

KILLER BASS CENTRE, CARVIN, ASHDOWN, SCHECTER, DIAMOND AND PIGTRONIX GEAR ON TEST!

THE UK'S NUMBER ONE BASS GUITAR MAGAZINE

BASSES

Guitar Magazine

**STUART
HAMM**
THE FASTEST
FINGERS ON
PLANET BASS!

BILL WYMAN

**WOLFGANG
VAN HALEN**

**MARKUS
GROSSKOPF**
HELLOWEEN

GROG ROX
DIE SO FLUID

CODY WRIGHT

NIGEL HARRISON
BLONDIE

DANIEL FIRTH
CRADLE OF FILTH

www.bassguitarmagazine.com UK £4.35 Issue 119 July 2015



9 771476 521054

19

>



STONE IMMACULATE

Sometime Rolling Stone Bill Wyman returns with a new album and signature bass. Paul Trynka asks the sticky-fingered questions

— Photography by Judy Totton —

There's no place like home. While his ex-bandmates head for the stadia of North America, Bill Wyman has been busy in his basement – where he cooked up his aptly-named *Back To Basics*, his first solo album in over 30 years, aided by the home-made bass that underpinned his band's rise to fame 50 years ago.

Sitting in Sticky Fingers, the Kensington restaurant that features a luscious selection of his old basses, plus the Gibson Les Paul goldtop that the late guitarist Brian Jones played for his very last public appearance with the band, Wyman is relaxed and almost uncharacteristically cheery. It's been 20 years since he left the Stones, but the joy of a low-key career, away from the hassles is one, he says, that's "much more fun".

Over the past couple of decades, Wyman has produced plenty of albums with his Rhythm Kings, the blues and roots band that hinges on musical luminaries and friends like Georgie Fame and Geraint Watkins. The idea of a solo release, he says, came "when I was listening to some old demos, and suddenly started

an upbeat, positive vibe. The optimistic feel denotes something of a renaissance for the 78-year-old, who has three young daughters – one of whom, Matilda, helped audition the new material along with her friends: "I thought they'd like the newer, more uptempo stuff, but it turns out they like blues. It still appeals to a younger generation."

Compared to musicians starting out, Wyman reckons that he and his ex-bandmates benefited from a freedom that's gone today – even if it was harder work back then. "You had to find out how to do everything yourself," he says. "It was totally different from today, where everyone wants to become a star and go on TV or Youtube – we were doing it with no idea at all that it would become a big deal. We did it because we loved the music."

Wyman's new album, both in its bass-lines and its cover, pays tribute to the incredible primitiveness of the music scene when he first started out, for his current instrument of choice is a modern Bass Centre reissue of the practically home-made bass that kicked off his career. Most of the instruments on offer when he decided to take up the instrument were "pretty horrible", including the Dallas Tuxedo bass that his friend, drummer Tony Chapman, helped source. With Tony's encouragement, Wyman took the primitive, single-cutaway instrument round to a neighbour, who owned a fretsaw; soon the instrument was a double-cutaway fretless.

Chapman later joined the Stones, which is how Wyman first hooked up with the band. The former was booted out a few weeks later, but Wyman stayed on for three decades. That first bass saw him through many of those decades: he continued using it despite several endorsement deals, and reckons the Fender Mustang bass, often associated with him thanks to its use on several seminal Stones tours, was "OK", but never appealed in the same way. The original sits in a glass case on the wall of Sticky Fingers, replaced by the modern replica. He explains: "It was made by Barry Moorhouse from the Bass Centre in Surrey. He told me lots of other people love the production model, including girls, because the neck's so slim."

The instrument itself is deliciously distinctive – a small slab alder body with simple pickguard, one humbucker and one Baldwin-style pickup, like the one that Wyman added to his own, but with a solid, modern bridge-tail-piece with chunky saddles replacing the original's unadjustable, pressed metal affair. With its 30-inch scale, it's extremely compact, but with a distinct, rather than woolly, basic tone. "It really is the perfect bass for me," Wyman adds. "That's why I put it on the album sleeve!" His main version is fretted, although the Bass Centre is planning to deliver him a fretless instrument, and are currently considering a stripped-down, single-pickup 'Junior Blues' model.

As one of Britain's leading bassists from his first Stones show on December 14, 1962, Wyman had to contend with the lack of knowledge about his instrument in those early days. He'd managed to get close to the sound he wanted, initially with a homemade bass cabinet: "My sound has

"EVERYONE WANTS TO BECOME A STAR AND GO ON TV OR YOUTUBE"

thinking, 'These sound pretty good!' And it just grew from there..."

Wyman's solo albums were a big deal in the 1970s, when he famously became the only Stone to have a solo hit – much to the chagrin of Mick Jagger, who hired the hippest producers and musicians for his own solo works, which mostly sank without trace. Yet those days were "a real drag, dealing with a company and everything they'd line up for you", which is why recording the skeleton of his album in the basement was "low-key. It just grew bit by bit. I wasn't even thinking in terms of it being an album until I played it to friends, and they said 'people need to hear this!'" The initial songs included the laid-back, sweetly melodic 'November And Stuff' – a song about money, initially intended as a follow-up to Wyman's 1981 hit 'Je Suis Un Rock Star', but which, with its shuffling Alabama 3 groove, sounds startlingly contemporary.

Most of the songs (heretically) were built around a core of acoustic guitar, played by long-time collaborator Terry Taylor; these were augmented in two stages, as more friends, including Mark Knopfler and long-term Stones engineer Glyn Johns, suggested improvements, firstly with drummer Graham Broad and keyboardist Guy Fletcher, while Robbie Macintosh's guitar lines were added later, for emphasis here and there. Although the whole album shares the same JJ Cale-ish groove, along with a distinctive Wyman world-view ("quirky, is what everyone called it") the newer songs especially share

always been about that bass, short scale, and 18-inch speakers," he says. Yet, in Britain's mostly primitive recording studios, capturing that sound on tape wasn't easy: "The one thing is that they didn't really understand how to record bass and drums in the studios we worked in then. So the record would come out, and you couldn't hear the bass at all, and you couldn't hear Charlie's bass drum either," he says. "It bothered me, but I'd come to accept it, that it was about the whole band and not just me. But finally, with some of the remasters you can hear it properly!"

It was those 2002 Abkco masters that first revealed the subtle sleaziness behind Wyman's playing, especially the fluid creativity of classic sides like 'Under My Thumb'. Of the original versions, it's probably the band's first Top 20 hit, 'I Wanna Be Your Man', that first revealed his potential - its intensity and distortion, helped by the absence of manager and Phil Spector wannabe Andrew Oldham for that session, helped inspire American garage rock. "People go on about that bass-line," says Wyman, "but it's really just a simple walking bass, except it's doubled up in tempo."

By the time of the band's first American tour, the Stones had already scored their first endorsement deal, which saw Bill eventually bag his own Vox V248 Wyman bass. Today, he reckons the instrument "really wasn't very good" - but adds that when the band first hit the States in 1964, he finally had his sound down. "When we got Vox involved, they supplied the bass and the amplification. I had a 100-watt top and two cabinets, about two feet high, each with an 18-inch speaker. We'd split the lead from the amplifier to the two cabinets, and placed one on either side of the stage. Everyone used to wonder how I got that sound, because it was better than anything anyone else had."

That first Stones US tour also revealed the gulf between English and American recording techniques. The whole band was enthused about recording at 2120 Michigan, the Chess studios, where so many of their idols, from Chuck Berry to Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf to Little Walter had recorded. They recorded the hits 'Time Is On My Side' and 'It's All Over Now' at that first session, which was a revelation: "Ron Malo [the main Chess engineer] was terrific, he really knew how to record. I remember him telling me, 'Plug in there.' It was a socket on the wall, and I was looking around to see if it was connected to an amplifier by hidden wires." This was, of course, Wyman's first experience of DI recording.

Although Wyman's personal assistant occasionally interrupts our conversation should your fearless interviewer have the gall to ask about the 'old days', it's obvious that Wyman feels a justifiable pride in his band's role in pioneering the blues, and alerting mainstream America to its own heritage. They witnessed Howlin' Wolf's TV debut in May 1965, sitting down at the great man's feet for his performance: "It was a very special moment, all sitting there," says Bill. "We were taking something that America had, and introducing it to them. And it was all the more amazing, in that Wolf introduced us to this elderly gentleman who he said was a friend. Brian and I went over and chatted to him, and it was Son House - this fantastic legend, who told us how

"EVERYONE USED TO WONDER HOW I GOT THAT SOUND, BECAUSE IT WAS BETTER THAN ANYTHING ANYONE ELSE HAD"

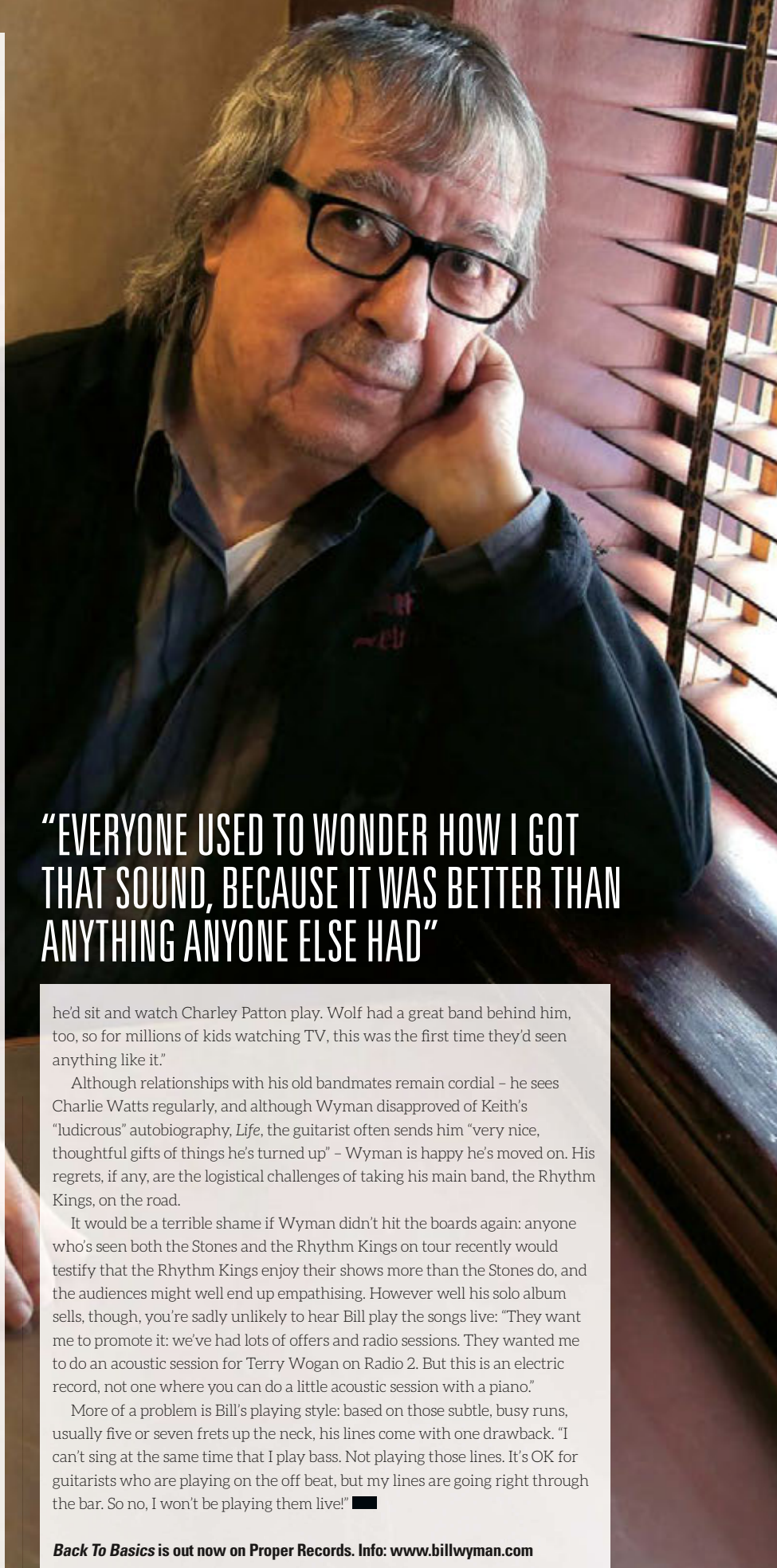
he'd sit and watch Charley Patton play. Wolf had a great band behind him, too, so for millions of kids watching TV, this was the first time they'd seen anything like it."

Although relationships with his old bandmates remain cordial - he sees Charlie Watts regularly, and although Wyman disapproved of Keith's "ludicrous" autobiography, *Life*, the guitarist often sends him "very nice, thoughtful gifts of things he's turned up" - Wyman is happy he's moved on. His regrets, if any, are the logistical challenges of taking his main band, the Rhythm Kings, on the road.

It would be a terrible shame if Wyman didn't hit the boards again: anyone who's seen both the Stones and the Rhythm Kings on tour recently would testify that the Rhythm Kings enjoy their shows more than the Stones do, and the audiences might well end up empathising. However well his solo album sells, though, you're sadly unlikely to hear Bill play the songs live: "They want me to promote it: we've had lots of offers and radio sessions. They wanted me to do an acoustic session for Terry Wogan on Radio 2. But this is an electric record, not one where you can do a little acoustic session with a piano."

More of a problem is Bill's playing style: based on those subtle, busy runs, usually five or seven frets up the neck, his lines come with one drawback. "I can't sing at the same time that I play bass. Not playing those lines. It's OK for guitarists who are playing on the off beat, but my lines are going right through the bar. So no, I won't be playing them live!" ■

Back To Basics is out now on Proper Records. Info: www.billwyman.com



BASS CENTRE

Bill Wyman Signature Bass

Kev Sanders sees a red scratchplate, and he wants it painted black... when he tries the new Bill Wyman Signature from Bass Centre

Manufacturer: Bass Centre
www.basscentre.com

Tested at: The Great British Bass Lounge
www.greatbritishbasslounge.com

Considering his legendary status as bass player with the self-proclaimed 'greatest rock'n'roll band in the world' (at least until 1992) it's a little surprising that there hasn't been a Bill Wyman signature bass available now for years. In fact, back in the late 60s Vox made a 'Teardrop' bass with Wyman's name on it, although he had no input into the design and has since said that he actually didn't like the bass very much, despite using it for some time. If you look at old pictures and film from the early days of the Stones, Wyman is more likely to be seen playing either a Dan Armstrong or a Framus 'Star' bass. But there's a bass that pre-dates either of these and, like the story of Brian May and his guitar, it was one that Wyman made (or at least modified) himself.

In 1961 Wyman took an old short-scale bass of dubious lineage and cut down the body to a smaller size that he found light and comfortable. Next, in a prophetic move – and to deal with the buzzing and rattling from the strings – he removed the frets, in effect creating a fretless bass years before Jaco did the same, and long before one was commercially available. He called it his 'Tuxedo' bass and he used it on and off for most of his career. Now it's the inspiration for the new Bill Wyman Signature Bass from the Bass Centre.

BUILD QUALITY

Let's start with the obvious; this is a simple instrument made with simple construction methods and materials. Of course there's nothing wrong with that – after all, so is a Fender Precision. In fact there seems to be a growing trend among the bass-building community to move towards simpler construction techniques and electronics. Manufacturers seem to be increasingly focused on using high quality tonewoods and hardware, and this Bass Centre instrument is a good example of what I mean. It is very well put together: details like the accurate neck join and perfect fretting point to a quality build with tight tolerances and careful quality control at the Korean workshop, where they also build the Brian May signature guitars.

Everything is finished in a smooth glossy black so there's no way of checking the quality of the alder wood used for the body, but it's light and resonant and sounds good when played acoustically. What you can see is the tightly grained rich, dark rosewood fingerboard: unusual

at this price point, as are the large white pearl dot markers which, like the jumbo nickel frets, are flawlessly fitted and smoothed.

The pickups and preamp are all authentically 60s, both in terms of looks and design. It's a simple format, but again, this is in no way a negative observation and anyway, less is most definitely more when it comes to this kind of instrument. The two-a-side tuners are quality lightweight Hipshots. These look good in the black chrome finish but personally I think a set of traditional chrome cloverleaf Schallers would be more in keeping with the retro vibe of the bass and a better match for the rest of the hardware. The chunky bridge is chrome and looks as dependable as it is functional, but perhaps the most striking aspect of this bass is the thick red perspex scratchplate. It looks fantastic, and elevates the instrument to something much more visually interesting.



**“LIGHT, RESONANT AND
SOUNDS GOOD WHEN
PLAYED ACOUSTICALLY”**

SOUNDS AND PLAYABILITY

The pickups are powerful, quiet and – unsurprisingly – have a tone which is perfectly suited to old school rhythm and blues... particularly the back pickup. Although it doesn't have the vintage looks of the front unit, with the bridge pickup volume and the tone turned up full, the sound is authentically Stones.

If you listen to the two-beat feel and tone of Wyman's bass-line on the track 'The Last Time' you'll get a good idea of how this sounds. It's punchy with a thick, rich lo-mid bias, and has more than enough presence to be used on its own. Adding in some of the neck pickup fills out the sound considerably and now you have a great Fender-ish vintage rock'n'roll tone – a bass sound that will sit perfectly in any blues trio alongside an old distorted archtop or battered Tele.

There's plenty of scope for adjusting your sound using the simple passive tone control and pickup volumes, but the way you play this bass will also have a big effect on the tone. I had some great results playing right over the end of the neck and even tried playing it with an old felt pick. Like this, you can get the perfect 50s and 60s bass sound, minus of course the hum and crackle that was such a common part of any bass guitar's sound back then.

**"A GREAT FENDER-ISH VINTAGE
ROCK'N'ROLL TONE WHICH WILL SIT
PERFECTLY IN ANY BLUES TRIO"**



The tiny size of this bass is a bit of a mixed blessing. It's a little too small to play comfortably with it on your lap, but standing up with it strapped on, the tiny body makes much more sense and the light design means that it's effortless to play, even for long periods of time.

For me, a little more thought could have been put into the neck joint. It may well be of the same form and dimensions as Wyman's Tuxedo bass, but with quite a thick body and very shallow neck socket, there's a lot of the body protruding at the point where the neck joins the body at the 16th fret. However, the chunky short-scale neck is super-comfortable to play and the Elites flatwound strings it comes fitted with are a perfect match for the feel of this bass.

CONCLUSION

I guess you'll either love or loathe the look of this instrument. Personally I think it looks cool in a kitsch, early-60s sort of way: rather like a Vox Phantom or one of those old 60s basses that were made in Italy by electronic organ manufacturers. £600 is not a lot for a bass these days, and although you could argue that there's not a lot of it, what there is in the Bass Centre Bill Wyman Signature is very good quality. Like any instrument at this price, there are limitations: this won't be a bass for everyone. However, my guess is that most potential buyers will either be dyed-in-the-wool Wyman fans or will have started their careers on the kind of bass that this instrument takes its cue from. Features like the chunky neck joint and short scale will be of less importance to them than its accurate and authentic appearance and sound.

Bass Centre and their distribution partners House Music have brought us some cracking instruments over the years – from the Bass Collection range to their signature models in the British Bass Masters series. They've always represented great value for money too, and although the Bill Wyman signature is a bit of an oddity and a deviation from the Fender-inspired instruments that form the bulk of Bass Centre's catalogue, it continues the company's tradition for quality basses at affordable prices. ■