

# KEEPING A STEADY BEAT

by Andrew Curry

Very few musicians are blessed with an unerring sense of time. In fact, many excellent ones have trouble with metronomes. However, you, as a bassist, are expected to keep a steady beat for the other members of your group.

The tendency of most bassists is to drag the beat. I am guilty of dragging sometimes.

It is most frustrating to play with someone who can't keep a steady beat; the person who plays a few notes steadily is actually a more valuable musician than one who knows the fingerboard perfectly but is unsteady.

Here are a few ideas to help you achieve a rock solid beat. I'm writing for bassists, but these suggestions could apply to anyone playing a rhythm instrument.

A. COUNT. No, I don't count to 4 over and over during every song. It does help me to count:

1. At the beginning of the song. If someone counts off or plays or sings an intro, count along with him, and keep counting several bars into the song;

2. During rest measures. Don't depend on yourself to "feel" the passage of time. Too, it's awfully easy to be influenced by someone else's mistake during a rest; whoever has the fill during the rest is much more likely to make a mistake while no one else is playing, and if you haven't been counting it can throw you off and make everybody look foolish when the band roars back in at 3 different places;

3. When you play passing notes in two-beat time. Because you are playing twice as many notes in the same period of time, the tendency is to slow down a little to give your notes time to "breathe." Counting here will prevent such lapses.

4. When you change from two-beat to four-beat, and vice-versa.

B. "Think DOWNBEAT." Let the other pickers think about the upbeat, or offbeat. You are the pulse of

the band, and the other rhythm players should be reacting to you when they the second and fourth beats. A few years ago I developed a habit of snapping my fingers on the up-beats of slow songs. I quit when I realized that it generally made me hit the downbeat a hair late. If you think on the upbeat too much, you will be "reacting to a reaction," and that spells DRAG;

C. Keep your body still. Sometimes playing music is so much fun that you want to dance or bounce. The only problem with shakin' your thing while you play (aside from looking funny) is that in no time at all you find yourself playing to your movements rather than moving to the beats. Again, you are reacting to a reaction;

D. Relax. Learning how to relax can be one of the biggest stumbling blocks in music (or anything else!). Sometimes during a gig I suddenly become aware that some of my muscles are tensed up. If I can will myself to relax, I play better, sing better, smile better; I have a good time, the audience has a good time, and in the long run I am paid more money;

E. Keep your instrument's action low. Remember that the big strings of a bass take more time to respond to touch than do the little strings of a guitar - that's simple inertia. If your right and left hands work together, as they should, the time it takes to push the string down with your left hand can make you pluck a little late. In other words, you may be attacking the string on the beat, but the physical delay of high action makes you late. Some bassists seem to prefer high action to prevent string rattle, but I believe they'd be better off having their instruments adjusted and/or developing a lighter touch;

F. Talk tempo with your co-pickers. If someone is messing you up when you play, discuss it with him. No one should be touchy about it unless he doesn't want to get better. If you can, tape yourselves and talk about specific tempo lapses;

G. Don't get too high when you play, especially if you aren't already warmed up.