But This Goes to 11…

Welcome to the world of bass rigs.

'Oh no, not some techy article. I'll ignore that.' If that's what you're thinking, then let me exclaim, 'Stop!' This isn't about teaching you pointless physics about how bass amps work, nor teaching you how to build your own gear if you're so inclined. It's about enlightening everyone, from the complete beginner to the seasoned pro, on useful practical matters that will affect not only what gear you choose to use but more importantly how you use it.

If you're the kind of player who believes that your tone is in your hands, and that it's not about the bass it's about the bassist, then you're in like-minded company. Tone starts in your head, and you need to learn how to transfer that through your hands, instrument and amp to your audience (be that real live listeners or a recording console).

Cast your mind back to those boring maths lessons (whether that was last week or last century – or maybe you're in one now?) and you might remember the Venn diagram. That thing with a bunch of coloured circles which tended to overlap. Well, here's how I see bass rigs – as a giant quasi-Venn diagram. You have 'quiet to loud' running up the vertical Y axis and 'low frequencies to high frequencies' running along the horizontal X axis. You could also have 'clean to dirty' running along the Z axis, but you would need a pair of 3D glasses to see it!

To perfect the concept, this would be an 'n-dimensional' space where 'n' is the number of different parameters that can describe the ability of a bass rig, but we don't want to start messing with your mind to the detriment of your 'groovaciousness' just yet, so let's get back to the matter in hand.

Each rig can be described by a locus (curvy shape), and your tonal and SPL requirement (the highest output the speaker can manage) can be described by another locus. If your tone/SPL locus fits inside your rig's locus, then you're sorted. If not, then you have a problem.

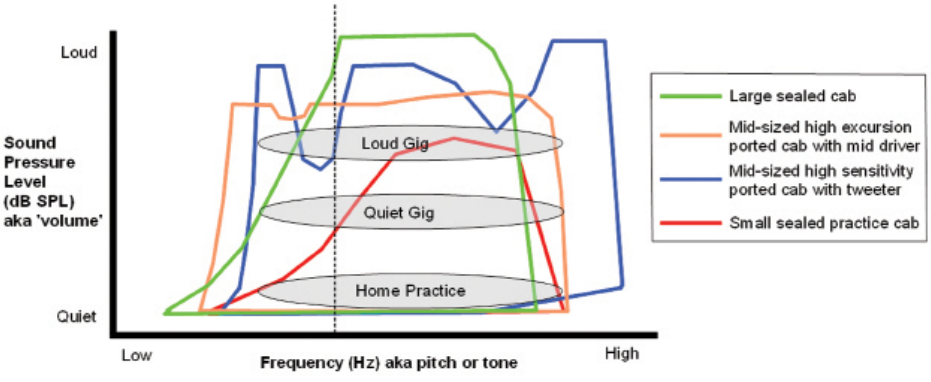
By drawing these loci we can highlight a very significant fact – the tonal ability of a bass rig and the loudness required from it are deeply intertwined. The louder you need to play, the more your bass rig will struggle to provide enough bottom end. Also, the harder you push a bass rig, the less clean the tone will be, and the further the response will shift from the low-volume response and the more it will compress. For home practice you can use smaller amps with great success, but the louder you play, the more 'speakerage' you will need to maintain that same tone.

And what's the other big thing we spot? That no bass rig has merely one sound – every bass rig can produce a whole host of sounds and it's down to you to find them. Admittedly, you're going to struggle to get a convincing gut-strung double bass sound from a tenor-tuned roundwound-strung Alembic! So sometimes you will need different gear, but there will be many occasions where an effective solution can be found through a bit of thinking and a bit of practice.

Going back to the seemingly hopeless task of a tenor bass pulling off a 1920s upright 'thang', what happens if you roll off all the treble at the amp, boost around 150 Hz for that boomy old sound, cut around 800 Hz to ensure none of that grainy roundwound sound gets through, stay on the bottom three strings and use as many open strings as possible? Then think like you're playing a big old doghouse, get that swing and pulse in your groove, and go for it.

So that's what this column is about – learning how to get exactly what you want from your gear so you can make the best music possible.

Next time we'll go back to the start and look at what's really going on with the most basic of rigs, and how that affects your tone.



About The Author C. ALEXANDER CLABER

Alex first picked up a bass when studying engineering at university, and his quest for sonic perfection led him to found Barefaced Audio, while also leading The Reluctant, an alt-ska/funk outfit.