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MANIC STREET PREACHERS

'ROCK MUSIC IS ABSOLUTELY EMPTY!'

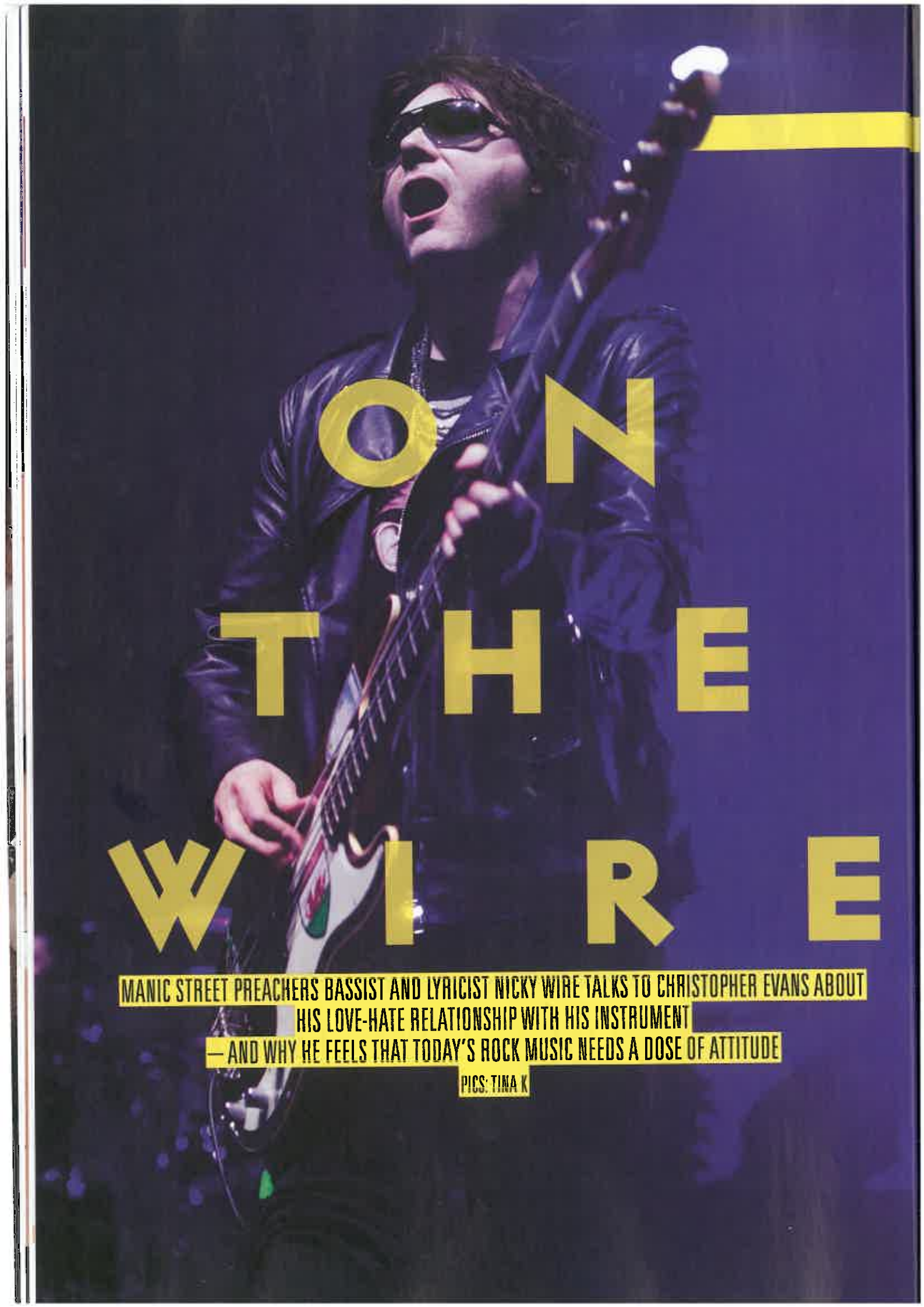
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ON THE WIRE

MANIC STREET PREACHERS BASSIST AND LYRICIST NICKY WIRE TALKS TO CHRISTOPHER EVANS ABOUT HIS LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS INSTRUMENT — AND WHY HE FEELS THAT TODAY'S ROCK MUSIC NEEDS A DOSE OF ATTITUDE

PICS: TINA K

Y

ou may recall 1991, when the Manic Street Preachers exploded on to the British and international music scene with grandiose claims that they would sell 16 million copies of their debut album *Generation Terrorists* before dismantling in a blaze of beautiful glory. Armed with heavy make-up, political sloganeering and a diatribe against everyone and everything, quoting from Camus and Plath to Monroe and Brando, the punk-inspired band from the Welsh valleys became the darlings of the alternative music press. Led by the band's androgynous and antagonistic spokesmen Nicky Wire and Richey Edwards, the Manics' provocative lyrics quickly gained them a devoted fanbase.

Fastforward to 2014. Thankfully, the Manics haven't fulfilled their self-prophesised implosion and are set to release their twelfth album, *Futurology*. Recorded in Berlin and Cardiff, bassist and lyricist Nicky Wire describes the record as 'post-punk-disco-rock'. Asked about the bass playing on the new album, Wire explains: "It's really Jah Wobble, particularly on the track 'Europa Geht Durch Mich': there is a lot of Jah throughout the album. There are a lot of detuned bass riffs on the album as well. 'Let's Go To War', 'Europa' and 'Walk Me To The Bridge' are all detuned to G – I think! I could be wrong there, James [Dean Bradfield, Manics singer] detunes it for me."

As self-deprecating as ever, Wire is sitting in his room at the famous Rockfield Studios in rural Monmouthshire in Wales, drinking coffee and looking relaxed ahead of the album's release and tour. Tall and slim – hence his nickname; he was born Nick Jones – Wire looks younger than his 45 years. He clearly knows his stuff about the bass, although he claims he isn't remotely technical.

"There's quite a lot of baritone bass on this album," he continues. "We've got a Burns baritone and a Gretsch Guild B-401 that is my studio faithful. They've become quite important instruments, especially for the post-punk stuff on the album. I think you can get a lot out of it, in that shiny New Order sort of way. The Ovation, which is the Kim Gordon bass, has been used a lot too, especially for the low stuff. It's a fucking heavy bass though... I can't use it live."

Wire's contribution to the Manics' music has increased over the last few albums: he has even taken lead vocals on a number of tracks. Is he turning into Sting or Paul McCartney, then? "Definitely not!" he laughs. "I haven't played bass and sung live yet. The only time I might is on the track 'Futurology', where I sing the chorus. I've been practising, but it's the most unnatural feeling. It's difficult for me: backing vocals usually puts me off a band as I'm so fucking finicky. I think Kim Gordon gets away with it, though, as she always looked cool at a mic, as did Melissa Auf Der Maur – she's one of my favourite bassists."

Wire has been known in the past to downplay his musical ability, admitting that Bradfield has played bass on "around 5 or 10 per cent of the [Manics' songs]", but his passion for his instrument and his admiration for some of his bass heroes is obvious. Asked how he would describe himself as a bass player, he grins and replies: "Well, I think I'm pretty unique! Growing up, my heroes were pretty much rock bassists. I loved Roger Glover of Deep Purple because he was so in the pocket: he just kept out of the way of everything and was one of the most melodic, gracious bass players there has ever been. And then there's Geddy Lee of Rush who I look up to like an absolute god: I've never heard a bass player like him, really."

He adds: "I've always tried in a very punk way to take tiny little elements

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of Geddy and Ronnie Lane. I loved the melody of Ronnie Lane and the way he just wanders. The track 'Yes' off [the Manics' 1994 album] *The Holy Bible* actually doesn't really work, but it does. James was like 'It's just not the right notes!' and I said 'I know, but it works'. So Ronnie Lane is a big influence, as is Russell Webb from the Skids. Also Derek Forbes, who I bow down to as the greatest British bass player ever for the early Simple Minds stuff. I could never be those people, but you can hear a lot of Simple Minds on this album."

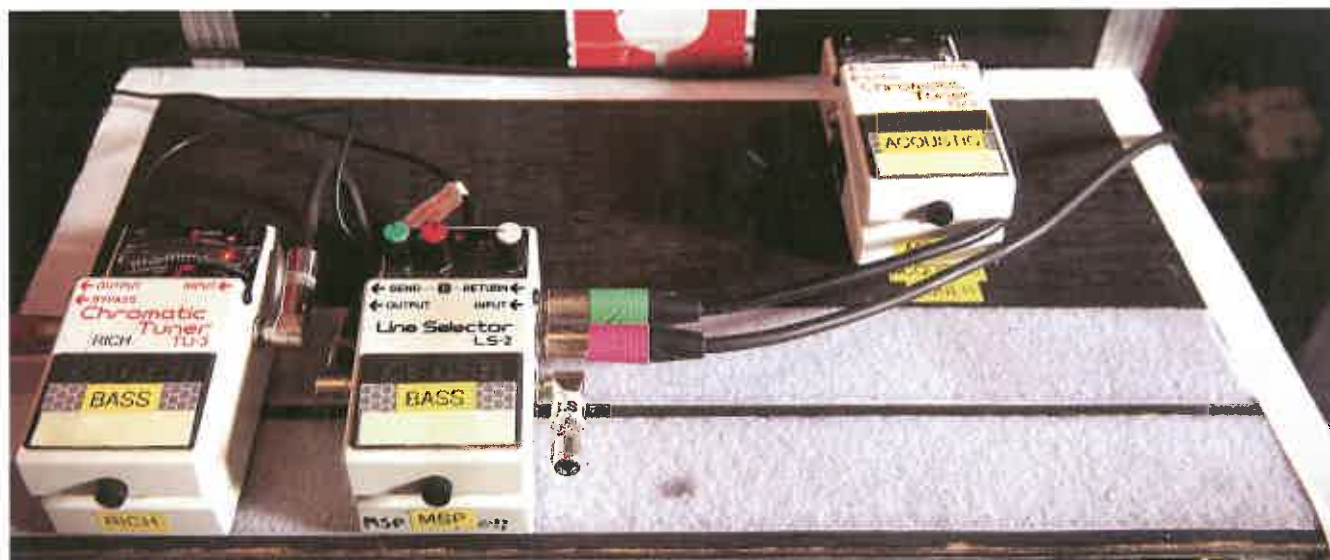
Wire's bass-lines have often been experimental over the years, he muses. "There is *The Holy Bible* version of us, and this version of us. There have been some heavy, meaty bass-lines like 'Peeled Apples' and 'Archives Of Pain', and then there's the in-the-pocket stuff like 'Send Away The Tigers' and 'Everything Must Go', which is me locking in with Sean [Moore, drummer]. I prefer playing like that: if I can obliterate myself into Sean's bass drum then I'm happy."

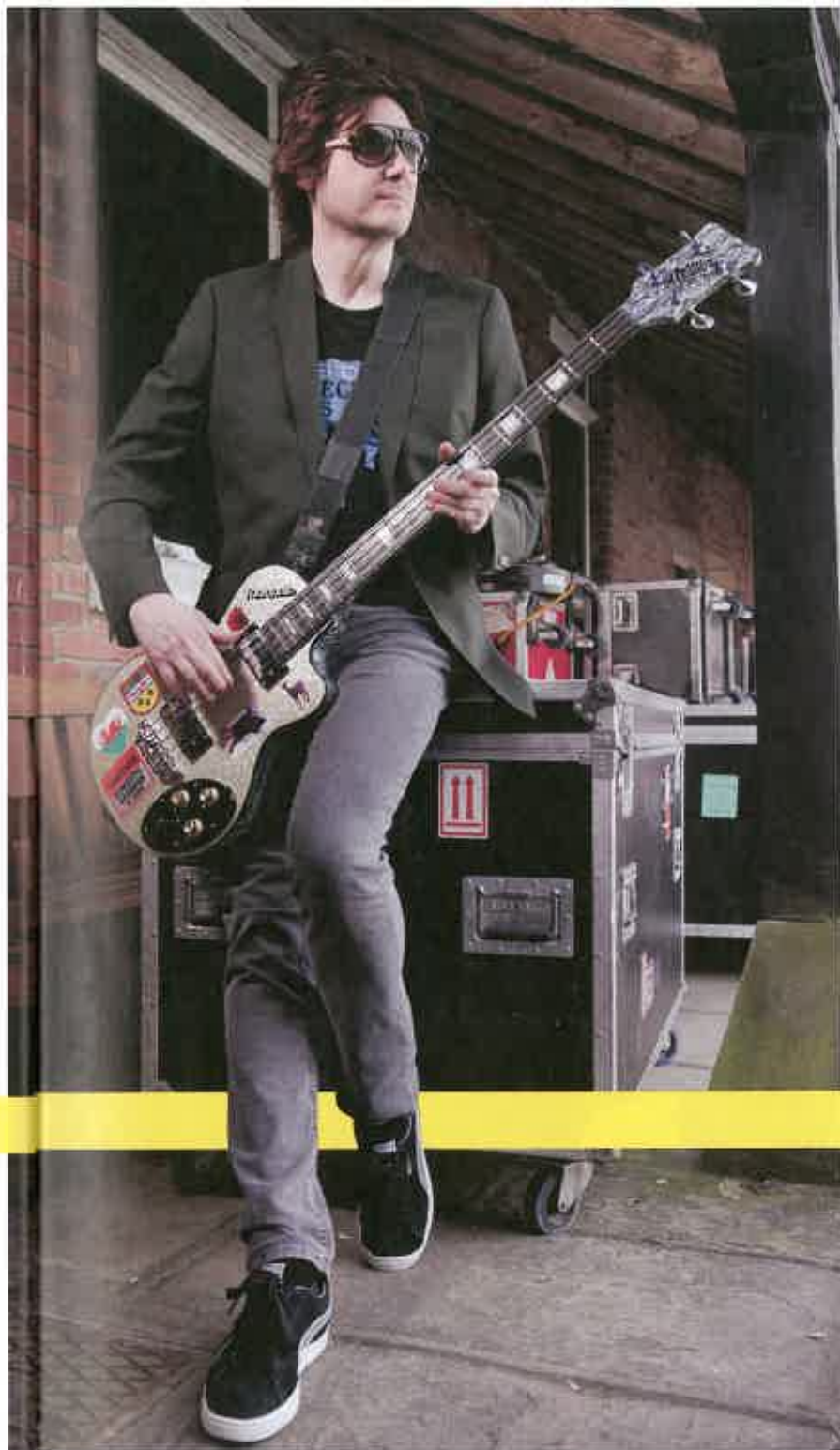
Seeing Wire's basses lined up, many of them typically covered in glitter or stickers of the Welsh flag, the Sex Pistols and Nirvana, it's clear that he has an eclectic taste when it comes to his choice of bass. "When I started off all I cared about was how a bass looked," he admits, "so I was obsessed with a Rickenbacker and a white Paul Simonon Fender. That was pretty much all I cared about. Then I was desperate to have a Charvel. I had the original white one that I smashed after one gig in Coleraine University in front of about 14 people. It actually sounded really good, so I really regret that one."

Readers of a certain age will recall that Wire was famous for smashing up basses on stage in the Manics' early days. He continues: "I also smashed my white Fender Precision at Sheffield Leadmill, so two of my icons were gone. Then I had a Gibson Firebird or Thunderbird or whatever the fuck it's called: I didn't like those, they were like planks. I used Fender Precisions and Jazzes for a long time even though I really disliked them. I've never got on with Fenders at all, but I used them through [the albums] *Everything Must Go* and *This Is My Truth, Tell Me Yours*."

He continues: "I had a black Jazz that was all right, but I just hated playing them live because they were so heavy and cumbersome. I ended up smashing one to bits at the Millennium Stadium gig on New Year's Eve in

"I THINK THAT ROCK MUSIC IS ABSOLUTELY EMPTY. IT'S BECOME A PARODY OF AMERICAN POP-PUNK AND IT JUST DOESN'T FEEL GOOD"





1999. I decided to move on and since then I've got two 70s Guilds, a B-401 for the studio and a B-301 for live, which are my go-to basses these days. I also use Maranellos live because they look so good and you can chuck them around and they stay in tune, which is rare for a bass. That's the other thing with a Fender: for a bass player like me who jumps around, it would go out of tune. I've never tuned my bass on stage in 24 years, I just wouldn't do it."

On *Futurology*, Wire mainly used an Ovation as well as a Tokai Precision copy. He smiles when he thinks about how he winds his bandmates up with his choice of bass. "I do frustrate the hell out of James and Sean, as I tend to gravitate towards odd basses. I picked the Tokai up pretty cheap in a music shop in Newport, but it's turned into a fucking brilliant bass."

Throughout his career, Wire says that he has kept his set-up relatively basic, although he did experiment with different pedals early on. "I did have a really good Hiwatt early on because of John Entwistle," he explains, "but that got trashed as well. I also had a Trace Elliot to try and be Duff McKagan, but it was way too twangy. But if I'm honest, I've no idea if I have a specific set-up. In the studio I tend to use a lot of Avalon U5 preamp/DIs. Loads of my favourite records from the 70s are just straight DI. I'm pretty sure most of *London Calling* is just straight DI."

Speaking of former Guns N' Roses bassist McKagan, Wire has fond memories of Duff contributing a bass-line to the Manics track 'A Billion Balconies Facing The Sun'. "Duff was an absolute blast," he says. "Guns N' Roses were such a moment for us in the 80s. They really did feel like our band, because all the music we loved until that point was kind of second-hand, whereas Guns seemed like the perfect mix of punk and rock'n'roll. He's such a sweetheart. We sent the track over to him and he did such a fantastic bass-line. The trouble then was that I had to copy it live! He's very much a plectrum man and I haven't used them for around 15 years, as I can't really connect with my bass without using my fingers. He loved the song, though, and was like [adopts American accent], 'You guys have done it again – it sounds like Lindsey Buckingham mixed with the Clash'. You can't get much better than that, can you?"

Wire says he doesn't have predetermined ideas or a specific riff he reverts to when buying a bass. "I just look at it and buy it purely on the vibe," he says, before uttering the immortal line, "The only thing worse than music shops for being full of cunts is the Apple store. That's just about taken over."

Something triggers his memory and he retells a story from the band's early days when he and bandmate Richey Edwards, now missing for 19 years and officially presumed dead in 2008, visited a guitar shop while on tour. "We were playing Cambridge Junction, and me and Richey went in to this guitar shop, literally looking for a guitar to smash up that night, like a Squier Telecaster or similar. The guy in there was so supercilious. He saw us looking at it and it was shit, probably worth £150."

Wire adds: "He came over and asked if we wanted to try it out, and Richey and me said 'Nah, we're just looking for something to smash tonight, we're doing a gig' – and he literally said, 'You can't buy it then'. It was a shitty Squier Telecaster copy!



He was saying that it was out of order, that it was a precious thing and so on. That disregard has always been deep in us."

With modern technology and the availability of videos and tutorials, Wire thinks that "just playing" is still the best way to improve as a bass player. "James will still show me a bass-line now and again," he says. "There's no fucking pride or shame in the band from any of us. I'm really humble as a bass player. I've always been musical and I've always had timing: it's bothering to play in time with everyone else that's usually my problem! I put my bass down and started skipping during 'You Love Us' at Glastonbury in 1999. James was looking across at me, like, 'Where the fuck is the bass?' But that's the element of performance I have. On [the Manics' 1993 album] *Gold Against The Soul* we really upped the game. It's not our greatest album but it's very kind of muso. I never thought I could play the bass like Flea, but I did on the track 'Drug Drug Druggy'. It's not really me, though."

Asked for tips for aspiring bassists, Wire says: "For me it's about keeping out of the way of great melodies and great riffs. Obviously, if your band is based around a bass riff like the Chilis it's different, but for us I always felt there was so much going on between James's guitar and the vocals there was no need for me to interfere with that."

The punk influence that has stayed with the Manics is evident throughout *Futurology*. Wire says that his bass-lines are inspired by the bands he has always loved. Renowned for playing his bass low, Wire says: "It's been the fucking bane of my life. It's ruined my shoulders and back jumping around with it, but I could never do it any other way. Peter Hook was a hero and even

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Ronnie Lane had it in a really good place, as did Sid Vicious. Duff plays it low too. I do regret it, as it's so much fucking easier to play it a little higher."

He adds: "For its absolute deepness but simplicity, I love the bass-line in 'Public Image' by PIL. Considering Jah Wobble wasn't really a bass player, they turned up with such an amazing comeback single that bass rumble fucking destroys you. It's unsurpassable. I wish I'd written some of Jah's and loads of Geddy's bass-lines. They add countermelodies to everything — vocals, guitar and drums. Every instrument is speaking in its own language, it's totally astounding."

Futurology flirts between disillusionment with the unevenness and injustices of society ('Let's Go To War' and 'Black Square') to the baggage of the past ('The Next Jet to Leave Moscow'). There is a belief in a future for humanity, although Wire believes that rock 'n' roll is now simply a career path, devoid of any desire for political statement.

"I think that rock music is absolutely empty," he sighs. "It's become a parody of American pop-punk and it just doesn't feel good. There is no relation to me for what was punk, and there's definitely no relation to me for what was rock. There is an emptiness to that kind of genre. It's crying out for any kind of rock band, with any kind of attitude or social edge. It doesn't have to be full-on political diatribes, but it needs to have some engagement with what is going on."

Looks like there's still work for the Manics to do. For now, that baton is still firmly in their hands, and Nicky Wire doesn't seem willing to pass it on just yet. **EW**

Futurology is released in June. Info: www.manicstreetpreachers.com