

EQUIPMENT TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUE IN JAZZ BASS HISTORY

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THE ROLE OF EQUIPMENT TECHNOLOGY IN HISTORY

➤ Chicken and egg situation:

Is music history determined by advances in equipment technology or is equipment technology ?

➤ Beginning with Stradeveri in the early 1700s, changes in violin construction, bow theory and the reliance on steel-wound gut strings led to a violin revolution that culminated with the works of Arcangelo Corelli, an Italian composer from the 1760s.

➤ A precursor to the Swing Era was the development of the hi-hat in the 1920's, the last piece of the modern drum set. During the Swing Era, drummers kept time on this new instrument, a pattern that is cliché today.

EARLY JAZZ BASS HISTORY AND SELF-TAUGHT MUSICIANS

- Early jazz bassists are renowned for their poor technique. This due to a few factors:
 - Jazz was music born on the “streets”, therefore there weren’t any established method of performance or even a set instrumentation
 - Most early jazz musicians did not have any formal training beyond private instruction
 - As an African American art form, musicians focused more on their ears than their eyes when playing music.
 - By today’s standards bass equipment in the 1920’s was still in its infancy: gut strings and high action with no amplification.
- Until the arrival of Jimmy Blanton, there was no standardized method of playing pizzicato in a jazz setting. Jazz bassists were experimenting with various right hand techniques.

“BLACK AND TAN FANTASY” (1927) DUKE ELLINGTON FEATURING WELLMAN BRAUD



“BEALE STREET BLUES” (1963) MUGGSY SPANIER FEATURING POPS FOSTER



“ONE O’CLOCK JUMP” (1943) COUNT BASIE



JIMMY BLANTON

- Although there are no surviving videos of Jimmy Blanton performing, one can discern from his playing that he had established a method of playing pizzicato that allowed him to get a bigger sound and to play faster:
 - Anchored his hand on the fingerboard (probably with his thumb)
 - Minimized hand movements up and down the fingerboard for a consistent tone
 - Kept his right hand towards the end of the fingerboard for a more percussive tone
 - Relied primarily on his index finger
 - A solid left hand technique (from his background in Classical?)
- His playing set a standard of technique that allowed jazz bass to flourish

“ONE BASS HIT” (1946) DIZZY GILLESPIE WITH RAY BROWN



DOUBLE BASS RENAISSANCE OF THE MID-20TH CENTURY

- Pierre Delescluse's development of the first complete set of steel strings for double bass in the 1930's, bringing about an advancement of bass standard and performance
- Made from a solid, reliable substance, intonation problems were minimized. The thinner gauge also made the bass easier to play with reduced effort and allowed for a lower string height from the fingerboard.
- Opened new areas of technical skill and initiated the double bass renaissance of the mid-20th century
- Serge Koussevitsky was an early admirer of the strings and made his bass section in the Boston Symphony switch.

SCOTT LAFARO

- Initiated a new standard of virtuosity on the double bass with the Bill Evans trio
- Previously, bassists were struggling with their volume on stage, competing with drums and the rest of the ensemble
- Gene Ramey:
“I had to do whatever I could to compete with the drummer, like raising my strings about an inch. The higher you set your strings the more volume you can get out of the bass, but you have to be very careful of getting out of tune. You also have to pull the strings as if they were ropes...anything to get loud enough.”

- For all of LaFaro's technical accomplishments on the bass, little has been said of his own light, clear and bright sound, qualities which were unheard of for jazz bassists of his time.
- LaFaro made a few additional changes to Blanton's achievements:
 - Use of thinner strings:
By 1960, gut strings were considerably thinner than they were forty years prior. Though there is not much evidence that LaFaro played metal strings, he surely took advantage of the lighter-gauged strings that were becoming increasingly available.
 - Lower string height from a custom-made bridge
 - Used the weight of the fingers rather than the arm to produce his sound
 - Adopted and popularized a two-finger approach that allowed for faster passages

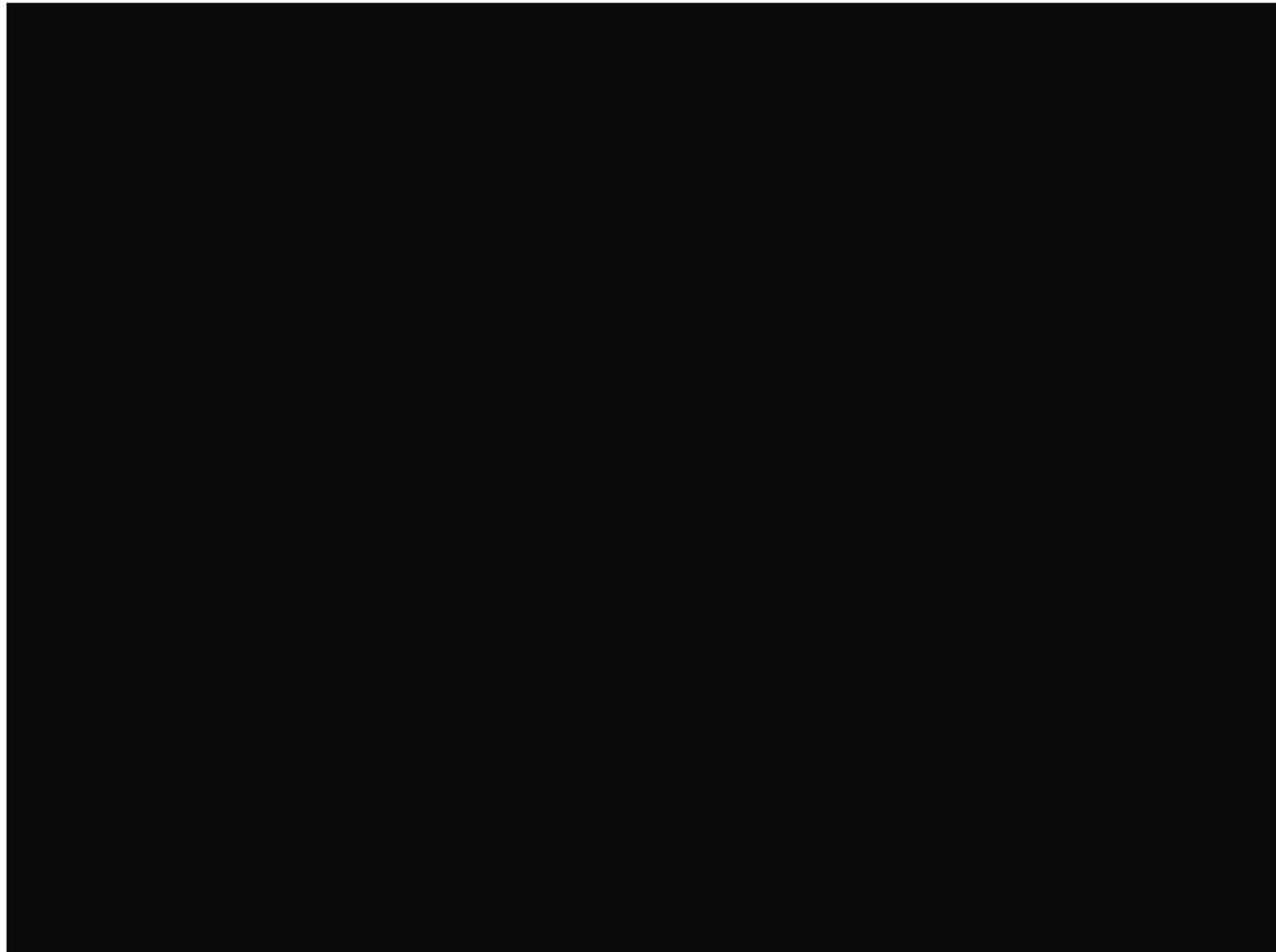
ONE-FINGER APPROACH

- While classical guitarists have always used all five fingers in their right hand, the prevailing philosophy for acoustic bassists of the time was to use one finger, sometimes using both the index and the middle fingers as “one” large finger
- This philosophy held over on early electric basses, which were designed with a tug bar: a finger rest allowing players to play one finger, in this case, the thumb.



A UNIQUE TAKE

- Today, just about all electric bassists play with two-fingers, however, a famous example of an electric bassist who played with one finger is James Jamerson.

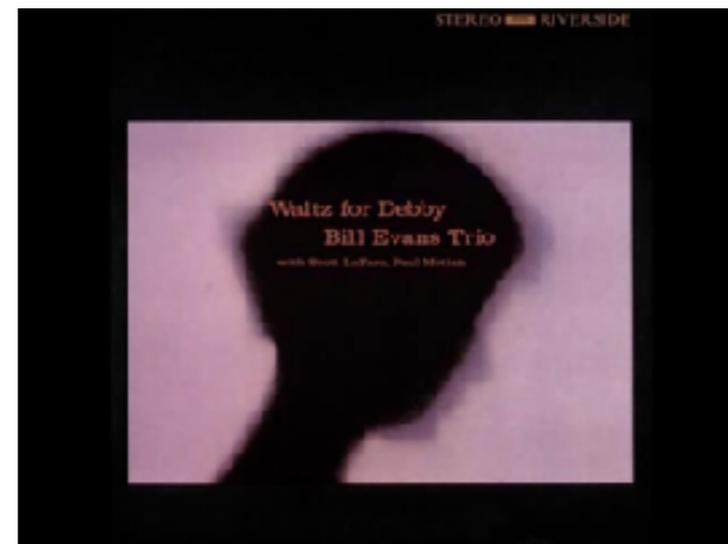


TWO-FINGERED APPROACH

- **Red Mitchell** is often cited as one of the first to use a two-finger pizzicato approach on the double bass during the 1950's in Los Angeles.
- Many of his peers in Los Angeles also adopted this device including **Charles Mingus**, **Don Bagley** and **Scott LaFaro**.
- LaFaro's two-finger approach was further popularized by **Eddie Gomez** and **Neils Henning Orsted-Pederson**, who went on to incorporate three fingers in his right hand.

LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD

- Since drummer Paul Motian mostly played brushes with the trio (instead of the ride cymbal for keeping time), LaFaro was able to not worry about the loss in volume resulting from low action.
- Though many jazz bassists did not use a microphone when playing live, LaFaro may have seen the potential in relying on the microphone for volume.
- “Waltz for Debby” (1961)



ELECTRIC BASS AND FUSION

- Though Monk Montgomery pioneered the use of the electric bass in jazz in the 1950's, it did not become more widely used in jazz until the advent of the Fusion-era (c.1969-1970)
- The electric sound was very popular in the 1970's (and 1980's) and so even in traditional jazz or bebop situations the acoustic bass sounded like an electric instrument.
- The first bass pickups were produced and the new jazz sound for acoustic bassists was through an amplifier
- Electric bass became more common as many acoustic bassists began to double (Ron Carter, Ray Brown, Stanley Clarke)
- By this time, electric bassists were using the two-fingered approach and acoustic bassists like Stanley Clarke were playing the acoustic bass *like* an electric bass

RETURN TO FORVER FEATURING STANLEY CLARKE (1973)



TECHNOLOGY AND JAZZ BASS TODAY

- A few major developments:
 - A renaissance of improved technology for jazz bassists since the 1990's: superior pickups, synthetic gut strings and mass-made lighter bass amplifiers, etc.
 - The internet
 - Continued use of current technology to produce new music

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