

Gospel bass legend Joel Smith

“Humble Rumble: Joel Smith Keeps It Real On A Host Of Gospel—& Secular—Sessions,” April 2001

By E.E. Bradman

“Real, solid foundation—that’s what bass is made for.”

Just off Oakland’s Nimitz Freeway lies East 14th St., a busy, four-lane thoroughfare that lives up to its other name—International Boulevard—with a wide variety of mostly single-story restaurants, storefronts, apartments, and bars. Even at 10 in the morning, the long, faded blocks project a sense of late-afternoon ennui; to a visitor, the street seems to stretch forever into the distance.

It’s easy, then, to miss the small building with gray double doors somewhere near the middle of the 2200 block. Inside, the gold and platinum records on the studio walls are more obvious, as are the immediate warmth and firm handshake of the smiling man who walks us into the main room. Nothing about Joel Smith’s bearing indicates the ego to match his recording and live credits—on bass and drums—with Al Jarreau, the Jerry Garcia Band, Michelle Shocked, Tony! Toni! Toné, and the brightest names in contemporary worship, including the Rev. James Moore, T.D. Jakes, Beverly Crawford, and Kim Burrell.

The Oakland native has developed his reputation with a savvy mix of low-end focus and fluid technique, delivered with a throaty Jazz Bass tone heavy in low-mids. One producer called Joel the most incredible bassist or drummer he’d ever heard. Bassist/bandleader Fred Hammond [March ’01], who grew up on Joel’s playing, calls

him a genius, and Joel himself acknowledges that sessions have been derailed by drummers too awestruck to play with him. Despite the praise, Smith remains down to earth—but he’s fiercely loyal to the bottom line. “Everyone has their thing, and each is valid. A lot of guys like to play up high, for example, and that’s great. I have nothing against it. But real, solid foundation—that’s what bass is made for.”

Joel was born on December 6, 1959, into one of the most distinguished gospel families. His mother, Feddie Hawkins, is a member of the Oakland-based Hawkins Singers, headed by her brothers Walter and Edwin Hawkins, who enjoyed huge success with the 1969 hit single “Oh Happy Day.” Joel began playing drums at age six and took up bass at 12. He was hooked. “Right away, I had so much fun with bass because it was so related to what drums are to me—the foundation. That’s the way I looked at the bass, ’cause that’s what it is.”

A year later Joel made his recording debut with his uncles, taking inspiration from both sides of the rhythm section. “I watched Gaylord Birch and Eddie Bayers on drums, and I listened to a lot of Chuck Rainey, Verdine White, and Anthony Jackson. They all had their signature styles, and they also knew how to lay a foundation. I was intrigued because they all had different approaches.”

Mainly self-taught, Joel was lucky enough to receive one-on-one tutoring from Sly & the Family Stone bassist Rusty Allen; other top-notch players gave him encouragement, too. “When I was 13, my uncle Edwin asked me to play a session for him, and I thought he was kidding, since I only played in church,” says Smith. “He also said he had a surprise for me. The next day I went early, set up my drum kit, and walked to the corner store. On my way back I saw a yellow cab pull up to the door, and the driver began to unload bass equipment.” He was still halfway down the block when a familiar silhouette

got out of the car, and Joel stood speechless as Chuck Rainey began setting up his equipment. Joel's uncle came up to him. "Remember the surprise I told you about? This is it."

Those sessions—which resulted in the Grammy-winning *Wonderful* [Sounds of Gospel] and an earful of praise from Rainey—helped Joel decide to get serious about bass and the importance of connecting the two instruments' roles. "As a young boy, being around cats like that made me grow up quick musically. I was always around older cats who showed me what could happen within the structure of a song, and all the different approaches. That was a blessing."

Smith's versatility is one of the keys to his success. "Joel's one of the best-kept secrets, but producers and artists—the people who keep you working—definitely know him," says Jerry Mannery, executive producer for the Rev. James Moore, with whom Joel recorded four albums. "We brought him in once to play bass and something happened to the drummer. We got another bass player, Joel got on drums, and he didn't miss a beat."

Mannery, director of Malaco Records' gospel division, says Smith had a great relationship with the Rev. Moore, who died last year. "Moore traveled a lot and knew many, many musicians all over the country; he used the best of the best. Joel would usually wind up being musical director, tightening up the musicians and bringing them together. He's a great spirit, too. One thing that sets him apart is his humility; there are a lot less accomplished people out there tooting their own horns. I call him whenever I have an opportunity."

A distinct part of Smith's sound is the late-'80s, neck-through F Bass 5-string he's owned for six years; the maple fingerboard and ash body are just right. "This bass is a gift. It fits me so well. It's so quiet and never brittle—some people think it's keyboard

bass when they hear it,” Joel laughs. “I didn’t expect that tight sound from a neck-through. I can get a lot of different tones, including a Marcus tone, but everybody does that. I like a little more bottom.” He prefers DR Hi-Beams, Studio Pro 1000 series Monster Cables, and an SWR SM-900 and Goliath 4x10. Joel emphasizes that he gets more low end from his instrument and less from the amp. “I go with my ear, with whatever is comfortable. I use my fingers to get a full tone. I like a lot of bottom, but the way I play, I want everything to be distinct—punchy but clean. When I’m making my moves, you know it.”

Between his busy schedule of sessions, lessons, tours, and live dates, Joel is attending music theory and MIDI classes near his Oakland home. He’s also working on a solo album that’ll reflect the wide variety of jazz, fusion, and gospel music he has played over the years. “I love music and I love God at the same time. He wouldn’t have given me this talent without the ability to handle different situations. Secular music doesn’t bother me; I keep myself spiritually and mentally together, because I have to stay true to myself. Whatever the situation, I am who I am.”

“The Jackson Five: Joel On Anthony”

Like most bassists, Joel Smith first appreciated Anthony Jackson upon hearing the O’Jays’ 1973 smash “For the Love of Money” [*Ship Ahoy*, Sony]. He went on to study AJ’s prodigious ’70s and ’80s studio output, and he remains firmly rooted in Jackson’s sophisticated groove aesthetic. “Whatever he does, he’s ferocious with it. At the same time he really knows his place, and you can hear his discipline.” Here are five of Joel’s favorite Jackson tracks.

1. “Encanto Meu,” Tania Maria, *Bela Vista*, 1990 [Blue Note].
2. “Any Old Sunday,” Chaka Khan, *What Cha’ Gonna Do for Me*, 1981 [Warner Bros.]. “The whole album is great. It’s just an R&B setting, but he was playing some stuff!”
3. “Tell Me a Bedtime Story,” Quincy Jones, *Sounds and Stuff*, 1978 [A&M]. “He has a certain approach that’s hard to put into words. It’s just a feel I understand.”
4. “Montage,” Dave Grusin, *One of a Kind*, 1977 [GRP]. “I like the way Anthony is countering Steve Gadd’s hi-hat and snare groove. I listen to how people make their space, because there are so many ways of going about it. That’s what makes it intriguing.”
5. “Keep Your Eye on the Sparrow,” Earl Klugh, *Finger Painting*, 1977 [Blue Note]. “It’s a very simple line, and Anthony’s using the phaser—one of the ways I can tell it’s him.”

“The Groovesmith”

Smith, then 21, pushed the choir and drove the band with lines like Ex. 1 on “Worship the Lord” [*Edwin Hawkins Live with the Oakland Symphony Orchestra*]; listen to his variations as the track flies by at 160 BPM. “Let’s Just Praise the Lord” uses swung quarter-notes for a hip-hop feel. Joel leaps out of the mix with a Jackson-inspired fill (Ex. 2). “Anthony has really influenced me with that particular move. I call them ‘bombs’—I use them if I want to just explode for one brief moment, little flavorings here and there.” On “It’s Gonna Be Alright,” the opening track of the Rev. James Moore’s 1993 album *I Will Trust in the Lord*, Joel displays his awesome muting technique for five minutes of bass, minimal drums, and choir call-and-response. On lines like Ex. 3, “I mute with my right hand, but I like the attack of my index finger instead of the thumb. Sometimes my left hand helps mute, too.”

A Selected Discography

With Walter Hawkins & the Love Center Choir: *Love Alive, Vol. 5: 25th Anniversary Reunion*, Interscope. **With the Edwin Hawkins:** *Live with the Oakland Symphony Orchestra*, Myrrh. **With Edwin Hawkins Singers:** *Oh Happy Day Reunion*, Intersound. **With the Rev. James Moore:** (all on Malaco) *Live in Detroit; I Will Trust in the Lord; Live with the Mississippi Mass Choir; Live: Rev. James Moore*. **With Mississippi Mass Choir:** *Greatest Hits*, Malaco. **With Beverly Crawford:** *Now that I'm Here*, Warner/Alliance. **With Kim Burrell:** *Everlasting Life*, Tommy Boy. **With the Dallas-Fort Worth Mass Choir:** *I'd Rather Have Jesus*, CGI/Platinum. **With Kurt Carr & the Kurt Carr Singers:** *No One Else*, Interscope. **With Tramaine Hawkins:** *The Search Is Over*, A&M. **With T.D. Jakes:** *Live from the Potter's House*, Sony. **With Stephanie Mills:** *Christmas*, MCA. **With Al Jarreau:** *Heaven and Earth*, Warner/Reprise. **With Robin Hodge-Williams:** *Anoint Me*, N-House. **With Shanice:** *Ultimate Collection: The Best of Shanice*, Polygram; *Inner Child*, Motown. **With Kenton Rogers:** (both on Blackberry) *Alive & Pressin' On; Just Look at Me*. **With Rev. Cleophus Robinson Jr.:** *Back Again*, Malaco. **With J. Spencer:** *Blue Moon*, Motown. **With the Williams Brothers:** *Hand in Hand*, Malaco. **With Lawrence Matthews:** *Lawrence Matthews & Friends*, Interscope.