

HOW TO BUY AN ELECTRIC BASS

BY DAVID MOTTO

THE ELECTRIC BASS, A CROSS BETWEEN A STRING BASS AND AN ELECTRIC GUITAR, HAS become extremely popular in its half-century of existence. Originally conceived as a convenient replacement for the string bass for performers of popular music who needed to amplify their instrument or who traveled frequently, the electric bass now far outsells its ancestor. Invented in 1951 by Leo Fender, the electric bass is, in historical terms, an infant.

Today, the electric bass is used in virtually every style of popular music including rock, R&B, jazz, country, salsa, and Broadway musicals. In school music programs the instrument can be used in jazz combos, jazz bands, jazz choirs, guitar classes, musical theatre productions, pep bands, and concert bands. There are even accounts of its being played in marching bands! Both guitarists and upright bass players often double on the electric bass.

ELECTRIC BASS CONSTRUCTION

Because the electric bass is such a young instrument, none of its components has been standardized. Electric basses are available in a stunning array of sizes, shapes, colors, and configurations. The most common configuration for an electric bass is the four-string (tuned high to low G, D, A, E — the same as a string bass). Other configurations are five-string (adding a low B string) and six-string models (adding both the low B string and a high C string to the original four-string model). Instruments are available with solid-body or hollow-body construction.

Bass manufacturers make use of a wide variety of materials in constructing electric basses. Though generally made of wood, basses are also made of graphite, polycarbon composites, and special plastics. When purchasing an electric bass for the first time, look for a bass made of wood. The body of the instrument will generally be made of maple or ash. Both of these woods make fine instruments though the ash body is usually lighter in weight. This can be an important consideration for the bassist who plays standing up with the electric bass supported by a shoulder strap. Exotic woods such as koa, bubinga, bird's eye maple, and zebrawood are available as veneers for the top of the body. These woods are extremely beautiful, but they do little to add to the tone produced by the instrument and can add hundreds of dollars to the price tag. Fingerboards are made of maple, rosewood, or ebony. Ebony is the highest quality of these woods, but is much too expensive for most people

Editor's Note:

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when considering a bass purchase. For a first instrument, a maple fingerboard is recommended.

Electric basses are made with either fretted or fretless fingerboards. The fretted fingerboard has metal frets marking each half step on the fingerboard. Fretless instruments create a tone closer to a string bass, and vibrato can more easily be used. However, fretless basses are notoriously difficult to play with accurate intonation. The recommendation for most players is to buy a fretted instrument. With frets, the electric bass is much easier to play in tune, and the young musician can learn to play the instrument in a relatively short amount of time.

There are two main types of neck construction: bolt-on and neck-through. The bolt-on neck is anchored to the body of the instrument with a series of screws going through a metal plate at the back of the instrument's body. Bolt-on basses deliver a strong attack on the notes played and are the most common type of construction. A neck-through style has the neck of the bass extended through the body and glued directly to the wood that makes up the body. Neck-through instruments sometimes look like the neck and the body of the instrument are made of a single piece of wood. Neck-through instruments are known for long sustain and smooth attacks of notes.

Size is another element of the electric bass that has not been standardized. The body can be long and narrow or extremely wide. It is important that the player be able to comfortably reach the strings with his or her strumming hand, so make sure that the body is not so large as to make the instrument difficult to play. The regular scale for an electric bass is 34 inches. (Scale measures the length of the string from the nut to the bridge.) Some models are available with shorter scales for players with small hands. Unless the instrument is being purchased for a child or for someone with extremely small hands, the 34-inch scale is recommended. Long scale necks, available on some high-end instruments, should be avoided for beginning and intermediate players.

ELECTRONICS

In addition to the construction of the instrument itself, there are electronics to be considered. Embedded in the top of the bass body, right under the strings, are electronic pickups. The pickups convert the sound waves created by the vibrating strings into electric signals that can be carried to the amplifier. Like all other aspects of electric basses, there is no universal configuration for pickup size, shape, and placement. Unless you are purchasing a high-end bass and are already knowledgeable about pickup choices, it is best to go with the standard pickups the manufacturer offers with the instrument.

On the body top are volume and tone controls. These are usually circular knobs or toggle switches connected to the elec-

tronic circuitry hidden inside the body. An electric bass may have as few as two of these knobs or as many as six. Common controls include volume, overall tone, treble, bass, midrange, and pickup selection. Additionally, there may be a switch that boosts the decibel level of the instrument's output signal. Basses that offer such a signal boost are called "active" and have a 9-volt battery inside the body. Basses without this capability are called "passive." In the low-to mid-price categories, the majority of electric basses are passive.

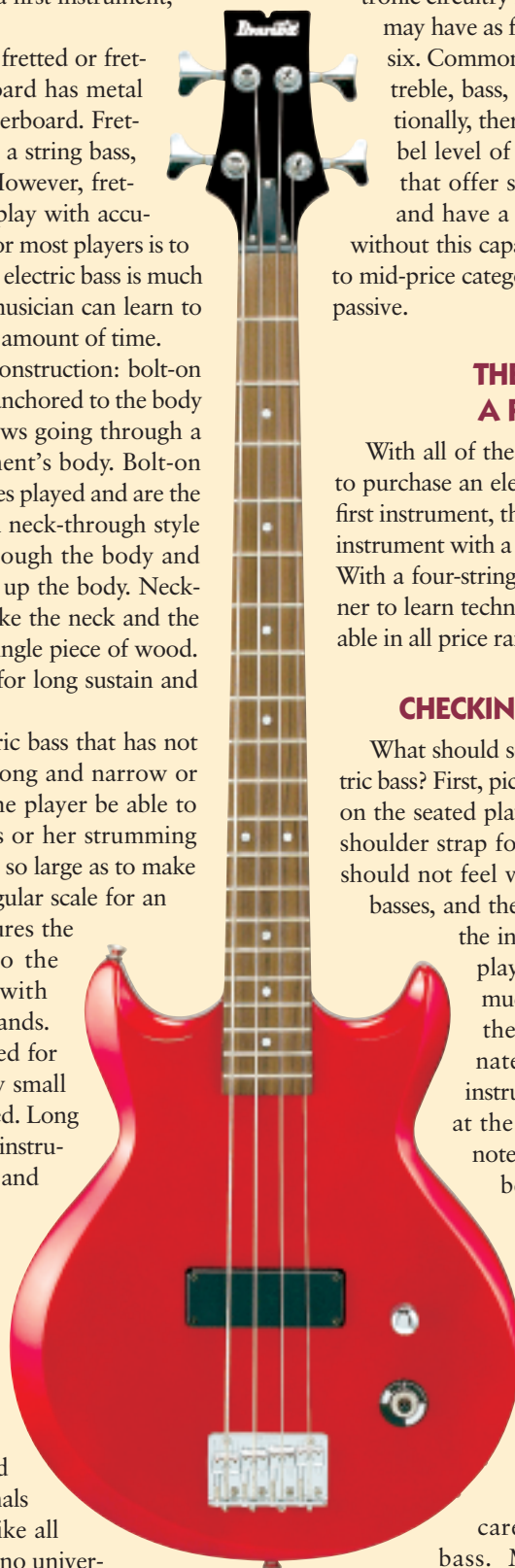
THE BEST CHOICE FOR A FIRST INSTRUMENT

With all of these options, the aspiring player looking to purchase an electric bass can feel overwhelmed. For a first instrument, the best choice is a four-string solid body instrument with a bolt-on neck and a fretted fingerboard. With a four-string model it is much easier for the beginner to learn technique, and there are more models available in all price ranges.

CHECKING OUT THE INSTRUMENT

What should someone look for when buying an electric bass? First, pick out an instrument that balances easily on the seated player's leg and that also balances with a shoulder strap for the standing player. The instrument should not feel very heavy compared to other electric basses, and there should be no loose components on the instrument. Next, you should be able to play the instrument without exerting too much force to press the strings down, and the instrument should be properly intonated. To check the intonation of the instrument, play the harmonic of each string at the twelfth fret; then, play the fingered note at the twelfth fret. The pitches should be exactly the same. Always have the instrument properly set up and adjusted before you make your purchase. Last, choose a color that appeals to you. Color will not affect the tone (and usually not the price), and having a great looking instrument goes a long way toward motivating the bassist to practice regularly!

There is also a list of things to be careful of when purchasing an electric bass. Make sure the tuning pegs turn smoothly and do not rattle at all. Look down the length of the neck of the instrument. It should look straight with no large pits or bows in its shape. While you're looking down the neck, make sure that each of the four strings is the same distance above the fingerboard. Before the bass is plugged into an amplifier, play the instrument, fingering



notes up and down the fingerboard on every string. The strings should not create any buzzing sounds.

Next, plug the instrument into an amplifier and, once again, play notes all over the fingerboard. Make sure the volume of all of the strings is essentially the same and that you hear no buzzes. Turn the volume and tone controls through their full range. You should hear no crackling sounds, and the knobs should turn smoothly. While the bass is still plugged into the amp and the volume is up, try to wiggle the cord where it plugs into the bass. The cord should not move sideways, the fit in the jack should be snug, and there should be no popping noises when you touch the cable.

MAKING THE PURCHASE

How much should all of this cost? On the low end, there are packages that include an electric bass, small practice amp, soft vinyl case, and a cord for \$300 and sometimes even less. On the high end, there are custom-made basses of the finest materials, electronics and craftsmanship for \$4,000 and up. Roughly speaking, the price categories for electric basses are as follows: under \$300 for entry-level instruments, \$300-\$600 for mid-level instruments, \$600-\$1,200 for professional level instruments, and over \$1,200 for high-end instruments. You can purchase a versatile instrument that will suit the needs of beginner through advanced players for approximately \$500. Amplifiers are available in a similar price range, and you should expect to pay at least \$300 for an amp that can be used both for practicing at home and for performance.

Where should one purchase an electric bass? There are many options including the local music store, mail-order catalogs, Web sites, and the used market. Though the used market offers the best prices, it is unwise for someone to buy used unless they know exactly what they want and possess a higher than average knowledge about bass construction, electronics, and repairs. New, brand-name instruments are recommended for purchasers of a first electric bass. Local music stores can also offer a correct setup and adjustment of the new instrument.

ACCESSORIES

An electric bass is virtually silent without being plugged into an amplifier, so buying an amp will be part of your purchasing process. An amplifier is more than an accessory for the electric bass; it is a necessity. Another article the length of this one would be necessary to cover the full spectrum of amplifier choices, but here are a few pointers: Purchase an amp specifically designed for basses. Get a combo amp, i.e. a single piece of equipment that includes both the amplifier and speaker(s) rather than an amplifier with a separate speaker cabinet. There are many great combo amps on the market, and most players do not need separate pieces of equipment unless they are performing in large venues. Look for an amp that you can lift yourself or make sure that the amp has wheels!

Other accessories are needed to complete your electric bass purchase. One essential piece of equipment is the cable

that connects the instrument to the amplifier. These cables have a 1/4-inch mono end. Make sure you purchase instrument cables, not speaker cables, which often look the same. It is wise to avoid the cheapest cables. For the most versatility, get a cable that is at least 15 feet in length.

Another necessity is a case for the instrument. Cases are sometimes included in the purchase price of the instrument,

PURCHASER'S CHECKLIST

- In conclusion, here is a quick list to help you make the best purchase of an electric bass:
- Purchase a new instrument that has been properly set up, made by a known brand name
- Get a four-string fretted instrument with a 34" scale
- Play the instrument both unamplified and through an amp before you buy it
- Get a hardshell case that fits the instrument
- Get at least one 1/4" instrument cable
- Buy a combo bass amplifier that is large enough for performances but small enough that it can be moved easily

but not always. Make sure you ask. Cases come in two general styles: the softshell case (also known as a gig bag) and the hardshell case. The hardshell version is recommended but whichever you choose, make sure the case fits your instrument! Because there is no standard shape for an electric bass, many cases will only fit certain models.

Like everything else with the electric bass, a wide assortment of string choices is available. The three types of strings are round wound, ground wound, and flat wound (also known as tape wound). Round wound strings have the brightest tone and are the best choice for most styles of music. They are generally the easiest to find in music stores, and it is a good idea to have an extra set of strings on hand.

David Motto is the electric bass instructor in the Jazz and World Music program at San Francisco State University. He is the author of the best-selling Musician's Practice Planner and Essential Sightreading Studies for Electric Bass, a three-volume set of books with play-along CDs. Motto has written for Bass Player magazine, and he recently created Musician's Online Practice Planner software for school music programs. He also has performed/recorded as an electric bassist for over 20 years. David Motto can be reached at david@moltomusic.com.