



Dingwall Voodoo Prima Bass 5-String
By Scott Malandrone
January 1996
Bass Player Magazine.

The “wet noodle” effect – it’s a common complaint about the feel and sound of the B string on many 5-string basses. The problem is derived from the laws of physics: a string with a lower pitch requires a longer scale length (the distance between the nut and the bridge) for correct tension and intonation, which is why a B string with a standard 34” scale can feel “loose” compared to the neighboring E string. Piano builders have always operated by the principle of “Longer equals Lower,” and bassmakers have noted this, which is why there are now many 5-string basses with extended scale lengths of 35” and 36”. Canada’s Dingwall Designer Guitars has taken this one step further: The company’s Voodoo Prima bass has a 5 string stretched to a super-long 37”.



According to luthier Sheldon Dingwall, the Voodoo combines Ralph Novak’s fanned fret system (which features angled fret placement and individual-string scale lengths) with grand-piano building techniques. By giving each string its own scale length and then placing the nut and bridge at opposing angles and fanning out the frets, Dingwall has created a bass with each string extended “closer to its ideal length.” Why do it this way? In essence, it’s because the longer a string is, the brighter its tone will be (and vice versa). “If you work with physics,” says Dingwall, “you can get a balanced sound out of any string.” We were curious to hear how well this worked, so I spent some time with a Voodoo Prima bass in our Soundlab and at a band rehearsal.

The Voodoo Prima is extremely well crafted. Its lightweight body has a walnut core with a beautiful, bookmatched 1/8” quilted-maple top and back. (it’s also available with an ash, sassafras, or Saskatchewan-birch body in several solid or transparent finishes.) The wood is finished with an oil-and-wax



combination that doesn't feel sticky; this has to be maintained regularly, which is why the bass comes with a supply of wax.

The Prima's nine-piece, bolt-on maple neck is very fast. The pau ferro fingerboard is fitted with 24 medium-height frets, which are placed in the fingerboard with a combination press fit / glue-in method. Here's the process: cyanoacrylate (Superglue) is squirted into the Fret slots, the frets are pressed in, and then they're clamped down with a radius cawl to ensure a tight fit. The Voodoo's neck is strong; unlike many necks with an angled-back headstock, this one doesn't have a separate, glued on peghead. Instead, it's carved from the same wood used for the rest of the neck. Graphite reinforcement strips under the fingerboard add extra stiffness and help to prevent dead spots.

The Voodoo uses two Bartolini P-style soapbar pickups with a 2 + 3 configuration – the B and E strings are covered by the pickups upper magnet, while the A, D, and G are covered by the lower one. The pickups are connected to a 9-Volt Bartolini TBIBT preamp with a master volume, blend, and concentric bass and treble knobs. Unfortunately, the blend is wired in what I think is a counter-intuitive manner: turning it to the right (clockwise) selects the neck pickup, not the bridge. Also, since there isn't a separate battery compartment (the battery's retaining clip is bolted to the inside of the cavity cover), it would be nice if Dingwall used thread-brass screw inserts to prevent stripped-out screw holes.

The Dingwall/Kahler bridge has a unique design. Each string has its own isolated saddle assembly, which is bolted to a countersunk plate made of aluminum; the string's scale length determines how far back the saddle is placed. Four rear-mounted screws extend through the body to attach the bridge assembly on the bass.

Sound is where the Voodoo excels. I performed the majority of my testing through the BP reference rig, which includes a Demeter VTBP-201DBL preamp, a Hafler Pro-5000 power amp, and Eden 410XLT and SWR Triad cabinets. I also cranked a MESA/Boogie M-2000 driving an Ampeg SVT-410HE. Acoustically, the Voodoo has a rich, even tone with a sweet top end; plugged in, the instrument really does have enhanced "weight" and clarity down low – notes played on the E and B strings resonate deeply in your chest, with strong lows and throaty mids. Open strings have a piano-like tone with lots of spank and sustain, and tweaking the Voodoo's bass knob adds subsonic muscle. In a band setting, the bass is very powerful, pumping out clear, distinct lows that sit perfectly between the sound of a drum kit and distorted guitars. And you don't have to adjust your attack when plucking the B string – the extra tension really makes a difference.



It could take you a while to get accustomed to the Voodoo's fanned frets. First position playing is the most difficult, especially if you play a lot of octaves; reaching for low C and its octave on the D string can be quite a stretch – and it's worse if you strap the bass on low (or have small hands). Also, since there aren't any neck position markers on the fingerboard, playing past the 12th fret requires your full attention; if you aren't careful, you accidentally end up a half-step off or on top of a fret. The Voodoo isn't as difficult to play as you might think, though – but you will have to spend some time adapting your technique to get the most from its innovative design.

The availability of strings is another issue. Because of the Voodoo's extended scale, you'll need to use Dingwall's stainless-steel taper-wound strings (\$41.95 list), which are currently available only in .045 - .130 gauge. And since you wouldn't want to be stuck with a broken string and no replacement, you'll have to stock up. (According to Sheldon Dingwall, GHS Super Steels in the Long Plus length will also work, but he says his strings are optimized for the Voodoo and "make a difference.")

Nonetheless, the Voodoo Bass is a wonderful advancement in the sound of 5-strings; low end doesn't get much more commanding than the huge sound this instrument produces. The axe has already found its way into the hands of bassists as different as Leland Sklar and Metallica's Jason Newsted, so the Voodoo clearly appeals to a wide range of players. Will you be one of the brave?



**Dingwall Voodoo
Prima Bass 5-String**
List price: \$2,695

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	■	■	■	■	■
Electronics:	■	■	■	■	■
Playability:	■	■	■	■	
Sound:	■	■	■	■	■
Value:	■	■	■	■	■

Bottom Line: A unique axe with a super-tight *B* string.

[Note from Dingwall: Since the publication of this article in Bass Player Magazine (January 1996) we have made pearl position markers on the fretboard face a standard feature on Voodoo models. Separate battery cavities with quick release access plates are also a standard feature on all Prima and Z-series models.]