



# BASS IS LOADED

## Babe Ruth's hip-hop homerun

text **Jesse Serwer** photography courtesy of **Janita Haan/Babe Ruth**

"The Mexican" might be the unlikeliest of all b-boy anthems. Recorded in 1972 by Babe Ruth, a British progressive rock band whose second-greatest claim to fame may have been opening the West Coast leg of the *Frampton Comes Alive* tour, it certainly doesn't seem to have the same inherent connection to New York Afro-Latin culture as, say, the Jimmy Castor Bunch's "It's Just Begun." But after speaking with Babe Ruth founder and "The Mexican" songwriter Alan Shacklock, I learn his inadvertent role in the early development of hip-hop culture seems oddly fitting.

Over the course of our interview, Shacklock cites Albert King's "Cold Feet"—a proto-rap track if there ever was one, and the basis for Wu-Tang's "Protect Ya Neck" and Diamond D's "Check One, Two"—as his greatest inspiration as a young guitarist. He explains that he wrote the lyrics to "The Mexican" as a response to John Wayne's one-sided 1960 film *The Alamo*, which didn't bother to humanize the Mexican troops, who lost the infamous 1836 battle to Sam Houston's army. The fifty-eight-year-old classically trained guitarist names J Dilla, the Roots, and A Tribe Called Quest among his favorite contemporary artists, and quotes from Jeff Chang's 2005 hip-hop tome, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*.

"The Mexican" wasn't just a Babe Ruth song, it was *the* Babe Ruth song. The first tune ever recorded by the band (they ultimately released five albums), it was the *only* track on the original demo used to seek out the record contract that led to 1972's *First Base*. With its funky bass line, driving drumbeat, and climactic interpolation of Ennio Morricone's *For a Few Dollars More* theme, it was also the culmination of a life's worth of influences on Shacklock, who grew up enamored with African American music and Wild West shoot-'em-ups.

Born thirty minutes north of London in the town of Hatfield, Shacklock picked up the guitar while still in his single digits. By age

twelve, he'd formed a band called the Juniors with future Rolling Stones guitarist Mick Taylor, who was just fourteen at the time, and eventual Jethro Tull bassist John Glasscock, then eleven.

"I was fascinated with the blues, and the soul music coming out of the South like James Brown and Derek Martin," recalls Shacklock, who now lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where he works as a record producer. "We'd study who the players were on these records and try to imitate them. We were fanatics. I remember getting a 45 with 'That Driving Beat' by Willie Mitchell, and it was just awesome. I still listen to that and 'The Midnight Hour' by Wilson Pickett, and it's matchless to me."

The Juniors released their lone single, "There's a Pretty Girl" b/w "Pocket Size," for Parlophone in 1964. Soon afterward, Shacklock found himself in blue-eyed soul singer Chris Farlowe's band, the Thunderbirds, an act whose lineup would briefly include a pre-Zeppelin John Bonham. In the late '60s, however, he put his rock career aside and enrolled in London's prestigious Royal Academy of Music, mastering classical Spanish guitar. "That's where the Spanish influence you hear on 'The Mexican' came from," Shacklock says.

After graduating in 1971, Shacklock decided to apply his command of classical song structure to a combination of hard rock and the driving soul music he grew up on, recruiting bassist Dave Hewitt, keyboardist Dave Punshon, and drummer Dick Powell. The foursome took the name Shacklock and began developing material that its eponymous founder had composed while at the Royal Academy.

### First Base

"I was fascinated with Motown and [with] what arrangers like David Van DePitte and Paul Riser were doing. I wanted us to be very simple, and very much based on a constant groove," Shacklock