

The Linear Approach

Guitarists and keyboardists are able to learn harmony on their instruments in a vertical fashion. They are uniformly required to play chords (several notes at a time). This approach to harmony on the bass guitar neck takes into account the role of the bass in almost all situations. Bass players are seldom asked to play more than one note at a time. This means that a different horizontal approach to learning harmony is necessary. Instead of playing all the notes of a particular chord at once, a bassist must imply the sound of a chord one note at a time in a horizontal or linear fashion. In almost every style of music you are required at some point to play a line. Sometimes it's in the middle of a groove or a fill, sometimes it's walking through a tune, and when you're soloing, it's almost completely linear. Creating these lines means making an informed decision about which note gets played on which beat. Just settling for the correct scale or arpeggio rarely gets the job done. The end result can sound fairly academic.

- 5 Listen to the CD to hear how the C major scale works with Cmaj7.



- 6 The next example shows what happens when you don't start with the root of the chord.



Scales work only when you begin with the root and ascend. Arpeggios work a little better, but both approaches result in lines that are neither connected or very smooth.

The first thing to understand about the construction of lines is there are strong beats and weak beats that the ear considers before it is satisfied that the harmony is successfully being played.

- 7 Let's see how the strong beats work. Try playing some random notes along with the CD. Track 7 will have a pair of two-bar Cm7 examples. In the first one you'll hear chord tones of Cm7 (C, Eb, and G) on the strong beats 1 and 3. Play any note you want on the weak beats 2 and 4. In the second two-bar example you'll hear those same chord tones on 2 and 4. Play any note you want on the strong beats 1 and 3. You should notice that no matter what you play in the first two bars you can still get a sense of the Cm7 sound while the second two bars sound much less like Cm7.

The important thing to remember is that with a quarter note pulse the ear needs to hear harmony notes on 1 and 3 and it puts a lot less emphasis on what's played on 2 and 4. The further we get into this process the more we'll effectively learn to use the notes on beats 2 and 4 to reinforce what the ear hears on 1 and 3.