The Two-Feel

First developed to generate a feeling of buoyancy or lightness for dance music, the two-feel is a common style of accompaniment most often utilized by bassists during the melody or head of jazz compositions before transitioning into a standard walking four bass line for the solos. Sometimes referred to as the two-beat, the broken two-feel, or even the skip two-feel, this concept can be also frequently heard within the "A" sections of 32-bar A-A-B-A song forms where the "B" section is played in a straight-ahead walking four style. Unlike a walking four bass line consisting of a steady stream of quarter notes, the traditional two-feel places the emphasis on the half note.

In its most fundamental form, the two-feel or two-beat consists of only two half notes per measure. Typically, if the measure contains a single chord, the root of the chord is played on the first beat followed by the fifth on the third beat. When presented with two chord changes per measure, the root note is placed on the downbeat of each chord. As a bassist performing within the rhythm section of any ensemble, your primary responsibility is to outline the root movement of the chord changes so the root of a chord is the most important note, and it should be the first note that you gravitate towards when constructing walking bass lines. Using the concept of tension and release, the harmonic tension of the line may be heightened by placing a non-diatonic tone as a chromatic approach note on beat three of the measure. By integrating rhythmic embellishments such as eighth-note triplets, skips, ghost skips, syncopated rhythms, hammer-on skips, pull-off skips, and slurred skips, you can create more of a broken two-feel or skip two-feel.

With regard to incorporating rhythmic embellishments, be careful not to go beyond your role as an accompanist. If the bass line becomes saturated with too much rhythmic activity, it may defeat the general purpose of the two-feel. Since the two-feel is usually applied while the melody of the composition is being played, you do not want to exaggerate the half notes with too many rhythmic embellishments or else you might distract the listener's attention from the melody. Rhythmic embellishments can add a rhythmic depth to your lines, but too many embellishments may disrupt the overall flow of the pulse. The two-feel should enhance the melody and not draw attention away from it. Although rhythmic embellishments can be placed anywhere within the measure, they are most frequently found before points of harmonic shift and within turnarounds. In a standard 12-bar blues, rhythmic embellishments are commonly placed in measures 4, 8, 11, and 12 to highlight the arrival of bars 5, 9, and the subsequent chorus. With the broken two-feel, the underlying sense of rhythmic tension and release is intensified, thus enhancing the forward motion of the line. As always, the notes and rhythms that you choose to play should support and compliment the music as a whole.

To demonstrate the development of walking bass lines in the two-feel style, I have composed many sample bass lines over several choruses of the 12-bar blues. In the first chorus, the notated bass lines consist of half notes simply featuring root notes and perfect fifths in the classic two-feel style. During the second chorus, you will notice the addition of quarter notes, skips, and chromatic approach notes which will increase the underlying sense of tension and release. Take note of how the quarter notes, when placed on beats three and four of the measure, tend to accelerate the forward momentum of the bass line into the next chord change. In the final chorus, rhythmic embellishments including eighth-note triplets, skips, ghost skips, and syncopated rhythms have been added to illustrate the broken two-feel style.

First, play through these bass lines as notated to acquire a deeper understanding of the possibilities you have available to construct walking bass lines in the two-feel style. Pay close attention to the accuracy of the rhythmic embellishments, and make sure that you can execute them without disrupting the steady flow of the quarter note pulse. Then, transpose these bass lines to all of the remaining keys such as a 12-bar blues in Bb, Eb, G, and so forth. Finally, improvise walking bass lines in the two-feel over the 12-bar blues in every key, and continue to expand the two-feel style to any other song form and composition in the jazz repertoire.

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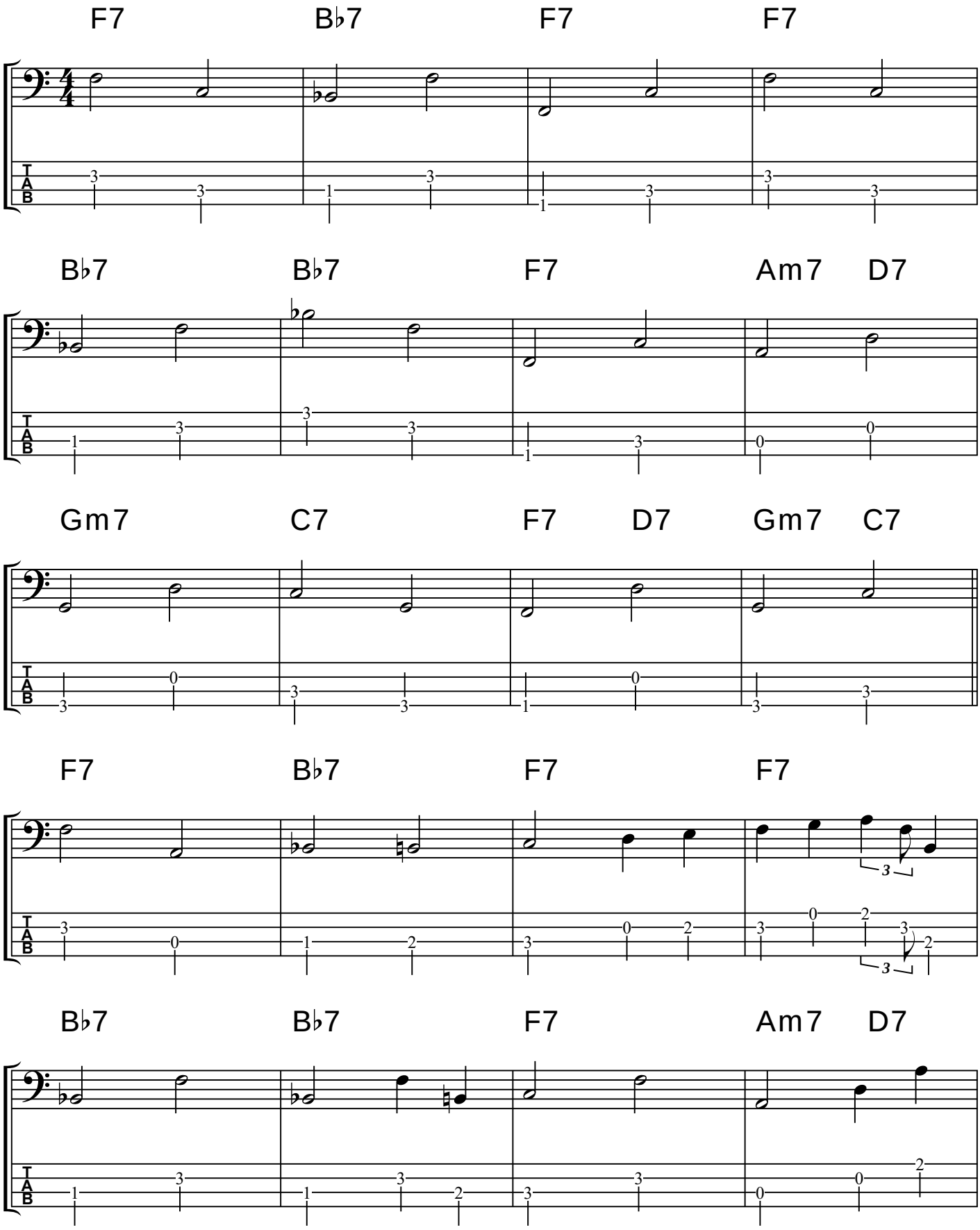
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B♭7 B♭7 F7 Am7 D7
Gm7 C7 F7 D7 Gm7 C7
F7 B♭7 F7 F7
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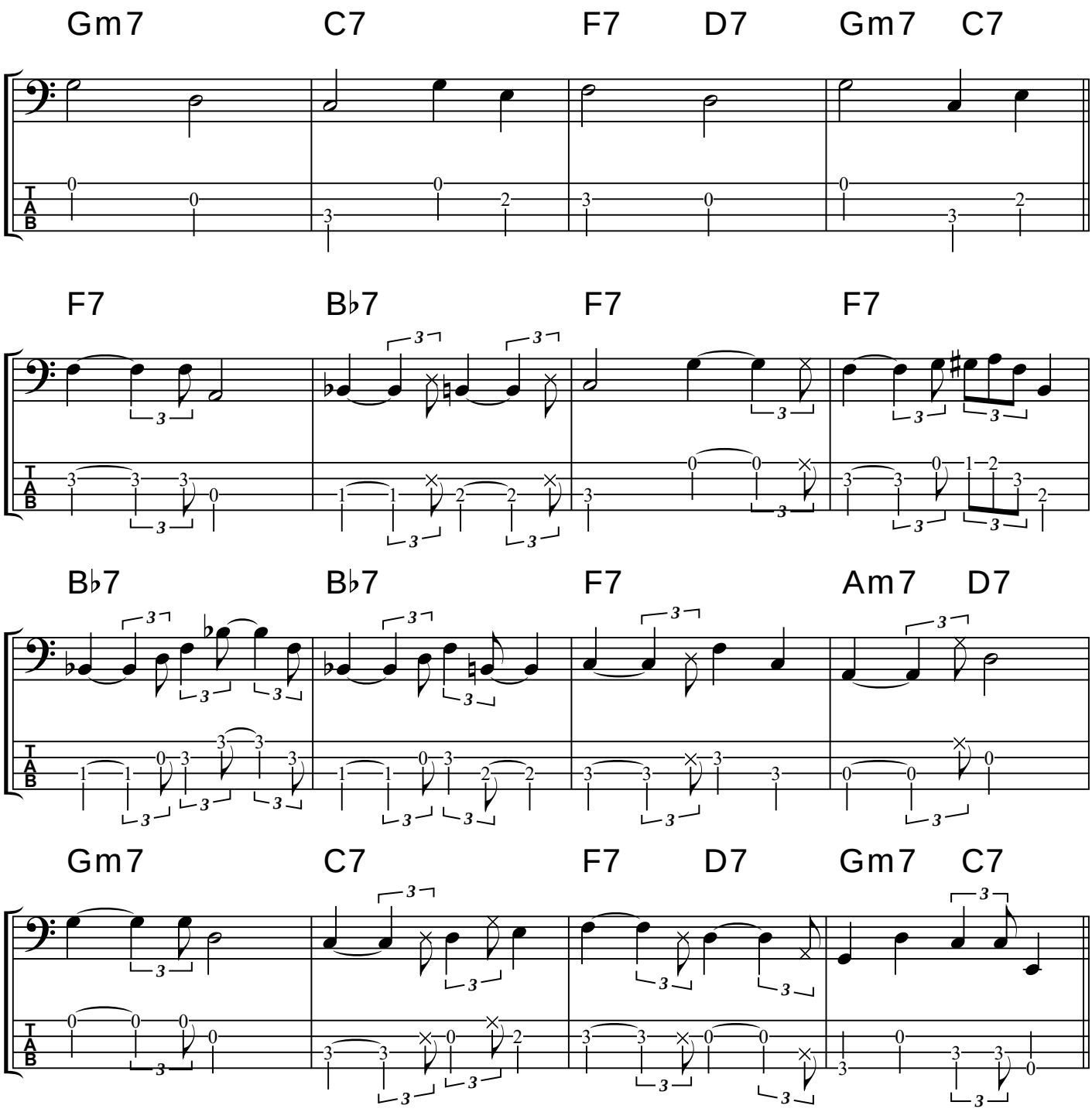
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F7 B♭7 F7 F7
B♭7 B♭7 F7 Am7 D7
Gm7 C7 F7 D7 Gm7 C7