

SOUNDROOM



Stonefield 1-5S

BY JONATHAN HERRERA

RARE IS THE DAY I'M TASKED TO REVIEW A BASS that's as thoroughly unusual as the Stonefield M-series instrument here. In nearly every facet of its design, the Stonefield takes a left-of-center approach. There are so many dizzying differences between this bass and the average axe, I'm not sure the space allotted is sufficient for a deep dive.

First, its origin. Bass player and designer Tomm Stanley (see, even "Tom" gets an unusual twist at Stonefield!) builds his instruments in New Zealand, and they are the end result of a years-long quest that deeply tested Stanley's commitment to realizing his vision. Through early imagination, trial, error, and perseverance, a set of key design principles emerged for Stanley, and he spent the ensuing years refining his processes to crystallize his at-times amorphous design ideas. The tenets of Stonefield's approach include excellent ergonomics, innovative passive-electronics packages, the pervasive use of genuinely exotic woods, and a visual aesthetic that pays homage to his adopted country.

Where to begin? First, the look. The Stonefield is a big bass. It's about two inches thick and three inches longer than the typical Fender-ish bass. Stanley's inspiration for its assertive contour was both the waves on New Zealand's beaches and sinuous Maori *koru* patterns. It has a headstock and what look like tuning machines, but further inspection reveals that the tuning machines are merely anchoring posts, and that tuning actually happens at the tailpiece. The trademarked Tomm Stanley Tuning System does not function as the bridge, however; that duty is left to a much lower-tech floating bridge, akin to that of an orchestral stringed instrument. The ¼" jack protrudes from the body—that sort of looks like an inverted Stratocaster design—and three

lower-bout knobs are joined by another on the upper horn. Flipping the bass around reveals that the neck-through instrument's body wings are not flush with the neck, which itself is composed, unusually, of numerous vertical laminations. Viewing the bass on its side reveals that the neck is back-angled about three degrees relative to the body, which among other things, places the strings remarkably high—like, one inch—above the body.

So yes, as I mentioned earlier, the Stonefield is strange. Yet, closely scrutinizing each eccentric design decision reveals a unifying purpose and pervasive thoughtfulness. For example, the bass has amazing balance. Most instruments neck dive on my lap, but the Stonefield's proportions and lightweight tuner-free headstock planted it firmly in playing position. That saved left-hand effort that would otherwise be partially dedicated to holding up the neck. Its length and neck angle combine to place the strings and neck in an idealized playing position, too. Its ergonomics are excellent, except for my one major beef: I don't get the crazy neck profile. Granted, neck shape is subjective, but I'm not drinking the Kiwi Kool Aid on this one. It's a really deep D-profile, with a nearly flat back and steep sloping shoulders. It's way thick, almost like an upright. Your mileage may vary.

The Stonefield uses a variety of proprietary anodized aluminum and stainless steel parts, and its bespoke tailpiece is a thing of machining beauty, placing each string on roller bearings as it travels to the ferrules on the body's back. Tuning is precise, easy, and stable. String changes, while not difficult, do require a special tool that's included with the bass. I dig the floating bridge, and could possibly even be convinced that it imparts some sort of organic Old World vibe to the instrument's sound, but it is

inarguably less precise to intonate than the more typical saddle-based system. You have to loosen the strings and nudge it around, checking intonation in typical fashion, until you get close.

In a bass filled with notable features, one of the Stonefield's most remarkable is its electronics package. It's an elaborate passive design that, despite the single humbucking pickup, is capable of coaxing a remarkably diverse array of sounds out of the instrument. There are bass and treble controls and a 6-position rotary switch for sweeping a midrange notch filter. Strangely, the bass control is a push/pull pot that changes the behavior of the midrange switch. Since the system is passive, no boost is on offer; any perception of boost is merely the result of the attenuation of frequencies around the "boosted" frequency range. Bass players are used to seeing passive tone controls, consisting of a simple lowpass circuit built from a potentiometer and a capacitor. Yet, many more frequency-selective filters can be made out of various combinations of pots, capacitors, and inductors, and that's the approach taken with the Stonefield. Analyzing the exact means by which this is accomplished is well outside the scope of this review, but suffice it to say, the system does dramatically alter the instrument's sound. It's just not predictable in the way we're accustomed to with opamp-based onboard circuits that offer precise equalization. The Stonefield's electronics are highly interactive, imprecise, and require significant experimentation to grok. But, given that it's passive, the system has an immediacy, speed, and dare-I-say organic quality that's a joy of its own. The installation is also top-notch, and the anodized aluminum covers, extensive use of conductive shielding paint, and humbucking pickup combine for a beautifully noise-free instrument.

GOOD ON YA, MATE

I could go on and on about the Stonefield's many little design details, but it's a musical instrument after all. For my fretless tester, I used a variety of amps, including high-end rigs from Bergantino and Aguilar and vibe-y vintage amps from Ampeg and Klemt. In my studio I paired it with a Tube Tech MEC-1A, a Universal Audio SOLO/110, and a Kern IP-777.

Out of the gate, I could not get a sound that worked well for me. Usually, when I'm testing a bass, I set everything flat and check out the instrument's essential personality. But the Stonefield's elaborate electronics defied that strategy, initially, as I didn't have much precedent for its peculiar idiosyncrasies. I persevered, though, and was quickly rewarded. My Stonefield tester was capable of an impressive variety of excellent tones, from a thumpy and dark upright-style sound to an assertive and punchy, midrange-focused attack. The "EQ," such as it is, shapes the overall sound immensely, and its high interactivity meant there was a learning curve. I found a handful of tones I dug, remembering what knob cocktail got me there, and sticking with those as I played. The Stonefield had a rich and blooming quality, with a harmonically dense midrange that somehow seemed analogous to the instrument's aesthetic. The B string was taut and well controlled, and the bass exhibited excellent evenness throughout its range. While I was initially apprehensive that its single-pickup design might be a substantial sonic limitation, I found myself able to emulate a range of tones that evoked two-pickup circuits.

With time, I came to appreciate the Stonefield. Its holistic coherence evinces a visionary designer with an undeniable commitment to detail. It obviously won't be for everybody, but any imaginative player open to new concepts may find a companion with the Stonefield. **BP**

S SPECIFICATIONS

1-5S
Street \$4,800
Pros One-of-a-kind boutique bass that hosts a plethora of intriguing design ideas; full-throated and beautifully textured sound; excellent balance
Cons Neck profile is unusually chunky and deep; unique passive circuit takes time to make sense of
Bottom Line If you're in a rut of Fender-style basses or same-old coffee-table-topped boutique beauties, the Stonefield will shake things up. It's as quirky and lovable as New Zealand is to us Americans.

Construction Neck-through
Body Salusalu
Top Anigre
Binding Fine line, Australian blackwood sap; thick edge, black maire
Nut Black maire
Bridge Solomon ebony
Hardware Titanium
Neck Aircraft-grade okume & marine-grade keruing, vertically laminated
Fingerboard Solomon ebony
Neck width at nut 52mm
Neck width at 24th fret 73mm
String spacing 16mm
Pickup OEM humbucker
Scale length 34"
Controls All passive: volume, 6-position midrange notch filter, treble, bass (push/pull to change midrange filter center frequency range for 10 total positions plus bypass)
Weight 9.5 lbs

Made in New Zealand
Contact stonefieldmusic.com