

TUTION TIP: ANALYSING A BOSSA NOVA BASS LINE



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Skill Level:

Analysing a bass line is all about trying to understand why a person played what they did at that time. This is a very valuable skill as anything you discover can be applied to your own playing. This process is how most musicians involved in popular music have gained their skills and refined their sound, learning from past masters, blending and adapting ideas into something new.

Our One-Year Diploma course at Guitar-X has two lessons that deal with analysis: *Bass Stylistics* and *Vocabulary & Improvisation*. In *Bass Stylistics* we look at the essential elements of each style and learn some classic riffs and bass lines, concentrating on sound, feel and also analysing the harmonic and rhythmic information in each example. You then apply this information in *Vocabulary & Improvisation* in creating your own bass lines or improvising in those styles.

As an example, I'm going to look today at a bass line in the *bossa nova* style, as it lends itself well to a rhythmic and harmonic breakdown. The process we use here could be adapted and applied to any other styles of music. For more info on *bossa nova* and other latin bass styles, check out Dave Marks' Style File column from BGM Issue 30.

BOSSA NOVA BLUEPRINT

Bossa nova is a style that evolved in Brazil in the late 50s, and is essentially a slowed down, simplified version of another Brazilian style of music called *samba*. The basic bass line for bossa nova and samba is the same and is shown in example 1 – we can call this our 'blueprint' for bossa nova. This can be broken down and analysed from two angles: rhythmic and harmonic. The rhythmic part is just considering the rhythm separately to the notes, and the harmonic component is describing how the notes used relate to the chord at that time. The chord for this example is D major, and the notes in the bass line are D and A, so this would be described as the root note of the chord, and the 5th of the chord. Using that rhythm and the root and 5th of each chord would be the standard approach for playing any song in a bossa nova style.

Example 1: BOSSA NOVA BLUEPRINT

D



RHYTHMIC INFORMATION



HARMONIC INFORMATION

Root – 5th

THE NEXT STEP

Once you've mastered this basic approach you may wonder what to do next. Sticking to just that rhythm and just the root and 5th may get a bit boring, and there might be times when you want to add more interest to the bass line. There's nothing wrong with experimenting and coming up with your own variations. Another good approach is to analyse someone else's bossa nova bass line to see what they do and get some ideas. One of the most well known Brazilian musicians associated with bossa nova is Antonio Carlos Jobim, and for his 1967 album *Wave*, he used jazz legend Ron Carter on double bass. By transcribing and analysing one of his bass lines, we can get some ideas for how to play in the bossa nova style. I've chosen the first track from the album, also called *Wave*.

ANALYSIS

As there is a very specific blueprint for a bossa nova bass line that Ron Carter would also have been aware of, it is very interesting to see how and when he deviates from this. Kind of like, we know what he 'should' be playing – so when isn't he?! We can compare each bar he plays to the bossa nova blueprint and see how it differs rhythmically and/or harmonically.

BAR 1

RHYTHM – This is the same as the blueprint, apart from he misses out the last quaver (8th note) in the bar and plays a minim (half note) instead.

HARMONY – For the first half of the bar the chord is D minor 7, for which he plays D and another D an octave higher. Both would be considered as a root note. The second half of the bar the chord changes to G dominant 7. He continues to play a D, which in relation to the chord of G7, is the fifth.

BAR 2

RHYTHM – Another variation, this time adding two quavers (8th notes) at the end of the bar. The **HARMONIC** information is the same as bar 1.

Bar 3 is the same as bar 1, and bar 4 is the same as bar 2. To summarise the intro, Ron sticks to the root and 5th, and modifies the bossa nova rhythm, but only in the second half of each bar.

BAR 5

RHYTHM – Same as the variation in bar 1.

HARMONY – The chord is now D major 7 for the whole bar. Ron plays D, the root, and A which is the fifth, the same approach as the blueprint.

BAR 6

RHYTHM – A new variation, but again the first half of the bar is as per the blueprint.

HARMONY – The chord is B flat diminished 7, and Ron plays a B flat to start with, which is the root. He then plays an E, which at first might seem a strange note to play as it is a flat 5 away from B flat, but a diminished 7 chord already contains a flattened 5th, so effectively he is still just playing root and 5th of the chord.

BAR 7

RHYTHM – Finally he has played the rhythm the same as the blueprint!

HARMONY – Ron starts with the root of the A minor 7 chord, but then plays a G sharp which isn't part of the chord. Now we have to try and justify why he played this note – or did he go wrong?! Don't forget about the rhythmic element, as this note is only played for an 8th note – worth half a beat, and directly afterwards he plays another root (A). This could be described as a 'chromatic approach note' – meaning he is just approaching the root from a semitone away, a very common device used in lots of bass lines.

Ron continues in much the same vein, but lets have a look at bar 11. There are two chords in this bar, both are harmonically quite complex. Essentially they are extended and altered versions of a standard dominant 7 chord. What Ron plays is just the root and flat 7th of each chord which really fits in with our role as a bass player – to outline the basic harmony of the piece - let the other instruments worry about the 13s and sharp 5s!

Throughout this analysis I've had to use quite a lot of music theory terminology. This is because theory gives us a way of accurately describing music and therefore communicating those ideas to other people. If your music theory isn't your strong point, this can be a great way to learn, and you can still benefit from analysing bass lines – you might just find them harder to describe in words.

By analysing a bass line, we're getting into the mind of the musician who played it – almost like having our own private lesson or masterclass. So next time you bump into Ron Carter, you could ask him about his approach to playing bossa novas, but you'll probably know a lot of the answers already!

Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like me to cover, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk - see you next time.

ANALYSIS TABLE

	RHYTHM	HARMONY
Bossa Blueprint		Root – 5 th
Bars 1, 3, 5		Root – 5 th
Bars 2, 4		Root – 5 th
Bar 6		Root – 5 th
Bar 11		Root – flat 7 th

♩ = 145

Wave

Antonio Carlos Jobim
Bass - Ron Carter

Chords: Dm⁷ G⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷

Measures 1-4: Bass line with notes and rests, and guitar fretboard with fingerings (7-7, 5, 5-5-5, 5, 5-5-5).

Chords: D^Δ B^bo⁷ A^m7 D7(b⁹)

Measures 5-8: Bass line with notes and rests, and guitar fretboard with fingerings (5, 7-7, 8-8-8, 7, 6, 5, 6-7-7, 7-7-7, 7).

Chords: G^Δ Gm⁶ F#¹³ F#7(#5) F#m⁷ B7(b⁹)

Measures 9-12: Bass line with notes and rests, and guitar fretboard with fingerings (5, 7-7, 5, 7-7, 0, 9, 11, 9, 11, 9, 11, 11, 9, 11).

Chords: E⁹ B^b7 A⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ etc...

Measures 13-16: Bass line with notes and rests, and guitar fretboard with fingerings (9, 9, 7, 7, 8, 6, 7, 0, 3, 5, 5, 0, 3, 5, 0, 3, 3, 0).