

t.m. STEVENS

# BASS FOREVER



words & illustrations  
by george bates







**"the bass choose me."**

t.m. stevens

**”...‘who is tm stevens?’ a friend had asked me after  
! spent the afternoon with the man in question. my  
response - he is simply an american treasure,  
bass legend / visionary, electrifying performer and  
an extremely open and hospitable guy.“**

george bates



Who an artist is, is the culmination of so many diverse and molding factors from life, chance and most importantly sheer will, grit and determination. Usually we only get to see the pinpoint focus of all of this depth of history and life experience when it is revealed on-stage. It is here where it explodes into a stunning and memorable performance or recording, but rarely do we ever get to see what goes on Backstage. The idea of what "Backstage" is and what happens there has always intrigued me the most about any artist's intent and history. It's within the nuance of the Backstage where you get to see what it really takes to be an artist and the bravery one has to have to risk it all for something that most folks can't even image. What I'm talking about is what it takes to actually make your voice and intent both distinct and heard.

When I starting out playing in bands someone who I really respected in the music scene said to me "On the first note that you play, people decide if they are going to stay and continue to listen to your band or leave the room. On the first note...". Imagine for a minute that sort of pressure and the implications of making every second and every note count to that degree. This is not a world for those not willing or not capable to be "On Point" all the time and deliver at the drop of the hat a precise and engaging aesthetic. It's a demanding and Art with all that implies. So, recently I went "Backstage" with TM Stevens for an afternoon of conversation and photos by Sven Hoffmann that extended deep into the night.

George Bates : Why did you move to Long Branch NJ?

TM Stevens: I was playing the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, NJ with Little Steven one night and Bruce Springsteen jumps up on stage to play with us and I'm thinking, why am I living in NYC where I'm lugging these huge amps up to my apartment when it's this nice, easy and with this caliber of musicians and artist down here in the ocean towns of NJ...

GB: Why did you gravitate towards the Bass?

TM: The Bass chose me.

We drove around town with TM for a while and the conversation easily unfolded into a personal history lesson covering a huge swath of American musical history and the joys and realities of being a working musician. TM told the stories of how he bought his first bass from a junky who needed cash in Harlem and shortly thereafter he began playing Burlesque clubs when he was underage. Because he was so young the club owners had to send him to hide in the alley when inspectors and officials came by so the club wouldn't get shut down or fined. He spoke of how when he was very young he found James Brown behind a venue after a seeing his performance and told him that he was going to play in his band someday, and he did! The story he told about actually playing with James Brown was fascinating as TM remarked "If James points at you during a performance that's a \$20 mistake. I was only fined twice while I was in the band but once, while we were performing, James did a split and couldn't get back up, he got stuck down there, so he motioned to me that he

needed my help. So I walked over to the mike and said "Ladies and Gentlemen for the first time, James Brown has done a split and, he loves this crowd so much that he's decided to stay there for you!" The crowd went wild and I whispered to James that when I put out my hand use it to give me a slap, jump up, do a spin and grab the mike. James did it and the crowd went absolutely insane!" Later that night James said " TM, how did you know how to stage that so perfectly?" and TM says. "Because I'm a total Pro. I know what I'm doing!". James gave TM a \$200 bonus that night for his ability to truly understand the complexities of what a live performance really is and to deliver on the true natural showmanship of the artist at work. James also singled him out to sing the only other vocal track on James Brown's Living in America in addition to his bass playing.

When we arrived back at TM's House after spending some time in town and on the beach the first order of business was a few healthy pours of some Jäger and then we got down to looking around. We were invited into a treasure trove of American musical history as everywhere you look there are things like dimestore developed snapshots of historic concerts with TM on stage, photos of Joe Cocker, Miles Davis, Pretenders and countless other luminaries from music history everywhere and walls of Platinum and Gold records he's played on. This guy has been a part of ever facet of American musical history during his lifetime and everywhere you look it's a music history buffs "diggers" paradise. Every item has a story and depth related to TM's art, ethos and process. I'm very interested in process and what process is for an artist and an artist's unique voice. A true voice cannot be replicated by anyone. How an artist hones, risks and assesses their voice, craft and intent through process and then continues to push the limits is remarkable if you take a minute to think about it. Sure, there is a path that has been set forth by others who have done similar sorts of things but to have a voice is to simply do something there is no precedent for and that is incredibly risky. As an artist, no one has ever really done it "your way" and there's really no guide to doing it "your way". What makes up that unique voice is only really seen "Backstage" and everywhere we looked in TM's house we saw the things that formed, honed and perfected that unique TM voice. Gumby figures, Buddhist images and reminders, Bob Marley Flags, African carvings, legendary concert swag, fistfuls of backstage passes from decades of tours, a dizzying assortment of modern and vintage Baseses, Guitars, Amps and the framed Military Service American Flags prominently displayed in a special place over the mixing board that were given to TM for the service his Mother and Aunt gave to the US Armed Forces, just to name a few.

There is a photo that was taken during the sessions TM played with Miles Davis that hangs on the wall that's just insane. In the photo he's so young sitting next to miles wearing a T-shirt that says "Bass Forever" on it. It's probably one of the coolest thing I've ever seen and to be standing next to the man who was in on that session wearing that shirt was humbling and it put a lot in perspective about Art in general. TM mentioned that after his first session with Miles he just went up to him and asked him what he thought about his Bass playing and Miles said "It was good" the young TM said "Good, I

thought it was great!" Miles then said "Sure, you played everything fine all the notes were right on and correct but its' when you really take some risks and are willing to make mistakes, that's where things get really interesting..." Apparently folks at the session were not cool with the fact that he just walked up to Miles and flat out asked him about his playing. "You don't just walk up to Miles Davis and begin talking to him...!". For the next day's session TM mentioned that he took more risks and went "Out" there with his playing more and also respected the distance between the band and the man but Miles walked right up to him after that session, said nothing, and offered him half of his sandwich right up to his mouth. Everyone agreed that was a sign that Miles really dug the playing that day.

TM is so easy to hang out with but the most remarkable transfiguration occurred whenever the Bass was in his hand. The scene would go from a casual hangout with a really friendly guy to suddenly it felt like we were at a performance in a stadium venue. He brings that energy to any room instantly with his electric stage presence and profoundly creative bass playing. But when he played the 8 string bass, with the map of Africa painted on it-double neck, the room sounded like a choir of funky angels laying down some thunderous of Shocka Zooloo hellfire! You expect this sort of intensity and "juice" only to be seen on-stage but he brings that presence to any room, any time, no matter the size. That's some natural charisma on top of a true artists ethos. He fills any room, period. Our afternoon had easily slipped late into the night and after hearing such a wide range of stories from—"In the Joe Cocker band I was also enlisted by the manager to help out by making bottles of booze disappear if they were within arms reach of Joe so he could actually perform at the shows later on..." to stories of performances with Sun Ra and a love of Led Zeppelin records—my sense was of the prevailing ethos—Everything is for The Music. The Life is The Music. The meaning of all of this stuff is The Music. The Music really happens "Backstage". It's all Art, and the point of any Art or Aesthetic is that if, even for a minute, you can take someone out of their narrow world view and expose them to an idea or feeling that helps to reshape their view into a more positive or thoughtful reflection (that Rocks!) then something of real value has been accomplished. Art's value is in what it makes a person think or feel. As I sat with TM that night and watched the video footage the final show of the Bootsy Collins Funk Unity Japan Tour there is a point where Bootsy leaves the stage and hands it over entirely to TM. In that moment TM had decided to give every band member a solo even when the spotlight was entirely his. Now this had not been done on the tour at all up until this point so you can actually see how surprised and overjoyed these musicians were for this gift and the level of intensity, feel and musical prowess that was put into everyone's solo is incredible to see and hear. You can see the audience come alive with more enthusiasm and actively respond to the bands invigorated intensity. Everyone in that room is having a better time than they had a few minutes ago. Something had changed. TM brought that change and life to that room and brought, no, burned the house down with nothin' left but a pile of ash. EVERYONE left that room that night in touch with something a little better in their lives, I'm sure of that. Bass Forever, Bass Forever... TM Forever.



