

How Learning to Play Bass Rocked My World

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How Learning to Play Bass Rocked My World

By Michele Gregoire Gill

UCF Forum columnist

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I've always wanted to sing, but I'm not very good. I have a loud, strong voice, but a short range, and I am not always on key.

When a School of Rock opened near my home to offer music classes, I took my son on a tour, wishing someone had signed me up for voice lessons when I was a teen.

The performance room was incredible. It was like being on stage—amps everywhere, posters of Led Zeppelin adorning the walls, a drum kit, microphones.

I turned toward my son. "Aaron, don't you want to do this? You could pick any instrument or even sing."

I'm gleeful at the possibilities.

Adam, the instructor, is super chill. Wearing an old T-shirt and backwards baseball cap, he talks about not just taking lessons but performing with a group weekly because it improves skills faster that way. Plus it's just fun.

Adam shows us different instruments and doesn't cringe when my son bangs on them, making a lot of noise. He's patient and kind, and I want him to be my son's teacher stat.

Aaron, though, is not interested, and he starts heading out the door.

I hesitate, not wanting to leave the magic in these walls, so I blurt out a question, fully expecting the answer to be no: "You don't happen to teach adults, do you?" What Adam says next changes the next year of my life. He tells me they do have an adult performance group that meets at night, and one is just about to start if I want to come by for a visit.

My heart leaps at first, but with two young boys and a full-time job, I don't see how I could make time to do anything like this. Plus, I think I'm too old to learn to play in a band.

I leave reluctantly and try to convince Aaron to pick an instrument for just a month. He's adamantly opposed, so I drop it and go about my life as usual.

A few weeks later, though, I get an email saying the adult group has launched. The email lingers in the back of my mind for weeks.

One evening, as I've finished teaching my evening graduate class on learning theories, I sit in the parking lot, checking my email. It's 8:20 p.m., and the kids are already in bed, and I just don't feel ready to go home yet. The email says that the group meets at 8:30 p.m. If I hurry, I won't be that late.

This is so unlike me. I've become a creature of routine. Work during the day, make dinner for the kids and help them with homework, head to teach my grad students a few nights per week, go home, tuck the boys in if they are still awake, exercise while I watch a show I've recorded, answer emails, then head to bed.

I feel daring and hopeful as I drive. When I enter the building, I see a handful of others already there talking and tuning guitars.

And I'm frozen in place.

These are not adults. Not these kids. Nope. I feel like their mom—they are all in their young 20s, with maybe one of them in his early 30s. I am easily the oldest person there, and so I consider sneaking out and leaving. Adam sees me, though, and introduces me to the group.

"What instrument do you play?" he asks.

"None," I reply. "I was thinking of singing."

They already have a singer though, and she's good.

"Why don't you try the bass?" suggests Adam, handing me a heavy, four-stringed instrument. I take it in a kind of stupor, still looking for a way to sneak out.

We head in to the performance room, as Adam smiles and makes us all feel welcome. He shows me a couple of chords to play, says the group has been together for just a few weeks and is practicing Sublime's *What I Got*.

"Just play D like this," Adam demonstrates, "and then play G like this, alternating between the two. Start with holding each note for two beats, then switch, like this." I practice a few times, till he nods, assuring me that I've got this. Then he turns to the other musicians and calls out the chords for them as well. Not only am I the oldest person in the room, older than even the teacher, I am the only one here who cannot play an instrument. I thought we'd all be beginners, but nope. Just me.

Adam counts us in, Chris starts singing and I start playing, D then G, over and over. I soon start to relax as I find myself moving to the beat. My mind switches off, and I just start *feeling* the music.

We are playing in perfect rhythm.

For an academic, this is life-changing. And as an introvert with a fair amount of social anxiety, I have never felt this in tune with a group—ever. When the music ends, I jump up in the air and scream: "That. Was. Awesome!"

The other guys laugh a little, but it's not mean-spirited. I'm in. I am part of the band.

We stay together for just under a year, playing weekly, and our culminating performance is at a bar where we booked a gig. I sing backup and play wonderful songs: *Zombie*, *Seven Nation Army*, 1979. I am lost in the music. My smile feels like it's going to break my face.

I look around the room and it doesn't matter what age I am or how much older I am than my bandmates. All that matters is that I keep good time and play the right chords. I'm a part of this group. I'm 49, and I play bass in a rock band.

(YouTube video of me playing bass in our final concert: https://youtu.be/y_cl3i3XF-c)

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