

Tony Levin March 3, 2002 Part I

There is a photo of Tony Levin on the back of his book *Beyond the Bass Clef*. It's a black and white portrait, he's wearing a black leather jacket, his arms are folded in front of him cradling a black headless, fretless bass. All you can see, all that stands out against the black is his head, his hands and the strings on the bass. Everything else hides in shadow.

Where words fail to describe Levin's sound or his style or the niche he has carved for himself as one of the most in demand bass players of all time, this photo serves to define Tony as a musician and the role he has crafted for himself in the music industry.

Like the photo, Tony's playing isn't flashy. The way the portrait plays with light and shadow to create a partial image of the man is the way his bass parts blend with whomever he happens to be playing with, supporting, coloring, shaping, stepping to the fore only when it's absolutely right.

Tony's resume reads like a Who's Who of late 20th century popular music. Perhaps he has been so successful because he is absolutely at home standing in the shadows offering the invisible yet rock solid foundation that good bass playing, really good bass playing provides. It's not that Tony knows his gig, providing that support is Tony's gig.

He's been a fixture in music industry since the late '60s and shows no signs of slowing down. He has played Stick almost as long as The Stick has been publicly available. It's safe to say that Tony Levin has introduced more people to The Stick than anyone else. I hasten to add that he has done so only because The Stick was the absolute right instrument for each song he used (and uses) it on. I don't think Tony Levin would have used it if was not.

Tony Levin is foremost a bass player. Regardless of the instrument—bass, Stick, NS upright, cello—Levin gravitates towards the low end. But he's also a photographer, painter, writer, cyclist, record label owner, creator of Funk Fingers, Web site creator and maintainer, the list goes on. And looking at it from the outside, it seems like he approaches each creative task with the same sense of rightness and appropriateness that make his big, fat bass grooves so irresistible.

I caught up with Tony the day after rehearsals for the Tony Levin Band tour in support of his new solo CD *Pieces of the Sun* (yes, he leads his own band too) finished and just before he jetted off to Japan for a one-show only engagement with singer Robbie Dupree.

Jim Reilly: Rehearsals have wrapped up for the tour?

Tony Levin: Yea, we only had four days to rehearse, which of course wasn't enough, but we'll have to make due. We will have a couple of days, or at least a day, to remind ourselves before the tour starts.

In between now and then all the guys are going in different directions to do different projects, but we'll also each be practicing our parts. There's some pretty tough stuff technically to play in the show.

JR: How did it come together after the four days?

TL: I wish I could say it's totally ready to play, but it isn't (laughs). Especially my parts. I have a lot of practicing to do, especially on The Stick. I did a lot of lead playing on this album, which I don't normally do. In the studio, you can punch in and you can overdub but doing it live is a whole different thing. So, I have a lot of practicing to do and I will do it!

JR: How do the live versions differ from the studio recordings?

TL: That's a good question. It varies with the piece. The most obvious difference is in a piece called Apollo where the California Guitar Trio played the middle section by themselves. I had them overdub in Texas actually, they weren't even in the same state as the rest of the band.

Live, Jerry Marotta and I will pick up acoustic guitars and we'll do that section in quite a different way. We'll extend it and there will be a little soloing. Naturally we'll have to leave a little space afterwards because we can't suddenly enter with our electric instruments and with the drums. So there has to be some clever rearranging of the piece.

Frankly, that's the kind of stuff I like. I like when a piece has a life of its own and gets a little bit different on the road than it is on the record.

There're other pieces that have huge differences live too. On the piece Tequila Jerry not only plays drums but a sax solo. We tried it a few times with him playing both drums and sax and that wasn't so hot. We're very fortunate that our merchandise guy and monitor man, his name is Doug Stringer, is also quite a good drummer. Doug's going to come over and play drums on that piece.

There are some pieces like Ever the Sun Will Rise, where there are multiple keyboard parts and even though Larry Fast could perform them live, he wouldn't be playing them with his fingers. He would be triggering them. He has the technical apparatus to trigger things. But I prefer to have everything played live so Jesse (Gress) will play some of those parts on guitar that were actually background keyboard parts.

JR: When you were putting the album together did you come in with parts written out for the band or did you put it together in the studio?

TL: It varied a little depending on pieces. By and large the album was composed. I didn't actually write anything down but I recorded the pieces in my home studio and I did all the parts. Not the drum parts, just a real simple drum machine or click. But I played the guitar parts and the keyboard parts and I especially played the Stick and bass parts.

Then I played that for the guys and said, “Here’s the departure point. You play what you want but this is what I had in mind.”

Some of the parts changed, some of them stayed exactly the same. I know with the keyboard parts Larry had the option of adding to it or replaying it or even using the MIDI of what I had done and just putting his unique sonic stamp on it.

So, it was a combination. A lot of the pieces are that way. You can kind of tell the composed pieces because they have a lot of sections and a lot of complex harmony.

But then I really wanted to jam with the guys in the hopes that some songs would come out of that. So, at the end of a few days in the studio, even though we were pretty tired, we would just jam and come up with new ideas. A few of those turned into songs.

The piece called Geronimo and the piece called Blue Nude Reclining, started as jams. I wrote a melody for them and did some overdubbing and re-recording and made them into pieces.

So, there is a little bit of variety.

There are also two pieces that existed before: Peter Gabriel’s Dog One and Synergy’s, Larry Fast’s, Phobos. I just played the guys the old tapes and said this is what we’re going to do and we learned it.

JR: There’re some sort of ‘hints of the past’ there, tune wise and sonic wise.

TL: Yea, I very consciously wanted to tie, to make a connection with our history in progressive rock and tie that into modern rock music.

JR: Was that an inevitable result of getting this particular cast of characters together?

TL: My last album was more a product of just my own head and what I wanted to do at the time. This time I’m really trying to stretch back and connect with this early stuff—particularly the sound of Jerry’s drumming and Larry Fast’s synth playing and of my Stick playing. It’s so identifiable on the early Peter Gabriel stuff. To me it doesn’t sound dated and old, it’s a valid thing. I thought it would be nice to refer back to some of that old material as I recorded new material.

JR: The Stick does play a prominent role on the new disc.

TL: That’s another difference. On my last album, Waters of Eden, I didn’t play Stick at all. I wanted to feature fretless bass, have a lot of melodic playing in the bass, kind of mellow stuff. I did play a few different basses, especially the upright with a bow. But on this one I wanted to go back to the Stick playing that I really love doing and I wanted to do a little more cello playing.

JR: The cello is a nice addition. How long has that been going on for?

TL: It started in '94 or '95 when we were rehearsing with the reformed King Crimson. Ned Steinberger brought this instrument by our rehearsal, which was a brand new electric upright that Ned had designed to be played both plucked and bowed. It being Crimson, I immediately reached for the bow and the fuzz tones and started getting feedback on it. I really found it very useful in that incarnation of Crimson.

In the years since then he's made a cello, which is a very similar instrument, just a little smaller, it goes higher and the tuning is different. I started playing that on my last tour and used it a little bit in the recording of this one. It sounds very much like—it sounds actually exactly like—the NS Electric Upright, only it goes higher.

JR: Is there a conscious decision to make a tune a Stick tune or a bass tune or a cello tune?

TL: It varies. On the last album, I wrote some of the pieces on the fretless. I wrote a melody and then I imagined the chords and started from that. This one almost all the compositions were from my head, only later would I decide the bass instrument. In fact, sometimes the bass instrument was the last thing I would decide because, as you can imagine, I was so preoccupied with, "What is the synth going to do, what is the guitar going to do, who's going to have the melody," and I knew I could cover the bass part latter.

There are a few exceptions, there are a few pieces that came to me from the Stick part. I think you can tell. Like a few sections in Ever the Sun Will Rise break down to just Stick and drums. That particular part is very much like the piece I Don't Remember from the old Peter Gabriel records. So, I just said, "O.k. here I'll play that Stick part and Jerry will play Jerry's drumming and then I'll build on it from there.

JR: How does it differ being the headliner, being the guy fronting the band?

TL: The guy fronting the band is pretty darned different. I can't say that I prefer it but it's o.k. To begin with, I'm the kind of guy who's at heart very much a bass player and I'm happy as long as I'm playing the bass. I don't really care if I'm in the front or if I'm in the back or my name is even used. I just want to be the bass player, so I'm very happy backing people up.

I'm also happy being in those kind of collaborative things like King Crimson and Bozzio, Levin, Stevens and Liquid Tension Experiment and Bruford/Levin Upper Extremities, I've done a lot of equal-part-collaborative bands. And I'm happy with that.

When you're the guy whose name is on the record, you're the one who makes a lot of the decisions aside from just the playing. The playing is kind of the same but you make a lot of decisions, which is an o.k. thing. It's kind of nice having the show and the tone of the album and the tone of the tour being the way I prefer it to be.

Along with it there is a lot of pressure and a lot more work to do. So in the end it's all kind of equal to me. I know it's a lot more work when I'm taking my own band out then if I'm just playing bass with somebody else. But it's fun.

One good example that comes to mind now that I'm putting together the live show and booking the tour is that in King Crimson we have a band approach to everything. The way that the show is, is determined by the nature of King Crimson, which is o.k. I do have some say in it but to a large degree it's a band thing. This is my show and I can put together the set list. I like a live show to have a few different elements in it. I like a show to have new music but I also like to give the audience something familiar, which they've heard before. I like to challenge them with something that may be brand-new, but I also like to give them some treats, something that's really accessible and easy and fun.

To me an ideal set will combine all those things. For example, on this tour I'll be doing the new music from Pieces of the Sun but I'll do so Gabriel stuff, I'll do some King Crimson—I'm sure we'll do Elephant Talk and maybe even Sleepless. We'll vary it each night so even people who come to a few shows will hear different things.

I like doing things like that. Some nights we'll even throw in an old Genesis song called Back in New York City, which Larry, Jerry and I used to play with Peter Gabriel.

Those are things that make the show a comfortable show for me. Not that there's anything wrong with King Crimson shows but it's the nature of the band not to give the audience a treat and do some old classics. You're always challenging and pushing them to try and accept new stuff, and that's fine.

JR: Like you say, that's the nature of the band.

TL: It is. And I find that when it's my thing I can do other things. I can go out right after the show and I can greet people and sign CDs and be friendly, which is not appropriate in King Crimson.

It is kind of fun being able to make those kinds of decisions.

JR: Let's talk about Papa Bear Records. How did that come about? What prompted you start your own record label?

TL: After a lot of years of playing on people's records and touring, I was thinking about why I hadn't made a solo record or started even thinking about it. I was talking to a good friend of mine, a singer named Robbie Dupree, and he pointed out that I was always on the road and in what little time I had at home, the last thing I was going to do was devote it to more music time. And of course, he was correct. Sometimes you need your friends to point out obvious things to you.

Robbie actually said to me, “Why don’t you take a portable tape recorder on the road and make an album while you’re out on the road?”

That little simple sentence grew into a whole project where I took a digital tape recorder, at the time an ADAT was new thing, around the world on my tours with Peter Gabriel and I recorded duets and trios with world musicians, by that I mean non-US guys, on interesting instruments. I just gradually did that around the world.

When I had it musically the way I wanted, I considered what it would be like to take that to a record company, and I just didn’t want to put myself through that.

(Note: The album is World Diary)

TL: It’s not the most accessible album, it’s mostly duets and trios and mostly instrumentals. Since I started out musically exactly where I wanted to be, I thought I would rather not compromise at that point. They were going to say, “Why don’t you have Peter Gabriel sing on a song?” Or something like that and I didn’t really do it to make money because I was working as bass player the whole time, so I thought, “I’ll just put it out myself.”

It was just when I was starting a Web site, so I began to sell it on the site. At that time, I couldn’t even take credit cards for orders. I had a few offers to distribute the record, the Papa Bear Records, to stores but I felt that the business of actually arranging for distribution of records is just too much business. It would take me too far away from the music, which I really want to be my focus.

It’s enough of a distraction having my own record label and having to do all of the stuff for the release myself. I thought distribution would just be too much and I have stopped at that.

I very much enjoyed getting into the art part of it. I designed the packaging of my first three releases and did my own art work on them. I found that to be really satisfying. I like the feeling that the person buying the CD is actually getting artwork done by the artist and the package was designed by him. They’re getting the whole shot. Even if it’s not as good as it might be if parts were done by different people, they’re getting the full shot of what that particular project is about. I really like that.

That especially came into play when I did the second album, From the Caves of the Iron Mountain. We recorded it inside a cave, underground. I took elaborate pictures and hand colored the pictures of the cave. I even made the inner booklet. It opens vertically and gets darker as you go down, like the cave. I really went for the cave vibe on that.

(Laughs)

I liked that there was no record company to ask permission for that because frankly—and I understand, being a small record company—because of the finances, record companies don’t like to change anything about their packaging plan. They don’t want a different

number of pages in the booklet or a different shape because that costs them money and takes them away from their normal schedule. I was lucky I was able to do it the way I wanted.

I still very much treasure having Papa Bear Records. Sales are modest but, as I said before, I really have my income from other places so I really treasure having the vehicle for whatever I want to release. I'm sure I'll continue to do that throughout my career.

JR: Do you think something like a Papa Bear Records could exist without the Internet?

TL: Absolutely not. It wouldn't exist at all. Thank goodness for the Internet.

Another thing, since we're on that subject, because I was one of the early guys on the Internet, I set up the site very much with that early ethic of: "It's not really to sell things." Gradually the site changed to tonylevin.com, originally it was papabear.com, because I found that people were actually more interested in my road diaries and photos than they were in seeing the Papa Bear products. Which is the way it should be. So, I really revised the site so what it is about is a look behind the scenes of the rock world and somewhere off on the side you can go and buy the record if you want. There are no pop up windows trying to sell things, there are no rented spaces for other things.

Like anyone who used the internet in the beginning, it's a treasured thing to have sites that are about the content, not about trying to sell things and also aren't about trying to have the newest flashy graphics and fancy stuff that will seem dated in a year. So, my site has continued to be very content oriented.

JR: You really have embraced the Internet; you've made your public life very accessible.

TL: Thanks. I think, like anyone, I have the lines that I draw but because I'm not super-famous I can draw the line of closeness or separation from fans in a different place. I wouldn't call it even fans, but the public who really like the music that I make and the people I play with. I can draw the line a little closer and a little friendlier to them than someone who is more famous.

I think that the Internet enables you to be a little bit closer to the people who follow you and like your music. There can be a couple of degrees less separation but you still have that distance that you need. For example, I can't answer every e-mail from anybody who goes to tonylevin.com but I can kind of question them about things, people can send e-mail and some of them go through to me so there is some communication.

JR: Let's talk about The Stick for a little bit. It was '76 when you first got The Stick?

TL: I'm not sure, that sounds right. I know I brought it to Peter Gabriel's first album, which was made in '76 so I certainly had it in '76.

JR: What was the first album you recorded Stick on?

TL: That's a good question. I know the artist, he's an old friend of mine, Gap Mangione. I was doing his second album. It was brand new, in fact I had got The Stick only a day or two before that. It shows you what a kind guy he is that he let me take out this instrument that I could only play very simple parts on. But I actually did play it on a track on Gap's record.

I took it to Peter Gabriel's first recording and the producer (Bob Ezrin) took one look at it and said, "Put that thing away."

Subsequent to that I took it on tour with Peter and played it on one piece, a relatively simple piece so I could start to get used to playing it on stage. In those days, this was the very early Stick, the open strings rung a little bit more and the pickup on the instrument was much more microphonic then it is now. The pickups have changed a great deal through the years. Even the cord going to the amp was microphonic so I had a lot of trouble keeping from feeding back on stage, something you would never have trouble with now.

So, all that took some work. I think the piece was called Moribund of the Burgermeister off Peter's first album. Even though the album was bass, I always played that piece with Stick.

JR: And it was on Peter's second album fairly prominently?

TL: Yea, by then I was under way with it. I treasured from the beginning the way it has a different kind of bass sound. The attack and just the nature of the different tunings made it sound, in a subtle way, different than a bass. I thought, "This is something that is really appropriate for Peter Gabriel or some kind of alternative music."

Later, it's ironic that I played on so many albums that I began to be called for playing it on regular music, not just alternative and it's fine for that.

JR: What were some other initial reactions to The Stick back in the early days?

TL: Kind of the same. Producers were pretty scared by it. Engineers liked it because it has a good, clean sound. Especially down low it's cleaner than a bass, clearer. But producers sometimes just aren't ready for something that looks really different and sounds a little different. But some did and gosh knows how many albums over the years I used it on.

Here's a good example, ironically the same producer (Ezrin) many years later, when I was playing on Pink Floyd's Momentary Lapse of Reason specifically asked me to bring The Stick and play it.

END OF PART I

Stay tuned for part II. Some highlights? We talk about the Discipline album and its place in Stick/progressive rock history. Find out who has inspired Tony in the past, who he's listening to now and who is at the top Tony Levin's 'Still Want to Play With' list. And discover what he really thinks about loud, pounding music as he works out.