Playing Jazz Guitar Bass Lines with Chords

The guitar is an extremely versatile instrument, with seemingly endless techniques and tones around every corner. One very important and widely used Jazz guitar technique is playing bass lines in combination with chords.

A guitar in standard tuning will never reach the lower bass notes of a real bass, but between the sixth and fifth strings on the guitar you can create the illusion of a bass player being present.

Playing a walking jazz guitar bass line is a captivating method of comping for other musicians, and yourself.

Jazz Guitar Bass Line #1

Root Note Bass Line

To get started with walking bass lines it is important to be aware of the root notes in each of the chords you are playing. The function of the bass is to provide the foundation for the harmony of the given tune. The bass note usually involves playing the root notes of a given chord, but can also be other chord tones depending on the inversion.

Using a ii-V-I-VI progression in the key of C, perform the root notes of each chord using
only quarter notes first. A ii-V-I-VI progression in the key of C is as follows:

ii – Dm7
V – G7
I – Cmaj7
VI – Am7

Now play through the root notes of each chord:

After finding and performing your root notes, add in the chords. Start by playing chords on beats 1 and 3:
To make the above pattern more interesting, add a little bit of syncopation...
Jazz Guitar Bass Line #2

Root and Fifth Bass Line

Once you are comfortable playing the previous patterns using the root notes of each chord exclusively, play the root and fifth of each chord.

Dm7 – Root is D and fifth is A

G7 – Root is G and fifth is D

Cmaj7 – Root is C and fifth is G

Am7 – Root is A and fifth is E
Continue to play the root note on beat one and three of each bar, and include the syncopated chord pattern from the previous exercise:

Jazz Guitar Bass Line #3

Approach Note Bass Line

Once you can comfortably identify and play the root and fifth in the ii-V-I-VI progression, try a slightly different approach. This next bass line technique involves an approach note.

Approach notes are simply notes that approach a targeted note, either diatonically or chromatically. The targeted note for walking bass lines is generally the root note.
Start by placing a chromatic approach note on beat four of every bar. In the case of two chords per bar, the approach note would be placed on beats 2 and 4. The approach note should be played on the quarter note before the chord change, regardless of time signature.

Experiment with approach notes, try playing two chromatic or diatonic notes away from the target root note. For more ideas on approach notes, you can check out the approach note soloing series here. The concepts in the approach note soloing series can be easily applied to bass lines as well.

Jazz Guitar Bass Line #4

Diatonic and Chromatic Bass Line

The next approach involves the diatonic scale notes in the key of the progression or tune you are playing. In the example of ii-V-I-VI in the key of C, you will play notes from the C major scale. When approaching a root note diatonically, and you find yourself running out of diatonic notes, add in a chromatic note.
Using quarter notes again, let's take a look at how we could connect root notes using diatonic notes from the key of C. This example also highlights the usage of chromatic notes when there are not enough diatonic notes between roots.
Finally, let's try connecting root notes using arpeggios. Arpeggios are widely used in many walking bass lines, if you need to review any of your arpeggios you can check out a lesson here on single octave arpeggios or check out the arpeggio resource library.

After connecting the arpeggios with the root notes, try adding in chords on beat one.
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