

Ballad Comping with Bass

The previous examples of comping are mainly intended for tunes taken at a medium tempo. Playing ballads with a bass player is a little different. We need to be very aware of our ‘time’, because it’s so easy to speed up. And yet, we need to cover for the lack of aural atmosphere that a drummer often provides. I was surprised in going back to listen to a couple of piano/bass CD’s I did with the ⁵⁰*missus*, Wesla Whitfield, how often I played ‘4 in the bar’ with my left hand. If I’d sat down to intellectually think out a comping strategy for playing ballads, I probably would not have imagined that I would play that much on the beat - almost like a rhythm guitar. But there I was, using quite minimalist chords and saving the right hand for subtle melodic fills. Here’s how that looks on the page.

Example 5a

Ballad ♩ = 60 He Was Too Good To Me - Rodgers & Hart

The musical score for 'He Was Too Good To Me' is presented in three staves: voice, piano, and bass. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D-flat minor) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked as Ballad ♩ = 60. The lyrics are: 'He was too good to me, How can I get a-long now?'. The piano part features a right hand with melodic fills and a left hand with block chords. The bass part provides a steady accompaniment with some triplet figures. Chord symbols are placed above the voice and bass staves: A^bMA⁷, D^bMA⁷, CMI⁷, F⁷(#5), B^bMI⁹, E^b7_{SUS}, and E^b7.

The left hand needs to be legato and yet detached! Notice that I didn’t fill in the first two measures melodically and that’s because I wasn’t sure when Wesla was going to come in! She was singing way behind the beat, and I didn’t want to step on her entry when it finally did come. Here’s how the tune is written and harmonized originally, so you can understand why I was waiting for her entrance. The melody starts on beat 1 of bar 1, and Wesla didn’t start singing until the ‘and of 1’ in bar 2. There’s one thing you don’t want to do, and that’s step on the vocalist’s opening lines!

Example 5b

Chord symbols: A^b , $B^b_{MI}7$, E^b13

Lyrics: He was too good — to me. How can I get a - long now.

This minimalist approach to the start of the tune actually creates a wonderfully mysterious atmosphere, and has the audience wondering what's about to happen next. Remember, even though we, as accompanists, are playing music instrumentally, we're also in the story-telling business, and we can learn much from all the little dramatic tricks that playwrights, actors and directors use to create tension and release.

When the ballad is more bluesy, which often happens in the jazz oeuvre, our approach can be more rhythmic, even though the tempo is slow. This is also an effective approach when we're implying a ⁵¹*double-time feel*. But be careful. Another of my pet peeves that I hear much too often, is the constant doubling of tempos in jazz ballads — most egregiously when the bass takes it up and starts walking in the double tempo! What's the point? But I digress yet again.... because, of course, the *implying* of double-time feel can be very exciting. Here's an example of that on the minor key ballad "You Don't Know What Love Is."

Example 6

You Don't Know What Love Is - Don Raye & Gene De Paul

Bluesy Ballad ♩ = 60 (12/8 feel)

Chord symbols: $F_{MI}6/9$, $D_{MI}7(b5)$, $G7(b9)$, $C7$, $F_{MI}9$, $G^b9(\#11)$, D^b9

Voice lyrics: You don't know what love is, — un-til you've learn'd the mean - ing of the blues. un