



# BASS

## Jumping into Spring with *Giant Steps*

by Tom Pieper

Someone is going to ask you to play *Giant Steps* by John Coltrane. No big deal as many jazz tunes are part of a shared repertoire of many years. This particular song however may raise some questions and you may feel, like many players before you, that John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* is one of the most difficult songs ever written. When John Coltrane first recorded this song the piano player, Tommy Flanagan, played a solo that turned out to be memorable only because it captured a moment of struggling to negotiate the changes. Out of fairness, no one else at the time could have come any closer. He received the song at the recording session without a chance to work through the harmonic nuances before the tape rolled. Most players today can remember a similar feeling when first encountering this tune. First recorded in 1959, the progression has its origin in the bridge of the song *Have You Met Miss Jones* (1939 Richard Rodgers). The particular feature is that the chords of the bridge move in a pattern of major thirds.

| B $\flat$  Major 7 | A $\flat$ -7 D $\flat$ 7 | G $\flat$  Major 7 | E-7 A7 |  
 | D Major 7 | A $\flat$ -7 D $\flat$ 7 | G $\flat$  Major 7 | G-7 C7 |

Coltrane used this unusual chord movement of a major third and played his tune at an up-tempo speed. A saxophonist is expected to master this song, as is any improviser in the modern jazz context. As a bassist, you too will play this song at many different stages of your career. Often a line of saxophone players will try to out do each other and will rely on you to make them sound good. You may as well start early to come up with solutions to help demystify the song so you can contribute to the musical explorations ahead.

Recently I have returned to the idea of two bassists playing on this tune. The melody's range and intervals lend itself to a performance of two bassists. In addition, the freedom of a bass duet

helps you to exploit all the facets of the harmony unencumbered. Even better is with saxophone and bass where the range and timbre keep both voices distinct while still blending as a cohesive sound. By diving into the harmony of thirds, understanding the phrasing, and by using improvisation, you will progress through this tune in little time. As always, understanding the harmonic movement will help you to produce a supportive bass line for whatever ensemble you find your self playing in. The melody and the bass line are foundational as you learn to improvise your own bass line and solo.

Starting with the melody (Ex. 1) will help you understand the phrasing and unique character of this tune. On the surface, the melody is phrased in four four-bar phrases. Upon further examination, you may notice two four-bar phrases and one eight-bar phrase. The harmony moves to tonal centers a major third apart and the last eight measures pass through all four keys. When you listen and play the song, you will hear/see how the melody transposes to several keys while maintaining a steady upward projection. At first, the melody outlines a G Major 7th chord and the root progression moves up by m3 and 4ths; in measure 4, the harmony modulates through a II-7 V7 a tritone away from the root (three whole steps compared to the two whole steps of the moving by major thirds). The second phrase of the melody outlines an E $\flat$  Major 7th chord and in measure 8, again modulates through a II-7 V7 a tritone away. When you divide a key in equal parts you will be presented with 3 key centers before returning again to the first key. In this way, Coltrane keeps the tonality turning in on itself, keeping the listener wondering where the form starts and ends, even while maintaining a 16-bar form. This is especially true when improvising a solo or walking a bass line through these changes.

For the start, the bass line plays "in 2" or half notes which

Ex 1: melody with bass line on the root of chords

### Giant Steps by John Coltrane

	Melody outlines G maj 7 chord	Tritone root progression	Melody outlines E $\flat$ maj 7 chord	Tritone root progression
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9

Ex 2: melody with bass line descending by whole step

## Giant Steps — Melody and Whole Step Bass Line

Chords for Ex 2:  
 System 1: B maj7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7, A-7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7 F#7, B maj7, F-7 Bb7  
 System 2: Ebmaj7, A-7 D7, G maj7, C#-7 F#7, B maj7, F-7 Bb7, Ebmaj7, C#-7 F#7

complement the melody. A bass line that is often played on the melody of this tune descends by whole steps for the first five chords on the first two phrases (Ex. 2) The chords alternate between major seventh chords and dominant seventh chords for the first eight measures. This allows the music to move to the new key centers in an efficient manner. The second half of the tune moves by ascending tonal centers a major third higher. The II-7 V7 chord helps establish these tonal centers. That is the details of this tune.

To begin with walking a bass line you must play the root movement (Ex. 1) and become comfortable with how that sounds. The second step will be to play the root followed by the third of each chord (Ex. 3). In this progression, you will find that the third is above and then below the next root. The second way to negotiate

the walking is to play the root of each chord on beat one followed by a note a half step above or a half step below the next chord change (Ex. 4). Finally, try to pick out a chord tone and move to the closest chord tone on the following chord (Ex. 5). Or consider a variant on the bass line that descends by whole step (Ex. 6). All of these strategies could be tried at a slow tempo, and using the metronome clicking on 2 and 4 until you are consistent with the time and the intonation. As your confidence improves, move the tempo up to a faster speed.

When you begin to solo, you can take your time as well. Often beginning with a digital pattern will help to bring out the sound of the chord and build the skills to play at the speed required. Three ways to begin are:

## Giant Steps — Bass Lines

Chords for Ex 3: B maj7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7, A-7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7 F#7, B maj7, F-7 Bb7  
 Chords for Ex 4: Ebmaj7, A-7 D7, G maj7, C#-7 F#7, B maj7, F-7 Bb7, Ebmaj7, C#-7 F#7  
 Chords for Ex 5: B maj7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7, A-7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7 F#7  
 Chords for Ex 6: B maj7 D7, G maj7 Bb7, Ebmaj7, A-7 D7

- 1235 (Ex. 7)
- 5321 (Ex. 8)
- 12355321 (Ex. 9)

All played as even eighth notes, especially as tempo increases.

A final way to firmly establish the tune in your mind is to play the progression in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time with each half measure maintaining the same relationship to the original  $\frac{4}{4}$  meter. This lets you play with enough time to

consider your notes and the sound of the harmony. Also, try to play in  $\frac{5}{4}$ (3+2) or  $\frac{7}{4}$ (4+3 or 3+4) as your time and understanding will grow. It will also have a great influence on how you play the tune when you return to the original meter.

As always, everything you play and practice will have an impact on your performance and your ability to play this tune in a jazz setting. This is what is required too as you must be flexible to create music in as

many different contexts imaginable.

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### Giant Steps — Solo Ideas

The image displays three examples of solo ideas for the piece "Giant Steps" in 4/4 time. Each example consists of a bass line with eighth notes and a corresponding chord progression above it.

- Ex 7:** Bass line starts with a 5 (below the staff). Chord progression: Bmaj7, D7, Gmaj7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, A-7, D7.
- Ex 8:** Bass line starts with a 5 (below the staff). Chord progression: Gmaj7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, F#7, Bmaj7, F-7, Bb7.
- Ex 9:** Bass line starts with a 5 (below the staff). Chord progression: Bmaj7, D7, Gmaj7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, A-7, D7.