

BASS

PLAY

ALAIN CARON

FUSION
LIVES!

T.M. STEVENS
FUNK+ROCK=
BOOM!

EXCLUSIVE
REVIEW
THE BEST
UPRIGHT BASS
TRANSDUCERS

JUNE 1996

\$4.50 U.S., CAN. \$5.50, U.K. £2.75

06>



WIN!
CURBOW + EDEN
\$12,500
GIVEAWAY

A MILLER-FREEMAN PUBLICATION



ALAIN CARON

By Peter Murray

"Fusion music still exists, and it's here to stay," states a confident Alain Caron. While the current trend in jazz seems to favor acoustic "purity," Caron points out that the only things yet to be done in music are new combinations. "It's the end of the century, and *everything* is fusion."

Alain's most recent release, *Rhythm 'n Jazz*, is his second as a leader. The record shows off Caron as a seasoned soloist and a progressive composer; it's his most focused work to date and makes a good case for musical alchemy. The strong melodies, fretless 6-string solos, and percolating funk grooves with immaculately even slapping technique have already turned more than a few heads—and may even give the purists pause.

Caron looks young for his 41 years. He's meticulous, focused, and cerebral—an energetic virtuoso who, despite his considerable achievements, seems to show no signs of running out of ideas. Although he's thoroughly involved in every aspect of playing bass, he's also the quintessential well-rounded musician: performer, composer, teacher, and student. As if that weren't enough, Alain is well aware of the importance of technology in the process of conveying his art to his audience, and he has become

closely involved in the design of his instruments, amplifiers, and strings. The result of this potent combination is one of the strongest—and most underrated—voices of the bass world.

The youngest of 11 children, Caron was born in the small town of St. Eloi, Québec, and raised on a farm. At age 11, after he won a local talent show playing guitar and singing, the backup band invited him to join. The organist was also a capable bass player and introduced Alain to the

Photographs by Alain Tremblay

TRUE BELIEVER

instrument. Caron was a quick convert, and when the bass chair in his sister's Top 40 band opened up, he was invited to tour with them for the summer. "When September came along," he recalls, "I told my parents, 'Listen—I'd like to stay in the band and go off by myself.' I was very serious for my age, and I said, 'I know what I want to do—

I want to be a musician. I know you can't afford to send me to a university, so the only chance I have is for you to let me go.' They said, 'Okay—we trust you,' and I left."

For the next several years, Caron honed his musical abilities playing in various R&B and Top 40 bands. At age 21 he met guitarist Michel Cusson; the duo soon moved to Montréal to form a band, which they called Euzebe. "The name was a complete joke," confesses Caron. "The first time

we played was on St. Euzebe's Day, so they called it the St. Euzebe Jazz Party. It's ridiculous!" As the band gained local recognition and a record company contract, they had to reconsider the joke. "After searching and searching for a name, we decided to keep just the four middle letters: UZEB. I thought it was a cool, weird name—and everybody who already knew us was able to relate." At the same time, Caron studied privately and built up his chops with jingles, record dates, and

EQUIPMENT

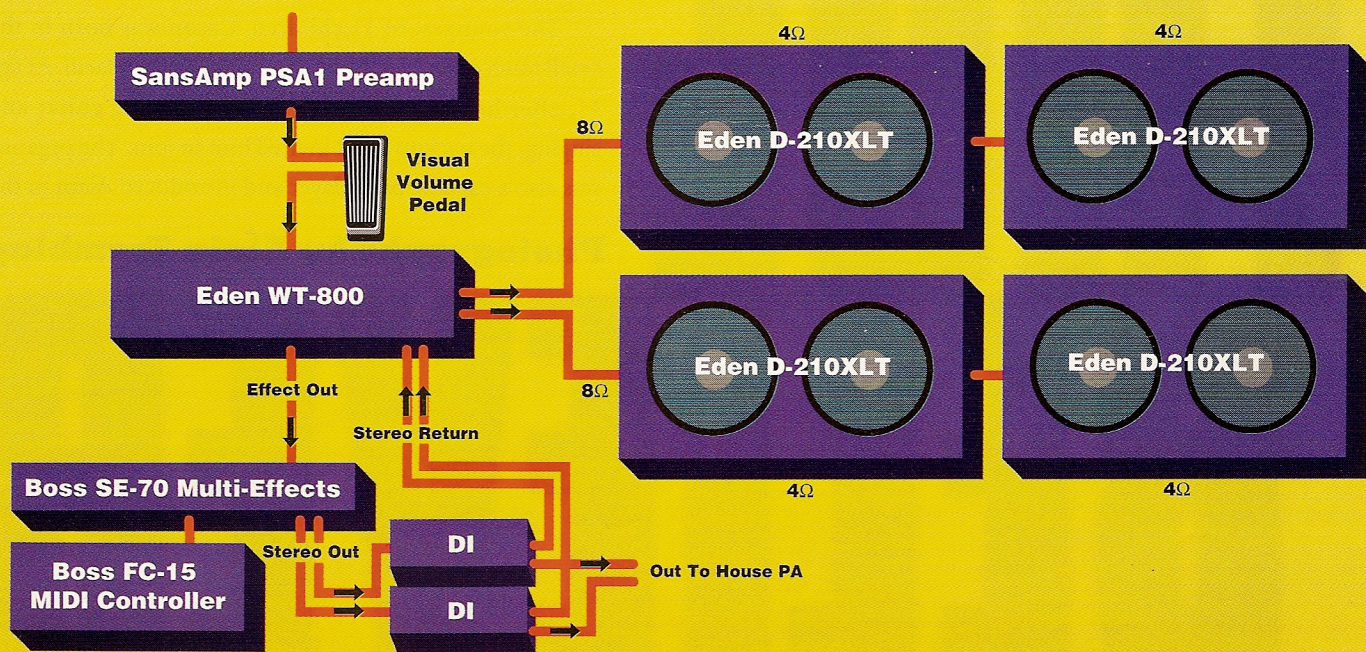
A L A I N ' S A R S E N A L

Alain Caron's high standards, discriminating ear, and methodical mind have made him a valued partner of the manufacturers with whom he works. For many years he's collaborated with builder George Furlanetto of Hamilton, Ontario, in developing the sound of his 6-string F Bases. "George's fretless basses have a character that no other fretless has, that's for sure," Caron states. "And it's becoming my sound!" The F Bases feature a rich, woody tone in part shaped by low- and high-EQ pots that each blend between two curves rather than merely shelving; this assures consistent output level and provides a greater variety of tones. Alain is also using Seymour Duncan/Basslines pickups in one of his instruments.

Whereas his bass roster once included 4- and 5-strings, uprights, piccolo basses, and synth basses, Alain now focuses on his electric 6-strings, preferring to use the fretted axe only for slapping. He doesn't have time to play much upright these days, although he's very excited about a 6-string double bass currently being built for him. He also has a Peavey Midibase bass-to-MIDI controller, which he uses for writing with his Cubase Score computer sequencing software. LaBella Super Steps (.029, .045, .065, .085, .105, .128) are Caron's strings of choice; he uses LaBella Hard Rockin' Steels on his fretless, which has a wooden bridge.

On the amp front, Alain is working closely with David Nordschow of Eden Electronics to develop his ultimate bass rig, which currently consists of an Eden WT-800 head run stereo into four Eden D-210XLT speaker cabinets, two per side. "I think they're the best speakers on the market right now," Caron proclaims. In the amp's effects loop, Alain patches a Boss SE-70 signal processor, controlled by a Boss FC-15 MIDI pedalboard. A recent addition to his setup is a Visual Volume pedal, which provides an LED volume indicator. "You lose highs on any volume pedal, as well as a little bit of precision in the low end—it shrinks," notes Caron. "But the Visual uses a very high-quality console pot, and you don't lose those frequencies. It's the best there is." In addition to the gear shown here, Caron sometimes uses an Akai MIDI line mixer to switch among his instruments and patch in several effects, including an Akai EQ and a Boss Octave pedal.

6-String Fretted or Fretless F Bass



almost-nightly jazz gigs. "At that time we were gigging regularly at 13 or 14 jazz clubs," he remembers. "I was playing lots of upright bass with all the bebop musicians in town."

In 1980, Caron attended a summer session at Berklee College of Music in Boston; in the short time he was there, he discovered he was on the right track musically. "I wanted to know where I was, in terms of what level I was at. Plus, I wanted to challenge myself in a school situation." However, instead of staying in the States to pursue a career as a bebop sideman, Caron returned to Québec. "I think it was a good choice," he says

reflectively, with the satisfaction of knowing he went on to make a major mark on the international fusion scene of the '80s.

UZEB ended up playing together for 15 years and releasing ten albums. Not only were they one of the most important and influential fusion acts of their time, they were also a commercial success, selling over 500,000 records worldwide. Recent years have seen Caron touring with guitarist Mike Stern, recording with Mike's guitarist wife, Leni Stern, and giving master classes in Europe and North America. I chatted with Alain over strong coffee in his sparse, modern townhouse just outside Montréal, and I was impressed by the expert vibe that continuously emanated from this sage veteran.

How important was being a member of a band in developing your sound and style, as opposed to being a session player?

It's very tough to be in a band, because the better a musician gets, the more the phone rings. So, first of all, it's hard to get a schedule together; when you're trying to book a band, the members have to be available. UZEB's main virtue was that everybody was focused on the band, so it allowed us to book gigs and try things at different levels: music, performance, developing a unique sound, producing records, managing tours—all the parameters that are important in a career. It's good to be able to go into a studio where they say, "Here's the chart, the style is this, I want you to go in that direction"—but it's not in those situations that you develop your sound. The main thing I got out of UZEB was the ability to develop my sound and spread the word.

Fusion seems to have become a dirty word these days.

Yes, it has—and that's too bad, because the word is fine. A word is a fashion; now, the word "jazz" is cool. Fusion is not "in" anymore, because when you say the word, people think of a certain sound: loud and fast playing, with no emotion. That's why I called my new record *Rhythm 'n Jazz*—because it's rhythm & blues and jazz!

The fusion movement was originally about breaking with the jazz tradition—but after a while, most fusion musicians seemed to stop innovating. Your music, though, continues to explore rather than copy.

I've never tried to copy; I try to avoid it, actually. The problem is the media. I think people have the ability to hear and like different types of music—if they get a chance to hear it. With most of the radio stations in the U.S., if you don't fit that "jazz" sound, you don't get on the air—so there's no room for anything different. Some music isn't played on the radio because people don't like it, but people don't like it because they don't know it exists—so we're stuck in a circle. The whole media system for music is terrible. Today's society isn't designed to develop new artists and deep, good music; you've got to fit the market. It's a trap.

So you believe people are actually open to good new music.

Definitely! We proved it with UZEB, and I always go back to that. After we made our first record, the whole industry in Montréal said, "It's never going to work; it's music for musicians." But we sold 35,000 records, which is more than most singers sell in Québec! We went to the crowd; we weren't musicians focused on ourselves onstage. We played music we liked and believed, and we were ready to give it to the people. We'd say, "Hi, people—we're here to play music for you," just to make that connection. I think musicians should understand that. If you're too much of a purist and too introverted onstage, you won't

connect with the audience. If you convince yourself people are not going to like your music, they never will.

Do you think that's a common problem with jazz?

It is, because if you look at the golden age of jazz ... man! People were onstage doing a *show*! I'm not a showman, but I always try to be conscious of the people in front. UZEB went on the road with that in mind; we had the same concept when we went outside of Québec, and it worked. That convinced me the people are a lot more open than the media and record companies.

Some of your contemporaries, such as Mark Egan and Marcus Miller, have had to start their own labels. Does that concern you?

Oh, yes! You've got to be very aggressive and believe in yourself to survive in this business right now. It's hard to find people to work for you at a decent price, because everybody wants to make money. Plus, I think there are too many records. Everybody has a CD out! For record companies, it's become a nightmare to choose who's good and who isn't. I'm sorry to say this, but A&R people don't necessarily have the ability to understand music, because they're focused on making money—so you have to turn to independent labels, who like what they do. We were originally on a very small Montréal label called Paroles & Musique, and in France we were on a label called GMS; without those two companies, UZEB probably would never have made records.

I spend a lot of time sending faxes and stuff like that, because if I didn't, I'd stay at home and end up teaching. I'd rather perform, and I think I'm talented enough to be up there onstage.

Keith Jarrett has said that many younger players are blindly trying to follow in the jazz tradition as a fashion—emulating the greats instead of doing what he considers the essence of jazz, which is to create your own thing.

But that can bring you back to square one: if you're original and you play like yourself, you don't fit. It's a prison that purist jazz created for itself. If you can't sound like Scott LaFaro or Ray Brown, or if you're a piano player who doesn't play like Bill Evans, you're not good enough. You've got to pass the test, and once you pass the test, they say, "Ah ... you sound like Bill Evans!" I respect jazz; I want to play it, and I consider myself a jazz player, but I always try to be out of it a little.

Why, then, was UZEB successful?

We were lucky to meet people who were willing to help us make a record and put it on the market. I used to play for this guy who had a jingle agency; at every soundcheck in the studio, I'd be playing all my shit, and the engineer, the band leader—everybody but the man who ran the agency—would say, "No jazz in here!" and things like that. I got pissed, but this guy said, "Man, that's cool what you're playing!" I told him, "I've got a band—why don't you come listen to us?" He did, and he liked it. He had a really open mind

and connections in record companies, and he gave us a chance. We made an album, and the crowd bought it. But basically, if you don't get that break, you're fucked! And if it takes too long, you become a has-been, where people say, "Oh, not him again—he's frustrated, because he's wanted to make it for a long time." That's dangerous, too.

Do these challenges make you more cautious? How conscious are you of airplay, for example?

I still haven't been caught in that trap. I've never said, "Okay—I'm going to do this to get airplay." I believe in myself, and I believe that if I like the music I write, others will like it, too. I'm not from Mars; I talk with people, I come from a large family and can deal with people, so my

music's got to be like me.

I've always believed that if you're dishonest when you shake someone's hand, you can fool him a couple of times—but after a while, he'll know you're an asshole. My father is my idol because of his honesty; he once said to me, "If you invest shit, you'll get shit!" I'd rather play with someone else than put my name on a record that I'm not convinced is totally me. I respect my name.

*Why did you decide to put "Donna Lee" on *Rhythm 'n Jazz*, instead of covering a different Charlie Parker tune or a Jaco composition?*

I realize you've got to be pretentious to do that! [Laughs.] I thought about it a long time. I was already practicing all the Parker heads when

SLAPPING OUTSIDE WITH ALAIN CARON

Track 4 of Alain Caron's *Rhythm 'n Jazz*, "Slam the Clown," is a funky, uptempo tour-de-force that showcases his unusual slap style. Before powering into a euphoric and intense groove with drummer Dennis Chambers, Alain slaps out the tune's complex head. "The basic tonality is *Dsus4*," he says, "and a *sus4* chord's character is that it can go to a dominant or a minor chord." This ambiguity allows the use of the Mixolydian or Dorian modes, or the blues scale. To add depth to the melody, Caron creates tension by taking it "out" and bringing it back inside.

The first door to the "outside" is based on the G altered diminished scale, which alternates half-tones



and whole-tones: tonic, ♭2nd, #2nd, 3rd, #4th, 5th, 6th, ♭7th (G, A♭, A#, B, C#, D, E, F). "If you're in D minor and go to the IV chord, G, you can apply that scale as a way to take D minor outside," Alain reveals. "I just reharmonized the

line with thirds." The minor thirds to which he's referring are *G*, *Bb*, *Db*, and *E*, all contained within the *G* altered diminished scale. Playing them creates a tension that resolves beautifully upon return to the center-key tonality, *Dsus4*.

The second "outside" option is the A altered scale (A, B \flat , C, D \flat , E \flat , F, G), which is derived from the E \flat dominant Lydian chord, E \flat #11 \flat 13. (See bars 4 and 5.) "Playing outside is about setting up tension that will later be relieved," says Caron. "It's about chords taking you for a ride, but you know you're coming back to the center key."

Technically, the whole "Slam the Clown" bass line is slapped—but because Alain's technique is

so even, it's difficult to tell his slaps from his pops. By using his thumb in both down and up motions and popping with his index and middle fingers, he never needs to use left-hand thumping and hammer-on techniques, which tend to have limited melodic applications. In this excerpt, however, there are no upstrokes of the thumb: Caron slaps with his right hand positioned over the end of the fretboard, using minimal hand movement. Meanwhile, he mutes all the lower strings with his right palm. "It's always there," Alain confirms. He gets further control by anchoring his right-hand pinkie against the body of the bass, just past the C string. **Slamin'!**

Song and Transcription by Alain Caron

$\text{♩} = 120$

1

String: B B A A A A E E E E B E E B B B B E E E A E
 L.H.: 4 1 4 2 4 2 4 3 2 1 4 1 3 3 1 2 4 4 2 A E
 R.H.: T T P1 T P1 P2 T P1 P2 T T T P1 P2 T T T T P1 T P1 T P1 T


4

A A E E E E E E E E A A D A E E A D A
 1 1 4 3 2 1 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 4 1 4 1 4 1 4
 P1 P2 T T P1 T T P1 P2 T T T T P1 P2 T

7

[illegible]

10



B	B		E	E	E E E	E E E A E A D	A	A	A	A
4	1		4	1	1 2 3	1 2 3 1 3 1 1	3	1	3	1
T	T		T	T	T P1 T	T P1 T P1 T P1 P2	T	T	T	T

13

© 1995 Les Éditions du 5 juillet et Les Éditions Jean-Marie Salhani. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

As a leader: *Rhythm 'n Jazz*, Avant-Garde/Lipstick; *Le Band*, Avant-Garde. **With UZEB:** (all on Avant-Garde) *World Tour '90*; *Noisy Nights*; *Fast Emotion*; *Live in Bracknell*. **With Michel Donato:** *Basse Contre Basse*, Avant-Garde. **With Caron-Ecay-Lockwood:** *Caron Ecay Lockwood*, Avant-Garde. **With Leni Stern:** (both on Lipstick) *Like One*; *Ten Songs*.

Jaco came on the scene—but the way he did it was so strong, so musical, and so good that I'll always have respect for him. I practiced "Donna Lee" on fretless, to prove to myself I was able to do it; then I started to do it on the upright, in the same register; and then I started to practice it an octave higher. Finally, I played it with my slap technique: I thought, I'll practice it just for me—but at some point I decided it was good. In the liner notes, though, I wrote that the tune was for Jaco, because it doesn't belong to me. I can play "Donna Lee" on fretless and make it sing a lot more, but that's been done; I figured my version had to be unique. I think I've done that, whether you like it or not. I must confess I like it, and I'm still working on it!

*On **Rhythm 'n Jazz**, there seems to be a greater focus on the writing and a greater integration of the bass parts into the overall compositions than on your earlier work.*

I agree. When UZEB was starting out, I had all kinds of ideas: crazy rock fusion, Cuban rhythms, and romantic songs. This time I thought, I'm not going to do that again; I'm going to put in two basic elements: a rhythm & blues type of harmony mixed with jazz, a deeper harmony. I think there's only one square 16th-note feel on the record, and one 6/8; all the rest of it has a swing feel.

The playing seems to be more in the service of the compositions, whereas previously the compositions seemed to be vehicles for playing.

That's right. When you start playing jazz, what do you want to do? You want to improvise. You start by making arrangements of existing tunes, and then, when you start to write, your main focus is still on creating ways to make solos. And the more you write, the more you arrange your solos. I'm starting to scratch the surface of not hearing the solo but the tune itself: the way it starts, the power of the melody, and the way to make the melody come out. I learned a lot from playing with Mike Stern, in terms of how to develop a tune and how to make a solo work.

*There are no solos transcribed in your book **Rhythm 'n Jazz** [published by Les Éditions du 5 juillet, 7891 rue St-André, Montréal, Québec H2R 2R2 Canada; (514) 948-6112]. Is that to encourage other players to transcribe, or to get them to come up with their own solos?*

It's to encourage them to make their own. The book is not a method—it's a vehicle to play the tunes. The purpose is to make the musician understand how the tunes are written. There's a framework, and you improvise on it.

Do you write on the keyboard?

Yes, most of the time. Before I sit down at the piano, I imagine the tune as much as I can: the tonality, the groove, the harmony, the form. In each song, you can emphasize the melody, the harmony, or the rhythm. You can make a strong melody or a complicated melody, and you can make a complicated or very simple harmony, or a dark harmony. Meanwhile, the

to write: with a melody that's developed on a motif. I'm trying to develop more and more techniques for composing, but all the time I try to have the framework and the whole idea of the tune in my head. Then I just set them up on the keyboard; I work on the parts and put them into the computer. And sometimes I write with just the bass.

You have fantastic intonation on fretless. Are there specific exercises you worked on to develop that?

I'm still working on it. The main thing is to want it, to make it your top priority—even more than the actual notes you're playing. When you play, you need a lot of experience with the instrument to be able to disconnect yourself and be

your own listener. I practice slowly, and the thing that has helped me the most is practicing lots of solo pieces, like Bach's. You should first get in tune with yourself—from one note to another—and then get in tune with the other players. I've found that if I start to listen to the notes I play instead of the pitches, I get out of tune; it's all a matter of focus. I've also found it's harder to play in tune through headphones.

When I first got a computer a long time ago, I started to practice scales and arpeggios just for intonation, with no vibrato at all: playing all the notes right on the buck. I taped myself and lis-

**"IF YOU
CONVINCE
YOURSELF
PEOPLE ARE
NOT GOING TO
LIKE YOUR
MUSIC, THEY
NEVER WILL."**

tened back to it. Left-hand technique is very important for intonation; as you improve your technique, your intonation will get better.

Your thumbstyle playing has become more and more even between the slaps and pops. When did you start developing that concept, and how did you make it happen?

I've always had that concept. When I started listening to Stanley Clarke, the thing I noticed was that most slappers didn't play melodies—just octaves and rhythmic things on basic chord tones. I started to work on octaves, but right away I also started to slap in upstrokes as well as downstrokes and to pull with both my index and middle fingers. [Ed. Note: See instructional sidebar, page 48.] There's an example of that on a tune called "Brass Licks," on UZEB's first studio record [*Fast Emotion*]; not many players were using that technique at the time, which was in 1981. For the past five years I've spent a lot of time on my slapping, and I'm still splitting my time half-and-half between fretless and slap.

You've always been committed to good equipment—from the instrument and amp to the sound of the PA.

Definitely, from the very beginning. When I was playing in Top 40 bands, I was singing; I'd sing okay, but people would tell me, "We can't hear you!" When we started to play in larger rooms I was getting a good sound out of my amp, but people in front would say, "Your bass sound sucks." I'd answer, "No, it's not true—you're listening to the PA and the sound man is bad." But you can't explain that to every person, and besides, it's not their problem. They're the ones who are listening. After all, what are we doing as musicians? We're selling sound—and even if I play great notes, if I don't have a nice sound, there's no point. So I always hire a good sound man whom I know, which costs a lot of money.

I'm still working on sound, because there's always something you can do to improve. I want the listeners to hear the same thing I hear, so every time I have a new sound man, I say, "Listen to the record, and stand in front of my amp—that's the sound I want to hear out front."

What would you say to a young player who's trying to improve?

You should always have fun, first of all. For many years I was never happy, because I was always trying to reach next month's level, which was impossible. If your friends tell you you're good, it's not good enough. Go challenge yourself. When you think you're good, go practice—listen to Jaco's "Donna Lee" or Scott LaFaro. But you have to be careful not to go too far on the other side and think you're shit; that's dangerous, too. Play at your own level. If you practice something during the day, don't try to play it that night, because you'll be disappointed. In general, I'd say you've got to be proud of yourself, so you can do what you do with conviction. You have to be convinced of what you can do. ♪