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MAURIZIO ROLLI

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MoodSwings

by Alessandro Arcuri

It's certainly not an easy task to give homage to a mythical character like Jaco Pastorius; more than 25 years after his solo debut it's still difficult to approach his works without the risk of falling into banality or pretentiousness. [Maurizio Rolli](#), knowing that it wouldn't have been an easy job, decided to give homage to the Master in a very personal way. His CD "moodswings", in fact offers a revision of Pastorius' most famous tunes, in a way that almost appears as it was suggested by Jaco's works themselves: the search of a personal musical identity through a continuous challenge, and reconsideration of all your musical knowledge. Knowing where to leave intact a genius' work and where, instead, to give a personal reinterpretation, is the result of a careful analysis and profound knowledge of what you're about to face, and

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Maurizio gives us the proof of that all, with the help of some famous contributors (just listen to the opening tune where he duets with Michael Manring, or to the tune written with Mike Stern), in this beautiful record.



I noticed that often jazz musicians with a classical background, when facing modern harmony studies, claim that they're learning more from those studies, rather than from classical harmony ones, often too strictly linked to rules that are long surpassed, nowadays. Did that happen to you too?

I believe that my learning course has gone the opposite way, much like the conclusions I came to. I begun by studying

jazz harmony (which I would define “theory of improvisation”) and afterwards I took a direction towards “cultured” music, which is not strictly “classical” music, but it’s rather “contemporary”. I’m really interested in modern composers, even if the attraction towards those “fathers” like Bach is strong, like in every jazz musician.

I can’t tell if there are really two different harmonies, but I don’t really think so. I see two different languages, with different styles, but I really feel it’s no use to consider them separately. I believe that all the greatest Jazz composers and arrangers, from Duke Ellington to Gil Evans, and from [Vince Mendoza](#) to [Maria Schneider](#), and so on, drew from Bach and Schoenberg, and Stravinsky and Mahler, but I also believe that 20th century composers were also influenced by Jazz, to a certain degree.

What I came to dislike is that “clustered” approach to harmony of some jazz books; I prefer to consider harmony as a science in which the process to reach a goal is as stimulating as the goal itself.

Probably what those musicians you were talking about hate, is a surpassed teaching method, rather than classical harmony in particular, and also learning programs that force you to study a topic in a way that has no longer any practical application... it’s no mystery that Conservatory’s programs really need to be re-adjusted, but can we say that the cure will be better than the disease?

Do you think that arranging a tune can be a tough issue for a bassist, whose role is often “limited” to a rhythmic function - even if it still is the pivotal point of all harmony - compared to how it can be for - let’s say - a pianist? Given the proper musical knowledge, of course, I noticed that often bass players have a different way of thinking than pianists. Do you feel it’s more difficult to approach an arrangement or do you think that since we are used to live the music “from the ground up” (from the basis of harmony and rhythm), makes the task easier?

I think it’s difficult to rearrange a tune without ruining it, no matter what instrument you play. I must tell that since I learned to use the piano (and note that I said “use” not “play”) to write music, the quality of what I write got better, but it can also happen that technical skills get over creativity.

Surely bass players write differently from piano players, but all the best bassists also play a bit of piano.

The real difference I found, considering my personal experience, is that I have to stretch more my imagination, since it’s impossible, for me, to play all the different orchestra parts.

I’m not saying that for a pianist it’s easier, but for me it’s impossible. I rely on my imagination.

Since on your beautiful CD, *homage to Jaco Pastorius*, is a tribute to one of the latest innovators on electric bass, and since it also features another big innovator as Michael Manring, where do you think bass is heading, nowadays?

With the open tunings that Manning is experimenting and the absurd tapping ostinatos of Les Claypool, just to tell a couple of names, what do you think can still be said on the instrument?

Do you know any other innovator, on bass, now?



I think that the names are the ones that everybody already knows. I don't know very well Les Claypool's work, but I think that Michael's one is absolutely the best.

I think that him and, in a different way also Marcus Miller, are the true Jaco's heirs, because their sound is very different from his one, and that gives them a very personal voice, even if the Master's influence is inevitable: it would be like playing Bebop and pretend not to play Parker.

Anyway Michael's incredible... the energy that he conveys in his shows is unbelievable, he's an orchestra just by himself, and I'm not only talking about his wild use of polyphony, I'm talking about his sheer sonic impact. I've never seen anyone using so

many different techniques without being like a circus show, except in his case.

And he's also a man of uncommon intelligence and even more rare modesty and kindness. It's truly an honor for me to be a friend of his.

The covers of the Pastorius' tunes that are featured on your CD range from the most genuine quotes to the most radical arrangements. In the cover of "Havona" you explain, in the CD booklet's notes, how the tune itself led to a somewhat "one way to the final arrangement", whereas in the case of Continuum you start with a very honest quote of the original theme, and only afterwards you give more space to personal contributions that lead then back to the main theme. Did you approach each song only with a particular idea you had in mind, adapting the arrangement until it met what you wanted to hear, or did you let the intrinsic nature of each tune dictate the road to follow?

The primary directive was that the music had to be as much "mine" as possible, still being inspired to the Master's music. It's actually a reinterpretation of Jaco's material, not intended only as music.

I put some precise limits, I didn't do any fragmentation or any modification to the original melodies; I wanted that the tune to be arranged had to be still recognizable, because that music does not need any "correction", being already perfect the way Pastorius conceived it.

Still I wanted to come up with something that was "the fruit of my intellect" (just to quote the code of S.I.A.E. [*translator's note: the Italian Society of Authors and Editors*]) and that I felt as much "mine" as possible. So I shifted my attention on the harmonic and timbre side.

If you notice I had deep respect to the original form of the tunes, while I had a more personal approach towards the standards. Trying to alter harmonies such as "Three views" one would be like ruining perfection, but even when a song went under a deep reinterpretation, the original version was still quoted on the opening part (such as in Continuum)

All the CD balances between the quote and the invention; rather than adding ideas and running the risk of ruining everything, all the ideas are reinterpreted.

That's what happens when Havona's solo is re-introduced by the horns section, but also, looking at the whole CD's architecture, with the introduction of "Donna Lee" as the opening tune. That's played by Michael Manring and myself, clearly quoting the original version (note the E major ending), but rendering a whole different thing, if you consider the mood and the humor. The CD ends with Jaco playing the piano, exactly like in his first record, where Herbie Hancock plays a piano solo in the closing tune. So, this way, the whole CD is filled with the echoes of Jaco's work.



Speaking about Jaco, there's a well-known saying of him that goes "I know exactly where I stole every note". The importance of the sources of inspiration, for a musician, is clear; but knowing how to deal with them is a whole different thing. How do you think a young musician could find the right balance between the imitation of an artist he or she draws inspiration from, and the development of a true personal voice on the instrument?

And how do you convey this to your students?

In my teaching method I try to "quote my sources".

Each time I teach something I try to give a logical explanation in order to stimulate the urge to keep on studying... if, for instance, I'm explaining my own solutions to particular problems, otherwise, noticing how diverse are the sources to draw from, I make clear how useful is a particular knowledge and how other musicians apply it.

I often cite musicians who do not play bass... it can happen that only by imitating how Michael Brecker plays you can

sound different from this or that bassist, given the differences of approach. Often an instrument's limitations are the strength of another one, and the key to move forward.

When you talk about "quoting your sources" I can't help to notice that, for example, when you start your solo on "Havona", you quote Miles Davis' "Four", then you give the example of Michael Brecker as another source of inspiration; I've seen that the horns are among the instruments we draw mostly from, in order to broaden the possibilities of our instrument. Do you think it's just because they have a deeper tradition of solo playing than electric bass (and even of double bass) or is it because they have such different roles that it's inevitable to find new approaches and new ways of playing?

I must admit that when I played the solo on "Havona" and I became aware of the quoting you just mentioned I wasn't very happy, because it seemed a bit out of context. But then I came to think that Jaco, in his solo, clearly quoted Stravinsky's "The rite of spring" and I felt better, because also my solo, then, had a philological meaning.

I think that drawing from many sources (Coltrane, Hendrix, the Beatles, Bach, Marley, Caribbean music...) is one of the greatest gifts of Jaco. You never knew what to expect from such a guy, with such a variety of styles he colored his music with. That's typically jazz, after all.... Stealing from all the "nearby" genres and making them your own... even if I think we're kind of losing that habit, going towards a sort of "crystallization" of the jazz language.

Regarding Michael Brecker, he's one of my favorite musicians, and I think he's one of the most advanced modern soloists. Drawing from him necessarily enriches your bag of tricks, both technically and harmonically. I believe that every instrument has its limits, but each instrument's limits can be another instrument's strength... drawing from the works of other bassists is surely useful, but drawing from other instruments widens your palette and it helps finding your own style, like it helps getting inspiration from the vocals, too.

I often have this saying in my head, I don't know who said it, but it goes like this: "Jazz is that music where the voice imitates the instruments and the instruments imitate the voice."

I don't feel I could leave out one of the two hypothesis you gave, I'd even say they're both right, because after all music is a form of art where no past experience must be thrown away and everything can be useful.

Massimo Moriconi, in one of his training books, says that often a musician models his musical taste upon his technical limitations; he advises a complete mastering of the instrument you play in order to get the most out of it. It's also true that if you don't have anything to say, but you're skilled, sooner or later you bore everyone out; how do you think you can avoid falling in the "technique as the ultimate goal" trap?

It's difficult to say; it's such a subjective matter. The technique itself is a complex discipline. It's often considered a synonym

of speed, but it's a misunderstanding you get from a superficial knowledge.

I see technique as something more linked to obtaining the sound with your skills; the ability to execute difficult passages, that is.

Since Jaco the bass guitar became a virtuoso instrument, like the bass community rose up saying "we exist, too!". It's not been possible to conceive the electric bass in the same way anymore.

It's also true that Jaco wasn't simply a skilled player, he was a wonderful musician, and his bass themes are still impossible to emulate (due to his formidable chops). Every bassist knows how to play "Teentown", but if someone tries to play "A remark you made" the difference is clear! Not to mention those who can play the "Donna Lee" head, but don't know how to comp it with a decent walking line!

I think that the "trap" you mentioned can be avoided trying not to forget what instrument you're playing and why you play it. What's its purpose and what are the features that the other musicians look for in a bassist.

Many of my students show up with their thumb in the air, asking me to show them how to slap, while others go crazy trying to play tapped cello suites, but they can't follow an F blues. They don't want to be bassists. I can tell you that you learn those things in the worst way, being fired again and again, until you realize that bass is not a guitar tuned an octave below.

Since you play both electric and double bass, do you find that the two instruments have two roles that, even if similar, still are different, because of their different sound and approach, or did you discover an influence of one towards the other, in the way you play them?

The study of double bass gave me a musical and technical knowledge that the electric didn't. I learned how to study it in order to optimize the time I had to spend on an instrument I hated, because it kept me apart from my true love, the electric bass.

I learned to listen to music that didn't belong to the electric bass literature; I found out that with no drums I had problems in making the rhythm clear, and I wasn't aware of that. I clashed with some limits I had and didn't see, as a boy. Maybe that was because the instruments I played didn't challenge me enough, or maybe because of my young age.

The more limits I discovered the more I had to work to overcome them. And also the double bass didn't allow me to "fly", I had to "walk". And that forced me to think about the music, rather than focusing only on the instrument, I learned to keep the hands in check until I had something in my head to say. Now that I fell in love with double bass, too, and I can think only about music, I can choose the sound that fits better in every situation, like a trumpet player with four different mutes. The only difference is that four mutes weigh a lot less than four basses! It annoys me having to explain to all the people that tell me they prefer double bass that's not a problem of mine, but it's theirs... what should I do... throw away the instrument?

The duet you did with the singer Diana Torto, with the collaboration of two sax

players and a cello player, is not exactly what you could call a typical band's line up. How do you approach such situations from a bassist but also arranger's point of view?

Same solutions... sound-wise. My worst nightmare is that people fall asleep at a concert of mine (and that happens to better musicians than me, too)

I think that you must avoid boredom putting always something new into music, using all parameters, such as rhythm, harmony, timbre, dynamics, form and all their combinations. All the instruments in that line up (that are seldom used together at the same time) are used in unusual roles... imitating the missing instruments. If you want guitar you can pluck the cello, if you want distortion you put a piece of paper between the double bass' strings... *et voilà*, if you want tablas you use the soprano sax's keys, if you want the brushes on the snare you use the reed, and so on... or you drag your right hand on the bass' body while the left hand taps the fundamentals. That way arranging the parts becomes like having a whole orchestra at your disposal. On the contrary, the first times I had the chance to work with an orchestra I made everyone play at the same time, and that produced only a single sound I could work with. I learned a lot by working with small line-ups and trying to achieve a sound similar to the one of a whole orchestra, and that taught me that, for instance, in a brass section you could have something like twenty singers, no matter which instrument they play.

I've seen that you are a faithful user of Italian basses and amps, is that the fruit of a long research or did you favor our products right from the start?

To tell you the truth they favored me right from the start... I'm working together with [Laurus](#), [Mari](#) and [MarkBass](#) since many years... but I wouldn't do that if I didn't find what I was looking for.

I usually stay aside from the market and musical instruments shops, but that's because I'm so close to those makers that I can just let them know my needs and have a solution in a very short time.

With MarkBass there's a special relationship because it all started when their amp was just a gray box with big black knobs on it. Most of the early development tests were done with my instruments, so it was inevitable that for me it would have become the best amp around.

You can visit Maurizio Rolli's web site at: <http://www.mauriziorolli.com>

Maurizio Rolli's CDs are also available through [BassStiff Online](#).



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