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Understanding The Bass Guitar

BY ROB ELRICK

IN 1992, ELRICK BASS GUITARS WAS A FLEDGLING business, and *BASS PLAYER* had only recently emerged as the first monthly publication exclusively dedicated to bass. At that time, the industry was much more sparsely populated, but the seeds of the market we now enjoy were being sown by new manufacturers, and BP was there to guide us. In the years since, I have hand-carved over 1,300 Elrick basses, I've entered (and exited) a design license with an Asian manufacturer, and I've introduced a supplemental line with European manufacturing partners. *BASS PLAYER* has also stayed busy introducing its readers to the best of the overwhelming number of new products made just for us. It's great to be joining the magazine as a guest columnist!

While it's nice to look back and reminisce, there is no time like the present, and we live in an interesting time, with its own unique resources and obstacles. Nearly universal access to the internet has made it easy for manufacturers to gain consumer awareness of their products, directly addressing their target audiences through their websites and social media channels. The opportunity to get answers to everyday questions has helped grow the forums and social networks we now take for granted. But for those hoping to benefit from the experience of others, it's important to question how much of the information populating those forums is accurate, and how much is opinion.

The music-products industry is uniquely populated with instruments and devices of a highly subjective variety. Few of these products can be cataloged strictly by objective analysis, like a refrigerator or dishwasher. Before the internet became most people's primary resource for information, magazines were the narrow—but effective—channel for debuting and evaluating new products. These specialty publications, as well as bricks-and-mortar retailers, were instrumental for introducing and validating new or unfamiliar brands and products. Relationships and trust were built between these institutions and their audiences, reducing consumers' risk when making what might otherwise be leap-of-faith purchases of new products from little-known brands.



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Today, however, there is a disproportionate amount of subjective (opinion-based) vs. objective (fact-based) vetting of products. The proliferation of opinions and misinformation on YouTube and in specialty forums has become at once a blessing and a curse. While these resources provide seemingly limitless content, it's often impossible to verify the expertise proffered by their contributors.

In an effort to counter the advancement of “internet facts” and common misconceptions about the bass guitar, in this column I hope to present a basic understanding of how your bass works. I intend to discuss the bass guitar in general, rather than my instruments specifically. I'm rarely at a loss for words, but I'll be keeping columns to no more than 800 words so that my explanations are as concise as possible.

Over the past quarter-century, the bass guitar market has become a place where almost no whim is unserved: We have everything from 1-strings to 15-strings, bass banjos and ukuleles, the innumerable Fender derivatives, and concepts so fantastical they make the original Steinberger bass seem downright folksy. The one thing the market doesn't offer in abundant supply is the answer to why builders make some of the choices they do.

If you've ever had questions that only led to frustrating non-answers like “that's how Leo did it,” this column should help with information that's a little more conclusive. Leo Fender made each choice for a reason—to best implement his concepts—but let's face it: Making those same choices without understanding them does not result in expertise.

When tackling topics that require the consultation of bona fide experts, I'll get advice from individuals who are, in fact, genuine authorities. The DIY culture, easy access to “how-to” videos, and online instruction have resulted in a plethora of armchair experts; for your benefit, they will not be the resources for this column.

The bass guitar is not an inherently complex mechanism. I hope this column will help demystify its fundamental aspects. Understanding your instrument will improve your player experience and make it easier for you to maintain and care for your most prized possession. **BP**