



Alex Claber

Alex first picked up a bass when studying engineering at university, spending countless hours rehearsing, recording and gigging in a succession of original alt-rock/funk bands. His quest for sonic perfection led him to apply his engineering skills to loudspeaker design, establishing Barefaced Audio in 2008.

This column is brought to you in association with Barefaced Ltd, who manufacture high-output lightweight speaker cabs for the gigging bassist in their micro-factory in Brighton and export these cutting-edge models globally. An extensive archive of previous articles can be found at www.barefacedbass.com. Barefaced have finally launched their radical '69er 6x10" cab, designed to emulate the awesome tone of the original late-60s fridge cabs, but with better dispersion, greater power handling and much lower weight.

If you have any questions regarding this article or suggestions for future articles, please contact Alex at bgm@barefacedbass.com.

ALEX CLABER

Barefaced Bass

Alex Claber ponders the eternal issue: to slap, and indeed, to pop?

Just in case I hadn't written about enough contentious subjects – though on the whole I've been trying to present facts rather than opinions – this month I'm going to talk about slap bass. If you've panicked at the sight of this, please don't just turn the page, this will be worth reading! On the other hand, if you're a big slap fan, please don't be offended by what I have to say...

Our esteemed new editor is to blame for this subject matter – some weeks back Joel emailed a set of 'tell us about yourself' questions to the BGM contributors including this statement:

"Slapping the bass is ace/stupid, because..."

I pondered my answer to this for a fair while before concluding I couldn't say anything succinct that I wouldn't end up disagreeing with. Here's a selection of my answers:

- Slapping the bass is stupid because it usually sounds out of place.
- Slapping the bass is ace because you can drive the groove like another percussion instrument.
- Slapping the bass is stupid because it's hard to do well and many who try fail.
- Slapping the bass is ace because you finally get to hear why you paid for new roundwound strings and a cab with a tweeter in it.
- Slapping the bass is stupid because it sounds horribly 80s.
- Slapping the bass is ace because it allows bass players to do impressive solos.
- Slapping the bass is stupid because it allows bass players to do impressive solos...

Fundamentally I think slapping the bass is just another way of making music with the

Figure 1

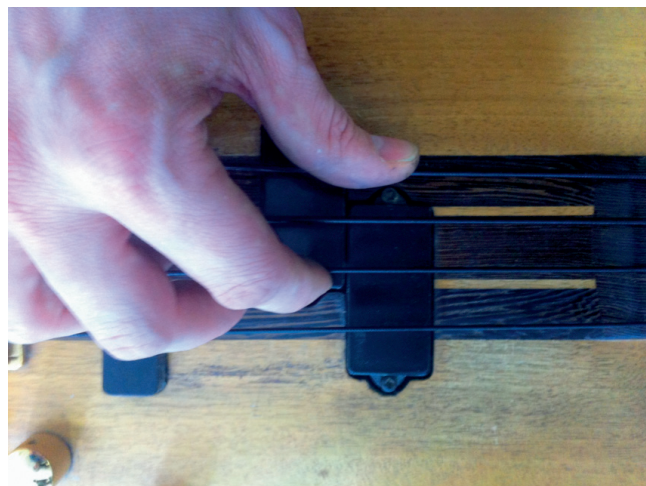


Figure 2

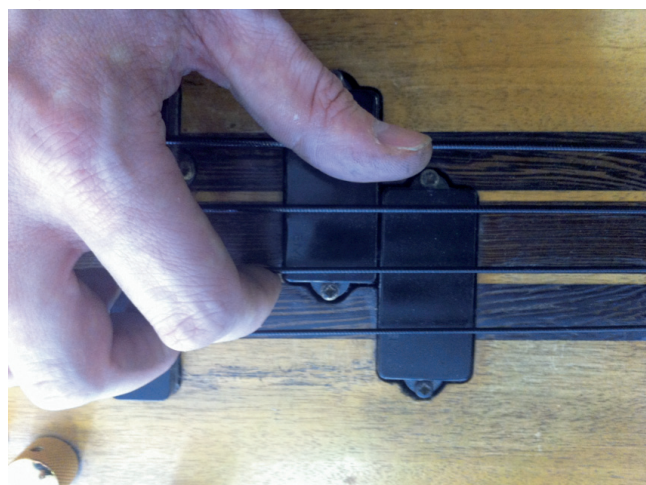
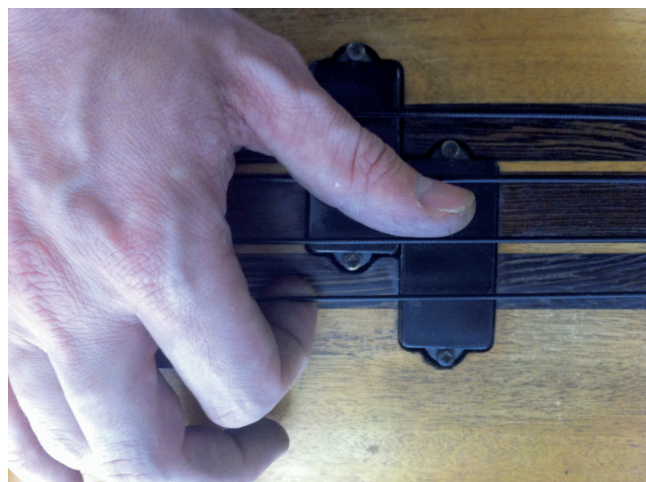


Figure 3



instrument – it's merely a technique for exciting the strings so that they make sound, just like using a pick or conventional fingerstyle or thumb plucking or strumming. The mistake that befalls most beginners (and many seasoned bassists who eschew slap) is to consider it a completely different way to play the bass, when it's just a development of more classical guitar style technique. Try this: move your hand so that your thumb is against your E string and your first two fingers on the D string, as shown in Figure 1.

Now play the E by plucking with the thumb and the D by plucking with the fingers. Get a groove happening, just something simple with octaves, and then let your hand shift as shown in Figure 2. Let the thumb pluck mutate from a pluck through the string into a hit downwards towards the body of the bass, while the fingers start quickly pulling the string away from the body of the bass so it snaps back into the fretboard. Shift up the A and G strings as shown in Figure 3 and continue laying it down. If you've never slapped before and don't want to start now, just give it a go!

Stick with the thumb and finger plucking, get a groove happening and see if you can resist the temptation to pop some accents or slap a big downbeat so it really thumps through the virtual band mix in your head. Everyone has that, right? Keep that groove going and switch back from plucking to slapping/popping and hear how there isn't just slap and not slap, there are many levels in between.

Notice that at no point did I suggest plugging your instrument in! Assuming your hearing is OK then you should be able to get tone and groove happening with your bass unplugged – yes, the lows are missing at your ears, but they're implied from the rest of the harmonic content and you should be able to feel them through the body of the bass. Once you plug in, all that bottom will come through as an extension to your real tone, which happens in the midrange.

Slap playing is often considered the preserve of those who like to pyrotechnically exhibit their mad 'skillz' – unfortunately, also often at the expense of the musical message. But that's not what it's really about, just as drumming isn't about fancy solos – it's about laying down a groove on the kit. The original slap bassist, Larry Graham, certainly solos at times in Graham Central Station, but it is

his band, and his music and his playing always makes sense in context. And if you check out Graham Central Station, you'll notice that some of Larry's greatest solo moments aren't slapping, they're with the fuzz pedal cranked up to 11, roaring through the mix like a massive guitar.

One of the joys of slap playing from my perspective is that it quickly tells you what a loudspeaker can really do. The downside from most bass players' perspectives is that it tells you what a loudspeaker can't handle. Cue unfortunate farting noises, bizarre loss of bottom compared to fingerstyle (this is common), harsh edge on the treble attack and general bass rig disappointment. It's no wonder that so many bassists think they need a different EQ for slap compared to fingerstyle – so they crank up the highs to show off that clicky pop and sharp slap, pull back the midrange to hide the dubious midrange tone and boost the lows in the hope of finding some bottom. If you don't slap now, becoming sufficiently competent to get decent slap tone happening is invaluable when rig shopping, because you don't need to get as loud to find out the limitations of amp or cab. You'll hear a lot of the treble plus and minus points before your ear might have sussed them out fingerstyle.

If you're thinking 'He's got this wrong – if the strings don't bounce off the fretboard to give that slap sound then it isn't slap bass', then consider this: Mr Graham doesn't call it slap, he calls it 'thumping and plucking'. Doesn't that get to the essence of what slap is really about? It isn't about making pingy flurries of noise like

a percussionist falling down one of those annoying staircases that are a feature of 99% of British gig load-ins, it's about thumping out some fat low notes and counterpointing them with some higher plucked notes. Raise your action and/or put on some heavier gauge strings and it becomes much easier to thump away without the string hitting the fretboard – it has that kick drum-like punch to drive the mix (and lock in with the drums and make it sound like your drummer has a huge right foot) but there's no sharp crack to annoy the rest of the band. As the energy level in the song increases, then you have a ton of dynamic and tonal range to work with. By cranking up how you're thumping those low notes, adding more plucked high notes in, smacking the accents hard enough to get that fretboard click and also muting the strings with your left hand so your right hand can play solely percussive ghost notes, you'll drive the groove even harder.

The proof of the pudding with all music is in the eating, if you'll pardon the mix of sensual metaphors – so for some examples of really thumping, unflashy, groove-driving slap, check out Chuck Rainey on the choruses of 'Peg' (Steely Dan); Larry Graham on 'Hair' (Graham Central Station) and 'Everyday People' (Sly & The Family Stone), and Flea on 'Can't Stop' (Red Hot Chili Peppers). Note how fat and mellow the tones are and how it's the thick fat punching low notes that are doing most of the grooving. No tweeter needed – or even wanted!

On the amplification front, if you want to lay it down in a fat cool slap stylee you need an amp that isn't going to clip when you hit it with a loud transient, and a cab that can handle that transient cleanly. The reason too many rigs sound thin and harsh when you slap is that you run past the limits of both amp and woofer, which means you lose your bottom end and gain a load of dirty mids and

rough highs. Turn your amp down enough and it should be able to handle slap within its limits, but possibly not loudly enough for your band – the best solution is a rig that can move more air cleanly (extra volume displacement). However, you can do a lot with intelligent mixing (like getting the guitarist to cut their lows so you don't need to boost yours to compete) and compression (to squish the loudest part of the transient and give your rig an

easier ride) – but that's a whole 'nother article in itself!

The other factor that can make a vast difference in how your thumping and plucking sits in the mix is where you actually hit the strings. Just as with fingerstyle and pick playing, your biggest tone control is where you excite the string, because that changes the balance of harmonics. Many bassists assume that you should be slapping up near the end of the fretboard – this does give you more fret click/slap/pop, but is that what you really want? It also means that the low-frequency part of your sound is very much oriented towards the deeper lows, which are tougher on your gear and won't punch through the mix as well as slightly higher bass harmonics. Shift your hand back towards the bridge and thump and pluck between the pickups (as in the photos) – there will be loads more midrange growl and texture, more thump and less boom in the lows, and less excessive pop in the treble. And you can start enjoying the continuum between plucking, thumping, slapping, popping and so on, as the strings feel tighter back there: you can get the thump without the string-on-fret percussive.

Chuck Rainey was certain that the chorus on 'Peg' would groove hardest if he slapped it, but he also knew that Steely Dan wouldn't let him slap on one of their songs. He turned around so they couldn't see what he was doing, and they loved it – try the same with your band! But always remain a slave to the groove. Keep the technical pyrotechnics for impressing (or annoying) other bass players in guitar shops...

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