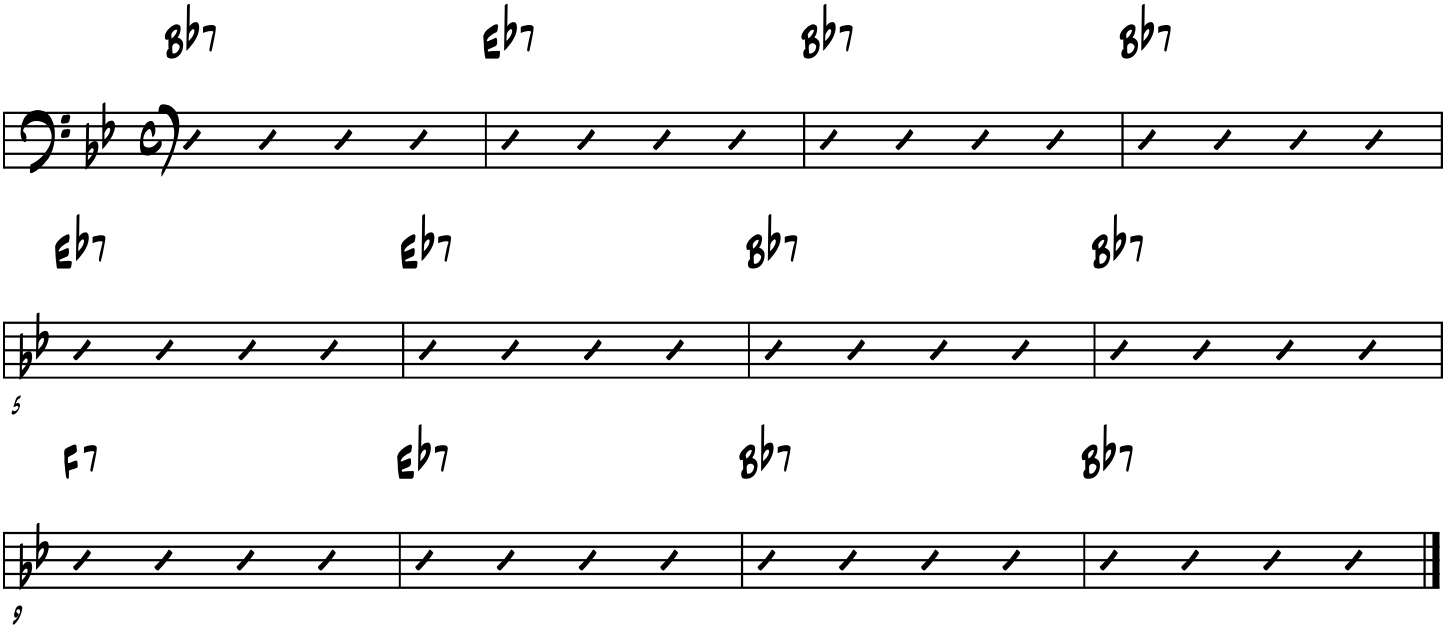
The Blues

THE BLUES IS THE MOST WIDELY USED FORM IN JAZZ MUSIC. THE FORM OF THE BLUES, OR THE STRUCTURE OF A SINGLE CHORUS, IS TWELVE BARS IN LENGTH. THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS TO THE 12-BAR BLUES FORM, NOTABLY HERBIE HANCOCK'S WATERMELON MAN (16-BARS) AND LEE MORGAN'S SIDEWINDER (DOUBLE LENGTH 24-BARS). BOTH OF THESE TUNES ARE CONSIDERED BLUES EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE LONGER THAN 12-BARS.

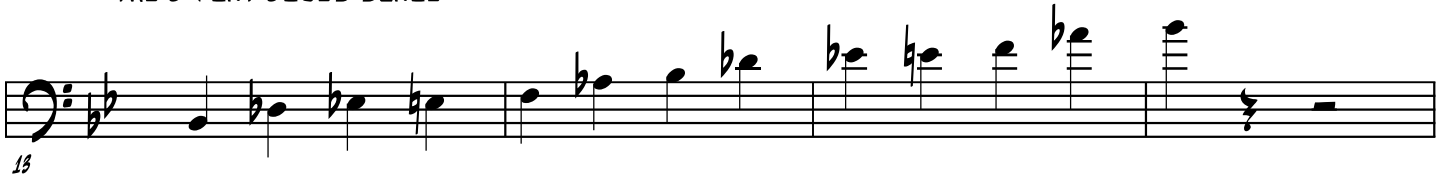
IN IT'S MOST BASIC HARMONIC FORMAT, THE BLUES IS COMPRISED OF ENTIRELY OF DOMINANT SEVENTH CHORDS. THIS BASIC HARMONIC FORMAT, OR CHORD PROGRESSION, UTILIZES DOMINANT SEVENTH CHORDS BUILT ON THE I , IV AND V OF WHATEVER KEY WE ARE IN. THIS BASIC CHORD PROGRESSION FUNCTIONS AS FOLLOWS:



ONE OF THE AMAZING THINGS ABOUT THE BLUES IS IT'S INCREDIBLE FLEXIBILITY. IT CAN BE TRADITIONAL AND MAJESTIC, AS PLAYED BY LOUIS ARMSTRONG. IT CAN BE HARMONICALLY SOPHISTICATED, AS PLAYED BY CHARLIE PARKER. IT CAN BE SOULFUL AND FUNKY, AS PLAYED BY HORACE SILVER. IT CAN BE A SPRING BOARD FOR AVANT-GARDE IDEAS, AS PLAYED BY JOHN COLTRANE. YOU CAN SHOUT LIKE JIMMY RUSHING OR WHISPER LIKE MILES DAVIS. IT CAN BE WHATEVER YOU, AS A SOLOIST, WANT IT TO BE FROM CHORUS TO CHORUS. LISTEN TO DIZZY GILLESPIE IN THE 1950'S AND YOU WILL HEAR HIM PLAY A CHORUS OF BEBOP THEN A CHORUS OF PURE BLUES (UTILIZING THE BLUES SCALE), ALTERNATING BETWEEN THE TWO APPROACHES.

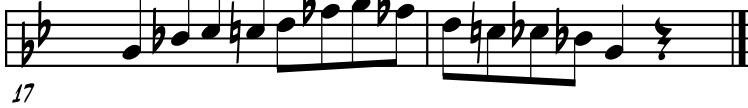
THE UNIFYING SOUND OF THE BLUES IS REPRESENTED BY THE BLUES SCALE. THE BLUES SCALE FUNCTIONS OVER THE ENTIRE TWELVE BAR FORM AND ALL THREE DOMINANT SEVENTH CHORDS THAT MAKE UP THE BLUES PROGRESSION: I - IV - V. THE SCALE IS BUILT AS FOLLOWS: ROOT (1) - FLAT 3 - 4 - SHARP 4 - 5 - FLAT 7 - 8 (1)

THE B-FLAT BLUES SCALE

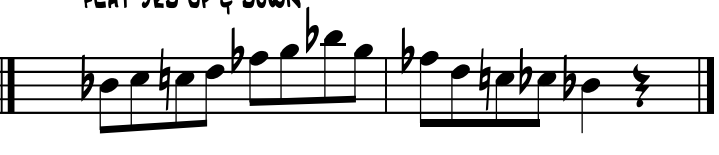


NOW, WE MUST GET COMFORTABLE WITH THE BLUES SCALE BY PRACTICING IT SWINGING OUT IN EIGHTH NOTES. THE SCALE SOUNDS BEAUTIFUL PLAYING IT IN A LINEAR WAY, JUST MOVING FROM NOTE TO NOTE. LET'S FIRST PLAY THE SCALE UP AND DOWN FROM EACH SCALE DEGREE, THEN DOWN AND UP FROM EACH SCALE DEGREE.

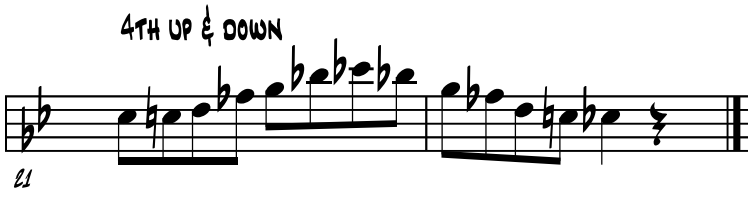
TONIC UP & DOWN



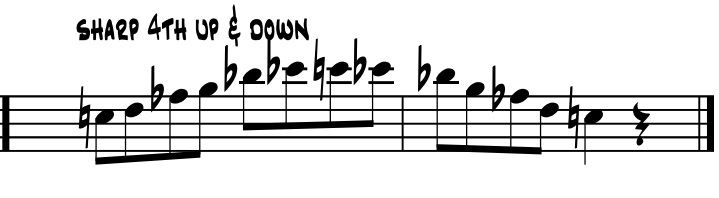
FLAT 3RD UP & DOWN



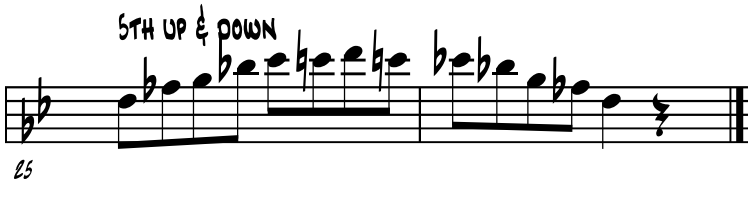
4TH UP & DOWN



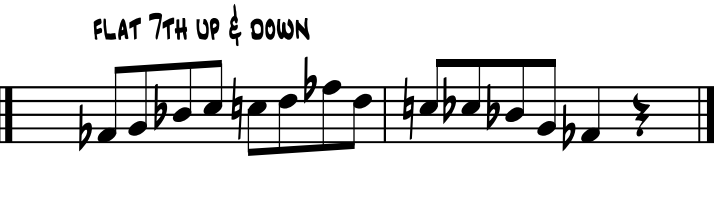
SHARP 4TH UP & DOWN



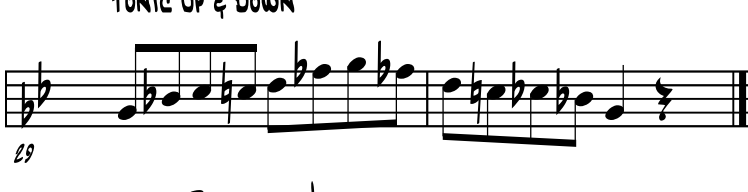
5TH UP & DOWN



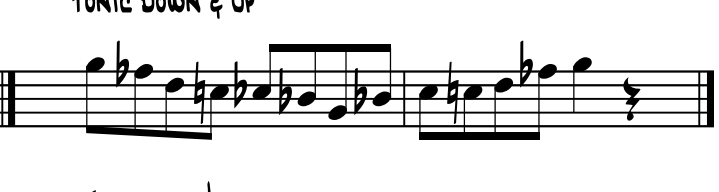
FLAT 7TH UP & DOWN



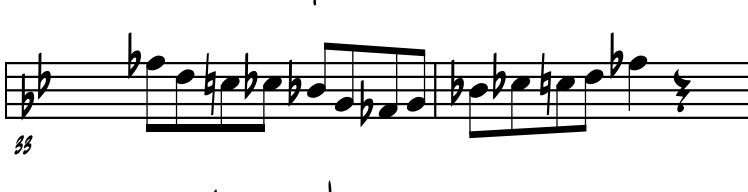
TONIC UP & DOWN



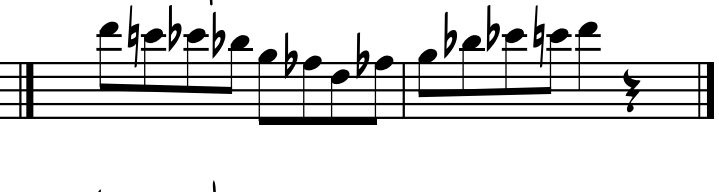
TONIC DOWN & UP



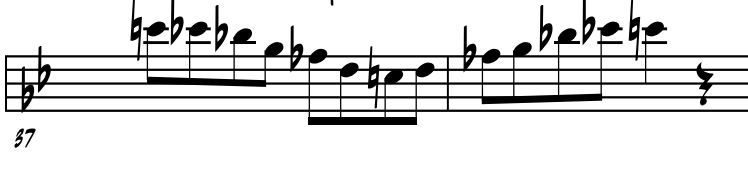
FLAT 7TH DOWN & UP



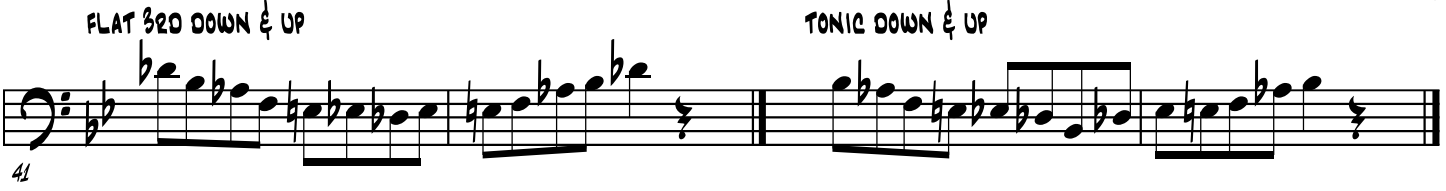
5TH DOWN & UP



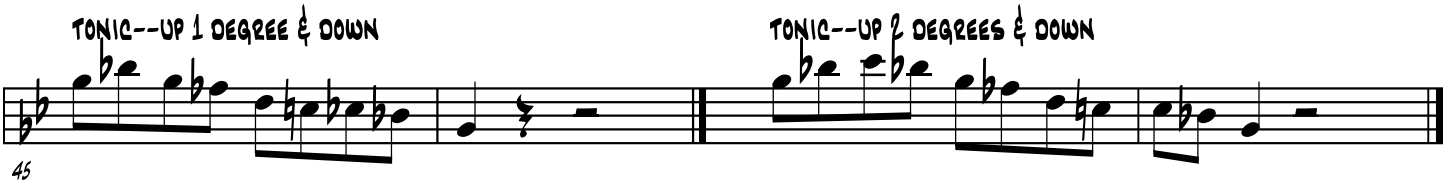
SHARP 4TH DOWN & UP

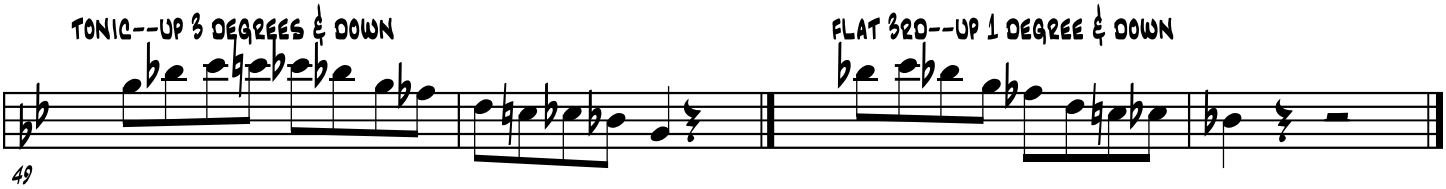


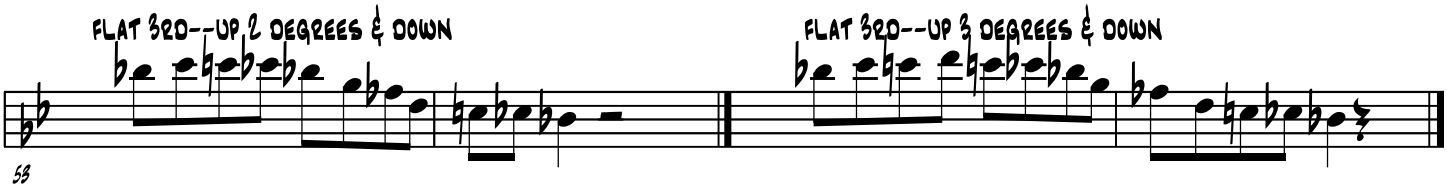
4TH DOWN & UP

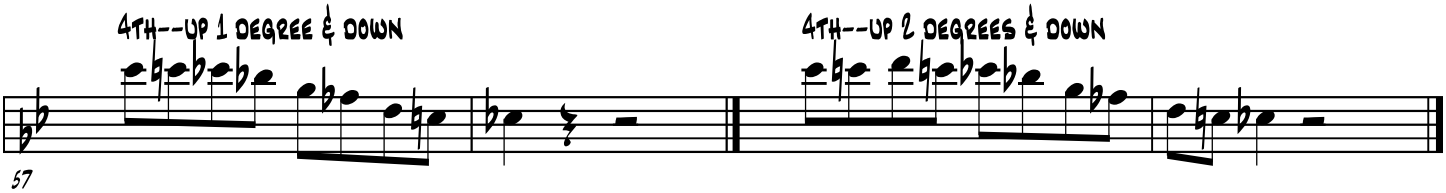


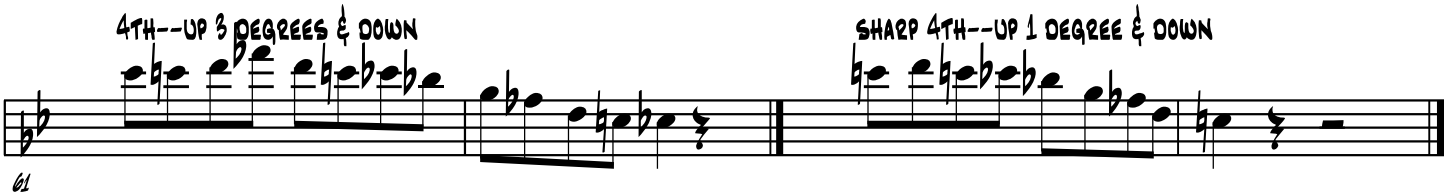
NOW LET'S PRACTICE PLAYING THE SCALE BY GOING UP ONE (1) SCALE DEGREE AND DOWN, THEN UP TWO (2) SCALE DEGREES AND DOWN, THEN UP THREE (3) SCALE DEGREES AND DOWN.

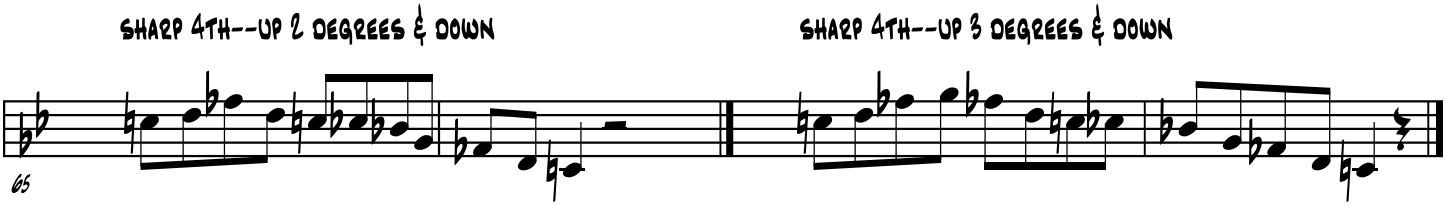






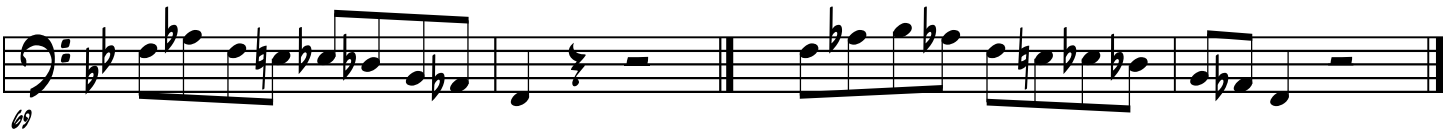






5TH--UP 1 DEGREE & DOWN

5TH--UP 2 DEGREES & DOWN



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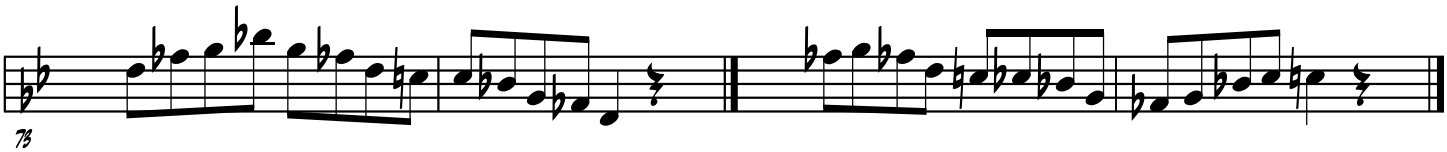
5TH--UP 3 DEGREES & DOWN

FLAT 7TH--UP 1 DEGREE & DOWN



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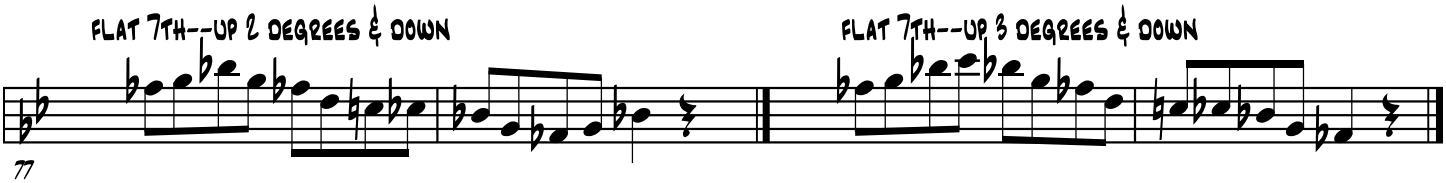
FLAT 7TH--UP 2 DEGREES & DOWN

FLAT 7TH--UP 3 DEGREES & DOWN



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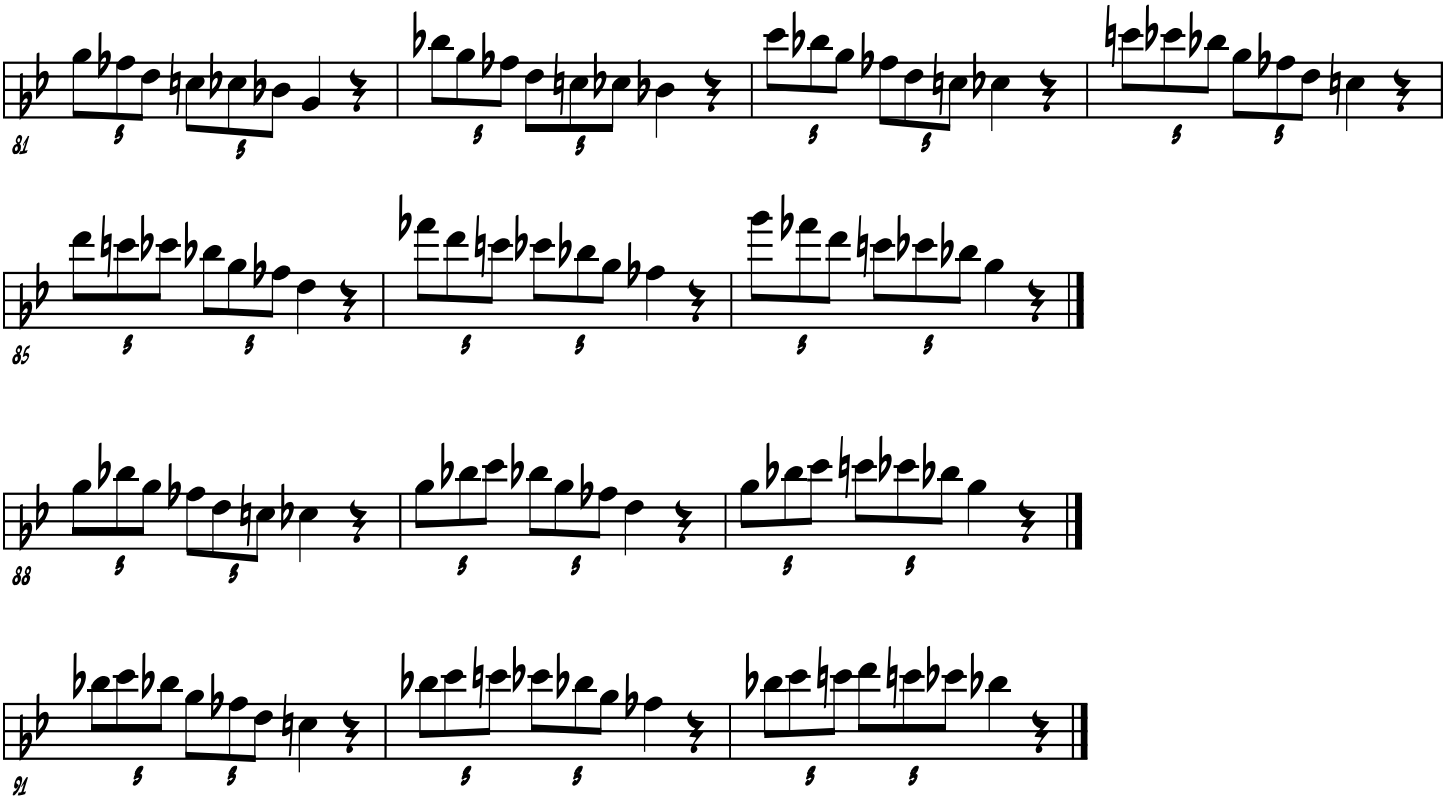
NOW LET'S PRACTICE THE BLUES SCALE DESCENDING IN EIGHTH NOTES TRIPLETS, WHICH IS THE TRUE RHYTHMIC ESSENCE OF THE BLUES. IF WE LISTEN TO THE GREAT BLUES PLAYERS, SAY FOR EXAMPLE CHARLIE PARKER, DIZZY GILLESPIE, CURTIS FULLER, CLIFFORD BROWN, SONNY ROLLINS, LEE MORGAN, WYNTON KELLY OR B.B. KING, THE USE OF THE BLUES SCALE IN EIGHTH NOTE TRIPLETS ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THEIR IMPROVISATIONS.



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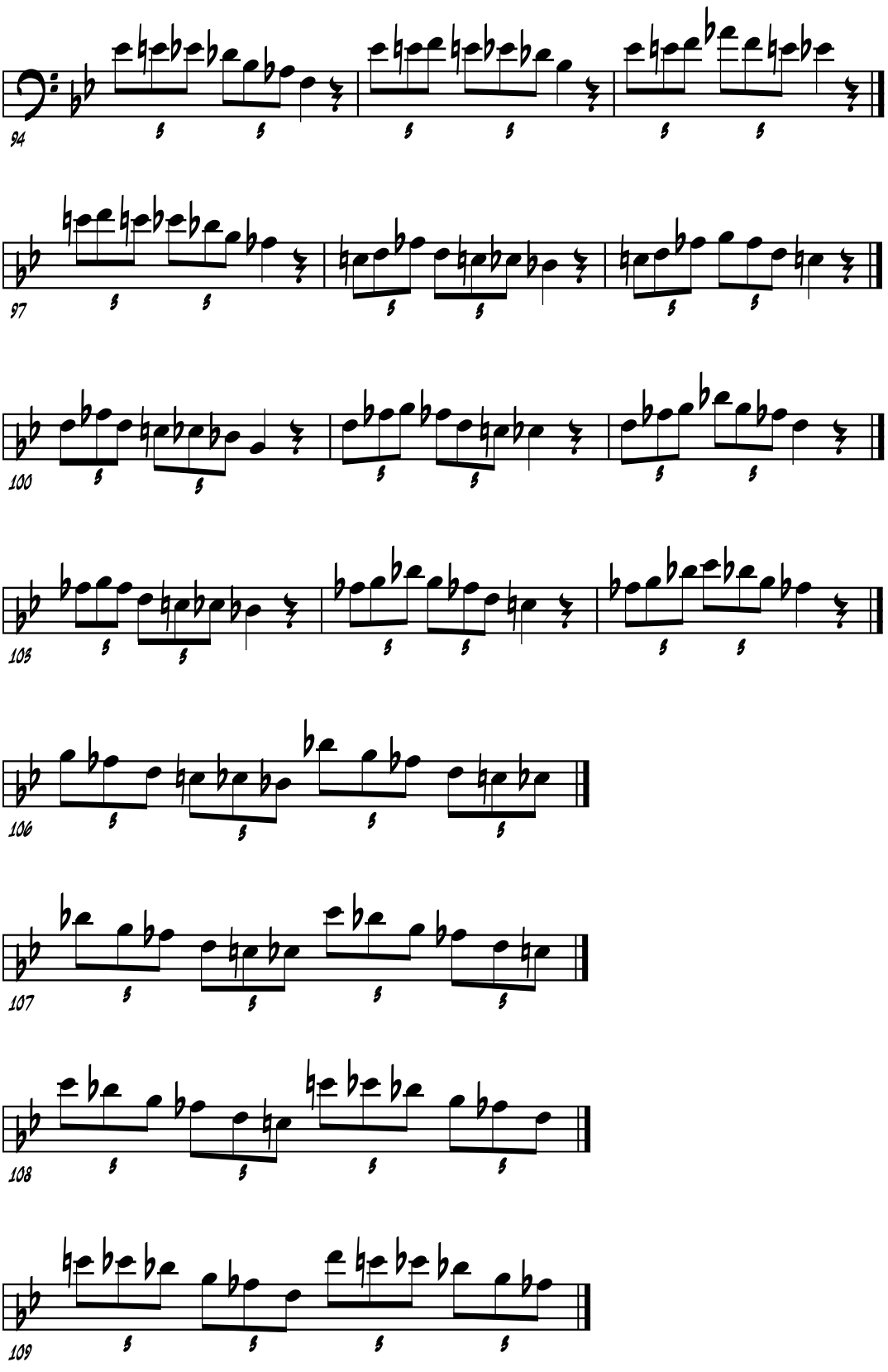
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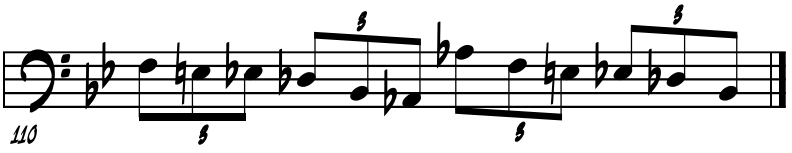
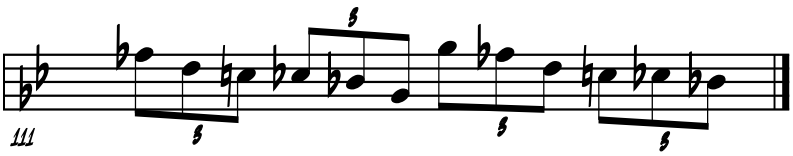
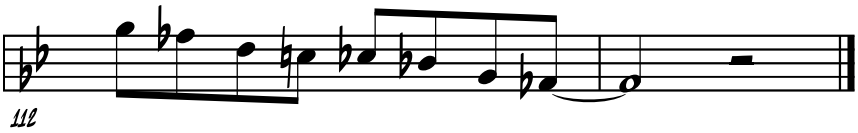
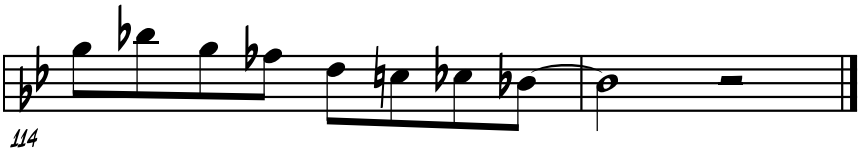
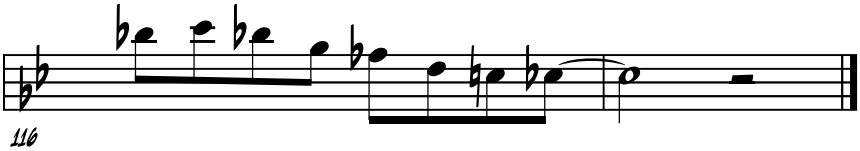


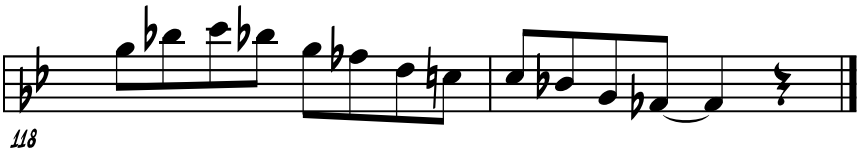


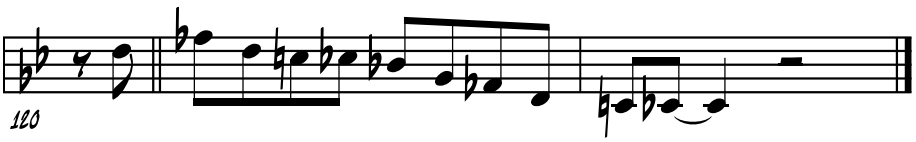
RHYTHM IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF MUSIC. TO CREATE OUR OWN PHRASES WE MUST LISTEN TO THE MASTERS AND LEARN THEIR SOLOS IN ORDER TO GAIN A TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF THE RHYTHM OF THIS MUSIC. THE BLUES SCALE SWINGS ON IT'S OWN AND PLAYING IT IN A LINEAR FASHION JUST SOUNDS GOOD. NOW LET'S BUILD SOME PHRASES UTILIZING THE IDEAS WE'VE BEEN WORKING ON.

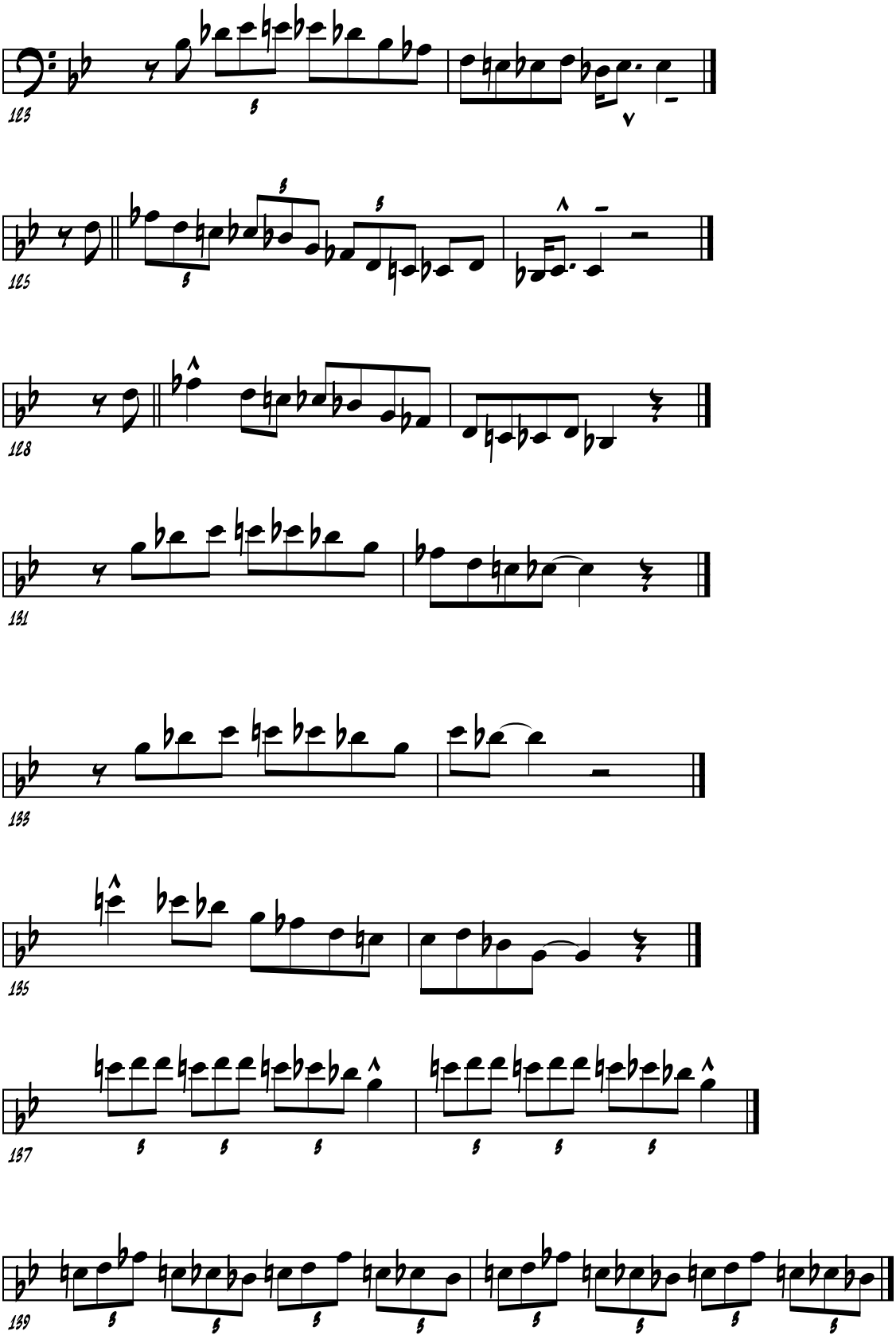








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The Blues

The next step in developing melodic material on the blues is internalizing the riffs and heads that make up the foundation of the blues. Learn them by ear. Not only the notes, but the exact phrasing and articulation used by the masters. You may freely quote these riffs in your solos. Here is a list of essential blues heads to learn:

1) Tenor Madness (John Coltrane) B-flat blues
2) Sonnymoon for Two (Sonny Rollins) B-flat blues
3) Now's the Time (Charlie Parker) F blues
4) Straight, No Chaser (Thelonious Monk) B-flat blues **Miles recorded this in the key of F
5) The Blues Walk (Sonny Stitt) B-flat blues
6) Cool Blues (Charlie Parker) C blues
7) Soft Winds (Benny Goodman-Charlie Christian) B-flat blues
8) Buzzy (Charle Parker) B-flat blues
9) Blue Seven (Sonny Rollins) B-flat blues
10) Blue Monk (Thelonious Monk) B-flat blues
11) Bag's Groove (Milt Jackson) F blues
12) Blue & Boogie (Dizzy Gillespie) B-flat blues
13) Freddie the Freeloader (Miles Davis) B-flat blues
14) Wee Dot (J.J. Johnson) B-flat blues
15) Billie's Bounce (Charlie Parker) F-blues
16) Walkin' (Richard Carpenter) F-blues
17) Au Privave (Charlie Parker) F-blues
18) Blues for Alice (Charlie Parker) F-blues
19) The Blues March (Benny Golson) B-flat blues
20) Dance of the Infidels (Bud Powell) F-blues
21) Cheryl (Charlie Parker) C blues
22) Mohawk (Charlie Parker) B-flat blues
23) Down (Miles Davis) F blues
24) Solid (Sinny Rollins) B-flat blues
25) Watermelon Man (Herbie Hancock) F-blues **16-bar form

We must also learn the solos of the great masters, by ear off of the recordings, not from books. The greatest blues players in the history of this music are Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker. Other masters of the blues include Lester Young, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Jackie McLean, Cannonball Adderley, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Stitt, Pepper Adams, Joe Henderson, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Fats Navarro, Kenny Dorham, Clifford Brown, Freddie Hubbard, Lee Morgan, J.J. Johnson, Curtis Fuller, Slide Hampton, Frank Rosolino, Carl Fontana, Charlie Christian, Wes Montgomery, Grant Green, George Benson, Jimmy Smith, Jack McDuff, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, Red Garland, Wynton Kelly, Hampton Hawes, Bobby Timmons, Oscar Peterson, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Rushing, Billie Holiday, Joe Williams and Dinah Washington.

The Blues & Breaking Down The Changes

We have practiced improvising on the blues using the blues scale in eighth notes and eighth note triplets with pickups over the barline as well as creating our own phrases.

We have also practiced quoting blues heads and blues riffs as melodic material in our solos.

The next step is to "break down the changes" and become familiar with the three dominant 7th scales and chords that make up the chord progression on the blues.

The blues, in it's most basic format, is built on three dominant 7th chords.

Those chords are built on the I , IV and V of whatever key the blues is in.

In it's most basic format, we arbitrarily make all 3 chords (I, IV, and V) dominant 7th in quality.

Let's look at the blues in B-flat concert (trombone, tuba, bass).

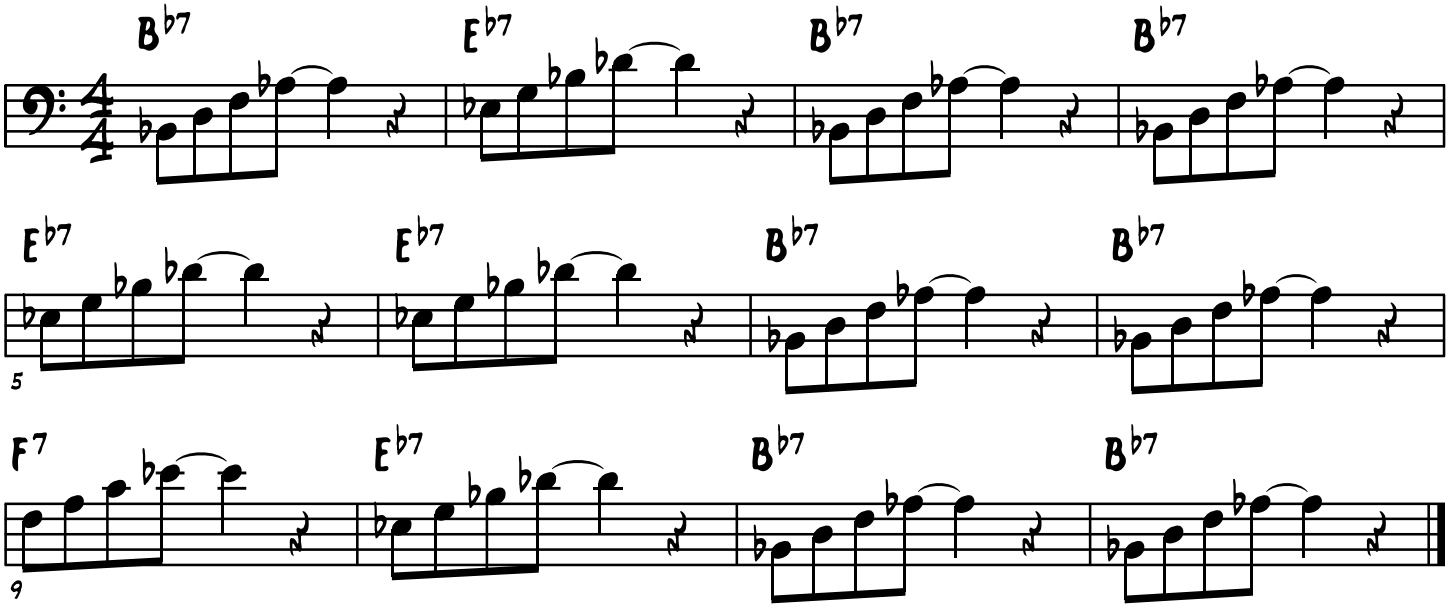
The I chord = B-flat7, the IV = E-flat7 and the V chord = F7.

Now let's outline the dominant 7th chords and scales over the 12-bar form.

After outlining the scales and chords, we will then move onto dominant 7th riffs and phrases.

It is the juxtaposition of the blues phrases and dominant 7th phrases (and eventually linear bebop phrases) that gives your improvisations great melodic variety.

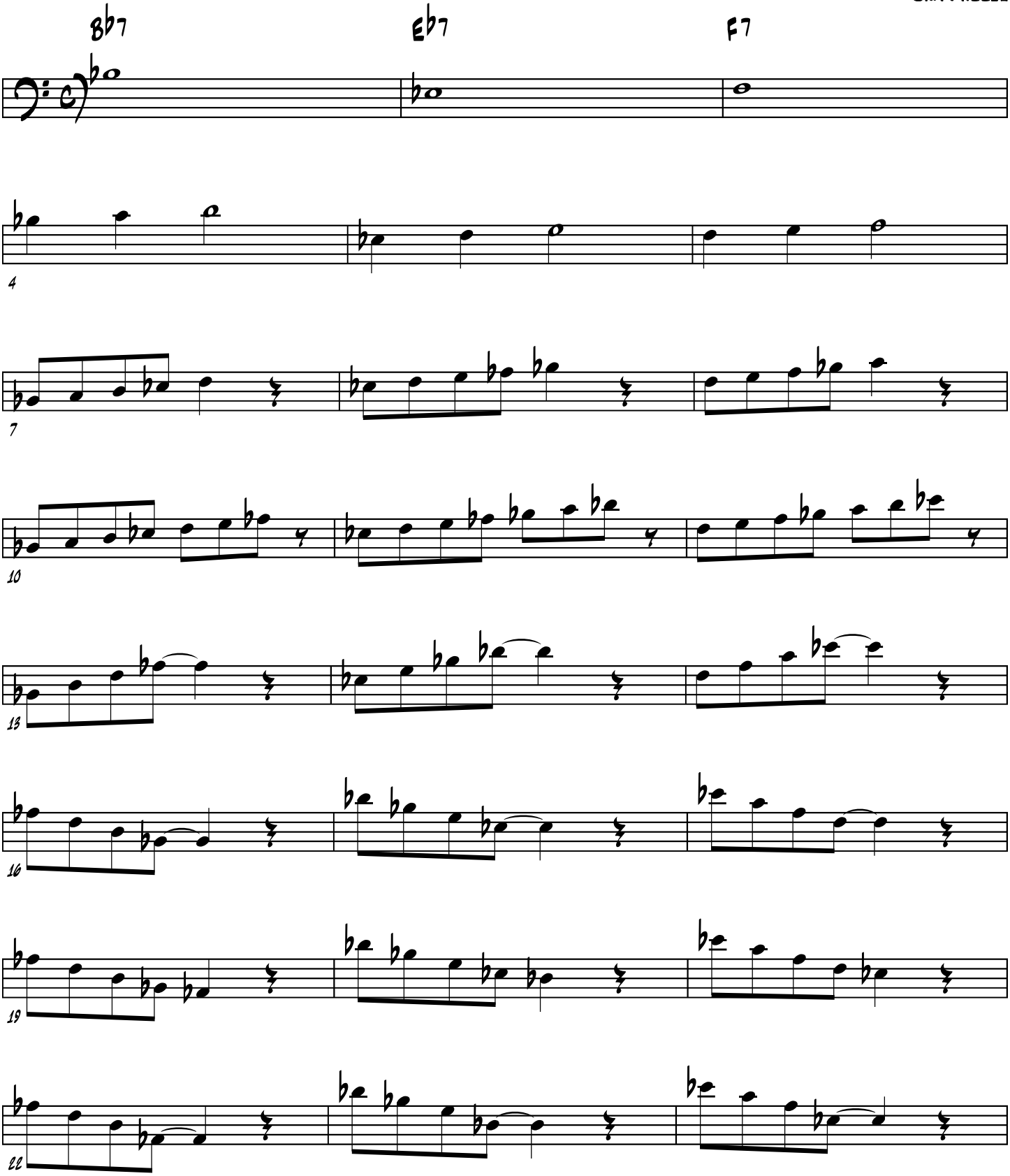
Listen to Dizzy Gillespie on the recording "Cool Breeze" from "Dizzy at Newport" (Verve 1957)



Bass Clef

Breaking Down the Changes

Dan Miller



Breaking Down the Changes

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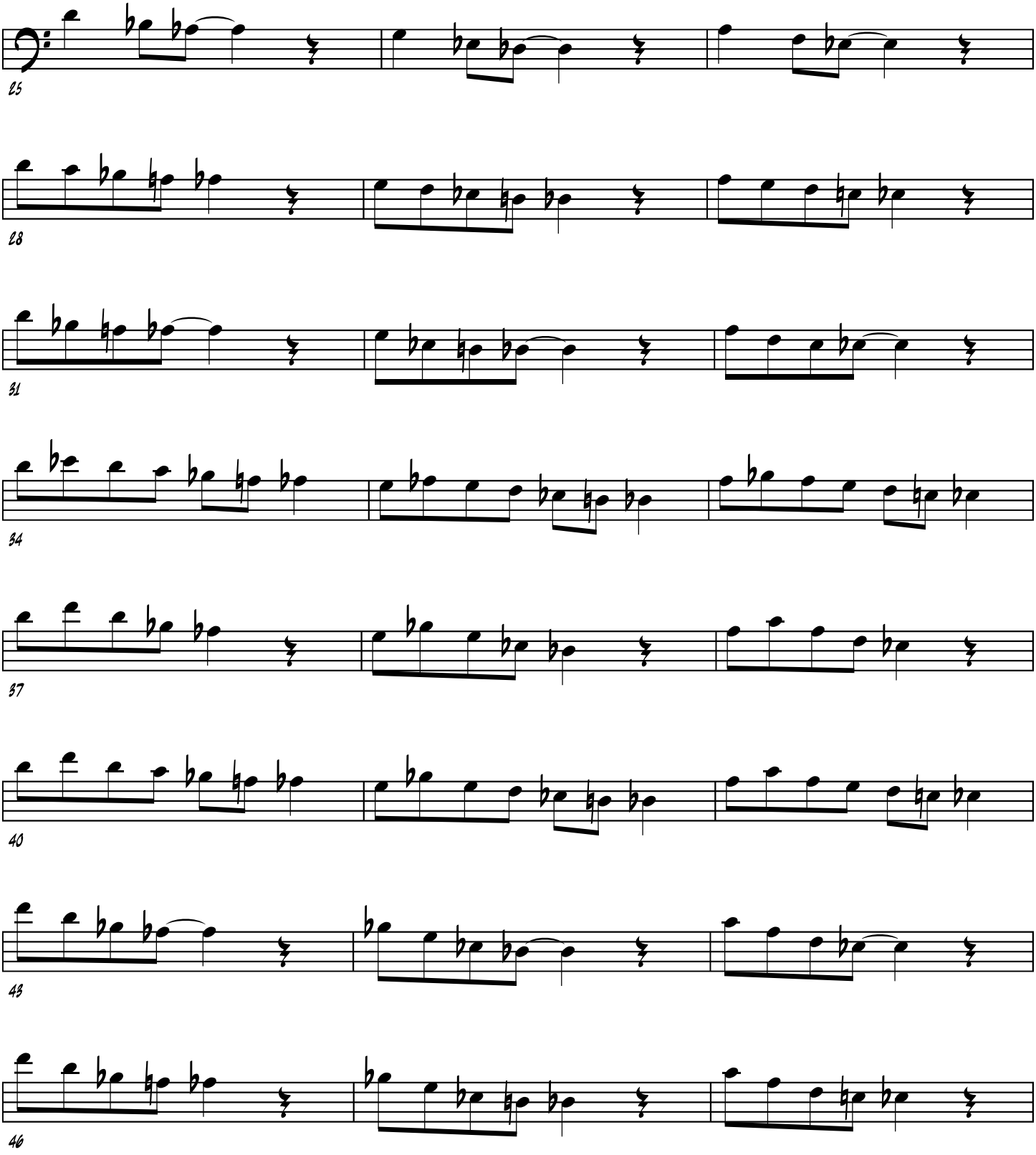
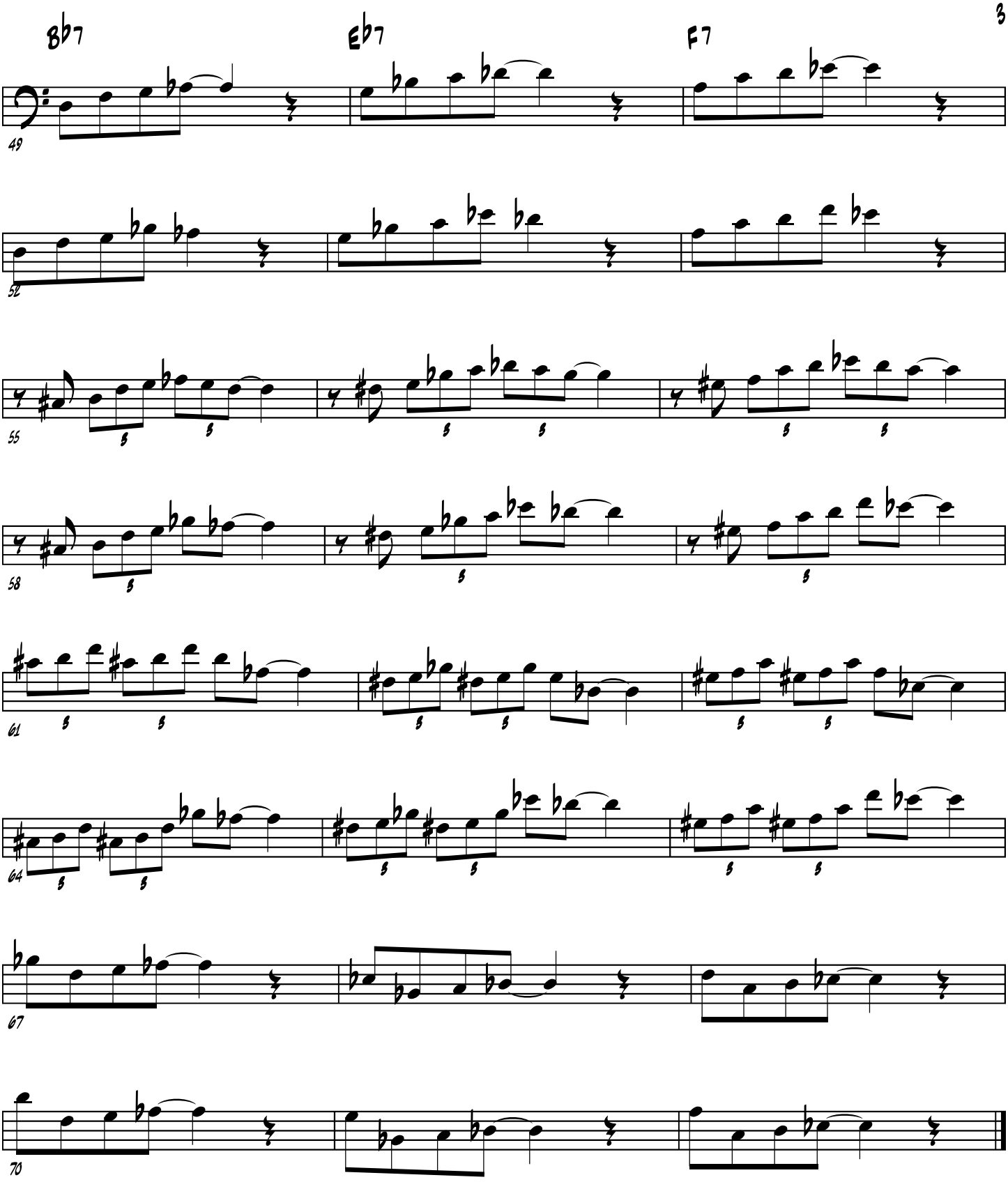
B♭7 E♭7 F7




Bb7
Eb7
F7
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