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JOHN MYUNG OF DREAM THEATER, PERHAPS THE MOST TECHNICALLY GIFTED BASSIST ON THE PLANET, LOOKS BACK AT HIGH POINTS OF HIS CAREER WITH THE HELP OF BGM'S ELLEN O'REILLY

PICS: TINA K

When it comes to technical chops and inventive bass-lines, Dream Theater low-ender John Myung is the king. As a founding member of one of the most successful progressive metal bands in the world, Myung has become renowned for the jaw-dropping techniques he employs in his band, complemented by the incredible skills of his fellow musicians James Labrie (vocals) John Petrucci (guitar), Jordan Rudess (keyboards) and Mike Mangini (drums). If there's anything that Myung doesn't know about bass, we'd like to hear it...

Hailing from Chicago, Myung formed Dream Theater with Petrucci and former drummer Mike Portnoy while studying at the world-renowned Berklee College of Music in Boston. His bass-lines are incredibly challenging, while also demonstrating his keen sense of time, groove and harmony. He's been in these hallowed pages before, of course, so this time *BGM* has settled on a slightly different approach. Instead of going through Myung's life story, I've rifled through my Dream Theater back catalogue to pick 10 of my favourite Myung bass parts before heading off to meet the softly spoken bass god at London's Wembley Arena.

1 Metropolis Part I: The Miracle And The Sleeper (from *Images And Words*, 1992)

First up, we listen to Myung's shredding, two-hand tapping segment in this song, which blazes in at around 5'30". I shouldn't help but wonder what note choices he made when coming up with such a line, and the creative process behind it.

"Well, that's just going up a G major scale starting on the seventh, and it's just a root-fifth, very basic sort of pattern, but the energy of the song led to a moment where everyone looked at me and said it was time for a bass solo. I had to do

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something, and I just started tapping away and it was a real neat pattern that my hands fell into. I'm not really a solo player: I play because I like playing with other musicians. I don't necessarily like playing by myself, but, in the context of a song with the band, that's the perfect example of people pushing you more than you would normally do. That's what I love about being in a band, we all support each other, push each other."

The speed and accuracy with which Myung plays the line leads me to ask how he achieves such an even tone and volume. Is there much compression involved?

"In the studio there's just so much processing going on, apart from the equipment that I normally use. What I use doesn't actually sound like my equipment once it's filtered through all the presets in the studio. The engineers have a certain way of wiring: they'll pass the bass through a piece of gear, like a classic unit-type compression, and I'll ask them 'Why are you doing that, because it's not doing anything?' Then they'll say, 'We're doing it because we like the way it colours the sound'. As for the evenness, compression will handle a lot of that, but it's part performance, part studio gear. You have to make sure that your hands are strong enough to be able to carry the part better. Another important thing is getting used to playing with higher action: when I practise at home, or when I'm recording in the studio, I tend to have things set a little bit more comfortably, but when I'm playing

live it works against you because you have to bring everything up a notch. One of the best ways to do that is to raise your action, because it gives the strings more room to vibrate, so the instrument naturally becomes louder. Being able to play and practise with a bit of a higher action than you're normally accustomed to, that's when you really have to work at something."

2 The Ytse Jam (from *When Dream And Day Unite*, 1989)

Arguably one of Dream Theater's most iconic instrumental tracks, this song boasts many tasty licks, but it's the bass solo at 3'32" that stands out. I ask John if he had planned that solo, or if it had been a case of flying by the seat of his pants.

"Oh wow! Yeah, that was a real high-energy part: sometimes you just have to come and play with as much fire as you can from the first note. That was a series of things that I was practising at the time, hammer-ons and scale stuff. That was me attempting to be like Eddie Van Halen or something, sort of being challenged and playing whatever came to mind. It was improvised but then it became the part. That was the first record and being in the studio, working with producers, everything was new. I remember using a little bit more distortion: the characteristics of the bass really change when you have a lot of overdrive. You have a little bit more freedom to do legato and long stuff that really cuts through. That was a spur-of-the-moment thing."

As Myung is a former student of Berklee, I wonder how his studies affected his approach to improvising.

"My education at Berklee was very brief: we were only there for a year. I got most of what I learned from listening to recordings and meeting people. I was the big Iron Maiden fan and I still am. Rush and Yes had me up playing bass until two o'clock in the morning trying to figure stuff out. They played that key role in making me want to be a player and be in a band. A lot of things that Berklee encouraged us to do were really positive, but it wasn't necessarily something that had a direct infusion into what I was doing. It was providing good history and structure in terms of classical and jazz standard arrangements and ways of creating harmony, so they challenged you to do things, which was good – but the most I got out of school was the musicians that I met. So many incredible people from all over the world, there were people into punk, jazz, classical and rock. You slipped into a really cool musical culture, it was a mind-opening experience. I was just a kid from the suburbs and then there were all these really great players into all sorts of different music."

3 Scarred (from *Awake*, 1994)

The intro of 'Scarred' is a wonderful example of Myung's sense of groove and sets the tone for this epic track.

"I remember being in New York City after two years of touring off *Images And Words*, and I remember there being a lot of pressure because that album had been so successful. That was just me, John and Mike working stuff out and it turned out to be a really cool song. I was really into bands like The Cure back then, and I think it was just a combination of what I was hearing and the vibe that was present. Music's like that, you don't really plan it. I don't tend to use a whole lot of effects, only if the part really calls for it. It's always gotten in the way of a bass being a bass, with all the processing and stuff

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MesaBoogie amplifiers

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Fractal Audio AXE effects

that goes on, you need the bass to be this pure tone. I recorded that with a Tung bass back then. For me, tapping is a real natural thing, and a lot of guys developed it like Billy Sheehan. There's a lot of jazz improvisation where you can do lots of root melody things, so I was borrowing from that."

4 New Millennium (from *Falling To Infinity*, 1997)

Not only is John Myung a bass beast, he has also ventured into the world of the Chapman Stick. On 'New Millennium', Myung tests out his two-hand tapping on this most intimidating of instruments.

"I always wanted a Chapman Stick. There's so many different ways to play that instrument because it has a 12-string range. To keep things simple I wanted to use it only as a bass, so I was playing towards the lower range of the instrument and trying to come up with a pattern. That was just a functional pattern that had a nice groove to it. That was me, Mike and Derek [Sherinian, keyboards] trying to find out where the bass-line was in this thing we were working on. There's not a whole lot of processing going on, that's pretty much the way it sounds. It's like the ultimate bass guitar: the low end has this real special sound, with the way the pickups are configured. It has this really round tone and this middle attack for tapping: it's like a touchboard instrument. A bass guitar ascends in fourths whereas that instrument ascends in fifths, so it's a little different. I have memories of being overwhelmed by the Stick at first because there are so many different possibilities: if I was to use it again that would still be my mentality, to use it as a bass. Once you have it in your hands, try to forget everything technical about it and just try to come up with something."

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5 Lifting Shadows Off a Dream (from *Awake*, 1994)

Check out the beautiful bass intro!

"I love songs that start where it's just a feel, and you work on it as a band. I don't think everyone was at the studio yet: I had gotten there early and I was playing this part and figuring it out and Kevin [Moore, keyboardist] just started playing this line. I was like, 'Oh my God, what are you playing? That sounds incredible!' and we developed it as a band and it became a really cool song. The beauty to that part is totally unique to the six-string. It's utilising the full range of the instrument: I'm playing low B and then a higher B off the A string and then I'm playing harmonics off the high C and creating this B to G root motion, and that with the keyboard really takes off."

6 A Change Of Seasons, III. Carpe Diem (from *A Change Of Seasons*, 1995)

Over 23 minutes in length, 'A Change Of Seasons' has a lot to offer for prog bass fans. We checked out two particularly tasty bass moments: first is the bass solo at 9'06".

"It's weird listening to music like that because it puts me right back where I was when it was happening! Half the time we were writing, and half the time we were doing pre-production for a tour. When I was going through the initial line, I was thinking Chris Squire, a Yes sort of bass-line. He has a cool way of creating these really melodic bass parts. I was doing a Squire impression and complementing John's guitar part, creating a short but melodic part to bring us into the next section."

7 A Change Of Seasons, IV. The Darkness Of Winter (from *A Change Of Seasons*, 1995)

Listen to the blistering unison riffage at 12'18".

"I'm just following what the guitar is doing. John comes up with these really intense patterns, and this was one of those things where he'll show me what he's

doing and I'll work it up to speed. You can get a lot of mileage from using three fingers rather than just two. I go back and forth between the two depending on how the part sounds. If you play with two fingers it can be difficult, but with the third finger it's actually a more fluid motion and it's actually not that hard. Notice how when you're actually about to play, the way you normally rest on the strings they become even. The physics of it actually work in favour of using three fingers. I think it's just a case of finding out what your comfort zone is, I think you can get a unique attack with two, where you utilise your middle finger, but in terms of trying to play something that demands more fluidity, you can incorporate the third finger and work that into your technique."

8 The Glass Prison (from *Six Degrees Of Inner Turbulence*, 2002)

Many readers will have heard the bass-led opening to 'The Glass Prison', comprising a haunting chordal sequence that eases into a much heavier song.

"This brings me right back to Bear Track Studios in New York. It was me and John, just working on something together. With me it always starts with a feeling: I remember showing it to John and he was playing it on his guitar. He organised it a little bit differently by putting a low B behind it and that's when the part developed and he said 'You play the B and I'll play the chordal part and add a harmonic'. It reminded me of something that Megadeth would do. It started as a cool melody and we applied it to how it would play out across a guitar, and that's when it started gaining a little bit more structure. We locked on that journey which became 'The Glass Prison'."

9 Enigma Machine (from *Dream Theater*, 2013)

Dream Theater's most recent release was their self-titled 2013 album, the first to involve new drummer Mike Mangini in the creative process. The instrumental 'Enigma Machine' boasts some amazing interplay between the guitar and bass at 1'40".

"That was one of those really crazy busy sections. When we were trying to glue that part together, we found the pulse of the song and seeing where that pulse would align with what John and Jordan were playing. Working with that foundation to build the part, they would play the line and I would keep track of time. That took a little bit more time to write, because you have to be patient – or at least John and Jordan would have to be patient, because they would play something and I'd be like 'Stop, go back' and that's when we really had to take our time and find out exactly what is happening. I can't play in an arbitrary way, it has to synchronise with what they're playing. That was one of those labour-intensive parts, when you're trying to find what the bass part should be, finding it out note for note. You have to figure out what's going on, then you have to learn the part and internalise it."

10 Surrender To Reason (from *Dream Theater*, 2013)

The final track we listened to was also from the new album, featuring lyrics written by Myung and a retro bass-line at 1'39".

"That was the first song that came together on the new album. We were going into the guitar solo phase and John was like, 'OK John, play the best bass-line you can think of'. We were revisiting a lot of our older

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influences at the time, and I thought of 'Working Man' by Rush and the way Geddy Lee would break into that. That part was also heavily influenced by the sound I was getting: the tone that you're hearing was my writing sound. Sound is so important: if the sound resonates with you musically from the get-go, then it can push you and inspire you to do things. The best lines are the ones that aren't too busy, they're sort of repetitive but driving. I was connecting with something I had heard and a record that I had grown up with. That was the relationship I had with that part: sometimes you don't know if it's good or not, but after coming away from it I'm happy with it." ■

