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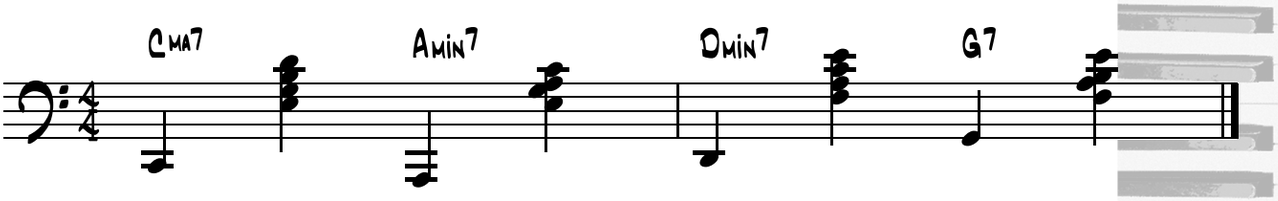
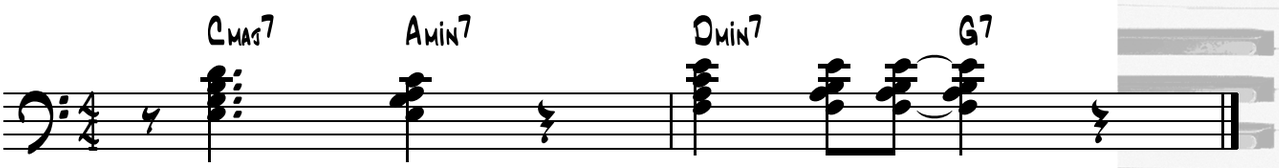
Historical Perspective

In the early days of jazz, the pianist was an orchestra unto him(her)self. The melody, harmony and rhythm of the tune were all contained in the two busy hands of the performer. In the 1920s and 1930s, players like James P. Johnson, Fats Waller and the boogie-woogie pianists like Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis amazed crowds with their abilities to keep an awesome groove, invent swinging melodies and drive a band all by themselves. This type of playing was often called *stride* piano, as the left hand strode between bass notes and chords.



The great Art Tatum (1910–1956) made solo jazz piano playing a musical and technical feat equal to that of the great 19th-century improvisers of classical music, like Sergei Rachmaninoff and Franz Liszt. But by the time the 1940s rolled around, the quick tempos and changing roles of the bass player and drummer in a jazz group required the pianist to play in a different way. Through pianists such as Bud Powell (1924–1966) and later, Red Garland (1923–1984) and Bill Evans (1929–1980), a different approach evolved, which is the foundation of all contemporary jazz piano styles.

- Pianists left the bass notes out, to be played by the bassist in a style that became known as the *walking bass* (quarter notes that outlined the harmonies of the tune).
- The chords were simplified to voicings of three or four notes, which were rhythmically comped. Pianists selected only the notes in the chord that would show the harmonic movement as simply as possible, freeing themselves to focus on their more intricate bebop lines in the right hand.



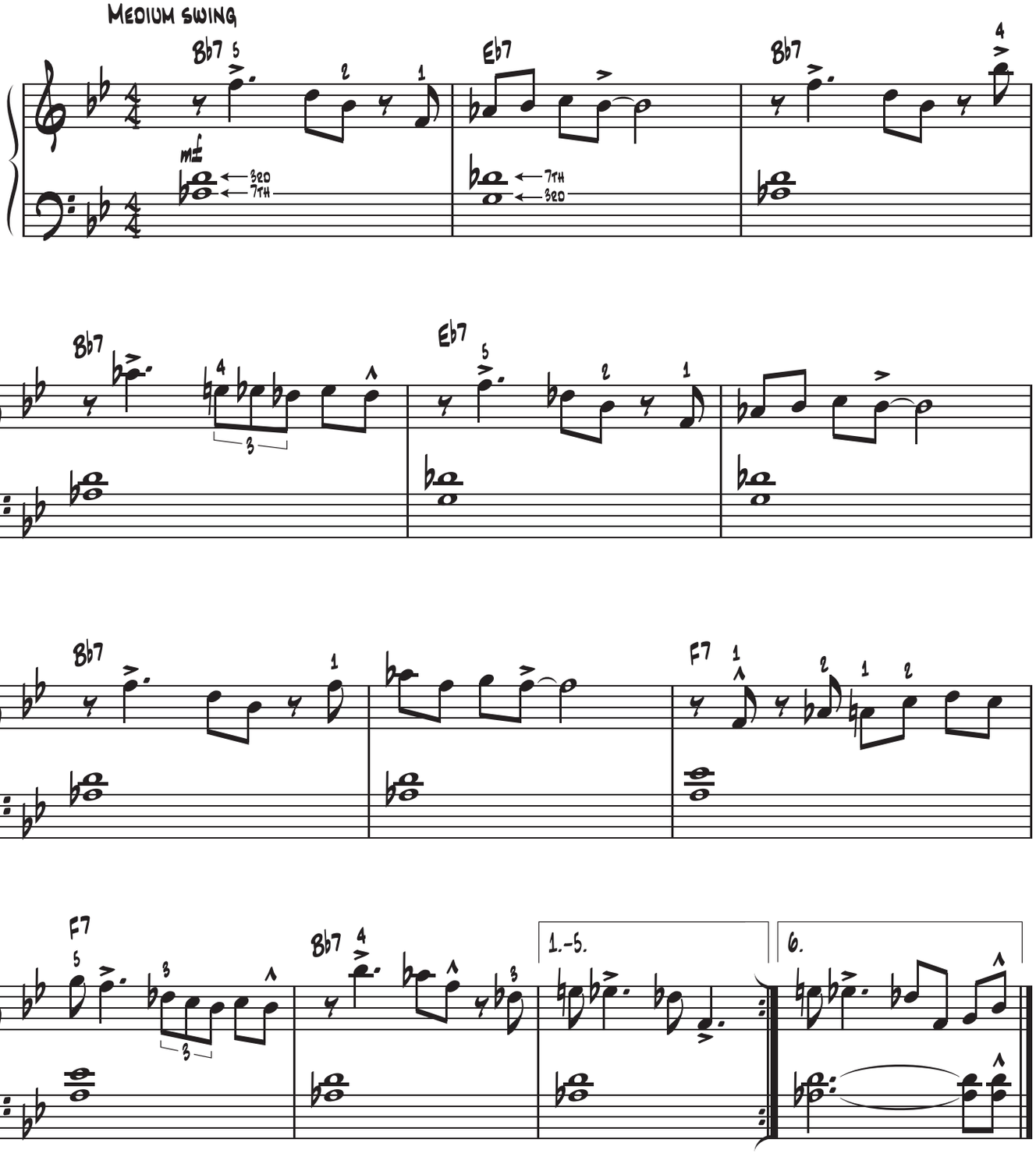
SECTION 1

Two-Note Left-Hand Jazz Voicings

TOOL 1 : Standard Blues

BASICALLY BLUES

Track 2

PLAY 6 TIMES

MEDIUM SWING