



Eastwood Magnum Bass

BY ED FRIEDLAND

IN THE WORLD OF ELECTRIC BASS design, the 1970s was an era of great experimentation. Alembic's technological advances of the late '60s sent manufacturers and players on a quest to improve the status quo; some of these developments took hold, becoming the foundation of modern bass design, while others were relegated to the realm of curiosities. One instrument that straddled the line between wack and wonderful is the Ovation Magnum bass. Originally released as the Magnum I, II, and III, these odd-looking beasts featured graphite-reinforced necks, stereo outputs, crude graphic EQ, massive bridge assembly, quick-action string mute, neck-position humbucker mated with a diminutive single-coil at the bridge, and heavy mahogany construction that made a four-hour gig seem like hard labor. The Magnum did not catch on in a big way, but over the years it has been favored by Jah Wobble, Justin Meldal-Johnsen, Ross Valory of Journey, and Sonic Youth's Kim Deal, and rumor has it that Roger Waters used one on Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. Though it may seem an improbable candidate for resurrection, the Magnum has indeed returned in more

basic form, thanks to the nonconformists at Eastwood Guitars.

Eastwood's bass lineup focuses on outside-the-box offerings, and its version of the Magnum certainly fits the profile. A dead-on reissue would have been impractical (and perhaps unadvisable), but the Eastwood Magnum does feature the essence of the original—without some of the drawbacks. Eastwood has ditched the original's graphite-reinforced mahogany composition, opting instead for a lightweight mahogany body that follows the outline of the Ovation. Though the short top horn puts the strap button over the 14th fret, the bass balances better than expected. The Magnum's bolt-on maple neck (with rosewood fingerboard) has a slim nut with a rounded profile that is definitely Jazz-like. While the giant neck-position humbucker has certainly faded from common use, those with a penchant for well-upholstered low end know them to be a sure ticket to dub heaven. The tone from this fat boy is big, wide, and perfectly suited to roots-oriented styles. A 3-way toggle kicks in



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the single-coil pickup, which sits approximately in '70s-era J-Bass bridge position. As expected, the single-coil mated to a humbucker produces 60-cycle hum, but when they're blended, the noise is tolerable. The bridge pickup has its own little section of pickguard, making it look like it was an after-market modification. It's an odd cosmetic choice that fits right in with the Magnum's quirky appeal. Slick, gold speed knobs crown the individual volume and tone controls—a nice vintage touch that gives the potentiometer rotation a smooth feel.

The Ovation's titanic cast-aluminum tailpiece/bridge assembly was over-the-top "Me"-decade design at its best (worst?), and Eastwood has sidestepped that detail with a slightly meatier version of the Fender-style bridge. I would have liked to see an attempt to recreate the original built-in string mute apparatus; it's a feature that really helps shape the wild and woolly tone of the "mudbucker." The overall fit and finish is on par with Indonesian imports in the sub-\$600 range—which is to say, competent, if not inspired.

Fresh out of the case, my first act was to ditch the factory-supplied roundwound strings for a set of GHS Precision flatwounds. Although this bass could certainly function with a good set of rounds, flats just seemed to complement the basic nature of this bison-like creature. Restrung, the Magnum inspired deep thoughts of Aston "Family Man" Barrett and Robbie Shakespeare—not to say this bass is only good for reggae, but it's easy to see why proto-punk dubmeister Jah Wobble still keeps his Ovation Magnum busy. The front humbucker supplies serious girth, but putting a little chunk of foam under the strings down by the bridge gives the attack a more pronounced bump and shortens the decay. The theory behind the Ovation's built-in string mute is, in fact, well founded.

At first, I wasn't crazy about the string-to-string balance of the humbucker. On most 4-strings, the radius of the bridge saddles (which should mirror the fingerboard) puts the inner strings farther from

the polepieces, making the *A* and *D* strings a little quieter than the others. Oddly enough, it was the Magnum's *E* and *G* strings that suffered from lower output. But by raising the screw-type polepieces on the *E* and *G* as high as they could go without interfering with the string excursion—and sinking the *A* and *D* polepieces all the way down below the pickup cover—I was able to balance the output of all four strings. Eastwood says the pickup will undergo some design changes in the next production run, but this basic fix worked fine.

The bridge pickup has a tighter, thinner attitude somewhat reminiscent of a Jazz Bass in "Jaco" mode. Its inherently lower output meant a noticeable drop in volume when I switched from the front pickup. Using the separate volume controls, I brought the neck pickup down to 8, and the levels evened out. The blended pickup tone is a hollow, full-spectrum sound similar to a dual-pickup Danelectro. This setting provided a great muted pickstyle tone that balanced low thump and clicky attack. Setting the neck pickup back to 10 gives it the sonic advantage in the blend; the result is a more articulate version of the humbucker's solo tone—still thick and meaty, but with more detail.

I took the Magnum out to a rehearsal with an acoustic guitar-based quartet with light drums, and its dark, organic personality melded nicely with the other instruments at low volume. But on a gig with a '60s-inspired rock five-piece, the Magnum's payload—cranked through a warm Genz-Benz Streamliner 900—filled the room with thumping low-rider bottom. On Cream's "Outside Woman Blues," my fills captured the vibe of Jack Bruce's Gibson EB-3, but I also imagined how roundwounds and a touch of tube overdrive could turn this axe into a grinding ditch witch.

The Eastwood Magnum is a fun bass to play. Its tone signature is decidedly retro, but that's the point. Although it's certainly possible to slap, tap, and do chordal harmonics on the Magnum, I wouldn't suggest it: This baby is made to pound out big notes with its city-block-leveling humbucker. **BP**

Flashback! Read all about the original Ovation Magnum in the March '09 issue of Bass Player.



EASTWOOD MAGNUM BASS

Street \$500

Pros Fat retro tone

Cons May require pickup adjustments

TECH SPECS

Body Mahogany

Neck Maple

Fingerboard Rosewood

Strings GHS Precision flatwounds

Controls Volume, volume, tone, 3-way pickup switch

Tuners Gotoh

Neck width at nut 1.5"

Scale length 34"

Pickups Humbucker (neck), single coil (bridge)

Weight 9.2 lbs

Gig bag Not included

Made in Indonesia

Warranty Three years limited

Contact eastwoodguitars.com