

Victor Wooten's Bass/Nature Summer Camp

"Welcome to Wootcamp," February 2002

By E.E. Bradman

"You'll leave knowing that Victor Wooten is a myth—and that you're the reality."

We were lost and we knew it. All 50 of us were in the woods, blindfolded, slightly dizzy, and barely awake. Our assignment was to make it to the main house by listening to the steady thud of a bass drum. It seemed a mile away. Like ace musicians on a barely lit stage, we absorbed and discounted the little sounds—crackling sticks, high-pitched bird calls, and nervous titters—to make our way through dead leaves and over fallen branches, arriving one by one to touch the drum and remove our blindfolds. As we learned to trust our reflexes, we avoided many a tree trunk and ditch. Our ears and natural instincts saved us once again.

Welcome to "Wootcamp," the summer Bass/Nature workshop put on by Victor Wooten. The Flecktone and solo artist is probably best known for his arsenal of dazzling chops, but underneath Wooten's show-stopping technique are unique perspectives enhanced by years of studying animal tracking, wilderness survival, martial arts, and spirituality. His "Wootcamp"—held for the last two years just outside Nashville—aims to take the concepts one step further by helping bassists connect physical fitness, all-around awareness, and enhanced musicianship through five days of intense workshops, performances, and interaction with nature.

Heavy concepts aside, it seemed like a great place to spend Labor Day weekend: I'd work on my chops, meet other players, and enjoy the beautiful woods of Tennessee's

Montgomery Bell State Park, 40 miles west of Music City. I arrived to find an enthusiastic group that had little in common except the love of bass: Men and women of all ages, races, and playing levels from as near as Nashville to as far away as Sweden. The setting was beautiful, the food was tasty, and the unfurnished four-bed cabins were within walking distance of the bathhouses and the classrooms.

Our classes rotated among four buildings on the property, each equipped with at least five Ampeg 1x15 combos or a mixer that went to two or three amps. For two or three two-hour periods each day, Victor, Adam Nitti, Steve Bailey, or Victor's older brother Regi took a class of 15 or so students through bass lessons, sometimes accompanied by Nashville studio percussionist Jim Roberts. Many of us shared a desire to work on soloing, so several of the classes addressed that issue. Nitti led workshops on functional and improvisational bass playing and "spherical time interpretation," illustrating the difference between playing behind, on top, and in front of the beat. Regi Wooten used a classic funk line to get campers up and thumpin', then took them into basic tapping techniques. Comfortable on any version of electric or upright bass, Steve squeezed practical tips on practicing, intonation, and muscle memory in between bass-related anecdotes.

Between bass sessions and stories, we were treated to tai-chi, yoga, and kung-fu classes and impromptu concerts before meals. Victor and the "nature staff"—three animal and wilderness survival experts—led us on tracking expeditions, a bird-watching trip, a hands-on fire-making workshop, and blindfolded journeys through the woods. (They knew the routes well and stood by to guide us around poison ivy and brambles.) Wooten repeatedly connected nature and music, encouraging us to develop the "wide-angle vision" that's an asset onstage or in the forest—to notice the structure,

improvisation, and harmony in nature, and to try innovative approaches that can make the difference between death and survival or stagnant and fresh musical approaches. Jon Young, founder of Washington state's Wilderness Awareness School and a legend in the animal-tracking world, expressed his strong connection to the earth and music with a down-home set of folk and bluegrass duets with his teenage son, Aidan.

The musical guests were no slouches, either. Flecktones leader Béla Fleck and upright virtuoso Edgar Meyer played and delivered a fascinating quasi-lecture on upright bass technique, the history of the banjo, bluegrass vs. newgrass, and songwriting and performance. Cross-cultural quartet Facing East, led by flautist John Wubbenhorst, mixed demanding Indian rhythms and *ragas* with jaw-dropping performances by two South Indian percussionists and bassist Steve Zerlin.

Besides developing a camaraderie based on our mutual love of bass, we learned a lot by watching and listening to each others' incredibly diverse approaches. Classes and informal jams gave us opportunities to play for one of the toughest possible crowds—a roomful of bassists—while putting into practice the non-competitive, practical concepts the teachers espoused. On the last day, we gathered in the dinner hall to put all the preceding days' lessons to use. Each of us chose a tune or groove, and regular Wooten drummer J.D. Blair, Flecktones drummer Roy "Future Man" Wooten, Roberts, and Regi on guitar served as our backup band. Over the course of five hours, most of us got up and jammed. It was everything a closing ceremony could be—raucous, sentimental, impressive, scary, silly, and seriously diverse. It was a blast!

If it sounds like a lot, it was. Wooten himself acknowledges it's difficult to describe his Bass/Nature camp to first-timers, but he sticks to his goals. "We do so much at camp that it's hard to say what we did," he says. "What can we teach you in six days?"

Everything you play you could have played the day you got there. But our goal is to show people what they aren't aware they know. You'll leave knowing that Victor Wooten is a myth—and that you're the reality.”

“Of Nature & Naturals”

Frequent Victor Wooten collaborator Steve Bailey has taught at both Bass/Nature camps, and Wooten’s fondness for blindfold exercises brings back memories of an old stunt from his BIT days: As Bailey played an uptempo solo on his fretless 6-string, he’d dare a student to suddenly stop him and ask which note was under his fingers. “I use three methods to teach students the fingerboard. First, learn major scales in one position starting on each finger. Then try major scales starting on each finger—all on one string. Then do steps one and two blindfolded, visualizing the notes under your fingers. Say them out loud,” he advises.

Bailey recommends doing 1st-position major scales with Ex. 1, on the 1st finger. “Extended fingerings are difficult at first, but I’ve seen bassists with tiny hands pull this off in most positions with a slight wrist pivot.” Most bassists are probably most familiar with Ex. 2, which starts on the 2nd finger. Starting on the 3rd finger for Ex. 3 requires some stretching. “Notice how this becomes 1st-finger *F#* minor,” Bailey says. Ex. 4’s 4th-finger pattern requires a “mind” shift. “True mastery means all four fingers becoming equal,” says Bailey.

Once you’ve tried those, Examples 5–8 take you from the 1st finger to the 4th, all on the *A* string. “Concentrate on making shifts smooth,” Bailey says. “These all make sense when used in conjunction with the others. Try playing all the major scales in 5th position; you should be able to do this with only a couple of awkward moments. Then play all major scales on the *G* string starting below the 5th fret. Finally, make up your own challenges.”

Playing with the cross-cultural group Facing East has required Steve Zerlin to apply some of the fundamentals of Indian classical music. “The group blends Western music and both North and South Indian schools of music. I come from a jazz, funk fusion, and R&B background, and I try to bring this influence most respectfully to the mix.”

Ex. 9 is the melody of “Celebration,” a Facing East composition that has evolved into a bass feature. *Raga Jog* (Ex. 10) is the principal tonal framework of “Celebration,” which Zerlin refers to as “8.5.” (Its rhythm cycle or *tala* is eight-and-a-half beats.) “To gain a basic understanding of the scale and characteristics of *Raga Jog*, play the natural 3rd in ascending passages and the b3rd in descending passages. It’s a pentatonic scale; there is no 2nd or 6th scale degree. Emphasize the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and root over the b3rd.”

Examples 11 and 12 are solo passages derived from the “Celebration” rhythmic pattern. Breaking the line into 34 16th-notes may be the best way to subdivide this odd time signature. Count it out—eight-and-a-half quarter-notes equals 17 eighth-notes, which equals 34 16ths; three groups of six notes (18 16ths) plus four groups of four (16 16ths) also adds up to 34 16ths. Finally, six groups of five notes (30 16ths) plus one group of four equals 34 16ths. “I recommend practicing this to a metronome on the quarter-note. The first eight-and-a-half beats are on the downbeat, with the second measure on the upbeat. Mastering this challenging meter will improve your time and feel.”

Victor Wooten is a master of breaking down his formidable chops with everyday rhetoric. His “above and below” concept is a fresh way to look at soloing when your theory knowledge just isn’t enough. “Let’s say we are in the key of *C* major. Even if the chords are moving by quickly, we can usually find the 1, the 3, and the 5—*C*, *E*, and *G*. These are our target notes [Ex. 13]. Even if this is all we know, we can still play an

interesting solo by applying this concept. Here's how it works: Instead of just playing the root note, I first play the *C#* above, the *B* below, and then the root note, *C* [Ex. 14]. You can also do just the opposite: play the note below, then above, and then the root [Ex. 15]. If we apply this concept to all of our target notes in the key of *C* major, it will sound like [Examples 16 and 17].

“The way to keep the mind at ease while using this concept is to think only about the target notes. Don't ask yourself what the 'above' and 'below' notes actually are; just dance around the target notes as you please. In this exercise I chose to dance a half-step above and a half-step below, but you can use whole-steps or a combination of whole-steps and half-steps. Be creative. It's up to you.

“Let's say I have a favorite lick [Ex. 18]. Applying this concept to the first four notes, I play a half-step above them, then a half-step below before playing them in my target position and finishing the lick. This will make my old lick sound new [Ex. 19]. I can also apply the same concept by rearranging the order of the second group of four notes, thus giving the lick a different sound [Ex. 20]. Try playing above and below the 'above' note and above and below the 'below' note. By thinking only about one note, *C*, you can get these nine notes [Ex. 21].

“You can apply this to many aspects of your playing, as well as to tempo and dynamics. If you are comfortable playing in a certain position, try playing above and below that position. Have fun!”

“Birth Of A Bass Line”

Adam Nitti must like teaching: Besides being an instructor and curriculum writer at Atlanta Institute of Music, he keeps a busy schedule of D’Addario and SWR clinics, posts instructional material at www.adamnitti.com, and writes his monthly column for BP readers. He has also taught at both “Wootcamps,” where he shares his love for creative technique and strong fundamentals. “One of the things I most enjoy doing as a bass player is creating lines that complement a groove or song. Creating a good bass line requires us to use our inventiveness and good judgment; it is an interactive process that requires us to be sensitive to the other players and the parts they are playing.” Nitti recommends considering many factors when composing a bass line. Here are three of the most basic:

Activity level. “How busy is the music? Does it come across as sounding cluttered, or spacious? What are the roles of the drums and other rhythm-section instruments? Does the song have vocals? If so, how much space has been left for them? As most of us know, bass and drums have a unique relationship. When a drummer and bass player compete for the same rhythmic space, however, the individual strength of each player diminishes, and neither part stands out as much as if it were played alone. Bass and drums should be complementary—they should effectively embellish each other and work together to make the groove even stronger.”

Dynamics. “How loud or soft is the passage? Does the music have a sense of urgency, or is it more laid back? If the song has lyrics, does the music accurately reflect the emotion of the topic or subjects? Does your bass tone complement the other

instruments' dynamics? Is the technique you are using (slap/pop, fingerstyle, etc.) appropriate for the music's dynamics? Is your volume appropriate for the passage?

“Sometimes we assume that if we're playing through an amp, we control our volume only with the volume knob. Remember that our volume control should provide only the dynamic threshold for our loudest passages; the rest is up to our hands! Don't be afraid to ease up on the volume by lightening up your touch. Be sensitive to the way the song's dynamics modulate between louder and softer passages.”

Harmonic content. “What chord changes are you playing over? Is there even a chord change implied? Should you play only roots of chords, or something more complicated? Does your line need to sound more melodic? If so, what scales, modes, or arpeggios will fit the context of the chord changes? Is your bass line harmonically compatible with the other instruments? What is the bass's responsibility in the context of the song?”

“Chords are the building blocks of harmony, so we should pay attention to them when composing a bass line. Chord changes pretty much dictate what we should or should not play in most compositional situations. Those of you who have studied harmonization and scales should be careful not to overuse this knowledge. Less experienced players sometimes have a tendency to ‘force’ the use of a particular scale or pattern when they encounter a compatible chord, and the end result is often a bass line that is too complicated, too busy, out of place, or contrived. Make sure you are truly using your *ears* to determine what to play—not your *hands*. Listen objectively to songs you're working on, and strive to choose only the notes that have a sensible and meaningful place in the music.”

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