MEL BAY'S
REGGAE GROOVES FOR ELECTRIC BASS

by
Chris
Matheos

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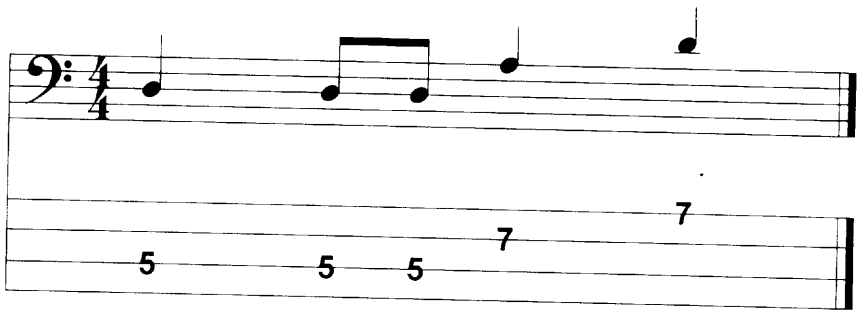
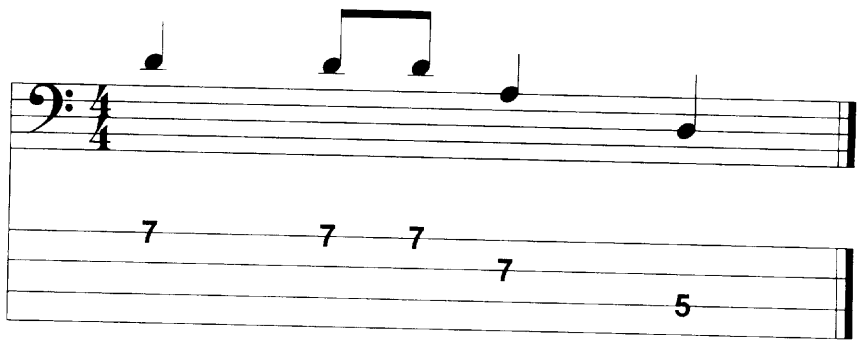
BUILDING A BASS LINE

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:

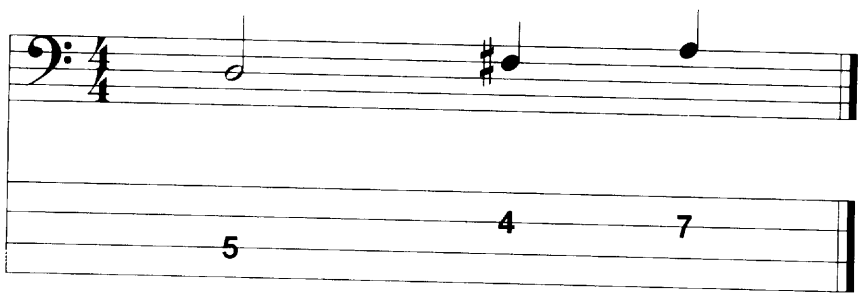


This pattern can also be played like this:

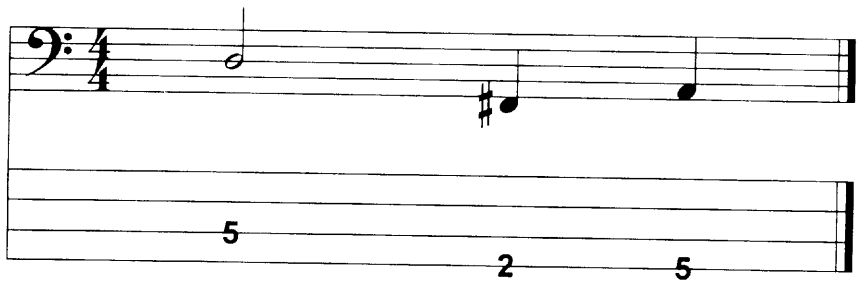


Example two has the same rhythm as example one.

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

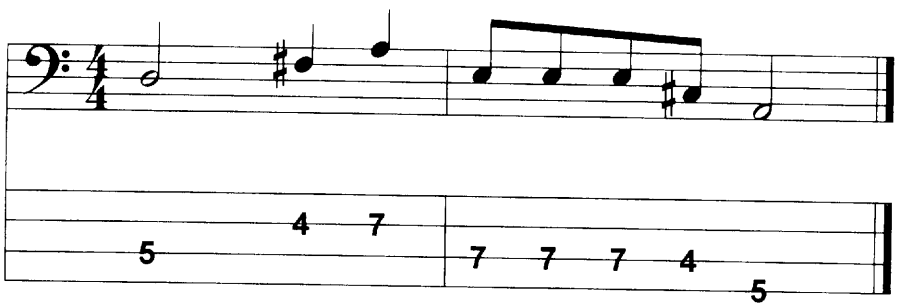


This pattern can also be played like this:



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

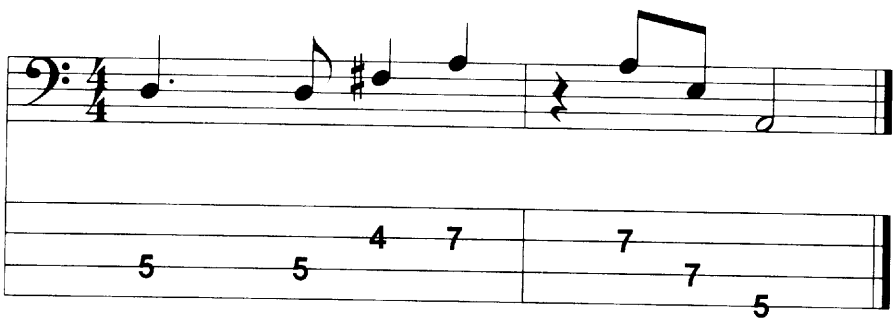
Many students have difficulty playing reggae bass lines at first. Some bass lines do not always start on the root. The previous four exercises started on the root. The following example is two bars long. The first bar starts on the root on a D chord. The second bar starts on the fifth of an A chord.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



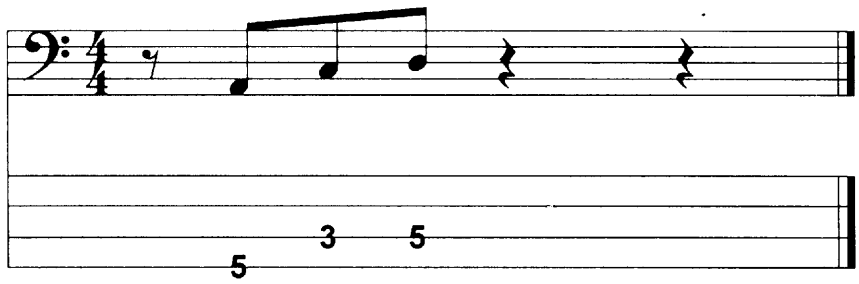
I call this technique breathing. By adding a rest here and there, you can create a very interesting feel.

RHYTHMIC DISPLACEMENT/ BREATHING

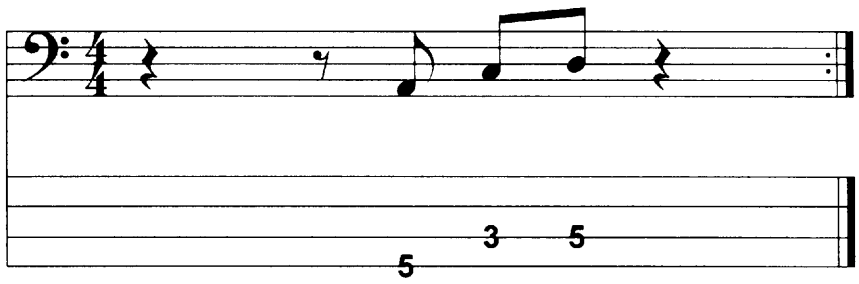
It is very easy to create a breathing feel. I like to take things a step further by doing some rhythmic displacement. I like to take a rest and move it to a different spot in the bar.

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.

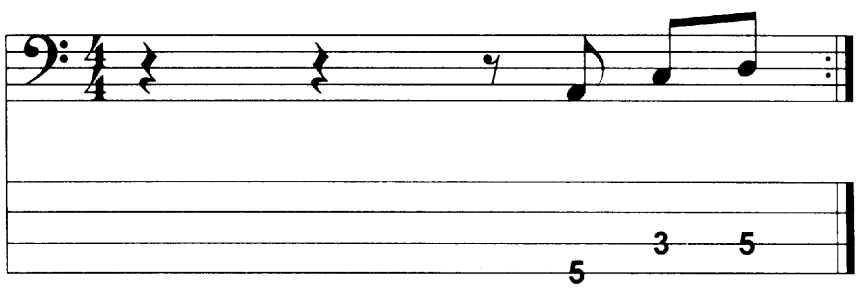
EXAMPLE 1-



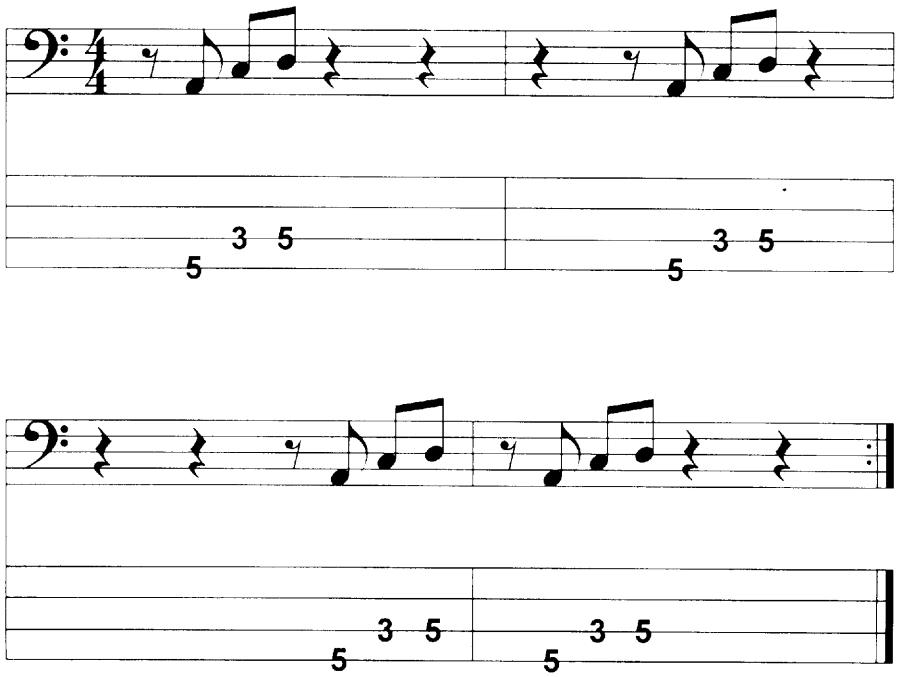
EXAMPLE 2-



EXAMPLE 3-

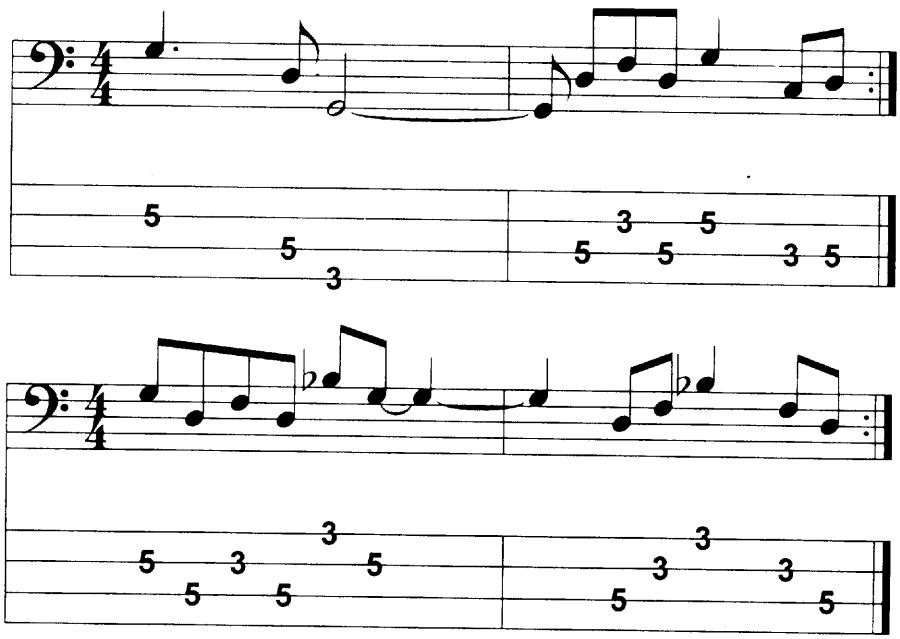


EXAMPLE 4 mixes the above three examples.



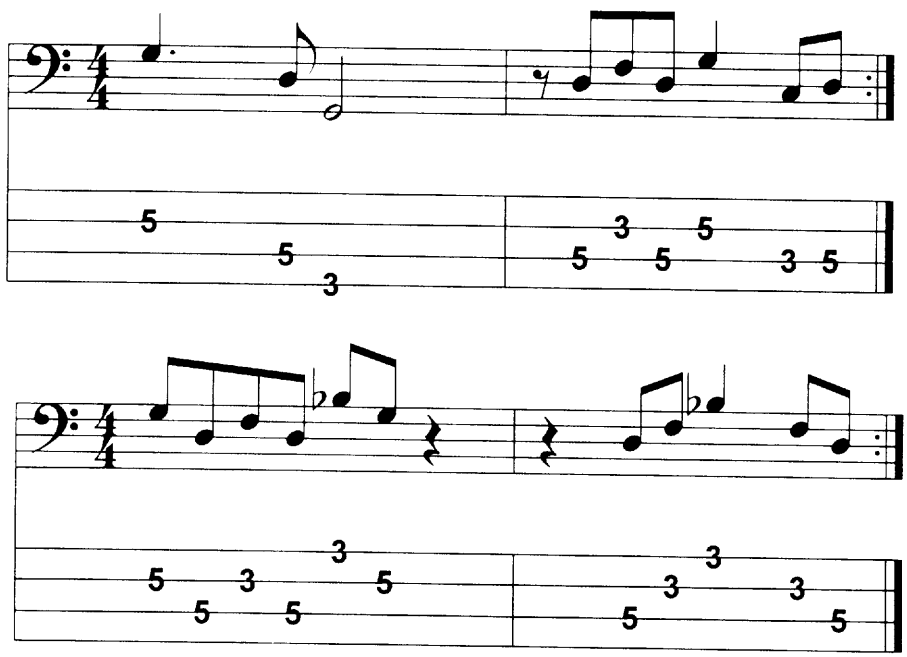
CROSSING THE BARLINE

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:

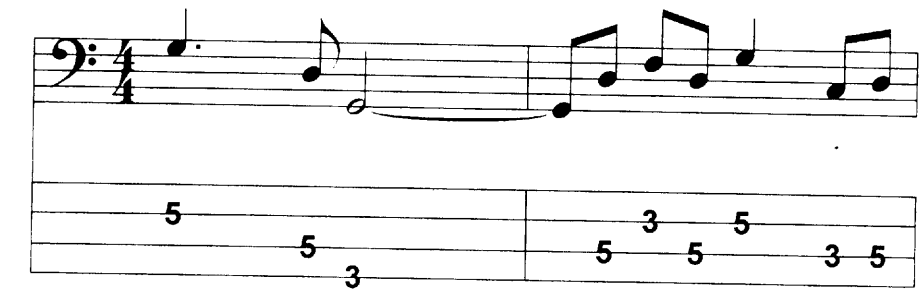


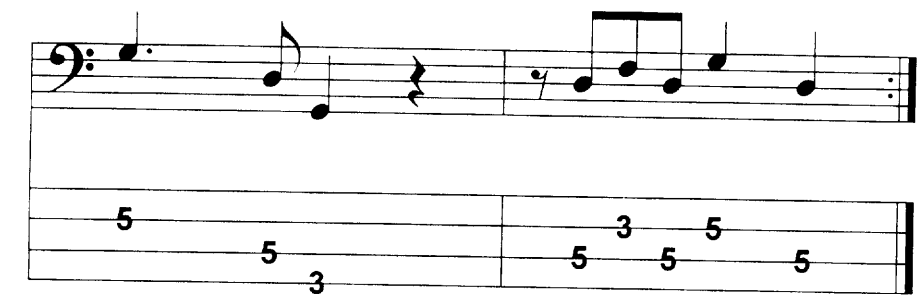
Holding notes over the bar line can create a tasteful effect, but sometimes it is just as tasteful to put rests in place of the tied note.

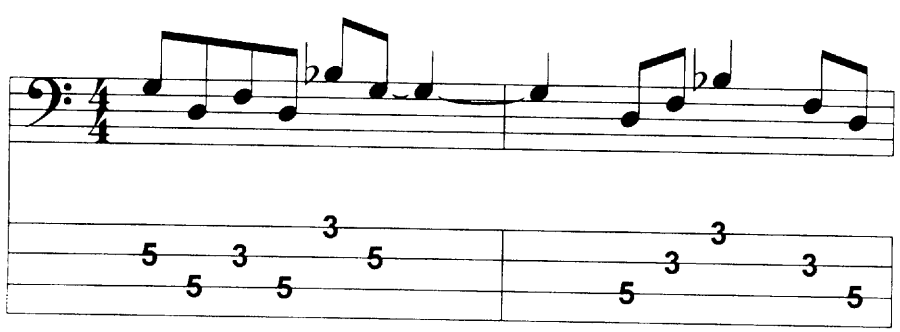
Example three is the same as example one, but I put rests in place of the tied note. Example four is the same as example two, but I've done the same to it.

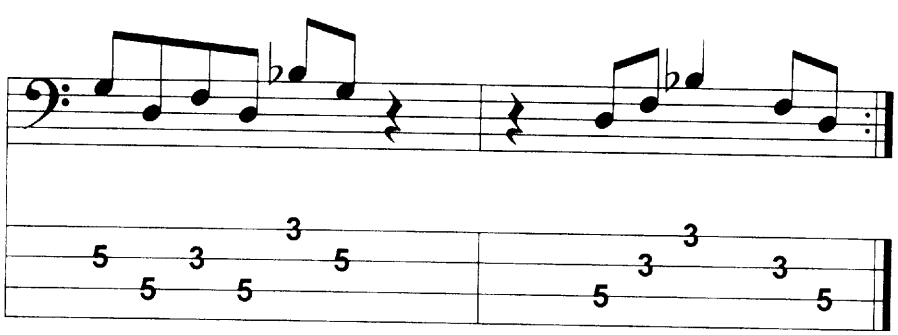


Often a complete song will vamp on a two bar bass groove. A good way to create variety in a vamp groove is to mix the feel up. The below example is a vamp. I hold a note over the bar line on half the bars, and leave rests around the bar line on other bars. I am alternating examples one and three with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









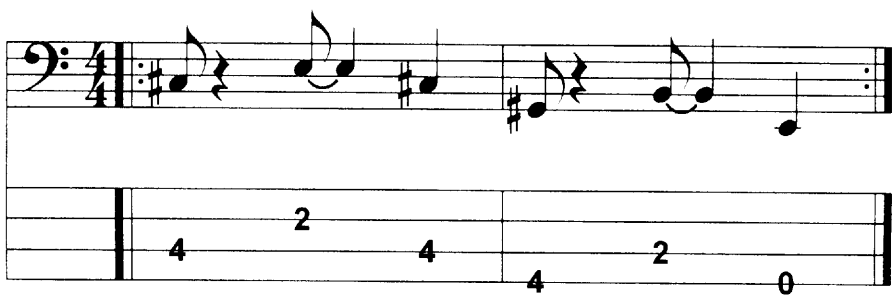
DEAD NOTES

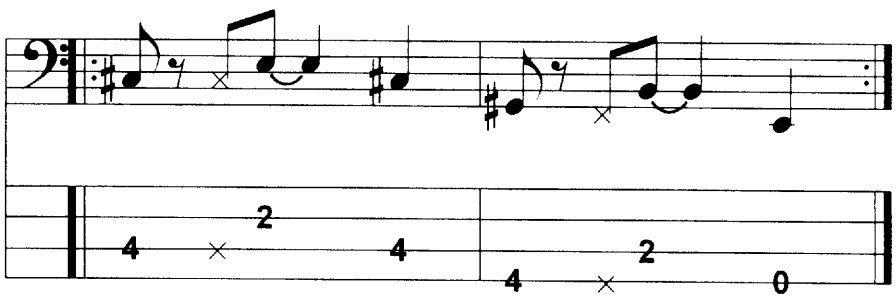
Dead notes can be added to a groove to create a more percussive feel. Playing dead notes is simple. Change nothing with the right hand technique. With the left hand, mute the strings instead of fretting a note. Leave the fingers resting lightly on top of the strings. Dead notes sound like "clicks".

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.

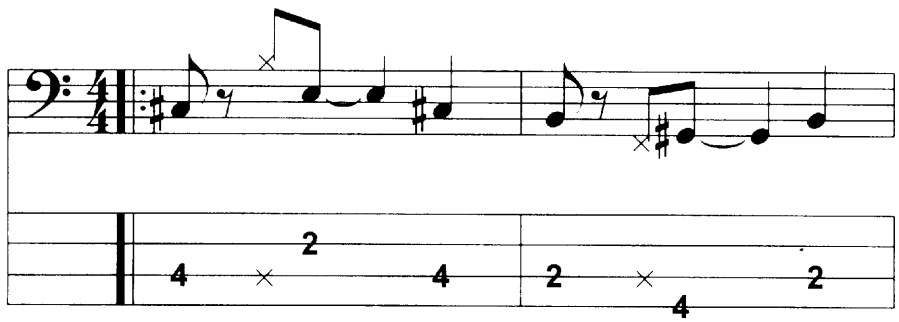
Examples one and two are very similar grooves. In example two I have replaced some of the rests with dead notes.

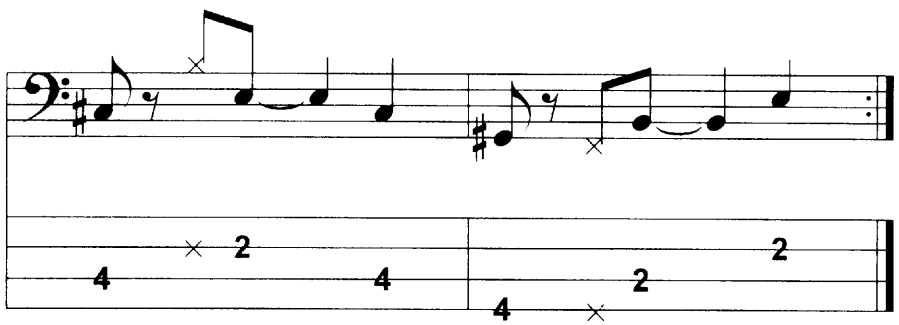


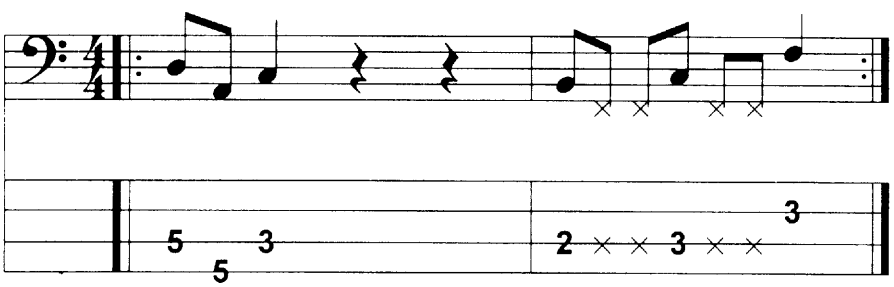


Both examples have a great feel to them. They are both excellent grooves. One is not necessarily better than the other. Adding dead notes is a great way to build the song. I often like to mix the dead note feel of example two, with the more laid back feel of example one.

Example three is an expansion of the previous two exercises.



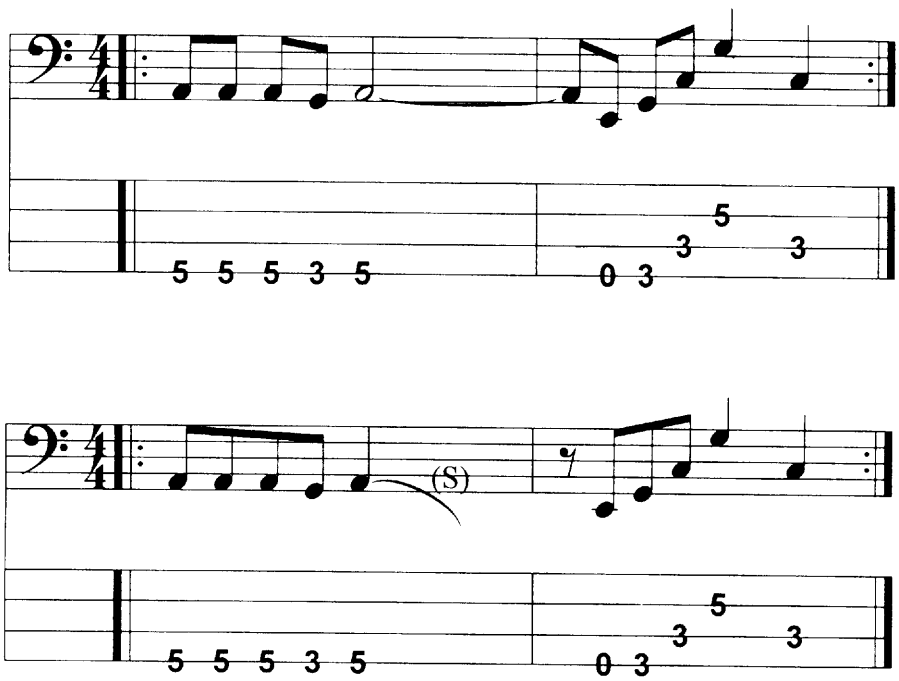




FRETLESS BASS/ SLIDES

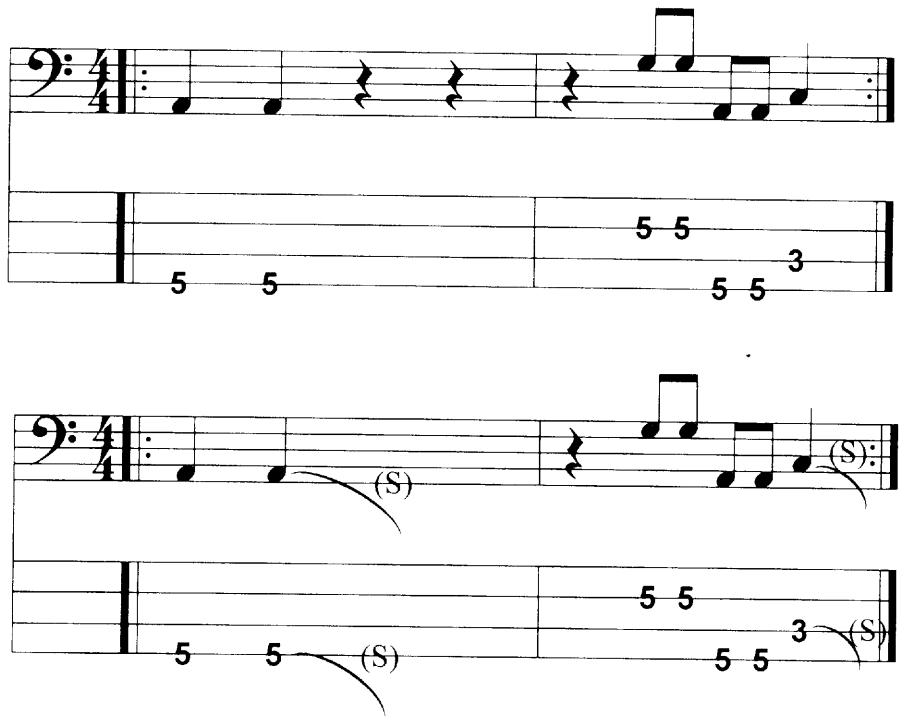
I have always enjoyed playing reggae with a fretless bass. There are so many little things that can be added to a groove with a fretless bass. My favorite thing to add to grooves are slides. I generally do all my reggae slides in a downward motion (in the direction of the headstock). Slides can be played 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.

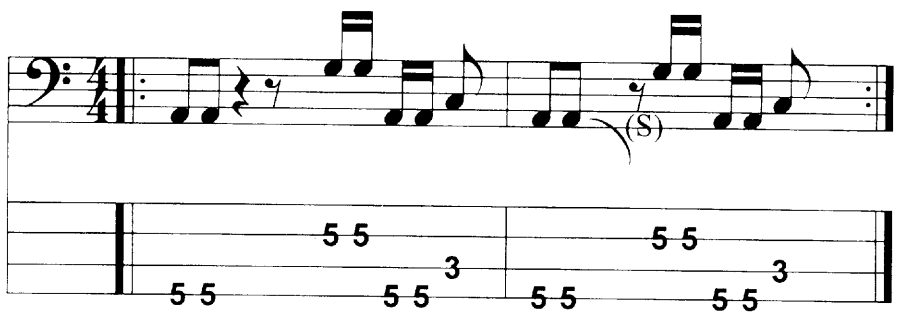


A small thing like a slide can make a large difference in a groove.

*****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.

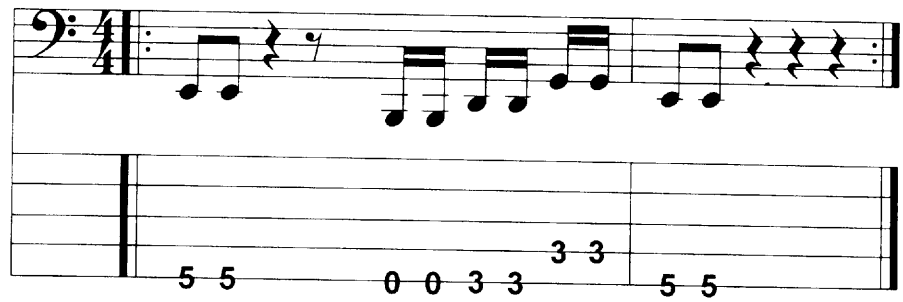


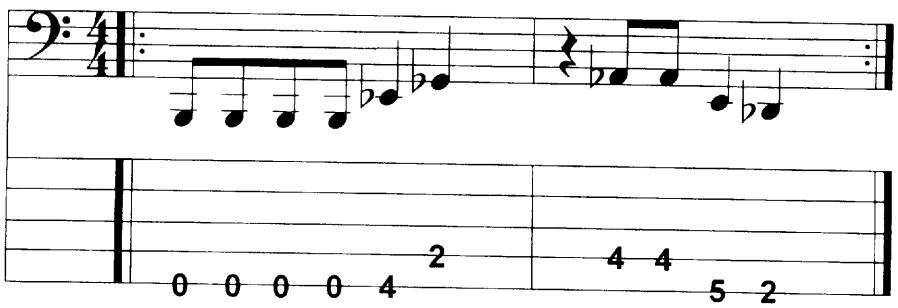
My approach to playing fretless bass is different than my approach to fretted bass. On fretless I often look for rests, and replace them with a slide. If I am playing a vamp, I like to alternate the rests with slides. This can subtly create a unique variety to your groove.

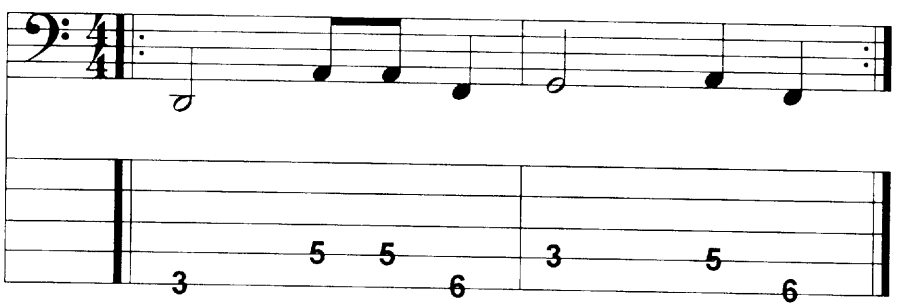


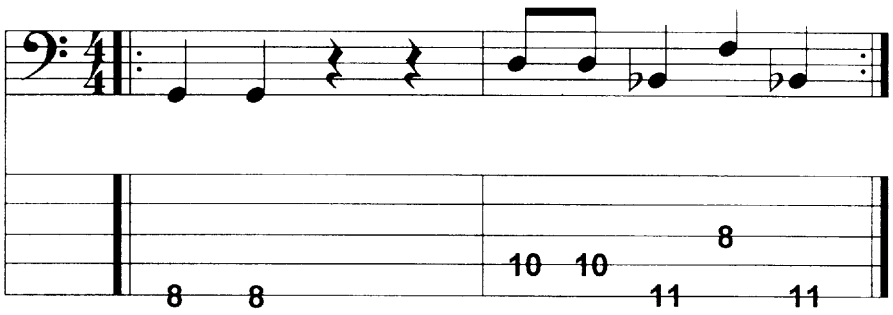
FIVE AND SIX STRING BASS

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.





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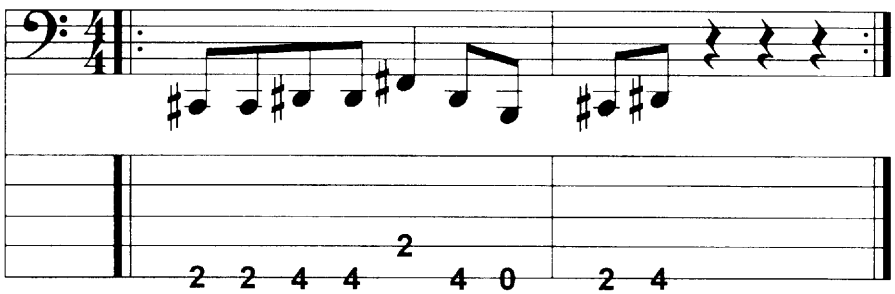
10 10
8
11
11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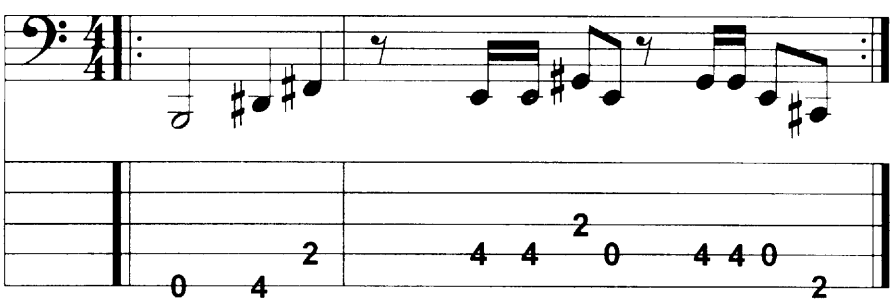
2
4 0
2 4

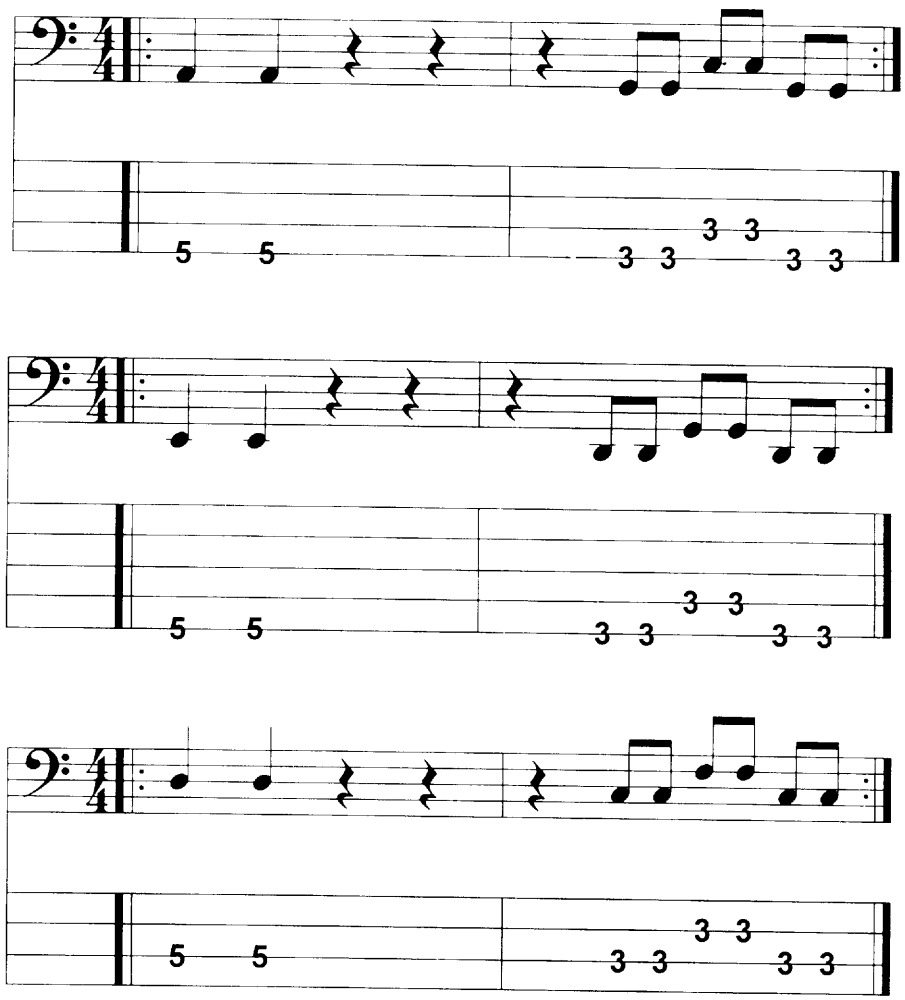

0 4
2
4 4
2
0
4 4 0
2

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.

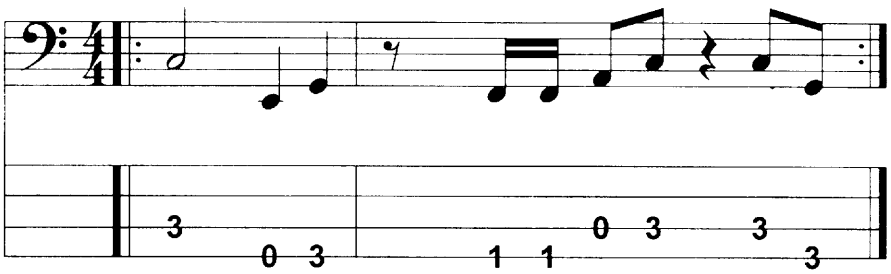
Being able to move patterns is a very useful technique. The following examples are all the same pattern. In each example I move the pattern to a different spot on the bass.



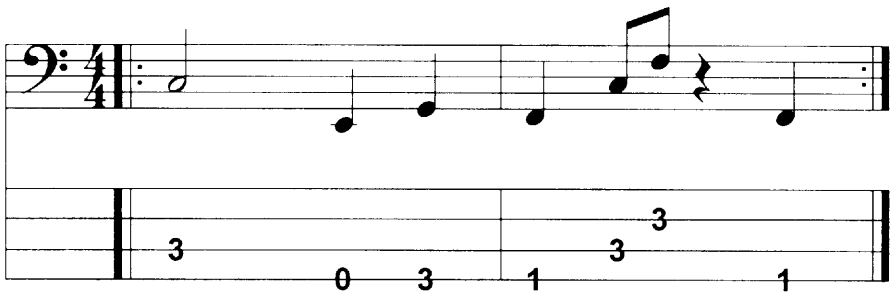
VARIATION IDEAS

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.

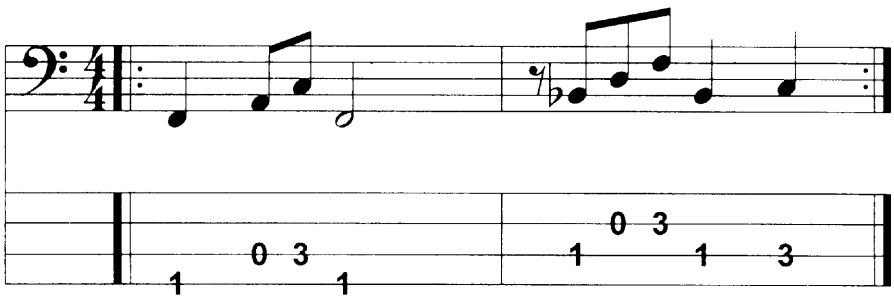
Example 1



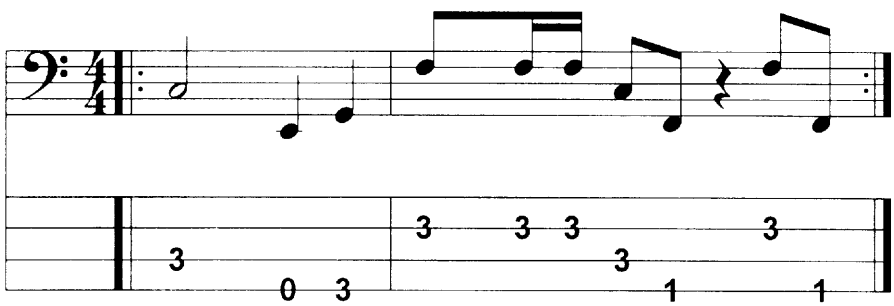
Example 2



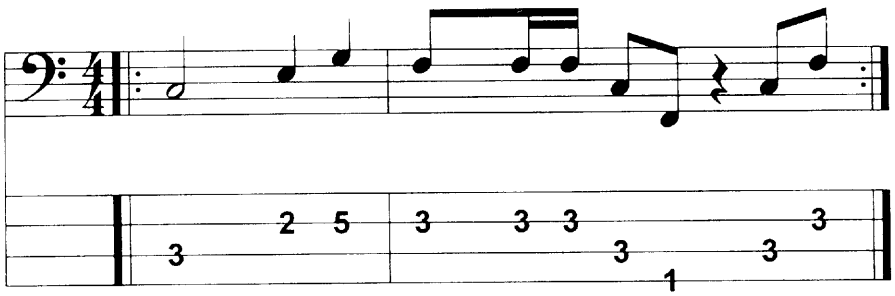
Example 3



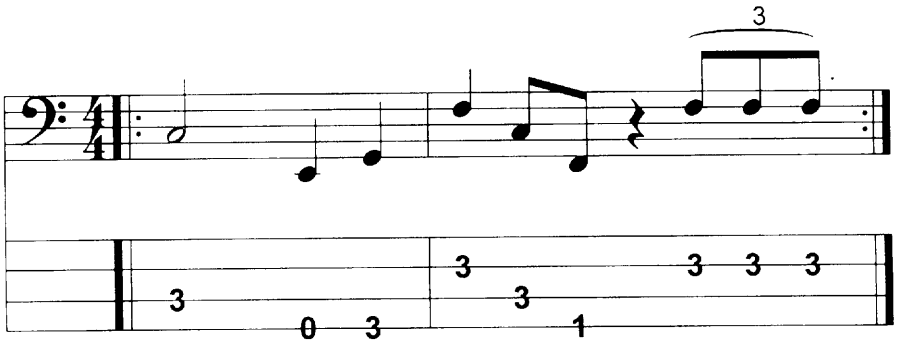
Example 4



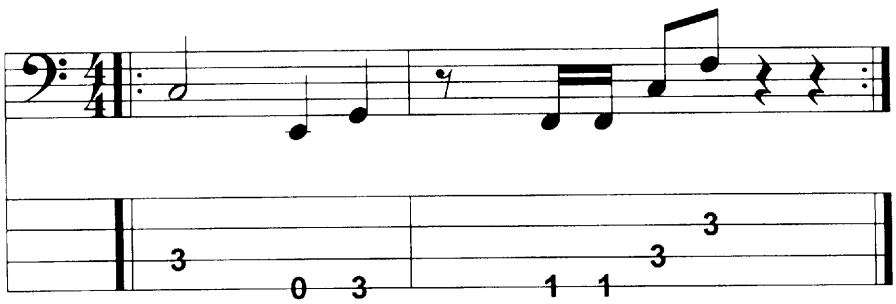
Example 5



Example 6



Example 7



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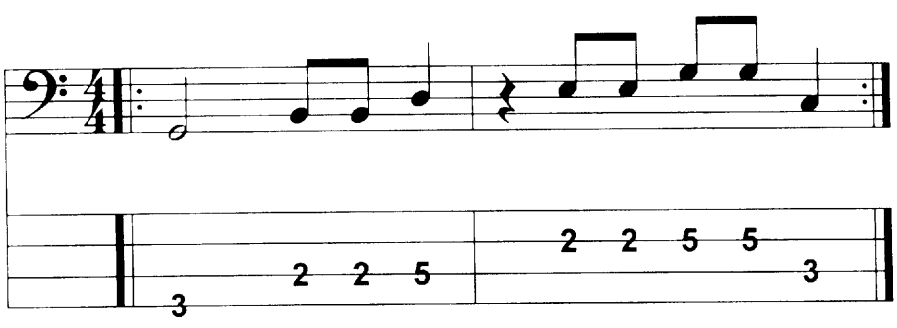
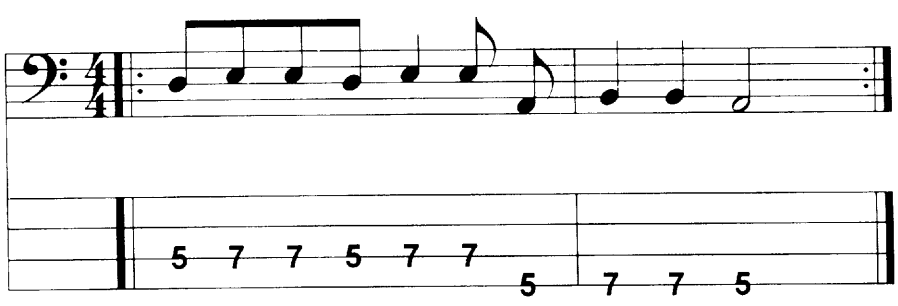
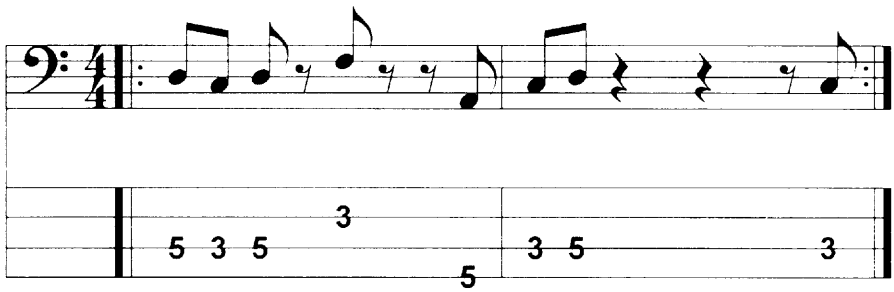


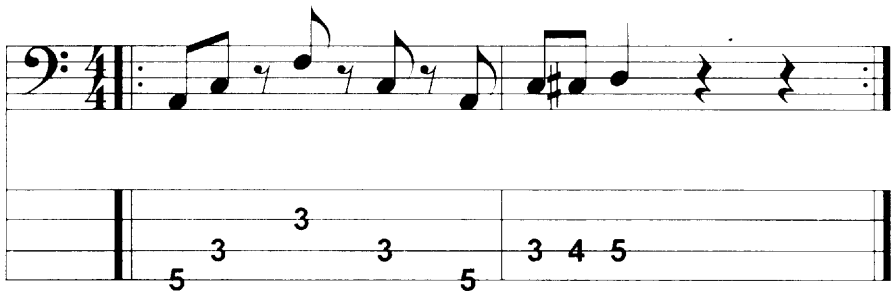
Example 9



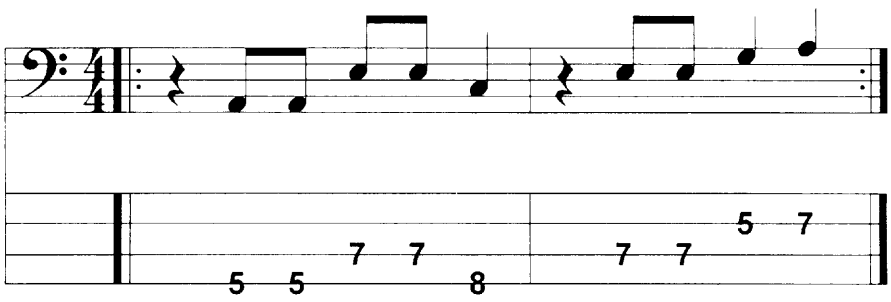
Example 10



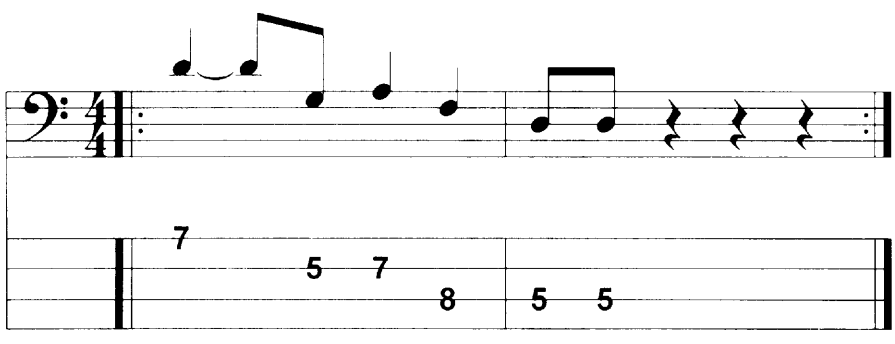
Example 11



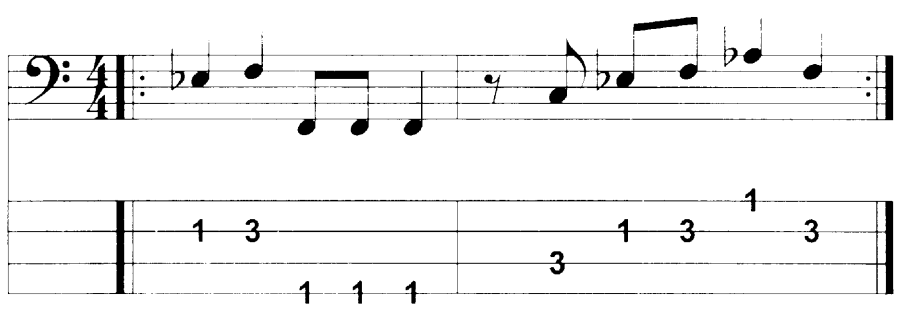
Example 12



Example 13



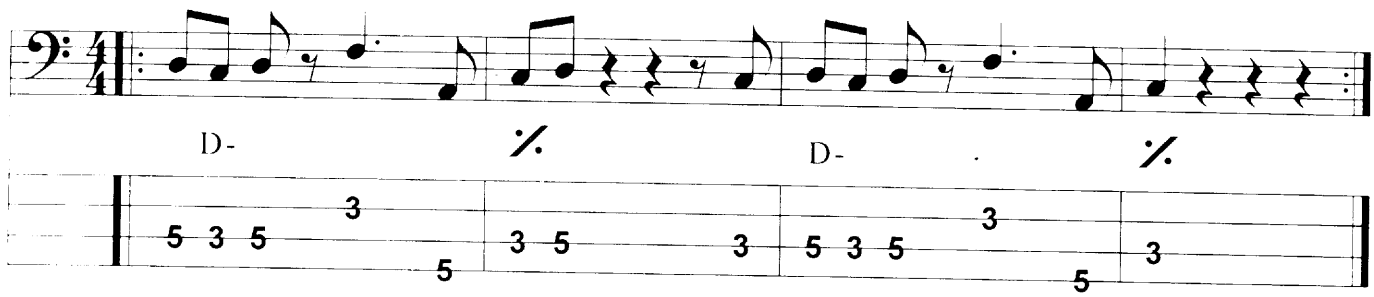
Example 14



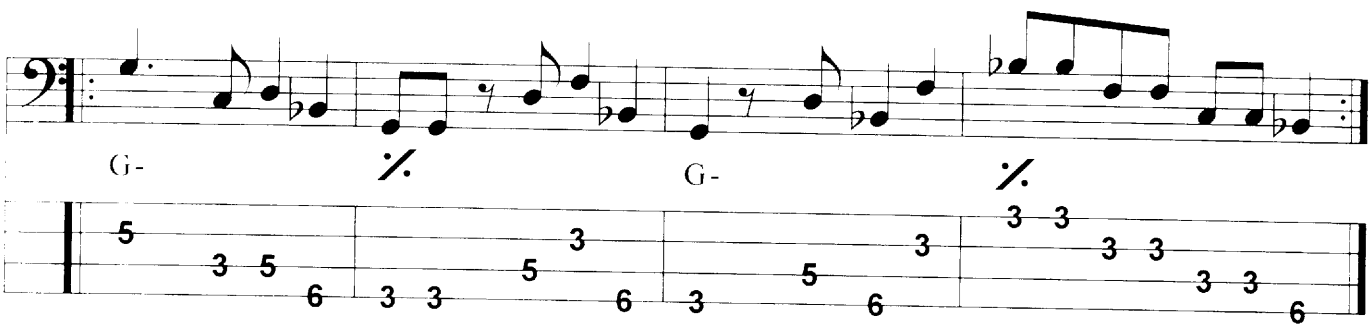
RHYTHM SECTION

The following eighteen examples have been recorded with a full rhythm section. They have also been recorded without bass so that you can play along.

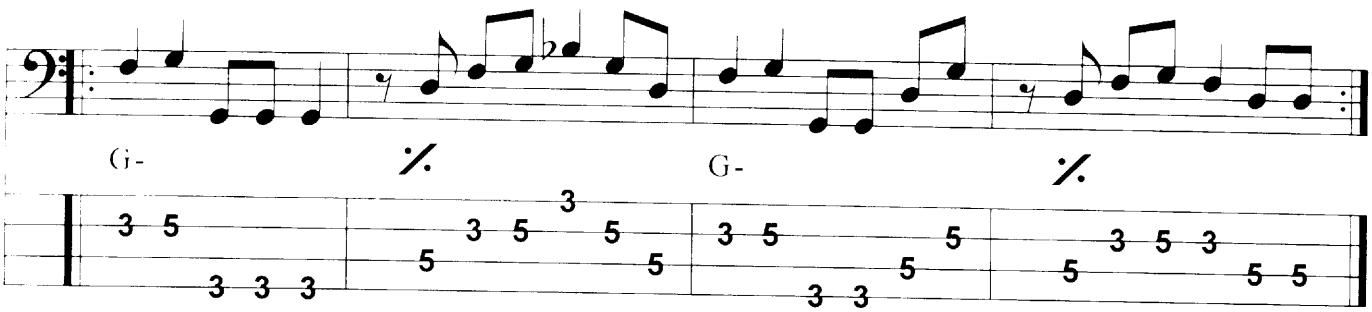
Ex. 1



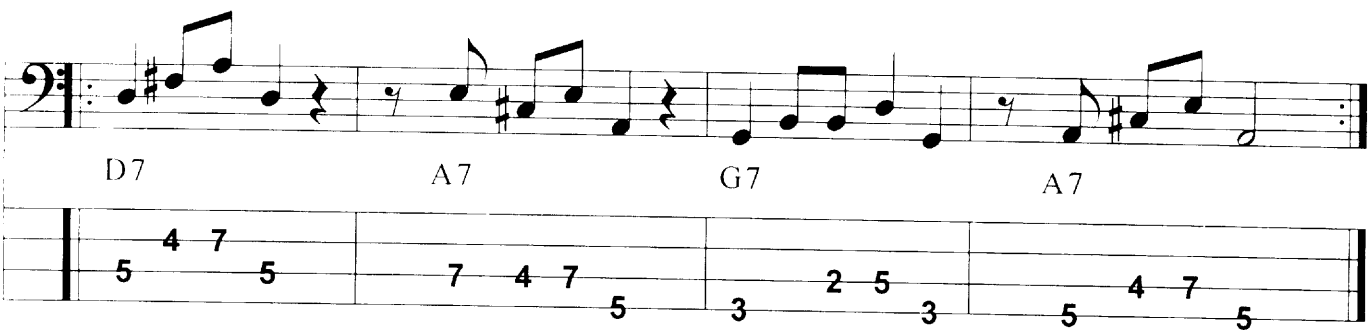
Ex. 2



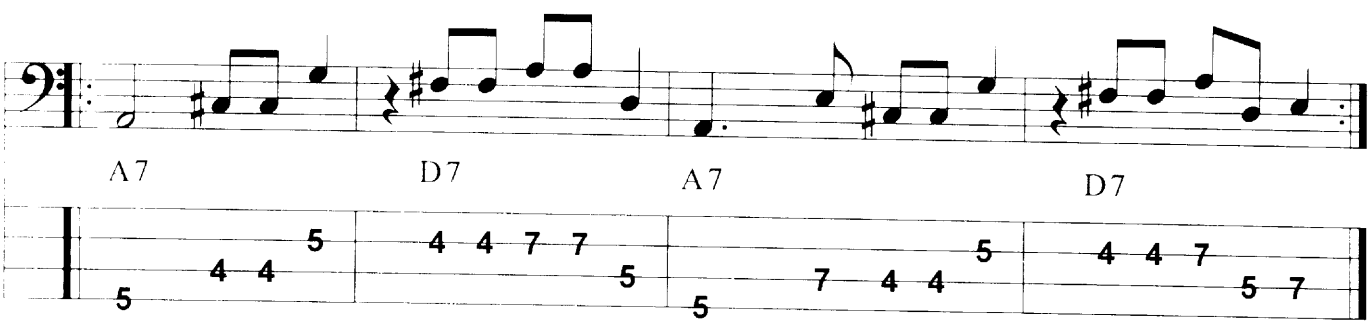
Ex. 3

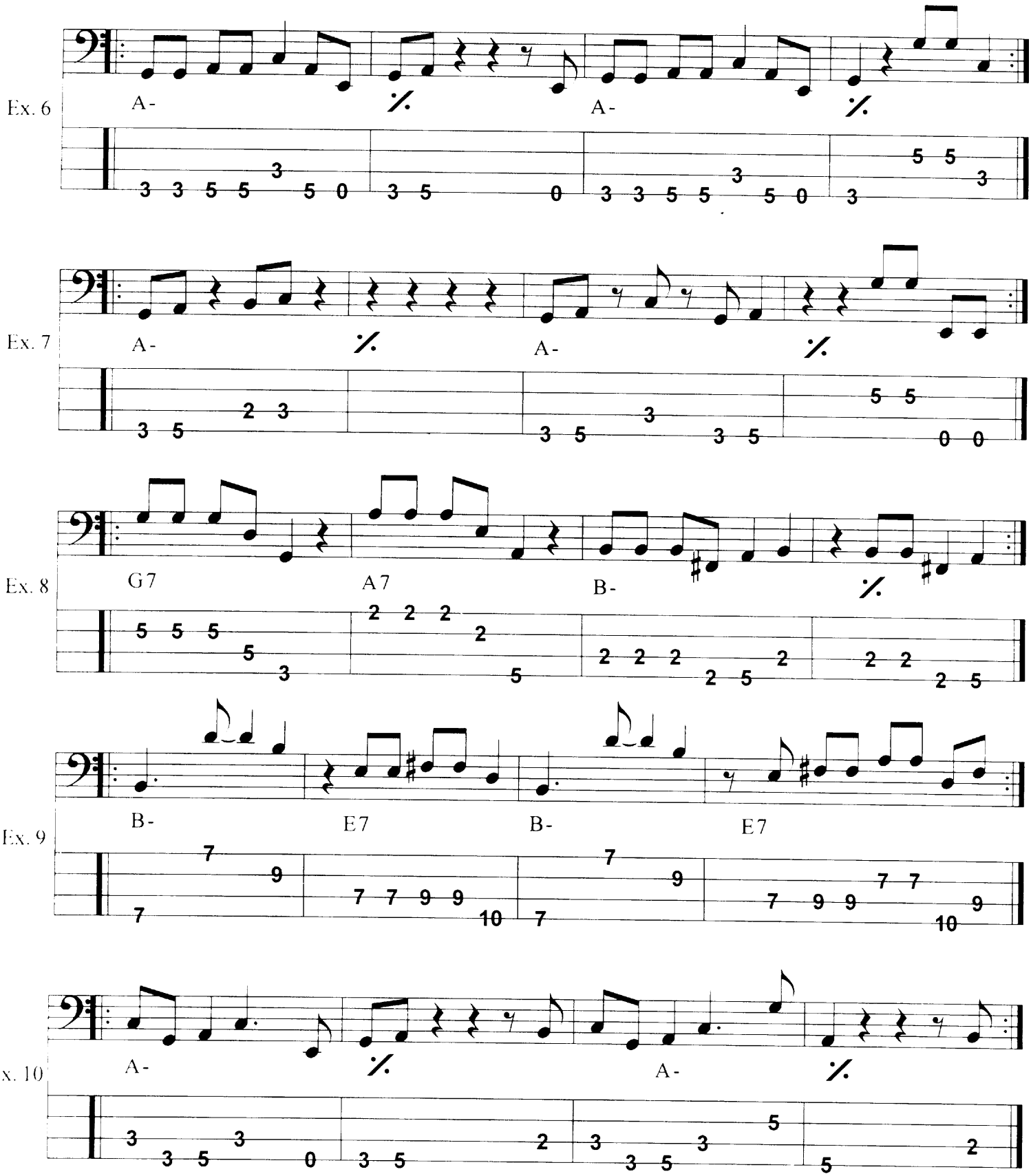


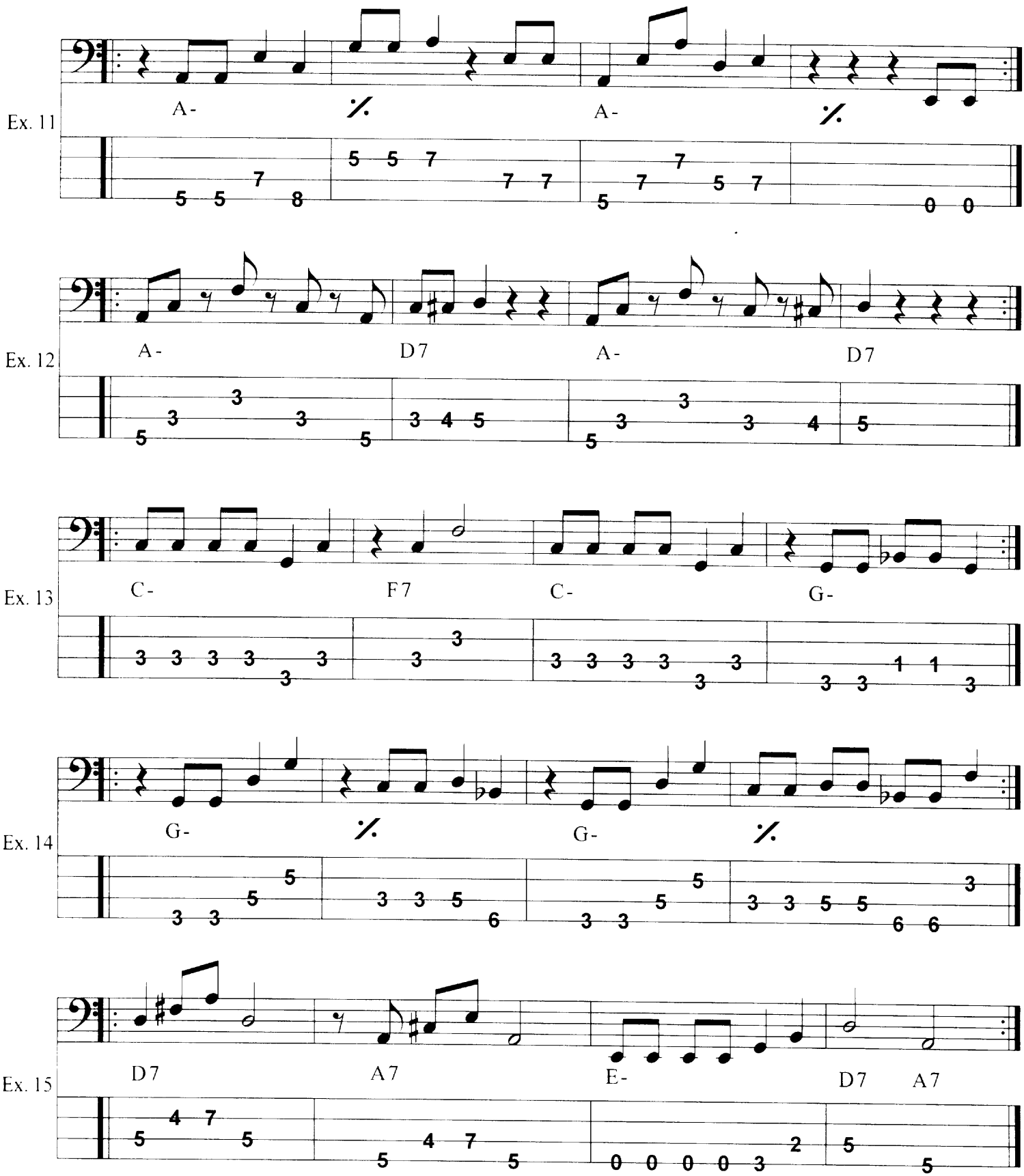
Ex. 4

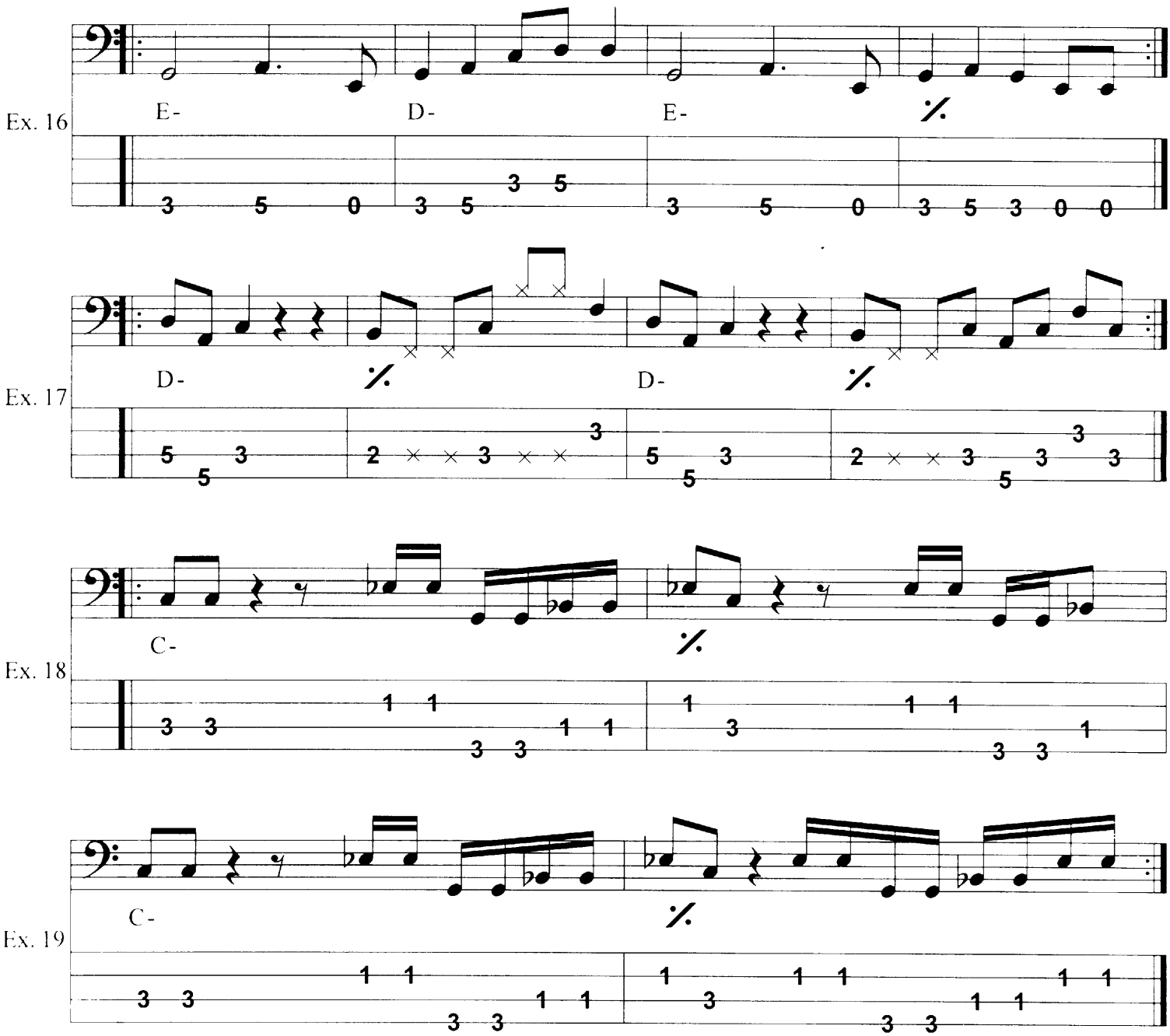


Ex. 5




Ex. 6
A-
A-
Ex. 7
A-
A-
Ex. 8
G7
A7
B-
Ex. 9
B-
E7
B-
E7
Ex. 10
A-
A-


Ex. 11
A-
A-
Ex. 12
A-
D7
A-
D7
Ex. 13
C-
F7
C-
G-
Ex. 14
G-
G-
Ex. 15
D7
A7
E-
D7
A7


Ex. 16
E-
D-
E-
Ex. 17
D-
D-
Ex. 18
C-
Ex. 19
C-