



BASS

Donna Lee: An Authentic Jazz Etude Challenge for the Modern Bass Player

by Tom Pieper

I keep hearing more and more bass players who are completely comfortable playing melodies and solos alongside their woodwind and brass peers. Over the last 40 years, the average bass player has reached a level of proficiency as high as other instrumentalists, easily playing melodies once reserved for horn players. These new roles magnify and enhance the skill of the most important member of the band, and melds well with playing walking bass lines and lifting an ensemble with ensemble expertise and a deep groove—another tool in the gig bag for bass players to share. I see this trend of competent bass players who are also composers and band leaders continuing. Everything is available for an aspiring player to access, making the evolution of modern bass players capable of producing strong, imaginative and inspiring solos complete. As you continue to listen to the archives of the past, remember to search out everything you can find on YouTube, and create your own performances to share with the community of jazz musicians across the world.

I attended a clinic in 1982 with the Heath Brothers and pianist Stanley Cowell asked a friend who was playing piano if he could play a ballad, the blues and rhythm changes. He said, “Sure,” and Stanley responded, “That’s all you need.” To an artist of the highest stature, the statement was honest and true; for the rest of us, more structure is needed. Repertoire for jazz is also based on melodies by the most influential and fluent practitioners. For many years, the music of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis set the bar for the aspiring artist. As historians see George Washington’s *Farewell Address* or Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, they outlined a shared language of civility and a mutual understanding.

In music, we no longer can meet and interact with all the innovators and originators of jazz; all that remains are their recorded legacy. With this in mind, the music has historical significance and requires “diggin’” deep into the past as we move the bar forward to continue the

progression of jazz as an art form. Improvisations and knowledge of where music came from helps us to continue in the best traditions of our past.

Donna Lee has long been a benchmark for musicians to prove themselves, and continues to be a required tune in the jazz repertoire. *Donna Lee* is especially popular to play at up tempos, and now even faster than the original. This is a habit of ego, and sometimes playing the tune slower than everyone else can yield insightful and nuanced performances. *Donna Lee* is a contrafact, or a new melody based on another chord progression. The tune commonly known as *Indiana*, and formally (*Back Home Again in Indiana*) was composed by James F. Hanley with lyrics by Ballard MacDonald in January 1917. Charlie Parker originally received credit for writing *Donna Lee*, but Miles Davis claims he was the composer. Controversy over who wrote the tune and others does not change the fact that the melody is melodically interesting and challenging to play.

I first heard Jaco Pastorius’ recording of *Donna Lee* in about 1977. It set the world’s ears on fire, not only for his mastery of the electric bass, but also for his understanding and ease of improvising on the ultimate saxophone tune. His version is reduced to the essence with just electric bass and congas. With this one simple track, he put the jazz community on notice and allowed bass players to be upfront as bassists, composers and band leaders. An inspiration and a challenge to me and many bass players at the time. I was playing electric bass and could play the melody, walk on the chord changes and start to improvise on the tune. Years later, I began to perform the melody on the double bass. Not only is the line a challenge for fingerings, it is a good tune for understanding the language of bebop. Chromatic passages and arpeggiated extensions of the chord allow the melody to adhere to the harmonic structure of the original composition. A few years later, upright players were taking notice of this recording and began to play other Jaco

tunes on the double bass.

You can listen to the Jaco Pastorius recording, a duet with Don Alias on congas, at <https://youtu.be/-0NNA6w8Zk4>. Here is a nice version on double bass too https://youtu.be/Rqwik_wdLa4. Charlie Parker and Miles Davis for an original to compare: <https://youtu.be/bF0W4fHiVUc>.

Many versions of tunes are always available, but I will include fingerings from the *Real Book* published in bass clef. The form of the melody is in two sixteen-bar sections. The chord progression is diatonic with only a few secondary dominant chords. Often, contrafacts were written so musicians could play the popular tunes of the day, and create a new melody to record without paying royalties to another composer. This practice is still very popular today. I hear the melody phrased in 6 4-bar phrases and one final 8-bar phrase, and the harmony is based two 16-bar sections. I think it is critical to align the melodic content with harmonic movement and understand a rest may also be part of the phrase. Players combine melodic content and harmonic direction to understand form and function for creating an improvisation.

In breaking down this melody, you can see how combinations of step-wise and chordal melodies create the line for this tune. The melody subtly integrates chromatic tones to create a line infused with color, interest and rhythmic direction. As a general note, it helps to play chromatic tones in the same position: m.2, m.11, m.14, m.25-26. I like to shift with the same finger when possible, as in m.5, m.7, m.11, m.14, m.25-26. And a final suggestion is to shift on an open string, as in m.6, m.14, m.27, and m.30. Probably a good idea to play not a harmonic on the high G as it will be easier to play the A flat that follows. Notice the similarities between m.2, m.12, m.13, m.28. Even though in most cases the $\flat 9$ and $\sharp 9$ follow the arpeggio, in m.2 the same pattern happens over the change and creates the $\flat 6$ ($\sharp 5$) to the 7th over the next dominant chord. The triplets generate a nice turn in the line and create movement and energy

throughout the tune.

How to practice? Start out slowly and try the fingerings I have suggested. Remember that you can and should come up with fingerings that feel good for you. The fingerings here may be a good place to start, so try them! (Note to self: I have been struggling with m.25 (1212-2424-2424-421-4) 1—and after a lesson this afternoon, I think this fingering works well. Let me know.) Build up the tempo where you can play with consistency, regardless of the original. You can use the original for a goal after you learn the tune so keep it in mind. Playing along can come later in the learning process.

I like to think of all songs from the bebop tradition as etudes for jazz. After you have the line down, begin to alternate a chorus with a walking bass line—hey that's something horn players cannot do—and then alternate with solo choruses. When you really know the line, try playing it by memory and alternate melody with your own phrases. Since you have a bow you may want to play this melody arco as well. This would be great slowly for intonation and really hearing how a single note line can delineate a harmonic progression. Keep practicing and soon you will be ready to play with your friends and perform for an audience. Observe if any surprises come up when you do.

Tom Pieper teaches orchestra for the Wayzata Public Schools, and bass at MacPhail Center and his private studio in Minneapolis. You can hear his work with the Illicit Sextet and SpirtJazz on YouTube and iTunes. †

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- CHARLIE PARKER

DONNA LEE

(UP TEMPO)

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