

HELLO US RHONDA



Prince, Jeff Beck, Sheila E: Rhonda Smith has played with a stellar cast of musicians. Ellen O'Reilly asks the questions



here are bass players with feel, there are those who exude groove, those with insane chops, and then there are those who possess all the above and then some;

Rhonda Smith is one of this elite. It's no wonder her CV brims with names such as Prince, Jeff Beck and Sheila E among other renowned musicians.

I caught up with the bass queen herself at the Warwick Bass Camp back in September last year. As Smith told me: "It's a great gift for all of us bass players to have the opportunity to be together in one place: we have so much fun. I've never been at a camp that's been this far away or for such a long period of time. Usually it's a day or two, so you really get time to get to know each other as professors."

Let's get straight to the point and talk gear. "I'm proudly using PRS Gary Grainger Private Stock custom four-strings, five-string and fretless. It takes about two or three months to get a Private Stock instrument. It's an amazing bass, I love it to death. It's a long story with my gear: I'm not

endorsing a bass amp company right now by choice. I've been with Mesa Boogie for a long time and I decided to make a change, so I put my money where my mouth is and built my own amplifier and cabinets with Paul Reed Smith's help. I

used it on tour for two months with ZZ Top and Jeff Beck, which was all pretty much outdoors or large venues, so it was a good place to test the rig."

She goes on: "I have three cabinets and each one has two 12" speakers in it. I have a preamp made in California by JCF Audio, which is amazing: it's got everything I need to dial in my sound. At the moment I don't wanna do valves because we're trying something new, so right now I'm using a very old Crest 8200 amp that was modified. It's a very, very clean, powerful sound. So that's what I'm using right now. It doesn't have a name, it's just mine, so we'll see."

Smith is well known for using bass effects: I was itching to find out exactly what she was using these days. "Ooh, I'm using tons of stuff!" she exclaims. "First of all, I gotta give a little shout out to MXR and Dunlop. I'm not trying to blow smoke up anybody's ass, but from

years of playing with pedals, I know they're great. I have Dunlop bass distortion pedals from the Larry Graham school because that's what Larry uses. MXR make the best octave divider: it's fantastic, I use that as a staple. I love the chorus, and the envelope is one of the best on the market. I use a Dunlop tap delay pedal that's really great and I have a whammy pedal that I use from the Prince days. I started using pedals when I was playing with him. It was sort of a prerequisite as there were certain things that he wanted me to use because he wanted a particular sound, and I respected that."

Anyone who has ever seen Smith play will know how precise her technique is, particularly her slap technique, where she effortlessly blasts out articulate, percussive drills and ghost notes, even using the body of the bass as a drum head. I was keen to know how she developed such clean technique, and she explains: "The funny thing is, I've a very straight thumb, and I thought it was never really a bass player's thumb. There were other guys out there with thumbs that had curves, but it actually worked out a little bit better for

developed it. Later, Victor and a bunch of other people came out with that, so it was really great to see that that style was coming out. I don't play with a pick because I use my finger like a pick."

She goes on to describe this range of techniques at her upcoming masterclass. "I call it 'Pulse Rhythms'. I made that style into exercises, which are constant sixteenth notes that go all the time. You're making a constant rhythm, and at the same time you're playing licks and lines and you're soloing. Try and go on for as long as you can without breaking the rhythm, and without playing the same thing over again. I've got 11 different right hand techniques that I use in the pulse rhythms to make different sounds and rhythms. Every six months to a year I try to add one or two more."

Smith's style is so individual that I wonder who her personal bass heroes were. She tells me: "Definitely Jaco Pastorius, and a lot of rock players too. I didn't start playing funk until much later in life. Geddy Lee was somebody I got into when I was young, and Chris Squire, and Stanley Clarke I really had a thing for.

Prince was also a big influence, as I had to

learn his style from him.

Larry Graham also had a big influence on me later in life: to meet him later and have him play right in front of me and go on tour with him was a great thing. Marcus Miller, Louis Johnson... there's a lot of people."

Has Smith's extensive experience given her any

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me because I have a technique, which I call 'top barre'. It's a bit like Victor Wooten's, with a little variation."

Smith then shows me a flamenco-like technique in which her second through fourth fingers strike the strings in quick succession, as though they have been released by an invisible spring. She uses this technique to add extra percussive sounds while slapping. This gives the illusion of a faster slap, by adding more notes through utilising all the picking fingers. Smith's right hand remains perfectly poised in place just below the neck, and the knucklebone of her thumb is in steady position for an incredibly clean, accurate slap.

"When I first started doing that technique it was when I was living in Montreal many years ago," she explains. "A friend of mine who was a drummer let me hear tapes of a bass player from back in the 70s. He explained this technique to me and over the years I

useful advice for us? You bet: "I always give musicians the same advice: do it because you love it! Don't have any preconceived notions about what you're going to get, or who you're going to play with, or how much money you're going to make. What you put into it, you get back, and everything else that comes with it is just the icing on the cake. My career progressed because I always had the same principle that I have today, and that is respect for music. If you hire me to play in your band and you give me the music, I'm gonna learn every note of your music. You're not going to have to worry about me not knowing my parts when I come in to your rehearsal, because I take care of my job 120 per cent. Be on time, be nice to people: those things count for a lot - because in the end you spent a lot of time with these people!" ■

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