

On Screen

Films & DVDs



Jaco Pastorius relaxing (top) and in the studio with Herbie Hancock, 1975

Jaco: The Film

Paul Marchand & Stephen Kijak (Directors)

Slang East/West 2×DVD 2015, 110 mins

Virtuosity – a virtue? Or a vice? Jaco Pastorius, regarded by many as the most technically gifted bass guitarist of his or any other generation, embodies an ideal of supreme dexterity and advanced musicianship. Whether this was a good thing for the man himself is one of the central themes addressed by Paul Marchand and Stephen Kijak in this documentary – the film strongly suggests that Pastorius’s sad, shabby death at the hands of a club bouncer in 1987 resulted from a tragic nexus of bipolar disorder, arrogance and an essential inability to cope with his own prodigious skill.

Pastorius emerged fully formed in the mid-1970s, catapulted into the vanguard of post-Miles jazz rock via the patronage of a host of top musicians and industry insiders. In addition to his still-breathtaking

speed and precision, he developed a unique vocabulary for the fretless bass, carving out a flexible new role for it beyond the supply of weight and support to the lead instruments. Apart from his speed of execution, he possessed an advanced grasp of harmony and, via his mastery of string harmonics, was able to suggest something akin to a Mingus or Ellington big band arrangement on an instrument that had until then been considered resolutely monophonic.

The problem is, there’s only so much you can say about technique as an end in itself. Jaco as a composer was assured but conservative, and while there’s much to enjoy in his music beyond his technical facility, the latter aspect is what commands the attention. A fair amount of time in the film is given over to celebrity muso analysis that is desperately flat and superficial – you will be unsurprised to learn that Pastorius is dubbed “the Hendrix of the

bass” on a number of occasions – but in some ways the vapidly on display in these interview sections points up the most crucial issue of all, and, who knows, maybe one that haunted Jaco himself: just how is this skill to be used? How can something of worth be constructed from an instrumental technique that focuses so much attention on itself?

The answer is more likely to be found by listening to the relatively small catalogue of music Pastorius recorded in the second half of the 70s and early 80s (a sporadic series of solo albums and work with Joni Mitchell and Weather Report) than the airheaded platitudes of Carlos Santana or Flea. But somehow, the interviewees’ inability to find anything to say beyond “Wow, he was awesome” speaks volumes about the elusive nature of virtuosity. What can be said about its purpose? Its meaning? What is there beyond “Wow”?

Where the film does impress is in

its meticulous approach to shading in biographical background. Pastorius’s roots in Floridian music culture, with its strong Latin and Caribbean influences, are skilfully highlighted, and these trace elements in his style emerge all the more strongly on subsequent listens for being contextualized in this way. Certainly the film does succumb to a slightly voyeuristic sentimentality – an interview scene from his troubled later years where he seems to dry up under questioning, lost and confused, is the product of the editing suite rather than a record of what actually transpired – a production decision that is disingenuous at the very least. But if the story of his fall is presented in overly mythic form, the narrative of his earlier engagement with music, voracious and total as it was, is both fascinating and moving. And the extensive footage of his playing is, of course, awesome. Wow.

Keith Moliné