

CHAPTER 2 GETTING STARTED

The whole thing is really kind of funny. It all began one day, back in the late sixties, when no drummer could be found for miles around. The bass player had to lay down the time, the groove, the feel and the pocket all by himself, as if he were a bassist and a drummer rolled into one. The “thumb slaps” functioned as the kick drum, and the “finger pops” supplied the backbeat of the snare drum. The rest of the stuff was fills.

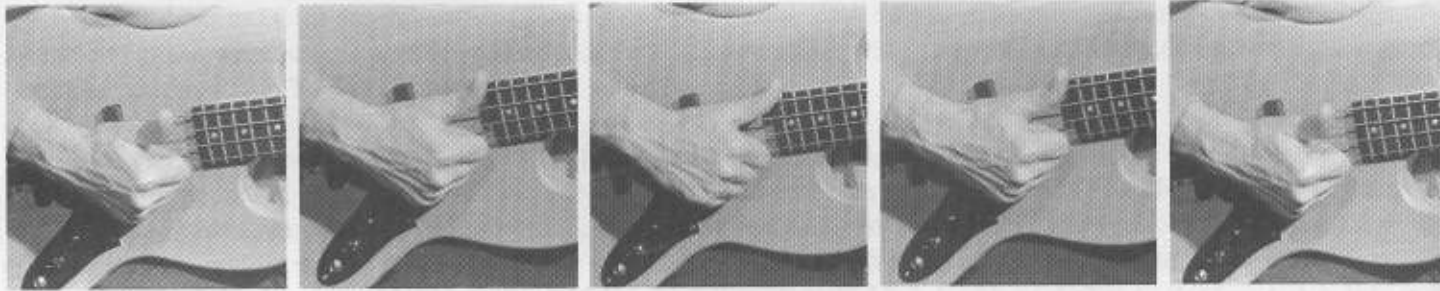
The man usually given credit for developing this style of bass playing is Larry Graham, of Sly & The Family Stone and Graham Central Station. Other early innovators include Louis Johnson of The Brothers Johnson, and Bootsy Collins of George Clinton’s Parliament Funkadelic.

Throughout the following decade, the idea seemed to catch on like wildfire. The seventies brought us Stanley Clarke, who practically scared everyone to death with his blistering speed (not just with his thumb, but with his fingers, too!). Neil Jason and Will Lee are two other very influential funk players to come out of that period.

The heroes of the eighties were Mark King, Marcus Miller and John Patitucci. Other important players include Victor Bailey, Brian Bromberg, Oscar Cartaya, Nathan East, Jonas Hellborg, Darryl Jones, Tim Landers, John Peña and several others. Who’s to say what new names will “pop” up in the nineties? Maybe yours! In the meantime, be sure to use the **Discography** in the back of this book to do some serious listening. It’s *SO* important!

Now that you’ve had a little history lesson, let’s begin with the basics (*bassics?*) of funk bass playing, namely, slapping and popping. Since everything else in this book is built upon these techniques, it’s crucial that you become proficient and comfortable with them before proceeding any further.

The Slapping Technique. “Slapping” simply means hitting the strings with your right thumb. This technique is the foundation of funk bass playing, and must be executed with utmost precision. I find that the most practical spot (and the most comfortable) for the thumb is at the end of the fingerboard at about a forty-five degree angle to the neck of the bass.*



The Slapping Technique

Take a look at Exercise 2.1, and try striking the open “E” and the “A” strings with the joint of your right thumb. Start very slowly and deliberately, with your metronome set at quarter note = 60. Concentrate on getting the fullest sound possible, and on striking only one string at a time.

Note: *In order to facilitate more efficient arm movements while slapping the bass, many players wear their basses quite high. If you find you are uncomfortable at first, try shortening your strap a little and see how it feels. It’s also important that your bass stay in one position, regardless of whether you’re sitting or standing.*

*Many variations exist about where and how to place your thumb. Tony Levin, for example, plays completely differently than, say, Abe Laboriel. Feel free to experiment with the positioning of your thumb. Just make sure the emphasis is on precision of attack and fullness of sound.