

## Trey Gunn of King Crimson

“Vertical Horizons,” June 2002

By E.E. Bradman

***“Strong, huge bass is essential to King Crimson.”***

Look onstage at a King Crimson show and you won't see a bassist—but close your eyes, and you'll feel the low end: more staccato than legato, chunky, thick, and growly. Check again and you're likely to find lanky Texan Trey Gunn using all ten fingers on an 8-, 10-, or 12-string Warr Guitar, tapping out chords, supervising the bottom, and skillfully grooving through the tricky changes of the world's freshest prog-rock flagship.

If he seems uniquely secure in the low frequencies, credit his first electric instrument—a Fender Precision—and a brief absorption as a 15-year-old with the bass lines of Bad Company mainstay and former King Crimson sideman Boz Burrell. “The way the music has evolved, strong, huge bass is essential to King Crimson. Pat [Mastelleto] has all these incredible drum sounds going on, [guitarist/vocalist] Adrian Belew and [guitarist/leader] Robert Fripp are all fuzzed out, and I've got the bass role. Right now, we're pretty balls-to-the-wall.”

Trey Gunn's career has been filled with coincidences and explorations. He began piano at age seven, picked up bass and guitar in high school, and played in punk bands while running an 8-track studio on his way to a composition degree from the University of Oregon in the late '80s. While in school, Gunn travelled to West Virginia to take guitar and composition lessons with Fripp. “I always thought it was silly—the rock & roll idea that you didn't learn from people who were good. If there are great players out there, I wanted to learn from them.” After graduation, Trey moved to New York, and within a year, he was gigging with Fripp.

Trey decided to concentrate exclusively on the Chapman Stick in 1987. First developed in the early '70s by former guitarist Emmett Chapman, the Stick's vertical fretboard demands a percussive, piano-like technique; most players divide the board into bass and guitar sides. Gunn honed his skills with Fripp, David Sylvian, Michael Brooks, and Toni Childs, and when Crimson awoke in 1994 after a ten-year hiatus, Gunn and Tony Levin played Sticks underneath Fripp, Belew and drummers Mastoletto and Bill Bruford. The recordings of the band's "double trio" attest to Gunn and Levin's complex bass interplay, and Gunn's subsequent tour and studio experiences have been loosely preserved in his diaries at [www.treygunn.com](http://www.treygunn.com).

For the last few years, Trey has played custom instruments built by L.A.-based luthier Mark Warr ([www.warrguitars.com](http://www.warrguitars.com)). Warr's Touch-Style Guitars have guitar-like bodies, and they're playable vertically as well as horizontally (a planned bass model will allow for Touch-Style and/or standup approaches). Trey's signature series includes 8-, 10-, 11-, and 12-string models. He currently owns six Warrs, including 8-, 10-, and 12-string paduak neck-throughs, an 8-string bolt-on made of ash, wenge, and bubinga, a 12-string, neck-through prototype, and a 10-string bolt-on that's maple and MIDI-compatible. Everything except the 8-string is stereo; bass and guitar outputs are separate, and Trey sends each out to Line 6 bass and guitar PODs. All models feature tilted headstocks, Bartolini preamps, graphite-reinforced necks, and fade controls between the Bartolini and RMC piezo-to-MIDI pickups.

Essential to Gunn's sound are his effect units. The Warr guitars feed into a Sound Sculpture Switchblade 16 switching system, which is controlled by a Rocktron All Access pedalboard. All the effects are on Sound Sculpture loops: an ART SGE Mach 2 distortion unit, an Electro-Harmonix Micro-Synth, a Roland GR-30 guitar synth, a T.C. Electronic G-Force unit [controlled by a Dimension Beam infrared MIDI controller], and the PODs (the Bass POD always runs in parallel with the dry bass signal). Also on Sound Sculpture loops are signal paths out to the pedalboards—one for the bass side and one

for the treble, “guitar” side. The bass side has a Line 6 DL-4 delay pedal, a Line 6 FM4 filter modeler, and an EBS OctaBass’ the guitar side only has volume. The bass returns to the rack through the Euphonic preamp, then through a DBX 160 compressor and out to the Euphonic power amp and on to the two 3x10 towers. The top side goes to two 1x10 cabinets. Trey’s 600-watt Euphonic iAmp-600 1x10 combo, two Euphonic Audio 1x10s, and two Euphonic Audio 3x10s provide serious bottom and optimum clarity for both sides of his Warrs, whose range extends five-and-a-half octaves from a low *Bb*. “If you can’t hear it, what’s the point? There’s no spectacle to watch, so if the audience can’t hear you and you can’t hear yourself, it’s not worth it.”

Despite the accumulated gear and technical chops, Gunn and his band— fellow Warr player Joe Mendelson, drummer/percussionist Bob Muller, and guitarist Tony Geballe convey a hint of recklessness and soul during live performances, but they never lose control of their otherworldly textures and odd-time ostinatos. In *Crimson*, Trey handles the low end while adding textures and power chords on top. With Levin, he stuck mostly to chords on the high end. In his own band, which has recorded five albums since 1994, Gunn smoothly alternates lead and bass roles with Mendelson. “Joe is really a good soloist; it’s an ideal situation. I can solo and then have an immediate shift, because we’re both right there with full-range instruments. It can be whatever we want it to be—we’ve orchestrated it fairly well.”

Still, the thrill of the unknown pushes Gunn into new territory. “There’s no template for *King Crimson*, so we don’t even know if we’re doing it right. The vertical guitar is pretty new; you’re not going to have a Coltrane or a Hendrix on this instrument for another 50 years. And I’m most excited when we play for somebody who doesn’t know what we’re about: They came to see *Blues Traveler* or *Tool*, and suddenly there’s *King Crimson*. They either hate it and they run away—or their heads are just blown off.”

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