

## WHAT IS 80-20 BASS?

This is something that I've been working on since at least 2010 - and in the early years of this process I didn't realize that I was working on something. It started out with teaching a course called Cracking The Detroit Code about the bass lines of James Jamerson - only I didn't teach the basslines, I analysed a bunch of Jamerson's bass lines looking for underlying patterns that he repeated in different tunes.

(These underlying patterns I called "devices." More on devices in Module 0 Unit 2).

Then I started work on a series of columns for my weekly magazines where I deconstructed the bass lines of first Francis Rocco Prestia (of Tower of Power). And then I deconstructed a bunch of Tommy Shannon's bass lines from his days with Stevie Ray Vaughan.

In those "deconstructing" columns I talked about searching for and codifying something that I referred to as "universal language" of bass.

Over the years as I've transcribed and analysed and played bass lines - and especially in the last few years with First Bass And Beyond - I've been seeing common bass line patterns and ideas crop up over and over again.

And these bass line patterns occur across genres from rock and pop to blues and soul and funk and country - hence the idea of "the universal language of bass."

But "universal language of bass" sounds pretentious and as a concept is also difficult to grasp. So instead, I'm hanging my theories on a new name: 80:20 bass.

In this introduction I want to introduce you to the concept that I'm

calling 80:20 bass - and it's built around a "principle" called Pareto's Principle. Which is also commonly known as the 80:20 Rule.

## **So What Is Pareto's Principle**

First of all it's important to realize that Pareto's Principle isn't a hard and fast rule - it's more of a guiding principle. That being said, it's remarkably accurate.

Pareto's Principle is named after an Italian Economist called Vilfredo Pareto. In 1896 he published a paper that showed that approximately 80% of the land was owned by 20% of the people.

And that principle has been extended to other things - Microsoft software engineers noted that by fixing the 20% of the most reported bugs in their software, that 80% of their issues were also fixed.

Or it's a business axiom that 80% of your revenue derives from 20% of your customers.

Or 80% of your results derives from 20% of your efforts.

I don't want to talk about Pareto's Principle at great length - other than to say as a guiding principle it's been tested for over 100 years and within defined parameters it's actually reasonably sound.

If you want to learn more about Pareto's Principle the go-to book is probably Richard Koch's *The 80:20 Principle*. You can find that on Amazon and it's pretty cheap.

## **80:20 Squared (And Cubed)**

Just like the 10,000 Hour Rule (and deliberate practice), people tend to know a little bit about the 80:20 Principle and when they talk about it they are consequentially superficial and glib in their writings.

Just like the 10,000 Hour Rule though there are deeper levels to the 80:20 Principle.

80:20 squared is one of them.

This is where you layer 80:20 on top of itself.

So let's go to the original observation to give you an example of 80:20 squared. Pareto originally observed that 80% of Italian land was owned by 20% of the people in 1896.

If we transfer that idea to say wealth in the US (or the World), the 80:20 Principle tells us that approximately 80% of wealth is owned by approximately 20% of people.

Now if you take that 20% of high wealth owners and apply 80:20 to them you get a compound equation:

80% of 80% of the wealth is owned by 20% of the top 20% of people.

80% of 80% is 64%.

20% of 20% is 4%.

So 64% of the wealth is owned by just 4% of the people.

And you can apply 80:20 to those high flyers - those 4% - and come up with around 51% of wealth is owned by 0.8% of people.

When you start 'squaring' and 'cubing' the 80:20 principle the results become much more interesting.

### **Interesting - But How Does This Apply To Bass**

Using the 80:20 rule is about being efficient - if you can find the 20% of activities that give you 80% of results then by focusing your practice time on those core activities you'll make the most efficient and effective use of your practice time.

There's a couple of assumptions here though:

1. The first assumption is that to apply 80:20 thinking to your bass practice and bass playing you need to KNOW what are the 20% activities are.

2. The second assumption is related to this particular series - and that assumption is that at least a major part of your bass playing goals revolve around becoming better at playing bass in the context of either playing existing real world songs in some kind of working/covers band OR becoming better at creating bass lines in a spontaneous manner. And also that these goals are in the context of playing genres other than jazz and walking bass.

So one thing that's specifically excluded is soloing and improvisation. And this is an example of 80:20 thinking at work - as a generalization for most players and most gigs (e.g. 80% of them! And more!) you will not be called upon or need to play a solo. And "soloing" requires a very different mindset to playing bass lines.

And let me give you three examples of bass players who are all different and all known for playing bass lines with a high level of improvisation in them - and yet between them I can think of only one or two recorded instances of them taking a solo. The three bass players I'm thinking of are James Jamerson, Rocco Prestia and Pino Palladino.

Or for an example of a player who plays in a simpler style we need look no further than Tommy Shannon - I'm sure he's recorded a solo at some stage in his career...but for the life of me I couldn't point you in the direction of that solo or solos. (If you know of such a song...please email and let me know).

So 80:20 bass is going to be focused on the 20% activities that will apply when it comes to playing and creating bass lines.

## **Identifying The 20% Activities For Playing And Creating Bass Lines**

But what are these 20% activities that give such great results when you practice them?

The answer is that from deconstructing literally thousands of bass lines over the last 10 years I've identified a number of 'devices' that crop up again and again in bass lines. (*Paul's Note*:tomorrow I'll answer the question: what is a 'device?')

And the number of these devices is much smaller than you'd imagine.

Plus you can apply the principles of "80-20 cubed" that we talked about earlier and master the most common devices first and then add in more advanced devices that you really like the sound of.

Practicing these devices in isolation and then practicing combining them with other devices will give you the following skills:

- (i) the technical capability to play these devices whenever you encounter them in bass lines of the players you like and want to emulate
- (ii) a vocabulary from which to create your own bass lines - plus we'll practice using some specific processes that I developed to help you practice creating bass lines spontaneously
- (iii) improved transcription capabilities - practicing them in isolation will make the sound of each device familiar to you so when you hear your favourite bass player playing you'll be able to pick out which devices he's using
- (iv) the ability to take a player's style and work out what he's doing in terms of rhythm and 80-20 devices so that you can play lines in that player's style. (Depending on the player it takes analysis of between 5 and 15 transcriptions to do this.)

## Summary

The 80-20 principle tells us that - as a generalization - 80% of our results are achieved from just 20% of our practice.

If we can identify those 20% activities - and do more of them - then our practice will become much more effective.

That is the starting point of 80-20 bass.

Having transcribed and analysed thousands of songs over the last 10 years and seen the same patterns repeated over and over across genre, and having spent time cataloguing and codifying those patterns, I decided that the 20% activities for most bass players would be to learn the bass playing devices that we're going to cover in depth in 80:20 bass.

Tomorrow we'll talk about my definition of a 'device' so that you understand it before we move on.