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DAVID DYSON • JAZZ CONCEPTS



ADVANCED
MASTER CLASS

BRYAN BELLER

Bryan Beller has worked with Mike Keneally for 13 years, and he has also worked with Steve Vai, Wayne Kramer (MC5), Dweezil Zappa, and many others. He's also a freelance writer in the literary sense. His debut solo album is called *View* [Onion Boy Records]. More info exists plentifully at www.bryanbeller.com.

DAVID DYSON DADDY POP



I RECENTLY ATTENDED THE BASS BASH, ONE of those seven-incredible-bassists-in-one-evening concerts at the Winter NAMM show. Everyone was outrageously good in his own way, but I was most transfixed by the jazz-funk of David Dyson. While his deep-grooving band pounded out a thumping beat, he let loose a two-minute slap groove that left my mouth in a perfect "o." It didn't lack for pyrotechnics, but what floored me was how the rhythmic and melodic content of the slap lines kept evolving, as if it were a simple fingerstyle R&B or blues bass line. His slap technique showed up as a flawless extension of his musicality. Then again, what would you expect from the touring bassist for

brilliant bassist/composer Meshell Ndegeocello?

Dyson's musical vision isn't limited to slap bass: He's a multi-instrumentalist, producer, composer, and musical director whose credit list would fill this page. His most recent solo album, *The Dawning* [Lo'hand Funk, 2004], is filled with the kind of compositions, grooves, and textures I witnessed at the bass-fest. This month's Masterclass dissects a signature Dyson slap groove, extracted from a piece he wrote for his son, "Donovan James."

"I wanted to capture the vibe of my son's personality," says Dyson. "He is real laid back and quiet half of the time. But the other half of his personality ... he is a jubilant clown, just like his daddy. Hence the

bass line and bubbly melody in the head and verse.”

The bouncy, joyous melody occurs over a slap groove that sounds easy, but it requires some practice to get smoothly rolling off the thumb and popping fingers. Each one of the four-bar musical examples shown here varies slightly as it's repeated throughout the tune. Once you get it, you can start playing around with them, like Dyson. In Ex. 1, the tonality shifts from A7sus to Em7 every other bar. Note how Dyson stays in 3rd position through most of the example, and how the line's complexity comes from where the thumbs and pops land. Plus, the sliding and hammering of certain thumbed notes provides a just-right amount of slinkiness. Overall, the line defies the usual back-and-forth, thumb-pop-thumb-pop pattern. It shifts at unexpected places and keeps you on your toes.

Ex. 2 is more complex. Dyson outlines an E \flat maj7 arpeggio-plus-chromatic-descending-line over an E \flat 9sus chord, and then he repeats it inside D \flat , almost entirely with his thumb. Even when the chords shift to C9sus, Gmaj6, and B9sus, his left-hand motion remains economical, staying put in 1st and 3rd position. It's the right hand that requires training in both cases. For the funk-challenged, these two examples are great exercises to open up new slap patterns.

As for how the line relates to the harmonic content, Dyson says it came from the bottom up. “I first

created the slap line and the drum sequence; then I sat at the piano while the groove was looping to see what I heard over the top. I knew it had to be syncopated rhythmically, but it also had to lay a bed with the groove for the melody. The trick is thinking of each part like a layer, as percussionists do when creating a locking groove with a drummer.”

Dyson lists his slap influences as Larry Graham, Louis Johnson, Rodney “Skeet” Curtis, and Marcus Miller. “All of them showed up at one time or another in this song,” he says—but the little improvisational twists he adds to these complex lines shows Dyson taking it to the next level. That didn't happen by accident. “The longer I play or hear a groove, the more things I hear. The basis for the improvisation is attributed to two things: First, listening to everyone that I can—bassists, guitarists, and more. When I hear a lick or line I wouldn't have thought of, I want to learn it, customize it, and add it to my vocabulary. Second, I spent a lot of time with a drum machine working on spontaneous grooves and lines. Now, it comes easy.”

Like anything technical, you'll want to start this one slowly, and only speed it up when you have it nailed. Then you can try working your own ideas into the groove little by little. Dyson's final advice is simple: Just be yourself. “I would advise cats to play like themselves, listen to every genre they can, and zero in on what makes their playing unique. Then I'll come and check you out!”

-BP

Ex. 1 A7sus Asus13 Em7 Em9 A7sus Asus13 Em7Em9

♩ = 110

S PO T P T P T T T P T S T P T P T T P T T P T S T PO T P T P T T T P T T P T P T P S T P S S T T P P S

(0) 5 (5) (5) (0x5) (0) 0 0 (0) (0) 0 7

3/5 3 (3) (3) (3x3x3) 3/5 (3) (3) 3/5 (3) 3 3/5 3 (3) (3) (3x3x3) 3 (3) (3) 3/0 (3x3)

Ex. 2 E \flat 9sus D \flat maj9 C9sus E \flat 9sus Gmaj6 B9sus

T H H H T T T P T T T H H H T H T P T T T P T P S T H H H T T T P T T H T H T P O T

5 6 5 6 (5) (6)6 3 4 3 4 (1)1 1 3 3 (3) 5 6 5 6 (5) (6)6 3 5 3 5 3 2 0

6 5 4 (4) 4 3 2 6/ 6 5 4 (4) (6)6

“Donovan James” by David Dyson.

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