

Some tips for getting the bass line solid right away when it's not written down.

Regardless of a particular style, there are certain things that a bassist should keep in mind and use as a guiding factor in creating an improvised bass line over chord changes. There are always exceptions to these “rules” but can be very helpful when first putting together a successful bass line or part.

1. Upon the arrival of a new chord symbol, the bassist should play the root of the chord on the first available beat. Most of the time, this means the bassist should play the root of the chord on beat one of the measure containing the chord. If a measure has two chords, the root of each chord should be played as each new chord arrives, usually on beats 1 and 3. In the case of slash chords i.e. F/A or D/C the bassist should treat the note to the right of the slash as the root of the chord, even though it may actually be another function.
2. Once a new harmony has been established through the root, the bassist should always prioritize “low” chord tones when constructing the remainder of the line. 5th's, and 3rd's are recommended, 7th's less so, 9th's or higher tend to obscure the chord type and sound like wrong notes when accented in the baseline. Again, exceptions to this exist.
3. There is an extremely strong link between accented beats in a meter or groove, and the importance our ears give a particular bass note. “Low” chord tones should be placed on accented beats primarily, while less accented beats (ands, beat 4, etc...) are more free in terms of note choice. Constructing a bass line is very different than “soloing” basic triads, roots and fifths are the bass players primary tools.
4. Every style will have particular “norms” for bass line construction. Let's examine some of the most common jazz styles and some strategies for each.

Swing (any tempo)

The “walking” bass line is the fundamental role of a bassist in swing style music, there are common variations.

1. “In -Four” means that the baseline is comprised of mostly quarter notes, for beginners I recommend ONLY quarter notes. Once good timekeeping and note choice start to develop, adding 8th note triplets to the mix can be a nice variation. The consistency of the quarter note pulse is by far the most important aspect, note choice should come second, even if the bass line is just root, root, root, etc... Here are a few one-measure patterns that tend to work well for beginners when creating bass lines from chord symbols, these assume knowledge of the basic major and minor triad...

Root - 3rd - 5th - Root (love this one)



Root - Root - 5th - 5th



Root - 3rd - 5th - (half step away from next root)

Root - (half step away from 5th) - 5th - 3rd



Playing a note one half step away from an accented chord tone is common in most styles, when there are 2 chords per bar it is quite common to alternate roots with half step “approach tones”



2. Playing “In two” is a variation on the standard walking line. It implies that the bassist will play on beats 1 and 3 only, leaving beats 2 and 4 open or using light fills, in this case it is common to play only the root and fifth of each chord.



“Latin” (Bossa Nova/Samba)

Usually when a chart is marked “latin” in can be interpreted as either Bossa Nova or Samba, both Brazilian grooves. Many different and varied “latin” grooves exist, a samba or hybrid samba is probably the most common when no specific parts are written. Samba and Bossa are very similar, the most noticeable difference being the tempo, samba is faster, bossas tend to lay back. (think girl from Ipanema)

The bassist should again target the root and fifth of each chord on beats 1 and 3. The trick is to make beat 3 the “heavy” beat and beat one he shorter “lighter” beat.



When the articulation is added and 8th note pickups are added, the bass line really grooves...



Ballads

Ballads and slower tunes are pretty straightforward for a bassist. While an active line can be useful as part of an arrangement, most of the time the bassist will play long, full length roots on half or whole notes. Fills should generally be minimal and at the ends of harmonic phrases. It is quite common for upright players to use a bow on intros, endings and even the entirety of some ballad arrangements.

Funk and Straight 8th Grooves

If the music has “Funk” written as the given style and no specified bass line, a few guidelines will help get the correct feel which can then be built upon to expand the groove.

1. Beat one is the most important, it can actually be quite effective to have the bassist limit themselves to only count one of each measure and an occasional fill.
2. If possible, have the bassist match the rhythm of the kick drum pattern using chord tones from the basic triads. As before, roots and 5th's should be treated as structural while higher chord functions should be used more sparingly and with less rhythmic accent.
3. After the down beat has been established, most funk lines tend to feature a repetitive pattern which features a bit of syncopation. The challenge for newer players is keeping the line *exactly* the same for each repetition. focus should be placed on note length, articulation, rhythmic accuracy and dynamics as opposed to creative note choice.

A few words on gear....

1. Basses, both acoustic and electric, require a certain amount for maintenance to sound their best and remain fully playable. It is recommended to replace the strings of an electric bass as least twice a year. Acoustic strings, being more expensive, do not need to be replaced as often, maybe once every 4 years or so for a school instrument.
2. It is recommended to have instruments which cannot play in tune or are overly difficult to play taken to a luthier (someone who works on guitars/basses) for a set-up. The luthier will adjust the neck, bridge and string height as well as fix any little problems that have come up since it's last set up. A school instrument should be set up every few years, ideally at the same time as a string replacement.
3. These days most bassists use amplifiers when performing. An acoustic bass will require a “Pickup” in order to be plugged into an amp. The quality of the pickup is extremely important to the sound of a bass. If you can invest in a high quality pickup, you can make up for a lower quality instrument.
4. Generally speaking, the larger the amp, the more trouble. When selecting an amp for bass, don't go for the biggest speaker or the most power. A smaller amp with a “direct out” will often deliver a clearer tone on stage and in rehearsal. For performances, using the direct out to connect the amp to the sound system will make up for any lost volume. Portability is also a concern when choosing an amp, light weight does not mean less powerful, go for something one person can carry comfortably.
5. If you are not sure which instrument is better for a given song, the answer is yes! in recent years, both electric and acoustic bass can be found in literally any style of music, there is not problem with playing swing on electric or funk on upright, depending on the player and the arrangement, anything is possible, even keyboard bass and bass as melody or chords.