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Thumbs of Thunder

The Hard-Hitting Legacy Of Louis Johnson

By E.E. Bradman

IN AN ERA SATURATED WITH

monstrously influential players, Louis Johnson streaked across the sky as few others did. With a wide array of techniques at his command, a signature tone, and unmatched intensity, Johnson managed to balance ridiculously successful, concurrent careers as a versatile studio musician at the top of his game and an in-your-face bass superstar.

As a session wiz, Louis contributed classic bass parts to albums by a long list of jazz, funk, R&B, fusion, pop, and rock luminaries. As a certified bass hero, Louis—known around the world as “Thunder Thumbs”—was the catalyst that inspired a million thumpers: Even in the '70s and '80s, when thumpin' was the law of the land, Louis' aggressive technique put him in a league of his own. And along with his guitarist brother George in the Brothers Johnson, he ruled the late '70s and early '80s R&B charts, enjoying platinum albums and chart-topping singles.

When Johnson, 60, died of liver failure in May, fans and peers immediately eulogized him. Victor Bailey called Johnson a “supernova” and gave him props for his intensity, musicality, and “astronomical” studio credits. Nathan East put him “right up there as one of the most important bass players of our time.” Bootsy Collins tweeted, “Another brick in our music foundation has left the building.” Legendary producer Quincy Jones, with whom Johnson had enjoyed dazzling career highlights, called him one of the greatest bass players ever to pick up the instrument.

Brother To Brother

It was George, in fact, who introduced Louis to music. When George was five and Louis was three, they shared a guitar until, at George's request, Louis got a bass a few years later, a “big ol' old-fashioned Gibson that was bigger than he was.” Louis remembered being inspired at age six by the sound of the Mexican guitar-rón near their Los Angeles home. Their first band, Johnson 3+1, included older brother Tommy on drums and cousin Alex Weir on guitar, and they absorbed Chicago, James Brown, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, and Sly & the Family Stone; Motown, of course, was at the top of their list—when they took turns singing lead, Louis handled the Stevie Wonder vocals. After some regional success—including a hit single, “Testify,” produced by Bobby

Johnson with
Leo Fender



The Ernie Ball Music Man StingRay: Early Days

BY JONATHAN HERRERA

FEW PLAYERS ARE MORE

associated with a bass than Louis Johnson and his Music Man StingRay. The kinship went beyond a visual aesthetic—the StingRay's uniquely bright, slightly scooped tone was a driving force behind Johnson's kinetic and pioneering slap style. We asked a handful of experts about the development of the StingRay and Johnson's involvement: Sterling Ball (CEO of Ernie Ball Music Man), Dudley Gimpel (head of Ernie Ball Music Man R&D), and Music Man collector Dave Jeffrey.

What were Leo Fender's and Tom White's goals with the StingRay bass?

Sterling Ball Leo was hard of hearing, so he liked a bright sound. Bright sounded normal to him. Leo was happiest with the design of the pickup and bridge. My godfather, Tommy Walker, designed the preamp. He was one of Fender's earliest sales reps and a self-taught electronics genius. When they got to the R&D phase, Tommy would bring in me and some friends to play the stuff and report back. Since I had grown up around Leo and Tommy, I wasn't afraid to tell them what I really thought, and Leo was such a country & western guy that the perspective of a young rocker like me was important.

What set the StingRay apart from other basses when it debuted in 1976?

Dudley Gimpel The StingRay was a milestone in the industry, especially because of its 2-band active electronics. It changed the way people perceived the sound of bass guitar and inspired a whole new genre of bass technique. The preamp was designed for low power consumption—you could leave it plugged in for days and still have a good battery. The active circuitry eliminated the loss of high frequencies over long cable runs.

Dave Jeffrey The first preamps had some problems with “motorboating,” but Leo changed to a new manufacturer in '77, and that solved it. Music Man epoxied the preamp to prevent reverse engineering.

How involved was Louis Johnson in the development process?

Sterling Ball Louis visited the factory a lot and was a very important artist for Music Man, but the bass was already designed when he discovered it.

Dudley Gimpel In conversation with Tom Walker, Louis Johnson's name came up often as a key player in making the bass popular. His style and the sound of the bass were such a perfect match.

How has the single-pickup StingRay evolved over the years?

Sterling Ball After Ernie Ball acquired Music Man in 1984, we took a look at the original Music Man hand-wound pickups, and they were all over the map; some were hot, while others were soft and smooth. Dudley and I identified a standard and manufactured the pickups with tight tolerances.

Dudley Gimpel The StingRay is known for its large polepiece magnets and dual-coil humbucking design. Early StingRays had magnets that were both large in diameter and long, requiring holes milled into the body to ensure a good fit. The magnets were so strong they interfered with the strings' vibration. We subsequently shortened the magnets to eliminate this problem.

Contemporary StingRay pickups are made to the same spec as the originals, although we've improved the finish on the Alnico V polepieces, removed the sharp edges, and made them more uniform. We also wind the coils in opposite directions, maximizing hum-cancellation and resulting in a parallel-wired pickup. Subsequent changes, like the trussrod adjustment wheel, 6-bolt neck mount, 3-band EQ, compensated nut, and more have only served to improve on the original design, without interfering with its special sound.



Leo Fender with many of the other
folks behind the StingRay bass



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Womack—Johnson 3+1 effectively broke up when George went on the road with Billy Preston in 1968. But in 1971, Preston's bass player quit suddenly just as the band was leaving for a Canadian tour. Louis was still in high school, but George convinced their mother to bring him to the airport to meet Preston and get on the plane.

"Billy didn't know I had been teaching Louis the set whenever I was home off the road," George says. "We get to our first soundcheck, and we see Sly Stone and Freddie Stone there, just to see Billy. After the first song, Billy looked over at me and said, 'He's great!' During the show, Billy's sticking his chest out, because Louis and I were his Larry Graham and Freddie Stone. And all of a sudden, I turn and see Sly and Larry groovin' on the side to me and Louis, which made my day."

By 1973, the brothers were back home, writing and working on ideas. Louis later remembered that legendary producer Quincy Jones had gotten in touch after hearing a demo for Chaka Khan's sister, Taka Boom, that he and George had played on; George recalls meeting Jones at an audition for Stevie Wonder. "I was at the Record Plant because I had just met Stevie, and I wanted to join Wonderlove," he says. "Louis and I met and played for him, and Quincy, who was around the corner in Studio

C, passed by and heard all this funk jumpin' out of Studio B. Quincy peeked his head in, whispered into Stevie's ear, and then left. About ten minutes later, two guys dressed in black came and took us back to the studio where Quincy was. We walked into C and realized that Q had the biggest room at the Record Plant, with flowers and baskets of fruit, and all I thought was, We're supposed to be here."

Thus began one of the great partnerships in pop music. The brothers immediately brought their songwriting magic and instrumental prowess to Jones' *Body Heat* [1974, A&M] and *Mellow Madness* [1975, A&M], and Louis became one of the core members of Q's production team; in 1975, Louis appeared on albums by Herbie Hancock, Bill Withers, Gabor Szabo, Airto, Bobby Womack, and Grover Washington Jr., marking the beginning of what would be a highly successful studio career.

The brothers also joined Quincy's studio and stage orchestra despite being unable to read the charts. "We had to learn all the complicated things he did in his show real fast," says George. "At rehearsal, the musical director came through to check everything before Quincy arrived. When he got to us and saw our sheet music, he started laughing: 'These guys are so bad that they can play this shit upside down!'"

On tour in Japan, Louis got to hang with the



great jazz bassist Ray Brown, who was also with Quincy. “He would stand off in the wings and watch when I was playing,” Louis told Bill Gibson in an extensive interview for *Q on Producing* [Hal Leonard]. “He taught me how to play a walking bass part without repeating the same thing over and over—how to change the scale around and how to keep it interesting.” By the middle of the tour, George and Louis were already working on the songs that would appear on their major-label debut. When they returned, Quincy arranged to have them signed to A&M. With a nod toward the Brothers Gibb (a.k.a. the Bee Gees), they took on a new name and threw themselves into their first album.

Number One

All their gifts were on display on *Look Out for #1*, which hit the charts in 1976. Featuring great songs, an all-star lineup, and future classics like “I’ll Be Good to You” and “Get the Funk Out Ma Face,” it was an auspicious debut that heralded a long and fruitful career. *Right on Time*, released in ’77, blazed up the charts with “Strawberry Letter 23,” and won the Brothers a Grammy for the sensuous R&B instrumental “Q.” Between tours, Louis kept a steady session schedule, groovin’ with everyone from Wah-Wah Watson and Joe Tex to the Pointer Sisters and Herb Alpert. A third platinum album, *Blam!*—led by Louis’ anthemic “Ain’t We Funkin’ Now” and the slick ‘n’ stanky “Mista Cool”—upped the ante.

The Brothers’ fourth album, their fourth and last with Quincy Jones, would take Louis’ career into the stratosphere. “Stomp” made 1980’s *Light Up the Night* their biggest seller, and it also featured “This Had to Be,” co-written by Louis,

George, and the 21-year-old singer of the Jackson 5. “Michael was a big fan of the Brothers Johnson and *Look Out for #1*,” George says. “In ’79, when ‘Stomp’ was out and he and Quincy were doing *The Wiz*, we played Carnegie Hall, and Michael surprised us by introducing us—‘Ladies and gentlemen, the Brothers Johnson!’ He stayed on the side of the stage for the whole show.”

That summer, Jackson’s *Off the Wall* would enjoy massive success. Louis contributed memorable bass parts to all but three of the songs, co-writing “Get On the Floor.” His studio career was going into overdrive: Between 1979 and 1982, Louis appeared on albums by Rufus & Chaka (“Tonight We Love”), Michael McDonald (“I Keep Forgettin’”), Stanley Clarke (“We Supply”), George Benson (“Give Me the Night”), Aretha Franklin, Patti Austin, Earl Klugh, Andrae Crouch, Lee Ritenour, Herbie Hancock, and Jeffrey Osborne. In 1981, the Brothers Johnson released their fifth album, *Winners*; Louis stepped out on his own with *Passage*, a funky, soulful Christian collaboration with his then-wife Valerie that featured his vocals and songwriting up front; and he appeared on

The Dude by Quincy, whose sophisticated sheen was the perfect match for Louis' earthy touch.

This mix between romantic and rockin' was one of the core elements of Jackson's 1982 mega-hit *Thriller*, which blew the lid off anything Quincy, Michael, Louis, or anyone else expected. From the insistent pulse of "Billie Jean" to the smooth funk of "P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)," the sweet mystery of "The Lady in My Life," and the tasteful R&B of "The Girl Is Mine," Louis left an imprint in pop-culture DNA that will forever be impossible to ignore.

Studio Savant

As Louis' career skyrocketed, George became increasingly responsible for handling Brothers Johnson business, and as sometimes happens with brothers, they didn't always see eye to eye. On one tour, Louis—a born-again Christian—read the Bible on his own bus, while things were a little different on George's ride. "We was rollin' with Parliament-Funkadelic, Chaka and Rufus, and the Gap Band, and most of the bands were on my bus. There was a cartoon where Louis had a cross on the front of

his bus and I had a joint on mine. Plus and minus—it goes together," he says, laughing. "That's how separate we got. But I have a Bible that Louis gave me, and it's one of my most prized possessions."

Looking back, George has mixed feelings about his brother's busy studio career. "If he hadn't shared the Louis Johnson sound with everybody, it would have made our stuff more profound; people would have looked forward to the Brothers Johnson. But he had spread it around the world and with other artists, so it wasn't nothing new." In *Q on Producing*, Louis told Bill Gibson why he had put so much work into his studio career. "I had seen a lot of the groups that came before us reign for a few years but then fade away, so while we were doing the Brothers Johnson, I started doing session work, too. A band's career can be short; the only thing that's permanent is your skill and being unique and bringing something special to the song. That's what I've always tried to do."

Like many studio savants, Louis felt the pinch of mechanization, and in *BASS PLAYER*'s September '92 Masters of Funk cover story, he fondly recalled an era before MIDI and drum machines: "It was a magical time, but in retrospect, we shouldn't have let ourselves get sampled." Though work had indeed slowed by the mid '80s, Louis was still layin' it down with Stanley Clarke, Peabo Bryson, the Jacksons, and Aretha (that's Louis on "Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves"), and his funky take on "Silly Love Songs" was a highlight of Paul McCartney's film soundtrack *Give My Regards to Broad Street*. The Brothers' 1984 *Out of Control* (and his own *Evolution*, released a year later in Europe) didn't attract much notice, but Louis' 1985 self-titled instructional video for Star Licks showed him



in amazing form, playing with passion and intensity while kicking butt on a huge-sounding Music Man StingRay.

His association with Quincy resulted in him playing on the “We Are the World” sessions, and he appeared on “Who Is It” from Michael Jackson’s 1987 album *Dangerous*. Through the end of the decade, Louis shared his talents with the old guard—including Barbra Streisand, the Isley Brothers, and George Duke—as well as up-and-comers like Irene Cara, Johnny Gill, and John Mellencamp. In 1988 the Brothers Johnson put out their final studio album, *Kickin’*, and Louis’ last L.A. sessions were for Quincy’s 1989 *Back on the Block* album, which included covers of “I’ll Be Good to You” and “Tomorrow.”

Branching Out

Having reached dizzying heights as a player and solo artist, Louis set out to explore new passions.

He had made great music with Fender Precisions and Alembics, and Yamaha had consulted him for its BB3000 basses, but Louis was most associated with the Music Man StingRay (see Jonathan Herrera’s sidebar on page 23), and he played a Music Man Sabre, too. By the early ’80s, however, he was already building prototypes of a custom bass, and in 1991, he connected with Treker, who eventually manufactured a Louis Johnson signature model. Louis also appeared on several other all-star instructional videos, and he established music schools, including the Louis Johnson Bass Academy and Louis Johnson Black Dragon Institute (which he described as “part music, part martial arts”).

In the ’90s, the Brothers did some touring and appeared with Larry Graham and Graham Central Station in Japan. Their last serious trek together was in 2002, and the *Strawberry Letter 23: Live*



Louis Johnson:

A REMEMBRANCE

BY ALEX AL

In addition to his touring and recording role with Michael Jackson and his TV time in the house bands of Arsenio Hall and George Lopez, Alex Al remains an L.A. session ace whose credits include Herbie Hancock,

Sting, Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon, Mariah Carey, and Beyonce. Here’s his tribute to Louis Johnson.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, IN DETROIT, YOU HAD TO KNOW EVERYTHING

Louis did; I learned the Brothers Johnson stuff when I was seven or eight, and I’m still hearing nuances. He was the James Jamerson of funk. When you heard Jamerson, you knew it was him, and when you hear Louis Johnson, there’s no doubt: You know it’s him.

I don’t know anyone else who was doing what he did and still getting all those sessions done—it’s as if he was two different people. Just the fact that he could be a recording artist and a bona fide bass star known in jazz, funk, and fusion communities, while being a modern-day session giant ... only a few people were doing that. I think people don’t really grasp the wideness of his influence.

I’m very blessed to have gone through the King of Pop’s catalog and learned Louis’ parts verbatim, because that’s essentially what the job was. When I played “Billie Jean” in rehearsal for the *This Is It* tour, Michael stopped the whole band and said, “I just want to hear the bass.” There’s a keyboard part I had to play, as well as a Louis Johnson part, which I saw him play a long time ago, and I remember how he did it: With the thumb on the bottom note hitting that pulse and then playing the rest of it. In the B section, Louis kind of stretched out, playing nice fills. When I played that, Michael smiled, and everything was cool. I thought, Thank God for my love of Louis Johnson. It wasn’t the first time it had gotten me out of trouble.

I met Louis when he came to BIT while I was there. He was very humble, and he had the good personality to be able to work with all the things that are unforeseen in this business. He was definitely one of my heroes. I was very sad when he passed, and I feel like he’s one of the best that ever picked up this instrument.



LOUIS JOHNSON

CD/DVD captures a live performance in Oakland, California in 2003. Although his high-profile career was behind him, he stayed busy thumpin' the licks for which he was best known. YouTube has footage of Louis jamming with music students in the Netherlands in 2009 and throwing down with Stanley Clarke in 2012. On his Facebook page, Louis posted clips of gigs, sessions he remembered fondly, and artists whose tunes he enjoyed. He traveled, living at various times in Indiana and Minnesota, with additional stints in Japan and Australia. In fact, he had just returned from Australia and settled in Las Vegas when his accountant became alarmed that he hadn't heard from Louis in a few days. He got in touch with George, who sent someone to Louis' place. But liver failure, exacerbated by cirrhosis, had gotten there first.

Louis' Legacy

The influence of Louis Johnson is everywhere in the 21st century. Hardly a day goes by without a hyperactive thumb-slinger putting thumb to *E* string, a tribute to Louis—even if it's inspired by Flea, who followed in Louis' StingRay footsteps and told *BASS PLAYER* in '96 that he rocked a Treker bass that Louis had given him. Long before it was commonplace for bass players to endorse instruments, Louis and his sound were inseparable from Leo Fender's StingRay.

As a studio musician with Quincy, Louis brought discipline and readiness to his sessions. "I was studying martial arts, and I was always very quiet and very respectful and just did what Quincy said. It's as simple as that," he told Gibson. "I was peaceful and relaxed and showed up ready to learn—ready to devour the parts." As he put it in 2009, "When I play, I become the bass. I'm no longer Louis Johnson, I am the bass—so the bass is in trouble!"

Louis' legacy is firmly represented in the diverse body of great music he left behind. "He was one of the baddest bass players ever," concludes George, who's working on a book and a movie about the Brothers Johnson. "His legacy is all the stuff that's on record, all the sessions he played. Listen to that shit and try to play it. He cannot be messed with."

For his part, Louis remained humble about his contribution. "I just feel very fortunate that the Lord chose me to put the bass in my hands when He did, and that I was able to make a contribution." **BP**

See music sidebar, page 32



More Than Thunder Thumbs

BY BILL LEIGH

LOUIS JOHNSON MAY HAVE BEEN ONE of the foremost pioneers and promulgators of slap playing on the electric bass, but his broader musicality and sense of groove were what helped sell Brothers Johnson records and kept the phone ringing on session dates.

Example 1 shows Louis using a lighter touch

on the midtempo Brothers Johnson jam "I'll Be Good to You" [*Look Out for Number 1*, 1976, A&M] with less thunderous thump-and-pluck octaves, sliding around what's essentially a walking bass line, occasionally interrupted by some ghost-note funk. Dig how he slides on select upper-octave pluck notes, especially in descending passages.

Louis started one of his best-known songs, the Brothers Johnson cover of Shuggie Otis' "Strawberry Letter 23" [*Right on Time*, 1977, A&M], with the tiptoeing fingerstyle staccato octave licks shown in **Ex. 2**. His approach at the top of the track is so gentle that it makes for a powerful contrast when the thunder rolls in at the verse, shown here at the end of bar 4. That lick starts with an open-E thumb that allows for a pop way up on the G string's 7th fret D. But take another

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EX. 1

Example 1 shows a walking bass line in 4/4 time. The notation includes a bass staff with notes and stems, and a guitar tablature staff below it. Technique markings include 'T' (thumb), 'P' (pick), 'H' (hand), and 'S' (slide). The tablature shows fret numbers for each string (0-9).

EX. 2

Example 2 features staccato octave licks in 4/4 time. The notation includes a bass staff with notes and stems, and a guitar tablature staff below it. Technique markings include 'T', 'P', 'H', and 'S'. The tablature shows fret numbers for each string (0-10).

EX. 3

Example 3 shows a funkier bass line in 4/4 time. The notation includes a bass staff with notes and stems, and a guitar tablature staff below it. Technique markings include 'H' (hand). The tablature shows fret numbers for each string (0-2). Chord symbols are provided above the staff: Em7, Cmaj7, Am7 Bm7, Bm7 F#m7, and Em7.



More Than Thunder Thumbs Continued from page 32

Bright disco funk
♩ = 125

EX. 4

* L = left-hand slap

look at those syncopated fingerstyle plucks in the intro: Louis starts phrases a 16th-note before or after the beat, or extends the groove across the bar line. As for the notes, octaves were the rage in mid-'70s slapped disco funk, but LJ twisted the trope with fingerstyle skank and mid-phrase octave flipping, creating a jarring angular feel.

Louis wasn't just called for his thunderous thumping abilities, but also for simple, solid grooves, like on much of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album [1982, Epic], and "I Keep Forgettin'," from Michael McDonald's 1982 solo debut *If That's*

What It Takes [1982, Warner Bros.]. The track is barely underway before Louis slips in a descending 16th-note lick, shown here in **Ex. 3**, bar 5. Of course, Louis Johnson didn't get the nickname Thunder Thumbs by accident. There are numerous examples that showcase his slap skills (see the June '09 issue for a complete transcription of the Brothers Johnson's "Stomp," complete with a ripping bass solo showcase), but Louis himself cited "Get On the Floor," from Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* [1979, Epic], as one of the songs of which he was most proud. Indeed, "Get On the

Floor" was structured around the bass line, with Johnson earning a co-writing credit. The song zips along at a feisty 125 beats per minute, and Louis' line features numerous ghosted 16th-note motifs, so oil up that thumb joint and take it slow before working it up to tempo. When you see three 16th-notes in a row, chances are there's a left-hand slap in the middle, so watch carefully. Throughout the chorus lick (**Ex. 4**), Johnson keeps his short notes tight and percussive, which helps make the accented notes and slippery octave really stand out.