

Gail Ann Dorsey of David Bowie and Tears for Fears

“Deep Cover,” June 2000

“I try not to do too much. The simplest notes are the best.”

Everyone plays covers sooner or later, but what’s the secret to making famous bass lines your own? For bassist/vocalist Gail Ann Dorsey, who has toured with David Bowie and Tears For Fears, it’s all about mixing business and pleasure. “I find a balance between giving the artists what they want and enjoying myself,” says Dorsey, who will hit the road later this year to support Bowie’s latest Virgin album, *Hours*. “I usually learn the songs note-for-note. If I put on the record after I’ve been playing the songs awhile, I’ll notice I’ve changed them slightly, but I try to keep the special nuances—the song wouldn’t be the same without them.” And what strengths does she bring to a song? “I’m a chameleon. I try not to do too much. Some of my favorite bass players are the ones who lay back in the pocket. The simplest notes are the best.”

That approach has served Dorsey well in a variety of settings. Since moving to London as a 20-year-old in 1983 and returning to the U.S. in ’95, the Philadelphia native has worked with Concrete Blonde, Sophie B. Hawkins, Gang Of Four, Jane Siberry, Boy George, Bryan Ferry, the Indigo Girls, and Courtney Pine. One of Dorsey’s earliest challenges was singing Oleta Adams’s vocal parts on Tears For Fears’ Elemental tour, and her duet with Bowie on “Under Pressure” is a concert highlight. Dorsey has simple advice to those negotiating the tricky terrain of singing and playing: Take it step by step. “I usually work a song at a slow tempo with a metronome—first the bass part, then the

vocal part, bar by bar. Then I work it up to speed. Once I lock it in my head, I can recall it.”

Amid her high-profile gigs Dorsey is ready to get back to her own music. Her two solo albums, 1988’s *Corporate World* and ’92’s *Rude Blue*, are both out of print, but she hopes to have a new album out by the end of the year. A tentative guest list includes Bowie, Me’Shell NdegéOcello, Skunk Anansie singer Skin, Bowie keyboardist Mike Garson, and Indigo Girls/Gang Of Four bassist Sara Lee.

Dorsey’s main instruments are her four Ernie Ball Music Man StingRays—a 1985 4-string, an ’85 5, a ’96 5, and a circa-’96 4. She also plays a fretless MTD-435 and three fretted MTD Grendels, all with Bartolinis, as well as a ’59 Fender Precision, a G&L 2500 5-string, and an Epiphone El Capitan acoustic bass guitar 5. All those basses are strung with .045–.105 Elite roundwounds, and she uses flatwounds on her Epiphone Rivoli and P-Bass. Dorsey powers her Ampeg 4x10 and 1x18 cabinets with an Ampeg SVT Pro Classic head. Her effects include a Boss LMB-3 Bass Limiter Enhancer, a Boss ODB-3 Bass Overdrive, an EBS Octabass, an Ibanez AD99 Analog Delay, a Boss SYB-3 Bass Synthesizer Pedal, and an EBS Multicomp compressor, but she leans most heavily on her T.C. Electronic Chorus/Flanger (to simulate fretless). On two tours with Bowie, she has relied on the DigiTech RP-12 as her one-stop shop. “Like everything in life and music, many things go into producing a uniqueness in character. I use the pedals like an artist deciding which colors will be necessary to reproduce my vision.”

Reflecting on individuality and input in her current gig, Dorsey says, “I get to shine in this band more than in any other. It’s an opportunity to make my mark and be one of the great bass players David Bowie has had. I have big shoes to fill, and I think

I've filled them. I wouldn't say I've made the songs better, but I've consistently risen to the task."

– ***E.E. Bradman***