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Jan-Olof Strandberg

Finnish Fret-Master

By Ron Garant

When it comes to music, including bass, America remains buffered from many international artists who deserve greater recognition. Finland's Jan-Olof Strandberg is one of those talents.

I first met Jan-Olof a few years ago at a NAMM show, and we have kept in touch regularly since that time. I always look forward to our next meeting, for he brings a vibrant sense of camaraderie to the world of bass, and a feeling that we are all brothers in our pursuit of excellence and musicianship.

Born in Helsinki May 11, 1956, J-O studied classical music at the Conservatory of Helsinki, on double bass. As he recounts, "I liked it very much...I listened mostly to modern classical music and modern jazz, like the ECM records, Jan Garbarek, Keith Jarrett, Dave Holland...and then to Miles Davis, my all-time favorite. I also heard the early Return to Forever (acoustic) record and was very impressed with the music and Stanley Clarke's smooth bass lines!

"Later in the '70s I read about playing bass with the thumb in *Guitar Player* magazine—playing with the thumb? Like Monk Montgomery? A new sound? I didn't know what they were talking about, since on the records I listened to, the electric bass sounded like it always did! Then I noticed that this style was not being played on jazz records, but on funk and dance records—so because of this, I had to buy those records—Larry Graham's *Graham Central Station*, the Brothers Johnson, and my hero, Stanley Clarke, who also played the style on jazz/fusion records.

"But now, how the hell are they doing it? Keeping in mind that at the time, there were no groups coming to Finland and doing concerts (in this style) and there were no videos either. So what happened was that during a rehearsal, my strap broke and just in time, I caught the G-string before the bass hit the floor, and out came a sound like *pow!* I then noticed, this is *the* sound! I went home and started from there and was very proud of myself, I

found the new sound! Nobody played like that in my country, as far as I know."

For bassists, composition is often a challenge, since the its main role is not melody playing. Master writers like Paul McCartney and Brian Wilson are known for writing on the piano, so I asked Jan how he goes about writing a song.

"I start to think about a groove or a melody, and then I improvise around it for a while. When it starts to feel right, I put it down on paper. At that point, the B and C parts come quite easily. When the construction of a song is ready with all the parts and the arrangement, I take it to Sami Virtanen or Right-Hand Hänninen, or to a studio where they have a computer, and start to work with it. When that's ready, I call the musicians I think would fit the song best.

"Sami and Right-Hand help me a lot with the computers, they're masters with that! I like both ways of working—it depends on the situation. On my new record, "Illustrations," I did it the old way most of the time—I played my signature acoustic bass guitar (built by Rauno Nieminen). We recorded it both direct and with an ambient microphone to capture all the fret noise, to get an acoustic feel in general. My engineer asked if we should remove all the noise and I told him, please no—that's what I want! In my opinion, it's musical noise! When you record, whatever sounds good, that's what it should be!

"I have also been composing other kinds of music, but on my solo records, I want it to be built around my bass playing, my voice, that's why I'm doing solo records."

The idea for the Strandberg Signature bass came to J-O many years ago. "I was thinking of an instrument that would have a beautiful acoustic sound and at the same time, an instrument that would be nice to play on. So I expressed my ideas to a friend who runs the Rauno Nieminen acoustic instruments company. I said to him, why not make a thinner body? Because the instrument has to be plugged in when you perform anyway, even an upright bass is usually plugged in when you listen to a piano trio. Rauno agreed—if the raw materials were good, the instrument would sound good. One important thing would be to have an ebony fretboard, which provides a compressed sound and we would need phosphor bronze strings to get the real acoustic bass guitar sound. Another very important thing that 99% of

manufacturers exclude in acoustic instruments is to have the strings go into the body to benefit from the resonance of the body. And my instrument does not have an F-hole because I wanted to avoid feedback!

"Another thing I like a lot is that you can use the body for percussion by drumming on it—you can take the slap-bass thing to another level. [Check out his song "A.S.I." on the companion CD to hear what he's talking about.] Try to drum on an electric bass body! When I speak with electric bass players, some tell me they play acoustic bass too—that's fine, I like double bass a lot, and I play some. But the thing is, double bass and electric bass guitar are about as close as violin and guitar! The double bass is a bass violin and built for playing with a bow. Now, don't get me wrong, I like jazz, but you know what I mean."

When asked about the current state of bass music, Jan-Olof replied, "I like the idea that bass players are doing records. I think the bass guitar is a complete instrument, you can do whatever you like, as long as it's tasty. Think about classical instruments—violin, cello, and double bass sound great together and you can perform a solo piece as well with each instrument. It sounds beautiful if it's played well."



VALOKUVA MATTI HUUKKA

upfront

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"Another thing I like a lot is that you can use the body for percussion by drumming on it—you can take the slap-bass thing to another level. [Check out his song "A.S.L." on the companion CD to hear what he's talking about.] Try to drum on an electric bass body! When I speak with electric bass players, some tell me they play acoustic bass too—that's fine, I like double bass a lot, and I play some. But the thing is, double bass and electric bass guitar are about as close as violin and guitar! The double bass is a bass violin and built for playing with a bow. Now, don't get me wrong, I like jazz, but you know what I mean."

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Jan-Olof Strandberg Equipment List:

- 2-EBS Classic preamps for stereo
- EBS Fafner amplifier
- 2-EBS 2x10 cabinets and 2-EBS 1x15 cabinets
- Neuser stereo 4-string Cloudburst
- Alembic Series 1 5-string
- Alembic Series 2 6-string
- Alembic Signature Fretless
- Steinberger XL-4
- Ken Smith 6-string
- Strandberg Signature fretted and fretless acoustic bass guitars
- Vektor upright
- EBS pedals (everything available!)

"It's the same thing with 6-string, 12-string guitars and bass guitars—they are all great instruments and sound fine together or separate. The important thing is the way of thinking—in making a bass record the same rules exist—like in music in general, good production, good songs. What do you want to say? Of the bass player records I've heard, I think Stanley Clarke makes fine records, they last from generation to generation. Marcus Miller makes great music, Jaco Pastorius, Jeff Berlin, Victor Bailey...bass is their voice, the same way as Coltrane's was sax, Hendrix' guitar.

"One bass player I like a lot is Louis Johnson, I think he understands how to use the thumb—he plays with it! Louis gets a sound out of the bass that most players only dream about. The difference between Louis and others playing with their thumb is like the difference between B.B. King playing the blues and Johnny Cash playing the blues. It's about understanding what you are doing.

"The role of the bass is always going to be the same, it's just sometimes played with synths, sometimes with a tuba, and sometimes with bass guitar. In rock and blues music, the bass guitar is a perfect instrument to play the bass with!"

Jan-Olof has been friends with Stanley Clarke for years now, and I asked him about their relationship, "Stanley is a great person, as is his wife Sofia. I met them in Helsinki many years ago, and I've remained friends with them ever since. When I'm in Los Angeles, I always visit with them. Stanley's wife Sofia always makes great food, I think she's the best cook in California! Stanley Clarke is my hero when it comes to playing the upright or electric bass, I grew up with his music."

The year 2000 is proving to be a busy one for J-O, he was in Italy in March, then Holland and Belgium, then in Germany (Frankfurt) for the Musik Messe. His group appeared on a TV show in Finland, and he'll be doing a sampler CD with a company, "It's going to be 100 different loops and sounds I am going to create! I'll

be working on my new record as much as possible and there are a few other record projects I'll be playing bass on. On my new record I'll be using a new fretless acoustic bass guitar and a new upright bass as well. But in general the record is going to be very electric. I'm also writing columns for a magazine called FUZZ and I'll be working with Neuser basses to create a new electric bass guitar for next year. I'll be doing some shows in Scandinavia for EBS amplifiers, whom I have been with for over 10 years! I have plans to be at the summer NAMM...and many more things!"

To the aspiring player, Jan-Olof has some advice: "Try to play every day, the more you have the instrument in your hands, the better you'll become. Always try to practice with a metronome, it's very helpful. When you play, listen to the quality of the notes. When I studied classical music, I learned how important it is to have control over your sound. To me, technique is not about speed, it's the quality of the notes and the articulation. Speed will come at the same time for free! You may not like it, but in some ways practicing an instrument is like sports, if you have talent and a good eye for ice hockey but no conditioning, then you can not play top hockey! And always remember, you play because you like to play. Some players learn fast, and some slow, but the most important thing for you is, do you like to play the bass? The most talented players may not necessarily get the most gigs, a lot of it has to do with your attitude—be nice to your fellow musicians and they will be nice to you. We only live once, so it's better to take care of each other!"

A.S.L.

The song "A.S.L." is a tribute to bassist Armand Sabal-Lecco. A lover of World music, Jan-Olof has been influenced by many artists, Armand included. As Jan states, "Armand is a dear friend of mine and I like his playing a lot. He has influenced me in many ways—I love music from different cultures and I hope you hear some of my Scandinavian roots in my playing as well, because I think it's important that people know where you are coming from. In a positive way, this is the real fusion! In Armand's playing, I hear the love of African music and the sounds of American music. Armand loves funk and I thought that this song would be a nice tribute to the man."

Regarding the recording of the track, Jan recounts, "On this song we used a microphone in front of the bass guitar to capture the noise, and also one at the fretboard. I played quite hard because I think the sound gets better when you dig into the strings. I approached the bass like a tonal percussion instrument, and expanded the slapping to the body of the bass. There is also a part where I do some neck-bending with falsetto chords. The fast triplets at the end are played like...picking with the thumb and index finger and ghost notes on the same string. The chords were played in a normal guitar way of playing up and down on all strings. The drumming on the body was done on the side of the bass and on the top of the bass body to get a different kind of percussion sound." Jan-Olof can be reached at jans@dlc.fi. **B**

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A.S.L.

Dedicated to Armand Sabal-Lecco

Jan-Olof Strandberg

A

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Drum with fingers

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Form: A, B, C, A, C

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