

Session bassist, producer, and songwriter Tommy Sims

“Macro Grooves,” November 2000

By E.E. Bradman

“It’s all about Bernard Edwards, James Jamerson, and those cats who made whole songs out of a bass line.”

Tommy Sims has a passion for the big picture. His muscular lines are usually just what the song requires—no less, no more. His solo debut, *Peace and Love*, proves he’s also a gifted multi-instrumentalist and singer. And in an era when bass players are moving beyond their traditional rhythm-section role, Sims is steadily carving a niche as a producer, arranger, and writer with an ear for the groove.

“I love being just the bass player, coming in to collaborate with other cats on the date,” says Sims, who has worked with Bruce Springsteen, Garth Brooks, Eric Clapton, the Neville Brothers, and others. “I don’t do much of that anymore, but when people call me to play bass, they throw up the track and leave the room: ‘Just put the bass part on there—we know you’ll figure out what to do.’”

A Chicago native, Sims first picked up bass as an 11-year-old in his family’s Baptist church, absorbing the sounds of gospel and Motown and becoming proficient on several instruments through high school. After studying music at Western Michigan College and the University of Michigan, Sims began working in Nashville in the late ’80s. He soon became a busy player and songwriter on the city’s contemporary Christian music scene, contributing to critically acclaimed releases by Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Margaret Becker, and others. By 1990, Sims was commuting to Los Angeles to work with John

Cougar Mellencamp/R.E.M. producer Don Gehman, programming, playing bass and keyboards, and co-producing. Since then, Sims has learned to change his approach depending on the situation. “In hip-hop and R&B, the producer is called upon to do everything but sing the song; the label wants the artist to be able to show up and sing. But if I’m producing rock, I may be asked to shape raw material into something the radio will play.”

Tommy’s wide range of experience makes *Peace and Love* an appealing showcase for his diverse skills. From acoustic, bass-less Jim Croce covers to Old School jams to sweeping orchestral arrangements, Sims proves that his greatest strength as a bassist is a well-developed ability to make his soulful parts integral to their surroundings. Like another bass-playing producer, Larry Klein [August ’99], he grooves like an arranger with one eye on the production, building his lines in the context of the final product.

Surprisingly, Sims downplays the bass chair as a head start for producers. “Other producers might call in a bass player or lean on the drummer to find the pocket. When I listen, I instantly hear where the pocket is. But that’s probably the only edge I have as a bassist who produces; all the other stuff comes from studying harmony, the other instruments, arrangements, and vocalists.” Although he acknowledges the influence of R&B bass players of the past, he doesn’t identify strictly as a bassist. “I don’t consider myself a bass player any more than I am a guitar player or pianist. I realized all of these things are just functions of the song, so I stopped studying bass players and started working on my songwriting and arranging.”

Most of *Peace and Love* was recorded at Tommy’s Nashville home studio. His main bass is a ’76 Fender Jazz with a Sadowsky preamp. He also uses a ’62 Jazz and a Yamaha BBN5A 5-string. “The ’62 has a good, funky Verdine White type of thing, and it’s more

tight and focused. The '76 has big, wide bottom end, and the Yamaha is basic and very functional.” For Minimoog sounds, he uses a Studio Electronics Midimoog and SE-1, as well as custom equipment. Sims is always experimenting with amp tones and DI boxes, but he notes much of the CD’s bass was recorded direct. “When I feel the bass line is right there, I’ll sit down and plug in directly—I know I can grab one of these old Fender basses and put the part to tape, even if I come back later and redo it.” Live, he uses an Eden 4x10 with an Eden World Tour 800 head. Tommy strings all his basses with GHS Boomers, .045–.105.

Although he’s not a fan of large-scale tours, Sims is reservedly enthusiastic about taking his band One World, a loose collective of Nashville studio players, on the road. When he does, he’ll probably shy away from pyrotechnics and special effects. “I think I know more about bass lines and pockets than I do about how to make use of a 7-string. I’m just your basic 4-string cat—and for me, it’s all about Bernard Edwards, James Jamerson, and those cats who made whole songs out of a bass line.”

“Down-Home Economics”

Tommy Sims’s playing may be economical, but when he plays, he *plays*. After a long intro on “New Jam” (from *Peace and Love*), Sims kicks into the insistent octave *Dm7* pulse of Ex. 1’s bar 1; he then tosses off fills like the one in bar 2, which occurs at 3:43. Typically Tommy uses few notes, but his quarter-note groove with accents is straightforward and undeniable. Without altering the feel, Sims adds harmonic tension with a tasty two-bar scalar move before landing on the low *A*, implying the *V* (Ex. 2).

Ex. 3 marks the transition to the bridge at 4:00 with a minor-3rd shift upward to *Fm7*. Here Sims continues the octave feel with slight ornamentation in bar 3 and a trickier fill in bar 5—a rhythmic 1st-position figure followed by a rest on the downbeat, after which he returns to the groove. Other factors worth noting: Tommy’s thick, rich tone, his command of muted and staccato notes, and the relaxed feel of even the trickiest packages.

A Selected Discography (* = produced and played on)

Solo album: *Peace and Love*, Cherry/Universal. **With Bruce Springsteen:** *Music from the Motion Picture Soundtrack: The Streets of Philadelphia*, Epic; *Plugged: In Concert*, Sony; *A Tribute to Curtis Mayfield*, Warner Bros. **With Charlie Peacock:** *Strange Language*, Chordant; *Secret of Time*, Sparrow. **With Margaret Becker:** (all on Sparrow) *Grace*; *Soul*; *Steps of Faith 1985–1992*; *Never for Nothing*. **With Selena:** *Dreaming of You*, EMI Latin. **With Amy Grant:** (all on A&M) *Behind the Eyes*; *House in Love*; *Heart in Motion*. **With Michael W. Smith:** (both on Geffen) *Change Your World*, *Go West Young Man*. **With Michael McDonald:** *Blue Obsession**, Ramp. **With the Neville Brothers:** *Valence Street**, Columbia. **With Garth Brooks:** *In the Life of Chris Gaines**, Capitol. **With Michael Bolton:** *Greatest Hits**, Columbia. **With Michael English:** *Michael English*, Curb; (on Warner Bros.) *Michael English*; *Healing*; *Hope*.

© BASS PLAYER