Contrabass Conception: Anthony Jackson's Journey To 6-String Supremacy

By **Chris Jisi**

Thumb through an assortment of electric bass books that attempt to include the history of the instrument—it's alarming how hazy the birth of extended-range bass guitars seems to be, with 5- strings preceding 6-strings, instruments magically and simultaneously emerging from guitar companies in the early '80s, and other such falsehoods. In truth, the path to today's easily accessed, wide assortment of 5's and 6's was forged largely by one musician, Anthony Jackson. The 56-year-old Manhattan native is best known for his long-running session career, playing on seminal pop and jazz recordings with the likes of Billy Paul, the O'Jays (that's Anthony's picked groove on "For the Love of Money"), Chaka Khan, Steely Dan, Paul Simon, Al DiMeola, Steve Khan's Eyewitness, Michel Camilo, and Wayne Krantz. A perfectionist with an unshakable commitment to artistry in all settings, Jackson conceived a bass with six strings as far back as 1968, leading to his invention of the first "contrabass guitar" in 1974. His road to the "big 6," however, was paved with detours in the form of reluctant builders, closed-minded producers, limited funds, and countless trial-and-error design dead ends. Jackson says his dogged pursuit of his dream instrument helped fulfill his musical voice, but the process also led to the standardization of extended-range basses worldwide.

We caught up with Anthony at Fodera's waterside Brooklyn shop. The reason for his visit? A maintenance tune-up on his current model, in preparation for his next-day journey to the Athens, Greece school of Yiorgos Fakanas (see page 38). There, he will spend much of the remainder of the year teaching and—in yet another forward step—preparing to perform and record a Fakanas-composed set of pieces for string quintet (with double bass), horns, rhythm section, and two bass guitars.

When was the first time the idea for a 6-string occurred to you?_It was sometime in 1968; I was 16 and I had been playing the bass guitar for about four years. While practicing with a collection of Jimmy Smith organ trio records, I kept finding myself running out of room while walking—wanting to get down underneath the bottom register and wanting to move to the upper register without feeling like I was going to run out of space. I had been tuning the instrument down a half- or whole-step since the first band I played in, at age 12. But for whatever reason, at this particular time the idea to put another string on the bottom occurred to me. I had tried out the Fender Bass V, which had a high C string, a few years earlier; it was a poorly designed instrument that disappeared quickly, but I remember thinking, Why didn't they put the extra string on the bottom? I envisioned Fender as the builder of this new instrument, because that was the world

standard then, and I thought, While we're at it, let's put a string on top and extend the range in both directions.

Being so young, I had no idea of the problems building such an instrument would impose, but I was determined to get it built. The name came to me immediately, probably the same day as my vision; it would be well below the range of a bass guitar, so it either had to be a doublebass guitar or a contrabass guitar, which is what I went with. I spent the next few years turning it over in my mind. My career started to pick up in 1972, and by late '73 I had a little money and I began inquiring as to who built custom instruments in New York City. I was given two names: The late Charles LoBue, who I never spoke with, and Carl Thompson.

What are the details of your collaboration with Carl Thompson?_I went up to Carl's shop in winter 1974 and told him my idea. His reaction went from initial polite puzzlement, to resistance, to anger. He didn't see the purpose in the low B; he felt no one would be able to hear it, as the speakers in cars and television sets were too small. He wondered where I would find strings, and at one point he suggested instead an upright bass-like extension from the E string. I told him I was certain it would work. He asked me to wait while he thought about it, and finally, he came out of his workshop and said, "I'll do it, but I really don't want to do it, so here are the conditions: I'm not going to help you, you're going to have to tell me exactly what you want done. If it doesn't work it'll be your fault, and if it does work, you take the credit; I don't want my name associated with it. And I'm going to charge you $2,000 for my time." I remember taking a gulp and thinking, What am I getting into here? That's an awful lot when a new Fender cost $350. He finished up with, "I think it's a dumb idea." But I was enough of a dreamer and a fool in the eyes of some to agree to his terms. My inexperience cost me; I insisted on a wide spacing at the nut and I just assumed the neck would taper out and be wider at the body. Instead, Carl kept the width the same throughout, and the spacing was so tight at the bridge the instrument was barely playable. I was disappointed, but it was a great lesson.

What did you use for strings?_I believe they were Rotosounds. Just prior to meeting Carl, while I was working with Buddy Rich, I had come up with the idea of a string with a bare core over the bridge saddle. I approached Rotosound and they sent me a few custom sets where basically the ball ends had to be attached with an Allen wrench and measured off. It took about 20 minutes, but I got the desired result: better and more stable overtones, and increased sustain. I'm hazy as to where I went from there, but at various points GHS, La Bella, and Richard Cocco wound custom sets for me.

What was your initial reaction to having six strings?_Basically, I felt like the concept had worked. I focused on exploring the low B initially, and being conscious of not overusing it. I think most players tend to stay down there a little too much at first; it's like a new sensation. I remember deliberately trying not to think that way. The higher range seemed akin to the overlapping ranges of, say tenor and baritone saxophones, or viola and violin, where there are many notes in common, yet they sound different respective to instrument. I could play into the guitar range, but with a throatier voice. Of course, I explored chordal playing, but my primary goal was not to become a great jazz soloist. My vision for the contrabass guitar was as more of a concert instrument with extended range, to be able to play orchestral parts previously not possible.

If you watch [the YouTube clip of] “Streetwise,” from Simon Phillips’s instructional DVD [Simon Phillips: Complete, Alfred, 2007], you’ll see me playing the original melody at pitch, at the very top of the instrument, at the end of the clip. A couple of principles come through there: I’m sitting down and raising the instrument on my right thigh, pointing the neck upward, leaning close in, and using a pick. It would be impossible to play this passage standing or sitting with a strap on because the instrument can’t be swung that far. That’s the kind of potential I had in mind when I say I envisioned it as a concert instrument.

Where did you use the Thompson and what was the reaction?_I brought it to one recording session, playing it on the title track of Carlos Garnett’s album Let This Melody Ring On [Muse, 1975]. I remember no exaggerated reaction from either the musicians or those behind the glass. I also took it on one tour with Roberta Flack, playing it on a few songs where I wanted to get down lower. No one gave me a hard time, and the instrument sounded pretty good in both cases. I knew by then I wasn’t going to stay with it, though; I would use it mainly to get practice on the two new strings and to get comfortable reaching in-between what was now a maze of strings.

Despite the drawbacks, I went back to Carl and had him build another bass, although not for performance, as it had no pickup. This was to see if we could eliminate dead spots. At Carl’s suggestion, we extended the scale to 44" and strung it with extra-long upright strings. Unfortunately, it didn’t eliminate the dead spots and it was simply too long to be playable; it was destroyed in a home accident soon after. One bright spot was the string tension, which was delightfully tight all the way down to the B string; that lesson would serve me well later.

Meanwhile, your lack of a contrabass guitar didn’t halt your exploration of extended low range on many of your “career” recordings.

Correct. In 1978, I started doing really intensive down-tunings of a major 3rd or a 4th on my Fender Jazz the night before a session, using epoxy cement and serrated kitchen knives to raise and file the nut, while also adjusting the trussrod and bridge. I’d tune down all four strings so they had an even feel and tone across the neck. To get the notes I wanted, I had to play with lightest touch possible. It was a priceless education on controlling my instrument with my fingers only, learning how to make them speak and dance— from an almost subliminal whisper to a roar, all without plucking too hard, which would have caused the strings to hit the fingerboard and go sharp. One of the first tracks I cut this way was a Diana Ross song called “No One Gets the Prize,” from her album The Boss [Motown, 1979]. Another early attempt was the chorus of Chaka Khan’s “Love Has Fallen on Me,” from her album Chaka [Warner Bros., 1979]. That paved the way for the more widely known down-tunings I did on Chaka’s albums Naughty and What Cha’ Gonna Do for Me [Warner Bros., 1980 and 1981], and the Luther Vandross cover of “A House Is Not a Home,” from his album Never Too Much [Epic, 1981].

How did you come to work with Ken Smith on your next contrabass guitar?_My career pace necessitated an almost fouryear void in my next attempt. While working on [pianist] Warren Bernhardt’s album Manhattan Update [Arista/Novus, 1980], I happened to use Ken’s original 4-string on two tracks, and it worked well. I approached Ken about building my instrument, and he was quite reluctant at first. I finally convinced him, but he felt the Fender spacing I wanted would result in a neck that was too wide and difficult to play; he insisted on a little closer spacing, to which I relented. I got the instrument in December 1981 and it was just comfortable and playable

enough for me to stay with for a year and a half. But as testament to me being right, Ken indeed widened the spacing when he began making them in production.

Nevertheless, in the fall of 1982, I took a big chance and retired the Fender, choosing to use only my contrabass guitar. For the most part, I didn't have any problems because I had already established a reputation as a serious and respected bass guitarist. Still, some were uneasy when I pulled out the 6 in the studio. One of the most negative comments got back to me second-hand: "You tell Anthony Jackson if he wants to bring his 'science experiment,' then let him book his own sessions. I want to see the Fender!"

The other problem I discovered with the first Smith was it couldn't be used with a pick; the sound was dull and thick. I used it on the tour for Al DiMeola's Tour de Force: Live album [Columbia, 1982], with Steve Gadd, Jan Hammer, and Mingo Lewis, and the whole time Al complained he wasn't hearing my usual top end. I finally relented and plugged in the Fender, which I had with me, and everyone's jaws dropped! Jan said, "There it is—there's your sound!" So although the Smith is pictured somewhere in the album, I replaced all my parts in the studio later, with the Fender. The second Smith came in early 1984, which was the last 34"-scale prototype; the spacing was right and the sound was improved. I recall it working very well on a track from George Benson's 20/20 album [Warner Bros., 1984], called "New Day," as well as Michel Camilo's album Suntan [Evidence, 1986].

With Fodera, you seemed to find the perfect partnership._Without a doubt. Vinnie [Fodera] and Joey [Lauricella] were the first builders I met who were willing to respect my invention as the product of a dream, not as a career move. They were working for Ken Smith and had built No. 3 and No. 4. When they decided to leave to start their own company, we made a barter arrangement: They would build me whatever instrument I wanted; I would try it out both in studio and onstage, and give them feedback as to what was and wasn't working; and they would filter these ideas into their production models. Then they would build me another, and the cycle would continue. It's a partnership of three, with Vinnie as the luthier, Joey as an integral go-between, being a professional bassist himself, and me testing the instruments.

What were the key design changes over the course of your seven Fodera prototypes?_The first two, No. 5 and No. 6, were doublecutaway 36"-scale signature models—to be called the Anthony Jackson Contrabass. They were heavy, with long necks, but they were state-of-the-art at the time. The ideas continued to boil, sometimes in working situations. While checking the neck for movement on No. 6—the last double-cutaway—during a Phoebe Snow session, I noticed there was no tension left on one of the trussrods. So I loosened it all the way and took it out. The instrument got lighter, and that led us to a single, properly placed trussrod—its location is a trade secret. Also on No. 6, we tried a high-quality integrated circuit in the active electronics, and it did sound better at first. But while A/B-ing the sound of the instrument active and passive one day on a Reggie Lucas session at Quantum Studios in Union City, New Jersey, I heard a difference; there's high distortion even with the $75 IC. I decided that was it for onboard electronics. To properly power a really good preamp you need a big, hot-running AC transformer, not two 9-volt batteries.

A key for me was an intuition I had while lying in bed in late 1987 about building a Presentation model that would have only the features I wanted on it: A 36"-scale, extra-wide neck at nut and

bridge, 28 frets, no electronics, no controls, a chambered body, and a single pickup. One well-placed pickup, I felt, would result in a richer, more complex sound than any two pickups; with two, you've got a lot of audio information obstructed by other audio info that's simply out of phase. Why not choose the best spot to get the most information out of one pickup?

The most striking alteration on your Presentation model was the single cutaway.

Agreed. In early 1989 I had expressed concern about neck instability. A few weeks later Vinnie said he wanted to try a single cutaway with the horn extending much higher up than normal to grab hold of and stiffen the neck. I remember being miffed; it's going to look clumsy and be too heavy. He assured me he would carve the back of the cutaway for minimal mass increase. Two weeks later, he came in with a full architectural drawing, and I almost fell to the floor! It was so beautiful and exquisite, I thought, if this works it will be one of the most beautiful guitars ever conceived, an instant classic—and I still feel that way.

The first Presentation, No. 7, made with decent but not great materials, worked out very well. We did a lot of work on No. 8, replacing the alder body and maple top with an ash body and various tops; No. 9 was even better. And then we hit the jackpot with No. 10, which I received on Valentine's Day, 1996, and still play today. For the record, No. 11 was an attempt to go back to a 34"-scale. It didn't work out and the instrument was sold in Japan.

What else stands out about No. 10?_The weight; at just over 10 pounds—it would be lighter without the Hipshot [detuning key] on the B string, which I use for the occasional A or Bb —it's five pounds lighter than the Smiths and early Foderas. As 6's got popular, builders were using heavy tropical hardwoods; it took a while for us to have the nerve to leave them out and simplify the wooden structure of the instrument to allow it to speak more. No. 10 has a chambered red alder body, a quilted-maple top, a sugar maple neck, and a century-old Brazilian rosewood 28-fret fingerboard. Other helpful modifications were changing to a titanium bridge and trussrod. Titanium rings at a higher frequency, which helped remove the instrument's somewhat uncontrolled deep low end and resulted in a slightly lighter but still very deep, fasterspeaking sound. Also, we were constantly changing pickups until we came across Aero. They custom-wound four dual-coil humbuckers for us and we picked the best one. The jack is an XLR, rather than a q" jack.

Upcoming, we plan on changing the tuning machines and many of the screws to titanium. From my experience as an audiophile, and having assembled a live sound system I'm happy with, we're going to begin using precious metals in the pickups.

How has your style and approach changed this many years into playing the contrabass guitar?_For one, I've come to play with a lighter touch; I haven't had to replace my frets in 13 years. Musically, it's not so much a change of style as it is growth, which is inevitable when you have more range. For example, whatever I'd learned from studying Jamerson on the 4- string I could apply in other registers, particularly lower down. There's also a great deal of conceptual freedom for having the range. I enjoy playing with a large ensemble and being the one to put a big, fat foundation under it, like a section of string basses with extensions, or a pipe organ—I could do that alone. Or to be able to play very high parts fluidly, without sounding like I was straining. It's a register for the sake of the music, not as a gimmick, or to play more notes, or to

make other bassists go, Wow! It's like having a car with a larger engine. It doesn't mean you're going to go faster all the time, but high speeds are less of a strain on both engine and driver.

Will there eventually be a new model?_Considering I have fewer performing years in front of me than behind me, I'm not sure. The goal all along was to build an instrument on which if I was having trouble playing something it would be my fault. But much of the time it has been, If I could only make the instrument do this or that. Sooner or later you want an instrument that's more capable of being played than you are of playing it, so the only limitation you worry about is yourself, and you can focus only on what you need to do. That's about where it is now. It took six years before I knew how to properly set up No. 10, with perfect nut height, trussrod, and bridge adjustment. I don't want to spend the next six years getting another instrument just right—now I'm ready to get to work. I've been at this for over 33 years; the only thing that has consumed more energy is playing music. If someone said No. 10 is your last contrabass guitar, I could live with that. Vinnie wants to build another one with some new principles, and, okay, I'm game. But I'm not sitting here with my heart racing, like I was with all the others.

Are there other 6-string bassists you've come to admire?_There are many fine 6-string players now, two of whom—Steve Bailey and Oteil Burbridge— I got to perform with as a guest of Bass Extremes. But the first name that always comes to mind is John Patitucci. He's one of the few I can say I have no suspicion of having jumped to the 6 early on to get more work or notoriety; he genuinely loves the instrument and has made it his musical voice, along with the upright. Another name that bears mention is Jimmy Johnson, who very early on took his chances and made an impact down low playing a 5-string— in addition to being one of the finest bass guitarists ever to play the instrument.

What are your thoughts on the future of the contrabass guitar, and does it rank below, even with, or higher than your musical achievements?_I've never paid attention to what anyone else thought of my instrument since the initial smattering of negative reaction. I realized it was a tool for me; if no one else ever used it that was fine. I'm not as concerned with the legacy of it, and I while I may recommend its benefits for those who ask, I don't see it as the ideal bass or string configuration for everyone. That said, when it has been pointed out that I invented an instrument now played by thousands worldwide, it's certainly a source of pride. Someone said my Presentation model is basically a big P-Bass; I can appreciate that viewpoint. If Leo Fender could come back today I think he would approve.

As for career achievement, the instrument's invention ranks lower than my art. I love making music on the bass guitar, and the music is what people come to hear. If I was told I could only play a 20-fret 4-string from now on, I could handle that. The 6-string was a dream; I don't need it to make a living, but I most definitely wanted it. The contrabass guitar has been a path to ecstasy for me, my Eden.

GEAR

Bass Fodera Anthony Jackson Presentation Contrabass Guitar Strings Fodera Anthony Jackson bare-core prototypes
Amplification Millennia Media HV-3B, HV-3C, or TD-1 preamps
Cabinets Meyer Sound UPA-1P Wide Coverage Speaker with USW-1P Subwoofer, or two CQ-1 Wide Coverage Speakers (all powered)
Cables Nordost, Audioquest, and Reqest Effects Ernie Ball 6165 Stereo Volume Pedal, flanger: "Pending; I've found no satisfactory designs at present. My current favorite is the ProTools plug-in MetaFlanger from Waves."
Other Fender standard heavy-gauge picks, Ernie Ball Steel (metal slide used by pedal steel guitarists), Peterson V-SAM Tuner