

# Building Dexterity on the Bass

While it is always important to have a strong theoretical backing and intellectual depth to your music there are times where you just need to focus on your chops. You can have the coolest idea ever, but if you don't have the dexterity and agility to move freely and quickly around the fingerboard you won't get anywhere. These drills are devices. They are not particularly melodic by themselves, but they'll help you gain the facility to play anything you want. Think of these like bass push-ups – you don't do push-ups to get good at push-ups; you do them to build strength for other things (like playing the upright really fast).

These drills will be for both the electric and upright bass and will work both hands. In my opinion finger-strengtheners and gripping-devices don't have a lot of value. You should do all these exercises on your instrument, speed will ultimately come from accuracy and that just takes time. There is no shortcut.

## Exercise 1:

To start we're going to focus the right hand for electric bass. I play with a three-finger technique, alternating between my index, middle, and ring fingers. Some bassists are in the two-finger school, my thinking is that if you've got them use them. If you don't use a three-fingered approach it may be good to learn, there is a lot of cool rhythmic technique you can get that is not easily accessible with only two fingers.

For this exercise you'll alternate your fingers, index-middle-ring-middle-index-middle-ring-middle... in a rolling motion. Make sure each note is the same volume and same duration – do this with a metronome for consistency. Do this until each note sounds *exactly* the same regardless of which finger you use. Now start the metronome and count in 5/4 (five beats per measure). On the one of each measure accent the beat with the corresponding finger keeping the same alternating/rolling pattern.

Counting in five causes the downbeat to land on each finger in an alternating pattern: the first downbeat will be your index finger, the second on the middle, the third on the ring, the fourth on the middle, et cetera. This drill will help you build individual control for each finger – something which is extremely useful in string crossing patterns and fast passages. You can do this drill on the edge of a table, or against the side of your leg while you walk. The goal is to develop consistency across all your fingers.



## Exercise 4:

Now we'll do a few upright drills. This drill is focused on building up facility with the bow. The bow is what determines a lot of your "voice" on the upright bass, and string crossing is something that should be automatic. This exercise focuses on crossings over adjacent strings, I'm going to mark them as high (H) and low (L) – they should be practiced on all strings. These should also be played in every part of the bow and built up in speed with a metronome (as always consistency is key).

1. L H H L I L H H L I L H H L I L H H L
2. H L L H I H L L H I H L L H I H L L H
3. L H L H I L H L H I L H L H I L H L H
4. H L H L I H L H L I H L H L I H L H L
5. L L H H I L L H H I L L H H I L L H H
6. H H L L I H H L L I H H L L I H H L L

This covers the major four note patterns associated with two strings. Practice starting both with an up bow and a down bow. As you start to get more comfortable with the exercise start denoting different notes to different parts of the bow and make the necessary adjustments in speed to reach those marks. Additionally start putting strings in between, so instead of playing on adjacent strings (such as G and D) play on G and A or G and E. If you play classical music or jazz with a bow start to look for these four note patterns in the music you're playing – you'll be amazed at how often they pop up. The best part is that once you have these down you'll only have to focus on the left hand – your right hand will be on auto-pilot!

## Exercise 5:

This is for upright bassists working on consistency in the left hand. Finger a C on the A string with your first finger. Now draw your bow slowly. As you play the C shift your hand position from your first finger to the second, then from the second to the fourth – all in a single bow stroke. You should do this until you do not hear any break in the note, it should be a "silent" shift. This can take a serious amount of practice to learn, but the payoff is huge. Your half-step shifts will be seamless. Once you feel good doing this with one note try playing an entire scale in this fashion.

## **Exercise 6:**

This can be for either bass guitar or upright bass. Play a simple four note pattern, then shift and play it an octave higher. Now shift the pattern up a half step and repeat. Keep doing this until you run out of neck ;-). Set your metronome so you know you're consistent and gradually build up speed. You may want to start with a pattern on one string and then add more string crossings as you improve.

These drills may not seem flashy or impressive, but they are fundamental to building up dexterity you need to move around the bass quickly and comfortably. You can integrate them into a small portion of your daily practice routine – it's better to do these for 10 minutes every day compared to an hour once a week.