



# “Three Fives That Fire On All Eight”

## The Elrick Master, Gold, and Expat Series Bass Guitars

By Vic Serbe

### The Company Line

I have to be honest. I’ve known about Rob Elrick’s instruments for quite some time, but until these review pieces came my way, I’ve not done more than noodle on them or marvel at the craftsmanship at a shop, or of course the NAMM show. Rob is passionate about his work and loves to chat about the business, which he knows a lot about ... including his respected peers. So ultimately, this review was a double win for me; getting to know Rob, and finally really getting a chance to play and enjoy his basses.

Rob’s business, as has been the case with many other fine luthiers, began out of personal necessity. In Rob’s case, it started with his lack of

satisfaction with a 6-string instrument he’d been playing since 1989. Back in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, the market was limited for high-quality 5-string basses, let alone 6-string basses. So, in 1992, Rob started working on his own solution to the problem, with the intention of showing a prototype at the 1993 winter NAMM Show (though it ended up being the summer 1993 NAMM before he was actually able to do so). Rob attended Berklee College of Music in Boston, but before that, he was a scholarship student at Detroit’s Center for Creative Studies/College of Art and Design (CCS/CAD), where he was a Crafts Department major (essentially a materials major). Combining the arts and crafts skills along with his musical knowledge made him a natural candidate for lutherie. His first 6-string design was a neck-through with a 36” scale, but Rob’s business was

successful and expanded fairly quickly to include 4-8 string basses of various scale lengths and also to include both hybrid and bolt-on neck versions.

Today, Rob offers three body shapes, in four series of basses. The Classic body shape was his first offering (though, ironically, it was based off of the e-evolution design), and he also now offers the e-evolution and New Jazz Standard (NJS). Both the Classic and e-evolution are available in single-cut and double-cutaway shapes. The four series are: Master, Platinum, Gold, and Expat. The Master, Platinum, and Gold series are made in the USA, while the Expat models are built in the Czech Republic (though they use the same USA electronics, and Rob supplies much of the lumber they use). Master and Platinum series include both the Classic and e-evolution body shapes, but not bolt-on necks. Master is distinguished from Platinum in that it's the "anything goes – full custom spec from the ground up" model, and as such, there is no base model or price. Platinum, Gold, and Expat series all have base prices and option upcharge schedules. Gold series basses can be any body shape or neck configuration. Expat models are bolt-on only, and include e-evolution and NJS body shapes. Confused? I was too, initially, but it only took a couple hundred emails from a patient Rob to clear it up. No biggie, right? Anyway, it really just boils down to one simple fact. If Rob offers an aesthetic that's pleasing to you, he's probably got at least a few configuration options for you to choose from.

### Details

Rob sent us three basses in for review, two of which got the full live gig test, but the Master series was a bit more limited. This was mainly because I was a little nervous about having a \$10,500 bass that didn't belong to me out too much on a gig, but also because, honestly, it shares a lot of tonal heritage with at least the Gold Series, so it just wasn't that necessary. I should also note that all three models featured block inlays. This is because block inlays are a new option for Rob this year, and these basses were destined for the NAMM show, where Rob really wanted to have multiple examples available. In addition to the "in-hand" review, here, both the Gold-series e-evolution and the Expat NJS basses will undergo full technical reviews by Technical Editor, Phil Maneri.



**Expat Series New Jazz Standard (NJS) 5-string:** This bass is a 5-string with a J-bass styled body, 24 medium-sized frets (plus a "zero fret"), a 35" scale length, and what Rob calls his "heel-less" design neck attachment, where the neck joint is scalloped and recessed to improve upper register access. Its bolt-on neck is 3-piece maple, with what I'd call a "medium C" profile, has a 2-way adjustable truss-rod, and is held on via six bolts. The Indian rosewood fingerboard has the optional mother of pearl block inlays (a \$200 upcharge). The headstock is clearly a J-inspired 4+1 design, with the nice touch that its face is finished in the same gloss transparent "root beer brown" as the body (now would also be a good time to point out that the Expat Series is unique in that they can be ordered with lacquer finishes, which is especially popular with some J-style bass fans). This NJS has a one-piece swamp ash body with a black pick guard, but no typically accompanying control plate. The tuners are black Hipshot Ultralites, the bridge is a custom 19mm-spaced Elrick design made by Hipshot, and the strap buttons are the Dunlop Dual Straploks (my personal favorites). The pickups are Bartolini CB J-style pickups, coupled with the familiar Bartolini NTMBF 3-band preamp, operating at 9 volts (the NTMBF preamp is designed to run at either 9 or 18 volts). The controls are volume, blend, treble, mid, then bass (all EQ is cut/boost). The volume is



push/pull for passive mode, and the mid control is push/pull for mid bands (pull for high mids). I will say that, with any bass that supports a passive mode of operation, I really prefer to also have some kind of tone control in that mode, where this bass does not. I would miss that if I were playing in passive mode, so at least for myself, this would relegate passive mode for emergency/backup operation only (e.g. if the battery power were to run out mid-set, for example). The strings installed are Elrick's own stainless steel medium gauge "Fundamentals" strings, in the following gauges: .045", .065", .085", .105", .130" (tapered *B* string).

#### **Gold Series e-evolution 5-string bolt-on:**

Though both the Classic and the NJS body styles were marketed prior to the e-evolution, from a design origins perspective, the e-evolution actually preceded (and formed the basis for) the Classic design. This bass has a swamp ash body with a burl maple top, finished in natural satin. It has a 3-piece maple neck, with what I'd call a "medium C" profile, has a 2-way adjustable truss-rod, and is held on via five bolts, where the neck joint also employs Rob's "heel-less" design. It's a 35" scale instrument with 24 medium-sized frets (plus a "zero fret"), a bubinga fingerboard (a favorite of Rob's), and optional pāua abalone block inlays (a \$750 upcharge). The pickups are normally Bartolini J-style on this model, but this one came with soapbars installed (a \$250 upcharge). It uses the same Bartolini NTMBF preamp as the NJS, also operating at 9 volts, but employs a 3-position switch for the midrange frequencies (adding a third option over the push/pull of the NJS). It also uses a switch for passive/active mode switching, so there are no push/pull controls on this bass at all (I prefer

switches to push/pull, myself). Similar to the NJS, it has all black hardware with the custom 19mm-spaced Elrick bridge, Dunlop Dual Straploks, and Hipshot Ultralite tuners. Again, though, no passive tone control, and the same stainless steel 45-130T strings as on the NJS (Rob also offers Elrick Fundamentals in nickel).

#### **Master Series e-evolution 5-string single-cut:**

This, my friends, is artwork in motion, and carries a price tag to match. Rob tells us this bass was initially designed with so many bells and whistles specifically to showcase as many options in one instrument as possible (figuring it would be around for a while at that price). Well, it didn't even make it through the NAMM Show, so there went that plan! This particular Master Series model has a single-cut design swamp ash body with a one-piece spalted maple burl full-face top, and is finished in a natural satin. It has a 5-piece combination hard maple and cherry neck, with a "medium C" profile, a curly soft maple heel block, and a birdseye maple fingerboard. The fingerboard has a pāua abalone purfling inlay and block inlays which are a combination of a pāua abalone border around mother of pearl. This bass has a 35" scale with 24 medium-sized frets (plus a "zero fret"). It also has the optional 6-string sized headstock with face that matches the figured top on the body, and a logo inlay that's also a combination of pāua abalone and mother of pearl. The Bartolini NTMBF preamp is used in this bass, similar to the other models, but the pickups in this one are Aero dual coils with wood covers to match the figured top on the bass. The hardware is the same Hipshot Ultralite tuners and the same 19mm-spaced Elrick custom bridge, but they're gold in this case. It also uses Dunlop straploks, but these are the integral version, as opposed to the external Dual design. The controls are volume, blend, treble, mid, and bass, where the mid is push/pull (pull for high mid). There are two switches. One selects passive vs active mode, and the other is a coil splitter for the dual-coil pickups. This bass was also strung with the same stainless steel 45-130T strings as the other review models. Wow; this is some fancy bass guitar, for sure! The Master Series also came with a really nice hard-shell teardrop shaped "Vectra" case made by TKL. This is the first one of these I've seen in person, and it's really nice. The other two basses shipped in the Elrick "Zero Gravity" rigid cases.

## Fit and finish

All three basses have wiring cavities that are extremely cleanly wired. The truss rod access at the heel of the neck is great ... you don't have to pull a badge off the headstock to adjust the neck. The inlay work is excellent, the body carving is smooth and attractive, the nut work very clean with nicely rounded edges, and the fret work is excellent. The frets are all nicely dressed, leveled, and crowned. All three models have the block inlays, but I find it interesting that the block sizes vary as much as they do. For example, the Expat NJS are by far the largest. In fact, they may be the largest block inlays I've seen on a bass. Rob explained that this bass was from the first run of basses with blocks out of his shop in the Czech Republic, and that future Expat basses will have smaller blocks.

The Gold Series inlays are smaller, and more along the lines of what I'd typically expect to see, whereas the Master Series has the smallest, to accommodate the purfling detail in the inlay pattern. The Gold and Master Series basses also have a wood cover for the electronic cavity, which is a Rob Elrick signature design. It's very nicely done as a cut from the back of the body, so it's not only a nice wood cover, but the grain of course matches up beautifully. And of course the neck joint on the Master single-cut is superb. The transition from the neck to the body up high is completely invisible to the hand. I guess if I had to nitpick a bit, the NJS had a noticeable gap in the neck pocket along the top of the neck, though the bass definitely didn't suffer tonally, so it's at best a negligible cosmetic matter. On the Gold Series, I'd personally prefer to see a full face top covering the neck heel. On the Master series, the neck heel extends just a tiny bit past the fingerboard, which looks a little different, but you have to look fairly close to see it.

## On the gig

These basses all have a non-recessed jack, as opposed to recessed designs and/or designs employing an Electrosocket jack (which is recessed by itself). While the recessed jacks look kind of nice, it makes it tough to use 90 degree plugs, which some people prefer. The weight varies on these basses from 8.2 pounds on the NJS to 7.9 pounds on the Gold, to 8.8 pounds on the Master. Basically, all three are nice light weight basses – especially the feather-weight Gold Series! The

balance on the strap is excellent on all three basses, and the lower horn design on both the Gold and Master Series basses are really nicely shaped and located for seated playing.

All three basses support passive mode operation, but all three basses also lack a passive tone control. As I mentioned before, I feel pretty strongly these must go hand in hand, and I would specify one for a model I'd purchase. The passive tone on all three of these basses were very nice, but I, personally, need a way to tame the high end on fresh roundwound strings – especially stainless steel, which is my personal favorite type. Of course, Elrick (and other manufacturers) make nickel strings, as well, so this may not be an issue for all players. The NJS body doesn't have much of a shoulder cut, but still feels great hanging against your body due to the nice belly cut. However, the Gold and Master Series basses were noticeably more comfortable both on the strap and on the lap. The slightly thinner body and the shaping are just great.

Tonally, as you can imagine, the NJS does a very good job of representing a great J-bass tone. It has a bright sizzly top end with a nice scoop in the mids for great slap tone in fully blended mode, where favoring the bridge bumps the mid for a great burpy tone, and favoring the neck fattens things up for a great rock tone. And that's all without even touching the EQ. Bumping the low mids (and maybe a bit of bass) while favoring the bridge is just wonderful, and dropping the treble control warms things up very nicely.

The tone on the Gold Series is typical of a soapbar sound, as it's natively stronger in throughout the midrange with an overall fatter warmer sound. You can still get more than enough burp from the bridge,





and the neck pickup is just plain big sounding. This bass also has three midrange options, so you can bump low mids for more punch, or you can cut high mids for a more modern scooped sound, and heck, do what you want with the mid-mids. They're useful for both boost and cut options depending on the pickup(s) being used and the tone you're looking for.

The tone on the Master Series is more complex, as it has a dual personality with the coil splitting available. In dual-coil mode, it's a bit brighter than the soaps in the Gold Series, but not quite as sizzly as the NJS. But at the same time, it's stronger in the high mids natively than both the other basses. When you split the coils, it actually gets a nice injection of J-like tone, with a little added brightness, though I still wouldn't say it's the same sound as the NJS. This one has push/pull for mids, so only low and high to choose from, but I never really needed to do much with the mids on this bass, anyway. One thing I did notice on the Master Series, however, is it tended to be a little noisier than the other two basses when you didn't have at least one hand on the strings. Not a big deal, though. Probably a very

minor grounding matter at best, and during normal play, it's not present. The tonal options on this bass with the 3-band EQ and coil splitting are brain splitting, but it suffices to say this bass can cover a huge gambit of sounds. It doesn't sound like a classic J in single-coil mode, but it's a great single-coil tone, nonetheless. And dual-coil mode is just plain gutsy and funky.

All three basses have great neck profiles and felt great in the hands. I also like to look for dead/dull/live spots in the necks on basses, and I must say all three of these, including the more traditionally based NJS, were very even from low to high. The *D* and *G* strings did not tend to disappear on you without digging in harder, and the *B* strings were just wonderfully focused and powerful, without being overbearing. In short, I found it very hard to resist placing an order for a Gold Series for myself. I especially bonded with that one, and one may yet be in my future.

### The Bottom Line

These basses represent a huge tonal map of sounds, and Rob has even more variations available. There's precious little Rob can't cover, tonally, with at least one model offered with various options, and he also serves a broad range of affordability at the same time, with the Expat Series instruments representing an especially great value. **BGM**