

Bass Technique Lesson

FRETTING HAND TECHNIQUE

**HAND POSITON, ONE FINGER PER
FRET, DIGITAL INDEPENDANCE**

By Paul Wolfe

LEGAL STUFF

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Enjoy!

Paul

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hi, my name is Paul Wolfe and I have been been playing the bass since I was 15 (seems an awfully long time ago!) and have been making a living from music since 1992.

In 1994 I co-founded CARTE BLANCHE, one of the UK's most popular party/function bands.

In addition to Carte Blanche, I have played with numerous tribute bands covering Abba, Robbie Williams, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, Blues Brothers, Freddie Mercury, Kylie Minogue,

70s Disco, 80s, Britpop, Bee Gees and more.

I have played over 1500 gigs since 1990! Highlights (and lowlights!) included a palm shaded beach bar in St Tropez, The Natural History Museum, The Science Museum, Ski Resort gigs (Meribel, Tignes, Val D'Isere), Lords (! - a personal favourite!), Twickenham, The Stoop, Grosvenor House Hotel, The Dorchester, the Park Lane Hilton, New Years Eve on the beach in Qatar, The British Club in Dubai, wedding in Chantilly (France), wedding in Dublin, weddings all over the UK, balls for universities across the UK, the list goes on...and on...and on!

FRETTING HAND TECHNIQUE

INTRODUCTION

Mastering basic fretting hand technique allows the beginning bassist to build his bass playing proficiency by learning more complex and demanding songs.

Conversely once the beginning bassist starts to move onto more complex songs, bad fretting hand technique will start getting in the way, making learning these songs more difficult than they need be and more frustrating.

Fretting hand technique can be split into four distinct parts:

- 1) Good left hand position (being right handed myself, I assume the majority of players are right handed also - apologies to all lefties!)
- 2) Fretting the note to be played with the fingertip wherever possible.
- 3) Using the one-finger-per-fret system.
- 4) Digital independence.

Let's get to it.

LEFT HAND POSITION

A good hand position is vital to developing good fretting hand technique – when you want to start learning some cool licks and riffs bad technique will only slow you down.



The thumb should be positioned on the apex of the curve of the back of the neck of your guitar, this will allow your fingers flexibility of movement on the fingerboard itself.



On MTV you sometimes see rock bass players with their thumbs placed so it peeks over the top of the fingerboard adjacent to the E string. Please please please don't imitate this – try it for yourself and you'll see why. The second you do this the flexibility in your fingers will vanish and whilst it might look cool you will seriously struggle to progress to playing more demanding lines (think: demanding lines = cool).

FRETTING THE NOTE WITH THE FINGERTIPS



When your fretting hand is in position, try playing some notes. The fingers of the fretting hand should be curled over slightly at the end so that you actually fret the note you want to play with the fingertip rather than the flatter part of the finger behind the nail (the way a guitarist would be more likely to fret a note).

The main reasons for fretting a note with a fingertip are:

- 1) It produces a better sounding note – you can apply more pressure with the fingertip at the specific point you wish to apply the pressure (the fingerboard, just behind the fret) – this gives a stronger, clearer note with far less likelihood of getting any fret buzz.
- 2) You get a ‘cleaner’ overall sound – if you play with the flat of your fingers you have more muting problems to address when you are up on the E and A strings.

USING THE ONE FINGER PER FRET SYSTEM

Starting out a beginning bassist should definitely work at the one-finger-per-fret system.



This simply means that whichever part of the fingerboard you are playing at, your fretting hand fingers should lay on the fingerboard so that each finger covers a fret. (As you progress with your bass playing you'll run into

discussions/articles etc on extension fingering, where you cover 5 or 6 frets with the four fingers of your fretting hand and your thumb works as a pivot to shift the hand around to facilitate this. For now that's all you need to know about extension fingering).

If you have a large scale bass (eg a Precision) you may find the stretch to cover four frets with four fingers a challenge, particularly up by the nut. Don't worry about it for now, the finger independence exercise I'm going to show you will help ingrain the concept of one-finger-per-fret into your bass playing and when you first apply this exercise you can start further down the neck where the spacing is not so severe.

DIGITAL INDEPENDENCE

Digital Independence is the final component in developing good fretting hand technique – the aim of digital independence is to develop fretting hand facility so that note produced by fretting with each of your fingers sound the same and there are no ‘weak’ fretting hand fingers (the third finger in particular seems to be the main weakness in most beginning/intermediate player’s fretting hand).

To develop Digital Independence there’s an exercise called – unsurprisingly – the Digital Independence Exercise.

This exercise take every permutation of alternations between your four fretting fingers and plays through them all systematically and logically. A consistant and persistant application of this exercise will help develop fluency, accuracy and strength in.your fretting hand technique

THE DIGITAL INDEPENDENCE EXERCISE

This exercise is simple to memorise – my suggestion is to memorise the permutations and then apply them with a metronome, keeping a record of it in your practise journal. Over a relatively short period of time you should be able to increase the tempo on the metronome considerably.

A warning however, don't spend hours and hours on this exercise trying to shred the metronome into submission! This exercise is about digital independence and as such it is purely mechanical and not musical. 10-15 minutes **MAXIMUM** is the time you should allocate for this exercise.

OK, enough talk, let's move on with the exercise.

Pick up your bass and place your left hand at a spot on the neck where you feel comfortable with one-finger-per-fret spacing.

Then, starting on the E string, play the first permutation twice, then the second permutation twice, then the third permutation twice etc etc. When you have played the last permutation move to the A string and repeat.

Repeat on the D string and finally the G string.

To develop efficiency in your fretting hand note that if you are for example fretting with your third finger, that your first and second fingers should also be applying pressure

at their respective frets. When fretting with your fourth finger, all four fingers should be applying pressure.

When 'descending' eg fourth finger to second, lift the fourth and third fingers the smallest distance possible. Working on the combination of these two elements will produce a highly efficient fretting hand technique.

Here's the permutation - remember that each number corresponds to one of your fretting hand fingers. 1 = first/index finger. 2 = middle finger. 3 = ring finger. 4 = pinky.

When you play this exercise with a metronome consider each note played as an 8th note - therefore each permutation (when played twice) equals one bar.

THE PERMUTATIONS

1 - 2 - 3 - 4
1 - 2 - 4 - 3
1 - 3 - 2 - 4
1 - 3 - 4 - 2
1 - 4 - 2 - 3
1 - 4 - 3 - 2
2 - 1 - 3 - 4
2 - 1 - 4 - 3
2 - 3 - 1 - 4
2 - 3 - 4 - 1
2 - 4 - 1 - 3
2 - 4 - 3 - 1
3 - 1 - 2 - 4
3 - 1 - 4 - 2
3 - 2 - 1 - 4
3 - 2 - 4 - 1
3 - 4 - 1 - 2
3 - 4 - 2 - 1
4 - 1 - 2 - 3
4 - 1 - 3 - 2
4 - 2 - 3 - 1
4 - 2 - 3 - 1
4 - 3 - 1 - 2
4 - 3 - 2 - 1

VARIATIONS

A simple variation of this exercise is to start on the G string, and play it backwards.

In this variation the permutations run like this:

4 - 3 - 2 - 1
4 - 3 - 1 - 2
4 - 2 - 3 - 1
4 - 2 - 3 - 1
4 - 1 - 3 - 2
4 - 1 - 2 - 3
3 - 4 - 2 - 1
3 - 4 - 1 - 2
3 - 2 - 4 - 1
3 - 2 - 1 - 4
3 - 1 - 4 - 2
3 - 1 - 2 - 4
2 - 4 - 3 - 1
2 - 4 - 1 - 3
2 - 3 - 4 - 1
2 - 3 - 1 - 4
2 - 1 - 4 - 3
2 - 1 - 3 - 4
1 - 4 - 3 - 2
1 - 4 - 2 - 3
1 - 3 - 4 - 2
1 - 3 - 2 - 4
1 - 2 - 4 - 3
1 - 2 - 3 - 4

ADVANCED VARIATIONS

When you've really mastered the permutations of the Digital Independence exercise there are some further variations you can try **WITH THE IMPORTANT CAVEAT** of taking it easy, these variations can lead to hand strain if not careful.

Start on the E string with the first finger as before. **BUT** assign the second, third and fourth fingers to the A string. When you've finished the set move the first finger to the A string, and the second, third and fourth fingers to the D string. And then the first finger on the D string, the others on the G string.

Then you can repeat with the second finger on the E string and the other three fingers on the A string. I'm sure you can see where this leads!

You can come up with a stack of variations on this one simple exercise (and its reverse permutation which is just as important).

FINAL WORD

The Digital Independence Exercise should bring all the concepts together towards developing good fretting hand technique.

It is important to remember that this is **ONLY** an exercise and bear the goal in mind when doing this exercise – to develop fretting hand technique. This is **NOT** music – and our ultimate goal is to become the best musicians we can be – don't waste time playing these exercises for hours and hours, beating up on your metronome.

10 - 15 minutes a day, regularly applied, is all that you need. Really.