

Bass Fundamentals

Column #10 – Arpeggios

In the first lesson of this series, we covered "Autumn Leaves", and also the basic foundations for playing this tune, using arpeggios of the chords being used in the framework of the song. The truth is, for more accomplished players, arpeggios and scales are the basis for most of what you will use to create and play your parts.

Scales you use to transition between positions and chord forms. Arpeggios of the chord(s) are what you play once you get there. It beats the heck out of thrumming away on a root tone of the chord all night long. Yes, some songs sound better just holding down the "fort". But many songs that are played that way can benefit from a 'facelift', which is to say, they can be altered to add more motion, colour and texture to the song as a whole, and what you play in particular. And you can do this without ruining the integrity of the song - if you do it right!

So let's have some fun and take a basic progression and play it straight at first, then begin to process of "jazzing" it up. Yeah, we can borrow from other music styles to create a more interesting part.

Look at **Example #1** below, and play the straight eighths you might use in one incarnation of this progression.

Am

F

5-5-5-5-5-5-5-5 5-5-5-5-5-5-5-5 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1

G

1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1 3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3 3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3

Dm

Em

5-5-5-5-5-5-5-5 7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7 7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7

Am

7-7-7-7 5-5-5-5-5-5-5-5 5-5-5-5-5-5-5-5

Now let's take the chords, and examine them, how they're put together, and use that information to start the transformation of the bass part. The chords we're playing at the moment are: **Am**, **G**, **F**, **Dm** and **Em**.

Am: 1, b3, 5

G: 1, 3, 5

F: 1, 3, 5

Dm: 1, b3, 5

Em: 1, b3, 5

Now that we know what makes them tick, we can use that information to add more variety to what we play under the chords, but without clashing with them, as in **Example #2** below...

Am F

The first system shows a bass line with eighth notes and a guitar fretboard diagram. The fretboard diagram has two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The B staff contains the following fingerings: 5 5 3 5 5 3 5 | 5 5 3 5 5 3 5 | 1 1 5 1 1 3 5.

G

The second system shows a bass line with eighth notes and a guitar fretboard diagram. The fretboard diagram has two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The B staff contains the following fingerings: 1 1 5 1 3 5 | 3 3 2 2 3 3 4 5 | 3 3 2 2 3 3 4 4.

Dm Em

The third system shows a bass line with eighth notes and a guitar fretboard diagram. The fretboard diagram has two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The B staff contains the following fingerings: 5 5 3 5 5 3 5 | 7 7 5 7 5 7 5 7 | 7 7 5 7 5 7 5 7.

Am

The fourth system shows a bass line with eighth notes and a guitar fretboard diagram. The fretboard diagram has two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The B staff contains the following fingerings: 7 7 7 7 7 5 | 7 8 | 5 5 3 5 3 5 3 5.

As you can see, this progression actually now has some *motion* going on, but doesn't undermine, or distract from, the drive of the chordal rhythms being played. While the eighth note foundation is still retained, as in the first example, we are now *creating motion*, not merely momentum, which pedal point eighths tend to emphasize over movement.

Now, let's actually start tweaking the chords. Instead of just **Am**, let's make it **Am7** (1, $b3$, 5, $b7$). By adding a $b7$, we add more colour tone to the chord, thereby giving the bass (and other

instruments) **more information** to draw from. Now, understand that in the second example, we already began adding that **m7** tone in the mix, using the rule of substitutions (where if you're playing a minor chord, any version of that minor chord can be suggested, even played, as an alternative to the simple minor (1, b3, 5) chord.

So the **Am** is now **Am7**. We'll keep the **Dm**, but also change the **Em** to **Em7** as well. The **F** and **G** are majors and will remain so for now.

Now that we have more colour tones, **Example #3** creates some true arpeggio playing with the bass part.

Secondarily, you need to pay attention to the rhythm and cadence of the progression to help determine just how you can approach laying down a suitable supportive bass part that doesn't conflict with, but rather compliments, the overall feel and flow of the song.

Understanding chord theory, the structure of chords, and knowing what they are made of is critical to a bass player's ability to create more dynamic and musical passages. You will still want to play the simpler parts where they are more suitable to what's going on - sometimes momentum is more important than virtuosity - but it's nice to know that where the music allows, even encourages, greater musical expression, that you can bring something truly beneficial to the musical passages involved through the use of arpeggios. They will make the song come alive in a way you cannot imagine, once added to it, how the song ever got along without!

Of course, there's lots more on this subject. But for now, explore the possibilities, based on what you've learned here.