

PASSION, FIRE AND GRACE DOMINIQUE DI PIAZZA

Mike Flynn talks to a modern master of the electric bass about his journey into music and the highs and lows of his career so far.



In the 30 years since Jaco Pastorius first turned the bass guitar on its head and brought it from the back of the stage to the front, it almost seems commonplace for bassists to now play lead melodies, pulsating forthright basslines and explosive solos. Yet in the intervening years few bassists have built upon Jaco's founding techniques as emphatically as French bassist Dominique Di Piazza, who in turn has been a huge influence on the new generation of players that include Matthew Garrison, Hadrien Feraud and countless others. The Lyon-born bassist made a massive impact when he appeared on jazz guitarist John McLaughlin's classic 1991 trio album *Que Alegria* alongside Indian percussion maestro Trilok Gurtu. Di Piazza's fizzing basslines and solos zipped all over the instrument, matching McLaughlin's quicksilver lines note for note, soloing with exceptionally melodic ideas and stunning technique. The bass centrepiece came in the form of a startlingly beautiful solo piece called 'Marie' that showed Di Piazza's free-ranging use of guitaristic chords, classical and flamenco lines, harmonic counterpoint and a revolutionary right-hand picking technique that used all five digits. After playing some 200 shows with this trio, Di

Piazza's name was now held among the modern greats of the bass; he was the name on everyone's lips, and looked certain to have a path set out ahead of him. But then the unexpected happened: he disappeared, the recordings stopped and so did the live shows. Rumours began to surface that he'd turned to religion and had quit playing altogether. It wasn't until the early 2000s that word spread that he was back and playing again, better than ever, was giving masterclasses and that he had returned to music full-time.

With all this in mind, and with his London Jazz Festival appearance at Charlie Wright's jazz bar in Hoxton on 18th November with his own trio featuring guitarist Nelson Veras and drummer Manhu Roche, it was high time we discovered how Di Piazza found his way back into music. Speaking on the phone from Paris, it turns out that Dominique was far from a child prodigy, as he explained: 'I grew up in a musical environment. My stepfather, who was a Gypsy, raised me, and by the age of 16 I could play a little bit of guitar. I learnt a little about chords but I was not really caught up with music. I really got serious when I was 20; in fact, I started the bass when I first heard Jaco.'

It speaks volumes about Di Piazza's natural musical talent that just ten years later he was making

a landmark album with jazz legend John McLaughlin, and his initial studies were intense to say the least. Coincidentally he was reminded of this a short time ago: 'It's funny because someone recently gave me a recording of a concert I did with a French guitarist in 1982 and I was amazed, because it sounded almost like the way I play now! At the time I had only been playing bass for two or three years. It's really funny as my style is already there.'

Di Piazza's playing style is both harmonically and rhythmically very distinctive, and for all his speed and dazzling technical ability, his basslines or solos have an abundance of rhythmic strength and an innate sense of melody. Dominique attributes this to his musical surroundings at the time: 'I was influenced by the Gypsy jazz sound but also by African rhythms. What really amazed me with Jaco was the way he played the 16th notes; for me it sounded like music from Cameroon. You have this kind of feel [sings a bouncing 16th-note rhythm]; for me they have a connection, and of course, I know that Jaco had a lot of Afro-Cuban influences in his playing style. But during those first two years I really worked like crazy, playing like...15 hours a day. Since I started to fall in love with the bass when I was 20 I really felt like it was already too late for me because I knew all the great

players by the time they were 20 had already made great records – I knew that [the drummer] Tony Williams had done this at the age of 17, and Jaco made his solo album at the age of 23 or something, and Miles Davis at the age of 19. So for me I was really in a hurry to get to that level, to catch up.'

While Dominique is a formidable bassist, he drew on a vast range of musical sources to develop his own harmonic knowledge: 'I not only learnt about the bass but I had a good tutor of the bebop style because at that time I was also listening to Charlie Parker and all the old beboppers, and piano players like Oscar Peterson, and a lot of guitar players and flamenco too. I was self-taught so I didn't know what the limits were! So I didn't just have Jaco in my mind when I was playing, I also had people like John Coltrane, Django Reinhardt, Charlie Parker, Chick Corea and Joe Zawinul. I was interested in all kinds of improvisation.'

Turning professional in 1979, playing in his hometown of Lyon, Dominique moved to Paris in 1986 and immersed himself in the city's cultural melting pot. One of his first gigs was with highly acclaimed French jazz violinist Didier Lockwood, while also playing in a huge variety of styles that included Brazilian and African bands, jazz,

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The Di Piazza trio featuring Manhu Roche and Nelson Veras

fusion and big bands (which helped his sight-reading), as well as session work in studios and jazz piano trios. He has fond memories of this period: 'I think it's the best way to grow as a musician, not only as a bass player, but in music, in your timing and your ability to adapt, to learn different rhythms. So it was a really good period of preparation to play with people like John McLaughlin and Trilok Gurtu.'

The subsequent recording with this trio, *Que Alegria*, still stands as one of John McLaughlin's finest mid-career albums, with its stirring emotive melodies and highly intuitive interplay between three world-class virtuosos. Dominique is still immensely proud of the recording and sees it as a high point in his career. 'For me it was the greatest musical experience to record this kind of music with such incredible musicians at this period of time.' There's some YouTube footage of this trio playing the title song live in Italy, with a very young-looking Dominique playing a 5-string Warwick Streamer, and it's his distinctive 'woody' tone that blends perfectly with McLaughlin's nylon-string guitar and Gurtu's shimmering Indo-fusion drumming. Dominique has since moved on to play many different basses but is still fond of his bass tone at that time: 'I don't know if it was the quality of the studio or the sound engineer but I am now always searching for the kind of sound that I had on that record on either 4- or 5-string basses!' he

laughs. 'I also played a lot of songs on *Que Alegria* with a 4-string Jazz bass made by Philip Kubiki, and I already had my special bridge, that I made myself, which makes the bass sound more like a fretless.'

Dominique's stunning solo bass feature, 'Marie', from the same album still sounds fresh today some 18 years after he first played it; it's even become something of a solo bass standard for plucky bassists seeking to explore chords and advanced picking styles. Yet it was John McLaughlin who first recognised that this was something unique to Dominique's approach to the bass, as Di Piazza explains with a grateful tone in his voice: 'In fact, I developed this style when John heard me warming up, and in soundchecks and rehearsals. I also had a solo spot in the live show so that also came from that, and thanks to John I'm now always asked to perform a solo spot in any of the bands I now play with.' The piece itself was almost an afterthought at the end of the sessions, as Dom explains: 'We were in Germany at the time and I had booked a taxi to take me to the airport. I had a couple of hours to wait around when John said he'd like to record a solo bass piece for the album. So we did two takes that were like the one on the album and one more busy one! At the time that was the one I would have chosen, but John chose the one that was more fragile, more emotional, more musical, and I think he made the right choice.'

With word spreading about this phenomenal new bass talent, Dominique's ascent to the top of the global bass tree seemed assured – yet after such a dramatic arrival... silence. To say Dominique found religion is no exaggeration, but in fact he was more inclined towards spirituality than any evangelical calling. It's rare for musicians, artists or anyone immersed in an all-consuming career to step back and contemplate another way of life, and to his fans it came as something of a shock. 'I can't say it was like a cult but it got a bit fundamentalist and it took me a while to fully remove myself from it. Plus I had a young family at the time and I wanted to spend some time with them too.'

Thankfully for fans of his playing, Dominique returned in 1997 and has since made a series of superb albums with the likes of Dennis Chambers, Biréli Lagrène, incredible Indian electric mandolin virtuoso U Shrinivas and many others. He recently sealed his return to form with a fiery display alongside his old friend John McLaughlin in the guitarist's 4th Dimension quartet on a world tour last year, though it was through an unfortunate accident to Mac's current bass prodigy Hadrien Feraud that he got the call: 'Hadrien and I are very close friends and we joke all the time, so when he called me up and explained he had broken his finger and couldn't play I wasn't sure if he was joking! But he wasn't, so I went back on the road with

John, and it's strange because even though it had been 16 years since we last toured together, after a few gigs it felt like nothing had changed. And it was great to discover these two great British players Gary Husband and Mark Mondesir.' A DVD has just been released of this fired-up group in all their glory in Budapest and shows Dom has lost none of his ability to dazzle in his solos or lock in tight with the drums.

Over the years Dominique has been associated with several bass manufacturers but currently plays both 5- and 6-string F Basses (though he says he's now considering going back to just a 4-string!) and has moved from Markbass to TC Electronic now, using the RH450 amplifier and a variety of TC cabs. Yet greatest among his many contributions to the advancement of the bass is his complex right-hand technique, which has revolutionised the way the likes of Hadrien and Matthew Garrison have also expanded their plucking techniques. Born out of a need to cross strings – that he found particularly hard using the standard index and middle fingers – Dom followed his instincts to create his unique approach. 'I knew having played guitar that I could use my thumb, and because I was self-taught I didn't think it was wrong at all, but funnily enough when I first started this style no one was interested because it was too far outside what everyone else was doing. Jaco was big at the time, so I actually had to learn the two-finger technique because that's what people wanted to learn when I gave private bass lessons! It really warms my heart that now so many people have been influenced by me in this way; it makes me feel good.'

His innovative approach has also produced a new device known as the Pocket Picker (see www.thepocketpicker.com), which allows bassists to practise their right-hand techniques without their bass – the new models even include a short 5-fret neck that will allow people to learn scales and finger patterns too. The same company will also be producing Di Piazza's patented 'special bridge', which allows a fretted bass to produce a fretless-like growl with uncanny accuracy. All in all, it's great to know one of the modern masters of the bass found his way back to music and continues to show us all how to take the bass beyond the limits.

www.dominiquedipiazza.com