

Motown to Modern With Fitz & The Tantrums

It's tough to find a groove-oriented bass player who wasn't influenced by vintage Motown tracks, especially the inspired fretwork of bassist James Jamerson. But Joe Karnes puts a new spin on that beloved old sound when he plays with Fitz & the Tantrums, the neo-soul combo that burst from the LA club scene with their 2010 album, *Pickin' Up the Pieces*, and its hit single, "MoneyGrabber."

Mere imitation was never the band's goal, explains the Los Angeles native: "There are already a lot of bands doing the Motown revival thing, and doing it more authentically than we do. But we've never aimed to recreate the Motown sound note for note. We're more interested in blending that sound with our other influences, like synth pop and electronica."

The group is recording their next album in Los Angeles with producer Tony Hoffer (Belle and Sebastian, Norah Jones, the Fratellis). The upcoming release will venture further afield from the Detroit sound, he says. "We're also very influenced by '80s pop bands like ABC and Style Council, and the next record will be a little heavier on that decade. We'll be changing up the sonic palette and exploring things like synthesizers. We're definitely getting adventurous."

And there's certainly room for the band to expand their palette — even though Fitz & the Tantrums is a sextet, the lineup includes just three melodic instruments: sax, organ/piano, and Karnes' bass. "Having just one chordal instrument definitely gives me more liberty," says Karnes.

Perhaps it's no accident that Joe's earliest bass influences were three-instrument bands such as the Jimi Hendrix Experience and Led Zeppelin. He singles out Zeppelin's John Paul Jones as a particularly crucial influence. "He was one of the first players to draw me to the bass, especially his playing on *Led Zeppelin II*. The song 'What Is and What Should Never Be' just floored me by showing me how a bass could carry a song. Zeppelin isn't funk by any means, but if you break things down, you find they have a lot of the same aesthetics, especially their amazing grooves. John Paul Jones was certainly influenced by Jamerson, and you can hear a lot of similarities of feel and note choice. He's adventurous the way Jamerson was, and his playing definitely led me to Motown."

So did one of his parent's favorite discs: the Motown-fueled soundtrack to *The Big Chill*. "We'd play it over and over on road trips," Joe remembers. "The track that really stood out for me, bass-wise, was the original version of Marvin Gaye's 'Heard It Through the Grapevine.' It's such a great example of the way Jamerson would hold notes over the beat, or anticipate beats. The part isn't busy at all, but he does so much more than just hit the ones and twos. The line develops constantly over the course of the song. It demonstrates how where you put the notes — and where you omit them — is every bit as important as the notes themselves."

It will probably come as no surprise to learn that Karnes usually favors basses with a vintage flavor. Particularly important are old-school passive electronics, as opposed to modern active systems. "I'm a pretty diehard passive guy," he says. "For me, passive systems sound warmer and have more crunch. They just sound more 'real' to me, and I can hear more of the instrument's wood."



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Joe's newest bass is a Yamaha BB2024X. "I'm really loving this bass," he says. "It's a super-utilitarian passive model that plays great right out of the box. The tone is warm, inviting, and natural, but with just enough bite to it to give it character. It's the first bass I've owned that mixes P-style and J-style pickups. You can switch between them or mix them for three distinct sounds. There's great burliness in the neck pickup, or you can switch to the bridge pickup for more of that punctuated midrange sound. It's got a uniquely gritty tone, and it's perfectly complementary to my other basses. It's just a beautiful, beautiful instrument. Plus, I really appreciate all the effort and love I've gotten from Yamaha. It's a really great company, with great people. They're making great products, so I'm happy to be part of the family."

