

Introduction to Slap-Bass: History, setup, and technique

By Donovan Stokes (published in Fall 2008 Issue of *Bass World: The Journal of the International Society of Bassists*)

A Quick and Dirty History of Slap

The first thing we must do is to define “Slap-Bass.” For our purposes, we will limit our discussion to the upright bass, and will not concern ourselves with the Slap technique of electric bassists. With that constraint, we can broadly define Slap-Bass as a percussive, pizzicato style of playing the upright bass.

Slap-style incorporates three main elements:

1. Traditional pizzicato.
2. “Snap” pizzicato: A pizzicato in which the string is allowed to “snap” against the fingerboard. The resultant sound contains both pitched and percussive elements. *This is sometimes known to classical musicians as “Bartok Pizzicato”*
3. “Slap,” or percussive elements: These can be extensive, but generally involve hitting the strings, fingerboard or body of the bass with the both the right and left hands.

Trying to pin down the earliest uses of Slap technique on a string instrument is like trying to pin down who was the first human being to use language. Two things are clear, however: Firstly, that Slap-Bass was in use before 1910, and secondly that by 1915 it was present in Eastern European and American folk music.

Classical players are primarily aware of the “snap” part of Slap-Bass technique, as Bartok introduced it to them with his Fourth String Quartet in 1928, and subsequent later works. He most certainly did not invent the technique, however, and Slap-Bass researcher Djordje Stijepovic believes Bartok heard this technique first during his research into folk music.

By the early 1920s, Slap-Bass had already become a staple sound in American Jazz and American Hillbilly (later coined “Country” music). The rhythmic Slap-style of playing was well suited to these genres of music, and added both variety and volume to the bass parts. Some of the better-known proponents in the jazz music of this time period include George “Pops” Foster, Wellman Braud and Milt Hinton. Milt Hinton, of course, continued to play this style virtuosically until the end of his career, and several contemporary jazz players continue to be proficient in Slap-style playing.

Slap-style was particularly useful in the Hillbilly music found on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry, where drums were not allowed. In the absence of drums, the percussive quality of the Slap-Bass provided the rhythmic impetus needed. In this context, the bassist became both a pitch and a rhythmic player in the rhythm section.

As disparate musical styles began to fuse and create new genres of music in the United States, Slap-Bass came along for the ride. Although the Slap technique was destined to take a back seat in jazz, it remained popular in hillbilly music and gained ground in blues (Willie Dixon, (1915-1992) was a notable proponent), bluegrass, Hillbilly, and Hillbilly Boogie. As the name implies, Hillbilly Boogie music included country vocals over a boogie-woogie bass line, often incorporating Slap-Bass. Slap-Bass

was also a key component of the sound for 1940s Western Swing, which fused swing and country music (Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys being the most famous group).

In the 1950s, a new style (that later became known as Rockabilly) emerged. Rockabilly was a term created to describe the musical fusion of Rock and Roll with Hillbilly music. Originally meant as a slur against its practitioners, the term Rockabilly was widespread by the early 1950s and was embraced by players and audiences alike.

Musicians such as Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley (specifically his Sun recording sessions), Chuck Berry, Bill Haley and His Comets, and others helped to establish this genre. Rockabilly proper existed only for a few years in the 1950s, but music continues to be influenced by this short-lived style to the present day.

There were revivals, of sorts, for Rockabilly in the 1960s and 70s, but it was the 1980s that would see Rockabilly-influenced music gain widespread popularity again. This renewed interest allowed the music to fuse with other, more contemporary styles (such as Punk and Hardcore) and gave rise to a musical scene that has remained active to the present day. The Rockabilly-influenced band The Stray Cats and the more aggressive sounds of Jason and the Scorchers (which fused Punk rock and country music) are notable from this time period.

The late 80s and early 90s saw the creation of a new style of music termed Psychobilly. For the uninitiated, the quickest way to classify these genres is as a blending of Punk Rock and Rockabilly. Fast tempi are the norm, and the use of an upright bass playing Slap-style is paramount. With the popularity of groups such as The Reverend Horton Heat, who had formed in the mid-1980s, the mid-1990s saw the beginnings of a widespread interest in this new genre of music, using Slap-style upright bass.

Also popular in the current day, and tamer than the Psychobilly groups, the Brian Setzer Orchestra has seen a great rise in popularity since its inception. This group fuses Slap-style bass playing with a big band, and the vocals and guitar playing of Brian Setzer, of Stray Cats fame.

Current fertile ground for Slap-Bass

Although there are notable differences between each of the contemporary “-billy” subgenres, they lie largely in lyrical content, stage shows and visual aesthetics. Therefore, for our purposes here, all of the possible sub-genres of Psychobilly (i.e. punkabilly, gothabilly, etc.) will be grouped together under the umbrella heading Psychobilly.

No musical genre can rightfully have “-billy” in its genre title without the extensive use of an upright bass. Not an electric bass, nor an electric upright bass, only a true double bass will do. Furthermore, all “-billy” styles require the bass player to be “out front.” The player is expected to be a showman, both musically and visually.

After the introduction of Psychobilly, a slew of bands have added Upright Bass to their lineup and fused the Rockabilly style with more contemporary styles, such as Goth, Punk, etc. Since the turn of the century, bands such as Tiger Army, Reverend Horton Heat and the Horrorpops have gained greater and greater popularity. All incorporate spectacular Slap-style bass playing and it is in this genre that the greatest strides in technique have been made, and where the bulk of Slap-style playing occurs in the present day. Although some students wish to play more “Roots” music, most of my students come to me wanting to play Psychobilly.

Instrument Setup for Slap Style playing (*at a glance*):

In addition to the musical and technical considerations, Slap-style playing requires a particular type of instrumental setup.

Action: A greater distance (in comparison to classical or jazz playing) between the string and the fingerboard string action is often suggested. This greater distance will allow the fingers of the right hand to more easily grab the string from underneath (i.e. between the string and the fingerboard). While this is certainly helpful, personal experience shows that the strings can actually be quite low, once the player has become competent.

Fingerboards: Traditionalists often prefer rosewood fingerboards for the “thump” they produce. This is especially popular among bluegrass players, and Nashville session players. The more aggressive Psychobilly players will benefit from ebony fingerboards due to their greater durability and sustain.

Gut strings: These are generally thicker than metal strings, often with less sustain. These are great for acoustic groups and more traditional genres. (Kevin Smith uses these for some of his work.) Psychobilly players generally avoid guts.

Nylon strings: A modern option to problematic gut strings. However, the higher pitched strings can often be either too thin or loose. These are generally similar in tone, quality and response to guts, but with more stability and a thinner gauge. Nearly impossible to bow, but this is generally not an issue for ‘billy players. Nylons are easier on the right hand than steel strings and more economical. Patricia Day of the Horrorpops uses nylon strings.

Weedwackers: Easy to play, economical, cool looking (often bright green in color). No sustain, minimal acoustic sound. Weedwackers are entirely impossible to bow with any success.

Steel Strings: Familiar to most readers. Steels can be tough on the right hand, but are easy to amplify at high volumes, especially with a magnetic pickup. They give a distinctive sound when played Slap-style. Generally preferred by the more aggressive players. Strangy of The Klingonz and Jimbo Wallace of Reverend Horton Heat both use these.

Structural Enhancements to the instrument:

Psychobilly and Rockabilly bassists place unique demands on their instruments. These demands exceed the traditional demands of jazz and classical bassists. As a result, a good Rockabilly or Psychobilly bass must have several special facets.

1. **Ruggedness:** These instruments take a beating onstage and off. Marshall Lytle (Bill Haley and His Comets) is credited with being the first to pioneer “bass stunts,” i.e. riding the bass like a pony, standing on the C bouts, lifting it above one’s head, etc. Remember, the bass player is often expected to be a showman. The Psychobilly players, especially,

have taken hold of this, so the instrument must be durable. This means reinforcing the instrument structurally, particularly around the neck joint and endpin block. Furthermore, they must travel well both in planes, and in the back of a van with amplifiers, drums and Anvil cases. As a result, many players structurally reinforce their basses to ensure that they can withstand the rigors of the stage and the road. Makers who offer specialized lines of instruments for the Rockabilly market, such as Aaron Reily of Guarneri House, offer specialized construction of their instruments to meet this need.

2. Feedback reduction: Primarily the domain of Psychobilly players, feedback can be a significant problem when playing at high volumes. In addition to proper use of EQ, an instrument may have the F-holes covered, or have extra pressure placed on the top (via foam, etc.). Dampening the strings between the bridge and the tailpiece is also common. Some instruments have no F-holes at all, but instead have painted F-holes, on a solid top, instead. Again, makers who specialize in this market offer a variety of solutions.

3. Aesthetics: Rockabilly, and Psychobilly especially, is a Rock and Roll aesthetic. This means a fine, hand rubbed, French polish is not going to do the trick. Many of these basses are painted. This not only helps with feedback reduction and durability on the road, but allows the bass to mimic the aesthetics of the player or group (i.e. “We like skulls in our band” or “We have tattoos”.) A custom paint job, or custom carved scroll is not uncommon. Occasionally, you will see custom body shapes as well. Patricia Day of the Horropops has a “cutaway” model, similar to some old Kay basses, while Kim Nekroman’s bass is in the shape of a coffin with a cross as a scroll.

Amplification/Recording for Slap-Style playing

There are two Sound Sources when playing Slap-Bass: The Fingerboard (for the Slap) and the F-holes (for pitch). It is often best to have separate pickups (or microphones) for these sources and to mix them separate channels for optimum sound. Here are some basic suggestions:

Microphones: Great for low volume, Americana music. Unusable for high volume, or Psychobilly styles. One near the F-hole, and one near the fingerboard allows for optimum flexibility and sound control.

Pickups: Both Transducers and Magnetic pickups are popular among Rockabilly and Psychobilly players, as they often play at high volumes. As with microphones, two pickups are generally advised, one for the Slap and one for the pitch. However, magnetic pickups can often be used as a single sound source at the end of the fingerboard.

Amplifiers: Many are in use, but GK and Ampeg are popular across the board.

Now that we have all the correct equipment, we ought to learn to slap!

Basic Playing Techniques:

There is no standard terminology for these techniques, and the same term can mean different things dependent on who is speaking. Terms describing Slap-Bass

technique are often used in haphazard manner and can lead to confusion down the line. Therefore, I have attempted to codify the terminology here in a way that is both precise and clear.

As with traditional plucking, and use of the bow, the execution of specific techniques vary from player to player and are best presented in a video format, or in person. However, here are some basics definitions:

Pluck: Plucking the string with out any percussive or “snap” elements. Often executed in a similar manner to the “Snap,” (i.e. pulling the string at a 90 degree angle to the fingerboard) but with less force. The resultant sound is that of traditional pizzicato.

Snap: Plucking the string by pulling it away from the fingerboard in a vigorous manner, thereby allowing the string to hit against the fingerboard. The resultant sound should be a combination of pitch and percussion. Some players call this a single Slap, but this terminology can lead to confusion. I have therefore classified it as a “snap.”

Slap: Executed by hitting the hand (generally the right hand, although the left hand is also used) against the string with enough force to press the string, or strings, against the fingerboard. The resultant sound is percussive and un-pitched in nature, and is generally done rhythmically between pitched notes.

Sub classifications:

Single Slap: a single hit against the strings and fingerboard

Double Slap: two consecutive hits against the strings and fingerboard. This is sometimes termed the “Drag Triplet” and/or “Gallup,” dependant upon rhythm.

Triple Slap: Getting the idea?

At fast tempi the double and triple Slap will involve hitting the strings with various parts of the hand, including the heel and fingers. It is important to keep your wrist and arm loose and to let the hand bounce naturally.

Left hand Slapping

Not that I need to tell you, but you can hit the strings and fingerboard with your left hand as well, either alone or in rhythmic combination with the right hand.

Learning Tools:

The basics above will only get you so far, especially without seeing someone actually execute the techniques. If you want to learn this technique right, or possibly become a virtuoso Slapper, you will need either a teacher or a quality video to take you to the next level. Instruction in this style of playing is still in its infancy, but there are some good videos to get you started. If you can’t get to a teacher, then I suggest the following videos as the best currently available: *Slap-Bass: The Ungentle Art* by Mark Rubin and Kevin Smith, or *Rockabilly Slap-Bass* with Pete Turland.

I have also entered into a joint venture with luthier Aaron Reiley of Guarneri House, so look for a comprehensive DVD on technique and the ultimate in rockabilly basses, in the Spring of 2009. In the meantime, keep Slappin!

Special thanks to: My Slap-Bass students for turning me on to this style of playing. To professionals Tommy Vee, Geoff Fitzpatrick and Mark Rubin. Extra special thanks to Pete Turland, Kevin Smith and Djordje Stijepovic for all their help and sense of bass family.

Historical Highlights (?- 2008)

Pre-1910's:

Folk music of multiple cultures

**1915 earliest reference describing Bill Johnson's playing with his Creole Jazz Band

New Orleans/Jazz:

George "Pops" Foster (1892 1969): Luis Russell and Louis Armstrong

Wellman Braud (1891 – 1967): Duke Ellington

John Lindsay (1894 – 1950) Toured with Louis Armstrong 1931-32

1926 Jelly Roll Morton Red Hot Peppers recordings

Steve Brown (c. 1890 – 1965)

New Orleans Rhythm Kings

Al Morgan (1908 – 1974)

Recorded with Fats Waller in 1929

Cab Calloway's Orchestra in the early 1930's

Milt Hinton (Judge) (1910 – 2000)

Cab Calloway, etc., etc., etc.

June 22 1925, The earliest recording of the slap bass is the song "Milenberg Joys," recorded by Ted Lewis & His Band. Harry Barth slaps through the song

1927 Grand Ole Opry:

Drums not allowed on stage, slap bass provided the rhythmic pulse in country/hillbilly music

1928 Bartok:

Fourth String Quartet, Mvt. 4, 1928

Blues players:

Willie Dixon (1915 – 1992)

Big Three Trio, Chuck Berry

Bassist, songwriter, producer

Ernst "Big" Crawford: Muddy Waters

1940's Western Swing:

Joe Ferguson (Bob Wills)

Shug Fisher

1950's By this time, slap bass is used in **Country, Bluegrass, Caribbean** and many other styles.

Bluegrass: Jake Tullock

1954 **Rockabilly**– Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, etc.

Bill Black (William Patton Black, Jr.) (1926 – 1965)

Elvis Presley: Sun Records (1954 – 1957)

Has a successful solo act

Marshall Lytle

Bill haley and His Comets

Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry

Pioneered the stage antics of current day players: Twirled bass over his head, rode it like a pony, stood on top of it, etc.

James Kirkland b. 1934

Bob Luman, Ricky Nelson

Pioneered the “triple slap”

Ray Campi (b. 1934)

Bill Haley, Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, and Gene Vincent

Dosey Burnette (1932 – 1979)

Solo act, pop country, rockabilly

Current day: “**Roots**” music, **Rockabilly**, **Psychobilly**, etc.

Jazz: **Roland Guerin**

Rockabilly Music: **Lee Rocker** (Stray Cats, Lee Rocker)

Country/Bluegrass: **Kevin Smith** (Dwight Yoakam, Heybale!)

Gypsy Music: **Vlad Viorel** (Taraf de Haidouks)

Pop/Rock/Psychobilly/Gothabilly/Punkabilly, etc.

Patricia Day of Horrorpops

Kim Nekroman (Dan Gaarde) (Nekromantics)

Jimbo Wallace (Reverend Horton Heat)

Mark Winchester (Brian Setzer Orchestra)

Djordje Stepovic (Head Cat, others) Currently writing a book on Slap
bass

Jimmy Sutton (Chicago based player)

Dave Roe (Johnny Cash and Dwight Yoakam)

France: **Gilles Chevaucherie** : subbed for Willie Dixon