

## Rob Allen MB-2

By Chris Gill

AT FIRST GLANCE, the Rob Allen MB-2 four-string (\$1,500, including gig bag) looks like a normal electric bass, but closer examination reveals that this instrument is anything but ordinary. The bass is stripped down to the essentials--the body's top is completely bare with the exception of an acoustic guitar-style wooden bridge with a one-piece saddle and a wood volume knob embedded in the bridge beneath the G string. The neck is fretless, featuring laminated strips in the fingerboard where the frets should be. Coming from the shop with steel-core nylon tapewound strings, this bass is designed specifically to emulate the sound of an upright base.

Several features help the MB-2 deliver the big upright bass sounds in a compact, solidbody package. Actually, the lightweight, swamp ash body isn't solid at all--a beautiful figured-maple top covers hollow chambers carved into the body. A solid center block runs underneath the strings, giving the bass a punchy, resonant sound with ample sustain, even when it's not plugged in. A thin polymerized tung oil finish that feels more like fine sanded wood than a coating allows the body to vibrate to its full potential.

But what makes the MB-2 truly sound like an upright is its ingenious bridge pickup system. The cocobolo bridge is embedded 1/4 inch into the body where it comes into contact with the swamp ash material and picks up vibration from the body as well as the top. In addition, the strings are anchored through the back of the body to enhance responsiveness and sustain. The bridge features a corian saddle, which transfers vibration even more evenly than organic materials like bone. Mounted to the saddle is a Fishman Acoustic Matrix Natural piezo pickup, featuring a passive tone control that is adjusted via a trim pot accessed through a small hole drilled in the rear control cavity cover. The tone control's main function is for rolling off the high end, and, for obvious reasons, does not lend itself to making tonal adjustments on the fly. That's because the MB-2 is designed to provide one excellent sound instead of a variety of tones (after all, you don't see too many upright basses with adjustable tone controls either). If you want more tonal variety, you can always make adjustments at your amp or preamp.

Chances are, most players won't mind the fact that the MB-2 provides only one sound as that singular tone is incredible. The bottom end is deep and thick, making normal solidbody basses sound weak by comparison, yet there is a spectacular note definition that's almost impossible to achieve with an amplified upright. This, my friends, is what bass is all about.

And thanks to Allen's meticulous craftsmanship, the MB-2 is a true joy to play. Weighing less than seven pounds and featuring a well-balanced design, the instrument is extremely comfortable. The exquisite bird's eye maple neck has a manageable 34-inch scale, and its cocobolo fingerboard feels as smooth as polished marble, making sexy slides and slurs a breeze. Thanks to the bass's sleek neck and inlaid "fret" markers, even players unaccustomed to playing fretless were soon flying around the fretboard like experts.

### The bottom line

The MB-2's combination of high-quality materials, excellent craftsmanship, comfortable playability and outstanding sound are hard to come by even in basses costing almost twice as much. If you've ever wanted to explore the sounds of an upright, but you don't want to deal with the hassles, the MB-2 is the ideal alternative. It is the closest thing you can find to an upright bass in an electric solidbody's clothing.