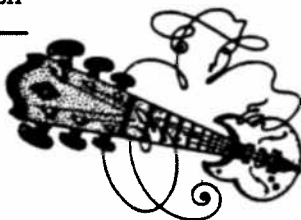


Top session man Anthony Jackson looks at Ken Smith's S-II custom made bass guitar.



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Basscheck

THE KEN SMITH SII ELECTRIC BASS

This is the lowest priced double pickup bass in the Ken Smith catalog. Since each Smith bass is completely hand built and custom designed, some of the details described herein (such as types of woods used, dimensions, etc.) may be altered according to each individual player's needs and desires.

With this in mind, I'll go on to talk about the particular SII Bass which I examined and played at Ken's factory.

Neck

Right off the bat, the SII's neck has a beautiful feel. The strings are a touch close together (approx. 10mm apart) — much closer, say, than a Fender, but very playable after a bit of fiddling about and getting used to the feel. The neck is a three piece design (maple with a rosewood center), and is joined to the curly maple body with a dovetail joint (very well executed and beautiful in appearance). The fingerboard is rosewood, with pearl dot inlay at all the standard positions, and the neck tapers from 2 1/2" at the 24th fret to 1 1/2" at the brass nut.

A player coming from an older Fender Precision or an Alembic will probably find the closeness of the strings a bit tight, but not necessarily uncomfortable, the feeling simply being one of difference, not inferiority or superiority. I happen to prefer the narrower spacing, myself.

The finish around the circumference of the neck is not flattish, as are most necks — rather, it's steeply curved. Again, it's a different sort of feel than a wide, flat, Fender type neck, but it's very comfortable. The oiled finish Ken uses is much more comfortable than the usual lacquer, and the neck — indeed, the entire instrument, has an overall feeling of solidity, strength, and workmanship common to only the best of the new custom made instruments coming out now.

The mother of pearl fingerboard inlays are flawlessly installed, as are the frets. This is a superb woodworking job — usually not so good, even on other custom made instruments.

Electronics

The electronics of the SII are as basic as can be. It's equipped with two Bill Lawrence pickups (rosewood



covers for these are optional), and passive electronics, which include balance, volume, and tone controls, a standby switch, and a low frequency cut switch (which will be replaced on future models with a phase switch).

I opened the back plate, and examined the passive circuit which Ken uses. Incidentally, this SII model has a chrome back plate, but the new models will be equipped with a fitted, recessed plate made of simulated Brazilian rosewood.

The circuit board is constructed of fiberglass. The components are assembled neatly, and the soldering job is quite good. Even the finish of the inside compartment is to a high standard. There are four pins for the pickups to be attached to the circuit board, and one pin for the ground. Thus, there is no soldering between the pickup wires and the ground wire to the circuit board itself. The pots, rather than the standard carbon pots, are constructed of conductive plastic, of the same variety as the pots used in the MCI mixing boards.

Pickups

The Bill Lawrence pickups used on the SII sound quite flat and unhyped, which is what I prefer. Any hying should be done externally — preferably off the instrument (EQ, and that sort of thing). The pickups sound clean and crisp, and they're altogether what they're supposed to be.

Incidentally, a nice touch with regard to the pickup controls is the midrange roll-off tone control Ken uses, rather than the more common, and infinitely less effective treble roll-off type.

Playability

I've saved the most important thing for last. The SII is a joy to play. It shows all the signs of having been designed and built by somebody who is a *player* — someone who has had considerable experience with bass guitars before, as opposed to someone who's merely a designer.

Fret access up and down the neck is very good. There is a bit of cramping up at the 24th fret, but I'm told that the player can have the lower cutaway deepened somewhat if that is a problem. For most players, access is superb to three fingers — four finger chords may be a bit of a problem, but certainly not an insurmountable one. Again, an instrument of this type demands that the player contribute some input into its construction, and speak to the builder about his or her particular needs.

The neck feels even — string response is even. There is the usual slight touch of dead spot on the first string between the fourth and seventh position, although the dead spot on the SII is *much* less noticeable than usual. Due to the quality of the neck, and no doubt also the quality of the fingerboard, woods used, and time allowed for drying — all these things contribute to making the neck a much better than average feeling one in terms of playability.

I would recommend the Ken Smith SII heartily to anyone looking to spend a \$1000 or more on a custom made bass guitar. Incidentally, as a final note — the SII lists for \$1420.00*, and Smith basses with more advanced features (active electronics, etc.) are priced correspondingly higher.