



# Upright CITIZEN

Having played with just about every name in popular music, session bassist Dave Swift is justified in having an instrument for every occasion. **Lars Mullen** meets a real bass fanatic

On internet guitar forums, where pixels and foolishness run free, one can sometimes witness multiple instrument-acquirers being trapped into a collection-justification discussion whirlpool with those who, minimalistically, feel that possessing one or two tools for the job is quite enough. Bassist Dave Swift would never be thus cornered – and besides, his reasons for building a large and fascinating assembly of instruments is amply exonerated by the fact that he's simply damn busy... and busy across a wide range of styles. Dave has been a full-time member of the Jools Holland Rhythm and Blues Orchestra since 1991. That means a lot of work, not just under the red-light

conditions of the recording and TV studio, but also cruising to and fro between some of the world's more salubrious venues.

'It might be the best job in the world,' says Dave happily. 'On the *Later* programme it's up to me to provide the low-end for a vast range of music styles, backing anyone from Kylie Minogue to Jeff Beck, from Tom Jones to Joe Bonamassa. I worked as a session bassist for many years before coming into this band, so it's the kind of thing I'm used to.'

Dave started playing bass guitar as a youngster at school, and being, as he puts it, 'a fan of the bizarre and the ridiculous', he also studied and passed all the exams for the

trombone. His school careers officer, taking a dim view of the bass guitar, recommended that he apply for a job in the armed forces in the RAF brass band. 'I really wanted to be an athlete so I thought, hang on, do I really want to play trombone and possibly get shot at?' laughs Dave. 'Meanwhile, my original music teacher was getting me working playing bass, and he also advised me to take up the double bass which would allow me to get more work. So at this stage I was playing trombone, bass and double bass. It was all quite accidental, really... but by the time I was 18, I had enough work to turn professional.'

Even today, Dave's double bass abilities get him lots of calls. 'It's that deep, woody sound – perfect for so many situations,' he explains. 'When I first joined Jools, he only wanted me to play double bass.'

'The one that's seen on TV is a Hawkes dating back to 1906. I keep it in a temperature-controlled environment at the BBC studio. That one's far too precious to tour with, so I asked a builder called Roger Dawson to make me a replacement. It's recently arrived after a four-year

wait, and I'm loving it. Trouble is, there's a danger in favouring one double bass – unlike a regular bass guitar, if they don't get played enough then they sonically go to sleep.'

You might think that the electric upright double bass is a modern invention, but Dave has two rare Ampeg electric upright Baby Basses dating from the mid-'60s. 'Aren't these cool!' he says. 'These were an attempt by Ampeg to make it easier to tour with a double bass. They're moulded from a material called Uvex which is the same substance used to make camera film, painted from the inside and filled with some sort of expandable foam. It's a sort of ancient-meets-modern design, with a traditional wooden neck and ebony fingerboard but a fixed aluminium bridge. The only way you can adjust the string height is to actually move the neck via an Allen key on the side. The wood effect on one of them looks really authentic, while the turquoise model is very rare indeed.'

'The trouble is, the internal foam material seems to expand in the heat. I've heard stories of early Ampeg basses literally exploding when unsuspecting owners left them in cars in the Californian sun. On winter nights when I have the heating up they creak like a good 'un, and I get a little bit worried imagining exploding basses in the house!'

As so much of the music Dave is called upon to play is roots-orientated, from blues to boogie to soul, funk and jazz, Fenders are a



Three Fender Jazzes; a 2010 in candy apple red, a white '78 and a natural '76

**'Fender still reigns as my priority choice. With basses, it's the looks that do it first for me'**

mainstay. 'Fender still reigns as my priority choice,' he confirms. 'My '78 olympic white Fender Jazz with the rosewood fingerboard and block inlays was one of my first "on tour" acquisitions. It was hanging on a shop wall in Edinburgh for a bargain £525. It was the first time I had seen one so clean and complete with all the parts... it just looked fantastic. I'll admit that with basses it's the looks that do it first for me, and if it's used then it has to be in tip-top condition.'

'I've also acquired a maple-bodied 1976 Jazz Bass with a maple neck. The owner was about to modify it to fretless, which is the worst thing you can do to a lacquered maple fingerboard, so I like to think I rescued it.'

'For me, candy apple red is the real deal. I looked around at vintage ones but the prices were ridiculous, so when Fender introduced

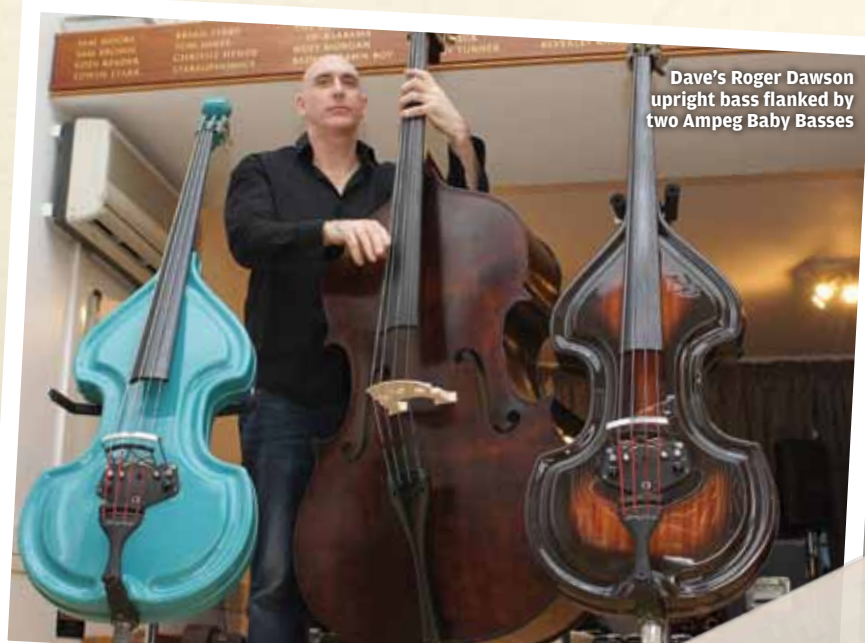
the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Jazz in 2010 in my fave colour and with the rosewood board, I just had to go for one of those too.'

'It was the Fender Precision that influenced me from day one, and even today a Precision is my benchmark bass for most gigs with Jools. All my P-basses are fitted with flatwound strings as I need to aim for the warmth of a double bass. I also roll off the treble and play with my thumb in a plucking motion, and palm-mute when necessary.'

'I remember when the Precision Specials came out between '80 and '83. At the time I didn't like the gold hardware, but I've fallen in love with the colours and matching headstocks. They weigh a ton... maybe that's why you don't see many being played! I have four – walnut, candy apple red, Lake Placid blue and white, which is the rarest.' ➔



Early '80s Precision Specials in walnut, white, candy apple red and Lake Placid blue



Dave's Roger Dawson upright bass flanked by two Ampeg Baby Basses





Next from Dave's Precision stash are three from the 1970s. 'I've only really started to collect P-basses in earnest in the last two or three years,' he says. 'These are a walnut, a natural maple and a white one with a fretless maple fingerboard. It's pretty unusual to see the fretless/maple combination, especially in this condition, as past owners often used to fit roundwound strings which wore the lacquer away, leaving a shabby fingerboard. I've had my long-time bass tech Andy Gibson move the bridge slightly as the strings didn't line up that well on the fingerboard. I think quality control at Fender was perhaps slightly lacking around this period.'

The next trio of Precisions are more recent. 'The first one is a 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It sounds and plays like a P-bass but it's put together as a celebratory model with features inspired by various periods. I think it works really well.

'I love a bass with a story, and this fiesta red Precision certainly has a mystery to it. As far as I know it was owned by my friend Pino Palladino who used it when he toured with Cliff Richard and the Shadows. It was originally black but was sprayed this colour by Sims Custom Shop in Kent. I believe it then went on a Who tour, as Pino was standing in on bass just after the death of John Entwistle. He's also seen playing it on the *Strat Pack: Live In Concert* video from 2005. I've used this a lot with Jools, and it's one of my favourites. I also have a five-string Precision. It thrilled me no end when Fender launched this model as I had previously been using Musicman five-strings, but this one gave me the best of both worlds.

'I have two older Musicman basses here, both in black – a Cutlass 1, which basically has a Stingray body, and a Cutlass 2, which

Three from the '70s including a white fretless with maple fingerboard



A 60th Anniversary P, a five-string Precision and the ex-Palladino bass



## 'All my Precisions have flatwounds. I roll off the treble, play with my thumb, and palm-mute'

has a Sabre body. Both were introduced with Modulus graphite necks. I sometimes find them a little harsh, but the graphite does get rid of any dead spots.

'My other Musicman is a white four-string Sabre with a fretless ebony fingerboard. This was an eBay find. I seem to be getting quite a lot of stuff from the US at the moment... that's where all the rare basses seem to be.'

Despite his double-bass background and his passion for Precisions and Jazzes, Dave is no four-string purist. 'The electric bass hasn't been around for that long,' he points out. 'It's still evolving from the Precision bass, which was originally designed by Leo Fender around '51 as a portable version of a double bass,

hence the four strings and the foam under the strings to diffuse the top end. But there are people out there who think the bass guitar should have had six strings from the beginning, as it's closer to the guitar family than the orchestral family of stringed instruments. I think also that bass players are generally far more open-minded than six-string guitar players when it comes to instrument design. Many feel it's important to continue the evolution.

'I'm very interested in the history of the bass guitar, so some of my basses are a little unusual in sound and design. Some have been commercial failures in the real world, but that hasn't stopped me buying them. Others are things that I've bought with nostalgia in mind, before a lot of the great ones disappear. I'm drawn to the shape and colour. I'm not that worried what it sounds like – as long as it's in good condition and it's all-original, that's enough for me.

'Though I've got some pretty extreme multi-stringed basses which we'll get on to later, they can be a little over the top for a rhythm and blues band, so I asked Sheldon Dingwall in Saskatoon, Canada to build an instrument with Precision aesthetics but with the Novax fan-fret design. The Novax principle uses piano technology for the scale length, with the frets fanned out to create different scale lengths for each string.

'The result was this Dingwall 5 Super P. It's great! I often get asked how long it took to learn how to play a fan-fretted instrument. It took me five minutes... didn't bother me at all. People are frightened by the design when it's hanging on the wall, but it looks far more like a regular bass when you look down on the fingerboard. I've been playing this one a lot since I got it in late 2011.'

Two unusual Musicmans, a Cutlass 2 and 1



A fretless Musicman Sabre and a fan-fretted Dingwall 5 Super P





Brave new world: a Roland G-88 synth controller and a G-33



Below, a quartet of Roland G-77 synth basses



turned out to be pretty exceptional. Anthony wanted superior neck stiffness without the use of graphite or anything that might change the tone, so Vinny Fodera extended the single cutaway and made this handsome body profile.'

Underrated '70s and '80s basses also make an appearance. 'This 1977 Kramer 650B was one of my "I must have that now!" basses,' Dave admits. 'I actually had one of these when I was a teenager. The selling point is they've got wooden necks but aluminium fingerboards, which can cause some stability issues with uneven expansion under the lights. I still think they're kind of cool to this day.'

'This Ibanez MC-900 Musician bass is another prime example. This was an eBay purchase from Australia. I couldn't believe it – it came all that way and the guy had just put in a normal guitar case, but it somehow survived. Sting used to use a fretless version, and I'm still looking out for one of those.'

Next we've got not one but three heavy, mahogany-bodied Ovation Magnums. 'I love the industrial look, but they're still one of the ugliest basses ever,' Dave admits. 'They remind me of a sad puppy amongst all the happy ones at a dogs' home. I'm a sucker for the underdog! I have two Magnum 1's and an active Magnum 2. All three have a muting mechanism in the bridge – great for the Jools gig where I'm aiming for a double bass sound – helped by a huge humbucker in the neck position with adjustable polepieces. The mute system works okay, but it changes the intonation each time it's applied, so you either have to have it permanently on or off. ➔

## 'Roland synth basses still look great and sound pretty cool but the tracking is a little slow'

Dave's taste for forward-looking instruments that missed the mainstream includes a keen interest in Roland synth basses. 'Back in Wolverhampton in the early '80s I had a job working in a guitar shop, and I can remember opening the boxes when these first arrived,' he recalls. 'They still look great and the synth sounds are pretty cool, but the tracking is a little slow, so you can't really play with any speed or dexterity. On the other hand they're really well built and they sound great just on their own. The one with the maple through-neck piece is a Roland G-88, while the other one is a G-33.'

'The Roland G-77 bass synths – one red, one black, and two whites, one being an unusual fretless – were bought from a pure sense of fun. I have used them on gigs! The sounds from the GR-77B floor units are cool, but the antiquated technology lets them down a little.'

Up next is a gorgeous six-string. 'I'd always wanted, but not necessarily needed for work, a six-string bass,' Dave says. 'My hero, Anthony Jackson, invented the modern six-string bass, and he plays a Fodera, made in Brooklyn, New York. So for me a Fodera was the ultimate. I went over to meet him in New York in 2004 when he received a lifetime achievement award and ordered one, but there was a really long

wait and I couldn't linger, so I started looking around at other high end luthiers making multi-strung basses, found Dingwall, and ordered this top-of-the-range Dingwall Prima Artist with the Novax system, with a 37" scale for the low B. The intonation and clarity is quite amazing. It's fitted with an FD3 treble pickup and a custom-wound bass pickup. They're noise-symmetric, tone-asymmetric pickups, which in easier terms that means they are really low-noise and deliver increased tight, low end clarity. The only input from me was my choice of walnut wood.'

'When the Fodera Anthony Jackson Presentation Contrabass finally arrived, it

Left, a Dingwall Prima Artist; right, the Fodera Anthony Jackson contrabass



Left, a 1977 Kramer 650B; right, an Ibanez MC-900 Musician







Two Ovation Magnum 1's and a Magnum 2 (centre)



Fretless Steinberger XL2 and a Westone The Rail

## 'I love the industrial look of the Ovation Magnum, yet they're still one of the ugliest basses ever'

'One of the things I like about these basses is that, like Fenders, they're built like tanks. I think they were also one of the first-ever basses to include graphite reinforcement strips in the necks.

'Still built very strong but far smaller are my Steinberger XL2 basses. I loved these when they came out – people like Sting and Tony Levin were playing them. I found these after trawling through the internet and coming across a guy in the states called Don Greenwald who has a website called [www.headlessusa.com](http://www.headlessusa.com). I have two black ones and a rare fretless white model.

'This Westone from the mid-'80s is along the same lines. It's called The Rail because the single pickup assembly slides back and forth on a steel rail system to change the tone. It really does work. This one appealed to my quirky side. It comes in a mini silver gigbag looking very much like something from an early Star Trek movie!

'The three Steinberger Q Series basses are still headless with graphite necks but have a more conventional wooden body shape. I've got two Q4s and a Q5, and I call it my "strawberries and cream"

trio. They're heavy, with a very unusual body shape which appealed to me, and they sound great... very vibrant. The red Q4 has a DB bridge which allows you to de-tune to any preset alternate tuning from Eb down to B. Very ingenious, but that's Ned Steinberger for you.'

Dave has reached a point where he's pretty happy with his amplification. 'I'm using the USA-made Aguilar amplifiers at the moment,

and I find the Tone Hammer 500W head with a pair of SL-112 Series 1X12" speakers is ideal for small to medium venues. I've kept a few of my old amps as well. I still have my Polytone MiniBrute 3 bass combo from when I was about 18 – it's since been all around the world with me. It's a neat little amp with a big output, and they were very popular with double bass players at the time.

'For a long time I didn't realise Polytone also made guitars and basses. A friend told me about this Polytone Contempo B bass which he spotted on eBay – it was immaculate, and I just had to have it. It's got a mahogany body and neck and a chunky gold-plated bridge. It's no lightweight, and the large headstock with big brass tuners and the level body horns also make it very neck-heavy. I love the Polytone "P" position markers. I fitted flatwound strings to this one... it's big and meaty, with a very old-school sound.

'I have several fretless basses, and that goes back to the beginning with my learning on the double bass. For fretlesses I have a preference for rosewood or ebony fingerboards for a dark, warm sound rather than the brighter

response from maple. As far as I'm concerned, if they're a little unusual, that's all the better. One bass that's gained some credibility in recent times is the Guild, like this single-pickup Guild B-301A. The "A" stands for "ash body", which was an option as the standard body was mahogany.

'Another fretless favourite is my fretless Rob Allen Deep 5 Custom, made in California. This is actually Jools' favourite bass... every time I use it he reminds me how much Van Morrison was impressed with how close it sounds to a double bass. It's semi-hollow, with a centre block, and it's fitted with a piezo pickup with volume and tone controls on the bridge, which is ebony and from the same stock as the fingerboard for a perfect match. My contribution was choosing the walnut for the construction and a high C string instead of a low B. This bass really fills the gap, with a really big woody sound.

'We once spent all day recording with Paul McCartney, and he was signing memorabilia that the band had taken along; I didn't even have a piece of paper, but not wanting to miss out I asked him to sign the back of this bass. He was a little reluctant to sign the gorgeous wood, so he suggested writing on the control panel! After a few gigs I noticed his signature was starting to smudge, so in a panic I had Martin Petersen at the Bass Gallery in London make me a replacement panel, and I keep the original safe.

'Working with great musicians, touring the world – and eating well, which is another passion of mine – it's not a bad job. And there's always time to keep a sharp eye out for unusual basses, an addiction that's fine for my health but detrimental to my wealth!' 🎸



Dave Swift with his rare Polytone Contempo B bass



A trio of Steinberger Q Series basses



Left, a Rob Allen Deep 5 Custom; right, a Guild B301A