



BASS

Walking Bass Basics

by Tom Pieper

Sometime in your career as a bass player you will be asked to play in a jazz band or strolling string group. Moreover you may be required to create your own bass part. As a bassist I have always enjoyed the variety of music that I am asked to perform and believe that all music must be performed authentically. You must approach other styles of playing with as much discipline as orchestral ensemble or solo playing. Here are some basic walking bass techniques that will help you achieve your goals, and make the entire ensemble grooving and grounded.

The most important thing for the walking bass line is to produce a good swing feel. Without a basic understanding of the form and function of a bass line you will not be able to produce a line that contributes to the sound of the group. Everything does not have to be reinvented every time you play; you simply must be able to communicate your intentions with clarity and conviction. These examples will help you get the message out to the other players in your group. Remember that to be creative you first must be disciplined. Your mastery will not go unnoticed.

1. Pick a simple chord progression from a credible source. Blues are great because they are short and have only a few “types” of chords (i.e. Dominant, minor seventh, or major). If you start with a Fake Book try the *New Real Book* edited by Chuck Sher, or try to use a Jamey Aebersold play-along book that also comes with a recording.
2. Put your bow down on the stand, drop your right hand to within four inches of the end of your fingerboard, and anchor your thumb on the side.
3. Play with a metronome. Begin with the metronome on beats 1, 2, 3, and 4 and make sure that the walking quarter note of the bass matches the click exactly. When you are completely in sync, the sound of the metronome is covered up by the sound of the bass note; any variation in your tempo will allow you to hear yourself ahead or behind the beat. You cannot possibly learn to keep good time without using a metronome.
4. First play only the root for each chord change.

C7 F7 C7 ♯

5. Now play the root of each chord on beats 1, 2, and 3; on beat 4 play a half step below or above the next chord change.

C7 F7 C7 ♯

C7 F7 C7 ♯

C7 F7 C7 ♯

6. The final step is to have the metronome click on beats 2 and 4. In jazz most chord changes happen on the strong beats of the measure, 1 or 3. By having the metronome click on the 2 and 4 beat you will become more accountable and more responsible for keeping the music, plus you will “lock-in” with what the drummer is playing on the hi-hat. Be persistent, you must count “1 click 3 click,” “1, 2, 3, 4.” Review the previous material and try to play it comfortably at any tempo.

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Beyond the Basics

To go beyond the basics you must understand these standard chords and their chord symbols.

- Major 7th chord (Cmaj7, CΔ7)
Root, Major 3rd, Perfect 5th, Major 7th
- Minor 7th chord (Cmin7, C-7)
Root, minor 3rd, Perfect 5th, minor 7th
- Dominant 7th chord (C7)
Root, Major 3rd, Perfect 5th, minor 7th

1. Play the root of the chord on beat 1, 3rd on beat 2, root on beat 3, and half step above or below the next chord change on beat 4.

a

b

c

You will notice that at this point the bass line in examples a. and b. are the same, because these two chords have the same structure for the bottom of the chord (i.e. Maj 3rd and P 5th).

Also take note that on a. the half step below is a chord tone (the 3rd), this happens when moving by fourths. It still features the chromatic motion of beat 4 moving to the next root on beat 1.

And in example c., when you move from the minor 7, the major 3rd above the root appears on beat 4, the chromatic resolution to beat 1 overrides any apparent contradiction to the sound of c minor and still makes the bass note lead to the next chord.

2. Go to the piano and listen to the chords along with these bass lines.
3. Tadd Dameron's progression to *Lady Bird* is a great vehicle for trying the previous ideas for walking bass lines. The chords are of the three types that we have discussed, and the root motion is often by fourths.

4. One other common device is to use a half-note feel instead of quarter notes. This is often done for the melody (head) of the tune. By playing in "two" you have a longer time to hear how the chords sound with each of your note choices. This often produces a bass line that is more melodic.

- a. You can begin with either the root or the third on beat 1
- b. Continue to move in the same direction (try 2 measures ascending and 2 measures descending) and play the next chord tone.

c. Sometimes you can drop down to the 3rd instead of always playing it higher than the root (half notes or quarter notes)

Try these ideas out and when you're comfortable, play them with other instrumentalists or even with another bass player. Always remember to keep listening to examples of great bass players: Ray Brown, Ron Carter, Paul Chambers, Doug Watkins, Walter Page, and Sam Jones among others. As you continue to develop your skill, remember that you can carry on this great tradition of walking bass lines and improve the sound of every group that you are asked to perform with. So dig in and keep on swinging.

Tom Pieper teaches strings in Minneapolis at Ramsey International School of Fine Arts, Putnam Community School, and Downtown Open School. He is an Electric Bass and Bass Instructor at MacPhail Center for The Arts. Tom has played professionally since 1980 in Milwaukee WI, Rochester NY, and the Twin Cities. His recent recording by his group, SpiritJazz (sic), But Now I See... is available at spiritjazz.com, cdbaby.com, and selected record stores throughout the area. †