

# { future soul }

***Thundercat's solo debut announces the arrival of a bold new bass voice***

{ By E.E. Bradman • Photo by Theo Jemison }

IT'S A WARM SUMMER NIGHT AT NEW York's Bowery Ballroom, and the room is packed with a multiracial, mostly young crowd to see Flying Lotus, purveyor of a string-laden dreamscape of hip-hop, house, dubstep, and jazz colors. Lotus has also brought along opening acts who are on his label, Brainfeeder, including animated DJs/performers with names like Dr. Strangeloop and Teebs, plus a baby-faced old soul on keys named Austin Peralta.

As Lotus takes the stage and Peralta settles in with his Nord Lead, another player tweaks an SWR head atop a 4x10/1x15 bass stack. He's sporting a backward baseball cap with Native American-style feathers over his ears and down his shoulder, and besides his jeans and sneakers, he's wearing what looks like a cross between an umpire's chest protector and a samurai vest (turns

out it's a custom-made *saiyan* uniform inspired by the anime hit *Dragon Ball*). When he plugs in and turns on, however, his bass lines are anything but cartoonish. Underneath Lotus's subsonic bass drops and in between the show's upright- and synth-bass-heavy samples, the character known as Thundercat lays his own funky foundation, complete with low-frequency bombs, percussive pats, chordal interludes, walking lines, and 16th-note bebop runs on an MTD 6-string and a semi-hollowbody Ibanez Artcore. A few songs in, he steps up to the mic and reveals a sweet falsetto that just won't quit, accompanying himself with dazzling chords on his MTD and then ripping into a blistering bass solo. The crowd goes wild.

Over the past seven years, Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner has made a name for himself as a soulful, idiosyncratic

stylist and colorful stage presence who's comfortable conjuring a wide spectrum of tones to fit any situation. From his early days with boy band No Curfew and upright gigs with straightahead bebop quartet Young Jazz Giants to his two decades with punk-funk icons Suicidal Tendencies and four years with Snoop Dogg, 27-year-old Bruner has never been concerned with stylistic boundaries. His chops, unerring ear, and songwriting/production skills have endeared him to a mostly Los Angeles-based group of producers and artists loosely connected by an affinity for unconventional production techniques and an ability to reimagine soul music in thrillingly fresh ways.

It's no surprise, then, that *The Golden Age of the Apocalypse*, Bruner's debut album, features several members of this community, which includes Flying Lotus, electro duo J\* Davey,

multi-instrumentalist/vocalist Georgia Ann Muldrow, avant-soul singer Bilal, percussive innovator Chris "Daddy" Dave, powerhouse producer trio Sa-Ra Creative Partnership, violinist Miguel Atwood-Ferguson, and perhaps the most commercially successful purveyor of this aesthetic, Erykah Badu. The album's warm, low-fi production and vintage synth flavors may sound familiar, but *Apocalypse* is a feast for bass fanatics: Bruner's upfront lines and fluid chording technique are the meat of every tune, which flaunt the influences of Jaco Pastorius, Matt Garrison, Bruner's hero Stanley Clarke, and his close friend Hadrien Feraud. The way he combines these disparate elements, however—including humor, "outside" harmonies, minimal accompaniment, soulful vocals, and satisfying progressions expressed as bass chords over funky rhythm tracks—is all his.

**One of the hallmarks of your style is your use of chords. What bass players inspired you to go in that direction?**

My understanding of chord structures comes more from analyzing melodies than listening to cats play chords. As for playing chord shapes on bass, I learned a lot from Dominique Di Piazza and Hadrien Feraud. In fact, I wrote "It Really Doesn't Matter" with Hadrien, and on the album, we're playing it together—when he's playing bass, I play chords, and then I'm playing chords while he plays bass.

**Do you write on keys or on bass?**

Most of the album is written on bass. There are some nuances that aren't bass—a couple synths, some strings, a piano patch here and there—but for the most part, all the chord structures are written and played on the bass.

**Is that something you've been working on for a while?**

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Yeah. When I've written songs and produced for other people, I've recorded everything on bass—the chord structure, the melody, the harmony, and the ambience. Every time I did a take, I'd change the tone. I wanted everything to be as clear as possible, but not recognizable as bass guitar. I took time to do stuff like that, and it has developed into its own thing.

## **How did you learn harmony?**

When I was younger, I went to Yamaha music school, but I learned theory and everything I know about being a musician from Reggie Andrews, who retired last year after many years of teaching high school music. He's got a track record—the Earth, Wind & Fire horn section, Patrice Rushen, and Ndugu Chancler all went to school under Reggie.

## **Some aspects of your approach remind me of Matt Garrison.**

Matt's one of my homeboys. His amazing understanding of harmony and phrasing introduced me to a whole different style of playing. But Hadrien Feraud has been even more of an influence. He's retarded! I enjoy just talking to him about concepts and stuff. We're very close friends.

## **I hear some Jaco in there, too.**

That might just come out subconsciously. It's all in there—I wouldn't be surprised.

## **Your cover of George Duke's 1975 hit "For Love (I Come Your Friend)" totally turns it out!**

Stanley Clarke and George Duke have been floating around in my life at different times, and then my brother [drummer Ronald Bruner Jr.] started playing with them. When I finished "For Love I Come," I played it for George, and he didn't recognize it until the melody came in. Then he was like, "Wait a minute—that's my song!"

## **You do a cool Stanley Clarke-style lick in "For Love I Come," and "Return to the Journey" bears the stamp of the master, too.**

"Return" is my tribute to Uncle Stanley. He's my hero! He was supposed to sing it with me, but he just didn't get around to it. When he heard it, he was like, "Ah, this is different."

## **Have you gotten a chance to connect with him, one on one?**

I have, and we had an immediate bond as bass players, of course. It was a little stronger than that, though; he's more like family. I got to play him Georgia Anne Mulrow's *Worthnothings* album [Stones Throw, 2006], which meant a lot to me, and Georgia's free spirit reminded him of '70s Flora Purim. He started turning me on to different albums, stuff he used to listen to when he was coming up. It was cool.

## **Do you see a connection between the music of the '70s, when fusion was fresh, and the music you're involved in now?**

Absolutely! *Apocalypse* definitely has that '70s spirit of open collaboration with other musicians, without jealousy or ownership. When Erykah came in and sang backup on "Walkin'," it was easy, like Michael McDonald singing on Steely Dan's "Peg"—not that I'm a Donald Fagen or anything, but you know what I'm saying.

Hip-hop has made it popular to have a "Yeah, I did this" attitude, because of the business and how easy it is to access things. This album is a chance to share music and allow it to be exactly what it is without trying to make up for anything. The fact is, the '60s were like that, too, the '80s were like that in their own way, and the '90s were, um, weird. And then we have now, which I don't even want to try to describe [laughs]. This is the year of the "dumb-down."

## **Is it part of your mission to turn folks on to jazz?**

Definitely. You can't reinvent the wheel, but you can put 20" spinners on it [laughs]. It's only gonna broaden people's horizons mentally when you reintroduce them to something that should have never left in the first place.

## **Lots of Lotus' music has elements of jazz, as do your bass lines on his album.**

There aren't many producers like Lotus. He has a different mentality; musically and creatively, we're on the same wavelength.

## **Do Lotus and J'Davey producer Brook D'Leau give you precise directions in the studio, or free rein?**

It's a mixture of both. Brook might give me strong directions or he might put up the track, walk off, and come back in five min-

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- Find all things Thundercat on his Tumblr page.
- See Bruner and his 6-string MTD co-star in a psychedelic Flying Lotus video.

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Thundercat thumps with Suicidal Tendencies

utes. But that's because we've spent so much time together that we think the same. It's the same with Lotus. When we did *Cosmogramma*, there was a lot of ESP going on. It was magical.

**I've heard you're a big fan of first takes.**

It's not always about perfection. There are times when solos are worth doing over again, but I like to let it be. I don't want to redo a good take just because I wasn't comfortable with one little part.

**Onstage at Lotus shows, you manage to be heard despite the wall-shaking sub bass.**

It's the things that I play in between that allow me to be heard. If there's an 808 [electronic kick-drum sound] in the song, my bass can't be in the same frequency. I think about my bass lines as percussion, and I do other things.

**Describe the different sounds you get with your two basses.**

My MTD cuts like a knife. The body and the neck are all maple, so it's like a super shank. My hollowbody Ibanez Artcore is the other extreme: It's like a *guitarrón*, with heavy La Bella flatwounds. That's my baby.

**Why 6-string?**

I have to! The C string gives me more to work with. I've always thought I would never play more than five strings, but in all honesty, that MTD has grown on me.

**Your bass lines are smokin', but your**

**stage presence is memorable, too.**

I've always been a character, onstage and off, but I don't want to dress crazy and then suck. There was a time when I only wanted to play with people who let me be me, but now, I am myself no matter who I'm playing with. I can be anybody I want to be.

**Do you see yourself primarily as an artist or as a sideman?**

There's a difference between being an artist and a musician, and it's important not to blur that line. Some artists, like Erykah, encourage me to be more of an artist; when I'm being a sideman, I just play the gig. When it's my time to shine, I'm ready, but it may or may not come.

**What in your approach sets you apart from other bass players on the scene?**

I give a little more than the next guy. I treat other people's projects as if they were mine—I give myself to what I'm doing. When you work a lot, it's easy to get jaded, but I try to avoid that. I show up and do the best I can.

**Would you ever advise folks to turn down otherwise desirable gigs if the money isn't right?**

They'll just find someone else to do it, and it's not going to be as great because you could have done better. At what cost

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## Ex. 2

Med. R&B  
♩ = 114

E Adim G/A E/F# D/E

Tablature: 16 14 13 | 23 21 20 | 20 16 16 16 13 13 14 11 11 | 18 16 14 | 20 19 17 | 17 17 14 14 12 12

## Ex. 3

Up R&B  
♩ = 124

E♭maj7 B♭2/D Cmaj7 G2/B G♭maj7 D♭2/F E♭2 E♭maj7

Tablature: 14 12 11 16 9 10 13 7 14 | 13 12 10 9 10 13 10 8 13 | 13 12 10 9 10 13 10 8 13

## Ex. 4

Cmaj9(#11) B♭maj7(#11) Em9(11) F6/9 E♭maj7(#11) Dmaj7(#11)

Tablature: 11 7 14 14 14 13 | 12 12 12 11 | 12 13 11 10

## Ex. 5

Experimental hip-hop  
♩ = 82

Em9 N.C. Em9 C6/9(#11) B♭6/9(#11) Am(add11)

let ring - - - | let ring - - - | let ring - - - - - |

Call: 12 11 | 12 11 10 | 10 | 8 10

Response: 3 5 7 9 11 8 10 6 5 7 3 5

Call: 12 11 9 | 12 11 9 | 7 0

Response: 15 17 14 18 | 13 15 12 16 | 14 14 14 | 12 14

## Ex. 6

Double-time hip-hop  
♩ = 80

F#maj7 Bmaj7 F#maj7 Bmaj7

Tablature: 10 10 | 11 11 8 8 | 11 11 9 9 | 7 7 7 9 9 11 11 9 9 | 11 11 9 9 | 9 11 11 | 11 11 10 10 18 18 17 17 | 15 15 13 13 11 | 11 11 14 14 13 13 11 11 9 9 8 8 | 9 9 6

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are you going to hold up this greatness that has nothing to do with you?

Asking for money can be a very sensitive issue. No single approach works for every situation, so it's important to know who you are—and then you can be the same person, even when you deal with different situations differently.

**Do you think bass players should have managers who handle that stuff for them?**

[Laughs.] By the time you say, “Talk to my manager,” you’ll have lost the gig. They’ll end up calling the other guy because he doesn’t have a manager and it’s easier to get him on the gig.

**Do you get advice from older musicians you play with?**

Erykah gives me perspective on things, and the benefit of her experience, on stuff I wouldn’t naturally think about. She tells me about the pitfalls and how people function. It’s like having a pit bull in your corner!

**Your father and brother are both drummers. How did that shape your bass playing?**

I grew up with a broad perspective of drumming—my dad, my brother, and everything between. My brother is a monstrosity, so sometimes drummers try to impress me, or they get timid. I tell them not to think about it too much.

One time, when we were 14 or 15, my brother and I were playing, and he was like, “God, I hate playing with you. You suck!” But you know what? It didn’t hurt. It inspired me to get better. I came back at a certain point, and he was like, I don’t know what happened, but something changed.

**What’s it like to play with Chris “Daddy” Dave?**

Playing with Chris is one of the greatest conversations I’ve ever had. He’s so open. That’s one fast dude, and he’s gotten faster in ways other cats don’t really try to think to get fast in. But it’s not about that to him, at least not all the time [laughs]. There was one time when we were playing with Erykah, and he did something so crazy, so funky, and he broke it down so quick—it wasn’t out of pocket, it was like somebody opened a

window on an airplane—that Erykah turned around and threw a tambourine at him. I had never seen someone do that!

**Your album combines influences from all over the map—’70s fusion, modern gospel, ’80s electro, dubstep, old-school R&B . . .**

That’s exactly what I was going for. I’m happy that *Apocalypse* is being heard and that it’s considered relevant to some degree. These days, if you’re a young instrumentalist, you’re either a straight jazz musician or you’re in a rock band, but I wanted people to see that cats really do mess with each other across genres.

**Do you have any plans to take a band of your own on the road?**

I would love to, but it would take a lot of money. At the same time, this album is flexible enough that I could perform it live with just a DJ or I could bring a full band. It could be just me sitting with my bass and singing, James Taylor-style, or with Miguel Atwood-Ferguson and a 60-piece orchestra. I want to keep it open so that people never know what to expect. **BP**

# THUNDERCAT



## GEAR

**Basses** MTD custom shop 6-string; custom Ibanez Artcore 4-string

**Rig** SWR 750x head with two SWR 4x10 cabs

**Strings** Dean Markley SR2000s (.030–.125); La Bella 0760M flatwounds (.052–.110)

**Effects** Boss SYB-5 bass synth pedal

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

**Solo albums** *The Golden Age of the Apocalypse* [2011]. **With J\*Davey** *New Designer Drug* [2011]; *The Beauty in Distortion/Land of the Lost* [2008]. **With Snoop Dogg** *Doggumentary* [2011]. **With Miguel** *All I Want Is You* [2010]. **With Erykah Badu** *New Amerykah, Pt. 2: Return of the Ankh* [2010]. **With Suicidal Tendencies** *Live at the Olympic Auditorium* [2010]; *No Mercy, Fool!/The Suicidal Family* [2010]. **With Flying Lotus** *Cosmogramma* [2010]. **With Miguel Atwood-Ferguson** *Timeless: Suite for Ma Dukes* [2009]. **With Bilal** *Airtight's Revenge* [2010]. **With Sa-Ra** *Nuclear Evolution: The Age of Love* [2009]; *Hollywood Recordings* [2007]. **With Shafiq Husayn** *Shafiq En' A-Free-Ka* [2009]. **With Eric Benet** *Love & Life* [2008]. **With John Legend** *Once Again* [2006]. **With Young Jazz Giants** *Young Jazz Giants* [2004].