

Janek Gwizdala Masterclass at ACM Guildford, March 2007

Part 2: Early Days/Practising

(all speech/audio transcribed by Tom Kenrick 2017)

Q: What was your initial inspiration for picking up the bass?

That's super, super easy and it's a guy from England, his name is Laurence Cottle, anybody heard this guy? His name's Laurence Cottle, he's a fantastic electric bass player and I went to see him at The Gun Tavern in Croydon one Sunday and on the Monday I went out and bought my first bass and that was it.

And he lived five minutes away from me and he took me to every gig and everything he played for about 2 years straight; I recorded it all on a little tape player and would come home after every gig every night, transcribe it all and learn it note for note. I thought I was really good – everyone used to ask me:

“How do you play, man?”

“I play like Laurence Cottle”.

Of course I didn't play anything near like him but he was definitely my initial inspiration and still is to this day, I still keep in touch with him a lot.

Q: So was bass your first instrument?

No. I started playing drums when I was 11 years old and then I studied classical guitar for 7 years, and in amongst all that I studied the French Horn very, very briefly and more recently the trumpet and obviously the piano over the last 10 years or so; not really studying the piano formally, when I transcribe solos I transcribe everything at the piano in order to teach myself how to play – it kind of worked because I play piano pretty good, and pretty much everything I can do on a bass I can do on a piano.

And it's really useful for arranging gigs and when I'm in the studio producing records, which is another thing that I'm really into and do a lot of. It's pretty

useful – and when I went to Berklee I made a bunch of bread by playing a lot of piano trio gigs in the first year that I was there, randomly enough.

Q: *Is that how you've done it all, just through transcribing?*

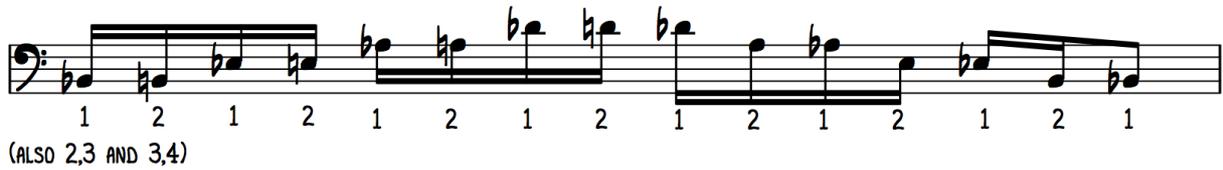
There was no magic little thing that a teacher told me “oh yeah, do this, this, this and this and then it's all going to work”.

Q: *And you didn't go and woodshed scales and get into those?*

I have exercises, which I use which happen to be scales and arpeggios and all that stuff to get my technique in shape:



You know, just to cover the instrument – to get around the instrument and keep it in tune:



Make sure the 3rd and 4th finger are working really well on the left hand – all kind of silly things that you can pick up anywhere.

I just took a Hanon – it's called the [Hanon Virtuoso Pianist](#), it's a piano scale and arpeggio book – and I just took a bunch of things that I felt really helped my technique out of that book and did them with a metronome from 40bpm to 400 (he's talking quavers. I hope.) Every day for about 3 or 4 hours – that was my technique practice routine.

40bpm is like a funeral procession, 400 [bpm] you basically don't hear the notes any more, but making sure [I'm] really conscious of each level of taking that metronome up that it's super even and super clean – which is maybe not what you're ultimately going for, maybe your musical idea isn't completely clean, but if your technique is such that you can execute **anything** [then] you can sure as hell execute something sloppy if you want to... There are bridges permanently between the brain and the music.

The way I practise at home is just to have iTunes on random and just hit it, you know, until I find something that inspires me and I get into it. It might be 2 notes, might be a whole song I want to learn, maybe a phrase of a solo; I can take 2 notes and practise for an hour with them, know what I mean?

If I hear this:



If I hear that on a solo... oh man, there's so much you can [do]:



But in context, maybe like:



So that was just incorporating that minor 3rd interval, but all over the instrument:



You get the idea of just being able to take a tiny phrase – two notes, one note, a song, whatever it is – and have that inspire you to practise.

I think that's a super important point as well – **don't practise if you're not inspired.**

Q: How much do you practise and does it affect your social life?

How much do I practise and does it affect my social life? Tonnes. And the second part? Tonnes.

I have practised a lot more than I do now, because I'm kind of busy and travelling and touring and stuff, which does totally get in the way of practising.

And as stupid as it sounds I feel like I'm in worse shape when I come back off the road off a tour than when I went out, when I was practising because I didn't get to practise too much on the road.

But, as time will testify, I went through some intense periods of shedding, like the day I picked up the bass it started – 9,10, 11 hours – as much as I could cram in. We'd come home from gigs together and I'd be like 'I gotta play, gotta play, gotta play', so we'd end up in his bedroom just jamming all the time.

To get to where the technique is fluid enough so that you can execute your ideas without the technique getting in the way you've got to go through somewhat of an intense period of shedding - for me anyway, for the kind of stuff I play - for that fast stuff, the nonsense. I'm trying to slow it all down now and forget about it. Yeah, a lot of practice.

And does it affect my social life? Umm... No. And I mean that quite that seriously because one of the things I strive for almost as much as being a great musician is to have a balanced life, and I think that's super important. And it doesn't always work – right now it's not working for me, but there are plenty of good times where it does and on the whole it does work very well.

If someone gives you a hard time about practising and not going out it's not a bad thing; when you're headlining Shepherd's Bush Empire next week or something and they're sitting at home with a glass of milk.

Q: What was your first approach to playing changes?

First approach to playing changes? Just... badly; firing away and not really hitting too much, initially, as I think everyone kind of does, stumbles into it. The importance of transcription was stressed to me from a very early age – well, not early age but early on in my bass playing and in wanting to be an improvising musician, so that's all I did.

I'll show you this, because I never go anywhere without at least a couple of these books, and basically... this is kind of a new one, so it's not so full, but [I'd] just try and kind of transcribe tonnes of solos and write them all down. There's Metheny solos and Michael Brecker solos and Bill Frisell solos and Sonny Rollins and Clifford Brown; all kind of great jazz improvising artists.

And I do this all the time, at least... There was a stage when I didn't have any gigs. In July, I think it was, I didn't have too many gigs so I was doing one a day, and I kind of filled up half a book in a month, which is great, and then spent the next month digging back into certain phrases which I wanted to check out...

Me and [Mike] Stern call these 'The Scrolls of Knowledge' - which is basically what they are - and we fill them up and we go and dig back into them and hopefully get re-inspired by what we transcribed and find something new within it, or get bored of it and be inspired to transcribe something else.

Books like this, I have maybe 20, 30 of these books full of stuff that I've been working on over the last 8 years, 10 years, whatever it's been. And always 2 or 3 travel with me at all times.

Q: Why do you sing when you play?

Why do I sing? Because, as guitar players and bass players and piano players and drummers, we can play constantly without taking a breath. I could sit here for the next hour going... And it'd get super boring, but I couldn't sing that, know what I mean? So the singing along with what you're playing helps your phrasing, because at some point you have to breathe, so you tend to play in somewhat more concise and melodic phrases.

And also the fact that when I'm playing or when any great improviser is playing, what's coming from their head... it's like... they're thinking about it before it comes out [on the instrument]. Just momentarily, but it's that transition of coming from the brain to the instrument and that just connects it a little bit more. And obviously I got it from Benson... the classic 'On Broadway Solo' and a tonne of his other solos. He sings along to all of that stuff with a serious R'n'B voice - I don't ever actually pretend to sing exactly what I'm playing, but I'm definitely kind of close (implied harmony here is Bb or Bb7, *a la* 'On Broadway'):



And I had to breathe at some point in there, so it wasn't actually a lot of breathing in that little thing, but just making... like when I started playing the blues:

***Transcription of F Jazz Blues on last page**

You know, to create space in between the spaces and make question and answer stuff.

Q:When you learn all these different styles do you tend to just concentrate on one for a period of time until you nail it and then move on or do you....?

I have done. I've been really fortunate to be able to work with some people in different styles; I've been fortunate enough to play with Airtó Moreira and Flora Purim, Brazilian jazz artists, so that was like a crash course in Brazilian music. And it was so much of an inspiration at the time I really dug deep into it, I went and checked out Milton [Nascimento] like a ton of Brazilian people. So yeah, I really dig into it.

I don't think it's ever been really one thing at the same time because my mind is a little bit crazy.