Developing a cohesive walking bass line

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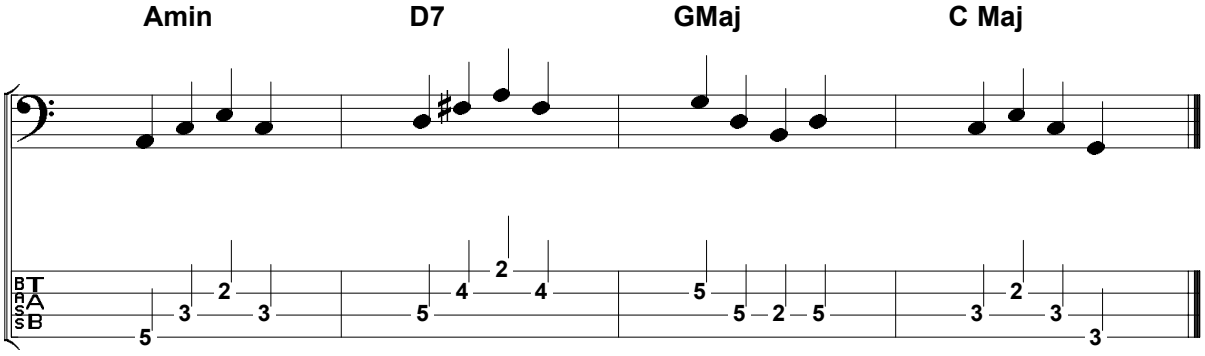
Developing a walking bass lines is a subject that many of my students (guitarists and bassists alike) have been interested in. If you are a jazz player, then having the skill to walk the changes to a particular song is a must. As hard as it might seem at first to do this, there are some very systematic exercises and incremental steps that will help us develop these skills. In a previous lesson, I gave many examples for walking lines from one chord to the next. In this lesson, I want to break down the steps necessary for developing a variety of lines.

Before we get to the steps for creating lines there are some prerequisites. First, we need to know our chord tones. We need to know that when we see a G7 chord that it is made up of the notes G B D F. Second, we also need to know our major scales. If we want to be able to use the right notes that fit over a particular chord, we will need to know the notes available in each key. That is not to say that we can't get started with this material prior to learning the notes of the chords or the scales, but that knowledge will make developing your own bass lines much easier. It is not within the scope of this lesson to develop those skills. There are many sources for learning chord tones and scales (visit www.funkyfolkmusic.com or www.guitarcollege.com for books and material).

Assuming that you are comfortable with chord tones and scale tones, we will develop skills at three incremental levels. The first level will be to **develop bass lines using triad chord tones only and resolve to the next chord root in the most economical way** (i.e. the closest root of the next chord). **Exercise 1** demonstrates this with several examples. This is the first step in developing walking bass lines. If this kind of work is new to you, it may take several weeks or a month to get comfortable with walking lines between chords. Take your time, it will eventually sink in. Also, write out your own ideas. There are any number of possibilities for moving from one chord to another, so pick some progressions that you like and experiment with simple bass lines. Write some of your lines out too. This will help you focus on the right notes and not just noodle on your instrument. Remember only to use triad chord tones at first and get used to using the root, 3 and 5 of the chords and resolve only to the next root. This will build a solid foundation for you to get used to using the triad tones and roots on the first beat of the measure.

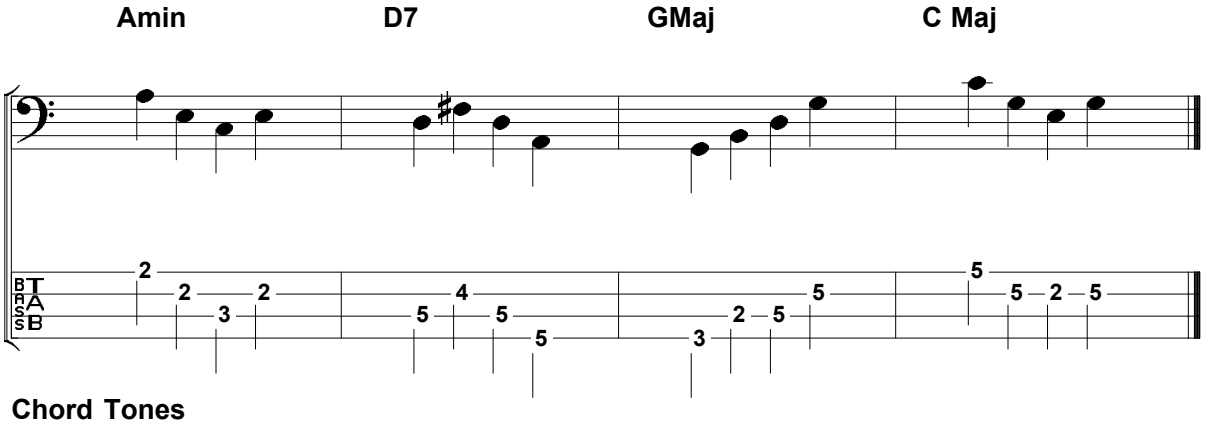
Exercise 1:

Simple bass lines using triads only and resolving to nearest root of next chord.



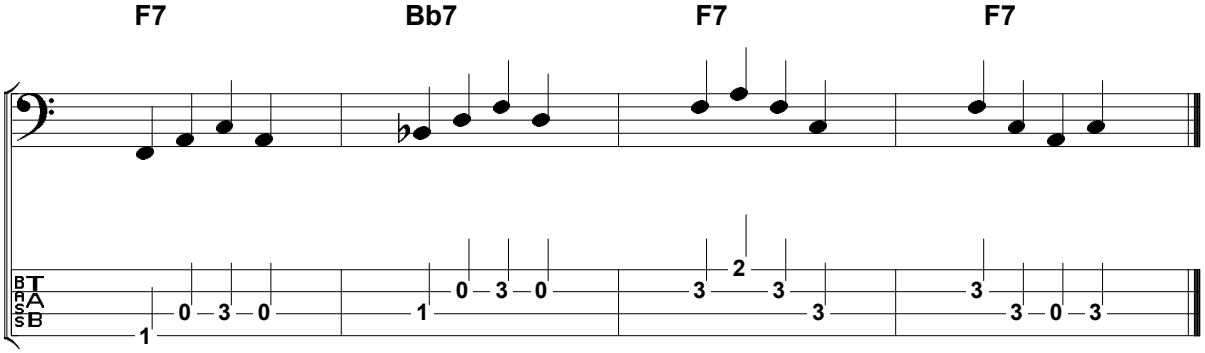
Chord tones

1 3 5 3 1 3 5 3 1 5 3 5 1 5 1 3



Chord Tones

1 5 3 5 1 3 1 5 1 3 5 1 1 5 3 1



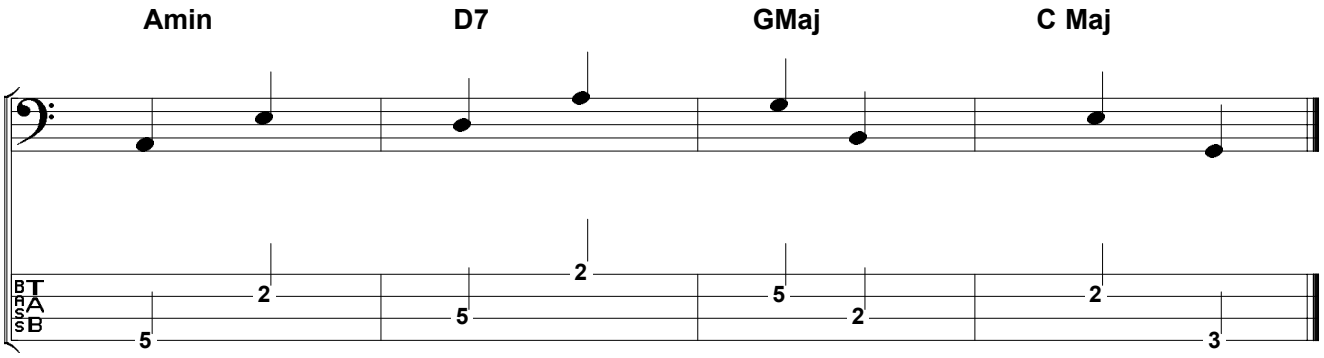
Chord tones

1 3 5 3 1 3 5 3 1 3 1 5 1 5 3 5

Worksheet:

Fill in the blanks with your own ideas

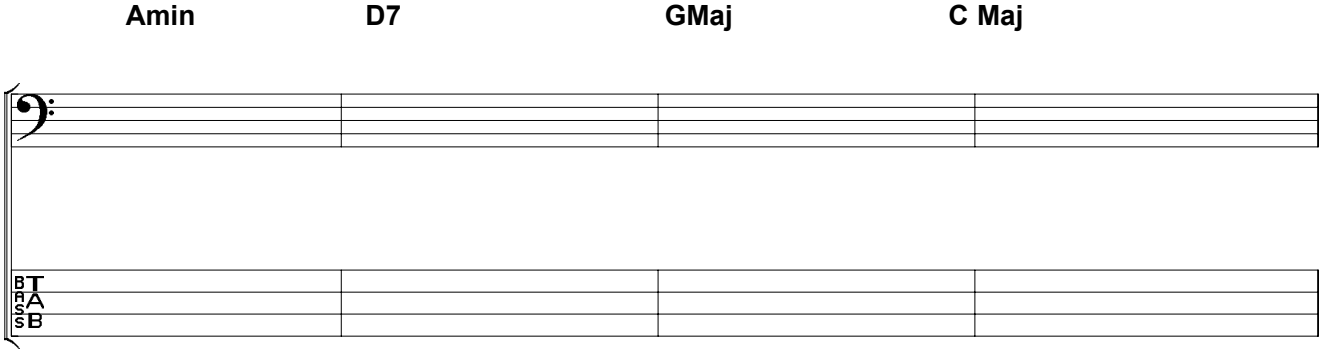
Simple bass lines using triads only and resolving to nearest root of next chord.



Chord tones

1 __ 5 __ 1 __ 5 __ 1 __ 3 __ __ 5 __ 3

Create your own line now

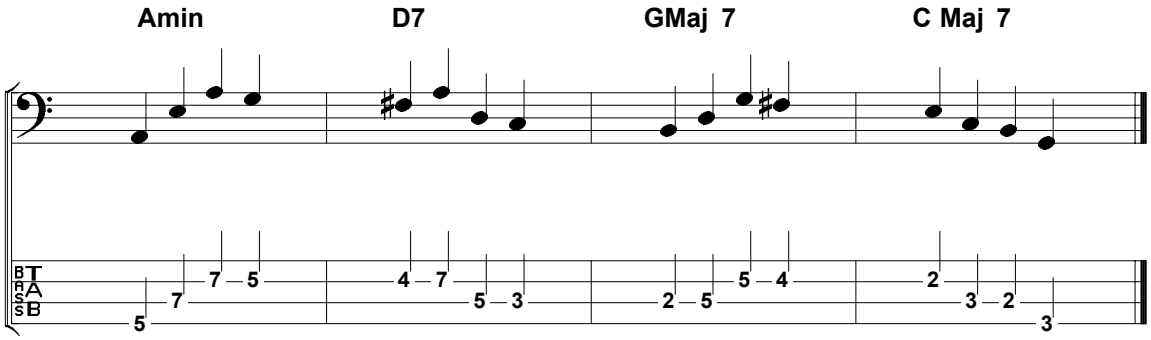


Chord Tones

The second level will be to **use all chord tones (including 7ths) to build your line from. When resolving to the next chord then you will resolve (by proximity) to any available chord tone of the next chord**. This helps create a nice flowing line that uses voice leading. Creating lines that resolve to the closest chord tone allows for a smooth transition between chords and creates a nice sounding line. **Exercise 2** demonstrates this idea using the same chords that were given in example 1. Once again, practice this idea for a while before moving on. Write out your lines for tunes that you like.

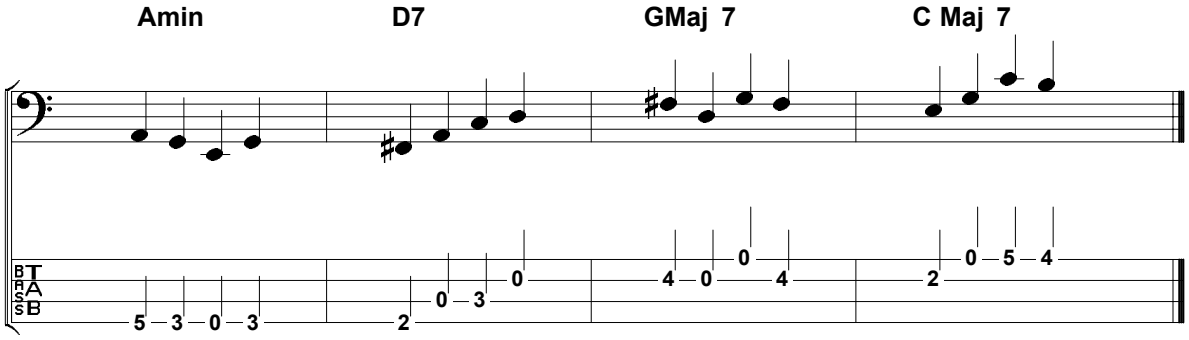
Exercise 2:

Bass lines using all chord tones and resolving to nearest chord tone of next chord. Notice how this sounds very different from the lines in Exercise 1.



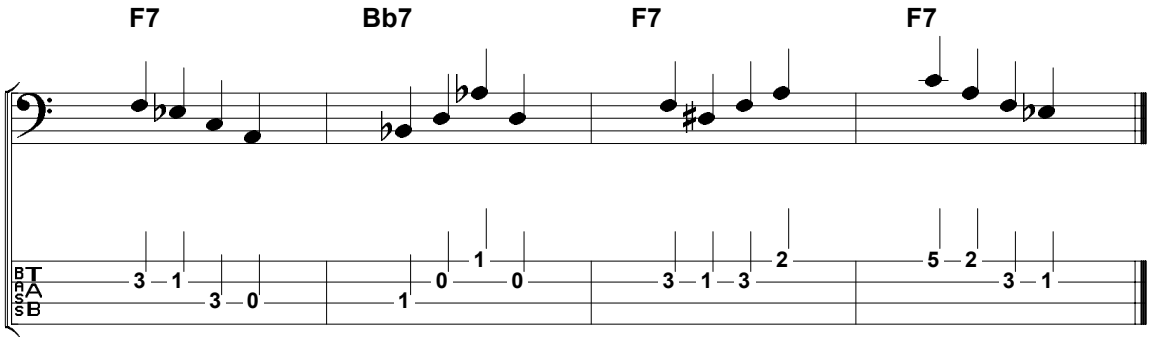
Chord tones

1 5 1 b7 3 5 1 b7 3 5 1 7 3 1 7 5



Chord tones

1 b7 5 b7 3 5 b7 1 3 5 1 3 3 5 1 7



Chord tones

1 b7 5 3 1 3 b7 3 1 b7 1 3 5 3 1 b7

The third level allows you more freedom to be creative in your bass lines. For this level there are 2 parts. Part 1 is **use scale tones 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 (obviously use the 3rd and 7th that correspond with the chord—i.e. don't use the major 3rd on a minor chord).** Resolve to either a root or a close tone of the next chord. For part 2, **use scale tones, then add ½ step motion into the resolving chord (on beat 4 of the previous measure).** For this one resolving to a root will probably sound best, but feel free to experiment. Lets try some of these and see how they sound (**demonstrated in exercise 3**).

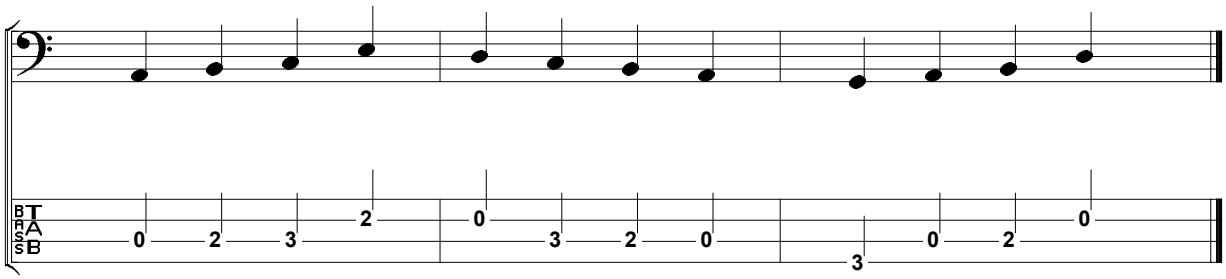
Exercise 3

Part 1

use scale tones 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7. Resolve to either a root or a close tone of the next chord.

This first one resolves to roots of the next chord.

A min7 D9 G Maj7

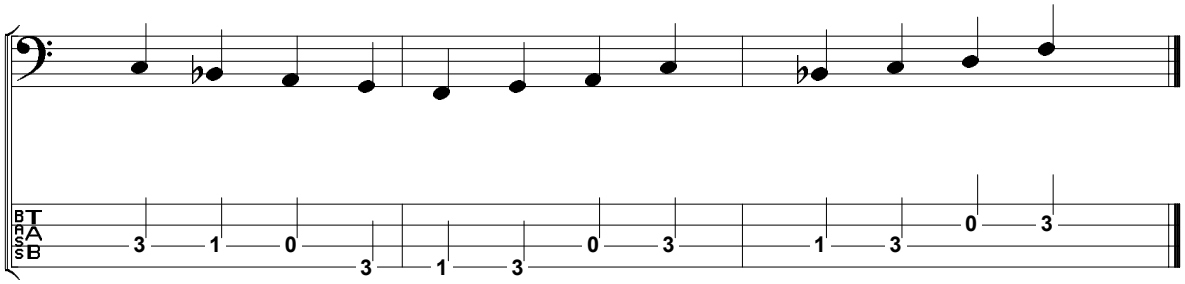


Chord tones

1 2 b3 5 1 b7 6 5 1 2 3 5

This one resolves to roots as well.

C min7 F7 Bb Maj7

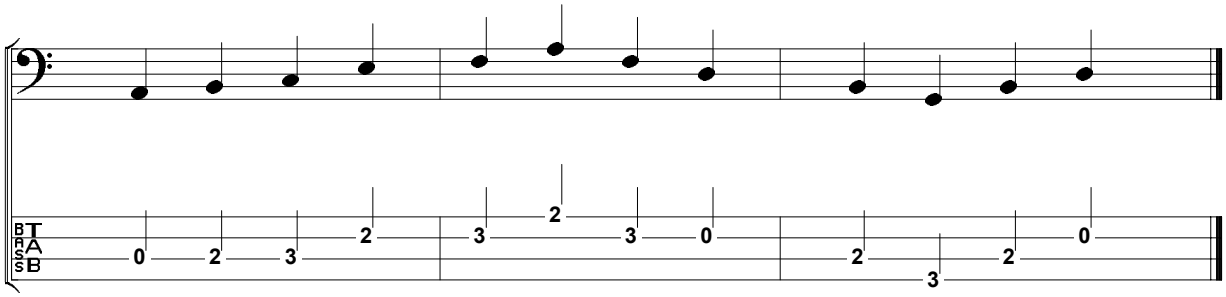


Chord tones

1 b7 6 5 1 2 3 5 1 2 3 5

This one resolves to a chord tone of the next chord but not to the roots.

A min7 D9 G Maj7

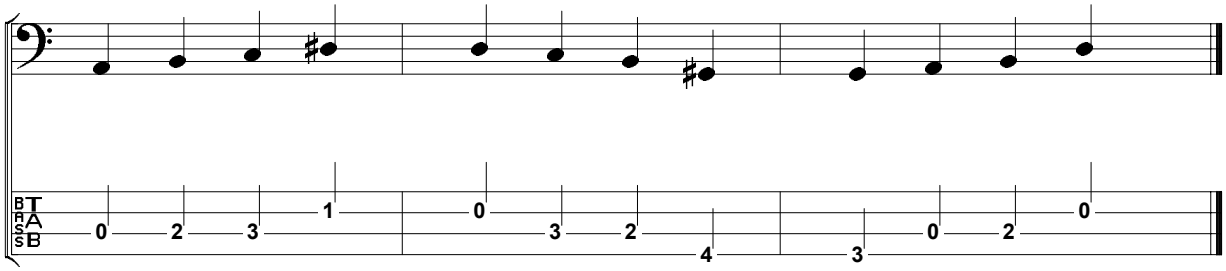


Chord tones

1 2 b3 5 3 5 3 1 3 1 3 5

Part 2 use scale tones, then adds 1/2 step motion into the resolving chord (on beat 4 of the previous measure).

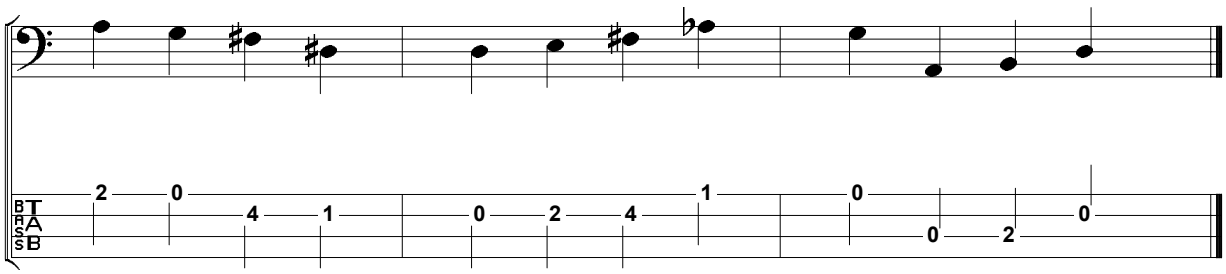
A min 7 **D9** **G Maj7**



Chord Tones

1 2 b3 (1/2 step) 1 b7 6 (1/2 step) 1 2 3 5

A min 7 **D9** **G Maj7**

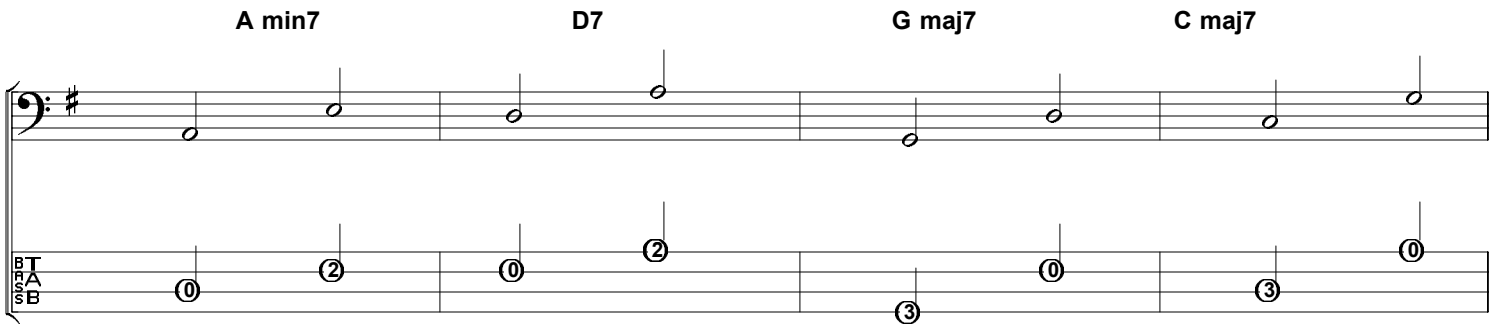


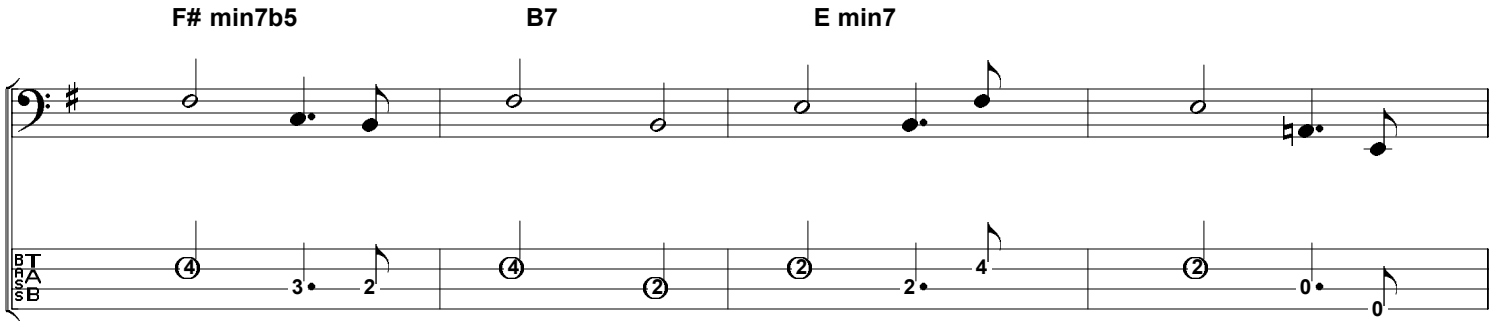
Chord Tones

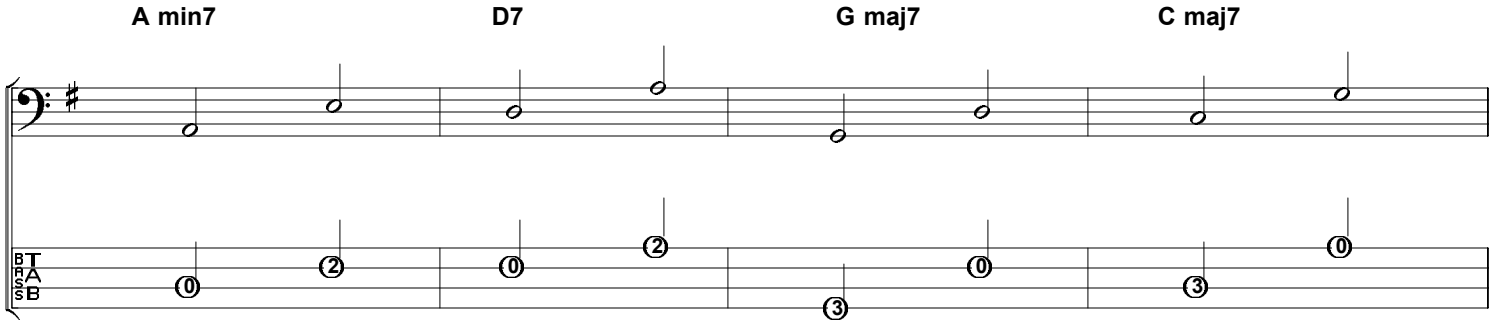
1 b7 6 (1/2 step) 1 2 3 (1/2 step) 1 2 3 5

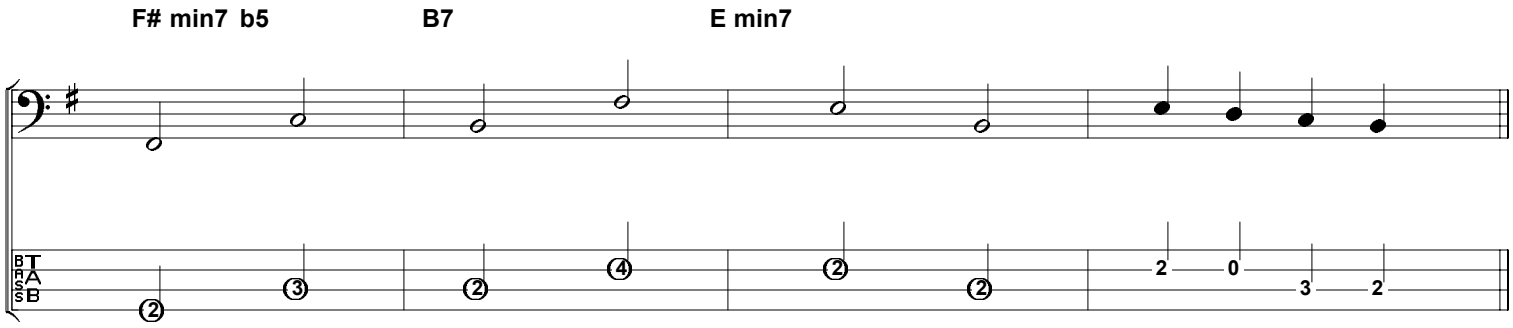
For the last part I've included a bass line that I wrote for the chords to a tune like Autumn Leaves. Here I also employ a little ½ time (half notes) and some 1/8 notes as well. SO you can see how we might change the rhythm a little. Enjoy this. Remember, there is no substitute for practice and time on your instrument, so try some of these ideas with your favorite standard. Also, don't forget to write out your lines at first and really practice these. The more you do, the easier they become. If you like these ideas and want more information, my books "Walking Bass Lines for Jazz Guitar" and "Walking Bass Lines for Bass Guitar" are available at www.funkyfolkmusic.com .

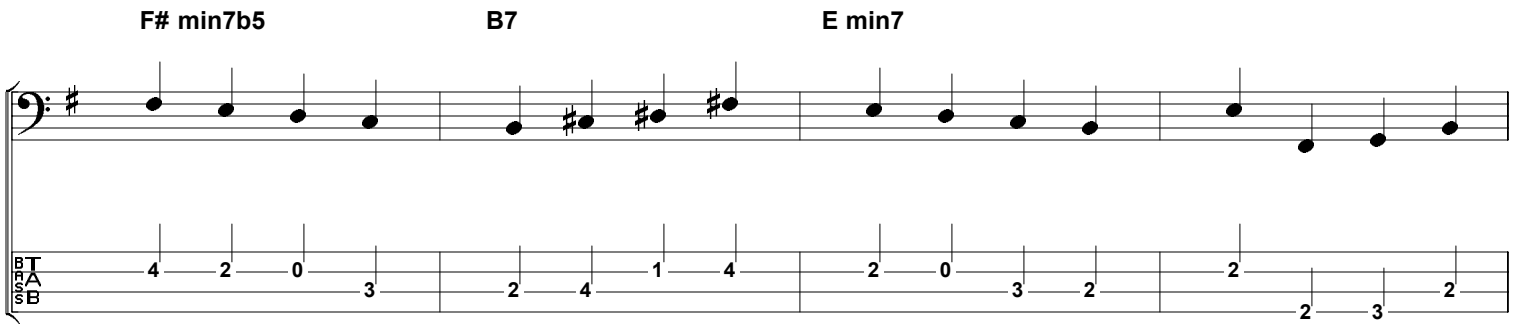
Bass Line for songs like: Autumn Leaves







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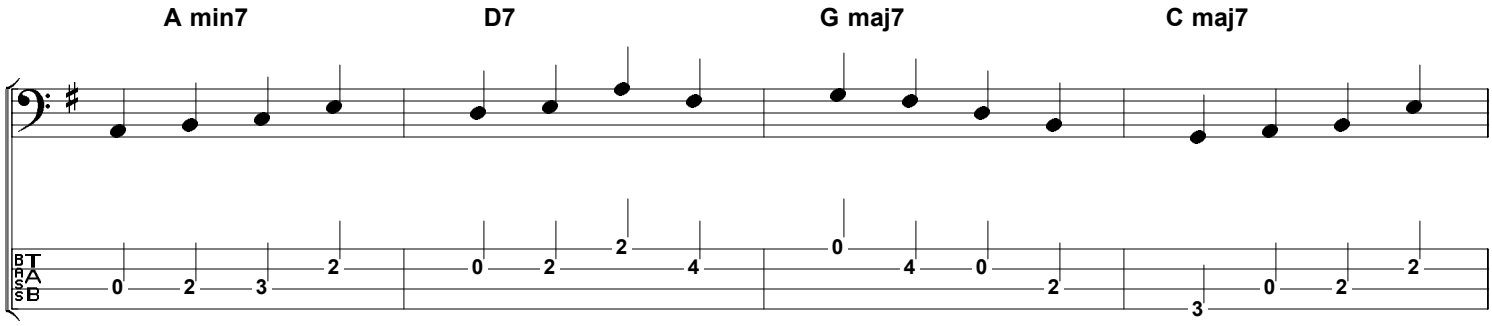
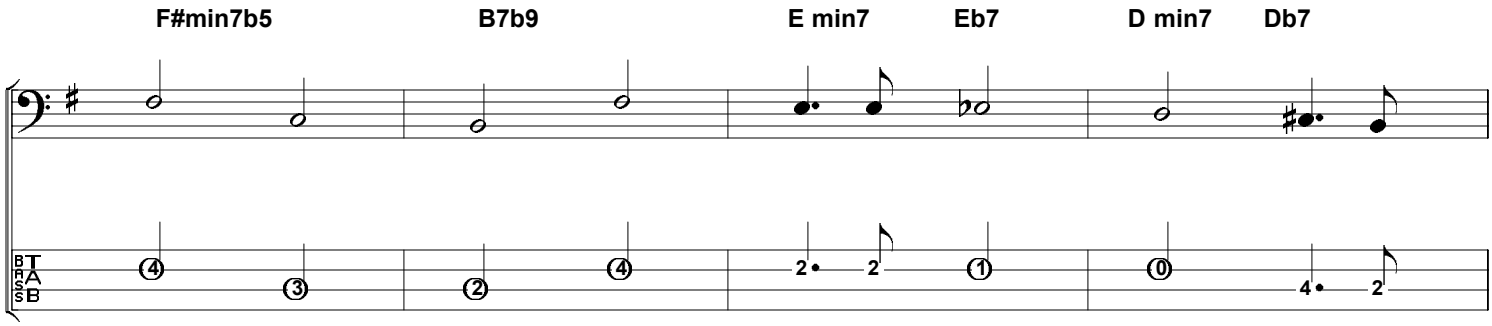
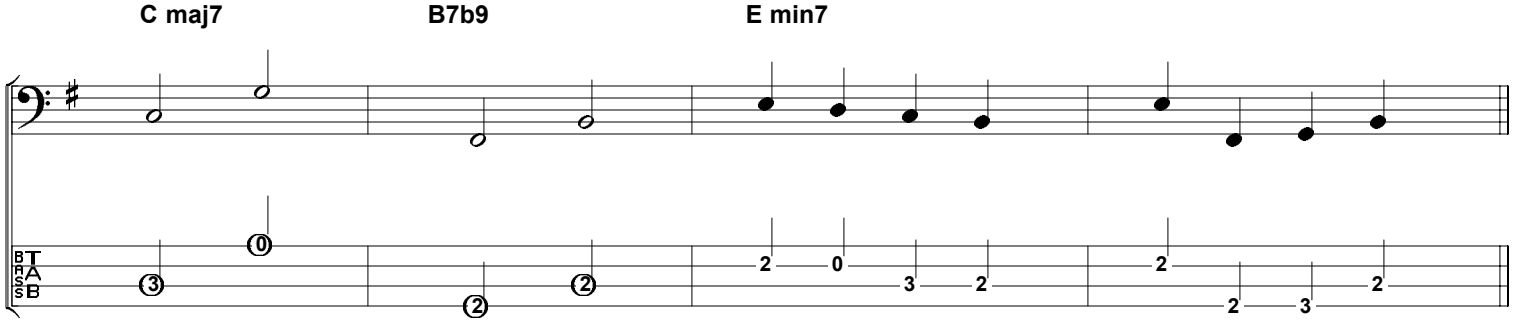
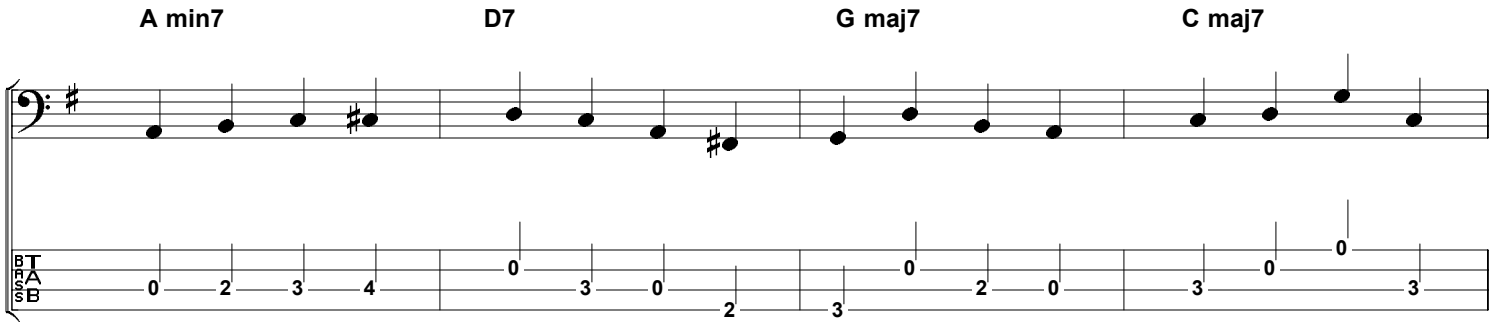
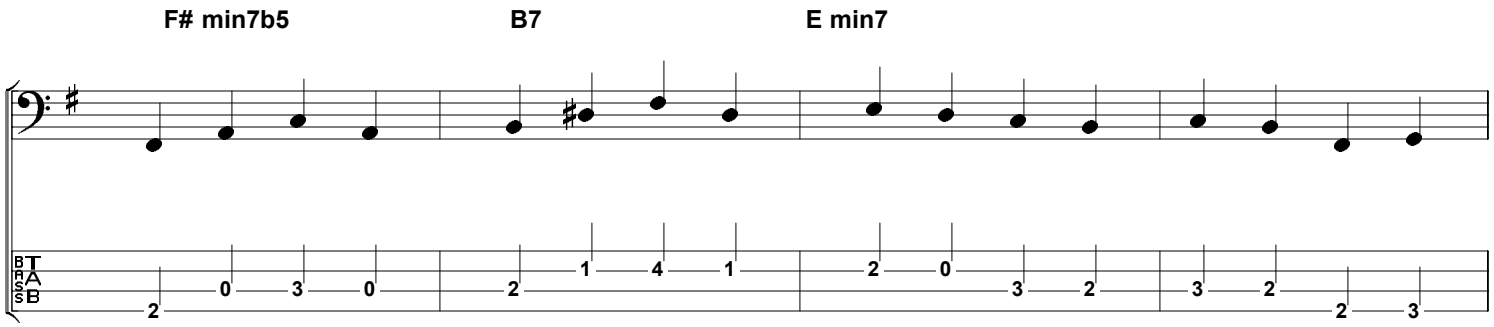
B7
E min7


A min7
D7
G maj7
C maj7


F#min7b5
B7b9
E min7
Eb7
D min7
Db7


C maj7
B7b9
E min7


A min7
D7
G maj7
C maj7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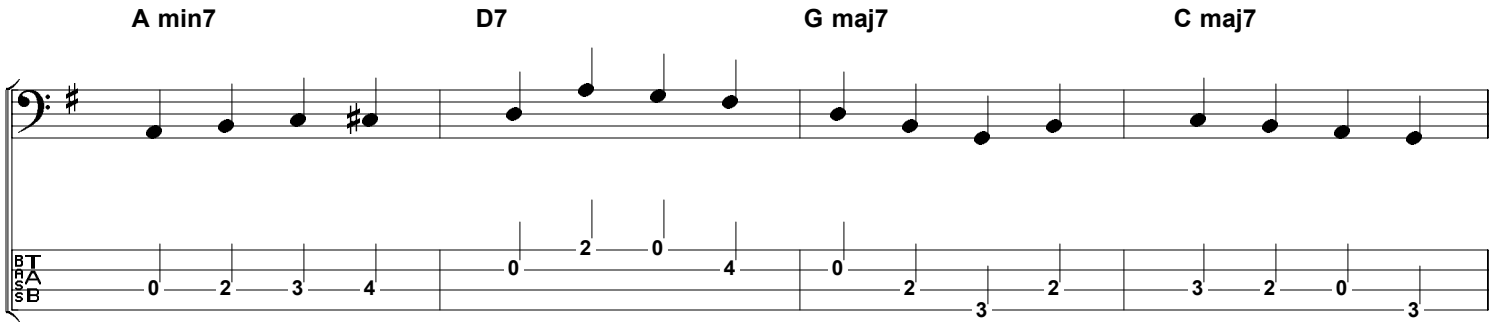
B7
E min7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D7
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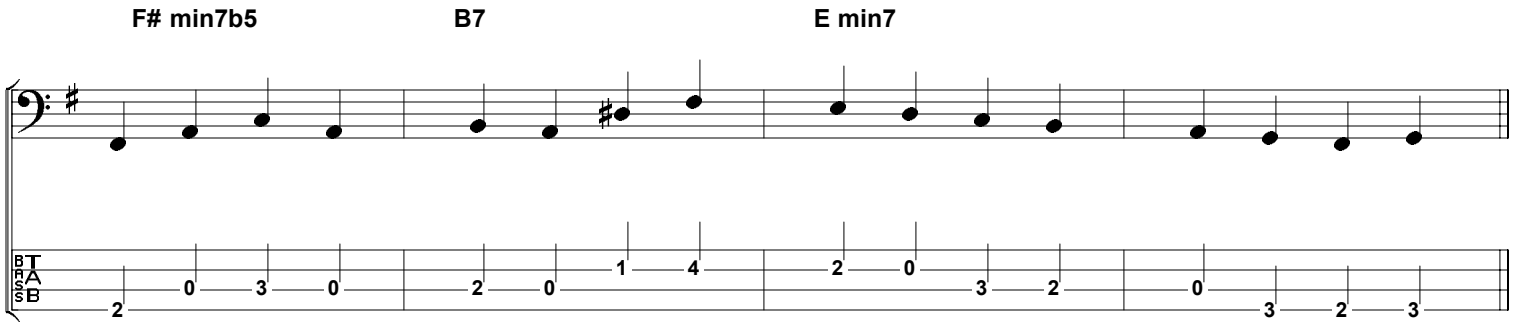
C maj7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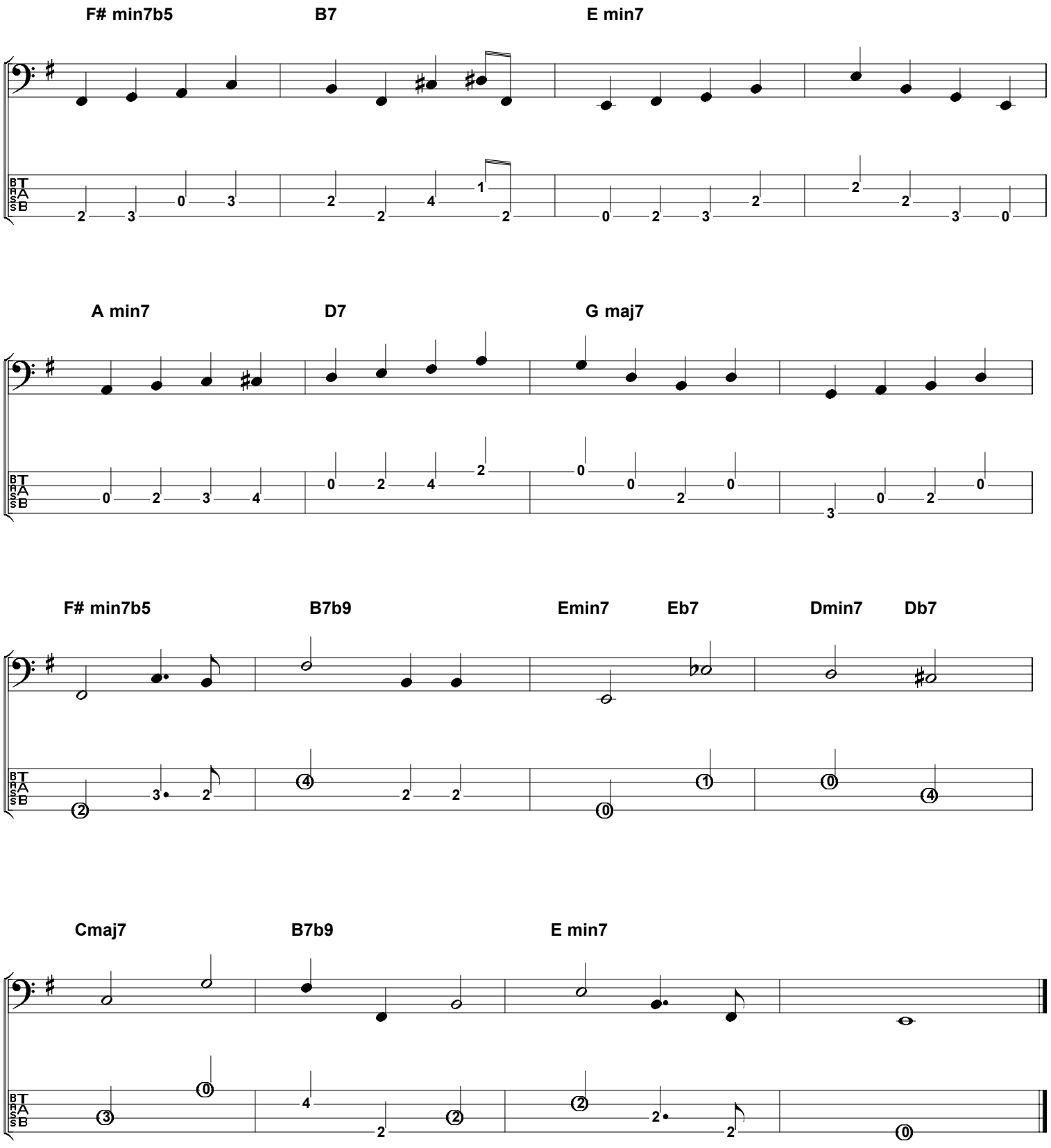
B7
E min7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B7
E min7
A min7
D7
G maj7
F# min7b5
B7b9
Emin7
Eb7
Dmin7
Db7
Cmaj7
B7b9
E min7