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# BRIAN MAY

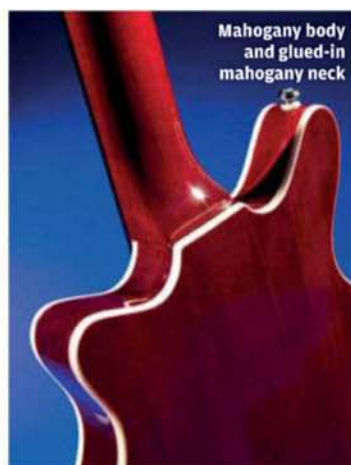
## Bass

Even if the inescapable Queen association doesn't appeal to you, the Brian May Bass is still a refreshing '60s-inspired medium-scale instrument. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

If there's one piece of trivia about Brian May (other than that he plays guitar in Queen and is married to Anita Dobson of *Eastenders* fame) that everybody on earth is likely to know, it has to be that he built his own guitar... well, to be precise, he built it with his dad, partly to save money, and partly just for the challenge. May designed it himself using the best parts he could fashion or recycle, and ended up with a guitar with individual looks and a very distinctive sound. From 1975 he had replicas made, originally by the luthier John Birch, mainly as spares but sometimes for specific recordings or shows.

There have been copies of Brian's guitar down the years. Guild released 300 in 1984, though they were solid instead of semi-hollow and had DiMarzios in place of Burns Tri-Sonics; the re-established Burns concern then made a decent effort; and then, in 2004, at the instigation of Barry Moorhouse of House Music and with May's long-time tech Pete Malandrone onboard, Brian May Guitars was established, to make an affordable replica with May himself being fully involved.

Adding a bass to the BMG roster was inspired by luthier Andrew Guyton, the man May has turned to for replicas since 2003. Guyton gave up trying to persuade BMG that it was a good idea and just went ahead and made one anyway. They obviously liked it because the model we have for review is the budget-priced, Korean-made version of Guyton's prototype.



Mahogany body and glued-in mahogany neck



Lightweight open-gear tuners on an arrow-shaped headstock

The 31.5" scale is an interesting choice between a Fender 34" and the 30" typical of Danelectro and Gibson

For amateur luthiers Brian May and his father managed to design a very fresh-looking instrument, with a near-circular body plus horns that have faint echoes of Grimshaw. The BM Bass is a fairly close replica of the original Red Special, but with greater mass. The body is mahogany, and the strings are front-loaded. There's only one finish available and of course it has to be the same classic cherry overcoat which adorned May's own instrument. It's expertly applied and allows plenty of grain patterning to show through, complementing the overall look.

Cream binding frames both top and bottom edges; there's no ribcage or forearm chamfer but as the bass is

a couple of millimetres thinner than standard girth, this doesn't really damage the playing comfort too badly. As the body design puts the waist so close to the neck, it'll take time and a little adjustment to get comfortable... or you can just wear a strap, which solves the problem nicely.

The mahogany neck is secured to the body in a Gibson style, using the set-in method, and the scale length is worth noting straight away: it's 800mm/31.5", an interesting choice between a long 34" Fender scale and the 30" favoured by Danelectros and short-scale Gibson basses. This makes it perfect for guitarists looking to double on something that feels close to

### FACTFILE

#### Brian May Bass

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody bass. Made in Korea**  
PRICE **£715, padded gig bag included**

BUILD **Mahogany body, set in mahogany neck with 20 medium-gauge nickel frets on an ebony fingerboard. Hipshot tuners and BM Vintage Style bridge. Chrome hardware**

ELECTRICS **Passive with one BMB Humbucker and one BMB Single Coil pickup. Two volumes and one tone control**  
LEFT-HANDERS **No**  
FINISH **Antique cherry**  
RANGE OPTIONS **None**

SCALE LENGTH **800mm/30.5"**  
NECK WIDTH  
Nut **45mm**  
12th fret **52mm**  
DEPTH OF NECK  
First fret **22mm**  
12th fret **25mm**  
STRING SPACING  
Nut **11.5mm**  
Bridge **18mm**  
ACTION AS SUPPLIED  
12th fret treble **3mm**  
12th fret bass **3mm**  
WEIGHT  
**3.57kg/7.85lbs**

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**Bass Centre**

Wyman Bass  
From the same makers as the Brian May Bass, this diminutive four-string is short of scale and small of body but big in sound, and worth a look  
RRP £595

**Danelectro**

'58 Longhorn Bass  
A 30" short-scale belter which delivers the fundamentals very nicely and looks just fab  
RRP £399

**Gretsch**

Electromatic Junior Jet Bass II  
Based on the single-cutaway Duo Jet guitar design with a single mid-placed pickup and a short-scale neck  
RRP £287



With no pickup selector, you'll be balancing that humbucker with the volume controls

**Despite the odd way it sits on your lap and the neck pickup's lack of definition, the BMB is great fun to whizz around on**

their main instrument, or for beginners, or the shorter in stature.

While not super-slim or fast the cherry-finished neck isn't at all bulky, and it's comfortable and highly playable. Naturally, it culminates in a headstock with the arrowhead form familiar to Queen fans worldwide. A set of high-quality open-gear chrome Hipshot tuners line up two abreast, separated only by May's signature. As well as a black synthetic nut there's a zero fret in residence which should help minimise the difference between open string and fretted note.

The fretboard is ebony and carries 20 medium-gauge nickel frets with white pearloid dot markers, with two at frets five and 19 and three at the octave, an adornment that matches the BM Bass to the RS (though May's guitar has 24 frets and a further set of three dots at the second octave). A further set of markers line the top edge, all white dots except for thin block inlays at frets five and 17, a quirky detail that no one has a reason for... but we really like that kind of silliness at *Guitar & Bass*.

The bridge, a chrome BMB Vintage Hi Mass unit, is a chunkier version of Leo Fender's basic design. Passive electronics are the order of the day, and the BMB is kitted out with a humbucker in the neck position and one BMB Single Coil at the bridge, both with shiny chrome covers. If the colour of this bass didn't put you in mind of Jack Bruce's Cream-era Gibson EB-3, the pickups and their positioning certainly should. As it's passive, the controls are simple, with two volumes and one tone dial of the standard more-or-less treble variety, so getting a sound is easy-peasy.

**Sounds**

The basic sound (both pickups on with the tone knob at full) is excellent: nice and fat with growling lows and an overall feeling of controlled aggression. There's a hint of zing at the G string but elsewhere the clarity is more even and more natural, and the midrange is generally solid with a punchiness cloaked in a darker hue. Highs are clean and clear; they're slightly choked in the P-Bass manner but you have to work pretty hard to induce finger or fret-noise. It all amounts to a pretty good, stylistically versatile starting point.

Cutting back the tone control has an interesting effect: at about three quarters cut you get the expected silkier version of the basic sound, but before this, the reduced trebles allow a little more high-mid to poke through, so the thinner strings get fractionally snappier and more brittle until the final metamorphosis. Soloing the bridge pickup uncorks a surprisingly lively option with a pleasing throatiness lurking beneath a tighter, brighter tone. You get only a slight hint of the

nasal zing in higher registers, the D and G strings veering more in the direction of bright and cutting. The lows are tight and plenty wide enough for high-intensity finger-funk forays. Roll back the tone knob and the BMB's bridge pickup starts to sound the way you expected all along: all the rat-a-tat attack is there, but it's not quite fat enough... you lose high-end attack and lower midrange-induced body.

There's another surprise in store from the neck pickup, as it's not quite as good as we would have liked; we would have appreciated an earthy, Gibsonesque sound with dark mids and slightly choked highs, but here we get a smooth, woolly rumble without too much definition. The only possible applications, other than filling space on a dance music gig through a trillion-watt PA with massive bass bins, would be roots music or old-school blues - there's just about enough attack to work for those. The only useful blend we could find involves dialling the bridge pickup back to about 80 per cent, a move which reclaims some clarity and which works well for a dubby, reggae-flavoured thump.

**Verdict**

In truth, the fairest way the judge the BMB is not on where it has come from, but on how good it actually is as a bass. Ignoring the lineage of the shape, it's an unusual and fine-looking beast with a heap of '60s flavour which harks back to wilder times without really trying to. Tonally, it's fairly solid and dependable stuff with just a bit more top end than you'd expect given where the pickups are sited. You do pay for this in the quality of the neck pickup sound, but this - and the slightly strange way in which the BMB sits on your lap - are the only real issues. For fans of full-scale basses the scale length might feel a bit cramped but, to be honest, we found it highly playable and great fun to whizz around on. The price is near the upper reaches of what you'd call 'budget' but if you're a guitarist looking to double on bass or a bassist looking to make things a bit smaller, it's well worth a go.



The BMB comes with a zero fret and a black plastic string guide



Simple but beefy bridge and great-looking control knobs

**FINAL SCORE**

BRIAN MAY BASS	
<b>Build Quality</b>	17/20
<b>Playability</b>	16/20
<b>Sound</b>	16/20
<b>Value for money</b>	16/20
<b>Vibe</b>	17/20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82%</b>