

THE TRICKSTER'S MAGIC REVEALED

A LOOK AT SOME OF THE LINES,
TECHNIQUES, AXES AND EFFECTS FEATURED
ON *SOUL CIRCUS*. BY BILL LANPHIER



"I'M A TRICKSTER, BABY," sings Victor Wooten on "Victa," a song from his latest CD, *Soul Circus*, and he isn't kidding. This low-end savant has so many playing techniques up his sleeve and so many different axes and effects in his arsenal that it's hard to believe—much less figure out or play—what you're hearing. Let's check out some of the highlights from *Soul Circus* and find out what makes the trickster tick.

A great example of Wooten's trademark warp-speed "slap-and-pop" technique can be found in the first bar of "Victa," *Soul Circus*' second track, shown here in **FIGURE 1**. Victor overdubbed the entire lick and dropped it in with Pro Tools rather than playing live on the basic track. Note that the same lick is dropped in again at 4:11, but this time it's placed differently so that the first G note falls on the downbeat. The example shown matches what's heard in the intro.

To fit so many notes in so short a space, Wooten relies on several right-hand articulation techniques, some standard, some he devised. The first note is an index-finger "pop," executed by hooking the finger under the string and pulling and releasing it so that it snaps against the fretboard. The second note is sounded with a conventional thumb-down "slap" (indicated by the abbreviation "TD"). Now things get really interesting: Wooten also plays the third note with his thumb, but instead of slapping it employs a "thumb-up" upstroke on the same string ("TU"). He uses additional combinations of thumb-down and thumb-up articulations throughout the remainder of this one-bar phrase, as well as a couple of hammer-ons and a legato finger slide. As this example demonstrates, Wooten is a firm believer in and practitioner of *economy of motion*.

The two consecutive G notes at the end of beat two in **FIGURE 1** serve two worthwhile functions. First, since one is fretted and the other played open they sound really cool

back to back. Second, that open note gives Wooten the opportunity to smoothly move his left hand down to a different position.

Though *Soul Circus* is more pop-oriented than Wooten's previous outings, the bassist

manages on several of the album's tracks to sneak in some fairly complex rhythmic ideas even as he maintains a solid groove. For example, in the excerpt from "Prayer," illustrated in **FIGURE 2**, he seamlessly moves from 6/8 to 4/4 and back by maintaining a relatively steady eighth-note pulse across both meters. (Incidentally, Wooten plays the tune's intro and solo at 3:27 on his Taylor fretless acoustic bass guitar.)

With its 11/8 meter, "Stay" really takes the rhythm out for a "pop" album. Illustrated in **FIGURE 3** are the first four bars of the tune's intro. Each measure is best heard and felt as a

FIGURE 1 "Victa" intro

I = "pop" string w/index finger TD = thumb down ("slap") TU = thumb up ("pop" string w/thumb)

FIGURE 2 "Prayer" (from 1:07)

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bar of 4/4 plus three more eighth notes. Yes, it's kind of a cruel trick to play on dancers, but if they can manage to dance in 4/4 over the top of it all for 11 bars, they'll end up in perfect sync with the band again.

Moving on to some less esoteric material, check out Wooten's super-bluesy overdubbed solo in the intro to his take on the Earth, Wind and Fire classic "Can't Hide Love," depicted in **FIGURE 4**. Wooten uses his Roland V-Bass for this part (as he does in his solo on the CD's title track), triggered by his five-string Fodera, which is equipped with a high C string (low to high: E A D G C). Although there is a basic bass track happening behind this figure and the solo bass drops down into the low register at a couple of points, it cuts through the mix and nothing sounds muddy, thanks to the combination of the V-Bass' fretless patch, vibrato from a Digitech pedal and the tone itself: lots of mids and less bottom. Wooten also helps the solo bass track stand out by picking aggressively to the point of making the strings snap against the fretboard, creating a sound that falls "somewhere between a full snap and fingerstyle, but no thumb slapping."

Also notice how Wooten's tone on the basic bass track on "Can't Find Love" evokes that of Verdine White, EWF's great bassist. Was that intentional? "Well, no," says Victor. "But thank you! I've listened to that song since I was a kid, and I checked it out again while recording our version. I'd like to think Verdine's spirit was present!"

In Wooten's instructional videos (see his very cool website, victorwooten.com) he often cites silence as the "unsung hero of music." And, forthright guy that he is, Victor admits that he's always working on doing a better job of using space (rests) in his playing. Apparently, his effort is paying off. Check out his use of space not only in the "Can't Hide Love" solo example (**FIGURE 4**), but also in the groove to "On and On" (**FIGURE 5**), also from *Soul Circus*. Wooten's feel isn't as "on top of the beat" as it is on some of his earlier playing (e.g. the intro to "U Can't Hold No Groove" on *Show of Hands*), but there's an urgency here that hints at the monster lurking in the spaces.

There isn't much extended tapping or unaccompanied bass on *Soul Circus* until the end of the CD, but the intro to "Ari's Eyes" (**FIGURE 6**) is worth the wait—it's one of the prettiest yet simplest bass solos you'll ever hear. The key words here are finesse and restraint. Notice that the phrase introduced in the first three bars of this excerpt is repeated almost verbatim three more times in the 12-bar example, with a few different notes subtly changing the mood each time around. It's a very effective melodic approach. Wooten plays this part on his Fodera tenor bass tuned, low to high, G D G C; the usual tuning is A D G C. This is the equivalent of a "drop-D" tuning on a conventional four-string bass transposed up a fourth. [*This excerpt may al-*



Wooten and company rock NYC's Irving Plaza. (clockwise) Victor and bass tech Anthony Wellington; Regi Wooten, with 10-string; MC Divinity



FIGURE 3 "Stay" intro

Em7 A7 Em A7

short notes

FIGURE 4 "On and On" intro and chorus

Fmaj9 Eb13 Dbmaj9 Bbm9 C7

FIGURE 5 "Ari's Eyes" intro performed on tenor bass, tuned, low to high, to G D G C

Am7 C/G F6 C/E F/Eb D7sus4 two-hand tapping

8va throughout

let ring

let bottom note ring

tap

let bottom note ring

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