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ALO, NICKI BLUHM & THE GRAMBLERS

# Steve Adams

Turning Jams Into Gems

BY JIMMY LESLIE | PHOTO BY DOUG BURKHARDT

**FOR TEN YEARS, NATIVE STEVE ADAMS HAS** been a stalwart anchor at the bottom of the San Francisco Bay Area's thriving jam scene. Adams' main band, ALO, sells out ballrooms near and far, and the understated, fingerstyle P-Bass devotee with impeccable instincts is always in demand for sideman and session dates. On ALO's fourth album for Jack Johnson's Brushfire label, Adams and his bandmates made a concerted effort to craft solid songs bristling with the democratically creative foursome's feel-good forays of upbeat improvisation.

**How does ALO usually start up and develop a jam?**

One thing we do is take turns starting a jam, and then just let ideas unravel in whatever order. Each of us has the opportunity to change the harmony or the rhythm. We try our best to support each other's inspired moves and give them time to develop. We may ditch everything, but some ideas may lead to keeper parts. The ultimate goal is to find parts we personally love, but which still fit with the rest. Once we've got something collectively cool, we go back, dissect, and pick out the core ideas. Sometimes certain moments of the jams might even suggest other avenues of pursuit.

We also experiment with styles and feels. The propulsive,

syncopated bass line I play on "Speed of Dreams" came about while jamming on the changes in a ska feel during pre-production. The song ended up having a more pop-rock feel, but the ska-like bass line stuck.

**What's one song on the new album that started from pure spontaneity?**

"Falling Dominoes" was born in the studio when we were having fun messing around with that groove. Zach [Gill, keyboardist/singer] threw out some vocal ideas, and we were unknowingly halfway there. Since it wasn't planned, we sort of forgot about it. But like a lot of organized bass players, I also play the role of archivist. I encouraged the band to revisit the jam and develop it into a song. Musically, all it needed was a little bridge modulation to reset the main groove and it was good.

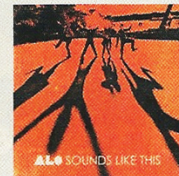
**Do you create charts to help with arrangements?**

Sometimes. Creating a chart can help you zoom out and see the bigger picture. We're all traditionally schooled, but any band can develop its own song language. Creating a song arrangement is like designing a building. You want it to be unique, but it also needs to function. You need to be able to find the kitchen and the bathroom! A song needs those familiar elements, but it also needs the mystery and magic of something new. **BP**

**i INFO**

ALO, *Sounds Like This* [Brushfire, 2012]; Nicki Bluhm, *Driftwood* [Little Sur, 2011]

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EQUIP

**Basses** '74 Fender Precision Bass with Leo Quan Badass II bridge, Squier Vintage Modified Precision Bass, Martin BC-15E acoustic bass  
**Rig** Mesa Engineering M3 Carbine with Vintage Powerhouse 4x10 cabinet, Mesa Engineering Walkabout Scout 1x15 combo  
**Strings** D'Addario Half Rounds (.050-.105)

CONNECT

Watch Steve Adams play and sing "Falling Dominoes" with ALO: [bassplayer.com/december2012](http://bassplayer.com/december2012)

