

Electric Vs. Upright – Transitioning from one to the other

More and more nowadays, it is necessary for those who play bass to be ‘doubblers’, those who can play electric and upright bass. This might seem like a simple task since both instruments are tuned the same and serve the same role on the bandstand, but don’t be fooled. These are two different instruments that use different muscles in your hands as well as a different approach to learning the instrument.

The majority of bassists start on upright, then will learn electric. But, nowadays the opposite is true. Electric bass is still a fairly new instrument compared to the upright bass, but more are going to electric due to its sound, construction, and portability among other reasons. Below are some basic similarities and differences in the instruments that I have found, specifically if you are transitioning from Electric to Upright. Again these are just basic, nothing too detailed

Some similarities are:

- Tuning: Both instruments are tuned EADG. It makes it easy to transition just on that alone
- Reading: Both instruments use Bass Clef to read.
- Some muscle memory: the spacing from G# to A on the G-string is pretty much identical.

Some differences are:

- Technique: The bass is played vertically on upright, but an electric is played horizontally, hence the name bass guitar.
- No frets: Visually it is easier to play electric due to the fact that there are frets. On an upright, there are no frets, so you have to rely more on muscle memory and ear. Most learn Upright by ‘positions.’ This is laid out well in the Simandl book, a standard for learning the upright bass.
- Bow: Much of my practice on Upright uses the bow. This helps much with left hand intonation. There is a little wiggle room with intonation using your fingers, but with a bow you have to be ON.
- Intonation/Ear: This applies to the previous two. Much of left hand technique is muscle memory and using your ear to know whether the note is in tune or not and adjusting quickly.

- Tone in right hand: Electric uses a little more finesse in the right hand. On upright, it is much more physical. I developed blisters much more often while learning upright than electric due to the physical nature of plucking on the upright.
- More Range: the lowest note on a 4 string bass is the low E. But on an upright bass, your highest note is much higher, around a high C# - the equivalent of the 30th fret or so on electric. A fender bass goes up to 20 frets.
- Care of the instrument: Both are made of wood, but due to the fact that an upright bass is much larger AND acoustic, it needs much more attention and care. I always tell my students it is like having a child in a way. Can't leave it in the car for long, and have to make sure it is kept in a temperature-controlled room that is not too dry or humid.

As you can see, transitioning from one to the other, especially from electric to upright, is no easy task. Treat them as separate instruments, but use your music knowledge on one to apply to the other, much like learning a language.