

# BASS NOTES

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## MERLO PODLEWSKI

### The Undertow in Jack Johnson's Flow



KIPYZ/ONEAL

**A DECADE AGO, MERLO PODLEWSKI** got the call to play with an obscure surfer-songwriter named Jack Johnson. Podlewski's chill demeanor and love for the Meters, Jimi Hendrix, and Bob Marley made him an easy personal match for laid back Jack, and he's been riding high on a monster wave with him ever since. Johnson's latest, *To The Sea*, is out now.

**Jack Johnson has professed his passion for "unobtrusive tones." Is that how you would describe what you're going for?**

I guess so. I'm going for a reggae tone, but I'm not playing those licks in their native context. We go for the irie tones of a reggae band—slightly dirty guitar, dry, old-school drums, warm, round bass, and a mellow vocal—but we don't use one-drop rhythms or anything like that. I learned loads of licks listening to Family Man Barrett and Robbie Shakespeare growing up, but we mostly play them in an American soul style.

**Can you elaborate?**

Different styles of music utilize many of the same stock licks. Where they stop and start in a bar is often the only difference between, say, a funk lick with an emphasis on *one*, and the same lick in an afro beat context, where it might start on *three*. Reggae is like soul like moved over—you don't emphasize the *one* as much, but the licks are essentially the same.

**Can you draw similar comparisons tonally?**

When I started playing in clubs, I discovered that Latin music and reggae have essentially the same warm bass tone. If you can get that tone out of a rig, you can do world music gigs, plus soul and hip hop.

**How do your mechanics factor into nailing the irie tone?**

I feel that you need heat on the front end in order to achieve a true tone, so I use heavy strings, high action, and I dig in—even on low-volume gigs. I'll pluck up near or on the neck to mellow my sound. I play a lot of Jack's stuff using frets five through ten. In that region, you get a warm sound that doesn't grind like the tone you get from playing the lower frets, and the notes don't jump out too much either. The middle region of the neck is the sweet spot. —JIMMY LESLIE



#### HEAR HIM ON

Jack Johnson, *To The Sea* [Brushfire, 2010]

#### GEAR

**Basses** Hofner HCB-CB Club Bass, '70s Epiphone (studio)

**Rig** Tech 21 Landmark 300 head, Ampeg SVT-810E 8x10 cabinet, Ampeg B-15 (studio)

**Strings** GHS Bass Boomers Heavy (.050-.115)

**Tone tip** "If the venue is too boomy, I'll cut my amp volume way down and rely on the monitors."



Check out Merlo's breakdown rap during Johnson's "Staple It Together."

Visit Jack's YouTube channel for all sorts of good stuff.



Cruise over to Jack Johnson's website for tour info.



## RETRO-RAMA

### 1962 National Val-Pro 85

**THE NATIONAL COMPANY WAS** founded in 1926, and its core business was making guitars and resonator instruments especially favored by blues and roots artists. National, who also did business under the names Dobro and Supro at various stages, eventually became Valco after World War II, and made instruments, amps, and accessories until going out of business in the late '60s.

In 1961, Valco/National introduced a new line of guitars that were made of synthetic "Reso-O-Glas," which was a blend of Fiberglass and polyester resin, filled with high-density foam. This enabled unusually artsy molded shapes to be mass-produced easily and inexpensively. In 1962, National introduced a bass version, dubbing it the Val-Pro 85. A couple years later, the treble cutaway was changed to curve downwards (perhaps to look more like Florida on the "map" that the body resembles) and the name was changed to the National 85.

I found this cream-colored slab of short-scale fantasy—which belongs to Rich Mermer of Mermer Guitars—at this year's Chet Atkins Festival in Nashville. This '62 is in near-perfect shape. It may look like a toy, but it's got enough weight to set you straight when you when you pick it up. The bass seemed almost like an optical illusion; until I started to play it, its outside body distracted from the fact that its scale length is a mere 25". The wacky paddle-shaped headstock sports huge Gibson-style tuners, and the trapeze bridge (which has a nice bit of art-deco flair) shows no sign of wear or strain. The symmetrical thumb and finger rests demonstrate the newness of the electric bass at the time, as some folks played with their thumb and used the lower finger rest, while others used the top

rest and played fingerstyle. Clearly, slapping and popping were not yet being taken into account; you could get hurt playing this bass too aggressively!

The two-pickup design features a single-coil magnetic pickup (though the cover mimics a humbucker), and a second pickup is built into the bridge. Interestingly enough, the pickups can't be isolated from one another. The simple controls, volume and tone, are placed backwards from the norm, but the end result is that turning the tone knob down slightly emphasizes the magnetic pickup, and when you turn it up, the high end of the bridge pickup comes through.

Regardless of its size, the 85's tone is clear and full, and the super-short scale makes it really fun to play. The intonation on this National is pretty accurate, and the neck has stayed true. With its funky, plunky tone and flatwound strings, this National would sound perfect for blues, R&B, and pretty much any kind of roots music. Good things sometimes come in small packages, and this is definitely one of them. All in all, this bass has no business sounding as good as it looks, but it does! —DAVE POMEROY



MICKEY DOBO