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APOCALYPSE MEOW

It's the end of the world as we know it, and **Thundercat** feels fine

NOT JUST A WEEK BACK FROM TOURING in Australia, and Stephen Bruner has a lot of adjusting to do.

For the past two weeks, he's been playing bass for Suicidal Tendencies, and for most of his life, he's been making music for other people: George Duke, John McLaughlin, Erykah Badu, Snoop Dogg and whoever else cares to pay him for his versatile fretboard sprints. But now he's got a debut album, *The Golden Age Of Apocalypse*, out on his pal, producer/laptop musician Flying Lotus' Brainfeeder label, and with it, an entire reconsideration of who he is. As his girlfriend drives him and his four-year-old daughter to the neighborhood Chick-fil-A, he considers that maybe his father had it right all along.

"My dad had to tell me I was an artist," says Bruner. "That's not something that I knew I was doing. [For me], it was like, I would do music, and I'd be this character. And he was like, 'Stephen, you have to look at yourself a little differently, understand that this is what you're doing.' Now it's turned into that, finally. Even for me, it still feels weird."

Bruner understands how unfair the game can be for outliers such as himself. As we are talking, the hype surrounding Tyler, The Creator and his Odd Future collective has reached a fever pitch, and Bruner sees much to be admired in Tyler's success. Yet Tyler is a skate kid and hip-hop artist who can count on a vast youth-culture industry to back him up. Thundercat is at heart a jazz bassist named after an old '80s cartoon series. Not so much a demand for that, but when Bruner describes his origins, you immediately see that that's not the point.

Bruner grew up here in Los Angeles, his aforementioned father a session drummer for Gladys Knight, the Temptations and many other R&B groups known and forgotten. His brother Ronald followed directly in his dad's steps as a drummer for Stanley Clarke, and he also developed a willful temperament toward jazz-music orthodoxy.

"He was at a club in NYC once," chuckles Bruner. "He gets up onstage right in the middle of somebody's solo, and he goes, 'Ladies and gentleman, John Coltrane is

dead. Stop this.'"

His mother was a jeweler and born-again Christian with a mohawk. In this environment, Bruner had the freedom to explore himself more fully than most, and above all, he embraced the fantastical panoramas of anime—a lifelong love that still consumes him—alongside jazz music. The two are still intertwined for him.

"I became very attached to things emotionally," he says. "Naturally, when you're a kid, you wanna be Superman or something like that. I connected to it like that. But as I was getting older and artistically developing, it was something that I held onto as to identify with because I enjoyed it so much. And not just that; creatively, I felt like it was inspirational."

Bruner's introduction to Flying Lotus (as it turns out, the great-nephew of John Coltrane's wife Alice) at SXSW began his metamorphosis, first with their collaboration "Mmmhmm" and finally with *The Golden Age Of Apocalypse*. Already tweeted by the BBC's Gilles Peterson as perhaps the most essential bass player's LP since Jaco Pastorius' *Jaco*, the album carries a sunny, positive vibe missing from the post-Lex Luger gladiator dystopias of hip hop and the overblown pomp of modern R&B. FlyLo's production accounts for some familiar sonic tics and clicks on "Fleer Ultra," but there's time out for more accessible moments, like R&B track "Walkin'," as well as the cover of "For Love I Come" by George Duke, one of Thundercat's mentors.

Many of Bruner's family and friends—his brother Ronald, Erykah Badu and Shafiq Husayn from Sa-Ra, to name a few—show up, but it's easy to miss them. Thundercat's bright musical palette is the star here. "It's such a melting pot of stuff, you don't know where stuff is coming from," he says of his work.

In the current musical milieu, Bruner admits, "Jazz is a scary word for most people." Yet the potential reward for articulating a unique vision, Bruner knows, is much greater. "The first time I heard 'Portrait Of Tracy' by Jaco, I couldn't even wrap my mind around it. It was like, 'Dude, that's possible?' And that's what I want this album to do for people. I want them to hear it and go, 'Ahhh. I didn't know that this was possible.'" —Justin Hampton

