

LATE SHOW

with
David Letterman



Story by Tom Bowlus. Photos by Sandrine Lee

I could waste a goodly amount of space here telling you who Will Lee is, and why he was chosen as the first player to be interviewed in *Bass Gear Magazine*. But that would leave less space for the interview itself, so I'll be very brief. Will has been playing bass in Dave Letterman's band since its inception, and he has performed on countless albums and stages across the globe. His resume is quite diverse, and the variety of his playing experiences is one of the reasons I was hoping that Will would help usher in our first ever player interview. He is also a thoroughly enjoyable person to talk to! In the spirit of full disclosure, I will say that we had asked Will to be interviewed in the magazine before we knew that there would be a Sadowsky Will Lee Model. But I must admit, the timing is pretty convenient!

Now, on to Uncle Will...

TB: I love that photo with you and Roger Sadowsky.

WL: Yeah, my wife Sandrine took that photo at our apartment. She knows her stuff. She does all the Ampeg ads, which is great, because we get to meet all the guys. Next week is Cliff Williams from AC/DC,

and Stephan Lessard from Dave Matthews band has been over here; John McVie from Fleetwood Mac... A lot of it happens here at the apartment, or in different studios, like in LA, so it's been a really nice little trip

TB: I love that Tony Levin shot, with him sitting in the chair.

WL: Oh yeah, Tony is always styling. He has a nice countenance.

TB: He is definitely comfortable in his own skin.

WL: Well, he's one of a kind, so he'd better be.

*TB: Speaking of one-of-a-kinds, did you get to interact much with Sir Paul the other night on *Late Night*?*

WL: Well, it was kind of a hectic day, so all I was able to say was, "Welcome home." Actually, to me this is where my career started: with him playing in that building, on Ed Sullivan's stage.

*TB: I read that you were inspired to take up the drums after watching the Beatles on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.*

WL: That's right. I had the drums for several years, but I never really felt like doing anything with them. But they showed us "Here is what you do, and here are the results you get when you do it."

People react crazy; they go nuts. I said, "That's for me, and I want to do that."

*TB: So how crazy is it to be playing on the *Ed Sullivan stage* almost on a daily basis, then?*

WL: It's sort of like going to a holy place. It's very sacred, and fertile, ground. Lots of things have launched their way into the hearts of millions of people from that stage; probably billions at this point.

TB: You have been playing with Paul Shaffer for, what, 27 years, now?

WL: We are in our 28th year.

TB: It seems like every night you have a great time; what's your secret?

WL: I like playing music. I never get tired of it. For me, it's not only the thing I am the most qualified for. In a way, it's the only thing I am halfway qualified for, seeing as how I am a terrible plumber and a lousy insurance salesman. Luckily, I have the music thing to fall back on.

TB: You can sing a few jingles, too.

WL: Sing jingles, sing anything... Yeah, I love singing. And even though it's a challenge to sing and play bass at the same time, I love what we do with the Fab Faux. I get a chance to sing a lot of Beatles songs. I've been doing that for 11 years, now.

*TB: In the *Fab Faux*, do each of you try to take on certain of the Beatles' voices, or do you kind of split it up from song to song?*

WL: Actually, there are five of us, and everybody sings. It's great because the song that you sing is not based upon do you do a good impression of this guy or that guy. It's like, how much do you want to sing this song? So, for that reason, I'll be singing a Ringo song, and five songs later I'll be singing a John song, and five songs later I'll be singing a George song, and eventually a Paul song, etc. So it's fun because we don't relegate it to any given singer's role. Once you've been the lead singer on a song, it doesn't really switch around to another guy singing it. It's based on the initial spark of who wanted to do it in the first place.

TB: Looking down your discography on your webpage, you have 468 recordings.

WL: That is just a selected list. I've probably done about 1,500 albums. If you

Hangin' with Uncle Will



Left:
The father and son Birdhouse Crew - (from the left) Lew Soloff, Bob Dorough, Will Lee, & Billy Hart

go through the allmusic guide, you'll probably find more.

TB: One that I was surprised to see on there was the soundtrack to Heavy Metal.

WL: Yeah, there's a really cool song that Donald Fagen contributed to that soundtrack. It ended up on some Steely Dan "best of" albums. The song is called True Companion, and it's really a nice piece. It almost sounds like a piece from a Fagen solo record.

TB: You've got a ton of recordings with Chuck Loeb. What's it like playing with Chuck?

WL: Man, that guy; music follows him wherever he goes. He's really proficient, not only as a guitar player, but as a guy who can compose. It's a little known fact that he wrote the CNN theme song. So, his music is everywhere. He's a really solid writer with a great musical sense about him. He's kind of limitless, I think.

TB: I know you have a very musical family, with both of your parents being accomplished musicians. Is anyone else in the family musically inclined?

WL: Nobody went into it professionally, but my brother and both sisters (I am the oldest of four) really have a lot of music in them. They all sing well and can pick up instruments and fake songs, but nobody ever went down the professional music road. So for that reason, I can say that they play music for the only real honest reason, which is for the pure enjoyment of it. Me, I went at it to try and make a living at music, so my version of playing can't be as honest as their version of playing. My motivation for playing can't be as pure as theirs, because it's what I do to survive. And they do it purely for their soul. That's

how I started, but since it became my career, I can't legally say that.

TB: What was it like working with your dad on BirdHouse?

WL: Well, first of all, I know how much he was enjoying it, so it was automatically a wonderful environment to be in. He's the guy who decided to do a Charlie Parker record, and I said, "Yeah, man. I'd love to do that!" It was interesting to play with him in the studio, because though he's been a player his whole life, he had never spent the kind of time that I had in the studio. He was the only guy in that room who had actually played with Charlie Parker, so he was the only official guy in the room, in a way. It was really fun to be playing with him with a full live band in the studio, and I think the results are pretty good.

TB: What's next on your agenda as far as any solo work goes?

WL: Well, I am constantly working on songs, and fortunately I am going to have a chance to go away to the south of France where I am going to have a minute to sit down and reflect and come up with something. There are few pieces of music that are close to being finished. These days, I am not sure if it's important to think of doing an album, as opposed to just recording a good song or a few songs; making them available for digital download, or whatever. But if I have enough things that fit together, I'll do an album or collection of whatever. I am a sucker for things like album covers, though, so that alone is a reason to do a record, I think.

TB: Along those lines, I see that the Will Lee Bass Library has been successful. Do you

have anything else planned?

WL: I feel like I did what I needed to do in that area. Guys like me and everybody else with a second bedroom studio, with just a computer and a keyboard, wanted to be able to make the sounds come up on their project sounding good. For my money, there were no bass samples out that sounded like what I knew a bass track should sound like, especially when you solo it without hearing any of the other instruments. When you solo a bass track, rarely are you going to get the kind of "ping" sound that some people think a bass sample should sound like. My goal at the time was to put together a series of samples that had all the fret noise and all the buzz that would be revealed when you soloed a real bass track. I think that we pulled that off pretty well when we did the Sampleheads Bass Libraries. I made sure it was nice and grungy, and funky and kind of screwed up, so that when you actually played it in the context of the music, you had what sounded like a guy actually playing the bass. I had some mixed feeling about doing it, because some people may look at it as putting some bass players out of work – possibly even myself. But the truth of it was that someone was going to do it, and it's probably going to be an engineer or something, so why not have it be a real guy doing that?

TB: On a lighter note, you always seem to make a nice statement with your wardrobe on the Late Show.

WL: [laughs] Well, it is national TV, so... I do have to say that there were 22-23 years of Dave allowing us to wear whatever we wanted on stage. But apparently, one of us (or some of us) were not satisfying what he thought we should look like. So after 22-23 years of no dress code, one day we get a memo: From today forward, the band is required to wear jackets and ties. We were like gasping, we couldn't believe it! So, I said, "Alright, we'll put some jackets and ties in there for ya."

TB: I had also read that Paul models some of his style of dress after you. Is there any truth to that?

WL: I have heard him say that, but the

inspiration goes both ways.

TB: How did you start working with Paul?

WL: When he first came to town, I had already done quite a few hit records, with Barry Manilow, and stuff like that. He was hired by a guy named Paul Jabara, who had a big hit with Donna Summer, called Last Dance. This same guy and Paul Shaffer wrote It's Raining Men together; huge hit song. It keeps coming back, over and over again. So Paul sought out the production team that made these Barry Manilow records, and next thing I know, I was in the studio with Barry Manilow's producer, Ron Dante. He was producing this demo which Paul Shaffer was arranging for Paul Jabara. The people in the band were myself and the drummer, Jimmy Young, who also played on Barry's single, Mandy, and Paul Shaffer. We started talking, and we hit it off as friends immediately. That was our first encounter, and after that, we ended up doing a few different records together. He produced one of the three albums that a band called the 24th Street Band recorded, and that band was the basis for the original Late Night with David Letterman band – before it

became the Late Show with David Letterman – back at NBC. That band was with Steve Jordan and Hiram Bullock, and the band had disbanded right before Paul had gotten the call to be the musical director on this new David Letterman talk show. So he just brought that band in as his band, basically.

TB: So Hiram was playing with you from the first, with Paul?

WL: Yeah, for the first two years. He was the original guitarist.

TB: What a great player. What a loss.

WL: Yeah, he was a great player. I was thinking about him when we were talking



about Chuck Loeb, because Hiram is also one of those guys with a huge musical vocabulary. When you are playing with him, he can just pull rabbits out of his hat, you know?

TB: Do you think that starting as a drummer helped you at all as a bass player?

WL: Well, I think it would have helped me to start with anything. But I don't think I would have started with anything else, because my main feeling for music comes from the groove, before anything else. I guess had I started on a "lighter weight" instrument, groove wise... I don't want to belittle any of the instruments, because they're all just as important as the

other... But if I were to start with one of the sissy instruments, like guitar or keyboard [laughs], I probably would have shot myself. No, I would have found myself gravitating more towards the things that have a heavier driving force effect on the band; so it would have been either bass or drums, I can pretty much safely say.

TB: Who are some of your favorite drummers to play with?

WL: My favorites? Well, I do well playing with any cat who has a really solid groove. I've been told lately that I have the tendency to bring out the best in drummers. Because I grew up in

environments like in Miami, for example, where you didn't have the kind of competition that you have in New York, the quality of the players wasn't quite at the level of what's happening here. As a result, I had to play with all kinds of drummers who really weren't "world class," let's say. And that gives me the ability to play with just about anybody I sit down with. I can almost pick up on where their foot is going to land after hearing them play a couple of bars. I kinda already know who I am dealing with. That helps me make a band sound more solid, I think. So, with the risk of not singling anybody out, I'd just like to say that, as opposed to who are my favorite guys.

TB: Wise answer.

WL: My favorite guys are the guys who have the earthiest groove, the groove that makes them feel like they're screwed into the ground, instead of flying around somewhere freely in the air.

TB: It sounds like you are saying that you have learned to adapt yourself to the drummer you are playing with at a given time.

WL: That's absolutely true, yes.

TB: Were you playing music back in Texas, or did you mostly get into that once you moved to Miami?

WL: My family lived in Texas until roughly spring of 1964, just after the Beatles had made their big splash in February/March of '64. Then a month or two later, we moved. Pretty soon after we got to Miami, I started looking around for like-minded kids my age who wanted to do a band. So it wasn't until we moved to Miami.

TB: And then from Miami to New York, or were there any layovers in between?

WL: Yeah, Miami was it from '64 to '71, and at that point, I got a call to come and audition for a band I was totally in love with, called Dreams. It had Mike and Randy Brecker, and Billy Cobham, in that band. Billy Cobham was the first world class guy that I found myself playing with that made me realize that I didn't have to do all the work as a groove maker in the rhythm section. It's probably why I passed

the audition, because I found it so easy to play with this guy; because he was so confident. He knew he was the shit.

TB: That whole comfortable in your own skin thing.

WL: Yeah, it kinda makes the whole band work.

TB: Tell me how your gear has evolved through the years.

WL: Boy, I've been through everything. As bassists, we had Bassman amps in the beginning. Actually, we went from no-name amps, to Kalamazoo, and finally Fender. We are still talking tubes at this point. But when I played into my first Standel solid state amp, I was in heaven, because of the instant gratification of how fast the solid state amp reacted – as opposed to how long it took for the note to come out after you played it with tubes. I love to play solid state for the sake of playing, but for the sake of listening, I still love the tube sound. When I go in the studio, my favorite thing has always been to go right into a direct box and have a split signal. Take my signal into some more tube stuff, compressors and things like that, but just feed me the direct signal, so that I can really get that nutsack from playing with a drummer that's like right on time; and then listen back and it's all fat sounding.

TB: Yeah, that's great. There is something magical about tubes, but that speed thing, you have to give that one to solid state.

WL: You really do, for pocket.

TB: I noticed that you recently started playing some Hartke gear?

WL: Yes, I'm back into the Hartke camp. I'm a Hartke family member.

TB: Is that an LH1000 up there?

WL: Yes, it is. It's really nice.

TB: It has a nice, tubey vibe to it, but it's still quick and fast and taught.

WL: I'm enjoying it a lot. It's funny – this doesn't have anything to do with Hartke – but just in general, I've found that I play very, very hard. I'm not light on my feet when it comes to playing. My action's pretty high, and I dig in really hard most of the time. When guys do a setup for me, they can't believe how much buzz I get, after they've set it up and get

no buzz. I really do strangle the strings when I play. I have found that because of how percussive I play, there are very few amps out there that don't fatigue after about 45 minutes, and you start to hear the sound spread. I hear it. Nobody else hears it, but I definitely hear it. And that's with a Walter Woods 1,200-watt amp, or whatever we're talking about. So I am still looking for that amp that doesn't do that.

TB: I think I hear what you are saying. And I think that there is also a certain tone that you can't get with a low action and a light touch.

WL: Well, my favorite bass and drums sound is Chuck Rainey and Bernard Purdy, and that guy doesn't play hard at all. In fact, neither of them really plays that hard. But that stuff played really lightly records really well.

TB: I suppose everyone finds their tone in different ways. I've just never been able to do it with a light touch, myself.

WL: Yeah, I know what you mean. It's a little bit too exciting to not just dig right in.

TB: Your dad played some upright, didn't he?

WL: Actually, he played in the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

TB: Did you ever get the upright bug?

WL: Not really. I never saw him do it. It all happened before I was born. But I love a great player. I love the sound of Stanley Clark on the Chick Corea early records, and stuff like that. There's nothing like a good upright player.

TB: How long have you been playing basses made by Roger Sadowsky?

WL: I guess you could easily say it's been about 30 years. A lot of history went into making the signature bass – a lot of meetings, and a lot of him trying to figure out what the hell I was trying to say. When I said "more oomph," he would turn that into sort of a technical formula. Then we'd come back, and sure enough, the bass had more oomph. So he speaks my language.

TB: You finally got Roger to do a midrange control, which is amazing.

WL: It is amazing. And that's just a sign

of how well he always listens to the guys when they have something they need from an instrument. He listens. And for that reason, I think that's why a Sadowsky bass – any Sadowsky bass – exists. When I first met Roger, his specialty was as an acoustic guitar luthier. Then here come the New York studio guys who say, "I heard about this guy who does good fret jobs; well let's check him out." So we find Roger Sadowsky, and he starts listening to us and suggesting, "Oh, maybe you'd like a preamp," and stuff. The next thing you know, you have this awesome bass sound. I'm sure he'll attribute it to input from the bass players, which I'm sure is truth. But what also is true is that he was able to accommodate so well what we needed.

TB: It's easy to look at a Sadowsky and think that you see a fairly typical looking instrument, but once you play one, they have their own magic.

WL: That's for sure. They record unbelievably well. For me, I love to cut through a room with a certain amount of midrange. So when I got around to thinking about what I would love to have in a signature model, that's the thing that I would love to do: to drive my sound through the other instruments in that room, with less effort than ever before. In other words, I didn't want to have to pull the strings to get those frequencies out. I would pull so hard, the next thing you know, you're so sore the next day, you can't even play. I do like to play hard, but I don't like to make the amp do all the work to find a certain boost in that midrange area.

TB: What was your inspiration for the neck profile, it's a little thinner than the average Sadowsky 4-string.

WL: I find myself in all these interesting scenarios, and I would really like to have a bass which I could call my "everything" bass. If you're going to take one bass to a session to or live gig, I would hope that that bass could do anything that you call upon it to do. I remember at the time, one of the things I was doing was playing with the Jaco Pastorius Big Band. To play Jaco's parts, you realize that not only was his playing a result of what he was hearing in



Roger Sadowsky, the Will Lee Signature bass and Will Lee, the MAN.

his head, it was also physically what was happening in his hands. He got his chops on a '61 Fender Jazz Bass. And that bass of his has a super thin neck close to the nut, and I realized that probably has a lot to do with the incredible articulation of some of these wild ass figures that he's playing. I think I needed a thinner neck to get me around some of those figures when I was trying to play them, myself. Once again, Roger – with his incredible ability to listen – was willing to bend his own rules that he's always had and make something

that he's never done before. He's come up with the thinnest neck that I think he's ever had in production, this Will Lee Model.

TB: It sure plays like a dream, that's all I know.

WL: Yeah, I love being able to play, when the music calls for it. You want to be there. The other thing I love about these active instruments, you can put a set of roundwound strings on this instrument and play any style that's ever been played from an electric bass, I think; just by

playing around: adding highs, or taking them out.

TB: Well, you do need to cover a lot of ground on The Late Show.

WL: That's true: on The Late Show, and in the studio. Now I have a bass that can keep you from bringing eight basses. Just bring a bass.

TB: I know a 4-string with a drop-D will certainly cover a lot of ground. Do you have much call for playing 5-string, anymore?

WL: I do. I play 5-string quite often. You say drop-D, but I drop my E string down to a C, using the Hipshot. With the exception of one half-step, that's almost the range of a 5-string, right there. It's amazing what you can do with a 4-string bass, if it's the right one. So kids, trade in all your instruments, and get a Will Lee Sadowsky bass (just kidding).

TB: What's your thought on using in-ear monitors versus a stage rig?

WL: Well, the in-ear thing is fantastic, actually. The only thing that's a drag about it is it keeps you from hearing and feeling the audience a bit. Recently, I did the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in Cleveland. For some reason, this year I found myself playing a

lot of upright. We had Little Anthony and the Imperials, and a woman named Wanda Jackson (who was inducted). There was also a jam that actually didn't air, but it was wonderful. It was a tribute for the sideman category this year, and the guy who got in was D.J. Fontana, Elvis' drummer. In tribute to D.J. – and Bill Black, actually – we were doing Jail House Rock. In order to try and be authentic about it, I decided to play upright on that one, and I realized that they had supplied me with some in-ear monitors. Playing upright with in-ear monitors, for me, is the greatest thing that's happened in a really long time. Because you can actually hear what you're doing, no matter what the band's doing. And you don't have to peel your fingers to try to make the notes pop into the room so you can hear them. You actually get a beautiful tone by not playing too hard, and you can be in tune because you're actually hearing what is happening. It's a wonderful thing. But if you're going to do in-ears with electric bass, I think the real key is to get in-ears with multiple drivers. I think that it's really important to have the double or triple driver ones; at least double driver. So

you can get all that great low end that you need, and feel like you're actually pumping some bottom end into the room.

TB: You've given me a bunch of your time, and I don't want to keep you much longer, but is there any one question that you always wanted to answer, but nobody ever asked?

WL: I think the most important thing to do is to try and figure out, "How the hell did that guy do that?" I have to say that to this day, I still pick apart the Beatle records as much as possible, and I keep finding more and more new information. As a bass player, it's one thing to try and figure out the parts and stuff, but as a total musician, one of the greatest things you can do is listen to something you like, and listen to it again and again. You'll eventually start to hear all the subtleties of what made the recording great. That starts with not only the composition, but how the players treated the composition, as well as how things were recorded, where they were placed in the mix. For example, that beautiful, juicy bass sound that you hear on the Revolver record, and the song Rain by the Beatles, and Sgt. Peppers stuff, the bass was not only recorded in a specific way using nice tube stuff, it was also mixed – according to Geoff Emerick – 1dB hotter than everything else in the mix. So that really helps you appreciate the fineness of the bass, especially if the player is playing well. And if he isn't, well... [laughs]

TB: Well then, hopefully the engineer is there to turn down the "suck" knob.

WL: Yes, and please make me sound young, while you're at it. ■

For more information about Will Lee, check out his website, www.willlee.com. To see more examples of Sandrine's fabulous photographic work, be sure to visit her site at www.sandrinelee.com.



Will and his Fab Faux Beatles tribute band, at the Beacon Theater, September 2009