

Building a Bass Line

This is a method that really helped me years ago. I had the fortune to find Kris Berg (Collin College) some years ago. I've learned a lot from him. He published a method for creating bass lines called "Bass Lines in Minutes" (You can find it on Amazon). I used some of that to make the examples below. I hope what I have below points you in the right direction. I'll be happy to do this on a real tune with more complex changes if that will help you.

The examples are built on a Bb blues but the technique will work on any chord progression. Blues changes are one of the most common progressions you will see in jazz. There are many variations of blues but this one is generally the foundation. Memorize this progression so you can play it in any key.

EXAMPLE 1 - To outline the chord changes the basic rule is "see a root note, play a root note". This example has the root of the chord as the first note of each measure. Isn't that easy! Now you have 25% of the tune. Play this example and the sound of the progression will be easy to hear. You should internalize that sound. Note that we have repeated root notes on the measures where the same chord is played for two measures. We'll talk about an alternative later.

EXAMPLE 2 - The next step is to figure out how to get to the next measure. A common method is to approach the first note of the next measure a full step or a half step from below or above. Any interval can be used but in general you will want the line to flow smoothly and not have large jumps say greater than a 4th or 5th (and there are always exceptions). These notes may or may not be a scale tone or chord tone. Since they serve as a "passing tone" for only one beat this is okay. This can also add a little color to your line. And remember - there are always exceptions. The chord may dictate you do something else. You'll learn this over time. Play this example and you can hear how we get from one chord to another and how the last note of the measure tells the listener what is coming next. Hey, guess what? Now you have 50% of the tune!

EXAMPLE 3 - Our last step is to fill in the two beats in the middle of each measure. These notes (and the last note of the measure) can be used to give the quality of the chord such as major or minor 3rd and major or dominant 7th or color tones in the chord (altered 5th, 9th, 11th, 13th, etc). Again, the goal is to make the line flow smoothly. Now you have 100% of the tune!

EXAMPLE 4 - This example is much like Example 3 except we'll have a different way to play the line when we have two or more measures with the same chord. Look at the 3rd and 4th measures and see that we are not playing a root note on the first beat of the 4th measure. The same is true where ever we have two measures with the same chord. There is nothing wrong with playing a root on each measure but when you have this occurrence you can take a little more freedom with what you play and still do your job of outlining the chord changes.