



Globe-trottin' bass prof
Leo Traversa talks to
 Mike Visceglia about African
 grooves and going to school

You attended Berklee back in the day, and now you teach Afro-pop and Caribbean bass at the Bass Collective in New York. Is music school something you'd advocate?

Yes—especially if you plan on freelancing; reading ability and versatility really help. Going to Berklee opened up a lot of doors for me, and attending an international college with musicians from around the world certainly had an influence on me.

With credits like Michael Brecker and Milton Nascimento, you're known primarily as a jazz and world music player. Was that a conscious career path?

No. I grew up on a steady diet of all the great rock and R&B of the Sixties and Seventies, and I'm just a naturally curious and open-minded person. When I hear something I like, I want to go out and try it, so I do.

Do you change basses depending on the artist you're working with?

Yes. If I'm playing an older style, I'll try to use an older bass and give the music the respect and touch it needs. If I'm playing old bossa novas and sambas, for example, I like the old P-Bass, but if it's a more modern Brazilian style, I'll bring the Tobias 5-string. Sometimes I'll bring a Fender and use an octave pedal to cover the notes below low E.

How did your love for African music develop?

As soon as I heard Salif Keita's 1987 record *Soro*. Then I started to meet African musicians who had come from Paris or South Africa via Paul Simon's band. I listened and learned until I could sit in, and when I got a regular Friday night gig to put together an African band, my friends showed me the ropes, playing the music from their native Cameroon, South Africa, Nigeria, Congo, and Mali. As time passed, I was honored when they would call me to do their gigs.

Tell me about the book you're working on.

I'm almost finished with *The Five Keys to World Rhythms*, a book for bassists and other rhythm section players that will guide them through the basics of African, Caribbean, and South American music. I'll put updates at leotraversa.com.

What African bassists would you recommend checking out?

Etienne Mbappe and Guy N'Sangue, who are both top-call on the Paris recording scene. Richard Bona, Bakithi Kumalo, and Mamadou Ba are great—and they all live here in New York. Habib Faye has been with Youssou N'Dour for a long time, and Michel Alibo was the bass player on *Soro*. I know I'm leaving out some, but that's a good start.