



Bill Rich

The Blues and Beyond

Kevin Brooks tells the story of the influential blues bassist Bill Rich, who currently plays with legendary guitarist Taj Mahal, and whose long career has included jamming with Jimi Hendrix and influencing Jaco Pastorius.



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Was music in the blood in your family?

Yes, music was definitely in the blood. My dad played a mean harmonica; nothing serious, just a hobby. My mom would sometimes drag us to church on Sundays where she sang gospel and sounded pretty good. What got the ball rolling was my brother, Herb. He started piano lessons at 4-years old. My sister Carol sang, my brother Bob sang and played percussion, and I ended up with a guitar in my hands. We sat around the house playing music together and after a while my dad helped Herb and Bob put together a band. It was called The Seven Wonders Combo and was fun, but a lot of hard work. I wanted to go play with the other kids but they made me stay at home and do the boring stuff like practice and learn songs!

Why did you change to electric bass?

Well, somehow I ended up with this double neck guitar, a Danelectro which had the guitar on top and the bass on the

bottom. I started fooling around with the bass neck. I would play these night clubs - of course my dad had to go with me because I wasn't old enough to be there - and I would listen to these bass players, and the sound would shake my whole body. I liked that. They were good but they were not playing it the way I thought it should be played. So I decided to switch to the bass.

Who were your early influences? I gather you met James Jamerson who I presume must rank up there?

On guitar it was Chuck Berry, Lonnie Mack and Duane Eddy. When I started playing bass, the electric bass wasn't in the mix. It wasn't until a few years later when Motown broke into the scene that the electric bass came in with a bang. To me, James Jamerson, the bass player on almost all the early recordings for Motown, put the electric bass on the map. His style caught everybody's attention, especially mine. I loved the way he played through the changes; that was way cool. I met him when I

was doing this gig in LA at the Persian Room on Crenshaw Street. James Gadsen, a good friend of mine and a drummer for the Watts 103rd Rhythm St. Band, told him we should hook up and then brought him down to the gig. I was so excited to see him sitting there checking me out, what a rush! We had a very interesting conversation about music, the music business, and just living life. I thought I knew it all along, but never heard it the way he put it. It changed my whole outlook on life. Or maybe he just put it in perspective.

What was your first bass?

When I finally started playing bass full-time I bought this cheap bass that looked like a Fender Jazz but was really made in Japan and only stamped 'Made in the USA'. I believe it was a Conrad. I peeled the name off the head of the bass. It was special and playing a bass with no name on it worked for me for what I was doing. Back then the instrument didn't make the player. Some dudes had the top of the line gear, like Fender or

Gibson, and still weren't playing up to that level.

You spent a few years touring with The Whispers and then made it into The Buddy Miles Express. That must have been an exciting development in your career.

I was doing gigs with The Whispers in Oakland, wearing the suits and stuff. I would go over to San Francisco and Mill Valley and hang at the Heliport, which was a big rehearsal hall for a lot of groups like Santana, Grateful Dead, Sly and the Family Stone, and Janis Joplin, just to name a few. When Buddy started his own band he called me to see if I wanted to work with him. The first thing I did was go and get myself a new Fender Jazz Bass. We recorded the Buddy Miles Express album and hit the road.

What's your association with Jimi Hendrix?

I first met Jimi in Hollywood in 1968. Our first gig with the Buddy Miles Express was at the Whisky A-Go-Go. Man, everybody