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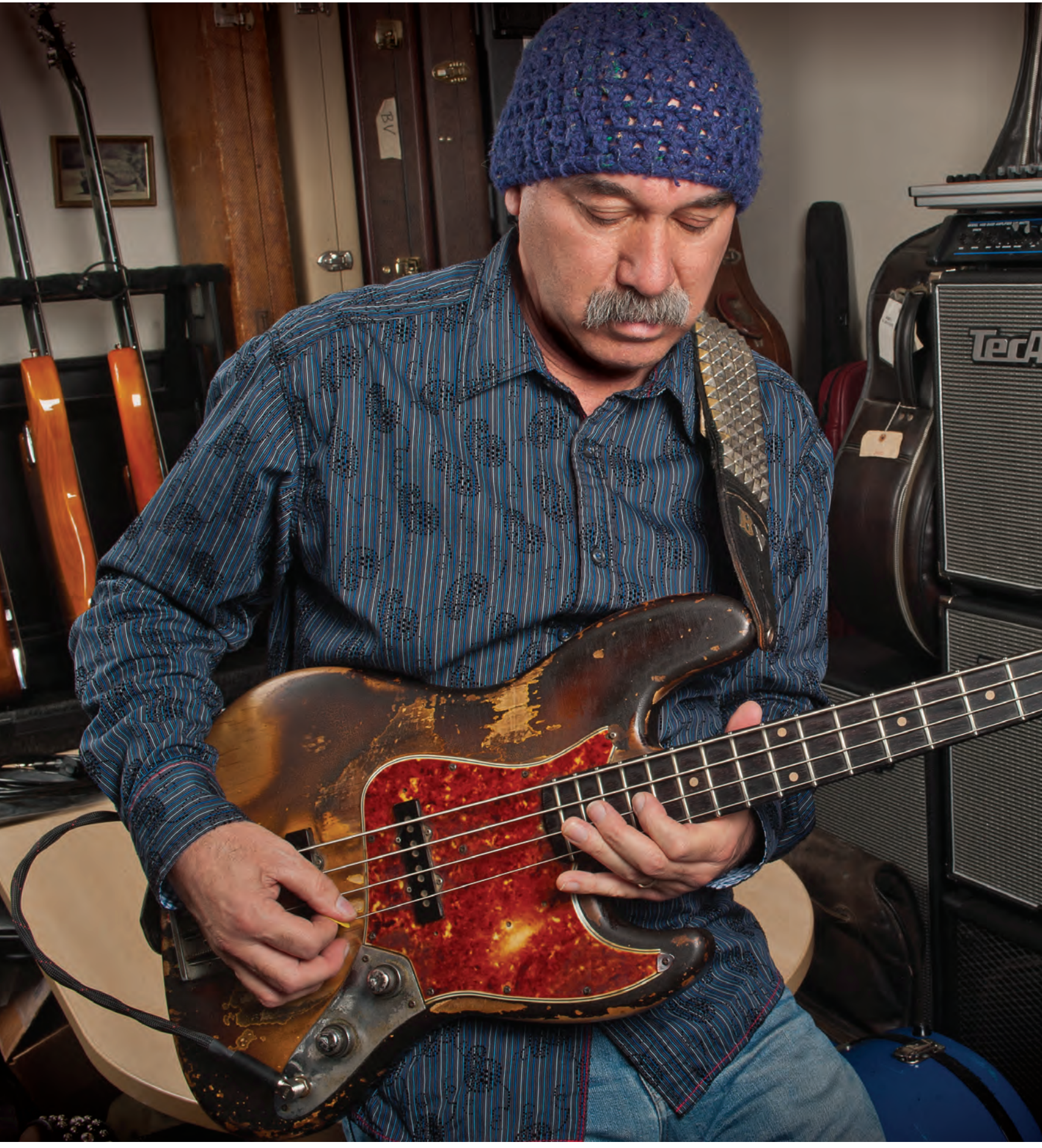
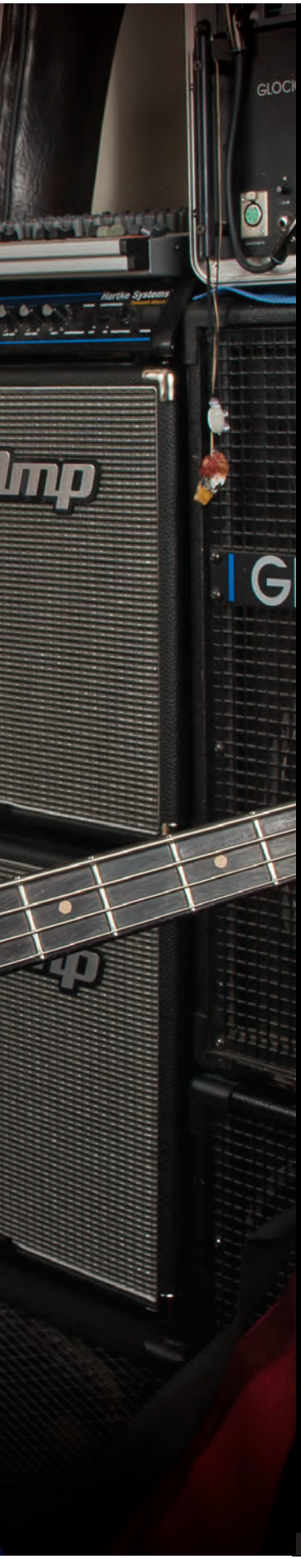




PICK-TASTIC!

BOBBY VEGA

& HIS SUPER-FUNKY PLECTRUM

FOR MANY MUSICIANS, SEEING BOBBY VEGA play for the first time is an unforgettable experience. The sheer range of colors he's able to pull out of a passive 4-string—soulful chords, surprising harmonics, monstrous thumpin', and neck-spanning fingerstyle grooves, all delivered with extraordinary time, feel, dynamics, and distinctively clear tone—make him a one-of-a-kind bass maestro who sounds like no one else on earth.

Of all his skills, however, it's Bobby's mastery of the pick that has brought him the most attention. His funky, melodic style is what got him on record with Sly Stone

BY E.E. BRADMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL HAGGARD

when he was 17, and it's what has set him apart from other San Francisco Bay Area badasses since the '70s. It's also what made his 35 gigs with Tower Of Power in 2001 so special, and it's a big reason that for the last couple years, bass players everywhere—from Berklee, Brooklyn, and the Bay to workshops in Italy, bass shows in London, and classrooms in Germany—are stumbling over themselves to get funky with a pick.

PLECTRUM PERFECTION

10 Bobby Vega Delights

1 

Sly Stone
"High on You" [1975, *High on You*]
The track that started it all.

2 

Paul Butterfield
"Fair Enough" [1978, *Rockpalast: Blues Rock Legends, Vol. 2*]
Twenty-one-year-old Bobby tears into this one with gusto.

3 

Lee Oskar
"Feelin' Happy" [1978, *Before the Rain*]
This upbeat tune is bolstered by staccato 16ths *à la* Rocco Prestia.

4 

Hubert Laws
"The Baron" [1978, *Say It With Silence*]
Bobby grooves deep underneath this slab of flute-tastic '70s jazz-funk.

5 

Pressure
"Can You Feel It" [1979, *Pressure*]
Those fills—and that airtight lock with the rhythm guitar—are unmistakable.

6 

Cold Blood
"I Just Want to Make Love to You" [1989, live]
Bobby and his boyhood heroes update a stanky, stone-cold classic.

7 

Etta James
"Get Funky" [1990, *Stickin' to My Guns*]
Listen as Bobby deftly doubles synth bass, and don't miss him on James' *Live at Montreux 1975–1993*.

8 

Bobby Vega/Chris Rossbach
"Foam Boats" [2005, self-titled]
Just one of many great moments from this soulful, intimate album.

9 

Bobby Vega
"Xs" [2010, *Sketches of Bob*]
Vega's balance of laid-back and unshakeable has rarely been so high in the mix. "Buttermilk" is pretty tasty, too.

10 

Joe Satriani
"All of My Life" [2015, *Shockwave Supernova*]
Proof that Bobby's pick powers extend to the warmest corners of the tone spectrum—and down to the *B* string.

PLECTRUM VERBOTEN

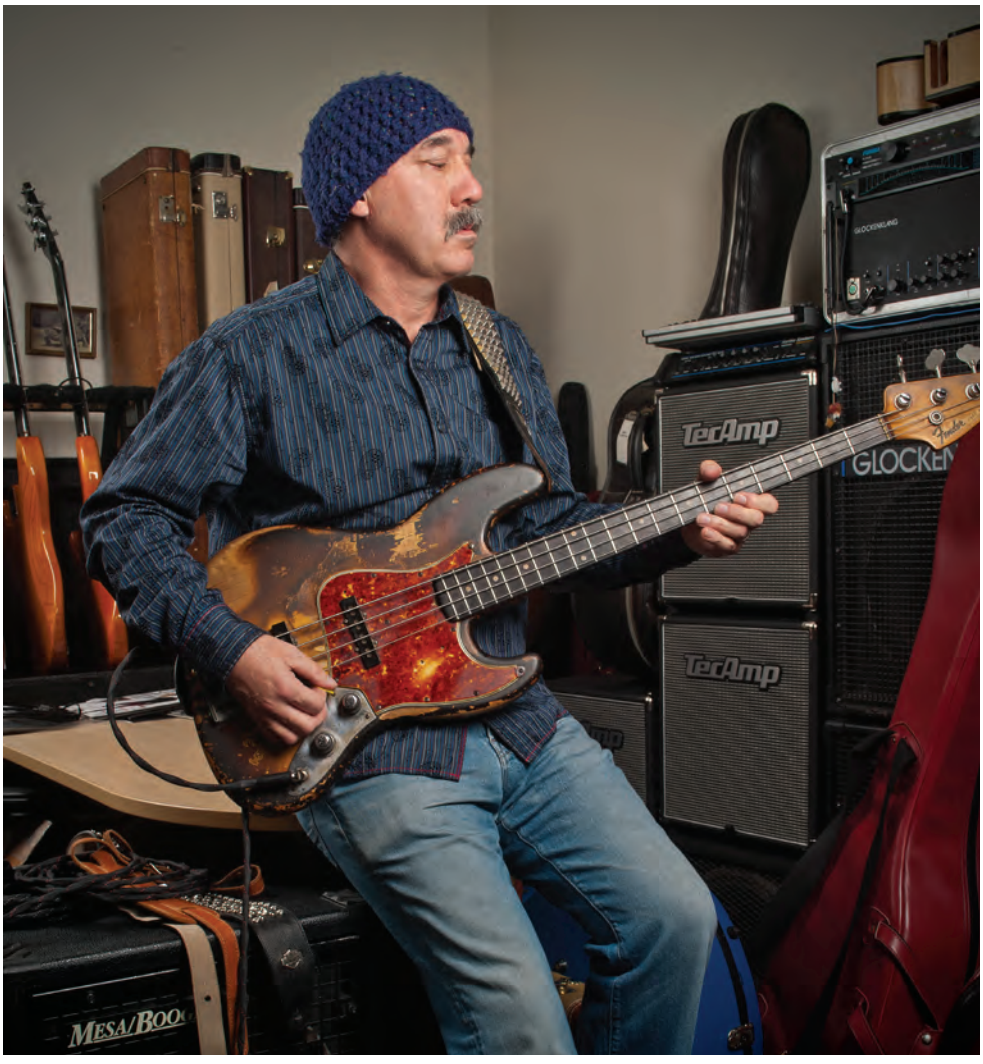
In the short history of the electric bass, the terms "funky bass" and "guitar pick" have rarely been used in the same sentence. The precedent was set early: Many of the earliest "Fender bass" players played upright and had no use for the pick, and Motown's James Jamerson, our first superbad upright/electric doubler, set the tone. In rock, Carol Kaye, Paul McCartney, and Bill Wyman, all originally guitarists, used plectrums on '60s bass classics like "Good Vibrations," "Come Together," and "Sympathy for the Devil," lighting the way for future prog, metal, jam-band, and punk pick masters.

As the electric bass began to develop its own identity in the late '60s and early '70s, the plectrum became a logical choice for many rock bassists playing through effects and competing with Marshall stacks—but for the most part, jazz, R&B, soul, and funk bass stayed steadfastly fingerstyle. There were exceptions, of course: Kaye and fellow studio pro Joe Osborn, as well as Cold Blood's Rod Ellicott and Hamish Stuart of Average White Band, expertly used picks in the service of the groove, and jazz bassist Steve Swallow developed a highly personal plectrum style. Right around the time Anthony Jackson laid down his classic part on the O'Jays' 1973 smash "For the Love of Money" (a precursor to his brilliant pick performances with Chaka Khan and Al Di Meola between 1976 and 1982), Sly Stone was getting hip to a Chinese/Puerto Rican/Mexican/French teenager who lived right in his all-black San Francisco neighborhood.

HANDPICKED

Bobby's first professional gig, at age 16, was with Bo Diddley, but it was 1975's "High on You," the title track from Sly's first album without the Family Stone, that put him on the map. *High on You* hit the streets a month before Bobby turned 19, and his trademark style—propulsive, lyrical bass lines nimbly played with a pick and always deep in the pocket—got him gig after gig with a cross-section of high-profile artists, including R&B/soul icons Etta James and Billy Preston, rockers Quicksilver Messenger Service and Jefferson Starship, new age pioneer Kitaro, master percussionist Babatunde Olatunji, New Orleans drum god Zigaboo Modeliste, jam-band faves KVHW and Zero, and Bay Area legends Carlos Santana, Jerry Garcia, and Paul Butterfield. His three solo albums and an instructional DVD, *Down the Road* (1997), *Bobby Vega/Chris Rossbach* (2005), *Sketches of Bob* (2010), and *Bass Lessons in Tone, Vol. 1: The Pick* (2010)—all available at **bobbyvega.com**—are ample displays of the instantly identifiable sound he's developed on thousands of gigs since the late '70s. Forty-five years after Bobby first began playing a Norma bass that his mother bought him at Montgomery Ward, his swinging, muted approach is all the rage: A quick spin through online bass forums and "Bobby Vega-style" video lessons proves that getting funky with a pick has never been coooler.

Far from resting on his laurels, however, the 59-year-old San Francisco native has stayed busy preaching his "pick, fingers, and



thumb" gospel on tour, through columns in this magazine, and at packed gatherings such as Bass Player LIVE!, Detroit Bass Day, and the Warwick Bass Camp. An enviable collection of 50-plus instruments and a large roomful of amps and rare effects, combined with more than four decades on stages and in studios, have given Bobby plenty of insight into bass gear, and he's generous with his knowledge. It's no surprise, then, that he's been the full-time "Ambassador of Bass" at EMG Pickups since 2008, handling bass artist relations, assisting in product development, and "generally, making things happen for bass" at EMG, as founder Rob Turner puts it. Even now, between tours with longtime guitar comrade Steve Kimock, as well as workshops around the country, he's excited about plans for signature picks and bridges, a new column at NoTreble, a radio show for Bass on the Broadband, and a best-of album with new bonus tracks.

In person, Bobby exudes down-to-earth humility, constant humor, "always-on" restlessness, as well as an unusual blend of finely tuned sensitivity crossed with undeniable confidence. Put a bass in his hands, and more likely than not, he'll whip out a pick and make it do something you've never heard it do. Because no matter where he is or what time it is, for Bobby Vega, a pick is always within reach.

Did you get flak for playing with a pick in the beginning?

Nope. Matter of fact, I got more attention because of what I was doing and the sounds I was getting. That's what probably set me out from the pack—the clarity of my playing with the pick.

Did you start with your fingers?

Yeah, but the pick was just easier. My first real bass was a Gibson EB-1. It sounded really dark, and I was playing it through a Fender Bassman and two 1x12s or a 1x15 or a Sunn 2x15 cabinet. It was boomy as all get out! So I started using a pick.

Besides tone, what else inspired you to use a pick?

I liked that it sounded consistent and really even. I wasn't that consistent with my fingers, so I got dexterity and stamina from the pick. Players like Jaco, Hadrien Feraud, and Linley Marthe have


Carol Kaye


Joe Osborn


Carles Benavent

THE PICKER'S PICKS

10 Outstanding Pick Players

1 Anthony Jackson
"For the Love of Money" (the O'Jays)
"Anthony leaves so much space, and he's so clean."

2 Bob Daisley
"Bark at the Moon" and "Crazy Train" (Ozzy Osbourne)
"So clean and even ... You can hear all the phrasing."

3 Rod Ellicott
"I Just Want to Make Love to You" (Cold Blood)
"One of my biggest influences. This track is ridiculous. It's just sexy, man."

4 Joe Osborn
"Close to You" and "We've Only Just Begun" (the Carpenters)
"'Close to You' has one of the sexiest bass fills that ever was. Listen to the feel, the space, and the phrasing on 'We've Only Just Begun.' Joe is funky and so musical."

5 Paul McCartney
"Come Together" and "Something" (the Beatles)
"A genius. So great and so lyrical."

6 Chris Squire
"Roundabout" (Yes)
"That's bad. That bass line *is* that song."

7 Justin Chancellor
"Schism" (Tool)
"You can hear the pick coming off the string; the 'deets' are the side of the pick, the scratch. The tone and the articulation are great."

8 Carol Kaye
"Good Vibrations" (Beach Boys), "Hikky-Burr" (Bill Cosby), "Games People Play" (Mel Tormé)
"She was a big influence. If you're ever in San Diego, call her up, put down your money, and take a lesson!"

9 John Paul Jones
"Whole Lotta Love" (Led Zeppelin)
"That's the shit. He is such a major influence."

10 Carles Benavent
"He's ridiculous. Everyone should know about him. That's the guy!"

incredible stamina; they can go really fast for a long time. I can't do that with my fingers, but I can do it with a pick.

What's the best way to hold a pick when you're getting started?

Hold it the way you want to hold it. Even if you start out thinking you can't play with a pick, keep on messing with it, and you'll find out what's most comfortable for you.

I find myself holding my pick pretty tight—I'm always worried that I'm going to drop it.

When you're starting to learn how to write with a pen, you grip it really hard, but after a while, you get more comfortable. Same with a pick. If you play a light pick and grab it really tight, you'll get a lot of *thwack thwack thwack*. If you hold a heavy pick too tight, your wrist will start hurting.

What about speed, dynamics, and articulation?

If you lighten up the touch, you'll notice that your articulation will become better and the sound will get better. To go faster, I use a heavy pick and then lighten up my grip. To get a softer sound, I hold it lightly, and with my skin and muting, I can get a pillowy sound that slides off the string instead of whacking it straight on. When you tighten up your hand, it's hard to go fast; there's a tension, not flow. You have to find your balance between tension and flow.

How do you feel about picks with grips?

I've tried using them, and it makes my wrist hurt because the pick is stuck in my hand. It doesn't flow as much.

You use the fat side of the pick.

I do. It sounds better, feels better, and allows me to decide how much of the pick I want to hear.

How do you know which shape is right for you?

Put some picks in your hand and mess with 'em. It's just like a bad habit—it takes a while to get into. How you gonna know what you like until you start? [*Laughs.*]

Pick parts are usually louder than fingerstyle lines, right?

They're more articulate, but they shouldn't always be louder. You should get a consistent volume with your pick, fingers, and thumb. I tell students to record themselves playing with fingers, play the same thing with a pick, and listen back to it.

How do you choose which technique to use?

I wait until I hear which tone is called for. Sometimes I use pick, fingers, and thumb on different segments of a song so I can change the channel or support the vocal or instrumental parts. It's like knowing how to use spices: How much are you gonna put in? How much do you need? And can you do it without any of them?

You can use fingerstyle techniques to get a pick-like tone, too.

A lot of people watch me play with a pick, get ideas, and then play stuff with their fingers that way. If you look at **gospelchops.com**, you'll see people playing up and down with their thumbs, getting that 16th-note thing, without using a pick. Dougie Rauch used to do that, too; he played like that with his

hands. He used really heavy Fender roundwounds—he'd put a backbow in the neck and then use heavy strings to straighten it out. The action was low and real fast-playing, real punchy. Dougie was a motherfucker! Hands down, he was simply the best that I've ever seen.

Bernard Edwards, John Entwistle, and Steve Harris also have finger techniques that could be mistaken for a pick.

Jack Casady, too. Watch the last video Entwistle made, and check out his "5:15" solo in *Quadrophenia*. Listen to Bernard Edwards on Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" and T.M. Stevens on Narada Michael Walden's "I Shoulda Loved You"—he sounds like he's using a pick because he's got the groove and consistency to be able to do that.

What would you say to someone who's still on the fence about using a pick on bass?

It ain't for everybody, but hey, picks are cheap. Go get some and spend five or ten minutes at a time playing with one. It might grow on you!

Aren't there big tonal differences between different types of picks, such as nylon, celluloid, ultem, Tortex, and real tortoiseshell?

Of the ones you mentioned, ultem has the most top end. Celluloid has a little less top end, and Tortex picks have more mids, right down the center. Nylon picks are definitely the darkest of the bunch. All around, tortoiseshell picks are the best for me. But it really depends on your hand and how you're striking the string. Some people can use all of those different picks and each pick would sound the same to them. The question is, can you get the sound out of each kind?

But there must be some crucial considerations when choosing a pick.

The thickness, the edge, the roundness, how much it slides off, the squareness, the tip, where you're holding it, whether you're squeezing it hard or letting it loose in your hand—all these things matter. Each pick will feel different, sound different, and make you play differently.

So you wouldn't use the same pick for everything?

Different textures for different tones and grooves. It's all in how you hold the pick and how tight or loose you hold it.

There must be one pick that can do it all, right?

I get the most sounds with a medium; my main pick is a .73 Dunlop Tortex.

In general, tortoiseshell picks are the closest thing to the sound of fingernails, and that's why people use them on acoustics—they have more articulation, and they open up better. There are all different kinds of composites that sound great, but I haven't gotten to them all.

Do you use different compression or EQ with a pick in the studio?

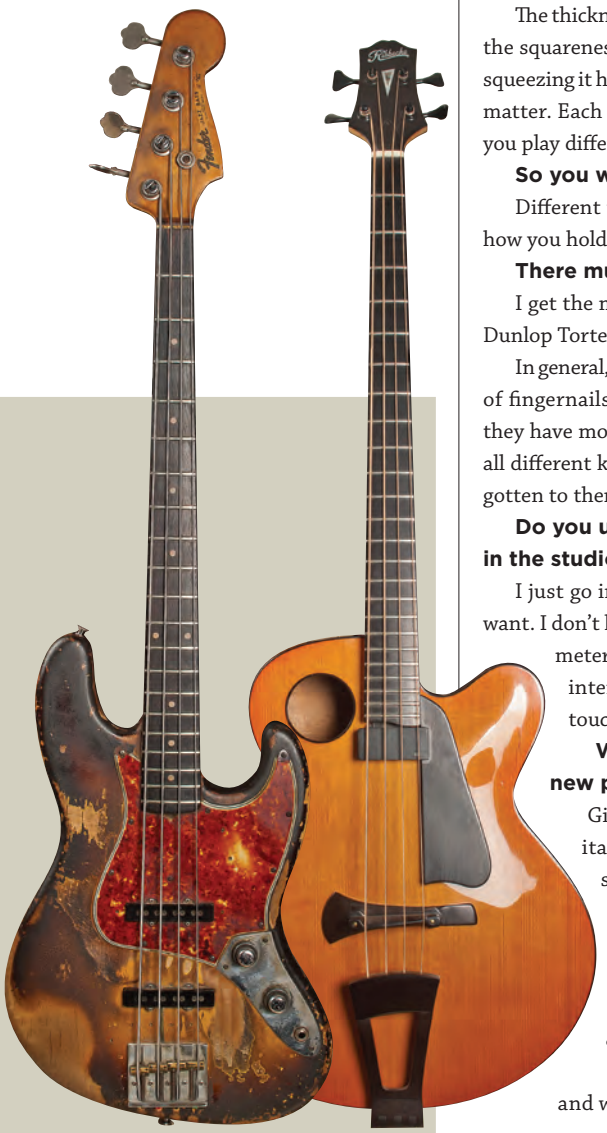
I just go in and play, and the engineers set it however they want. I don't hit it as hard as I can, because if I do, I can "pin" the meters. You have to find where your throttle is, and how intense or hard you want to hit it—it's all about your touch and your instrument.

What's the most common mistake you see new pick players make?

Giving up because it doesn't come naturally. We gravitate toward what's easiest or what we do best, but sometimes it's good to make yourself do something that doesn't come easy right away. Can you dribble a basketball or ride a skateboard right away? No. It takes a little time and a little practice.

The pick certainly seems to be having a moment.

There are more people playing with a pick now, and what it takes is somebody or the right moment to



INFO

EQUIP

Basses 1961 Fender Jazz Bass with custom pickups, with the bridge that became the BadAss II; Ribbecke Bobby Vega Halfling with custom Rob Turner/EMG pickup
Strings D'Addario EXL-165 nickel ('61 Jazz), BV phosphorus bronze (Ribbecke)
Picks .73 Dunlop Tortex, and an assortment of tortoiseshell picks
Rigs Glockenklang Bass Art top with Bass Art 1x15 cab, Heart-Core 1x15 cab, and Acoustic Art 1x10 cab; various Phil Jones heads and cabs; TecAmp Black Jag and Puma heads, with an assortment of cabinets; Warwick Hellborg Amp System

make that happen, to make it okay. Where we are right now in the times is, "Oh, it's not okay to do that." And really, it's okay to do it whatever which way you want.

What's your perspective on the pick's current popularity?

When we heard James Jamerson and Chuck Rainey and Duck Dunn, we went, "Wow. That's cool!" Then Larry Graham comes out with stuff like "I Want to Take You Higher" and "Thank You" and "Hair," and we went, "Oh, shit!" After that, Stanley Clarke played "Lopsy Lu" and "Silly Putty," and then came Louis Johnson. All of a sudden, there was Jaco—even though Rocco Prestia was doing all this stuff a long time ago, too, but at the time, nobody was paying attention to him. Once Jaco came on the scene, everyone started playing on the back pickup, getting that French-horn kind of sound, and then *bang!* There's Victor Wooten. Now, that Dominique Di Piazza sound, with the three-finger technique and the palm thing, the flamenco guitar-ish stuff, is popular; in all honesty, Abe Laboriel did that with Lee Ritenour on *Friendship* [1978, Jasrac].

After all that, where you gonna go? Now that all these great melodic bass players have cut the path open, I can run around swinging 16ths and playing rhythm-guitar-type stuff with a pick, and people are noticing. Players are more open, and they're looking for something that's different and new. Now the pick playing by people like Chris Squire, Anthony Jackson, Carol Kaye, Dave Ellefson, Joe Osborn, and Bob Daisley is coming to the forefront, and it's the "new" thing, even though it's not new.

Do you hear your influence on other players?

I hear where other people are getting their influences, and that's a good thing. Sometimes it hurts when people take my stuff and say it's theirs, but other times, it doesn't—that's what happens with evolution. Like they say, "Steal from the best, leave the rest."

How can players take their approach and tone to the next level?

It starts with you and your instrument, then your amp and your cabinet, and then your techniques. And if someone has something that inspires you, don't be afraid to pay for it. They worked at it; they put a lot of time into doing it.

The level of players today is ridiculously high, almost like when baseball players were on steroids hitting home runs out of the park. If you can't play "Teen Town" or "Chromatic Fantasy," you might as well take your stuff and go home [*laughs*]. I'd love to be part of helping today's up-and-coming players get their sounds together with cabs, amps, picks, cords, and techniques. It took me 43 years to learn how to do this stuff; maybe somebody can do it in five or ten years and actually enjoy it longer. **BP**