




photography by eddie malluk



alphonso johnson

Alive

by David C. Gross

I have always been a fan of Weather Report and was excited to do this interview with Alphonso Johnson. Following is some biographical material that will help the uninitiated in learning a little about this great musician. He studied string bass at the Philadelphia Music Academy with John Lamb, former bassist of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. His touring career began when he was 17, and at the age of 21, Alphonso toured the world with the Woody Herman Orchestra. He then joined the Chuck Mangione Quartet and played on the album *The Land of Make Believe*. Wayne Shorter heard Alphonso with that group and asked him to record the album *Mysterious Traveler* with his group Weather Report. Alphonso co-wrote two songs for the album and toured with the band from 1975 to 1976, during which time he recorded his first solo album for CBS/Epic titled *Moonshadows*.



In 1976 Alphonso started experimenting with the Chapman Stick and he recorded a second album, *Yesterday's Dreams*, for CBS/Epic. A year later he recorded his third album, *Spellbound*. In 1979 he toured with the CBS All-Stars (Tom Scott, Billy Cobham, and Steve Kahn) and recorded a live album in England with rock organist Rod Argent. That same year Alphonso received a Grammy Nomination for Best R&B Instrumental for the album *Street Life* with the group The Crusaders.

Alphonso's first film scoring attempt, which was a soundtrack for a children's film entitled *Sound of Sunshine... Sounds of Rain* in 1983, netted him an Academy Award Nomination for Best Animated Film. A year later he joined Santana and with that group toured in Europe with Bob Dylan and recorded the album *Real Live* from that tour.

A summary of his many touring and performing credits includes: Santana, Weather Report, The Crusaders, Bob Weir, Chuck Mangione, George Duke, En Vogue, Wayne Shorter, Sergio Mendes, Tony Williams, Joe Williams and Frank Gambale. Alphonso's teaching credits include a stint at the Mesar House Institute of Music in Tokyo, the Bass School of Music in Köln, the Musicians Institute in Los Angeles, the National Guitar Summer Workshop and the California Institute of the Arts. He has conducted bass seminars and clinics in Germany, England, France, Scotland, Ireland, Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Brazil and Argentina. He has also contributed a chapter in *The Guitar Teacher's Handbook*, published by Oxford University Press. He wrote *The Bass Guitar* which was also published by The Oxford University Press in 1994.

He wrote a chapter in *Lessons with the Greats* which was published by DCI/Belwin in 1993.

In 1995 Alphonso was asked to become a member the group Abraxas which is comprised of all the original members of the group Santana. Recently, Alphonso has been touring with *Jazz Is Dead* with Billy Cobham, T. Lavitz, and Jimmy Herring paying a tribute to the late Jerry Garcia. As you can see this man has kept busy. We must have been on the phone close to 90 minutes. I'm sure AT&T is happy! Here are some highlights from our conversation:

I wanted to get some preliminary data on you in terms of schooling, influences, etc.

My first musical influences started in the late 50's, early 60's when I started singing on the street corners of South Philadelphia. When I got to elementary school I was part of the All Philadelphia City Boys Choir. At that point I started playing bass in the school orchestra.

Had you played any musical instruments before?

No.

Why did you choose bass?

Because I was the tallest kid in the class. I was the only one who could reach the instrument.

What about high school?

I played trombone in High School. We had no string instruments. Most of my string bass playing was in Elementary and Junior High.

Did you have any teachers that were important influences on you?

Without a doubt. Mr. George Allen was basically my mentor in Philadelphia.

Did he work with any other well known musicians?

Christian McBride studied with him. Almost any kid who studied in the public school system was touched by his influence.

What sort of music were you listening to back then?

Everything from Hendrix, Philly Sound, Motown, everything. It was all about music and sounds, things that were new and exciting. Things are definitely different today. Music seems so much more compartmentalized. I think the music charts no longer reflect the diversity of musical styles. It is more than the music becoming compartmentalized as much as people's thinking and artists thinking becoming limited. For whatever reasons, artists, not all artists, have decided to limit themselves, therefore it limits the amount of music that they can produce.

When did you start on the electric bass?

I used to play house parties. That's how I sort of learned to play the instrument. We would just show up at someone's house and they would get some beer and invite some people over and we would play whatever the latest top 40 stuff was.

Did you have any serious practice regimens with both technique and reading?

Not on the electric bass. My first instrument was the upright bass and I studied classical music. I learned more about orchestral music and defining the role of the bass in an orchestral context. After I graduated high school I studied with John Lamb at the Philadelphia Musical Academy and used the Simandl book.

Can you tell me a little about your concept of bass playing in Weather Report?

Right before I joined Weather Report I was playing with Chuck Mangione and one of the things I really liked about that quartet was that the instrumentation was flugelhorn, saxophone, bass, and drums. When we would start a song, that would be the sound of the band. There was no other harmonic or chordal instrument. When Gerry Niewood, the saxophonist would solo, Chuck would sit down and play the piano. My role would shift as a part of the rhythm section, because the rhythm section all of a sudden expanded.

In what regard would it shift? Would

you become more rhythmic, less busy to a certain extent?

I didn't have to outline chords as much but I also had to play more within the harmony that Chuck was laying down on the piano. When it was just bass, drums, and flugelhorn, I could shift the tonal center even though I followed the form of the song.

Before working with Chuck, you worked with Woody Herman. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience?

I worked with Woody for about 8 months. I played electric and upright on that gig.

Did you have to stress your reading ability on that gig?

It was all reading!

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How did you get your reading chops together? Do you have any secret tips or did you just sit in a room and drive everyone around you crazy?

Reading is a funny thing, you just do it. You have to learn the technique of it. When I was with Woody Herman, I spent all of an hour and a half before the first gig with Gregory Herbert in his hotel room going over the charts. He would explain that the last bass player had problems here, or when Woody conducts this part he wants you to do this, be careful at this tempo change, etc. The actual reading of the notes you learn by doing.

There are two schools of thought. A number of players do not read and have managed to have a successful career while others can read and function in any situation. I have 6 books about how to play bass on the market and each one of them has both notation and tablature. I have always been curious why a person would take the time to learn to read tab when they could be spending that time learning to actually read music. I

guess the book publishers bottom line is more important.

It is important to inspire and encourage musicians to play and by providing tablature it allows them to do that and can serve a useful purpose. On the other hand, you and I both know, in the real world to work and support yourself as a professional musician, you have to learn how to read. There is no way around it. It is important to stress to the younger and beginner musicians who are just learning how to play to use tablature to get the ball rolling but you need to get with a good teacher and learn how to read music because you limit yourself without it.

It is important for people to see this in black and white!

I did a gig last year that I tell people was the hardest gig of my life. It was a casual at the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles. It was a great experience. I had to play at a fundraiser for the Whitney Houston/Michael Bolton Foundation for Kids. He's a great person. Have you heard his Arias CD? That was one of the pieces I had to perform. That night I played behind En Vogue,

Whitney, Johnny Mathis, Robert Goulet, you name it! It was the A to Z of music and it was all reading charts with different conductors, different styles of music, I had to play upright, electric bass, fretless, arco, pizzicato. It really kicked my butt! It was one of the most difficult things I had ever done. It was the first time I came home and my wife asked me how did it go and I could just say, "Wow!"

Once again, you would not have gotten a call for it unless you could read music, right?

Exactly. It really puts you into a different league where the contractors have the confidence to know that when you get there the music will be done. That is the main thing.

Let's get back to Weather Report. You recorded 3 records with them. Can you tell us a bit about them?

The first one I did was *Mysterious Traveler*, then *Talespinin'*, and the last one was *Black Market*. The first one I did in transition from Miroslav Vitous