



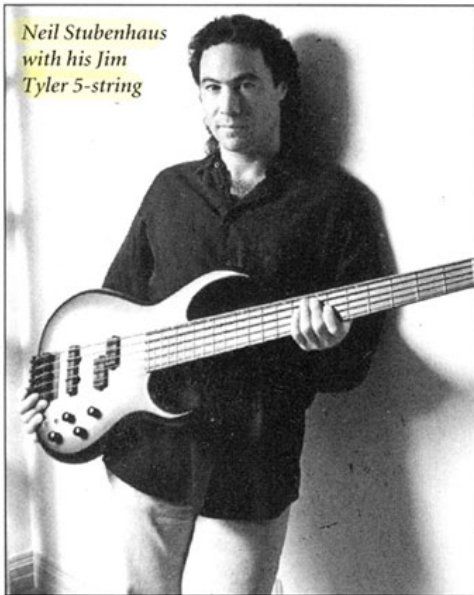
THE WORKING BASSIST

John Patitucci

My Dinner With Neil

My previous columns have focused on lessons I've learned in various working situations. Now I'm going to pass along some insights from Neil Stubenhaus, who has been one of the busiest session bassists in Los Angeles since the late '70s. I recently had dinner with Neil, and he graciously allowed me to tape our conversation so I could share his thoughts with you. (Well, some of them anyway.)

Neil Stubenhaus
with his Jim
Tyler 5-string



SILVER JACOBY

Neil grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, where he started out on drums at the age of seven. He moved on to guitar and eventually switched to bass, he says, because he was always teaching the lines to the band's bass player. By the time he was 17, Neil was good enough to get a gig touring with Little Anthony & the Imperials, an R&B act best known for their hits "Going Out of My Head" and "Hurts So Bad."

After getting a taste of life as a professional, Neil decided to go to Berklee, where he studied with Steve Swallow and went on to become an instructor himself. In 1977,

*John Patitucci is an acknowledged master of both electric and acoustic bass. A busy session player and the leader of his own group, John has made four solo albums; the most recent, *Heart of the Bass*, was released on Stretch/GRP in September (see page 70).*

he left Berklee for a road gig with Blood, Sweat & Tears. A year later, when the band broke up, Neil auditioned for guitarist Larry Carlton, who took him on the road and helped him to get some studio gigs. Neil was soon doing TV and movie soundtracks as well as records, and it didn't take long for word to get around about his abilities in the studio.

When Neil broke in, the L.A. studio scene was very different. For one thing, there was a lot more work. That was one of the things we discussed, so I'll switch over here and let Neil speak for himself.

Yesterday & Today: "I don't think it's a secret that there's less demand for live musicians now. It started with the drum machine—with a drum machine, a composer can record a demo himself, and that eliminated the need for musicians to record demos. If you can't keep the fringe musicians working on demos, then how's anybody going to hear them play?"

"The studio business is based on a concept of 'tried and true.' Nobody is going to hire a musician they've never heard play in the studio—they don't know how he interprets things, they don't know how quickly he can get a track, they don't know if he can play with a click. If you can't prove yourself by playing demos, what are the chances you can break in?"

The Rhythm Thing: "Having played drums first was really helpful to me. Jaco learned drums first, too. There are bass players who have failed professionally even though they knew where the notes were and could play fast, because their rhythm was lacking. If your rhythm is bad, you're dead!"

"Miles Davis would hire a guy if he could play two notes with the right feel. In the studio, feel is the #1 thing a record producer is looking for. You can fix a mistake, but if a track doesn't feel right, the producer is not going to be able to sell it."

Live Music: "If you're not playing with people, I don't know how you can learn how to play. The reason I started playing was because I had four other people to play with, and we played all the time. I didn't

learn just by sitting down and practicing scales. I learned by listening to what other people played, and then figuring out what I could play with them that worked. I was never the practicing fool, which in certain ways I regret—maybe I was too lazy, maybe I could have developed a lot more. But I think the whole thing is about playing with people."

Get A Good Axe: "Your instrument should sound great by itself, without any help. We've been toying with onboard preamps and compressors and all this crap for a long time, but the bottom line is that in the studio you should be able to plug your bass into the board and get a really good sound. My basses are custom-built for me by Jim Tyler [of Tyler Guitars, 6166 1/4 Sepulveda Blvd., Van Nuys, CA 91411], but a lot of people are making great instruments. You don't have to buy a stock Fender and modify it to death anymore."

Red-Light Fever: "Being comfortable in the studio is a matter of experience. It takes time, although some people find it absolutely natural. I remember going into the studio with one of my first bands, and I didn't care if the tape was rolling or not. It didn't bother me. If you have a home studio and get used to recording yourself, that should help when you go into a professional studio. You'll be more accustomed to being recorded when you play."

Perfection: "We've become more aware of perfection than we were in the '70s. Back then, there were a million mistakes on records, and we loved every mistake. We even learned the mistakes and incorporated them into the tunes. Nobody cared if one guy rushed or another guy played behind. Machines changed all that, and I think we've gone a little too far. I don't think the public can discern between a final product that's 'perfect' and one that's 'close enough.' I see a lot of people go way too far fixing little things that nobody else can hear."

The Future of the Bass: "The big question is: What's next? In the '70s, Jaco, Alphonso Johnson, Stanley Clarke, and Larry Graham took us by storm. Everything followed from that. We're still trying to deal with their innovations—I don't know if it's as much a matter of technique as it is a matter of maturity. You have to understand that when you're in a groove situation, your role is to be supportive; when it's time to blow, your role is to play a great solo. You want to have both covered, and have personality when you do both, but you've got to delineate between the two. If you want to play in a lot of situations and be accepted, then you have to treat different types of music with respect and know what's really called for in the bass." ☺