Neil at home with Tylers. His advice to aspiring session players? "Take out a loan and get a home studio together."

THE INSIDER

Studio Great Neil Stubenhaus Tracks The Ups & Downs Of L.A. Sessions

BY CHRIS JISI • PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL ZLOZOWER

In his 20-plus years as a first-call Los Angeles studio bassist, Neil Stubenhaus has seen the music business from the inside—from sessions for Quincy Jones and Burt Bacharach and on such chart-toppers as "On My Own," "Pink Cadillac," and "The Wind Beneath My Wings" to film dates for John Williams and 13 Academy Awards shows to Barbra Streisand's historic 1994 tour. All told, his tally includes more than 400 album dates (yielding 60 gold records and 40 Grammy-winning songs), close to 400 film scores, and hundreds of television soundtracks and jingles.

Neil has also had a first-hand look at the industry's changing tides, including the wave of technology and mechanization that has eroded session players' workloads. Yet Stubenhaus has persevered, comfortable in studio anonymity while always speaking his mind and championing the cause of the instrumentalist. "A musician's lifeblood is to play," he asserts. "The need to be around people performing and creating is in our soul."

A native of Fairfield, Connecticut, Neil began playing drums at age seven. His mother, a classically trained pianist, encouraged him to study keyboard—but he instead picked up his sister's guitar at age 12, inspired by Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix. Blessed with a quick ear, in neighborhood bands Neil spent much of his time showing bass players their parts before switching to bass at 15. He soon purchased a P-Bass and worked his way into the area's elite bands, supplementing such initial rock influences as Tim Bogert and Jack Bruce with the sounds of Motown, Sly Stone, Quincy Jones, and Miles Davis. After high school he spent a year and a half touring with Little Anthony & the Imperials, until his passion for jazz and for playing with different musicians led him to follow local pals John Scofield and bassist Chip Jackson to Boston's Berklee in 1973.

At Berklee, Stubenhaus connected with classmates such as Jeff Berlin, Mike Stern, Steve Smith, and Vinnie Colaiuta, and studied with Steve Swallow. When Swallow departed, he recommended Neil to teach his 50 students. "It was a hectic and exciting time," Stubenhaus recalls. "Trailblazing bassists like Stanley Clarke, Miroslav Vitous, and Paul Jackson frequently came through town, and Pat Metheny and Jaco were based there doing Pat's trio, so I got to know Jaco well." A '77 call from Stern led Neil to leave Berklee and join Blood, Sweat & Tears. When the tour ended, keyboardist Gap Mangione—who had just recorded a Larry Carlton-produced album—hired the rhythm section.

While Neil was performing with Mangione at the Roxy in Los Angeles, Carlton invited him to audition for the band he was putting together in support of his solo debut. Neil got the gig and moved to L.A. in October 1978, with the understanding the session guitar ace would help him land studio work. "Larry called jingle writer Don Pieistrup and TV composer Mike Post, and that was all the spark I needed. Through a Pieistrup session I met a huge record contractor, and on a Post date I met Tom Scott. By 1980 I was working every week with major artists."

What early session experiences helped your playing the most?

Probably my greatest learning experience and the key to my studio development occurred during the making of Tom Scott's 1979 album *Street Beat*, which is when I first played with Jeff Porcaro. Until that day, whenever I heard Porcaro on a record I thought he was a solid groove drummer, but he didn't impress me like Steve Gadd. Tom counted off the first tune, and I couldn't believe what I was feeling. Jeff's instinct for instantly coming up with a happening part blew me away. His musicality was beyond anything I'd ever experienced. He understood a song section by section, be it playing something slightly different to define the bridge, taking the groove to a new level in the fade, or making the perfect pause. I realized it was not about me and my bass playing. It was about the music.

How did you become Quincy Jones's first-call bassist?

I'm not sure, but I'm honored and amazed to this day. I first met him around 1981 during a pre-tour rehearsal for his album *The Dude*. Louis Johnson couldn't make it, and [trumpeter/arranger] Jerry Hey recommended me to sub for the day. I was a huge fan of albums like *Walking in Space*, so when we played through that material I knew it cold. Quincy has a gift for letting the music come out of his artists and musicians naturally before he adds his input and pieces everything together, and the results speak for themselves.

"Having something in your playing that stands out is terrific for individuality, but it can limit you."

Veteran producers and arrangers often credit the bass player with making or saving a track, yet many session greats feel they were undercredited and underpaid for their contributions to hit records.

Bass is probably the most undercredited instrument, because it has the ability to drive the music in a particular direction without the listener—and often the other musicians—knowing it. When the bass player moves in a successful new direction, everybody falls in so instantly and seamlessly it's usually not immediately apparent why. To drive a whole song on bass, or for a rhythm section to come up with a killer arrangement, and be paid a flat labor wage just doesn't seem fair. Especially when the rest of the business doesn't work that way. Songwriting and publishing all pay again on radio, TV, and film, but what the sideman contributes doesn't. It's not something I'm bitter about, but I can think of plenty of sessions like that in my career.

On a typical session do you get to interpret charts?

If I think the written or demo bass line is lacking—and it's not being doubled—the first thing I do is change it to what I think is better.

GEAR

Stubengear

Neil Stubenhaus began his session career on a mid-'70s Fender Precision with Seymour Duncan PJ pickups. He also had several early-'60s Jazz Basses; everything was strung with Rotosounds. His main instrument now is a custom James Tyler 5-string. The white-with-blackburst bass features Seymour Duncan PJ pickups and a rosewood fingerboard. His backups are identical red-and-white Tyler 5's. Also in his cartage case are a fretless Pedulla PentaBuzz 5, a semi-hollow fretless Rick Turner Renaissance 5, a Tyler PJ 4-string, a Washburn AB35 5-string acoustic bass guitar, a Sadowsky 4, and a Ken Smith 5. Neil strings most with .045–.130 Rotosound RS66 Swing Bass sets.

In the studio, Neil usually records through a custom SWR Super Redhead, which includes a talk-back mic and an active direct box with a Jensen transformer. "The transformer warms up the sound," he notes. Also at hand is an SWR Interstellar Overdrive preamp, a Yamaha SPX990 (for chorus, pitch shift, or reverb with fretless bass), and a Korg tuner. For home-studio sessions he carries a Raven Labs APD-1 direct box. Onstage Neil plugs into an SWR SM-900 head with two stacked Goliath III 4x10 cabinets, via Monster cables. On Barbra Streisand concerts he uses a Workingman's Twelve combo.

Union Able

Through the Recording Musicians Association of the American Federation of Musicians (**www.rmaweb.org; www. afm.org**), Neil Stubenhaus is active in projects such as improving working conditions, developing relationships to create more work, pursuing ancillary payments, and educating musicians. Says Neil, "My objective is to increase pay and raise the level of respect. [The union's current base side-musician scale for a three-hour "phonograph" session is $290; for a TV or film session, $260.] I'm passionate about elevating our status. If you're a stockbroker you learn early on about 401(k)s and IRAs, and your company contributes to your retirement fund. Too many musicians don't even think about such issues. And most don't know there's over a billion dollars in the union pension fund, which members can collect on from age 55 for the rest of their lives, if they're smart enough to participate."

Ninety percent of the time the reaction is, "That's great, Neil." If they're married to the part, they'll say, "Stick to the ink there." The key is having the confidence to try your own idea in the first place.

What I've seen more in recent years is no chart at all—not even a chord chart. You just learn and memorize the tune as you go. I enjoy the challenge, especially if it's a great song.

What about the reputed hazards of a session bassist having an identifiable sound and style?

Having something in your playing that stands out is terrific for individuality, but it can limit you. In most situations producers want the bass to blend in and not draw attention to itself, especially now with everyone wanting low end more than ever because it's technologically possible. So a bassist with a distinctive sound may be passed over for a session. I may not have as distinct a sound as some of my peers, but people still know it's me by the notes I play.

There's a twist to the sound issue, however. I can't tell you how many times producers or engineers have me tweak my tone while playing alone or just with the drums, without taking into consideration how the bass is going to sound when combined with all the other instruments. That's a big fallacy in recording bass. You need to judge the sound in the context of everything else on the track.

What are your typical preamp, EQ, and pickup settings?

In the studio I very rarely use my onboard preamp. I prefer the true passive sound, and I realize the studio has far better electronics than my bass has. I keep my balance pot dead center, so both the P and the J pickups are full up. The treble and bass knobs are flat, though on live gigs I may add a touch of either one.

What do you like to hear in the headphone mix?

I like to hear as much of everything that's pertinent to the track, and then hear my bass one increment above that, above where it would normally be in the mix. Good or bad, bass players become conditioned to hearing ourselves a bit above everybody else; that comes from years of us standing in front of our amps on live gigs.

How do you work with click tracks?

I'm comfortable with the click. I embrace it and play with it as if it's a drummer playing just quarter-notes. The key is to like the click, feel it, and feel your time with it so you enjoy having it there. If it makes you nervous you'll have trouble. If you start to pull away from it or your time is floaty, the first thing to do is turn it up—to the point of pain if need be!

What are your right- and left-hand techniques?

I basically use a finger-per-fret with my left hand. In the right I alternate my index and middle fingers to pluck, occasionally adding the thumb or ring finger. When I slap, my right thumb is angled toward the headstock so it's neither perpendicular to the strings nor straight up and down. For muting, I use my right palm and pluck with the thumb or with a pick, and I also do some left-hand muting. But I believe there's no set, standard technique for playing the electric bass.

What's your regimen for practice and warm-up?

Usually I just play whatever comes to mind to loosen up my fingers. I also don't pick up my bass every day if I'm not working. I believe if you get away from your instrument for a few days you come back fresh, with some new ideas. But remember, I'm not a virtuoso soloist type. I play more from my gut, and I can execute whatever I think of 99 percent of the time. But if I'm hitting the road with Karizma [*see Lesson, page 56*] and have to kick into high gear, I'll warm up and shed more.

When did the session scene start to take a downturn?

Well, the day synthesizers showed up on sessions in the early '80s was the day I couldn't hear myself in the headphones anymore. I'd never asked for more bass in the Fender Rhodes days, but suddenly I couldn't hear a note I was playing, and thus began this process we called "begging for bass." The mechanization all happened at once: synths, drum machines, keyboard bass became the choice; people were understandably grooving on the new technology. The problem was those tools made it easier for musicians, including less-talented ones, to create plausible music on much smaller budgets.

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Neil Stubenhaus *continued*

The first to fall off was TV music. TV composers tried to save money by doing everything themselves, and once the studios caught on, the budgets were drastically reduced. Viewers didn't complain, and that sealed it. Jingles were next. Then the record scene followed. Between self-contained grunge bands and home studios, the pace slowed. Being called in to overdub by yourself instead of playing with a rhythm section became common. With less demand for artistry on all fronts, the quality level diminished. The least affected was motion picture work, which has largely retained its quality and remained lucrative thanks to bigger budgets. Also, it has a better residual system than record work.

Movie sessions can range from orchestral dates, where the musicians read the music and watch the conductor—who follows the film—to small-band situations where we just read the music and sometimes have the option of following the film on a monitor. I've been very fortunate to work with all of the major composers, including the great John Williams. John's score for *Sleepers* was memorable. Beforehand, he approached me and told me the main theme throughout the movie needed a sound, which I decided should be my fretless Pedulla. Right before the cue, in front of 80 musicians, he said to me, "Okay, Neil, you'll deliver the message." Now, having to watch the conductor in a variable tempo, read the notes on the page, and keep an eye on the fingerboard for intonation is a challenge in itself—but if it's John Williams, you're already as scared as hell, because after two takes he's moving on. Thankfully, it all came together.

What advice can you offer to aspiring session bassists?

There's not a lot of major session work for bassists in L.A. anymore. The players I compete with for calls have been the same for over a decade. I think the answer is to emulate the current music scene and embrace the technology. Hone your bass skills, but also develop some keyboard and songwriting skills. Then take out

A Selected Discography

With Karizma: *Document*, Hudson Music [**www.hudsonmusic.com**; 888-796-2992]. **With Quincy Jones:** (all on Qwest/Warner Bros.) *Basie & Beyond*; *From Q with Love*; *Q's Jook Joint*; *Back on the Block*. **With Tom Scott:** *Target*, Elektra; *Desire*, Elektra; *Street Beat*, Columbia. **With George Benson:** *The George Benson Collection*, Warner Bros. **With Billy Joel:** *The Bridge*, Columbia. **With Elton John:** *Duets*, MCA. **With Anita Baker:** *Rapture*, Elektra. **With Patti LaBelle:** *Winner in You*, MCA. **With Was (Not Was):** *What Up, Dog?*, Alliance. **With Manhattan Transfer:** *Bodies & Souls*, Atlantic. **With Rod Stewart:** *Vagabond Heart*, Warner Bros. **With Frank Sinatra:** *L.A. Is My Lady*, Warner Bros. **With Rickie Lee Jones:** *Flying Cowboys*, Geffen. **With Milton Nascimento:** *Yauarete*, Columbia. **With Ray Charles:** *Ain't It So*, Atlantic. **With Don Henley:** *Actual Miles*, Geffen. **With Natalie Cole:** *Everlasting*, Capitol. **With John Fogerty:** *Eye of the Zombie*, Warner Bros. **With Randy Newman:** *Land of Dreams*, Reprise. **With Smokey Robinson:** *One Heartbeat*, Motown. **With the Corrs:** *Forgiven, Not Forgotten*, Atlantic. **With Brenda Russell:** *Paris Rain*, Hidden Beach/Epic. **With Neil Diamond:** *Heartlight*, Columbia. **With Glenn Frey:** *Soul Searchin'*, MCA. **With Al Jarreau:** *Breakin' Away*, Warner Bros. **With Regina Belle:** *Passion*, Sony. **With Gino Vannelli:** *Nightwalker*, Arista. **With Vinnie Colaiuta:** *Vinnie Colaiuta*, GRP. **With Pages:** *Pages*, Epic. **With the Nielson/Pearson Band:** *Neilson/ Pearson*, Capitol.

Soundtracks (a few of Neil's favorites): *Heartbreakers*; *Down to Earth*; *Isn't She Great*; *The Story of Us* (with Eric Clapton); *Bowfinger*; *Payback*; *Rosewood*; *Sleepers*; *Passenger 57*; *Hook*; *Tequila Sunrise*; *Romancing the Stone*; *Return of the Jedi*; *The Toy*; *Some Kind of Hero*.

a loan and get a home studio together. Learn about the gear and the software and how to program, and start putting grooves and tunes together. From there you can begin collaborating with other home studio owners, including playing bass on their tracks.

In other words, create an underground session scene.

Exactly. We've reached the point where a whole generation of artists has been raised entirely on machines and synthesized sounds. If enough home-studio-savvy bass players counter this by adding real bass on the projects they're involved in, the session bassist—and the instrument—will maintain a healthy existence.

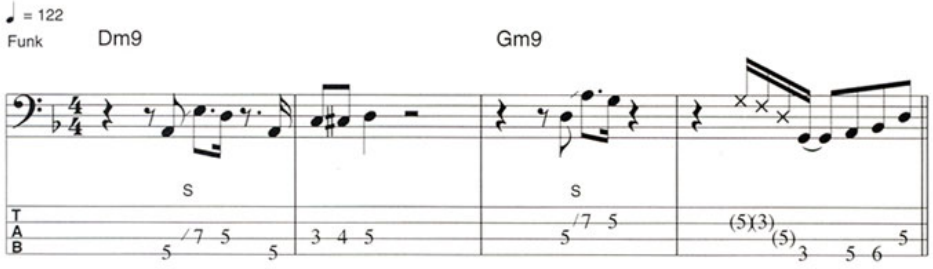
MUSIC LESSON

Stubengrooves

Like many studio vets, Neil Stubenhaus can name standout sessions from among the thousands he's done. Here are a few examples, plus a sample of his groovework with Karizma, a recent project with keyboardist David Garfield, guitarist Mike Landau, and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta. Ex. 1 shows his style on the chorus of Tom Scott's '82 classic "Desire." Using his mid-'70s PJ Precision, Stubenhaus took the basic sketch and made the bass part his own with slurs and ghost-notes. Ex. 2 emulates Neil's prominent P-Bass part on Smokey Robinson's '87 hit "Just to See Her." In classic Jamerson/Motown style, both the intro/verse (shown) and a later verse break down to just bass, voice, and drums. "I improvised from a lead sheet, and the vibe of the song dictated what to play." Ex. 3 shows Neil's killer shuffle verse on Quincy Jones's "Cool Joe, Mean Joe (Killer Joe)," from '94's *Q's Jook Joint*. "Quincy didn't have a particular groove in mind, so I started playing this line on my Tyler 5, which is sort of a nod to Ray Brown's part from Quincy's *Walkin' in Space* version of the tune."

Ex. 4 (page 58) shows Stubenhaus's improvised groove behind David Garfield's piano solo 2:11 into "Heavy Resin," from Karizma's new live CD, *Document*. Note the tricky odd-time meter, which Neil and Colaiuta give a smooth, half-time funk feel. Stubenhaus played his Tyler 5. "Each bar is divided into six beats and five beats, and Vinnie plays the kick-and-snare backbeats on *three* and *nine*." In support, Neil always plays on *one* (the downbeat of the first six beats) and *seven* (the downbeat of the second five beats). In between he adds cool color tones on syncopated upbeats.

Ex. 1



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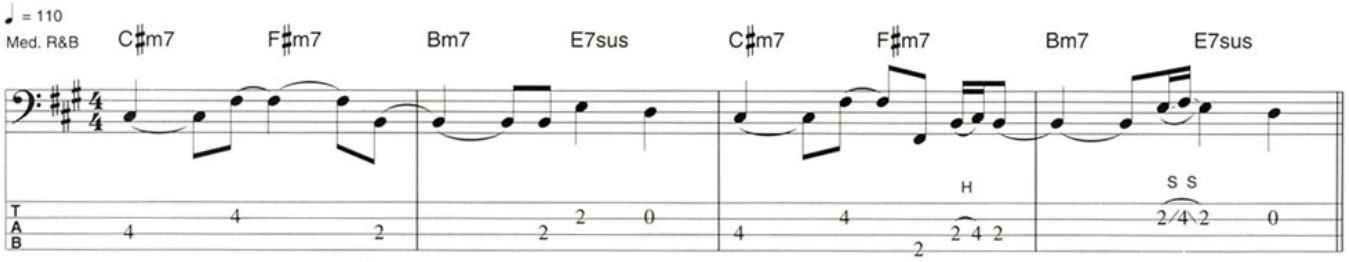
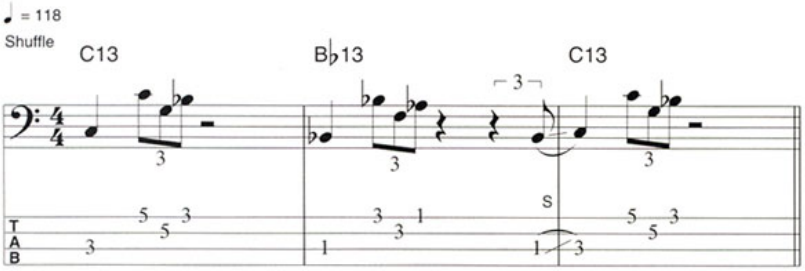


Ex. 3



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