

## 9 The Bass Guitar in Popular Music

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### Introduction

All modern bass guitars (also known as electric basses) can be traced back to the Fender Precision Bass.<sup>1</sup> Released in 1951, the Precision Bass was intended to replace the acoustic upright basses that were then common in popular music. The instrument had been adapted from the design of the company's Broadcaster electric guitar (soon to be renamed the Telecaster) and featured a large solid body, a long, fretted neck, and four thick strings. Most importantly, it utilized a pickup, which allowed the instrument to be electrically amplified. At the time of its release, this bass guitar hybrid was considered so strange and unconventional that, according to one salesman, retailers "who were not sure if Leo [Fender] was crazy when he brought out the solid-body guitar were darn sure he was crazy now . . . They were convinced that a person would have to be out of their mind to play that thing."<sup>2</sup> In the end, the Precision Bass overcame its reputation as a novelty instrument thanks to its many practical advantages: it was easier to transport, easier to play, and, through its amplification, it was far easier to hear in an ensemble context than a traditional upright. The bass guitar's popularity subsequently spread across popular music as more and more musicians discovered these advantages. So great was its impact that, by the mid 1960s, not only did every major guitar manufacturer have their own version of a bass guitar but the instrument had also become a standard component of nearly every genre of Western popular music. In the decades since, the bass guitar has endured as popular music's favorite low-end instrument.

The bass guitar's history is inseparable from the history of the solid-body electric guitar. Both were often designed and built by the same instrument makers, produced at the same manufacturing facilities, and based around similar technological innovations, most notably amplification. For the electric guitar and bass guitar, the significant increase in volume that amplification provided made it possible for both to replace their acoustic predecessors. Despite their connections, however, each instrument ultimately came to serve distinct musical functions, with lead electric guitarists becoming featured soloists and bass guitarists relegated to background accompaniment.<sup>3</sup> Most writers have not equally valued

these two functions. The abiding trope of the “guitar god,” along with the overemphasis on rock styles in most early critical and scholarly analyses of popular music, has led to a robust literature on the electric guitar (to which this present volume also contributes). By contrast, the repetitive nature of most bass lines, their relative simplicity, and, most importantly, their supportive function in the music have all led critics, journalists, and academics to see the bass as less worthy of serious inquiry. Bassists’ musical contributions, therefore, have been regularly overlooked and underestimated, which, in turn, has meant that the bass’s role is far less commonly understood by average listeners.

This chapter and its accompanying playlist provide an overview of the ways that the bass guitar is most often used in popular music.<sup>4</sup> Rather than discuss the instrument in terms of genre, I focus instead on its wider musical functions. As I argue, bass lines can largely be categorized by five common performative strategies: basic accompaniments, rhythmic- and groove-oriented approaches, melodic-oriented approaches, slap and pop styles, and the use of alternative instruments and techniques. While these strategies frequently overlap, this simplified taxonomy is intended to help listeners better appreciate how the bass shapes the overall sound and feel of a recording. By using a diverse cross-section of examples drawn from classic rock, metal, pop, R&B, soul, funk, reggae, disco, jazz, hip hop, and more, this chapter also highlights bass guitarists’ profound, wide-ranging impact on music history.

## **Bass-ic Accompaniments**

The bass guitar is best thought of as a supporting instrument. Traditionally, bassists operate as part of the rhythm section, working in conjunction with drummers to construct the music’s rhythmic feel. Contrary to a drum kit, however, the bass guitar is also a pitched instrument. Tuned a full octave lower than a standard electric guitar, the bass occupies the “low end” of the frequency spectrum, and bassists therefore supply foundational low notes that establish or reinforce a song’s harmony, most often by playing the root notes of each chord.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, when an amplified bass guitar is played loudly in a live setting or reproduced via a decent speaker setup, the sound that it produces is felt within the body as much as it is heard by the ear. This is why the bass is usually a central component of dance musics: studies show that the tactile sensations produced by bass frequencies actively stimulate bodily movement.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, these functions have made the bass indispensable for most popular styles. To better understand the bass’s importance, this

section details some of the basic yet meaningful ways that the bass guitar is often used in popular music.

One approach that electric bassists frequently take is simply to “double” what the other musicians are playing, especially the electric guitarist. Most commonly, this takes the form of a “unison riff,” in which the bassist and guitarist play the same short, repeating musical phrase (although typically in different registers). For example, the intros to Black Sabbath’s “Paranoid” (1970) and Living Colour’s “Cult of Personality” (1988) each begin with the guitarist introducing a short, distorted riff, followed by the bassist joining in and duplicating the riff an octave lower. When the bass enters, those riffs are transformed into something dramatic and powerful, as when combined, the two instruments now more fully occupy the recording’s sonic space. This situation plays out in reverse in The Allman Brothers Band’s “Whipping Post” (1969), with the bass establishing the main riff first, followed by the guitarist joining in. In practice, unison riffs usually convey a sense of power, with the bass’s prominent low end adding to the “heaviness” that is valued in hard rock, punk, and metal.<sup>7</sup>

Because the bass plays a significant role in determining a song’s underlying rhythmic and harmonic structure, bass lines provide a supportive framework through which the other musical elements are understood. Take, for instance, Van Halen’s cover of The Kinks’ “You Really Got Me” (1978). The song is largely centered on an embellished unison riff played by bassist Michael Anthony and guitarist Eddie Van Halen. After the second chorus, Van Halen breaks away to play a highly technical solo that features rapid-fire passages, extended bends, “offbeat” phrasing, and his signature tapping, all while Anthony continues to play the riff underneath. Anthony’s role here is essential, as his steady rhythm and implied harmonic progression act as the foundation on top of which Van Halen builds his solo. In turn, the bass also becomes the lens through which we as listeners comprehend the solo’s expressivity, as Van Halen’s complex phrasing and note choices only make sense when heard against the stability of Anthony’s repeating bass line. In more extreme examples, the bass guitar is the only element that prevents a song from devolving into complete incoherence. Such is the case on Radiohead’s “The National Anthem” (2000), which is structured around a two-bar bass line, played by Thom Yorke, that continuously repeats while the rest of the music alternates between harsh dissonance and moments of relative calm. Beginning at approximately 2.50 minutes into the recording, the dissonance builds to a fever pitch with an extended free-jazz-inspired brass band section, which recedes temporarily before returning to ratchet up the tension yet again. Without the musical frame provided by Yorke’s bass line, the song would sound far more jumbled and chaotic.

None of the examples described thus far are particularly challenging to play. This demonstrates an important axiom about bass playing, which is that bass lines do not need to be complicated to be effective. Adele's "Rolling in the Deep" (2010) is a case in point. The bass guitar enters at the pre-chorus, with producer Paul Epworth playing eighth notes on the roots of each chord. This is a simple, straightforward bass line, but one that simultaneously performs four key functions: it fills out the low end, it reinforces the harmonic progression, it emphasizes the insistent rhythmic feel, and most importantly, it contributes to the song's building intensity. When the chorus finally hits, the bass complements Adele's vocals as she soars into her higher register and then descends. In both sections, the bass adds energy to the song, which dissipates as soon as the bass drops out at the beginning of the subsequent verses. Simple bass lines can also serve as an anchor that unites a song's otherwise disparate musical elements.<sup>8</sup> For example, on the Pixies' "Where Is My Mind?" (1988), Kim Deal plays a basic, four-bar root-note bass line; slow, steady, and consistent, her bass provides a valuable sense of stability across the song's exaggerated shifts in dynamics. As she explained to *Bass Player* magazine in 2004, "The bass in the Pixies is just glue; that's all it is. It's not supposed to be something else."<sup>9</sup>

Bassists' contributions may often be subtle, but they are nonetheless consequential. From filling out a recording's sonic space to creating a framework for the musicians and listeners, or simply by anchoring the rest of the band, even the humblest bass lines can have a significant effect on how we hear and make sense of the music. As I detail in the rest of this chapter, these effects are further magnified when bassists go beyond the basics.

## **Rhythmic- and Groove-Oriented Approaches**

One way that bass guitarists can take on a more prominent position in the music is by leaning into specific aspects of the bass's established functions. By far the most common strategy is to expand the bass's rhythmic role. Although the implementation of this strategy can vary widely depending on style and genre, its function is to take a more active part in shaping the overall feel of the music. In hard rock, metal, and punk, for instance, the bass is regularly used to provide a sense of forward motion. On Suzi Quatro's "Can the Can" (1973), Quatro's galloping bass line gives the song a rhythmic punch that pushes the song forward. As she explained to an interviewer in 2019, "The bass and drums are the engine that drives the song; nothing is more important."<sup>10</sup> Doubling down on this approach, Lemmy Kilmister adds a similar drive to Motörhead's "Ace of Spades"

(1980), conveying a sense of power and momentum through his incredibly fast rhythmic playing and his distorted bass timbre.<sup>11</sup>

While some bass guitarists use their instruments to rhythmically propel the music, others choose instead to emphasize cyclic grooves. These sorts of groove-oriented bass lines are especially common in dance musics, which often derive pleasure from the layering of repetitive, interlocking rhythms. Take Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" (1982), which begins with a drum pattern that establishes the song's steady pulse, followed by bassist Louis Johnson adding the song's repetitive, hypnotic bass line. Together, these two elements create a fluid, rhythmic feel, with Johnson's cyclic bass line weaving around the drum's kick-snare pattern. At various points in the recording, synths, Jackson's vocals, and electric guitars are all layered into the mix, but the overall arrangement is sparse, and the bass is the only element that consistently supplies the groove.

Many groove-oriented bass lines are thus constructed around riffs, with the bassist playing a short musical phrase that they repeat (or loosely vary) throughout a song. Unlike the unison riffs described in the previous section, groove-oriented bass guitar riffs are usually played solely by the bassist and tend to operate in the background of the music. Their purpose is to accentuate the rhythm by working with and against the other musical elements. This approach was first popularized by bass guitarists operating in 1960s African American styles, such as R&B and soul. A classic example is Wilson Pickett's "In the Midnight Hour" (1965), featuring Donald "Duck" Dunn on bass guitar. For most of the song, Dunn plays an ascending bass riff that he repeats over and over again, creating a distinctive push-and-pull groove by locking in with the drummer's snare hits on the second and fourth beats of each bar. As in the Michael Jackson example, the bass riff works both as a standalone layer in the music *and* as part of an interlocking rhythm section.

Likewise, although the feel of the music is quite different, reggae musicians often employ a similar formula, combining a bass riff with a simple drumbeat (collectively known, following Jamaican Patois, as the "riddim") to create a foundation for the rest of the music. This structure can be heard on Sound Dimension's "Full Up" (1968), which features a classic riddim bass line played by bass guitarist Leroy Sibbles. Although Sibbles' bass is a bit buried in the overall mix, it still contributes to the song's laid-back feel. However, since riddim lines are regularly repurposed and reused, Sibbles' original bass line has lived on in later adaptations, including Musical Youth's "Pass the Dutchie" (1982).

Some bass guitar riffs, in fact, are so memorable that they become the defining feature of a song. Among the many examples that fall within this category are Roger Waters' bass line to Pink Floyd's "Money" (1973), Tina

Weymouth's bass line to Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer" (1977), Rick James' bass line to "Super Freak" (1981), John Deacon's bass line to Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure" (1981), Kathy Valentine's bass line to The Go-Go's' "We Got the Beat" (1982), Mike Dirnt's bass line to Green Day's "Longview" (1994), and Chris Wolstenholme's bass line to Muse's "Hysteria" (2003).

In addition to using repetitive riffs, bass guitarists also often use syncopation to emphasize their rhythmic role. Rather than only stressing the music's regular, strong beats, syncopated bass lines accent weak beats (or offbeats). In so doing, they create small-scale rhythmic tensions that can add a distinctive feel to the music. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this technique comes from the verses of King Floyd's "Groove Me" (1970), on which bassist Vernie Robbins plays a slow, repeating two-bar riff. From a pitch perspective, this bass line is fairly uninteresting, as Robbins simply performs an ascending major pentatonic scale. What makes it stand out, however, is its syncopation: after emphasizing the first strong beat (the "downbeat") of the phrase, *every one* of his subsequent accents falls on offbeats. When heard against the backdrop of the steady, regularly accented drum pattern, Robbins' alternation between rhythmic stability and instability creates the song's titular groove. This approach is characteristic of funk music, especially as developed by James Brown in the mid 1960s and early 1970s. On Brown's "Super Bad" (1970), for example, bassist Bootsy Collins follows that same formula—shaping the groove by playing two-bar, push-and-pull bass lines that emphasize the downbeat of the first bar followed by offbeat accents that add rhythmic tension. Drawing inspiration from early funk, disco bassists extended this approach, which was further accentuated by their increased prominence in the overall mix. This style is best represented by Bernard Edwards' catchy riff on Chic's "Good Times" (1979), which uses a syncopated, push-and-pull effect to give the song its signature danceability.

More recently, neo-soul bassists such as Meshell Ndegeocello have developed more restrained groove-oriented styles based around meticulous conceptions of space and syncopation. As she explained to musicologist Tammy L. Kernodle:

My thing is I feel time . . . I want to be able to put any note where I hear it in that time configuration. And that's usually how I think of bass lines. I can play them right on the chord, right where it goes. But, there's incremental beats in between those that I have a natural attraction to. So I try and find those as well.<sup>12</sup>

One of the best examples of Ndegeocello's bass style is her "Make Me Wanna Holler" (1996), which features a slow, hypnotic groove, precise timing, a clear emphasis on empty space, and intermittent improvised fills.

Some bass guitarists use their speed, technical facility, and internalized sense of rhythm to construct even more complex grooves. One example is session musician Chuck Rainey, who was known for his sophisticated approach to rhythm. When given complete freedom to improvise on a session, Rainey would often craft intricately subdivided bass lines. On Aretha Franklin's "Every Natural Thing" (1974), for instance, he begins with a propulsive, syncopated bass riff that he varies constantly; at the chorus, he explodes, building the song's rhythmic energy through a blistering flurry of syncopated sixteenth notes. By contrast, on Steely Dan's "Kid Charlemagne" (1976), Rainey plays an intricate bass line that is also constructed around syncopated sixteenth notes; here, however, his approach differs as his free-flowing playing anchors the song and gives it a consistent sense of groove despite its challenging arrangement. Succinctly summarizing his style, Rainey explained to me that: "A lot of people think that I play a lot of notes, but I don't. I play a lot of rhythm on the few notes I do play."<sup>13</sup> For styles of rock that value complexity and virtuosity—most notably progressive rock and some forms of metal—bass guitarists frequently use complex grooves to demonstrate their technical mastery. Geddy Lee's bass playing on Rush's "YYZ" (1981), for example, alternates between intricate unison riffs and elaborate solo passages, showcasing both his and the entire band's virtuosity. Modern jazz musicians have similarly been drawn to complex grooves, both for their added challenge and for the creative possibilities they offer. For example, on bassist Esperanza Spalding's "I Know You Know" (2008), she spends the first minute and a half deliberately not accenting the downbeat, crafting a complex, stop-start syncopated bass groove that complements her vocals; for the bridge and solo sections, she introduces accented downbeats that radically change the feel of the groove, before ultimately returning to her original approach. Taken as a whole, Spalding's bass playing demonstrates her immense skill and serves as a vehicle for her personal expression.

## Melodic-Oriented Approaches

Another way that bassists have expanded their role is to play melodically. In this style, which emphasizes the bass's function as a pitched instrument, bassists draw on a wider palette of potential note choices to deliberately craft extended, connected musical phrases. By transforming the bass into a featured melodic layer in the music, this approach breaks with traditional conceptions of the bass as merely a background or supportive instrument. It is therefore far less common than rhythmic- or groove-oriented



approaches (which remain the norm) but is understandably prized by bassists that wish to take on a more prominent musical role.

While there are multiple styles of melodic bass playing, key characteristics unite the approach. For instance, bassists who adopt a melodic approach often eschew the bass's usual timekeeping function (i.e. reinforcing the pulse of the music) and hence are free to leave more space in their playing and/or vary their rhythmic activity to serve their musical phrase. Similarly, melodic players often emphasize the bass's middle and higher registers, an approach that is facilitated by the instrument's frets, which allow the musician to find notes quickly and accurately at any position on the neck. They also commonly employ various types of articulations—slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs, leaps, etc.—that mimic the inflections of the human voice.<sup>14</sup> Most melodic bass lines thus have a distinctive, singable quality that draws the listener's attention. Session bassist Carol Kaye's performance on Barbra Streisand's 1973 ballad "The Way We Were" serves as a good example. Kaye builds her melodic bass line slowly over the course of the song, complementing Streisand's dramatic vocal performance. Moving up and down the neck, Kaye constructs a free-flowing line that incorporates slides, rhythmic variation, leaps, and more—all of which serve to heighten the song's sense of wistful melancholy.

Melodic bass lines are most often introduced at the beginning of a song, acting as an opening hook that stands apart from the rhythm section. The bassist then usually maintains a foregrounded role throughout the rest of the song. For example, Led Zeppelin's "Ramble On" (1969) starts softly with muted drumming and a strummed chordal lick on acoustic guitar; but ten seconds in, bassist John Paul Jones enters with a four-bar melodic bass line that is prominently situated in the mix. Operating in the bass's higher register, Jones uses leaps, slides, and smooth phrasing as he weaves around the drums and guitar. As Jones repeats his melody, the vocals enter, but the bass does not recede into the background. Instead, it maintains its featured position, even as Jones switches to a more insistent, rhythmic style in the choruses.<sup>15</sup> An even more conspicuous melodic approach can be heard in Prince's "Diamonds and Pearls" (1991), which opens with Sonny T. playing a four-bar melodic bass line that moves sinuously between the bass's higher, middle, and lower registers. As is ultimately revealed, this bass melody is also the main vocal melody of the verse, which Prince sings in a higher octave. This bass-voice relationship continues into the choruses, with Sonny T. and Prince doubling the chorus melody as well.

Another common approach is to use the bass to supply a counter melody that is meant to be understood through its interaction with a song's other melodic elements. On the Beatles' "Something" (1969), for instance, Paul McCartney plays in the bass's middle and higher register,



incorporating slides, leaps, hammer-ons, contrasting fast and slow passages, grace notes, and more. His melodic bass playing functions as a counterpoint to George Harrison's voice, working in a style of call-and-response that fills out the space of the otherwise slow, understated recording. One of the clearest examples of this counter-melodic approach comes from the opening of Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine" (1987), in which bassist Duff McKagan adds a distinctive, singable bass line underneath Slash's famous, string-skipping opening electric guitar riff. Notably, both McKagan and Slash are placed at a relatively equal volume in the mix, and the listener is invited to concentrate on either part individually, or to experience them as an intertwined whole.

As is probably clear from the descriptions thus far, melodic-oriented and rhythmic-oriented approaches are not mutually exclusive. Many melodic bassists will switch to a more rhythmic-oriented approach at key moments in a song (such as the chorus) to add a sense of energy or stability. Furthermore, bass riffs are, in some ways, inherently melodic, even if their predominant function is to emphasize the rhythm or groove. Other bassists straddle the line between the two by adding some melodic flourishes to cyclic bass lines, creating what I call "melodic bass grooves." As with much groove playing, in popular music, melodic bass grooves are primarily associated with African American dance music traditions. Perhaps the most famous melodic bass groove comes from The Jackson 5's "I Want You Back" (1969), featuring bassist Wilton Felder. In the intro and verses, Felder plays a bass hook that fluidly navigates the chord progression; in the choruses, he plays a contrasting bass line, adding in more rhythmic variety and embellishments. Both are foregrounded in the mix, acting as melodic layers in the music while also contributing to its overall groove.<sup>16</sup> Jimmie Williams' bass line to McFadden and Whitehead's "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" (1979) has a comparable function. Starting at approximately 17 seconds into the recording, Williams introduces the distinctive two-bar bass riff that he will play throughout nearly the entire song. Yet, in contrast to some of the riffs discussed previously, Williams incorporates melodic phrasing—leaps, ghost notes, and slides—that give the line a singable quality; at the same time, its steady pulse, syncopated rhythms, and constant repetition emphasize the song's disco groove.

Some bassists have cultivated even more complex melodic styles by adopting a more soloistic approach. This approach was first popularized by session bassist James Jamerson, who played on hundreds of Motown hits in the 1960s and early 1970s, including music by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Supremes, The Four Tops, Martha and the Vandellas, and many more. Drawing on his background as a jazz musician, Jamerson developed an adventurous,

highly influential style of pop bass playing. Here is how he described a typical session:

When they gave me that chord sheet, I'd look at it, but then start doing what I felt and what I thought would fit . . . I'd hear the melody line from the lyrics and I'd build the bass line around that. I always tried to support the melody. I had to. I'd make it repetitious, but also add things to it . . . It was repetitious but had to be funky and have emotion.<sup>17</sup>

Jamerson's style is on full display on Stevie Wonder's "For Once in My Life" (1968) and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" (1971), as he improvises nuanced, constantly varying melodic bass lines that intricately weave around each singer's voice. A more recent version of this approach can be heard on TLC's "Waterfalls" (1995), which features a similarly intricate melodic bass line improvised by LaMarquis "ReMarqable" Jefferson. In rock contexts, bassists that adopt elaborate melodic approaches often simply take over the role conventionally reserved for the electric guitar. On The Who's "The Real Me" (1973), for example, bassist John Entwistle plays an extended, improvised solo throughout the entire song. Likewise, through her work with Jeff Beck and others, bassist Tal Wilkenfeld has become known for her nuanced, melodic soloing.

## Slap and Pop Styles

Thus far, I have described broad conceptual categories centered on the bass's musical function. However, it is also worth briefly discussing the ways that bassists physically play their instruments, as that too has a significant impact on their sound.<sup>18</sup> Broadly speaking, bass guitarists either play with their index and middle fingers, with their thumbs, or with a pick.<sup>19</sup> Many will even switch between these techniques, selecting the one most appropriate for a given song. But, of all the different ways of playing the bass, one is so distinctive and identifiable that it warrants a special explanation: slap and pop. The style is named for the way that bassists strike the strings, usually by hitting the lower strings with the side of their thumb ("slapping") and then using their other fingers to pluck the higher strings away from the instrument ("popping"). This technique gives the bass a percussive thump that makes it stand out in the music, and though there are different approaches to slap bass, they all center around this basic effect. For example, on Ida Nielsen's "Throwback" (2016), Nielsen plays in a typical slap and pop bass style, using her thumb to play the funky, sliding bass riff and her other fingers to provide additional accents. As with most slap bass lines, Nielsen's functions as a melodic bass groove, strongly

emphasizing the rhythm while also serving as a standalone melodic layer in the music.

For bass guitarists, the slap and pop style was first popularized in the late 1960s by Larry Graham of Sly and the Family Stone, who employed it, most famously, on their 1969 hit “Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin).” Expanding on Graham’s model, funk bassists made slap bass a regular feature of later African American musical styles, as exemplified by the bass lines to Cheryl Lynn’s “Got to Be Real” (1978) and Patrice Rushen’s “Forget Me Nots” (1982). By the 1980s, the style had also been adopted by rock bassists operating in both new wave and funk metal styles, such as Mark King from Level 42 and Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers. In the 1990s and 2000s, slap and pop bass lines were also incorporated into some styles of hip hop, either through sampling—such as the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Hypnotize” (1997), which samples Abe Laboriel’s slap playing on Herb Alpert’s “Rise” (1979)—or through newly recorded performances—such as Aaron Mills’ slap line on Outkast’s “Ms. Jackson” (2000).

Notably, jazz fusion bassists continue to adopt and expand the slap bass style. One of the first was bassist Stanley Clarke, who used it, for example, on the intro to “Lopsy Lu” (1974). Marcus Miller subsequently built on this approach, drawing on slap and pop techniques to construct complex bass lines that combine melodic grooves, fast rhythmic passages, singable melodies, and extended soloing (all of which can be heard on the track “Power” from his 2001 album *M2*). Furthermore, bassists such as Victor Wooten have used slap techniques to develop intricate “one-man band” performance styles, playing multiple interlocking parts on a single bass guitar (see “U Can’t Hold No Groove” from his 1996 album *A Show of Hands*).

## Alternative Instruments and Techniques

As we have seen, many bass guitarists have sought to expand their instrument’s basic role in popular music. In addition to the bassists previously discussed in this chapter, a select few have moved beyond the bass’s traditional confines by embracing new technologies and performance practices. In so doing, these musicians have developed notable, albeit atypical, approaches to bass playing.

One significant innovation was the development of the fretless bass guitar. Like their upright bass counterparts, fretless basses enable smooth slide playing, which musicians often use to give their bass lines an added expressivity. The first notable fretless bass player was Bill Wyman of The Rolling Stones, who played the instrument on many of the band’s hits up

through 1975. In the mid 1970s, the fretless became associated with jazz fusion bassist Jaco Pastorius. Thanks to his recorded and live performances with Weather Report, his first solo album, and his collaborations with Joni Mitchell, Pastorius continues to be regarded as one of the best bass guitarists of all time—a designation that stems both from his astounding technical abilities and the unique timbre he elicited from his fretless bass (both of which can be heard on his 1976 rendition of “Donna Lee”). Beginning in the early 1980s, session bassist Pino Palladino further introduced mainstream pop audiences to the sound of the fretless bass through recordings such as Paul Young’s version of “Wherever I Lay My Hat (That’s My Home)” (1983). Other notable fretless bassists include Japan’s Mick Karn, Bakithi Kumalo, who played on Paul Simon’s *Graceland* (1986), and Pearl Jam’s Jeff Ament, who played a fretless on most tracks from his band’s debut album, *Ten* (1991).

Other alternative bass techniques evolved directly out of prior innovations in electric guitar performance. The most famous of these is the use of two-handed tapping. Rather than following the traditional method of using one hand to fret a note and the other to strike the string, in two-handed tapping, the musician utilizes both hands on the fretboard, using hammer-ons and pull-offs to play rapid, expansive passages. Popularized by Van Halen in the late 1970s, this technique eventually became widespread among heavy metal guitarists, after which it was also adopted by some bassists. One of the first bass guitarists to explore the expressive possibilities of two-handed tapping was Stuart Hamm. Through his work with guitarists Steve Vai and Joe Satriani, as well as his solo material, Hamm developed a complex style that employed tapping as a compositional device, using it to craft intricate, interlocking musical phrases (see, for example, his entirely tapped bass line on “Terminal Beach,” from his 1989 album *Kings of Sleep*). Other bassists that regularly incorporate two-handed bass tapping include Billy Sheehan of Talas and Mr. Big, and Les Claypool of Primus.

Several musicians have also adopted instruments that extend beyond the traditional bass guitar’s limited range. Five-string basses, which add an additional lower string to the instrument, are the most commonly used extended-range bass guitars today. By most accounts, the first bass to feature a lower-fifth-string design was an Alembic custom built for jazz bassist Jimmy Johnson in the mid 1970s. This design became more widely available in 1984 with the commercial release of the Yamaha BB5000. Session bassist Nathan East was an early adopter of the BB5000 and used it to great effect while working with Al Jarreau and Philip Bailey, among many others. Five-string basses are especially prevalent in contemporary styles of heavy metal, which (in conjunction with electric guitarists’ own use of detuned or

extended-range instruments) tend to emphasize the lower frequency spectrum. A handful of bassists have also come to specialize in playing six-string basses, which have both an additional lower and higher string.<sup>20</sup> Pioneered in the 1980s by R&B/jazz session bassist Anthony Jackson, the six-string style allows the musician to explore a much wider selection of note choices, playing registers, and phrasing options (Jackson's virtuosic six-string style is best captured on his multiple recorded collaborations with pianist Michel Camilo, such as 1994's "Not Yet"). Although the six-string bass remains a niche instrument, it continues to be used by bassists across musical genres, including John Myung of the progressive metal band Dream Theater, ambient/improvisational bassist Steve Lawson, and funk/fusion/contemporary R&B/hip hop bassist Thundercat.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion: The Bass Guitar Today

The bass guitar is still commonly used within many types of modern popular music, especially those descended from twentieth-century styles—such as rock, punk, metal, funk, R&B, and jazz fusion. In addition to those already mentioned, other notable contemporary bass guitarists include Este Haim of Haim, Justin Chancellor of Tool, MonoNeon, Joe Dart of Vulfpeck, Jamareo Artis of Bruno Mars' Hooligans, Michael League of Snarky Puppy, Derrick Hodge, and Mohini Dey. However, like the electric guitar, the bass guitar's overall popularity has waned somewhat over the last twenty years. Thanks to the widespread availability of computer-based music recording software and the influence of electronic dance music production practices, many pop bass lines are now created digitally instead of using a musician-bass guitar-amplifier setup. For many contemporary artists, songwriters, and producers, this process is simply easier and more cost-efficient. This technology is also so advanced that it can convincingly reproduce the sound of a bass guitar. For example, although Dua Lipa's "Don't Start Now" (2020) distinctly references 1970s disco, its bass line was programmed digitally. Yet rather than demonstrating the bass guitar's obsolescence or irrelevance, in many ways, these efforts actually reveal how ingrained the instrument's associated sounds and functions are within popular music: they remain indispensable, even when the instrument itself is no longer present.<sup>22</sup>

Bass guitarists, using the various performative strategies described in this chapter, have profoundly shaped popular music for more than sixty years, and it is important that we take their contributions seriously. Such recognition simply requires that scholars, critics, and fans more equitably value popular music's supportive and soloistic elements—a reappraisal that seems long overdue.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of the experimental electric basses that predated the Fender Precision Bass, see my book at press, Brian F. Wright, *The Bastard Instrument: A Cultural History of the Electric Bass* (University of Michigan Press, 2024).
2. Fender salesman Charlie Hayes, quoted in Forrest White, *Fender: The Inside Story* (Backbeat Books, 1994), p. 52.
3. Rhythm guitarists, like bassists, are considered part of the rhythm section and, as such, their role has also been undervalued. For more, see Kate Lewis's Chapter 11.
4. To aid the reader, I have compiled the following Spotify playlist, featuring (nearly) all of the recordings discussed in this chapter, along with notable selections from the bassists who are only mentioned in passing: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5vjs11KSIJGBSOg0lrhoQa?si>.
5. The root is the fundamental, defining note of a chord. So, for a G major chord, G would be the root; for an A minor chord, A would be the root; etc.
6. See Michael J. Hove, et. al. "Feel the Bass: Music Presented to Tactile and Auditory Modalities Increases Aesthetic Appreciation and Body Movement," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 149/6 (2020): 1137–1147.
7. See Jan-Peter Herbst and Mark Mynett, "Toward a Systematic Understanding of 'Heaviness' in Metal Music Production," *Rock Music Studies* 10/1 (2022): 16–37; and Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, revised edition (Da Capo Press, 2000), pp. 24–25.
8. See Brian F. Wright, "Transvaluing Adam Clayton: Why the Bass Matters in U2's Music," in *U2 Above, Across, and Beyond: Interdisciplinary Assessments*, edited by Scott Calhoun (Lexington Books, 2014), pp. 17–30.
9. Bill Leigh, "Gigantic!: The Pixies' Kim Deal Turns a Modest Approach into a Big, Big Sound," *Bass Player* (November 2004): 33.
10. Kevin Johnson, "No Control: An Interview with Suzi Quatro," *No Treble*, 28 March 2019. Available at [www.notreble.com/buzz/2019/03/28/no-control-an-interview-with-suzi-quatro](http://www.notreble.com/buzz/2019/03/28/no-control-an-interview-with-suzi-quatro) (accessed October 17, 2022).
11. When it comes to the bass guitar, overdriven and distorted timbres were pioneered in the 1960s by bassists John Entwistle, Jack Bruce, and Jack Casady and, though electric guitarists use them more often, these timbres have been potential components of bassists' toolkits ever since. Due to space limitations, there was no room in this chapter to discuss the various bass timbres that are common in popular music, nor the impact that bassists' small-scale timing inflections have on the overall feel of the music. Both are productive areas for future research.
12. Tammy L. Kernodle, "Diggin' You Like Those Ol' Soul Records: Meshell Ndegeocello and the Expanding Definition of Funk in Postsoul America," *American Studies* 52/4 (2013): 200.
13. Chuck Rainey, interview with author, October 23, 2021.
14. To accomplish a "hammer-on," the bass guitarist strikes the string while fretting it with one finger, then (without striking it again) they use another finger on their fretting hand to forcefully press down at a higher fret, producing an ascending two-note motion. For a "pull-off," the musician similarly strikes the string once, but rather than pressing down on a higher fret, they pull one of their fingers off the fretboard while holding a lower fret with a different finger, thereby producing a descending two-note motion.
15. This style of melodic bass playing is common for bands, such as Led Zeppelin, that feature a vocals-guitar-drums-bass configuration. In these formats, the single guitarist usually must decide between playing lead or rhythm; when they choose to play rhythm, this can create the opportunity for the bassist to take on the lead role instead.
16. It is worth noting that the bass line on "I Want You Back" is initially doubled by the piano. However, I still hear this as a melodic *bass* groove specifically because of the ways in which Felder phrases his lines.
17. Nelson George, interview with James Jamerson, "Standing in the Shadows of Motown," in *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (Da Capo Press, 2001), pp. 171–172.
18. Although they are outside the scope of this chapter, there are other important factors that also influence the sound of the bass guitar, including the amplifier and its settings, the strings, pickups, added effects, etc.



19. In general, bassists that use picks tend to use thicker (and sometimes wider) ones than electric guitarists, as this allows for a stronger attack on the bass's larger strings. The use of a pick is a longstanding source of contention for those within the bass community that are invested in the bass being considered a standalone instrument, as it is often interpreted as a sign that the musician is playing "like a guitarist" and is therefore inauthentic.
20. Due to their lower register, their tuning (BEADGC), and their larger size, six-string bass guitars are still fundamentally distinct from traditional electric guitars. However, there are some instruments, such as the Danelectro UB-2 and the Fender VI, that were "bass" versions of traditional electric guitars; they featured smaller bodies, smaller strings, and were designed to use the same standard tuning as an electric guitar, only one octave lower. Most notably, the UB-2 was adopted by session guitarists in Nashville, where it became the basis for the "tic tac" style of country bass playing.
21. Experiments with even larger, expanded-range bass guitars continue today. For example, although they are rarely if ever used, some luthiers have built basses with as many as *fifteen* strings.
22. Matt Brennan makes a similar argument about the modern status of the drum kit in *Kick It: A Social History of the Drum Kit* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

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