

Bass Fundamentals

Column #5 – Octaves

You may have played around with the idea of octaves, but never really learned to play them very well. Most of the popular music you will learn doesn't include them. Yet, they are a very important part of the landscape in music, from Boogie Woogie to Progressive Rock to Jazz.

First, you should learn to play them smooth and evenly. So break out your metronome to keep yourself honest.

The following exercise will get your fingers on both hands used to the idea. How you play this is really up to you. You can use your first and second fingers on the plucking hand, you can play with a kind of slap and pop approach with thumb and second finger; even thumb and first finger plucking. It's up to you. I recommend the basic approach of first and second fingers as a starting place.



You don't have to play the exercise straight through. You can play the quarter notes for as long as it takes you to get it smooth and even, then move onto the eighth notes and do the same thing; then the triplets; then the sixteenth notes. And I would recommend this approach to ensure you are not cheating yourself out of learning good timing - which you need regardless of what you play, whether simple or very complex.

For the second exercise, we're going to play the stereotypical 'disco' bass run, which was all about octaves. And about a zillion people copied this lick after it first appeared. But don't ask me what the first song to do this was, I can't remember.



In the third exercise, we're going to move over to the first and third strings as part of the exercise. You should be able to move fluidly from string set to string set, even if it isn't playing just octaves.



The final example has you playing octaves together, in the fashion that John Entwistle used when performing "Pinball Wizard" live to preserve the famous guitar line from the record.



A great benefit you derive from playing octaves is that it strengthens your fretting fingers a lot, which is a good thing because stamina is very important for all musicians, regardless of instrument.

With these examples, you have a basic foundation upon which to build in creating new ideas of your own. So definitely experiment with different ways to play octaves. You may even find a place in songs you currently play that might benefit from the inclusion of the octave style licks you've learned here today. Be bold, be fearless, and make sure to include some kind of octave exercise in your daily warm up routine.