

MEL BAY'S REGGAE GROOVES FOR ELECTRIC BASS

by
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BUILDING A BASS LINE

Creating a reggae bass line is very simple. There are a few patterns that make up many of the classic bass lines.

One of the most common patterns is the root, fifth, octave, pattern. If we were to play it under a D chord it would look like this:

Musical notation for a reggae bass line pattern under a D chord. The notation is in bass clef, 4/4 time. The melody consists of four notes: a quarter note (root), a quarter note (fifth), a quarter note (octave), and a quarter note (octave). The fretboard diagram below shows the corresponding fingerings: 5, 5, 5, 7, 7.

This pattern can also be played like this:

Musical notation for an alternative reggae bass line pattern under a D chord. The notation is in bass clef, 4/4 time. The melody consists of four notes: a quarter note (octave), a quarter note (fifth), a quarter note (fifth), and a quarter note (root). The fretboard diagram below shows the corresponding fingerings: 7, 7, 7, 7, 5.

Example two has the same rhythm as example one.

Another common pattern is the root, third, fifth, pattern.

Musical notation for a reggae bass line pattern under a D chord. The notation is in bass clef, 4/4 time. The melody consists of four notes: a quarter note (root), a quarter note (third), a quarter note (fifth), and a quarter note (fifth). The fretboard diagram below shows the corresponding fingerings: 5, 4, 7.

This pattern can also be played like this:



The above patterns are very simple. They are some of the most common patterns in reggae bass.

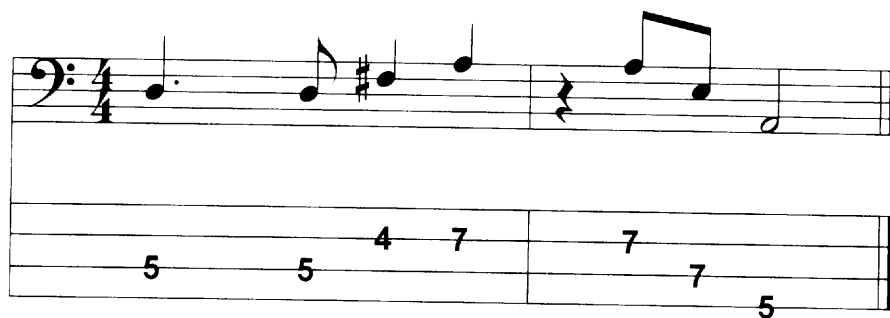
Many students have difficulty playing reggae bass lines at first. Some bass lines do not always start on the root. The previous four exercises started on the root. The following example is two bars long. The first bar starts on the root on a D chord. The second bar starts on the fifth of an A chord. In the second bar I am reversing the root, third, fifth pattern. I play fifth, third, root:



This can be done with most patterns. If I am playing a four bar phrase, I usually like to play the root on the first bar. On the second, third, or fourth bars, I may break it up. I like to play phrases starting on the third too.

Reggae is a groove based style of music for electric bass. Changing up the starting notes of a pattern can make your groove less repetitive sounding.

Another unusual thing about reggae bass is that you do not always have to play on the downbeat. It is common to completely skip the downbeat. In the following example, I play nothing on the downbeat of the second bar:



I call this technique breathing. By adding a rest here and there, you can create a very interesting feel.

RHYTHMIC DISPLACEMENT/BREATHING

It is very easy to create a breathing feel. I like to take things a step further by doing some rhythmic displacement. I like to take a rest and move it to a different spot in the bar.

Examples 1, 2 and 3 all use the same pattern, but in each example I start the pattern on a different beat. All three examples have two quarter note rests and one eighth note rest. By changing the order of the rests, we create rhythmic displacement. With a solid drum groove underneath, rhythmic displacement can hardly be noticeable, but it is a great way to make your groove suddenly sound more interesting.

EXAMPLE 1-

Example 1 shows a bass clef staff in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note, a quarter note, and another quarter note. The second measure contains two quarter rests. The third measure contains a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. The fourth measure contains two quarter rests. Below the staff, a guitar fretboard diagram shows the notes 5, 3, and 5 on the strings.

EXAMPLE 2-

Example 2 shows a bass clef staff in 4/4 time. The first measure contains two quarter rests. The second measure contains a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note, a quarter note, and another quarter note. The third measure contains a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. The fourth measure contains two quarter rests. Below the staff, a guitar fretboard diagram shows the notes 5, 3, and 5 on the strings.

EXAMPLE 3-

Example 3 shows a bass clef staff in 4/4 time. The first measure contains two quarter rests. The second measure contains two quarter rests. The third measure contains a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note, a quarter note, and another quarter note. The fourth measure contains a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Below the staff, a guitar fretboard diagram shows the notes 5, 3, and 5 on the strings.

EXAMPLE 4 mixes the above three examples.

The first system of musical notation consists of a bass clef staff in 4/4 time and a three-line guitar fretboard. The staff contains two measures of music. The first measure has a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note G2, an eighth note A2, and a quarter note B2. The second measure has a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note G2, an eighth note A2, and a quarter note B2. The guitar fretboard shows the fingering for these notes: the first measure has a 5 on the first string, a 3 on the second string, and a 5 on the third string; the second measure has a 5 on the first string, a 3 on the second string, and a 5 on the third string.

The second system of musical notation consists of a bass clef staff in 4/4 time and a three-line guitar fretboard. The staff contains two measures of music. The first measure has a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note G2, an eighth note A2, and a quarter note B2. The second measure has a quarter rest, followed by an eighth note G2, an eighth note A2, and a quarter note B2. The guitar fretboard shows the fingering for these notes: the first measure has a 5 on the first string, a 3 on the second string, and a 5 on the third string; the second measure has a 5 on the first string, a 3 on the second string, and a 5 on the third string.

CROSSING THE BARLINE

Reggae bass lines are also very unique because the bass does not always play on the downbeat. In the previous chapter we have seen some examples of this. When working with two bar phrases, it is common to hold a note over the bar line. The following examples demonstrate this:

The first example shows a two-bar phrase in 4/4 time. The first bar contains a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, and the second bar contains a quarter note followed by a quarter note. A horizontal line connects the end of the first bar to the start of the second bar, indicating a note held over. The second staff shows the corresponding fretboard notation: the first bar has a 5 on the first string, and the second bar has a 5 on the second string, a 3 on the first string, and a 5 on the second string.

The second example shows a two-bar phrase in 4/4 time. The first bar contains a quarter note followed by a quarter note, and the second bar contains a quarter note followed by a quarter note. A horizontal line connects the end of the first bar to the start of the second bar, indicating a note held over. The second staff shows the corresponding fretboard notation: the first bar has a 5 on the first string, a 3 on the second string, and a 5 on the first string; the second bar has a 3 on the second string, a 3 on the first string, and a 5 on the second string.

Holding notes over the bar line can create a tasteful effect, but sometimes it is just as tasteful to put rests in place of the tied note.

Example three is the same as example one, but I put rests in place of the tied note. Example four is the same as example two, but I've done the same to it.

The third example shows a two-bar phrase in 4/4 time, identical to the first example. However, instead of a note held over the bar line, there is a rest in the first bar of the second staff. The second staff shows the corresponding fretboard notation: the first bar has a 5 on the first string, and the second bar has a 5 on the second string, a 3 on the first string, and a 5 on the second string.

The fourth example shows a two-bar phrase in 4/4 time, identical to the second example. However, instead of a note held over the bar line, there is a rest in the first bar of the second staff. The second staff shows the corresponding fretboard notation: the first bar has a 5 on the first string, a 3 on the second string, and a 5 on the first string; the second bar has a 3 on the second string, a 3 on the first string, and a 5 on the second string.

Often a complete song will vamp on a two bar bass groove. A good way to create variety in a vamp groove is to mix the feel up. The below example is a vamp. I hold a note over the bar line on half the bars, and leave rests around the bar line on other bars. I am alternating examples one and three with examples two and four.

Example 1: Musical notation and fretboard diagram for a two-bar bass line. The notation shows a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note in the first bar, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note in the second bar. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: Bar 1 (5, 5, 3) and Bar 2 (5, 3, 5, 5, 3, 5).

Example 2: Musical notation and fretboard diagram for a two-bar bass line. The notation shows a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note in the first bar, and a quarter rest followed by a quarter note in the second bar. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: Bar 1 (5, 5, 3) and Bar 2 (5, 3, 5, 5, 5).

Example 3: Musical notation and fretboard diagram for a two-bar bass line. The notation shows a quarter note followed by an eighth note in the first bar, and a quarter note followed by an eighth note in the second bar. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: Bar 1 (5, 3, 5, 3) and Bar 2 (5, 3, 3, 5).

Example 4: Musical notation and fretboard diagram for a two-bar bass line. The notation shows a quarter note followed by an eighth note in the first bar, and a quarter rest followed by a quarter note in the second bar. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: Bar 1 (5, 3, 5, 3) and Bar 2 (5, 3, 3, 5).

DEAD NOTES

Dead notes can be added to a groove to create a more percussive feel. Playing dead notes is simple. Change nothing with the right hand technique. With the left hand, mute the strings instead of fretting a note. Leave the fingers resting lightly on top of the strings. Dead notes sound like “clicks”.

The occasional dead note can add a bit of drive to a groove. When dead notes are properly added to a groove, it almost feels as though you are pushing the rhythm section.

I like to take a groove and add one or two dead notes to it. I usually add them in place of an eighth note rest with dead notes.

Examples one and two are very similar grooves. In example two I have replaced some of the rests with dead notes.

Example 1: A musical score in 4/4 time, key of D major. The bass line consists of eighth notes: D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C#3 (quarter), D3 (quarter). The guitar fretboard diagram shows the following fret numbers: 4, 2, 4, 4, 2, 0.

Example 2: A musical score in 4/4 time, key of D major. The bass line consists of eighth notes: D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C#3 (quarter), D3 (quarter). The guitar fretboard diagram shows the following fret numbers: 4, x, 2, 4, 4, x, 2, 0. The 'x' marks indicate dead notes.

Both examples have a great feel to them. They are both excellent grooves. One is not necessarily better than the other. Adding dead notes is a great way to build the song. I often like to mix the dead note feel of example two, with the more laid back feel of example one.

Example three is an expansion of the previous two exercises.

The first exercise is written in bass clef, 4/4 time, and the key of D major. The melody consists of two measures. The first measure contains a quarter rest, a quarter note D (marked with an 'x'), a quarter note E, and a quarter note F# (marked with a '#'). The second measure contains a quarter note G# (marked with a '#'), a quarter note A, a quarter note B, and a quarter note C (marked with an 'x'). The guitar fretboard diagram below shows the fingering: Measure 1: 4th fret (marked '4'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 2nd fret (marked '2'), 4th fret (marked '4'). Measure 2: 2nd fret (marked '2'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 4th fret (marked '4'), 2nd fret (marked '2').

The second exercise is written in bass clef, 4/4 time, and the key of D major. The melody consists of two measures. The first measure contains a quarter note D (marked with an 'x'), a quarter note E, a quarter note F# (marked with a '#'), and a quarter note G# (marked with a '#'). The second measure contains a quarter note A, a quarter note B, a quarter note C (marked with an 'x'), and a quarter note D. The guitar fretboard diagram below shows the fingering: Measure 1: 4th fret (marked '4'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 2nd fret (marked '2'), 4th fret (marked '4'). Measure 2: 4th fret (marked '4'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 2nd fret (marked '2'), 2nd fret (marked '2').

The third exercise is written in bass clef, 4/4 time, and the key of D major. The melody consists of two measures. The first measure contains a quarter note D, a quarter note E, a quarter note F# (marked with a '#'), and a quarter note G# (marked with a '#'). The second measure contains a quarter note A, a quarter note B, a quarter note C (marked with an 'x'), and a quarter note D (marked with an 'x'). The guitar fretboard diagram below shows the fingering: Measure 1: 5th fret (marked '5'), 5th fret (marked '5'), 3rd fret (marked '3'). Measure 2: 2nd fret (marked '2'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 3rd fret (marked '3'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 5th fret (marked 'x'), 3rd fret (marked '3').

FRETLESS BASS/ SLIDES

I have always enjoyed playing reggae with a fretless bass. There are so many little things that can be added to a groove with a fretless bass. My favorite thing to add to grooves are slides. I generally do all my reggae slides in a downward motion (in the direction of the headstock). Slides can be played on a fretted bass, but it does not have the same tone or feel as a fretless bass.

In example one there is a half note at the end of the first bar.

In example two there is a slide at the end of the first bar, instead of a half note.

Example 1: Musical notation for a bass line in 4/4 time. The first bar contains a half note on the 5th fret. The second bar contains a quarter note on the 3rd fret, a quarter note on the 5th fret, and a half note on the 3rd fret. The fretboard diagram below shows the fingering: 5 5 5 3 5 in the first bar, and 0 3 3 5 3 in the second bar.

Example 2: Musical notation for a bass line in 4/4 time. The first bar contains a half note on the 5th fret, followed by a slide (S) on the 3rd fret. The second bar contains a quarter note on the 3rd fret, a quarter note on the 5th fret, and a half note on the 3rd fret. The fretboard diagram below shows the fingering: 5 5 5 3 5 in the first bar, and 0 3 3 5 3 in the second bar.

A small thing like a slide can make a large difference in a groove.

*****NOTE: If you do not own a fretless bass and want to get more out of your slides, I recommend that you experiment with your tone knob. Try setting it on a more bass sounding setting. Your slides should come out better.

The first system consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a quarter rest, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with fret numbers: 5, 5, 5, 5, 3.

The second system consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Slides are indicated by curved lines with '(S)' above the notes. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with fret numbers: 5, 5, 5, 5, 3.

My approach to playing fretless bass is different than my approach to fretted bass. On fretless I often look for rests, and replace them with a slide. If I am playing a vamp, I like to alternate the rests with slides. This can subtly create a unique variety to your groove.

The third system consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Slides are indicated by curved lines with '(S)' above the notes. The bottom staff is a guitar staff with fret numbers: 5, 5, 5, 5, 3.

FIVE AND SIX STRING BASS

Low end is an important part of the reggae style. A low “B” string is a great way to create more low end. I have not found a high “C” string very useful in this style. The following grooves are written for five string bass. They can also be played on a six string bass.

The first groove is written in 4/4 time. The bass staff contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, and ending with a quarter rest. The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 5 5, 0 0 3 3, 3 3, and 5 5.

The second groove is written in 4/4 time. The bass staff contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, and ending with a quarter rest. The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 0 0 0 0 4, 2, 4 4, and 5 2.

The third groove is written in 4/4 time. The bass staff contains a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, and ending with a quarter rest. The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 3, 5 5, 6, 3, 5, and 6.

MOVING PATTERNS

The previous section used a lot of the same patterns from earlier in the book. The patterns were moved to be played with a low "B" string. Reggae bass is a pattern oriented style.

I have often played a popular song with a band. Then I'd play the same song with another band, but in a different key. So I had to move the pattern to a different spot on the bass.

Being able to move patterns is a very useful technique. The following examples are all the same pattern. In each example I move the pattern to a different spot on the bass.

The first example shows a reggae bass pattern in 4/4 time. The musical staff contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter rest, a quarter rest, a quarter note, an eighth note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Below the staff, the fretboard diagram shows the pattern on the low B string (string 5). The first two measures are marked with a '5' on the first and second lines. The last four measures are marked with '3 3' on the first, second, third, and fourth lines.

The second example shows the same reggae bass pattern in 4/4 time. The musical staff contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter rest, a quarter rest, a quarter note, an eighth note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Below the staff, the fretboard diagram shows the pattern on the low B string (string 5). The first two measures are marked with a '5' on the first and second lines. The last four measures are marked with '3 3' on the first, second, third, and fourth lines.

The third example shows the same reggae bass pattern in 4/4 time. The musical staff contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter rest, a quarter rest, a quarter rest, a quarter note, an eighth note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Below the staff, the fretboard diagram shows the pattern on the low B string (string 5). The first two measures are marked with a '5' on the first and second lines. The last four measures are marked with '3 3' on the first, second, third, and fourth lines.

VARIATION IDEAS

The following patterns are all very similar. I wrote them to show some variation ideas in action. I changed small things like rests and the length of notes. The following fourteen examples are a few of my variation ideas. They show some of reggae's most basic groove ideas at work. I hope you will create your own variation ideas.

Example 1

Example 1 consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef in 4/4 time, showing a melodic line with a quarter rest in the second measure. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with fret numbers 3, 0, 3, 1, 1, 0, 3, 3, 3.

Example 2

Example 2 consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef in 4/4 time, showing a melodic line with a quarter rest in the second measure. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with fret numbers 3, 0, 3, 1, 3, 3, 1.

Example 3

Example 3 consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef in 4/4 time, showing a melodic line with a quarter rest in the second measure. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with fret numbers 1, 0, 3, 1, 1, 0, 3, 1, 3.

Example 4

Example 4 consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef in 4/4 time, showing a melodic line with a quarter rest in the second measure. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with fret numbers 3, 0, 3, 3, 3, 3, 3, 1, 1.

Example 5

3 2 5 3 3 3 3 1 3 3

Example 6

3 0 3 3 1 3 3 3

Example 7

3 0 3 1 1 3 3

Example 8

3 2 2 5 2 2 5 5 3

Example 9

5 7 7 5 7 7 5 7 7 5

Example 10

Musical notation for Example 10, consisting of a staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in eighth notes and rests. Below the staff is a guitar-style fingering diagram with two lines. The first line contains the numbers 5, 3, 5, and 3. The second line contains the numbers 5, 3, 5, and 3. A vertical bar line is placed after the first measure of the diagram.

Example 11

Musical notation for Example 11, consisting of a staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in eighth notes and rests. Below the staff is a guitar-style fingering diagram with two lines. The first line contains the numbers 5, 3, 3, 3, and 5. The second line contains the numbers 3, 4, and 5. A vertical bar line is placed after the first measure of the diagram.

Example 12

Musical notation for Example 12, consisting of a staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in eighth notes and rests. Below the staff is a guitar-style fingering diagram with two lines. The first line contains the numbers 5, 5, 7, 7, and 8. The second line contains the numbers 7, 7, 5, and 7. A vertical bar line is placed after the first measure of the diagram.

Example 13

Musical notation for Example 13, consisting of a staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in eighth notes and rests. Below the staff is a guitar-style fingering diagram with two lines. The first line contains the numbers 7, 5, 7, and 8. The second line contains the numbers 5 and 5. A vertical bar line is placed after the first measure of the diagram.

Example 14

Musical notation for Example 14, consisting of a staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in eighth notes and rests. Below the staff is a guitar-style fingering diagram with two lines. The first line contains the numbers 1, 3, 1, 3, and 1. The second line contains the numbers 1, 1, 1, 3, 1, 3, and 3. A vertical bar line is placed after the first measure of the diagram.

Ex. 6

A- / A- /

3 3 5 5 3 5 0 3 5 0 3 3 5 5 3 5 0 3 5 5 3

Ex. 7

A- / A- /

3 5 2 3 3 5 3 3 5 5 5 0 0

Ex. 8

G7 A7 B- /

5 5 5 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 5 2 2 2 2 5

Ex. 9

B- E7 B- E7

7 9 7 7 9 9 10 7 7 9 9 7 7 10 9

Ex. 10

A- / A- /

3 3 5 3 0 3 5 2 3 3 5 3 5 5 2

Ex. 11

A- /: A- /:

5 5 7 8 5 5 7 7 7 5 7 5 7 0 0

Ex. 12

A- D7 A- D7

5 3 3 3 5 3 4 5 5 3 3 3 4 5

Ex. 13

C- F7 C- G-

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 1 1 3

Ex. 14

G- /: G- /:

3 3 5 5 3 3 5 6 3 3 5 5 3 3 5 5 6 6

Ex. 15

D7 A7 E- D7 A7

5 4 7 5 5 4 7 5 0 0 0 0 3 2 5 5

Ex. 16

E- D- E- %

3 5 0 | 3 5 3 5 | 3 5 0 | 3 5 3 0 0

Ex. 17

D- % D- %

5 3 | 2 x x 3 x x 3 | 5 3 | 2 x x 3 3 3 3

Ex. 18

C- %

3 3 | 1 1 | 1 3 | 1 1 3 3 1

Ex. 19

C- %

3 3 | 1 1 | 1 3 | 1 1 3 3 1 1 1 1