Modal Bass Line Modules

We will now take a look at a style of jazz known as modal tunes. Modal tunes are songs built on one or two chord changes that last at least eight bars each. The example we'll use in our study is the 1959 Miles Davis composition entitled So What. So What is a 32 bar tune with an AABA form. Dmi 7 is played over the eight bar A sections and Ebmi7 is played over the B section.

Lets take a look at the challenges we're faced with when playing walking bass lines on modal tunes such as So What. The first challenge is how to walk over one chord for eight measures and play a bass line that has some melodic interest and doesn't just blindly play random notes from the dorian scale. Before we learn how to do this lets take a look at some common mistakes many beginners make. See if this doesn't sound familiar.

Most beginners tend to obscure:

1. The feeling of the downbeat.
2. The 2 or 4 bar (symmetrical) phrase.
3. Landing on the root of the chord on beat one.
4. The form of the song.

Now that we know what the common problems are let's see if we can create some general rules or guidelines that will help us avoid some of these common problems.

Since most beginners tend to obscure the feeling of the downbeat, one commonly used technique is to play the root on beat one of every other bar. This creates the confirmation of the root of the chord on one and the feeling of a two bar phrase. It's also easier to keep your place playing four 2-bar phrases rather than eight 1-bar phrases.

Now let's play through our first example. You should get the feeling of the two-bar phrase, and the feeling of importance the root has on beat one of every other bar.

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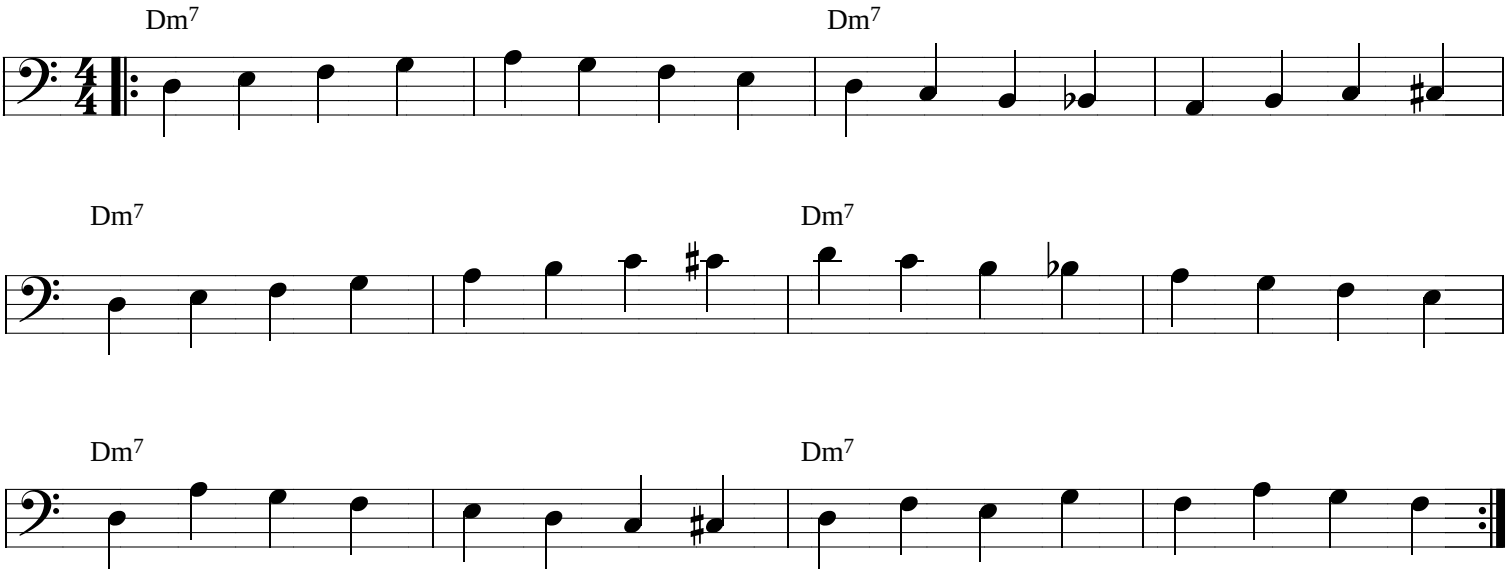
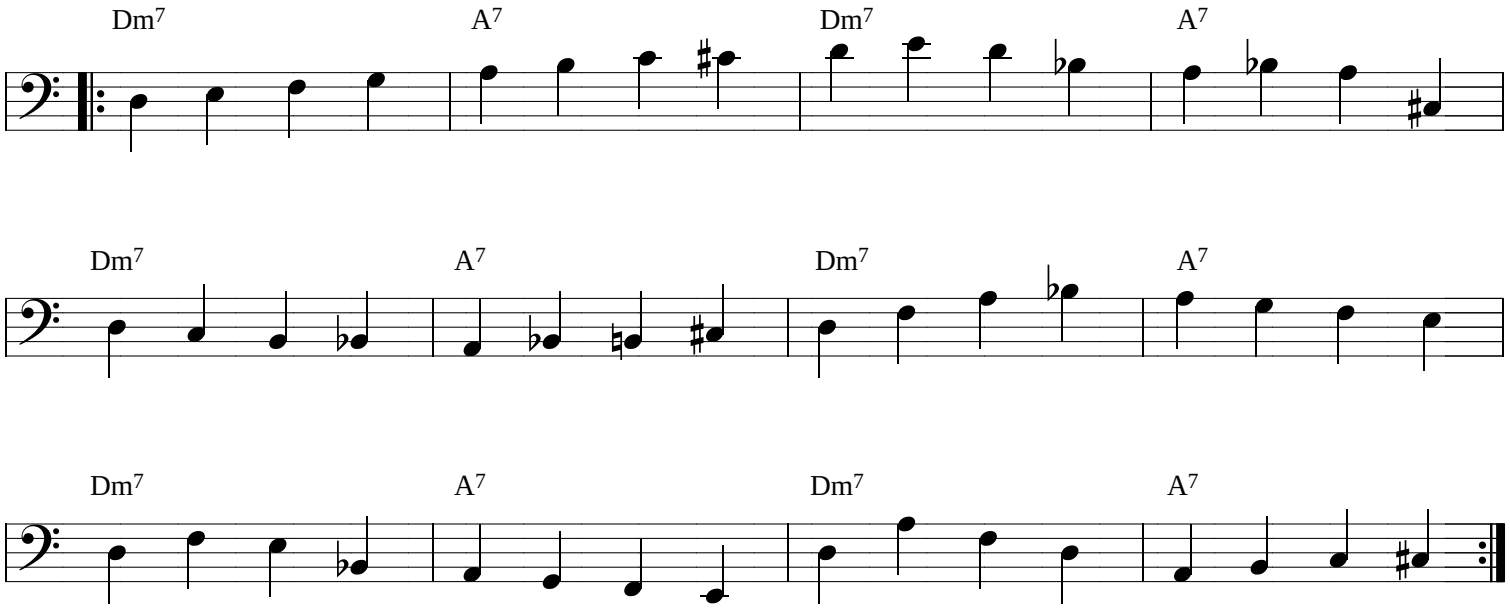


Now that we're comfortable with the root on one of every other bar, we can now place the fifth (A) on beat one of the alternating bars. This solidifies the feeling of the two-bar phrase and implies a V7- I relationship. This technique is also very effective when used on non-modal tunes when the chords last longer than one bar. I'll use an example from "Take the A Train" to illustrate my point.



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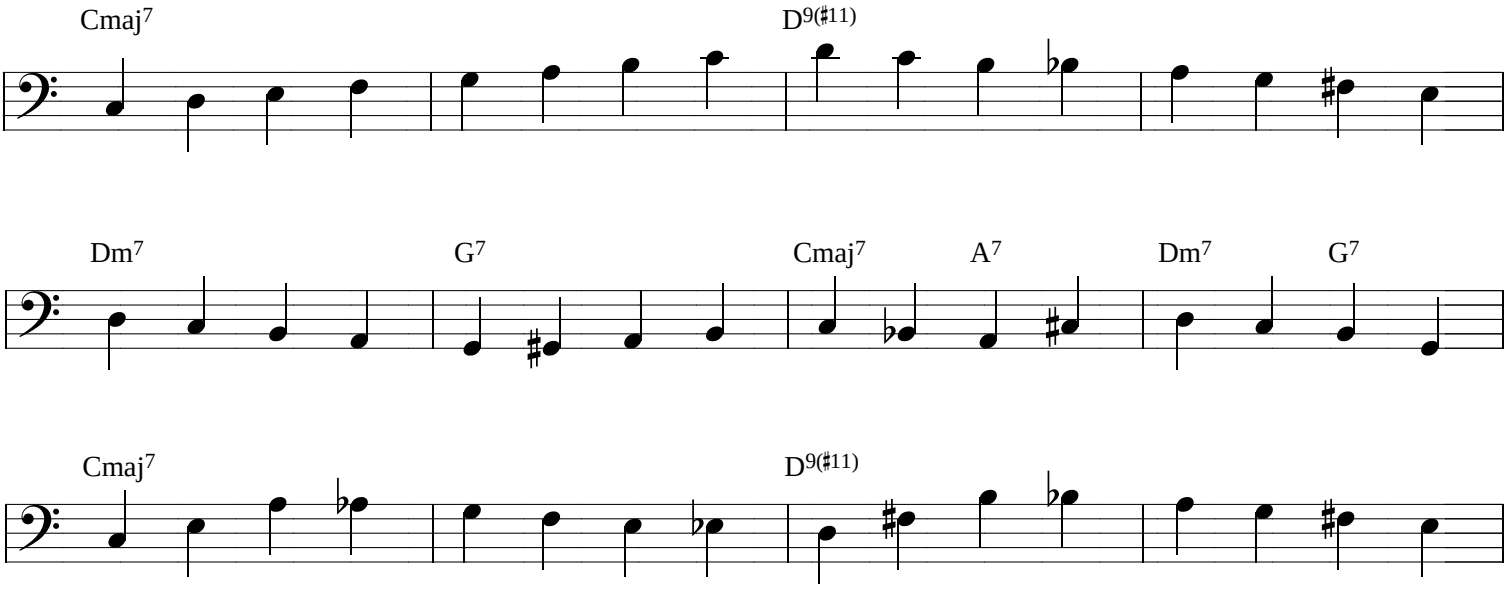
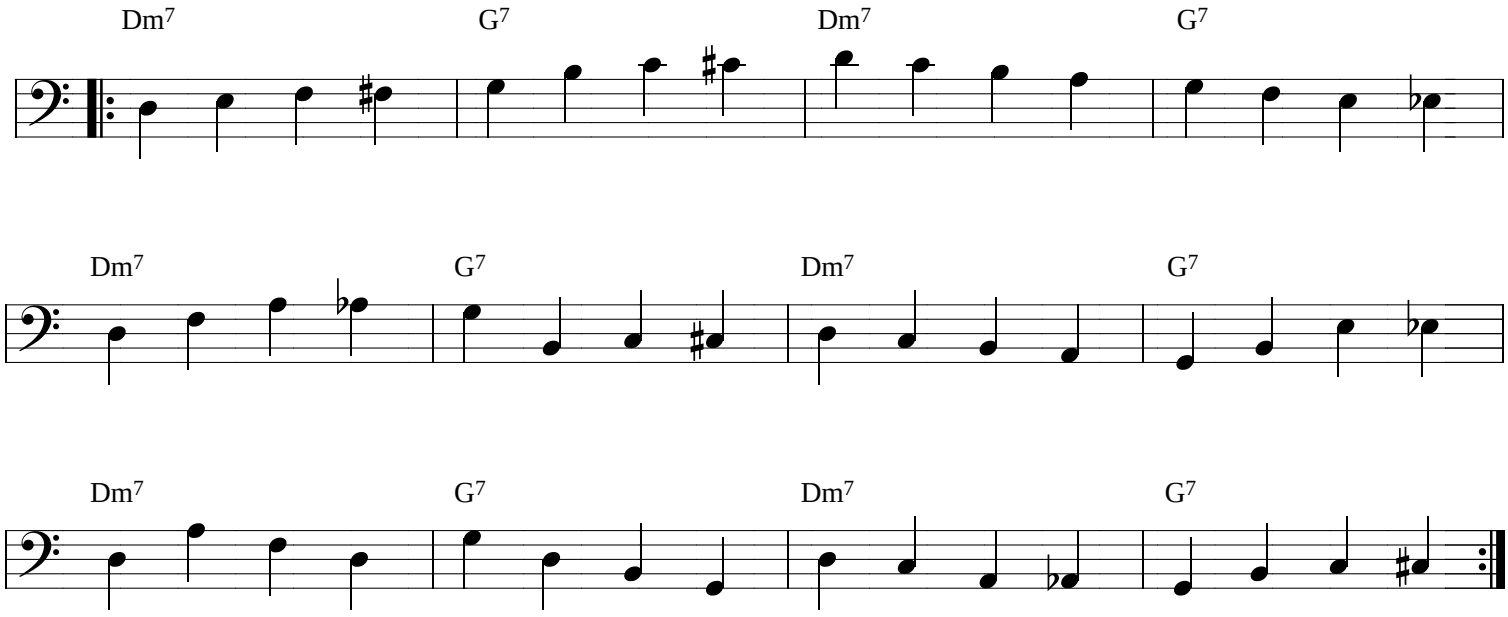
"Take the A Train" example



There are two more techniques commonly used in modal tunes. One is to imply a Dmi7 to G7 sound by playing one bar of Dmi7, then one bar of G7, then alternating them. The other is to imply two beats of Emi7b5, then two beats of A7b9 after Dmi7. This give us a little more movement harmonically by implying a minor ii-v and helps reinforce the importance of the root on beat one and the feeling of the two bar phrase. The following examples illustrate these techniques.



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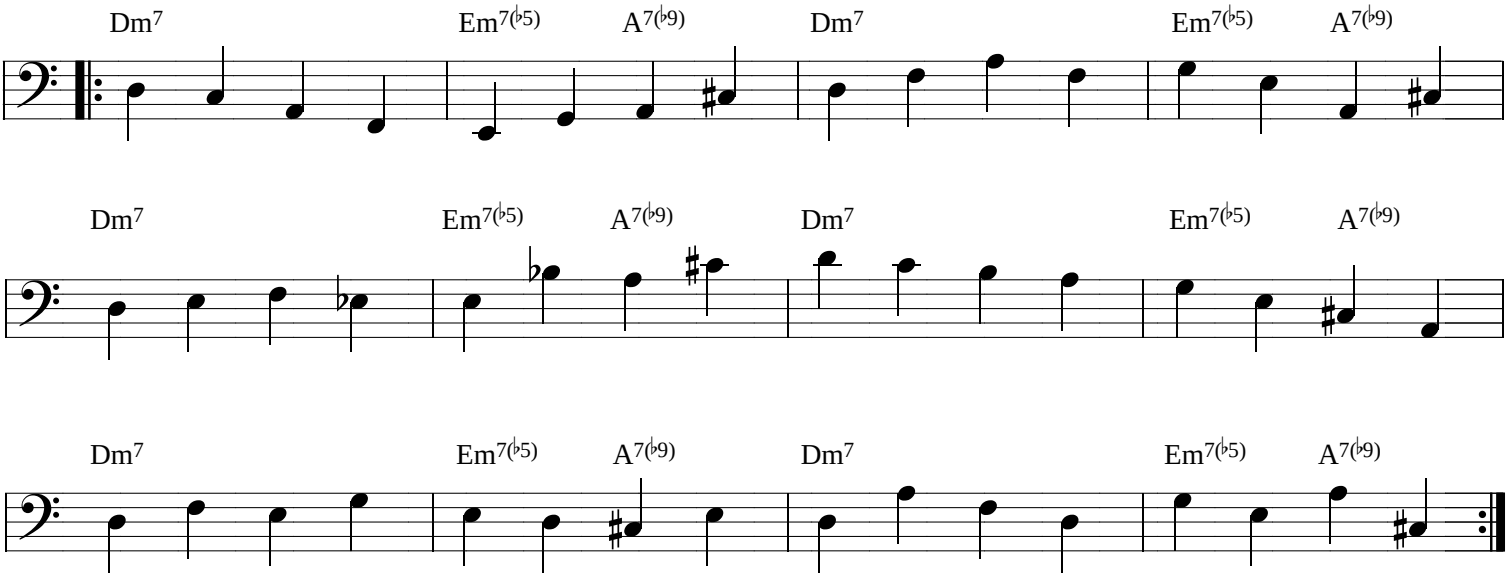
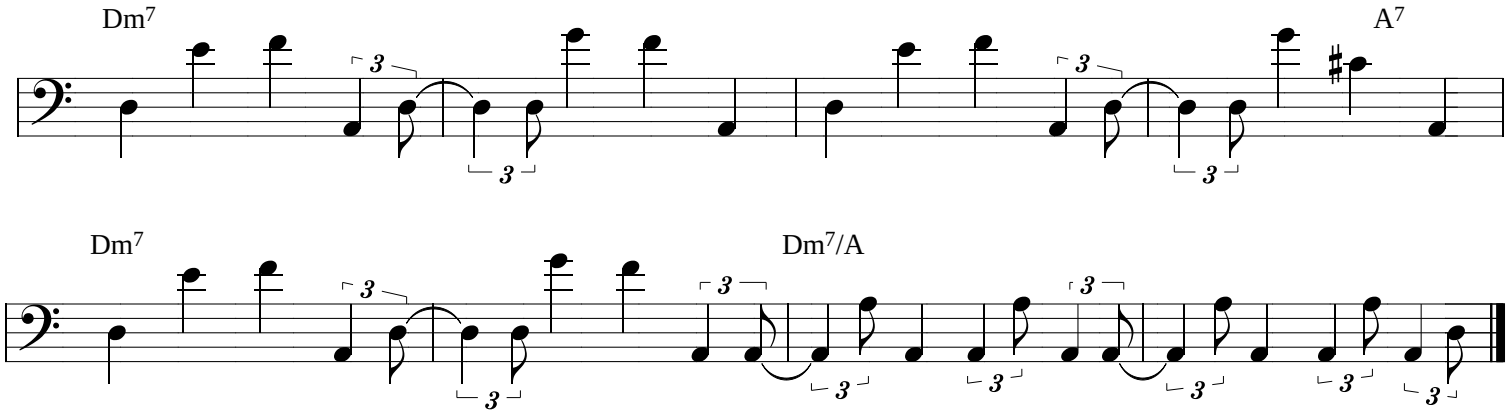


Another challenge created by "So What" is that people get lost in the form. Usually by the third or fourth chorus people start arriving at the bridge (Ebmi7) at different times. If this is a problem then playing an ostinato (repetitive bass line figure) over the last eight bars of the form is a great way to musically tell the other band members that "this is the last eight and we're going back to the top". In addition to the ostinato, playing a pedal "A" in the last two measures is another effective way to mark the form.



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