Roy Wooten
This is the Future, man!
by Norman W. Weinberg

In an era of predictable pop configurations and forgettable melodies, it's refreshing to hear a band quartet—individualities forging a progressive synthesis of instrument, sound, and style. Bela Fleck and The Flecktones are a group that is shattering more than a few audiophiles' preconceptions, with an unorthodox approach to jazz and an instrumental lineage that must strike first-time listeners as a little bizarre. The band features Bela Fleck on banjo, Howard Levy on harmonica and keyboards, Victor Wooten on bass, and Roy "Future Man" Wooten playing a modified Synthesizer he calls the Drumhat. This custom-designed instrument allows him to be as expressive as any acoustic drummer, yet gives him the freedom to move around onstage.

On the group's well-received debut album, Bela Fleck & The Flecktones ( Warner Bros.), Wooten demonstrates rock-solid jazz and funk grooves and intricate passage work. His "drumming" displays a finesse that springs from the unusual capacities of his Drumhat. There are symbols that seem to change color depending on the context; unusual sounds that breathe life and movement into the music, and rhythmic patterns that flow in and out of Fleck's challenging musical textures. Bela Fleck long ago established himself as a genre-bending bandleader, reinventing the instrument and breaking its limitations during nine years with the progressive bluegrass band, New Grass Revival. He formed The Flecktones in 1985 for a PBS special called The Louisiana Monr. The producer approached Bela and asked him to put together his dream band. Bela knew about Howard Levy, a Chicago pianist and harmonica player who has appeared with everyone from Tito Puente to John Pizzarelli. Victor Wooten and Wooten got the gig through an unusual telephone audition. "Victor played some stuff over the phone," Roy explains, "lots of triplet flurries and tapping stuff. Bela said it sounded just like the banjo to him." The next step was to find a drummer.

When the group was auditioning drummers, Bela kept asking Vic what he thought of each player. Victor's recurring response was, "He's pretty good, but you should really hear my brother." Vic knew that Roy was back in Virginia working on some new ideas which involved triggering electronic drums in a new way. So Bela called Roy several times and they talked theory and music, and Roy was hired sight unseen on a trial basis to do the TV spot. "He went on a gut instinct," Roy remembers, "and said I was going to go with it. We got there and started playing and it was really cool!"

Roy explains how he originally decided to approach triggering electronic drums in a new way. "I wanted to be able to play the drum set with my fingers. Because if I could do that, I could begin to expand the art form. A guy gave me an old Gibson hollow body guitar and I started from there." Bill Cogin, a guitar maker in Smithville, Virginia, had an open mind and was able to interpret Wooten's creative ideas. At the end of 1985, Roy asked him to install a Yamaha RX-21 drum machine inside the Gibson. The following year, Bill was mounting sensors in the Gibson's neck so Roy could use his left hand to carry the backbeat and other drums. "That was the instrument I used in a band with my brothers. When we played a New Year's Eve date at Busch Gardens, I got a chance to test the idea." That gig represented a certain phase, transforming Roy's idea from conception to reality.

"What I'm asking for requires a lot of engineering moxie. Chris Dellanio, an electrical engineer from Ohio represents the next phase; I met him when he was working at Busch Gardens." Chris and Roy overhauled a Dyanacord Rhythm Stick. "That instrument was the right idea, but it was too shallow. Chris and I added pedals and tried a different layout. I used that on stage for maybe a couple of weeks. Then I got the Synthesizer from Live Rhythm." Creating a new instrument can be expensive, and Roy saw that the Synthesizer represented certain things that he wasn't able to develop on his own. While not quite perfect, he could still merge many of his ideas with the..."
Synthesize. "Now I have a drum system laid out underneath my hands that has evolved out of working with the first two prototypes," says Wooten. "I'm getting drums into position so that I can take these patterns that I'm practicing and work them up and down the fretboard. I want to be able to take these drumset ideas and move them through the changes rhythmically and harmonically like Miles or Cobham.

"The Synthesizer's whammy bar can turn a Sustain the 3:14...