# The Contributions of Jaco Pastorius to Electric Bass Playing and Fusion Jazz as Exemplified in Three Selected Works

At Some point during the concert, Jaco jumped onstage during a solo by bassist Alphonso Johnson. He stood behind Alphonso with his arms folded across his chest like a warrior, silently evaluating the bass player. Next, as Carlos Santana says, "Jaco walked over to Alphonso, who had just taken an incredible bass solo, and held Alphonso's hand up in the air like he was the champ, the way a referee does in a boxing ring to the winner. But the bouncers off to the side of the stage didn't know who Jaco was, so they wrestled him off the stage. There was a scuffle, and they took him outside. (Milkowski, 261).

After reading this excerpt from Bill Milkowski's biography *Jaco: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius*, one would be hard-pressed to believe that the man in question was one of the most significant electric bassists and jazz musicians of the late twentieth century. Despite any initial skepticism, I can assure you that this is the case. John Francis 'Jaco' Pastorius IV was more than an eccentric fan, but a brilliant musician, composer, and pedagog whose contributions to his craft remain unmatched in many ways. Born December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1951 in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, Jaco's tragically short life/career spanned the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s (Milkowski 264). By the end of his life, Pastorius suffered from severe manic depression, was an alcoholic, and battled a serious cocaine addiction; all of which lead to his death at a bar brawl near his Ft. Lauderdale, Florida home in 1987 (Robinson, Grove Online).

Over the course of his career, Jaco released four albums as a bandleader, soloist, and composer, performed on eight albums with the fusion jazz group *Weather Report*, where he was the bassist between 1975 and 1982, and sessioned on dozens of albums for artists such as Joni Mitchell, Pat Metheny, and Herbie Hancock (Milkowski 87, 137, 323). To fully understand the magnitude of Jaco's contribution to his craft requires extensive study of all of Pastorius' music. In fact, according to Pat Metheny, "Jaco

Pastorius may well have been the last jazz musician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to have a made a major impact on the musical world at large" (Metheny, CD booklet- Jaco Pastorius). Despite this, the purpose of this essay is to examine a few key works that clearly exemplify some of the musical and pedagogical contributions that Metheny is alluding to. The most significant of these accomplishments are Jaco's redefinition of the role of electric bass, his development of advanced extended technique, and his ability to seamlessly mix a variety of musical styles together to form a truly unique musical product. To explore these concepts in greater detail, I have selected three of Pastorius' compositions that display examples of Jaco's style and musical/compositional approach. Each of the pieces will exemplify the high level of sophistication and innovation that he achieved as a bassist and composer.

#### **Teen Town**

The first Pastorius piece I will examine is *Teen Town*. Originally written for *Weather Report* and recorded on their 1977 studio album *Heavy Weather*, the work was named after an under twenty-one club in South Florida that Jaco frequented in his youth (Milkowski 19-20). Analysis of this chart will not only show that Jaco brilliantly combined an eclectic mix of musical styles, but that he redefined the role of electric bass in jazz ensembles.

Though *Teen Town* has been performed with a multitude of different orchestrations, the original from Heavy Weather features soprano saxophone, synthesizer, electric bass, and drumset, and conga drums. Even before a note is played, one can see the blending of multiple styles. The synthesizer, an electronic instrument featured mainly

in rock genres, is written alongside soprano saxophone, which at the time this work was written, was associated mostly with jazz. Also included are congas and hand percussion instruments, which are characteristic of Latin American music.

The tune begins with the statement of the main theme overtop of the four measure, four chord harmonic progression that is present throughout the entire piece. This chord series contains heavily jazz influenced harmony featuring dense use of upper structure triads (C-thirteen, A-thirteen, F-thirteen, and D-thirteen), and is played by the synthesizer (Lucas Pickford, Teen Town Trans). While the score only provides chord names, analysis of the recording will show that the synth player, Joe Zawinul, uses all of the pitches in each respective chord (Teen Town, Heavy Weather). For example, the Cthirteen chord contains the pitches C, E, G, B-flat, D, F-sharp, and A. While the use of so many extended pitches makes the key a bit ambiguous, the progression "centers" around C and resolves to that pitch (see figure 1.1), and Jaco creates stability by having the keyboardist voice the 'root' pitch of each chord as the lowest pitch. Irregardless, this line serves as the harmonic basis on which everything else in the tune is built. The main theme (which I will refer to as the 'head') is four bars long and scored overtop of this progression. It features a series of descending whole steps for the first two measures, which form the "antecedent" of the theme. This same passage is again played in the third and fourth measure, this time raised up a perfect fourth. To support this melody and harmony, a basic rock beat, with heavy emphasis on two and four is played by the drums (figure 1.2). This pattern continues throughout the entire work.

Figure 1.1



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/teentowntrans.htm

Figure 1.2



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/teentowntrans.htm

After the introduction, the A Section begins. The synthesizer and drums drop significantly in volume and the electric bass begins playing a new melody. Pastorius presents a pre-composed line that essentially arpeggiates the harmony in the synthesizer. While it may seem as though Jaco moves outside the chord quite a bit, analysis shows that because he utilizes the upper structure to such a great extent that almost all of his pitches "fit" within the harmony. For example, in the first measure (*see figure 1.3*), Jaco presents an entire measure of sixteenth notes and only three of the pitches, all functioning as passing tones, could be considered "outside" of the C-thirteen chord. Another interesting element of this passage is Jaco's use of contrary motion. The 'root' pitch of the bass line starts on C, drops *down* to A, goes *up* to F, then back *down* to G. This is exactly the opposite of the motion of the melody line played in the bass part, where the melody is played in one register in the first measure, then moves to a higher register in the second, to a lower register in the third, then back to a higher register in the fourth. Jaco's use of contrary motion in this way, whether intentional or not, adds richness to the harmony of this section

The four bar chord progression with solo bass playing the melody is heard a total of eight times (thirty two bars), each time through contains slight variations to the melody line to maintain interest. In addition, to create tension, forward motion, and interesting counterpoint at the end of this section, Pastorius adds the soprano saxophone by having it play the root note of each chord as the harmony changes.

Figure 1.3



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/teentowntrans.htm

After the A Section, the B Section begins by presenting the main theme once again. It is played twice this time, and instead of ending on a D-thirteen chord, the melody and harmony continue to extend downward in the last two beats of the final bar, making the phrase end on a B-thirteen chord. This creates a sequential modulation, based on the "head" material, from C to E. The C Section, now centered around E, features eight bars of a simple, eighth note melody which outline the new harmonic progression of E-thirteen, C-sharp thirteen, A thirteen, and F-sharp thirteen. This progression is exactly the same as the A Section, only it is now presented in E. Furthermore, the chords are once again presented in the synthesizer part, which serves as the harmonic foundation on which the bass and drums sit. The four bar chord progression in the new key is played four more times (for a total of thirty two bars, perfectly symmetrical with the A Section), and this time features an improvised solo by the soprano saxophone.

After the sax solo, the coda begins. The piece stays in E and the electric bass returns by playing a pre-composed melody line. This lasts for eight bars and is similar in rhythm and melodic contour to the A Section. The next part of the coda features the

synth and drums continuing to play the rock beat and four chord harmony that has been prevalent throughout the piece. Variation is created, however, by placing short solo "fills" overtop of the rhythm section. These fills are presented in the soprano sax, bass, drumset and conga drums. The fills are based off of fragments of rhythmic and melodic material already presented throughout the piece. After a two bar drum solo, the piece ends with a tutti, full ensemble statement of the main theme.

Many elements of this composition represent Jaco's important contributions to his craft. Most noticeable is the blending of styles. Throughout the course of the piece, Jaco uses instruments characteristic to jazz (soprano saxophone), Latin American music (conga drums), and synthesizer (rock). Furthermore, he uses jazz harmonies and melodies superimposed over heavily rock-influenced rhythms. This created a blend of sounds that was only starting to be heard during Jaco's lifetime. Less noticeable but more important in *Teen Town* was Jaco's use of the bass guitar. Rather than being a rhythm section instrument that played underneath more traditional "melody" or "lead" instruments, in *Teen Town*, Jaco brought bass to the forefront of the composition immediately, with a present, busy, no-holds-barred solo line. Through compositions like *Teen Town*, Jaco expanded the possibilities of what could be played on the instrument through these creative, improvisatory-like melodies (Pomeroy, 64). According to Fernando Gonzalez, Jaco "redefined the role of the electric bass" and made it "OK for the bass...to stand out," which is exactly what Pastorius has done in *Teen Town* (50).

## **Opus Pocus**

Opus Pocus was a studio track that Jaco recorded for his 1976 debut, self-titled album, Jaco Pastorius (Jaco Pastorius, album). The piece is significant mostly for its seamless integration of multiple musical styles, as well as its use of the bass guitar to function as a both a contrapuntal melody line and traditional "bass line" at the same time. In the recording, one hears the use of multiple steel drums, soprano saxophone, synthesizer, Latin/accessory percussion, drumset, and electric bass. The piece begins with the steel drum playing a two bar ostinato phrase outlining an E flat-six arpeggio figure (figure 2.1). After this ostinato is played a few times, a busier sixteenth note passage, written in a higher register, is played by another steel pan. This sixteenth note passage is the "head" of the tune, and functions as transition material between other contrasting sections throughout the rest of the piece (figure 2.2). This two bar melody is established through multiple repetitions. On the final repetition, the ensemble plays the "head" in tutti, but this time the descending sixteenth note line continues further downward, setting up a modulation from E to C-sharp (Jaco utilizes this technique of sequential modulation to setup the key change in *Teen Town*, as well). Throughout this passage, one hears the steel drum, an instrument from Trinidad and associated with Caribbean music, presented in a western classical-romantic orchestration, utilizing jazz harmony. Pastorius ingeniously draws noticeable influence from three completely different genres of music within the first twenty bars of the piece.

Figure 2.1



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/opustrans.htm

Figure 2.2



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/opustrans.htm

The A section introduces material in a new key. Pastorius has now modulated to C-sharp, and the entire A section is rooted in this tonal center. The drumset begins to play a light rock groove with a heavy 2 and 4 backbeat, establishing a slow, solid funk feel. The steel drummers and synth player begin improvising in unison, typically either outlining a C-sharp blues scale or a C-sharp thirteen chord. While they are improvising, however, they are not the "lead" instruments in the passage. On the contrary, the synth and pans parts serve more as texture than as melodic material. In this role, these two instruments are reminiscent of the "collective improvisation" typical of Dixieland and early jazz ensembles. The electric bass begins to play a riff based off of the bass line established by the steel pan in the introduction (*see figure 3.1*). While this line is not the melody, analysis of the recording will show that Jaco intentionally played above the rest of the ensemble. While the bass part serves the function of a typical bass guitar line by complimenting the drumset part and providing a harmonic/rhythmic foundation, it also "plays off of" the other instruments in the ensemble. One clearly hears the synth and

pans waiting to play "in between" the notes of the bassline, implying this part serves a melodic, textural, and contrapuntal function in addition to being a traditional "bassline". This is a prime example of Jaco using the bass guitar to fulfill multiple, non-traditional musical responsibilities. The primary musical voice in the A section, however, is the soprano saxophone. The sax improvises over top of all the other instruments by way of increased volume and higher range, but refers to the same material as the other voices, including references to C-sharp thirteen chords and the C-sharp blues scale. This adds a strong jazz feel to this section. At the end of the A section, the "head" returns once again in tutti, ending with a sequential modulation, this time back to the original key of E. Like the introduction, Jaco uses multiple styles, drawing upon funk, jazz, Dixieland, and Caribbean throughout this phrase.

Figure 3.1



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/opustrans.htm

The B Section is centered in the key of E major and increases in tension through denser parts and slight tempo increase. First, the drum part, though still in a funk style, becomes increasingly busy. While the A section contained a simple back beat on 2 and 4, the B section features thick high hat work through the use of sixteenth note syncopation, and features a "busier" snare drum part that sets up other instruments rhythmically. The combination of these elements creates a much "harder" drum groove in the B section. Additionally, the melodic instruments (synth and pans) that had less of a role in the A section now are more prominent. This creates a clear sense of collective improvisation

among all melodic instruments. The bass guitar part remains similar to the A section, but is now more complex. In order to remain relevant with multiple other voices having a prominent role, Jaco establishes the bass's presence by way of wide range leaps and percussive "tapping" of certain pitches (see figure 4.1). The use of wide leaps and timbre change allow the bass part to maintain prominence in the much thicker orchestration of the B section. This phrase ends with another the restatement of the head, as well as another sequential modulation, this time back to C-sharp for a repeat of the A section.

Figure 4.1



\*'x' signifies a "tapped" or "muted" pitch

image source: www.lucaspickford.com/opustrans.htm

After the A section is repeated, Pastorius uses the head to modulate once again, this time from C-sharp to B-flat. The coda represents the climax of the piece. This is reflected through a dramatic key change, thick orchestration, sudden loud dynamics, and consistent "up beat" rhythmic pattern on the bell of the ride cymbal. While the A section featured the saxophone as the primary melodic voice, and the B section utilizes more collective improvisation, with the focus, much like the introduction, being with the steel drums, who play a composed, four bar melody line for the rest of the tune (the pan part is repeated for about two minutes on the original recording) (see figure 5.1). Their material, much like both the A and B sections, is based off of the B-flat thirteen chord and B-flat blues scales. The bass line is now at its most rhythmically dense, featuring almost exclusively sixteenth notes (see figure 5.2). Of note in this passage is the emphasis of the "blue" note D-flat in the third bar of the bass line, as well as the blue note A-flat in the

final bar. Both imply blues influence on a passage already showing shades of Caribbean and funk styles. While the steel drum is the main voice, the bass guitar clearly functions as a secondary layer of counterpoint, as well as a standard bassline line providing rhythmic and harmonic support. Once again, this shows Jaco utilizing his bass part in multiple ways. The soprano sax and synthesizer add sparse, textural improvisation to the coda, which are subservient to the bass and pans. *Opus Pocus* ends with a board fade as the ensemble continues to loop coda section material.

Figure 5.1



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/opustrans.htm

Figure 5.2



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/opustrans.htm

Much can be gathered about about Jaco Pastorius both as a bassist and a composer from this work. Compositionally, Jaco clearly drew from multiple sources for *Opus Pocus*. This is widely credited to his diverse musical background. Jaco spent his early career studying orchestration with Charlie Brent of Wayne Cochran and the C.C. Riders (Milkowski 45). This influenced helped Jaco incorporate an R&B/soul/funk flare into his writing (Gonzalez 10). Jaco, according to his father, also spent much of his youth listening to Frank Sinatra, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane, leaving an early impression

of/love for jazz (Portrait of Jaco). Furthermore, it is no doubt that his South Florida upbringing surrounded Jaco by the sounds of the Caribbean music (Milkowski 80).

Opus Pocus also serves as an example of the versatility in Jaco's bass parts by having them function both as melody and bassline at the same time. Jeff Andrews remarks that "he [Jaco] taught us that the bass could be anything- a piano, a conga drum, a saxophone. He worked with it melodically, harmonically, and percussively" (Andrews, quoted in Galileo of Bass 7). Essentially, Opus Pocus is a testament to the eclectic variety of inspiration present in Jaco's music while also serving as a model for the versatile role that he felt the bass guitar could serve.

# **Portait of Tracy**

Portrait of Tracy is a short piece for solo bass guitar written by Pastorius and recorded on his 1976 self-titled album (Jaco Pastorius, album). It is an important example of Jaco's use of extended technique and innovative compositional practice applied to the electric bass. Before delving any further into discussion of Portait of Tracy, one must understand that the piece was a function of the instrument it was played on. Jaco used but a single bass guitar his entire life: a 1962 Fender Jazz Bass, which Jaco affectionately referred to as "The Bass of Doom" (Jisi, Bass of Doom). The Bass of Doom was no ordinary jazz bass. It had been modified and turned into a "fretless" bass by Jaco in the early 1970s when he pried the frets out with a butter knife and filled in the gaps with marine epoxy (Portait of Jaco). While the bass was now much more difficult to play in tune, the removal of the frets allowed the instrument to vibrate more, which allowed Jaco to more easily play artificial harmonics and glissandos. I also gave the instrument, as Marcus Miller states, a sound full of "warmth and wood" (Perspectives on

Jaco). Essentially, the fretless bass offered Jaco a multitude of additional musical options, and *Portrait of Tracy* features many of them.

The piece starts with one bar introduction with a descending sixteenth note passage whose pitches are artificial harmonics (figure 6.1). Right from the start, Jaco is presenting this thin, high-pitched, resonant texture, which sets the tone for what will be a unique musical landscape. After the introduction, Jaco presents the main theme of the work. The theme is played contrapuntally with multiple musical lines happening at the same time. Jaco achieves this by playing a simple bass line plucked normally on some strings, and a melody line over top played entirely in artificial harmonics on others (figure 6.2). In addition, there is a "middle" voice, which plays along with the harmonics of melody but is plucked normally (figure 6.2). Over the course of the first seven bars, Jaco plays instrument, which until his time had been almost exclusively monophonic, in three part harmony. Jaco presents variations of the main theme for another eight bars, matching previous material both in range and texture. Throughout the development, Jaco uses the "middle" voice to harmonize the melody in different ways, sometimes creating very consonant intervals such as major thirds and sometimes playing dissonant, clashing intervals like tritones or major sevenths. The use of different harmonies in this line creates variation and builds tension as harmonic instability increases.

Figure 6.1



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Figure 6.2



image source: www.lucaspickford.com/transtracy.htm

The piece, essentially in an arch form, now begins the B section. Throughout this section, Jaco creates a simple melody based on the pitches D and A (played as harmonics). Underneath this, Jaco plucks the bass line, consisting of sustained, low register long tones (see appendix for score example). Unlike the melody line, the bass line changes pitches in each bar, usually in half steps, creating different harmonies. As the phrase continues, Jaco adds the "middle" voice in once again, which plays in harmony with the melody line. Much like the A section, Jaco carefully chooses the intervallic relationships between the harmonic and "middle" voice, creating tension or resolution depending on where the musical line is moving. Jaco ends *Portrait of Tracy* by reprising the material from the main theme/A section.

While the work is only two minutes long, *Portrait of Tracy* is one of Jaco's most famous and frequently played pieces. Jaco pioneers new means of expression through his use of artificial harmonics, and shows that the bass could be a harmonic instrument capable of playing rich harmonies and counterpoint though the composition of multiple musical lines.

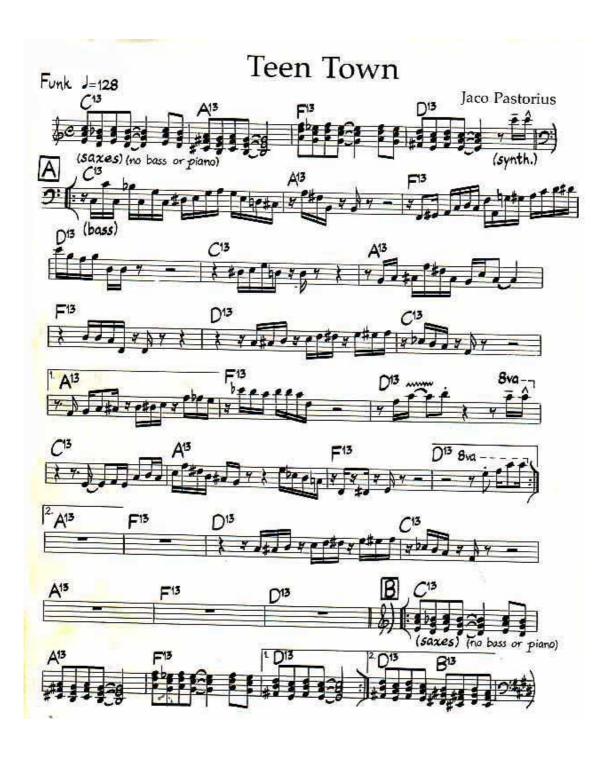
#### Conclusion

It has been established through analysis of the selected works that Jaco Pastorius was a major contributor to the development of electric bass playing throughout the twentieth century. Through pieces like *Teen Town*, one sees Jaco put the bass front and center as the primary instrument of musical interest, something that had not been before. *Opus Pocus* shows an eclectic mix of multiple musical styles seamlessly incorporated into one unique work. Additionally, it demonstrates Jaco's ability to compose bass parts that function both as a traditional bass line as well as a dominant melody voice. Finally, *Portrait of Tracy* shows the new musical possibilities that came with Jaco's development of the fretless bass, as well as his use of multiple musical lines played simultaneously on an instrument that had become synonymous with monophony. Jaco was often quoted as saying "I'm out to make this non-instrument [electric bass] an instrument," (Portrait of Jaco), and based on the material presented in the three pieces discussed above, it is clear that he played a significant role in achieving this goal.

# **Appendix**

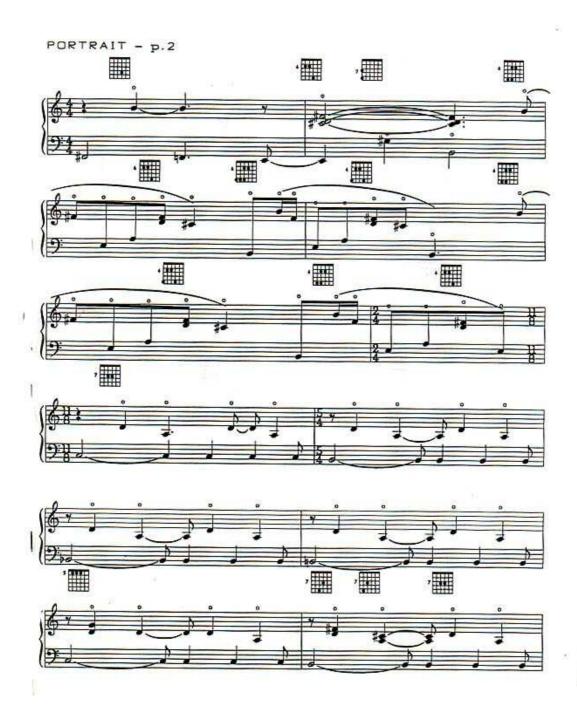








# PORTRAIT OF TRACY \*\* ,





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