

Why Should I Take a Bass Class?

by Ingrid Noyes, Nate Lee, Paul Knight, and Dan Eubanks

As director of the Walker Creek Music Camp, and formerly the CBA Music Camp, I have found that it's always hard to fill the bass classes at camp. Once you learn how to go I, V, I, V, isn't that all there is to it? People say things to me like, "I already know how to play the bass, I want to work on my guitar solos," so our guitar classes fill easily while we work like crazy to get the bass classes even halfway full.

If you're a bass player and it sounds like we've got your number, consider whether you've ever asked yourself questions like, "Why did that guy get the gig (get asked to play with that band, etc.) and not me?" or "What was it about that band I listened to last night that made it so awesome? (or so unremarkable...)". The answer might very well lie in the bass player's hands (and ears!).

To help answer these questions, I asked my friend Nate Lee for his perspective on playing with a mediocre versus a great bassist in the band. Nate is a Nashville-based bluegrass musician, high in demand as a studio musician and touring fiddler/mandolinist. Here's what he told me makes a good bass player, from a mandolin/fiddle player's perspective:

- A good bass player provides a comfortable and steady pulse for everyone else to latch onto.
- When taking an improvised solo, I am often going out on a limb to try something new, which is taking a big risk. If the bass player (and the rest of the band) isn't playing steady rhythm, they won't be where I think they will be when I'm trying to land an especially difficult lick. It's like having the trampoline snatched out from under me when I'm in the air.
- A good bass player makes the song "feel" right, and therefore allows the rest of the band to relax and settle in to the groove.
- A good bass player matches the mood of a song by listening to the person singing it and emulating their mood.
- A good bass player is listening to the other players. Actually, truly, listening.

Hmmm. Maybe there IS more to learn besides I, V, I, V, and maybe there IS a pretty big difference between an OK I, V, I, V and a killer I, V, I, V.

To get a perspective from a bass player's point of view, I talked to Paul Knight, who plays bass with Peter Rowan among others. Here's what Paul said, after thinking hard about why the bass is so important in a band:

"The bass can have a profound influence on a band. It can bring out the best in soloists, singers and the band as a whole—providing groove, dynamics, a solid foundation, and inspiration. With study and practice you can provide all that in real time, without thought, in the moment. The audience may not understand the contribution you are making but you will feel it and so will your fellow musicians. That's what I love about the bass. It's worth working on!"

If this all gives you pause for thought, and you'd really like to sound more like (fill in the blank—your favorite bass player) and get asked to play with more bands and at more gigs, consider getting yourself to a music camp and spending three solid days working on it.

You have an opportunity coming up soon, from October 8th to 11th at the Walker Creek Music Camp near Petaluma, CA, where Dan Eubanks, veteran teacher and bass player from the Grammy-nominated bluegrass band Special Consensus, will be teaching the bass class. This class is geared for intermediate players, though a hardworking beginner could benefit from it too, and unlike most of our bass classes, this one is open to electric basses as well as acoustic. I asked Dan what are some of the questions he might address in class, and here is just a sampling of topics that may be covered:

- OK, I know this tune in G but the band just put a capo on and now it's in B—do I know where my notes are in B as well as I do in G?
- I know I V on individual chords, but the band doesn't seem to be happy with my choices moving between chords and phrases; is there some way I can make that transition better?
- What do I do if something goes wrong on stage with the arrangement or equipment? What if I or someone else breaks a string?
- I have to use an amp with the band that just hired me and I don't know anything about them or pickups, how do I get a good "plugged in" sound?
- The bandleader wants me to change the length of my notes. What does he mean and how do I do it?
- What register sounds best behind each soloist?

If you don't know the answers to these questions, you still have a lot to learn about being a good bass player—come to camp! If you have any problems getting your bass to camp, we can provide you with a loaner bass for the duration (many thanks to Steve Swan for this fabulous service!). And to sweeten the deal just a bit more, if you're reading this after September 1st and didn't know about the camp until now, we'll waive the late fee for you. Hoping we've successfully knocked down all your excuses, if you're interested, check it out at www.walkercreekmusiccamp.org or call 415-663-1342 for more information.