

# Improvisation Composition

From *Fundamentals of Jazz Improvisation:  
What Everybody Thinks You Already Know*

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# Improvisation Composition

During improv class one semester I introduced the concept of writing out a composition. One student said, "This isn't a composition class." He felt it was too much of a demand. My rebuttal, "Yes it is. The only difference is that the improviser has to compose 'on the fly'."

Jazz improvisation is instantaneous composition performed within guidelines of style, form, chord progression or other constructs. The amount of composition ranges from free jazz to melodic interpretation. Often it is a challenge for students to "break the ice" so to speak and begin to create. Accumulation of resource such as facility with chords and scales, patterns, mastery of one's instrument, rhythms and articulations, and other fundamentals of music are as necessary to the jazz improviser as a palette of colors is to the artist. Putting them together, composing, in creative ways requires what the Baroque writers called "good taste." How does one combine jazz fundamentals in an acceptable, artistic manner? How does one develop "good taste" in improvisation composition? Listening, emulation, and application are essential. Here are a few application ideas designed to "break the ice."

## Musicality Principles

Success with the exercises below will be enhanced when a few points are kept in mind.

**Phrase Lengths:** Read the chapter, Form and Structure. Many jazz tunes use eight bar phrases. These phrases are often further delineated into four bar groups. Melodic content often follows this organization and has a responsibility to help outline the form. Rhythms tend to be more active (more complex, more notes) just before new sections and less active at the beginnings of phrases. Harmonies are more active (dominant chords) leading in to the next unit. The most activity will take place at the end of one chorus before the next. The second most active is often leading into the bridge. Next is the delineation of phrase lengths as discussed. And, lastly, recognize a feeling of the 4th bar of a phrase leading to the 5th.

**Climax Placement/The Golden Mean (.618):** Most music reaches its climax about 2/3 through. Devices such as increases in rhythmic complexity, note frequency, pitch range, and dynamic are common means. Start with softer dynamics and fewer notes allowing one's solo to grow naturally.

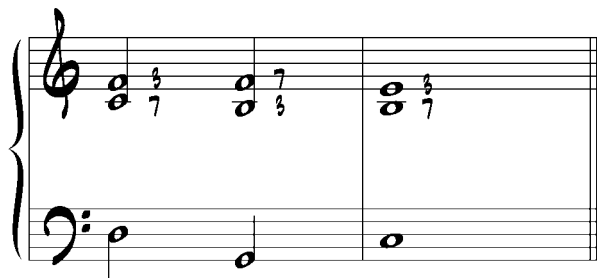
**Space:** Too many notes hardly ever sound good. Music needs to breath. Listeners need time to consider, time for the motifs to register. Leave room, rest between melodic words. Consider the run-on sentence and avoid the tendency in improvisation. Also, the rhythm section can do wonders for the soloist. Let them make you sound better. Give them a chance to interact. As a solo grows, the amount of space may diminish naturally.

**One and Three:** Jazz is often thought of as a 2 and 4 emphasis, which is true in tone color from the high hat, but is primarily a flat four with even dynamic distribution. Melodically and harmonically 1 and 3 are goals in most cases. Lead over bar lines, resolving on one is a good guiding principle

with many exceptions. Keep in mind the two-part division of the measure in 4/4 time; the half note is the fundamental unit.

**Harmonic Delineation:** Generally, jazz soloists and composer attempt to outline the harmonic structure of a composition in the melodic material without dependence on the chording instruments. One should be able to hear the harmonic progression from the improvised line alone, without the rhythm section. Choosing notes that are most different between chords as opposed to common tones does this. The Guide Tone principle below is helpful.

**Guide Tones:** Three resolves to 7 and 7 resolves to 3. These are important note tendencies in music and jazz is not an exception. The 7<sup>th</sup> of dominant resolves to 3 of tonic; 3 moves to 7.



Not an absolute but a good guiding principle for constructing improvisations. Guide Tones provide melodic structure and direction.

**Meter and Form:** Keep track of the meter and form of the tune. It is common for young improvisers to disregard the fact that the composition is in 4/4, or 3/4, for example, and play rhythms that wander and notes that have illogical resolutions. Similarly, form must be maintained. The improviser should know the tunes phrase lengths, most commonly 8 bars, where the bridge is, etc. These fundamentals can be adhered to in innumerable ways, but not ignored. Even displacing a pattern or adding a syncopation is done knowing that it is a displaced rhythm or syncopation.

**Articulation:** Rhythm and articulation go hand in hand. Articulation can make or break a phrase. Some seemingly illogical melodic lines can be made to work with good articulation. Refer to the Charlie Parker Analysis and the chapter Rhythm Vocabulary.

**Good Taste:** One's ability to discern quality in jazz comes from concerted listening and exposure to quality performances over time. The more one performs with other great players, the better one becomes. Transcription and other emulative situations enter our soul and increase our ability to judge. More intellectual studies can help if applied. Guidance from seasoned professionals either in the classroom or the bandstand helps. Always ask about one's creation, composed on paper or improvised in time, "Does it sound good." Make conscious decisions.

# Melodic Embellishment

Use the melody of the tune as a structure for improvisation.

*Autumn Leaves* (Joseph Kosma and Johnny Mercer), A section:

Original melody and simplified harmonic structure for the A section of *Autumn Leaves*. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The melody is written on a single staff. The harmonic structure is indicated by chords above the staff: C-7, F7, BbΔ7, BbΔ7(#11), AΔ7, D7(#9), G-7, and C-7.

Alter the rhythm; vary the articulation.

Original melody and simplified harmonic structure for the A section of *Autumn Leaves*, with altered rhythm and articulation. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The melody is written on a single staff. The harmonic structure is indicated by chords above the staff: C-7, F7, BbΔ7, BbΔ7(#11), AΔ7, D7(#9), G-7, and C-7. The rhythm and articulation are varied, with some notes marked with accents (^) and others with slurs.

Add embellishments.

Original melody and simplified harmonic structure for the A section of *Autumn Leaves*, with added embellishments. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The melody is written on a single staff. The harmonic structure is indicated by chords above the staff: C-7, F7, BbΔ7, BbΔ7(#11), AΔ7, D7(#9), G-7, and C-7. The melody is embellished with various rhythmic and melodic patterns, including slurs and accents (^).

$A\emptyset7$   $D7(\#9)$   $G-7$   $C-7$

Change structural melodic pitches while maintaining the essence of the melody. This is a common technique of artists such as Miles Davis and Billie Holiday.

$C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $Bb\Delta7(\#11)$

$A\emptyset7$   $D7(\#9)$   $G-7$   $C-7$

Use structural melodic pitches as a framework for improvisation.

$C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $Bb\Delta7(\#11)$



## Rhythm Blocks and Pitch Groups

### A Method for Getting Past “Writer’s Block”

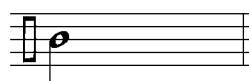
This is a process with four goals:

1. To help students apply variety of rhythm and articulation as opposed to tendencies to play excessive quarters or eights, all separated or slurred, with prime emphasis on down beats
2. To help students think of scales as pitch groups that represent a harmonic color rather than stale step wise motion
3. To stimulate variety and originality
4. To inspire critical and creative thinking through assessment and modification of the end product; to foster “good taste”

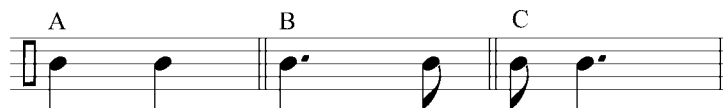
#### Step 1: Rhythm Block Assignment

Randomly assign Rhythm Block numbers (1, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4) to each half note of duration.

##### 1-note rhythm



##### 2-note rhythms



##### 3-note rhythms



##### 4-note rhythm



Example:

Two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff contains the following notes and fingerings: 3A (quarter), 2 (quarter), 2B (quarter), 3C (quarter), 4 (quarter), 1 (quarter), 2A (quarter), and 2C (quarter). The second staff contains: 3B (quarter), 4 (quarter), 3A (quarter), 2B (quarter), 1 (quarter), 2C (quarter), 4 (quarter), and 2B (quarter).

Step 2: Pitch Group Assignment

Randomly assign pitches from the appropriate pitch group (scale).

Three staves of musical notation showing pitch groups for different chords. The first staff shows Dmi7, G7, Emi7, and A7. The second staff shows Ami7, D7, Abmi7, and Db7. The third staff shows Cma7, F7, Emi7, and A7. Each staff contains a sequence of notes representing the pitch group for the respective chord.

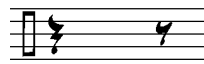
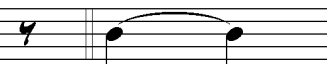
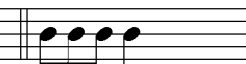
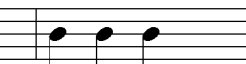
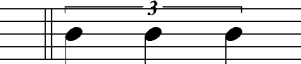
Example:

Two staves of musical notation showing pitch groups with specific pitch assignments. The first staff shows Dmi7, G7, Emi7, and A7. The second staff shows Ami7, D7, Abmi7, Db7, Cma7, F7, Emi7, and A7. Below each staff, the specific pitches for each note are listed.

| Staff   | 3A     | 2        | 2B      | 3C    | 4         | 1     | 2A        | 2C   |
|---------|--------|----------|---------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|------|
| Staff 1 | G B C  | A F      | B A E   | C F G | C# B G F# | A     | G F#      | B C# |
| Staff 2 | E B F# | C B F# E | Eb C Bb | Ab Eb | B         | Eb Bb | C# D B C# | A E  |

### Step 3: Add Modifications

Impose at least one rest, tie (if possible), and triplet on the composition. This exercises musical judgment.

|                                                                                   |                                                                                   |                                                                                   |                                                                                    |                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rest<br>(can sub for any note)                                                    | Tie<br>(can connect any two notes)                                                | Turn<br>(replaces two 8th notes)                                                  | 1/8th note triplet<br>(replaces two 8th notes)                                     | 1/4 note triplet<br>(replaces two quarter notes)                                    |
|  |  |  |  |  |

Make musical decisions when applying rests, ties, and triplets. Example:



### Step 4: Articulations and Alterations

Well-chosen articulations can make a seemingly nonmusical line successful. Play the composition and notate appropriate articulations.

It is unlikely that this random application of Rhythm Blocks and Pitch Group notes has resulted in a perfect improvisation. Use musical judgment to make corrections. Ideas from the above section, Musicality Principles, should be considered. **THIS IS THE CRITICAL ELEMENT FOR YOUR MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT.** Decisions will be based on your “good taste,” which comes from exposure to good music (see the chapter on Listening).

Example:

- ~ = terminal vibrato
- HT = half-tongue, half-valve, or damping (ghosted)



# Patterns

Read the section on Patterns in the chapter, Lick Book. Patterns serve as a useful tool in creating solos, either written or improvised.

Patterns have been placed in every measure of this progression from *Song for My Father*. As stated, if a soloist performs consecutive patterns this frequently, it is usually unsuccessful. There are four values in this example:

1. Placing known patterns within a written improvisation is a way to get started when nothing comes to mind
2. The example demonstrates how patterns can serve as a point of departure for more original lines (point 6 above)
3. Patterns from the jazz tradition help the listener relate to the solo (point 8)
4. Transcribed patterns from a recoding of the tune help the improviser understand its character (point 5); mm. 1 and 6 are from Joe Henderson's rendition

The image displays nine musical patterns arranged across three staves. Each pattern is labeled and associated with a specific chord symbol. The notation includes various rhythmic values and melodic lines.

- Pattern 1:** Associated with G-7. It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 2:** It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 3:** Associated with F7. It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 4:** It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 5:** Associated with Eb7. It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 6:** It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 7:** Associated with A-/O. It consists of a sequence of eighth notes with a triplet of eighth notes.
- Pattern 8:** Associated with F-7. It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.
- Pattern 9:** It consists of a sequence of eighth notes.

The following examples show the original pattern application on the top line and the modifications on the second line.

The onset of the solo is too busy. Certain intervals are retained (B-flat to A, then B-flat to A and F) but space is provided. Beat 1 and part of 2 are intact. The third bar pattern uses altered pitches, which don't seem prepared so soon in the solo, and the range feels too high at this point. The skip element is retained, an inspiration from the pattern, and more space provided.

$F-7$   
Pattern 1
Pattern 2
 $E\flat 7$   
Pattern 3

The pre-determined pattern in m.4 seems to follow well and is retained with the excepting of space being added on the upbeat of three. The bebop pattern in m. 5 feels out of place in the context and an entirely new motif is imposed retaining only the downward motion of beat one and the shape of beat two. Perhaps some tendency is residual from the original pattern. Measure 6 is retained.

Pattern 4
 $D\flat 7$   
Pattern 5
Pattern 6
 $G-C$   
Pattern 7

Although the pattern in m. 7 works and could be retained, it is somewhat cumbersome and is simplified. Measure 8's pattern serves as inspiration for the soloist.

$E\flat 7$   
Pattern 8
Pattern 9

# Improv Composition

There are two significant purposes for this exercise: 1) it provides the instructor the opportunity to learn the student's level of understanding, and 2) it requires the student to codify or assimilate knowledge learned to this point.

Improv composition will elicit creativity. As difficult as writing out a logical solo might be, it is not as challenging as creating a composition spontaneously. This is an exercise in slow motion improvisation allowing time to incorporate new principles of improvisation.

Several strategies might be useful to those unfamiliar with composition, improvised or otherwise.

1. Write out the head (melody) first then employ various degrees of embellishment.
2. Superimpose patterns from worksheet assignments either on the melody or as a starting point to a blank sheet of staff paper.
3. Randomly assign Rhythm Block rhythms to an eight bar section every half measure then randomly assign pitches appropriate to the chord. Randomly (or semi-randomly) place rests, ties, and triplets to the phrase. Play the creation and make tasteful musical corrections.
4. Mix and match all of the above.
5. Use space (rest); no run-on sentences.

Staff paper is provided herein. The correct number of measures is given, which also suggests the number of choruses expected.

Tunes for Part 1 include:

*Impressions*

*Satin Doll*

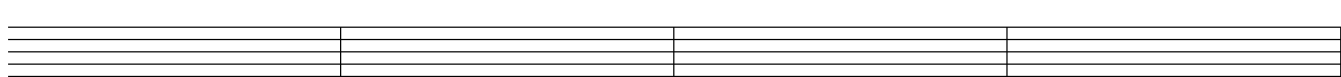
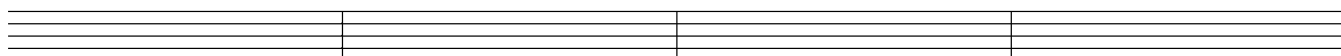
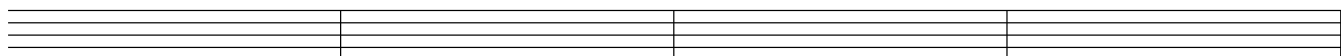
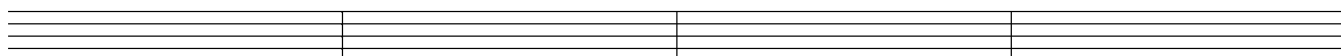
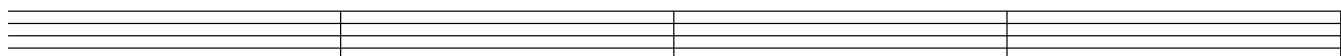
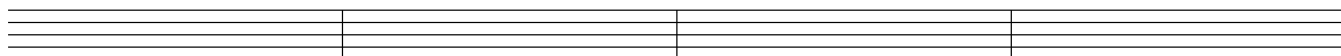
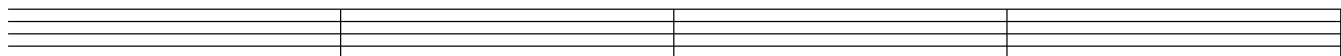
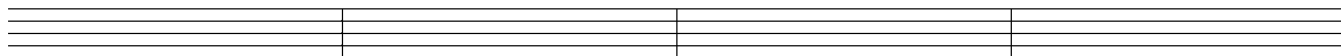
*Song for My Father*

Blues (any 12-bar head)

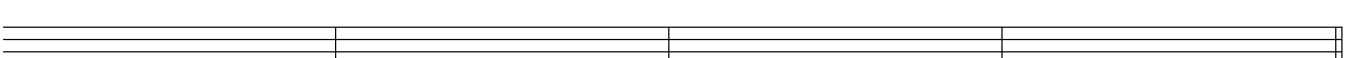
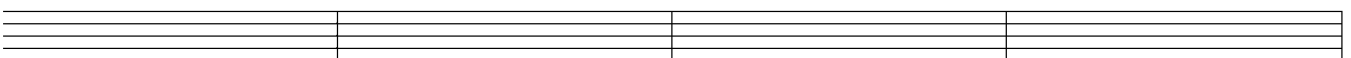
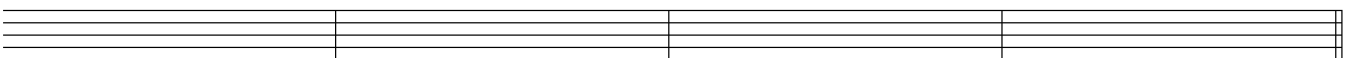
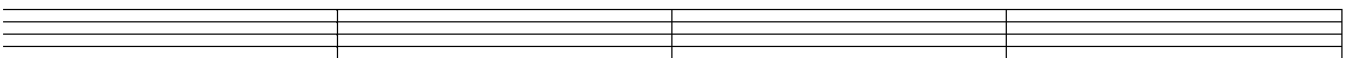
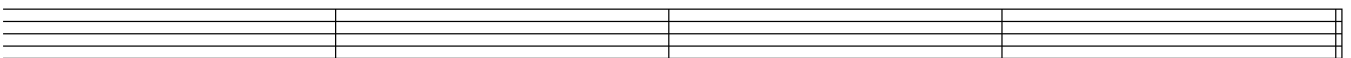
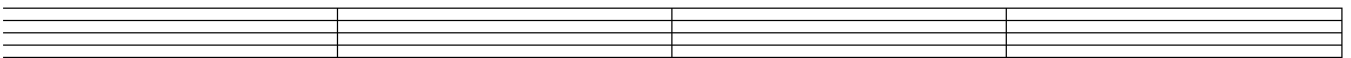
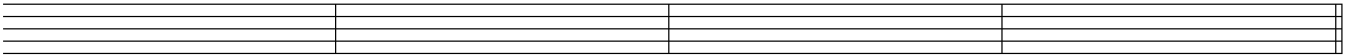
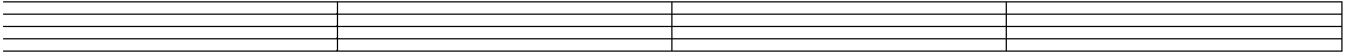
*Autumn Leave*

Rhythm Changes

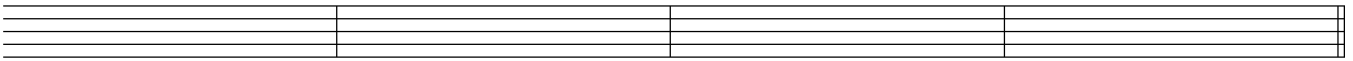
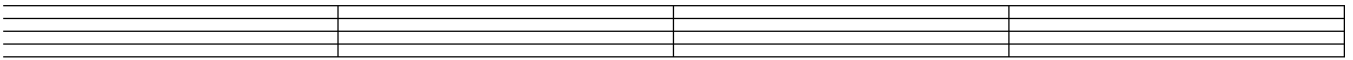
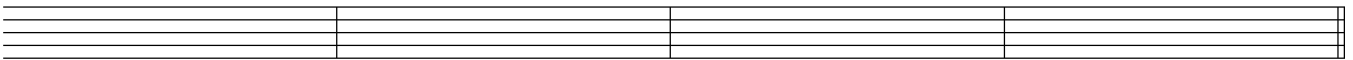
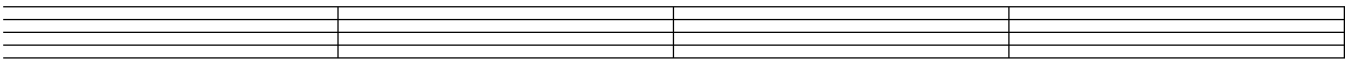
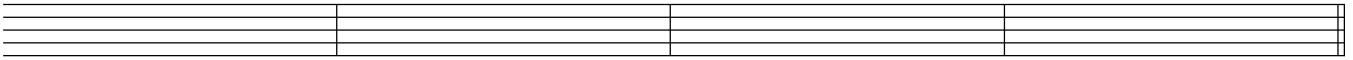
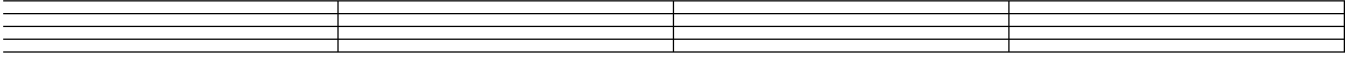
# *Impressions*



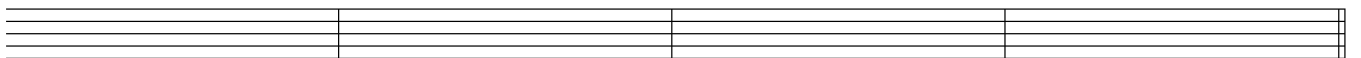
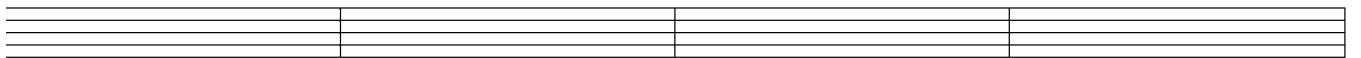
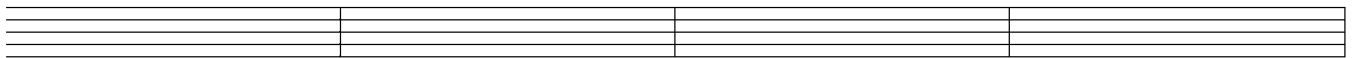
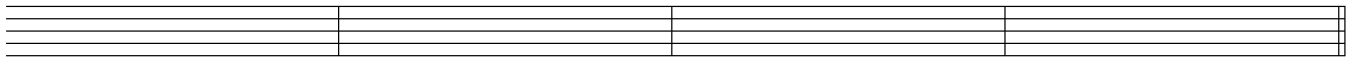
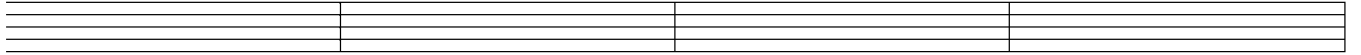
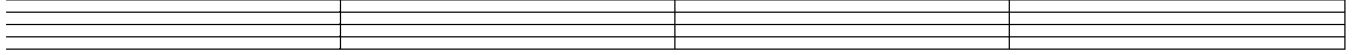
# *Satin Doll*



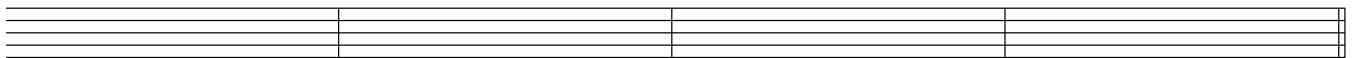
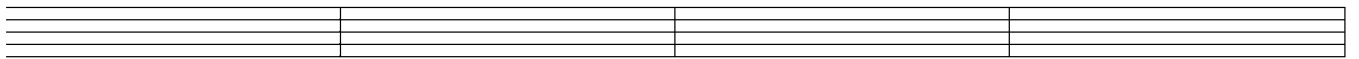
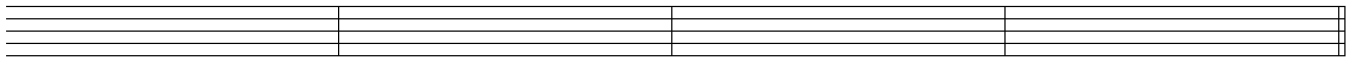
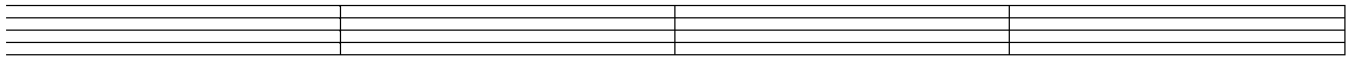
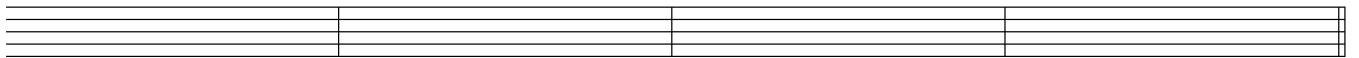
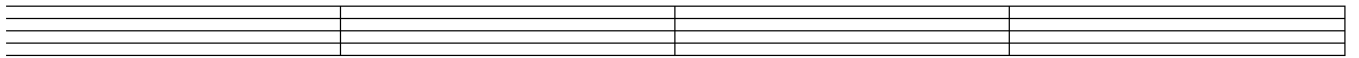
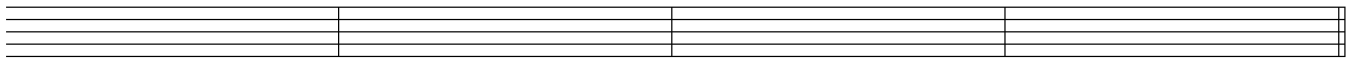
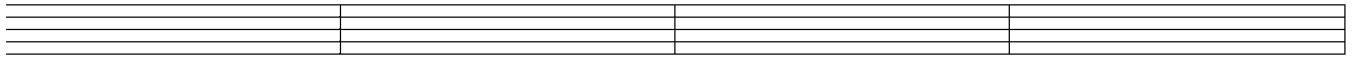
## *Song for My Father*



# Blues



## *Autumn Leaves*



## *Rhythm Changes*

