

**Berklee
Online**



Bass

Digital Handbook

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Welcome!

Whether you're just beginning your musical journey, advancing your career, or simply seeking a community that shares your passion, you belong at Berklee Online. I encourage you to explore this handbook, and learn how we can help you confidently develop your craft and build your musical future.

All the best,

A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Mahoney'.

Jonathan Mahoney

Dean of Pre-College, Online, and Professional Programs

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Building Speed and Building Chops

By Anthony Vitti

From the Online Course
Rock Bass

Some bass players get too hung up on playing fast, but the truth is that speed has nothing to do with chops. I never practiced playing fast for the sake of being able to play fast. My feeling has always been that if a song is at a particular tempo, then I need to be able to play that song a little faster than it is. Why, you may ask? If I am having trouble playing a song at its original tempo, then I am thinking too much about whether or not I will be physically able to play it. That means that I am not concentrating on my time and feel 100 percent and the groove is going to suffer. When you're in this mindset, you cannot be recording or playing live at the peak of your ability because there is no cushion for error.

When you're given a piece of music, you're being told what to say, but it's up to you to say it. That's the "chops." It is the ability to play consistently, to be able to hold down a long groove, the ability to control the sound and length of notes on your instrument, and the ability to play exactly what you want. I play the same notes that you do, but we do not sound the same. That is the difference in "chops" between us, and that's what you should focus on.

Now, back to the speed issue. We have all experienced the difference between practicing at home and playing live, in front of people.

We all feel we are better players at home, because there isn't any pressure on us. We can make a mistake and go back and try it again. That's why you have to practice like you are performing. You have to put yourself under pressure just like you are recording or playing live. The one thing that always seems to happen when you play live is that the songs are counted off much faster than the recordings you were listening to at home or the tempos you practiced at. This is very common because of the energy at the live performance. This is the reason that you practice playing fast.

If I have a song that is 120 BPM and I am practicing that song at home, I had better be able to play that song at 132 BPM—because I know when we play it live, it may be faster than I practiced it. I cannot be playing at the peak of my physical ability if I haven't tried it that way. I need to have some extra fuel in the gas tank in case that song is counted off fast. If 132 BPM is as fast as I think that song could be counted off, and I can play it at that tempo, then when it is being played at a slower tempo, I can just focus on my feel and note placement: I don't have to worry about whether or not I can physically keep up with the tempo. That is why you practice playing fast: so that your playing at the slower tempos is more confident and solid.

If ever there was a song that I heard somebody play, I would never say, “Oh, I can’t play that; that’s too fast.” I always knew that if I broke it down and slowed it down enough, I could play the notes. And then it was just a matter of time for me to work up the tempo. It’s a lot like running a marathon. If you’ve never run one before, you’re not going to go out and run 26 miles today. You have to work up to it, and run a couple of miles a day, and eventually in a couple of weeks you’ll build up that endurance and you’ll start running longer distances. It’s the same thing with playing fast; you have to build up that speed and chops. And you have to maintain that when you play. And you do that by practicing.

Anthony Vitti is the author of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. Check out his bio on page 9, or learn more about the other lessons in this course by clicking the link below.

Interested in exploring this course further?

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Instructor Spotlight:

Anthony Vitti

Anthony Vitti has been a professor in the Bass Department at Berklee College of Music since 1988. He got his start in the rock club scene in New York City in the early '80s, sharing the stage with bands like Twisted Sister, TT Quick, and the Good Rats. Anthony has played bass in several Broadway shows and for several TV and radio commercials.

At Berklee Online, Anthony authored and instructs the *Rock Bass* course.

What bassists most made you want to play?

Marcus Miller, Chris Squire, Geddy Lee, and Paul McCartney.

How many basses do you own?

I own about 15 basses. Most are vintage Fender Jazz basses.

What kind of amp do you prefer?

I use solid state 1982 Gallien-Krueger heads and SWR cabinets.

Have you modified any of your basses?

My main Jazz bass has EMG pickups. They are active and very quiet compared to the stock Fender pickups.

What bass lines have had the biggest impact on you?

“Super Lady” by Luther Vandross, “Roundabout” by Yes, “YYZ” by Rush, and “Silly Love Songs” by Paul McCartney and Wings.

What advice would you give to a student who is thinking about studying bass with Berklee Online?

The online courses are awesome. I am able to pack much more material into the online course than I can in a regular Berklee lab that meets once a week.

A photograph of Nathan East, a Black man, playing a white electric bass guitar. He is wearing a dark, long-sleeved button-down shirt with a floral pattern on the left chest. He is looking down at the guitar. The background is dark. A red banner is at the bottom of the image.

Celebrity Interview

Nathan East on 40 Years of Hits

By Pat Healy

If you haven't heard the name Nathan East before, you have definitely heard his bass. He has played on upwards of 10,000 songs, many of them hits, by artists such as Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Beyoncé, Lionel Richie, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Bob

Dylan, and thousands more! In this excerpt from Berklee Online's *Music is My Life* podcast, he discusses his long and varied career in the music business.

Is it true that you've played on over 2,000 recordings?

You know, I find it difficult to keep up now, because when you're going on 40 years, when you start doing the math, and there was a time when I was doing 28 almost 30 sessions a week, that's like four a day. You're almost living in the studio. Back in the day when you couldn't throw a rock without hitting a studio in LA, there were hundreds of studios and hundreds of projects going on at all times. So it really was a fluid time for the music business. And for those of us that were fortunate enough to be in that circle, we were getting called. I'd just drive up and down Sunset Boulevard, jump into a recording session with Lionel Richie in the morning, and then be with Clapton and Phil Collins at night. It was crazy.

In the early '80s when you're playing on all these sessions, how much of you are you bringing to it and how much are you just trying to please the artist?

You always keep the most important thing in mind, which is the song. That's the most important thing for the bass. And you listen

to the singer. You listen to the melody. Like Jaco used to say, “Learn the melody and then that lets you know what to play underneath it.” So even instead of trying to inject my own voice and personality, what I was really focusing on was just what was right for this song, so that when I walk out of the studio, there’s a really good chance that I’ll get a call to come back. That was my thought process.

Did you ever get to a point where you would hear yourself so much on the radio that you didn’t recognize your bass lines?

Well, it happens a lot. I mean obviously, the first few years my friends used to say, “Hey, Nate’s on the radio,” “Here’s something Nate played on.” They used to tease me, because later on they’d call me out, “Hey, here’s something Nate *didn’t* play on.” They were giving me a hard time. But yeah, to this day, it’s always exciting. I heard my song “Lifecycle” on the radio the other day and I got all choked up, because it was like, “Oh man, they’re playing me, my song, this thing I created,” and it just still makes my heart go pitter-patter when I hear it.

And that's another thing altogether, because that's not just your bass that you're hearing on that one. You're hearing your voice, which is a whole different story.

A whole different story. And so I feel really excited that at this stage in my career, now after so many years—three and a half, going on four decades—that there's still something that really is fresh and exciting.

You've played music for four decades, and you've played with a lot of legendary musicians from previous eras. And now you're playing with younger musicians as well. So what is your outlook on what's in store for the future?

Well, I think we're at one of the most exciting places in music we've ever been. And my son Noah had me put up a Snarky Puppy video on YouTube the other day and he said, "Dad, check this out." And he played it for me. Blew my socks off. Cory Henry took a solo that I'm still recovering from. And then there's Jacob Collier, and of course Esperanza Spalding. She's amazing. And so you see these shooting stars coming out, and I'm just so excited about the fact that people still get it. People still love music. Young musicians are coming up, and they're pushing that envelope. Some of these guys I would never jump in the ring with.

Really? You're intimidated?

Absolutely! Are you kidding? Man, there's some monsters out there.

Wow, but I think a lot of people would refer to you as a monster on the bass.

Well, I try to play a good song. I try to come up with a good part for a song. But there's Dirty Loops and all these guys. These kids are not playing. They're really taking it to another level, which makes me really happy and really proud.

Is there anybody left on your list of artists that you have always wanted to play with?

Well, Prince was on that list. So I missed that opportunity. Actually Miles Davis was on that list a while back. When I look at U2 I think, "Oh man, how cool would it be to play with those guys?" And I'm a huge Pat Metheny fan, and although we've jammed together, informally played, we haven't done anything formal. James Taylor as well. We always joke about doing something together. But he has a great band: Jimmy Johnson of course plays bass and is the music director.

And how did you get to a point when you're writing with Philip Bailey and Phil Collins, and writing with Babyface?

Well, many times in the studio for instance, with Philip Bailey's record, we were in England. We had recorded for two weeks.

Probably had a dozen songs maybe recorded. And on the very last day, or the day before the last day, he says, "I'm still looking for that undeniable single where the record label just says, 'We'll pick this.'"



Always keep the most important thing in mind, which is the song. That's the most important thing for the bass.

- Nathan East

That was an invitation pretty much to go over to the piano and start working out chords. And then it literally was like one of those, "Well, what about this?" moments. Started playing these chord changes, and then next thing you know, 20 minutes later, we had this skeleton of a tune. At least enough to make a track.

But every single way is different. Sometimes you're with a person and you think, "Oh, wouldn't it be fun to write together?" There used to be a lot of that going on for sessions. And you're in this creative environment. It's fun to be able to participate on that level, as well as just playing.

Let's talk about Daft Punk's "Get Lucky." Is that the bass line that most people know you by? Is there one that you wish they knew you by instead?

Well, it's funny, because "Get Lucky" was another day in the life of sessions for me. Another day of "Okay, what can I come up with?" Trying really hard to do something that serves the song, and something that's interesting. And it got so much coverage, so much attention that I'm obviously very grateful for it and proud of it. But there's some songs, like "Change the World" by Eric Clapton. That was one I was very proud of. "Love Will Follow" by Kenny Loggins, way back in the '80s. "Easy Lover," which we were talking about before, I like that bass line. "101 Eastbound" from Fourplay. All the Anita Baker records that I did, which were from the very first one with her, have parts that I'm very proud of.

And with all these people that you have played with, and playing on your own, and having old friends come in to record on your Reverence album and the previous albums, what do you look for in somebody that you're playing with?

Well, music is such a dialogue. And that's what we enjoy. For instance, when I played with Fourplay: we've been together for 25 years now, with Bob James and Harvey Mason. Now Chuck Loeb, formally, Larry Carlton and Lee Ritenour. We're talking about some of the top, finest musicians ever, period, in the world. And so the thing is, it's always a dialogue. It's a conversation that we have when we all pick up our instruments, and we start responding to what we're hearing.

And that's one of the things I always emphasize to the young players. Because you can sit in your room, and you can practice your licks, and come out and be rippin' and roarin', but it means so much more in the context of a dialogue with some of the other musicians. And I've been very fortunate to play with great musicians throughout my career, which every time helps you learn. And to this day, you pick up little things as you go.

Working with Michael Jackson as compared to working with Bob Dylan as compared to working with Lionel. Is there a through line in the way that they work and the dialogue that they would have with the musicians and the songs?

Yeah, I think everybody, regardless of genre or instrument, it's kind of like they're bringing a piece of their heart with them. So when you're sitting in the room with Eric Clapton and B.B. King—which by the way, two of the guys with the biggest hearts I've ever played with—it just comes through in their music. And it doesn't have to be flashy. One note will move you. And move you into another direction. And it determines what you play.

The most important advice that I can give to young musicians, and I got the same advice, is to listen. Because if you listen to what's going on around you, it's almost the blueprint of what you should be doing. And especially in an environment and in the studio where you're making a record. I mean you really, really got to listen to what's going on.

When I go in to record, I literally use each session as an opportunity to create what the best part is for whatever song I'm working on.

So it's just a series of songs, and it's probably been well over 10,000 songs since I started. So you listen to it, and the only thing I'm thinking about when I listen to that song is "What is the absolute best way to support this? What's the best bass part? What's the best thing I can play for this song?" And I keep carving ideas out until I get something that I feel is perfect for the song. So that's what I've spent my life doing for almost the last 40 years. Just song by song, session by session. Just trying to make sure you leave some good notes behind.

Getting Down with the Motown Sound on Your Bass

By Danny Morris

From the Online Course

R&B Bass

In the early '60s, bass players increasingly began using electric bass guitars over the upright or double bass. This change occurred in conjunction with Motown's rise as a musical powerhouse that produced hit after hit. The Motown sound was an integral part of the bass's evolution and, as a result, there is a signature timbre that we associate with R&B bass from the mid-'60s into the early '70s.

In studying the timbre of R&B bass, it's important to explore the playing style and equipment used. The playing style often incorporated a muting technique, while the equipment consisted of flat wound strings on the bass, foam under or over the strings at the bridge, and an Ampeg B-15N amp. Let's take a look at each in turn.

Muting

When you play a note on the bass and you have not muted the string, the note that sounds will have a fundamental frequency associated with it, in addition to its respective harmonics. A string will vibrate across its length as a standing wave, and depending on how and where you pluck the string, you will also create other shorter wavelengths—the associated harmonics. Not only is this useful information for getting different tones out of the bass, but it

also helps to provide you with an understanding of why muting your strings can be so effective.

When players use their fingers to dampen a string that has been fretted, they are effectively removing the shorter, high frequency vibrations and some of the higher pitches from the string. The muting technique alters the shape of the waveform produced by the string. Normally when a string is played, it has an initial attack transient that sounds the note, and then slowly fades as the string's energy is dissipated. When you apply the muting technique, the initial transient of the string still sounds, but its energy is dampened at a much faster rate. Instead of having the string ring out and hold its tone with good deal of sustain, it will now have more of a punch. The amount of change produced by this technique depends on how much muting is applied.

Ampeg B-15N Amp

The second key component of the classic Motown and R&B bass sound is the Ampeg B-15N amp. Yes, many people will tell you that *how* you play is more important than *what* you play, but there are many different aspects of the B-15N's design that play a part in

creating the Motown sound, which is warm, dark, deep, and slightly distorted. Think about any classic Motown bass line, and that's what you hear: warm, dark, deep, and slightly distorted. "For Once in My Life" by Stevie Wonder? Check! "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" (both the Gladys Knight and the Pips version and the one by Marvin Gaye)? Yup! Even the basic yet unmistakable first notes of "My Girl" by the Temptations. It's all warm, dark, deep, and slightly distorted. Everything from the characteristics of the B-15N's circuitry, the interaction of its tubes, the closed cabinet that is not ported, and the type of speaker all contribute to the sound it creates.

You don't have access to this model? Don't fret (pun intended). It is possible to approximate this sound if you are working with a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) or using effects pedals. In a basic sense, you have to translate the effects of the playing technique and characteristics of the amp into equalization, compression, and other processor settings. There are also many plug-ins that can be used to affect the signal—ranging from ones that distort the signal and give a dirtier sound, to ones that can add different harmonics to affect the overall tone. Amplifier simulators, in particular, are one type of plug-in that have been designed to help recreate the nuances of the original amplifiers.

James Jamerson

Although technology offers many ways for us to shape our tone, the best way to get a great sound starts with the player, their instrument, and their technique. So even if you have the right equipment, you still need to learn the right technique. A bass player gets their sound from their hands. After they have mastered their sound, then the rest of the signal chain from bass, to amp, to processing is a way to add sparkle and shine to a great sound. So let's take a look at the man who laid down most of those Motown bass tracks: James Jamerson. He was influenced by the great jazz players and, in turn, influenced many bassists himself. He was one of the major forces on the Fender electric bass, and we celebrate his influence on our bass vocabulary. We could analyze any of his bass lines for days, but let's listen to his playing on Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." He uses many of the devices we explore throughout this course, such as:

- rhythmic syncopation
- use of chromatic/non-diatonic notes
- long ascending and descending shapes

Search Spotify or YouTube for the song now and take a listen. Jamerson's lines are rhythmically interesting, keeping the song moving forward. On YouTube you should be able to find some clips with the bass line isolated, and there's also a really moving clip of Marvin performing the song, singing and playing piano, with James sitting right next to him. Legend has it that he recorded his part, laying on his back in the studio.

In the intro, he hits squarely on beat 1 with a powerful open E. He continues to hook his motif with slight variations and finally in the fourth measure uses a descending chromatic approach to the 5th of the chord.

On the next measure, Jamerson plays two eighth notes, signifying the start of the vocal verse. This can be thought of as a "bass drum language rhythmic concept." When the bass plays an identical figure with the kick drum (or bass drum), the result is a strong foundation.

Try playing the intro. Once you are comfortable with that, check out what Jamerson does coming out of the bridge into the third verse. The bridge starts off with eight bars of A minor, and Jamerson pivots back and forth between the root, 5th, and octave. The next four bars

are a B7sus chord, which is the V chord of E major. Jamerson uses ascending ideas throughout, ending with a variation on a motif he stated earlier in the song, ending each verse section. He culminates this long four-bar idea with three eighth-note open E's to start the third verse. This is another example of the bass drum language rhythmic concept.

Once you have learned vocabulary and concepts from many of R&B's bass masters and your rhythmic and harmonic lexicon has grown through practicing, then it's time to develop your own voice.

Danny Morris is the author of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. Find out which bass in his collection is his favorite on the following pages, or learn more about the other lessons in this course by clicking the link below.

Interested in exploring this course further?

Learn More



Instructor Spotlight:

Danny Morris

Danny “Mo” Morris is a professor in the Bass department at Berklee College of Music, and has worked with students since 1988. He is known for his muted tone, warm personality, and ability to work with all levels of students. In the 1980s, Danny was the bassist for the James Montgomery Blues Band and the Jon Pousette-Dart Band.

At Berklee Online, Danny is the author and instructor of *R&B Bass* and *Bass Performance 101*.

What bassists most made you want to play?

There are so many. Music is what got me hooked. Hearing what the bass is capable of got me intrigued. Here are a few standouts: James Jamerson, Chuck Rainey, John Paul Jones, and Phil Lesh.

How many basses do you own?

Around 10 currently. My fave is my 1965 Fender Precision with 20-year-old Flatwound strings.

What kind of amp do you prefer?

Ampeg. I love their tubes and warm sound.

What advice would you give to a student who is thinking about studying bass with Berklee Online?

Come on in! Let's discover together how to study music. It's a language. With more than 40 years of experience teaching, I still feel as though I'm a student first and foremost.

Faculty Favorites

Professors Rank the Top 10 Bass Lines

By Danny Morris and Richard Appleman

Before you take our course, we thought it would be fun to share our top 10 lists—songs or albums—that we have found inspirational and thought you might enjoy exploring. It was tough to limit ourselves to 10 each; there were many more we could have added to the mix!

Danny's Top 10

1. Phil Lesh on “Dark Star” from *Live Dead* by the Grateful Dead. This is just quintessential psychedelic improv.

2. Chuck Rainey on “Holy Moses” from *Young, Gifted and Black* by Aretha Franklin. I just love the double stops and the gospel-tinged R&B, coming through a Fender bass.

3. Francis Rocco Prestia on “Squib Cakes” from *Back to Oakland* by Tower of Power. This is sixteenth-note funk with chromatic approaches.

4. Willie Weeks on “Voices Inside (Everything Is Everything)” from *Donny Hathaway Live* by Donny Hathaway. Best bass solo ever! There’s a reason why Donny saves the best for the last movement on this 13-minute jam.

5. Pino Paladino on “The Joint” from *Hard Groove* by the RH Factor. This is “feel and groove” sophistication right here.

6. Jaco Pastorius on “All American Alien Boy” from the album *All American Alien Boy* by Ian Hunter. It’s not unique to hear creative

genius on a straight-ahead rock tune, but to hear this type of creative genius on bass in a straight-ahead rock tune is something else.

7. Paul McCartney on “Something” from *Abbey Road* by the Beatles. Melodic pop bass at its finest.

8. Stevie Wonder on “Boogie on Reggae Woman” from his album *Fullfillingness’ First Finale*. Stevie set many standards in his time, and with this 1974 track, he set the standard for synth bass.

9. James Jamerson on “What’s Going On” from the album *What’s Going On* by Marvin Gaye. If you’ve read my entry on Motown bass, you already know how fond I am of this track and Jamerson’s playing, but it bears repeating that this tune has rhythmic and melodic hooks par excellence.

10. Ray Brown on “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe” from 25 by Harry Connick Jr. It’s been said that “the primary function of the bass is to play time,” and Ray Brown illustrates that perfectly on this 1992 track.

Rich's Top 10

1. Ray Brown on “Days of Wine and Roses” and “Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars,” both from *We Get Requests* by the Oscar Peterson Trio. If Danny is going to cite Ray Brown, I have to agree with him, but he shines especially brightly on these jazz trio/acoustic bass playing standards.

2. Ron Carter on “So What” from *‘Four’ and More* by Miles Davis. This is great post-bebop modal jazz with uptempo acoustic bass.

3. Tony Levin on *Still Crazy After All These Years* by Paul Simon. This whole album, from 1975, is a great studio album with great tunes and a great rhythm section. It goes without saying that Steve Gadd’s drumming on this album is unsurpassed, but the way Tony Levin (and to a lesser extent Gordon Edwards and David Hood) play with his drumming is spot-on.

4. Paul McCartney on *Abbey Road* by the Beatles. Danny mentioned “Something,” but really, the whole album is great songwriting and great bass playing.

5. Charlie Haden on “Song for Che” from *Liberation Music*

Orchestra by Charlie Haden. Only Charlie Haden could use the acoustic bass for a solo that embodies social protest. He dedicated the mostly instrumental song to revolutionaries in the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea during a live performance in 1971 and was detained at Lisbon Airport and jailed, and interrogated by the Portuguese secret police. Upon his release the FBI questioned him. Now that is dedication!

6. Miroslav Vitouš on “Freedom Jazz Dance” from *Infinite*

Search by Miroslav Vitouš. This nearly 11-minute track kicks off the 1970 debut by this Czech acoustic bass virtuoso.

7. and 8. Bootsy Collins on “I Got to Move” by James Brown

and on **“Bop Gun (Endangered Species)”** by Parliament. Bootsy revolutionized funk with his electric bass, beginning when he joined James Brown at the age of 18, and expanded on that with Parliament in the late 1970s.

9. TIE: Oscar Pettiford on “Tricrotism” and Niels-Henning

Ørsted Pedersen on “Tricrotism.” It’s hard to choose between Pettiford’s bebop acoustic bass and Pedersen acoustic bass chops, so let’s call it a tie.

10. Gary Karr and Richard Davis on “The Eccles Sonata.”

Solo classical double bass from the heart, you owe it to yourself to check out the YouTube clip of these two really going for it in a 1969 televised special.

We hope you enjoyed reading this list as much as we enjoyed creating it. We discuss some of these bass lines in more detail in the *Bass Performance 101* course that we wrote together. The components to great bass playing are many, yet the key ingredient is always to serve the song. That said, after you complete *Bass Performance 101*, you'll be in a good position to begin really digging into Jaco and Bootsy and the rest of our favorites here. As always, we suggest that the best playing begins with listening, and this list is a great place to start listening.



Instructor Spotlight:

Rich Appleman

Rich Appleman is chair emeritus of the Bass department at Berklee College of Music. He has performed with Bernadette Peters, the Boston Pops, Rosemary Clooney, and jazz greats such as Lionel Hampton and Sweets Edison. Rich has played in the Broadway pit orchestra for *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *42nd Street*.

At Berklee Online, Rich is the co-author and instructor of the *Bass Performance 101* course.

What kind of amp do you prefer?

A Walter Woods head used with any good speaker cabinet. Also a Gallien Kruger MB Bass Combo amp. It's small, sounds good, and has XLR outputs, which are great for the sound folks.

Have you modified any of your basses?

I modified my upright in 1990, adding a low C extension. I needed those low notes for theater gigs. I'm so glad I did it. I also added a jazz bass pickup and a brass bridge to my old Fender P bass in the '70s. I wanted the "Jaco" sound.

What bass lines have had the biggest impact on you?

Jaco Pastorius' "Portrait of Tracy," from Count Basie's *Atomic Basie* album, "The Kid from Red Bank," and Joe Cocker's "Feelin' Alright" with Carol Kaye on Fender bass.

What advice would you give to a student who is thinking about studying bass with Berklee Online?

Make sure you have the required equipment and available time to spend on course material and practice. Ask lots of questions and make lots of friends.

World-Class Courses

With Berklee Online, you have more than 300 courses to choose from, including several that focus on bass. Here's a look at some selected course offerings for bassists:

- **Bass Performance 101** [↗](#)
- **Rock Bass** [↗](#)
- **R&B Bass** [↗](#)
- **Jazz Bass** [↗](#)
- **Basic Improvisation** [↗](#)





Student Stories

Divinity Roxx on Her Audition for Beyoncé

By Berklee Online

Divinity Roxx is probably best known for her work as the bassist for Beyoncé in her all-female band. She also happens to be a Berklee Online alum. Divinity got her start playing with bass wiz Victor Wooten, and has established quite a solo career for herself: Not

many people can rap and play bass at the same time! She shares the story of auditioning in front of Beyoncé and Jay-Z, and hearing the news that would change her life and career.

Tell us about the nucleus of the Beyoncé band and how it all came together.

Well, everybody came to this place from different paths. So it's 2005 and I'm in Atlanta. I'm performing. I'm doing my thing. I'm rapping. I'm playing. I'm writing songs. I'm recording. I had been out in LA trying to get a record deal. And, you know, that whole thing.

I'm touring with Victor Wooten at this time and Beyoncé put out a press release. She's looking for an all-female band and she's having auditions. And at the time, I'm still a struggling—*really* struggling—musician and doing my gigs. I'm touring with Victor, but Victor is touring with Béla Fleck and doing his own thing. So he's juggling all these different things. So we didn't tour a lot—maybe two or three times a year at the most. And he had to spend time with his family.

So in between touring with him, I'm still doing my own thing and trying to build my brand and learning about marketing and learning how to produce and make beats.

Are you just teaching yourself all this stuff?

Yeah, dude. I mean, people were trying to take advantage of me. They wanted to sign me and make me give away all my publishing. I had gone to Georgia State, so I had learned about publishing, and learned about the music business, and really became business-minded. So I was like, “I’m not giving you all of that.”

And then I would go in the studio with different producers, and they would try to shape my sound, and I didn’t like the way it was going, and it didn’t feel like me. So I was like, “I’m going to learn how to use Pro Tools, and I’m going to produce myself.”

So I’m doing this, and I’m really serious about it. And I would have days where I didn’t shower, and I’m just making beats all day. And I’m into this song, and I’m structuring it. And I’m spending hours on end, up all night doing this.

My sister sent an email and said, “Hey, you know, Beyoncé is looking for an all-female band. I think you should go audition.” I was like, “Whatever.” That’s the truth! Like, I thought it was a gimmick, did not believe it at all! Then people started calling me from around the country who I had met on tour with Victor: “Did you hear, Beyoncé

is having auditions for an all-female band? You're the first person I thought of."

What was your awareness of her before that?

Well, of course I was aware of her.

You couldn't *not* be.

Couldn't not be. I mean, she was huge.

But from that distance . . .

I wasn't into pop music. I was, you know, real underground hip-hop. You know what I mean? Keeping it 100 percent real. Every now and again I would pass by a video. "Check On It" made me stop. I was like, "Dang, that beat is dope."

And of course, she was on all the radio. And so all her beats were always dope. The songs were always amazing. But it wasn't on my radar. People started calling and they're like, "You should go." And I was like, "Eh, okay. I'll think about it."

So then I had some other friends, this other producer, who had really been hooking me up with sounds and he believed in me as a

producer. He really took me under his wing to teach me things about sound design. And he's like, "Divinity, you know Beyoncé is having auditions for an..." and I'm like, "I know." He's like, "You should go. You should do it." I'm like, "Man, but I don't think it's real." I was like, "She could call anybody. I think Rhonda Smith is going to get the gig."



I would go in the bathroom, look at myself and say, 'You just dig in. You've got to get this. You can do this.'

- Divinity Roxx

And what about Meshell Ndegeocello? Who else? I had a list of great female bass players who would probably play this gig with Beyoncé. Certainly I was not on that list. Seriously, she could have anybody in the world, why would she want me to do it? And they were like, "You should go to the audition."

They came over to my house. They really did this, him and his partner came over to my house one day. And I was in producer mode, which means I hadn't showered and I'm like in my pajamas for three days. And they're like, "We're not leaving your house until you say you're going to the audition."

So is this the day of the auditions?

No, this isn't the day of the auditions. Probably three, four days before. And they're like, "You should really go." I was like, "Alright, I'm going to go. I'll do it. I didn't think I was going to get it. I was just going to do it." So she had auditions in different cities. So I was in Atlanta. So I show up to the Atlanta audition. I pretty much know most of the girls there.

How did you bone up on the material?

They recommended that you get the *Dangerously in Love* DVD. And we were playing the arrangement of—it was like this James Brown-esque song.

How was the audition itself? Was she there?

No, she wasn't there. She had some musical directors and people she trusted who were there. I played the song. And then they just

asked me to play. And then I left. I was like, “Okay. I did it.” And I go home, and I’m getting a little anxious because around midnight I didn’t get a call, but I didn’t even—it was like, “Oh well, didn’t get it. It’s Okay.”

My phone rang after midnight. And this deep voice on the phone is like, “Divinity, you’re going to go to New York for the second round of the auditions. So we’re going to get a plane ticket for you, hotel, blah, blah, blah.”

After midnight?

After midnight. I had no money. I didn’t even know how I was going to pay the rent the next month, honestly. I had negative \$200 in the bank, literally. So I’m like, “I’m going to go to New York. How am I going to eat? What am I going to do?” So I called my mom and was like “Mom, I’m going to New York for this Beyoncé audition. I’m like, I don’t know...” It still wasn’t that big of a deal.

So I get up to New York. I’m nervous—so nervous, so scared. I couldn’t eat anyway. Then we go through the whole audition process. I remember the first time I sat down with Nikki [Glaspie, drummer], and played with her. I turned around and was like, “Yes,

Okay!” We were playing “Deja Vu,” I think—“Work it Out,” that was the song.

Yeah, OK.

So we play “Work it Out,” play “Deja Vu,”—killing. Slowly, the girls who were going to be in the band started coming into the room together. Because at first, they were just putting different configurations of girls together: “Give me the girl from Atlanta, give me the keyboard player from Houston, give me the saxophone player from New York.”

Finally, they found this combination on the second day of rehearsals. It was feeling good. We were having fun. We were encouraging each other, talking to each other, like, yeah. We’re playing “Deja Vu,” pretty much over and over and over again, because it was her single. And of course it had that crazy bass line.

[Hums bass line] Ooh, it’s so killing. And I knew the guy who played on the record—Jon Jon [Traxx]. I had just been hanging out with him in Atlanta. Anyway so, we played together and then we’re tired of playing that song at this point. Like, we have given everything we have.

And people are watching you, too?

Yeah. You know, Beyoncé and Jay-Z showed up.

Oh, they're there?

Can you imagine?

Man, *that's* pressure.

Yes. I remember them sitting there. That's when it became really real for me and I started thinking this could be cool. After all of my, "Meh, whatever," I was like, "Wait a minute. This could be really awesome!" So I would go in the bathroom, look at myself and say, "You just dig in. You've got to get this. You can do this." You know, like all these pep talks I would have with myself. But I remember Beyoncé and Jay-Z were there. And I think that's when they made the final decision.

Now, are they talking with you?

Not really.

Sitting behind a table, *American Idol* style?

They're sitting behind a table, *American Idol* style, smiling. She's just checking us out. We don't know each other so we don't know how

to act with each other yet. So it was just kind of dreamy in my mind. It's this dreamy thing, you know?

So they leave. And I'm thinking, "Oh man, I don't know what's going to happen." They call us back in the room. We think we're about to play again, so we put our instruments like, "Okay, we're going to do this again." And Matthew stands there—her dad, Matthew Knowles—stands there and says, "Beyoncé has chosen all of you to be in her all-female band."

And I remember just looking around the room at each one of the girls, slowly, just having this moment, looking at everybody and thinking, "Wow, that just happened." And he says, "And you guys are playing the BET Awards in two weeks, so go home, get packed, get ready, and we're going to be doing a lot of work."

Crazy. I call my mom, of course. We called my sister on three-way. She's like, "What happened?" I was like, "I got the gig." And then I start crying. And she's like, "Why are you crying?" I was like, "Because I'm so used to everybody saying no." She's like, "Well, somebody had to say yes." And we were off. Crazy.

How to Achieve a Jazz Sound on the Electric Bass

By Jim Stinnett

From the Online Course
Jazz Bass

Many times in the past 40 years have I have heard people say, “You really can’t play jazz on the electric bass.” Perhaps these critics did not hear Jaco Pastorius, Bob Cranshaw, Monk Montgomery, Jeff Berlin, Todd Johnson, Steve Swallow, John Pattituci, and a host of other great jazz electric players. I have come to realize that such critics have probably developed this belief by hearing electric players who do not sound much like upright players, which makes sense.

Electric jazz is a different beast. And while I love the electric jazz sound, let’s assume that we are now talking about more traditional jazz, and finding a way for your electric bass to get walking lines to sound more “traditional.”

It starts with your ears and concept. Simply put, if you listen to double bass players walk, you will begin to emulate the sound and feel. When I decided I wanted to play jazz, a teacher of mine gave me 10 Oscar Peterson records. Nine of them had Ray Brown playing and one featured Sam Jones. At this point in my life, I played only the electric bass. I wore those records out, playing along with them. Copying the masters is the most direct way of acquiring a concept, so it was no wonder that my playing took on the characteristics of the upright bass.

I work with many electric players who want to learn walking lines, and a few suggestions can make a world of difference in helping to produce the traditional jazz sound. Keep these tips in mind the next time you're plugging in with players who favor a traditional approach.

- **Bend the string with each note you attack**—i.e., dig in. You may need to raise your strings if your action is super low. I have basses set up with higher action for walking playing.
- **Turn down the volume.** This will help you dig in and create a stronger attack with a quicker decay.
- **Tone is vital.** Too much highs and the sound is tinny and thin. Too much lows and it is boomy and you obscure the attack. The sound needs to be fat but with a clear attack.
- **Get at least six feet away from your amplifier.** This will help you hear your volume in relationship to the other players. The only thing worse than an electric bass player drowning out the band is the bassist who sounds weak.

The best place to start trying out these tips, of course, is practice. That way, you can see what the people you're playing with think of your new sound and approach, without the risk of embarrassing

you at a gig. You don't want a bandmate asking, "How come you're quieter than usual?" or "Why are you standing so far away from your amp?" in front of a room that's full of listeners, do you? If you must try out these new tactics at a gig, just keep your ear open. No matter what kind of jazz you're playing, good jazz players react to their surroundings when making music in a group. This will let you know without even asking whether or not the players favor traditional jazz or more electric jazz. This interaction can only happen if you are able to listen to the other musicians while you are playing your instrument. So listen up, and play on!

Jim Stinnett is the author of the Berklee Online course from which this lesson comes. Learn more about the other lessons in this course by clicking the link below.

Interested in exploring this course further?

[Learn More](#)



Success Strategies

How to Practice Bass Effectively

By Greg Mooter

I have heard of bass players utilizing practice times from 10 minutes to 10 hours per day, achieving success at each end of the scale. Of course, success is also a relative term. One practicing 10 minutes a day cannot expect to make great leaps in their abilities from week

to week. On the other hand, one practicing 10 hours a day may need to get a life. Or maybe, they have found one. Performing regularly at gigs, or just playing in a garage band can restrict the amount of your practice time.

For most players, the exertion of “real” playing far surpasses the strains of the practice room. Performers with day gigs that tax the muscles of their musical anatomy, or players participating in sports that use these muscles, need to be mindful of their bodies’ physical limits. They may also need to restrict their practice time. A practice routine is an exercise program with academic material incorporated into it. There are, however, three areas of practice that can be classified and quantified. All are equally necessary for successful practice.

Maintain and Build

Each player comes into this with certain physical and mental ability. As long as we have proper physical technique and our academic foundation is not flawed, we must first maintain our current level, and in time, we need to build upon it. Specific fingering exercises, scale and arpeggio patterns, and stamina exercises are often used

for this purpose. Occasionally playing or reading pieces previously mastered can also help to fulfill this area of practice.

Personal Interests and Needs

All players have tunes that they want to learn. Many of these can be quite difficult to learn and play. This type of material needs to be incorporated into the practice schedule. Learning can be accomplished through reading or transcribing. In learning a piece that you're often listening to on the stereo or with headphones, take the time to transcribe the music on paper first. This action will help you learn the piece more quickly, locate errors, and improve your reading ability.

Survival Skills

There are sometimes things that must be learned in order to survive. You are playing a show next week, and the part is too difficult for you to sight-read. You just joined a band, your first gig is this Saturday, and you need to learn 18 tunes from a demo. You have an audition with an orchestra next week, and they are going to have you play excerpts from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. These are all

examples of needs for your immediate survival as a bass player. Not only does this material need to be incorporated into your practice schedule; at times, this material will supersede all other priorities.

In the end, it is a blend of these that you should strive for, leaning, at times, in one direction or the other, depending on which direction the wind blows.

Check out more bass tips in my Berklee Press book, *The Bass Player's Handbook*.



Instructor Spotlight:

Dave Clark

Dave Clark is a bassist, multi-instrumentalist, composer, and producer. He currently teaches bass and jazz at Berklee College of Music. As a performing bassist, Dave has appeared with Peter Frampton, the Drifters, Lesley Gore, and his compositions have been recorded by such artists as Gary Burton, Cercie Miller, Tim Ray, Dick Johnson, Armen Donelian, and Strange but Trio.

At Berklee Online, Dave instructs the *Jazz Bass* course, authored by the late Jim Stinnett.

What bassists most made you want to play?

I was a huge fan of Miles Davis, and it was going to a 1970 live concert where I heard bassist Michael Henderson that seemed to tip the scale into thinking maybe bass was for me.

How many basses do you own?

I own four acoustic upright basses, three solid body uprights, and nine bass guitars that I can think of.

What kind of amp do you prefer?

I currently play Galien Krueger amps and have for some years.

What bass lines have had the biggest impact on you?

Lots of Miles Davis songs. I would mention Percy Heath walking on “Blue Haze” from the *Blue Haze* album. “So What” and “All Blues” from the *Kind Of Blue* album. “Eight-One” from *E.S.P.*

What advice would you give to a student who is thinking about studying bass with Berklee Online?

Enjoy! Practice as much and as thoughtfully as you can and do a lot of listening in the style of the course you are taking. And again, Enjoy!

Your Career Path

Ever wonder what kinds of careers exist for bassists? You may be surprised to learn that there's more to it than just playing in a rock band. The opportunities are even broader:

Session Musician • Bandleader • Pit Orchestra Musician
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Private Music Instructor • Cruise Ship Musician • and more!

Check out our Careers page for more inspiration!

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Instructor Insights

The Key to Building a Groove Is All Q&A

By Anthony Vitti and Lenny Stallworth

As a young player, like most, I used to feel confined that I was playing the same stuff over and over again. I felt that it was theory—or some unknown scales that I didn't know how to use—that was causing this. Yet, when I would transcribe my favorite players,

I noticed that the bass lines and note selection were a lot simpler than it sounded on the recording. Of course a lot of that was the feel and phrasing of the player, but part of it was that some of these players never seemed to run out of ideas. Their bass lines were always different and fresh and they were able to do a lot with just a few notes and rhythms. When I tried to write my own lines, I always felt I was playing the same licks or just didn't have ideas.

Over the years, from playing, talking with great players, and studying their lines, I discovered what the great players do. It's all question-and-answer. That means that you state an idea and then you answer it with a similar idea. The answers may be a little different note-wise or rhythmically, or even range-wise. After the answer, you then state the initial "question" again. After that you give a bigger "answer," then you add "fill" in your line to wrap it up and turn it around.

So, by way of example: If you have a one-bar bass line, you play that line, and we will call it "A." Then you answer it with a similar idea, but a little different. We will call that "B." We then play the "A" groove again, and then we play a "fill" or "bigger statement" that we will call "C." And there you have it.

What you are going for in the question-and-answer technique is a form of “A, B, A, C.” This way you take a simple one-bar idea and now you have stretched it out to four bars. Or, you take a simple two-bar idea and now that idea is eight bars and you do not sound like you have repeated yourself. Think about that!

Most verses in songs are eight measures. If we play two verses in a row, that’s 16 measures. With this eight-bar construction example, I have only repeated myself twice. If you were playing a one-bar bass line, you would have repeated yourself 16 times!

Let’s look at the song “Forget Me Nots” by Patrice Rushen. The title might not ring a bell, but as soon as you cue it up on whatever your streaming player of choice is, you’ll recognize it. It’s bassist Freddie Washington laying down what has to be one of the most recognizable and famous slap bass lines of all time. It earned Freddie a gold album award and it has been featured and sampled numerous times in movies, TV shows, and nearly 50 other songs. Probably the most famous version today is the theme song to *Men in Black*, the 1997 movie starring Will Smith (who also sang the song).

Pay attention to the thumbing figure on the first beat of measures 4 and 8. That’s not easy to do. Also, check out how Freddie

incorporates the basic octave technique with the other foundational techniques we have studied. Lastly, listen to the groove construction on both sections. It's A, B, A, C, what we have been focusing on in this lesson. This bass line really reinforces the question-and-answer technique. If you start listening closely to bass lines, you'll get a lot more ideas—and answers!—from the Q&A technique.

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