The John Entwistle story

by George Clinton

I suppose my first steps as a pro was when my grandfather used to stand me up on the tables at the local Working Man's Club and let me sing. I'd do Al Jolson stuff and things like that — and then I'd go round with a hat and buy crisps with the takings. My mother played piano and because of these musical tendencies I was showing she decided that I should be a pianist too, and so when I was seven I was forced to learn. I did this until I was about eleven then I had the urge to play something louder. Now, my father played the trumpet and I borrowed it for a few weeks and managed to convince my mother that I should be able to teach myself the piano at the same time as learning to play the trumpet at school.

I nearly became a violinist though: I went to the wrong room when they were sorting out the musicians for the school orchestra and had a violin stuck in my hand; but when the violin teacher wasn't looking I crept out and went into the trumpet room instead. But it turned out there were too many trumpets in the orchestra so I ended up playing the French horn. I started off with a little tenor horn with sellotape stuck all over it because it leaked. Finally, the school bought an old French horn, an old military one with valves. I played that for a while until I passed an audition to go into the Middlesex Schools Orchestra and it was suggested to my school that they buy me a new French horn, and this I played until I left school when I had to return it. I didn't actually own a French horn till I was about nineteen; they were always too expensive.

I started playing bass when I was about fourteen; nobody wanted trumpets in rock and roll bands, it was three guitars, drums and that was it.

The trumpet being a lead instrument I'd have thought you'd go on to lead guitar.

Somehow I couldn't get the hang of playing six strings; I could play lead figures on it but as far as chords were concerned, the ends of my fingers were too thick. I've got a couple of Gretschs now with the strings further apart which I can play chords on quite easy, but in those days with strange little solids and narrow necks...
think another was that everybody was grabbing hold of lead guitars; you know, from the skiffle era everybody had cello guitars, and there never seemed to be any bass players around, and as bass players were in demand I got into that. Also it was a comparatively new instrument so I made my own bass guitar. It was about five foot six and the frets only went two thirds of the way up the fingerboard because I took the scale from a Hofner bass so there was about nine inches of fingerboard with no frets. The wire came straight from the pickup to the amp and I had drum material stuck on the front with control knobs stuck all over it with glue to make it look more complicated. It looked revolting, and it only lasted a month and I ended up with a bass that had apparently been stolen. I bought the body for a fiver, made friends with someone who worked in a factory and he got all the parts for me and put it together as an English bass. I used that for about a year I suppose, and after that I managed to buy a Fender Precision.

What were you doing musically at that time?

When I first started off I was in a group with Pete Townsend and a couple of other fellows from school; and we were playing shadows numbers — Apache and that sort of business. After that when I started with Roger — and Pete was in too — we played in pubs. Finally we played dances in pubs. We had a rehearsal every week and learned which ones we thought were good out of the Top Ten. Then we realised that that would get us nowhere and we changed to rhythm and blues. Pete and I went to school together and before we formed a rock band he played banjo for a while in a band where I played the trumpet — a dixieland band. He got thrown out of that so he took up the guitar instead.

What happened with Pete at the Railway Hotel in Harrow?

Oh yes, that was a Rickenbacker. They’re very easy to break, actually. He had this bit where he put his fingers on a chord and smashed the head into the speaker so that it would crash the chord in and start feeding back. What happened was that he bought a Rickenbacker which was a hollow body guitar, and he had this Fender amp which he used to stand at ear-level. He couldn’t get rid of the feed back, and he found the only way he could play was by using the feed back, and he used to control it to get the note he wanted. Anyway, smashing the head into the speaker weakened the neck and then one night we were playing in the Railway Hotel which had this low ceiling and he had another bit in his act where he stuck the guitar straight up in the air and spun round to get tangled up in the lead — only on this occasion the head went through the ceiling and came off! With that Pete lost his temper and smashed it to smithereens with the mike stand. Unfortunately — or fortunately — our future manager, Kit Lambert, was in the audience and when he saw this he thought it was all part of the act and said to us to keep it in, so we did. It was a pretty expensive idea though for about six years; we went through thousands of guitars — we were doing five shows a week. Pete had about five Rickenbackers on HP at one time but the guitars never existed — smashed up. Then he went on to Stratocasters. So at least if he smashed three Stratocasters he might just about get two out the bits that were left; because they were just screwed together. He used Stratocasters for quite a time and then he went on to Gibsons.

How did you learn the bass?

I started playing along with Duane Eddy records. I went through a stage when I was undecided whether to be a bass player or lead guitarist and I had a cello guitar which I borrowed from Pete, with the two high strings taken off. I’d just play along with my record collection. Everyone was learning to play at the same time so it was quite easy to sit down and listen to Shadows records and dissect them and work out the parts, and after a while you learned how to put your own bass parts together. You’d
decide you didn’t like the part the bass player was doing so you’d change it.

Who did you listen to on bass in those days?

There were quite a few good bass players around — Jet Harris, Cliff Bennett; but mainly my influence was the American bassists, I liked the bass playing that went along with Sandy Nelson’s drumming — a clicky, trebly bass. But Duane Eddy was the real influence, to me he was a cross between a guitarist and a bass player.

When did you decide you didn’t just want to play bass lines?

I think it happened gradually, but the time it actually started changing was one night we were playing at a local pub and another bass player came up to me and said ‘how do you manage to play so fast with your thumb? I can’t move my thumb that fast.’ I said that it must be because I played the piano. But that got me thinking that if I can move my thumb that fast because of my piano playing then maybe I should use all the fingers. That started me off playing with the first two digits, then I gradually worked the others in. Finally, because our drummer wasn’t one for playing complicated stuff, and to make the band sound more proficient I developed a sort of slappy style. I’d slap the bass instead of the drum beat and work it into the finger style. There weren’t that many bass players playing with the fingers in those days — it was either plectrum or thumb.

After a while we started playing in bigger places and the bass just wasn’t coming through. I was using a very boomy old Rivoli bass. I changed to a Rickenbacker which was a little bit better but still using a very boomy sound. Our manager suggested that I try and cut through by putting more treble on, so I went to the extreme and turned it up really trebly and found it worked. There I was, imitating Duane Eddy on the stage and it was a much louder, raspy sound. And then I had the idea of using two amplifiers, so I had one very boomy and the other very trebly to get the best of both worlds.

And it went on from there. I ended up with two amps and two cabinets, so Pete had to get two amps and two cabinets. Then I decided I should have more speakers so I had two amps and four speakers. Then Pete got the same, and we went on building; I suppose that way we really invented heavy rock. In a way it was my fault because I was too loud so the rest of the band had to keep up with me.

And your developing technique allowed your musicality to range?

Yes, and also, there were just two guitars so there was a lot of room for me to mess around. And I had to fulfil two jobs, as a rhythm guitarist and a bass player, and as Pete was basically a rhythm style lead I worked in quite a few lead figures in the bass side too. We learnt to play together with the two melodic instruments and drums and gradually by the use of amplifiers our style of playing built up a huge wall of sound that sounded like far more than two musicians.

What direction is your style taking now?

It’s getting more towards playing lead figures and at some point actually taking over the solos from Pete — Pete goes back to playing chords and I’m playing the lead. We try and arrange between us when it’s going to be and I can usually tell when he’s tired or hasn’t any ideas for a solo and I gradually take over.

You know the old thing about tenors playing like altos, and altos playing like soprano — do you find you want to get the high notes when you’re playing solos?

No, I tend to skillet between the two. I look upon the bass as being a total compass. I’m lucky with these new Alembic basses. I’ve got a two octave range on each string — on the G string you can go to high G instead of E flat which you get on most basses. The company told me that they would stick thirty-three frets on it if I want, but I
can't imagine playing that high on the bass—you'd need a huge cutaway and there wouldn't be much body left.

*Is playing bass with the Who an easy role?*

In a way it's very difficult playing bass with a band like the Who. You're confined. It's okay bass players making a solo album featuring bass and building everything around it, but that can never happen in a band—unless you're playing in unison with the solo instruments which is immediately jazz. You can go into the studio and play an unbelievably fast bass line but it doesn't necessarily fit the song. You can't have a long melody line all over the place in the background, so it's confining in that way.

**What is it like playing with Keith Moon?**

Keith features himself—he plays a solo all the way through and you can play the song along with him. There are advantages and disadvantages. You can really play a very open sort of rhythm because he won't leave any gaps, but on the other hand the way he plays leaves you a lot of openings to play any figure you want because whatever you play it's going to fit in with his drumming because he's hitting them all at once. I've never heard of another bass player playing with him properly.

*People have compared Stanley Clarke's style to yours just because he plays fast but actually you're a melodic player and he's bass.*

He's definitely a bass player. He plays a string bass as well which I can't even touch. He'll explore every aspect of the chord whereas I'll only take what I want out of it. But Stanley's melodic as well. It's what I was saying about unison playing. In a jazz style you can have fast unison riffs going—like the sax and organ—and the bass will imitate it, which is fine in that style. I prefer to go for more sustained notes, more trebly, raspy sound, using a kind of piano sound—like a guitar with a sustain on it. I prefer my...
playing to be emotional rather than technical. It helps, of course, to have the technical ability to play fast but I won't play a line just because it's complicated and blows a few people's minds. If it fits the song I'll play it but it's playing within the confines of a straight band.

I suppose I'd like to do a solo album which has a couple of bass instrumentals on it where I could really let myself go, but since I've started using the Alembic where the extra treble and the facility to get up high means that I can take more solos, I've finally fulfilled my role in the Who. You see, I wasn't really playing what I wanted to play. I was using a Thunderbird bass which was very difficult to get any top from. To do this I had to run one amp into the back of another and they were so loud that I could only play with that sound for maybe two songs. With the Alembic I can play like it all the way through, varying the volumes.

Actually, I've had two major changes. Before I had the Thunderbird I used to use an extremely trebly sound and play lead figures, and I was OK with a Precision bass. Then we started playing stadiums and huge places that held up to 70000 people and the sound just didn't carry — it sounded like a little click at the back of the audience. So I changed the whole equipment and the basses to the Thunderbird. In a way it was an advance for me because I've been in a rut ever since Tommy which was the last album where I used a Precision. I'd work out a series of lines that flowed into each other with the twang of the trebly sound and I'd find myself drifting into that every night, unless it was a bit of free form. So from there my whole style changed for about five years until recently when I've had another change onto the Alembics — the best change I ever did.

How do you pluck the strings now?

In different ways. Sometimes I pull the strings up and just let them go — like a bow string. Other times I'll pluck them very cleanly, or just tap with the tips
of my fingers.

What do you do when you want to play very fast?

I think I tap. A lot of bass players hit the strings with the inside of their thumb now. That usually only works on tapewound strings and I don't use them.

What about your strings —

John Entwistle strings?

Well, back in the early days when I first started playing Precision and Rickenbacker Rotosound sent me a couple of sets of strings and I didn't like them; the D and G were fine but E and A were too thin and didn't vibrate well enough for me. You couldn't get a clear note out of them. So later I accepted their invitation to go to the factory and I took a couple of basses with me and they just made me sets of wire-wound strings until I told them they were getting onto the right track, and eventually we ended up with a set of strings that sounded like a piano and exactly how I wanted.

I knew what I wanted because I had had a Danish bass that had extremely thin wire-wound strings on and sounded just like a piano. And the thing was that once the strings on it broke you couldn't buy more and so I bought three of those guitars just for the strings. But they were so thin they kept on snapping. But once the last set bursted I decided I couldn't keep on buying the basses — they only lasted a week each. But I played three weeks on those basses and they sounded amazing — I'd built up a whole way of playing with them. I had to scrap the whole thing and go back to La Bella tape wound again — until I got the offer from Rotosound. And as I said they made me exactly what I wanted and churned me off thirty sets and later phoned up and said do you mind if we put them on the market?

How long do they last?

One show, I get my particular strings un-polished from the factory, so they're even more twangy. I'll change them every couple of days for rehearsing or recording but for a show they've really got to be... when you run your fingers across them they sort of hiss, which is the way I like them to sound. They need stretching to hell before you go on stage though. I have to stretch them for about twenty minutes — I wouldn't dare go on stage and play them without; they'd go down four tones. You hold the string and push with your thumb so that you bend the string, or pull upwards. With the E string you tune it then pull it with your hand and it'll go right down about five tones just by pulling it once, so you have to keep on pulling it. I usually do it with a strobotuner. I just pull it and pull it until it stays on the same note and if it stays on the same note after two more pulls it's more or less stretched. Then it's left until just before the show and stretched again. I have to do that to two basses every show and if I decide to use the eight string I have three to do.

How far has your musical education helped?

It was a nuisance when I first started playing bass. I had to try and forget it all because it didn't seem to help. I had perfect pitch when I first joined the Who. That came from learning the French horn; the first part of the lesson was usually taken up with me having to sing F sharps, C sharps, or B flats or whatever. He'd tell me to sing a note and if I didn't get it right then I'd have to practice singing that note till I actually got the note in my head. He would come up to me any time and say sing an F sharp and I'd sing it in perfect pitch. But when I joined the Who they'd decided that to make their guitar strings vibrate better they'd tune up half a semitone up from concert. And my pitch went to hell because it was never the same and every day there was me tuning up my G string and knowing that it was a G sharp or G nearly sharp. It drove me nuts — until I finally lost my perfect pitch.

I decided that when I played bass that I wouldn't learn the notes. I know what notes I'm playing, obviously, but I try to forget what I'm playing at the time. I don't like to know that I'm going to play a whole set of
semidemi quavers leading up to G from B flat. I want to know what I'm starting on but I don't want to know the notes in between because that would get in the way. And you can only think about notes at certain speeds. You can play it by ear a lot faster than by music—or at least I can. I knew to a certain extent where all the notes were on the fingerboard but I didn't like knowing, I only learnt the important ones—the lower, sort of root ones—the E, G sharp. And for the first five years I never learnt where the octaves were for those notes, I preferred to sort of feel it, to slide up to it. It's got to be in the ear; Pete and I don't sit down and work out complicated unisons. I've got Stanley Clarke's albums and Return to Forever and I got a couple of things by other bass players. They're all extremely good players but I don't particularly like sitting and listening to them because it's bass playing that I've always tried to stay away from. I try to keep up with everyone's style to see if I can imitate it—just to make sure that I can do it. I'm not a great fan of jazz; I've got absolutely no jazz records except maybe ones by a bass player and then it's only something to check out whether I can play it. I like Larry Graham. His songs are all centred round the bass, but they're much more funk than jazz. He really plays a drive rhythm, it's fantastic. I think he's got a lot more guts than Stanley Clarke.

What made you start your guitar collection?

When I first bought the Precision in 1959. Not too many people knew about amps and speakers in those days and I had two 15 inch speakers and a little amplifier and it always sounded distorted. We knew nothing about mis-matching—you bought an amp, and it was all self-contained and that was it. You got a Vox AC30 and you had two 12 inch speakers and an amplifier and no one knew what made anything work—if a fuse went you wrapped it in silver paper and stuck it back in. . . blow the whole thing up. After that I had an open backed cabinet with an 18 inch speaker, and because the rest of the group used to carry it because it was too heavy, we made it so that the speaker would hang on a six inch nail and you unhooked it when you carried the cabinet. That sounded diabolical so I got the closed cabinets, two double 15s and because of the distortion I was getting from everyone said 'When I plug my lead guitar into it it doesn't distort; it must be the bass—get rid of that bass.' So I got rid of it and got an Epiphone Rivoli—which was my first step backwards. It was a big boomy semi-acoustic, and after I'd bought and sold the other one I realised it was not the guitar but the speakers that were lousy. I think I'd blown one of them and it was just buzzing. So I was saddled with an Epiphone Rivoli. I eventually sold that and bought a Rickenbacker, and then the neck of that warped so I sold that and bought a Gretsch which was like a tree trunk. And then the three Danelectro I sold them and bought a Jazz Bass which I used for a couple of years while we made our early singles, and finally went to the Precision. I had that until the Who's Next Album.

I found that with all the guitars I'd sold people were saying 'Have you still got that fantastic Rickenbacker?' And I'd say 'sold it.' 'Still got that Precision?''sold it.' I ended up with £50 for each of those guitars and I might have well have kept them. So I never sold another bass unless I didn't like it. I bought most kinds of basses to see what they sounded like, but I never traced the old ones.

What about the brass collection?

I'd always had a trumpet from when I'd been at school. I'd part exchanged it for a better one all the time. Then I bought a French horn and gradually during the Who's career I've needed other instruments like euphoniums and tenor horns and valve trombones to actually play the brass sections on the Who's albums. I bought a lot of stuff from Manny's Music Store in New York. They seemed to have anything I wanted so I bought it. I've got about forty now, from piccolo trumpet and cornet down to double B flat tuba. I've got about ten trumpets—C trumpets, D trumpets, several Bflat trumps. I've always found that it helps me to have a duplicate. If I'm doing a recording session all my brass stuff stays there and I haven't any brass at home to play with; and if I am doing a brass section in Gloucestershire and I left it all there to come here then I haven't got it here. So now I've got more or less two of everything except the tuba and I leave one at each house.

Do you write your brass parts?

I don't bother to write the note values down, I know that in my head anyway. I'll start off with a four note chord and say, take the lower notes with a valve trombone or bass trumpet and take the high notes with trumpet and see what it needs after that—melody lines or high parts. I write them out in the treble clef.

How many brass do you write for?

Usually about sixteen. The Finale of Tommy was a thirty-two piece brass section and I played it all as well. I did it all in block chords or solo horn figures. I don't write counterpoint or anything like that. I think our style of rock and roll is more suited to block chords—or low trombone part interspersed with high trumpet. The whole instrumentation was 8 trombones, 8 trumpets, a couple of other figures that were done by flugelhorn and melophonium and I just keep on over-dubbing them. It took seven hours to do the Finale. It was mixed down quite a bit, but the impact was still there—people knew there was a huge brass section behind it. Actually you can hear it more in the cinema than you can on the record—the mix that went along with the film was more brass-orientated.

Do you ever practice those instruments?

I just use what I know about, really. If I want a very high trumpet part I just slow down the track, use a varispeed—cheat.

Do you think symphonic rock works?

It depends whether the orchestral players are really interested in what they're doing. I suppose a lot of string sections I've used have been great and they've really got into it. It's horrible when you get a snobbish attitude. I remember in the old days when we used to play in pubs; where you'd get a straight dance band. We'd do the interval—a bit of rock and roll and then the straight dance band again. I knew all about straight bands because I used to play in one when I was twelve in an outside evening suit playing Calvino Moon, 2nd trumpet. Anyway, they'd sit down and it would be an 8 piece band and they'd get all the numbers lined up and play it strictly by music. And then we'd come on trying to improvise. I remember one of them saying to Keith Moon 'What do you need a bloody great kit like that for?' The fellow had a 2 inch snare drum and a bass drum that covered him up.

What was Keith's reaction?

Told him to piss off, I think; he didn't used to be so tactful in those days. Also we had to show our union cards before they let us set up.

The union in those days was built around the dance bands.

Still is; it's nothing to do with the rock and roll business at all. I think the Union tends to think of its semi-professional musicians rather than its professionals. Professional musicians aren't very pleased with them. The last Top of the Pops we did about a couple of years ago was a fiasco because the Top of the Pops orchestra was given a month's notice and is supposed to be given a year's. The Union clamped down on Top of the Pops and said 'right, everyone who appears on Top of the Pops has got to go into the studio and re-record it if they want to use a backing track.' So, we, because we wanted to do our new single, had to go into the studio again and spend seven hours re-recording the backing track—a sixteen piece brass section—which I was playing. And it costs about five hundred quid to do Top of the Pops; and they give you about thirty quid—union rate—for playing.
How do you find the difference in recording studios abroad and in England?

The only trouble with England is that the tax laws to do with the recording are just crazy; they’re actually putting English studios out of business. Say a group makes a record in England; they make it in an English studio which is money for England; and say the group record an album which is very successful in the States. Now, that money coming in from abroad from the sales of the record has to be paid at the English rate; you’re not allowed to bring in the 25% tax free — you’ve got to pay 83% on the lot. Whereas if you record it in France or Germany or anywhere else — you can bring in 25% royalties tax free. So if you’ve got a huge hit record in the States you’re getting 38% or thereabouts as opposed to 17%. So obviously people are recording outside of England. And that’s what is wrecking the studios. But the English studios are the best in the world, I reckon.

How do you see the future of the bass guitar?

I’d like to think that I’ve done my bit to make it more of a lead instrument. I’m sure I was the first bass player to play lead figures on a bass — as far as the rock business is concerned; and I’ve tried to keep doing it and pushing it.

How do you see your own career — still with the Who?

I don’t really know. I’ve done quite a few solo albums, although not for some time. I’ll do another towards the end of this year. But the part of this business that pleases me most is playing on stage and I think that if the Who don’t tour enough for me I’ll probably get a band together with other name musicians and do a couple of tours and an album. I like doing session work as well so I might take a few sessions. I just want to keep playing that’s all; I don’t want to be a rich pop star that sits back and does nothing.

John Entwistle’s guitar collection of 98 pieces to date includes 20 electric guitars (mostly Gretsch, Eddy Cochran being favourite); 23 Precision basses from the year of introduction (1951) until CBS took over in 1965, with the exception of models for 1961 and 1963 (Jazz Basses for these years mollify). The remainder of the collection is mostly Gibson — Thunderbirds and original EB1 and EBOs; plus 8 Alembic basses (5 standard models and 3 custom). The electrics of the Alembics consist of two pairs of volume and tone controls for bass and treble with a three way toggle switch between each pair. The switches connect to capacitors which, when operated cause different levels of frequency boost. In addition John has installed a Master Volume and Tone control with its own 3-way toggle switch for pre-set pickup selection. A dummy pickup is mounted between the 2 standard Alembic pickups producing no signal but balancing the frequency of the 4 strings. These can be further balanced by the 4 screw adjustment facility on the back of the instrument.