

Learn to Play Bass

Bass Lessons From Day One

House of Pages Trusted Music Instruction

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Introduction

The Role of the Bass Guitar and the Bass Player

When you pick up a bass guitar for the first time, you're not just holding an instrument—you're holding the foundation of the band.

The bass guitar is unique—it bridges the gap between rhythm and melody. It locks in with the drummer to create the groove that keeps the music moving, while also supporting the harmonic structure of a song. You might think of it as the glue that holds the music together.

As a bass player, you're not just another musician in the background; you are the backbone. Without you, the song would lack depth and rhythm. The bassline gives the music its pulse, and when played correctly, it can elevate an entire band's performance. The magic of the bass guitar lies in its ability to both anchor a song and subtly steer it in different directions. If you listen closely to your favorite tracks, you'll start to notice how much of the song's mood and feel is shaped by the bass.

One of the most critical roles you'll play as a bassist is mastering the groove. The groove is what gives a song its flow, its undeniable sense of rhythm that makes people tap their feet or nod their heads. The groove comes from your ability to lock in with the drummer and maintain a steady rhythm throughout the song. No matter how many flashy guitar solos or intricate drum fills are thrown in, the groove ensures that the music holds together.

Mastering the groove is not just about timing; it's about feel. It's about knowing when to add a note or when to leave space. That's why, as a bass player, your ear becomes just as important as your hands. You'll learn to feel the beat, sync with the drummer, and create a solid foundation that the rest of the band can build on.

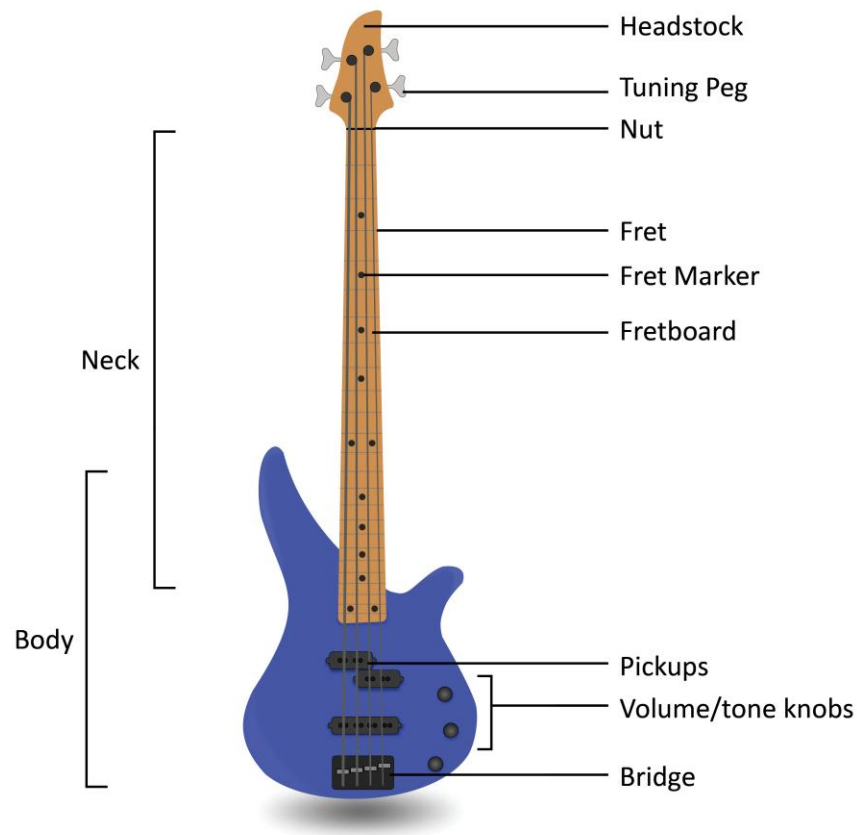
Anatomy of the Bass Guitar

How do you expect to play an instrument if you don't know it? It's like swimming in the ocean before you are able to swim in a pool. That just won't do.

Ugh... but it's a guitar... and all guitars look the same. Yeah, sure, but if there is something wrong with your guitar, how will you be able to fix it? Think about it like this: In order for a doctor to diagnose their patient, they need to know every part of the human body to understand how it works. Once they know how the body works, they know what they can do to fix it. It's the same with your bass.

If you know your bass, not only will you play it and understand it better, but you will be able to fix it when issues arise later on.

So, let's not hang on for too long. Here are the different parts of the bass!



Headstock

This is the very top of the bass. The tuning pegs are located here. In some renditions of bass guitars, like the Steinberger and certain Ibanez models, this part of the bass is removed—not for any other reason than it looks cool (and makes the guitar lighter).

Tuning Pegs

These little gadgets allow you to tighten or loosen the strings to change their pitch. You'll use these every time you tune your bass, which should be before every practice or performance.

Neck

This is the long part of the bass where your fretting hand will play. It contains the fretboard, where you press down the strings to change the pitch of the notes.

Frets

These are the metal strips on the neck that divide the fretboard into different notes. Pressing a string down just behind a fret changes the note that's being played.

You'll also hear "fret" used for the space between two strips. When I say "play the 3rd fret", I mean press in the space just behind the 3rd metal strip. Same word, two jobs. It catches everyone out at first.

Fretboard

The surface of the neck is made up of many different frets all next to one another. It's a comfy flat surface you can press your fingers down on. This is known as the fretboard. The fretboard is where you'll spend most of your time with your fretting hand.

Fret Markers

The dots on the fretboard, usually at the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th and 12th frets. They don't do anything to the sound. They're just there to help you find your place.

Pickups

These are magnets located on the body of the bass that convert the vibration of the strings into an electrical signal, which is then amplified. The type and placement of pickups can dramatically affect your sound.

Bridge

The bridge is where the strings are anchored on the body of the bass. This is where the strings end, and it also plays a role in the instrument's tone and sustain.

Body

The body of the bass guitar is where you'll find the controls for adjusting the volume and tone. Different basses have different body shapes, but the body is where the sound is generated and controlled.

Controls (Volume/Tone Knobs)

These knobs allow you to adjust the output of the pickups, as well as the tone of your sound. For example, turning the tone knob down will give you a warmer, more muted sound, while turning it up will make your tone brighter and sharper.

Basic Maintenance Tips

Taking care of your bass guitar is essential to maintaining its playability and sound quality. Here are some basic maintenance tips to help you keep your instrument in top shape:

- **Wipe down the strings:** After each practice session, take a few seconds to wipe down your strings with a cloth. This helps to remove any sweat, dirt, or oils that can build up and cause your strings to wear out faster.
- **Clean the body and fretboard:** Use a microfiber cloth to wipe down the body and fretboard of your bass to remove dust and grime. There are also special guitar cleaners that you can use to keep the finish shiny.
- **Get a professional setup:** If you notice that your bass is difficult to play or doesn't sound right, it might be time for a professional setup. A technician can adjust many parts of your bass guitar to ensure that your bass is playing smoothly and sounding its best.

How to Use This Book

Now that you understand the role of the bass guitar and the parts that make up your instrument, it's time to get into the heart of this book: the lessons. This book is designed to be flexible and accessible, no matter your schedule. If you can dedicate just 15 minutes a day, you'll see progress. The exercises in this book are meant to build on one another, so even with short practice sessions, you'll be steadily improving.

Don't feel pressured to rush through the lessons. If you have more time on some days, you can always stack multiple lessons together for longer practice sessions. The key is to stay consistent. Practice regularly, even if it's only for a short time each day, and you'll notice your skills developing.

Each chapter focuses on a specific area of bass playing, from right-hand and left-hand techniques to rhythm, groove, and creating basslines. You'll also learn how to apply what you've learned by playing simple songs in different styles, like rock, blues, and funk. By the end of this book, you'll not only have a solid grasp of basic techniques, but you'll also have the confidence to start creating your own basslines and playing along with your favorite songs.

Remember, the most important part of learning any instrument is to enjoy the process. Keep your bass close by, practice often, and don't be afraid to make mistakes. Every time you play, you're getting better.

Chapter 1: Getting Started With the Basics

How to Hold Your Bass Guitar

I think my favorite memory of when I first picked up a bass was the fact that I did not really know how to hold onto the instrument. I was a scrawny little kid, and at times, it felt like the bass was much larger than me. I think my dad joked that when I held onto the bass, it was bigger than me and he couldn't see me. With that being said—I had no idea how to hold onto this instrument. Was I supposed to grip it like an axe? Hug it? Who knew?

I think I had been playing for about two weeks when my uncle introduced me to Green Day... yup, you can guess where this story goes! I begged and pleaded for a guitar strap, and there I was, in front of my mom's mirror, the strap hanging around my shoulders and the body of the bass hanging by my knees. Oh, it felt so good!

Until I got back pain.

Holding your bass guitar correctly is the first step to becoming comfortable and confident when you play. Whether you're sitting or standing, the key is to find a relaxed, balanced position that lets you move freely up and down the fretboard. Start by resting the body of the bass on your lap if you're sitting, or using a sturdy strap that positions the bass comfortably across your body if you're standing. Ideally, the neck of the bass should tilt slightly upward, making it easier for your fretting hand to reach the notes without strain.

Make sure the bass is close to your body—not too far out—and that both your shoulders are relaxed. Your plucking hand should hover naturally over the strings, with your elbow slightly bent, allowing you to easily alternate between plucking and resting. If you're standing, adjust your strap so that the bass stays in the same position as it would if you were sitting; this makes switching between the two more seamless. The idea is to feel in control of the instrument while staying relaxed so you can focus on making great music without any discomfort.

How to Tune Your Bass Guitar

Bass String Notations

Before we get into the details of tuning, let's talk about bass string notations and what they mean. A standard bass guitar has four strings, and each of these strings is tuned to a specific note. These notes are represented by the letters E, A, D, and G, from the thickest string to the thinnest string.

- The E string is the lowest-pitched and thickest string. It is also referred to as the 4th string.
- The A string is the next string, referred to as the 3rd string.
- The D string is the third string from the top.
- The G string is the highest-pitched and thinnest string, referred to as the 1st string.

In standard tuning, these strings are tuned to E, A, D, and G, respectively. This tuning pattern is shared with the bottom four strings of a guitar.

Each string plays a different pitch or note, and the combination of these notes allows you to play basslines, chords, and melodies. Understanding the relationship between these strings is important for tuning and playing your bass guitar correctly.

When tuning your guitar, the goal is to make sure each string is vibrating at the correct frequency for its respective note. If one string is even slightly off, the entire bassline will sound out of tune.

So, how do you get each string to the right note? Let's dive into the different tuning methods you can use.

Tuning Methods

It always feels like musicians form little cults when it comes to finding which tuning methods work best for them because, at the end of the day, it comes down to preference. Now, you can get some really fancy clip-on tuners you can purchase from your local music store, as well as built-in tuners in pedal boards, etc., but we are going to explore the quickest and easiest methods to tune: with a simple app on your phone and your natural tuning mechanism—your ear!

Tuning Apps

If you don't have a clip-on tuner, don't worry! Many free and paid tuning apps are available for smartphones and tablets.

Using a tuning app is simple:

1. Download a tuning app from your app store. There are plenty of reliable options like GuitarTuna, Fender Tune, and Pano Tuner.
2. Open the app and allow it to access your microphone.
3. Pluck the E string and hold your phone or tablet near your bass guitar or amp, if you are using one. The app will detect the pitch and display whether the string is in tune or needs adjustment.
4. Adjust the tuning peg for each string until the app shows that the string is perfectly in tune. Repeat this for the A, D, and G strings.

One advantage of using a tuning app is that many apps offer additional features such as metronomes or chord libraries, which can be useful for practice.

Pro Tip: Always tune in a quiet space if possible. Background noise can interfere with the app's ability to pick up the sound of your bass, leading to inaccurate tuning.

Tuning by Ear

Tuning by ear is a valuable skill for any musician and one that will significantly improve your ability to recognize pitch. This method requires no external devices and relies entirely on your listening skills.

Here's how to tune your bass by ear:

1. Start by finding a reference pitch for your E string. You can use a piano, another instrument, a tuning fork, or an online tone generator. Play the reference note and pluck your E string.
2. Listen carefully to both the reference note and the sound of your string. Adjust the tuning peg until the E string matches the pitch of the reference note.
3. Once your E string is in tune, you can use relative tuning to tune the other strings. Place your finger on the 5th fret of the E string—this note is an A, which is the

same pitch as your A string when played open. Pluck both the A string and the 5th fret of the E string, and adjust the A string until the pitches match.

4. Repeat this process for the D string by playing the 5th fret of the A string, which should be the same pitch as the open D string. Adjust the tuning peg until they match.
5. Finally, tune the G string by matching the pitch of the 5th fret of the D string to the open G string.

Tuning by ear might be tricky at first, but it's worth practicing regularly. It will help you develop a more precise sense of pitch, making it easier to play in tune and recognize subtle differences in sound. Over time, tuning by ear will become second nature, and you'll appreciate how this skill translates into better overall musicianship.

Pro Tip: Tuning by ear sharpens your pitch recognition—practice tuning without a tuner sometimes. Even if it's challenging at first, it's a skill that will improve with time.

Why Tuning Matters

Imagine this: Sting, or your favorite singer in the world, singing a song...but his voice sounds out of key. *Yikes*. If you don't tune your bass...that's you!

With an out-of-tune bass, it does not matter how on time you play, or if you press all the right frets—it's not going to sound good! You can only polish a turd so many times; it'll still remain a turd...and that's an out-of-tune bass. A bass that is out of tune will make the whole song sound, quite frankly, like crap. Tuning ensures that your notes blend seamlessly with other instruments, especially in a band setting.

Bass guitars often provide the foundation of a song's harmony, and slight tuning issues can muddy the sound, making it difficult for the band to sound tight and cohesive. Proper tuning also helps you develop good ear training, which is essential for recognizing pitch, playing by ear, and improvising.

How Often Should You Tune?

If you don't tune, you don't play. Simple.

And this might sound a little bit harsh, but as a musician, you need to get into the habit of tuning as many times as you can. If you have a spare moment, tune. Before you practice? Tune? Free moment during your coffee break on a workday? Tune.

Jokes aside, bass guitars, like all stringed instruments, are sensitive to changes in their environment. Factors like temperature, humidity, and even how hard you play can cause the strings to go out of tune. That's why it's important to check your tuning before every practice, rehearsal, or performance to ensure that your sound stays crisp and accurate.

Fingerstyle vs. Plectrum (Pick) Playing

As a bass player, you have two main techniques for plucking the strings: fingerstyle and using a plectrum (pick). Each method has its own advantages and produces a distinct sound. Depending on the style of music you're playing, one might suit you better than the other. However, it's beneficial to learn both techniques, as each has its place in your bass-playing toolkit.

Fingerstyle Playing

Fingerstyle is the traditional method for playing bass. It involves using your index and middle fingers to pluck the strings, creating a smooth, warm, and organic tone. This technique gives you more dynamic control, allowing you to easily adjust the volume and intensity of each note by how hard or soft you pluck the strings. Fingerstyle playing is also highly versatile, enabling you to create a wide range of tones, from soft and mellow to punchy and percussive, simply by changing the way you attack the strings.

One of the main benefits of fingerstyle playing is its expressiveness. Since you're directly interacting with the strings, you have more control over subtle nuances, making it easier to create complex, flowing basslines. It's commonly used in genres like jazz, funk, blues, and soul, where dynamic expression and groove are essential.

Another advantage is that fingerstyle allows you to maintain a consistent flow between notes, which is particularly helpful when playing fast lines or intricate rhythms. Since you're alternating between two fingers, the motion is smoother and more fluid than using a single pick.

Playing With a Pick (Plectrum)

Using a pick, or plectrum, offers a different sound and feel. When you play with a pick, the attack is sharper, and the sound is brighter and more aggressive. The notes tend to have a bit more punch and definition, making them stand out in a mix. This technique is often favored in rock, punk, and metal genres, where a strong, driving bassline is needed to cut through the loud guitars and drums.

The pick also allows for faster playing in some situations, especially when alternate picking (up and down strokes) is used. If speed and clarity are your goals, playing with a pick can help you achieve that with less effort than fingerstyle.

However, playing with a pick can reduce some of the nuances that fingerstyle offers. You'll have less control over dynamics and subtle shifts in tone. But in genres that call for a steady, consistent sound, the trade-off is worth it.

Pro Tip: Try playing the same riff using both fingerstyle and a pick. Notice the difference in tone and feel—each technique brings something unique to your playing.

Chapter 2: Right Hand Techniques and Open String Exercises

Right-Hand Techniques

Here is something you probably never thought you would hear in your life: Your right hand can change the world. As a bassist, your right hand (plucking hand) is the driving force behind the rhythm and tone of your playing. It's responsible for making the strings vibrate, and the way you pluck those strings has a huge impact on how your bass will sound. Consistency and smoothness in your plucking are key to producing a clean, even sound that will form the backbone of any bassline.

When you pluck with the right technique, you'll notice an immediate difference in the clarity and punch of each note. Consistent plucking ensures that every note rings out with equal strength, and smoothness allows for fluid transitions between notes, especially when playing faster passages. Let's break down the key elements that contribute to good right-hand technique.

Positioning Your Hand and Fingers

Start by placing your thumb on a stable point on the bass, typically on the pickup or the edge of the bass body. This will act as an anchor for your hand, giving it stability while allowing your fingers to move freely. Your index and middle fingers should be slightly curved and relaxed, ready to pluck the strings.

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that your fingers should move naturally and without tension. You don't need to pluck hard to get a good sound. Instead, focus on making your finger movements light and controlled. Over time, this will help you develop speed and endurance while reducing the risk of fatigue.

Alternating Fingers for Smoothness

To achieve smooth, even plucking, you'll want to alternate between your index and middle fingers. Alternating fingers distributes the workload evenly between both fingers, preventing fatigue. It'll also allow you to pluck a whole lot faster and evenly.

Don't be the macho-man bassist who thinks one finger will do—one finger is never enough. When you rely on one finger, it will tire out a lot quicker. That's not all, though, your playing will sound uneven, and your notes will sound a bit janky. Some notes will ring out louder than others, and that might be because you have less control over that one finger.

We can always make a lousy little comparison—your bass string is the prisoner you need to keep locked up. If you have one security guard, that guard will have a spurt of energy every now and again when they try to control the escaping prisoner when the prisoner least expects it. When you have two guards, this prisoner can be easily controlled and kept in his place.

The only way you will be able to keep your notes even and your fingers strong is through some exercises. But first, you need to know about an important device...and that device is called a metronome.

Metronomes

Naturally, musicians don't like it when people tell them what to do. We don't conform to society. We are creative. Strong. A little bit rebellious, if you will. So, to no surprise, there is probably not a single musician who enjoys getting told how fast and how consistently they should play by a metronome.

But sad news for you, beginner bassist... you probably need a metronome. A metronome will help you develop good rhythm—which means that later when you're shredding it on stage, you won't look like a loser. You'll look like the rock star you deserve to be.

A metronome is exactly what you think it is: an annoying clicking sound that is in a specific time. And every song ever written, except those by Claude Debussy, uses a metronome.

There are so many different types of metronomes available to you, and you can choose from any one you'd like!

The first type of metronome you probably remember from your first piano teacher's class if you ever had piano lessons as a kid. These are old-fashioned metronomes that swing back and forth to keep time (Pfeiffer, 2016).

Next up, you get modern, electronic metronomes you can find in any music store. These little guys are usually battery-powered and easy to operate.

But if you don't feel like spending a copious amount of money on something you're going to hate for the rest of your life, you're more than welcome to look for a free metronome app on your phone or one online. These are some of our favorites:

Metronome Apps:

- Smart Metronome & Tuner (available on iPhone and Android)
- Metronome - reloaded (has the icon of a good old classical metronome)
- Metronome: Tempo Lite

Websites:

- <https://www.imusic-school.com/en/tools/online-metronome/>
- <https://www.pickupmusic.com/tools/metronome>
- <https://guitarapp.com/metronome.html>

Exercises: Open Strings

That sounds so boring, you might think at first, but once you try these exercises, you will be surprised at how they can kick your butt! They bring out the worst in you—which is exactly what you want to improve.

We're going to be running through different versions of something we call an open string exercise. This will test your fingers' endurance and strength and most importantly, improve your fingers so you can become a solid bassist.

All the exercises will start off the same way:

1. Rest your right-hand thumb on the pickup of your bass guitar.
2. Pluck the E string (the thickest, top string) with your index finger.
3. Then immediately pluck the same string with your middle finger.

Continue alternating between your index and middle fingers while plucking the E string. Focus on maintaining an even volume for each note, ensuring that both fingers produce the same volume of sound.

But don't jump in to play like Jayen Varma just yet—you're not that good yet! Start off slow and steady. Perhaps keep a metronome on 80 beats per minute and pluck a note every eighth note. Focus on the way your fingers are plucking the strings. You need to touch the strings at a consistent speed, with a consistent force—in both fingers!

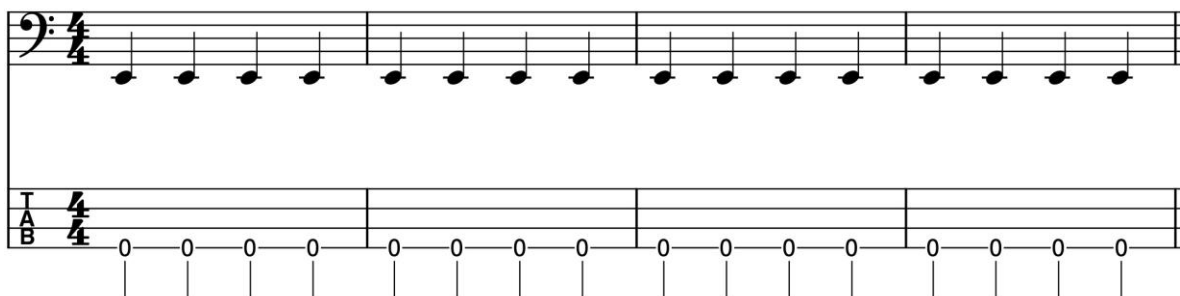
This technique is essential for achieving a consistent tone. When both fingers work together seamlessly, your playing will have a balanced, rhythmic quality that's essential for playing solid basslines.

Let's look at some tabs to help you spice things up.

Open String Exercise No. 1

This exercise focuses on helping you get comfortable with a slow and steady rhythmic pattern while reinforcing the right-hand plucking techniques you've learned. Since you're only using open strings (not fretting any notes), you can concentrate fully on your timing and the quality of your plucking.

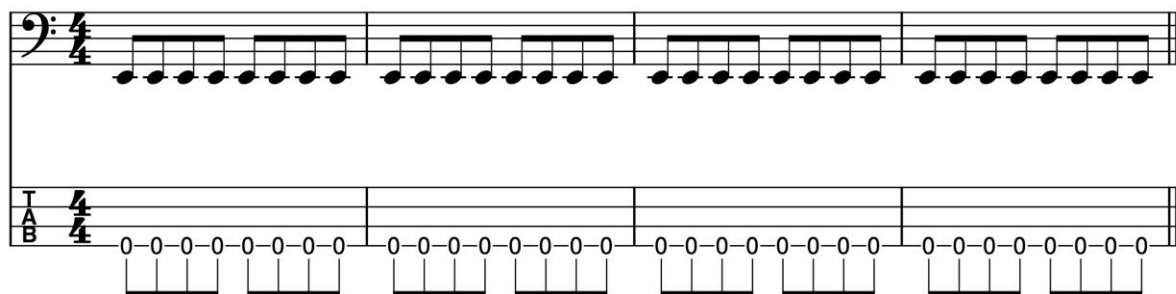
Incorporating a metronome into this practice is key to developing good timing. The metronome serves as your guide, keeping your rhythm steady and allowing you to gradually increase your speed as you become more comfortable.



During this exercise, set your metronome to 80 beats per minute. On each beat, pluck the string. Remember to alternate between your index and your middle finger. Do it for about a minute—you'll feel your fingers getting tired in no time! If this is too slow for you, you can increase the speed of the metronome.

If you're comfortable plucking one string, then we can spice things up a little bit.

Open String Exercise No. 2



During Open String Exercise No. 2, keep your metronome at the same speed as Open String Exercise No. 1. This time, your notes are going to be eighth notes, which means they are going to double the speed of the previous exercise. We can't say this enough: Make sure your fingers strike the strings evenly and that all the notes sound as similar as possible!

Open String Exercise No. 3

Do you want to challenge yourself? Do you want to explore the other strings? Then try this exercise.

The image shows the musical notation for 'Open String Exercise No. 3'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, containing four measures of eighth-note patterns. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with two lines labeled 'T' (treble) and 'B' (bass), also in 4/4 time. It contains four measures of open string exercises, each measure consisting of four '0's (open strings) grouped by a bracket. The first measure has a bracket under the first four strings (E, B, G, D), the second under the next four (B, G, D, A), the third under the next four (G, D, A, E), and the fourth under the last four (D, A, E, B). The exercise ends with a double bar line.

The beauty of this exercise is that you can do it on repeat as many times as your heart desires... or, well, until your fingers get tired. In this exercise, you are not only practicing the strength and endurance of your fingers, but the accuracy of finding the strings.

Remember: Alternate between your index and middle finger!

Open String Exercise No. 4

The image shows the musical notation for 'Open String Exercise No. 4'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, containing four measures of eighth-note patterns. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with two lines labeled 'T' (treble) and 'B' (bass), also in 4/4 time. It contains four measures of open string exercises, each measure consisting of four '0's (open strings) grouped by a bracket. The first measure has a bracket under the first four strings (E, B, G, D), the second under the next four (B, G, D, A), the third under the next four (G, D, A, E), and the fourth under the last four (D, A, E, B). The exercise ends with a double bar line.

For this exercise, remember to start plucking with your index finger and alternate between your index finger and your middle finger.

Open String Exercise No. 5

The image shows a musical score for the song "The Rose Tree". It consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass line in 4/4 time, written in bass clef. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature line, also in 4/4 time, with fret numbers (0, 1, 2, 3, 4) written above the staff lines. The melody is simple and consists of eighth and quarter notes. The guitar part is a single-note line following the same melody, with fret numbers indicating the positions on the fretboard. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

For exercise no. 5, you will have to pay special attention to your right-hand fingers because even though you are alternating between strings, you still need to alternate between fingers.

Open String Exercise No. 6

[illegible]

For the last exercise, we are going to put everything together we've learned in this chapter so far.

Pro Tip: Start with slower tempos to get comfortable with rhythm.

It's easy to rush through these exercises in an attempt to play faster, but the goal is consistency and control. Start slow, even if it feels too slow at first. This will give you the opportunity to fine-tune your timing and make sure each note sounds clean and even. Over time, as your confidence and ability grow, you can gradually increase the tempo of your metronome.

Practicing at a slower pace allows you to focus on the details of your plucking technique and ensures that you're not developing bad habits. Speed will come naturally as you gain more control over your hand movements, but it's important to build a strong foundation first.

Common Mistakes and How to Fix Them

While practicing these exercises, there are a few common mistakes to watch out for. Let's break them down and discuss how to correct them.

Over-Plucking or Plucking Too Hard

Many players, especially beginners, tend to pluck the strings too hard in an effort to produce a louder sound. This leads to uneven dynamics and can make your bassline sound harsh or messy.

Solution: Focus on achieving even, relaxed strokes. You don't need to pluck aggressively to get a good sound. Let the pickups and amplifier do the work of amplifying your sound. Light, controlled plucking will help you maintain consistency and avoid unnecessary tension in your hand.

Rushing Through the Rhythm

Some players have a tendency to rush through the rhythm, especially when trying to play faster notes like eighths or sixteenths. This can cause you to fall out of sync with the metronome and throw off your timing.

Solution: Keep the tempo slow at first. Make sure you're in perfect sync with the metronome before attempting to speed up. It's better to play slowly and accurately than to rush through the exercise and develop bad habits.

Uneven Plucking Between Fingers

If you're not alternating fingers consistently, one finger may end up doing more work than the other, leading to an uneven sound. This is especially noticeable when playing faster rhythms.

Solution: Pay close attention to how you alternate between your index and middle fingers. Both fingers should contribute equally to the plucking motion. If one finger feels weaker or less consistent, slow down the exercise and focus on making each pluck even.

The Importance of Relaxation

One of the most common mistakes bass players make is tensing up their plucking hand. This can lead to uneven playing; bad, rushed tone; and fatigue. Playing with a little bit of tension in your hand might be inevitable at the beginning, but it might also feel like there is nothing wrong. The problem is that the longer you keep this tension in your hand, the worse it gets for you in the long run. You might start to feel pain and aches in your wrists and fingers in a year or two. Who would want to pick up a bass guitar when their fingers are hurting? Definitely not me.

There are many ways you can make sure that you don't hurt your hand, though. One of these methods includes something so simple: relaxing.

To avoid tension, keep your hands and fingers relaxed. And don't try to strike your bass string with force—you really don't have to. That's why you have pickups! Let them do all the work for you. Practice gently plucking the strings, and you'll see no matter how soft you do it, the pickups still manage to... well, pick it up. And amplify it. So, well done for finding out that pickups can do the thing that they're made for.

As you practice, periodically check your hand and wrist for signs of stiffness. If you feel any tension, stop, shake out your hand, and resume playing with a lighter touch.

Consistency Is Key

Your right-hand needs to be consistent. You can't be a good, or even a decent, bass player if your right-hand doesn't strike the strings with consistent pace, strength, or time. Every note should sound clear, with the same volume and tone, regardless of which finger is plucking the string. Inconsistent plucking can result in uneven dynamics, where some notes are louder than others, making the bassline sound choppy or unbalanced.

To develop consistency, focus on even strokes. Whether you're playing slowly or picking up speed, the volume and clarity of each note should remain the same. If you notice that some notes are sounding weaker than others, slow down and pay attention to how your fingers are moving. Make sure that both your index and middle fingers are contributing equally to the plucking motion.

Another way to improve consistency is to practice with a metronome (queue the sigh of pain and agony).

Set it at a slow tempo and focus on timing each pluck in sync with the beats. This will help you maintain a steady rhythm and ensure that your playing is smooth and consistent, even as you increase your speed.

Chapter 3: Left Hand Techniques and Exercises

Basic Left-Hand Technique

Your left hand (or fretting hand, for right-handed players) is just as crucial to your playing as your plucking hand. While your right hand is responsible for generating the sound, your left hand determines the notes, shapes the bassline, and controls the dynamics and clarity of each note. Proper technique with your fretting hand will make your playing smoother and more accurate and your hand less prone to fatigue.

Proper Hand Positioning

The first thing to focus on is how you position your left hand on the neck of the bass. Proper hand positioning is critical for both comfort and precision, especially when you start playing more complicated basslines.

If you need some key points, here they are:

Thumb Position

Place your thumb behind the neck, roughly in the middle, and keep it positioned vertically. Your thumb should act as a pivot, giving you stability while allowing your fingers to move freely along the fretboard. Make sure it's not pressing too hard or clinging to the neck—light pressure is all that's needed. Avoid wrapping your thumb around the neck, as this limits your finger movement and creates unnecessary tension.

Fingers Curved and Close to the Frets

When you press down on a string, your fingers should be slightly curved. Use the tips of your fingers to fret the notes. Press the string down just behind the fret (the metal strip)—not on top of it, and not too far behind it—because this will give you the cleanest sound. Keeping your fingers close to the frets reduces the effort needed to press down, which will improve your accuracy and speed.

Relax Your Wrist

Make sure your wrist is straight and relaxed. Avoid bending it too much or creating tension in your hand. You want to be able to move freely up and down the neck, so don't lock your wrist in one position. If you feel tension or discomfort, take a moment to adjust your posture. A relaxed wrist will help you avoid strain during long practice sessions.

Use All Four Fingers

To develop finger independence and strength, use all four of your fingers—index, middle, ring, and pinky—when playing. It might be tempting to rely only on your index and middle fingers, but your ring and pinky fingers are just as important. Developing strength in these weaker fingers will give you better control and make it easier to play faster, more complex basslines.

Finger Independence

A critical part of the left-hand technique is developing finger independence. This means training each finger to work separately and efficiently, which is vital for playing scales, chords, and fast-moving basslines. If your fingers are too dependent on each other—meaning they tend to move together even when they shouldn't—your playing will sound sloppy and uneven.

Start by making sure each finger is positioned correctly and moves independently of the others. This is called "one finger per fret". Each finger looks after its own fret: first finger on one, second finger on the next, then third and fourth. That lets you reach four frets without moving your hand. It may take time to strengthen your ring and pinky fingers, but with practice, they'll become just as nimble and responsive as your index and middle fingers.

One exercise to build finger independence is playing a chromatic scale (which we'll cover in a later section). The key is to ensure that each finger stays close to the fretboard and presses down cleanly, with minimal movement from the other fingers. Over time, this practice will give you better control and precision in your playing.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

When it comes to your left-hand technique, there are a few common mistakes that beginners tend to make. Recognizing and correcting these early on will save you from developing bad habits that can be hard to break later.

Pressing Too Hard on the Strings

One of the most common issues is pressing too hard when fretting notes. This not only makes your hand tire more quickly but can also cause the notes to sound harsh or muted, especially if you're pressing too far from the fret.

Solution: You don't need to press down hard to get a clean sound. Light pressure—just enough to make the string touch the fret—is all that's required. If your notes are buzzing or unclear, it might be because you're pressing too far behind the fret. Adjust your finger placement closer to the fret and use lighter pressure.

Fretting Too Far From the Fret

As mentioned, the further your finger is from the fret, the harder you'll have to press down to get a clear note. This also increases the likelihood of buzzing or muted sounds.

Solution: Always aim to press the string right behind the fret. This gives you the cleanest sound with the least amount of effort. If you're having trouble getting a clear sound, check your finger placement and make sure you're not fretting too far from the fret.

Tension in the Wrist and Hand

Playing with tension in your wrist or fingers will make it harder to move up and down the fretboard and can lead to discomfort or even injury over time.

Solution: Keep your wrist relaxed and your fingers light. Avoid locking your wrist in place or pressing too hard with your thumb. If you feel tension building, stop and stretch your hand. Over time, maintaining a relaxed posture will allow you to play for longer without fatigue.

Final Tips

Proper left-hand technique is essential for becoming a smooth, efficient bass player. By focusing on correct finger positioning, building finger independence, and avoiding common mistakes, you'll set a strong foundation for your future bass playing. Developing good habits early on will pay off in the long run, making it easier to tackle more complex techniques and improve your overall performance.

Exercise: Chromatic Warm-up

The chromatic warm-up is an essential exercise for developing finger strength and independence in your left hand. It's a simple yet highly effective drill that will improve your coordination, accuracy, and speed. These exercises help train each of your fingers to work independently, which is crucial for playing more complex basslines later on.

A chromatic scale involves playing every note in sequence, one fret at a time, without skipping any. This means you'll be using all four fingers of your left hand, moving from fret to fret and string to string. The exercise is simple: Starting on the E string, you'll work your way up the fretboard, playing one note per fret with each finger, then moving on to the next string.

Chromatic Warm Up 1



Let's break down how to play this exercise. Start on the E string (the lowest string) and work your way up through the A, D, and G strings.

1. Place your index finger (1st finger) on the 1st fret of the E string and pluck the string.

2. Next, place your middle finger (2nd finger) on the 2nd fret, followed by your ring finger (3rd finger) on the 3rd fret, and your pinky (4th finger) on the 4th fret.

3. Once you've played all four notes on the E string, move to the A string and repeat the same process: index on the 1st fret, middle on the 2nd, ring on the 3rd, and pinky on the 4th.

4. Continue this pattern across the D and G strings.

After completing the exercise on all four strings, you can move back down the neck by reversing the order, going from the 4th fret back to the 1st fret.

Chromatic Warm Up 2

Now that you know the basics of how to play a chromatic warm-up, try the next exercise. What's different?

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a chromatic warm-up exercise on the bass staff, set in 4/4 time. Each system includes a staff with notes and a corresponding fretboard diagram below it. The fretboard diagram shows frets 0 through 15, with fingerings (0-7) indicated for the first eight frets. The first system covers frets 0 to 15, and the second system, starting with a measure number '5' above the first measure, also covers frets 0 to 15. The notes are chromatic, moving up and then down the fretboard.

The main difference is the fact that this warm-up plays on each fret of the fretboard, from the lowest note to the highest note.

Let's go through the steps together:

1. Play an open E string.
2. With your index finger, press down on the first fret of the E String. Keep your finger there.
3. Press your middle finger down on the second fret of the E string. Keep your finger there.
4. Press your ring finger down on the third fret of the E string. Keep your finger there.
5. Press your pinky finger down on the fourth fret of the E string. Keep your finger there.
6. You've run out of fingers, so now what? Simple: Lift all your fingers and press your index finger down on the fifth fret. Make sure your thumb and your hand move with your finger to support it in its new position.
7. Repeat all these steps with your fingers on the adjusted frets.

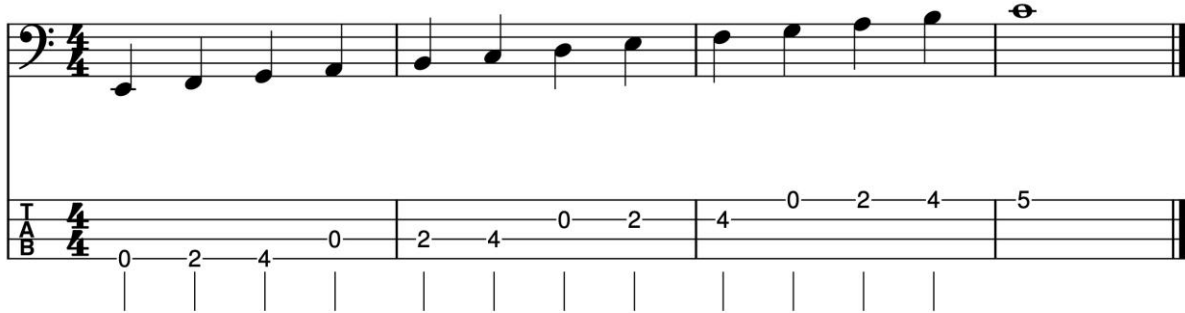
By repeating these exercises regularly, you'll notice improvements in your finger strength and dexterity, which will allow you to play faster and more accurately.

Pro Tip: Start slowly, making sure each note is clean and even. Once you're comfortable with the finger alternation, gradually increase your speed to challenge yourself.

Exercises for Finger Independence

Try these two exercises to teach your fingers to move independently. Remember: Your first finger should always press down on the first fret, second finger on the second fret, third finger on the third fret, and fourth finger on the fourth fret.

Exercise 1



Exercise 2



Learning From the Legends

Throughout this book, you will come across some case studies of legendary bass players. Each of these bassists offers valuable lessons for your playing. Whether it's Jamerson's melodic grooves, Kaye's versatility, or Jaco's groundbreaking innovations, there's something to take from each player's approach to the instrument. The common thread between them is their creativity and willingness to push boundaries. They didn't just play notes—they used the bass to tell stories, create moods, and elevate the songs they played on.

As you continue your bass journey, take inspiration from these greats. Listen to their music. Experiment with the techniques they popularized, but more importantly, find your own voice on the bass. Music is about expression, and the bass is a powerful tool for expressing rhythm, melody, and emotion. By studying the work of these legends and applying their lessons to your own playing, you'll develop not only as a bass player but as a musician.

The stories and contributions of these legendary bassists remind us that there's no one "right" way to play the bass. Whether you're laying down a simple groove or experimenting with complex harmonics, the most important thing is to stay creative and play in a way that feels authentic to you.

Case Study: James Jamerson

James Jamerson was the heart of Motown's Funk Brothers and one of the most influential bass players ever. His deep, driving grooves defined the Motown sound of the 1960s and 70s, creating basslines that were both melodic and rhythmic. Jamerson's basslines on hits by Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and The Supremes showcased his fluid, innovative style, where every note felt like it belonged. One listen to "What's Going On" reveals his magic—his bassline feels like a melodic conversation, syncopated yet locked in rhythm. Playing "The Hook," Jamerson made every line hit you right in the chest, shaping a feeling, not just a sound.

Chapter 4: Introduction to Music Theory for the Bass Guitar

When you're starting out on the bass guitar, you might feel that music theory is a bit intimidating. But don't worry! You don't need to become a theory expert to play bass well. In fact, learning a few basic concepts can greatly improve your playing and help you understand what's happening in the music you love. Music theory is like the language of music, and the bass guitar plays a key role in laying down the foundation for this language, especially when it comes to building chords and creating harmony.

Notes and the Fretboard

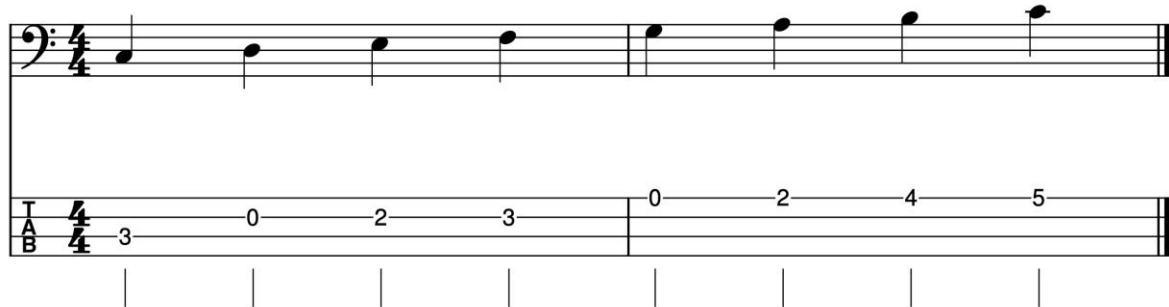
First things first: Let's talk about notes. Every song is made up of notes, and these notes are the building blocks of music. On the bass guitar, the notes are laid out along the fretboard. If you look at your bass, you'll see that each string has its own set of notes as you move up the frets. The open strings on a standard four-string bass are E (the thickest string), A, D, and G (the thinnest string). As you press down on each fret, you're raising the pitch of the string by a half step, creating different notes.

The great thing about the bass guitar is that its layout is consistent. Once you learn the pattern of notes on one string, you can easily apply that pattern to the others. For example, pressing down on the 5th fret of the E string gives you an A note, which is the same as playing the open A string. Knowing this relationship helps you navigate the fretboard more easily and quickly find the notes you want to play.

Scales: Your Musical Toolbox

A big part of music theory revolves around scales. A scale is simply a series of notes played in a specific order. Think of a scale as a musical toolbox that gives you the notes you'll use to create basslines, melodies, and chords. When you hear musicians talk about playing in a certain "key," they're referring to the scale that forms the basis of the song.

The C Major Scale



The C major scale is one of the most important scales to learn because it contains all the natural notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, and B). These notes form the basis for a lot of Western music. When you play the C major scale on your bass, you're playing a series of whole steps (two frets apart) and half steps (one fret apart) in a specific pattern: whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half.

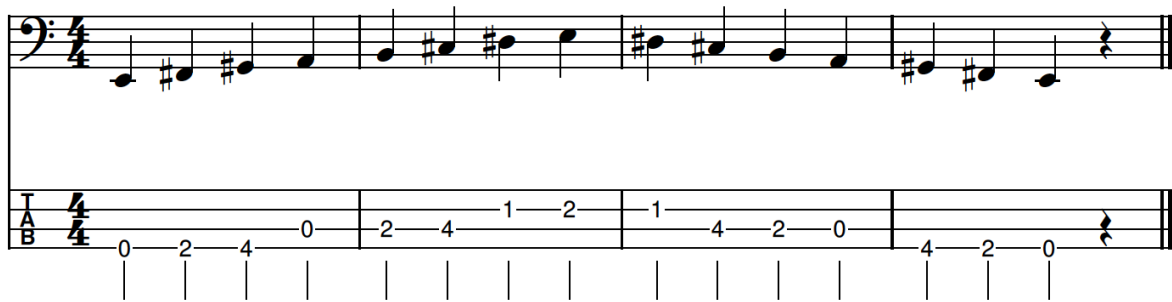
On your bass, this means starting with the C note (usually found on the 3rd fret of the A string) and moving up the fretboard according to this pattern. Here's the breakdown:

1. Start with the C note on the 3rd fret of the A string.
2. Move two frets up (a whole step) to play the D note.
3. Move two more frets (another whole step) to play the E note.
4. Move one fret up (a half step) to play the F note.
5. Continue moving up until you reach the B note, ending on the C one octave higher.

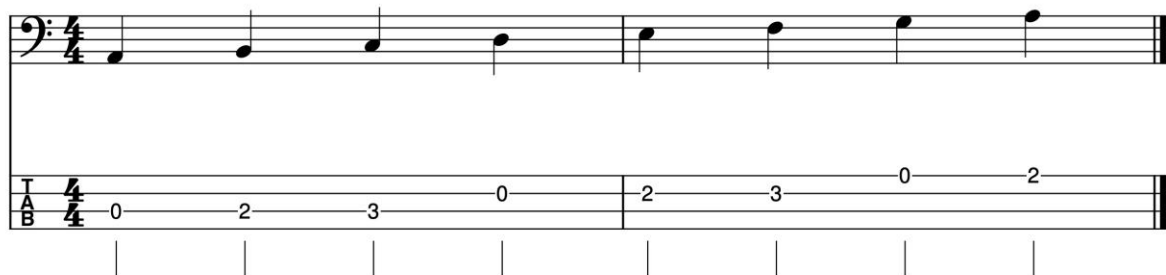
As you practice the C major scale, pay attention to the sound and the feel of each note. You'll notice that it has a bright, happy sound, which is typical of major scales. Learning this scale will help you create uplifting basslines and melodies, and it's a solid foundation for understanding other scales and musical concepts.

The E Major Scale

Here is the major scale in the key of E. This time we're keeping it simple by starting on the lowest note of a bass. You'll notice how it also follows the pattern of whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half.



The A Minor Scale



Now let's introduce the A minor scale. This scale is the "relative minor" of the C major scale, which means they share the same notes but start from different points. While the C major scale starts on C, the A minor scale begins on A and follows a slightly different pattern: whole, half, whole, whole, half, whole, whole.

Think of it like this: root, second, flat third, fourth, fifth, flat sixth, flat seventh. It's not quite as easy as the major scale cheat, but you get the jist of it.

When you play the A minor scale, you're essentially using the same notes as the C major scale (A, B, C, D, E, F, G) but in a different order. This changes the feel of the scale, giving it a more somber or emotional sound.

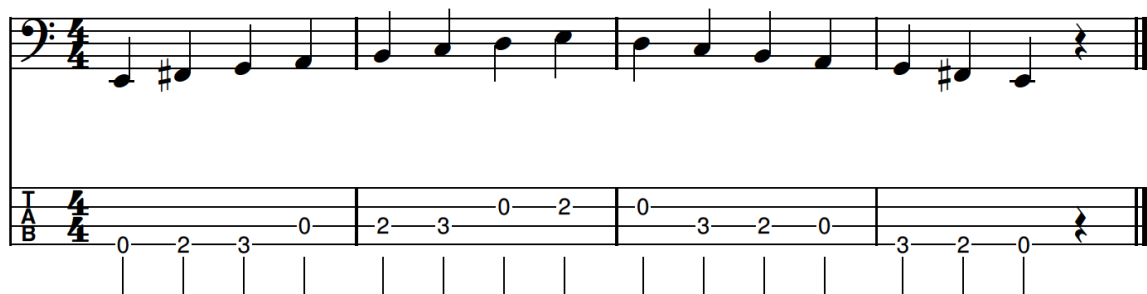
To play the A minor scale on your bass:

1. Start with the A note (usually found on the 5th fret of the E string).
2. Move two frets up (a whole step) to the B note.
3. Move one fret up (a half step) to play the C note.
4. Continue moving up until you reach the G note, finishing on the A one octave higher.

The A minor scale is a fantastic scale to learn because it's often used in various musical genres, from rock and blues to jazz and pop. Understanding both the C major and A minor scales will open up a world of musical possibilities, giving you the tools to create a variety of basslines and melodies.

The E Minor Scale

Here is another minor scale, the E minor scale, to give you more practice. Notice how it uses the same pattern as the A minor scale.



Listen to the notes as you play the scale. It sounds quite sad, doesn't it? How does it make you feel? What memory does it invoke?

Scale Shapes

When you learn a scale, you are not just learning the steps of the scale, the up and down to the scale, and how to write music. You are learning the fundamental shape of every other scale in that specific voice. That means if you can play a C major scale, you can play any other major scale—same with a minor scale. Or a blues scale. Why?

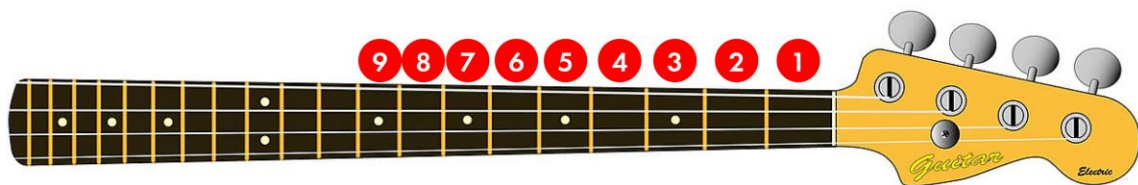
Because the shape of the scales remains the same; only the key changes.

It is fundamental that you learn the shape of the scale. When you play other scales, that shape will be a repetition, but the only difference is that you will start the scale on a different note. All the steps in the scale are still the same—only the notes change.

Introduction to Tablature

If you're new to playing bass, then it might be a little bit overwhelming to look at the sheet music for the first time. It's a page filled with lines and dots—and sometimes, random scribbles. You can feel your brain run up and down the lines like a ladder, but alas, none of it makes sense.

But don't worry—other musicians felt overwhelmed too, so they banded together (pun intended) and decided to write out music in a way they could all understand. This is called tablature (tabs for short, for all the lazy musicians out there).



Tablature is a straightforward way to read music specifically designed for stringed instruments like guitar, bass guitar, etc. Instead of using traditional sheet music, tabs use lines and numbers to show you exactly where to place your fingers on the fretboard. It's like a map that guides you through the song, note by note.

Here's an example of tablature:

Blitzkrieg Bop Bass

The Ramones

Tommy Ramone, Dee Dee Ramone

The image displays two staves for the bass guitar part of 'Blitzkrieg Bop' by The Ramones. The top staff is traditional musical notation in 4/4 time, featuring a bass clef and a key signature of one flat. The bottom staff is a bass guitar tablature, indicated by 'T' and 'B' at the start, with a 4/4 time signature. The tablature uses four horizontal lines to represent the strings, with numbers indicating fret positions. The notation is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, corresponding to the measures in the staff above. The first measure contains a continuous eighth-note pattern on the 5th fret of the first string. The second measure contains a quarter note on the 5th fret, followed by eighth notes on the 7th fret. The third measure contains a continuous eighth-note pattern on the 5th fret. The fourth measure contains a quarter note on the 5th fret, followed by eighth notes on the 7th fret. The fifth measure contains a whole rest.

At first, it might look overwhelming and complicated, but take your time. The more you look at it, the less scary it will get. It's just like reading sheet music—but for *dummies* (you're not really a dummy, it's just easier). You don't have to translate the meaning of the note in your head, which means you save a lot of time you can use to master the art of bass playing!

In the figure on top, you can see there are two parts to playing an instrument—the top line is the traditional sight-reading experience—it has all the notes and rests that the fancy musicians read. Beneath it is the broken down, tablature version of it. In summary, it tells you what fret of what string you need to press down. If you ever find yourself questioning which is which, look for these easy signs: A bass tablature only has 4 lines to represent the 4 strings, and it also has TAB written in front of it instead of the traditional bass clef.

The number on each string represents the fret you need to be pressing down. An average bass has about 20 frets. This is usually not an indication of what finger to use, but as you familiarize yourself with the bass guitar, you'll learn quickly what finger to use and where on which fret.

Each line on the tab represents a string on your bass. You read a tab from the top string down. The top string is the high G string. On your bass, that's the lowest, thinnest string. The second thinnest string is your D string. The third string from the top of a tab, but the

second string from the bottom on a bass guitar, is the A string. Last but not least, we have everyone's favorite, the top E string.

Here's a simplification of the above:

G - - - - -
D - - - - -
A - - - - -
E - - - - -

Each note is represented by a number. That number indicates which fret you have to press that specific string.

Music tablature is a fantastic way for beginners to learn bass in a quick and easy manner—but don't let the laziness consume you! Always try to read and understand your music notation because at the end of the day, the notation tells you how long you should press on a fret and note, whereas a tab doesn't always do that.

Chapter 5: Developing Rhythm and Groove

Introduction to Rhythm

When it comes to bass playing, rhythm is everything. While the melody and harmony often get the spotlight in music, the rhythm section—particularly the bass—holds the music together. As a bassist, you are responsible for creating the groove that drives the song forward. Understanding and mastering rhythm is one of the most crucial skills you'll develop, and it's what will separate a good bass player from a great one.

At its core, rhythm is about timing. It's the ability to play your notes in sync with the beat, creating a steady pulse that supports the rest of the band. In many ways, the bass serves as the backbone of the rhythm section, working closely with the drummer to keep the time steady and the groove tight. Whether you're playing a simple riff or an intricate pattern, if your rhythm is off, the entire feel of the song will suffer.

The Role of Rhythm in Bass Playing

You're probably tired of hearing this, but the bass player is the foundation of a song. Yup... you're the one no one can go without, regardless of if we can hear you in the mix or not. One of the primary roles of the bass guitar is to lock in with the drums and create the rhythmic foundation of a song. The drummer provides the beat, but it's the bass player who gives the beat its depth and movement. Think of the bass and drums as partners: The drums keep the time, and the bass fills out the lower end, adding warmth and groove to the rhythm.

Even if you're hitting the right notes, playing them at the wrong time will throw off the entire song. That's why developing a solid sense of rhythm is crucial—you want to ensure that your playing is not only musically correct but also rhythmically accurate.

When you think about rhythm, it's not just about hitting the notes on time. The best bass players don't just play the beat; they feel it and internalize it, allowing their playing to flow

naturally within the groove. This connection to rhythm is what makes your basslines feel tight and cohesive, whether you're playing in a small jazz trio or a full rock band.

Why Groove Matters

The concept of "groove" is central to rhythm. Groove is the element that makes people want to dance, tap their feet, or nod their heads to the music. As a bass player, your ability to groove determines how your playing connects with the listener. A good groove isn't necessarily complex, but it's always in the pocket—perfectly synced with the rhythm of the song, giving it a sense of flow and momentum.

One of the key aspects of the groove is repetition. A solid groove often consists of a repeating pattern that fits within the rhythmic structure of the song. By repeating certain phrases or patterns, you create a sense of familiarity and consistency, which is essential for building a strong rhythmic foundation. However, this doesn't mean playing the same thing over and over without variation. The best bass players know how to introduce subtle changes in their grooves while keeping the overall rhythm steady.

Groove is what gives the music its feel. A tight groove can make a simple bassline sound powerful and engaging, while a weak groove can make even the most technically impressive lines feel flat. This is why rhythm and groove are so crucial for bass playing—they allow you to give your music energy, direction, and movement.

The Importance of Timing

Another crucial element of rhythm is timing. Being able to play in time with the rest of the band is the foundation of rhythm, and it's especially important for bass players. If your timing is off, even by a fraction of a beat, it can throw off the entire song. This is why practicing with a metronome or drum loop is essential—it helps you develop a consistent internal clock that keeps your playing on track.

Timing isn't just about playing notes on the beat. It's also about understanding how to play around the beat. Some basslines require you to play directly on the beat, giving the music a sense of urgency and precision. Other times, you might need to play slightly ahead or behind the beat to create a looser, more laid-back feel. This is often referred to as

playing in the pocket—the ability to place your notes exactly where they need to be in relation to the rhythm.

Developing your timing skills will make you a more versatile and reliable bass player. Whether you're playing fast, energetic rock lines or slow, steady grooves, being able to keep time is what will allow you to fit seamlessly into any musical situation.

Listening and Reacting to Rhythm

A big part of rhythm in bass playing is learning how to listen and react. Your role as a bassist is to support the rest of the band, and this means paying close attention to the rhythm of the song and adjusting your playing accordingly. The best bass players don't just follow the beat; they listen to how the drummer and other musicians are playing and find ways to complement and enhance the overall rhythm.

This is where your sense of rhythmic awareness comes in. The more you practice and play with others, the better you'll become at picking up on subtle changes in the rhythm and responding in real-time. This might mean adjusting your groove to match a change in the drummer's playing or playing slightly ahead or behind the beat to create a certain feel.

Learning to listen and react to rhythm will make your basslines feel more connected to the music. It's about being in tune with the rest of the band and making sure that your playing is always serving the song, rather than standing out or drawing attention away from the groove.

Understanding On-Beats and Off-Beats

To get a feel for rhythm, it's helpful to understand the concepts of on-beats and off-beats. The on-beat is simply the main pulse of the song—those steady beats you hear when counting along with the music. If you're counting "1, 2, 3, 4" to a song, those numbers are the on-beats. You'll usually find that the bass and drums hit these beats together, creating a tight, strong rhythm that the rest of the band follows.

The off-beats, on the other hand, fall in between those main pulses. If you were to count "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and," the *and* is your off-beat. Off-beats are crucial for adding groove and syncopation to the music. By placing your notes on the off-beats, you can create a sense of movement that makes the rhythm more interesting and danceable.

A lot of basslines play with this contrast between on and off beats, alternating between them to create different rhythmic feels. As you learn to identify and play on both the on-beats and off-beats, you'll gain a deeper understanding of how to shape the groove and feel of a song.

Clapping Exercises to Develop Rhythm

To help you get comfortable with the concept of on and off beats, let's start with some simple clapping exercises. For each exercise, you'll clap along with a steady pulse, which you can set using a metronome or tapping your foot.

Exercise 1: Clapping on the Beat

1. Set a slow tempo, around 80 beats per minute (BPM).
2. Count out loud: "1, 2, 3, 4."
3. Clap on each number as you count.

So, it should feel like 1(clap), 2(clap), 3(clap), 4(clap), in sync with the beat. This is clapping on the on-beat, and it's the basic rhythm that will form the backbone of your bass playing.

Exercise 2: Clapping on and off the Beat

1. Keep the same slow tempo, around 80 BPM.
2. This time, count out loud: "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and."
3. Clap on the *and* for each beat, which means clapping between the main counts.

So, it should feel like 1 and(clap), 2 and(clap), 3 and(clap), 4 and(clap). This exercise will help you get a feel for the off-beat and how it contrasts with the steady on-beat.

Exercise 3: Combining On- and Off-Beats

1. Using the same tempo, count: "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and."
2. This time, clap on both the on-beats and off-beats.

So, it will feel like 1(clap) and(clap), 2(clap) and(clap), 3(clap) and(clap), 4(clap) and(clap). This combination of on- and off-beats is a great way to start feeling the groove and understanding how different rhythms fit together.

Rhythm and Feel

Finally, rhythm is about more than just technical precision—it's also about feel. The best basslines are not only rhythmically tight but also feel natural and effortless. When you're in sync with the rhythm of the song, your playing will flow more easily, and your basslines will have a more relaxed, confident feel.

Feel is something that develops over time, through practice and experience. The more you work on your rhythm and timing, the more natural it will become, and the more you'll be able to focus on the musicality of your playing rather than the technical details. Eventually, your sense of rhythm will become second nature, allowing you to create grooves that feel both tight and fluid.

Chapter 6: Funk

How do we even begin to describe funk?

Is it a movement? Is it the jiggly jelly feeling you get in your bones when a groove is just so sweet?

Well, yes. Funk is all of the above. Funk is the teary-eyed ballad from the blues protest songs. It's the sweet guitar solo from the R&B track bringing so many sweet, sweet couples together. It's the praise and worship of gospel music. Funk is what happens when all these soulful genres combine and have a cute, spoiled baby!

Funk is all about groove, energy, and making people move.

History of Funk

We saw the first rendition of funk in the 1960s after all these beautiful other genres were in full swing. We didn't really see much funk in the 60s though, but by the 70s and 80s, people could just not get enough! The rhythm was infectious, and the dance floor needed more.

In the late 1950s, musicians were getting bored of the genres they knew. They wanted to step out to see what was out there in the world. James Brown took the leap and coined the name *funk*. It just had a ring to it. James spent a little bit of time, and a little bit of magic, and created the rhythm we all know and love today. (For those wondering, he played the first beat on the 1, so he emphasized the first downbeat measure). His band, The Famous Flames, grabbed this world-changing beat, birthing funk into the universe.

Of course, everyone slept on funk for a while. It wasn't until the late 60s—a whole decade later—that people finally opened their eyes to see that they stuck gold. All of a sudden, funk bands popped up like flowers in spring. It was as if the season of funk finally bloomed!

What is Funk?

The genre is characterized by its tight grooves, syncopated rhythms, and rhythmic accents that emphasize the downbeat. Iconic funk artists like James Brown, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Sly and the Family Stone have shaped the sound of funk, and at the center of it all is the bass guitar.

As a bass player in funk, you're essentially the driving force. The basslines are often front and center, adding both rhythm and melody to the music. A great funk bassline is groovy, percussive, and full of rhythmic energy—it's what makes you want to dance. The bass typically works closely with the drums to lock in a tight rhythm, often using syncopation to create a "popping" or "slapping" feel that stands out. Unlike other genres where the bass might take a back seat, in funk, the bass is a star.

Funk bass playing relies on using techniques like popping, slapping, and ghost notes (subtle, muted notes that add to the rhythm). It's all about getting the groove in the pocket and playing with a sense of bounce. Funk basslines often repeat catchy patterns, but it's the feel and how you accent the beats that really make it funky. Your role is to lay down a groove that drives the song forward, fills out the rhythm, and keeps everyone on the dance floor moving.

The Fundamentals of Funk

So, you got into funk bass playing... congratulations, you're a drummer now!

It might sound like I am kidding, but I am actually not. When it comes to playing funk on your bass guitar, or any instrument, you need a strong background in beats and rhythm. Here you thought you picked the easy way out by playing an instrument that only requires your hands (insert evil laughter here).

Jokes aside, the most important thing about playing funk is to keep your rhythm strong and steady. Like we said earlier, funk is about the groove. You need to find your groove.

But let's practice that together!

Exercise: Timing

Most music is straightforward, right? Right... You play your note on a beat, and that's the end of it. Sometimes, you pick your favorite beats, and these usually end up being beats 2 and 4. You know this because if you had to listen to any rock n roll or pop song right now, they would have a snare hit on beats 2 and 4 (or 1 and 3), but when it comes to funk? Throw everything you know right out of the door.

In funk, we have something called *syncopation*.

Syncopation is when the accent rhythm notes fall on an off-beat. You'll find a snare hit on the *and* in between 1 and 2. The best way to understand syncopation is to learn how to play it, so let's jump right into an exercise.

The exercise is written in 4/4 time. The first measure contains eighth notes on beats 1, 2, 3, and 4. The second measure contains eighth notes on the 'and' of 1, 2, 3, and 4. The third measure contains eighth notes on beats 1, 2, 3, and 4. The fourth measure contains eighth notes on the 'and' of 1, 2, 3, and 4. The tablature below the staff shows the fret numbers for each note: 3, 3, 3, 3 for the first measure; 2, 2, 2, 2 for the second measure; 0, 0, 0, 0 for the third measure; and 2, 2, 2, 2 for the fourth measure. The tablature also includes a squiggly line for a rest on the first beat of the first measure.

Rests

For the first time ever, you might have noticed these weird squiggly lines in the tabs. The first time I saw it, I thought it was a hair. Or a bug. I got anxious seeing it!

But don't beat yourself up—the squiggly line is a rest. A rest is a time during any piece of music when you are not playing a note. That means that if you see a rest in your music, you better not make a peep!

You get different types of rests. This particular one in the exercise above is an eighth rest. That means in a beat, you are going to rest and not play a sound for half a beat. For funk, rests are fundamental to add to the rhythm and groove of the songs.

Exercise: Dynamics

Most of us think that dynamics is just how hard or how soft you pluck a note. That is true, and that is how you can get depth to a note you are playing, but it is not the only way you can achieve dynamics when you play bass.

I hope you're sitting behind your bass while you're reading this because I want you to try something: Pluck the string right in front of your pickup. How loud is the note? Now, pluck the string close to your bridge. How loud is the note? How about close to the neck of your bass?

Your right-hand position can help you achieve different dynamics.

Let's look at an exercise you have done previously so we can build and focus on your technique.



For every bar you play, move your right hand closer and further away from the pickup, either closer to the bridge or the neck of the guitar. Remember to play and remain on time—you still have to focus on being consistent with your timing. You'll notice a change in dynamic of the notes—some notes will be louder, and some will be softer than others. If you feel comfortable, move it in between notes too, and find a groove that feels natural to you.

Ghost Notes

Ghost notes and bass guitar go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. It doesn't matter which genre you find yourself in, it just makes the bass guitar sound groovy and fun.

A ghost note can bring a whole song to life.

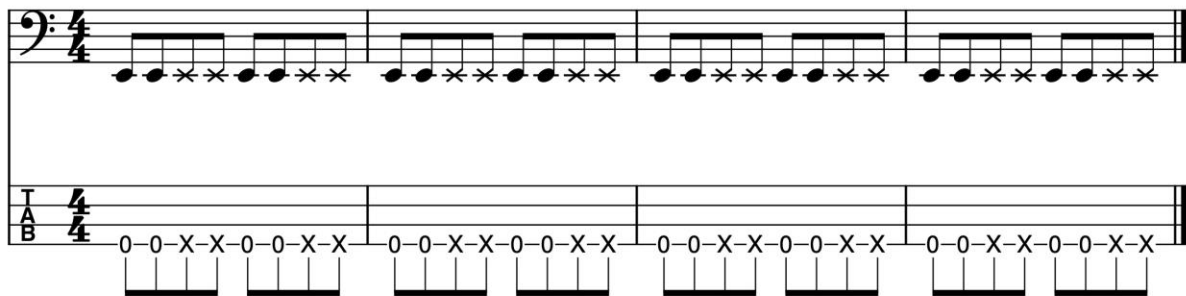
So... what is a ghost note and how do you play it? Well, to play any note, you will have to... well, play a note. But instead of pressing down on a fret to create the sound, you are going to rest your hand on the fret slightly so when you play it, you play a note that kind of sounds like a thump.

Let's try a ghost note together.

Rest your left index finger on the top E string of your bass guitar. Now, pluck the string with your right hand. The note should not really sound like a note but rather have a percussive sound.

Exercise: Muting

Ghost notes are notated with an x as seen below. Try the exercise below, and try to seamlessly create the sound of a ghost note.



Case Study: Carol Kaye

When you stumble upon the name Carol Kaye, you might huff and think, *I have no idea who this crazy lady is*. But oh boy, you are wrong! Yes, I know, no one likes to be wrong, but stick around, and I'll tell you why!

You might not have heard Carol Kaye's voice or her story, but you have most definitely heard her butter-smooth fingers run over the notes on a bass.

This woman is powerful. Unbelievable. And the best of all: She made things happen in music. She sat through 10,000 sessions to play bass for different bands and musicians, with her significant and stand-out playing style featured on 40,000 different songs

(Erickson, 2005). Can you imagine learning to play 40,000 different songs? I definitely cannot.

Carol Kaye was born in Everett, Washington, on the 24th of March, 1935 (Blecha, 2019). If you looked at Carol Kaye's family, all the puzzle pieces would fit, and you would understand why she was so... well, talented. She was practically born a musician because both her mom and pops were musicians, too. Her pops played some epic riffs on the trombone, participating in big bands.

We often read horrible stories about musicians and their pasts; to an extent, Carol's story isn't much different. Her mother was an angel in hell, living with a man they all called father but who treated them like dogs. When we see a dad, we see someone who is supportive and loving, but unfortunately, that is not always the case. Carol's dad was quite the opposite. He was quite violent and mean toward Carol.

Carol, like any other kid, always tried to cope, and the one coping mechanism she could find was music. When they played music in the house, it made their family whole again. It made all their pain go away. When her dad picked up the trombone and her mom slid in behind the piano, it didn't matter that they were poor. It didn't matter that her dad was violent. All that mattered was the music. All of a sudden, her dad was... well, *human*.

In 1941, Carol's family packed their bags and moved off to Long Beach (Blecha, 2019). In an attempt to make money for the move, Carol's father decided to sell her mom's piano—a decision that would haunt Carol's memories. But the move did not make things better, as the family expected it to—instead, it made things a whole lot worse. After some tough love, Carol convinced her mom to leave her dad.

Carol got her very first guitar when she was about 13—a steel-string guitar (Blecha, 2019). A guitar sales rep came round to their house one day, trying to sell the steel string for only \$10. After Carol's parents got a divorce, her mom was struggling to put bread on the table—so much so that Carol helped out by scrubbing floors after school. Miraculously, her mom pulled together the money to get the guitar for Carol. She sent her to a few lessons, and before Carol knew it, she was pretty good at playing guitar.

If there is a will, there is a way—and Carol made sure to find a way to learn how to play an instrument. Her friend had participated in her own guitar lessons with a phenomenal guitarist called Horace Hatchet, and Carol often went with her to the lessons. After a while, Horace made a deal with Carol—if she helped him teach, he would give her lessons in return.

It didn't take her too long to discover the instrument of her heart though: the electric bass guitar. You couldn't keep Carol away from the stage because as soon as she could, she hit the stage with her bass.

In 1957, Carol was gigging with some epic be-bop jazz musicians in Los Angeles. This was the gig that changed her life. She was noticed—all her hard work, hours practicing, and time spent behind the bass was worth it. She was recruited by the legendary Sam Cooke—a soul and pop pioneer in the studio.

Carol never looked back.

She went on to play on records for loads of famous musicians, from Frank Sinatra to Elvis Presley. So, that's why we say: You might not know Carol Kaye by her name, but somewhere along the lines, you will have heard her beautiful playing style.

Carol played on countless iconic tracks from the 1960s and 70s, shaping the sound of pop music. Her versatile style made her equally comfortable with rock, jazz, and pop, adapting seamlessly to the needs of each song. On The Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," her subtle yet powerful bassline supports the vocals and complex instrumentation, while on Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'," her driving groove defines the song's infectious feel. Kaye's philosophy was to serve the song with rhythm and melody, showing that simplicity and precision can create timeless basslines.

Guess the Carol Kaye Song

Carol Kaye wrote this epic bass line. Can you guess what the song is?



The song's name is "California Girls" by The Beach Boys. So, well done if you guessed that correctly!

Challenge

You've learned quite a bit in this book so far, but what's the use if you acquire this knowledge but you don't put it to use? Here is a small song where you can practice everything you have learned: muted notes, rests, groove, and feel.

Start off by learning each note slowly and play the track bar by bar.

Once you are comfortable with the notes, slowly add feel to it: Play staccato (short) notes, and move your right hand up and down the bass.

Sixteenth Notes

In the song below, you will see sixteenth notes (the ones with the double bar attaching them). A sixteenth note is a rhythmic unit that divides a single beat into four equal parts. If you think of one beat as a whole pie, sixteenth notes are the four equal slices you'd cut from it.

To count them, use: "1-e-and-a, 2-e-and-a, 3-e-and-a, 4-e-and-a." Each syllable represents one sixteenth note within a beat.

In funk, sixteenth notes are crucial for creating tight, syncopated grooves. They add energy and intricacy, especially when paired with techniques like ghost notes or syncopation. When playing sixteenth notes, focus on even timing and precision—no rushing or dragging.

Let's Talk About That Funky Bass

Bass Guitar

Bass Guitar

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

3

6

9

12

15

Chapter 7: Rock

I Want to Rock

It might be bold of me to make this assumption, but I have always felt like somewhere in our lives, we all dream about becoming *rock stars*. Yup... I said it. We dream about shredding our instruments on stage, be it a guitar, bass, vocals, or a triangle. We all dream about our names being chanted before we hit the stage. We all dream about being... well, admired. When I think of rock and roll, I think of the Twisted Sister music video for “We're Not Gonna Take It.”

But what is rock and roll? And why is it so... revolutionary?

The History of Rock

Rock and roll only really found its feet in the 1950s, following its older brothers blues, jazz, and gospel (believe it or not, country music also has a finger in this pie). But unlike these genres, rock and roll was not a genre of music associated with a race or skin color—it transcended that. When a revolution happens, there are plenty of things all happening at once. That's what happened with rock music: Many different reasons all worked together to shape what we know it as today.

The first thing was the fact that music was easily accessible to pretty much everyone. The development of the 45rpm vinyl record helped bring everyone's favorite song home (BBC, n.d.). It became a lot easier for people of all backgrounds and financial positions to listen to the music they wanted.

Rock and roll would never have been possible if musicians didn't experiment in the 50s. They experimented—not only with sound but with technology. Someone played around and developed the electronic guitar, making a whole range of sounds possible. Pair a distorted guitar with teenage anger, and—you guessed it—rock and roll made its way into the mainstream. Kids could finally find music that described their rebellion, and no one above the age of 25 could stand it.

But rock and roll wasn't just about angst and rebellion. For the first time, teenagers felt like they were understood. They listened to lyrics that allowed them to talk about their feelings and about the lives they were experiencing (BBC, n.d.). It didn't help that rock music was all about fast tempos and catchy choruses.

The first recorded rock song that charted was "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and His Comets. This track soared, snatching the number one spot on the charts in the UK and US in 1954. Of course, the lyrics weren't appealing to younger teens yet, but with a catchy riff like that, who wouldn't like the track?

In the 50s and 60s, we saw the roots of rock and roll with Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and Little Richard, one causing more rebellion than the other. Before we knew it, there was a British invasion with bands like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. The British had a grip on Jimi Hendrix too, because two-thirds of his bands were made out of Brits.

By the 70s, rock music was all over the show—bands popped out of nowhere, each hungrier than the next for a distorted guitar. We said hello to hard rock and heavy metal, with a rise in rock bands like KISS, Black Sabbath, Pink Floyd and so many more. By the end of the 70s, we could describe rock music with three words: loud, obnoxious, enraged vocals (I know those are technically four words, but it doesn't matter).

In the 80s, people got bored. Rock and roll wasn't as cool as it used to be anymore. It all sounded exactly the same, and it *sucked* because everything got bigger. The snare. The hair. The guitar solos. All of a sudden, we saw a plethora of different genres pop out of nowhere—punk, new wave, college rock, indie rock, you name it. Big names fueled the rock scene, with some of these instrumentalists and musicians creating some of the most infamous rock n roll sounding solos, riffs, and hooks—think Van Halen, Randy Rhoads, and Judas Priest. But then in the exact same scene, you found acts like The Cure, REM, and Pixies.

In the 90s, rock made its way back to mainstream radio with a little bit of help from the likes of Nirvana and Metallica. Kurt Cobain, Nirvana's vocalist and frontman, ended his life in 1994, adding a nostalgic and shock factor to rock and roll music (Grierson, 2018). All of a sudden, everyone wanted to listen to bands who had a similar quality as Nirvana because they were never going to hear rock ever again.

That's enough history for now. Before I get carried away, let's chat about the theory behind rock and roll.

Good Ol' Rock 'N' Roll

Rock music is known for its epic backbeat. Yup, a genre based around drums. This music is rarely written in any other time signature than 4/4, with a tight-knit bass guitar and drums.

That is why it is imperative that you, a bassist, build a strong foundation of skills. You are the breath, the lungs, the pounding heartbeat of the band. Without you, a band cannot exist, and rock music certainly cannot pack the same punch without you.

Don't underestimate the power of rock, though. Sometimes, you will feel bored when you play it, because you'll find yourself playing the same thing over and over again, but without you, the guitarist can't be as flashy as he wants to be.

Rock music does not always have the most complicated basslines. It's not the most technical music out there (there are exceptions like Kansas, Uriah Heap, and Jethro Tull). But you can still be a phenomenal bassist within the rock community—just bring out your own individuality!

Exercise: Staccato

Not all rock songs are shredding masterpieces with crazy drums and screeching vocals. Some of them lean a bit more toward their friends—blues and funk. And with this specific exercise, you'll feel the groove kick in.

During this exercise, we are going to focus on staccato notes—short notes that you mute shortly after you pluck the string. It's indicated with a dot on top of or below the note.



Start off by setting your metronome to about 100 bpm. We're going to go a little bit faster in this exercise because rock and roll waits for no one.

Start off by plucking the rhythm of the tabs on your open E string. So, it'll be something like this: one, two, three, four, one, two, three *and* four. Take note of the *and*. Once you are comfortable with the rhythm, you can add your finger to the frets.

If you feel like 100 bpm is too fast, you can slow it down to where you feel comfortable and work your way up.

Exercise: Slides

One of the easiest ways to add a little swing, a little rock and roll in a song, is through a slide. It just makes the music that extra bit smooth, buttering the song up with lots of attitude.

A slide is when you slide your finger from one fret to the other, usually over a bunch of other frets. The easiest way to practice a slide is by plucking the top string, the E string, and sliding your finger over each fret until you hit the 12th fret (usually signaled to you by a double dot on the top of the neck). Try and it feels how it feels. Do it on the different frets, sliding through octaves, or even just from fret one to three.

It's not always the easiest to add a slide to music, especially when you are not sure when, how, and what the timing will be. The problem with rock music is that the sheet music isn't always available for each song either, especially the more modern songs, so you're going to have to learn what to play by ear.

Here is a pretty easy exercise where you can add a slide in before you pluck the open E string. Make sure that when you slide, you slide based on the feel of the bass and the music—don't force anything. Don't slide for too long or too short, either, otherwise it won't feel the same.

The image displays a musical exercise for the bass clef in 4/4 time. The notation consists of two staves. The top staff shows a sequence of eighth and quarter notes with slides indicated by horizontal lines over the notes. The bottom staff is a guitar tab with fret numbers: 7-7-7-7-7-2-0-2-7-7-2-7-7-7-7-7-2-0-2-7-7-2. Below the tab is a diagram of the fretboard with vertical lines indicating the fret positions.

Start off the exercise by setting your metronome to about 80bpm. Slow and steady wins the race. Place your index finger on the seventh fret of the second string. Pluck the notes in the rhythm of the tabs.

When you hit three, slide your finger from the seventh fret all the way back to the first fret and release the string. Make sure you pluck the open E in time with the fourth beat. The key is to practice it over and over again to find the right groove.

Challenge

We've met all kinds of rock stars in our era—but what's the point of learning these complicated rock parts if we don't know how to play the original bops? Let's take a trip back to the past and learn how to play a challenge that starts where rock does.

This piece is inspired by Chuck Berry—but I'm sure you'll be able to guess the song!

Let's Rock, Johnny!

Bass Guitar

Bass Guitar

5

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

9

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

13

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

16

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

19

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

Chapter 8: 12-Bar Blues and the Blues Scale

Can you imagine a world without Eminem, Bon Jovi, Marvin Gaye, or Aretha Franklin? Well, that's a world without blues. If it weren't for the invention of the blues, our lives would be dull, and our music would be... well, who knows!

From the smooth voice of Bessie Smith to the fiery licks of Jimi Hendrix, you've probably heard a blues track or two. And if you didn't tap a foot or snap a finger, then something is seriously wrong with you.

But do you know what? Without blues, I am convinced I would have never fallen in love with music. As a kid, I wouldn't say I liked music history—I could not have cared less about an old man losing his hearing while banging his hands angrily on a piano. I cared even less about a child prodigy who wrote an entire play about a magic flute.

Until the day my angsty teen self stomped into our music class and my ears laid upon the first little snippet of blues I ever heard in my life—Bessie Smith. I couldn't remember a single lyric to the song, but I knew her name, and her name was all I needed to realize that there was so much more to the world. My 14-year-old brain went on a spiral for the next few months, exploring the likes of BB King up until Jimi Hendrix.

When we hear the word *blue*, all of our minds go to one emotion—sadness. When we lose someone we love, we feel blue. When someone breaks our hearts—we feel blue. And yes, blues music might deal with these extremely sensitive emotions, but it's far more than self-pity and negative emotions. Blue music is about surviving and overcoming hardship. It's about dealing with your frustrations head-on. But blues can also be about having fun. Living a simple life. Enjoying simple things.

A Brief History of Blues

We might know blues today as the basis of rock and roll—a predominantly Caucasian, western style of music. Blues have deep origins in American history, especially within the African American experience (Kopp, 2005). We heard the first blues plucked in the early 19th century, and the people who invented the style of music were all but lucky. They were former enslaved people, their kids, and American sharecroppers who sang songs together as they picked cotton and vegetables from the fields they worked in.

These songs were not quite as musical—I mean, who could have played a guitar and worked in a field at the same time? The music they sang was reminiscent of the music of their ancestors—African chants and work songs. Think of call-and-response songs with colorful drumbeats and rhythm parts.

Before we knew it, blues blew up in Mississippi—and by the 1930s and 1940s, blues made its way to Chicago.

The Minor Pentatonic and Blues Scale

Blues music has a distinct sound—and if we had to play you a blues scale, you would immediately go, "Oh yeah!" That's because this scale has defined the genre as a whole. As a matter of fact, this scale has such a chokehold on more than just blues musicians; there are plenty of rock n roll musicians out there that will tell you that a blues scale was the very first scale they could muster on a fretboard. (To no one's surprise, the blues scale was one of the first scales I learned too. The third scale, to be exact. Not that anyone asked.)

By this point, you're probably quite familiar, and perhaps a little bit fed up, with scales. But the thing is, scales are probably one of the most important parts of music because, without scales, there is no music. There is only awkward silence (queue the cricket noises).

To truly understand the blues scale we need to first look at the minor pentatonic... not because we want to bore you with theory, but because the minor blues scale is practically a mirror image of the minor pentatonic (it just has an extra note).

The Minor Pentatonic Scale

This scale is probably the most widely used scale to date when it comes to modern music. That's because it's a versatile scale that can translate to any instrument and any genre. It's just a bonus that this is also an extremely easy scale to play, from punchy bass lines to shreddy guitar solos.

What makes the pentatonic scale that much different from any of the scales we've done so far? Firstly, it's only five notes. The minor pentatonic scale includes the root note, flat third, fourth, fifth, and flat seventh notes of a major scale.

So, let's jump into learning our very first E minor pentatonic scale.



The Blues Scale

Now that we've looked at a minor pentatonic scale, it's time to learn a blues scale.



The gorgeous blues scale that you can find above is in the key of A. But what sets apart this scale to be so... bluesy? If you had to take a closer look and put on your classically trained musical glasses, you would notice that there is this beautiful passing tone between the third and fourth notes—the flat fifth of the major scale. In this case, it would be the Eb (or the 1st fret on the D string).

The 12-Bar Blues

Now that we know what the blues scale looks like, we can write some blues music, right? Well... sort of. You don't have all the tools yet to write a slick blues bass solo. What we

have to remember is that all these notes that we find in the blues scale can be somehow put in a sequence to make music. And some good-sounding music at that.

A 12-bar blues is a way to do that. It is a way we can structure music to help us write a cohesive song that not only gives us some guidance but is fun to listen to and fun to play. The cool thing about the 12-bar blues is that you aren't just limited to writing blues—you can write in any genre your heart desires. So, if you want to become the next Flea, now's your chance!

The easiest 12-bar blues is structured in three parts—each part contains four bars, or measures. The first four bars contain the same root note—so, if your song is in the key of A, you are going to write four bars of music in the chord structure of A.

The second part contains only two bars of the fourth chord. If our key is A, then these two bars would be in D. The next two bars are going to return to A.

For the third part, we are going to spice things up. The first bar is going to be in the fifth chord/note of the scale, so in this case, it would be E. The second bar is going to be one bar of the fourth chord, a chord we've worked with briefly before, before returning to the two final bars of A. If you want to spice it up, you can end back on V.

If you're not sure what you're looking at, let's look at the music below:

12 Bar Blues

The image displays a 12-bar blues progression in 4/4 time, organized into three systems of four bars each. Each bar contains a single whole note, represented by a horizontal line on a five-line staff. The progression is defined by Roman numeral chord symbols placed above the bars.

- System 1 (Bars 1-4):** All four bars are labeled with the Roman numeral **I**.
- System 2 (Bars 5-8):** The first two bars are labeled **IV**, and the last two bars are labeled **I**.
- System 3 (Bars 9-12):** The first bar is labeled **V**, the second bar is **IV**, the third bar is **I**, and the final bar is **V**. The notation ends with a double bar line.

You can see for the first four bars, we are sticking to the very first chord or root note of the scale. That's the first segment of the 12-bar blues. The second segment, which consists of the next four bars, is split in half. The first two bars consist of the fourth note/chord of the key, while the last two bars of the segment consist of the first notes again.

The last segment, or the last four bars, is where all the fun happens! During each bar, we change the chord or root note of the bar—it jumps from note number 5 in the scale, to 4, to 1, to 5.

Let's Practice Together

You've been equipped with all the tools you need to write your own 12-bar blues, but let's play our first one together. Below is an extremely simple and basic 12-bar blues piece that should tickle your fancy and taste for the beautiful blues scale.

In this exercise, you will play through all the chord progressions mentioned above, and you'll see that we keep the structure pretty simple so you can analyze and see all the notes used within each chord.

In every bar, we use notes you can find in that specific chord. For this 12-bar blues, we're playing in the key of E. That means the chords look something like this:

I = E

IV = A

V = B

It's a Blue Day

5

9

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. It consists of three systems of music. Each system has a bass line (bottom staff) and a guitar fretboard diagram (top staff). The fretboard diagram shows the fret numbers for each string (1-6) and the time signature (4/4). The bass line is written in bass clef. The first system shows the first four measures. The second system shows measures 5 through 8. The third system shows measures 9 through 12, ending with a double bar line. The fretboard diagram for the first system shows the following fret numbers: 0-0-7-7-5-5-2-2, 0-0-7-7-5-2-5-2, 0-0-7-7-5-5-2-2, 0-0-7-7-5-2-2. The second system shows: 0-0-7-7-5-5-2-2, 0-0-7-7-5-5-2-2, 0-0-7-7-5-5-2-2, 0-0-7-7-5-2-5-2. The third system shows: 4-4-2-2-4-4, 0-0-7-7-5-5-2-2, 0-0-7-7-5-2-5-2, 7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7.

Chapter 9: Reggae and Pentatonic

When we hear reggae, we think of Bob Marley. Dreadlocks. Jamaica. Mary Jane.

My first introduction to reggae music was at a wedding when I was about four years old... and in a movie called *Cool Runnings*, but that's not the point. The song was called "Red Red Wine" by UB40, and I remember singing the song for days afterward. It didn't matter that I'd never had red wine (I mean, I was four, and the closest I had got to red wine was grape-flavored Fanta), but it quickly became a favorite of mine.

It was only in high school when I went down the path to learn what reggae actually was when I sat in my high school music classroom.

Reggae developed in 1960s Jamaica, as I am sure you might have guessed. Believe it or not, but reggae came from a song in 1968 called "Do the Reggay" by a musical group called Toots and the Maytals. Shortly after the release, a bunch of other Jamaican musicians released music that was similar in sound and essence. This handful of artists includes Larry Marshall, The Beltones, and Desmond Dekker. After these releases, reggae broke out like a flu—but a good flu.

In 1963, everyone's favorite reggae artist rose to fame—you guessed it, Bob Marley & the Wailers. At first, Bob Marley was not known for reggae; he was known for dancehall and ska tracks that made it big. It was almost as if he and his band were making music that was not for them, because the moment they found reggae, they embraced it.

Bob Marley & the Wailers had their big breakthrough moment when international sensation, Eric Clapton, covered one of their tracks called "I Shot the Sheriff." This was a track the band wrote back in 1974. Bob Marley and the Wailers started a music revolution, inspiring bands like UB40 and Steel Pulse, both English reggae bands.

What Is Reggae?

In essence, it's a mashup of a whole bunch of genres, including ska, mento (a type of Jamaican folk music), rocksteady, and American soul, rhythm, and blues. But what is Reggae really? How do you recognize it?

Reggae can only be described as a feeling. When I listen to Reggae, I feel... empowered. Reggae music focuses lyrically on strong issues, social issues, and the Rastafarian religion. The themes of the music are strong, and it is there to make you realize that there is so much more to life.

From a musical perspective, you can recognize reggae music at -30dBs, because it has such a distinct sound. Like with rock music, reggae has a strong backbone with the drums and percussion. Alongside these strong beats, it often pairs hypnotic and unique basslines with upstrokes on the guitar. This specific, off-beat, syncopated upstroke is called the *skank beat*.

The most prominent part of reggae music must be the broken Jamaican-English dialect.

There are three features you will always see in reggae music: steppers, rockers, and one drop.

Steppers

This forms the beat on the kick drum. It's similar to the American disco and rock "four on the floor". It just means with every quarter note that plays in a bar, the kick drum is played. And why is this important for you as a bassist? Because as the bassist, you have to accent that tempo and groove. You'll follow this groove in reggae and use it as the basis of all your playing.

Rockers

Rockers is quite similar to steppers, except the accents are not quite as hard. There is a little bit more room for groove and syncopation.

One Drop

This one is a bit busier, featuring a sixteenth-note steady beat—usually seen in American funk music. The accents on the bass fall in like with the backbeat, the beat formed by the kick and snare drum. And the reason for this weird name? Well, because Bob Marley's song, "One Drop," features this very beat!

Bass and Reggae Music

As a bass player, you play a huge role in reggae music. In fact, the bass is often considered the heartbeat of the genre. Reggae basslines are characterized by their rhythmic "one drop" patterns and syncopation. Instead of focusing on playing on every beat, reggae emphasizes the space in the music—the notes you don't play are just as important as the ones you do. The bass in reggae usually locks in tightly with the drums, often dropping on the off-beats and creating a groove that feels both steady and relaxed.

Your main job as a reggae bassist is to keep the groove simple, steady, and driving. You want to create a rhythmic foundation that gives the song its bounce and allows other instruments, like the guitar and vocals, to shine. Reggae basslines tend to be repetitive but melodic, adding to the hypnotic feel of the music. Once you get into the rhythm, you'll find it's all about holding down the groove, letting the bass breathe, and making every note count.

Exercises

When it comes to practicing reggae music, it's important to realize that you won't always be playing exactly what the other instruments are playing. Sometimes, with rock and pop, it is so easy to get discouraged because you barely have time to shine as a bass player. With reggae, you often get your moment to be different, play something different—lead the sound of the band.

So, let's jump into the first exercise: a syncopated, fun bassline.

Exercise: Syncopated Beats

With reggae, one of the most important aspects is to know how to play on a syncopated beat or with rests. Often, the guitars are strumming on the off-beat, and as a bassist, you need to know how to accent that.

So, let's try out an exercise together.



Put your metronome at a reasonable pace, perhaps 80 bpm. It's always easier to count in your head, so count each beat out for yourself. Then add the in-between beats. You can help yourself by counting like this: "one and two and three and four and". The numbers will each fall on a beat, while the *and* will fall on a steady silence in between the two beats.

With your right hand, pluck an open E to the rhythm of the tabs above. Once you have control over your right hand, add the left hand.

If it helps, you can learn the left hand without the metronome, but make sure you play it with the metronome once you get the hang of it.

Exercise: Explore the Fretboard



We haven't had many exercises in this book exploring more of the fretboard, so I thought this was the perfect little moment to introduce you to the rest of it.

In the above bass line, you'll see we play over different strings so your right hand can get used to jumping up and down the bass guitar.

The rhythm to this might be a little challenging, so start off by learning the placement of both your hands before attempting to add the metronome. Once you can comfortably glide between frets and strings, challenge yourself to a metronome speed of about 80 bpm and gradually increase it to 120.

Case Study: Jaco Pastorius

With access to the internet, we can sometimes feel overwhelmed with the amount of talent that is out there in the world. But if we're lucky enough, and we scroll long enough, we can find legends. Artists we can relate to. People we can admire with an inspiring story. Jaco Pastorius is one of those people.

Jaco was the type of artist who picked up an instrument and changed the way we looked at him. He picked up the bass guitar, and instead of viewing it as a challenge, he viewed it as an equal, quickly befriending the bass and letting it sing instead.

Jaco was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania (*The Life of Jaco*, n.d.). His dad was a musician—a drummer, to be more specific. He was fond of the big band scene, often playing or singing in a big band. He was not known as Jaco, of course, but by his full name: John Francis Anthony Pastorius. His family baptized him with the beloved nickname, Jocko, of which a family friend and neighbor horribly misspelled as Jaco. Jaco ended up sticking.

When Jaco turned eight, his family upped and left for Florida. While he was in Florida, he lived the life every kid dreamt of: playing games, having fun, and learning how to play music. He had to buy his own little drum kit with money he made from delivering newspapers. He knew right from the beginning that he was going to have to work hard for what he wanted, and that didn't scare him at all.

During a football league game in 1964, Jaco hurt his wrist, and he faced a decision he thought he would never have to face: sports or music. He chose music, but unfortunately, his wrist was hurt so badly that he needed surgery to correct it. That meant no more drumming for Jaco.

His wrist did not stop him. In 1966, Jaco joined a soul cover band called Las Olas Brass. The problem with this cover band was that there was a drummer far more talented than Jaco. The decision was obvious: Keep the talented drummer. But what were they going to do with Jaco? Well, around the same time this debacle had revealed itself, the bassist of

the band decided to leave, leaving a big gaping hole in the band—a hole that Jaco could fill if he wanted to.

Jaco counted the pennies he had left from his paperboy job to buy a bass—a Fender Jazz bass. You can say the rest was history.

Jaco Pastorius revolutionized the bass guitar, transforming it from a supporting role to a lead instrument. Known for his virtuosic skill, he pioneered the use of harmonics, fretless bass, and jazz fusion techniques that opened new doors for bass playing. On tracks like “Portrait of Tracy,” Jaco’s use of harmonics creates a hauntingly beautiful melody, pushing the bass beyond traditional roles. In “Birdland” with Weather Report, his fast, groovy, melodic lines balanced technical mastery with deep rhythm. Jaco broke barriers, encouraging bassists to see their instrument as a means of full expression.

Challenge

We have learned a lot together in this book so far. We’ve walked the steps together, from the 20s blues to the rock of the 90s. I think it’s safe to say that we can put everything we’ve learned together in a piece of music. Where better to put it together than in a reggae song?

This piece was inspired by the likes of UB40 and Bob Marley—all the best and most famous reggae artists.

Start off by putting your metronome on a nice and slow beat—90 bpm will do. This will help you get into the groove of things. It’ll help you focus on each note, each beat. It will allow you to feel every length of the note and play with the right feel.

This piece interchanges between a nice and easy bass line, where you are going to practice playing with rests and dotted notes (a note that is one and a half its value). You are going to learn to play between alternate strings, so focus on your right-hand finger position and posture.

Red Whiskey

Bass Guitar

Bass Guitar

4

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

7

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

11

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

15

B. Guit.

B. Guit.

The musical score for 'Red Whiskey' is written in 4/4 time. It consists of two main parts: Bass Guitar and B. Guit. (Bass Guitar). The score is divided into five systems, each with a measure number (4, 7, 11, 15) indicating the start of a new section. The Bass Guitar part is written in bass clef, and the B. Guit. part is written in bass clef. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and sixteenth notes, as well as fret numbers (1, 3, 5, 7) and bar lines. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the 15th measure.

Chapter 10: Posture and Hand Health

Posture and Hand Health

Playing bass guitar for extended periods can put strain on your body, especially if you're not mindful of your posture and hand positioning. It's essential to maintain proper posture during long practice sessions to avoid tension and fatigue, which could lead to injury over time. In this section, we'll focus on how to set up your body and hands to ensure you're playing comfortably and efficiently so you can enjoy longer practice sessions without discomfort.

Sitting Position

If you prefer to practice while sitting, make sure you choose a chair that allows you to sit upright with your back straight and your feet flat on the floor. Avoid slouching, as this can cause tension in your neck and shoulders. Your bass should rest comfortably on your thigh, with the neck angled slightly upward. This position makes it easier to reach both the lower and upper frets without bending your wrist too much.

Standing Position

When standing, it's important to adjust your bass strap so that the bass sits at a comfortable height. Ideally, the bass should rest at about the same height whether you're sitting or standing. If the bass is too low, it will force your wrist into an awkward angle, which can lead to strain. Keep your shoulders relaxed and your back straight to avoid tension. You want to balance the bass so that you're not holding it up with your fretting hand—your hands should be free to focus on playing.

Arm and Hand Positioning

Whether you're sitting or standing, your fretting hand should always have a relaxed wrist. Avoid bending your wrist too much, as this can lead to tension and even repetitive strain injuries. Your plucking hand should rest comfortably on the bass, with your thumb positioned on the pickup or side of the bass for stability.

Keep Your Wrist Straight

When playing, try to maintain a neutral wrist position. This means avoiding extreme bends in the wrist, whether you're fretting notes or plucking strings. A bent wrist puts more strain on the tendons and can lead to discomfort, especially during extended practice sessions.

Avoid Gripping Too Hard

Many bass players, especially beginners, tend to grip the neck of the bass too tightly. This not only causes tension in the hand but also makes your playing less efficient. Use just enough pressure to fret the notes cleanly—there's no need to squeeze the neck. Keeping a light touch will reduce strain and allow you to play more fluidly.

Keep Your Shoulders Relaxed

Tension often builds up in the shoulders during long practice sessions, especially if you're focusing intently or feeling stressed about a difficult piece. Remember to keep your shoulders loose and avoid hunching. If you notice your shoulders creeping up toward your ears, take a moment to relax them before continuing to play.

Final Thoughts on Posture and Hand Health

Remember, bass playing should feel comfortable and natural. If something doesn't feel right—whether it's tension in your wrists or strain in your back—don't hesitate to adjust your posture or take a break. Over time, good habits will help you play more confidently and enjoyably. If you take care of your body, your body will take care of your music.

Pro Tip: Take frequent breaks to stretch and avoid muscle fatigue.

Hand Stretches and Exercises

Playing bass guitar is physically demanding, especially on your hands, wrists, and forearms. Over time, repetitive movements, like plucking strings or fretting notes, can lead to tension, strain, and even injury if you're not careful. That's why it's important to include stretches and exercises in your practice routine to keep your hands and wrists healthy. In this section, we'll cover a series of simple exercises that will help prevent injury, improve flexibility, and increase strength.

Wrist Rolls

One of the easiest and most effective exercises to release tension in your wrists is wrist rolls. These help loosen up the muscles and tendons in your wrist and forearm, which can become tight after extended playing.

Here's how to do them:

1. Start by holding your hands out in front of you, palms down.
2. Slowly rotate your wrists in small circles, keeping your arms still.
3. Make sure the movement is controlled and gradual—don't force your wrists to move too fast or too far.

4. Rotate clockwise for 15–20 seconds, then switch directions and rotate counterclockwise for another 15–20 seconds.

Repeat this exercise a few times throughout your practice session, especially if you feel tension building up in your wrists. Wrist rolls help keep the joints loose and the tendons flexible, reducing the likelihood of discomfort or injury.

Finger Stretches

Your fingers do a lot of work while playing bass, especially when fretting complex patterns or playing fast riffs. Over time, the small muscles and tendons in your fingers can become fatigued, so it's important to stretch them out regularly.

Finger Spread Stretch

1. Hold your hand out in front of you with your fingers spread apart.
2. Gently use the opposite hand to pull each finger back slightly, one at a time. Don't pull too hard—just enough to feel a stretch.
3. Hold each finger stretch for 5–10 seconds, then move on to the next finger.
4. After you've stretched all your fingers, repeat the process on the other hand.

This stretch improves the flexibility of the tendons in your fingers and prevents stiffness after long playing sessions.

Finger Claw Stretch

1. Hold your hand out in front of you and bend your fingers so your fingertips touch the top of your palm, forming a claw shape.
2. Hold this position for about 10 seconds. After 10 seconds, release the position.
3. Repeat this exercise 3–5 times per hand.

This stretch helps relieve tension in the knuckles and finger joints, which are often under pressure when playing.

Thumb Stretches

Your thumb plays a crucial role in both fretting and supporting your plucking hand. It's important to keep it flexible and strong to avoid overuse injuries.

1. Hold your hand out with your palm facing up.
2. Gently grab your thumb with your other hand and pull it backward, away from your palm, until you feel a gentle stretch.
3. After 10 seconds, release.
4. Repeat 2–3 times, then switch hands.

This stretch helps loosen up the base of your thumb and prevents tension from building up during long practice sessions.

Forearm Stretches

The muscles in your forearms are constantly working when you play bass, particularly when you're plucking or fretting quickly. Stretching your forearms helps reduce tightness and prevents strain.

Forearm Flexor Stretch

1. Extend your right arm out in front of you with your palm up.
2. With your left hand, gently pull back on your fingers to stretch the forearm.
3. Hold the stretch for 15–20 seconds, then release.
4. Repeat on the left arm.

This stretch targets the muscles on the underside of your forearm, which can become tight after repetitive finger movements.

Forearm Extensor Stretch

1. Extend your right arm out in front of you, palm down.

2. Use your left hand to gently pull your fingers down and toward your body, feeling the stretch in the top of your forearm.
3. After holding for 15-20 seconds, release.
4. Repeat on the left arm.

This stretch helps relieve tension in the top of your forearm, which can build up from constant plucking or strumming.

Hand Squeeze Exercise

Strengthening your hand muscles is just as important as stretching them. The hand squeeze exercise is a simple way to improve grip strength and overall hand endurance, which will help you play longer without getting fatigued.

1. Grab a soft object, like a stress ball or a rolled-up towel.
2. Squeeze the object as hard as you can without causing pain, holding the squeeze for 5–10 seconds.
3. Release and repeat 10–15 times for each hand.

This exercise helps build strength in your hand muscles, making it easier to play complex basslines and hold down frets for extended periods.

Finger Tapping Exercise

Finger independence is crucial for bass playing, and this exercise helps improve both flexibility and coordination in your fingers.

1. Rest your hand on a flat surface with your fingers spread apart.
2. Begin tapping each finger individually, starting with your index finger and moving toward your pinky.

3. After tapping each finger individually, try tapping two fingers at a time (e.g., index and middle, ring and pinky).
4. Gradually increase your speed while maintaining control.

This exercise builds finger independence and dexterity, helping you navigate the fretboard with more precision.

Pro Tip: Incorporate these stretches and exercises into your practice routine, but don't wait until you feel pain or discomfort to start.

Final Thoughts on Hand Health

Taking care of your hands, wrists, and forearms is essential for long-term success as a bassist. These simple stretches and exercises are designed to prevent injury, improve flexibility, and increase strength—all of which will help you play more efficiently and comfortably.

Conclusion: Next Steps in Your Bass Journey

You've covered a wide range of techniques that will serve as the backbone of your playing. From basic fingerstyle plucking to advanced techniques like slides, you've developed the skills needed to play with confidence and control. You've also worked on improving your rhythm, timing, and groove—critical elements that define a solid bass player.

As you continue to grow as a bassist, the possibilities are endless. You might consider joining a band to put your skills into practice. Playing with others is one of the best ways to improve. It pushes you to think about the role of the bass in different musical contexts and helps you develop a sense of teamwork. Whether it's a local jam session or an organized group, playing with others will enhance your timing and allow you to experiment with the techniques you've learned.

Another next step could be to explore more advanced techniques. You've built a strong foundation, but there's always more to learn. Techniques like slap bass, muting, and tapping will open up new worlds of sound and expression. Additionally, learning music theory—including scales, modes, and chord construction—will deepen your understanding of how to create great basslines and improvise with more freedom.

It's also worth experimenting with different genres of music. If you've been focusing on rock or blues, try branching out into jazz, funk, or reggae. Each genre brings its own set of challenges and styles, and playing a variety of music will make you a more well-rounded bassist. For example, funk basslines focus heavily on syncopation and groove, while jazz basslines often involve walking bass and improvisation.

Final Friendly Message

As you move forward in your bass-playing journey, remember to stay dedicated and keep practicing. The bass guitar is not just an instrument—it's a way to express yourself, connect with others, and enjoy music on a deeper level. Every time you pick up your bass, you're building on the skills you've already learned, and with time, you'll only get better.

The key to success is consistency. Practice regularly, but also have fun. Whether you're jamming with friends or practicing alone, take time to enjoy the process. Progress may feel slow at times, but each step brings you closer to mastering the instrument. Most

importantly, never stop learning. Playing bass is a lifelong skill that grows with time, and there's always something new to explore. Keep pushing your boundaries and enjoy every note you play.

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