Bluegrass Bass

INSTRUCTION COURSE

By Bradley Laird

www.bradleylaird.com/bass

This book is dedicated to the memory of Tony Terrell, my old bass mentor and friend. (Photo by Cathy Strong)

BLUEGRASS BASS
INSTRUCTION COURSE

Lessons for The Beginning Bluegrass Bass Student

by Bradley Laird

www.bradleylaird.com/bass

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS Continued

WELCOME TO
THE WORLD OF BLUEGRASS BASS

Bluegrass bass is a lot of fun to play but is not usually found in the spotlight. Solos are rare and sometimes it might seem that the bass player is “just playing along” but this is far from true. The bass is an integral part of the bluegrass (and lots of other styles of music) ensemble and playing it well is just as important as any other instrument.

Whenever I play bass I like to try to achieve these 3 goals:

1. Play correct notes, in tune. The ones shown in this course are one of many correct options but they are a good place to start. Wrong notes on the bass “do more damage” than wrong notes on some of the other instruments so it is important to know where you are in the song and do your best to play “correct” notes above all else.

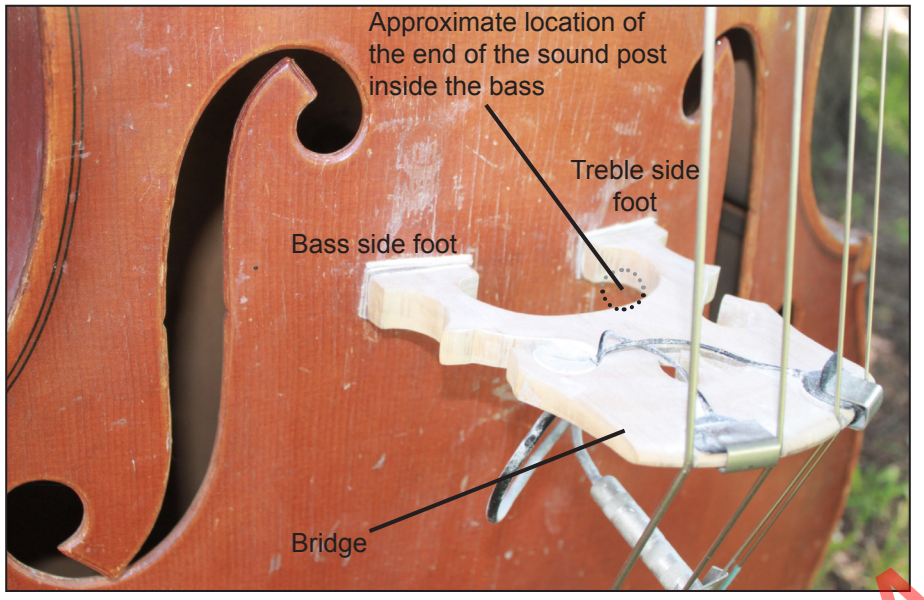
2. My second goal, and truthfully it is perhaps more important than goal number 1, is to play each note at the correct time. Steady is the word. Yes, you must play “with” the others even if they stray from perfect timing, but you shouldn’t be too easily led astray. You may hear others say that your job is to keep time and that is correct, but the thing those folks often forget is that they have the same job! It is everyone’s job to play with good timing. Since your part, at least in this book, is fairly simple it may be easier for you to play in time than the other instruments. Do your best, practice with good solid recordings or a metronome, and then remain a tiny bit flexible to help keep it all together. Listening to the mandolin chop and the downbeats of the guitar can help you “lock in”.

3. My third and final goal, and one which I often do not spend much time worrying about since I am focusing on goals 1 and 2 so much, is to play musically. Yes, even simple “boomp boomp boomp boomp” can be played musically or not. Work on your tone. Work on your separation between notes. (Note: Overlapping ringing notes can be very muddy sounding.) Try to play at the appropriate volume. And, when all of these things are coming together then, and only then, should you attempt to play “fancy runs” and “walking lines.” In other words, fancy notes played out of time, with poor rhythm and tone, can be more harmful to the overall sound than good, clean, basic playing.

You may at times feel unappreciated as a bass player. But, trust me, good musicians will feel when a bass is played well and when it is not. They may never say it, but they know. Do not take your job lightly. It is far more important than most people know.

This course will start from the ground up with the basic information you need to play the bass. As the course progresses you will also learn some of the more advanced concepts used by some of the world’s best bassists. So, grab your bass and let’s get started.

Here is a closeup photograph showing the bridge area:



You'll notice that there is a transducer installed (a Fishman BP-100) on my bass bridge. You can see the wires going to a jack mounted between the strings below the bridge. It doesn't affect the normal acoustic sound of the bass but can be plugged into an amplifier if needed.

Unlike fretted instruments such as mandolin and banjo, your bridge can be in the "wrong" location and you can still play it "in tune." It is common to align the bridge centered between the little notches in the "f holes". The front of the bridge (the side facing up) should be perpendicular to the soundboard and the back (the side facing down) will be angled a few degress. Over time, with constant tightening of the strings, the bridge may begin to tip towards the fingerboard. This should be addressed so that it doesn't suddenly collapse while you are playing. Basically, loosen the strings a bit and stand it up straight. See a qualified bass luthier for more advice.

One of the parts, critical to all upright basses, which you cannot see here because it is inside the instrument, is called the "sound post". If you peek inside the F hole on the treble side (that's the side with the smaller diameter strings) you should see a wooden dowel about 3/4" in diameter wedged between the soundboard and inside of the back of the instrument. The usual placement is partially underneath the treble side foot of the bridge. **Your upright bass MUST have a sound post.** The sound post plays a role in supporting the soundboard physically and its precise placement in relation to the bridge **affects the tone and volume** of the instrument.

Look in your bass and **be sure you have a sound post** and that it is located approximately under the treble foot of the bridge. I have marked the location of the end of my sound post on the photo. **Caution: Never completely loosen or remove all the stings at once** or your sound post may fall over inside your bass. If that happens **DO NOT** string it back up to tension without restoring the sound post to its correct position. Contact a bass expert for more information about correcting this if it happens to you.

STANDING WITH YOUR BASS

In this photo on the left I am standing the way some beginners play. As you can see I am standing behind the bass. Don't do this. It's hard to see what you are doing. Your right hand ends up in a very poor position for playing. Get around on the side of the bass or at least partially around to the side.

NO

YES

If you choose to sit on a stool be sure to get one that is tall enough so that your hips and upper body are roughly in the same place as when standing. Personally, I think it is better to stand when playing. Sit on the stool when relaxing between sets.

RIGHT HAND TECHNIQUES

There are several ways to pluck the bass strings but this is my favorite. First, place your right thumb on the side of the fingerboard about 5 inches from the end.

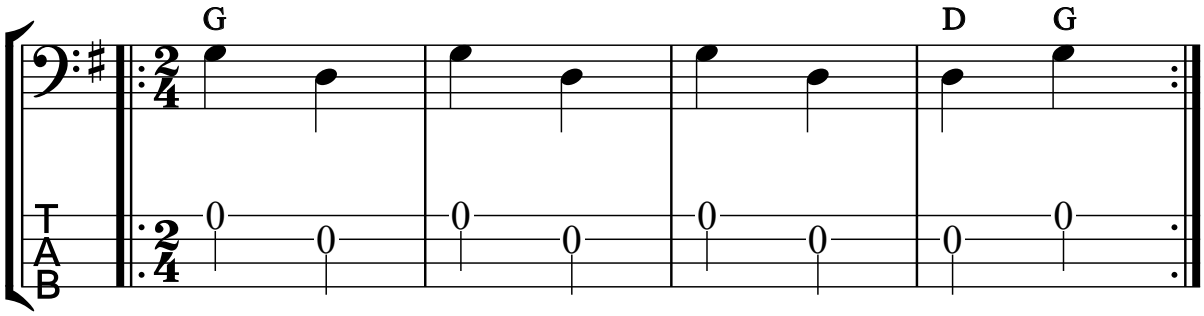
Next, bring your fingertips down so that the index is resting on the G string near the end of the fingerboard. Your middle, ring finger and the upper side of your entire hand is lightly resting across all of the strings.

Notice that the fingers are angled extended in a line from the elbow, through the wrist and downwards. Check that your fingers are not crossing the strings at a right angle.

Another way to assume this position, in the most relaxed way possible, is to stand with your right arm loosely hanging by your side. Keep your shoulder relaxed and bend at the elbow. Raise your forearm, with your hand hanging loosely down, until you reach the position shown in the second photo. Touch the side of the fingerboard with your thumb and lay your fingers across the strings ready to pull on the G string with your index finger.

NOTATION AND TABLATURE

Here is an example of “standard” 2/4 time bluegrass bass playing as you will find it in this course. Let’s see what’s going on here:



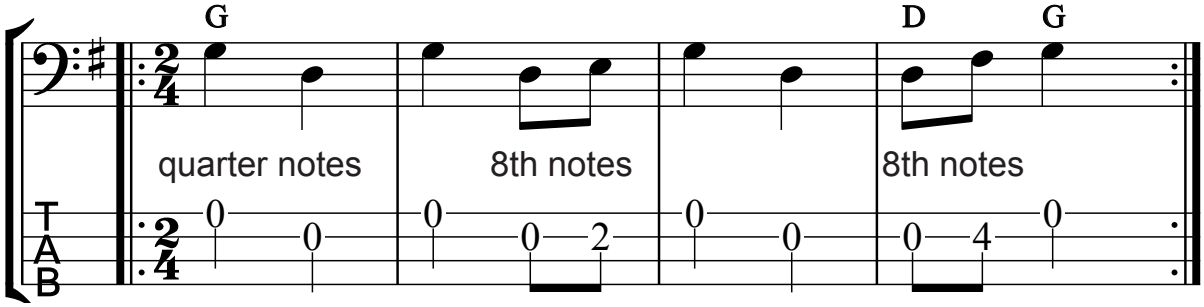
1. The first thing you should notice is that the music is written in two lines. The top line is in “standard bass clef” music notation and the second line is written in “tablature”. For the purposes of this beginning course I am going to focus on the tablature line only. The standard notation is there for those who already have some familiarity with it.

2. Notice that the music is marked “2/4” and this simply means this: There are two beats per measure--we are thinking in groups of TWO-- and a “quarter note” gets one beat. You can see that the music is divided by vertical lines called “measure lines” or “bar lines” (measure and bar mean the same thing.) 2/4 music will have two quarter notes per measure.

So what is a quarter note? The quarter note gets its name because MOST music is played in 4/4 time. Not bluegrass, mind you. All that other music like pop, rock, etc. And in 4/4 time there are 4 beats in a measure. Thus, each note is one fourth of a measure and so they call them quarter notes. Quarter notes are identified by having a single stem extending vertically (up or down).

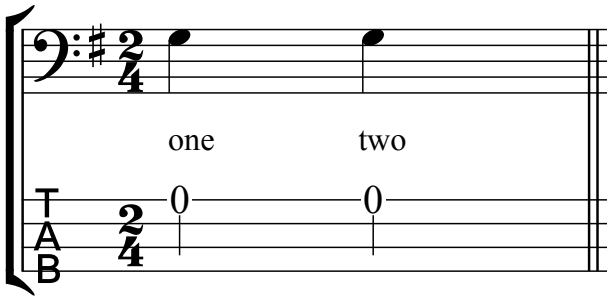
Most of the time, when playing bluegrass bass, you will be playing quarter notes and they are generally counted 1 - 2 - 1 - 2 etc.

You will also encounter something called an 8th Note. An 8th note is half the time value of a quarter note which means you could fit two of them in the time space of a quarter note. This is what 8th notes look like:

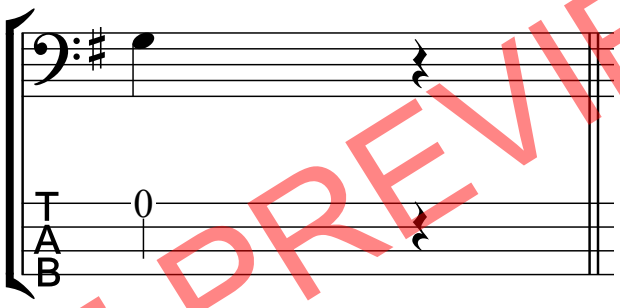


QUARTER NOTES AND RESTS

This is a typical measure in 2/4 time. It shows two quarter notes and would be counted (aloud or in the mind) as “one two”. In this example you would simply play the open 1st string two times:



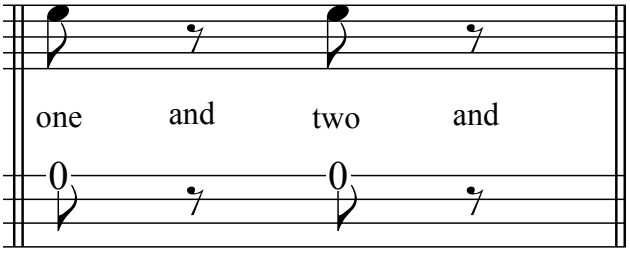
Sometimes you will encounter spaces in the music where you do not play notes but time is still counted. Look at this example which shows a quarter note followed by a quarter rest:



That little squiggle is called a quarter rest and is simply a silent quarter note. You think it, but do not play it.

8TH NOTES AND RESTS

You’ll also encounter 8th notes and 8th rests. Single 8th notes have a little “flag” when they are standing alone and the 8th rests looks like a little sylized “7”. When counting 8th notes we say “and” so these two beats are counted as “one and two and”. That’s the basic bluegrass rhythm!



On the next page I’ll show you some of the possible ways these two values of notes (quarters and 8ths) and values of rests (quarter rest and 8th rest) can be combined.

Now that you have a basic understanding of playing 2/4 time using open strings, along with a little careful damping, let's take a look at creating different notes using the left hand.

LEFT HAND NOTES

The fingers of your left hand, in addition to the damping we just looked at, can be used to shorten the vibrating length of the strings. This is called "stopping" a string. On instruments with frets (such as guitar) it is called "fretting" a string. Both of these techniques shorten the length of the string which is allowed to vibrate and this creates a higher sounding tone.

If you place your fingertip on a string and press the string down so that it is solidly in contact with the fingerboard you will produce a note higher in pitch than the same string played open.

In the photo to the right I am using my index finger to depress the 1st string to create an A note. Shortly we will discuss all of the places you can place your fingers to create many different notes, but for now I want you to notice the position of my hand, fingers and arm.

The first thing to notice is that the fingers are curled and I am using the tip of the finger to "stop" the string.

Viewed from behind you'll notice that the curve of the fingers continues on through the wrist, the forearm, the upper arm, and ultimately to the left shoulder. The thumb is placed behind the neck to stabilize the hand/arm to counter the downward force applied to the string.

Something that I think is often misunderstood, or overlooked, is that the act of pressing a string down onto the fingerboard is not a simple squeezing of the finger(s) and thumb. That would be very tiring and doesn't make good use of the much larger arm and back muscles--not to mention gravity!

The weight of the arm, combined with the back muscles, in one large unit, is where the power comes from. Try pressing a string down **without using your thumb at all** and you will instantly understand all of the other forces involved. Try to keep your thumb pressure present as a stabilizing force but use your whole body to contribute to the work.

UPRIGHT BASS MARKING GUIDE

INSTRUCTIONS

STEP 1 - Measure Your Bass
Using a tape measure, measure the distance from the inside edge of the nut to the bridge. You are determining the length of the strings on your bass or the "scale length" of your bass.

STEP 2 - Choose the Template
Choose a Marking Guide which is nearest in length to the measurement you took. For example: If you measured 42.25" inches, select the 42" guide. Remember that these Marking Guides are meant to "get you close" and help you play in tune better as a beginner.

STEP 3 - Print Out Marking Guide
Print the page with the Marking Guide you selected.

STEP 4 - Cut Out Marking Guide
Carefully cut out the two strips following the dotted lines.

STEP 5 - Join the Strips
Using the numbers which appear on both strips as a guide, align the two strips together forming one long strip. It may be helpful to hold the paper up to a window or lamp so you can be sure you align the marks so they overlap perfectly.

STEP 6 - Tape Together
Securely fasten the two strips together using tape. You may even want to tape both sides to make it more secure. You now have completed making the Marking Guide.

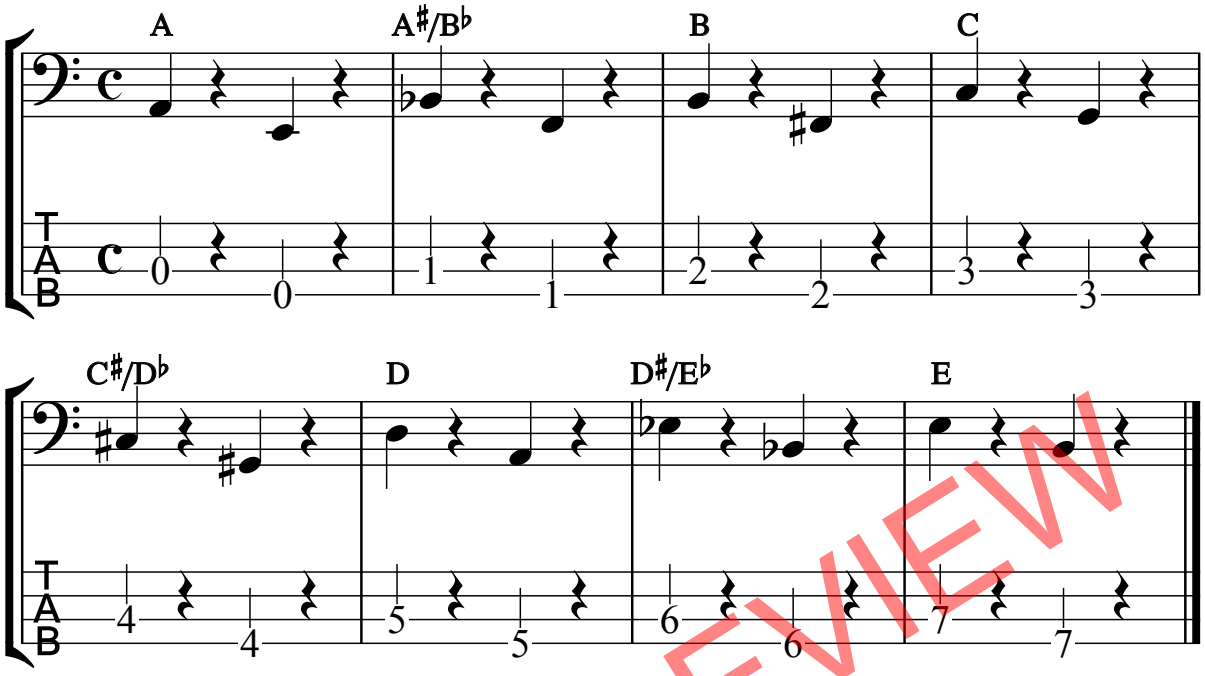
STEP 7 - Insert Under Strings
Slip the Marking Guide under the strings of your bass, with the number 1 closest to the scroll and slide the top edge up so that it rests against the edge of the nut. Align the arrows so they point to the edge of the fingerboard nearest the E string.

STEP 8 - Mark Your Bass
Using a pencil, movable stickers, or plastic electrical tape, apply temporary marks to the side of your fingerboard at each location shown. Small triangles of plastic electrical tape works really well. Align the point like an arrow to the positions indicated by the guide. You can use a permanent marker to write the numbers on the plastic electrical tape if you like.

Note: The Marking Guide is meant to assist the beginner in finding the note locations. The precise locations of these marks are affected by bridge placement, type of strings, and string height. Therefore, after carefully tuning your bass, you should double check your markers by playing notes at each position and verifying the placement with an electronic tuner. Consult your music teacher or an experienced bass player if you need assistance.

Here are the patterns found on the 3rd and 4th strings on your bass:

PATTERNS ON THE LOW PAIR OF STRINGS



I suggest that you play through all three sets of patterns. Check your tuning and begin to memorize those positions. You'll notice that there are duplicates of many of the patterns. You can play the A pattern at 2-2 on the high pair or open on the low pair. This means you have choices. You are already becoming a bass player because a bass player DECIDES what they will play.

Before we move into the Songs Section I want to talk a bit about songs and chord progressions since a lot of what we do as bass players is think about the chord progression. So, what is a chord progression?

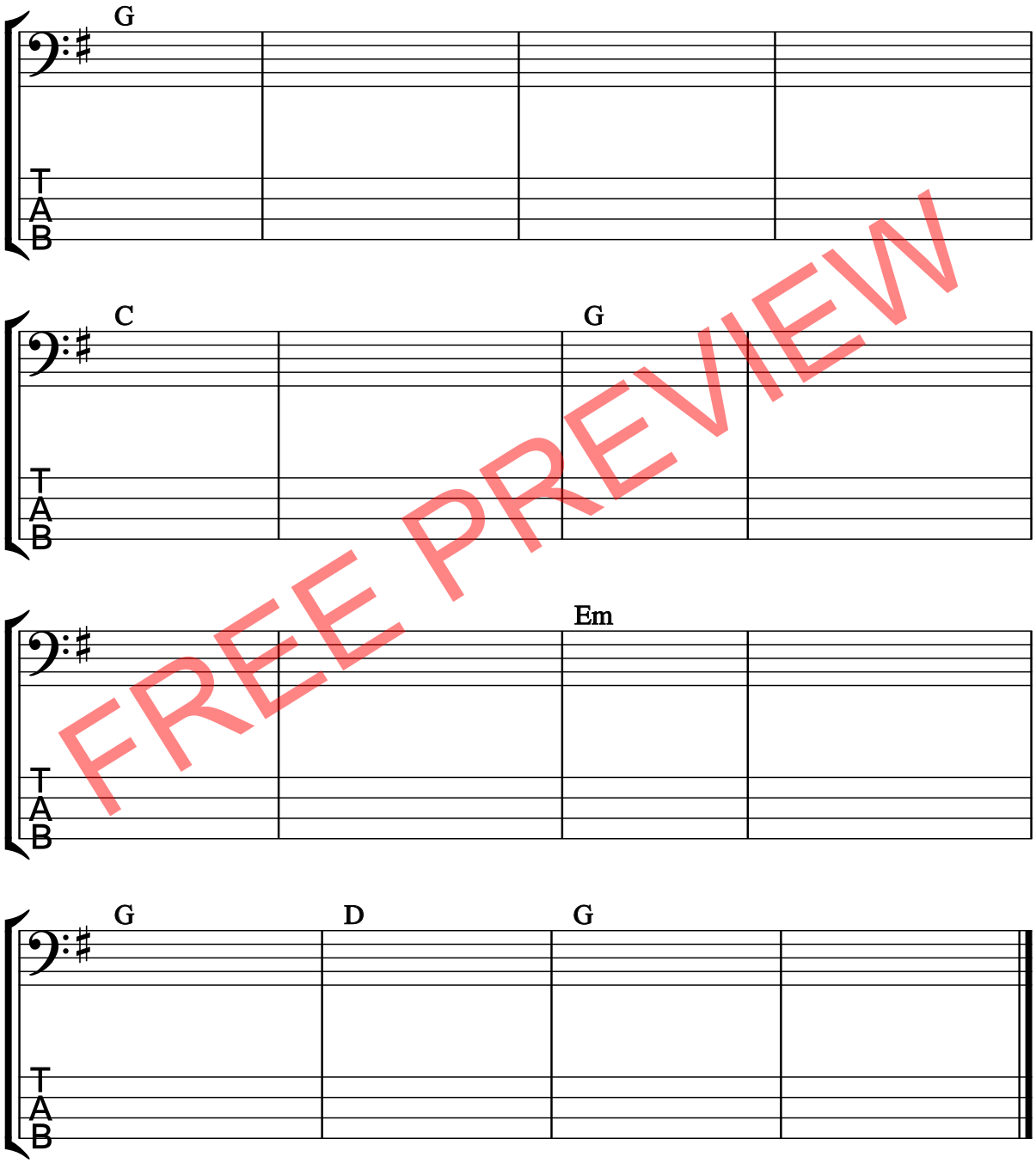
CHORD PROGRESSIONS EXPLAINED

A chord progression is simply the ORDER of the chords in a song and, taken to a higher level, how long each chord is played. All songs have a chord progression. I suppose drum solos do not, but I am talking about all BLUEGRASS songs here and "we don't like no steenkin' drums 'roun heer!" Except when we do, of course. Like old Flatt & Scruggs records and hippie bluegrass.

On the next page I will show you a couple of common bluegrass songs and show you their chord progressions.

This is the chord progression for **“Sittin On Top Of The World” in the key of G**. You can see there are 4 measures of G (two beats per measure just like most bluegrass songs... we’ll deal with waltzes later.) followed by two measures of C, four measures of G, two of Em (minor) and 1 measure of G, one of D, and two of G. (Skip ahead in the book and you’ll see how I play it. Don’t do that yet! Read on and do it yourself first!)

As an exercise, print this page, and write your own bass line using the cheat sheets with the two note Root-Fifth patterns. Just remember, two notes per measure.



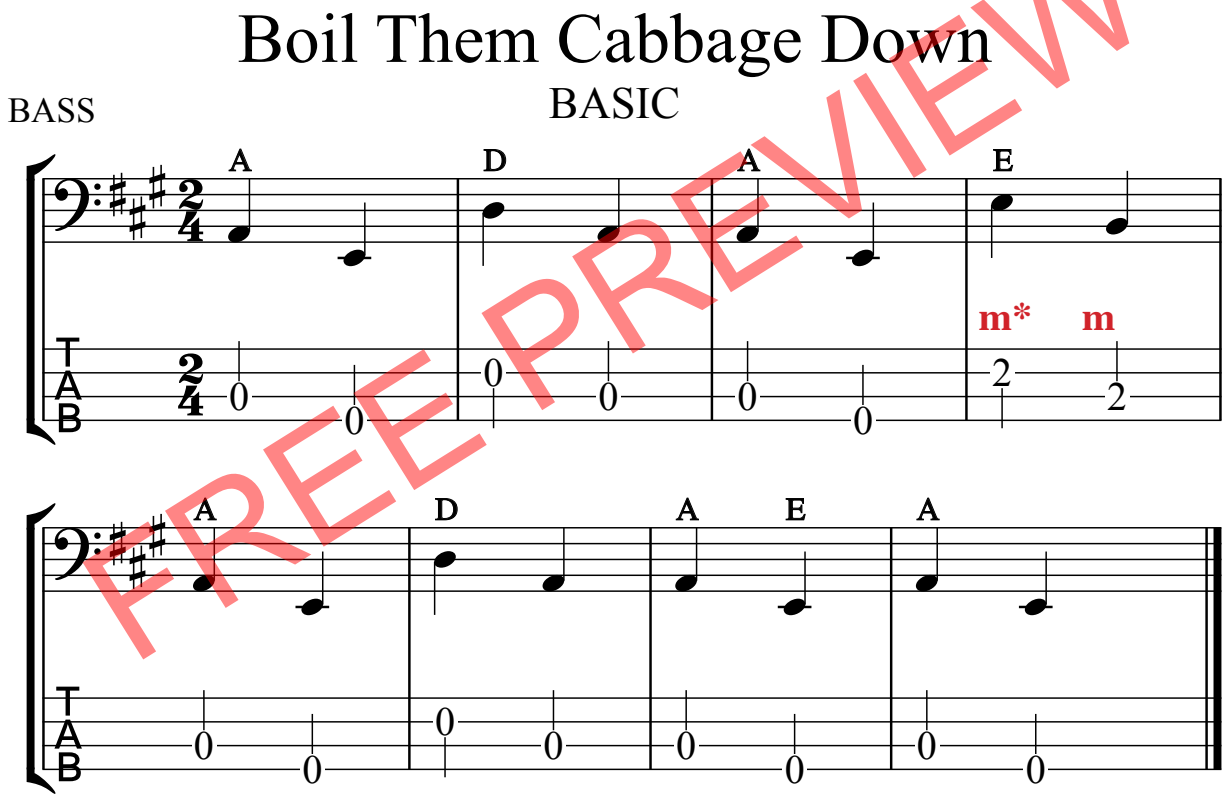
In the 13 rules I said all songs must end on the root. That is only true at the VERY END of the song. Most songs are repeated over and over and over and then they end. THAT is when you must play the root. If you are repeating you can hit a fifth before you start over.

BASIC SONG SECTION

This section of the course will show you some possible bass arrangements which stick closely to the rules laid out so far. Later in the course I will show you additional arrangements for some of these same songs using other techniques such as leading tones, walking, etc.

For now do two things: Learn to play these to improve your physical stamina, your timing and your tuning. Then, secondly, take time (when you need a break) to stop and think about each note. Is it a root? Is it a fifth? Why is he playing this note here? Does this note agree with the 13 Rules?

Use your body and your mind. By the way instruments are usually called “tunes” and vocals are called “songs”. Here is the first basic root-fifth style arrangement. I am sticking this in here again because I want to re-examine it with the new knowledge you have.



***These fingerings are only suggestions. You could use your index finger for both notes. However, when two notes are beside each other, I do not suggest you use two different fingers! It is difficult to get them to line up and be in tune. If you try to “park” your index and middle finger on those two notes, side by side, you will invariably have one of them higher than the other and the notes will be out of tune. I suggest you hop back and forth with a single finger. Laying a finger flat down, like a barre chord on a guitar, is sometimes tried, but it too is a recipe for sore hands. All that said, sometimes you just have to do what you have to do!**

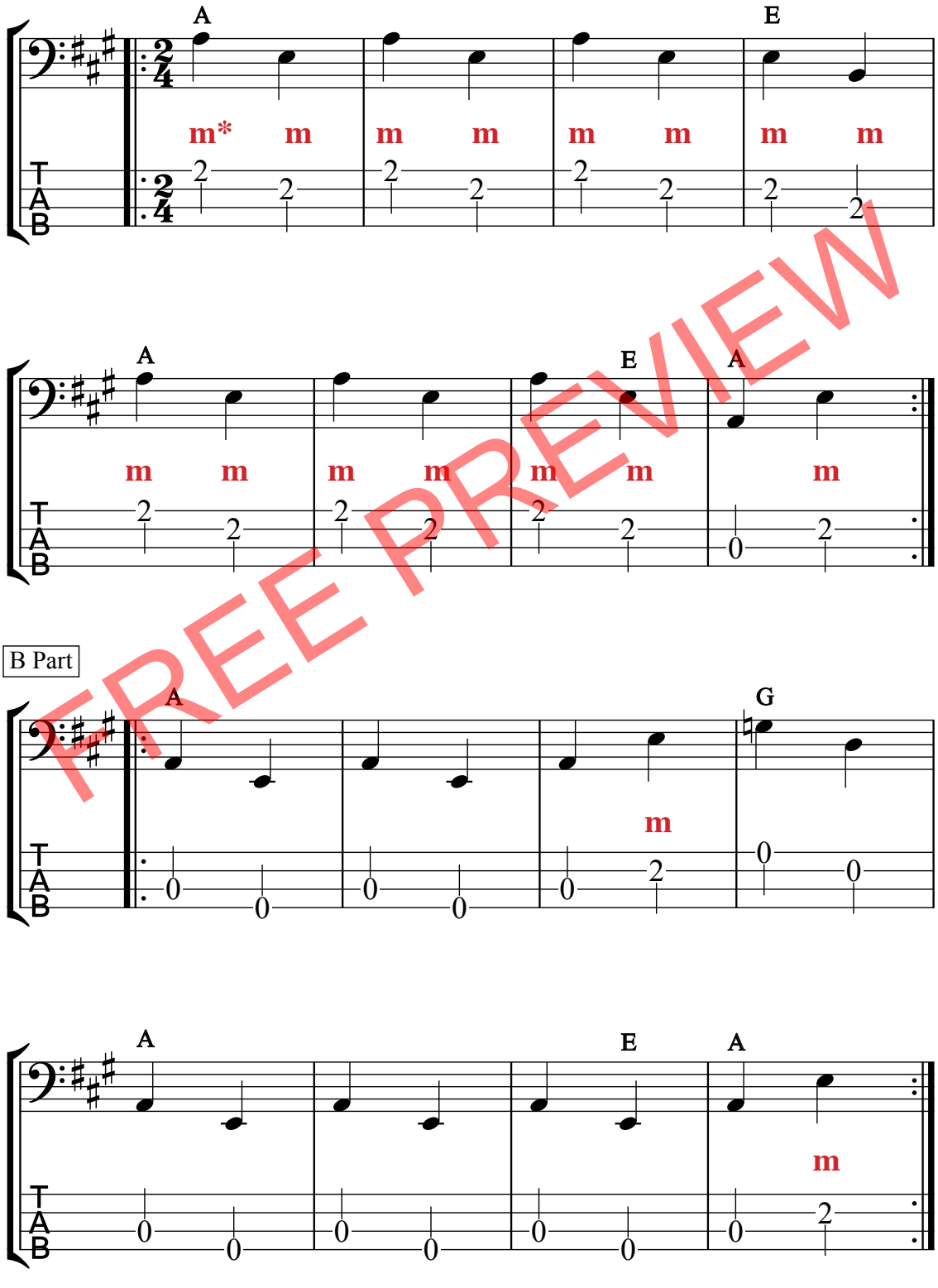
Here is another instrumental, usually played in the key of A, called Old Joe Clark. It has a typical two-part organization like Salt Creek and fifty million other fiddle tunes. There are no tricks in this one except the final measures. It all follows the rules but it is interesting as I play low root and high fifth in the last measure and also in the 3rd measure of the B part. No rules broken though and it's pretty musical. Remember to play each part twice.

Old Joe Clark

Traditional
Arranged by Brad Laird

Key of A

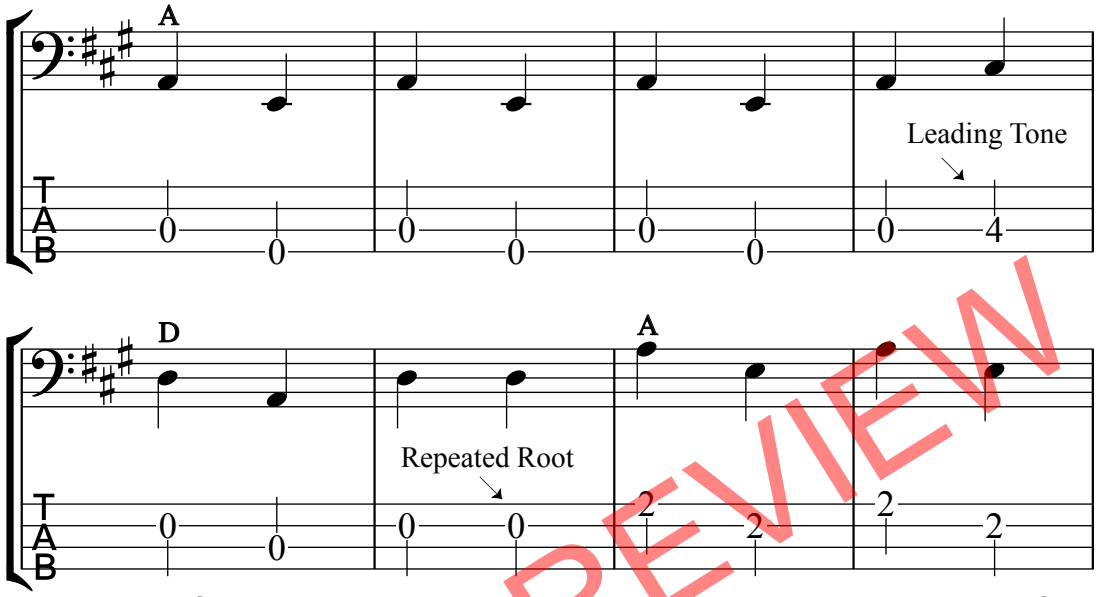
A Part



LEADING TONES DISCUSSED

If you examine the first line of the arrangement we just studied you will see a leading tone at the end of measure 4. Here are lines 1 and 2 again to save page turning:

SITTIN ON TOP OF THE WORLD
with 1/2 Step Leading Tones
and Repeated Roots



That “4” at the end of measure 4 is a leading tone. It violates the 13 Rules of Root-Fifth Bass Playing because, well, um... it’s not a root or a fifth. As you can see we are on an A chord and the 4th position on the A string is a C#, or the THIRD note of the A major scale. I won’t go into more theory than that right now other than to say it is note found in an A Major Chord and it is just one tone away from the destination chord in measure 5.

You see we are aiming to land on a D chord and we’ll need to play a D note (the root) when we get to the 5th measure. What we are doing is sneaking up on that note from one Chromatic Scale tone lower. You see the 4th position is C# and the 5th position is a D on that string. Basically you are looking for two things when you create a leading tone:

1. Let the leading tone be either a root, a fifth or another chord note such as the third, of the chord you are leading from, and...

2. You ascend by one scale tone to land on the new chord’s root.

That will not seem too complicated to those with some music theory background but to a beginner it may be mind-blowing. Think about it as sneaking up to the next chord from below.

Let me just say this to simplify. You could think of this a one note “walk up”. “Walking” on a bass, which we will discuss later, is playing scales or parts of scales (remember our C scale) to carry you from one chord to another. What is really happening is that you are (in measure 4) playing a D scale note which also happens to be an A chord note... it’s a beautiful thing.

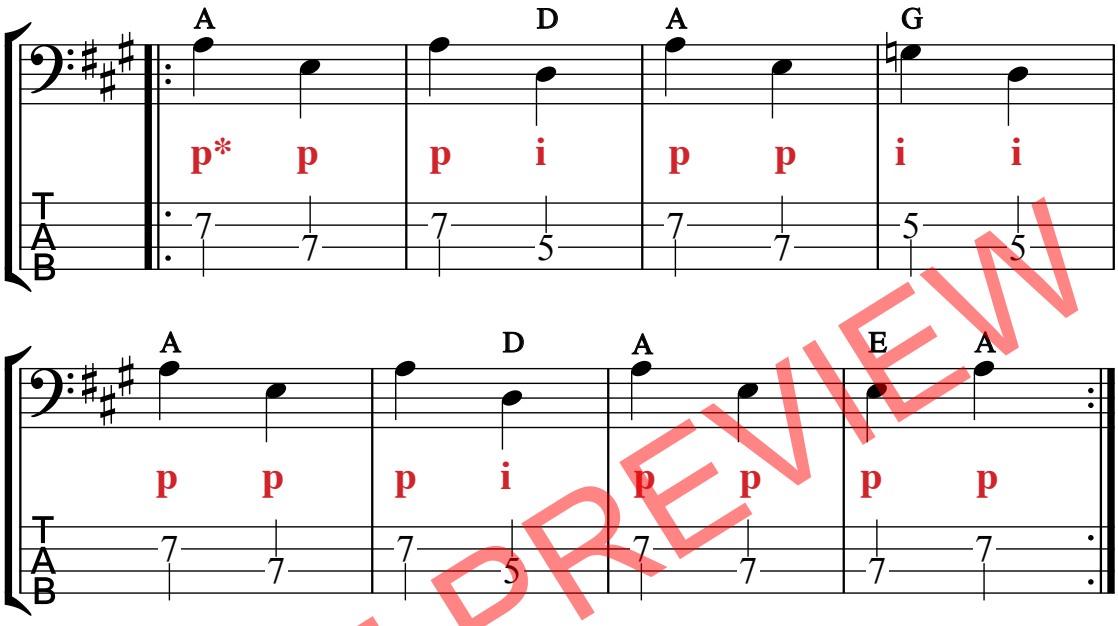
Here is ANOTHER version of Red Haired Boy. You can learn a lot from this if you take the time to study it and ask yourself WHY? This is what I call the electric box style. Electric bass players often play things up the neck that we dog house guys play open. Try this and ask yourself why it works and how can I use this?

Red Haired Boy

Electric bass "box" approach

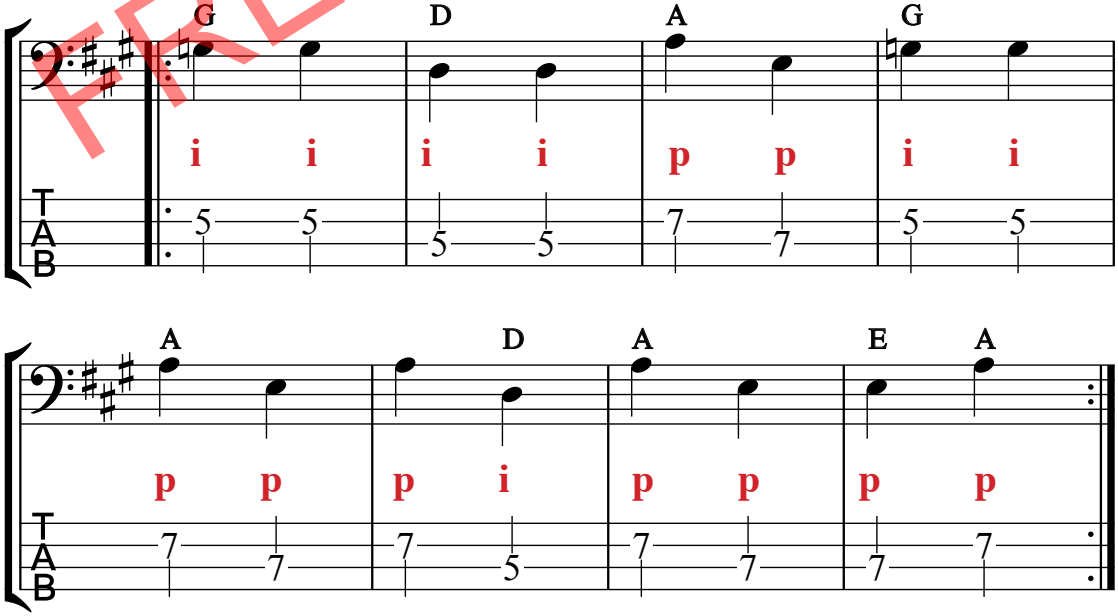
Traditional
Arranged by Brad Laird

A Part



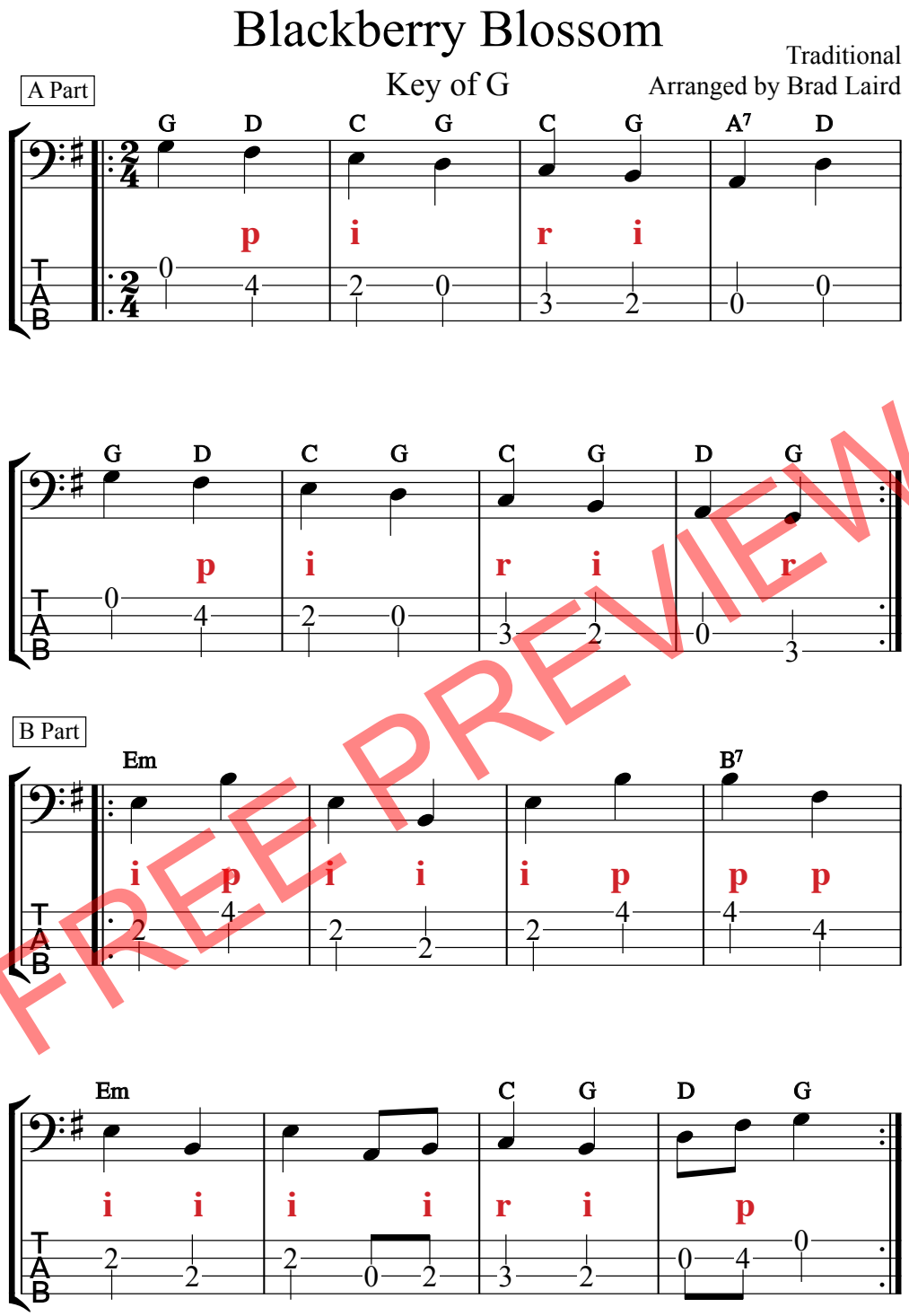
* You can use other fingers to do this but electric players use i and p.

B Part



Think back to what I said about the 5th position being the same as the next higher open string and this stuff will make more sense. 5 on the 2nd string is the same at 0 on the first.

Like Whiskey Before Breakfast on the previous page, this version of Blackberry Blossom uses some of those same “linear” techniques. Yes, it strays from the 13 Rules. But, by playing some selected “thirds” it creates a beautiful flowing bass line. See for yourself:



This is a far cry from the basic root-fifth style and if you absorb the ideas in it you will be a more musical bass player. Of course, you can always play root-fifth. Sometimes that is the ONLY thing that should be played. You have to decide for yourself. Don’t forget to back up that pinkie with your ring finger during the start of the B part. This version I consider to be one of my most well-though-out arrangements. But, don’t repeat it over and over and over. Break it up with other ideas. Anything done to excess gets old fast.

Just doin' my thing at the Chomp N' Stomp in Cabbagetown (Atlanta, Georgia) a few years ago. This outfit was hard to describe but a lot of fun. Left to right are: Tony Duck, mandolin; me on bass; Cory Chambers, guitar; Jerry Zee, scrub brush on a cardboard box and "Harps" Jackson on blues harp. Fun stuff but I am still a die hard bluegrass man.

WALTZ TIME

If you go back at look at the “Rules” I laid out there were two pertaining to 3/4 or waltz time. Here are those rules:

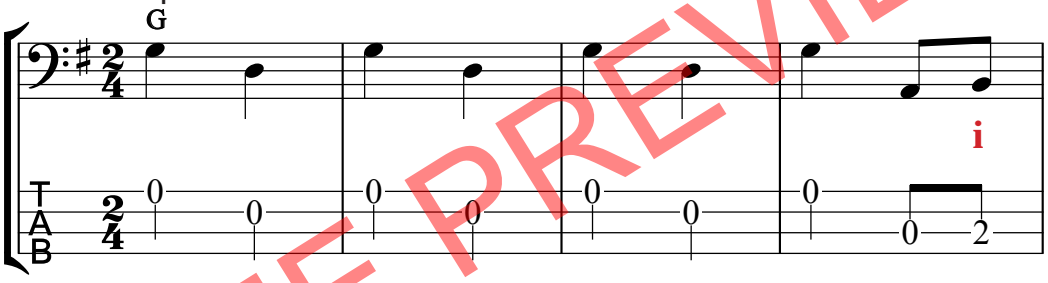
Rule #8: In 3/4 time (waltz time) the bass usually plays one note per measure on the first beat of the measure.

Rule #9: In 3/4 time, the bass normally plays the root at the beginning of the measure, and if the chord continues, the bass will play the fifth at the beginning of the next measure.

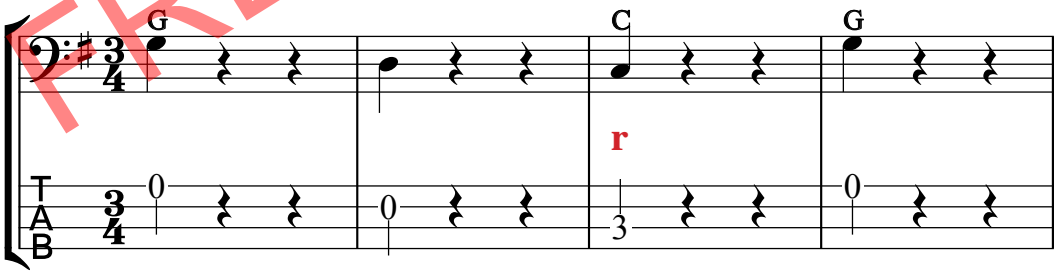
Now remember that the rules can be broken if you have a valid musical reason to do so. These two rules just lay out the basics for getting through a waltz without stumbling. Let’s take a quick look at a comparison between the usual 2/4 time and this 3/4 waltz time:

Here is an example of each:

In this example of 2/4 time you have two beats per measure and fill each measure with some combination of quarter or 8th notes or rests. A full measure is two beats.



This example is a waltz in 3/4 time. 3/4 time means THREE beats per measure and a quarter note gets one beat. Therefore, each measure contains three quarter notes or quarter rests:



Of course, you can play 8th notes too if you want to. If you did you would be able to fit six 8th notes or rests in any measure.

Let’s go to the next page now and learn a few basic (pun intended) ways to approach a waltz. Bear in mind that waltzes are a small minority of the songs and tunes you’ll run across in bluegrass but THEY DO EXIST. In fact there are some pretty famous ones like “Blue Moon of Kentucky”, “Kentucky Waltz”, “In The Pines”, “Amazing Grace”, etc. that you will encounter. Waltz time is fun to play if you have done the work in advance to feel comfortable playing them. You may notice that there is a lot more “space” in your playing but just relax and let a waltz be a waltz. The other instruments will fill in the blanks. OK, let’s go play some waltz time.

GO PLAY! HAVE FUN!

David Blackmon, fiddle and Jack Watson, drums.

Buddy Ashmore, guitar

John Teate, mandolin and Patrick Owen, guitar