Bluegrass Bass

By
Ned Alterman & Ritchie Mintz

Complete Instruction Guide

Featuring:
Missy Raines • Mark Fain • Tom Gray • Marshall Wilborn • Byron House
Jere Cherryholmes • Wayne Taylor • Roger Bush • Ruth McLain
Benny Galloway • Jack Cooke • Randy Davis
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This folio consists of pages from different sections of the book, presented together as a “sample chapter” for illustrative purposes.
Preface to the 21st Century Edition

In the 1970’s, a company called Oak Publications, a division of Music Sales Corporation, published a series of “how to play” music instruction books for the emerging bluegrass/newgrass/folk players of the day. The books included Bluegrass Banjo and The Bluegrass Songbook, by Pete Wernick, Bluegrass Mandolin by Jack Tottle, Bluegrass Guitar by Happy Traum, Bluegrass Fiddle by Gene Lowinger, Bluegrass Dobro by Stacy Phillips, Melodic Banjo by Tony Trischka, and (lest we forget) Bluegrass Bass by Ned Alterman and Ritchie Mintz, originally published in 1977.

They were all good books, most of them written by well-known players and performers, and generations of bluegrass pickers learned how to play from them. They were, in fact, among the first instruction books dedicated exclusively to bluegrass music, and they were among the first music instruction books to feature TAB. They were also among the first music instruction books to come with stereo records inside. Remember those 33 ½ “floppy” vinyl records you’d tear out and play on your turntable? They weren’t exactly high tech, but they worked.

In the 1980’s, the business of publishing music instruction books was changing fast. Everyone with a TV either had or was planning on getting a VCR, and music instruction books were rapidly losing their market share to instructional videos. Music publishers and distributors adapted to the changing times by carrying fewer titles, and Music Sales Corporation was no exception. When the last copy of Bluegrass Bass was sold in 1990, the decision was made not to reprint it, and Bluegrass Bass became officially “out of print.”

In the 21st Century, it’s a whole new digital world. Instructional DVD’s exist for practically anything you could possibly want to learn, and not surprisingly, DVD’s are especially well suited to teaching and learning how to play music. In today’s music instruction DVD’s, the picture and sound quality are fantastic and your teacher is often one of your favorite performers. Also, the digital format enables split-screen images, angled views, close-ups, slow-mo’s, fast forwards and “how’s that again?” repeats available in seconds at the touch of a button. It’s like having an infinitely patient teacher who never gets tired of teaching you things over and over again, shows you enough amazing stuff in an hour to keep you busy for a year, only charges you once, doesn’t care if you’re late, and never asks if you’ve practiced! How cool is that?

In this new 21st Century Edition of Bluegrass Bass, the original book has been revised, edited and expanded with many new color pictures and 21st century updates. You’ll find new interviews with such modern bass stars as Mark Fain, Marshall Wilborn, Byron House, Jere Cherryholmes, and Missy Raines, to name just a few. Audio-wise, there are two CD’s included: The old floppy soundsheet record has been digitally re-mastered and turned into a great new play-along CD with all the tracks from the original recording, now happily noise free and in perfect tune. In addition, the authors’ award-winning CD Towne & Country Revue: Live at Mountainears has also been included, along with complete song charts, playing tips and commentary for all 14 tunes.

Coming soon is Bluegrass Bass, The Movie, our “work in progress” DVD that’s part entertainment and part instructional video. On the DVD, which you’ll be able to view online and download, you’ll find more entertaining interviews with great modern players, plus clips from live performances with instruction and commentary by the artists themselves and picture-in-picture close-ups of how they play. Stay tuned to our website www.PickinRanch.com for information on Bluegrass Bass, The Movie.

We’re proud and excited to present to you the new 21st Century Edition of Bluegrass Bass. We wish you great success in your pursuit of music, and we hope you have a ton of fun playing Bluegrass Bass.

Ned and Ritchie
Forward

The upright bass… what a fantastic instrument! It has the ability to enhance any kind of music, and is always a welcome addition to any musical combination. In the world of bluegrass and folk music, banjo pickers and guitar players seem to abound, but there never seem to be enough bass players. For this reason, the bass makes an ideal second instrument, especially for guitarists. In fact, guitar players can expect many “ah-hah” moments as they go through this book, because it’s also about the bass strings of the guitar. But any musician will gain valuable musical insights through study of the bass.

In this book, we begin by assuming you know nothing about music. But if you can render a simple scale – DO, RE, MI, etc, (at least in your mind) – you will have a good jump on things. First off, you’ll learn several different but related ways to tune your bass and you’ll begin immediately to play songs on open strings. And it’s so easy it can be done literally with one hand! We’ll proceed from that point in a logical series of steps designed to build important skills, with the hope that soon you’ll be ready to play good, solid bass along with other pickers, and with your favorite recordings, too.

Everyone knows it takes time and practice to learn how to play music, so it may come as a surprise to you to learn that the bass fiddle, at least as played in folk and bluegrass music, is not as difficult as other instruments. In bluegrass, the chord changes tend to be similar from song to song, and are usually predictable. The bass runs used to connect chords are also relatively simple and easy to learn. So even if you're a complete beginner, you can become a competent bass player in a relatively short period of time.

Success is within anyone’s grasp. There are many bluegrass bassists who do little more on their instruments than what we show you in the beginning – rocking back and forth on open strings. A step up from that level are bassists who play in closed positions and connect the chord changes with melodic bass runs. And a bass player who happens to know some “slap bass” techniques can have an audience yelling for more in short order!

The development of good rhythm, accurate pitch, and ease of playing may take you a while, but as they say, getting there is half the fun. If you keep at it, you will experience exciting breakthroughs.

Everything you’ll need to know is here – where to put the fingers and why, exercises for both right and left hands, theory, scales, chords, progressions, bass runs, walking bass lines, slap bass techniques, solos – and it’s all clearly illustrated. Bass parts are presented in easy-to-read TAB as well as in standard music notation (bass clef). There are lots of good tunes to learn and play and tracks to pick along with on the accompanying CD’s, plus information on important related subjects like how to select a bass fiddle, how to set it up for easy playing, how to use an electronic tuner to place side position markers, tips on playing in a group and much more.

But a book can only go so far. When you run into a bass teacher, or even a friendly picker who wouldn’t mind showing you a few things, grab the chance! A few lessons can take you a long way on bass, and can be a valuable addition to what we teach you in this book.

We extend to you a hearty welcome to the Pickin’ Ranch Bluegrass Band.

Thanks for showing up for the audition. We’ve been expecting you.

You have a bass, right?

Good. In that case, you passed the audition.

You’re the new bass player and it’s time to pick!

Ready?

Let’s tune up.
The Right Hand

The picture below illustrates good right-hand position for pizzicato (plucking) style. Your right hand position will probably be somewhat different. Good tone depends not only on a good sounding bass, but also on a good setup and good strings. But there is much more to good playing than that. We can’t adequately instruct you about hand and body positions because our hands and bodies are all different, and what works for one bass player won’t always work for another. What we can do is give you some good advice, and that is to seek out bassists whose playing you admire, and take some lessons from them. Just a few lessons can make a huge difference.

Behold the right hand of a master player, jazz bassist Paul Spikes. There is much to learn from studying this picture, so take your time. Look closely. Note the gentle angle from the forearm through the wrist to the hand. This picture is filled with the energy of relaxed strength. Can you sense it? You can see it in the hand and the way the fingers touch the strings. Although you can’t actually see the palm side of Paul’s hand, try to imagine what it might look like. Focus your attention on Paul’s fingers, especially the index and middle fingers. Notice how much of each finger comes in contact with the strings. There’s a long callous line on the underside of each finger right where the string is. If you could see those calluses, they would tell you a lot about how Paul plays. What do those calluses have to teach you? Try and see them in your imagination. How many songs do you think this hand has played? How many notes?

Paul Spikes gets a big, warm sound out of his gorgeous Pollmann carved bass, but he never strikes violent blows. He plays wonderfully well with a light, authoritative touch.

Body posture is important. How you stand in relation to the bass affects your right hand position and the way your fingers pluck the strings, and that affects everything.

Let’s digress for a moment and talk about the endpin. Most bassists wouldn’t dream of playing without first extending the endpin. Try different endpin settings and choose a comfortable height setting for your bass. A good starting point would be with the string nut (up by the tuners) about even with the top of your head. Preferences vary. Classical and jazz bassists (and those with similar training) like higher settings to facilitate bowing and good left hand technique and also to provide easy access to the higher octave positions. Bluegrass and folk musicians tend to like somewhat lower settings. While we’re on the subject: Don’t forget to securely hand tighten the endpin screw. (You wouldn’t want any gravitational surprises.) And remember to check the protective rubber tip on the endpin once in a while to make sure it hasn’t worn through. It’s a good idea to carry a spare.
Right: The thumb of the right hand is an important digit for bass players. It’s usually positioned for pulling leverage at the side edge of the fingerboard. The placement of the thumb varies from player to player. If you are attentive to wrist position and the direction the index and middle fingers take as they approach the strings, the thumb will naturally find its best location. In the photo at right, the camera has caught the hand in motion. Notice the positions of the index and middle fingers. Paul Spikes appears to be plucking the G-string with his middle finger. What’s the index doing?

Left: Colorado bassist Paul Waitinas’ right hand looks relaxed and ready. The index finger is positioned on the G-string with the tip of the finger extending past the string.

Right: Paul shows how he positions his thumb behind the fingerboard for good pulling leverage on the E-string.

Left: After plucking the D-string, the index comes to rest on the adjacent A string.
Beginning To Play

With the bass in tune to standard pitch, we can begin by playing a song or two straight off. We'll start with *Little Birdie*, a traditional American folk song. The job of the bass is to keep time by striking the strings in a steady rhythm. On the recording, the bass is heard through the right channel only, so you can tune it in or out as you wish.

To play bass for *Little Birdie*, you’ll need two chords, G and D, and for each chord you’ll rock back and forth between two notes.

There is no need to employ the left hand for this tune. Just pluck the open strings with the index finger of the right hand.

---

**The G Chord**
Striking the open G-string followed by the open D-string.

**The D Chord**
Striking the open D-string followed by the open A-string

---

“The bass player needs to view his instrument and what he does on it in light of what’s going on in the song. *Listen to the song, don’t just listen to yourself.*”

-Jere Cherryholmes
Will The Circle Be Unbroken?  Track 3

Traditional  Key: D

WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN

EYE LORD, EYE AND EYE

HOME A-WAIT IN

IN THE SKY, LORD, IN THE SKY
Circle Playing Tips

**Will the Circle Be Unbroken?** is a classic folk/bluegrass/gospel song.

In *Little Birdie*, we were playing in the key of G. The term key is defined more fully in later chapters, but for now, think of it this way: Our starting point for *Little Birdie* was a G chord, and our ending up point was also G.

G was the "home" chord, also called the I chord, so the tune was in the key of G.

*Circle* is in the key of D, so our home chord will be D. There’s a chord change from D to G (aka the IV chord) in the second line and a return to D (I) at the end of the line.

\[
\begin{align*}
V.1 & \quad \text{I was standing by my window,} \\
& \quad \text{On one cold and cloudy day.} \\
& \quad \text{When I saw that hearse come rollin',} \\
& \quad \text{For to carry my mother away.} \\
V.2 & \quad \text{Oh I told that undertaker,} \\
& \quad \text{Undertaker, please drive slow.} \\
& \quad \text{For the lady you’re a-haulin’,} \\
& \quad \text{Lord, I hate to see her go.} \\
V.3 & \quad \text{Oh I followed close behind her,} \\
& \quad \text{Lord, I tried to be so brave.} \\
& \quad \text{But I could not hide my sorrow,} \\
& \quad \text{When they lowered her into the grave.} \\
V.4 & \quad \text{I went home, Lord, my home was lonely,} \\
& \quad \text{Since my mother she was gone.} \\
& \quad \text{All my brothers, sisters crying,} \\
& \quad \text{In a home so sad and alone.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{G} & \quad \text{D} \\
\text{bye and bye, Lord, bye and bye.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

There’s another similar change in the last line of the verse/chorus, except it goes from D (the I chord) to A (the V chord), which you just learned, and then back to D:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{D} & \quad \text{A} \\
\text{In the sky, Lord, in the sky} \\
\end{align*}
\]

This I-V-I change in the last line of the verse or chorus is typical of thousands of bluegrass and folk tunes.

The Roman numerals are used as generic one-size-fits-all designations for chord changes, regardless of the song or key. For example, in *Little Birdie*, you played two chords - G and D. Just count up the alphabet from G to D, with G as note number 1 and D as note number 5. (Yep, you guessed it – it’s another one of them there I-V chord progressions.)

You will find it helpful if you listen to the CD track (Track 3) first. The bass is heard in the right channel, while the rest of the band and the vocals are heard in the left. You can adjust either channel up or down as you wish. As you listen to the track, follow along in the music and TAB so the change to the A chord in the last line doesn’t take you by surprise. Then listen a couple of times without the book and see if you can hear the changes by ear. Even if this is your first experience playing music, you will probably find it easy.

Please don’t be deceived by the simplicity of this bass part. Your job as the bass player is not to hit fancy notes. What you're aiming for here are three things that form the essence of good bluegrass bass playing: simplicity, good tone and good time.
The Left Hand
Playing these chords using open, or unstopped, strings is handy and easy, and most bass players make use of open strings whenever possible. However, in order to become a good bass player, it’s important that you learn to play chords, scales and arpeggios (more on them later) in what are called closed positions. Once you learn to play in closed positions, playing in various keys without relying on open strings becomes intuitive and easy. Getting there, though, is not so easy. Learning to play in closed positions takes time and practice, but that’s the nature of learning music, and you will find it well worth the effort. It’s the challenges that make you a stronger player.

Compare the various left hand positions illustrated below.

C on the A string  Classical
C on the A string  Folk/Bluegrass

D on the A string  Classical
D on the A string  Folk/Bluegrass

E on the D string  Classical
E on the D string  Folk/Bluegrass
F on the D string  Classical

F on the D string  Folk/Bluegrass

G on the D string  Classical

G on the D string  Folk/Bluegrass

A on the G string  Classical

A on the G string  Folk/Bluegrass

B on the G string  Classical

B on the A string  Folk/Bluegrass
While those are not all the possible combinations, they do reflect the various approaches to fingering the same note different ways.

Next time you have the chance to watch an orchestra perform, check out the string bass section. Notice that the bassists all play with the same formal hand and arm positions. The classical way of playing string bass was developed centuries ago to facilitate good bowing technique and a beautiful, singing vibrato.

The Folk/Bluegrass Fingering Style
The folk/bluegrass left hand fingering style is simpler and somewhat easier to learn. It consists of grabbing hold of the note wherever it lies, often using the whole hand to grip the neck. This whole-hand or “baseball bat” grip, is combined with 1-, 2-, and 3-finger grips to produce chords and successive scale or bass run notes.

The folk/bluegrass fingering style (also known as “grabbing a fistful”) probably evolved in a loose way from the classical forms. The early string band bass players, like many of today’s folk and bluegrass musicians, played entirely by ear and most were self-taught. Many were excellent musicians who developed a simple bass technique that fit the kind of music they played, and in the true folk tradition, they taught it to others and handed it down. It is still widely used.

Different Ways of Playing C
The examples below show four ways of playing a C using the folk/bluegrass fingering style. In each photo, a different finger of the left hand is used to stop the note. The finger used to stop the note is called the “lead” finger.
Most modern bass players use a combination of folk/bluegrass and classical style fingerings, a blend of the styles and techniques they’ve learned as they went along, which is something you’ll probably do as well. As you get out there more in the pickin’ world, you’ll notice that many more bluegrass and other roots music bass players now use the classical fingerings. Where do you suppose they learned them?

Closed positions are challenging at first, but they open up the entire instrument to you and greatly expand your musical horizons. For those who want to move beyond the basics, closed positions are the keys to the kingdom. And if you have background or training on an instrument where you learned to read music, by all means make use of that skill in your learning process.

There’s plenty to be learned from good bass players, no matter what kind of music they play. Always watch and listen to good players whenever you can, and take lessons from them whenever you get the chance. Regardless of your level of playing or experience, you will find that taking even one lesson from a good teacher can do you a world of good. A friend of ours, already an accomplished bass player, told us about the great birthday present he got one year from his wife: a one-hour private lesson at the RockyGrass Festival with one of his all-time favorite bass players and performers. That hour literally transformed his playing. Sessions like that aren’t as hard to arrange as you might think, but you do have to take the initiative and make the appointment in advance. Our friend’s wife easily arranged the lesson several weeks in advance by contacting the performer’s management office. Can you say Google?

It doesn’t have to be a private session, though. There are all kinds of reasonably priced picking camps, workshops and multi-day “academies” out there, and they’re often connected with festivals. They enable you to learn from famous musicians in small classes, and everybody has a great time.
The F Major Scale
As with the E scale, just the lower octaves are shown in both open and closed positions. See if you can figure out the next higher octave on your own. There’s an open G-string available if you want to make use of it.

The notes of the F major triad (root, third, fifth) are F, A, and C.

The major arpeggio (lower octave) looks like this:

As you know, arpeggios are great to practice and play. When you work out that next higher octave F scale, try adding the higher octave arpeggio notes onto the lower octave arpeggio, and see if you can continue on up the neck to play a full 2-octave F major Arpeggio. (Look Ma, no TAB!). Then move the whole thing up a whole step and do it G.

A famous fiddle and guitar tune, *Beaumont Rag* is often played in F by fiddlers, and lots of vocals are sung and accompanied in F, since it’s a good mid-range key for singers. Bluegrass guitar players will often choose to play in F by using a capo at the 1st, 3rd or 5th fret and playing in either E, D or C position, depending on the song. The late great Johnny Cash, for example, sang and played a lot of his songs in the Key of F using Key of E chords (E, A, and B7) with a capo at the 1st fret.
Roots, Octaves, Thirds and Fifths – F Major

Here’s another good visual aid. Whenever you come to this page, spend a minute studying the positions. Soon you’ll know them from memory. Although shown in the key of F, the positions are moveable up and down the neck and usable in all keys. You will find it most productive to learn them as pairs of related notes, especially roots and thirds, roots and fifths, and octaves, and to be able to place the notes in position two at a time, even if one of the notes, like the 3rd or the 5th above, is resting only lightly on the string, or hovering in place just above it. Think of these pairs of notes as partial chord forms, which is exactly what they are. Once you learn these positions, no matter where you happen to be on the fingerboard, you’ll always know where to find a “good” next note. You’ll often see skilled bass players playing out of positions. (Take another look at pgs. 62 and 64.)
Benny “Burle” Galloway is a fine bass player as well as an excellent singer, songwriter, and guitar player. His songs sound like they are a hundred years old, yet connect with the listener on a level that few songwriters achieve. Burle writes songs that are both complex and simple, songs so evocative and well crafted that the Yonder Mountain String Band chose to make an album with Burle consisting solely of tunes written by him, with guests such as Tim O’Brien, Jerry Douglas, Sally Van Meter, Darol Angor, Casey Dreisen and Dirk Powell. Entitled *Yonder Mountain String Band And Benny Galloway: “Old Hands,”* the CD debuted at #5 on The Billboard Bluegrass Charts, and is Yonder Mountain String Band’s best-selling studio album to date. As a performer, Burle puts everything he has into his soulful singing and playing, whether he is on the upright bass, electric bass or acoustic guitar. As a songwriter, he continues to produce amazing and beautiful songs, each one unique, simple, melodic and memorable. Ned and Burle, who are longtime friends, sat down together one snowy night at the Bluebird Lodge in Gold Hill, CO, high up in the mountains west of Boulder, to talk about bass playing, performing, songwriting, and other things musical. The following is an excerpt from that interview.

**Ned:** Ready to talk about bass playing, Burle?

**Burle:** Nah, I don’t know anything about that. What else?

**Ned:** Singing? Songwriting? Fly fishing?

**Burle:** Yeah, fly fishing. Now you’re talkin’! Might know a little something about that!

**Ned:** Why don’t we talk about diggin’ a hole, Burle? We talked about that one time before, remember?

**Burle:** Diggin’ a hole…yeah, I remember that. OK, cool. That’s good. What else?

**Ned:** Don’t know yet. Just start diggin’ and we’ll think of something else as we go along.

**Burle:** OK, diggin’ a hole… let’s see, where to begin…? The pocket, I guess. In most acoustic music, the pocket is cool, and that’s where you want to be as a bass player a lot of the time. But for me, as a bass player, the pocket, as a musical place, is too small. What I’d rather do is dig a great big hole and have everybody jump in. It’s not a technique. It’s more of an idea, a metaphor, if you will, and a touch. It has a lot to do with what kind of bass sound I like, so I guess I’ll tell you about that. What I like is a real deep, deep low end, no mid’s in the mix whatsoever, and a good clear attack on the highs so you can feel and hear your fingers coming down on the strings and getting around them up there at the high end of the neck. A great bass that rings acoustically has the attack all over the place, but as far as the player is concerned, it’s primarily a right hand thing. In my band situation, we plug in 90% of the time, so I can use the electronics to boost that whole sonic situation to get that real thick bottom end I want, that deep groove that’s the big hole I was talking about before, the big, deep hole that everybody can jump into.

As for diggin’ a hole and keeping the sound liquid and deep, and by liquid I mean that the chords flow and change easily where they need to, and for that, I like to play in the lower positions rather than the higher ones. When everyone gets in that hole and starts swimmin’ around together, and really, that’s just a metaphor for everyone playing and thinking the same way, then grand and glorious, it’s a great hole to be in! As a bass player, if you can dig a hole like that, instead of just squeezing everything into a little pocket, there’s going to be a lot more people can fall in and swim around together, and it’s gonna get a lot more liquid, and you’re going to have a big, deep, liquid sound.
Ned: What about note selection, Burle? You play a lot more than just 1’s and 5’s, yet your playing is always tasteful and simple. Anything to say about that?

Burle: As for notes and note selection, 1’s and 5’s are a certain process you can make, and they are a good way to get through some things. But if you’re trying to convey some music and get some stuff heard, I’d say it’s better to stay away from playing just 1’s and 5’s. I try to find that one other big note, that other resonant note that’s running along through the harmonic of what’s being sung or played. There’s always some key note that will throw the song over the top. For each song it’s different, and, really, it becomes more than just a 1 and a 5. It makes the song breathe in a different way, in a little different place, and that is a really important part of holding the bottom together. If you can hold the bottom together and bring out the melody at the same time, everything’s going to fall into that same big hole just beautifully, and with the right musicians and the right song, when that happens, it feels like the best thing you’ve done lately.

(L to R) Joshua Bell, Sam Bush, Edgar Meyer, Mike Marshall
Slap Bass  Track 17

Slap bass can be the ultimate expression of bluegrass bass playing. It’s always showy and entertaining, but it’s not everyone’s cup of tea. Some bass players use it a lot, some not at all. Audiences always seem to love it, though, and from the player’s point of view, it’s more fun than a barrel of banjos (almost). Slap bass, like any other musical style or technique, has to be learned right, practiced hard, played well, rehearsed with band members, and used tastefully.

The Single Slap
In a single slap, you play each note exactly as if there were no slap. So, in an “UM’–pah, UM’–pah” count, the accented “UM’” beats are the only ones played on the bass. These are the downbeats of the measure. During the “pah” (off beat), which is normally silent, bring your right hand down, fingers extended across the strings over the first few inches of the fingerboard. You should strike the strings smartly enough so that they in turn strike the fingerboard producing a sweet sounding “tick”. It should not go “slam” or “bash”. It should sound more like a snare drum played with the brushes than a cymbal going “crash”.

The action of your bass (the height of the strings above the fingerboard) should be low enough to allow you to slap the strings on the fingerboard without striking violent blows.

Before trying this slap technique, learn this little trick that makes it all possible. When you bring your right hand down to slap the strings, position the hand so that the fingertips are in contact with the string you are going to play next. For example, if you are slapping in a G chord using the open 1st and 2nd strings (G-tick, D-tick; G-tick, D-tick…), you should pluck the 1st string for your G note. Then slap, but when you come down, align the fingertips with the 2nd string. This little bit of thinking ahead sets you up to pluck the 2nd string for the D note coming up next, and so on. Thus, in slapping, you are always positioning your right hand to pluck the next note. The “UM-pah” should sound like: “UM-slap, pah-slap; UM-slap, pah-slap…”

The Double Slap
The double slap is exactly like the single slap, except that an additional “tick” sound is generated by plucking the string so hard that it bounces back against the fingerboard. This technique easily turns to noise, so it has to be practiced until it sounds good. The double slap is actually three sounds squeezed into the rhythm of “UM-pa.” Right after the plucked note, almost simultaneous with it, comes the “tick” of the string bouncing back against the fingerboard. To accomplish this, get your plucking finger (index or middle or both) under the string and draw it away from the fingerboard. We’ll call these two synchronous sounds “boom.” Next comes the “pa” – the offbeat that gets one downward slap.

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About the Authors

Ned Alterman started playing bluegrass music while in college in the 1960’s. Seeking a banjo instructor who could unlock the mysteries of Scruggs-style banjo, he discovered a teenaged Ritchie Mintz living in the next town.

"Ritchie was an advanced player and a natural teacher, even at that young age. He had a full collection of bluegrass records and had learned all the banjo picking on them entirely by ear. I credit him with teaching me everything I know about playing bluegrass banjo. The way he taught me is still the way I teach it to others."

Ned eventually discovered his own talent for teaching the pickin' arts and in 1971, opened Folk Arts Music in Boulder, Colorado. After 14 years as proprietor of Boulder's favorite music store, he sold the business in 1985. Ned Alterman has been an English teacher, a music teacher, a writer and book editor, an inn owner and a product manager. He is also a popular Colorado wedding ceremony officiant and is often asked to marry couples at bluegrass festivals. Ned still plays banjo, guitar and bass, makes great homemade pizza, enjoys teaching and writing, and loves going to bluegrass festivals. He continues to make his home in Boulder, Colorado.

Ritchie Mintz first picked up a guitar at age 8. At 10, he heard Erik Darling playing Scruggs-style banjo with the landmark folk group, The Weavers. “I never got over it,” he says. He credits an introduction to basic music theory as opening the doors to all the bluegrass instruments. He was teaching guitar and banjo at age 15. In the 1970’s, Ritchie worked at Folk Arts Music in Boulder, Colorado, teaching hundreds of people to play.

Ritchie Mintz is a Certified Advanced Practitioner of Rolfing® Structural Integration. Trained at the Rolf Institute and expert in the field of human physical structure, Ritchie has over 30 years experience straightening human frames and aligning bodies with gravity. He is a veteran Bodywork professional and an experienced educator and author. Ritchie makes his home in Austin, Texas.

Ned and Ritchie have played in several bands together over the years, most notably, The Towne and Country Revue. They wrote the original Bluegrass Bass together in 1977, and re-wrote it for the 21st Century in 2007.
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