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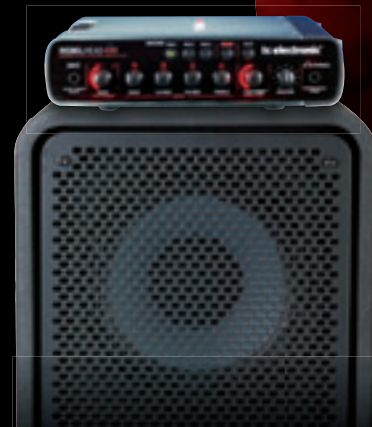
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Swinging the Blues

Dave Swift of Jools Holland
& his Rhythm and
Blues Orchestra

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Swinging the Blues

Dave Swift

As bassist for Jools Holland and his Rhythm & Blues Orchestra, Dave Swift has arguably the best gig in town, performing alongside some of the biggest names in popular music. **Nick Wells gets the full story...**

Alongside the numerous multi-platinum albums that he has recorded with Jools Holland and his Rhythm & Blues Orchestra, Dave Swift's regular radio and television appearances on shows like *'Later... with Jools Holland'* have seen him share the stage with the likes of Al Jarreau, George Benson, Chaka Khan, Sir Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, Paul Weller, BB King and literally hundreds of other international stars. The versatility that's required to cater for these star guests, both in terms of technique and general musicality, is something that Dave prides himself on, but his current itinerary with Jools is a far cry from his early days in the capital. 'When I moved to London in the late 80s I had to start from scratch,' says Dave, 'and really rely on word of mouth. I knew a guy called Paul Weimar (aka 'Shilts') and he used to take me out to gigs and introduce me to musicians, but I soon realised that a lot of the players that were doing well down here were London born and bred so I didn't want to come across as this pushy young bassist from the Midlands, barging my way into their well-established music scene, but the fact that I was a bass player who doubled, could improvise

and sight-read helped me ease my way in.' Dave persevered on the London live circuit for two years before getting the opportunity to audition for Jools Holland. 'I was mostly doing jazz gigs on double bass at venues like the 606 Club in Chelsea, the Bull's Head in Barnes and the Jazz Cafe in Camden Town, amongst others,' recalls Dave, 'and I eventually ended up working with a sax player called Phil Veacock who had already been playing with Jools for a year or so. Jools had been using Pino Palladino and then Keith Wilkinson, (the bassist from Squeeze), but now he wanted someone who could play the double bass, so he asked Phil if he knew anyone and I was asked to come and audition at his studio, Helicon Mountain, in South East London. That was in September of 1991, which is when it all started.'

Having equal facility on both the electric and double bass allows Dave to provide the right timbre for the various guest artists that frequent the Jools Holland roster, but having initially been hired for his ability on the double bass, persuading Jools to accommodate the electric bass guitar was a tougher proposition than he had anticipated. 'I originally got the gig because I could play the double bass,' explains Dave, 'and for the

first couple of years that's all I played. I remember doing a gig for Amnesty International where we had to play with Lisa Stansfield, Des'ree, Rick Astley, Sam Brown and Mica Paris. It was mostly pop stuff where the original bass part had either been played on a keyboard or on a bass guitar that had a low B string. I thought the obvious thing to do was to leave my double bass at home and use my 6-string Ken Smith. Bearing in mind this was a new high end instrument with an unusually wide neck and active electronics, and as far as Jools was concerned, had two strings too many, he really didn't want me to play it, and in the end I had to adapt the original bass part so I could play it on the double bass and it all worked out fine. It took me a while to understand where Jools was coming from but I eventually came to realise he didn't want us to be a generic TV house band, he wanted the band to have its own personality and character.'

Jools Holland's Big Band, as it was known then, made its television debut in the early 90s appearing as the house band on the Channel 4 show *Don't Forget Your Toothbrush*, as well as on *Later...With Jools Holland* on the BBC. It was during this period that Dave finally got his chance to revisit the bass guitar.

'We played 'Aint Nobody' and 'I'm Every Woman' with Chaka Khan and I remember thinking "those two songs are going to be pretty tough to play on double bass so I finally convinced Jools to let me play the songs on bass guitar, and from then on he agreed that me alternating between the two instruments was the right thing to do and a key element to the bands identity. When we started backing different artists on various TV shows I was able to show my versatility on both instruments and I think Jools began to realise that he had hired the right guy.'

Later...With Jools Holland has been running since 1992 and continues to showcase a diverse mixture of live bands and guest artists who often require a stand-in backing band or rhythm section that Jools supplies courtesy of his Rhythm & Blues Orchestra. 'I will be at home and Jools' secretary will call and say "BB King is on the show next week, can you make it over to the BBC and play bass?" It's all very laid back and a bit like somebody inviting you down the pub for a pint! It's all very quaint and very British. And that's Jools: he wants to create this pleasant and relaxed atmosphere for all concerned.'

Having to share the stage with the likes of Al Green, Bono and





Dave outside Holland's studio in South East London, Helicon Mountain

Lionel Richie might seem like a dream gig, but from the rhythm section's point of view it can also be hard work. 'We don't get much rehearsal time,' explains Dave. 'We might get given a CD to learn a week before the show, but sometimes we only get a couple of days. It's the same with the radio shows: they are great fun, but we don't always get to hear the tracks beforehand. We might only have 10 minutes to learn the song while the artist is sitting there! It's not nerve-racking but you have to pull your socks up and get on with it.'

The ever-growing list of stars that Dave has accompanied as a member of the Rhythm & Blues Orchestra is simply staggering (a full list can be found on Dave's website www.daveswiftbass.com). In fact, it is far easier to say who Dave hasn't played with than attempt to name all of those he has. 'Someone asked me the other day if there was anyone who I would still like to play with, and it's getting harder and harder to answer that question, but I would still love to play with Stevie Wonder, KD Lang and Alison Goldfrapp. I've got this fantastic collection of transcriptions at home: these entire box files containing all the bass lines to the songs that I've played throughout my career. It's a great reminder of who I have worked with.' When asked to recall a few

career highlights it's performances with the likes of Chaka Khan, Al Jarreau, Lionel Ritchie, George Benson and Michael McDonald that spring to mind. 'These were the people I was listening to when I first started playing bass,' Dave explains, 'and that's the reason why those performances will always stand out for me. We recently played with Booker T and the MGs, and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. Being on stage with Kylie Minogue and Paul McCartney for 2007's Hootenanny was another highlight.'

Speaking of Sir Paul McCartney, Dave is one of the very few people to have appeared on stage with Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr and George Harrison, but it's his encounter with Harrison that is the most memorable. 'George chose the village of Port Merion, in North Wales, to host his 50th birthday party,' he recalls, 'and at the time Jools was interviewing the chaps for the Beatles anthology, and it was George's turn, so George invited us all down and we had this great party. We got down there and spent the whole weekend with George and his family and friends. We set the instruments up in the corner and he got his ukulele out and we played all night. When George, along with the majority of his guests, finally went to bed in the early hours a few of us stayed

up and our trombonist started playing the piano and singing at the top of his voice in a very drunken fashion. None of us realised that he was directly beneath George's bedroom! So the next morning George came down looking a bit worse for wear and starts asking, "Who the bloody hell was playing that piano until the early hours? I couldn't get any bloody sleep!" I remember thinking "I wonder how much my silence is worth!"'

Since getting the gig with Jools back in 1991, Dave has found himself in several notable situations that are completely unique to Jools Holland's Rhythm & Blues Orchestra. 'We were the house band at the G8 conference in Birmingham a few years ago and afterwards we got to meet Bill and Hilary Clinton and Cherie and Tony. We played at the Millennium Dome on Millennium night in front of the Queen – the Hooters are always really good fun. We have also played in Rochester Cathedral, and Prince Charles was in the audience and we all got to meet him after the concert, which was quite an experience. Even though it did feel like we were all standing in a police identity parade!'

Another important vocational aspect of Dave's work with Jools is knowing how to behave around such big-name stars. 'There are some people who you feel you

can ask for an autograph, but at other times it just isn't appropriate. Over the years it's something that you get a feeling for. I am such a big fan of Al Jarreau and David Sanborn that I just had to ask them to sign a few album covers from my collection, which they did willingly. It's important for us to make the individual artist feel comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings, which is a big part of our job. It's not just about being a qualified musician. This gig has taken all of our social skills up a notch or two.'

Having the facility to play both the electric and double bass in a range of different styles remains a major factor in Dave's success with the Rhythm & Blues Orchestra, but choosing the right bass for a particular artist is not always an easy decision. 'I've got so many instruments now,' Dave explains. 'I've got 35 bass guitars, two double basses and eight electric upright basses, and it's sometimes hard to make the right choice. When I played with Al Jarreau we did a song called 'Last Night'. The original bass line had been played on a keyboard, and I just couldn't decide what to use. In the end I decided to use my fretless Precision and an octave pedal to try and recreate a synth type sound. The recording went really well and it was a real career highlight for me, but watching it back the following



Tina Korhonen / Retna Pictures

A Word From Jools Holland

What makes Dave Swift the right man for the job?

What's great about Dave is his ability to switch from playing a staccato bass line on the electric bass to playing something much more expressive on the double bass. If we are playing one of Rico's (trombone player Rico Rodriguez) ska tracks, I might need a certain bass tone for that Jamaican style, and Dave has the ability to do all of that. I will sometimes ask him to skip like James Jamerson, or sound like Israel Crosby on one of those early 1930s records, so he has to have a lot of reference points when switching between those worlds and then be creative on the songs that I have written.'

How does Dave's playing style compare to other bass players you have worked with?

I've worked with a lot of fantastic bass players, like Pino Palladino, who is a magical player, and Dave has that same lyrical beauty. I remember working with Marcus Miller, who is quite good on the double bass, as he is on the electric, and Dave's like that, but he really is equally as fluent on both. When he first joined us he developed a playing style for me, which involves playing with his thumb and using very slightly pushed and staccato bass notes when he is walking – if we were going into the boogie woogie zone, let's say – which gives a very distinct sound that's completely different to playing with your fingers, which is more legato. It creates a false sound that's almost like a double bass that hasn't been recorded very well in a small studio, but of course we are playing a big hall, and that sound allows my left hand a lot of freedom on the piano. Dave has got this one bass guitar, which has these nylon strings – it was fretless – but Dave made it sound just like a double bass, and I remember Van Morrison asking me how he made it sound like that. And the truth of it is, he has got lots of different basses, but it's Dave's way of playing that makes it sound the way it does.'

How important is Dave's ability to cater for different guest artists?

It's important that he is able to bring different tones and colours for the different people that we play with. When somebody says they want to switch key he can take it up a semitone or whatever, it doesn't matter; he can play it wherever you want it. We have just done a record with Ruby Turner called 'The Informer', and the title track has a really interesting bass line that makes the song come alive, and on other tracks Dave plays the double bass, which gives it a completely different tone. From my point of view as a bandleader, particularly if we are working with a guest artist, it's fantastic because I know that when we start playing Dave will have learnt the music and pinned down the bass line. The band has a huge repertoire and my live set is never the same, but at the root of everything is the bass and the drums, everything else can be built up from there. It's like the foundations of a building and it's the most essential part of the orchestra.

Are first impressions important when working with different guest artists?

'There are 18 of us in the band, and if we have backing vocals there are even more, so people are coming into a whole new situation where the thing that they love the most, their own music, is going to be played by all these different people and they don't know what it is going to sound like. So first impressions are very important, and Dave is always able to make people laugh and feel comfortable, and physically he is very big so if they get really nasty he can just put them in a box somewhere!'

The Informer by Jools Holland (with Ruby Turner) is out now. Visit www.joolsholland.com for upcoming live dates.

day I realised that it was such an intimate, acoustic setting, I really should have used my double bass and ditched the octave pedal!'

Despite owning an extensive collection of basses, that some musicians would only keep for display purposes or under the bed, Dave insists on keeping all of his basses set up and ready to use at any time should the gig require it. 'I have to be a bit of a chameleon,' he tells us. 'I have to play the double bass, or an electric double bass if feedback is an issue, and other times a fretless is a better choice. I've had to play with a pick for people like Belinda Carlisle, Kylie, Mika and Roger Daltrey. I actually really enjoy playing with a pick, in fact, I started out playing bass with one. For other songs I will need a 5-string with a low B. The 5-string that I often use with Jools is a semi-acoustic, fretless bass that was made by Rob Allen in California. They usually come with a low B, but mine has a high C string instead. This allows me to play higher register walking bass lines in lower positions on the fingerboard. Jools did ask me when I joined the band not to spend too much time playing in the same register as his left hand on the piano, so this bass is ideal. The Rob Allen bass is equipped with flatwound strings and when muted with the side of my right hand and plucked with my thumb provides a sound not dissimilar to an upright bass, which really appeals to Jools, and now I can probably play as fast with my thumb as I can with my two fingers! Having said all that, my true passion is for the double bass. I have played both instruments for the same length of time, but I just have a stronger connection with the double bass. The Jools gig for me is about versatility, which is something that I thrive on.'

Those who have witnessed Jools Holland and his Rhythm & Blues Orchestra playing live will know all too well how Dave's fundamental approach to bass playing serves as the rhythmic foundation for the entire band, as Dave explains: 'I've never had any aspiration to be a great virtuoso or a solo artist. All of those things are great, but it just isn't me at all. I like doing my job and doing it well. I'd rather not draw attention to myself, and that's the main reason I haven't been tempted to form my own band. A friend once described me as an industrial bassist and I wasn't too sure how to take that at first, but after looking back over my

career I think that's absolutely accurate. I don't think there is anything bad about that.' When asked to summarise his role with the Rhythm & Blues Orchestra, Dave refers to a quote from *The Bass Player's Handbook* by Greg Mooter (Berklee Press). The quote reads: 'The pros are not necessarily prepared for any situation, but rather are willing to prepare for any situation.' Dave continues: 'I am very honest about my abilities: I know I'm not a fully dedicated hard-core jazzier, or a virtuoso soloist, but like the quote says, if I had to step vaguely into those roles I would at least do my very best to prepare in advance and attempt to carry off the job as convincingly as possible to make it



Dave onstage with Kylie Minogue and Sir Paul McCartney for 2007's Hootenanny

happen and get the job done.' Dave has remained a key player in Jools Holland and his Rhythm & Blues Orchestra since 1991 and currently performs up to 100 shows a year with the acclaimed group, but the rewards have made him the envy of bass players from all around the globe. 'Jools has said this himself,' he tells us. 'It's like the Count Basie and Duke Ellington bands: the reason why we work so much is that you simply have to just keep the band going. You can't expect everyone to stick together for two or three gigs a month, so Jools needs to provide that kind of work. As a musician this is the closest thing to having a day job, but if that's the case then it's the best day job in the world.'



ROB ALLEN DEEP 5

'This was custom-made for me. It's strung E - C with independent volume controls over the G & C strings. We did a couple of things with Van Morrison and he commented on it. Even Prince Charles asked me about that bass when he saw us at Rochester Cathedral!'



POLYTONE CONTEMPO B

'I've got a Polytone Contempo, which is ultra rare, and most people recognise Polytone for making amps, but they did make a bass and a guitar, which is pretty rare. I've still got my original Polytone Mini Brute III combo that I had when I was a kid.'



Ovation MAGNUM

'I've got these Ovation Magnum basses that were made in the 70s. They look like someone has gone to a scrapyard and grabbed a load of bits and put them all together, but I love them for that reason. It's almost like they are so unloved I want to adopt them! I've got 4!'



WESTONE RAIL BASS

'I've got a Westone Rail bass that has tuned steel rails that join the body section and a sliding pickup that changes the tone; not many people like them, but I thought I would find a home for it! I still need to get a black one, of course, but that's on the shopping list!'



ROLAND G-77

'I've got some of those early Roland G-77 bass guitar synthesisers that you used to see all over Top Of The Pops back in the 80s. They didn't really track all that well, but as bass guitars they feel great and are really nice to play - even the Star Trek ones with the futuristic stabiliser arm!'



MUSICMAN CUTLASS

'Musicman brought out the Cutlass in the early 80s. The Cutlass I was like a Stingray, and the Cutlass II was more like a Sabre. I had a Cutlass I and I loved it, but for some reason I got rid of it - I can't remember for the life of me why! Since then I have bought both a Cutlass 1 and II.'

BOOGIE WOOGIE BASSES

Regular viewers of *Later...with Jools Holland* will have seen Swift call upon his Music Man Bongo and his '68 Fender Precision in recent episodes. Despite owning over 40 different basses, Swift insists he didn't set out to become a collector. 'People were always going on about old Fenders and Gibsons, but it never occurred to me to buy

a second hand bass. I wanted to buy a bass from a shop that was all shiny and pristine. It wasn't until the mid 90s, when I had been with Jools for a couple of years, that I decided I wanted a vintage instrument. So I bought an old Jazz bass that I found in a shop window in Edinburgh. Then I got an old Gibson and I was hooked.

The majority of the basses I've got are not your traditional collectors items; they are all quite quirky, but still playable, and I always make sure they can be used at a gig. Though if I turned up at a gig with my Westone Rail bass or the Roland G-77 I don't think Jools would be too thrilled! With Jools you have to make sure it looks right.'