

Tuning your Bass/Lesson

TUNING YOUR BASS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW!

By Paul Wolfe

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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!

TUNING YOUR BASS

If you're gonna learn how to play the bass, the first thing you gotta do each time you pick up your instrument is make sure it's in tune.

There are 3 ways to tune a bass:

- 1) Use an electronic tuner
- 2) Use the 'open string' method
- 3) Use the 'harmonics' method.

We're gonna check out all 3 methods.

1) USE AN ELECTRONIC TUNER

Everyone should own an electronic tuner. It's the quickest and most accurate way to tune your guitar that there is – plus you can pick up one that does the job for around £10 (approx \$20).

Using an electronic tuner is simple, most of them simply require that you plug your guitar into the tuner play one of the strings and most tuners will automatically detect which string you're playing and tell you if you are flat or sharp. There will be some kind of digital display that tells you whether you are flat or sharp and you either tighten or loosen your tuning peg until the display lets you know you are in tune.

Repeat for all strings and you're ready to play!

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2) USE THE OPEN STRING METHOD

This (and the harmonic method that follows) is how we tuned back in the day before electronic tuners were plentiful and cheap!

If you turned up for a gig or a jam you'd get a note from someone else in the band – preferably the keyboard player if you had one – and you tuned one string to that note. Then you tuned your other strings to that string.

Here's how it works:

Let's assume you've tuned your G string (that's the highest in pitch, and physically the thinnest) to 'G' from your keyboard player. Next you have to tune your D string to your G string. Fret the D string at the 5th fret (which is a G note) and play the open G string and then the D string. For the D string to be in tune these two notes need to sound the same – if the two notes are not at the same pitch you will hear an oscillation (the faster the oscillation, the further apart the two notes are). As the oscillation slows down you are getting closer to being in tune – when you can't discern the oscillation then you're in tune!

Now you can tune your A string to your D string. Fret the A string at the 5th fret (which is a D note) and play the open D string and then the A string. Again listen out for any oscillations and adjust the A string until it sounds the same as the D string.

Now you can tune your E string to you're a string. Fret the E string at the 5th fret (which is an A note) and play the open A string and then the E string. You should know the drill by now, when you're E string is in tune you're ready to play!

The first time you use this method it might take a while to figure out – check out the YouTube video lesson on tuning I've posted to see it in action – but you'll get the hang of it pretty quickly.

3) USE THE HARMONICS METHOD

This method is similar to the open string method – except that instead of tuning to an open string, you tune to one of the natural harmonics on the bass.

(A harmonic is a bell like chime – theoretically it is an overtone – that you can produce at certain 'node' points on the bass by applying pressure to the string without fretting it and then playing a note. Don't panic, it will all become clear in a moment!)

As with the Open String method we'll assume that you've tuned your G string to a keyboard player's G.

The harmonics we're going to use for tuning are located at the 7th fret and the 5th fret. To sound a harmonic place your finger on the G string right over the 7th fret. Don't push it down to the fingerboard though or you'll sound a note and not the overtone. Then pluck the string as normal (back by the bridge produces a nice crisp overtone). Try it a few times until you get the clear, bell

like chime. Once you're confident of producing the harmonic, then place a finger over the 5th fret on the D string and repeat the procedure until you're comfortable producing the overtone there too. When you are happy, play them both if the strings are in tune with each other they should produce the same note. If the strings are out of tune with each other, you'll hear the oscillation we talked about in the open string method (but much clearer!) and you can adjust the pitch of the D string until the two harmonics sound the same.

When the D string is in tune you can tune the A string by repeating the procedure with the harmonic over the 7th fret of the D string and the 5th fret of the A string.

And when the A string is in tune you can tune the E string by repeating the procedure with the harmonic over the 7th fret of the A string and the 5th fret of the E string.

As with the open string method it might take a few minutes to get the hang of this method – but check out the YouTube video lesson and it should all be reasonably clear.

Now you're ready to play!

RECOMMENDATION

Using an electronic tuner is by far the quickest, easiest and most accurate way of tuning your guitar. If you're a gigging bassist, it's a must.

However if you read some of the other articles available on How-To-Play-Bass.com you'll quickly realise that I really buy into the concept of making exercises do double duty.

You can do this when you're tuning your bass. First plug your bass into your tuner and tune your G string. Then turn the tuner off and tune the rest of the strings by ear. Either the open string method. Or the harmonics method. It doesn't matter. When you think you're in tune, plug your tuner back in and double check it.

If you do this every time you tune up (i.e. every time you practise) you'll soon improve your accuracy and give yourself a bit of ear training in the process.

It's also a good idea to tune from other strings and not just your G. So tune your A string first and then tune everything else from that. Or your D. Or your E.

This will also help when any of the following happen:

- 1) You left your tuner on and you come to tune up at a gig and your battery is flatter than the proverbial. And you don't have a spare.
- 2) Your tuner lives on the floor as part of your pedal set up and someone spills beer/water/vodka/liquid refreshment of choice on it and it no longer works.
- 3) You leave your tuner on your amp at a gig and someone swipes it.
- 4) You get to a gig and you forget that your 3 year old son was playing with your tuner and you forgot to pack it – you packed the empty box, just not the tuner.

- 5) Etc etc. All of the above have happened at one stage or another – although electronic tuners are great you always need a back up plan!