

Linear Bass Line Construction

The true definition of a jazz combo is a bassist and at least one other player—hence, the importance placed on the former's vital role in jazz. The bassist has the dual responsibility of providing both a rhythmic and harmonic foundation. In most straight-ahead jazz, this is accomplished through the use of walking bass lines—quarter-note lines performed with a long, warm tone in which the root of each chord is attacked as each chord changes. The remaining notes connect one chord to another in deference to the harmony of the moment.

The majority of the lines constructed by the walking bass masters are composed of three elements: scales, arpeggios and chromatics, and the combination of the three. The rule of thumb when constructing lines using scales and arpeggios is to be cognizant of each chord's scale and chord tones—using correct 3rds, 7ths and appropriate alterations (e.g., #5, b9) as indicated. The guideline for using chromatics is that as long as you start your line on a chord tone of the chord you're on, and land on a chord tone (preferably the root) of the next chord as it changes, chromatics are cool.

These exercises are meant to be practiced not only by bassists, but also on piano (left hand) by all musicians. The following three one-measure bass lines connect two chords that progress up a 4th (or down a 5th), the most common progression in jazz. We call them "cycle patterns":

- Down the scale (1-7-6-5): Be sure to use a b7th for minor 7 and dominant 7 chords and a major 7th for major chords;
- 1-3-5 chromatic;
- Whole, half, half, half (steps going up).

CYCLE PATTERNS

1 (down the scale) 2 (1 3 5 chromatic) 3 (whole, half, half, half)

With just these three patterns, nine combinations can be used to construct nine distinctive ways of walking a II-V-I progression.

CYCLE PATTERN COMBINATIONS

1 & 1 (down scale / down scale) 1 & 2 (down scale / 1 3 5 chro) 1 & 3 (down scale / w, h, h, h)
 2 & 1 (1 3 5 chro / down scale) 2 & 2 (1 3 5 chro / 1 3 5 chro) 2 & 3 (1 3 5 chro / w, h, h, h)
 3 & 1 (w, h, h, h / down scale) 3 & 2 (w, h, h, h / 1 3 5 chro) 3 & 3 (w, h, h, h / w, h, h, h)

After mastering these nine combinations in the key given, the next step is to practice the nine combinations in all 12 keys. Similar lines can be constructed for II-V-I progressions in minor keys. Note that the following three patterns are altered from their major key counterparts in order to fit the chord qualities, i.e., half diminished (minor 7th b5) for the II chord, dominant 7th altered (meaning flat and sharp 5th and flat and sharp 9th) for the V chord and minor 7th for the I chord. The "altered cycle patterns" are:

- Down the altered scale (1-b7-#5-b5);
- 1-b2-3-b5 (be sure to use a minor 3rd for half diminished chords and a major 3rd for dominant 7 altered chords);
- half, whole, half, half (steps going up).

ALTERED CYCLE PATTERN

A⁷ D7alt A⁷ D7alt A⁷ D7alt

1 (down the altered scale) 2 (1 b2 3 b5) 3 (half, whole, half, half)

Again, with just these three patterns, you have nine combinations that can be used to construct nine distinctive ways of walking a minor II-V-I progression. Substituting the altered cycle patterns for the regular cycle patterns fits the chord qualities better.

ALTERED CYCLE PATTERN COMBINATIONS

A⁷ D7alt G⁻ A⁷ D7alt G⁻ A⁷ D7alt G⁻

1 & 1 (down alt scale / down alt scale) 1 & 2 (down alt scale / 1 b2 3 b5) 1 & 3 (down alt scale / h, w, h, h)
 2 & 1 (1 b2 3 b5 / down alt scale) 2 & 2 (1 b2 3 b5 / 1 b2 3 b5) 2 & 3 (1 b2 3 b5 / h, w, h, h)
 3 & 1 (h, w, h, h / down alt scale) 3 & 2 (h, w, h, h / 1 b2 3 b5) 3 & 3 (h, w, h, h / w, h, h, h)

Again, after mastering these nine combinations in the key given, practice them in all 12 keys. The next step is to apply these patterns to a tune that utilizes II-V-I progressions in both major and minor, such as "Autumn Leaves." Using just these six patterns, plus a scale for the tritone progression (E^bΔ to A^o in the 4th to 5th bars) and an arpeggio for the unison progression (G to G7alt in the 7th to 8th bars), there are now literally hundreds of ways to walk the first eight bars. Here are but a few:

FIRST EIGHT BARS OF "AUTUMN LEAVES"

C⁻ F7 B^bΔ E^bΔ A^o D7alt G⁻ G7alt

cp 3 cp 2 cp 3 scale acp 1 acp 2 arpeggio acp 3

C⁻ F7 B^bΔ E^bΔ A^o D7alt G⁻ G7alt

cp 1 cp 3 cp 3 scale acp 3 acp 3 arpeggio acp 2

Once you feel comfortable walking the first eight bars of "Autumn Leaves" by mixing up the different patterns at will, the final step is to practice this eight-bar progression in all keys. Try doing one key per week for 12 weeks. At the end of the three-month stint, you will find that you have a much better handle on walking through changes. This exercise also will substantially increase your familiarity with the entire instrument. More importantly, it will give you more confidence when approaching new tunes, allowing your mind and spirit to focus less on the notes and more on TGIF (time, groove, interaction, feel) with that at-least-one-other-player in your combo.

DB



Bassist J.B. Dyas is vice president of education and curriculum development for the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at the University of Southern California. He is a past recipient of the DownBeat Achievement Award for Jazz Education.