

Chapter 1

The Very Basics of Bass

In This Chapter

- ▶ Differentiating between bass guitars and other guitars
- ▶ Understanding the function and parts of the bass
- ▶ Getting ready to play bass
- ▶ Trying your hand at grooves, solos, fills, and different musical genres
- ▶ Picking up gear and taking care of your bass

The bass is the heart of music. Its unique qualities set up a gravitational field that draws you in — perhaps it's the rich, deep, mellow sound or the hypnotic rhythms. In the right hands, the bass is a tremendously powerful tool, because it gives a band its feel and attitude. But what exactly is the bass? What makes the bass so powerful? And how does it contribute to giving music that irresistible feel? Whether you're a raw bass recruit or a seasoned veteran, this chapter helps you answer these questions.

Discovering the Differences between the Bass and Its High-Strung Cousins

Bass guitars differ from other guitars in several significant ways:

- ✓ **Traditionally, basses have four strings, while guitars have six.** In the 1970s, some bassists started adding strings. Nowadays, you can find five- and six-string basses (and beyond), but four-stringers are still considered the norm.
- ✓ **Nearly all bass guitars are electric.** Other guitars come in all flavors: electric, acoustic, or a combination of the two. You do encounter some beautiful acoustic bass guitars, but they're generally not loud enough to be of much use in a band (unless your band consists of just one or two acoustic guitar players who join you in your music-making endeavor).

- ✔ **The bass strings are an equal distance musically from each other.** The sound of each bass string is tuned an equal distance from the string above it, making the instrument perfectly symmetrical. So if you play a scale starting on one string, you can use the same fingering to play that same scale starting on a different string. This type of tuning makes playing the bass quite different from playing the guitar, where the second-highest string is tuned differently than the others.
- ✔ **The bass has a lower pitch than the guitar.** The deep notes of the bass fill the lower end of the sound spectrum. Think of these notes as the “bass-ment,” or foundation, of music.
- ✔ **The bass’s neck is longer than the guitar’s, thus making its strings longer.** The longer the string, the lower the pitch; the shorter the string, the higher the pitch. Think of a Chihuahua and a Saint Bernard, for example. The Chihuahua has short vocal chords, and a rather high-pitched bark; the Saint Bernard . . . well . . . you get the idea.
- ✔ **The bass player and the guitarist serve different functions.** I won’t bore you with the guitarist’s job description, but the bass player’s makes for fascinating reading, as the next section shows. By the way, if you *do* happen to want to know more about the guitarist’s job description, you can check out *Guitar For Dummies*, by Mark Phillips and Jon Chappell (Wiley).

Understanding the Bass Player’s Function in a Band

As the bassist, you play the most crucial role in a band (at least in my opinion). Everyone in the group follows your subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) lead. If the guitarist or saxophonist makes a mistake, hardly anyone notices, but if the bassist makes a mistake, everyone in the band and the audience instantly knows that something is wrong (in which case you may want to throw an accusatory glance at one of your bandmates).

Forging the link between harmony and rhythm

You’re responsible for linking the harmony (chords) of a song with a distinctive rhythm (groove). This link contributes to the *feel* (mood) and *genre* (general style) of the music, which together determine whether a song is

rock, jazz, Latin, or anything else. Chapter 6 tells you exactly what you need to do to establish excellent grooves, and Part IV discusses the different musical genres you're likely to play. The goal is to be able to emulate any bassist's style in any genre and, at the same time, to be creative — using your own rhythms, notes, and ideas!

Moving the song along

Every song is made up of chords (harmony) that are particular to that song, and all the notes in the song relate to the sounds of those chords (see Chapter 5 for more about chords). Some songs are based on only one chord, from beginning to end, and so all the notes relate to that one chord sound, making such songs easy to play. The chords of most songs, however, change as the song progresses. In these cases, the first group of notes in the tune relates to the first chord and has one kind of sound, the next group of notes relates to the next chord sound, and so on throughout the song.

By playing notes that are related to the chords of a song, one note at a time and in a precise rhythm, the bassist propels the music along. You set up each chord for the other players in your band by choosing notes that lead smoothly from one chord sound to the next.



Good music creates a little tension, which then leads to a satisfying release of that tension (a resolution). For example, you can feel the tension and release in as simple a tune as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” The tension builds as you sing the first line: “Twinkle, twinkle, little star.” Can you end the song right there? No, because you want to hear how it ends. That’s the tension. When you finish singing “How I wonder what you are,” you feel a resolution to the tension, a sense of coming home. You can end the song there; in fact, that’s how it does end. The bassist plays an important role in creating and releasing tension. You’re pretty much in the driver’s seat!

Keeping time

Keeping a steady beat, or *pulse*, is one of the bassist’s primary functions. I refer to this function as *locking in with the drummer*, because you work closely with the drummer to establish the rhythm. So be nice to your drummers. Listen to them carefully and know them well. And while the two of you are on such cozy terms, spend some time together reading what Chapter 4 has to say about rhythm.



Nothing works better than a *metronome* to help you develop an unflinching sense of time. The steady (and sometimes infuriating) click that emanates from this device provides an ideal backdrop for your own precise note placement, be it on or off the beat. You can find out more about the metronome in Chapter 4.

Establishing rhythms

As a bassist, you need to have a clear understanding of exactly how the rhythm relates to the beat. Not only do you need to know where to place the notes for the groove in relation to the beat, but you also want to make your grooves memorable (see Chapter 6 for more about how to create memorable grooves). If you can't remember them, no one else will, either — including the listener (who, of course, makes the trip to hear you play).

Looking cool

While the guitarists move through their aerobic exercises on stage, dripping with sweat and smashing their guitars, you get to be cool. You can join in with their antics if you want, but have you ever seen footage of The Who? John Entwistle was cool. And if you ever get a chance to see U2, check out their bassist, Adam Clayton. He's one cool cucumber. Great bassists are just too busy creating fabulous bass lines to join in the antics of their bandmates.

Dissecting the Anatomy of a Bass Guitar

You can call it a bass guitar, an electric bass, an electric bass guitar, or just a bass. All these labels crop up in discussions of music and musical instruments, and you may encounter individuals who believe that only one of these labels is correct. But it doesn't matter which term you choose, because they all refer to the same instrument.

Figure 1-1 depicts the bass guitar (or whatever you prefer to call it), with all its main parts labeled.

The bass consists of three sections: The neck, the body, and the innards. The different parts of the neck and body are easy to see, but the innards aren't so obvious. You'd have to remove the cover (or covers) to get at the innards, but knowing why they're there is important.

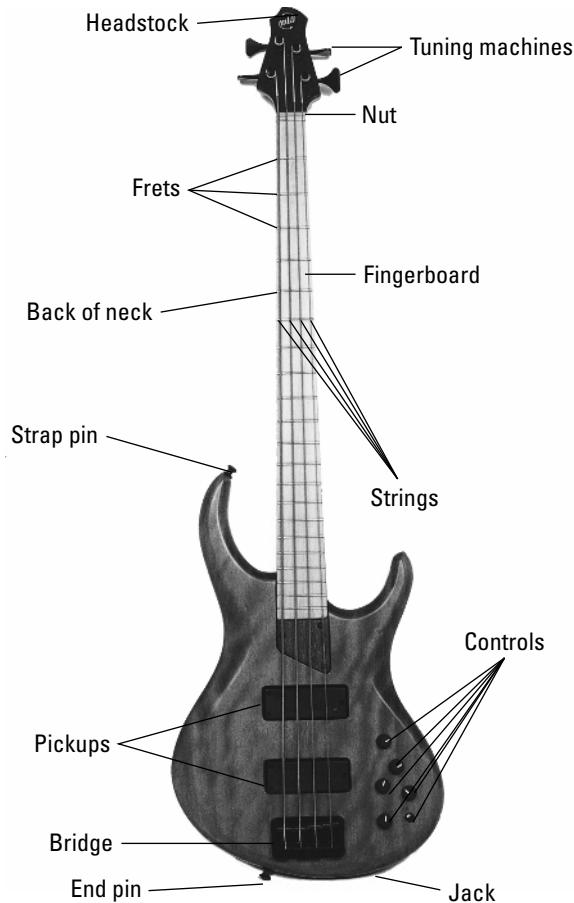


Figure 1-1:
The bass
guitar in all
its glory.

The neck

The neck of the bass guitar falls under the dominion of the fretting hand (usually the left hand). The following list describes the function of each part of the neck:

- ✓ The **headstock** is the top of the neck. It holds the tuning machines for the strings.
- ✓ The **tuning machines** (also called *tuners* or *tuning heads*) hold the ends of the strings. (The other ends are anchored at the bridge on the body; see the next section for more info about the body of the bass.) By turning the individual tuning heads, you can increase or decrease the tension of the strings, which raises or lowers the pitch (sound).

- ✓ The **nut** is a small piece of wood, plastic, graphite, or brass that provides a groove (in this case, a small indentation) for each string. It establishes one end of the vibrating length of the string.
- ✓ The **fingerboard** is attached to the front of the neck and is the flat side of the neck, beneath the strings, that holds the frets. The neck and the fingerboard usually are two separate pieces, but not always. The frets are embedded in the fingerboard.
- ✓ The **frets** are the thin metal strips that are embedded, perpendicular to the strings, along the length of the fingerboard. They determine the pitch of the note that's played. Frets are arranged in *half steps* (the smallest unit of musical distance from one note to the next). When a string is pressed against a fret, the string's vibrating length, and thus its pitch, is changed.
- ✓ The **strings**, strictly speaking, aren't part of your bass, because you remove and replace them periodically. However, your bass would be absolutely useless without them (except maybe as a "bass-ball" bat). The strings are connected to the tuning machines at one end and to the bridge at the other. The vibration of the strings produces the sound.
- ✓ The **back of the neck** refers to the part of the neck where the thumb of your fretting hand rests.

The body

The body of the bass guitar falls under the dominion of the striking hand (usually the right hand). The following list describes the function of each part of the body:

- ✓ The **pickups** consist of magnets embedded in a plastic bar that lies underneath and perpendicular to the strings. You may have two magnets for each string or one long magnet for all the strings. The magnets form a magnetic field, and the vibration of the string disturbs (or *modulates*) that field. This modulation is then translated into an electric signal, which in turn is converted into sound by the amplifier and speaker.
- ✓ The **controls** are the knobs used for adjusting the volume and tone (bass and treble) of the pickups. They're located toward the end of your bass.
- ✓ The **bridge** attaches the strings to the end of the body; it holds one end of each string. Modern pickups, such as piezo pickups or lightwave pickups, are sometimes installed inside the bridge. These pickups read the vibration of the string at the bridge.
- ✓ The **strap pin** is the metal knob on the body near the neck, where you attach one end of your shoulder strap (usually the thick end).

- ✔ The **end pin** is the metal knob on the bottom end of the body (by the bridge) where you attach the thin end of your shoulder strap.
- ✔ The **jack** (also called the *input jack*) is the socket used for connecting the cord from your bass to the amplifier (for more on amplifiers, see Chapter 16).

Well, there you are — who says you don't know jack?

The innards

The innards, sometimes referred to as the *guts*, aren't visible to the eye (they're hidden in the cavity of the instrument and covered with plates), but they're essential to the sound and feel of the bass guitar. The following list describes the innards of the bass guitar:

- ✔ The **truss rod** is an adjustable metal rod that runs the length of your bass guitar's neck. The truss rod controls the curvature of the neck and fingerboard and keeps them stable. If you need to make adjustments to it, you can reach it through the top or bottom of the neck.
- ✔ The **electronics** of a bass guitar are a collection of wires, "pots" (short for *potentiometers*, or electronic capacitors, the round devices connected to the inner side of a volume knob), and other important-looking electronic items that help convert the vibration of the string into sound. The cavity for the electronics usually is located under a plate on the back of your bass guitar's body. It also may be located under the control knobs on the front of your bass.
- ✔ The **batteries** are an option. If your bass has *active electronics* (electronics with their own power source), you have one or two 9-volt batteries attached to the electronics (via some wires). These batteries are located in the same cavity as the electronics or in an adjacent cavity on the back of the body, and you need to replace them periodically. If your bass has *passive electronics* (electronics with no batteries), you don't have to worry about replacing batteries.

On a Need-to-Know "Basses": Gearing Up to Play Bass

Getting yourself ready to play — both physically (with technique exercises) and mentally (with theory) — is essential to being a good bass player. You also have to prepare your instrument by tuning it and playing it correctly. When you play the bass guitar correctly, your fingers can move with ease from note to note.

Coordinating your right and left hands

Because you play the bass with two hands — one hand striking and the other fretting (no, it's not worried!) — both hands have to be well coordinated with each other. With the exercises in Chapter 3, you can warm up your hands on a daily basis (just like an athlete warms up before a sporting event).

Mastering major and minor chord structures

Two basic tonalities prevail in music: major and minor. Each tonality has a distinctive sound. Major sounds somewhat *happy* or *bright*, whereas minor sounds *sad* or *dark*. Musicians use these sounds to express the mood of the song (or themselves, for that matter).

As a bassist, you have a unique advantage: The bass is perfectly symmetrical, and all the fingering patterns remain intact no matter where you play them on the neck. Any major or minor chord will always *feel* the same to your fingers, because the pattern of notes doesn't change. Each fret on the neck equals one half step, the smallest *musical interval* (distance between two notes). The sound of each string is exactly five half steps from the sound of the next lower string . . . no exceptions! Chapter 5 tells you all about these patterns.



Because all your chords and scales fall into consistent patterns that you can play anywhere on the neck, the question becomes, “Where do you start the pattern?” Chapter 4 guides you through this process with ease.

Tuning your bass

Tuner and *bass* . . . reads almost like a fishing expedition, but fishing for the right note is the last thing you want to do when playing your bass. Your bass needs to be in tune with the other instruments as well as with itself. Chapter 2 explains several different methods for tuning your bass just right.

Combining scales and chords

Scales and chords form the backbone of music. Here's a brief rundown on each of these:

- ✓ *Scales* are groups of notes (usually seven) used to create tunes.
- ✓ *Chords* are three or four specific notes within a scale that form the harmonic (musical) content.



As a bassist, you use scales together with chords to form your bass lines (or grooves). Using both scales and chords gives you flexibility to express your individuality (see Chapter 5 for details). You often can spice up your bass lines by choosing from several corresponding scales.

Playing Grooves, Solos, and Fills

Playing grooves is an essential art to being a good bassist. After all, the grooves you play determine the harmonic *and* the rhythmic content of a song. Is it any wonder that good bassists are the most sought-after musicians?

Creating grooves and riffs

Grooves and riffs contain several basic elements (Chapters 6 and 7 tell you all about them). Grooves have a rhythmic content (groove skeleton) and a harmonic content (a chord and scale). *Riffs* are a short melody that you can play to fill a space in the music.

A bassist will often play a groove in the lower register and then add a riff in the higher register to give the bass line variety and to keep listeners interested. Creating grooves and riffs isn't just a matter of divine inspiration (although that never hurts); it's actually dictated by science and can be practiced.

Treating yourself and your audience to solos and fills

As a bassist, your job is to play the groove. But that doesn't mean you have to restrain yourself from playing tasty solos and fast-fingered fills. As long as your solo or *fill* (miniature solo) relates to the groove and is indeed part of it, you can play them to your heart's content.



When you need a very cool solo, or you need to fill some space with bass *flash* (a fancy mini-solo to show off your skills), the blues scales and pentatonic scales are hard to beat. Whether you're playing blues, rock, jazz, or anything in between, these scales, when properly applied, will never let you down. You benefit from the symmetry of the bass: One fingering fits all! (Refer to Chapter 7 for the lowdown on these scales and on fills and solos.)

Experimenting with Different Musical Genres

Defining the genre of a tune is your primary function as a bassist. You define a genre by the notes and rhythms you choose — and you have to do this while locking in with the drums! In this section, I show you some of the common genres plus some tips to make you feel comfortable playing outside your genre of specialty.



A musical *genre* is an overall type of music, such as world beat. A musical *style* is a subcategory of a genre, such as reggae or West-African music (both of which are considered world beat styles).

The following list defines the genres you'll encounter most often:

- ✓ **Rock** styles are generally played with a steady eighth-note pulse (two eighth notes per beat) tightly locked with the drums, which drives the song. A lot of styles are part of this encompassing genre. Among them are pop, rock, rock 'n' roll, fusion, and even country. I provide a broad selection of *templates* (note and rhythm suggestions for each style) for you to choose from, and I hope that you expand on them for your own playing — just take a peek at Chapter 8 and rock on!
- ✓ **Swing** styles are based on the triplet feel. With the *triplet*, a single beat is subdivided into three equal units, not the usual two or four. The styles in this genre are somewhat lighter than the rock styles, and they include the shuffle (which is common for most blues styles), as well as the walking bass lines, which are associated with jazz. Shuffle off to Chapter 9 to find out more about swing.
- ✓ **Funk** styles rely heavily on the sixteenth note, the smallest rhythmic subdivision commonly used in music. For bassists, this is the busiest genre. You may have quite a few notes to play and need to lock in firmly with the drums to keep the groove tight. This genre focuses a lot of attention on the bass and is usually a technical challenge. So check out Chapter 10 and get your fingers ready to play some intricate stuff.

- ✔ **World beat** is a widely recognized category in almost any music store. I use this term to describe styles that aren't native to North American music but are relatively common, such as South American, African, and Caribbean styles. This book prepares you for the most common world beat styles, but bear in mind that many other international styles are out there waiting to be explored. For more on the world beat genre, see Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Odd meters** aren't part of the regular four-beat patterns you may be used to. Meters that use five, six, or seven beats (and beyond) are part of the odd meter family. Although unusual, odd meters can sound quite natural when played correctly. In fact, the waltz (three beats to the measure) is an odd meter style that arguably feels very natural because it's so common. Chapter 12 tells you how to play odd meters smoothly.
- ✔ **Beatles** styles are about one thing: What would Sir Paul do? That's the question to ask yourself when you're faced with a song and you're not quite sure how to approach your bass part. Paul McCartney is probably the most famous of all bass players, and with good reason. He developed eight distinctive styles of bass accompaniment that apply to just about every contemporary song out there, be it a pumping eighth note, a walking line, or a countermelody. Chapter 14 has your bass covered.



Playing in a specific genre is an important skill to develop. For example, say that you're used to playing jazz, but your friends want to play rock 'n' roll. How do you create a bass groove that sounds authentic and fits the bill? Chapter 13 shows you the ins and out of the main musical groove genres so you can satisfy any requirements your bandmates impose on you without sounding like a jazz head *trying* to play rock 'n' roll.

Stocking Up on Some Bass Gear

So many basses, so little time. Well, maybe you have a lot of time, but the fact remains: You have a lot of different basses to choose from, and new ones are coming onto the market all the time. You need to know what to look and listen for. You also should know what other gear you need to fulfill your *bass* desires.

Buying a bass

Some basses offer a specific sound, and others offer an array of different sounds suitable for many different styles of music. Of course, you want to choose a bass that you can play comfortably. Okay, your bass should also look cool, but remember: Looks are only varnish deep. Chapter 15 helps you with the entire bass-buying (or is it *bass-adoption?*) process.

Getting an amplifier

How much power do you need? How is the sound? Can you carry everything yourself, or will you need half a dozen burly roadies to budge the amp and speaker? Check out Chapter 16 for help with these questions. Oh, and speaking of “budge” . . . how big is your budget? How much money you have to spend is another consideration when thinking about purchasing an amp.

Accessorizing your bass

You need to carry some items in your bass bag at all times, such as a strap, tuner, and cables. Other items are optional, such as a chorus unit or fancy stickers for your fans. Chapter 16 helps you determine which accessories you need and which you don't. Think about whether you can perform without an item. If you can, it's optional; and if you can't, it's a necessity.

Giving Your Bass Some Good Ol' TLC

Even though your bass requires very little maintenance, certain parts need an occasional adjustment or periodic replacement. You can do a lot of maintenance yourself, with a minimal complement of basic tools. Check out Chapters 17 and 18 to guide you through this process.

Changing the strings is the most common maintenance you perform on your bass. How often you change the strings depends on how clear you want your sound to be — the newer the strings, the brighter the sound. Whatever you do, *please* don't listen to the stories about bassists who change their strings every 25 years (and then only because one broke).



Change your strings *at least* every three to six months (more often if you play a lot). And be sure to wash your hands before you play (sounds funny, doesn't it?) to keep dirt from your hands off your strings. For more info on changing your strings, see Chapter 17.