

# Fender 50th Anniversary Jazz Bass

**I**t all began with the Fender Precision bass. In 1951, the first commercially successful solidbody electric bass ushered in a musical paradigm shift, paving the way for electric music. Not only did the P-Bass facilitate the development of rock and roll, but jazz artists like Lionel Hampton also saw the benefits the instrument offered in terms of musical power and convenience. Hamp immediately bought one and had his bassists play it (Monk Montgomery being the first to make the switch at his request). The P-Bass dominated through the '50s, and though other companies jumped on the bandwagon with varying degrees of success, the Precision experienced no significant competition until Fender released its second bass guitar in 1960, the Jazz Bass.

The Jazz was built to be the deluxe model in the Fender bass lineup, and its sculpted, asymmetrical body, dual pickups and slimmer neck made it an upgrade in both form and function. And while the P-Bass initiated many major changes, the Jazz Bass would go on to further push the development of modern music, and bass playing in general. The two-pickup design gave the Jazz a tighter, more focused sound than the P, a quality that helped push the bass into the spotlight. R&B session great Jerry Jemmott took advantage of this tone to create a bubbling, active bass style that was a major influence on the young Jaco Pastorius. Another significant early adopter of the Jazz was Larry Graham, who, as a member of Sly & the Family Stone, and later with his own group Graham Central Station, forged a unique style of playing the bass that has now become a mainstay of contemporary jazz: slap funk. By the end of the 1970s, the Jazz finally did become the preferred electric bass in jazz when players like Jaco, Marcus Miller and Victor Bailey proved the Jazz Bass was capable of filling out the rhythm section *and* asserting itself as a distinct solo voice.

The venerable Fender Jazz Bass turns 50 this year, and to celebrate half a century of trendsetting tone, Fender has released the super-sexy 50th Anniversary model. Incorporating features from its illustrious history, the anniversary model is no mere reissue; there has never been a J-Bass quite like this, and when the production window closes, there will never be another like it again.

For Fender fans, identifying the timeline for the many earmarks of this instrument represents something of a Da Vinci Code, but despite the far-flung feature set, the bass looks and feels cohesive. The alder body has a nitrocellulose Candy Apple Red finish with a matching headstock, which was one of the first custom colors offered in the early '60s. The Fender headstock decal went through several subtle variations, but the 1962 version was chosen

for this bass. The flat-bottomed slab rosewood fingerboard is another early '60s element on the Anniversary bass. (Fender switched over to a thinner, concave board by the beginning of 1963.) The attractive block inlays originally appeared in mid-1966, but were accompanied by fingerboard binding—a cosmetic touch that is sorely missed on this neck. The 20-fret maple neck is the modern C shape found on current instruments, with the added support of Posiflex graphite rods for stability.

The tuning machines present the classic cloverleaf profile to the front, but behind the headstock we see they are actually modern, lightweight Fender/Hipshot gears with tapered shafts. The High Mass Vintage bridge is also from current times, and gives you the option of top-loading or stringing through the body. While the original P-Bass had the strings running through the body, this element did not show up on the Jazz until 1995. The two '75 Vintage single coil pickups are in the '70s position, which places the bridge pickup 1/4-inch closer to the bridge than the earlier design. The original reason for the move was to prevent the pickup from sticking out from under the chrome bridge cover, but players soon discovered the proximity to the bridge gave the Jazz a more biting tone, which played a big role in the development of slap funk. Originally placed under the G string, the plastic finger rest has also been moved to the '70s position above the E string, where it serves as a thumb rest.

The 50th Anniversary model comes bedecked with the 1960s chrome pickup covers, which are currently offered only on Vintage series basses and the Marcus Miller signature model. The covers add cosmetic flair, but also block some of the best right-hand real estate. The majority of players remove them, and in days of old, they were highly prized as ashtrays. The one functional aspect of the bridge cover was to hold a rubber strip that muted the strings just in front of the bridge. This strip is included in the accessory pack if you want to get the true, old-school thumpy bass tone that Leo Fender originally had in mind. Also included in the deluxe black hardshell case are four individual felt string mutes, which were part of the earliest J-Bass design. They were phased out by 1963 in favor of the rubber strip, and their inclusion here is somewhat baffling: The '70s bridge pickup placement makes it impossible to install them.

The Jazz Bass is produced at many different price points, and the 50th Anniversary model—with its street price of around \$2,000—is a special instrument. The fretwork, the filing of the nut, the fit of the neck pocket, and the finish details are on par with the most expensive axes from the Fender Custom Shop. The tone is classic Jazz Bass: In bridge position you get the burpy clarity that helped Jaco get his message across, while the front pickup has an open depth that fills out the lows with authority. Both pickups running together produce a blend of rich low end with solid mid punch and sweet, organic highs.

The 50th Anniversary Jazz Bass is a fitting salute to the legacy of one of the greatest basses of all time. As a limited-production run, there is a degree of collector's cache to this bass. But rather than stick it in a sealed glass case, the best tribute to its groundbreaking tone would be to play the hell out of it for the next 50 years. **ED FRIEDLAND**

