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MeShell gets real

Her New Album, Her Hot Band, and How To Make It Feel Good

BY BILL LEIGH

"It's true," chuckles MeShell NdegéOcello. "I can't reach the tuning pegs on my bass when it's strapped on." Here's evidence that size doesn't matter: Though she stands only five feet tall, the bandleader's giant sense of groove is only a small part of her stature as a creative musical artist. Looking for proof? Check her new album, *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*, due to hit stores in April. Though MeShell's last release, *Bitter*, took a distinct left turn into lush string sounds and moody acoustic guitars, *Cookie* features her solidly funky bass playing along with her powerful compositions, provocative lyrics, an imaginative use of speeches and spoken-word samples, and a considerable dose of hip-hop flavor. Produced by her long-time guitarist, Allen Cato, *Cookie* also includes contributions from P-Funk guitarist Michael Hampton, singer Lalah Hathaway, and her long-time friend Marcus Miller, who contributes a beautiful fretless solo.

Onstage it's a different stature story: Her seasoned band—Cato, keyboardist Federico Peña, drummer Gene Lake, and bassist David Dyson—transform MeShell's carefully crafted songs into soulful meditations that draw on avant-garde jazz improv as much as deep funk. "I'm just going to tell you some stories," was her understated introduction to one small town audience, packed into a converted theatre. "Is that cool?"

Whether she's singing, rapping, or playing keyboards, MeShell maintains an onstage control of her band as if they were a direct extension of her conscious creative flow. When she straps on the bass, though, the energy intensifies. "She has a conviction on the bass I very seldom see in other players," says Dyson, himself an accomplished player. [See page 48.] "She won't rip off a Victor Wooten solo, but she'll groove you to death. I love those moments on the gig—we never plan it,

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL HAGGARD

MeShell NdegéOcello continued

it just happens—where we're just grooving together, moving in and out of each other. I'll be playing a one-line part like a guitar player while she's in the groove. Then she'll move up the neck, and I know to go down to the bottom and hold it down."

Having come of age in Washington, D.C., MeShell cut her teeth playing go-go music, the city's distinctive funk offshoot with a loping, percussion-driven shuffle beat. After a move to New York, where she paid additional dues playing with members of Vernon Reid's Black Rock Coalition, MeShell's early demos helped her get signed by Madonna's record label, Maverick. These days, MeShell stays busy not just with her albums and tours but also as a session bassist. She played on two tracks on Alanis Morissette's latest Maverick release, *Under Rug Swept*, participated in Gov't Mule's *The Deep End* project [see January '02], and contributed a track to Citizen Cope's self-titled Dreamworks release. She also appears in the upcoming documentary film *Standing In the Shadows of Motown*, performing with Motown's surviving session musicians, and she occasionally appears with improvisational trio Plane, alongside Living Colour drummer Will Calhoun and composer/guitarist David Torn. "I love playing other people's music—sometimes more than my own. I like hearing what they don't hear and adding it. With Citizen Cope, I got to be Lee Sklar—just creatively supporting the songs and adding what was best. With Plane, I play bass, samples, and piano, often on the same tune. On one gig, I tuned the bass in 5ths, just to see what would happen. I actually had to hear stuff instead of just playing because I knew where my fingers should go."

Though *Cookie* hasn't even been released yet, MeShell is already focusing on newer compositions. Crowds are mesmerized by one new song the band plays, "Quentin Mack," an angular jazz-funk maelstrom in which Dyson's and Lake's roles seem nearly reversed. "I'm just trying to be creative and not get bogged down by industry ideas of what success is," says MeShell. "My stuff is heading more toward messing with tempos and harmonies and trying to create something interesting. On the tape I made to teach 'Quentin Mack' to the band, there are three different bass lines. It's killin'," she grins, barely able to contain her excitement. "I know that's arrogant, but it's killin'!"



Do you consider yourself a songwriter first or a bass player first?

I love the bass—and the way I play is very much my personality. I'm all right standing way behind whoever's up front, just holding down a



groove. I like to make everything lock, gel, and be funky. Compositions move me more than anything, though—the construction of the song, the lyric, and everything. My goal is to be a great writer, not a great bass player.

Most of my favorite bass players are writers. Jaco's my hero because of his virtuosity and craft in composing and arranging. Of course his bass playing is way up there, but the songs are

beautiful. *Jaco Pastorius* [Warner Bros.] is the greatest bass record ever made, but *Word of Mouth* [Warner Bros.] was a big part of me wanting to hear strings and orchestral sounds in my music. Probably my favorite bass player when I was growing up was Prince. His bass lines, like "Let's Work" [*Controversy*, Warner Bros.], are like songs within themselves. Then there's Paul McCartney—an incredible songwriter and bass player, and Sting, who writes the lines you remember.

Are there bassists you admire just for their playing?

Rodney "Skeet" Curtis from P-Funk—put him way up on the list; everybody slept on him. Paul Jackson with the Headhunters—he sounds like a bass player. I also had a great mentor: Mike Neal, who played in a go-go band when I was



GEAR

Cookie Cutters

On all four solo albums, MeShell has recorded primarily with her pre-CBS Fender Jazz bass, which has been strung with the same flatwounds for over ten years. For other sessions she selects from her collection of 4-strings, which includes a Modulus VJ, Celinder, Ernie Ball/Music Man StingRay, and a Surine. Though she used a SansAmp PSA-1 for *Cookie*, she usually takes an Aguilar DB659 preamp or an Avalon U5 DI to recording sessions. Her tech, Mauro Tatini, strings her basses with Thomastik-Infeld flatwounds and Dean Markley roundwounds. Onstage, her Celinder and Modulus VJ basses are run through a Whirlwind Selector A/B box and Behringer Ultra DI DI-100 to an Ampeg SVT-4PRO head powering Ampeg 4x10 cabinets. "I don't like *pankiness* or bite," she says. "So I often roll off the highs. But sometimes the engineer says, 'Look, you've got to have *some* highs.'"

David Dyson plays MTD 535 basses through an EBS Falner head and an Eden 410XL cabinet. To recreate some of the keyboard-bass sounds on *Cookie* onstage, David steps on an EBS BassIQ envelope filter; occasionally he also uses EBS OctaBass and MultiChorus pedals. With his own band, he supplements the 4x10 with a Peavey 2x10. On his solo album David used a fretless MTD 5-string and a Tobias Killer B; for his next album, Michael Tobias made David a new ash 5-string for a different sound. All of David's MTD basses have Bartolini pickups and preamps and are strung Dean Markley Blue Steels or SR2000s.

growing up in D.C. Our playing is very similar. He played on Maxwell's first record [*Maxwell's Urban Hang Suite*, Columbia]. He's been my teacher as far as developing my bass personality and just holding it down. He always said, "You've got to know what *not* to play. Just hold it down—it's a waste of time if nobody can dance to it." I definitely got that slide stuff I do from him. It's the period—the end of the sentence.

What does writing bring to your bass playing?

Simplicity and flow. Bass is the harmonic and rhythmic foundation, and I like that. I like to make it feel good and give it a personality. I'm okay not being a solo bass artist; I don't want to be so alone. I'm never going to be Victor Wooten. That's not my gift; I didn't get virtuosity in bass playing.

What is your gift?

I have virtuosity in creativity. You can sit me onstage now with a drummer and I'll come up with a bass line. You can put me in any setting and I'll make it work. I can play with anybody: I could play with Incubus, with Lynyrd Skynyrd, or with Joshua Redman if he didn't

mind me playing electric.

How do you keep the ideas flowing?

I know when to stop. When it's not coming, I stop, go watch some movies, eat some food, and hang out. When it comes back, I try to address it. Don't push it; when it happens, it happens. I realize it's not under my control. Sometimes the spirit hits you, and sometimes it doesn't.

It's like having shows night after night. Sometimes you're *killin'*. Other times you feel like, Whew, glad I got through that! Hope we didn't hurt anyone! Hey, I've seen famous people I love have rough nights. That's just how it is.

*Is there a reason *Cookie* has much more bass than your previous record, *Bitter*, yet you're not playing as much bass live as you did on the *Bitter* tour?*

People say there's not a lot of bass on *Bitter*, and that it's not funky. I'm like, *whatever*. I like the bass on *Bitter*; it's beautifully legato, it's cool, and it sounds good. As a bass player, when someone calls me for a gig, I am there to implement their needs, not my ego. The music I wrote for *Bitter* called for that bass style. Live, though, the *Bitter* tour was the first time I ever tried singing and playing. As it evolved, I realized I could play a little more while singing. I noticed Jimi Hen-

drix had a tendency to play along with the phrases he was singing, so I tried that, and the bass lines got a little fuller. With the new material, sometimes the bass lines are so contrapuntal I can't sing with them. And it's rapping more than singing, and rapping and playing bass is too difficult. Plus, I have to front a show. I have to tell the band what to do and interact with the audience. When I'm playing bass, I disappear—I become part of the band, and I don't think about the people out in that audience. When I take the bass off, I can interact with them again.

You give a lot of stage direction to the band.

I see all the songs as groups of phrases, and sometimes I want the band to go to a different phrase. I learned this from Gene, actually, who played with [free-funk saxophonist] Steve Coleman. Steve would play a certain lick that would be a signal for the band to go somewhere else. So I'm keeping the band together and trying to see where it should go. If something Gene plays inspires something else, I'll say, "Break it down—let's see what can happen." I'm just directing.

So your show is very improvisational.

There are structures, but if we feel something, we'll go with it. We're all huge Prince fans, but we also have records by Allan Holdsworth, Weather Report, Pat Metheny, and Lyle Mays. We come from that mental place where music is supposed to grow and evolve and be expansive, so there are some songs in the set where we leave room for that. I think of it as improvisational, hip-hop-based, R&B.

The hardest gig is probably David's, because he has much less room for improvisation. It's a challenge for him, because he can play a whole lot of bass, but the new compositions require more of a foundation. That's just where I come from. If I die tomorrow, I want people to say, "Well, it was funky. It was definitely groovin'."

David doesn't try to play like me. I like the members of my band for who they are as people. We sound like we sound as a band because everyone plays like they are. Our common ground is the song I wrote; it's the topic we're going to discuss. Every night we take that topic and see what we can do with it—what we can find in ourselves. Like when we play the beginning of "Better by the Pound," sometimes I wish it could go on forever.

When you play that intro live, you can really hear the difference between your style and David's.

Even more on "God.Fear.Money." I play *super* behind. It's a very D.C. go-go feel; everything has this lope in it. David, on the other hand, tends to play on top of the beat. It's still funky, but it's totally different. David has the percolating style, but mine is to just let it go, let it breathe. Space is where it is. I can take my hands off the bass for a good bar and be fine. Here's how I see it: If you were doing this all the time [*breathes really fast*], you'd think, I can't breathe! I'm hyperventilating! Instead, it's all about [*takes slow, easy breaths*]. That's what I'm trying to get to. To me, music is

David Dyson: The Player's Player

When MeShell NdegéOcello

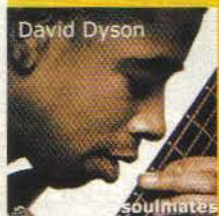
acknowledges that David Dyson's role is the hardest in the band, Dyson is quick to agree. "MeShell is a perfectionist, she can be intimidating, and if there's something she doesn't like, she'll let you know. Once you get to know how she thinks, though—and usually she thinks less is more—it's a lot easier."

Few are more capable for the gig than Dyson, who previously played with MeShell in '97 and '98 and rejoined her band last fall. In between, he's fronted his own band and recorded an album, *Soulmates* [Marimel/Warner Bros.] as well as toured and recorded with Pieces Of A Dream, Bob James, Tim Hagans, Bob Belden, and Walter Hawkins. His lengthy resumé also includes a long stint with New Kids On The Block. He recently completed an album with Earth, Wind & Fire singer Philip Bailey, and he plans to begin recording his second solo CD this spring.

Onstage, MeShell and David have to balance differences in playing style and sound. "Our styles are different in the way our personalities are different. I tend to take liberties while still maintaining the groove. She's no-nonsense—she gets right into it. In terms of sound, I like a brighter, crisper top end, though I back off a bit on her gig. She likes a full, fat bottom and mids, and just the bottom of the treble range. I've learned a lot from her both as a player and a bandleader. She's in total control onstage."

The respect is mutual. "David is one of my favorite bass players," says MeShell. "He has a beautiful sense of harmony and melody. It's funky, but there's lyrical stuff intertwined in it."

David Dyson's Web site: www.dysonsgroove.com



MeShell NdegéOcello continued

like sex—you've got to relax and take it slow. You can't be just on it all the time. A lot of musicians think they've got to be at the bat—Pow! Pow!—hitting home runs all the time. I'm fine just taking it easy.

How do you work in the studio?

At home I have Korg Triton keyboards, an Akai MPC60 sampler, and a Roland VS-1880 multitrack recorder. I'm not real technically proficient, but I can work enough gear to get my ideas down. When I was younger, Mike Neal taught me how to record. "Never stop writing, and always know how to get what you have in your head onto tape," he'd say. At home, I put down collages of ideas, and then I go into the studio and piece them together.

Allen Cato, who produced *Cookie*, is not just an incredible guitar player, he's also a mad scientist on Pro Tools. When writing bass lines, I'd try to come up with as many ideas as I could for a tune, until he'd get sick of me—I can sit and write bass lines all night long. Usually I'd step out and let him pick the ones he liked. I played mostly my Fender Jazz, and I used my Celinder on one or two tracks. I'd let a friend borrow my Aguilar DB659 preamp, so I just plugged in from a SansAmp PSA-1 straight into Pro Tools.

In terms of structuring music, David

A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Solo albums: (all on Maverick) *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*, *Bitter*, *Peace Beyond Passion*, *Plantation Lullabies*. **With Alanis Morissette:** *Under Rug Swept*, *Maverick*. **With Citizen Cope:** *Citizen Cope*, *Dreamworks*. **With Gov't Mule:** *The Deep End, Volume 2*, *ATO*. **With Scritti Politti:** *Anomie & Bonhomie*, *Virgin*. **With the Rolling Stones:** *Bridges to Babylon*, *Virgin*. **With Holly Palmer:** *Holly Palmer*, *Warner Bros*. **With John Mellencamp:** *Dance Naked*, *Mercury*. **With Madonna:** *Bedtime Stories*, *Maverick*. **With Chaka Khan:** *Epiphany: The Best of Chaka Khan*, *Warner Bros*. **With Joe Henry:** *Scar*, *Hollywood*. **With Boney James:** *Seduction*, *Warner Bros*.

Gamson, who produced my first two records, has been my greatest teacher. I have a lot of ideas, but I don't believe in self-production. You need someone to tell you when you're getting a little self-indulgent, or when you have an idea you should really work on.

*In addition to electric bass, you also play keyboard bass on *Cookie*.*

Give me a keyboard and a pitch bend and it's on. Keyboard bass and regular bass are both a

part of me. Cato wrote the bass line for "Dead Nigga Blvd. (Pt. 1)"—it's me playing the Fender, but I'm also playing a Moog synth bass line behind it. I love keyboard bass and regular bass interacting. Supa Dave West, who produced De La Soul, came up with the hip-hop line on "Hot Night" using sampled bass notes on an Akai MPC60. I replaced his line with the Fender. Hip-hop is really grounded in how it feels. Gene and I like to dance; when we go to a club, we like to get our freak on. When I played "Hot Night," I tried to tap into that feeling. I rolled off all the tone on the bass and locked on it. "Priorities 1-6" is all keyboard. To me, the other greatest bass player of all time is Stevie Wonder. The way his keyboard bass percolates on "Boogie on Reggae Woman" [*Fulfillingness' First Finale*, *Motown*]
—oh my God, you don't want to play after that! I just wanted to tap into that Stevie energy.

*The moods on *Bitter* and *Cookie* are totally different. Are there some moods that make you want to pick up the bass more?*

Oh, no. There's three years between each of my records, and in between I change and grow and hear new things I like. Before *Cookie*, I was getting into Outkast, some Master P, and Incubus, but I also was listening to a lot of "out" stuff—Weather Report, *Miles Live at the Fillmore East*

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