

## **Juan Nelson of the Innocent Criminals**

“Free to Shine: Juan Nelson Puts the Fire Under Ben Harper’s Folk Fire,” August 2001

By E.E. Bradman

There’s a gently celebratory mood in Jaun Nelson’s hotel suite on ths sunny Saturday, the morning of the one of Ben Harper’s last spring 2001 tour stops. In the next room, Nelson’s wife and personal assistant chat and laugh; coffee, juice, and muffins arrive shortly; and Juan’s main bass—a sleek, charcoal-grey MTD 5-string—lies in an open case by a window that overlooks the San Francisco skyline.

Nelson, however, is most captivated by black-and-white concert video on his hotel TV screen, where two future legends give it up and turn it loose on a sweaty Paris night in 1971. Juan had, in fact, seen the band in 1970, as a 12-year-old, and it was quite an experience. “We used to play James Brown’s music and emulate his dance moves. When we found out he was coming, my uncle said, ‘Let’s go see the man himself.’ We went down to the Shrine in L.A., and it was great, man—Hot Pants,’ ‘Popcorn,’ ‘Cold Sweat.’ And Bootsy. That was my era!”

Later that night, Juan is untethered and free in the music. Harper, seated, commands center stage with one of his Weissenborn lap steel guitars, his head thrown back. Drummer Dean Butterworth and percussionist David Leach are the spice and foundation to Ben’s slides and squeals. But Juan is their common key. Majestic and graceful, he roams the stage, steps right to the edge, and looks over the audience and into the sky for a smokin’ solo on “Steal My Kisses”—a tune off Harper’s latest studio CD, *Burn to Shine*. Juan is clearly enjoying himself, and the crowd goes wild.

Nelson's life-long absorption with R&B and soul has led him to quite a few places—sessions, touring, and TV shows around the planet with musicians from P-Funk alumni to Roger Clinton. For the last seven years, however, Juan has brought his sensitive yet bootylicious bass work to Harper and the Innocent Criminals, sharing the funk with a whole new generation and stoking the fire under Harper's righteous redemption songs.

Born August 24, 1958 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Nelson moved to the Los Angeles Crenshaw district at age seven. His dad bought an organ soon after, and Juan took sax in junior high, encouraged by a grandfather who dabbled in music and kept instruments around for the kids. "My mother played keyboards in church, so there was always music and singers around. I sang in church, too. At that time, gospel wasn't as aggressive and contemporary as it is now. Had it been, I probably would've been all over that. It was a Baptist church, though, and we really threw down."

After seeing James Brown, Juan's next chance to hear bass was at one of his dad's corporate dinner parties. "There was a live band, and I got close to the bass player. I could feel the low vibrations, and I was really digging that. I knew right then I wanted to play bass. In '76-'77 Nelson and a friend started their first group, which enjoyed moderate success and even toured Japan as the Six Million Dollar Band. "We emulated all our favorite artists—Graham Central Station, Bootsy's Rubber Band, the Brothers Johnson—everything that sold and was on the radio. We spent so much time in the garage that we grew together and actually learned how to play music together." To make ends meet, Nelson spray-painted fighter jets on the Northrop Aircraft assembly line. "I used to go to that job every day wishing I could play music. When they fired me after six years, I was determined to become a musician."

Nelson decided that the best way to get serious would be to add new skills to his R&B repertoire. “When I started playing around town, I made sure to broaden my horizons with a couple of blues gigs and a jazz gig. I wanted to learn the differences in these styles, to know the subtleties. I didn’t want to approach blues, for example, playing the same lines all the time. I got with some good cats and made sure I had those gigs to make me a better player. Funny thing is, I draw on those experiences even today.”

In the mid and late '80s, Nelson stayed busy with a variety of projects, including gigs with R&B artists Vesta Williams, Brenda Russell, and Leon Haywood, vocal quartet All-4-One, and soul singer/drummer Al Wilson. He also has fond memories of Masterblast, an exciting Afro-Cuban group led by Tower of Power saxophonist Steve “Doc” Kupka. In the meantime, Juan studied theory and harmony at L.A.’s Eubanks Conservatory.

One of his more memorable collaborations was with Sunbear, an Oakland-based group that occasionally included session keyboard whiz Greg Phillinganes. Nelson and the band had a regular gig across the street from Burbank studios, and employees would check them out. In '91, Roger Clinton—then working on the set of *Designing Women*—recruited the group as his backup band for TV-taping warm-up routines. “Roger used to tell us his brother was going to be president, and we just laughed. We never believed him.” When Bill Clinton went to the White House in 1993, Sunbear played inauguration parties around D.C.

A couple of years later, Tracy Chapman drummer Rock Deadrick had just finished working on the debut album by a new singer-songwriter, and he told fellow drummer Johnny Kirkwood to invite Juan to audition for the band. “I was struggling for work, and I had to make a decision about what direction I was going to go in. Johnny

told me, 'It's not a lot of pay right now, but the cat's saying something with his music.' I was interested right away. Good lyric writers are rare, so when I heard Ben for the first time, I was like, 'Yeah, man—this is cool.' I auditioned and got the gig."

Harper went overseas to promote the new album, and Nelson and Deadrick got together at Juan's house to work on the material. "We were scheduled to rehearse for a week before Ben got back; we got together twice. As soon as we hooked up and started playing, we just locked up. The chemistry was great. Sometimes you have to work on it, but with us, it happened real fast. I dropped everything else right then."

Seven years and four albums later, Nelson is an important part of Ben Harper's success, co-writing the title track of *Fight For Your Mind*, arranging numerous tunes, and serving as the vital link between the guitarist/singer and the rest of the Innocent Criminals. Juan has nothing but praise for Harper. "I've been in situations I thought were special, and you put all this work into it, and the people don't respond. There's something very special about Ben, and I know it every time I feel the crowd respond."

*What was your first impression of playing with Ben?*

I didn't know I was going to have so much freedom to interpret his music. I had been a sideman for these other groups, so I knew how it was: You play your part, get paid, go home, right? From the beginning, I was allowed to be creative within the music. It's an opportunity for me to express myself and be with a positive cat who's writing music that matters.

*What's your role in songwriting and arranging?*

Ben brings in a song and I create the bass part. I also do arrangements for him, although I don't usually get credit for that. I am writing my own tunes, and when we get together for an album project, I submit songs to him.

*How did you marry your funk aesthetic with Harper's folk background?*

At first, Ben was worried about that—he thought I was too funky. I took the challenge. I wasn't going to let that stop me! I'm funky if I want to be, but I can play a simple part. That's just a part of the discipline of playing. I'm sure Jaco could play country & western and some fatback funk stuff, too. He was just a well-rounded musician. That's what I want to be.

*You have an interesting role as the only other melodic instrument in the band.*

I have a lot of freedom. I like to play a few chords here and there and fill up the music for Ben, because he's usually playing open chords on guitar. But I do miss playing with a keyboard player—I'm pushing for Ben to have a sideman who could play guitar and keyboard on the road so that sometimes he can set down the guitar and sing.

*Do you work on grooves with rest of the rhythm section?*

We work out grooves, listen to tapes of the shows, and make changes. On the road, it's a challenge to keep my lines exciting to play every night, so I like to change them around. We mix songs and sets in each show, and we're starting to bring back the old stuff, too.

*What accounts for the band's tightness?*

Chemistry. We're all coming from different places—I'm coming from the funk, Ben's coming from a folk perspective, the percussion player is coming from a Latin or African thing, and we have a rock drummer. All those tastes come together to form a sound. I don't try to explain it—it just works. And we're tight from playing together, too. The

song “Alone,” for example, wasn’t part of the original *Burn to Shine* sessions, but everything just fell together—the bass line, the drums, Ben’s parts. We spent about two hours on that song before we recorded. That kind of stuff can happen after four years of playing together.

*Some fans have said they wish you stepped out like you used to.*

[Laughs] In the early days, just after I co-wrote “Fight for Your Mind,” I got a long spot in the show on that song, and it was a whole adventure. We did it every night—but after three or four years, we just had to give it a rest, and we haven’t done another song that features the bass like that. Lately, though, we’ve been bringing “Fight for Your Mind” out of the mothballs. The simple fact is that Ben lets me step out as long as I want to: “All right, shine—it’s your time. Just let me know when you’re finished.” I’m disciplined enough to play the music, and when it’s my turn to step out, I’m going to do my best to groove and make the music happen.

*How did “Steal My Kisses” come about?*

Ben wrote the chords and lyrics, and he played it in the back of the bus one day. So I got out the bass and wrote the bass line, and our drum tech, a big Run-DMC fan, started beatboxing to the song. We arranged it, and it turned out to be a pretty cool track.

*It’s great to hear a bass solo on the radio.*

It’s about time! [Laughs] I’ve been stepping out with more solos lately. I’m a ham anyway—I love to play for people, because when they respond, it makes me feel good all over.

*You seem to prefer the stage to the studio.*

I’m getting better because of all the recording we’re doing now, but I’m more inspired by playing live than I am in the studio. A lot of times when I’m onstage, I use my

imagination to play something wicked or just right—something I didn't think of in the studio.

*Does the band take new material out on the road before going to the studio?*

That would be great, but it's rare. We have done it. Ben's protective of his songs, though—we'd play something at soundcheck and next thing you know it's on the Internet! That's cool, but it's hard to sell a record when everyone's got it already. He doesn't mind people bootlegging the shows, but he wants to keep the new material safe. It's good and it's bad, because the songs don't really get a chance to breathe and evolve before we record them.

*Which bassists are you listening to these days?*

Anthony Jackson is the man. I want to meet him so bad just to let him know how much I respect his playing. All his stuff with Chaka Khan just blows me away. I really dig Marcus Miller's playing; he's one of the pioneers. And we're playing Fred Hammond's live video *Purpose By Design* [Verity] on the tour bus every day.

*What other projects are you working on?*

I had a lot of fun playing with Gov't Mule when they opened for Ben Harper last year. I get calls for sessions all the time. I just did some sessions with a singer from Paris, Latin-funk stuff. I just try to get in as much music as I can. As far as the future, Ben has been cool about giving me points on the albums; I don't want to be one of those cats who's broke after their music career. I've also enrolled in BIT between tours to finish the theory and harmony studies I started so long ago. I want to get better at what I do.

*Looking back, what made you commit to music as a life goal?*

Getting laid off at Northrop. I decided that if a company could lay me off with no notice and control my life like that, I'm going to be a musician, I'm going to be happy,

and when I go from the planet, I'm going to have a smile on my face—you know what I'm saying? And while I'm here I'm going to try to make some beautiful music.