

## CHAPTER 7

## Walking Bass Lines

Walking bass lines add forward momentum to your playing. In a walking bass line, the left hand plays a note on every beat (quarter notes, in 4/4). There is an implied triplet feel (like swung eighth notes), often with grace-note skips peppering the basic rhythm. Especially when playing solo piano, without a bass player, a walking bass part can add vital energy and color.

Notes in walking bass lines are of two essential types: target notes and approach notes.

- *Target notes* are chord tones on strong beats (1 and 3, in 4/4). They are landing points, with minimal tension.
- *Approach notes* connect or lead to the target notes. They are points of tension and require resolution to a target note.

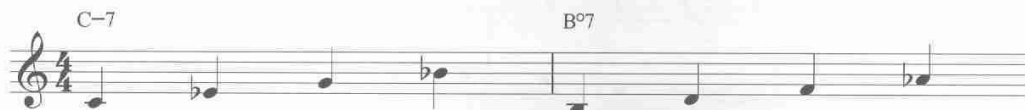
To construct a walking bass line, begin by setting the target notes—chord tones (any inversion) on beats 1 and 3.



Fig. 7.1. Target Notes

There are many ways to choose approach notes. Here are three potential sources.

1. The diminished-7 chord based on a root a half step below the current chord's root, called an "approach chord." This dominant sound creates a strong motion towards resolution, when followed by a chord tone. Figure 7.2 shows the target notes for the C-7 chord, based on B°7.



Target Notes: Chord Tones of C-7  
Approach Notes: Based on B°7

Fig. 7.2. Approach Chord



## HARMONIZATION WITH MAJOR AND MINOR TRIADS

Choose bass notes not found in the triad that result in the desired rate of dissonance. Triads and bass line may be combined with diatonic or non-diatonic triads, and a diatonic or non-diatonic bass line.

**B-7b5**  
Melody is Locrian. Structures are D, ND.

D      D      ND      ND      ND      D

Bass line contains D and ND notes.

D      ND      ND      ND      D      ND

Bass line contains notes from B Locrian.

D      D      D      D      D      D

**Diatonic triads (Locrian)**      **Bb-7**

Diatonic bass line

Non-diatonic bass line

Detailed description: This figure illustrates the harmonization of a B-7b5 chord in a Locrian mode. It shows two systems of triads and bass lines. The first system shows diatonic triads (D, ND, ND, ND, ND, D) and a diatonic bass line (D, ND, ND, ND, D, ND) that contains notes from the B Locrian scale. The second system shows diatonic triads (D, ND, ND, ND, ND, D) and a non-diatonic bass line (D, ND, ND, ND, D, ND) that contains notes from the B Locrian scale. The key signature is Bb and the mode is Locrian.

Fig. 7.7. Diatonic and Non-Diatonic Triads and Bass Lines

## DERIVATIVE BASS LINES

You can use *derivative bass lines*, or any bass line containing more than just roots, to fill in windows (chapter 6). You can use either diatonic or non-diatonic triads in the right hand. Here are measures 19 to 21 from “Theme for John,” harmonized with major triads, choosing a bass note not found in the chord, resulting in the desired level of dissonance.

Db6      Db/Gb      D/E      Eb/Db      E/D      Ab7      Db-7

Detailed description: This figure shows measures 19-21 of 'Theme for John' in Bb major. The right hand contains major triads for each chord: Db6, Db/Gb, D/E, Eb/Db, E/D, Ab7, and Db-7. The left hand contains a derivative bass line with notes: Bb, Ab, Gb, F, Eb, D, C. The key signature is Bb and the time signature is 4/4.

Fig. 7.8. “Theme for John,” Measures 19–21

## PRACTICE

Practice these two progressions to get more comfortable with playing walking bass lines. Then create your own walking bass lines to the progressions in appendix B, as well as standards such as "Stella by Starlight," "I Love You," "Autumn in New York," and "Blue Bossa."

### Exercise 7.1. Walking Bass Lines



TRACK 23

(a)

First system of Exercise 7.1(a) in 4/4 time. The right hand contains four measures of slash notation. The left hand contains walking bass lines for the following chords: F-7, Bb-7, Eb7, and Ab6.

Second system of Exercise 7.1(a) in 4/4 time. The right hand contains four measures of slash notation. The left hand contains walking bass lines for the following chords: Db6, G7, C6, and a whole note chord in the final measure.

(b)

First system of Exercise 7.1(b) in 4/4 time. The right hand contains four measures of slash notation. The left hand contains walking bass lines for the following chords: E-7b5, A7, C-7, and F7.

Second system of Exercise 7.1(b) in 4/4 time. The right hand contains four measures of slash notation. The left hand contains walking bass lines for the following chords: F-7, Bb7, Eb6, and Ab7.