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Econo 101

Mike Watt's School Of Punk Rock

MIKE WATT IS THE ECON PROFESSOR YOU WISH YOU HAD—

friendly, articulate, and wildly entertaining. But sit for a spell in his classroom—an abandoned Navy latrine in San Pedro, California, that Watt converted into his practice pad—and you're bound to learn lessons beyond most scholars' comprehension.

Don't let his working-class duds and down-home mannerisms fool you: Watt is a learned dude. As likely to reference medieval artists and authors as he is to drop F-bombs and scatological metaphors in his colorful Pedro vernacular, Watt is himself a study in contrasts.

If there's prerequisite for a class with Watt, it's learning a few phrases of Wattspeak. First of all, "econo" has nothing to do with supply-and-demand. Rather, it evokes the ethos pioneered by his band the Minutemen in the early days of American punk rock. Traveling by van, staying with friends, and writing bite-size songs that are as direct and forceful as a kick to the gut are a few examples of what it means to "jam econo."

It was the Minutemen that put Watt on the punk-rock radar, along with guitarist, fellow frontman, and musical foil D. Boon and funky, frenetic drummer George Hurley. The band's muscular sound, direct delivery, and ideological focus coalesced for 1984's *Double Nickels on the Dime*, which was followed by albums that showcased the trio's unlimited potential. Sadly, the voyage ended in 1985 when D. Boon died in an auto accident—a topic Watt has taken on in his operas *Contemplating the Engine Room* and *The Secondman's Middle Stand*.

After a short break, Watt and Hurley soldiered on,

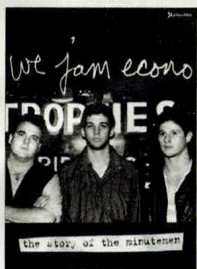
forming FIREHOSE, which challenged punk purism by signing with a major label, Columbia. Watt also began to juggle a number of side projects. In 1985 he formed Dos—a two-bass duo with his then-wife Kira Roessler (Black Flag)—and he began playing in Jane's Addiction/Porno For Pyros drummer Stephen Perkins's jazz/funk fusion outfit, Banyan, which also featured avant-garde guitar guru Nels Cline. Although FIREHOSE dissolved in 1994, Watt continues to gig and record with both Dos and Banyan, as well as with his organ trio, the Secondmen, and his guitar trio, the Missingmen.

At the moment, Watt is focusing his efforts on still another project—garage-rock originators Iggy & the Stooges. In fact, we might have Watt to thank for the Stooges reunion, celebrated this month with the band's first studio release in over 30 years, *The Weirdness*. In 2000, while recovering from an illness that nearly took his life, Watt began rebuilding his chops by forming two Stooges tribute bands: one on the East coast with Dinosaur Jr. guitarist J Mascis and drummer Murph, and one in the West with his Porno For Pyros bandmates, Stephen Perkins and guitarist Peter DiStephano. After Watt hooked up with Stooges Scott and Ron Asheton (drums and guitar), the band's buzz reached the ears of frontman Iggy Pop. Thirty years after its implosion, the Stooges reformed in 2000, with Watt filling in for original bassist David Alexander, who died in 1975.

"Iggy's the cat who made it all happen," Watt says humbly. "But who knows if I got the ball rolling? We

BY BRIAN FOX

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRAVIS McCOY



For more on Watt with the Minutemen, check out the DVD documentary *We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen* [Plexifilm, 2006]. The 90-minute film features interviews with and about the band, and a bonus DVD compiles three live performances.

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Lots more from this interview with Mike Watt is online at www.bassplayer.com.



had a meeting after a gig in Buenos Aires where Iggy pointed at me and told everyone, 'You know, I think this guy brought an energy that got this whole thing going.' I couldn't believe it. I was 16 when I was listening to the Stooges, and here I am now. I think I should be paying them. What a school! My ears are like gigantic sponges, trying to soak up everything they can. This is heavy."

A Navy brat from a harbor town, Watt has long looked to the sea for inspiration, absorbing its flux and flow. "Kayaking isn't getting away from music," he points out. "I write songs out there paddlin' the 'yak. They come from a different place than when you have a bass sitting in your lap, what I call 'neck math.' When I'm out there, stuff's hitting my eyes, nose, and ears, and I've got rhythms in my body. Music's coming from a whole different place."

Since his days with the Minutemen, Watt's continued to investigate currents in his own playing, an endeavor that's given him considerable creative range. Watt can produce a whirling, churning undertow as cold and powerful as an arctic surge. In calmer times, Watt's soundwaves wash over you, bathing you in a buoyant brine.

Fortunately, Watt's hydrodynamic explorations have not gone unnoticed. Last year, McNally Smith College of Music in Minneapolis even established a bass scholarship in his name. "Incredible," says the 49-year-old punk rocker. "I went there to spiel last year," he recalls, employing Wattspeak for "give a presentation or interview." "I started playing, but thought, Am I really going to teach them more licks? So I just put the bass down and started talking bass philosophy. I really feel the need to pass this stuff on. But I want to hand down possibilities, not answers."

Add session dates with Kelly Clarkson to Watt's busy schedule, and it's amazing he has time to share anything with anyone. But bust out those thinking caps, fellow students—class is in session.

HOW DID YOU GET READY TO step in on the new Stooges record?

Oh man, it was a pants-shitter. Making this album, I had this recurring nightmare of a gravestone that just read, **FUCKED UP THE STOOGES RECORD**. To get ready, the first thing was the music. They did demo sessions in Miami; then Iggy flowed me the tunes. I got the forms worked out, and then I flew to Miami and spent three days with Iggy, going over every part. He had a little amp, and I had the 'puter, a Mac PowerBook

with GarageBand. I put their tracks up and played along. He'd go, "Maybe you should try this," and he'd sing me a bass line. He came up with all the bass lines. He let me keep just one of my own, but that was no problem for me. I just surrender.

What were some specific things he wanted?

He wanted me to use a pick. A lot of guys ask me about pick vs. fingers. It's almost like a test of manliness. It's good to play with a pick, because there are things you can do with it you can't do with your fingers. A lot of singers and guitarists like the definition bassists get using a pick. The one thing that's lame about picks is that you lose 'em! So I try to get that definition using my fingers. Instead of the two fingers galloping, I use them together. I call it "the flipper." Sometimes Iggy couldn't tell the difference between that and a pick.

Where do you position your right hand when you play?

All over. Where you hit that string is as important as how hard you hit it; it's one of our strongest dynamic controls. Sometimes you don't want to be defined. You want to be blurry, almost like a dude playing arco.

What's one of the biggest challenges playing with the Stooges?

Man, there are parts of me that want to charge out there. Especially with the older songs—these are songs that have been in my head for 30 years! When you've got those good songs in your head and you're into it, you just want to let it carry you like it's a wave. But I've actually got responsibilities.

Have you ever gotten carried away?

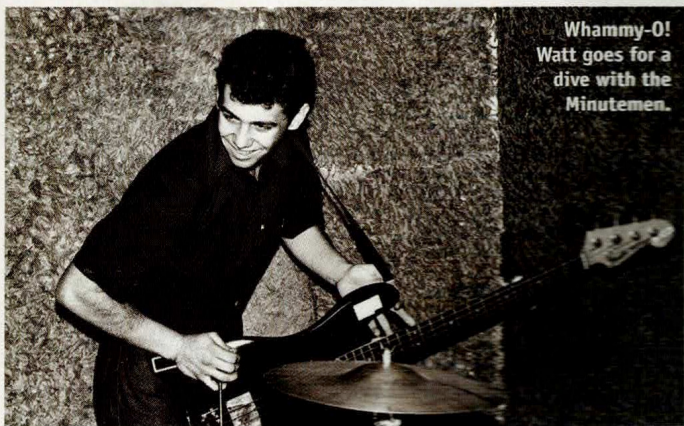
I've done it accidentally. Iggy called me out onstage for it in Lisbon: "No jazz!" And I was just pivoting on an octave, like a disco kind of thing. After the gig, he was like, "Was I hearing it wrong, or was I dancing on top of a bass solo? You know, Cab Calloway fired Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker for playing 'Chinese jazz . . .'" He was just kidding around, but I have big respect for that.

I'm part of an ensemble here that's being conducted. Iggy runs the stage. It's weird, because he's got this total-abandon, chaos thing—he's off. At the same time, he's hearing every note. He's got incredible focus. You cannot imagine the way he ran our practices and recording sessions. He kept it right on the money. It was beautiful.

What have you learned working with Iggy?

There's something you get from working with a frontman who doesn't work a machine [play an instrument]. They have a whole different perspective. They're not all focused on operating their machine, like the rest of us.

Society puts a lot of value on being the boss, but you can't learn everything being the boss. If you ask cats to follow your direction, you should get some lessons in following direction. Life is about taking turns. If you're a boss, you can tell people what to do, but is that really



Whammy-O!
Watt goes for a
dive with the
Minutemen.

getting the best out of them? There's an art to inspiring. You have to figure out ways of telling them without making them feel all beat down. Iggy's got a real talent for wording things so you have confidence. He's actually enabling you to find confidence in yourself by showing you the logic in his ideas.

How did you psych yourself up for recording with the band?

I was always thinking about Dave Alexander and the way his stuff fit. *Fun House* [Elektra, 1970] is amazing. It sounds like it could have been recorded last week. A lot of other records from that time sound dated, but the Stooges did it right. But I think it's also the rest of us—we latched onto that sound, and we kept it contemporary.

It can be hard for me to fit in; I have this tradition from the Minutemen that's nothing like Dave Alexander. It's partially because I didn't hear Dave first—I heard Jack Bruce, John Entwistle, and James Jamerson. I wanted to be like them, even though I couldn't even imagine what they were doing. It was just this thing that was rolling over the guitar player! Like "Crossroads" on Cream's *Wheels of Fire*; Clapton's kind of there, but then Bruce just rolls him over. It's such a victory!

I was listening to records that Stu Cook [Clearance Clearwater Revival] was on, and Steve Currie with T. Rex, but I couldn't hear their parts. Dave Alexander was the first guy I could hear and actually play like. I hear Dave key in the Stooges' music. And now it's my turn to fill the hole from him being gone. I told them, "Man, I'm clay." But I didn't want to copy Dave Alexander, because this is the Stooges now. They don't want to make a nostalgia record.

On your blogs, you were very open about your insecurities tracking the album.

I did that to help me get confidence up, because I was shittin' a pecan log. The recriminations on myself are never-ending. That way, you're thinking out loud, confronting yourself, and trying to be honest. Hopefully you'll shame yourself into doing better.

You also publish a tour journal on your website.

I do tour blogs to get people curious about getting

out to other towns and meeting people. When you put words out there, you're sharing with people. I try to make it about the human experience. I really dig touring; it's sort of like my pop's life as a sailor. That's what I'm trying to celebrate. Touring gets you excited about life—you get to visit different lands, different folks. Bass is a means for that.

How would people describe your musical personality?

Maybe a little over the top—I don't know. I'd only know this from hearing

other bass players. No matter what instrument you're playing, to serve the tune is a noble fucking deal. And music is generous enough that it gives back to that kind of player. But man, I sometimes do go all "Raging Bull" on people. D. Boon and Nels Cline throw it at you hard, so I throw it right back.

The Stooges played with Sonic Youth in England, and after the gig, [bassist] Kim Gordon said, "Man, I like the restraint, Mike." That was a big compliment. It's the last thing I'd ever expect about Watt!

How did you get the call to play with Kelly Clarkson?

I know her producer, David Kahne, from the old days. I didn't really know her or her music—I guess she's a pop singer who won some game show [Fox's *American Idol*]. I got to meet her and talk to her a little. I will say this: She can fucking sing! The young man she wrote the songs with, Jimmy Messer, is a skater who knew my music—he was the best. He was so enthusiastic about the whole deal. David, too, was very patient with me.

I haven't done a lot of session work—it's scary! The song's all done, you go in there, you've never heard it before, and you've got to come up with parts under a big magnifying glass. Some of the tracks already had bass on there. It's bad karma to replace somebody else, but some were MIDI, so that's okay [laughs]. It tripped me out when Dave A/B'd them; my bass was way fatter! It's hard for me to get perspective on my own music, because I'm so self-critical, but I couldn't believe the difference.

What kinds of ideas did you bring to the sessions?

One song reminded me of Madonna, so I put in a little dance lick. They let me try all sorts of stuff, even fuzz bass. I was really into it, because it was so creative. When you think of pop music, you don't normally think "creative." For those guys to open up the music like that was pretty righteous.

On this one song, David said, "Okay, she's going to get kissed here—the music's all working up to that." It was almost like theater, interpreting a script. So I did this ascending double-stop thing, ending on the

Selected Discography



Solo albums *Secondman's Middle Stand*, Red Ink, 2004; *Contemplating the Engine Room*, Columbia, 1997; *Ball-Hog or Tugboat?*, Columbia, 1995. **With the Stooges** *The Weirdness*, Virgin, 2007; *Telluric Chaos* (live), Skydog, 2005. **With Kelly Clarkson** (Untitled at press time), RCA, 2007. **With Banyan** *Live at Perkins' Palace*, Sanctuary, 2004; *Anytime at All*, Virgin, 1999; *Banyan*, Cyberoctave, 1997. **With Porno For Pyros** *Good God's Urge*, Warner Bros., 1997. **With Dos** *Justamente Tres*, Kill Rock Stars, 1996; *Uno Con Dos*, New Alliance, 1991. **With FIREHOSE** (on Columbia, except where noted) *Mr. Machinery Operator*, 1993; *Live Totem Pole*, 1992; *Flyin' the Flannel*, 1991; *FROMOHIO*, SST, 1989; *Sometimes*, SST, 1988; *If'n*, SST, 1987; *Ragin' Full-On*, SST, 1986. **With the Minutemen** (all on SST) *Project: Mersh*, 1985; *3-Way Tie (For Last)*, 1985; *Politics of Time*, 1984; *Double Nickels on the Dime*, 1984; *What Makes a Man Start Fires?*, 1983; *Buzz or Howl Under the Influence of Heat*, 1983; *The Punch Line*, 1981; *Paranoid Time*, 1980.

3rd, and making the chord really ass-fat.

When Kelly was leaving, she turned to the producer and said, "I think the 'old punk guy' idea is a good one." We both laughed. But I was kind of alien to her, and it was all alien to me. Usually you'll hear about "synergy" and that kind of shit in a marketing meeting. But this is not that—this is a human experience.

Whenever you play, it's not a wasted thing. You're investing in that gig that might be around the corner. Who knows how those experiences add up? The stuff [Sonic Youth guitarist] Thurston Moore has taught me about music, the playing with D. Boon—it all comes together to help me. And if you get enough in you, maybe some comes off on the cats you're playing with. Here, with Kelly, I'm in a 'mersh [commercial] situation, but all this avant-garde, weird, bizarre stuff comes into the moment, because I've suddenly got to create. I've got to help this song out, or I'm failing as a bass dude.

Composition of your part is the whole dealio, maybe even more important than your sound or technique. You don't want to bogart—you want to aid and abet. Most people look at the tile—bass players are the grout putting it all together. We set them cats up. Ideally, we can do that like Jamerson; if bass goes away, the whole song falls apart. "My Girl," is a righteous, econo part—that is the grail! The danger in human behavior is, the more you do something, the more you like to do it. First the training wheels come off, then you're riding with no hands, then on a unicycle. But really, it's where you take the bike that's important.

When I see bands, the first thing I do is look at the bass player. I think, Chances are nine out of ten that this guy didn't write this song. Look at the bass part he thought of. What would you think of, Watt? And what physics does to us bass players is tricky—the more notes you play, the littler you sound, because our wavelengths are so long. So we've got to find the *right* notes—the big daddies!

What are some ways to find the right part?

This is what our musical lives are all about. It's that mission. I don't know if there are formulas, because each song has its own personality. Sometimes you want melodic. But isn't it funny that nobody can deny a good bass line? It's almost like panning for gold. "I found it!" Well, how do you find it? You sift through everything with a goddamn pan! You run through all your shticks—pentatonic riffs, bass drum patterns, 5ths, octaves—your whole vocabulary.

I look for indicators. Drummers do it big-time, practically saying, "Here comes a new part." Here's an on-ramp, here's an off-ramp. You learn to read the song as a journey, with hills and valleys beyond just the groove. It feels good when you're hopping on a groove, but does it go anywhere? It is a killer thing—groove is righteous, but there's also something about drama and theater.

There's something, too, about spirit. When I hear Jamerson on [Marvin Gaye's] "What's Going On," it's telling you a lot. It's almost asking what's going on. Somehow Jamerson gets that feeling, improvising through the chords, but never spinning it out. It's one of the greatest bass lines ever. Somebody told me he was playing it on his back, all boracho [drunk]! We all owe Jamerson. He was one of the first guys to realize what bass was all about, and not treat it as a toy.

What's been key in developing your bass style?

Playing with D. Boon. He went for a new thing, bringing the whole idea of putting politics and personality into your band. He was like, "You know what? I'm going to play real treble-y, and I want the bass way up there, and the drums filling every space we can, because we're going to make this egalitarian. We're going to make this a three-way fucking tie." He wouldn't play power chords. He'd say, "This isn't going to give you enough room." What a generous guitar player.

Inspiration from the new opera you're working on comes from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. How did it start out?

I went to the Museo del Prado in Madrid when I was with the Stooges in Spain, and I actually saw the paintings with those little creatures. We don't know a lot about the cat, but the paintings were probably visualizations of proverbs. I don't know 500-year-old Flemish Dutch shit, so I made up my own proverbs—39 of them.

It's as if I took a mirror and broke it into 39 pieces. I thought, Why not just take a glimpse of the inside of my head right at this moment? The idea came from working on the Minutemen film *We Jam Econo* [see sidebar]. I was like, "Whoa, I like these little songs—there ain't a lot of filler here!" So I wanted to do little songs.

This new opera is different from my other two in that it's not narrative—it's simultaneous. Because of Stooges commitments, I haven't been able to work with the Missingmen on this piece yet. And it looks like this year is going to have a lot of Stooges stuff.

What else have you been writing?

I've written an album for Nels Cline and Bob



Boom Sticks & Thunder Brooms

Watt's main bass with the Minutemen was a Fender Telecaster Bass, but now he gigs almost exclusively with his '65 Gibson EB-3, a 30½"-scale instrument that has seen a number of modifications. "I added a Lane Poor pickup where a Fender P pickup would be—that stock neck pickup is too woofy," he says. "I also added a blend knob, because I like having a single volume control. With the preamp, I tend to boost the midrange a bit, depending on the room."

"I brought a bunch of basses to the Kelly Clarkson session, but they liked the Thunderbird II the most. There's something about mahogany—it sounds so round. I had to move the bridge, because it was totally out of tune from the 7th fret up." Watt strings his basses with D'Addario EXL165 roundwounds, .045–.105. He usually plugs into Eden heads and cabinets, typically a WP100 Navigator preamp, a WT1550 power amp, and two D410XLT 4x10 cabinets. "They have good punch and definition. The Navigator preamp has a really good compressor. I'm such a thug, I've got to use a little compression." Watt's rack also includes a Furman PL-Plus power conditioner and a Korg DTR-2000 chromatic tuner. For Stooges dates, he normally plays through rented Ampeg SVTs.

Though Watt used a few stompboxes on *The Secondman's Middle Stand*, he's wary of effect pedals. "I feel the debt the bass owes the band, and pedals fuck with that low end. Envelope filters can be trippy, though, because you play those things; they're actually musical devices."

More on Watt's bass collection—as well as his thoughts on strings, engineers, and soundmen—is at www.bassplayer.com and his own website, www.hootpage.com.

Lee, the last band I had for the *Engine Room* opera. And I wrote another opera for the Secondmen, my organ trio. These are entire records for the guys. I like the idea of writing for particular dudes. It's the ultimate thing you can do for a friend. I'm writing for my guys, giving them everything I can. Also, it's a chance for me to grow. I put a big demand on myself.

What about Dos?

In Dos, there's no hiding. There's no drums to mask you. And we're competing for the same narrow band of sound, so composition becomes very important—we've got to ping-pong on each other. Yuka Honda, Sean Lennon's musical director, is mixing our new record right now.

What other projects are you working on right now?

I'm doing a trippy project playing with a shamisen, this crazy Japanese banjo. Kaori Tsuchida from the Go! Team is sending me the tapes from England. Shamisen music doesn't normally have bass. The way they hold time—or don't hold time—is really rubato. That's basically how I played when I was a kid [laughs]. But here I am, this punk thug trying to learn from it. I started learning about the music, but said, "No, don't—I want you to bring your deal." There is a danger in doing something for a long time—you get in ruts. So she's very generous to do it with me.

I've done projects like this before where you're not even playing with the person live. It takes discipline. You're dealing purely with the music. It's without that human dynamic, except through their creative work. Usually I'm with my guys right here at the prac pad.

Playing in an ensemble with people is a heavy challenge; that's why most bands tend to have a single dictator. Here, you don't have to deal with that clutter. In a way, though, I think it's a necessary clutter. When I bring my songs to my guys, I look to see how they play 'em, and I change to fit. Maybe a great composer has a vision in his head, and he has to hear it, but you're talking to Watt. I'll tell you—my songs ain't that fucking sophisto [sophisticated]! In fact, these guys are going to breathe the life into the songs.

Maybe this comes from my punk background, but I would rather take a dude with spirit than a dude with chops. Prac it [practice] enough and they'll get it. A lot of the chops dudes are princesses that are impossible to be with as people. It's great playing with cats that you know as dudes. There's something, too, in the process of showing them. What I'm look-

ing for in music people is how they spell their name with their machine.

You also play with Banyan.

I don't play with Banyan all the time—but man, if Nels is there, I try to be there. I love that cat. He's taught me so much. I've had to do Banyan with other guitar players, and it's hard for me if they bring some guy in there who's going to comp on chords. He's going to get steamrolled! Not on purpose, of course.

Last year we played the Monterey Jazz Festival—playing "Fun House" in front of a bunch

of guys in sweaters! [Laughs.] Scofield played right before us—he was very cool. Some of these cats, the chops don't mean anything. They're just humans who want to talk music. Which is great, because everybody's got something to teach you.

I try to keep myself in situations that will teach me shit. The more challenging, the better. It keeps me young, curious, and humbled. Life isn't supposed to be figured out. It's supposed to have twists and turns and things you can't predict.