

## STEVE HUNTER: BASS DESIRES

### A Tall Poppy talks to John Shand\*

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**T**here was a great quote from Anthony Jackson, the bass-player, who said one of the things he hated to read most was if a critic said, 'Anthony's playing was unobtrusive'. Jackson said, 'To me, unobtrusive should only refer to contraceptive devices and waiters'."



*Steve Hunter: He plays his instrument with an in-your-face virtuosity, particularly in the high energy context of Playdiem...*

The man recounting the story, bassist Steve Hunter, would seldom have been accused of this "sin". He plays his instrument with an in-your-face virtuosity, particularly in the high energy context of Playdiem, and to a lesser extent with his own bands. The hollow credo of speed for speed's sake, however, is absent. Hunter can sing through his bass, and, more and more, there is a lonely, pensive quality, particularly in evidence on his stunning album of solo and multi-tracked electric bass guitar, *Night People* (Tall Poppies).

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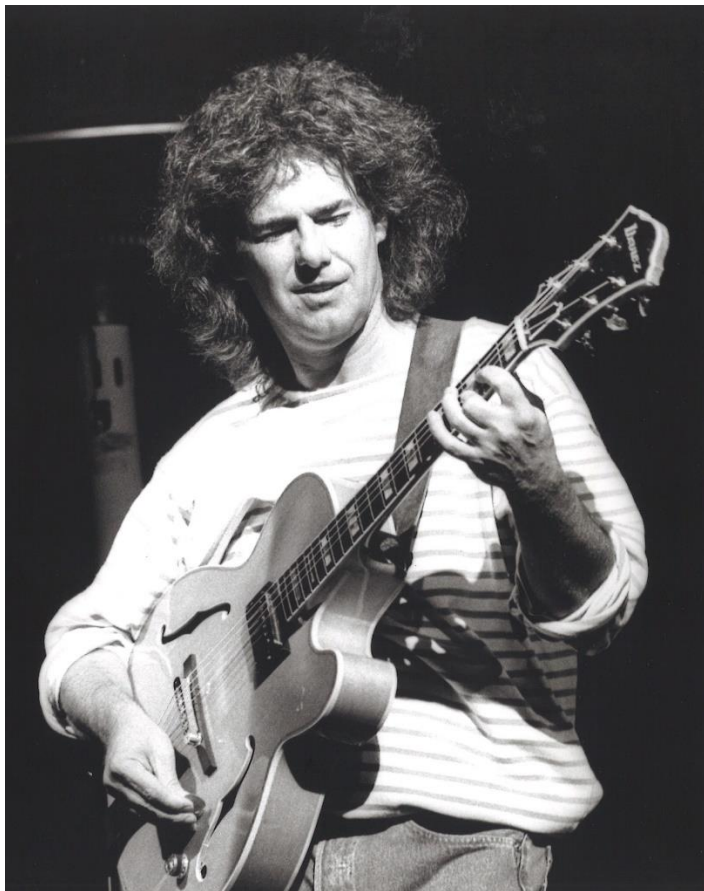
\*In 2019 John Shand is a playwright, librettist, author, journalist, drummer and critic. He has written about music and theatre for *The Sydney Morning Herald* since 1993. His books include *Don't Shoot The Best Boy! – The Film Crew At Work* (Currency), *Jazz – The Australian Accent* (UNSW Press) and *The Phantom Of The Soap Opera* (Wizard). In 2017 he won the inaugural Arts Journalism Award at the Walkleys, the nation's pre-eminent awards for journalism. He lives in Katoomba (NSW) with she who is called The Mouse. He enjoys wine, and wishes he could say in moderation.

Hunter grew up in Kent, in the south of England. In late 1974, at the age of 14, he and his family moved to Sydney, where, shortly after, he had a strange encounter of the four-stringed kind at a party.

"It was one of those parties where everyone hangs around in the bedroom smoking joints and stuff. I saw a bass against the wall, picked it up, and just found that I could kind of play it. I didn't know where the notes were or anything, but I just felt that I could get my hands around it. I thought, ' This is it'. It was one of those instants where you know that's your calling, or whatever you want to call it.

"It almost felt like, ' Did you come here to find this?' Cos in England it didn't seem real that that would have happened. You would watch Top of the Pops, and all the bands of the day seemed so far removed. But here, Sherbert were playing down the street. It was like, ' Oh, they're the guys on TV'. It was closer. It was easy to grasp that you could actually do it too, so it was good."

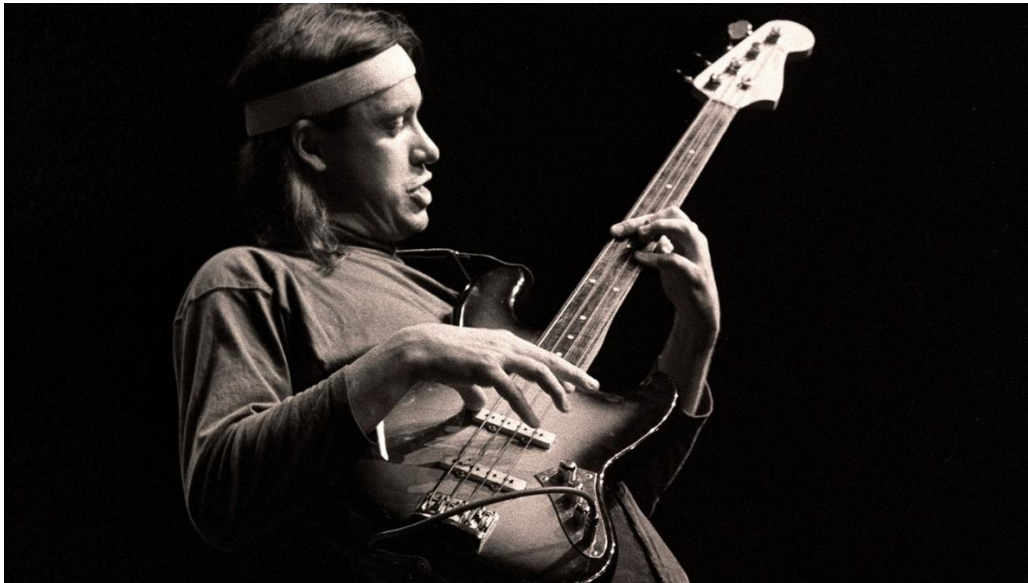
Hunter promptly bought an \$80 bass from a hock-shop, and "practiced my arse off". Through to the age of 22, he did about 8-10 hours every day, teaching himself. "For me, technique was a very natural thing. I could do all that stuff pretty much after a year. It is related to the physicality of your body, and also how you hear it. I have enormously long hands, so a lot of what I do is really difficult if you've got hands half the size. [Guitarist] Allan Holdsworth's a great example, because he's got monstrous hands, and then there's somebody like Pat Metheny who's got tiny hands, and you



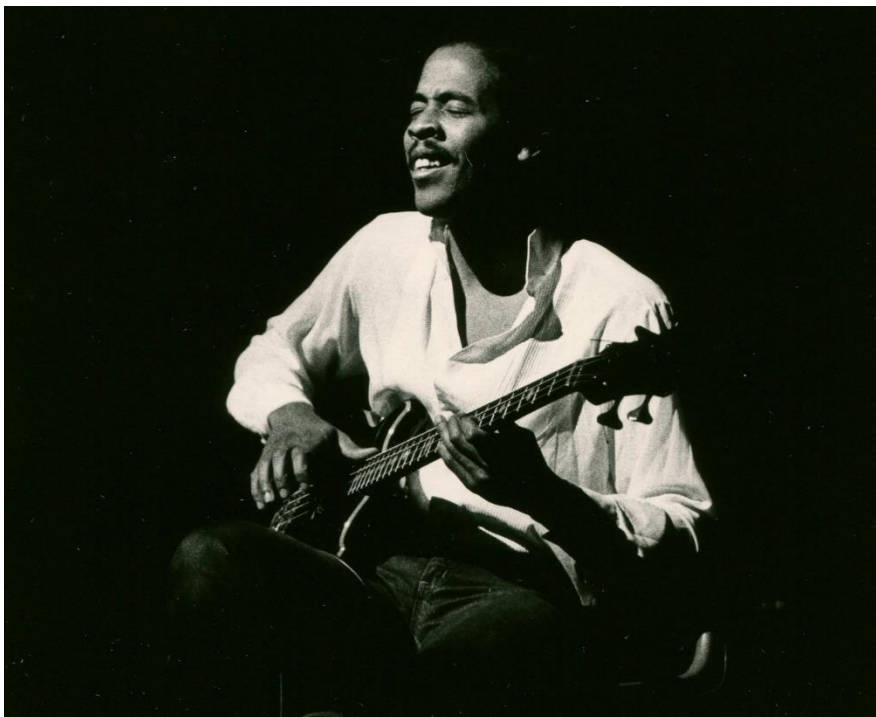
*There's somebody like Pat Metheny (above) who's got tiny hands, and you can really hear it in their playing... PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

can really hear it in their playing. Holdsworth will play huge chords stretching 10 frets. Pat's got these little hands, and they're slurring around in little motions. It makes you wonder how much the physical limitation shaped the musicality."

Hunter's pursuance of technique on his instrument was spurred by the fact that the musicians who played the music he most liked -Weather Report, John McLaughlin, Jeff Beck, Chick Corea, Miles Davis -all had enormous chops. As he explained, the literature for his instrument was being generated in the '70s by Jaco Pastorious, Stanley Clarke, Anthony Jackson, et al.



*The literature for the instrument was being generated in the '70s by Jaco Pastorius (above), Stanley Clarke (below), and Anthony Jackson (following page), et al...CLARKE PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*





"To me, it's like if you play tenor saxophone, you're going to listen to John Coltrane, cos that's where the heavy stuff is happening on that instrument. But on the electric bass, that's where the stuff was happening. So it was natural to gravitate to that as a young guy who wants to get the instrument under control."

Hunter swiftly became a band leader, forming Timeless in 1978 at 18, with Kevin Hunt, keyboards, and drummer Tony Buck. Though gigs were rare, they diligently rehearsed twice a week, with Steve now writing material.

"I would study things like a scale or a certain kind of idea, and I'd always try to then write a tune using that idea, so that it was something that I could actually apply, and not just some piece of information sitting there dormant. I've written over 200 tunes, now."

He dug into acoustic jazz, spending a year with the Errol Buddle Quartet at the ripe old age of 20. It turns out his subsequent absence from such bands is simply a matter of bandleaders' eschewing electric bass in favour of its big brother. (At the end of our chat, Hunter said, "One thing I do want to say is that I am available for gigs, just to get rid of any mystery about that that may be there.") Hunter toyed with taking up double bass, but swiftly decided he could not be good enough on both instruments.

"I can hear, when most guys play, which one's his main instrument, even though some play both well. Stanley Clarke and John Patitucci can do both. But not many can. You hear Ron Carter, for example, play electric, and it sounds terrible to me. It's

really sloppy, and it's got no definition of tone. He doesn't have the same respect for the instrument. It's like, 'Oh, yeah, right, the old Fender'."

After Errol Buddle Quartet came the Ken James Quintet, which included both Vince Genova and Indra Lesmana on keyboards, and subsequently recorded as Nebula. Hunter cites Genova and James as important figures in his development.



*The Ken James Quintet, which included James (above) and Indra Lesmana (below) on keyboards, subsequently recorded as Nebula... JAMES PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY, LESMANA PHOTO CREDIT PETER SMETANA*



1986 saw the first Hunter-led record, called *Visa*, with Carl Orr, Andrew Gander, Craig Walters, Kevin Hunt and Guy Le Claire. "They were all friends. We were all born about 1960, and all gravitated together, and those guys are still friends and still people that I play with."

Subsequent projects included three years with Carl Orr's band, and a stint with Mark Simmonds' Freeboppers, including the recording of a still sadly unreleased album with Mike Bukovsky, Greg Sheehan, Duncan Archibald, and "this weird violin guy who I have never seen before or since". The non-release was the result of the '87 stock-market crash. The tapes still exist. Cue some enterprising independent.

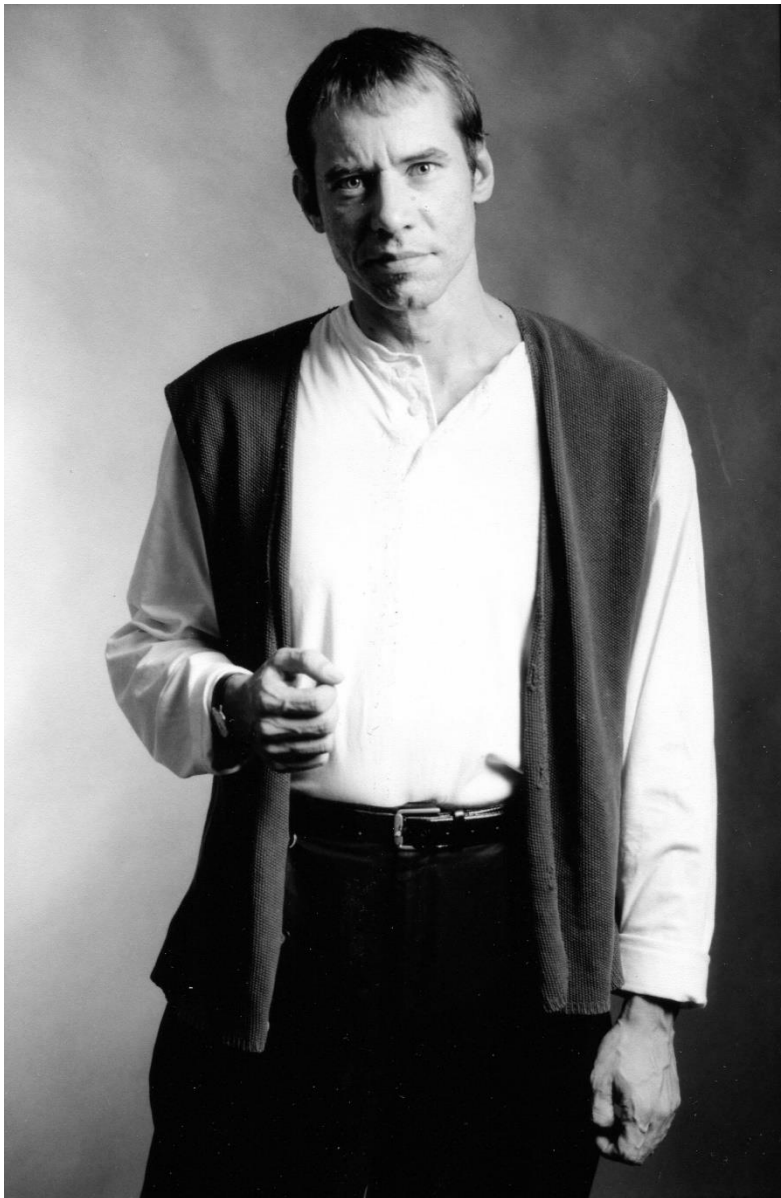


*Hunter spent three years with the band led by guitarist Carl Orr (pictured above)...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Steve said that he and Mark "banged heads a bit, but the music was good. He's a tough customer, but I like him, and I respect him as a conceptualizer of music as well as a player. He actually knows exactly what he wants. Chris Abrahams [keyboards] is like that, too, where the playing and the music is the same deal. Whereas, with some other people, you hear great playing, but it sounds like something else you've heard.

"I like Chris's playing a real lot. He's got that facility that I like, too. It's at his disposal if he wants it, and I enjoy hearing that. Thinking about that, and what you

asked before about technique, it's that the power in reserve makes the music much stronger. It's taken me a while to learn: 'You've got all that shit you can do; now don't do it.' On *Night People*, I consciously didn't do all that stuff. I just thought, 'Who am I? What am I trying to say?' Other people who are interested in my music know that I can do all that shit. I don't sit at home doing that. I sit at home trying to play melodically and pretty, a lot of the time. It's not impressing-16-year-old-bass-players time.



*Hunter: I still practice two hours every day... It always leads on to a tune, anyway, so that becomes the real pleasure. Everything I work on develops a tune... PHOTO CREDIT GARY JOHNSON*

"As a young musician, I got impressed by people's technical ability. That was something to strive for. But technique involves so much. It's not just that overwhelming barrage of notes; it's playing a note really softly and putting the right kind of vibration on it; or exactly how long do you want to hold that note for. So

when you're listening to someone like Charlie Haden, who doesn't eat the bass for breakfast in a notes sense, you hear a lot of technique. You hear a lot of just finger pressures and little things that only bass-players will really get; the emotional quality of it, everyone will get. That's really what communicates the most, because every note is really intended.



*Charlie Haden: every note is really intended...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

"I put on *No Standing*, the record that Nebula did in '83, a year or so ago, and listened to what I was doing on that, and it was like ten times as much as what I play now; totally over the top. I don't even think I could play it now, because I just don't think in that way. But I'm not going to become a minimalist, or anything. I'm still going to keep that stuff in there, because I can do it and I hear it. I want to have the chops to do it when I want to do it. So I still practice two hours every day. That's a real pleasure. It always leads on to a tune, anyway, so that becomes the real pleasure. Everything I work on develops a tune. I just write down a little bit, and later on work on that. So it has a purpose. I'm not just thrashing away at the instrument for the sake of it. I love it. I really love it."

In 1990, following the recording of *Homebase* - "a really clean, well-produced, pre-composed fusion record" - Hunter headed for the States, where he gave a copy to Chick Corea's manager. Corea's response was to invite Steve to do a trio gig with him, and that led to doing 14 dates together in the Caribbean two years in a row.





*Chick Corea (right) pictured with Stanley Clarke: Hunter did 14 dates together with the band Chick Corea & Friends in the Caribbean two years in a row...*

"I had been writing to him since I was 16, and sending him stuff. I wrote to all those guys that I was listening to: John McLaughlin, Joe Zawinul, Stanley Clarke and Chick. He was the only one that'd write back like he was interested in what you were doing. The others would write, ' Thanks for your tape and here's a signed photo.' I didn't want a signed photo of Stanley Clarke on my wall! Sure it's good, but that's not what I wanted. I wanted communications."

The rest of the band - called Chick Corea and Friends -consisted of Mark Isham, trumpet, and Tom Brechtliner, drums. Both Isham and Hunter were asked to contribute a composition to the repertoire.

"It was a middle ground between his electric band and his acoustic trio. We became really close friends. He's one of the giants, and you learn so much from being around someone like that: just talking with somebody that's worked with Miles and Stan Getz, and got like 70 albums out under his own name. That's been a highlight in a lot of ways."

The brush with fame had little positive impact on Hunter's Sydney-based career. Few calls for gigs came in. There may have been an element of reverse snobbery, with some people assuming that Chick Corea's bassist would not be interested in local projects. Whatever the case, Hunter felt ostracized for a while.

"Tony Buck actually shed some light on it for me. He said, 'Man, I recognised a long time ago that the Sydney jazz scene is so small, it's not worth worrying about. Just do what you're going to do.' It was total truth, and I just stopped worrying about trying to defend what I was doing because it was electric; stopped worrying about other people's taste, and whether they think it's hip or it's not.



*Tony Buck: the Sydney jazz scene is so small, it's not worth worrying about. Just do what you're going to do... PHOTO CREDIT BARKA FABIANOVA*

"And, interestingly, I think that the *Night People* record was a first step in that direction musically for me. When I listen to that record I can hear myself, and my own identity. I've had more compliments on that record than anything else I've ever done. You don't have to be Mr Bass Hero, or whatever; things you thought you had to do."

Belinda Webster of Tall Poppies approached Hunter after hearing him do a solo piece at a gig. "She was great. She got me at a really good time to do that music, because it wasn't over-practiced. And she just got me at the right time, emotionally, too,

because I was splitting up with my wife, and it was a good time to play introspective music."



*Hunter: As a young musician, I got impressed by people's technical ability. That was something to strive for. But technique involves so much. It's not just that overwhelming barrage of notes; it's playing a note really softly and pulling the right kind of vibration on it...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL BOOK*

The approach was different to previous solo bass records. It was informed as much by flamenco music as by jazz. "It's got a real European feeling about it, which was something that I used to kick against, and I am a European! To me, flamenco is the blues of Europe. They've got that cry for help or whatever. Portuguese music is the same thing. I kind of relate more to that as a European than I do to delta blues or something. I never bought that thing of pretending to be black, or sound black. I just look in the mirror: I grew up as basically a working-class English boy who's got nothing to do with it, and I've never contended that I have."

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