

Don Thompson

Don Thompson is a jack of many trades in the world of jazz—and he's the master of just about all of them. Although he's best known for a body of bass work spanning more than 30 years and involving such top-notch collaborators as guitarist Jim Hall and pianist George Shearing, Thompson's domain is not restricted to the lower frequencies. He also has parallel professional careers as a pianist, vibraphonist, composer, and recording engineer. It seems that Don's internal music finds a compelling voice on just about any instrument—in fact, he also plays drums and trumpet. Legend has it that once, during a break in a recording session with the Boss Brass, Thompson began inspecting Moe Koffman's saxophone; noticing this (and fearing an impending takeover) Koffman ran over, exclaiming, "Oh no you don't!"

Thompson, 54, was born in Powell River, British Columbia, Canada. He landed his first



major gig playing bass with the seminal John Handy Quintet from 1964 to '67. Don moved to Toronto in 1969 and quickly became a sought-after session man, working with such jazz notables as trombonist Frank

Rosolino, vibist Milt Jackson, and guitarist Barney Kessel on bass, piano, vibes, or some combination thereof. Between 1975 and '82 Thompson toured and recorded with the Jim Hall Trio and anchored the landmark *Jim Hall Live* album. The following five years saw a fruitful partnership with George Shearing, with whom Don played both bass and piano.

More recently, Thompson won the 1994 Composer and Vibraphonist Of The Year awards

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By Peter Murray

Photographs by Paul Hoeffler

Above: Thompson onstage with pianist George Shearing and guitarist Joe Pass

from the Canadian magazine *Jazz Report*. As an accomplished multi-instrumentalist and a teacher (at no fewer than three schools), he has a unique viewpoint on the art of jazz—and how the bass fits into the picture.

Peter Murray writes for *Canadian Musician* magazine, which published excerpts from this interview in its August '94 issue. Murray plays bass for the Toronto band *surrender dorothea*; his first instructional book is *Essential Bass Technique* [Thermidor Music].

What do you get from the bass that you don't get from the vibes or piano?

That's a good question—and a hard one, too. Every instrument has things it'll do that you can't do with anything else. When I play vibes I can get sustain and vibrato, so sometimes I get the feeling I can play like a horn player—hit a note and hold it, that kind of thing. But of course, you can't bend notes on vibes, so you're stuck with a definite, in-tune pitch all the time. Also, everything sounds so pretty on vibes that it almost goes against you to play avant-garde or free music; nothing ever sounds *weird*. On piano, you can play all the harmony and orchestration you want—so given all that, you wonder what else the

bass could offer. Strangely, the bass is sort of like a horn to me—the control of the vibrato, the ability to bend into notes, fall off notes, and play really smooth lines. When I'm playing bass, it's as close as I can get to a voice, and I think that's what I like about it. On the piano or vibes, that "fixed pitch" thing messes you up every time.

And you touch the strings of a bass with your fingers.

Yes—it's not like pushing down a piano key, which hits something else that hits something else. When you play the acoustic bass, the sound is right underneath your fingers. I used to play electric, too, and the sound would always come from somewhere "over there"—no matter what I did, it still came from over there. I couldn't control the dynamics the way I can on a string bass.

Why did you take up electric bass?

It was mostly because of work. There was a lot of work around if you played electric bass: jingle sessions and films, most of which was eighth-note rock and country—that kind of stuff. So it was a matter of making money more than anything else. I did a lot of session work all through the '70s.

Why did you move away from that?

I just got tired of being a studio musician. I got tired of sitting in a chair wearing headphones and reading music, 75% of which wasn't happening. You turn into a machine—you're just reading a bunch of dumb parts, and nobody really cares about anything, unless you make a mistake or go overtime. When I quit studio work, there was no reason to play electric bass anymore, because none of my other gigs required it. So that was where it ended, although I did work with some really good

EQUIPMENT

Thompson's Triad

Don Thompson has three acoustic uprights; they include a French bass, made by Georges Chenaud around 1847 in Paris, and a little flat-back bass. ("Someone told me it was a Tyrolean, and someone else said it wasn't," Don explains.) But Thompson's favorite is a dark, $\frac{3}{4}$ -size German instrument. "It's just an 'old German bass'—that's what they call them," he says. "It's really good; it can play things that the flat-back won't play. That's why, when given a choice, I'll take it every time, even though the flat-back has a terrific sound and feels really nice." Don has used Thomastik Spirocore strings (orchestra tuning) for as long as he can remember. For live amplification, he uses an Underwood pickup and turns his little Roland Cube 60 amp to face the back wall of the stage. "That makes the amp about twice as loud and takes all the hardness out of the sound. It's not really directional and not really centered—it just seems to fill the whole room."