

Walking Bass Lines

By
Per Danielsson

When accompanying by using walking bass lines, you can turn the piano into an entire rhythm section. Except for the guitar, piano is the only instrument that has this unique capability. The right hand will supply the harmony and the left is doing the job of the bass player. If both hands are played rhythmically perfect we can also assume the role of a drummer.

In order to create a strong harmonic sense the bass lines have to be harmonically solid. This is where the solo pianist has an advantage, since the right hand always knows what the left hand is doing. It is easy to use the exact same changes, creating the effect of a well rehearsed rhythm section. This is especially fun when you improvise chord substitutions.

This article will introduce you to some basic concepts for playing bass lines. I recommend taking the time to transcribe some lines by skilled bass players. It will help you improve your understanding of walking bass lines and how they are played.

Bass lines over a ii-V-I progression.

Musical notation for a ii-V-I progression in 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords: Dmin7, G13, and CMaj7. The left hand plays a walking bass line: D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half).

Musical notation for a ii-V-I progression in 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords: Dmin7, G13, and CMaj7. The left hand plays a walking bass line: D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F#2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half).

Dominant chord bass line.

Musical notation for a dominant chord bass line in 4/4 time. The right hand plays a C7 chord. The left hand plays a walking bass line: C2 (quarter), D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half).

Musical notation for a dominant chord bass line in 4/4 time. The right hand plays a C7 chord. The left hand plays a walking bass line: C2 (quarter), D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half).

Major chord bass line.

Musical notation for a major chord bass line in 4/4 time. The right hand plays a CMaj7 chord. The left hand plays a walking bass line: C2 (quarter), D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half).

Musical notation for a major chord bass line in 4/4 time. The right hand plays a CMaj7 chord. The left hand plays a walking bass line: C2 (quarter), D2 (quarter), E2 (quarter), F2 (quarter), G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half).

1. Octave leap.

The octave leap is used to keep the bass line in a good sounding register.

Octave leap using the 5th in the middle.

2. Chromatic approach tones.

You can create a flowing bass line by using chromatic approach tones. This works because of a constant feel of tension and release. Notice the tri-tone intervals.

Tri-tone TT TT TT TT

Blues in F.

F13 Bb13 F13 F13

Bb13 Bb13 F9 E9 Eb9 D9

Gm7 C7 A7b13 D7(#9) G13 C7(#9) F13

Analyze this exercise: Where are the octave leaps?
 Locate the tri-tone intervals.
 Locate the chromatic approach tones.

Practice Hints: Play the bass line legato.
 Practice with a metronome.
 Play the bass line together with a repeated comping pattern in the right hand.

Comping Pattern 1.



Comping Pattern 2.



B \flat Maj7 E \flat 7 A \flat 7 G7

C7 C7 Cmin7 F7

B \flat Maj7 E \flat 7 A \flat 7 G7

Cmin7 F7 B \flat Maj7 B \flat Maj7

Am7(\flat 5) D7(\flat 9) Gmin7 Am7(\flat 5) D7(\flat 9) Gmin7

Am7(\flat 5) D7(\flat 9) Gmin7 C7 F7

B \flat Maj7 E \flat 7 A \flat 7 G7

Cmin7 F7 B \flat Maj7