



HOW THE ELECTRIC BASS GUITAR CHANGED THE WORLD

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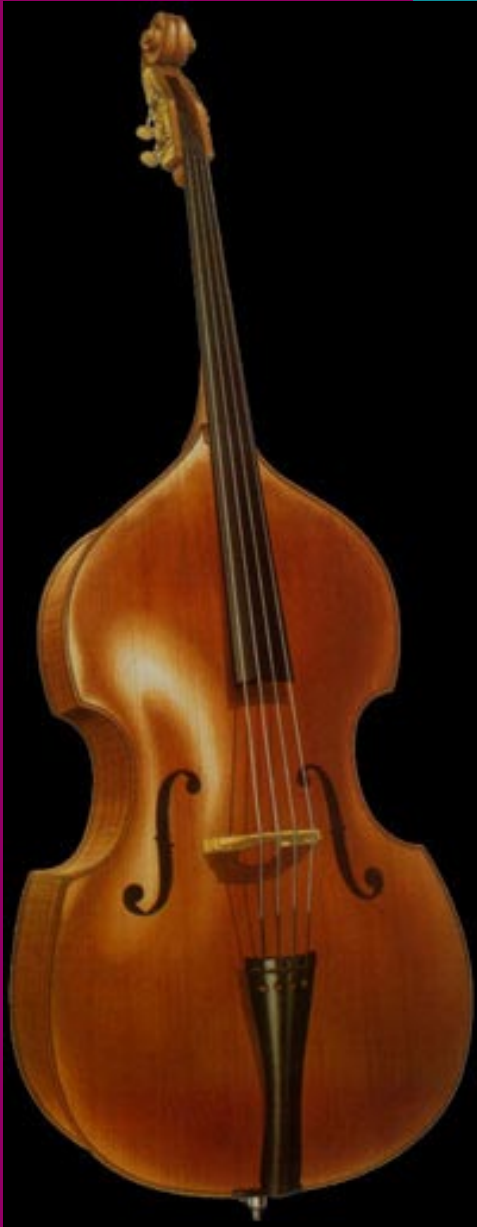
The History of the Bass



Prior to 1952, most composers and performers had to depend on the upright or acoustic bass to provide the foundation for their various works. The electric bass guitar came along and a musical revolution was spawned.

If this innovative technology had not been developed, it is doubtful that popular music and its performance, would be the experience we have today. What prompted the invention of the instrument that has become a standard and often featured component of popular music?

To understand why the electric bass guitar became necessary, we must first look at the development of Rock and Roll and the audience it attracted.



The Upright Bass

As the troops returned from their various theaters of war, they flocked to nightclubs and other dance venues to celebrate their reunion with loved ones. Performers such as Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and the Comets, and scores of other acts were drawing crowds that had previously only been exposed to recordings of this new style of music, called “Rock and Roll.”

With the large crowds came the need for larger concert and dance halls and the need for more music volume. Difficult to amplify, the upright bass is also somewhat fragile and expensive, with higher quality instruments selling for many thousands of dollars. They are basically huge violins and are subject to violent mood swings, mainly due to humidity changes.

The Tutmarc Bass



Since the pulse that motivates dancers comes predominantly from the bass and drums, the bass had to compete with the rest of the band or disappear completely. Inventors were quick to respond to the rising needs of the music community.

One of the early pioneers often overlooked by music historians, is Seattle's own Paul Tutmarc, founder of the Audiovox Company. Mr. Tutmarc offered an early version of his electric bass in 1936. It was made of walnut and looked very much like a guitar. Alas, his venture was a commercial failure and his invention was soon relegated to history's scrap heap.



The Fender Bass

But Leo Fender, considered by most to be the “Father” of the electric bass guitar, had both the commercial savvy and the engineering expertise to bring his own design to fruition. The first Fender Precision Bass dates back to October/November of 1951 and sold for a modest \$199.95.

Although the consumer marketplace has been flooded with cheap imports and high-end, boutique guitars, Fender basses are still considered the industry standard today.

The most sought after bass guitar is the 1962 Fender Jazz, which originally sold for three hundred dollars. A vintage model in fairly pristine condition can sell for as much as \$5000.00.

Monk Montgomery



The first documentation of a Fender bass being used in a live setting appears in the July 1952 US jazz magazine, *Down Beat*. In the related article, noted jazz writer Leonard Feather penned, “Hamp-lified Fiddle May Lighten Bassists’ Burdens.”

The story centered around The Lionel Hampton Band bassist Monk Montgomery, and his new Fender bass. The first shot of the musical revolution had been fired.

Traditional bassists were outraged! They felt that the new instrument was just a toy and they believed that it could never take the place of their beloved instruments.

James Jamerson



It would be hard, indeed, for anyone to deny the fundamental role that Motown had in the development of the electric bass and the energy it supplied to the countless hit records of artists such as Marvin Gaye, Martha and the Vandellas, Stevie Wonder, et. al. The man behind the driving bass sound was a young jazz artist from Charleston, South Carolina, James Jamerson.

A founding member of the “Funk Brothers,” Jamerson inspired such legendary bass players as The Beatles’ Paul McCartney, Led Zepelin’s John Paul Jones, and countless others.

Sir Paul McCartney



Speaking of Sir Paul, he inspired a legion of bass players to learn his style during the “British Invasion.” Few players have stood the test of time as has Mr. McCartney. He is still touring and although in his sixties, many would argue that he may sound better than when he was a young lad from Liverpool.

He is pictured at the left, playing the famous Hofner “Beatle-bass” that was used on the early recordings. The original setlist for the “Let it Be” live broadcast is still attached to the top. During the late 1970’s, the bass was stolen and was only recently reunited with its famous owner. From an instrument collector’s point of view, it is priceless.

Jaco Pastorius



In 1976, when his self-titled solo album was released, Floridian Jaco Pastorius set the music world on its ear. He had an aggressive approach, punctuated by rapid-fire staccato funk lines, blazing solos and soaring, delicate harmonics. He single-handedly created a new sound for the well established fusion band, Weather Report. He was an innovator in the truest sense of the word.

Alas, as is often the case with genius, Jaco succumbed to mental illness and drug dependency and met an early demise, much like his alter-ego, saxophonist, Charlie Parker. He, too, died at the untimely age of thirty-five.

Marcus Miller



Marcus Miller, Grammy Award winner of the 2001 Best Contemporary Jazz Album for his solo CD, *M²*, was born in Brooklyn in 1959. By the age of thirteen he was proficient on the clarinet, piano, and bass guitar and had begun composing music.

His bass playing can be heard on over 400 records by such diverse artists as Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, Grover Washington Jr., Mariah Carey, Bill Withers, Elton John, Frank Sinatra, LL Cool J, and many others.

He is a prolific composer with more than thirty solo albums to his credit.

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