

How to create bass lines

First rule: always memorize the melody of the song!

Always.

Always.

Always.


You should be able to sing and play it in the original key.

If you really want to be totally extra, extra awesome, you will be able to sing and play it in ALL KEYS.

If you're amazingly extra awesome, you'll be able to sing the melody and make a bass line at the same time.

Walking Bass:

Walking bass lines always sound cool in any style of music, but are essential to jazz blues and "Great American Songbook" jazz standards.

1)  Musical notation for a walking bass line in 4/4 time, starting with the root of each chord in quarter notes. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The chords are Dm7, G7, C7, and F7. The notes are: Dm7 (D, G, Bb, F), G7 (G, B, D, F), C7 (C, Eb, G, Bb), and F7 (F, Ab, C, Eb).

1) Start by playing just the root of the chord in quarter notes. If you ever get confused or feel insecure, you can always return to this. It's not going to sound particularly jazzy (it's a little better suited to rock), but it will work!

2)  Musical notation for a walking bass line in 4/4 time, playing the root on the first quarter note and other chord tones on the other quarter notes. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The chords are Dm7, G7, C7, and F7. The notes are: Dm7 (D, G, Bb, F), G7 (G, B, D, F), C7 (C, Eb, G, Bb), and F7 (F, Ab, C, Eb).

2) Play the root on the first quarter note and other chord tones on the other quarter notes. Make up as many different patterns as you can.

How to create bass lines

3) 

3) Play in four quarters: root-passing tone (pt)-third-root or Root-pt-third-fifth.

4) 

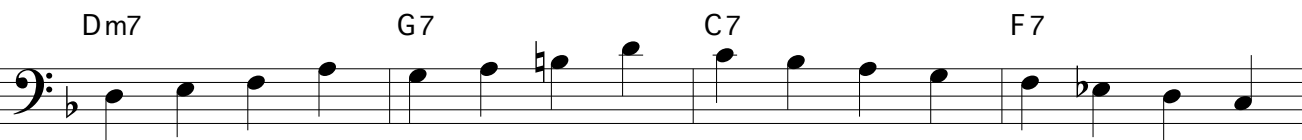
4) You're ready to really start "walking," but now you also have to start planning: Take two different chords and you want to move as stepwise as possible between the roots of the two chords.

You can use one skip of a third per measure, but only if necessary, and usually between chord tones (root-third, third-fifth, fifth-seventh). Keep in mind that for blues, the major chord always has a flat 7. If you move down from the root, the next note is a whole step away.

You can also move chromatically, but like using skips, don't do it all the time.

Try different combinations!

4) 

4) 

How to create bass lines

5)

5) If you have the same chord for two measures you can use step 2 or 3 for the first measure and then step 4 for the second measure.

6)

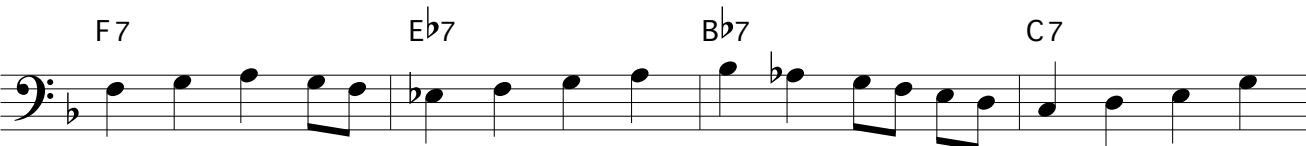
6)

6) If you have two chords in one measure, you may or may not be able to move stepwise. Make sure you put the root of the chord on the 1st and 3rd beats, then skip or leap to another chord tone on beats 2 and 4.

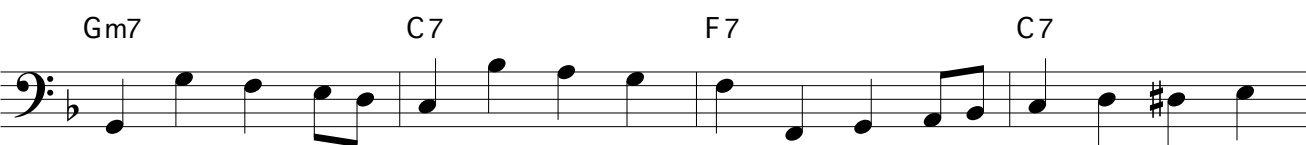
If you go through the first six steps for every new song, you will develop a sense of what works and - more importantly - what you like.

When you've reached the point where you don't have to plan out what you're going to do every time, you can start to spice up your bass lines in the following ways. Keep in mind that these are spices - don't overuse them. Most of the time, you'll use a mix of steps 2-6. The best time to add "spice" is when the drummer does: the last measure of a phrase to show a new phrase is going to start.

How to create bass lines

7) 

7) Use eighths to fill in a space where you might otherwise skip or leap.

8) 

8) Leap from the root to the fifth, seventh, or octave. After a leap, always move stepwise in the opposite direction.

9) 

9) Start on a chord tone other than the root.

10) 

10) 

10) Play a rhythm other than four quarter notes.

If you go through all 10 steps every time you practice a song, you will really know the song AND you'll have come up with a whole bunch of ideas you can spontaneously put into practice.

How to create bass lines

Ostinato or Riff bass

An ostinato is a repeated rhythmic-melodic figure: the rhythm and melodic shape are the same each time.

For example, when you do steps 1, 2, or 3 above, you are creating the most basic kinds of ostinato figures.

If we took step 2 and did the same chord tone pattern for each chord, that would be an ostinato.

Musical notation for an ostinato bass line using chord tones. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The rhythm consists of quarter notes. The melodic shape is a stepwise pattern: G2, A2, Bb2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. This pattern is repeated three times, corresponding to the chords F7, Bb7, and F7.

We could apply the same idea to step 3, using chord tones and passing tones.

Musical notation for an ostinato bass line using chord tones and passing tones. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The rhythm consists of quarter notes. The melodic shape is a stepwise pattern: G2, A2, Bb2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. This pattern is repeated four times, corresponding to the chords Bb7, F7, D7, and C7.

Because we're using only quarter notes with a mostly stepwise melodic shape, our examples so far resemble a walking bassline; however, a walking bassline in quarter notes is not an ostinato, because even though the rhythm stays the same, the melodic shape is always changing. Review the previous examples from the walking bass section.

Usually an ostinato will be a little more rhythmically interesting than just quarter notes, but it doesn't have to be very fancy to be effective.

Musical notation for a funky ostinato bass line using straight eighths. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The rhythm consists of eighth notes. The melodic shape is a stepwise pattern: G2, A2, Bb2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. This pattern is repeated four times, corresponding to the chords F7, Bb7, F7, Bb7, F7, D7, F7, C7.

How to create bass lines

Often you'll use an ostinato for the head (when the whole group plays the melody at the beginning and the end) and use a walking bass for the changes (when people take turns improvising over the chord progression of the song).

Learn some of the more famous ostinato bass lines: Night in Tunisia, All Blues, Peter Gunn, Hit the Road Jack. Turn on the radio, pop, rock, or jazz, and listen for ostinatos. Try to learn them by ear.

Constantly make up your own. Any short melodic idea with a fun rhythm that's easy to remember will work. Keep your ostinato simple and then learn it in every key and within each scale:

Here's a pattern that fits with a dominant 7 chord. In the two examples below, we fit the pattern first to each note of an F-mixolydian scale (the scale that fits with a dominant 7 chord); then we fit it to all the dominant 7 chords around the circle of 4ths.

The image displays musical notation for an ostinato pattern and its application to various dominant 7 chords. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb).

The first example shows the ostinato pattern for F7, which is a mixolydian scale: F, G, A, Bb, C, D, E. The pattern is: F (quarter), G (quarter), A (quarter), Bb (quarter), C (quarter), D (quarter), E (quarter).

The second example shows the pattern applied to a sequence of dominant 7 chords around the circle of 4ths: F7, Bb7, Eb7, Ab7, Db7, Gb7, B7, E7, A7, D7, G7, C7.