

DELIBERATE PRACTICE

5 BIG PRACTICE MISTAKES

There are 5 mistakes that I see students (and not just bass students, just as practice ideas and theories apply across different activities, I see the same mistakes made in these different activities). Here are the 5 big practice mistakes I see:

- Learning Something That Doesn't Tie Into Your Bass Goals
- Learning Something New...But Too Fast
- Learning Without A Clear Goal In Place
- Practicing Things You Can Already Play
- Not Enough Regular Feedback On Your Playing

Here are my detailed thoughts on each of these mistakes:

Practice Mistake 1 - Learning Something That Doesn't Tie Into your Bass Goals

This mistake is best summed up by a post I read on Talkbass.com once. The post said something like this (and I'm paraphrasing, because I don't remember the precise details...but I'm pretty close!)

“Hey everyone

So I really want to become a good bass player. I have two hours to practice and here's how I've set up my practice routine

1. 10 minutes on scales
2. 20 minutes on slap licks
3. 20 minutes practicing soloing ideas
4. 10 minutes on arpeggio
5. 20 minutes on grooves
6. 20 minutes on theory
7. 20 minutes on ear training

What have I missed out?”

Now for my own reasons I don't post in Talkbass.com very often, so I didn't leave any “feedback” for this guy. If I had, it would have been along these lines:

“Hey man

I applaud your intentions. However your execution is poor. Here's why: you are missing crucial steps in the process of improving as a bass player.

The biggest step you are missing is having a clear goal of the level you wish to attain. Without having a concrete picture of where you want to get to, how can you be sure that your practice time is invested in moving you closer to that goal.

Let me give you an example: say you had to drive a 57 Mustang from Central Park, New York to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco for a bet. Which of the two options below do you think would get you to your destination in the most efficient manner:

1. Pick up the Mustang. Trust that you vaguely know which way is west. And start driving.
2. Pre-plan your route taking into account driving times, rest stops, overnight stops, refuelling, and so on. Program said route into your GPS. Pick up the Mustang. Start following your pre-planned route. Follow Course Corrections suggested by your GPS any time you make an unintended deviation.

Of course the answer is Option #2.

It's a no-brainer, right?

Let's go back to your bass practice. Without defining what becoming ‘a good player’ means to you it's impossible to tell whether the practice

you are doing is moving you closer to that goal.

Let me give you a practical example: if you define ‘a good bass player’ as someone who can play walking bass lines and solo in a mainstream jazz context then the kind of things they should be practicing are totally different to a person who wants to become a ‘good bass player’ but defines it as being able to play staccato 16th note funk like Rocco Prestia.

Does that make more sense?

Knowing where you want to get to not only allows you to focus with laser precision on what you should be practicing, it also makes it a gazillion times easier to know when you’ve drifted off course - and how to get back on course - and how to track your progress.

So the very first thing you need to define is: where are you going to as a bass player?”

Now this might sound basic. But you’d be surprised at how many bass players I see with detailed practicing schedules who have no concrete idea of what they are trying to achieve.

My advice is to spend an hour writing down what you’re trying to achieve on the bass and where you want to get to. And be as concrete as you can - list tunes you want to be able to play, or bass players you like and what elements of their style you want to be able to emulate and so on.

When you’ve got that clear picture in your head, or preferably written down on a piece of paper, then - and only then! - go to your practice activities and audit them based on your goals. Ask this question of every thing you practice:

“Will practicing this move me towards my bass playing goals?”

If the answer is no, then strike it from your practice list and replace it with something that does.

Practice Mistake 2 - Learning Something New But Too Fast

There's a tennis academy near Moscow for women tennis players - I don't know the latest stats but in the mid-2000s there were more women in the World Tennis Top 20 that had trained at this Academy than there were tennis players from any other country.

You're probably imagining that this Academy - it's called the Spartak Academy by the way - is a state of the art training facility. If you're thinking that you'd be wrong....this academy has 15 clay courts which due to the weather are only open for four months in the year, and just two indoor courts for all year use.

And yet despite their basic facilities they produce top tennis players. That's down to the training regime.

Every day at Spartak every one of the students - ranging from the young newly arrived girls (I think they 'board' from Age 7) right through to the older girls who are preparing to leave and try their luck on the professional tennis circuit - do the same exercise.

That exercise is to spend an hour hitting 'perfect' shots in slow motion over and over. (There are no tennis balls in this exercise...they are visualized.)

There are two really important parts to this exercise:

1. The slow motion
2. The repetition

The slow motion allows for correction of any mistakes in weight distribution, angle of racket, position of hand and wrist and arm and shoulder and so on.

And the repetition is part of teaching the brain the 'perfect' way to play this shot.

How This Applies To The Bass

When you're learning a new piece if you try and learn it too fast, then you'll incorporate mistakes into what you are doing. If you don't fix those mistakes your brain will 'assume' that you are content with this and fast repetitions will just solidify these mistakes.

That's why it's vital to start out with new material playing really slowly.

I advise the following approach to learning something new:

1. Chunk what you're learning into manageable parts
2. Take the first chunk and play it out of tempo. You're looking for potential problem areas, or potential areas where you need to examine your technique.
3. When you are happy with where you are going to play every note you can start playing with some kind of metronomic background. (I use a chordal metronome.)

But the first playthroughs should be done really slowly...most students define really slowly as maybe 15 or 20 BPM slower than the original. That's still too fast. I often learn things at around 50% of the original tempo initially (often this has the metronome at 50-60 BPM). My goal isn't to get up to performance speed as quickly as possible it's to play at a speed where I can put in a perfect playthrough.

4. When I've done a perfect playthrough I want to start the solidification of this learning. So I'll aim for at least 9 more.
5. Only then will I increase the speed of the chordal metronome. And often I'll only nudge it by three or four BPMS....five at the most. And then aim for another bunch of perfect repetitions.
6. By the time you've increased tempo three times (so the original tempo plus three incremental increases) you've put in 40 perfect repetitions.

And what you've done is the equivalent of programming a circuit in your brain that will 'play that section' whenever you need it to. Often almost subconsciously.

7. You can keep increasing the tempo slowly. Before you know it you'll have not only mastered the 'chunk' you were working on, but you'll have learned it to a level that your brain will remember almost forever.

The next time you're learning a song....take this technique for a spin and see what happens. I guarantee it will change the way you look at learning new material!

Practice Mistake 3 - Learning Without A Clear Goal In Place

This practice mistake overlaps practice mistake 1 in some ways. We've talked about Practice Mistake 1 already, if you missed that email hit reply and I'll send it to you. (Actually I should put all these articles somewhere where you can read them not just in your email inbox...I'll work on that for tomorrow and post some links!)

Now Practice Mistake 1 was more about ensuring that you have bass goals in place and make sure that your practice brings you closer to achieving those goals.

That's like the 10,000 Foot view.

Practice Mistake 3 is more like the 100 foot view.

How many of you can honestly answer this question: before you pick up your bass to start practicing on EVERY-SINGLE-DAY that you practice you already know 100% what you are going to practice.

Let me go deeper into the question: how many of you before you practice have a concrete practice schedule for the day detailing not only what you are going to practice and for how long you are going to practice it?

I'm guessing probably not many of you?

Why Is This Important?

Let me give you an analogy to help you understand this. We're going to use a commercial airline flight as an analogy.

Before we do I just want to give you an interesting fact that you may not know: did you know that for over 95% of EVERY commercial flight the plane is technically off course?

And yet - barring unexpected emergencies and dangerous weather conditions - every flight lands at the desired destination.

The reason they can do this is that periodically during the flight the pilot and co-pilot check their current course against where they are going. And it is so common that it is routine to make small and subtle course corrections because the plane is slightly off-course due to tailwinds or headwinds or sidewinds.

So tying this back to bass.

If you board a flight at New York's JFK airport heading for London Heathrow then in bass terms JFK Airport represents where you are now as a bass player. And London Heathrow represents where you want to be.

To ensure as a bass player you arrive at the bass playing equivalent of London Heathrow you have to work backwards from Heathrow all the way back to JFK (I'll give you a bass example in a moment) and that creates an overall practice plan.

Then you work on practice elements that take you along this journey. There are two reasons you write everything down (and use a timer to clock how much time you practice): (i) to ensure that you are moving forward on your bass playing flight path (ii) so you can take course corrections if you are veering off the path.

My Bass Playing Flight Path

On Saturday I shared with you my bass playing goal (appended to the end of this article)- which is to emulate James Jamerson's playing (one finger on the plucking hand, reliance on first position with the fretting hand) on some of my favourite classics like Bernadette and Standing In The Shadows and My Whole World Ended and so on.

So working backwards from that (and bear in mind that this is just a snap shot of a more detailed document):

1. *The Destination:* Playing Bernadette/Standing In Shadows etc incorporate Jamerson's playing devices at a 16th note rhythmic level. Activities to practice: common rhythmic patterns, common rhythmic patterns using common melodic devices, common rhythmic patterns combined with rakes and pull-offs and open strings and so on.

2. *Moving From Straight 8th Note Rhythms to 16th Note Rhythms*

Around 65/66 Jamerson started building on his straight 8th note patterns with some 16th note rhythmic accents. Tracks like Behind a Painted Smile, Keep Me Hanging On, etc. Activities to practice common 'transition' rhythmic patterns, practicing these transitional rhythms with melodic devices, with open strings, and so on.

3. *Straight 8th Note Rhythms* Around 64 to 65 Motown started moving away from the shuffle rhythm that dominated their sound in the early Motown period. Tunes include songs like Back In My Arms Again, This Old Heart Of Mine, Get Ready, Going To A Go-go, Uptight, Ain't No Mountain High Enough, and so on. practice activities include the identification of 8th note rhythms that Jamerson used, and identification of which melodic devices he was using at this stage of his career and modelling both.

4. *Early Shuffle Tunes* Motown's first big sellers were shuffle based tunes - Heatwave, Baby Love, Where Did Our Love Go etc. Even within relatively simple tunes we get glimpses of some of the things Jamerson was going to do....identify and practice etc etc.

As I Said This Is A Snapshot...AND A Working Document

Each of these stages is broken down into more sub-stages. And because it's a living, breathing plan it gets altered (a course correction) with nearly every week of practice.

The point is....and the big takeaway from the article...is if you are clear about where you want to get to as a bass player you can start moving in that direction once you've spent some time thinking about where that destination is and how you might get there.

When you have such clarity to your goals it's much easier to be always moving towards them than if you think: Yep, I wanna be a better player. I'm gonna go learn this great funk riff I saw on YouTube today.

Said riff might sound cool but before you start learning it and investing valuable practice time ask yourself this question: does learning this move me towards my goals? If the answer to that question is no....then I highly recommend reconsidering whether to invest practice time on it.

Practice Mistake 4 - Practicing Things You Can Already Play

This is a big one. If your goal is to make constant and consistent improvement in your playing then you need to have a clear idea of where you want to take your bass playing (see Goal 3). And then you should be working towards achieving that goal by learning new skills, expanding on existing skills and so on.

Now there are days when we don't really want to practice but we force ourselves to pick up the bass. On those days it's really, really common to take the path of least resistance and 'practice things that you can already play.' This might be a lick. Or a bassline to a song. Or another exercise.

But practicing something that you can already play won't improve your playing.

Let me give you a non-bass playing example of this. How many hours of

driving have you done since you passed your driving test? A thousand? Five thousand? More?

And honestly, are you any better at driving than you were the day you passed your test. (Studies suggest that our 'driving ability' actually decreases within 6-12 months of taking your driving test).

If your driving goal was to do things like handbrake turns, control an aquaplaning vehicle, change gear without using the clutch (like a racing driver) and so on how would you go about achieving this? Merely continuing to do what you've already done - i.e. just driving more - won't get you there. You have to study and learn the things that you DON'T know and then practice them. Not practice and repeat the things that you already DO know.

As for driving....so for bass.

The Two Big Exceptions To This

There are two cases where practicing what you already know ISN'T a practice mistake.

The first is when you are warming up. The purpose of a warm up is to get yourself ready to start playing so that you don't strain anything. So playing something you already know slowly and methodically that uses all the fretting hand fingers and gets your plucking hand moving. Bear in mind that a warm up shouldn't need to last longer than 5 minutes or so.

The second exception is going over song bass lines in preparation for a gig. Now if you're using your "improvement practice" time to do this then you have to be prepared to accept the trade off of not making forward progress in your bass playing whilst doing this. But it's also important not to let your band mates down and to make sure you are prepared for the gig....so that would be an acceptable trade off IMHO.

Sidebar: There IS a way that you could make the time you spend going over of lines for upcoming gigs do double duty - so you prep for the

gig AND make marginal improvement in your playing. And that's to go over your lines playing along to a metronome that's set to click only on Beats 2 and 4. (Or depending on your sense of time....beat 2 or 4 only.... or Beat 2 or 4 every other bar....or every 4 bars....make it challenging!) If you've got Band In A Box there's also a way of setting this up so instead of a drum hit on Beat 2 and 4 (or whatever configuration you are using) you can use a staccato guitar chord so you get a variation on a chordal metronome).

Practice Mistake 5 -Not Enough Regular Feedback On Your Playing

This is something that just about no-one out there is talking about. And it's really holding some people back.

Now you might be wondering why getting regular feedback is so crucial. Remember the flight path analogy I used - if the pilots don't check their heading periodically - and make minor course corrections (aka Feedback) then the variables in wind speed and direction will knock them off course and they won't land at their destination airport.

So that in a nutshell is the role that feedback does: it keeps you on course.

It Does More Than That Though...

Now we've talked about goals briefly in this little series, and working towards a bass goal isn't quite such a linear process as flying a plane from JFK to Heathrow. And feedback performs another equally valuable and vital role in the learning process: it helps you identify mistakes so that you can fix them.

Here's something that I've learned from studying how the brain learns: if you play a piece, and in playing it you have a mistake in some way (e.g. you interpret a rhythm wrongly, or you play a C instead of a B, and so on) AND you keep practicing that piece over and over with the mistake contained within it....well the part of the brain where learning is deepened and solidified doesn't have any kind of quality filter. And you'll keep on repeating that mistake.

Somewhere down the line it may finally emerge that you're making a mistake and you'll have to spend time fixing it. Let me tell you from hard experience: if you learn something that's wrong often enough it can take between twice and four times the amount of time to relearn it correctly than if you had learned it correctly the first time.

An Example From First Bass And Beyond

Let me give you an example straight out of the mouth of one of my 'Beyonders.' (That's the name for a subscriber to First Bass And Beyond by the way.) FB&B has been going for nearly 7 years and over that period I've transcribed a massive amount of songs.

Not only has my hearing of bass got better as a result of all this practice, but my understanding of what goes into bass lines (which has been honed by my work on 80:20 bass) has also improved. On top of that I'm using a better transcription tool now.

Combined with the improvements in teaching technology this means that I can now create lessons out of tunes that five years ago say were too advanced to be presented as anything but a transcription. And so I've revisited tunes that I'd transcribed previously.

Often I find subtleties in the bass line that I missed 5 or 6 years ago and when I do, I correct them. Recently I did this with a video lesson and Beyonder Nigel Walden said in the private Facebook Group something along the lines of:

"...it's great to see you improve the transcriptions and make them more accurate....but I learned (the song in question) 5 years ago and it's taking me ages to learn it with the corrections!).

So it's really important that you are getting regular feedback on your playing.

Where Can You Get Regular Feedback On Your Playing?

The obvious answer to this is from a teacher.

And this does work. But for it to work you need the following things to align:

- there's a teacher available (either locally or via Skype) who is qualified to give feedback
- that said teacher will take the time to work out what you're trying to achieve
- that said teacher knows not only how to spot mistakes (most of which are obvious) but knows what remedies to proscribe so that the mistakes are fixed forever.

The sad truth however is that most folks out there who have hung out their shingle as a bass teacher DON'T meet these criteria. There's an awful lot of guys who are doing what I call "tiggering" - teaching as a gig. And I've spoken with many Beyonders whose only local bass teacher was in fact a guitar player/teacher who also did bass lessons.

The teachers who DO meet the criteria...and there are a few of them around...often charge \$75 (or more) per half hour on Skype. So you can use them now and again...but the costs soon mount up if you have a weekly or twice monthly 'feedback' session.

There's Another Way Though...

And that's to give yourself feedback.

Now like every skill you have to learn how to do this - though it's not as hard as it might sound. If you go searching for help with this on the Interwebs I don't you'll find any. As I said at the top of this email, no-ones talking about this topic or teaching it.

However, that's going to be changing real soon ;)

In September I'm starting to work on a new course of self-study bass instruction called How To Play Bass In 50 Songs. And there will be lessons on exactly how to do this....and I'm hoping for a ton of practical examples both from the course and from existing beyonders that will really bring these concepts to life.

Now anyone who's an existing subscriber to FB&B BEFORE October 1st will get access to that course and all its ancillary materials as part of their FB&B membership. And whilst you're probably much further along than a Beginner...those segments teaching you how to give yourself feedback, what to look for, and how to fix it, COULD be the difference between your playing staying in a rut and jumping to the next level and the next and the next. (I tend not to think in terms of "jumps" in level, but to think more in terms of slow and steady ascension. Mistake fixing - triggered by feedback - is one of the big factors in this.)

APPENDIX 1- MY BASS PLAYING GOALS

This appendix ties into Practice Mistakes 1 and 3 and the importance of having goals.

Now when it comes to the bass I've got not one, but TWO different goal areas to work in:

1. My own bass playing
2. My teaching of bass guitar

I'll cycle back to talking about my goals for teaching tomorrow, so today we're going to talk about what my bass playing goals are.

Now I don't know how long you've been following me on How To Play Bass Dot Com or what you know about me, but here's a quick summary

- I started playing the bass when I was 15 (so a long time ago)
- Through a chain of random circumstances I became a professional bass player when I was 26 instead of being trapped in a life of hell in the most profession ever (which was what I originally trained and qualified for)
- I've been a professional bass player ever since - either from playing in bands to running my own bands to now, teaching on How To Play Bass Dot Com which is pretty much a full time gig. (Actually strike out the 'pretty much' - it IS a full time gig!)

- These days I gig infrequently, but in the days when I did gig I performed at the business end of close to 2000 gigs in the UK, Europe and a few gigs in the Middle East.

Now if I'm honest I don't practice as much as I should because like a lot of folks I struggle for practice time. Especially with my demanding full time job ;)

And if I sat down and was brutally honest about what I would like to achieve on the bass guitar (in terms of JUST playing the bass guitar, so taking teaching out of the equation) there's really only ONE thing that I aspire to being able to do.

And that's to be able to learn and play my favourite songs from the works of James Jamerson in an authentic style.

In "an authentic style" means from a technique perspective playing with just one finger of the right hand, and mostly using 'first' position from the perspective of the left hand. (That's if you pluck with your right hand, if you're a lefty then flip the hands.)

The kind of songs that we're talking about are tunes like Bernadette, Standing IN The Shadows Of Love, In A Different World (all The Four Tops), What's Going On (Marvin), Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing (Marvin and Tammi) and a bunch more.

In yesterday's email I spoke of 'knowing where you want to go' and then planning a route to get there.

With emulating Jamerson's playing through a fortune set of circumstances by working through his back catalogue in a mostly chronological fashion I'll be able to progress from his simpler lines to his intermediate lines to his more complex lines.

So my plan is to combine learning songs in roughly that kind of sequence with specific exercises that help master very discrete and very specific parts of Jamerson's library of ideas.

Now that's a very simple overview of the plan and earlier in the year I got started on doing this...but then the website re-development for my Courses websites has pretty much started eating all my time and my practice of this material dropped off.

Hopefully I'll be picking that up again in the very near future.

APPENDIX 2 - MY BASS TEACHING GOALS

Here are the 'teaching bass' goals that I have:

1. Continue to work on my understanding of "deliberate practice" and also its application to learning the bass and improving on the bass. (If you don't understand deliberate practice and how it works then you won't know if you're practicing something that's actually improving your bass playing!)
2. Continue to work on sharing those discoveries with the subscribers of First Bass And Beyond so that they can understand these important practice principles and apply them to their own bass playing and can get closer to achieving the "constant and consistent" improvement that only deliberate practice gives.
3. Create the most comprehensive self-learning course for beginners that exists. This will start in September and will sell for at least \$200. Maybe more. If you're a subscriber to First Bass And Beyond you'll get access to it for free. **Paul's Note:** something that I learned this year to help people improve I've never seen anyone write about...that includes the two bass teachers I most respect (John Goldsby and Jeff Berlin).
4. This is the big one. I'll be starting a course called 80:20 bass in January. For bass players who are NOT beginners this will be revolutionary and will systematically teach you EXACTLY what to practice in order to master 99% of the bass repertoire. (It will teach a whole lot more too.... that's the biggest benefit though.)

First Bass And Beyond Will Be Reopening Soon

If you've read through the PDF you'll sense a constant theme that the bulk of what I do in terms of teaching and sharing learning revolves around First Bass AND Beyond.

It really is a unique resource for bass players and one of the goals that I've left out is that I want to turn it into the #1 Bass Playing Resource for Beginner and Intermediate Bass Players. When I'm ready to reopen enrollment to the new site where First Bass And Beyond is going to be housed, I'll be sending you an incredibly low cost way to try it out AND there will be a cool bonus that you get just for trying it out.

Until then....I'll continue to write more articles on aspects of bass playing that I hope you are enjoying!

Any questions, drop me an email and let me know!

Paul