

THE BANGIN' MAN

Jim Lea, for 25 years a key member of Slade, reminisces on a life at the low end with Ken Sharp

For a glorious run in the early 70s, Slade were the reigning kings of glam rock, delivering an atomic blast of boot-stomping, curiously-spelled anthems

including 'Mama Weér All Crazee Now', 'Cum On Feel The Noize' and 'Skweeze Me, Pleeze Me'. And while frontman Noddy Holder and lead guitarist Dave Hill attracted the most attention, it was the band's bass player, Jim Lea, who penned the music for their songs.

Since the original line-up of Slade split over 20 years ago, Lea has kept a low profile, resurfacing in 2007 with his first solo album, *Therapy*. He's presently working on a follow-up, *String Theory*, playing a variety of string instruments including violin, cello and viola. *BGM* spoke to the press-shy Lea about his days making 'noize'...

You started out playing violin at age 9.

I inherited my grandfather's violin. He died nine months to the day before I was born. He was a violinist, so music was always in the family. I

learned it all by ear without reading music. Then at the age of 13 I heard a record by the Shadows: I was just transfixed and had to go get a guitar. I bought a guitar book, didn't understand the music, chucked it away and just played. It was instant, same with the violin. My first guitar was a rubbish guitar. Back then if you saw a Fender Stratocaster you'd have thought you'd seen Jesus Christ himself, something that was magical, mystical and wonderful.

How did you wind up playing bass?

I was really shy, and realised when you play guitar all the people look at you but nobody looks at the bass player. I picked up playing bass the same natural way as violin and guitar. I don't play brass instruments, but I can get a tune out of any string instrument. I bought a Framus bass like the one Bill Wyman played in the Stones when they first started. Because my hands were small, that was the perfect bass for me. To this day I only play short-scale basses because my hands are small. Playing guitar definitely affected the way I play bass.

How did the bass make you feel?

I was full of passion for it. I couldn't think of anything else. I played chords and big octaves, which would distort because I'd turn the amp right up. This was about the time The Who hit in England, so John Entwistle with that bass break in 'My Generation' is how I wanted to play all of the time. I wanted it to sound like a guitar: I wasn't bothered about being a bass player. Later, I bought another bass from Beatties, an old fashioned store in my hometown. A friend saw me playing at this staff dance at the time and said, "The bass was bigger than you and there was steam coming off the strings. You were going up and down that fretboard like nobody's business. I'd never seen anything like it". I played all over the place and really fast as well, Paganini stuff, which on a big bass I couldn't have done. Jimi Hendrix really inspired me as a bass player. He was doing much of the same stuff, playing the bottom strings and doing stuff on the top.

How do you wind up playing with Slade?

I was still at school and I saw an advert in the local paper for a band called the N'Betweens, which is what Slade was called first. I'd seen them before and they were fantastic, kind of like the Kinks or the Stones. I went to the audition with my bass in a polythene bag! Prior to my audition, a bass player was trying out and also doing the singing, and he sounded fantastic. I just sat there and thought he'd got the gig. They told me later that they looked out in the audience and saw a little kid with a bass in a polythene bag, and [they thought] they'd give me a play and send me home. So we started playing together and I was playing the sax parts, bass parts, chords, up and down the fingerboard. At one point, [drummer] Don Powell made a joke and I laughed and all of my nervousness went out of me. Then Dave said he wanted to just play with me. He said, 'Son, just turn down, I wanna see what you're doing'. So we

played 'See Saw' by Don Covay and by then all my nervousness was long gone. I must have looked like kind of a Paganini character to him. After we were done Don said, 'Hey mate, where do you live?' And then I knew I was in the band.

Is there a certain personality type that defines a bass player?

Bass players are often the guys who can play a lot of instruments as well. Often they've got a lot of brain power in the band and often they're a bigger part of the sound. It's like with McCartney, when you actually start to listen and understand what he's doing, you realise how fantastic he is.

Define your approach to the bass in Slade.

Different. Haha! It wasn't just a nice bass sound. It was really distorted, plus I played very fast. In fact, the first recording studio we ever went in, I went to listen to the playback and my bass playing sounded like a fly going around the room. I played a lot of octaves and got the band to do that as well. Back in the N'Between days on some of the Motown stuff, when we all did it together, it sounded amazing. All the bands who saw us in that era, people like Status Quo and Peter Frampton from the Herd, said they'd never heard anything like it. We were completely unique. We had this massive sound. It sounded like an orchestra. Roger Taylor from Queen was in a band supporting us at a gig in Cornwall and told me, 'We'd never heard anything like it, the sound was unbelievable and you were 10 times louder than anybody else!'

What was your main bass in Slade?

I bought a red Gibson EB-0 bass at a shop called Jones & Crossland. I don't have that bass any more, I exchanged it with the bass player in Robert Plant's band Listen. That was a red Gibson EB-3 and it was my main bass in Slade. That was suited to my playing style and it had a treble pickup on it.

How would you describe your technique?

Honestly, it was not like anybody else. It was completely free thinking. It was all over the top, up and down the fretboard. It would be like somebody playing the violin real straight in an orchestra and then Paganini comes in and starts doing stuff.

You were bending notes in a song like 'Gudbuy T' Jane'.

Oh yeah. Nod and I went to see Jimi Hendrix on a bill with Engelbert Humperdinck, Scott Walker and Cat Stevens. I was completely knocked out. I couldn't believe what this guy was doing and that pushed me even further into the bending. So I was doing that from '66 onwards.

It sounds like there weren't many bass players that inspired you as a player.

Yeah, that's true. It might sound strange but I never took any notice of bass playing. As Nod used to say, 'We've got three lead guitarists in our band.' I think he also said the best lead guitarist was Jim.

Can you select a few bass-lines in Slade that really work for you?

I'd pick the bass part on 'How Does It Feel?', the contrapuntal playing against what's going on top. Also, 'Far Far Away'. When we became a rock band, I could still do the octaves and the bending, but when we started to make commercial singles, my bass playing had to adjust. I remember Don and I jamming on a shuffle, and that's where 'Coz I Luv You' came from. It sounded so powerful but so simple. So then I employed that on all the Slade hit singles. I just went into that kind of walking bass style but I'd always add some melody and movement.

Did Slade's manager and producer Chas Chandler, bassist with the Animals, ever offer bass playing guidance in the studio?

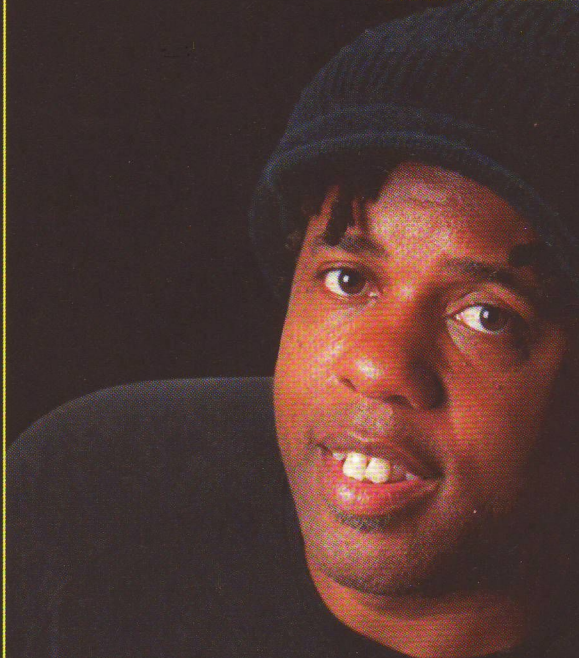
I'll tell you a story. One night in the mid-70s, Chas and I were out at a club in London called Tramp. Chas was a big drinker who could hold his drink and go through the whole night. We were talking and I'd remembered, when we were in the studio, him asking us each to play something so they could nail down a sound. I'd always do the beginning of 'We Gotta Get Out Of this Place' by the Animals. That night I said, 'Are you okay with me doing that?' And he said, 'It really pisses me off.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You play that, but I think you're the greatest bass player that's ever lived.' And I said, 'What? Blimey Chas, that's praise indeed.' Chas thought we were the greatest band ever. Even when we left him he always said we were the greatest band in

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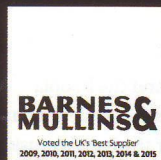
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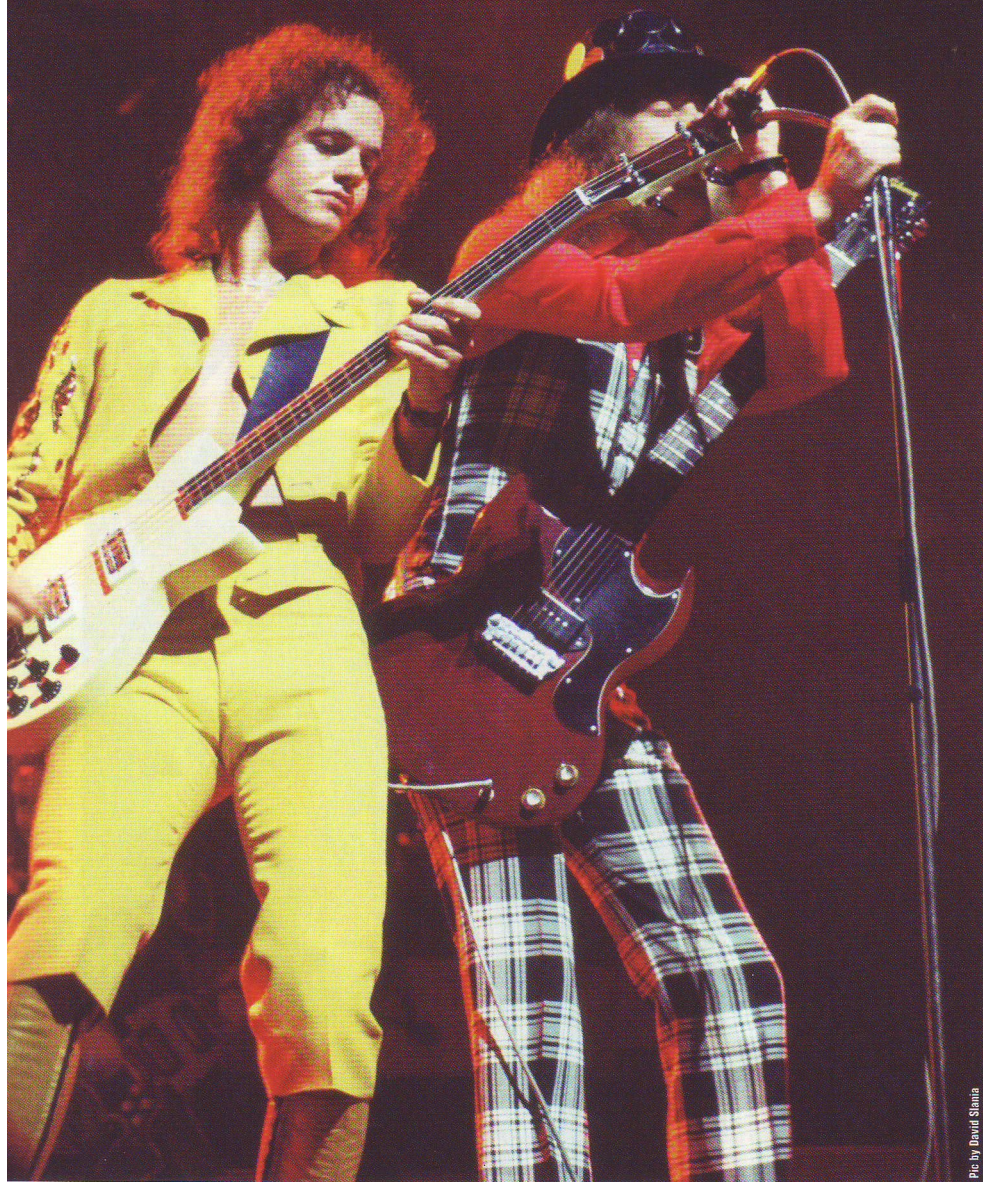


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Pic by David Slavin

the world and always will be, which was a very big compliment.

What was your studio set-up with Slade?

It was a combination of going direct and then putting a mic on the amp. I didn't use a bass amp in the studio: I used a Laney guitar amp. I didn't use any different basses in the studio, just the same Gibson EB3. I used two Vox 360s live.

Did you use any effects in the studio or on stage?

I never plugged into any effects, but I did have a built-in overload booster in my bass. We got that idea from Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath who used one. It was a treble and volume booster: it became five times louder. I used to blow a load of speakers and they'd scream in pain. I must be the only bass player who broke a set of strings every week. That's expensive.

When Slade became huge and the hoopla around the band focused less on music and more on image, did you yearn for the band's music to be treated seriously?

I remember when Clapton left the Yardbirds in

1966 to join John Mayall's band, I said to Nod, 'That's what I would do.' Nod thought that was mad, he's leaving a band that had a number one record. But it's exactly how I felt. I would never sell out or anything like that. Of course, when I discovered the niche of how to write hit singles, there was a downside when the screaming girls came into it. I hated that. I thought, we're a band and we were proud of what we do. We're not to be screamed at, we're meant to be heard. You could certainly hear us, that was for sure! It's nice today that our music still stands up. 40 years later, Slade is still played a lot on the radio here in Britain. I know we have a great deal of respect now. Back then the image of the group was of guys from the street having a good time, and we weren't like that at all. We worked really hard and we were very, very professional.

John Lennon once said that if he could, he'd rerecord every Beatles song. How do you feel about the Slade catalogue in that sense?

I feel exactly the same way. It was all put down very quickly and could have been done better and more powerfully at times. But as time has



gone by, the Slade catalogue has been remastered and now I hear them on the radio and they sound good. I don't feel that way any more.

Speaking of Lennon, Slade were held in high esteem by him.

Nod told me he'd met Sean and Julian Lennon and they said that their dad liked Slade.

That's definitely true. I recall reading an interview with John done by Chris Charlesworth in Melody Maker in '73 or '74 and he spoke about being a fan of Slade.

You can't get a bigger compliment than that! I saw a TV show on Mick Jagger on the Biography channel. Mick Taylor was being interviewed. He said that Jagger was always watching what was going on in the charts. He said once he got this record and kept saying, 'We want to sound more like this.' He couldn't remember what the song was, but the band was Slade. That was the session for the song 'It's Only Rock And Roll'. So that was another huge compliment.

Which bass players do you admire?

Although I didn't play like him, I thought Larry Graham from Graham Central Station was phenomenal. I also like Mark King of Level 42. Paul McCartney is fantastic. If it's possible for Paul McCartney to be underrated, he's underrated as a bass player.

Tell us more about your latest musical project.

It's called *String Theory*. It's all original material and I'm playing primarily string instruments. It's got violins, violas, double basses, cellos. Never knew how to play a cello but I made myself play the fucking thing! I can pretty much get a tune out of anything. My last CD *Therapy* is available through amazon.com; it comes with a bonus CD taped at a gig I did in 2002 at the Robin 2 Club in Wolverhampton. For that show, I didn't play bass but guitar. *Therapy* is kind of cerebral and the live CD is me rocking out. ■

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