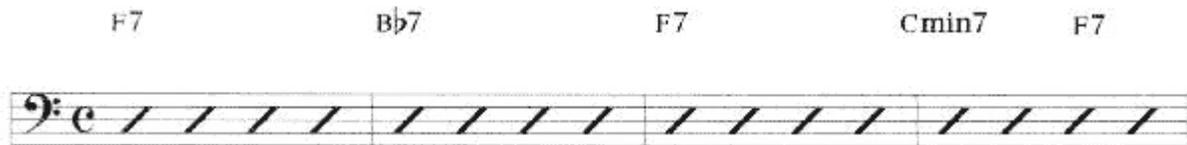


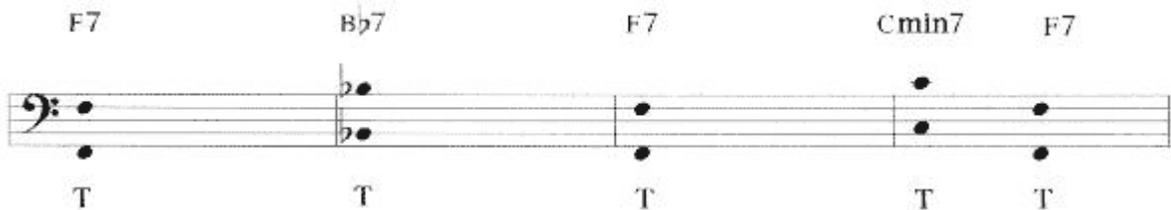
Lessons: Bass Line Construction: Target Approach

by Chris Fitzgerald

Many jazz bass lines are created by using two different categories of notes: Target notes, and Approach notes. Target notes are notes that must be played at a specific place and time during a chord progression bass line. The most common target note in most jazz bass lines is the root of each chord as it occurs in the progression. For instance, if the first four bars of a blues you are playing looks like this,



then your best choice of target notes will be the root of each chord played on the beat during which the chord change occurs (If there is only one chord per measure, play the target note on beat 1 of that measure; if there are two chords per measure, you will need a target note for each chord, most likely on beats 1 and 3). At this stage, your only choice is which octave to play the target note in, since the chord progression has determined the note you must play for you. In the following example, target notes (abbreviated "T") have been added an octave apart. (The choice of octave is yours).



As you can see, choosing basic target notes for a jazz bass line is not a terribly creative process: If the chord in question is F7, and it is the only chord in the measure, you know you must play an "F" (in whatever octave) on beat one of that measure. This might seem rather unimaginative until you realize that, by using this process, your note choice on beat one of any measure that has a chord symbol over it will be the same note chosen by great bass players such as Ron Carter and Ray Brown. When you look at it in this way, all of a sudden it becomes an extremely useful and interesting process!

The process gets a bit more creative when you start to add Approach notes. Approach notes do exactly what the name implies: their function is to approach (or lead smoothly into) the existing target tones. For example, in a typical jazz "2 feel" bass line for any song in 4/4 meter, the bass will play a half note on beats 1 and 3 of each measure. When there is only one chord per measure, the note on beat 1 will be a target note (the root of

the chord for the measure), which leaves beat 3 open for an Approach note (abbreviated "A"), as follows:

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef with five measures. Above the staff are the chords: F7, Bb7, F7, Cmin7, and F7. Below the staff, target notes (T) and approach notes (A) are indicated. In the first measure, the target note is Bb and the approach note is A. In the second measure, the target note is Bb and the approach note is A. In the third measure, the target note is F and the approach note is A. In the fourth measure, the target note is C and the approach note is T. In the fifth measure, the target note is F and the approach note is T. Question marks are placed above the approach notes in the first three measures.

(Notice that measure 4 does not require any approach notes, since beats 1 and 3 are both filled with target notes.)

The next task is to choose the appropriate approach note for each measure. A good rule of thumb to follow for beginning bass lines is that the motion from approach note to target note should be stepwise (i.e. - the approach note should be either a half step or a whole step away from the target note so that the motion from approach to target seems logical). There are two simple ways to accomplish this: using Diatonic approach notes, and using Chromatic approach notes. If you haven't had a lot of music theory training, these terms can seem somewhat intimidating, but don't worry - we'll examine each type of approach separately to avoid confusion.

The term Diatonic, loosely translated, means "within the scale". When you use diatonic approach notes, you are choosing your approach notes from the chord scale of whatever measure you are playing. For instance, in the previous example, the chord scale for the first measure is F7, a dominant scale. The F7 scale which is a step (either a half step or a whole step) away from Bb. This gives you two choices for this measure: you can use a diatonic approach from below, which would be the note "A"; or you can use a diatonic approach from the above, which is the note "C". Either will work.

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When you play the previous example, you will find that the diatonic method for approach tones works fine and is a viable option. After repeated hearings, you may begin to feel that this method of approach sounds rather bland much of the time. This is because the diatonic approach method often results in whole step resolutions between approach note and target note. In the previous example, there was only one instance of a half step resolution (from the approach note "A" in the first measure to the target note "Bb"), and many people feel that a half step resolution tends to sound stronger than a whole step resolution. If your ear is telling you the same thing, then it is time to examine the Chromatic method of approach.

When you use the Chromatic approach method, it is of no concern whatsoever whether the approach note is a part of the current chord scale or not. All that matters is that the resolution from approach note to target note is by half step from either below or above. If we modify the previous example from diatonic approach to chromatic approach, it will look like this:

Musical notation showing a bass line in 4/4 time with two chords per bar. The chords are F7, Bb7, F7, Cmin7, and F7. The bass line consists of quarter notes. The notes are: F7 (T), Ab (or), Bb7 (T), Ab (or), Bb7 (T), Ab (or), F7 (T), Ab (or), Cmin7 (T), F7 (T).

At this stage, the Chromatic approach method is clearly the easier to implement of the two, since no real knowledge of chord scale construction is required to use it. But don't be fooled: While you can get by with this method for a "2 feel" bassline, you will need to become intimately acquainted with jazz chord scales in order to construct a walking bass line - our next project.

A typical walking bass line consists of a string of quarter notes in 4/4 time. When there are two chords per bar, we can construct a walking line by simply using the chromatic approach method to fill the spaces between target notes, as follows:

Musical notation showing a bass line in 4/4 time with two chords per bar. The chords are Dmin7, G7, Cmin7, F7, Bbmin7, Eb7, Amin7, and D7. The bass line consists of quarter notes. The notes are: Dmin7 (T), Eb (or), G7 (T), Eb (or), Cmin7 (T), Eb (or), F7 (T), Eb (or), Bbmin7 (T), Ab (or), Eb7 (T), Ab (or), Amin7 (T), Ab (or), D7 (T).

The line constructed by using this method is not only perfectly acceptable, but is also an extremely typical example of a walking line in a two-chords-per-bar context.

Building a walking line gets a bit more complicated when there is only one chord per bar. Beat 1 of each measure will be filled with target notes, and beat 4 will be taken up by approach notes. This leaves beats 2 and 3 of each measure open, as follows:

Musical notation showing a bass line in 4/4 time with one chord per bar. The chords are F7, Bb7, F7, Cmin7, and F7. The bass line consists of quarter notes. The notes are: F7 (T), Bb7 (A), Bb7 (T), F7 (A), F7 (T), Cmin7 (A), Cmin7 (T), F7 (A).

The spaces in a walking line like this one may be filled in one of two ways: by using chord tones, or by using scale tones. We'll look at how to use chord tones first.

The term chord tone refers to any of the following parts of the scale: Root, 3rd, 5th, or 7th. For example, in the F7 scale, the chord tones would be F (root), A (third), C (5th), and Eb (7th). To use these chord tones (abbreviated "C") to fill the holes in the above line, the main concern is to arrange the chord tones in an order that leads toward the next target tone. Then choose an approach tone that leads into the target tone by stepwise motion.

F7 Bb7 F7 Cmin7 F7

T C C A T C C A T C C A T A T A

Using only the techniques discussed so far, you now have the tools to build basic "2 feel" and walking bass lines. We'll discuss the use of scale tones and how to combine them with chord tones in the next chapter. Until then, spend some time constructing lines with the basic tools you have so far: target notes, approach notes, and chord tones. Good luck!