

TECHNIQUE 2

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Chapter 1: Thumb Plucking and Palm Muting



Ex. 1.1a: Guitar Village - Fender 1956 Precision bass in two-tone sunburst.

Thumb plucking and palm muting is a technique used to emulate the sound of an upright bass on the bass guitar. The bass guitar is a relatively new instrument compared to the upright bass that has been around for hundreds of years. When Leo Fender introduced the first bass guitar in 1951, all bass players played upright bass. The sound they were used to hearing was the sound of the acoustic upright bass. Here now was this new instrument that was much easier to carry around, but didn't quite have the same sound as the upright. In order to achieve the sound of an upright bass on this new instrument, the bass guitar had a pickup and bridge cover. Foam was stuffed under the bridge cover to deaden the

strings to make it sound more like an upright. The early Fenders also had a finger rest below the G string to make it easier for the player to put their hand in the proper position for thumb plucking by laying their palm on the pickup cover. Today bassists do this by placing the palm of their hand across the strings by the bridge and pluck with their thumb.

This technique is useful in a variety of situations. Its roots go back to early blues and R&B players who still wanted that thumpy upright sound. Latin players use this technique to emulate the sound of the Ampeg Baby Bass (an electric upright bass used almost exclusively by Latin bands). The technique reduces sustain and deadens the sound of the instrument. It also adds some percussiveness to the sound, which is very useful in Latin music. The technique is also useful for creating a dub reggae sound. Anthony Jackson is one of the modern masters of this technique. He not only uses the technique to emulate the sound of an upright, but also to add dynamics and change the mood of the music. His use of this technique is very fluid; he has developed the technique to where he can also alternate between his index finger and thumb for added dexterity.

To properly execute this technique, place the outer side of your plucking hand on top of the saddles of the bridge. Then bring your hand down so that the palm of your hand is covering the strings. Your hand will be almost perpendicular to the strings. (Ex. 1.1b)

Ex. 1.1b



Now, rest the fleshy part of your thumb on the string, and curl your other fingers in slightly, allowing the tips of the fingers to rest on the strings (Ex. 1.1c). You can use the other fingers of your hand to further mute the strings that are not being played. This hand position is similar to the position for slap bass, which we will discuss in Unit 2.



Ex. 1.1c

It is important to keep the outer part of your palm on the strings over the bridge saddles. If you move your hand too far towards the pickups it will affect your intonation. Place enough pressure to keep the strings muted, but not so much as to totally deaden the tone and make your hand tense. Increasing and decreasing the pressure can adjust the amount of muting. As you play across the strings from lowest to highest and back down, allow your hand to float along with your thumb to access all of the strings.

Practice the following exercises slowly on muted open strings. Pluck the strings using steady downward strokes with your thumb (T). Stay relaxed and concentrate on control, evenness of tone, and keeping a steady pulse. This technique will take some time and regular practice to develop enough dexterity to make it useful. Take your time and don't get frustrated.

Ex. 1.1

Ex. 1.2

Ex. 1.3

Ex. 1.4

Ex. 1.5

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.6

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.7

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.8

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.9

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.10

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.11

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.12

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Now practice the same exercises, this time using open strings.

Ex. 1.13

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.14

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.15

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.16

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.17

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.18

T T T T T T T T T T T T T T

Ex. 1.19

T T

Ex. 1.20



Musical notation for Ex. 1.20, bass clef, 4/4 time. The exercise consists of four measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The second measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). The third measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The fourth measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). Below the staff, there are 16 'T' characters, one for each eighth note.

Ex. 1.21



Musical notation for Ex. 1.21, bass clef, 4/4 time. The exercise consists of four measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The second measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). The third measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The fourth measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). Below the staff, there are 16 'T' characters, one for each eighth note.

Ex. 1.22



Musical notation for Ex. 1.22, bass clef, 4/4 time. The exercise consists of four measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The second measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). The third measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The fourth measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). Below the staff, there are 16 'T' characters, one for each eighth note.

Ex. 1.23



Musical notation for Ex. 1.23, bass clef, 4/4 time. The exercise consists of four measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The second measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). The third measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The fourth measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). Below the staff, there are 16 'T' characters, one for each eighth note.

Ex. 1.24



Musical notation for Ex. 1.24, bass clef, 4/4 time. The exercise consists of four measures of eighth-note patterns. The first measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The second measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). The third measure has a descending eighth-note scale (G2-F2-E2-D2-C2-B1-A1). The fourth measure has an ascending eighth-note scale (A1-B1-C2-D2-E2-F2-G2). Below the staff, there are 16 'T' characters, one for each eighth note.

The next exercises are examples of bass lines in different styles that work well with this technique. Play the examples with your fingers first, and then use the thumb and palm mute technique to hear how the character of each line changes. Playing each line with the proper feel will enhance the effect.

Ex. 1.25a, **Blues:**



Ex. 1.25b, **R&B:**



Ex. 1.25c, **Latin:**



Ex. 1.25d, **Reggae:**



Ex. 1.25e

A more advanced version of the thumb and palm mute technique adds the index finger to alternate with the thumb (Ex. 1.25e). This can be very useful for playing cross-string patterns and faster passages. Play the following exercises by alternating between downstrokes with your thumb (T) and upstrokes with your index finger (I).



Practice these exercises with both muted and open tones, then go back and practice exercises 1.1 through 1.24 using this technique.

Ex. 1.26

T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I

Ex. 1.27

T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I

Here are some simple bass lines to play using alternating thumb and index finger.

Ex. 1.28

T T T I T I T T T I T I T T T I T I T I T I

Ex. 1.29

T T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I

Ex. 1.30

T T T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I T I

Chapter 2: Melodic Development

It is important for bass players to understand and develop melodic phrasing. While the role of bass players is predominantly to provide a harmonic and rhythmic foundation and be supportive, there will be occasions where we can step to the forefront and provide a more melodic role. In addition, developing melodic ideas and phrasing will help you create more interesting bass lines and increase your fluency on the instrument.

Melodic phrasing is taking a succession of notes and forming them to create a distinctive sequence, i.e. a melodic phrase. To that end, we begin developing melodic phrasing by practicing scales and varying them rhythmically.

These first exercises utilize one- and two-octave E major scales, combining quarter-note and eighth-note rhythms.

Ex. 1.31



Ex. 1.32a



Ex. 1.32b



The next exercises, in the keys of A and F major, combine quarter-note and eighth-note rhythms along with ties between certain notes. A tie is a curved line \frown that is placed either above or below two notes to connect them rhythmically (i.e. the value/length of the note is extended through the second note). In these exercises the ties add rhythmic displacement and syncopation to the phrases.

Ex. 1.33

