



**Gene Aitkin**  
Nat'l. Vocal Jazz Chm.

## VOCAL JAZZ

# The Rhythm Section

Hello, and welcome to another vocal jazz session, this time dealing specifically with the bass. I might take this opportunity to tell you that the new RARE SILK album, NEW WEAVE, Polydor #810 028-1 Y-1 has just been released. Without a doubt a great album. One of the specific reasons it is a great album is because of the rhythm section. For a learning experience, take the NAJE EDUCATOR rhythm section articles (including the next one on piano), RARE SILK's NEW WEAVE album, find a nice comfortable chair and enjoy discovering some of the insights as to why this rhythm section sounds so good.

### THE BASS

The bass, its sound and tuning, the way it's played, and the placement of the amp are some of the most important things to consider toward making a solid rhythm section. Without taking all of these factors and several other factors into consideration, the rhythm section might not be quite as polished. Discovering problems in a rhythm section is not hard to do as long as you know what to listen for and can focus in on those specific things.

### PLAYING THE BASS

In most cases the string bass and the electric bass are played with an alternating right-hand forefinger and middle

finger. Placement for playing straight-ahead tunes is usually above the pickups on electric bass, and just below the fingerboard on the acoustic bass. To get a little more "front" or "bite" on the electric bass move the right hand closer to the bridge.

For funk or rock tunes, move the hand closer to bridge area. This will give a shorter note and again provide more "bite" to the sound.

Some bass players like to turn down the volume and play light. This is a good idea especially for up-tempo tunes and solo work—it allows you to get around the instrument a lot faster. However, playing light on "groove" tunes usually does not work. Turn down the volume a little and "dig" into the string more.

### ACOUSTIC vs. ELECTRIC BASS

If at all possible, the acoustic bass should be used in the vocal jazz ensemble, except for funk or rock charts in which case the electric bass should be used. The acoustic bass provides a larger sound due primarily to additional overtones.

However, if the acoustic bass player has some pitch problems, it would be much easier to have the student play an

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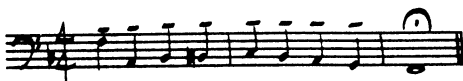
electric, fretted bass. The fundamental of a chord is usually in the bass, and unless the fundamental is right on the money, the singers will try to find the pitch, moving the note sharp or flat, thereby destroying the tonality of the chord.

This problem of pitch is true on sustained chords or chords within a moving passage. It is thus better to sacrifice a little of the sound of the bass for better intonation.

## SUSTAINING BASS NOTES vs. SHORT BASS NOTES

All bass notes must have a sustaining sound except those notes marked specifically short, and those notes which are used primarily in funk or rock tunes.

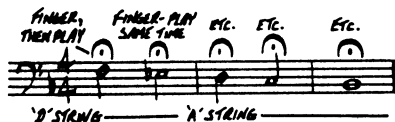
For sustain concept use this idea of a tuba playing the following passage with no break in the air stream:



Another way to grasp the concept is to sing the line using the syllable "do," without stopping the air stream.

Listen to the bass . . . is it getting that same type of sound . . . or is there a slight break between each note. If there is a break, then it is a matter of coor-

dinating the left hand with the right hand. Work slowly on a psecific passage, leave left hand fingers down until the last possible second, then strike the next note with the right-hand finger at the same time you place the left-hand fingers on the next note. A good exercise is as follows:



Then begin to speed up this exercise.

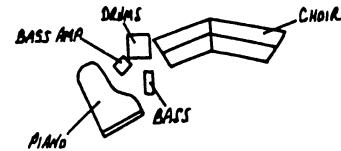
Funk or rock playing on the other hand requires short notes . . . not much sustain at all. Bass players who are acoustic players should switch to electric bass to get this desired effect.

## BASS AND AMP PLACEMENT

As mentioned in past articles, the position of the bass is critical both from the vocal jazz choir member's standpoint of being able to hear the fundamental of the pitch, and from the standpoint of the rhythm section so they can concentrate on the most important element in jazz . . . TIME!

The bass (if acoustic) should be in a position such that the front of the bass is

facing the choir—the choir needs to hear the fundamental of the pitch. By the same token, the bass must be close to the hi-hat of the drummer. The best suggestion is to set-up as close to the diagram as possible:

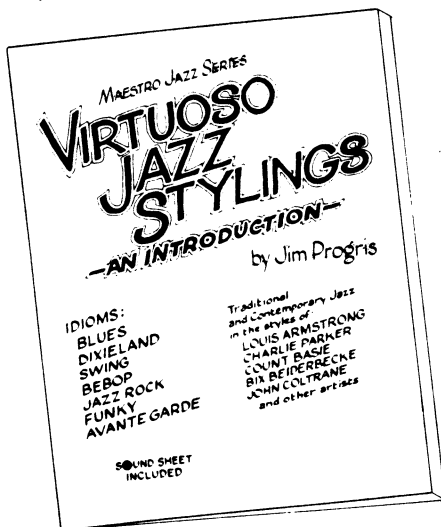


As per the diagram, the bass amp is placed directly behind the bass player, turned slightly so that the drummer can hear. The amp should always be elevated by placing it on a small chair/table.

## TUNING THE BASS

Use of a battery operated tuning device is suggested. Companies such as the Korg Company make a guitar tuner (which can also be used for bass) for relatively little money. Use of a tuning device is more accurate and a lot faster than relying on the ear and tuning by harmonics. Any of these tuners can be calibrated to almost any piano thereby providing a lot of flexibility for tuning.

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## VOLUME AND SOUND

This area deserves special attention. Listening to good jazz bass players is the key so that you or the students have an idea of the type of sound and amount of volume you want. Bass players must consider what happens to their sound after it gets beyond the choir. Usually, the sound a bass player hears as a "good sound" will come out of the rhythm section too boomy and too loud.

The ideal sound for a bass player is a sound that to him/her sounds a little on the treble side. By the time the sound leaves the stage area it has picked up some overtones and comes out sounding pretty good. Same for volume . . . back-off on the volume so it is a little lower than one thinks is correct. Maybe the drummer or piano player is forcing them to play louder. These dynamic adjustments need to be made also.

The sound of a bass can be enhanced by the use of an equalizer—usually one no less than a 10-band. An equalizer will provide bass players with more flexibility in sound and will enable them to get more core to the sound. Bass

frequencies are generally in the area of 40Hz to 500Hz. The two most common frequency problems are the 250Hz and the 500Hz. In most cases, cutting one or both of these out will improve the bass sound.

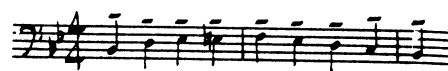
The equalizer is also handy if you play in different rooms as room configurations and absorption will give the bass an entirely different sound.

For the best control of the bass volume in performance, the use of a line-matching transformer allows the bass sound to go directly into the P.A. Board. The bass sound can then be controlled by the sound engineer in the audience. The other positive aspect of this manner of amplification is that the bass can then be fed directly into the monitor system for all singers to hear.

## GHOST NOTES, SKIMMED NOTES

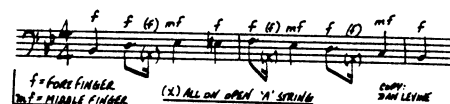
For some reason, when playing straight quarter notes in a straight-ahead chart, the time doesn't anchor. By adding lower ghost notes to a line, the element of time seems to improve. As an example, here is a bass line that sounds good, could be correct time-

wise, but lacks that something special:



However, if you add a lower ghost note (skimmed note) it seems to add more energy to the line. This technique is accomplished by playing a note on the A, D, or G strings with forefinger . . . the forefinger continues the movement down to the next open string, skimming it lightly and quickly before the next note which is struck with the second finger.

The ghost note in each case is the lower open string and **is not** an identifiable pitch as the open string is just lightly touched.



## SLAPPING/THUMB SLAP/POPPING

Useful especially on funk tunes, this technique is accomplished by a rotation of the wrist or flicking of the wrist. Using the thumb, hit the string just to the right and slap the string directly into the

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fingerboard. The part of the thumb that strikes the string is between the tip and the first joint. The thumb is used primarily for notes on the E and A strings. As the thumb comes up the forefinger or middle finger plucks a note on one of the D or G strings, pulling the string straight up. Releasing the string then gives it a "popping" effect.

### AMPLIFIERS AND PICK-UPS

Amplifiers are a personal taste item, but there seems to be agreement on brands and styles in the inexpensive and expensive areas. For something inexpensive, the Polytone Mini Brute or the Polytone Model 101 amps are durable plus sound quite good. As for expensive amps, the Walter Woods Amplifier with a separate Bose, Gary Raymond, or other good brand speaker seems to work very well . . . the latter being used by a lot of professionals.

### BASS STRINGS

Another area of concern is a good set of strings for the bass. For acoustic bass, a number of good quality, medium gauge steel core strings, such as Thomastik are available. For electric bass medium to medium heavy gauge strings such as Roto Sound, GHS Boomers, or D'Adario Half Rounds are recommended. These strings are all round wound strings. The reason for using these type of strings is a better sustained sound, a little better "front" on the sound, and an improved harmonic content. Round wound strings do, however, produce a screeching sound when the bass players shift positions.

As strings get older, they must be replaced. When the string sounds "thuddy," lose their sustain quality, or display lack of overtones, chances are the strings are getting old. Some musicians recommend boiling their steel wound strings in water. This works in some instances.

### METHOD BOOKS

The following method books should be part of every music director's and bass student's library:

Bass Method  
Walking on Chords  
Improvising Jazz Bass  
Fusion Bass Styles  
Rufus Reid Bass Lines  
Ron Carter Bass Lines  
The Improvisers Bass Method  
The Evolving Bassist  
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Gene Aitken is Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Co. as well as a free-lance bass player in the Denver area. Since his arrival at UNC the jazz program has shown tremendous growth with over 400 students enrolled. Gene has extensive background as a professional musician including appearances with Vicki Carr, Accidentals II, Four Freshmen, Henry Mancini and more. During the summer months he is co-principal trumpet with the Peter Britt Orchestra in Jacksonville, Or. He is active in numerous professional and community organizations and is widely sought after as a clinician in both classical and jazz fields. Gene presently serves NAJE as the National Vocal Jazz Ensemble Chairman.