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- » Reading notation, tab, and grids

Chapter 1

Reviewing Practice Fundamentals

I know you're just as eager to get started as I am to get you going, but before letting you off the leash, I'd like to make sure you get the most out of your practice time — in terms of skill as well as enjoyment.

In this chapter you find tips on how to structure (and *un*-structure) your bass guitar practice sessions. Some material you're probably familiar with, and other material may be brand-new, but all is very useful to your bass-ic well-being.

How to Approach Practicing Your Bass

Imagine it's the beginning of a perfect day. You're well rested and eager to play, and the only thing on your agenda is to practice bass. Alas, a perfect day indeed. You get comfortable in your bass space, tune your bass guitar, and then . . . and then you wonder how you should be spending your precious practice time.

A primary reason for writing this book is to give you an arsenal of really useful exercises that are fun to play, sound musical, and above all make you a better bass player, so you never again have to wonder what to practice on one of those perfect days when your bass guitar is calling you.

Dividing your practice time

Organizing the time wisely in your practice sessions is one of the most crucial steps you can take to ensure a consistent, effective, and efficient practice routine. First, you need to choose how much time to allot yourself on any given day, and also how much time you can dedicate on a regular basis (it takes more than one session to create a master). Instead of spending the entire practice session slogging through technical exercises — bass gymnastics if you will — keep in mind that music is *fun*. Make sure you assign a good chunk of time for playing songs or just “noodling”; it's important.



TIP

My suggestion is to divide your practice time into thirds. Dedicate the first third to the physical warm-ups; the second to scales, arpeggios, and other theoretical stuff; and the last third to consolidating the physical and theoretical workout into grooves and songs — or just noodling.

If you're able to practice for 30 minutes, start by warming up for 10 minutes with string crossing and finger exercises, then run scales and arpeggios for the next 10, and then play some fun stuff to fill out the final 10. If it's a 15-minute session, your increments are 5 minutes each. If you have exactly 23 minutes, then you may want to break out a calculator, or just wing it; don't take this suggested schedule *too* seriously.

The importance of noodling

How important is it to do some noodling on your instrument after you practice all those scales and arpeggios? Very. It's like playtime after your puppy's obedience training. You gotta have fun. Besides, you often find that you have the best musical ideas when you're just playing. *Noodling* — playing without any preconceived plan or goal — lets you get in touch with your creativity, a very important asset in a musician.

Simply let your fingers roam and see where they lead you. Don't worry about any of it making theoretical sense. Just discover what certain note combinations sound like, compose your very own groove, copy another groove you enjoy listening to, or even invent a whole new technique for playing bass.

Making a fool of yourself

When you practice, you want to be able to sound bad without passing harsh judgment on yourself. After all, you're practicing to get better; therefore, you practice things you still need to work on, right? So be kind to yourself, keep your mood light and your frustrations at bay, and get ready to play some really foolish stuff. It's fun. How do I know? Take a wild guess.

When you take music too seriously, you can really crimp your joy of playing. It's not that music shouldn't be taken seriously — of course it should, but not all the time. Keep a playful element in your playing.

Exercises for a lifetime

Playing bass is an art that takes constant practice. It's not as if you can quit playing a finger exercise after you finally master it. Your fingers would get rusty again pretty quickly. Don't you have to keep exercising your body in order to stay fit? That goes for your fingers, too.

Certain exercises in this book are sure to be in your personal practice routine for your entire bass-playing career. Others are exercises that you can revisit on a regular basis but that may not be part of your daily routine. Still others are useful for the occasional deviation from what you usually do, when you're just in the mood to play something different.



REMEMBER

None of the exercises in this book is a waste of practice time, but the “lifers” deserve your special attention. When I recommend that you play an exercise regularly, it may be a good idea for you to add it to your permanent practice routine.

Getting into Position

Having a nice, comfortable space to practice in — and even more important, *being* comfortable in that space — needs to be on top of your “bass-desires.” Whether you sit or stand while practicing, you want to position your bass for your ease and comfort, so that your hands have complete access to the notes.

Your posture



TIP

I suggest always wearing a strap with your bass, regardless of whether you’re standing or sitting. This ensures that your bass guitar is always in the same position, and you get used to finding your way on it in a consistent manner. You need to be able to reach all the strings with your striking hand (the hand that you strike the strings with, usually the right) and all the frets with your fretting hand (the hand you fret the notes with, usually the left).

Be very careful not to stare at the front of your fingerboard (the part of your bass’s neck that holds the frets); your neck and wrists would be strained beyond comfort. Instead, look at the edge of the neck.

Keep your back straight, your shoulders wide, and your arms loose. Don’t forget to breathe every once in a while. Whether you sit or stand, your bass should hang from your shoulders and rest firmly against your belly. If you’d like to review proper position and posture in detail, take a look at *Bass Guitar For Dummies*, 2nd Edition (Wiley).

Positioning your hands

Position your striking hand so that you can strike any string with minimal movement of your hand. In fact, I prefer to rest my thumb on a thumb rest or on the pickup. It gives me a great vantage point from which to measure the distance of each string by feel rather than having to look at it. This position is best for fingerstyle technique, which this book focuses on. Of course, if you’re really comfortable with pick playing or with slapping, you may want to use that technique to get yourself through these exercises. For more details on alternate right-hand techniques, you can refer to *Bass Guitar For Dummies*, 2nd Edition.

You want to position your fretting hand to cover one fret per finger without causing any undue stress. By using one finger per fret, you set up your hand to execute by far the most musical figures with minimal (if any) shifting. In case you do have to shift, it’s usually by one or two frets in either direction. This four-finger method gives your hand the consistency to play all patterns by feel rather than by vision.

Tackling Notation

Your bass guitar is the perfect instrument — perfectly symmetrical, gentle but authoritative in tone, expertly combining rhythm and harmony, and beautifully stating grooves as well as melodies.

An interesting peculiarity presents itself on bass (and other stringed instruments). Each note written for piano can be played in only one spot. Not so on your bass guitar. The same written note can be played in three or four different spots on your fingerboard. This is why positioning your hand correctly is so important in playing the exercises in this book.

Note names on the neck

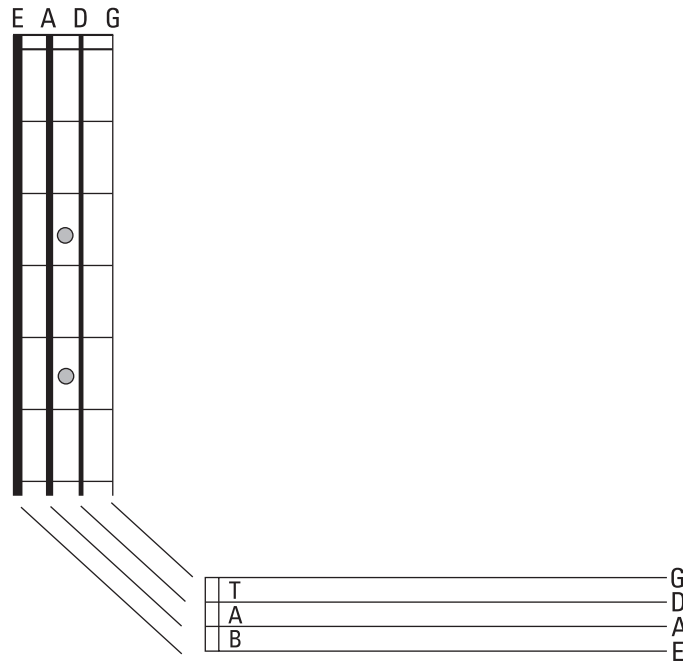
Any scale and any arpeggio that you play on bass follows a precise pattern. The pattern never changes (except when using open strings). Only the starting point changes, dictated by the key. For instance, the C major scale feels exactly like the G major scale — both patterns are identical. The only difference is that you start the C major scale on C (at the 3rd fret on the A string) and the G major scale on G (at the 3rd fret on the E string). The following figure gives you a rundown of the names of the notes on your fingerboard. Note that they repeat at the 12th fret (the double-dot).

	E	A	D	G		
F	A#	B _b	D#	E _b	G# A _b	
F#	G _b	B		E	A	
G	C	●		F	A# B _b	
G#	A _b	C#	D _b	F#	G _b B	
A	D	●		G	C	
A#	B _b	D#	E _b	G#	A _b C# D _b	
B	E	●		A	D	
C	F		A#	B _b	D# E _b	
C#	D _b	F#	G _b	B	E	
D	G			C	F	
D#	E _b	G#	A _b	C#	D _b F# G _b	
E	●	A		D	●	G
F	A#	B _b	D#	E _b	G# A _b	
F#	G _b	B		E	A	
G	C	●		F	A# B _b	

Traditional music notation and tablature

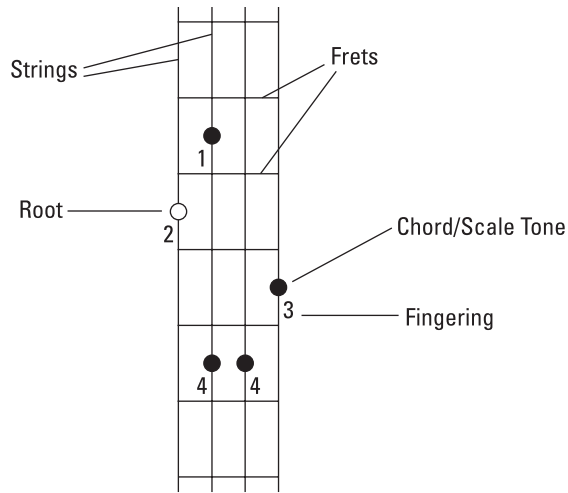
Throughout this book I combine traditional music notation with *tablature*, also called *tab*. Music notation shows you the note, octave, and rhythm of the desired tone, whereas tablature gives you the location on your bass guitar's fingerboard.

Tablature shows you what fret to press, and on which string, in order to get the desired note. The following two figures show you how the strings of your bass guitar correspond to the lines of the tablature staff and how the notes in music notation correspond to the frets on each string.



Using the grid

The grid represents the bass neck, looking at it head-on. I use the grid when I want you to see a pattern — for example, the shape of a scale or an arpeggio. You can visually remember the pattern; it doesn't change. The open circle represents the root of a scale or chord, and the black dots are the scale and chord tones. Take a look at the next figure to see the different parts of a grid.



Breaking down rhythmic notation

Rhythm is such an important factor in playing bass that I treat it as an integral part of the exercises in this book. An excellent source for a detailed explanation of how to work with different rhythms is *Bass Guitar For Dummies*, 2nd Edition. The following figure gives you a rundown of the different possible rhythmic combinations in one beat.

The figure displays seven lines of musical notation in bass clef, 4/4 time, illustrating various rhythmic patterns for one beat. The patterns are as follows:

- Quarter note, quarter rest, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth rest eighth rest, eighth note beamed eighth note.
- Quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note.
- Quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note.
- Quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note.
- Quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note.
- Quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note.
- Quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note, quarter note, eighth note beamed eighth note, eighth note beamed eighth note.

The next figure shows you how notes that last longer than one beat are represented in music notation.



As the following figure shows, you can also *tie* one note to the next, thus extending its length by adding both notes together.



Chord notation



TIP

The idea behind chord notation: write a little, describe a lot. Instead of writing “Use the Mixolydian mode on C and outline a dominant tonality with the root, 3rd, 5th, and flat 7th,” you can instead simply sum it all up as “C7.”

You can extract two types of information from a chord symbol: the chord tones of the harmony and the scale tones of the mode. The following figure gives you examples of some of the most commonly used chord symbols, along with the corresponding chord tones and modes.

Chord Symbol: C

Chord Tones: Root 3rd 5th

Mode: Ionian

Chord Symbols: CM7 CMaj Cmaj7

Chord Tones: Root 3rd 5th 7th

Mode: Ionian

Chord Symbols: Cm C-

Chord Tones: Root b3rd 5th

Modes: Dorian Aeolian

Chord Symbols: Cm7 C-7

Chord Tones: Root b3rd 5th b7th

Mode: Dorian

Chord Symbol: C7

Chord Tones: Root 3rd 5th b7th

Mode: Mixolydian

Chord Symbols: Cø C-7(b5) Cm7(b5)

Chord Tones: Root b3rd b5th b7th

Mode: Locrian



REMEMBER

Occasionally you encounter chord symbols that use numbers other than 7 — 6, 9, 11, or 13. Treat any chord that doesn't have a major or minor symbol in front of the number as a dominant chord and use the Mixolydian mode with it, with one exception. If the number is 6, treat the chord as a major chord and use Ionian (note that you treat the C9, C11, and C13 exactly as you would the C7).