

Constructing Sensible Bass Lines



by Chris Bruya, OAJE President

"If the bass is wrong, everyone is wrong". Have you ever heard that phrase before? I'm sure that your experience has proved all too often that wrong bass notes can give a real sense of insecurity to a group. We expect so much of bass players without realizing it: keeping time, outlining harmonic content, creating dynamic levels, and in the case of upright bass, intonation. Playing walking quarter notes is easy, right? WRONG! Have your students (all of them) try clapping or play successive quarter notes and find out how hard that is. Or what about the task of picking out the right notes to play? Bass

players must have a thorough background in chord and scale construction to do that very well. So what do you do when you have a young bass player with no prior knowledge of the idiom and the chart has only chord changes on it? One option is to pick another chart, but the best option, at least for the player, is for you to write out a part based on the principles of good walking bass line construction. With a written part for the player based on the chords in his/her part, the student can begin to learn how bass lines should be put together. Here's what you need to know to write bass lines.

If you have read the previous articles in this newsletter having to do with piano voicing, your

mony (chords and how to stack them), the bass player is concerned with horizontal harmony (how to convey chord changes with a line). So the bass player needs to know well the scales that go with chords. In the example below I have paired common chord calls and the corresponding scale. Be sure to notice the chord tones (bass players must know this, too). Young players should practice the basic scale forms for major, minor, dominant and diminished chords until it is not necessary to think about them. Since the bass is fretted, transposing is simple. Make sure to encourage the 5th and 7th fret hand position and keep young players away from using open strings. If you can't locate a scale sheet for your player to practice from, write one out for

CΔ7	
C7	
C-7	

knowledge of jazz chord construction should be pretty good. One difference between piano voicings and bass lines, however, is that while the piano player is concerned with verticle har-

them.

The next step is to use scales and chord tones to get from one chord to another in a progres-

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sion. Here are some basic rules:

1. Always play the root on beat one. Bass players (pros) don't always do this, but it's a good place to start.

2. On the quarter note before a new chord (usually beat 4), approach the new chord in one of 3 ways:

A. Approach from a perfect 4th below or perfect 5th above.

B. Approach in scale-wise fashion from either above or below.

C. Approach by half step from either above or below.

3. For the other notes in a measure (usually beats 3 and 4) use scale and/or chord tones. The idea is to get a smooth, linear bass line that will "project" the chord changes. A good bass line won't even need the chords from a piano to get the basic harmonic content across. The last example of a blues progression shows the basic concepts outlined above.

If you follow these rules and write some lines for your bass player, there should be a good sense of harmonic security in your ensemble. Gradually, you should be able to pass on this knowledge to your player and have them write out their own parts, with the ultimate goal being a player that can spontaneously create a part while reading chord changes.

I did not address the samba or bossa nova bass line yet, but this is really easy. For the most part, use root and 5th of the chords in the characteristic rhythm of the style, usually dotted quarter notes followed by an eighth note. Occasionally fill in a measure with quarter notes, usually chord tones.

Two great books to use as aids with bass players is *The Evolving Bassist*, by Rufus Reid, and the companion book, *The Evolving Bassist, Part 2*. Also try the *Rhythm Section Workout* by Jamie Aebersold. This is a record and book set that has a rhythm section recorded and the transcribed parts writ-

ten down in the book. The idea is that the student will play along with the pro and then turn off the respective stereo channel and play the part or make up his/her own. This record/book set can also help the other members of your rhythm section. Best of luck getting your bottom in shape!

The image shows four examples of bass lines for blues progressions, each with chord changes and approach labels. The first example shows a C7 to F7 to C7 progression with chromatic approaches. The second example shows an F7 chord with scale-wise and by fifth approaches. The third example shows a C7 to B7 to Bb7 to A7 to D-7 progression with scale-wise and chromatic approaches. The fourth example shows a G7 to C7 to A7 to D-7 to G7 to C7 progression with scale-wise, by fifth, and chromatic approaches.