

# BASS FRONTIERS

Tobias Giveaway Inside



*Neil Stubenhaus*  
**Studio Bass Legend**

**Scott Ambush**  
*Spyro Gyra*  
**Bob Birch**  
*Elton John*  
**Rodney Whitaker**  
*Wynton Marsalis*



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Whether he is touring with **Wynton Marsalis' Septet** or performing with the **Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra**, Rodney Whitaker remains true to the upright.

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One of the distinct benefits of playing with **Elton John** is that he uses his band in the studio. Along with years of touring and recording, Bob had the honor of performing on Elton John's "Something About The Way You Look Tonight" on the *Candle in the Wind '97* single, which was the best-selling single of all time.

### 27 Scott Ambush

**Spyro Gyra's** HOT groove-induced bassist is none other than **Scott Ambush of Ambush Basses**. It's not uncommon for bass luthiers to be great players, but for a bass builder to have Scott's level of success as a leading player in the Jazz Scene is unprecedented.



### 32 Neil Stubenhaus

It has been said that one quarter of our Planet has heard a Neil Stubenhaus bass line. Think I'm kidding? **Check out page 35!** Not exactly a household name, **Stubenhaus stands for "bass" in the recording world.** Most of us know him as the creator of some of our favorite bass lines, while producers and writers know him as the "magic element" to a hit song or soundtrack.



Cover Photo of Neil Stubenhaus  
by Peter Figen  
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by Dennis Crews

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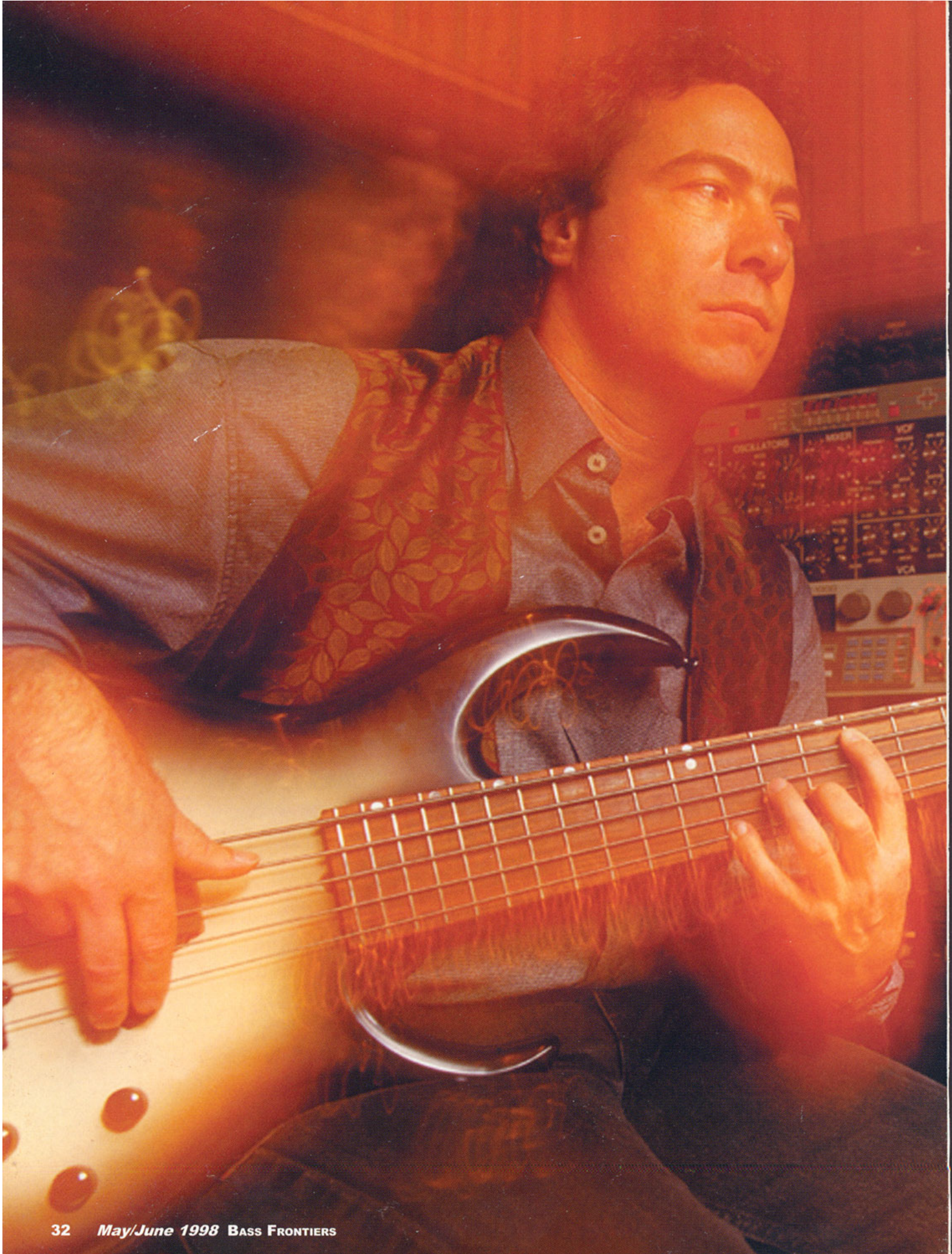
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# Neil Stubenhaus

*By Jim Hyatt*

*Photos by Peter Figen*

**W**hen you wonder what it is great producers and writers want from a bass player, you can take a listen to Neil Stubenhaus and find a wealth of information. Neil Stubenhaus—not exactly a household name—is the quintessential studio musician. For the past 18 years Neil has carved out an impressive career recording on movies, television shows, commercials and of course, hit albums. In fact, Neil has played on more than 70 Gold and Platinum records, of which produced over 40 Grammy winning songs. He was given the “M.V.P.” Award from the NARAS (National Academy of Recording Arts Sciences) L.A. Chapter, as well as the “Outstanding Achievement Award” from Berklee College of Music.



## Neil Stubenhaus

**Y**ou can contrast his versatility when you listen to Anita Baker's *Rapture* and Hanson's *Middle of Nowhere*. His bass lines have the magical element that has been sought by countless artists from Barbara Streisand, Billy Joel, Al Jarreau, Frank Sinatra, to Selena, to Quincy Jones. After reading through Neil's motion picture soundtrack credits and television advertising credits, you will realize that Neil is a great ambassador of the bass by having such high-level commercial success.

Neil has become a bass player for all the right reasons. He started taking drum lessons at age seven. Young Stubenhaus had his first Sonor drum kit by the age of 10. In Junior high school, he was playing with the high school dance band. At the ripe old age of 12, Neil was playing drums in a rock band when he became interested in guitar. Within six months, he was playing better than the guitar player in the band. Neil said, "He got pissed and quit, so I became the guitar player and we got a drummer. We had a bass player who needed me to teach him all the bass parts, which sparked my interest in the bass."

Stubenhaus says, "When I was 15, I started meeting the really cool musicians in town who were all older than I was. I started a band with a guitar player named Vinnie Cusano (now known as Vinnie Vincent) who encouraged me to play bass. I hopped on a train to New York City and bought a Fender Precision at Manny's Music. I went on to play bass in several other bands from there."

"After high school I landed a gig touring with Little Anthony and the Imperials. I stayed for a year and a half, and decided to go to Berklee College of Music when I was 19. In a relatively short time at Berklee, I was meeting all the good players, of which half of them were on the faculty. It was then that I started playing with them. Some of the great students at the time were Steve Smith, Vinnie Coliauta, John Robinson and Mike Stern."

"After two years, Pat Metheny and Steve Swallow (one of my bass heroes and my bass teacher at the time), had decided to quit their teaching gigs; leaving a void in the bass and guitar departments. Swallow asked me if I was interested in teaching (I was) and recommended me for the position. I taught there for two years. I think I learned a lot more while teaching because it forced me to think much more about every detail of bass playing. At the end of my second year of teaching, Mike Stern recommended me for the bass chair in Blood Sweat & Tears. I left Berklee and did BS&T for about a year. I was preparing to move to New York when a short series of gigs with Gap Mangione led me to Larry Carlton who was producing Gap at the time.

I owe that introduction to a great guitar player and good friend named Carlos Rios. Larry asked me to move to LA and join his band. I moved to LA and stayed with Carlton for 6 months, and within the next 6 months a few studio calls started to roll in."

The chemistry between Neil Stubenhaus and Larry Carlton can be heard on Larry's *Live in Japan: Mr. 335* album. Their friendship was the catalyst for many great recordings to come for Neil.

Neil says, "Larry Carlton turned me on to Don Piestrup, a legendary genius who does really high quality creative jingles (whom I still work with), and also to Mike Post who hired a lot of musicians for television film at the time. I met Tom Scott at a Mike Post session, and I met musicians and other contractors at Don Piestrup sessions and from that point it just snowballed."

"Larry would tell these people that I could read anything, which sounded quite impressive. My reading was actually rather so-so at the time, but I learned to sight-read quickly on the job, so nobody knew one way or the other."

It wasn't long before Stubenhaus was doing the major record dates. He says, "There were several in a short time frame in the late 70s, early 80s. In 1979 I started doing dates for a Tom Scott record. That was the greatest at that time because he just let me play the way I played, and allowed me to influence the music. I walked in and sat down at my gear, and Jeff Porcaro was sitting there at the drums, smiling and getting sounds. He didn't say a word. I was silently flipping out with anticipation of what was about to happen musically. It was completely relaxed, wide open for creative input, and open-ended so that we never cared what time it was or how long it took. We had a great time."

It was in those memorable sessions of Neil's career that he met other great musicians such as Steve Gadd, Richard Tee, Rick Marotta, and others.

Though staying in-town was the road Stubenhaus took, he has done some fabulous tours. He said, "I have done a few tours—Tom Scott, Larry Carlton and John Fogerty from the 80s, and the only tour in the 90s was Barbara Streisand. I'm reaching a point where I would like to do more but I tend to be a little picky about circumstances. I'm not crazy about long tours and I like them to be in short bursts with breaks in-between so that I can maintain my thing in town. However, anything can change!!"

When asked how he built his Session accounts to where they are today, Neil said, "Endless praying for miracles!" He says, "Some weeks are blank and some weeks are

## Neil Stubenhaus

busy day and night. 'Average' weeks are a thing of the past. Some calls are for a whole week, like rehearsing and playing for the Academy Awards (a really challenging gig with a full orchestra), but some gigs are just a day or two here and there for a movie or a record."

I asked Neil to describe a variety of recording session scenarios and he said, "On Gino Vanelli's *Nightwalker* I used a Yamaha bass. It was either a BB3000 or a BB2000. I used a Fender Jazz Bass in the rehearsals but it went on so long that I just kept switching basses for the hell of it. The sessions with Gino were fun, but he's really serious so they weren't exactly a laugh a minute. At the time, Vinnie Coliauta and I were doing the Gino rehearsals and recordings from 12pm to 6pm everyday, and sessions for a group called Pages from 7pm to 1am. We alternated driving duties daily. (Vinnie was usually late, and would want to stop to eat even after the session had already started). That went on for a while. It was quite hairy, but fun."

"Streisand sessions are hard work but entertaining nevertheless, especially the large orchestra stuff. The Hanson sessions were all overdubs, but the kids were there most of the time. The fourteen year old sketched me playing a couple of times very accurately. Ironically, some of the more 'eventful' sessions can be more obscure artists that don't end up selling that much."

While Neil was adapting to the needs of the producers, his bass needs haven't changed much over the years. He said, "I always loved Fender Jazz basses, and I have a collection that ranges from 1960 to 1964s. I played them more frequently back then. I prefer a P/Jazz setup these days and I incorporate that into most of my basses. In general, over the last eight years, I've been using either a James Tyler 4-string or 5-string bass. Before that, the majority of the sessions I played on were with my customized P-Bass. (The boys who stole my car in 1989 got that bass as an added bonus.) All fretless bass tracks are either my older Pedulla 4-string or a Pedulla Penta Buzz 5-string."

"Other gear I bring into the studio include the SWR Redhead, modified to accommodate an extra direct box (passive), with 3 rack spaces for a tuner, a Yamaha effects processor (SPX990) and an SWR overdrive unit. Occasionally, I bring a synth rack with samplers and synth modules driven by a custom synth midi bass. I've been experimenting with the new Yamaha synth bass pickup lately."

However fortunate, professional recording musicians are paid on a scale basis. Neil joking remarks, "We now carry signs that say 'Will Play for Sex', but more accurately,

Stubenhaus says, "Most of the players including myself charge double the current recording scale. Dealing with money is a pain in the ass, and most musicians aren't very good at it. Everyone's rates are basically the same which is helpful at keeping the 'negotiating process' to a minimum."

When I asked Neil how the Los Angeles recording scene has changed over the past 15 years, he laughingly said, "Now, everyone is gay! But seriously, the sessions 15 years ago were always a room full of musicians tracking. While this is still the rule in Nashville, it is definitely not in LA. Synthesizers, drum machines and pre-programming in general, dominate the recording process for many artists. Television film has mostly disappeared and gone the way of one man bands, with a few exceptions. So have jingles. As a result, there is less room for a lot of players. Motion pictures keep some of the orchestras busy, and on occasion there are pictures with rhythm sections. For the most part though, we are now in an overdubbing world for records, probably more than 50%. The LA scene is certainly much different than it was."

When I asked Neil what he thought would be good for the industry, he replied, "Either an enema or some Prozac! Actually, that's a complicated question. If radio would take a few more chances, then we could actually educate the public who might enjoy better music, which would in turn get some of the record company dollars into the hands of good artists and good musicians, which would generate more creativity and more quality work. But if the companies are making a fortune with rap music and other forms of music that don't employ the talents of high quality musicians, they have no incentive to take chances. It's difficult to blame them from a business standpoint, so I'm not holding my breath for any major change."

Though he doesn't often ponder the future of the Recording Industry, Neil joking said, "Well, I was having lunch with Nostradamus the other day and together we decided.... The future is this: recording equipment will get better and cheaper and more accessible. Everyone will make music in their homes and employ other musicians only as needed. Major records and films will still involve live musicians, but only with the producers who appreciate the value of live playing and have the budget. Economics and changing musical styles are the factors that will control the future of the recording scenes here or anywhere."

On a final note Neil said, "Most musicians can never really stop playing, and I am no exception. I just hope that when I retire, it will be MY decision!!!"