

Jaco Pastorius

“Evolution Of A Genius,” January 2002

By E.E. Bradman

“First cut, you’re dead. Look out—you’ve never heard nothing like this.”

—Jaco describing his debut album

Though most noteworthy musicians develop and refine a personal style over the course of a career, very few change an instrument’s essential function as rapidly and with such charismatic force as 24-year-old Jaco Pastorius did with his self-titled 1976 debut. It’s just as rare that someone—a colleague, a fan, or both—has the foresight to record such a groundbreaking artist’s growth from beginner to innovator, documenting it for later generations to study and enjoy.

Portrait of Jaco: The Early Years, a two-CD audio tour through the early years of the self-proclaimed “world’s greatest bass player,” features loads of previously unreleased music and remembrances from friends who were there. Produced by Jaco’s longtime friend Bob Bobbing, *Portrait* profiles Jaco from his first home recording in 1968—using Bobbing’s tape machine—through the release of *Jaco Pastorius* in the summer of ’76. Informative spoken-word vignettes by figures throughout Jaco’s early years, from dad Jack Pastorius to Weather Report co-founder Joe Zawinul, weave through the set’s 30-plus tracks. In those eight years, Jaco set the template for many of his later innovations, gaining valuable experience in the clubs, studios, warehouses, and garages of South Florida. Indeed, *Portrait* is easily the most diverse showcase of Jaco’s talents, providing a glimpse into the influences he would later blend into his own unique mix.

In a market flooded by “rare” and “previously unheard” recordings, both authorized and bootlegged, *Portrait of Jaco* is the real thing. No one is as qualified for such a comprehensive undertaking as Bobbing, whose relationship with Jaco began when they both auditioned for the same band in 1968. Bobbing got the gig (“Jaco played some amazing stuff—it didn’t really fit”), but he was immediately impressed by Jaco, who had been playing for only a few months. As he told biographer Bill Milkowski in *Jaco: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius* [Backbeat Books], he and Jaco began hanging out and talking bass, and Bobbing, who was a year older, helped Jaco get gigs and introduced him to other musicians. Jaco even stored his basses at Bobbing’s apartment because he thought the temperature and humidity were stable there. But Bobbing says one of the main reasons Jaco hung around was to get access to Bobbing’s reel-to-reel recorder, as he wanted to send some recordings to jazz giant John Coltrane’s widow Alice Coltrane. “I showed Jaco how to work it, and he borrowed it for a weekend. That’s when he did his first recordings.”

Bursting With Firsts

Jaco himself opens *Portrait*’s first disc by welcoming listeners to Fort Lauderdale’s Oakland Park neighborhood. Bobbing’s recording of a train crossing South Florida’s Dixie Highway and Jaco’s exemplary “Barbary Coast” bass line for Weather Report are expertly juxtaposed with Jaco’s declaration from a video interview shortly before his 1987 death. The effect is poignant. “I know where I stole every note, and I was raised by the best musicians in the world!” It’s a fitting intro for his father, a singer and drummer, who tells us proudly little Jaco was “the biggest Sinatra freak,” adding that Jaco was also exposed to the big band music of Nat “King” Cole, Tony Bennett, and the Dorseys.

Like few other anthologies, *Portrait* is bursting with firsts. Jaco's brother Gregory ushers us into the 17-year-old's '68 debut home recording, a cover of Pee Wee Ellis's "The Chicken," on which Jaco recorded and played all the instruments. In the recordings that follow, Jaco's dominant musical presence is already in place for his first hard-groovin' R&B band (the organ-bass-drums trio Woodchuck) and first four-minute solo feature (on Sly Stone's "Higher," with Tommy Strand & the Upper Hand). Acquaintances marvel at the speed with which Jaco picked up bass; in two segments, he enthusiastically advises Bobbing on string choice and harmonics. Over a nine-month period, Jaco developed his sound, his stamina, and his showmanship with chitlin' circuit king Wayne Cochran & his C.C. Riders. By the time he left that band in 1972, Jaco had gained new music-reading and writing skills, represented on *Portrait* by his first fully orchestrated original composition, "Amelia."

The next track is a blockbuster surprise: Jaco playing solo acoustic bass guitar in '74, warming up and sounding great on the head to Charlie Parker's "Dexterity." Running down standards with Jaco was a particular pleasure for Alex Darqui, a close friend and pianist who lived next door at the time of the recording. Reedman Ira Sullivan tells how Jaco convinced him to play with a "Fender bass" for the first time. On his first album appearance, Jaco's instantly identifiable feel propels Willie "Little Beaver" Hale's "I Can Dig It, Baby," a precursor to the funky accompaniment Jaco brought to Joni Mitchell years later. All these situations provided the "oven for Jaco's genius," as Bobbing calls it—the proving grounds for his famous groove and fretless chops.

In fact, many of Jaco's most enduring compositions were recorded in their earliest forms long before *Jaco Pastorius*. At an outdoor elementary school program with Sullivan, Jaco and the band play what later became "Continuum." Once Jaco decided to

produce his own solo album in '74, he contacted close friend and Las Olas alumnus Alex Sadkin, who was engineering at Miami's Criteria Studios. Sadkin let him into the studio after hours and off the books. The second disc includes an early version of the Caribbean-flavored "Opus Pocus," with commentary by steel pan player Othello Molineaux; a furiously avant-garde "Balloon Song," introduced by frequent collaborator and drummer Bobby Economou; and three tracks featuring Jaco and the Peter Graves Orchestra, Jaco's first foray into big band music. (Graves would later join him in the Word Of Mouth Big Band.) Jaco also sings beautifully over a rare work version of his "Las Olas." But for pure anecdotal pleasure, few sequences rival former Epic A&R head Steve Popovitch's story of Jaco's audition and record deal and Jaco's bragging insight into the impact of his debut. "First cut, you're dead. Look out—you've never heard nothing like this!"

Bobbing's method of interspersing spoken interludes with archival music may take some getting used to, but nowhere is it more successful than his features with guitarist Pat Metheny, singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell, and Weather Report keyboardist Joe Zawinul. All three contribute poignant, informative, and definitive recollections of their first meetings with Jaco, the perfect result of Bobbing's skillful music and interview sequencing. But he saves the best for last. *Portrait* ends with a heartbreaking send-off from Zawinul—backed by Jaco's sublime work on the band's "Cannonball"—who gives Jaco the ultimate accolade by putting him on equal footing with himself and saxophonist Wayne Shorter as the nucleus of Weather Report. "Jaco would be proud," Bobbing says.

‘I Want It To Be Perfect’

By his late teens, Bobbing himself was a busy bassist and bandleader. When he wasn't gigging himself, though, Bobbing carried his Sony TC-630 Sound on Sound recorder to Jaco's gigs—despite the unit's cumbersome size. “The fact that I took the time to lug around that 50-pound recorder, go to all these clubs, and set up the mike illustrates my passion for Jaco,” Bobbing says. “He was just a kid around town who was nothing special to most people, but I could see he was phenomenal, no doubt about it. And Jaco liked me to record. So we just did it, and we'd listen to the tapes afterward.” Later, on the road with Weather Report, Jaco would listen back to the tapes and recall the good ol' days—a perspective Bobbing recalled during the making of *Portrait*.

In addition to playing bass, Bobbing enjoyed a successful career as a South Florida booking agent, studio owner, and artist manager. When he decided to put together *Portrait* after being interviewed for Milkowski's Jan/Feb '91 BASS PLAYER cover story, Bob began gathering phone numbers. He started with others who knew Jaco early on, many of whom still live in South Florida. Bobbing had kept in touch with Economou, Darqui, Molineux, Graves, Sullivan, and drummer Scott Kirkpatrick, but tracking down and interviewing others proved to be more difficult than anticipated. R&B singer Betty Wright hooked him up with “Little Beaver” Hale. Bobbing interviewed ex-C.C. Rider Charlie Brent after one of his gigs in Central Florida, and he interviewed Cochran, now a pastor, at his Miami church. Setting up appointments with Mitchell and Zawinul was tough, but both were eventually forthcoming and enthusiastic. Initially wary of Bobbing's motives, Metheny flew to Fort Lauderdale to spend a few days with Bobbing, then jumped on board.

Though much of the music on *Portrait of Jaco* is from Bob's archives, several of the juiciest discoveries came from interviewees. An old girlfriend of Metheny sent recordings of his trio with Jaco and drummer Bob Moses, captured prior to the *Bright Size Life* sessions. Other gems, like Alex Darqui's cassette of Jaco's Criteria Studio demos, had traveled all the way to New Orleans. Johnny Pastorius, Jaco's eldest son, provided Bob with Jaco's personal tape of "Las Olas." Jaco music copyist Larry Warilow provided a cassette of a live 1973 TV broadcast of Jaco, Sullivan, and Economou.

Much more daunting was the editing process. After gathering the music from many different sources—cassette, vinyl, reel-to-reel, and even a TV broadcast—Bobbing taught himself Pro Tools and waveform-editing software Peak. But he restricted himself to cleaning up hiss and making smooth transitions. "I didn't want to play God. These are the tapes Jaco and I listened to, I want everyone to hear them just the way Jaco and I heard them back in the day. My decision was to leave them as they are—to allow the imperfections to exist alongside the magic." Bobbing then began the lengthy process of licensing and clearing the rights for the package, which features liner notes by Bobbing, an overview by Pat Metheny, an introduction by founding BP editor Jim Roberts, and a short essay by daughter Mary Pastorius.

Bobbing closed his recording studio and production business in '94 to work on the project. He was the main force behind the Fender Custom Shop's second Jaco signature bass, as well as Hal Leonard's recent Jaco transcription books (see page 55). Bobbing also worked closely with the BBC's Steve Shepard, producer of the 1998 Jaco documentary *Punk Jazz: A Portrait of Jaco*. "I bit off a lot, but it's a labor of love," says Bobbing, who estimates he has spent most of the last ten years and about \$60,000 of his own money on the project.

As we went to press, Bobbing confirmed that the discs will be available at his Web site, www.jacothearlyears.com, and at the Pastorius family's official online home at www.jacopastorius.com; they'll be on Bobbing's Holiday Park label. The release was scheduled for December 1 to coincide with Jaco's 50th birthday. Though Bobbing has had previous versions close to ready, he's glad he waited. "Any one of them would have been great. But it's going to come out only once, so I want it to be perfect—for Jaco. This is going to stand the test of time, and it's probably the most significant thing I'll do before I die. So I'm not in a hurry. But I'm ready to let go."

The Gear of Jaco Pastorius

“Two Views Of His Gear,” January 2002

By E.E. Bradman & Scott Shiraki

Although Jaco was known to say his tone was “in his hands,” the gear he chose was an important component of the “Jaco sound” and image. At a time when most bassists sounded like variations of James Jamerson or Larry Graham, Jaco’s sweet and punchy pre-’65 Fender Jazz Basses, bright Rotosound Swing Bass RS66 roundwound strings, and warm Acoustic 360 amp helped him fuse the upright’s vocal-like, expressive qualities and the electric’s quick and defined attack. Jaco settled on this combination by 1972 and largely stuck with it until his death in 1987.

Jaco claimed to have owned over a hundred basses in his lifetime. Most were early-’60s Jazz Basses with the pickguard and pickup covers removed and the stack-knobs replaced with the three-knob configuration. Here’s a list of his significant axes, with insights and comments from two people who knew Jaco’s gear best: Bob Bobbing, who met Jaco in early ’68, and Florida repairman Kevin Kaufman, who worked on Jaco’s basses beginning in ’78.

1967 Fender Jazz, serial no. unavailable

Fifteen-year-old Jaco got his first electric bass, a new sunburst Fender Jazz with binding and pearl blocks, in 1967. He strung it with La Bella flatwounds and played it through a Sunn amp in Las Olas Brass, and with the organ trio Woodchuck. It was his main electric until 1971.

Upright bass, maker unknown

Jaco's father, Jack Pastorius, gave Jaco his first upright around the same time he received his first electric. Jaco later acquired a second upright, which he played throughout high school and until around 1974. (Jaco plays the head of Charlie Parker's "Dexterity" on upright on the first *Portrait of Jaco* disc.) He loved the sound but found the instrument's upkeep frustrating. Eventually, he traded it for Bobbing's '60 Jazz Bass. Bobbing eventually gave the upright to a friend, who maintains it as a keepsake.

1960 Fender Jazz, SN 026100

Jaco's '67 Jazz was louder, but he preferred the smoother, sweeter sound of Bobbing's black '60 stack-knob with clay dots on a rosewood neck.

Bobbing recalls the first time Jaco flirted with fretless. "When I had the bass, I put on La Bella flatwounds and raised the action because the frets were played out, and it didn't bother me. But when Jaco put on Rotosounds and lowered the action, it buzzed too much." Anticipating a refret, Jaco pulled out the frets and played the bass on a funk gig one night with Tommy Strand & the Upper Hand. "The band was doing all these funk tunes, and the sound of Jaco's fretless wasn't defined enough. The bass was a little harder to play in tune, too. It was a transitional thing." As he did with every subsequent bass, Jaco replaced the stack-knob controls with a later three-knob setup. According to Bobbing, he felt this provided a clearer, more direct sound.

Jaco eventually sold this instrument—refretted—to bassist/guitarist John Paulus for \$425 around 1971. John moved to Los Angeles and went on to play with artists such as Bobby Caldwell, John Mayall, and Canned Heat. Paulus, now an L.A. session player,

says Jaco borrowed the bass Weather Report recording sessions, although he's not sure if Jaco used it.

Early '70s acoustic bass guitar

In the early '70s, Jaco and luthier Larry Breslin co-designed a fretless, 5-string acoustic bass guitar with a high C string; upon completion, Jaco paid Breslin \$500. It featured a 34-scale neck with Brazilian rosewood fingerboard and sides, maple veneer fretmarkers, an epoxy coating, and a spruce top. Jaco strung it with Rotosound roundwounds. In later years, the headstock broke off and Jaco brought the bass to Kaufman. He still has it.

1962 Fender Jazz, a.k.a. the "Bass of Doom," SN 64437

Like the fate of a mythic hero's mighty weapon, the original condition and final resting place of the world's most famous fretless are shrouded in mystery. Its legendary tone was well documented through every era of Jaco's career, and he himself told several versions of the tale.

According to Bill Milkowski's August '84 *Guitar Player* cover story, the '62 Jazz was already fretless when Jaco bought it in Florida for \$90. Upon meeting Kaufman in 1978, Jaco told him he removed the frets himself with a butter knife and filled in the slots and missing fingerboard chunks with Plastic Wood, followed by several brushed-on coats of Petite's Poly-Poxy. Kaufman's first job for Jaco was to replace the peeling epoxy, which he did by using his own method of pouring on the epoxy in one treatment and shaping it with a rasp.

Kevin recalls a huge repair job he did in the mid-'80s after Jaco had apparently smashed the Bass of Doom in an argument. Kaufman and fellow repairman Jim Hamilton painstakingly glued together what remained of the '62–15 large chunks and several small pieces (the hardware and electronics were still functional.) They inlaid wood where fragments were missing, laminated a figured-maple veneer on the front and back, and repaired the shattered headstock by laminating an ebony/maple veneer to hold it together. Refinished in a two-tone sunburst, it was returned to Jaco in New York. Kevin says it still sounded great.

According to Kaufman, Jaco left it in New York's Central Park shortly before his death. It hasn't been seen since.

1960 Fender Jazz, SN 57308

Jaco's main fretted Jazz Bass, a two-tone sunburst, of average weight and "very resonant" according to Kaufman. This was Jaco's main bass on tour with Joni Mitchell; it can be seen and heard on her *Shadows and Light* album and DVD. Its whereabouts are unknown.

Early '60s Fender Jazz, SN 82429

During his 1982 Word of Mouth tour of Japan, Jaco threw this bass into Hiroshima Bay; Ibanez Guitars then refinished it natural. Shigeru Uchiyama's photographs of Jaco and this bass appear in promotional material for the live *Twins* and *Invitation* albums, on the back cover of *Invitation*, and on BP's Jan/Feb '91 cover. According to Kaufman, Jaco didn't like this bass as much as the others. Its whereabouts are unknown.

1963 Fender Jazz, SN L14769

The opening shot of Jaco's DCI instructional video, *Modern Electric Bass*, shows Jaco slotting the nut on this bass. The original neck was being repaired at the time, so Jaco installed a '70s Fender Precision neck on the Jazz body. This bass wound up at Albert Molinaro's Guitars R Us shop in Los Angeles and was sold to a collector with the original and the P-Bass necks.

1960 Fender Jazz, SN unavailable

Longtime Buddy Guy bassist Greg Rzab bought one of Jaco's final Jazz Basses from the Pastorius family in 1994. Rzab played the bass, apparently used by Jaco during a six-month stretch of intense practicing in 1986, on Guy's 1994 album *Slippin' In*. "I used it on 'Lover with a Feeling,' and it was really alive in the studio—the notes and harmonics jumped out of that bass." Greg eventually sold it to a good friend—a famous bassist who chooses to remain anonymous. "It's in good hands and being kept safe."

Acoustic 360

The Acoustic 360 amp, which debuted in 1968, featured a 200-watt power amp. The separate preamp had a built-in fuzz effect, and the large cabinet housed an 18" backward-firing speaker. According to Bobbing there was nothing like it in 1971, when he and Jaco, just out of their teens, saw South Florida bassist Carlos Garcia using one on a gig with Nemo Spliff. "The Acoustic had something special," recalls Bobbing. "We talked about it, we loved it. We went down to Modern Music in Fort Lauderdale and put money down and got two of them immediately."

In retrospect, the Acoustic was as important to the development of Jaco's tone and technique as his Jazz Basses were. "The Acoustic held up better than a Sunn or an Ampeg fliptop B-15 could. Jaco could play an open *E* while he did intervals up the neck, harmonics, and his muted fingerfunk style, which required punch and clarity. The timing of that amp was important, because no one would have been able to get that particular sound without it. Jaco couldn't have come out in '62 and done the same thing with a Bassman amp or an Ampeg flip-top." More important, Bobbing says, the combination of the '62 fretless Jazz and the Acoustic 360 gave him the perfect acoustic-like warmth, too. "The 360's big, vibrating cabinet was set up so it had a reflective sound without all the high end—not muffled, but without the bright, clanking speaker cone. At low volumes, with his fretless, he could make it sound like an upright." Rumors continue to circulate regarding several of Jaco's Acoustic 360s.

*Special thanks to Bob Bobbing, Greg Rzab, David Page (for providing serial numbers of Jaco's basses), John Paulus, Albert Molinaro, and Kevin Kaufman. Kevin Kaufman now operates Kauffman-Daenzer Instruments; he can be reached at (561) 832-1249 or by e-mail at **kauffmandaenzer@aol.com**. Larry Breslin of Deerhead Guitars can be reached at (719) 576-4567.*

© BASS PLAYER