Blues Bass Line Assignment

Write a walking bass line for a 12-Bar Blues tune.

Follow these steps:

1. Select a 12-Bar Blues lead sheet. Place the melody (head) on the top line of a grand staff, with the chord symbols above.

2. Write the root of each chord on the first beat of each measure in the bass register, using quarter notes. In the blues most chords are either Mm7 or mm7. Occasionally, the root may be replaced by the third or fifth if the moving line benefits.

3. Connect these chord roots in mostly stepwise (conjunct) motion with a quarter note on each beat, "walking" between the chord changes.

4. Approach the first beat of each measure with stepwise motion most of the time.

5. To vary the constant stepwise motion, you may outline the triad or bounce between the root and fifth of the chord.

6. Create rhythmic interest with repeated notes in an eight-note pattern in swing time, or a triplet pattern of intervals.

7. It is idiomatic to use the M2, m3, M3 scale degrees when moving upward between roots a P4th apart. Moving downward with the same intervals (W-H-H), an inversion of the upward movement, is effective and creates a half-step approach to the next chord.

8. The last two measures often use a I – VI – II – V progression. This "turn around" is a good place to experiment with substitute chords. An example using tritone substitution would be I7 – subV7/vi – ii7 – subV7/V. In the key of F the chords are F7 – Ab7 – G7 – Gb7.

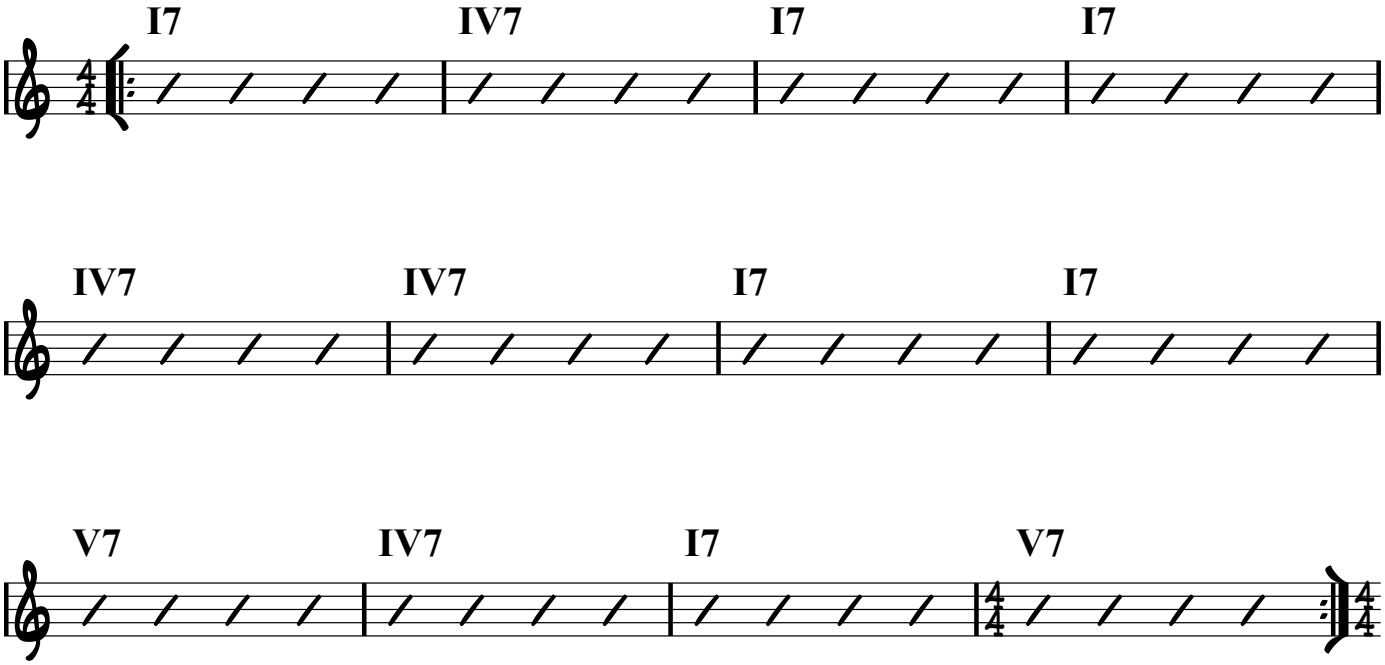
9. A tritone using the M3rd and m7th of each chord is a good voicing for each chord in the 12-bar blues above the bass line. Smooth voice leading is created by moving each tritone down by half-step to the next chord. The F chord is represented by the notes A and Eb, and the this moves to Ab and D for the Bb chord. The tritone substitutes in the turn-around create a strong circle of fifths motion over half-steps in the bass.

Other considerations:

The standard 12-bar blues progression has evolved over the last century, from early Delta blues to sophisticated Jazz blues variations. Typical chord changes in Roman Numerals for each style are shown below. Study and transcribe your favorite blues bass lines to learn how creative bass players and arrangers have developed this style of music. Try playing any two parts of the Blues by Five arrangement together at the piano in a swing tempo.

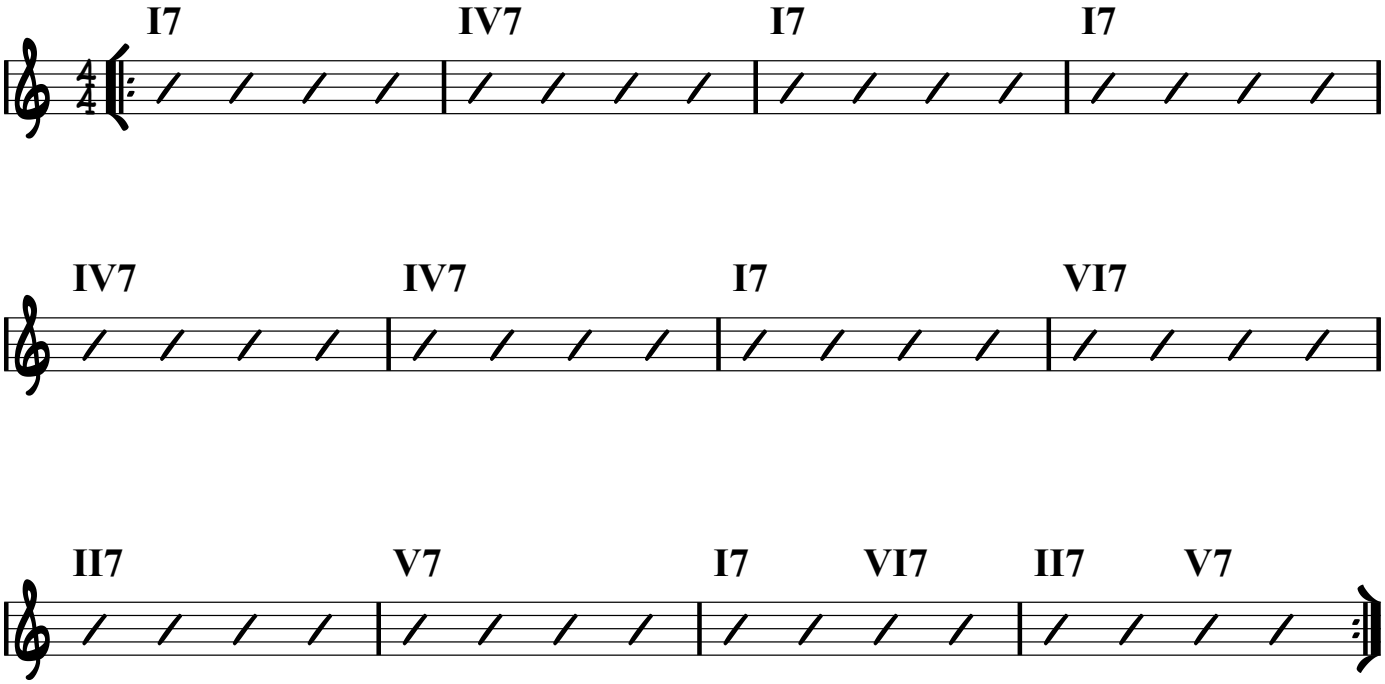
DELTA BLUES

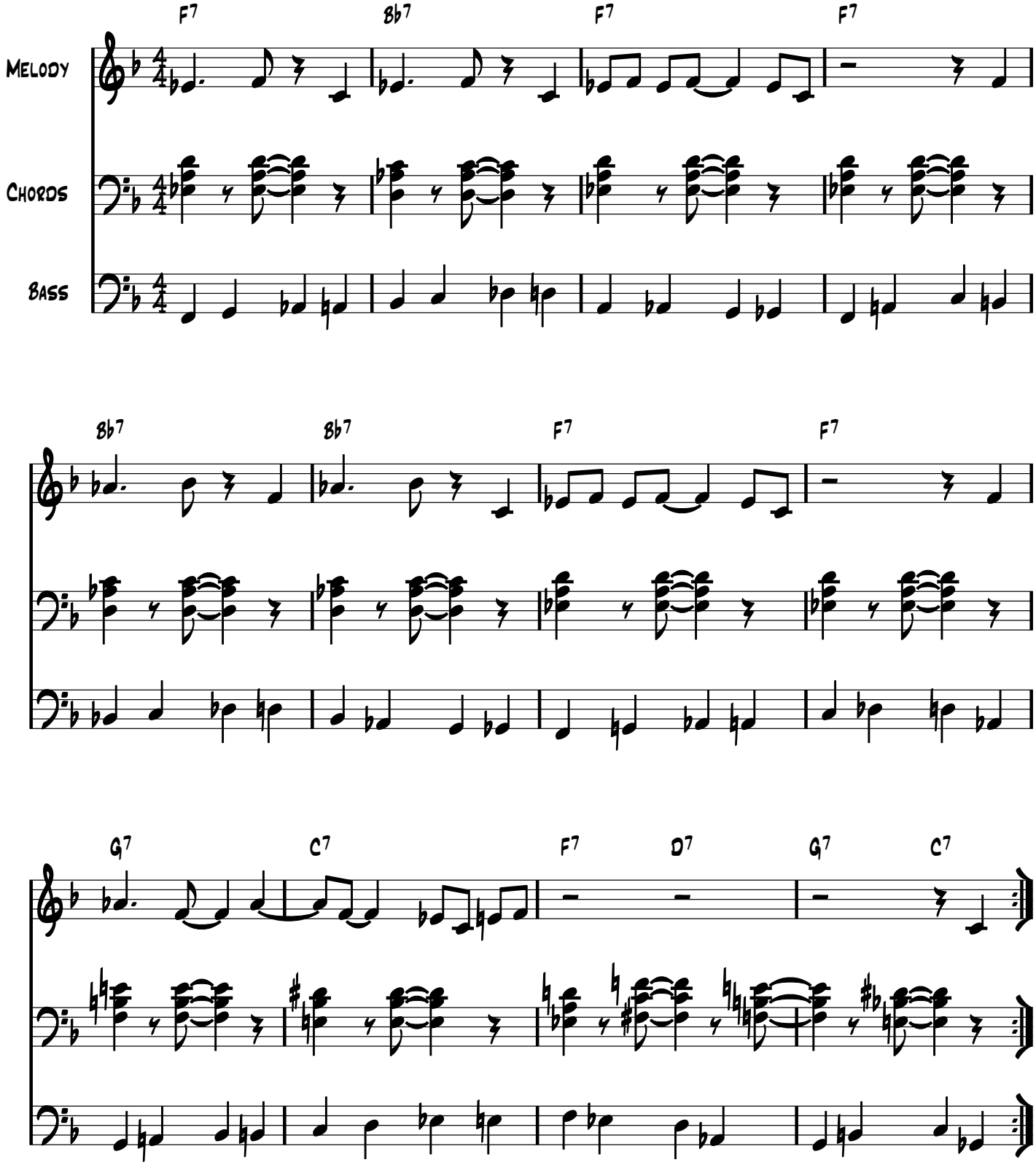
(BASIC CHANGES)



JAZZ BLUES

(EXPANDED CHANGES)



BLUES BY FIVE

Red Garland