

Developing a cohesive walking bass line

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Developing a walking bass line is a subject that many of my students (guitarists and bassists alike) have been interested in. If you are a jazz player, then having the skill to walk the changes to a particular song is a must. As hard as it might seem at first to do this, there are some very systematic exercises and incremental steps that will help us develop these skills. In a previous lesson, I gave many examples for walking lines from one chord to the next. In this lesson, I want to break down the steps necessary for developing a variety of lines.

Before we get to the steps for creating lines there are some prerequisites. First, we need to know our chord tones. We need to know that when we see a G7 chord that it is made up of the notes G B D F. Second, we also need to know our major scales. If we want to be able to use the right notes that fit over a particular chord, we will need to know the notes available in each key. That is not to say that we can't get started with this material prior to learning the notes of the chords or the scales, but that knowledge will make developing your own bass lines much easier. It is not within the scope of this lesson to develop those skills. There are many sources for learning chord tones and scales (visit www.funkyfolkmusic.com or www.guitarcollege.com for books and material).

Assuming that you are comfortable with chord tones and scale tones, we will develop skills at three incremental levels. The first level will be to **develop bass lines using triad chord tones only and resolve to the next chord root in the most economical way** (i.e. the closest root of the next chord). **Exercise 1** demonstrates this with several examples. This is the first step in developing walking bass lines. If this kind of work is new to you, it may take several weeks or a month to get comfortable with walking lines between chords. Take your time, it will eventually sink in. Also, write out your own ideas. There are any number of possibilities for moving from one chord to another, so pick some progressions that you like and experiment with simple bass lines. Write some of your lines out too. This will help you focus on the right notes and not just noodle on your instrument. Remember only to use triad chord tones at first and get used to using the root, 3 and 5 of the chords and resolve only to the next root. This will build a solid foundation for you to get used to using the triad tones and roots on the first beat of the measure.

Worksheet:

Fill in the blanks with your own ideas

Simple bass lines using triads only and resolving to nearest root of next chord.

Amin D7 GMaj C Maj

BT
R
A
S
B

Chord tones

1 _ 5 _ 1 _ 5 _ 1 _ 3 _ _ 5 _ 3

Create your own line now

Amin D7 GMaj C Maj

BT
R
A
S
B

Chord Tones

The second level will be to **use all chord tones (including 7ths) to build your line from. When resolving to the next chord then you will resolve (by proximity) to any available chord tone of the next chord.** This helps create a nice flowing line that uses voice leading. Creating lines that resolve to the closest chord tone allows for a smooth transition between chords and creates a nice sounding line. **Exercise 2** demonstrates this idea using the same chords that were given in example 1. Once again, practice this idea for a while before moving on. Write out your lines for tunes that you like.

The third level allows you more freedom to be creative in your bass lines. For this level there are 2 parts. Part 1 is **use scale tones 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 (obviously use the 3rd and 7th that correspond with the chord—i.e. don't use the major 3rd on a minor chord).** Resolve to either a root or a close tone of the next chord. For part 2, **use scale tones, then add ½ step motion into the resolving chord (on beat 4 of the previous measure).** For this one resolving to a root will probably sound best, but feel free to experiment. Lets try some of these and see how they sound (**demonstrated in exercise 3**).

Exercise 3

Part 1

use scale tones 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7. Resolve to either a root or a close tone of the next chord.

This first one resolves to roots of the next chord.

A min7

D9

G Maj7

Musical notation for Exercise 3, Part 1, Example 1. The notation shows a bass line with notes and a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The notes are A2, A2, A2, A2, D3, D3, D3, D3, G3, G3, G3, G3. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 0-2-3-2 for A min7, 0-3-2-0 for D9, and 3-0-2-0 for G Maj7.

Chord tones

1 2 b3 5 1 b7 6 5 1 2 3 5

This one resolves to roots as well.

C min7

F7

Bb Maj7

Musical notation for Exercise 3, Part 1, Example 2. The notation shows a bass line with notes and a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The notes are C2, Bb2, C2, C2, F3, F3, F3, F3, Bb3, Bb3, Bb3, Bb3. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 3-1-0-3 for C min7, 1-3-0-3 for F7, and 1-3-0-3 for Bb Maj7.

Chord tones

1 b7 6 5 1 2 3 5 1 2 3 5

This one resolves to a chord tone of the next chord but not to the roots.

A min7

D9

G Maj7

Musical notation for Exercise 3, Part 1, Example 3. The notation shows a bass line with notes and a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The notes are A2, A2, A2, A2, D3, D3, D3, D3, G3, G3, G3, G3. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 0-2-3-2 for A min7, 3-2-3-0 for D9, and 2-3-2-0 for G Maj7.

Chord tones

1 2 b3 5 3 5 3 1 3 1 3 5

Part 2 use scale tones, then adds 1/2 step motion into the resolving chord (on beat 4 of the previous measure).

A min 7

D9

G Maj7

Chord Tones

1 2 b3 (1/2 step) 1 b7 6 (1/2 step) 1 2 3 5

A min 7

D9

G Maj7

Chord Tones

1 b7 6 (1/2 step) 1 2 3 (1/2 step) 1 2 3 5

For the last part I've included a bass line that I wrote for the chords to a tune like Autumn Leaves. Here I also employ a little ½ time (half notes) and some 1/8 notes as well. SO you can see how we might change the rhythm a little. Enjoy this. Remember, there is no substitute for practice and time on your instrument, so try some of these ideas with your favorite standard. Also, don't forget to write out your lines at first and really practice these. The more you do, the easier they become. If you like these ideas and want more information, my books "Walking Bass Lines for Jazz Guitar" and "Walking Bass Lines for Bass Guitar" are available at www.funkyfolkmusic.com .

Bass Line for songs like: Autumn Leaves

A min7 D7 G maj7 C maj7

The first system of the bass line consists of four measures. The first measure is A min7, the second is D7, the third is G maj7, and the fourth is C maj7. The melody is written on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bass line is written on a six-string guitar staff with fret numbers in circles: 0, 2, 0, 2, 3, 0, 3, 0.

F# min7b5 B7 E min7

The second system of the bass line consists of three measures. The first measure is F# min7b5, the second is B7, and the third is E min7. The melody is written on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bass line is written on a six-string guitar staff with fret numbers in circles: 4, 3, 2, 4, 2, 2, 4, 2, 0, 0.

A min7 D7 G maj7 C maj7

The third system of the bass line consists of four measures. The first measure is A min7, the second is D7, the third is G maj7, and the fourth is C maj7. The melody is written on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bass line is written on a six-string guitar staff with fret numbers in circles: 0, 2, 0, 2, 3, 0, 3, 0.

F# min7 b5 B7 E min7

The fourth system of the bass line consists of three measures. The first measure is F# min7 b5, the second is B7, and the third is E min7. The melody is written on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bass line is written on a six-string guitar staff with fret numbers in circles: 2, 3, 2, 4, 2, 2, 2, 0, 3, 2.

F# min7b5

B7

E min7

BT
R
A
S
B

4 2 0 3 | 2 4 1 4 | 2 0 3 2 | 2 2 3 2

A min7

D7

G maj7

C maj7

BT
R
A
S
B

0 2 3 2 | 0 2 2 4 | 0 4 0 2 | 3 0 2 2

F#min7b5

B7b9

E min7

Eb7

D min7

Db7

BT
R
A
S
B

④ ③ | ② ④ | 2 2 ① | ① 4 2

C maj7

B7b9

E min7

BT
R
A
S
B

③ ① | ② ② | 2 0 3 2 | 2 2 3 2

A min7

D7

G maj7

C maj7

Bass guitar notation for the first system. The staff shows a sequence of notes: A2, A2, A2, C#3, D3, A2, A2, G2, G2, G2, A2, A2, C#3, D3. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 0-2-3-4 for the first measure, 0-3-0-2 for the second, 3-0-2-0 for the third, and 3-0-0-3 for the fourth.

F# min7b5

B7

E min7

Bass guitar notation for the second system. The staff shows a sequence of notes: A2, A2, A2, A2, D3, C#3, D3, A2, A2, A2, A2, A2, A2, G2, G2, A2, A2. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 2-0-3-0 for the first measure, 2-1-4-1 for the second, 2-0-3-2 for the third, and 3-2-2-3 for the fourth.

A min7

D7

G maj7

C maj7

Bass guitar notation for the third system. The staff shows a sequence of notes: A2, A2, A2, C#3, D3, A2, A2, A2, A2, G2, G2, G2, A2, A2, A2, A2, A2. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 0-2-3-4 for the first measure, 0-2-0-4 for the second, 0-2-3-2 for the third, and 3-2-0-3 for the fourth.

F# min7b5

B7

E min7

Bass guitar notation for the fourth system. The staff shows a sequence of notes: A2, A2, A2, A2, D3, A2, C#3, D3, A2, A2, A2, A2, A2, A2, G2, G2, A2, A2. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 2-0-3-0 for the first measure, 2-0-1-4 for the second, 2-0-3-2 for the third, and 0-3-2-3 for the fourth.

F# min7b5

B7

E min7

The first system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a sequence of notes: F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with six strings labeled B, T, A, S, B from top to bottom. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the strings.

A min7

D7

G maj7

The second system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a sequence of notes: F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with six strings labeled B, T, A, S, B from top to bottom. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 0-4 below the strings.

F# min7b5

B7b9

E min7

Eb7

D min7

Db7

The third system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a sequence of notes: F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with six strings labeled B, T, A, S, B from top to bottom. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 0-4 below the strings.

Cmaj7

B7b9

E min7

The fourth system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a sequence of notes: F#2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with six strings labeled B, T, A, S, B from top to bottom. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 0-4 below the strings.