

WALKING BASS AS MELODIC-FORMAL ACCOMPANIMENT: SELECTED PAUL CHAMBERS HARD-BOP BLUES CLOSE READINGS

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Abstract

This article offers selected close readings of Paul Chambers's walking bass in three late-1950s hard-bop blues recordings: "Bags' Groove" from Hank Mobley's *Hank Mobley*, "Straight, No Chaser" from Miles Davis's *Milestones*, and "Blue Train" from John Coltrane's *Blue Train*. Rather than proposing a general theory of walking bass or a comprehensive account of Chambers's style, the article examines how selected bass lines contribute to melodic continuity, harmonic direction, and formal perception within recorded ensemble performance. It focuses on three modest analytical terms: target orientation, chromatic continuity, and motivic scaling. Target orientation describes how a bass line directs attention toward harmonic or phrase-level arrivals. Chromatic continuity describes how passing tones, approaches, neighbor motions, and occasional enclosure-like figures connect local targets. Motivic scaling describes how small cells, contours, or registral gestures may recur or resemble one another across a phrase. Through a transcription-based close reading approach, the article treats walking bass as melodic-formal accompaniment: a rhythm-section practice that remains supportive while also helping listeners hear motion through the blues form. The argument is deliberately bounded and humanities-oriented, positioning recorded jazz accompaniment as an art object suitable for close analytical interpretation.

Keywords: Paul Chambers; walking bass; hard bop; jazz accompaniment; close reading

Introduction

Walking bass is usually understood as a supporting practice in jazz performance. The bassist keeps time, outlines harmony, connects chord changes, and provides a foundation for soloists and the wider rhythm section. These functions are central to the idiom, but they can also make the walking bass seem analytically secondary: present in the music, yet less often treated as an object of close reading than solos, chord substitutions, or formal design. Existing jazz scholarship has provided strong models for analyzing improvisation, interaction, harmony, and recorded performance, but rhythm-section lines remain comparatively underexplored as melodic-formal objects in their own right (Berliner, 1994; Larson, 2009; Martin, 2018; Monson, 1996; Waters, 2011). This article approaches the walking bass differently. It treats selected Paul Chambers lines not only as accompaniment, but as melodic-formal activity within recorded jazz performance.

The article focuses on three late-1950s hard-bop blues recordings: "Bags' Groove" from Hank Mobley's *Hank Mobley*, "Straight, No Chaser" from Miles Davis's *Milestones*, and "Blue Train" from John Coltrane's *Blue Train*. Hard-bop blues is a useful context for this inquiry because its recurring formal frame allows subtle decisions about bass-line direction, chromatic motion, and phrase placement to be heard clearly (Rosenthal, 1992). These examples are not presented as a complete account of Chambers's style. They are selected case studies that show how walking bass lines may contribute to harmonic direction, melodic continuity, and formal perception while remaining accompanimental.

The argument is deliberately modest. The article does not claim that Chambers's bass lines constitute a general theory of walking bass, nor that accompaniment becomes significant only when it resembles soloistic invention. Instead, it asks how support itself can embody musical

design. Jazz bass pedagogy and theory have long recognized that walking bass involves more than root placement, including chord tones, passing motion, chromatic approaches, registral control, and idiomatic connection (Goldsby, 2002; Levine, 1995; Terefenko, 2018). The present article builds from that practical understanding toward close reading: it asks how those materials are embodied in selected recorded passages.

The article develops three analytical terms: target orientation, chromatic continuity, and motivic scaling. Target orientation refers to how a line directs attention toward harmonic or phrase-level arrivals. Chromatic continuity refers to how passing tones, approach tones, neighbor motions, and occasional enclosure-like figures connect local targets. Motivic scaling refers to how small cells, contours, or registral gestures may recur or resemble one another across a phrase. These terms are used as practical descriptors, not as a closed analytical system. They support a humanities-oriented reading of recorded jazz accompaniment as an art object shaped by line, motion, and ensemble function.

Objectives

This article has four objectives. First, it repositions selected Paul Chambers walking-bass lines as objects of arts-humanities close reading rather than as background harmonic support alone. Second, it examines how three selected passages from “Bags’ Groove,” “Straight, No Chaser,” and “Blue Train” contribute to harmonic direction, melodic continuity, and formal perception within hard-bop blues performance. Third, it defines three practical analytical terms—target orientation, chromatic continuity, and motivic scaling—for describing the line-level work of walking bass accompaniment. Fourth, it offers a bounded interpretation of Chambers’s bass-line construction without claiming to define his complete style or to propose a universal theory of walking bass.

Literature Review

Jazz musicians and pedagogues have long recognized walking bass as more than a sequence of roots. Practical accounts of jazz bass playing commonly emphasize pulse, harmonic outlining, chord tones, stepwise connection, chromatic

approaches, register, and idiomatic line construction (Goldsby, 2002; Levine, 1995; Terefenko, 2018). These sources are useful because they describe the working materials that bassists use to construct lines. However, they often approach walking bass primarily as a performance skill or theoretical technique rather than as an object of close humanities-oriented interpretation. The present article builds on that practical literature while asking a narrower analytical question: how do selected Chambers lines make harmonic and formal motion audible in recorded performance?

Jazz studies and jazz theory offer further tools for this question. Berliner (1994) frames improvisation as a learned and situated practice rather than as unstructured spontaneity. Monson (1996) shows that rhythm-section interaction is central to how jazz musicians create meaning in performance. Rosenthal (1992) situates hard bop within a mid-century musical culture in which blues, groove, harmonic fluency, and ensemble drive were closely connected. Studies of jazz analysis and recorded performance also show how transcription can support detailed interpretation of improvised musical materials (Larson, 2009; Martin, 2018; Waters, 2011). Taken together, these sources justify treating Chambers’s walking bass as a serious analytical object rather than as background infrastructure.

Recent research strengthens this case by bringing renewed attention to bass lines, groove, and ensemble process. Riley and Dixon’s FiloBass project offers a manually verified corpus of professional jazz bass-line transcriptions, with metadata including beats, downbeats, chord symbols, and form markers, and explicitly frames double bass accompaniment as an important but often overlooked part of jazz performance (Riley & Dixon, 2023). Shiga and Kitahara (2021) approach walking bass computationally, modeling pitch-class and metric-position tendencies in generated jazz bass lines. Although the present article is not computational, this work confirms that walking bass can be studied through patterns of pitch, meter, chord relations, and phrase function rather than solely through general stylistic description.

Recent groove and rhythm studies are also relevant because walking bass operates inside performed time rather than as pitch structure alone. Jacobsen and Danielsen (2023) argue that timing perception in jazz-related groove performance is shaped not only by rhythmic placement but also by sonic features such as timbre, intensity, and articulation. Duman et al. (2024) define groove as a participatory experience shaped by time-related, pitch-related, performance-related, and listener-related factors. These studies support the broader premise that accompaniment and groove are not neutral background conditions. They are active components of how listeners experience musical motion, participation, and ensemble meaning.

This article is also located within recent research on rhythm, ensemble pedagogy, and structural listening. Seow (2025a) argues that rhythm pedagogy in higher music education should be understood through plural groove practices, embodied listening, and culturally situated rhythmic fluency rather than through a narrow notation-centered model. Seow (2026a) treats pocket as a teachable ensemble design pattern involving specific listening, technical awareness, role clarity, and macro-level orientation. Seow (2026b) examines how disrupted periodicity and constraints in intercultural listening can reshape jazz-oriented formal perception. These studies are not used here as direct evidence about Chambers, but they help situate the present article within a current research concern: how musicians hear, organize, and evaluate motion through rhythm-section and ensemble practice.

This body of literature can be expanded further without making the present article depend on it directly. Seow's related research on aural skills, creative health, world-percussion study, patch literacy, genre-inclusive curriculum design, evaluative judgement, and ensemble pedagogy repeatedly treats rhythm, listening, role awareness, and musical motion as practice-led and practice-based objects of inquiry (Seow, 2024, 2025b, 2025c, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e). These sources do not function as evidence about Chambers, but they strengthen the paper's current research location: walking bass is being read as part of a wider

concern with how musicians hear, organize, and coordinate motion in ensemble settings. Recent empirical work on jazz swing also supports this broader concern, showing that perceived jazz motion depends partly on timing relationships and rhythm-section reference rather than notated pitch alone (Nelias et al., 2022).

This recent literature matters because Chambers's walking bass is not being treated here merely as harmonic spelling. The selected passages involve harmonic direction, melodic connection, phrase placement, recurrence, and ensemble function. These concerns overlap with current work on groove, structural listening, rhythm-section interaction, bass-line data, and formal perception. A walking line may state chord tones, but it may also direct attention, sustain continuity, and create phrase-level coherence. This is why a close reading of Chambers's bass lines can contribute to arts-humanities research even when the object of study is highly specific.

The gap, therefore, is not the absence of writing on jazz, bass, groove, or improvisation. The gap is more specific. Existing scholarship gives strong accounts of improvisation, interaction, rhythm-section practice, walking-bass construction, and groove perception, while recent work has begun to treat bass-line data and ensemble fluency more directly. What remains useful is a modest close reading of selected Paul Chambers walking-bass passages as melodic-formal accompaniment. This article addresses that gap by examining how target orientation, chromatic continuity, and motivic scaling operate in three hard-bop blues recordings.

Theoretical Framework

This article uses a concise analytical framework based on three terms: target orientation, chromatic continuity, and motivic scaling. These terms are not intended as a general theory of walking bass. They are practical descriptors for close reading selected recorded passages.

Target orientation refers to how a walking bass line directs attention toward harmonic or phrase-level arrivals. A target may be a root, but it may also be a third, fifth, seventh, registral arrival, delayed resolution, or phrase-positioned chord

tone. This is important because walking bass should not be reduced to a mechanical rule of placing roots on strong beats. Practical jazz theory and bass pedagogy recognize the importance of chord tones, passing tones, and idiomatic connection, but a close reading must ask how these materials function in a specific passage (Goldsby, 2002; Levine, 1995; Terefenko, 2018).

Chromatic continuity refers to how passing tones, approach tones, neighbor motions, and occasional enclosure-like figures connect local targets. The term is used carefully. Not every semitone is an enclosure, and not every chromatic note carries the same structural weight. A chromatic note may smooth a local connection, prepare a chord tone, delay a resolution, or contribute to a longer directed line. The analysis, therefore, identifies chromatic function only where it can be related to a specific target or phrase-level motion.

Motivic scaling refers to how small cells, contours, or registral gestures may recur or resemble one another across a phrase. In walking bass, a motive does not necessarily need to be a foreground theme or a fully developed melodic subject. A short contour, neighbor-note figure, intervallic shape, or registral ascent may create coherence if it recurs, adapts, or appears in a recognizable form. This concept allows the analysis to describe local recurrence without overstating it as large-scale motivic development. Together, these terms support the article's central claim: selected Chambers walking-bass passages can be heard as melodic-formal accompaniment. The bass line remains supportive while simultaneously helping listeners hear arrival, continuity, recurrence, and motion within the blues form. The framework is therefore deliberately modest. It is designed for close reading of the selected examples, not for classifying Chambers's complete style.

Methodology

This article uses a transcription-based close reading approach to three selected Paul Chambers walking-bass excerpts. The corpus consists of "Bags' Groove" from Hank Mobley's *Hank Mobley*, "Straight, No Chaser" from Miles Davis's *Milestones*, and "Blue Train" from John

Coltrane's *Blue Train*. These recordings were selected because they place Chambers's walking bass within related but contrasting hard-bop blues contexts: a medium-tempo F-blues setting, a faster F-blues performance, and an E-flat blues framework associated with a larger hard-bop ensemble texture (Blue Note Records, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Discogs, n.d.; Miles Davis Official Site, n.d.).

The study does not seek to provide a full corpus analysis of Chambers's recorded output. Instead, it uses three short notated excerpts as case studies. Each example is examined in relation to chord symbols, measure position, phrase function, contour, and local bass-line behavior. The analysis asks how the bass line directs attention toward arrivals, connects local targets, and creates recurrence or resemblance across short spans. This method follows the broader use of transcription in jazz analysis, in which recorded musical materials are notated to support close interpretation while remaining accountable to listening (Larson, 2009; Martin, 2018; Waters, 2011).

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, each excerpt is read against its local harmonic area and formal position. This identifies points of target orientation, including roots, non-root chord tones, delayed arrivals, and phrase-positioned tones. Second, the line is examined for chromatic continuity, including passing tones, approach tones, neighbor motions, and enclosure-like figures, only where these can be connected to a specific target. Third, the analysis considers whether short cells, contours, or registral gestures recur or resemble one another across the phrase.

The method is deliberately limited. It does not claim to reconstruct Chambers's intention, nor does it claim that every note in the selected examples is formally significant. It also does not treat the bass line as independent of the ensemble. Where relevant, the analysis considers the possibility that piano, horns, or the wider ensemble texture may provide harmonic and formal markers that affect how the bass line is heard. The purpose is not to isolate Chambers from the recording context, but to ask how his walking bass participates in that context as melodic-formal accompaniment.

Data Presentation

The data for this article consists of three short transcription excerpts from Paul Chambers's recorded walking-bass performances. Each excerpt is treated as a selected case rather than as evidence for a comprehensive account of Chambers's style. The examples are presented in the order in which they are discussed below.

Example 1. Paul Chambers, "Bags' Groove," mm. 1–12, from Hank Mobley's *Hank Mobley*, beginning at approximately 0:41. Transcription by the authors.

Example 1 shows a transcription of Paul Chambers' walking bass line for "Bags' Groove" (mm. 1–12). The notation is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and B-flat major. The first staff (mm. 1–4) features chords F7, Bb7, F7, and F7. The second staff (mm. 5–8) features chords Bb7, Bb7, F7, Am7, and D7. The third staff (mm. 9–12) features chords Gm7, C7, F7, D7, Gm7, and C7.

Example 2. Paul Chambers, "Straight, No Chaser," mm. 57–68, from Miles Davis's *Milestones*, beginning at approximately 1:14. Transcription by the authors.

Example 2 shows a transcription of Paul Chambers' walking bass line for "Straight, No Chaser" (mm. 57–68). The notation is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and B-flat major. The first staff (mm. 57–60) features chords Gm7, C7, F7, and F7. The second staff (mm. 61–64) features chords F7, F7, F7, and F7. The third staff (mm. 65–68) features chords Bb7, Bb7, F7, and F7.

Example 3. Paul Chambers, "Blue Train," mm. 13–20, from John Coltrane's *Blue Train*, beginning at

approximately 0:58. Transcription by the authors.



The examples are used to support three linked readings. Example 1 is used to discuss target orientation in a hard-bop blues setting. Example 2 is used to discuss chromatic continuity across a phrase-level span. Example 3 is used to discuss motivic scaling, cell recurrence, and registral movement. The examples are not intended as complete transcriptions of the recordings. They are short excerpts selected to make the article's analytical claims visible and testable.

Discussion of Findings

Target Orientation

The analysis indicates a form of target orientation in Example 1, "Bags' Groove," but not through a simple rule of placing roots on every important downbeat. The line begins inside an F-blues environment and moves through F7, B-flat7, A minor 7–D7, and G minor 7–C7 areas. Across the excerpt, Chambers uses roots, thirds, fifths, stepwise continuation, and phrase-positioned arrivals to keep the harmonic motion audible. The analysis indicates that the bass does not need to state every chord in full. Rather, the line provides enough directed information for the listener to hear the form as moving.

The most important moment is m. 5. Under B-flat7, Chambers does not place B-flat on the downbeat. Instead, the measure begins D–F–F–C. D and F are chord tones of B-flat7, so the bar is not harmonically empty. At the same time, F and C also retain continuity with the preceding F7 area. This means the bass line does not single-handedly announce the subdominant through a root. Its function depends partly on the ensemble context. If the pianist or horns clearly articulate B-flat7, Chambers's line participates in the move by supplying non-root chord tones within the new harmony. If the surrounding texture is more ambiguous, the same D–F–F–C motion may also be heard as carrying residual F7 continuity into the B-flat7 area. This is precisely why "target

orientation" is a better term than "root placement."

The passage, therefore, clarifies form through several types of arrival. Some measures use roots or stable chord tones directly. Others use non-root chord tones to indicate harmonic quality. Still others create continuity through a change before more strongly confirming the new area. In this sense, the bass line helps keep the blues form intelligible not by mechanically marking every chord, but by balancing harmonic information with melodic continuity. The line supports the ensemble while also shaping how the listener hears motion from one blues area to the next.

Chromatic Continuity

Example 2 shows chromatic continuity in "Straight, No Chaser." The excerpt moves through G minor 7, C7, F7, and B-flat7 areas across a later phrase-level span of the performance. Because this is a faster F-blues setting, the line has to maintain forward motion while keeping the harmonic path clear. Chambers does this through a mixture of chord tones, stepwise motion, chromatic approaches, and neighbor motions.

The important point is that the chromatic notes do not all do the same thing. Some function as passing tones between more stable chord tones. Others approach a chord tone from above or below. Some behave as neighbor motions that momentarily color or delay a target. Only a smaller number should be understood as enclosure-like, and only where the target is approached from both sides.

This distinction matters because calling every semitone an enclosure would overstate the evidence and flatten the analysis.

In the G minor 7 and C7 portions of the excerpt, Chambers's line projects motion toward the F7 area rather than simply listing chord tones. The local chromaticism helps bridge the ii–V motion into F7. Once the line settles into the F7 span, chromatic lower and upper approaches help sustain motion within what could otherwise become a static tonic-dominant area. Later, the movement into B-flat7 is prepared not simply by a root announcement, but by line direction and approach behavior. The listener hears the bass moving through the form because the chromatic events connect targets into a longer path.

This is chromatic continuity: chromaticism functioning as a connection rather than decoration alone. It does not mean that every chromatic pitch is structurally important. It means that, in this passage, selected chromatic events help Chambers maintain direction across the phrase. The line traces the changes, but it also creates a sense of directed travel within the blues form.

Motivic Scaling

Example 3 shows motivic scaling in “Blue Train.” The passage does not present a fully developed motive in the sense of a foreground theme. A safer description is that it contains recurring cells, contoural resemblance, and registral movement. These are enough to create phrase-level coherence without turning the bass line into a soloistic subject.

The excerpt moves through E-flat7 and A-flat7 areas before returning toward E-flat7 and then C7. Throughout the passage, Chambers uses short, repeated, or resemblance-based figures: small chromatic-neighbor motions, rising gestures, and contourally similar cells. These gestures are not always literal repetitions. Some recur as adapted shapes rather than exact motives. The analytical claim should therefore remain modest: the passage shows motivic resemblance and cell recurrence, not large-scale motivic development.

The registral movement is also important. In the second half of the excerpt, the line rises into a higher register before descending again. This

ascent gives the phrase a local intensification, while the later descent helps return the line toward a more grounded accompanimental register. The effect is not a dramatic thematic transformation. It is a smaller-scale process in which recurring shapes and register help the walking line cohere across several measures.

Motivic scaling is useful here because it names something between formula and theme. Chambers may be drawing on idiomatic walking-bass vocabulary, but the placement and recurrence of that vocabulary still matter. A small chromatic cell or rising contour can serve a local voice-leading function while also giving the phrase a recognizable shape. In this sense, Example 3 supports the article's claim that walking bass can be melodic-formal without ceasing to be accompanimental.

Synthesis of Findings

The three examples show different but related aspects of Chambers's walking-bass practice. Example 1 shows that target orientation is broader than root placement. Example 2 shows that chromatic motion can connect targets into phrase-level continuity. Example 3 shows that small cells, contours, and registral gestures can create motivic resemblance across a short span. Together, these findings support the article's central claim: selected Chambers walking-bass passages can be heard as melodic-formal accompaniment.

This claim remains bounded. The examples do not prove a complete theory of Chambers's bass language. They do not show that every walking bass line has the same structure. They also do not isolate the bass from the ensemble. Instead, they show that accompaniment can participate in formal perception. Chambers's lines help listeners hear where the music is, how it moves, and how local gestures connect across the blues form.

The value of the three terms is therefore practical. Target orientation names arrival. Chromatic continuity names connection. Motivic scaling names recurrence and resemblance. Used together, they offer a concise vocabulary for close reading walking bass as line-based musical activity. The bass line remains supportive, but

support is not passive. In these selected passages, accompaniment becomes one way that musical motion is organized and heard.

Conclusion

This article has offered selected close readings of Paul Chambers's walking bass in three late-1950s hard-bop blues recordings. Its claim is deliberately bounded. It does not present a complete theory of Chambers's style, a comprehensive account of hard-bop bass playing, or a universal model of walking bass. Instead, it shows how selected Chambers lines can be heard as melodic-formal accompaniment: supportive rhythm-section lines that also help listeners perceive harmonic direction, melodic continuity, and motion through blues form.

The three analytical terms proposed here name different aspects of that process. Target orientation describes how a walking bass line directs attention toward harmonic or phrase-level arrivals without depending only on root placement. Chromatic continuity describes how passing tones, approaches, neighbor motions, and enclosure-like figures can connect local targets into directed motion. Motivic scaling describes how small cells, contours, and registral gestures may recur or resemble one another across a phrase. These terms

are not intended as a closed system. They are practical tools for close reading.

The analysis also shows why ensemble context matters. Chambers's bass line does not operate in isolation from piano, horns, drums, or the wider recorded texture. In some cases, such as the B-flat7 area in "Bags' Groove," the bass may participate in a harmonic move through non-root chord tones while other instruments help clarify the formal location. This does not weaken the argument. It strengthens it by showing that walking bass contributes to formal perception as part of an ensemble process.

The article's contribution is therefore modest but useful. It treats recorded jazz accompaniment as an art object suitable for close analytical interpretation. In the selected examples, Chambers's walking bass does not merely outline the blues. It shapes how motion through the blues is heard.

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Generative AI assistance was used for language editing, structural revision, formatting checks, and reference-audit support during manuscript preparation. The authors reviewed all content, verified the cited sources, and remain fully responsible for the final manuscript.

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