CHAPTER II: BOOGIE-WOOGIE PIANO

The popular boogie-woogie piano style developed from pre-1900 blues forms. The popular "rhythm and blues" tradition shares many common elements with both boogie-woogie and gospel music. Boogie-woogie is first and foremost, however, a solo piano style. It achieved wide popularity during the 1930's, although variants of the style existed much earlier in the century. Some of the most important pianists in this tradition include Jimmy Yancey, Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis, Pinetop Smith, Cow Cow Davenport and Pete Johnson.

Most classic boogie-woogie compositions were based on the twelve-bar blues form, although the style was later applied to standard popular songs of many different forms. In the ninth and tenth bars of the twelve-bar blues form most boogie-woogie pianists use either the V chord alone (for two measures) or a progression of V — IV (for one measure each). The blues progressions found in most early boogie-woogie compositions use only the three basic chords: I, IV and V.

Rhythmically speaking, boogie-woogie pianists usually played a pattern of perpetual eighth notes in the left hand. This aspect of the style was often referred to as "eight to the bar," meaning eight bass notes per measure. Sometimes, particularly at faster tempos, the eighth notes were played evenly. At moderate and slow tempos, however, the eight notes were often played as alternating quarter and eighth note triplets, or as dotted eighth and sixteenth notes, creating a kind of shuffle feel. Some of the most common boogie-woogie left hand patterns are illustrated below.

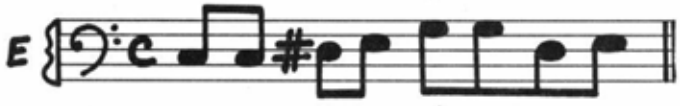
Pattern A uses the root and fifth of the tonic chord, with the sixth used as an accented upper neighbor tone on beats 2 and 4.

Pattern B is similar to A, except that the lowered seventh on the third beat creates a stronger blues feeling. Miles Davis later used a 6/8 (or 3/4) variation of this exact line in his classic tune *All Blues* from the legendary ***Kind of Blue*** album.

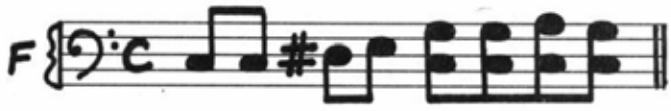
Pattern C is also similar to A, except that the raised fourth is used in place of the sixth as a chromatic lower neighbor tone.

Pattern D is a chromatic variation of A, with a passing tone between the fifth and sixth creating triplet eighth note groups on the second and fourth beats.

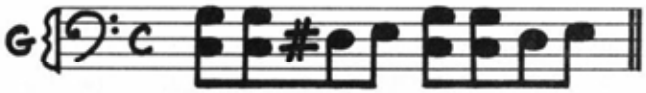
Pattern E is based on the major triad, with the movement from minor to major third adding a strong blues flavor.



Pattern F combines patterns A and E with a pedal point on the chord root. This pattern was used by Pete Johnson in his original *Blues on the Downbeat* and *Death Ray Boogie*.



Patterns G and H are variations of pattern F.

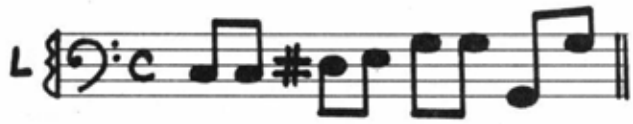


Pattern I is created from two lines above the chord root: a-g-a-g and $d^{\#}$-e-f-e. They imply a harmonic movement of C-C^{07}-C-F/C-C. It should be noted, however, that the C^{07} and F chords are simply ornamenting the basic C chord. As in stride piano, it is relatively common for right hand melodies to clash with these embellishing harmonies, especially when the melodies are simple repetitive riffs based on the blues or pentatonic scales.

Pattern J alternates the C and F triads, the F triad being a simple embellishment of the tonic C triad.

Pattern K alternates the same triads in a solid unbroken manner. A variation of this pattern, alternating a second inversion tonic triad with the root position dominant seventh chord, was used by Meade Lux Lewis in his famous *Honky Tonk Train.*

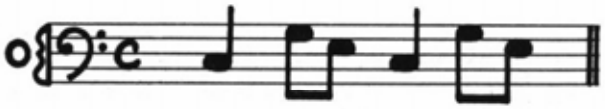
Pattern L combines Pattern E with an octave drop on the fifth of the chord.



Pattern M is a variation of L, with chromatic movement between the third and fifth of the chord. This minor mode version of this pattern was used in Jack Fina's popular *Bumble Boogie* (a boogie-woogie version of *Flight of the Bumble Bee*).

Pattern N consists only of broken octaves outlining the tonic triad. This basic technique can be used in playing any tune in a boogie-woogie style: simply construct a good walking bass line on the chord progression (as illustrated in Chapter IV), then play each bass note in this broken octave style. This style was used by Pete Johnson in *Cherry Red* and by Ken Kersey in *Boogie Woogie Cocktail*.

Pattern O alternates quarter notes with pairs of eighth notes while, harmonically, outlining the tonic triad. This style was used often by Jimmy Yancey, as in his classic *Yancey Stomp*. It is interesting to note that this rhythm is also the basic jazz ride rhythm, developed by drummer Warren "Baby" Dodds in the early jazz bands of Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong. This rhythm was later played on the hi-hat by swing drummers and on the ride cymbal by bebop drummers. Even in modern styles it remains a basic part of every drummer's rhythmic vocabulary.



Pattern P is a triplet variation common in medium and slow tempos.

Pattern Q is a variation of P, with the D# creating a strong blues flavor.

Pattern R is a bluesy variation of the rhythm used in O.

It should be obvious that hundreds of slightly different patterns can be derived from those given above. In addition, patterns might be developed in 3/4 time, giving a completely different feeling to the constant eighth notes in the left hand. The compositions included in this chapter illustrate how to apply the basic boogie-woogie technic to different stylistic contexts while also providing a starting point from which to develop strong rhythmic independence between the hands. As in stride playing, the best boogie-woogie playing sounds as if the right and left hand parts are being played by two different players. This effect is quite difficult to achieve and maintain consistently, but great fun to work at and well worth the time and effort.

Boogie-woogie, like stride, is becoming an increasingly vanishing art. Rock 'n' roll and all commercial music styles since the 1950's have stolen much outright from the black music traditions of boogie-woogie, rhythm and blues and gospel, not to mention jazz itself. Although some early rock 'n' roll musicians such as Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino played boogie-woogie style piano behind their own vocals, rock 'n' roll eventually orchestrated the piano style. The electric bass or bass guitar played the bottom notes of the bass line, the piano often played only repeated eighth note chords in the middle or upper register, and the guitar added rhythmic comping and occasional soloistic fills. What boogie-woogie pianists had played as soloists, the early rock groups often divided among three or four separate players. Of course, rock 'n' roll changed black music in a much more fundamental way by transforming an essentially acoustic music into a totally amplified electronic idiom. Ears which are accustomed to hearing musical energy and rhythmic excitement created primarily by oppressive levels of amplification may be surprised to hear how much energy a great boogie-woogie pianist can generate on an old acoustic upright piano. The suggested listening list at the end of this chapter should provide an enthusiastic foot-stomping introduction to the great boogie-woogie tradition.

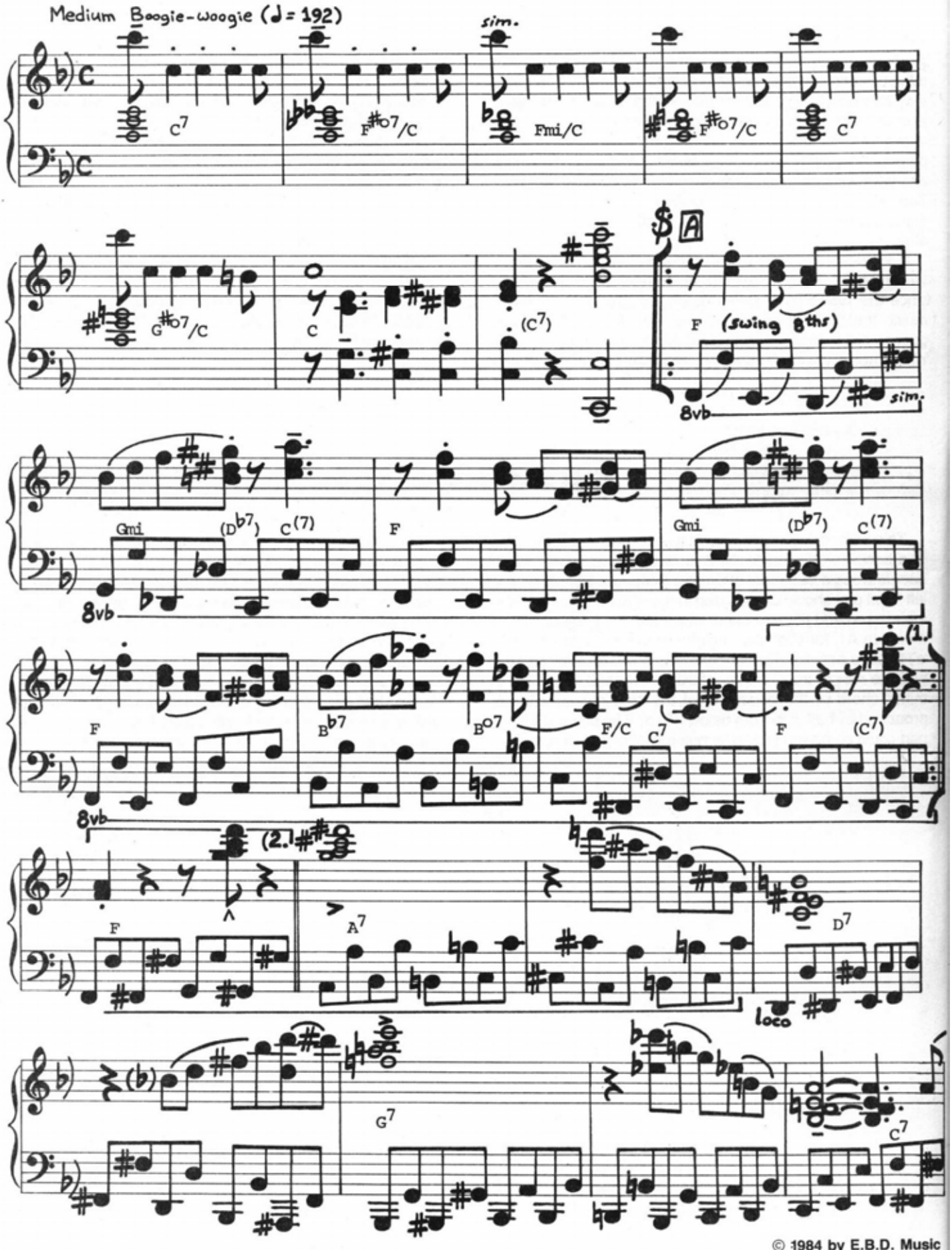
Basie's Boogie

This composition illustrates how any tune can be treated in a boogie-woogie style. It is, in fact, nothing more than a boogie-woogie treatment of *Basie's Beat* from Chapter I. The left hand part should be analyzed in terms of the specific chord tones used and the manner in which each is approached. In measure A1, for example, a diatonic passing tone (the note 'e') is used between the root of the F chord on the first beat and the root of the D minor chord on the third beat. The G minor chord at the beginning of the next measure is approached by half-step from below ($f^{\#}$ - g). The entire left hand part could be played in quarter notes (omitting each upper octave eighth note) to transform the accompaniment into a bebop style walking bass line.

While learning to improvise on the form of this piece the original left hand accompaniment should be used. Then, as a separate project, other "eight to the bar" bass lines should be worked out which outline this same harmonic progression. Eventually the left hand should begin to combine fragments of these prearranged bass lines in a free and spontaneous manner. Just as in learning stride piano, much research and practice is required in order to internalize enough vocabulary so that new combinations begin to develop naturally.

Basie's Boogie

by Bill Dobbins



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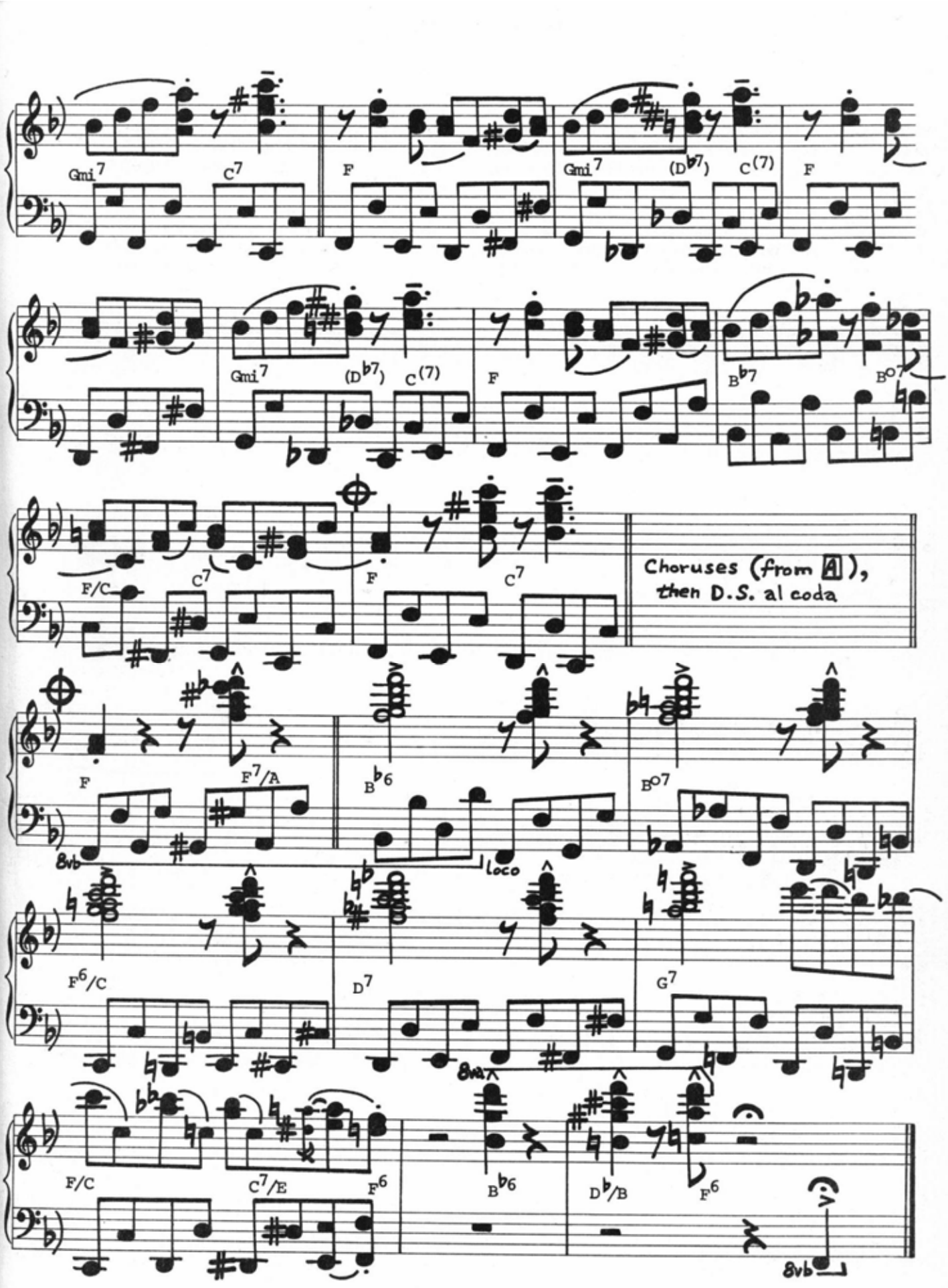

Gmi7
C7
F
Gmi7
(Db7)
C(7)
F
Gmi7
(Db7)
C(7)
F
Bb7
Bo7
F/C
C7
F
C7
Choruses (from A), then D.S. al coda
F
F7/A
Bb6
Bo7
8vb
loco
F6/C
D7
G7
8va
F/C
C7/E
F6
Bb6
Db/B
F6
8vb

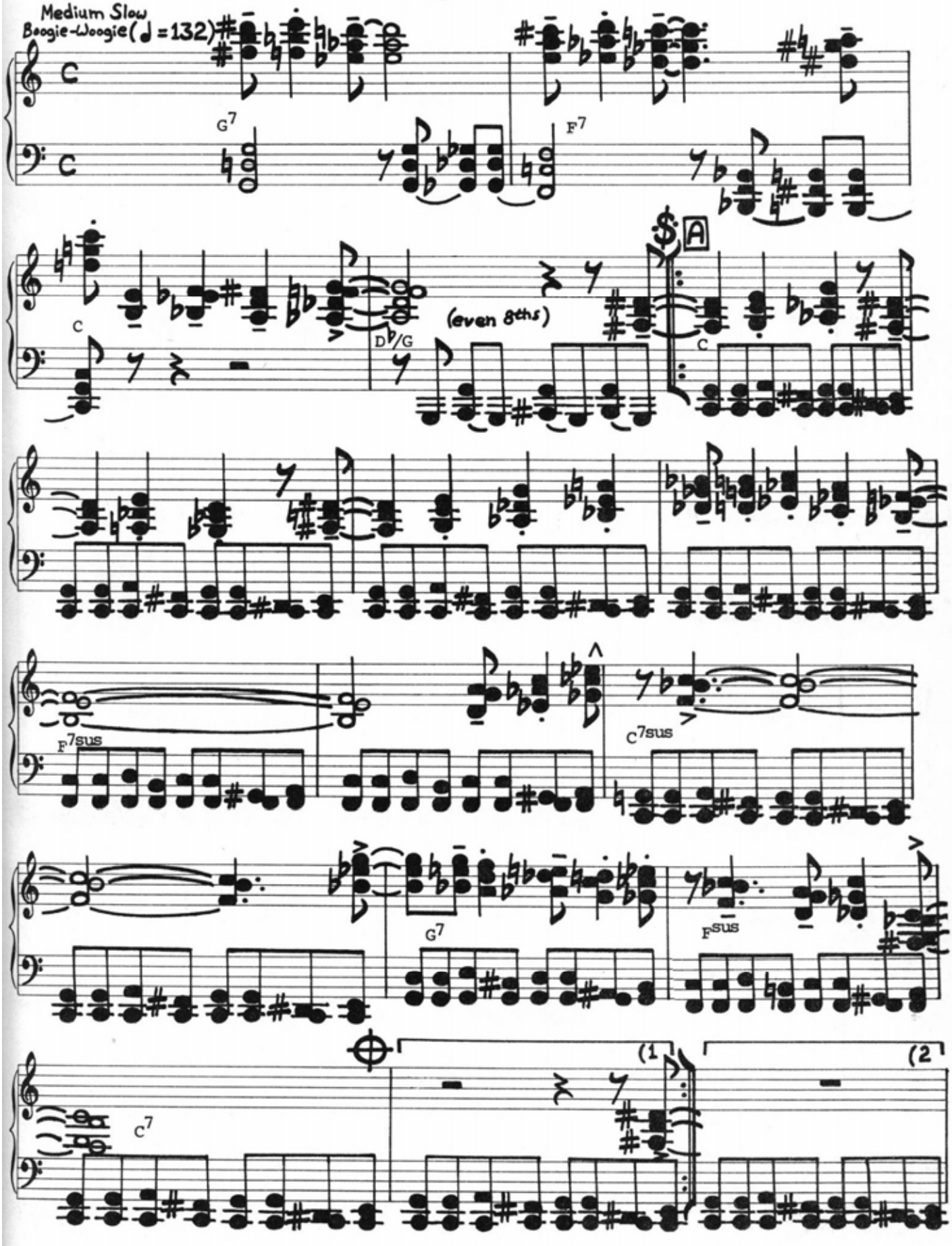
Prickly Pete

This composition is based on a left hand pattern similar to one favored by Pete Johnson. The right hand theme, however, is much more contemporary in conception. From the introduction thru the letter A, second inversion triads and fourth chords are created by moving chromatically parallel fourth intervals under the melodic line. These chords are, from time to time, quite dissonant with the left hand pattern, giving the tune a "prickly" character. Once again, however, the dissonances are believable within the style due to the simplicity of the melody and the clarity of the resolutions, particularly at the ends of phrases. At letter B the right hand melody sounds in two keys at once: C blues on top and E^{b} blues underneath.

In this type of composition, as in Johnson's own work, the original left hand pattern should always be maintained throughout the improvised choruses. There are, generally speaking, three basic types of boogie-woogie forms: the single pattern piece such as *Prickly Pete,* broken octave bass line pieces such as *Basie's Boogie* in which the bass line may vary considerably from chorus to chorus, and multi-section pieces in which each large section is built on a different boogie-woogie ostinato. Because of the obvious mixture of stylistic vocabulary, *Prickly Pete* will achieve maximum interest by building greater and greater harmonic and rhythmic tension against the repetitive left hand pattern in each successive chorus.

Prickly Pete

by Bill Dobbins



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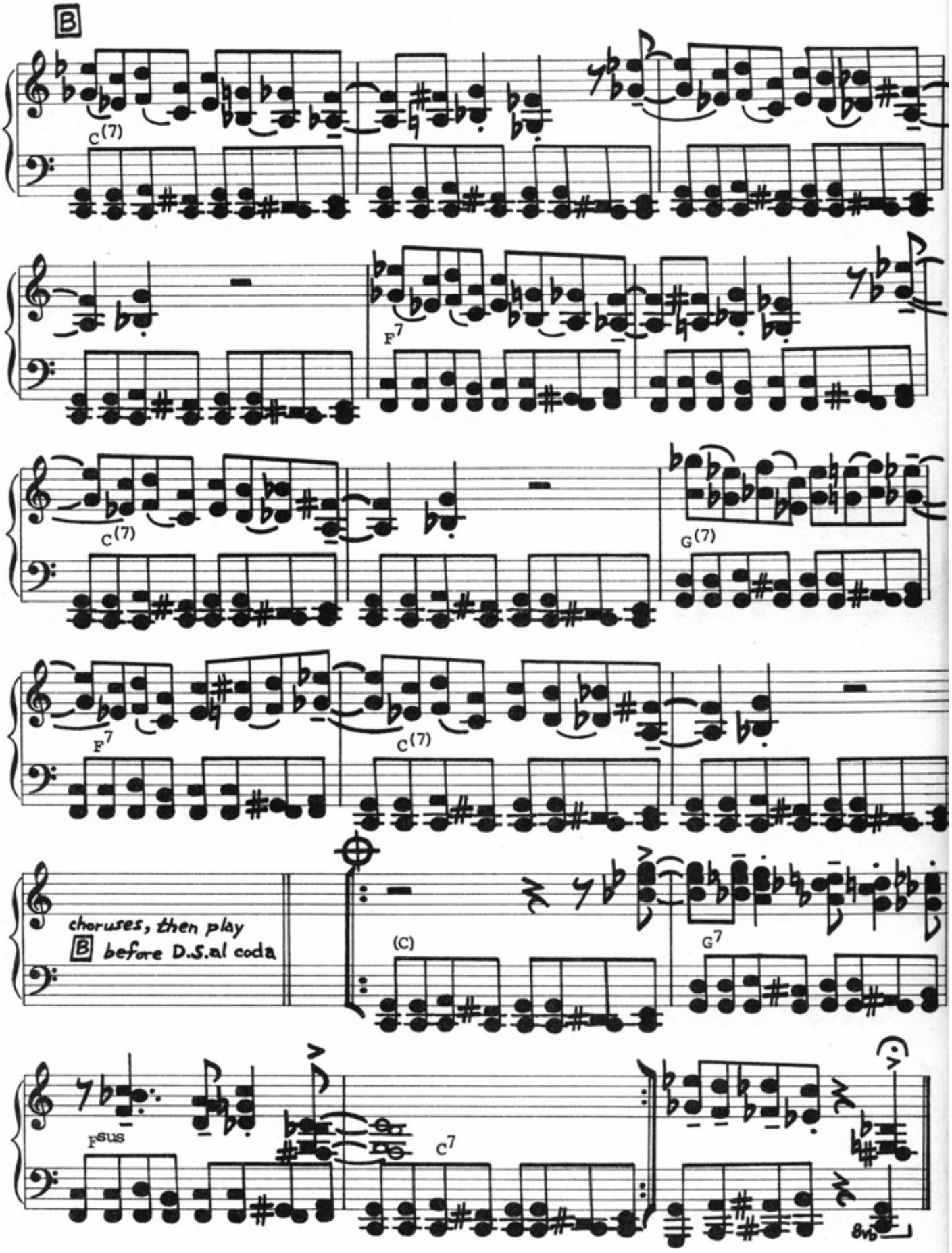

B
C(7)
F7
C(7)
G(7)
F7
C(7)
choruses, then play
B before D.S.al coda
(C)
G7
Fsus
C7
8vb

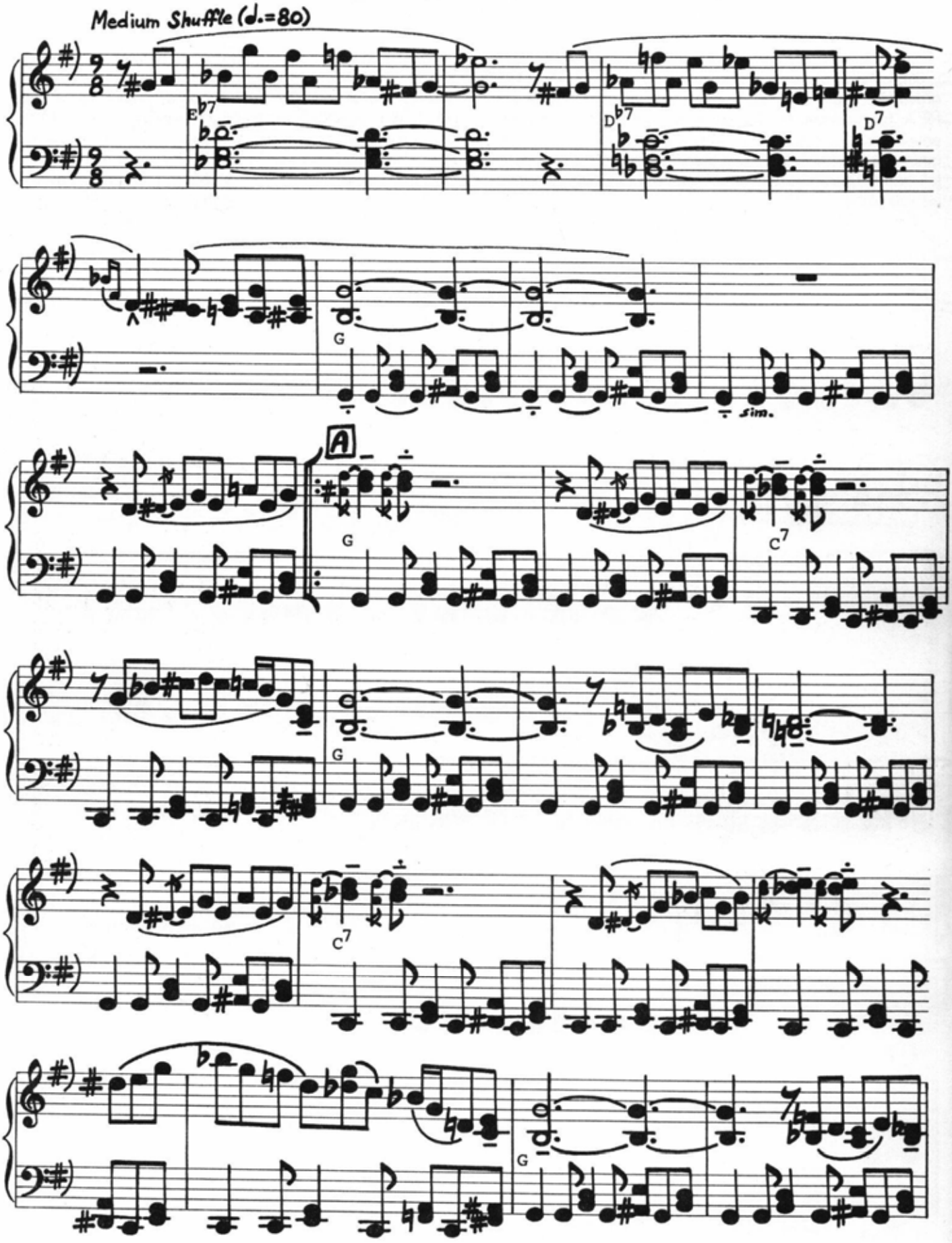
Wobbly Waltz

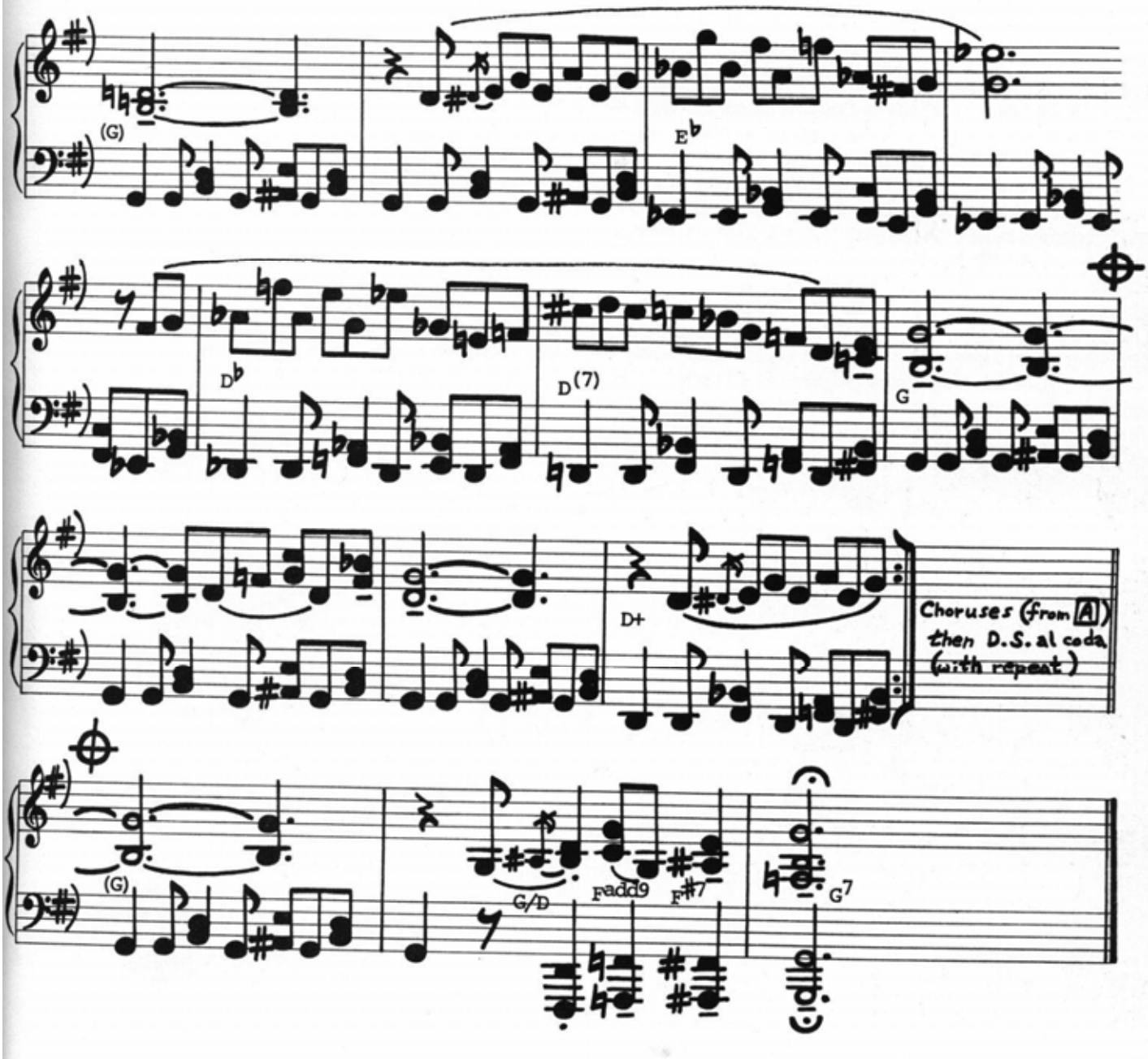
This piece is in 9/8, generating a rhythmic feeling of triplets in 3/4. It should be noted that the right hand melodies are often grouped in patterns of two notes. In the measure before letter A, for example, the pattern e-g-e-a-e-g repeats the note 'e' every second note, creating a cross-rhythm of three quarter notes (3/4) against the two dotted quarter notes in the left hand. These cross-rhythms give the piece its "wobbly" character.

The overall form is that of a 24 measure blues with each chord lasting twice as long as in the usual 12 measure form. In measures A17 thru A20 there are chromatic substitute chords. The usual V chord (D^7) is ornamented first by half-step from above ($E^{\flat 7}$) and then by half-step from below ($D^{\flat 7}$) before it is finally stated in measure A20. This is a kind of harmonic "wobbling." As with *Prickly Pete*, the left hand pattern from the theme should be used throughout the improvised choruses. The simple use of 9/8 in this piece illustrates how easily a fresh new twist can be put on an old style.

Wobbly Waltz

by Bill Dobbins




(G)
E♭
D♭
D(7)
G
D+
Choruses (from A)
then D.S. al coda
(with repeat)
(G)
G/D
Fadd9
F♯7
G7

Suggested Listening

	Boogie Woogie, Jump and Kansas City	Folkways 2810
	Boogie Woogie Kings	Euphonic 1208
	Boogie Woogie Man	French RCA 730.561
	Boogie Woogie Piano Rarities	Milestone 2009
	Boogie Woogie Trio	Storyville 4006
Pete Johnson	*Boogie Woogie Mood*	MCA 1333
Meade Lux Lewis	*Barrel House Piano*	Archive of Folk and Jazz Music 268E
Jimmy Yancey	*In the Beginning*	Jazzology JCE-51