

“Turning Goat Piss Into Gasoline”

A Stylistic Analysis of Duck's Bass Lines

Whenever anyone mentions Duck Dunn's bass lines, almost invariably you will get the same answer: Duck played simply. While there's more to it than that, "simple" is a fitting word to describe his playing, if the description is to be only a single word. In the wake of musicians such as Jaco Pastorius or Victor Wooten, many young bassists seem to have forgotten that old adage, "less is more." While James Jamerson was playing his bouncy, playful bass lines in the Snake Pit, Duck Dunn was laying down a solid harmonic and rhythmic foundation upon which the rest of the musicians could build.

Although he was simple, Duck wasn't playing the generic "root-fifth" movement synonymous with the bass playing of that time. His deep pocket further established him as a rhythm section player, rather than solely a bassist. Further, while Duck was accomplished at executing a solid walking bass line, it wasn't Duck's natural playing style.

He didn't read music, but at Stax, it wasn't necessary. The arranger either gave him a chord chart or just told him the chords, and in some instances, told him exactly what to play. Many times, Duck would track the part, listen to it in the control room, and go back for another take, trying to play half as many notes. It's fairly obvious that Duck was heavily influenced by what he did early on with the Mar-Keys, often playing unison lines with Cropper.

Rather than studying formally with teachers, Cropper would say they learned in the real world. "We had a few lessons from time to time, but we were mainly on-the-job-training, self-taught people. Just like a plumber or electrician who never went to electric school or plumbing school to learn how to do that. You learn by watching other people and making things work. You got a drip, you make it stop. You got the power out, you put two and two together, and you make it work 'til you turn the lights on. And you do that enough times through life, you learn how to do that real quick, and real good, but it may not be the way the professor had in mind."

In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate what could be considered a standard Duck Dunn bass line. I will divide it up into three elements that set Duck's playing apart, not

only from his predecessors and contemporaries, but also from the bassists that he subsequently influenced in the years following his success. Inside of each element, we will look at a few lines from his earliest days at Stax to his playing in the later years.

It should be noted that, while this analysis isolates Duck's standard style, it doesn't mean that (many) exceptions can't be found. However, if a player looks at what made Duck's playing so unique, this is where to start.

Rhythmic Choices

The most undeniable element of Duck's playing was his deep pocket. His groove centered on the beat (rather than pushing or pulling) and remained rock-solid throughout an entire song.

The bassist/drummer relationship was an important part of music for Duck. When he played with bandleader Ben Branch, the drummer in that group (who was known as "Big Bell") made Duck keep his eyes on the drum kit until Big Bell told him he could face the audience. It was a week before that happened.

As Steve Potts said, "Duck just had a good feel. He wasn't a busy player; his feel was solid... you can't help but to groove with him. You can't help it! I mean it was just so much fun playing with Duck; his groove was just so wide and solid. He was the same from the beginning [of his career] to the end. He never did change his feel."

Many of Duck's lines are syncopated, which helps drive the tune. At the very least, the downbeat of every two measures is reestablished. Duck used to tell the story that Al Jackson (who, Duck would argue, was the "Stax sound," much in the way that Jamerson was the "Motown sound") would tell Duck to wait for Al to play beat two, then he could play after. Often, Duck's first two notes were on the downbeat, then the "and" of two. It wasn't a hard-and-fast rule, but syncopation was very common in Duck's bass lines.