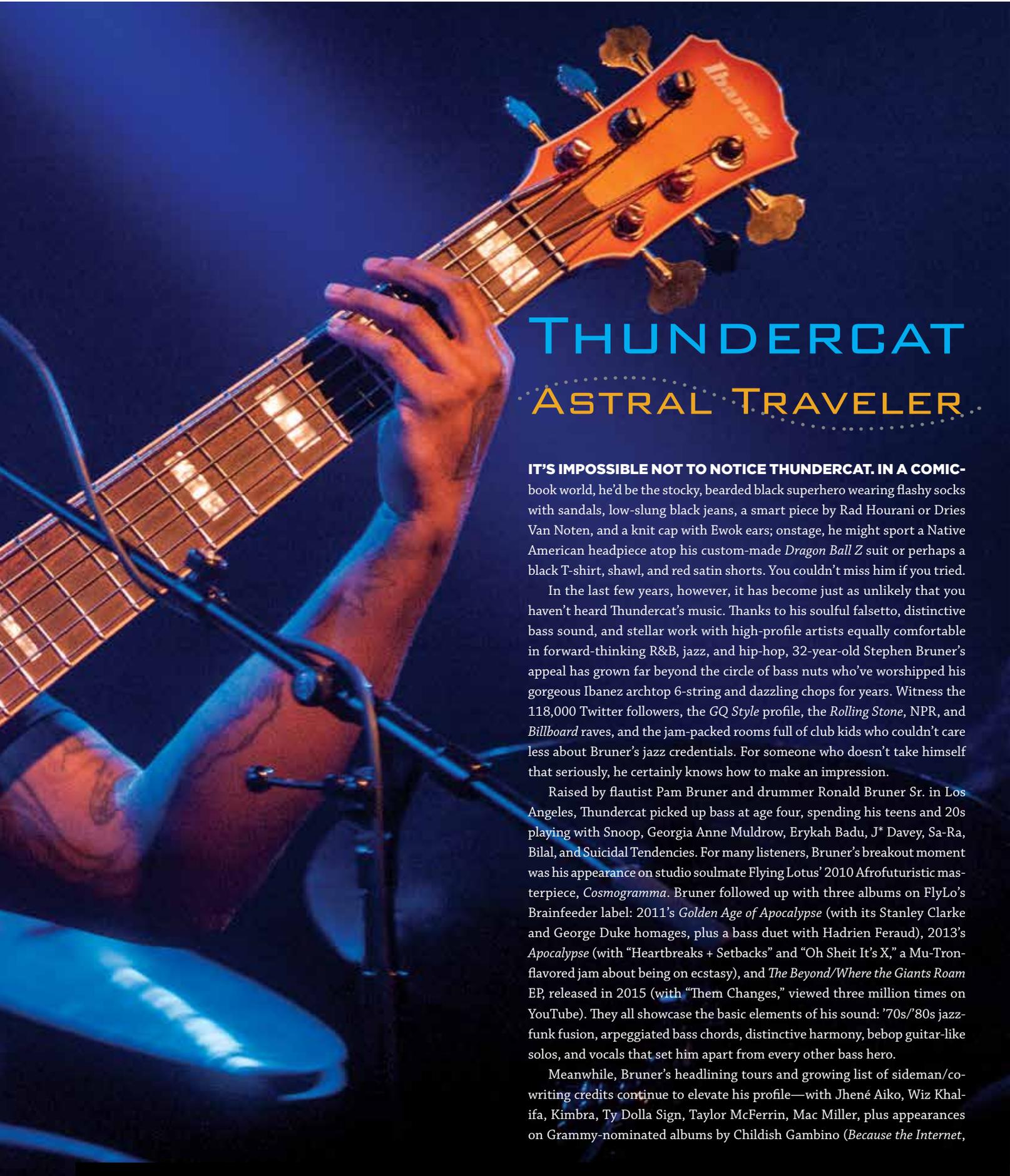




**By E.E. Bradman**

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL HAGGARD



# THUNDERCAT

## ASTRAL TRAVELER

**IT'S IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO NOTICE THUNDERCAT.** In a comic-book world, he'd be the stocky, bearded black superhero wearing flashy socks with sandals, low-slung black jeans, a smart piece by Rad Hourani or Dries Van Noten, and a knit cap with Ewok ears; onstage, he might sport a Native American headpiece atop his custom-made *Dragon Ball Z* suit or perhaps a black T-shirt, shawl, and red satin shorts. You couldn't miss him if you tried.

In the last few years, however, it has become just as unlikely that you haven't heard Thundercat's music. Thanks to his soulful falsetto, distinctive bass sound, and stellar work with high-profile artists equally comfortable in forward-thinking R&B, jazz, and hip-hop, 32-year-old Stephen Bruner's appeal has grown far beyond the circle of bass nuts who've worshipped his gorgeous Ibanez archtop 6-string and dazzling chops for years. Witness the 118,000 Twitter followers, the *GQ Style* profile, the *Rolling Stone*, NPR, and *Billboard* raves, and the jam-packed rooms full of club kids who couldn't care less about Bruner's jazz credentials. For someone who doesn't take himself that seriously, he certainly knows how to make an impression.

Raised by flautist Pam Bruner and drummer Ronald Bruner Sr. in Los Angeles, Thundercat picked up bass at age four, spending his teens and 20s playing with Snoop, Georgia Anne Muldrow, Erykah Badu, J\* Davey, Sa-Ra, Bilal, and Suicidal Tendencies. For many listeners, Bruner's breakout moment was his appearance on studio soulmate Flying Lotus' 2010 Afrofuturistic masterpiece, *Cosmogramma*. Bruner followed up with three albums on FlyLo's Brainfeeder label: 2011's *Golden Age of Apocalypse* (with its Stanley Clarke and George Duke homages, plus a bass duet with Hadrien Feraud), 2013's *Apocalypse* (with "Heartbreaks + Setbacks" and "Oh Sheit It's X," a Mu-Tron-flavored jam about being on ecstasy), and *The Beyond/Where the Giants Roam* EP, released in 2015 (with "Them Changes," viewed three million times on YouTube). They all showcase the basic elements of his sound: '70s/'80s jazz-funk fusion, arpeggiated bass chords, distinctive harmony, bebop guitar-like solos, and vocals that set him apart from every other bass hero.

Meanwhile, Bruner's headlining tours and growing list of sideman/co-writing credits continue to elevate his profile—with Jhené Aiko, Wiz Khalifa, Kimbra, Ty Dolla Sign, Taylor McFerrin, Mac Miller, plus appearances on Grammy-nominated albums by Childish Gambino (*Because the Internet*,

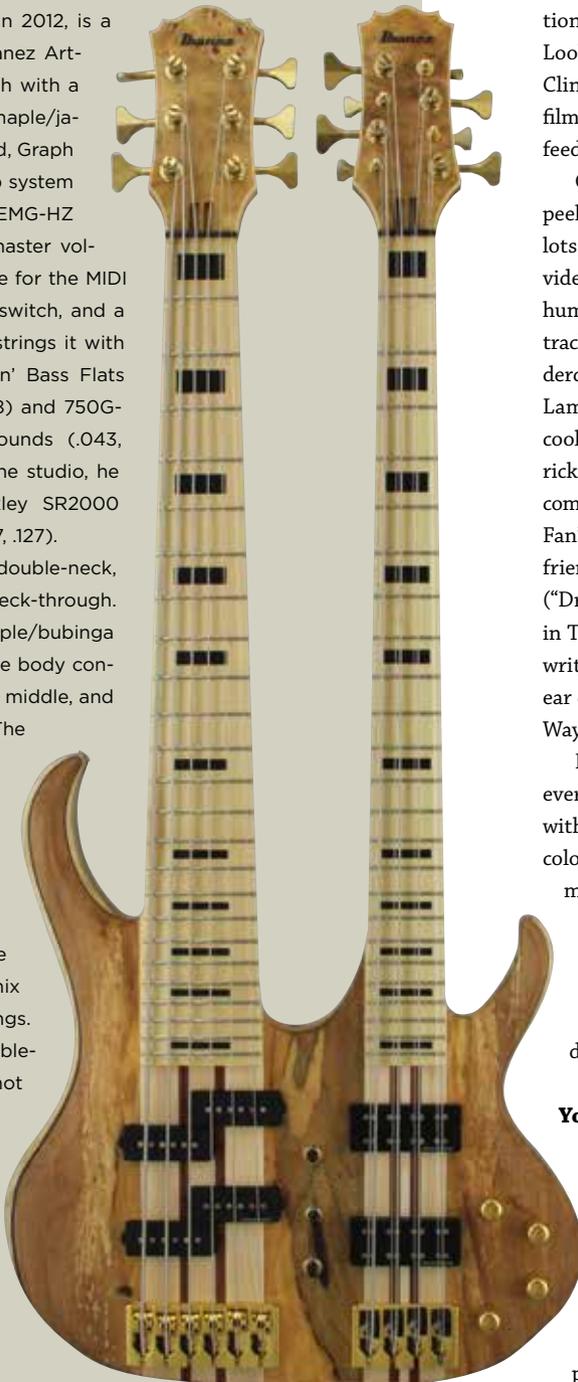
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**BASS IN THESE STREETS**
**THUNDERCAT'S MAIN AXE, CREATED**

by Ibanez's L.A. Custom Shop in 2012, is a highly customized 34"-scale Ibanez Art-core 6-string. It's a neck-through with a maple top and back, five-piece maple/jatoba neck, rosewood fingerboard, Graph Tech Ghost Modular MIDI pickup system with a Quickswitch, and custom EMG-HZ pickups. The controls include master volume, tone, piezo volume, volume for the MIDI system, a 3-way Les Paul-style switch, and a dark/mids switch. Onstage, he strings it with La Bella 760FM-CB Deep Talkin' Bass Flats (.029, .049, .069, .089, .109, .128) and 750G-CB Gold White Nylon Tapewounds (.043, .050, .065, .085, .105, .135). In the studio, he uses medium-light Dean Markley SR2000 strings (.027, .047, .067, .087, .107, .127).

His Ibanez 6-string/8-string double-neck, built in 2015, is also a 34"-scale neck-through. Both necks are five-piece maple/bubinga with maple fingerboards, and the body consists of a spalted-maple top, ash middle, and crotch mahogany back wings. The preamp is an Ibanez EQ; the controls include a 3-way toggle (for the neck selector switch) and two 3-way toggles (for Aguilar 6P-60 P-Bass pickups on the 6 and Seymour Duncan NYC humbuckers on the 8). The double-neck is strung with a mix of La Bella RX and SN nickel strings. Both the 6-string and the double-neck have jumbo frets, Hipshot tuners, and Hipshot bridges.

Thundercat amplifies his instruments through Aguilar DB 750, DB 751, or Tone Hammer 500 heads with two DB 410 or GS 410 4x10 cabinets. He uses a Pigtronix Bass Envelope Phaser and a DigiTech Whammy pedal.



2013, Glassnote/Island) and Terrace Martin (*Velvet Portraits*, 2016, Ropeadope). Last year, Bruner's pivotal role on Kamasi Washington's widely acclaimed *The Epic* (2015, Brainfeeder), as well as the Grammy he took home for "These Walls," his collaboration with Kendrick Lamar, brought Bruner a new level of attention. Concurrently, he and a tight circle of L.A. friends, including Washington, Martin, upright star Miles Mosley, and older brother Ronald Bruner Jr., were warmly praised for jumpstarting a new generation of jazz excellence. He's insanely busy, with no end in sight: Look for him with WOKE, a supergroup with Flying Lotus, George Clinton, and Shabazz Palaces; on the soundtrack to FlyLo's first film, the surreal *Kuso*; and on his brother Ronald's explosive Brainfeeder debut, *Triumph*.

Out of this dizzying maelstrom of activity comes *Drunk*, a 23-track peek into the mind of a man-child/wizard/superner who spends lots of time pondering relationships, anime, his friends, partying, video games, his cat, alcohol, technology, drugs, and scatological humor. More hi-fi than its predecessors, *Drunk* is concise (only one track makes it to the four-minute mark), but it packs all of Thundercat's favorite flavors. There are spacey songs about death ("Lava Lamp," "Jethro"), nods to Motown ("Where I'm Going," "3AM"), cool guest spots (Pharrell Williams on "The Turn Down" and Kendrick Lamar on "Walk On By"), fleet-fingered excursions ("Uh Oh"), complex vocal arrangements ("Inferno," "Blackkk"), a cat fantasy ("A Fan's Mail"), a love letter to Japan ("Tokyo"), advice for a would-be friend ("Friend Zone"), and, of course, songs about getting wasted ("Drink Dat," "DUI," and "Drunk"). The sparkling retro gems "Bus in These Streets" and "Jameel's Space Ride" bear the mark of co-writer/Knowler mastermind Louis Cole, but the album's sweetest ear candy just might be the yacht-rock throwback "Show You the Way," featuring Michael McDonald and Kenny Loggins.

Live, Bruner's vocals and stage presence are more confident than ever. It's a thrill hearing him grab fistfuls of notes while locking in with drummer Justin Brown and singing over unusual harmonic colors. Although Bruner's muscular approach guides the music as much as (if not more than) keyboardist Dennis Hamm's sophisticated parts, a high-flying Thundercat solo is always around the corner. Between songs, he's funny, self-deprecating, and honest, and off stage, he's exactly the same—a just-passing-through astral traveler who's bemused by all the attention but definitely having a good time.

**You've been getting lots of praise from the mainstream press. How does it feel?**

It's been pretty trippy, to say the least. I don't know what to think of it.

**Congratulations on the Grammy for "These Walls." Did it change your life?**

Everything got crazy. It was so intense! I needed some sort of buffer, so I changed my number. I looked at it like self-preservation: I try to stay focused and stay sane.

**You certainly seem more comfortable onstage these days.**

For the most part, I feel comfortable but I never get used to it. I was very quiet as a kid—this is like, the opposite. Every now and again, singing freaks me out just a little. Nonetheless, I enjoy every part of it.

**You're singing a lot more on *Drunk*.**

On the first two albums, there were lots of instrumentals, and I was trying to convey ideas that way. Now songwriting has taken a front seat.

**Has focusing on vocals changed the way you play while you sing?**

Dennis and I were just talking about what your brain has to focus on between playing and singing. Usually, you don't think when you're playing, but singing forces you to think. It's always like, How am I supposed to play this and sing at the same time?

**The lines you're singing are so ...**

Juxtaposed against what I'm playing? Yeah, it's pretty messed up [*laughs*]. Singing and playing looks easy when you see guys like Sting do it, but having two different melodies going at the same time is always difficult. One comes first, you put them together, and then you have to figure out how to improvise and still hit the changes. One thing I do enjoy about touring is that it's an open practice. You get better with repetition.

**Your live bass tone is gigantic. How long have you been using Aguilar amps?**

[Aguilar rep] Justin Huth recommended Aguilar gear to me four or five years ago because it was straightforward, and I like that. The DB 750 [head]

with two 4x10s—that's the one. Aguilar's stuff is known for being really powerful, and that's what I need onstage. People are telling me to turn down, and I'm like, No! I'm trying to burn down the stage. That's the whole point! [*Laughs.*]

**Are you still using heavy-gauge strings on your Ibanez signature bass?**

I dance between two sets of strings, one for live and one for recording. In the studio, I still use tapered, medium-light Dean Markley SR2000s, and live, I've been using a custom flatwound 6-string set by La Bella. I use La Bella nylons a bit now, too.

**How do you like your Ibanez double-neck?**

It's fantastic. It's got this Pink Floyd-ish tone that's really open—it rings out because there's the 6-string on top and an 8-string on the bottom, both with EMGs. I wanted to go for that vintage P-Bass sound, but there's hardly any lacquer on the wood, and it's like this open "baaaaang!" It's pretty funky; it has its own life.

**How often do you play it?**

Weirdly enough, I wind up playing it at really big shows, like when I did the Hollywood Bowl



with Michael McDonald. I did something for *Complex* [magazine], and I play it live in L.A. It's so specific. The first time I played it was in London at the Koko, and it was intimidating—it sounded so open that I was trying to bring it back. But I figured out over the course of the show that it's just something you have to embrace for what it is. I love it to death.

**You don't use a pick, even on the 8-string?**

Nah. Total fingers.

**I'm curious to see how it settles in. How was your main 6 changed since you got it in 2012?**

It's definitely done some morphing. I broke a couple tuning pegs, bent the neck in a little ... every time I bring it in to Ibanez, I'm like, "Can you guys redo the frets a bit?" And I've added a ramp in-between the pickups.

**Why?**

To be honest, having played like this for almost 30 years, my hands hurt every now and again. I'm not gonna lie—sometimes I have to have somebody carry my bass. I had to start taking glucosamine, and I've slowed down drinking a lot.

**Do you feel a difference?**

Now I can feel how terrible everything is! [Laughs.] Yeah, on this tour, they have a whole bunch of vegetables and stuff. I had to stop drinking because of the wear and tear on my hands. I'm not super old, but it was one of those things where I can feel it.

**How do you like playing with the ramp?**

It's low, but it's not super low. The truth is that I still feel pain, but there's more of a flat surface, so I don't have to worry about where I'm playing on the

pickups; I can stay in one area and it'll be the same amount of intensity on each pickup. Sometimes I'm strumming and sometimes I'm playing fingerstyle, and with the ramp, it'll feel seamless. I still move my fingers closer to the neck to dig in. It's a small change, but it keeps my hands a bit more preserved.

**How do you find melodies over your chord changes? Do you come up with the melody first?**

They go hand in hand. Sometimes, I'll hear the changes first, and I'll ask myself what I'm supposed to find inside the harmony. Every once in a while, I'll be hearing a melody, and I'll try to create the changes around it. It comes from different places, and I try not to be scared or put limitations on myself. I'll try anything, even if I hear something I don't like. I'll go for it. There's no wrong way.

**Dissonance is such an essential part of your sound.**

I like to try to think naturally, even if something is completely dissonant. And there's a way to convey dissonance: If you play a major #11 chord, for example, hitting the #11 at a higher frequency may freak someone out because it sounds so dissonant, but if you play it as a b5, it's more comforting.

**When you're writing a song, do your vocal lines affect your harmonic choices?**

The more I sing, the more I try interesting harmony. A lot of the time, it has to do with reference points, the things you listen to that influence your ideas. One of my favorite melodies is "Descent to Madness" from Flying Lotus' *You're Dead*. I knew it made sense harmonically, and the melody was



within the changes, but I remember thinking, What the fuck am I singing? [*Laughs.*] I'm very influenced by guys like Gentle Giant. *The Power and the Glory*—that's my album right there. And of course, groups like Yes. My heroes! And Cream.

**What is it you like about those bands?**

The way the harmony and the melodies sit together. One of my favorite songs is Cream's "White

Room," because of what Jack Bruce is singing over that descending harmony. Those are the things that I draw from, those bands and guys like Gino Vanelli, the Bee Gees, Kenny Loggins, and Michael McDonald. It's about writing songs instead of attacking a moment and trying to say everything at once.

**Your chords are so thick. How do you keep things from getting muddy?**

Live, I'm using a DigiTech Whammy pedal with the octave up, because if I don't, it's a bit muddled. My bass still sounds super-thick like a P-Bass, but I have to give some sense of openness, so I have to have that octave up. And that's why my Ibanez basses are made a certain way; some basses wouldn't do as well with chords. They'd be going all over the place.

**What other effects are you using onstage?**

Just the Whammy and a Pigtronix Bass Envelope Phaser. The Pigtronix is powerful—it reminds me of a Mu-Tron Bi-Phase, but it's nice not to have to deal with the weight of a Bi-Phase. I've also played with a Moogerfooger MF-103 12-Step Phaser, and I used to have a Boss SYB-5.

**Let's talk about the album. Why'd you name it *Drunk*?**

It's a bit cheeky, but I'm a touring musician, and everybody I know is an alcoholic. It's just a reality. I've had friends die because of it, and I've had life-altering moments with people thanks to alcohol. It's interweaved in our profession.

**Why are the songs so short?**

People think a song has to be three minutes so it can be "radio friendly." Come on, man! Bands like DRI exist. Bad Brains exist. Suicidal Tendencies. It comes out the way it does, and you let it be the way it is. One of my favorite sayings by Erykah Badu is that this is not a race. A song is supposed to come out the way it's supposed to come out.

**What are you thinking when you sit down to write songs?**

Flying Lotus and I try to create without bias. The process becomes like a current, and I pick from it. I try to see things through. Somebody else may see something else, and I'm open to that; that's how I write with my friends. But I try to go as hard as I can with what I have.

**How was working with Kenny Loggins and Michael McDonald?**

They're the kings of cool! I was a bit nervous at first because they are who they are, and what the hell do I have to offer those guys, you know? At the same time, they're looking at me like, What are you talking about? Michael McDonald is a songwriting genius—the ideas would just be flying. Kenny was very precise about what we were doing and how we were doing it. By the time we finished "Show You the Way," I didn't want to play it for them because I didn't want them to change a thing. When I saw Kenny later, at Sundance, he was like, "Good job, man. Good stuff." I was like, "Thank you for even taking the chance." We also worked on a couple tunes other than "Show You the Way"; they might

come out someday.

**You definitely turned up the production on this album.**

Yeah, we spent a lot more time on that. There was a funny moment: I had been sitting with “Them Changes” for some time, and I loved it. I brought it to Flying Lotus, and he said, “I don’t think there can be a better mix than what you’ve done with it.” I was like, “Flying Lotus thinks I’ve produced a song very well, and there’s nobody there to see it. Where’s the studio audience? This isn’t fair!” I realized that my ears had started tuning in to the production side of things.

**What software are you using?**

Ableton [Live], always. I went from Pro Tools to Ableton. It was the game-changer and still is, especially for the songwriter. It makes your process easier.

**The band is sounding tight. How long have y’all been together?**

About four years. Justin and Dennis are two of the main reasons I love doing this. We communicate a lot onstage, and it’s great to have people that you can genuinely talk to and understand. We’ve lived

life together. Plus, they’re better than me. It’s like an ass-whippin’ every night!

**There were a few shows where you had another bass player.**

Yeah, Joel Whitley was playing bass for me for a second. When I played with [upright player] Miles Mosley in Kamasi’s band, we complemented each other, and it wouldn’t clash because the frequencies were so far apart. I did it with Stanley Clarke once, and the truth is, you have to be cognizant of the other person’s tone and the role they’re playing; you have to be constantly watching them but also thinking about how to keep it funky. At first, I was cool with having two basses in the band, but then I needed to have more control over things. As much as I enjoyed playing with Joel, it just felt like the trio was the format.

**Who are you listening to these days? I noticed that you gave a shout-out to Mononeon on Twitter.**

Mono’s a sweet dude. He should move to L.A.; it’s cool that he’s removed from everything and living in Memphis, but being in L.A. will allow him to dig in in a different way. He can be himself and nobody will mess with him. He’s such a beautiful individual, and his ears are massive. I want to see the best shit happen to him.

**What’s in the future?**

I’m very excited for a couple things that are in the works. I’ve been working with Anderson .Paak a lot. Now, there’s a guy who can sing and play! Lotus and I are working on stuff. And I’m interested to see what people think of this album, because I’m singing more. Besides that, trying to keep a level head and trying not to die—so many of my friends have. And I’m already ready to start writing again. **BP**