



ALAIN CARON

Mike Flynn chats to one of the unsung heroes of modern bass guitar.

Canadian bassist Alain Caron has been walking his own distinct and highly evolved path since 1977. Initially self-taught, Caron earned himself a place at Boston's prestigious Berklee College of Music and soon found himself working as an up-and-coming jazz pro. Yet it was as a member of 1980s Quebec-based fusion group UZEB that he rose to national prominence as the band gained cult status and a reputation for scorching virtuoso musicianship and an exciting rock-edged sound. Much like their fellow countrymen Rush,

UZEB's style embraced strong melodic themes and a certain narrative quality, and despite being instrumental, the music had storytelling lyricism and plenty of drama too.

Caron produced his first solo bass-led album, *Le Band*, in 1992, which revealed his full mastery of both fretted and fretless 6-string bass. What distinguished his playing wasn't simply his jaw-dropping control and effortless chops, but rather his highly original technical and harmonic concepts that were born out of years of playing double bass and a deep understanding of the jazz tradition. This was no flash in the pan or overhyped new bassist, but the arrival of one of the instrument's true masters.

Still going strong today, it was a rare opportunity to speak to this bass professor in person while he was in Europe at the Frankfurt Musikmesse to demonstrate the

first prototype of his new Markbass speaker system. After delivering some sparkling solo demos and dazzling duets with fellow endorsee Pipo Martino, Caron took time out for an in-depth chat about his amazingly prolific career to date. I wondered how it all began for this deep-thinking bass master... 'I started out playing piano, guitar and a bit of drums when I was about seven or eight years old. And then I started playing bass when I was 11. To me it was like a big guitar and I was playing drums at the same time! So I really enjoyed it. I left home when I was 14 years old to play in top 40 bands all across the country, and a year later I discovered jazz. I was listening to guys like Oscar Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie and Bud Powell – so all the right stuff. Then I started listening to Bill Evans and a lot of trio jazz work, then up to Miles Davis and then obviously Chick Corea and

Herbie Hancock... This inevitably led Caron onto a wider palette of 1970s fusion sounds, but unlike some younger players today he also took in a healthy dose of popular music to give him a well-rounded approach to creating his own style. 'I listened to a lot of Motown music, a lot of rhythm and blues like Joe Tex, Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding – all those cool grooves. Honestly, I've always been attached to that music a lot more than... let's call it rock. For some reason, though, I've listened to Yes and Genesis, but I've always preferred the likes of Tower of Power and Blood, Sweat and Tears, and Cold Blood, these kinds of bands. I was raised in Canada, and I'm French speaking basically and I went to a French school; I was exposed to all the French songs, so I kind of like this Romantic style – a little bit more like Italian or French songs, which are very romantic with nice melodies, so I guess I've been influenced by that as well.'

It's this rare combination that crops up in all that Alain plays.

Be it a spaciouly melodic ballad with acres of room and a starkly poignant fretless melody, driving fingerstyle funk or aggressively precise slap, Caron always has one eye, and ear, on the bigger picture. He agrees: 'Yeah, it's all there; that's what I like about fusion playing – the word "fusion" isn't hip anymore, but the concept of fusion – we're still right in it. All the music we hear is a mixture of styles from different countries: from the Middle East, to Asia, to South American music, to Cuban music. If you search the Internet you can hear music from all over the world in a second, so if you leave your mind open when you write and when you play you are definitely influenced by all of that, and to me it's still called fusion!'

It's a tad ironic that the term 'fusion' seems to be fine describing the latest trends in high dining or the latest bubble car hybrid hatchback, but is nothing but

sacrilegious when it comes to music. Caron takes up the point with mild exasperation: 'For some reason it stopped in the 80s – there was jazz-rock and then fusion and then nothing! So it's kind of weird. But anyway, that's the way it is.'

One of the most remarkable aspects of Caron's incredible fretless facility is that in spite of coming to prominence in something of a parallel universe to Jaco Pastorius, he's always somehow managed to avoid sounding like just another Jaco clone. In typically self-disciplined fashion he took drastic steps to retain his own approach. He explained: 'I was playing in UZEB before Jaco arrived, and then when I heard him I said wow, this is too strong! His playing was very avant-garde, very unique and very creative. It had such a

to give it a different flavour and a different range.'

It's the latter point, which also marks Caron's originality and constant striving for something personal and unique, that has been a major factor in his long-standing relationship with remarkable Canadian luthier George Furlanetto and his stunning F-Bass guitars. 'I first started working with a luthier in Montreal and we started making basses with longer necks, so I had a fingerboard that continued almost all the way up to the pickups. And then George Furlanetto called me and said, "I see that you are working on a new instrument. I may have something for you." And so we met and he had made a 4-string bass, but with a wooden bridge, and with a very warm tone, very woody. It was exactly what I was looking for.



Caron testing prototypes of his new signature series speaker system at Markbass HQ

strong impact on me that I stopped listening to him; I even stopped practising electric bass for a while and focused on upright bass, because I liked his sound so much and I didn't want to be influenced by him. So I started listening to Ray Brown, Eddie Gomez and Scott LaFaro to try and get some different ideas. Then I started to study Pat Martino guitar solos, or saxophone solos, or Michael Brecker or John Coltrane solos. I didn't want to copy any of Jaco's licks: it was too easy to go down that track. I don't want to judge anyone who did, but that was my approach, and that's why I switched to a 6-string bass, so I could have a different sound, especially on fretless, because everybody who played fretless right after Jaco, for some reason, they all sounded like him. I really wanted to get away from that so I worked with F-Bass to develop a 6-string bass that had a unique sound, a warmer tone that wasn't as bright; especially on the high C and low B strings, just

A small kind of upright-sounding bass, but something you could play loud and travel with. And then he told me that with the type of neck I had I needed a 5-string. So he built me a 5-string with a high C, and I loved it. But I had been listening to Gino Vannelli playing synthesizer bass, and I wanted to have that low D, E and C# and low B, so I asked George to build me a 5-string with a low B too, so then I had both, but what I really needed was a 6-string, so he built me a prototype in 1983 or '84 and I've been playing a 6-string bass for over 20 years now.'

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of Caron's career to date is the fact he's led his own band as a solo artist since the early 1990s, something few bassists, excluding Dave Holland and Avishai Cohen, have attempted. It's even more surprising when a career as a star sideman seemed like the obvious choice when he moved to Boston, as he continues: 'In 1980 I went to the Berklee School of Music, and I was playing



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upright bass and gigging a lot. I played with Tom Harrell and Dave Kakowski, so I saw the possibility of having a career as a sideman. The door was wide open. But then I had the other option of working with UZEB, developing a unique sound and identity, and making our own records the way we wanted to, and I chose that path. So we did UZEB for 16 years, and I learnt a lot about writing music, thinking about music, arranging, producing – because we produced all our own records.'

All this invaluable experience added an intimate knowledge of the music business to Alain's already brimful mix of talents. And it's something that sustains

him today in an increasingly tough market in which young players often struggle to 'conceptualise' above and beyond simply making music. Just like his musical knowledge, Caron's wide-angle perception is as discerning and articulate as his approach to both business and creativity. 'I learnt all of the different aspects of the music industry – I learnt the whole business. When you are in a group, after a while you make your first record – you want to prove to everybody that you can play fast. Then the next record you want to prove that you know about music, and after that you start to think, what else can I do? We wanted to play music that touched people.



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but without losing the musicality and the complexity of music, so we started to combine elements in our production to give each record more of a concept. We were writing music as if we were writing music for film, because we’d have an image that we wanted to express with the music. So I always keep that in mind, and every time I write a tune there is a story behind it. What is the vibe? What’s the colour? It’s more than just writing a lick, you need something underneath that will touch people. The reason I use guys [in the band] from around town is very simple: it’s to give the group a certain sound. You need to rehearse, you need to talk with these guys, you need to play; as a bandleader I’ve learnt that as well. You can put a great group of musicians together, but with my group, playing a certain tune can go in many different directions. In a short time it’s very hard to give a group an identity and a direction, so I always prefer to work with my musicians to really make sure they understand the direction I want the music to go in.

Among his arsenal of flawless techniques, Caron’s slap style allows incredible clarity and limitless melodic possibilities, favouring precision and groove over speed for the sake of speed. Similar to, but not exactly the same

as, Victor Wooten’s patented style, Caron’s command of down and up thumb strokes and first and second finger plucks is nothing short of mesmerising. It’s been part of his playing since the late 1970s and continues to astound today. He elaborates on its origins: ‘I started slapping in the late 70s, when I first heard all the guys like Stanley Clarke...and Larry Graham, of course, he was the first. But Stanley Clarke brought it to a different level. So I was doing the thumb downstroke and then the pull up [with the first finger], but I was doing studio work as well, and each time I needed to play a line I had to go back to fingerstyle, so I started to think, “I need to figure a way to still be able to play a line by plucking or hitting the strings with that technique.” So I started using my thumb both ways up and down, and then plucking the strings with these two fingers [holds up his index and middle fingers]. So it’s being able to go up and down and do those three elements on the same string so you can play parallel and up and down. It’s a lot of hard work, but I have techniques and exercises for that, basically to be able to play any line, but by plucking and pulling the strings up and down. It’s very hard in the beginning but then, like any technique, you have to work on it.’

So what does this all-round bass

monster, producer, composer and record company boss think of the state of music today? With file sharing rampant and millions of people now expecting music for free, does he think there’s a positive

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future ahead for music? ‘Of course, but I’m not as optimistic about the future of the music industry, the record industry especially. Because I own my own record label I know the other side of it as well. It can be very, very hard just to break even when you are producing a record. It’s so easy to download music for free, and the worst part is the kids take it for granted. It cannot stay like this for a very long time; we need to find a solution, otherwise we’re going to be in trouble, or the quality of the music will decrease because now anybody can make a record. So to reach the level of Frank Gambale playing guitar, or Mike Stern, you need to spend a lot of time shedding, and then we need to make a living and we need to be able to sell our music, otherwise it’s going to be a major problem.’

Yet live performances seem as popular, if not more so, than ever before; perhaps that offers a solution of sorts? ‘But the two go together, because in order to book a tour you need to produce a record, and if you want to sell your record you need to tour, so it goes hand in hand. If you call up a booking agent and say, “I have a new record,” then he will say, “Can your record company support the tour (ie pay some of the costs for the tour)? Will you promote the tour?” So we need to find a new approach to the music industry. Recording music, distributing it, marketing it and then touring – it all goes together. The way record labels used to work, I think it’s over and we need to find a solution to the free downloads. It’s also a problem when one country has new laws against piracy but then another site will spring up in Russia – where you can download my music every week; there’s a new site, in China, and in many countries, so it’s a big problem.’

If anything can stop this creative erosion it could be people’s willingness to support new talent – the next Alain Caron ready to entertain and enlighten future generations – but that might not happen if it’s not sustainable for them to earn a living from music.

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