

Jazz Improvisation

Passing Notes

By Cliff Engel

Passing notes are scale tones that pass between two chord tones by scale step. Chord tones are the root, third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees of a scale. Scale tones are the second, fourth, and sixth scale degrees.

Composers have utilized this passing notes concept for centuries. From J.S. Bach to Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and beyond, musicians have made extensive use of this common technique. Listen to Bach's compositions and you'll hear passing notes. Check out the melody to "Four," a classic jazz standard filled with passing notes, by Miles Davis.

In Example 1, you will see a two-octave CMaj7 arpeggio. In Examples 2-7, you'll find every permutation of the passing notes technique applied to a two-octave CMaj7 arpeggio on a 4-string bass.

These combinations are as follows:

Passing note between the root and third (C-D-E-G-B)

Passing note between the third and root (E-D-C-G-B)

Passing note between the third and fifth (C-E-F-G-B)

Passing note between the fifth and third (C-G-F-E-B)

Passing note between the fifth and seventh (C-E-G-A-B)

Passing note between the seventh and fifth (C-E-B-A-G)

Tablature has been provided to assist as a positioning reference. Depending on where you shift from one note to the next on a 4-string bass, keep in mind that there are several other ways to play a two-octave arpeggio, and you should definitely experiment with as many permutations as possible. For the extended range bassist who plays a five or six-string instrument, these exercises are easier to play because the extended range allows the examples to be played across the fingerboard without the necessary shifting required to play these exercises on a 4-string bass. On an extended range bass, this passing notes concept can be applied to three-octave arpeggios. Every bassist can also take these techniques and apply them to all the inversions of a Major 7th arpeggio (1st inversion: E-G-B-C, 2nd inversion: G-B-C-E, and 3rd inversion: B-C-E-G).

After you practice this passing notes technique on all of the two-octave Major 7th arpeggios (CMaj7, GMaj7, DMaj7, AMaj7, EMaj7, etc.), you'll want to apply this concept to the following chord types:

Cm7

C7

Cm7b5

Cdim7

CmMaj7

C7sus4

CMaj7#5

CMaj7b5

C7#5

C7b5

If you would like to associate scales with each chord type, here is a list of the most common chord types with their related scales:

Maj7: Ionian, Lydian, or Major Pentatonic

m7: Dorian, Minor Pentatonic, Blues Scale, Aeolian, or Phrygian

7: Mixolydian, Lydian b7, Minor Pentatonic, Blues Scale, or Half-Step/Whole-Step Symmetrical Diminished

m7b5: Locrian #2 or Locrian

dim7: Whole-Step/Half-Step Symmetrical Diminished

mMaj7: Melodic Minor (Jazz Minor or Jazz Minor #4)

7sus4: Mixolydian

Maj7#5: Lydian Augmented

Maj7b5: Lydian Augmented or Lydian

7#5: Whole Tone or Altered Dominant (Super Locrian)

7b5: Whole Tone, Altered Dominant, Lydian b7, or Half-Step/Whole-Step Symmetrical Diminished

Keep in mind that this is by no means a comprehensive list of all the scales musicians will practice with these chord types but rather a list including some of the most favored scales played by musicians over these chord changes.

Be sure to apply all the correct passing notes to each chord type. For example, if you are playing Lydian over a Maj7 chord, the passing note will be a #4 as compared to the perfect 4th of Ionian. If you are practicing Lydian b7 over dominant 7 chords, the passing note will be a #4 in comparison to the perfect 4th of Mixolydian. The symmetrical diminished scale will have a #4 and double passing notes (C-Db-D#-E) between the root and third as compared to Mixolydian. Basically speaking, if you associate multiple scales with a chord type, there may be several passing note combinations for that particular chord type.

Examples 1-7 are basic exercises to help you develop the passing notes concept over the most utilized chord types. In Example 8, I have included a phrase composed of passing notes. This is the type of line that you would hear in a more musically applicable context such as in a solo or melody. Take the passing notes concept and experiment with composing your own lines using passing notes. With the virtually limitless number of phrasing permutations, you are only limited by your imagination.

Always remember to practice every example over every chord type and transpose each chord type to every key across the entire range of the fingerboard. To make this amount of practice material more manageable, I would recommend practicing one chord type per day in every key center. For example, on the first day apply this passing notes technique to the major 7 chord type. On the following day, practice applying passing notes over minor 7 chord types and so forth. Within two weeks, you will have applied the passing notes concept to all the necessary chord changes.

CMaj7 Arpeggio

Ex. 1

1

Musical notation for Ex. 1: CMaj7 Arpeggio. It shows a bass clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a guitar TAB staff below it. The melody consists of eighth notes: C2, E2, G2, Bb2, C3, E3, G3, Bb3, C4, E4, G4, Bb4, C5. The TAB shows fret numbers: 8, 7, 10, 9, 10, 9, 12, 16, 12, 9, 10, 9, 10, 7, 8.

Passing Note Between The Root And Third

Ex. 2

3

Musical notation for Ex. 2: Passing Note Between The Root And Third. It shows a bass clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a guitar TAB staff below it. The melody consists of eighth notes: C2, Eb2, E2, G2, Bb2, C3, E3, G3, Bb3, C4, E4, G4, Bb4, C5. The TAB shows fret numbers: 8, 10, 7, 10, 9, 10, 12, 9, 12, 16, 12, 10, 12, 9, 9, 10, 8, 10, 7.

Passing Note Between The Third And Root

Ex. 3

5

Musical notation for Ex. 3: Passing Note Between The Third And Root. It shows a bass clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a guitar TAB staff below it. The melody consists of eighth notes: C2, E2, G2, Bb2, C3, Eb3, E3, G3, Bb3, C4, E4, G4, Bb4, C5. The TAB shows fret numbers: 7, 10, 8, 10, 9, 9, 12, 10, 12, 16, 12, 9, 12, 10, 9, 10, 7, 10, 8.

Passing Note Between The Third And Fifth

Ex. 4

7

Musical notation for Ex. 4: Passing Note Between The Third And Fifth. It shows a bass clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a guitar TAB staff below it. The melody consists of eighth notes: C2, E2, G2, Bb2, C3, E3, F3, G3, Bb3, C4, E4, G4, Bb4, C5. The TAB shows fret numbers: 8, 7, 8, 10, 9, 10, 9, 10, 12, 16, 9, 10, 12, 10, 9, 7, 8, 10, 8.

Passing Note Between The Fifth And Third

Ex. 5
9

8 10 8 7 9 10 12 10 9 16 12 10 9 10 9 8 7 8

Passing Note Between The Fifth And Seventh

Ex. 6
11

8 7 10 7 9 10 9 12 14 16 9 10 7 9 7 8

Passing Note Between The Seventh And Fifth

Ex. 7
13

8 7 9 7 10 9 10 9 16 14 12 9 10 9 7 10 7 8

Passing Notes Between Chord Tones

Ex. 8
15

10 7 9 10 8 7 8 10 9 10 12 10 9 12 14 16 12 10 12 9 10 9 7 10 7 8 10 8