

BY JESSE SUBLETT

A L L
A B O U T
T H A T
B A S S

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL SALLANS



KEEPING
THE GROOVE
WITH TEXAS
BASSISTS

Tommy Shannon's 1963
Fender Jazz bass guitar.

BASS IS THE HEARTBEAT OF TEXAS MUSIC,

from the hard-rocking roadhouse blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan to the *conjunto*-revival sounds of Los Texmaniacs. Whenever you go out dancing to live music, the underlying tones of the upright bass fiddle or electric bass guitar drive your every move across the floor—and that's true whether you notice the person playing the instrument or not.

I've been playing bass for 50 years. In The Skunks, Austin's first punk band, I was band leader, lead singer, and chief songwriter—and yet I couldn't help noticing that many fans paid more attention to our exceptional guitar player. Such is the plight of the bass player, even though they're often the MVP of the group.

In many native Texas musical styles, bass is a point of distinction, a hallmark of the genre's origins and dance styles. Western swing wouldn't mean a thing without the bassist's fretting fingers walking up and down the instrument's neck, emphasizing the swing feel and the illusion of movement, as if you're "waltzing across Texas" while whirling your partner around the dance floor.

The bass also serves as a cultural ambassador, bridging musical styles. In the early 1900s, a hybrid Tex-Mex musical style was born when Mexican musicians borrowed the accordion and polka beat of German and Czech immigrants as a foundation for their conjuntos. They traded the piano accordion for a button accordion and the rhythm section for the *bajo sexto*, a hybrid 12-string guitar with both heavy-gauge bass strings and guitar strings. The bajo took the place of the left-hand side of the accordion—the bass side—freeing the accordionist to play the complex arias conjunto is known for. It would be natural for the bass player of a Czech polka band to step onstage with a Tex-Mex conjunto and play along seamlessly—for an audience that speaks a completely different language.

In 1956, the bass guitar forever altered country music. In a recording session, Ray Price, the honky-tonk superhero from Perryville, became frustrated by the bass guitar causing feedback during the song "Crazy Arms." Price asked the bass player to switch to a 4/4 shuffle walking bass pattern. The change not only cured the feedback problem, it also produced one of Price's biggest hits and proved to be such a reliable dance-floor magnet that the pattern became known as the "Ray Price beat."

Fast-forward to the late 1970s, when The Skunks and our spiky-haired contemporaries were reinventing three-chord garage rock by hammering loud and fast eighth notes on our Fender basses—as if we were getting paid by the note. Maybe in the last place you'd expect it, we were staking out Texas' outsized role in the punk-rock revolution.

Here we profile four working bassists who propel the beat forward and two luthiers who craft the instruments. These are the low-frequency cornerstones of Texas' ever-evolving musical melting pot. As goes the bass guitar, so goes Texas music.

JENN ALVA

JENN ALVA'S EPIPHONE P-BASS IS ALWAYS up-front and loud in the mix, the perfect foundation for the music of Fea, a Latina quartet from San Antonio. The band is on Joan Jett's record label and has even won praise from punk guru Iggy Pop.

Alva has played with drummer Phanie Diaz since they were 12. In 2004, the pair recruited Nina Diaz, Phanie's younger sister, as lead vocalist and guitarist, and named the trio Girl in a Coma. After releasing four critically acclaimed albums, the band parted ways, leading Alva and Phanie Diaz to form Fea in 2014.

The fat and fierce tone of Alva's bass, which she runs through a distortion pedal, is a point of pride. "I always get dudes trying to sneak a look at my pedal board," she says. On occasion, a sound tech will ask if they can get a clean signal in addition to the distorted one, "and I'm like, no, that's it."

Alva's mother was always playing oldies by favorites like Patsy Cline and Freddy Fender in their San Antonio home, and eventually, Alva realized that many artists were Latinos with Americanized names. "Like Ritchie Valens and Freddy Fender—why did they think they had to change their names?" she says.

Fea spent roughly half the summer on tour and the other half recording its second album at Sonic Ranch in Tornillo, a border town 40 miles southeast of El Paso. But the band's home base remains San Antonio, which is where you'll find Bang Bang Bar, operated by Diaz; Alva works at the bar and owns The Dogfather, a gourmet hot dog shop next door.

"One thing we've all learned is that touring is great, but it always feels good to come back to San Antonio," Alva says. "Phanie and I always preach that you don't have to leave your hometown to make it. We've got this great family here."



SIGNATURE TRACKS:

Check out "Mujer Moderna" and "No Hablo Español" on Fea, the band's eponymous debut from 2016.

FAVORITE PLACES TO PLAY:

When not on tour, Fea can be spotted at venues on the St. Mary's strip in San Antonio, Alva says, name-checking La Botanica, Paper Tiger, Limelight, and Hi-Tones. Sam's Burger Joint is also among the band's favorite places to play, along with Bang Bang Bar.



MAX BACA JR.



Max Baca Jr. and his nephew and bandmate Josh Baca.

MAX BACA JR., LEADER OF THE SAN Antonio-based, Grammy-winning Los Texmaniacs, is a big guy—big enough to make a bajo sexto look like a small guitar. In reality, his Macias '74 bajo is about the size of a jumbo acoustic but with a deeper body to accommodate the low strings. With the instrument in his hands, Baca thumps bass notes while playing rhythm chords and inserting crisp chromatic runs. “I call the bajo the grizzly bear of guitars,” Baca says.

First developed in the Mexican state of Michoacán, the bajo sexto was quickly embraced by Mexican musicians on this side of the border in the early 1900s. Today, as other parts of the country are catching on to bajo-centric music—i.e., conjunto, Norteño, and Tejano—Texas remains its largest exporter.

Baca grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he learned to play accordion and bass as a child, accompanying his father's conjunto band. Max's father used to take his sons to see the big conjunto stars perform at Lubbock's Fronteriso club, which is where a 7-year-old Max first saw Texas accordion legend Flaco Jimenez. It was the beginning of years of hero worship, followed by years of working together. Max was 24 when Jimenez called him to San Antonio to play bajo in his band. “First thing, Flaco told me to start using the lower bass strings,” Baca says. “He told me, ‘You know, they put those strings there for a reason.’ A lot of players don't, but I play them now.”

Baca collaborated with Jimenez in line-ups of the Texas Tornados and Los Super Seven before Baca formed his own band, Los Texmaniacs, in 1997. The Texmaniacs have since become standard-bearers of Tex-Mex music with seven albums to their name. “I wanted a band that played traditional conjunto but also had that rock 'n' roll energy,” Baca says.



SIGNATURE TRACKS:

Check out “Deportee” on the album *Los Cruzando Borders* (2018), with guest vocals by Lyle Lovett.

FAVORITE PLACES TO PLAY:

“Some of our favorite places are Hilltop Cafe in Fredericksburg, Gruene Hall, and Luckenbach. Those places have the vibe, man.”



KEVIN SMITH



IN THE PAST 30 YEARS, AUSTIN musician Kevin Smith has toured and recorded with many marquee names, but the big daddy gig has to be playing bass with Willie Nelson and Family. Smith got the job after the death of Nelson's longtime bassist Bee Spears in 2011. Nelson couldn't have worried much about Smith's qualifications, which include stints with such acts as Heybale!, Jim Lauderdale, Dwight Yoakam, rockabilly legend Ronnie Dawson, and Smith's own rockabilly outfit, High Noon.

Smith moved to Austin from Colorado in 1988. "My first marriage broke up, and I ended up moving in with another bass player, Mark Rubin, of the bluegrass band The Bad Livers," he says. "We both had our own drummer-less trios we were playing in, so there was a lot of bass testosterone in the house."

Smith and Rubin also produced a how-to video on the "slap-bass" technique that makes rockabilly music snap, crackle, and boom—without a drummer's help. "You're grabbing the string and pulling it away from the fingerboard," Smith says, "and letting it snap back to the fingerboard, so that makes a click. Also, you're letting your palm hit the fingerboard, which makes extra clicks."

Smith says Nelson runs his show by intuition and instinct, with no set list. "We always start with 'Whiskey River,'" Smith says. "You can sense the flow by the way he's running the set. I start on the electric bass, and at some point I'll switch to the upright."

And whether with Nelson or other Texas country-western bands, he says it all comes back to the signature 4/4 walking bass style, aka the Ray Price beat.

"It's all about keeping people dancing because that's what we do. Locking into a real good groove and letting people dance—that's my favorite thing."



SIGNATURE TRACKS:

Check out Kevin Smith bass-slapping up a storm on "Bluebonnet Boogie" with High Noon on the album *Stranger Things* and grooving on George Gershwin's "Summertime" on *Summertime: Willie Nelson Sings Gershwin*.

FAVORITE PLACES TO PLAY:

Smith's favorite places to both perform and see bands are "the old, rural dance halls like Fischer Hall [in Comal County] and Watterson Hall [near Bastrop]," he says. "The feeling of community in rural dance halls is tough to find in other types of venues."



JACOB AND SORAYA SALINAS

BEFORE BECOMING A BUILDER OF CUSTOM BAJO SEXTOS, Jacob Salinas was a budding bajo player with big dreams. He wanted to own a Macias bajo, made in the San Antonio shop founded by Martín Macias, a native of Mexico who settled in San Antonio in the 1920s. But the price was far more than a 13-year-old could afford.

After trying to get by with more modestly priced instruments made by a different San Antonio luthier, he picked up a few tips from watching the luthier work, then learned the rest by trial and error.

"He never gave me any measurements or anything," Salinas says. "I just watched him a few times, then I came home and started putting wood together."

In 2011, Jacob and his wife, Soraya, built their own shop behind their home on the outskirts of San Marcos. Today, they produce about 25 bajos a year. With ornate rope binding and exotic woods like koa and Brazilian rosewood, the instruments sell for \$2,400 and up. Among the high-profile players of Salinas bajos are the Uvalde hit-makers Los Palominos, a modern Tejano band that owns four Salinas instruments.



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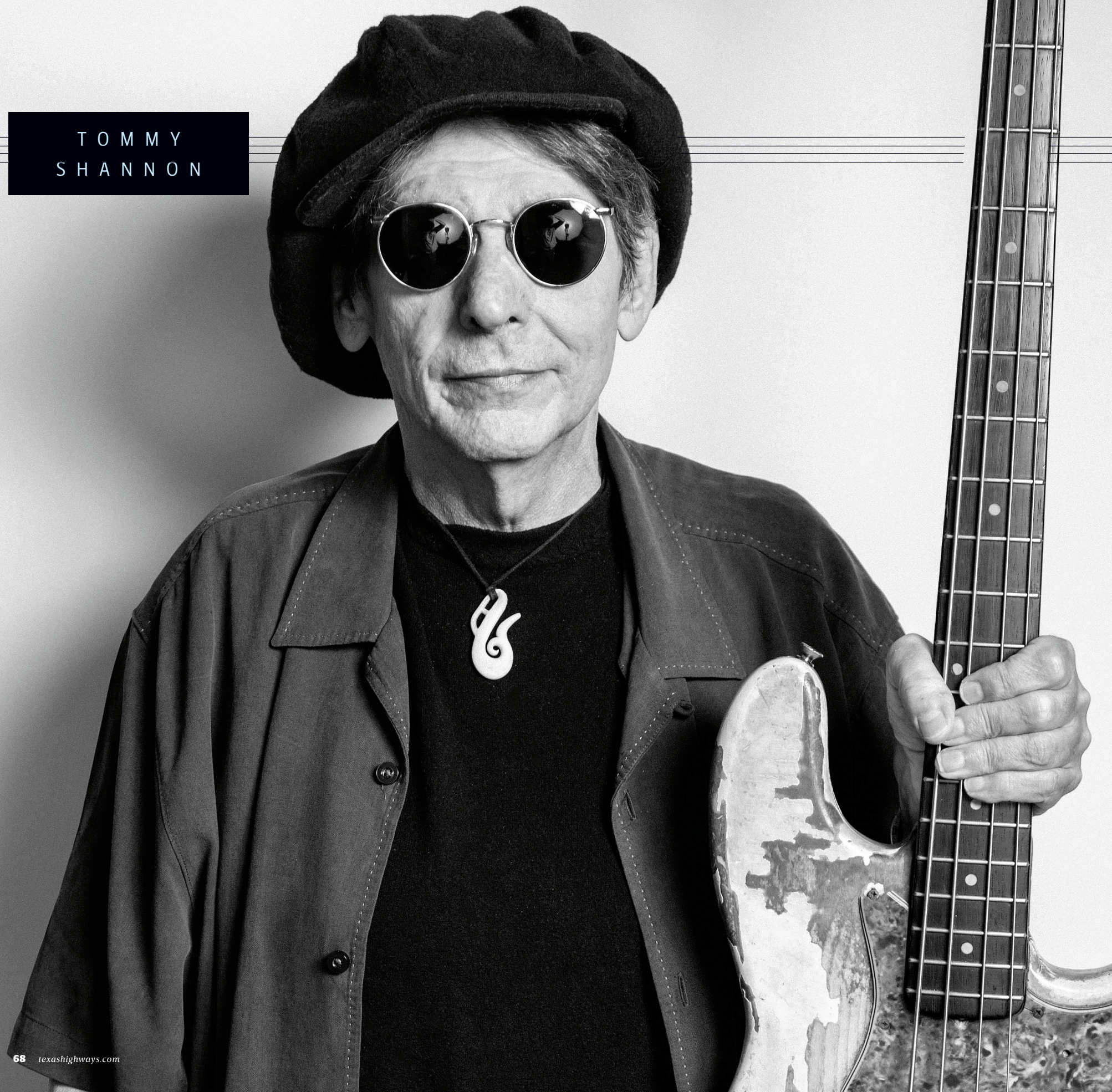
For a taste of modern Tejano, check out Los Palominos' 2016 album *Piénsalo* and the new single "Con La Fuerza De Un Huracán."

WANT A CUSTOM BAJO SEXTO?

Jacob and Soraya Salinas welcome visitors and prospective bajo buyers by appointment to their shop near San Marcos High School. 512-667-0233. In San Antonio, the descendants of Martín Macias still craft some of the world's most coveted bajo sextos and bajo quintos (the 10-string version) at their shop on Vermont Street. 210-923-7529.



TOMMY
SHANNON



TOMMY SHANNON, RAISED IN THE Panhandle town of Dumas, stands well over 6 feet tall, skinny and long-limbed, as if crafted in the image of the white '63 Fender Jazz bass that's taken him all over the world. Shannon was laying down the bottom line with that Fender in Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble during the 1980s; the great glam-blues band Krackerjack in the 1970s; and the Johnny Winter Trio at Woodstock in 1969, to name just a few notable musical ensembles. Not many bass players can say they've been playing the same instrument for over 50 years.

And if basses could talk, Shannon's bass could tell some stories, like about the time Jimi Hendrix played it. "I was playing in this club in New York," Shannon recalls, "and somebody came up behind me and asked if he could play. When I saw it was Jimi, I just handed it over. I didn't even finish the song I was playing."

When Beaumont's Johnny Winter took the blues-rock world by storm in the late 1960s, his flashy guitar slinging was driven home by Shannon's thunderbolt bass riffs. Shannon's style reflects years of experience playing Top 40, soul, and rhythm and blues on the Texas bar-band circuit. In that cutthroat world, bands lived or died by a single dictate: Keep people dancing because dancing people buy drinks; and if the bar doesn't sell drinks, the band is useless overhead.

Shannon brought that same sensibility when he joined Vaughan's band in 1981, another key moment in the growth of Texas blues. With Shannon and drummer Chris Layton constituting the monster rhythm section of Double Trouble, the trio sold over 11.5 million records and continues to define Texas blues-rock today, almost three decades after Vaughan's death.

"Texas blues has its own feel, just like Chicago and other places," Shannon says. "The cool thing with blues is you just stay in the pocket. I never think about what I'm going to play next." 🎸



SIGNATURE TRACK:

"Crossfire" on Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble's 1989 album *In Step* shows off the hard-driving, irresistible force that is Shannon's bass style. The song actually originated with a bass riff Shannon came up with "fooling around in my living room."

FAVORITE PLACE TO PLAY:

Antone's Nightclub in Austin. "I've played Antone's for over 40 years," Shannon says. "I've been fortunate enough to have played with some of the greatest musicians in the world on that stage."

To listen to a playlist of songs mentioned in the article, go to texashighways.com/allaboutthatbass
