



Rob Shanahan

## NATHAN EAST

**With his first solo album, the renowned bassist shortens his bucket list**

By Jeff Tamarkin

FOR MORE THAN FOUR DECADES, NATHAN EAST HAS contributed dynamic and innovative basslines to recordings and live performances by a vast array of artists, including Eric Clapton, George Harrison, Michael Jackson, Beyoncé and duo Daft Punk, whose Grammy-winning platinum album *Random Access Memories* features East on 10 tracks, including the smash "Get Lucky."

An natural, East began playing bass at 14, and in no time was playing along with recordings of jazz greats like Charles Mingus and Ray Brown. Just two years later, East landed his big break backing Barry White on the road. Throughout the 1980s East's skills fueled his reputation as an ace and first-call session player. At the end of the decade, he helped create the acclaimed contemporary jazz group Fourplay.

In spite of his achievements, Nathan East had never released a solo album—until now. "You want to do everything in your life, and there weren't many things left for me to do," says the Philadelphia

native. "I've aspired to make a solo record for many years." For the self-titled album, East teamed with Chris Gero—an executive with the Yamaha Entertainment Group—as co-producer, and together they tapped an impressive roster of players and vocalists including Michael McDonald, Sara Bareilles, Ray Parker Jr., Toto's David Paich, and two Fourplay members, Bob James and Chuck Loeb.

For *Nathan East*, the bassist and his collaborators interpreted songs by Van Morrison ("Moondance," sung by McDonald), the Beatles ("Yesterday," a duet with East's 13-year-old keyboardist son Noah), and Steve Winwood ("Can't Find My Way Home," with Clapton on guitar). "I wanted some cohesiveness so the record sounded like a band," says East, 58. "But I wanted it to be a very full musical statement. I wanted to feel like I could hand this to someone and say, 'This album is my musical story.'"

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### Why the long wait to do this?

Because I have been playing on literally thousands of records for other people. I call Fourplay my solo album because the group is a chance for me to stretch out, write, be a member of the band. And to be honest, this album is still a community effort.

### When did you start the process?

I had ideas for songs in my head and I'd make demos, then Fourplay would go into the studio to record, and those demos would end up on the Fourplay record. Finally about a year ago, I started honing in on what I was actually going to do. Chris [Gero] and I put pencil to paper and he asked, "If you were going to do something, what would it be?"

### How did you meet Chris?

We've known each other for at least 20 years through Yamaha—I've been a Yamaha artist for 33 years now. We've done lots of concerts together—he's a great concert producer—and we thought we could translate that spirit and energy to a record. We started tracking in July 2013 with a core rhythm section that included my late, great friend Ricky Lawson on drums, Michael Thompson

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on guitar, Jeff Babko and Tim Carmon on keys, and Rafael Padilla on percussion. From there, people started dropping by and falling in. It became an embarrassment of riches.

### How was it working with Daft Punk?

They're really low-key, and they have great ideas. I was enjoying that they wanted to go retro and you could just play. It's funny—not trying to be current, "Get Lucky" became the most current song. In the summer of 2013, you couldn't go anywhere without hearing it. We recorded it and sent it to Nile [Rodgers], who made it so much funkier that I ended up redoing the bass part to match his guitar. But nobody would have predicted it would go as high on the charts as it did, and win at the Grammys. Sometimes you say they didn't get the awards right—they got that one right.

### What music first impacted you?

It was the Charlie Brown TV specials. I'd listen to Vince Guaraldi's songs and think, "That's cool—I want to do that." When I was in seventh grade, I went to the music teacher and said, "I want to play piano." He said, "We don't have piano but we have violin, viola, cello or bass." The upright bass was too big and the violin and viola were too small so I started on cello. That just sucked me into music. Later, when I picked up the bass, I thought, "This is cooler than the cello." I'd stand outside the band rehearsal room in high school and just listen to the bass player.

### Which bassists influenced you?

I was listening to pretty much everything. So of course McCartney, but also James Jamerson, who was on all the Motown stuff, and Chuck Rainey, who played on Aretha's records. Tower of Power had Rocco Prestia, and Earth, Wind and Fire had Verdine White. Peter Cetera from Chicago was another. And players like Stanley Clarke. When Jaco Pastorius came along, he just messed everybody up. He was unbelievable—you couldn't help but be influenced by him.

### How did Fourplay come together?

Lee Ritenour, Harvey Mason and I all played on Bob James' *Grand Piano Canyon* record. Harvey recommended me to Bob, so I'm forever grateful for that, and when Bob asked Lee about bass players Lee also put my name in the hat. Fourplay was great because it was organic and had a sound of its own.

### The band hit big right away.

You can never predict how it's going to go. Four guys decide to do a quartet and the next thing you know it blows up. Those first few albums became classics. But I understood why—those three guys are some of my favorite musicians, so there was sort of this supergroup persona. All three were solo artists in their own right. It was great to have that be more than a one-time thing. The thing I love about Fourplay is that we got together for the fun of it. We didn't have any rules. To me that's freedom, and that's what I love about playing music. We could do whatever we wanted. And it was just fun.

### What's most notable about your work with Eric Clapton?

The sheer number of hours we've put in together. We've been through a lot, and still to this day, we're able to stand onstage together and have a great time—it's a wonderful association and collaboration. We listen to similar styles of music, and we

## EAST SIDE STORY

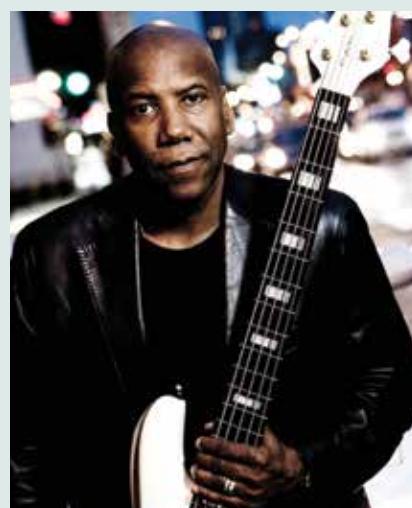
Session ace Nathan East recalls some unforgettable collaborations.

### BARRY WHITE

Working with Barry was like going to school, a complete early education. He knew how to create a hit on the spot. He'd actually sing the lines to each of us—the bass line, the guitar line. He was a very powerful hit-maker back in the day. When I toured with him, I was 16 years old, playing Madison Square Garden and the Apollo Theater.

### MICHAEL JACKSON

I miss Michael dearly because he was this great, extremely gifted musician who knew exactly what he wanted. You realized that when you were in the studio with him—and it's why he was one of the best. He wasn't this freaky guy. We'd tell jokes, have dinner together and record. I was thoroughly heartbroken that he left us so soon.



### WHITNEY HOUSTON

I was there for "Greatest Love of All." She was this beautiful young woman standing in the studio. Nobody knew who she was. All you knew was she's stunning, she sings great. You always just say, "I hope it goes well," but you just don't know where it'll go.

### PHIL COLLINS

Phil and I had many years of recording and touring together. A highlight of my career was writing "Easy Lover" with Phil and Philip Bailey. When we wrote that song, Phil's "Against All Odds" had just gone to the top of the charts. I felt very fortunate being in the studio writing with a guy who had the No. 1 record in the world at that time! I used to hear it playing on three radio stations at once.



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## 'I'd stand outside the high school band rehearsal room and just listen to the bass player'

have similar visions. Musically, Eric and I nearly complete each other's sentences, and that's a special relationship. You don't really know you've had that until you've played with someone for a long time.

### **Recall some unusual sessions?**

One of the most challenging was a Wayne Shorter album called *Joy Ryder*. He writes these tunes that don't necessarily lend to your fingers. His compositions are so amazing—some songs I had to take home and really practice so I could make them sound natural. A lot of people don't know that I played on a Judas Priest record. I don't know if that was meant to be public knowledge or not. At one point their bass player was in rehab, and they were recording, and they asked me to come in but to keep it under the radar.

### **You're a licensed pilot.**

I love flying! My brother David got his license first and the four of us brothers kind of tagged along. I said, "Ah, man, I can do this," so I took flying lessons and loved it. Our father was an aerodynamics design engineer, so aviation was in our blood. I'm an airplane owner now.

### **What's next?**

The solo record was one of the things on my bucket list. People ask me who I'd want to play with—I've never played with Steely Dan or Pat Metheny. James Taylor and I played at President Obama's inauguration, but I'd love to do more with James. It would be fun to tour with Sting or McCartney. Sure, those guys play bass, but if they need a bass player I'd love to jump in there.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Nathan East has endorsed Yamaha bass guitars for more than 30 years. "They're a phenomenal company that makes great instruments," he says. "The sound of Yamaha's basses is just perfect. They blend with everything, and I love the richness of the tone." Yamaha has created two different Nathan East signature models, the more recent being the five-string BBNE2. "That's the one I play onstage and take to the studio," says East. "I wanted a one-size-fits-all instrument I could record with and play live. We experimented with string spacing, neck length, gauge and pickups. We did a lot of research and development until we came up with this." East also uses Yamaha's six-string TRB6 bass and the electric SLB-200. Says East, "You can't tell the difference between that model and an upright." East puts his basses through the TC Electronic Blacksmith amplifier and employs Radial Engineering's Firefly direct box, and he uses Jim Dunlop strings.