

## How To Pick A Great Bass Guitar Teacher:

Author: John William Simons

Date: 10/15/2005

So you've found the 4, 5 or 6 string bass guitar of your dreams, plunked down a few hard earned bucks for your new/used toy, and have now tinkered with it long enough to realize that perhaps a few lessons might be a wise investment to accelerate your journey into musical super-stardom...

Searching for and selecting a bass teacher can in-and-of-itself be as challenging an experience as picking out your first bass – but it doesn't have to be. This article will provide some insight into the thought process and criteria one may want to consider when searching for and selecting a bass instructor. Although it may seem obvious, it's important to note that selecting a bass instructor based upon convenience/cost is rarely if ever the best criteria to consider for what will hopefully turn out to be a long-term meaningful relationship.

One of the prerequisites prior to embarking on this quest is to give some thought to your personal goals and reasons for taking up the instrument. After all, a quality teacher will be interested in hearing about what you hope to achieve in terms of performance level aspirations (garage band, hobbyist, church, school, professional performer), stylistic interests (punk, jazz, rock, metal, funk, R&B, country, acoustic) and technique preferences (plectrum, pizzicato, slap, tap, fretless).

Due to advances in technology and distribution channels, there are more ways than ever to find materials available purporting to help you learn how to play the bass. For example, there are a plethora of videos, books, and web-based resources available – some are quite affordable (and in some cases even free) and helpful to the beginner, others are overpriced and as clear as MUD.

Ultimately though, none of this will be a worthy substitute for meeting regularly with a quality teacher who can provide you with immediate feedback and direction, helping you avoid the pitfalls of developing bad technical or practice habits. Most teachers have been exposed to the current/popular resources available, and at the very least can guide you – highlighting the materials they have found to be the most beneficial for learning to play bass – saving you time and money.

Invariably, one of the first considerations is cost, which can vary widely (generally anywhere from \$20 per lesson to \$80 per lesson). Does that mean that a \$10 lesson is always a better value than a \$100 lesson... or that a \$100 lesson will always be 10 times as informative as a \$10 lesson? Well, “no”, or at the very least not-necessarily. Generally speaking, I believe you will find most musical instructors to be fairly honest and ethical about asking for and charging what they feel their time and knowledge are worth – or at least what the market will bear in their particular locale – but as with all products and services available in today’s open market – it’s always best to heed the warning “buyer beware”.

Teachers these days may offer lessons at their home, at your home, at a local school or college, community center, music instrument store or private music school. Whatever the venue, or situation, try to avoid being part of any “bass student cattle drives” – frankly no two bass players are alike in terms of how they assimilate information, thus you deserve individual attention and personalized lesson plans that cater to your specific needs.

A 30 min lesson with a teacher that barely remembers your name and hustles 30-50 students through their door each week might seem impressive (or at the very least a really good racket), but these lessons will be of little or no benefit to the students over the long haul. Also, beware of the teacher who spends any amount of lesson time trying to “wow” you with deft yet banal musical “licks” that (in an attempt to stroke their own ego) they have obviously practiced ad nauseam and have very little relevance to any musical reality. Hey, you’re paying for the lessons right? You didn’t ask to be entertained; you just want to learn!

On the other hand, many quality teachers only accept a limited number of students, and there may even be a waiting list! Although this doesn’t serve your immediate needs, it is often a good indication that they take the craft of teaching seriously, and engage only dedicated students that really want to stick with it and learn. Moreover, a good teacher appreciates (dare I say needs?) to be surrounded by motivated students, as it inspires them to continue learning themselves.

The electric bass is a physically challenging instrument, and such a 40-50 minute weekly lesson is strongly recommended for both beginner and intermediate level students. Many teachers are open to meeting with you before beginning formal lessons to discuss your goals and make recommendations. Remember, your initial contact (be it via phone or in person) with

a prospective bass instructor is a chance for you to “interview” them to see how closely their background and teaching style matches your needs.

Some basic questions to ask your prospective teacher might be:

**Is the electric bass guitar your primary instrument?**

- If it isn't, run (don't walk) to the next prospective instruction candidate – you're wasting your time, find someone else...

**Do you play upright bass (also referred to as acoustic or bass fiddle, or double bass)?**

- Be aware that muscular development, left-hand fingering, and to some extent musical approach/philosophy can be dramatically different between the upright bass and bass guitar. This isn't necessarily a “red flag”; in fact their insight can be quite valuable depending upon your stylist goals, but generally speaking, and especially for those just starting out on the instrument find someone that primarily plays electric bass...

**What styles do you consider yourself to play well?**

- If they respond “all styles” find someone else... pros know what they're good at and where they're limitations or unexplored territory lies...

**How long have you played electric bass?**

- If they haven't played at least 5 years, and/or aren't performing professionally, then their knowledge base is still developing... you can do better!

**Did you study at a musical school or are you self-taught?**

- Clearly there are some great Universities, Colleges, and private/specialty music schools across the country. If you are considering (or planning) to study contemporary music at one of these institutions, it may be worth picking the brain of someone that's actually attended – and certainly prior to spending a small fortune on your musical education. Beyond that, an expensive education does not necessarily make a great bassist. Most working pro's are continually studying and learning, and practical knowledge (i.e., “street smarts”) from a working musician is invaluable. Along that same line of thinking, beware of anyone offering

bass lessons fresh out of school. Again, their "real world" knowledge base is still developing, and you may be just the "guinea pig" they've been waiting for...

### How long have you taught bass?

-They may be a GREAT bass player, but don't assume this automatically makes them a GREAT teacher. Assess how organized they are, i.e., do they show up on time for lessons, does your slot start and end as scheduled, are they prepared for YOU?, do they offer information and insight not taken directly from a book?, are they able to answer your questions in a clear and concise manner?, are they easy to talk to?, do you like this person? - remember, you might be seeing quite a bit of one another over the course of time that you study with them...

### Do you perform regularly? (with whom?, and where?)

-Try to go out and see them perform if you can - certainly it can be tough for younger students if the teacher performs solely at clubs with an age requirement, but if the instructor doesn't do a variety of gigs, he/she may be suffering from musical "tunnel vision". Most pro's perform publicly at many different types of venues (for example: churches, parks, private events, street fairs, county fairs, festivals, etc.)

### What age group are your students? (and what is the experience/performance level of your students)

-Try to find someone that teaches a wide variety of age groups (not just kids, and not just adults), styles, and levels. Likewise, it would be ideal if your teacher has helped other students reach or improve their respective performance levels. Ask them if any of their students perform (and where?).

### Will you help me play songs I'm interested in learning?

-Studying music one of the most mentally/physically challenging and personally gratifying endeavors you will ever experience in your lifetime - but it's got to be FUN too. You will stay motivated if you can learn to play bass-lines from music that you enjoy. If your instructor isn't able to help you learn to play along with songs that you like, then your time spent practicing

will become drudgery, and your inspiration for tackling the instrument in the first place will eventually suffer.

### What methods of instruction do you teach?

-Your new teacher should be able to read bass clef notation and be comfortable using a metronome...

A couple of the biggest differentiators among bass teachers with respect to teaching style is; the use of a metronome or not, and does the instructor convey bass lessons via tablature notation (musical shorthand) or reading bass clef (notes). The author of this article highly recommends and encourages students of all skill levels to become comfortable practicing with a metronome, and learning how to read bass clef notes – both of which should be done as part of the daily practice routine. This will pay pronounced dividends down the road in terms of faster musical development and achievement of higher levels of musical proficiency. As skill sets, becoming “one” with the metronome and being able to read basic bass ideas will result in the bass student getting more opportunities to perform with other quality musicians.

Tablature is a short cut that leaves the bass student literally “short-changed” on the path of musical development, especially in terms of rhythmic development.

In closing, a quality bass instructor will be able to impart an understanding of the role of the bass in an ensemble, and an understanding of music theory as it applies to the bass. You should find the teacher to be patient, yet firmly push you to the edges of your abilities and knowledge, inspiring you to hone your problem solving skill set and always be open to tackling new challenges. The best teacher is one whose ultimate goal above all others is to help you become the best bass player you can possibly be – even if it means eventually surpassing the teacher’s own abilities sooner or later.

Some people feel that we’re either born with the ability to play music or not. I believe each of us has a unique musical voice waiting to be revealed, all of us just as worthy of being heard. A quality bass instructor will facilitate that process greatly.

John William Simons Copyright 2005