

## TECHNIQUE 1

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# BASS TECHNIQUE 1

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## Introduction

One of the most important factors when learning to play the bass is technique. Good technique is often confused with the ability to play fast. In reality, good technique not only involves facility on the instrument, but also tone production, the ability to play with good time, articulation, and musicality. The ability to execute the music at hand with the proper sound, rhythm, articulation and feel is the essence of good technique.

Since, as human beings, we are all built differently and think differently, we will each have different issues when it comes to technique. We all have our own strengths and weaknesses. As bassists, we have to think of ourselves as athletes. Just like athletes we have to train our muscles (both mental and physical) in order to properly execute and excel in our chosen sport. This comes with studying and practicing the fundamentals. Building a good foundation of proper technique will help you to overcome some of the physical and mental obstacles of bass playing, and help prevent injuries.

In this book we will cover the fundamentals of proper technique. The techniques and exercises discussed will help to give you the foundation needed to perform with confidence, accuracy, and longevity.

The topics we will cover include:

1. Proper posture. This is how you sit or stand while playing, including the position of your arms and hands.
2. How to warm up and stretch to help prevent injuries.
3. Proper hand placement on the fretboard and the plucking hand.
4. The notes on the fingerboard and tuning the instrument.
5. Different plucking techniques, including using your fingers and a pick.
6. Playing in time and using a metronome.

# Chapter 1: Posture

Good posture is very important when playing the bass. Stand up and sit up straight. Don't hunch over the instrument or lean back when sitting. Above all, stay relaxed and free of tension whether you're standing or sitting. Tension is a musician's worst enemy. If you are not relaxed and playing with too much tension your technique will suffer, and your risk of injury will be greater.

When standing, adjust your strap so that the bass is hanging comfortably midway between your hips and collarbone, around the area of your belly button (Ex. 1.1). We've all seen some players playing with their basses hanging down by their ankles and others with their basses just under their chin, because they think it looks cool. All this will do is limit your technique and leave you vulnerable to serious back and hand problems.

Your strap should handle the weight of the bass, not your hands. The neck of the bass should be angled slightly upward, and your shoulders should be level. Many players rest the forearm of their plucking hand on the body of the bass. This is fine as long as your wrist is not bent at an extreme angle. You should try to raise your forearm slightly without raising your shoulder. This will keep the wrist of your plucking hand straighter. Your fretting hand should be in a position where you can comfortably move up and down the neck of the bass without straining and overly bending your wrist

Ex. 1.1



Ex. 1.2



When sitting, the bass should be in a similar position as when standing. The bottom cutaway of the bass should rest on your right thigh (if you are right handed) or your left thigh (if you are left handed) (Ex. 1.2). You can choose to not use a strap when sitting, but then you will have to handle the weight of the neck. The neck of the bass should again be angled slightly upward and your plucking hand should be in a position that allows you to play comfortably without excessively bending your wrist.

Ex. 1.3



Another way to position the bass when sitting is to place the bass between your legs so that the bottom cutaway is resting on the opposite thigh of your plucking hand. This is similar to the way classical guitarists hold their instrument. The leg that your bass is resting on may need to be slightly elevated. Many chiropractors and physical therapists recommend this position. (Ex. 1.3)

Ex. 1.4



Follow these guidelines to find a position that fits your physique and allows you to play comfortably and without unnecessary stress to your body. Always remember to stay relaxed and with as little tension as possible.

Your fretting hand should be in the proper position for playing. This will help tone production and facility. Hold your fretting hand out flat with the palm facing up. Curl your fingers in almost as if you were going to make a fist, but leaving an opening to fit the neck of your bass. (Ex. 1.4)

The neck of the bass should be parallel to the palm of your hand between your thumb and the other four fingers. The ball of your thumb should rest on the back and in the middle of the neck approximately beneath your middle finger—not hanging over the top of the fretboard. Do not put pressure on your thumb. Your thumb is the guide for your hand. Take the other fingers of your hand and place them on the fretboard, one finger per fret. You will have to stretch your fingers a little; how much depends on the size of your hand. When you fret a note on the bass, your finger should be slightly behind the fret, not right on top of it or too far behind it. This is the best position for producing a good tone. (Ex. 1.5-1.6)

Ex. 1.5



Ex. 1.6



Ex. 1.7



Your plucking hand should be in a position that is perpendicular to the strings. If you are holding the bass correctly, your hand and arm will form a right angle where your elbow bends. Your shoulders should remain level. (Ex. 1.7)

Anchor your thumb on the pickup closest to the neck of your bass. Some basses may have a thumb rest or a ramp between the pickups for anchoring the thumb. Anchoring your thumb will help to stabilize your plucking hand. (Ex. 1.8)

Ex. 1.8



Another concept is the **floating thumb**. This is where you anchor your thumb on each string as you move up from lowest to highest and back down. As you're playing up from the lowest string to the highest, your hand will open up and become wider if you leave your thumb anchored on the pickup. Moving your thumb up and down with your hand and anchoring it on different strings will prevent you from overly stretching your open hand. (Ex. 1.9)

Ex. 1.9



It is also possible to play without anchoring your thumb, laying it instead on the strings and letting it move up and down with the natural motion of your hand. In this instance the thumb acts as a mute, muffling the strings that are not being played. This can be very useful, especially when playing in the extreme upper register of the instrument. This technique requires more control of your plucking hand and should only be used when needed. (Ex. 1.9a)

Ex. 1.9a



# Chapter 2: Playing Techniques

## **Plucking the strings:**

Plucking the strings is one of the ways to produce a sound on the bass. It is important to have good plucking technique in order to produce a good, even tone.

The most efficient way to pluck the strings is to alternate between your index and middle fingers. This will enable you to play across the strings with ease and better dexterity. Your hands should always be relaxed and without tension. Use the tips of your index and middle fingers to pluck the strings. Your fingers should move evenly, striking each string with the same amount of force. This is important for achieving a consistent tone and output level.

## **Playing with a pick:**

Another way to produce a sound on the bass is to use a pick, also known as a *plectrum*. There are two common ways to use a pick on the bass. One is to play all down-strokes. The other is a combination of down- and up-strokes.

## **Metronome:**

All of the exercises in this book should eventually be practiced with a metronome. A metronome is a device used to mark time and designate a tempo. As a bassist, it is very important to be able to play in time. That is part of your function in the rhythm section along with the drummer. As an exercise, set your metronome to a slow tempo like 60 BPM (beats per minute). Listen to the tempo and try to match it by tapping your foot in time with the metronome. Next, try plucking one string on your bass on quarter notes with the metronome. Do your best to match the tempo. Practicing with a metronome (and also a drum machine) will help you learn how to play in time and develop your inner clock.

## **Warming up:**

Protecting your hands is one of the most important things you can do as a musician. One of the best ways to do this is to warm up properly. You should never start out playing as hard and fast as you can. Start by playing slowly and doing simple finger exercises to get the blood flowing in your hands and allow your hands to loosen up.

Play a chromatic scale on each string up and down the fingerboard using one finger per fret. Do this at a slow tempo for a few minutes. You can also play simple finger exercises by alternating fretting fingers, as in: 1234, 1324, 2413, etc. The important thing is to start off slowly. You can gradually speed up, but don't get too fast. Give your hands enough time to warm up.

Stretching is also important. You should stretch your hands and arms before and after you play. This will keep your hands limber and help you avoid getting cramps and protect you against injuries such as tendonitis. There are many books on the market with stretching exercises. You can also find information on the internet.

## **Plucking adjacent strings and cross string picking:**

As stated earlier, the most efficient way to pluck the strings is to alternate between your index and middle fingers. It is common and usually feels most natural to start with your index finger and alternate with your middle finger. However, there may be playing situations where it might feel more natural to start with your middle finger.

The following exercises will help you develop your plucking hand. Mute the strings of your bass by grabbing the neck with your fretting hand. The thumb on your plucking hand should be anchored to the pickup. You can also use the floating thumb technique for this exercise. Play each exercise by plucking the string starting with your index finger, then alternating between your index and middle finger. Pluck just hard enough to feel a little resistance from the string. Remember to stay relaxed. Practice the exercise on each string slowly. Practice it first without a metronome, then with a metronome set at 60 BPM.

Ex. 1.10

**i - index or first finger**  
**m - middle or second finger**

a

b

c

d

e

f

g

h

The previous and following exercises can also be practiced with a pick. Practice them using just down-strokes at first, then combine down- and up-strokes.

Adjacent string plucking is when you pluck a string with one finger then pluck another string with your alternate finger, moving across and up and down the strings. Cross-string plucking is skipping over a string and plucking the next string. These techniques will give you the facility to play various musical passages and are a normal part of bass playing.

As in the previous exercise, mute the strings with your fretting hand. Pluck each string evenly and with the same force.

Ex. 1.11

### Adjacent String Plucking

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m

Ex. 1.12

### Cross-String Plucking

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m