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Understanding chords is a critical part of mastering the notes side of bass playing (as opposed to the rhythm side). If you find yourself frustrated not knowing what notes to play in an original bassline, it's probably because you don't know and understand chords.

Chords are essential. I urge you to be very thorough in reading this and other lessons I add in this category.

What is a Chord?

A **CHORD** is a group of notes played together at the same time. Bassists don't play chords as often as guitarists or pianists do. This is because playing several low-pitched notes at the same time can sound muddy. Playing chords on bass can sometimes fill up too much sonic space competing with the rest of the band. It can be done, but must be done with care.

Instead of playing chords directly, bassists *outline* the notes of chords. Bassists emphasize the individual notes that make up chords. By outlining the notes of chords a bassist implies the sound of a particular chord.

I always explain to students it's like guitarists say a whole word (e.g. "dog"), while bassists spell it out (e.g. "D" "O" "G"). We get the same point across, but in a different way.

To give you an example, a C major chord is created by playing a combination of the notes C, E, and G at the same time. As a bass player I can create the impression of a C major chord in the bassline by outlining the notes C, E, and G individually. I could play them in order, repeat notes, change the order, etc. If I played C-C-E-E-G-G-E-E, I would be implying the sound of a C major chord.

If you studied some of the [common bass pattern lessons \(http://www.studybass.com/lessons/common-bass-patterns/\)](http://www.studybass.com/lessons/common-bass-patterns/), you've already learned some important notes that outline chords. The root, fifth, and seventh are all notes from common chords.

Defining Chords, Arpeggios, and Chord Patterns

Since we'll be discussing chords and the notes within them a lot, we need to make some clear definitions and distinctions between chords, arpeggios, and chord patterns:

A **CHORD** is three or more different notes played at the same time.

An **ARPEGGIO** (pronounced ar-pay-zhee-oh) is the individual notes of a chord played one after another. For example, a C major arpeggio is played C, E, G, and C an octave higher. An arpeggio typically implies that the notes are played *in order* from lowest to highest and often back down.

You will play and practice arpeggios up and down a lot. A healthier perspective on thinking about chords and arpeggios is thinking about the notes as a specific set of notes. I will usually refer to

this set of notes as *chord tones*. **CHORD TONES** are the individual notes that make up a particular chord. C, E, and G are the chord tones for a C major chord. No order of notes from low to high is implied when I say “chord tones.”

A **CHORD PATTERN** is a pattern of chord tones on the bass fretboard. I will start you off with easy chord patterns and eventually teach them to you all over the fretboard.



What’s the Difference Between a Scale and a Chord Pattern?

I get asked this question a lot. Scales and chords are both specific groups of notes, but there are a couple of important differences. The main difference is the notes of a chord are played *all at the same time*. The notes of a scale are not. It is possible (and common) to derive chords from the notes of scales.

Chords usually have fewer notes than scales. Most chords contain 3 or 4 different notes. Most scales contain 7 notes.

Why Learn Chord Patterns?

As a bass player your role is to support the sound of each chord. If you don’t know chord patterns, you can’t fulfill your obligations. The better you know your chord tones, the better you’ll be able to define the sound of each chord. And, you’ll be able to do it more interestingly and creatively.

Don’t Bassists Play Things Other Than the Notes of Chords?

Yes, they absolutely do. The key thing to understand is that chord tones are the heart of a bassline. Other notes derived from scales, or chromatic notes, serve to complement and embellish the chord tones. Without properly emphasizing chord tones, you will end up with a weak bassline.

In Summary

If you haven’t guessed by now, studying chord tones is going to be a major part of your studies as a bass player. The better you learn about chord tones, the stronger your basslines will be. The stronger your basslines are, the more people will want your bass playing services.

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