



## The Ace of Bass returns

Cream alumnus, multi-instrumentalist Jack Bruce offers up 'Silver Rails,' his first solo LP in 10 years

By Ken Sharp

**IF ANYONE HAS EARNED** a free pass to rest on his laurels, it's legendary bassist Jack Bruce. But that's not how he rolls. Heralded for his extraordinary work in Cream and as a solo artist, as well as his virtuosic abilities on bass, Bruce remains fiercely driven – even with five decades of music-making under his belt. He also is committed to breaking new ground with his artistry, as evidenced on "Silver Rails," his first solo album in more than a decade. It's all there: Consummate musicianship and Bruce's signature expressive vocals set to immaculately crafted and melodically inventive songs.

**GOLDMINE: It's been 10 years since your last solo album.**

**JACK BRUCE:** Yeah, it has been a while. I didn't plan to be away so long; it's just the way it worked out. About a year ago, I was approached by a guy called Mark Powell from Esoteric Records and he said, "Would you fancy doing a new studio album?" And, of course, I said, "That's not a bad idea," and I did it.

**GM: Had you been stockpiling songs over the decade?**

**JB:** I'm always writing songs, but these songs were very much written for this album, yeah.

**GM: What's the significance of the title of "Silver Rails"?**

**JB:** Well, it's a phrase from one of Pete Brown's lyrics for the song "Reach for the Night." There's a wonderful artist who improvised the cover, and he suggested that we call it "Silver Rails." I had a bunch of titles – some crazy titles, and some funny ones, too. I had all sorts of funny ones, and he liked that one best in order for him to make a great painting.

**GM: Speaking of "Reach for the Night," it sports a haunting melody and evocative lyrics with its theme of "Get rolling instead ..." – meaning keep moving in your life, don't be idle.**

**JB:** I think that applies to people of all generations. But it certainly applies to when you get older. You can just sit back and rest on your laurels (laughs), but I think it's good to keep trying to be creative and that's what I work hard at doing.

**GM: There's the line, "It's a pretty scary sound to hear your future running down..." meaning get on with it, the clock is ticking.**

**JB:** None of us know when our time will be up – even if you're young. A lot of the greats died when they were 28. It's always good to do it when you can. You ain't gonna be able to do it when you're not around.

**GM: Writing songs for this album – are you penning songs with your audience in mind, or just to please yourself?**

**JB:** Well, it's a little bit of a combination. But certainly, initially, I write what I like. It wouldn't work if I thought about this guy in Des Moines or somewhere (laughs), and I'm gonna try and write a song that he likes. I mean, I don't know what he likes (laughs). But I know what I like. To be honest, these songs on the new album all came very organically.

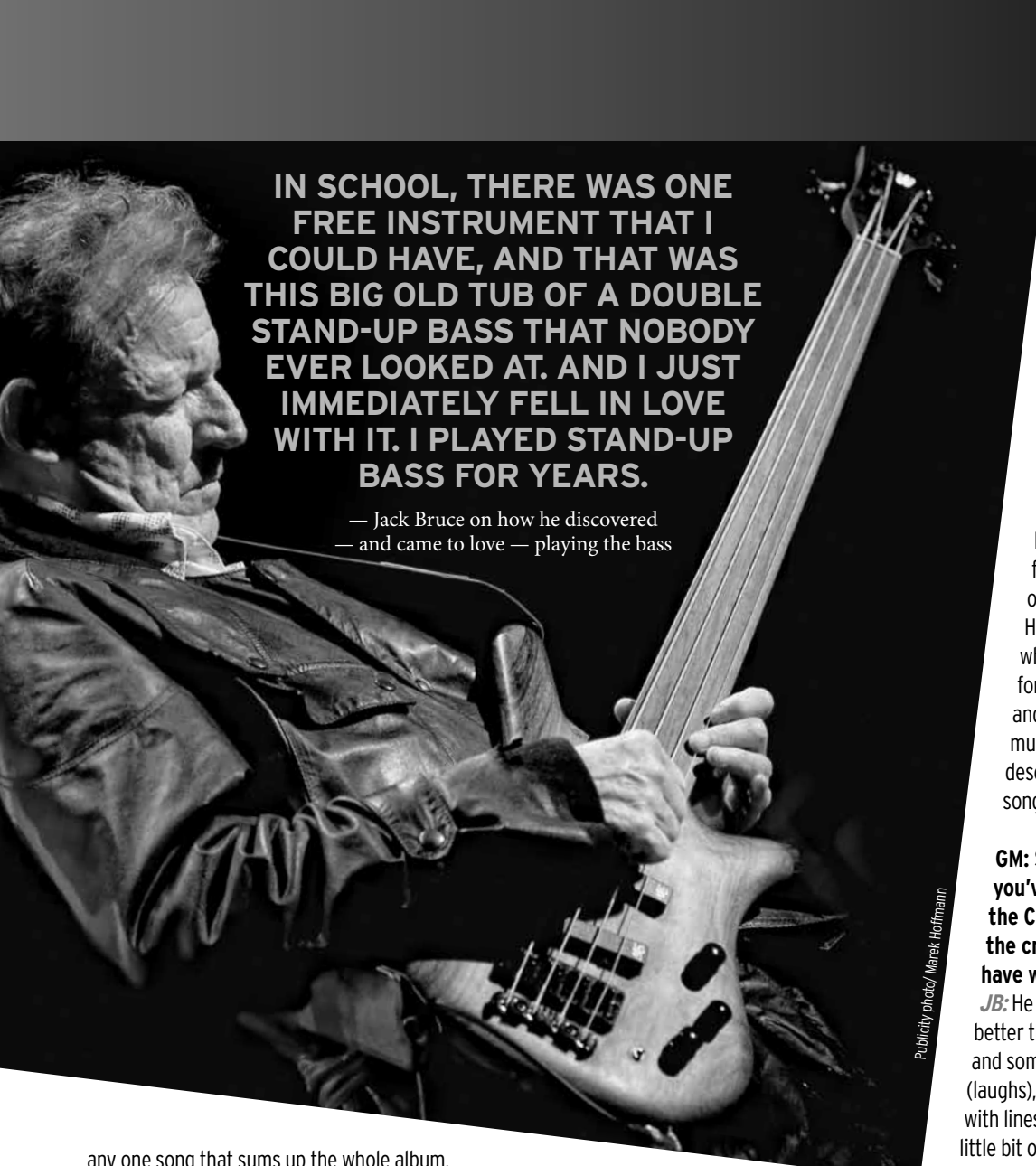
**GM: Did you mainly write the songs on piano?**

**JB:** No, I usually write them in my head. Then I'll find a piano and put down little things to remind me of what it is. Then I work on the form. But with "Drone," which is a very strange track on the new album – that was the first song I wrote for this record. That song was very much influenced by my son. He's 21 and at university. The music that he plays I always listen to, because he's got very good taste. There was this band called Om that he played, and their music inspired me to write "Drone." About a year ago, what was supposed to be spring here hadn't happened. Last year's winter just dragged on, and we were all so fed up waiting for spring to arrive, so I wrote that one. The next one was "Candlelight," which is the first track on the album. That was a lyric that my wife, Margaret, had been working on. She wrote this lyric and sort of left it lying around (laughs), and I saw it and I really liked it. So I set it to music. "Don't Look Now" is another good one; it has a pretty epic, cinematic sound.

**GM: If you could only play one song from the album to best sum it up, what track would you choose?**

**JB:** Oh, that's really tricky, because it is quite a diverse album. So if you play something like "Rusty Lady" with Robin Trower on guitar, you would think it's gonna be a blues-rock album, and it's not. There's an element of that in the album, but there's also other things, too. I don't think there's



A black and white photograph of Jack Bruce, an older man with grey hair, wearing a dark leather jacket. He is shown in profile, playing a double bass. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the instrument against a dark background.

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— Jack Bruce on how he discovered  
— and came to love — playing the bass

Publicity photo/ Marek Hoffmann

album. The creativity was just flowing like I couldn't believe. And I think the same thing applies to Pete (Brown), who wrote lyrics for many of the songs on "Silver Rails." When I played him some music, he was immediately inspired to go in the right direction. Pete wrote the lyrics for the song "Reach for The Night" coming back on a plane from Germany. He just wrote that lyric, which was very biographical for me. He sent it to me, and I set it very easily to music. I could just hear that descending line. I love that song; it's one of my favorites.

**GM: Speaking of Pete Brown, you've worked with him since the Cream days. Characterize the creative synergy you have with Pete.**

**JB:** He seems to know me better than I know myself, and sometimes it's quite scary (laughs), because he's come up with lines foretelling the future a little bit on previous albums. I don't know if (Mick) Jagger and (Keith) Richards are still writing together,

but if they are, they're the only writing team that's been going longer than us.

**GM: There will be a special vinyl edition of "Silver Rails." That's good timing, as vinyl is making a comeback. Where do you stand on the CD vs. vinyl debate?**

**JB:** You're right, vinyl is making a comeback. I've always liked vinyl, but I've also always been a guy interested in the latest technology. I know some people think you lose certain things with digital, but I think you gain other things, too.

**GM: Do you still play vinyl?**

**JB:** Oh, yeah. I've got quite a big collection, and I do listen to things from the old days – blues and some classical things. There's a warmth to vinyl, and a lot of people like the format because it is bigger and you can see the artwork nicely. It brings to mind the old days in the '60s, when all those great albums with fabulous artwork came out.

any one song that sums up the whole album.

**GM: So it was your mindset from the beginning not to be drawn into a specific style on the new record?**

**JB:** Yeah, that's right. What I did when they asked me to make an album, I thought I better have some kind of a template. So I went back to my first solo album, "Songs for a Tailor," and I listened to that and thought, "That's what I wanna do." When I did that album, Cream had just finished, and I was about 25. So for this record, I thought, why don't I write bookends with both albums? I thought I could write an album with a similar approach as "Songs for a Tailor" with diverse material and good melodies from the point of view where I am now. So that was my template. It's not just a bunch of songs. A lot of the songs are related to each other – like "Hidden Cities" is very much related to "Drone" musically. There's definite thread running through the album, and it's not always obvious, but it's there.

**GM: Writing songs today for "Silver Rails" with decades of experience under your belt: Is it easier or harder to please yourself?**

**JB:** It's actually easier. I found it easier to write these songs on the

**GM: Teenagers are getting into vinyl.**

*JB:* I think that's fantastic. I also think it's wonderful that there are so many formats available to choose from. Obviously, downloads are a problem for artists. But I do it (laughs), so I can't tell other people not to do it. I do buy CDs, but I have been known to download things, too (laughs).

**GM: How do you define "success" artistically in 2014?**

*JB:* I'm not just the bass player from Cream – although I'm very proud of that, and I look back on that band with great fondness. But I've done many, many other things. I think of myself as a very experimental and diverse musician but without being too far out all the time. I think that's my kind of success. But then, I'm also a husband and a dad. All of my kids play on the new album. I have two daughters and a son and an older son, Malcolm, from my first marriage. I had five children, but unfortunately, and very tragically, one of my sons died at age 28. It's not something you ever get over.

**GM: When did you first realize you could survive in the music business without getting a proper day job?**

*JB:* I started off as a professional musician by playing anywhere. I didn't have high standards when I first started out. I had to prove to my dad, who was an engineer – the kind of engineer who gets really oily (laughs). He was a working man. He wanted me to go into the factory with him and get an apprenticeship. He thought that was security in his world, and I said, "No, I don't want to do that." The first job I got was playing in a band in a dance hall in Glasgow. I earned two pounds more on that one gig than my father earned in a whole week in a factory. So he said, "Well, maybe you've made the right decision." And he supported me after that. My mom always supported me; she knew I had some talent that needed to come out.

**GM: Being such a magnificent singer, did either of your parents sing, as well?**

*JB:* My mother was a fantastic singer of Scottish folk songs. That was the first music I ever heard. I'd literally be by my mother's knee with her singing those amazing songs. Then my father could do a pretty good Fats Waller copy. He used to play the piano and sing in a Fats Waller style, so he was really good, too.

**GM: You play many instruments: piano, cello, organ and harmonica. But, of course, you're best known for playing bass. How did you get saddled with the bass?**

*JB:* This is gonna sound quite strange, but we were very poor. A lot of people were very poor in that time after the war. I was born in '43 and grew up in the '40s and the '50s, and there was simply no money. In school, there was one free instrument that I could have, and that was this big old tub of a double stand-up bass that nobody ever looked at (laughs). And I just immediately fell in love with it. I played stand-up bass for years.

**GM: So that love for the bass came not only by necessity, but it was something you truly connected with, too.**

*JB:* Yeah. I think quite often if you have a set of circumstances that might not be the most positive, you can turn that into a positive situation. There was no way I was gonna be able to get a guitar or a trumpet or a saxophone. It just wasn't possible, but the bass was there, and luckily, I just fell in love with it. And also, it was my tool to make a living and to escape from my very humble, working-class roots in Glasgow. Quite a lot of people from Glasgow did it by boxing; quite a lot of people did it by playing football. But I did it with music.

**GM: Maintaining musical purity in a business that is worried most about bottom line and less about creativity and art – how have you dealt with that and worked within those confines?**

*JB:* That's always difficult. I mean, you always have to walk a tightrope because you have to make a living (laughs). Sometimes you have to make more than a living these days (laughs). I'm not saying I never did anything that I felt I shouldn't have been doing; like everybody, you compromise sometimes. But I've been very fortunate in having such a long and successful career without actually compromising. When Cream finished, Ahmet Ertegun said, "You just got to get a couple of young guys and go out on the road, and you'll clean up." I said, "Ahmet, it's just not what I wanna do." You see, I wanted to move on. I was a composer with Cream obviously, and I wanted to carry on doing that and not just do a rehash. I wouldn't have been able to have done that after Cream and just cash in on that audience. I didn't believe in doing that, so it wouldn't have worked.

**GM: Had you not pursued a career in music, is there any vocation or career you would have enjoyed pursuing?**

*JB:* Well, I've always liked literature very much, but I don't know if I have the real spark for that. So I'd have to say no. I don't think I can do anything else. I think I was given this one talent and this one voice and the ability play and write, and that's it (laughs). I'm not planning on changing the world; I'm what I am. It's fantastic to still be around and still get respect and love in this business.

**GM: It's readily apparent that the spark of creativity and fire that drives you is nowhere close to being extinguished.**

*JB:* I wouldn't want to do it if I didn't get excited by it. Even when I did the demos for this new record in my home studio, I just loved those songs. I was planning to record the new album in this little studio that I use sometimes. My daughter is a film director. She was having a premiere of her movie, and I met this guy, Rob Cass, who's a wonderful producer. He's the in-house producer at Abbey Road. He said, "Why don't you come make your album at Abbey Road?" I didn't really know his work very much. He's an Irish man, and I felt he was really the guy, and it turned out that he really was. He wasn't one of those producers who tried to change things too much. He just tried to get what I wanted. He allowed me to be myself. Those are the best kind of producers, in my opinion.

**GM: Away from music, in 2014, what are the things that make Jack Bruce happy?**

*JB:* I love being with my family, but it gets more and more difficult. My older daughter is married, and she's got a very high-powered job. My younger daughter is a film director. My oldest son, Malcolm, is a brilliant musician, and he hasn't really had the break he needed, but I think he's getting close. My younger son is at university, studying philosophy and it looks like he's gonna be quite a bright star in the world of philosophy. We have this wonderful estate in Majorca (Spain), and we simply love going there, because it's like paradise. There's a great phrase somebody said about Majorca which is, "It's paradise if you can stand it." (Laughs.) We've got this whole valley that's hidden away, and it's really beautiful. My wife is a great horse rider and that's what she does. I write music every day; I do it all the time. I also like to hang about and just kick back. **GM**