

Gospel bassist Maurice Fitzgerald

“Lion’s Pride: Young Maurice Fitzgerald Roars With The Best,” July 2001

“Sometimes it feels like I’m the only bass player in gospel music.”

You can hardly fault Maurice Fitzgerald for sounding confident. Barely a decade after first picking up bass, the 27-year-old has amassed a resumé that includes some of gospel’s best-known artists. He’s currently on tour with Fred Hammond and Radical For Christ, the funky worship sensation that sold out two weeks in March at Madison Square Garden. He’s happily married to his best friend. And his schedule just keeps getting busier.

What keeps the Chicago native gigging? His well-honed ability to recognize gospel changes anywhere, anytime, in any key. “In the churches where I grew up, there was no such thing as charts. You had to remember everything. It’s all about ears: You hear it once and you get it. In the studio, that’s what I’ve developed a reputation for—knocking a session out, no overdubs.”

Fitzgerald started on drums in church, and by age 13 he was a regular visitor to rehearsals of the legendary Rev. Milton Brunson, whose band featured bassist/producer Steve Huff. After he switched to bass as a high school sophomore, Maurice woodshedded on gospel, Jaco, and Jamerson classics. He also worked hard to absorb the sound and feel of contemporary players like Marcus Miller and John Patitucci, a fact reflected in his advanced technique and the bright, modern tone of his BT Custom Ken Smith 5, Roscoe LG3005 5, and SWR SM-900 head and 6x10 cab. Fitzgerald augmented his listening sessions with chart-reading lessons, scales, finger exercises—and the occasional

undercover club date. “Sometimes my mom didn’t even know where I was. I’d say I was going to a friend’s house, and I’d go to a club,” he laughs. “Learning different styles made me a more rounded bass player. I’m not saying every bassist should play clubs, but they should do whatever they can to broaden their horizons, be around good musicians, and challenge themselves.”

At 19, Fitzgerald auditioned and landed the gig with popular North Carolina-based Rev. John P. Kee & the New Community Choir, a platform that gave him new visibility and musical exposure. “John was always surrounded by incredible musicians, and we would challenge and learn from each other. I spent hours working out, playing through changes, trying to push songs as far as we could go within the arrangement.” In the end, however, Fitzgerald’s five-year, three-album stint with Kee taught him more than theory. “It was my first big gospel gig, so I thought I was going to make a lot of money. But it was more of a learning experience than anything. John trusted me to be original, and I tried not to let him down. He pushed me to come up with parts I hadn’t heard or played before.”

Over the last four years, Fitzgerald has brought his chops and youthful energy to collaborations with Donnie McClurkin, Marvin Sapp, the Rev. Jackie McCullough, Kim Burrell, Bishop T.D. Jakes, and many others. His highest-profile gig, however, may be his current post with Radical For Christ. Although he was honored by the invitation, Fitzgerald says preparing for the audition was a harrowing experience. “Fred called me when bassist Terrance Palmer stepped down to focus on producing. I was excited, but I was really nervous knowing Terrance and Fred were both great bass players. But I was confident I could pull it off.” Two weeks of studying a videotape of one of the band’s shows paid off. “I went in, they counted off a song, and then went to the next one. Before

I knew it, we had run through the whole set—and learned some new songs. After that, Fred was like, ‘Here’s the tour schedule.’”

Does Hammond suggest parts? “At times he does, but he pretty much just lets me do what I do. Sometimes in rehearsal he says, ‘Reese, why don’t you try this?’ For the most part, he never gives me bad advice. Fred knows bass, so when he asks me try something, I do it.”

“Our styles are very similar,” says Hammond. “Maurice knows how to play the pocket and move around in the pocket. He does things I would do, and he makes me feel comfortable when I’m singing. We think alike.” Fitzgerald, who’s been married since 1999, finds it tough to negotiate the demands of business and family. “Sometimes it feels like I’m the only bass player in gospel music right now,” he laughs. “My wife Lisa is very understanding. She’s a singer—I met her while I was on tour with Kee, so she knew I was going to be gone a lot. I pray every day for the wisdom to make the right decisions.” His association with Hammond has also inspired Maurice to get into writing and producing, and he is planning a solo album.

As a member of Radical For Christ—one of the genre’s most popular fusions of traditional gospel, modern R&B, and funk—Fitzgerald notes that today’s worship music poses particular spiritual and musical challenges. For singer Kim Burrell’s latest CD—a live gospel album with shades of house, rock, jazz, funk, and Latin—Fitzgerald took the extra step of recording the demos straight to MiniDisc and writing his own charts, though he had memorized the music before the recording. “Gospel has changed significantly in the last ten years; it’s more hip-hop and jazz-oriented. Some people have been criticized for bringing other flavors to gospel, but you have to balance it out by doing hip-hop for young folks and traditional gospel for older people who don’t want to

change. You can stay true to the original style of gospel and give everybody a little of both.”

--E.E. Bradman

Team Player

“Gospel musicians have to have great ears,” says Fitzgerald. “There are patterns everybody uses. It’s like a language—if the piano player plays a certain progression, you know what’s next.” A hallmark of Fitzgerald’s playing is his ability to lay down supportive lines that sparkle through tried and true progressions. The simple, sturdy foundation in Ex. 1 opens Donnie McClurkin’s *Live in London and More*. Of his time with Rev. John P. Kee, Fitzgerald remembers “Thursday Love” from *Strength* as a highlight. “I tried to do something different, moving around the song like a guitar player would. A lot of people have commented on that.” As the track opens, Fitzgerald and the band sparsely outline the *Cb9–Bb7–Eb7–Ab9* progression, giving Rev. Kee space to introduce the song (Ex. 2a). After a *Bb* hold and turnaround, Maurice goes into the main verse line (Ex. 2b). He steps out a little in Ex. 2c with an *Eb* in the bar 1, and the band hits the *Bb* breaks in bar 2 for a suspenseful hold on *Eb* before plunging in again. In Ex. 2d he takes it further out, throwing in a chromatic run from *Ab* to *B* and an octave *Gb* in bar 2 before going back for more. “You’ve got to have a good ear for what the piano player’s doing, or you’ll get lost in the sauce.”

A Selected Discography

With Bishop T.D. Jakes & the Potter's House Mass Choir: *The Storm Is Over*, EMI Gospel. **With Dr. Charles G. Hayes & the Cosmopolitan Church of Prayer Choir:** *Have Thine Own Way Lord*, Savoy. **With Kim Burrell:** *Live in Concert*, Tommy Boy Gospel. **With William Becton & Friends:** *B2k: Prophetic Songs of Promise*, CGI Platinum. **With the Kurt Carr Singers:** *Awesome Wonder*, GospoCentric. **With Rev. Jackie McCullough:** *This Is for You Lord*, Interscope. **With the McClurkin Project:** *The McClurkin Project*, Interscope. **With Ramsey Lewis:** *Dance of Your Soul*, GRP. **With Fred Hammond & Radical For Christ:** *Purpose by Design* (video only), Verity. **With Donnie McClurkin:** *Live in London and More*, Verity. **With New Divine Destiny:** *Be Ready*, Verity. **With Yolanda Adams:** *Songs from the Heart*, Verity. **With Rev. John P. Kee:** (all on Verity) *Strength; Stand; Show Up!*. **With Vanessa Bell Armstrong:** *Desire of My Heart: Live in Detroit*, Verity. **With various artists:** *Verity Records: Live at the Apollo*, Verity.

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