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Gail Ann Dorsey and Catherine Russell On The Road With David Bowie

GAIL ANN DORSEY and CATHERINE RUSSELL

"THE FIRST BASS I EVER OWNED WAS AN EPIPHONE!
IT WAS A SECOND HAND, SUNBURST WITH A WHITE
PICK GUARD, AND I BELIEVE IT COST ME ABOUT \$150!"
.....GAIL ANN DORSEY



Gail Ann Dorsey is a top session bassist and vocalist with an eclectic, impressive career spanning two decades. She has also received critical acclaim and notoriety as an international solo recording artist with her 1988 WEA debut album *The Corporate World*, and her 1992 Island Records recording *Rude Blue*. Gail has performed and recorded with an incredibly diverse collection of distinguished artists including Bryan Ferry, Dar Williams, Tears For Fears, The Indigo Girls, Jane Siberry, Khaled, Skin, and most notably, her near decade as touring bassist/vocalist for the legendary David Bowie. Recently, Epiphone's Don Mitchell was able to chat with Gail Ann.

EPI: I hear you are quite a wonderful guitar player and singer in addition to your obvious skill as a bassist. Tell us about your early days as a musician....what got you interested from the start?

GAIL ANN: I think my appetite and aptitude for music came with me when I was born. I can remember asking for a six string guitar when I was five. I finally got one on my ninth birthday. It was a present from my Godmother Edith who lived next door. I've always loved music and singing. My older brother used to tape me singing Otis Redding's *Sittin' On The Dock Of The Bay* on an old reel-to-reel tape recorder and play it back to me. I never got tired of singing into that microphone and listening back to my voice!

My first guitar heroes and heroines were Mark Farner of Grand Funk Railroad, Tony Maiden of Rufus, Neil Young, Terry Kath of Chicago, Joni Mitchell, Brian May and the ultimate Jimi Hendrix. Later I discovered the extraordinary acoustic

guitar of Joan Armatrading, and my favorite female guitarist of all-time, the sublime Nancy Wilson of Heart. Playing bass was definitely an unexpected turn for me. I always wanted to be a great guitarist. I wanted to express myself through the acoustic and electric guitar.



EPI: What was your inspiration to pursue music as a career?

GAIL ANN: Funny enough, I think that my main inspiration for pursuing a career in music was going to film school! I was certain that I wanted a career in film and television as a screenwriter/director. I attended California Institute of The Arts, School of Film & Video Live Action for three semesters. Basically, I discovered that music was much more suited to my creative temperament, at least at that time. I refocused my career plans to music, because at least with music, the rewards for your labor are more instantaneous. Movie-making is a long and arduous process. Playing music for an audience is the moment! Aside from the circumstances of my film school experience, I have always believed that my life's journey was meant to be a musical one. I believed this as a child, and so far it has been my truth. I am blessed and humbled by that truth.

EPI: Would you describe yourself as more of a schooled player with all the correct scales and notes flowing through your head or more of a "seat of the pants" groove player?

GAIL ANN: I am without question a "seat of the pants" everything player! I did have music lessons for the clarinet when I was about ten but I could never seem to apply what I learned on the clarinet to any other instrument. I taught myself to play guitar, bass, and drums by imitating stuff from my favourite albums. I still cannot read music very well, if at all. I don't even know the notes on the neck of the bass or guitar above the seventh fret without counting or having to think very hard about it! Over the course of my musical life, I have

picked up tidbits of info about theory, reading, and chord progressions from other musicians that I have worked with so I guess they have been my teachers but I think the experience of performing is the greatest teacher of all. I keep putting myself on the line and I learn. That's what happens.

EPI: What was your first encounter with Epiphone and what was it that made you choose the [El Capitan](#)?

GAIL ANN: The first bass I ever owned was an Epiphone! I bought it at a tiny music store in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania across the street from the infamous Tower Theater. It was second hand, sunburst with a white pick guard, and I believe it cost me about \$150! That was a lot of dough in 1976! The bass had black (nylon) strings on it. I had never seen that before and thought it was really cool. I gave the bass to a guy in my neighborhood when I left Philadelphia for film school. Sadly, I don't know what ever became of it, and to this day, I still have never seen another like it! I wish I knew what the model was. One day I must check the Epiphone archives!

My second Epiphone was a six string electric guitar I named "Golda" because of all her shiny gold trimming! I bought "Golda" second hand from a music store in Bryn Mawr, PA. I saved up a whopping \$110 for this guitar! (My mother bought the bass!) I still have "Golda". I played her in my first ever music video for the single Wasted Country from my 1988 Corporate World album. I use her occasionally in my live shows when I play Joni Mitchell's The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey from her 1978 Mingus album. The song requires a very odd and hypnotic tuning. "Golda" is perfect for the job! She never had a proper guitar case, but she has remained in my guitar collection since 1978. She is my oldest and dearest Epiphone guitar.

I always wanted an acoustic-electric bass in my collection. I had my eye on a Martin, but when I saw that Epiphone made a 5-string acoustic-electric, I was curious. I went for the "El Capitan", and I have not looked back. I used this big,



gorgeous bass on the 1998 Jeffrey Gaines album Galore. I was just about to embark on a 10-week tour with folk music diva Dar Williams in 2000 and the "El Capitan" was the perfect addition to my bass arsenal on that tour. It worked so beautifully with her music, and as a bass, it was deeply satisfying to play. The tone is so fat and rich! You can hear it on the song Iowa on Dar's Out There Live CD from that tour. Beautiful, the way it fills the space and makes a warm bed for the other instruments. I love this instrument!

I now have a new [Epiphone Thunderbird bass](#) in my bass arsenal. I can't wait to break that out! There will be photos of my Epiphone collection on my website---coming soon!

EPI: In a male dominated industry, you are a great example for other strong, talented woman pursuing their dreams. Who inspires

you to be the best you can be and why?

GAIL ANN: My Mother Ruby has always inspired me to be the best person I can be. Her unconditional love and support has held my hand through many storms. She does not understand this crazy music business I exist in at all, but her pride in my achievements has made my successes all the more sweeter. Ruby is my marker for strength, endurance, and the courage required to succeed in anything.

It truly was a male dominated industry when I was a small girl starting out, but that has changed, and women will continue to make a very potent and relevant imprint in popular music of all sorts. There are so many more female bass players and guitarists and drummers in the big arena now. Bassist and composer extraordinaire, MeShell Ndegeocello, Rhonda Smith, bassist for Prince, and Yolanda Charles who plays bass in the Robbie Williams band. There are also the pioneers who have fought and forged their way into female musical history like bassist Sara Lee of The Indigo Girls, Gang Of Four and The B-52's, guitarist Wendy Melvoin, and Johnette Napolitano of Concrete Blonde. So many more accomplished women instrumentalists come to mind for me now than in the 1970's or even 1980's. I am proud to be a part of that legacy. So very proud!

For me, Nancy Wilson of Heart, Joan Armatrading, and the great Joni Mitchell still represent the standard by which I measure musical excellence. I still have plenty to strive for, and that is good!

EPI: Playing with David Bowie is a dream gig for most musicians on the planet! How did you hook up with David? How long have you been working with him?

GAIL ANN: Believe it or not, I actually got a telephone call from David himself, completely out of the blue! I was in the middle of recording what would have been my third solo album. It was some time in May of 1995. I thought one of my English friends was playing a trick on me! Apparently, David had seen me performing as a solo artist on British television during the time I was promoting my first solo album, *The Corporate World* in the late eighties. I must have done something very impressive on that TV appearance, because it was nearly six years later that he asked me to join his band!

Yes, it is indeed a dream gig for just about any musician! I am still amazed that I will always be able to say I played bass in David Bowie's live band for nearly a decade! I am incredibly in awe of the whole experience.



EPI: Tell us all about your new CD "I Used to Be..." and where it is available.

GAIL ANN: *I Used To Be...* is my third solo release, and the first solo album I have produced in over a decade! It is a collection of original songs from my archives that had not been previously released. Some of the songs date back almost 20 years! I am mostly known in the US as a bass player, but I have had a fairly successful solo career in Europe and the UK. I am not just a bassist, but a guitarist, and

most importantly, a singer. The songs on *I Used To Be...* are just that, songs. This is not an instrumental bass album, although, I believe there are some very eloquent and very fun musical moments on bass and every other instrument on the recording. I had an exceptional group of musicians to work with.

I have included a special feature section on the making of *I Used To Be...* on my website. There are some great photos from the recording session too! You can also purchase the CD directly from my website at gailannDorsey.com, or in your local record store, distributed through RYKO in the US and Pinnacle in the UK.

EPI: With your huge commitment to touring with David you have been somewhat limited in how much time you can spend on your own projects. What is the status of your solo career and what are your long-term goals for this aspect of your career?

GAIL ANN: About three years ago, I began to do solo performances in my local

area of Woodstock, New York, and in and around New York City. I had been so busy working with so many other artists that the years had caught up with me. I began to realize that I was missing a very important part of my creative self. Now, I am taking serious steps towards a very active solo career, which will include more self-produced albums and lots of live performance. Eventually, I would also like to compose music for film, and even produce other artists. It means a fair bit of extra work for me, trying to juggle my solo projects while on tour with David Bowie for a year, but I am managing to have some fun with it all. I feel like I am starting all over again, and it's exciting for me to think about all the possibilities that could be ahead for me. Confidence is everything, and I am starting to realize what that is.

EPI: Your stage presence is VERY striking. How important do you think it is for a player to develop their own look, vibe and style?

GAIL ANN: Thank you. For me, the female artist who set the bar for "image" was Grace Jones. I adore Grace Jones for her bravery and imagination and commitment to art. Her music was very influential for me as well. She is a perfect specimen of looks, vibe, and style. Few have the materials that Grace is made of as a visual artist, but any vocalist or musician should take her example and search for individuality and showmanship on some level. It's fun!



I never set out to look one way or another, but you can't help but realize that image is one of the most important things in popular culture today---especially in the music business! It always helps to try and look interesting in some way. People have to look at you!

If you want to know if image is important, just look at my boss, Mr. Bowie... but remember, image is nothing without the excellent music to go along with it!

EPI: If you weren't on the road with David Bowie, who would you most like to tour with and why?

GAIL ANN: Myself. I would really like to spend more time than not on my own music and career, and less on other artists. However, if Annie Lennox called, I think she might be one of the only exceptions! I have always thought her vocal and songwriting talents to be so passionate and inspiring. She is a true original, and I would be thrilled to lay the bass lines around such an amazing voice.

EPI: How much freedom does David give you to be your own player? Is he looking for a direct copy of the records or is he open to your interpretations?

GAIL ANN: David Bowie is one greatest artists you could ever work for in terms of freedom, and allowing yourself to come through in performance without holding back. He has cast his band like a film director casts a film. He knows what elements will gel, how the players will compliment each other to make a brilliant ensemble. He is known for his infamous bands throughout his career.

Whether or not he is looking for a direct copy of his records when we play live depends on how he wants to interpret the song. We do a little of both. Some songs are played very traditionally, just like the recording. Other songs are very different. On this Reality Tour, the song Modern Love has a new spin, but The Man Who Sold The World is very much like the original. Back in 1996, we did a completely different version of The Man Who Sold The World. It was a Drum 'N Bass version, and very, very cool. The great things about David is, you just never know!

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Also, currently touring with David Bowie is vocalist and utility player Catherine Russell. In addition to her current work with Bowie, Catherine has worked with Madonna, Gloria Estefan, Cyndi Lauper, Joan Osborne, Steely Dan, Marc Cohn, Peter Wolf, Rosanne Cash and Spin Doctors to name a few. We also had the chance to chat with this multi-talented Epiphone player. Here's what she had to say:

EPI: Your resume is very impressive and you've worked with many people in the past, but, how did you begin working with David Bowie. Were you a fan before hand?



CATHERINE: Gail Ann Dorsey recommended me to David Bowie because, as I understand it, he was looking for a singer who could play simple keyboard and acoustic guitar parts. I have been a fan of his music since Ziggy Stardust. That is still one of my favorite records of all time.

EPI: You are obviously a well established performer. How much freedom does David give you musically? Is he looking for a direct copy of the records or is he open to your interpretations?

CATHERINE: It appears that DB has always molded his songs to whomever he is working with at the time. This is possible with great material. That is why the songs tend to



have the particular flavor of the band playing them. We learn the tunes, then make them work for us. This is the great thing about working with DB, he has respect for the individual talents of his band members. I feel I've grown the most as a musician in this band.

EPI: Even though many people think of you as a singer or as a keyboard player, you play many different instruments on the Reality tour. How did you become so skilled on so many different instruments. When did you pick up guitar and why?

CATHERINE: In the New York musical circles that I come from, I am considered a singer with a working knowledge of instruments. And I think this is a proper description of my situation. I have always wanted to play every instrument because I grew up in a musical family, with a variety of instruments in the house. I started playing acoustic guitar in junior high school with a friend who taught me a few chords. Electric guitar has always been food for my soul, but playing it came much later. I am fortunate to have good, patient teachers.

