

The signature Toucan inlay
on a bass built by Greg
Pecknold in the early
1980s.



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Toucan Bass

**Aided by a Fleet Fox,
rises like a phoenix**

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKE BUCHMAN

FOR MOST OF US, musical instruments are more than just tools. They are intimate partners in our artistic process, channels of our spirit, voices of our soul. They express their feelings to us and absorb our own. They are alive.

So, what happens to a beloved guitar, bass or banjo when its playing partner passes on? Does its voice go mute, its soul dormant?

This is the story of one special bass: a fretless Toucan built nearly 45 years ago for a very special player, and its rise from the ashes of his passing, like a phoenix, to soar again in the hands of beloved friends.

BASSIST CHUCK DEARDORF was one of the “sturdiest pillars” of the Northwest jazz scene, according to Paul de Barros, *Seattle Times* columnist and one of the deans of music critics in these parts. Pianist Jovino Santos Neto, who played with Chuck for many years in his Quinteto, told de Barros that Chuck was “one of the best in the world.” Deardorf died of COVID-19 in October 2022.

Elected to the Seattle Jazz Hall of Fame in 2010, Chuck was a “first-call bassist” according to *All About Jazz*, a veteran of jazz, new age, folk and other genres. He gigged with everyone from Bud Shank to Chet Baker, Miles & Karina to Dave Matthews, Don Lanphere to Larry Coryell. Revered as a player on upright and electric, he was equally well-known as an educator with Western Washington University; Cornish College of the Arts, where he served as jazz program administrator for 14 years; and Centrum Jazz Workshop in Port Townsend, Washington.

IT WAS IN Port Townsend that Chuck ran across boatbuilder-turned-luthier Greg Pecknold. As a young man, Pecknold played bass for R&B bands in clubs like The Vault on Seattle’s Second Avenue. By the late 1970s he was still playing, but

making his living with other skills. In the tight-knit Port Townsend community, he became friends with and inspired by guitar builder Steve Grimes. So, he started applying his woodworking skills to instrument-building, focusing on basses inspired by Alembic’s fretless basses and the sounds of Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius.

“When Jaco came along, I was just blown away. And I was a big Weather Report fan and jazz bass fan,” Greg remembered during a recent conversation on Zoom. “And everybody at that time was like, okay. We got a new sound here.”

“All of my basses were similar in construction and style. Stanley Clarke had been playing a 24-fret Alembic at the time, and many jazz players were interested in the extra high-end range for soloing. A five-string bass opened up a new set of lower register options, and that was what Chuck was excited about. I had built a few fretless basses and Chuck had played them and said he loved the ‘bloom’ quality that my basses had,” Greg wrote in an email prior to our conversation.

“I tried to emulate that sound. The instruments I was making at the time each had their own slightly different character, but what I was always going for was that bloom. It’s this sympathetic

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harmonic vibration with the fingerboard and the string.”

In the summer of 1981, Chuck asked Greg to build him a fretless 5-string bass. “I modified my usual specifications to accommodate the strings and neck tension and chose a beautiful piece of Hawaiian koa wood for the body, maple and purple heart for the through-the-body neck, and ebony for the fingerboard,” Greg wrote. And, of course, his signature toucan inlay of abalone shell graced the headstock.

“When I finished the instrument and strung it up, I was amazed to find that the bloom it had was the best yet. It was a deep and resonant ‘mwahh’ sound with incredible sustain. When Chuck came to pick it up, he was equally surprised at the wonderful sound it had.

“I’m pretty sure Chuck loved playing that bass. Through the years I would often see him playing that bass at a gig and I was always so proud to see something that I’d built come to life in the hands of a virtuoso like him.”

Chuck’s wife, singer-songwriter Kelly Harland, remembers the first time she heard the Toucan. “The day he got it he opened it and played it,” she said. “I’d heard him play several electric basses while I was upstairs or in the kitchen. Throughout the years I heard him play an assortment of basses. I didn’t know which was which. But I could tell the difference the first time I heard it...And I understood how different this instrument was than all the other electric basses that Chuck played.”

BRUCE PHARES GREW UP playing stand-up bass in youth orchestras but transitioned to jazz and other kinds of music after his first exposure to Stanley Clarke’s playing in Return to Forever. He enrolled in Cornish College of the Arts, where he soon met Chuck and started a lifelong friendship.

“I took an apartment next to Chuck on Capitol Hill [the Seattle neighborhood

PNW bassist Bruce Phares with the Pecknold bass that he first saw 45 years prior.



Pecknold's creation paid homage to the sandwich construction and brass hardware found on Alembics.



around Cornish, which at the time was a bohemian stronghold] and [saxophonist] Denny Goodhue because Chuck, you know, was always watching out for me,” Bruce said on the Zoom call with Greg and myself. “He said, ‘There’s this apartment coming up available, and we call it Bebop Hotel. Dave Peterson lives there. I live there.’ So, I moved [into that] downstairs, basement apartment.

“And then Chuck got me gigs at Jazz Alley, and he hooked me up with Mark Murphy playing there, and Frank Wess, Sir Roland Hanna, and a number of great gigs. And Chuck was always trying to help me out,” Bruce said.

When Chuck got the Toucan in 1981, his compatriots took notice.

“All of us bassists were quite envious of Chuck,” Bruce said. “And a great number of musicians who weren’t bassists were blown away by the sound of it when Chuck would be playing. And so, from the beginning when Greg first gave it to Chuck, it was something that guys in that community were all on it. I mean, because up to that point, everything else was corporate basses. You know?”

Helpful Fox

WHEN CHUCK DIED in 2022, Kelly said she was a “walking zombie. I had all of his stuff, his instruments, his two Mercedes-Benzes. It was a lot to handle.”

Down in California, Greg told his son Robin Pecknold of Fleet Foxes about the bass he had built for his departed friend. Robin suggested they try to get the Toucan back in the family “to give it a new chapter in its life,” Greg wrote.

Kelly picked up the story: “Greg called and said he was in the process of buying back basses [he had built] so he could leave them for his family. And that he was going to do that with other instruments too. The way he put it, I mean you have to tread water with somebody who was like I was, right? You have to be so

gentle how you are doing this. And just the way he did it....I had people, of course I did, who were asking to buy stuff, or whatever. They were all wonderful people too, but he was just like a prince.

“He said, ‘I would like to buy it back. Here is what I think it is worth,’ and it was totally fair. He said he was going to be in the area in the next few weeks and would come and pick it up. It was just like a dream. Suddenly Greg Pecknold, who I just revere, have loved all my life as an artist, [Greg toured and recorded with Kelly’s best friend Linda Waterfall] shows up at my door. It was so satisfying for me because this instrument was going with Greg. That was really a comfort to me, that whole exchange.”

Before handing the bass to Greg, Kelly opened the case and looked at it. “I knew what we had. I knew it was probably the one instrument, other than his upright, that I would get really excited about. The next thing I knew, I had the video of the Fleet Foxes in that beautiful hall. I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is a magic, spiritual thing,’” she said.

After bringing the bass down to California, Greg gave the Toucan “an interesting round of introductions, thanks to my son. He was working and recording down here and performing and had some amazing friends—you know, Jacob Collier and Pino Palladino and Blake Mills. I couldn’t have gotten that instrument into

“It was a beautiful experience, and I really felt that Chuck’s spirit was there with me that night.”

that world without my son and his relationships,” Greg said. And so, he was thrilled to do it. I was thrilled to see him do it and watch it all happen.

“And then it kind of culminated in that one concert I played with him,” Greg said.

“Robin brought me and the bass on stage and told the audience the story of how I built it so long ago. It was a beautiful experience, and I really felt that Chuck’s spirit was there with me that night.”

GREG AND THE TOUCAN joined Fleet Foxes onstage at Los Angeles’ Belasco Theatre on March 22, 2023, for a rendition of Joni Mitchell’s “Hejira” in which Greg nails Jaco Pastorius’ signature bass line and “mwahh” fretless tone. You can check it out for yourself at tinyurl.com/ToucanBass.

Not only was “Hejira” the perfect song to showcase the Toucan’s sound, but it was like a calling card from Chuck to Kelly.

“When that video of Fleet Foxes using the bass on ‘Hejira’ appeared, that is the MOST magical thing I have ever...it is just too much for me to stand,” Kelly said. “Because of course I am a Joni Mitchell fan, totally into Joni, and that is probably my favorite Joni song. And then I love the Fleet Foxes, and I love Robin Pecknold. And it was our bass that was up there on the stage.”

SOON AFTER THE GIG, Greg realized the Toucan needed to be more widely heard.

“I don’t play with anybody other than my son from time to time. I play every night for my own amusement and my practice, but I knew the bass needed to be heard by more than just my ears,” he said. “And Bruce can do that. Bruce can play that role.”

After Chuck died, “I remember those first couple of phone calls between the two of us,” Greg said to Bruce on Zoom. “I think we both spent more time crying a lot to each other about the sad situation, and the beauty of the instrument.”

And so, Greg decided to put the Toucan in Bruce’s care.



“I used to go see them both play, you know,” Greg said, “dueling upright bass concerts in Seattle. And I knew how much Chuck meant to Bruce.”

“He reached out to let me know that he had decided to put the bass in my stewardship so that it would be played more,” Bruce posted on Facebook in November 2024, “which was a deeply moving gesture that I’m still processing.”

“When I went to pick it up, I started crying at the post office,” Bruce said. “And there’s this line of people, you know, about eight people deep. And the weird thing is on [Vashon Island, Washington] I’m well known because it’s a small island. And I do this series, the Jam in the Atrium, and I’ve become quite visible. I can’t go to the store anymore without having five or 10 conversations with people who love jazz. And I’m in the

post office, and I start crying. And the postal guy says, ‘What’s going on?’ And I explained it to him, and I’m sure somebody else started crying behind me, just listening to the story. And a couple people were patting me on the back on the way out of the store going, ‘Way to go, dude. Man, can’t wait to hear you on it.’ You know? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.”

But it wasn’t quite that simple. “Initially, I was afraid to even pick it up,” Bruce said. “It just sat there, and I looked at it. I actually talked to Kelly about it, and she said, ‘Get out of yourself and pick up the fucking bass and play it.’ But it was just, you know, there was just, so [much of] Chuck, and I miss him so dearly. But, yeah, it’s here. And so, I’ve been writing songs on it, and I’m trying to figure out what I could be doing.

“That was a really important thing. So,

I’m just a big, mushy, old, sloppy soul. And this thing, you know, has just really reignited my love for playing the fretless again.

“I’m getting chances to play more what I’ll call alt-country rock. There’s a great scene on Vashon Island of old musicians who have been playing, you know, the really beautiful Americana, sort of alt-rock stuff for decades and I’ve gotten hooked into those people.”

Kelly provided a fitting final reflection on the resurrection of the Toucan:

“If Chuck had seen everything I just described: Greg comes to the door, he takes it back, that is exactly what he would want. Greg gives it to his son, they play the most fantastic song, it’s on video and everybody sees it, that is the next thing. And the last thing is it goes to his best friend. He would be overjoyed!” **FJ**