



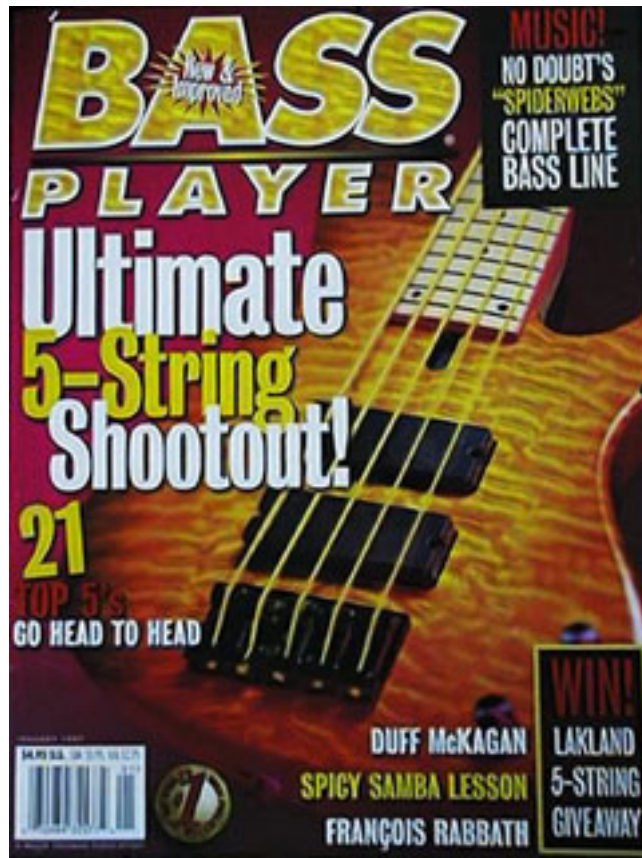
**5-string Shootout
by Scott Malandrone.
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Sine Qua non. It means “The finest.” That Latin phrase could be used to describe a bass built of the most lavish woods. It could also define one with extra rich tone. Or it could describe a 5-string with an astounding B. What’s your description of the consummate axe? Have you found your S.Q.N. instrument?

Here at Bass Player, we’re always on the lookout for the finest instruments available on the market. They don’t have to be the most expensive ones, though; our Shootout of 4-Strings Under \$500 (September ’96) showcased 13 of the most affordable basses on the racks. This time, though, we were out to find the *best* 5-string money can buy. (We are gluttons for punishment!) The Ultimate 5-String Shootout was born.

This roundup’s a bit different, though. Since we didn’t set a maximum list price for the basses to be submitted. We soon had more than 50 5-strings filling every corner of our offices. But we didn’t want companies to simply send their most expensive models (we’d be considering value, too), so we set up three price categories: UNDER \$1,500; \$1,500 TO \$2,499; and 2,500 & UP. Not every bass we received would be included, though – only those with the best blend of tone, playability, uniqueness, and craftsmanship. We were after the cream of the crop, which is why you’ll see lots of 4’s and 5’s in the scores. (It’s important to note not all of the invited builders – including a couple of major manufacturers – were able to get a bass to us in time.

Pass the lab coat. Our testing criteria involved first checking out each instrument for attention to detail, acoustic tone, playability, and amplified tone. This initial round of prodding revealed some basses with shoddy workmanship,





weird noises that couldn't be cured, or B-strings that lacked character or a feel consistent with the other strings. By the time we were done, we had narrowed the field to about 30 instruments.

Our semi-finalists were then put under the microscope. Dimensions such as body thickness, nut width, fret height, and string gauges were measured with a dial caliper that reads in thousandths of an inch. Neck joints, which should always be as tight as possible for maximum tone transfer into the body and tuning stability, were probed with .005" - .030" feeler gauges. (for the record, our old neck-joint testing device, a business card, averages .011".) We used a ruler with 1/32" and 1/64" increments to measure the string spacing at the bridge and nut. We also checked the truss rod's ability to straighten the neck or add relief when tightened or loosened. (Neck straightness was checked with a precision-ground 24" straightedge.) Fingerboard radius – the amount of curvature underneath the strings – was measured with a radius gauge. A low radius measurement means the fingerboard has more curvature; a high number means it's flatter. (Vintage Fenders have a radius of 6"; many builders today prefer 12".) An even more important test involved checking the fingerboard for high frets. With the fingerboard adjusted as straight as possible, we used a precision-ground fret-height gauge (accurate to .0005") to check three frets at a time. A high fret can mean string buzz – and poor tone.

We also scrutinized other areas of fretwork, including the shape of the crown, bevel and polish of the ends, and depth of the kerf (slot). We wanted to see shiny tops and ends free of filing chatter marks. We expected all of them to be tightly seated against the fingerboard. (a .005" feeler gauge found many gaps.) We also kept an eye out for kerfs that weren't filled on either sides of the neck, which might allow dirt or moisture (sweat) to accumulate underneath the frets. While some of these areas are more cosmetic than structural, a bass with superior fretwork scored high in all of these categories.

For playability, we looked at the shape of the neck and the overall setup. String height was checked by clamping the strings at the first fret with a capo and measuring the height at the 12th fret. With the capo still on, the relief was checked at the 7th fret with the string depressed at either the 15th or the last fret. Unless noted, each bass had a medium setup in the 3/32" (B) to 5/64" (G) range.

We also checked out the electronics for proper shielding, the effectiveness of the EQ, and lack of 60-cycle hum when the pickups were soloed or fingers were lifted from the strings. If the bass was active, we looked for a battery compartment, a cavity cover that was easy to open, or an active bypass switch to get you through the gig should the battery fail.



To critique each axe's tone, we trucked a load of amps into our soundlab. Our backline included a Demeter VTBP-201DBL tube preamp, a Hafler Pro 5000 power amp, and [sic] Eden 410XLT 4X10 and SWR Triad enclosures. Surrounding this rig were an SWR SM-900 head and Goliath III 4X10, a Trace Elliot AH400SMX head with a 1048H 4X10, a Gallien-Krueger 2000RB driving either an Acme Low B cabinet or a Hartke 4.5 XL 4X10, and a Glockenlang Heart Core head with a Tedd cabinet. Additional amplification brought in by our tester pool (see below) included two Alembic F-1X preamps, a Peavey DPC 1000 power amp, and a Genz Benze 410T 4X10. We plugged in the Monster Cable Monster Bass cords and tuned up with a Korg DTR1 Pro tuner.

The low-B Posse. To help with our evaluations, we invited a few experienced 5-string players to come in for a low-B-athon. By the time they were done, each instrument had gotten a fair shake in the hands of several bassists.

We then put each axe through one final test. Since the average bass can get buried underneath a blazing guitar amp's wall of distorted midrange faster than you can say "parametric," we set up a loud Marshall half-stack in our studio and fed it power chords. This test quickly had several basses saying "uncle" – and if an axe couldn't cut it here, what would it sound like when drums and vocals are added? In fairness though, we should point out that some of these instruments aren't designed with this type of extreme volume in mind; this is noted where appropriate.

A few words about pricing. "retail" refers to the manufacturer's suggested list price. (You can usually buy these basses at a discount, depending on the dealer.) "Direct" means the price you see is what you'll pay. Some direct-sale basses come with a money-back guarantee; contact the manufactures to find out more. Ready to go Low? Here, arranged in price order, are the 21 finalists.

[Note from Dingwall: for purposes of brevity, and relevance, we have included only the review pertaining to the Dingwall Voodoo Zebra Bass]

Dingwall Voodoo Zebra Bass

Made in Canada

Retail Price: \$2,695

Weight: 9lbs, 9oz

Scale length: 34" (G) to 37" (B)

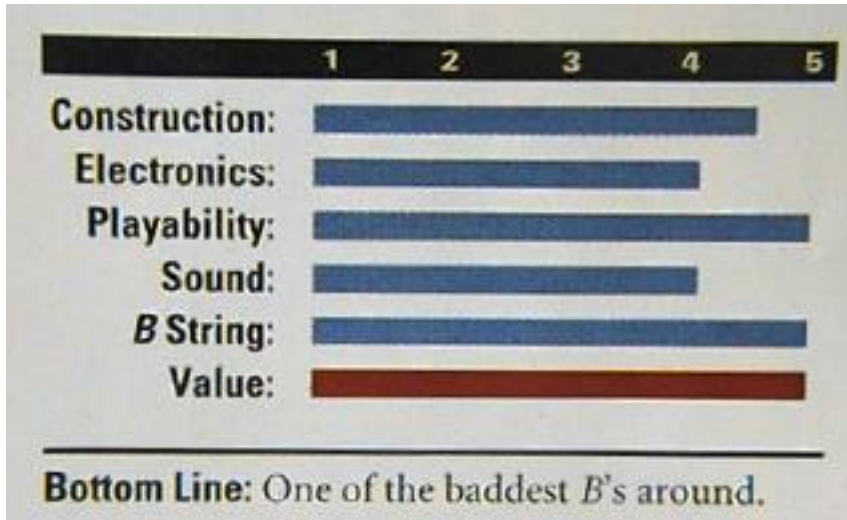
Width @ nut: 1 13/16"

String spacing @ bridge: _"

Fingerboard radius: 16"

Fret size: .080" (W) X .040" (H)

Strings: Dingwall Voodoo, stainless steel, .045" - .130" w/ taper-wound B, E, A



The Dingwall Voodoo Bass wins the award for the longest B-string scale length. To accomplish this, it uses a Novax Fanned Fret fingerboard, a Dingwall / Kahler bridge, and an angled phenolic nut. This yields scale measurements from 34" on the G string to 37" on its B.

Take a look at the photo – the grain of the Northern-swamp-ash body jumps out from underneath the first-class “whale pool blue” finish. That’s because it’s highlighted with a black pre-stain – thus the “Zebra” moniker.

This bass has a very stiff bolt-on neck, which is made of nine laminates of rock maple reinforced with two graphite strips beneath a pau ferro fingerboard. Combined with the medium-heavy body, this gives the Dingwall a lot of impact and attack.

The small fretwire provides clean and precise tone. The fretwork on the test bass was very good, with only a few chatter marks on the ends. (Oddly enough, the only high fret we found was the 11th, but the strings didn’t buzz against it.) A well-cut nut and very low action at the 12th fret (1/32" on the B and a 1/54" on the G) were unmatched for speed and playability.

The Voodoo uses custom Bartolini soapbar pickups and an NTBT-SP active preamp. The pickups are placed at an angle to match the fingerboard, with the coil structure in each pickup having one magnet covering the A, D, and G strings and a second coil that covers only the B and E. Controls include master volume, blend, and concentric bass and treble. The cavity is well shielded with foil and a brass plate, with the battery attached to the inside of the cavity plate. The bumper? The cover is held in place by four allen-head screws



with threaded inserts. If you lose the supplied allen wrench to remove them, forget replacing that battery at a gig. The electronics do, however, have an active/passive switch as a backup.

This bass is much easier to play than you might think. Testers loved the flattened-oval neck profile and low action. The strings have a very springy feel under your fingers, and they like to be dug into. Tone-wise, the B is Killin'; it's so big, though, we had to lower the pickups on the bass side to balance the B's output with the other strings. Still, it has a depth and character all it's own; if you're a low-end freak, this axe's B is delightful. Comments: "The B is like the voice of God!" "Lots of bite from the active electronics, but it sounds smoother passive" "Easier to play if you don't look at the neck."

[Note from Dingwall: Since the publication of this article in January of 1997, our Prima and Z-series basses come standard with separate battery compartments featuring quick release access plates.]