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WOODWARD PENS

JACO PASTORIUS' PLACE AS A TRAILBLAZING BASSIST IS SECURE. BUT WHAT ABOUT HIS LEGACY AS A BIG-BAND LEADER?

>BY JOSEF WOODARD
>PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHIGERU UCHIYAMA

The volatile virtuoso Jaco Pastorius burst upon the music world in 1976, stunning us with the ingenuity and chops of his debut, *Jaco Pastorius* (Epic), the Pat Metheny Trio album *Bright Size Life* (ECM) and his work with Weather Report. In the early '80s, Pastorius went on to do groundbreaking work in the big-band genre—fulfilling his earlier, pre-Weather Report passion—with his Word of Mouth band.

But a dark final chapter haunts Pastorius' story: He fell into a tailspin of substance abuse and mental illness. The possibility of rehabilitation was cut short when a nightclub bouncer in Fort Lauderdale beat him into a coma. When the 35-year-old died on September 21, 1987, Pastorius joined the ranks of icons like Jimi Hendrix and Charlie Parker, legends who revo-

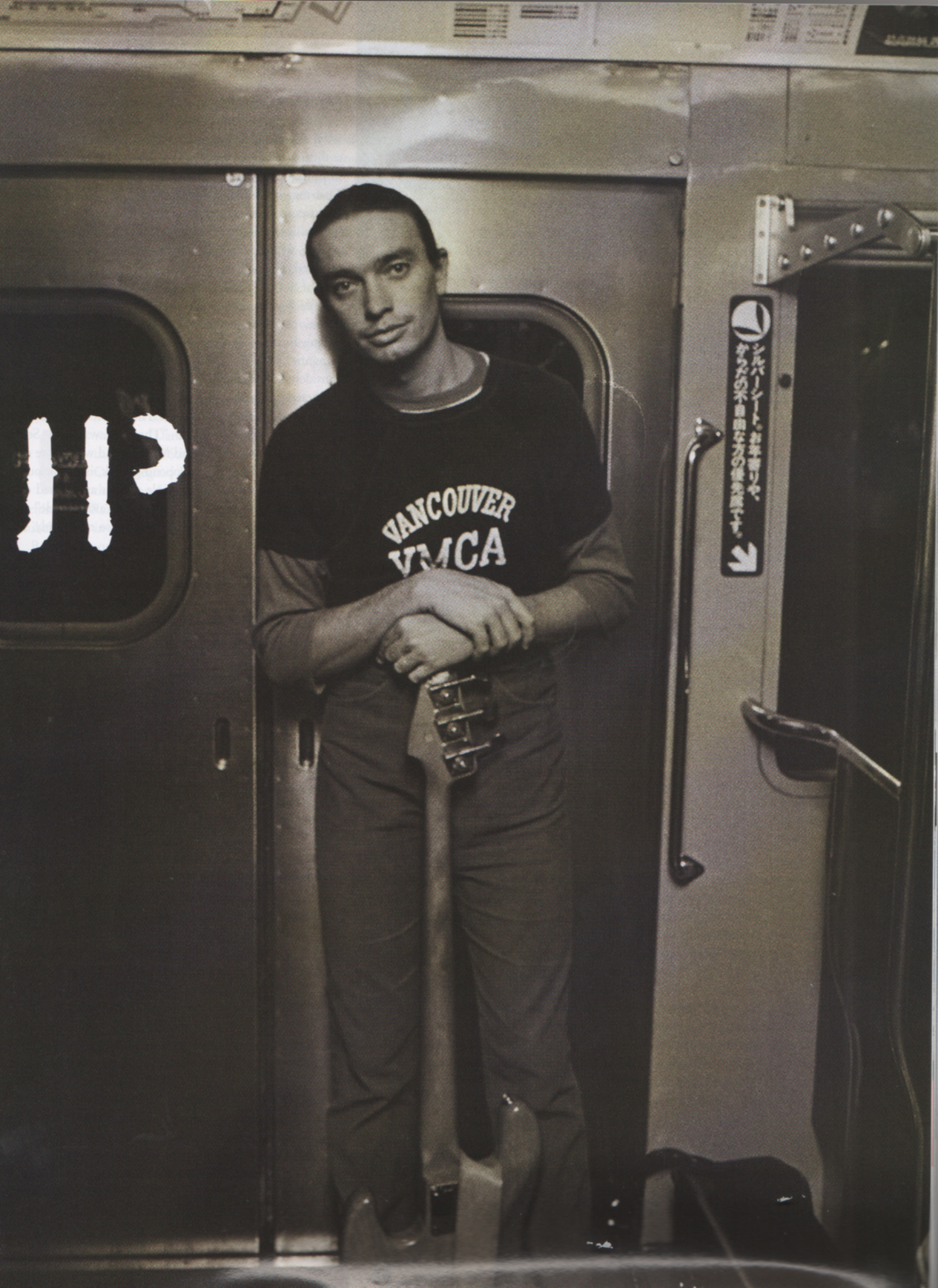
lutionized their instruments and music before being felled by demons.

Slice that tragic last chapter off the Jaco saga, though, and what you have is music that still sounds like the work of a true visionary, one with wild charisma, a profound sense of lyricism and ideas that embraced and exploded jazz tradition.

In the last couple of years, the Pastorius legacy has been picking up interest and polish, refocusing attention on what matters—the music. Bill Milkowski's definitive biography, *Jaco: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius*, told with unflinching attention to detail and also great affection, was recently updated and expanded for a new 10th-anniversary edition. Bob Bobbing, a keeper of the Pastorius family archives, recently

assembled a revealing two-disc set of interviews and previously unheard musical gems, *Portrait of Jaco: The Early Years* (available through jaco-pastorius.com). Then there's *The Word Is Out* (Heads Up), a follow-up to the successful 2003 *Word of Mouth Revisited*, by the Peter Graves-directed Jaco Pastorius Big Band.

For the Florida-based Graves, who hired the young Sunshine State firebrand for his big band in the early '70s and was involved in the bassist's later Word of Mouth projects, the legacy remained fresh. "His music never left my book," says Graves. "We wouldn't do a whole concert of his material, but we certainly kept it going here on a regional level. In the



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back of my mind, a recording was something I always wanted to do.”

After *Word of Mouth Revisited* was released, to great acclaim, Graves dug deeper into Pastorius' compositional library for the second album. Had Pastorius lived on and cleaned up, Graves says, “I’m sure he would have kept evolving. In what direction, I don’t know. I always believed that his pencil was mightier than his sword. I said it to him: ‘That pencil is going to outlive that bass of yours.’ I was enamored of his writing, from the beginning. You couldn’t help but be knocked out by his bass playing. To me, that was the obvious side. The more subtle side was his writing, whether it be arranging, orchestrating or composing.”

13 ring up Pastorius to musicians—particularly those who had close contact with him—and they tend to gush with awe; yet their voices are also tinged with sadness over his fate. “What can you say about Jaco?” says saxophonist Bob Mintzer, a member of *Word of Mouth* in the early ’80s and a performer on *The Word Is Out*. He’s clearly been influenced by Pastorius both as a respected big-band leader and as a member of the Weather Report-flavored band Yellowjackets. “He was a very adventurous composer and musician. His music was very powerful and poignant, and remains so to this day. It would stand to reason that people would want to play that music.”

“There’s been enough focus on the bad years,” says drummer Peter

Erskine, who played for years with Pastorius, both in Weather Report and in *Word of Mouth*, and who appears on *The Word Is Out*. “The guy was just so full of music. He had an enthusiasm for music and sports and for the kind of relationships that people have. Friendship really meant a lot to him. That may be the most significant part of [*The Word Is Out*]: It’s a tremendous expression of the affection and friendship of the music community in Florida, and the music community at large, with all these great and very busy bass players getting involved. Hats off to Peter Graves for pulling it together. It’s a lot of fun to hear this music again.”

The Word Is Out hits the shelves 25 years after Pastorius’ ambitious *Word of Mouth* album, his first solo project after ending his stint in Weather Report. The 1981 LP is feisty, romantic, virtuosic and ambitious, and today it should be considered a genuine jazz masterpiece. The album is full of elaborately orchestrated textures that are fortified by strings, brass, wordless vocals and Toots Thielemans’ chromatic harmonica. Compositions like “Three Views of a Secret,” “Liberty City” and “John and Mary” blend with more experimental asides. “Crisis,” the opening track, is a delirious and dissonant piece in which multiple soloists are layered over a bass track. It must be one of the most “avant-garde” tracks ever released by Warner Bros, which did so reluctantly, anticipating commercial suicide.

To dig down to the roots of that album, you have to go back to Fort Lauderdale and a club called Bachelor’s III (which was partly owned by quarterback Joe Namath). Graves led his big band there, and the venue was just a few blocks away from Pastorius’ alma mater, Northeast High School. Graves led the house band for an array of name acts passing through: “Mel Tormé, Nancy Wilson, Della Reese, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Johnny Ray, Patti Page,” he says. “It just ran the gamut of the entertainment business. Because a lot of the acts, at that time, were more pop-oriented, and you had this whole jazz-pop thing going on with Blood, Sweat and Tears and Chicago, I always had my ears

open for a rhythm section that could make that switch from traditional swing jazz, which was the triple meter, into the pop-jazz, which is more duple meter, with an R&B background.

“I heard about this kid who had just come off Wayne Cochran’s band. Somebody I knew down there said, ‘He’s a great player but he’s got an attitude. You can’t work with him.’ I said, ‘Bingo. That’s exactly what I’m looking for, an attitude,’” Graves says, laughing. “Rock ‘n’ roll and R&B demand a certain amount of that. It just can’t be laid back. It’s got to have that type of a drive to it. As soon as I heard that, I sought him out, I brought him in. He came in with Bobby Economou on drums. We did a rehearsal at Bachelor’s III, and he blew my mind. You couldn’t help but be impressed by what he brought to the table. It was raw in a lot of ways, but you could sense right away you had a tiger by the tail.”

Pastorius settled into Graves’ band for a few years, where he developed his bass and writing chops, penning much of the original material that would end up on his debut LP and beyond. Graves’ group was both a steady gig and a creative laboratory. The band would back stars at night and play its own adventurous charts earlier in the evening. “I’ll never be able to forget the image of Jaco Pastorius playing ‘How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?’ with Patti Page,” Graves says with a laugh. “That’s an image that will burn brightly in my brain forever.”

While the bassist’s love of big-band music was partly instilled in him by his jazz-singer father, John Pastorius, he was far from being a natural, instinctive genius when it came to writing for larger groups. Graves says

Pastorius “did his homework. He studied scores by Bach and Bartók. He had already been through an R&B school in Wayne Cochran’s band, with [guitarist] Charlie Brent teaching him. He and Larry [Warrilow, a skilled arranger involved in many of Jaco’s big band projects] became soulmates, from a writing standpoint. Larry is extremely well studied.

“In between the shows, Jaco would be shedding all these tunes,” Graves says. “Many times he’d wave me over. He would just put the tip of the bass up to my ear so I’d be the only one who could hear. Waiters would be getting their ice and yapping or whatever, and I’m listening to ‘Continuum’ and ‘John and Mary’ and all these great songs that ended up on his debut album. One night, Larry was watching Jaco’s fingers, and it dawned on him what he was working on—he was shedding Johann Sebastian Bach’s ‘Chromatic Fantasy’ on a break during a show! It was kind of surreal at times. It was great to be there when all of that was coming together.”

The *Word Is Out* features bassists Mark Egan, Jimmy Haslip, Victor Wooten, Oteil Burbridge, Gerald Veasley (whose work on “Dania” is impressive), Will Lee (who navigates the snaky 16th-note business on “River People”) and Cuban legend Israel “Cachao” Lopez Jr., an influence on the young Jaco. Pastorius appears, through careful digital stitching, on “Reza”: Graves took a live recording that the bassist made on Sanibel Island in the mid-’80s and built an orchestration around it.

But the most impressive bass playing is by Richard Bona, the Cameroon-born and Pastorius-inspired player who is tailor made for the job. Bona plays, and burns cleanly, on three of the album’s tracks, just as he nailed his part on “Punk Jazz” from *Word of Mouth Revisited*. This is not the first time Bona has been pressed into service for his Jaco-esque voice. Since moving to the U.S. in 1994, Bona has worked with some of the same leaders/musicians Pastorius collaborated with decades earlier, including Joe Zawinul and Pat Metheny.

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—PETER GRAVES

Bona is unabashed about his close connection to Pastorius’ influence. Originally a guitarist, Bona says, “I was never interested in the bass until I heard Jaco. I heard his first record, with ‘Donna Lee’ and ‘Portrait of Tracy,’ and I thought, ‘Wow, I want to be able to play the bass like that.’ I took two strings off of my guitar and it became like a bass. I played that record many times, every day, for two years, learning the whole record, every single song, every keyboard part and all the solos. I lived with that record.

“I always describe Jaco as having the heart of a folk musician,” Bona says. “When you listen deeply to his music, his soul was close to folk music. It’s the same with those guys, like Miles. They had a different worldview of music—very, very wide. Also, Jaco definitely was very really close to the melody, no matter what music he played. And they’re sweet melodies, instead of being those tortured melodies.” Bona starts singing the melody of ‘Continuum’ and sighs: “Amazing. So soulful.”

Word of Mouth Revisited also features many great guest musicians who don’t play bass, including such close Pastorius collaborators as Erskine, Mintzer, Randy Brecker, Mike Stern, Thielemans and steel-drum player Othello Molineaux. Of that guest list, none was as close as drummer Erskine, who, for several years, played with the bassist as part

of the most powerfully poetic Weather Report rhythm section; they can be heard together on albums beginning with 1978’s *Mr. Gone* through 1982’s *Weather Report*.

Erskine confesses that he has normally been “avoiding or politely declining invitations to participate in one memorial project or another, partially because I felt that the project wasn’t really right. My test was: Would Jaco approve, or enjoy hearing this? The cool thing about the Peter Graves project is that he was very much, and still is, into the way Jaco liked to do things. Peter was a partner in arms and, in fact, I think they had a mutually beneficial relationship. He gave Jaco a lot of early breaks, in terms of work, and then Jaco was very loyal and made sure that Peter Graves was involved with any big-band things that we did—whether we did it in New York or Japan or Chicago or wherever.”

“When Jaco first started doing [Word of Mouth], he was tickled pink that here he was fronting a big band,” Erskine says. “I remember times at his house when he pulled out a [Thad Jones and Mel Lewis big-band] album. I don’t know if people really imagine Jaco sitting around listening to Thad and Mel’s band, but that’s what he aspired to. And also, of course, the Sinatra recordings with arrangements by Nelson Riddle and Gordon Jenkins.”

Fellow Word of Mouth original member Bob Mintzer arranged and solos on the tune “Dania,” an early Pastorius composition that often opened Word of Mouth sets but was never officially recorded. Mintzer’s first experience as an arranger in Word of Mouth came with his sparkling chart for “Invitation,” which became the kick-off song and title track to the band’s 1983 live album. “Jaco knew that I had written some big-band music, and he just asked me to arrange that,” Mintzer says. “We were playing it with the sextet [version of Word of Mouth], and he wanted a version that could be played with a big band, so I just basically expanded on what we were doing with the sextet.” Musically, he says, “It was Jaco’s concept, to be sure.”

Randy Brecker played on “Come On, Come Over” from Pastorius’ debut album, and later, from 1982 to 1983, in Word of Mouth. At the time Pastorius launched Word of Mouth, the trumpeter says, the big-

band scene knew “nothing quite like that, because he had all these diverse elements—the R&B and funk elements, the rock element, along with expert, amazing tunes and great orchestrations. It was the first and maybe one of the only serious fusion big bands. There were other big bands around. Thad and Mel were going strong. But they were all strictly jazz bands, with upright bass. Jaco just made everything his own.”

Brecker remembers a clear point of departure in terms of the bassist’s presence of mind. It happened when Word of Mouth took a break between a U.S. tour and a strange gig at the Montreal Jazz Festival in 1983. “When we reconvened in Montreal, he just wasn’t himself. You’d look into his eyes and he just wasn’t there. Whatever happened in that few months’ interval, none of us ever found out. It was a combination, I suppose, of substance abuse and real mental illness. He just never really came back from that.”

Mike Stern came into Pastorius’ musical life in the post-’83 “demon” years. Stern spent a few years as the bassist’s bandmate and, in an unhealthy substance-abuse-enabling relationship, his drinking/drugging buddy. But it is also fitting that Stern is a featured soloist on *Word of Mouth Revisited*’s beautiful Dan Bonsanti arrangement of the Metheny ballad “Sirabhorn” from *Bright Size Life*. Stern remembers hearing that song and others in the workshop phase in 1976 while he was studying guitar with Metheny at

Berklee in Boston. The trio of Metheny, Pastorius and drummer Bob Moses would work on the tunes in tiny clubs like Zircon.

Stern's first experience playing music with Pastorius came when the guitarist was in Blood, Sweat and Tears, and the jazz-rock group called on Pastorius to fill in for a few months of gigs. They got together again years later, after Pastorius heard Stern's work with Miles Davis, specifically the tune "Fat Time." Stern says the bassist called him and said, "I'm so proud of you. I just heard this cut on Miles' comeback album [*Man With Horn*, 1981], Man, let's do some stuff.' So we did some stuff in New York, while I was still with Miles."

At the time, both were deep in chemically induced escapism. As Stern admits, "We did a couple of tours, including a U.S. tour. Talk about a

blur—forget about it. People keep coming up to me and saying, 'Man, I heard you with Jaco but you won't remember it.' It was obvious we were all shit-faced. Everybody says, 'Oh, the band sounded great, but you were all definitely well oiled.'"

Sensing the seriousness of his addictions, Stern checked into rehab and sought to distance himself from Pastorius, fearing that he would slip back into bad habits. Stern's efforts to steer Pastorius into cleaning up were futile. "I always felt like he was ready to bottom out," Stern says, "getting miserable enough for him to see if he could cool out. When he got in that fight [in Fort Lauderdale], I thought, 'Well, that's it. He's going to pull out of this coma or whatever and he will have seen the light. The rest of his life, he's going to stay sober.' There was no other way for Jaco. It was one or the other. He was a classic alcoholic, like me. 'All or nothing at all,' as Miles used to say.

"It's really tragic, a really fuckin' sad story," Stern says. "He was such a sweet cat, basically. He was crazy as a hoot owl, but really a sweet guy. He had manic depression and all of that. His basic thing was just carrying on too much. He couldn't work on anything else unless he cooled out, but he never cooled out. That's that whole story in a nutshell."

When the subject of Pastorius' final years is raised, inevitably Word of Mouth's infamous performance at the 1984 Playboy Jazz Festival comes up like Exhibit A in the saga of his demise. It was, indeed, a bizarre moment in annals of live jazz, particularly because it took place in a high-profile setting before 17,000 bewildered and many booing listeners. The set quickly devolved into a strange kind of anarchy, as Pastorius repeatedly left the stage, leaving the ensemble ship without a captain. He ran backstage and grabbed musicians waiting in the wings and generally steered the performance into the realm of pell-mell.

The set ended with the other musicians having exited the stage and Pastorius enmeshed in a squall of feedback and chaotic noodling. The executive decision was made to end his set by triggering the festival's rotating stage, and emcee Bill Cosby escorted Pastorius offstage.

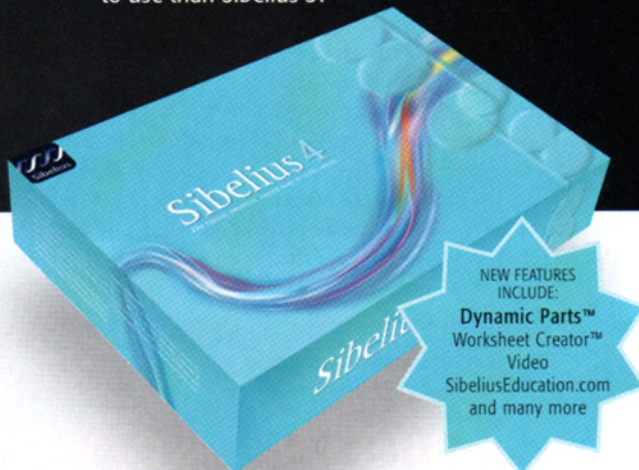
That fateful performance is often spoken of with an air of pity and disbelief, viewed as a very public sign of Pastorius' fall from grace, into the tailspin of his final phase. But from my perspective, there was also a thrilling taste of wild political incorrectness at the Hollywood Bowl that day, a blow against politeness and predictability—which this particular festival has often been guilty of.

Dancing along the precipice of abandon and anarchy was always part of Pastorius' special, fragile genius, and this was a case where he lost his footing, but spectacularly so. That Pastorius never had a chance to get up and dust himself off is a great tragedy.

"The biggest crime," Graves says, "is all the songs that didn't get written. What about all those songs? Here we have an opportunity with this second album to do things like 'Dania,' 'Good Morning Anya,' 'Beaver Patrol,' 'Las Olas'—a number of things that even his staunchest fans aren't even aware of. We have that responsibility and honor to bring those forward." **JT**

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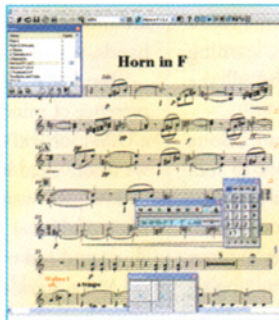
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