



Dave Frank School of Jazz

In-person in NYC or Skype lessons worldwide

WALKING BASSLINE CLINIC 12/12/10

Playing with a walking bass line is a style of piano playing that is used most often in solo jazz performance. Popularized by piano greats Lennie Tristano and Dave McKenna, among others, the walking LH bass line can effectively substitute for a rhythm section, if desired, and provides a rhythmic and melodic foundation for RH improvisation.

Definition:

The walking bass line is a melodic line primarily made up of quarter notes, that intersects the chord changes of a tune usually at the root.

Basic Walking Bassline Elements

- 1) Start on the root of the chord. Ascend stepwise to the next root.
- 2) Descend stepwise to the next root.
- 3) Ascend and/or descend from root to root using a combination of steps and leaps, approaching the next root from a step above or below.
- 4) Use triad and/or seventh chord arpeggios in the bassline, ascending and descending.
- 5) An immediate octave leap down from root to lower-root can be nice, often done on the first and second beats of a bar
- 6) 8-5-1 motion is nice
- 7) Using very low notes (down to the lowest C) frequently is fine. The highest note to be used in general would be in the G below middle C range.

Advanced Bassline Techniques

- 1) A half-time bassline (on beats 1 and 3 or 2 and 4) can be used before the regular 4/4 walking line, or as a break during the middle of the performance. With half time basslines, the notes generally consist of the chord root and a chromatic approach to the next root.
- 2) Other bassline figures include using two swing eighth notes instead of a quarter note, or an eighth note triplet rhythm instead of a quarter note.
- 3) Hitting the 3rd, 5th or 7th of the chord with the bassline at the point of chord change is also possible, creating a more subtle sound than the root.
- 4) Repetitive patterns, like Bach, etc., are also useful as a melodic device.

5) Smudges can be used to create a different texture in the bassline. Usually you can smudge from 1 ½ to ½ step approaching the intended note from below.

6) Use a 3-5 rhythm in the bassline rather than the usual 4 feel. You can anticipate the chord changes to align with the changed rhythmic feel. You can also try a 2 feel at times to break up the four feel.

Writing Beginning Basslines

- 1) Write the roots of the chords in the bass clef with the chords written above
- 2) Write an approach note to the next root, ½ step (usually) above or below the next root.
- 3) Fill in the blanks by using steps and occasional leaps using your ear to choose the correct passing tones. Change directions frequently and stay in the bassline range.

Practice points for developing a walking bassline style

- 1) Write basslines to many tunes, using the theory mentioned above. As you get comfortable with the style, you can use your ear more to choose the notes
- 2) Once you've written basslines to numerous tunes, practice improvising basslines over chord progressions first (2-5, etc.) slowly (met 63 bpm) in a bunch of keys. Use simple, worked out voicings in the RH
 - A) 2m7 - 5dom7 - 1maj7
 - B) 2m7b5 - 5dom7 - 1min6
 - C) 1maj7 - 6dom7 - 2m7 - 5dom7 - 1maj7
 - D) 1maj7 - 1 dom7 - 4maj7 - 4 min 6 - 1maj7
 - E) 1maj7 - 3dom7 - 6dom7 - 2m7 - 5dom7 - 1maj7
- 3) Practice improvising a bassline over complete tune vs. RH chords or a recording of the changes

The ability to improvise RH lines with an improvised LH bassline is one of the most advanced ways of playing. It can be done by a gradual adding of RH lines, simple at first, then getting more complex, to a comfortably improvised LH bassline.

- 4) Once you feel comfortable improvising LH basslines over tunes, add a half note improvised line in the RH over the LH bassline
- 5) Use simple repetitive rhythmic patterns to improvise RH lines over basslines (1/4 1/4 1/2, 1/4 1/8 1/8 1/2, etc)
- 6) Improvise short 1/8 note lines (1-2 measures) in RH over improvised LH walking bass
- 7) Increase the duration of the RH improvised line until freely flowing
- 8) Add 1/8th triplets and 1/6th note lines for intensity
- 9) Have a ball!

Suggested Listening

- 1) Lennie Tristano – solo recording from 1961, originally called the New Tristano
- 2) Dave McKenna – any solo recordings, a great one is Live at Maybeck
- 3) Mike Jones solo recordings
- 4) My recordings Ballads and Burners, Turning it Loose! and Portrait of New York (Jazzheads records, www.jazzheads.com)

Green Dolphin Street Bassline

Handwritten musical score for the bassline of "Green Dolphin Street". The score is written on six staves. The first staff is the melody, and the other five are for bass. Chords are written above the bass staves. The piece is in 4/4 time and starts with a C major 7 chord. The bassline consists of quarter notes and eighth notes. The score ends with a double bar line and a fermata over the final note.

Chords and notes shown in the score:

- Staff 1 (Melody): Cmaj7, G7, Cmaj7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7, Ebmaj7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7.
- Staff 2: Dm7, G7, Cmaj7, Cmaj7, Ebmaj7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7.
- Staff 3: Dm7, G7, Cmaj7, Cmaj7, Ebmaj7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7.
- Staff 4: Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7.
- Staff 5: Bm7b9, E7, Am6, D7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7.
- Staff 6: G7, Cmaj7, Ebmaj7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7.

Additional markings: "DC al Coda" is written next to the final measure. A fermata is placed over the final note of the bassline.

Six empty musical staves provided for practice or additional notation.