

PERFORMANCE 3

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MI Curriculum Series

Series Sponsor: Jon Clayden, Vice President of Academic Affairs

Creative Director & Executive Editor: Donny Gruendler, Vice President of Instruction and Curricular Development

Managing Editor: Joe Bergamini

Published for MI by WBH MusicWorks LLC

Executive Producers: Rob Wallis, Joe Bergamini, Mike Hoff

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BASS PERFORMANCE 3

Unit 1

1. Advanced Eighth-Note Rock Bass Lines 4
2. Performance Notes and Sound 5
3. Eighth-Note Rock Play-Along 1 8
4. Performance Notes and Sound, Pt. 2 9
5. Eighth-Note Rock Play-Along 2 11
6. Advanced Rock Performance 12

Unit 2

1. Advanced Shuffle and Straight Eighth Feel 14
2. Performance Notes and Sound 15
3. Blues-Rock Play-Along 1 18
4. Blues-Rock Play-Along 2 19

Unit 3

1. Heavy Metal Bass Lines 21
2. Performance Notes and Sound 22
3. Heavy Metal Play-Along 25
4. Progressive Metal Play-Along 26

Unit 4

1. Introduction to Soul-Funk 28
2. Performance Notes and Sound 29
3. Soul-Funk Play-Along 1 32
4. Performance Notes and Sound, Pt. 2 34
5. Soul-Funk Play-Along 2 36

Unit 5

1. Introduction to Hip-Hop 38
2. Performance Notes and Sound 39
3. Hip-Hop Play-Along 42
4. Performance Pieces 43

Unit 6

1. Introduction to Worldbeat 45
2. Performance Notes and Sound 46
3. Worldbeat Play-Along 48
4. Worldbeat Performance Pieces 49

Unit 7

1. Switching Between Finger and Slap Style 52
2. Performance Notes and Sound 53
3. Finger/Slap Funk Play-Along 59

Unit 8

1. Switching Between Straight and Swing Feels 61
2. Performance Notes and Sound 62
3. Bossa Nova Play-Along 69

Unit 9

1. Brazilian Styles: Introduction to Samba 71
2. Performance Notes and Sound 72
3. Samba Play-Along 74
4. Samba Performance Pieces 78

Unit 10

1. Introduction to Bass Chords 87
 2. Performance Notes and Sound 88
 3. Bass Chord Play-Along 94
 4. Performance Piece 95
- About the Author 98

Chapter 1: Advanced Eighth-Note Rock Bass Lines

Playing an eighth-note rock bass line is one of the most called-upon techniques you will be asked to perform as a professional bass player. Though simple in concept, the beauty and depth (and success) of eighth-note rock relies heavily on a fundamental awareness of minutia: the length of notes, where those notes are played, the use of a pick or fingers, front pickup or back—these are all important decisions one must consider when creating a professional-sounding rock bass line.

We've covered the basic construction of eighth-note lines (single notes built on a repetitive eighth-note rhythmic figure), but now we'll look at some of the details that help give rock grooves that professional feel, the performance aspects that will separate the truly great from the truly average bass line.

It can be helpful to think of the techniques covered in this chapter as "paint colors" that give your bass line its unique flavor. Let's dissect a musical example to explore these topics.

Chapter 2: Performance Notes and Sound

Pickup Selection: One of the more important decisions we have as bass players when performing is what pickup to use for a given song. As you know, there are generally two choices, front or back. The front creates a more round, less defined sound, while the back is thinner with more attack. For this unit we will be using both pickups set on full (or center detent for more modern instruments) so as to best utilize the best attributes of both pickups.

Anticipations: The eighth-note rock bass line lends itself nicely to rhythmic anticipations. Generally, anticipating the start of a new bar is something that can push the sound of the line forward. It's often a good idea to make sure the drummer is also anticipating the same figures. In the example below we are anticipating the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth bar. Anticipations are simply notes played early. They anticipate an arriving phrase, chord, or note.

Ex. 1.1

♩ = 140

A G5 B^b5 C5 A5

G5 B^b5 C5 D5

Note Length (Staccato): Note length is one of the more important aspects of a successful rock bass line. By changing the duration of certain notes within a section, you can drastically change the sound and function of the line within a song. In this example, we are playing the notes from the pre-chorus (B section) of this chapter's song as short as possible (staccato). *Staccato* is simply defined as a note with a shortened duration, and represented in music notation by a note with a dot below it.

Ex. 1.2

♩ = 140

B G5 F5 E^b5 D5 G5 F5 E^b5 D5

G5 F5 E^b5 D5 E^b5 F5 G5

Note Length (Legato): Try playing the same example with long notes, this time concentrating on running the notes into each other as much as possible (legato). A legato marking indicates a note or phrase that is to be played in a sweeping motion, or as connected as possible, and is notated with an elongated line below each phrase. One common performance trick is to play a note and slide to the same note an octave higher on the same string. For example, you could play the two G's in measure 1 on the third fret of the E string and slide to a G an octave higher, also on the E string.

Ex. 1.3

♩ = 140

B G5 F5 E♭5 D5 G5 F5 E♭5 D5

G5 F5 E♭5 D5 G5 F5 E♭5 D5 E♭5 F5 G5

Passing Notes: In the example below, we utilize a passing note (the G \flat in bar 32). A *passing note* is a note outside the key that is used to set up a new chord or section of the song. They are generally used on a weak beat (beats 2 or 4), and function as a way to lead our ear back to the original key or bass line. Passing notes are also sometimes referred to as approach tones, as they generally approach a target note or chord from a half step above or below. Notice how the G \flat in the example below pulls our ear back to the root note by approaching the G in bar 33 from a half step below.

Ex. 1.4

♩ = 140

C G5 F5 G5 F5 G5 C5 G5 C5

G5 F5 G5 F5 G5 C5 G5 F#5

29

A G5 B♭5 C5 A5

33

Note Location on the Bass: All notes are not created equal. Generally, rock bass lines sound best when played on the E and A strings. An A played on the twelfth fret of the A string, is more sonically rich or “big” sounding than the same A played on the seventh fret of the D string. It is important to keep this in mind when creating a bass line that will have a consistent sound from one note to the next.

Even though the D in bars 2,4,5,6 and 7 from the example below can be played on the A string, it could potentially sound more full when played on tenth fret of the E string. These minute details often depend on the newness of your strings and setup of your bass. Low action will generally make this effect more noticeable.

Ex. 1.5

♩ = 140

B G5 F5 E♭5 D5 G5 F5 E♭5 D5

G5 F5 E♭5 D5 G5 F5 E♭5 D5 G5 F5 E♭5 D5 E♭5 F5 G5

Chapter 3: Eighth-Note Rock Play-Along 1

Ex. 1.6

$\text{♩} = 140$

A G5 B \flat 5 C5 A5

G5 B \flat 5 C5 D5

5

B G5 F5 E \flat 5 D5 G5 F5 E \flat 5 D5

9

G5 F5 E \flat 5 D5 G5 F5 E \flat 5 D5 E \flat 5 F5 G5

13

C G5 F5 G5 F5 G5 C5 G5 C5

17

G5 F5 G5 F5 G5 C5 G5 F \sharp 5

21

A G5 B \flat 5 C5 A5

25

G5 B \flat 5 C5 D5

29

G5 E \flat 5 D5 G5 F5 E \flat 5 D5

33

Chapter 4: Performance Notes and Sound, Pt. 2

In our next song example, we will look at other common devices when it comes to creating a strong eighth-note rock bass line.

Pentatonics: The major and minor pentatonic is good way to create interesting melodic structure within a rock bass line. They can be applied as fills or integrated into the overall bass line itself (as seen below in the A-section of our song example).

Ex. 1.7

♩ = 140

A

C5 F5 C5 F5

C5 F5 C5 F5

When pentatonics are used as fills, it is often helpful to consider “playing into” approaching chord changes or song sections in order return to (and solidify) the established bass line. In the example below, notice how the minor pentatonic fill in the fourth bar leads nicely back into the bass line at the fifth bar.

Ex. 1.8

♩ = 140

C

C5 B^b5 C5

25

C5 B^b5 C5

29

Playing Over the Bar Line: Take a look at the fourth and fifth bar of this example. Notice how the pentatonic fill carries over the top of the standard four bar section. One would expect the fill from the fourth bar to conclude in the fifth bar and return to the bass line, but it does not. This is often referred to as “playing over the bar line.” Simply put, it is extending a fill so it does not resolve where the listener expects. This technique should be used sparingly, and only when you have developed a strong internal feel so as not to get lost or disrupt the flow of the established groove.

Ex. 1.9

♩ = 140

B E♭5 F5 G5

17

E♭5 F5 G5

21

Space: One interesting aspect of all bass lines is the idea of space within a line. Composing a bass line that is too busy will often make the music sound thin when that line gets to a simpler section, or drops out for any reason. Because of this, it is generally better to begin a bass line simply, and have it grow over the course of a song. In a rock bass line, we are often relegated to eighth notes, so an interesting technique to help build space into your line can be something like the last three bars of Ex 1.9. Notice how the downbeat of every bar is left open.

Pick vs. Fingers: Playing bass with a pick is often an overlooked skill when it comes to the various techniques the professional bassist must have at their disposal. A pick can sometimes help a bass line cut through louder types of music, creating that “driving” feel common in rock bass parts. You should be able to play all bass lines with both pick and fingers, especially when it comes to eight-note rock parts.

Locking with a Drummer: Of course, as with any other style, locking in with the drummer is essential when developing a successful rock bass line. Concentrating on the eighth-note divisions in various parts of the drum kit (the hi-hat or ride cymbal) can often help line up the eighth notes found in the bass line with the time feel of the drummer. Learn to listen to different parts of the drum kit at various times. This will help develop your ability to “lock in” with a drummer and improve your internal time feel at the same time. Of course, practicing with a metronome is also imperative when developing a good sense of time.