

issue 14



INDUSTRY NEWS

2014 Winter NAMM Show	80
2014 Winter NAMM Show Awards	90

COLUMNS

How I See It	6
Editor-in-Chief Tom Bowlus talks about the importance of putting things in context.	
From the Bench	92
Technical Editor Tom Lees takes a look at burst power, and how different amplifier topologies handle this task in different ways.	
Luthiers' Round Table	98
Our friend, Dan Lenard, of Luthier Access Group, serves up three questions for the Round Table.	
Great Moments in Rock-n-Roll History – “Rock and Roll” as Term and Event	108
John Cipiti explores the first use of “Rock and Roll” as a term and event. I’m proud to say, it all started in Ohio.	
In The Doghouse – Stand Up or Sit Down: Posture Issues	110
Chris Fitzgerald talks about the posture issues which all double bass players must deal with at one time or another.	
Philthy Talk – The Allure of Cheap	112
Phil Maneri speaks out against the increasing trend towards more, and cheaper, stuff.	
The Upright Perspective	114
Bass maintenance for non-luthiers, part 1.	
Manufacturer’s Response	116
Yes, that’s right. We give manufactures and luthiers their very own space to tell us what they really think about our reviews!	
Fundamental Support –Fernando Jones’ Jazz Camp	118
Fernando Jones helps keep the blues alive by teaching it to kids - for free.	



In The Doghouse

By Chris Fitzgerald

Stand Down or Sit Up: Posture Issues All Bassists Must Deal With

As part of this series on the “signal chain” of double bass amplification, this column has covered a lot of varied ground, from amps and preamps, to microphones, speaker cabinets, strings, and even down to that part of the signal chain (technique) that comes before the first sound comes out of the bass. Today, I’d like to take a step farther back and talk about an aspect of double bass playing that, in a way, even precedes all of the above in the signal chain: posture – specifically, as it pertains to whether we choose to sit or stand while playing, how this affects our relation to the instrument, and why different people choose to stand or sit.

One general observation I’ve made over the years about bassists and posture is that on the whole, classical bassists tend to play seated, while jazz bassists tend to choose to stand while playing (not counting notable exceptions, like Edgar Meyer and Gary Karr on the classical side and Neils Henning Ørsted Pederson on the jazz side, to name but a few). This observation is borne out by a survey of 520 bassists conducted by the International Society of Bassists

(link at the end of this article), which reports that 86 percent of orchestral bassists prefer to sit, while 90% of jazz bassists prefer to stand while playing.

When I ask players, themselves, why this is so, the most common answer from orchestral bassists is that due to their extensive rehearsal schedules, it is impractical and uncomfortable to stand for that many hours, so they developed a technique around playing seated. The most common answer from jazz bassists is that they choose to play standing because they consider their relation to the bass to be something akin to a dance involving the whole body, and that sitting restricts their movement, thus impeding their time feel.

Both answers make perfect sense, and considering how many great examples of each there are (including the exceptions), it would certainly be hard to make a case for one clearly being better than the other for everyone. Personally, I am a bit of an anomaly in that I am one of the few jazz bassists I know who strongly prefers to play seated. Further, I play from a position (discovered by accident) that tends to remind people of the way a cellist sits, since I sit on a low (24”) stool with the endpin all the way in and with the bass angled into my body so that my knees are nearly wrapped around it. When people ask why I sit this way, I think they expect there to be some complicated theory behind it. In fact, the truth is far simpler than that. The real answer is that sitting this way

simply feels right to me, and that of all the playing positions I’ve tried, this is the one that feels like the way that my body wants to relate to the bass to get the sound and feel I want.

Regardless of whether you choose to stand or sit, there are several aspects of relationship of the body to the bass that we must all deal with. Some of these interrelated aspects include:

- Overall physical comfort and alignment, especially as relates to the spine, hips, and legs.
- Whether you as a player prefer the bass to be able to move freely, or whether you prefer to move freely around a fixed bass.
- How to balance the bass without putting too much pressure on the thumb of the left hand.
- How to brace the bass against your body without damping the vibration of the back too much.
- Ability to reach and exert force into the strings (right hand) and fingerboard (left hand) in a way that feels natural both arco and pizz.

All of these issues are not only important to all bass players, but they are also extremely subjective, and therefore personal, and will necessarily vary from player to player. Clearly, there is a wide variety of ways that both standing and seated players relate to their basses, and many examples of bassists who are obviously quite successful playing from the position

they choose to adopt. With that said, the list above provides some food for thoughts for all bassists to consider.

There is an excellent blog by Jason Heath (linked at the end of this article) which describes many different standing and seated playing positions. So, rather than recap that information here, I'd like to address some of the issues raised above, expand on them in a general way, and describe how I deal with them in my seated position. Before proceeding, I want to reiterate that I do not feel that my way is the best way for anyone other than myself. Rather, I just want to illustrate the process of dealing with general bass posture issues that led me to this style of playing. Each player must find their own way according to what works for them physically and musically.

Overall Physical Alignment

Whatever playing position you adopt, realize that you are going to be maintaining this posture for significant amounts of time whenever you play. Given this, the position should be as comfortable and aligned as possible. Start with your hips and legs: are they more or less even, with the weight evenly distributed, or is one leg extended at a different angle from the other with the weight shifted more to one side? If the latter, this is likely to affect the alignment of your lower back. Next, focus on your lower back: is it relatively straight and centered but still relaxed, or hunching forward? Again, slouching forward can cause long term health issues. Many players who stand point to these issues as part of the reason they like to stand while playing; they feel that standing allows them to adjust their posture and alignment regularly so that they don't have to maintain one shape for too long at a time. For me, as a

seated player, I cope with this issue by sitting on a stool with a single curved rung around the bottom, so that both feet can rest at the same level. This aligns my hips and allows me to keep my lower back in a comfortable position.

Fixed or Moving Bass

Proponents of a bass that is free to turn cite the ability to turn and angle the bass to an optimal playing position, depending on the demands of the music. While this makes perfect sense to me, and I avail myself of it when I do play standing, I prefer to fix the bass to my body in a single position so that it feels like a part of my body, because when playing this way, I can always feel where everything is, without having to look. In this fixed position, I can also find the perfect angle for the bass where I can reach everything with both hands, without contorting my body to do it.

Balancing the Bass/Bracing against the body

Each player has their own way of doing this, and this is perhaps the most personal aspect of bass posture (refer to the excellent Heath blog linked at the end for details and examples). How a player chooses to do this will directly affect how much force can be applied to the fingerboard (LH) and strings (RH) of the bass without causing it to move away from the source of the force.

Damping

The closer to the middle of the back of the bass the body is touching, the more the body dampens the sound of the bass. For this reason, it is best to keep the body contact closer to the edges of the back to minimize the effect. In my posture, my body touches only the edges and the inside of the *E* side bout, which doesn't seem to dampen the vibration of the back at all, that I

can tell. Before I found this position, I often had my left knee against the back of the bass, which muted the back quite a bit and dulled the overall sound.

Limiting the use of the Left Hand Thumb

Perhaps one of the most common technical issues I see in players of all postures is the overuse of the left hand thumb to either generate the force to press down the string, or to balance the bass. When the left hand thumb is used to squeeze the string, it builds up tension in the left forearm; when it is used to balance the bass, it tends to do the same, and also can put stress on the muscle between the thumb and the hand, and limit mobility and facility. Freeing up the left hand thumb and drawing playing force from the torso is probably the biggest reason I sit; when I don't have to rely on the thumb to hold the bass steady, I can exert as much force into the bass as I want from the larger muscle groups without worrying about it moving.

Whatever posture you choose to adopt, it can't hurt to reexamine it from time to time in light of the issues discussed above. Keeping an open mind about improvements, and practicing in front of a mirror can help each player spot tension in the mechanism that we all rely on to make music before too much damage is done. Be observant, listen to your body, and stay healthy!

ISB Survey on Bassist Health:
<http://www.isbworldoffice.com/body-bass.asp>

Posture blog by Jason Heath:
<http://doublebassblog.org/2008/05/standing-versus-sitting-for-the-double-bassist.html>)

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