

Chapter 2

Gaining the Tools and Skills to Play

In This Chapter

- ▶ Holding your bass properly
 - ▶ Positioning your right and left hands
 - ▶ Finding out how to read a fingerboard diagram
 - ▶ Getting your bass in tune
 - ▶ Practicing your first song with your bass
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In this chapter, you tackle the basics of playing the bass: How to hold your instrument, how to position your hands, how to read a fingerboard diagram, how to tune your bass, and how to play a song with your bass. So roll up your sleeves and get ready to dive in.

Getting a Handle on Your Bass

Before getting started, let me clarify some terminology. I refer to *right hand* and *left hand* in this book, but what really matters is what each hand does:

- ✓ The right hand is your *striking* hand; that is, it strikes (or plucks) each string and puts it into motion to produce a sound.
- ✓ Your left hand is your *fretting* hand; it presses the strings onto the fret to settle on a pitch.

If you're left-handed, and you decide to play your bass as a lefty, apply the instructions for your right hand to your left hand, and vice versa.

Frets are the small metal strips that are embedded in the neck of your bass, underneath the strings. You usually have between 20 and 24 frets on your bass. To fret a note, you press the string onto the neck between two frets

with your left hand. For instance, to play a string at the 3rd fret, you press your finger between the 2nd and 3rd frets, closer to the 3rd. Take a look at Figure 2-1 to see the proper way to fret a note on the 3rd fret.



Figure 2-1:
Fretting a
note.

Holding Your Bass

In this chapter, you finally get to wear your bass, which, after wading through the preliminaries in Chapter 1, is a welcome change.



If you watch other bass players, either live or on television, you may notice an array of ways to hold a bass. Some definitely look cooler than others, but you may have difficulty playing with a proper hand position when the instrument is either scraping along your ankles or creeping up around your chin. Compromise is the name of the game here.

Strapping on your bass: Strings to the outside

When you strap on your bass for the first time, I recommend that you sit down to do it. Adjusting the strap is easier this way. Ideally, the strings of the bass should cross between your belt line and your belly button at a slight

angle upward (up on the neck end). This position ensures optimum right- and left-hand coverage, and it works well regardless of whether you're standing or sitting. Oh, and yes, the strings should face the outside!



Strapping on and adjusting a bass eventually becomes as natural as riding a bike, but when you first start out, you have to follow some basic instructions to get it right. If your left hand is strained when playing, try raising the height of the bass. If your right hand feels uncomfortable, try lowering the bass.

You can achieve the ideal compromise position for both your left and right hands by following these steps:

- 1. Attach the thick end of your strap to the *strap pin* (the little metal knob) on the body at the neck end of the bass.**
- 2. Attach the thin end of your strap to the bottom strap pin (also called the *end pin*) of the bass.**
- 3. Hold your bass solidly by the body or the neck with your left hand, and pull the strap over your head and right shoulder, putting your right arm through as well.**

Allow the strap (with the bass attached) to rest on your left shoulder and continue across your back until it connects with the bottom strap pin of the bass just below the right side of your rib cage.

- 4. Adjust your strap in length until the strings are in the area between your belly button and belt buckle, and then fine-tune it from there.**

You can find your own personal preference, but you want your bass to rest in this general area. Take a look at Figures 2-2 and 2-3 and note that the general position of the bass is the same whether you're standing or sitting.

Voilà! Standing with your bass

And now, get on your feet! The time has come to take a stand with your bass. Here's how:

- 1. Make sure your strap is securely attached to the strap pins.**

Also, make sure your strap is straight, not twisted from one end to the other.

- 2. Let your bass hang loosely from your shoulder.**

Keep your left hand underneath the neck, but don't clutch it. Some basses are a little neck-heavy and others are perfectly balanced. No matter what type of bass you have, you need to get used to the feel of it.

3. Position your hands on the bass.

Your left hand should be free to roam the neck from top to bottom without having to hold the bass. Your right hand should be able to reach all the strings comfortably.

The standing position will most likely be your live or performance position (see Figure 2-2).



Figure 2-2:
Standing
with your
bass.

Sitting with your bass

During those endless hours of practice, you may want to sit down to play (see Figure 2-3). I recommend using a stool or a tall chair without armrests. That way, the position of your bass is similar whether you're standing or sitting. In addition, you want your thighs to be at least parallel to the floor; try to sit so they're higher than your knees, if possible.

After you sit down, keep the strap on. You may feel a slight slack in the strap when the bass touches your thighs, but it should still hold the bass in place. Your left hand needs to be free to roam across the neck without your having to worry about holding the bass in place, and your right hand must be able to reach all the strings comfortably.



Figure 2-3:
Sitting with
your bass.

Placing Your Hands in the Proper Position

The secret to getting your hands into position is simple: Keep them loose and relaxed. You want to strike and fret the strings with the least amount of effort possible. The proper position enables you to play at great speed and with great accuracy. It also helps you control your tone.

Positioning your left hand

You want your left hand to cover one fret per finger without causing any undue stress in your hand. By using one finger per fret, you set up your hand to execute almost any musical figure without *shifting*, or moving your hand position to reach a note. (A *figure* is an independent and self-contained musical phrase, sort of like a sentence when you're speaking.)



When you do have to shift, a move of one fret in either direction usually suffices. Check out Figure 2-4 for the proper left-hand position, and follow these steps to accomplish it:

- 1. Hold out your left hand with your outstretched arm in front of you.**
Keep your wrist and hand limp.
- 2. Without changing the angle on your wrist, turn your hand over so that your palm faces up and your fingers are slightly curved.**
Position your thumb so that it faces your index finger (or the area between your index and middle fingers).
- 3. Bring in your elbow to the side of your rib cage (without moving your hand) until the neck of your bass is in the palm of your hand.**
Remember not to close your hand!
- 4. Place the tip of your thumb on the middle of the back of the neck of the bass.**
Make sure that your fingertips are pointing upward.
- 5. Gently spread your fingers onto the strings, with each finger close to an adjacent fret.**
- 6. Curl your fingers until your fingertips are on one of the strings.**
Be sure to keep the tips of your fingers close to the frets.

Figure 2-4:
Position
of the left
hand.



Now you're just about ready to press the string to the fret to play a note. Even though you can now fret the desired note, something still has to set the string in motion to produce the actual sound. This is where your right hand comes in. Read on for details.

Positioning your right hand

You may see several popular right-hand techniques; so many, in fact, that they could fill a book all on their own. In this book, I concentrate on the *finger-style* technique, which is the most flexible and widely used technique, covering virtually all styles of music. This technique also allows you to work more efficiently with *dynamics* (accenting certain notes). In this section, I

also show you the proper positions for the *pick* technique and *slap* (thumb) technique.



I refer to the right hand as the striking hand rather than as the plucking or pulling hand. The other terms are technically correct, but I prefer the term *striking* because *plucking* and *pulling* imply that you should pull the strings away from the body of the bass, which produces a thin sound. Instead, you need to strike the string *into* the body of the bass, not *away from* it.

Finger-style playing

The name *finger-style* refers to your striking the strings with the index and middle fingers of your right hand. You can hear this style in country, rock, jazz, and funk — and just about any other type of music. Jaco Pastorius, James Jamerson, and Francis Rocco Prestia are only three of the multitude of bassists who use this technique. Take the following steps to set up your hand properly. Then compare the position of your hand to Figure 2-5.



Figure 2-5:
Right
hand in
the proper
finger-style
position.

- 1. Bring your right arm up, as though you're pointing to something in the distance, while keeping your wrist, hand, and fingers relaxed.**

Keep your wrist at a 45-degree angle (approximately), keep your thumb facing your index finger, and keep your fingers gently curved, with your fingertips pointing to the floor.

- 2. Start bending your elbow slowly, keeping it just slightly away from your rib cage.**

3. Let your hand approach the instrument until your thumb settles onto the *thumb rest* (a plastic or wood bar for resting your thumb on) or the *pickup* (the magnetic bars that pick up the string vibration).

Keep your elbow next to your body, not behind it.

4. Settle the weight of your arm onto your thumb.

This position may take some time to get used to, but it keeps your hand and shoulder in their most relaxed state. The thumb acts as a measuring device for your fingers and the individual strings. With this position, you can feel which string you're playing instead of having to look to see where you are.

5. Reach for your high string with your index or middle finger (see Figure 2-6).



Figure 2-6:
Hand
reaching
for the
high string.

Your thumb has to bend a little more, and your hand must pivot out on it to reach the highest string.



The terms *high string* and *low string* refer to the sound of the strings, not to the position of your hand. Your high string is actually the string closest to your feet, whereas your low string is closest to your head.

6. Reach for your lowest string.

Your thumb is now straighter. Your hand pivots on the resting thumb, toward your body, and your palm is closer to the body of the bass, as shown in Figure 2-7.



Figure 2-7:
Hand
reaching
for the
low string.

Pick-style playing

Some players prefer to use a *pick* (a small triangular plastic piece, about the size of a quarter) to produce a note instead of using their fingers. Because the strings on a bass are much heavier than on a guitar, your bass pick needs to be heavier as well.

You can hold the pick in one of two ways: closed or open. To set your hand properly for closed-hand pick playing, following these steps:

- 1. Hold your pick between your index finger and thumb.**
- 2. Make a light fist and rest your thumb on top of your index finger.**
- 3. Slide your index finger along the bottom of your thumb until it reaches the first knuckle of your thumb.**

This is where the pick goes, with only the tip of it showing. See Figure 2-8.