

## A FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH TO A WALKING BASS LINE IN JAZZ STYLE

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### Abstract

As a jazz bass player, the best quality of a walking bass line is the primary concern. The jazz bassist's usual role in the band is the chord progression narrator and timekeeper. They also create a foundation and connection to the band by using a walking bass line. It is important for every jazz bassist to know that in every quarter note and every beat, there is meaning for the other band members. Understanding the basic chord structure and having a good ear may help the jazz bassist to create an excellent bass line; however, creating a walking bass line can be complex and a mystery to a beginner. So, this is a demonstration which describes to a reader how a bass line is produced in jazz by using the experience and knowledge of the author. In this paper, the writer attempts to give a lesson which is suitable for the beginner to the intermediate level. At the beginning of this paper, there is an explanation that tells a reader how the bass line was developed throughout jazz history. To clarify to the reader, the author also creates some examples which would be beneficial to any bassist who is interested in this method. The specific goal of this paper is to assist and encourage the reader in perceiving the basic concept of creating a walking bass line and the author hopes this method will be beneficial to any reader.

### Introduction

The walking bass line technique consists of four quarter notes in order to create both rhythmic and harmonic parts. The technique is also commonly utilized in many styles of music besides jazz, like classical, blues, rock, funk and country music. Initially, the technique perhaps arose between approximately 1600 and 1750 in the Baroque period.<sup>1</sup> In jazz history, it is difficult to tell who was the exact person who invented the walking bass line technique. The method presumably developed at the beginning of 20th century. In early jazz, a tuba player's role in the small or large ensemble was to function as a bassist, then the bass line was soon transferred to the

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<sup>1</sup> Green, D. M. & Jones, E. (1920). *The principles and practice of modal counterpoint*. New York: Routledge.

role of the double bassist. The bass line in early jazz music or ragtime music was usually performed on the 1st and 3rd beats. According to many scholars, it was Wellman Braud, a creole jazz bassist in New Orleans, who was the first to play the bass line on every single beat. In the recording, “Rockin' in Rhythm” by Duke Ellington, Braud started to play the bass line, switching between playing on the 1st and 3rd beats to every beat.<sup>2</sup> He also earned the reputation as the creator of the slap technique. Jimmy Blanton is another jazz bassist who is known as the father of the walking bass technique. His walking bass line has been transcribed and studied by many jazz bassists. He also joined Duke Ellington's band in 1939. Next, Walter Page is another person who is credited with developing the walking bass line. Page played in Count Basie's band from the 30s to the 40s. He also began to utilize the chromatic approach, which was frequently used in the bebop era later. In the bebop style, the music was challenging for the bassist both in tempo and harmony. Oscar Pettiford was a bebopper who explored new complexities on the bass.<sup>3</sup> Later on, other jazz bass players, like Ray Brown, Charles Mingus and Paul Chambers, were influenced by him. After the bebop era, free jazz and avant-garde jazz began influencing new and upcoming jazz artists. These particular styles introduced a new method of improvisation. It also allowed the bassist to be more free in order to create the bass line with more independence than in the past. Barre Philip, the free jazz bassist, joined Cecil Taylor's quartet in 1955 and then recorded the album called *Jazz Advance* in 1956. Soon, the album inspired avant-garde jazz artists like Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. In the mid-60s, Ron Carter became the bass player in Miles Davis' second quintet. He created a new style of walking bass in the contemporary jazz period. Supported by Tony William and Herbie Hancock, Carter developed his great time-free and complicated harmonic concept in the bass line. He also earned a reputation as one of the most recorded bassists of all time.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the walking bass line technique has been developed, evolved and ameliorated by many bassists throughout jazz history. The technique always changes to support the demands of the soloist. To understand the different concepts of the walking bass line, a reader should listen to a diversity of periods in jazz music.

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<sup>2</sup> Goldsby, J. (1958). *The jazz bass book: Technique and tradition*. San Francisco, CA: Backbeat Books.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, R. (2000). *The evolving bassist*. Teaneck, NJ: Myriad Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> Carter, R. (1988) ‘Building Jazz Bass lines’ West Bluemound road WL 53213 U.S.A.

## Methods

### Learning two feels

The fundamentals of the walking bass line are a combination of scales, modes and chord tones (see Figure 1). It is important for bass players that they should also be able to tell the difference between every chord structure and precise scale spelling. Beginners could start to learn to feel a rhythm in jazz by clapping their hands to beats 2 and 4; once players have acquired mastery of their hands, they should change the tap of the beat to the foot. In learning tapping beats 2 and 4, the author strongly recommends that learners should start to tap the beat with a metronome, starting with a slow tempo. After that, the student may start to play a rhythm on an instrument. To perform on the instrument, the student should set off in a comfortable tempo and then start to tap the foot on the 2nd and 4th beats (always remember that the 1st beat occurs on the up beat during the click sound). Then, begin to play the G note (open string) on the 1st beat and the 3rd beat. After the player begins to get accustomed to the feeling of the time, start to play the C note two times, and then move to A, D, G two times on the 1st beat and the 3rd beat as well (see Figure 2). Next, add the interval of a fifth on every chord. For example, in the C chord, play the C on the 1st beat and then add the G on 3rd beat; similarly, in the A chord, add the E note on the 3rd beat, in the D chord add the A note on the 3rd beat and in the G chord add the D note on the 3rd beat (see Figure 3). This technique is commonly known as “two feels” in the jazz style. The two feels or the half time feel is widespread in early jazz music, like rag time or Dixieland jazz.<sup>5</sup> The student must listen, learn and emulate this kind of music in order to understand the feeling associated with the music.

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<sup>5</sup> Gridley, M. C. (2011). *Jazz style*. 11th edition. New Jersey: Pearson, Prentice Hall

Memorize all these chord tones and scales structure

The figure displays 20 rows of musical notation in bass clef, each showing a chord symbol and its corresponding scale or mode. The notation includes chord symbols, scale names, and specific notes with accidentals. Some scales are shown with alternative spellings or notes marked 'or'.

Chord / Scale	Notes
Cmaj / C major or Ionian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Cmin / C dorian	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A, B
Cmaj6 / C major or Ionian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Cmin-6 / C dorian	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A, B
Cmaj7 / C major or Ionian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Cmin-7 / C natural minor	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A <sup>b</sup> , B <sup>b</sup>
Cmin7b5 or C half dim	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A <sup>b</sup>
C locrian ♭2	C, D <sup>b</sup> , E, F, G, A, B
Cdim7 / C whole half dim	C, D <sup>b</sup> , E <sup>b</sup> , F <sup>b</sup>
Cmaj9 / C major or Ionian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Cmaj9#11 / C lydian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C#
Cmin9 / C dorian	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A, B
Cmin11 / C dorian	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A, B
C7 / C mixolydian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup>
C7b9 / C mixolydian b9	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup>
C7alt / C altered Scale	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup> , C <sup>b</sup>
C13 / C lydian b7	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup>
Cmaj13 / C lydian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C#
C-13 / C dorian	C, D, E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, A, B
Csus	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
C7sus4 / C mixolydian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Caug	C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C#
C whole tone	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Caug7	C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C#
C whole tone	C, D, E, F, G, A, B
C7sus9	C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C#
C mixolydian	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup>
C9b13	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup> , C <sup>b</sup>
C mixolydian b13	C, D, E, F, G, A, B <sup>b</sup> , C <sup>b</sup>

Figure 1. The combination of: scales, modes and chord tones.

Play the G pitch on the 1st beat and 3rd beat  
then, tap the foot in the 2nd beat and 4th beat.



Figure 2. The 1st beat and the 3rd.

Practice the bass two feels technique in different chords

1. root  
Cmaj7 Am7 Dm7 G7

2. adding octave  
Cmaj7 Am7 Dm7 G7

3. adding fifth  
Cmaj7 Am7 Dm7 G7

Figure 3. The two feels.

### Building a simple bass line

To illustrate a walking bass line, the author recommends that the student should learn a basic chord progression in the 12-bar blues. The 12 bar-blues is commonly used for many jazz students when they improvise for the first time.<sup>6</sup> The student should begin by playing only beats 1 and 3, using only the root and the fifth in every chord (see figure 4). and then, double the root and the fifth on beats 2 and 4 in every chord (see figure 5). The fundamental of a walking bass line consist of chord tones, scales and chromatic pitches. First, to create a bass line using chord tones, the player should start to play an arpeggio (Root, 3rd 5th, and 7th) in every chord (see figure 6). To developing the bass line, the student should switch the chord tones around, for example, R-3-7-5 or R-7-3-5 (see figure 7). The student may sing the bass line along as the play the pitches.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, R. (1963). *Bass method*. Volume 1. 1st edition. Oradell, NJ: Hal Leonard Corporation

After that, the player may create a walking bass line by using scales. In order to use the scales, the student can begin to play 1,2,3 and 5 (scales degrees) on every beat from 1,2,3 and 4 respectively in quarter notes (see figure 8). Then, switch other scale patterns such as 1-7-6-5, 1-7-6-7 and 1-2-6-5. The chromatic approach is the technique which is commonly applied to an improved a walking bass line. This method also helps the bass line sound more smooth and appropriated because of the last pitch on beat 4, which always resolves to the first beat of the next chord (either a half step down or a half step up). For example, to approach from the F7 chord to the Bb7 chord, the last note on the 4th beat must be A or B in order to resolve to next chord chromatically. (see figure 9). the student should combine each individual technique together. The author recommends that the player should sing the notes along while playing a walking bass line.



Figure 4. The root and the fifth.



Figure 5. The double root and the double fifth.

Figure 6 shows three staves of bass clef notation. The first staff contains four measures with chords F7, Bb7, F7, and a double bar line. Fingerings are R 3 5 7 for the first two measures, and 'similar' for the third. The second staff contains four measures with chords Bb7, F7, Dm7, and a double bar line. The third staff contains four measures with chords Gm7, C7, F7 (labeled '(turnaround)'), Gm7, and C7.

Figure 6. the root, 3rd 5th, and 7.

Figure 7 shows three staves of bass clef notation. The first staff contains four measures with chords F7, Bb7, F7, and a double bar line. Fingerings are R 3 5 7, R 3 7 5, R 3 5 7, and R 7 5 3. The second staff contains four measures with chords Bb7, F7, Dm7, and a double bar line. Fingerings are R 5 3 7, R 3 5 7, R 7 5 3, and R 3 5 7. The third staff contains four measures with chords Gm7, C7, F7, Gm7, and C7. Fingerings are R 7 5 3, R 7 5 3, R 5 3 7, and R R 5 5.

Figure 7. Switching chord tones around.

Figure 8 shows three staves of bass clef notation. The first staff contains four measures with chords F7, Bb7, F7, and a double bar line. Fingerings are 1 2 3 5, 1 2 3 5, and 'similar'. The second staff contains four measures with chords Bb7, F7, Dm7, and a double bar line. The third staff contains four measures with chords Gm7, C7, F7, Gm7, and C7.

Figure 8. Using scale degree.

Figure 9 shows a single staff of bass clef notation with four measures. The chords are F7, Bb7, F7, and a double bar line. Fingerings are R 3 5 c.h., R 3 4 c.h., R c.h. 2 3, and R c.h. 7 5. 'c.h.' stands for chromatic.

Figure 9. Chromatic resolve.

### Approach techniques

There are the three basic approach techniques that assist the jazz bassist to build a smooth walking bass line. The double chromatic, the dominant approaches and the scale approaches are the methods which are commonly used by beginner to intermediate players (see Figure 10). So far, the author has only instructed the reader to approach on the 2nd and the 4th beat. In fact, the approach methods can be utilized on the 3rd beat as well (especially when there are two chords per bar). First, the double chromatic approach is the method that utilizes the chromatic pitch two beats before resolving to the target note from a half step (either from above or below) (see Figure 11). Also, if the player uses only one chromatic note for approaching a target, it is known as the chromatic approach. The scale note and the chord tones are normally utilized as the target. Second, the dominant approach is the method that resolves to the target note using the fifth interval. For example, if the target note is F, the approach note would be C. The dominant approach can resolve to the target note either up or down a fifth interval. This style of approach was widespread in early jazz music. Third, the scale approach resolves to the target note using the scale tone, either one scale degree above or below the target note. The scale approach is the method which prevents a bass line from leap motion. In the bebop era, the chromatic approach was often used in the II-V-I chord to make the sound more open and modern. Oscar Pettiford was the person who brought the bebop theory to bassists.

The student should start to listen and then transcribe his music.





Figure 10. The double chromatic, the dominant and the scale approaches techniques.

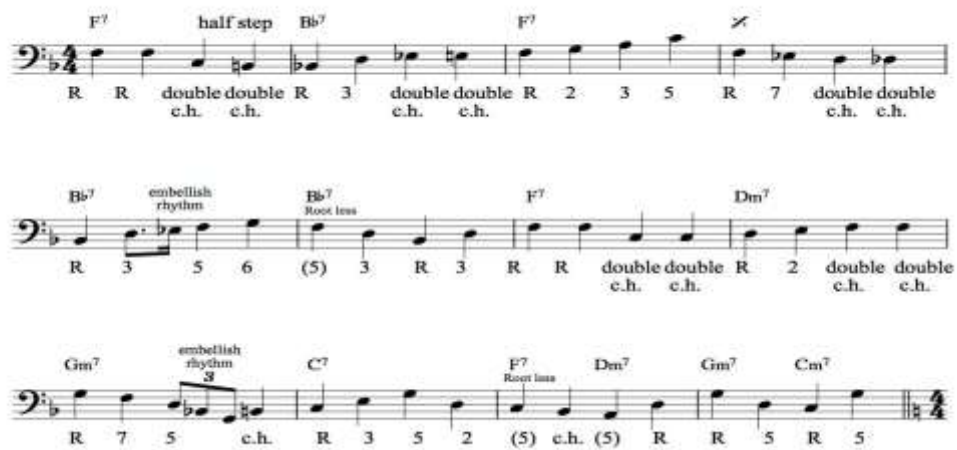


Figure 11. The double chromatic approach.

The demonstration of the three approach techniques, chord tones and scale degrees

### The Rhythm change

**A**      Half step above      Half step below

$Bb^{maj7}$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$     $Dm^7$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$

Chromatic approach      Dominant approach

$Fm^7$     $Bb^7$     $Eb^{maj7}$     $Ebm^7$     $Dm^7$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$

Scale wise      Dominant approach      Chromatic approach

**A2**

$Bb^{maj7}$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$     $Dm^7$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$

Dominant approach      Chromatic approach

$Fm^7$     $Bb^7$     $Eb^{maj7}$     $Ebm^7$     $Dm^7$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$

Dominant approach      Scale wise      Scale wise

**B**

$D^7$  (chord tones)       $G^7$  (scale degree)

1 3 5 7 (5) 3 R 7 R 2 3 5 R 7 5 3

$C^7$  (chord tones)       $F^7$  (scale degree)

1 b7 5 3 1 3 b7 5 R 2 3 5 R 7 5 3

**A**

$Bb^{maj7}$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$     $Dm^7$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$

Chromatic approach      Scale wise

$Fm^7$     $Bb^7$     $Eb^{maj7}$     $Ebm^7$     $Dm^7$     $G^7$     $Cm^7$     $F^7$

Dominant approach      Chromatic approach

### **Rootless & Rhythmic Variation**

When students are familiar with the ideas of creating a walking bass line, they can improve their line by making it more complicated and theoretical. In jazz music, it is unnecessary for a bass player to play the root on the 1st beat every time. When omitting the root, a bass technique is developed, commonly known as “rootless.” The 3rd and the 5th chord tones are usually employed on the 1st beat instead of the root (see Figure 12). Also, the 7th chord tone can be used as a target pitch, but it can occasionally cause an issue in the bass line. It is important to know that when utilizing the rootless technique properly, it can create a euphonious sound if the player uses a chromatic approach on beat 4 to resolve to the target pitch. Always notice that the bass player should utilize this technique as an alternative, but not too frequently, in order to maintain chord progression. Another technique, known as “rhythmic variations”, is often used to improve and express the feelings of the bass player. A jazz drummer may change the rhythmic patterns on the ride cymbal to accompany the soloist. In the early 40s, Jimmy Blanton began to use varied rhythmic embellishments in his bass lines. After that, this technique was extended. To bounce a rhythm, the bass player may add an anticipated note on the up beat of beat 4, or play a sixteenth note off the down beat (see Figure 13). The eighth note triplet can also facilitate the construction of the rhythmic variation, such as in a medium swing. Listening to the drummer is key in order to make the groove more rhythmical and more musical. It is strongly recommended that students transcribe some jazz bass players, like Ray Brown and Oscar Pettiford.

Figure 12. The rootless technique.

Figure 13. The rhythmic Variation.



The image displays four musical examples of walking bass lines for slash chords. Each example consists of a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs) and a walking bass line (bass clef).  
- Example 1: Chord D/C maj7. The piano accompaniment shows a D major triad with C in the bass. The walking bass line consists of quarter notes: D, E, F, G.  
- Example 2: Chord Dm/C min7. The piano accompaniment shows a D minor triad with C in the bass. The walking bass line consists of quarter notes: D, E, F, G.  
- Example 3: Chord D/C 7. The piano accompaniment shows a D major triad with C in the bass. The walking bass line consists of quarter notes: D, E, F, G.  
- Example 4: Chord Gm7/F maj7. The piano accompaniment shows a G minor triad with F in the bass. The walking bass line consists of quarter notes: G, A, B, C.

Figure 14. Creating a walking bass line one a slash and a poly chord.

## Results

After spending four weeks of class utilizing this method, the author has discovered that students can effortlessly create a proper bass line in a short period. This lesson was taught to the students in one hour classes per week and all the lessons were taught in private lessons (one student per a lesson). Most of the students who engaged in this programme were inefficient and inexperienced in jazz. This method could easily help them to improvise on their instruments and perceive the fundamentals of a chord structure and the basic theory. After grasping all these lessons, these students could probably join an ensemble and use their bass line to improvise in their music. In this study, the author divided the lessons into three separate sections (approaching a walking bass line to a slash chord and a poly chord technique may be taught to a student who has a fairly basic understanding). Every lesson needs to take at least one hour to give a lecture to the learner. The first lesson covered the two feels technique. The second lesson was on creating a simple bass line by using the chord tone and scale degree and the third lesson was on the three approach techniques. By using the sequences of this method and switching them around, the learner could create a walking bass line which is simple to understand as an accompaniment and contributes more to the soloist. The three approach techniques also helped students to decorate their bass lines to be more melodic and functional with a chord progression. The reason this method is easy to grasp is the sequencing of the lessons. The author tends to start with the easiest topic to explain to a student and move on to more complicated subjects. By combining the three lessons, the author assures the readers that they will be able to join an ensemble and enroll in a band as an accessible bass player.

## Conclusion

The basic of a walking bass line usually consist of four quarter notes in the measure. There are at least two patterns that the student can learn to create a basic walking bass line by using chord tones and scales. In addition, using a chromatic on the 4th beat to approach the next chord may help the bass line sound more smooth. In beats 2 and 4 the student may use approach techniques such as the double chromatic, the dominant and the scale approach to created a bass line as well. In order to establish a good time feel, start by playing a bass line by tapping beats 2 and 4. After the student feels familiar with the time or the chord progression, add more rhythmic variations and use a rootless technique to create a more interesting bass line. To become a well-rounded jazz bass player, the bassist must be precise in timing, chord progressions, and intonation. Always pay attention to the quarter note while playing with the drummer. Listening and transcribing virtuosic bassists like, Ray Brown, Jimmy Blayton and Oscar Pettiford can help the student develop a sense of swing feel, which is the most important ability to have in jazz music.

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