

A Few Thoughts for Bass Players (and Other Musicians)

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Preface

This book is a collection of tips, advice, and lessons I've learned over four decades of playing bass — in studios, on stages, and in rehearsal rooms across New Zealand and around the world.

It's written for bass players of all levels who want to grow their groove, develop solid musicianship, and connect more deeply with others and the music they make.



About Mark Hughes

Mark Hughes is a professional bass player and educator based in Auckland, New Zealand. Over the past forty years, he has performed and recorded with many of Aotearoa's leading artists, including Dave Dobbyn, Greg Johnson, Tami Neilson, Tim Finn, Bic Runga, Jackie Clarke, Rikki Morris, Strawpeople, and Hands Off, New Zealand's premier cover band.

Mark is passionate about helping bass players develop strong fundamentals, real-world musical understanding, and a deep sense of groove. He teaches players of all levels, focusing on tone, time, and touch — the foundations of great musicianship.

He proudly represents Lakland Basses and La Bella Bass Strings in New Zealand, and also offers bass lessons, instrument setups, and test-and-tag services for working musicians.

Whether I'm on stage, in the studio, or teaching one-on-one, my goal is always the same — to make the music feel good and help others find their own voice on the bass.

"Groove. Feel. Connect." — that's the philosophy behind everything he plays and teaches.



Section 1: Practice & Musicianship

“Every great bassist I’ve met shares one thing in common: they play with intent. Not for speed, not for show — but to serve the song.”

Mindful Practice

Start every session with a purpose. A few minutes of focused practice is worth more than hours of aimless playing. Before picking up the bass, decide what you’re working on — tone, timing, fingerboard knowledge, or a specific song. Use a metronome half the time to refine your timing, then switch it off to trust your internal clock. Record yourself regularly; playback reveals truths your ears miss in the moment.

Warm-ups & Technique

Warm up slowly and gently — stretch your hands, wrists, and shoulders before you play. Use simple open-string rhythms to settle your touch and time. Then move to basic finger independence patterns (1-2-3-4) up and down the neck, keeping tone and timing even. Focus on clean fretting, even plucking, and smooth position shifts. A relaxed, efficient technique will serve you far better than brute force.

Timing & Groove

Groove is the heartbeat of the music. Spend time with the metronome clicking only on beats 2 and 4 — it’ll train you to feel time instead of chase it. Play along with real records and listen closely to how the bass locks with the drums. Record short exercises or grooves and listen back for consistency. Experiment with playing slightly ahead or behind the beat; learning to control feel is what separates good players from great ones.

Scales & Fingerboard Awareness

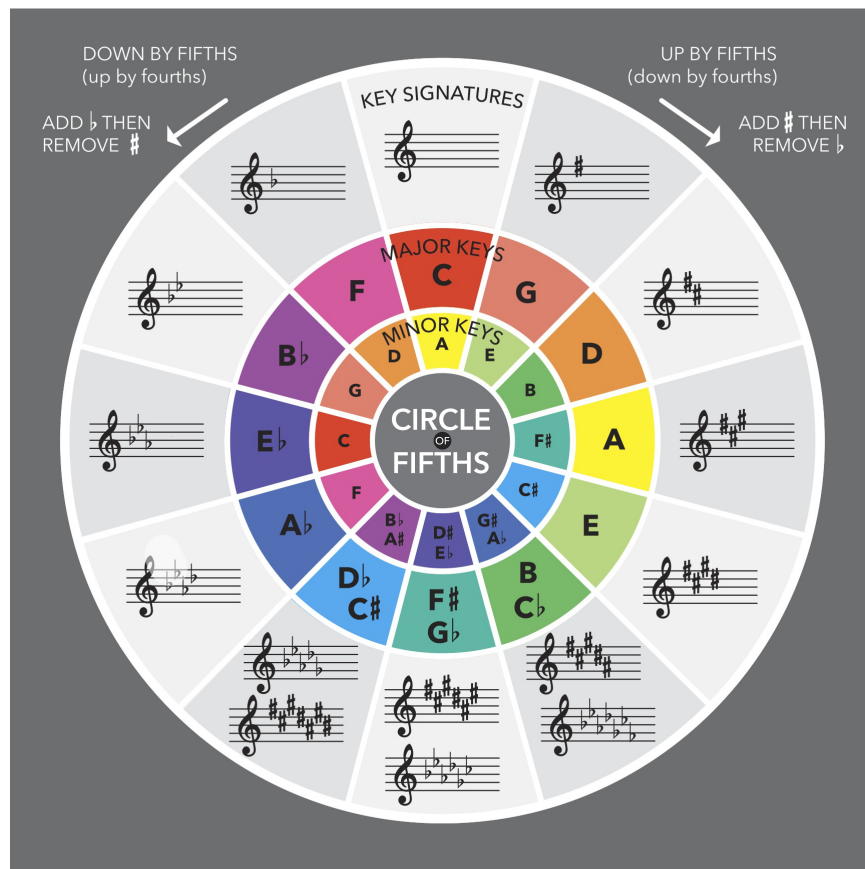
Scales are more than finger exercises — they’re the roadmap of music. Practice major, minor, and pentatonic scales in one position, saying the note names aloud as you play. Explore broken intervals — 3rds, 4ths, 5ths, and 6ths — to strengthen both your ear and your fingers. Work through the circle of fifths to understand key relationships, and remember that tone, time, and phrasing matter more than speed. Turn every scale into a musical idea: play it with dynamics, vary the rhythm, and make it groove.

Ear Training & Theory

Train your ear daily — it's the most powerful tool you have. Sing intervals (root to 3rd, 5th, flat 7th) and match them on your instrument. Learn songs by ear before checking charts or tabs; it strengthens your musical instincts. Connect what you hear to theory — recognise chord tones and progressions in real songs. Understanding how harmony works helps you craft bass lines that truly serve the music.

Mindset & Consistency

Progress comes from steady, mindful repetition. Break your practice into short, focused blocks — warm-ups, groove work, scales, ear training — and give each your full attention. End every session playing something musical and fun; remind yourself why you love the instrument. Always ask, "Is it grooving?" because that's what it's all about — groove, feel, and connection.



Section 2: Gear, Setup & Tone

Great tone doesn't start with expensive gear — it starts with knowing your instrument and treating it well."

Getting Your Bass Set Up

A proper setup can transform the way your bass plays and sounds. Good action (string height), a straight neck, balanced pickups, and healthy electronics all make a huge difference. Any bass — regardless of price — can benefit from a professional setup. It's money well spent, but it's also worth learning to do yourself. Being able to make small adjustments means you can keep your instrument comfortable and reliable wherever you're playing.

Adjusting the Truss Rod and Action

Your truss rod controls the straightness of the neck, and a small tweak makes a big difference to feel and playability. Every neck needs a slight curve, and every player likes a little different tension. Learn how to adjust it safely — just small turns at a time. Once you understand how it works, you can dial your bass in exactly how you like it. Action is the height of the strings above the fingerboard and is adjusted at the Bridge. I recommend learning how to make both Truss Rod and Action adjustments yourself so you can dial in your Bass to how you like it.

Pickup Height and String Choices

Pickup height shapes your tone. Too close, and your strings can distort or lose sustain; too far, and you lose clarity. Take time to experiment. If you want a new sound, start with fresh strings — they're the cheapest tone upgrade you'll ever make. Try flats for warmth, rounds for brightness, or half-rounds for something in between. Use a string gauge that matches your touch and style.

Care and Maintenance

Keep your bass clean and polished — it's a tool of your trade, not a piece of furniture. Wipe it down after gigs, and keep the hardware free of grime. A small investment of care protects your sound and prolongs your bass's life.

Comfort and Setup

Set your strap height so you can play comfortably both sitting and standing. Consistency helps your muscle memory, and proper posture saves your shoulders and wrists over long gigs.

Cables, Tools, and Reliability

Use a good-quality instrument cable — cheap ones fail at the worst time. Always keep a spare cable and battery in your gig bag. Learn to solder; being able to fix a jack or wire can save an entire show. Keep a small toolkit handy with screwdrivers, spare strings, fuses, and tape.

Amp EQ and Tone Shaping

Start with your amp EQ flat, then make small adjustments. Cut frequencies before you boost them — it keeps your tone clear and balanced. Use your amp for warmth and presence, not just volume. Experiment with pickup blends — your best tone often lives in the middle.

Pedals and Effects

Pedals can inspire creativity, but know your clean tone first. It's the foundation everything else builds on. Use compression to even out your dynamics, not to hide sloppy playing.

Protecting Your Gear

Your gear is part of your sound and reputation. Protect it with quality cases, amp covers, and sturdy bags for accessories. A little prevention goes a long way when you're loading in and out of vans, stages, and studios.

Transporting Your Gear

Get yourself a small trolley or cart to move your equipment safely and easily. You can find affordable, lightweight, and foldable options at most hardware stores. It'll save your back, speed up setup and pack-down, and make getting from the car to the venue a whole lot easier.

Straplocks

Always secure your strap — a dropped bass can end a gig fast. Use proper strap locks or Grolsch-style rubber washers, and check them regularly. A solid strap connection keeps your mind on the music, not your gear.

Studio Tone & Direct Recording

In the studio, aim for clarity and consistency. Use a good preamp or DI like a Noble, SansAmp, or similar. Engineers appreciate a clean, flat signal they can shape in the mix — deliver a noise-free, reliable line every time. Bring fresh strings, know your tone, and let the track guide your sound.

In-Ear Monitors (IEMs)

IEMs can be a game changer but take time to adjust to. The clean, isolated sound feels different from hearing an amp move air. Get a good seal with ear tips — fit is everything for bass tone. You don't have to spend a fortune; plenty of affordable IEMs sound great. I have expensive custom-moulded ones, but I often prefer my \$100 AliExpress pair for comfort and balance. Once you're used to them, IEMs protect your hearing and give you consistent monitoring wherever you play.



Section 3: Playing with Others

“The best bass players don’t just play with the band — they make the band feel good.”

Preparation & Rehearsal

Show up ready. Learn the songs before rehearsal — not during it. Preparation earns respect and gives you confidence to focus on groove instead of notes. Make charts, listen to the arrangements, and know the transitions. Being the player who’s reliable and relaxed makes everyone else sound better.

Locking with the Drummer

Your main partnership is with the drummer — that’s where the groove begins. Listen deeply to the kick drum and find that shared pocket. Sometimes you’ll sit on the beat; other times slightly behind it, depending on the style. Communicate with body language — a look or a nod can tighten the whole band instantly.

Listening & Space

Bass isn’t about filling every bar with notes — it’s about making every note count. Leave space for vocals and other instruments. When in doubt, simplify. Great bass lines often sound effortless because they serve the song, not the ego.

Communication on Stage

Make eye contact with the drummer, the singer, and the MD if there is one. Be aware of cues, endings, and dynamics. Watch for hand signals or subtle visual cues during live sets — the more you connect visually, the tighter the band feels musically.

Band Dynamics & Attitude

Keep your volume balanced — you’re part of a mix, not on top of it. Match your energy to the song’s mood and dynamics. Stay calm when something goes wrong — pros recover quietly. Help others when you can; that’s how you get called back.

Studio Collaboration & Preparation

Studio sessions reward preparation and flexibility. If you have a demo of the song, make a chart before the recording date — mark sections, hits, and cues. It's just plain courtesy; it shows the songwriter or producer that you're taking their music seriously and making an effort to contribute positively. Write down any creative ideas you might have, but be ready to pivot. Your bass part has to fit the song and the musicians you're recording with. Bring your best-sounding gear, check intonation, and make sure your instrument is quiet and reliable. Stay open to feedback — producers and artists might have different visions, and being adaptable is part of being professional. Sometimes the simplest idea, recorded cleanly and with feel, is the one that makes the record.

Closing Thought

Every great band shares one truth — when the bass feels right, everything feels right. Your job is to make the song breathe, move, and connect. That's real musicianship.



Section 4: Creativity & Growth

“Creativity doesn’t come from showing off — it comes from listening deeply and making brave choices that serve the song.”

Writing Your Own Bass Lines

Develop the habit of creating, not just copying. When you learn a song, don’t stop at memorising the original line — explore alternatives. Try moving notes to different octaves, altering the rhythm, or leaving more space. This helps you understand why the original works and builds confidence in your own voice.

Transcribing and Studying the Greats

Transcribing bass parts trains your ear and teaches musical language. Pick a few of your heroes — Jamerson, McCartney, Pino, Jaco, Duck Dunn — and write out what they played. Listen for how they respond to the drums, shape phrases, and create tension and release. The goal isn’t to copy; it’s to absorb ideas that inspire your own phrasing.

Listening Beyond the Bass

Great bassists think like arrangers. Pay attention to guitars, keys, percussion, and vocals. Notice how their rhythms and note choices interact with yours. Understanding the whole arrangement helps you leave space and support the song more effectively.

Exploring New Genres

Every style teaches something: funk sharpens feel, reggae teaches patience and space, jazz expands harmony, pop demands consistency, and rock tests stamina and tone. Even if you never play those genres live, exploring them broadens your rhythmic and harmonic vocabulary.

Ear-Led Learning

Whenever possible, learn songs by ear before looking up charts or tabs. It strengthens your musical intuition and deepens your connection to sound. Your ears are your most valuable tool — keep them active and challenged.

From Scales to Music

Scales and theory are tools, not rules. Use them to build lines that express emotion and groove. Start from chord tones, then colour them with passing notes or chromatic approaches. Practise connecting scales to harmony so your ideas always support the song's movement.

Improvisation & Spontaneity

Improvisation isn't random — it's controlled risk. Work with loops or backing tracks to experiment with phrasing and rhythm displacement. Record short jams and listen back critically. The more you explore, the more fluent and confident you become in the moment.

Staying Curious

Keep learning: watch other musicians, read, listen, and ask questions. Curiosity keeps your playing fresh. Growth doesn't stop once you "know" the basics — every gig, session, and rehearsal teaches something new if you stay open to it.

Closing Thought

Creativity is a lifelong journey. Let every note you play be guided by curiosity, feel, and the desire to connect — that's how real growth happens.



Section 5: Professionalism & Longevity

“Your reputation travels faster than your playing — make sure both are solid.”

Professional Attitude

Be early, be ready, and be kind. People remember how you make them feel as much as how you play. Keep your word, follow through on commitments, and maintain a calm, friendly attitude. Being reliable and positive gets you rehired faster than flashy chops ever will.

Appearance & Preparation

Dress for the gig — it’s about respect for the venue, the audience, and the artist. Bring what you need: tuner, spare strings, batteries, tools, and a working pen for notes or charts. Small details show professionalism and reduce stress on stage.

Communication & Collaboration

Listen more than you talk at rehearsals and sessions. Ask questions when needed, and take direction gracefully. Support the music, not your ego — your role is to make everyone else sound better. Be flexible with arrangements and always focus on serving the song.

Social Media & Reputation

Your online presence matters. Post positively, support other musicians, and avoid negativity. Word spreads fast in music circles — protect your reputation by keeping things professional both online and off.

Lifelong Learning

Never stop learning. Keep taking lessons, watch others, and stay curious about new gear, genres, and techniques. Every player, no matter their level, can teach you something. Growth keeps your playing fresh and your enthusiasm alive.

Financial & Practical Awareness

Music is an art, but it’s also a business. Learn to invoice properly, track expenses, and manage your gear and transport costs. Professionalism offstage supports your creativity onstage.

Health & Longevity

Look after your hands, back, and ears — they're your instruments too. Stretch before and after gigs, keep your posture healthy, and wear ear protection in loud environments. A little self-care means you'll still be playing comfortably decades from now. But health goes beyond technique. Eat well, get enough sleep, and spend time outdoors. A bit of sunshine, fresh air, and movement does wonders for your mood and focus. Enjoy nature, exercise regularly, and keep your body strong — it's the engine that supports your creativity. Take time to slow down and centre yourself. Meditation or quiet reflection can help calm nerves, improve focus, and keep you balanced during busy periods of travel, rehearsals, or gigs. Even a few minutes a day can make a big difference in how you feel and play. Avoid relying on alcohol or drugs to cope with nerves or pressure — they only dull your awareness in the long run. Keeping a clear head helps you make better musical and life decisions. Balance your work with rest, laughter, gratitude, and mindfulness. It all feeds back into your music.

Stage Fright & Confidence

Everyone feels nerves; the goal isn't to eliminate them, but to manage them. Reframe nerves as energy. Breathe slowly before you step on stage, feel your feet on the ground, and smile to relax your body. Prepare so well that you can relax — confidence comes from repetition. Focus on the groove and connect with the drummer; the crowd is secondary to the feel.

Accept small mistakes — the audience rarely notices if the groove is strong. Visualise a great performance beforehand. Warm up quietly (hands, shoulders, mind), and don't compare yourself to others — your tone and feel are unique. After the show, reflect on what went right as well as what to improve — that's how confidence grows.

Gratitude & Mindset

Every gig is a gift. Stay grateful, even for the small ones — they all lead somewhere. Keep your sense of joy and connection to the music, because that's what audiences feel. When you play with heart, people remember.

Closing Thought

Professionalism isn't about perfection — it's about attitude, respect, and consistency. Keep showing up, keep improving, and keep loving what you do. That's what builds a lasting career in music.

Final Thoughts

Playing bass is a lifelong journey — of rhythm, tone, creativity, and connection. Every song, rehearsal, and gig teaches you something new if you stay curious and open. Keep learning, keep listening, and keep serving the music.

Look after yourself along the way. A healthy body, a clear mind, and a grateful attitude will carry you further than any gear or technique ever could. When you take care of yourself, you take care of your music too.

Groove. Feel. Connect.

