From The Bottom Up: Building Your Own Jazz Bass Lines

Overview & Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to learn how to create bass lines from a set of chord changes. The majority of the presentation will focus on "walking" bass lines in a 4/4 meter. While some knowledge of music theory is necessary, excellent bass lines can be created just by using notes in the triads of any chord progression.

Key Points

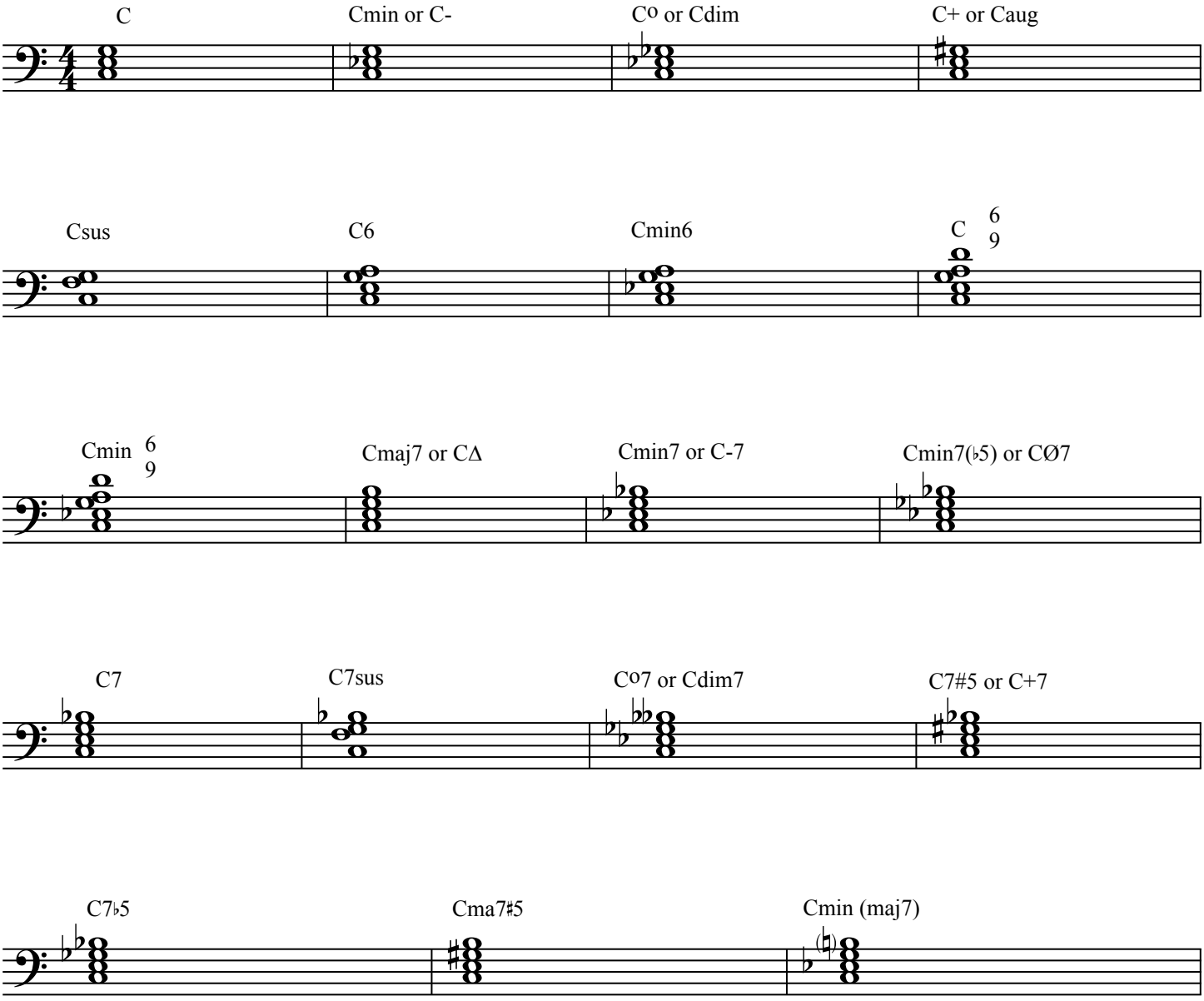
1. Always play the root of the chord when the chord changes.
2. The remaining beats of the measure can be filled using the 5th of the chord or by repeating the root.
3. Any chord change can be preceded by a note that is one half-step above or below the resolution tone. For example, if the chord is C major, the notes B-natural or Db can be played the beat before the chord change. These chromatic notes can be used regardless of what notes are in the chords or the key signature.
4. When playing jazz bass lines, accurate rhythm is always more important than accurate notes.

Key Terms

1. **Swing Rhythm** - Playing two eighth-notes as the first and third notes of a triplet.
2. **Tunes** - Jazz musicians use this term to describe songs or standards that they are playing.
3. **Transcription** - This is the act of listening to a recording and notating what one of the musicians is playing. Jazz musicians often transcribe improvised solos by instrumentalists to learn the language of improvisation. Jazz bassists perform this same activity, but usually for improvised bass lines.

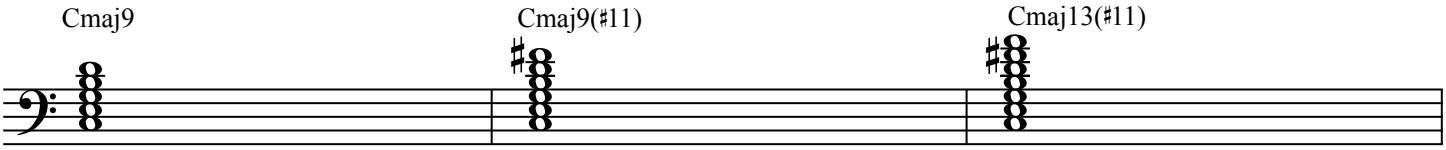
Building Bass Lines

Before learning to build bass lines, the student must learn chord symbols and what they mean.
The following are the most common chord symbols seen in lead sheets:

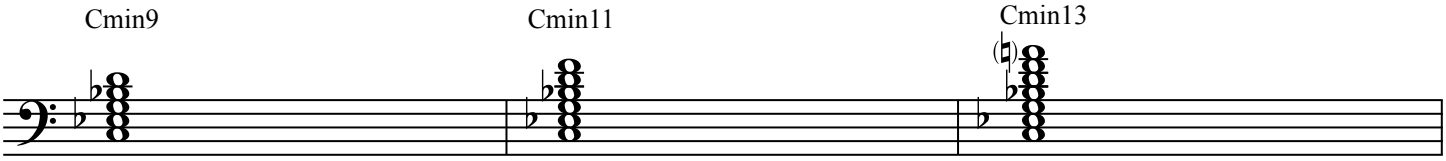


In addition, chords can also have added extenions of 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths.

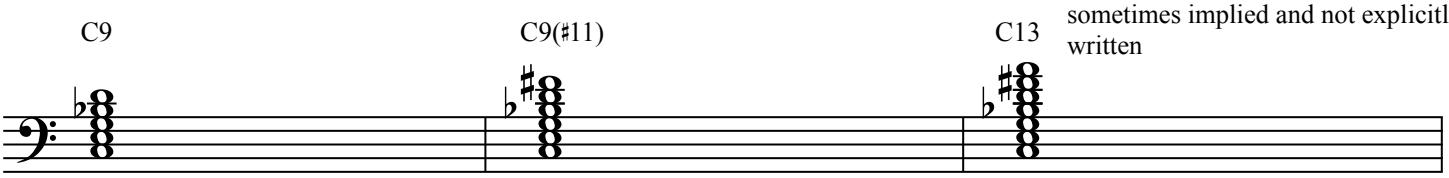
Major Chords



Minor Chords

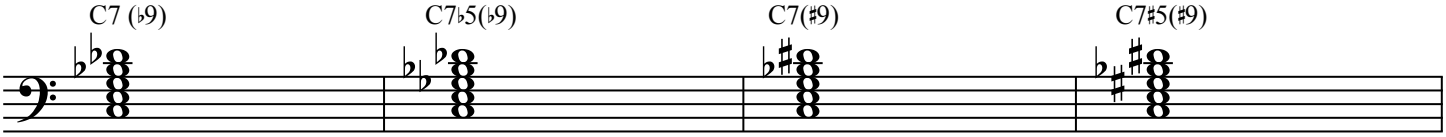


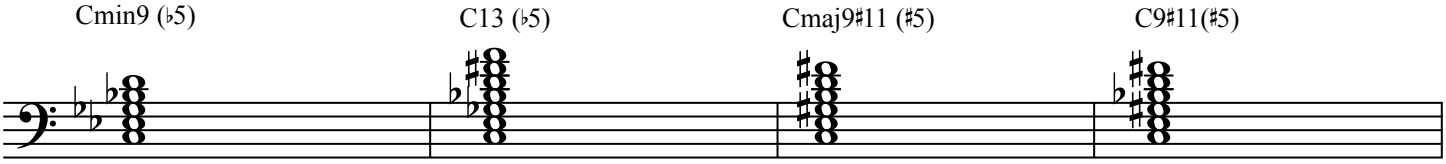
Dominant Chords



*In major and dominant chords the 11th is almost always a #11. It is also sometimes implied and not explicitly written

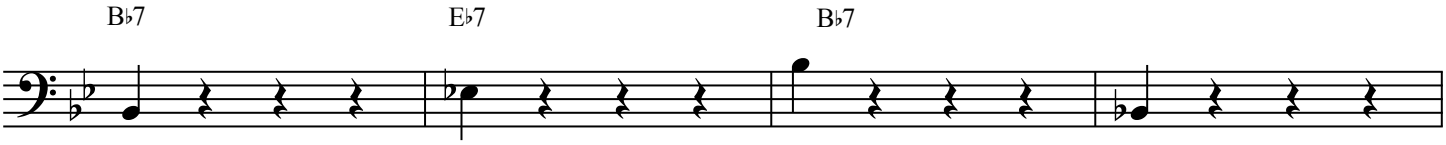
Chords with extensions can also be altered, speifically by using ♭5, ♯5, ♭9 and ♯9.
Below are some common examples



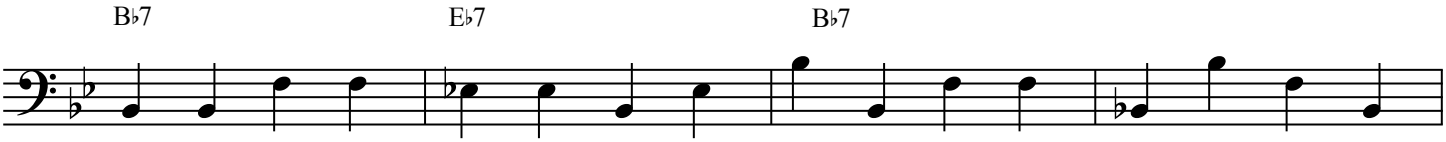


Keep in mind that despite what extensions are added, the foundation of the chord (root, 5th, 3rd, and 7th) remains the same.

Once the student has an understanding of chord theory, he or she can begin to create bass lines. The first lesson will be building walking bass lines in the 4/4 - meter swing style. In general, it is a good strategy to play the root of the chord on the downbeat of the measure. For example:

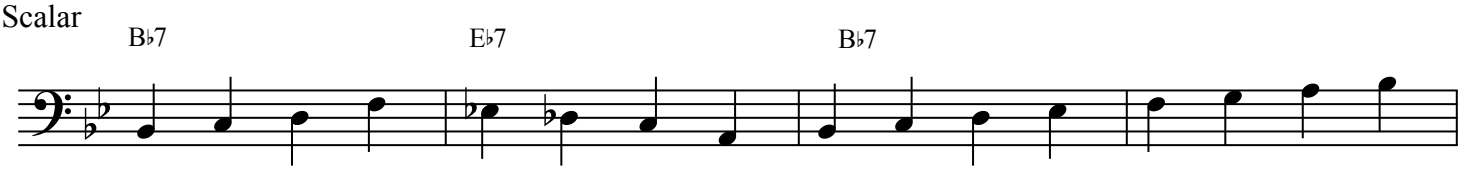


The remaining three beats can be filled in by either repeating the root or playing the 5th of the chord. Also, the root can be displaced by octaves.

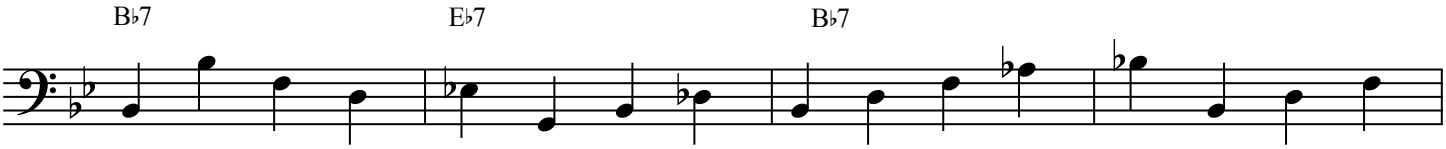


When students feel comfortable with the above concepts, they can create more harmonic interest in their bass lines using the following methods: scalar, arpeggiation, and chromatic leading tones.

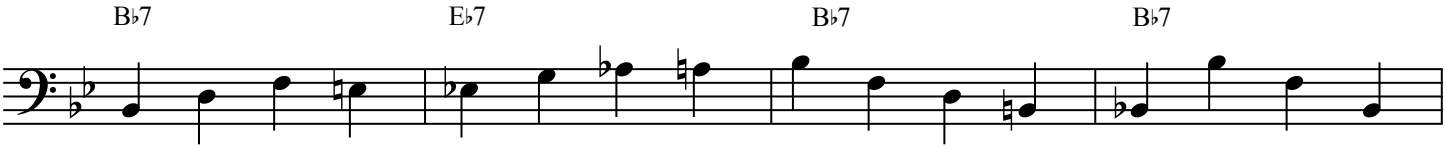
Scalar



Arpeggiation

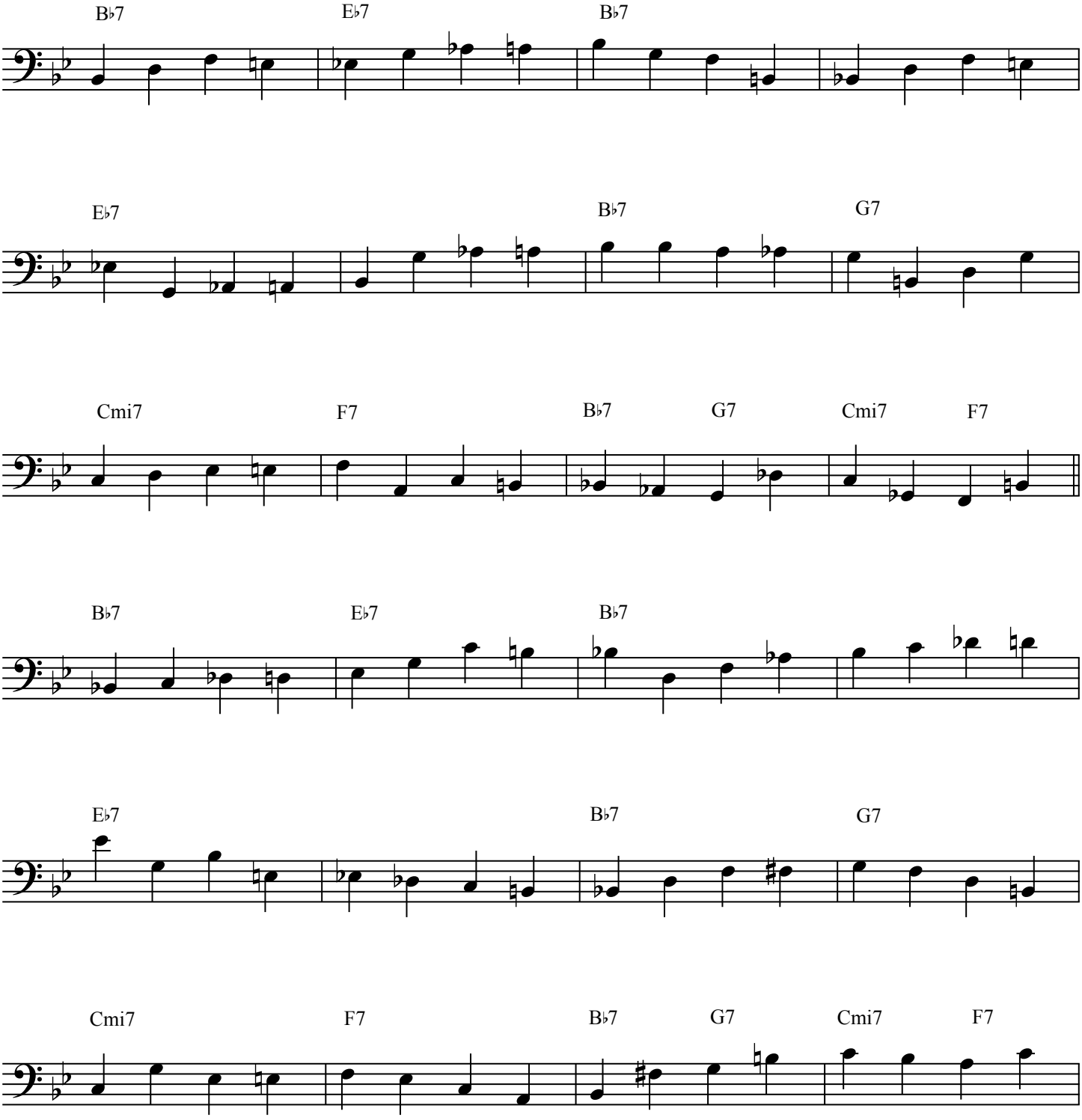


Chromatic

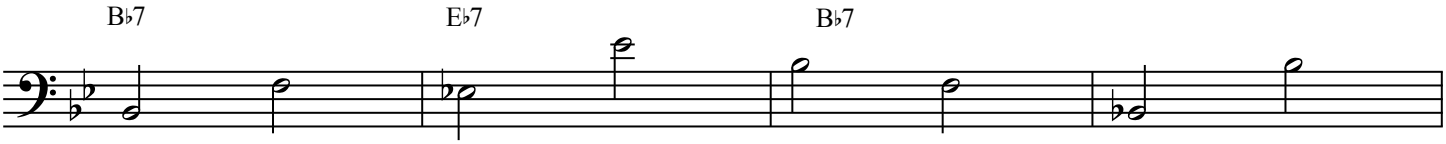


When using chromaticism, it is important to remember that any note that is either a half-step **above** or **below** the resolution note can be used before a chord change. For example, if the resolution note is a C, then the bassist can preceed that note with either a B-natural or D-flat, **regardless** of the harmonic construction of the chord.

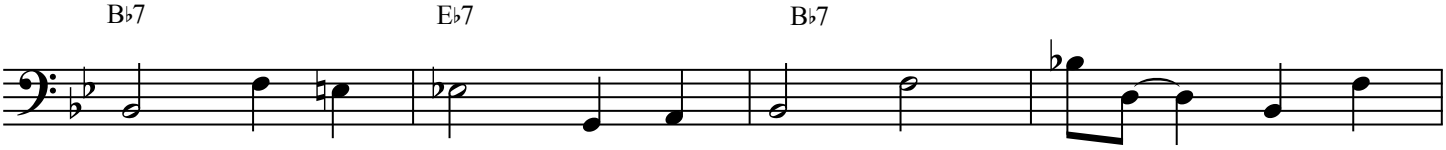
Once these methods have been learned, the student can combine all of them to create a walking bass line. Below is an example using all of the previously discussed concepts in a Bb blues progression:



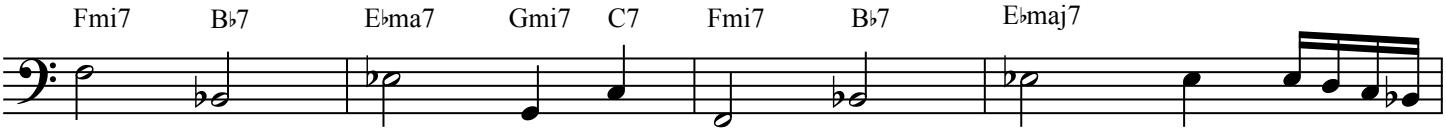
It is common practice by jazz bassists to simplify a walking bass line by playing only on beats one and three, usually during the beginning of the tune when the melody is being played. This simplification is known as a **Two-Beat Bassline**. This style heavily utilizes the roots and 5ths of chords.



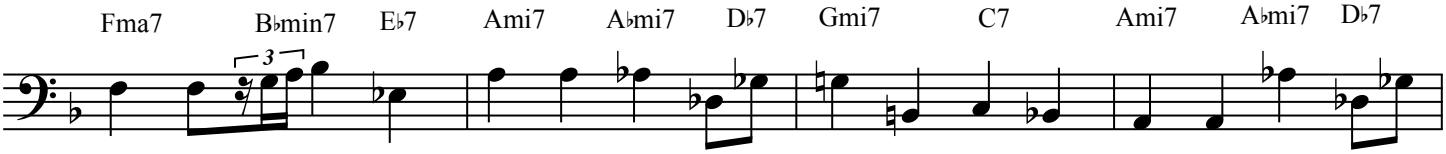
Two-beat bass lines can be embellished by adding other notes, but it is imperative that the emphasis remain on beats one and three at all times.



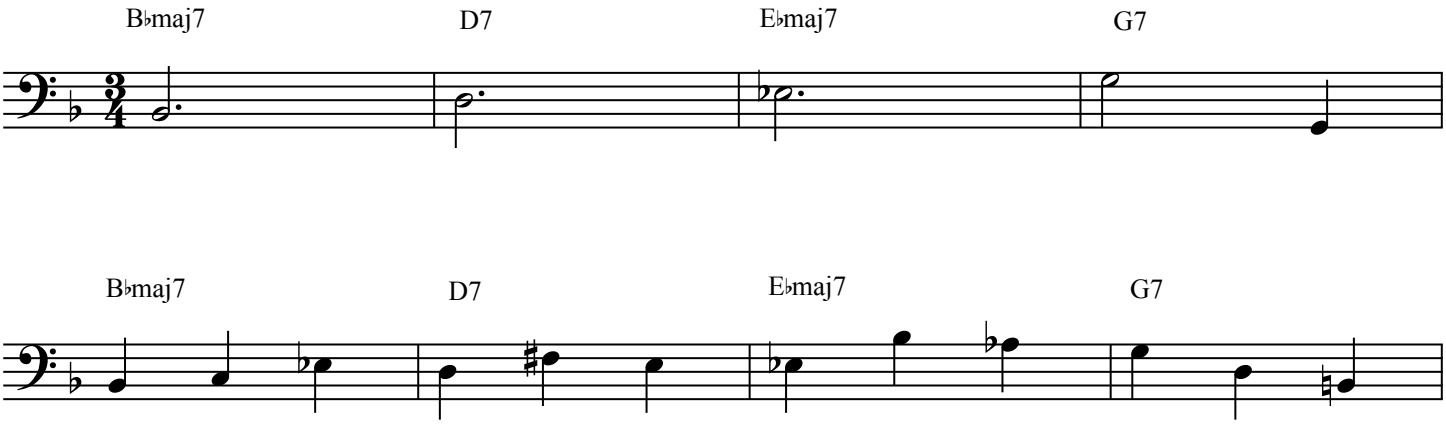
Two-beat bass lines are also used in playing **ballads**. Ballads are slow tunes that can be played with or without swing rhythms.



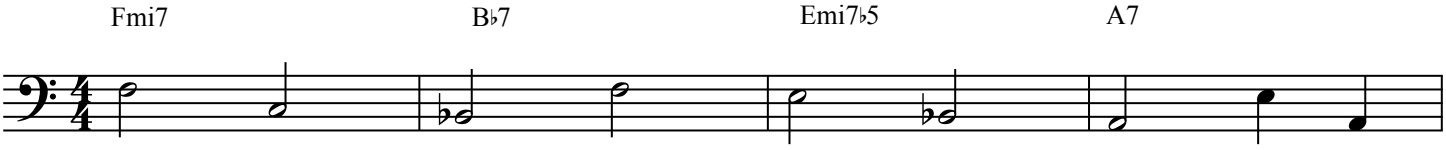
Walking bass lines in a 4/4-meter swing style can also be used in playing ballads. For example:



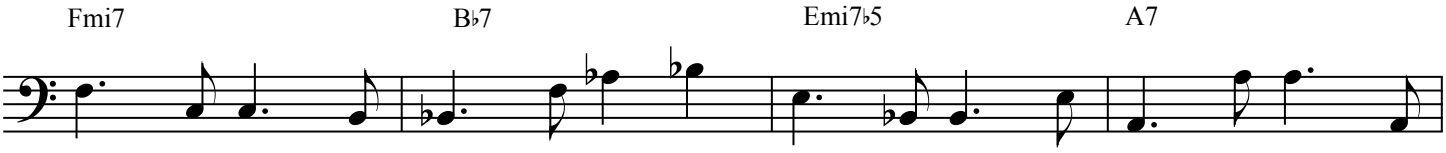
When playing in a **triple meter** (3/4 or 6/8), walking bass lines are constructed the same as in a 4/4-meter. Two-beat bass lines are usually played as dotted-half notes.



Tunes in the **Latin-American styles** (bossa nova, samba, etc.) are also common in the jazz standard repertoire. The basic principle for playing Latin tunes is the same as playing two-beat bass lines.



Latin or straight-8th note bass lines can be embellished by adding an 8th note on the offbeat of beats two and four. However, it is important that the emphasis remain on beats **one and three** and not on the syncopated notes.



In the remaining pages of the chapter, a number of different resources have been provided for practice:

1. A two-beat and walking bass line on the changes of the tune "Beautiful Love"
2. A sample Latin bass line on the tune "Corcovado"
3. An example of four common chord progressions found in jazz, including a blues, minor blues, modal song form and rhythm changes.
4. A jazz blues progression written in all twelve keys.
5. Five differnt bassline transcriptions:
   "Is You or Is You Ain't My Baby" - medium swing: Sam Jones, bass
   "What Is This Thing Called Love" - up-tempo swing: Israel Crosby, bass
   "Don't Blame Me" - ballad: Sam Jones,bass
   "Gone With The Wind" - ballad: Israel Crosby, bass
   "Days of Wine and Roses" - medium swing: Ray Brown, bass

A note on transcriptions:

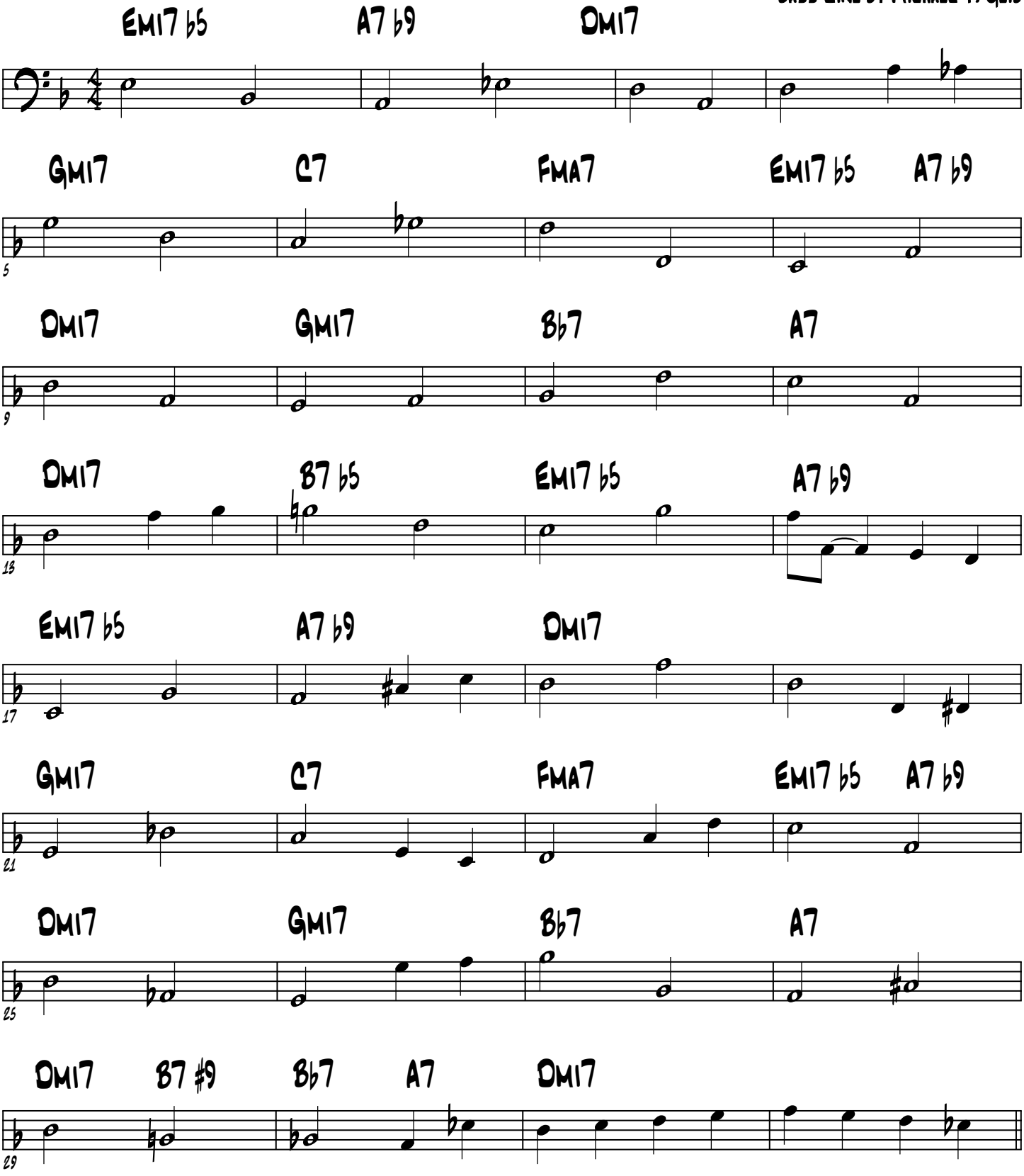
While the included transcriptions will provide valuable insight into how to construct interesting bass lines, each student is highly encouraged to perform his or her own transcriptions of prominent bassists from the jazz idiom. Not only will transcribing provide insight to building bass lines, it will greatly enhance the student's ear-training and aural skills. The following is a brief list of significant jazz bassists, all of whom are worthwhile to transcribe:

Slam Stewart	Sam Jones	Ron Carter
Milt Hinton	Percy Heath	Chuck Israels
Jimmy Blanton	Charles Mingus	Eddie Gomez
Israel Crosby	Wilbur Ware	Dave Holland
Oscar Pettiford	Larry Gales	Rufus Reid
Ray Brown	Scott LaFaro	Lynn Seaton
Paul Chambers	Jimmy Garrison	Christian McBride
Doug Watkins	Charlie Haden	John Clayton

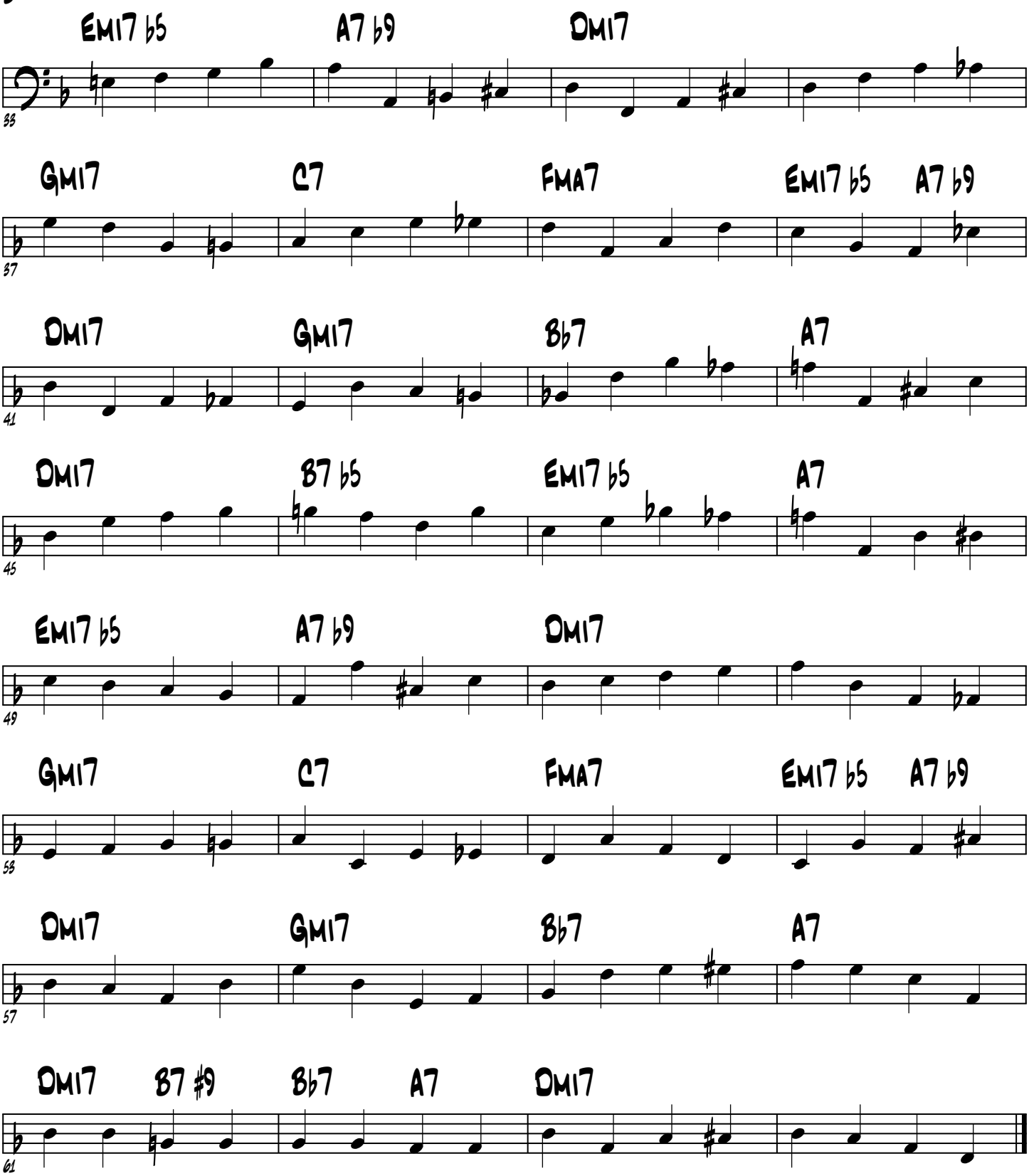
Bass

Beautiful Love

Victor Young
Bass Line by Michael T. Geib



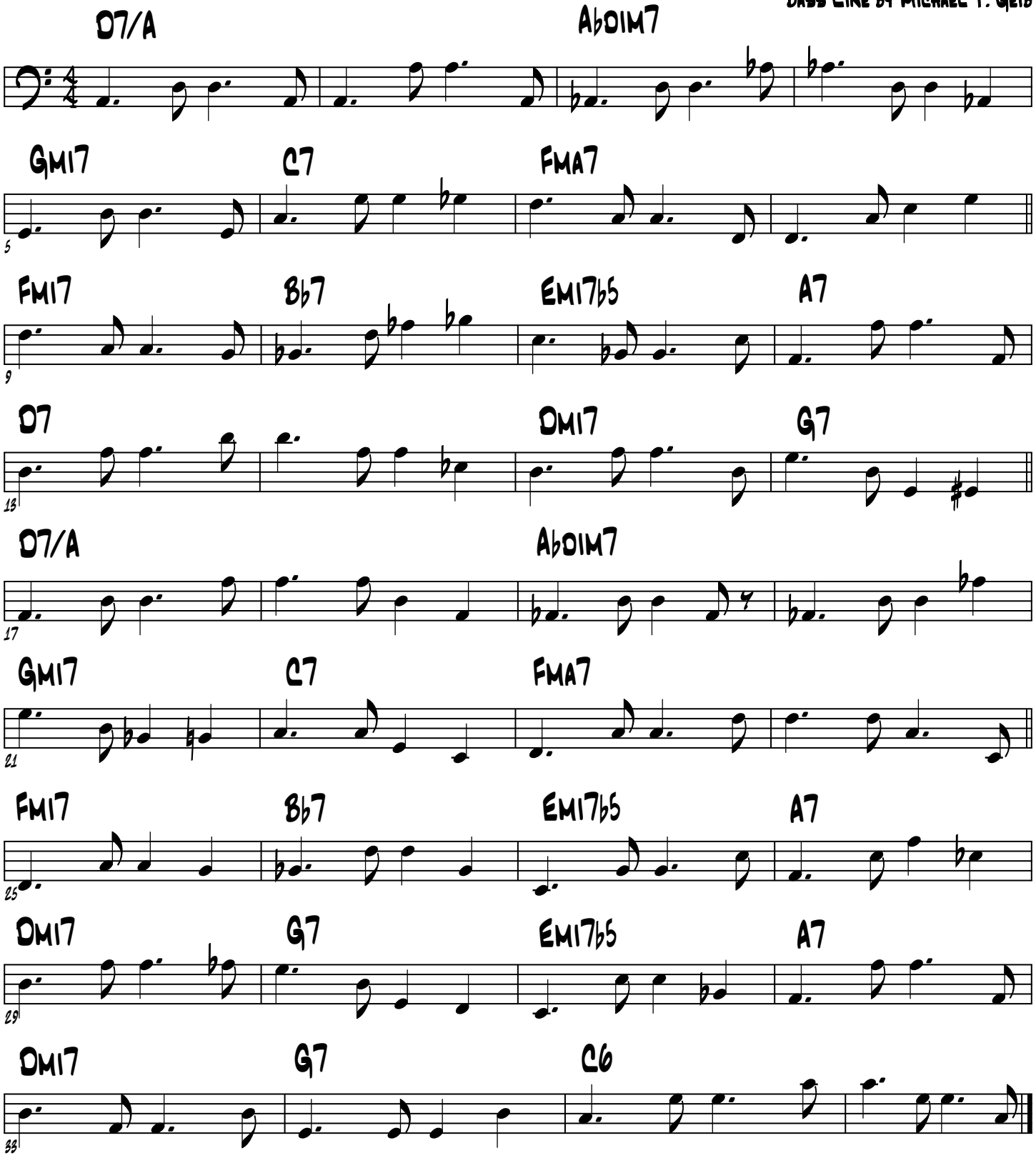
Beautiful Love



Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars (Corcovado)

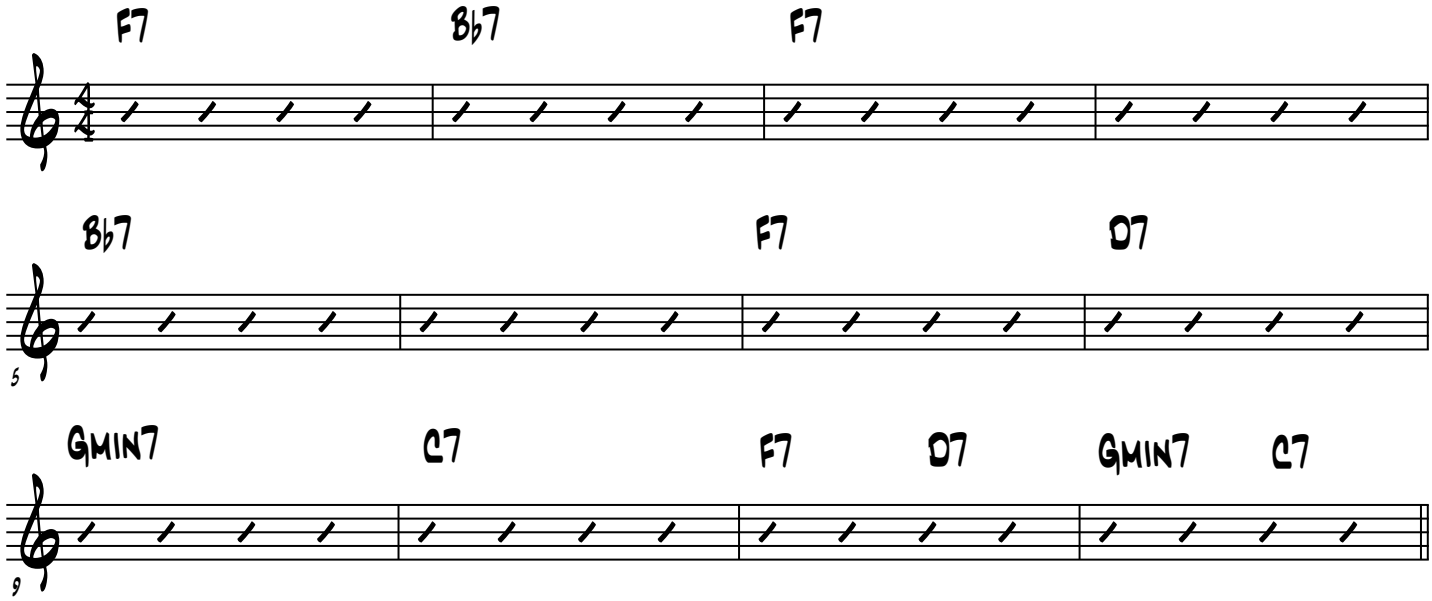
Bass

Antonio Carlos Jobim
Bass Line by Michael T. Geib

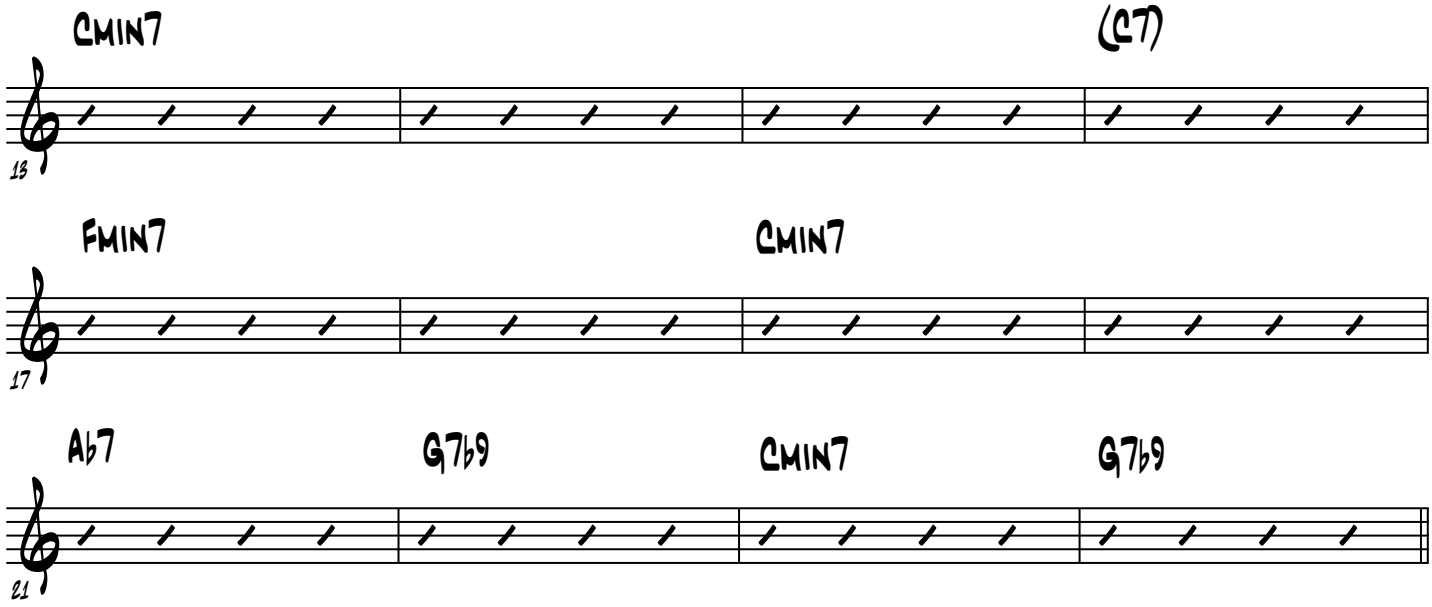


Common Jazz Chord Progressions

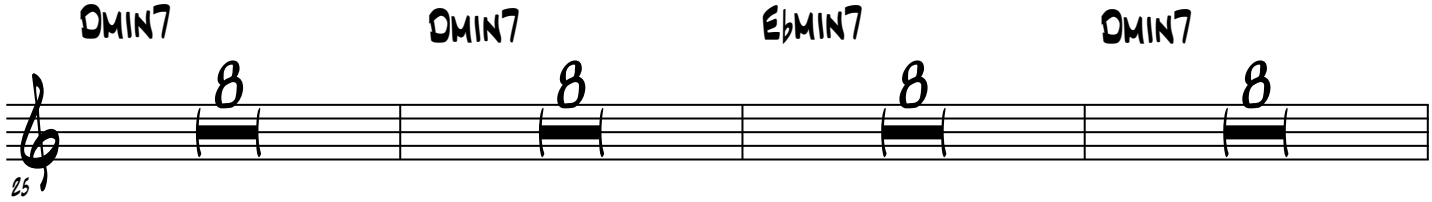
1. Jazz Blues



2. Minor Blues



3. Modal Tunes (So What, Impressions)



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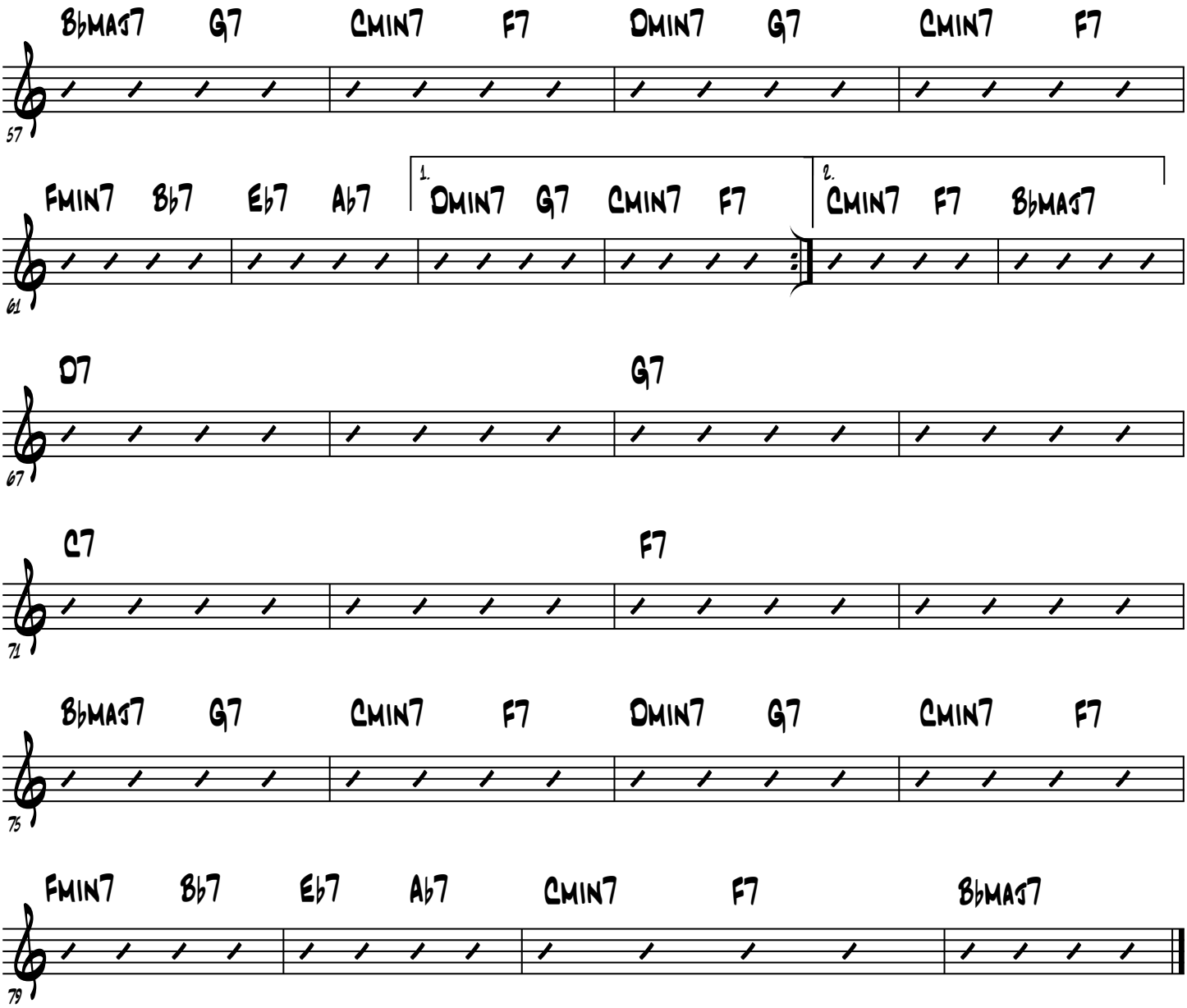
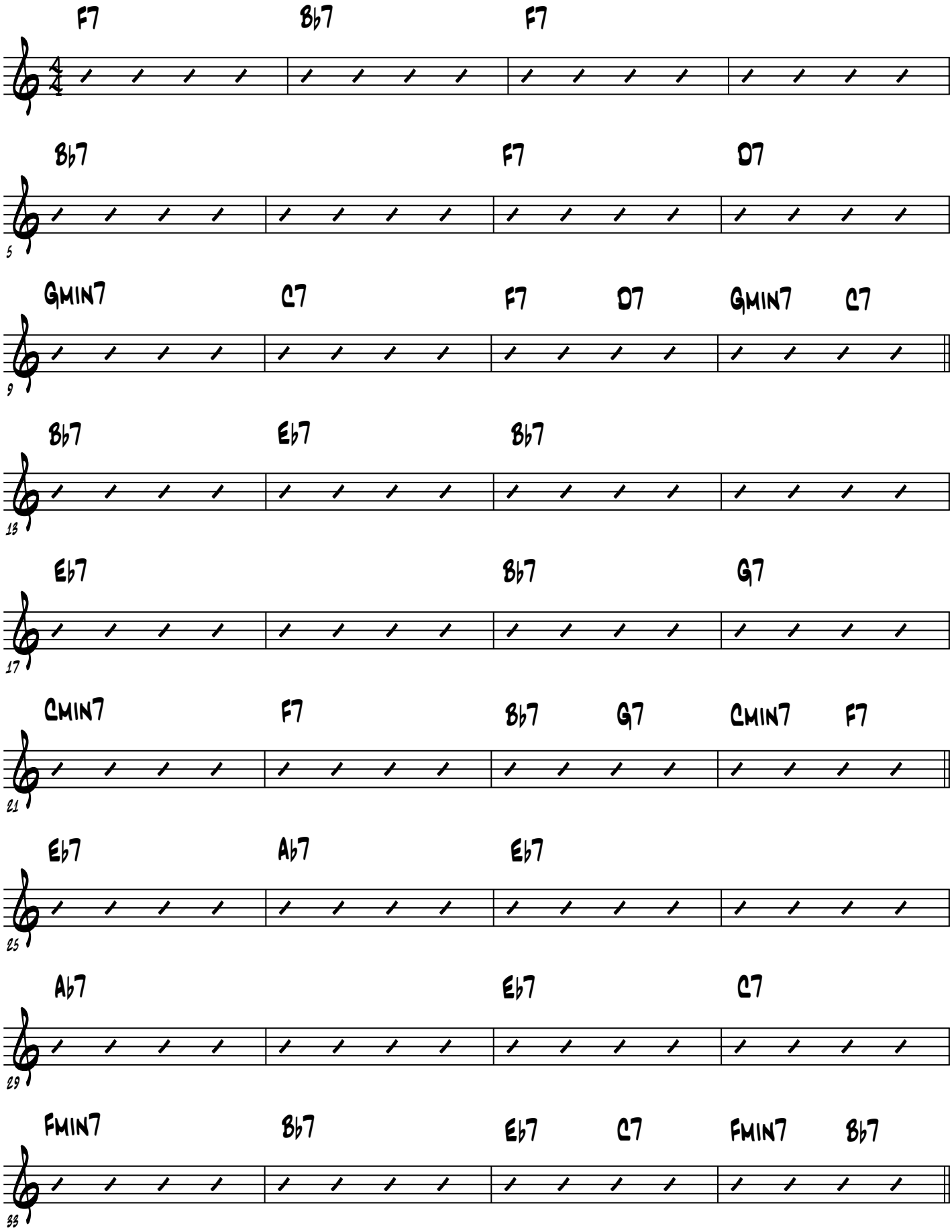
4. Rhythm Changes



Blues In All Keys



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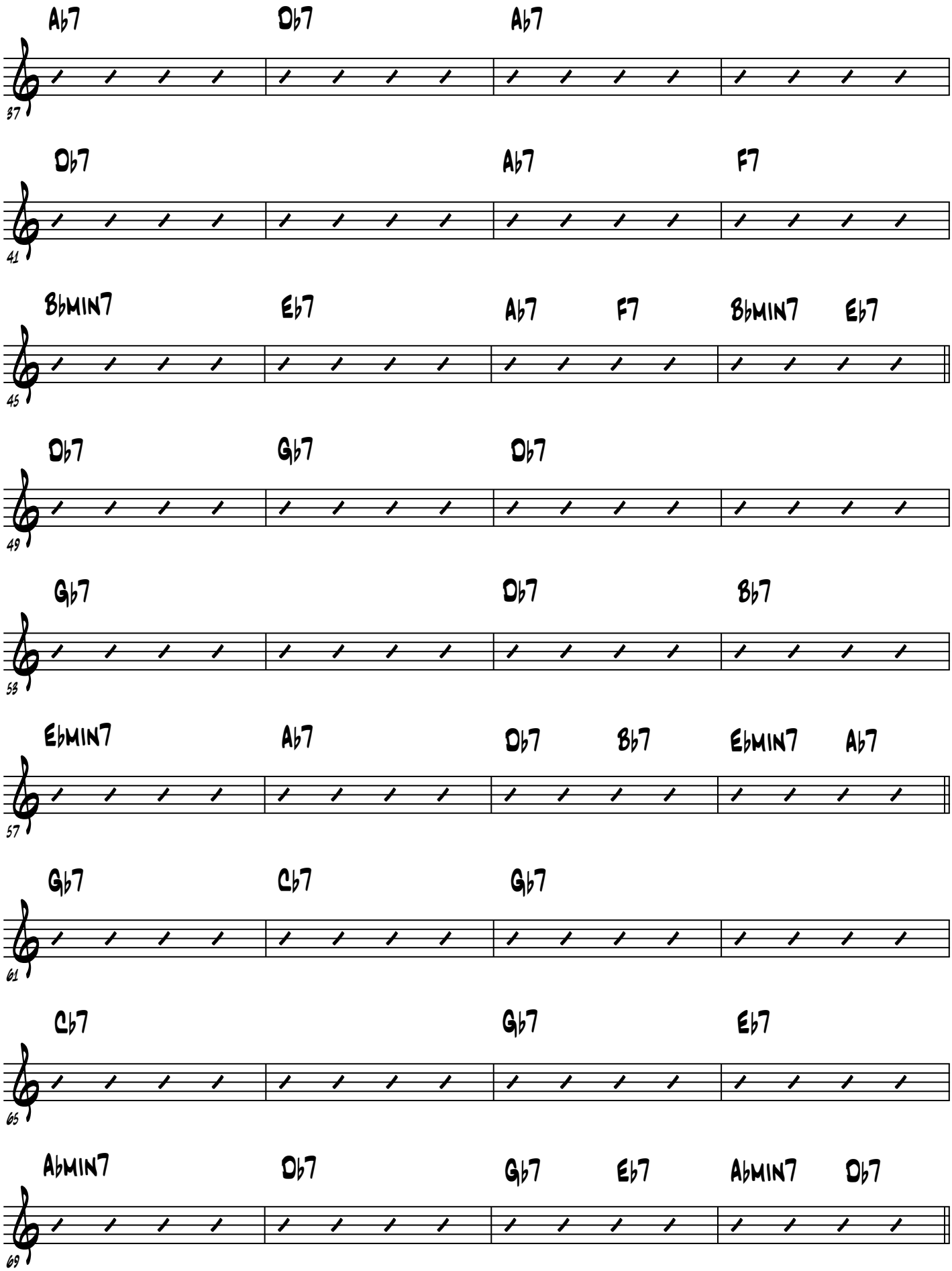
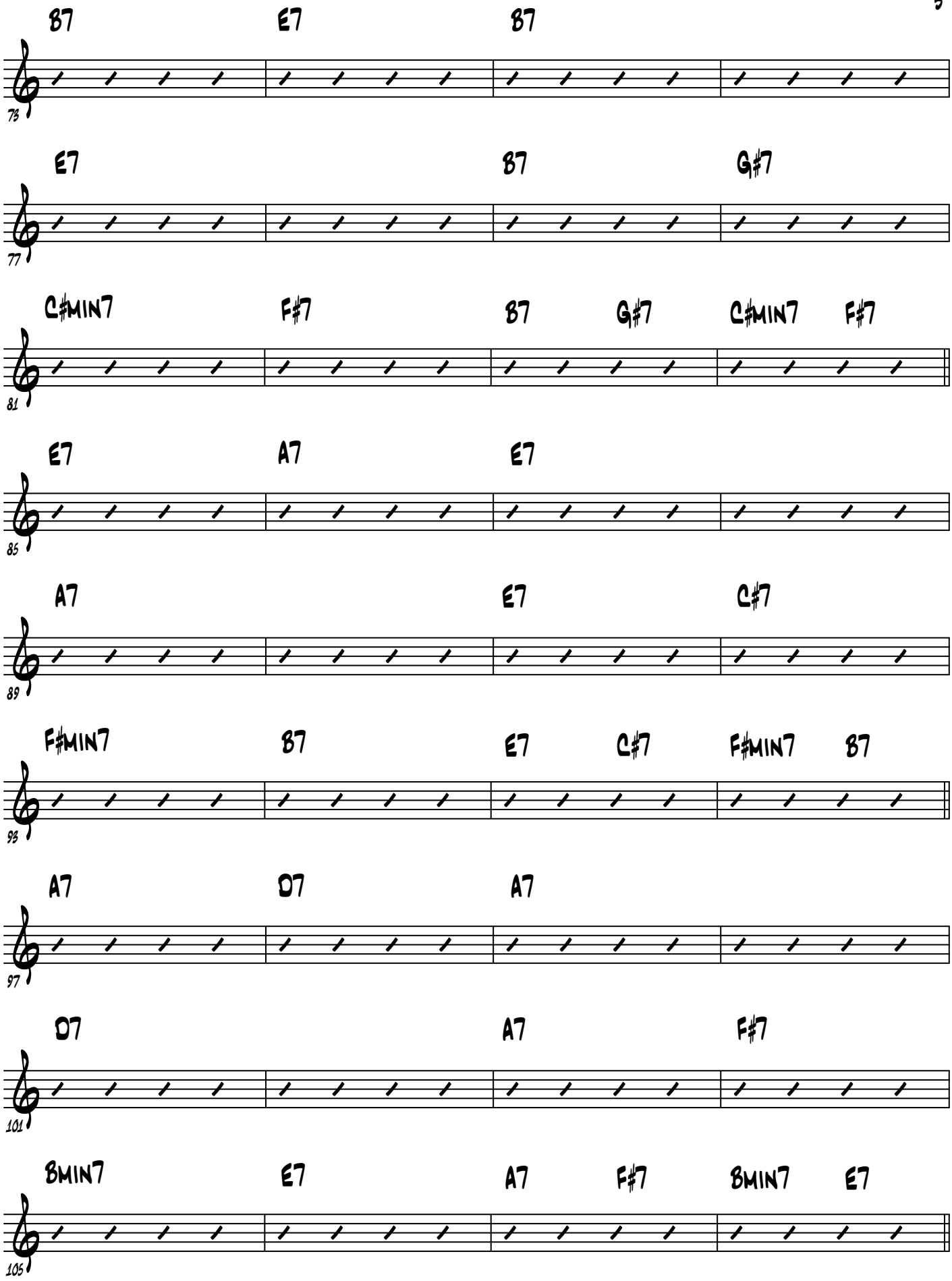
BLUES IN ALL KEYS

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E7
B7
73
E7
B7
G#7
77
C#MIN7
F#7
B7
G#7
C#MIN7
F#7
81
E7
A7
E7
85
A7
E7
C#7
89
F#MIN7
B7
E7
C#7
F#MIN7
B7
93
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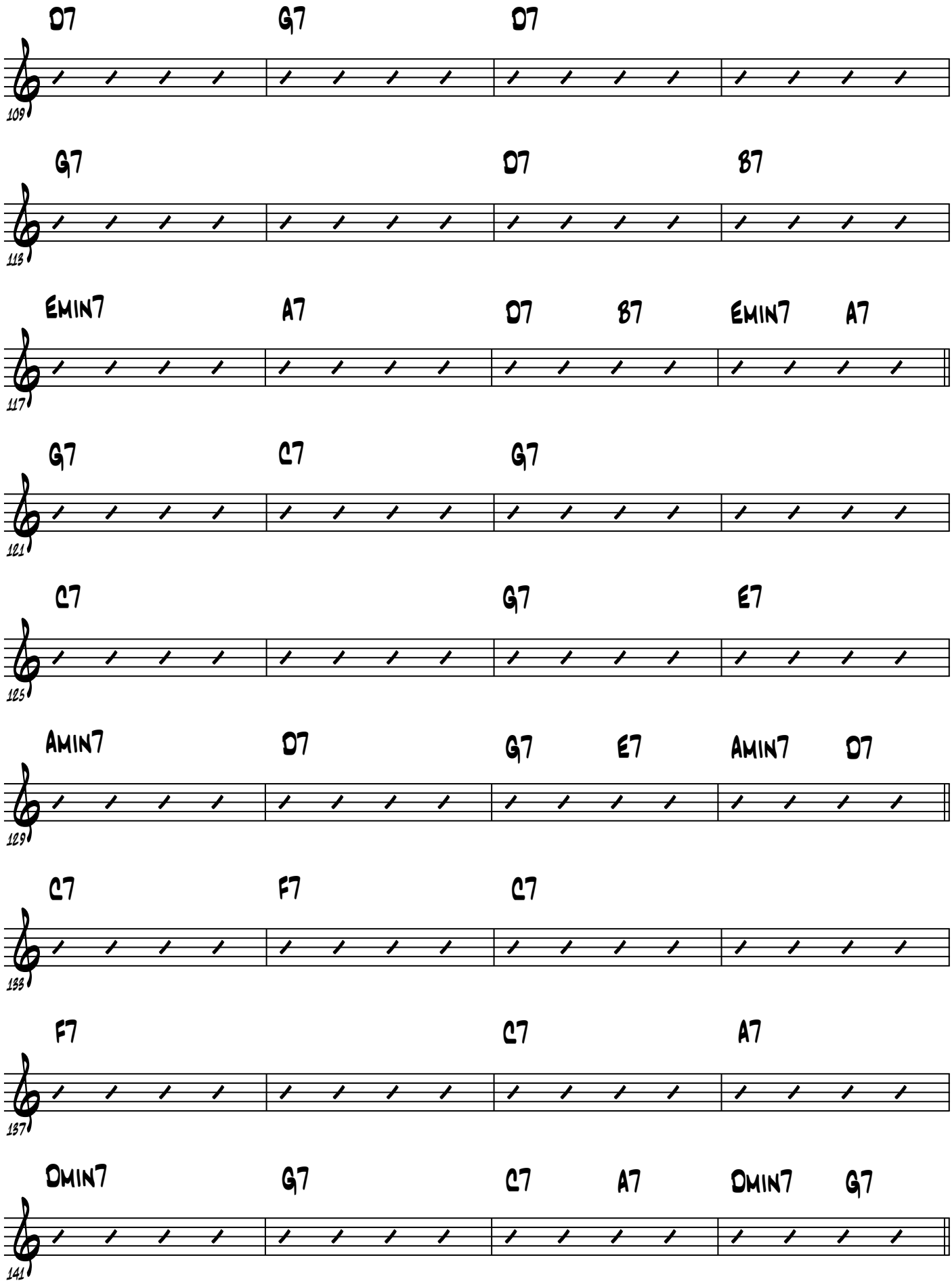
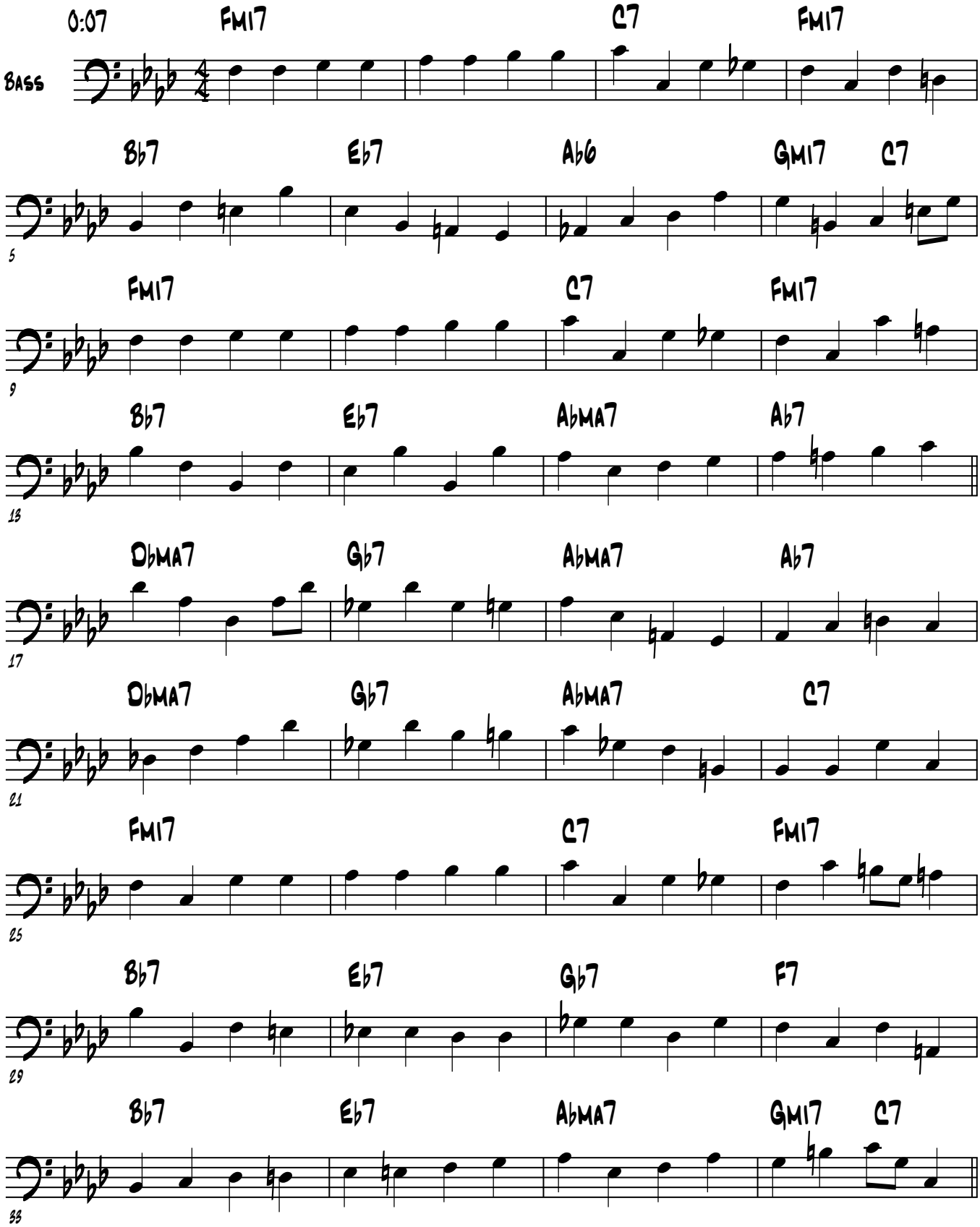

D7 G7 D7
109
G7 D7 B7
113
EMIN7 A7 D7 B7 EMIN7 A7
117
G7 C7 G7
121
C7 G7 E7
125
AMIN7 D7 G7 E7 AMIN7 D7
129
C7 F7 C7
133
F7 C7 A7
137
DMIN7 G7 C7 A7 DMIN7 G7
141

ALBUM: Barry Harris at the Jazz Workshop
ARTIST: Barry Harris

Is You or Is You Ain't My Baby

Sam Jones Bassline

Louis Jordan
Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib



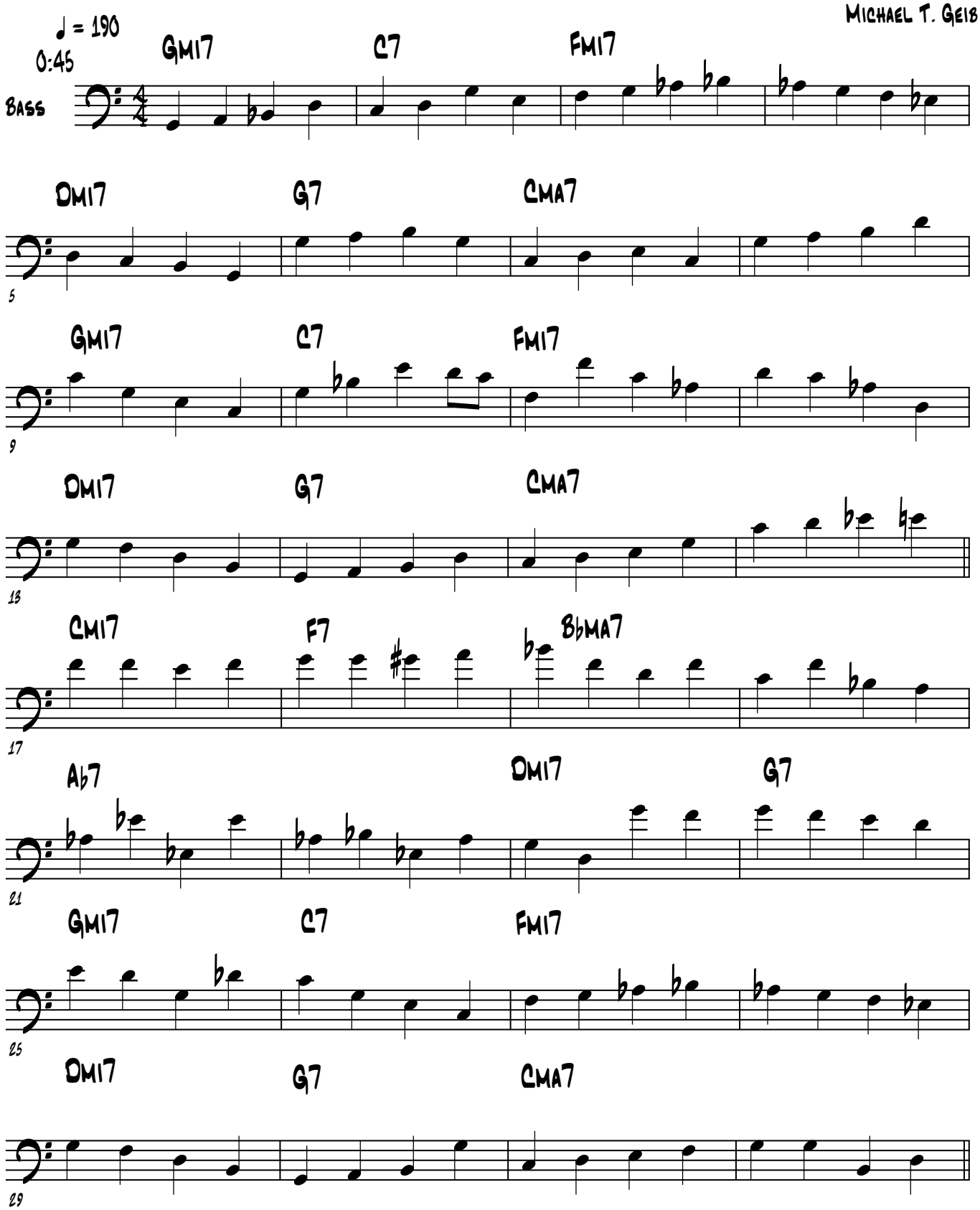
Album: Jazz Moments
Artist: George Shearing

What Is This Thing Called Love

Israel Crosby Bassline

Cole Porter
Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib

♩ = 190
0:45



Album: Barry Harris at the Jazz Workshop

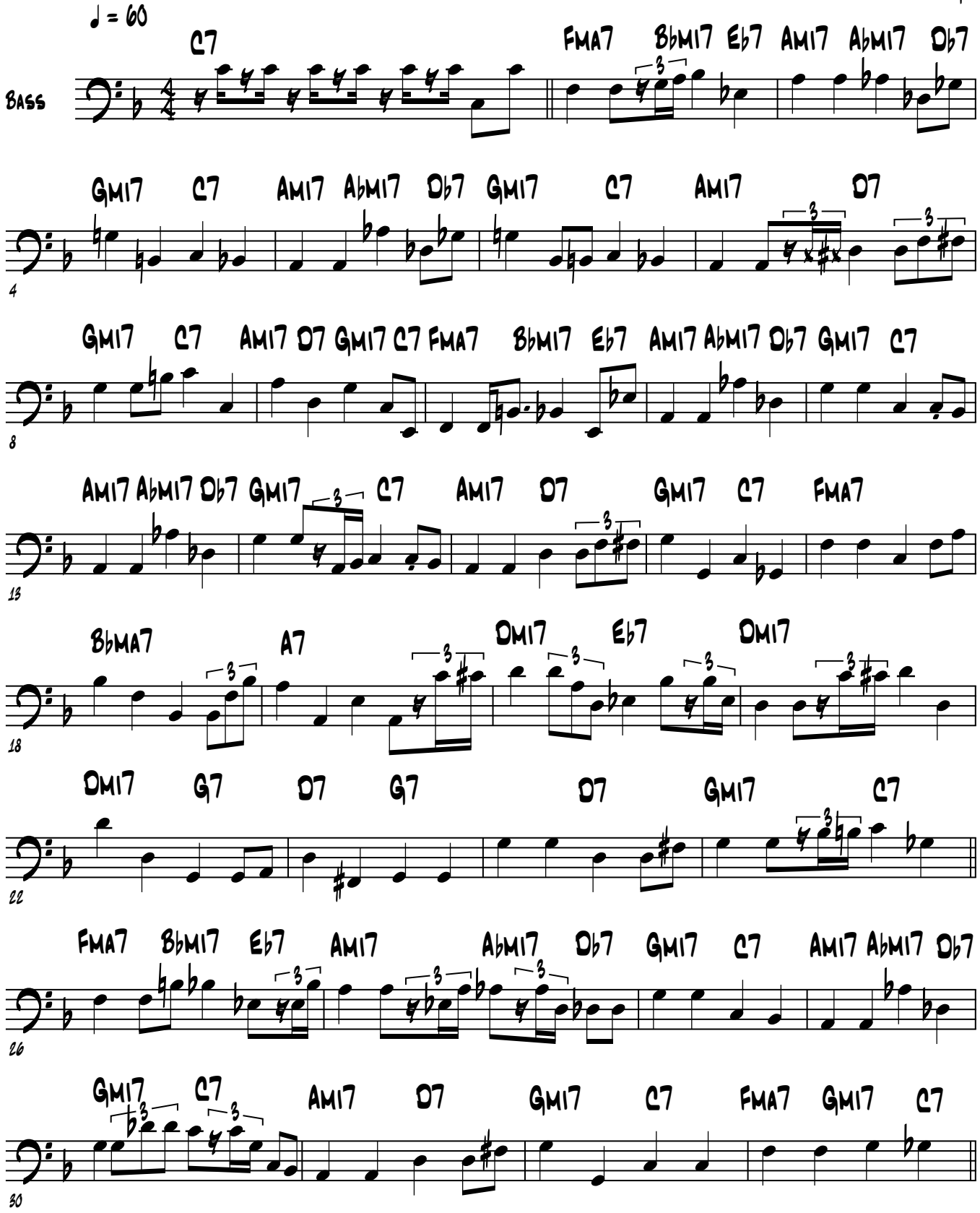
Artist: Barry Harris

Don't Blame Me

Sam Jones Bassline

Jimmy McHugh

Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib

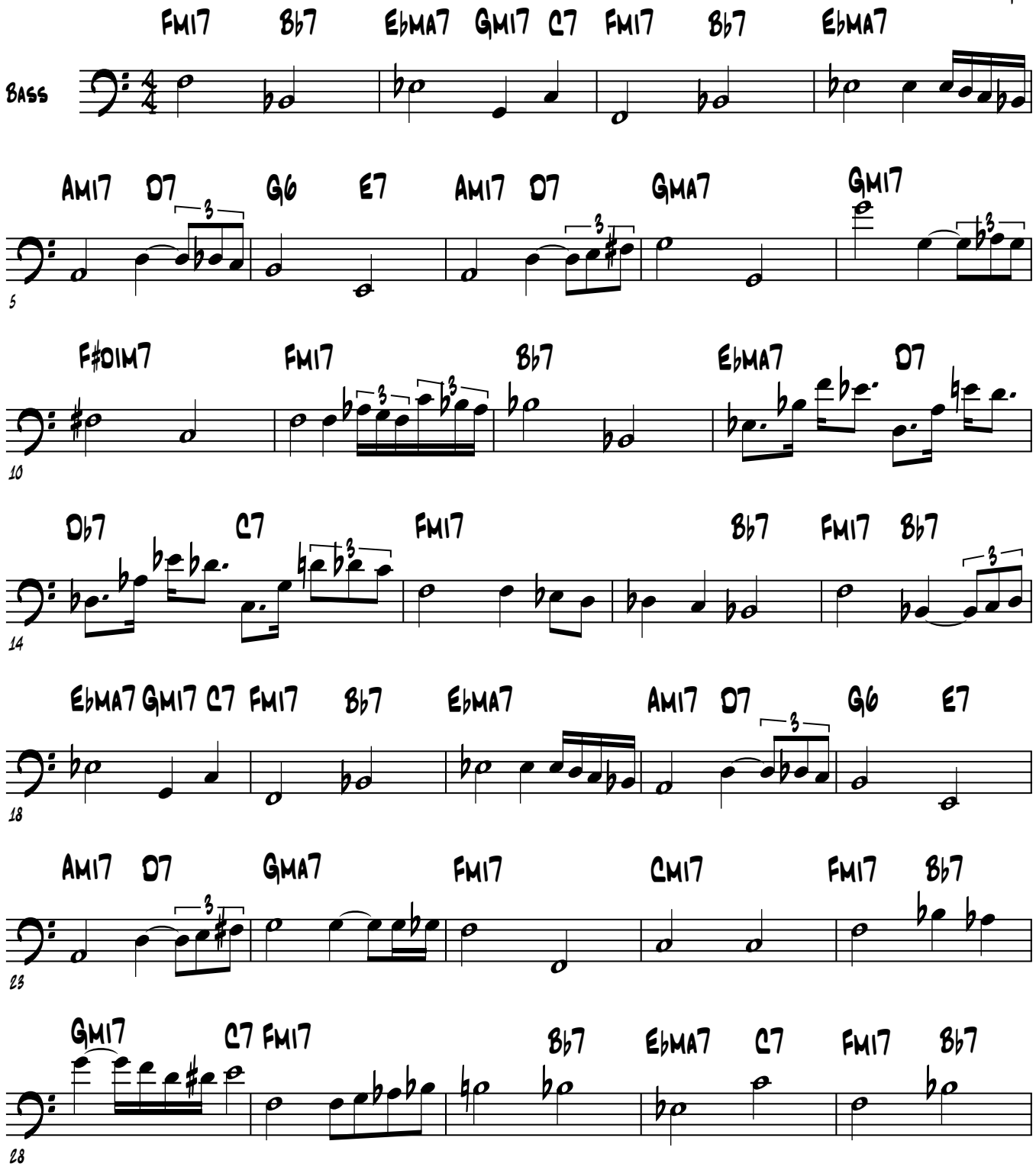


Album: Jazz Moments
Artist: George Shearing

Gone With The Wind

Israel Crosby Bassline

Allie Wrubel
Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib



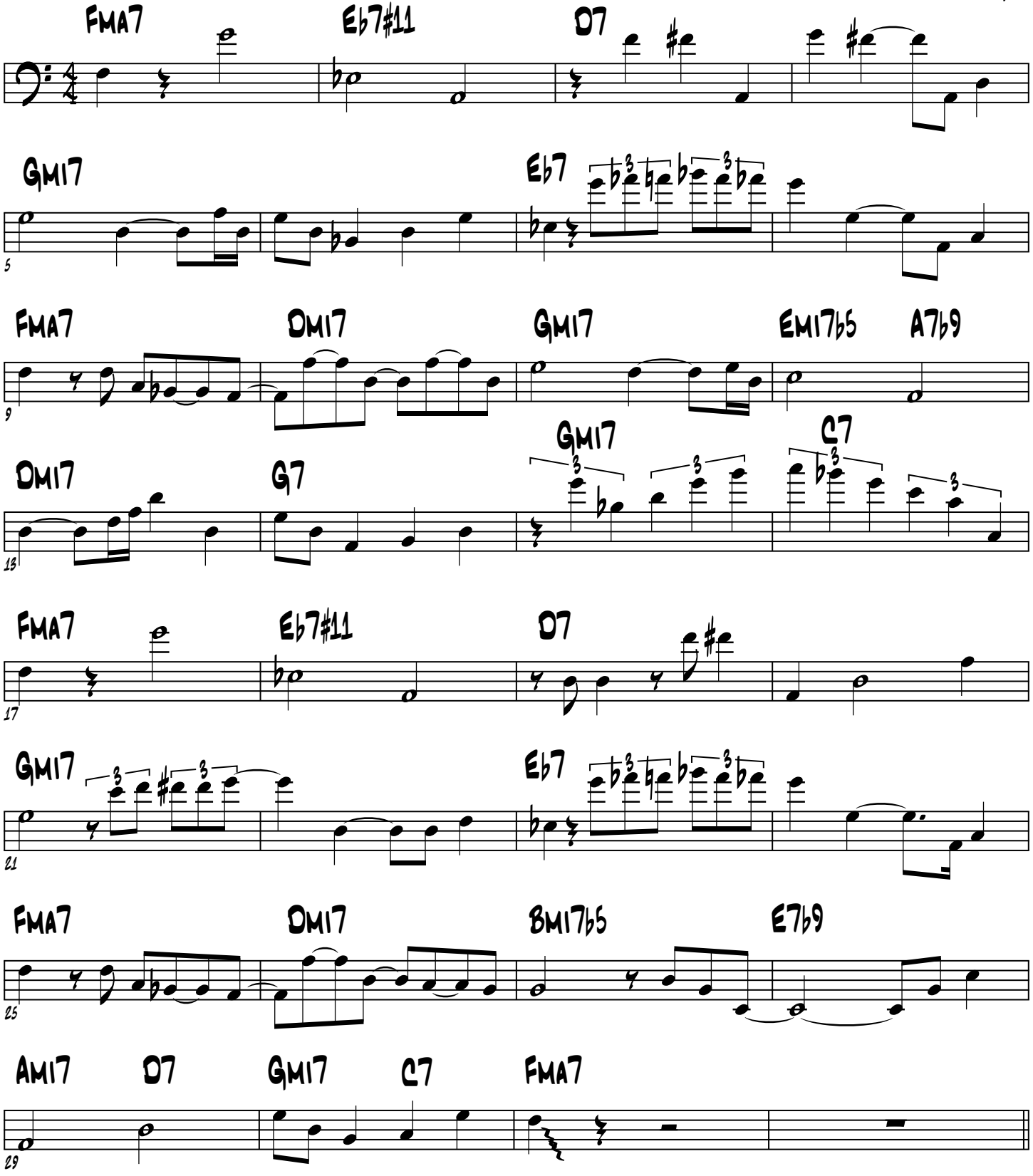
Album: We Get Requests
Artist: Oscar Peterson

Days of Wine and Roses

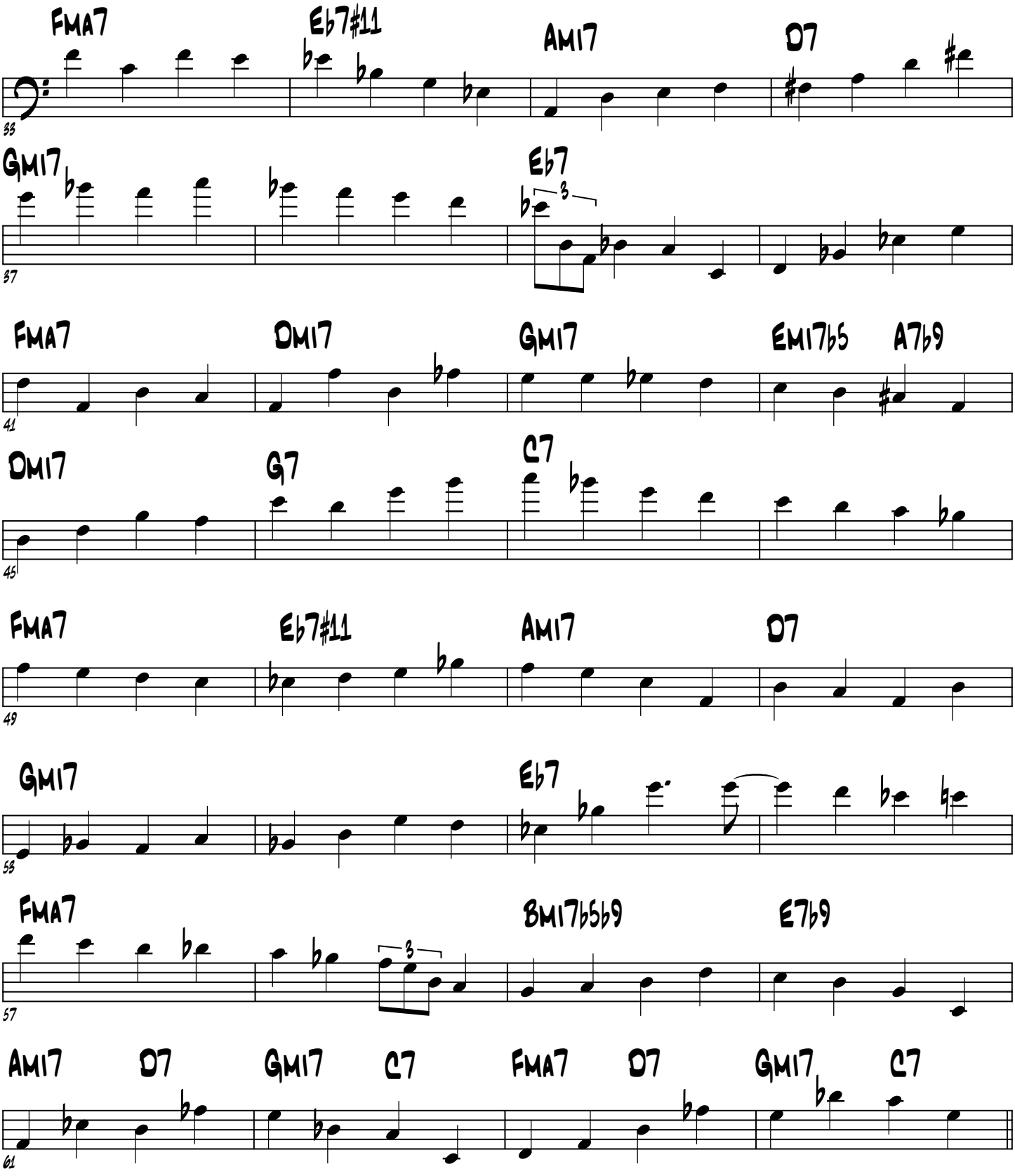
Ray Brown's Bass Line

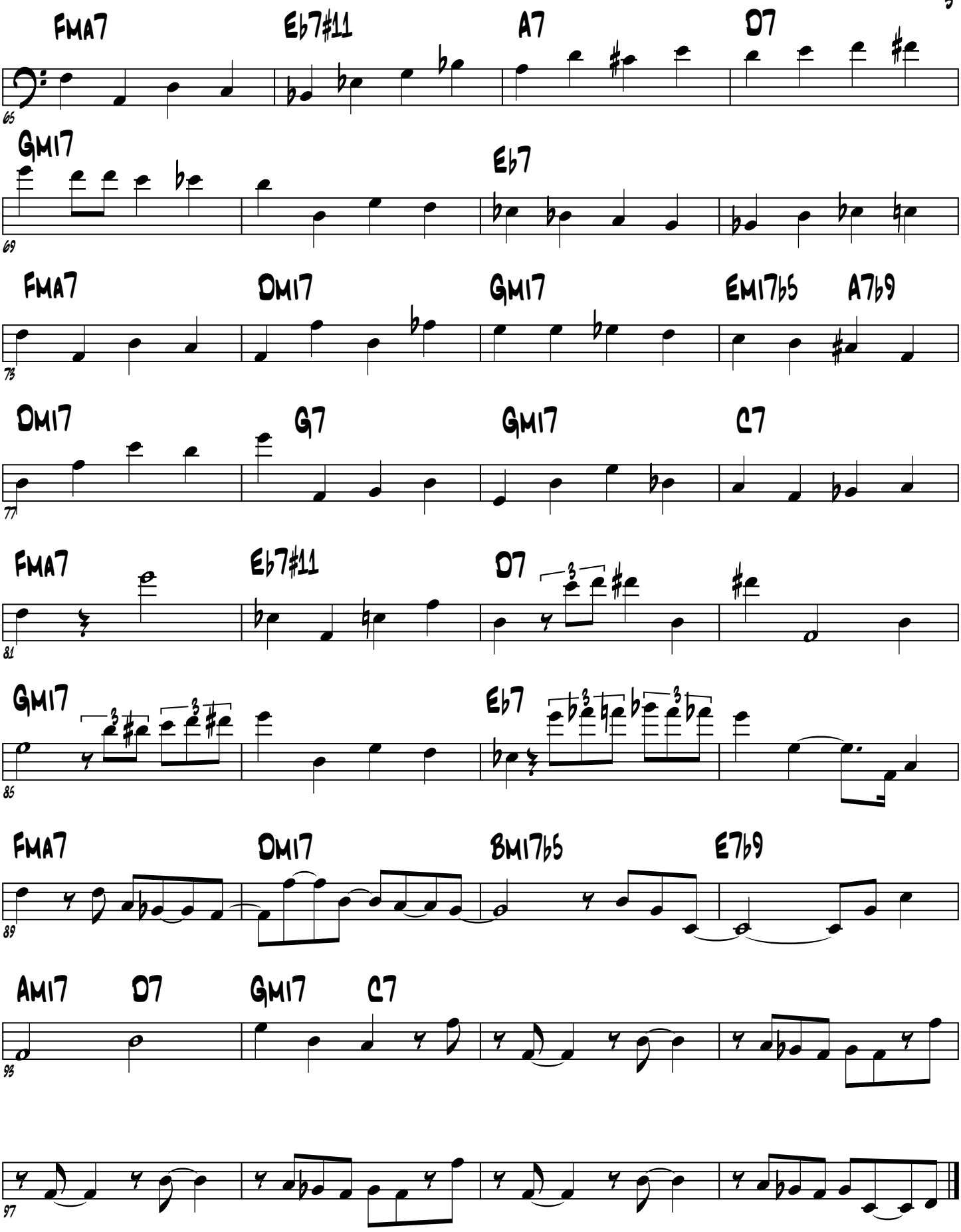
Henry Mancini

Transcribed by:
Michael T. Geib



Days of Wine and Roses

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Eb7#11
A7
D7
65
Gm17
Eb7
69
FMA7
Dm17
Gm17
Em17b5
A7b9
73
Dm17
G7
Gm17
C7
77
FMA7
Eb7#11
D7
81
Gm17
Eb7
85
FMA7
Dm17
Bm17b5
E7b9
89
Am17
D7
Gm17
C7
93
97