

Although jazz has experimented with the violin, the electric saxophones and even the moog, it has never given an honest chance to one of the most popular mainstream instruments, the electric bass.

Purists complain that it lacks the warmth and tone definition that men like Charlie Mingus can draw out of their acoustics, but therein lies the mistake. To view the electric bass as just a mechanical imitation of the upright is to say that the baritone sax is nothing more than a clarinet in a lower register, or the trombone is just a French horn wound in a different direction. The power and presence of the electric bass have made it as unique and original an instrument as we have, and to view it as stepchild to the acoustic only serves to narrow jazz horizons and cut us off from one of the electric's foremost artists and technicians, Joe Osborn.

Osborn's instrument is a vintage electric, dating back to the era when Leo Fender was still working his own assembly lines, and the intervening years of steady work have mellowed its strings and copper windings to a

joe osborn: studio stringer

by david perry

point where they produce a beautifully classic, natural bass tone. As Hal Blaine says, "Joe's sound is as distinct and unique as Erroll Garner's, Wes Montgomery's or even Ella Fitzgerald's. He can pull the most beautiful, soft, lyrical tone out of that axe, and he can also make it breathe fire. It's that kind of versatility that's been keeping him so busy."

Since the late '50s, Joe has been one of the fabled heavyweight Los Angeles rhythm players and has worked himself into a position where he now handles well over half of the Coast's hit record dates. Though his work ranges from the most basic kind of bubblegum music through rock to jazz, most of his calls come from solid pop artists like Simon & Garfunkel, the 5th Dimension, the Carpenters, and Barbra Streisand. He has several years of road work under his belt, but prefers the studio business.

He says: "Studio work is really the only area where an instrumentalist can cover the entire spectrum of music. In the course of a week I might do a film, commercials, records, TV shows, and maybe even a live club date. There is a challenge in virtually every kind of date, ranging from trying to make a good lick out of a dotted-quarter-and-eighth pattern to deciphering a wild jazz chart. Studio work

offers a man as many challenges as he cares to find."

Dick Bogert, engineer at A&M Studios, has recorded Joe hundreds of times.

"Joe's dates are always a treat," he says, "from both a technical and esthetic viewpoint. I always run his output cable directly into my console, no amps or microphones, and his signal is so clean that I never try to doctor it up electronically. Most producers like to favor him in the mixdowns, partly because of his tone but also because his bass lines have such an important melodic function outside of their rhythmic value."

Despite the unique timbre of Joe's instrument, his reputation and career have been based more on creative judgment and ability. The 5th Dimension's arranger, Bob Alcivar, seldom records without Joe.

"I like to keep a pretty tight rein on my rhythm section, but Joe is not a man to be crowded. I leave lots of room in my charts for him to stretch out and get into those slides, shadings and attacks that only he can do. Bass players have a tendency to be very linear; by contrast, Joe always gives me a very vertical harmonic possibilities in even the most basic 1-4-5 blues progression, and by working in 9ths, major 7ths, octaves, glisses, harmonics, double-stops and other colorings he can really break up the same old tension-resolve, dominant-to-tonic routine."

"It's Joe's background on the guitar," says Johnny Rivers, "that has given him such a solid chordal approach to the bass. He is so accustomed to fingering five or six notes at a time on the guitar that he has the speed and agility to build bass lines that might not even occur to an arranger or another bassist. That plastic pick he uses may be a little unorthodox on the electric bass, but it's the key to his whole bag of tricks. He gets a much cleaner tone with it, and it makes him fantastically quick in the strings. Back in the early '60s, we worked as a duo, but we sounded like a complete rhythm section because Joe's bass lines were handling rhythm, lead and even counterpoint. He wouldn't have half of his intuitive and creative sense without those early years of head work."

Like many rhythm players, Joe prefers to see himself as an inventive thinker rather than an accurate reader.

He says: "It's hard to find a rhythm player who'll admit to being a good reader. It's a matter of pride that we all fly by the seat of our pants. But still, some work, like film dates, does require very sharp reading with all those sync points and time changes. I have been a relatively solid reader for three years. Before that, I got by just reading chord changes, but one day Mike Deasy told me about a call I had lost because they needed a strong reader. So I taught myself to read very quickly. Still, I think I do my best work when the arranger gives me just the chord symbols and maybe a light sketch of what he is looking for. There are very few arrangers who won't allow their rhythm players to experiment with their written parts."

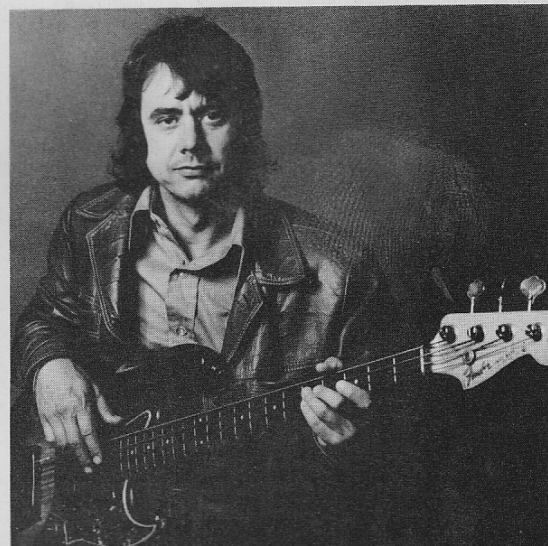
On the subject of today's music, Joe is very lucid.

"I suppose it is sort of a low-brow thing to say, but of all the work I do, the pop record dates are really my favorite. Commercials pay better, films can be more exciting, but the variety of record work, and the impact a hit record has on the business satisfies me the most. I don't mean that every session is a

classic, but when we turn out records like *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, *Superstar*, *Aquarius*, etc., I am very proud to be a part of the business.

"An awful lot of hit records have made it solely on the strength of a few tuned-in sidemen. With 16-track machines in general use today, almost all records are produced in sections, rhythm first, then vocals, then strings and horns. Most arrangers depend on their rhythm players to create hooks, figures, turns, and even chordal variations on which the vocal, string and horn writing can be pegged. We have to keep our minds not only on how our own lines are working, but also on what the arranger can make out of them. It's a responsibility, and those guys who lay down just ordinary lines don't get asked back.

"A lot of our lines have become classics. For instance, Larry Knechtel's piano part on Simon & Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* is now as important to the song as the lyric. I was on the date, and I saw Larry sweat through days with Paul (Simon) working out that line. Every version of *Bridge* I've heard



since then has lifted Larry's part directly from the original. I consider that a tribute to Larry, and indirectly to all sidemen who are really the anonymous giants behind so much of our music.

"My work gets lifted too, by jazz as well as pop people, but somehow neither Larry nor I ever make the polls. I guess we have to be contented in knowing that some very heavy artists like our work enough to steal it. Some day, I'd like to see a little note on the liner jacket of an album that reads something like: 'The bass line heard on Side 2, Cut 5, *California Dreamin*, was created by Joe Osborn on February 6, 1965 for the Mamas & Papas, and is copied, note for note, with his permission!'"

With five of the recent Top 25 records (and four more scattered throughout the rest of the survey) graced by his presence, it is a little ironic that the name of Joe Osborn won't be appearing in the pop polls this year. But he does have the kind of bread-and-butter recognition he needs: a tight datebook and nine chart records this week.

More than a few All-Stars would trade their position in the polls for a little of Joe Osborn's kind of recognition.