By: Jamie Holroyd

On one of Joe Pass' instructional videos, he says that every guitarist should be able to enjoy comping just as much as soloing. As guitarists we can get hung up on playing scales and modes which are important, but end up neglecting chords.

I once spent a whole summer working on nothing except chords and made more improvement as a jazz guitarist than I had done before. Not only did it improve my chordal knowledge, but it helped my single-line playing too.

In this article, I'm going to be sharing some tips and lessons I've learned over the years that have helped me improve as an accompanist in an array of settings.

Knowing loads of cool voicing's and inversions doesn't mean anything unless we know how to apply them tastefully in a live setting. Below are some pointers that have helped me comp in a variety of situations over the years that I always refer back to.

Listen to the Soloist

Sounds simple, doesn't it?

But, being able to find something that really fits what the soloist is playing can be tricky to do. If you're in a situation such as backing up a horn player, always remember that you are there to make them sound good.

The only way to get good at this is through experience, but there are sometimes hints to help us know what to play. For example, a soloist might be imposing angular harmony that you might be able to go with by using dissonant voicings.

On the other hand there are players who simply want you to give them a clear sense of the form and time.

As well as listening to the soloist, listening to the bass and drums is also important. Perhaps there's something they're doing that you can lock in on to enhance what the soloist is playing.

Keep It Quiet

Achieving a well-balanced volume level between each member of a group, where everyone can hear each other well, is unfortunately a rare occurrence; especially with a large ensemble.

However, there are some ways this problem can be solved. Position yourself as close to the other rhythm-section members as possible so that you can hear and see them clearly.

There's never a reason to be as loud as the soloist. The volume control on your guitar is a useful tool, because you can adjust your volume without moving.

I usually set the guitar's volume knob around 7 for comping so that I have plenty headroom to raise the volume for soloing if I need it.

Less is More

Smaller voicing's often speak louder than big 6-string chords and work well in almost every situation. If I'm not sure what extensions or chord types to use, small voicing's usually just on two adjacent strings will do the job, because they only state the chord type so no harmonic extensions can clash.

Unless you're playing without a bass player, always omit the root from your voicing's (if it's on the lower strings) as it sounds clunky.

Keeping our voicing's small and our comping quiet and light for the soloist will also mean that it won't sound too empty when we have to solo if there's not a pianist in the ensemble.

Sometimes the Best Thing to Play is Nothing At All

When I've been playing long gigs or jams, I've noticed the occasional solo can sound better with no comping at all. A solo with no comping can give the player more harmonic freedom and take the solo in a different direction as well as provide some contrast in the music.

Even not comping for only the first chorus or a section of a tune can have a subtle, but pleasant affect, and when chords eventually come back they have even more impact that can enhance the solo in a different way.

It's also nice to sometimes have a break so you're not playing constantly!

Think Beyond Chords

Are chords always appropriate?

Well for the most part yes. However, there are other devices that you can incorporate with, or instead, of chords.

If you know the tune you're playing well, try creating subtle little counter melodies to the melody using octaves or longer note values. I'd recommend playing these little melodies on the lower strings of the guitar so you're not getting in the range of the instrument playing the melody.

Thinking of counter melodies also works well if there's a pianist who's already covering the chords.

If In Doubt, Ask

As guitarists, there seems to be two instruments that we are never quite sure how to comp for; piano and bass.

Do we comp at all?

If so, do we play sparsely or full?

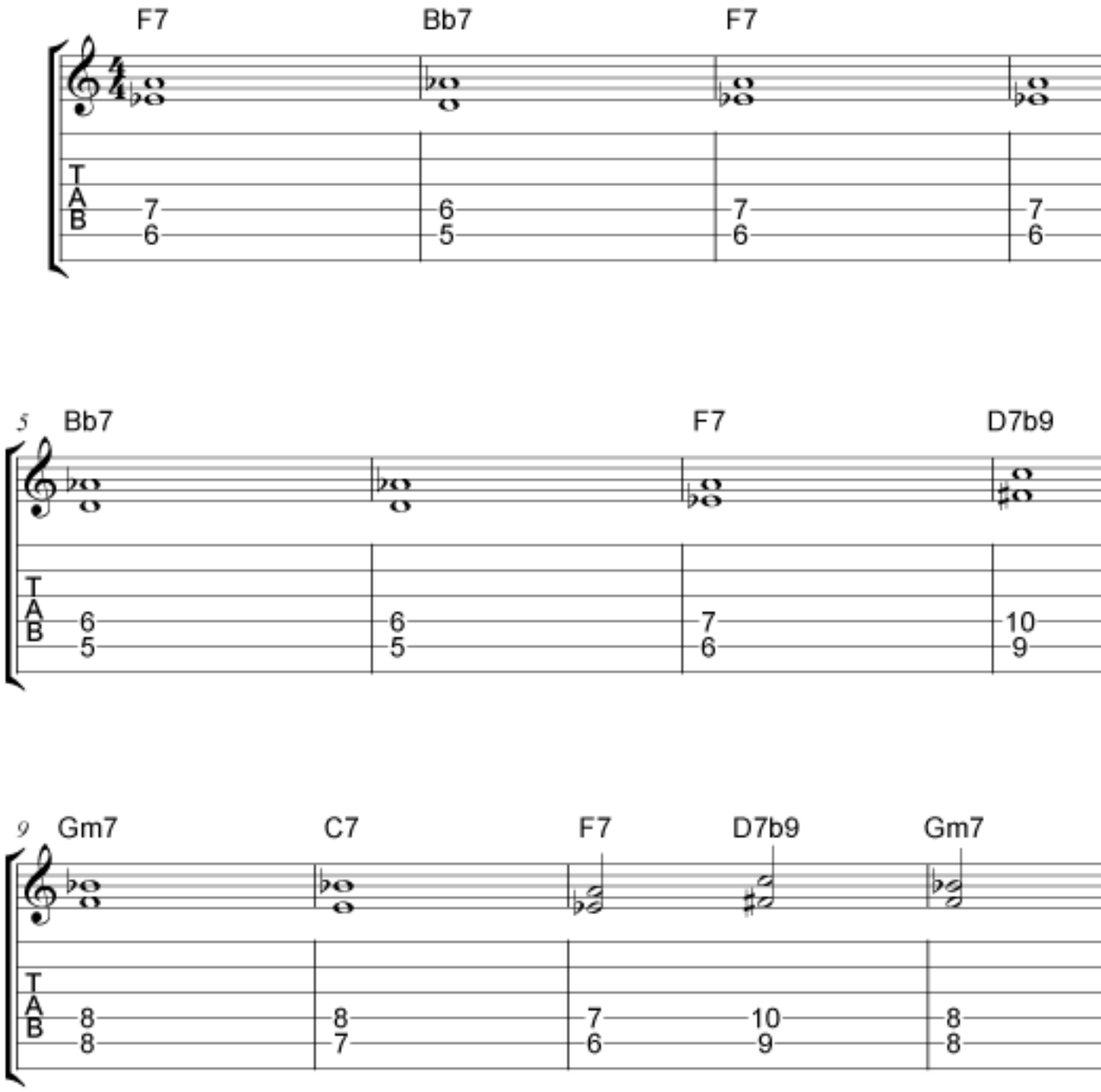
The best way to know what to play is simply by asking the musician that you're comping for. Other musicians are usually grateful that we ask, and that way we can be sure what they want.

When I ask this question of musicians I get different responses each time. Some are not bothered and leave it up to you, some want never want any comping and others are adamant that you play a steady rhythm. But I wouldn't have known at all if I didn't ask.

In this article we will be discussing a method of comping that is little used in the guitar world but that is used all the time by jazz pianists. **Piano comping**, or 3 rd and 7 th comping as it is sometimes known has been used by several famous guitarists such and Ed Bickert, Ted Greene, Kurt Rosenwinkel and most notably Lenny Breau. The method itself is rather simple, just find the 3 rd and 7 th of the chord we would like to comp and those two notes are the basis for the voicings that we will use.

In the first example I have laid out all of the 3rds and 7ths for the chords in an **F blues**. These shapes are based around the sixth fret and notice how little movement there is between chords. This is one of the reasons that these chords are so ideal for guitar, one does not have to jump around a lot to comp through a tune or progression.

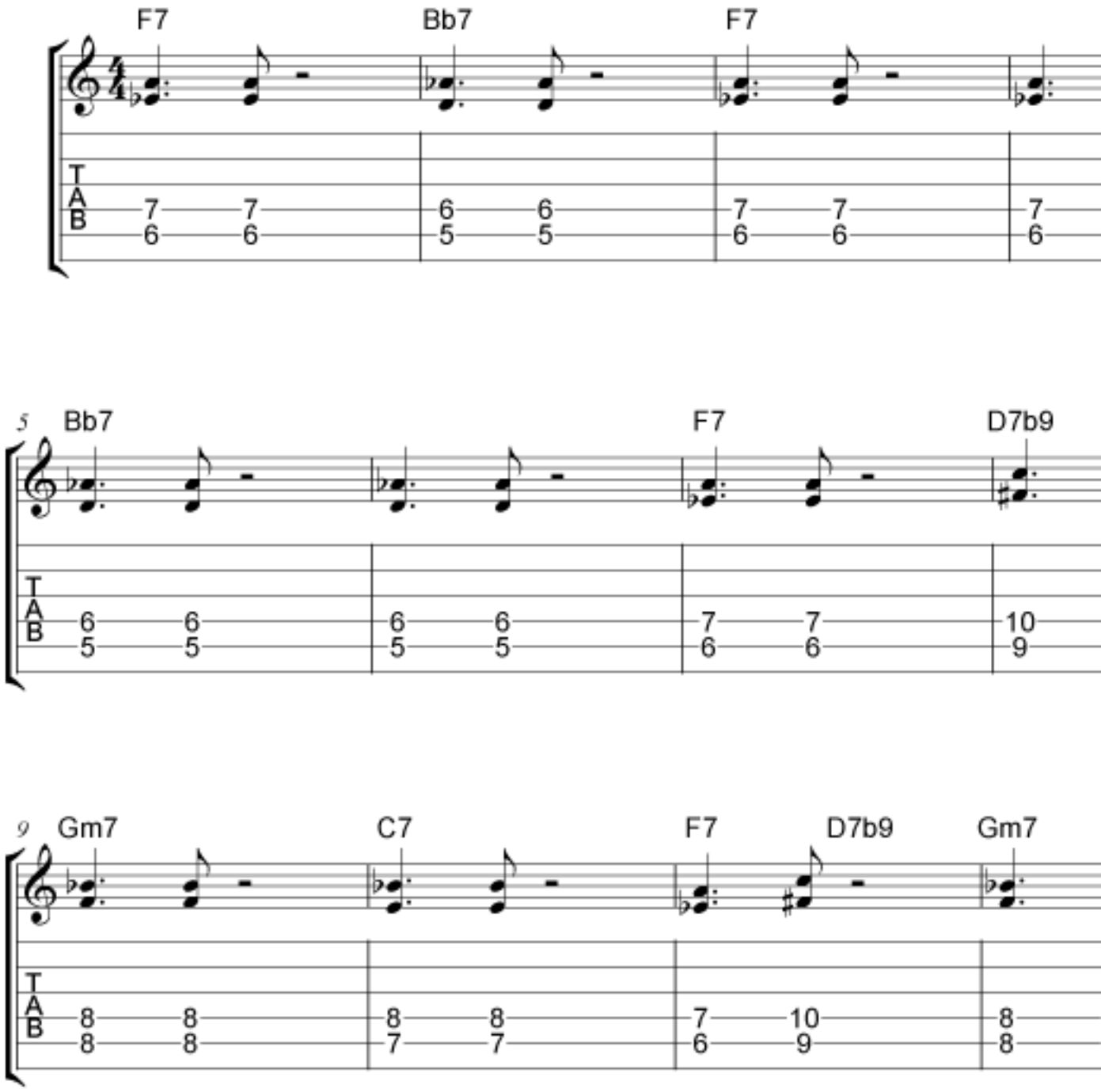
Example 1



In example 2 we have taken the 3rds and 7ths of each chord, from the above example, and added a simple **Charleston rhythm** to them. This exercise may seem simple to some of us, so if you would like to push yourself further you can change the rhythm to make it more difficult.

One way to do this is to **"push" the Charleston rhythm around the bar**. For example, the original rhythm falls on 1 and the & of beat 2. What one can do to make it more difficult is start the same rhythm but a beat later, so the & of 1 and 3, then a beat later, 2 and the & of 3, and a beat later, the & of 2 and beat 4, and finally 3 and the & of beat 4. This is a great way of taking an easy rhythm and making it sound more hip by displacing it around the bar.

Example 2

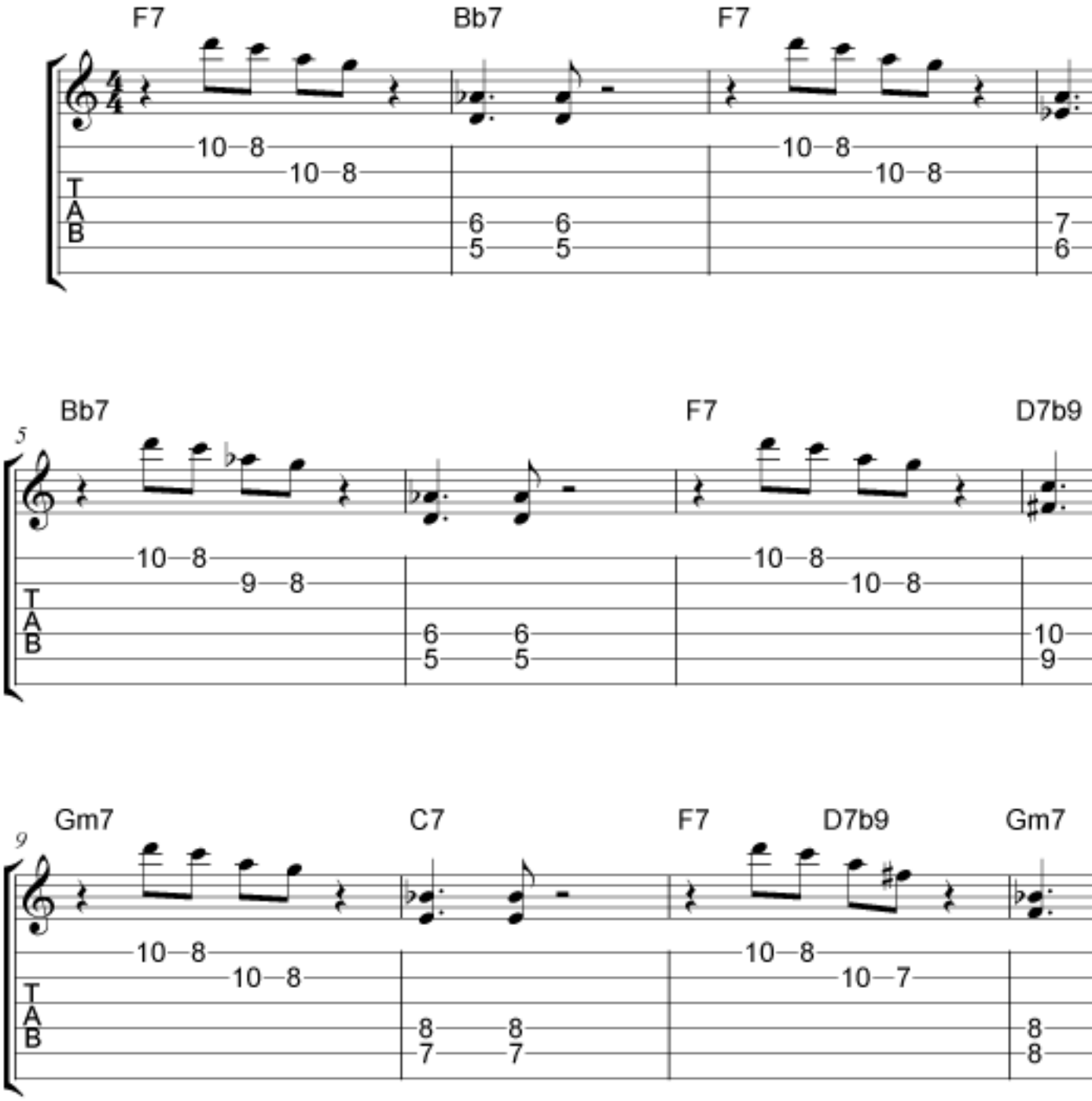


Now that we are getting the hang of comping using only the 3rds and 7ths let's take this method one step further. In the next example we will start adding a **simple melodic line** in between our comping. So every second bar (1-3-5-7-9-11) will contain the melodic phrase, and the other bars (2-4-6-8-10-12) will contain comping based on the chords from the previous example.

Notice how **the melodic line changes slightly** to accommodate the different chords, the A moves to Ab on the Bb7 chord and the G moves to F# on the D7b9 chord. Once you get this exercise under your fingers you can try using a different melodic idea, or switching between two ideas throughout the chorus.

You can also **add different rhythms** to the comping bars, like the ones mentioned in the description of Example 2. It is often surprising how far we can stretch one or two ideas using this method because the comping helps to break up our ideas and gives us, and our listeners, time to digest what we've just played.

Example 3



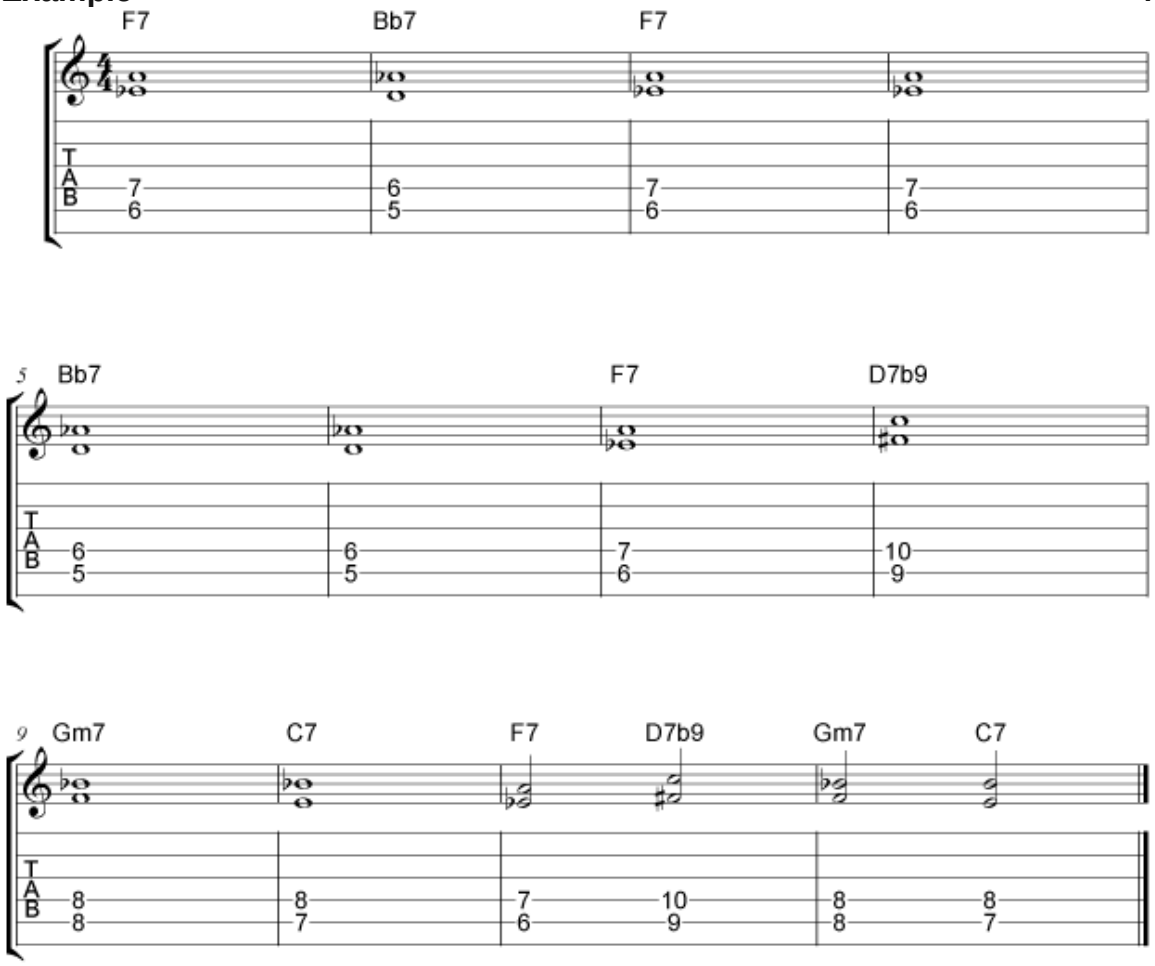
Now that we have worked on separating the comping and blowing we can start **putting them together**. In Example 4 we will take the Charleston rhythm and add it to the melodic line from Example 3. The key to this method of playing is the use of the right hand.

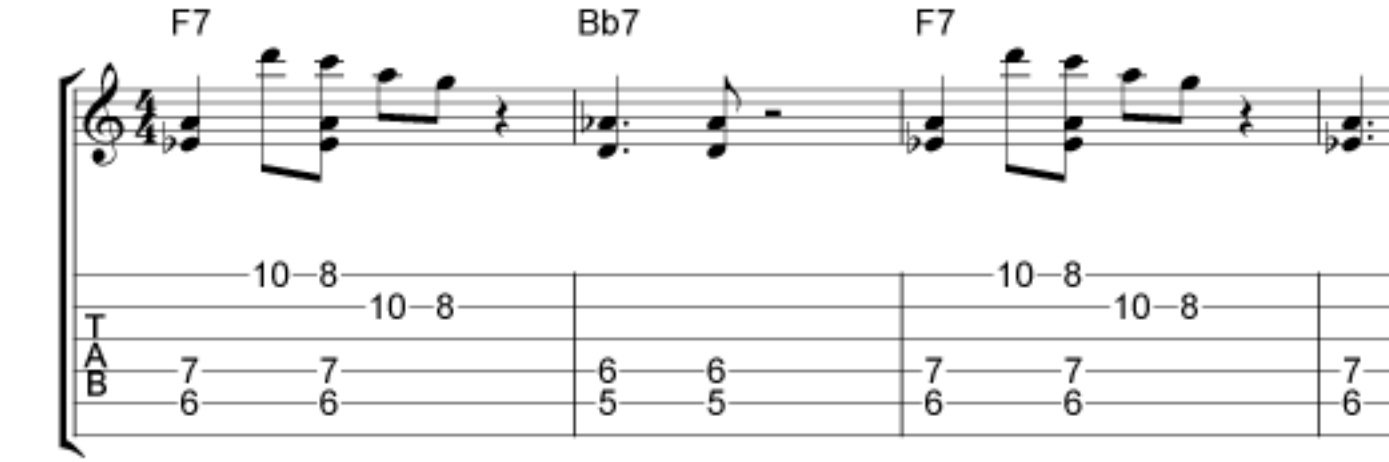
There are several ways to do this, the first is to use fingers only, similar to what Lenny Breau did, or we can use **"hybrid" picking** which is fingers and pick at

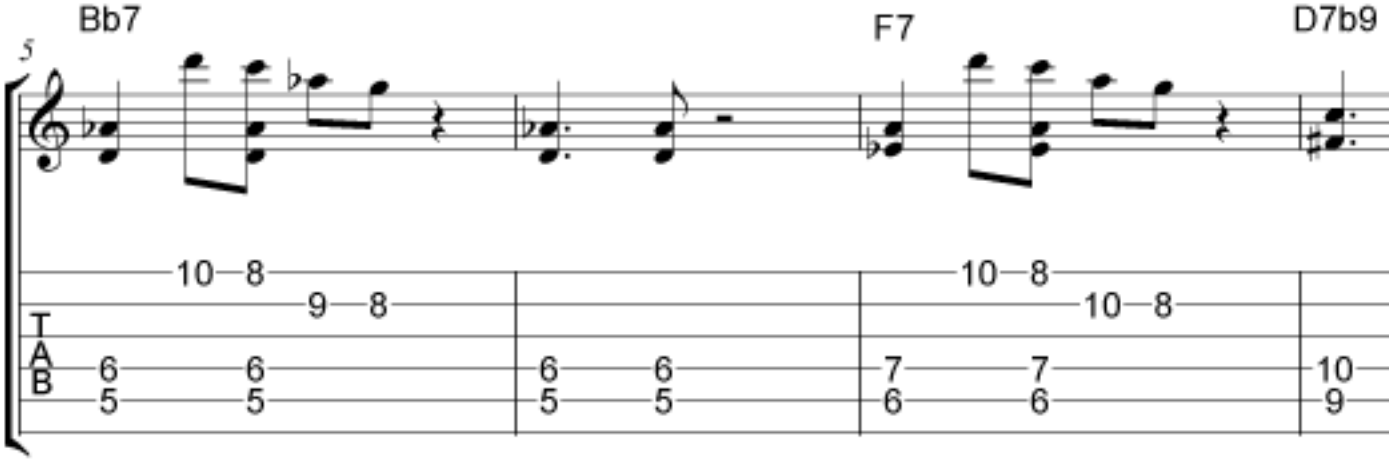
the same time. When doing this we use our pick to play the lowest note, then our middle finger to play the second lowest note, while our ring and pinky fingers play the melodic line.

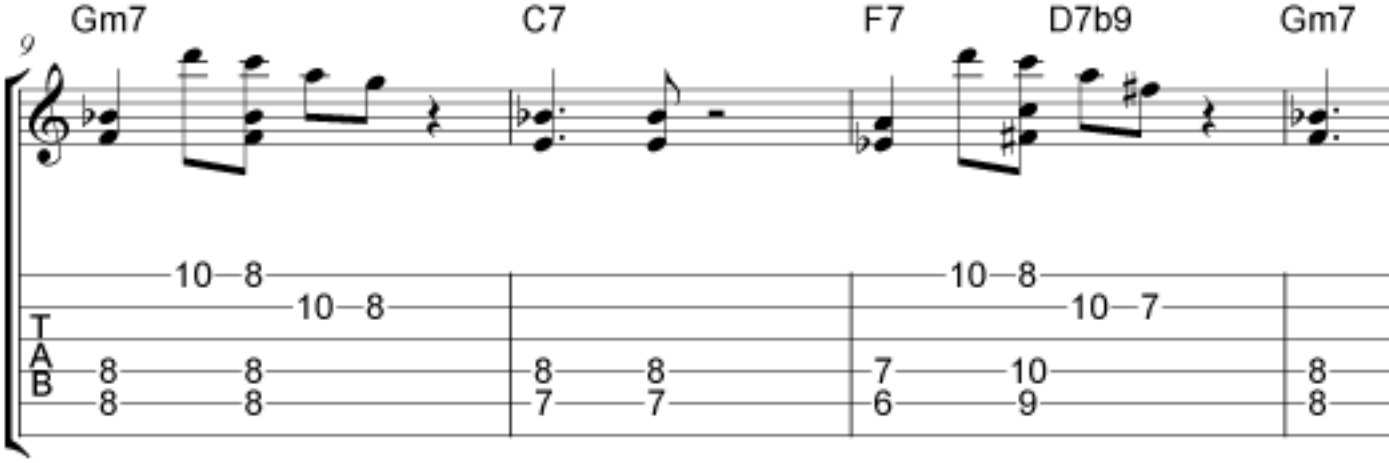
The last way to approach this technique is to **strum the chords**, which is what Ed Bickert and Kurt Rosenwinkel do. The strumming method is a little harder because we have to mute the strings we aren't using in order to avoid the open strings ringing into our chords. Try using all three methods and see which one feels the most comfortable.

Example **4**




F7
Bb7
F7
T
A
B


5
Bb7
F7
D7b9
T
A
B

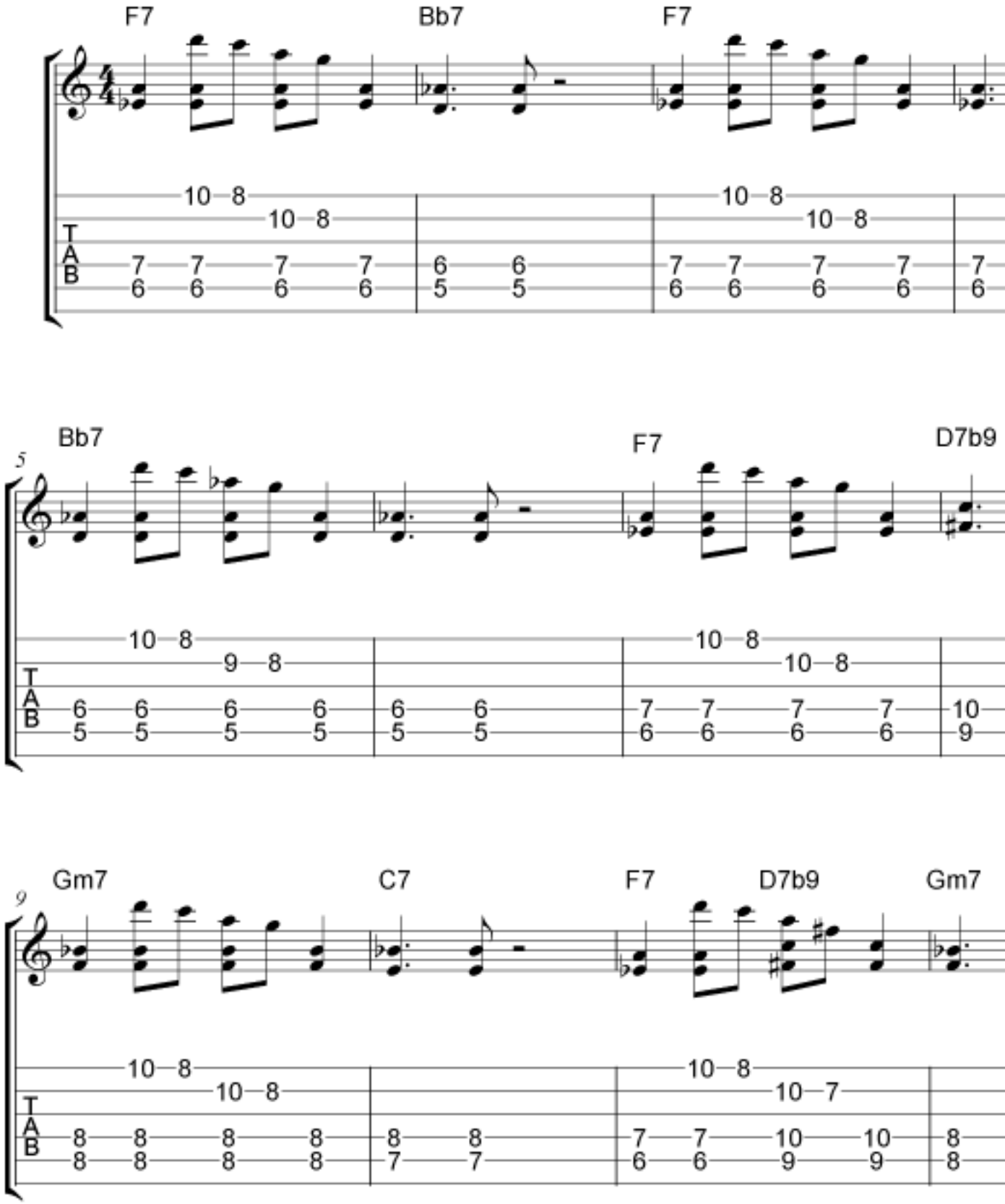

9
Gm7
C7
F7
D7b9
Gm7
T
A
B

Now that we can use the Charleston rhythm under our melodic line we will explore a technique used by Lenny Breau and many pianists, **playing steady quarter notes under our lines**.

For this example we might want to break it down into **two exercises**. First just get used to playing steady quarter notes for each bar that contains melodic material. Once we are comfortable with this technique we can add the melodic line on top of the steady quarter note pulse.

One thing to notice is how the two comping rhythms, steady quarters and the Charleston , **contrast** with each other to give variety to our comping ideas. Even though both rhythms are relatively simple, by having two different rhythms alternating with each new bar it keeps things from becoming monotonous and sounding boring to both ourselves and our listeners.

Example 5

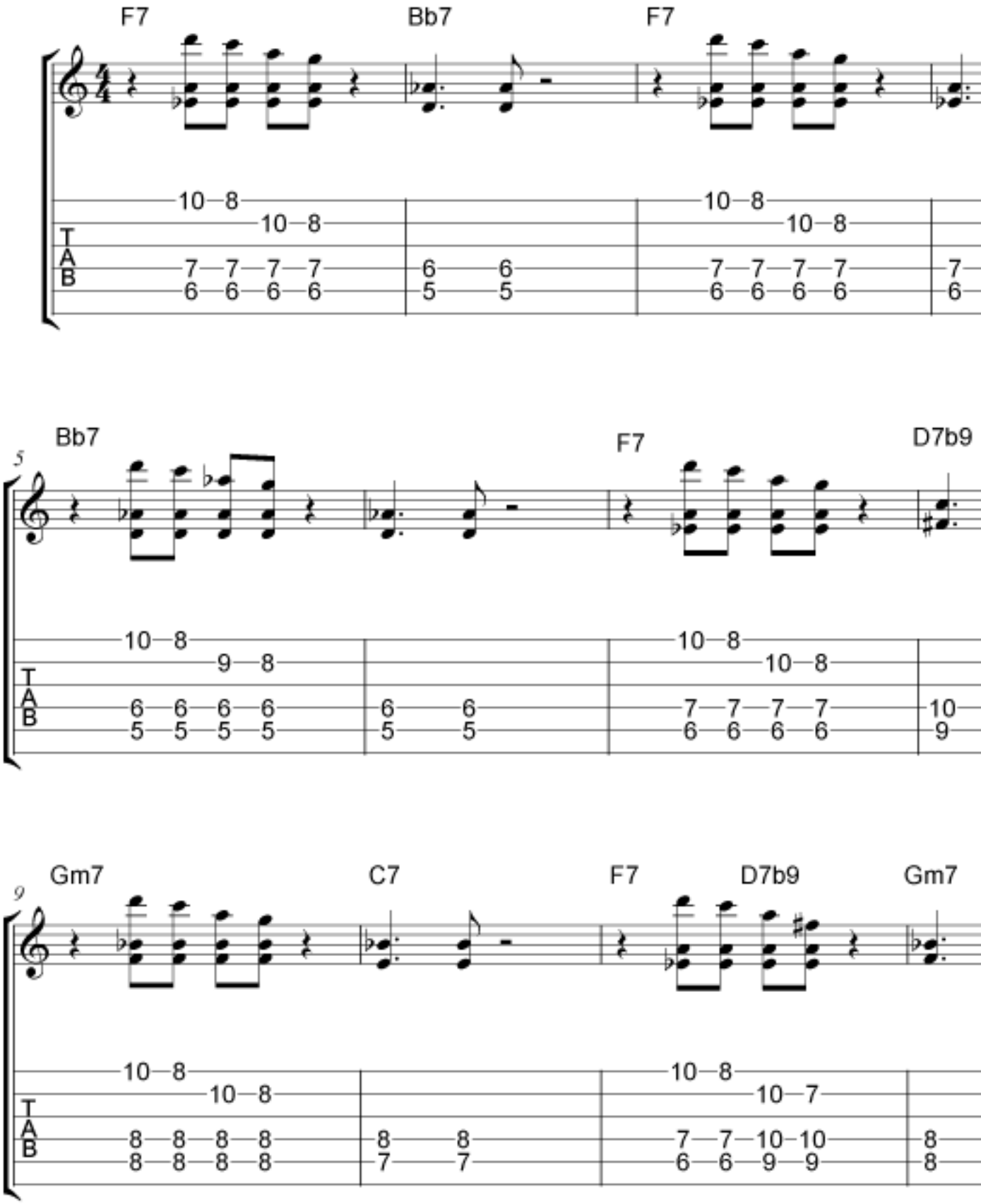

F7
Bb7
F7
5
Bb7
F7
D7b9
9
Gm7
C7
F7
D7b9
Gm7

Now we will look at a technique used by pianist **Bill Evans** as well as guitarist Lenny Breau. Instead of having a "separate" comping pattern under our melodic line with will comp "in sync" with our line. So each beat of the line, beat 2, 2&, 3 and the & of 3, will have a chord accompanying each note.

This is a great method for building **chord solos** and **chord melodies** because we can have a moving line going but we are not jumping all over the neck and thinking of a million different voicing's to match these notes.

One thing I tell my students when they are learning this technique is to listen to **pianists comping** and soloing, and pay attention to their left hands. It amazes everyone when they hear the pianist's hand barely moving and staying put for each chord most of the time. This is a great way to make a mountain out of a mole hill in a very good way!

Example 6


F7
Bb7
F7
5
Bb7
F7
D7b9
9
Gm7
C7
F7
D7b9
Gm7

Now that we can solo and comp for ourselves in one position we can take these same methods and**play them in different areas of the neck**. Example 7 lays out the three other 3 rd and 7 th positions for each chord of the F blues. There are two for the 5 th and 4 th strings as well as two positions for the 4 th and 3 rd strings.

Some people use this method on the lower two strings as well, but in my experience **the lower strings are too muddy for this technique** so it is best to learn it on the 5 th -3 rd string sets.

One thing to notice is the voicings for the Gm7 chord. It is common practice when using this technique to **avoid perfect 5ths** as it takes away from the stylistic nature of these voicing's. Instead of playing an open 5 th on Gm7, Bb-F, we can substitute a G7, B-F, in its place. This provides very smooth voice leading to the C7 chord as G7 is the dominant chord of C, and keeps these chords sounding within the jazz guitar idiom.

This method **can be applied to any ii-V chord progression**, the ii chord can be minor or dominant, the only case where one has to watch when using this technique is when playing with a piano player, as sometimes it would clash with what the pianist is playing.

Example 7