

THE LEFT HAND (OR FRETTING HAND)

The left hand (or right hand if you are a lefty) will employ one of two techniques when you play bass; depending on the type of riff you are playing. These two techniques are:

- the 3-fret stretch
- the 4-fret stretch

THE 3-FRET STRETCH



The 3-fret stretch is going to be used very often when you play bass. But do not just use your first three fingers to do this; use all *four* fingers over *three* frets. I also call this "the cup" or "bunch of bananas," because when your fingers are alongside each other and you turn your hand inward to fret the bass, it looks like a bunch of bananas. It's probably the best left-hand fingering technique for most groove playing.

The 3-fret stretch makes sense for a number of reasons:

1. First of all, on a bass, three frets are just about the width of your four fingers, so it's a *natural* hand position.
2. Secondly, the "bunch of bananas" helps mute any strings that you are not playing and articulate the notes you are playing. (It gives them a bit more punch.)
3. Thirdly, it makes for *economical* use of the left hand. There's not a lot of flailing around.

Go check out any top-level pro bassist at a gig. Chances are, he's using "the cup" and his hand barely moves, even though you're hearing a barrage of bass notes.

THE 4-FRET STRETCH



The 4-fret stretch requires that you stretch all four fingers over four adjoining frets. This is probably the farthest stretch you will need to employ. It is most effective when playing scales, some arpeggios (chord tones), and melodic phrases or riffs because you will be able to reach most of the notes without moving your wrist. It can be used for groove-oriented routines *sometimes*. But you will find it most effective when playing licks more than grooves.

WHICH TECHNIQUE SHOULD I USE?

Both techniques are important, depending on what you're playing. But let it be said, if I walked into a gig and saw the bassist's left hand in a 4-fret stretch and saw no part of his body keeping time, I would assume he's more of a riffing bassist than a big-time groove bassist. If I walked in on another gig and saw the bassist's left hand in "the cup" position and his head (or some part of his body) movin' to the groove, I'd know this guy's gonna be "layin' it down." Point of the story: I'd probably leave the first gig after a couple tunes, and stay at the second gig all night!

There's nothing wrong with riffs and licks. They are great. But, if you define yourself as more riff than groove, you may be a pretty good instrumentalist, but you are not a good bassist. Balance the two, and you can be great.

Try not to be seduced by bassists with great "lead" chops. It can distract you from establishing one of the most important skills of bass playing: a strong pulse and sense of momentum in your playing. Whatever you play must always come from deep within the groove. The late Jaco Pastorius, for example, was a brilliant soloist. But people sometimes forget that he was an R&B bassist first, and a soloist second. When he soloed, it was a song. And there was *always* groove. That's why his riffs worked.

THE RIGHT HAND (OR PLUCKING HAND)

In this segment, we'll explore two very important right hand techniques. (Lefties, refer to your left hand here!) All are valid and accomplish different goals. One is not necessarily better than the other; it simply depends on the style of the song to be played.

Back in the 70's, you weren't considered a *real* bass player unless you played fingerstyle. What a misconception! That may have encouraged some players to be lazy and not develop other techniques such as picking, etc. Sometimes a "picked" song might be just what the doctor (or producer) ordered. Maybe a ballad might call for a thumb/muting technique. So, be versatile, and learn them all. Personally, I couldn't imagine the bass part to Yes' "Roundabout" without Chris Squire and his pick, or Anthony Jackson's "For the Love of Money" without a pick. Marcus Miller's thumb/muting technique is the perfect touch on a David Sanborn ballad. Larry Graham's slap and pop is the *only* way to play "Dance to the Music." Think of your right hand as a painter's palette and these techniques as the different colors. Painting with only one color would be so limiting. Playing bass with one technique is also so limiting. I rest my case.

THE TECHNIQUES

While all of these techniques are important, you'll probably find the first one shown, fingerstyle (a.k.a. pizzicato), to be the most versatile. Beginners should start with fingerstyle, and then proceed to the other techniques. All others should likewise review proper fingerstyle technique, and then proceed to the other styles.

Remember to use these examples as a starting point. They are to be played on open strings so you can develop good right hand technique before you have to play more complicated note patterns. As your technique improves, be creative and make up your own examples based on the techniques explained here. Be strict on yourself, and do not deviate from proper technique. If you are not disciplined, you will develop bad technique. Your favorite grooves will not groove. If you start out with proper technique, *everything* will groove.

1. FINGERSTYLE (A.K.A. PIZZICATO)



One right hand technique is *fingerstyle*, also known as "pizzicato." The rules are simple and to the point:

- Rest your thumb against the edge of the pickup, and use your index and middle fingers to pluck each string.
- *Always* rest the thumb against the pickup when plucking the E string. You may rest the thumb against the E string when moving to play the A, D, and G strings. (If you are playing a lick just on the E and A strings, leave your thumb against the pickup.) When you have to return to the E string, just slip your thumb back against the pickup. After a few times, this process will become automatic.



- Always begin plucking with the middle (m) finger and *alternate* with your index (i) finger. Try plucking the open E string with this method, playing steady quarter notes. Then, do the same thing on the open A string. Next, play the open D string. Then, play the open G string. I call this a "TV exercise" because you can just veg out to the TV while getting some quality technique practice time in. Repetition is the key. When you play something over and over again, it becomes second nature. You don't even have to think about it; you just do it.

♩ = 88 i = index finger
 m = middle finger

- The only time you do *not* alternate is when you are moving from a higher string (like the G) to a lower string (like the D). Just remember, use the same finger for the last note played on the higher string as you would for the first note on the lower string. Then, begin alternating again. When you analyze this process, you'll discover that this is actually the most efficient use of your right hand. The finger to pluck the last note on the higher string *naturally* falls into position against the next lower string, ready to pluck the first note on that string. Check it out, it works.

EXAMPLE 1

♩ = 88 i = index finger
 m = middle finger

◀ [AUDIO-BassBegin1.mp3](#)

Important point: You may be wondering, "Why start plucking with my middle finger? Why not use my index?" The answer is, if you start with your index finger, chances are you will be *inconsistent* in alternating your fingers when you play bass. This is an observation of mine based on twenty years of teaching bass. I believe this for the following reason. Because your middle finger is *longer*, it is already resting against a string, ready to go to work. Therefore, it is the natural, *intuitive* choice. In theory, one would guess the index finger wants to begin, but against a string, the middle finger is in a more natural ready position. *Every* student who alternated beginning with his or her index plucked with the same finger for several notes at a time during a piece of music. This severely limited their ability to play fast *and* their ability to groove! I'm sure someone is an exception to this rule, but if you play the percentages and begin with the middle finger, your life as a bassist will be a groove!

Warning! When you practice, *watch* your right hand to be sure you are alternating fingers. Most bassists watch their fretting hand and assume that their plucking hand is doing the proper job. Don't assume anything when playing bass. Be sure you are playing with proper technique. It is almost impossible to break a bad habit once it has become part of your technique. Be smart and avoid problems before they become your problems.

Right hand placement and tonal variety. You can get tonal variety when you pluck by moving your right hand toward the neck or toward the bridge. If you move closer to neck, the tone will darken (get bassy). If you move closer to bridge, the tone will brighten (get trebly). Most of the time, right over the pickup is the best place to play. But occasionally you may need more bass or treble, and this technique works.

2. PICKING



Remember: You need to be able to make many different *kinds* of sounds to be a strong bassist. Picking is one of those sounds. Picking has its place in bass playing. There are actually two ways to pick: You can use a pick, or you can use your fingernail. I like to use the fingernail on my index (#1) finger as a sort of "imaginary pick." This way I can never drop my pick because it is part of me!

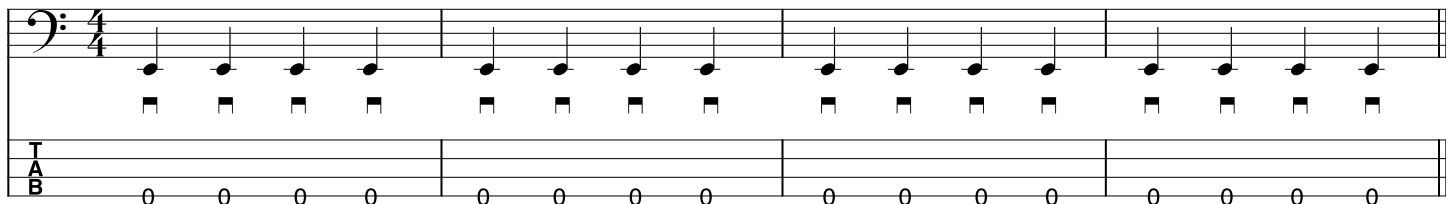
If you prefer an actual pick, grasp it between your thumb and your index finger. If you prefer your fingernail, put your thumb and index finger together as if you are holding an imaginary pick. Rest the edge of your hand against the bridge, behind the saddles that hold your strings up. This will give you a solid anchor and allow you to pluck steadily and evenly.

QUARTER NOTES

To become a good picker, you must learn to play downstrokes and upstrokes. First practice downstrokes with quarter notes. This will help you feel the pulse and "downbeat feel" of downstrokes.

EXAMPLE 2

 = downstroke
 = 88



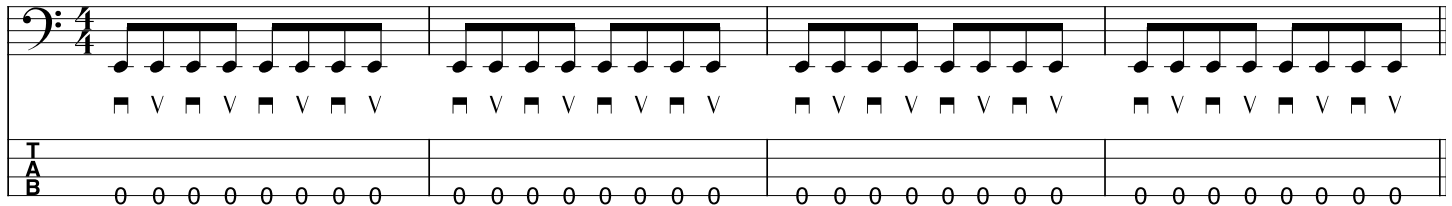
◀ [AUDIO-Example2.mp3](#)

EIGHTH NOTES

Then, practice alternating downstrokes with upstrokes while playing eighth notes. Remember this when playing eighth notes: Play downstrokes on downbeats and upstrokes on upbeats. If you do this, you will always groove.

EXAMPLE 3

 = 88
  = downstroke
 = upstroke



◀ [AUDIO-Example3.mp3](#)

FENDER PLAYERS CLUB BASS FOR BEGINNERS



This lesson is from:

[Bass for Beginners](#) (Bass Builders series)
by Glenn Letsch.

This book/CD pack by professional bassist Glenn Letsch provides the basic tools for solid, fundamental electric bass playing.

It covers topics that all players need to know, such as: proper left- and right-hand technique; reading standard notation and tablature; music theory and application; bass isometrics; scales; ear training; and more!

The book also answers frequently asked questions, and provides a special section of practice routines for the beginning bassist.

The CD includes 99 demo tracks.

Inventory # HL 695099. Book/CD pack \$19.95 (US).

Recordings referred to in this lesson:

"Roundabout:" from Yes, *Fragile*, 1972 (Atlantic)

"For the Love of Money:" from the O'Jays, *Ship Ahoy*, 1974 (Philadelphia), CD 1990 (Columbia)

"Dance to the Music:" from Sly & the Family Stone, *Dance to the Music*, 1968 (Epic)

Representative recordings:

Jaco Pastorius: *Jaco Pastorius*, 1976 (Epic/Legacy)

David Sanborn: *Voyeur*, 1981 (Warner Brothers)