

“Have A Ball... Five”

The Bordwell Ball 5 Bass Guitar

By Vic Serbe



The Company Line

Cliff Bordwell is someone you may or may not have heard of yet, but he has been building top quality “CB” basses since 1991 – though his company was officially founded more like 10-12 years ago. His first bass was a fretless 4-string, built around the time he started college as a bass major, and it attracted enough attention from his friends and other local bassists that he started building for others within a few years after that. If you’re familiar with Here Come the Mummies, you may see founding member “KW Tut” playing his custom Bordwell Ball (4) bass on stage. Another name you may see playing a CB is Chris Wood. One of the reasons you may not be aware of his instruments is that Cliff’s build schedule is conservative. He only builds about sixteen basses a year – typically in groups of four, over a three-month build period – and does it as a one-man shop. He has no apprentices or other employees. He currently offers I believe seven body styles, though he is probably best known for his Ball model, with its unusual body shape, and the large “scroll” on the top horn (which also looks kind of like a ball, and is where it gets its name). In my case, I was somewhat aware of Cliff’s work, but it was the tone I heard from a passive Ball bass at a Here Come the Mummies show that primarily precipitated this review.

I’m going to spin this review a little different than some others, though I have done this before. In doing the background research, I asked Cliff about his build philosophies and design criteria/goals. He answered so well, it’s best to simply quote him here.

“A lot of the build philosophy and construction ideas come from my machinist background. I have 15 years of experience being a machinist. The work ranged from Military to NASA and

similar tight tolerance low production jobs. Knowing how to cut material to relieve the stress, how to hold material to keep tight tolerances comes from all those days of working on some crazy difficult stuff. It's amazing how similar wood is to metal, both have built in stress, both need to be cut in a way to not create stress, and for the most part, the same methods work when working with them."

"The design ideas started way back when I was a bass major in college. Practicing 3 or 4 hours a day you really come up with opinions on bass comfort and playability. That is also when I started my first bass, it was a 4-string fretless. It started there, putting ideas into the design for better balance, better overall comfort for standing and seated playing. A lot of ideas to make both your right and left hand comfortable. Neck angle to bring the neck closer to you, shaping the body so the fingerboard comes to you instead of leaning away from you. Small details like rolling over the edge of the fingerboard, to how the transitions blend into each other, it all adds up to make a significant difference when you're putting some major hours down."



So, what are these basses really like when you see one up close and play one on a gig? Read on. I think you'll like what you see.

Details

The bass tested here is a Ball 5, but with some options. Cliff structures his pricing in two tiers: the Standard and Deluxe. The Standard is essentially a passive bass with no figured woods, but still many build options. The "Deluxe" package adds figured woods, more build options, active electronics with a choice of pickups, and choices in hardware. The review instrument is a Deluxe, but also adds

the following upgrades: Aero 5-string J-style pickups, side jack (standard is on the face), full-faced top, passive tone control, and stabilized birdseye maple for the fingerboard.

Hang on, what was that last part? Stab-i-what? The wood used in his “stabilized” fingerboards is provided by a third party. According to the source, stabilized figured woods have been impregnated with certain materials to produce a “dimensionally stable” wood (hence its name). The process minimizes or eliminates shrinking, cracking, expanding, and warping. Other benefits are moisture stability, being oil impervious, and no raised grain issues. Cliff also feels they make especially superb fretless fingerboards, adding to the mid tone/focus and growl, or “mwah” as we call it in the bass world. Other builders also use similar products on their fingerboards, so this is not unique to Cliff’s basses, but it’s also not super prevalent. I personally believe in them, and this is the third brand of bass I’ve had experience with that has at least generally had this kind of fingerboard material (for both fretted and fretless).

Cliff offers two classes of integral mounted necks: the Classic and Modern. The Classic is 3-piece quarter-sawn maple, while the Modern has a wenge bar in the center. He offers three neck profiles, in “standard” or “thin” (.850” and .810”, measured at the 1st position, respectively). His “C” shape (smooth round feel) would be a radius contour similar to a Jazz bass. His “D” shape would have a blockier feel, with the edges having more material under your hand. Both of these profiles are familiar and used widely in the world of bass building. However, his third shape, the “Oval,” is unique. It’s similar to the C shape, but with the edges tapering more for a thinner feel. He also offers an “Offset” option for any of the three profiles, which is asymmetrical shaping, shifting the thickest point towards the bass side, and you can choose your treble and bass side profile individually from the standards. Additionally, all of his shapes can be further adjusted upon request to get a more custom neck profile. The neck also has a volute, and an 180 kickback (no string retainers needed to provide sufficient down-force on the nut). The review instrument is a 34” scale instrument and has the Classic neck, with the Thin Oval neck profile, but does not have the Offset option.

Cliff also offers multiple body thicknesses, though sometimes electronics choices will dictate a minimum thickness (e.g. push/pull pots, batteries, etc). The review bass has a push/pull pot and a battery, so the body had to be at least 1.525” thick, which is what it is. He also offers 1.625”, which he compares to a Fender bass, and a svelte 1.425”. We’re only talking 10ths of an inch here, but it does make a noticeable difference. The review bass has a lightweight ash body and a flamed walnut top.

Cliff offers about any brand of preamp you could want, with Nordstrand and Audere being the brands he uses most commonly. The review bass has the Aguilar OBP-3, which I know very well. The preamp is wired to provide +/-18dB at 40Hz (bass), +/- 16dB at 400Hz (mid), and +/- 16dB at 6.5 kHz (treble). The review bass also has the volume on a push/pull pot for passive mode (pulled), and an added traditional passive tone control. A blend control is also used in this case instead of a second volume control. It is possible to wire this preamp for switchable mids (making 800Hz alternatively available), but that option was not selected on this instrument.

Moving on to hardware, like so many vendors, Hipshot is what’s used for tuners and the bridge. The tuners are Ultralites and the bridge is the A-Style, with 19mm (.750) string spacing. Cliff uses bridges with the aluminum base on most of his builds, but he offers the brass version as an option. The review bass also has Dunlop dual-function Straploks. The strings are DR Nickel LoRiders, .045 – .125 gauge.



Fit and finish

Well, what can I say that the pictures don't already also say, and as backed up by Cliff's engineering experience? The man has a penchant for precision, and it's well represented in this bass. I can't find a glue line anywhere. In fact, looking at the neck joint, it's almost as if he figured out how to weave wood fibers with each other and just skip the whole gluing process altogether. The body shaping is supple and consistent. The neck feels wonderful, and beautifully smooth from end to end, with nicely rolled fingerboard edges (though still plenty there to avoid the sense you might accidentally pull the G string off on a bend). The routes are clean and precise, the fretwork is spot-on. The inlay on the headstock is well done, with very little filler at the perimeter. The truss rod route even has a nicely rolled edge. The cavity cover is a perfect fit, employing machine screws and brass inserts in the body. The wiring is done reasonably well, the cavity is well-shielded and the cavity cover has brushed foil glued to it to complete the shield "can."

I had only two very minor niggles with the instrument. One was I didn't anticipate that abalone inlays would be very difficult to see in low light on that dark fingerboard. Totally not Cliff's fault at all, but a choice I wouldn't repeat. Plain black would have been better in this case. The other minor issue is the use of relatively thick hard rubber washers under the Straplocks. On a strap, there is enough pressure that they can compress, which allows the screw to potentially come loose or maybe even bend ... especially on the top horn. I replaced them with plain felt and all was good after that. It should be noted that Cliff has revised his builds to use plain felt washers and black side dots, as needed.

On the gig

This bass is light. I weighed it at 7.7 pounds! Combine that with the relatively thin body and the shape of the body, it's an effortless carry all night long. In fact, the body doesn't need much sculpting. It just doesn't need the deep belly cut or strongly rolled shoulder a typical J-bass has. The neck is smooth and fast, and fits your hand like a glove. The integral neck design also means no heel, so time spent where there's "no money" is also very pleasant. The pickups are focused and very open-sounding. You have a lot to work with, tonally, which is a good thing, because the Aguilar preamps are known for their high-gain EQ. A little goes a long way, but these pickups make good use of it. It's a very good pairing. There's plenty of burpy bite on the bridge, plenty of big round fatness on the neck, and overall, plenty of everything from low to high. Yeah, it's got a lot of J in it, so no surprises here. I didn't find much in the way of hot or dull spots across the board, either. I suspect that stabilized board helped there, as well as Cliff's quality of construction, of course. The shielding does its job in relatively noisy environments, and no grounding issues were detected.

The Bottom Line

This bass fires on all cylinders, plain and simple. Cliff's an extremely talented luthier with extensive bass expertise. This means he knows how to make us happy. It feels great, sounds great, plays great, and lacks any sort of Achilles' heel. It's not a complete J-bass knock off, which is a very good thing, but the J force is still very strong in this one, so any J-bass lover will also love this bass, as I did. If you're looking for a very J-like persona, but with a beautifully unique aesthetic, you should definitely try a Bordwell. Or, maybe check out some of his other models. I suspect they're every bit as great as this bass, making them "short list" contenders for sure.