WALKING BASS

for Piano

An easy method for creating Walking Bass Lines on Piano

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## Table of Contents

**Explanation of the Contents** ................................................................................................................. 5

**Introduction to the Basics** ...................................................................................................................... 7

**Chapter 1** ............................................................................................................................................. 8
Walking Bass Note Range ......................................................................................................................... 8
Diatonic Harmony .................................................................................................................................. 8
Walking Bass Two Note Sequence ........................................................................................................... 10
Walking Bass Three Note Sequence ....................................................................................................... 14
The Racing Monkeys (Lead Sheet) ......................................................................................................... 18
The Racing Monkeys (Piano Version) ..................................................................................................... 19

**Chapter 2** ............................................................................................................................................. 22
Walking Bass Four Note Sequence ......................................................................................................... 22
Major Triad with the Major Sixth added ................................................................................................. 22
Mother’s Face (Lead Sheet) ..................................................................................................................... 25
Mother’s Face (Piano Version 1) ............................................................................................................. 26
Major / Minor Triad with the Major Second added ............................................................................... 27
Mother’s Face (Piano Version 2) ............................................................................................................. 29

**Chapter 3** ............................................................................................................................................. 32
Ascending and Descending Scale ........................................................................................................... 32
Red River Valley (Lead Sheet) ............................................................................................................... 37
Red River Valley (Piano Version 1) ....................................................................................................... 38
II – V – I – Major Cadence .................................................................................................................... 43
Aura Lee (Lead Sheet) ............................................................................................................................ 44
Aura Lee (Piano Version) ......................................................................................................................... 45

**Chapter 4** ............................................................................................................................................. 48
Major Triad with the Minor Seventh added ............................................................................................ 48
Combination of two extended Major Triads .......................................................................................... 49
Midnight Special (Lead Sheet) ............................................................................................................... 52
Midnight Special (Piano Version) .......................................................................................................... 54

**Chapter 5** ............................................................................................................................................. 56
Major Triad with the Minor Third added ................................................................................................. 56
Walking Bass Five Note Sequence ........................................................................................................ 59
Backwater Blues (Lead Sheet) ............................................................................................................... 60
Backwater Blues (Piano Version) .......................................................................................................... 61

**Chapter 6** ............................................................................................................................................. 64
Chromatic Passing Notes ....................................................................................................................... 64
Triad with Chromatic Passing Note ....................................................................................................... 64
Chromatic Passing Note with Minor Third ............................................................................................ 68
Chromatic Passing Note with Major Third ............................................................................................ 71
Down by the Riverside (Lead Sheet) ..................................................................................................... 73
Down by the Riverside (Piano Version) ................................................................................................ 75
The Tritone as Chromatic Suspension .................................................................................................. 80
Walking Train (Lead Sheet) ................................................................................................................... 84
Walking Train (Piano Version) ............................................................................................................... 86
Chapter 7 ......................................................................................................................... 88
  Typical Bass Lines with Chromatic Passing Note ............................................................ 88
  Bass Line 5b .................................................................................................................. 97
  Slow Motion Blues (Lead Sheet) ..................................................................................... 98
  Slow Motion Blues (Piano Version) ............................................................................... 100

Chapter 8 ......................................................................................................................... 104
  Typical Harmony Sequences in Minor .......................................................................... 104
  Wade in the Water (Lead Sheet) .................................................................................. 107
  Wade in the Water (Piano Version) ............................................................................. 108
  II – V – I Minor Cadence .............................................................................................. 112

Chapter 9 ......................................................................................................................... 116
  Walking Bass in Octaves ............................................................................................... 116
  Red River Valley (Lead Sheet) ..................................................................................... 121
  Red River Valley (Piano Version 2) .............................................................................. 123

Chapter 10 ....................................................................................................................... 126
  The Diminished Chord ................................................................................................. 126
  The Diminished Scale .................................................................................................... 127
  Typical Harmony Sequences with the Diminished Chord ........................................... 129
  The Man I Love (Lead Sheet) ....................................................................................... 136
  The Man I Love (Piano Version) .................................................................................. 139

Tips & Tricks ....................................................................................................................... 144
  Slash-Chords .................................................................................................................. 144
  Counterpoint Outer Voices ......................................................................................... 145
  Comprehensive Symbols for the Bass Line ................................................................. 145
  Combination of Major / Minor Chord ......................................................................... 146
  Melody Interpretation ................................................................................................... 147
  Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 147

  I Got Rhythm (Lead Sheet) ......................................................................................... 148
  I Got Rhythm (Piano Version) ..................................................................................... 149

  Jingle Bells (Lead Sheet) .............................................................................................. 152
  Jingle Bells (Piano Version) ........................................................................................ 153
Chapter 1

Walking Bass Note-Range

Usually the bass lies in the lower sound range of the music. Therefore, the bass is played by the left hand on the lower part of the keyboard of the piano. The possible note-range of a walking bass can reach from sub-contra A to middle C.

possible note-range of the walking bass

It is recommended to put the walking bass line in a note-range between contra F and small g. Bass lines above small g tend to sound “thin”, while bass lines under contra F sound very “dull”.

recommended note-range of the walking bass

Diatonic Harmony

By diatonic harmony we mean chords that can be formed from the notes of a major scale. If we take the key of C major, the scale looks like this:

C major scale

As we will see as we go through this course, the notes of the major scale can be played in sequence up and down with a walking bass.
Walking Bass Two-Note-Sequence

It is possible to create a good bass line using just 2 notes of a chord. A simple major (or minor) chord is composed of the root, third and fifth, as we see in the two illustrations:

C major triad

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{C} \\
\text{\quad root} \\
\text{\quad major third} \\
\text{\quad fifth}
\end{array}
\]

C minor triad

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Cm} \\
\text{\quad root} \\
\text{\quad minor third} \\
\text{\quad fifth}
\end{array}
\]

In the beginning we can ignore the third of the chord and just use the root and the fifth for a walking bass. We want to practice the walking bass with the help of typical harmony sequences often found in songs. The first harmony sequence that we want to learn, is composed of the I., IV., V. and I. degrees:

harmony sequence 1, key of C major

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c|c}
\text{I.} & \text{IV.} & \text{V.} & \text{I.} \\
\hline
\text{C} & \text{F} & \text{G} & \text{C}
\end{array}
\]

In our first harmony sequence we will practice the walking bass with the root and fifth in three different keys with the examples 1a–c:
Major / Minor Triad with the Major Second added

The second possibility to achieve a four-note-sequence for the walking bass is to take the ordinary major or minor triad and insert a second:

major triad with the major second added

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{C add2} \\
\begin{array}{c}
\text{root} \\
\text{second} \\
\text{third} \\
\text{fifth}
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

minor triad with the major second added

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Cm2} \\
\begin{array}{c}
\text{root} \\
\text{second} \\
\text{third} \\
\text{fifth}
\end{array}
\end{array}
\]

We will now practice the two new four-note-sequences with harmony sequence 4 (see page 16), with a minor cadence composed from I., IV., V. and I. degree:
Chapter 3

Ascending and Descending Scale

In the first two chapters we have dealt with using the notes of a chord for the walking bass. In addition to this you can form a walking bass from the notes of a scale. Take, for example the key of C major, we can use all the notes of the ordinary C major scale. For the beginning, it is advisable to play the notes of the scale in an up or down sequence. For example if we want to go from C major (I. degree) to F major (IV. degree) in a 4/4 beat with a bass line, we can use a downward movement of the scale:

downward movement of the C major scale

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{I.} & \text{IV.} \\
C & F \\
\end{array}
\]

If we want to go from C major (I. degree) to G major (V. degree) with our bass line, an upward or downward movement could look like this:

upward movement of the C major scale

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{I.} & \text{IV.} \\
C & F \\
\end{array}
\]

downward movement of the C major scale

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{I.} & \text{V.} \\
C & G \\
\end{array}
\]

We will practice the illustrated bass movements with the examples 14a–15d with combined upward and downward movements.
“Backwater Blues” is a typical dominant blues with a 12-bar form. As you can imagine from the term “dominant blues” it is composed only of dominant seventh chords. You could also say that a dominant blues is composed of the three major chords from the I., IV. and V. degree of the ordinary major scale. The I. and IV. degree are changed into dominants by adding the minor seventh, while the V. degree is already from its nature, a dominant.

In a blues-song the use of the notes of the major triad with the added minor third makes a very good walking bass. In the piano version we see that this four-note-sequence is used many times. Here is an overview:

C  

piano version, bars 1, 3, 7, 13, 15, 25, 27, 37, 39

F  

piano version, bars 2, 4, 10, 14, 29, 38, 42

G  

piano version, bars 9, 21, 41

We have also used the notes of the major triad embellished with the minor seventh (bars 6, 42) or with the sixth (bars 17, 31, 33, 47). Also we have used chromatic passing notes again and again in the bass line of the piano version. In the following chapter this topic will be fully explained.
Chapter 7

Typical Bass Lines with Chromatic Passing Notes

If we analyse the walking bass lines from a good bassist in a band, we quickly come to realise that there are bass lines that appear over and over, because they sound so good and have proved themselves successful. It is obvious that we should have a command of these bass lines like a musical vocabulary, so to speak. In chapter 6 we have already learned several possibilities of how we can use chromatic passing notes in a bass line. In this chapter we want to look at more typical bass lines with chromatic passing notes.

Bass Line 1

The first bass line that we want to learn, has a downward movement and is composed of the root, the minor seventh, the fifth and the diminished fifth of the underlying chords. Let us suppose that we want to play the dominant G7 (V. degree) of the key of C major, then the bass line would look like this:

As the illustration shows, the diminished fifth (note “Db”) is the chromatic passing note to the root of the following chord (C major). We can play a chord combination from V. and I. degree for bass line 1. We have already made use of this combination in the song “Walking Train” (page 87, bar 24).

Instead of the dominant, we can also play a minor7 chord in bass line 1 with a chord combination from II. and V. degree, then we would have a bass line like this:

And a chord combination from VI. and II. degree in bass line 1 would look like this:
Chapter 9

Walking Bass in Octaves

The individual notes of the bass lines in this method can be played doubled and also in octaves. Let’s take, for example, the notes of the major triad with the added major sixth:

C major triad with the major sixth added

\[ \text{C6} \]

If we play each note twice, and then place the second note an octave higher, we get the following bass lines:

notes from C6 repeated                             the repeated notes played an octave higher

\[ \text{C6} \]

As you can see from the illustration, instead of the usual quarter-note bass line, we now have an eighth-note bass line. The repeated note is played an octave higher.

This style of playing, with octaves in the bass line, is very popular, but is not easy to play. Therefore we want practice this new style with the help of repeated exercises.

Examples 50a–d correspond to exercises 8a–c from pages 22–23, except that this time the left hand plays a bass line with eight notes and octaves.

In example 51a–d we see the five note sequence of the dominant from chapter 5 (page 59), whereas in example 52a–d we have used chromatic passing notes in the bass line.

All twelve dominants are found in example 53 and can be practiced in a single exercise. The left hand plays one measure with a chromatic passing note and then a bar with a descending scale pattern.
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for Piano
Exercises in all Keys
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# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1**
- Walking Bass Two Note Sequence, CD-Exercise 1–3 ......................................................... 3–8
- Walking Bass Three Note Sequence, CD-Exercise 4–6 .......................................................... 9–14

**Chapter 2**
- Major Triad with the Major Sixth added, CD-Exercise 8–9 .................................................. 15–18
- Major / Minor Triad with the Major Second added, CD-Exercise 11–12 .............................. 19–22

**Chapter 3**
- Ascending and Descending Scale, CD-Exercise 14–17 ........................................................ 23–30
- II – V – I – Major Cadence, CD-Exercise 19 ........................................................................ 31–32

**Chapter 4**
- Major Triad with the Minor Seventh added, CD-Exercise 21–23 ......................................... 33–38

**Chapter 5**
- Major Triad with the Minor Third added, CD-Exercise 25–26 .......................................... 39–42
- Walking Bass Five Note Sequence, CD-Exercise 27 ............................................................. 43–44

**Chapter 6**
- Triad with Chromatic Passing Note, CD-Exercise 29–30 .................................................... 45–48
- Chromatic Passing Note with Minor Third, CD-Exercise 31 .............................................. 49–50
- Chromatic Passing Note with Major Third, CD-Exercise 33 ............................................. 51–52
- The Tritone as Chromatic Suspension, CD-Exercise 35–37 .................................................. 53–68

**Chapter 7**
- Typical Bass Lines with Chromatic Passing Note, CD-Exercise 39–43 .............................. 69–78

**Chapter 8**
- Typical Harmony Sequences in Minor, CD-Exercise 46 ...................................................... 79–89
- II – V – I Minor Cadence, CD-Exercise 48–49 .................................................................... 90–102

**Chapter 9**
- Walking Bass in Octaves, CD-Exercise 50–52 .................................................................... 103–108

**Chapter 10**
- Typical Harmony Sequences with the Diminished Chord, CD-Exercise 56–58 ................. 109–136
Chapter 1

CD-Example 1

Michael Gundlach
Walking Bass for Piano