

Roy Wooten

This is the Future, man!

BY NORMAN WEINBERG

IN AN ERA OF PREDICTABLE POP configurations and forgettable melodies, it's refreshing to hear a *band apart*—individualists forging a progressive synthesis of instrument, sounds, and style. Bela Fleck and The Flecktones are a group that is shattering more than a few audience's preconceptions, with an unorthodox approach to jazz and an instrumental lineup that must strike first-time listeners as a little bizarre. The band features Bela Fleck on banjo, Howard Levy on harmonica and keyboards, Victor Lemonte Wooten on bass, and Roy "Future Man" Wooten playing a modified Synthaxe he calls the Drumitar. 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 Drumitar. There are cymbals that seem to change color depending on the context, unusual accents that breathe life and movement into the music, and rhythmic patterns that float in and out of Fleck's challenging musical textures.

Bela Fleck long ago established himself as a genre-bending banjoist, reinventing the instrument and breaking its limitations during nine years with the progressive bluegrass band, New Grass Revival. He formed the Flecktones in 1988 for a PBS special called *The Lonesome Pine*. 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 Prine. Victor Lemonte Wooten

got the gig through an unusual telephone audition. "Victor played some stuff over the phone," Roy explains, "lots of triplet thumps 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 sounds 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 he 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 drum sounds 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 on the art form. A guy gave me an old Gibson hollow body guitar and I started from there."

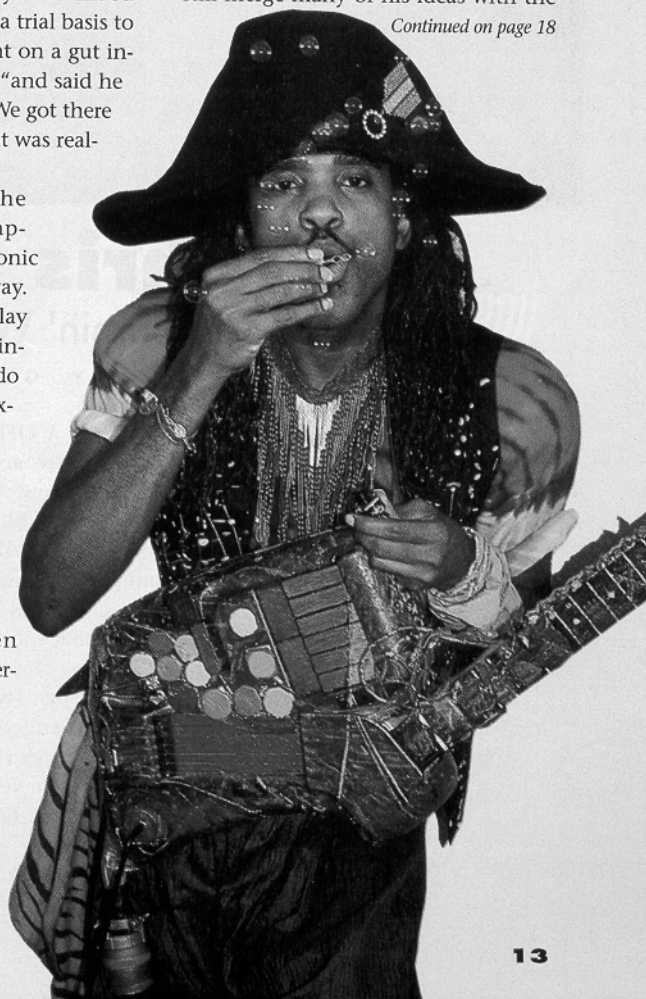
Bill Cogan, a guitar maker in Smithville, Virginia, had an open mind and was able to interpret Wooten's creative ideas. At the end of 1985, Roy asked him to install a Yamaha RX 21 drum machine inside the Gibson. The following year, Bill was mounting

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 Years' 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 mojo. Chris DeHaas, an electrical engineer from Ohio represents the next phase. I met him when he was working at Busch Gardens." Chris and Roy overhauled a Dynacord Rhythm Stick. "That instrument was the right idea, but it was too shallow. Chris and I added FSR pads and tried a different layout. I used that on stage for maybe a couple of weeks. Then I got the Synthaxe from Lee Ritenouer."

Creating a new instrument can be expensive, and Roy saw that the Synthaxe 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

Continued on page 18



Wooten

Continued from page 13

Synthaxe. "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 drum-set ideas and move them through the changes rhythmically and harmonically like Miles or Coltrane.

"The Synthaxe's whammy bar can turn a

tom into a really low trashy sound, or make a wash of sound from a cymbal. I can make the drums wail and bend the cymbals up and down. For the recording, I had the whammy bar mapped to cymbal damping. You can hear this effect on the cut 'Mars Needs Women,' but it's real subtle."

Right now, Roy is using the Dynacord Add One, the Kawai R-100 drum machine, and the Alesis HR16. "I'm getting sounds from all three at any time. The ride cymbal, as I hit it harder, will swell into a crash cymbal. Then, when I click-in another drum machine, a cymbal bell comes into the texture. It's almost

like orchestrating voices; a real tight Alesis hi-hat swelling into a looser Dynacord hi-hat. I spent a long time with the cymbal sounds to create something that fit with the sounds of the banjo."

Roy's philosophy of playing electronic drums is very pragmatic. "In any type of recording or sound reinforcement, acoustic sounds must be turned into electrical signals. What I'm doing is just playing those signals direct. The sound goes straight through the wires, straight through to the P.A. without having to go through the air first. When I was a kid, I used to play cardboard boxes. Now it's kind of like the same thing except I get to pick what sound the cardboard is going to make.

"Playing with fingers is not as physical as playing with sticks. It's more of a pictorial thing. Like a kid who loves drums sitting in class and drawing pictures of drums. I'm painting the drums, and at the same time, trying to paint the physicality of the drums.

"With acoustic drums, the physical motion of the stick going up and down as you're slamming into the drums keeps you in a certain time. Doing it this way takes a lot of concentration and control. It's kind of a Zen thing. It's very slippery. There's this window of dynamics, and the better you can hold back, the more you can do with the dynamics. I guess you could say it's a lot like power steering."



Some people might think what Roy is doing is just a gimmick. But that doesn't seem to bother the Future Man. Curiosity might get people to listen, and when they do, "They'll hear that I'm hip to Max Roach, Elvin, Philly Joe, Tony, Cobham, and I also dig the rap stuff and dance music. I can throw in a little bit of that rap-swing thing and then toss Elvin-triplets over the top.

"There are a lot of virtuoso ideas I want to get to. When you do them on an acoustic drum set, you're soloing. But now I can flutter those bass drums like Buddy Rich and get them in there under the music. Some of the things I do would require great physical effort on a drum set: swinging around the drums, over the tom-toms, and—bang—into the cymbals. With acoustic drums, it's overlapping. Now I can pull that stuff up underneath the banjo but I can also rage over the top."

Roy has made a serious commitment to his concept. "I could easily do this gig on acoustic drums, but I'm trying to move forward artistically. I gave up a lot of work to record this album because I really wanted to show the potential of the idea: the power of using just two hands and playing the drums in a new way. When artists truly believe in their ideas, the art will move forward. I believe I can take my instrument to a new place, just like Hendrix did with the guitar." •


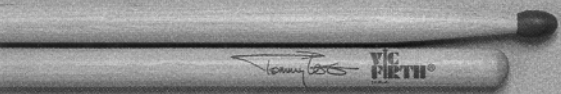
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