

TUTION TIP: POSTURE AND PAIN!



Andrew McKinney
Head of Bass at
Guitar-X, part of Tech
Music Schools in
London. Andrew is
currently touring with
the James Taylor
Quartet.

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Each issue Andrew will
be featuring a specific
class taught at the
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bite-size chunk of the
lesson, and an insight
into what it's like to be
on a course.



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020 8749 3131

Skill Level:

Playing the bass guitar is not what our bodies are designed for. The act of wiggling our fingers in an isolated and specific way would not have given us a significant advantage over our fellow apes and cavemen, so our bodies have yet to adapt fully for this task. According to evolutionary biology it takes approximately 50,000 years for genetic mutations that enhance one's ability to survive to become a feature of the human genome. So, assuming bass guitarists are more successful at reproducing than non-bass guitarists, we can expect that approximately in the year 51951 (1951 = Leo Fender first manufactures the Precision bass) humans will have evolved to have ultra-resilient, super quick and powerful digits that will make Victor Wooten seem like a clumsy oaf. That's a long time to wait, and based upon the assumption that playing bass guitar makes you more attractive to the opposite sex..., so in the meantime, we need to take steps to protect ourselves from pain and injury.

When students enrol on one of our full-time courses at Guitar-X, it can mean a significant increase in the number of hours a day spent playing bass. They are also given a constant stream of new and challenging things to play, all of which can take their toll physically. Inevitably, some students will experience pain or discomfort at some point, and I thought I'd share with you some tips and advice that I and the rest of the bass team at Guitar-X are constantly re-iterating.

STRAP LENGTH/BASS HEIGHT

The first thing to understand in setting your strap height, is that your hands will operate best when your wrists are at as neutral as possible - as in not bent left, right, up or down, but completely straight. The problem is that it is almost impossible to play bass with completely straight wrists, especially without causing contortions in other parts of our body.

STRAP TOO HIGH – Good for fretting hand, but plucking hand is bent forwards at wrist.

STRAP TOO LOW – Good for plucking hand, but fretting hand is now bent forward at wrist.

The best you can do is to have a compromise that involves as little wrist bending as possible. Try setting it up as follows: with the strap on and whilst sitting down, have the majority of the weight of the bass supported by your leg, with just a little bit of weight taken by the strap – just enough to hold the neck of the bass in position. When you stand, the bass should remain at roughly the same height, which will help in having a consistent feel seated or standing.

PLUCKING HAND PROBLEMS

Excessive bends in the wrist are the main cause of problems as discussed above, but they can also be caused by restricted blood flow. Some players counterbalance the weight of the neck by pushing down with their plucking hand forearm on the body of the bass. It is okay to touch the bass here, but don't lean too hard. Also be careful not to overcompensate and tense up your shoulder – make sure both shoulders are relaxed and level.

WARMUP

The most important thing to remember when playing the bass, especially the first few notes each day, is to relax and reduce tension. Start off by playing as lightly as possible with the minimum tension in your body. Just play a few simple notes, a scale or a pattern as relaxed as you can.

It is also good to do some light stretches, especially for our wrists. Bass playing normally involves having our wrists bent slightly forwards, so make a habit of stretching the wrist backwards at frequent intervals. Be careful not to pull or push too hard – all you're trying to do is improve blood flow, not become the bendy man at the circus.

ENVIRONMENT

Where do you play your bass most often? If you have a practice room or area, see if there is anyway it can be optimised for comfortable bass playing. If you look at music or tab, put it on a music stand at a decent height. Reading from a table top or your lap will make you hunched over and probably damage your back. If you're working at a computer screen, get the monitor up at eye level so that your back and neck is straight as possible. Also make sure you are not too cold or too hot, as this can affect your muscle movement.

It is perfectly possible to have a pain/injury-free bass playing career, and hopefully these steps will help. Prevention is the most important thing to remember, as once you are experiencing regular pain, the first step will be to stop playing for anything up to several months – not a nice thought!

Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like me to cover, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk - see you next time.

WARMUP EXERCISE – CHROMATIC SCALE

This is an exercise that Jaco mentions on his tuition DVD. Using one-finger-per-fret, play up a chromatic scale starting on A at the 5th fret. When you get to C at the top, slide your hand up one fret and then descend. When you get to the bottom you should be on B flat. Go up another fret and ascend. Following this pattern work your way all the way up the next until you run out of space – then reverse the process and head back to where you started. Playing 8th notes at 60 bpm on a four-string bass with 20 frets, this should take you about 4 and a half minutes. Not only will this get your fingers nicely warm, it's good for clearing your mind and focusing on your instrument.

The first system of musical notation is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It shows a chromatic scale starting on A at the 5th fret, ascending to C at the 12th fret, sliding to C at the 13th fret, descending to B flat at the 11th fret, and then ascending to B at the 10th fret. The notation includes a treble clef for the first four frets and a bass clef for the remaining frets. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above the notes. A fretboard diagram below the staff shows the fret positions for strings A and B, with fret numbers 5 through 10 marked.

Fingering: 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 → 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1

The second system of musical notation continues the chromatic scale exercise, starting on B at the 10th fret, ascending to C at the 12th fret, sliding to C at the 13th fret, descending to B flat at the 11th fret, and then ascending to B at the 10th fret. The notation includes a treble clef for the first four frets and a bass clef for the remaining frets. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above the notes. A fretboard diagram below the staff shows the fret positions for strings A and B, with fret numbers 7 through 11 marked.

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 → 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 Etc.