

## THE INNOVATIVE STYLE OF THE BASS GUITARIST JOHN ENTWISTLE (BASED ON THE COMPOSITION *MY GENERATION*)

### STILUL NOVATOR AL BAS-CHITARISTULUI JOHN ENTWISTLE (ÎN BAZA LUCRĂRII *MY GENERATION*)

ALEXANDR VITIUC<sup>1</sup>

doctor în arte, conferențiar universitar,  
Institutul de Arte A.G. Rubiņstein, or. Tiraspol

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5091-5979>

CZU [780.8:780.614.131.015.2]:781.68

780.8:780.614.131.071.2(410)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.55383/amtap.2025.2.05>

*The present article examines the bass part in the composition My Generation, performed by bass guitarist John Entwistle. The analysis concerns the musician's use of the minor pentatonic scale and the blues scale atop the small major chords of the seventh, which allows drawing analogies with the sound of early archaic blues. J.Entwistle's commitment to a clear and accentuated meter-rhythmic base is of particular interest, since it was intended to reveal the character of the composition being performed. At the same time, the modification of rhythmic structures within the bars and the metro-rhythmic variability make it possible to state the bass guitarist's high performing mastery.*

**Keywords:** bass guitar, John Entwistle, My Generation, The Who, performing technique

*În articol este cercetată partida basului din lucrarea My Generation în interpretarea bas-chitaristului John Entwistle. Sunt analizate utilizarea de către muzician a pentatonicului de stare minoră și a modului de blues, suprapuse peste acordurile de septimă mici majore, fapt ce sugerează analogii cu sonoritatea unor bluesuri arhaice timpurii. Un interes deosebit îl prezintă predilecția lui J. Entwistle pentru baza metro-ritmică clară și accentuată, menită să dezvăluie caracterul lucrării interpretate. Totodată, transformarea structurilor ritmice în interiorul măsurilor și caracterul metro-ritmic variabil ne-au determinat să constatăm că bas-chitaristul posedă o înaltă măiestrie interpretativă.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** chitară bas, John Entwistle, My Generation, The Who, tehnică interpretativă

### Introduction

It is evident that the rapid development of rock music in the 1960's is inextricably linked to the popularity of modern bass guitar art. The playability of the design peculiarities and the available volume of the dynamic range were absolutely intertwined with the practical use of the bass guitar as an indispensable member of rock bands. Formed as a rhythmic instrument designed to provide harmonic accompaniment, the bass guitar quickly gained recognition as a full-fledged representative of the rhythm section.

Spreading the bass guitar playing techniques contributed to forming characteristic sound of individual bands. It is interesting to mention that to create a rigid metro-rhythmic basis the bass guitarists mainly used a pick. The bright and clear articulation highlighted this method of playing, and also logically harmonized with the style of rock compositions. At the same time, trying to diversify the sound of the bass guitar with original timbre colors, individual performers used both the pizzicato technique and other sound production techniques.

<sup>1</sup> E-mail: [vityuk150582@mail.ru](mailto:vityuk150582@mail.ru)

### **John Entwistle's innovative style peculiarities**

One of the first performers who succeeded to reveal in a new way the instrument possibilities in rock music was the English bass guitarist John Entwistle — the invariable member of the rock band *The Who*. Due to his unique approach and original manner within performing his compositions, the musician achieved a sound that determined the style of the group. According to John Atkins, J. Entwistle was a sheer talent and style bassist who single-handedly transformed the bass guitar into a melodic, expressive instrument [1 p. 14].

J. Entwistle began his professional career in the early 1960's playing the trumpet in the *Confederates* jazz band. The group performed only one concert, after which Pete Townshend, the electric guitarist and J. Entwistle's colleague, suggested focusing on playing rock and roll. During this period, another friend of the musician, the vocalist Roger Daltrey, suggested switching to the electric bass guitar. Forming *The Detours* band and soon afterwards *The Who* band, J. Entwistle formed a unique group style, which had a huge influence on the formation and the development of bass guitar performance [2 p. 238].

It should be mentioned that J. Entwistle practiced many methods of sound production including the mediator technique, the fingerstyle, the harmonics and the tapping. Fingerstyle is a special playing guitar technique (mostly for the acoustic guitar), when one performer is simultaneously playing several parts – solo, rhythm and bass [3 p. 127]. The bass guitarist often combined several of these techniques at once whilst performing, using them depending on the nature of the compositions to be played.

Entwistle's melodic bass playing was primarily determined by the extended bass lines based on pentatonic revolutions. Since the group's main guitarist P. Townshend played mainly chordal parts, J. Entwistle often had to perform solo parts, becoming in this way the *frontman* of *The Who*. *Frontman* is the member of a musical or creative group whose onstage behavior or lifestyle receives the most attention. Often the *frontman* is the leader and manager of the group (but may not be, but only represents the "face" of the group) [4 p. 134].

The main J. Entwistle's innovation in positioning the right hand on the bass guitar when playing pizzicato induced changing the thumb position. Various players practiced playing primarily on the bridge or the neck pickups, while J. Entwistle developed the pizzicato technique, where the thumb was placed on the 4th *E* chord. Owing to such a thumb position, the player was able to play in a more aggressive manner, as well as to significantly widen the technical potential of the right-hand remaining fingers.

Another of J. Entwistle's technical innovation was the phenomenal method of playing with the index, the middle and the ring fingers of the right hand when performing pizzicato directly on the neck of the bass guitar. The musician admitted calling this method as the "*typewriter*" for its brightness and clarity [5]. Its essence was that when playing notes, the musician seemed to tap the fingers of the right hand on the bass guitar chords, thereby creating an original percussion basis. In addition, such a sound production method made it possible to play music on all the chords of the bass guitar at once or to use all fingers on one of the four strings.

At the same time, the bass guitar musical part received moreover additional metro-rhythmic flexibility, drawing analogies with chord tapping during the percussion performance of artificial harmonics. It should be noted that such a technique was truly innovative and was subsequently mastered by other bass players who were mainly using the slap technique.

### **John Entwistle's performance principles based on *My Generation***

Referring to J. Entwistle's oeuvre, the author seeks to analyze his performing style on the basis of *My Generation* (1965) composition from the eponymous album of the rock band *The Who*. The composition was written in the rhythm and blues style with elements of beat music.

It is interesting to know that the song was created by P. Townshend and reflected the views of the British youth — the *Mods*. The British youth subculture which was formed in the late 1950's and

reached its peak in the mid-1960's [6 p. 24]. In one of his interviews with the music magazine *Rolling Stone*, the guitarist admitted that creating the “*My Generation* was a young people's attempt to find their place in society” [7 p. 159].

The compositional structure of the song is a lead-chorus form that consists of a 4 verses introduction and of choruses, of a bass and an electric guitar solo, and two links between choruses 2 and 3, and choruses 3 and 4. The composition ends with a coda. The work was written in the rock music genre with a direct rhythm and blues influence.

Table 1:

Form section	Intro	AB	A <sub>1</sub> B <sub>1</sub>	C	Link	A <sub>2</sub> B <sub>2</sub>	Link	A <sub>3</sub> B <sub>3</sub>	Guitar solo + Coda
		Verse 1 + Chorus 1	Verse 2 + Chorus 2	Bass guitar solo		Verse 3 + Chorus 3		Verse 4 + Chorus 4	
Bar	4	16 + 4	16 + 4	16	4	16 + 8	4	16 + 8	28 + 9

The composition begins with an introduction based on 2 harmonic functions (G5-G5/F). The bass guitar part is simple and is based on playing quarter notes for each measure beat. Such a performing feature, used by J. Entwistle, was primarily intended to reveal the character of the performed composition by means of a clear and accentuated meter-rhythmic basis.

Figure 1:

In the first composition's verse (bar 5), the bass player introduces ascending triplets *f-f#-g*, performed using legato and eighth notes. The given initiative showed the musician's desire to indicate the musical composition's movement through changing the rhythmic durations. Arriving to bar 8, J. Entwistle introduced a short appoggiatura to the note *f*, thereby varying the monotonous rhythmic skeleton of the work. It should also be taken into account that the entire composition was built on a hard two-chord riff.

Figure 2:

Musical text of the composition *Crossroads* borrowed from the publication *25 Essential Rock Bass Classics* [7 p. 35–44]. Reaching the composition's chorus, in order to ensure the uniqueness of the bass line in the accompaniment, the performer used different types of rhythmic patterns. The process was accompanied by active mediator movements, designed to enhance the stylistic features of the composition we are talking about.

Figure 3:

Figure 3 shows a musical score for a bass line. The score is written on two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into four measures. Above the treble staff, the chords are labeled: G, Gsus4, G7, Gsus4, G, Gsus4, G7, Gsus4. The bass staff shows the following fingerings: 5-5-5-5-5-5, 3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3, 5-5-5-5-5-5, 3-3-3-3-3-3-0-3.

The second verse and the chorus are quite the same as the first one and once done, it is followed by a bass solo.

As laid down by the Norwegian researcher Per Elias Drabløs, the first electric bass guitar performer who played solo on the big stage was not a jazz musician but the rock star J. Entwistle, when recording several bars in the composition *My Generation*. These lines were considered to be the first recorded bass guitar solo [8 p. 40].

It is also reported that wishing to maximize the high frequencies sound within his solo, J. Entwistle purchased specifically for this purpose the six-string bass *Danelectro UB-2 6-String Bass*. However, the thin strings of the instrument would constantly break therefore the musician had to use the *Fender Precision Bass* [1 p. 52].

Figure 4:

Figure 4 shows a musical score for a bass line, divided into three systems. Each system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into four measures per system. Above the treble staff, the chords are labeled: G5, G5, G6, G7, G6. The bass staff shows the following fingerings and accents: 5-3-5-5-5-3, 5-3-5-3-5, 5-5-5-5, 3-3-3-3; 5-5-3-5-5-3, 5-3-5-3-5, 5-5-5-5, 3-3-3-3; 5-3-5-5-3-3, 5-3-5-3-5-3, 5-5-5-5, 3-3-3-3. There are also accents labeled 'full' and '3' above the notes.

Figure 5 shows a musical score for bass guitar, measures 40-43. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of eighth notes and quarter notes, with triplets and bends indicated. The fretboard diagram below the staff shows fingerings for the bass line. Chords G5, G6, and G7 are indicated above the staff.

It is worth mentioning that the bass solo is based on the minor pentatonic sounds which J. Entwistle played atop the  $G5$  function. Such a decision created a special sound referring to the early archaic blues performed by bluesmen.

To enhance the sound of a blues note, the musician used a *bend* in bars 28, 36 which was created by means of raising the note  $c_1$  up a semitone. *Bend* is a blues technique in which the playing finger of the left hand moves upward along the fret, tightening the String and moving it towards the adjacent, thicker string [9 p. 26]. As a result of such a sound production method, the blues mode got formed in the part, exacerbating the unstable sound of the composition. Within bar 32, J. Entwistle used as well a *bend*, but the notes  $c$  and  $B^b$  were produced a quarter-tone up already. To a large extent, it reminded of the electric guitar parts that were typical for that time.

As to bar 41, the musician ingeniously introduced a short appoggiatura into the bass line to smoothly lead the melodic line. At the same time, within a bass solo, various rhythmic units were used within the bars (triplets, quarter-point-sixteenths, etc.), allowing to diversify the minor pentatonic scale sound and to give the bass line an additional impetus.

After a short 4-bar link consisting of two harmonic functions, there followed a transition to choruses 3 and 4 and a verse with a tonal deviation of  $A$ -dur and  $B^b$ -dur.

The composition ending leads to the electric guitar solo and a coda in a new C major key. It is important to note that atop the main key, the bass guitar mainly performs the C minor pentatonic scale and the C blues scale parts and sounds. So doing, J. Entwistle returned again to the unstable sound of the musical part, significantly exacerbating the modal tensions.

Figure 5:

Figure 5 shows a musical score for bass guitar, measures 92-95 and 96-99. The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of eighth notes and quarter notes, with bends and appoggiaturas indicated. The fretboard diagram below the staff shows fingerings for the bass line. Chords C, C/F, and Bb/C are indicated above the staff.

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the composition *My Generation*, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. What distinguishes the J. Entwistle's bass line is the commitment to a clear and accentuated metro-rhythmic basis.

2. Using the minor pentatonic and the blues scales atop the minor major seventh chords greatly enhances the sound of J. Entwistle's bass line, drawing analogies to the early archaic blues sound.
3. The rhythmic structures modification within the bars as well as the metro-rhythmic variability allows us to observe the high performing level of the bass guitarist.
4. The practical use of *bends* on the bass guitar when increasing the main sound by a semitone and by a quarter-tone, as well as by a short appoggiatura, reminds the sound of electric guitar improvisations performed by the musicians of the time.
5. J. Entwistle's artistic activity influenced future performers not only within the rock music, but also within jazz. It is worth mentioning Chris Squire, Geddy Lee, Billy Sheehan, Krist Novoselic, Victor Wooten, etc. among the most famous performers.

#### Bibliographic References

1. ATKINS, John. *The Who on Record: A Critical History, 1963–1998*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. 2000. ISBN 978-0-7864-4097-9.
2. CAMPBELL, Michael. *Popular Music in America: The Beat Goes On*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2019. ISBN 978-1-3375-6037-5.
3. ОДОЕВСКИЙ, В. и Н. КОРЧАГИНА. Исполнительство на акустической гитаре в технике фингерстайл: исторический и методический аспекты. *Музыкальное искусство и образование*. 2020, т. 8, вып. 2, с. 124–139. ISSN 2309-1428.
4. ВЛАСОВА, Лариса; Анна ГЕРШАНОВА; Дмитрий ДЯТКО; Гузель ЕЛИЗАРОВА и Светлана ИГНАТЬЕВА. *Лексикографические штудии 2013: (Международная коллективная монография)*. Москва; Берлин: Директ-Медиа, 2015. ISBN 978-5-4475-3907-8.
5. MORGAN, Simon. *John Entwistle So Who's The Bass Player? Review*. Disponibil: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/9ngb/> [accesat 2024-01-15].
6. ВЕННЕР, Ян и Джо ЛЕВИ. *Великие интервью журнала Rolling Stone за 40 лет*. Москва: РИПОЛ классик, 2016. ISBN 978-5-386-08502-5.
7. SHUKER, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music*. London: Routledge, 2013. ISBN 978-0-2031-8801-9.
8. DRABLØS, Per Elias. *The Quest for the Melodic Electric Bass: From Jamerson to Spenner*. London; New York: Routledge, 2016. ISBN 9781472434821.
9. ПЕНДИЩУК, Юрий. *Классическая гитара: сборник пьес и ансамблей для юных гитаристов*. Винница: Нова книга, 2011. ISMN 979-0-707505-70-0.

*Manuscris primit la 05.09.2025. Acceptat pentru publicare la 28.10.2025<sup>2</sup>.*

---

2 Acest articol este distribuit sub Licența Creative Commons Atribuire-Necomercial-Fără derivate 4.0 International.