by Adam Perlmutter

What's Between The Lines

John Coltrane • Giant Steps

In an '80s guitar rag, if memory serves, there's this rad washroom picture of several hard-core Guitar Institute of Technology students. While they're urinating, they've got their axes strapped on backwards. An accompanying article describes how pupils practice in the school's halls and in the cafeteria, too. Saxophonist John Coltrane—an entirely different sort of shredder—was similarly obsessive when it came to practicing. He was known to woodshed in club dressing rooms and even in homes at which he was a dinner guest. Highly curious and spiritual, Coltrane constantly sought new modes of expression, yielding numerous jazz advances: an expansion of the harmonic language, the acceptance of soprano saxophone as a modern improvising instrument, the introduction of non-Western music as a springboard for improvisation, and the validation of free playing (i.e., open-ended improvisation).

Coltrane's first high-profile gig was with the big band of trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1949–1951). During his mid- to late-1950s apprenticeships with trumpeter Miles Davis and pianist Thelonious Monk, Coltrane matured rapidly, and in 1960, he debuted his own advanced quartet, comprised of pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Reggie Workman, and drummer Elvin Jones. That classic quartet performed for six years, recording such seminal pieces as a modal version of Rodger's and Hart's "My Favorite Things" (1960) and the original suite "A Love Supreme" (1964). By the time of his premature death in 1967, Coltrane was widely regarded as a jazz saint. The following transcription will expedite learning Coltrane's "Giant Steps" (1959), which he recorded shortly before forming the classic quartet. In seriously studying jazz, a mastery of this composition is compulsory.

COLTRANE SUBSTITUTIONS

As Coltrane began to feel encumbered with traditional ii–V–I changes, he modified them to suit his sophisticated harmonic conception. **Fig. 1A** contains a standard ii–V–I progression in E♭ major, while **Fig. 1B** features what are known as "Coltrane substitutions." After the ii chord (Fm7) of E♭, a dominant chord a half step higher (F♯7) is played. The F♯7 resolves to Bmaj7, a new I chord. Following that chord, a V7 chord a minor 3rd away (D7) is featured, resolving to its I chord (Gmaj7). Another minor 3rd movement brings the progression to B♭7, the original key's V7 chord, which resolves to E♭maj7, the I chord.

The chord progression of "Giant Steps," based on Coltrane substitutions, may initially seem intimidating. To simplify, consider that all chords belong to one of three equidistant key centers (E♭, G, or B). Harmonically, the first eight measures are more active; there is a downward major 3rd modulation in every bar; in the second eight measures, there is an upward modulation every other bar.

THE MELODIC LANGUAGE

While it may sound incredibly complex, Coltrane's improvisation is based on simple formulae; he tended to outline chords in four-note diatonic groupings: 1–2–3–5, 1–3–5–7, 3–5–7–9, 5–3–2–1, etc. For the E♭ chord, he sometimes employed the E♭ major scale (E♭–F–G–A♭–B♭–C–D). A B♭ bebop scale (B♭–C–D–E♭–F–G–A♭–A) was sometimes featured in the Fm7–B♭7 measure. Think of that scale as the major scale with the addition of a lowered 7th. Coltrane used few chromatic alterations in the solo. One example is the E♭ note in the 10th measure of section B1. That note is the ♭9 of the D7 chord.

To successfully improvise over "Giant Steps" changes, start very simply and slowly (145 bpm or less): follow the form, playing only the chords' roots. Next, play the root, 3rd, and 5th of each chord, and after that, the root, 3rd, 5th, and 7th of each chord. Now you're ready to tackle some of Coltrane's four-note groupings over each chord, such as shown in **Fig. 2A**, which features the 1–2–3–5 pattern. Then, mix the 1–2–3–5 pattern with an 8 (1)–7–♭7–9 pattern on each dominant 7th chord [**Fig. 2B**]. With the transcription as a guide, select your favorite patterns and practice them with this systematic approach. Eventually, navigating this exciting progression at top speed will become second nature. G1

Fig. 1A ii–V–I Progression

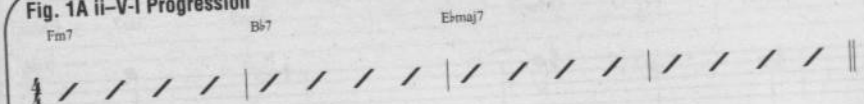


Fig. 1B ii–V–I Progression with Coltrane Substitutions

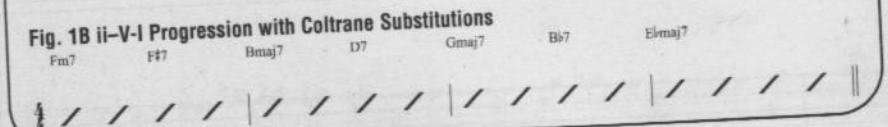


Fig. 2A

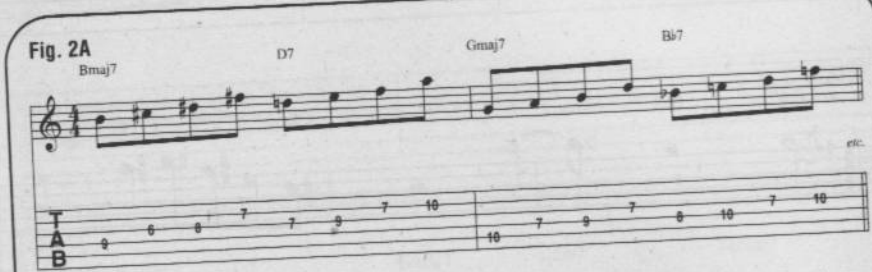
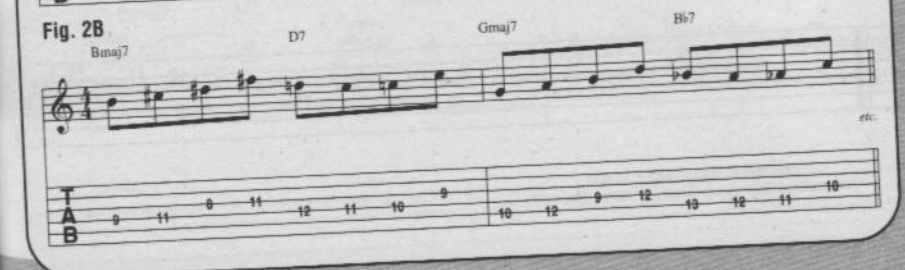


Fig. 2B



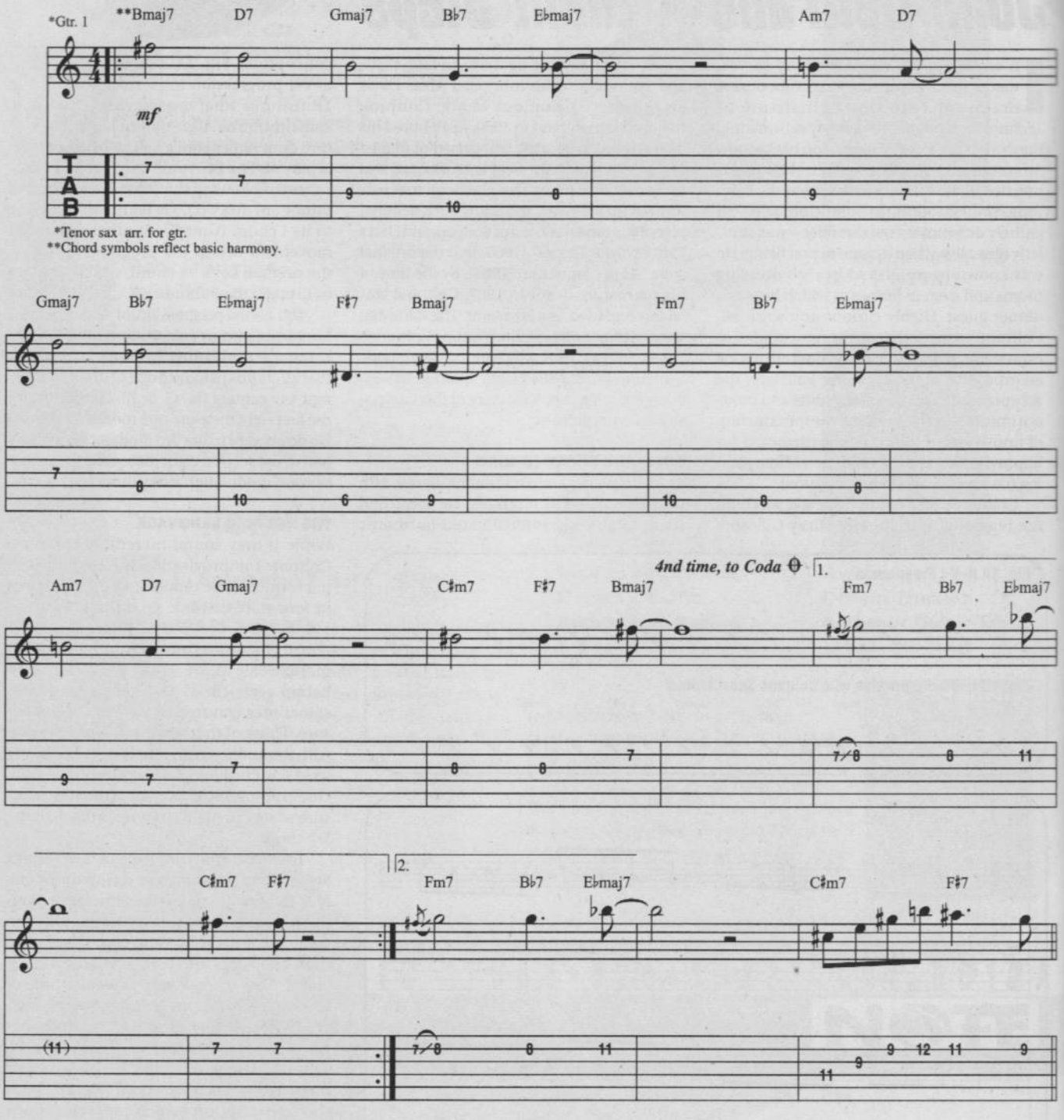
GIANT STEPS

As Recorded by John Coltrane

(From the Atlantic Recording GIANT STEPS)

Transcribed by Adam Perlmutter

By John Coltrane


A Head
Fast Swing ♩ = 290

**Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 Am7 D7

*Tenor sax arr. for gtr.
**Chord symbols reflect basic harmony.
Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 F♯7 Bmaj7 Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7
Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C♯m7 F♯7 Bmaj7
4nd time, to Coda
1.
Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7
C♯m7 F♯7
2.
Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7 C♯m7 F♯7

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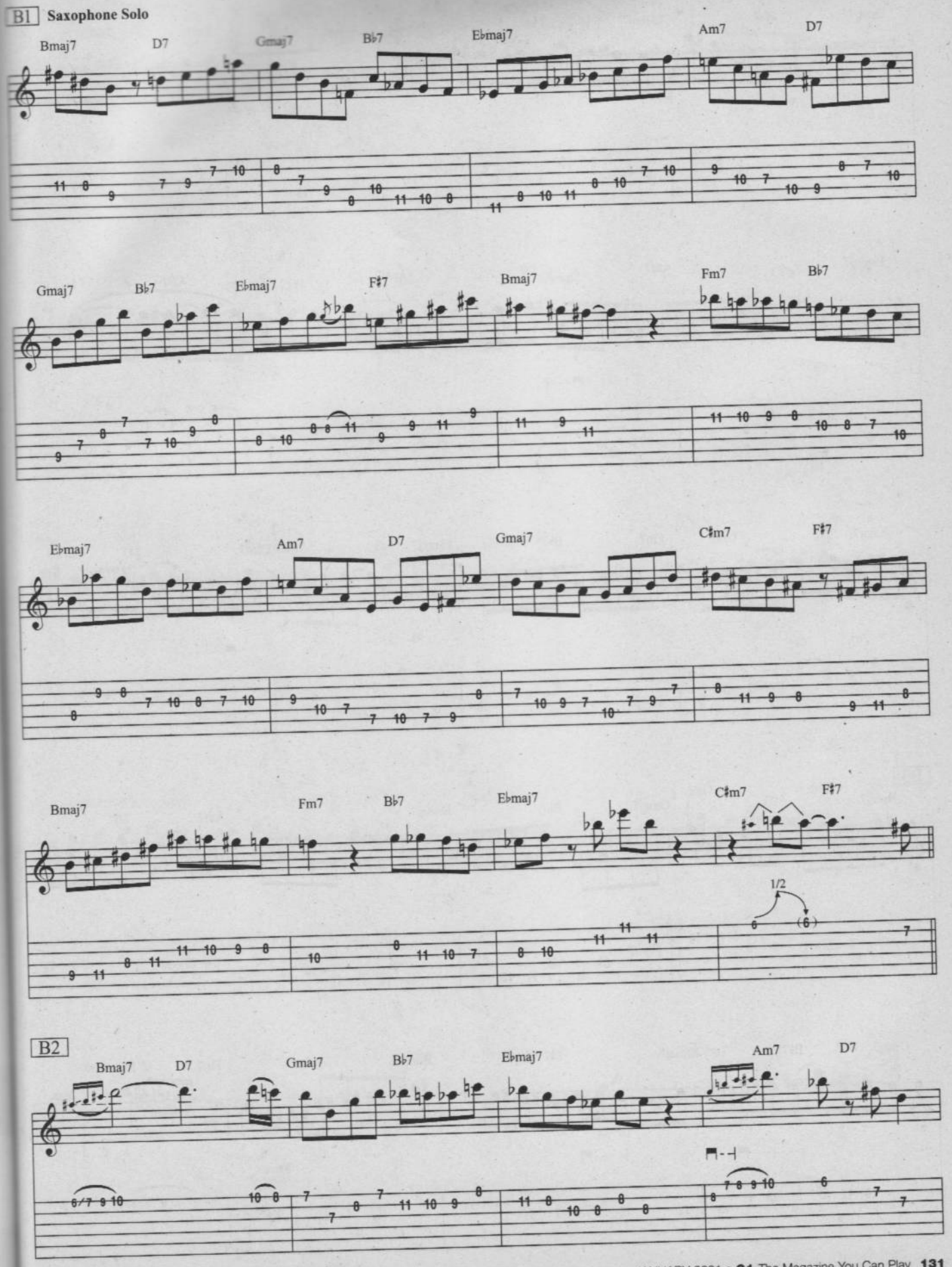
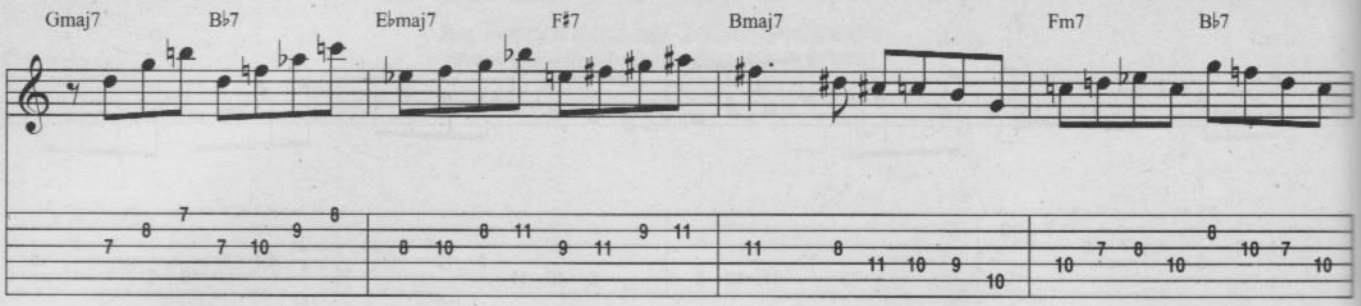
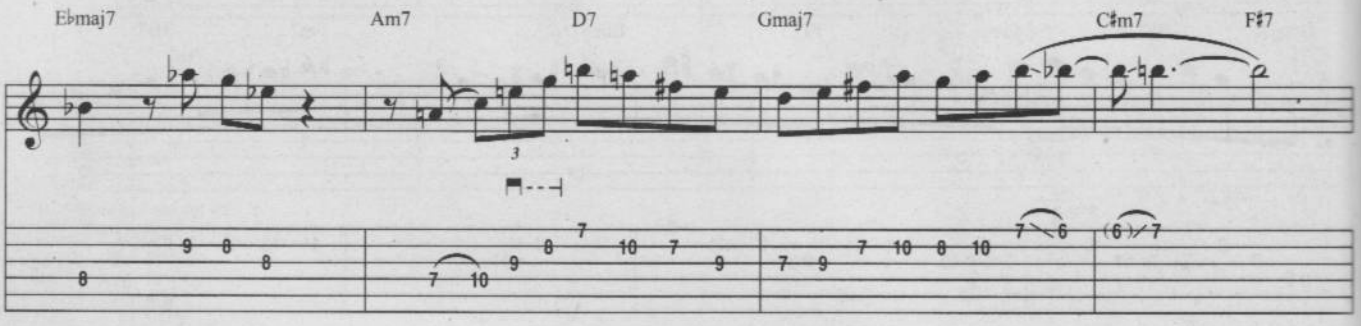
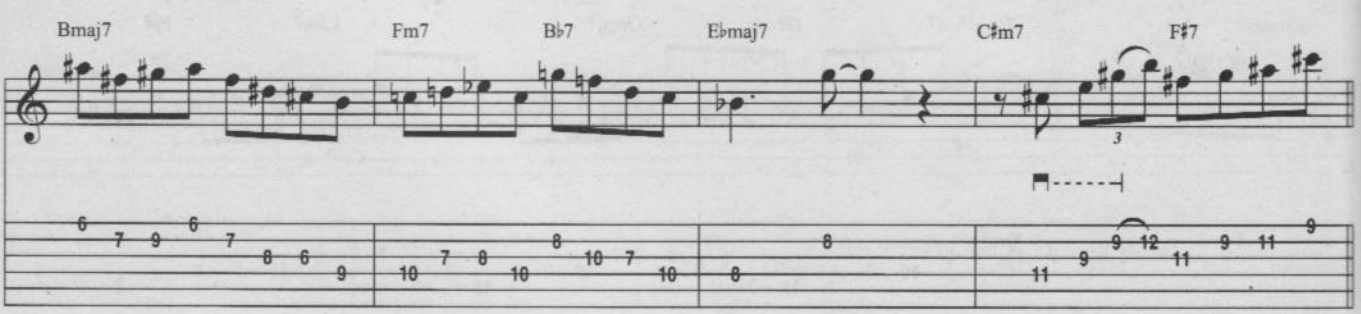

B1 Saxophone Solo
Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 Am7 D7
Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 F♯7 Bmaj7 Fm7 B♭7
E♭maj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C♯m7 F♯7
Bmaj7 Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7 C♯m7 F♯7
1/2
B2
Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 Am7 D7

Giant Steps







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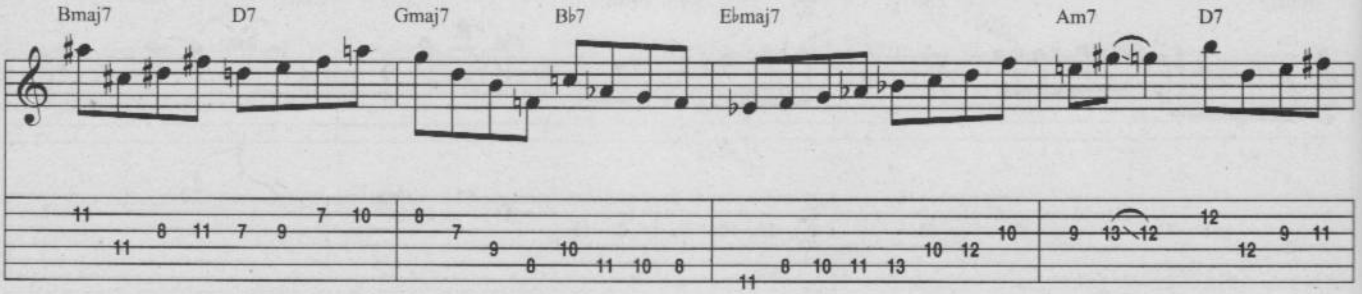

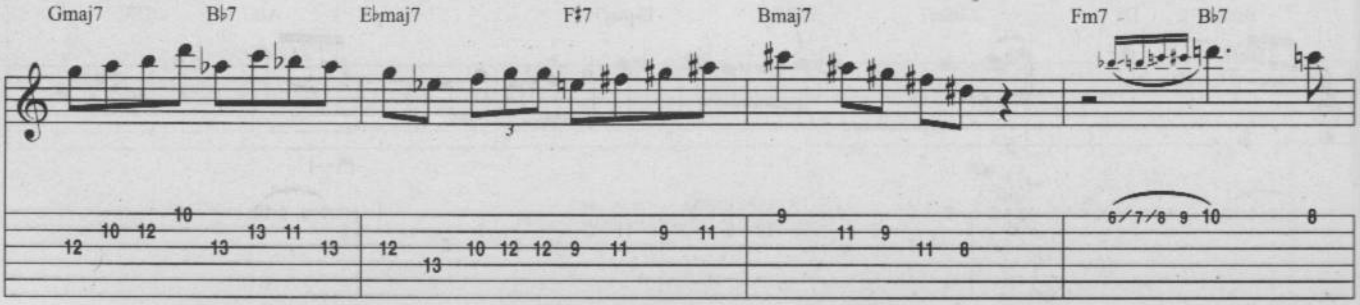

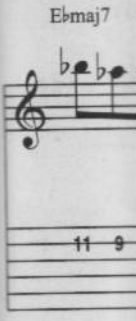

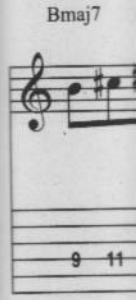

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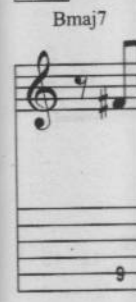

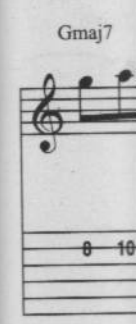

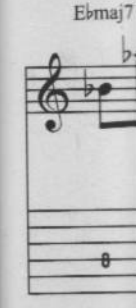

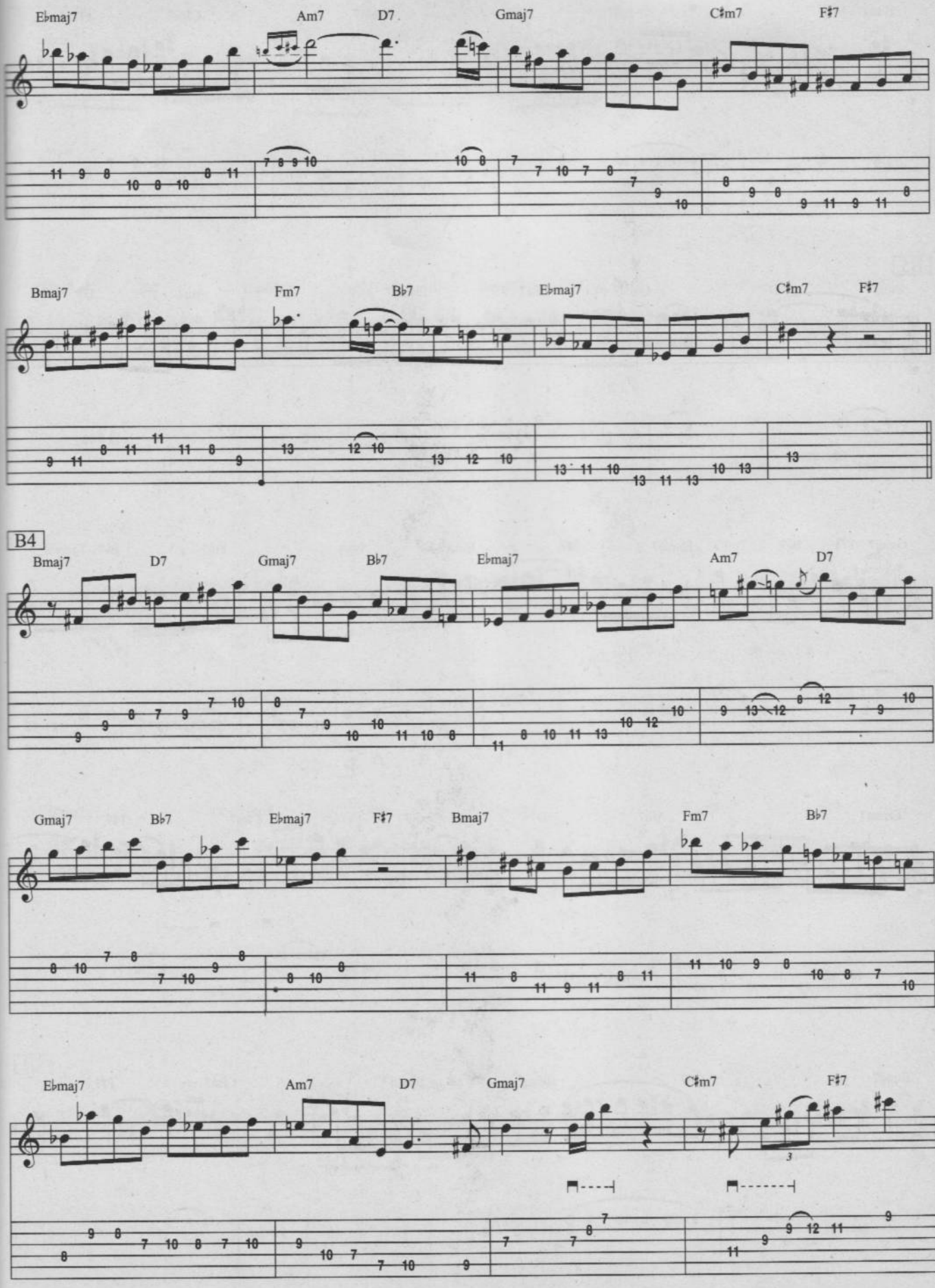
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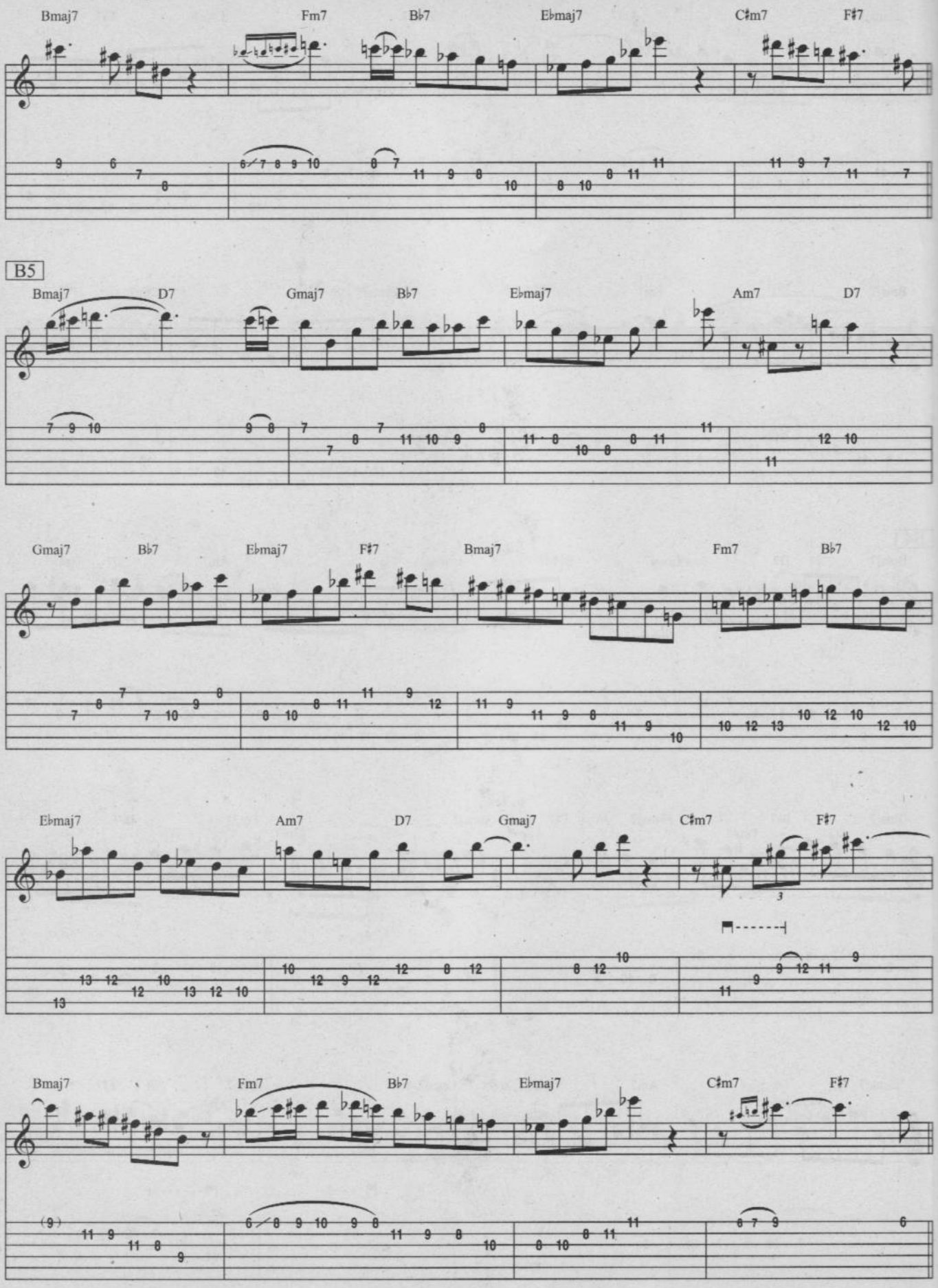
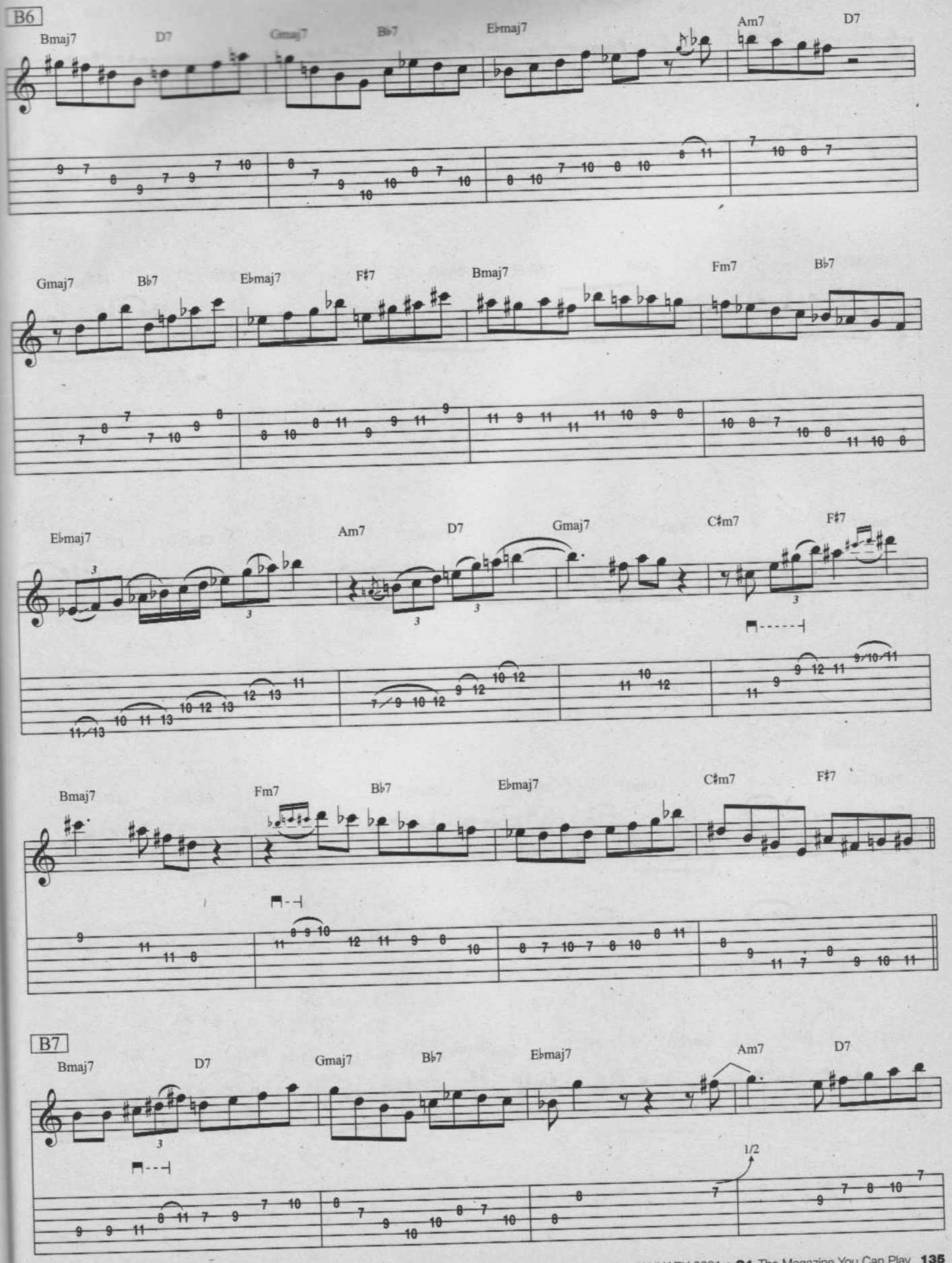
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
C♯m7
F♯7
B4
Bmaj7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7

Giant Steps


Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
C♯m7
F♯7
B5
Bmaj7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
C♯m7
F♯7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Bmaj7
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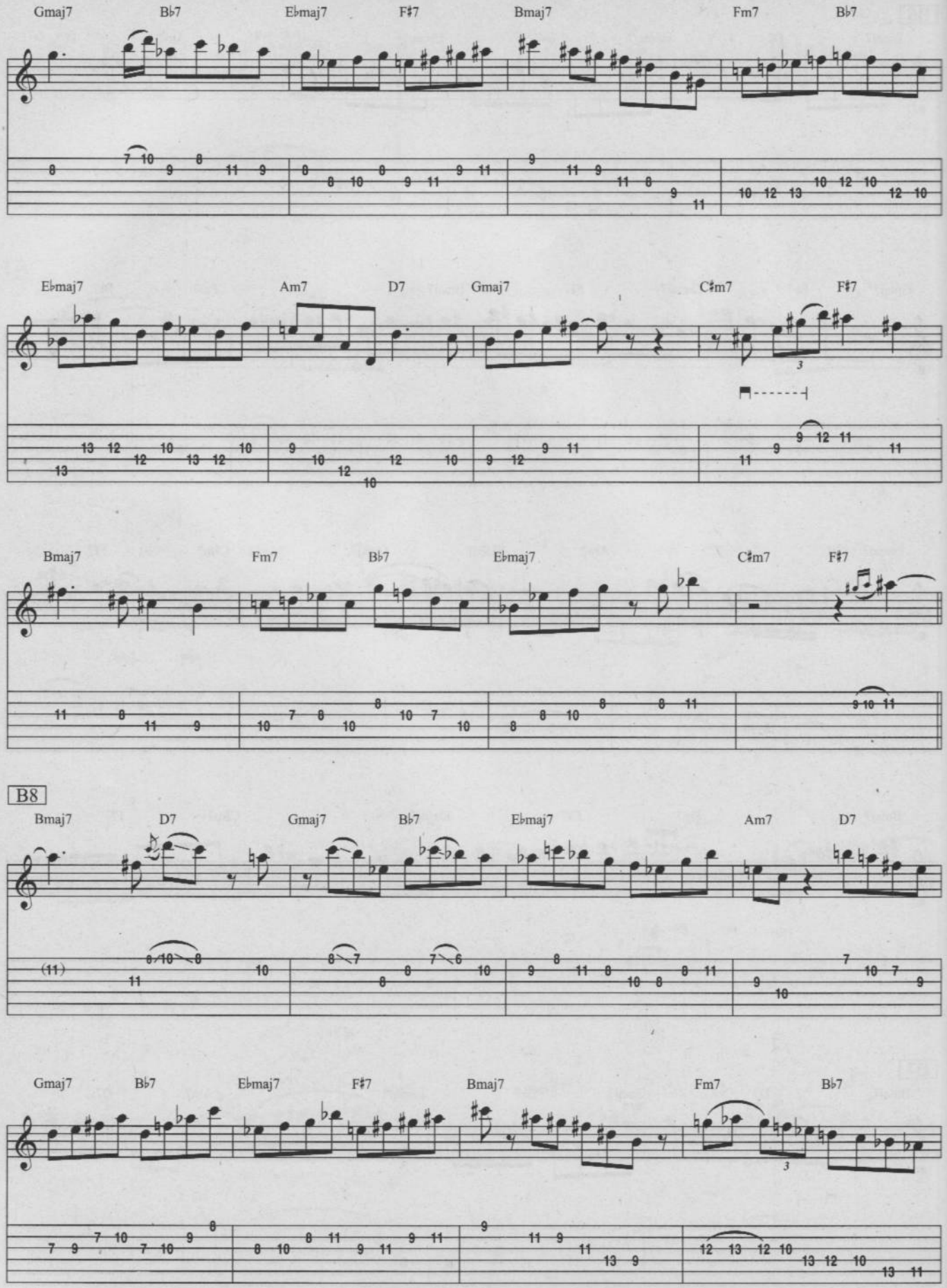
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
C♯m7
F♯7
B7
Bmaj7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
1/2

Giant Steps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E♭maj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C♯m7 F♯7
Bmaj7 Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7 C♯m7 F♯7
B8
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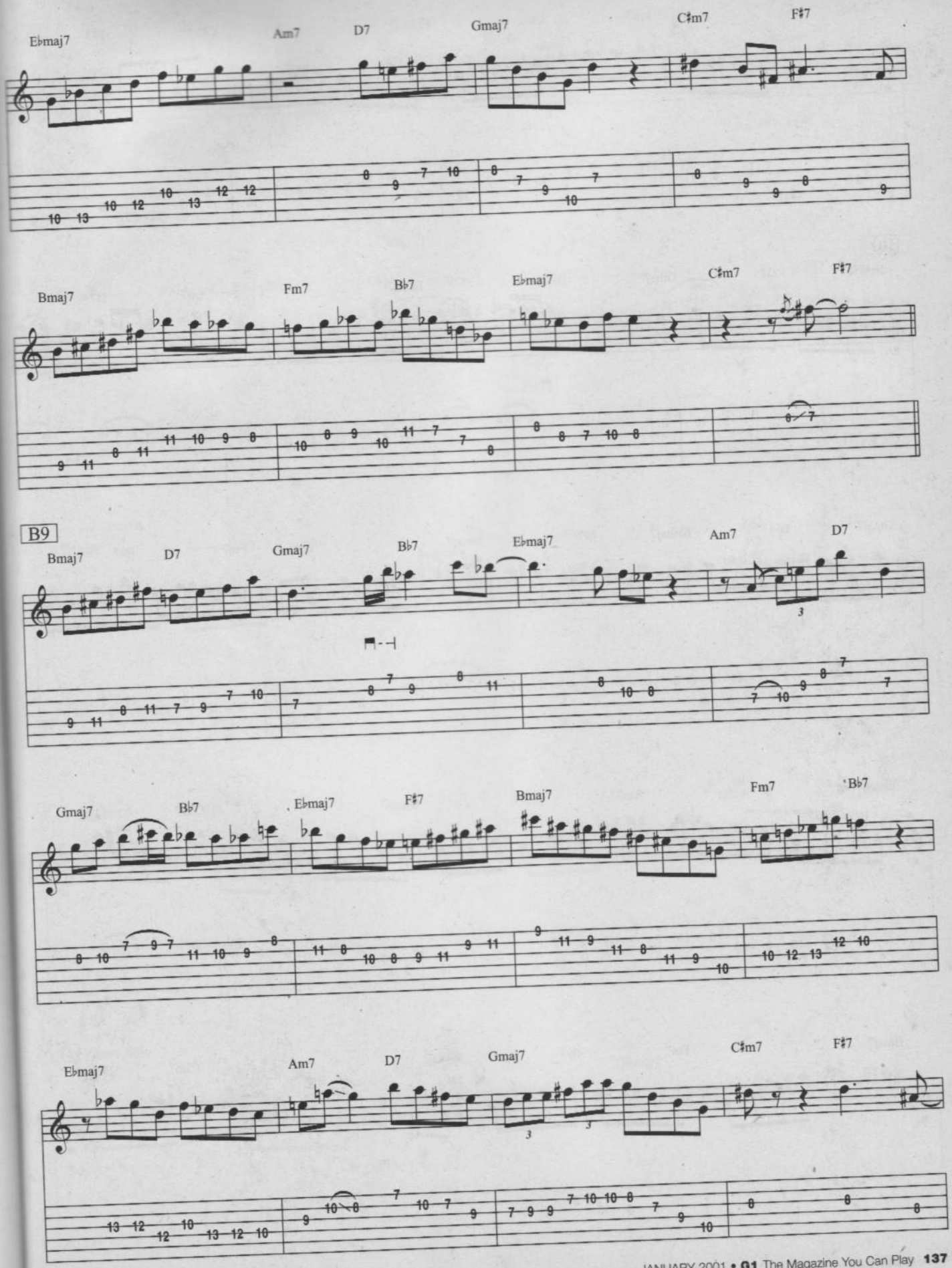
Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 F♯7 Bmaj7 Fm7 B♭7


E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
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C♯m7
F♯7
B9
Bmaj7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
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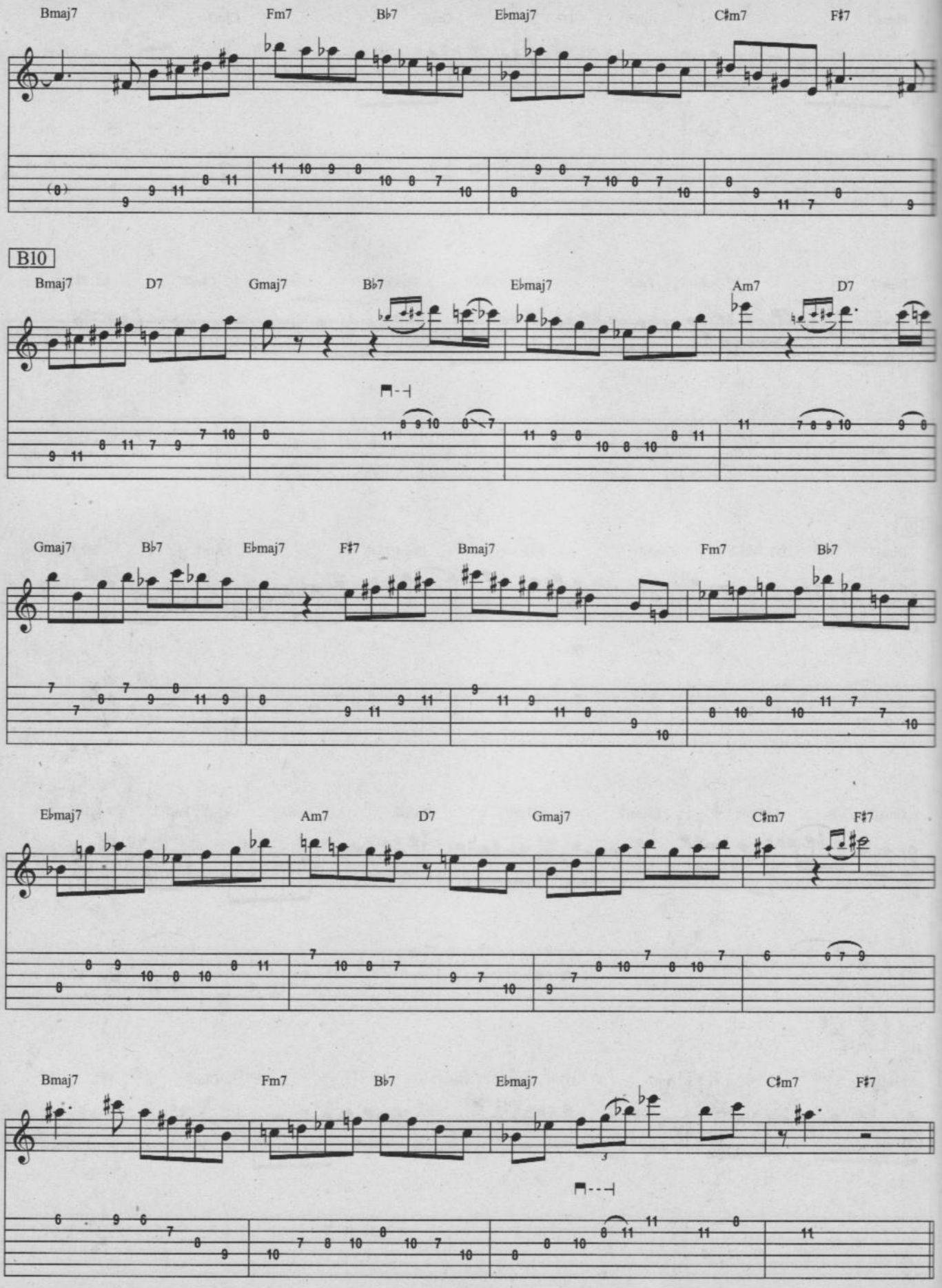
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7

Giant Steps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B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
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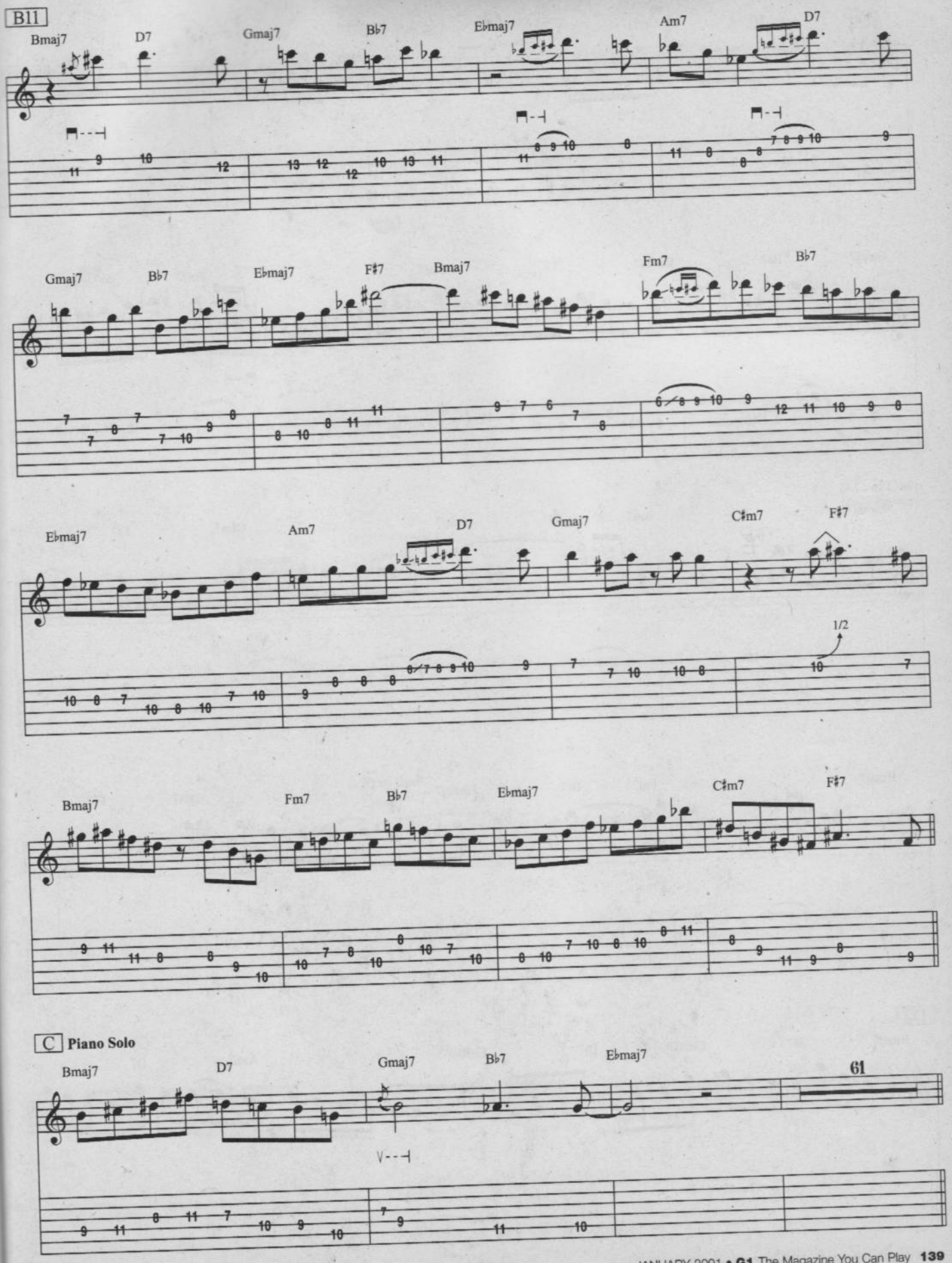
F♯7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Gmaj7
B♭7
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D7
Gmaj7
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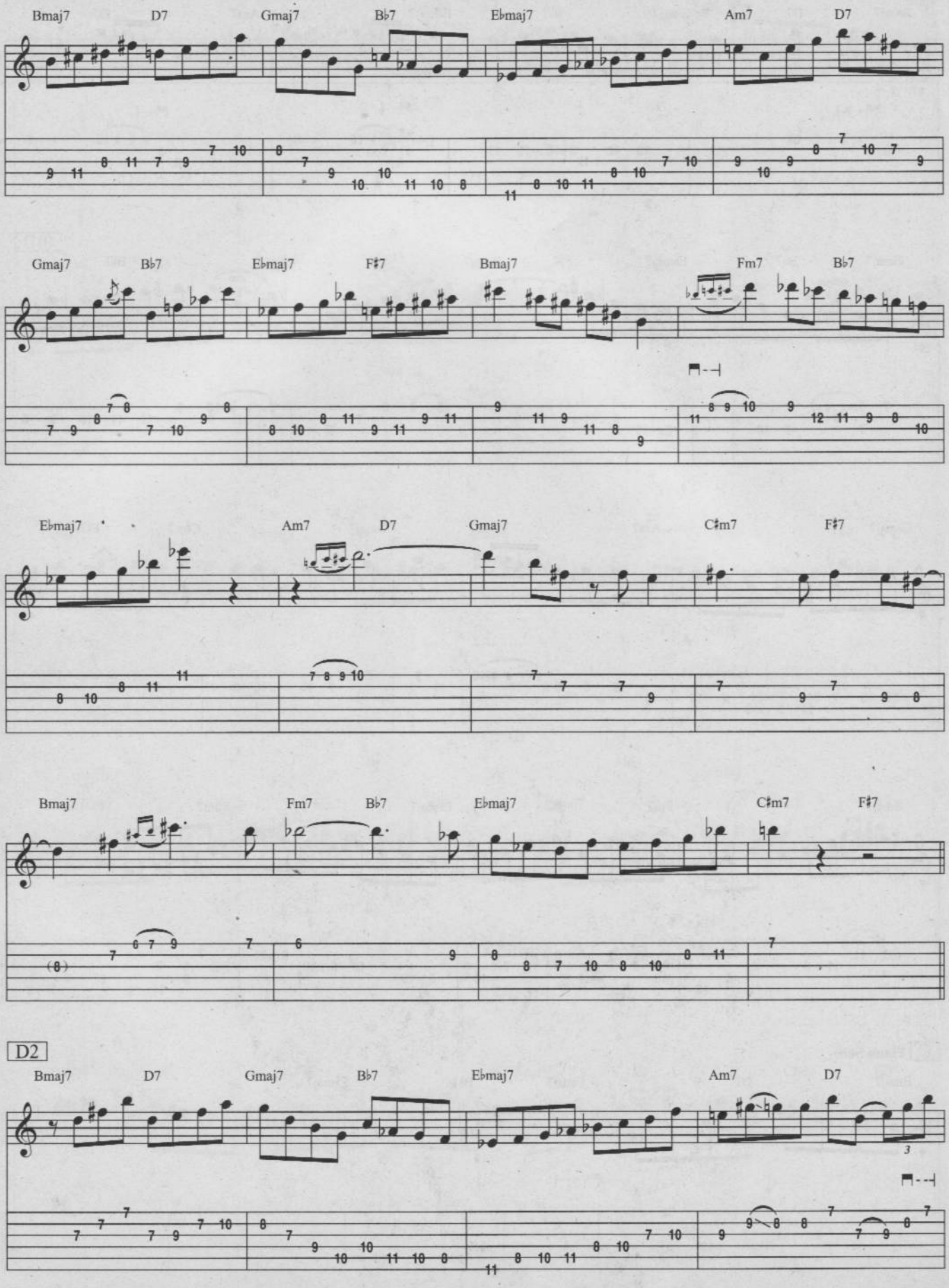
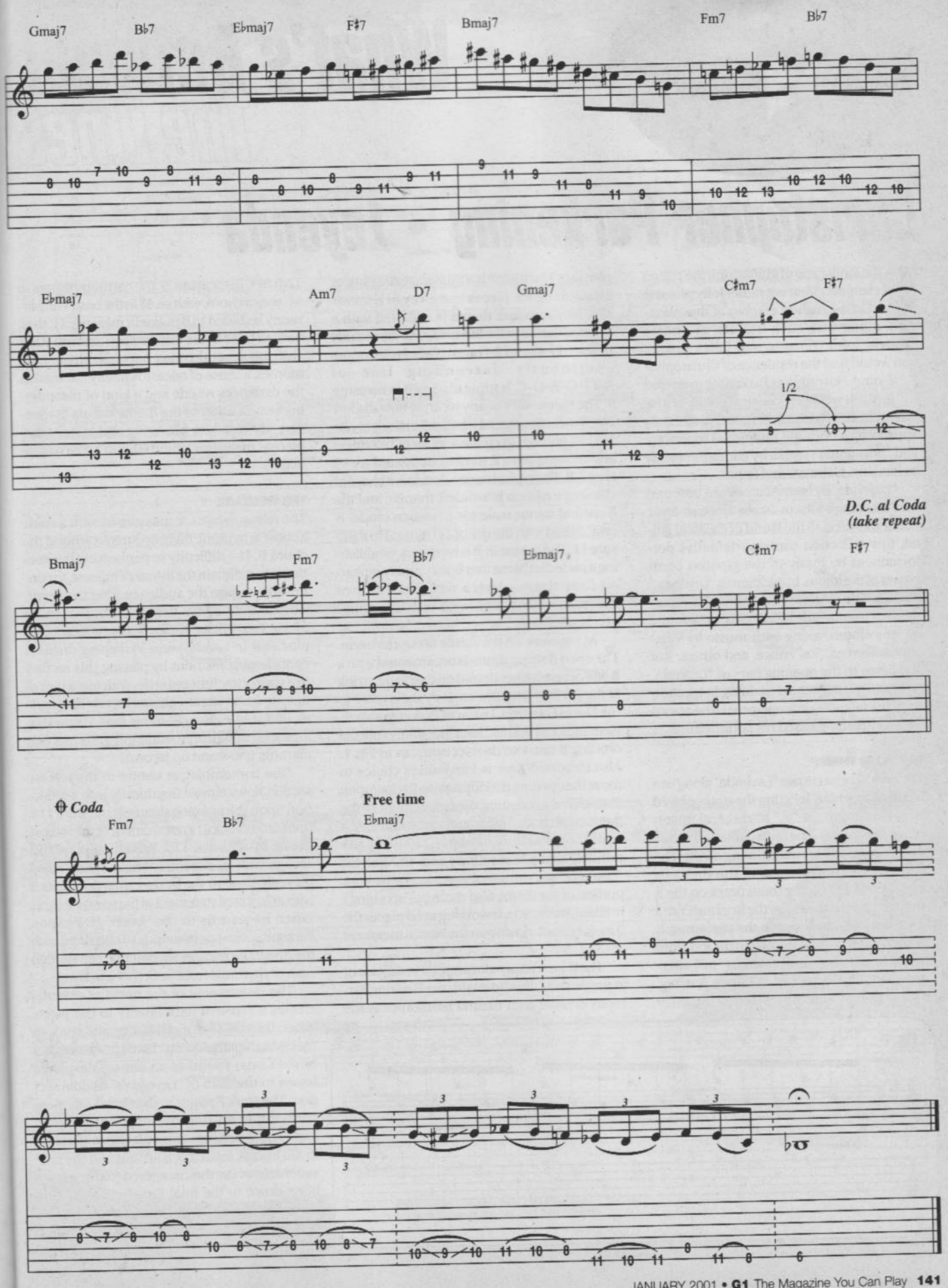
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7
1/2
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
C♯m7
F♯7
C Piano Solo
Bmaj7
D7
Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
61

Giant Steps

D1 **Saxophone Solo**



Giant Steps


Gmaj7
B♭7
E♭maj7
F♯7
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
Am7
D7
Gmaj7
C♯m7
F♯7
1/2
D.C. al Coda
(take repeat)
Bmaj7
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7
C♯m7
F♯7
Coda
Free time
Fm7
B♭7
E♭maj7