

1 Introduction

I have taken the time to write down some of what I know and feel about using the electric bass in a guitar choir. This document is an odd combination of instruction and philosophical discussion.

If you are an experienced musician already, but don't know the bass, this document is probably enough to get you started on the road to becoming a really effective bass player. If not, this document should still help you to understand what the bass is, and why it's an important part of a guitar group.

The discussion here focuses on the standard 4-string electric bass, often called a "bass guitar", with E-A-D-G tuning. For a 5-string or 6-string bass, or even for far-out 8-string, 10-string or 12-string octave-tuned basses, the same principles apply, but no specific discussion is included here.

Please take a minute to let me know if this document is useful to you. More importantly, please let me know how it's not useful to you, so that I can improve it or provide something altogether different. I can be reached by email at jeclark3a@verizon.net.

2 Why Do We Need a Bass for the Guitar Choir?

There have been times when I have been dismayed to hear people say that the electric bass "embellishes" guitar music, or adds a "nice touch". From that point of view, the bass is not seen as a truly integral part of the music, but only as an add-on or supplement. So, someone who holds that view might not think of the bass as being very necessary to the choir.

I have a very different viewpoint. The electric bass is a critical part of the musical foundation of the guitar choir.

The bass contributes these key factors:

1. Fullness of sound – The bass notes fill out the guitar chords, and give them a sense of completeness that can't be achieved with the guitar (or any number of guitars) alone. This is particularly true with chords that don't make full use of the lower strings of the guitar. For example: D, Dm, most diminished chords, or simplified 4-string versions of chords like F or Bb.

2. Basic rhythm reinforcement – The emphasis provided by a bass note is very effective for establishing the downbeat, and making it easier for the guitar players to stay together.
3. Establishing rhythmic “movement” – This may be the most important contribution of an electric bass. The use of various simple bass figures sets the rhythmic style or “movement” every bit as much as does the strum pattern used on the guitars. Examples abound: The simplest downbeat-and-hold bass pattern establishes a smoothness in the flow of a song. An almost equally simple pattern using the downbeat and another strike on the same note at the last beat of the bar gives a bit more movement to the rhythm. The “alternating” 4/4 bass pattern (root on beat 1, fifth on beat 3) gives a strong country feeling and moves the music ahead forcefully. A “Latin” 4/4 bass pattern (root on beat 1, high fifth between beats 2 and 3) is the key to producing an effective calypso rhythm. More complex bass figures allow the choir to make the most of special rhythms, such as 5/4 time.

In my experience, adding the bass to a group will almost always be more effective than adding more guitars, even if the bass player has only basic skills. Suppose that I have only two competent guitar players available this morning, and one of them is also qualified as a beginner-level bass player. In that circumstance, I will always choose to have one guitar and the bass, rather than using two guitars.

3 How Big a Deal Is Learning to Play Bass?

The St. James Folk Choir has used a bass at almost every service for about 30 years. With normal turnover of choir members, we have had more than a dozen different bass players during that time.

With one exception, those bass players had never touched a bass before joining our choir. Three had never played a guitar, and two had never played any musical instrument. In two or three cases, guitar players with no bass experience have been able to fill in on only a few days notice and with only an hour or so of instruction.

If you are a guitar player who can pick out simple tunes on the lower strings (E-A-D-G) of a standard guitar, you already have almost all of the skills you will need. The electric bass tunes exactly like those lowest four strings of

the guitar, E-A-D-G, but one octave lower. You'll only need to learn to apply the techniques described in the next section to know what notes to play. The longer fingerboard, wider string spacing and fatter strings may take a little getting-used-to, but that won't take long.

Even if you have no guitar experience, it can be pretty easy to learn enough to be an effective bass player. You start by learning where the notes are on the bass fingerboard and how to use your fingerboard hand (the left hand for righties) to hold the note while your other hand plucks the string. (On the [instructional page](#) of this web site, there's a file "Electric Bass Fundamentals" that shows you to where find the notes.) As you gain that knowledge, you can start to apply the techniques of the next section, just as an experienced guitar player would.

Please don't misunderstand; really first-class bass play can get very difficult. It would take years to become an excellent, professional-level bass player. The point here is that it can be pretty easy to reach a level where your bass playing makes a positive contribution to the guitar group.

4 So, How Do I Play the Electric Bass?

This section gives a description of how to play the electric bass. It doesn't really qualify as instructional material in the normal sense, but you will find that you can use it as a guide for experimentation as you teach yourself to play.

When playing the bass for a guitar choir (or any band or group that uses rhythm guitars), we always start with the guitar chords that are (I hope) written out on music sheets. Those chords tell you the primary note to play on the bass for each bar of the song, and as you get more advanced you can use the chords to deduce other notes to play as emphasis or "passing" notes.

When there is no slash (/) in the written chord, the primary bass note is just the name note (called the "root") of the chord: See A, play A. See Em, play E. See C9, play C. See Ebmaj7, play Eb.

When there is a slash (/) in the written chord, the primary bass note is the note that follows the slash: See F/C, play C. See D/F#, play F#. See Bm9/D, play D. See A7sus4/E, play E.

4.1 The First, Biggest Step – Play the Primary Note

As a beginning bass player, simply **play that primary note on the downbeat of each bar**. If there is more than one chord in the bar, just play the primary note for each chord at the same time the guitar players switch to that chord. (Works with no capo; If the guitar players are using a capo, see the next section.)

You will immediately hear that even this simple method of playing adds a lot of richness to the guitar music. However, you'll find that it often leaves "empty" places in the music. This is most obvious when a slow tempo may leave enough time between downbeats that the bass note fades away without contributing much at the end of the bar.

The easiest way to fill those "empty" places is to strike the same primary note again during the bar. Sometimes, striking that extra note on the third beat of 4-beat bar works well. However, it's very often more effective to play that extra note on the last major beat of the bar: in 4/4 time, play on the downbeat and on the 4th note of the bar. In 3/4 or 6/8 time, play on the downbeat and the 3rd quarter note of the bar.

You'll have to decide for each passage of each song whether to play these notes in connected fashion (called legato), or in a detached fashion (called staccato) with quiet spaces between the notes. You produce connected notes by holding the string down on the fingerboard and striking it at the correct times with the plucking hand. You produce staccato notes by relaxing the tension in your fingerboard hand between notes, and allowing the string to lift off the fret just enough that the note stops ringing, but leaving your fingers in contact with the string to prevent the open string from sounding.

I recommend that you never play any open strings on a bass as a beginner, except when you have to play a low E. If the note says D, use the fifth fret of the A string. Experience shows that it's a lot harder to make sure that you quiet the open string before you play the next note than it is to play a note that goes quiet by itself when you lift your finger to play the next note. The ugliest thing you can do on a bass is to play two unrelated notes at the same time, and avoiding the use of open strings helps you to avoid that ugliness. (An experienced player may use an open note occasionally, but only when there is a sure way to kill that open note while playing the next note. More advanced players may intentionally play more than one note at a time,

usually octaves and fifths, but that is not recommended when you are starting out.)

4.2 Correcting the Key for a Capo

Many songs call for the use of a “capo”, the device that clamps onto the neck of the guitar and shortens the strings. The capo raises the natural key of the guitar and allows the guitars to play easy (or relatively easy) chords in a key that would otherwise be very difficult.

This creates a challenge for the bass player; The chord you see on the page doesn't give you the right note to play in tune with the guitars.

The bass plays notes that are higher than those shown on the guitar music, higher by the number of frets where the capo is placed. If the music shows “Capo 3” (or Capo III), the bass notes are three frets higher. C becomes Eb, E becomes G, F becomes Ab, etc. If you are uncertain what the right note is, just put your finger on the note that the music shows, and count up (toward the bass body) the number of frets shown by the capo position. Suppose you see the chord D with Capo 3; Put your finger at the fifth fret of the A string to play the D, and then count up: 1 – 6th fret Eb, 2 – 7th fret E, 3 – 8th fret F. So “D Capo 3” is really an F.

It won't be much help for you to actually put a capo on the bass. As a bass player you will find that you depend on the fret markings at the 3rd, 5th and 7th frets to know where you are on the instrument, and the capo can change the meaning of those marks to the point where you can't find your place.

There are two effective ways to look at the guitar's capo for a bass player:

Transpose the music: The method that we currently use most often in our choir is to write out a separate sheet of music for the bass when the guitars play with a capo. Just change the names of all the notes in the chord names to the higher names, leaving the rest of the characters alone. For example, with Capo 2, the chords might change like this: C becomes D, Em becomes F#m, Gmaj7/D becomes Amaj7/E, CaddD becomes DaddE. Watch out for those last two cases. Those chords name two different notes, and both notes must be transposed to be completely correct.

(It's possible for a beginner to just write the primary note to play, but I don't recommend that. Writing out the full chord will help you to play correctly as your technique becomes more advanced.)

The disadvantage of this transposition to a separate sheet is that someone has to take the time to write out the transposed music. I do that for our choir with a computer, but not every choir has someone who is willing to take the time or who has the right software. There is also the inconvenience of having to have an extra music stand when the song fills two sheets.

The “no-look” method: A method that we used for many years takes advantage of the fact that the “shape”, or positional relationship, of the notes you play stays the same when you transpose to a higher key. If you move from D (A string 5th fret) to high A (D string 7th fret), you are moving up one string (A to D) and up two frets (5th to 7th). If we transpose those notes for Capo 3, they become F (A string 8th fret) and high C (D string 10th fret), and you are still moving up one string and up two frets.

To use the “no-look” method, find the right starting note by counting frets (this gets easy very quickly), and then play all the following notes relative to that starting note, primarily by feel, without looking. You'll occasionally have to look down to keep yourself in the right place, but you won't (and shouldn't) be transposing every note, and you will avoid the confusion (with Capo 1 or Capo 3) that comes with having the meanings of marked and unmarked frets reversed.

This method requires a higher skill level than transposing the music sheets, but it does save the preparation time of writing out separate pages. It also allows you the freedom to play by watching the guitar player's chord hand, without any written music.

4.3 Progressing Beyond the One Note

So far, we have only discussed playing one note for each chord, the primary note, and perhaps striking it more than once during the bar. That simple technique will get you a surprising amount of value for the group. However, a skilled bass player usually plays a sequence of notes related to the chord name (called a figure) for each chord, sometimes carrying the same figure to

different chords and sometimes playing a different figure for each bar of the song.

This section and the following sections describe some figures that you can apply to add more flavor to your bass playing.

4.3.1 What Notes are in That Chord?

First we should talk more about the notes that are in a chord.

We've already mentioned the primary note, the root or the note under the slash. The notes in the chord itself are determined by the name of the chord and its type. The notes in the chord don't change when the primary note is under the slash.

Basic major and minor chords each consist of three notes: The root (the name note), the "third", and the "fifth". The file "Electric Bass Fundamentals", on the [instructional page](#) of this web site, shows you how to find the third and fifth notes of the chord when you know the root. We'll ignore for the moment special cases such as diminished (dim) and augmented (+) chords.

For both major and minor chords, the **fifth** is easy to find on the bass.

- The "higher" fifth is both one string higher than the root and two frets higher, as well
- The "lower" fifth is on the same fret as the root, but one string lower.

(Remember, when we say a "lower" string, we mean one that is fatter and closer to the top edge of the fingerboard, whereas "higher" strings are thinner and closer to the bottom edge of the fingerboard. Also, when we say a "lower" fret, we mean one that is further from the body of the instrument, whereas "higher" fret are closer the body of the instrument. This is sometimes confusing to new players, but those are the facts.)

The location of the **third** depends on the type of chord:

By looking at the diagrams in "Electric Bass Fundamentals", you can see that for **major** chords, the **third** is found like this:

- The “higher” third is one string higher than the root and one fret lower. If you play the root with your middle finger, the higher major third falls naturally under your index finger on the next higher string.
- The “lower” third is both one string lower than the root and also three frets lower.

Similarly, for **minor** chords, the **third** is found like this:

- The “higher” third is one string higher than the root and two frets lower. If you play the root with your middle finger, you can reach the higher minor third by stretching slightly with your index finger on the next higher string.
- The “lower” third is both one string lower than the root and also four frets lower. This is not a very convenient position to reach, but still may be useful.

4.4 Passing Notes

In an earlier section, we talked about striking the primary note an extra time on the last beat of the bar. That extra note is a kind of natural transition as you pass to the next bar, and so we call it a “passing” note.

To increase the sense of movement, you can use a different note for the passing note, both when the chord changes from bar to bar, and when the chord remains the same. If you choose the passing note well, it leads you naturally to the next chord and gives a sense of completeness in the transition from chord to chord.

4.4.1 So, How Do I Choose a Passing Note?

The passing note depends both on the chord you’re coming from and the chord you’re going to, as described in the following subsections.

In these sections, we’ll talk about using a single such “passing” note for each bar. (In later sections, when completed, we’ll extend that concept to more complicated figures.)

4.4.1.1 *Passing Notes – Next Chord Same as This Chord*

Where the chord stays the same from one bar to the next, the easiest passing note is simply to strike the same primary note again on the last beat of the bar, as noted before. This adds some movement, but not very much.

An effective passing note for adding more movement when the chord stays the same is to strike the fifth of the chord on the last beat of the bar. Either the lower or higher fifth can be used, but I have used the lower fifth more commonly and reserved the higher fifth for special cases.

To support a 4/4 country-style rhythm, you can play the fifth as a sort of passing note in the middle of the bar (beat 3 out of 4). So, the root and the fifth have the same time duration in the bar. I often call this figure by the name “Alternating Bass”, since the effect is that you are playing the first and fifth after each other at a constant rate.

4.4.1.2 *Passing Notes – Next Chord Different Than This Chord*

Where the chord changes from one bar to the next, your options become more varied. There is no ‘right’ passing note. You will have to experiment to find what sounds best to you in each situation.

Again, as noted before, the easiest passing note is simply striking the same primary note again on the last beat of the bar. This adds some movement, but not very much.

Usually, the sound will be more natural when you select the passing note as one of the notes that’s in the chord you’re passing from. Then, in some few cases, a good passing note is one that is not in either the “from” or “to” chords, but is selected to move smoothly from one chord to the next. (I have never encountered a case where there is any apparent advantage to selecting a passing note because it’s in the chord you’re going to.)

There are two situations that deserve some special attention: minor chords and chords with a slash.

When you are moving from a minor chord to another chord, please remember that the minor third is a different note than the major third. As

you gain experience, you will find that the major third comes naturally to you as a common passing note, and one very common error is to play the major third as a passing note from a minor chord. The result is usually a jangling, dissonant pass. Instead, please learn to see the minor chord name on the page, and to adjust your view of where the third is.

Similarly, when moving from chord whose name contains a slash, please remember that the primary note is not the same as the root, and the notes of the chord will be in “funny” places compared to the note you’re playing. For example, as you gain experience, you will find that the fifth of a chord comes naturally to you as a common passing note, and one very common error is to play the fifth of the primary note as a passing note from a slash-named chord. Again, the result is often a jangling, dissonant pass. Instead, please learn to see the real chord name (the part before the slash) on the page, and to (mostly) use the third, fifth or root of that chord for passing.

The next section contains a lots of examples of how to choose a passing note when moving from one chord to a different chord.

4.4.1.3 *Passing Notes – Next Chord Different – Examples*

This section will show as many examples as I can produce for how to choose a passing note when moving from one chord to a different chord. For some combinations of “from” and “to” chords, I show two or even three possible passing notes. Each example is one that I have used, or have taught our bass players to use, in real songs.

The following table is arranged by the type of chord you are moving from, and then by the position of the primary note of the next, or “to”, chord relative to the “from” chord. [Examples](#) are shown in [blue](#).

The most effective way to use this table is to hold a bass (or even a guitar) in your hands, and to play each example as you read it. This will help you to familiarize yourself with both the feel and the sound of many common passing notes.

“From” Chord	“To” Chord Primary Note (Relative)	Passing Note (And Explanation)
Major or Minor	Flat 2 nd (1 fret higher)	Lower fifth (adds movement, although we more often just repeat the root.)
E	F	B
Am	Bb	E
Major or Minor	Full 2 nd (2 frets higher)	Flat 2 nd – 1 fret higher (adds movement, jazz-like sound. Note: not in chord.)
C	D	C#
F	G	F#
Dm	E	D# or Eb
Major or Minor	Minor 3 rd (3 frets higher)	2 nd – 2 frets higher (adds movement. Note: not in chord.)
E	G	F#
Am	C	B
Major	Major 3 rd (4 frets higher)	2 nd – 2 frets higher (adds movement. Note: not in chord.)
C	E	D
G	B	A
Minor	Major 3 rd (4 frets higher)	Minor 3 rd – 3 frets higher (Can’t identify a real song in our repertoire containing this move.)
C	E	D
G	B	A
Major	4 th (5 frets higher)	3 rd – 4 frets higher (moves very naturally to next chord.)
C	F	E
G	C	B
D	G	F#
“	“	2 nd and 3 rd – 2 frets and then 4 frets higher (moves very emphatically to next chord. Often used in country style play. We often call this “rolling up” to the 4 th .)
C	F	D then E
D	G	E then F#

“From” Chord	“To” Chord Primary Note (Relative)	Passing Note (And Explanation)
Major	Lower 4th (7 frets lower)	Lower 3 rd – 8 frets lower (moves very naturally to next chord, much as when moving to the higher 4 th .)
C	F	low E
G	C	low B
D	G	low F#
Minor	4th (5 frets higher)	Minor 3 rd – 3 frets higher (moves very naturally to next chord.)
Am	D	C
Em	A	G
Dm	G	F
“	“	(Don’t use the major 3 rd “roll up”. Avoid the major 3 rd .)
“	“	2 nd and minor 3 rd – 2 frets and then 3 frets higher (moves emphatically to next chord.)
Am	D	B, C
Em	A	F#, G
Minor	Lower 4th (7 frets lower)	Lower minor 3 rd – 9 frets lower (moves very naturally to next chord.)
Am	D	low C
Em	A	low G
Dm	G	low F
Major	Flat 5th (6 frets higher)	Major 3 rd – 4 frets higher (Can’t identify a real song containing this move.)
C	F#	E
Minor	Flat 5th (6 frets higher)	Minor 3 rd – 3 frets higher (Can’t identify a real song containing this move.)
Am	Eb	C
Major	Higher 5th (7 frets higher)	higher 3 rd – 4 frets higher
C	G	E
G	D	B

“From” Chord	“To” Chord Primary Note (Relative)	Passing Note (And Explanation)
D	A	F#
Major	Lower 5th (5 frets lower)	Lower 3 rd – 8 frets lower
C	G	low E
G	D	low B
D	A	low F#
“	“	Major 7 th and 6 th – 1 fret lower and then 3 frets lower (moves very emphatically down to next chord. Often used in country style play. We often call this “rolling down” to the 5 th .)
C	Lower G	lower B, A
G	Lower D	lower F#, E
D	Lower A	lower C#, B
Major or Minor	Flat 6 th (8 frets higher)	5 th – 7 frets higher (moves very emphatically up to next chord.)
C	Ab	G
Em	C	B
Major or Minor	Lower Flat 6 th (4 frets higher)	5 th – 5 frets lower (reaches down, and then moves very emphatically up to next chord.)
C	Ab	Lower G
Em	C	Lower B
“	“	Flat 7 th – 2 frets lower (moves very dramatically down to next chord.)
C	Ab	Bb
Em	C	D
Major or Minor	6 th (9 frets higher)	5 th – 7 frets higher (moves naturally to next chord.)
C	A	G
Em	C#	B
Major or Minor	6 th (3 frets lower)	7 th – 1 fret lower (moves naturally to next chord, if the passing note is in the current key.)

“From” Chord	“To” Chord Primary Note (Relative)	Passing Note (And Explanation)
C	A	B
Em	C#	D#
Major or Minor	6 th (3 frets lower)	Flat 7 th – 2 frets lower (moves more dramatically to next chord, if the passing note is in the current key.)
C	A	Bb
Em	C#	D
Major or Minor	Flat 7 th (2 frets lower)	Maj 7 th – 1 fret lower (moves dramatically to next chord.)
C	Bb	B
Em	D	Eb
“	“	5 th – 5 frets lower
C	Bb	Lower G
Em	D	Lower B
Major or Minor	Maj 7 th (1 fret lower)	5 th – 5 frets lower
C	B	Lower G
Em	Eb	Lower B