

## A TALK WITH THE BEARCLAW

I got into an online chat with bassist [Joe Burcaw](#). It was just a kind of, “Hey, how are you? I like what you do,” sort of thing. At some point Joe sent me an MP3 of a song he did with [GI Blythe](#). I have to say that I had never heard anything quite like it. I listened to it thirty times in a row, easily.

What makes a song great? I can’t tell you. What made the latter *Seinfeld* shows great? Rare confluences of acting, personalities, writing, and sensibilities.

The song is titled “The Narrative of G. Bristol Groot,” from the album *Lost in Space* [[Vampyre](#)].

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For me, everything about the tune is perfect. It’s a story-song, the hardest of all to carry off. Listen to the dynamics of the bass. They don’t makes sense...yet they *do*. This song will remain fresh forever. Every time it ends, I have the urge to play it again. When I listen to it, I travel. For five minutes and nineteen seconds, there’s no such thing as Meniere’s disease or osteoarthritis. I found my saving grace in this song.

Joe—or Bearclaw, as he’s known—told me that he’s a fan of the amazing bassist John Taylor of Duran Duran; I could hear it in this song. What Joe and I understand about Taylor is that he’s a unique stylist. The second you hear John Taylor, you say, “That’s John Taylor.”

Anyone who loves John Taylor’s bass playing is special. So here’s my second interview since 2002.





Dan Kane Photography

*What's the thumbnail sketch for your career? You've done so much that I think it should be left up to you to describe what you do in the order that's most important to you.*

Number one, I'm a musician/bass player and educator who strives every day to learn and absorb as much information and knowledge as conceivably possible and then pass it along to those willing to receive it. Life is way too short, and time is of the essence in making a difference doing something constructive with the information I'm absorbing.

I've always felt this sense of urgency to get moving in a productive fashion, to never look back, and to never question my productivity or lack of it. David Lee Roth wrote this amazing book titled *Crazy from the Heat* back in the late 90's, which I've just finished reading. It's truly inspired me to study more and to make adjustments in my life so that I'm staying true to myself in what I can bring to the table as a creative person.

In my opinion life experience goes hand-in-hand with musical experience. It's those life experiences—whether they're hardships or achievements—that shape you into the person and musician you are. For me, if I never went through the turmoil and disappointments necessary to becoming a successful musician and educator, I wouldn't be as grounded as I am now.

*Black 47 has been called "the premier Irish-American rock group." Is there such a thing as "celtic rock," and if so, what drew you to it?*

The media loves to add their catch phrase and twist on what Black 47 represents to them, musically speaking. The term "Celtic Rock" is a layman's term for describing something that can't be categorized stylistically. Even though we're part of the Irish scene, we're worlds apart from what everyone else is doing.

You have to understand that I was a fan of the band before I became a member. I went to college in the New England area and saw them at a small club in Boston back in the mid 90's. I was completely blown away by the whole production and "balls to the wall" rock & roll/punk-rock ethic they exuded! Matt Pinfield used to have a program on MTV called 120 minutes, and it was on his show where I first heard of B47 and their unique and unorthodox sound. It was the video for "40 Shades of Blue" that initially held my attention. To this day that song is still a favorite of mine to perform at our shows.

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Our album *Bankers and Gangsters* includes a song called "Celtic Rocker" which is a play on words for that "Celtic Rock" labeling. Our lead singer-guitarist Larry Kirwan had a field day writing the lyrics for the song. He was completely taking the piss and poking fun at how "Celtic Rock" has become synonymous with Black 47.

*You've cited John Taylor of Duran Duran as a major influence. Would you agree that he's not given enough credit as a bassist with a unique style? Also, what is it about his playing that you admire?*

I am a child of the *MTV* generation, so when I was nine years old, this new format of video television hit the cable network stations across the country. It was here that I first saw and heard Duran Duran's "Planet Earth" video.

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Duran had a lot of push from *MTV*, and as a result I was able to get a good feel for what they were all about due to their videos being in constant rotation.

So to answer your question, yes, John Taylor is the reason why I picked up the bass to begin with. As far as his street credibility goes, it seems as though lately more and more cats are giving him the respect he very well deserves! I was elated when I saw your *Unsung Bass Heroes* segment in *Bass Player* magazine twenty years ago. This was in all seriousness a turning point for JT's reputation as a player, and not as a pin up boy for *Tiger Beat* magazine.



What caught my attention most was how he and drummer Roger Taylor were able to fuse disco funk with punk. It was a beautiful blend of Chic meets The Sex Pistols with a touch of Roxy Music for good measure. I was also drawn to how up-front his bass tone was in the mix, which was an absolute treat when listening with headphones. I spent hours upon hours up in my bedroom practicing to the first three Duran albums. This music provided me with a serious education on how to play "four on the floor" dance/pop music.

*Your bio says that John Taylor promoted your band Azurtech. This would seem like a tremendous opportunity. What happened to Azurtech?*

It was a complete head trip having your bass idol promote your band. I don't discuss this aspect of my early days for some reason, and really need to get it off my chest I suppose.

Azurtech was the culmination of four young guys busting their asses to make it not only as musicians, but as people yearning for validation. Azurtech originally started out as Free Fall, straight out of high school. Due to tragic circumstances our original singer Shawn Shanks passed away in a car accident. I still reflect on what we could have accomplished together as a unit if he was still with us. He had the voice of an angel, very similar to Peter Murphy but with much more feminine qualities, to the point of having

people question what gender he was when listening to his vocal parts.

After Shawn passed away we had to figure out what to do, so our guitarist Marco Passarelli, our drummer Michael C. Jones, and I opted to carry on as a three piece. Marco and I took on the burden of vocals, which was a complete bitch for us since we'd never really ventured down that road before. All three of us were amazing backing harmony singers, but something got lost in translation with the lead vocals. We were so rigid about doing things "our way," without any outside influences and help that I think we shot ourselves in the foot by not taking time off to audition singers.

The Azurtech album *Pop Junkie* is a fantastic record, but we didn't spend enough time fine tuning the vocals due to money limitations and deadlines to get the product out for promotional purposes, etc. As a result you have this great catchy album with rather weak melodies and harmonies. Hindsight always gives you a fresh perspective, but it is what it is.

John Taylor got involved with us by pure fate. He was in Boston with his solo band, and we had tickets for the show. At this point John had split from Duran Duran. We were patiently waiting in line, and I had to take a leak, so I decided to run behind the club and take care of business. Wouldn't you know, minutes later John is pacing back and forth by himself hiding from the crazy Duran sycophants roaming the grounds, hunting him down. As I finished up, I called out to him and completely scared the living daylight out of him. He thought I was a crazy fan, and I had to convince him that I was one of the sane!

I told him I was a huge fan of his playing and asked if he would be interested in hearing my band's demo. He was a very gracious person and said that I should contact his assistant. Our brief encounter lasted less than two minutes. We shook hands and I left having to pinch myself that this really just took place. The next day Marco was at his day job and who walks into the store but John Taylor and his assistant Patty. Marco started chatting both of them up and was able to get Patty's cell number.

John listened to our music and really dug it, so he made an agreement with us: He would promote and sell our CD on his website for a certain percent, which was pretty reasonable considering what the industry sharks can take from younger naive bands. This opportunity opened us up to the Duran fans and led to us headlining some Duran Duran fan functions in NYC and in Boston. They were well attended, and we went over incredibly well with the Duranies.

Our sound was a cross between Duran, INXS, and The Cars but heavier, so the formula was perfect. We eventually struck a spec deal [*Someone charges less than they would normally in the hopes of getting a future return, Ed.*] with an agent in London and decided to move to the UK so we could capitalize on the opportunities that were presenting themselves. Lo and behold we got screwed by the agent and ended up on our own with no one to help us.

After close to six months of struggling to break into the UK market, we made the unfortunate decision of flying back to the States (all on separate flights) as friends, and not as band mates. It's too bad because we had a lot of momentum and talent, but the timing was wrong and just not meant to be. I love those guys and do miss what we had chemistry-wise, but we had to move forward. Now Azurtech remains as a positive blueprint in the ashes of my mind. 😞

*You've performed and recorded with artists ranging from the Black Crowes to the Neville Brothers. What's your approach toward recording? Do you play what you're handed, or do you try to make it your own? And does your live playing differ significantly from your studio playing?*

I have a rule of thumb that I abide by when playing other people's music: Play for the song and not for yourself. Every situation is unique. If someone hands me a chart, then I'll do my best to ask what the bandleader is looking for and add embellishments where needed, but when notation is involved, for the most part I play what's written.

For B47 we usually work through our parts in the preproduction phase so that when it comes time to record, we're 100 percent set on what to put on tape. When I recorded the GI Blythe album *Lost In Space*, we had a three-day window of opportunity to write, arrange and record seven of the eleven tunes. That was a challenge and a bit nerve wracking, but we pulled it off and created a kick-ass body of work under the circumstances!

My live playing might alter a bit from the recorded version of a specific song, but nine out of ten times I stay close to what I recorded on the album and translate it to the live setting verbatim.

*Your nickname is Bearclaw. Part of your living is made by giving Bearclaw's Bass Lessons. Do you have a core philosophy to teaching? What makes a good bass teacher, in your opinion?*



I used to fight with myself over acknowledging the strengths I had to offer as an educator. It wasn't until after I graduated college that I began my journey of teaching students privately. I lacked self-confidence and felt that I had nothing to say when in fact I had quite a lot to say musically.

After twenty years of teaching I can honestly say that I'm in my comfort zone when I can give my students something to ponder, whether it's a left-handed warm up drill, a theory regarding chord shapes, or just a daily dose of discussing how to live life to its fullest.

Teaching is an ability you either have or don't. There is no school or university teaching you how to become a great teacher who inspires their students on a day-to-day basis. It's an energy field that resonates from the deep recesses of your soul, if you have what it takes. I thoroughly enjoy helping other people who might need a little motivation or positive reinforcement.

*A non-musical question. In Bearclaw's Bass Lessons policies, you state, "Joe also requires a parent, legal guardian or some sort of adult supervision over the age of 18 to be present at all lessons with students under the age of 18." Do you have any thoughts about having to include such a requirement? For people of a certain age, it would never have occurred to us to think of that.*

Yes, I had a wonderful teacher from high school who was wrongly accused of being inappropriate with a student he was tutoring at home. It ended up being a fabricated lie that was eventually dropped, but the damage was done and his reputation was tarnished forever. That event has stuck in my mind for ages. To protect myself from wrongly filed accusations such as this one, I always require an adult over the age of eighteen to be present in the room if the student is under the age of eighteen. Safety for everyone comes first with my teaching business.

*Talk about GI Blythe and the absolutely terrific song "The Narrative of G. Bristol Groot." It's one of those tunes that you hate hearing come to an end. There's definitely some John Taylor sneaking in around the corners. Was that deliberate or did he simply take possession of your soul?*

John must have been summoned the day I wrote that bass line because it does indeed have his feel for sure. Geoff Blythe, the bandleader of GI Blythe, said that he heard a more legato sound for the head section of "Groot," reminiscent of what an upright bass sounds like within the context of jazz bop music. So that's what I was shooting for, but as the drummer Crispin Taylor and I started laying down the foundation and pocket, I improvised the rest of my line and just went for it! When listening to the playback, we couldn't get over how frekin' funky it turned out, and that was a one-take performance if I'm not mistaken.

*Where do you see the future of popular music going, both in terms of how musicians can make a living and in terms of artistry?*

I'm a bit bewildered but also optimistic for the future of music. The live scene (at least in New York City) has been diminishing since before the market crash in '08. Fewer and fewer promoters are hiring original bands; more DJs and cover bands are getting the gigs, which is an absolute crime!

If you venture out to Long Island (the land of cover bands) you'll see very little original music being promoted in the clubs. This needs to stop, and venues need to begin booking original acts again. There is a plethora of talented people not getting the proper support they need when hitting the circuit.

As for making a living via music, you really need to have your hands in multiple cookie jars to sustain yourself without having to eat doggie biscuits out of the box. Sharpen your skills with DAW [digital-audio workstation, Ed.] platforms such as Pro-Tools, Logic or Ableton. Write articles for blogs or trade magazines, teach privately or at a university. Be true to yourself and see what you have to offer outside of your music that still relates to what makes you happy as a person. Nothing is more worse than working a 9 to 5 day gig that rips the living life out of your soul, so be gentle to your inner musical child and pamper it with work that will stimulate you.

*Black 47 is disbanding in November of this year. Can you explain why this apparently amicable decision was made?*

We initially made the decision to disband amicably last July. Larry called each one of us separately and discussed where he felt things were going and what we should do, which was to hang it up by the end of 2014, but not without first putting out a new album that we could promote. I wasn't shocked to be quite honest; I knew it was inevitable by the lack of shows and blasé disinterest

from our former booking agency. Things were not good. We went from playing 125 shows a year to just under 30 in 2013. The writing was on the wall, so I am just happy that we're all still good friends and doing things on our terms.

It's so funny how people come out of the woodwork when a band of 25 years' gigging experience decides to call it quits. We performed on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and on *VH1's Morning Buzz* with Nick Lachey last month. It was absolutely surreal doing *The Tonight Show*, a crowning achievement for a professional musician's career. I guess now I have to attempt climbing the Himalayas and then I can call it a day.

*The US today has become a hyperpolitical, deeply divided nation. Genuine hatred is expressed even by our highest-ranking political figures. Are there risks for bands that are as outspokenly political as Black 47 is?*

To a degree, yes. We promoted our album *Iraq* which was an antiwar effort. I remember this vividly: We were in Pittsburgh, and I was packing up my bass after the gig. This gargantuan, inebriated and highly agitated war vet got right in my face and said, "I wanna kill you mutha fucker"! I guess I was the closest recipient within his limited scope of sight.

My initial reaction was to defend myself and prepare for a scrap, but the rational side of my brain said to avoid conflict at any cost. Luckily our sound man—a buddy of mine—saw what was transpiring and stepped in to calm him down and quell the situation.

We had a song off of the *Iraq* album called "The Ballad of Cindy Sheehan" that did not go over well, and as a result of the constant booing and walkouts we omitted it from the set list. You have to really feel out your audience when you're a political outfit, and sometimes that gets a band such as us in trouble. For the most part we haven't had any serious problems over the years, thank goodness.

*A personal interjection: Your interviewer was nearly murdered by the Irish Republican Army on July 20, 1982, in the Regent's Park bombing. The difference between death and life was sixty seconds and a right turn instead of a left. What's your reaction to being interviewed by a survivor of an IRA bombing?*

I'm greatly touched that you made a right turn instead of a left turn at Regent's Park on that fateful day. I used to live in southeast London, close to where Boy George grew up, and always felt a tinge of uneasiness when walking down the underground to catch the tube. You just never knew when and where the IRA would strike with a dirty bomb, but you cannot constantly live in fear because if you do, the terrorists win the war.

*In your bio you say that you approached band leaders and singers, handed them your business card, and told them that they needed you in their band if they were to achieve any amount of success. You say that in hindsight this was audacious and overconfident. Can you explain what your playing brings to a band or recording session?*

Feel, feel, and more feel. I know what I am capable of doing, and what my limitations are as a bass player. A first-time listener of my music isn't going to hear over-the-top chops along the line of Victor Wooten or Marcus Miller. Instead, they'll hear someone who has a strong sense of where to place notes within the bar that will be effective for the song.

I used to be one of those testosterone-induced males who thought playing fast and furiously was cool. Now as a "mature" adult I've finally come to the realization that less is more, and to make each note count.

*Have you thought ahead to life after Black 47?*

The day after we made the decision to disband I was on the phone networking with colleagues to secure myself something stable by the end of 2014. My goal is to become the next bass player for Dweezil Zappa's *Zappa Plays Zappa* band.

Everything is timing, and I am a patient guy. I praise Dweezil for what he has achieved by carrying the torch so to speak for his father's extensive musical catalogue. Frank's music is a language all of its own that younger legions of musicians need to be exposed to.

*Do you have any advice for young bassists just starting out?*

If you have that burning sensation in your belly, that fire inside that refuses to dim, then follow your gut and pursue what makes you content as a human being. I knew when I was in college at 19 years old that I wanted to pursue music full-time. I can't stress

enough to never, ever listen to the haters who'll try and bring you down and squash your dreams.

Always believe in yourself and work your ass off to get to the top. That's what I did, and all of the perseverance paid off in the end. Tenacity is a key component along with a positive attitude, and let's not forgot the most crucial ingredient: Skill.



Dan Kane Photography



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