

# Four-String Harmony

By Tanner Sherlock

Billy kicks us off with a power-chord and Travis sets us on beat immediately, but I wince. My pick misses the D-string, right as I'm about to strike the G that starts my part of the intro. I barely miss it, like when a skipped stone hits water a millisecond too early and sinks hard and fast, and even though I'm back in step instantly, there's a tingling heat at the back of my neck that's encouraged by my quickening heartbeat. It's a mistake we all make; I've made it a hundred times before. But not here, not in a place like this.

Playing bass is a thankless job, the type that gets you teased for being a 'nerd' but without the assurance that 'one day, it'll all be worth it when they're working for me.' A lot of kids are hard on you, and even when, or if, you are successful, the teasing doesn't stop. That's a big 'if,' of course, but it's an 'if' a lot of us are willing to take.

I started young; Dad picked up guitar as a grade schooler in the 80's and wanted me to do the same so that I'd have something to do besides play video games and watch cartoons. He bought me a bass, though, because he said it was easy to learn and a 'good gateway to a better instrument.' I hadn't started graying his hair yet, but buying that bass seemed to be his invitation to do so.

I still remember holding one for the first time: black pickguard on a black body, maple neck and head, and a pair of single-coil pick-ups that have convinced me to this day of the superiority of the Jazz Bass. I think my Dad could tell that I liked it a bit too much, because he seemed to second-guess himself as we brought it up to the counter. "What if we got you a Telecaster instead? The bass thing was probably silly." I shook my head and smiled at him with eyes that probably reminded him too much of himself. He sighed and paid in cash.

Within an hour, Dad was sitting down across from me, Strat in his lap, long fingers positioned perfectly, and started teaching me the notes along the neck. My tiny fingers had trouble pressing down on each fret and striking each string, but we got into a rhythm quickly. Our lessons got easier and I loved my bass more and more; it was beautiful both aesthetically and sonically in a way that's hard to describe to people who don't get it. A guitar may look flashy, but there's something to the way a bass curves, the simplicity of the four strings and the low, humble tones that make it truly special.

I moved on to better axes after that. American basses over Mexican, customs with particular set-ups that worked better for exploring the progressive melodies that were worming their way into my everyday. Dad put his bass-stepping-stone hypothesis to the test when he gifted me a nice Telecaster for my 11th birthday, and to his credit, he was correct, because playing guitar came quickly to me. I never left the bass, though, and was in my first band by middle school.

I don't realize that our first song is over until Travis ends it with a hard hit on the crash. We exchange glances and I can tell he's nervous too; his dark eyes are always expressive, and he's looking at me with a determination that I rarely see from his typically stoic turn of mind. His sticks are already in position to start playing the next song, but he's waiting on me. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I look down at my hands; they're shaking. I think he's the only one who's noticed, so I breathe to calm myself. Travis keeps waiting, and when he thinks I'm ready, he starts. We don't have to say anything to be in-sync again, but before I look away, he gives me a nod. We both know how important this could be. We also know that Billy and Alex can afford to make mistakes. We can't.

Everyone knows that the drums hold the band up — they're the foundation, the columns that give structure to every song. Everyone comes to see the guitarist and the singer show off and enrapture the audience's heart. The bassist is the glue, then, the piece that holds it all together even when the drummer misses a beat and the guitarist strikes a wrong chord. You have to be able to do it all, to hold it up, guide it, and show it off when the timing's right. But that doesn't mean we're not all necessary. Everyone has a job; we all need each other to be okay.

We've been a band since high school. Billy got us together after he was kicked out of his last band for, according to him, writing chord progressions that were 'too metal.' Travis had his sticks ready when he heard Billy rip off the drum-track to *Enter Sandman* on the mix he was working on, and Alex was just looking for a chance to practice the singing lessons he'd gotten the year before. I was the fourth recruit; they had a guy phoning it in as a bassist for three months before he gave up the instrument completely. Travis walked up to me a few days after the guy left, told me what'd happened, muttered a bitter 'Good riddance,' and invited me to fill in for one of their practices. I'd seen him around school and liked what I'd heard of his playing, but we hadn't really talked about much beyond surface-level music opinions and band gossip. Somehow, though, as soon as we started playing together, his Motörhead-heart found something kindred in my Dance Gavin Dance tank top and skinny jeans, and once a drummer and bassist find each other, there's not a force in the world that can tear them apart.

We slip into our second song immediately. Alex is trying his hardest to keep up with the rest of us and he's doing a good job of it; he's the least experienced musician but probably the most natural at it, a wannabe-Morrissey who has the same talent without the pretentious prejudice. What he lacks in experience he makes up for in showmanship, which I think is what you want in a singer. He and Billy work off of each other's energy well, and I can tell the crowd

likes it. I've known him the second longest after Travis; all of us went to school together, but Alex is the only one I had classes with. He's probably the smartest out of all of us, and might be the only one who could actually find something else to do with his life if the music thing doesn't work out.

Dad is in the audience. We haven't talked since I dropped out, but I've seen him in the crowd of every show I've done. He's always in the back, a set of wrinkles and gray hair that's almost at home with the dyed-platinums and pinks of everyone else at the venue. We catch eyes during almost every song. I'm pretty sure he stares at me the whole time, and even when I try not to look, I always find myself glancing towards him. His eyes feel judging, but not of the lifestyle or the music itself. They're judging my performance, where I miss a stroke of the string, when I switch between my fingers and my pick for a different tone, how Travis and I work together to modify a song when we need to. Sometimes I watch his eyes dart to different parts of my bass and his muted expressions morph between an array of countenances and I wonder if he's telling me what to do. When I listen, the crowd goes nuts.

But today I'm not watching. The venue is the biggest we've played and the crowd is huge but I know he's there. I know he's looking at me, but I just can't meet his gaze. There's an unspoken, sweet, ugly weight in the air. Five other bands have played before us, we're the last of the night, and there's a recruiter somewhere in this crowd. The rest of the band knows it. It's in their eyes, if you know to look for it. Travis is staring into somewhere I still haven't found. Billy is lost in contrarian-induced rejection and his playing sounds like he's trying to prove himself to someone. Maybe himself, maybe everyone who's ever heard him play, I'm not sure. Alex has the coolest head and I'm glad most of the audience is paying attention to him because I can't help but think the rest of us look like we're about to collapse from the pressure.

They explode when Billy plays the first few chords of *Holiday*. He and I work well together; Travis and I may be good friends but I think Billy gets me the best out of the band. He's a lot to handle, but his talent to see past bullshit is refreshing and pleasantly alarming. His acute musical instinct is obvious just by watching him: his playing is effortless but calculated, smooth but motivated. He's probably played his instrument for as long as I've played mine, and he definitely has the skill to prove it. He's a showman though. He slides all over the stage and plays behind his head and embraces all of the other stereotypes that define hard-rock guitarists. He grins at the crowd as he enters the final chorus, and before I realize what's happening, it's done.

We start our last song — an original we all wrote together near the end of one of our practices a few months back. It's the only song where we all get equal attention, I think. Each of us put something into it that made our parts unique. This isn't just a song for the guitar or singer, it's one for all of us. I begin to smile; this feels like a good end, the right way to end.

Then Billy's guitar cuts. We're lucky that it's at the end of the second chorus, because it sounds like we did it on purpose. This was supposed to be a guitar solo, though, so all of us exchange glances, trying to figure out what to do. Billy's fretting hand is tense. Alex is literally holding his breath. But Travis starts hammering a hard beat, like he's leading to something, then looks at me and nods again. My eyes widen but I nod back, and I think I know what to do. I swallow down whatever anxiety I have and focus on Travis to collect my rhythm. Then, I start to improvise. I think about what Dad taught me, about how Billy shows off with his complex chord progressions and how Travis keeps our rhythm perfectly so that each section flows into the next.

I don't think about what could happen after tonight. I don't think about the freedom, or the loss, or the scrutiny or the validation. I'm only in the present, where I'm hammering, sliding, walking up and down a scale or two and picking my way through the solo. People start clapping

to the beat. For a moment I feel like I'm flying, like what I'm doing is both effortless and the hardest thing I've ever done. I look at Billy and he gives me a thumbs up; he's ready. I play one last bar, then go silent. We all count the beat in our heads, and all at once, we enter the final chorus.

Ending a setlist is strange; the energy will usually dissipate slowly as the final notes ring out. Some bands let their guitarist have the last say. Others the drummer, some the bassist. It depends on the song, of course, but for this one, we end as a group. Alex finishes the last line and the three of us continue for a bar before playing the last four notes together. It's then that I'm pulled out of my haze; the set is done, my mind isn't in the lofty aether of music but in the hard present of the stage. I'm sweating and so is everyone else, Travis is catching his breath and Alex, Billy and I are exchanging glances. We did it, and that's what matters, and then we look out at the crowd. They're silent for a moment. I hear someone start to clap. Grey hair. I smile.