

Roots and Fifths, Patterns and Theory

What Are Roots and Fifths?

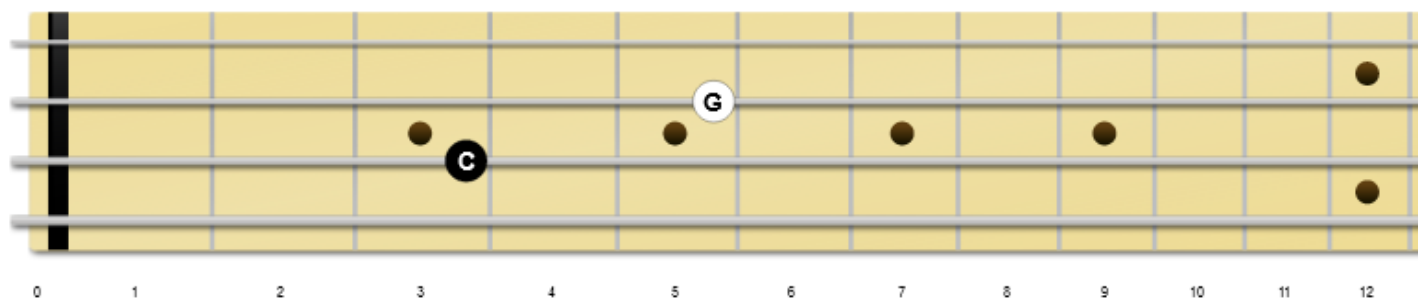
The root and fifth pattern is one of the most common note patterns used by bass players. When a guitarist or keyboardist plays a chord, he or she is playing several notes at the same time — usually 3 or more different notes. Two of the notes which form each chord are called a root and a fifth. The root and fifth of the chord are the most supportive sounding notes a bassist can play beneath a chord.

Roots and fifths are conveniently the same pattern for almost every chord. It doesn't matter if it's a major chord, minor chord, or a power chord. You can apply this pattern pretty broadly when creating basslines. If you know the root note to play, you can use the fifth, too. It almost always works.

Why is It Called a Fifth?

The short answer is the notes of scales and chords are assigned specific numbers. The fifth is simply the fifth note of the scale from which it comes.

The Fifth Above



Playing Roots and Fifths on the Bass

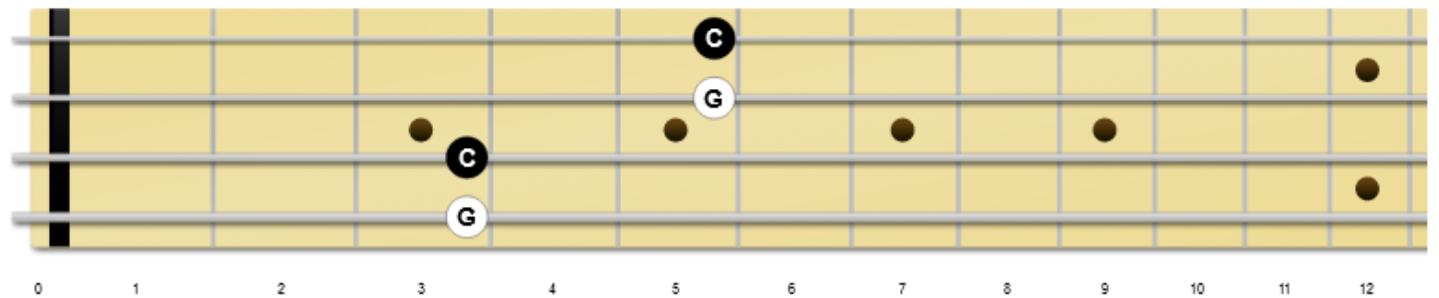
The root-fifth pattern is pretty easy to remember on the bass fretboard and it's not too hard to play. Just like the octave pattern, the root-fifth pattern is the same shape all over the neck of the bass. Remember when we say above/below and up/down, we are talking about *pitch*, not physical space. The fifth *above* any root note is always on the next higher string, two frets higher.

The Fifth Below



The fifth *below* any root note is always on the next lower string, on the same fret.

Roots 5ths Octaves



When you combine the octaves of the root notes and the octaves of the fifths, you have a lot you can play with for nearly any chord.

Study the diagram which includes the octaves. Notice for any root note there is a fifth a string below. Notice how the 5ths are octaves of each other.

Fingering Roots and Fifths on Bass

You will be playing roots and fifths a lot regardless of style. It's good to develop a consistent fingering and learn to play the patterns cleanly. When you play these patterns by themselves, use your 1st finger on the root and play the higher 5th with your 3rd finger. You can still use either the 3rd or 4th finger on the higher octave of the root.

When playing the lower 5th, always use the same finger you used on the root note.

The Use of Roots and Fifths in Bass Playing

You will quickly notice that roots and fifths are the most common bass note pattern after just roots by themselves. If roots and fifths aren't being used all by themselves in a bassline, a lot of the time they anchor more complex basslines. The reason roots and 5ths are used so often is because they consistently sound good, they fulfill the bassist's supportive responsibility, and they're not too hard to play.

You'll most easily recognize root-fifth basslines in styles like country, polkas, tejano, and tuba basslines. Those are just very obvious uses. Don't think for a minute that these are the only uses of roots and fifths. They are absolutely everywhere in every style from Classical music to metal. The root and fifth pattern is critical to bass playing. You must have a thorough grasp of these patterns regardless of what you intend to play.

The Sound of Roots and Fifths

Try to get the sound of roots and fifths in your head. They are everywhere.

Some common root-5th sounds are:

- the piano bassline for the *Linus and Lucy* theme (root-5th-octave-root-5th-octave).
- the first two notes of the *Star Wars* theme (root-5th)
- *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* by Mozart (root-lower 5th-root)

Country/Folk Bass Pattern in D

```
G|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
D|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
A|-5-----|-5-----|-5-----|-5-0-3-4-|-5-----|-5-----|
E|-----5---|-----5---|-----5---|-----|-----5---|-----5---|
```

"Low Rider" (Cheech & Chong) Bass Pattern in G

```
G|-----|-----|-----|-----|
D|-----|---3---3-5-|-----|---3---3-5-|
A|---1--3--4-|-5-----5---|---1--3--4-|-5-----5---|
E|-3-----|-----|-3-----|-----|
```

"Stand By Me" (Ben E. King) Bass Pattern in G

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           [A]           [A]           [F#m]           [F#m]
G|----1-|-2---2---1-|-2---2--2-1-|-----|-----|
D|--2---|-----2---|-----|4---4---2-|-4---4--4-2-|
A|-----|-----|-----|-----4---|-----|
E|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
```

Oh I won't be a- afraid, no I won't shed a tear, just as

```

           [D]           [E7]           [A]           [A]
G|-----|-----1-|-2---2---1-|-2---2---1-|
D|-0---0--0-4-|-2---2--2---|-----2---|-----2---|
A|-----|-----|-----|-----|
E|-----|-----|-----|-----|
```

long as you stand, stand by me

12 Bar Blues - Walking Bass Line

A A A A

2 1 4 1 ... similar

T
A
B

5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4

5 D D A A

T
A
B

5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4

9 E D A A

T
A
B

7 6 9 6 5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4 5 4 7 4