



**SCOTT'S
BASS
LESSONS**



Beginners Level 01

With Ian Martin Allison

01. Before You Start Playing

COURSE BOOK

LEARNING *PATHWAYS*

Lesson 1

Introduction

Welcome to the wonderful world of the bass guitar!

This instrument is elegant and simple, yet so powerful and persuasive.
Beware! You are on the path to greatness, and:



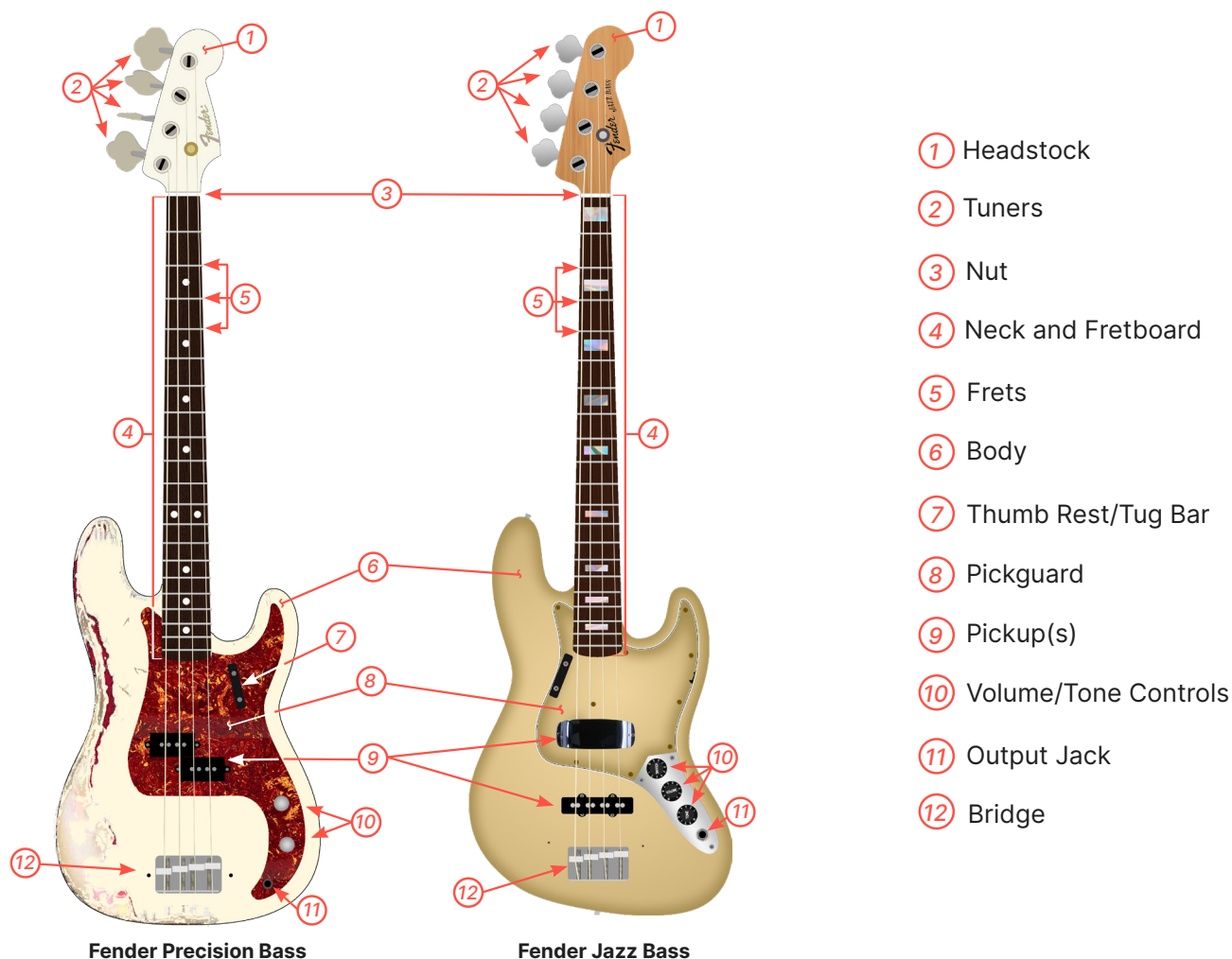
This course—the first in the Beginners Learning Pathway—will give you a solid foundation on the very **basics** of playing this incredible instrument, including what the various parts of the bass are and how they function, how to properly hold this beast and how to tune it, what to do with your hands, how to dial in a sound, a bit about amplifiers, and much more.

Lesson 2

Parts of the Bass

So, you've just bought the coolest instrument on the planet. Smart move! Now what? Well, before you start to lay down some heavy grooves, let's make sure we know what we're holding in our hands. Let's start with the basics. What *is* this heavy, 4-stringed thing anyway? Despite the many shapes and sizes, basses all generally have the same components:

Figure 01 Bass Anatomy



LESSON 2 (continued)

Let's look at the most critical components in a little more detail:

Headstock

The headstock is the very top of the neck, and therefore the instrument, and contains the tuning pegs (tuners) that the strings attach to. Headstocks come in all shapes and often give an instrument a distinctive look:

Figure 02 Headstock Shapes



Tuners

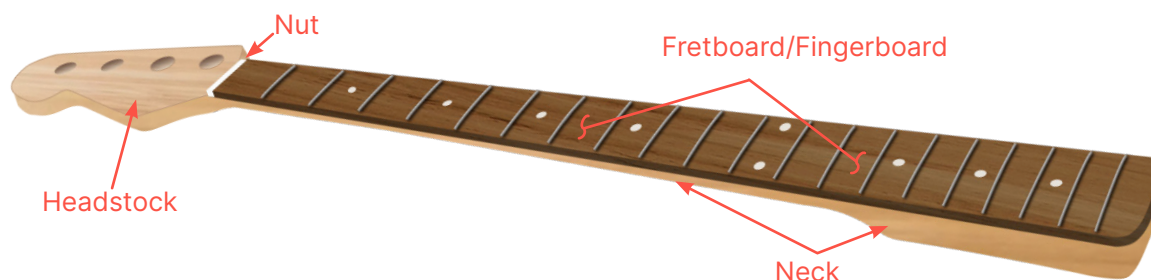
Tuners go by a variety of names that all refer to the same hardware: “machine heads,” “tuning heads,” “tuning machines,” “tuning pegs,” “tuning keys,” and “machine tuners,” among others. They’re made up of large “keys” that are turned to tune each string via a screw-like mechanism on the back of the headstock. The tuners are what attaches the strings to the headstock, and may be found on either side of the headstock, or both.

Nut

The nut sets the string spacing and height of the strings at the top of the neck. It's where the neck meets the headstock, and is usually made of hard plastic or bone.

LESSON 2 (continued)

Figure 03 Neck and Fretboard



Neck and Fretboard

The neck is the long, skinny part of the bass guitar, and is usually attached in one of three ways: bolted on, glued on, or it's part of the body () itself. The front/top side of the neck is called the **fretboard** (fingerboard) and is the main playing surface of the bass. Necks come in a variety of sizes, but for a four-string bass guitar, the standard length roughly 24 inches (~61 cm), resulting in a standard bass scale length, as measured from the nut (④) to the bridge (⑮), of 34 inches (86 cm). Both the neck and the fretboard can be made from any of a variety of hard woods—they don't need to be the same—including maple (brighter tone), mahogany (warm and fat tone), rosewood ("rock 'n' roll" tone) and ebony (bright tone and lots of sustain), among many others.

Frets

The lines you see across the neck are the actual *frets*, and they separate the fretboard into discrete sections. They're made of a metal wire, like nickel, and when you push a string down between two of them, the string changes pitch—the higher up the fretboard (as you get closer to the bridge and farther away from the nut), the higher the pitch of the string.

continued →

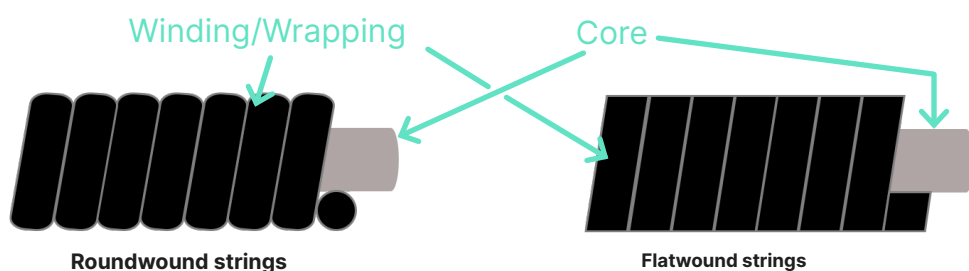
LESSON 2 (continued)

Strings

Bass strings are arguably the most important part of your bass guitar. A string is measured by its diameter, with the heaviest (thickest) strings producing the lowest pitches when played open—without a finger on any fret. A string is *also* named by the pitch it produces when played. From low (pitch) to high, the strings are E, A, D, and G for a four-string bass.

Bass strings are typically made up of an inner metal core (nickel or stainless steel) that is then *wrapped* (wound) in some way. This also affects the tone of the string: **roundwound** (the “standard” type of string for most bass players), where the core is wrapped with another round, metal wire, or **flatwound**, where the core is wrapped with a flat wire, are most common:

Figure 05 Roundwound VS Flatwound Strings



Flatwound strings emphasize the low- to mid-range in their tone, have a smoother feel, and tend to have a longer life, but are more expensive than their roundwound counterparts, which are brighter in tone and offer more balance. Ultimately, the choice is up to you and your particular playing style.

LESSON 2 (continued)

Body

Basses come in many different shapes and styles, but two stand out in the crowd: the P-Bass and the J-Bass. “P-Basses” are styled after the Fender Precision Bass, the first bass to feature frets and known for its signature, versatile, fat tone; “J-Basses” are styled after the Fender Jazz Bass, and feature an angled body with a separate neck and bridge pickup, allowing a wide variety of tones to be produced. But overall, bass bodies come in quite a variety of shapes.

Figure 06 Body Shapes



Bass guitar bodies, much like fretboards, can be made from any of a variety of woods, each of which affects the tone of the bass in different ways. Harder woods such as maple or rosewood produce a brighter tone, while softer woods like ash and alder have a more warm tone. Note that the wood used for the body does not need to be the same as that of the fretboard and in fact is usually different.

LESSON 2 (continued)

Thumb Rest/Tug Bar

If present, this small piece of the bass is referred to as the **thumb rest** if mounted “above” the strings since it acts as a place to rest your thumb while playing with your fingers. If mounted “below” the strings, it’s called a **tug bar**, and acts as a place to rest your *fingers* while playing with the *thumb*. Same hardware, different name.

Pickguard

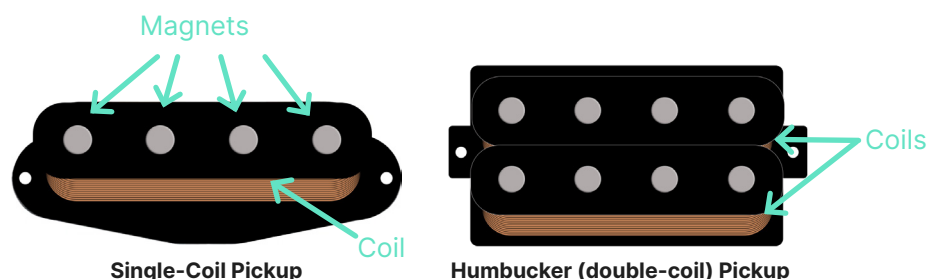
The pickguard, usually made from plastic, is there to protect the body of the bass from scratches. These days, using a pick to pluck the strings of a bass guitar is less common, so the presence of a pickguard on the bass is largely decorative. (You may also hear this referred to as a “scratch plate.”)

Pickups

Pickups will have the largest impact on the tone of your bass, since inside the pickup is a magnet that “picks up” the vibrations of the strings and turns it into a signal that gets sent to the amplifier.

Generally speaking, pickups are a magnet wrapped by a copper coil that picks up changes to the magnetic field when the string vibrates. The two most common pickup types are the **single-coil** and **double-coil**. As you might expect, single-coil pickups have a single coil wrapped around the magnet. They generally have a bright sound, but they tend to pick up extraneous noises, and often “hum.” Double-coil pickups are designed to cancel out the hum sometimes present in a single-coil and for this reason, they’re often referred to as **humbuckers**.

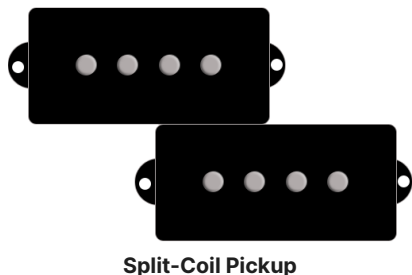
Figure 07 Pickup Types



LESSON 2 (continued)

Pickups (continued)

You may also see **split-coil** pickups; they're what you'll find on a P-bass. Basically, a split-coil pickup is a single-coil that's split in two.



Split-Coil Pickup

On modern basses, pickups come in two categories: **active** and **passive**. Passive pickups are probably what you think of when you hear the term pickup; they were the first type of pickup used on bass guitars and their warm tone is part of their characteristic sound, but they offer fewer options on how to tweak your tone. Active pickups, as the name implies, offer a more *active* role in shaping their tone—they include a batter-powered pre-amp that allows for wider control of your sound. The tone of either type of pickup is influenced by its placement under the strings: as you move from the bridge towards the neck, the sound will change from thinner and bright to more warm and full.

Bridge

The big, sometimes bulky piece of metal hardware towards the bottom of the bass body is called the **bridge**, and it's where the strings attach to the body of the bass. The different parts of the bridge assembly ensure proper string spacing and height, but with much more precision since everything is easily adjustable, unlike the nut. As with just about everything else, they can come in all different shapes and sizes.

Lesson 3

Holding the Instrument

It may seem simple, but there *is* a proper way to hold the bass guitar. It's important that you avoid developing any bad habits from the start, so let's look at the proper technique to get you off on the right track.

Seated Playing

While you don't see too many professional bassists playing live while seated, rest assured, like *you* likely will, they spend most of their time seated when playing—especially when practicing. Key things to consider:

- Find a nice **balance point** on your leg for the curve on the bottom of the instrument. If you let go of your bass, it should not immediately fall over. Your fretting hand should not be needed to hold up the instrument.
- The **height of your seat**. Your legs should be at a 90 degree angle; keep shoulders relaxed and straight—not hunched over! Be conscious of this.
- Consider the way the bass sits against your body—do not let your body interfere with your ability to reach the entire fretboard. Do not hold the bass right against the body; rather, have it positioned at a **30–45° angle away** from your body, with the bridge closest to you. Imagine a box in front of you. The bass should be positioned from corner to corner, making it much easier for your fretting hand to move up and down the fretboard, allowing you to reach the full range of the instrument. And, of course, try and stay relaxed.
- Your plucking hand should not be bent much at all; **the angle at the wrist should be natural with no tension**.

Playing while Standing

Now it's time to stand up! And unless you want your bass to fall to the ground, you're going to need to attach a strap to it. It's important that your strap is comfortable—it's carrying the weight of the bass on your shoulder. Hook the ends of the strap onto the strap locks so that when you stand up, your bass is positioned the same as it was while you were seated.

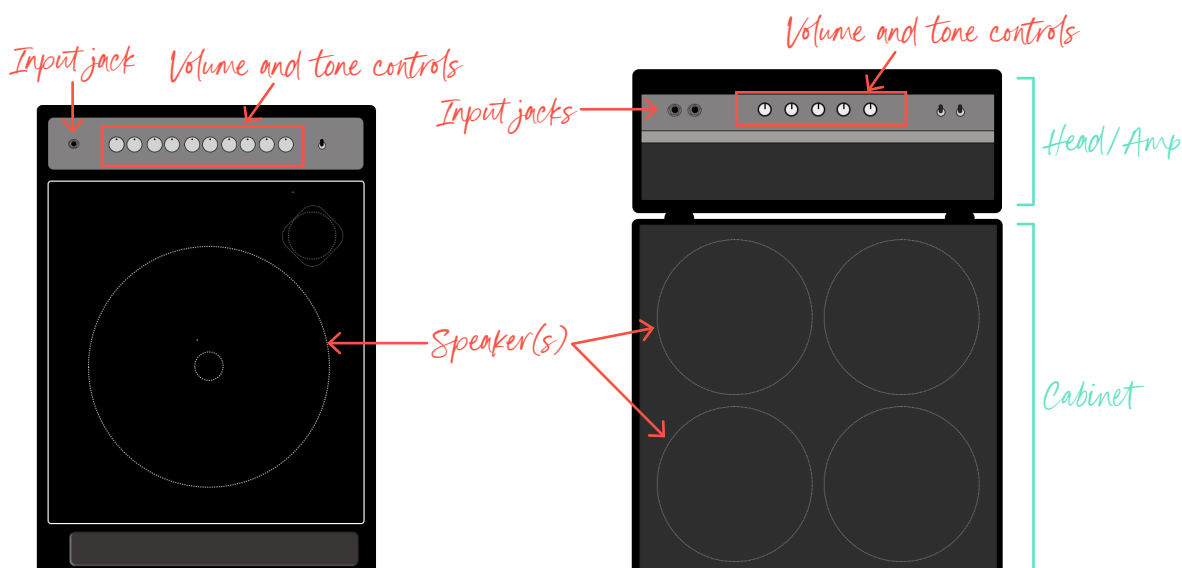
Lesson 4

Bass Amps

Unless you're playing an acoustic bass, chances are good that the beast you're holding in your hands is a little low in volume. Fortunately, someone had the great idea to invent the bass amplifier (amp). In this lesson, we'll take a look at a typical bass amplifier and demystify all its knobs and settings.

Bass amps come in two varieties: a **combination** amp, or a **head and cabinet**. A combination (combo) amp has everything under one roof—the amplifier and speaker are in one big rectangular “box.” Alternatively, you can separate the amp (head) from the speakers (the cabinet):

Figure 4.01 Combination vs. Head + Speaker(s)



LESSON 4 (continued)

Cables

It doesn't matter how big or bad your amp is unless you actually plug into it, and to do that you'll need a **cable (lead)**. Standard audio cables are all 1/4-inch in diameter, but it isn't necessarily one size fits all. Be sure you get a cable that is meant for a bass guitar! Also, cables come in lots of lengths, so make sure to get one that will allow you the freedom to move around.

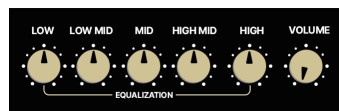
Figure 4.02 Typical Audio Cable End



Plugging In and Finding the Proper Sound

To avoid any sonic surprises, try this order when connecting your bass to your amplifier:

01. Turn the volume knob(s) of your bass and amplifier all the way *off*.
02. Plug one end of your audio cable into the output jack of your bass, and the other end into the input jack of your amp.
03. Set the tone controls on your amp to a **flat EQ** setting: set each knob to the midpoint of its range, usually meaning the indicator will be straight up. For example, your setting should look something like this:



04. Turn on your amplifier. Depending on the age/type of amp, it may take longer than you think for it to be ready, and the power button may be on the *back* of the amp.
05. Turn your *bass* volume knob(s) all the way up.
06. Pluck any open string, say the low E string, then gradually increase the *amplifier's* volume until you get to a volume appropriate for the room you're playing in. If you do not hear any sound coming out of your amp, check your connections and volume knobs, and make sure it's plugged in and turned on! 🤖
07. Now, play any note and turn the EQ knobs through their full ranges to hear the effect each knob has on the tone. Easy peasy.

Flat EQ

There's no boost or cut going on with the equalization.

Amp Hack:

Use a flat EQ on your amp and get the sound from the knobs on your bass and your hands.

Lesson 5

Tuning Your Bass

Hey, why is this thing so hard to tune properly?
I mean, it only has four strings...

There are a number of ways to tune your bass to the proper pitches E, A, D, and G. But unless you have perfect pitch, correctly identifying one of those string pitches exactly can be difficult. And your instrument must be exactly in tune with the other musicians! (Well, *everybody* has to be tuned to the *same* pitches.)

Pitch

The **pitch** of a note refers to how high or low that note is. The highest open string on a regular guitar is an E note, just like the lowest open string on a bass guitar, but we can all agree that they're not the same E note: they are two different pitches of the same note!

We adjust the pitch of the strings by turning the tuning keys. But how do we know the correct pitch to adjust to? There are any number of ways to determine the correct pitches of the strings, including using your ears, electronic tuner pedals or even a smart phone or tablet. Let's look at a few options.



"The importance of getting this instrument in tune can not be overstated ... and it's hard to do!"

LESSON 5 (continued)

SBL Groove Trainer

Unlike pedal tuners, the Scott's Bass Lessons Groove Trainer app for your smartphone or tablet is **completely free** and will accomplish the same thing plus a whole lot more—it's an entire player's practice toolkit. It's available for both iOS and Android.



SBL Groove Trainer 4+

Bass player's practice toolkit

[Devine Music Limited](#)

Designed for iPad

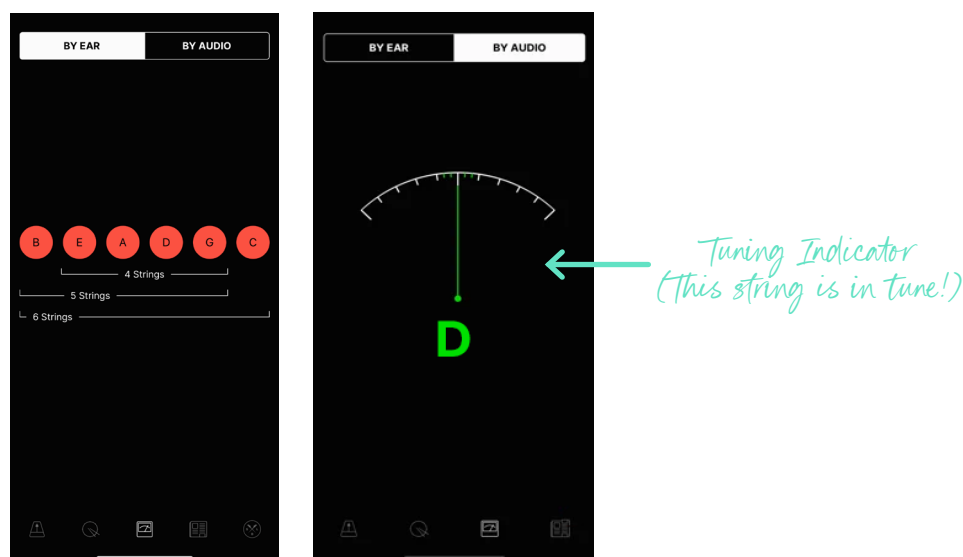
★★★★★ 5.0 • 124 Ratings

Free

Any type of tuner—even your ears!—will compare the vibration frequency of the plucked string to the frequency required to accurately sound the correct pitch, and indicate whether you need to increase or decrease the string tension to arrive at that particular pitch; we do this by turning the tuning keys. Bases typically have four strings, with the strings individually tuned to E, A, D, and G. Open the tuner tab on the app, and decide if you'd like to tune **BY EAR** or **BY AUDIO**.



Figure 5.01 SBL Groove Trainer Tuning Options



"I always like to go a little bit below the pitch, then up into pitch; that creates the best tuning stability."

LESSON 5 (continued)

Tuning “BY EAR” VS “BY AUDIO”

By choosing the “BY EAR” option, when you tap the string note on screen, it will play the note in the correct pitch. It’ll be up to you to match that sound by turning the tuning keys without any other visual guidance. This is a good first step to get your bass “reasonably” close to in tune.

When you’re close to in tune, choose “BY AUDIO”. Here, your phone’s microphone will listen to your plucked string, and indicate whether your pitch is too high, or *sharp*, (indicated by “Tune Down” on the screen) or too low, or *flat* (indicated by “Tune Up” on the screen). As you tweak the tuning keys, you will see the pitch indicator update *in real time*. When you’ve got all the tuning indicators for each string pointing straight up...you’re good to go!

Using an Electric Tuner

Electric tuner pedals, like the Boss TU-2 Chromatic Tuner (shown below), work in much the same way as the Groove Trainer, but will require you to be connected via a cable. One benefit of the tuning pedal is that in a live environment, when the tuner is switched “on,” the sound of your bass is *muted*, so no one has to listen to you dial in your tuning.

Figure 5.02 Chromatic Tuning Pedal



Lesson 6

Wrap Up

Congratulations on making it through the start of your bass career! You've learned all the names of the components of the bass, what they do, how to properly hold and tune your bass, and you have an idea on how to get a sound out of your amplifier. Well, there's only one more thing let to do: *let's make some noise on this thing!*

See you in the next course.

