



BASS

Fill in Those “Holes”

by Tom Pieper

In last spring's issue, I talked about the main function of the bass in a jazz ensemble; for this I chose the example of the walking bass line with several variations. Those examples helped to integrate the bass into the harmonic structure of the song, and to allow the bass line to complement a harmony player (e.g. piano, guitar, or vibraphone). Similar techniques can be used and expanded on to modify and enhance any written part you are given. With the proliferation of pop arrangements for strings I would like to give you options that will support the sound of the ensemble, and help you develop a more interesting and compelling bass line.

We are drawn to harmony, and this is certainly an important element in the formation of a complete and successful bass line. I chose to start with simple harmonic variations in my last article because most of my students view this as their most important concern. To many, this is the greatest “hook” into playing and improvising. In this article I will focus more on rhythm than harmony as a solution for expanding the bass line. While the harmonic choice of bass notes cannot be overlooked, rhythmic variations for the bass often are of even greater importance.

Never underestimate the need to be honest with your time-feel when playing any style of music. Just as you practice scales, etudes, and excerpts of demanding passages, you must put adequate effort toward how accurately you play rhythm. By doing this you emphasize and acknowledge the natural way a rhythmically solid bass line compels the music to swing. We need to think of the groove as a deep trench that we are happy to get stuck in. Think of it as the “track” for cross-country skiing, or the guide that pulls you through the car wash. Take out an old well-played L.P. and look at the grooves in the vinyl; this is your bass line. The more the record has been played the deeper the grooves. The variations to the bass line here will deepen your groove, and add a more mature and authentic sound than what you will find printed on the page.

The printed page is a part of the story, but certainly not all of it. If you want to play bass lines convincingly you must listen to recordings of the masters. The recordings are the definitive source. You can read and try these techniques and your bass lines will improve noticeably. If, however, you take the time to listen, copy, analyze what you hear on recordings, and put what you hear into practice, you will have even greater impact. The recorded history of jazz is rich and now easily available. Examples of grooving bass players include Wilbur Ware, Doug Watkins, Tommy Potter, Sam Jones,

Jimmy Garrison, and Ray Brown, among others. They all have made different choices based on taste, and whom they were playing with. Variations are used to greater or lesser degree. Always remember not to let the rhythmic variation disturb the basic feel, and recognize that ultimately the most important thing to strive for is consistency. If you internalize the sound that you wish to produce it will be evident in your playing.

The Basics

We will begin with two traditional ballad styled arrangements; look in your library

The Basics

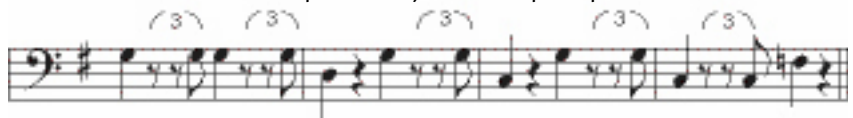
Example 1. Misty



Example 2. Ain't Misbehaving



Example 1b. Misty with “-let” pick-up



Example 2b. Ain't Misbehaving with “-let” pick-up



Example 1c. Misty with open string pick-ups with rearticulations



Example 1d. Misty with open string pick-ups with slurs



and you will probably find some arrangement of *Misty* (Example 1) and *Ain't Misbehaving* (Example 2). Most of the written bass lines that you see will consist of a



combination, or half notes with some quarter notes added.

These bass lines emphasize utilitarianism and the functionality of the bass part found in many arrangements. This is not a bad place to begin, and for many situations you have to take care of business before adding anything else. Part of the reason that parts are written this way is so that the majority of bass players can play them and give a good foundation to the ensemble. Our task is to take the next step and discover how to

use more techniques that will inspire you and those around you. Chord changes typically happen on beats one, or beats one and three. By playing the most important notes of the chord in the bass at these points, the harmony and rhythm of the song is being supported by the bass line. There are however "holes" in the music which are begging to be filled and improved upon. If you do this with integrity, artistry, and confidence you will find that your phone will always be ringing.

We will start with some of these simple variations. First of all think about the underlying unit of the triplet as your first variation. You must internalize this sound in order to use it. The music is in $\frac{4}{4}$ time, but recognize that the triplet is an important

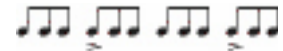
subdivision.

A. Internalize your practice by walking around and "playing in your head" this loop: "one-trip-let-two-trip-let-three-trip-let-four-trip-let"



B. Now do it with the metronome clicking on beats two and four

C. When you master this sit down and tap your foot on the offbeats of two and four while you say it "one-trip-let-two-trip-let-three-trip-let-four-trip-let"



D. Now pick up your bass and play on any single note while continuing to tap your foot. Do not forget the metronome: "one-trip-let-two-trip-let-three-trip-let-four-trip-let"



The last note of the triplet on the weak harmonic beat leads into the following strong harmonic beat (S.w.S.w.) For a good rhythmic feel you need to accent the backbeat, so think of it as the opposite (w.S.w.S). I have begun by making the pick-up note the same note as the last pitch played. (Example 1b)

In *Ain't Misbehaving* you might use this technique more frequently because the chords change every two beats, so each change gets an extra boost. (Example 2b)

Another variation is to use the open string as a pick-up into a note that follows on the same string, or an open string higher or lower than the note that will follow. You can either rearticulate the note or slur the note by letting your right hand continue to pass through the string to hit the next string. (Examples 1c and 1d)

Beyond the Basics

As with many things more variations are always possible. Sometimes a more percussive sound can be achieved by using deadened or ghost notes. Put your finger on the note and hold it firmly but do not press it against the fingerboard. If you play this on a natural harmonic you will want to move slightly so that it does not ring. This should give you a thick clicking sound that can be highly desirable and effective. (Example 1e) The next example uses many pick-ups in a row and has oblique motion between the pick-ups and the rising chromatic bass line. (Example 2c)

The "trip-let" pick-up adds even more possibilities for rhythmic and harmonic

Beyond the Basics

Example 1e. *Misty* with "deadened" or ghost note pick-up



Example 2c. *Ain't Misbehaving* with "deadened" or ghost note pick-up



Example 1f. *Misty* with "-trip-let" pick-ups



Example 2d. *Ain't Misbehaving* with "-trip-let" pick-ups



Example 1g. *Misty* with "-trip-let" arpeggios



Example 2e. *Ain't Misbehaving* with everything!



variations. (Examples 1f, 2d and 1g) The last example uses some of all the variations in combination. (Example 2e)

I saw Ray Brown give a clinic in 1991 where he spoke about how the bass lines that he played were his melody. They must be able to stand alone. Strive for this type of excellence in your listening, analyzing, and playing. Remember you can fill in each “hole,” alternate, or use occasionally with longer note values. As your rhythmic sense develops, certain preferences and tendencies will begin to appear. Do not avoid

combinations that do not come naturally, so that in the end your choices will be based on knowledge and the situation, instead of any limitations. Flexibility is extremely important. Every variation will not work in every playing situation, or at every tempo. Listen to other players and if you like what you hear try to emulate their feel as well. Be aware that the rate of occurrence varies among players to a great degree. In the end if the variation enhances your feel and groove, and makes the ensemble sound better you have made the right choice. If

you begin to approach your bass lines with this attitude you will find all the “holes” that wish to fill.

Tom Pieper teaches strings in Minneapolis at Ramsey International Fine Arts Center and is the Electric Bass and Bass Instructor at MacPhail Center for Music. 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, tcmusic.net, and selected record stores throughout the area. †