

Bassist Has Passion for Teaching

An old proverb says the early bird catches the worm. For Joe Burcaw of Local 9-535 (Boston, MA) many opportunities were granted by being the last one to bed and the first one awake. As a morning person by nature, he says he receives his energy from the sunrise.

"It gives me time to practice," the bassist says. "I eat, breath, and think about music 24/7."

He's been performing for almost a decade as bass guitarist for Celtic rock band Black 47, but the group will make its final recording and tour this year. Burcaw still gets excited when he talks about Black 47 playing at Boston's TD Garden last March, opening for the Dropkick Murphys to a crowd of 17,000.



Photo: Dan Kane

Joe Burcaw of Local 9-535 (Boston, MA) has played with Black 47 for 10 years.

"The panoramic view of the people out there was breathtaking," Burcaw explains. "That was surreal for me." In six months' time, he went from playing small clubs in New York City to playing before thousands of people. "That was a real eye-opener," he says.

Born in Ohio and raised in Connecticut, Burcaw says his influences include John Taylor, Sting, and Geddy Lee, but he has always been particularly inspired by Frank Zappa. "I think

it's very important for younger generations of musicians to be exposed to Frank's music," he says. "It's a language in itself."

Burcaw's music career began after attending school at Salve Regina University of Rhode Island, where he received an associate degree in music performance. He relocated from Newport, Rhode Island, to Boston, Massachusetts, with the band Azur Tech, which he describes as a cross between Duran Duran, INXS, and Peter Murphy.

Through the guitarist's connections, the band secured a recording contract in London in the late '90s and headed overseas. But after six months, the band imploded, according to Burcaw. "There were some personal things going on," he explains. "We all decided it was best just to pack it up and come home."

Later, Burcaw landed in New York City, where he would spend the next 11 years, becoming a member of Local 802 (New York City), after learning about the union from numerous conversations with symphonic and Broadway musicians. "They had a lot of respect for the power of the union," he says.

While living in New York, he also met many jazz and avant-garde musicians who were taken advantage of, frequently performing under pay-to-play systems and earning below standard wages.

"I truly believe the union is a very powerful organization," Burcaw explains. "Not enough musicians are privy to its protective role from crooked record producers or

labels. I feel that more awareness needs to be invested when it comes to the rock 'n' roll guys and gals, slaving away, night after night, with nothing to show at the end."

As a member of Local 802, several years ago, Burcaw played a major role on a committee with executive board member Andy Schwartz and committee member Marc Ribot, achieving a collective bargaining agreement for performers at the NYC Winter

Jazzfest. The agreement established minimum scale wages for all festival musicians and ensured AFM recording protections for commercial use of recorded material.

In 2002, Burcaw was playing in about five different bands, and networking all over the city. He attended shows, seminars, house parties and meet-and-greets. Oftentimes he would stay out until 4 a.m. handing out business cards. "If it pertained to music, I was there," he says.

He began playing with Black 47, a band he'd been a fan of for many years, after answering an anonymous Craigslist ad. "I just knew something was happening," Burcaw says. "There was an automatic chemistry. Once I got in that room, we all clicked. After eight years of sharing the stage with my brothers, I still need to pinch myself back to reality!"

The 41-year-old has created his own teaching service called Bearclaw's Bass Lessons, where he conducts private lessons via Skype. Burcaw also teaches ensembles at the School of Rock Boston.

"I get such a joy and pleasure out of teaching," Burcaw says, adding that he'll probably never stop teaching. "It puts a smile on my face when I can teach something to a younger musician, knowing they can walk out of there inspired."

"When I'm in my 80s I still want to be active," Burcaw says. "I want to be out there, teaching and performing. Music is a universal language that brings people together, and I want to be a part of that." One professional goal he hopes to achieve is to someday have a chance to play in the Zappa Plays Zappa band, fronted by Dweezil Zappa of Local 47 (Los Angeles, CA).

Burcaw most recently moved to Boston, joining Local 9-535. He contacted Local President Pat Hollenbeck requesting his time to answer some questions. Hollenbeck talked with Burcaw for an hour, discussing various musicians and methods of networking in the Boston area.

"It was such a wonderful thing he didn't have to do and he did," Burcaw says. "People have to understand that the union really is here to help; you just have to take the initiative to go out there and ask. I just want to thank the AFM for being there and representing us. Without the AFM, who knows where we would be."