

Bass Fundamentals

Column #18 – Syncopation And Counting:

Part One

One of the areas many aspiring players struggle with is syncopation and counting. All through this series we have stressed the importance of using a metronome and counting. Why? Well, speaking solely for myself, as a musician with over 40 years professional experience, and playing music for over 54 years, one thing I still do a lot is count and use a metronome. The reason is simple: to ensure I am playing things correctly, placing the notes in the right place at the right time, for the right length of time.

So you must understand this: the drummer is not the sole person responsible for keeping the band on beat. They have a responsibility to do their part, but they are not responsible for you staying on beat. **You are**. Together, every member contributes to good tempo (or meter), and maintaining good tempo throughout the song!

With that in mind, what follows are some good ideas you can work on to play correctly. You need to be honest with yourself as you work through this particular lesson. It matters.

First up, let's take a familiar line, a standard walking Blues bass line. Play this with a metronome at 132 bpm.

One of the most important aspects of syncopation and counting is this: when playing fast tempo tunes, there is more "forgiveness" in note placements. What I mean is that the placement of the notes is not as critical. When you play an uptempo rock or pop tune, the tempo is running by in such a way that sloppy execution is actually covered up; you can be a bit "off". As long as you're mostly on beat, you're okay.

To make the point, play the following rhythm at about 120 bpm. Then at about 160 bpm.

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line of eighth notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bottom staff shows fretting hand positions: 5, 5, 5, 5, 7, 7, 5, 5, 7, 7, 5, 7, 5, 8.

Pretty straightforward, no problems keeping on beat - at least that's how it sounds because the tempo is fast enough to blur any inaccuracies in your playing. But now, play the same riff at 60 bpm.

In order to become more precise, play the above example again at 60 bpm. But this time, set your metronome to 120 bpm. What you are doing is now clicking to the eighth note. This will help you become more stable and regulated in the timing of your plucking hand playing, how in sync your fingers are with the metronome, with the beat. It will also help your fretting hand precision in the passages where you are fretting different notes with every eighth beat.

Okay, let's move on to the next one. Play this next riff at 60 bpm. Don't cheat, actually play this through.

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line of eighth notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bottom staff shows fretting hand positions: 3, 5, 3, 1, 2, 3, 5, 3, 5, 6, 3, 3, 3, 6, 6, 5, 3, 3.

Remaining with the same example, set the metronome at 120 bpm, and continue to play at 60 bpm. At first you will probably be just a bit off. The more you adjust your thinking to precision playing, the quicker you will lock into the beat in the right way.

For the next example the timing of the playing will need to be exact. You can start off at 60 bpm (and have the metronome at 120 bpm if you wish), and get the timing right. Then speed up the tempo, but only so much as you are able to maintain precise note placement. Do not speed up until you have your timing right.

The musical notation shows a bass line in 3/4 time. The staff contains a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The first four notes are beamed together, and the last four notes are also beamed together. The key signature has one sharp (F#). Below the staff is a fretboard diagram with two lines, T (top) and B (bottom). The fret numbers are: T: 9, 9, 7, 5, 9, 7, 5, 2, 5, 5, 2, 5. B: 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 2, 5, 5, 2, 5.

The simple reality is that too many players accept sloppy playing at normal. It is not normal. It is mediocre at best. Professional musicians, true professionals, do not allow such poor housekeeping to be a part of their playing. They practice with a fanatic devotion to accuracy and precision, putting things exactly where they not only need to be, but are supposed to be - because that is how the music is written, and so must be performed. To let these details slide is unacceptable.

The simple reality is that an average level player can sound as good as a very accomplished player by simply polishing their abilities in syncopation and time keeping skills to the point that they are playing their parts exactly as they should be played, with everything in its place, and precisely so. I've heard young players sound superior to veteran players simply because the younger player took care to make sure everything sounded "perfect", as much as their level of understanding allowed. And I've heard veteran players sound amateurish because they became lazy and allowed sloppy technique to be acceptable in their playing.

You don't want to be that guy... tired, road weary and burned out, to the point of just not caring, and resting on their laurels and "history" and reputation, no longer striving for excellence.

Using a metronome to parse the beat into smaller portions, to ensure you are putting your notes exactly where they belong will go a long way to helping you sound like a better player than you may actually be. It is the polished part that will show people you mean business.

So let's talk about counting.

Go back to the beginning of this article and start counting - out loud - as you play. Do not do it in your head. Too much stuff going on in there. Count out loud so you can hear what you're doing, where notes are landing, where they're supposed to be. When you count, you are telling yourself that the notes you are playing belong in a certain place, according to the chart and what's written. When you mess up, because you are counting out loud, you will see and know it is not right. Now you can correct it. Now you can make it right and play the part the way it is supposed to be played.

Combining a metronome and counting out loud will further your effort to play parts the way they are meant to be played, and with a precision that shows you care about what you are doing. You're not just going through the motions.

I know a guy who is a rhythm guitar player. It isn't a glamorous job. He's part of the rhythm section. And he knows that his rhythm parts have to be meticulously executed so the songs sound the way they are designed, the way they are supposed to sound. He is proud of his ability to drive that rhythm part, locked in sync with the drummer and bass player, and propel the song forward. Many a musician has come up to him after a show and complimented him - not the lead player - for how amazing it was to watch him do what he does.

So bass is part of the rhythm section - the section responsible for the groove, and pushing the song forward, "driving the bus" as they say. Without good rhythm, groove, chops, technique and a comprehensive understanding of note placement, and the importance of this, coupled with counting and working with a metronome, the songs you play may sound good.... but they won't be great.

Think about it. You know it's true.