

FENDER PLAYERS CLUB JACO PASTORIUS

With the release of his stunning self-titled debut in 1976, Jaco Pastorius single-handedly wrote a new chapter in the annals of bass. As one Pastorius disciple so accurately expressed it, "Jaco opened the door and we all walked through."

Jaco Pastorius' soloist approach to the electric bass guitar was wholly unprecedented back in 1976, while his use of false harmonics as a melodic device was simply revolutionary, pointing a new direction for a generation of bass players who followed in his wake.

The self-proclaimed "World's Greatest Bass Player" first made his mark on the music world with Weather Report, the premier fusion band of the '70s. Formed by Miles Davis alumni Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, Weather Report became a widely popular concert attraction with the addition of Pastorius to the group in 1976.

"Before Jaco came along," Zawinul notes, "we were perceived as a kind of esoteric jazz group. We had been popular on college campuses, but after Jaco joined the band, we started selling out big concert halls everywhere. Jaco became some kind of all-American hero to these kids."

"Weather Report was a really powerful group before, but Jaco was in a space all his own. He was so different from all the other bass players of that time. He had that magical thing about him, the same kind of thing Jimi Hendrix had. He was an electrifying performer and a great musician."

With a natural flair for showmanship, the extroverted Jaco was as acutely aware of entertaining as he was of the history of jazz. Crowds came in droves to watch him do flips off his amplifier, a clear nod to the rock and R&B performance ethic he had grown up with in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

In his own unique fashion, Jaco came to personify fusion music itself, turning rock audiences on to new music by providing the links between Jimi Hendrix and John Coltrane, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker, Bob Marley and James Brown, Johann Sebastian Bach and the Beatles.

Originally a drummer, following in the footsteps of his Dad, journeyman jazz man Jack Pastorius, Jaco, switched to bass at age 15. He was playing in a nine-piece horn band at the time called Las Olas Brass, which covered popular material of the day by the likes of Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, James Brown and the Tijuana Brass. The switch to bass, Jaco confessed, was actually not his own choice.

"What happened," according to Pastorius, "was they got another drummer, Rich Franks, who was older and a much better player than me technically. And when the regular bass player left the band around that same time, I just moved over to bass."

It was easy for him. With his large hands, long fingers and double-jointed thumbs, Jaco seemed to be born to play the electric bass guitar. His first instrument was a pawn shop cheapie he picked up for \$15. By woodshedding intensively over the next several months, he gained a remarkable command over the instrument in a short amount of time. Jaco's youngest brother Rory Pastorius has vivid memories of Jaco's rapid progress on bass. "By the time he was 16, he was probably the best bass player in South Florida. By the time he was 17, he was definitely the best bass player in the entire state."

At that point, Jaco had already perfected his signature muted 16th-note funk style, which would later crop up on such Pastorius pieces as "Come On Come Over" and "Opus Pocus" from his debut album on Epic and on "Barbary Coast" from *Black Market*, his maiden voyage with Weather Report. That technique, combined with the sound of his Fender Jazz Bass, his amplifier and roundwound strings, helped to give Jaco a brighter, punchier sound with more sustain to each note. That, in essence, became Jaco's voice on the instrument and remained his trademark throughout his celebrated career.

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Armed with the proper tools, an enormous talent and an ego to match, Jaco became a man on a mission, ready to take on the world. He gradually climbed the ladder to success, from South Florida groups like the funky Hammond B-3 trio Woodchuck (1969-70) and the slick white soul band Tommy Strand & The Upper Hand (1971-72) to the national touring band Wayne Cochran & The C.C. Riders (1972-73), which served as the oven for Jaco's approach to "creative overplaying."

It was on the gig with Cochran, playing several sets a night seven nights a week, that he developed the incredible facility and stamina, which later served him so well in the fast company of Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter of Weather Report. It is also where Jaco began exploring chording, false harmonics and percussive effects on the electric bass guitar, qualities that later come out in his intimate recordings with Joni Mitchell (1976's *Hejira* and 1977's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*).

As drummer Allyn Robinson, Jaco's rhythm section mate in the C.C. Riders, explained, "His playing was so emotional and so creative, but it wasn't cluttered. As busy as it often was, it always flowed. It was like a living, breathing thing; it had that yin and yang."

The beauty in Jaco's playing was not in the obvious things. It wasn't that he could play fast, necessarily. It was in his phrasing. Jaco just made me sound good. I've never had a musical hookup with another bass player like that, before or since. There'll never be another to come along like Jaco. To me, there's bass before Jaco and there's bass after Jaco. That's just the way it is. I mean, this guy was touched by God."

Jaco experienced a meteoric rise to superstardom with Weather Report (1976-82). As drummer and fellow Weather Reporter Peter Erskine put it, "At one point, he was like the biggest thing in the music business, like the Michael Jackson of jazz. He made such an incredible impression. For a creative instrumental musician to have that kind of impact is really unheard of. Here was someone who had what seemed to be the most unbelievable potential. He really had the world by the tail."

Jaco Pastorius died tragically on September 21, 1987, just ten weeks short of his 36th birthday. But the recorded legacy he left behind-with Weather Report, with Joni Mitchell and with his own Word of Mouth band-remains for the ages.

-- Bill Milkowski, from *Fender Frontline* Vol. 25 (1999)



Bill Milkowski is the author of:

Jaco: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius (Miller Freeman books)

by Bill Milkowski

This tragic tale of the man who revolutionized the electric bass will appeal to players, fans, and anyone curious about the fine line between creative genius and madness. Bass players and music fans today - whether of jazz, rock, reggae, pop, or punk - owe much to Jaco Pastorius who literally reinvented the role of the electric bass. Jaco takes an in-depth look at his life through biographical narrative, personal tributes, and photographs. It chronicles his development beginning in the nightclub circuit, then on the road with Wayne Cochran & The C.C. Riders, then catapulting to stardom in Weather Report. It explores his diagnosis as a manic depressive, his eventual downfall accelerated by alcohol and cocaine, and his senseless and violent death. Includes photos. The CD includes three live Jaco Pastorius concert tracks.

Inventory # HL 330256. **Book/CD pack \$14.95** (US).

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Albums referred to in this article, and suggested listening:

Joni Mitchell, *Hejira* (Asylum, 1976)

Joni Mitchell, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (Asylum, 1977)

Joni Mitchell, *Mingus* (Asylum, 1979)

Jaco Pastorius, *Jaco Pastorius* (Epic, 1976)

Jaco Pastorius, *Word of Mouth* (Warner, 1981)

Weather Report, *Black Market* (Columbia, 1976)

Weather Report, *Heavy Weather* (Columbia, 1977)