

Meet Your Maker

Words by Tim Slater

Chris May

Overwater have been synonymous with sumptuous hand-crafted basses for over 25 years. Founder and MD Chris May chats with Playmusic Pickup about why he feels his basses enjoy such a great reputation.

Over a quarter of a century, British bass manufacturer Overwater has supplied the low-end muscle behind more hit records than it's possible to name. Originally starting out purely as a builder of one-off bespoke basses the UK-based manufacturer now encompasses semi-production based methods but Overwater founder and owner Chris May insists that he is happy with the balance that he feels he has achieved between the technical advantages offered by modern CNC manufacturing and the traditional

hand-finishing that remains close to the heart and soul of his instruments.

Overwater officially began during the late 1970s but Chris May built his first instruments long before then while he was still at school.

"I made my first guitar as a wood work project when I was just a kid. The first one was a plywood acoustic guitar, followed by an electric guitar made out of oak! Everything about them was wrong but it was kind of an introduction, if you like.

Later on my dad helped me make one that was actually playable and



when I was 17 I found myself in that scenario when I was the worst of three guitarists in the band and so I was told that I was gonna have to play bass and my only option was to make one!"

After training in engineering Chris moved up to the north of England to study at Durham University and he remains based in the north today, although his current premises are a far cry from Overwater's first workshop, which was a shed at the bottom of the garden.

Overwater was officially born in 1979, which coincided perfectly with the 'bass boom' that saw the Chris's open-minded approach and obvious skills as a luthier strike a chord (or a big bottom 'E') with the new generation of players who wanted more performance from their basses that was beyond the capabilities of the old standards like Fender. New woods, active electronics and even different tunings were all the rage and like some alchemist operating at the fringes of civilisation, Chris frenziedly laboured to meet the demands of the new generation of bassists.

"In those days bassists always tended to be more open to the possibilities of doing something a bit different whereas guitarists tend to be rather conservative. I guess that the bass guitar is still a new instrument in lots of ways and my generation where the generation that developed that whole esoteric bass thing; in America you had Alembic and on our side we had WAL, JD, me and a bit later Robert Status. Players like Stanley Clarke and Anthony Jackson and Mark King, made bass playing trendy among young kids and that was all going on during the late 70s and early 80s."

One of Overwater's most significant achievements is that they changed the sound of bass guitar, not just by their choice of materials but they also inspired the concept of going beyond four strings.

Chris explains, "We built our original 'C' bass for a guy called Andrew Bodnar, who was with the Thompson Twins at the time. He was part of that first generation of bass players who suddenly found themselves having to compete with keyboard players who could go below standard 'E', so suddenly there was a demand for that. Andrew's idea was a low-tuning four-string bass that tuned (low to high) C-F-Bb-Eb and that was our first claim to fame because it preceded the five-string, which hadn't really appeared on the scene yet in the UK. This also attracted the attention of some fairly major players like Mickey Feat, Guy Pratt (Pink Floyd) and John Entwistle, of course.

After a year of playing the 'C' bass it was Mickey Feat who asked me to make him a five-string, and that was the start of the five-string."

Summing up why Overwater basses are special, Chris puts it down to simple combination:

"It's about playability and sound. Our instruments work, they have a fundamentally good tone and you don't have to fight them. It's not something that you can immediately put your finger on but I think that's it's just that we've been around a long time and we do what we do to the best of our ability. We are halfway between a production situation and a bespoke thing; we make a reasonable amount of instruments but we do it in a very personal way." **PU**

