LIVE IN LIVING COLOUR

BY E.E. BRADMAN | PHOTO BY MIKE MARQUEZ

"I should have known something was up," **Doug Wimbish** says. "I flew into a hurricane that day. I'll never forget it."

On a warm afternoon in July, Wimbish is at Novasound, his studio in Hartford, Connecticut, messing around with remixes of Living Colour's *Shade*. He's got plenty to say about the band's first release in eight years, an exciting return to form based loosely around the blues—but to put it in perspective, let's set the stage for his Living Colour audition, way back in 1991.

After making a name for himself as a teenager with East Coast funk ensemble Wood, Brass & Steel in the mid '70s, Wimbish had helped birth hip-hop in the early '80s. He contributed bass parts to classics such as Grandmaster Flash & Melle Mel's "White Lines" for producer Sylvia Robinson at All Platinum and Sugar Hill, and he put the flash underneath "Unity," the 1984 James Brown/Afrika Bambaataa collaboration, on Tommy Boy Records. Soon, he was working with icons such as Solomon Burke, Etta James, Wilson Pickett, and Jack McDuff, as well as appearing on R&B albums by Candi Staton, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, Lou Rawls, and the O'Jays. When Wimbish moved to London in 1984, gigs with Mick Jagger and Jeff Beck—as well as a burgeoning studio career that spanned pop (Michael Bolton, Carly Simon), funk (George Clinton, Nona Hendryx), R&B (Melba Moore, Freddie Jackson), futuristic industrial and dub (Tackhead, Mark Stewart, On U-Sound), and rock (Billy Idol, Peter Wolf)—elevated his profile substantially. His circle included cutting-edge producers and remixers, such as Chris

Lord-Alge, Adrian Sherwood, Arthur Baker, Trevor Horn, and Rick Rubin. By his 35th birthday, he was juggling sessions with Jagger, Madonna, Seal, Annie Lennox, Joe Satriani, and Ronnie Wood while mulling an offer from Bruce Springsteen.

In the midst of this whirlwind, Wimbish was invited to audition for Living Colour, whose 1988 debut, *Vivid*, had gone double-platinum. (Doug had met Living Colour founder Vernon Reid—a Tackhead fan—as early as 1982, so it's no surprise he was on the shortlist of replacements when original bassist Muzz Skillings left.) Flying through that hurricane on his way back into New York, he arrived at the band's Brooklyn rehearsal space. Reid, drummer Will Calhoun, and frontman Corey Glover asked what he wanted to do first, and Wimbish suggested "Time's Up," the blazing, tricky title track of the band's 1990 second album.

The room got so quiet that Doug wondered if he'd said something wrong.

"I'm looking around, and I can feel the vibe," he chuckles. "They're looking at each other and not saying anything. Finally, they tell me, 'We've auditioned a lot of people, and you're the only bass player who wants to play that song.'"

He nailed it, of course, and was back in London the next day.

ENDLESS ENERGY

Inspired by the '70s innovations of Larry Graham and Bootsy Collins, Connecticut native Doug Wimbish has

developed a one-man sound-system approach to bass that blurs the lines between supportive accompanist and passionate soloist. His trademark style and unorthodox techniques—which call for the agility of a martial artist, a magician's sleight of hand, and a chef's knack for adding unique spices at unexpected times—has made him one of the world's most in-demand bassists.

Wimbish's 25-year stint with Living Colour may not be his longest musical relationship (he still rolls deep with Wood, Brass & Steel comrade Skip McDonald), but it's a perfect fit. He's an endlessly energetic rhythm-section partner for Calhoun and a stimulating foil for Reid, unafraid to groove hard or ferociously reach into the stratosphere with his own brand of histrionics. "When we get out of our own way," Wimbish says, "we're the best band on earth."

Shade, like 2003's *Collideoscope* and 2009's *Chair in the Doorway*, is a lively showcase of the Living Colour partnership. The first single, a cover of the Notorious B.I.G.'s "Who Shot Ya," condemns gun violence, a problem more prevalent now than it was for the bluesmen who inspired the album's foundation. *Shade* isn't just your granddaddy's 12-bar blues, though: This 13-track fireball has the soulful vocals, fresh samples and programming, powerful drums, and incendiary guitar that are Living Colour's hallmarks. Wimbish is a major presence throughout, Whammying skyward on "Preachin' Blues," grooving mightily underneath "Pattern in the Time/Skin in the Game" and "Invisible," adding signature flavors to "Two Sides," getting things started on "Blak Out," and laying a fat foundation to every tune. "At this stage of our lives, we're glad we're able to make a record that sums up what we're all about," he says. You know he means it.

Living Colour has survived drastic changes to the music business and a breakup. Wimbish officially joined the band in early 1992, but 1993's excellent *Stain* failed to crack the Top 20, and tensions led to a hiatus in 1995. Wimbish moved back to London, adding Lee "Scratch" Perry, Little Annie, Naomi Campbell, Brooklyn Funk Essentials, Nitzer Ebb, Bomb The Bass, Depeche Mode, and a dozen other credits to his resumé. He released a solo album, *Trippy Notes for Bass*, just after his Jungle Funk collaboration with Calhoun and percussionist Vinx hit the streets in 1999. Meanwhile, the work kept on coming, from INXS' Michael Hutchence and Herb Alpert to Puff Daddy and Bim Sherman.

Since Living Colour reunited in late 2000, Wimbish, back on U.S. soil, has played a large role in keeping things together. His decades of studio experience have earned the trust of his bandmates, who okayed Andre Betts, Wimbish's choice for *Shade* producer. Away from Living Colour, Doug has found time for an instructional DVD, *New Dimensions for Bass* (he also gives Skype lessons at **doug@dougwimbish.com**); a second solo album, *Cinema-Sonics*; his Head>>Fake project, also with Calhoun; and sessions with artists as wide-ranging as Kanye West, Ms. Lauryn Hill, African Head Charge, Busta Rhymes, Mos Def/Black Jack Johnson, Tarja Tarunen, Barrington Levy, Primal Scream, BT, Sussan Deyhim, and Dhafer Youssef. His energy is boundless.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Back in Hartford, Wimbish is grateful for a life well lived, but excited about the future. At press time, he was hyped about the debut of DMD, a trio with guitarist Marcus Machado and drummer Daru Jones, another trio with 14-year-old guitarist Brandon "Taz" Niederauer and drummer Joey Peebles, and recent work with English rapper Roots Manuva, KMFDM frontman Sascha Konietzko, German band Schiller, and tween rockers Unlocking The Truth. He also mentions a new chapter with lifelong collaborators McDonald and Sherwood—a fresh batch of Little Axe and Tackhead material, as well as upcoming releases with Scratch Perry, Bernard Fowler, Coldcut, Ghetto Priest, and the Jungle Brothers. And then there's the annual WimBash, a series of Wimbish-organized music jams that have taken place all over the world, from Winter NAMM in Anaheim and the DREAM Project in the Dominican Republic to London and New Orleans JazzFest, since 2004.

We talked to Wimbish, 60, at his home, where he was surrounded by a lifetime's worth of basses, effects, amps, and other gear. More than four decades after he first began gigging, Wimbish's enthusiasm for all things bass remains spectacularly undimmed.

Congratulations on a quarter-century with Living Colour.

Ain't that something? Who would have ever thought?

Your connection with Will Calhoun is tighter than ever.

I could play four notes and a rhythm and he already knows where to go with it, and vice versa. I know his swagger and his template and when he's going to speed up or slow down. I sound better with him on drums, and he sounds better with me on bass. Period.

What inspired Living Colour to dig into the blues on the new album?

It all started when we played at the Robert Johnson At 100 event at the Apollo, in 2012. We did Johnson's "Preachin' Blues," and the performance that night was so magical that we decided to re-engineer the blues for our next album, tying together traditional tunes like "Preachin' Blues" with songs like Biggie's "Who Shot Ya" and Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues," and still having it sound like us.

How important is it for the band to stay current?

Some people would love it if we made another *Vivid*, but we have to be who we are right now. It took five years to make this record, because we needed enough time to listen, find the right songs,

and find the right way to play this material. We're happy with what we did. This is the statement we are contributing to this crazy music business right now, and I'm proud of it.

The business has changed so much since you started out in the '70s.

It's a different world. When I was a teenager working with Sylvia Robinson at All Platinum and Sugar Hill, those were the last days of being in the studio with an arranger, working with different artists. It was like Motown. But the studio scene has changed—unless you're in Nashville playing sessions or in L.A. doing film stuff, those days are over. New York is a tough city unless you're doing jingles or you're already in that kind of clique.

It's surprising how much of your early work is still on the airwaves.

I hear music we did in the Sugar Hill era almost daily, whether it's Sugarhill Gang's "Apache (Jump On It)," which is played at so many sports games, or "Funk You Up" by the Sequence, which has been used by artists like Dr. Dre and Bruno Mars. We're part of the DNA of hip-hop. And DJ Soul Sister in New Orleans brought back Wood, Brass & Steel's "Funkanova" in a big way.

What kind of gigs were you doing back in the day?

I remember doing four sets a night in Hartford, driving to New York City to play after-hours clubs where the first set didn't start until 5:30 in the morning, and then driving back to Hartford. Sometimes, Wood, Brass & Steel would do three gigs a day: We'd split up the band to do two weddings, play a New York set until 11 AM, and then drive back to Hartford so we could play the next gig that night.

Who were your mentors?

Local musicians. Gary Williams, who gave me my first bass lessons, later worked with Babyface, the Isley Brothers, D'Angelo, and Pino [Palladino]. He just passed away. As I got older, Harold Sargeant, the drummer in Wood, Brass & Steel, became my mentor; he introduced me to Skip McDonald. These cats who were the real, knowing-how-to-survive players, coming off the chitlin' circuit—they taught me that it ain't all about the notes. It's how you survive to get to the stage where you play the notes.

Who were your first bass heroes?

I came up at a time when the bass was in your face, so I was listening to electric and acoustic players: James Jamerson, Bootsy, Stanley Clarke, Jaco, Paul Jackson, Alphonso Johnson, Billy Cox, Jack Bruce, Chris Squire, Sal Cuevas and Bobby Valentín from Fania All-Stars, Aston "Family Man" Barrett, Chuck Rainey, Ray Brown, Verdine White, Cachao, Ron Carter, John Entwistle, Charlie Mingus, Monk Montgomery, and Larry Graham.

You had a thriving career in the U.S. What inspired you to move to England in '84?

There was so much activity over there. England has more recording studios than any place on earth, and at that time, there weren't so many distractions. There was a lot of interest in the Sugar Hill rhythm section; English cats were checking out me, Skip, and Keith [LeBlanc].

You developed a whole other style during those years in London.

I completely invented another personality in England. Skip, Keith, Adrian [Sherwood], and I were doing mad stuff! Tackhead was one of the first

bands, if not the first, to make records with samples and an AMS DMX 15-80S digital delay. I was around all these dub-head minds like Adrian, doing stuff with Lee "Scratch" Perry and Ari Up from the Slits, working with Mark Stewart and Daniel Miller from Mute Records, remixing for Depeche Mode, and collaborating with Neneh Cherry and Shara Nelson from Massive Attack. Adrian was also working with Rough Trade Records and Al Jourgensen of Ministry on the *Twitch* album. I was with people who had a vast knowledge of reggae, and people who were into all the hardcore stuff. I learned so much.

Is that how you found your distinctive tone?

My tone came through trial and error, making records, doing gigs, playing different styles, and becoming different characters. The shape of your note is based on the spacing, the songs you play, how you articulate things, and how you push it. Every time I see someone play, school is in. The more I play, the more comfortable I am switching characters.

When did you get into effects?

I began collecting pedals when I was young; I had a Mu-Tron, a fuzz, a phaser, and an Echoplex when I was about 13. I still had tape on the neck to show me where the notes were, but I was learning to play and developing a taste for sounds at the same time—they went hand in hand. If there was a pedal nearby, I plugged it in. I was never afraid.

Where were you buying gear?

Back in those days, I borrowed more gear than I bought. The elders I was around knew I liked pedals, so they would go out and get them for me. And my brother's and sister's friends in Vietnam would send home strange pedals from China and Japan.

Were you using effects on every gig?

On certain bass gigs I had to play it straight, but then Larry Graham came out with the fuzz, and jazz cats started to get into funk—Herbie [Hancock] slayed us with "Chameleon," Miles with *Live Evil* and *On the Corner*. Jimi [Hendrix] turned a lotta cats out, sound- and style-wise. I watched Bootsy go from playing tight stuff with James Brown to being in P-Funk with the Mu-Tron and fuzz, on the heels of Larry Graham, who was the granddaddy of all that stuff. By the time I turned 18 in 1974, sonics were full-on. The bass was in your face.

What was your first real bass?

In 1974, I traded a white Ibanez SG copy, a set of new strings, and $50 for my '72 Fender Jazz, the one I played all the Sugar Hill stuff on. Right around then, I learned how strings affected tone. I was using black nylon strings, and when I got roundwounds, it might as well have been Jesus Christ coming out of the clouds. Now I could hear things!

> "The industry is on its knees, so you have to create your own lane."

Over the years, you've become associated with Spector basses and Trace Elliot amps.

My Spector basses and Trace Elliot amps are a match made in heaven. My classic tone is a Spector bass with EMG pickups, Rotosound .040–.100 roundwound strings, with the old-school Spector preamp; a TC Electronic 2290 digital delay; Trace Elliot AH600SMX stereo heads with 4x5 Brite Boxes; and Trace Elliot 4x10 and 1x15 cabs. When you have two 4x10s and two 1x15s, you don't have to strain the amp much. You can turn down real low, and it can handle depth.

How did you use the 2290?

That was my main brain, for years. It had five auxiliary sends, one of which I could use in stereo, so I started to put my rack stuff and pedals through there. I retired it a couple years after Living Colour got back together, and now the Eventide H9 has replaced everything I got from the 2290.

You have a unique way of making split-second effect choices.

I've been working on "audio illusions" for a long time, challenging myself to see how quickly can I get in and out of an effect, fearlessly and smoothly, like Houdini or Bruce Lee. By the time people notice, it's already gone. It's an art to move sonics and the shape of the note in real time.

Most of your effects are guitar pedals.

Besides the SansAmp Bass Driver, everything I use is a guitar pedal. Sometimes, manufacturers take out the top end of their bass pedals, and they compress it. The frequencies aren't what I'd like to hear; I need more fidelity. But there's a lot of great minds working on bass pedals out there

right now, and I'm all eyes and ears.

In your opinion, what's the most common pedalboard mistake players make?

Using bad cables. I make sure every cable is the best quality, and that they're not too long. Don't wind 'em up; once you start curling cables, you're starting your own radio station. I mostly use Asterope cables, which are almost like instruments themselves. Essential Sound Products cables are brilliant, too. It's amazing what clean power will do to your sound. And it's important to use the power supply that came with the pedal.

What advice would you give to a young bass player today?

The industry is on its knees, so you have to create your own lane. Get out of your comfort zone. Be humble, be open, and be real. Be social! Put down your iPhones and iPads and walk over to your instrument, because it's not going to walk over to you. Put the time in. Listen with your ears and not your eyes, but keep your eyes wide open, because you might see something you like. Read up on your heroes, see how they were at your age, and see where they are right now. And go see them live!

Are you still learning new things?

I'm always developing. I'm 60 years old and I'm just getting into Victor Wooten's double-thumping technique, and I ain't afraid to say it. If you're honest with yourself, you'll sleep well at night.

Who inspires you these days?

I'm inspired by so many players out there—folks like Victor, Richard Bona, Rodney "Skeet" Curtis, Oteil Burbridge, Gerald Veasley, Steve Bailey, Andrew Gouché, Phil Lesh, John Benitez, Rex Brown, Norwood Fisher, Darryl Jenifer, Billy Sheehan, Stu Hamm, Squarepusher, Christian McBride, and Robert Trujillo. I'm also digging Mononeon, Hadrien Feraud, Thundercat, Cody Wright, Janek Gwizdala, Damian Erskine, and the great Brazilian player Michael Pipoquinha. I'm a bass player's biggest fan. **BP**

CINEMA SONICS

Main basses 1987 Spector NS-2 with EMG P+J pickups, '87 NS-2 5-string with EMG Jazz pickups
Other basses '66 and '72 Fender Jazz Bass (both with Flying Mojo pickups), Ned Steinberger NS electric upright, Supro Huntington III, Kala U-bass, Industrial Radio PRO-4 MIDI bass, 1987 Spector NS-2 fretless with P+J pickups
Strings Rotosound Swing Bass 66 roundwounds, .040–.100
Amps Two Trace Elliot AH1200 heads, two Trace Elliot 4x10s, two Trace Elliot 1x15s
Small pedalboard (in order) SansAmp Bass Driver, Pigtronix Disnortion Micro, Supro Fuzz, DigiTech Whammy 4, Dunlop Cry Baby 535Q, DOD FX-25 Envelope Filter, DOD Synth-Wah, Boss DD-3 digital delay, Zoom B3 or Zoom MS-60B, Eventide H9, Singular Sound BeatBuddy
Bigger pedalboard (in order) SansAmp Bass Driver, Pigtronix Disnortion, DigiTech Whammy 4, Dunlop Cry Baby 535Q, chorus pedal (Boss BF-2 Flanger, DigiTech Nautila, or Source Audio Gemini), DOD FX-25 Envelope Filter, DigiTech Synth Wah, Way Huge Ringworm, Boss DSD-2 Digital Delay Sampler, Boss DD-3 Digital Delay, Boss SSL-20 Slicer into two other H9 pedals (with Barn3 attachments), Pigtronix Infinity Looper, Dunlop Volume XL pedal (with four inputs, hotwired stereo)
Solo gig essentials Zoom B3 or Zoom MS-60B, Singular Sound BeatBuddy, DigiTech Vocalist, Eventide H9, Pigtronix Disnortion Micro, DigiTech Whammy Ricochet
Studio Rupert Neve Designs RNDI DI, Behringer X-Air XR18 and X32 mixers, Telefunken mics
Other Peterson Strobe and StroboClip tuners, Shure PGXD4 wireless unit, Shure SE535 in-ear monitors, MXR/Custom Audio Electronics MC403 Power System, Galaxy Audio AS-1800T wireless unit for in-ears, Asterope cables, Essential Sound Products cables, Mono cases, Ashdown B-Social Desktop Bass Amplifier, Keith McMillan SoftStep and 12 Step pedals, Slaparoo SlapStick, and several Phil Jones Bass products (including the BG-100 Bass Cub, BigHead headphone amp, Briefcase, Compact 4, and Bass Buddy)