

NINE LIVES OF THUNDERCAT

L.A. dude. New icon. Virtuoso. Studio cat. Fanboy. Bass demon. Superhero. Philosopher. All at once. But just call him Thundercat. By E.E. Bradman



“Every day has been a mental... whatever you call this,” says Thundercat. “I saw Kamasi [Washington] a couple days ago, and he was like, ‘This is the longest I’ve gone without genuinely playing my instrument in the manner that we do.’ It’s weird, man! It’s messing with my brain function. I feel like I’m in slow-motion right now.”

Thundercat has all the reason in the world to feel like he’s in slo-mo. A week into the tour celebrating his latest album and just days after a joyful March 9 appearance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, the coronavirus pandemic took him off the road. He was already home in North Hollywood when *It Is What It Is* officially dropped on April 3, garnering high praise and inspiring more than one reviewer to note that the album’s themes of loneliness and loss (“Lost in Space,” “Unrequited Love,” “Fair Chance,” “It Is What It Is”),

nostalgia (“Interstellar Love,” “Funny Thing,” “Overseas”), fear and technology (“Black Qualls”), dancing the pain away (“Miguel’s Happy Dance”), being vulnerable (“Dragonball Durag”), sweet uncertainty (“How I Feel”), and the perfectly titled “Existential Dread” seemed eerily prescient.

As Thundercat shelters in place, the murder of George Floyd, the nationwide protests that follow, and the general malaise—exacerbated by hot weather and lockdown-related restlessness—are on his mind. While we chat one afternoon, he gets word that protests are headed his way; helicopters are buzzing his neighborhood, and the 5pm curfew approaches. “There’s a lot going on at once... I feel a little loopy right now,” he says.

If anyone can survive this weird-ass moment with style, it’s Thundercat. The 35-year-old multi-hyphenate navigates extremes like few others: Vulnerable and playful, simultaneously down to earth and deep in space, he is equally eloquent about substance-related shenanigans and being a doting dad to 13-year-old Sanaa. He makes the idea of genres seem downright silly while proving that Pokémon, jack-off jokes, and *Cannibal Holocaust* can co-exist beautifully with Bootymath, streetwear, yacht rock, and serious discussions about being a black otaku in the age of Trump. Like a cat who’s living all nine of her lives at once, Thundercat fully inhabits multiple realities and somehow pulls it off with grit and humor. Is it any wonder, then, that his outlook on life in 2020 is both realistic and optimistic?

“What stands out more than anything right now is that we are not the first ones to go through this,” says the South Central native whose DNA carries the impact of the 1965 Watts uprising, as well as gang warfare, drugs, the AIDS crisis, and the L.A. riots in his lifetime. “I’m not saying it’s not real—the difficulties, the existential dread, is real,” he says, laughing. “But you know what? From every bad thing comes something good. I know we’re gonna be alright.”



I. The L.A. Dude

Some people are naturally badass, and others are deep learners. Stephen Lee Bruner, born within weeks of the original *Dragon Ball* manga's debut and the beginning of the *Purple Rain* tour, is both.

By all accounts, Stephen is a sensitive, quiet kid with a style all his own; fortunately, his parents—Pam, a flautist/percussionist, and Ronald Sr., drummer for Diana Ross, Gladys Knight, and the Temptations—encourage this. He picks up bass at four, and both he and drummer Ronald Jr., two years older, go to Yamaha Music School (as does keyboardist Jameel, born when Stephen is 12). He can't remember whether his first tape was Stanley Clarke's *Journey to Love*, Jaco Pastorius' 1976 debut, or the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* soundtrack, but by high school, Bruner is blossoming under the tutelage of maestro Reggie Andrews, mentor to three generations of L.A. musicians, including Patrice Rushen. He also connects with future collaborators like Kamasi Washington and plays in church while gigging with “multicultural pop group” No Curfew.

A turning point occurs when Ronald Jr. gets 18-year-old Stephen the bass chair with thrash/punk pioneers Suicidal Tendencies in 2002. Suicidal leader Mike Muir pushes Stephen into the spotlight, a

boon for his chops, vocals, and stage presence. The 2004 self-titled debut of the Young Jazz Giants—Kamasi, Ronald Jr., keyboardist Cameron Graves, and Bruner on upright—is a preview of what will become known as the West Coast Get Down. Ronald leaves Suicidal a year later, but Stephen stays for another 12, during which he plays with the cream of 21st-century black music in L.A., making magic with J*Davey, Bilal, Georgia Anne Muldrow, Miguel Atwood-Ferguson, Austin Peralta, Steve Spacek, Brandon Coleman, Raphael Saadiq, Snoop Dogg, and Erykah Badu, who helps Bruner develop into a full-sized Thundercat.

In 2010, Flying Lotus' *Cosmogramma* begins a deep friendship that leads to Thundercat's debut, *The Golden Age of Apocalypse*, on FlyLo's Brainfeeder label in 2011. *Apocalypse* follows a couple years later. Bruner's contributions to two of the most celebrated albums of 2015, Kamasi's *The Epic* and Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, further raise his profile, setting the stage for *Drunk*, No. 6 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart in 2017, and *It Is What It Is*, which climbed to No. 5 in April.

"I remember like it was yesterday. Different times, for sure," Bruner muses on those early years of gigging around Los Angeles and getting paid in sandwiches and trading cards. "We were moving forward, consistently creating and playing new music, but I didn't know that it'd be something that would translate the way it has. It's hard to fathom."



II. The New Icon

With a Grammy, several headlining tours under his belt, over a half-million followers between Instagram and Twitter, as well as dozens of play-alongs and covers (including Ariana Grande’s take on “Them Changes”), it’s safe to say that Bruner is a bass icon for the new decade. In fact, it’d be hard to name another 6-string monster prominently featured by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Pitchfork*, *Hypebeast*, *GQ Style*, *W*, NPR, *The Fader*, *Complex*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Billboard*, *Interview*, *Stereogum*, *New York*, and *NME*—all in the first five months of 2020.

Despite the attention, however, Thundercat is in no hurry to talk about his craft in say, an instructional video. “I don’t know if I have anything to say. I’d rather show people how to save money or something,” he says, laughing. But what would he tell players trying to find their own style? He knows it can be tough: Raphael Saadiq famously told him years ago, “Nobody wants to hear what you have to say. Play the record,” and Snoop interrupted a Thundercat solo mid-stream to say, “You ain’t gotta do all that, man.”

Bruner considers the question for a second. “Be patient with yourself, because there’s a lot of pain that goes with developing something. But don’t be afraid of hard work. It won’t go unrewarded.”

I ask whether he had spent years chasing a sound he heard in his head, or whether his singular aesthetic was a byproduct of him steadily working.

“I didn’t know where I was going, at first,” he says. “I knew what I felt and what I enjoyed, but I didn’t know it was leading to my own voice. It just takes time—patience and time.”



III. The Virtuoso

Thundercat's more likely to give shout-outs to Uzi and Lil B than lead a bass workshop, but that doesn't mean other players aren't relishing his unique melodies and ear-bending, non-diatonic harmony. Consider, for example, how *It Is What It Is* might sound to nerds like J., who's been playing and analyzing bass lines since the '80s, and B., who's just realizing that symmetrical scales are the secret to the modern bass sound he loves.

B.: What an album! Do you hear the Stanley Clarke influence, right from the beginning?

J.: Absolutely. Those flurries of sound in "Lost in Space" are *so* early Stanley.

B.: What about all these unrelated chords?

J.: Dude! Listen to the first section of “Interstellar Love,” which is Dbm9, Bmaj9, and Ebm9—not related, and not really out there; rich colors, though. But the next section—Bbmaj7 to Fsus to Gbmaj7, Emaj7, Ebm, and back to the Bbm—is like, outer space!

B.: I dig the chromatic flavor on “How Sway” and “I Love Louis Cole,” with its signature Knower harmony.

J.: The first section is Gb, Gbm, B, and Gb. It’s I-IV and back to I, but he goes from the major to the relative minor, always a jarring sound. The next four chords are Gb, D, B, and Gb. Again, basically, I-IV-I, but that D is a radical major-third drop. And then that diatonic hook blows my mind—A, E/C#, F#m, E, D, A/C#, Bm, E7sus.

B. So catchy!

J.: Even when Thundercat’s being simple, there’s always something cool.

B.: How about his two-chord progressions with a twist?

J.: Like “Fair Chance,” Amaj7 to C#m9, but with a Bb7b5 passing chord. Or “Unrequited Love,” Gm9 Cm9 Gm9 and then a Gbmaj7—where’d that come from? I thought “Black Qualls” was going to be a simple Gm-Dm in the verse, but it’s an Em7!

B.: That vocal line and those fills at the end... wow.

J.: He’s singing a Dm or Gm melody over the Em, with f’s and c’s. That pre-chorus is pretty jazzy, with a mb5 chord (Am7b5) to a b9 V chord (D7b9), going to Bbmaj7 Am Gm7 C7sus, all in Gm. But then we get to the chorus, Dmaj9 to Dm9, with those sick bass fills.

B.: “Dragonball Durag” sounds like a cousin of “Show You the Way,” from *Drunk*.

J.: Yep! The first half implies Bm and starts on the IV chord (Em to F#m7); the second half implies the relative major, D, and starts on the IV chord (Gmaj7 to A Bm7). At that point, the tune is in Bm—except the answer chord is that cool II dominant E13#11. Then, climbing down—Gmaj7 F#m7 Em7 A7sus to Dmaj7, the tonic, followed by a C#m7b5 F#7 turnaround back to Dm. Diatonic, but very interesting.

B.: What’s going on in “Miguel’s Happy Dance”?

J. It’s so Thundercat—he’ll play a progression once and do something to it the second time around. The first chord, Abm7, is the end of a cycle that actually starts on Fmaj7 and then goes Dbmaj7 Bbm7 Ebm7

before he hits that ridiculous D7b5#9. The second time, instead of the D alt chord, he plays the Abm7. After that, he modulates, playing the same changes up a minor third, with maybe a few tweaks.

B.: Damn!

J.: “Existential Dread” is dense but pretty diatonic, too. It’s just Gb Db Ebm7; sometimes he climbs it up to Db/F. But the secret is that the first time through the four-bar progression, he throws in a flash of Bb major after the Ebm7. Crazy!

B.: So random. I totally dug that double-tracked bass in “How Sway,” with its familiar tonalities.

J.: That’s the one where he climbs chromatically from Cm9 to Em, right? The second time, he goes all the way to an Fmaj7, with a little variation, of course. The arpeggios are very Weather Report, very Wayne Shorter. The first three bass notes are C, A, and C#—the rest is beyond my ears.

B.: There are also a couple straightforward tracks, too, like “Overseas.”

J.: Which is totally *Off the Wall*-era Michael, with all those cyclical ’80s pop changes—Dmaj7 F/G Cmaj7 Eb/F Bbmaj7 G/A—heavy on sus chords for the V chords.

B.: So, what are your main takeaways?

J.: Thundercat loves minor/major 9 chords and 11ths; that’s where his melodies are. He also writes progressions that are diatonic except for one wild chord that knocks you out. His non-diatonic chord jumps that dip down a major or minor third are probably inspired by George Duke and by Jaco tunes like “Teen Town” and “Havona.” If you played Thundercat progressions on piano, it’d be tough to hear a melody, but when he strings it together, it’s perfect.



IV. The Session Cat

Long before his solo career, Bruner was already in demand as a session bassist. His chief collaborator for the last decade, Flying Lotus, has co-produced and released all four Thundercat albums, featured him on every FlyLo disc since 2010, and pulled him onto other projects such as *Grand Theft Auto V*, an episode of HBO's *Atlanta*, and the 2017 horror/comedy *Kuso*. (Keep an ear out for a future session with Hadrien Feraud and a Thundercat/JD Beck/DOMi freakfest, too.)

Instead of a discography, we've curated a 14-hour [Spotify playlist](#). Want to hear Bruner swing on upright? Check out the Young Jazz Giants. Need some razor-sharp thrash and slap? Go to Suicidal Tendencies' *No Mercy Fool!* Dig that "Portrait of Tracy" tribute on Steve Spacek's "Hey There" and lose yourself in Thundercat's work with Erykah Badu and Sa-ra, but don't sleep on killer bass performances like Kimbra's "Miracle," Moses Sumney's "Quarrel," Janelle Monáe's "Take a Byte," Mac Miller's "What's the Use," and Kendrick Lamar's "These Walls," the centerpiece of Bruner's massive contributions to *To Pimp a Butterfly* and winner of the Grammy for Best Song in 2016.



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V. The Ringleader

The Thundercat live experience is a triumvirate of powerhouses: Dennis Hamm rocks piano/synth textures, complex and interactive parts, as well as ultra-sexy keyboard bass when Bruner goes up high; Justin Brown—who released his own blazing debut as a leader, *Nyeny*, in 2018—is a master of next-level drum chops, authority, and dynamics. Together, they specialize in a loose but controlled chaos that’s a joy to experience.

Dennis and Justin have been with you for seven years, a lifetime in this business.

I don’t take it for granted. They’re not always with me, but when they are, we have fun. We be playin’!

Dennis’s keyboard bass sounds are so damn nasty.

He’s got such big ears. At one point, I felt like I needed two bass players, because I wasn’t sure how I was going to cover the bottom and top parts, but the quality of player that Dennis is allows the band to function the way it does.

I saw footage of the Blue Note shows from February 2019, and it was killin’!

I wasn't sure how we were going to play two to three sets every night for seven nights and have something to say each time, but I really liked how that turned out. I'm happy I had Dennis and Justin with me—I felt like we could go anywhere we wanted.

How do you approach co-writes?

I try not to put a cap on anything. When BadBadNotGood sent me “King of the Hill,” for example, I had to sit with it for a minute before I could get out of my mind about it. I didn't want to kill it before it even got a chance to grow. It took a lot of work, but once it was finished, I sent it back, and they loved it.

I heard you had fun working with Pedro Martins on “It Is What It Is.”

One of my favorite moments! We both knew what we were capable of, and we went straight to the beautiful part. Pedro Martins is a monster.

That Louis Cole track has so much energy.

“I Love Louis Cole” was created mostly by him—I played bass on it, of course, and wrote the lyrics. I forget what gave me the idea to sing over it like that, but I went for it. Louis is really honest about whether he likes what I do, so I'm happy he loved it. It's a beautiful thing.



VI. The Bass Demon

The legend of Thundercat is inseparable from the giant signature Ibanez Artcore he first bonded with in 2012, an 11-lb. semi-hollowbody with 19mm spacing on a neck that's 98mm wide at the 24th fret. (He also rocks a red custom-shop MTD 6 he's owned since ____.) In the last year or so, though, Bruner's been onstage with pink and yellow versions of his signature 6. We reached out to ask why.

Whassup with that pink bass?

That's the Kirby, named after the Nintendo character. It has the same EMG pickups but less electronics than the other guy. It's a bit lighter, but it still lends itself to that same amount of power because it's really just a solid 6-string P-Bass.

Interesting. After all these years, Anthony Jackson also ended up with what is basically a big P-Bass.

That make so much sense—the sound has bottom, and it's open.

Are you taking a break from your main axe?

I just needed a change of scenery. The big brown bass is heavy [*laughter*]. It's still a joy to play, though.

You've seen the yellow Pikachu bass, right?

Yep. Classic! It's pretty much the same as the Kirby, right?

It is. Me and Ibanez are working on a new one right now, trying to figure out where we want to go with it. It'll have the same neck and headstock, but with a thinner, smaller body. I'm trying to figure the inlay work and the right thing, sound-wise. I'm thinking of putting an octaver in it so I could have fewer pedals.

Fresh. What pedals are you using these days?

The red Digitech Whammy and a Moogerfooger MF-103 12-Step Phaser.

Which basses made it onto the album?

The big brown bass and a bit of the red MTD.

And you're still using flatwounds?

Yep. Medium-gauge La Bella Deep Talkin' flats [the 760FS-CB set]. They're fantastic, and they last forever.

Even when they're months old?

Yeah! Flatwounds are the business, man. Also, I don't know if I mentioned it before, but I started having problems with my hands, so I had to do something different.

Aren't flats stiffer than rounds, though?

The string is taut, but it lends itself to be played more like this [*gently bends palm*] than like this [*shapes hand like exaggerated claw*]. Plus, my action's pretty low, and the strings are a good gauge [029-.128].

The ramp helped, too. I still have moments of pain, but I don't have to hold my breath and play through it.

Do you ever think there are tones you just can't get with a 6?

Definitely. When you factor in the wood and everything that makes it vibrate the way it vibrates, a 6-string embodies a lot, but not everything. The bigger the bass, the thicker the strings, the heavier the vibration... it's just inevitable that it'll sound different.

I'm assuming you have a collection of 4's and 5's at home.

Some custom Ibanez basses, a few Fenders, MTDs, a Burns bass—a couple things.

Is it true that you own Michael Henderson's old P-Bass?

I did, but years ago, when I was at a jam session, somebody broke into my car and stole it.

Damn. Are there vintage Fenders in your collection?

I have a pre-CBS 1962 P-Bass, but I'm not much of a classic collector as compared to going for a certain sound. The Fenders I have are standard P-Basses and Jazz Basses. Ibanez has done a great job of developing instruments for me that are capable of creating the sounds I'm looking for. One of my basses is a 4-string Burns copy, with Burns pickups and stuff. Other than that, there's an upright, of course. Upright is definitely also where I come from.



VII. The Superhero

Bootsy has his Space Bass, his star shades, and top hat;

Larry with his white Moon and outfit is all that.

Bare-chested Jaco, in baggy pants, ruled

As acolytes over his Bass of Doom drooled.

Marcus ain't Marcus without the porkpie—

And just like he said, the sun don't lie.

Thundercat, fan of all things Japanese,

Curates costumes however he pleases:

Bleached dreads covered by a Gunner Foxx hat

Or wolf and Native headpieces. So cheeky, that!

He digs the classics—Gucci, Chanel, Vitton,

But he also gets his Rad Hourani on.
Hypland, Kapital, Cosmo, Nathalia,
He probably loves Pikachu way more than all o' ya.
How about the vest inspired by *Dragon Ball Z*
Or that one time he dressed like a mariachi?
Visvims on his toes, Birkenstocks for his feet,
Those muay thai trunks just can't be beat.
Don't get me started on all that ink—
Cowboy Bebop! Jaco! Mac! The kitchen sink!
A ThunderCat roars from each of his hands
Signifying dominance over all the lands.
Bling, fly shades, septum ring, necklace
Watch him mix and match—this dude is reckless!
Does he make you laugh? Does he make you smile?
That's the plan, baby. There's no denial.
“I be out there, full *Pootie Tang*,
Trollin' for booty in 'Dragonball Durag.'
It's important to be silly in times like these.
Let it all out. Don't hold in that sneeze!”



VIII. The Fanboy

Any true music aficionado knows that Joni Mitchell is one of the all-time greats: Besides her adventurous, singular catalog and alternate-tuning wizardry, she has collaborated with legends like Wayne Shorter and Jaco, who did some of his best work on her late-'70s *Mingus*, *Hejira*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, and *Shadows & Light* albums. A meeting between Joni and Thundercat seemed like a lofty dream—until Herbie Hancock made it happen.

“I was playing with Herbie at the Hollywood Bowl, and she waited around after the show to say hi. You *know* I geeked out!” Bruner says. “The first thing I did, like a complete nerd, was show her the tattoo of Jaco on my right calf. She looked at me and said, “You know, I loved the guy, too, but I wouldn’t get him drawn on my body!”

I mention that Pitchfork interview where Thundercat played “Portrait of Tracy” right after showing love to Raphael Saadiq, Marcus Miller, Louis Johnson, Jack Bruce, Larry Graham, and Paul Jackson (plus the System’s David Frank). He gets quiet. “Getting a chance to tell people about Jaco and the man we know him to be was a cool moment,” he says.

A Thundercat/Joni collabo might be wishful thinking, but another longtime hero did make it onto *It Is What It Is*. “I met Steve Arrington from [’70s funk band] Slave though Dâm Funk a few years ago,” Bruner says. “We wanted to do something, and he was a bit apprehensive at first, naturally, because of the age difference and everything. But he murdered it.” The result, “Black Qualls,” is a slam dunk for Bruner’s greasy old-school feel, Steve Lacy’s ’70s-correct guitar and vocals, and Arrington’s signature vocal delivery.

Slave bassist Mark Adams, who passed away in 2011, was an influence, too. “I learned the importance of making a bass line glide and move from Mark Adams’ Slave bass lines and the Whispers,” he says. “It’s cool to be able to do a gang of stuff, but I wanted to know how to make a bass line resonate in the body so that it gets people moving. Everything about how those bass lines felt, that’s what I wanted to feel like, no matter what I was doing. Like James Brown said, ‘What’sever I play, it’s got be funky.’”

Like many ’80s kids, Bruner grew up on Japanese pop culture; he was into comic books, Sega Genesis games, *Mortal Kombat*, and anime long before he first visited Japan with songwriter Leon Ware at 17. One of his all-time favorite movies is *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie*, based on the animated series.

“Anime takes such a front row of my processing in general, and it’s what gets me through,” says Thundercat. “All of it—from the little weird idiosyncrasies that hide in the philosophy to the personal struggles of the artist creating it—I take into what I do. It meant so much to work with [*Cowboy Bebop* director] Shinichiro Watanabe on that 2019 episode of *Carole & Tuesday*. What better way than to offer music [“Unrequited Love”] to the person who spent so much time developing stories for me as a youth and as an adult?”



IX. The Philosopher

“There are so many things I wish I would’ve seen or been able to change, but that’s just not how it works sometimes,” says Thundercat, looking back on the last couple years. The one-two punch of best friend Mac Miller’s accidental overdose in 2018, followed a couple months later by the end of a relationship that seemed headed toward marriage, affected Bruner deeply. Both events put him in a reflective frame of mind and prompted him to stop drinking, change his diet, take up boxing, and lose 100 lbs.—just in time for the tour and the pandemic that continues to postpone it.

Congrats on quitting alcohol! It must be tough, especially on the road.

It’s a battle. This environment tells us, “Just knock one back— it’ll make things a little easier,” and it genuinely does. But you’re still gonna have to deal with stuff at some point.

How did you get the strength to quit?

Erykah [Badu] used to tell me I’d stop when I got tired, and I did. Seeing my friends die, not being able to remember anything, having to apologize all the time for something I did—I just got tired.

Does making music feel any different?

The good thing is that I didn't attach music to alcohol. I can't play drunk. Most of my music is created sober.

How does it feel to play these songs every night?

I do have a weird relationship with a lot of the tracks because of the content of the music. I was hurting. I lost both my best friend and the girl I was going to marry.

And just as you're about to release the album...

...coronavirus hits. Dang! But I know that life comes with ups and downs, and you just get better at navigating them. That's all you can hope for, I'd imagine.

Do you sense joy on the other side of "it is what it is"?

Yeah, but it takes a minute. Time heals. Sometimes it doesn't heal, and sometimes it leaves scars, but it just takes a second.

Does playing help?

Sometimes. Over the last year, I had to sit down and just take life in. I couldn't deny it, couldn't look over it, couldn't necessarily work through it. I had to let life in, and I'm still in the process of doing that.

What are you most looking forward to?

The chance to play. This is the longest I've taken to not play, over this last year. It's been a healing process. Even the album coming out is healing. I'm a different person now.

It is what it is.

There you go.

Here's hoping that creating new music can carry you through.

I'm always open to inspiration and the creative process. I'm into the joy of bending and stretching what I know, or what I don't know, and delving into the music. I'm always looking to make something different.

I'm happy I'm alive, I guess.