



BASS

David Santos

# To Ring Or Not To Ring

Over the years I've found that consciously letting a note ring, leaving a space or stopping a note from ringing, while simultaneously listening to the effect that this is having on the related music and musicians, is a very mature and advanced concept of bass playing. Many players don't seem to think in this way; most young guys look for ways to put lots of activity in a small amount of space, thereby "thinking" in a motion-oriented way on their instrument. Indeed, most of today's bass heroes seem to inspire novices to focus on "hands on the bass" exercises. As a result, in their efforts to play faster and develop better technique, I believe that inexperienced players begin to think of bass playing almost like a competitive sport akin to street basketball, slapping each other a high five after a fancy behind-the-back pass, or playing a rhythmically intricate bass lick in a space that opens up in the music. Slapping the bass at every opportunity, perhaps to attract notice from other bass

notes, of different duration, occupying the space of a beat in 4/4 swing time. Those two notes are written and discussed as eighth notes but are felt almost as triplets or as a dotted eighth (lengthened eighth) and a 16th (shortened eighth). It seems to swing because the eighth notes are uneven. The downbeat, or the point when the foot hits the ground, is where the first note of an uneven eighth note originates, lasting slightly longer than it normally would in a straight eighth feel, and then the second of the two eighth notes occurs as a shorter event, closer to the point where the foot hits the ground again. Swing isn't the only genre in which this concept comes into play—listening to a shuffle on a Muddy Waters recording such as "I'm Ready" or "Rock Me Baby" is a great way to learn about uneven eighths.

Here is an exercise: Say the word "strawberry" while patting the ground with your foot. Notice that there are three syllables per foot pat. Now, allow the first syllable "straw" to last longer, while actually eliminating the middle syllable "berr" and leaving the last syllable "y" where it was. Hopefully you are saying "straw-ree straw-ree straw-ree straw-ree." If this experiment has been successful, you are speaking in swing or uneven eighth notes and experiencing the manipulation of duration as a concept.

Through the years, many bass players have provided me with inspiration and knowledge in the area of duration. Rocco Prestia comes to mind as an influence regarding the use of "short" notes; he's the very funky bass player with Tower of Power, and his work on the early Tower albums motivated me to investigate left-hand muting techniques to shorten the length of a note.

As exercises in duration, play major, minor, chromatic, blues, and major pentatonic scales as well as classic bass lines muted, then alternately play them as legato or "long" notes.

Another player who inspired me with the use of short notes is Will Lee, the wonderful bass player on David Letterman's TV show. Listen to Donald Fagen's record *The Nightfly* and check out Lee's work on "Walk Between the Raindrops." His use of shortened quarter notes in a walking bass line is really creative and musical.

When playing live with a band, or recording in the studio, think about how long your notes are ringing. Think about how much space you leave between your notes. Use your foot as an aid in subdividing, and add the concept of duration to your mixed bag of tricks.

## Will you let the note ring into the downbeat or cut it

### off abruptly when your foot hits the ground?

players, seems to be a common practice.

To define the concept of duration in relation to bass playing, let's agree that a bass line is the integration of a series of "spaces," with specifically, strategically placed pitches of varying lengths, at different locations, on, off, or in between the beats. Think about how long notes and spaces last with relation to tempo, meter and time. Listen to the effect a full beat of silence has on the music associated with it. Listen to the effect of a full quarter note as opposed to a "short" quarter note (also referred to as a "staccato" quarter note). Listen to the effect of a quarter note that's played on an upbeat and lasts through the next downbeat to the next upbeat (syncopation). Explore upbeats in a duration-oriented way, being mindful of just how long you intend to let notes ring in relation to approaching downbeats. Will you let the note ring into the downbeat or cut it off abruptly when your foot hits the ground? Pay attention to how long a single eighth note lasts within a pulsing, steady stream of straight eighth notes.

Listen to a Count Basie recording and mimic the feel and phrasing of some of the players. Ask yourself, "Why is it swinging?" Play a series of notes in the swing feel. The most defining characteristic of the swing feel is duration; we can say that there are two

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