



Jeff Berlin Beats the Solo LP Jinx

by Philip Bashe

Berlin is a longtime advocate of Leo Quan's Badass bass bridge, which he calls "the greatest invention ever devised for the bass guitar." He favors Bartolini pickups and Carl Thompson light-gauge strings.

A bass player's solo album, what a ridiculous concept: showcasing an instrument that most people generally prefer buried safely under a blanket of guitars, keyboards and drums. The only thing more ludicrous is a drummer's solo LP, but *shhhh*, don't tell Carmine Appice.

It's taken bassists the better part of a decade and a half to comprehend this inherent paradox, suggesting that perhaps they're missing more than just two strings. Remember Jack Bruce's early solo discs, with the

bass placed so prominently in the mix that even at normal volumes it could move furniture? And if you were foolhardy enough to crank the low end, you first had better doublecheck that your home-insurance premiums were paid up.

Jeff Berlin remembers, and on his first LP under his own name, the 32-year-old sessionman has avoided the self-indulgences that

have plagued most other bassists' records. *Champion's* eight tracks are intended as compositional showcases first and foremost, yet ultimately provide a splendid platform for his considerable abilities. He shows off, sure, but always within the context of the music.

"Anytime bassists or drummers get a solo deal," says Berlin, a resident of Los Angeles, "they always seem to commit the violation of flaunting every lick they've ever known, and that can wear really thin. I figured that at this point in my career people know I can play, so I didn't need to reiterate that point. Besides, with such incredible musicians on the album, I decided just to play as part of the band."

Those musicians include such talents as Scott Henderson and Journey's Neal Schon on guitars, keyboardists T Lavitz and Clare Fischer, and Ronnie Montrose, who coproduced with Berlin and contributed backing vocals but, oddly, left his guitar in its case for the sessions at the Music Annex in Menlo Park, California. Berlin's biggest coup of all was in coaxing Journey's Steve Smith and Rush's Neil Peart to drum on the LP—no small feat in the case of the latter, for whom recording outside of Rush is extremely rare. Berlin admits that Peart's presence on *Champion* was flattering and explains how it came about.

"A lot of people have compared my work with Bill Bruford to Neil and Geddy Lee's style as a rhythm section. Geddy used to listen to the Bruford band a lot and said some nice things about me in the press, so when Rush were playing out my way, I called him up, and he invited me backstage.

"So I was hanging out with the band, just enjoying one another's company. And remember when you were in summer camp and would exchange phone numbers before leaving for home? That's what we did. I had some tunes in mind for Neil, phoned him up, and he spent a day and a half with me recording his parts."

Peart appears on the album-ending "Champion (of the World)" and a canny adaptation of Cannonball Adderly's "Murabi," which features both him and Smith drumming at the same time. For Peart, who's played with the same bassist for the past 11 years, it required surprisingly little adjustment to spar musically with Berlin. "One of Jeff's hobbies is boxing," says Peart, "and he brings that muscularity to his playing. So it was actually very easy for us to develop a rapport, because we're both such physical players."

On "Murabi," *Champion's* standout track, Berlin demonstrates the form that won him enough votes to place Top Five in this year's *IM&RW* Music Awards Poll for best bassist. He and guitarist Henderson blurt out Adderly's trumpet lines on their respective instruments, tailgating each other up and down some treacherous terrain before the band blows in with gale-force intensity. Berlin's forte as a player is the suppleness of his touch: For example, on "20,000 Prayers"'s solo section, he thrums a rapid flurry of 16th notes so delicately, you're deceived into

thinking it must be a guitar rather than a bass. Yet just a few measures later, he shifts from overdrive into first gear, simply laying down eighth notes, and passes the baton to drummer Smith, who ignites the tune dynamically with a burst of fills.

Even Berlin's solo arrangement of the traditional "Dixie" lacks the sort of magniloquence one might expect, as he counterpoints the bass and melody lines like a four-string equivalent to the revolutionary jazz guitarist Stanley Jordan. "And no overdubs," he says proudly of "Dixie."

Berlin is no son of the South, but hails originally from Hempstead, Long Island. He credits his father, an opera singer, with encouraging him musically: By age five the precocious youngster was already studying violin. Upon leaving the Berklee College of Music in 1975, it didn't take Berlin long to procure some impressive credentials. "I left school in April of that year," he recalls. "In May I was in a band with Carmine Appice, in June and July I was on the road with jazz guitarist Pat Martino, and then I recorded " in Europe with Patrick Moraz"; an auspicious bow for a 22-year-old.

That same year Berlin had Bill Bartolini design a pickup for his main bass, a Fender Precision with a 1962 J-bass neck. It worked flawlessly for nearly a decade, recounts Berlin, but finally began building up too much static about a year ago. "So I called up Bill and

asked him if he could make me a new one. He went over to a drawer, pulled out the very same schematic he'd sketched ten years earlier, and wired me a new pickup. Neat!"

Berlin switches on only the back pickup, and he's also a longtime advocate of Leo Quan's Badass bass bridge, which he calls "the greatest invention ever devised for the bass guitar." Berlin, who plucks using his

"I'm a consummate sideman; whatever is needed, I can come up with the goods."

thumb and index and middle fingers, strings his Fender and Tobias basses with Carl Thompson light-gauges (.40, .60, .80, .100), and in the studio believes in allowing his fingers to determine his sound. He records direct, employing but one effect, a Klark-Teknik reverb unit, and even then only minimally. Live, he plugs into all-Yamaha gear: PB-1 preamp, two P2200 200-watt power amps and two 2-15" cabinets.

Though most fusion players tend to get labeled as technicians, Berlin is hoping that the music on *Champion* will distance him from that classification. "The word 'fusion,'" he says warily, "has a bad connotation, because most fusionists haven't been successful in making music rather than chops exercises." Not that fusion is all he listens to.

Though he generally doesn't find rock & roll challenging enough, "as a feel," he enthuses, "it's incredible." And Berlin fans may be surprised to learn that he is a fan of roots rockers Huey Lewis and the News, and their bassist, Mario Cipollina. As his past credits attest—including work with Allan Holdsworth, Earl Klugh, Ray Barretto and Patti Austin—his musical interests and capabilities are farreaching.

Asked if having assumed the role of band-leader for his own album will make it difficult to return to session work, Berlin dismisses such a notion immediately.

"Nah, not at all. I'm a consummate sideman; whatever is needed, I can come up with the goods. I read really well, so anything that's put in front of me, I can play."

Egotistical? Yes. But Berlin is a likable sort who fluctuates compulsively between boastfulness and humility, calling back a few days later to inquire, "I didn't come on too strong, did I?"

Reflecting on his career, he says, "There are two realities: One, that I can play with anybody and do a great job. But then," he adds humbly, "I'll listen to Allan Holdsworth and wish I could become as aware of tonality as he is. Or become as musical as Michael Brecker. Or Clare Fischer, who's just brilliant."

"I'll listen to these guys, and it makes me realize that I still have to work very, very hard in order to have a musical understanding like they do. In that respect, it can make you feel very inadequate." □

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