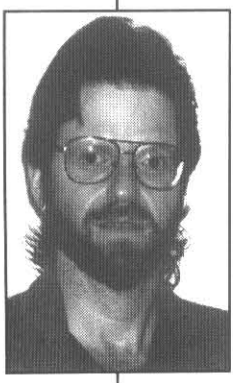
Jazz Riffs for Piano

by Frank Feldman

great Riffs series

About The Author



Frank Feldman graduated magna cum laude, with honors in music, from Brown University, and went on to study classical piano at the graduate level at the New England Conservatory of Music. He is the composer of over 200 songs and instrumental compositions in a variety of genres, and the author of *Creating Coherent Jazz Melody—A Sourcebook For Improvisers.*

Frank has been a freelance pianist and private classical and jazz piano instructor since 1979, and has performed at hundreds of venues throughout the country, including Carnegie Hall. He is the president and founding member of The New York Jazz Piano Institute, based in Lynbrook, New York.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank Arthur Rotfeld, Mark Phillips, Jon Chappell and all the folks at Cherry Lane Music for their help, guidance, and support; Edwin Hymovitz for the depth and eloquence of his piano teaching; Ilona Ross for her engineering wizardry; and Danielle Fenton for her support. Finally, I'd like to express my profoundest gratitude to all the great masters of jazz, which is America's purest and deepest musical tradition. Their inspiration and achievements have given a focus to my life and work, and have given me countless hours of pleasure.

CONTENTS

Jazz Riffs

INTRODUCTION FOR PIANO

The musical examples found in this book are composed in the styles of several great jazz pianists. Attempting to put their achievements into tidy little historical boxes is an inadequate and superficial approach—the lines that connect their work are not simply chronological. As you come to appreciate the work of more and more of the music's greatest figures, the subtle paths of influence, from one artist to another, will become clear.

The Late Swing Era And The Style Of Teddy Wilson

Teddy Wilson's approach to the piano differed vastly from that of his contemporaries. He exploited the advantages that the new electronic microphone offered him: playing right-hand lines full of precisely articulated, intricate arabesques. Although his left hand often employed a stride action, it had none of the brutish accents characteristic of the period. At times, he used tenths in the left hand with no changes in register. Though his harmonic palette was not large, his disciplined elegance presaged later, more subtle developments in the art of jazz piano.

The Role Of The Piano During The Bebop Era

Upper-extensions of the chord, such as ninths, ♯11ths, and 13ths, as well as altered notes, such as the ♭5 and ♭9 of dominant seventh chords, began to appear in small combo music of the late swing era. The bassist began to take over the duties of the pianist's left hand. Tempos began to increase. Pianists of the era strove to incorporate the virtuosic innovations of the great alto saxophonist Charlie Parker into their right-hand lines. With their newly emancipated left hands, they punctuated those lines with percussive, staccato chords.

Bud Powell epitomized the highest aesthetic achievement of the bebop era. Passionate and imaginative, he exhibited a profound influence on the pianists who followed him.

Thelonious Monk was the most original pianistic voice of the era. While others strove to adapt the virtuoso lines of the period's great horn players for the piano, Monk played sparse, angular solos, full of silence, surprise, and references to the tune's melody. His musical language was abstract and dissonant, yet full of wit, verve, and droll humor.

The beboppers' repertoire consisted primarily of improvisatory-sounding, ornate, deftly syncopated melodies based on the chord progressions of popular songs of the day, such as "I Got Rhythm," and, of course, the perennial 12-bar blues. The musicians considered their music an art form, intended for attentive, informed listening.

The Varied Piano Stylings Of The Post-Bop Era

George Shearing, always a gentle and elegant player, favored the cool, laid-back West Coast sound during the post-bop era of the '50s. He was "modernized" by listening to Bud Powell and other disciples of the new music. Shearing enjoyed great commercial success adapting Milt Buckner's style of *locked hands* playing to medium tempo ballads. In this style of block chord playing, the melody is played by the thumb of the left hand and doubled one octave higher in the pinky of the right hand, leaving the lower numbered fingers and thumb of the right hand free to play chord tones.

Erroll Garner was an entirely self-taught, brilliantly playful maverick of the piano. Much of his musical language was characteristic of the bebop era, though his strummed, guitar-like left-hand chords—with their four-to-the-bar feel—harkened back to the swing era. In his right hand, he often played block chords consisting of octaves (or spans even larger than the octave) filled in with chord tones, as well as lush, romantic, wide-spanning chords. Garner played behind the beat in an immediately recognizable and deftly swinging way.

Red Garland subscribed to the harder swinging and funkier notions of East Coast post-bop piano playing. He worked with the Miles Davis unit from 1955 through 1958. His single-note lines combined the innovations of the beboppers with the new, more bluesy aesthetic of the hard bop school. Red, in his unique style of block chord playing, struck the left-hand chord (often a four-note, rootless ninth chord) simultaneously with each melody note in the right hand. The right hand consisted of the melody note in the pinky, doubled at the octave by the thumb, plus the note a fifth (or diminished fifth, depending on the tonal context) above the thumb's note. The resulting series of slightly "off" parallel fifths was the hallmark of Garland's block chord style.

Bill Evans brought new depths of harmonic and melodic richness to jazz piano playing. Although his biggest early influence was Bud Powell, Evans' temperament was more sensitive, subtle, and introverted. He was a ruthless self-critic with a rigorously analytical mind. Bill employed the rich resources of the European classics in his playing to an extent previously unknown in jazz. His trios displayed remarkable contrapuntal interplay between bass, drums, and piano. A deep inner honesty and integrity imbued the beauty and lyricism of his playing. No other pianist since Bud Powell has had a greater influence on his contemporaries and on those who followed him than Bill Evans.

Evans contributed greatly to *Kind Of Blue,* Miles Davis's groundbreaking album of 1959. Its fresh modal conception dispensed with frequent chord changes, and encouraged the soloist to flights of melodic spontaneity, unhampered by the need to accommodate rapidly changing harmonies. The impact of that album, and of Bill's contribution to it, was tremendous.

The Jazz Piano Styles Of The '60s And Beyond

During the 1960s a confusing variety of styles, schools, and individuals, along with some grim economic realities, created an identity crisis in jazz which has not abated to this day. Hence, we'll focus on three of the strongest, most influential players of the period: Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and Keith Jarrett.

Herbie Hancock inherited a wonderfully funky, laid-back approach from Wynton Kelly, his predecessor in the Miles Davis group. Herbie integrated the sensual harmonic language of the French impressionists into his jazz playing in a very personal way. His work as soloist and accompanist in Miles Davis's great quintet of the 1960s was particularly outstanding.

McCoy Tyner, who greatly influenced Chick Corea, adapted for the piano many of the pentatonic and modal innovations of the tenor saxophonist John Coltrane. Tyner played for long stretches in the Dorian mode, favoring percussive, drone-like 5ths in the bass, left-hand voicings in 4ths, and virtuosic cascades of pentatonic digital patterns in the right hand. Corea took elements of this style and adapted them to suit his own crisp, clean, incisive musical temperament. A trained classical pianist, he also used many of the techniques of twentieth-century "serious" music in his improvisations.

Keith Jarrett is a law unto himself. He relies more upon the inspiration of the moment than upon predetermined formulae or patterns. Notes are often secondary to the romantic, effusive sweep of his playing. Whether improvising on a 32-bar song form or developing thematic material on a far broader canvas, Jarrett has made the piano sing a new song, ranging from the deeply reflective to the breathlessly ecstatic. He is an archromantic who will daringly and recklessly abandon himself to the moment, as well as a virtuoso who seamlessly incorporates sophisticated, intellectual, European classical techniques into his playing. In Keith Jarrett, improvisatory playing at times attains an emotional depth it has perhaps not had since the time of Chopin and Liszt.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I heartily encourage you to take the materials in this book and vary, adjust, and recompose them to suit your needs, goals, and musical taste. Combine the riffs in novel ways—perhaps one of the bebop riffs might work well in the block chord style of George Shearing. In any case, transpose whatever you're working on into a number of keys (a very effective form of ear-training, by the way), and use it at every opportunity in your improvising. Also, learn to think about harmony using Roman numerals. They are the most effective way to grasp the underlying grammar and architecture of phrases and songs, and they make transposition easy. (If you aren't familiar with Roman numeral analysis, consult a good harmony textbook.)

An even more gratifying way to practice new riffs is to "plug" them into a section of a song form. Identify the sort of harmonic progressions in which the riff would be effective and find a tune that has several instances of that progression. If you can, "compose" a solo over the chord changes of a tune, then transpose the solo to several keys.

Don't hesitate to focus your studies on the players and periods that interest you most. Love is always the best motivation. Encyclopedic knowledge is not the goal. You may, ironically, find that immersing yourself in the style of a particular player or period opens your ears to other players and periods that previously held no allure for you.

Finally, don't over-rely on the notation! Jazz is a music of infinite rhythmic suppleness and subtlety. No one learns to speak a language without hearing it often. If you make listening to jazz and attending jazz events an integral part of your life, your progress will be far more natural, enjoyable and rapid.

Good luck!

(CD tracks of the examples are indicated in the black boxes)

Editor's Note

The music in this book is to be played with a *swing feel*, in which a pair of eighth notes that begin on the beat are executed as the first two-thirds and last third of an eighth-note triplet. In instances where triplets and eighth notes appear simultaneously (e.g., when the right hand plays three triplet eighths against two eighths in the left hand), the second eighth of the left hand coincides with the third eighth of the right hand's triplet.

RIFFS IN THE STYLE OF THE LATE SWING ERA

Tenths & Arabesques

Note the left hand's 10ths and the right hand's delicate arabesques in this common chord progression.

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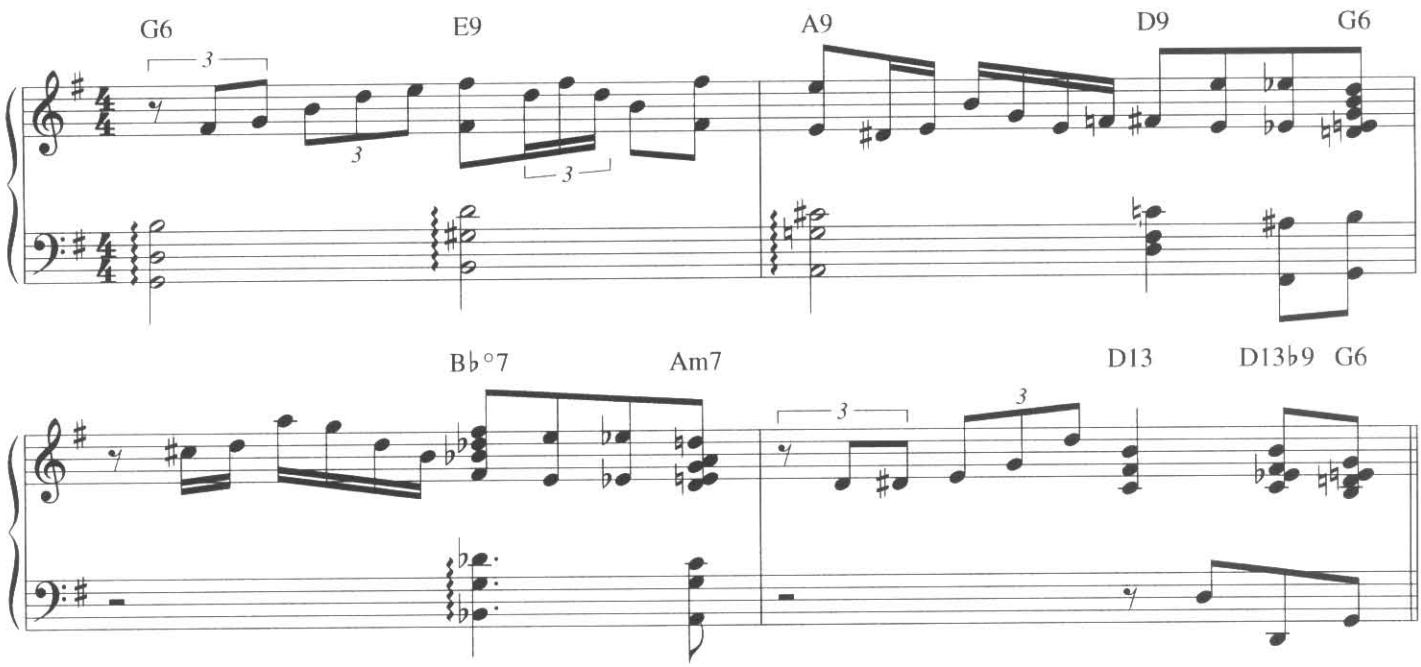

Teddy Wilson-Style Arpeggios

The sweeping arpeggios that abound in this example and the B♭9♯5 chord are typical of Teddy Wilson's style.

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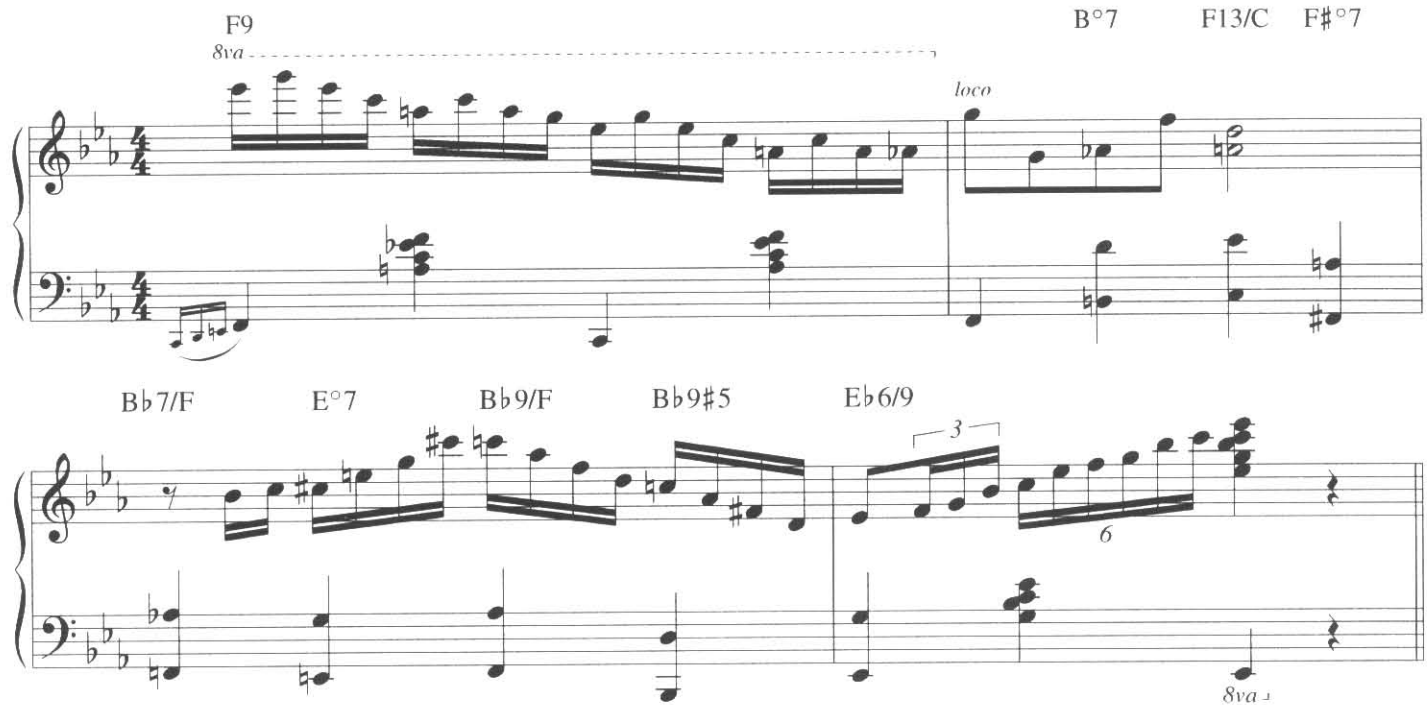

RIFFS IN THE STYLE OF THE BEBOP ERA

Passing Harmonies #1

The progression iim7–♯ii°7–I (Dm7–D♯°7–C in the key of C major) was one of many venerable swing traditions preserved by the beboppers.

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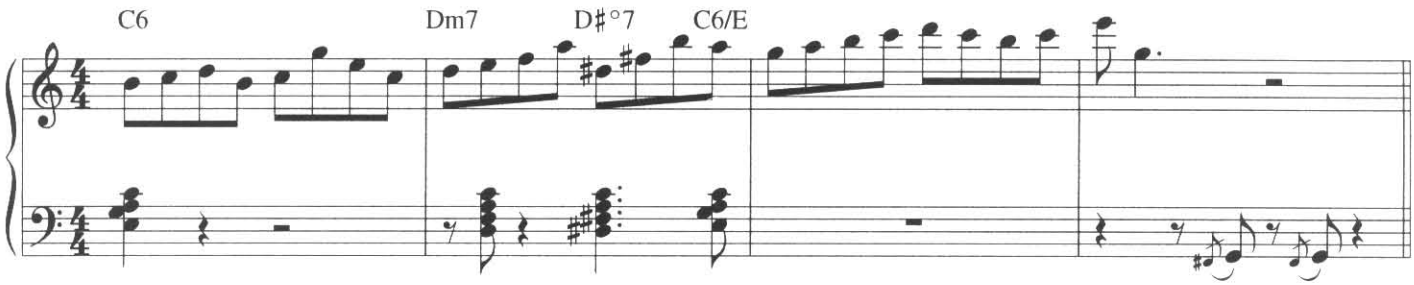

Passing Harmonies #2

Observe how the right hand continues to outline the chord of B♭6 even though the left hand introduces passing harmonies (Cm7 & C♯°7).

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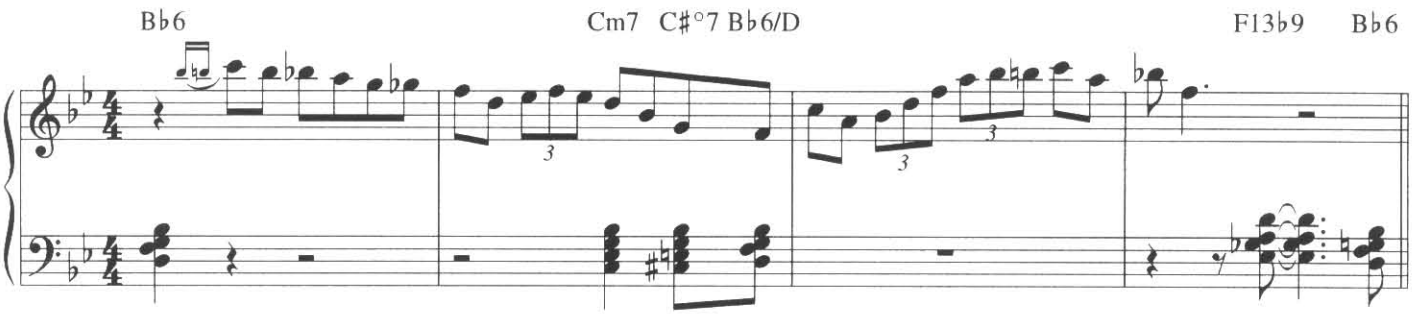

Tritone Substitution

The substitution of a dominant 7th chord a semitone above the tonic, for the one a fifth above the tonic, is one of bebop's most famous musical innovations. Here B♭7 is followed by the substitute chord, E7, which then resolves to the tonic E♭. This device, known as the *tritone substitution*, is so named because the substitute chord (E7) lies a tritone away from the V (B♭). (Note: The tritone sub has the sound of an altered V without the root; for example, the notes of the E7 chord (E G♯ B D) are the ♭5, ♭7, ♭9 and 3rd of the B♭7 chord.)

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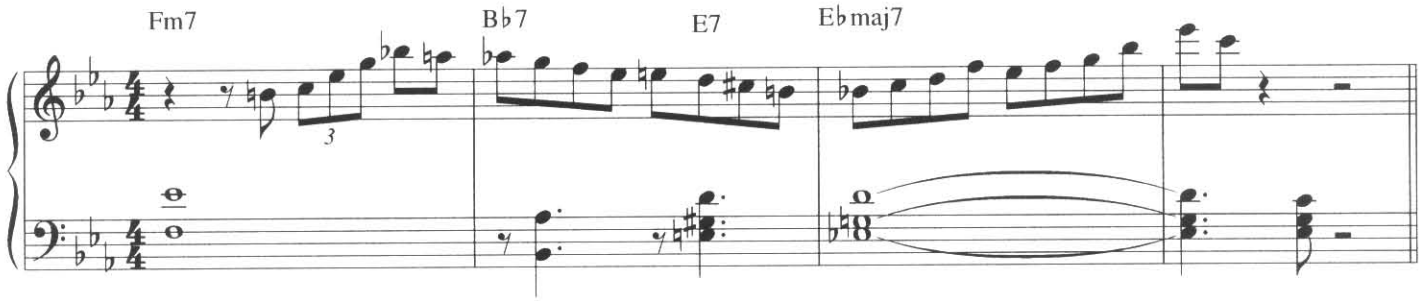

Chromatic Weaving

Observe the chromatic line that weaves through the ii chord in this example: C (bar 1, beat 2), B (bar 1, beat 3), to B♭ (bar 2, beat 1). The B♭ then resolves to the A of the F7 chord. Also note the ♭9th and ♯11th extension in the F7 chord—common in the bebop vocabulary.

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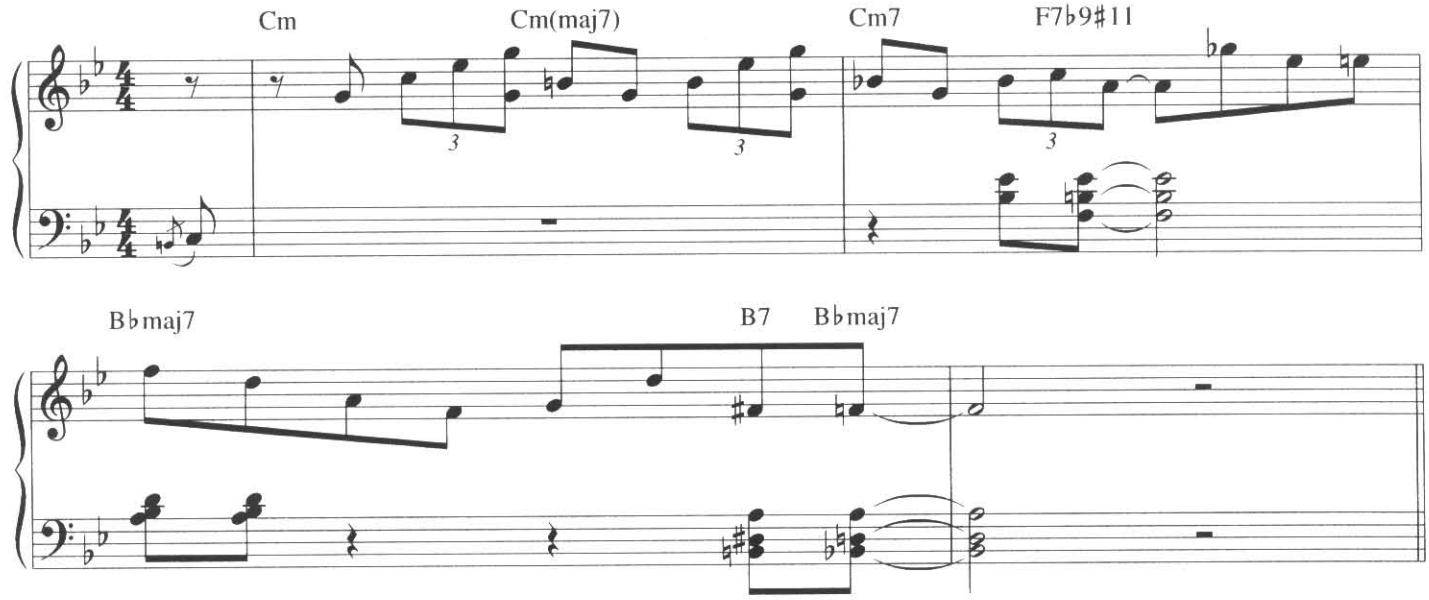
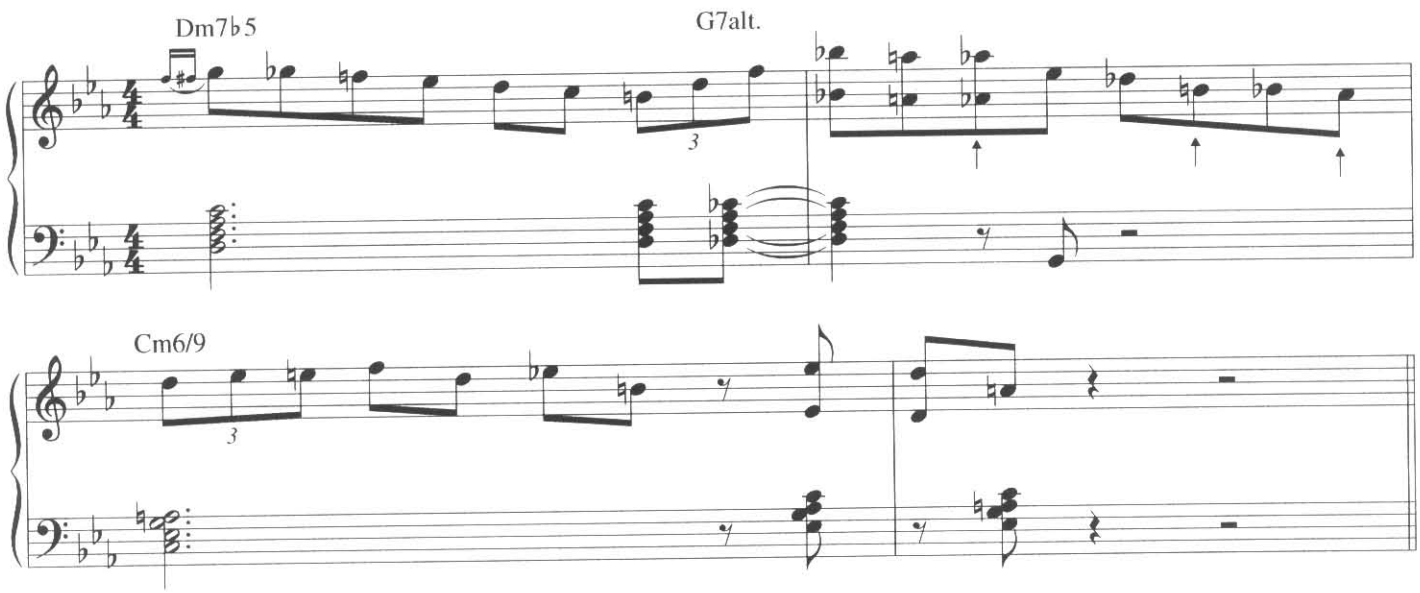


ii–V–i In Minor

Notice the right hand's superimposition of an A♭ minor chord over the G7 chord (shown with arrows). The notes—A♭, B(C♭), and E♭—are, respectively, the ♭9, 3 and ♭13 of the underlying harmony.

7



Bebop Double-Time Riff

Virtuosic double-time playing was a bebop specialty. This example is also full of chromatic passing tones and neighbor tones, typical of the period. Study them carefully!

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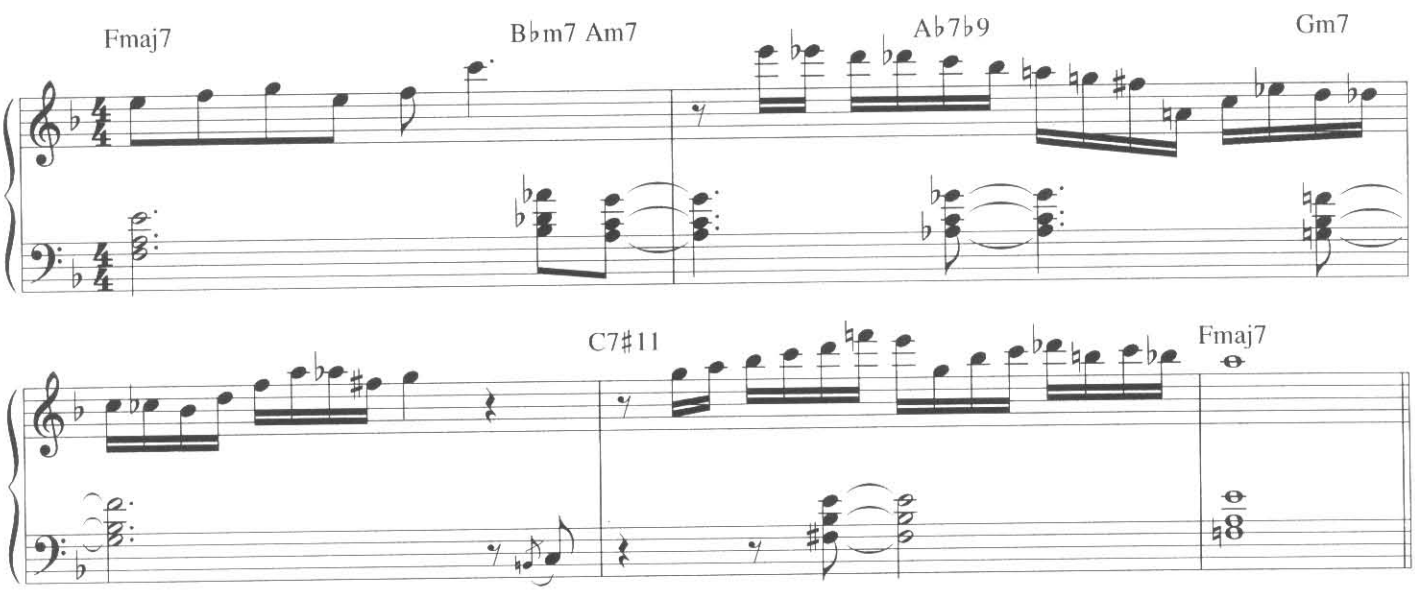
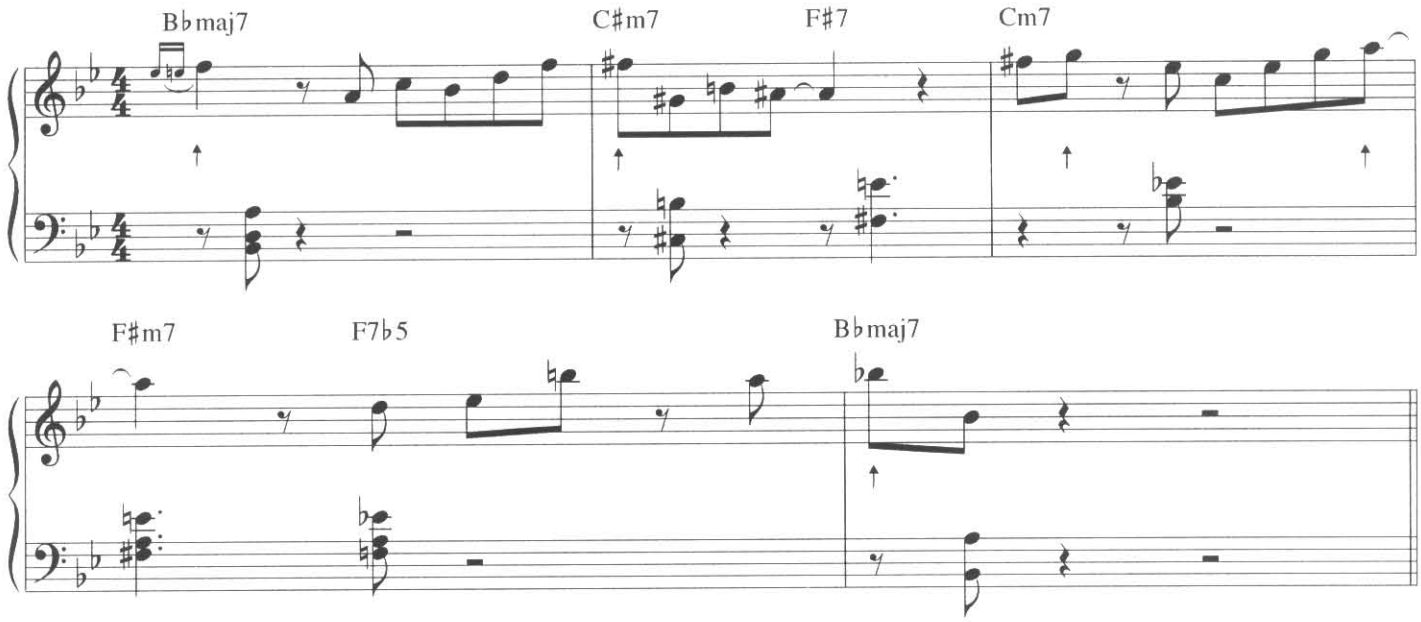


Unresolved ii–V

The second bar of this example contains an unresolved ii–V in the Neapolitan (♭II)—a device often used by Miles Davis ("Half Nelson," "Four," etc.). The arrows show a hidden step-wise line filling in the interval between the F in bar 1 and the B♭ in bar 5.

9



ii–V Tritone Substitution

In bar 2, Bm7 precedes the tritone sub, E7 (Bm7 and E7 are the ii and V in A); if you can substitute the V, why not bring the ii along for the ride!

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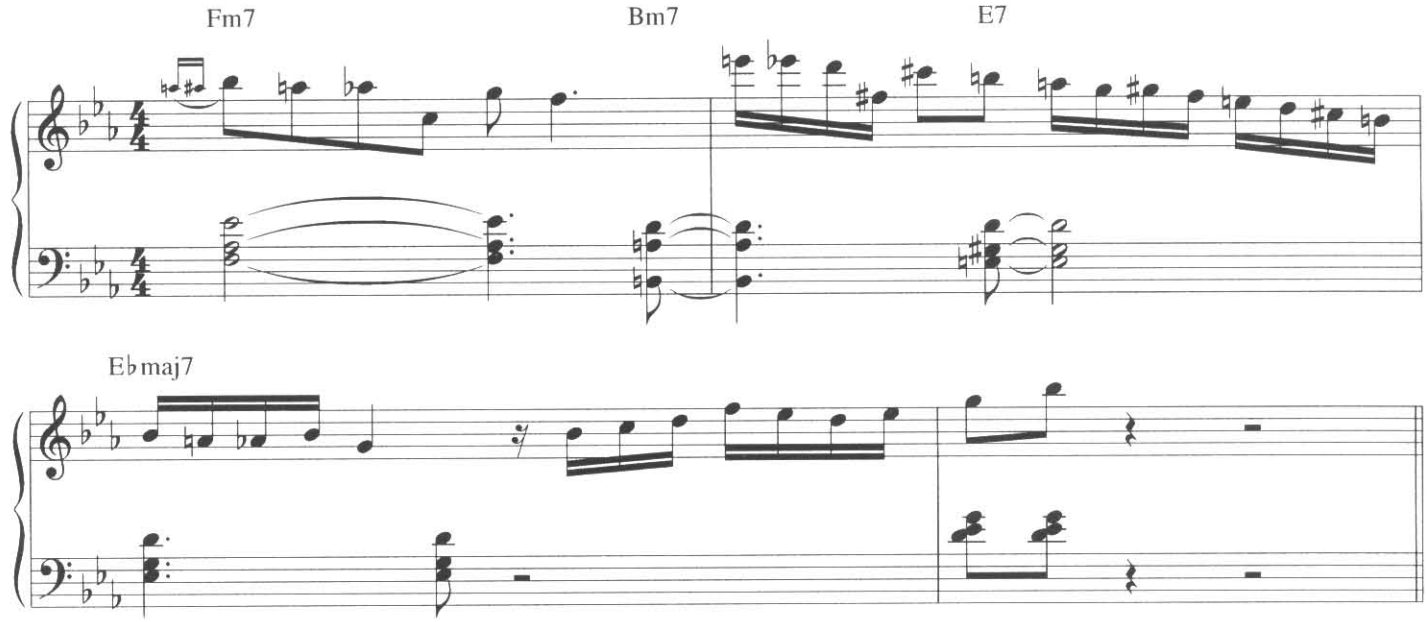
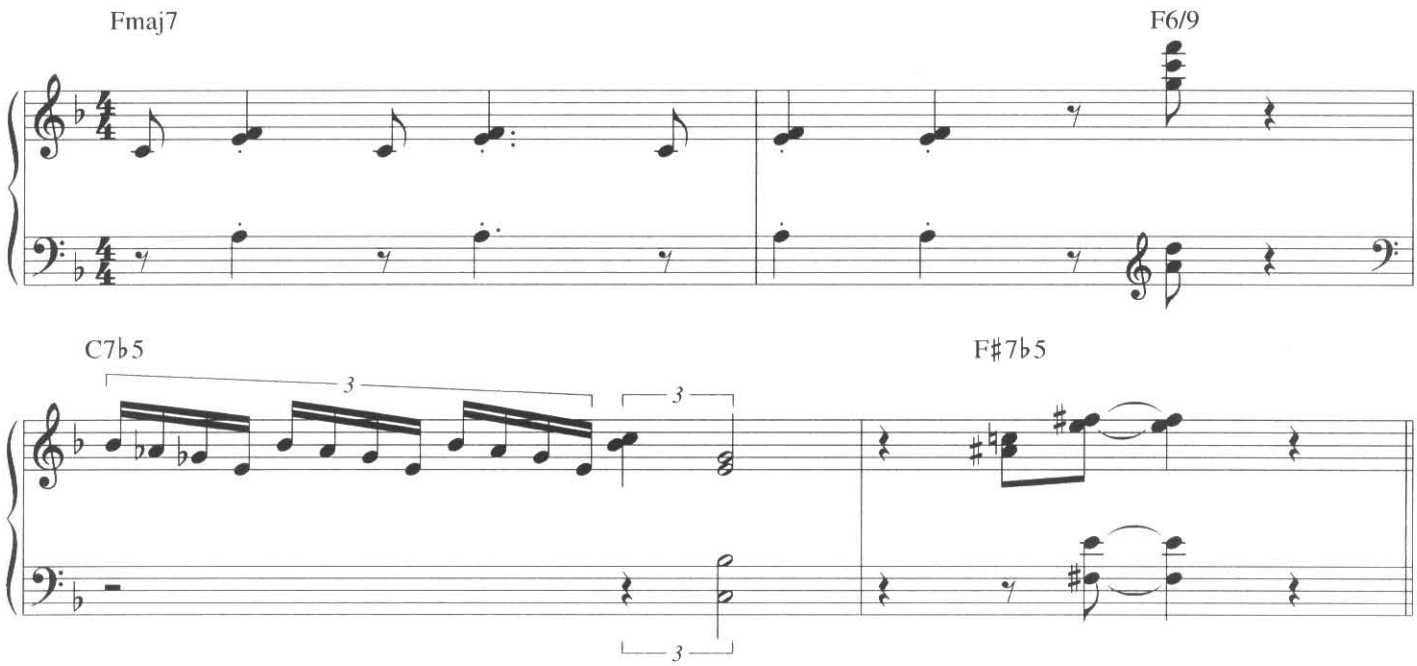


Thelonious Monk-Style Riff #1

The dissonant semitones beneath the melody note F, the dramatic use of register, the voicing in 4ths of the F6/9 chord, and the humorous use of the whole-tone scale in bar 3, establish a Thelonious Monk–like sound in this example.

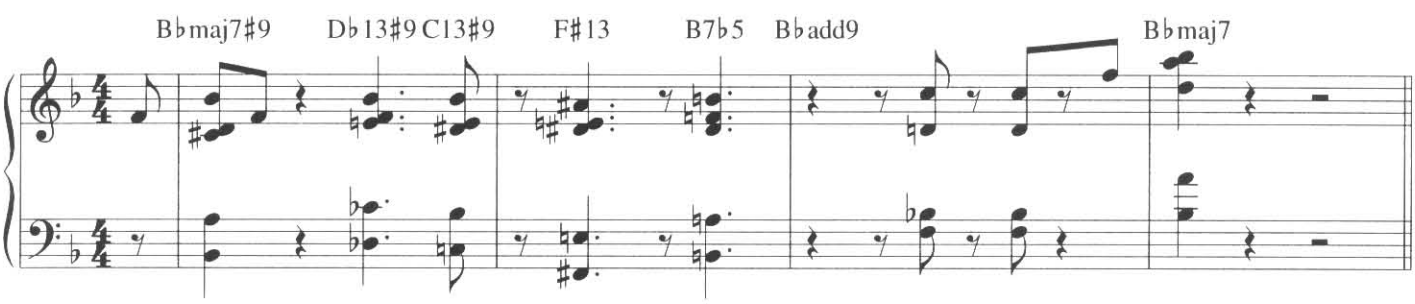
11



Thelonious Monk-Style Riff #2

Though other pianists might have chosen these substitute dominant chords, the lean, angular voicings and sharp, jabbing dissonances are typical of Monk.

12

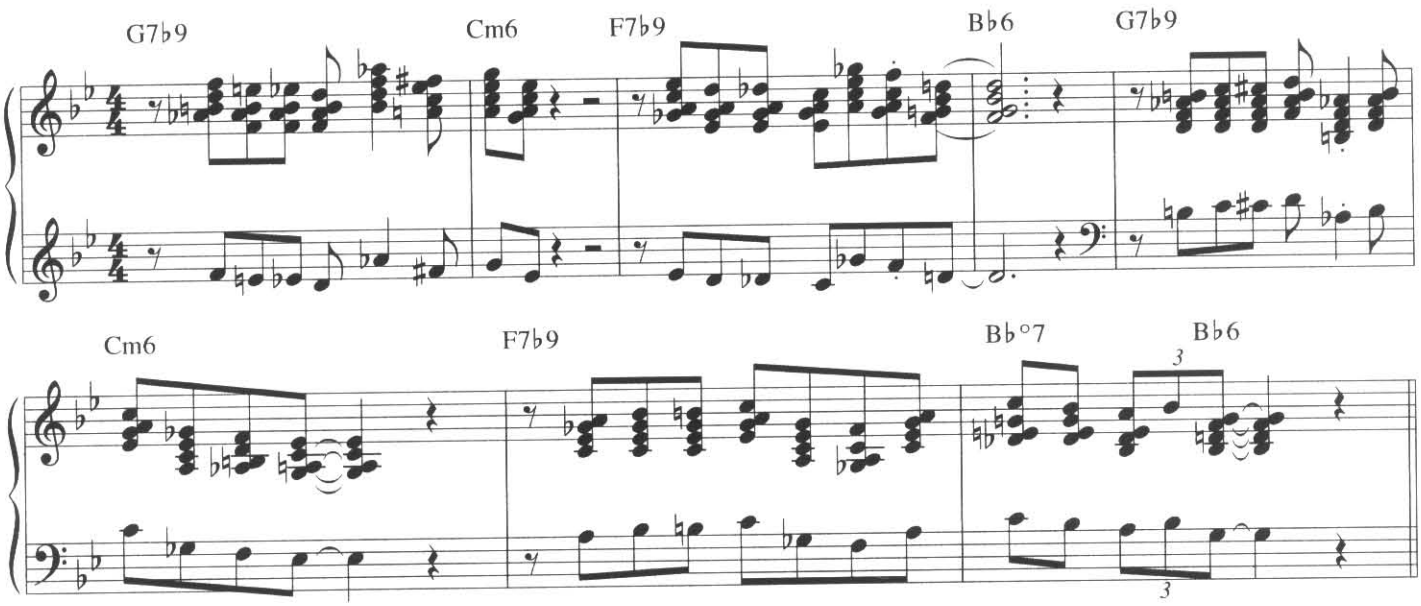


RIFFS IN THE STYLES OF THE POST-BOP ERA

The Two-Fisted Style of George Shearing

This example is in the style of George Shearing. Diminished 7ths occur frequently in this style as rootless 7♭9 chords, and as supporting neighbor and passing chords.

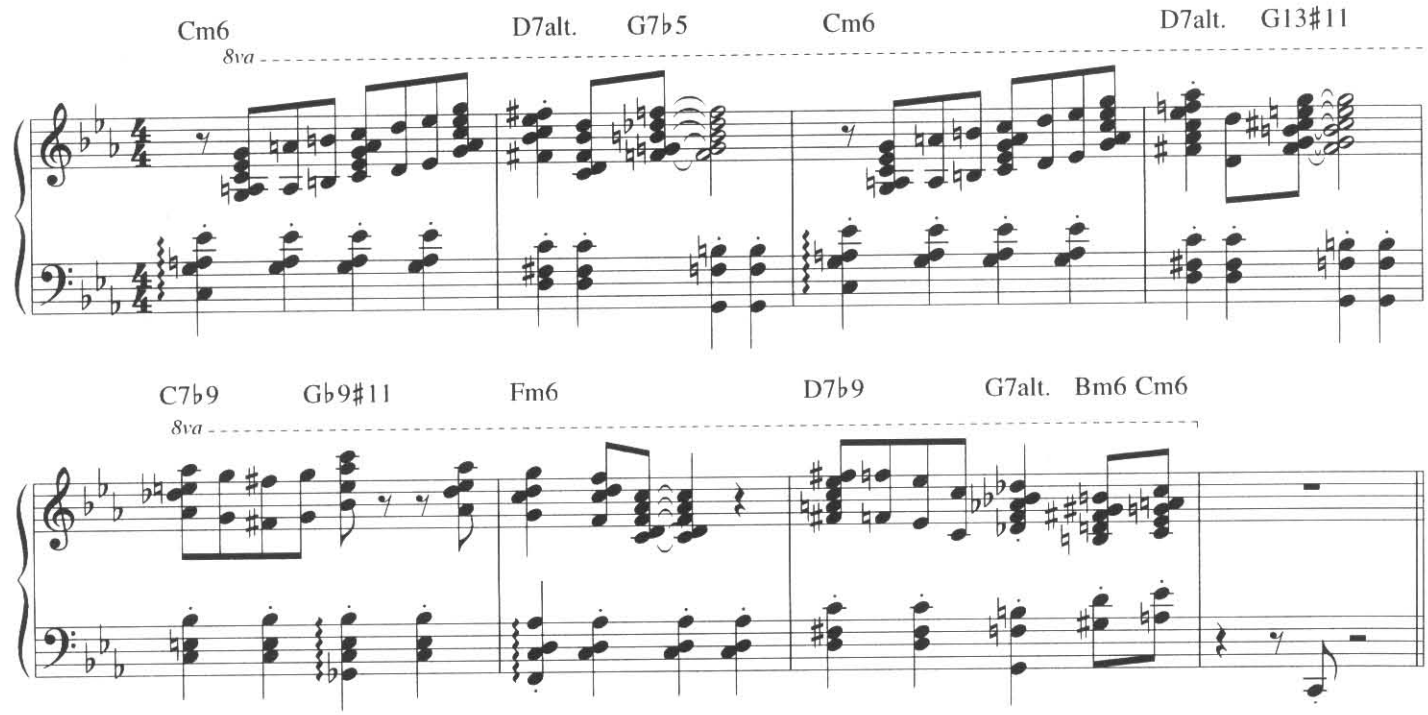
13



The Block Chord Style of Erroll Garner

Erroll Garner's dense orchestral style is demonstrated here. When the right hand spans a 9th (e.g., bar 2, beat 2), the thumb almost always plays two notes a step apart (most typically, the root and the 7th of the chord).

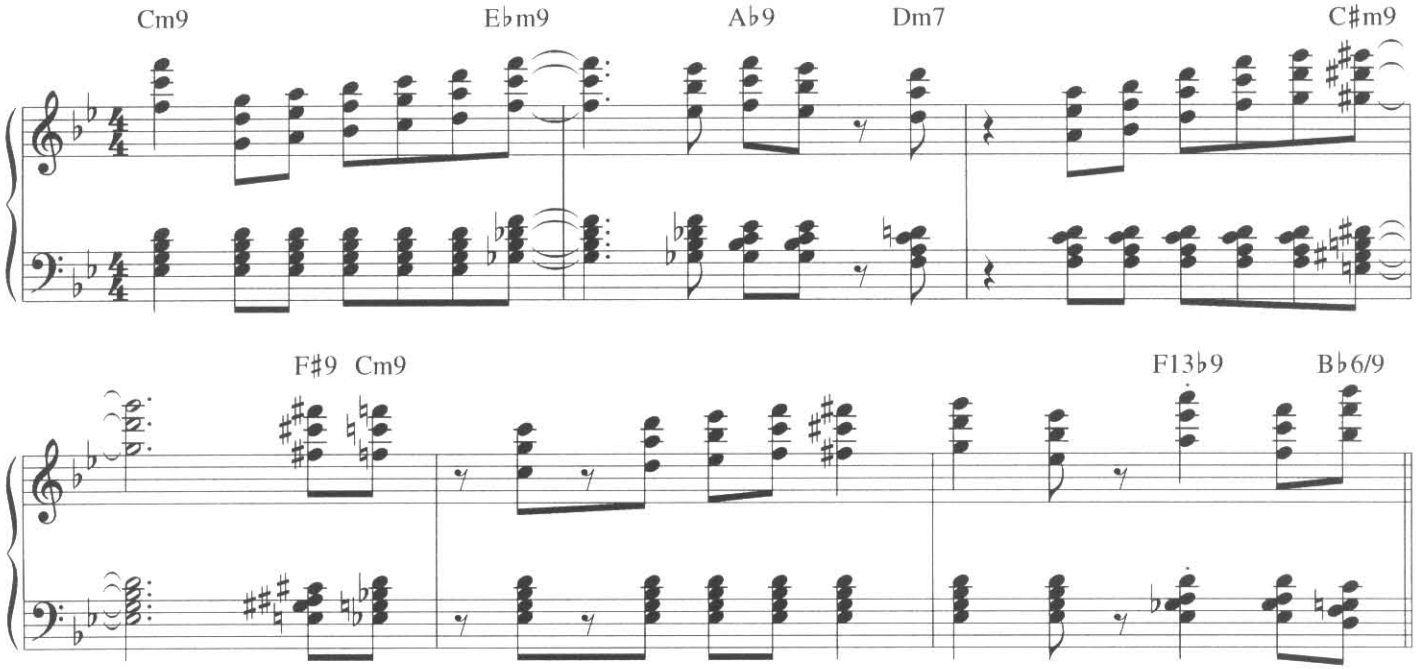
14



The Block Chord Style of Red Garland

The block chord style of Red Garland was unique and unmistakable. Note the two unresolved II–V's: E♭m9–A♭9 (ii9–V9 in D♭ major), and C♯m9–F♯9 (ii9–V9 in B major)—typical of the harmonic style of Miles Davis's mid-'50s ensemble.

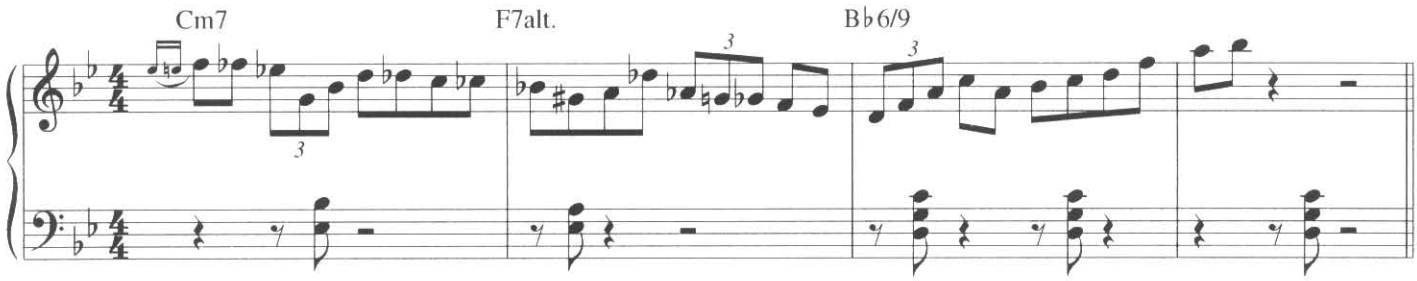
15



Shifting Triplets

One of the hallmarks of Bill Evans' swinging style is his varied placement of eighth-note triplets. In this example, eighth-note triplets occur on beat 2 (bar 1), beat 3 (bar 2), and beat 1 (bar 3). (Riffs 16 through 23 are all based on the style of Bill Evans.)

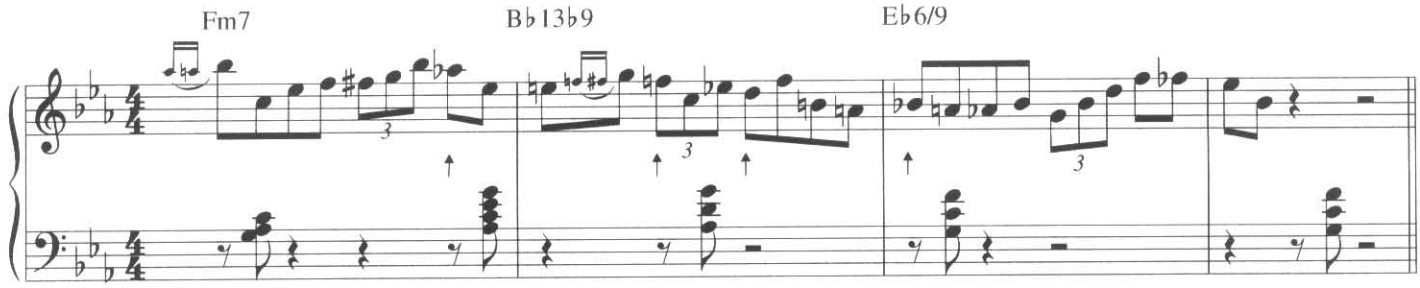
16



Ornamented ii–V–I Riff

Check out the series of descending thirds in the melody—A♭–F–D–B♭ (shown with arrows)—each of which is preceded by a *cambiata*—a combined lower neighbor/upper neighbor figure.

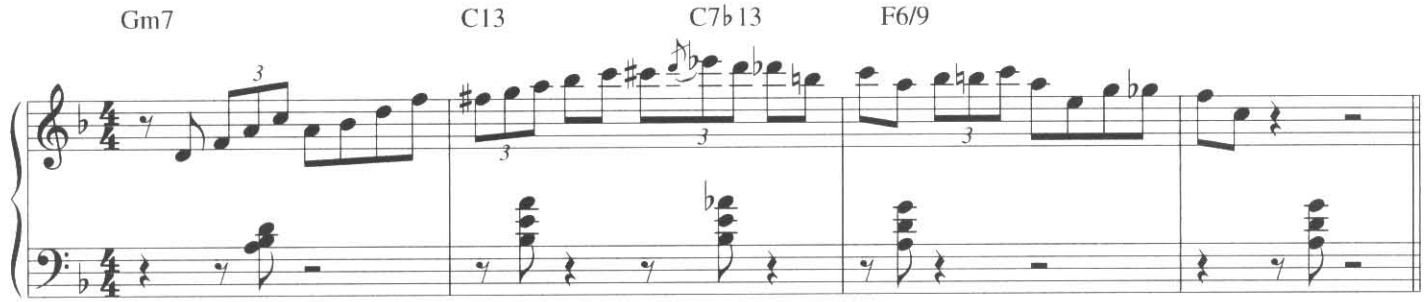
17



Melodic Analogy

Notice the melodic analogy between E♭–D–D♭ (bar 2) and G–G♭–F (bars 3-4). It is common to approach the ♭9 of V7♭9 with the note a whole step above it. This note (here, the E♭ over the C7 chord) is usually called the ♯9 of the chord, even though it is simply an upper neighbor of the ♭9.

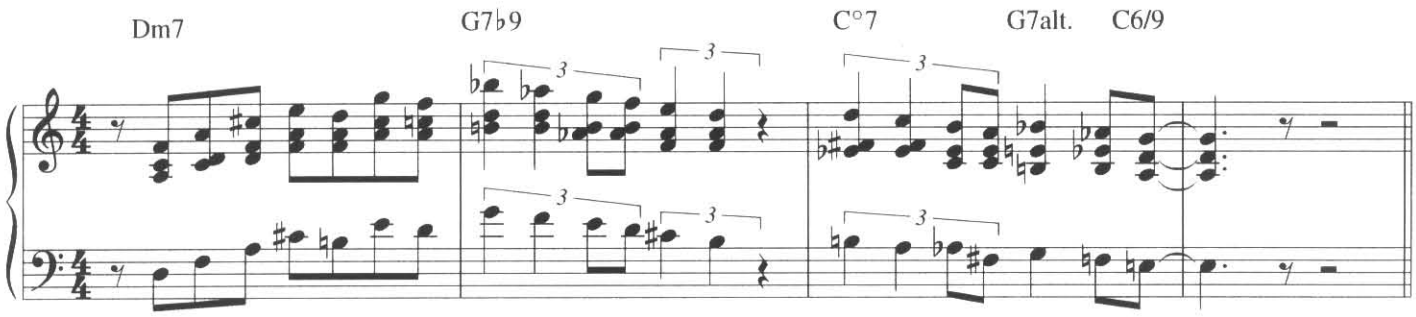
18



Trademark Block Chords

Play the following close-position voicing of Dm7: A C D F. Drop the D down an octave and you will have the first chord of this example. One of Bill Evans' pianistic trademarks was the block chord treatment of seventh chords in this fashion.

19



Rising Arpeggios

Observe how the arpeggiation of E♭maj9 in the first bar generates a succession of rising arpeggios, each a third higher than the one before it.

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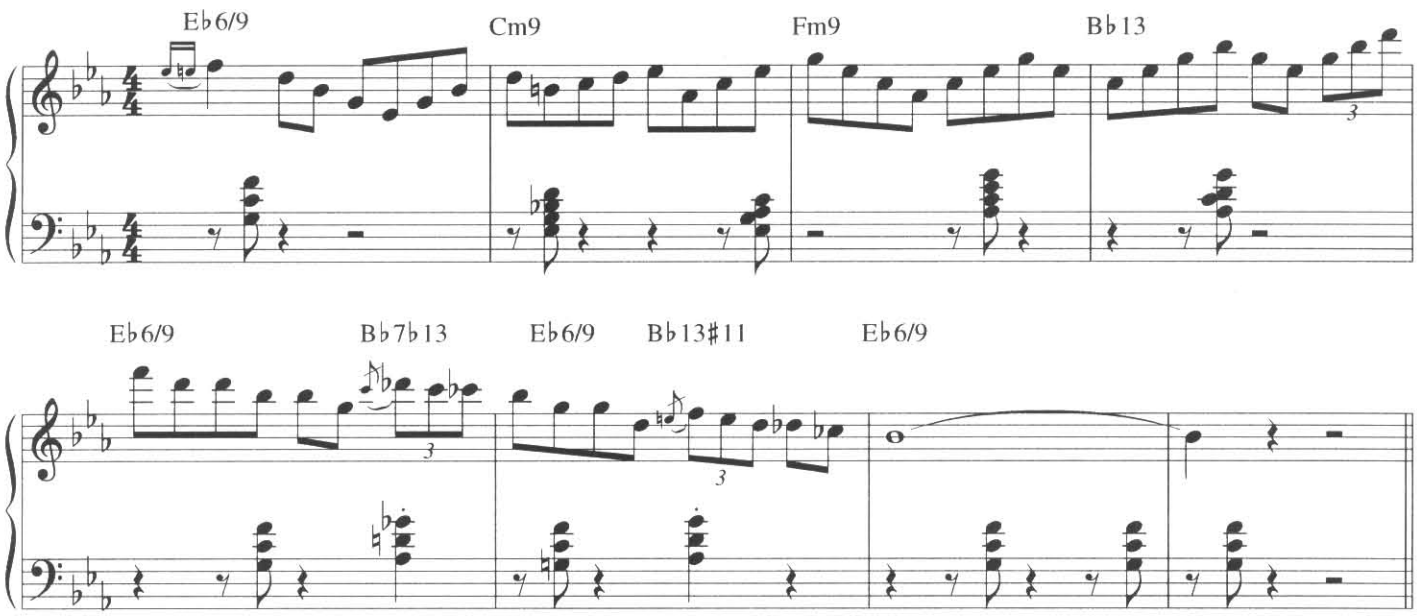
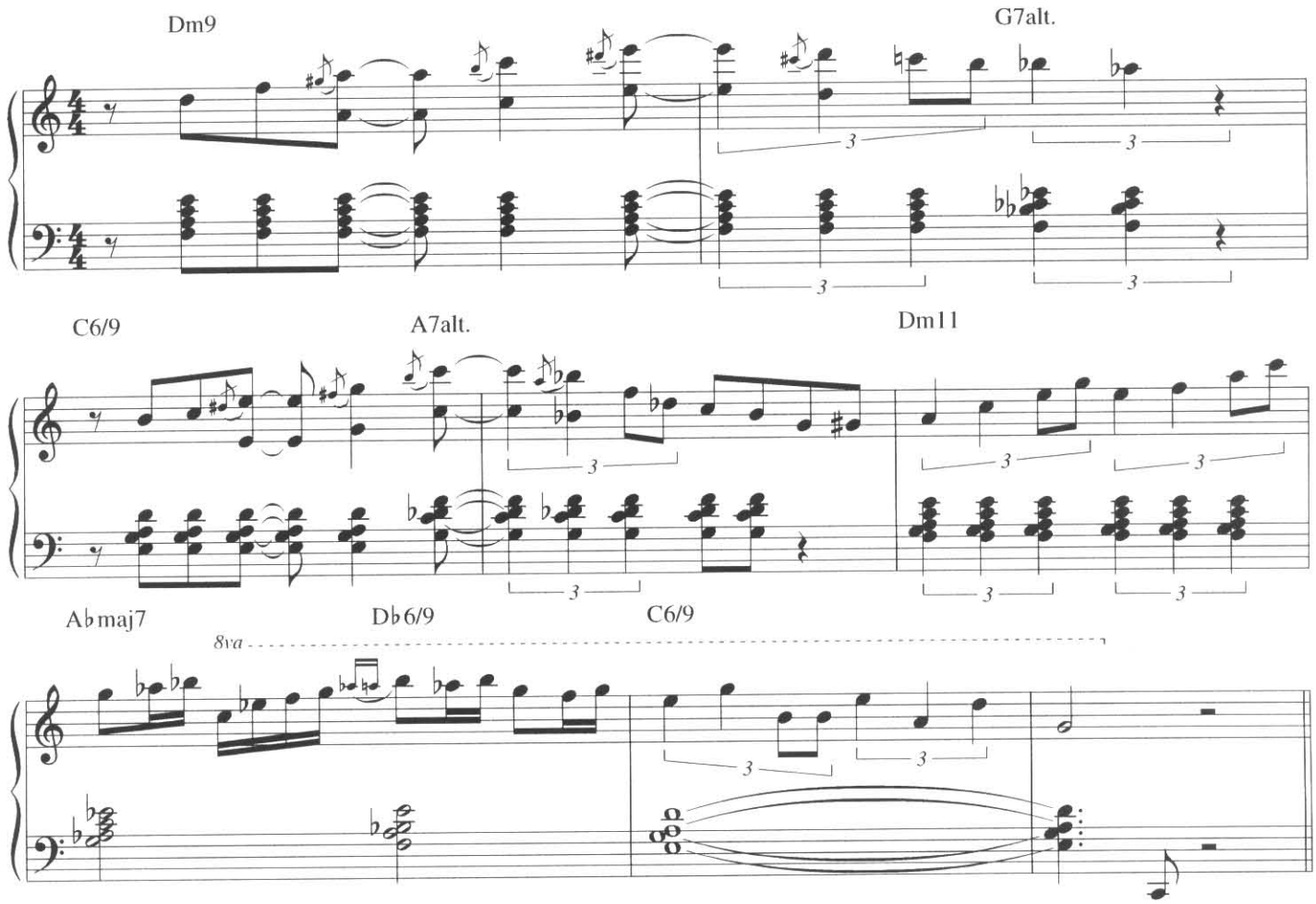


Faux Block Chords

Examine the characteristic use of quarter-note triplets here, as well as faux block chords, in which the left hand's chords are struck simultaneously with almost every note in the right hand. The A♭maj7 and D♭maj7 chords (♭VImaj7 and ♭IImaj7) appear where one would have expected G7 (V7).

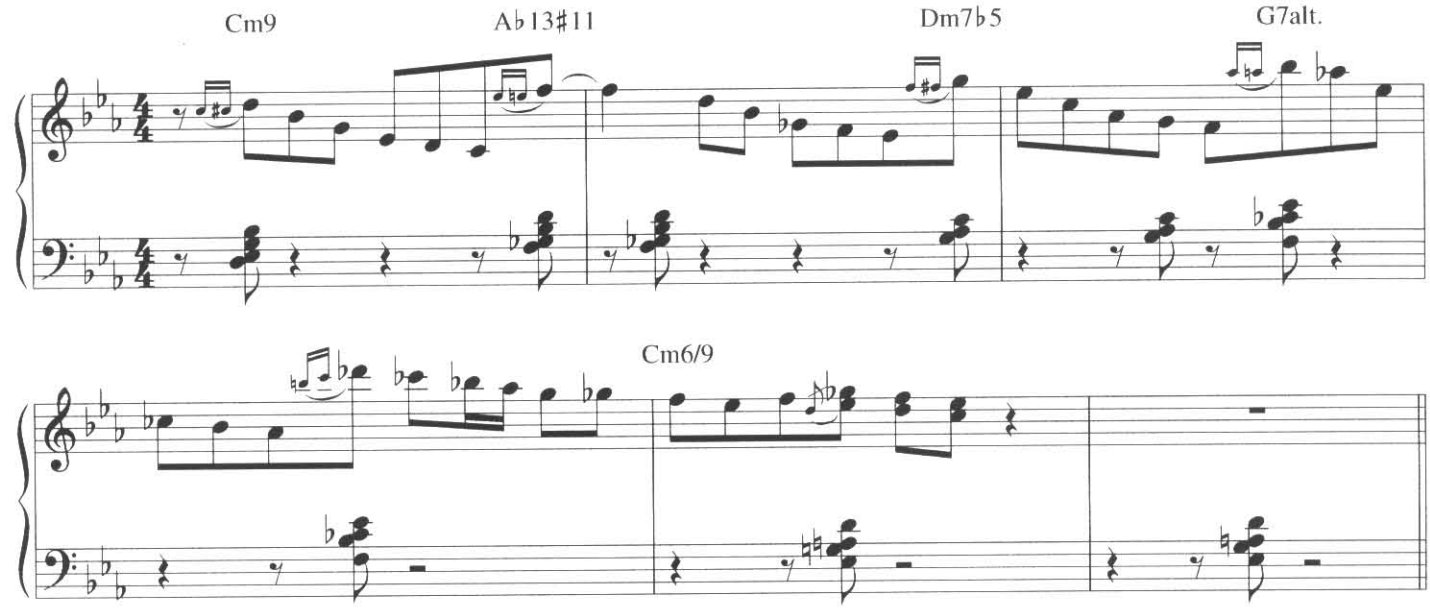
21



Anticipated Arpeggios

In bars 1–4, a progressively ascending six-note motive outlines the chords Cm9, E♭m9(maj7), Fm9, and A♭m9. Beginning in bar 3, the motive appears earlier and earlier in relation to each successive measure, intensifying rhythmic interest.

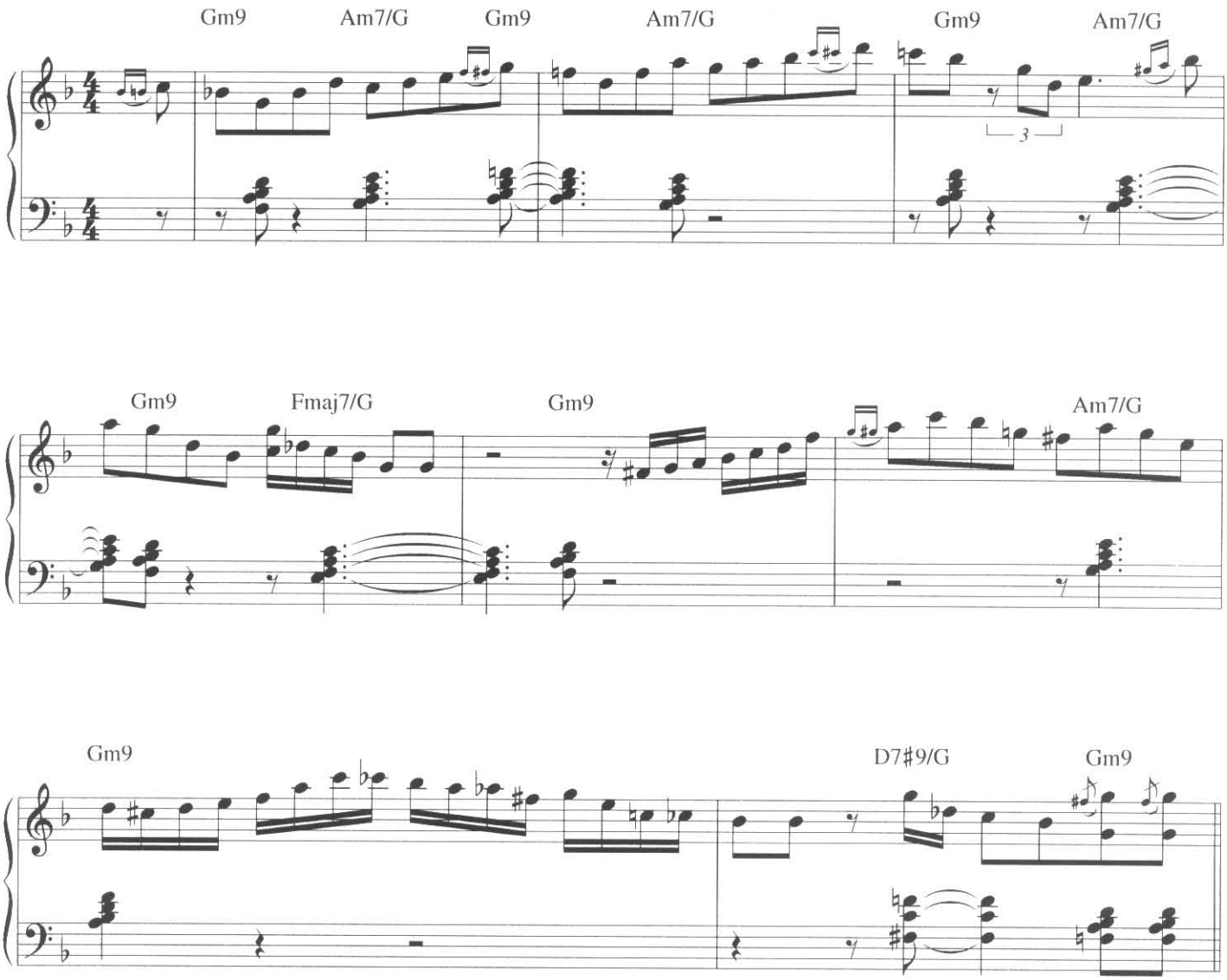
22



Dorian Riffs

This example is in G Dorian (G A B♭ C D E F), the mode based on the second degree of the F major scale (hence using the same key signature). The modal style was seldom "pure," and often contained references to bebop and the blues. For example, check out the F♯ lower neighbor tones in bars 5–8, the bluesy D♭'s in bars 4 and 8, and the chromatic neighbor and passing tones in bar 7.

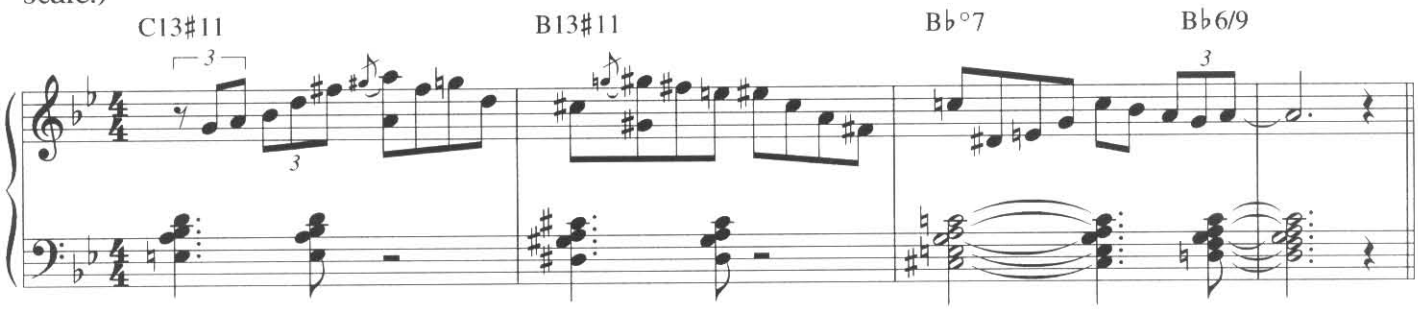
23



Herbie Hancock—Style ii–V–I

This example demonstrates one of Herbie Hancock's favorite left-hand voicings of the 13 chord. The use of i°7 in bar 3 as a neighbor chord of Imaj7 is another common Herbie device. (Note that the i°7 in these examples often includes added major 7ths and 9ths, and other notes from the diminished scale.)

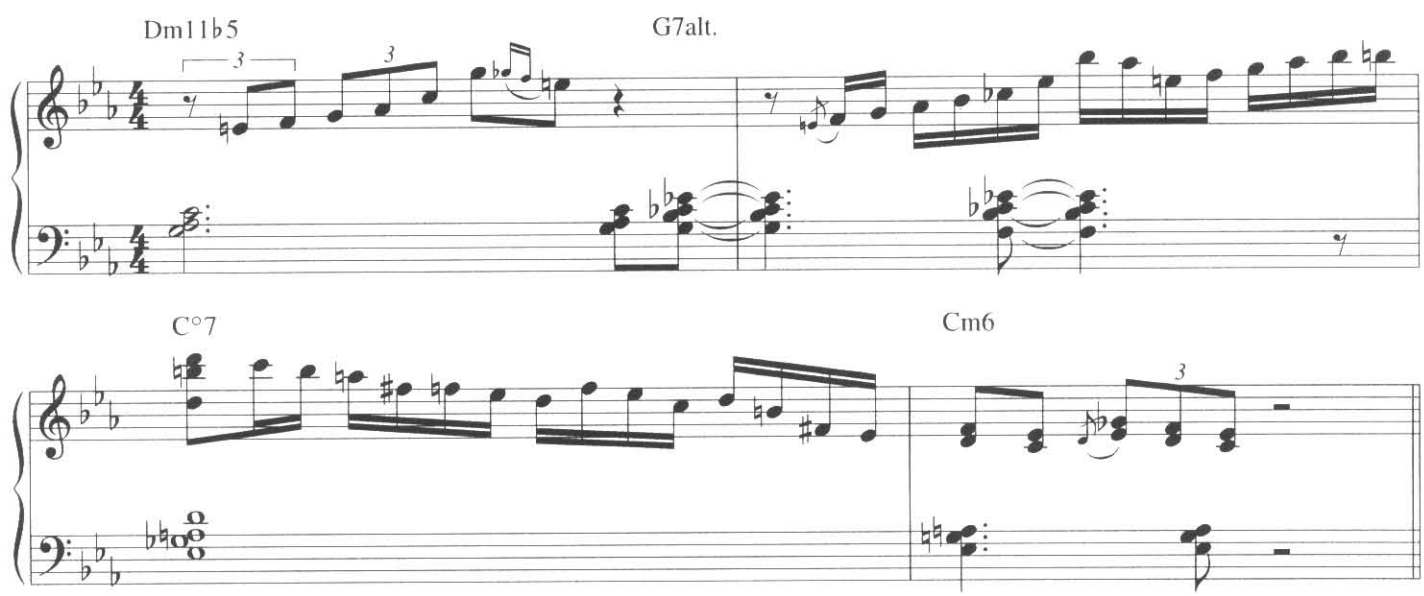
24



Herbie's Melodic Minor Modes

Herbie is fond of the melodic minor modes. In this example, F melodic minor is superimposed on the Dm11♭5, establishing the hip D Locrian ♮2 modality (D E F G A♭ B♭ C), and the G alt. chord is treated with the G altered dominant scale (G A♭ B♭ C♭ D♭ E♭ F), the seventh mode of A♭ melodic minor.

25



Herbie's Hallmarks

Many different harmonic devices we've studied are found in this example, including tritone subs, unresolved ii–V's in distant keys and melodic minor constructions. Study the subtle variations in the bluesy inflections of bars 1 and 3, as well as the funky treatment of the I chord in bar 7.

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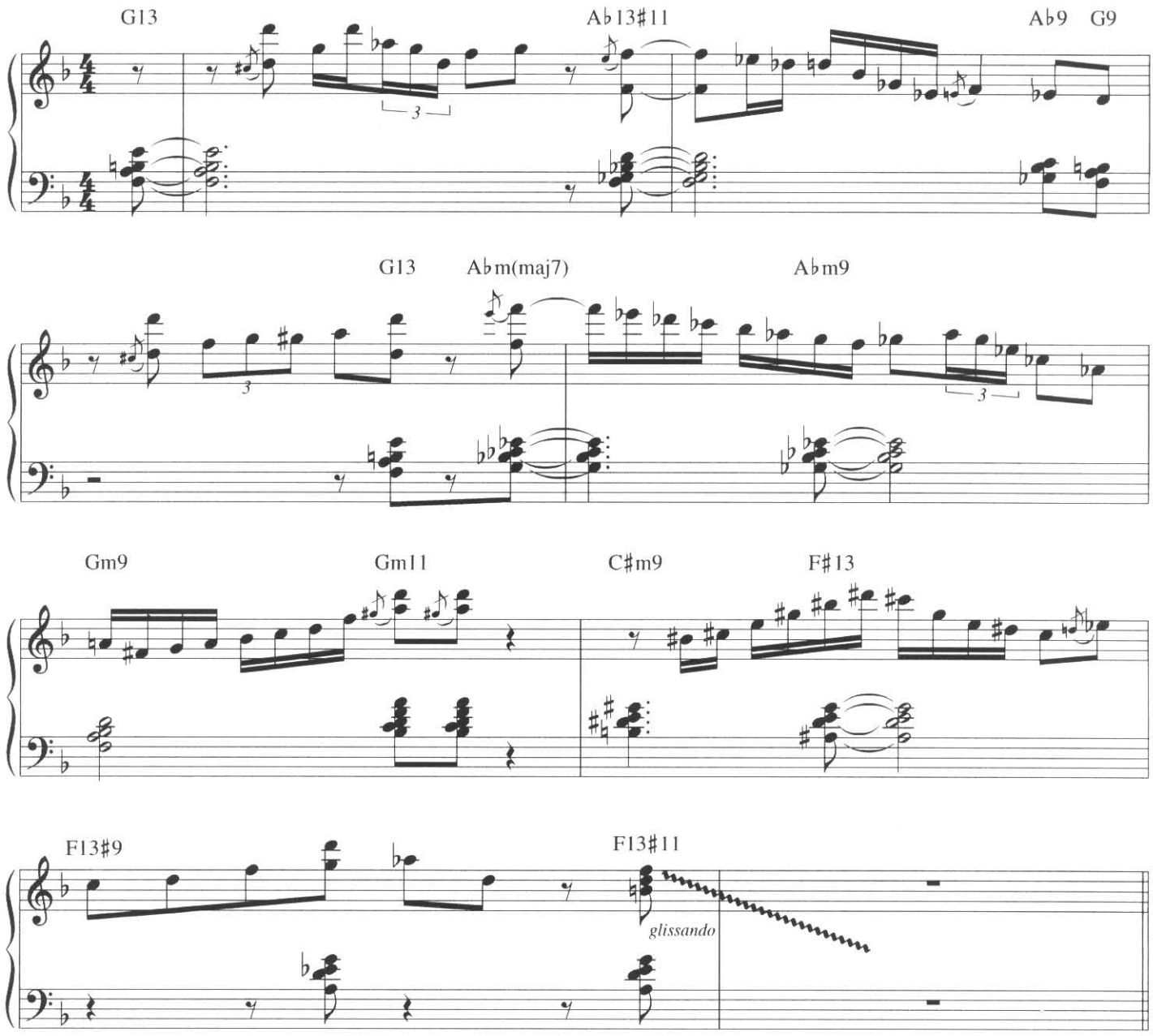
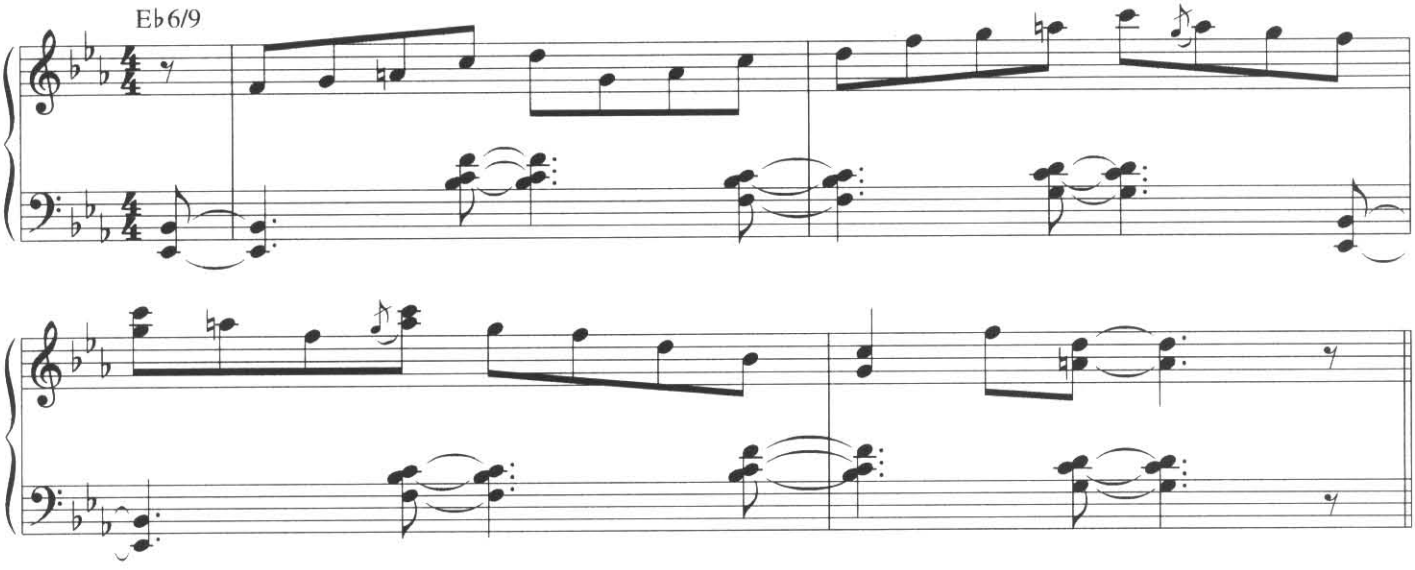


Chick Corea—Style Lydian Riff

The superimposition of the F pentatonic scale (F G A C D) over the prevailing E♭ major chord—a Chick Corea trademark—gives this example a bright, Lydian flavor (because of the A♮—the ♯4 of the E♭ chord). Note the drone-like fifths in the bass, and the predilection for 4ths and 2nds in the left hand's voicings.

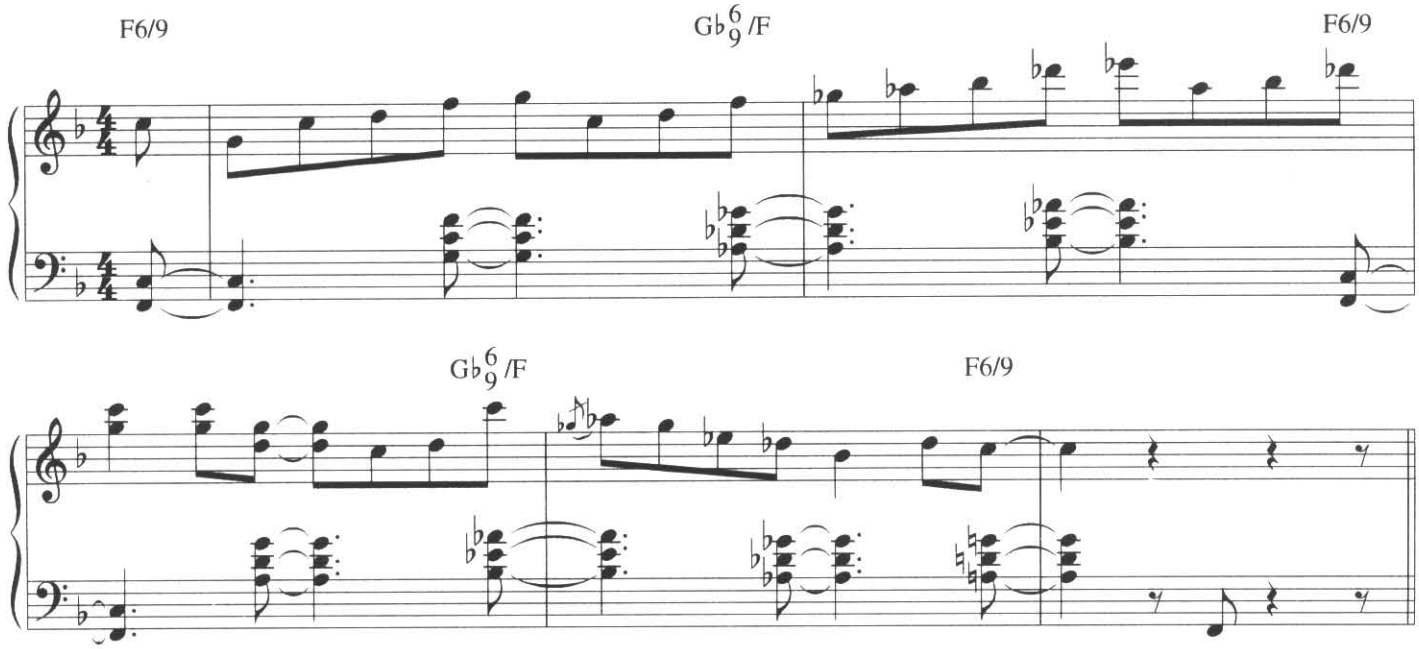
27



Side-Slipping Riff

Check out the detour to G♭ pentatonic in bars 2 and 4 (*side slipping*, shifting your voicing, pattern or lick up or down a half step, can be very dramatic and effective). Again, observe the 5ths in the bass, as well as the left-hand voicings in the 4ths.

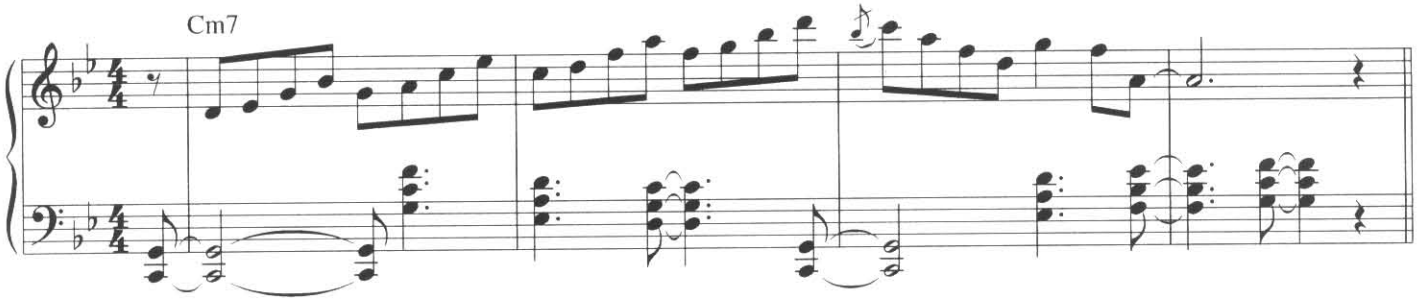
28



Chick-Style Dorian Riff #1

In high-speed virtuosic playing, Chick often plays repetitive, easy-to-play digital patterns like those in the first two bars of this modal example. Note the contrary motion between the hands.

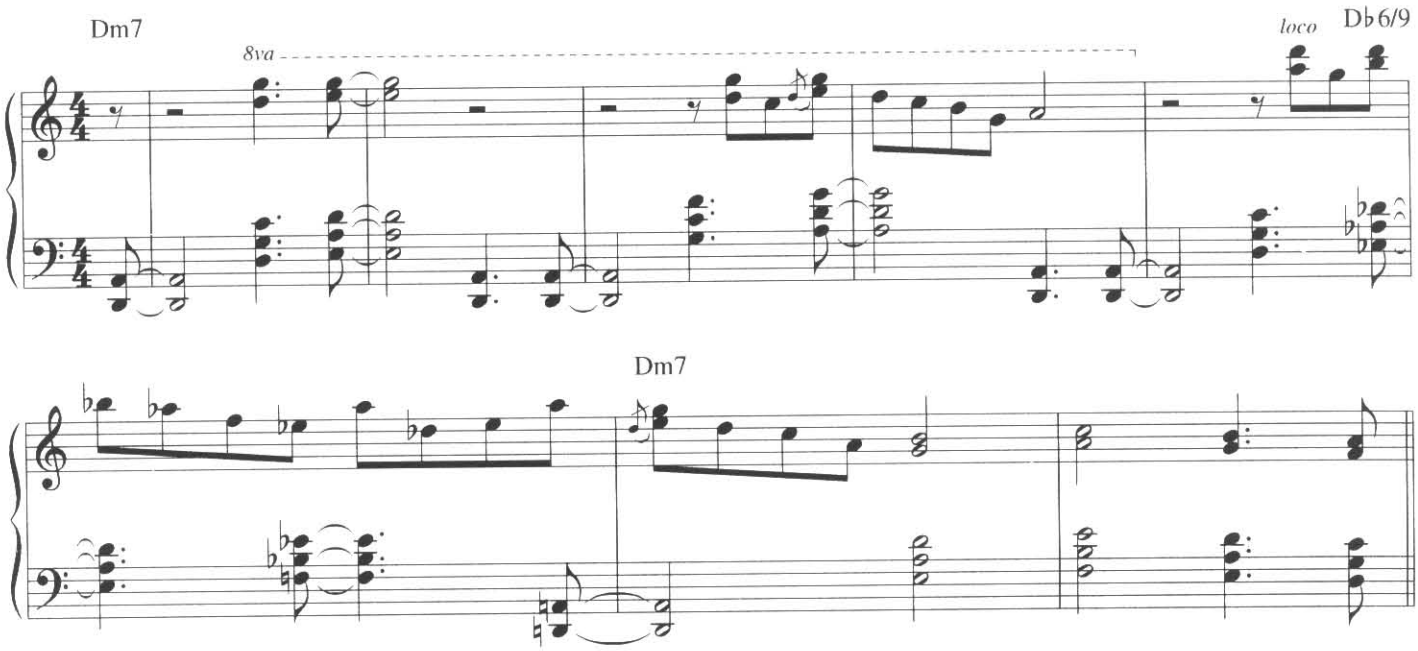
29



Chick-Style Dorian Riff #2

The brief detour to D♭ pentatonic in bar 6 provides additional tonal interest. In the last bar one finds the famous "So What" voicings, first heard on Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* and played by countless pianists on innumerable occasions since then.

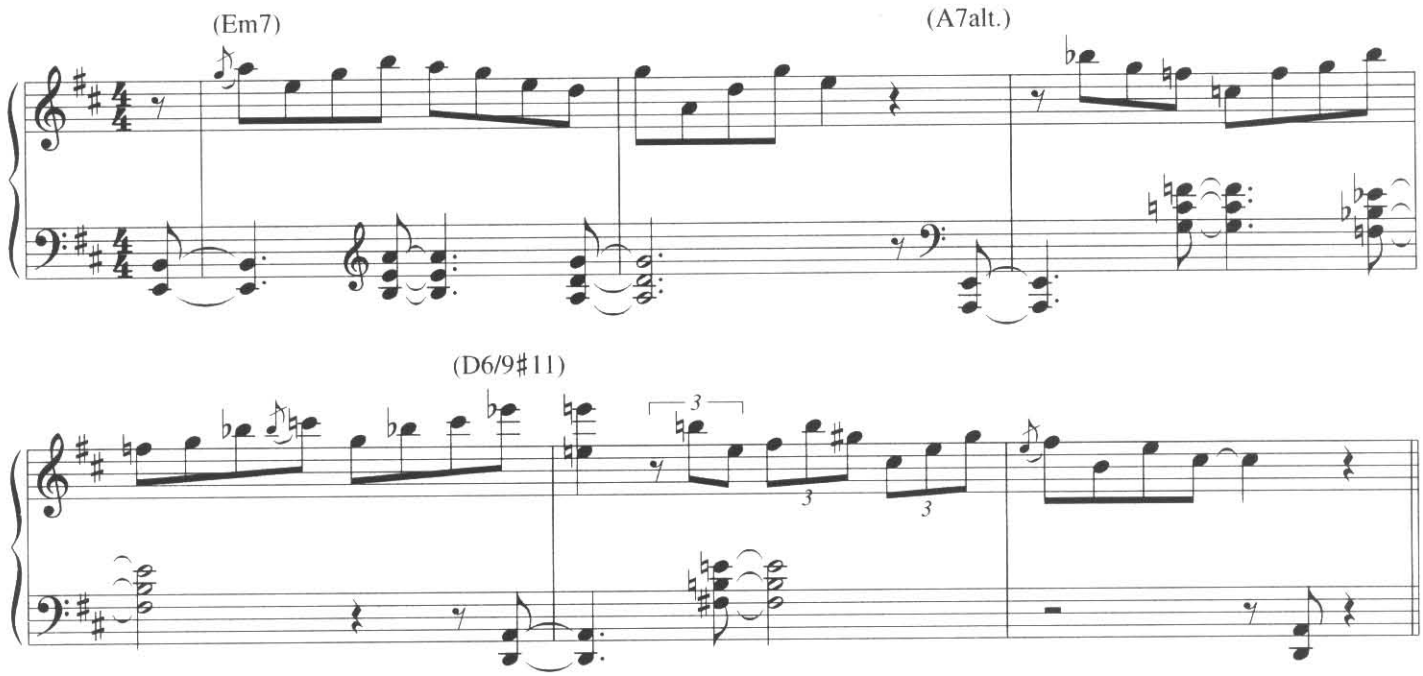
30



Chick-Style ii–V–I

This example shows a Chick-style approach to the ii–V–I progression; his use of carefully selected pentatonics implies extended harmonies. (The implied harmonies are in parentheses.) In bar 3, the right hand plays notes from the E♭ pentatonic, which function as the ♭5, ♭13, ♭7 and ♯9 over the implied A7 chord. In bar 5 we find E pentatonic over the implied D6/9, establishing a Lydian flavor.

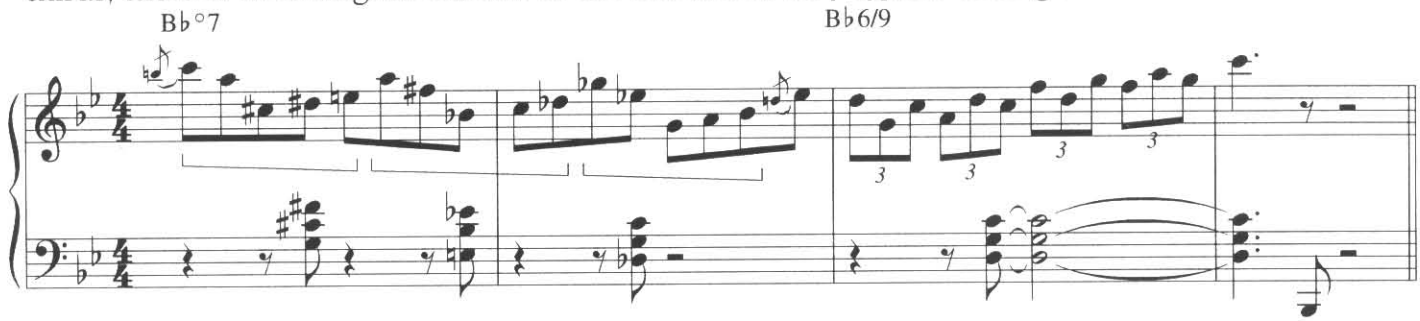
31



Diminished Scale Pattern, Descending in 3rds

Like Herbie, Chick often treats the I chord initially as a diminished-seventh before finally resolving it. The five-note diminished scale pattern (shown in brackets) is sequenced in descending minor thirds; there is an analogous descent of the left hand's very typical voicing as well.

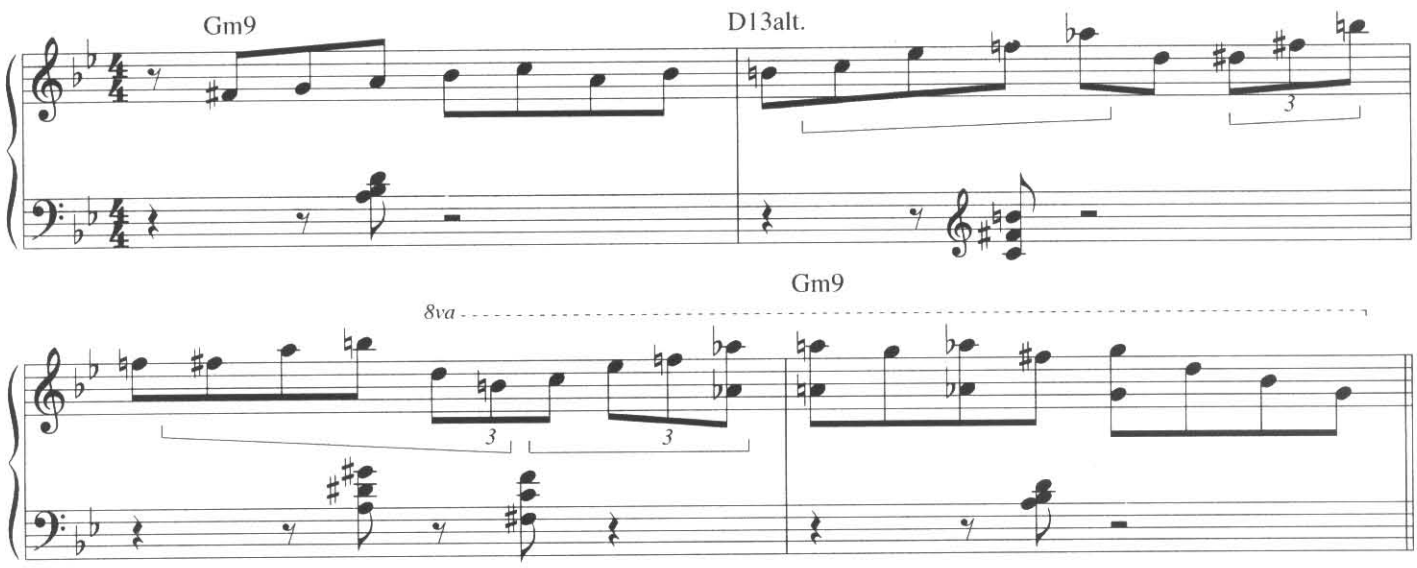
32



Pentatonic Constructs From The Diminished Scale

Observe the contrary motion (in successive minor 3rds) between the hands in bars 2–3. Examine the pentatonic formulations (shown in brackets) within this ascent: A♭ pentatonic, B pentatonic, D pentatonic and A♭ pentatonic, one octave higher than its original appearance in bar 2.

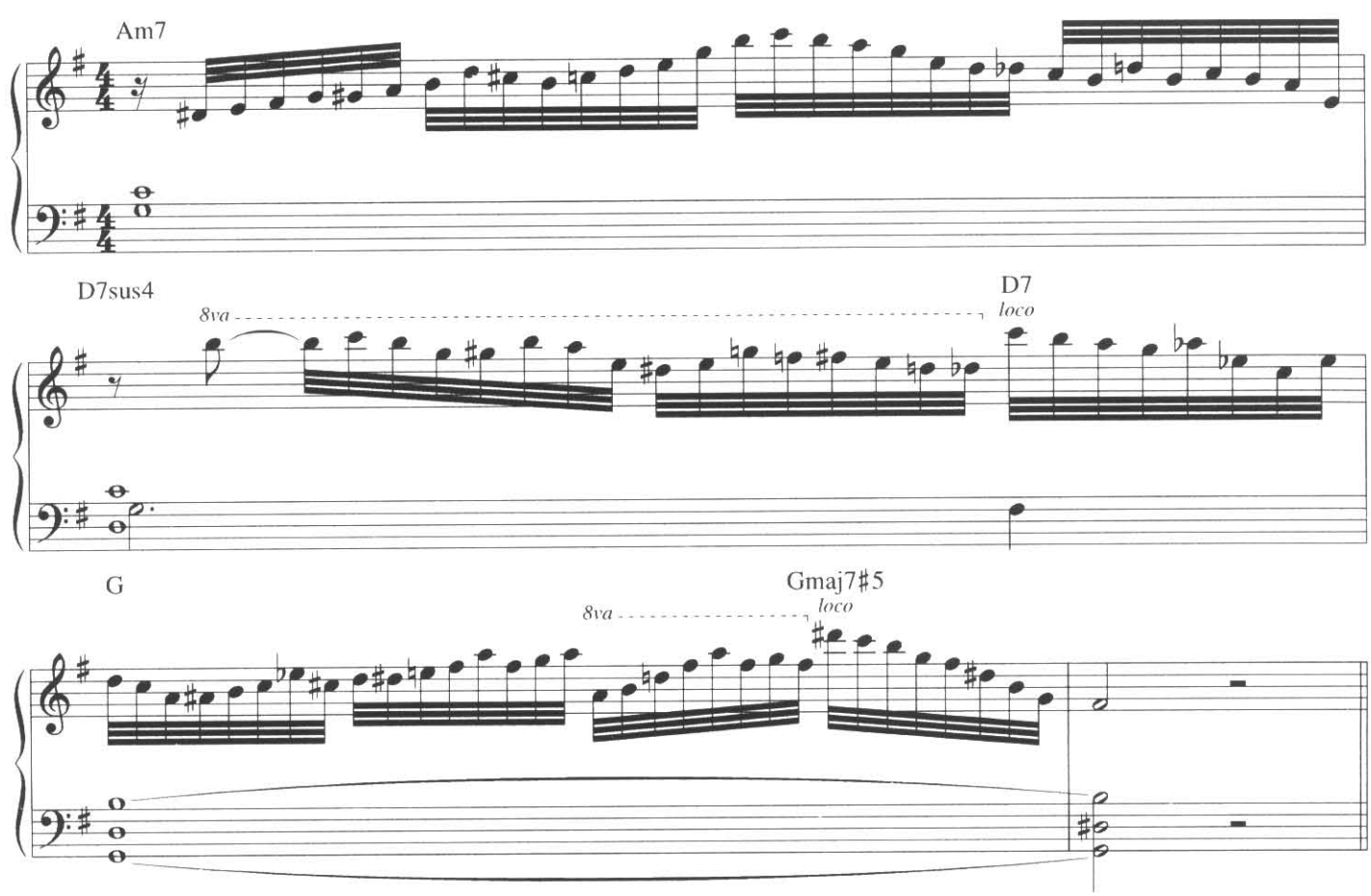
33



Keith Jarrett—Style Cadenza-Like Passage

There is much in the note selection of this example that might very well have been played by a bebopper, which I leave for the reader to discover. Do note the A♭ major triad in the right hand at the very end of bar 2, a mild example of polytonality—a technique which Jarrett is fond of—as well as the concluding maj7♯5 chord—delicious and poignant, and often heard in his playing.

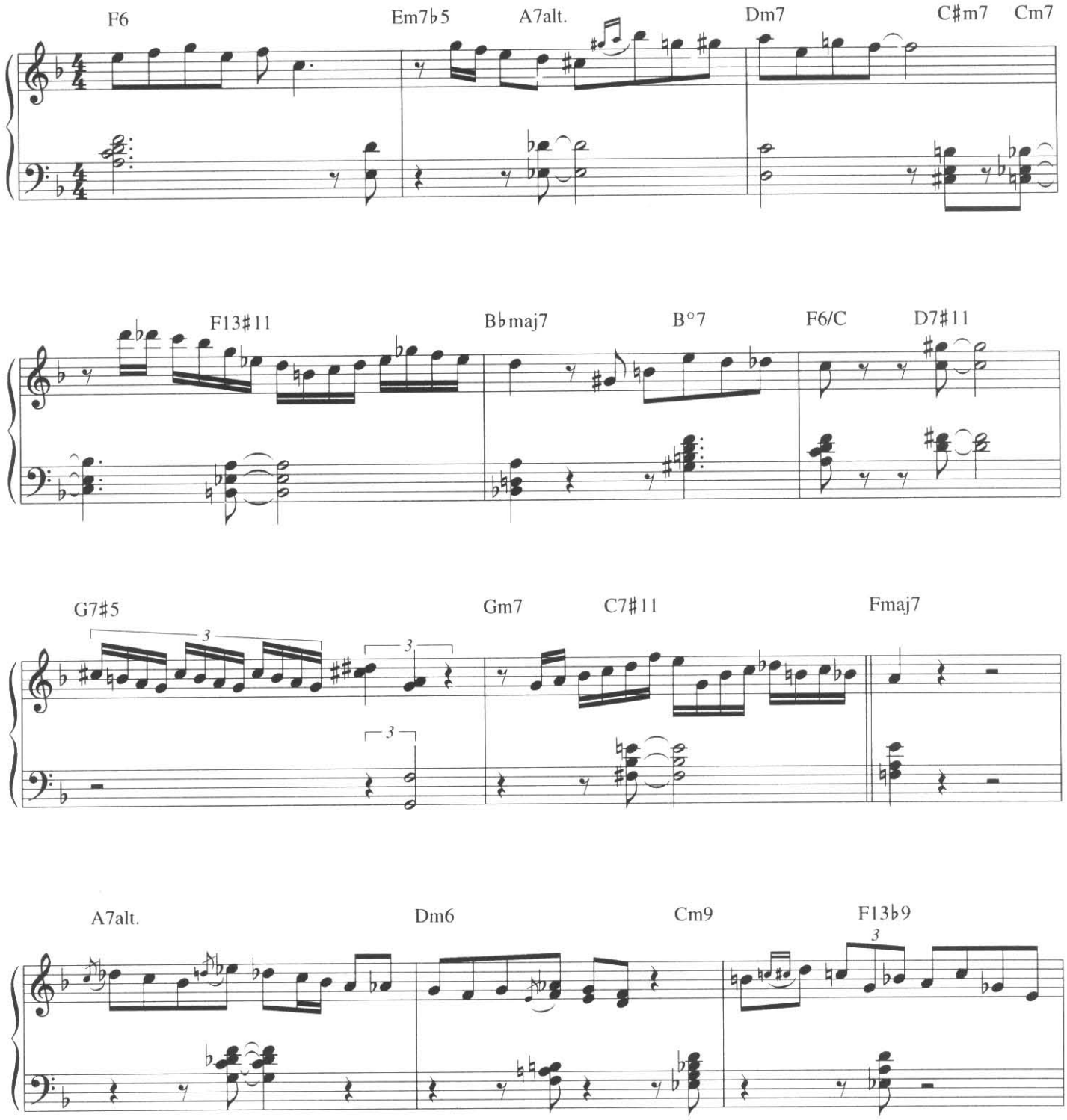
34

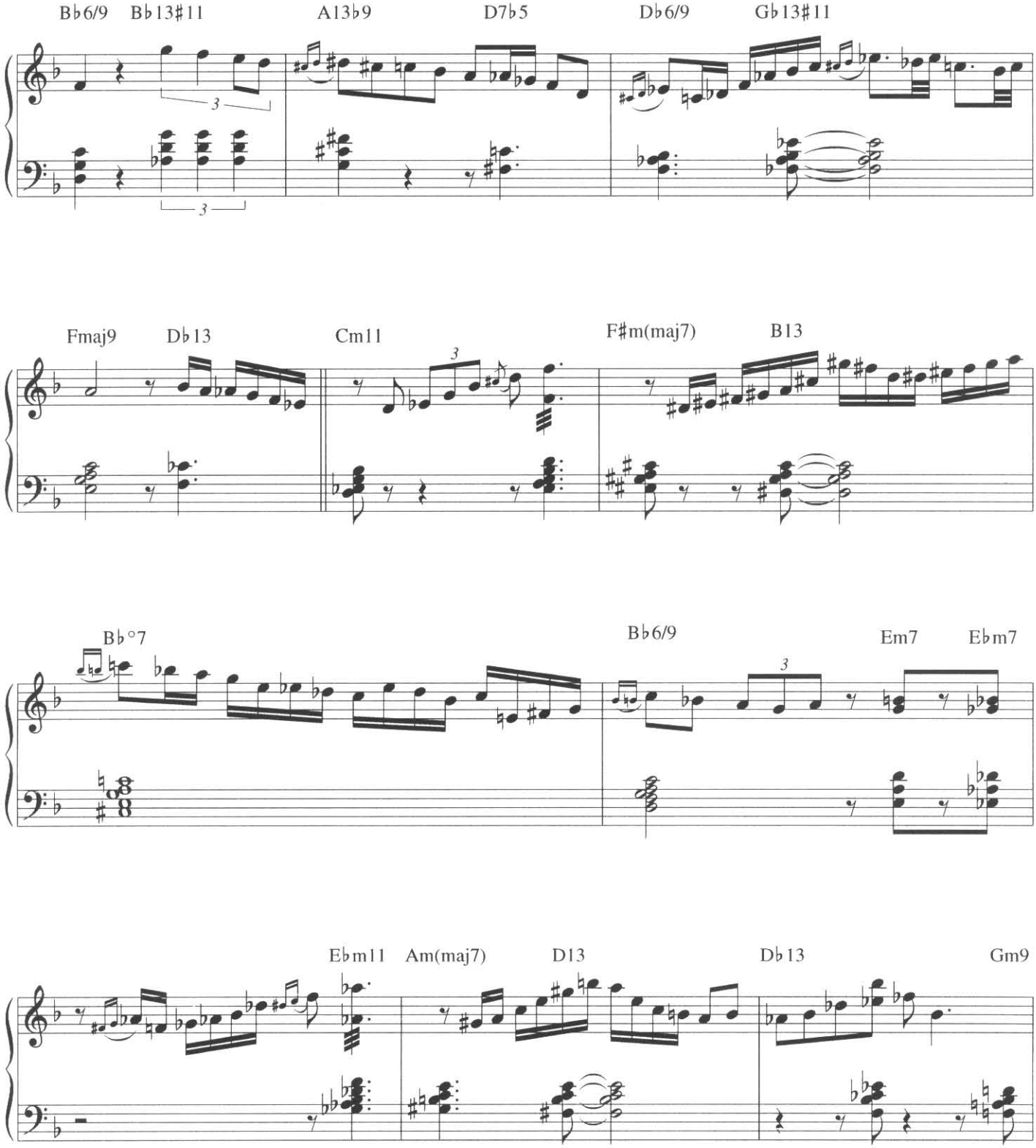


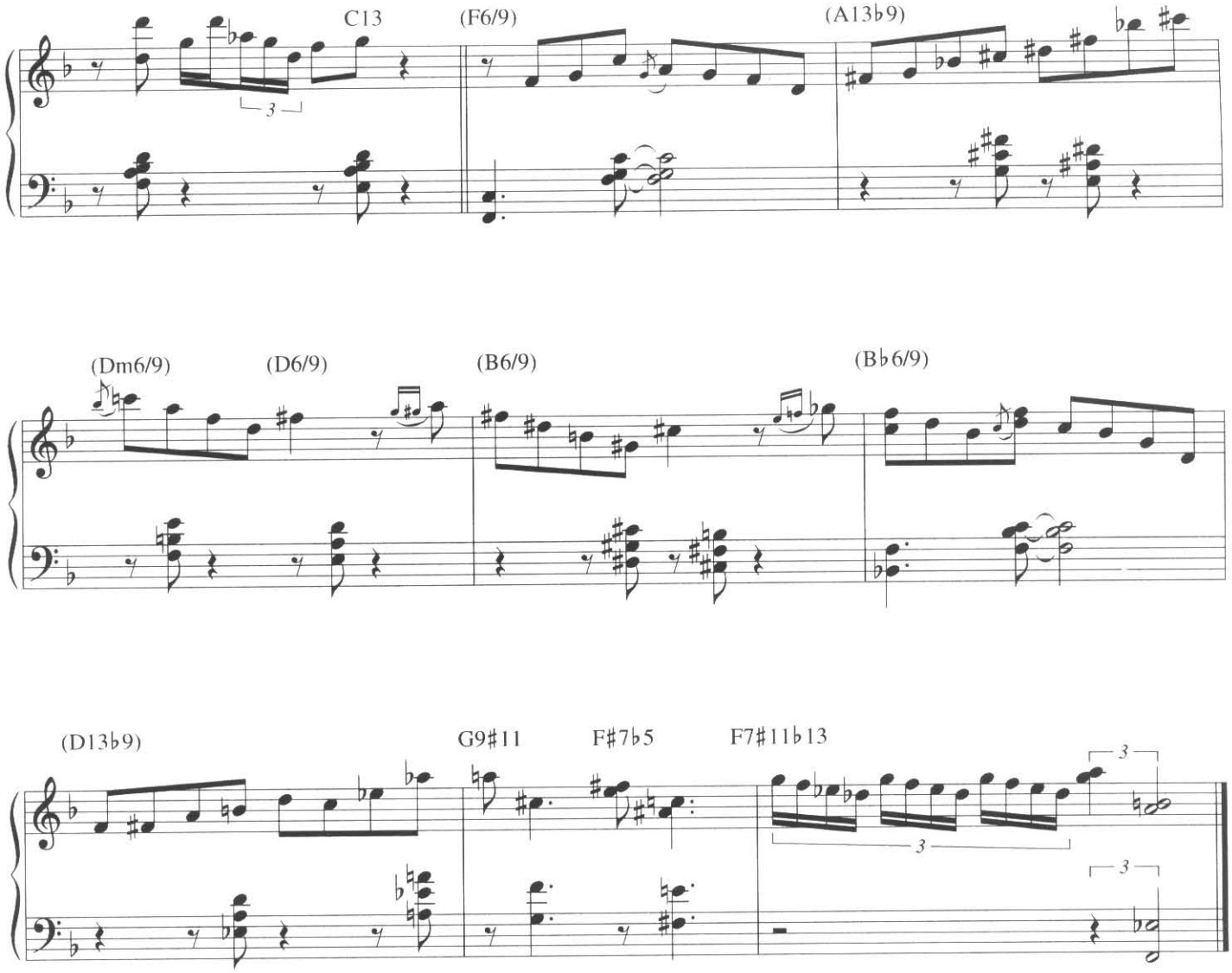
Summary Solo

This extended solo, based on the chords from Charlie Parker's "Confirmation," uses many of the riffs and techniques we've been listening to and discussing. Bars 1-8 use materials from the bebop examples; bars 9-16 are in the style of Bill Evans; bars 17-24 are derived from the discussion of Herbie Hancock's style; and bars 25-32 allude to the examples in Chick Corea's style (with a final, sly wink from Thelonious Monk in the last 2 bars). See if you can identify them all, and be sure to think about exactly how and why they are effective at that particular moment!

35




B♭6/9
B♭13♯11
A13♭9
D7♭5
D♭6/9
G♭13♯11
Fmaj9
D♭13
Cm11
F♯m(maj7)
B13
B♭°7
B♭6/9
Em7
E♭m7
E♭m11
Am(maj7)
D13
D♭13
Gm9



Writing this book has been a gratifying opportunity to reacquaint myself with the music of the great artists represented in its pages. I hope it has been a worthwhile journey for you as well!