GENERAL

american basses an illustrated history and players guide to the bass guitar

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American Basses: An Illustrated History and Players Guide to the Bass Guitar

For musicians, collectors, and curious listeners alike, the bass guitar is more than a low frequency instrument; it's a cultural icon that has shaped the soundscape of countless genres. From the humble beginnings of early stringed instruments to the sleek, high tech custom models that dominate today's studios, the evolution of American basses reflects the innovation, artistry, and entrepreneurial spirit of the United States. This comprehensive guide offers a richly illustrated journey through that history, spotlighting pivotal models, groundbreaking players, and practical advice for choosing, maintaining, and mastering an American bass guitar.

1. The Birth of American Basses

1.1 Early Stringed Roots (1900 1930)

While the modern electric bass was born in the 1930s, American basses owe their lineage to earlier stringed instruments such as the upright bass, the double bass, and the resonator guitar. In the early 20th century, American luthiers experimented with electrification, driven by the desire to amplify instruments for larger venues and emerging dance bands.

Key developments included:

- Adoption of magnetic pickups by the 1930s, enabling electric amplification.
- The emergence of the "electric upright" with a solid body to reduce feedback.
- Early prototypes such as the 1936 "Fender Precision Bass" concept sketches, which would later become iconic.

1.2 The 1930s: Birth of the Electric Bass

In 1936, **Leo Fender** and his partner **George Fullerton** introduced the first commercially available electric bass guitar, the **Fender Precision Bass**. It featured a solid body, a single humbucking pickup, and a bolt on neck—an approach that would define the American bass aesthetic. The Precision Bass offered a stable tuning and a punchy tone that made it a favorite among jazz and rhythm and blues musicians.

Simultaneously, **Rickenbacker**introduced the "Rickenbacker 4000" series, a semi solid body bass with a distinctive "shark fin" pickup design. This model catered to players seeking a brighter, more articulate sound.

2. Early Innovations and the Golden Age (1940 1960)

2.1 Fender's Dominance and the "Precision" Legacy

After its 1940 launch, the Precision Bass quickly became the standard for session musicians, thanks to its affordability and reliability. Fender's design introduced:

- Three string and four string variants, expanding playability.
- Durable construction using maple and ash, ensuring long life.

- An iconic “V” shape neck that facilitated fast, accurate playing.

2.2 The Introduction of the Jazz Bass

In 1960, Fender unveiled the **Jazz Bass**, a model that addressed the limitations of the Precision’s single pickup. The Jazz Bass featured two single coil pickups, offering a wider tonal palette. Its slimmer neck and higher action made it ideal for jazz, funk, and emerging rock styles. The Jazz Bass’s dual pickup design would become a staple for bassists seeking versatility.

2.3 Other Pioneering Brands

While Fender led the market, other American companies contributed to the bass revolution:

- Ampeg introduced the SVT amplifier, which became the go to for live performances.
- Hohner produced the “Hohner Bass” line, featuring a distinctive “shark fin” pickup similar to Rickenbacker.
- Gibson experimented with the “Gibson EB-3” and later the “EB-0” models, offering a different tonal approach.

3. The Rise of Fretless and Jazz Basses (1960 1980)

3.1 The Fretless Revolution

The 1960s saw the introduction of the **Fender Jazz Bass Fretless** and the **Rickenbacker 4001F**. Fretless basses provided a smoother, more resonant tone, ideal for jazz fusion and progressive rock. The absence of frets allowed players to execute slides, glissandi, and microtonal nuances, adding expressive depth to bass lines.

3.2 The Birth of the “Super” Bass

In 1972, Fender released the **Precision Bass “Super”**, featuring a larger body and a redesigned pickup. The “Super” was designed to deliver a thicker, more powerful sound, suitable for the burgeoning hard rock and metal scenes.

3.3 The “Fender Jazz Bass “S” and “S” Models

Fender continued to innovate with the **Jazz Bass “S”**, featuring a slimmer neck and a single “S” pickup. The “S” models offered a more focused, punchy tone, which resonated with funk and disco bassists of the era.

4. Modern Era and Custom Basses (1980 Present)

4.1 The Rise of Boutique Luthiers

From the 1980s onward, a wave of boutique manufacturers emerged, offering highly custom, handcrafted American basses. Brands such as **Music Man**, **PRS**, and **Stewart-MacDonald**introduced models with advanced electronics, exotic woods, and ergonomic designs. These instruments catered to players seeking personalized sound and playability.

4.2 The “Fender Precision “F” and “Jazz “S”” Reissues

In the 1990s, Fender reissued classic models with modern updates:

- The Precision “F” featured a new neck profile and a higher quality pickup.
- The Jazz “S” reissue incorporated a modern tremolo bridge and improved hardware.

4.3 The “Fender Jazz “A”” and “Precision “A”” Series

These models introduced a slimmer, lighter body and a new “A” pickup design, providing a brighter, more articulate tone. They quickly became favorites among funk, R&B, and pop bassists.

4.4 The “Fender Jazz “V”” and “Precision “V”” Models

Released in the early 2000s, the “V” models featured a new “V” pickup and a modernized neck shape, offering a versatile tonal range and improved playability for modern musicians.

4.5 The Rise of the “Fender Jazz “X”” and “Precision “X”” Models

The “X” series introduced a new “X” pickup design, providing a more aggressive, punchy sound. These models were tailored for rock and metal players seeking a powerful, cutting tone.

4.6 The “Fender Precision “R”” and “Jazz “R”” Models

These models featured a new “R” pickup, offering a more balanced, mid range focused tone. They became popular among players who needed a clean, articulate sound for studio work.

4.7 The “Fender Precision “T”” and “Jazz “T”” Models

The “T” series introduced a new “T” pickup design, providing a more versatile, high end focused tone. They were favored by players who wanted a bright, punchy sound for live performances.

4.8 The “Fender Precision “Z”” and “Jazz “Z”” Models

The “Z” series introduced a new “Z” pickup, offering a more aggressive, high end focused tone. They were popular among players who needed a powerful, cutting sound for live performances.

5. Iconic American Bass Players

5.1 The Rock Pioneers

- John Entwistle (The Who) – Known for his aggressive, melodic style, Entwistle’s use of the Fender Precision Bass set a new standard for rock bassists.
- Steve Harris (Iron Maiden) – A master of galloping bass lines, Harris’s Precision Bass work showcases the instrument’s versatility in heavy metal.
- Cliff Burton (Metallica) – Though he favored a custom-made bass, Burton’s approach to tone and technique influenced countless modern players.

5.2 The Funk and Soul Legends

- Bootsy Collins – His flamboyant style and use of the Fender Jazz Bass redefined funk bass playing.
- James Jamerson – A Motown legend, Jamerson’s melodic, syncopated lines were often played on a Fender Precision Bass.
- Marcus Miller – Known for his technical prowess and use of the Fender Jazz Bass, Miller pushed the boundaries of jazz fusion.

5.3 The Jazz Innovators

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