



THE DEAL

The Truth About Strings

BY ROB ELRICK

BY SOME ACCOUNTS, I'VE BEEN PRETTY LUCKY.

Not winning-the-lottery lucky, not even rock-star parking-spot lucky. No, I'm lucky because I've got my own strings.

I know—so do a lot of people these days. But I was fortunate to have had the luxury to develop my own proprietary strings with a patient engineer over a span of several years, nitpicking along the way until every detail perfectly suited my expectations. Of course, that means my strings are perfect for every bass guitar, right? Yeah, I wish.

Strings are probably the most important but under-considered component on your bass guitar. There is a lot to discuss about strings and their relationship to your instrument, and I expect we'll revisit them numerous times. For the moment, I'd like to address the importance of understanding their fundamental aspects.

Strings are, almost certainly, the most subjective components on any guitar. And yet, their performance qualities are often overlooked in deference to brand loyalty. The truth is that there is no one string that can be celebrated as “the best” for any and every application. To take that one step further, there really is no one string that's perfect for an individual player. Strings are the direct interface between player and instrument; they're the point at which human touch and physical response meet. This is no small matter. The responsiveness of a particular string can vary wildly from one instrument to another, even in the hands of the same musician. But few take the time and make the investment to find the ideal string set for each individual bass in their collection. Certainly, with the variety of choices available today, it can be an expensive undertaking—but considering that it's possible to spend many times your instrument's value over the course of its lifetime, taking that journey is well worth the cost.

Let's start that journey by making sure you're using your strings correctly. First, it's important to remember that a string vibrates along its entire length, from the ball end to the tuning post, not just from the nut to the bridge saddle. If you're using a device to minimize the sympathetic vibration of your strings, you are compromising their fundamental performance potential. To objectively evaluate the performance of your strings, you must eliminate anything that impedes their ability to vibrate freely. If you use flatwound strings with

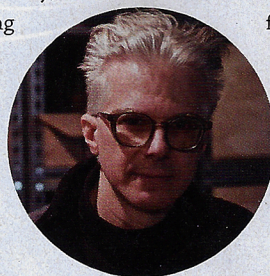
foam to dampen or diminish attack and sustain, you may have other objectives or priorities, but please—read on.

Correct installation of your strings is also important for optimal performance. A twisted core wire will reduce a string's potential to vibrate at maximum efficiency. When the core is twisted, the string acquires an internal tension that prevents it from vibrating up to the potential to which it's been engineered, so now you have an underperforming product that happens to be the point of contact between the player and instrument. If you've noticed that your string-ends spin haphazardly when you detune them for removal, you may have been playing strings with twisted core wire. This twisting usually happens when you install strings by wrapping them around the tuner posts. If you don't have a quick-release bridge (i.e., if you have to pass the string through a hole in the bridge), to avoid inadvertently twisting the core wire, let the string dangle free while you wrap it around the post, drawing up slack until the ball end seats itself in the bridge; this allows the string to turn freely until it's ready to be brought to tension. This method is not possible if you string through the body, though; more on that in a moment.

If you have a quick-release bridge, you probably already know that your life is a little easier. After cutting your string to length, twist it around the tuner post before inserting the ball end into the bridge. As with the other method, allow the ball end to turn freely while taking up the last of the slack.

To avoid twisting the core on string-through-body installations, there's a little more work cut out for you. When a string is fed through the body, upon reaching tension, it develops a distinct bend at the point where it passes over the saddle. The ball end cannot spin freely when the string is brought to pitch, and the bend becomes the point from which the core can twist. To avoid twisting in these installations, prior to reaching final tension, slip the string from the tuning post and use the coils you've already created to re-wrap the string around the post by hand, then bring the string to pitch.

Now that your strings are free to vibrate to the potential engineered by their manufacturer, you can begin objectively evaluating performance as it relates to your individual touch on each of the basses in your collection. **BP**



Rob Elrick has been fabricating hand-carved bass guitars under the improbable sobriquet *Elrick Bass Guitars, Ltd.* since 1992. Visit him on the web at elrick.com.