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## Rob Allen MB-2f

### 5-String Fretted Acoustic-Electric Bass

By Karl Coryat

The nylon-string acoustic-electric bass is still considered a specialty instrument--but why? In an age when big bottom is back in a big way, it seems these piezo-driven wonders should be right up there with the fretless and 5-string electrics. But we're spotting a trend: The lightweight, clean-looking, great-sounding acoustic-electric is fast becoming the hot ticket in instrument design. Luthier Rob Allen has staked his claim in this market with well-built basses that sound terrific. We reviewed his fretless MB-2 acoustic-electric 4-string in February '98. This time we checked out a fretted 5.

Everything about the Allen MB-2f says elegance. The lack of a blocky magnetic pickup (the piezo transducer strip is hidden under the saddle) gives the face a super-clean look. Allen goes a step further by forgoing a tone knob and moving the single wooden volume control onto the bridge. The result? A design purity that seems more akin to classical guitar than an Eisenhower-era electric contraption with clunky knobs and switches. (No letters, please!) Other benefits of the design: very light weight and a sweet, if somewhat muted, unamplified tone. The reduced heft is instantly appealing--you'll never develop shoulderitis from strapping on one of these axes--and it's pleasant to practice or warm up on the Allen unplugged.

The MB-2f's construction is near perfect all around; our tester was built even better than the Allen we reviewed earlier. The neck pocket and "ivoroid" binding were super tight; the nut profile was just right; and the frets were even, well dressed, and well seated with epoxy--although there was a bit of epoxy bleed onto the fingerboard from the fret's edges. Our tester's finish was also better than the first MB-2 we saw, and Allen now fully recesses the neck bolts for improved upper-register feel. The action was medium-high; unfortunately this is not nearly as adjustable as on a standard metal-bridge bass. Action adjustments can be made with small truss rod tweaks. No thumbrest, you say? Each MB-2f comes with a wooden thumbrest, which you can glue anywhere on the face if you so choose. (Although the B string serves as a fine thumbrest for non-B work.)

The real reward comes when you plug in the Allen. Few basses produce as warm and striking a tone. With its nylon-tapewound La Bella strings, the MB-2f exudes an upright-like tone far from the sound of any steel-string electric. Notes--both fretted and open--have a tubby thump and blossom that belies the electrons and metal frets from which they arise. Palm-muting further accentuates the Allen's upright vibe. Played through an Ampeg B-50R 1x12 combo (see Shootout, July '99) in a small band with two amplified acoustic guitars and percussion, the bass had bandmates convinced at times they were jamming with an upright player. Piezos tend to sound a little "clacky" if you dig in, so you may need to lighten your touch--but on the other hand, their sensitivity expands the types of attacks you can use. Pickstyle playing is especially effective, with improved note definition that gives way to sweet roundness as the notes sustain and decay. Of course, you could switch to steel strings for a different sound--but that would be missing the point of this bass, which seems to be made for the nylon-wrapped La Bellas.

Like most 5-strings, if the MB-2f has a weakness, it's the B string. Although it isn't at all sloppy, your touch needs to be especially light in the lowest register. Still, the string speaks nicely with a focused, up-from-the-bottom tone. (At press time Allen was working on a 35"-scale prototype, which should have a better B-string sound and feel; the longer scale version may be available by the time you read this.)

While the Rob Allen may not have many bells or whistles--none, really--this is hardly a one-tone axe. Why? Because it's incredibly sensitive to subtle technique nuances, a quality enhanced by the instrument's fabulously elegant design. If ever there were a bass that will give you the tone that's in your hands, this is it.