



# In The Doghouse

By Chris Fitzgerald

## Shell Voicings For Bass, Part I

The term “jazz bass” usually refers to a style of bass playing which is monophonic (i.e. – linear/melodic, playing only one note at a time) in nature. If you think of the words “jazz bass,” you most likely imagine a walking bass line or a linear bass solo. But there is one common exception to this conception of the style: at times, many jazz bassists play double stops (two-note chords), which imply more about the chord structure they represent than a single note could. While early jazz bassists used double stops only infrequently as a way to reinforce certain harmonies and introduce a bit of variety into an otherwise monophonic texture, advances in instrument and string design, combined with similar advancements in technique, for many jazz bassists eventually made it possible for entire chord progressions to be harmonically outlined by a single bassist playing double stops. This article will explore one approach to building such

harmonic realizations for jazz bass.

Arguably, the most common double stop played by jazz bassists is the interval of the 10th, which for practical physical reasons is played on the bass between the 4th string and the 1st string. In a typical 10th voicing, the root of the chord in question is played on the 4th string, and the 10th (i.e. – the 3rd of the chord played an octave higher) is played on the 1st string. Voicings that are built in 10ths have several advantages over other types of voicings that are possible to play on the bass: first, they outline the root and 3rd of the chord, which are the two strongest guide tones in almost every common chord type; second, they are physically relatively easy to play, since they require very little horizontal stretching to reach because of the tuning of the instrument; last, because the 3rd of the chord is displaced up by an octave, they tend to overcome the tendency toward muddiness that often accompanies two-note chords played in such a low register.

Based on all of the above, it would be logical to simply stop

there and attempt to outline the changes to jazz standards using only the interval of the 10th for every chord. But anyone who has tried this quickly discovers that trying to move this structure large distances around the fingerboard has two distinct disadvantages: it is physically unwieldy to shift the large distances (often a 4th or 5th) that most jazz chord progressions require, and; shifting a double stop large distances on the double bass easily can wreak havoc on the intonation of one or both double stops, even for experienced jazz bassists. For this reason, it is useful to have a second type of double stop voicing to use to facilitate better voice leading and easier technical execution of double stop voicings.

While it is technically possible to construct nearly any interval as a double stop, the second most common interval used by jazz bassists to outline the quality of a chord is the 7th. There are many reasons for this, but the two most compelling are that the 7th is – along with the 3rd – considered to be a “guide tone” of almost every common jazz harmony, and that major and

minor 7ths are technically just as easy to construct on the bass as major and minor 10ths. In fact, when taken together, 7ths can be formed with exactly the same horizontal spacing and fingering as their corresponding 10th intervals; the only difference is that while most moveable (i.e. – not built from an open string to a fingered note) 10th double stops are built between the 4th string and the 1st string, most moveable 7th double stops are built between the 3rd string and the 1st string.

Before we look at specific examples of these intervals as guide tone or “shell” voicings for bass, it will be helpful to examine the types of chords each type of interval can represent. The three most common chord types in jazz chord progressions are major 7th chords (including variants such as Ma6 and Ma9 chords), dominant 7th chords (including all altered dominant chord types) and minor 7th chords (including variants such as mi7b5 chords). For all Ma7 and mi7 chords, the formula for constructing 10th and 7th double stops is the same: a major 10th or major 7th would be used as a shell voicing for any Ma7 chord, and a minor 10th or 7th would be used for a shell voicing for any mi7 chord.

So far, so good; but for dominant 7th chords, the formula is a bit trickier. Since a dominant 7th chord contains both a major 3rd

and a minor 7th, a dominant 7th chord can be represented by either a major 10th or a minor 7th, as illustrated in following example. For the purposes of the example, we’ll call all 10th double stops “Type IV” voicings, indicating that the root of the chord is played on the 4th string, and all 7th double stops “Type III” voicings, indicating that the root is played on the 3rd string:

In the above example, you can see that for “Type IV” chords (built up from the 4th string) the major 10th interval can be used as a shell voicing to represent either a Ma7 or Dom7 chord, and that a minor 10th interval can only be used to represent a mi7 chord. For “Type III” chords (built up from the 3rd string), the formula is somewhat reversed: the major 7th interval can only represent a Ma7 chord, where as the minor 7th interval can be used to represent either a Dom7 chord or a mi7 chord. While this can be a little confusing at first, once it sinks in and becomes second nature, it becomes easy to construct a shell voicing for just about any chord symbol you are

likely to run into in a standard jazz chord chart in two different ways – as a “Type IV” shell voicing (major or minor 10th from the 4th string to the 1st string), or as a “Type III” shell voicing (major or minor 7th from the 3rd string to the 1st string). Try all of them both ways and start to get a feel for how they are constructed. In Part II of this article, we’ll discuss a system of

voice leading these shell voicing types in a way that will allow you to play virtually any standard jazz progression in a very logical and ergonomic way on the bass, and which will also keep all of the voicings on the part of the fingerboard that will allow them to speak clearly and finger cleanly without interference from the heel or body of the bass. **BGM**