tonebase

15-MINUTE

JAZZ SAXOPHONE WARM-UP ROUTINE

LEARN MORE AT TONEBASE.CO

SAXOPHONE

Warm-Up Outline

Introduction

In 2025, the jazz saxophonist must be prepared for a variety of playing situations. Be it big band, small group, or simply a practice session, this 15 minute warm-up routine is designed to get our sound, body, and mind ready to make music. For this, we divide our time into four focused blocks: **Creativity, Sound, Technique,** and **Groove**.

Before You Begin

As saxophonists, the quality of a reed can make or break a good warm-up or practice session. Reeds are highly variable, even within the same brand or box, and it is imperative that you take note of "where you're at" for the day. Is your reed stiff or too soft? Adjust accordingly. You may need to soak your reed (either in your mouth, or in water), to rehydrate the wood and allow it to vibrate more freely. Is your sound "stuffier" than normal? You may need to "wake up" the reed before it's ready to play.

For this, set your metronome to ♩ = 80 bpm. Play your low B-flat with as much breath support and volume as you can (avoiding any overtones or cracks), and hold the note for eight beats. You should be completely out of breath by the time the eighth beat is up. Afterwards, breathe in for four beats, ensuring you feel your belly expand, and repeat the process one more time, playing with as much volume as you can. It should be loud. You can apologize to your neighbors afterwards.

Routine Outline

Creativity (2 mins, 30 secs)

Free improvisation. (What do **you** have to say today?)

Sound (5 mins)

1. **Soft Overtone Matching** — 2 mins, 20 secs
2. **Rest** — 10 secs
3. **Dynamic Taper Long Tones** (Spirit Bomb Exercise) — 2 mins, 20 secs
4. **Rest** — 10 secs

Technique (5 mins)

1. **Slow Chromatic Scale Exercise**, 60 bpm — 2 mins
2. **Rest** — 30 secs
3. **Minor 7 and Major 7 arpeggios**, 60 bpm — 2 mins
4. **Rest** — 30 secs

Groove (2 mins, 30 secs)

1. **Play a tune** of your choice 120-200 bpm, with the metronome set to beats 2 and 4. (60-100bpm if setting metronome to half time).
2. **Keep it groovin'!**
3. Alternatively, **perform the attached etudes** at your desired tempo. Do not sacrifice groove.

1. Creativity (2 mins, 30 secs)

Every time we pick up the horn, it is imperative that we remind ourselves of why we do this in the first place. As jazz musicians, **it is necessary** to bring our authentic selves to each and every playing situation.

Every seminal jazz musician we love, unapologetically brought **their** sound to each and every gig. From their first note, without a doubt we know whether it is Sydney Bechet, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Johnny Hodges, or Anthony Braxton speaking to us through their horn.

By beginning our warmup with free improvisation, without regard to judgement, genre, or style, we remind ourselves of our creative voice. Technique is arbitrary outside of purpose. **And the purpose is to be you.**

Here are some ways you might begin your practice session with improvisation:

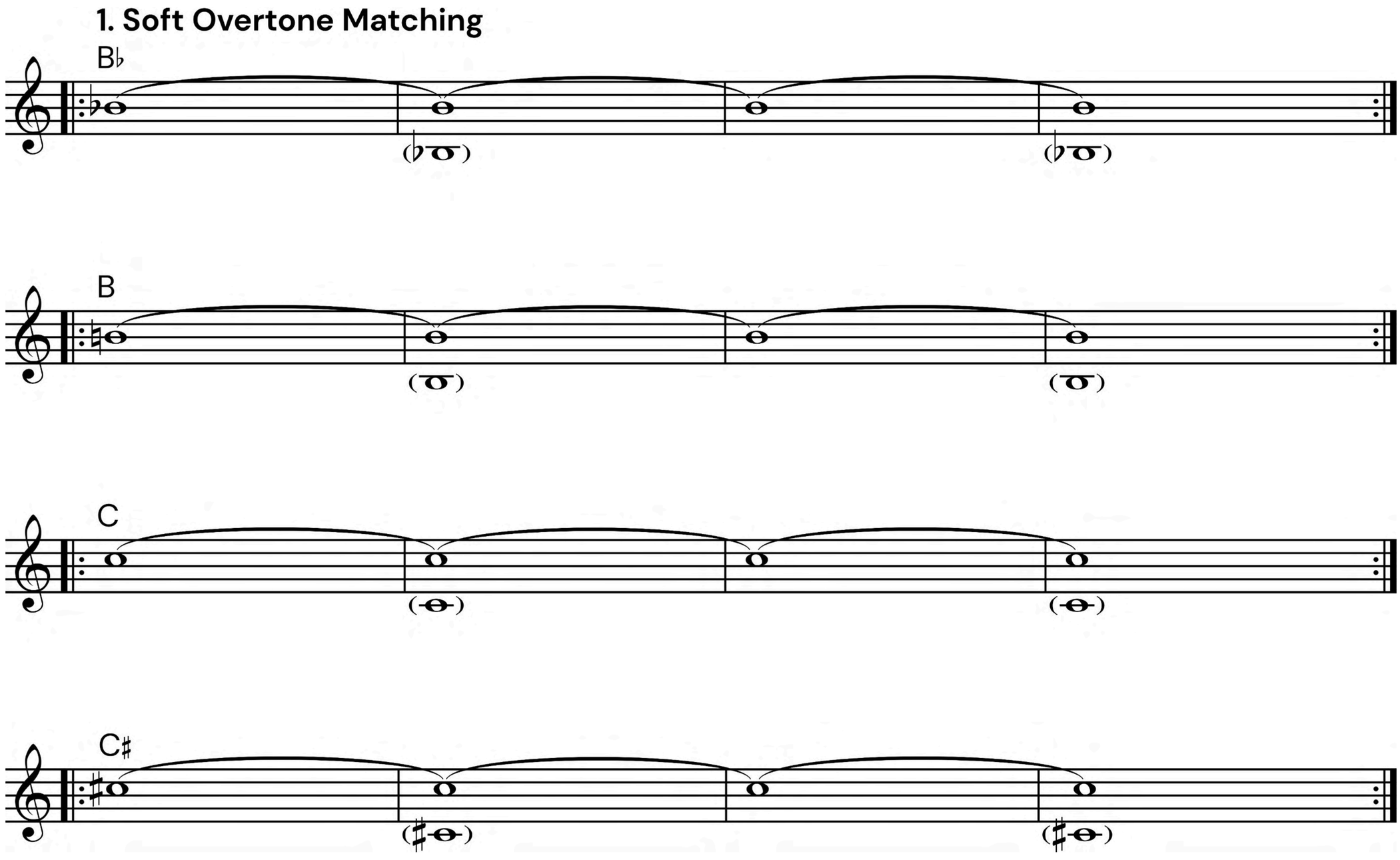
- Play in one key or scale. Create a diatonic melody as a ballad.
- Create a groovy bass line that you intersperse with improvisation.
- Explore textural aspects of the saxophone (Flutter tonguing, extended techniques, see how many weird sounds you can make).
- Play a standard you like rubato, with no time.

The goal is to connect with how you are feeling in that moment. Remind yourself of who you are, and who you want to be through your horn. For the jazz musician, **this is not optional**.

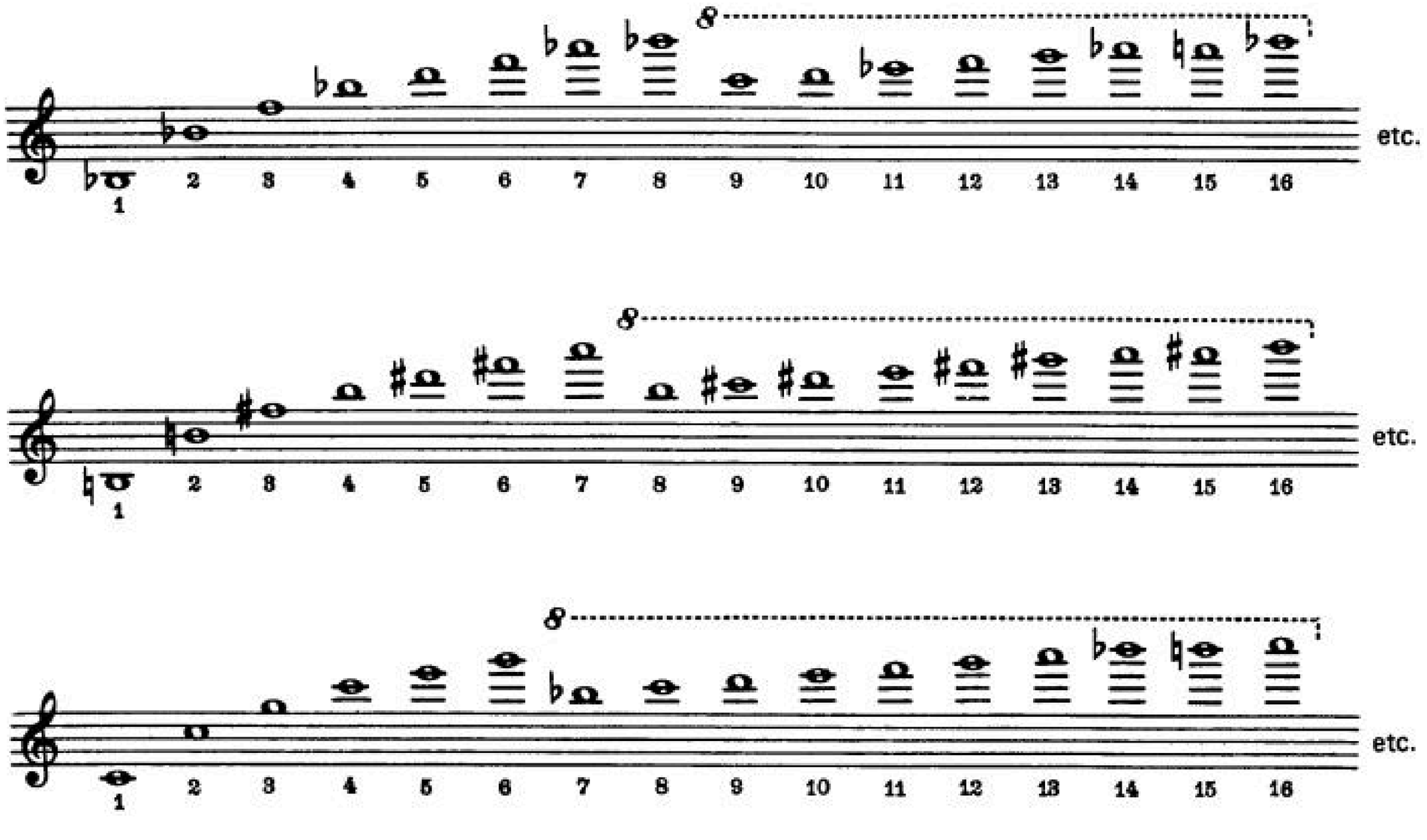
2. Sound

Soft Overtone Pitch Matching (2 mins, 30 secs)

Treat this exercise as a form of meditation. We are reminding our brain and body how to generate a resonant, full, and colorful sound, as well as ensure that every note we play from this moment forward is **beautiful**. We'll begin with overtones.

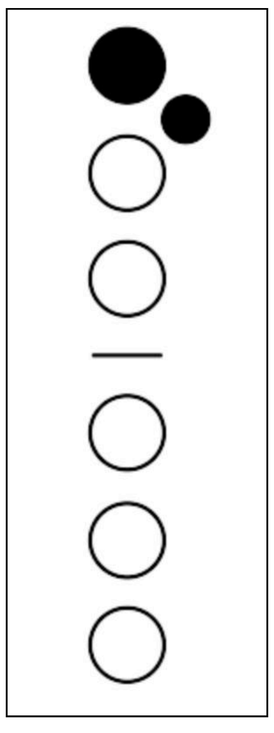


If you're unfamiliar with overtones, by manipulating our voicing (throat and tongue shape) and air flow, we can produce different pitches based on the lowest notes of the saxophone. Please see the provided excerpt from Sigurd M. Rascher's Top Tones for Saxophone for the available pitches in the overtone series.



This exercise should be done within a dynamic range of ***p* to *mp***. It is very important that this exercise is performed **softly**.

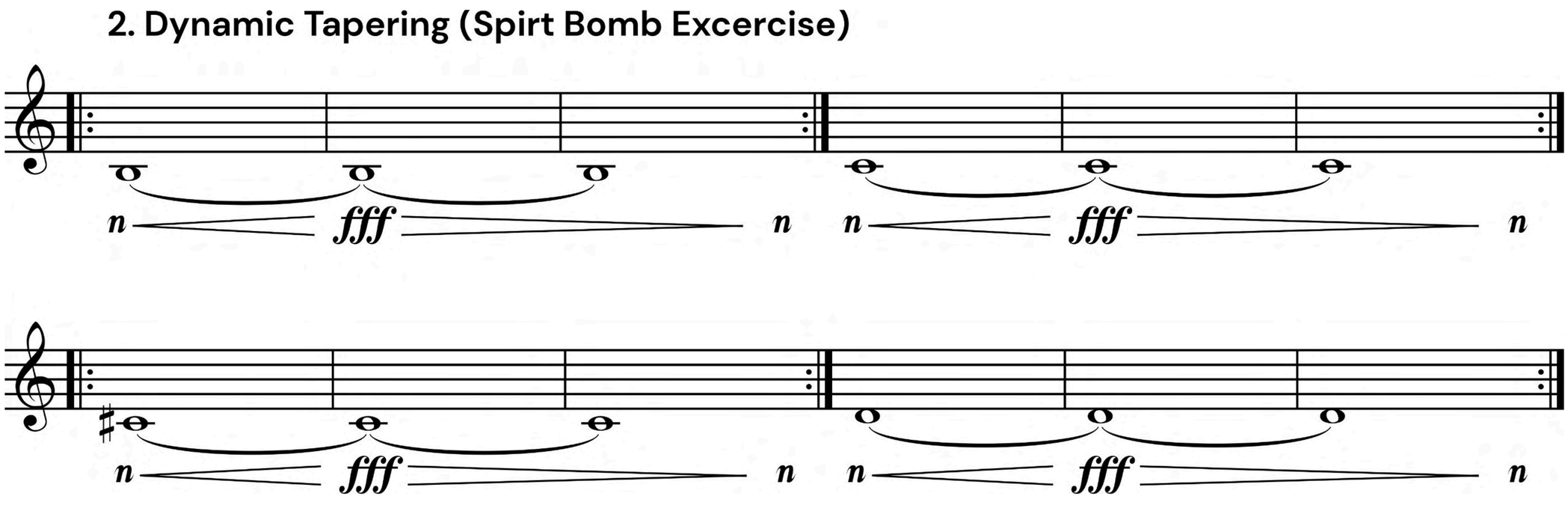
- Play and sustain your middle B-flat, with the bis-B key fingering (see below). Focus on achieving a warm, full sound. If visualization helps, imagine that the sound is a soft, down-feather pillow.
- While sustaining the note and **without tonguing**, finger a low B-flat, but keep the pitch the same. You should be playing the first overtone of the low B-flat.
- Repeat this process for low B-natural, low C, and low C-sharp. Matching each middle register pitch with its equivalent overtone. You should spend 35 seconds on each.
- It is important that your fingered pitch (not the low fundamental), attempts to match as close as possible the fullness and warmth of the overtone.



I prefer to practice this, **slowly**, and out of time, reinforcing the meditative aspect of this exercise. Remember, tension is the enemy and should be avoided **at all costs**. Do not train your body to tense as you play. While performing this exercise, if you notice tightness in your embouchure, fingers, arms, or anywhere in your body, make the necessary adjustments to eliminate it. This may mean you need to play at a slightly louder dynamic for now.

Dynamic Tapering Long Tones (Spirit Bomb Exercise)

This exercise builds endurance, reinforces the importance of core support to sound generation, and increases our dynamic range. In this exercise we will generate sound from air at a dynamic of ***n*** (*niente*), all the way to ***fff***.



- With your normal (relaxed) embouchure, finger a low B-natural.
- Ensure your core is tight (not squeezed). If you're unsure what this should feel like in the beginning, have a friend or family member gently push you while you sustain a middle C-sharp. As they push you, your body will reactively gently tighten your core muscles. This is how we should support our core at all times while we play.
- Begin to blow air, without tonguing, and without making a sound. You should hear the air gently flowing through your horn.
- Slowly increase in volume **without any cracking or accidentally playing any overtones**. Continue **slowly**, until reaching your maximum volume, ensuring that you maintain an even, full sound, without any wavers.
- While still sustaining, slowly decrease in volume, until you return to the sound of air gently blowing through your horn.
- **Repeat this process for C, C-sharp, and D.** You should spend 35 seconds on each note.

If you did this correctly, you **will** be winded after you complete the exercise. Your core may be a little sore. This means you performed the exercise correctly, and you've taken your body and sound through its maximum dynamic range. Note that the increases and decreases in volume should be slow and gradual.

If it helps to visualize, picture a ball of air spinning rapidly at the bottom of your horn, right under the bell. The ball **does not spin less rapidly at quieter dynamics. It spins just as fast at max volume as it does at our minimum**. We should always have strong breath and core support even at soft dynamics. (I named this exercise the Spirit Bomb exercise, because I like to imagine that I'm Goku from Dragon Ball, conjuring a Spirit Bomb in my saxophone. You do you.)

---

3. Technique (5 mins)

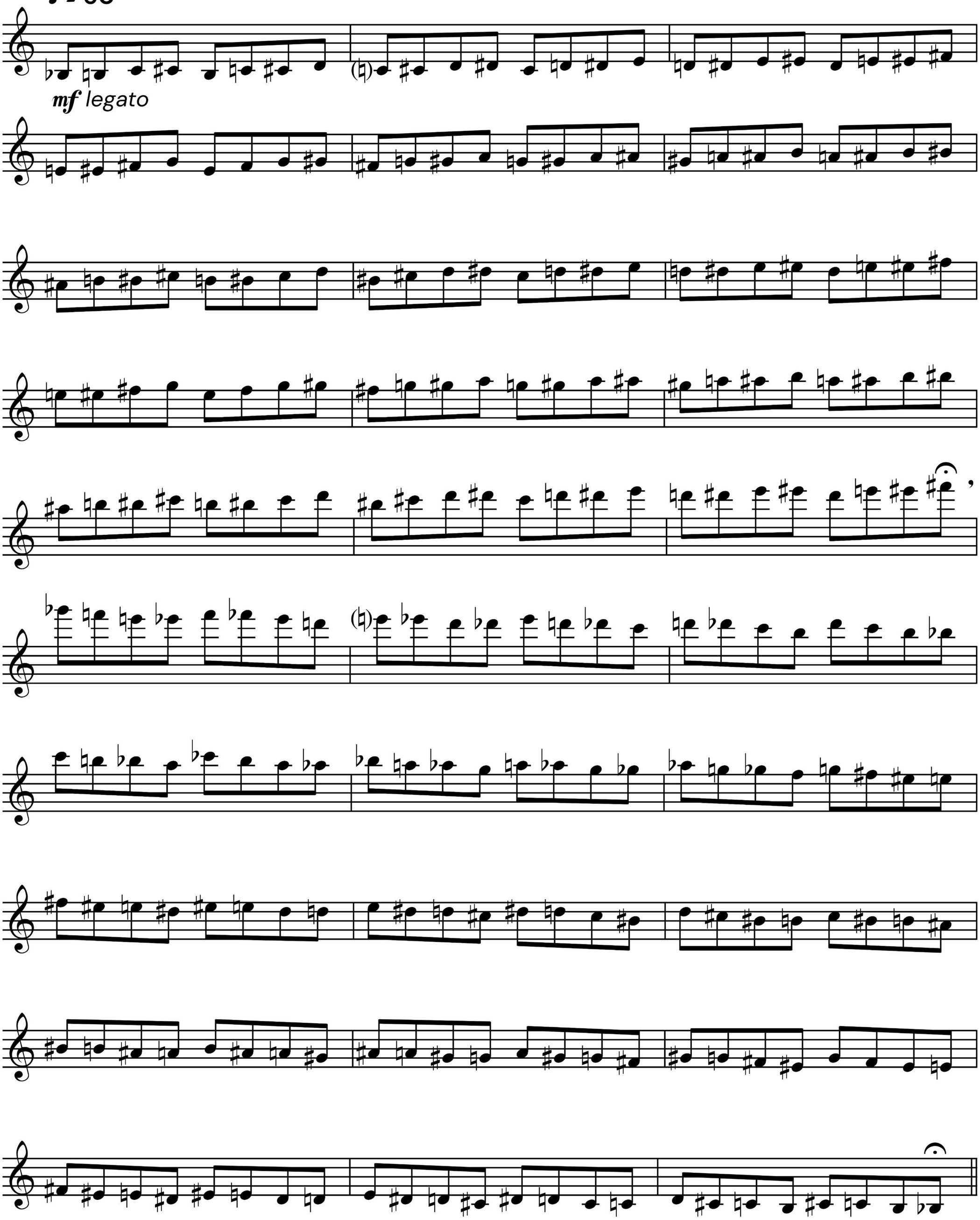
Reinforce evenness and clarity of technique.

Slow Chromatic Scale (2 mins)

The chromatic scale is an incredibly useful tool for reinforcing proper saxophone technique. Exercise 3 should be performed at ♩ = 60 bpm. Not too loud, and not too soft, around a ***mf*** and **legato**. For this exercise, we focus on evenness between notes, avoiding any blips, with no articulation, slurred for the entirety of the exercise. Feel free to place breaths in between bars as necessary, with care **not to breathe in the middle of a bar**. Observe the fermata at the end of measure 15.

3. Slow Chromatic Scale

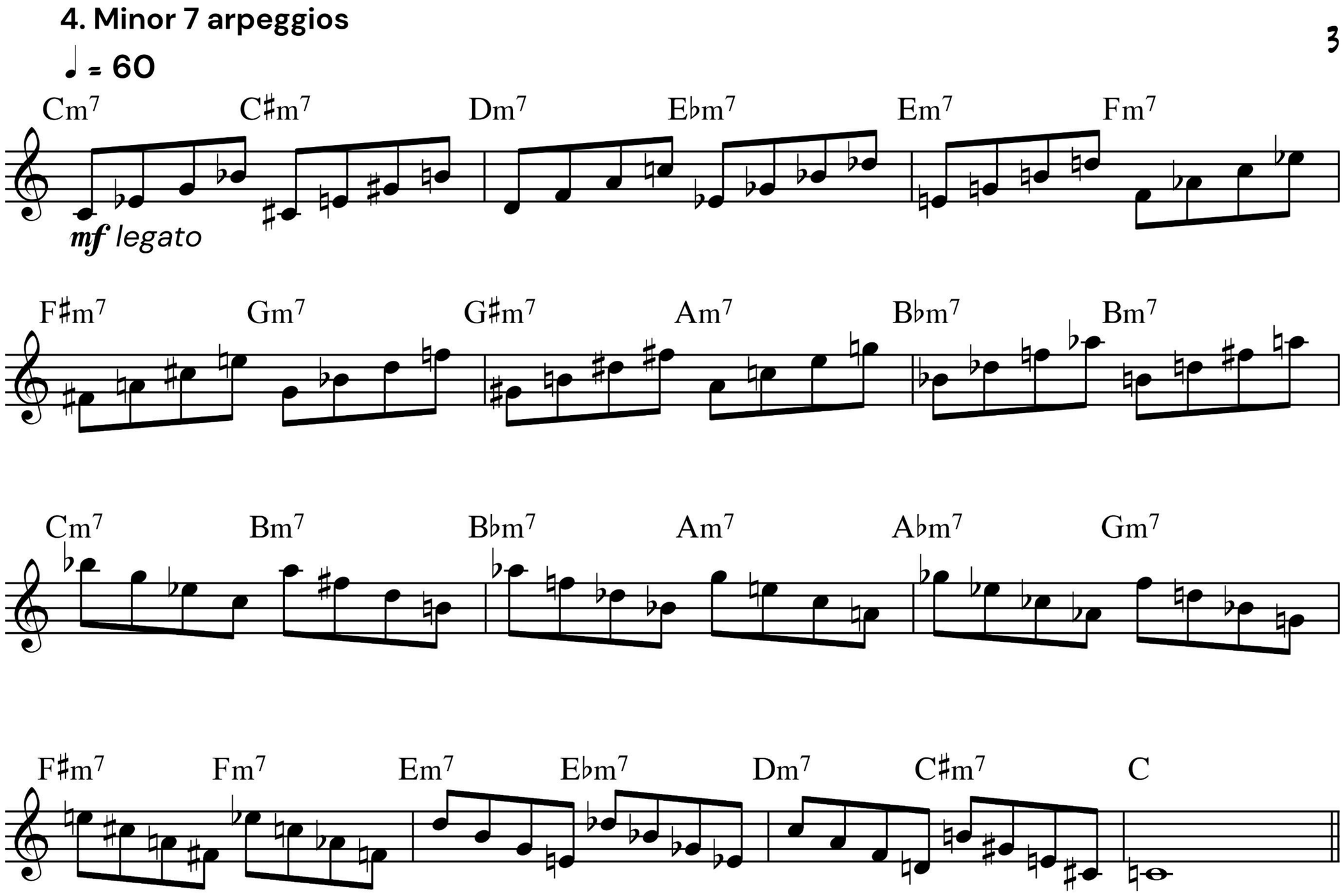
♩ = 60



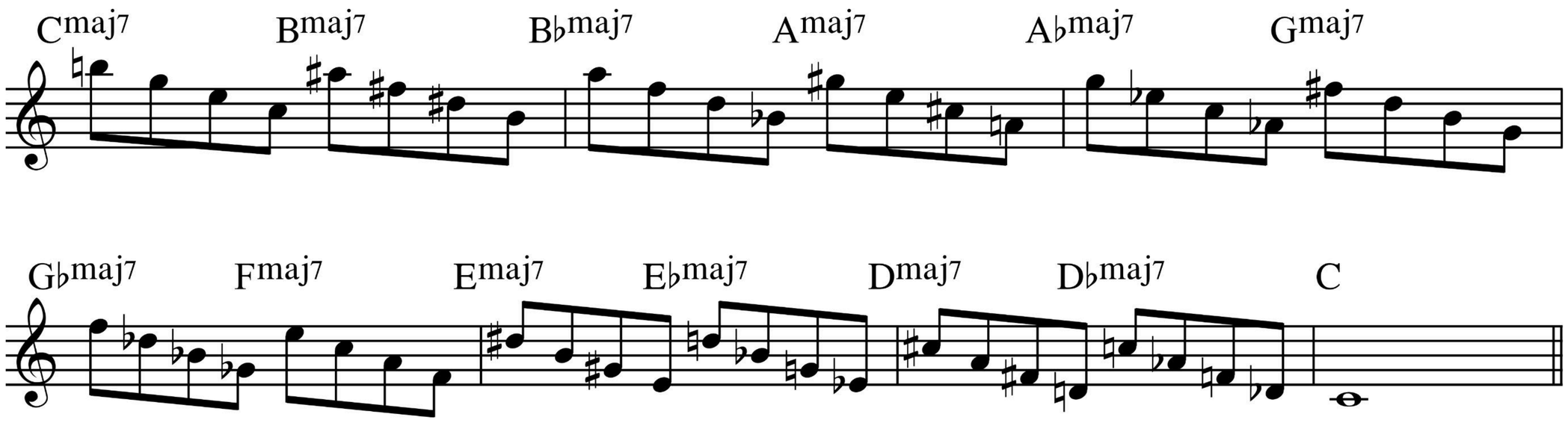
Rest for 30 seconds.

Minor Seventh and Major Seventh Arpeggios (2 mins)

Once again, at ♩ = 60 bpm, perform exercise 4.



4. Major 7 arpeggios



Rest for 30 seconds.

When you first begin utilizing this for your warm-ups, play through everything legato in order to train evenness in the fingers (not the tongue). Once you can comfortably perform the exercise evenly, feel free to mix up the articulation.

Major seventh and minor seventh arpeggios are seminally useful for the jazz musician, as they are applicable over a variety of chord changes. For example, a Cmaj7 arpeggio may be played over an Am9 chord. A Gmin7 arpeggio may be played over a E♭maj9, so on and so forth.

---

4. Groove (2 mins, 30 secs)

The final portion of our warm-up is similar to the first in its utilization of improvisation. However, now our focus is on time and rhythm.

The process is relatively simple. Pick a tune you **know**, and **love to play**. It is important that it is a tune that you know well, because the last thing we want is to have to think of the changes. (This is a warm-up, not a full on practice session after all). This exercise will focus on a tune in 4/4, but feel free to modify it to your needs.

Set your metronome anywhere from 60 to 100 bpm. The pulses will be beats **2** and **4** (similar to the hi-hat pattern a drummer would play). Alternatively, you can set your metronome to 120 to 200 bpm, and **hide beats 1 and 3**.

From here, play the head (melody) of your standard of choice. Take as many choruses of soloing as time permits, focusing on keeping things **grooving**. If you do it right, the metronome will **begin to dance along with you**. In other words, the metronome should start to feel like it has a "pocket."

To help with this, visualize that you are playing with your favorite drummer and bassist as you play.

If you are still on your tune learning journey, the attached etudes composed by Bob Mintzer are wonderful for this exercise.

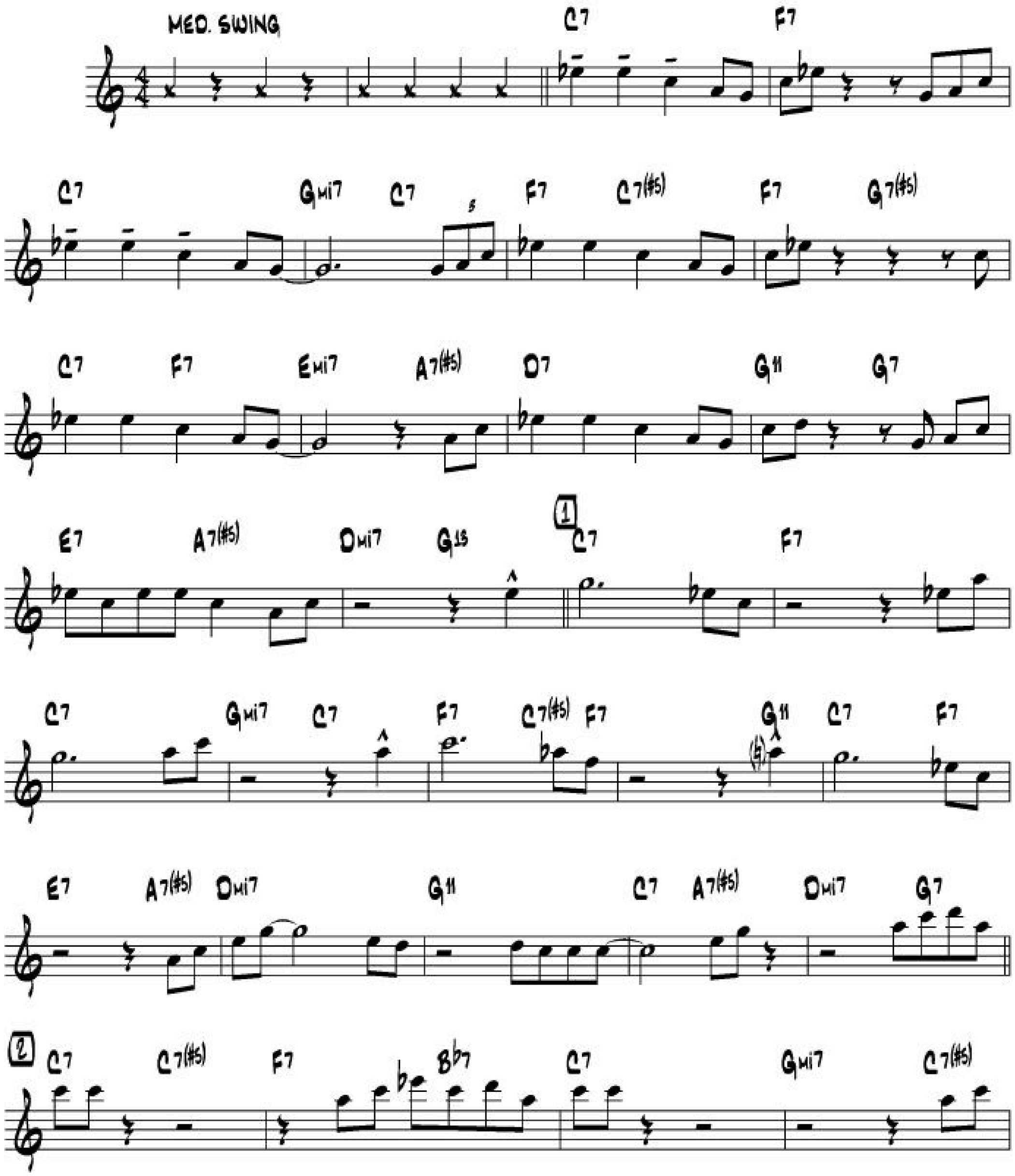
Finished

This concludes your warm-up. This routine comprehensively ensures that you will be ready for whatever role you are filling as a jazz saxophonist, whether it's simply for a practice session, or you're getting ready to perform with your band. Of course, feel free to modify the duration, and customize the exercises to fit your needs. That being said, the order of exercises is designed to build upon one another, focused on efficiently equipping you for your next musical task. Find the system that works for you! Remember that bringing your authentic musical self to these is **not optional for the jazz musician**. We need your voice!

Etudes by Bob Mintzer

1. BLUES 1

B♭ INSTRUMENTS



F7 C7(#5) F7 Emi7 A7(#5)

Dmi7 G7 Emi7 A7(#5) Dmi7 G7

3 C7 C7(#5) F7 C7

Gmi7 C7 F7 C7(#5) F7 C7 F7

Emi7 A7(#5) D9 G11 F7 E7 A7

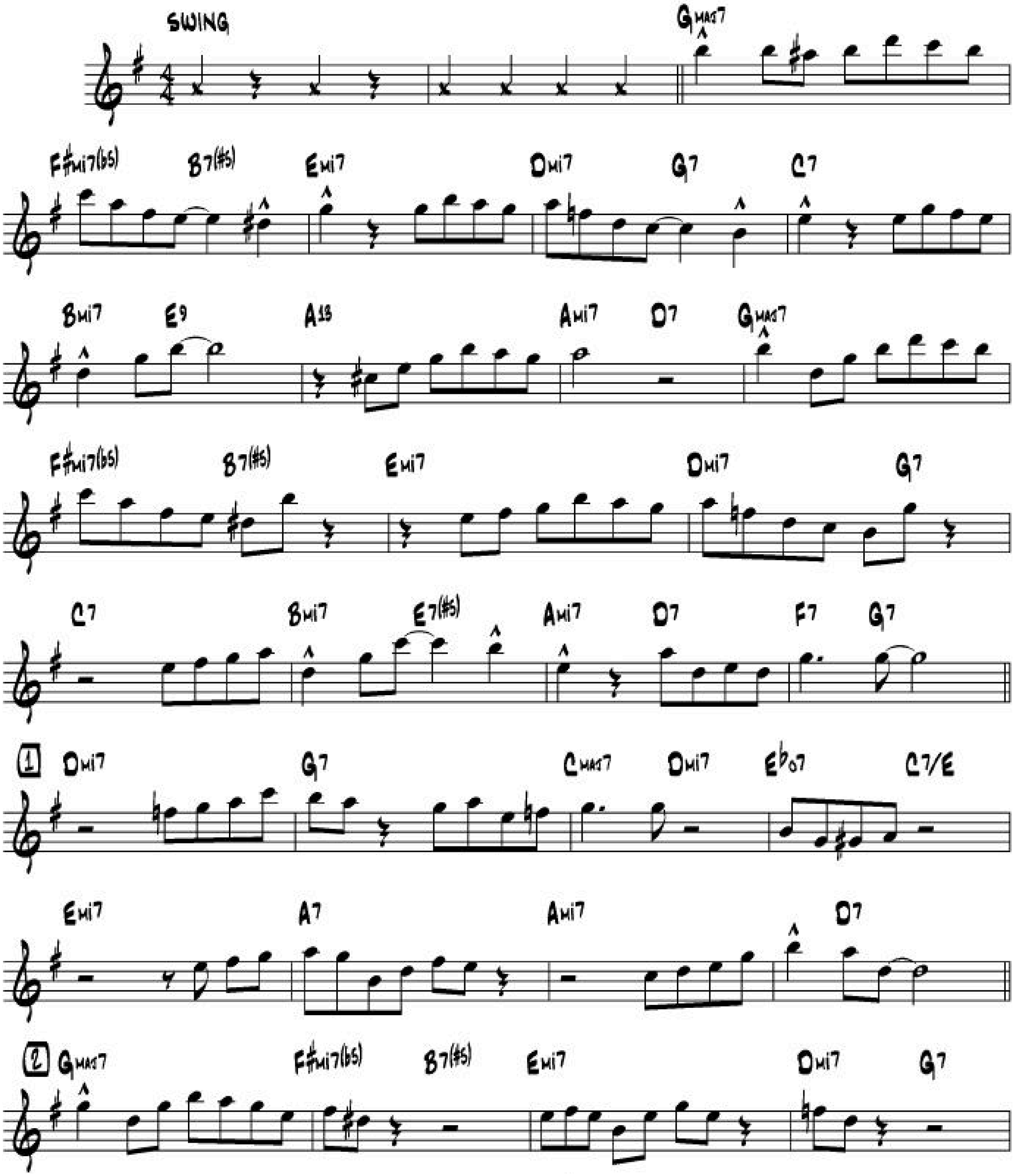
4 Dmi7 G7 C7 F7 C7

C7(#5) F7 C7(#5) F7 C7 F7 Emi7 A7

Dmi7 Ab13 G11 G13 C7 Gb7 F7 C7

B. INSTRUMENTS

II. SWINGIN'



C7 Bmi7 E9 Ami7 D7 G

3 Gmaj7 F#mi7(b5) B7(#5) Emi7 Dmi7 G13

Cmaj7 F13 Bmi7 E7 A7 Ami7 D7

Gmaj7 B7(#5) Emi7 Dmi7 G7(#5)

C7 Bmi7 E7 Ami7 D7 G

4 Dmi7 A7 Dmi7 G13 Cmaj7 G13 Cmaj7

Emi7 A7 Ami7 D7

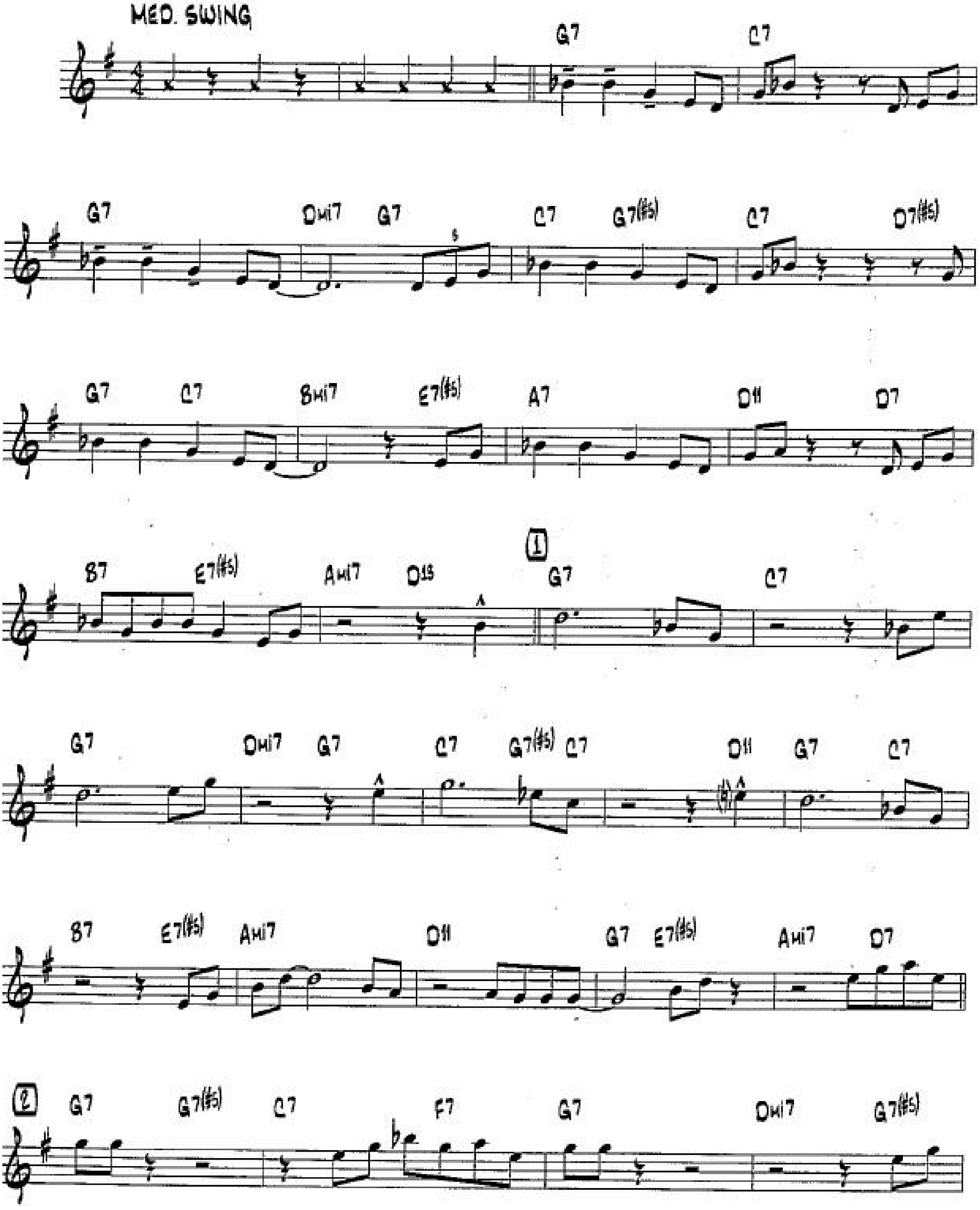
5 Gmaj7 F#mi7(b5) B7(#5) Emi7 Dmi7 G7

C7 F7 Bmi7 E7 Ami7 D7 F13 G13

1. BLUES 1

E♭ ALTO SAX/BARI SAX

MED. SWING



C7 G7(#5) C7 Bmi7 E7(#5)

Ami7 D7 Bmi7 E7(#5) Ami7 D7

3 G7 G7(#5) C7 G7

Dmi7 G7 C7 G7(#5) C7 G7 C7

Bmi7 E7(#5) A9 D11 C7 B7 E7

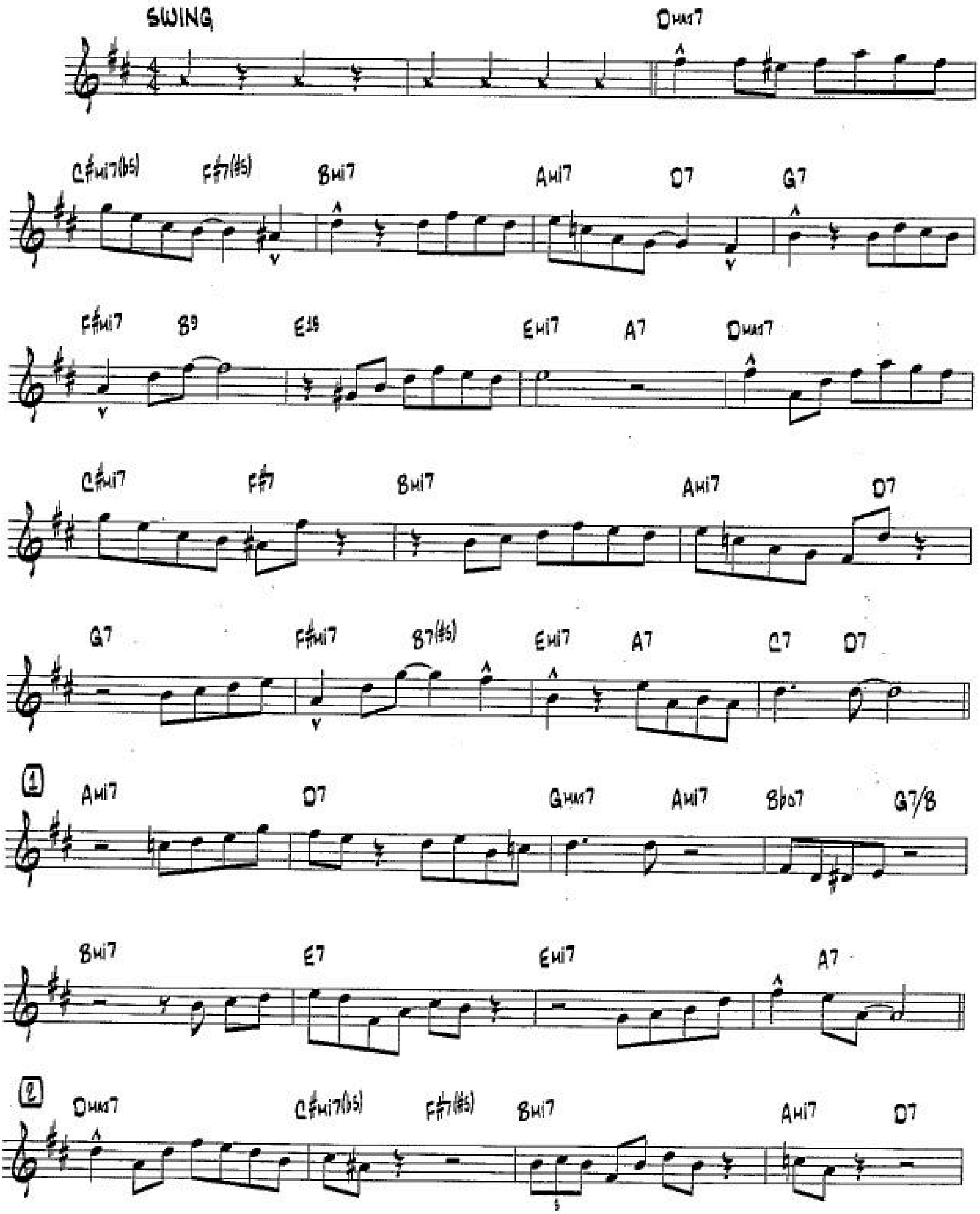
4 Ami7 D7 G7 C7 G7

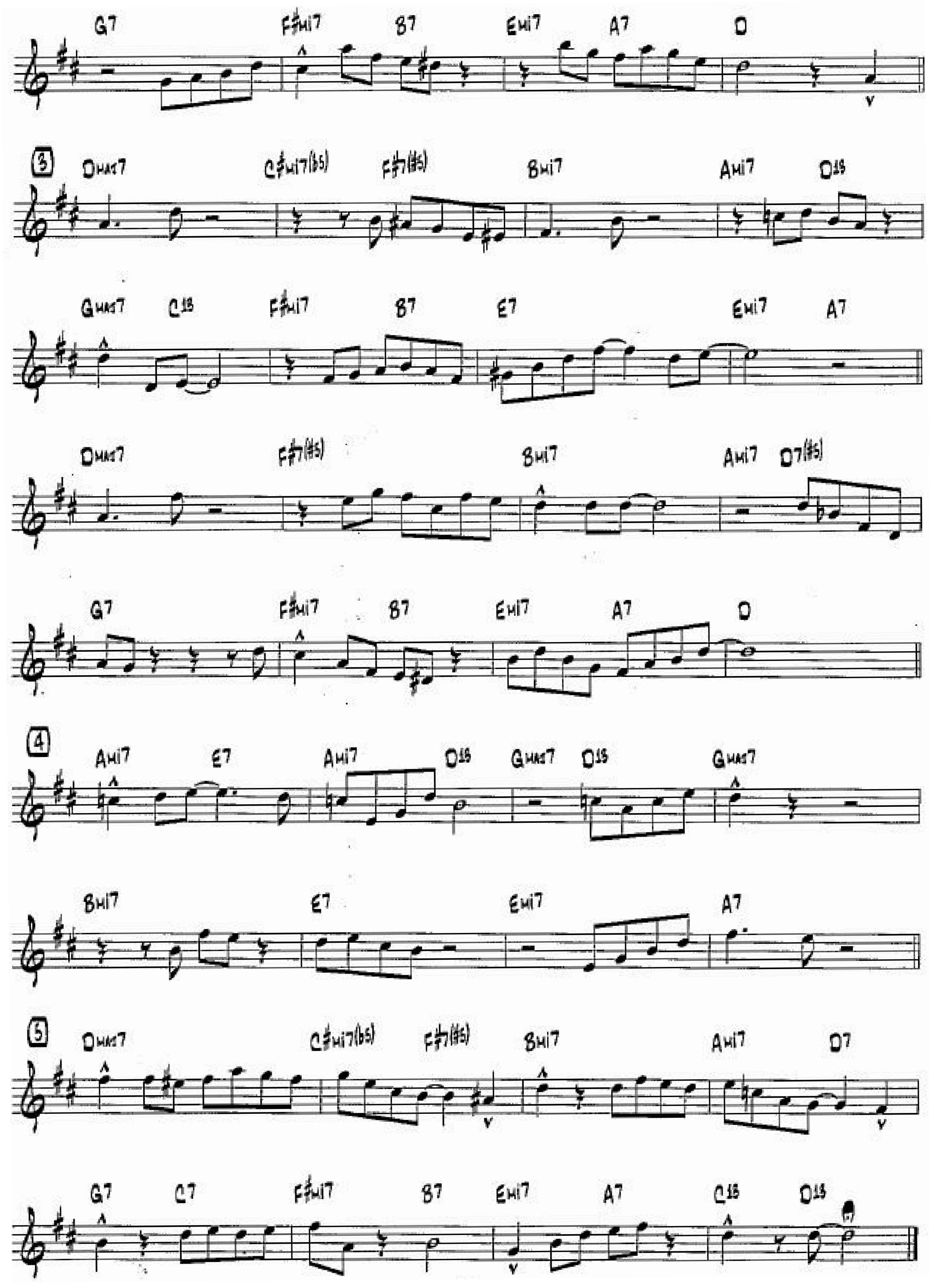
G7(#5) C7 G7(#5) C7 G7 C7 Bmi7 E7

Ami7 Eb13 D11 D13 G7 C#7 C7 G7

II. SWINGIN'

E♭ ALTO SAX/BARI SAX




G7 F♯mi7 B7 Emi7 A7 D
3
Dmaj7 C♯mi7(♭5) F♯7(♯5) Bmi7 Ami7 D13
Gmaj7 C13 F♯mi7 B7 E7 Emi7 A7
Dmaj7 F♯7(♯5) Bmi7 Ami7 D7(♯5)
G7 F♯mi7 B7 Emi7 A7 D
4
Ami7 E7 Ami7 D13 Gmaj7 D13 Gmaj7
Bmi7 E7 Emi7 A7
5
Dmaj7 C♯mi7(♭5) F♯7(♯5) Bmi7 Ami7 D7
G7 C7 F♯mi7 B7 Emi7 A7 C13 D13