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**Jack Casady - The Interview****JACK CASADY**  
THE INTERVIEW

Jefferson Airplane rocketed to superstardom in 1967 on the strength of their hits "Somebody To Love" and "White Rabbit," making them a cornerstone of San Francisco's burgeoning rock scene. Jack Casady's groundbreaking basswork was a highlight of "Surrealistic Pillow", the Airplane's 1967 breakthrough album and was only the beginning of a career that would establish him as one of the most influential bass players in rock and roll history. Epi's Don Mitchell recently spoke with the legendary bass player.

**EPI:** When did you first become interested in music?

**JACK:** Well my father was an audiophile when I was a kid. He used to build what was known back then as Hi-Fidelity or Hi-Fi equipment so we always had a nice system that we would play records on. He loved music and was a member of The American Jazz Society so once a month we would get records

in the mail and I would listen to all of them. This was around 1956 when I was twelve years old and I was exposed to a lot of different music from the 20's, 30's and 40's. It was also about that time that I discovered my dad's old acoustic guitar that was in our attic.

**EPI:** Was that your first experience with an instrument?

**JACK:** Yes. I was creeping off into the attic and playing it thinking nobody knew, but of course in a household everybody knows where their child is, so it was not the big secret I thought it was. Then one day that guitar just disappeared. A short time later, at Christmas, my gift was a letter pinned to the tree that told me I had been given twelve guitar lessons and that the old acoustic had been taken to the shop to be set up with steel strings.



**EPI:** Ha, you can't fool mom and dad can you!

**JACK:** Right! They knew I was interested and it made a nice Christmas gift.

**EPI:** How did the lessons go?

**JACK:** My first teacher was a big band guitarist named Harry Vorhees. Later on I took from a number of guitarists; one was Bill Harris who was the guitarist for the Clovers. He had studied with a guy who studied with Andres Segovia.

**EPI:** So you were kind of Grandfathered to Segovia?

**JACK:** Well, I don't know about that, in a manner of speaking I guess, but I certainly saw him many times at Constitution Hall.

**EPI:** Did you move on to electric or stay with the acoustic?

**JACK:** I had a newspaper route and delivered The Washington Post and the Evening Star. Collectively, on Sunday I served about 400 papers and I also had a lawn mowing business so it didn't take all that long for me to buy my first electric which was a Student Model Gibson 175. It had the big f-hole body and a single pickup. Back in those days I was playing Buddy Holly stuff, Gene Vincent stuff and I tried my best to play Jim Burton stuff, who was playing with Ricky Nelson.

**EPI:** How did your musical journey progress from there?

**JACK:** Charles, my older brother was a classmate of a guy named Jorma Kaukonen. They went to Woodrow Wilson High School while I was in Jr. High but Jorma and I ended up starting a band called the Triumphs. It was Jorma playing rhythm on his Gibson J-50, incidentally the very same guitar he used on Embryonic Journey a few years later when we were starting out as Jefferson Airplane, and I played what was known then as lead guitar.

**EPI:** At what point did you switch over to bass?



**JACK:** A good friend of mine, Danny Gatton called me up one day to fill in for his bass player. This was around 1959 or 1960 and I loved it so much that I went out and bought a bass. All of a sudden my work quota increased dramatically because I played both bass and guitar.

**EPI:** It sounds like you were working steadily. What prompted you to make the move from the East Coast to the West Coast?

**JACK:** A fateful phone call from Jorma in 1965. I hadn't seen him in about a year so we were just chatting and catching up when he asked me to come to the West Coast and join

[Jefferson Airplane](#). I dropped out of college and went out to San Francisco and joined the band.

**EPI:** That was indeed a fateful call. Did you have any idea at the time that you were part of a music scene that would influence music forever?

**JACK:** None. You know how ten years ago nobody had any idea how important the internet would be or how it would affect our lives? Or back in 1989 when you carried a cell phone around that was the size of a brick? You had no idea what was about to come. Back then it was kind of rude to talk in public on a cell phone and now you can't get anybody to shut up next to you. You don't realize how that kind of stuff works out.

**EPI:** Was the music scene out there much different than your East Coast experiences?

**JACK:** Yes. When I came out to San Francisco, I came from a background where you rehearsed with charts and all that. All of a sudden I was with guys that came out of art school and doing things their own way. They were just playing. Nobody thought they were going to make a living at it. I always

expected to make a living at it but a lot of other people didn't.

**EPI:** So were you intent on getting Jefferson Airplane a record deal?

**JACK:** That was our only opportunity to get recorded. Back then, nobody had their own studios like they do today and the only chance to hear yourself back was to get a record contract and go into the studios where the equipment was. And it was quite a bit different then. We recorded our first album on a three track. There were two tracks for recording and one track to bounce to. The next album, Surrealistic Pillow, the one that really broke us out with Grace Slick, was recorded on a four track.

**EPI:** Did the move to the West Coast help you develop your style?

**JACK:** It was an opportunity to play with some people that had some really wacky views of how music should be made. It allowed me to try out a lot of different things where on the East Coast I was primarily working in cover bands, where you had three saxes, wore plaid tuxedos and did five sets a night for six nights in a row. In San Francisco I had the opportunity to flesh out different ideas and create my own music.

**EPI:** How did your connection with Jimi Hendrix come about?

**JACK:** Back in those days we were playing the Fillmore Auditorium a lot and since it was our hometown we got to meet a lot of the acts that came through. I met Jimi there. Sometime later we were in New York taping The Dick Cavett Show. That night we went to a local club to check out Stevie Winwood and Traffic and Jimi happened to be there too. In those days we carried our guitars around with us everywhere we went because there was always a chance to play. We went over to the studio that would later become Electric Ladyland Studio and hung out all night. At about 7:30 in the morning Jimi asked me if I wanted to play a blues he was recording and I said sure. We ran over it one time and he broke string. Ran over it again and then I think part of a third time and that was it. I was as surprised as anybody that it ended up on the record.

**EPI:** In the midst of all this huge success you decided to start another group with Jorma. What was the inspiration for [Hot Tuna](#)?

**JACK:** At the time I was listening to stuff like Reverend Gary Davis, John Lee



Hooker and a lot of the blues folk music that was getting attention on the college campuses with artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Jorma and I started the group to focus on that Americana style of music. Jorma and I have been playing together for forty-seven years now and most of those years we've had our band Hot Tuna. It still provides us with that small combo interplay that we enjoy so much.

**EPI:** Tell me about your Epiphone Signature Bass.

**JACK:** When I first started playing, I ran across a short scale semi-hollow bass. Despite lacking some low end, I really enjoyed the semi-hollow nature of that bass and over the years tried to capture that characteristic. In 1985 I was living in New York and happened to stop in a music store one day and saw a goldtop, full scale semi-hollow Les Paul bass. I loved the bass but found the pickup to be deficient. It had a tendency to bleed out when too many other instruments were playing. I did a little investigating and found out that only about 400 of the instruments were made in 1972 and because it was kind of an odd duck, it didn't catch on. I approached Gibson and asked if they would be interested in reproducing the bass with my input. Epiphone's Jim Rosenberg was very interested and allowed me to kind of re-make the instrument. I told Jim that I'd like to develop a Jack Casady pickup for it and he hooked me up with the R&D Department at Gibson. I went to work on the pickup and it took almost two years to develop. I think they were getting pretty ancie by this time but I wanted it right. I did a lot of homework and bench testing and finally when it clicked in right, it was great. They blow the old Gibsons to smithereens, even in the construction. As you know, the early 70's weren't good for cars or guitars (Laughs) and the workmanship that's coming in on these instruments is just super. Every year I get two new instruments that I take out on the road. No ringers. I have none that are set up a special way or anything like that and they are great.

**EPI:** Your first solo project, "Dream Factor" has been critically acclaimed. Any plans to do another solo Jack Casady project?

**JACK:** Actually I have a few songs done already for an instrumental album. On "Dream Factor" I tried not to make it a bass specific record. I wanted it to be a song oriented record so I wrote most of the stuff on guitar and then approached different singer-songwriters to do the lyrics and sing the songs. I've never been real ambitious about playing everything myself and all that kind of stuff and I'd rather construct melodies than blow through jazz changes, but this next album will be featuring the bass guitar more.

**EPI:** We at Epiphone and a generation of bass players that you have influenced certainly look forward to that!



For more about Jack Casady visit [www.JackCasady.com](http://www.JackCasady.com).

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