

Ballads

Playing a ballad is another important skill for the jazz bassist to learn. Ballads require a level of finesse and sensitivity that presents a real challenge for many bassists. The first goal of ballad playing is to support the tune without taking focus away from the melody. There is room for small statements here and there. (After all, we don't want to become totally invisible.) However, if people are listening to the bass player instead of the lead instrument, then the bassist is playing too much (or maybe the lead isn't very interesting, which is not your fault). When accompanying a ballad, every note is very exposed. There can be no questionable choices here. Play the roots, chord tones, and use approach types and passing tones to land on a strong choice in the right place. Play big, fat whole notes and half notes. Don't be afraid to hit the root on beat one and let it ring for the entire measure. Let the tone of the bass shine through. It's possible to say a lot with just one note. If you play upright or fretless bass, ballads are a great opportunity to "work" the note by adjusting your finger pressure. You can make a note "spread" by squeezing it with the left hand just after you attack the string. This takes some practice, but you can eventually learn to control the swelling. To a lesser extent, this technique can be achieved on fretted basses. On fretted instruments, the right-hand attack has a greater effect on the sound. Play ballads with the right hand close to the fingerboard, and point the plucking finger toward the bridge so you can use more of the flesh. The more meat you put on the string, the fatter your sound.

Vibrato is another technique that makes ballad playing more musical. Vibrato is achieved in two ways. The first is by shaking the left hand, letting it pivot off the finger that is holding the note down. The second is to slide the finger holding the note to subtly change the pitch back and forth. This technique works only on non-fretted instruments. Speed and width are very important aspects of vibrato. Practice getting a slow, controlled vibrato that is wide enough to hear, but not so wide that you can drive a truck through it! Fast vibrato has its uses, but not in ballad playing. As in our note choices, use the vibrato tastefully; we don't want to overdo it.