formed?

When we first started calling ourselves the Who I used a Marshall 50-watt amp with a 4-12 cabinet. I had the first 4-12 cabinet that Marshall made. We more or less forced them to make 100-watt amps by changing to Vox, who had already made one. Marshall decided that if they were going to keep us, they'd have to make a 100-watt amp. They used to make their amps with speaker material on the front, and they looked completely different. I said, "I don't like that; I want it all black," so they changed them. I bought another 4-12 cabinet, and then Pete bought another 4-12 cabinet, and it went on and on and on. We had more equipment than any other band in the country — it was ridiculous. I was using a Fender Precision on the first albums, and then I had an Epiphone and a Rickenbacker. Then I got rid of the Precision and got a Gretsch bass, which I could hardly play. I played it for ten minutes, and my hand got worn out. Then I had three Dan Electros in a row because you couldn't buy the strings small enough to vibrate properly. I only used the guitar until one of the original strings busted, and then I bought another one.

Why were you going through all those different basses?

I was trying to find something I could play. I felt comfortable with the Rickenbacker, but the neck warped, and it started sounding very strange, so I changed to a [Fender] Jazz Bass. The first proper bass setup I ever used, I had a big cabinet with curtain material on the front, and we used to carry our own equipment then, hire a van to take us to the concert. Because we thought it was too heavy, we used to hang the 18" speaker on a nail every time we'd go to a concert, and when I played a bottom E, it would fall off the nail. So we'd have to stop halfway through the number and hang it back on the nail. The first time I could ever play my E string properly was after I'd been playing bass for about three years. I'd never actually touched the E string; I was just playing on the first three strings. And the first
time I actually touched the E string was when I got my first 4-12 cabinet, and I was using an Epiphone semi-acoustic bass.

**You're now using a Thunderbird bass?**

Yes, I started getting into a bit of a rut using a Fender, and I found that we were playing bigger places, and it just didn't have enough bottom. I was using Hi-Watt amps with that Fender bass, and I was getting a nice trebly sound out of it, but there didn't seem to be any bottom in the band. The bass is very important, so I changed to Sunn Coliseums just before Who's Next (released in 1971, MCA, 2023). I had this Thunderbird bass for quite some time. In fact, at the time it was in a shop being sold for me because I just couldn't be bothered to use it. But they couldn't sell it; nobody wanted it, not even for a hundred pounds, which is like $250.00. So I said, “Oh, blast, I'll take it back.” I thought I might as well try it out on stage, and it was perfect, though it didn't have enough treble, and it still doesn't. It's very difficult getting enough treble; you have to turn the treble pickup right up. All the Thunderbirds are the same, they're not exactly boomy, but there's no presence there unless you use a very “presencey” amp like a Hi-Watt. Sunn hasn't got that much treble either. The Thunderbird I'm using now is a '64. It's in pretty good condition, but I'm going to start using my “Fenderbirds” on stage. Once I realized Thunderbird was the bass I was going to be playing for a few years, I panicked because they stopped making them. I went to Manny's [156 West 48th St., New York, NY 10036], and told them to buy up the whole stock, so consequently I got ten two-pickup Thunderbirds. Some of them had harmonic, microphonic pickups, so I couldn't use them, and with the rest, I just couldn't get the action as low as I wanted. So I used the pickups and hardware and bought some blonde Fender Precision necks and had some old style Thunderbird bodies built for the Fender necks to fit, and I've been using them on stage more than the Thunderbirds. I use them for recording as well. Blonde Precision necks are my favorites; those and Rickenbackers. Thunderbird necks tend to be too thin down at the bottom. I get my fingers all tangled up when I go to the first fret.

**You play with both your fingers and a pick?**

I play with my fingers most of the time. I don't like playing with a plectrum. I use it for stuff like “Boris The Spider” [Happy Jack, MCA, 2045] and “My Wife” [Who's Next], but I'd much rather play with my fingers. I can play faster with my fingers anyway; I use all four. When I first started playing I was using my thumb, and I thought this was a bit stupid, because I'd learned the piano, and the trumpet, and the French horn, and learned to use all my other fingers, so I might as well use those. I started using my first finger, then my second and, and then sort of brought all the others in. Only about two English bass players played with their fingers at that time. Everybody was using felt picks and thumbs. When I use a pick it's a Herco heavy tortoise-shell.

**What type of strings do you use?**

Rotosound. I have to use them — I designed the flaming things! Poor Greg Lake, Chris Squire [laughs]. I was looking for bass strings which vibrated properly, and I couldn't find a good E and A string on any set at all, except maybe for LaBella — they weren't too bad. But I wanted a round-wound string. I was approached by Rotosound, and they said they'd make some strings for me, exactly what I wanted. So I went to the factory, and they brought out a set of their round-wound and asked what I thought of them. The E and the A didn't vibrate properly, and the D and the G weren't heavy enough. So I sat there all afternoon while they made me strings with different cores, and different gauges, and different types of wire, and finally got through the E, A, D, G, and got a balanced set. And I said, “They're fine, make me as many sets as you can.” They started making them and said, “Look, we'll put your picture in the string sets, and we'll put these strings on the market.” So they issued them as “Swing Bass,” and they've been out ever since. A lot of people use them and get the same sound as me. I wanted to get a sound like a piano, which is why I wanted round-wound strings; I found that I could play chords and get a lot more sustain out of wire wound, so that's really why I set out to get the strings done. We did the same thing with strings for medium and short scale basses, though shorter scale basses don't seem to sound as good as medium or long; they don't have the same kind of harmonics happening. The Thunderbird is a long scale.

**What type of equipment do you use in the studio?**

If I need a very trebly sound I use a Sunn Coliseum with a 4-12 cabinet, but most of the time I find that we need a sort of bassy sound, so I use an 18” speaker with a Sunn Coliseum. On stage, I use two Sunn Coliseum stacks with Ox, and four with the Who. I use the straight Coliseum amp with a slave going through four 18’s, two in a big reflex cabinet, almost like a PA cabinet, and two in just straight compressed cabinets. Then I use two other amps, one for midrange, going through two 4-12’s and then an amp coming from the preamp out into the front of the next amp, with a lead cord which goes through two 3-12’s, which are like PA cabinets as well. This is so I can project the sound but still have some sound on stage. The 18’s are Vegas and the 12’s are all the normal Sunn speakers.

**What setting do you use on the amps?**

I more or less have to use the equip-
I’ve taken over a lot more lead work. Maybe if I’d been with another band I might be one of those very tasteful bassy players, a proper bass player, really. I’ve never truly considered myself a bass player. I think I’m a lead/rhythm bass player. Because the Who was a three-piece, and we tried to reconstruct the same sound as on record, I used to play most of the time with a plectrum and played rhythm figures on the bass. Then, when we started doing more complicated stuff with Tommy [MCA, 10005], I started playing lead figures. Occasionally before that, when the guitar went off, I’d have to take over a solo and turn everything full up and go into a solo.

Do you change your instruments in any way?

Not really. When I get hold of an instrument I put a set of Rotosound strings on it and set the action as low as possible. I prefer playing with a very low action, but that’s about all I do to it. I immediately take off the hand rest and the tailpiece cover, a thing of the distant past.

On large project pieces like Tommy and Quadrophenia [MCA-10004], do you try to get a particular sound for each track?

Yes. I think if you listen to my bass
parts on their own they sound unbelievably disjointed, but when you play them with the other instruments on the track, they fit. That’s what comes with playing with Keith Moon. I mean, if you play Keith’s drums alone, it sounds like an avalanche. But once you put it in with the track it’s okay. Keith must be the hardest drummer in the world to play with, mainly because he tries to hit nearly every drum at once. And if you try and fit in with one of his beats, you have to play like him, hoppity-hoppity, all over the place. It’s really difficult; he doesn’t play a hi-hat either, so you’ve got no sort of backbeat going. I just try and fit in the bass runs with what the drummers are doing on the tom toms and bass drum. I have to look at them all the time, so the audience sometimes gets forgotten. There are some shows I’ve done with the Who where I haven’t even looked at the audience once.

Is this why you don’t move, so you can concentrate on playing, or is it just part of the image?

Half-and-half, really. I’ve tried moving a couple times and really haven’t gotten on with it at all. I don’t think it helps with bass playing at all to move about. I think it may do with guitars, because guitarists can play a chord and let it sustain and then move or jump up in the air and play a chord while they’re up there and then come down again. But a bass player has single notes and things to play, and moving about means you have to play a simpler part.

*Do you compose on the bass?*

I used to; then I changed to composing on the piano. Now I’ve gone back to bass again. I do a bit of composing now on synthesizer as well.

*Have you found that playing piano, French horn, and trumpet has influenced your bass work?*

Only insofar as it’s enabled me to play with my fingers on the right hand. With piano I use both hands, with trumpet you loosen up your right hand, with French horn you loosen up the left hand, and it’s enabled my hands to move faster. But that’s as far as it goes.

*What is a synthesized bass [played on Whistle Rymes] and an 8-string bass on /Mad Dog/?*

A “synthesized bass” was just something I did on an ARP Soloist. It was just like a *doliing, doliiing*. The bass part was so simple I just couldn’t be bothered to play it on bass, so I played it on synthesizer. The 8-string bass is a Rickenbacker I have, which goes up to an *E* octave, *A* octave, *D* octave, and *G* octave. It sounds like a bass and a guitar playing in unison, which is nice.

*Have you ever tried playing a fretless*

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Epiphone Revoli for a year, and you sound like a landslide or something — a big sort of blurred boom — you really go to the opposite extreme when you change guitars. I changed to a Rickenbacker and used full treble all the time. We found that it cut to the back of the audience as well, so you could hear what the bass was playing, instead of a blur.

Do you practice?

No, but I’m in the studio so much I don’t really have to. There’s something very boring about practicing bass. You can sit down in a tune-up room before a show and get more achieved than you would sitting down for three hours practicing at home. There’s something very strange about standing on your own in a room and trying to play. You can practice scales and stuff like that, but I prefer not to know where I’m going on bass. I’d hate to know that I was going to slide up to an F#, and then play a G#, and then an A, and know exactly what notes I was going to play. I think it would hinder me. It hindered me in the beginning; I didn’t know what notes I was going to. I used to get very confused. I also had perfect pitch when I started playing the bass, but the Who used to tune a semitone above concert because the equipment sounded better, and my ears just used to go berserk. We tuned sharper because it made the strings tighter and made the speakers work better. It played havoc with my hearing; I could never get in tune because I knew it was out of tune.

Have you ever had any training on bass?

No, I sort of picked it up myself. Up until six years ago I couldn’t read bass lines — I never bothered. I used to guess more or less where octaves and notes were; I got along okay. I used to work it out at rehearsals and in the studio. I’d sort of block off my mind and play. But now I know where I’m going, roughly. I can read, but I wouldn’t dream of doing it unless we’re in the studio, and we’ve got a very difficult number to remember. For some of the stuff on Quadrophenia [MCA, 10004], I wrote down chord sheets, and I found it helped. You get halfway through a six-minute number, and you don’t know where it’s going. Suddenly you get a brain block, panic, and go “Ehh,” and you’ve made a mistake — then the whole band has to start again. So I just use chord sheets.

Do you think people mistake your bass for Pete’s guitar because the sounds are so similar?

Yes, it does tend to happen. A lot of
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people in England, when “My Generation” [My Generation, MCA, 2044] first came out, thought that Pete was playing the solo, the bass solo. And for months, when we were playing it on stage, that solo would come up, and they always used to look at Pete. And after the bass solo was over they used to clap for Pete. I use a very guitar-like sound, so if the audience don’t know about the instruments they’re obviously going to get confused. The offensive thing is they automatically think it’s Pete. Yet they can’t understand why Pete just has his hands on a chord he’s just strummed, and there’s a lead figure coming out, and they’re still looking at him and saying, “How’s he doing that?” I did that solo with a plectrum, because in those days our manager, who was also our producer, didn’t think that fingers recorded very well. But all the stuff I did on Quadrophenia and Who’s Next [MCA, 2023] was fingers, and all the stuff I do on my own albums is fingers.

Where does the substance of your phrases and riffs come from if you don’t really listen to that many other players?

A lot of it stems from classical music; I play a lot of octaves with thumb and first finger. I tend to always keep my hand in the shape of a chord in case I want to hit an octave or a fifth. I find it very hard to play simple rock and roll bass parts. I don’t really like them; they’re boring. They achieve what they’re expected to achieve. You can get a rock and roll beat going, but they’re not particularly exciting to play – no more than playing one and three in a waltz is. I’m trying to create things to do with the bass; I just had a 6-string bass designed for me, a long scale one. The top two strings are tunable to C and F in fourths, and it has a C string and a bottom B, just to widen the scale. This is made by the same people in England who made my Fenderbirds. They also made a hook bass for me, shaped like an executioner’s axe. I just try to do new things.