

Robert DeLeo of the Stone Temple Pilots

“Soul At The Core,” November 2001

By E.E. Bradman

“Everything I’m doing is a Jamerson rehash—it really is.”

There would be no Stone Temple Pilots without Robert DeLeo. From the beginning, his distinctive songwriting and soulful, multi-instrumental contributions helped make the band stars. When critics called them imitators who had hopped on the grunge bandwagon, DeLeo predicted they’d be around long after the Seattle scene died. “Hey, it’s our first album,” he told a reporter. “Judge us on our fourth or fifth. We’ll still be here.”

Nine years later, DeLeo has much to be proud of. STP has survived both changing trends and singer Scott Weiland’s drug addiction to sell more than ten million records, all of them boosted by DeLeo’s low-end aesthetic. *Shangri-La Dee Da*, the band’s fifth release, showcases Robert’s skills as a player and writer, and the album’s warm bass tone might be the best-recorded of his career. From his full-bodied presence on “Hello, It’s Late” and Rocco-style 16ths of “Regeneration” to the Moog vibe of “Too Cool Queenie” and aggressive attack of “Long Way Home,” DeLeo continues to indulge his love for Motown and Philly soul in a modern rock context, often with delectable success.

Born on February 2, 1966 in Montclair, New Jersey, DeLeo was raised in Point Pleasant Beach, on the shore near Asbury Park. Right from the beginning, his was a ’70s AM-radio world. “I was hearing a lot of different kinds of music, probably because I was the youngest one in the family. Cat Stevens would be playing in one sister’s room, I’d

hear Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young in the other sister's room, and my older brother, Dean, would be playing Led Zeppelin. I heard Larry Graham and the stuff Bootsy was doing with James Brown, and it just blew me away. Songs like the Spinners' 'It's a Shame,' Al Green, and players like John Paul Jones, who brought a James Jamerson style to rock—that's what got me interested in bass."

DeLeo started on guitar, and by the time he was in high school, he had grown enamored with progressive rock. "I listened to John Entwistle, and I got into Chris Squire, whose tone I loved. By the early '70s he was already switching to roundwounds and going through guitar amps. He wanted to be heard! I learned Steve Howe's 'Mood for a Day' [from Yes's *Fragile*] in tenth grade. But there weren't many cats my age I could play with, because they didn't really know how to play." When his brother's cover band needed a bass player, 16-year-old Robert picked up a Fender Precision, a Sunn head, and a 1x18 cabinet. "For our first gig I had to learn 30 songs in two weeks: 'The Real Me' by the Who, 'Red Barchetta' by Rush, and anything from Yes to U2 to Duran Duran and the Beatles. No lessons, no theory—it was all by ear. It was natural. And being six foot two, I just felt more comfortable with the bass."

Toward the end of high school, Robert's parents' divorce prompted him to withdraw into music; eventually, he joined his sister out West and tried playing full-time. He wound up selling amps for Mesa/Boogie and working at Sunset Custom, which would later become Schecter Guitar Research. "[Guitarist] Les Paul once said an instrument can be your therapist and your girlfriend, and my P-Bass was the thing that got me through high school. When it was over, I got away from Jersey, saved my money, and bought a StingRay. I knew I wanted to do music, but I was frustrated."

Robert met Weiland at a Black Flag concert in 1986; the two found drummer Eric Kretz in a music ad, and Dean—who had followed his brother to Southern California—joined shortly afterward. Stone Temple Pilots was playing around San Diego by '87. After a few funk-rock detours (“it was the '80s—you had to play either funk-rock or be in a hair band”), they were signed to Atlantic in 1992.

The grunge and hooks of *Core*, released that September, made them celebrities within a year. Two years later, *Purple* debuted at No. 1 and went multi-platinum with hits like Robert’s “Interstate Love Song.” By 1995, though, Weiland’s heroin habit was beginning to grab more headlines than the band’s music. They barely made it through next year’s *Tiny Music ... Songs from the Vatican Gift Shop*, a critical and commercial success that showed the band exploring pop and psychedelic directions. By '98 Weiland had a solo album, *12-Bar Blues*, and the rest of the band—as Talk Show—released a self-titled CD with another lead singer. STP reunited for 1999’s *No. 4*, mixing nu-metal attitude with characteristic Pilots pop style.

Energized by *Shangri-La*, Weiland’s sobriety, and new management, Robert and the band finished a brief European jaunt in September and are currently headlining the Family Values Tour. DeLeo, who has already begun songwriting collaborations with Aerosmith, Ozzy Osbourne, and Sheryl Crow, has other plans beyond the touring life. “There’s going to be a time when playing songs like ‘Down’ might seem quite silly. I don’t know about the near future, but I see myself getting more into producing and songwriting. Of course, I really enjoy playing bass, and it’ll always be a fun challenge to incorporate my bass playing into the songs I’ve written.”

Your bass parts on songs like “Sour Girl” [No. 4] are clearly inspired by your R&B listening habits.

Thank you! Dean actually came up with the feel for that bass line. I dig the way Al Green did that feel; the Spinners did it, too, on songs like “Could It Be I’m Falling in Love.” I modeled “Wicked Garden,” also from *No. 4*, after Rocco Prestia—it sounds like a simplified version of a Tower Of Power line. I used a back-pickup, staccato sound for “Trippin,” too. How could you listen to “What Is Hip” and not go, Holy shit! Same for Verdine White—check out “Getaway” and “Shining Star.” Everything I’m doing is a Jamerson rehash—it really is.

There are also many John Paul Jones-isms in your playing.

The way he played those melodic, Motown- and Philly-style lines in a rock band made Zeppelin sound so sophisticated. I could just play the root notes, but I love the challenge of playing those soul lines in a rock format. Led Zeppelin’s secret, key ingredient was the funk. John Bonham had a big James Brown influence, and John Paul Jones took a lot from Jamerson. The most overlooked Zeppelin album is probably *Presence*—Bonham’s playing is so funky, and John Paul Jones is just wicked on the 8- and 12-strings.

Coming out of your funk-rock phase, did you purposely avoid slapping?

I became a little more interested in getting the song across, and I found that with STP, slapping didn’t do anything for songwriting. It was my way of humbling myself—taking away the flash and focusing on the songs.

Do you write on bass?

I consider myself a songwriter and a bass player, but nine times out of ten, I sit down and work it out with a guitar or a piano. I always come up with a chordal structure and then figure out how I want that to move. It’s fun to add bass later because I have the

freedom to move around what's already there; I listen to what the drummer's doing and work around that. I heard that Paul McCartney recorded the bass after all the other instruments were tracked, and that's why the bass sounds so good on all those records. It was the last thing down.

How did you approach the first couple albums?

I didn't put a lot of thought into my bass playing on *Core*. I can't say I was 100% there on that record. I was very angry at that point in my life, and the guitar was expressing my anger a little easier than the bass was. When it came time to put my bass tracks down, I felt like I just put everything I had into arranging each song. But those songs—"Sin," "Plush," "Creep"—were the proud moments of my early songwriting.

For *Purple*, I was still concentrating on songs. I knew what I wanted from my bass playing, but I didn't quite know how to get it. I consider myself a player, too, and sometimes I could have expressed that a little differently. But I'm not complaining.

You've put a lot of energy into songwriting and arranging.

It started simply enough—I just wanted to know where chords would lead. It was all experimentation and accident and learning by ear. One of the first things I played on bass was a major 7 chord—it was nice and I liked the way it worked. I listened to Gershwin, and the way Cole Porter put chords together. And getting a home studio in the '80s really allowed me to learn how to craft songs. I learned that arrangements can make or break a song.

How do you switch hats from bassist to arranger to songwriter?

There's a totally different perspective when I'm writing and playing guitar. When I'm playing bass, it's not about the notes—it's all about the feel. When I start thinking about the notes, that's when I get myself caught. The feel dictates the notes.

But your note selection gives you away as an arranger—you seem conscious of where everything goes.

It really comes down to being a music fan. I enjoy listening to jazz chord structures and the way chords go together, for example, and I borrow from that and try to put it into a rock format. That's been one of the secret formulas of my writing: trying to fit jazz-influenced chords into a song with a rock beat.

What prompted the trips into pop and psychedelia on Tiny Music?

I wanted to raise the bar a bit and show more of our influences—albums like the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and the music of Burt Bacharach and Astrud Gilberto. Songs like "And So I Know," which has a bossa nova feel, were new for us. Overall, *Tiny Music* was a bold album for us. The record company wanted us to write another "Interstate Love Song" or another *Purple*.

Did you try a new direction for No. 4?

We went back to our roots after *Tiny Music*. We learned a lot during the making of *Talk Show*, and Scott learned a lot making his record—mostly, we learned how much we meant to each other. With songs like "Church on Tuesday," which is very McCartney, we were saying, This is STP, and this is what we do. We wanted to go out, perform the songs, and prove that we're one of the greatest live bands.

Were detuned songs like "Down" influenced by alterna-metal?

Not really. We've been detuning for years—on *Core* we did it for "Piece of Pie." The real place I got that from was the Move, which was doing drop-D tunings on songs like "Brontosaurus" with Jeff Lynne in the '70s.

Do you go for a darker, fatter tone to offset Dean's bright guitar sound?

Yes. I dig the keyboard-bass sound and feel Stevie Wonder and Bernie Worrell get with their left hands. They were big influences on songs like “Too Cool Queenie” and “Hello, It’s Late” on the new album. Listen to the way ’70s AM-radio songs were mixed—there’s some serious low end on that R&B stuff! There’s good low end on STP records, too, and I’m proud of that.

With all the band history behind you, what did you want for Shangri-La Dee Da?

We wanted to explore new musical and emotional territory, and we were definitely influenced by ’60s and ’70s pop—great songs that were written to be hits by people like [Philadelphia International songwriting team] Gamble & Huff.

Do you feel your bass playing has improved as much as your songwriting since Core?

I was actually a better player back then. As I’ve matured, however, I’ve realized technique doesn’t make a good song. Being in a band is tough enough as it is, but trying to write the best songs possible and leave room to show off a little bit—and do it in three and a half minutes—man, that’s a challenge. But I enjoy it.

“Landing Gear”

Since 1997, DeLeo’s main bass has been the Schecter Robert DeLeo Signature Model-T. He built the first prototypes himself while working at L.A.’s Sunset Custom, which later became Schecter Guitar Research.

“When I moved out to California in ’88, I bought a Music Man StingRay because of Louis Johnson. I loved the tone of that bass—the low end and the snap on the top—but I wasn’t really into the midrange. I wasn’t slapping anymore, and I wanted to create something that could be heard in a rock format. When I started working at Sunset Custom, I put together a J-style version of what I use now, with a thumbrest that marked the position of that one Music Man pickup. I used that on *Core*. Later, it seemed like the PJ setup was more the voicing I was hearing for the band’s sound; this bass just made a lot more sense that way. It took awhile to get there.” Schecter has a 5-string version of the Model T, but Robert doesn’t play it. “I’m old-fashioned. I don’t know if I could get around on a 5.”

In the studio, DeLeo has also used an unidentified upright, a ’50s Danelectro Longhorn baritone guitar, ’66 Fender Precision, ’70s Fender MusicMaster, ’76 Rickenbacker 4001, G&L L-2000, and an Orlando, which Robert describes as a “Japanese bass from the ’60s that’s like a Gibson version of a Vox Beatle bass.”

Robert uses SIT strings, gauges .50-.105. His live rig consists of three 2x12 and three 4x10 Eden cabinets, an old Alembic F-1X preamp, and a QSC MX 1500 power amp. His favorite studio setup—copped from Chris Squire producer Eddie Offord—splits his signal between a ’67 50-watt Marshall Plexi guitar head/’69 Marshall keyboard 8x10 and a ’59 Bassman with a custom 1x15. “That bass tone stands the test of time. I crank it up—

there's a lot of guitar to cut through, and the Marshall gives me midrange. It's that nasal, honking sound.

“You're gonna hear guitars, no matter what. But if the music isn't happening, the first thing you say is, Where's the bass? You don't ever ask about the guitars. I ride [producer] Brendan O'Brien during the mixes: 'Put that bass up!' Generally, he's on my side.”

“Pilots’ Log: DeLeo on STP’s CDs”

Core, 1992

“I was green. I knew what sound I wanted to get; I just didn’t know how to achieve it. That record was just a J-Bass version of the Model T, a G&L L-2000, and an Ampeg SVT 8x10. I used them because they’re reliable. I also used this ’60s hollowbody called a Lingar on ‘Creep.’”

Purple, 1993

“I recorded most of *Purple* with my Schecter J-Bass and the live rig—three 2x12 and three 4x10 Eden cabinets, an old Alembic F-1X preamp, and a QSC MX 1500 power amp. I might have used the ’66 P-Bass. I liked the tone I got live, but it just didn’t translate in the studio the way I wanted. ‘Pretty Penny’ was my first attempt at upright, and for ‘Big Empty,’ I played the Orlando. It records great; I used flatwounds.”

Tiny Music ... Songs from the Vatican Gift Shop, 1996

For STP’s most musically diverse album, Robert used a variety of basses, effects, and setups—though his Marshall/Bassman setup saw the most action. Brother Dean DeLeo played a funky, octaved bass line on the opener, “Press Play,” using a Hagstrom 8-string with a pick. Robert picked up a ’50s Danelectro Long Horn baritone guitar for “Pop’s Love Suicide” and a Fender MusicMaster (played through an MXR Phase 90 pedal) for “And So I Know.” Ever the Yes fan, Robert used a ’76 Rickenbacker 4001 for “Art School Girl.”

No. 4, 1999

“If you sat in a room with the amps and heard the tone on ‘Down,’ you’d go, Man, that sounds like shit—like the blob rolling into town! But in the context of the song, it takes on this life of its own. I used a SansAmp Bass Driver DI to grind it up a little bit.

“On ‘I Got You’ I used the ’66 P-Bass with my Marshall and Bassman. I always wanted to have the tone I liked from those early Andy Williams and Englebert Humperdinck records: the sound of flatwound strings on a P-Bass with the tone all the way up.”

Robert also used his Orlando on “Atlanta” and the ’66 P-Bass for “Sour Girl.” He cites the big, wide sound of “Pruno” as an example of his favorite Marshall/Bassman tone.

Shangri-La Dee Da, 2001

“‘Days of the Week’ is a poppy song, so I tried to get as much girth and hair on that track as possible. The bass is pretty fat. We actually recorded ‘Hello, It’s Late’ as a shuffle during the *Purple* sessions; we built it with a click track and me playing a Fender Rhodes electric piano. I tracked the bass on the Orlando with flatwounds that have been on since ’93, and I used a bit of SansAmp distortion.”

For the beautiful solo on “Lonely Again,” DeLeo played up near his Model-T’s 12th fret and used the Electro-Harmonix Bass Micro Synth. “I love that thing. I had a lot of Electro-Harmonix effects when I was a kid, but they all broke. I got one just before we started recording, and it played a good part on this album. I also used it on ‘Transmissions from a Lonely Room.’”

A Selected Discography

With Stone Temple Pilots: (all on Atlantic) *Shangri-La Dee Da*; *No. 4*; *Tiny Music ... Songs from the Vatican Gift Shop*; *Purple*; *Core*. **With Talk Show:** *Talk Show*, Atlantic.