

LEARNING MADE EASY



3rd Edition

Bass Guitar

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Develop solid rhythm
and timing

Build scales and modes
into great bass lines

Play a ton of grooves
in a variety of styles

Patrick Pfeiffer

Professional bassist and bass coach

Bass Guitar

for
dummies[®]
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Bass Guitar

3rd Edition

by Patrick Pfeiffer

FOREWORD by Will Lee

Bassist, Late Show with David Letterman

for
dummies[®]
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Bass Guitar For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

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Foreword

For bassists or bass wannabes, *Bass Guitar For Dummies* takes you on a tour of the instrument and explores all avenues of bassdom. Of the myriad tools available for bassists, *Bass Guitar For Dummies* is at the pinnacle of them all. Never before has such a complete anthology been assembled. It's like having an unlimited ticket for all the rides at BassLand!

Patrick Pfeiffer, great communicator of bass guitar, has laid it all out for you to enjoy. *Bass Guitar For Dummies* can be read laterally, literally, or “loiterily.” In other words, cover to cover, in order, or at your leisure; when you have a couple of minutes, just read a page, or a chapter. It's not too deep, not too heavy, but it's all good information and a lot of fun. So dig in, and enjoy *Bass Guitar For Dummies*!

All the Bass,

Will Lee, Grammy-award-winning bassist, *Late Show with David Letterman*

Introduction

Shake the earth with deep, sonorous vibrations. Let your melodies swoop and soar like swallows over a meadow. Be the force that relentlessly drives the music with percussive, percolating emanations from your speaker. Rumble like the ominous thunder of an approaching storm. Whisper, growl, *roar* your grooves into the universe. For you, it's not enough just to be heard; you *will* be felt. You are . . . the bass player.

Imagine your favorite music without bass. It doesn't work, does it? The bass is the heartbeat of the music, the foundation for the groove, and the glue that holds together all the different instruments. You can hear the music sing as it's carried along by the bass groove. You can sense the music come to life. You can feel the vibrations of those low notes — sometimes subtle and caressing, sometimes literally earthshaking — as they propel the song. The bass is the heart of it all.

Leave center stage to the other musicians — you have more important work to do. The limelight may be cool, but bassists rule!

About This Book

You can find everything you need to master the bass in *Bass Guitar For Dummies*, 3rd Edition — from the correct way to strike a note to the way to play a funk groove in the style of Jaco Pastorius. It's all here.

Each chapter is independent of the others. You can skip the stuff you already know and go straight to the parts that interest you without feeling lost. To find the subject you're looking for, just check out the table of contents. You also can look up specific topics in the index at the back of the book. Or you can read from front to back and build up your bass-playing skills step by step. Whatever you choose, just remember to enjoy the journey.

I structure this book so you can decide for yourself how far you want to take your skills on the instrument. As I was writing, I checked out the entrance requirements for music schools and conservatories, and I included the information that fulfills those requirements (without getting too theoretical — after all, you don't want to spend all your time theorizing . . . you want to *play*). In fact, this book goes

well beyond the minimum requirements and shows you how to actually *apply* all this information to real-life bass playing. I show you how to play in different styles and how to create your own grooves and solos so you don't have to copy someone else's bass line note-for-note.

No bass guitar? No problem. This book doesn't assume you have your own bass. If you don't, just head over to Part 5 to find out how to choose the right bass and accessories to get started. If you already have a bass, you can start with the maintenance section in Chapter 18 and find out how to set up your instrument so it's easiest to play.

You don't need to read music to figure out how to play the bass guitar. (You can unknit your eyebrows now . . . it's true.) So how can you get the information you need from this book? Here's how:

- » **Look at the grids.** The grids are pictures of the notes you play on the fingerboard of the bass guitar. The grids show you where the notes are in relation to each other and which fingers you use to play them. They also provide you with an additional advantage: If you use the grid to finger a certain pattern of notes, you can then transfer the same pattern (fingering and all) onto any other section of the fingerboard to play the note pattern in a different key. That's why reading music isn't necessary. The notes on a page of regular music notation look completely different for each new key, but if you use the grid, you'll find that, as far as note patterns go, one size fits all.
- » **Read the tablature.** *Tablature* is a shorthand notational technique that shows you which string to strike and where to hold the string down to sound a note. The short name for tablature is *tab* (just in case anyone asks).
- » **Listen to the audio tracks.** You can hear all the exercises and grooves that are shown in the figures by simply going online to www.dummies.com/go/bassguitar and listening to audio tracks for each one. You can listen to the sound of a groove, take a look at the grid and the tab, put your hand in the proper position on the fingerboard, and then reproduce the sound. While you're there, you may as well check out the video clips that show you the details for playing certain figures.

After you master a groove, you can pan to one side to remove the sound of the bass. Then you can play the groove in the example with just the drums and the guitar (in other words, with real musicians). Or you can create your own groove in the feel and style of the example.

- » **As you improve, try reading the music notation.** As you get better, you can look at the notation and begin to learn to read music. After you figure out how to play a few phrases, you quickly discover that reading music notation isn't as difficult as it's made out to be. In fact, you'll realize that it makes your musical life easier.

I use the following conventions in *Bass Guitar For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, to help keep the text consistent and make it easy to follow:

- » **Right hand and left hand:** Instead of saying *striking hand* and *fretting hand*, I say *right hand* for the hand that strikes the string and *left hand* for the hand that frets the note. My apologies to left-handed players. If you're left-handed, please read *right hand* to mean *left hand* and vice versa.
- » **Up and down, higher and lower:** Moving your left hand up the neck of the bass means moving it up in *pitch* (moving your hand toward the body of the bass). Moving your left hand down the neck means moving it down in *pitch* (moving your hand away from the body). I use the same principle for the right hand. Going to the next *higher* string means playing the string that has a higher sound (the string closer to the floor). The next *lower* string is the string that has a lower sound (the string closer to the ceiling). Just think of whether the sound is higher or lower and you'll be fine.
- » **Triple music notation:** In the figures, the music for the grooves and the exercises is printed with the standard music notation on top, the tablature below, and the grid next to them. You don't have to read all of them at the same time (good heavens — that would be worse than reading piano music). Simply pick the one you feel most comfortable with, and then use the others to double-check that you're playing the groove or exercise correctly. Of course, you also can listen to the audio tracks to hear what the music is supposed to sound like.
- » **The numbers:** In the text, the numbers between 1 and 8 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) represent notes in a chord or scale (for example, the number 3 represents the third note in a given scale). The designation 7th, on the other hand, refers to a particular chord, such as a major 7th chord. Finally, the distance between two notes (the interval) is called a 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and so on.

Foolish Assumptions

As I wrote this book, I made one assumption about you, the reader: I assume that you want to play the bass guitar. But that's it. I don't assume anything else. No matter what style you're interested in, this book covers them all. It doesn't even matter whether you want to play a four-, five-, or six-string bass. The grids featured in this book can be used for any bass guitar, and the shapes of the patterns never change. All you have to do is read this book with an open mind, and I assure you, you'll be playing bass . . . and quickly. Of course, you can master the bass even more quickly if you use this book in conjunction with private lessons from an experienced bass guitar teacher who can help you tackle specific weak spots in your playing. And any experience you've had playing another instrument won't go to waste, either.

Icons Used in This Book

In the margins of *Bass Guitar For Dummies*, 3rd Edition (as in all *For Dummies* books), you find icons to help you maneuver through the text. Here's what the icons mean:



TIP

This icon points out expert advice to help you become a better bassist.



WARNING

Be careful! This icon helps you avoid doing damage to the instrument, yourself, or someone's ears.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Brace yourself for some technical facts and information that may come in handy some day. If you want, you can skip over this stuff — and still not miss a beat.



REMEMBER

Certain techniques are worth remembering. Take note of the information that's highlighted by this icon.



PLAY THIS

This icon helps you better understand what you're hearing when you listen to the audio samples and watch the videos of the different techniques.

Beyond the Book

This book provides a solid foundation for learning bass guitar, but you can find many more resources on Dummies.com:

- » There are more than 100 audio tracks that accompany the chapters of this book. I also give video demonstrations of more than 30 key lessons. You can download the audio tracks and watch the videos at www.dummies.com/go/bassguitar.
- » You can download the book's Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/bassguitar. It's a handy resource to keep on your computer, tablet, or smartphone.
- » You can read interesting companion articles that supplement the book's content at www.dummies.com/extras/bassguitar. We've even included an extra top-ten list.

Where to Go from Here

Where do you go from here? Well, to Hollywood Bowl, of course! Maybe not right away . . . but, hey, never give up your dream. If you don't have a bass guitar yet, skip to Chapter 15 to see what's in store for you. ("What's in store for you" . . . get it? It's the bass shopping chapter.) If you're a beginner, you have a bass guitar, and you're ready to play, skip to Chapter 2 and start getting your instrument in tune (followed by getting your hands into shape). If you're already playing bass guitar, start reading Chapter 5 with your bass guitar in hand, and then enjoy playing your way through the rest of this book.

No matter how well you currently play, this book can help you improve your skills. If you're picking up the bass for the first time, remember that bringing music into your life may well be the first step in a lifelong journey of musical enrichment. If you want to delve deeper into this whole bass business, please visit me at www.PatrickPfeifferBass.com.

1

Getting Started with the Bass Guitar

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover the different parts that make up a bass guitar.

Get an overview of what your bass guitar can do.

Figure out how to position your hands.

Prepare to warm up and coordinate your hands.

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

Chapter **1**

The Very Basics of 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 “bassment,” 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 4 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.



REMEMBER

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.



TIP

Nothing works better than a *metronome* to help you develop an unfailing 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.