

The Eight Common Mistakes Bass Students Make

Hi again, in this article I thought it was about time I talked about some perennial subjects that come up again and again with my students. These are the classic mistakes that so many people make when they're learning the bass, wasting practice time and slowing down their progress. If you avoid these pitfalls you will find your practice more interesting, less arduous, and you will get better quicker.

1. Don't spend all your practice time playing the bass.

There are some really essential skills you need to work on to become a good musician that require time away from the bass. If you have four hours to practice you can easily spend half of that time listening, writing down licks, learning about harmony and chord/scale relations at the keyboard etc. If you do that background work then the time spent on your bass will be much more productive.

2. Don't use your instrument to "help" you learn things by ear.

I've seen hundreds of students who struggle to recognise intervals, their relative pitch is very poor. And no matter how much time they spend learning songs by ear it doesn't get any better. Here's why: Their pitching is good enough to recognise a note if they can find it on their bass. So they listen to a bit, search around on the fingerboard until they find the note, then move on. Sound familiar? If you do this then all you're doing is using the basic pitch recognition you already have to search random notes until you hit the right one. This does absolutely nothing to develop your aural skill. You've got to learn to rely on your ears alone to recognise intervals, and sequences of intervals (i.e melodies).

How do you work on this skill? Well, to start with pick the simplest music you can find, nursery rhymes if necessary – use your instrument to work out the first note and what key you're in, then work without using your instrument. Do use your voice! – If you can sing an interval that means you can hear it. And learning to do one helps the other. Which leads me to my next point....

3. Practice singing.

All singers should learn an instrument, and all instrumentalists should sing. This is the best way to develop your sense of pitch. If you're not up for singing in public that's fine, it can be a private habit that you do in your bedroom. If you don't develop that sense of pitch then everything you play will just be a bunch of patterns on the fingerboard and you will never develop any real musicianship. Also, it's worth pointing out that some vocal ability is one of the most useful skills you can have to make you more employable as a bass player.

4. Learn some piano/keyboard.

The keyboard has been the most useful musical tool in the history of music. Composers have used it for hundreds of years, and if you do any programming the chances are you will use a keyboard to enter the information. It's a graphical interface that has all the notes laid out clearly with sharps and flats as black notes so you can see the shape of chords and scales

in a way that's not possible on any other instrument. If you learn chords and scales on a keyboard you will have a deeper understanding of everything you do on the bass.

5. Learn the names of the notes on every fret of the bass.

Earlier I mentioned that if you don't have good pitch recognition then everything you play will be just a bunch of patterns on the fingerboard. But you also have to know where the notes are on the bass. This is why using tab is more of a hindrance than a help. It just teaches you patterns, I've seen a lot of bass students who can play tunes without having a clue what notes they're playing. Tab is a shortcut in the short term, but like finding notes by trial and error it stops you developing your skills as a musician.

6. Don't play too hard (or too softly).

On any instrument you have a dynamic range, from very quiet (ppp) to very loud (fff). On an electric instrument you can set the volume on your amp anywhere from one to ten (or eleven if you're Nigel Tufnell), and because of this many players are then unaware of the dynamic they are physically playing at. There are several reasons why people play too hard. If your amp is underpowered and you're playing with loud drummers and guitarists you end up playing hard just to be heard in the mix. Some players also fall into the trap of playing hard because they imagine it will give them a 'big' sound. It might give a good attack, but what you gain on the attack you lose on the sustain. A lot of times you will have a fatter sound by turning up louder and playing lighter. This means the sustain part of the notes is louder in relation to the attack. Another reason people play too hard is they tense up when they are playing. This can be due to nerves or excitement – but either way it doesn't help your sound or your time. Have you ever had the experience of learning an intricate riff, then being unable to play it with a band at high volume? This is probably because you're playing harder than you realise and you have lost a lot of your dexterity as a result. Get used to turning up as loud as you need to so that you can play with a medium to light touch most of the time, only digging in when you need to play accents or really loud sections. It makes playing easier, and opens up the range of expression you can get from your bass.

7. Don't play to a click on every beat.

A lot of students practice to a click to improve their time. But just putting a click on every beat is not much help. It can show up some inconsistencies in your playing, but it is more likely to act as a crutch – doing the job of timekeeping for you so you never have to develop your own internal metronome. Try using the click on just beats 2 and 4. Now you are responsible for hitting beat 1 accurately. Now how about putting the click on just one beat of the bar (try all of them) – that's a lot of space to play in. You really have to be consistent if you are going to stay in time from one bar to another. Now how about instead of having the click on the beat try having it on the "and". How does that feel? Then maybe all the 16th note placements.... there are many possibilities to working with a click. Exploring them will give you a whole new awareness of time.

8. Don't waste your time practicing advanced techniques.

Bass magazines are full of cool info about all the virtuoso bass players. Most of them have instructional videos explaining their advanced techniques. Slapping, tapping, chords, soloing, harmonics, altered tunings etc etc. The amount of information out there about advanced techniques is hugely out of proportion to the amount of time most bass players will spend using those techniques. Why? Because it's fun, it's interesting, it's impressive, and it sells magazines and DVDs. I don't want to sound cynical here – I love some of the virtuoso bass repertoire. But here's the problem. A lot of bass students get some basic technique down and then start having a go at advanced techniques. Some of them spend quite a lot of their practice time on it. Sometimes they even get some of the licks to sound pretty good, but mostly they just play them badly. In any case there is no real musicianship behind it. Spending time working on advanced techniques for most people is a very poor investment of their time. Ask yourself what kind of bands you want to play in, and what core skills you need to do that kind of work. You are definitely going to need great ears, a solid knowledge of the fingerboard, a thorough understanding of chord/scale relations, great time, a great sound, a solid core technique. If you want to be a really useful band member then there are other important skills you may want to work on. Singing (at least well enough to do BVs), playing double bass, and sight reading. Maybe even getting your driving licence! All of that stuff should take priority over tapping, chords, solos etc. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a killjoy, I love all the cool things you can do with a bass, and I have no sympathy with the school of thought that says bass players should stick to 4 strings, never go up the dusty end, and stay in the background all the time. I'm not saying don't practice advanced techniques at all. Just realise that they are the icing on the cake. Take care of all the other stuff. Then have some fun with the advanced techniques. Often you will find that these techniques are not as difficult as they appear once you have got your core skills to a good level. I do a wide variety of different gigs, and very occasionally I throw in a harmonic or a tapped lick or a chordal part, but it's a very small part of what I do. I don't think anyone has ever asked me to do any of that stuff and I only do it when it is musically appropriate (which is not very often). Of course, if you really have your heart set on being the next great solo bass player and you are willing to work extremely hard indeed, then good luck, go for it!

Sometimes it's easy to fall into making some of these common mistakes because you're not really sure what you should be practicing or how to go about it. A good teacher should be able to work out a structured practice routine with you and give you some goals to aim at. If you manage to avoid the pitfalls I have talked about here you will find it much easier to make progress. Happy practicing!

www.mikenichols.co.uk