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The Bottom Line

The Ultimate
Bass Line Book
by
Todd Coolman

Jamey Aebersold Jazz[®]



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About The Author



Grammy award-winning bassist Todd Coolman is among the most sought-after musicians on the New York music scene today. Since moving to New York in 1978, he has performed and/or recorded with a virtual, "Who's who" of jazz artists including Horace Silver, Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Benny Golson, Ahmad Jamal, Art Farmer, Jay Jay Johnson, The Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, and numerous others. Coolman enjoyed a 25-year stint with the James Moody Quartet and continues to perform with Jon Faddis, Charles McPherson, Renee Rosnes, as well as leading his own small groups. Collectables on Sunnyside Records is Todd's fourth CD as a leader. Todd has also authored two books, *The Bass Tradition* and *The Bottom Line*.

Prior to his retirement from academia, Dr. Coolman's faculty positions included posts in the jazz studies programs at SUNY Purchase College and the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. After joining the faculty of the Skidmore Jazz Institute in 1998, he also directed the Institute from 2011-2018 and subsequently has returned to the faculty and remains active there today. He has recently formulated his own private studio of bass students, focusing on children ages 9 through 16.

Additionally, Todd has a critically acclaimed podcast that can be found here: <https://cooltoddcast.com>

In whatever spare time he can carve out of his busy schedule, Todd enjoys fly fishing, bird watching, hiking, and generally communing with the Natural World.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the lasting memory of Israel Crosby, whose contributions have unlocked so many doors for so many of us.

I would like to thank John Goldsby for his suggestions during the writing of this book.

I would also like to thank my wife, Darla, for her continuing support, encouragement, and unconditional love.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1940, when Jimmy Blanton was the featured bassist with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, the role of the bassist in jazz music has expanded and gone through several stylistic changes just as the music itself has changed. With the advent of improved technique, better instrumental instruction, and amplification and equipment innovations, the bassist is now exercising ever-increasing musical range. No longer relegated to merely accompanying others, the bassist can now be a featured soloist on an equal level with other soloists.

On the surface, these developments would seem to have nothing but positive effects. However, this may not be the case. Despite the changes in the music and the level of playing, the role of the bassist in jazz or any other kind of music is still primarily one of accompaniment, or, in other words, the foundation. There are indeed many virtuosic bassists in jazz today, but it seems there is also a growing perception that when a bassist is needed to "lay it down" or provide strong support, the field of qualified individuals is limited.

Therefore, it may be more important than ever to understand the intricacies and subtleties of accompaniment for today's jazz bassist (or composer, arranger, and keyboardist/synthesist for that matter). In most situations, the common point of departure for bassists is the spontaneous creation of the so-called "walking" bass line. It provides a simultaneous harmonic and rhythmic continuum which the rest of the group interacts with.

It is the purpose of this book to provide the first comprehensive and exhaustive study of bass line construction. Included in the study will be basic harmonic principles, chord/scale relationships, rhythmic embellishment, meters and tempos, musical styles (i.e. swing, latin, ballads, etc.), special situations (modal tunes, polyharmony, etc.), and so on. Each application shall be discussed from the beginning level to the advanced professional level.

The author sincerely hopes that by providing this information, he will not only enable the level of accompaniment to improve, but also effect a positive contribution to all jazz musicians who perform at every level. Remember, the purpose of mastering the art of accompaniment is not only to improve individually as bassists, but to be able to play whatever is required by the music of the moment. With this in mind, the whole shall always be greater than the sum of its parts.

CHAPTER 1: BASIC NOMENCLATURE

Before one begins any jazz-related studies, it must be a certainty that he is thoroughly operative when it comes to nomenclature as well as knowing what jazz music sounds like. This chapter shall deal briefly with basic chord/scale relationships that are necessary for understanding how to spontaneously construct bass lines. Since this is not a jazz theory book, only a summary overview is provided. If you feel especially deficient in this area (don't worry, we were all beginners at one time!!!), may I recommend first consulting any of the following excellent books: The Jazz Language by Dan Haerle; A Complete Method for Jazz Improvisation by Jerry Coker; and Scale Syllabus available free from Jamey Aebersold. If you are already fluent in jazz nomenclature, you may want to use the following as review material or simply go on to the next chapter.

Notice in Figure 1 that there is more than one chord symbol listed for each individual chord. This is simply due to the fact that chord symbols have never been standardized and their use is according to personal preferences. Just be aware that there is more than one way to denote a single chord.

For our purposes, we shall outline basic chord categories initially. Various types of altered chords shall be covered in subsequent chapters.

**POSSIBLE
CHORD SYMBOLS**

**TRACK
1** **FIGURE 1**

BASIC SCALE
CONFIGURATION

BASIC CHORD
CONFIGURATION

MAJOR
C, CΔ, CM, CMA,
CMAJ, CMAJ7

C MAJOR SCALE **C**

SCALE DEGREE CHORD DEGREE

DOMINANT
C7, C9, C11, C13

C MIXOLYDIAN SCALE **C7**

MINOR
C-, C-7, Cm, Cmi,
Cmin, Cm7, Cmi7
Cmin7

C DORIAN SCALE **C-**

HALF-DIMINISHED
CØ, Cm7b5, Cmi7b5,
Cmin7b5, C-7b5, CØ7

C LOCRIAN #2 SCALE **CØ+2**

-OR-

C LOCRIAN SCALE **CØ**

DIMINISHED
C°, Cdim, Cdim7, C°7

C DIMINISHED SCALE **C°**

NOTE: As you can see above, there are many different chord symbols which represent the same sound. Therefore, for purposes of simplicity and clarity, this book shall consistently use the following chord symbols:

- CΔ = Major Chord/Scale
- C7 = Dominant Chord/Scale
- C- = Minor Chord/Scale
- CØ = Half-Diminished or Minor 7th (b5) Chord/Scale
- C° = Diminished Chord/Scale

CHAPTER 1: REVIEW EXERCISES

To be sure that you are completely familiar with the above scales and arpeggios, practice (review) each one in the following manner:

1. Set metronome at m.m.=60.
2. Take a scale and its arpeggio and play it up and down at least two octaves. While playing, strive to get a beautiful, warm sound, use good intonation, stay with the metronome, and listen-listen-listen!!! Make sure you can hear the subtle difference between the chords and scales from different categories.
3. Take the scale and arpeggio you are working on and proceed to play it in the same manner through the key circle so that you encounter all 12 keys.
4. Once you are satisfied that you have a good command of the above (be patient, it may take a while), increase the tempo. Remember, however, that if you can't properly execute something slowly, there is no point in playing it any faster.

The main reason you must have such a firm command of the principles outlined above is that they will serve as the foundation for the study of all aspects of bass line construction in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2: SOUND PRODUCTION

Before we begin to discuss the fundamentals of bass line construction, it is vital to make sure that you can produce a sound and feeling on the bass that is indigenous to jazz. Your sound is your personal voice and it is the very first thing people will hear when you play. People make a lot of assumptions based on first impressions, so if what you play has a beautiful sound quality, people will instinctively be drawn to you and react favorably.

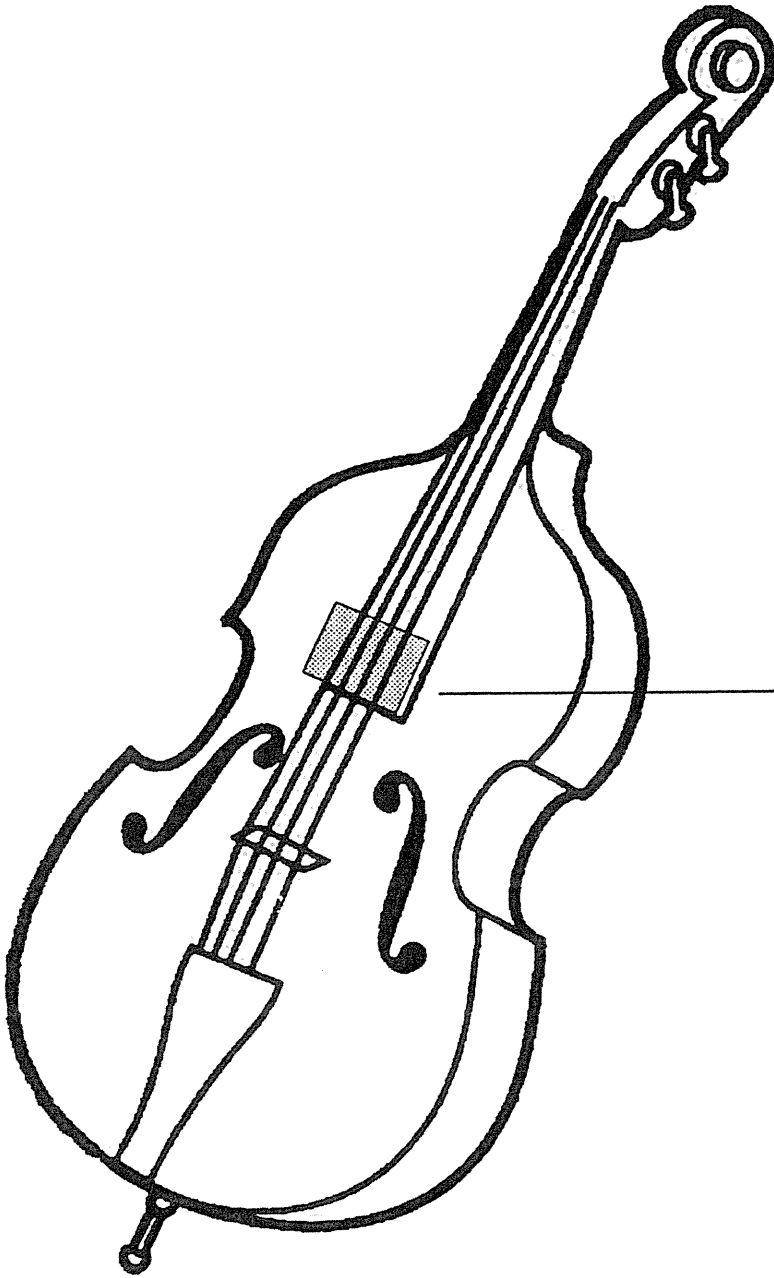
Two elements that are crucial to the sound of the bass when playing a walking bass line are what can be called the "ping" (attack), and the "ring" (sustain). You need to produce a sound with a distinct *beginning* that indicates where you play the beat, and that has a *sustain* that leads to the next note. Where you place your right hand on the string has a great deal to do with how much ping and ring you produce. The closer to the bridge you play, the more ping you will produce and the less sustain. You will also notice that the sound near the bridge will be thinner and brighter. Conversely, the further away from the bridge you play (up the fingerboard), the more sustain you will produce with a darker and warmer tone. The trick is to find that place on the string that will produce both ping and ring while getting a warm tone. For me this usually occurs when I play at the end of (but not beyond) the fingerboard (see Figure 2). It should also be noted that no matter where you pull the string with the fingers of the right hand, the duration of the note is determined by how long it is held by the left hand. As soon as the left hand loses contact with the fingerboard, the note will end.

The role of the left hand in sound production cannot be overlooked. It must remain in contact with the fingerboard at all times. Think of the left hand as being like a spider. As a spider moves along a flat surface, it seems to move by lifting only one leg at a time while leaving the others in contact with the surface. So, when you play a Bb (first finger on the A string) followed by an F (fourth finger on the D string), the first finger should stay firmly in place on the Bb until the F is played so the sustain will carry from one note to the next. Ultimately, the length of the note will be a matter of personal taste, stylistic dictates, or both.

Intonation is an often overlooked component of sound production. When a note is played in tune, the sound of the bass becomes noticeably more vibrant. This is because the overtone series becomes activated, and the instrument itself will create sympathetic vibrations throughout the wood. Practice intonation with the bow since it will generate a truer representation of pitch than pizzicato will. This is because the bow will activate more of the overtone series. A good way to practice playing in tune is to think of it as "matching." One should first hear the pitch in the "ear" and then match that pitch with the pitch as it comes from the bass. At first the mind-to-hand response may be sluggish, but with patience and practice the response time should eventually become instantaneous. It has been said that great intonation is simply correcting the pitch before it reaches the listener's ear.

For most jazz bassists today, pick-ups (transducers) and amplifiers have become part of their everyday

FIGURE 2



Experiment placing fingers of right hand between the end of the fingerboard to a point about 3" back for good blend of "ping" and "ring." (within the "End" Zone indicated)

equipment when performing in combos. Many of today's bassists have regrettably come to rely too heavily on amplification to create their sound. The result has been to "impersonalize" sound by making it more electronic and less bass-like. Always remember that *you and your instrument* create the sound, and the pick-up and amplifier simply interpret that signal and create a version of it. It stands to reason that the fuller and more complete sound you and your instrument create, the more information your pick-up and amp will have to interpret. Your sound will be more realistic. A good starting point for many bassists would be to turn down the volume of their amps, and rely more on themselves and their instruments. Experiment by raising your string height and playing without an amp in a duo or trio situation.

Last, but not least, it is a good idea to develop role models for sound production. It is important to be critical when listening to different bass sounds, to make decisions and arrive at preferences. Always know if you like or dislike someone's sound and know the reasons why. Once you have been inspired by the beautiful sound someone produces (it happens to all of us sooner or later), study that person's sound and then use them as a role model. It is not a bad idea to learn by imitation at first since all of the great players throughout history have done so to some extent.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW EXERCISES

1. Practice getting a beautiful jazz sound (ping and ring) on the open strings. Play on different parts of the string to find the location where you will get the best results (see Figure 2). Play on one string at a time so you can develop a "feel" for that particular string. Next, try playing different combinations of strings so you can practice string crossings while striving for a consistent sound (see Figure 3).
2. After you have mastered the open strings, walk up and down the chromatic scale. You must have constant contact with the fingerboard in the left hand to get a continuous sound from note to note. Play up and down each string as well as across the bass so you can begin to hear how different notes sound in different locations on the bass. You will eventually notice that notes sound better in one part of the bass than another, and you can then develop your own preferences. Remember, good intonation is an essential ingredient of good sound.
3. If you intend to use a pick-up and amplifier, set the tone controls "flat" (neutral) and turn the volume off. Then play acoustically to get the sound firmly established in your ear. Turn the volume of the amp up very slightly and see if you still have the same essential sound. If not, you may have to alter the tone controls slightly to compensate, or you may have to experiment with different locations for the pick-up. These adjustments are usually painstakingly gradual before you begin to hone in. Try to be patient, though, since your sound will become your signature.
4. Finally, listen to several jazz recordings and through a careful process of elimination, identify your one or two favorite bass sounds. Use these as role models and imitate them until your sound improves markedly and begins to come into its own. See the Discography on page 63 for suggestions.

CHAPTER 3: FUNDAMENTALS OF BASS LINE CONSTRUCTION

The three essential components of bass lines are derived from scales, chromatic passing tones, and chord tones. These subjects are discussed later in Chapters 5, 6, and 8. However, whether you are a beginning, intermediate, or advanced level bassist, the most fundamental purpose of the bass line in all styles of music is to define root motion. In jazz it is especially important because the chordal instruments rarely include the root of a chord in the chord voicing. The root tone validates the harmony so that the chord voicings will create a very specific chord sound.

Although there are no absolute rules, playing the root on the downbeat of each chord is a good place to start. For our own purposes, we shall consider this a "rule" until we discover alternatives in a later chapter. Figure 4 illustrates the principle of root on the downbeat (see Figure 4).

TRACK
2

FIGURE 3. Possible String Crossing Combinations (do several repetitions of each)

1

2

3 4

5 ETC.

Obviously, there are other possible combinations.

TRACK
3

FIGURE 4

Bb7 Eb7 Bb7 F- Bb7

Eb7 Eb7 Bb7 G7

C- F7 Bb7 G7 C- F7