

CRAWL BEFORE YOU WALK

by Steve Marks

Rhythm is what powers the engine. Most jazz melodies contain an underlying feeling of eighth note triplets. Two notes in the space of one beat are not played as even eighth notes but line up with the first and third triplets (there are exceptions). Walking bass lines should have a slight emphasis on the second and fourth beats of the bar - like a push off to the next note. The time feel should not be as strict as a metronome but should stay within a close range of the original tempo. Rhythmic deviation from playing 4 quarter notes per bar is usually encouraged as long as it's the exception and not the rule. Anticipation, triplets (especially arpeggios that move from high note to low) and skips (eighth notes that line up with that "swinging" third triplet) are rhythmic weapons of choice.

There's even more room for exploration in your harmonic choices. Starting each bar with the root of its' chord is generally preferred by as was the case with rhythm, a little deviation in good taste is very nice. Harmonically, each bar of a walking bass line should contain either:

1. All chord tones
2. Chord tones and scale tones
3. Chord tones along with scale tones and chromatic passing tones

Appoggiaturas (non chord tones that are leapt to) can also be used but should be spontaneously mixed up, taking into account the contour of your line, dissonance and resolution, rhythmic variety and articulation such as slurs, muted notes, and left hand pulloffs.

Example 1 illustrates some of these rhythmic and harmonic techniques (feel free to put in your own articulations).

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a walking bass line in 4/4 time. The first staff has four measures with chords C7, A7, Dmin9, and G7(#). The second staff has four measures with chords CMaj7, C#dim7, Dmin7, and G7(b9). The bass line consists of quarter notes with some eighth-note triplets and chromatic passing tones.

Example no 1

As you see there's a lot of material you can use to spin an exciting bass line, the question then is, how can a novice begin learning to improvise walking bass lines? The approach I use with my students is to take 8 bar chord progressions and have them write out bass lines. Improvising is merely composing without a pencil and paper (and without an eraser). Writing enables us to freeze the process and consider the options before we

commit to a note. Since our objective is to be able to improvise as many variations of a given chord progression as we can, don't belabor the writing.

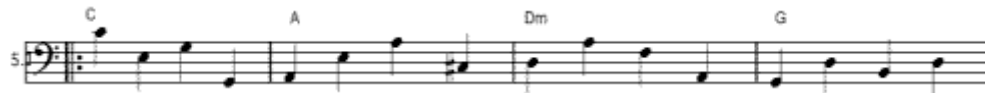
In order to focus on harmonic choices (and develop a strong quarter note groove) we'll save the use of rhythmic variation for later. First write out bass lines using only triad tones and beginning each measure with the chords' root.

Underneath every 7th, 9th, 11th, or 13 chord is a simple triad. For instance, a C7b9#11 is built on a C major triad. Before delving into 7th, 9ths, and 11th chords see how much mileage you can get from triads. Knowing all the notes in all the triads is a prerequisite. Another important component you can begin to incorporate in your lines is "stepwise connection". Stepwise connection is when the last note of one measure is either a half step or whole step above or below the first note of the next measure, as in my examples below. These are the rules:

1. Four quarter notes in every bar
2. Begin each measure with the chords' root
3. Only chord tones
4. Use stepwise connection between chords

The image displays six examples of bass lines for a 4-measure chord progression: C, A, Dm, G. Each example is written on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are quarter notes, and each measure begins with the root of the chord. The examples illustrate different rhythmic patterns and stepwise connections between measures.

- Example 1: C (C4, E4, G4), A (A4, C5, E5), Dm (D4, F4, A4), G (G4, B4, D5). Stepwise connections: C4 to A4, E4 to C5, G4 to E5, D4 to D4, F4 to F4, A4 to A4, G4 to G4, B4 to B4, D5 to D5.
- Example 2: C (C4, E4, G4), C#dim (C#4, E4, G4), Dm (D4, F4, A4), G (G4, B4, D5). Stepwise connections: C4 to C#4, E4 to E4, G4 to G4, C#4 to D4, E4 to F4, G4 to A4, D4 to D4, F4 to F4, A4 to A4, G4 to G4, B4 to B4, D5 to D5.
- Example 3: C (C4, E4, G4), A (A4, C5, E5), Dm (D4, F4, A4), G (G4, B4, D5). Stepwise connections: C4 to A4, E4 to C5, G4 to E5, D4 to D4, F4 to F4, A4 to A4, G4 to G4, B4 to B4, D5 to D5.
- Example 4: C (C4, E4, G4), C#dim (C#4, E4, G4), Dm (D4, F4, A4), G (G4, B4, D5). Stepwise connections: C4 to C#4, E4 to E4, G4 to G4, C#4 to D4, E4 to F4, G4 to A4, D4 to D4, F4 to F4, A4 to A4, G4 to G4, B4 to B4, D5 to D5.
- Example 5: C (C4, E4, G4), A (A4, C5, E5), Dm (D4, F4, A4), G (G4, B4, D5). Stepwise connections: C4 to A4, E4 to C5, G4 to E5, D4 to D4, F4 to F4, A4 to A4, G4 to G4, B4 to B4, D5 to D5.
- Example 6: C (C4, E4, G4), C#dim (C#4, E4, G4), Dm (D4, F4, A4), G (G4, B4, D5). Stepwise connections: C4 to C#4, E4 to E4, G4 to G4, C#4 to D4, E4 to F4, G4 to A4, D4 to D4, F4 to F4, A4 to A4, G4 to G4, B4 to B4, D5 to D5.



I suggest writing several solutions for each progression. After you've written and played a score of bass lines try improvising some lines using the same progressions and rules. Even though walking lines made up of only triad tones are just one facet of the total picture, you now have a good foundation upon which to build. It takes a while to assimilate all the techniques of walking bass and make it flow. You'll have to crawl before you can walk but eventually you'll be jogging along with "Ladybird" and "Donna Lee".

Examples 2-5 show four "solutions" using our beginners "rules". The idea is to be able to play many variations of any given chord progression. Play and analyze the examples. Transpose the progression to another key and write several "solutions" of your own.

Steve Marks