

READING BIG BAND BASS PARTS

INTERPRETING BIG BAND BASS PARTS

As the bass player in a big band, we read from parts that vary greatly in the amount of specific written information. You may see a bass part where the composer or arranger notates every pitch, rhythm, articulation, and nuance. As an example, the bass part for *Funk Unity* is completely written out without any call for an improvised bass line. In contrast, the bass part for *Shufflin' in F* features both written walking bass lines with chord symbols. This type of part allows the bassist to read the notation or create his/her own bass line from the chord symbols. Another type of part combines sections of written bass lines with sections where the player may improvise his/her own bass lines. This can be seen in the bass part for *Morning* where some sections of the piece have only a written line and other sections have only chord symbols. With these different types of parts, it is essential that big band bassists develop the skill to both *read* notation and *improvise* bass lines. The trick comes in knowing when it is musically appropriate to create your own part and *when* you should strictly follow the notation.

While this may seem obvious, an important clue to indicating when there is license to improvise a bass line is the presence of chord symbols. If chord symbols are provided, it generally means the arranger trusts the bassist to create an appropriate part. If no chord symbols are given, it means that the written part is integral to the arrangement and must be played. To be effective as a big band bassist, we must always be sensitive to our role as a member of the rhythm section and work within the parameters of a given arrangement. Remember that inside almost all big band arrangements, there is room for improvised solo space. This means that the big band texture will transform into a jazz trio or quartet. As the bassist, we must have the flexibility to support both the volume and power of a large ensemble as well as the more intimate, interactive texture of accompanying a jazz soloist.

There are certain situations when it is appropriate to alter a written part. This usually involves making subtle changes such as placing a passage up or down an octave, simplifying a part to make it swing/groove better, or omitting a passage to thin the texture of the band playing a unison line. Another option we may consider is to play a walking bass line when the part calls for a '2-feel.' Conversely, we may choose to play in a 2-feel when the part says to walk. However, when making a decision to alter a written part, care should be taken to respect the intent of the arranger or composer. And depending on the circumstance, the bassist should discuss these choices with the bandleader and/or other members of the rhythm section.

Look for other instructions such as type of groove (Swing, Bossa, Waltz, etc.) two-beat, walk, 'as is,' etc. Also, pay close attention to dynamic markings. Perhaps most important, *listen* to the ensemble, the other members of the rhythm section, and the soloist. Pay attention to what's going on around you and always look ahead to what's coming next.

THE ANATOMY OF A BIG BAND CHART

Most often, a big band chart is based on some type of specific format. Typically, the American song format is utilized, generally with one of the following song format types: **AABA**, **ABAC**, or Blues. In essence, most big bands arrangements are simply an orchestrated version of a specific form type. At each repeat of the format, the arranger assigns the various instruments of the ensemble to play melodic, supportive, or improvised material.

5TH CHORUS

Shout Chorus
A | A | B | A ||

This is generally the most intense section of the chart. The bass part may include written walking lines or rhythmic figures with the ensemble. For a shout chorus, be careful not to play in too high a register so the bass can provide a strong foundation for the ensemble.

6TH CHORUS

Tune
A | A | B | A || Close
saxes | saxes | brass | tutti

At this point in the chart the music may return to a more simple texture and the volume and intensity will be less. The bassist could play a two-beat feel to be consistent with what was played in the initial statement of the theme.

This is only a hypothetical situation. To learn more, take the time to study the way professional bassists design their parts in bands such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Woody Herman, etc.

EXAMPLE 5

45 F7 (written) B \flat 7 F7

49 B \flat 7 (improvised) F7

Throughout the solo, the melodic material is simple and based on elements of the blues vocabulary. It made sense to improvise a solo that would fit within the spirit and sound of the arrangement even though I could play other 'licks and tricks.' At the end, I played material to indicate the solo was coming to a conclusion and that the bassist's role was transitioning from soloist back to accompanist. Notice that the improvised melodic line was designed to fit back into the written line in bar 68 as indicated below.

EXAMPLE 6

67 F7 D7 D \flat 7 C13 \flat 9 as is 69

To accompany the alto saxophone solo at letter **G**, I used traditional walking bass lines for the first chorus. On the second chorus, I used a pedal note for the first two bars followed by the shuffle bass line played earlier. Using a pedal note changes the texture of the music by creating a static feeling in the line. The static bass note creates a feeling of tension, increasing the inevitable need for a release. This is a powerful musical device that can be used to vary the texture of a walking bass line.

On the return of the layered riffs in the horns at letter **M**, I chose not to use the shuffle bass line to keep a lighter texture in the bass and a driving, swinging time feel.

Below are listed several big band pieces that feature a shuffle beat. Most of the pieces are based on a blues form. Pay attention to how the various bassists create lines that fit with the drummer's shuffle beat.

SUGGESTED LISTENING

SONG	BASSIST	BAND	RECORD TITLE	RECORD LABEL	DATE
Alright, Ok, You Win	Eddie Jones	Count Basie	CB Plays Joe Williams Sings	Cleff Records P2-19852	1956
Blues In Hoss' Flat	Eddie Jones	Count Basie	Live Roulette Basie	Mosaic MD8-135	1962
Cousins	Chuck Andrus	Woody Herman	Woody Herman: 1964	Phillips PHS600-118	1964
Don't Git Sassy	Richard Davis	Jones/Lewis*	Live at the Village Vanguard	Solid State 18016	196?
Groove Merchant	Richard Davis	Jones/Lewis*	Central Park North	Solid State 18058	1969
Smack Dab in the Middle	Richard Davis	Jones/Lewis*	Jones/Lewis w/ Joe Williams	Blue Note CDP 7243 8	1966

*Indicates the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra

Shufflin' in F

Comp.: Jim Snidero
Arr.: Dave Rivello

♩ = 150

2nd time only

mf

A

B F7 Bb7 F7 Bb7

15 F7 C7 Bb7 F7 C7

C F7 Bb7 F7 Bb7

27 F7 C7 Bb7 F7 C7

D F7 Bb7 F7 Bb7

39 F7 C7 Bb7 F7 C7 As Is

E Bb7 Solo (opt. Ad Lib)

51 F7 C7 Bb7 F7

F 56 C7 F7 Bb7 F7

61 Bb7 F7 C7

66 Bb7 F7 D7alt. Db7alt. C13b9 As Is **G**

EXAMPLE 9

Example 9 consists of three staves of music in bass clef and common time (C). The first staff has four measures, each labeled with a C7 chord. The second staff starts at measure 5 and has four measures labeled C7, C7, Ab7, and Ab7. The third staff starts at measure 9 and has four measures labeled Bb7, C7, C7, and C7. Each measure contains a single eighth note with a slash through it, representing a rhythmic pattern.

The eight-measure section is organized as follows: A7 D7 | G7 C7 repeated twice followed by four bars of C7. The layout looks like this:

EXAMPLE 10

Example 10 consists of two staves of music in bass clef and common time (C). The first staff has eight measures with chords: A7, D7, G7, C7, A7, D7, G7, C7. Brackets are placed under the first four measures and the last four measures. The second staff starts at measure 5 and has four measures, each labeled with a C7 chord. A bracket is placed under all four measures.

Knowing the formal layout helps keep track of your place and to anticipate what is coming next in the music. Remember, the bassist's primary duties are to make the music 'feel' good and to provide a solid bass line for the other musicians in the band. There are not many traditional big bands that play funk music but there are some wonderful examples of 'horn bands' whose concept of funk music is highly recommended for study and musical enjoyment.

SUGGESTED LISTENING

SONG	BASSIST	BAND	RECORD TITLE	RECORD LABEL	DATE
Hikky-Burr	Chuck Rainy	Quincy Jones	Smackwater Jack	A & M SP3037	1971
Oakland Stroke	Francis Rocco	Tower of Power	Back to Oakland	Warner Brothers 2749-2	1974
Signed, Sealed...	James Jamerson	Stevie Wonder	S.W.'s Greatest Hits	Tamla T313L	1971
Squib Cakes	Francis Rocco	Tower of Power	Back to Oakland	Warner Brothers 2749-2	1974
What Is Hip?	Francis Rocco	Tower of Power	Tower of Power	Warner Brothers 2681-2	1973

D

First staff of music for section D, bass clef, featuring a rhythmic pattern with dynamics *f* and *mf*.

Second staff of music for section D, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

E

First staff of music for section E, bass clef, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

Second staff of music for section E, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

Third staff of music for section E, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

F

First staff of music for section F, bass clef, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

Second staff of music for section F, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

Third staff of music for section F, continuing the rhythmic pattern.

For this type of playing, it can be tempting to play too busily. As bassists we must always take care to allow the soloist to have a leading voice and not call undue attention to ourselves. In this example, much of the rhythmic activity of the bass line comes to rest on the downbeat of each measure. To create a more open feel, I avoid any type of walking bass line. Below is a transcription of the improvised bass line that accompanies the piano solo.

EXAMPLE 27

49 G- G-Δ/F# G-7/F E[∅] Eb- Eb-Δ/D Eb-7/D^b C[∅]

57 B- B-Δ/A# B-7/A G#[∅] G- G-Δ/F# G-7/F E[∅] A7^{b9}

65 D-6⁹ G-6⁹ D-6⁹ G-6⁹ D-6⁹ G-6⁹

71 B^bΔ EbΔ AbΔ#11 DbΔ#11

76 F#-Δ G-Δ A7^{b9b13} D-6⁹ E[∅] A7^{#9}

[65:] D-6⁹ G-6⁹ D-6⁹ G-6⁹ D-6⁹

[70:] G-6⁹ B^bΔ EbΔ AbΔ#11

[75:] DbΔ#11 F#-Δ G-Δ A7^{b9b13} D-6⁹ E[∅] A7^{#9}

Strayhorn

Comp.: Clare Fisher
 Arr.: Bill Dobbins

SWING ♩ = 144

mp *cresc.*

8 9 *mf* (w/bari) 3 3

13 17 D- G-

19 D- G- D- G- BbΔ#11 *cresc.* *f*

25 EbΔ AbΔ#11 DbΔ F#-Δ G-Δ

30 A+

36 37 *p cresc. poco a poco*

43 (solo) *f*