



BASS

Soloing: What You Need To Know as a Bass Player

by Tom Pieper

Background

Often times bass players are asked to play a solo. Soloing, or “blowing over the changes” is the same for any instrument, although idiomatic differences do surface. If you work on a few musical basics, your solos will be fun for you and enjoyable for those who hear and play with you. Stylistically, the bass should try to copy horn players or the human voice. Horn players typically have the most chances to solo and because of this they are often pretty good at it. Both the voice and wind instruments rely on the breath, and we can add a lot to our solos by incorporating the breath.

The blues is a great place to begin your soloing journey. The form is short and has multiple repeats, and the phrasing is clearly laid out for player and listener. By using the form, phrasing and melody, bass players can ignite the crowd and utilize the “idiomatic advantage” we have. Playing on the changes of *Giant Steps* at the same tempo as John Coltrane is an idiomatic disadvantage that we can overcome. By having more concepts of soloing under your cap and fingers you will connect more with your fellow musicians and your audience.

Getting started / Setting up your instrument

Make sure your bass is set up to play over the whole range of the instrument. String height is a matter of personal preference and subject to the style of music you prefer. When you are exploring other avenues on your instrument it is a good idea to watch someone who plays like you would like to and see how they set up their instrument. If the person has a good reason for their set-up and you like the results, try it for yourself. In any event your bass needs to have a good sound over a broad range, with or without any sound reinforcement. If the neck is not straight, the bridge needs to be higher than it should and this limits how easily you can play in the higher positions. If the bridge is cut too flat and the strings are too high you will not be able to isolate the strings in thumb position. A qualified luthier can

dress the fingerboard and set up the bridge for playing across the range of the bass. If your bass belongs to your school, ask the director to have it set-up, or even better, ask if you can set it up by taking it somewhere yourself. The bottom line is that when the instrument is set up well you will enjoy it more and your improvement will increase exponentially.

Use a pickup that works well with your instrument, amplifier, and the ensemble you are playing with. The most common pick-ups today are the Fishman, Realist, and the Underwood, although there are many other pick-ups to choose from. Once again, ask people whose sound you like about their choice and use it if it makes sense for your goals. Different players have different sounds and you might be surprised about what works best. Ray Brown used a polytone pick-up and while I could never make it sound good with my bass, his sound was amazing. Many players today endorse the Realist, and it works well for them, especially with the bow. If you play in a large group, pick one that gives you a great amount of output. If you play in a smaller group, pick one that has a great amount of tonal personality. This all takes some time to experiment with but the more time you put in the greater your reward.

It is a good idea to use strings that are not too old, and give a sustained sound. Although you may have to sacrifice some depth of tone with the bow, this added sustain is often desirable in jazz. A number of years ago I was at an impromptu performance by Edgar Meyer, and he said, “I don’t always like the tone of Spirochords under my ear, but they get my sound out to the audience.” Some people like gut strings. If you like the tone of these, and the quick decay of the sound, go ahead and try them. Once again the most important issue is finding a set of strings that makes your instrument sound good for the type of music you are performing.

Finally it is important to be able to record yourself with a tape player, computer, or a digital camera. Use anything that

allows you to take a step back from what it feels like to play, so you can listen more objectively and be analytical about your approach. On a few occasions I have found myself listening to a recording of a bass solo on the radio or in a club somewhere and I have thought:

1. I kind of like this way the solo starts.
2. That’s something I’ve heard before, although I think I could do that a little differently.
3. That part sounds great!
4. Oh, that part doesn’t work out — wait a minute I recognize that; it is something I played.
5. Or sometimes — why did I stop playing that way? I should try that again.

So keep listening with an open mind and constantly reassess what you are doing. In this way you can keep challenging yourself so that you are evolving and improving.

1. Melody

A great composition and improvisation is based on the melody of a tune. If the harmony does not fit with the melody you have not made an appropriate choice. If the scales you are using do not fit the melody you will need to choose other scales for your improvisation. You may listen to a recording and hear different scales on parts of the same tune, or even different scales throughout the tune by the same player. As your vocabulary grows it is a common way to improvise and change your choices as you play. It is also important to learn some basics to begin with. When you buy a Charlie Parker recording they may have two versions of each song on the CD, however each take is unique and different even though the tune is still recognizable. Great players add many harmonic variations when they improvise and as long as the harmony, melody, and scales are all used with awareness and skill everything comes out great.

The best way to begin learning how to improvise on a song is to learn the melody.

First practice playing a melody that you already know, and play this in different places on your bass (e.g., *Hot Cross Buns* in 4th position with open G, and in 1st position). Play the melody in thumb position, and try to play the melody in one or two more keys. Next write this melody on paper and give it to someone else to play. Does it sound correct when someone else plays it? If so, the next step is finding a recording of a song that captures your imagination but is not way beyond your technical abilities.

Select a melody that you can hear repeatedly, and one that does not have a million notes to begin with. Look for a blues that is based on a riff such as, *C Jam Blues*, *Bag's Groove*, *Sonny Moon for Two*, or *Now's the Time*. Listen, Listen, Listen. Find the beginning pitch and continue with all the notes of the first phrase. Try to capture exactly how the melody is played on the recording. After you can play a phrase of the melody, write that down and continue to learn the rest of the tune. In jazz improvisation, the harmony, form, and solos are all based on the melody. With the melody charted out, listen to the recording and try to find the root of the chord from the bass line. This is why choosing one of the blues is a good place to begin because the form is somewhat predictable and not too long. Find the first measure, second, and every harmonic root note until the melody ends. Write down the bass notes on the same page that you have your melody. Now you have a framework to add the rest of the harmony from your recording. Repeat the same steps to find the third, and the seventh of the chord and then add them to your harmonic sketch, or chart of your tune. You now have everything you need to begin your improvising journey on the tune. By writing it down you take the risk that you may not know it as well as you thought, but you will be able to revise it as needed. Call up a friend and have them play the melody you wrote down and see if it comes out how you thought. Be honest if it does not come out and revise until it correct.

C Jam Blues

We will play *C Jam Blues* by Duke Ellington in the key of D so that violinists, cellists, and violists can play along comfortably as well. This is idiomatically suited for strings because of the open string sounds, and familiar keys.

1 2 3 4

5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12

The melody is a four bar riff, or phrase, repeated 3 times to complete one chorus. In jazz we refer to the melody as the “head”. Play this in the octave written, and then try it an octave higher. If you can, try to learn to play all melodies in several keys. Charlie Parker told people they should practice everything in 13 keys, counting F#

and G^b as separate. I have found that if you can master a few keys you will not loose interest and you will gain mastery of the melody, harmony and scales.

2. Harmony

Go back to your recording and listen to see if you can map out the harmonic progression. Lucky for you the first thing you need to find or hear is the “bass root progression”. You will need to experiment with hearing these notes but when you get more comfortable hearing them they will add to your level of knowing a tune and soloing on the form. Ray Brown had students sing the melody while playing the bass root movement, and he stressed that it was just as important to think of the bass part as a melody. By being careful and precise with your bass playing responsibilities, you will be more equipped to solo when you are given the chance.

Try taping the melody or the bass progression and then play the other part along with your recording. You could also have a friend play the melody while you play the bass root progression. The melody and the bass progression give you the most important parts to fill in the rest of the harmony. After you have the bass notes in place try finding the third of the chord. (Major 3rd = 2 whole-steps or 4 half-steps. Minor 3rd = 1 ½ whole-steps or 3 half-steps). Think about these sounds and then play the melody with the thirds instead of the root. Do the same with the seventh of the chord (Major 7th = 1 half-step below the octave. Minor 7th = 1 whole-step or 2 half-steps below the octave.) Now you have the harmony you need to function as a soloist on the tune.

1 2 3 4

5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12

3. Scale Choice

Scales and chords are really the same thing, one is played over a period of time (horizontally) and the other is played at the same time (vertically). The D mixolydian scale is D(1), E(2), F#(3), G(4), A(5), B(6), C(7), D(8). The D dominant 7th chord is D(1 or root), F#(3rd), A(5th), C(7th), E(9th), G(11th), B(13th)

Try using the blues scale for your scale choice. Here you can begin to use the scale in two ways. First play the one scale for the entire 12 measures.

Next, change the scale to correspond with each chord change. The breath or space is an important part of this process. Make sure you do not play the notes early, but allow for the full value of the rests.

Many other scales will also work so long as you select a scale that fits the melody, chord, and phrase of the song you are improvising. If you map out the melodic phrases of a composition your improvisation will be clear and you will communicate this to your audience. To avoid any notes that can conflict, practice your scales from the root to the seventh when you have one chord per measure. Play the scale from the root to the seventh and back down when you have two chords per measure. This allows you to have chord tones on all the beats and scale tones on the offbeat. It also puts a space, or breath in before you start the next scale. This gives you and your listeners a chance to hear the phrase of the song you are improvising on. Remember the melody of this song has six beats of rest at the end of each phrase. Bring that out with your solo by leaving a space at the end of each phrase. Here's an example using the seventh scales instead of blues.

Some other things to think about

Learn a solo from a CD (i.e., transcribe) and use that material as part of your solo to help authenticate the language that you are using. Once again, write it down and see if it sounds correct when someone else plays it. You can also play it with the recording to see if you are accurate. After you know all is correct, memorize it and use in your improvisation.

Play with as many different groups that you can find. You can learn something from every style of music and ensemble that you play and rehearse with.

Sit down at the piano and begin to listen for what makes a chord unique sounding and how you can enhance this with your soloing. Try some of the voicings in the examples to begin to hear what is going on around you.

Use some of the intervallic and rhythmic motives in the tune for your improvisation (e.g., the rising 4th, the ♩ ♪ rhythm, or the ♩♪ rhythm).

Chord progression: D7, G7, D7, G7

7

Chord progression: D7, E-7, A7, D7, E-7, A7

While soloing, try to start your phrase on the note that you last ended on. This gives your solo a sense of connection to what went on before, and gives your solo a direction and shape.

Chord progression: D7, G7, D7, G7

7

Chord progression: D7, E-7, A7, D7, E-7, A7

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