

BASS MASTER CLASS
 As Published in *DownBeat Magazine*, August 2007
 by Dr. JB Dyas

Linear Bass Line Construction Part 2
Chromatics and More

In most straight-ahead jazz, the bassist's primary function is to provide walking bass lines -- quarter note lines 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. However, to construct lines that are more linear, that is, more scalar and chromatic than chordal, contemporary bassists often land on notes other than the root as the chords change, giving their lines a smoother and more *forward momentum* feeling.

To achieve this and still be faithful to the harmony, chromatics may be used as long as the line begins on a chord tone (preferably the root) and lands on any chord tone (root, 3rd, 5th, or 7th) of the subsequent chords as they change. The root, however, should still be attacked at crucial points in the chorus, e.g., the first beat of the first bar of each section, anchoring the form.

Chromatic and scalar lines sound especially hip when it appears that a long linear line "just happens" to fit perfectly. To show the difference between arpeggio- and scalar/chromatic-type lines, look at the last four bars of the bridge of Horace Silver's AABA tune *Sister Sadie* in which the chords are C7, Bb7, A7, and Ab7 (culminating on G7 which is the first chord of the last A). The first two examples below represent typical up-and-down lines using arpeggios, landing on the root of each chord; while they work fine and get the job done, they're not the hippest.

Example 1

Example 1 shows a four-measure bass line in bass clef. The chords are C7, Bb7, A7, Ab7, and G7. The line uses arpeggios: C7 (R 3 5 6), Bb7 (R 5 3), A7 (R 3 5 b7), Ab7 (R 5 3), and G7 (R).

Example 2

Example 2 shows a four-measure bass line in bass clef. The chords are C7, Bb7, A7, Ab7, and G7. The line uses arpeggios: C7 (R 5 3 R), Bb7 (R 3 5 b7), A7 (R 5 3 R), Ab7 (R 3 5 b7), and G7 (R).

The following two examples, on the other hand, are all stepwise, using a combination of scalar and chromatic lines. Note how 1) each line continues in the same direction, 2) a chord tone other than the root is landed upon on the first beat of most of the inner measures, and 3) the four-bar phrase starts and ends on the root of its respective chords (as they are at crucial points in the chorus). Also note that in Example 3, the line is ascending while the chord progression is descending (very cool).

Example 3

Example 3 shows a four-measure bass line in bass clef. The chords are C7, Bb7, A7, Ab7, and G7. The line is stepwise and ascending: C7 (R 2 ch ch), Bb7 (5 ch ch ch), A7 (R 2 3 4), Ab7 (5 ch ch ch), and G7 (R).

Example 4

Example 4 shows a four-measure bass line in bass clef. The chords are C7, Bb7, A7, Ab7, and G7. The line is stepwise and descending: C7 (R ch ch ch), Bb7 (b7 ch ch ch), A7 (5 ch ch ch), Ab7 (3 ch 2), and G7 (R).

If you've got the thumb position chops to do it, Example 4 sounds especially hip up an octave (no problem for electric players); then for a *really* long linear line, continue by going down the G bebop scale on the G7 chord for the first two bars of the last A of *Sister Sadie* as displayed in Example 5.

Example 5

R ch ch ch b7 ch ch ch 5 ch ch ch 3 ch 2 R R ch b7 6 5 4 3 2 R

Linear lines also sound great on tunes that have numerous measures with two chords per bar, such as John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*. Following is an example of the first four bars of this tune with a typical arpeggio/scalar type bass line. This is followed by a chromatic/scalar example.

Example 6

R 2 R 3 R 2 R 3 R 7 6 5 R b3 R 3 R

Example 7

R ch 5 ch R ch 5 ch R ch enc enc b3 2 5 ch R

The way to "find" these kinds of lines is to "see" the closest chord tone of the next chord (from the chord tone of the chord you're on), then, using chromatics and/or scale tones, proceed to that note. If you find that you get there too soon and need another note to make the line work, simply use an *enclosure*, "enclosing" (i.e., playing a half step above and below) the note you're approaching (as in the Eb to A- in the 3rd to 4th bar above). An alternative would be to keep the chromatic line from the Eb moving downward until it lands on the G in the 5th measure as in Example 8. Although you're not landing on a chord tone on the A-, the line still works as the chord is not in a crucial section of the chorus; hip chromatic line trumps landing-on-a-chord-tone in this case.

Example 8

R ch 5 ch R ch 5 ch R ch ch ch ch ch 5 ch R

Using an enclosure (as in the 3rd bar of Example 7) or keeping the line moving chromatically in the same direction (as in Example 8) are both far better than repeating a note (i.e., playing the same note twice in a row) which would give the line a "stutter," temporarily losing its forward momentum.

For a *really* long chromatic line that "just happens" to fit this twist-and-turn chord progression, play Example 8 up an octave then continue descending chromatically for the tune's next four bars as displayed in Example 9 (this is especially effective after a soloist has climaxed his last chorus and you're transitioning the vibe, preparing for the next soloist, especially at fast tempos).

Example 9

R ch 5 ch R ch 5 ch R ch ch ch ch ch 5 ch R ch 5 ch R ch 5 ch R ch ch ch ch ch 5 R R

An example of using the same technique for constructing an ascending line is below. Note the use of the upper chromatic approach note (2nd to 3rd beat in the first measure), “zigzagging” the line upwards.

Example 10

B D7 G B \flat 7 E \flat A- D7 G B \flat 7 E \flat G \flat 7 B F- B \flat 7 E \flat

R uc b7 ch 5 6 5 ch 3 4 5 ch b3 ch R b7 3 2 b7 ch 5 6 5 ch 3 4 5 ch b3 ch R uc R

To add scalar/chromatic lines to your walking bass vocabulary, you must first work them out very slowly in the practice room, giving yourself enough time to think, “seeing” where you are and where you are going. After working on a number of tunes, finding the linear lines within, you will eventually be able to improvise these kinds of lines on the spot, playing them when the musical situation you’re in at the moment calls.

Key:

numbers refer to the scale/chord tone of the chord of the moment; R = root of the chord of the moment; ch = chromatic; enc = enclosure; uc = upper chromatic approach note

*Formerly the Executive Director of the Brubeck Institute, bassist **J.B. Dyas** currently serves as Vice President for Education and Curriculum Development at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz. He received his PhD in Music Education from Indiana University and is a past recipient of the DownBeat Achievement Award for Jazz Education.*