

# MULTIPLE STRINGS ATTACHED

## STEWART MCKINSEY

**A**merican bass builder and clinician Stewart McKinsey has always worked at the cutting edge of the bass arena. A performer and session player, he has spent many years pioneering the playing and construction of ERBs (extended-range basses, to the rest of us). To those of you who have never seen, say, a 10-string bass in action, you're in for something of a shock: these massive instruments, whose best-known builder is the Conklin company, make your standard 4-, 5- and 6-string instruments look like child's play in comparison. After losing much of his valued gear to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Stewart is now working for Nordstrand Guitars, where he applies his considerable expertise in the bass field. A perfect man for a *BGM* interview, then.

**Stewart, you seem to have done the lot when it comes to bass...**

I was a full time player (solo artist, sideman, session guy, teacher, clinician...) but after I lost everything to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita a few years back I needed to take a break. For most of the last two years I have been working for Nordstrand Guitars, handling communications and testing all the basses. In the last couple of years I have made myself a handful of basses. My respect for luthiers

– which was healthy to begin with – has grown immeasurably. What an incredibly challenging and beautiful craft. It is equal parts art and science and there is a random factor, because one's primary medium is an organic substance. Two pieces of wood, even cut from the same tree, can behave in entirely different ways. It's just amazing!

**How did you first conceive the idea of an extended-range bass? Why not just stick with four or five strings like the rest of us?**

It's kind of a silly story actually. My initial foray into the extended range came from seeing an ad in *Guitar Player* magazine back in the early 80s. There was a picture of Jimmy Haslip playing a five and I had just gotten my first Yellowjackets albums. I really loved the sound of the notes below my E string. It took years before I was in a position to get a 5-string but eventually I did, and I have never looked back! I hadn't been playing my five for even a year when I went to the Musicians Institute, where I studied

with Steve Bailey. He really hipped me to a lot of what one could do chordally on a bass, and so I bought a 6-string from him. I hadn't been playing the new instrument for 20 minutes when I got the strangest thought: "Would it be possible to play an instrument with both higher and lower range than this 6-string?"

It took about 15 years for me to find someone who would do what I wanted, but from my first conversations with Bill Conklin I knew that it was a workable idea. Greg Campbell introduced me to Mark Wright and Dave Innis from AccuGroove speakers not long after that, and I was on a whole new track.

**Your Conklin 10-string is a pretty intimidating instrument to those new to extended-range basses. Can you give us some tips about how to approach playing such a bass?**

To get started, the big things to overcome are thinking with one's eyes and developing solid muting technique. If you look down at the massive fingerboard you will get lost. There are just so many strings, frets and places to play on the neck. It does not take as long as people imagine to co-ordinate your two hands so that they are playing the same string at the same time. Muscle memory is really remarkable, and your brain will get your body on the right track pretty quickly. But I have found that the best thing to do right away when playing an ERB is to tackle a tune you know inside-out. Don't watch your hands as you do it. For me this is usually old James Brown grooves or the Jaco Pastorius version of "The Chicken." But whatever you can play with your eyes closed on your regular instrument, play it with your eyes closed on the big bass!

Muting is also a tremendous challenge. With so many more strings, the instruments with seven or more strings simply have a lot more in the way of resonant frequencies. They want to make noise. Each player has a different approach to muting and

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it's worth learning what everyone does to adapt your own ways of doing things. It's absolutely essential to be able to hear only those notes which are supposed to be heard.

**What does the extra range allow you to do in practical terms when playing as part of a band?**

It's opened up a whole new way of playing in an ensemble. Playing standard bass parts on wildly different parts of the neck to exploit new timbres is only the first thing to consider. I can play in the sub-low range and do what a synthesiser or a pipe organ might. I can comp chords to use space in a different way. Because the physical characteristics of the strings are so unique, there are percussive effects I can use which I just love. Obviously a lot of players are approaching the instrument as two-handed tappers. The beauty of these instruments is that they are still so comparatively young. The vocabulary is expanding daily. And each player gets to be his or her own stylist. It's very cool to see.

**With the super-low strings, don't the frequencies go below the limit of human hearing? In which case, what's the point of playing them?**

This debate has been a part of the scene since cats started to dip below the low B of 5- and 6-string basses. In my experience, with proper amplification and sufficient power, if the strings and the instrument are well made and the player can grasp that the low notes open and blossom in a different way than the more traditional range of a bass, then the notes are indeed audible. Every human hears differently. This even changes over the course of a lifetime. Personally I can hear the low C# of my 10-string and I love the sound.

**How useful is the 10-string for chords?**

Well, I'm not really a pyrotechnic player as a lot of the ERB cats are, so one of the things I like most about the instrument is how I can approach it as a

composer. Now taking into account how simple my music is, that sounds like a pretentious title. But I love to exploit it as a chordal instrument. Players like Steve Nishimura are taking this to whole new levels.

**How do you play the extreme upper register strings and frets with such a wide neck?**

Carefully! No, seriously, they must be approached differently from standard roundwound or flatwound strings because they are generally just exposed wire. It takes any player who is serious about his or her craft a lot of time to get consistent volume across the instrument's entire range. You really need to shift your attack quite a bit as you move from the sub-lows to the ultra-highs. This is one of the situations where the tappers have an edge initially, over players like me who are more 'old school' in their approach.

**Are ERBs very heavy, or difficult to tune?**

Well, heavy is pretty relative. If you played some of the things Peavey and G&L put out in the 80s then you won't think of most ERBs as all that heavy. I played a walnut-bodied Fodera six with an ebony top for about 13 years before I got my first Conklin, so I was used to pretty heavy basses.

There are a number of ways to combat weight, though. Bill Conklin recommends something he calls dragonwood in the bodies of his basses, and that stuff is wonderful. It responds somewhere in between alder and maple and is far lighter. Fred Bolton of Bee Basses uses a very small body in his designs. The hardware and electronics figure in here, too. Carey Nordstrand built a bass of pine and spruce. It's a 5-string that weighs six pounds and is just a magical instrument! I use digital tuners and have never had any problems. The harmonics are also strong enough that it's pretty easy to tune most ERBs with more standard methods.

**Joel McIver**

**Info: [www.subcontrabassist.com](http://www.subcontrabassist.com), [www.nordstrandguitars.com](http://www.nordstrandguitars.com)**

**HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?  
12 STRINGS? 14 STRINGS  
OR MORE?**

It's a loaded question. I think there will always be people who do something to see if it can be done. For me, the practical limit – as dictated by my aesthetic and the way I compose/play – is a 10-string instrument. String construction is a very real factor in what one can do. Garry Goodman has a high .004 string on his 12 and that is amazing to me. My friend Skip Fantry for Knuckle Basses is a fantastic mad scientist (a pretty common trait among those in the ERB zone) whose research into string construction and scale length is just mind blowing. If it wasn't for the guys at S.I.T. Strings being open minded about what I was doing – about what all of the ERB guys are doing – then I probably would not be slinging these ridiculous instruments. I'm really fortunate in that I have an endorsement with my string company. My lowest string is my C# which is I believe a .195 or a .200. My highest string is a Bb and measures around .011 or .009.