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Special Offer

Having been longtime friends, Mike Tobias and SWR recently combined their efforts to produce an instrument that SWR was going to distribute as the "Journeyman" Bass. The bad news is that along with geographic problems, we have all become so busy we had to abandon the project, at least for now. The good news is that 12 complete prototypes were produced! While 4 are already spoken for, we have decided to offer the remaining 8 to newsletter readers first (4-4 strings and 4-5 strings).

The Journeyman basses are a combination of traditional and modern values designed to make the vintage bass owner feel comfortable with an upgrade. The 4 and 5 strings feature 34" scale, 21 fret, bolt-on necks. The truss rod adjustment is underneath the pickguard.

The bodies are swamp ash for lightness and tone. The necks are maple with rosewood fingerboards. They are finished in an environmentally friendly satin water borne urethane, loaded with specially designed Bartolini pickups and electronics.

Completely built in the USA with final assembly and QC done by Michael Tobias, he has also individually signed each one. Retail value was going to be \$1700 for the 4 and \$1900 for the 5 string. We're offering them for \$1000 and \$1100 respectively w/case. As well, each one will be "pre-aged" by Timbre Technologies who charge \$150 for their services (more can be learned about Timbre Technologies by reading the article on Pg. 10 of the 1994-5 Guitar and Bass Buyer's Guide entitled "Instant Vintage?" by Jim Roberts).

For sales info, please e-mail us at swr@primenet.com

5-String Journeyman's bass

4-String Journeyman's bass

4-String Journeyman's bass

swr@primenet.com

Paul Herman - Sales

Ship on Mon., 1-29-96

UPS ground, insured, take about 1 week

The Bottom Line Sunday, 4 February 1996 Volume 1996 : Number 069

From: Chip Chapin <chip@redacted> Date: Sat, 03 Feb 1996 16:17:17 -0800
Subject: "Journeyman" bass from SWR/Tobias (Part 1)

This is a review, special to TBL! Because of the length, I'm splitting it into two parts -- part two will be posted tomorrow. Even so it's kinda long. Hope some of you find it interesting. // chip

Today: (Part One) The "Journeyman" bass from SWR/Tobias. Tomorrow: (Part Two) Interviews with Steve Rabe and Michael Tobias

1. Finding and Buying the Bass

Readers of the SWR web page (<http://www.primenet.com/~swr>) in December might have browsed through their "Cyberspace Newsletter #1". Those who made it to the end saw a brief announcement of a "special offer" for some prototype "Journeyman" basses from a collaboration of Steve Rabe (Mr. SWR) and Michael Tobias.

This interested me right away for several reasons: (1) I'd been looking for a 5-string bass, (2) I like SWR gear (I use a Studio 220 amp), (3) I was positively disposed toward Mike Tobias because of his TBL contributions and informative web page (<http://csbh.mhv.net/mtd>) and (4) I'm sucker for a bargain, and these prototype basses were being sold at a substantial discount. The 5ers would be sold for \$1100 instead of the planned \$1900, including case. By comparison, a new Michael Tobias Designs 535 starts at \$3500.

Twelve prototype Jman basses were being produced, and eight were still available as of early December: 4 - 4strings and 4 - 5strings. Looking at the SWR web page today one finds an update that only 2 of the 4 strings are left.

After a phone call with Paul Herman at SWR, I sent off a check for \$1200 (\$1100 plus California sales tax and shipping). I had never dreamed I'd buy a bass without playing it first, much less without even seeing it, but I would have several days to examine the instrument and return it if not satisfied. When I called, all of the 5ers were still available so I had my choice of finishes -- I picked something called "cherry sunburst", mostly because the other finishes didn't sound so great to me. There's a picture of an ugly [IMO] green 5string on their web page now, but there were no pictures when I placed my order.

2. The Arrival -- First Impressions

Due to various delays, my new Journeyman was not ready for several weeks, and it finally arrived on January 12th. I was at work but my wife's band was practicing at our house the day that it came -- she called and asked if they could open the box. I said that was

OK and was glad to hear it described as "the most beautiful bass any of us have ever seen!" My own first impression, when I got home, came when I picked up the case and wondered where the bass was. Actually the bass was in the case, but it's so light at 8 lbs due to the thin swamp ash body that in comparison to my 11 lb Music Man it seemed empty.

OK, so how did it play? What did it sound like? The first thing I noticed was how smooth and natural the neck felt. The Journeyman 5 string necks are narrower at the nut than, say, an MTD 5 string:

Jman 5: 1 3/4" at the 0 fret, just under 3" at the 21st fret. MTD 535: 2" at the 0 fret, 3 1/16" at the 21st fret.

(The string spacing is 3/4" between strings at the bridge for both.)

That's only 1/16" wider than my MusicMan 4 at the nut. So to a long-time 4-string player like me, the neck width feels very natural. The shape of the neck is "ideal" with a very smooth and fast natural finish. Likewise the 34" scale feels comfortable and familiar, though 35" (like the MTD and many other 5 strings) would make for a tighter B string. Initially, I did have some problems pulling the G string off the edge of the narrow neck during bends, but haven't done this for quite a while now.

Playing through the amp, I was immediately struck by the crisp tone and incredibly smooth response up and down the neck on all strings. This axe has a wonderful sweet tone on the G string that's balanced very well with solid response on the lower strings. The B string itself is very good but not exceptional -- it lacks the tight feel of, say, a Pedulla Thunderbass. Obviously there is a tradeoff for the 34" scale. I have seen some also argue that a truly great B string requires neck-thru (Jman is bolt-on) and a heavier body, but these ideas seem more controversial. For example, the MTD 535 also uses a bolt-on neck and provides the option of a swamp ash body.

At any rate, the sound and feel of the B string really is "very good". After almost 30 years of [non-professional] bass playing I now wonder how I ever got along without it. The sub-E notes are distinct and thunderous (I have a biamp with an EV18) without getting muddy. Above the 5th fret on the B string, notes do have a lot more harmonics than the same note played on the E, and are not as distinct (in my very limited experience, this is a common problem among 5 strings). Nevertheless, I use these notes all the time -- the subtleties get lost anyway when playing with a loud band.

3. Some Basic Details

The Journeyman Bass has a bolt-on maple neck with rosewood fingerboard, 21 frets, and 5-on-a-side Japanese tuners (Schaller-style). The heel of the neck is laminated with about 1/8" thickness of wenge, and is mounted with four recessed bolts. The truss rod adjustment is under the pickguard -- the whole pickguard must be removed to adjust it :-(. The neck itself is well-shaped

with a natural finish (almost looks like no finish at all) and the logo "Journeyman -- designed by Michael Tobias". It is hand-signed and numbered on the back of the headstock by Tobias himself. The name "SWR", surprisingly, does not appear anywhere on the instrument -- more on this in Part Two.

The swamp ash body is very thin and has the same shape as other Tobias instruments I've seen. I like the shape very much. The body and neck have been sculpted somewhat at the cutaway for easier access to the upper frets. My "cherry sunburst" finish is black just around the edges, with the grain in the middle stained very dark and a cherry color over the grain. We're not talking Maraschino(sp) cherry red here, but rather the natural dark red color of a ripe cherry off the tree. It looks very classy IMO. The body is coated with a "natural urethane" satin finish. Unfortunately it was not expertly applied -- the finish actually has a fair amount of dirt in it! Under normal circumstances I would have returned such an instrument, but I love the way it sounds and plays, and it's not like they have a lot of others they could send me.

The electronics and controls are Bartolini: two pickups, five knobs and a 3-position switch. They seem very quiet and have a nice feel. The knobs are:

- Master volume
- Hi eq
- Mid eq
- Low eq
- Pickup balance

The last four all have center detents. The switch selects the center frequency of the mid eq and therefore only has an effect when the mid eq is in use. If you like to boost or cut the mids you will find that this switch can be used to make a substantial tweak to your tone. Power is from two 9v batteries.

The bass is shipped with Mike Tobias' own "MTD" strings, with an exposed-core (piano style) B string. Gauges appear to be medium or medium-light.

4. Timbre Tech Treatment

A unique feature of the Journeyman instruments is that they have undergone the patented "Timbre Tech" treatment. TT is a brand new process that helps a new instrument acquire some of that "vintage" tone. It is a joint venture of Steve Rabe, Michael Tobias and a third investor, Richard Robinson. They have just received their patent award. I was skeptical of this process but figured it couldn't hurt. Now I'm thinking of trying to get my other basses treated!

There was a brief sidebar by Jim Roberts about Timbre Tech on page 10 of the BP 1994-95 Buyers Guide, and Steve sent me a packet of more detailed information about TT that they had been passing out at the recent NAMM show. Very generally: the TT treatment apparently involves vibrating the instrument at audio frequencies

(20 - 4kHz) for some period of time. The result is a measurable increase in the acoustic output of the instrument, especially at mid and higher frequencies, and a subjective improvement in the evenness of tonal response and elimination of dead spots.

This evenness of response and lack of dead spots was the first thing I noticed about the instrument, before reading anybody else's testimony on the subject. I'd say that Timbre Tech is a winner that we'll be hearing more about in the future.

End of Part One.

Watch for Part Two tomorrow: Interviews with Steve Rabe and Michael Tobias

-- Chip Chapin, Hewlett-Packard Company, STD California Language Lab
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The Bottom Line Monday, 5 February 1996 Volume 1996 : Number 070

From: Chip Chapin <chip@redacted> Date: Sun, 04 Feb 1996
22:05:24 -0800
Subject: "Journeyman" bass from SWR/Tobias (Part 2)

This is a part 2 of a review, special to TBL! Because of the length, I've split it into two parts -- part one was posted yesterday and appeared in TBL V1996 #69. Even if you weren't interested in my own ramblings in Part One, I think you will find Steve and Mike's comments interesting and worthwhile. // chip

Yesterday: (Part One) The "Journeyman" bass from SWR/Tobias. Today:
(Part Two) Interviews with Steve Rabe and Michael Tobias

5. Background: Interviews with Steve Rabe and Michael Tobias

I wanted to get more information about the background and future of the Journeyman bass and so submitted various questions by email to its creators: Steve Rabe and Mike Tobias, along with a few follow-up questions after receiving their answers. I am grateful for their interest, cooperation and speedy replies, and acknowledge the value of their continuing participation in the TBL community.

I have made minor edits in the actual questions for brevity (and so some of them didn't sound quite so lame :-)) but have left the answers almost entirely unchanged.

STEVE RABE

Q1: How did this idea get started? Did it involve Michael Tobias from the very beginning, or did SWR "shop around" for a designer?

SR: Mike and I had wanted to do a project together for some time. After his contract with Gibson had expired, the opportunity presented itself. Unfortunately during this period, Mike moved to the east coast and we found working together closely obviously much harder than when living 15 minutes from each other.

Q2: Please briefly describe the business model you planned for this project. I notice that it does not bear the name "SWR" anywhere (somewhat to my surprise). Was "Journeyman" intended to be a completely separate brand? Was this to be a 100% SWR-owned business?

SR: While I chose the combination of pickups that went into your bass, I also had designed some electronics to go with them. I was basically pleased with the results, but they needed some more "tweaking". Had SWR electronics ended up in the bass (and they would have had the project continued), the logo would have been there. The project started out as a "Workingman's" bass. As the costs escalated, we changed the name to Journeyman. A Workingman's bass is still on the burner.

The Journeyman's parts were to be made entirely in the U.S. and assembled at SWR who would distribute them. Mike would still be in charge of the quality of the workmanship, but because the cost of sending necks and bodies back and forth from the east and west coasts became very costly, the project was abandoned (Mike is right now resting in my living room and I'm still trying to talk him into moving back to California :-)).

Q2a: What sort of electronics? Would this have replaced the Bartolini active eq? Or was it something else?

SR: Actually they were quite unique including a built in Aural Enhancer designed around the characteristics of the instrument. +/- 9 volts, active EQ and buffers eliminating all in-line capacitors. But, alas, it was a little noisy. Can't win 'em all.

Q3: Please give a very general timeline for this project.

SR: That's hard since we have been talking about it for years. The decision to abandon the project -- at least for the time being -- was late last year [1995].

Q4: Besides designing the instruments (and signing them), what was the extent of Michael Tobias' involvement in their manufacture? I.e. were these actually built by MTD? Finished and assembled elsewhere perhaps?

SR: The bodies and necks were made for us. Mike assembled the prototypes at his shop.

Q5: I was previously unfamiliar with the Timbre Tech treatment, but I understand this is a separate business you are involved with, is that right? Could you please supply (or suggest how I could obtain) a general description of the process and what it does.

SR: TT is a separate business that involves Michael, myself and a third investor. I am please to say that just today we got word from our patent attorney that we have received our patent! We have been working on this for the last 2 1/2 years.

[Steve then sent me a separate packet of information about TT.]

Q6: The instrument has an exceptionally fine, sweet tone, in my opinion. Speaking subjectively, how much of this would you attribute to the Timbre Tech treatment? Was T.T. always part of your plan for the Journeyman line?

SR: Yes. If you compared two identical Journeyman's, one with the treatment and one without, the treated instrument would be more responsive, brighter, sustain longer and have a more even response. Rick Fierabracci (Yanni) tried two instruments and noticed this quickly.

MICHAEL TOBIAS

Q1: Are these pickups/eqs the same as the ones used in your MTD 535 basses? The specs and controls sure look the same.

MT: No, These were specially set up for the Jman. It is a standard 5

knob set up.

Q2: What kind of strings were used on the Journeyman?

MT: MTD

Q3: Would you mind telling me who makes [the MTD strings]? Comment on the choice of a piano-style bridge taper for the B string?

MT: I am not supposed to tell who makes them and neither are they. Suffice it to say that it is a well known and highly respected string winding house in North America. These are the terms of the non-disclosure agreement we signed. I have always liked the tapered lo B . I think it intonates better and feels better under the thumb.

Q4: There's an interesting piece of some other wood, maybe mahogany, at the heel of the neck -- what is it and why is it there? I've never seen this feature on a bolt-on before.

MT: Wenge. Since these were protos, I wanted to see if a really hard piece of wood would affect the contact point. The basses with the wenge heel are a bit different tonally, better, maybe but certainly different.

Q5: Please comment on the differences between the Journeyman and your 535. I take for granted that the finish on an MTD bass would be better, but what about: weight? Woods? The overall sound of the instrument?

MT: The weight depends on the wood the bass is made from. Different basses weigh differently. The MTD is a different approach to the same problem. Non-traditional, woods, scale etc. The instruments sound different not only because of wood choices, but because of the differences in pick ups, eq, and the scale length. All MTD basses are 35" as opposed to the Jmen which were 34"

Q5b: How about the "tightness" of the B string?

MT: The B should be tighter on the MTD because of the scale length being longer.

Q5c: Shape of the neck (I believe the MTD necks are a little wider. Do you use wider string spacing or just allow a little more wiggle room at the edge).

MT: For the most part, the Jmen necks are to be more traditional. The design parameters were that the bass would feel natural to someone who had grown up on a traditional bass. Both basses have a 19mm spacing at the bridge. On the MTD's the necks are a bit wider at the nut.

MT: Enjoy your bass!

Thanks Mike and Steve ... I am!

2/6/96

NOTE: Paul Hermann (SWR) called me today to tell me mine is being shipped out by UPS. It should arrive ^{base player} on 2/13 or 2/14. They had to track down "YANNI" ^{on his bass} who was using its pickguard, to do some recordings in LA. (Hence the delay due to "pirated" pickguard.) (Rice Fierabracci)

From: SWRENG@aol.com
Date: Tue, 23 Jan 1996 21:23:31 -0500
To: redacted
Subject: Re: Prototype Bass

Hi Bill,

Thank you for your interest in SWR products. The Journeyman Bass is still available. Currently we have 5 strings available in the following colors: green and amber. 4 strings are available in red and amber. I have included for you some specifications that were not found in the newsletter:

The 4 string neck is: 1 5/8 at the 0 fret and 2 1/2 at the 21 st fret
The 5 string is: 1 3/4 at the 0 fret and just under 3 at the 21 st fret.

The bridge spacing at the bridge is 3/4" between strings for both.

The basses should weigh about 8 lbs. The eq is a Bartolini system with vol, blend, treble, mid, bass, and a mid shift switch. The shift points are matched to the pickups at 250, 480, 800 +/- a few cycles.

The finishes are oil on the necks and environmentally friendly waterbourne urethane on the bodies.

The basses can be ordered by contacting Paul Herman in the SWR Sales Department @ (818) 898-3355. Please let me know if you have any more questions.

Best Regards,
Kelly/SWR



