

Advanced Techniques for the Walkingbass®



“I have seen guys with 5 string basses who can’t get half the sounds that you are getting out of just three.”

-Buddy Fo of the Invitations

If you have read the “**Beginners Guide to the Walkingbass**” (available online at www.konawalkingbass.com), you have learned the basics about playing in an open tuning. You have seen how the three major chords in any key are related to each other in a very simple way, allowing the Walkingbass to be played in any key without having to learn different hand configurations for each chord.

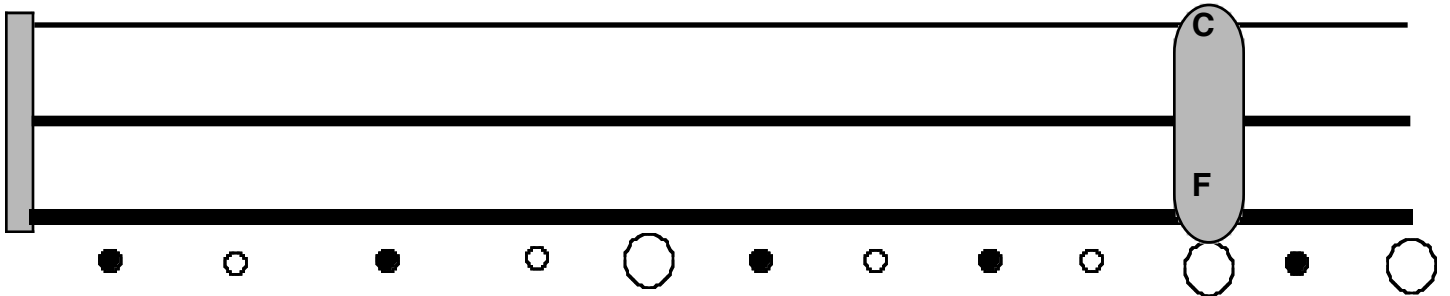
If you have been playing the Walkingbass for at least a few days, you know that this instrument is played with the whole finger of the left hand, not just the fingertips like a guitar or ukulele. I should mention that generally, a bass player is only playing one note at a time, and therefore, there is no need to press both notes in the chord at the same time like a guitarist does.

You may have also gotten to the point where you understand that there are some limitations to playing chords with just one finger. In this document, we will look at some of the techniques that can be used to improve your playing and overcome these limitation. There is a little more music theory involved, which you will find useful as you continue to play.

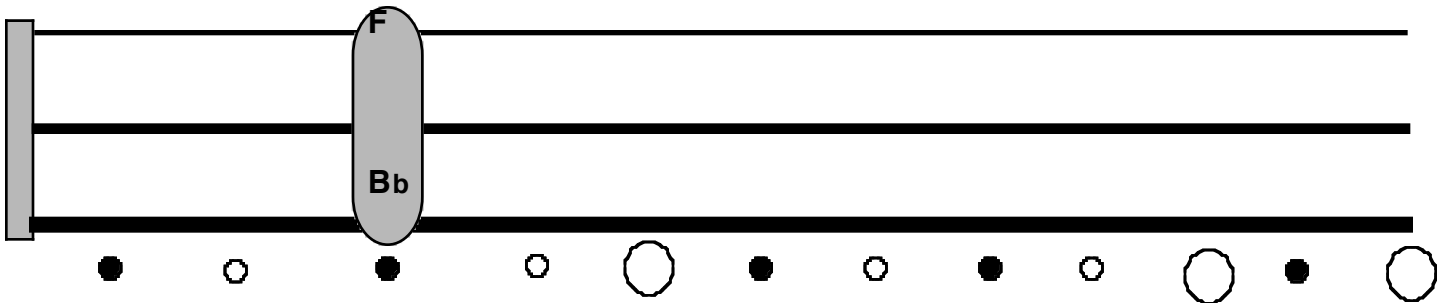
Playing Inside The Box:

I began playing the Walkingbass by simply moving one finger up and down the neck - the “bar chording” technique. This works, but as I began playing faster songs, I found it to be hard to get where I needed to be fast enough. Quite by accident, I discovered a different way to play. I call it “The Box”.

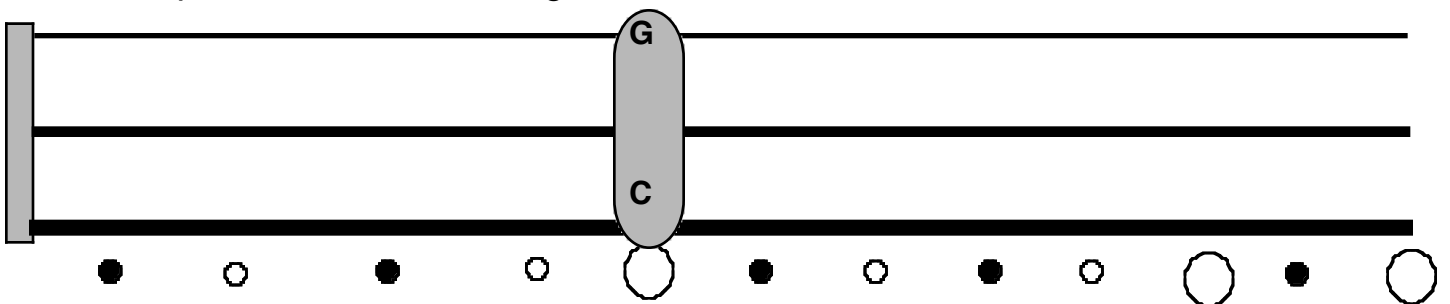
As a beginner, when I would play in the key of F, I played my F chord by laying my finger across the large white “F” dot and plucking the two outside strings (giving me the notes F and C).



Another chord in the key of F is Bb (the 4 chord), which I would play by going to the Bb dot and plucking the inside and outside strings (notes Bb and F).

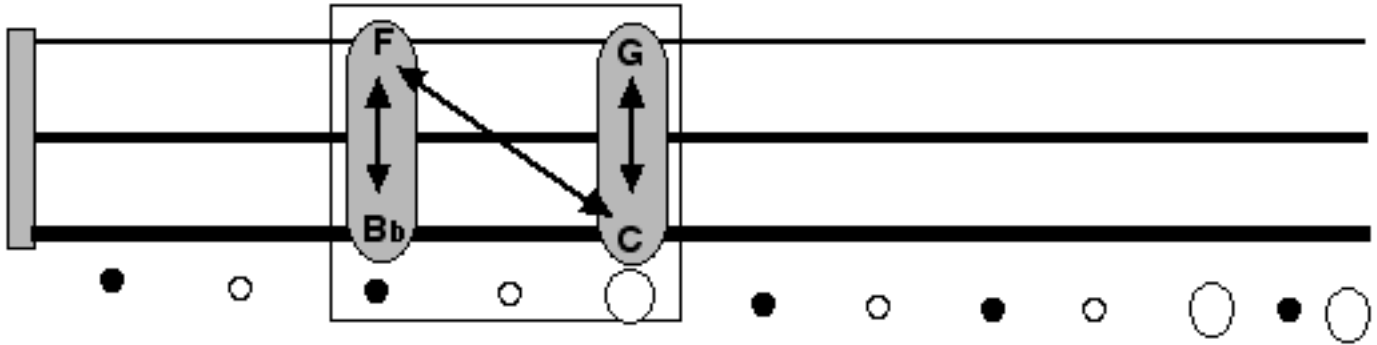


And for the C chord (the 5 chord), I'd play the notes C and G by going to the large C dot and pluck the outside strings:



Moving between Bb and C was easy, but it seemed inconvenient to move way up the neck to play the F chord. Especially when the same two notes in the F chord (C and F) are already built right into the Bb and C chords! I found that I could play the three chords in the key of F and never leave “The Box”, and have no worries about getting to the chord I needed in time.

Here's how it works:



Notice that there is a difference between how you play the original F chord (the 1 chord) and how you play it inside the box. Originally, the note F is on the low string, and the note C is on the high string. In the box, however, the note F is on the high, thinner, string, and the note C is diagonally across from it, on the low string. The chord has been “inverted”. If you play the original F chord, and then the inverted F chord, you will see that they don't sound exactly the same, yet they both work great as F chords. You'll easily develop the habit of playing the inverted position of the 1 chord when using The Box Technique after a bit of repetition.

The Box Technique:

Look at the arrows inside the box. They form a “Z” shape. When I am playing the Bb chord, I am laying my pointer finger across the neck, and plucking the B Flat note and then the F note. To play the C chord, I lay my ring finger across the neck and pluck the C note and then the G note. To play the F chord, I first lay my pointer finger across the neck and pluck the F note, then lay my ring finger across the neck and pluck the C note. This is different from the way other stringed instruments are chorded. With a guitar or ukulele, the fingertips are pressed against the strings using patterns that determine the chord. I am not using my fingertips, and the notes of the chord are being played one at a time.

Here is an exercise to familiarize yourself with The Box technique.

Start counting slowly to yourself; “One, two, three, four, One, two, three, four...”, and pluck the following note sequence as you count:

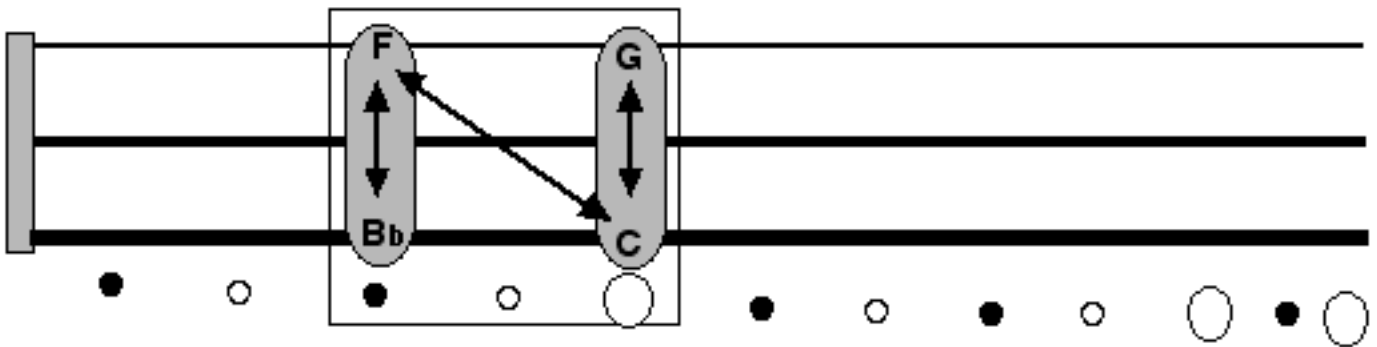
Key of F:

F - C, F - C (pointer/little finger, diagonally, starting with high string),

Bb - F, Bb - F (pointer finger straight across, low to high string),

C - G, C - G (little finger straight across, low string/high string),

And once again, F - C, F - C (pointer/pinky, high to low string)



Repeat this exercise until you become comfortable with it.

It may feel awkward at first. You are moving from the top string to bottom string while playing F - C, and playing from bottom string to top string while playing Bb - F and C - G. But practice this sequence, and you will find that you can play all three chords (F, Bb, and C) much faster this way than you can by moving long distances up and down the neck.

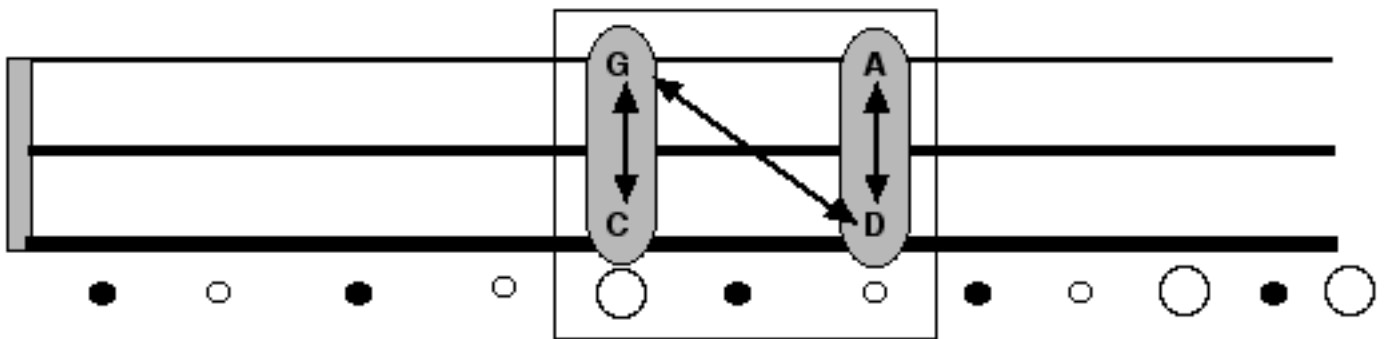
Playing inside the Box in other keys:

Once you have mastered this technique in the key of F, you will find that it makes playing in the key of F so much easier. Can this same technique be used in other keys? The answer is YES!

Here is the same box for the Key of G.

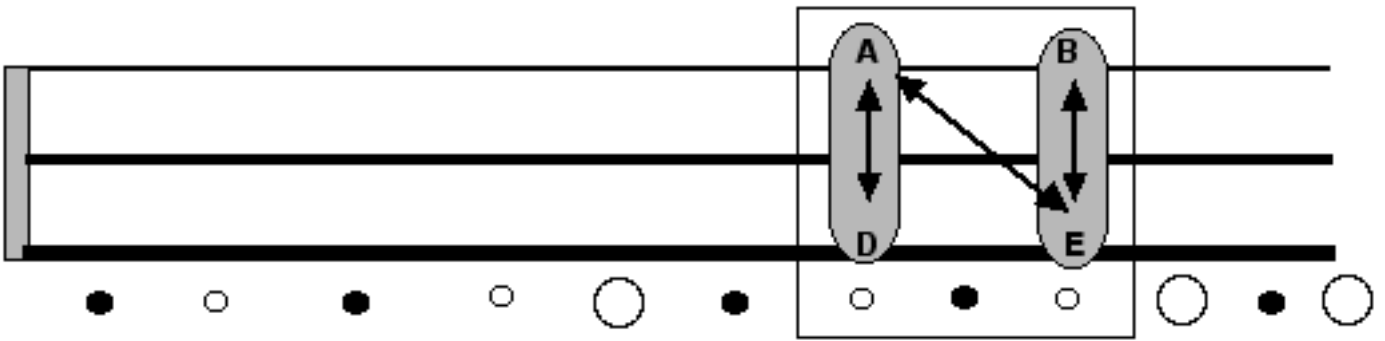
Try playing these notes in the same pattern:

G - D, G - D, C - G, C - G, D - A, D - A, G - D, G - D

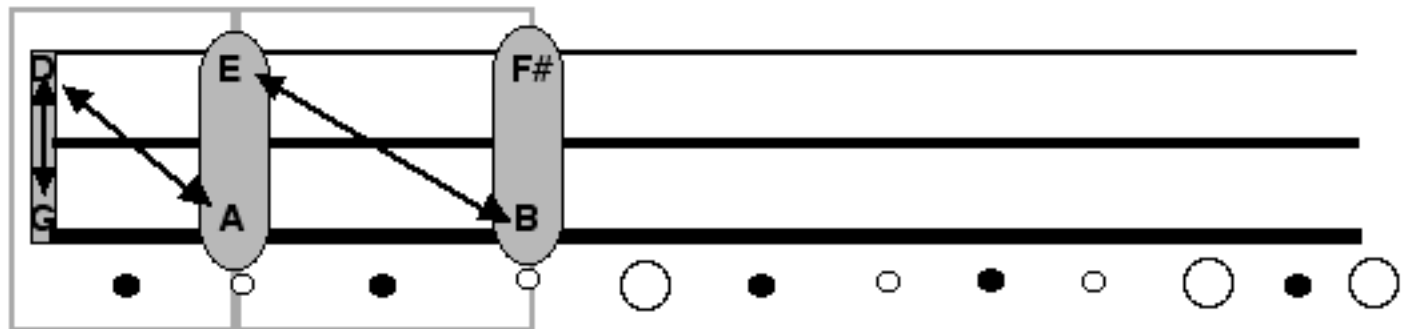


Again, try using the pointer finger to play the C and G notes, and the ring finger to play the D and A notes.

Here is The Box for the Key of A:



Here are The Boxes for the Keys of D and E:

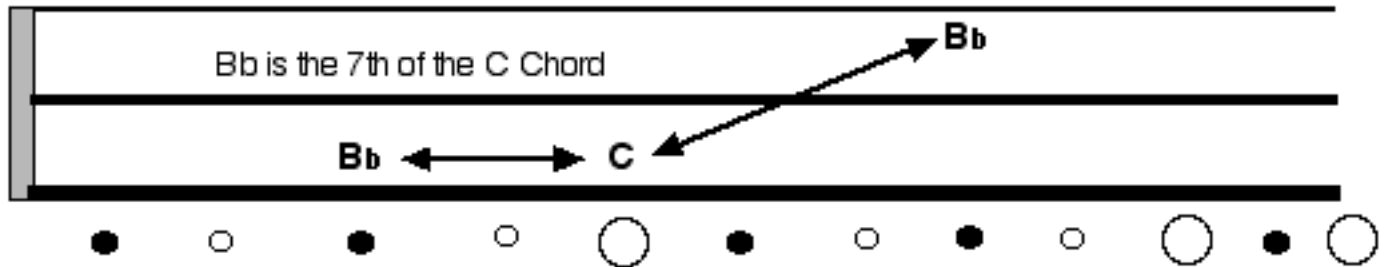


Notice that in the key of D the G is an open chord played without the left hand. The Box can be used in all keys except C# (C sharp), as it is too high on the fingerboard.

Playing 7th Chords

7th chords always contain the root of the chord and the 7th note of the chord. The 7th note is always 2 dots down on the low string, or 3 dots up on the high string. For example: You can play a C7 chord by first playing the C note on the low string, and then either dropping down two notes on the same string, or going up 3 notes and plucking the high string.

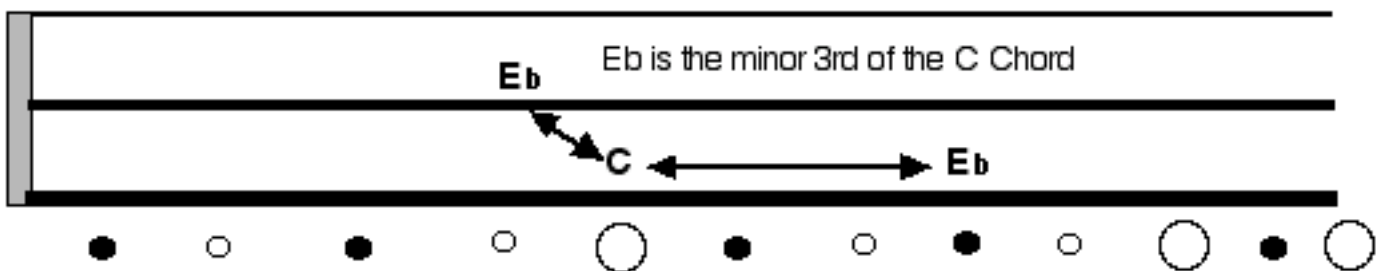
**Drop down two, or go up three and over two strings for the 7th.
This works in any key!**



Playing Minor Chords:

Minor chords always contain the root of the chord, and the minor 3rd. The minor third is always three notes up on the low string, or one note down on the middle string. For example: You can play a C minor chord by first playing the C note on the low string, and then either moving up three dots on the low string, or by moving to the middle string and dropping down one dot.

**Up three, or over one string and down one dot.
This works in any key!**

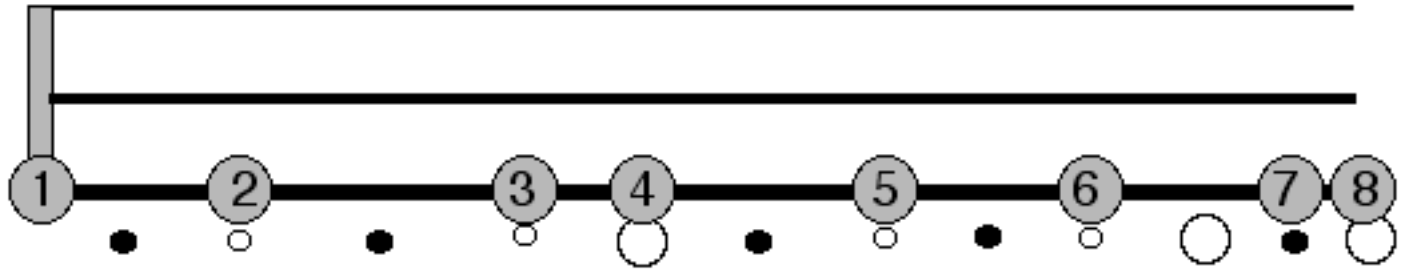


Walk-ups and Walk-downs:

Sometimes the most interesting thing a bass player can do is to play some notes on the way from one chord to another. These are often referred to as walk-ups and walk-downs, and they use the notes in the key signature. (Google "Musical Scales" if you want to learn more.)

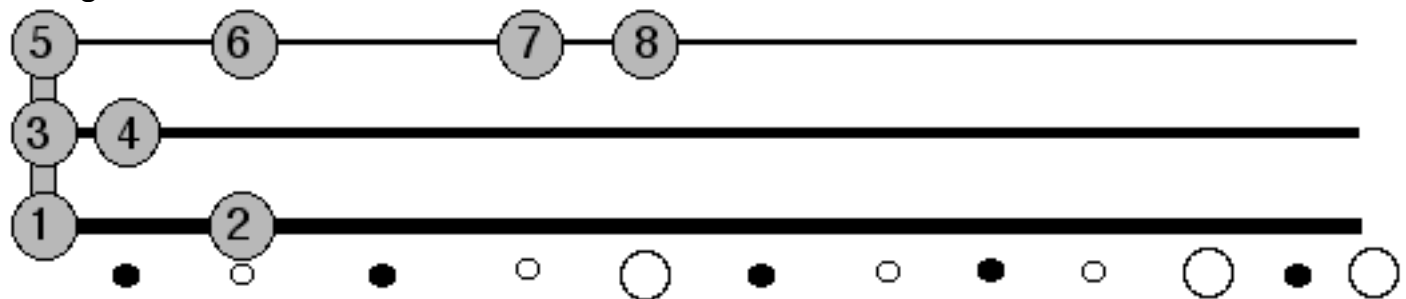
Here is the G major scale.

Try playing it several times from 1 up to 8 and then from 8 back down to 1. "1" is the open string G note (no fingers down), "2" is A, etc.



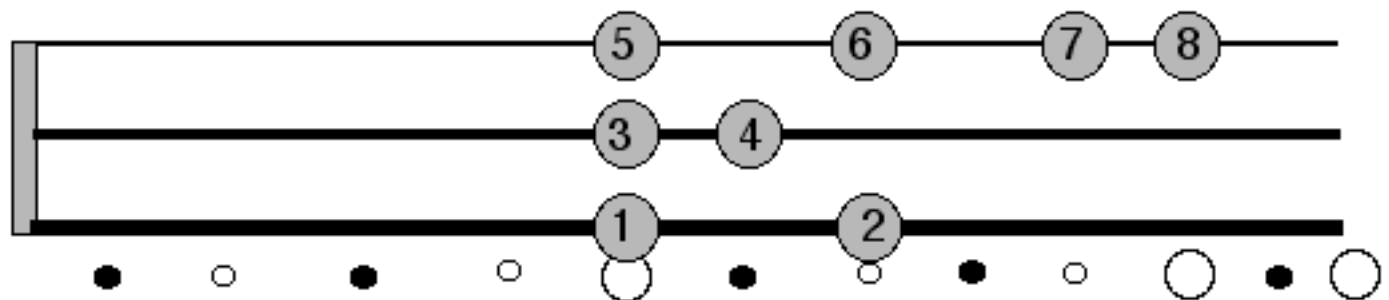
Then try playing it using all three strings like this:

"1", "3" and "5" (shown at the nut of the fingerboard) are your open G, B and D strings.



You can use this same pattern in any key.

For example, here is the C scale:

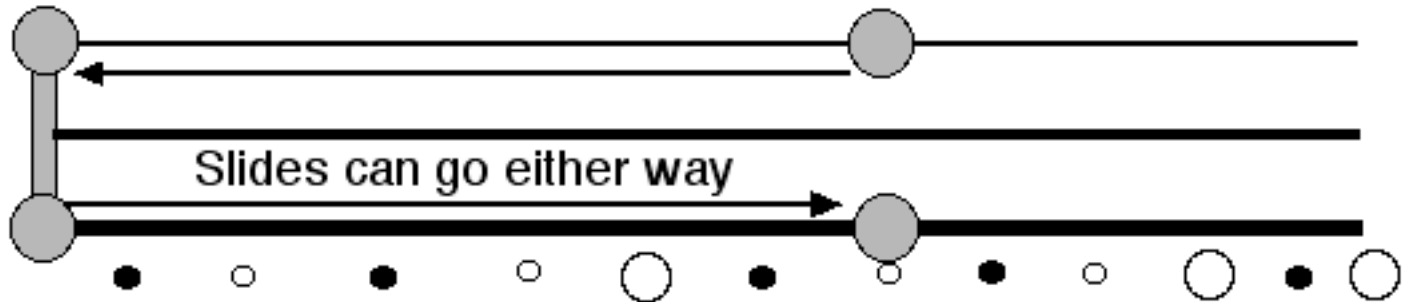


If you practice scales in the keys you are likely to be playing in, you will find that you are able to "walk" up and down the scales between chords, using the notes of the scale in that key, and your playing will become a lot more exciting!

Cheap Tricks:

You can make mistakes in the middle of a song, and the audience will usually forgive you, as long as you and you play your notes on the beat **and you end the song at the same time as everyone else!** Some songs just stop cold. Others sound better if you do something a little more exciting, such as:

You can slide into the last note of the song. For example, if you are playing in the key of D, there is a very good chance that the last note you will play will be the D note. Try sliding up the low string, and ending on the D. Or you could start on the high string, and slide down to the D. Sometimes a slow slide works, other songs will sound better with a quick slide.



Try this in different keys. You will usually find that a slide is especially effective if you start either 2, 5, or 7 dots away from your intended last note.

Another way to end a song is to hold the last note. With the nylon bass strings, there is not a lot of “sustain”. The vibrations tend to die away fairly quickly, so you can keep them going on the last note of a song by rapidly striking the string in short delicate strokes with the side of your right index finger close to the pickup, or with the side of your right thumb close to the nut. Use a light touch, and you will hear one long rumbling note rather than a series of individual notes. Kind of a “tremelo” effect on the bass!

Keep an eye on the other musicians. Watch for visual clues that the song is about to end. Work on your professionalism by trying to end “exactly” with the lead instrument or singer.

Tips on improving your style:

I have to be honest here. I hate to sit down and practice a song over and over. Yet I know that there are a lot of people who will tell you that this is the only way to practice and that they have benefitted from that approach.

I tend to place more emphasis on the importance of learning the ability to play with others in a live, spontaneous situation. To me, that is the best kind of musician.

Here are some tips:

1) If you know where your instruments chords are, and can get comfortable getting to them quickly, you are half way home.

2) If you know the song well enough, you can hear the chord change coming, and be right there when the change happens.

And so, rather than sit with sheets of paper in front of me, I find it much simpler to listen to the music I love, and try to hear the chord changes. You can listen to your favorite music even when you have no instrument around, and you can imagine yourself playing the chords. The next time you pick up your instrument, all of that time spent imagining will be there for you to tap into. (Remember the learning technique in the popular musical, "The Music Man"? It is simply this: If you can sing it or hum it, you are well on your way to being able to play it.) Music should be fun!

There is nothing as magical for me as playing music with other musicians. However they may not always be around. So practice playing along with your favorite CDs. Listen to other bass players, and to the bass lines on your favorite CDs. You will find that little by little, the techniques of others will find their way into your music.

Most of all, let yourself make mistakes! Any professional musician will tell you that mistakes happen to everyone - but a professional is someone who can quickly recover from their mistakes and continue on! Fear of making mistakes is the number one enemy of the musician. Knowing your instrument and knowing your music greatly reduce this feeling of fear. And truly, there is nothing like being put on the spot to bring out the best of your musical intuition!