

Walk with me

In the first part of a new series on walking bass, **Mauro Battisti** introduces the basics of this technique

WALKING BASS IS ONE OF THE most fascinating yet also peculiar techniques on the double bass in jazz. In this first article we'll uncover some of its distinctive elements and answer frequently asked questions that arise when dealing with the walking bass for the first time.

First of all, what is the function of the walking bass? With its urgent and regular articulation of ♩, the walking bass underlines the succession of chords that are the foundation of the composition and gives the necessary rhythmic-harmonic support to the band. It has a melodic function as well, through the use of counterpoint, that is expressed in the constant interaction of the bass with the other voices of the ensemble (remember that jazz improvisation is instantaneous collective composition).

What, then, is the first step for creating a walking-bass line? Know the chords well [see box on p.21] and understand their function within the harmonic structure of the composition. It is also important to know the principal melody or theme that gives shape to the whole improvisational structure of the piece.

How does the bassist decide which notes to use? The most basic way to create a strong line is to move around the notes of the triad – the root, third and fifth. Other notes – such as the seventh, the extensions (the ninth, eleventh, thirteenth) and non-chordal notes – are used mainly as passing notes or appoggiatura (for tension on a strong beat). To make the line dance and give it a propulsive push, it is important that it moves forward and the chords are connected in a fluid way.

In honour of the late bassist Milt Hinton, let's analyse one of his walking-bass lines in the popular standard *All of Me* [see right]. I have indicated a possible fingering under the staff (notice the use of the open strings).

ALL OF ME (S. SIMONS-G. MARK)

32 BARS ; A-B FORM

WALKING BASS BY MILT HINTON

♩ = 132

(A)

(B)

TRANSCRIBED FROM AL GREY'S ALBUM "STRETTIN' AND SHOUTIN'" - COLUMBIA

Let's begin by distinguishing the three main movements of the walking-bass line:

1. Chordal movement that proceeds by skips using the notes of the chords.

chord degree 1 5 5 1 5 1 5 1 3 5 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 b7 5

2. Scalar movement that proceeds step-wise according to the chord-related scale.

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 1

3. Chromatic movement that proceeds in half-steps (chromaticisms) using non-chordal tones.

1 6 5--(b5)---1 1 7 6--(b6)---5 4 3 1

Chordal movement highlights the harmonic function of the walking bass. With scalar movement, the walking bass gains more melodic liberty, while chromatic movement gives the line direction, increasing the sense of forward motion. We now take a closer look at the important characteristics of Milt Hinton's line that reveal some of the fundamental principles for improvising a good walking bass:

1. Chord changes on the downbeat are emphasised by a note of the triad (root, third or fifth) which produces a clear and solid movement. The root, being the strongest note in the triad, reinforces the chord function.

1 5 1 1 1 (5) 1 5 1

1 (5) 1 5 3

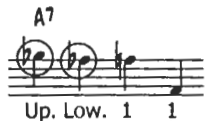
2. To create a flowing and continuous line, the chords are connected by 'directional' intervals: half-step (semi-tone), whole step (tone) and up a fourth (which is the same as down a fifth – the strongest interval in the diatonic system, due to the strength of attraction between dominant and tonic).

H-S H-S W-S W-S down 5th

3. Non-chordal notes are mostly used as chromatic approaches (ca) to chordal notes.

1 1 b7 6 (ca) -> 5 5 (ca) -> 1 (ca) -> 1

In bar 10, non-chordal notes are used as upper and lower neighbouring notes (double chromatic approach) that lead to the 'target note'. This is typical of the bebop style.



4. To create variety in the rhythmic movement, Hintón makes intelligent and functional use of triplets, which recreate the basic feeling of swing.



You can now test these basic techniques in the following way: try to create a purely chordal walking-bass line based on the notes of the triad and connect, where possible, the chords by directional intervals: half-step (semi-tone), whole step (tone), up a fourth or down a fifth. The following example shows a walking bass that follows these criteria on a typical 12-bar blues harmonic structure. (Note that the example is all in the first position.)



In the next article, we will discuss these and other fundamental aspects of the walking bass in more depth. In the meantime, experiment with creating your own bass line in the same way on blues and other standard tunes you like. This is a good way of mastering the use of triads, not as separate blocks or isolated arpeggios, but connected to a continuous, fluid line. And remember: listen to the great masters as much as you can. **DB**

A basic introduction to chord notation

In jazz, chords are generally indicated by symbols. This practice originates in the figured bass used in baroque music. The musicians that created the basso continuo for the violone improvised, elaborating their accompaniments on the basis of a numeric code within the harmonic structure of the composition.

Jazz chords are usually divided into five families: major chords (often succeeded by symbols such as ^{triad} or Δ or 'maj'); minor chords (indicated by '-' or 'min'); dominant-seventh chords; half-diminished chords (with the symbol 'ø'); and diminished chords (indicated by $^\circ$).

The next article will go into more detail regarding chord notation. To get you started, the chart on the right shows the five basic chords representing the different families and the most common scales related to them.

Major	
Minor	
Dominant 7th	
Half-diminished	
Diminished	