

# BRYAN BELLER ENGAGED IN SOME SONIC

soul-searching for his sophomore effort, Thanks In Advance, and the welcome result is a bona fide entry for bass album of the year. Beller's full-spectrum fretted and fretless basses play a largely foundation role, while still engaging and guiding four potent pairs of guitarists and drummers (including Mike Keneally and Joe Travers, Beller's compatriots in Keneally's band). But the featured stars clearly are Beller's compositions: newly-minted amalgams of vintage rock, blues, and jazz feels fostering fresh harmonies and angular muso melodies. The making of the disc is candidly captured in an in-depth DVD documentary, To Nothing, also available at the Nashville-based Beller's web site: www.bryanbeller.com

# What inspired Thanks In Advance?

It's actually the story of me getting over myself and reinventing the way I looked at life, put to music. I had a close friend-Wes Wehmiller, a great bassist—who suddenly passed away in 2005 at the age of 33. Up until then I'd never really felt truly happy or fulfilled, no matter how "successful" I was. I was always preoccupied with some noise in my head, a worry or fear or concern of some kind. But Wes's death shook me, and caused me to reevaluate everything I was doing, and especially thinking. It took a year, and some serious self-examination, but I ended up far less prone to anger and frustration, and much more grateful—not just for whatever life had in store, but for life itself. That's what the title infers: gratitude for the present moment, and also for an unknown future.

How did the music come to you?

I try to write conceptually and thematically, both song-wise and album-wise. As a mostly instrumental composer, I only have one opportunity in language to convey meaning and intention with a song: the title. So I'll start a new album by writing down a list of song titles that convey the narrative of the album, and then I'll write music appropriate to the emotional content of those titles. As a producer, that methodology helps me keep my eyes on the big picture as well as on the details, and it helps me gather the different musical genres I draw from into something that feels like an album, rather than just a collection of tunes and riffs.

The writing took place mostly on keyboards and guitar, not bass. I'm a piano player from my childhood, but the guitar was a new experience. Guitar is the main melodic voice on the album, so I learned to hack around on a beater Strat—sometimes playing it with my fingers like a bassist—just enough to make the demos and imply what I wanted as best I could. It took a full year to write the whole album, and I demoed every tune completely.

What was your bass approach on the CD?

Really, all I've ever wanted was to be the bassist in my favorite bands. They just happen to be from wildly disparate genres. In my mind, I'm in John Scofield's or Michael Landau's band one day, and then I'm in Metallica or Nine Inch Nails the next. At times, I might imagine myself with Jaco's Word of Mouth big band, Frank Zappa circa-1975, or late-'70s Pink Floyd. So

a song could spring out of my head that pulls randomly from any of the above, and it's my

## CAN BE HEARD ON

Bryan Beller, *Thanks In Advance*, [Onion Boy, 2008]; Mike Keneally, *Wine and Pickles*, [Exowax, 2008]; Steve Vai, *Sound Theories, Vol. I & II* [Red Ink, 2007]

#### **CURRENTLY SPINNING**

Nine Inch Nails, *The Slip*, [Null, 2008]; Marco Minnemann, *A Mouth of God*, [marcominnemann.com, 2008]; John Scofield, *Bump*, [Verve, 2000].

Basses Fretted and fretless Mike Lull M5's, fretted

#### GEAR

Mike LullV4, '64 Reissue Fender Jazz Bass, mid-'90s Fender Precision, Taylor AB-4 ABG; electrics are strung with D'Addario ProSteels, (.045-.130) Live Rig SWR SM-1500 head, Megoliath 8x10 and two Goliath III 4x10 cabinets Effects Roland FV-50 Volume Pedal, Boss TU-2 Tuner, Boss OC-2 Octave, Xotic Effects Bass BB Preamp, Digitech Bass Driver, Aphex Bass Exciter, TC Electronics SCF Chorus, Boss DD-3 Digital Delay, Demeter Opto-Compulator, Dunlop MXR M-80 Studio Four channels: an ART TubePAC preamp into Urei/Universal Audio 1176 compressor; a SansAmp PSA-1, preset 32 (sub boost); a miked combo or cab, usually SWR Super Redhead, plus effects/EQ; and usually extra effects or heavier overdrive/distortion

"Whether live or in the studio, I like to start with a bright, new-strings version of the most accurate classic Jazz Bass sound I can get, then add warmth and sweetness to make it feel right, and then add edge and dirt to fill it in and make it speak—all to varying degrees depending on the situation."

job to be the right bassist for that genre mashup of a song.

Essentially, even though it's my own record, I'm trying to be the bassist that I as the producer would want for a particular song, without being attached to any preconceived notions of my own musical identity as a bassist. This can translate into choice of instrument, level of overdrive and type of EQ, and other options, but most of all it shows up in how I use my right hand to play the line. At the end of the day, I'm at peace knowing it will always sound like me, no matter what I'm going for stylistically. That's the way it is for everyone, in my opinion. Our hands are like snowflakes: no

two are exactly alike, and the sounds we produce are totally unique at the core level. Embracing that is the key.

What can you relate about your tour with Dethklok?

It was like going to heavy metal fantasy camp. I've been in the "musician's music" world for a long time, which is extremely rewarding but will always be limited in terms of mainstream appeal. This was a chance to see how the other half lives, with thousands of screaming, insane fans who got the essential joke of Dethklok not being a "real band," but still loved and accepted the music as authentic metal. It's really something to play a sold-out theater in

Times Square in half-silhouette lighting while a horrifically violent cartoon plays on a 50-foot screen behind you—and your parents are watching from a safe perch in the VIP seating area, with their mouths forming a perfect 'O' while thousands of fans mosh each other to bloody pulps on the floor below.

I guess the takeaways are these: First, I'll always be a metalhead at heart, no matter how muso or fuso I seem from the outside; second, after three challenging years of reinventing my life, and then putting that journey to music, it was nice to be a sideman again, especially for something so completely and utterly absurd. —CHRIS JISI

## MUSIC

"The opening lick in 'Blind Sideways,' which is meant to imply a sudden, unwelcome event in life, is probably the closest I'll ever get to a bebop line in my writing. Nailing the raked opening figure after the eighth-note rest can be tricky; from there, the line lays out nicely on the fretboard—especially with the successive slides around the open G in the first half of bar two. Then it just works its way down to first position while the dissonant chords stab accents around it."

