

# BRUCE THOMAS

## Attraction For Hire

BY MARSH GOOCH

Photograph by Tim Kent

**"F**unexcitementravel" promised the headline of the ad Bruce Thomas answered in 1977. Appearing in an issue of *Melody Maker*, one of Britain's weekly music tabloids, the ad sought players for a band to back a Stiff Records singer/songwriter named Elvis Costello. Thomas, along with drummer Pete Thomas (no relation) and keyboardist Steve Nieve, were the lucky three chosen for the group that came to be known as the Attractions. Bruce Thomas's powerful grooves and melodic playing turned Costello's folkie tunes into aggressive new-wave singles that had an impact not only on the charts but on a multitude of neophyte bassists. They ate up the muscular bass riffs of "Pump It Up" and "(I Don't Want to Go to) Chelsea," along with the playful yet solid foundations beneath "Oliver's Army" and "Radio, Radio."

Thomas spent nearly ten years with Costello and his fellow Attractions. But by 1986, Elvis decided to try it out with other musicians, and the Attractions went their separate ways. Sort

of. Bruce and Pete Thomas kept their rhythm unit intact to back the likes of John Wesley Harding (as part of the Good Liars), a Spanish pop group called Duncan Dhu, and most recently, Suzanne Vega. The two have played separately on a number of other records, too; many of these were produced by Mitchell Froom, who has manned albums for everybody from Crowded House and Vega to Richard Thompson and Peter Case. In fact, it was Froom who was responsible for bringing Thomas and Costello back together on Elvis's 1994 disc, *Brutal Youth*. Though Costello had at times used Pete Thomas and Nieve over the 1986-'94 span, Bruce was never called. Chalk it up to personality differences.

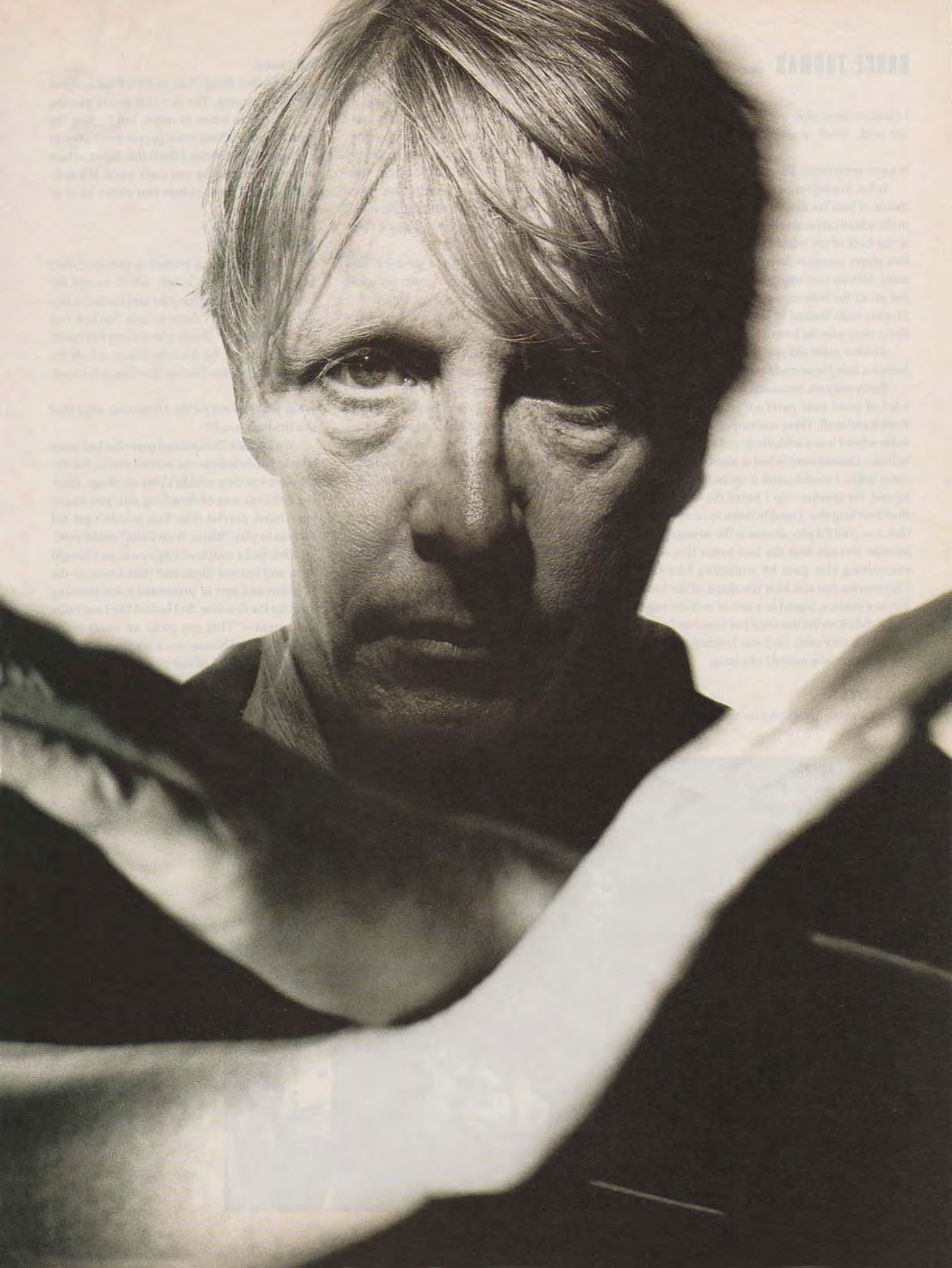
"It was always a bit intense with Elvis," Thomas says, "because he's such an intensely demanding person—not just artistically, but personally." Maybe it was Bruce's 1991 book, *The Big Wheel* [Faber & Faber], that got under Costello's skin. In it, Thomas wrote about the drudgery of a musician's life on the road in an almost stream-of-consciousness form that

wasn't always kind to "the Singer." But when Costello penned his counterattack on Bruce, "How to Be Dumb" (on 1991's *Mighty Like a Rose*, Warner Bros.), bassist Jerry Scheff was instructed to play the way Bruce would—quite a tribute indeed to Thomas's unique bass style.

"I've talked with Jerry about that," says Bruce, "because he's done some of our songs with Elvis [on albums and on tour]—and he said, 'There's just no other way of playing them. They don't work with other bass lines.'" Anyone who's heard Thomas's playing on Costello's records would have to agree.

### TINY STEPS

Bruce Thomas first got into music by playing the harmonica in a Middlesborough-area R&B band called the Tremors. "I went along with them for a few weeks, just getting up and playing a few tunes on the harmonica. Then one day the bass player didn't turn up, so I put on the bass and bluffed it. I actually bluffed two or three gigs, and by the time I'd done a few



## BRUCE THOMAS *continued*

I could at least play a 12-bar blues, and they just said, 'Well, you've got the job.'"

*It seems opportunity knocked for you.*

It did, in a big way. I mean, I knew a few rudiments of bass because I had made a bass guitar in the school carpentry shop, so it must have been in the back of my mind I was going to end up a bass player sooner or later. That bass looked like some African one-string zither or something; I put on all the frets myself, and I was playing an 11-tone scale instead of a 12-tone scale. So for about nine months I was playing Arabic music!

*At what point did you start to notice the difference a bass player could make in a song?*

Pretty early on, because at the time there were a lot of good bass parts on records, like the Beatles and stuff. There was no pop music on the radio when I was a schoolboy, so I used to listen to Radio Luxembourg in bed at night with a transistor radio. I would crank it up and put my ear against the speaker—so I heard the bass more than anything else. I used to listen to records like that, too. And I'd play albums at the wrong speed because you can hear the bass better that way; everything else goes by sounding like the Chipmunks, but you hear the shape of the bass line as a melody, played in a sort of melodic register. I didn't realize this until just now, but I suppose from very early on I was hearing the bass line as the skeletal melody of a song.

### BIG BOYS

Thomas and his then-current group, the

Roadrunners, moved to London to take a crack at the big time. Bruce had become the bass player in the group when bassist Paul Rodgers took the lead singer spot; Rodgers later went on to front Free, Bad Company, and the Firm. Being a "cheeky" young man, Thomas sought out Jeff Beck and John Mayall. "I asked them for a job," he remembers, "and I was never actually sent away; I got to at least play with them all. I auditioned for Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac as well."

Though he didn't manage to get a job with any of them, Thomas was fortunate to get some good advice. "Jeff Beck said, 'Just stick with it and you'll never be out of a job.'" And that's just what he did.

*What did you learn from the blues and R&B?*

Mainly, the discipline to stick with a riff; you can't just whiz about all over the place. You've got to pick your spot and know when to go up on the "thin ones," as they say—to know when to play obligatos or whatever. There's functional bass playing, and there's creative bass playing.

*You seem to do both.*

Yeah, well, that's it—you *have* to. But you have to know what's appropriate where. It's very much the same for keyboard playing or guitar playing as well: you have to know when you can cut loose a bit. John Mayall said a good thing to me, which I never forgot. He said in a blues band, the bass player is like the left hand of the piano—like a boogie piano player. You've got to hit the root note on the *one*, you know; you're not fiddling about. But then sometimes I like being the right hand of the piano as well. It's all about knowing when to be the left hand and when to be the

right hand.

The other thing blues and R&B teaches you is groove playing. The fact that you're playing very simply in terms of notes, but finding the groove, is something some people don't ever do in their whole lifetimes. I think that aspect of bass playing is something you can't learn. It's definitely one of those things you either have or haven't.

### OPPORTUNITY

Eventually, Thomas joined a group called Sutherland Bros. & Quiver, which toured the States in 1973 with Elton John and landed a Top 40 song in "(I Don't Want to Love You but) You Got Me Anyway." Shortly after leaving that band, Bruce answered the *Melody Maker* ad. At the time, he knew Pete Thomas from the pub circuit.

*When you tried out for the Attractions, what kind of a situation was it?*

Well, I think Elvis wanted guys who had never been in bands before—he wanted punks. But the problem was they couldn't play his songs. Punk is a different sort of thrashing out, you know: one-chord, psycho riffs. You couldn't get Sid Vicious to play "Blame It on Cain," could you?

Elvis had a couple of singles out, so I bought them and learned them, and then I went to the audition and sort of pretended I was learning them for the first time. So I looked like I was really competent—"That guy picks up songs really quickly." Pete Thomas was a big Quiver fan; he used to come to all of our gigs because he was a huge fan of our drummer. And Pete said that the day he saw me getting out of a taxi in London with a guitar case, it was the coolest thing he'd



Elvis Costello & the Attractions in 1979

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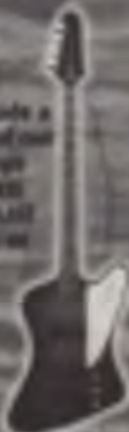
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## BRUCE THOMAS *continued*

ever seen—that a musician could actually travel around London in a cab. He said that moment was when he decided he wanted to be a pop musician. So in the end, he probably swung it for me—he was probably so determined to play with me he overrode Elvis's desire *not* to have me.

*This seems to be sort of an ongoing theme: Elvis's desire to have you or not to have you.*

I think it pretty much started as it went on, you know? I don't think he ever wanted me in the first place, and I don't think he ever wanted

me back [laughs]. I was just a thorn in his side. It must be some sort of weird karmic thing or whatever that we've been thrown together and drive each other crazy.

### PUMP IT UP

*Your bass playing, especially then, had a really aggressive feel to it—as if you had something to say.*

Well, I had probably been waiting for ten years to have a platform for my playing. A lot happened in a very short time, when we suddenly realized we were a world-class band and I realized I was probably a world-class bass player. I didn't know it then, but all of this had been building up inside

equipment

## High Fidelity

**Basses:** My first bass was a very primitive version of a Hofner violin bass, which I made in my school carpentry shop, with pickups adapted from microphones stolen from the handsets of public telephones. At the time, I thought the dots on the necks of guitars were purely some form of decoration—so I spent the first six months of my career trying to learn to play with an 11-note octave! I still have that instrument.

My first "proper" bass was a blond Epiphone Rivoli. Over the years, I've owned many classic basses such as a Danelectro, Rickenbacker, Hagstrom 8-string, Guild, Gibson EB-1 and EB-3, all the way through to basses by Tobias, Warwick, and so on. In the end, the only instruments I've kept on a long-term basis are the "famous" pink 1964 Fender P-Bass (which I've had since 1970), a couple of Jerry Jones Danelectro-style Longhorns (which I have used on virtually every recording I've done in the past ten years), and Status Series II and Empathy IV headless, active, graphite-neck basses. These instruments seem to cover most requirements—although I'd still like to find a good Fender Jazz Bass to fit with a Precision neck, or perhaps a Music Man StingRay. Over the years I have owned (and parted with) various 5-string, fretless, detuned, rubber-stringed, or MIDI-compatible basses and other exotica, and I agree with Flea that the bass guitar is essentially a four-stringed, fretted instrument that's worn low and played from the hip.

**Amps:** In the early days of the Attractions, I used a 400-watt Traynor Monoblock amp with two 18" speakers and four 12s; later, I changed to a modified Ampeg SVT head with two 8x10 cabinets. But for the past five years, my stage amplification has come from two Trace Elliot AH250SMX heads and four 4x10 cabinets. I wire them so one amp feeds a bassier tone to the lower speaker cabinets, while the other has a higher-middle setting and is fed to the upper cabinets. The SMX includes just about everything I need for a good sound: a preamp with valves [tubes], a particularly good graphic EQ (which is the only tone sculpting a bass really needs), plus high and low compression and a user-friendly tone control that allows you to vary the effect of the graphic EQ. Given the tendency for amplified bass to "spread" live, I find that 10" speakers give you better control over the sound. My studio amplification is a scaled-down version of the stage setup—one amp and one cabinet.

**Effects & strings:** The only effects box I currently use is the SansAmp Bass DI. I have used both the switchable and the parametric versions of the SansAmp, but I prefer the latter. I use Elite roundwound strings, gauges .045, .065, .085, .105—except on the Jerry Jones basses, which take D'Addario XL short-scale strings.

Geoff Emerick, who engineered some of the Beatles' later albums, produced several of Elvis Costello's records, including 1982's *Imperial Bedroom* and 1994's *Brutal Youth*. Geoff would put my bass through a compressor, and then through another one, and then through *another* one, so that I'd barely be touching the thing and it would sound like a hundred-mile-long rubber band. He also developed a unique approach to EQ, and these two factors shaped my bass sound on those records.

—Bruce Thomas

me, and I decided I was going to give it my best shot. It's nerves, you know—nerves and drugs and all sorts of things.

*So explain the bass riff in "Pump It Up" [This Year's Model].*

[Laughs.] It's basically the riff from "The Price of Love" by the Everly Brothers, and then it's the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" on the end—but it's the notes of "You've Got to Lose" by Richard Hell & the Voidoids. If you combine the notes of one with the phrasing of the other, you've got yourself a riff.

*Did you think it out that way when you were faced with the chords?*

I didn't sit down and think, I'm going to play this with that. I just started playing a riff, and then

later on I thought, Hang on—this is "The Price of Love," but it's the notes of... I mean, we played "The Price of Love" a couple of times as a cover version, and Richard Hell opened for us on one of our tours—so that's how these things happen.

*So you got the chords from Elvis; he showed you the song is primarily E-A-B, and then...*

I know one thing: you can't think it out with your mind. You think it out with your fingers. You do it by doing it—it's not an intellectual process. You might have a general approach, but you can't know what you're going to do until it happens.

I just did a session this weekend; I got the demo from Japan, I sat down and wrote out a chart, and then I played through it a couple of

times. And I thought, There's no point in sitting down and working out ideas until I get there with the drums and guitar, and with the singer saying, "No, it should have more melody here," or whatever. By the time we finished, I had a really good bass part; I was really kind of surprised. I was as much an observer as I was a creator.

*So you basically start out with the chords and go from there, like a guitarist or keyboardist.*

Yeah. It's definitely hands and ears and things. Obviously, the chords are relevant—but the two other parameters you have to be aware of, without thinking about them, are what the drums are doing and what the voice is doing. To a great extent, the vocals determine where I decide to go.

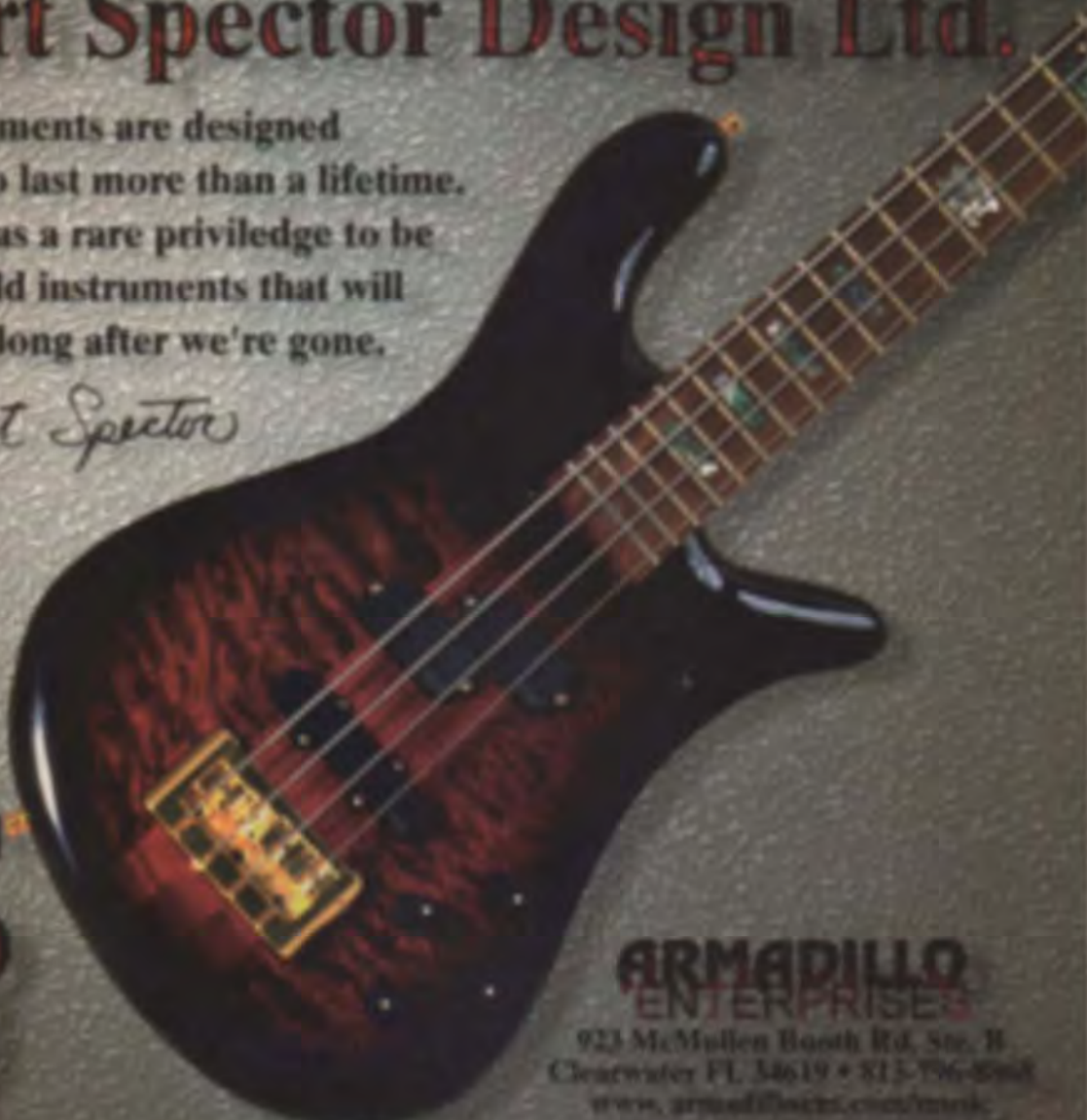
*You mean the notes of the vocal part?*

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You can't clash with the voice. It's almost as if the bass can become a second vocal part—but it can't leave the drums too far behind, and it can't get in the way of the voice. It ties the very bottom and the very top together. It ties the bass drum to the voice.

That's the way I always go. And at the same time, the bass line is actually forming the skeleton all the guitars and keyboards are draped over.

#### **CHARM SCHOOL**

*John Mayall told you that when the chord changes you've got to be on the root—and after that, you*

*get to decide where to go from there.*

Well, that created the right impression at the right time. It sort of induced a bit of discipline in my playing. The wandering-off stuff was certainly influenced by Paul McCartney—but another guy who influenced me was Phil Lesh from the Grateful Dead, because he would make excursions up the neck. And then there was [Motown's] James Jamerson, who could groove and play the most outrageous melodic things. Duck Dunn [of Booker T. & the MG's] was very rootsy, but that was it. Jamerson, though ... he'd drop beats, or he'd push ahead of the beat when everybody else was on the change; he would be anticipating it or lagging behind it. Or he'd pedal notes through a whole

series of chord changes. Or he'd play 3rds and 5ths and have his own sub-melody going on. That was very jazz-based; some of his stuff sounded almost Middle Eastern. So I guess I took that on board as well.

I taught myself music theory; I didn't read it from a book, and I didn't learn it at some "institute of bass technology." I figured out what chord triads were, and I figured out why they were called 6ths and 7ths and what note was augmented when a chord was augmented. And I figured out what the difference was between a minor chord and a major chord, and what note had to get flatted to make it minor. As a consequence, music was much more exciting for a start—and as another consequence, I didn't know the "rules" regarding what bass lines you played with what chords. I suppose I figured out that if you had a chord followed by another chord, there were notes common to each one. Or there were notes that would link one chord to another.

*So you might anticipate the next chord change by playing notes from that chord.*

Or I would bind them together. I suppose I just figured out very simple rules of harmony. I started basing my lines first of all on the chords, and then on the relationship of one chord to the next chord, and so on. I also realized you could play just one note that went across it all.

*Do you think that if you'd been pushed into formalized theory training, you might have said, "This is boring"?*

Well, I'll tell you one thing I think is just the absolute kiss of death to creative music: all of those blinkin' College of Bass Technology's or whatever, where they tell you everything and you take notes. I've talked to people who have said, "I just got my diploma from What's and Such and Such, so I'm ready to do a record now." That's what *you* think, pal.

You know, if some guy is saying, "I just got this piece of paper from What's and Such and Such," most record producers wouldn't touch him for a recording session. They want people who have some quirks or who do it wrong, if you know what I mean.

*A school can't really teach you feel.*

It also can't teach you creativity. It can teach you technique, and it can teach competence and the rules, but there is always the danger that in the process you might iron out wrinkles that make your playing unique. I mean, look at all the great artists; they're pretty untutored. Van Gogh didn't go to art college. It's not just that old cliché about "the University of Life"—I think if you're interested in anything, you find it. And also, of course, you don't always have to listen to music to inspire music. You can go into the woods to be inspired to play a certain way. If you want to be a painter you don't look only at paintings. Everything feeds everything else in the end.



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*A lot of the time you'll stay in the low registers for the bulk of a song, but during the fills or outros you'll often go up the neck. I don't hear a lot of bass players doing that.*

Well, there are only four strings.

What about 5- and 6-strings?

You've still got all the same notes as on a 4-string, more or less. But 5-string basses do not sound like bass guitars; they sound like tubas or synths or something. It's another instrument.

So you've tried 5's and 6's?

I've tried them all and abandoned them all. There were a couple of years when I was trying very hard to "get modern" and go along with 5-strings and all the rest, but when all was said and done I couldn't convince myself. I don't know—I suppose they've found their place in society. But I was glad I wasn't completely put out of business by them.

You also don't do much slapping or anything like that.

I have, and I do from time to time. I mean, it was great when Larry Graham was doing it, but then it just got a bit out of hand, really. A couple of years ago, when [Level 42's] Mark King was God, the Bass Centre in London sounded like a bloomin' knitting-machine factory. You'd never hear a note—you'd just hear [makes aggressive slapping sound], like an old-fashioned office with everyone hitting typewriters.

When people say Elvis is a great songwriter, they should also have to say, "But those songs would have been nothing without Bruce, Pete, and Steve." I'm amazed listening to *Armed Forces* almost 20 years later, because I still hear things I've never heard before.

We'll never know what would have happened if we hadn't been there, would we? You can't try infinite possibilities; you can put only one into operation, and so we'll never know what Elvis's career would have been without the Attractions, or even how his songs would have turned out. I mean, we know to a degree what happened when he went off and did a couple of albums without us. But the classic period is just the classic period, I suppose, and that body of work will have to stand as it does.

## NEXT TIME ROUND

Bruce Thomas is currently finishing up a few books, doing session work out of London and Los Angeles, and looking toward playing with the Attractions fronted by a different singer. But he didn't leave Elvis without playing on one more album (*All This Useless Beauty*) and one last tour, which in 1996 brought the Attractions to the U.S. and to Japan.

*Considering your 20-year history with Elvis, how did you step up to the plate one last time?*

I suppose that's my job [laughs]. And I guess, in the end, there might be someone in the audience who wants to give me a job! I don't suppose we'd be doing it after 20 years if all we did was

## a selected discography

**With Elvis Costello & the Attractions:** (all on Rykodisc except where noted) *All This Useless Beauty*, Warner Bros.; *Brutal Youth*, Warner Bros.; *Blood & Chocolate*; *Goodbye Cruel World*; *Punch the Clock*; *Imperial Bedroom*; *Almost Blue*; *Get Happy!!*; *Armed Forces*; *This Year's Model*.

**With Suzanne Vega:** (both on A&M) *Nine Objects of Desire*; *99.9° F.* **With John Wesley Harding:** (both on Sire) *The Name Above the Title*; *Here Comes the Groom*.

**With Peter Case:** *Six-Pack of Love*, Geffen.

tour around doing our greatest hits. But because we'd change arrangements or go off and write

books and operas and play with string quartets, just once we could come back and do a few more decent gigs. But I don't know if there's any more mileage in it now.

*So you're looking for work?*

Yeah. Save me.

*Save you from...?*

From the Attractions. I don't mind Pete Thomas coming along, or Steve Nieve. In fact, I don't particularly want to be saved from the Attractions at all.

*It's Elvis you want to be saved from.*

I think you've hit the nail on the head! I might bring my chums Pete and Steve along with me. I want to be headhunted, and I'll take half the agency with me. ♪

