



Betty



Alison Husbach @TrueFire



The Bass Summit
STUART HAMM AND ARIANE CAP

STUART HAMM *MEETS* ARIANE CAP

Every now and then, we get a couple of great bass players together to do our hard work and interview each other about their lives at the low end. This month, the great **Stuart Hamm** breaks bread with the equally great **Ariane Cap**, both state-of-the-art educators and practitioners of solo bass

S TUARTHAMM Ari, you're my closest musical neighbour in Los Angeles. I've really valued your friendship over the years. We go hiking, we go for coffee, I take Logic lessons with your lovely husband. It's great.

ARIANE CAP Remember how we first met? My husband and I were at Whole Foods Market, and all of a sudden, my husband says, 'You know that bass player you were talking about? I think that's him over there'. I was like, 'Oh my God, I don't have my makeup on'.

SH You didn't have your makeup on. I was so embarrassed. I didn't know where to look.

AC Ha ha! It was like 9am, come on. So we said hello, and it was an amazing moment for me.

SH Then we met again at a Warwick Bass Camp in Germany, and you reminded me that we met at Whole Foods, and we figured out that we live five miles apart in LA.

AC You sent me a text saying you were going on a solo tour, and would I be interested in opening for you. I was like, 'Wow!' To be addressed like that by Stu Hamm...

SH Oh, that's very kind. Are you still being super-healthy?

AC I try to be. It's really important to my wellbeing, because if I don't look after my body and eat right and sleep, I just don't function very well. I'm extremely active with writing books and teaching, so working out keeps me sane. I'm doing this crazy class twice a week of active breathing that is very heavy. It forces you to be in the moment.

SH I tried lifting weights once, but man, those things are heavy! But seriously, I'm just glad that my kids have grown up fit and athletic and slender. They inherited their mother's genes. Anyway, what have you been working on over the past year?

AC I've been incredibly busy over the pandemic. I've helped a lot of other teachers get online. I've done a ton of online teaching seminars, and I finished my second book. Now I'm deeply involved in the Indiegogo campaign with that. I've created new teaching formats, practice groups, you know, all sorts of different things. So that's been going really well. What about you?

SH Not being able to see my mom has been the main problem – she's up in Seattle and she's 97, so I've been dealing with that. But



“When I was growing up, any music that had drums was dismissed as not being ‘real music!’”

I managed to get some music done. I went to Sweetwater in Indiana to do a recording workshop, and I'm going back soon to finish a record with Alex Skolnick. I also went to Tampa to do two courses for Sweetwater. Now things are opening up here in California, I'm upgrading my studio with lights and a backdrop and a new keyboard and monitor and all that stuff. I still refuse to create 'content', because I'm a musician, and I want to make music, but at the same time, you better start swimming, or are you gonna sink like a stone? The times they are a-changing.

AC Are you teaching too?

SH I'm teaching a lot. Also, there's been

a pretty steady stream of guitar players wanting me to play on their projects, so I do a lot of recording here in my studio. I've really had to up my Logic game. It's funny, I always pushed back against doing any of that stuff, because I don't really want to be a video editor. The time that I spend learning iMovie or whatever, I could be becoming a better bassist, or a smarter man, you know.

AC Do you seriously feel that you need to improve as a bass player?

SH That's why I get up in the morning. Everyone has their own little niche that they can carve out of the music industry. You're really great at the education and the content

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and the books and all that stuff. To my detriment, I just wanted to be a respected bass player in lots of different styles, so I'm still motivated to get better. I'm still trying to make my bass sound like Glenn Gould, with articulation on every note. I'm still trying to get that clarity. Also, it takes me time to get to where I want to be. There may be some bass players that are so physically talented that they don't have to practise anything. I'm not that way. It takes me a good 15 minutes or half an hour to get to a point where I like the way I play, and in my life, there have been maybe 10 times when I felt that I was playing at the level that I'm really capable of. I enjoyed those times immensely, so I always try to get back there. What about you? I know you come from a music-conservatory background, with classical training that is steeped in the European tradition.

AC Yes, that's correct. I have a really unusual background compared to most other electric bass players. I grew up kind of secluded, in a small town in Austria called Innsbruck, and I started studying classical music when I was very little. I didn't listen to any rock or pop – nothing like that. Any music that had drums was frowned upon and dismissed as not being 'real music', you know. I was talented, but I didn't like practising – and that's not a good combination, because at some point you hit a wall.

SH Wow. When did that change?

AC When I was 18, I had the sense there was another world out there. I suddenly turned into a rebel and I felt that I needed to break out, so I went to America for a year on my own – and there it was: rock and roll. I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I fell right in the middle of it. People were playing jazz and rock and pop stuff. Everybody I knew had instruments, so when we were hanging out, I would pick a bass up and play something and go, 'Oh, yeah, that makes sense – I can do that', because I had the theory and I understood how music was put together.

SH Is that when you started performing?

AC Actually, no. When I came back from that year, aged 19, I took a totally different route and did a degree in biology. I knew I had to be in a band, though, because I loved the vibe of hanging out and making music. The first song I ever learned was 'Cheap Sunglasses' by ZZ Top. That was my first bass-line.

SH Did you find that improvising was hard to do after reading classical music off the page?

AC Strangely, that came quite easily to me. You're right that when you do classical music, it's all about the book. You never play something that's not there. Nobody ever showed me that improvising even existed. I didn't know you were allowed to do it. I tried improvising once when I was in my teens, and they were like, 'Why are you doing that? Forget it'. But when I saw a jazz gig, I said to myself, 'I don't care what it takes, but I want to be able to do that'. So when I finished my biology degree, I got really serious about catching up on bass. It was an amazing journey. When I started getting into solo bass, studying Steve Lawson, Michael Manring and you, it really cracked a huge door open for me, because I realised that I could do whatever I wanted. I should add that a huge paradigm shift took place in the world of bass when you started taking pieces by Bach and Gershwin and playing them on your bass. I understand that you come from a musicology background?

SH Yes. My dad, Charles Hamm, was the President of the American Musicology Association for a number of years. He was also the editor of the *Grove Dictionary*, and he was a composer, a sports fan, a novelist. He was my best friend and the greatest guy I ever met. I guess his claim to fame was that he started the academic study of popular music, so next time you read a scholarly paper on Snoop Dogg's beats, you can blame my dad for that. He also started the International Association For The Study Of Popular Music.

AC Was your mom musical too?

SH Yes, my mother was a voice teacher and opera singer, so my brother Bruce and I were exposed to all kinds of music. My father was a poker-

playing friend of John Cage, so we used to go and take my plastic army men and put them between the strings of John's piano for him to play. At home we had a microtonal piano that had 19 tones in an octave.

AC That sounds amazing.

SH It really was. We would go to a John Prine concert one day and then the Sun Ra Arkestra for three nights in a row. Bruce, who is an incredible musician, had all the cool music in his room – Mahavishnu Orchestra, and *Live/Evil* by Miles Davis, and Pink Floyd and all this weird stuff. Later on he ran the Ali Akbar



Khan School of Indian Music in San Rafael: he and his wife are the driving force of Indian music in the Bay Area. It was a really great, varied musical upbringing, and nothing was looked down on, whether it was pop or Judy Collins or the Staples Singers or Victor Borgia or whatever. I started playing bass by playing upright and walking through chord changes. The first time I played with a rock band, the first song I learned was 'Whipping Post' by the Allman Brothers Band. Now, you've really done wonderfully as an educator, and your two books are awesome. I steal from them regularly to use with my students. I wanted to ask you, why did you choose diagrams over TAB in your books?

AC I did that because I noticed that a lot of my students know a bunch of songs, but they can't crack the code to come up with their own bass-lines or to understand what they mean. That's a typical student: they're a little bit self-taught, and they've picked up a scale here and there, but it doesn't connect up. Now, normally when you teach theory to a student, you tell them 'Forget everything you know, and open up this music theory book on page one'. There's Every Good Boy Does Fine on



“I’ve been making my living with bass, and doing nothing else, since 1979... I can’t complain”

GEAR BOX

ARIANE CAP

Marleaux Bass Guitars, Fibenare Bases Hungary, Gruv Gear, BeatBuddy, Aeros Looper, Tsunami Cables, Back Beat

STUART HAMM

Warwick, Markbass, GHS strings, Wireworld Cables, TC Electronic, Zoom, River Straps

page two, there’s a whole note and a half note on page three, and after that you have pages and pages of arpeggios that just don’t connect with people, because it means they have to forget everything they already know.

SH Absolutely. How did you manage to solve that problem?

AC I wanted to meet them where they’re at – at the place where they already know some stuff on the fretboard. You know, ‘This five-note scale you already know is called a pentatonic, and you can play it here and you can play it there’. That was the purpose of my first book: it was step one in the way that I like to teach bass. But it’s still not the completely comprehensive knowledge of the fretboard that I want for my students, where they can fluidly go into the next chord in any progression. I want them to be able to go anywhere from anywhere – and that’s what the second book is about. I’m not against reading by any means; I think everybody

should learn notation, but learning notation is so much easier when you understand music theory and how it translates to the fretboard. We do this by using fretboard patterns in all sorts of combinations, from easy to hard.

SH What has been the high point of your career so far?

AC I’ve played with some amazing bands and musicians, but when you’re asked to come to a foreign country and play solo bass, that is just an amazing honour. So when you invited me to Brazil and we played a double bill, that was one of my favourite experiences – and I’m not just saying that because you’re here! And you?

SH Personally, I feel blessed every time I get on an aeroplane and realise that I’m flying someplace to get paid to play original music, and to do something

that no-one else does. Early on in my career I did a gig with Joe Satriani, and we played the Wiltern – and Stanley Clarke came to see me

“When I saw a jazz gig, I said ‘I don’t care what it takes, I want to be able to do that’” Ariane Cap

play. That’s a highlight for sure. And then there’s a town in south-eastern Estonia called Voru, where the Stu Hamm Bass Wellness Camp will happen when all this is over. I’ve had my two best gigs there. It’s such a beautiful country, and the people there are incredible. It looks like Vermont, where I grew up, with the birch trees and the snow and the hills. I don’t know what it is about that place, man, but those were two of the best gigs I’ve ever had.

AC What are the challenges that you face in 2021?

SH Well, I’ve been making my living at bass, and doing nothing else, since 1979, so it’s a challenge to keep that up. I’m not going to complain about it, but you gotta get ready, because the next Mike Tyson of bass is coming. He or she might be here tomorrow, or next week, but it’ll be soon. So that’s certainly a challenge, but that’s what life’s about. Bob and weave, man. Hold fast. Batten down the hatches. What about you?

AC I’m super-happy with how things are going with the teaching. I’m so happy with all the interactions I have with my students and the success they’re having. That is really feeding my soul, and I’m looking forward to creating more books and recording more solo bass stuff. Being in a band again would be great too – I’m starving to play with people. Let’s just live life.

SH You said it right, Ari. I have no control over the future, and so it doesn’t really matter what I want. What I’m aiming for is peace of mind and tranquillity, possibly nirvana, and then the rest will just take care of itself. I hope I can play bass. I’m really trying to do that. I’m working on it.

AC You know, Stu, you’re doing okay.

SH I’m doing okay. We’re doing okay! ■

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