

Les!

Like A Fine Cheddar, Les Claypool Keeps Getting Better With Age

LES CLAYPOOL IS IN A great mood today. He's right on time for our interview, and as he saunters into the restaurant not far from his home—dubbed Rancho Relaxo—he's looking satisfied. One of his favorite peeps, drummer Tim "Herb" Alexander, is recovering nicely after a heart attack and surgery a few months ago. "He's a V-8 that was running on

six cylinders for the last few years, and now he feels better than he did before the heart attack," beams Claypool, tucking into a fish taco and an Arnold Palmer. "He seems excited. I saw him today and there was a lot of laughter."

Herb and Les, of course, are two-thirds of Primus, the thrashin' funk trio with guitarist Larry LaLonde that exploded out of the Bay Area

BY E.E. BRADMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL HAGGARD





Caption

music scene toward the end of the '80s with crazy chops, memorable songs, and oodles of quirky humor. Right alongside bands like Jane's Addiction, Fishbone, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Primus ruled the '90s alternative scene, hitting paydirt with the 1991 opus *Sailing the Seas of Cheese*. Nine years, four albums, and a *South Park* theme later, Primus took a break from the studio until 2010's funky throwback *Green Naugahyde*.

Far from putting all his eggs in the Primus basket, however, Les has stayed busy with a long list of comrades. Over the years, he's headed up Colonel Claypool's Fearless Flying Frog Brigade, reunited with old bandmates in Sausage, rocked out with Stewart Copeland and Trey Anastasio in Oysterhead, and recorded with everyone from Adrian Belew, Beats Antique, and Limp Bizkit to Tom Waits, Hank Williams III, and Zach Hill. It's a wild ride that's vividly captured in Greg Prato's excellent oral history, *Primus: Over the Electric Grapevine*, and there's talk of a compendium of highlights and a compilation of Claypool's trademark doodles.

The recent *Primus & the Chocolate Factory with the Fungi Ensemble* puts a slow, upright-slathered, and distinctly Les spin on the psychedelic flavor of the Leslie Bricusse/Anthony Newley

soundtrack to the 1971 classic *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, while the self-titled debut of Duo De Twang, Claypool's colabo with MIRV guitar god Bryan Kehoe, is a funky Dobro-bass, country-tinged ride through country, surf, Claypool's back catalogue, Alice In Chains, and the Bee Gees.

In the 25 years since a little live album called *Suck on This* first introduced him to the world, Les Claypool has lived a colorful life that has culminated in fatherhood, a rich and varied discography, a singular bass-and-vocal aesthetic, and a career that just keeps on tickin'. Luckily for us, Claypool still has plenty to give.

It's crazy to think it's been 25 years since *Suck on This*.

I used to go to those 25th anniversary shows, and I would think, "These guys are old! This is horrible! What am I even doing here! These guys need to give it up and open a restaurant somewhere!" Now that's me [laughs].

***Sailing the Seas of Cheese*, your major-label debut, is considered your breakout album. Did it feel that way back in 1991?**

We never really had a breakout album. *Seas of Cheese* was the "peek-out" album. Like, there's the mainstream going by—we

peeked in and went, “Whoa! Look at all that shit!” That’s why it was called *Sailing the Seas of Cheese*, because we were going from the indie world to Interscope, which was still an indie, but had major backing.

And you’re still out there doing it.

We were always like the little train that could, plodding along. We’ve been lucky people like to come see us twiddle our fingers, but it’s not on any grand scale. It’s just been this consistent thing.

How has your bass playing changed since those early years?

When you’re young, you’re jumping around the stage and waving your dick around—“Here I am! Look at me go!” Now we can sit back, play, and experience the music more. There’s a little bump once in a while, but it’s coming from our experience of the music, not because we’re trying to pep up the crowd.

How’d you get into bass?

I’ve always said that bass is the crayon I picked out the box. I’d still be drawing the same picture if I picked up guitar or whatever, but it’d look a little different because it’d be another crayon. For me, it’s how I express myself sonically—that and my voice—in the easiest manner: 4-string bass. It’s a little more of a wrassle

with 6-string, but 4-string, I can just pick it up and shit comes out. I don’t even have to think about it.

What got you into playing 6-string bass?

I wanted to do something totally different. I am a huge Tony Levin fan, and I adore all that stuff he played on the Chapman Stick. The Stick seemed like a keyboard or something, though; it was so foreign. But I thought, “If I get one of those 6-string basses . . .”

Did you immediately get a fretless Carl Thompson 6?

I was at NAMM demoing gear for an audio company one year. This guy came up and said, “Hey, you play Carl Thompson basses—look at mine!” And he showed me this fretless Carl Thompson 6-string. And I thought, “One day I’m going to get me one.” So I asked Carl to build me one, and halfway through, I called him and said, “Hey, Carl—make it fretless!” That’s why it has all the lines in the neck; he pulled out the frets. That made the instrument much more of a challenge, and it became the bass that opened lots of doors for me.

And you used it on *Seas of Cheese*?

I love Carl—he’s a genius, the Picasso of instruments, but it takes a long time for him to build a bass. We were going in the studio to do *Seas of Cheese*, I needed something to play on, so I bought a Tune 6-string in L.A., and that’s what I used on “Jerry Was a Racecar Driver” and the other 6-string tunes on *Seas of Cheese*. Then I had my buddy Dan Maloney, who makes my basses now, yank the frets out of the Tune bass.

When you got the Carl Thompson, did you love it right away?

Actually, I had to send it back. If you watch the “Jerry” video, the upper horn looks totally different. There’s no horn on it; it’s kind of like a Telecaster lump. Carl called me one day and asked, “Hey, how come you’re not playing the 6-string?” And I was like, “Oh, Carl, it just doesn’t balance well.” “Well, send it back!” “I don’t want to bother you.” “Send it back! Send it back!” Without that extended horn, the bass was top-heavy, and it was driving me nuts. Carl cut off the whole top and put that extended scroll on it. That’s what you see in the “Tommy the Cat” video.

Most people think of your Carl Thompson basses when they think of you.

They’re unique. People try to copy Carl all the time, but he’s one of those guys who looks at a piece of wood and can turn it into something gloriously beautiful. I love guys like that—they look at the world just a little differently. Mike Watt’s one of those guys, too.

How often do you play 6-string these days?

I play it, but not nearly as much. It’s more of a wrestling match with the 6, especially the fretless. I enjoy playing it, and for certain things, it’s fabulous. Playing 4-string is like doodling with a pencil, but playing 6 is more like using a calligraphy pen. It takes a little more thought. If I want a different color or texture, I go to it. But I didn’t go to it at all on this new *Wonka* thing.

What inspired you to do the *Wonka* album?

When we finished up the last album cycle, I had this idea of

“THE MOST MAGNIFICENT MUSICIAN I’VE EVER PLAYED WITH”

“I’ve played with lots of cats, but there’s nothing that can even come close to what it’s like playing with Bernie Worrell. People talk about putting in 10,000 hours, or Tony Hawk will talk about ‘time on your board,’ but someone like Bernie, who has lived this extraordinarily colorful life, with so much to express—and the ability to express it—plus a little bit of the abstract eccentric element that I love? He’s unbelievable. It’s amazing what he’s contributed to music in the past 40 years.”





taking on some sort of sacred cow, either with my band or with Primus. And then when Herb came back, we were all excited about Primus. I always had the creepy “Candyman” idea in my head, so it kind of stemmed from there. Every year, we do a New Year’s show with a theme, so last year we decided to do the Wonka theme and play some of the songs from the *Wonka* soundtrack in our own way. Next thing I knew, we were doing the entire record. It just fell together so nicely. It’s one of the smoothest undertakings I’ve done in a long time.

What basses are you using on the *Wonka* album?

Mostly my NS upright. There’s a lot of arco stuff. That, and my little Dobro bass.

Tell me more about that Dobro bass.

A company sent it to me years ago, and it just kind of sat there. When I was working on the soundtrack for a 2008 horror film called *Pig Hunt*, I grabbed it out of the corner, slack-tuned it, and started slapping it. I wrote a song called “Booneville Stomp” with it, and from that point on I started using it quite a lot. And then I did the whole Duo De Twang project, and I used it quite a bit on the last Primus record. It’s just this janky, inexpensive plywood

thing, but it has a vibe.

You’ve played with some badass drummers over the years.

I’ve been fortunate to play with some of the greatest drummers in my field that are on the planet right now. I’ve learned the nuances of a lot of these players, and I’m a firm believer that if you’re being honest, your personality comes out in your playing, no matter what instrument you use.

What’s it like playing with Stewart Copeland?

He’s one of my best friends. He was a hero of mine for most of my youth, and still is. I can’t even imagine what he was like when he was young, because he’s such a wild stallion—extraordinarily intelligent, and a musical genius. The stuff he composes is always twisted. He grew up in the Middle East—Western music was not the first music he was exposed to—and he’s got a bit of this dyslexia thing going, so his approach to time is just naturally different from everybody else’s. He tends to play with the melody. If you’re playing with him and all of a sudden a guitar riff goes flying by, he’s chasing that thing around. I had never experienced that before.

What about Herb?

I didn’t really fathom a lot of the stuff he was doing until we did a surround mix of *Seas of Cheese* last year. I always thought I knew what he was playing on “Here Come the Bastards,” for example, but when we soloed all his tracks, I realized that he was playing all these little grace notes that emphasized different elements within the bar. It was incredible. I’ve heard many people try to play what he was doing, but no one has really gotten it.

Do Herb and [former Primus drummer] Jay Lane approach the material differently?

Jay has this hi-hat feel that’s very difficult to play. Ask Tim—he hates learning Jay Lane parts. And there are certain Herb things that Jayski had a hard time learning, too.

Jay has a “hop” to his playing; it’s like a 16th-note, leading-with-his-left-hand-on-the-hi-hat, Dave Garibaldi thing, because he grew up on Minneapolis funk and Tower Of Power, whereas Herb is like a lumbering beast coming through the forest with this swagger to it.

How would you describe the style of Brain [Brian Mantia, another former Primus drummer]?

Brain is like a chameleon. He can play with anybody. He can fill whatever slot needs to be filled.

Are you stickler for specifics, or do you just relax into each player’s style?

Depends on what it is. Especially with Primus, because we stretch so much, I try to let the personality of whoever is playing shine through, and I follow that. We just did some shows with Danny Carey, and he’s kind of got a Herb thing going, but he’s, you know, Danny Carey. I was amazed by how much space he leaves! He does all this intricate stuff, but there’s not a bunch of hi-hat stuff or ride going in-between. He’s almost playing Jerry Marotta-type stuff; he’ll leave these holes, and it’s really cool.

Jerry Marotta and Tony Levin are one of the all-time

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Solo albums (on Prawn Song) *Of Fungi and Foe* (2009), *Of Whales and Woe* (2006). **With Primus** *Primus and the Chocolate Factory*, ATO/Prawn Song (2014); *Green Naugahyde*, ATO/Prawn Song (2011); *They Can’t All Be Zingers*, Interscope/Prawn Song (2006); *Antipop*, Interscope/Prawn Song (1999); *Rhinoplasty*, Interscope/Prawn Song (1998); *Brown Album*, Interscope/Prawn Song (1997); *Tales From the Punchbowl*, Interscope (1995); *Pork Soda*, Interscope (1993); *Miscellaneous Debris*, Interscope (1992); *Sailing the Seas of Cheese*, Interscope (1991); *Frizzle Fry*, Caroline/Prawn Song (1990); *Suck on This*, Prawn Song (1989); *Sausage*, Prawn Song (1988). **With Duo De Twang** *Four-Foot Shack*, ATO (2014). **With Sausage** *Riddles Are Abound Tonight*, Interscope/Prawn Song (1994). **With Oysterhead** *The Grand Pecking Order*, Elektra/Asylum (2000). **With Colonel Claypool’s Fearless Flying Frog Brigade** (on Prawn Song) *Live Frogs Set 1 and Set 2* (2001); *Purple Onion* (2002). **With Holy Mackerel** *Highball with the Devil*, Interscope (1996). **With Colonel Claypool’s Bucket Of Bernie Brains** *The Big Eyeball in the Sky*, Prawn Song (2004). **With Tom Waits** (on ANTI-) *Bad as Me* (2011), *Real Gone* (2004). **With Adrian Belew** (on Sanctuary) *Side Three* (2006), *Side One* (2004).

On DVD

Fancy (2007, Prawn Song)
Electric Apricot: Quest for Festeroo (2006, National Lampoon)
Blame It on the Fish: An Abstract Look at the 2003 Primus Tour de Fromage (2006, Prawn Song)
5 Gallons of Diesel (2005, Prawn Song)
Hallucino-Genetics (2004, Prawn Song)
Animals Should Not Try to Act Like People (2003, Interscope/Prawn Song)
Videoplasty (1998, Interscope/Prawn Song)

**great rhythm sections.**

People always ask me who my favorite bass player is, and I'm not good on favorites, but when it comes to an all-around bass player, I'd have to pick Tony. He's got a signature sound, he's extraordinarily tasteful, but he still makes a statement, and that's a very difficult thing to do. And it's not like he's always way up in the mix, either; he steps out of the mix somehow because of what he's doing.

I heard him on Peter Gabriel's 1986 album *So* and King Crimson's *Discipline* (1981) right around the same time, and I was knocked out.

And then you hear him on *Momentary Lapse of Reason* [1987]. That's Pink Floyd, and you can hear Tony Levin being Tony Levin, and it's not out of place. It's glorious.

Who else rocks your world?

One of my favorite bass players was Mark Sandman of Morphine. There he was, playing 2-string bass with a slide, both of the strings tuned the same, and it stripped away all the parameters. It took things back to the days when guys were making music with bows and arrows. When you're not thinking about the rules, it's the most honest expression. I was just getting to know him before he died, and his music is some of my favorite music ever.

As for passion and what gives me a big frickin' musical boner, it's Larry Graham. I saw him play in a little room at a radio station a few years ago, and I felt like I was 12 years old—I was completely smoked and enamored by the whole thing. It's funny, thinking about those two players and how different they are. One is lust and one is love. And they could go either way [laughs].

Why did you decide to make your own Pachyderm basses?

Because there were certain things I wanted out of my 4-string that I just couldn't get from any of the Carl Thompsons that I had. Carl's basses are unique; you tailor your playing to them. I wanted to design something that was exactly what I always wanted. They're definitely influenced by his basses, but there are other things, too, like Rickenbacker 4001s and Jazz Basses.

In which ways?

Many years ago, I played this Jazz Bass, and it had the most amazing action. I realized it was because of the placement of the pickguard. Sometimes you have too much of a gap and it slows your ass down. I wanted a bass with a pickguard, so mine have this fancy wooden pickguard. And I extended the fingerboard down a little because that's where I rest my thumb.

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LISTEN



Duo De Twang,
Four Foot Shack
[2014, ATO/Prawn
Song]; Primus,
*Primus & the
Chocolate Factory*

with the Fungi Ensemble [2014, ATO/
Prawn Song]

EQUIP



Basses Pachyderm 4-strings, fretted and fretless Carl Thompson 4- and 6-strings, NS Design electric upright 5, Fender Jazz Basses, Dobro bass

Strings Dunlop customs

Amps AP 7600 channel strip, Ampeg cabinets

Effects Line 6 DM4 Distortion Mod-eler, Line 6 DL4 Delay Modeler, Korg AX300B multi-effect (for envelope filter), MXR M108 10-band EQ, MXR M80 Bass D.I.+

**I notice there are only two knobs.**

I don't like lots of knobs. I like the old Eddie Van Halen style, where there's just a volume knob. The other knob turns on the lights on the side of the bass so I can see it when it's too dark. My LEDs are raised, so it's a tactile thing. The bass balances incredibly well, and it's light, too.

When did you start getting into upright?

In high school. I had been playing for about two months, and I joined jazz band. The bass amp was broken, so I sat there for months while they tried to fix this damn bass amp. I started playing the upright so I could play with the band, and I just did my own thing. Years later, I bought an amazingly cool old Kay. It's been signed by Tom Waits and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. I was playing it on a Tom Waits record, and Larry Taylor, Tom's guy, was there. He was like, "You've got an M1B!" So I just kind of lucked into this awesome-sounding bass. His name is Oliver, which is my son's middle name; he was named after the bass.

What inspires you to be in so many projects?

I get enticed by things. I'll see the glimmer of something, and I'll go, I wanna do that. "Hey, do you want to go play with Bernie Worrell, Buckthhead, and Brain?" "Yeah, I'm gonna do that! This is amazing! Let's make a record." If it feels good, we'll usually keep it going.

Do you consider Primus your No. 1 project?

Primus is obviously going to be the most prominent thing on my tombstone, but I've said for years that I don't want that to be the only thing on my tombstone. I've got to do the other things, otherwise I'll just go crazy.

A good musical experience, for me, is like a great conversation. And if you don't have many conversations with people, you're not going to be a very good conversationalist. The ability to have a good musical conversation comes from doing it a lot, doing it with a lot of different people, and putting yourself in situations that might make you uncomfortable. Playing with all these guys—people like Adrian Belew and Danny Carey—and having those guys kick the shit out of me with these odd time signatures? It's good to have people come along and make you humble.

I'll tell you who made me humble recently: Esperanza Spalding. Jesus Christ! What planet is she from? She's gorgeous, has perfect pitch and a voice, and she's rippin' the shit out of her instrument. She scares me.

How did it feel to take such a long break from Primus?

Taking a break from Primus, from 2000 to 2010 or whenever it was, made me a way better artist—not just a better musician, but a better artist, singer, everything. Playing with Herb in the studio has really invigorated me on the Primus thing right now. The stuff he came up with on this *Wonka* album makes me think, Wow, I've got to write some new shit!

I love how much fun you have onstage and in the studio.

What's the point if you don't keep it fun? We all got into music because it was fun, and if it gets to where it's torture, you've got to change it up. When all is said and done, I wouldn't have been able to do it this long if we hadn't kept it fun. You gotta have fun in life, or you're doing something wrong. **BP**