Bass players are often underestimated. They only play single notes and not chords, they say. But that's not true. Bassists play chords, only resolved into consecutive tones. In fact, bassists have to understand more about music theory than many other instrumentalists. That's what this course is about.

WORKSHOP

(UKULELE-) BASS

FOR BEGINNERS & ADVANCED

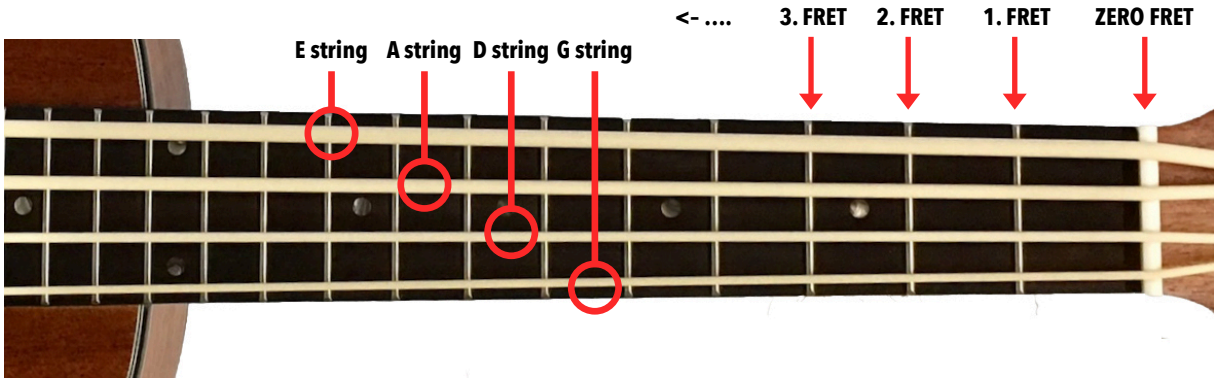
If you have this hand-out, you have probably participated in my workshop. Of course, that was a lot of information in a short time. Hardly anyone for whom all this is new can remember everything I told you. So here is everything again for home.

You can download the audio samples here:

https://www.ukelites.de/bassworkshop.html

Let`s get started:

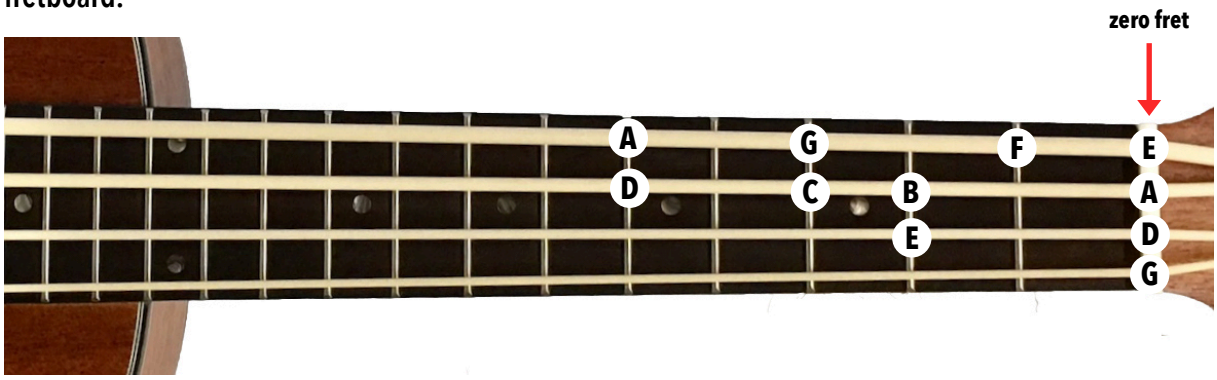
1. THE FRETBOARD



You don't have to be able to read music to play bass. **But:** You can't avoid learning by heart what the notes on the fretboard are called (at least for now the notes of the first five frets on the E and A strings). Because this is the only way to find the root note of a chord that you should accompany. But that's not so bad, because there are only 7 tones. Whaaat? Well, not quite, so: There are the tones

A B C D E F G (A B C ...)

So A B C D E F G are the names of our tones and you can't avoid learning their position on the fretboard.



Two facts stand out at once:

1. At the fifth fret I always have the same tone as at the zero fret of the next higher string.

2. Sometimes a fret is skipped or always, except between the notes E and F and B and C.

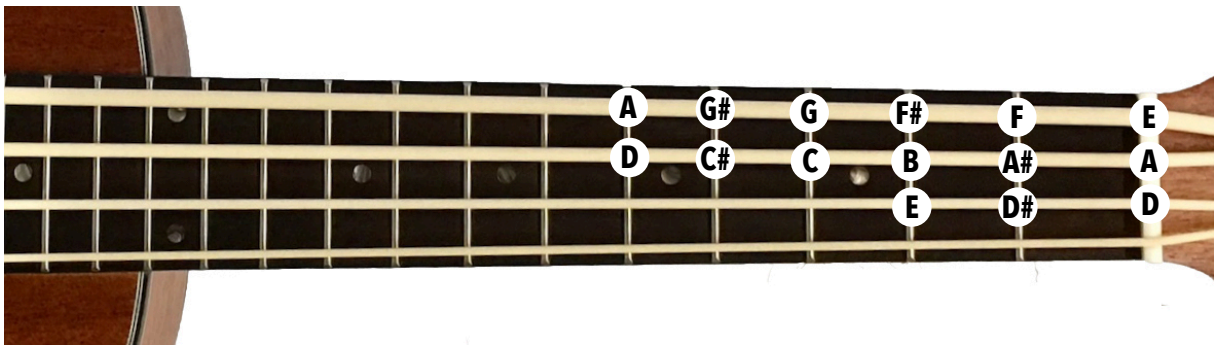
Between those with "gap" there are still semitones in between. Why only with them? Because the notes E and F as well as B and C are only one semitone apart anyway. What are these intermediate tones called now? They all have two names:

When a tone is **raised** from below , you add "sharp" to the letter. So the tone above F is called F-sharp, the one above A: A-sharp, etc. (the notation is then: F# for F-sharp, C# for C-sharp, etc.)

When a tone is **lowered** from the higher tone, "flat" is added to the letter. Thus, the tone below G is called G-flat, below D: D-flat (the notation is then: Gb for G-flat, Db for D-flat, etc.).

Why in both directions? For us, who don't play from notes, this is unnecessarily complicated, but for some keys in musical notation it is difficult to solve in any other way, because otherwise it is hardly legible for musicians. So just accept.

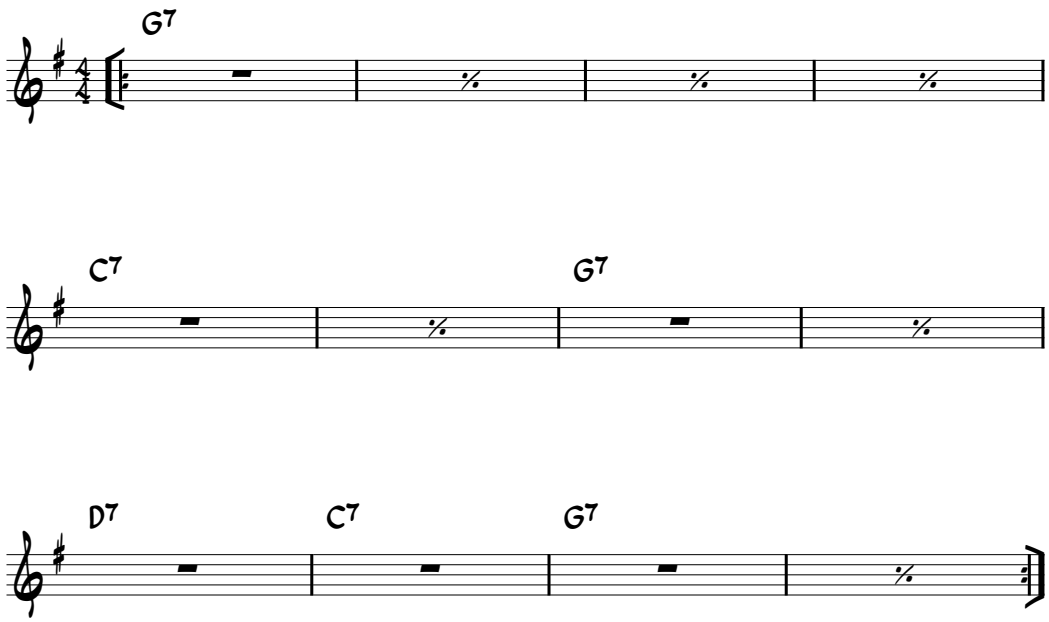
So F# and Gb are the same tones, just like "G#/ Ab", "A#/ Bb", "C#/ Db" and "D#/ Eb".



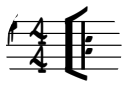
From here on there is an end to these note names, I promise! Learn to find these notes on the fretboard and from now on we will only think in INTERVALS!

2. CHORD SHEETS

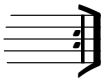
When you play with others, you usually have something that looks like this:



Chord sheets give you information about the song structure. Sometimes there are only lyrics with chords written to it. Then you just have to pay closer attention to when the chord change comes. This information is there:

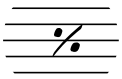


These two 4s mean that it is a four-quarter time, so 4 beats per bar (1 beat would be a quarter note). You will also encounter pieces that are in three-quarter time (waltz).



The double line with the 2 dots means that you repeat everything in between.

That's the chord symbol. In this case, it's a G-seven chord (more on that later).



This sign, which looks like a percent sign (%), means that the bar is the same as the bar before it. In the example above, we have four bars of G7 before the change to C7 comes.

One of your fellow musicians would now count in the song, as you already know it as a layman: one, two, three four... You would play on the following (imaginary) "one" (at the tempo as counted). And your first note (in the example above) would be the root note of the first chord, a G.

3. INTERVALS

The interval is the distance between two notes. The first interval (with a distance of 0, i.e. the same note again and at the same time the first note of a scale) is:

3a THE PRIME

also known as the "one", the "root" or the "keynote". The root note of any chord is the tone after which it is named. So the root note of the G7 chord is the tone G.

The root note is usually also the first note you play when a new chord appears. Now you could accompany each song by plucking around on the G for four bars (in the example above), then two bars on the C, then two bars on the G, then one bar on the D, one bar on the C and two bars on the G. And then again from the beginning, because we are repeating the whole thing.

In some rock music songs, this simple accompaniment is even desired, because it has a certain effect of simplicity and strength. Most of the time, however, the bass player only does this in the intro (the introduction of a piece) or during a bridge (a middle part).

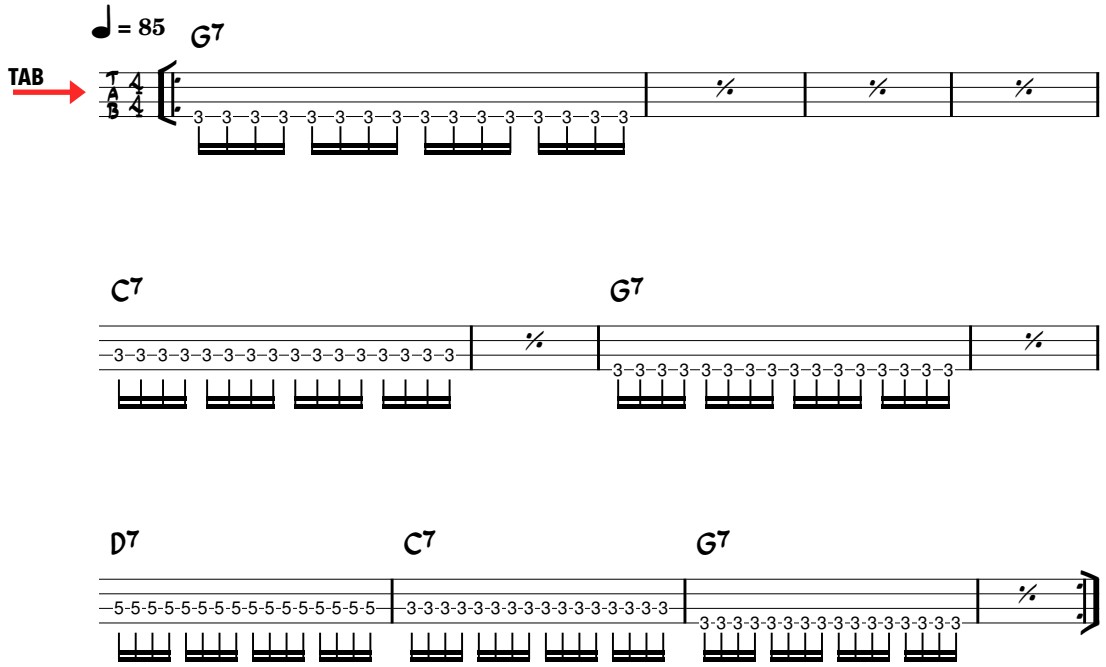
As an audio example, I made a bad rock piece in a music software in the chords shown above. As a reminder: You can download all audio samples as mp3 here:

https://www.ukelites.de/bassworkshop.html

Bsp1 ohne Bass.mp3
This is the rock song without bass accompaniment, so you can play along yourself.

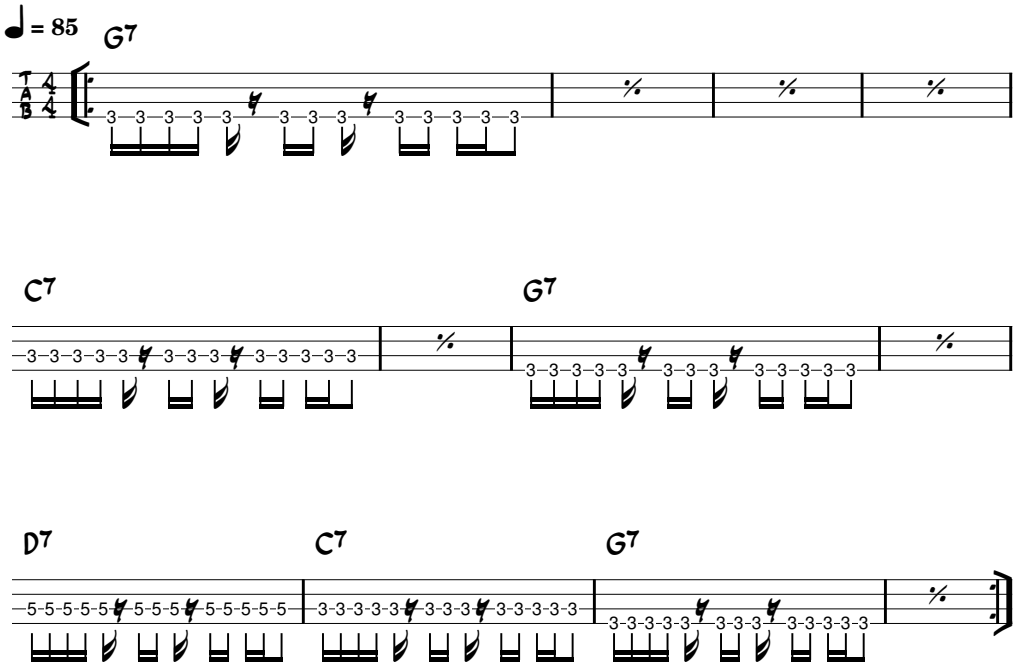
Bsp1 mit Bass.mp3
Here's the same song with bass. In the first round, I only play the root notes in a 16th note rhythm without emphasis or variation. In the second pass, only basic notes again, but in a different rhythm, so you can see what a difference it makes.

Now you see a so-called tablature of what I played in the first round. These four horizontal lines are not staves, but your bass strings. At the bottom is the E string. The small "3" means that I am playing at the 3rd fret, the note G. The two flags (here in blocks of 4) mean that they are 16-note notes – pretty fast notes: 16 fit into one bar!).



Here is what I played in the second round. These signs between the notes are pause signs – I stop the sound in front of it and leave a gap. The last note in the bar has only one flag instead of two – it is an eighth note (twice as long as a 16th note, but no rest). Listen to the example and try to play along.

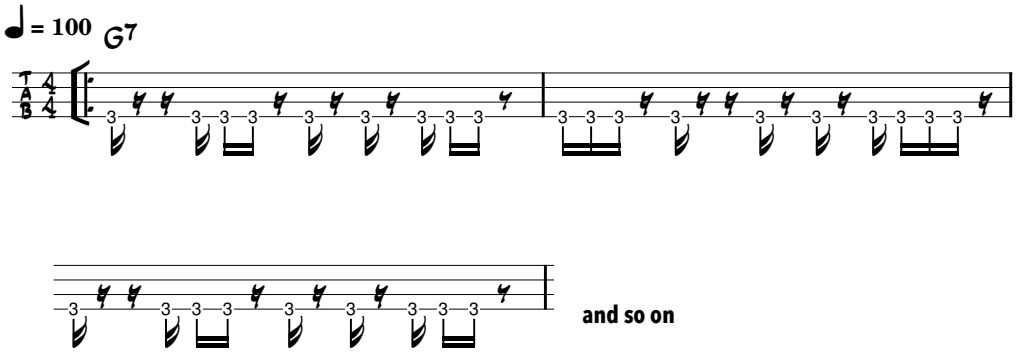
Think of it as daba-daba-dap daba-dap daba-daba-da



You can see that this already sounds different. I only played the root note. The bass is also an instrument that belongs to the rhythm section of a band. Here is another example that illustrates even more how much rhythm makes a difference to the bass. Again, I only play the root notes!

Bsp2 mit Bass.mp3
This is the same piece (in fact, this type of chord change is a 12-bar blues in the key of G), but now in some kind of soul groove.

These are the tabs to what I played:

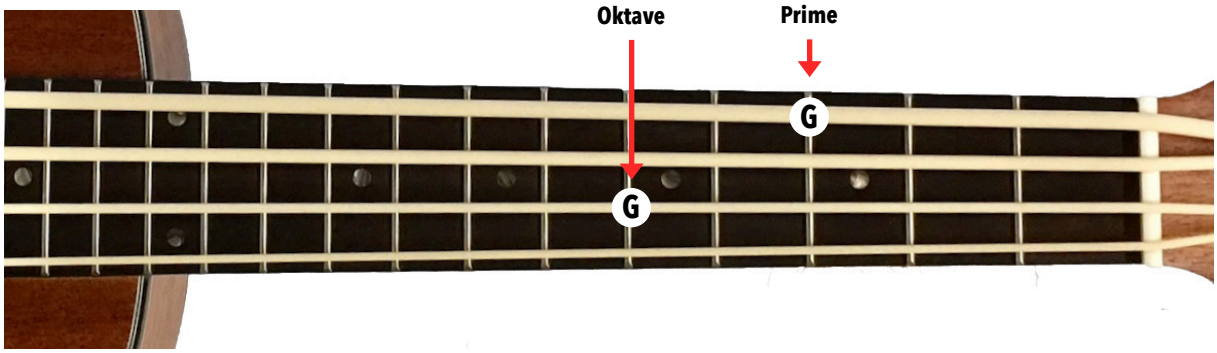


As you can see, you can have fun with the Prime alone. But enough, we need more. Let's take a look at what you can do by adding only the octave:

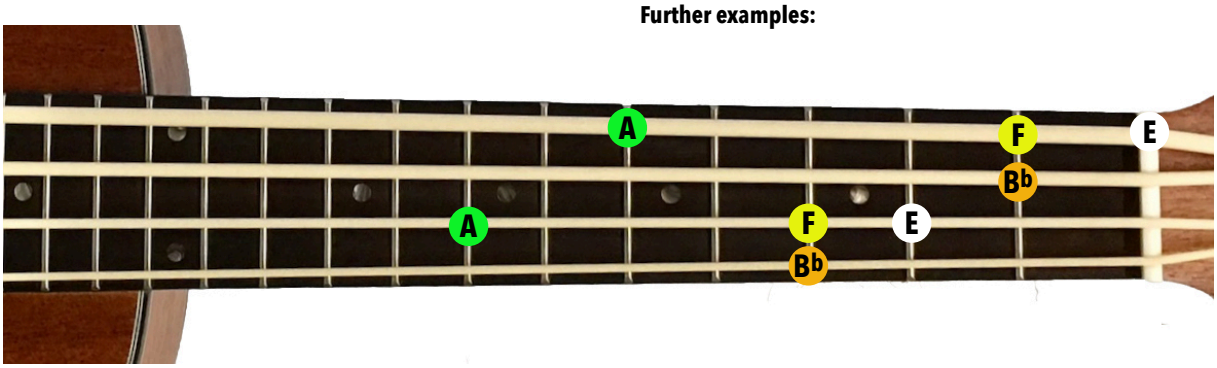
3b THE OKTAVE

Why the name octave? This is because the octave is the 8th tone in the scale that belongs to the respective chord. Our scales usually consist of seven different tones and end with the eighth. The eighth tone (octave) is the same tone as the first (prime) – only one octave higher. Our piece starts with the chord G7. The prime, as we know, is a G. So the octave is also a G.

Where can I find the octave on the fretboard? Always two strings up and two frets to the right (seen from the player when he looks down at his fretboard).

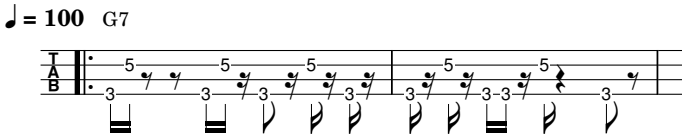


Further examples:



Whenever a note fits, the octave also fits – after all, it's the same tone, it just sounds a little different because it's higher. In some styles, a constant back-and-forth between prime and octave is even used as a rhythmic effect (disco music, for example) or as a special emphasis.

Bsp3 mit Bass.mp3
This is the same piece as in example 2, but with prime and octave alternating. Groovy, isn't it?

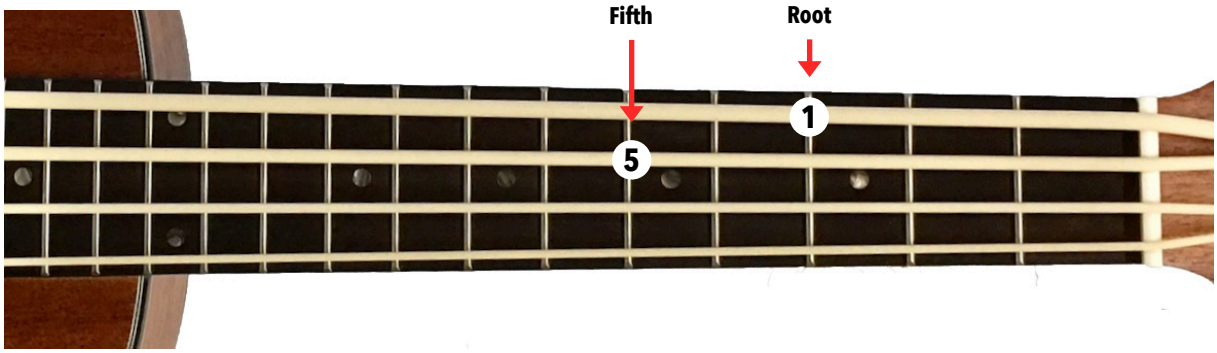


This is quite difficult to read, I just tabbed the first bars for the sake of order. It's better to listen to the example and play in the style yourself (doesn't have to be exactly what I played). You probably know this octave effect from many pieces of music. Let's get to the most important interval after the prime: the fifth

3c THE FIFTH

Fifth because it is the fifth note in the scale that belongs to the chord you are playing to. This interval alternating with the Prime is enough for some bassists for their entire career. The alternating playing of root and fifth is also called alternating bass. Entire music genres get by almost completely with this bass accompaniment, e.g. country music, German Schlager, folk music, etc.

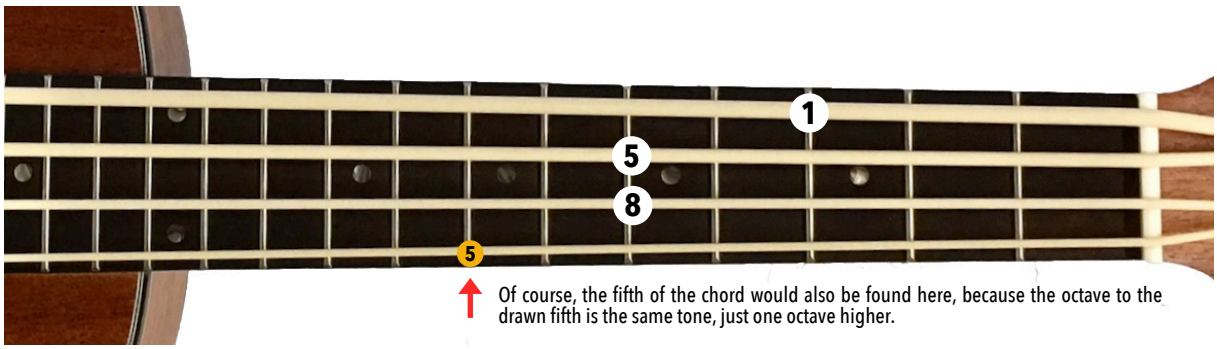
Where can I find the fifth on the fretboard? From the root one string up and two frets to the right.



The nice thing about the fifth is: it always fits! At least in the chord types that you will encounter first, i.e. all major, minor or (so-called) dominant chords (these are the ones that have a 7 after the letter, e.g. G7, more on that later).

Short insertion for the sake of completeness, you can also skip it first: For demanding pieces, especially old swing and jazz pieces, there are also chords on your chord sheet, which are the only two exceptions regarding the fifth. In diminished chords (symbol Ø or "o" or "dim") the fifth is a semitone lower, in augmented chords, ("aug", "+") the fifth is raised by a semitone..

I had promised that we would leave it with the tone names. You only need it to find your root note. We want to think in intervals. The octave is the 8, the fifth is the 5. Now you'll see why I introduced the octave after the prime. Because the fifth is also the fifth to the octave, because prime and octave are the same tones.



So you will not only find the fifth "two to the right / one up", but also one string lower at the same fret – let's call it "the low fifth".

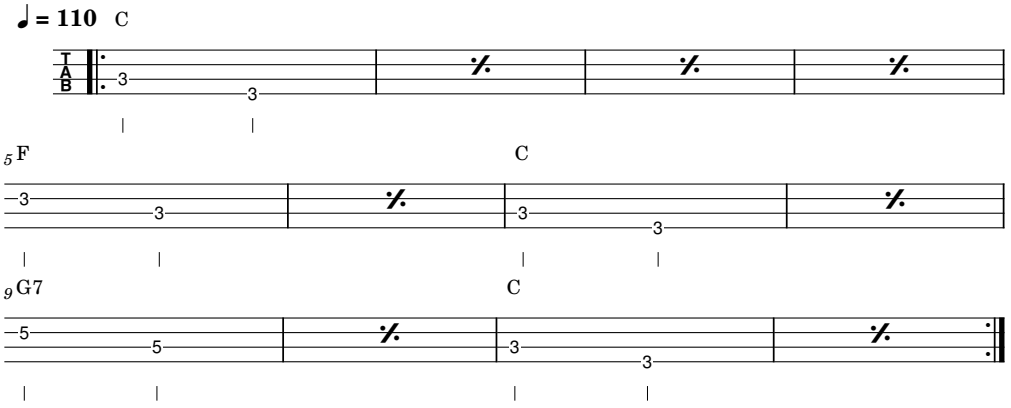
In our example with the root G, we can't go down a string from the low G, but we can start with the octave and then play the low fifth alternately with it. If you listen to both, you will notice that the low fifth alternating with octave results in the typical alternating bass that you know from countless pieces. But both are possible: You can also play the low G and the high fifth. It's just as right, just sounds a little different.

Time for an audio sample! Let's change the key: The progression is almost the same as before (12-bar blues), but in the key of C. We start with C, then change to F –> C –> G7 –> C.

Bsp4 mit Bass.mp3
This is a quiet country piece with alternating bass accompaniment. You can also find the same piece without bass in the download area.

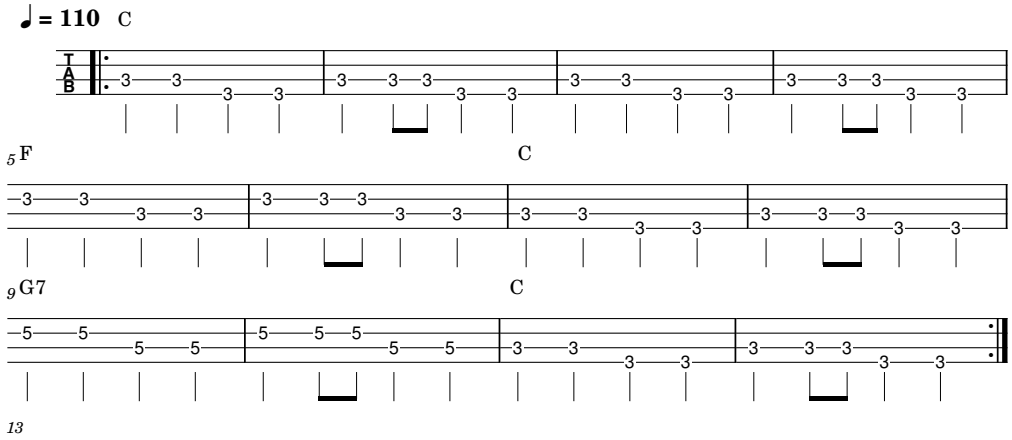
Rhythmically, the alternating bass goes like this: The 4/4 time has 4 beats per bar. We play the root note on beat 1, the low fifth on beat 3.

These are the tabs to what I played:



Of course, you can also pluck each quarter note or even eighth notes in between. This makes the song seem a bit faster, although nothing else has changed. You can hear the difference in the audio example **Bsp4a mit Bass.mp3.**

These are the tabs to what I played:



So much for the fifth. Time for something new!

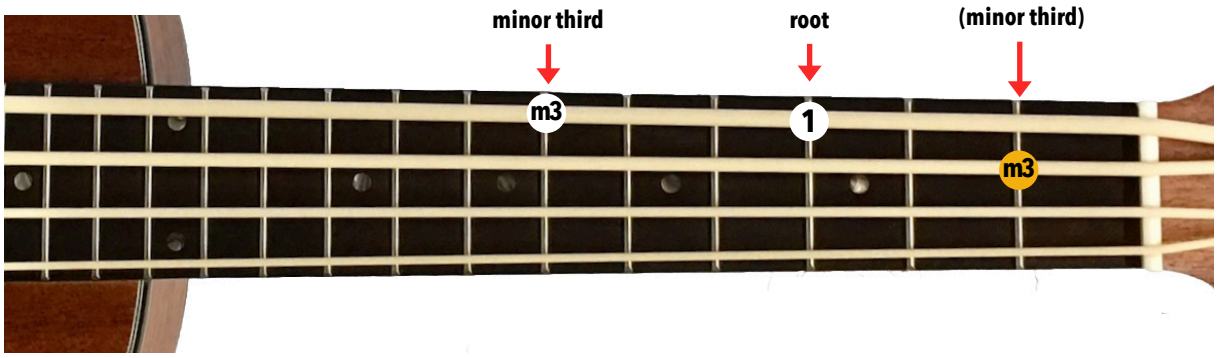
3d THE THIRD

Now it gets interesting, because there is not just one, but two of the third! Because the third is exactly the interval that makes the difference between major and minor! There is the minor third and the major third. How do I know which one to play? That's what the chord dictates.

For minor chords, there are the notations Gm or G– (for the example of a G chord) Important here is the lowercase m after the G. The minus sign after the G is typical for jazz chord sheets. If there are numbers behind it (e.g. 7), it doesn't matter at first.

Where can I find the minor third on the fretboard? From the root note, three frets to the right.

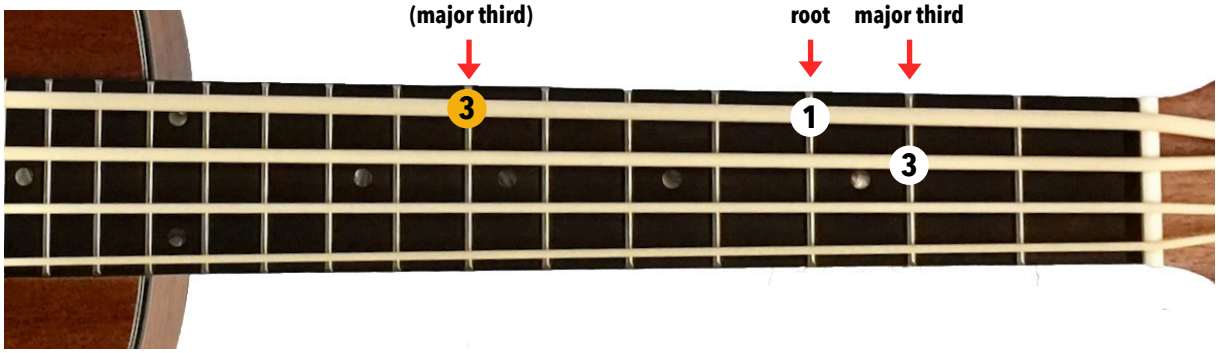
You can also find it one string higher/ two frets to the left (yellow here), but this position would only be an alternative if it should be more favorable for the next note. But in normal fingering, the first position is preferable.



All other chords are **major chords**, e.g. G or G7, G9 etc., but also GM7 (capital M). For major chords, you have to play the major third.

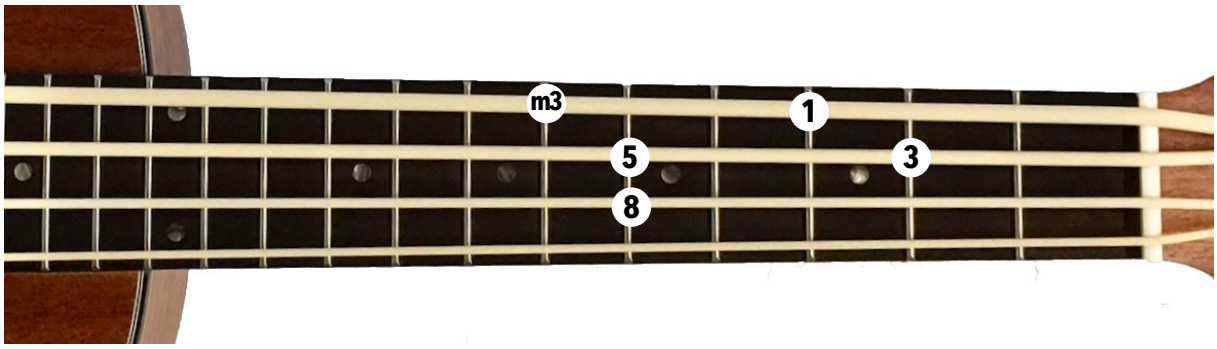
Where can I find the major third on the fretboard? From the root one string up / one fret to the left.

You can also find it on the same string / four frets to the right (marked yellow here), but this position would again only be an alternative, because the span is already quite large for the fingers.

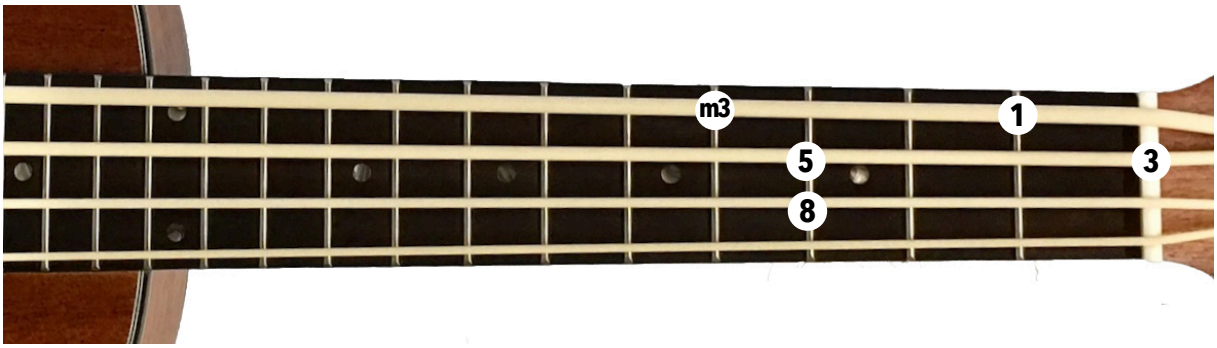


By the way, it would be a good idea to have the middle finger on the root, play the major third with your index finger and the minor third with your little finger.

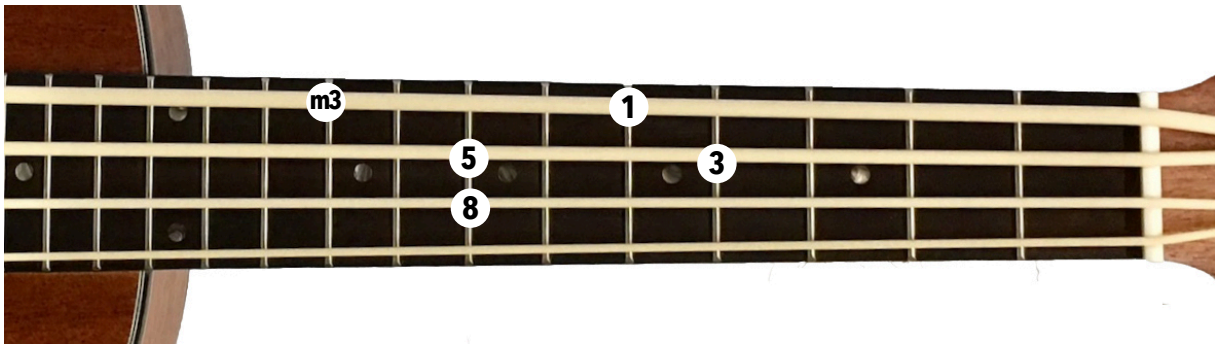
Let's summarize what we have learned so far. We have the prime, the third(s), the fifth, and the octave here using the root G as an example.



This pattern can be shifted everywhere. If we play to an F chord, then the whole system shifts 2 frets down.



Starting from the root note A, our system looks like this:



Then we want to apply what we have learned. To do this, we take one of the most famous chord progressions of all, known by many names such as *50s progression* or *stand-by-me chords* (named after the famous song) or *doo-wop chords* (named after the musical genre) or *ice cream changes* or *bubble gum changes* (changes stands for chord changes)... The list of hits with this chord progression is almost endless. From the key of A, we play the four chords

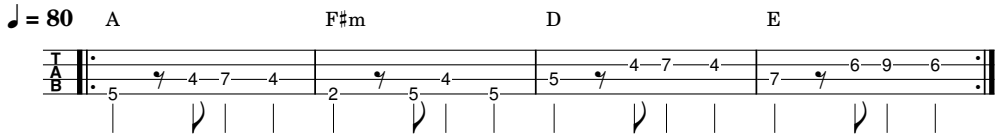
A F#m D E

We always use the same pattern, namely **1** (prime) **3** (third) **5** (fifth) **3** (third)

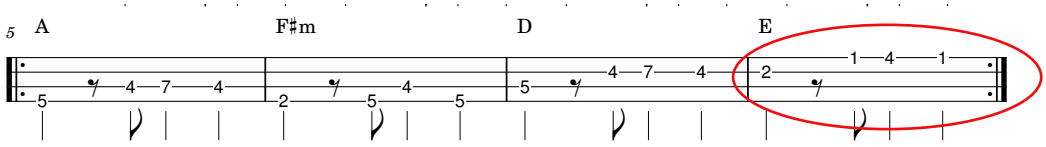
Attention: the second chord (F#m) is a minor chord. So we play the minor third. The other three are major chords, which means that we play the major third.

Let's listen to the song: **Bsp5 mit Bass.mp3**

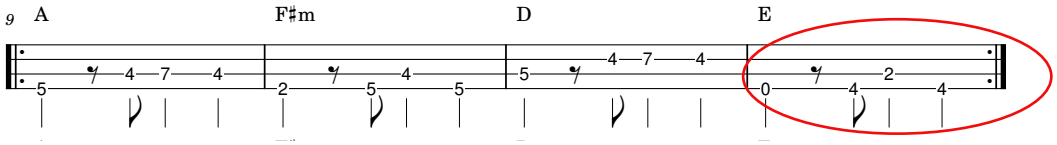
In the first two passes of the chord progression, I played this:



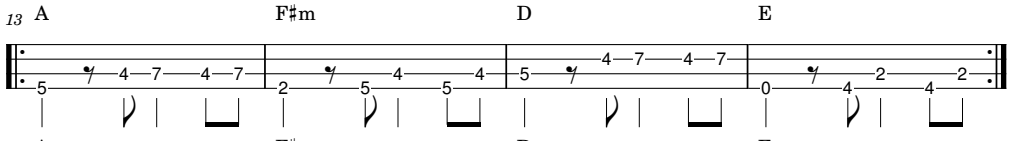
With the fourth chord in the example above (E), we slide up the fretboard quite a bit. Here you could play the same thing in another position – see example below. You can hold that as you like it better. Both in terms of accessibility for the fingers and the slightly different sound.



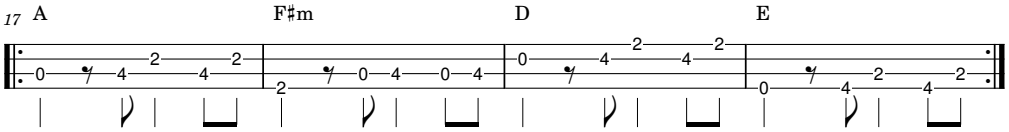
With the fourth chord (E), however, there is another variation. Because the E (root note of the E chord) also exists an octave lower. The lowest note of your bass is the unfingered E string. However, then you can't play your major third "1 string up / 1 fret to the left", because there is no left of the open string. That's why you have to play the major third on the low E string (4 frets to the right of the root note). So as in the example below. You can hear what that sounds like in the third and fourth runs of the audio sample. Whether you play high or low to the E major chord depends only on your personal taste (or what your fellow musicians find better).



If you are already a little more confident with your bass accompaniment, then you can try a slightly faster variant according to the pattern 1 3 5 3 5. You can listen to it in rounds five and six.



If you're wondering if fingering wouldn't be more practical as shown below, my answer is: Yes, maybe with this piece and when you are completely confident on the fretboard at some point.



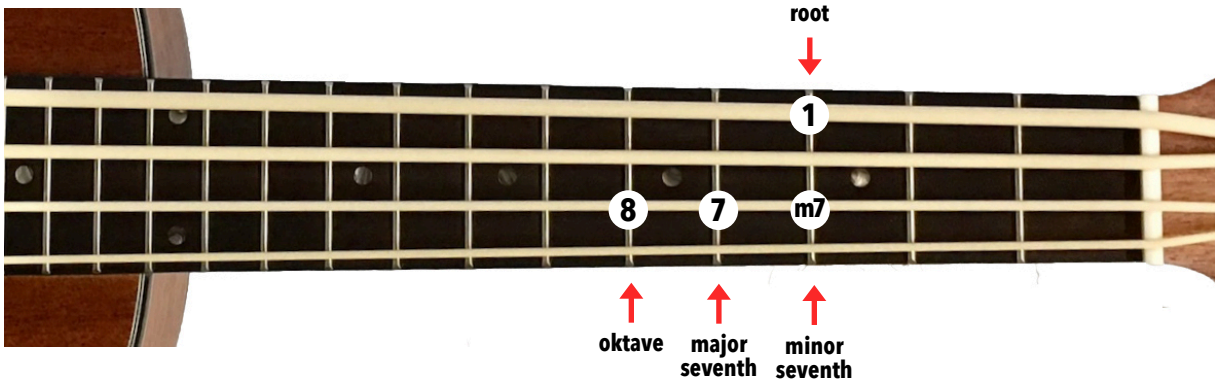
But there are more intervals and that's why I would rather stay in the system. More intervals? Let's go!

3e THE SEVENTH

You're almost there, now concentration again! The seventh has one property in common with the third: it also makes a difference between major and minor, which is why there are two different ones again.

As the name suggests, the seventh is the seventh note of a scale – i.e. the last note before it starts again with the octave. That's why it's easiest to orient yourself from the octave down.

The major seventh is 1 fret before the octave, the minor seventh is 2 frets before the octave.



How do I use the seventh?

Major chords: here you will use the major seventh little, more for runs as a passing tone than for recurring riffs. An exception would be a chord that is either written like "GM7" (capital M) or "GMaj7". These are called major seven chords and are major chords in which the composer would like to hear the major seventh just for flavour. That's why he wrote it down.

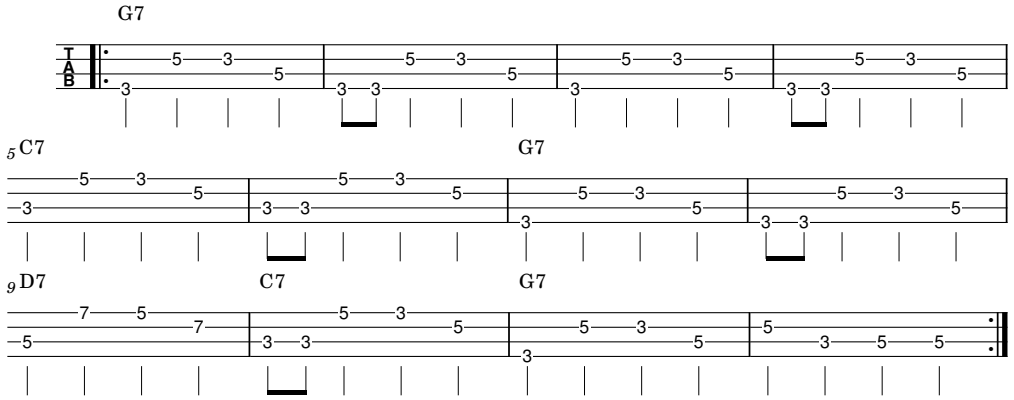
Minor chords: here more (minor seventh), but also more as part of a bass run, e.g. a short run down to the root note of the next chord.

Dominant chords: What is that? These are such an in-between thing, namely a major chord with a major third, but a minor seventh (as in minor chords). Dominant chords are common, especially in blues, jazz, rock music, rock'n'roll, etc. They are usually simply called "seventh chords". They spell themselves like this: G7 (or A7, C7, D7 – depending on what the root note is).
Attention: Chords that have a larger number than 7 (G9, G11, G13) are also dominant chords, except that the composer would like to hear an additional note if possible. If in doubt, you can treat all of them like a seventh chord.

With seventh chords, the seventh always fits perfectly. Many well-known bass riffs – especially in blues and blues-rock – have the seventh with them. Here is an example:

Bsp6 mit Bass.mp3

In the first two rounds, I play the pattern 1 8 7 5, a descending pattern (seen from the 8). Only in the last bar do I play a variation to indicate that the 12-bar scheme is now finished and starts again (the listener and some distracted fellow musicians are grateful for such small hints).



In the third round I change the pattern to the ascending pattern 1 5 7 8. In the end, you can move freely in the intervals you have learned already – 1, 5 and 8 always fit anyway, with the 3 and the 7 you just have to be careful what kind of chord it is.

If a piece ends on a seven-note chord, you can use the seventh as the final note, as in example 6, and preferably as in the example: on beat one of the final chord, play the 8, use the (actually wrong) major seventh as the passing tone and end on the minor seventh.

Let's summarize here which intervals you already know:

You know the 1, 3, 5, 7, 8.

What are you missing then? The 2, 4 and 6.

You rarely need **the 2** (the second). It usually occurs as a passing tone in bass runs / walking bass. Or as 9 (the octave of the second). If you continue counting from the 8, the next note would be the 9. Just as the 8 is the same tone as the 1, the 9 is the same tone as the 2. As mentioned above, the family of dominant chords also includes the ninth chords. So why aren't they called second-chords? First, to make clear that they belong to the dominant family (i.e. with the minor seventh) and because the 2 doesn't sound good with the 1. They rub against each other because they are too close to each other. But if you play the 2 an octave higher, so to speak as 9, then they sound good together. Nevertheless, as a bass player, you will rarely use them – maybe to add some color to ninth chords.

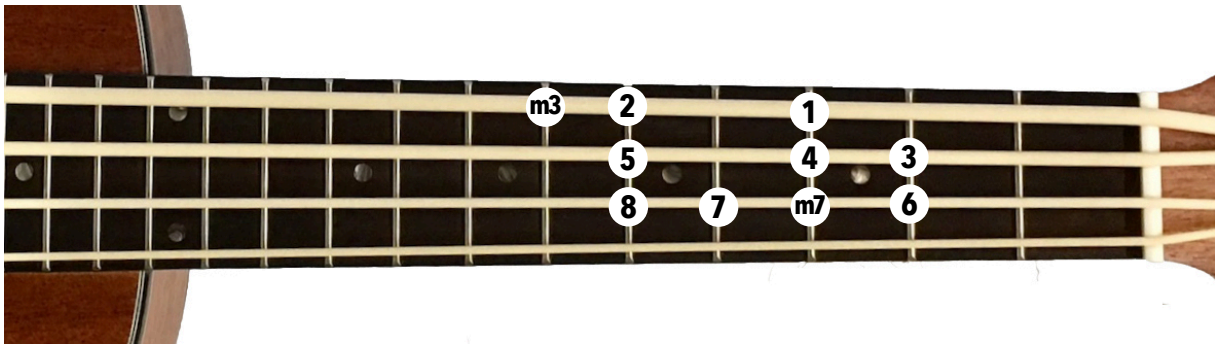
The same applies to **the 4**, the fourth, as to the second, except that it has its counterpart in the 11.

Only the 6 is missing!

3f THE SIXTH

The sixth is one fret below the minor seventh or at the same fret as the major third / one string higher. Seen from the prime: 1 fret to the left / 2 strings up.

Let's take a look at a complete "box" 1-8:



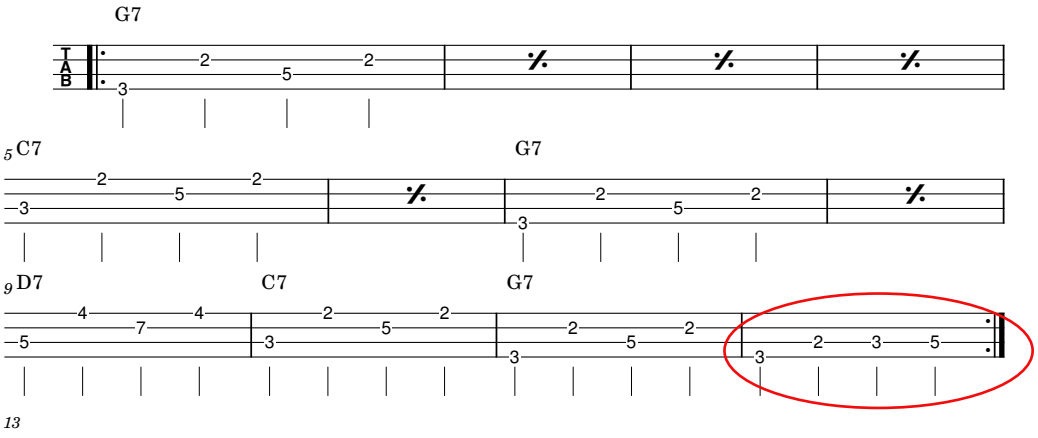
The 6 doesn't fit into every genre or piece of music, but where it fits, it brings in a lot of color. Especially in 50s pieces or in some blues and boogie pieces it fits very well.

I would like to give you a few examples:

Bsp7 mit Bass.mp3

The piece of music is the same as the last one, we only change the bass accompaniment.

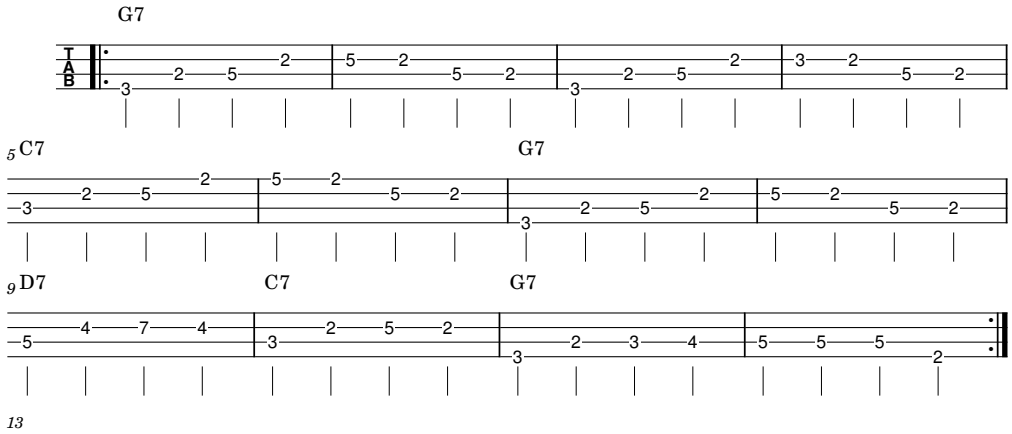
In the first round we play the simple figure: 1 6 5 6



In the last bar I added a variation again and here you can see how I used the 4 as a passing tone (the whole bar is 1 3 4 5).

I think that the same piece with the sixth sounds a bit happier and less cool instead of the previously played seventh. There you notice again what a difference the bass accompaniment makes.

In the second and third run I play a typical "walking" boogie bass. Here is everything we have learned:



This time, the pattern runs over two bars (1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 6, 5, 3). In the repetition (bars three and four) I do a small variation: In bar four / beat 1 I play the 7 instead of the 8.

To the chords C7 and G7 I play the main pattern from bars one and two again.

Now D7 and C7 follow, but we only have one bar each, which means that our pattern doesn't fit in. So I play something else (1 3 5 3) and end the whole scheme with a new run over two bars with 1 3 4 b5 5 5 5 M7.

Wait: b5? What is that? That's a diminished 5. This tone doesn't actually appear in my scale for the G7 chord. But I still play it as a chromatic (one semitone step after the next is called chromatic) transition tone. Why? Because I think it sounds good. And then we look at the very last note before it starts again with the 1 from the beginning. That's a major seventh, I'm not allowed to play it in a dominant chord! But I'll play it anyway at this point. Why? Because I think it sounds good.

After everything you've learned, you shouldn't forget one thing: anything that sounds good to you is allowed. With this in mind: Listen to what other bass players have played and if you like something, try to play it. Just try to have fun with your bass, play with others and have a good time together.