



The Right Foot *By Ed Friedland*

Chart-Reading Secrets



First, I'd like to note this is the 40th installment of *The Right Foot*. Writing this column has been a learning experience for me—and you, too, I hope! We've come a long way from the first *Foot*, when we learned how to hold the bass. Now we're reading music, playing gigs, and sharpening our powers of musical perception. Happy 40th; if you get an urge to buy a shiny red sports car, don't worry—it's just a midlife crisis kicking in.

An important aspect of real-world music reading is knowing that what you see is not always what you should do. There are several reasons. A chart may be incorrect or illegible. It may not have everything you need to know to play the music effectively, or the bass line may just suck. In all cases, accurately reading

the notes will not make you sound good, even if technically you're doing your job. Your real job is to interpret what's on the chart and play something that works best for the music. This skill takes much experience to hone, because many of these decisions must be made in real time the first time you're looking at the chart—in front of an audience.

Often on a gig you wind up reading "stock" store-bought charts that vary from highly professional to absolute junk. It's not uncommon to see an entire chart with no chord changes and with nothing but written-out quarter-notes—consisting only of roots! Do you play what's written? Not if you want to get called back.

Ex. 1 is typical of these "hack" charts. The goal is to devise your own swinging line, and

it's easier than it looks. First, realize you're looking at the root motion. That immediately gives you three solid note choices: roots, 5's, and octaves. With those three notes it's possible to build a line that has movement and still avoids clashing with major, minor, dominant, or major 7 chords. Ex. 2 shows one way to flesh out the line with R-5-8. On the gig, listen to the chords the rest of the band is playing while you're playing R-5-8. That will help you get more specific when you take the repeat.

Ex. 3 shows ways to fill out the line using chromatic (chr), scale (sc), and dominant (dom) approaches to the R-5-8 choices. This gives the line more interest but still avoids specific chord information.

The ultimate goal is to build an accurate

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3

C F B \flat E \flat D G C F B \flat D G

R chr 5 chr R 5 R chr R chr R chr R chr R dom 5 R/dom R sc 5 chr R chr R sc R SC R 5/sc

Ex. 4

Cm7 F7 B \flat maj7 Dm7 G7 Cm7 F7 B \flat maj7 Dm7 G7

E \flat maj7

chord chart in your head from the written bass line. To do this you need to use your knowledge of harmony and some common sense. First, let's plug in the root motion, since that's given. To get into chord specifics, examine what you have. The tune is in the key of $B\flat$, and the root motion is II/V/I-IV/III-VI/II/V/I/III-VI. (Slashes denote bar lines.) Drawing from the diatonic chord structures in $B\flat$, you wind up with $Cm7/F7/B\flat maj7-E\flat maj7/Dm7-Gm7/Cm7/F7/B\flat maj7/Dm7-Gm7$. It's a safe bet this is the chord progression, but in our imaginary chart, one chord is different. Check out the G root. In the key of $B\flat$ that would usually mean a minor chord ($Gm7$), but you may hear the horns or piano playing such chords as dominant. The

trick is to listen closely for the major 3rd ($B\flat$) in the voicing. In our chart the VI (G) is really part of a dominant root motion, with the III-VI resolving through the cycle of 5ths to the II chord. So the $D-G$ root motion acts as a IIIm-V in the key of the II chord ($Cm7$). In a IIIm-V, the V is generally a dominant chord, or V7. So the progression is $Dm7-G7-Cm7$. Ex. 4 is our final bass-line draft, accurately reflecting the progression.

By studying harmony and analyzing tunes to become familiar with typical root motion, you will be amazed how simple it is to fill in chords this way. This kind of mental work usually happens while you're in the middle of the chart, so in addition to keeping your place in

the form, watching the conductor, keeping the horn section from dragging, and eyeing the dessert tray, you're also doing harmonic analysis and spontaneous composition. Piece of cake! (There goes that dessert tray again.)

Next time we'll learn even more secrets of chart reading; until then you're covered for your next VFW Retiree All-Star Big Band gig.

Ed Friedland often hears charts in his head. Backbeat Books is publishing a compilation of many of his BASS PLAYER instructional stories; in the meantime you can find several at www.bassplayer.com/trenches, and you can pose questions and post opinions at his Bass Station forum at musicplayer.com.



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Chart Reading's Dirty Little Secrets

Last time we learned how to turn a cheesy stock chart into a bass line that works. Now let's look at other ways to make a chart happen when it gives you incomplete information—or too much.

A lot of times you'll see the bass part written on the downbeat while the horns and drums anticipate it. While this may work on paper, catching these unwritten kicks will help push

the band and keep the groove flowing. If you are listening to the music (we can only hope), you'll develop a sense of when these kicks happen. Luckily, experienced drummers set up kicks in obvious ways, so if you're also paying attention to the horn lines you'll catch them.

Ex. 1 is an excerpt of a big band chart with a walking bass line playing only quarter-notes while the horns (top line) play the kicks. The



Ex. 1
Horns C7 F7 F#dim C7/G A7 D7 G7

Ex. 2
Horns C7 F7 F#dim C7/G A7 D7 G7

band will sound more together if you catch the kicks (Ex. 2). Notice how the bass hits the anticipations but keeps the basic pulse moving—you don't want to stop the flow, just give it some "top spin."

At other times you may have to alter the written line because it's too hard for you to sight-read in tempo. Of course, this is your fault, but that doesn't matter on the gig—you still have to play something that works. If it's a tricky combination of rhythmic figures and moving

notes, you need to quickly discern what's essential and hope nobody gets upset about what you leave out. On a live gig, if you hit the big stuff and keep the form, your deletion will probably go unnoticed. And while you're surviving that situation, you should be inspired to go home and 'shed your sight-reading.

Ex. 3 is the kind of figure that could give you trouble. If you have the chance to look at a chart before you play it (always a good idea), this lick would catch your eye and you could

spend a minute working it out. Unfortunately, you don't always have that luxury. If you can't make it on the first reading, you could simplify it and still keep the basic idea intact (Ex. 4). Nailing the anticipations on beats *three* and *four* in bar 1 and bar 2's beat *two* will help you catch the part's important sounds. Ex. 5 is a slightly hipper way of getting through the lick by using dead notes on the troublesome 16ths. This lets you fill up the space, keep the rhythmic punch, and avoid clams.

As a professional you need to be a good enough reader to catch lines like this the first time. However, everyone "fakes" through a chart from time to time. Don't settle for this level of playing, but use it when the pressure is on. Part of being a pro is learning to cover yourself and make the music happen, no matter what. ♪

Ex. 3



Ex. 4



Ex. 5



Ed Friedland knows when to play what's written and when to fake it. Backbeat Books has released a compilation of many of his BASS PLAYER instructional stories; you can also find several at www.bassplayer.com/trenches, and you can pose questions and post opinions at his Bass Station forum at MusicPlayer.com.