

Hearing Bass Lines

Recognizing the pitches in a bass line is an extremely useful tool for a musician. “Hearing Bass Lines” will give you general knowledge on the kinds of bass lines used in contemporary music, along with an audio exercise that first plays a cadence to create a key center, and then plays four pitches in a typical bass line range that you need to identify. You want to identify these pitches based on the key center not on their interval relationship. This type of ear training skill is based on the “Contextual Ear Training System.” If you are unfamiliar with this system I suggest you check out the course “Ear Training One Note Complete.” There are many different kinds of bass lines but they all have one thing in common; their pitches can be identified in relationship to a key center. Of course bass lines do modulate to other keys but that is beyond the scope of this course. To get a better understanding of bass lines let’s take a look at some typical bass lines found in contemporary music.

Types of Bass Lines

Bass lines can be broken down into three general categories: harmonic, ostinato and mixed function. Bass lines can tell you a lot about the chords and modes being used in a composition. Whether a bass line is outlining a chord or defining a mode it almost always can be used as a quick way to get a general idea of the content of a piece of music.

Harmonic Bass Lines

A bass line isn’t always playing the root of the chord but often bass notes can give a strong indication of what chord is being played. For instance, if a bass line is playing C, A, D, G as whole notes there is a good chance that the chord progression in the song is: C, A, D, G. In order to identify the exact types of chords being played, i.e. Major, Minor etc... you usually need to listen to the instrument playing the chords.

Ostinato Bass Lines

A bass line can also create a key center by playing an ostinato melodic pattern. Keep in mind that there are all sorts of key centers. For instance any mode can create a key center. So for instance, you could have a Mixolydian key center or even one based on hybrid scales. Musicians often give names to these types of modal key centers. Some of the common names are: modal vamp, ostinato or montuno. An example of this would be where a bass player was repeating the notes: C, E, G, A, Bb in some pattern. This pattern would define a mode to our ear. When any group of notes are played, usually some have longer durations than others. The notes of longer duration tend to define the key center; therefore if we hear the C longer than we hear the E, G, A, Bb we will most likely hear the modal vamp in the key of C Mixolydian. While this isn’t always 100% accurate, it is something to keep in mind when listening to bass lines or for that matter any melodic statement. The important thing to realize is your ear will decide what key you are in and that information will help you decide what mode or chord to use over an ostinato bass line.