

Last Chicken in the Shop

In 1976 I auditioned for and was invited to join a newly formed John Cale Band. The lineup included me on bass, Bob Kulick on guitar, Joe Stefko on drums, and Dave LeBolt on keyboards. I didn't know much about John except that he was in the legendary Velvet Underground. It was an exciting time, as this was going to be my first professional concert tour, something I dreamed about since I started playing. I was going to tour Europe!

John's manager at the time was Jane Friedman. She was the head of a PR firm called The Wartoke Concern and also managed Patti Smith and Television. The offer that was made to me was to go to Europe for two or three weeks at a salary of \$100.00 per week. Yes, you heard it right. The reasoning behind this, Jane said, was that because John was no longer on Island Records, there was no tour support and the tour had to fund itself. I was 22 and wide-eyed. I enthusiastically agreed to the salary.

I went on a plane (for the second time in my life) and landed in Rotterdam, Holland for the first gig. The tour went well and I felt like a professional musician for the first time. When we got back, there was an offer from Jane to continue working with John in the U.S. There were some changes to the band. Bob Kulick was replaced by Richie Fliegler, and Dave LeBolt was replaced by Bruce Brody. The remuneration for this work was to be even less than Europe. The offer was no salary, only \$5.00 per diem. Yes, a total of \$35.00 per week! Jane assuaged my misgivings by saying that if this worked out, this would become the new John Cale band and there would likely be a new record deal, the rewards of which would make up for any sacrifices that we'd have to make in the short term. She referred to this endeavor as a "labor of love." Now, this was the mid-seventies—heady times in music. New York was exploding with the new wave and punk scene, with CBGB and Max's Kansas City as ground zero. We played up and down the East and West Coasts with repeated performances at CBGB. There were crowds there like I have never seen since, with hundreds of people stuffed into the club and scores more waiting outside to get in. There would be guest musicians sitting in with us, like Lou Reed, David Byrne and Ray Manzarek. In New York we would be playing shows with The Talking Heads, Blondie, Patti Smith, and Television. In LA we opened up for Cheap Trick at their first record release show at the Starwood club. In Topanga Canyon the legendary Lowell George sat in with us. We were, by all appearances, doing very, very well. We started working on new songs and rehearsing regularly. I had a feeling that the often talked about but elusive record deal was just around the corner.

In the middle of all this activity in the States, Jane and John decided to take the band back to Europe and, for the first time, the U.K. The year was now 1977 and the monetary offer this time was five English pounds per day, even less than \$35.00 per week. Once again we accepted. I tried to reassure myself that this all would be for the



Mike with John Cale and Lou Reed at CBGB
Ritchie Fliegler-Guitar, Alan Lanier-Guitar, Lou Reed-Guitar, Joe Stefko -Drums, Mike-Bass,
John Cale-Guitar and Voice, Bruce Brody-Keys

best, because after all it was a “labor of love.” These were to be John’s first appearances in the U.K. since the breakup of his all-English band of luminaries that included Brian Eno, Chris Spedding, Pat Donaldson and Chris Thomas. The reception for our all-American band was dismal from the start. John—known for his costumes, props and outrageous stage antics—was just standing there strumming his guitar or sitting at the piano and hardly performing the way his English audience was used to. The reviews were awful. We were being compared to his former superstar band and were being blamed for John’s relatively lackluster performances. Jane felt that things needed to change rapidly before he could further alienate his fans and the press. And change they did.

The first change that we noticed was that the new material that we had worked on, and was supposed to be part of the new record, was removed from the set. The next thing that happened was that there were now no lights on anybody on stage except John during the shows. When asked about this sudden and strange occurrence, Jane casually said that she had decided that the band was too *ugly* to be seen on stage with John. Furthermore, she had decided that we were *not* the right band for John after all, in spite of the pitiful salaries and sacrifices that we were making for the sake of the project. As you can imagine, the band was demoralized. Even the soundman, Denny McNerney, and guitar tech, Don Cogliano, knew that things couldn’t get much worse. But things did get worse.

As we were traveling through the English countryside one day on our way to a show in Croydon, the vehicle we were in started making stops at local farms. The tour manager would go out, disappear for several minutes at a time, come back, get in the

van and we'd depart again. This happened several times and the band could not figure out what was going on. At one farm that we stopped at he came back with a fully grown live chicken bound by his feet hanging upside down by his side. We looked at each other in disbelief and shook our heads in silence. When we got to the hotel I called Joe, our drummer, and asked him to please speak to John, as he had the best rapport with him, and try to find out what was happening. He did and was assured that nothing of note was to occur. No harm would come to the chicken. It was all to be in good fun. When Joe told me this, I said that if something untoward did happen it would be the end of the tour and whatever was left of the band, as things were about as bad as they could possibly be. He agreed but felt reassured by John.

Later that night, with great trepidation, we went on with the show. Things seemed as abnormally normal as they had been. No sign of the chicken. We got to the last song of the night, John's meta-goth version of "Heartbreak Hotel." For any of you that don't know the song or John's version of it, the last line, "You make me so lonely I could die," is sung by John in a blood-curdling scream that is sure to get a rise out of the crowd. Well, we got to that point in the song, which was usually about two minutes from the end of the show. Everything seemed uneventful when suddenly he rushed offstage. The band looked at each other with foreboding. John came back onstage with the chicken. Screaming "I could die, die, die," he pulled out a butcher's cleaver, dropped to his knees, and started hacking the chicken to bits. He cut the head off and threw it into the audience. He then swung the fresh carcass around by its legs, spewing blood all over the stage and out into the audience. We looked on in horror. He then threw the chicken's headless body into the audience and walked off stage. It was the end of the show and the end of the band.

Joe the drummer, Denny the soundman, Don the tech and I immediately walked over to Jane and told her that we quit. We demanded our return tickets to New York. She refused. I grabbed my bass but unfortunately Joe's drums were already packed into the equipment truck. He asked if he could take them. He was refused. We all reconvened in my hotel room to assess our situation. As we had no money and, at that time no credit cards, we were virtually stranded in England. Furthermore, fearing reprisals from John for having quit the band in the middle of a tour, the four of us stayed in my hotel room and barricaded the door with furniture. Joe had a friend in London, the American singer and pop celebrity Cherry Vanilla. The plan was to sneak out of the hotel before daybreak, go to Cherry's place, and figure out how to get back to the U.S. We all stealthily left at around 5 AM. Cherry hooked us up with a five-pound-a-night fleabag hotel, where all four of us stayed on floor mattresses in one room the next night. We all phoned home to have airline tickets purchased for us. Things looked relatively back under control with the exception of one thing: Joe didn't have his drums and John, Jane and the rest of the band left for Germany to continue the tour with

pickup musicians. So as we left to come home, Joe had to stay for another two weeks to try to track down his kit. He wasn't able to do so. So he came home.

Back at home no one could believe what we had been through. I went to the International Federation of Musicians Union to file a grievance and seek compensation. Because the tour wasn't contracted through the union (few tours are), we were unable to do so.

A month later Joe got his drums back.

It turns out that the "chicken incident" (as I call it) has become an often talked about and rather infamous episode in the lore of concert touring. I meet people from all areas of the music world that know and still talk about it. There's almost a cult status attached to it. What did I know? After all, it was only my first tour.

Being a Working Bassist in NYC

In my extensive travels I have met a lot of musicians from all over the world and have played in most of the major cities. From my point of view there is nothing that compares to the vitality and healthy competition that New York offers. Never have I seen such high quality musicians—specifically bass players—as I do now. Musicians from all over the world live and work here nightly in the hundreds of venues and the bar is very high. It is not uncommon to walk into one of the scores of clubs on any given night and see Will Lee, Lincoln Goines, Bakithi Kumalo, Matt Garrison, Mark Egan, etc., laying down dazzling sounds and grooves! If you want to measure yourself against a standard of excellence, come and experience the New York scene. With all of this competition you may ask, “How does one make a living?” I’ll now attempt to give my perspective on what I think it takes.

There used to be a time when there was a pretty thick line between bass players that were oriented toward more instrumental music (jazz, fusion, new age, etc.) and those who were more singer/songwriter-oriented (rock, pop, folk, R&B, etc.) The practice of each seemed to demand its own set of skills. However, just as diversification in other areas of life has become necessary, so has the working bassist needed to cultivate the skills required to satisfy a wide variety of musical situations. I’ve never seen so many players able to cross over to different genres as I do now, and do it very well. The more you embrace different styles of music and playing and can incorporate these into your “palette,” the more valuable you will be as a freelancer. The “specialist,” by definition, has limited market value. The “generalist” rules! If you are thinking about beginning or enhancing your career in New York, here are a few things you should know:

It is expected that you have mastered certain fundamentals. Your reading should be in good shape. You don’t have to be able to read Stravinsky, but you should be able to navigate a song chart or jingle chart with a modicum of rhythmic figures, structural and dynamic directions. If your desire is to be in a Broadway pit, your reading needs to be very good to excellent. You should also have a very good sense of time and be familiar with odd time signatures. These have a tendency to pop up more often in TV jingle sessions, movie and Broadway work, where the composer has certain time or scene restrictions to which the music must conform.

You should have a good sound and reliable instruments. Make sure your bass or basses are in good working order at all times. You never know when the phone is going to ring for that important gig or session. Try to have a backup instrument in case one is in the shop. Make sure there are no intermittent ground noises or neck buzzes. These

are most unwelcome in professional playing situations, studio or performance. Keep a small tool kit with you in order to make any adjustments to your intonation and to facilitate emergency string changes.

Make sure you have an efficient and portable amplifier. Most of the live work I and my friends do in New York is in the numerous clubs around town. A lot of them don't have in-house backline, so I bring my own gear. Often I use taxis to get around town, so it's important to be self-contained. All of my stuff fits on a heavy-duty luggage cart and can easily fit into the trunk of a car.

One of the mistakes you can make in New York is to over-equip yourself. I often see vans pulling up in front of clubs with guys rolling out stacks of amps. This is ridiculous on many levels. A lot of clubs have many bands in one night, and you have to get on and off stage fairly quickly. Having large, unwieldy equipment prevents this and can throw off the scheduling for the night—not a good way to make friends. Also a lot of times there is little or no sound check. The best way to handle that is to “mix yourself” on stage by playing at a level that doesn't rely too heavily on stage monitors. Having small, efficient gear will help you do that and will also help you to not over- power the vocals. You will be every sound engineer's best friend!

New York is a very social city and it's crucial to develop high- level people skills. Networking is an important aspect to your career, and in New York you'll find a very friendly and supportive musical community. Often, it's the player with the highly developed social skills and gregariousness that's going to get the work over the more proficient player. The ability to handle the pressures of a music career—with all of its adversities, rewards and eccentric personalities—is critical to success. New York is a city where you always need to be on top of your game. It's a 24-hour showcase. You never know who's going to be watching you perform even in the most innocuous little club. I've seen David Bowie, Joe Jackson, Chick Corea and many others checking out the local talent for records and tours. It's a place to keep your ears and mind open to new sounds and new experiences. I've always found the New York music community very willing to accept new players with good, new ideas. The scene is vast, from avant-garde to pop, and if you're confident and have a vision your chances of making it here are better than any place I've seen.

Good Luck!

Tony Levin



Coming out of Boston and now living in upstate New York, Tony Levin has become a superstar of the instrument. Distinguishing himself as a bassist, Stick player, and composer he has recorded in almost every genre of music and style from Paul Simon to Vonda Shepard to King Crimson. As the long-standing bassist for Peter Gabriel, he has added to the profile of the instrument by developing his innovative “funk fingers” technique. The list of recordings that he has appeared on reads like a history of music. He currently leads his own group, the Grammy-nominated Tony Levin Band. Visit him at: www.tonylevin.com.

MV: What were your early musical influences, and how did you settle on the bass guitar as your main instrument?

TL: After so many years playing the bass I had no recollection of why I chose the bass back when I was a ten-year-old. So a few years ago I asked my parents if they remembered. They said I had told them that it was just because I like the bass. Now, so many years later, I realize that it was a very good decision, perhaps because it came from my nature, not my intellect—and I’m very lucky that I still enjoy doing that very thing: playing the bass.

MV: You seem to have a wonderfully successful career playing creative and challenging music while staying out of the fray of the New York City scene. Was that a conscious decision on your part?

TL: I was a New York studio player in the early and mid-70s (back when there happened to be a lot of work there). I enjoyed it and was pretty successful, but I didn’t feel good about my playing when I went long without live gigs. So when the chance came to get out of town and tour, I took it. Ever since, I’ve done less studio work, but felt better about the balance of my playing. It seems like my creativity needs live performance to fuel new ideas.

MV: What were the circumstances that caused you to transition from playing with Paul Simon to Peter Gabriel?

TL: Touring with both, back and forth, was a little schizophrenic (though I like both types of music). In fact, I did miss one leg of a Peter tour because I was committed to touring with Paul in that season. Since then I've tried to put Peter at the top of my priority for gigs, and even check with him sometimes to make sure I won't miss out by getting involved with another tour.

MV: How involved is Peter Gabriel in the creation of the bass parts in his music, as opposed to Robert Fripp who seems like a meticulous scrutinizer of everything that goes into King Crimson?

TL: Peter is quite involved in every part of his recordings. He sometimes gives me a bass line (on synth) to start with—often, in fact, his synth bass part makes it to the final version. Sometimes I change it a bit, or change it entirely. Other times I come up with the part on my own. He always checks it out, and advises when it's appropriate. It's a good working relationship because we're both after the same thing: a bass part that works for piece, and brings something new to the bass function.

With Robert, it's often simpler because he either writes the bass line, or respects my sense of bass parts enough to just leave me on my own to make it up. We don't need much dialog, and I'm equally happy with my parts and the great lines he comes up with.

MV: When and how did you start exploring the Stick, and did you consider any other multi-stringed instruments (i.e. five- and six-string basses)?

TL: I heard about the Chapman Stick and got one in the mid '70's. Peter Gabriel One was one of the first albums I took the Stick to. Ironically, it wasn't the multi-string aspect that drew me to the Stick; it was the unusual percussive sound it has in the bass range. Later I found that the unusual tuning helped inspire me to come up with different bass parts than the usual fourths.

MV: You've played with a wide array of the world's great drummers: Steve Gadd, Manu Kache, Jerry Marotta, and Bill Bruford, to name a few. What do you personally look for in a rhythm section partner?

TL: Each of the drummers you name has his own feel when he plays rhythm. As a bass player it's fun being part of any kind of approach from the drummer, even if it's one that's new to you, as long as the drummer has mastery of the time. It was Steve Gadd

who really taught me how to play time (I was classically trained before meeting him), but I've adapted my sense of time many times through the years, and I play differently with each of the players you mention, as well as with the other great drummers I've teamed up with.

MV: Is there any way to articulate the difference in your approach when playing with Manu as opposed to Jerry or Bill?

TL: Plenty of differences, but hard to describe. I'll try. Recording with Manu, he will try at all times to come up with a distinctive, new part—making his approach to the piece unique. Sometimes this comes quickly, sometimes it takes a while. Anyway, at the same time I'm trying to do the same and to adjust to what the drums are doing. If he's latched on to some great pattern, I might play a bit less to give it the room it wants. Or, if I have a busier part (i.e. "Sledgehammer") he might play kind of basics, but as on that piece, hit some subtle beats with the bass.

Jerry will play with great strength when the music calls for it. Often we both gravitate to simple parts that have a similar weight to them, and maybe have some small element to make them unique.

Bill Bruford, always creating, always changing his parts, rarely plays the same part twice. Counter-rhythms are so natural to him, I can join in on those, or take the function of grounding the original time signature and letting the drums fly around it.

MV: What current solo projects are you working on, and what new records and/or tours are on the horizon? Where can we find more information on them?

TL: I've just finished and released a solo CD titled *Pieces of the Sun*, and will be touring quite a bit with my band. The album and band feature Jerry Marotta on drums, Larry Fast (of Peter Gabriel band) on synth, and Jesse Gress on guitar. We will be touring and will try to bring a blend of the new material and some older prog stuff (Peter Gabriel let me re-record an old track of his that was never released for the CD).

Later in the year, who knows. Maybe another Peter Gabriel tour. I hope so.

MV: With your intense touring and recording schedule, do you still find time to practice and, if so, what are you challenging yourself with these days?

TL: Not much practice time, but lots of challenges. Right now, I am practicing, and very challenged, to play the Stick lead parts from my CD (which were easier to record, of course, with overdubs and multiple takes, than to play live!). I'm also working, when

time permits, on a photo/journal book of my years in King Crimson.

MV: Do you have any particular overview or opinion on the state of the recording industry today, and do you foresee any substantial changes coming?

TL: Don't know enough to predict the future in that. I do think that this is a good time for music (though maybe not for music business) in that it seems more great music is being made, and recorded, all over the world, than ever. There is, of course, less market for all that music, and less outlets in major media (like radio) for really new creative stuff, but that doesn't seem to be holding back the creative process, which is great.

MV: What is your favorite Tony Levin recording and why?

TL: It's almost always the *current* music that I'm excited about. That's because my perspective isn't about my past, and what I've done. I just get caught up in good music, and in what's coming next. So, *Pieces of the Sun* is the Tony Levin music I'm listening to!

MV: Do you have any advice for aspiring professional bassists, particularly those looking to establish a touring career?

TL: I cherish the variety of musical approaches that bass players take, and wouldn't discourage any players from proceeding in their own direction. It seems to work best, in the long run, to strive to make genuinely good music, of whatever type you like. Other elements like popularity, record sales, income, and all the music biz stuff, can come and go—but you're always left with the appreciation of the music you've made, and nobody will take that away from you.