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BASSES

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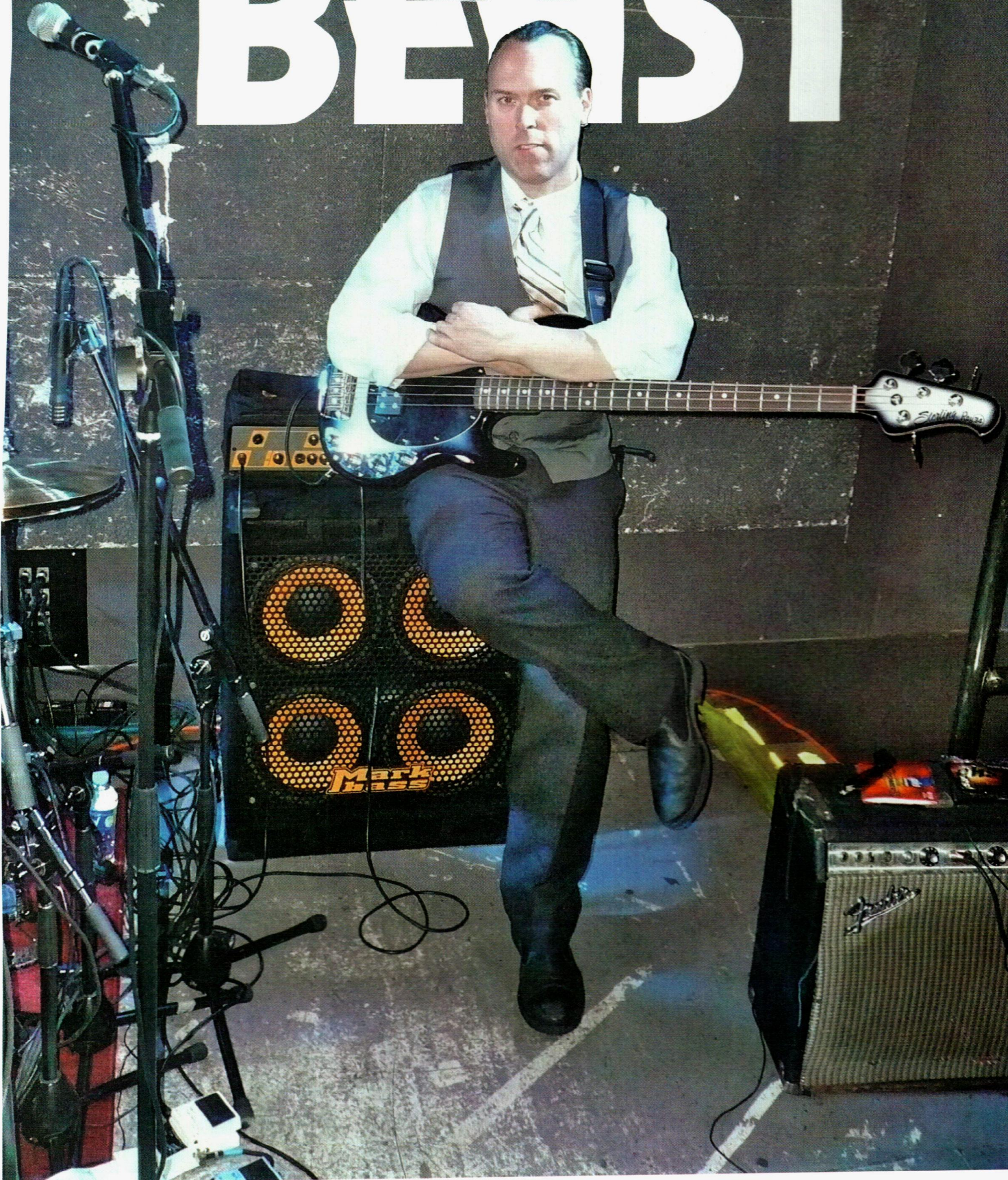
The Texas metal
monster lays it down

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5-STRINGS
A fistful of fives

+

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BASS BEAST



Joe 'Bearclaw' Burcaw is a monster of pocket and tone.

Joe Daly enters his lair

If you've got a nickname like Bearclaw, you'd better be prepared to back it up. Fortunately for Joe 'Bearclaw' Burcaw, he is one ferocious bassist – and as his name suggests, when he gets his hooks into a rhythm, neither man nor beast can unlock him.

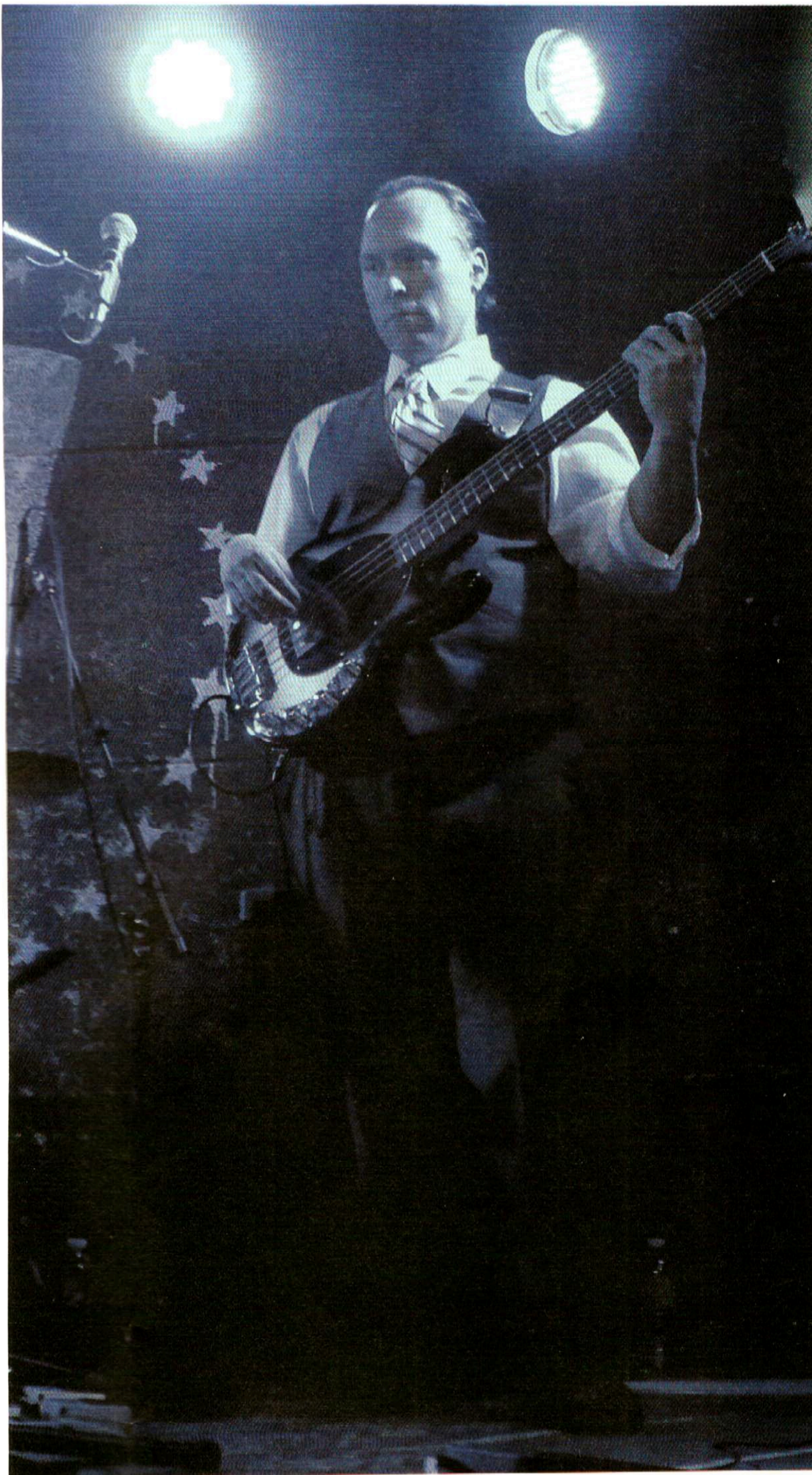
Bearclaw has firmly established that mastery of one's instrument flows from a thorough exploration of a wide variety of playing styles, and with his latest project, GI Blythe, Bearclaw sinks his teeth into the hearts of soul, R&B, ska and tried-and-true rock'n'roll. Formed by horn maestro Geoff Blythe, a founding member of the Eileen-beckoning Dexy's Midnight Runners, the six-piece have recently released *Lost In Space* – a free-wheeling, 11-song debut, rich in the warm tones of Memphis soul, the swagger of Stax and the hip-shaking grooves of 60s Motown.

With its hard-hitting horn section and the precision timekeeping of drummer Crispin 'The Pump' Taylor, GI Blythe presented Bearclaw with an opportunity to join a tight and sophisticated rhythmic foundation. Despite the challenges of time and space – Bearclaw lives in New York City, while much of the material was recorded in the UK, requiring some long-distance overdubbing – recording proved an immensely satisfying experience. "We had a window of three days to rehearse, arrange and record seven of the eleven songs on the album," Bearclaw tells us. "Crispin and I hit it off immediately as a rhythm unit: there was this surge of unspoken magical energy that we both tapped into when recording the album." On tracks like 'Run Rabbit Run' and 'The Narrative of G. Bristol Groot (Vampyre)', this synergy takes the form of sturdy grooves and punchy rhythms which suggest that the band enjoyed a massively good time putting the songs together.

Considering that Bearclaw overdubbed half of the record's original bass-lines from a control booth five time-zones away, the loose, playful vibe becomes all the more remarkable. "I have a natural tendency to hang a little on top of the beat as a player, which blended quite nicely against Crispin's bounce," he says. "When listening to the first batch of recordings, you aren't even able to tell we were in two opposite ends of the world, as we're making such cohesive and fluid music."

With horns figuring so prominently in the music, Bearclaw focused on creating ample room for the others while still maintaining a steady presence. "My role in this band is to anchor the kick drum and not get in the way of the upper register of the horns and keys: it's as simple as that," explains our man. "You won't find me noodling around past the 12th fret at all in GI Blythe. It's not necessary to stray beyond second position too often, because then you run into the risk of losing the bottom end and bleeding into the soul palette."

Of course, staying out of the way of the horns doesn't mean that Bearclaw doesn't enjoy himself. "I'm all over the fretboard, for the simple reason that our



music has a soul-meets-R&B flavour to it, which requires a lot of walking run-ups, octave patterns and pentatonic shapes to guide the tune's structure," he says.

In addition to anchoring the sound of GI Blythe, Bearclaw handles bass duties for Black 47, the Bronx-based Celtic outfit who accent Irish rock and folk with liberal doses of reggae and hip-hop. Traditional Celtic music has never relied on a bass to propel its rhythms, and so the role of that instrument takes on something quite different. "The rhythm section provides the foundation necessary to push the wall of tribal beats in repetition," says Bearclaw, "with particular emphasis from the downbeat from the floor tom. I tend to use more open string notes to emphasise where the downbeat is, relying on the E, A and at times the D string."

After a mini promotional tour with GI Blythe, Bearclaw will be hitting the summer festival circuit with Black 47, and then it's hopefully over to Europe with GI Blythe. Although his plate is piled high, Bearclaw is already talking about putting ideas together for the next GI Blythe album – because when you're living out your dreams, time off is time wasted. ■