

# Voice Leading

By Jim Stinnett

Voice Leading is the second lesson in this four-part series on walking bass line construction. In this lesson, we will illustrate how voice leading can be used to enhance the shape of your lines.

I have taught walking bass lines to beginning and intermediate players for many years. To these students, I always emphasize playing the root on the chord change. At a specific point of development, most students ask, "when do I play pitches other than the root at the beginning of a chord change, and which non-root pitches sound best?" In answer to this question, I introduce voice leading.

By starting with chord tones and arpeggios, we can very clearly illustrate this concept.

## Part 1 - Arpeggios

Voice leading traditionally makes one think of moving lines in step-wise motion. In jazz, a good pianist normally uses voice leading when playing chord changes. A typical illustration of voice leading would look like the movement in example one. In this common chord progression, the 3rd of one chord becomes, or leads to, the 7th of the next chord. Notice the common tones and the movement by step.

### Ex. 1 - Piano Chord Voice Leading

Cm7 F7 Fm7 Bb7 EbMaj7 Ab7 Gm7 C7

In a walking bass line, the voice leading concept is similar. Some of the bass motion leads to the root of the chord as opposed to the 3rd or 7th. A bass line obviously needs to be more grounded than a piano voicing. Voice leading and using guide tones, traditionally implies step-wise motion between sevenths and thirds.

Example 2 begins with the ascending arpeggio on Dm7: root - minor third - perfect fifth - minor seventh. Then on beat one of measure two, we move down to the closest chord tone of G7. We complete measure two by walking down the arpeggio. Measure three begins with the chord tone that is the closest pitch below beat four of the previous measure. We then walk up the CMaj7 arpeggio. Measure four begins with a drop to the closest chord tone of A7 and walks downward.

## Ex. 2 - Voice Leading Arpeggios

Dm7                      G7                      CMaj7                      A7

1   3   5   V   L   1   7   V   L   3   5   V   L   7   5   3

Simply put, walk up one chord and down the next. Notice the step-wise motion of chord tones from one chord change to the next. This is voice leading. Depending on the progression of the chords, this type of line can be simple or complex.

Many of these voice leading examples can be described as using a step-wise approach to a chord tone other than the root. While some of the voice leading approaches are 1/2 steps, others are whole-step approaches. The common factor is that they are all diatonic.

In example three, we change the contour of our line by simply moving up to the closest chord tone for C major. We begin the same as we did in example one by going up the Dm7 arpeggio. In measure two, we drop to the closest chord tone and walk down the G7 chord. In measure three, we now move up to the closest chord tone and arpeggiate down the CMaj7. Because of our change of direction moving to measure three and the subsequent downward arpeggio, we now begin measure four in a different position from measure four in example one. Measure four ends with a chord tone that creates a voice leading movement back to measure one.

## Ex. 3 - Voice Leading Arpeggios

Dm7                      G7                      CMaj7                      A7

1   3   5   V   L   1   7   V   L   1   7   V   L   3   5   3

Examples 4 and 5 present more choices for voice leading. In these two lines, we have now moved upward to the next closest chord tone for measure two.

## Ex. 4 - Voice Leading Arpeggios

Dm7                      G7                      CMaj7                      A7

1   3   5   V   L   3   1   V   L   5   7   V   L   1   7   5

## Ex. 5 - Voice Leading Arpeggios

Dm7                      G7                      CMaj7                      A7

1   3   5   V   L   3   1   V   L   3   1   V   L   3   5   3

This technique is similar to the technique used by a pianist when voice leading chord changes by highlighting the guide tone (3rd and 7th) motion from one chord to the next. Obviously, you can change the order and octave of the chord tones you choose to voice lead. This, in turn, will lead your lines in many different directions.

## Part 2 - New Patterns: 1-7-6-5 & 1-7-6-1/2

In the first lesson, *Creating Jazz Bass Lines*, we worked with a few specific patterns numbered with scale degrees. Let us add these two new patterns to our vocabulary.

### Ex. 6 - Demonstration Of Patterns 1-7-6-5 & 1-7-6-1/2

The musical notation for Example 6 is written on a single staff in bass clef. It consists of six measures, each with a chord change indicated above the staff. The notes are as follows: Measure 1 (G7): G2, B1, D2, E2; Measure 2 (C7): C2, E1, G1, A1; Measure 3 (G7): G2, B1, D2, E2; Measure 4 (Dm7 G7): F#1, A1, C2, D2; Measure 5 (C7): C2, E1, G1, A1; Measure 6 (C7): C2, E1, G1, A1. Below the staff, the scale degree patterns are written: 1 7 6 5, 1 7 6 1/2, 1 7 6 1/2, 1 1/2 1 1/2, 1 5 1 1/2, 1 7 6 1/2.

## Part 3 - Standards With Previously Introduced Techniques & Analysis

By combining voice leading with the techniques learned in the lesson *Creating Jazz Bass Lines*, you now have the tools to make great sounding lines. The following examples are but a few possible combinations.

As with all new material, it will take much repetition to internalize and then be able to reproduce at will these simple patterns. Isolate each element, and be specific in your practicing. I realize that no one would play a good bass line with every measure using the same pattern of note choices. However, this type of practice is necessary to learn these sounds by ear. Yes, it will sound like you are playing an exercise, but remember you are learning a language. Be patient and willing to learn your ABC's.

To improvise a good walking line you must master the components. Many students come to me with the complaint of, "I just play the same thing over and over." The problem is always the same - not owning the basics. When I speak to another person in normal conversation, I am improvising. I am speaking the same old words over and over again, yet every conversation is communicating a unique message.


When I first transcribed walking bass lines from the great players, I was amazed at how much they repeated themselves. I came to recognize that the notes being played over and over again were like words in a language, and that the words were not "the thing." It was the message being created by the combination of words used that conveyed their ideas. Just as in verbal conversation, the number of times you say the words: is, the, at, were, yes, bass, etc., is not noticed in relationship to your message. You can use the same words in different combinations to express an infinite number of ideas. In your bass lines, the slightest variations in note choices result in a completely different message.

Learn the vocabulary of good walking bass line construction, and you can play all day without getting bored.

# Ex. 7 - "There Will Never Be Another You" With Analysis

$E\flat$ Maj7                      Dm7 $\flat$ 5                      G7  

  
 1 7 6 5 1 2 3 1/2 1 3 1 V L 5 1 V

Cm7                      B $\flat$ m7                      E $\flat$ 7  

  
 L 1 5 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 3 5 1/2 1 3 5 1/2

$A\flat$ Maj7                      D $\flat$ 7                      E $\flat$ Maj7  

  
 1 1 5 1/2 1 3 5 V L 3 1 1/2 5 7 1 V

F7                      Fm7                      B $\flat$ 7  

  
 L 1 1 5 5 3 1 5 1 2 3 1/2 1 5 3 1/2

$E\flat$ Maj7                      Dm7 $\flat$ 5                      G7  


  
 1 2 3 5 1 7 6 5 1 5 1 V L 1 3 V

Cm7                      B $\flat$ m7                      E $\flat$ 7  

  
 L 2 3 1 5 3 1 1/2 1 3 5 V L 5 1 1/2

$A\flat$ Maj7                      D $\flat$ 7                      E $\flat$ Maj7                      Am7 $\flat$ 5 D7  

  
 1 5 3 V L 5 1 1/2 1 5 3 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2

$E\flat$ Maj7  $A\flat$ 7                      Gm7 C7                      Fm7 B $\flat$ 7                      E $\flat$ Maj7  

  
 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 V L 1 1 2 3 5

# Ex. 8 - "Lady Bird" With Analysis

CMaj7 Fm7 Bb7

1 5 1 1/2 1 5 3 1 1 2 3 1 1 5 1 V

CMaj7 Bbm7 Eb7

L 3 1 1/2 1 3 5 V L 5 1 V L 5 1 1/2

AbMaj7 Am7 D7

1 7 6 5 1 3 5 1/2 1 7 5 1/2 1 3 5 5

Dm7 G7 CMaj7 EbMaj7 AbMaj7 DbMaj7

1 2 3 5 1 5 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 V L 1 3 1/2

CMaj7 Fm7 Bb7

1 5 3 5 3 5 1 3 1 5 1 V L 1 1 V

CMaj7 Bbm7 Eb7

L 3 1 3 5 7 1 1/2 1 2 3 V L 1 5 1/2

AbMaj7 Am7 D7

1 3 5 1/2 1 5 7 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 1 5 1/2

Dm7 G7 CMaj7 EbMaj7 AbMaj7 DbMaj7

1 3 1 V L 1 5 3 1 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 1/2

## Ex. 9 - Blues In A $\flat$ With Analysis

A $\flat$ 7 D $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ m7 A $\flat$ 7  
 1 3 5 1/2 1 7 6 1/2 1 5 1 V L V L 1  
 D $\flat$ 7 D $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 Cm7 F7  
 1 5 7 5 1 5 3 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2  
 B $\flat$ m7 E $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 F7 B $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ 7  
 1 3 5 V L 1 7 V L 1/2 1 1/2 1 5 1 1/2  
 A $\flat$ 7 D $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ m7 A $\flat$ 7  
 1 1 7 V L 1 7 V L 1 5 3 3 1 1 1/2  
 D $\flat$ 7 D $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 Cm7 F7  
 1 1 5 1/2 1 2 3 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2  
 B $\flat$ m7 E $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 F7 B $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ 7  
 1 2 3 5 1 3 5 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2

# Ex. 10 - "Rhythm Changes" With Analysis

B $\flat$  Gm7 Cm7 F7 Dm7 G7 Cm7 F7

1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 V L 1 1 V L 1

B $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ 7 D7 G7 C7 F7

1 5 1 1/2 1 2 3 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2

B $\flat$  Gm7 Cm7 F7 Dm7 G7 Cm7 F7

1 3 1 1/2 1 V L 1 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 V L 1

B $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ 7 Cm7 F7 B $\flat$

1 3 5 V L 3 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 3 5 1

D7 G7

1 2 3 5 1 2 3 5 1 1 5 3 5 3 1 1/2

C7 F7

1 5 1 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 7 6 5 3 5 1 1/2

B $\flat$  Gm7 Cm7 F7 Dm7 G7 Cm7 F7

1 3 1 1/2 1 V L 1 1 5 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2

B $\flat$ 7 E $\flat$ 7 Cm7 F7 B $\flat$

1 2 3 5 1 1 7 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 3 5 1

## Ex. 11 - "Giant Steps" With Analysis

BMaj7 D7 GMaj7 Bb7 EbMaj7 Am7 D7  
 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 5 3 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2  
 GMaj7 Bb7 EbMaj7 Gb7 BMaj7 Fm7 Bb7  
 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 2 1 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 V L 1  
 EbMaj7 Am7 D7 GMaj7 C#m7 F#7  
 1 2 3 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 5 3 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2  
 BMaj7 Fm7 Bb7 EbMaj7 C#m7 F#7  
 1 2 3 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 5 3 V L 1 1 1/2  
 BMaj7 D7 GMaj7 Bb7 EbMaj7 Am7 D7  
 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 2 1 5 1 5 1 1/2 1 V L 1  
 GMaj7 Bb7 EbMaj7 Gb7 BMaj7 Fm7 Bb7  
 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 2 1 1/2 1 5 1 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2  
 EbMaj7 Am7 D7 GMaj7 C#m7 F#7  
 1 7 1 1/2 1 V L 1 1 7 6 1/2 1 1/2 1 1/2  
 BMaj7 Fm7 Bb7 EbMaj7 C#m7 F#7  
 1 5 1 V L 1 1 1/2 1 3 1 1/2 1 1 1 1/2



## Part 4 - Transcription

It is now time for you to begin transcribing some good walking bass lines. You must avoid the pitfall of choosing music that is too difficult for your ability. This results in frustration and failure. I would like to recommend a bass line that has worked well for many of my students. The song is titled "Now Is The Time" by Charlie Parker and is the first track on a play-along cd titled "All Bird" by Jamey Aebersold. The bassist is Ron Carter. Do not start at the beginning of the tune, but rather start where Ron goes into a walking quarter note-based line. I recommend that you do NOT write it down. Just memorize the notes. Once memorized, transpose to other keys. This assignment should take you some time. It is common for many of my students to spend a few weeks or more learning the line in the original key.

I suspect this assignment will be one the biggest challenges you have yet to face in your practicing, but I assure you, the benefit will also be tremendous. Success is not measured by what you start but rather by what you finish. Take your time, and stay at it. You can do it!

## Conclusion

Congratulations! You should now be playing very solid and melodic sounding lines. If you have just read the material presented here and not actually practiced and played the music, you should not be surprised that your playing has not improved. I can assure you that becoming a good bass player requires hard work and a lot of repetition. Information is relatively worthless without performance.

It is vital that you write out the chord changes to all the examples in multiple keys. Memorize the patterns presented in this lesson, and practice until you are fluent in each key. If you cannot play all of the patterns in all keys, spend more time to get this basic stuff DOWN. Remember, just because you understand it does not mean you can play it. Take the time to build your foundation.

As with lesson one, I suggest that you set a performance goal for each example. When you can play the song ten times in a row, in time, non-stop, with no mistakes, it is time to move to the next example.

Use the concepts presented here in practicing additional standard tunes, and add them to your repertoire.

For a more in-depth study of these concepts, see Jim's book titled *Creating Jazz Bass Lines* available at: [JimStinnett.com](http://JimStinnett.com).