

COLIN MOULDING

XTC'S

BACKROOM

BOY

The pop-music world has few bass heroes. While some bassists step outside the instrument's traditional boundaries to get noticed, others become so taste-conscious they forsake the opportunity to make vital melodic and harmonic contributions. XTC's Colin Moulding is a rare example of a bassist who balances both approaches. "You've got to bow down to the god Song!" the 43-year-old affirms. "It's nice if the bass line stands up on its own, but it has to fit within the song's confines and do it justice; you have to play off other people. When they're playing more, you have to retire a little bit. You learn to listen to other people as you're playing, which is often quite difficult."

It's a revelation to learn that even Moulding—to many a master of tasteful understatement—considers much of his early work "overplaying."

On the long-awaited new release *Apple Venus* [on XTC's own Idea Records, distributed in the U.S. by TVT] the band's music is more than ever illuminated by lush, mature harmony, not to mention XTC's precious prize: melody.

XTC has refused to tour since 1982 (due mostly to frontman Andy Partridge's stagefright), but XTC fans—many of whom gather on the Internet—now have much to celebrate. In addition to *Apple Venus*, the band has released a four-CD box set titled *Transistor Blast*. Also, XTC and Neville Farmer have written a colorful and insightful book, *Song Stories: The Exclusive Authorized Story Behind the Music* [Hyperion].

There's been a great development in your groove, from the punky, on-top-of-the-beat approach of earlier XTC records to a warmer, more flowing, laid-back sound.

I think I just learned to play better. There's a lot of overplaying on those early records, especially on my part. I think I play less than I did all those years ago, and yet it doesn't sound any emptier. It just sounds better placed—that's the secret. When I was about 22 all I wanted was

BY PETER MURRAY

PHOTOGRAPH BY EBET ROBERTS





Punk Ecstasy: XTC at CBGB, 1979.

to be heard, but you can make it sound fuller by playing less. You're just scribbling over somebody else's song when you're playing too much. You've got to have self-discipline about your playing, which I didn't really have until we came off the road.

Any examples where you thought you overplayed?

The first four albums!

Was there a particular role model for your bass playing?

The bassist for Free, Andy Fraser, used to play the cheekiest things; that's probably what really started me on the road to playing. On bass you can be cheekier than everybody else, because you're supposed to be in the background—and when you do come to the fore it's like, "Oh, where did that come from!" Then you retreat to your former position. I still think "All Right Now" is one of the best bass lines ever. He doesn't even play in the verses; he just comes in for the choruses and that middle bit, which was a revelation for me at the time.

What are some of your most successful bass parts?

I couldn't really single out any one track as the best. It's nicer to say I think I've done my duty on each track. One track might not be as distinctive a line as another, but if it does the job, then it's as good because it's fulfilled its purpose.

Are you getting better at that?

I'd like to think so. I was bloody awful when I started out, and probably playing so many gigs made it worse! It wasn't really until the early to mid '80s before I started getting anywhere near good.

How do you and Andy work on the songs he writes?

He plays bass on his demos. Sometimes there's no bass, in which case he's looking to me to come up with something. Sometimes there's half an idea of how the bass should go, and then the difficult bits he'll leave blank. But if he comes up with something he feels is integral to the song, obviously I'll play it. It's nice when you come up with a good line for somebody else's song, but it's not essential. You can make a song better with a good arrangement—but it's the song people are interested in. They have to enjoy the song; they don't have to enjoy the bass part. I mean, it's a musician's thing, really, to enjoy bass parts and stuff.

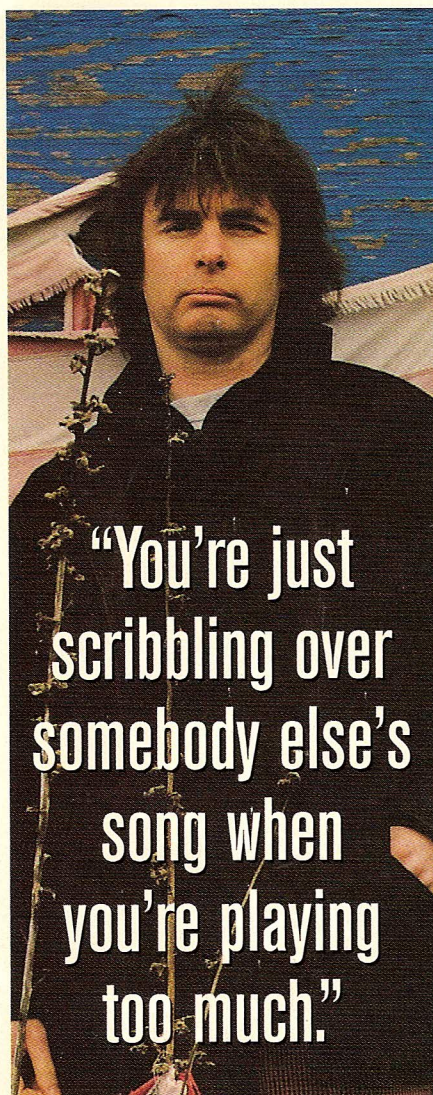
As an entirely self-taught musician do you ever regret not having studied formally, so you could write out string arrangements, for example?

That would be nice to do. I'm quite pleased with my brass arrangements on "Frivolous Tonight," although they were done in conjunction with [former XTC keyboardist/guitarist] Dave Gregory. I'd just sing the tunes and he'd figure out the notes on piano and write them in.

Do you know the chord names when you

selected discography

With XTC: (On Idea/TVT) *Apple Venus; Transistor Blast.* (On Virgin/Geffen) *Nonsuch; Oranges and Lemons; Skylarking; The Big Express; Mummer; English Settlement; Black Sea; Drums & Wires; Go2; White Music.* **With the Dukes of Stratosphere** (XTC's psychedelic side-project): *Chips from the Chocolate Fireball*, Virgin/Geffen. **With Sam Phillips:** *Martinis and Bikinis*, Virgin.



write a song?

No. I don't think you need to know the names of the chords the melody is falling onto. But you do have to have a melodic ear. The best stuff is done intuitively anyway. Forget about the technical side of it; it's just what you feel. Although I would like to read the dots—that would be helpful in conveying ideas to other people.

What is your approach to working with drummers in the studio?

I'm always the last to do my stuff. We put everything on, and then I put mine on—so it's

not that essential who I play with. When their parts are done I can take away a tape and put my stuff to it. I certainly love doing the bass later, when I know all the elements. You can really hone down your part.

What do you think of yourself as a bass player?

Technically I think I'm awful. Technology has been fantastic to me. You know, we insert things here and there and everywhere, chop it up and fly it in. But that's all part of it. The palette's grown much wider now; you can do all kinds of things, so you can express yourself a lot better. If you can do three or four takes, do three or four takes! Okay, if you're going to record a part for days on end it will get a bit boring, and you'll lose the impetus. The important thing is to keep the spirit up, because once the spirit's broken, there's no way the song will be great.

Do you have a special approach to coming up with bass lines?

I like to take Andy's demo or my demo, put it down to two tracks on my Portastudio, and play along on the other two tracks. It helps so much if you can listen to it coming back, as a song.

How conscious are you of the craft of that process? Do you think, Okay, we've had a busy verse section on the bass, so perhaps in the bridge we'll open it up...

Yeah, just like that. You criticize yourself and simplify the part. Take the essence of it, but just cut out one or two notes. What's the least you can get away with? The least will be the strongest. And you listen to it coming back several times to see what you prefer. Don't listen to it technically—listen to it emotionally.

You talk about doing the least amount possible, yet many players would just play eighth-note roots, doing even less but also contributing less.

It's a feel thing. If the song requires eighth-notes on the root, then it's what you've got to do. You've got to look at it as a song and say, "That part's more interesting, but is it really doing justice to the song? Maybe I can do something a bit more interesting in the second verse—but in the first verse that's what it's gotta be."

XTC's music changed a lot after you stopped touring in 1982.

When you don't tour it opens up your palette, since you don't need to worry whether you can reproduce everything live. We can do what we want in the studio, we can indulge ourselves to the hilt—and I'm afraid we do, as well. We're in our 40s now, and the prospect of going onstage and jumping up and down seems a little undignified.

Does your music's increased harmonic sophistication give you more opportunity?

I think it gives me less, actually. Usually, the more complicated the chord, the more it requires an absolute bass anchor. In those cases you don't look to the song's melodic interest, you look to the rhythmic interest. For example, something like "That Wave" [*Nonsuch*], where it's got these very discordant, horrible little chords, I probably

COLIN MOULDING *continued*

thought, Okay—we'll have to anchor this down. So you look at what accents you can play to make the line more interesting. There's a lot you can do with octaves and 5ths, believe it or not.

You seem to have the quintessential bassist personality: mellow, reserved, stable, pragmatic.

I'm one of the "backroom boys"—that's what I enjoy doing. If you write a song and you sing it, you've got to go out there and deliver, but I always feel as though I'm not really in my right place. I enjoy being one of life's backroom boys.

Are you a bass player partly because of your personality?

I guess so. It's all the more rewarding when you do poke your head out from behind people and say, "I'm here," both personality-wise and music-wise. If you say nothing for two hours in an interview and then you pipe up and say something, people listen to you. If you're talking all the time they'll put their hands over their ears!

Now that you have your own record company there's no longer an industry machine grooming you for the masses. Are you settling for the status quo in terms of popularity?

No, we want to be popular and sell records—to reach a lot of people if we can. But regarding our music, we don't have any control over that. You absorb influences, and what songs you come

MOULDING'S HOLDINGS

Colin Moulding's current main bass is a 1969 Vox Apollo 4; producer T-Bone Burnett gave him the instrument in 1993 during the recording of Sam Phillips's *Martinis and Bikinis*. "This is the sound I've been wanting for the last ten years," Moulding reveals. "It has a real nice bottom end and that '60s click as well, which I'm fond of. It's McCartney-esque, loves compression, and really sings. *Apple Venus* is the first XTC album we've used it on; I think it's on every track but two. It needs an amp, because it sounds very flat through a DI." Colin's Epiphone Newport, which he bought in '79 for the *Black Sea* sessions, shows up on "The Last Balloon" and "Green Man." "It's an old '60s-type bass with a damper, which gives it that stringy double-bass sound. But the intonation's gone on it, so I don't use it much now."

For recording the Vox bass on *Apple Venus* Colin bought a small 140-watt Gallien-Krueger combo amp, which he augmented with a G-K 4x12 cabinet. "Those Gallien-Krueger amps are very good because they don't have that hard, honky sound. It's solid-state but sounds very warm. Up until this year when I bought the G-K, I haven't had an amp since we came off the road—I've always DI'd."

The instrument Colin used on most XTC recordings from *The Big Express* onward was a Wal Pro Bass. "It has a very barksy tone, and it's quite versatile—but it doesn't go really low, and that's what I like about a lot of '60s bass sounds. The Wal has a more modern, active, cutting sound."

Colin has always strung up with Rotosound Swing Bass 66 roundwounds (.045, .065, .080, .105). "It's the only make I know, so that's what I get. I don't change them very often, either. I think at the end of the day it's what you get used to. I probably started off on them by accident."

up with is out of your control. It's not a conscious effort; it's where your mind's eye takes you. If it's not commercial and doesn't fit in with the scheme of things today, then our record sales will be poor. If it does, fantastic. But we don't want to play at being pop stars. It's just great writing songs and

working in the studio, and when somebody won't give us the money to make records, we'll go and borrow it from somewhere.

Unfortunately, good music doesn't sell itself.

Well, for starters there's no justice in this world. But you don't need that to carry on. As

COLIN MOULDING *continued*

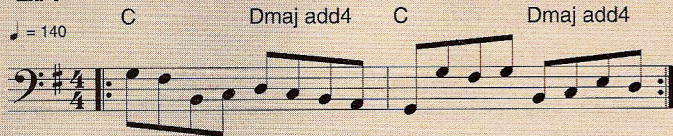
you get older, it's more and more important that you make music you really love and that gets you

off. I want the record to sell, because we've got to pay the bills and all the rest. But it's very important that we please ourselves. If you write for other people you'll be hurt; you're not going to get the acclaim you think you should. If you please your-

self, then if it gets panned and doesn't sell at least you've got something. I think *Apple Venus* is a really good record, and sooner or later somebody will play it somewhere and appreciate it. That's the only thing we can hope for. ♪

MAYOR OF MELODY

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3



Although Colin Moulding talks about playing "as little as possible," his impressive body of recorded work is full of clever melodic gems and witty harmonic twists. For those new to his playing, *Nonsuch*, *Oranges and Lemons*, and *Skylarking* all make for excellent introductions.

1989's *Oranges and Lemons*, featuring the single "Mayor of Simpleton," showcases Moulding's strong, melodic style. His parts' perfection is enhanced by Paul Fox's crystal-clear production, which places Colin's Wal bass upfront. "What I enjoy doing, and what I think I got into on that record more than on any other, is actually playing tunes," says Colin. "If there's nothing going on with the guitars and you're looking to some other instrument to fulfill the melodic purpose, it's good for the bass

to play the melodic line. On 'Mayor of Simpleton' the bass is playing a melody. I love *tunes*." Colin's main "tune" is shown in Ex. 1; its rhythmic density is relieved by the sparser root notes of the section that follows, which features a descending C major scale leading into the chorus.

"Summer's Cauldron," from *Skylarking*, showcases Colin's knack for phrasing. His lines weave in between Andy Partridge's vocal lines—note the gaps in Ex 2. Subtle syncopation throughout the song gives Moulding's line added depth and an understated funkiness, as in the way he rhythmically breaks up the scalar line in Ex. 3.