

CHAPTER FOUR: JAMERSON, MOTOWN AND I

James Jamerson the premier and most famous Motown and Detroit bassist and I had a very unique and creative relationship, in that I didn't outwardly go to him and ask for lessons and to be my teacher. He actually took me under his wing as an honored funk brother and taught me what I needed to know to be a world-class bassist. I was especially proud and grateful as James Jamerson (JJ) was probably one of the worlds' most popular and greatest players at the time and still is even in death. All the bassists in Detroit and throughout the country highly cherished a relationship such as this.



Before we met, he was just a thought in my imagination, as I would be thoroughly enchanted by listening to this exciting new instrument on the music scene and the way it excited music on recordings and took over my entire being. The electric bass had just come on the music scene in the early 60's and the sound captured my imagination and interest deeply. I already had been playing music on the saxophone and clarinet in school orchestras and bands and had started to play in adult clubs. Popular music was filling the radio airwaves and thriving in Detroit. I would sit in my bedroom and dive deeply into the musical sound and especially the pulsating, soulful, grooving electric bass.

I used to hear his name echo in the ethers by all the great and working musicians in town about his prowess and innovative playing. How could I be like him? And play this way, I thought to myself. I didn't want to "be" him, just everything he had, his playing, his professionalism, his work, and his reputation. This was a goal worth achieving. I didn't even think of the extreme challenges and roadblocks, I wanted it so bad, I just went straight for it. I focused myself on the electric bass, to become one of the world best.

I wanted an electric bass so bad, I could taste it! I wanted an electric bass so bad, "I would steal to get one." I would do anything. In fact, I broke the window of a music store late one night with a friend who had a car to get my first bass guitar. I was dumb. Money was scarce and bass guitars were expensive. We actually got away for about six months, and then my partner with the car went to a pawnshop and pawned his guitar and was busted by the Detroit police. He then busted me! We both did 30 days in the county jail and one year probation. Well that gave me even more of a reason to practice harder and longer. This time I had another good friend who loaned me his bass guitar, because he was now playing the more glamorous instrument, the electric guitar. This allowed me to practice and start playing at parties, clubs, hotels, concerts, and recordings.

There was a lot of work for a bass guitar player at the time as it was the now happening instrument with the new, modern sound that would make popular music groove and pulsate with soul touching, body dancing, mind bending energy. It makes popular records “sell.” It made people dance! It put the groove in the beat. It made music come alive with life. The bass guitar was a deeply embedded and powerful part of the widely emerging “Sound of Commercial and Popular Music Recordings”. The bass guitar was the pulsating foundation of rhythm and melody, propelling all the other musical parts and instruments towards their creative and expressive best. The bass guitar is the life blood and spirit which gives music that special ability to get you to move your body or appreciate a piece of music even to a greater degree.

I hung out with my neighborhood musician friends and we formed a band (The Jaywalkers) and played around town. For all you “Temptations” fans, David Ruffin was also in this group of highly talented musicians. I was so busy; I would get calls to do freelance work also. Don’t forget, all this time, I am still practicing by playing along to records, especially Motown records. Motown was a happening, upcoming new music company that was putting Detroit on the map with its new “Sound of America”. All the musicians around Detroit and the country wanted to work at Motown, but you had to know someone already working there to get in! I just kept practicing and playing. You see, I was still only 16 years old, trying to go out in the world and make it! I got a lot of calls from Blues players. There were a lot of them coming to Detroit from the Chicago and Memphis southern Blues scene. There were several Blues clubs and concerts around Detroit to always play. There was even what we called “After Hours” Blues restaurants that opened at 2:00am and stayed open to 8:00am. I played with a lot of great Blues artists, each highly talented and unique in their own way. Artists such as: T-Bone Walker, Little Walter, Bobcat Bob, and also did some big concerts with B.B. King and Bobby Blue Bland. I played a lot with the great John Lee Hooker. In fact, somehow word got around town that I was a good player and sounded like Jamerson, I had the Motown Sound, in that a Motown A&R representative Hank Crosby came to a gig to hear me, but didn’t tell me. The next day in the morning, I hear a knock on the door and it’s Ronnie White from Smokey and the Miracles asking me to take Jamerson’s place and play with them. Motown wanted to keep Jamerson in town all the time for playing on recordings. This was it! I couldn’t believe it!

I started to practice with Marvin Tarplin, the guitarist and music director at the time. We were the musicians playing on the road doing concerts with Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. The road was a new and exciting experience filled with both good and bad. However, all in all, you grew from the experiences and challenges life gave you.

One day I was at the Motown main studio building and offices, picking up a check and there he was, James Jamerson. My idol and inspiration! I walked over and introduced myself as the one who took his place with Smokey. He immediately said: “if Smokey and the boys picked you, you must be happening.” We spoke a little and then he had to go into the studio to record. The next time I saw him was at a Marvin Gaye concert at the Detroit State Fair. He was playing his ass off, phenomenal as always. After the show we spoke. I listened eagerly. He said: “I’ll throw some gigs your way; there is a lot of work coming up.” I was highly grateful and happy to say the least! I next saw him at a Mary Wells concert, and in between shows we talked. He said: “I want you to play the next time; I’ve got too much recording to

do.” That was the best compliment I could get in life! I had arrived! I felt. After that, we spoke often. He said, I’ve been hearing about you, young-blood. Keep grooving! Then came one of the most memorable times and opportunities of my life, The European 1965 Motown Review Tour, traveling through England, Scotland, Ireland and Paris France. This also included TV shows. Again, they wanted Jamerson to stay in Detroit and continue recording and therefore wanted me to play the tour seeing that I was already going to be there because I was playing with Smokey. The tour included: Stevie Wonder, the Funk Brothers, Diane Ross and the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, Temptations. I was playing with the entire Motown family as well as a big band of 16 instruments every night for about a month.

When we returned home to the States, I was even busier as ever. Holland-Dozier-Holland, the illustrious writing and producing team was going into the studio to record some new songs using some innovative production skills. One of these included using 2 bass guitars simultaneously. And who would know? They wanted “me” to play along-side Jamerson. This was another defining moment in history for me that shall remain in my mind forever. Jamerson welcomed me with open arms and some great playing ideas. He said: “you play the high part and I’ll play the low one. Just keep that groove and don’t stop for anything! Keep it steady and in the pocket!” Our chemistry together was astounding. The grooves we created playing together were a bright light in music’s history. The songs recorded were: Stop in the Name of Love, Baby Love, Where Did Our Love Go, all by Diane Ross and the Supremes which all went on to become huge “Gold” chart toppers at #1, selling millions of records. We also did other sessions like “Nowhere to Run” Martha and the Vandellas and “Reach Out” the Four Tops in this same manner.

After those sessions, Jamerson and I spoke regularly, as he was always giving me treasured playing and professional tips in our conversations. His son wasn’t born yet, so I think he saw me as, student-brother-family. He would come by my house regularly to hang out and talk about the music business. Every time he came by, a short bass lesson would creep in. Hey, anything I could get, I was all ears. He was still probably the most working musician and player on multiple hit recordings of anyone that I knew at the time, and I knew a lot of musicians. Jamerson was a musical phenomenon in every sense of the word. Even to this day his grooves and bass lines are heard and admired by all, including music lovers and musicians, 20 years after his passing. He had that something special. I especially knew this and wanted a part. I was willing to sacrifice and work hard for it. What Jamerson shared with me cannot be measure musically or financially in that his masterly influences and guidance are a treasure house of lifelong blessings of music magic that he passed from Master to Student. They are gifts of immense power, love, joy, prosperity and life.

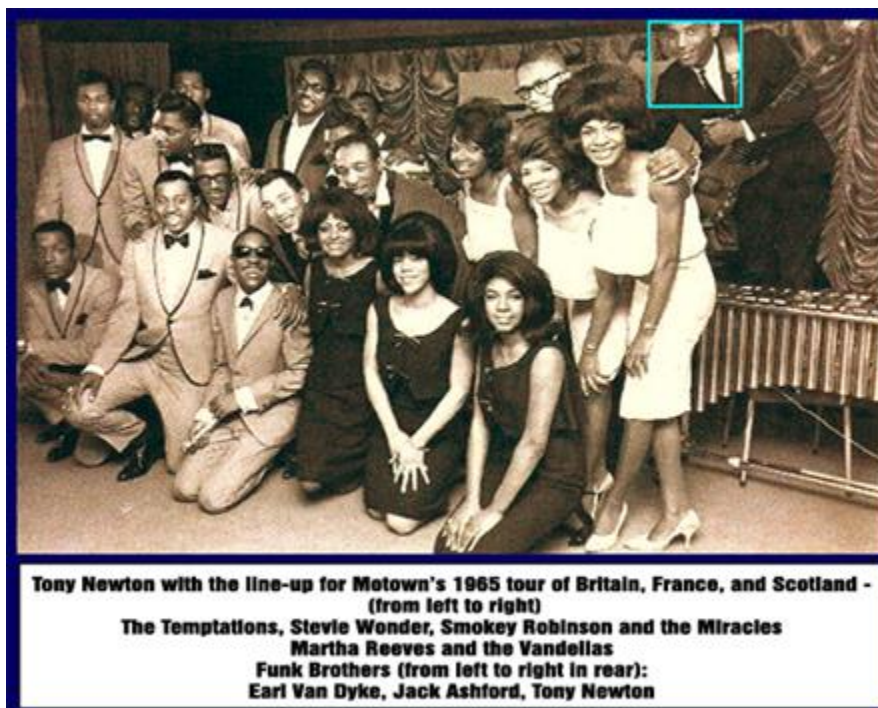
The music just kept coming! Musicians everywhere in Detroit recording studios and companies were literally popping up on every corner. Some were successful, some were not. However, it provided a healthy and creative atmosphere for creative, working and recording musicians.

Jamerson was all over the place, playing on numerous music hits. The electric Bass Guitar was claiming its role in the exploding popular music world. It was creating that infectious groove to dance to. You had to move. Music was electrifying. Jamerson and I saw each other often as we passed each other going from one recording session to another or some club gig. I remember playing with the “Funk Brothers”

with the leader, Earl Van Dyke one night at a Motown club concert at the 20 Grand night club. Jamerson looked at me and said: "I think you're ready!" This meant I was accepted and ready to play with the big dog musicians, even though I was only 17 at the time. I felt a surge of fire and light within me that I can still remember and feel. It was so illuminating. Jamerson was also on the gig and he would call me up on the stage to "sit in," and play with them, the Funk Brothers.

The music kept coming and I kept on playing! More and more, I played with all the Motown artists. We played the New York Apollo, Chicago Regal, Philly Uptown theaters which were big shows with 8-10 acts per show. These shows included artists like James Brown, Otis Redding, Richard Pryor, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and lots more. Jamerson would give me recording sessions when he was too busy with Motown to do outside work. I would get the work because I was the one that sounded closest to Jamerson's sound and style, which everyone wanted. It was the Detroit, Motown sound. Of course there were several other bass guitar players in town, all very good and close to the Detroit sound, let's call it. Somehow we all did our thing and I was fortunate to carve out my own little niche of musical respect and creative expression. I begin to come into and develop my own sound and expression, which is heavily influenced by Jamerson. But through my own music structure and discipline, I created a unique and expressive bass style purely my own through the help of my master teacher.

I started to play on several hit records all around Detroit from various companies in Detroit. Some came from other states to record the Detroit sound. The famous producer-writers H-D-H opened their own company and studios: Hot Wax, HDH, Invictus Records. I played on several of their hits by artists, Freda Payne, 8th Day, 100 Proof, Honeycone, and others. I remember, there were two out of town companies that recorded hits. One was 1000 Loves, The Platters, and Paul Anka's, So Long City.



**Tony Newton with the line-up for Motown's 1965 tour of Britain, France, and Scotland -
(from left to right)
The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles
Martha Reeves and the Vandellas
Funk Brothers (from left to right in rear):
Earl Van Dyke, Jack Ashford, Tony Newton**