

charlie parker for bass 20 heads sax solos arranged for electric bass with tab

Published: September 27, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Charlie Parker for Bass: 20 Heads of Sax Solos Arranged for Electric Bass with Tab

Charlie Parker, the legendary alto saxophonist, left an indelible mark on jazz with his rapid-fire improvisations, harmonic daring, and melodic invention. While his music is traditionally associated with saxophones, the electric bass—an instrument that anchors harmony and rhythm—has emerged as a powerful medium for reimagining Parker's iconic solos. In this guide, we explore the art of arranging 20 heads of Charlie Parker's sax solos for electric bass, complete with tablature that lets bassists of all levels dive into the bebop vocabulary.

Why Bassists Should Explore Charlie Parker's Solos

Jazz bassists often look to the horn players for melodic inspiration, and Parker's solos offer a wealth of melodic ideas, rhythmic motifs, and harmonic twists. By transcribing and arranging his lines for bass, musicians gain:

- Harmonic insight: Parker's use of chromatic passing tones and secondary dominants becomes clearer when played on a single instrument.
- Rhythmic agility: The fast, syncopated phrases sharpen a bassist's sense of groove and timing.
- Melodic development: Learning how Parker constructs phrases helps bassists write more compelling lines of their own.
- Historical appreciation: Engaging directly with the material deepens understanding of bebop's evolution.

What Does "20 Heads" Mean?

A *head* is the main theme or melody of a jazz tune. When we talk about "20 heads," we refer to a collection of 20 distinct Charlie Parker tunes—each with its own head—that will be transcribed and arranged for electric bass. Examples include "Ornithology," "Now's the Time," "Donna Lee," and "Yardbird Suite." These pieces represent a cross section of Parker's output, from early bebop to later hard bop explorations.

The Challenge of Arranging Sax Solos for Bass

Transcribing a saxophone solo to bass isn't simply a matter of moving the notes down an octave. Several factors must be considered:

1. Range and register: The saxophone's range (approximately A₃ to E₆) is higher than the electric bass's typical range (E₁ to G₄). Transpositions are necessary to keep the lines playable.
2. Technical feasibility: Rapid arpeggios and wide intervallic leaps common in Parker's solos may require adjustments to fit the bassist's hand span and plucking technique.
3. Harmonic context: Bassists often provide harmonic support; the arrangement must balance melodic lines with the underlying chord progression.
4. Rhythmic feel: The bass's role in driving the groove means that certain rhythmic patterns may be altered to maintain the swing feel.

Key Steps in the Arrangement Process

1. Listen and isolate: Use high quality recordings and isolate the solo track if possible. Focus on the melodic contour.
2. Transcribe the melody: Write the notes in standard notation or directly into tablature, noting rhythmic values.
3. Transposition: Shift the solo down by one or two octaves to fit the bass's comfortable range.
4. Adjust technical passages: Replace impossible leaps with stepwise motion or double stop equivalents.
5. Integrate harmony: Add root notes or arpeggios that outline the chord changes beneath the solo.
6. Polish the rhythm: Ensure the groove remains intact, perhaps by adding syncopated walking bass lines.
7. Write tablature: Convert the final arrangement into clear, legible tabs for bass players.

Tablature Basics for Bassists

Tabs provide a visual representation of where to place fingers on the fretboard. For electric bass, standard notation is often supplemented by **tablature** to show exact positions. Below is a quick refresher on reading bass tabs:

- Strings: Each line represents a string—E (1st), A (2nd), D (3rd), G (4th).
- Numbers: Indicate the fret to play. 0 means open string.
- Rhythm: Tabs typically do not show rhythm; you must refer to the accompanying notation or audio.
- Slides, bends, and harmonics: Use s, b, and h to denote slides, bends, and harmonics.

Example: “Ornithology” – Head Tab

Below is a simplified tab of the opening head of “Ornithology.” Notice the use of slurs and syncopation typical of Parker’s style.

```
G |-----|
D |-----|
A |--0---2---4---5---4---2---0-----|
E |-----|
```

Feel free to experiment with the groove by adding walking bass patterns underneath.

Arranging 20 Heads: A Practical Guide

We’ll walk through a step by step example using the tune “Now’s the Time.” You can apply the same methodology to the other 19 heads in the collection.

Step 1: Identify the Harmonic Structure

“Now’s the Time” follows a 12 bar blues progression in the key of C. The chord changes are:

```
| C7 | C7 | C7 | C7 |
| F7 | F7 | C7 | C7 |
| G7 | F7 | C7 | G7 |
```

Step 2: Transcribe the Head

Listen to the head and write down the melody. For illustration, the opening phrase in the original key is:

E&m5 E&m5 D5 D&m5 C5 B&m4 A&m4

Step 3: Transpose to Bass Range

Move the notes down two octaves. The transposed line becomes:

E&m3 E&m3 D3 D&m3 C3 B&m2 A&m2

Step 4: Adapt for Playability

Replace the E&m3–E&m3 double note with a slide or double stop. The resulting line might look like:

E&m3 E&m3 (slide to D3) D&m3 C3 B&m2 A&m2

Step 5: Add Harmonic Support

While the melodic line sits above the root notes, incorporate walking bass patterns that outline the chord changes. For example, during the C7 bar, play a walking line that moves from C to E&m to G.

Step 6: Write the Tab

Here's the final tab for the head of "Now's the Time."

```
G |-----|
D |-----|
A |--3---3---2---1---0---0---0---0-----|
E |-----|
```

Use this as a template for the remaining 19 heads.

Learning Strategies for Bassists

Transcribing and arranging Parker's solos can be daunting. Below are proven strategies to make the process smoother and more effective.

1. Start with Slow Practice

Play each head at a quarter of the original tempo. This allows you to focus on accuracy and technique.

2. Use a Metronome

Maintain a steady pulse. Begin with a metronome setting of 60 bpm and gradually increase as you master the phrases.

3. Break the Solo into Phrases

Charlie Parker's solos are often structured in four bar phrases. Practice each phrase separately before linking them.

4. Record Yourself

Listening back helps identify mistakes and assess your phrasing, timing, and tonal quality.

5. Study the Original Recordings

Pay attention to Parker's articulation—short, staccato notes, and his use of silence. Try to emulate these nuances on the bass.

6. Explore Alternative Fingerings

Sometimes a single line can be played in multiple ways. Experiment with different positions to find the most comfortable option.

7. Incorporate Pedal Tones

Adding a pedal tone (a sustained note under a melodic line) can give your arrangement a jazz authentic feel.

Resources for Further Study

- Transcription Software: Transcribe! or Amazing Slow Downer can help isolate solos.
- Tab Databases: JazzBass.com offers a collection of jazz bass tabs, including Parker's work.
- Instructional Books: "The Jazz Bass" by John Goldsby covers bebop theory and transcriptions.
- Online Courses: Berklee's "Bebop Bass" course dives into the language of Parker and his contemporaries.
- Forums: The Bass Player Forum has threads on arranging sax solos for bass.

Conclusion

Arranging Charlie Parker's 20 heads of sax solos for electric bass with tab is an enriching endeavor that bridges the melodic world of saxophones with the harmonic backbone of the bass. By following a systematic approach—transcribing, transposing, adapting, and tabbing—you can bring Parker's bebop brilliance into your own playing. Whether you're a student, a seasoned bassist, or a jazz enthusiast, this journey will sharpen your technique, deepen your harmonic understanding, and connect you to one of the most influential figures in jazz history.

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