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Tips for Bassists
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First Time Buyer

by Brian Minato

What do you look for when you buy or are looking to buy your first bass guitar? Should it be new and possibly expensive? Used and possibly cheap? Is the bass in question the one your favourite musician uses? Did you read about a particular model or did somebody recommend one? What about buying online at eBay or Craigslist, through the Buy & Sell or at a pawnshop? Small local store or generic music store chain? Four strings or twelve?

This issue's article is a two-parter ... I think it's very important to talk about the many options and situations which can affect your decision making process; *especially* if you are new to the world of bass guitar.

Here are some things to consider:

1) Price Range.
What do you want to spend or better yet what is your budget? Most musicians are balancing on fairly unstable financial ground, so be aware of what you are prepared to shell out. I'm a fan of making sure the money is in place (if possible) to get whatever it is that I'm looking for. That way the deal is over and done with at the beginning. Unfortunately, this scenario is the less common one to most of us working folk. This is where buying at a bigger music store can come into play. If your credit rating is okay, you can set up a payment plan and with minimal money down walk out of your local Long & McQuade or Steve's Music, etc., with your bass in hand. There will be interest added onto the overall purchase price just like any other payment plan and you will pay more in the end. Top of the line basses cost top of the line dollars so you might want to consider the compromise of getting a bass that is reasonably priced. It might not be your first choice but if you are in it for the long haul you'll eventually end up with the one or the ones you've always wanted.

2) Model and Brand.
I have pretty small hands. Some basses are not very comfortable to play as a result. Try out a few different kinds of basses, different brands, different shapes and different sizes. You want to get a feel, a sense of what might be right or wrong for your situation. What is it like when you play it sitting or standing? Is it light or heavy? Does it feel good playing with a pick *and* with your fingers? Is the neck size a regular scale, short scale or long scale? Does it feel balanced when you're wearing it with a strap? The main thing is to look around as much as possible. And never be afraid to ask questions. Any questions?

3) What Kinds of Music Are You Interested in Playing?
Some instruments lend themselves naturally to certain kinds of music. If you are in a hard rock band you probably want to get something that will give you the necessary crunch and heaviness, which is part of the music like a Gibson Thunderbird. If you like a lot of mid-range punch you may want to check out a Music Man Stingray. If you like jazz, a fretless bass may be in order or an upright.

4) Bring Someone Who Knows
I started out playing a copy of a Jazz bass when I was 13. It was a decent, well made beginner bass, which didn't cost an arm and a leg to acquire. My bass teacher, Wayne Boychuck, helped me pick it out. Actually, he sorted it out completely as I had no prior experience in the buying or selling of any sort of instrument. It was a definite plus to have someone give me guidance so I wouldn't get ripped off when it came time to actually hand my money over for my new purchase. It's not just little kids who get burned either. A contemporary of mine wanted to get an effects pedal for his burgeoning pedal board setup. He hadn't bought many before so I offered to help him out, to come along to the music shop so he could find something solid and workable at the best price possible. I was out on the road with Sarah McLachlan for a while and he didn't want to wait. What happened was he ended up going to a local music shop and got talked into buying a pedal which cost way too much that wasn't all that suitable to his needs. This pedal now sits around gathering dust. It really does pay to have someone with you who knows about gear and stuff – especially if it's your first time buying a bass.

See you next issue for part two.

Brian Minato is the bassist for Sarah McLachlan. He is also a Vancouver based musician/producer currently working with The Blue Alarm, Boywonderbread, Sandy Scofield, Jennifer Campbell, Chris Tait and other artists. Find him online at www.theblue alarm.com, www.myspace.com/theblue alarm.

First Time Buyer: Part Two

By Brian Minato

Last issue I talked about price ranges, models and brands, styles of music and the benefit of experience when checking out that first bass. Here are a few more things to consider:

Searching/Ordering/Buying Online

The Internet is a great tool for gathering info. You can research the bass or manufacturer you are interested in with minimal effort. Just typing in the name "Fender Precision Bass" or "Rickenbacker" on any search engine will bring up so many sites related to your topic. There are also various product review sites that can be very useful. They will provide you with price ranges, technical specs, the pluses and minuses of the bass and the reviewers' overall opinion. I've written reviews on basses and bass amps for this very magazine in the "Road Test" section. Just to let you know how much info is out there, I googled "bass guitar reviews" while writing this article and came up with 56,700 related sites. That is a lot of websites and way too much information to sift through. Try and get some tips from your fellow musos as to which product review sites are consistent or trustworthy. The one thing to always remember is that it is only one person's opinion, and what they like or dislike may be the complete opposite of what you like and dislike. The opinion that really matters ultimately is your own.

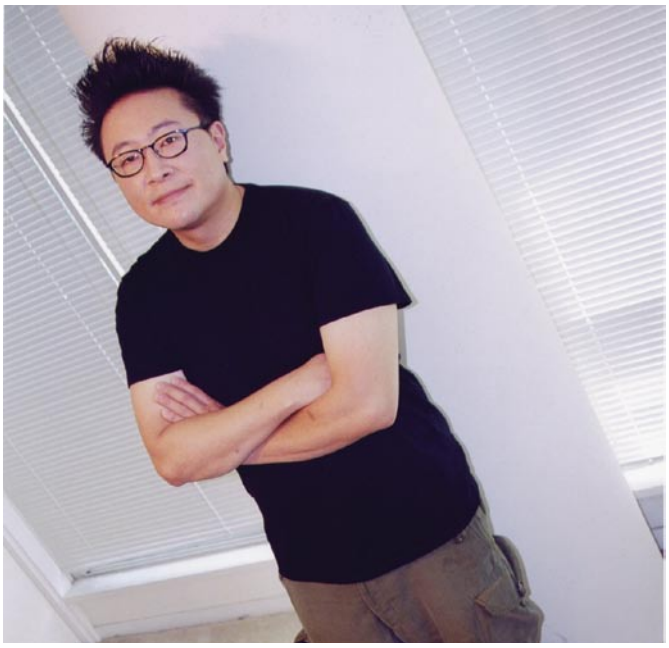
I would not recommend buying from online sites like www.ebay.com or www.craigslist.com for the first timer. There are just too many variables and intangibles. Just the fact that you cannot physically hold the bass in your hands until you buy it, if your bid is successful, would make me very wary. I know lots of people who buy gear online regularly, but all these folks are very experienced, know pretty much what they are looking for *and* understand what they are looking at when they are searching online. If you do feel the need to use an online service please make sure to consult someone who is willing to give you a little guidance. I know I would.

Buying New

Some of the positives about buying new would definitely be things like having a wider selection to choose from; getting a warranty in case something happens to your bass; the flexibility of financing; and the possibility of exchanging it should you change your mind. Also, if the store is a good one, the staff should be able to point you in the right direction once you explain what you are looking for. They can usually provide tech services such as the setting up of your bass. Ask around and go with a shop that has a good word of mouth reputation.

Buying Used

Caveat emptor, that old standby of **let the buyer beware** is so very, very true. I once bought a used electric guitar from some music shop in Boston for what I thought was an unbelievably cheap price. Not wanting to lose out on this "steal," I didn't bother to check it very closely. I nonchalantly took it up front, paid the money and walked out the door thinking "alright what a deal!" The neck warped the very next day, thus providing my touring band mates something to chuckle about for a few days. It *was* salvageable after some doctoring from my local guitar tech, but at an additional cost. Sometimes a



deal is not a deal. Sometimes it is. I also found an old '70s Gibson Grabber at a used music store in Columbus, OH for a really low price. It looked to be in pretty good shape but was a bit intermittent when plugged in. I figured, well the asking price is so low that any work I had to do to get it in playing shape would be minimal. A bit of soldering on the input jack and it was ready to go. I now use it all the time. You can check out the authenticity and verify how old a bass is by finding its serial number, which can be located somewhere on the body, neckplate, bridgeplate or headstock – depending on the model. This website can help you track down the year your bass in question was made: http://mediawebsource.com/guitar/serial.htm. The main thing is to pay close attention when looking at used stuff. There are no guarantees.

Some Final Thoughts

For you first timers be aware that no matter how cautiously you do your homework, and no matter how closely you examine every nook and cranny in a potential purchase, not every transaction involving your hard-earned money and the bass in question will be a pleasant one. That being said, don't get put off if the first couple of times at bat are less than stellar; chalk it up to the constant gaining of experience and knowledge when dealing with stores, pawnshops, the Internet, and other musicians. It'll prove to be invaluable to you in the long run – provided you're in it for the long run. I mean who knows? You might find the bass of your dreams your first time out. I hope you do.
Good luck!

Brian Minato is the bassist for Sarah McLachlan. He is also a Vancouver-based musician/producer currently working with The Blue Alarm, boywonderbread, Sandy Scofield, Jennifer Campbell, Chris Tait and other artists.

Transcribing

by Marc Rogers

Greetings, and welcome to the first of (hopefully) many bass columns. In future columns I'll be getting into some more detailed specifics of how to play the bass (both acoustic and electric) but for my first column I'd like to talk about what I think is the most important element in learning how to play bass: transcription.

Transcription is, in my opinion, the single best teacher for any musician, especially in most contemporary genres. I'm not necessarily talking about setting pen to paper, although for some people that's certainly an element of it. While writing down your favorite bass line or solo is a great exercise (and will also do wonders for your reading!), I've learned from personal experience that it's much more useful to have a really good musical memory and not read well, than to be able to read well but not be able to play long passages without written music. Ideally, however, you should be able to do both! My main concern with students is that they learn how to PLAY the material first. If they choose to also learn how to notate it on paper as well, that's a bonus.

When I set out to transcribe a piece of music, the first thing I do is listen to it as often as possible for about a week, whether on my iPod while doing errands, in my car while driving, or around the house. I try to get the melody/bass line/sax solo or whatever it is in my head as much as I can, so that when I sit down to learn it on the bass I have a very good idea of how it goes. It's a good idea to begin learning how to transcribe with a song that you REALLY like, because you'll be hearing an awful lot of it! If the song stays pretty much in one key, the next step is to determine what that key is. I find it generally easier to hear notes and lines relative to a tonic, so that can be a timesaver. Then the hard work begins.

I find that the best method of transcribing a bass line is to start off one bar at a time, and to try to hear the notes and rhythms in that bar very clearly in your head before you try to play it. That way you're not just learning by trial and error, you're training your fingers to play what you hear, which is really the ultimate goal of any performing musician. Once you feel you have the first bar under your fingers, proceed to bar two and continue the process. I often stop once I've completed a musical phrase (usually four or eight bars, but not always), then I go back and make sure I can play the whole passage smoothly. This is usually the point where you find any problems in your fingering; sometimes a fingering that worked well for one bar on its own doesn't lead into the next bar at all, so you have to adjust. This is also where you start developing your musical memory chops, especially if the line has a lot of variation. If you're new to transcribing I recommend starting with something repetitive, so as not to get too frustrated. As your skills improve, try moving on to more complex bass lines with more variation. Ultimately you can transcribe anything (guitar solos, vocal melodies, whatever) because the more you learn the more information you'll have under your fingers.

For me, transcribing involves more than just learning the notes. I try to get as close to the original as possible, including tone, phrasing, and feel. If you can, try to find a video of the player in question and watch how he/she plucks the strings, whether they use a pick/fingers/slapping technique, what kind of bass they're using, and so on. Emulating other musicians' tones is not only a useful practical exercise (if I only had a nickel for every time I've been asked for a "Paul McCartney" sound in the studio…), but it will also teach you a great deal about how to get different sounds of your own out of your instrument.

One concern students often have regarding transcribing is that they won't develop their own personal style. I don't believe that's true. Every person is unique with their own likes and dislikes, and you will naturally absorb elements of the music that appeal to you and reject the ones that don't. Even players who idolize only one or two musicians will inevitably end up with a unique sound given enough time. One of my favourite players, Anthony Jackson, learned to play by transcribing mainly two people: James Jamerson and Jack Cassidy. If you listen to him play, he definitely doesn't sound like either of them! He has a totally unique (and very cool) style all his own.

Transcribing can be a slow and frustrating process at first, especially if you're not used to it. The key is to be persistent and not get discouraged. The first bass line I ever decided to learn was "Pinball Wizard" by The Who, and it seemed like it took forever to figure out the notes, the rhythms, and especially how to actually play it on the bass. Once I could play the whole song with the record, however, I was hooked! Hopefully you'll have the same experience. Good luck and happy transcribing!

It's About Time

by Mike Downes

A jazz musician once said "so many drummers, so little time." Ouch. But this could just as easily be said about bassists. We all know how important our time feel is, but how much time (no pun intended) do we spend working on it?

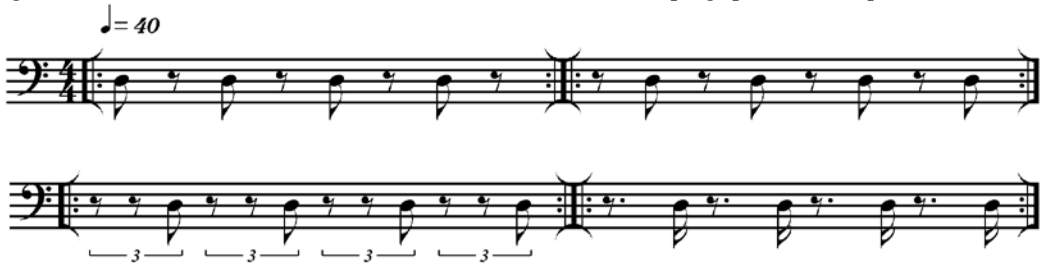
An obvious, but perhaps overlooked idea, is to listen daily to great players and absorb their sense of time. Listening to recordings and live players is an excellent way to internalize what a great groove feels like. As you listen, try moving your body with the music so that you become physically involved.

Play along with those same recordings. This is your chance to groove along with some of the best drummers in the world on a daily basis! As you play and listen, you will ingrain the time feel. As I mention in *The Jazz Bass Line Book*, there is a big difference between "knowing" something intellectually and doing it without thinking about it. The goal is to have ingrained a solid and consistent time feel to the point that it happens unconsciously.

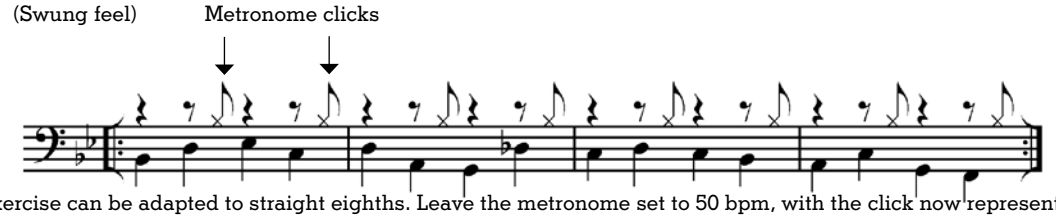
There is nothing like playing with a great drummer. Take every opportunity you can to play with strong players of any instrument. The energy is different than playing with recordings because you are truly in the moment while the music unfolds.

Debate rages over the use of metronomes. Bassist Jeff Berlin argues that metronomes should never be used. His point is that time comes from within. This is absolutely true, but in my opinion abandoning metronomes altogether is going overboard to make that point. Used judiciously, a metronome can aid in developing the internal feel that manifests itself in your bass playing. If nothing else, having practiced with a metronome will certainly help if you are ever asked to play along with a click-track. I've felt secure in that situation knowing that I developed the discipline and control to play with a non-wavering beat source. Below are some exercises that can be done with a metronome. If you find that you are ever tuning out the metronome, please turn it off. You'll only be teaching yourself to play without listening.

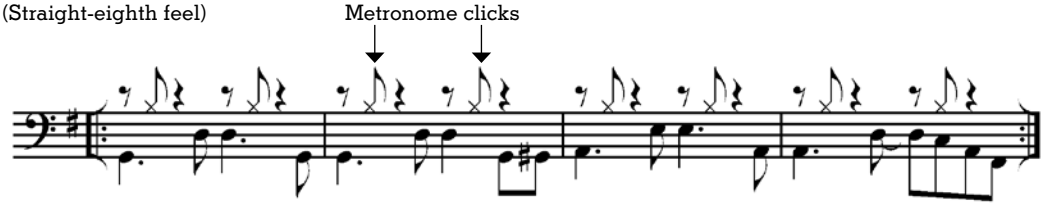
Exercise 1. Set the metronome to ♩ = 40 bpm. This slow tempo forces you to feel the time during the "gaps" between each beat. I find it very helpful to hear the subdivisions (eighth-notes, triplets, or sixteenth-notes) in my aural imagination. I prefer an imaginary ride cymbal over a clinical voice saying "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and," etc., but that's just me ... use whatever sounds pleasing to you. Repeat each bar as many times as you wish, or at least until you have "locked in" to the click. Then try playing all four bars consecutively. This forces you to switch subdivisions while still maintaining the underlying quarter note pulse.



Exercise 2. Set the metronome to 50 bpm. The click will represent the "and" of 2 and the "and" of 4 (swung feel) while you play a walking bass line (♩= will be at 100 bpm). I find this exercise particularly helpful because these "ands" of the beat are commonly played by comping instruments (piano, guitar, snare drum, etc.).



This same exercise can be adapted to straight eighths. Leave the metronome set to 50 bpm, with the click now representing the "and" of 1 and the "and" of 3 (straight-eighths feel). Play this or any other straight-eighth bass line.



Start working on it every day – it's about time!

Mike Downes is a professional bassist and composer living in Toronto, ON. He has performed on over 40 recordings including Forces *and* The Winds of Change *as a leader. He is also the Bass Department Head at Humber College, the author of* The Jazz Bass Line Book *published by Advance Music and co-author of* Jazz and Contemporary Music Theory. *For more information visit www.mikedownes.com or email mike@mikedownes.com.*

Warm-ups Part I

by Marc Rogers

fig.1

fig.2

fig.3

fig.4

Ask any musician who has suffered tendonitis or carpal tunnel syndrome about the importance of warming up…

I'm going to introduce my favourite warm-up exercise away from the instrument. I do this one every day, and often several times a day if I'm doing a lot of playing or practicing. It's a great stretch because besides warming up your hands and forearms, it actually can improve your flexibility and finger independence if done on a regular basis. Before we go any further, I must caution you that, like any stretch, progress should be gradual and you should immediately stop if you feel any pain. If you are patient and do the stretch on a regular basis you will notice results.

This exercise is intended primarily for your fretting hand (your left, if you're right-handed like me) but it can be done on both hands. For sake of illustration, I'm using my left hand in the photographs. To perform this stretch on your right hand, just reverse the hands in my directions.

You should start by holding your left hand out flat with all the fingers and thumb extended, and the palm of your hand parallel with your forearm so your wrist isn't bent at all (fig.1). Place your right hand over your middle, ring, and pinkie fingers on your left hand, leaving your index finger free to move (fig. 2). Now, slowly move your index finger towards the spot on your palm directly below your thumb, while keeping your other fingers and your thumb in place (fig. 3). It's unlikely that you'll actually be able to touch the palm on your first try, but go as far as you can. You should feel the muscles in your forearm being stretched. Hold this position for a count of 10, then release and shake your left hand out, letting it go completely limp. This will help prevent injury. Repeat this exercise with your middle, ring, and pinky fingers one at a time, remembering to support the other fingers with your right hand and not to move your thumb at all. Most people find the pinky finger the hardest one to do initially, but with practice it will become as flexible as the other fingers (fig 4).

If you keep at it, you'll definitely notice improved flexibility and finger independence. This is also a great stretch to do if you're playing your bass for a long period of time and noticing that your forearm is stiffening up – it's saved me on more than one long acoustic bass recording session! Next time, I'll get into some great warm-ups that you can do on the bass. Enjoy!

Marc Rogers is currently the bassist for The Philosopher Kings, Jon Levine, Susan Tedeschi, Chris Seldon, Karen Kosowski, and Sunshine State. He is also active in the Toronto recording and session scene. You can check out his website at www.marcrogers.com *and his tour dates at* www.myspace.com/marcrogers.

Taking The Upright Plunge

by Mike Downes

By "taking the upright plunge" I don't mean diving feet-first into water. I'm referring to making the switch from electric bass to acoustic upright (double bass, upright bass, acoustic bass, bass violin, doghouse, or whatever you like to call it – I'll refer to it as bass violin here). Aside from having four of the same strings, they are very different instruments. On a pragmatic level it makes you twice as employable. I began as an electric bassist and switched over to bass violin after high school. I've been there and I feel your pain, but I can also tell you that it pays off in many ways.

I'll start with the probable first step – finding a decent bass violin. Below are a series of questions to consider before writing the cheque:

Condition & Playability

What condition is the wood in? Are there any cracks, warps, openings, scratches, etc.?

Many "starter" acoustic basses are made of plywood. There are some great-sounding plywood basses out there and they are very durable. Wood (carved) basses generally cost more and are more susceptible to cracks, etc., but they usually have more depth and quality of sound. Some repaired cracks can be expected on an old fine bass. Conversely, just because a bass has shiny varnish and no scratches doesn't make it a good bass. The main faults to watch for are large open cracks and deformations in the body. These will most likely be expensive to repair.

Are the tuning pegs in good shape or are they difficult to operate? Do they slip?

Tune and detune the bass (by no more than a half-step) a few times to check this.

What is the condition of the bridge? Is it warped?

A warped bridge usually occurs because the strings pull the bridge when the strings are tuned. Once a bridge is warped, it is very difficult to restore it, even through steaming. At a certain point it becomes dangerous, as the bridge can collapse. A new bridge will cost a minimum of several hundred dollars.

Does the bridge have adjusters? How high are the strings off of the fingerboard?

Adjusters allow for changes due to the expansion and contraction of the wood that occurs when humidity and temperature levels fluctuate. Even though some purists argue that the bass sounds better without them, they are an excellent tool to keep the string-height consistent. If the strings are too high, the bass will be difficult to play, and if they are too low there may be buzzes on some notes on the fingerboard. Play a chromatic scale up each string and check for any buzzing notes.

How thick is the fingerboard?

Fingerboards can be planed smooth by a luthier to eliminate buzzes. However, they can only be planed so many times before being replaced. Replacing a fingerboard is expensive. Measuring from the edge of the "E" side, the fingerboard shouldn't be much less than a centimetre thick. The ebony fingerboards on my basses are 12 mm thick on average.

How old are the strings and in what kind of condition?

Strings can of course be changed, but bass violin strings are expensive ($150 and up compared to $10 and up for electric bass).

What is the type and condition of the endpin/tailpiece?

Watch the endpin while you or someone else plays – does it wobble a lot? If the endpin is thin or of poor quality it will wobble excessively, or could even break at some point.

What size is the bass?

Standard size is three-quarters. A full size bass may sound great, but remember that you will be carrying it around! It may even be hard to play because of its size. Compare it to other basses you have tried – is it overly heavy?

Origin

Where, when and by whom was the bass made?

Many basses have a tag that is viewable through the "f" hole on the "E" side. The tag explains the maker, location, and date the bass was made. Not all basses have one, but a good luthier should be able to provide you with the details.

Sound

How does the bass sound?

Are there any "dead" spots? Some basses have a great sound in a certain register, but then sound awful in another register. Check for consistency from string to string. If the bass comes with a pickup, ask to play it through an amp.

Price

You usually get what you pay for. Unless you are very lucky, a cheap bass is cheap for a reason. Expect to pay between $1,000-$3,000 for a plywood bass and $4,000 and up (sometimes VERY up) for a decent carved (real wood) bass. You should have a professional acoustic bassist check out the instrument to get his or her opinion. Always keep resale value in mind – will you be able to resell this bass if you want to buy up or if you are forced to sell it for financial reasons?

PLEASE visit a luthier before spending your well-earned money! A reputable luthier will be able to give you an expert appraisal of the bass. The appraisal costs very little in relation to the price of most basses and besides, you will need an appraisal to insure the instrument. If you skip this step you may find out from an appraiser that the bass is worth less than the value you paid for it.

Another small consideration is whether or not the bass comes with a bag. Upright bass bags are essential (especially in the Canadian climate) and they can be relatively expensive (high-quality bags are around $500).

Like any other investment, keep your cool and take your time. You'll know when you find the right bass. Once you do ... well, that's for another column. Good luck in your search!

Mike Downes is a professional bassist and composer living in Toronto, ON. He has performed on over 40 recordings including "Forces" and "The Winds of Change" as a leader. He is also the Bass Department Head at Humber College, the author of The Jazz Bass Line Book *published by Advance Music and co-author of* Jazz and Contemporary Music Theory. *For more information visit www.mikedownes.com or e-mail mike@mikedownes.com.*

Groove & Sound

by Mark Egan

Groove

When I first started doing studio work in New York, it became very clear that if you wanted to be in demand that it was all about your feel and sound.

Producers and arrangers hire you for your feel as a contributing rhythm section player. The more recording that I did, the more focused I became on my sound and the connection with a drummer.

When you record it's like a giant audio mirror when you play back, and that can give you greater insight into your playing – if you pay attention to it.

From those recording experiences I started developing left and right hand exercises that were useful for gaining consistency with the production of sound and groove.

The most direct way to work on playing grooves is to play a lot with a good drummer. If there's no drummer around, then the best way for getting a groove together is playing along with your favourite recordings and really emulating the feel. I've spent a lot of time playing along and learning classic R&B, funk, and jazz bass lines.

Sound

Creating a great bass sound comes first from the hands, then from finding a great instrument, strings, and amp.

Having a great instrument will inspire you to play. Strings come in all varieties, and it's a personal preference for your own sound. I've been using D'Addario XL170 strings for more than 30 years and they are part of my sound.

Amps are the final link in the sound production. It's all about experimenting by listening to your sound and trying different models.

As I mentioned earlier, the best way to learn about your sound is to record yourself and listen back. Ask yourself: "Is that what I want to sound like?" Then, continue experimenting until you feel comfortable.

Right Hand

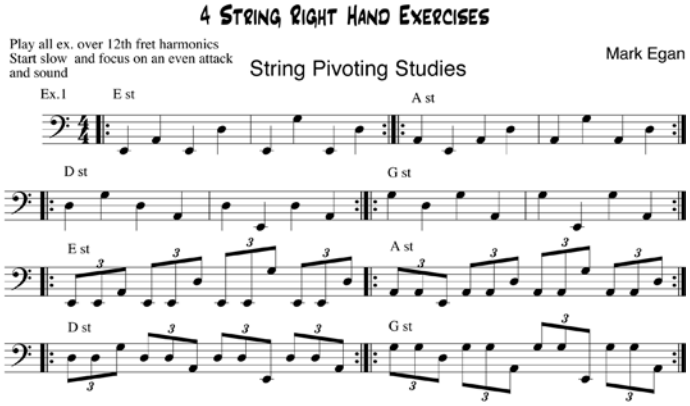
It's important to focus on the right hand technique and work on isolated exercises.

The right hand determines the nature of the sound generated by setting the string in motion. The attack can be short, long, percussive, loud, or soft, depending upon where the string is attacked and the intensity with which the attack is performed. These exercises might appear to be very simple, but they will help you develop a consistent articulation.

Exercise 1. These are right hand studies for fingerstyle playing and are based upon alternating the index and middle fingers of a four-string bass. They could also be applied to a pick or slap technique.

All of these right hand exercises should be played on open strings or open barred harmonics on the 12th fret for clarity. Start each exercise very slowly using a metronome or drum machine and gradually increase the tempo as each becomes more comfortable. It is helpful to keep a music notebook of metronome markings so you can see your progress and make variations on the exercise.

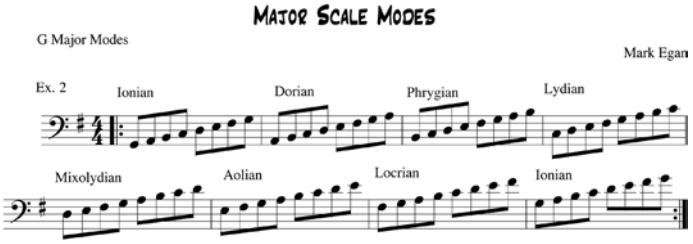
Try to make your attack even from finger to finger and concentrate on the point of contact between the string and finger. Listen to the tone that is being produced.



Left Hand

The left hand also determines the nature of the sound being produced. By using different articulations such as bending, sliding, vibrato, hammered-on notes, etc., a variety of different sounds and phrasings can be produced. On a fretless bass, one of the key factors in shaping individual sounds is the use of vibrato and slides.

Exercise 2 is a G major scale in all the diatonic ascending modes. This can be helpful for increasing dexterity in addition to offering melodic ideas. Try to work out as many fingerings and articulations as possible, and use all four fingers as often as you can. Write out these examples in all 12 keys and practice them slowly at first, gradually increasing the tempo. Also, keep a notebook for left hand exercises and try to invent your own variations. Eventually they may become the "seeds" for your own grooves and compositions.



Mark Egan, a charter member of the Pat Metheny Group, has played on multi platinum-selling recordings by Sting, Arcadia, and Joan Osborne and has also recorded and toured with the likes of Roger Daltry, Gil Evans, Sophie B. Hawkins, Marianne Faithfull, David Sanborn, Bill Evans, and John McLaughlin. He has an instructional video entitled Mark Egan Bass Workshop *as well as five solo recordings. His latest release,* As We Speak, *features a trio with guitarist John Abercrombie and drummer Danny Gottlieb, and is released on his independent label, Wavetone Records. For more information please visit www.markegan.com.*

The Heart Of The Groove

(Or, A Drummer Is A Bassist's Best Friend)

by Mike Downes

The drums and bass form the heart of the groove within a band. When the bass and drums lock in together, it is a beautiful thing for everyone involved. If they don't lock in though, nothing in the band will work. The other musicians rely on the groove being consistent – for example, lyrics may not come across if the music speeds up or slows down. As bassists and as drummers, your job is to keep the groove consistent throughout a tune, from beginning to end.

This column offers nine exercises to help bassists and drummers lock in their collective feel. Before the exercises though, I'd like to discuss some questions that often come up:

What do I do when a drummer is speeding up or slowing down? Should I go with the drummer so that we are together? If not, how do I compensate?

In the first place, how do I know where a drummer's time is relative to mine?

The short answer to the first two questions is to hold the groove to where you feel it should be so that the tune does not get faster or slower. Following is a somewhat longer answer, based on an experience of my own.

The first time that I played with the late, great drummer Jerry Fuller, I decided that I would try to lock in exactly with him and follow his lead. I knew that he had much more experience than me and had deservedly earned a reputation as one of Canada's finest jazz drummers. I listened closely to him and locked in to his ride cymbal, but everything slowed down. After the set I asked him why he thought the tunes were slowing down and if I could do something different to make it feel better. He gave me this fantastic suggestion which I have used ever since: "Sing the melody in your head as a time reference throughout the tune." (By the way, this is a good answer to the last question above.) What I realized is that he liked to play slightly behind the beat with bass players. He expected me to play the time strongly and consistently and he would do the same. That way we would find our collective groove. The next set (and following years) felt great.

Since then I have realized that each player has to bring his or her own strong sense of time to the bandstand. If one of you has weak, inconsistent time it will be very difficult to make the combined groove work. Both the bassist and drummer must have a solid, consistent time feel individually and then find a common ground to make the groove feel as good as possible. There is a catch though. Just because both of you have a strong feel doesn't mean that the groove will feel good. Maybe one of the players isn't listening in the moment or is inflexible. Sometimes it may feel like a battle over whose time is "correct." The fact is that people feel time in different ways. Some players play on top, some behind, but both can feel great in the right contexts. So how do you lock in together?

These exercises will hopefully help and will answer some of the above questions in an experiential way. I encourage you to come up with some of your own ideas as well. It is the intricate details that can make all the difference. To state the obvious, you have to listen and be flexible enough to make these exercises work.

1) Listen to music together and talk about the drum/bass relationship. Do the drums/bass play exactly together or is one more on top/behind the other in relation to the beat? This sharpens your awareness of the subtle differences in beat placement. An added benefit is that it gets you and the drummer in an open dialogue, which is very important if you'll be playing together a lot.

2) Get together and play without the other musicians – no pesky vocals, guitars, pianos, etc. to get in the way. That's a joke, but to get down to the true heart of the groove it is necessary to be free of the other variables.

3) Record yourselves! Recordings don't lie. You can discuss what you hear exactly as in exercise 1.

4) Have one of you play "right down the middle" of the time while the other player purposely plays on top or behind the time. You can play along with a metronome or a recording as a reference at first, then just use the melody in your head as the time reference. Do this exercise at different tempos. Slow tempos are great because the beat discrepancies become much larger and more obvious. This may be the single most beneficial exercise. It gives you the control to change where you place the beat in relation to different drummer's feels.

5) Play different feels and styles. The more you diversify the tempos and feels, the stronger your drum/bass relationship will become.

6) Switch instruments. You will be amazed at the perspective change when you put down the bass and play drums. It will help you realize what a drummer wants to hear from a bassist and vice versa.

7) Play at three different dynamic levels. Take a groove that you are working on together and play it loud, medium-loud, and soft. It is surprising how much control it takes to maintain the consistency of the groove while doing this.

8) Do some "trading." For example, start a groove together then have one of you drop out for eight bars, then join in again and have the other player drop out for eight bars. See if you can keep the groove consistent. The benefit of this is that it forces each of you to make the groove happen alone rather than leaning on each other.

9) Go have a beer together, celebrate, and make sure the drummer is your best friend.

Mike Downes is a professional bassist and composer living in Toronto. He has performed on over 40 recordings including Forces *and* The Winds of Change *as a leader. He is also the Bass Department Head at Humber College, the author of* The Jazz Bass Line Book *published by Advance Music and co-author of* Contemporary Music Theory. *For more information visit www.mikedownes.com or e-mail mike@mikedownes.com.*

The Big Picture

by Mike Downes

Becoming a great bass player involves countless hours of practicing in isolation. We focus on an endless list of minute details that can make a difference in our own playing. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own world that we forget the bigger picture.

I once saw the late, great drummer Elvin Jones give a clinic, and someone asked him what he listens for when he is playing. Jones responded that he hears the overall group sound, just as if he were sitting in the audience listening to the group. Here is the interesting part – if you listen that way, you can't help but hear yourself. But even better than just hearing yourself, you hear everything that you play in the context of the overall sound.

Playing with musical taste most often has to do with the big picture. Why is it that some bass players make a group sound fantastic while others destroy the group? It doesn't seem to matter if the bassist has incredible chops or not. There are players with incredible technique who can make a group sound great, just as other players with equally amazing technique can make a group sound terrible. The same applies to players that don't have those chops. So what makes the difference?

First of all, you only need enough technique to get your musical message across. If that musical message has more meaning with less notes, then you need just enough technique to get those notes across in the way that you want. Thelonius Monk and Miles Davis are two great examples in the jazz world of musicians whose technique matched their musical vision. Miles found a profound way of playing without the need for an abundance of notes. On the other hand, John Coltrane would often play numerous notes, and the effect was equally powerful.

Secondly, when it is less about "me" and more about the group, you and everyone else in the band will sound better as a result.

Below are some specific things to listen for in your own playing while you are performing in a group context. Remember to imagine that you are in the audience listening to the group.

Listen to your volume – can you hear all of the instruments and voices? Are you too loud or too soft in relation to everyone else? The volume that you play at will naturally find itself in good balance with everyone else when you are listening in the right way (as long as the rest of the bandmembers are doing the same). Listen to your tone as well. How does it blend within the overall timbral spectrum?

Listen to all of your note choices. How do they relate to the singer or melodic instrument? What is the perfect note you can play at this moment to make the band sound its best? A small change, such as placing a chord in inversion (G/B for example) can make a big difference to the harmonic feel.

Listen to the musical texture. Is your bass line contributing to and meshing with everything else going on? Sometimes it helps to simplify. Sometimes it is best not to play at all. Sometimes it helps to get busier with your bass line. Simplifying is most often the best choice, but not always. James Jamerson's bass lines are a case in point. They are far from simple, yet they serve an integral part of the musical package. When you are listening to the big picture, these choices are much easier to make.

Listen to the register you are playing in. Are you supporting the harmony? Choosing the right octave to be playing in can be tricky. Are you in the same register as another voice or instrument? Is the music best served by taking it up an octave or down an octave?

Ask yourself: is that new lick or extended technique you've been working on the best choice for the group?

Keep things in reserve. The best players can usually play more than they actually do. When they finally step out, it is very exciting. The "all the notes, all of the time" approach gets tiresome very quickly.

Listen to the shape of a tune from beginning to end. Is there anything you can do to make it more dynamic? Can you help the group create an interesting story that makes the listener want to keep listening? The bass has incredible rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, and textural power to move the music in various directions. Keep the big picture in mind and you'll usually make the right choices.

Mike Downes is a professional bassist and composer living in Toronto. He has performed on over 40 recordings including Forces *and* The Winds of Change *as a leader. He is also the Bass Department Head at Humber College, the author of* The Jazz Bass Line Book *published by Advance Music and co-author of* Contemporary Music Theory. *For more information visit www.mikedownes.com . Feel free to contact him at mike@mikedownes.com with any questions or comments.*

Sight-Reading

by Mike Downes

It isn't a necessity to read music to be a great musician – there are fantastic bassists out there who don't read music at all; however, being able to read music will seriously expand your horizons. It not only provides you with a lot more gigging opportunities, but it opens up a whole world of music. Who wouldn't want to be able to read through the Bach cello suites?

In this column, I want to share a few thoughts that I have on learning to sight-read music. In the bass masterclasses that I teach at Humber College, I have seen and heard both the successful methods and pitfalls in learning to read music. I am going to assume that you have an understanding of basic music notation conventions (clefs, various rhythmic durations, dotted rhythms, pitches on lines and spaces, leger lines, accidentals, time signatures, key signatures, etc.). If you don't, there are countless books, software programs, and online tutorials about music notation available.

Your sight-reading will improve immensely if you learn to play the bass without looking at it. This is an obvious but often overlooked point. By developing tactile memory on the bass, you avoid the trap of continuously moving your eyes from the page to the instrument.

Learn to associate a pitch on the staff with a fret or position on the bass so that they are linked in your mind. Remember, however, that a single pitch on the staff can usually be played on more than one string.

Truly sight-read a piece at first. Use a metronome, and play it from start to finish without stopping, regardless of how many mistakes you make. The idea is to make it from "point A" (the first note) to "point B" (the last note). Play it at the tempo the piece asks for.

Give yourself approximately 30 seconds to "scan" the music before you start playing. A good system is a "left to right" system that I have been using for years – first check the type of clef (usually bass clef), then scan the music to see if there are any clef changes (to treble clef for example). Following that, check the key signature and scan for any key changes in the music. Next, check the time signature and check for any time signature changes throughout the chart. Then follow the "road map," meaning repeated sections, d.s. al fines, codas, etc. so that you will be able to follow the notated material. Finally, do a quick search for any passages that stick out (a section with a lot of leger lines, for example). With practice, you can do all of this in 30 seconds or less. I have been on many gigs where I have had only 10 or 15 seconds to scan a new chart before playing it, and this method has helped me to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Next, go through these steps:

1. Play all the pitches out of tempo and work out fingerings (be specific as to which finger, which string, etc.). Another helpful idea is to name all of the pitches as you play them. Include any accidentals (don't call a B♭ a B, for example).

2. Tap the rhythms away from the bass or play them on a single note. The point is to concentrate solely on the rhythms without being distracted by pitch content.

3. Play the piece very slowly, but in time, again without stopping, regardless of mistakes. It can be helpful to break a longer piece into small sections; however, work on one section at a time, following these same procedures, then string the sections together later. You can gradually increase the tempo.

4. Practice reading farther ahead in the music than where you are actually playing. Usually this means a measure or so ahead. By doing this, you create a buffer zone to mentally process the information on the sheet music.

5. If you play another instrument, such as piano, play the piece on it. Singing it will also help to solidify the pitches and rhythms.

6. Return to the original tempo and play the piece again. If you are still making mistakes, isolate problem areas and go over them again using the methods above.

You may be thinking at this point that with all of this work you are no longer sight-reading, and you are correct; however, each time you go through these steps you are better developing the ability to sight-read.

It is a good idea to spend time truly "sight-reading." This means playing a piece to the best of your ability, accepting any mistakes you make, then simply moving on to another piece. Keep in mind that if you do this exclusively, you run the risk of making the same mistakes over and over, but if you never do this you aren't truly sight-reading. Try to balance both approaches.

Because it is important, I will re-iterate – don't stop whenever you make a mistake. This quickly turns into a bad habit. If you are reading with other musicians, this habit will derail the music. If you keep time, and play whatever you can (mistakes included), you at least keep the musical form intact.

I hope these tips help you become a better reader!

Mike Downes is a professional bassist and composer living in Toronto. He has performed on over 40 recordings including Forces *and* The Winds of Change *as a leader. He is also the Bass Department Head at Humber College, the author of* The Jazz Bass Line Book *published by Advance Music, and co-author of* Jazz and Contemporary Music Theory. *For more information visit www.mikedownes.com or email mike@mikedownes.com.*

Exercise Of 7ths & 3rds

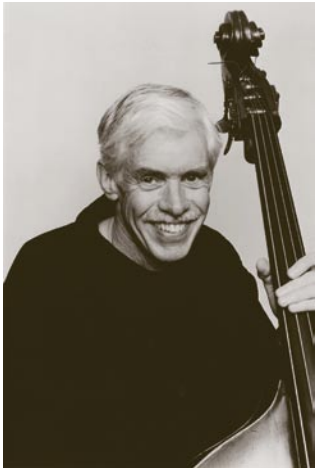
by Dave Young

This pattern, based on major and dominant 7ths ascending and major and minor 3rds descending, is a very effective tool to playing over chord changes. These patterns can be applied to either string bass or electric bass and offer a challenging test to left hand agility.

I first encountered this exercise when I spent a week with Niels Pedersen (NHOP) in Copenhagen back in the mid '80s. He is a wonderful bassist and a great human being. We hung out at his home and he suggested this exercise as a means of improving left hand dexterity. His approach to teaching was to first listen to the student and then offer advice and practical exercises to improve his or her playing.

I have used these patterns with bass students at the University of Toronto jazz program for a number of years. It may not be for everyone, but I think at certain levels of development, working through all the keys will give a bassist more facility in creating (a) walking bass lines, (b) logical harmonic-based solos, and (c) more advanced string-crossing technique.

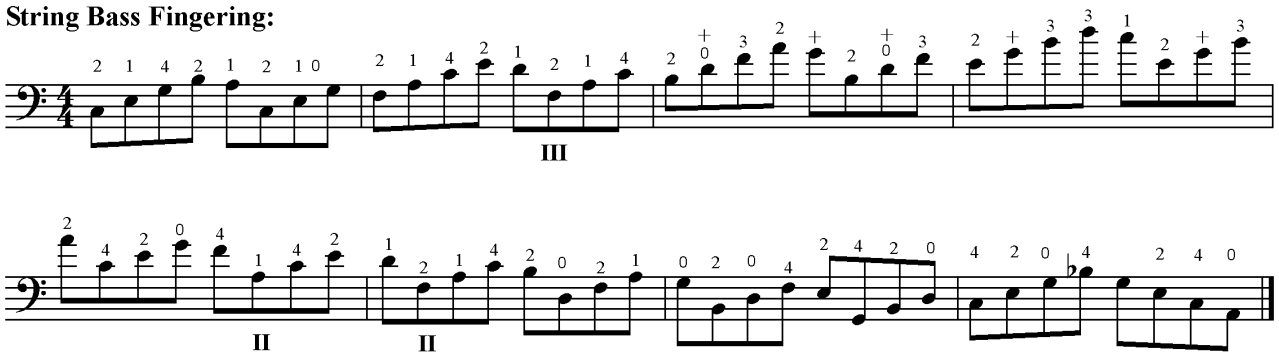
Since each pattern ends with a dominant 7th leading to the next key a 4th interval up, we cover all keys starting and ending with C major. For the string bass, the fingerings I prefer (Ex. 1) are set out in the C major section and this logic is followed basically in all keys. Generally speaking, in the ascending pattern you shift upward and use string-crossing to play lower notes. In the descending pattern, try to confine the thirds to the G and D strings which gives more practice shifting downward. For electric bass, fingering is quite different. Basically, you play the three ascending major and dominant 7ths in three different positions, utilizing cross-string playing to stay in each position. In the descending pattern, use G and D strings initially and then D and A strings to complete the pattern. Also, consider starting some of these keys on the E string as well as the A string. See Ex. 2 for C major suggested fingering.



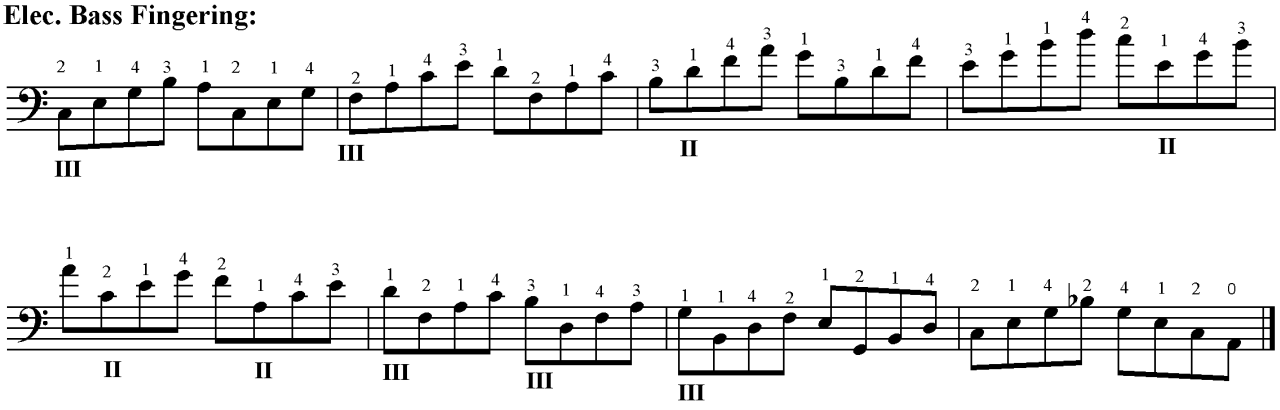
In summary, these patterns should improve your ability to play good walking lines and certainly provide new material for soloing. Playing cross strings and being familiar with adjacent key notes (i.e. 10ths, 7ths, and 6ths) really helps in reducing unnecessary shifting. Good luck with this exercise.

Winnipeg-born bassist and composer Dave Young's exceptional career has made him a much sought-after jazz bassist who regularly performs internationally with an array of jazz (and classical) luminaries, as well as with his own performing units. He is also one of CM's first contributors. Check out www.daveyoung.ca.

Example 1



Example 2



Basic Chord Shapes On The Bass

by Chris Tarry

I'm going to assume that you have a rudimentary understanding of diatonic harmony. If you don't, pick up *The Jazz Theory Book* by David Levine – simply the best book written on the subject. You can also go to my website where you can download various video lessons on basic theory that will help you with this topic.

I like to think of chords on the bass in a very simplistic kind of way, breaking basic chord qualities into two basic shapes: those that work using four available strings and those that use three.

Example 1 is a C7 chord. Start by placing your first finger on C (E string, 8th fret). Next, skip the A string and add the 7th using your ring finger, B♭ (D string, 8th fret). Complete the chord by adding the 3rd (or 10th) above that, E on the G-string (9th fret), with your pinky. Take a look at the shape. It's a chord spread out over four strings (you don't play the A string). Keep in mind that we rarely play the 5th when creating chords on the bass, as things tend to get muddy, so we generally want to use the chord tones that get across the qualities of the chord. In this case, it's the root, 7th, and 3rd (or 10th) on top.

Now, for my money, these chords spread out across four strings sound much better than the three-string version I'll show you in a second. The inverted 3rd on top is the reason why. It spreads the sound of the chord out and opens it up.

Let's create the three-string version of C7 (Ex. 2) right now, same place on the neck. With this shape, we play the root with our middle finger this time. C starting on the E string followed by E, first finger on the A string, then B♭, ring finger on the D string. You can see how this shape incorporates just three strings. In this example, we're not taking advantage of the G string.

These are your two basic shapes: the three-string available version and the four. The only difference between the two shapes is where we play the 3rd. Memorize how they look and what fingers you use to play each of the two shapes.

Let's put them to use so you can see how they can work together with a basic II-V-I progression. Let's also move a little higher up the bass. Generally, chords played below the 12th fret can tend to sound a little muddy, so we'll take it higher to get a clearer sound. Try G-7, C7, to FMaj7 starting on G on the E string, 15th fret (Ex. 3).

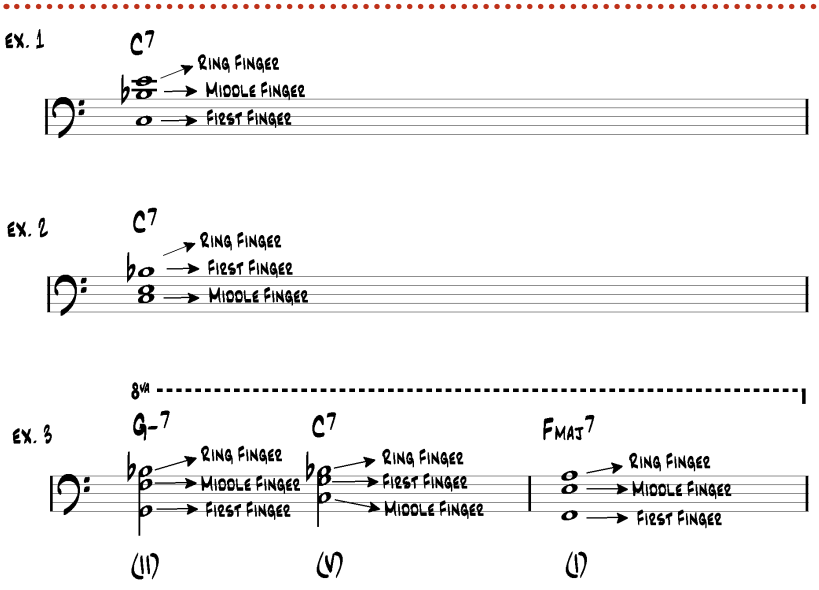
For G-7 we're going to use the four-string shape. First finger goes on G (E string, 15th fret), skip the A string, middle finger on F (D string, 15th fret), ring finger on B♭ (G string 15th fret, the minor 3rd).

Next, move to the C7 chord. We're going to use the three-string shape for this one. All you need to do to get there is move just two fingers. Keep your ring finger where it is (B♭, 15th fret), and move your middle finger to C on the A string (15th fret), and your index finger to E on the D string (14th fret). See how easily those shapes work together? Make sure to use the right fingers.

Lastly, move back into the four-string chord version for the resolution to the FMaj7 chord. First finger on F (13th fret), skip a string, middle finger on E on the D string (14th fret, the major 7th of the chord this time), ring finger on A on the G string (14th fret, the major 3rd).

Now, take that II-V-I and play it in all keys everywhere on the neck until it becomes second nature and the shifting between the different chord shapes starts to feel natural. As well, work out all the other chord qualities you can (minor 7♭5, diminished, augmented, minMaj7, etc).

Remember, we're using these shapes based on how many strings we have to work with at a given moment and to facilitate as little shifting as possible when moving from chord to chord.



Before selling all his pets and boarding a riverboat to New York, Chris made a name for himself as one of Canada's great bass players in a jazz group called Metalwood. He's won three Juno Awards, including one for his newest solo album Almost Certainly Dreaming. *You can check it out at his website www.christarry.com and e-mail him at chris@christarry.com.*

Fretted To Fretless Bass

by Mark Egan

I'm going to share with you my experiences transitioning from fretted to fretless bass. We'll also look at some concepts and exercises that will help you to become more comfortable playing a fretless bass.

My early experience as a bassist was first as an electric player, mostly playing rock and R&B music in the Boston area. I started studying seriously when I attended music school at the University of Miami in Florida after switching my major from trumpet to bass. During this time, I became very interested in jazz and all the great jazz bassists. These experiences inspired me to also start playing acoustic bass.

Playing acoustic bass established the foundation that later influenced my sensibilities on the fretless bass. The two instruments are similar in many ways. First, they are both fretless fingerboards and four- or five-string and second, the sound is created from the fingers on the strings directly on the fingerboard using vibrato and various articulations to create a groove.

A great guitarist, Stan Samole, who now lives in Canada, also played bass and played a Fender Precision fretless while at the U of M. This was my first introduction to a fretless bass, and I was very attracted to the sound and feel. I played that instrument from time to time, and I loved the fluidity of the sound and the groove and various articulations that you could create by not having frets. I also realized how difficult it was to play in tune since it was a blank neck with only fret markers on the side of the neck. It was especially difficult to play in tune when playing melodically in the upper register using all four fingers of the left hand since there were no markers on the fingerboard.

My next fretless encounter was with none other than the innovator of the instrument: Jaco Pastorius.

I was able to take a few lessons with Jaco while he was teaching during a summer session at the U of M in 1973. He taught me some diatonic groupings in major and minor. For example, in F major (1,5,10 = F,C,A/G,D,B♭/A,E,C/B♭,F,D/C,G,E/D,A,F/E,B♭,G/F,C,A). He played them in all keys at blistering speeds. We also worked on improvising and playing Charlie Parker songs.

The Transition

I realized that the fretless bass opened up a number of articulation possibilities. As I mentioned earlier, the sensibilities that I had acquired from acoustic bass playing with regard to the sound production and nuances that were available were very helpful. For example, if you are playing a G7 samba feel you can make use of slides and play a bass line as in Ex. 1. Sliding up to the 5th and 7th and giving strength to the chord tones creates a feel that utilizes the fretless slides.

As I mentioned earlier, it's always a challenge to play on a fretless in tune.

One of the best ways to work on your intonation is to practice with a keyboard or guitarist and to be aware of your pitch, constantly adjusting with your fingers. It's really helpful to have fret markers inlaid on the fingerboard. I'm always referring to the fret markers for intonation, especially in the upper register of the instrument.

Ex. 2 is for developing pitch and should be played with an open sustained A string.

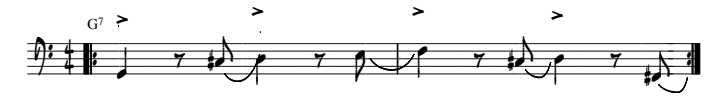
Ex. 3 is an exercise for developing slides. Try to play them as smoothly as possible.

It's also very important to have your bass intonation set up properly. Sometimes you might play a note directly on a fret marker but it may sound out of tune relative to an open string. The reason for this is probably that the bass needs to be intonated.You can have an experienced technician set the intonation for you and hopefully you can learn how to do it yourself.

Changes in seasons also affect any instrument and especially a fretless bass if you use a very low action in order to get a growling, drone sound quality. It's helpful to learn how to adjust your neck from a trained technician so that you can tweak your instrument in order to get the maximum droning fretless sound.

I hope that this fretless information has been helpful, and I look forward to the next time.

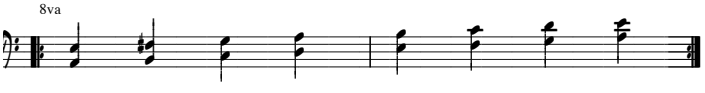
Ex.1 Sliding into Chord Tones



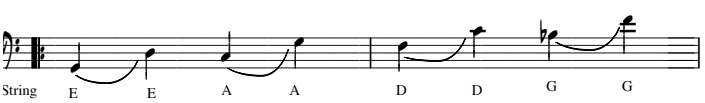
Ex. 2 5ths for intonation

Open Low A pedal sustained

Play retrograde



Ex.3 Slides



Mark Egan, a charter member of the Pat Metheny Group, has played on multi platinum-selling recordings by Sting, Arcadia, and Joan Osbourne and has also recorded and toured with the likes of Roger Daltry, Gil Evans, Sophie b. Hawkins, Marianne Faithfull, David Sanborn, Bill Evans, and John McLaughlin. He has an instructional video entitled Mark Egan Bass Workshop *as well as six solo recordings. His latest release is* Beyond Words, *and is released on his independent label Wavetone Records. For more information, please visit www.markegan.com.*

Session Work: The Bottom Line

by Steve McCormack

There is a lot to prepare for before you can jump into the session world – especially for a living. Only the chosen few get to work as full-time session players. You have to be prepared for anything, and this game is not all flash and glitter. There's no Hollywood ending, no glory of recognition, nor even a credit – just the opportunity, the work experience, and the paycheque. There are different types of session work available, all with different rates and demands.

I look at it as three classes of gigs: class **A**, class **B**, and class **C**.

Generally, class **A** session work is for high-budget productions like film, TV sitcoms, and other shows of all kinds like talk shows, dramas, cop shows – you get the picture! There is also work with high-profile artists who have a major deal.

Class **B** session work is jingles or commercials, TV and radio spots, children's shows, cable shows, and artists that are established on a label but not high-profile stars, if you will.

Class **C** session work is the most popular work available. This entails low-budget movies, videos, and demos for up-and-coming artists or bands on a small label with no distribution deal that independently put out their own product. Of course, there are other types of sessions out there, but these are the main ones.

Now, being ready, willing, and able to play these gigs is a whole new ball o' wax. The most demanding gigs are not necessarily the higher-profile jobs. One of the most difficult jobs I have done was a class C gig for an independent artist based in Los Angeles. It was all original material with every stylistic influence known to man. The music was very demanding to play and to read. There were several time changes in his songs as well as quick changes in every arrangement. I was sweating like a farm animal after the first take. After five days of this, the artist did pay me well, but what a test of patience and knowledge! The funny thing is that no one will ever hear that demo! Life goes on.

After years of playing your bass, you probably get to a point where you want to know more about music and its facets so you can improve on your instrument. Here is where going to a music school or finding a reputable music teacher, preferably a teacher with a music degree, is the way to go.

You have to go to school to learn what you need to be a successful session player. A bassist especially must learn all styles of music, and this itself is not an easy task. It should and will take a lifetime.

Sight-reading is an essential, required skill, and the task of learning this skill is a scary mystery to a lot of players. I recommend you learn to sight-read like the back of your hand, so to speak. Spending time on sight-reading will pay off.

Developing your ear is very important to you in all aspects of music. As a session player, the producer, musical director, or artist will sometimes only give you a chord chart of the section of music you are to play. Some charts, if you can call them that, are a few scribbled letters between a couple of lines supposed to be bar lines. The person for whom you are working, therefore, thinks you have ESP, or at least very good ears.

Remember, you're being hired to do a job with your instrument, and if you want to get hired again you will **do it right the fist time**. In this game, time is money! The producer is paying for you, the studio, the engineers, and the other players for the session. These people can't and won't wait around while you try and get your part right. With a developed and mature ear, and a confident command of your instrument, you will blaze through sessions of this nature like you truly do have mental superpowers.

Play the part you were asked to play and nothing more. Absolutely no over-playing at all! For example, here is a true short story. I get a call to audition for a famous producer in Los Angeles. I show up, and I'm sitting with my bass next to a colleague. The other bass player is noodling away on his bass, and playing some nice stuff, too! The producer walks in and quietly sits down. The other guy keeps playing until the producer says, "Man, that was fantastic playing. You're a great player." And in the same breath, he turns to me and says, "You're hired." I didn't even plug in my bass, never mind play a note. So be confident, but stay cool! It's a hard thing for some.

Your **sound** is a very important factor in your success. Make sure you have your instrument in great working condition at all times. You never know when you're going to get that call. If you sound great, people will want your sound and feel on their projects. Some session players have created a demand for their signature sound and great success followed. It's not just all about reading and playing what's on the chart.

Steve McCormack was born in Scotland and grew up in Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON. He attended the Berklee College of Music. Steve has played with Jeff Healey, Lee Aaron, and numerous other Canadian acts. Session credits include The Simpsons *since 1999,* Family Guy, Minority Report, Artificial Intelligence, Seabiscuit, *and many more movies. E-mail sambassman@yahoo.com.*

Scales In Thirds

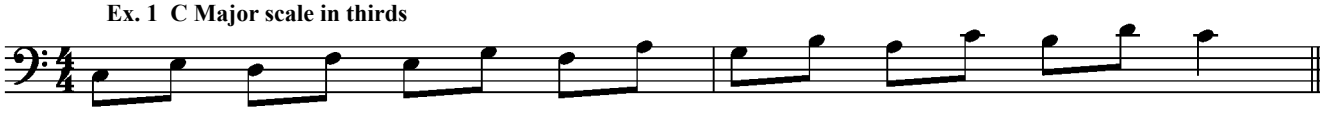
by Chris Tarry

Chris Tarry lives in New York City, but, he's Canadian and grew up reading Canadian Musician *magazine in the woods of the Great White North. Before selling all his pets and boarding a riverboat to New York, Chris made a name for himself as one of Canada's most respected bass players in a jazz group called Metalwood. He's won three Juno Awards, including one for his newest solo album* Almost Certainly Dreaming. *You can check it out at his website at www.christarry.com.*

Hey there, Canadian bass land! It's good to be back. Today's lesson is on playing scales and modes in thirds. Breaking scales into thirds (or any other type of interval) is not necessarily the most musical of pursuits, but it does help solidify the look, shape, and sound of a particular scale in your ears and fingers. You can break any scale, mode, pattern, or household item, into section-able parts. Today we're gonna try breaking them into thirds (well, except for the household items).

Take a look at Ex. 1. It's a basic C major scale broken into thirds. Give it a try. Hang on, I'll wait … anyone see *Lost* last week?

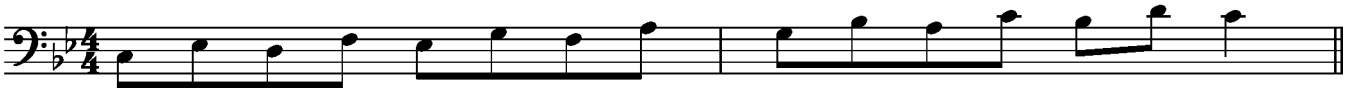
Ex. 1 C Major scale in thirds



Ok. Do you see the pattern it makes? There's the interval of a major or minor third between every note. Check it out again. C to E: that's the shape of a major third. Next, D to F: that's the shape of a minor third. E to D: another minor third. We move up the scale note-by-note, playing the corresponding major or minor third interval until we've done all seven notes in the scale. Do you see the pattern it creates? A term I like to use for these types of scale patterns is **digital patterns**, meaning they have a very mathematical and predictable look on the fingerboard. The sound of a scale in thirds is unmistakable – check it out and listen. I'll grab a coffee, do you want one? No, I'll get it…

Ok, now let's take a look at a mode broken into thirds. Check out Ex. 2: C Dorian. We know that Dorian is the same as a minor scale with a natural sixth note (or at least, for argument's sake, I'm assuming we know). Let's start with C to E♭: that's a minor third. Next note in the mode, D to F: another minor third. After that, E♭ to G: major third, and on up the scale we go. Remember, in creating these digital patterns you have to use the notes from the **scale or mode you're working within.** For example, you can't play C to E in the C Dorian mode; E is not a note in the C Dorian mode.

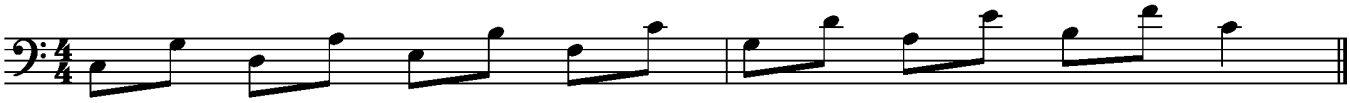
Ex. 2 C Dorian mode in thirds



Next we want to get our fingers working, so let's try and get these scales in thirds up to speed. Start with the metronome at a comfortable tempo, then, gradually increase the tempo as you get each new metronome marking together.

Once you've done that, don't just stop at thirds. Check out Ex. 3, a C major scale broken into fifths. Work out all your scales using many different intervals: sixths, fourths, seconds, sevenths, and on and on, keeping in mind that music is a lifelong pursuit (trust me it helps).

Ex. 3 C Major scale in fifths



In the beginning, I mentioned that breaking scales up this way is not the most musical pursuit. Just like running a scale is in itself not the best of musical choices when playing live, the same holds true for these digital patterns. Once you have them under your fingers, turn them into music by experimenting with different rhythmic figures, the length of notes, and which beat the note starts on. This will help you break up the typically "exercise" sounding quality in these digital patterns and help you get them into your playing sooner on a more musical level.

Thirds are a fairly basic topic, but basic is where all the best musical exercises start. Wait – let me explain. Where's my coffee? Ah yes, here it is…

It's up to you to take a simple exercise like this and run it. The beautiful thing about doing this is that where you take it is limited only by your imagination. "Grow the exercise," I always say. Play the scale in thirds, now two octaves, now in every key, now for every scale, for every interval, in every rhythmic pattern, in five, in seven, standing on your head … you get the idea. This kind of commitment is what makes the great players great. Take the information and make the most out of it – it's totally up to you. Now get in there and practice, and tell 'em Chris sent ya!

Writing A Memorable Bass Line

by Brian Minato

What is it that makes a bass line both memorable as well as supportive to the song in which it was created? What are the things that can inspire the creation of a bass part that gives a song forward momentum? What types of bass lines can stand alone?

Like most musicians, you can probably often be found sitting around absentmindedly noodling away at seemingly nothing on your instrument. This is when inspiration can strike! The previous nonsensical noodle session can quickly become the foundation of an unforgettable bass line and, hopefully, part of a song which might live forever! I find having some sort of recording device very handy just so you can document your latest masterpiece. These days, your options for recording ideas are almost limitless: cell phones, BlackBerries, handheld digital recorders, laptops, and more sophisticated recording devices. These various recording tools will allow you to have a copy should you really want to explore your initial ideas.

Coincidentally, I had just been asked to DJ an upcoming party when I got the call about this column, so I'd already been going through my iTunes library, creating playlists and listening to a lot of songs. As a result, there's a lot of bass! Listed below are songs which totally fit the bill for our topic:

"Walking On The Moon," Sting, The Police, *Regatta de Blanc*
"Come Together," Paul McCartney, The Beatles, *Abbey Road*
"Money," Roger Waters, Pink Floyd, *Dark Side of the Moon*
"Sunday Papers," Graham Maby, Joe Jackson, *Look Sharp*
"Safe From Harm," Massive Attack (Billy Cobham Sample), *Blue Lines*

I tried to pick examples that are fairly well-known, just so my points of reference aren't lost. The one thing common to each song is that if you took away the vocals, the other instrumentation, etc., and only had the bass parts going, you would probably still be able to name the song being played. That, to me is the biggest distinction between a bass line being able to stand on its own and one that is of a more commonplace, garden variety type. When I say commonplace, I don't mean it in any sort of derogatory way. I mean it more like this: if you did the same thing to a country-esque song with a root-5th type of bass line, it could fit into any number of songs, and if played on its own would not really give a clue as to the name of the song.

When I hear "Walking On The Moon," "Come Together," and Pink Floyd's "Money," I get the distinct impression those bass lines were very pivotal in directing what the other musicians came up with. Each bass part has such a strong, signature-like quality. I feel like they were written apart from the actual songs themselves. To me, they are the kinds of parts upon which other instruments can build, creating a more unique sound. They are the kinds of parts that can inspire other musical events to occur. Consider the sound, the grooves, and the push and pull between the Sting/Stewart Copeland, Paul McCartney/Ringo, and Roger Waters/Nick Mason rhythm sections on those tracks. Check out those songs and see what you think.

On the other hand, the "Sunday Papers" and "Safe From Harm" bass lines seem to have a more arranged feel to them – rather like they were written or created alongside with other existing musical parts. Graham Maby's iconic herky-jerky part from Joe Jackson's post-punk classic "Sunday Papers" feels like the sum of the guitar and drum parts all working together. The sound of Massive Attack has a strong basis in the world of turntables, samples, loops, and technology. "Safe From Harm"'s heavy, repetitive groove owes its debt to the wicked sample of Lee Sklar's bass from 1973's jazz fusion gem "Stratus" off of the *Spectrum* album by Billy Cobham. Again, check out those songs and see what impressions you get.

What I notice about bass lines like those previously mentioned is that you can sing them or hum them with relative ease. Try it. You'll see what I mean. That, to me, is another hallmark of a memorable bass line. Even though each bass part discussed above has a distinctiveness which allows it to be recognizable apart from the song it comes from, all those parts ultimately lend themselves to the support of the song. They are there to provide a solid low-end groove, to inspire the other musicians, and to make it easier for them to access to their creativity.

Good luck!

Brian Minato is the bassist for Sarah McLachlan. He is a Vancouver-based musician/producer currently working with Anthill, Sandy Scofield, boywonderbread, Jennifer Campbell, Hiroaki Takashiba, The Blue Alarm, and other artists. Visit these websites to check what he's up to.
www.myspace.com/anthillcanada
www.sandyscofield.com
www.myspace.com/cozure
www.myspace.com/boywonderbread
www.24hourcardlock.com/
www.myspace.com/hirotakashiba
www.myspace.com/theblueralarm
www.eden-electronics.com/artists/brianminato.asp
www.line6.com/artists/220

Tom MacDonald plays bass in Hedley, who you can check out at www.hedleyonline.com.

by Tom MacDonald

Keeping Your Bass IN SHAPE

I was doing carpentry before I joined Hedley, so I have a lot of carpentry analogies. As any carpenter will tell you, you have to keep your saw blade sharp and ensure it's cutting straight. Your tools are as important as anything to any trade – including music. Over the years of playing bass, I've played every style and every kind of instrument you can play, and keeping them in shape is a huge thing – especially physically.

Your Axe

Don't fret too much about perfectly intonating your bass. Really, it's impossible to intonate a bass perfectly from the first fret to the twelfth fret. You'll find while recording that if you're trying to record and keep every single note in tune, you're going to have to tune multiple times to get a track properly in-tune. Any tech worth his salt will tell you if you intonate a bass to your twelfth fret harmonic, you're still going to be out a little below the fifth fret.

Also, if your guitar is left to the elements – getting cold and then getting hot, and getting sweat on and then getting frozen, your action's eventually going to come up and your intonation's going to go out. If you don't take care of this, all of a sudden your action's an inch high and you find yourself digging in and overcompensating, making your hand hurt and likely putting your bass out of tune at the same time. That's where having your action set properly and being properly intonated comes in.

I did a tour once with Quiet Riot of all bands, and their bass player, Rudy Sarzo, is a legend. He was in Quiet Riot, Ozzy, Whitesnake – he's seen and done it all. Every single night, this guy would pull out his basses and intonate them properly, set the action, polish them up, and make sure that they were just waiting for him to go and terrorize them. It was inspiring.

The other thing to learn is soldering. Soldering guitar electronics is so simple that it becomes invaluable when you drop your guitar one night on stage and you break your input jack or break your cable and you find yourself with two pieces of cable and a jack end. A $15 soldering iron and a little bit of solder and flux puts you back on the road and it doesn't cost you $50 for a new cable.

Your Amp

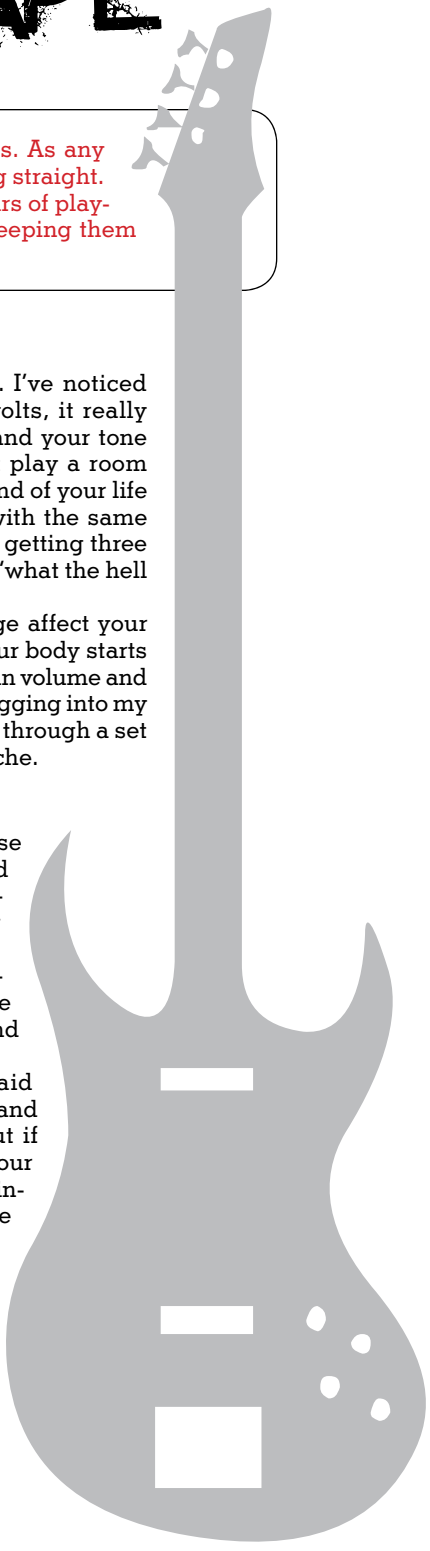
If you have a good power conditioner for your amp, it'll show you how many volts you're getting to your amp at any time from the wall. I've noticed if you're dropping below 120 volts, it really sucks the life out of your amp and your tone or volume will fade. You might play a room one night and have the best sound of your life and then play the same room with the same set-up the next night and you're getting three quarters of the volume. It's like, "what the hell is happening here?"

Not only does a dip in voltage affect your amp, but if you don't catch it, your body starts to overcompensate for your drop in volume and your drop in tone. I find myself digging into my strings a lot harder, and halfway through a set my arm or fingers will start to ache.

Your Playing

If you're set up properly, as close as you can to being intonated and your action's where it's comfortable for you and you hit your strings too hard, it's going to push you out of tune. As a player, you really have to concentrate on hitting your strings evenly and consistently all the time.

There's something to be said about dynamics, bringing it up and bringing it down in volume, but if you're just slamming away on your bass, you're going to push your instrument out of tune. Sure, maybe the average Joe can't notice but it really makes your band sound smaller. When everybody's completely in-tune and your instrument is in top shape, the sound of your band is going to be so much bigger.



BASSISTS READING SUGGESTIONS

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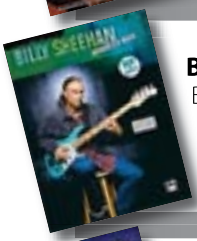

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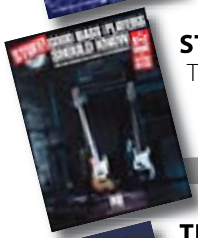

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