The Blues: Your First Ten Jazz Lessons

a jazz unit curriculum by Chad O’Brien

Unit Overview

The 12 bar blues form is a logical place to begin instrumental jazz instruction. Not only does it constitute a large percentage of standard repertoire, it also provides a perfect vehicle to teach students about the history, harmonic evolution, and expressive elements of jazz and, perhaps even more importantly, improvisation.

Too often though, ill equipped educators teach the minor blues scale and throw their students in the deep end. This approach fails to address the most fundamental aspects of improvising – the dominant/tonic (tension/release) relationship, use of idiomatic vocabulary, communication between soloist and accompaniment, and telling a story through motivic development. The way to accomplish these objectives is by teaching jazz as the greats learned it: through repertoire. By focusing on tunes with specific harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary, a beginning jazz instructor can help students develop a working understanding of these elements while creating a healthy environment for exploring a student's own voice.

This unit is intended for intermediate instrumental music students. Ideally, though not necessarily, at this point students have been singing and playing melodies, bass lines, and harmonies to folk songs for 2-3 years and are familiar with solfege in major, minor, and mixolydian. They can read, write, and improvise over tonic, dominant, and subdominant in the keys required for this unit. They have the executive skills needed for all repertoire.

In addition to the 10 aforementioned lessons, I have included 5 optional "stretch" lessons. I use this extra time to expand the scope of this unit to cover more standards. As I tell my students, this provides a more realistic representation of the life of a professional musician: composing, transcribing, studying theory and history alongside performance, and dedicating more practice time to specific tasks. If time does not allow the inclusion of these lessons, I encourage you to revisit them in later years or include them but reduce the repertoire to only the first three songs.

After this unit, students are equipped to pursue a multitude of different types of jazz. Personally, I move from this to teaching simple jazz standards (Autumn Leaves, Blue Bossa, etc.) and ii-V-I's; you could move on to modal jazz, bossa novas, funk, or even more blues! The possibilities are endless but are sure to include improvisation at a high level.

Blues Unit - Lesson 1 - C Jam Blues

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing, then playing) the melody and bass line to C Jam Blues in Concert Bb with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise melodies over the 12-bar blues form
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (12-bar blues form, riff, improvisation, lead sheet)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

Procedures

- Listen to Duke Ellington recording of C Jam Blues and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody and bass line (root movement) to C Jam Blues in Concert Bb (singing, then playing) (10)
- Explain/demonstrate improvising playing rhythms on the two notes of the melody (5)
- Students improvise in this way (15)

Assignment

Play through the melody and bass line to C Jam Blues (in Bb) and improvise with play along track.

Enrichment: Learn C Jam Blues in two other keys.

Blues Unit - Lesson 2 - C Jam Blues

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the melody and bass line to C Jam Blues in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form with musicality: varying dynamics, articulations, and note/phrase lengths and demonstrating an understanding of dominant/tonic relationship
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (transpose, etc.)

Procedures

- Review melody and bass line to C Jam Blues in Bb (singing, then playing) (10)
- Demonstrate, then allow students to practice improvising over the blues form using the two notes of C Jam Blues. As they do, encourage students to experiment with varying dynamics, articulations, note/phrase lengths, etc. (10)
- Repeat this process in C and/or Eb (20)

Assignment

Play through the melody and bass line to C Jam Blues (in several keys) and improvise with the play along track. Use varied dynamics, articulations, etc. to make your solo as interesting as possible; tell a story.

Enrichment: Transpose lead sheet to new keys.

Blues Unit - Lesson 3 (Optional) - C Jam Blues

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the melody and bass line to C Jam Blues in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form with musicality: varying dynamics, articulations, and note/phrase lengths and demonstrating an understanding of dominant/tonic relationship
- Students will compose melodies within specific harmonic and rhythmic parameters
- Students will know the history of the blues tradition and understand its importance to music history

Procedures

- Review/Perform C Jam Blues (in several keys if time allows) (10)
- Compose original riff-based blues head as a class (10)
- Presentation: Complete history of the blues with listening examples (20)

Assignment

Identify a familiar song that follows the blues form.

Enrichment: Compose your own riff-based blues head.

Blues Unit - Lesson 4 - Sonnymoon for Two

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the minor pentatonic scale, melody, and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two in Concert Bb with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise melodies over the 12-bar blues form
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (minor pentatonic scale, jazz standard, V-IV blues, etc.)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

Procedures

- Listen to Sonny Rollins recording of Sonnymoon for Two and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody and bass line (root movement) to Sonnymoon for Two in Concert Bb (singing, then playing) and the minor pentatonic scale (15)
- Explain/demonstrate improvising playing rhythms on the five notes of the melody (5)
- Students improvise in this way (10)

Assignment

Play through the melody and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two (in Bb) and improvise with play along track.

Enrichment: Learn the minor pentatonic scale in two other keys.

Blues Unit - Lesson 5 - Sonnymoon for Two

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the minor pentatonic scale, melody, and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form with musicality: controlling tonal content purposefully to build and release tension
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (development, intensity in music, etc.)

Procedures

- Review melody and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two (singing, then playing) and the minor pentatonic scale in Bb (10)
- Demonstrate, then allow students to practice improvising over the blues form using the minor pentatonic scale. After a few attempts each, have students practice developing/building a solo by starting with just the two notes of C Jam Blues and slowly introducing all five notes of the minor pentatonic scale (15)
- Repeat this process in C and/or Eb, writing the scale first for each key (15)

Assignment

Play through the minor pentatonic scale, melody, and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two (in several keys) and improvise with the play along track. Develop your ideas and build intensity in your solo by starting with just the two notes of C Jam Blues and slowly introducing all five notes of the minor pentatonic scale.

Enrichment: Besides tonally, how can your improvising be high intensity? Low intensity? Be able to demonstrate as well as discuss.

Blues Unit - Lesson 6 (Optional) - Sonnymoon for Two

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the minor pentatonic scale, melody, and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form with musicality: controlling tonal content purposefully to build and release tension
- Students will compose melodies within specific harmonic and rhythmic parameters
- Students will discuss the value of standard repertoire in art

Procedures

- Play the minor pentatonic scale and echo vocabulary/scale patterns (10)
- Review/perform Sonnymoon for Two (10)
- Compose original riff-based blues head as a class (10)
- Presentation: Listen to and discuss different versions of Sonnymoon for Two (10)

Assignment

Compose your own riff-based blues head using the minor pentatonic scale.

Enrichment: Listen to a version of Sonnymoon for Two that we did not hear in class.

Blues Unit - Lesson 7 - Splanky

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the minor blues scale, melody, and bass line to Splanky in Concert Db with and without sheet music
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (minor blues scale, call and response, ii-V blues, etc.)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

Procedures

- Listen to original recording of Splanky and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody and bass line (root movement) to Splanky in Concert Db (singing, then playing) and the minor blues scale (20)
- Echo vocabulary/scale patterns on minor blues scale (10)

Assignment

Play through the melody and bass line to Splanky (in Db) with the original recording.

Enrichment: Transcribe the shout melody.

Blues Unit - Lesson 8 - Splanky

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the minor pentatonic scale, melody, and bass line to Sonnymoon for Two in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form using idiomatic vocabulary
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (idiomatic vocabulary, licks, etc.)

Procedures

- Review melody and bass line to Splanky (singing, then playing) and the minor blues scale in Db (10)
- Write and play the minor blues scale in C then learn the melody and bass line in C (10)
- Demonstrate, then allow students to lead, echoing vocabulary/scale patterns (10)
- Improvise solos containing this vocabulary (10)

Assignment

Practice improvising over the blues form using vocabulary derived from the blues scale. Use licks that we played in class and try to invent your own original vocabulary.

Enrichment: Listen to some of the recordings we have studied in this unit. Do any of the solos include vocabulary from the blues scale? Try to play some of the licks on your instrument. If they are not in familiar keys, transpose them.

Blues Unit - Lesson 9 (Optional) - Splanky

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the minor blues scale, melody, and bass line to Splanky in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form using idiomatic vocabulary
- Students will compose melodies within specific harmonic and rhythmic parameters
- Students will discuss the value of standard repertoire in art

Procedures

- Play the minor blues scale and echo vocabulary/scale patterns (10)
- Review/perform Splanky in Concert C (10)
- Presentation: How to transcribe and the importance of learning solos (20)

Assignment

Transcribe the shout chorus to Splanky in Db.

Enrichment: Transcribe a chorus of a blues solo.

Blues Unit - Lesson 10 - St. Louis Blues

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the major blues scale, melody, and bass line to St. Louis Blues in Concert Eb with and without sheet music
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (major blues scale, chord, arpeggiation, through composed, motive, etc.)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

Procedures

- Listen to Louis Armstrong/Ella Fitzgerald recording of St. Louis Blues. Discuss the more elaborate form of this song and introduce historical context (10)
- Explain the use of motivic development in this song and how the motive is an arpeggio of the chords (5)
- Teach, by rote, melody and bass line (root movement) to St. Louis in Concert Eb (singing, then playing) and the major blues scale (20)
- Ask students to identify the one melody note that is not part of the scale. Explain that this note (in the 9th bar) is from the chord (Bb7) and the melody here is the same motive as the beginning of the song but arppegiates the V chord instead of the I chord (5)

Assignment

Play through the melody and bass line to St. Louis Blues (in Eb) with the original recording.

Enrichment: Transcribe the other sections of the song (besides the 12 bar blues). How do these contrast with the part that we learned?

Blues Unit - Lesson 11 - St. Louis Blues

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the major blues scale, melody, and bass line to St. Louis Blues in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form reflecting primary characteristics of the specific head
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary

Procedures

- Review melody and bass line to St. Louis Blues (singing, then playing) and the major blues scale in Eb (10)
- Write and play the major blues scale in C then learn the melody and bass line in C (10)
- Demonstrate, then allow students to practice improvising using the techniques studied in this unit and quoting the melody in the 9th bar (20)

Assignment

Practice improvising over the blues form using the techniques studied in this unit and quoting the melody in the 9th bar.

Enrichment: Experiment arpeggiating the chords in different ways. Try to incorporate these chords into your improvising.

Blues Unit - Lesson 12 (Optional) - St. Louis Blues

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the major blues scale, melody, and bass line to St. Louis Blues in several different keys with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form reflecting primary characteristics of the specific head

Procedures

- Play the major blues scale in Concert C (5)
- Review/perform St. Louis Blues in Concert C (10)
- Jam: Practice improvising over the blues form using all techniques studied. (25)

Assignment

Practice improvising over the blues form using all techniques studied.

Enrichment: Solo in as many keys as possible.

Blues Unit - Lesson 13 - Tenor Madness

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) melody and bass line to Tenor Madness and accompanying guide tone line in Concert Bb with and without sheet music
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary (voice leading, guide tone line, etc.)
- Students will understand historical context of the repertoire

Procedures

- Listen to original recording of Tenor Madness and introduce historical context (10)
- Teach, by rote, melody and bass line (root movement) to Tenor Madness in Concert Bb (singing, then playing) and the guide tone line (20)
- Demonstrate, then allow students to practice improvising over the blues form playing rhythms on the notes of the guide tone line (10)

Assignment

Play through the melody and bass line to Tenor Madness (in Bb) with the play along and improvise by playing rhythms on the guide tone line.

Enrichment: Try to write another guide tone line and improvise rhythms using that.

Blues Unit - Lesson 14 - Tenor Madness

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the melody, bass line, and guide tone line to Tenor Madness in Bb with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form within specific musical parameters
- Students will be able correctly use relevant musical vocabulary

Procedures

- Review melody, bass line, and guide tone line to Tenor Madness (singing, then playing) (10)
- Review the minor pentatonic, minor blues, and major blues scales in Bb (10)
- Demonstrate, then allow students to practice improvising using all techniques studied in this unit. Challenge them to keep in mind the elements of musicality studied in addition to the harmonic and melodic techniques. (20)

Assignment

Practice improvising over the blues form using all the techniques studied in this unit.

Enrichment: As a practice in creativity, try improvising by setting “limitations” on your solo. For instance, introduce only one pitch per chorus or play in only one octave. Try drawing a sort of “story arc” that you want to achieve in your solo and follow it by increasing and decreasing in intensity.

Blues Unit - Lesson 15 (Optional) - Tenor Madness

Lesson Objectives

- Students will perform (singing and playing) the melody, bass line, and guide tone lines to Tenor Madness as well as the minor pentatonic scale, minor blues scale, and major blues scale in Bb with and without sheet music
- Students will improvise over the 12-bar blues form and explore their voice

Procedures

- Review the melody, bass line, and familiar guide tone line to Tenor Madness as well as the minor pentatonic scale, minor blues scale, and major blues scale in Bb (10)
- Sightread other guide tone lines for blues Bb (5)
- Jam: Practice improvising over the blues form using all techniques studied. (25)

Assignment

Prepare for Unit Assessment

Resources

Repertoire recordings

Duke Ellington “C Jam Blues” - https://youtu.be/wgy-XNI6kVQ
Sonny Rollins “Sonnymoon for Two” - https://youtu.be/DXMwHVM113s
Dexter Gordon “Sonnymoon for Two” - https://youtu.be/-H5hJpt3t2k
Michael Brecker “Sonnymoon for Two” - https://youtu.be/qtvXZQ0iv8o
Count Basie “Splanky” - https://youtu.be/zxe_LCqS2dM
Louis Armstrong/Ella Fitzgerald “St. Louis Blues” - https://youtu.be/D2TUlUwa3_o
Sonny Rollins “Tenor Madness” - https://youtu.be/3MkUvZUTFUc

Play alongs

Bb Blues (fast) - https://youtu.be/wHVxf2M20gQ
Bb Blues (slow) - https://youtu.be/7Ulut9_yNYI
Bb Blues (very slow) - https://youtu.be/aUuzR_dsk9o
C Blues - https://youtu.be/LAOAC2aRKe8
Eb Blues - https://youtu.be/APbF5dr2eFw
Db Blues - https://youtu.be/OnQIIy_uHME
Sonnymoon for Two (in Bb) - https://youtu.be/kIp_0tRzI-I
Tenor Madness (in Bb) - https://youtu.be/7SaIuR4K2O0

Suggested references and sources

Developing Musicianship through Improvisation by Christopher D. Azzara and Richard F. Grunow

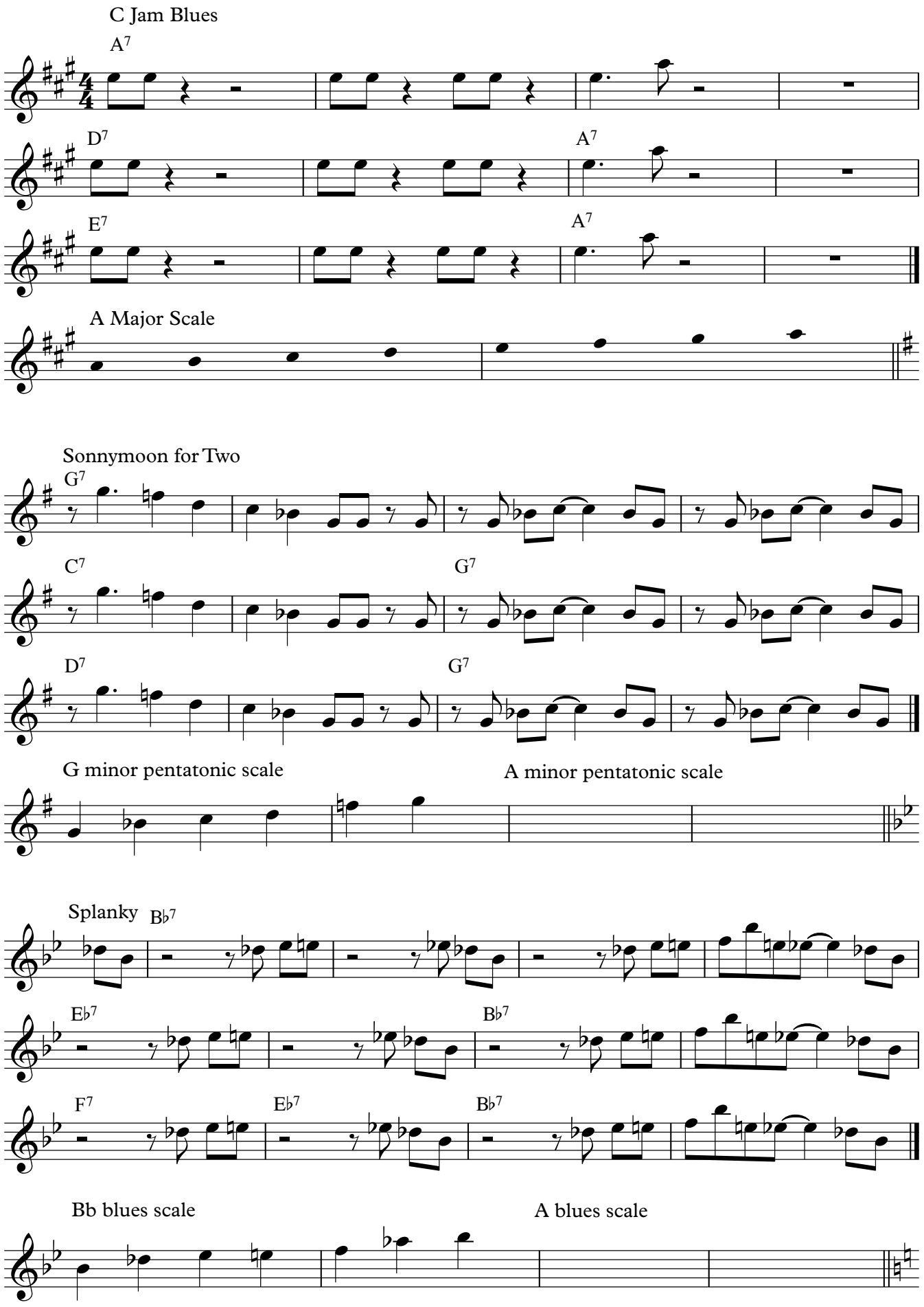
Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series - Teacher’s Guide for Winds and Percussion by Richard Grunow

Ready, Aim, Improvise! by Hal Crook

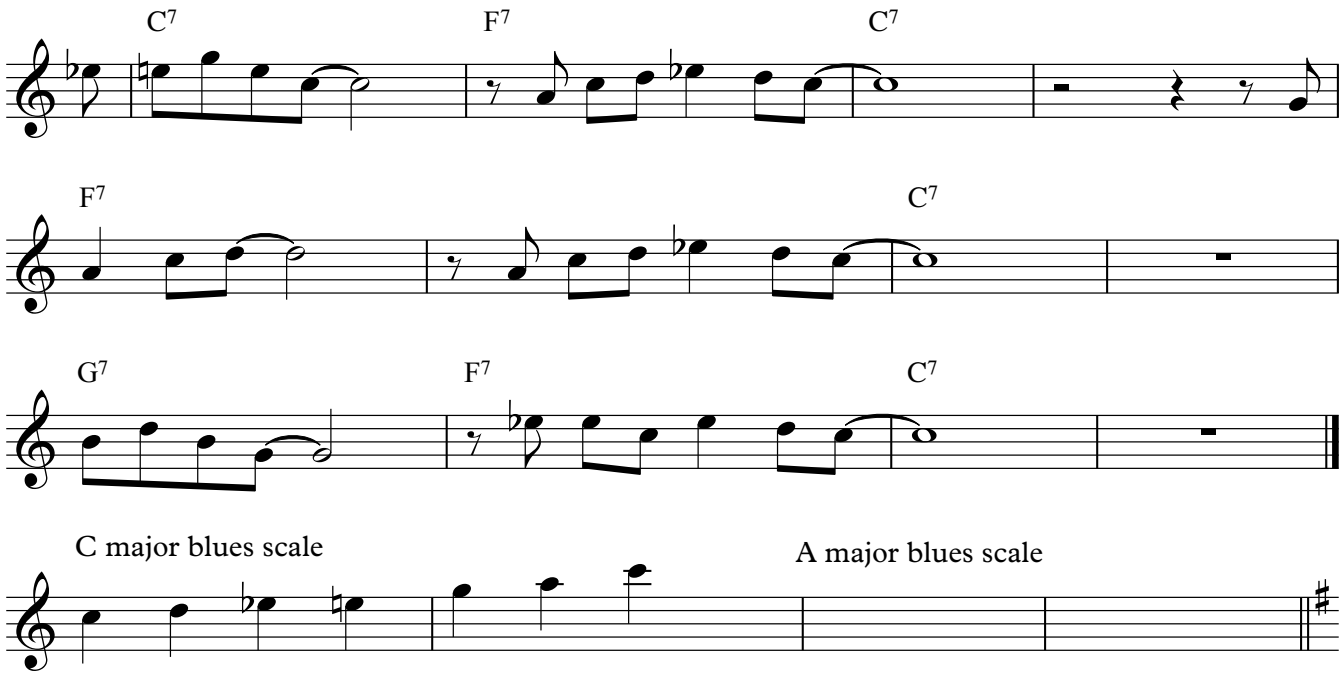
How to Improvise by Hal Crook

Da Blues

Alto Saxophone



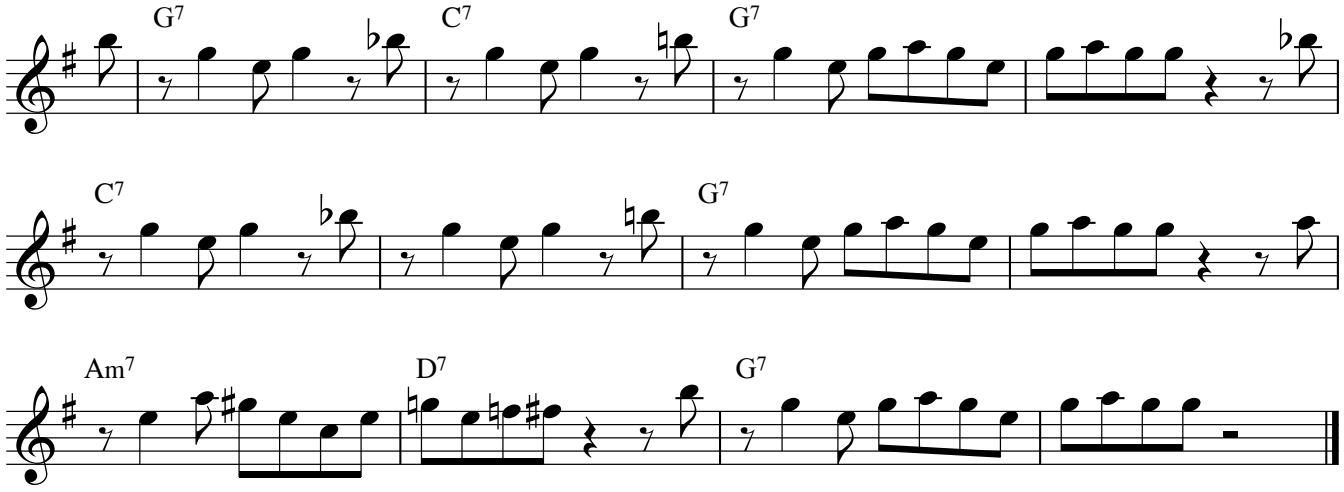
St. Louis Blues



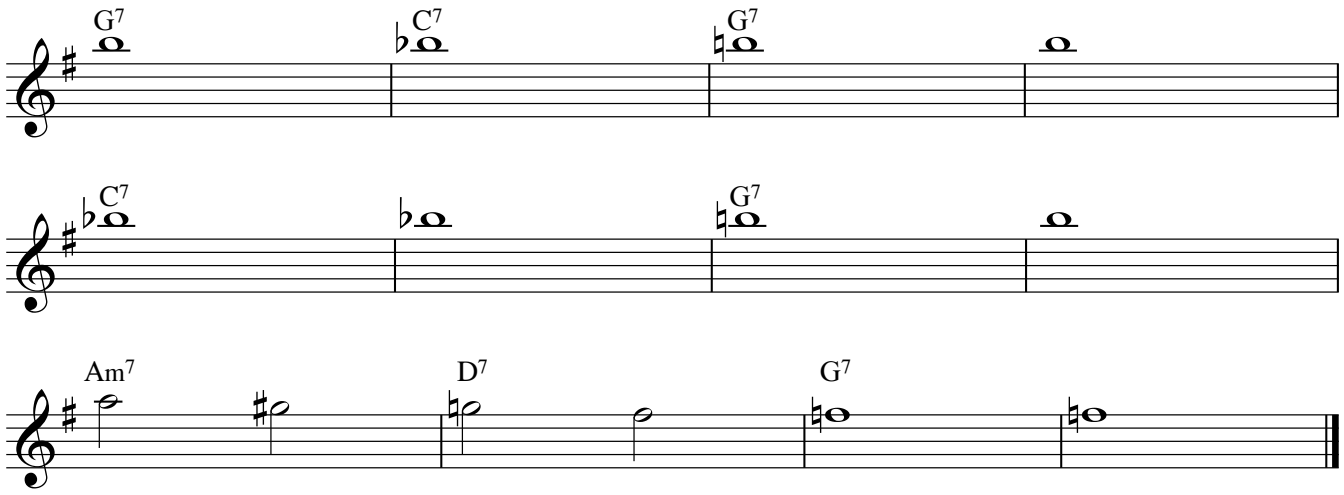
C major blues scale

A major blues scale

Tenor Madness



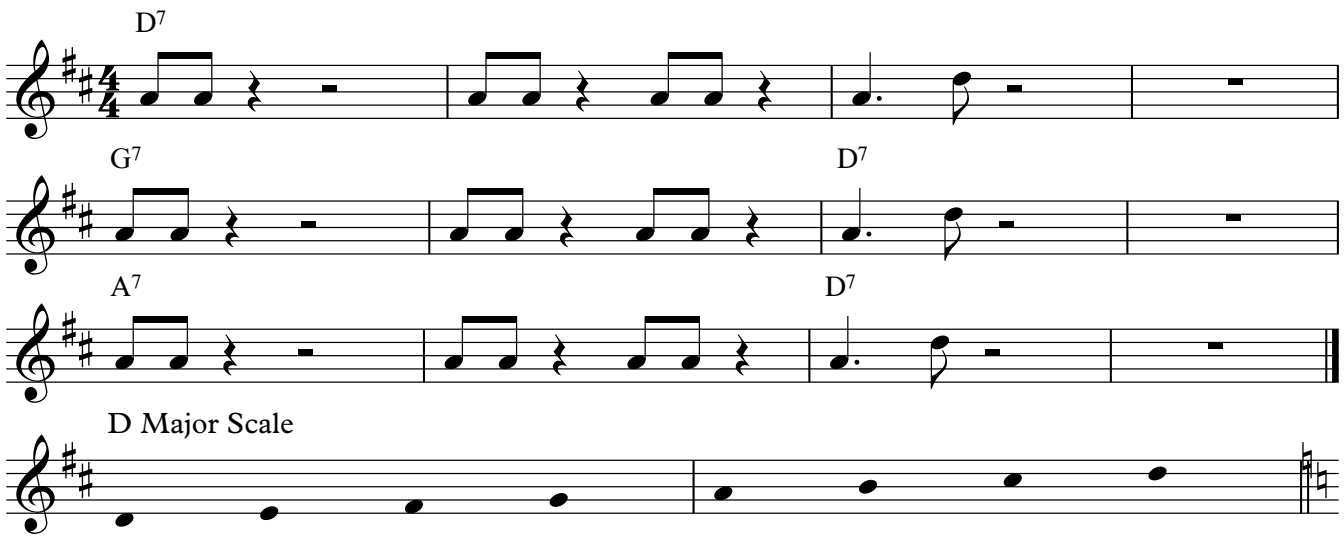
G blues guide tone line



Tenor Saxophone

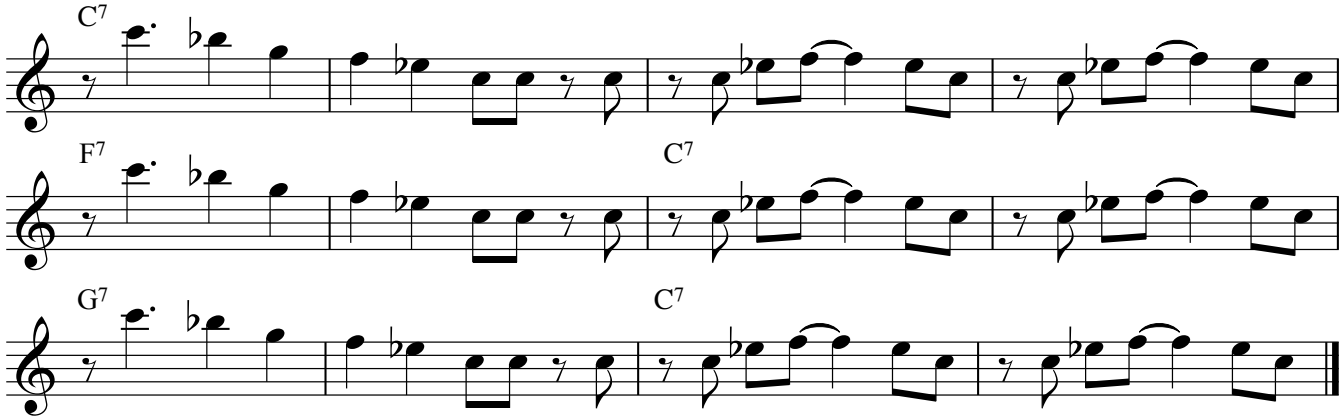
Da Blues

C Jam Blues



D Major Scale

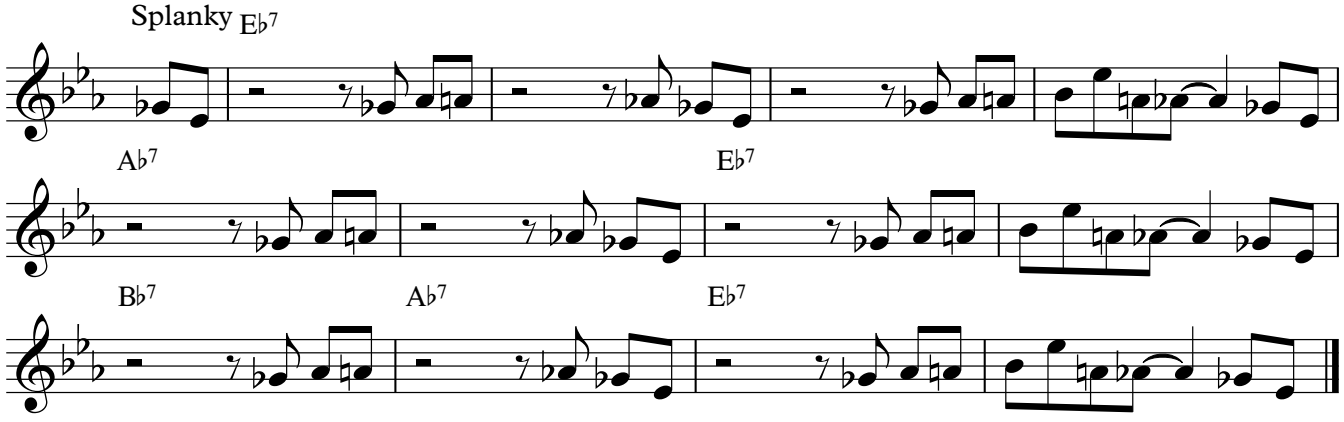
Sonnymoon for Two



C minor pentatonic scale

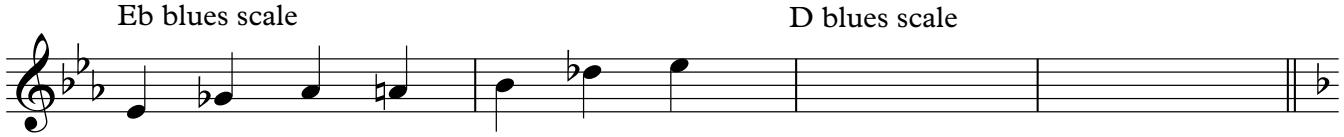
D minor pentatonic scale

Splanky

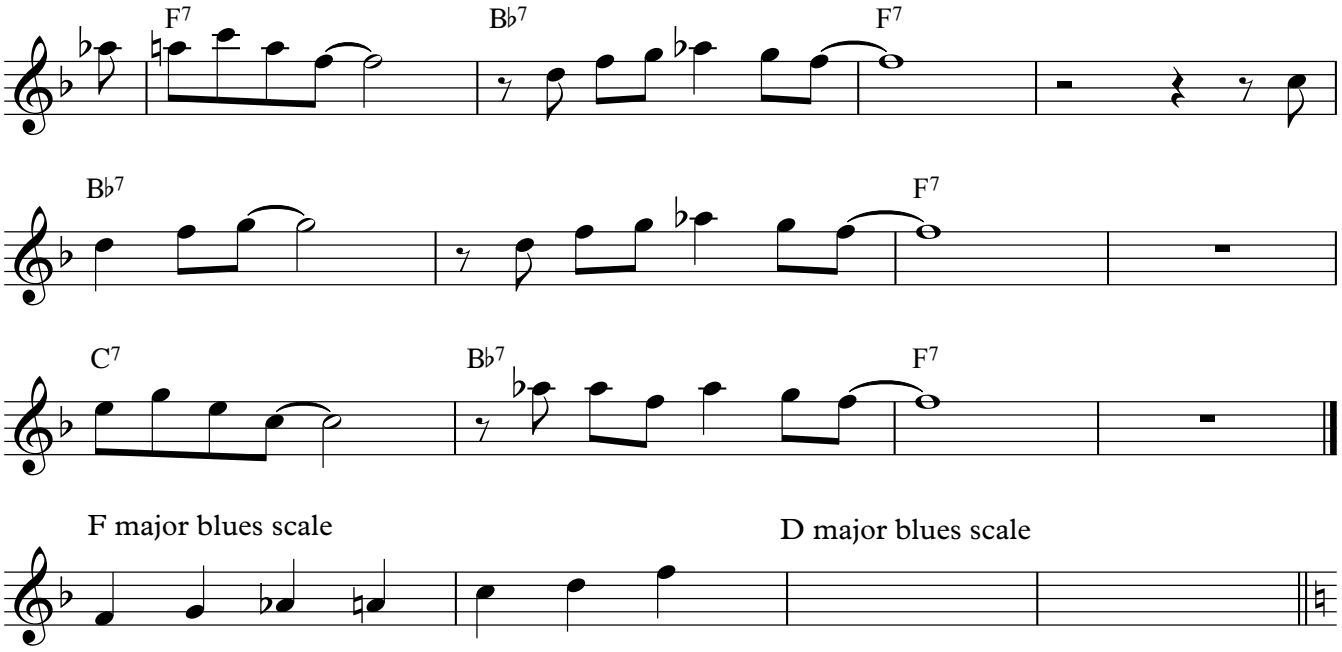


Eb blues scale

D blues scale



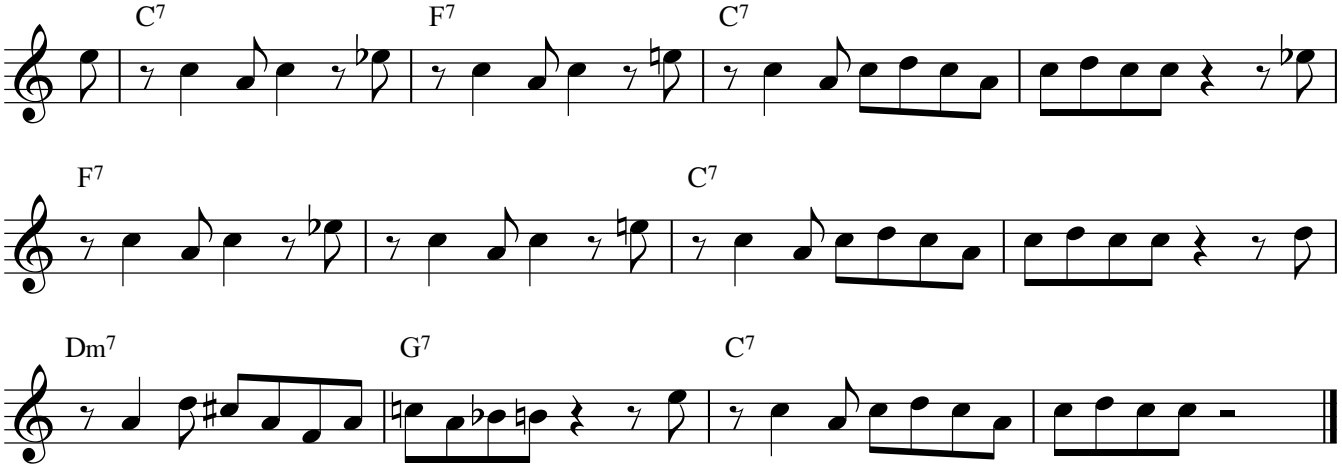
St. Louis Blues



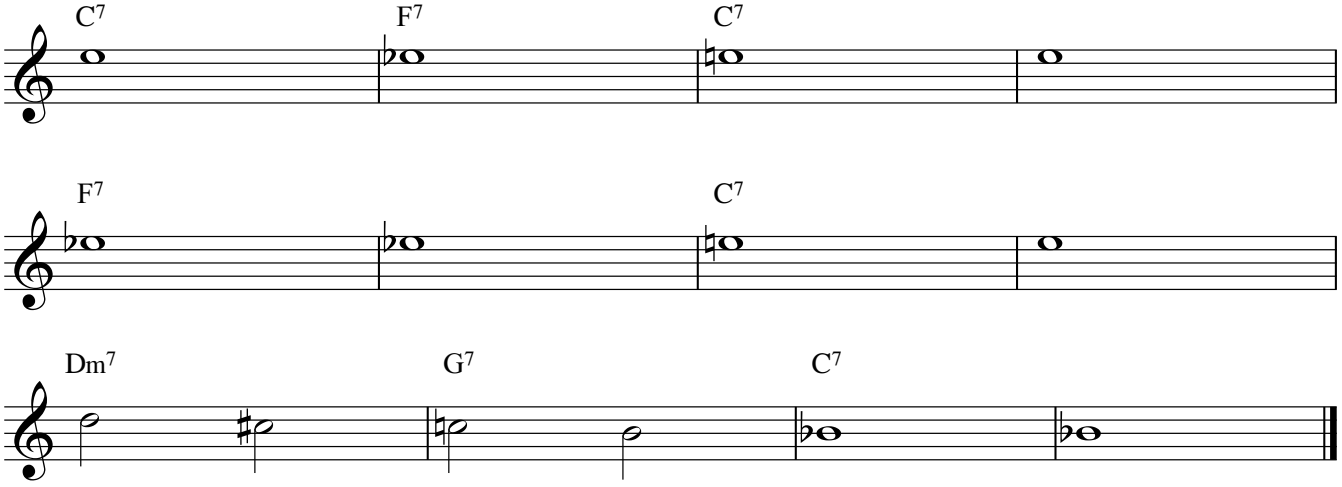
F major blues scale

D major blues scale

Tenor Madness

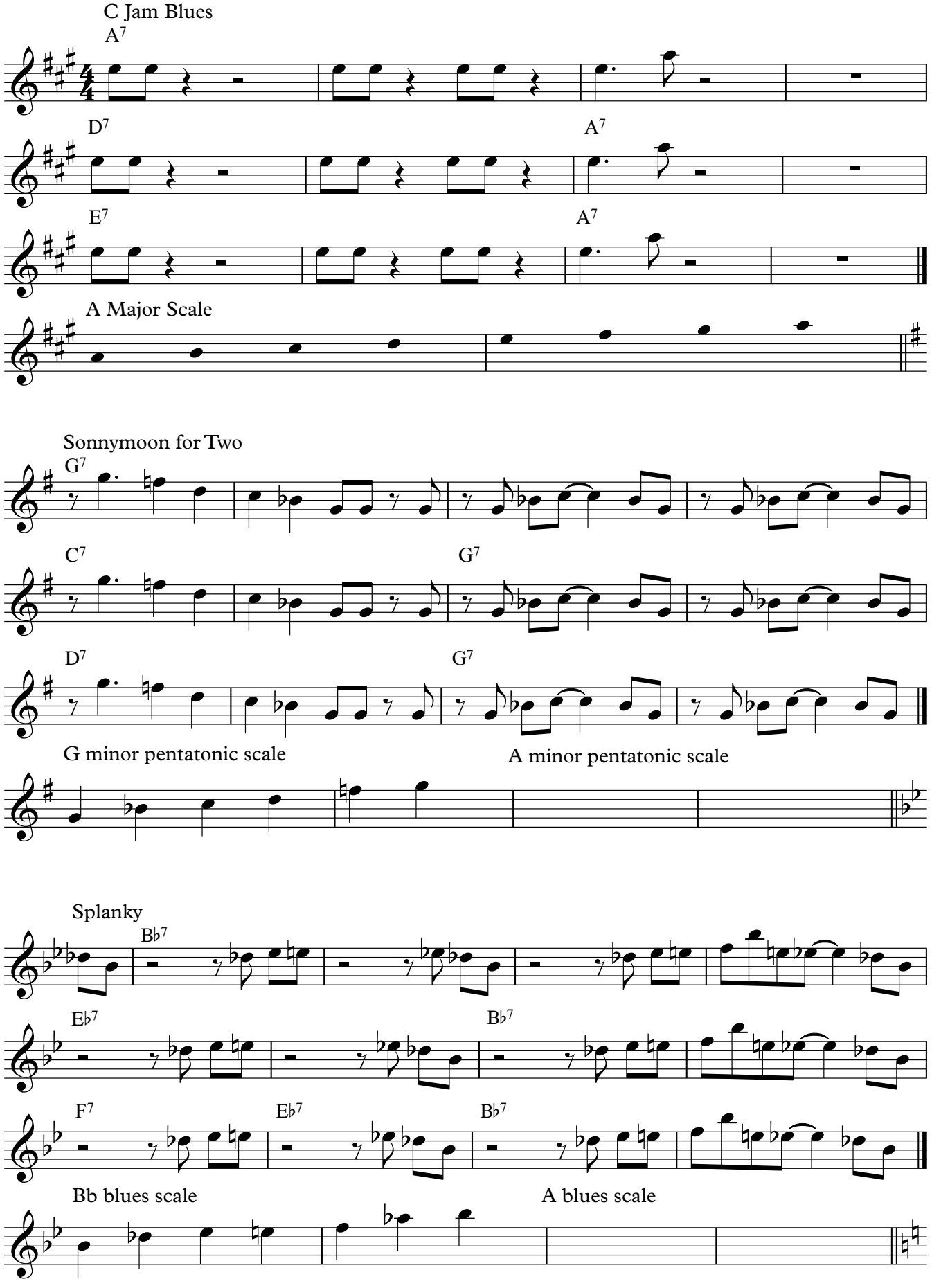


C blues guide tone line

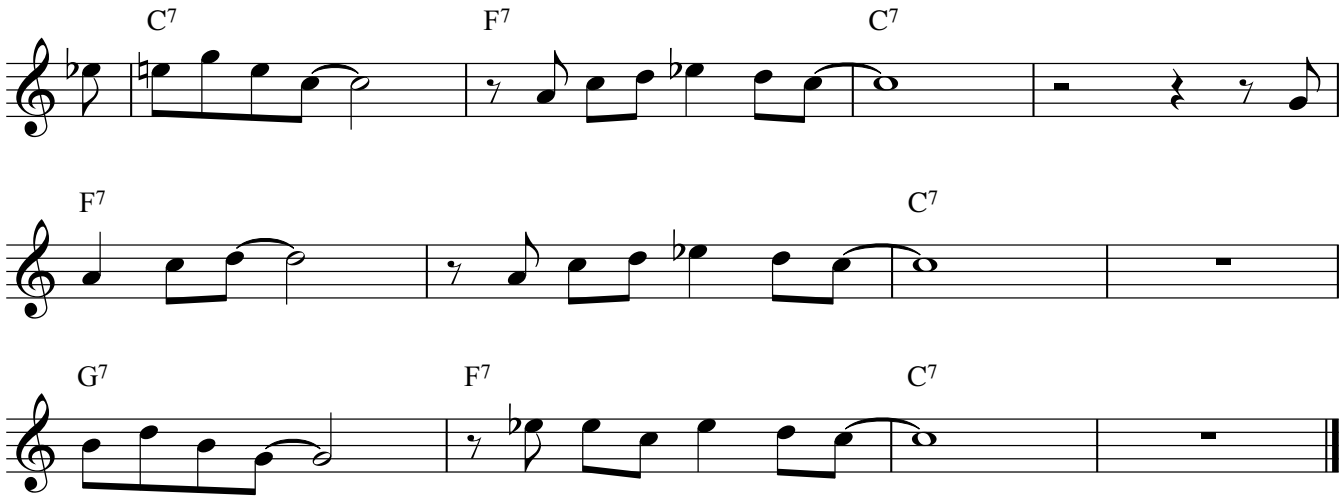


Da Blues

Baritone Saxophone

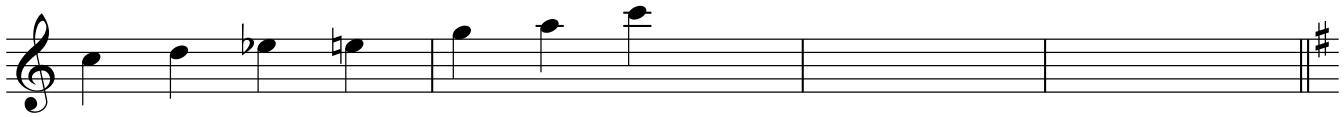


St. Louis Blues

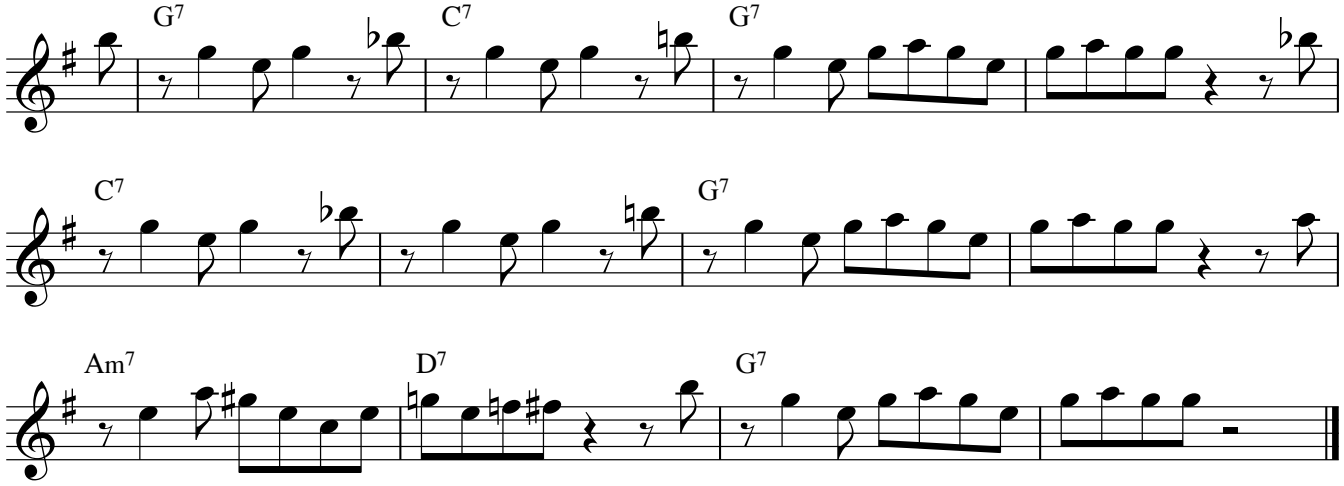


C major blues scale

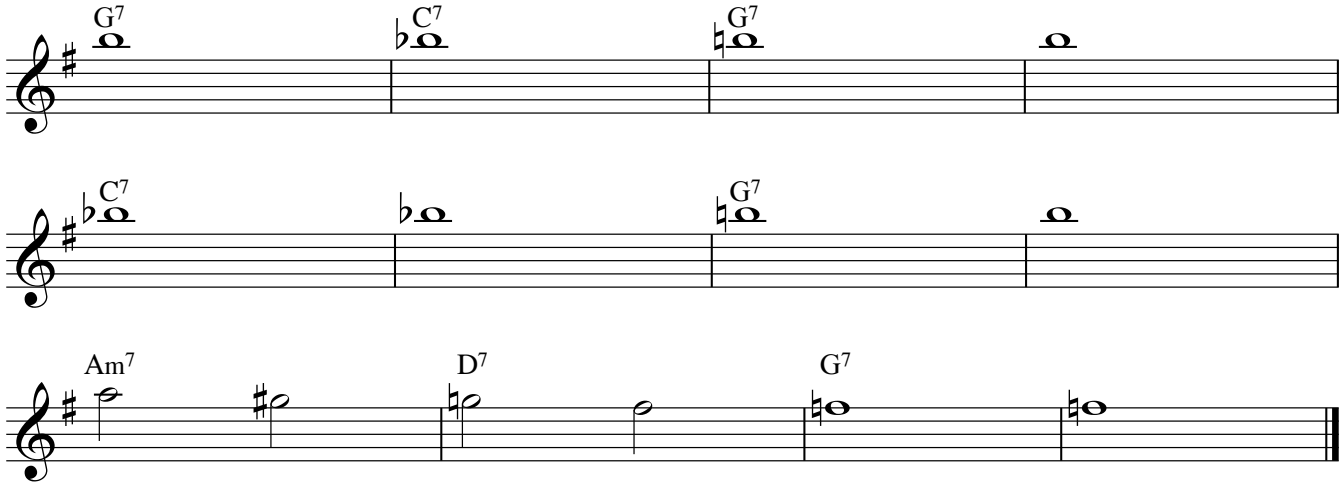
A major blues scale



Tenor Madness

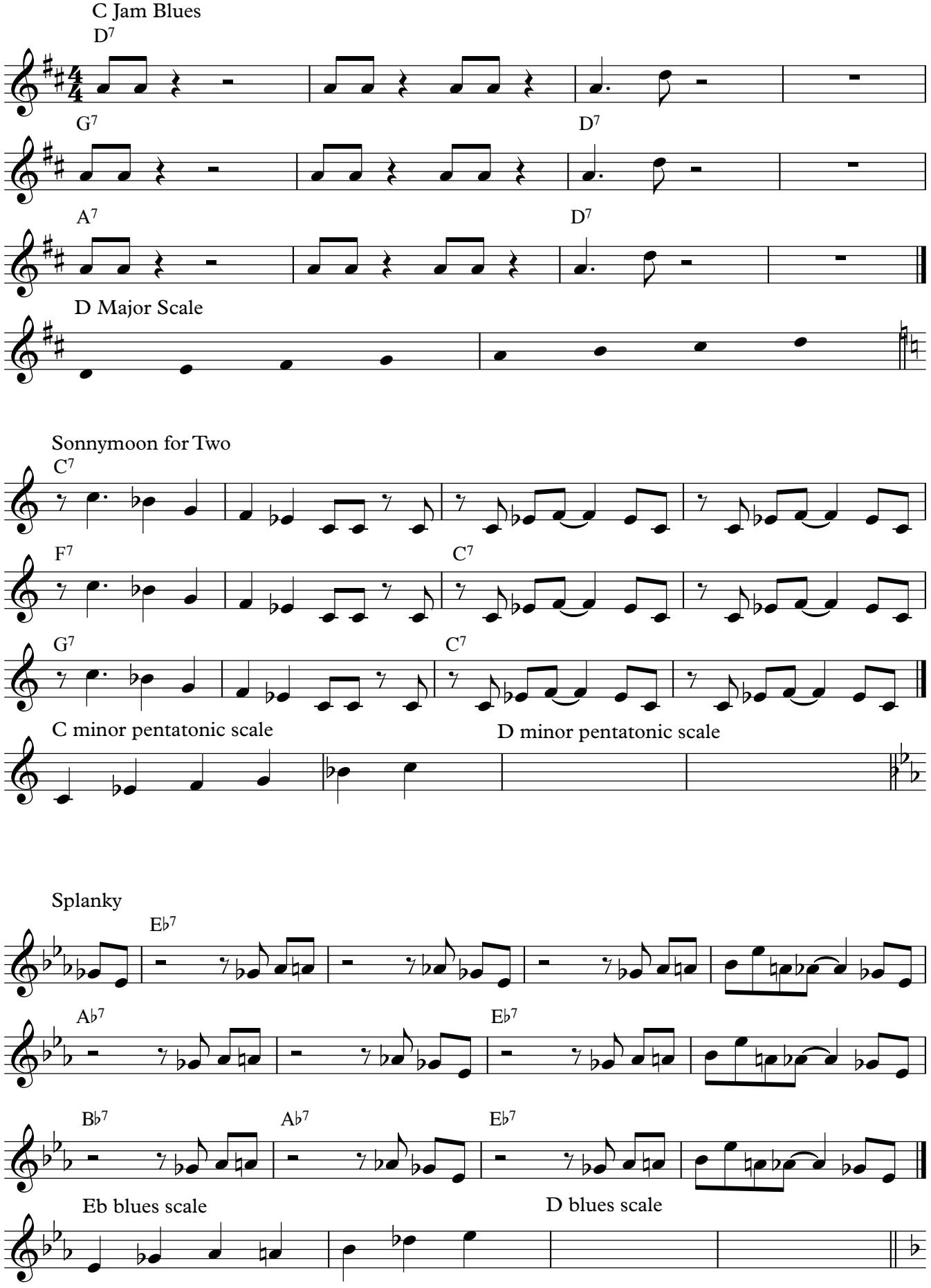


G blues guide tone line



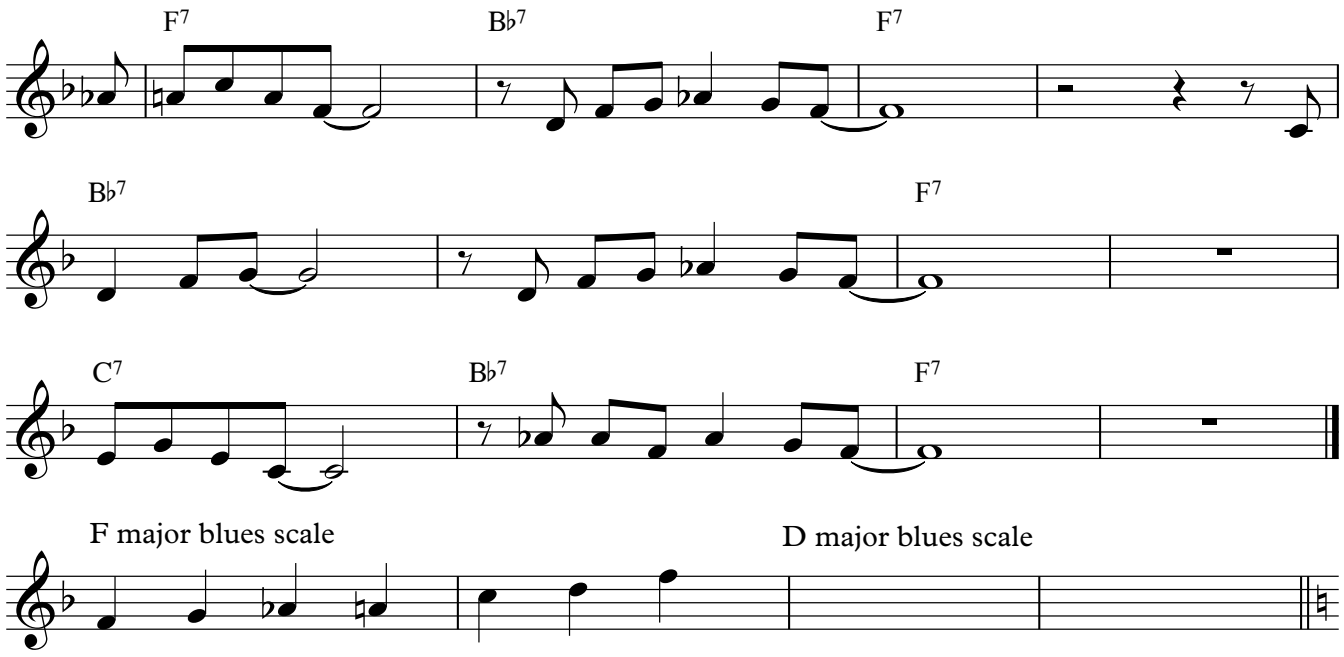
Da Blues

Trumpet in B♭



Trumpet in B♭

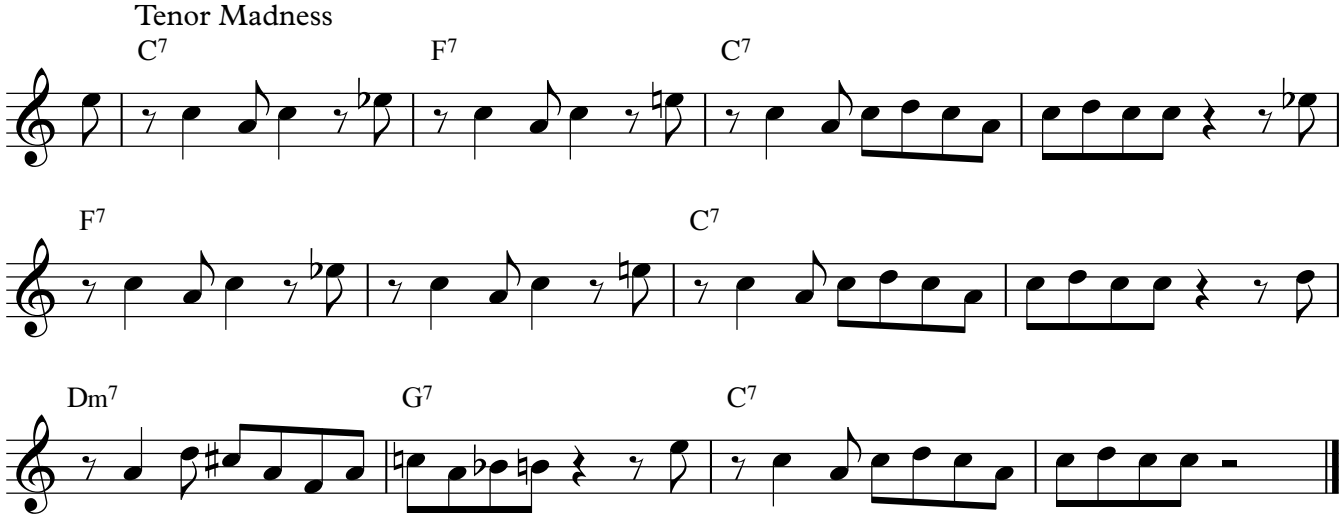
St. Louis Blues



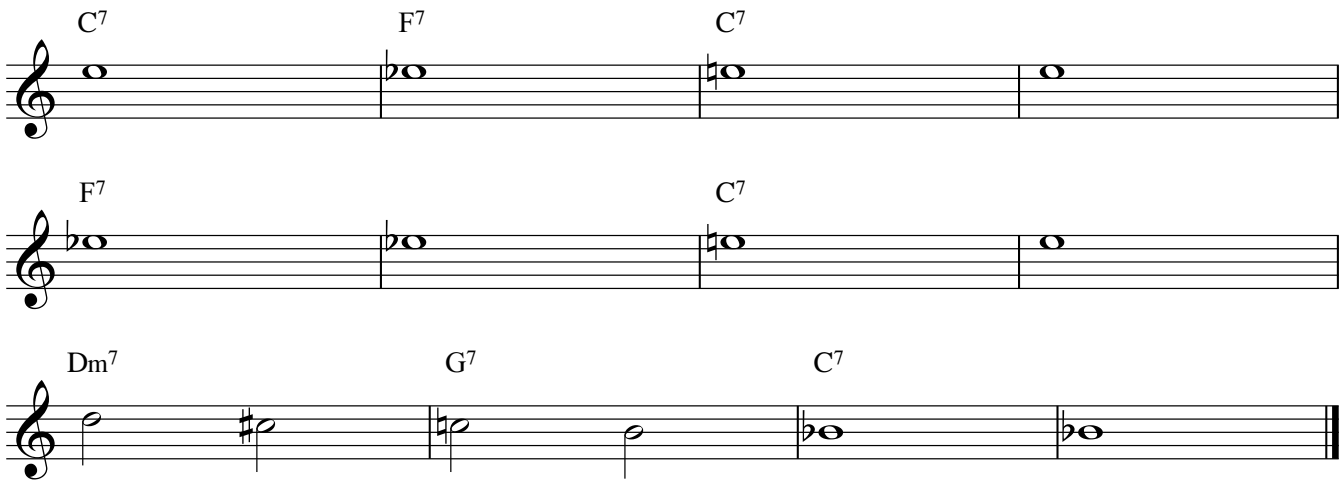
F major blues scale

D major blues scale

Tenor Madness

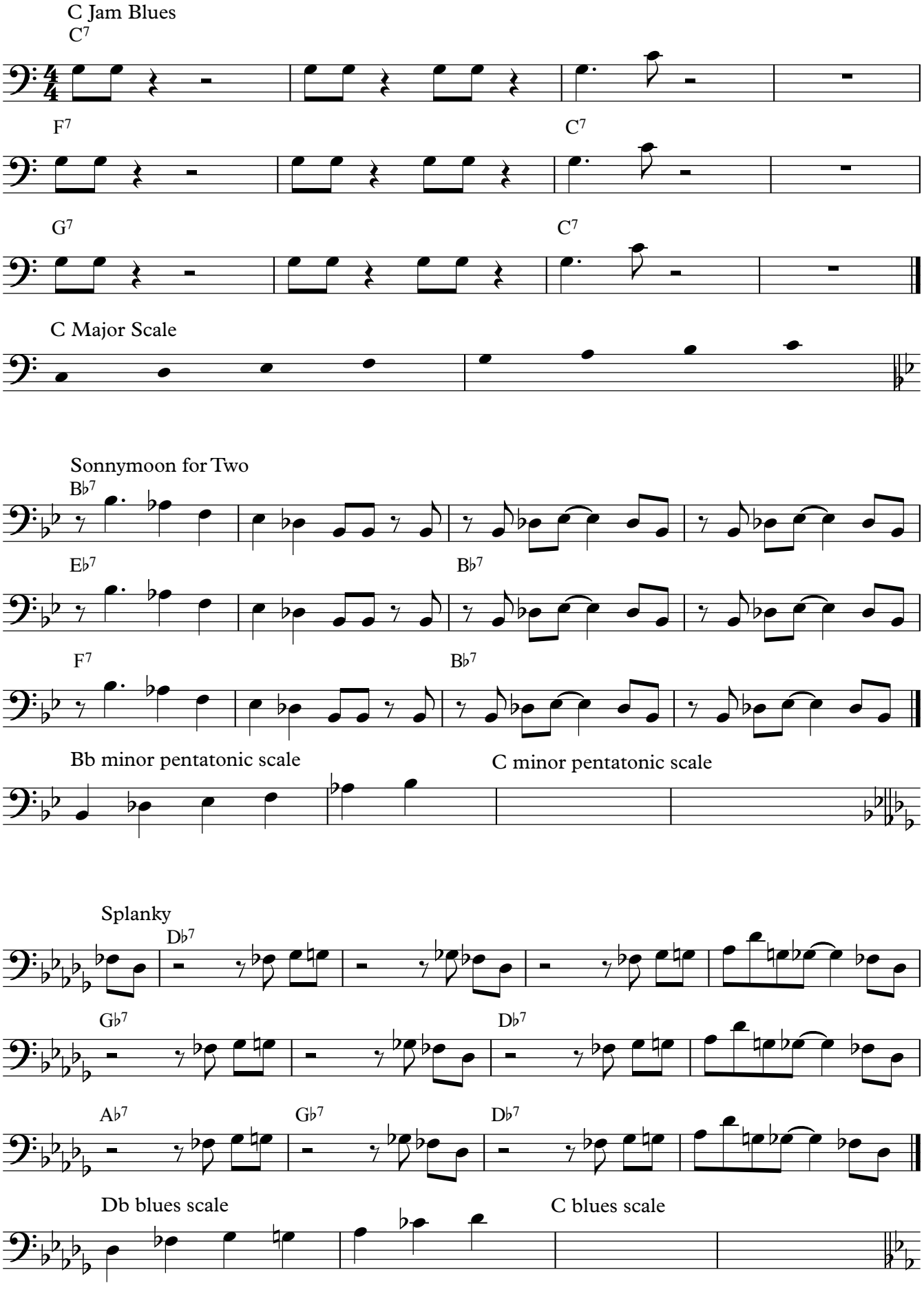


C blues guide tone line



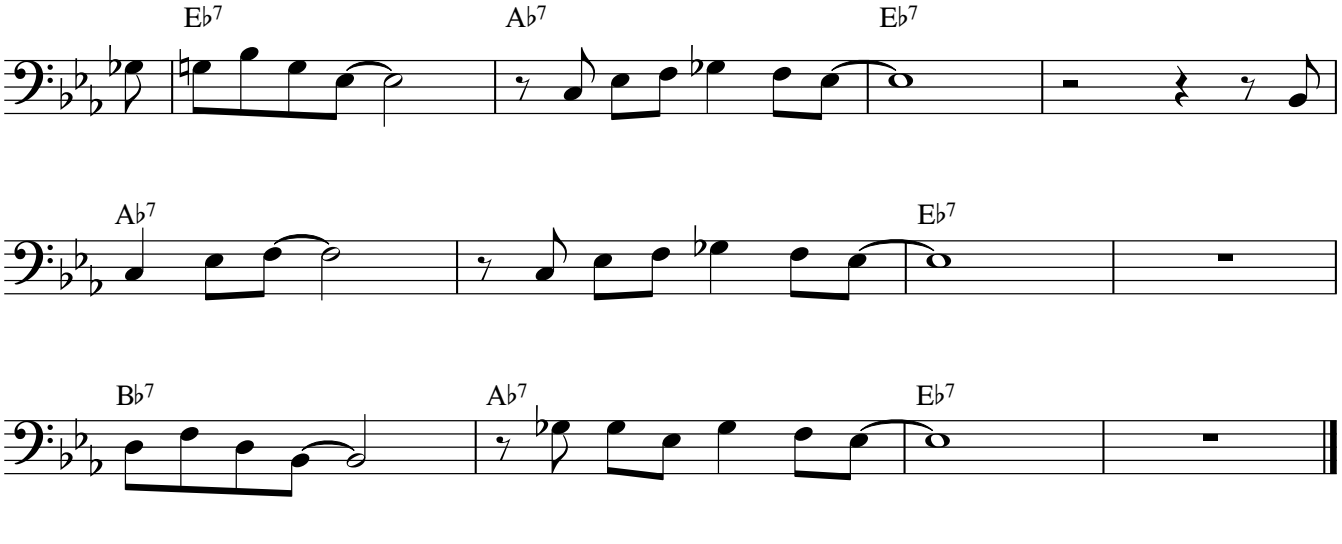
Da Blues

Trombone



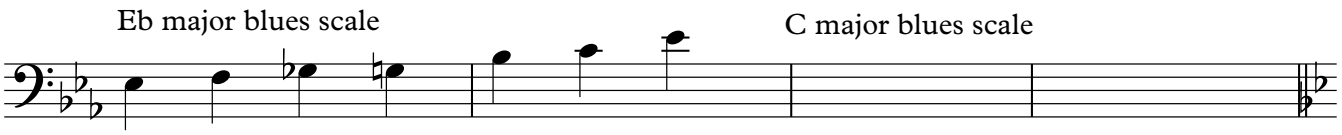
Trombone

St. Louis Blues

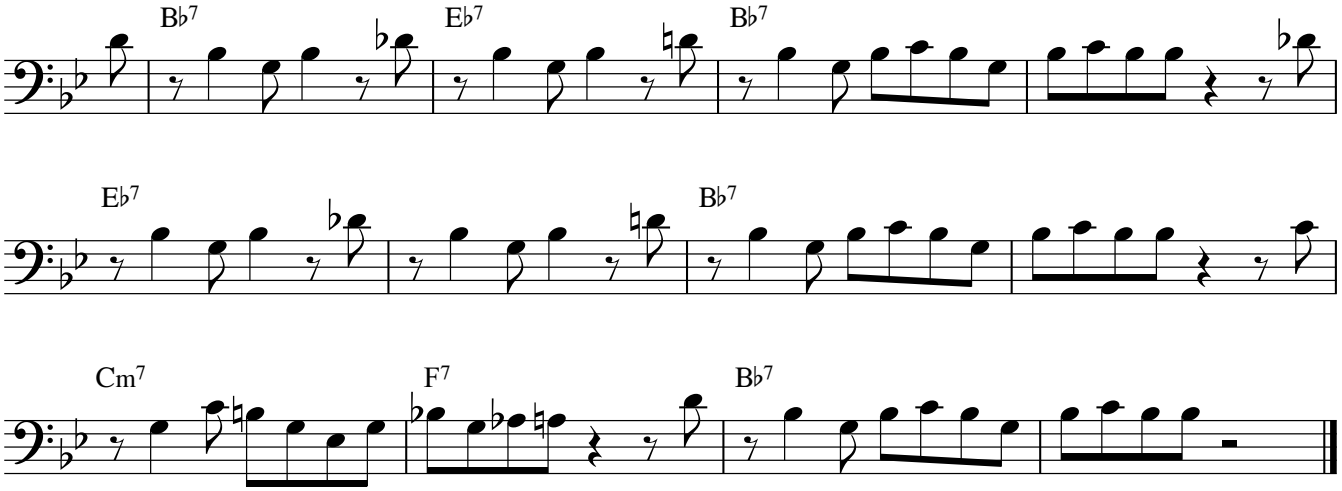


Eb major blues scale

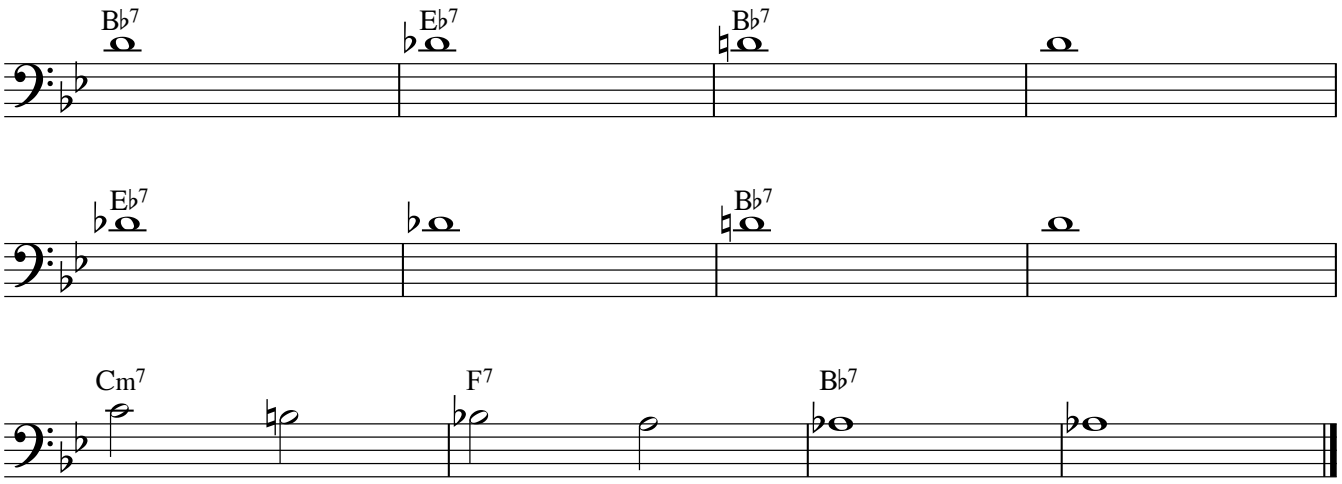
C major blues scale



Tenor Madness



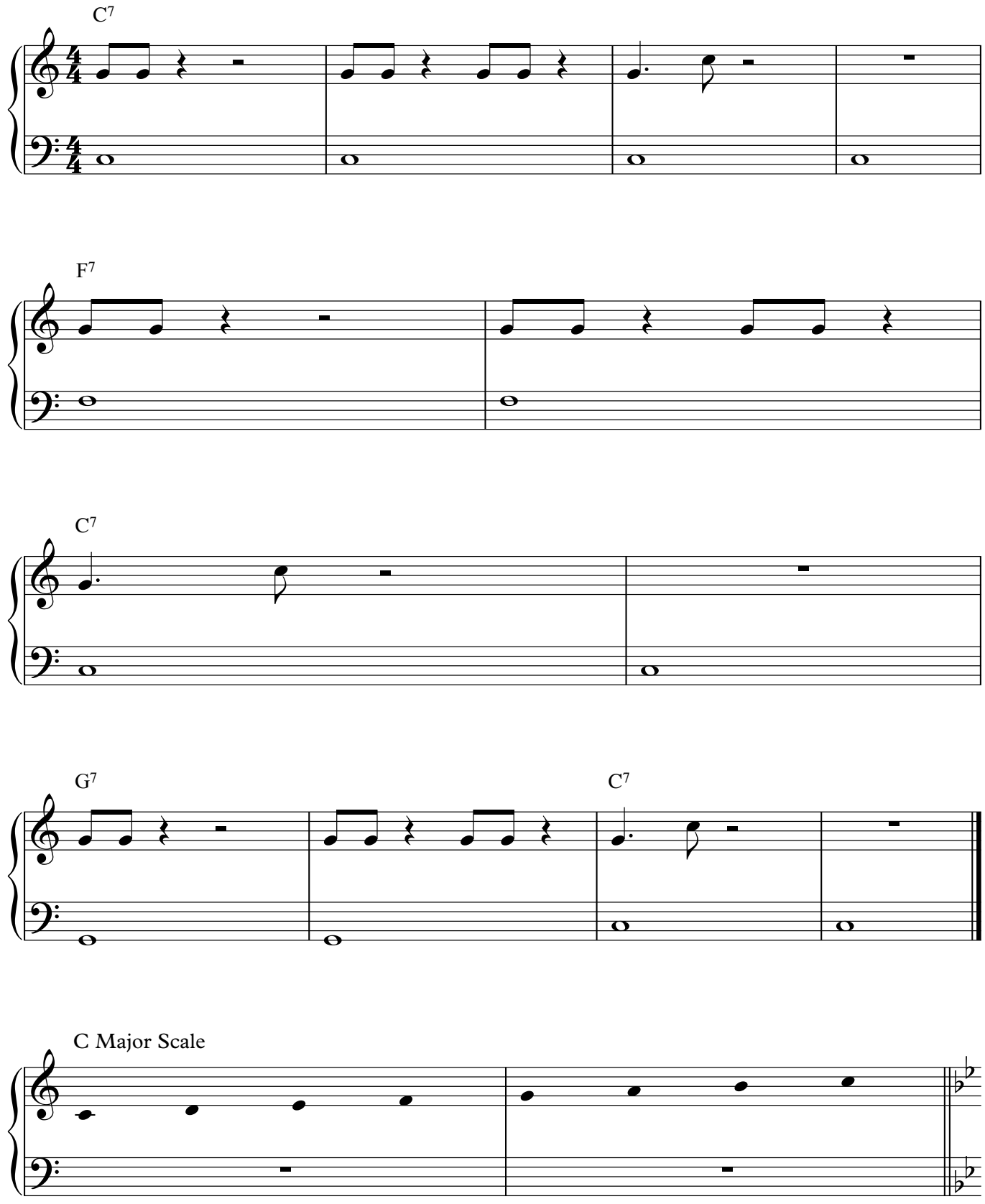
Bb blues guide tone line



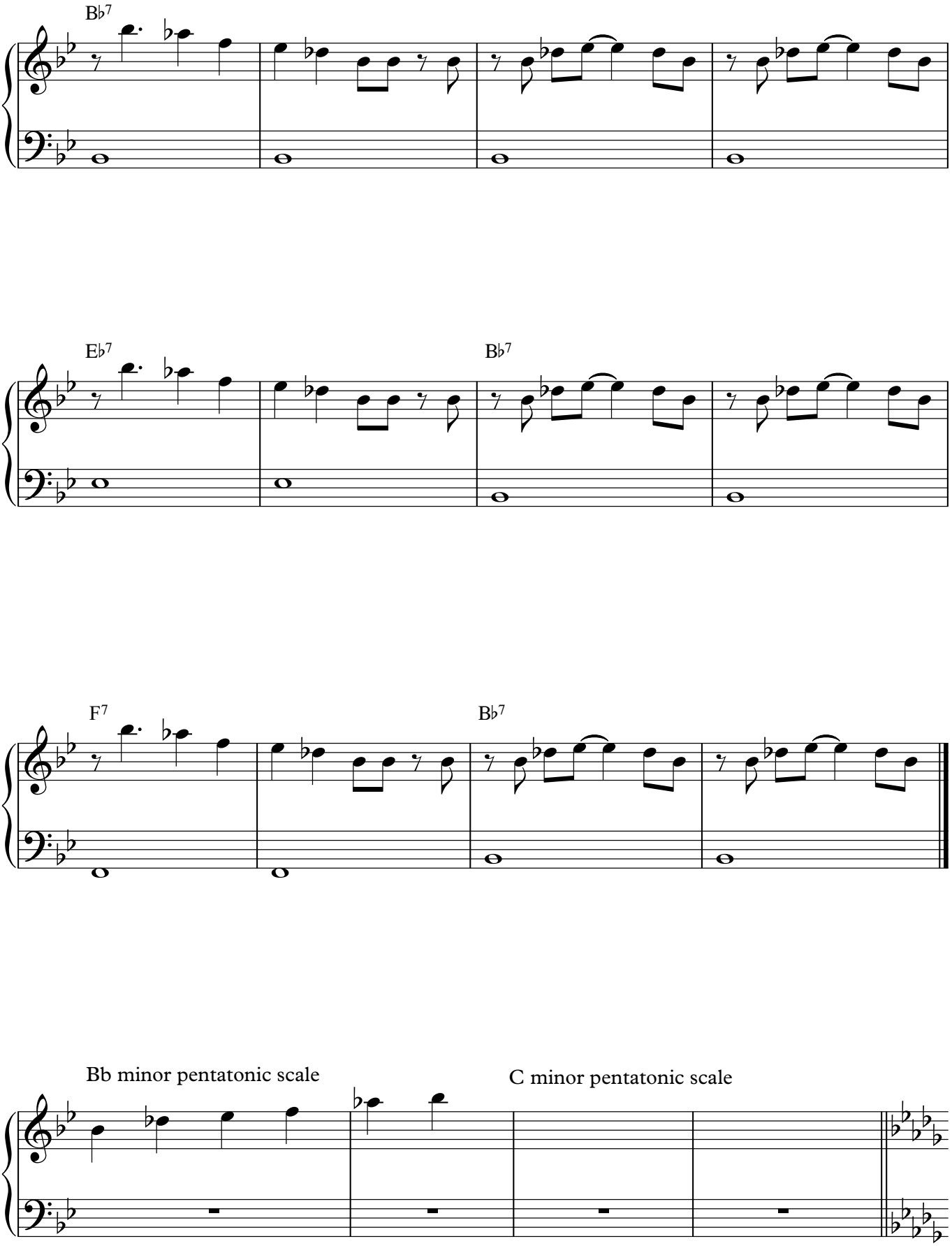
Piano

Da Blues

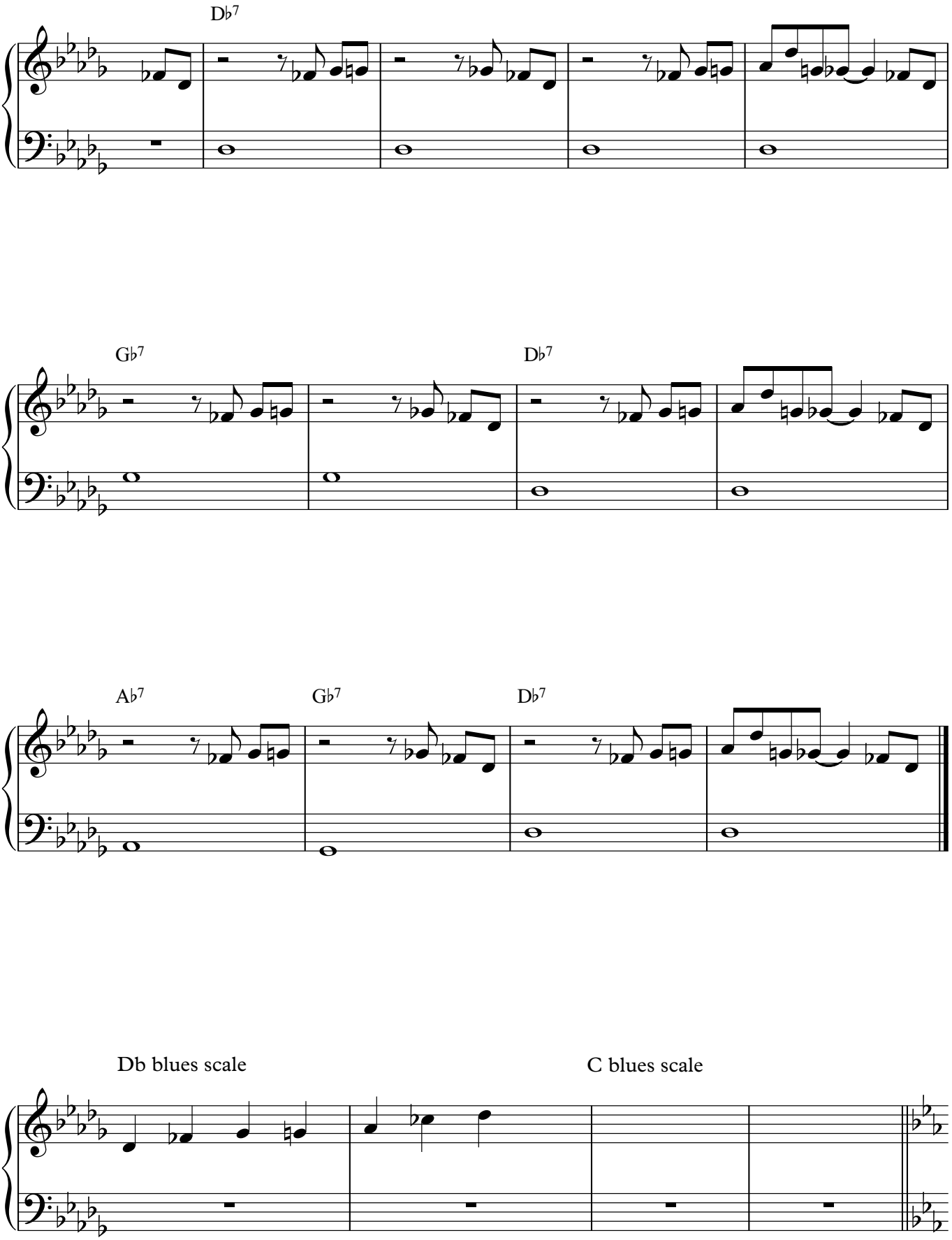
C Jam Blues



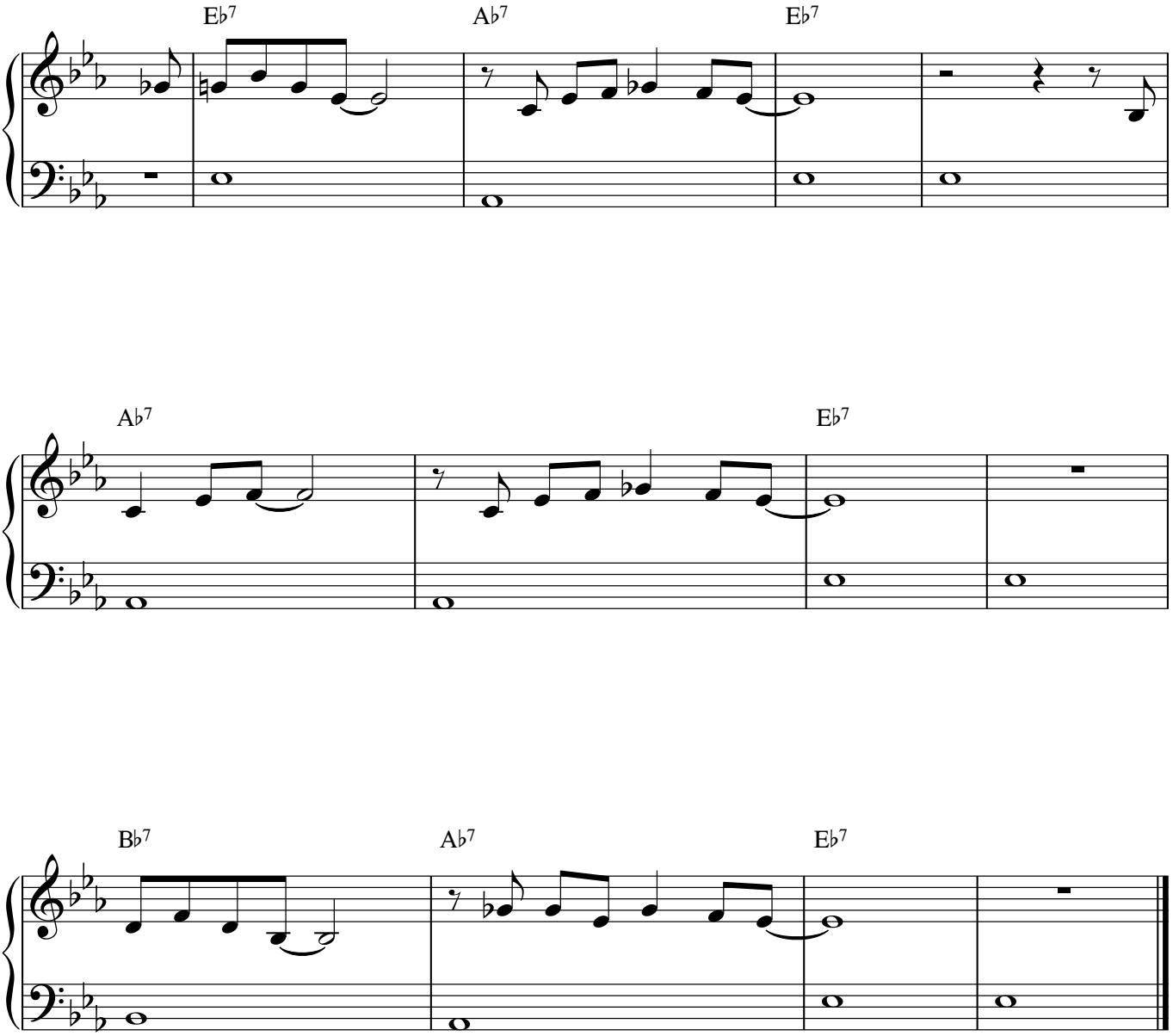
Sonnymoon for Two



Splanky

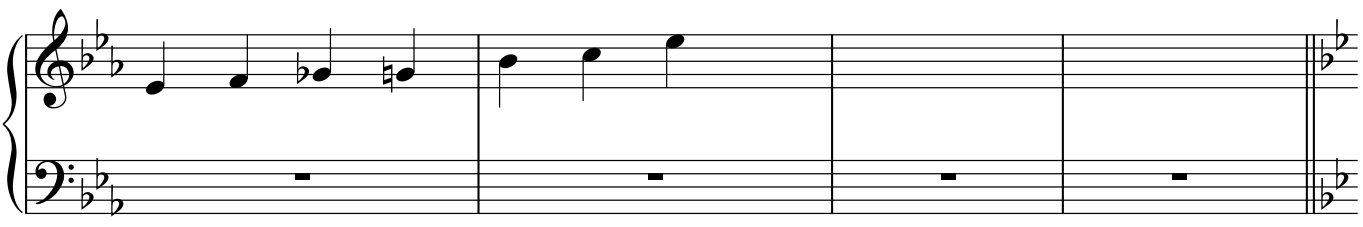


St. Louis Blues

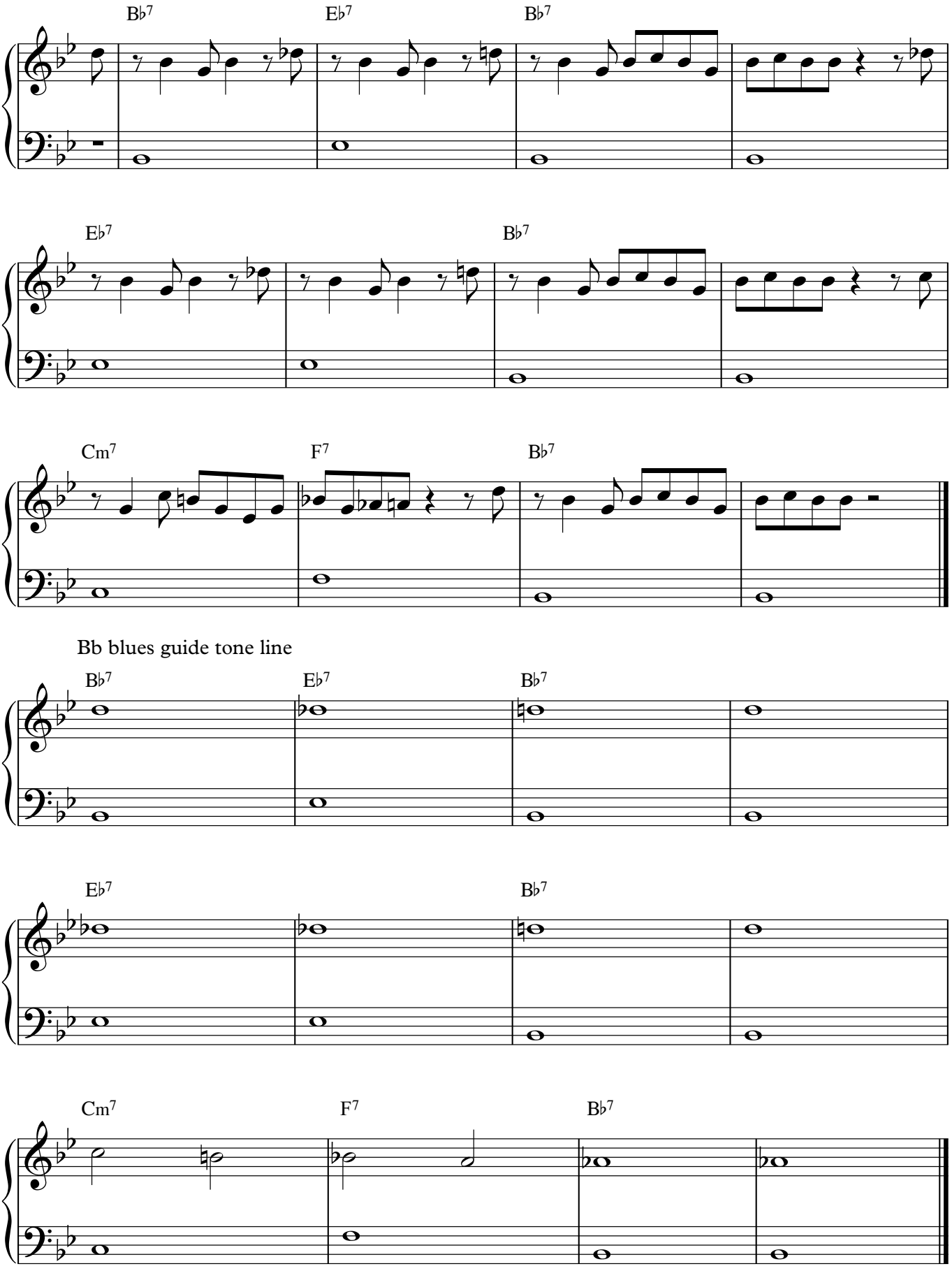


Eb major blues scale

C major blues scale



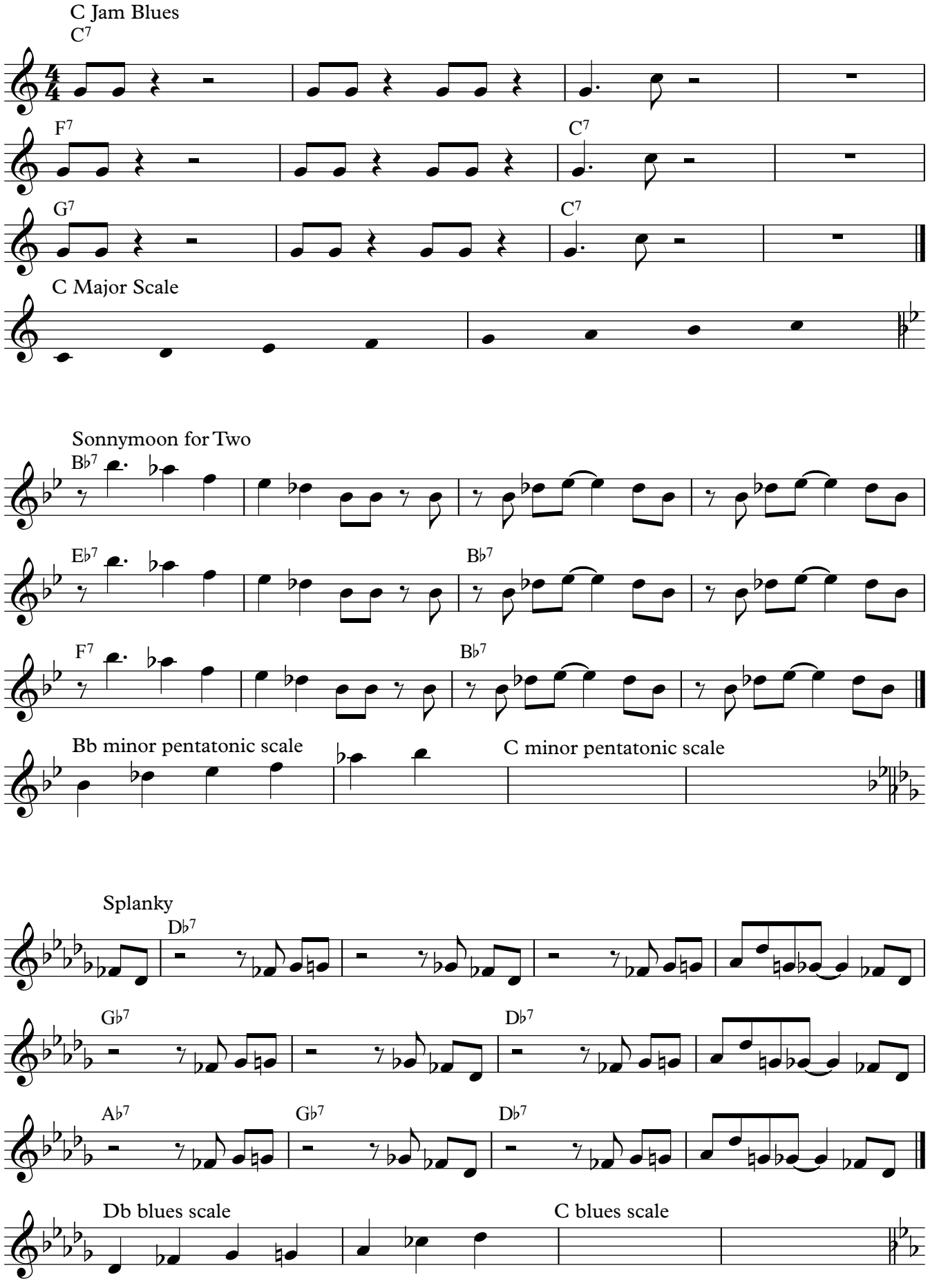
Tenor Madness



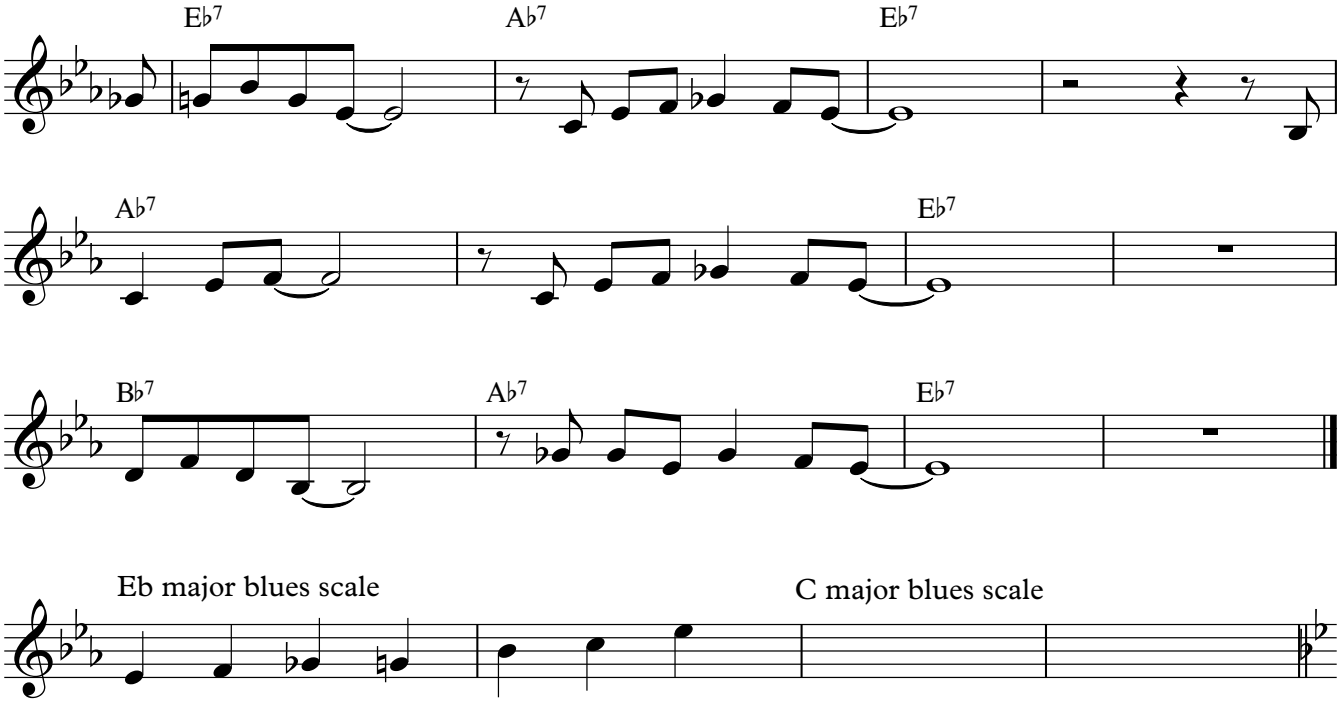
Bb blues guide tone line

Da Blues

Jazz Guitar



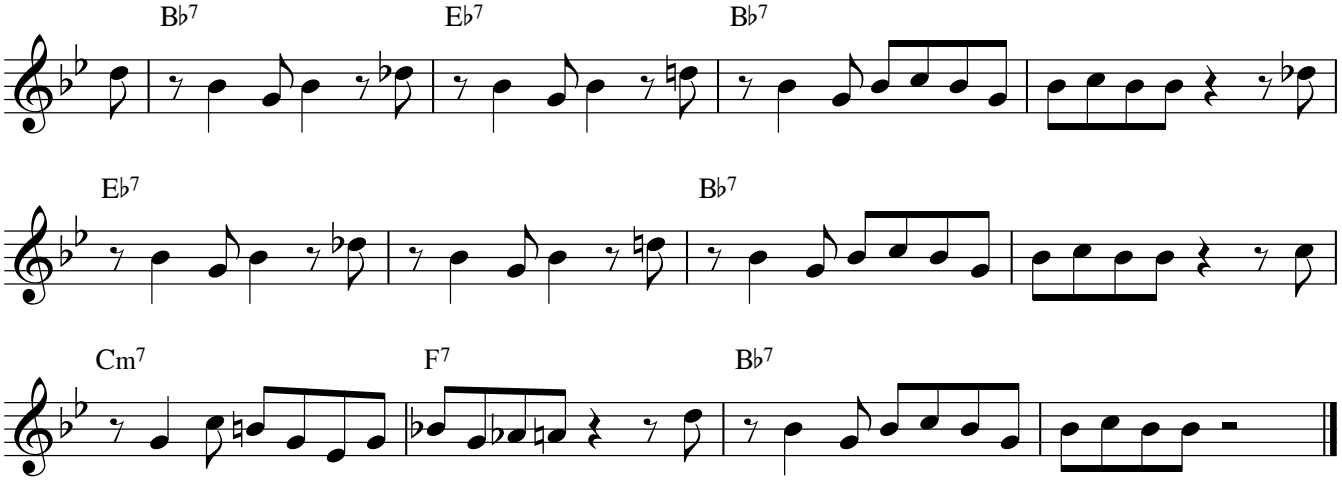
St. Louis Blues



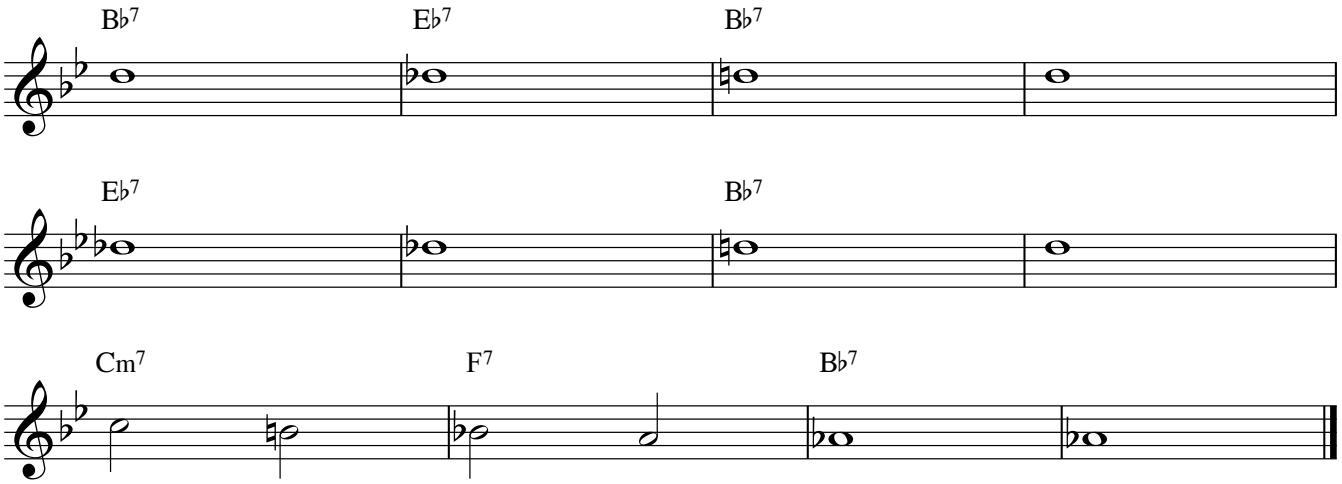
Eb major blues scale

C major blues scale

Tenor Madness



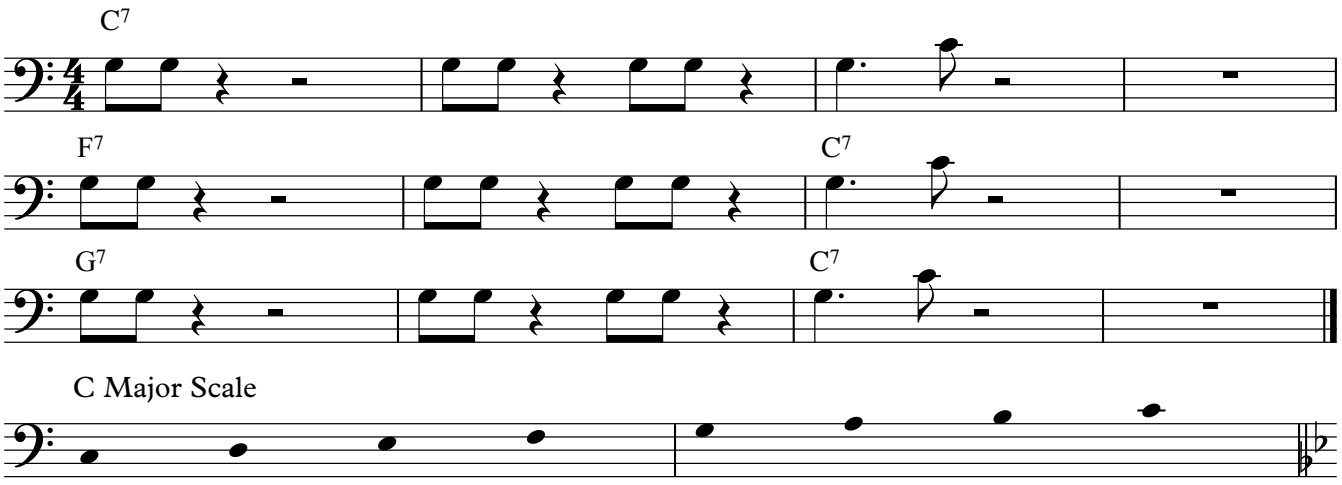
Bb blues guide tone line



Da Blues

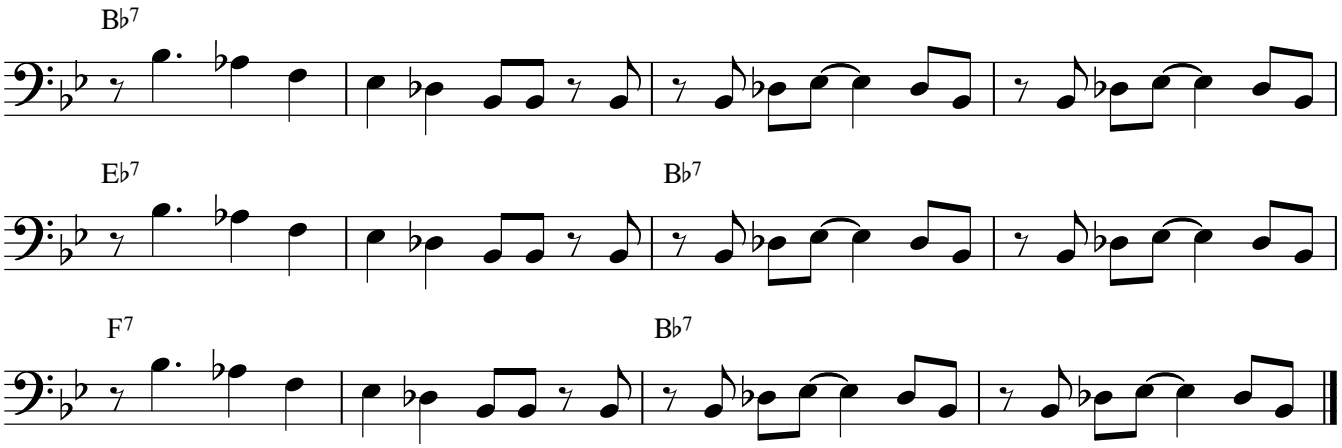
String Bass

C Jam Blues



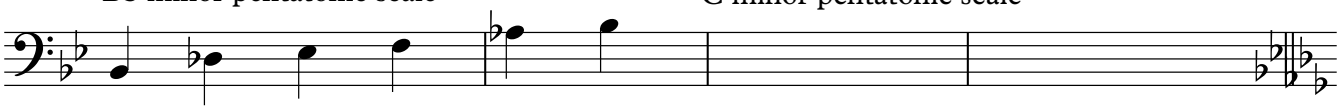
C Major Scale

Sonnymoon for Two

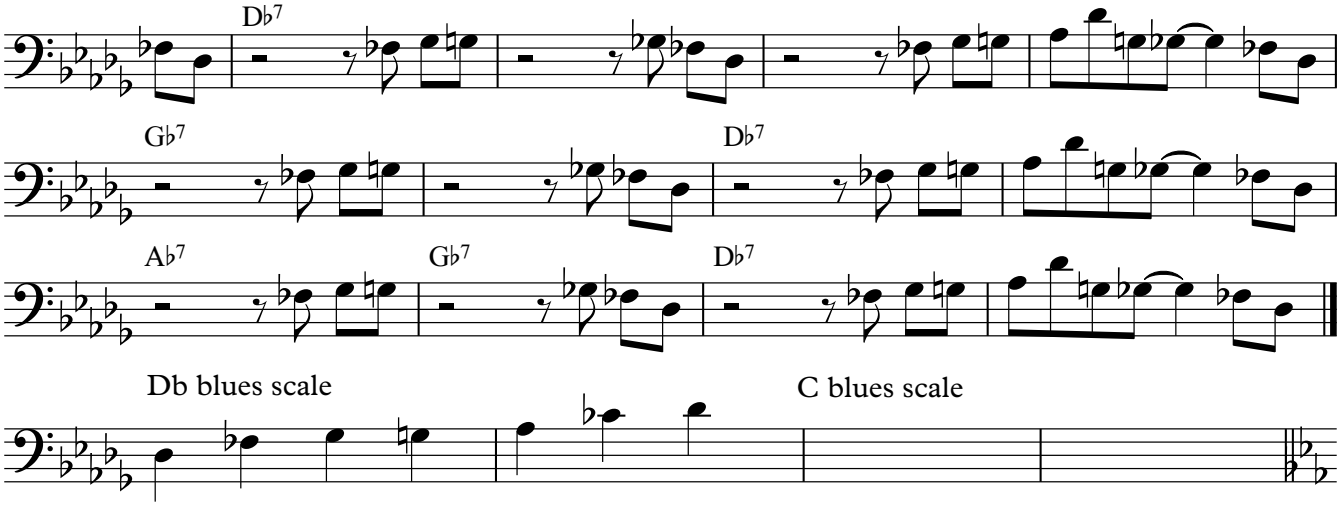


Bb minor pentatonic scale

C minor pentatonic scale



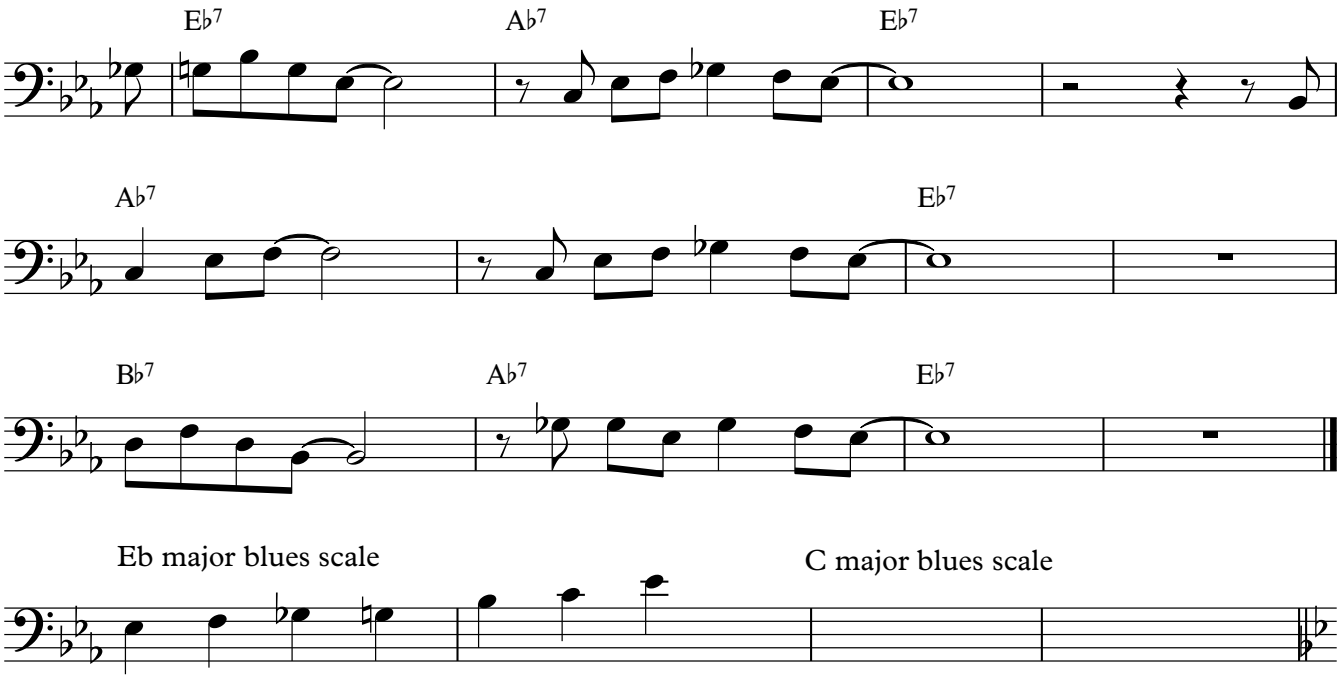
Splanky



Db blues scale

C blues scale

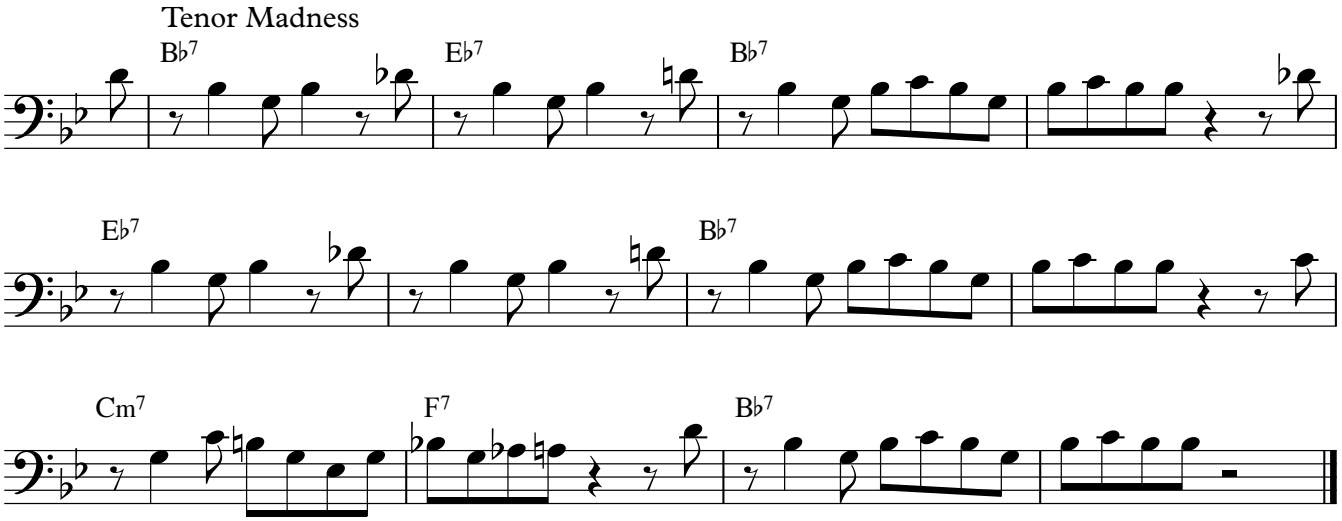
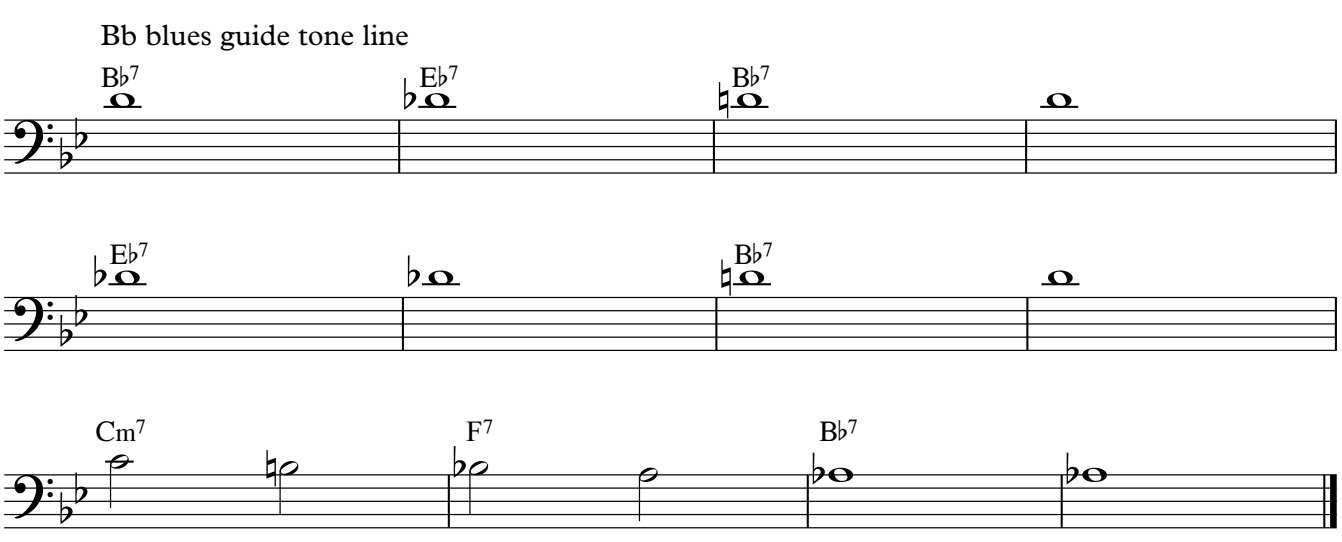
St. Louis Blues



Eb major blues scale

C major blues scale

Tenor Madness



Bb blues guide tone line