary has lent his production, remix, and conception skills to nearly 1,000 albums across a dizzying array of labels and categories. More than any other icon in the short history of the electric bass, Laswell has developed a subgenre all his own: bass-heavy musical cross-pollinations on the cutting edge of turntable, ambient, dub, world music, and drum-n-bass innovations.

Born in 1955, Laswell grew up in Albion, Michigan, 100 miles from Detroit. At age 14 he fell in love with music for all the things that went with it—"traveling, impressing people, and staying off the street. I found musicians interesting and impressive the same way other people thought cowboys or gangsters were hip." He picked up bass because everyone else played guitar and drums, and a year later, he was on the R&B circuit through the South and down the East Coast. Laswell's move to New York in the late '70s was the beginning of a long career that has included everyone from Whitney Houston to His Holiness the Dalai Lama; his unique outlook attracts many of the world's great musicians to his projects.

Far from being a mere chameleon, however, Laswell has remained outspoken and stubbornly experimental. He has drawn controversy ever since critics accused him of destroying reggae by using a drum machine with Yellowman in 1979; purists also haven't liked his Fela Kuti remixes, Bob Marley dubs, and Miles Davis reconstructions. Laswell takes it all in stride. "Most musicians just repeat themselves and the person they were influenced by. I'd rather do something crazy, something radical—something that upsets the usual format or challenges people to approach the whole thing differently." True to his word, Laswell has scorched ears since the early '80s with abrasive, avant-noise bands like Painkiller, Last Exit, Curlew, and Massacre while collaborating with world music, funk, and hip-hop pioneers. Since 1990, however, Laswell has been identified mostly with a smoother sound rooted in his reggae-deep tone. Several of the bands on his Axiom label (**www.axiom-records.com**)—including Material, Praxis, Arcana, and Third Rail—have been influential prototypes for sophisticated, groove-based world music.

Today, Laswell is busy bringing Axiom into the future with records by Sly & Robbie and Ethiopian singer Gigi, as well as an experimental blues album with Texas guitarist Lucky Peterson and a drum-n-bass collaboration with jazz drummer Jack DeJohnette. He's also scheduled to remix classical music from Sony's catalog, his own band Material, "Rockit"-era Herbie Hancock, and more Carlos Santana. (Last year's *Divine Light: Reconstructions and Mix Translations*, a Laswell treatment of two early-'70s Santana albums, was a critical and commercial success.) By the time you read this, Laswell will be appearing on new, live discs from his old noise band Massacre and fellow dub ambassador Jah Wobble; further down the road, Buckethead, Jane's Addiction, and Wu-Tang Clan family member Killah Priest are on his to-do list.

One of the most eagerly anticipated releases from Laswell's studios is the debut of Indian drum-n-bass monsters Tabla Beat Science, recorded live last year at San Francisco's Stern Grove. The band, a supergroup of sorts, included Laswell and three generations of exceptional Indian talent: *sarangi* player Ustad Sultan Khan, tabla master Zakir Hussain, drummer Karsh Kale, and tabla player/producer Talvin Singh. Turntablist DJ Disk and singer Gigi brought unique textures to several of the band's songs. An estimated 12,000 music fans—including dignified Africans, shawl-wearing Muslim moms, white-suited Indian businessmen, and shirtless, shoeless rave kids and hippies—made it the best-attended show in Stern Grove history. Laswell and his fretless '64 Fender Precision were essential yet respectful. Offstage, he carried himself with the quiet confidence of a man who worked behind the scenes.

Continued

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You've been accused of appropriating other cultures' music. How do you maintain your integrity?

Anybody who steps outside their specialty gets accused of cultural appropriation, but I believe in collaboration, not appropriation. Most Westerners who champion "world music" aren't players—they're entertainers and pop stars and celebrities. They like it, but they can't interact, so they appropriate. I put myself onstage with Ustad Sultan Khan and Zakir, and I'm only as good as I can be that minute. I can't hide. I just do what I do and hope it works. Appropriation is putting a little tabla on a million-dollar record; collaboration is when the musicians call you up and say, 'Come to Nigeria, come to India, and play with me'—okay, there's nothing to talk about. We'll just play.

When you play with someone like Zakir Hussain, do you try to apply Indian scales or theory to your bass lines?

No—everyone's already doing that. I'd rather embellish or add something I do naturally. It's better to play something that's *you*—and I think those musicians would much rather have somebody try to do something different, even if it's minimal or simple.

As far as taking a particular approach that somebody's already done, fans of classic dub and reggae bass recognize where you're coming from.

Yeah, but everybody who plays low-end

LASWELL IN THE STUDIO

By Scott Theakston

Integral to every Laswell project for the last 20 years has been engineer and guitarist Robert Musso, who has collaborated with the producer on thousands of sessions—including three Musso solo albums—at Brooklyn's Greenpoint Studios and at Orange Music Sound Studios in West Orange, New Jersey. These days, they handle live recording through an 8048 Neve Recording board equipped with 32 inputs, a 24-channel jukebox section, and 16 busses. Everything else is done in another room equipped with two four-bus, four-send 8048 Neve Broadcast consoles. For multitrack tape, they've used an A80 MkIV Studer and an A827 Studer.

If there's a recording philosophy running through the duo's diverse output, it's all about instincts. "More than anything, people need to think musically," says Musso. "To think musically you have to be educated about music—not only theory-wise, but you have to understand what's happening on the streets, what people are buying, what people like to hear, and what combinations can work. It's not about technology, ego, or record company politics. If people think musically and trust their instincts, good things will happen."

Input chain: "Bill has two Fender Precision Basses: one with flatwounds and one with half-rounds. He's got a basic pedalboard, and sometimes he'll use just a DOD FX-25B envelope filter—we have both the newer green version and the older gray original, which is a little different. He usually sets it so the envelope doesn't open up, so all he gets is bottom end. From there we go into a Countryman DI and into the Neve board. I put on a 45Hz high-pass filter, add 3dB or 4dB at 100Hz and another 3dB or 3.5dB at 700Hz, and leave the top alone. We come out of that into a Neve compressor—either the older 2254 or the newer 33609—going into one side. Most of the time, I set the ratio to 1 or 1.5, with a very high threshold, so I probably get 1dB to 4dB of compression. And sometimes that's it. If I need more bottom, I go through Pultec or Tube Tech equalizers."

Mics: "Our mics are pretty standard. We have one very good-sounding tube mic, Neumann U47, and a few 67s and 87s. Everything else is normal—Sennheisers, AKGs, and a few Beyer mics. I don't put Neumanns in front of amps; I usually use a Sennheiser 421, a Shure 57, or a Beyer. I don't always like the peaks you get with a condenser mic on a guitar amp, but it depends on who's playing it and the part they're playing. Sometimes, the 87 is the perfect thing, or an AKG C-414 if someone's really together dynamically."

Cabinets: "We occasionally use cabinets, especially if we're doing live drum tracks. Most of the time we use an older tube Ampeg SVT head, and we'll use an SVT 8x10, or a Mesa/Boogie or Hartke guitar cabinet if we want a little more edge. Other times, we use an old Ampeg B-15 if we want more 'honk'—we'll combine that with a DI and go for it."

Kick drum: "Our approach to the kick depends on the song and the drummer. Sometimes I scoop out the middle of the kick and it'll be just top and bottom; sometimes I want the kick to sit with the bass, so I emphasize the same frequencies on the kick I used on the bass, but not as much. If I want the kick and bass to occupy the same space, I add the same EQ on both.

"To push the bass or kick drum out front, I add 100Hz and 700Hz; to push it back, I add a little tight reverb. If I don't want them to work together—like they do on old R&B tracks—I add more of 60Hz or 40Hz on the kick drum, and I add 1.2kHz to 1.7kHz and a little more top end.

"For dub tracks, I place the bass below the kick drum, bringing out more of the beater and the punchy tones. I might go back and add 30Hz with a Tube Tech or a Pultec, which really widens up the bottom, especially on the dub tracks."

Subharmonic Synth: "I use dbx Subharmonic Synthesizer tastefully and carefully—it's easy to blow things up. When I print the Subharmonic Synth to tape I put it through a compressor before it gets grouped into the bass track so it doesn't go over the top.

"We're using the single-rack units with RCA inputs; I have everything cranked except for the highest frequency, which I roll back so it doesn't interfere with the low-end EQ on the bass. But I turn up everything else, and subtly add in the 20Hz, 10dB down from the original signal."

Mixing, mastering & compression: "When I mix I do pretty much the exact same thing—another compressor and Neve EQ again. How it's placed in the track really makes a difference, and I always compress the board's outputs when I mix, so it's actually getting compressed there as well. Bill mostly uses fingertips, but occasionally he switches to thumbstrokes for low-end dub; his dynamics are really together, so I don't have to squash the tar out of him.

"If, while mixing a song, I find I have to add more bottom end to get the midrange sound I want, I'll tell mastering engineer Mike Fossenkemper, and he'll roll off 3dB at 40Hz. But I try to get it right when I mix it.

"Mike also has multi-band, frequency-selective compressors, and I have those plug-ins on our computer if I really need it. We use a lot of crazy effects, and sometimes a random generator will give you a peak at 10kHz where we don't expect it. That's where those frequency-selective compressors are useful."

Recording tuba & bass: "Tuba is a difficult instrument to record because the players have to work harder to get some notes, so

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repetitious lines has their own concept of note structure. Aston "Family Man" Barrett, for example, tends to play pop songs and vocal lines on the bass; he's clearly a guy who likes songs. Robbie Shakespeare is a little darker. Jah Wobble incorporates weird time signatures into his ideas. He'll play something in seven, something in nine, and you know right away that's him. You can recognize players by the way they organize notes and phrases, by their melodies—even if they're only two or three notes—and by their feel, because everyone has a slightly different feel.

It depends on the drummer, too.

Right. Everybody says Family Man's playing is so laid back in Bob Marley's music, but it's not—it's actually in front of the drums. When I listened to the multi-tracks [while remixing 1997's *Dreams of Freedom: Ambient Remixes of Bob Marley in Dub*], I could hear the bass pushing ahead of the drums; Family Man is following Bob's vocals. But the whole band had a feel that everybody played together. The Meters are the same way: George Porter Jr. and [drummer] Zigaboo Modeliste and are all over the place, but the way they play together is a conversation that never stops making sense.

How do different drummers affect your playing?

Some drummers are easy to play with—you know you can do almost anything with them. Those drummers are rare. Karsh Kale is one. Hamid Drake is supportive, he listens, and he's innovative. Charles Hayward of This Heat has a different style, but he listens and can go different places. Zigaboo has great energy and enthusiasm.

I like playing with innovative drummers, but it can be a challenge. If you weren't following Tony Williams, you could find yourself trampled. Jack DeJohnette, too. I've played in situations where it was just me, Ginger Baker, and a *kora* [a 21-string harp from West Africa], and I really had to stay with Ginger or we would sound ridiculous. I played with Ronald Shannon Jackson for years, and he didn't listen, either. He rushed so bad I had to chase him the whole gig [*laughs*]. You have to know who you're dealing with.

What's it like to work with Bootsy, with whom you've shared tracks on projects like Material's Hallucination Engine?

Bootsy has developed a style of playing everything as accents. Instead of a straight bass line, he accents around a line, so there's room for a bass line under what he does. With Bootsy, it's not just

those notes come out louder. Mike placement is everything. You can't get too close or it doesn't sound right; you can't be too far away or it sounds like a classical record. I usually use a Neumann U67 or M87 a foot or two away from the bell, and I add a fair amount of low end, but not the tuba's tubby, low-end spectrum. I add in the 180Hz range, try to get some definition around 1.5kHz, and compress it during recording and again during mixdown. Then I try to get the bass below it and above it."

The future: "We have a couple of Pro Tools rigs, but I still have three analog machines," says Bill Laswell. "I just bought Otari RADAR hard-disk recorders, which I like a lot. I'm using the Pro Tools mostly for sequencing and editing—the way we use it is almost like automation. I recorded the Gigi album on analog and then flipped it into Pro Tools; I also used Tascam D-88s for backup for a couple tracks. We mixed it into Pro Tools using the Neve consoles. We would do a section, mix it, put it into Pro Tools, stop, go to the next section, DAT, and then put it into Pro Tools. So there's still analog, and I sometimes use analog to record drums and bass.

"I think Dolby Digital 5.1 is the future for radical mixing; no one's done anything really interesting yet. When you dub out in 5.1, you won't even need drugs anymore! [*Laughs.*] But I don't spend much time keeping up on gear. I'm more interested in inspiration, experience, people, and money—we have to find as much money as possible so we can pay the musicians and get gear. At the end of the day, it's just metal and wood and wires. You have to have ideas, inspiration, and integrity. Do your work and the gear will come."

Scott Theakston is a course director at Ex'pression Center for New Media in Emeryville, California.

ESSENTIAL DISCOGRAPHY

As a Player

Solo: *Dub Chamber 3*, ROIR; *Sacred System Chapter Two*, ROIR; *Sacred System Chapter One*, ROIR; *Invisible Design*, Tzadik; *Baselines*, Celluloid. **With Painkiller:** *Collected Works*, Tzadik. **With Deadline:** *Dissident*, Celluloid; *Down By Law*, Day Eight. **With Laurie Anderson:** *Mr. Heartbreak*, Warner. **With Peter Gabriel:** *So*, Geffen. **With Herbie Hancock:** *Future Shock*, Columbia/Legacy; *Sound System*, Columbia/Legacy; *Future2Future*, Transparent. **With Massacre:** *Killing Time*, Celluloid. *Meltdown*, Tzadik. **With Jah Wobble:** *Radioaxiom: A Dub Transmission*, Palm. **With Arcana:** *The Last Wave*, DIW; *Arc of the Last Testimony*, Axiom/Island. **With Public Image Ltd.:** *Album/Compact Disc/Cassette*, Elektra. **With Nicky Skopelitis:** *Exstasis*, Axiom. *Next to Nothing*, Caroline. **With Exstasis:** *Wake up and Dream*, Axiom. **With Praxis:** *Transmutation*, Axiom; *Sacrifist*, Axiom. **With James "Blood" Ulmer:** *Blue Blood*, Innerrhythmic. **With Third Rail:** *South Delta Space Age*, Polygram. **With Axiom Funk:** *Funkcronomicon*, Axiom. **With Last Exit:** *Iron Path*, Virgin. **With Style Scott:** *Dub Meltdown*, WordSound. **With Material** (all on Axiom): *Hallucination Engine; Live In Japan; Seven Souls; Memory Serves*. **With Gigi:** *Gigi*, Palm. **With Tabla Beat Science:** *Tala Matrix*, Palm.

As a Producer

With Motorhead: *Orgasmatron*, Castle Music; *Rock 'N' Roll*, Castle Music. **With Ryuichi Sakamoto:** *Neo Geo*, Epic. **With Ginger Baker:** *Middle Passage*, Axiom. **With Golden Palominos:** *The Golden Palominos: A History (1982-1985)*, Restless. **With Manu Dibango:** *Electric Africa*, Celluloid. **With Bootsy Collins:** *What's Bootsy Doin'?*, Columbia; *Blasters of the Universe*, Rykodisc. **With Herbie Hancock and Foday Musa Suso:** *Village Life*, Columbia. **With Fela Anikulapo Kuti:** *Army Arrangement*, Celluloid. **With the Last Poets:** *Holy Terror*, Rykodisc. **With Jonas Hellborg:** *The Word*, Axiom. **With Bahia Black:** *Ritual Beating System*, Axiom. **With Buckethead:** *Day of the Robot*, Subharmonic; *Monsters and Robots*, Higher Octave. **With the Master Musicians of Jajouka:** *Apocalypse Across the Sky*, Axiom. **With Pharoah Sanders:** *Save Our Children*, Verve. **With Pharoah Sanders and Maleem Mahmoud Ghania:** *Trance of the Seven Veils*, Axiom. **With Bernie Worrell:** *Funk of Ages*, Rhino. **With Sonny Sharrock:** *Ask the Ages*, Axiom. **With Henry Threadgill:** *Too Much Sugar for a Dime*, Axiom; *Carry the Day*, Columbia; *Where's Your Cup*, Columbia. **With Miles Davis:** *Panthalassa: The Music of Miles Davis 1969-1974*, Columbia. **With Carlos Santana:** *Divine Light: Reconstructions and Mix Translations*, Axiom/Palm. **With Bob Marley:** *Dreams of Freedom: Ambient Translations of Bob Marley in Dub*, Axiom/Island. **With Toshinori Kondo & His Holiness the Dalai Lama:** *Life Space Death*, Metastation.

Collections:

Illuminations: An Axiom Compilation, Axiom. *Manifestations: An Axiom Compilation II*, Axiom. *Deconstruction: Celluloid Recordings*, Celluloid. *Axiom Ambient: Lost in the Translation*, Axiom. *The Bill Laswell Collection*, Sonic Foundry. *Axiom Dub: Mysteries of Creation*, Axiom.

bass—it's a whole orchestra of different sounds, and his thumb technique is different from most of the guys who slap. I always encourage him to play more, to solo and do different things.

Do you ever slap?

I never learned that technique. Who wants to hear me fumble around with it when Larry Graham, who invented it, does it so well?

What do you tell bass players who want to develop their own sound?

To figure out if playing music comes naturally to them. If it doesn't, don't force it. There's enough bad music and bad musicians in the world already. If it is natural, work on it consistently. Travel, interact with people and sounds from different places, and don't be prejudiced against certain styles. Be open.

You've produced such a wide range of artists. Do you think bass players are especially qualified to be producers?

I don't know. If someone understands the concept of the kick, snare, and bass line, they're qualified to put together a basic track, which is the foundation. It's a start. In most cases, producers come from engineering or keyboard backgrounds, and that's why there are a lot of lame rhythm sections on modern productions. But somebody who wants to hear a lush string arrangement might disagree with me.

If I were the bass player on a project you produced, what kind of conversation would we have?

I would probably tell you to minimalize what you're doing, especially under chord changes. For example, on Angelique Kidjo's new album [*Black Ivory Soul*, Columbia], some songs had a new chord every bar for eight-bar sections and then 16-bar sections—it wore me out. The bass [played mostly by Afro-fusion star Michel Alibo and jazz veteran Ira Coleman] is moving a lot. She brought me in after things had already begun, but if I were cutting the basics, I'd find a way to get the bass lines to lie without modulating under the moving chords. Kids don't want to get beaten over the head with chord changes; that I know.

Angelique's original concept was to mix West African sounds with those of Bahia, Brazil, but the Brazilian flavor was so distinct it overshadowed the West African stuff. My job was to bring the African thing back—to balance it, and to bring clarity, especially in the bottom and rhythm section. I think we did it.

West Africa—especially Cameroon—is famous for its busy, rhythmically propulsive bass lines. You work with many African artists but you've stayed away from that playing style.

I've always liked South African music, where the bass was real simple. The West Africans are naturally busy, and once they realized there were Jacos and other guys, they got even more into fusion-style playing. It's great virtuosity, but at the end of the day, it doesn't sell. It's too busy.

How did you use the all-star players on Gigi's self-titled album?

When they brought me the songs, I hated the music, but I thought the vocal and vocal ideas were really good. There was a change on every bar, and I immediately knew we should try something different. I said, "No, just sing the melody. We'll play the chords, but let's keep the bass and the drums right *there* the whole time." [Percussionist] Aiyb Dieng, Hamid Drake, Karsh Kale, and I created rhythm sections based around the melodies, and gradually other musicians started to play between the rhythm and the melody. I didn't even know the songs; I would just play the line and leave it on tape, and I ended up keeping all the guide stuff I did. [Saxophonist] Wayne Shorter was around because I was doing Herbie's record, and I'd just say, Why don't you guys play on this—you'll like it! [*Laughs.*]

Did you ever get to work with Miles Davis?

I was supposed to do a project with him, but I screwed it up. He called me after the success of "Rockit," and we talked about an "endless music" idea in which he could go from beat-oriented music to his quintet to go-go. I gave him one track and he liked it, but we couldn't get his management to do a whole record. I figured I'd wait for him to take another break and I'd come back and bring a whole concept. But he died right before I could do it.

Do you think he would have approved of the Panthalassa remixes?

I knew Miles enough to know that he would love that record—I thought about him the whole time, and that's the stuff he would have liked to hear. I wouldn't mess with the music Miles made before 1969—those are fixed performances and compositions. After '69, it's experimental music, and the recording studio was a big part of what was going on. It wasn't completed because somebody said, 'This is the music, this is how it sounds, and we're done.' It was completed because the end result was established by editing, by putting things together—it was the beginning of remix culture. It's open to interpretation as long as you can do something good and the artist likes it. The Marley purists didn't like that I removed the vocals on *Dreams of Freedom*, but all classic dub albums take off the vocals. Santana really liked what I did with his music, so I might do more with him. And I'm going to be remixing Herbie Hancock's *Sextant* [Columbia/Legacy, '72] and the electro stuff I did with him in the '80s.

Continued

HELMUT REID, www.musicphoto.com

LIVE & MASSIVE

Bill Laswell's main instruments are fretted and fretless '64 Fender Precisions with Basslines Quarter Pounder and J-style pickups near the bridge. His tone control is usually open halfway or less. Laswell has been using the same sets of long-scale D'Addario regular half-rounds for about ten years. The settings on his old Ampeg SVT 8x10 have been the same since high school: "First channel—volume never past 4, treble a little over halfway, midrange halfway, bass down a quarter, low end kicked in, everything else even. On the bass, everything all the way up, except for recording, and then treble all the way off." He augments his SVT with a 1x15, such as an SWR Workingman's 15. Laswell's pedalboard includes a DigiTech Whammy, DOD FX-25B envelope filter, Big Muff π distortion, Boss DD-3 stereo digital delay, Ernie Ball volume pedal, and a Voodoo Lab Pedal Power universal power supply. He also uses a DigiTech XP-300 Space Station effect and runs his signal through short, cloth-covered Conquest cables.

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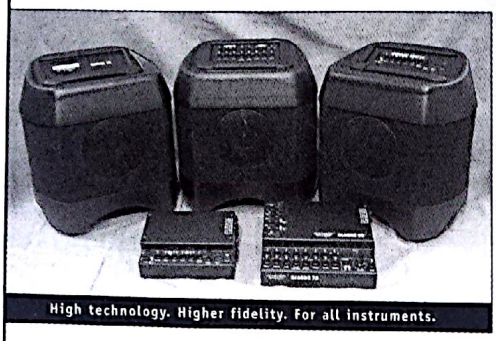

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Bill Laswell continued

What made you decide to move to New York in 1976?

When I was 15, I played on the chitlin' circuit—all over the South, down the East Coast, from Detroit to Key West, in union halls and bingo places—the kinds of places where if you don't play, you get stuff thrown at you. It was the best education a bass player could ask for.

While I was on the road, I started to hear other things and get glimpses of jazz. I was lucky to see early electric Miles, Funkadelic, and other people who were playing rock and psychedelic music with funk beats and repetitive bass lines. We started out playing R&B, but gradually we began playing more modern, fusion-oriented covers—instead of Wilson Pickett, we got into the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Eventually I decided to go to New York with some friends, since that's where it all happens.

How did you get into the scene?

I just tried to get on recordings. The whole punk scene had just happened; we'd go to CBGB's and see bands, and none of them could really play, so we thought, We could do that—give us a gig! [*Laughs.*] I would meet people who knew Ornette Coleman and Miles, and I would get their addresses, knock on their doors, and play them my music.

Did you try to develop a distinctive sound?

I went through several phases. For a while I used three Marshall stacks, a Gibson Thunderbird, a bunch of fuzzes, and roundwound strings. I also went through a long phase of using a Fender Bass VI [baritone guitar] with a pick, sometimes with fingers, through Ampeg SVTs and Marshalls—a lot of noise stuff. I used to play "prepared bass" with clips and other things on my strings. For the last few years, I've been using fretless P-Basses for more dub-oriented music, sometimes with distortion. My sound is changing all the time. I would hate to have one sound or one style. It should always be evolving.

You play with some of the world's most technically innovative players, but you seem to have gone the opposite direction.

I promised myself every year I should learn less and less technique. I don't want to know what music is. I'd rather be intuitive and take my time. Music comes from life experience, not a school or influence or obsession. So I just keep deconstructing the concept of "improving," and I listen to more and more primitive, repetitive music—African, Indian, simple Asian, hip-hop. People don't understand how simple music is if you're honest. Kids intuitively do amazing stuff without a music system; it doesn't matter that they use laptops or turntables—it's no different for sitars or basses. It'll be a long time before people can accept that. Hundreds of years from now, musicians will be laughing at how stupid we were, thinking about category and genre and style and territory and culture. It's sound! BP

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