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The Case for Bass Guitar – Swinging with the Jazz Band

The historical [un]acceptance of the bass guitar in mainstream jazz

There are various reasons why the bass guitar has not been accepted in mainstream jazz. These include its lack of history as an instrument, the perception of the instrument as a "cheaper alternative" to the double bass, and the small number of practitioners who knew what to do with the instrument.

One such early player who was successful in being accepted was Monk Montgomery, brother of better known guitarist Wes Montgomery and vibist Buddy Montgomery. As a member of Lionel Hampton's Orchestra in the early nineteen fifties, he recounts when Hampton asked him to use the bass guitar in his group, "Hamp handed me the Fender and told me he wanted this electric instrument sound in the band. It was like he was trying to turn me on to another chick. The electric bass was considered a bastard instrument. Conventional bass players despised it. It was new and a threat to what they knew. In fact, by being new, it was jazz." Before being asked to switch instruments, he played the double bass.

Another notable double bassist turned bass guitarist was Steve Swallow. In an interview conducted by Jim Roberts for Guitar Player magazine in November 1987, Roberts prompted Swallow to discuss his switch to bass guitar. "It was considered downright rude at the time. I lost some good friends, but I made some others. And I think that once I faced up to the fact that I wanted to play an electric instrument more than an acoustic one, I began to pay attention to music I had ignored." On a more complimentary note, Jimmy Guiffre remarked in the liner notes to a trio album [which also featured pianist Paul Bley and Steve Swallow] that he prefers Steve's "electric bass" because "a stand-up can't match the volume Paul and I get. ... The balance is much better now."

Anthony Jackson is one such bass guitarist who fervently believes in his chosen instrument and its viability in mainstream jazz yet was consistently met with unacceptability amongst "mainstream traditionalists". In a January 1986 interview by Jim Ferguson for *Guitar Player* magazine, Ferguson asked Anthony Jackson about his disagreement with jazz double bassist Ron Carter, "Several years ago, he did a number of interviews where he basically said that the world was going along fine until the electric bass [guitar] was invented. Being young and impressionable, I was deeply hurt by that."

The differing opinions on "acceptability" of the bass guitar in the stage band, or any jazz ensemble for that matter also probably has to do with its better known association with popular or electric-oriented music. It is rather interesting that the electric guitar, for example, is readily found within such jazz ensembles. The electric guitar has been around and has been in extensive use in jazz since the nineteen thirties. Its use and the virtuosity of players such as Charlie Christian, Jim Hall, Wes Montgomery, among others has solidified its acceptance in mainstream jazz.

Steve Swallow, however, shares a more optimistic view, "One of the great things for me about the electric bass [guitar] is that it has almost no history. There are very few people standing over your shoulder, watching you play. When I played the acoustic bass, I did feel very strongly, the presence of everybody looking over my shoulder. That history just doesn't exist with the electric bass [guitar]. I have had the sense that I am plowing forward into a country that I have never been in before."

I have discussed elsewhere on the view that some music educators hold of the "appropriateness" of the bass guitar in any ensemble besides, perhaps, the "rock combo." Fortunately for me, I had a band teacher who was willing to work with me to find my way as a bass guitarist. Again, fortunately for me, there was a music program in my area that accepted the bass guitar as a legitimate instrument. It worked out so well that I am now in the privileged position of being a music educator. My aim in this article is to share some ideas of what might work for you and the bass guitarist in your stage band rhythm section. There are certain approaches a bass guitarist can take to emulate the double bass's historical function in mainstream jazz.

Harmonic propulsion, rhythmic precision, forward momentum, and swing!

The key to the walking bass line lies in an understanding of "swing." There are many opinions and thoughts on this rather elusive "concept". Ken Morrison has stated that "For many writers, the synthesis of European and African rhythmic conceptions created the uniquely African-American rhythmic drive known as 'swing'. ... Swing is a perceptual orientation that creates a feeling of the beat that is different from both is European and African antecedents." Jazz took harmonic concepts from the Western European Art Music tradition and adapted it for its own use. In fact, the walking bass line is not entirely dissimilar to the function of the basso continuo prevalent in the Baroque era.

Bassist John Goldsby defines it best, "A walking line, in its simplest form, is a continuous stream of quarter notes that outlines the harmony and locks up with the ride cymbal to provide a strong, consistent pulse." Most stage band arrangements and compositions have walking bass lines specifically written out in order to complement what is going on in the other sections although a brief discussion of its principles are in order.

While at Capilano College, I had the fortune of studying with André Lachance, a mainstay double bassist and bass guitarist in the Vancouver jazz scene. He supported my desire to explore jazz playing through the bass guitar. He shared with me some important ideas that are the basis for many walking bass lines in mainstream jazz. He said that the "first beat of the bar should be the root of the chord. The third of the fifth can also be used although usually they will be followed by the root on beat 2 or 3." Beats 2 and 3 usually contained "chord tones out of the arpeggio going up or down, or tones from the scale implied by the chord going up or down. These notes outline the colour of the chord." For Lachance, beat 4 "is where the fun is. This is the approach note, the one that tells you the root of the chord coming up. It provides a sense of momentum, i.e. the harmony moving forward rather than sitting on a chord." On this final beat, three choices are evident: a diatonic or chromatic approach note or the fifth of the target chord [tonicization].

Mike Reveley, a jazz theory instructor at Capilano College uses the concept of the "activation of weakness" in order to explain "the essence of syncopation." He claims that "rhythmic syncopation adds energy to music though the process of accenting those parts of a rhythm that is naturally unaccented. By this unnatural action, it creates tension that requires motion to find resolution." Reveley uses the example of a rock drummer accenting the backbeat with the snare which, to him, "requires further events to resolve them." He further states that "the last half of anything is weaker than the first half. In triple time, the last two thirds of anything is weaker." Therefore, activation of these beats requires a harmonic or rhythmic event that would produce motion which, in

turn, leads towards the need for resolution. This idea reinforces Lachance's suggestion of using beat 4 to propel the walking bass line harmonically.

The "activation of weakness" concept can also help to illustrate the swing feeling, and particularly the division of the "two-thirds and one-third triplet grouping" that is often chosen to characterize the subdivision of eighth notes. In this instance, the "activation of weakness" occurs on the "one-third" part of the triplet grouping. This being said, Goldsby further claims that "Swing must be felt. You can feel both the rests and the notes in swinging music. You feel swing when notes dance through time and space, living and breathing only because the notes that came before and the notes that inevitably follow."

Sometimes, intellectualizing swing does not really help in having a student-musician understand how it is supposed to be felt. Even using the division of "two-thirds and one-third triplet grouping" to characterize mathematically swing can make for a rigid interpretation of the feel. Some older stage band charts have the swing subdivision notated as a dotted eighth and sixteenth grouping. The reality is somewhere in between and fluctuates depending on the tempo. The faster the tempo, the closer the swing feel straightens.

A popular method of explaining this concept is to have the student-musicians visualize an egg rolling down a hill. This image should [hopefully] suggest a triplet feel with a marked emphasis on forward momentum. Although Morrison would disagree that the feeling of swing can be expressed merely in terms of a triple rather than duple subdivision, it does make for a rather simplified explanation of how to cognize swing feeling.

To get a feeling for Reveley's concept of the "activation of weakness", try these next two exercises with your entire ensemble:

Have the ensemble go out for a medium paced stroll and have them think of a consistent stream of quarter notes. At some point during the stroll have them "brisk" or drag their heels on the ground as they take each step heel to toe. If successful, what should result is the heel "brisking" on the ground on the third eighth-note triplet, the last third of the two-third/one-third triplet grouping.

For more advanced student-musicians, I suggest playing a metronome in class between 100 and 120 beats per minute and having them clap on the skip beat. The next stage is having the metronome heard as being the skip beat and the student-musicians clapping the quarter note. These are somewhat difficult exercises, but are extremely worthwhile when consistently reinforced and has helped me with ensemble rhythmic precision and the development of internal time.

Whether it is an egg rolling down a hill, strolling and brisking or clapping quarter notes and skip beats, it always helps to have a strong sense of time. As student-musicians gain more experience and are more comfortable with time playing, inevitably an awareness of beat placement will occur. Does the bass guitar play ahead or behind the beat? This is not an easy question to answer, and indeed during my second year of jazz studies presented me with a serious dilemma. Gunther Schuller has remarked that metronomic accuracy does not in and of itself guarantee swing, but my own rhythmic concept of walking quarter notes was elementary at the time. What Lachance suggested to me was to continue to work with a metronome to develop a consistent sense of time and to listen to the historical figures in jazz bass playing. He told me not to worry too much about whether I was ahead or behind the beat. After following his suggestion, beat placement is not so much of an issue: the development of my internal "clock" now allows me to place the quarter note where it feels right.

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Schuller also describes the shape of the sound as being paramount to swing. "Swing depends on how precisely a note is entered, i.e. attacked, and how it is terminated: and how each note is linked to every other succeeding note in terms of attack and release."

With this in mind, I wish to correct the notion that in order to emulate the double bass, the bass guitarist must play marcato accents on either downbeats [beats 1 and 3] or backbeats [beats 2 and 4]. Instead, I suggest the creation of a constant continuum of quarter notes to create forward momentum. Morrison also notes that, "When stress accents are added on either beats 1 and 3 or 2 and 4, I hear a reduction in the forward momentum … This is because the bass line is a continuous melodic line that is more readily heard as a single rhythmic stratum. Therefore, mere phenomenal accents in the bass line itself do not create a different rhythmic stratum. Rather, regular accents on beats 1 and 3 or 2 and 4 reinforce the potential hierarchical metric interpretation. Undoubtedly, the harmonic and melodic accents in the bass line support the hierarchical metric interpretation of the 4/4 measure." Morrison further explains that, "When either beats 1 and 3 or 2 and 4 of the quarter note pulse are accented, a duple metric pattern is perceived. This is because regular alteration of accented and unaccented quarter beats reinforces the subsuming potential of the hierarchical monometric interpretation."

With these concepts in mind, hopefully it is apparent to the reader that the bass guitar can duplicate the function of the double bass in the jazz ensemble. Of course, the biggest difference between the two instruments is the sound. I have detailed elsewhere an approach to bass guitar sound but it might also be helpful to mention that by taking on the *function* of the walking bass line, it might not hurt to emulate the sound of organ bass and the double bass itself.

Emulating the sound of organ bass

The immediate comparison that comes to mind when thinking of organ bass and bass guitar is that both sounds are "electric", by nature. When listening to Jimmy Smith or Jack McDuff play organ bass, one cannot help but hear smooth and connected lines with present and consistent fundamental and attack.

A way to achieve this on the bass guitar is to simply strike the string closer to the end of the neck rather than on top of the pickup. By striking the strings in this location, more of the fundamental note is achieved. Because the strings are also less taut in this area, the bass guitarist must use sensitivity and control. An emphasis on a light-touch must be present in order to successfully emulate the sound of organ bass.

Emulating the sound of the double bass

The first few models of the Fender Precision bass guitar featured a finger anchor and its purpose was to allow the bass guitarist's left hand to curl underneath the anchor and allow her or him to play comfortably with their thumb. These instruments were also shipped with flat-wound strings and

foam cushioning which lay against the strings at the bridge so as to provide the characteristic muted "thump" that made recorded pizzicato double bass playing so propulsive and percussive.

In addition to being useful for emulating walking pizzicato double bass playing, this technique is also useful for playing tumbaos in salsa and Afro-Cuban music, emulating *surdo* drums in Afro-Brasilian music as well as a host of other Afro-Caribbean styles. Along with a muted "thump" for an initial attack what also results when using this technique is a quickened decay in the sound envelope of the note. A way to emulate the sort of attack on a bass guitar is to use what I call a palm muting thumb and finger technique.

This technique, popularized by such notable bass guitarists as Anthony Jackson and Gary Willis, makes use of the heel of the striking hand positioned against the strings close to the bridge. The amount of pressure one applies to the strings and the placement of the heel [closer or farther from the bridge] can vary the amount of muting that occurs. This time, the thumb and fingers are practically parallel to the strings. On a regular 4 string bass guitar, one can apply the thumb on the E string, the index finger on the A string, the middle finger on the D string and the ring finger on the G string. One uses downstrokes for the thumb and upstrokes for the rest of the fingers. Having the ability to access each individual string makes this a very adaptable technique.

Uses of both approaches in context with the drummer

By emulating both types of approaches, I am not suggesting that the bass guitar is without its own "sound." On the contrary and as I have argued in a previous article, sound is a very subjective matter. However, having a cognitive idea of how organ bass and double bass have functioned in mainstream jazz can give a good idea of the bass guitar's role in the same context.

The key to both approaches is to maintain a consistent attack when striking the strings. Having an inconsistent attack disrupts the flow of the groove. Next, consider the volume of the instrument. Being electronic and having the power of wattage means that it can get out of hand very quickly. What can happen, especially as ear fatigue sets in after a longer rehearsal session, is that the bass guitarist continues to turn the amplifier louder.

Having the drummer work with the bass guitarist in a rhythm sectional can help to iron out different ideas on how to approach playing with the jazz band. They can practice playing "time" together at various tempi practicing to maintain that consistency. The bass guitarist's and drummer's concept of "feeling" the quarter note must be the same and most of the time it is intuitive. One idea might be to use the organ bass pedal approach behind one soloist and using the double bass approach for another during the solo section of a tune. When the bass guitarist does this, the drummer can change the timekeeping onto another cymbal in order to provide a different backdrop for each soloist. I would also caution against having the drummer play "four on the floor", or, four quarter notes per bar on the bass drum loudly as this can disrupt the flow that the bass guitar is trying to create. The sharing of the bass drum and the bass guitar on the low end of the frequency spectrum has the potential to make the "swing" feel sluggish, especially at faster tempos. Of course, some stage band arrangements, particularly pre-bebop, however, do call for "four on the floor", and if so, have your drummer "feather" the bass drum instead by playing at a piano dynamic level.

Suggested listening

Of course, nothing beats first-hand listening to bass guitarists, double bassists or organ players playing straight-ahead, mainstream jazz in order to understand how to play the music. This is by no means a definitive or exhaustive list, it is merely suggestive.

Bass guitarists playing mainstream, straight-ahead jazz:

Anthony Jackson: "Michel Petrucciani, Steve Gadd, Anthony Jackson – Trio in Tokyo: Dreyfus Jazz FDM 36605-2."

Steve Swallow: "Real Book: XtraWATT 8", "Deconstructed: XtraWATT 9", "Always Pack Your Uniform On Top: XtraWATT 10", "Damaged in Transit: XtraWATT 11"

Bob Cranshaw: "Sonny Rollins + 3: Milestone MCD-9250-2"

Ron Halldorson [Canadian]: "The Guitar Sounds of Lenny Breau: RCA LP LSP-4076" "The Velvet Touch of Lenny Breau – Live: One Way Records OW 29315"

Jaco Pastorius: "Brian Melvin Trio: Standards Zone Global Pacific R2 79335"

Double bass players:

Andre Lachance [Canadian]: "Mike Allen – One Step Closer: Almus CD 002", "Ihor Kukurudza – As It Was: IK10002" "The Ian McDougall Sextet – Dry With A Twist: Barbarian Records CDM 02" "The Ian McDougall Sextet – Burnin' The House Down: Barbarian Records CDM 03"

Any Oscar Pettiford, Milt Hinton, Ray Brown, or Paul Chambers

Organ players:

Jimmy Smith: "Back At The Chicken Shack: Blue Note 46402", "Midnight Special: Blue Note 84078", "Crazy Baby: Blue Note 84030"

Conclusion

Certainly I would encourage bass guitarists to try their hand at playing the double bass, if only to feel the magnitude and magnificence of the instrument, but more importantly to gain an understanding of its function in the jazz ensemble. The band teacher I previously mentioned actually bought a double bass for the school music program from a previous student perhaps secretly hoping that I would become enamoured with the instrument. I tried it for a little while, but it did not catch on with me. I was wholly dedicated to mastering the bass guitar.

The predominance of classicism in jazz is another subject altogether, but I humbly wish to highlight a few ideas. In the very early days of jazz, the instrument of choice for holding down the "low-end" was the tuba. This was later replaced with the double bass during the swing era. Did tubists cry out that they were being replaced? With the electric guitar having been used in the swing era, a question lingers that, hypothetically, if Leo Fender's company had popularized the bass guitar during the same time, and players began using it, would mainstream "jazzers" readily accept the bass guitar in their groups or otherwise?

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