

## Walking Bass The Arpeggio Approach

#### What is Walking Bass?

A "walking bass" line is that most prominent of jazz features - a solid quarter note pulse bass line that outlines the harmony while creating smooth transitions between chords.

A good walking bass line creates a feeling of forward motion, driving the music along without getting in the way of the melody.

There is no one "right way" to create walking bass lines and the trends have evolved through the history of jazz music.

What is presented through these lessons is a way of developing your aptitude for walking bass - when you read statements like "the seventh should be used as a stepping stone to the root or thirteen", don't think of this as an unbreakable rule. Instead think of it like a guide to help you develop your own approach to walking bass.

The Root Note

Until you are adept at the style, it is a good idea to include the root note of each chord on beat one, the "downbeat".

If the bass is constantly playing upper chord tones, the harmonic structure of the music can become too ambiguous for the style.

#### The Arpeggio Approach

An arpeggio is a "broken chord" - meaning that instead being played all at once, the notes of the chord are played one after each other in sequence.

For example, here is the C major seven chord sounded all at once:





#### Effective walking bass lines can be played using arpeggios.

Arpeggio based walking lines have a specific sound because of the leap between each note.

Another good reason to practice walking in this way is that it will teach you what the chord tones are and where to play them on the instrument and in the music.

#### The Major Sixth Chord

The major sixth chord is a very consonant chord that comprises the root, third, fifth and sixth notes of the major scale. Because it contains no seventh it can be used as an arpeggio over major seven and dominant chords.



Here is an example of C6, F6 and G6 arpeggios being used to walk over a simple twelve bar blues (I IV V progression).





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#### Passing Tones And Root Substitution

In jazz walking bass lines are usually smooth sounding. After all, they're called "walking bass" lines, not "jumping bass" lines.

Here are some things we can do to smooth out our walking bass line.

Firstly, **when one chord lasts many measures**, jumping back to the root note every downbeat can disrupt the smoothness of the line. Instead, **try playing the fifth instead of the root note on every other measure**.

Another trick is to play chromatic passing tones on beat four.

Because of the way musical time works, beat four is a "weak beat". This means dissonant notes - notes that sound "out of key", can be played on beat four.

Here is our same blues progression being walked on using fifth substitutions and passing tones on the upbeat:





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#### The Minor Seven Arpeggio

Here is the C minor seven arpeggio:



The minor seven arpeggio can be used to walk over minor seventh chords. Combined with the major sixth arpeggio we can now walk over the ii V I sequence - this is an incredibly common chord sequence in jazz music.

Here are the first eight measures of "Take the A Train". We can create an effective walking bass line over this section using nothing but the sixth chord arpeggio and the minor seventh chord arpeggio:



#### The Minor Seven Flat Five Chord/Half Diminished Chord

The half diminished, or minor seven flat five chord, is a chord you will encounter most often in minor key signatures.

Here is the half diminished arpeggio:



Using just the half-diminished arpeggio, the minor seven and major six arpeggio we can walk over the first eight bars of "Autumn Leaves".







#### The Scalar Approach

The arpeggio approach is a powerful tool for creating clear, supportive walking bass lines. However, overuse can make arpeggio-based walking lines a bit monotonous.

It is a good idea to mix the arpeggio approach with other kinds of walking bass movement, such as scale fragments.

Scale fragments work well when the most important chord tones are played on "strong beats".

First, let's look at a scale and how it 'measures up' to its chord.

Here is the C major scale. There are seven notes in the C major scale (the octave is a repeat of the first note, **C**).



If we remove every second note from this scale we get the C $\Delta$ 7 chord.



C major scale: C D E F G A B (C)

C∆7 chord:

G E

С

В

Beats two and four are 'weak beats', because they aren't strong harmonic moments within the measure. For this reason non-chord tones and chromatic dissonances can be played on these beats without sounding "out of key".

This means if we start on the first note and go up the scale for two measures, the chord tones/beats will line up as follows:

root (beat 1) third (beat 3) fifth (beat 1) seventh (beat 3)

On the way down things are a bit different. Look at the example below to see how it works.



**Beats one and three are 'strong beats'**, because they convey harmony in a more meaningful way than the other beats (in 4/4 time).

Starting on the root and ascending the scale gives us the most important chord tones, the root, third, fifth and seventh on the strong beats.

Notice that on beat four of measure two the scale pattern is changed. On the way up (measure two) the line skips up a third, from **B** to **D**, so that the root note **C** can be used on the downbeat of measure three. I call this a *turn*.

In Walking Bass 1: The Arpeggio Approach, we learned that the major sixth chord arpeggio works well on major seventh chords. This is why the note A appears on beat three of measure three; the major sixth is a very consonant note even though it is not one of the primary chord tones. This means we can walk down the major scale using a chromatic passing tone on beat four to keep consonant notes/chord tones on strong beats.

Dorian And Minor ii Chords

Playing the C major scale from **D** to **D** produces the D dorian mode.



If we remove every second note from this mode we get the D-7 chord.



Let's use the dorian mode to walk over D-7.



In almost every chord-scale the ascent from root to seventh "plays itself". There's not really much that can go wrong. The critical point is always around the seventh of the chord and how to get from there to the next downbeat.

Because the seventh of dorian/minor seven chords is a whole step away from the root note, a chromatic passing tone works well. Contrast this with ionian/major seven where a *turn* was used.

In terms of scale degrees, the descent of dorian is identical to ionian: root, 7, 6/13, 6/13, 5, 4/11, 3, 2/9.

Mixolydian And Dominant Seventh Chords

Playing the C major scale from **G** to **G** produces the G mixolydian mode.



If we remove every second note from this mode we get the G7 chord.



Let's use the mixolydian mode to walk over G7.



If we think in terms of scale degrees, mixolydian/dominant seventh chords unfolds like the dorian/minor seventh chords.

- all chord-scales that contain a >7 provide space for a chromatic passing tone ascending to the root
- all chord-scales that contain a major 6/13 provide space for a chromatic passing tone descending to the fifth

#### The Major ii V I Progression

The ii V I sequence is very common in jazz. Using the dorian mode for minor seventh chords, the mixolydian mode for dominant chords and the ionian mode for major seventh chords, we can now walk the ii V I progression.



### Progressions like the above are called *diatonic* progressions because all the chords come from the same diatonic scale.

[The diatonic scale is like the chromatic scale - it has no root note. C major scale/ C ionian, D dorian, E phrygian, F lydian, G mixolydian, A aeolian/A natural minor, B locrian - these all come from the same diatonic scale]

#### There are lots of jazz chord progressions that are not diatonic.

The chords below are from "Donna Lee". The root notes of these chords all come from A<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> major, but **the upper structure of some of the chords contain notes from outside the key**. In this way these chords are non-diatonic.

A walking bass line needs to play the chord tones of each chord on the strong beats - **you cannot assume that one scale will work over every chord**.

The "first choice" mode for each chord is shown below, along with an example bass line.



Did you notice anything in this bass line that could be played more smoothly? Sometimes playing the same note twice can be very musical:



#### Walking the ii V I

You should learn to "think" in all twelve keys. This means being conscious of note names, harmonic structures and voice leading in all twelve keys.

Apply the concepts learned so far to the major ii V I in all twelve keys.



#### The Scalar Approach in a Minor Setting

Minor harmony and major harmony tend to invite different kinds of approaches to walking bass.

There are chords in minor harmony that seem to work best with the arpeggio approach.

However, in this section we will focus on the scalar approach.

Experiment with both and find your own solutions.

#### Aeolian And Minor Tonic Chords

When a minor chord is established as a tonic chord, usually by way of a preceding V7 chord, aeolian is often a good choice.

You do not HAVE to use aeolian, it can be very musical to use alternate chordscales (such as dorian, melodic minor and harmonic minor). But in this section we will confine ourselves to aeolian.

Playing the C major scale from **A** to **A** produces the A aeolian mode.



If we remove every second note from this mode we get the A-7 tonic chord.



A defining feature of aeolian is the  $\frac{13}{13}$  which poses a distinct challenge when walking, especially when descending. One way of preserving this characteristic is to include a chromatic passing tone on beat two. Remember, beat two and beat four are both *weak beats*.



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#### Locrian And Half-Diminished Chords

Playing the C major scale from **B** to **B** produces the B locrian mode.



If we remove every second note from this mode we get the B-7(b5) chord, also commonly called the half-diminished chord.



This chord is quite "unstable" and almost always forms part of the minor ii V i progression.

The half diminished/minor seven 5 chord is characterised by its minor third, 7 and most distinctively its 5. One way to preserve this sound while descending is to include a passing tone on beat two.



#### Dominant 9 Chords

In the minor ii V i progressions the V7 chord is almost always a V7,9 chord, even if the chord symbol includes this or not.

There are occasionally exceptions, such as Nat King Cole's rendition of nature boy where the guitarist clearly play a 49 over A7 when all surrounding chords would

suggest a  $\flat$ 9. Have a listen to hear how this changes the predictable voice leading of the sequence:



In contrast check out this Milt Hinton walking line over "All of Me". Notice that he emphasises the 9 of A7 by leaping to it? There is no 9 in the symbol but this is clearly the harmony this masterful musician was "hearing".

Notice also his line on the D-7 ii chord - he emphasises the dorian sound using the methods outlined in the previous section.



Phrygian Dominant And Dominant 9 Chords

Playing the A harmonic minor scale from **E** to **E** produces the E phrygian dominant mode.



If we remove every second note from this mode we get the E7(>9) chord.



Walking this chord-scale poses similar challenges to walking aeolian and locrian. The sound of this harmony is best preserved by using a chromatic passing tone in the descent between the root and the seventh. This passing tone therefore falls on beat two.



#### Walking the Minor ii V i

You should learn to "think" in all twelve keys. This means being conscious of note names, harmonic structures and voice leading in all twelve keys.

Apply the concepts learned so far to the minor iiø V i in all twelve keys.



# Walking Bass Connecting Chords



#### **Connecting Chords**

The real art form of walking bass is way in which chords are connected, weaved together.

Over the next few pages we will look at some great walking bass lines as case studies to see how these masterful musicians create musical, functional lines between chords.







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As we play through this bass line some musical devices become apparent.

#### **Motivic Development**

In measure one Reid plays a melodic shape that is paraphrased over the next few measures. Walking bass lines can develop motivic ideas in a similar way that melodic lines can. The difference is that walking bass lines are usually organised around strong chord tones on strong beats.

#### **Chromatic Connections**

Of the thirty-seven chord connections in this excerpt, Reid connects chromatically twenty-two times. Sometimes these chromatic connections consist of diatonic notes while at other times he uses "outside" chromatic notes.

#### **Descending Fifth**

The second most used connecting interval is a descending fifth - a device Reid uses eight times.

So far we have emphasised the stylistic trait for walking bass lines to be smooth. This is because learning to play smooth lines between chords takes practice - you have to move beyond simple arpeggio patterns. But in truth the descending fifth is also a big part of the walking bass sound.

#### Whole Step

The whole step approach is used six times. Where a whole step approach is logical it should be used. This adds variety to the line, keeps things smooth and helps avoid overusing the chromatic approach.

#### **Minor Third**

Less common intervalic connections do happen when the progression itself moves in angular motion. For example, the G7 of measure twenty nine connects to the Eø of measure thirty by way of a descending minor third.

#### Tritone into Chromatic Approach

A common device for walking through chords that are a fourth apart, where each chord lasts two beats, is to leap from the root to the tritone and then approach the next chord chromatically.

This happens in measures eight into nine, measure twelve, thirteen, fifteen and eighteen. A modified version of this device is used in measure twenty-two.

#### Third of V

In measures two and thirty Reid uses a common walking device that we haven't covered yet.

By walking from the root of iiø down to the third of V (a minor ii V sequence) Reid creates a contrapuntal descending line against the ascending fourth of the II V sequence. This device works well over any ii V sequence where each chord only lasts two beats. It works well on both minor and major ii V sequences.

#### Context

Remember, for any "rule" in music theory there is a caveat: ultimately the most important thing is context.