From The Bottom Up: 
Building Your Own Jazz Bass Lines

Overview & Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to learn how to create bass lines from a set of chord changes. The majority of the presentation will focus on “walking” bass lines in a 4/4 meter. While some knowledge of music theory is necessary, excellent bass lines can be created just by using notes in the triads of any chord progression.

Key Points

1. Always play the root of the chord when the chord changes.
2. The remaining beats of the measure can be filled using the 5th of the chord or by repeating the root.
3. Any chord change can be preceded by a note that is one half-step above or below the resolution tone. For example, if the chord is C major, the notes B-natural or Db can be played the beat before the chord change. These chromatic notes can be used regardless of what notes are in the chords or the key signature.
4. When playing jazz bass lines, accurate rhythm is always more important than accurate notes.

Key Terms

1. Swing Rhythm - Playing two eighth-notes as the first and third notes of a triplet.
2. Tunes - Jazz musicians use this term to describe songs or standards that they are playing.
3. Transcription - This is the act of listening to a recording and notating what one of the musicians is playing. Jazz musicians often transcribe improvised solos by instrumentalists to learn the language of improvisation. Jazz bassists perform this same activity, but usually for improvised bass lines.

Dr. Michael T. Geib, ASTA Conference Presentation 2016
Building Bass Lines

Before learning to build bass lines, the student must learn chord symbols and what they mean. The following are the most common chord symbols seen in lead sheets:

- **C**
- **Cmin or C-**
- **C⁰ or Cdim**
- **C+ or Caug**

- **Csus**
- **C6**
- **Cmin6**
- **C 6 9**

- **Cmin 6 9**
- **Cmaj7 or C∆**
- **Cmin7 or C-7**
- **Cmin7(5) or CØ7**

- **C7**
- **C7sus**
- **C⁰7 or Cdim7**
- **C7#5 or C+7**

- **C7♭5**
- **Cma7♭5**
- **Cmin (maj7)**
In addition, chords can also have added extensions of 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths.

**Major Chords**

\[
\text{Cmaj9} \quad \text{Cmaj9(#11)} \quad \text{Cmaj13(#11)}
\]

**Minor Chords**

\[
\text{Cmin9} \quad \text{Cmin11} \quad \text{Cmin13}
\]

**Dominant Chords**

\[
\text{C9} \quad \text{C9(#11)} \quad \text{C13}
\]

*In major and dominant chords the 11th is almost always a #11. It is also sometimes implied and not explicitly written*

Chords with extensions can also be altered, specifically by using b5, #5, b9 and #9. Below are some common examples

\[
\text{C7 (b9)} \quad \text{C7(#5)} \quad \text{C7(#9)} \quad \text{C7(#5)(#9)}
\]

\[
\text{Cmin9 (b5)} \quad \text{C13 (b5)} \quad \text{Cmaj9#11 (b5)} \quad \text{C9#11(b5)}
\]

Keep in mind that despite what extensions are added, the foundation of the chord (root, 5th, 3rd, and 7th) remains the same.
Building Bass Lines

Once the student has an understanding of chord theory, he or she can begin to create bass lines. The first lesson will be building walking bass lines in the 4/4 - meter swing style. In general, it is a good strategy to play the root of the chord on the downbeat of the measure. For example:

The remaining three beats can be filled in by either repeating the root or playing the 5th of the chord. Also, the root can be displaced by octaves.

When students feel comfortable with the above concepts, they can create more harmonic interest in their bass lines using the following methods: scalar, arpeggiation, and chromatic leading tones.

Scalar

Arpeggiation

Chromatic

When using chromaticism, it is important to remember that any note that is either a half-step above or below the resolution note can be used before a chord change. For example, if the resolution note is a C, then the bassist can preceed that note with either a B-natural or D-flat, regardless of the harmonic construction of the chord.
Once these methods have been learned, the student can combine all of them to create a walking bass line. Below is an example using all of the previously discussed concepts in a Bb blues progression:
Building Bass Lines

It is common practice by jazz bassists to simplify a walking bass line by playing only on beats one and three, usually during the beginning of the tune when the melody is being played. This simplification is known as a **Two-Beat Bassline**. This style heavily utilizes the roots and 5ths of chords.

Two-beat bass lines can be embellished by adding other notes, but it is imperative that the emphasis remain on beats one and three at all times.

Two-beat bass lines are also used in playing **ballads**. Ballads are slow tunes that can be played with or without swing rhythms.

Walking bass lines in a 4/4-meter swing style can also be used in playing ballads. For example:

When playing in a **triple meter** (3/4 or 6/8), walking bass lines are constructed the same as in a 4/4-meter. Two-beat bass lines are usually played as dotted-half notes.
Building Bass Lines

Tunes in the **Latin-American styles** (bossa nova, samba, etc.) are also common in the jazz standard repertoire. The basic principle for playing Latin tunes is the same as playing two-beat bass lines.

```
Fmi7       Bb7       Emi7/B5       A7
```

Latin or straight-8th note bass lines can be embellished by adding an 8th note on the offbeat of beats two and four. However, it is important that the emphasis remain on beats **one and three** and not on the syncopated notes.

```
Fmi7       Bb7       Emi7/B5       A7
```

In the remaining pages of the chapter, a number of different resources have been provided for practice:

1. A two-beat and walking bass line on the changes of the tune "Beautiful Love"
2. A sample Latin bass line on the tune "Corcovado"
3. An example of four common chord progressions found in jazz, including a blues, minor blues, modal song form and rhythm changes.
4. A jazz blues progression written in all twelve keys.
5. Five different bassline transcriptions:
   - "Is You or Is You Ain't My Baby" - medium swing: Sam Jones, bass
   - "What Is This Thing Called Love" - up-tempo swing: Israel Crosby, bass
   - "Don't Blame Me" - ballad: Sam Jones, bass
   - "Gone With The Wind" - ballad: Israel Crosby, bass
   - "Days of Wine and Roses" - medium swing: Ray Brown, bass

A note on transcriptions:

While the included transcriptions will provide valuable insight into how to construct interesting bass lines, each student is highly encouraged to perform his or her own transcriptions of prominent bassists from the jazz idiom. Not only will transcribing provide insight to building bass lines, it will greatly enhance the student's ear-training and aural skills. The following is a brief list of significant jazz bassists, all of whom are worthwhile to transcribe:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bassist</th>
<th>Sam Jones</th>
<th>Ron Carter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slam Stewart</td>
<td>Sam Jones</td>
<td>Ron Carter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milt Hinton</td>
<td>Percy Heath</td>
<td>Chuck Israels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jimmy Blanton</td>
<td>Charles Mingus</td>
<td>Eddie Gomez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Israel Crosby</td>
<td>Wilbur Ware</td>
<td>Dave Holland</td>
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<td>Oscar Pettiford</td>
<td>Larry Gales</td>
<td>Rufus Reid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray Brown</td>
<td>Scott LaFaro</td>
<td>Lynn Seaton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Chambers</td>
<td>Jimmy Garrison</td>
<td>Christian McBride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug Watkins</td>
<td>Charlie Haden</td>
<td>John Clayton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beautiful Love
Victor Young
Bass Line by Michael T. Geib

Emi7 b5   A7 b9   Dm17

Gmi7   C7   Fma7   Emi7 b5   A7 b9

Dm17   Gmi7   Bb7   A7

Dm17   B7 b5   Emi7 b5   A7 b9

Emi7 b5   A7 b9   Dm17

Gmi7   C7   Fma7   Emi7 b5   A7 b9

Dm17   Gmi7   Bb7   A7

Dm17   B7 #9   Bb7   A7   Dm17
Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars (Corcovado)

Antonio Carlos Jobim
Bass Line by Michael T. Geib

Bass

D7/A

Abdim7

Gmi7  C7  Fma7

Fm17  Bb7  Em17b5  A7

D7

Dmi7  G7

D7/A

Abdim7

Gmi7  C7  Fma7

Fm17  Bb7  Em17b5  A7

Dmi7  G7  Em17b5  A7

Dmi7  G7  C6
1. Jazz Blues

F7 \( \rightarrow \) Bb7 \( \rightarrow \) F7

Bb7 \( \rightarrow \) F7 \( \rightarrow \) D7

Gmin7 \( \rightarrow \) C7 \( \rightarrow \) F7 \( \rightarrow \) D7 \( \rightarrow \) Gmin7 \( \rightarrow \) C7

2. Minor Blues

Cmin7

\( \rightarrow \) Fmin7 \( \rightarrow \) Cmin7

\( \rightarrow \) Ab7 \( \rightarrow \) G7b9 \( \rightarrow \) Cmin7 \( \rightarrow \) G7b9

3. Modal Tunes (So What, Impressions)

Dmin7 \( \rightarrow \) Dmin7 \( \rightarrow \) Ebmin7 \( \rightarrow \) Dmin7

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4. Rhythm Changes

Bb Maj7  G7  Cmin7  F7  Dmin7  G7  Cmin7  F7

Fmin7  Bb7  Eb7  Ab7  Dmin7  G7  Cmin7  F7  Cmin7  F7  Bb Maj7

D7  G7

C7  F7

Bb Maj7  G7  Cmin7  F7  Dmin7  G7  Cmin7  F7

Fmin7  Bb7  Eb7  Ab7  Cmin7  F7  Bb Maj7
Blues In All Keys

F7
Bb7
F7

Bb7
F7
D7

Gmin7
C7
F7
D7
Gmin7
C7

Bb7
Eb7
Bb7

Eb7
Bb7
G7

Cmin7
F7
Bb7
G7
Cmin7
F7

Eb7
Ab7
Eb7

Ab7
Eb7
C7

Fmin7
Bb7
Eb7
C7
Fmin7
Bb7

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Blues in All Keys

D7  G7  D7

G7  D7  B7

Emin7  A7  D7  B7  Emin7  A7

G7  C7  G7

C7  G7  E7

Amin7  D7  G7  E7  Amin7  D7

C7  F7  C7

F7  C7  A7

Dmin7  G7  C7  A7  Dmin7  G7
Is You or Is You Ain't My Baby
Sam Jones Bassline

Album: Barry Harris at the Jazz Workshop
Artist: Barry Harris

Sam Jones Bassline

Transcribed by: Michael T. Geib

0:07

FM17  C7  FM17

Bass

Fmi7  C7  Gmi7

Fmi7

C7

Fmi7

Bb7  Eb7  Ab6  Gmi7  C7

Bb7  Eb7  Ab

C7

Fmi7

Gb7  Abma7  Ab7

Gb7  Abma7  Ab7

Gb7  Abma7  C7

Abma7  C7

Fmi7

Bb7  Eb7  Gb7  C7

Bb7  Eb7  Abma7  Gmi7  C7
What Is This Thing Called Love
Israel Crosby Bassline

Cole Porter

Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib

Album: Jazz Moments
Artist: George Shearing

Israel Crosby Bassline

0:45
Don't Blame Me

Sam Jones Bassline

Artist: Barry Harris
Album: Barry Harris at the Jazz Workshop

Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib

\[d = 60\]

C7

FMA7 Bbm17 Eb7 Am17 Abm17 Db7

Gmi7 C7 Am17 Abm17 Db7 Gmi7 C7 Am17 D7

Gmi7 C7 Am17 D7 Gmi7 C7 Fma7 Bbm17 Eb7 Am17 Abm17 Db7 Gmi7 C7

Am17 Abm17 Db7 Gmi17 C7 Am17 D7 Gmi17 C7 Fma7

BbmA7 A7 Dm17 Eb7 Dm17

Dm17 G7 D7 G7 D7 Gmi17 C7

Fma7 Bbm17 Eb7 Am17 Abm17 Db7 Gmi17 C7 Am17 Abm17 Db7

Gmi17 C7 Am17 D7 Gmi17 C7 Fma7 Gmi17 C7
Days of Wine and Roses
Ray Brown's Bass Line

Henry Mancini
Transcribed by: Michael T. Geib

FMA7

Eb7#11

D7

GM17

Em17b5

A7b9

GM17

G7

C7

FMA7

Eb7#11

D7

GM17

Em17b5

A7b9

Am17

D7

GM17

C7

FMA7
Days of Wine and Roses

FMA7  Eb7#11  AM17  D7

GM17  Eb7

FMA7  DM17  GM17  EM17b5  A7b9

G7  C7

FMA7  Eb7#11  AM17  D7

GM17  Eb7

FMA7  Bm17b5b9  E7b9

Am17  D7  GM17  C7  FMA7  D7  GM17  C7