


# MARK KING



**O**ne of the bass heroes of '80s pop, Mark King brought frightening fusion chops and a strong Stanley Clarke influence to Level 42's "Britfunk" sound of tightly woven arrangements and catchy vocals—which Mark sang over his intricate bass lines. Based on 16th-notes, Mark's style was complex, syncopated, and both melodic and percussive. Though his fingerstyle parts are distinctive, his slapping made him famous.

"The way I slap is very different from someone like Marcus Miller or the serious funk guys," explains Mark, who was featured in March '92. "Their playing has this great gravity that lays

the whole thing down. I sort of flutter around like a butterfly. It's much more like drumming—especially jazz drumming. When I slap I'm very happy to have a synth bass supplying the fundamentals so I can do what I'm good at doing."

The '90s were not always kind to '80s superstars, as audiences cast aside many who had made their names through musical sophistication. Level 42 split up in '94, realizing mainstream listeners had lost interest in the impeccable grooves of the band's glossy funk pop. "In the mid '90s it definitely felt as if we were still an '80s band," King says. "The goal post had moved, and I don't think

## SOLO & SLAPLESS AT A LEVEL 40

BY PETER MURRAY

PHOTO BY DON ZIPF



we'd really taken that on board. Those great jaw-dropping moments have been and gone."

King has returned with a second solo CD, *One Man* [Eagle Rock/Pyramid]—the first was 1984's *Influences* [Polydor]. The new album highlights King's distinctive singing voice—four of the songs don't even have bass—and it's underpinned by a deeper, rounder bass tone than the sound that marked Level 42. There's nary a slap nor pop. "There was no place for those flittery slap things, and as a songwriter I've got to do what's right for the songs. I wanted my producer, Paul Taylor, to make me sound current, so it wasn't for me to say, 'Well, this is all sounding really great, Paul, but don't forget—I am Thunderthumbs!'"

Even onstage King is reluctant to exploit his slap renown. "I just haven't felt like doing it on

## "Those great jaw-dropping moments have been and gone!"

my latest tour. If I slapped just because people wanted me to, they wouldn't be getting the real thing—I'd be a complete parody of myself."

As King has reinvented himself he's also revamped his equipment. He has a new signature Fender Jazz Deluxe, which features a smaller body and flatter fingerboard than a traditional J-Bass. On his current tour he's playing GB 4-strings. As with his other basses, he had the necks fitted with LEDs—"something that appeals to my

tarty nature." For an amp Mark teamed with Ashdown on the King Combo, a formidable 8x10 400-watter. "It's a bit retro," King notes, "but it's got a great subharmonic button that's like an octaver. It tracks wonderfully well." He still prefers extremely light strings; his current set is by Elites, gauges .030–.090.

King, who turned 40 last fall, got the chance to review the entire Level 42 catalog for an upcoming series of Polydor re-releases. The exercise gave him a fresh perspective on his contributions. "I like being a songwriter, because it makes you use all your musical facets. But I didn't write all of Level 42's music; some of the really good bass lines came from the other players. But what we came up with was a great vehicle for me as a bass player.

"All in all I'm very pleased. I'd hate to find myself in this funny 40-something wilderness and not have made a mark at all—that would be extremely frustrating."

## Classic King: The Sound Of No Hands Slapping

**T**hough Mark King's slapping is justly celebrated, Level 42 songs such as "Kansas City Milkman" from *True Colours* and "Good Man in a Storm" from *World Machine* [both on Polydor] show he was also a master of syncopated, melodic fingerstyle grooves. To get

Level 42's precise yet funky feel, pay careful attention to the note lengths and spaces in Examples 1 and 2. Ex. 1 is written for 5-string; you can also play it in drop-D tuning.

To cop the slap chops you need for tunes such as "Love Games" [A *Physical Presence*,

Polydor], you'll need to work with your left hand as well as the right. In Ex. 3 almost every other note is a pitchless left-hand whack; at high speeds that sound blends with the low E to create a rapid-fire onslaught. It will take some practice to execute the thumps imme-

diately following popped notes, especially when the popped notes are fretted, as in the "and" of *three* in both bars. Start slowly and practice with a metronome or drum machine. Don't hurt yourself, and for the good of your career, apply these licks sparingly!

### Ex. 1

♩ = 94    D9sus4    D    C9sus4    C    G9sus4    G    F9sus4    F

Handwritten notation for Example 1, a 5-string bass line. The notation shows a series of eighth and sixteenth notes across four measures. Fingering numbers (1-5) are provided for each note. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

### Ex. 2

♩ = 100    A    Em    Cmaj7    D9    E

Handwritten notation for Example 2, a 5-string bass line. The notation shows a series of eighth and sixteenth notes across five measures. Fingering numbers (1-5) are provided for each note. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

### Ex. 3

♩ = 188    E7

Handwritten notation for Example 3, a 5-string bass line. The notation shows a series of eighth and sixteenth notes across four measures. Fingering numbers (1-5) are provided for each note. The key signature has one sharp (F#).