

FIVE SECRETS

TO BECOMING A

BETTER BASSIST AND MUSICIAN



Welcome to my “**5 Secrets to Becoming a Better Bassist and Musician.**” I created this PDF to help you improve as a bassist and musician, and I hope you enjoy it and get something out of it.

I picked 5 things that are important TO ME no matter your skill level. Some of my secrets are common, some of them not so much. Improvement can mean a lot of things - it isn't ONLY how good you can play. There is that, and it's great if you can play well.

But there are other things like learning how to connect with others, keeping a positive attitude, and knowing what to focus on when you get frustrated, because it will happen. Music isn't easy.

In my 25 years of playing bass professionally, I've learned a lot, and I want to share some of it with you. Bottom line... I WANT YOU TO GET BETTER!

It starts now. What follows are my 5 secrets...

Keep playing bass,
MURPHY KARGES

5 SECRETS TO BECOMING A BETTER BASSIST AND MUSICIAN

By Murphy Karges



About to go onstage, opening for Bon Jovi at Giants Stadium, 2001. Dyed hair! The 1990's! (Kind of)

#1. YOU NEED TO HAVE GOOD TIMING AS A BASSIST

No matter what style & genre you play as a bassist, you are primarily a rhythm instrument. You play with the drummer to create the foundation for the music. There are other rhythm instruments (rhythm guitar, keyboards, percussion) but the bass is vital because you LOCK IN in with the drums and you are often playing the ROOT of the song. You provide the big, beefy bottom end that shakes the concrete foundation of the club, garage, theater, or stadium you are playing. If you're not locked in with your timing and rhythm, just imagine that power, that low end depth being 'off' the beat. You don't want that.

One of the best ways to improve your timing is to record yourself. Play along with a beat and then record it. You get instant feedback, and a clear representation of what you need to work on. I used to do it with a four-track recorder. I would plug my bass into one track, then I'd have my drum machine on another. I'd push play on a beat, start jamming, and record it. You find out very quickly if you are playing behind, on, or ahead of the beat. If you play bass long enough, you'll eventually learn that there are different times you WANT to be doing all THREE – behind, on it, or pushing a bit. But that's advanced... For now, let's just stick with the basics of improving your timing in general. (I have to say I still remember the make and model of that drum machine without even looking it up – Alesis HR-16. Iconic!)

If you don't have a DAW (digital audio workstation) then just open YouTube to a page of practice drumbeats or Spotify to something similar. Plug your bass into an amp, jam along with beats, and record it on the Voice Memo of your iPhone (Or any smartphone). It doesn't have to sound perfect. Just so that you can hear what is going on. Music isn't easy, so hang in there and be positive when you listen back to hear what you've done.

Did you hear what I said? **STAY POSITIVE!**

You're playing music right now, and you're probably playing along to your favorite music. What's not to be stoked about?

Good timing also equates to your pocket. That's HUGE as a bass player. How good is your feel? The better your timing, the more your pocket improves. Pocket is your groove, your feel, in any track, regardless of genre. And it's not just being a robot and playing on time but understanding how you want the song to feel.

For a masterclass on feel, or pocket, watch Victor Wooten in this video called 'Every BASSIST needs to HEAR this.' He talks about feel verses technique, notes, theory. You need to watch it. It's got almost 5 million views. For a bassist. Talking about feel. Love it.

When I used to teach kids to play bass, I was always surprised when I didn't see their foot tapping along as they played. I can't play anything without thinking of the tempo in my brain and tapping my right foot along. To me, music IS rhythm. If there is no rhythm, it's just random notes, unconnected, floating in the space of the universe, unintentional. However, if they are tied to a rhythm, then now it's music to me. I can follow it. I can feel the beat. I can sense the timing. The good news about learning to have good timing is that anyone can do it. It's not a God given talent that mere mortals like us can't learn. **EVERYONE can have good timing.** You just have to work at it. You must practice. A lot. But that's OK, because this isn't Algebra. It's bass! And bass is rad and fun.

I found a playlist on Spotify to jam along to beats. Click the link: [Drum Loops For Jamming on Bass](#)





#2. SHOW RESTRAINT

Everybody, when they start out, wants to be busy. It's because you want to show everyone you can play. It's rooted in insecurity. But when you become more advanced, what's ironic is that you often don't want people to hear you, because you're playing for the song, and you want to disappear into the music. Trust me, playing simple is cool.

The reason why people think otherwise is because playing simple isn't easy. It's hard. You are left wide open. Busyness can cover up issues of timing. **Playing simple, or with restraint, exposes you.**

Showing restraint also shows that you're not living in a bubble of your own. It means you're aware of the bigger picture, aware of what's around you. That's good. That shows confidence, poise, and maturity. If you're always off on your own in rehearsal, or in the studio, fiddling away and noodling away on little bass solos, then people will soon disregard you, because you're not connected and focused on what is happening in the moment. Do your noodling on your own time. A little bit is OK. But make sure the other members understand they have your attention. Don't think of restraint as only in your playing. You can show restraint in how you listen or react to things.

In preproduction for our self-titled 4th album, a part had been written for the song 'Under The Sun' and Rodney was playing it 'wrong.' One of the chords was written to be played as A minor, but he played as an A7 chord. I'm like,

"Hey Rod, dude, it's supposed to be A minor..."
It wasn't contentious at all. He just casually said,
"I think this sounds pretty cool though..."

I thought it sounded sour, and I'd gotten used to how it was written (my brother wrote the verse chords – trivia!). I always had opinions when it came to writing because from the earliest time of our band, as The Shrinky Dinx, I was the main music writer. It was partially because nobody else wanted to write as much as me, but also because I had a lot of ideas and wasn't afraid to share them. I pushed back a little and told him that I thought it should stay A minor. But we got to working on some other things, and it wasn't that big of a deal. I was confident that as the song developed further, if it continued to sound weird, then common sense would prevail among us all, and we'd change it back to A minor.



Filming the music video for 'Someday' in Florida in 1999

But what do you think wound up happening? What happened was that I started digging it. I grew to LOVE the A7 in there. The minor chord sounded pedestrian. The A7 was much cooler and more flavorful. I love it now. That moment taught me something important. It taught me that you should take somebody else's opinion every once in a while, even if you think you're right. Just let it go. There is other work to be done, and other battles to wage.

One more thing on restraint - if you think about what a song is – it's a story. It's not an instrumental jam where you are supposed to stand out on bass and play fills every verse and chorus. As the bassist, you're playing part of the song. You're NOT the song. You're just playing one part of it. If you look at it that way, then it's your job to play with restraint. And I've always thought that if you're a bass player who doesn't play busy, or with a lot of fills, then man, you'll REALLY hear it when you do a fill. It'll stand out. Because you're not normally busy. Which to me is cool. Learn to play and act with restraint.

#3. TAKE CARE OF YOUR AXE

This is something you don't hear very often when people talk about becoming a better bassist, or improving as a musician, or tips for playing better. But I'll tell you, if you've ever played a bass that had terrible, high action, or just a crappy overall feel to it – almost neglected, then you won't be inspired no matter how much internal happiness you feel about music and your bass.



But if you play a bass guitar that is 'set up', and it's silky smooth, and it sounds good, and it's relatively easy to play, then MAN oh MAN – you're in for a treat. You can get lost in that guitar for hours.

It DOES matter how it plays. Sure, Flea could probably pick up a bass that was old and had terrible action, and rip it, but he wouldn't play it for long. He'd jam on it for a bit, impressing everyone, but he'd soon put it down, and look for something that had a better vibe to it, something that spoke back to him, something that had been setup well and cared for. No matter how good a player is, the novelty of them being able to shred on lesser gear wears off quickly and then they'll want something that feels better. The difference isn't that they CAN'T play the neglected one. It's that they wouldn't play it for LONG. And you need to noodle and play on your instrument. It's vital. Some of the greatest songs ever written have come from noodling, just messing around, without the pressure or intent of writing something important.

If your bass plays perfect, flawless, then you might not need it. But if you've never had it done, it's worth finding someone good and investing in a setup. It costs about \$100, and a good guitar doc really tries to put your instrument into the best playing shape it could possibly be. Just Google "Guitar Setup" or "Guitar Doctor" in your local area to find someone. Good article [HERE](#) on what a "Setup" is all about. Or just hire my guy if you're in Southern California.. Click here: [The Guitar Doctor](#).



#4. BE A MUSIC FAN FIRST

I'm serious about this. It's an important step in developing as a musician for so many reasons. One of the main reasons is that this is where it all starts. The inspiration. The music you love. It's what landed you here, reading this PDF. You started out loving music in the first place, you were a FAN. Well... so was every other great musician that you know and love. But here's the difference...

You're going to tangibly use those great artists and learn from them. This is your college, your university waiting free-of-charge to learn from the greatest of all time. The most successful artists ever. All their skill sets are on display for you to comb through and gather bits and pieces for yourself. Yes. YOU BET you will be taking bits and pieces of inspiration from them to use as your own.

Where else do we get it from? And it's not ripping off, and it's not un-creative. It's being proactive and using what's available. David Bowie didn't pull his identity and sound out of nowhere. He grew it from his favorite artists and eventually made it his own. He famously said,

"THE ONLY ART I'LL EVERY STUDY IS STUFF THAT I CAN STEAL FROM..."



You can study a lot of music theory, but is it always necessary? At the end of the day, **you need to play music, so LISTEN to music.** Theory informs you of how it all fits together, which might be nice for some people, but more importantly, in my mind, is not how it works, but how it sounds.*

Because that's everything. What's coming out of your bass amp, what's coming out of the speakers.

Listen to great music. Be a student of listening.



Hallftime at the 2001 NBA Finals

Every great artist in the world began as a fan. Elton John, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, and new artists today, Drake, Post Malone, Taylor Swift, Foo Fighters.. whoever... **they were all music fans first.** They all started listening to records and those records perked their ears. They were like,

“Wait, what is this...??”

And then they were hooked.

Go back to being a dedicated fan of all your favorite records, all your favorite artists, because they’re giving you their best stuff. Those albums aren’t their demo tapes. Those records are the greatest realization of their talent – which is so amazing – it’s like this incredible cheat sheet on how to do things well.

So:

- 1.Reinvest in your music
- 2.Listen intently

It’s good to just listen idly, but sometimes take an evening off, and put on your favorite record. And just sit there and really focus on listening. Being present.

If you put music first, even before you touch a guitar, you’ll have your priorities inline. You will have your priorities inline because you will understand that it’s not about you, it’s about serving the music, and the pressure will be taken off you to be ‘great.’ You’ll be free to enjoy it and just play for the joy of music. So bury yourself in great music, and focus on listening and soaking it in distraction free. It’ll make you a better bass player and musician.

**I’m not here to get into a war about theory vs. no theory – I speak to what worked for ME, and it wasn’t theory, it was listening. If studying music theory inspires YOU, motivates you and gets you excited, then go for it!*

#5 HAVE A POSITIVE, CONFIDENT, HUMBLE ATTITUDE

Have a positive, confident but humble attitude. What that means is you're going to see the bright side of things. You're not going to get dragged down by situations that don't go your way. You're going to work hard, be realistic and know that it takes time for good things to happen. You're not going to say or think, "Oh I'm never going to get that gig," or "That'll never be me..."

With a good attitude, when something bad happens to you, you won't dwell too long on the negative. You may even be inclined to see the silver lining. Not all successes happen on the first try. You will say, "Next time," and realize that everything in life is a learning experience, and you'll be better for it. There is always another gig, another opportunity for you to apply yourself and your music and your bass playing.

It's okay to feel the pain of something not going your way...

You SHOULD feel it, and take it in. Because that rejection, failure, pain, and loss is what fires us up and *REMINDS us of what we want.*

But there is a big difference from that and from letting failure guide how you operate and think. Keeping a positive attitude means you won't let failure become a long-term viewpoint that gets stuck in your head, and you won't let it color new opportunities that come your way. If you have a friend who is doing well (at whatever it is YOU want to do), you will not become envious, or jealous, instead you'll see it as an opportunity that if they can do it – then you can do it too.

I want you to believe that. I NEED you to believe it. I can give you an example from my own life.



Stan and I in the studio cutting "Into Yesterday" for the animated movie "Surf's Up"

Two years before my band got a record deal from Atlantic Records in 1994, I saw my high school friend Tim explode in the band Rage Against The Machine. Yeah... it was crazy to see him in that band. I was like... "HOLY SH*T! That's Tim and Zach's band..."



Opening for Bon Jovi at the Meadowlands - trying to not screw up and keep it cool in front of 60,000 people

They were a grade below me, and here they were, years later, blowing up the world with their debut album. I can say this with complete honesty, and I'm not looking back with rose colored glasses, because I remember the EXACT feeling as I saw what they were doing.

It got me motivated.

The MAIN reason why I wasn't jealous or envious, and this I'M CERTAIN OF, is because I was doing what I loved. I hadn't given up on my dream of music and settled for a 'good' job as a dental assistant, a legal temp, an X-Ray lab assistant (My mom kept on pushing me to apply for this one X-Ray job at UC Irvine – it was hilarious) at that point in my life. If I was STUCK at one of those jobs I hated, then I would have been completely miserable. I would of said, "Ahh shit. Damn this crappy job... I want to go back to Rock 'n Roll..!!"

But since I was planted firmly in my crappy job (I think I was delivering pizzas at the time... at Little Caesar's), I was OK with it because it gave me time to work on my music. ALL of my FOCUS was being poured into my music every moment I possibly had. I was going to make it, and there was no other option to me. I would outwork everyone around me, all my life, no matter how long it took, until I reached my own personal goal – I wanted to make records and tour the world.

So that's why I was cool with Tim crushing it. Because I was in the process of taking my own shot. If anything, it just validated that I could do it too.

No matter your goal, having a great attitude will help you achieve it. Things won't always be easy. It will get hard. It will become a huge pain in the ass, and you'll want to quit and throw in the towel. Lots of things will attempt to throw you off: Lessons are hard, people are negative, unreliable, it's hard to find musicians as dedicated as you, money is tight, your own self-doubt, or your demo sounds like crap. These are just obstacles. Don't let them be finish lines.

Do you have a friend who reacts well to adversity? If you do, keep them around. If you don't, just find a fictional friend from a book or an author, anyone successful who you can follow who has a strong will and never-say-die attitude toward adversity, because they'll inspire you to keep going.

Keep positive people around you. It's not fake. It's not living in a bubble. It's choosing to see love, opportunity and passion, as opposed to doubt, fear, and conformity.

Remain positive (bad times don't last), stay confident (put in the work to become good) and be humble (gratitude takes you farther).

It's up to you to guard your attitude. Your attitude can save you.

Thanks for joining me on my 5 Secrets PDF... I hope it has in some small way, inspired you to improve, explore or get excited about your bass playing, your talent and your passion for music.

If you enjoyed this PDF at all, or have a comment, idea or thought, please reach out to me at one of the links below. Leave a message on my latest YouTube video, DM me on IG, or send me an email from my website.

Keep playing bass,
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2023

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