





# Holland Days

After 25 years as Britain's most broadcast bassist, Jools Holland bass player Dave Swift looks back on an unparalleled career

—— Interview: Mike Brooks. Pics: Tina K ——





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nyone able to sustain a career in music for 35 years deserves a pat on the back – but to have spent 25 of those years as a member of one of the best, and most highly

visible, touring and TV-based bands is one hell of an achievement. Dave Swift is that man.

To get the inside track on what it's like to be one of the most in-demand bassists in the country, we're spending the day with Swift in Guildford, where he's on tour with sometime West End performer and teatime quiz host Alexander Armstrong. Before the rest of Armstrong's musicians arrive, we have time for a quick coffee and a chat about Swift's early days.

It's odd to think that had things panned out as the young Mr Swift wanted them to, a life of make-up, masks and costume might well have captured his talents rather than music. "I never wanted to be a musician," says Swift, "but music has always been in my life. I used to sneak into my oldest brother's bedroom to see what records he had. These included Jimi Hendrix, Cream and Joni Mitchell among others. If I was feeling really brave, I would play them on his Dansette record player while he was at work..."

He continues: "There was always music in the air in our house by artists such as Glenn Miller and Peggy Lee, and both of my brothers played acoustic guitar. My passion as a kid was horror movies, though: I wanted to be a make-up artist in those films. However, a family across the road from us used to play Motown albums, and I remember liking that music a lot. That was probably the first time I seriously tuned in to music. I was totally captivated by James Jamerson's glorious bass-lines."

Singing in school and church choirs followed, and Dave was singing harmonies before he even knew what they were. This eventually led to him learning the trombone and a love of 2-Tone music. "It was so cool when the legendary Jamaican trombonist Rico Rodriguez joined Jools' band in 1996, because he'd played with the Specials," he tells us. "When I saw him playing on *Top Of The Pops*, he legitimised the trombone for me as a cool instrument."

Bass soon came calling, though. "Academia left me cold," says Dave, "and I left school with no qualifications other than some trombone exams, but once I switched to bass, that opened me up to more pop and jazz stuff. The turning point came when a mate lent me a Weather Report album, *Night Passage*, and I thought 'I hope no one expects me to play like this'... When I started learning to play bass guitar and double bass, the first line I learned by ear was 'One Step Beyond' by Madness. It was a simple line by today's standards, but hey, I was just starting out!"

Finishing up our beverages, we head to the stage...

2.15pm – 3pm

## Load In And Set Up

Working with Jools Holland, Swift is accustomed to having his equipment set up and soundchecked for him on his arrival – but this particular run of shows with Alexander Armstrong is a more hands-on affair. His array of equipment being used is fairly minimal due to the nature of the shows. "With this gig, there are open mics which pick everything up, so there's no backline: it's all in-ear monitoring," he tells us. "I've only used in-ear monitors for the last five years, after I contacted Ultimate





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Ears in the US and began using their UE11s. The clarity of sound is like being in the best recording studio. It's been a relief – I'm sure my hearing has been affected by standing next to drummers, and having bass cabinets pointing at my ears!"

However, IEMs come with their own set of disadvantages, says Swift, who has come up with a novel solution to those issues. "At first," he explains, "the bass response made me feel like I was cut off from the rest of the band. I could hear the notes, but I couldn't feel them. Jools' drummer Gilson Lavis was using IEMs with Porter & Davies' BC2 vibrating drum stool, so I contacted P&D and with my help they eventually made a vibrating platform for bass players called the KT platform, which stands for Kinetic Transfer. Once I started using it, all the planets aligned. I wouldn't want to play without it now: it's changed everything for me."

Due to a thumb ligament injury in recent years, Swift has reverted to using a pick for the majority of his bass guitar playing: this is not entirely surprising, considering his influences. "Necessity has led me back down that path," he tells us. "I'm really enjoying playing with a pick again, but now I really want more dynamic range, hence my renewed interest in roundwound strings. A lot of my favourite players play with a pick, such as Steve Swallow and Anthony Jackson: Anthony is just unbelievable, and takes my breath away to this day. Two other pick players I love are Bobby Vega and Cody Wright. Stuart Clayton kindly gave me a copy of his *Plectrum Technique For Bass Guitar* book and I've enjoyed checking that out. Who said you can't play jazz, fusion and funk with a pick?"

4pm – 4.30pm

## Bass Soundcheck And Monitors

Following some technical tinkering and a brief refreshment stop, Swift is called back to the stage to check that his electric basses, Roger Dawson upright bass and monitoring are all working as required. The assembled musicians have all arrived, so the appropriate line checks are carried out to make sure that everyone is ready to roll once the star of the show arrives around 5pm.

Swift is known to have a bass collection to rival a small shop, but he's fallen for two main basses in recent times, as he explains. "I've been using my Ibanez Musician and my Sadowsky P5 for this tour. Ever since I acquired my first vintage Ibanez Musician some four years ago, I've become passionate about playing and collecting them. These are wonderful but highly underrated instruments: I've heard some collectors refer to these as the 'Japanese Alembics' of their time. I just wish Ibanez had made a five-string version of these early Musician basses back in the day. I'm going to be speaking with Headstock Distribution soon: we'll be discussing the newer current Ibanez range, and I'll be taking along one of my beloved Musicians to see what might be possible to achieve in the future."

He adds: "As for my Sadowsky, it's one of the best five-string P-Basses I've ever owned: Roger Sadowsky seriously knows what he's doing! Mine has an ebony fingerboard, which has a more immediate sound, which is what I want now. I've got to an age where I need to be inspired about what I'm playing, so I want something that's interesting and captivating, with an organic, complex sound. My preference is for one pickup, a simple preamp and a wide fingerboard. I prefer heavier instruments, because I like the way they sound, and I like something substantial because I feel it reflects in the sound. Bass necks can never be too fat, in my opinion: I think a lot of the sound is in the timber. I've spoken to Billy Sheehan about this and that's why he likes baseball bat-style necks, you can hear the difference."

Swift's sound has gone through a transition in the past year or so – proof, if any were needed, that even professionals at the top of the tree constantly re-evaluate and reappraise their requirements. "With Jools, I used to take any bass that sounded bright and make it sound muted and subdued, even more double bass-like," he tells us. "I've gone the opposite way. I'm now predominantly playing with a pick, and I'm using roundwound strings much more on a lot of my basses. My favourites are Dunlop Super Bright nickel strings, because these days I like a more cutting, aggressive sound with more bite. I can still mute the strings and get that 'thud' if and when I need it."

His amp of choice is Aguilar, he says. "My friend and fellow bassist Paul Turner of Jamiroquai recommended Aguilar to me: I was looking for



something more suited to the Jools gig, and the quality, simplicity and classy look of their gear instantly appealed to me."

5.15pm — 6pm

## Full Band Soundcheck And Run-Through

When Armstrong arrives, the band kicks into action and a full soundcheck ensues, plus a run-through of several numbers from the show. Efficiency and professionalism are key at this point, both from the band and crew, as there is limited time before the doors open to the public.

Swift has had the enviable job of backing many of his favourite artists over the years, including George Benson, Smokey Robinson, Amy Winehouse, Joss Stone, Paul McCartney... the list rolls into the hundreds. Are there any musicians still on the wish list, we ask? "Where do I start?" he chuckles. "Obviously Stevie Wonder would be a dream, along with Nile Rodgers, Quincy Jones, Aretha Franklin, Kate Bush, Barbra Streisand...I could go on! My

CD collection is pretty eclectic, there's a lot of jazz in there. I was a huge Queen fan when I was a kid: they're one of my favourite bands of all time and so evocative of my youth, as were Blondie. I loved Kate Bush too: "The Man With The Child In His Eyes" is still one of my favourite songs ever."

With soundcheck completed to everyone's satisfaction, we follow Swift in search of food and replenishment prior to the show: a local pizza restaurant is the agreed choice. Being such a busy musician must inevitably take its toll physically, and despite being a tall, robust chap, Dave hasn't always enjoyed a perfectly clean bill of health, as he divulges. "I don't have my hands insured, but I've never had RSI — maybe because I don't practise enough," he laughs. "It's a well-known fact within the band that I've not had the best luck regarding my health over the years. I've had seven major operations since I was 29, but I've never felt better!"

Unsurprisingly, Swift is constantly 'on it': if he's not practising, he's learning songs for other projects, so finding time to relax and

switch off is difficult. "A lot of my time is taken up listening to stuff I'm working on or going to have to play soon, especially with Jools' radio show where we're recording on an industrial level," he explains. "What I do in my spare time, when I'm not learning stuff, is transcribing classic songs. For instance, I made the effort to study the history of the double bass and the bass guitar, so I went back as far as I could and transcribed bass-lines and solos by Walter Page from Count Basie's band and Jimmy Blanton, who played with Duke Ellington. I tried to do it chronologically, through the history and evolution of both instruments. It's great fun, and good for the ears."

7.30pm — 9.45pm

## Showtime

While Swift makes last-minute preparations, we take our seats: it's a full house. Alexander Armstrong's show is split into two halves, separated by an intermission. From the moment the show starts, the soundman has obviously got the bass sound sitting perfectly





use Pirastro strings: that company have really looked after me for the last 20 years, their choice of strings and variations is wonderful."

With so many projects in the melting pot at any one time, we wondered if Swift ever feels under any pressure – although if he does, it never shows in his performances. His reply is considered: "I would say that the Alexander Armstrong show involves more pressure than the Jools gig, because I'm playing a lot of different stuff from various films and shows. It's more like an orchestral gig in some respects as it involves a lot of arco work – in other words, playing with a bow. I don't get nervous on gigs, but playing on live TV does increase the pressure. In the TV studio, I'm

playing with iconic, world-renowned artists, surrounded by other bass players in the other bands, and being watched and scrutinised by the nation – so if you screw up, that moment is captured for all eternity."

Recently Swift played with one of his musical heroes, Paul Simon, on Jools' TV show. How was it, we want to know? "I was originally given the track 'Wristband' to learn from Paul's new album," he replies, "but during rehearsals at the BBC, he sang the song slightly differently every time – stretching bars, adding bars in, and missing some out. Basically, he was busking it! I had to continually keep adapting the bass part to fit with his vocals, which was a real challenge, particularly when

*"The Sadowsky is one of the best five-string P-Basses I've ever owned"*

in the mix. Swift's upright bass of choice these days is a Roger Dawson instrument: after the show, he tells us how he first met the veteran luthier.

"I'd earned a good living for 10 years in the Midlands, playing jazz, working in theatres and recording TV and radio sessions, so when I came to London it was for the challenge of playing with creative musicians, I could sight-read no problem, but I felt I needed to suffer for my art somewhat – and boy, did I suffer! For the first three years, I didn't play any electric bass, it was all upright. Playing the regular jazz gigs was so enriching for the heart and soul. Someone mentioned Roger to me, so I took my bass to him and asked him if he could enhance it. I remember getting it back and I couldn't believe how good it sounded – so from that point on, Roger was my guy."

He adds: "This bass is a young instrument: these things really need to be played in, because they get better as they get older. All stringed instruments fall asleep, so to speak, so they need to be played regularly to get the very best out of them. I'm very lucky that I





## BASSISTS

Dave Swift, Jools Holland



he performed it differently yet again on the actual live TV broadcast! Fortunately I'm very conscientious when it comes to learning bass parts."

9.45pm — 10.30pm

### Meet And Greet, Pack Away And Depart

After a rousing finale and encore, the show is over. As the masses make their way out of the venue, Dave has time to relax, meet members of the audience and indulge in a libation or two before collecting his basses and making his way home to London. Although the tour still has a few weeks left to run, the Swift diary is already filling up for the rest of the year.

"I've recorded an album on upright bass with the songwriter Thomas Solomon Gray,"

he tells us. "The next series of Jools's Radio 2 show will feature Carol Decker, Mike Batt, Mari Wilson, Paul Carrack, Gregory Porter and Beverley Knight, among others, and there's also a summer tour to prepare for. On the gear front, I'm working closely with the Dutch luthier Nikola Adamovic, who is making me a custom six-string bass, and I've also become interested in the five-string Jazz basses being made by the Finnish luthier Tom Stenback. There's also a strong possibility of a working association with Ibanez in the near future after the exposure I've been giving their vintage basses. Let's just say there are busy and exciting times ahead!"

With his mobile phone ringing and a driver ready and waiting, Dave was on his way home to catch a good night's sleep before making his way to the following night's show. He really is living the dream... ■

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