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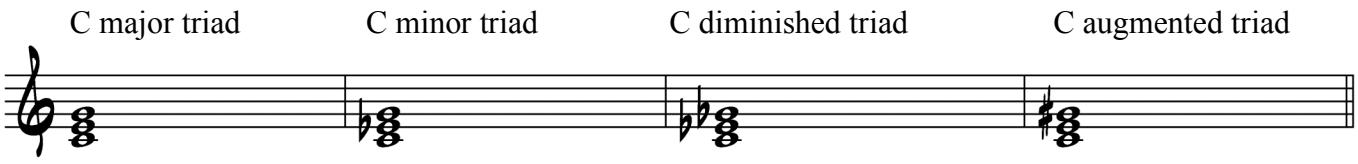
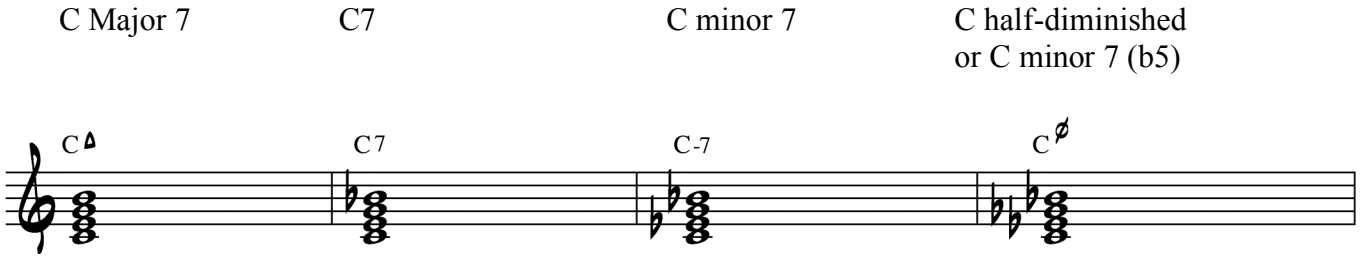
If is often difficult for pianists – even those with a good deal of experience – to get a handle on jazz. Listening to good jazz musicians is the most important part of the process. In addition to listening, though, pianists also need to acquire some basic skills so that they can function in a group. I have put together this packet to help people get started with that process. This is not a theory book, and I presume that the student has a basic understanding of chord construction. However, I do hope that this packet is helpful for educators, young pianists, and horn players who want to gain piano proficiency. If you have questions or comments, please let me know.

A Quick Review

There are four kinds of triads. Major triads are constructed form the root, 3rd, and 5th of the major scale. Minor triads have a lowered 3rd. Diminished triads have a lowered 3rd and a lowered 5th. Augmented triads have a major third and a raised 5th.



Here are four of the most common seventh chords. (There are others as well, but this is a good start). They are constructed as follows:

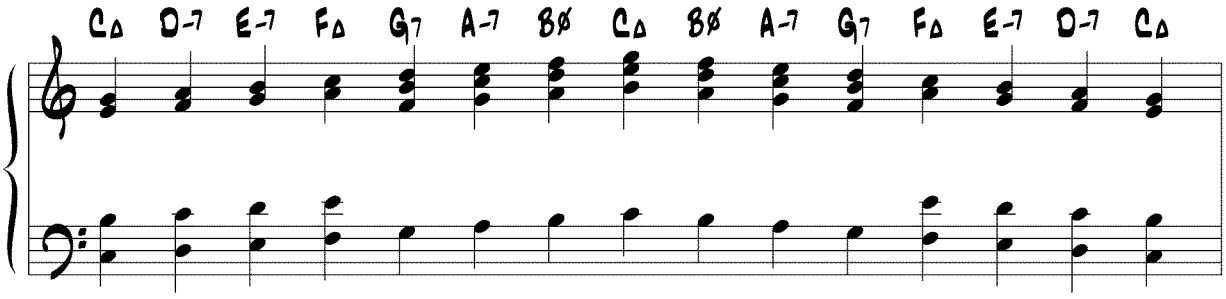


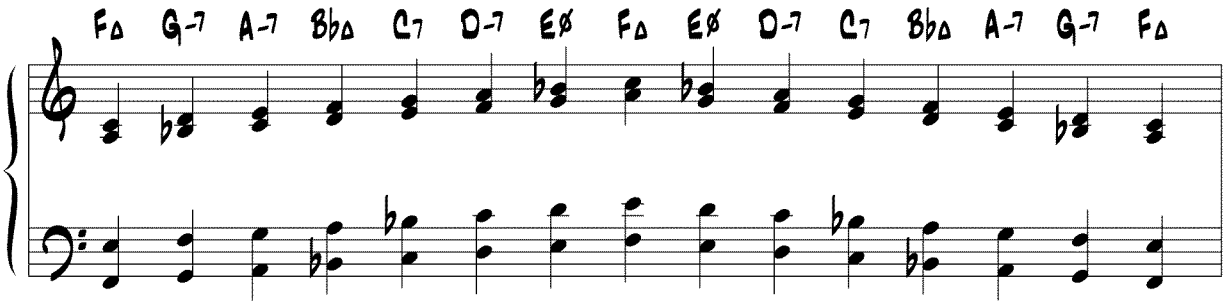
Understanding how these types of chords are put together is an important skill for jazz pianists.

Diatonic 7th Chords

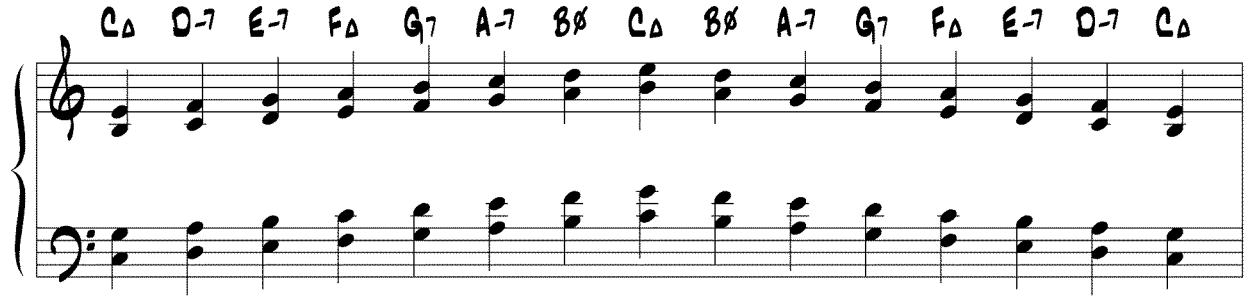
One advantage that pianists have over other instrumentalists is that the piano is a very visual instrument. To take advantage of this, I encourage students to visualize the "scale picture" in their minds. The C major scale, for instance, has a simple picture -- it is just white keys. Other scales have both black and white notes, but they each have a unique scale picture. For these seventh chords, we are just moving each tone up one diatonic step for each new chord. So, if you are able to see the scale on the piano, this process should be easier.

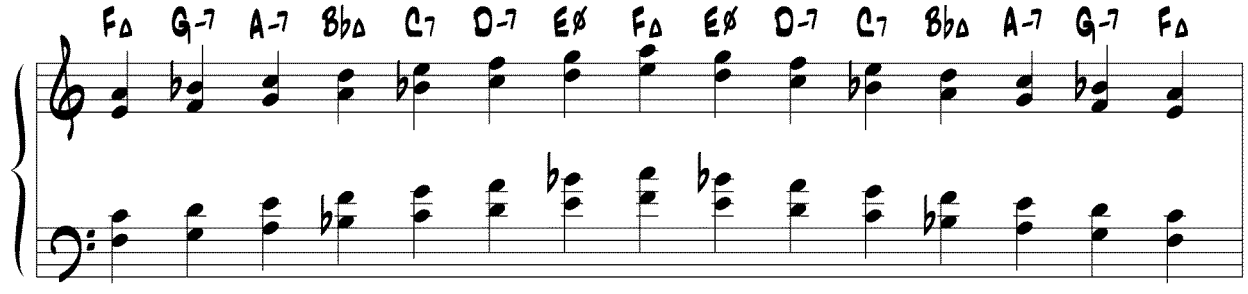
When you practice these voicings, think the name of the chord – even say it aloud – as you play each chord. By doing this, you will help reinforce the sound, look, and feel of each chord.





Alternatively, you could start with a different inversion and move it up and down the scale.

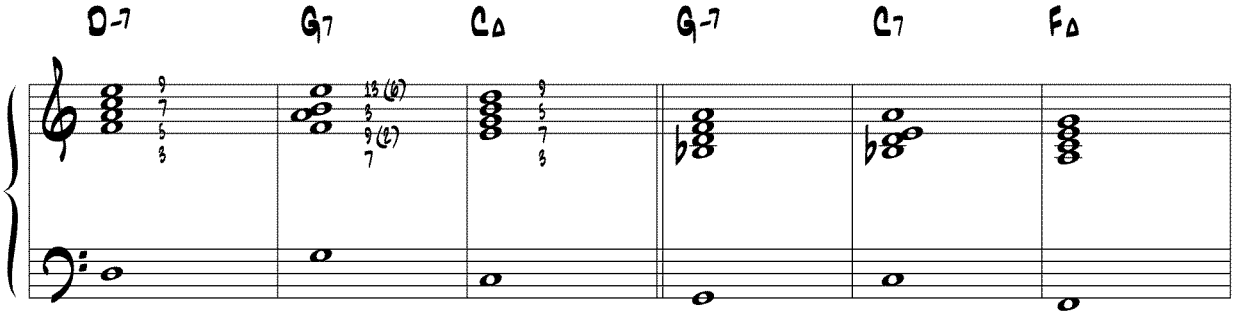




Eventually you should learn these chords in all 12 keys. But, it's best to master a few keys and then tackle a few others.

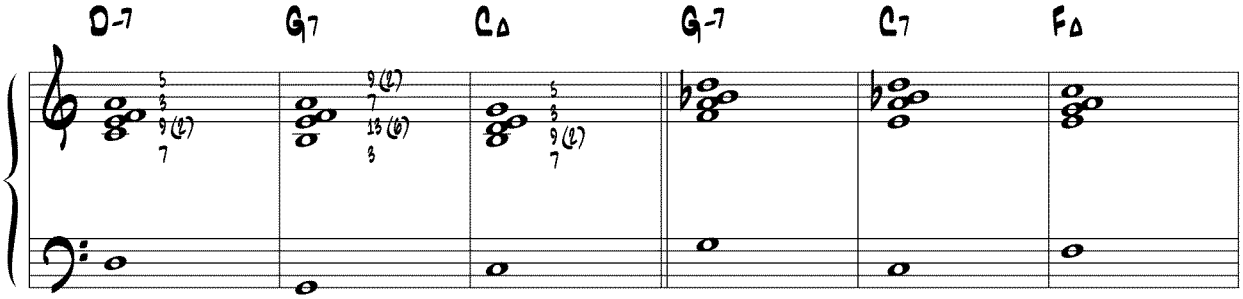
ii-V7-I VOICINGS

Entire volumes have been written on different ii-V7-I voicings. If you learn a few basic voicings, though, you can begin experimenting with different sounds. One basic voicing is the 3579 voicing. This is a four-note rootless voicing that includes the 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th for major and minor 7th chords. Dominant chords are formed by moving the seventh of the minor chord down a half step. This results in a colorful dominant voicing that includes the 3rd, 7th, 9th, and 13th.

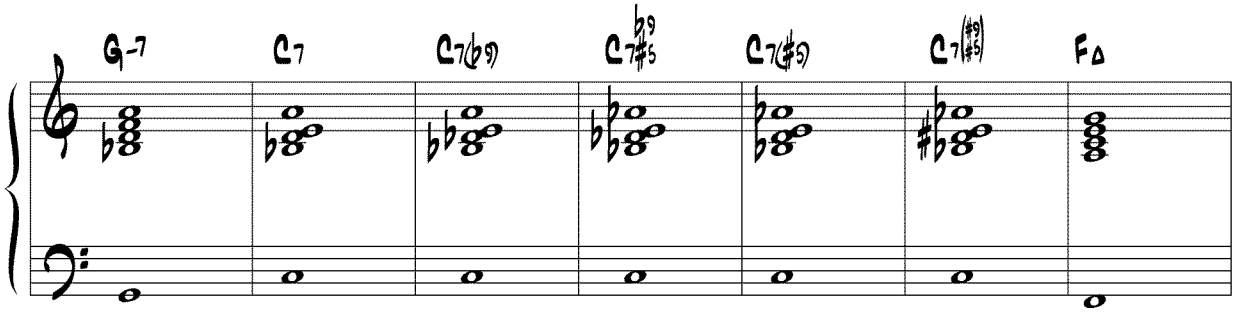


These voicings are very versatile. They can be played in the right hand above the root in the left, or the chord can be played in the left hand while accompanying a right hand melody.

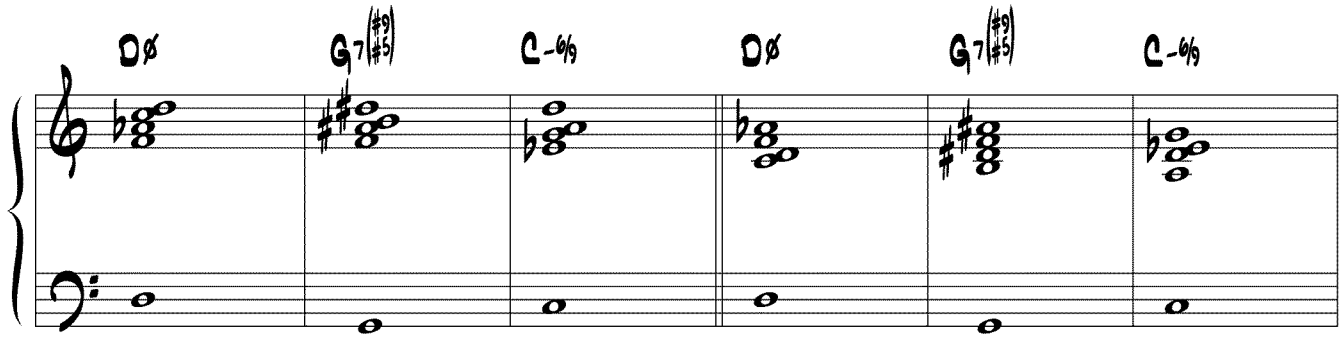
A common inversion of 3579 is 7935. I call it the "I Feel Pretty" voicing, because if you play the notes one at a time, you hear the Bernstein melody.



The dominant chord in this set of voicings can be altered in many ways. You can experiment with the following V7 alterations.

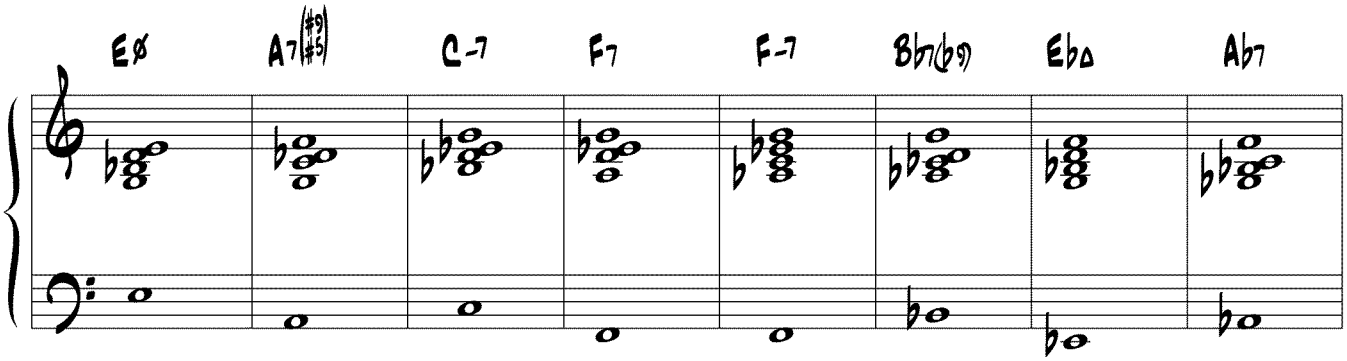


I have listed some possibilities for minor ii-V7-i progressions below. While the ninth can work for half-diminished chords, it is a very distinctive sound that isn't appropriate for all situations. So, I have avoided the using the ninth in these half-diminished chords.



When you start feeling comfortable with these voicings, practice them through all the keys and work them over the chord changes to standard tunes. You should not attempt to do this all at once. Take a few keys or a small section of a tune and work it until you can repeatedly play it perfectly. When you have done so, move on to the next set of changes. Good tunes to start with include "Just Friends," "Lady Bird," and "Afternoon in Paris." I encourage folks to play tunes that they have on cd. This way, you know how it is supposed to sound.

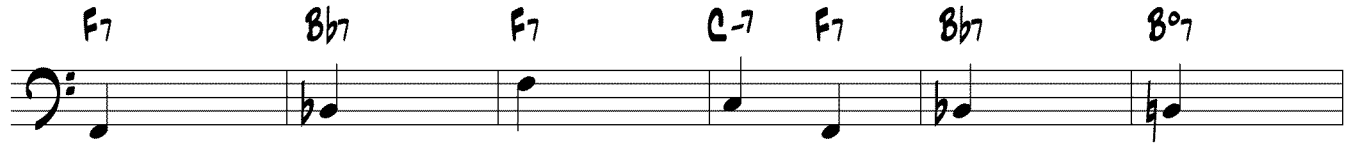
When you practice voicing chords through tunes, take into account voice leading and play the form of the chord that is closest to the last chord. If possible, you should avoid moving your right hand much. Here's an example from "Stella By Starlight."



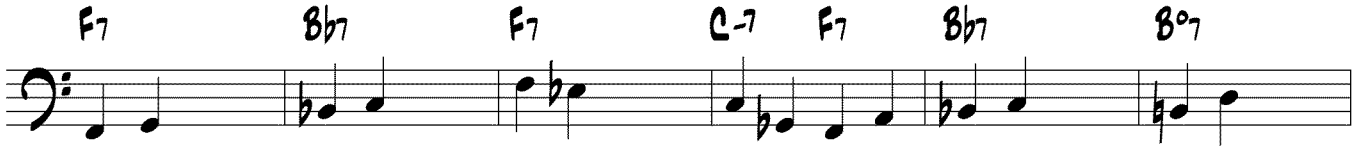
Guidelines for Creating Hip Walking Bass Lines

Good bass lines outline harmonies and give a sense of direction. The following items are not rules - they do not have to be obeyed. (In fact, they best bass players don't always follow them.) Rather, these items are guidelines to help you create your own bass lines that sound good.

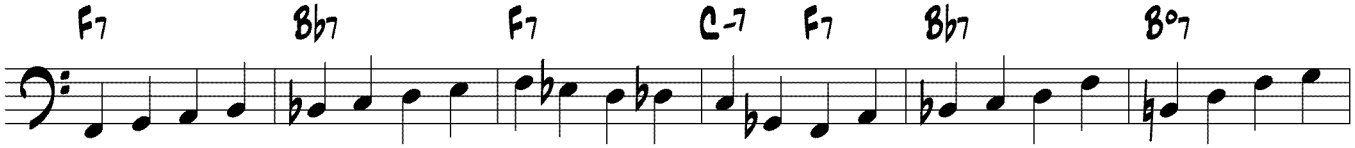
Step 1: Play the root of the chord on beat one.



Step 2: On beat 2, move stepwise to a note from the appropriate scale or play another chord tone.



Step 3: Place another chord tone on beat three.
Step 4: Put another scale tone on beat four. To make it even cooler, precede the next root by a half step above or below.

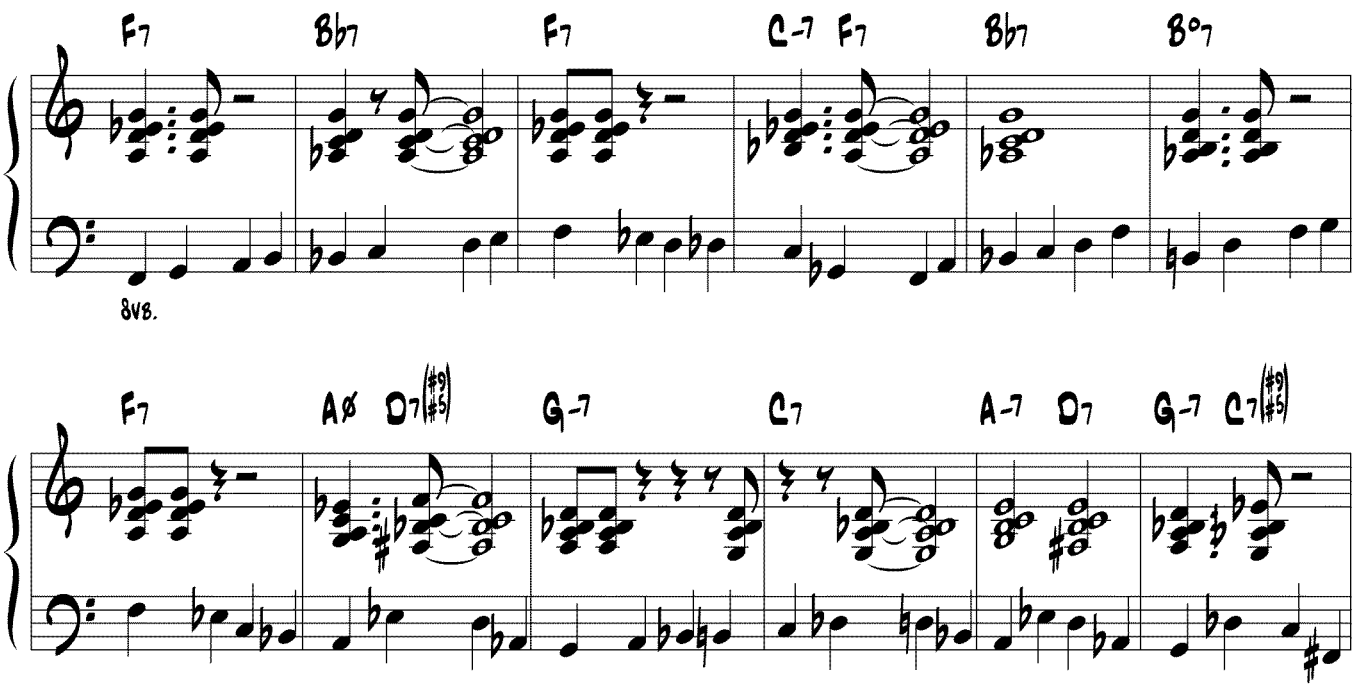


Other guidelines to keep in mind:

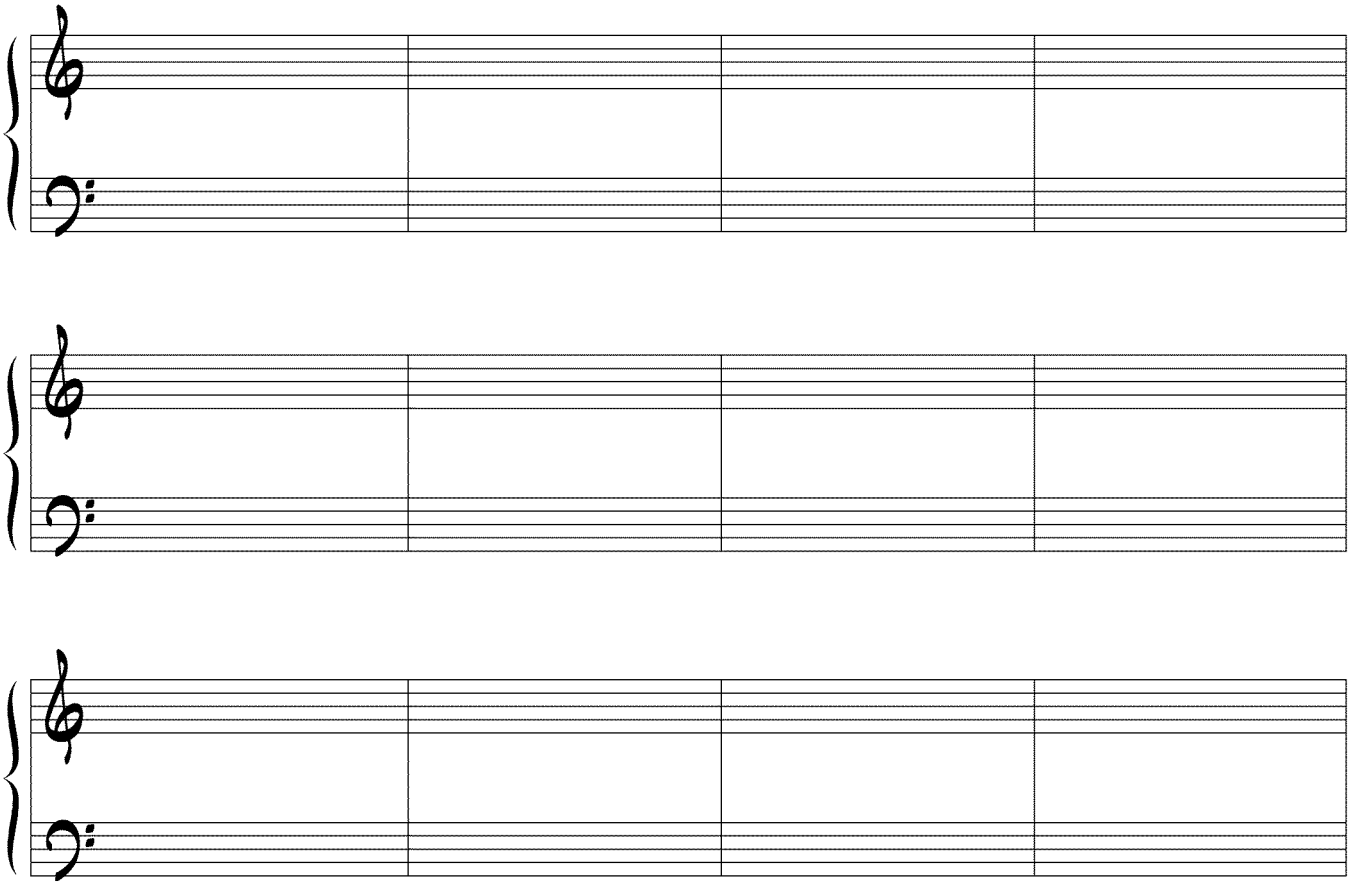
- Avoid too many large jumps. When you do jump, resolve stepwise in the other direction.
- Avoid repeated notes, unless you are doing it for an effect.

If you listen to bass lines by professionals and are willing to experiment, you will develop your own strategies for creating hip lines.

Here is a bass line and right hand chords for a blues in F.

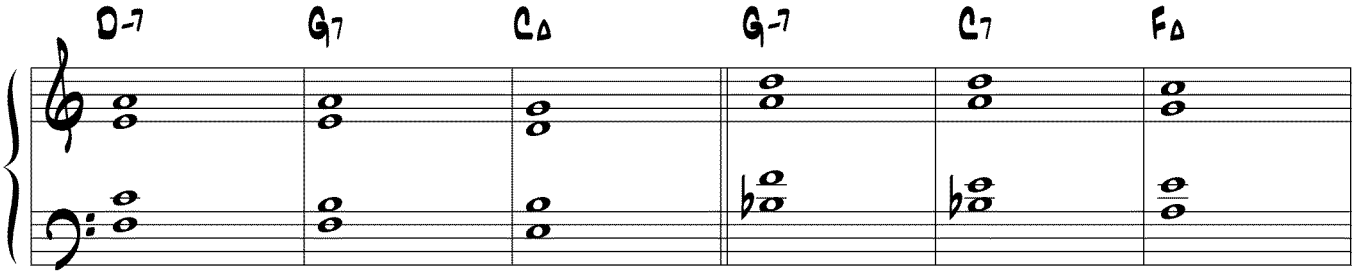


You can create your own with a bass line and right hand chords for a blues.

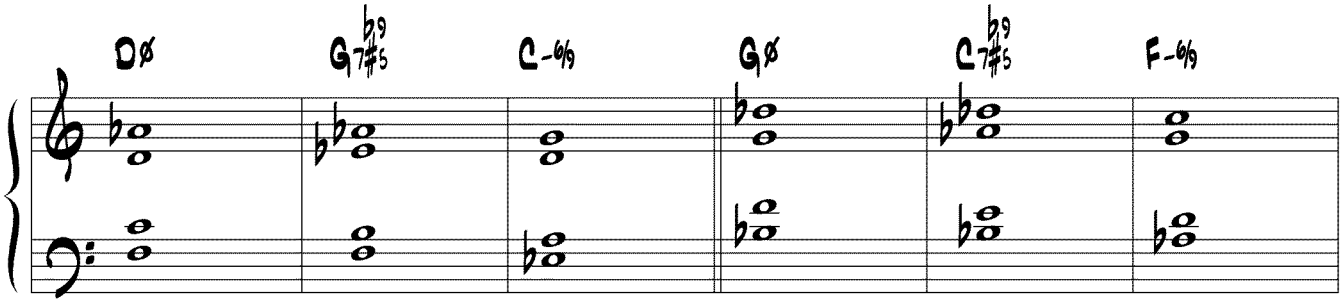


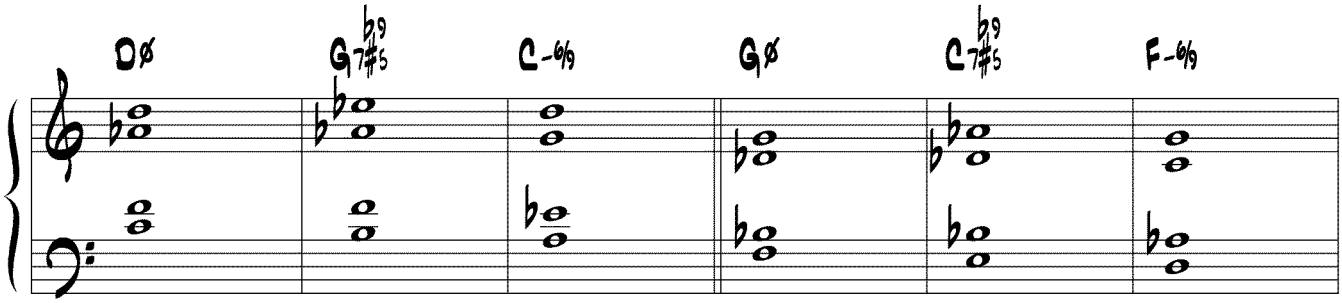
Open Voicings

For open voicings, we can put the 3rd and 7th in the left hand and color tones (6ths, 9ths, and 13ths in the right hand). These voicings are just spread out versions of the earlier 3579 voicings.



Again, these chords can be altered in many ways. These voicings are just good starting places. Also, it is better to master voicings in four keys than to scramble through them in all keys. So, I encourage you to take a few keys or an easy tune and master them in small segments – divide and conquer!





For further study

The Jazz Piano Book by Mark Levine
This book thoroughly explains concepts on theory, chord voicings, and improvisation. It's a great resource. Though I have gone through the book many times, each time I come away from it with different concepts to practice.

Stylistic II/V7/I Voicings for Jazz Keyboardists by Luke Gillespie
This is a fantastic book that contains hundreds of examples of good-sounding voicings. These voicings will help you not only with piano, but also with your writing.

These books and much other information on jazz are available at Jamey Aebersold's website - www.jazzbooks.com