

Jazz Walking Bass Rhythm Changes

A lot of jazz tunes have been written by putting a new melody of an existing chord progression. Two of the most popular progressions are the blues and the changes from George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm", commonly known as "rhythm changes". This chord progression is usually played in Bb and occasionally Eb, but you should be prepared for it to turn up in any key.


As with the blues, there are many, many variations on these changes but the following is a reasonably safe interpretation:

Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 | Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 | Bb Bb7 | Eb Ebm | Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 |
Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 | Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 | Bb Bb7 | Eb Ebm | Cm F7 | Bb |
D7 | | G7 | | C7 | | F7 | |
Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 | Bb G7 | Cm7 F7 | Bb Bb7 | Eb Ebm | Cm F7 | Bb |

As you can see, it's fairly repetitive with a lot of chords flying by (especially as a lot of rhythm changes tunes are VERY fast). Often players will use "autopilot" patterns on the first 16 , and last 8, bars and then relax a little on the 8 bar bridge where the chords only change every two bars.

As I mentioned earlier, rhythm changes tunes can be extremely fast, tempos over 300bpm are quite common. At these tempos the bass player doesn't always have to walk four notes in each bar, sometimes there is so much going on that two notes in each bar will sound a lot better. In the following exercise we play three different possibilities. In the first 16 bars we play two notes per bar, then we change to four per bar in the bridge. In the last 8 bars, we keep the four notes to a bar rhythm going but only change the pitch of the note twice in each bar. This is a useful way of keeping the time and harmony consistent if you are in a situation where either (or both!) is starting to wander.

Also note bars 29 & 30 where we deviate from playing the roots to play a very common phrase which you've undoubtedly heard before. Here we play Bb – the root of the Bb chord, Ab – the b7th of Bb7, G – the 3rd of Eb, and Gb – the minor 3rd of Ebm.


Bass Guitar 

6 

12 

17 

22 

27 

30 

Of course, there are times when you'll want to play four notes to a bar. As the chords are changing twice in each bar you are only really going to be able to play the root and one other note. The next example shows the same progression as above but with four notes in each bar:

Bass Guitar 

5 

10 

15 

20 

25 

29 

Again, this is only intended as an introduction to the possibilities available. Your choice of notes and rhythm will be dictated by what is going on around you at the time, the essence of jazz is improvisation and reacting to what others are playing. This is obviously easier said than done and it is easy to fall into autopilot sometimes, but you should always be aiming to support the soloist.