

Creating Bass Lines

There are a number of common techniques that you can use to create a bass line for a chord progression. These include the following:

1. Arpeggiate the chord.

2. Connect chord tones with diatonic passing tones. Diatonic passing tones are tones of the scale that works with the given chord progression. Usually your ear will reveal these tones (in the context of the progression and your knowledge of the tune), but sometimes an examination of the chord progression (and the individual chords within it) will suggest various possibilities.

3. Chromatic tones may also be used to connect chord tones and any diatonic tones.

4. In general, in each of the above instances, the more stable the tone (such as the root and 5th), the more likely that tone will appear on the stronger beats of the measure (beats one and three). For example, a common approach to the first four chords of “All the Things You Are” appears with roots on all of the downbeats of the measure (beat one). Thirds and passing tones appear on the weaker beats (beats two and four):



5. Two other common patterns that appear in walking bass lines are the root, second, third, and fifth of the triad (1-2-3-5; the second that is use depends on the mode), and 1-2-b3-3:

Two staves of music in bass clef, common time (C). Both staves show the same chord progression: Fmin7, Bbmin7, Eb7, and AbMaj7. The first staff uses the 1-2-3-5 pattern (root, second, third, fifth). The notes are: F (beat 1), Ab (beat 2), Bb (beat 3), and C (beat 4) for Fmin7; Bb (beat 1), C (beat 2), D (beat 3), and Eb (beat 4) for Bbmin7; Eb (beat 1), F (beat 2), G (beat 3), and Ab (beat 4) for Eb7; and Ab (beat 1), Bb (beat 2), C (beat 3), and D (beat 4) for AbMaj7. The second staff uses the 1-2-b3-3 pattern (root, second, flat third, natural third). The notes are: F (beat 1), Ab (beat 2), Bb (beat 3), and C (beat 4) for Fmin7; Bb (beat 1), C (beat 2), Db (beat 3), and Eb (beat 4) for Bbmin7; Eb (beat 1), F (beat 2), G (beat 3), and Ab (beat 4) for Eb7; and Ab (beat 1), Bb (beat 2), C (beat 3), and D (beat 4) for AbMaj7.

6. Most often, the root of a chord is approached by a note that is a half step below it, and functions as a leading tone to the root. The root of a chord is also often approached by a note which is a half step above. This suggests (or occurs along with) a tritone substitution.

7. In static chord progressions (where the same chord appears for one or more measures), the bass often appears as an alternating pattern of root and fifth.

8. Pedal Point. A sustained tone may appear underneath a series of changing chords. The tone would be played in a manner rhythmically appropriate to the piece.