

Magazine Article from the Portfolio of
Wheat Williams

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The first national magazine article on
Victor Wooten and his debut with Bela
Fleck and the Flecktones.

BASS MUTANT VICTOR WOOTEN

*From funk to
flamenco,
bluegrass to
Beethoven.*

EVER HEARD OF A banjo/harmonica/bass/electronic percussion jazz/funk quartet? That's the territory that Béla Fleck and the Flecktones cover on their self-titled Warner Brothers debut album, which crested at number 15 on the Billboard jazz charts and copped a Grammy nomination. Fleck, the former New Grass Revival banjo virtuoso, takes the instrument into uncharted territory with his adventurous compositions and unorthodox technique. Harmonica player/key-boardist Howard Levy plays the entire

chromatic scale on diatonic harmonicas. Roy Wooten wows audiences with his perfectly conventional jazz drumming, played exclusively on a heavily modified SynthAxe guitar controller triggering a bank of samplers. Still, the Flecktone's official secret weapon is Roy's

little brother Victor, 26, on bass.

Victor's live solos are total theater. He slaps and pops muted strings to simulate drum sounds while thumping out a bass line. He attacks the fingerboard with both hands flat, going from crashing thunder to scratching hip-hop. He taps a Tchaikovsky or Beethoven theme, rips through some funk, slings his bass in a full circle around his back, and occasionally does standing back-flips without missing a note. All this for an audience which, like as not, came to hear a banjo player.

Vic was touring California at the age of six, opening for Curtis Mayfield as the youngest member of the Wooten Brothers, a self-contained five-piece band. Even then, Victor was already playing note-perfect covers of Sly and the Family Stone

tunes and taking solos on a short-scale Univox copy of a Hofner Beatle Bass that was bigger than him. His only bass training came from his guitarist brother

Reggie, although he did study cello in the sixth grade. Before breaking up the band, the brothers released an album, *The Wootens*, on Arista, in 1985. Shortly after they stopped touring in 1987, Victor took a job playing fiddle and acoustic bass in a country music show at Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, Virginia, where he developed an interest in banjo technique as applied to the bass. His style freely incorporates rolls, bends, hammer-ons, and pull-offs.

On a visit to Nashville, Vic met the visionary acoustic musicians in New Grass Revival, multi-instrumentalist Mark O'Connor, and Dobro master Jerry Douglas. Encouraged, he kept returning to cut demos and gig in numerous R&B and

jazz bands. When a television producer for PBS' *Lonesome Pine Special* asked Béla to put a band together for a show, he called up Victor and Roy and formed the Flecktones. Victor was actually auditioned over the phone. The combination worked so well that they decided to make a self-produced, self-financed album. Digitally recorded live in the studio in five days with very little overdubbing, it was rejected by many before being picked up unaltered by Warner Brothers. *Béla Fleck & The Flecktones* took off immediately on release, aided considerably by exposure on VH-1 video and adult contemporary radio.

On the album, Victor walks all around straight jazz and shifts gears to hard funk in a heartbeat. But some of his most impressive technique comes into play when he follows Fleck through tortuous banjo arpeggios, matching him lick for lick an octave down: "The whole idea of playing like a banjo comes out of my funk technique. With my right hand, I pluck with my thumb on both the downstroke and the upstroke, on adjacent strings, as if my thumb were a guitar pick. Then I use my index and middle fingers to arpeggiate above that. With my left hand, I hammer-on extra notes between the ones I pick, which allows me to play twice as fast as I can with conventional funk technique and twice as long without getting tired."

Wooten also prefers to double-pick fast scalar runs with his thumb, rather than employing his index and middle fingers in the usual rest-stroke technique. "It gets a more articulate sound," he explains, demonstrating imitation rolled banjo chords by raking the first three fingers on his right hand up and down *rasgueado*-style, and throwing in some flamenco guitar licks.

Some of Wooten's fastest runs, which one might assume



Photo: Jim McGuire

"The idea of playing like a banjo comes out of my funk technique."

originate with Stanley Jordan-style tapping, actually come from double-picking and left-hand hammering technique. "But I use tapping as well," he declares. "Once I saw Stanley, it made me jump two steps forward from what I was already doing. From that point I started learning to play bass, chords, and melody together, which I reserve for my solo work."

Victor's solo work is showcased primarily at The Slice Of Life, a popular Nashville restaurant he often plays on

the weekends he's in town. "I play solo for a couple hours—jazz standards, classical, and my own stuff." For instance, Wooten does a two-part arrangement of "Misty" with a walking bass line, playing the entire melody an octave up with harmonics while keeping his left hand close to the first position—without tapping. But when he wants to tap, his two-handed technique is formidable. To demonstrate, Victor launches into the intro of his "Emerald Falls," a brilliantly contrapuntal jazz ballad that has become a staple of the Flecktones' live set.

On the album and live, Victor relies on a 1982 Fodera Monarch 4-string with a Kahler tremolo, although Nashville luthier Joe Compito is building him a 5-string fretless and a 6-



string. He plays through a Peavey Megabass amp into SWR Goliath 4x10 speaker cabinets. "I have a Sampson SR-22 wireless, and an ART SGE Mach II effects unit, although I don't use it much—maybe a little chorus, and that's it."

With television appearances on the *Arsenio Hall Show*, the *Today Show*, and the *Tonight Show*, things have been moving quickly for Victor and his bandmates. Last summer the Fleck-

tones opened 40 shows for Chicago, followed by a successful tour with the *a cappella* jazz group Take 6. Their unique approach to jazz is challenging America's perceptions of Nashville, and Music City may never be the same.

—Wheat Williams