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5 Tips to Move from Guitar to Bass

The guitar and bass might be similar instruments, but you need to know these things to make an easy transition.

By Mike Duffy

There are many similarities between the **electric guitar** and **bass**.

For one, they are both instruments that utilize magnetic pickups to register the vibrations of metal strings and create sound. Secondly, the lowest four strings on a guitar are the same as the four strings on a bass.

The **bass** is tuned to a standard EADG, while a **guitar's** six strings are tuned EADGBE (a bass *is* tuned an octave lower). And, the notes are the same on both, as well!

Even though they're similar, however, there are several differences between the two that you should consider, whether you're moving from the **guitar** to the **bass** or have never picked up either. Getting a handle on these differences will expedite the process of becoming a good and even great bassist.

Luckily, **Fender Play** recently launched an essential curriculum for any beginning bass player or a bassist looking to hone their chops. Here are five tips to help you along your bass journey:

1. Get Used to the Size of the Bass

It's obvious that **basses** tend to be larger than guitars. Even though there are fewer strings on a bass, they are much thicker because they need to be tuned so much lower than a guitar's strings. These large strings exert greater tension on the body and neck. This generally results in a slightly larger body, a thicker neck, longer scale length and larger hardware when compared to a guitar (a **Mustang Bass PJ** is a good choice should you want a shorter scale and smaller body).

Another decision to make is **whether to play fingerstyle or with a pick**. Fingerstyle is the most common method of playing bass. It's versatile, intuitive and offers more subtle dynamics and tonal variety than a pick does, plus it allows you to play slap bass. Prominent fingerstyle bassists include James Jamerson, Duck Dunn, Geddy Lee and Flea.

Playing with a pick changes the string attack, which changes the overall sound when compared to fingerstyle. It can produce a brighter, more abrasive tone that couples well with certain rhythms. Many notable bassists, like Megadeth's David Ellefson, Guns n' Roses' Duff McKagan and Paul McCartney, use a pick.

2. Practice Restraint to Support the Song

While the guitar tends to be a busier instrument, with multiple duties (lead, rhythm, etc.) throughout a song, the bass tends to be more economical.

But the role of a bass player just might be the most important in a band. The bass sets the foundation of the entire band and sets the pace of the song by **locking in with the drums and percussion**, even if you're playing a bassline of single notes. No matter how simple or complex the bassline is, it is a critical element that the rest of the band refers to along the way, so it must be reliable.

Essentially, bassists are responsible for establishing and maintaining the groove, and giving the music depth.

3. Make Friends with the Drummer

The rhythm section provides rhythmic and harmonic foundation for the lead guitar and singers to build upon. So, **the drummer and bassist need to be on the same page at all times**. Think about it, you don't get on the dance floor for a ripping guitar solo. It's the rhythm and groove that gets people moving. It's the "engine" of the band.

A good rule of thumb if you're just starting out is to stay tight with the kick drum (a.k.a. bass drum) and snare drum. You can use octave root notes - the low octave with the kick drum and the high octave with the snare - to construct a solid backbeat.

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4. Walk It Out

A **"walking"** bassline refers to a way of playing connecting notes between the roots of a song's chords. This helps the bass parts flow more smoothly by moving from one chord's root note **up or down** to the next. Traditionally, walking bass was used in blues or jazz music, but they are becoming more common in other genres, as well.

These transitional notes, also known as "leading tones" since they lead to the next note, can be diatonic or chromatic. Diatonic leading tones take notes from a specific scale to connect the dots between different chords. The easiest way to make those steps is to use every fifth chord. Meanwhile, chromatic leading tones don't necessarily come from the scale or key, but rather fall in between those diatonic notes.

5. Figure Out When to Fill

A **fill** is a short musical passage, or riff, that is played between phrases to break up the groove and make things a little more interesting. Basically, you're embellishing the bassline with a little expression to move the song forward in between a verse and a chorus, for example.

Now, the above note must be put into practice with restraint; it is tempting when it comes to **bass fills**. While they do let the bassist stand out, you never want to sacrifice the groove and distract from the song.

To ensure the groove remains tight, be aware of the number of beats to fill before the groove comes back around so the transition is seamless. Many of the best fills end on the first beat (and on the **root note**) of the next measure.

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