



BASS

David Santos

Unstrung Heroes

I recently did a clinic at a music store with quite a few professional bassists. Before I did my thing, I watched a few other guys do theirs, and I was a little nervous as I watched the guy before me play from one end of the neck to the other, tapping with two hands, slapping, popping, soloing, with fingers ablaze. I thought to myself, "Uh-oh, what am I going to do after this?" I was not only amazed at how fast this guy could move his hands, but also at the way the people in the crowd were responding to his exhibition of virtuosity. They seemed to be excited by it, almost like people at a circus while watching someone juggle or walk a tightrope. As his show was coming to a close, I thought, "Oh no, I have to follow this?!" But I remembered, as I made my way to the stage, that I am a competent musician. I have played with most of my heroes, and in just about every conceivable musical situation that exists for electric bass; surely I could share some important knowledge with this crowd.

I made my way past the exciting player, who was now selling CDs from the stage to a crowd of enraptured bassists. As I was taking my bass out of my gig bag (the one I keep with me to practice with in hotel rooms while on tour with Billy Joel), I noticed that I had forgotten to change strings. My mind began to play tricks on me—you know, that nervousness that can be debilitating. "Oh my God, not only can I not play as fast and as flashy as this guy, but my sound is not going to be as slamming." I looked at his bass, which was still in the stand, as he was being surrounded by young bass players who wanted to meet him. It was a six-string, custom-made beauty. I put my Yamaha four-string on, plugged it in, and began getting my sound, wondering, "What the hell am I going to play now?"

I had planned to discuss my concepts of playing in the pocket, playing as simply as possible and making the band groove, but I was sure those concepts would be lost in the resounding memory of the chops of this bass soloist. Again my fear (and perhaps my ego) was at work; my hands were sweating and my insecurities were called into play as I silently told myself, "Play a lot, play fast, show these guys what you can do, man; you're a bad cat, you can blow this guy away." All the wrong stuff!

I walked to the mic and looked into the audience, which was now settling down to see what I was going to do. I thought, "Wait a minute, this isn't about me—this is about us." We bass players, in the crowd, and on the stage. I remembered that music is

for people to enjoy, and 99% of the time, bass functions in a supporting role. I looked out at the expectant crowd and nervously asked if there were any questions, as I tried to regain my composure. There were none. You could hear a pin drop.

"OK... I guess I'll play something then." In that instant, I was doing what all of us do when we are preparing to play something in the studio, onstage, at an audition, or at a rehearsal. All of us make a decision, consciously or subconsciously, about how we are going to play, how we want to be perceived. It's a human thing ("I want to be liked") and it's also a professional thing ("I want to work, get the gig, be a part of something great").

I started tapping my foot to a groove, still not sure of what to play. One, two, three, four. One,

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two, three, four! Still no bass playing. I looked at the crowd. People were waiting, watching me intently—the other bass players, the kids, their parents, the owner of the store. One, two, three, four. "What the hell am I going to play?" All of a sudden, I played one note on beat 1 and held it for eight counts, and then played it again. That was it. I couldn't think of anything more important to play. A big, fat, simple, beautiful, round, in-the-pocket note. My foot was playing the groove, and my bass and the rest of my being—my body, my soul, my mind—was involved in playing that big, juicy note.

When I finished my clinic, I was not surrounded by excited young fans. Confetti wasn't falling from the ceiling. To be honest, nobody came over to me at all. The whole way out of the store it seemed like people were averting their eyes as I made my way to the car. I thought about this a lot as I prepared to make my way to the airport. You see, we bass players are the unsung heroes. We are the mortar between the bricks, the foundation of the house. It is our job, our purpose and our intention to support, to hold together with strength and quiet dignity, the structure of the music. "Always remember," I said to myself as I got on the plane for my next stadium gig, "I am doing a job. We are working in the pocket."

David Santos was profiled in "Hired Gun" last year (Sept. '98). He's paid his dues in bands and on the streets of New York City, where playing in the pocket is the name of the game. David's currently on tour with Billy Joel.