Six Blues-Roots Pianists

A thorough guide to early blues piano styles with instruction, historical notes, discography, and complete music transcriptions of boogie woogie, barrelhouse, and ragtime solos. By Eric Kriss. Based on recordings by six old blues masters: Jimmy Yancey, Champion Jack Dupree, Little Brother Montgomery, Speckled Red, Roosevelt Sykes, Otis Spann.

Oak Publications

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Introduction

What a piano blues comes from, long time ago befo' the piano blues came out, we used to play these jazz bands, we had 'em on the plantation, mos' every plantation had its band, but after the whiskey went out, then you couldn't drink this liquor free like you could befo', an' then . . . we had the bootlegger slippin' in the alley, so we had a piano joint, we played the piano, an' that's where these blues come from, in the same time.

— Willie B. Thomas, bluesman from Louisiana
(from liner notes to *Louisiana Country Blues–Herman E. Johnson*, Arhoolie 1060)

The piano was a relative latecomer to the blues scene. Many years before the piano arrived, a strong tradition of guitar blues had developed in the deep South, so the history of blues piano is one of adaptation to a blues form that already existed. The following brief history of American piano playing will outline how piano blues styles evolved.

During the latter half of the 19th century, when the minstrel show became a popular form of entertainment in the United States, piano playing broke away from the tenacious grasp of European classical music. Slowly, the discovery was made that the pianoforte did remarkably well as an entertainer and could be profitably used outside of the classical concert hall. At the same time, because it supplied much of the minstrel's material, black folk music flourished under a boon of commercialism. So not surprisingly, attempts were made to incorporate the piano into the already profitable black music market.

In the beginning pianists tried to imitate the sound of black music in a classical fashion, employing harmonies and structures more common to a Beethoven sonata than a moaning spiritual, rhythmic work song or sorrowful blues. But the sentimental efforts of composers such as Stephen Foster failed to capture the real feeling of black folk music. As black pianists developed in the minstrelry, however, they began to improvise from white composed music to retain the feeling and flavor of their own folk music. Eventually this became known as "sassing it up," "adding some razz," or simply "jazz."

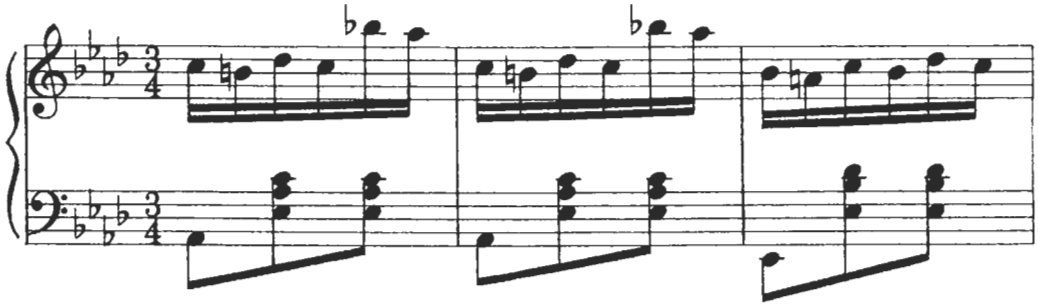
The adaptation of folk song material to the piano was approached in two distinct ways: some pianists imitated the folk music around them with varying degrees of success, while others "jazzed up" composed music to make it sound more folksy. It should be noted that prior to World War I, nonclassical piano playing was confined by its show business heritage, and only later, when it ceased to be the current rage, did the real folk piano blues emerge. Nevertheless, these early developments affected later piano styles.

By the 1890's an original style of American piano playing had evolved. It was an odd combination of white classical and black folk music at first described as "ragged time," referring to the unorthodox contrast between classical harmony and black derived syncopation. But as the predominantly white consumer public became accustomed to the sound, ragtime piano gained in popularity and prospered commercially for over twenty years.

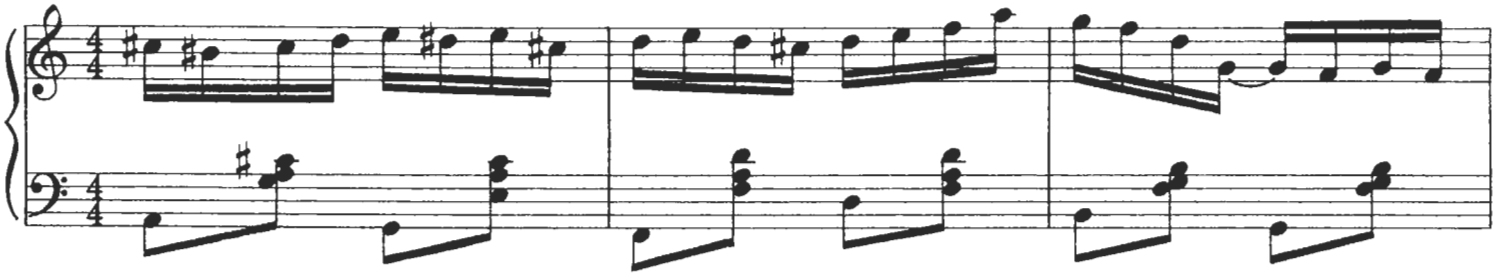
In structure ragtime borrowed much from European music, particularly the classical rondo form of a minuet. Scott Joplin's *Magnetic Rag*, for example, consists of four different themes, each 16 bars long, in the following pattern: AABBCCDD AA. *Paragon Rag*, also a Joplin piece, uses another typical ragtime form: AABBACC DD.

At times the similarity between European music and ragtime is striking. Compare, for instance, an excerpt from Joplin's *Paragon Rag* with Frederic Chopin's *Waltz in Ab Major*:

Chopin's Waltz in Ab Major (posthumous)



Scott Joplin's Paragon Rag



Observe the eighth note alternating bass, which maintains the rhythm, and the double time right hand solo line.

Joplin, James P. Johnson and many other ragtime artists viewed themselves as serious composers in the classical tradition, and considered their music suitable for the concert hall. Joplin even composed an ambitious opera, *Treemonisha,* and Johnson wrote several orchestral pieces, most of them beyond the ability of classically trained musicians.

The left hand in ragtime, characterized by a steady, classically derived bass, balanced the syncopated right hand melodies of tied notes and off-beat accents. As the form matured, the syncopations became more complex, more varied, and more difficult to describe. In St. Louis a group of pianists, including Tom Turpin and Louis Chauvin, took the Joplin rags (and other written compositions) and added improvised solos and endings. The result was a hybrid between emerging jazz styles and classical ragtime which made the music more danceable.

In New Orleans different influences were shaping the ragtime style: the walking bass runs of New Orleans jazz were translated onto the piano, and with masters such as Jelly Roll Morton, rags reached a new level of complexity and rhythmic sophistication. In some respects New Orleans ragtime was closer to the roots of black folk music, but it was still a long way from blues.

After the First World War the musical climate among black people changed. The Navy had closed the infamous Storyville section of New Orleans in 1917, bringing to an end the wild parties and free spending of wealthy whites who usually paid the black musicians. With the collapse of the white sporting market, the minstrel era really came to an end. Instead of playing in white "gilded palaces," sporting houses, and bars, black musicians began playing for black folk.

The change in audience caused a dramatic alteration in the music performed. The composed ragtime numbers (even Jelly Roll Morton wrote out almost every note which was played by his bands) didn't please the new downhome crowds, and the demand for more folk material proved irresistable. W.C. Handy, in his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, relates an interesting story of one of his band engagements at a rural breakdown. After failing to please the dancing crowd with his compositions, a local group was hired that, to Handy's astonishment, had the folks

hopping with real blues. Soon, Handy began writing his own educated versions of these rough folk blues. As classical ragtime piano lost its audience, a new breed of pianists really began to adapt folk blues to the piano.

By the 1920's the South was undergoing profound economic and social changes. The agricultural plantation system of Civil War days was gradually being replaced by timber logging, turpentine plants and other heavy industries. The lumber companies hired scores of itinerant black workers, paying them token wages and providing them with only the crudest of living arrangements. This environment of poverty and segregation provided the background for the growth of a powerful blues style. The turpentine and sawmill camps with their crews of bedraggled workers attracted a tough bunch of piano players who rocked in the local juke joints from the evening to the early morning hours. Because they were not blessed with either a good piano or the benefit of electric amplification, the juke pianists resorted to heavy, repetitious patterns to sustain their rhythm over the din of the unruly crowds. And since the pianos were frequently out of tune or in ill repair, it was often easier to play single note solos that could sidestep the disadvantages of the rough rural setting.

For those pianists who preferred to avoid the labor camps, the North offered a different life style. In Chicago the South Side had doubled its black population between 1910 and 1920, and Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, St. Louis, Cincinnati and Louisville all registered similar gains. For the thousands of Southern blacks who came North in search of jobs and a better life, the Northern urban centers actually offered little improvement. Prices were high, jobs paid poorly, and rents seemed to double every six months.

To combat the inflation, many black sections of urban America instituted rent house parties which usually featured local musicians. If a resident was behind in his rent, he would simply hire a pianist, bake some cookies, and charge his neighbors enough to keep the landlord from his door. Aside from the rent parties, small clubs opened up that, more likely than not, had an old piano somewhere in the back room. In these sordid, but very communal surroundings, blues piano developed rapidly.

This book is about these blues that evolved in the Southern labor camps or in the urban ghettos up North. They were played by musicians who didn't read music, and if they made any recordings at all, usually did so by chance and not by design. When studying these transcriptions, it is absolutely essential to listen to the original recordings, for the true piano blues are far more complex than any notation could ever indicate.

A word about the transcriptions is in order here. Western music notation often fails to describe accurately the nuances and complexities of blues music. I have tried to make these transcriptions as accurate as possible without making them hopelessly difficult and impossible to play. The transcribed vocal lines indicate approximate pitches only, and should be used as a guide when listening to the original recordings themselves. A complete discography is provided, as well as exercises to help develop blues piano techniques.

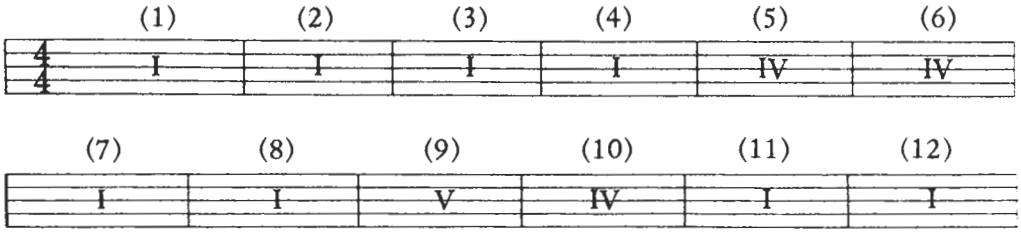
The Basics Of Blues Piano

An old piano bluesman once told me that, instead of crying, his hands would just tremble over the keyboard, and that's the way his music came out. This book won't actually make you tremble, but it will explain what a lot of that trembling is all about.

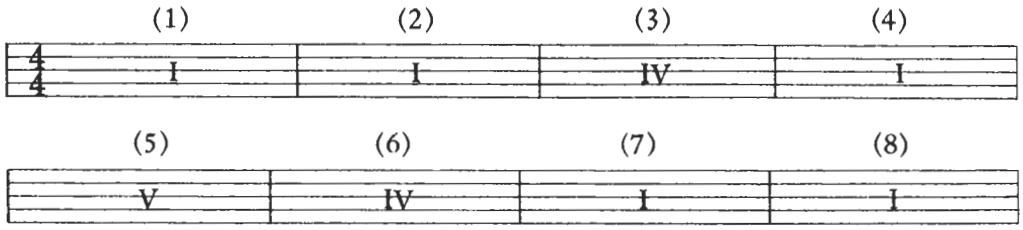
Blues piano, like blues guitar, is based on an 8 or 12 bar blues progression. In boogie or barrelhouse style the 12 bar form is preferred; in fact, for the faster boogie blues compositions, a 12 bar form is used almost without exception. Some blues are based on spirituals and gospel music, but they too are closely related to the basic blues progression.

The basic blues progression is built around the tonic, sub-dominant and dominant in the following manner:

The 12 Bar Blues Progression



The 8 Bar Blues Progression



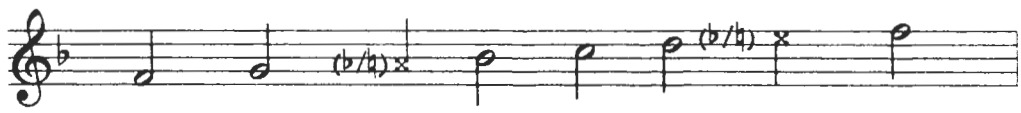
A 12 bar blues in the key of F major, for example, would begin with four measures of an F chord, followed by two measures of B♭, and so on. The 8 bar form may be doubled into a 16 bar blues progression.

Like many unaccompanied blues guitarists, the blues pianists frequently took liberties with the basic blues progression, sometimes employing different chord changes, sometimes varying the length of the chorus. Cripple Clarence Lofton, for example, occasionally used 11 or 11½ bar progressions, while the idiosyncratic Skip James seemed to avoid all structure in his piano playing.

In general blues pianists used more complex harmonic ideas than their guitar playing contemporaries. This is mostly due to the extended range and greater versatility of the 88 note keyboard as opposed to the 6 or 12 string guitar. Whereas guitarists rarely used 9ths, 11ths, or 13ths in folk blues, piano blues are filled with rich chord clusters and unusual harmonies.

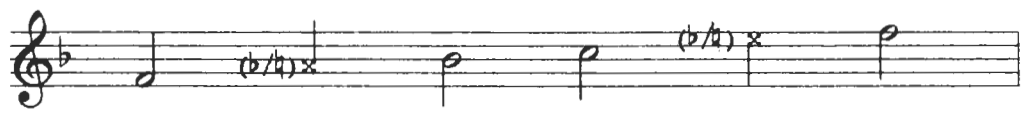
Much scholarly debate has centered upon the so-called blues notes and their mysterious spontaneous generation on American soil. Jazz historian Marshall Stearns describes the blues notes as "an endless variety of swoops, glides, slurs, smears, and glisses" focused around the third and seventh degrees of the scale. The blues scale below, in the key of F major, indicates several of the pitches used in blues vocal melodies. The x's indicate approximate pitches of blues notes:

A Blues Scale in the Key of F Major



A simpler pentatonic blues scale was widely employed in many guitar blues, and it is even found in some of the more "primitive" piano blues styles:

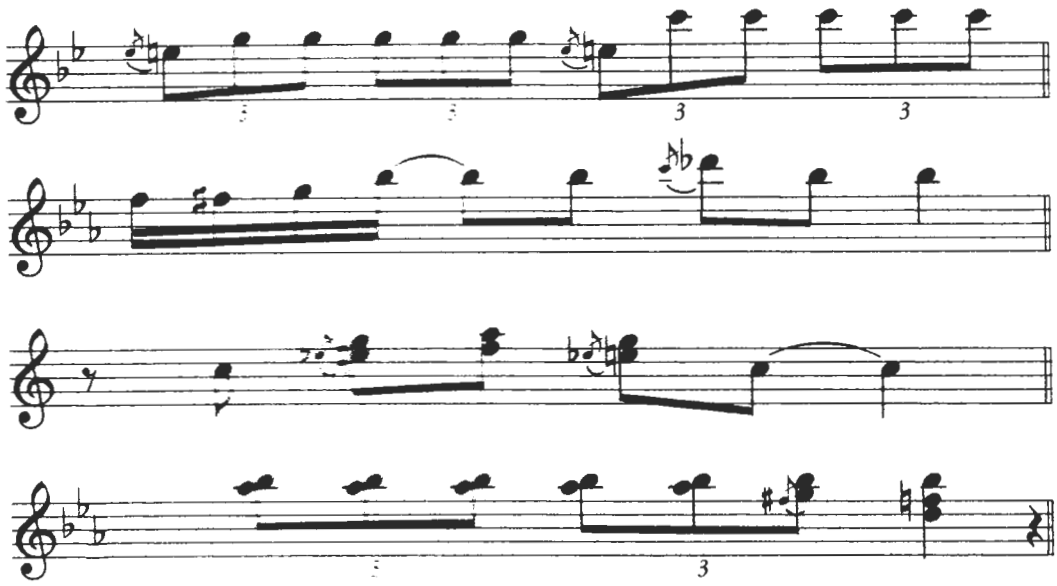
A Pentatonic Blues Scale in the Key of F Major



The guitarist, because he could "bend" notes, made his instrument conform to the blues notes in his vocal line. The piano, however, due to its fixed tone keyboard, was not so accommodating. Therefore, the blues pianist was forced to use other techniques to get a similar blues note effect.

One of the more common techniques developed was the constant use of grace notes and slurs around the third degree of the scale. Below I have notated some of these figures:

Grace Notes and Slurs



The pianist was able to use harmonic tension (by using 9ths, 11ths, and so on) in place of bending notes. Thus, while piano blues are harmonically complex, the overall effect is one of simplicity.

Another unique contribution of blues pianists was the development of the rhythmic boogie bass line. Guitarists were limited primarily to an alternating picked bass, but the pianist could expand his musical ideas with bass figures which were both harmonic and rhythmic. Some of the boogie bass lines were rhythmically arpeggiated chords; others were walking bass melodies, borrowed, no doubt, from jazz bassists at the time.

The evolution of boogie styles marked a major break with the European tradition of piano music. In Western classical music the left hand was used harmonically, with little attention given to its rhythmic capabilities. But in boogie bass lines, the left hand belted out an insistent repetitious melody which gave the blues a new driving excitement.

The following chapters will discuss in detail the styles of six blues-roots pianists, representing a wide spectrum of approaches to the piano. I hope this book will revive interest in the older piano blues styles and prevent this music from being buried under the weight of pop commercialism.

Jimmy Yancey

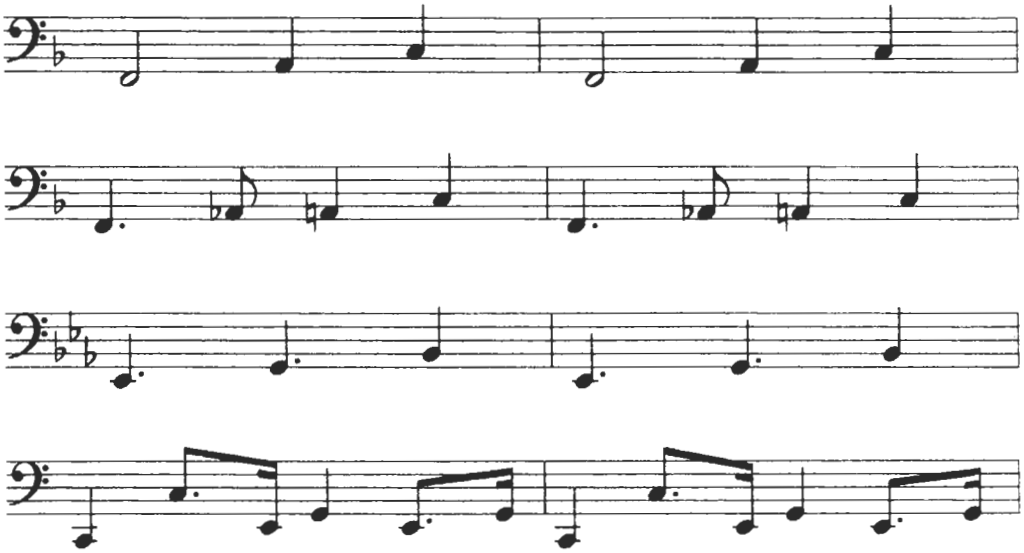
Jimmy Yancey, unlike many of the older blues musicians, was born up North, in Chicago, just as ragtime was becoming popular in the mid-1890's. A very musical child, he started dancing with the Bert Earl vaudeville show at age six, where he came in contact with minstrel music, ragtime, and probably an early style of blues.

In 1913 Yancey settled down in Chicago to work as a groundskeeper for the White Sox at Comiskey Park, a job he held for many years. Yancey never really made his living by playing piano, although he often performed at rent house parties and small clubs on the South Side, including Clarence Lofton's tavern. Yancey lived by the ball park near 35th and State Streets, and his house became a gathering place for many Chicago musicians. Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons, both disciples of Yancey's boogie style, often met there, as did veteran blues musicians like Cripple Clarence Lofton, Chippie Hill, Pinetop Smith, and Doug Suggs.

Although he grew up with ragtime influences, Yancey can hardly be called a ragtime pianist. His unique approach avoids many of the complexities of ragtime, and retains instead a simple and pure blues form. Yancey uses both the 8 and 12 bar blues; the latter he employs in his faster boogie compositions.

One important characteristic of Yancey's technique was his rolling, almost Latin sounding, bass lines. Some scholars have compared his bass lines to those of Jelly Roll Morton, the New Orleans ragtime artist, even though there is little musical similarity between the two. Most of Yancey's blues are variations on three or four different bass patterns, and he rarely plays more than single bass notes with his left hand. The following are examples of his most common bass patterns:

Yancey's Most Common Bass Patterns



Yancey had a particular fondness for parallel 6ths, both major and minor, and many of his harmonies employ these intervals. He tends to avoid full seventh, diminished or augmented chords, but he cleverly suggests full chords by playing only a few outline notes. For example, in the 4th measure of *How Long Blues,* the right hand trills on A♭, the seventh in the chord B♭^{7}, giving the measure a definite 7th sound without a full chord. In the second half of the same measure, Yancey plays D and D♭, the major and minor thirds of B♭, but his use of D and F in the bass outlines and F$^+$ and F^6 chord.

In many respects, Yancey's approach to blues piano was contrapuntal, and not heavily harmonic, like his ragtime contemporaries. He pioneered a pure style of piano blues and boogies marked by distinctive bass patterns and deceptively simple rhythmic interplay between the right and left hand.

In April of 1939, Yancey made his first recordings in Chicago. He continued recording for twelve years until his death, leaving a legacy of only sixty-eight known sides. Of these many were duplicates and alternate takes. The transcriptions in this book are taken from Yancey's last session, held only two months before his death on September 18, 1951. They represent some of his finest work on record, an example of the full maturation of his unique boogie blues.

Jimmy Yancey

How Long Blues (See page 12.)

How Long Blues is a beautiful version of the old blues standard played in the key of F major. Yancey recorded the piece six different times between 1939 and 1951, the last time with his wife, Mama, singing beside him. *How Long* was first recorded in 1925 by Ida Cox and Papa Charlie Jackson, and later made famous by another pianist, Leroy Carr, in 1928. Many folk variants of the song exist, so it is fair to assume that Yancey learned his version without referring to these early recordings. The transcription in this book can be heard on *Pure Blues—Jimmy Yancey,* available on Atlantic LP 1283.

How Long is deceptively simple. Be sure to retain an easy rhythmic feeling, without stiffness or pounding on the piano. It is important to keep your foot tapping and to play steadily.

The Yancey Special (See page 15.)

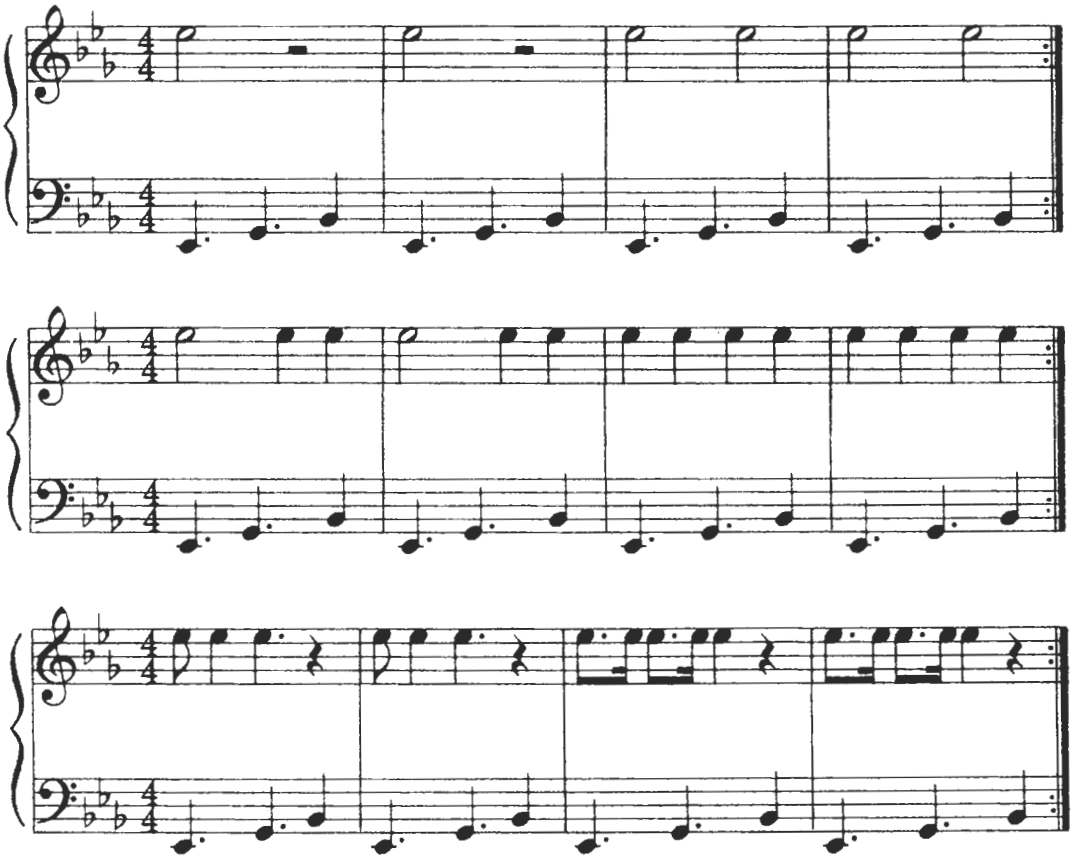
The Yancey Special was recorded on three separate studio dates with minor variations. It is a fast boogie in the key of C major with a tricky syncopated right hand superimposed over the repetitious left hand figure. It is best to play both hands separately until the right hand rhythmic subtleties are mastered. As with all of Yancey's blues, play *The Special* in a relaxed, but rhythmically exact manner. The original recording is available on Atlantic 1283.

Yancey's Bugle Call (See page 18.)

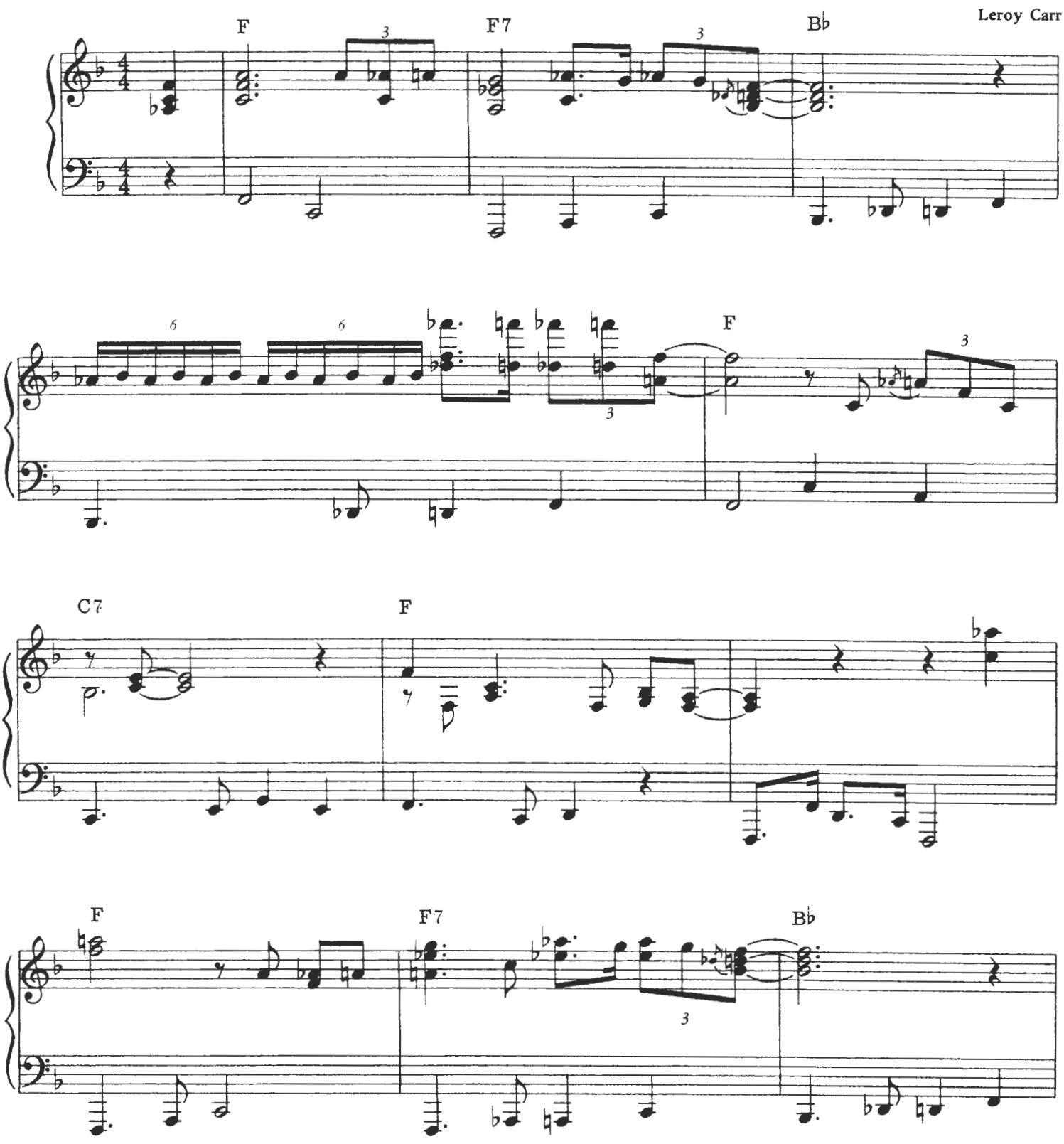
Yancey's Bugle Call, in the key of E♭ major, draws its name from the humorous imitation of *Reveile* in the introductory bars. Although the right hand looks easy, the job of coordinating the two hands requires practice. Play the piece slowly before attempting Yancey's up-beat tempo.

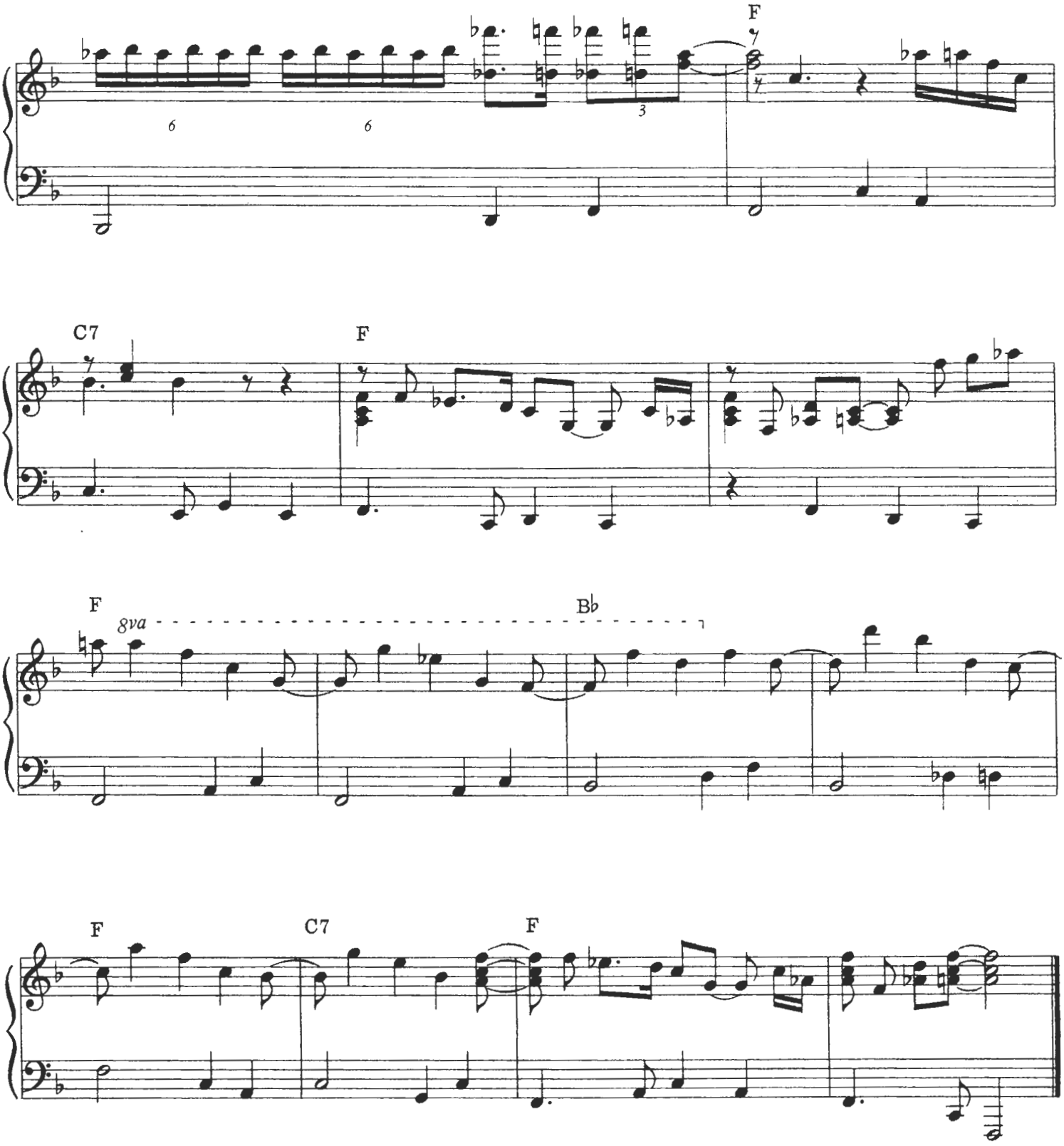
The most difficult technical problem of Jimmy Yancey's style is coordinating the rhythmic complexities of the two hands. The following exercises should be repeated with all of Yancey's bass patterns, even though I have only used one in my notations. The exercises may also be expanded into a blues progression for a more varied practice session. Remember, the goal is to play steadily, but in a relaxed way.

Exercises for Playing Jimmy Yancey



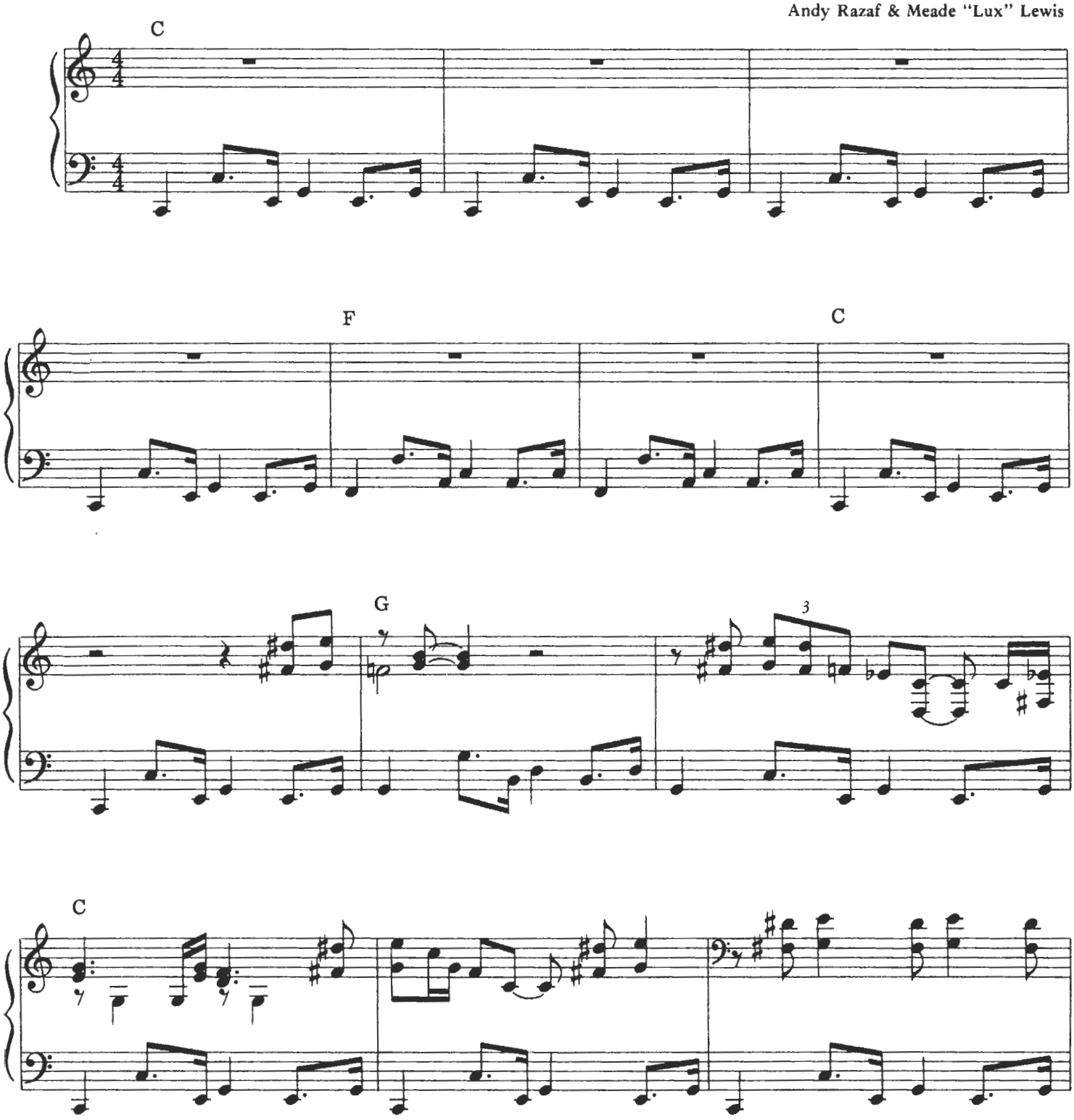
How Long Blues

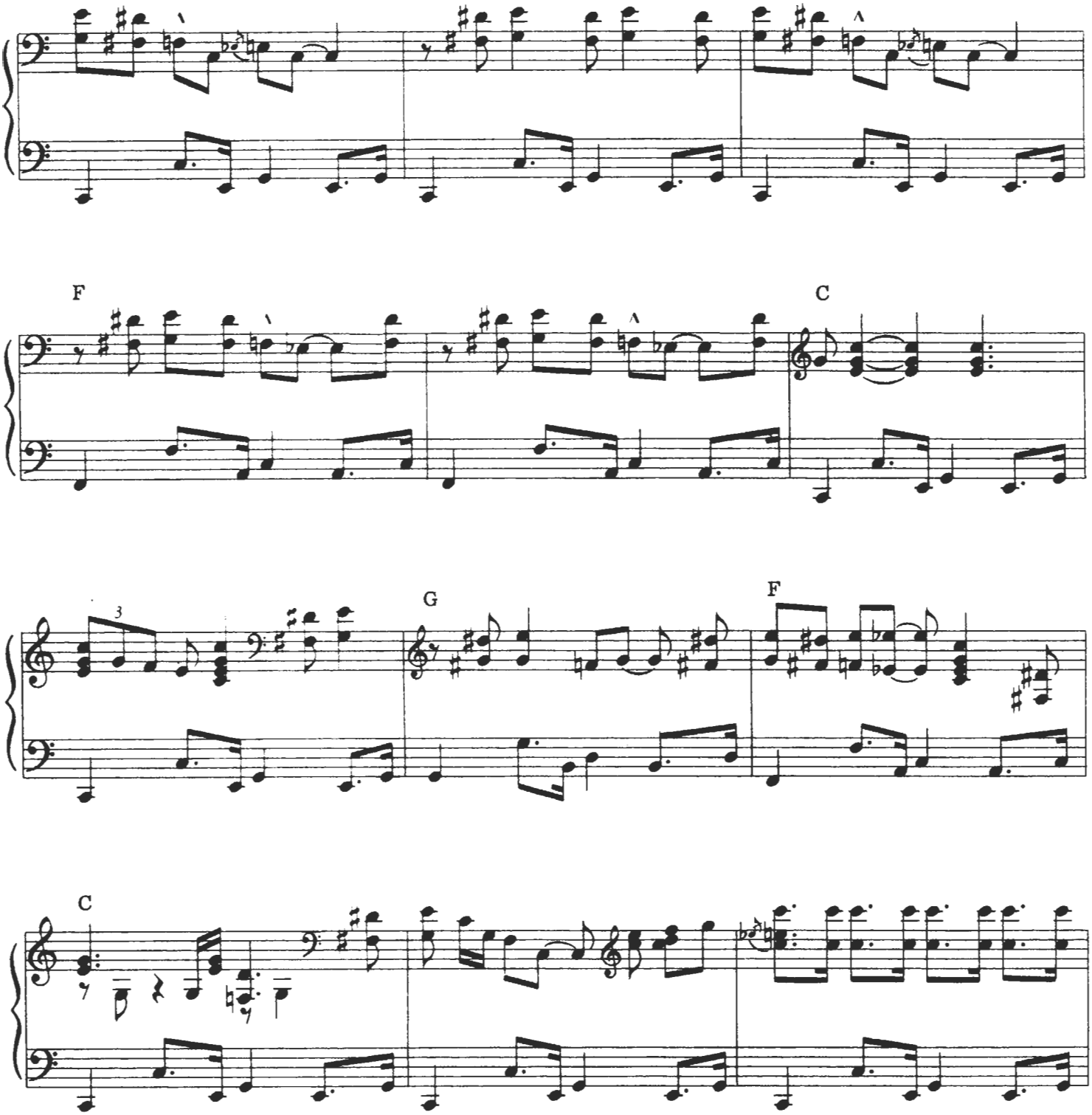



F
C7
F
F
8va
B♭
F
C7
F

The Yancey Special

Andy Razaf & Meade "Lux" Lewis




F
C
G
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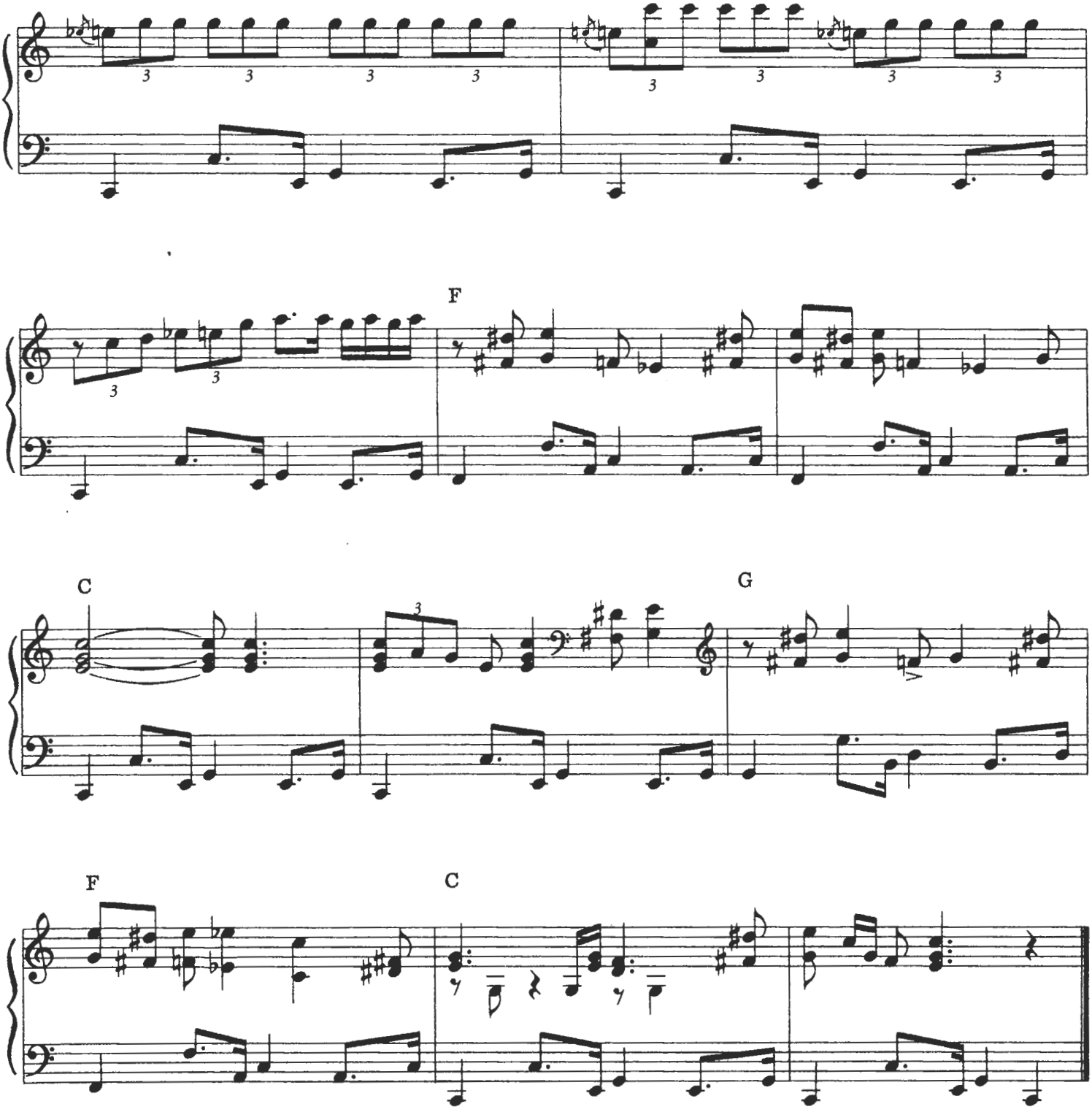
C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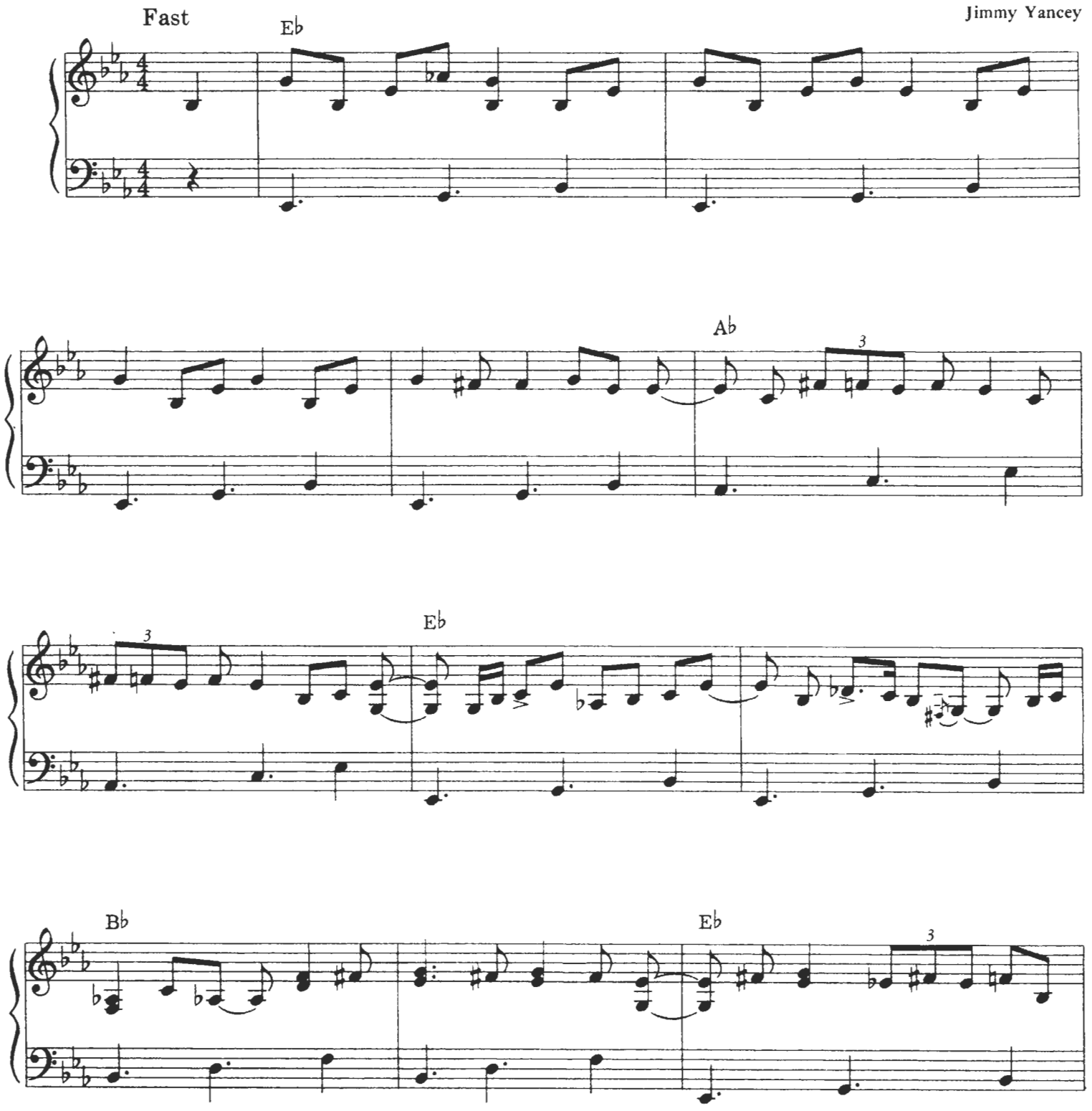
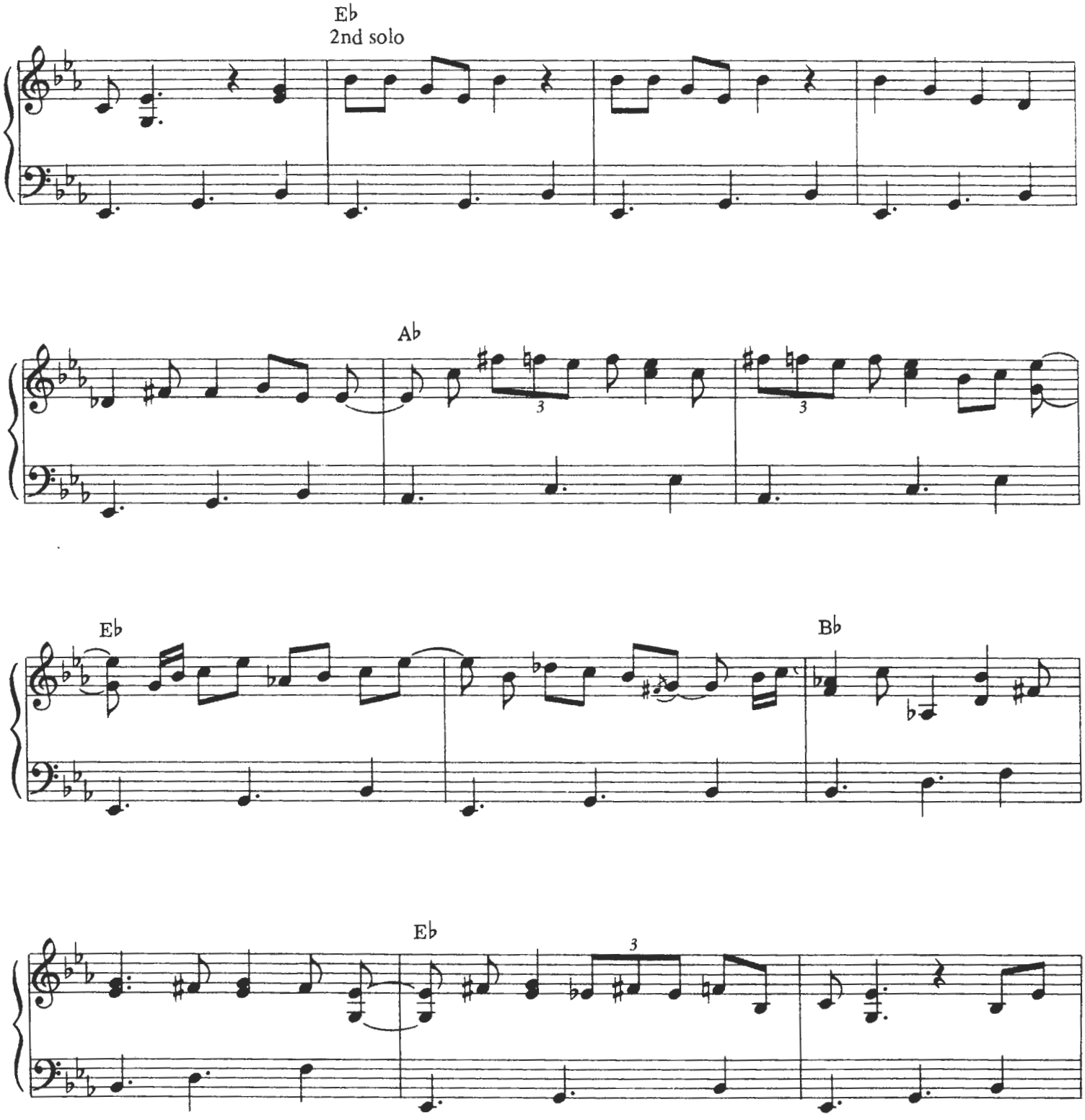
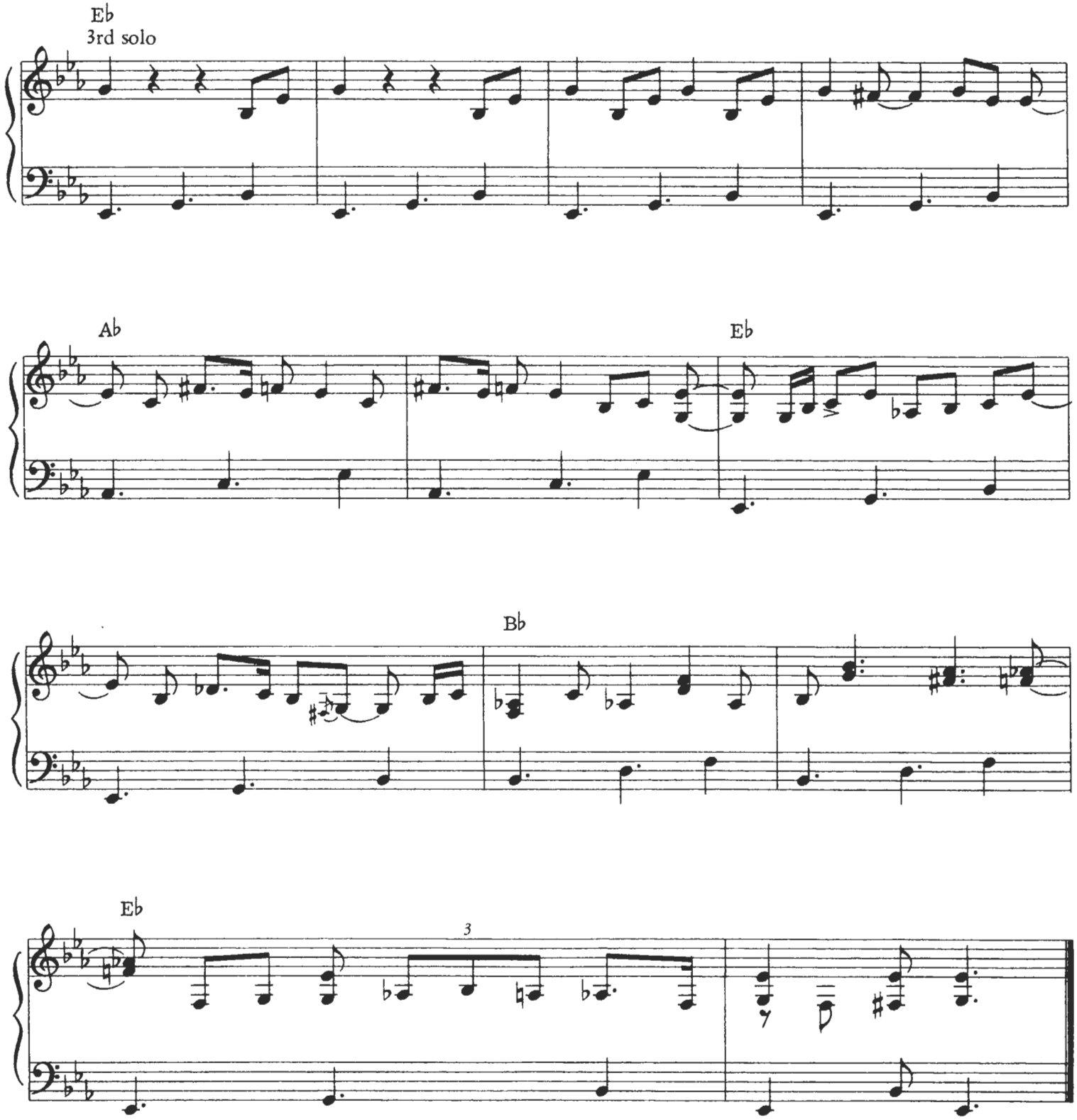
Yancey's Bugle Call




E♭
2nd solo
A♭
E♭
B♭
E♭


Eb
3rd solo
Ab
Eb
Bb
Eb
3

Champion Jack Dupree

"When your mother is gone, everything you do is wrong/When you don't have nobody, nothin' in the world can be done," laments Champion Jack Dupree in *Hard Feelings Blues,* and he speaks from experience—a traumatic childhood in the Colored Waifs Home for Boys in New Orleans. Dupree discovered loneliness early in the institutional setting, and he has described it ever since in his blues. But Champion Jack has several remedies for the blues, and they all center around women. "If you wanna live happy and live your whole life through," he advises in *Old Woman Blues,* "get you an old old woman that knows what to do."

Born in 1910, Dupree witnessed the growth and eventual decline of New Orleans ragtime and jazz as he walked the back alleys around Franklin and Rampart Streets. During one foray into the Storyville scene, Dupree met a local barrelhouse piano player named Drive 'Em Down, who developed a fondness for the boy and introduced him to the fundamentals of blues piano. When he wasn't studying music in a dimly lit barrelhouse, Dupree escaped into the fantasy world of professional boxing under the tutelage of Kid Green and his troupe of aspiring prize fighters.

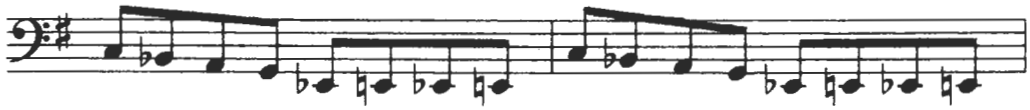
Drive 'Em Down died in 1930, and Dupree, with few ties to hold him to New Orleans, set out on his own. For ten years he earned money as a professional prize fighter, and when he could find work, he played piano on the barrelhouse and juke circuit for about $1.50 a night. At first Dupree performed blues from Drive 'Em Down's repertoire—traditional songs such as *How Long, Frankie and Johnny* and *Stack-O-Lee.* But as he matured in the rough jukes where the clientele always expressed their critical opinions in no uncertain terms, Dupree evolved his own distinctive blues.

The boxing life was not doing Dupree's piano fingers much good, so in 1940, when he knocked out Battling Bozo in the tenth round, the "Champion" quit the ring to concentrate on the blues. This last fight was held in Indianapolis, Indiana, a city with a receptive audience of newly arrived Southern blacks who were attracted by factory and defense jobs. Dupree liked what he saw and decided to settle down.

Aided by contacts he had made during the 1930's, Dupree got a job at the Indianapolis Cotton Club, a place noted for its rude patrons who delighted in hurling tomatoes at sub-standard performances. The rough life was not new to Dupree; he soon earned the respect of the rowdy critics with his genuine manner and superior blues singing. From then on he was known in blues circles as Champion Jack Dupree, an honorary title he has kept to this day.

Indianapolis boasted a school of piano blues led by Leroy Carr, a flamboyant figure who introduced a rhythmic, yet unsyncopated piano style with his guitarist partner, Scrapper Blackwell. Carr never developed an outstanding solo technique, but he is remembered for his bitter-sweet vocals and piano accompaniments that later influenced men like Mercy Dee, Bumble Bee Slim and Fats Domino. Carr's technique was especially suited for ensemble work because he did not limit himself to the boogie-woogie basses that dominated much of the early urban piano scene. Instead, Carr played an equiponderant bass illustrated by this run in *Good Woman Blues* (the riff is similar to one used by Speckled Red and Cow Cow Davenport):

Excerpt from *Good Woman Blues*



On *Barrelhouse Woman # 2,* Carr plays another unsyncopated bass line as he accompanies the guitar solos of Blackwell:

Excerpt from *Barrelhouse Woman #2*

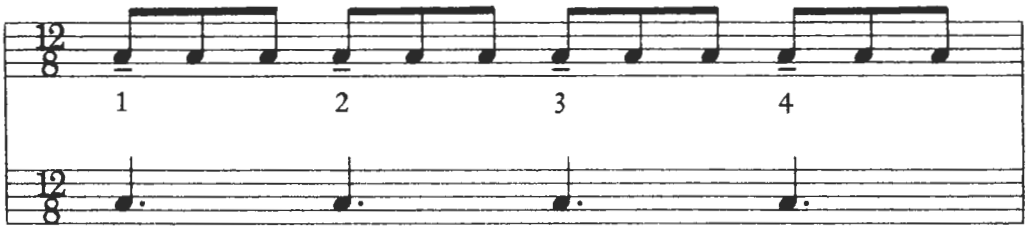
Dupree's style is also marked by the absense of a strong boogie bass, though it is not clear whether this can be directly attributed to a Carr influence. The two men met briefly in the early 1930's, but by the time Dupree returned to the city to settle down in 1940, Carr had died and Scrapper Blackwell was searching for a replacement for his famous partner. Dupree and Blackwell made a few recordings for the OKeh label in 1940; the new duet never clicked, however, and Dupree was soon off on his own.

Dupree's left hand often follows a loosely defined structure, more like a walking string bass than the usual repetitive piano boogie bass. This is both a strength and a weakness: the freedom gained in the left hand is countered by the need for a full, driving right hand. This makes single note soloing difficult; not surprisingly, Dupree rarely ventures into expansive solos. On *Too Evil To Cry* Dupree displays his single note virtuosity, but here he abandons his less structured bass for a repetitious boogie pattern. Like Leroy Carr, Dupree excels in ensemble playing; in fact, few of his albums feature him on solo piano. Often a bass, guitar, or full blues band backs him up as he sings in his low-down voice, "I opened the door, you were lying in the hall/Your breath smelled like you been drinkin' nachel alcohol."

Mercy On Me (See page 24.)

Mercy On Me, in the key of F major, is structured more like a gospel song than a blues, with an 8 bar introduction and a 16 bar chorus. The chorus pattern—I/I/IV/IV/I/I/V/V/I/I/IV/IV/I/V/I-V/I—departs from a standard blues progression, especially in bars 7 and 8 where the dominant (C major chord) gives a feeling of harmonic anticipation typical of gospel music. The 12/8 time signature is conceptualized as four groups of three beats, as triplets would be if played in 4/4 time.

12/8 Time Signature



However, Dupree cleverly uses shifting accents to give the piece rhythmic interest. It is necessary to refer to the original recording, available on Archive of Folk Music FS-217, to emulate these rhythmic gestures. The vocal melodies in several of the transcriptions have been raised an octave to put them in a more singable range.

A Good Woman Is Hard To Find (See page 30.)

Jack Dupree has spent a lifetime singing about women. *A Good Woman Is Hard To Find* has a clear message, neatly summarized in the title, and yet Dupree's delivery gives the material a suspenseful air. Like *Mercy On Me,* the piece is played with a feeling of *three* in 6/8 time. The measure is divided into two groups of three beats, with the first and fourth beats usually accented. *A Good Woman Is Hard To Find,* originally issued on the Danish Storyville label, is available in the United States on Archive of Folk Music FS-217.

Too Evil To Cry (See page 32.)

In 1944 Dupree recorded the dramatic blues *Too Evil To Cry* for Moses Asch in New York City. The blues follows the usual 12 bar pattern, but harmonically it offers a few surprises. The entire introduction is played with only an incidental use of the third (i.e., E and E♭ in a C chord) in the right hand. Thus the blues has a hollow, almost minor sound that Dupree contrasts with an occasional major triad. Several chords depart from the usual blues harmonies, like the D^9 chord in bar 10 or the "empty" C chord in bar 5.

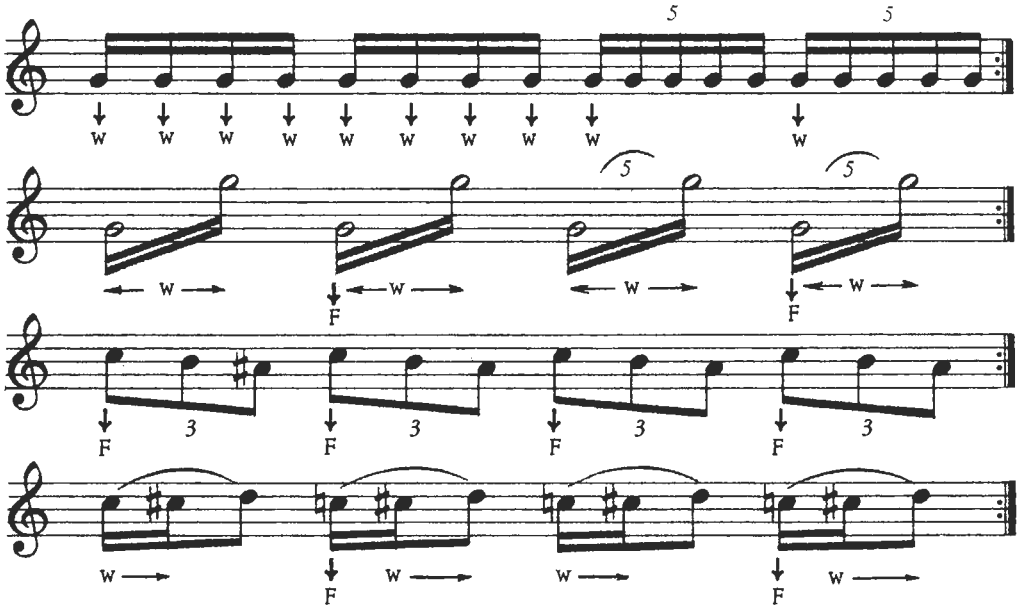
Dupree's use of quintuplets, septuplets, and so on may present a timing problem for the classically trained pianist. Do not dwell on the complexities of the right hand runs for the solo effect will be lost; namely, a forced sounding figure of seemingly "out of time" character that contrasts with the steady bass. A study of the original recording, reissued on Asch AA-1, will greatly aid in mastering this blues.

Dupree attacks the keyboard with a vigor unknown in classical piano, making the

instrument literally shake with excitement. Generally, he relies on heavy wrist and forearm motion rather than individual finger movement. The tremolo effects in *Too Evil To Cry,* for example, are best accomplished by rapid quivers of the entire hand, with the fingers more or less in a fixed position.

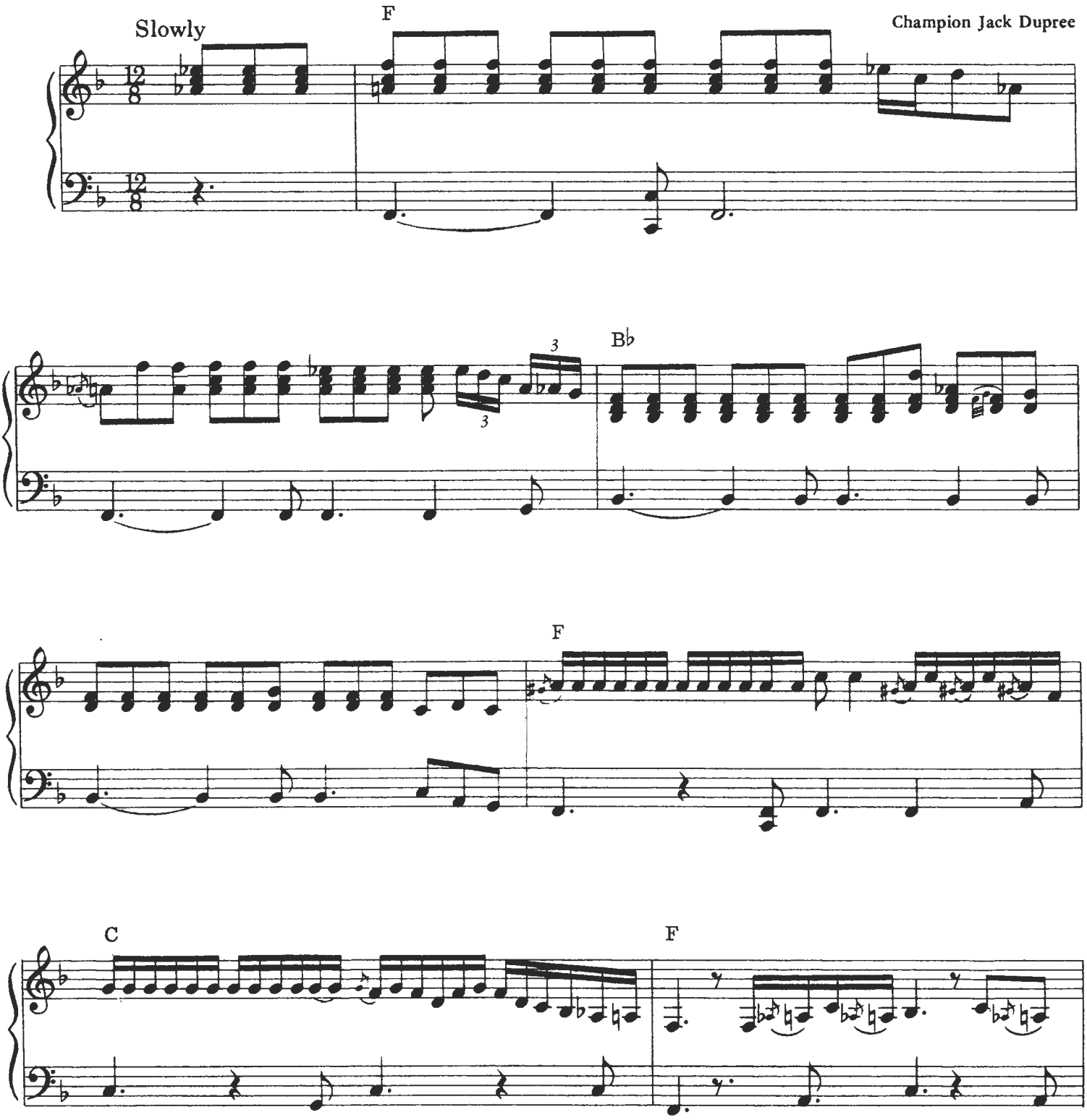
The exercises below will help develop energetic arm motions. The arrows marked "F" indicate forearm motion. Those marked "W" indicate wrist motion. Pounding should always be avoided. The best blues piano owes its magic to subtle understatement, never loud banging.

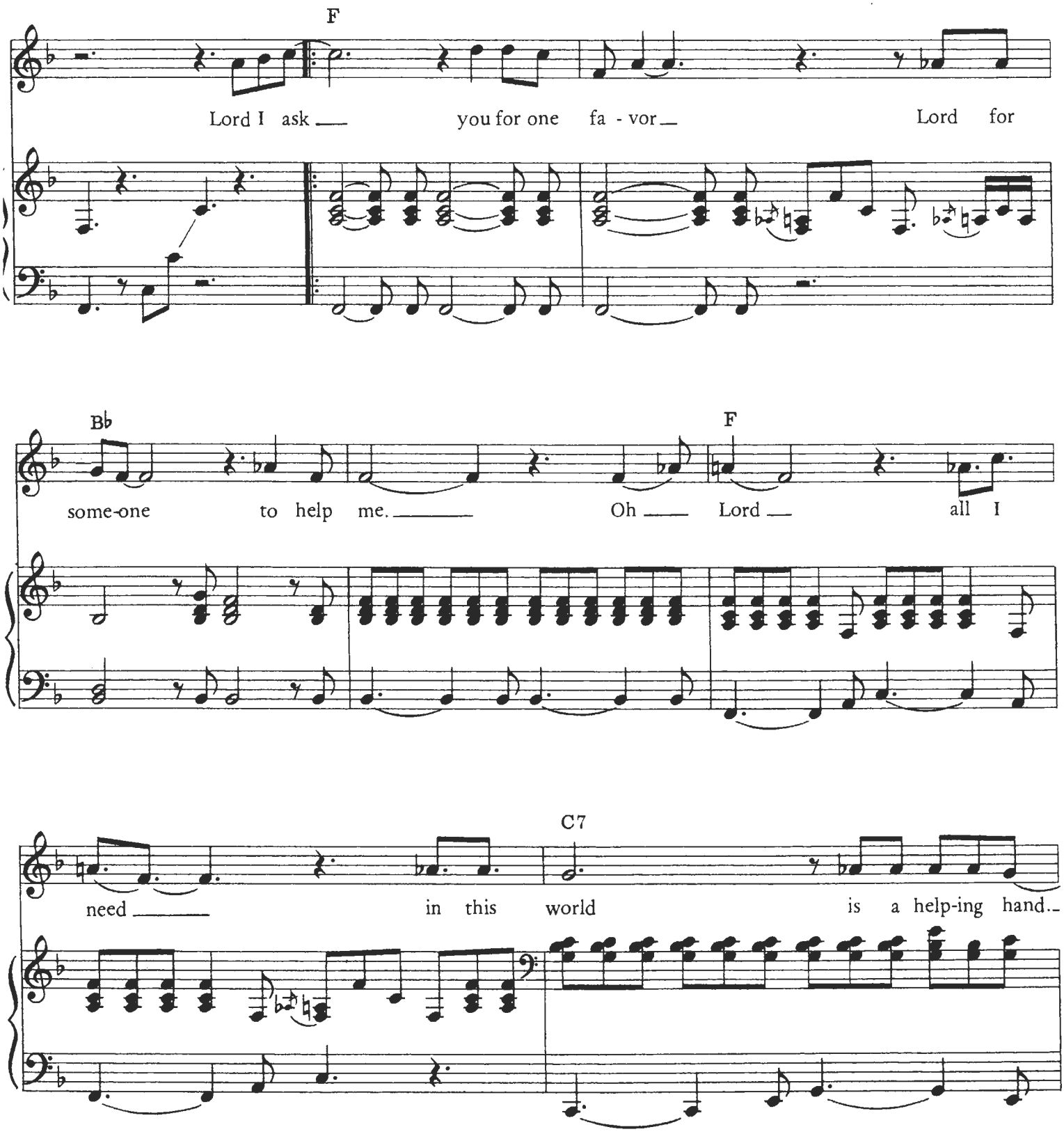
Exercises

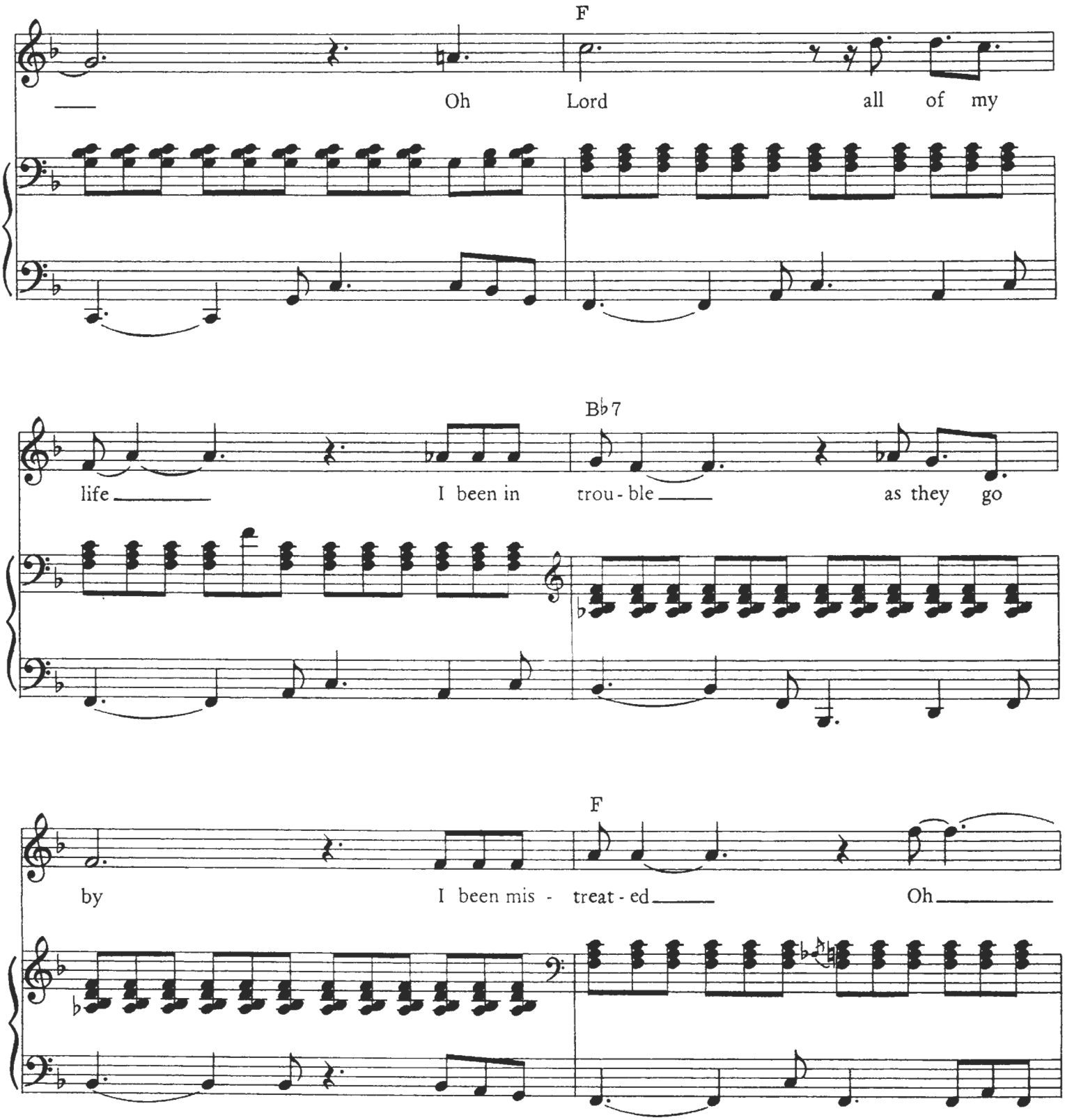


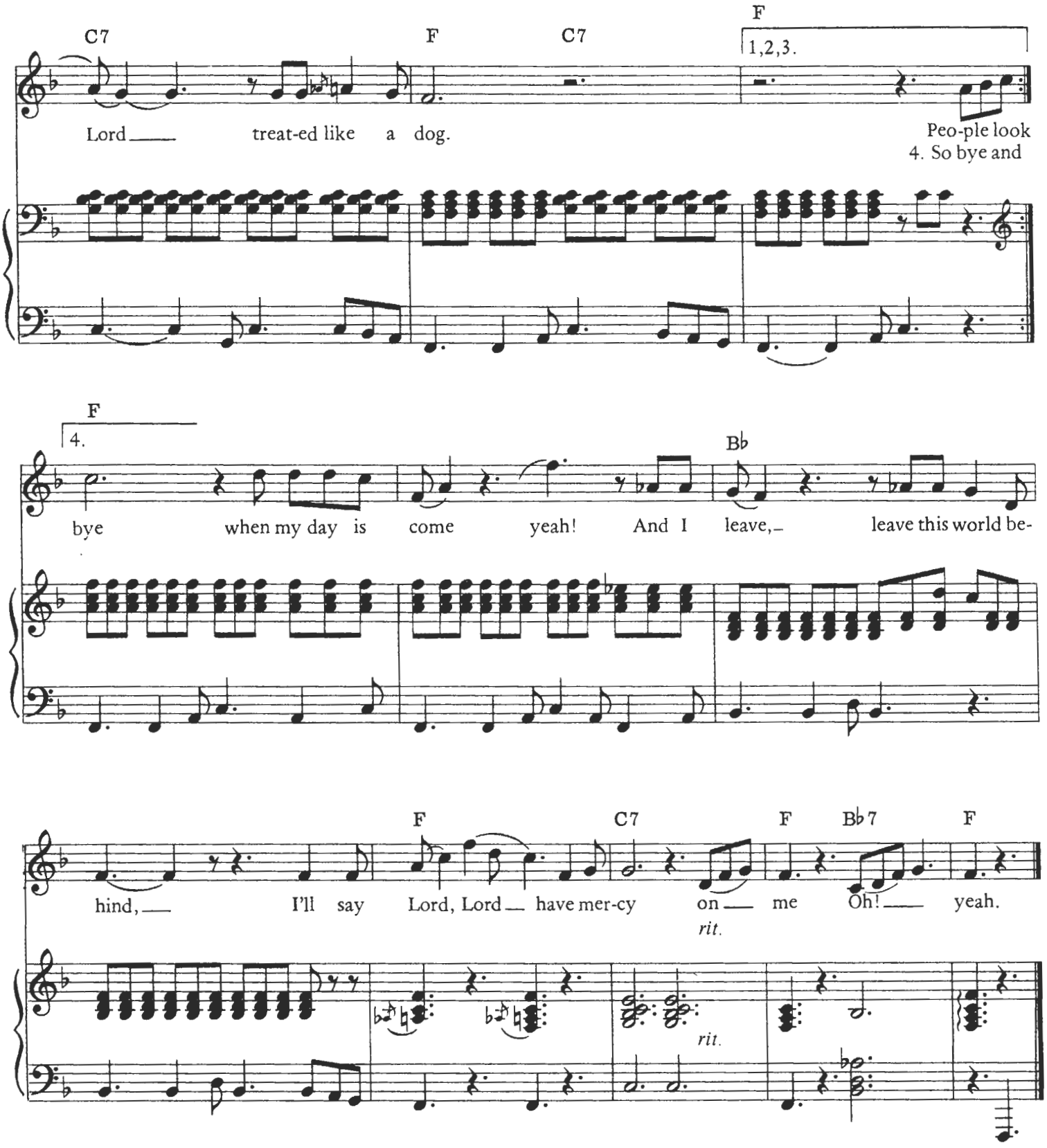
Champion Jack Dupree

Mercy On Me

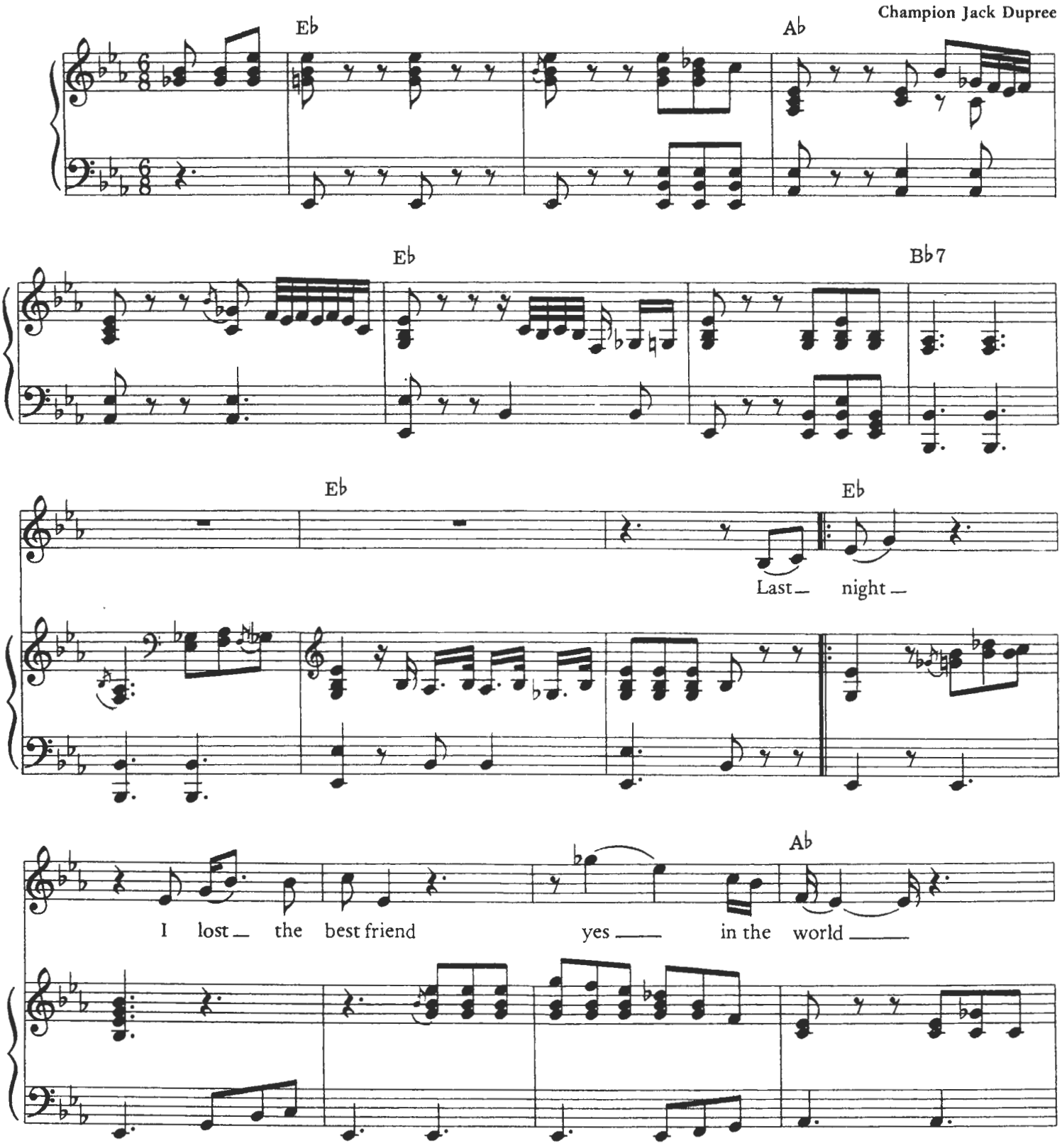


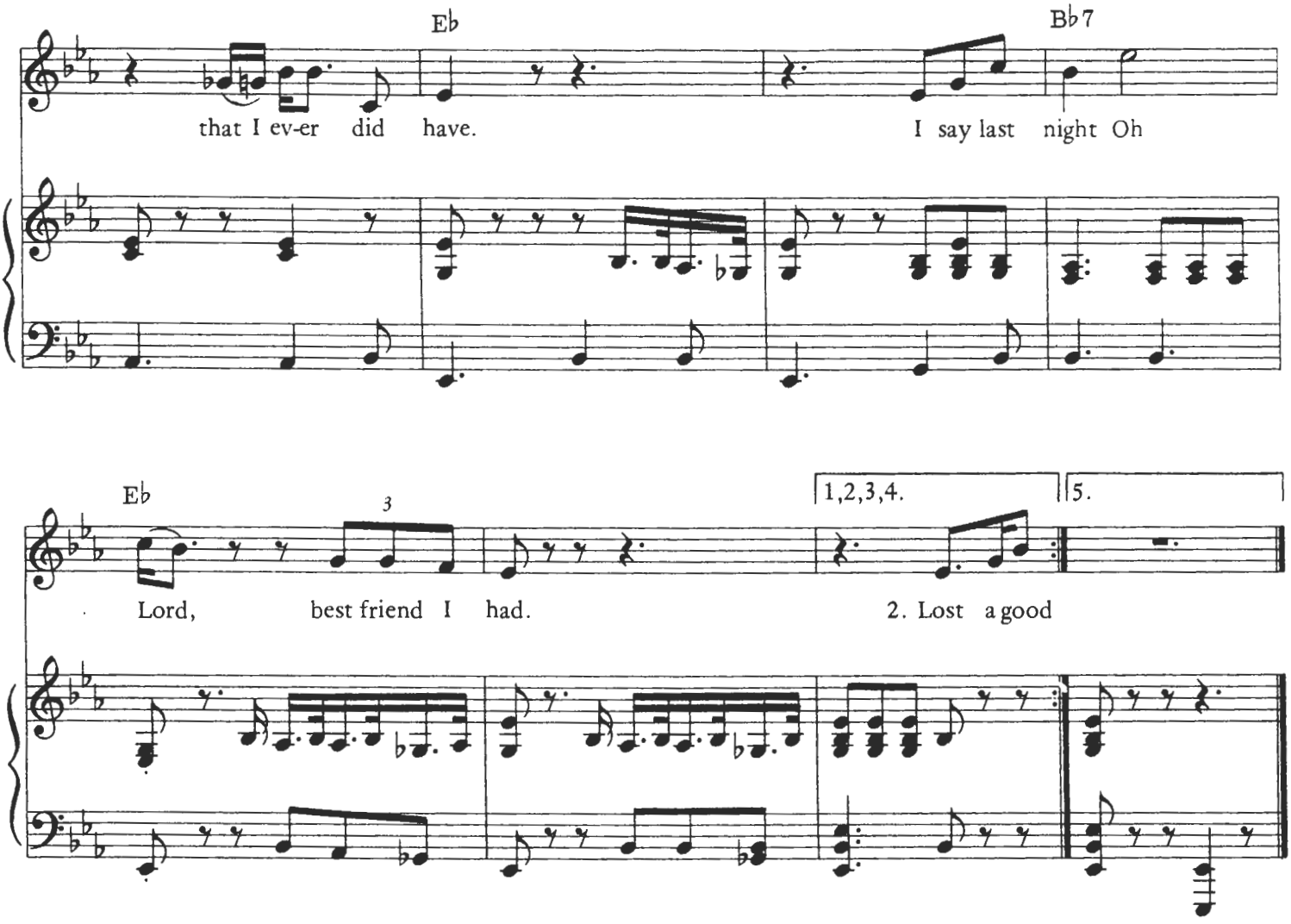

F
Lord I ask you for one fa - vor Lord for
B♭
F
some-one to help me. Oh Lord all I
C7
need in this world is a help-ing hand.


F
Oh Lord all of my
B♭7
life I been in trou - ble as they go
F
by I been mis - treat - ed Oh


C7
F
C7
F
1,2,3.
Lord
treat-ed like a dog.
Peo-ple look
4. So bye and
F
4.
Bb
bye
when my day is come
yeah!
And I leave,
leave this world be-
F
C7
F
Bb7
F
hind,
I'll say
Lord, Lord
have mer-cy on
me
Oh!
yeah.
rit.
rit.

A Good Woman Is Hard To Find





Lost a good woman and I grieve night and day
Yeah Lord, I lost a good woman and I grieve night and day
Always keep worryin', oh yeah, since you went away.

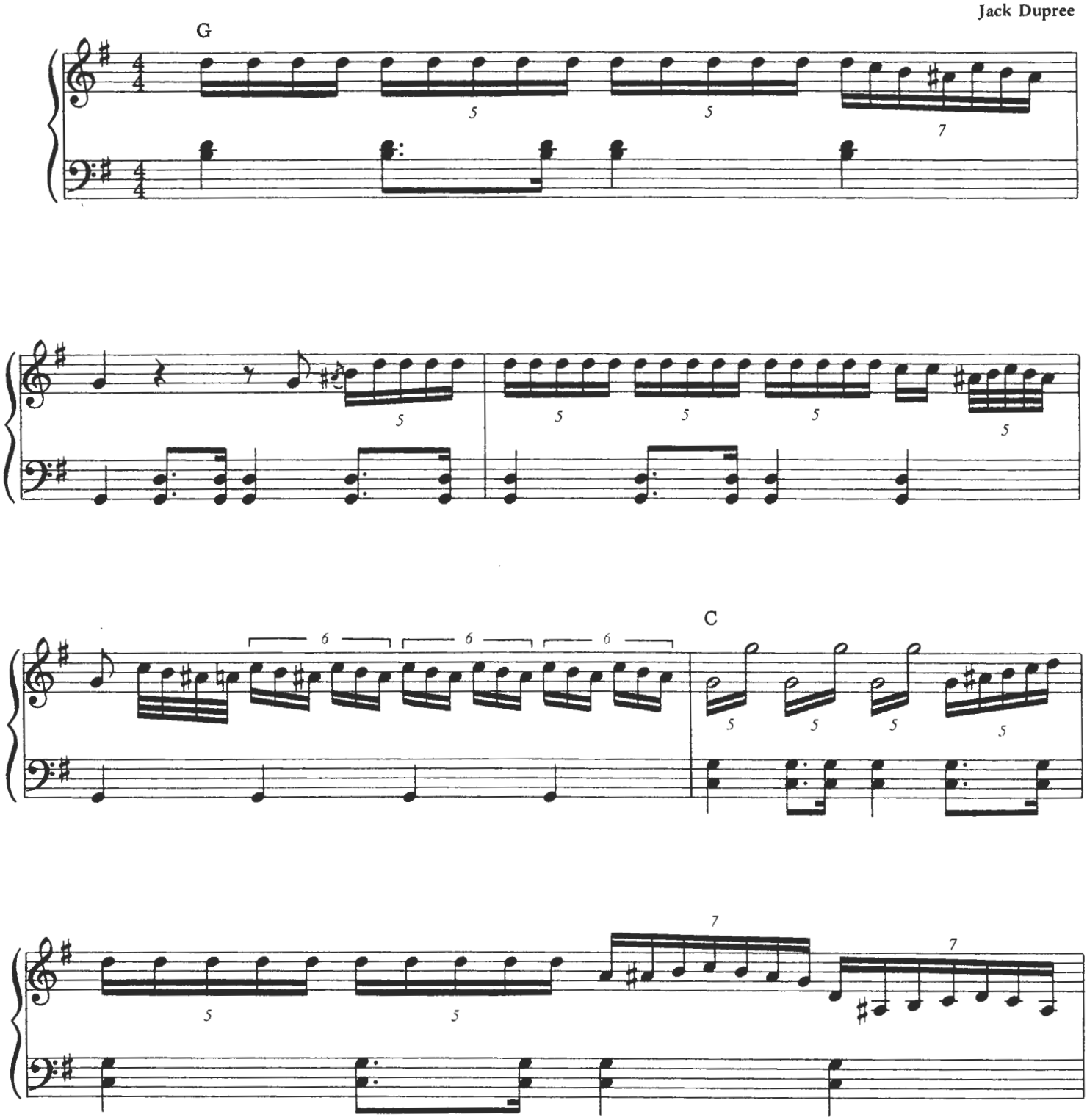
Well nowadays, a good woman is so hard
Yeah nowadays, a good woman is hard to find
When you think you got a good woman, oh yes, you got the other kind.

All I want is someone to love
Yeah, all I want is someone to love
Lord I'm lonely, oh yeah, as I could be.

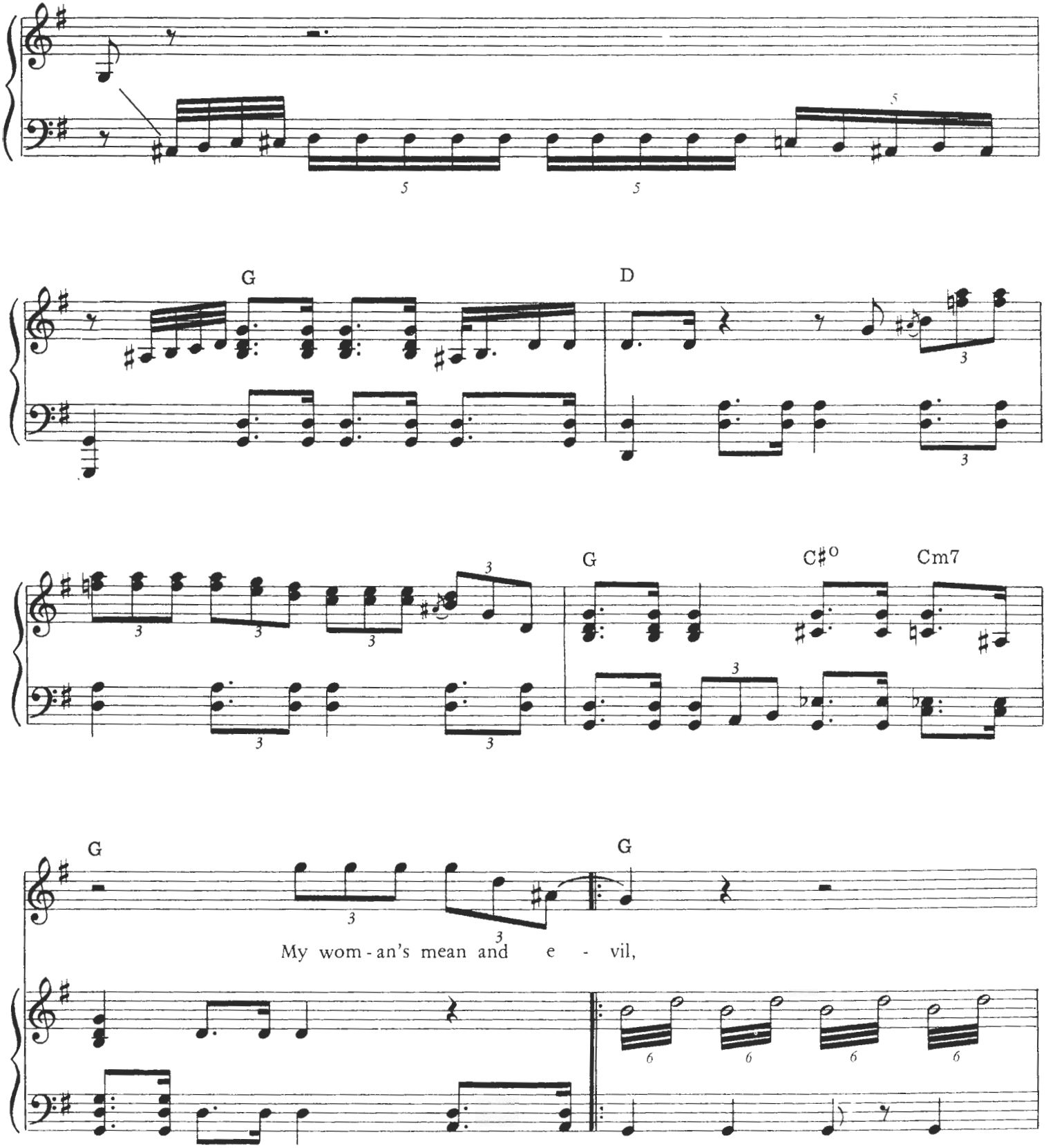
Nowadays, a real good woman
Yeah nowadays, Lord, a real good woman
A real good woman, oh yeah, is hard to find.

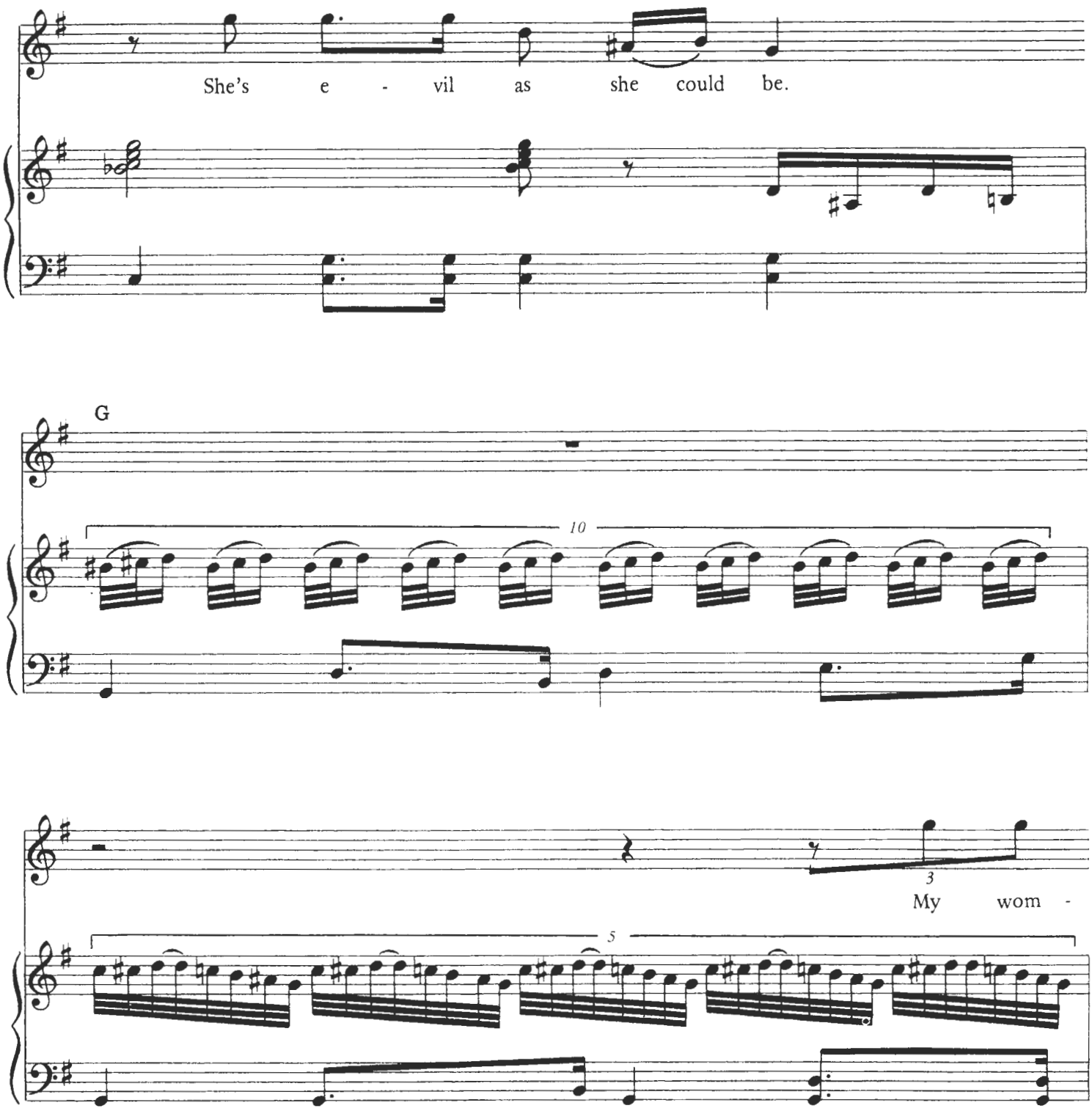
Too Evil To Cry

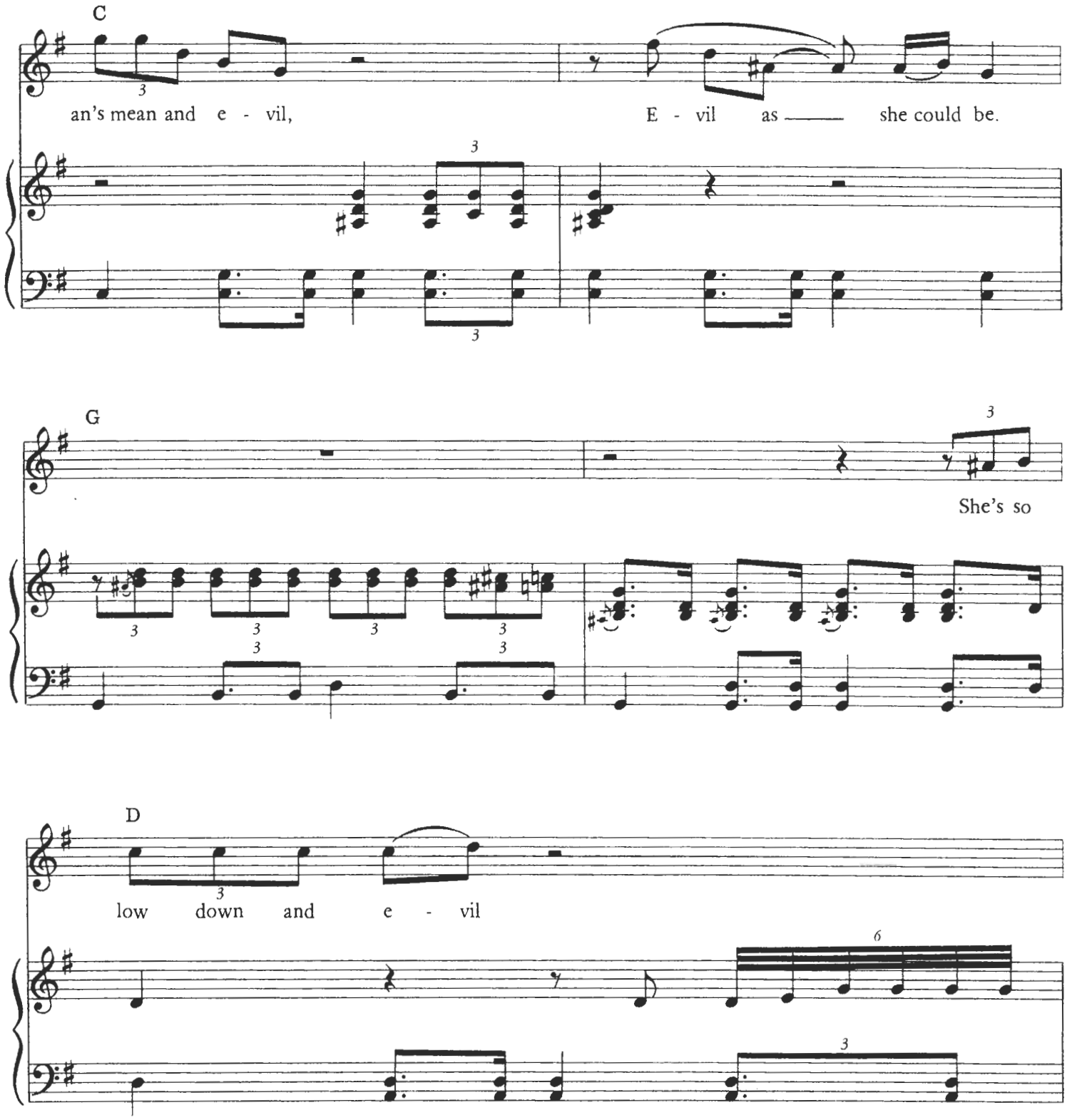
Jack Dupree

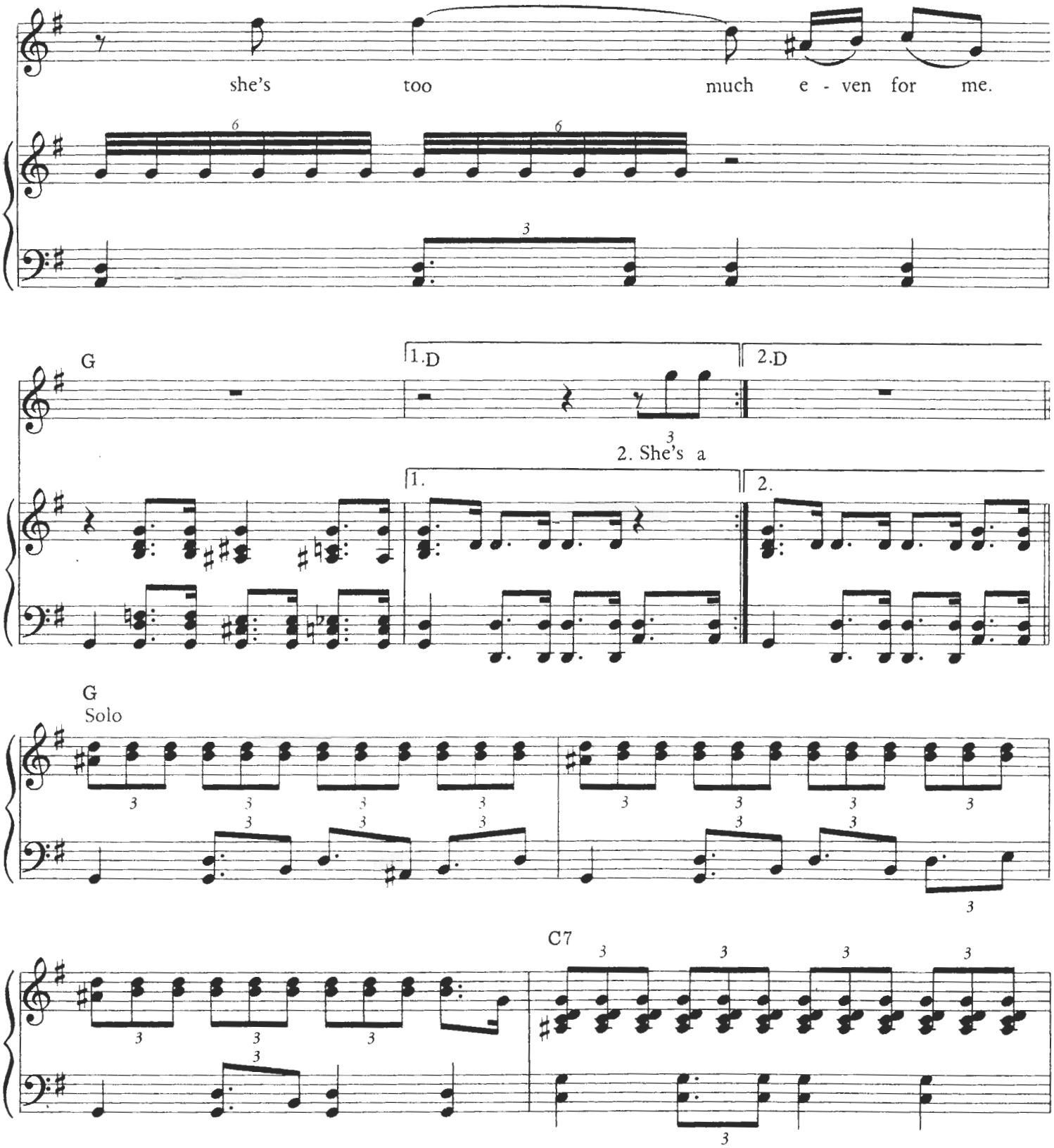


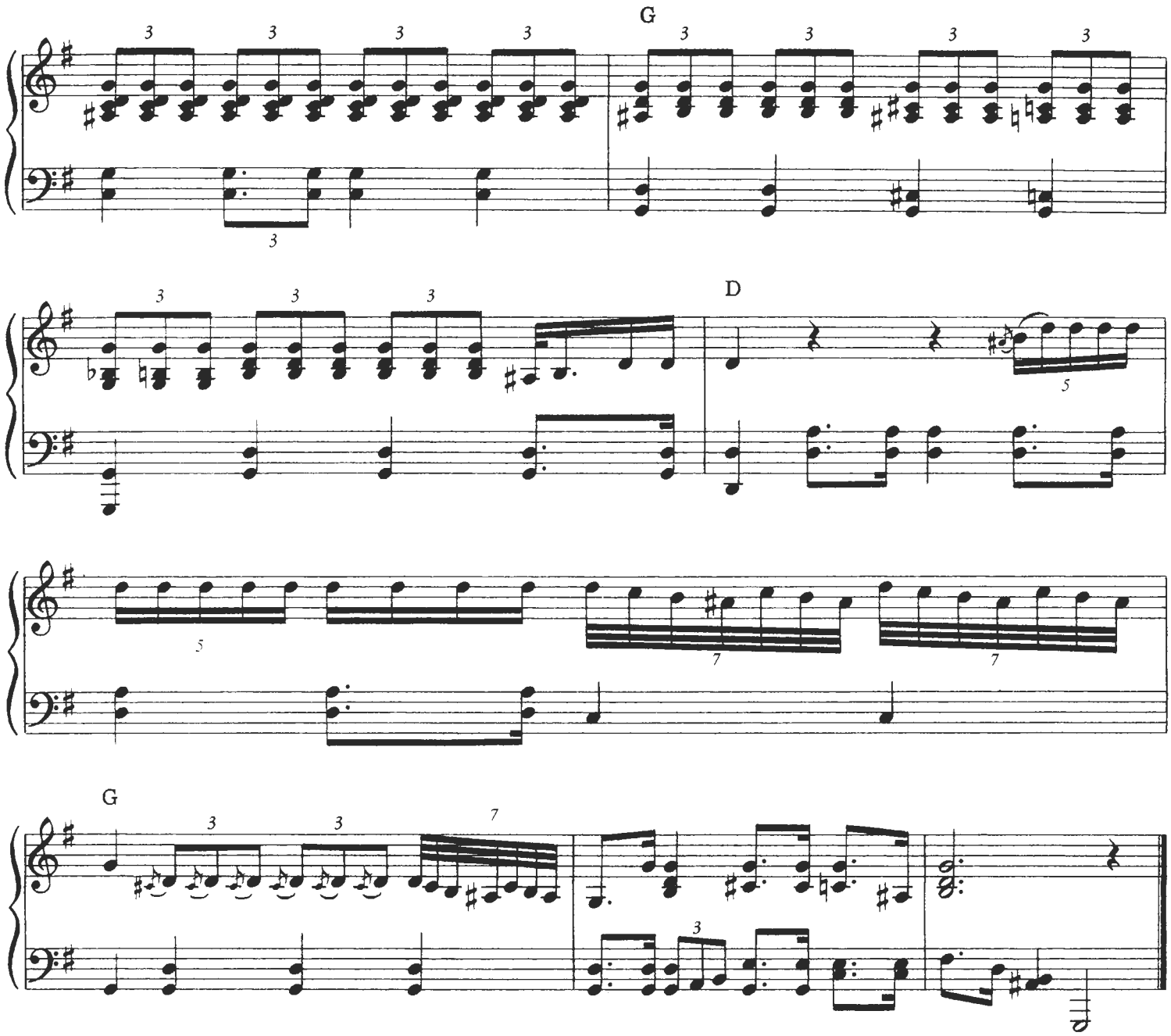
Used by permission from the recordings of Moses Asch
as recorded by Jack Dupree in record album (Folkways) ASCH AA1.


G
D
G
C♯o
Cm7
G
G
My wom - an's mean and e - vil,


She's e - vil as she could be.
G
10
3
My wom -
5


C
an's mean and e - vil,
E - vil as ___ she could be.
G
She's so
D
low down and e - vil


she's too much e - ven for me.
G
1.D
2.D
2. She's a
1.
2.
G
Solo
C7



She's a mean mistreater, and she mistreats me all the time
She's a mean mistreater, and she mistreats me all the time
I try to tell her I love her, but she won't pay that no mind.

My woman is evil, too damn evil to cry
My woman is evil, too damn evil to cry
She bends down with her head hung down, never wanna say goodbye.

Spoken: *Ain't no use bein' so evil, mama*
You're black and evil, that's all right baby
I just love you so, mama, it ain't no use.

So bye, bye, baby, listen to your daddy say goodbye
So bye, bye, baby, listen to your daddy say goodbye
You're gonna miss me when I'm gone, 'cause you're too damn evil to cry.

Little Brother Montgomery

"The first time I met the blues, baby, they came walking through the wood/ They stopped at my house first, mama, and done me all the harm they could/ Now the blues got at me and run me from tree to tree/ You should have heard me begging: 'Mister Blues, don't murder me!' " Little Brother sang these lyrics in 1936, in a veiled reference to his brutal upbringing in the lumber sawmill camps of Louisiana. Born among the itinerant workers and rough juke joints at the Kent Lumber Company, deep in the piney woods of Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana, Eurreal Montgomery learned first hand the meaning of the blues.

Montgomery's father, who migrated north from New Orleans around 1900, was a musician himself and fostered an interest in music in all his ten children. The Montgomery brood often sang in church and Eurreal Wilford, who came to be called Little Brother, began studying the piano at age five under the tutelage of his musical relatives. Years later, Montgomery recalled that *Kunjine Baby*, a tune of uncertain origin dating from the slavery period, was the first piece he learned. By age six he had graduated to simple blues pieces, and by age twelve was an accomplished musician, able to improvise with considerable facility.

In 1917 Little Brother ran away from home to become a juke pianist in Holton, Louisiana for eight dollars a week. That same year Storyville was closed, sending hundreds of blues musicians on an aimless search for new patrons. Little Brother met up with many of these wandering bluesmen, and although only eleven years old, he learned the rules of survival in the violent jukes and lumber camp barrelhouses. From Holton he ventured on to Ferriday, Louisiana, where he met two honky-tonk pianists named Long Tall Friday and Dehlco Robert. Together the trio devised new barrelhouse blues numbers, including a complex piece which eventually became known as the *Vicksburg Blues* or *44 Blues*.

For six years Little Brother continued his nomadic wanderings, passing through countless Louisiana towns, lumber camp jukes, Mississippi night spots and rural honky-tonks. An intimation of his rootless life can be gleaned from his blues lyrics. Again and again, Montgomery makes passing references to obscure places such as Fresno, Oakdale, DeRidder and Cravens, or to more general geographical areas such as Louisiana, Chicago, Mississippi and Texas. He always seems to be miles from his favorite woman, as he sings about traveling on the A&V Railroad or the Santa Fé line.

Finally, in 1923, Montgomery returned to his family and moved with them to Norfield, Mississippi, where he quickly established himself on the local blues scene. When the Depression hit the rural South, Little Brother took to the road again as a jazz pianist in several big bands and after World War II ended up in Chicago, where he lives today. Montgomery's travels and diverse musical background gave him a versatility uncommon among rural blues pianists. Aside from playing jazz and ragtime, Little Brother has performed everything from pop songs to church hymns. It is his blues singing and piano, though, that mark him as an exceptional and creative musician.

Little Brother's compositions do not fall easily into geographic, stylistic or chronological categories. While his playing bears a definite Mississippi stamp, his bass figures, use of grace notes, and structural forms defy any uniform classification. In many respects he resembles Skip James, another eclectic Mississippi piano and guitar player.

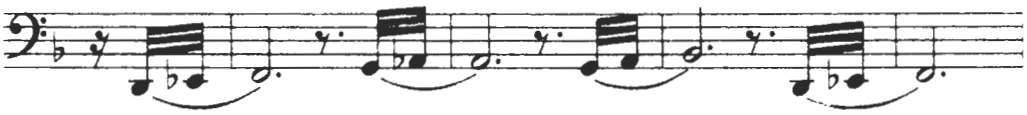
Montgomery loosely follows the standard blues form, but his variations sometimes make the patterns unrecognizable. In *Vicksburg Blues No. 2*, for example, the chorus is 24 bars long, but is subdivided into 4 sections of 8 bars each. The piece begins on the dominant, C major, in one of the most remarkable introductions to a piano blues ever recorded.

Tremblin' Blues (See page 42.)

Even more curious is *Tremblin' Blues*, which is also organized around a 24 bar form. After a four bar introduction, Montgomery plays two distinct 12 bar themes, neither of which follows a standard blues progression.

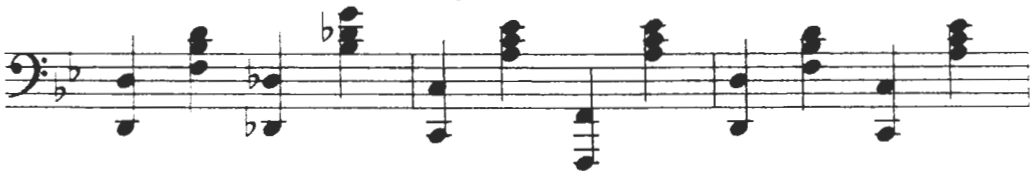
Montgomery's bass lines display similar idiosyncrasies. *Vicksburg Blues* features a "slide" bass consisting of rapid glissandi connecting one note with another:

Bass Excerpt from *Vicksburg Blues No. 2*



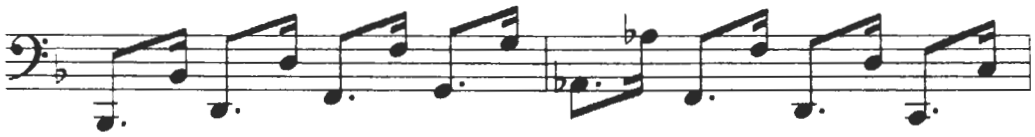
In *Tremblin' Blues*, however, the left hand plays in a ragtime style dominated by harmonic ideas rather than rhythmic ones:

Bass Excerpt from *Tremblin' Blues*



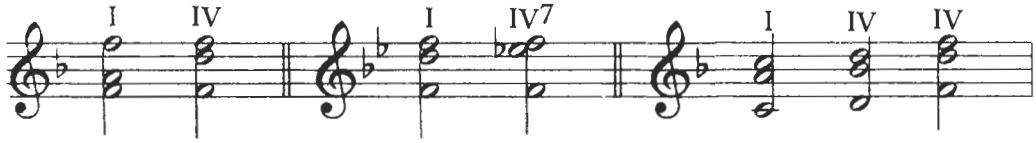
Bass Key Boogie represents yet another barrelhouse style involving a syncopated "eight to the bar" walking bass:

Bass Excerpt from *Bass Key Boogie*



Montgomery's right hand technique relies heavily on parallel octaves and sixths to outline the melodic line and somtimes double the vocal. He usually treats thirds by voicing them as sixths in the following manner:

Voicings



In this way, the transition from the I chord to the IV chord is easily made without a break in the melodic line.

In 1930 Little Brother traveled to Grafton, Wisconsin to make his first recordings for the Paramount Record Company. During the brief session he accompanied two female vocalists and cut two solo piano blues, *No Special Rider Blues* and the original *Vicksburg Blues*. In 1935 Montgomery recorded his famous, and best version of *Vicksburg Blues* for the Bluebird label. It is this later recording that is transcribed in this book.

After World War II blues enthusiast Bob Stendahl, Jr. recorded Little Brother for the old Disc label, but financial problems prevented the release of these sides until 1972, when Robert Koester of Delmark Records issued them on his own label. Both *Tremblin' Blues* and *Bass Key Boogie* are from Stendahl's 1947 session, and along with the 1935-36 sessions, these sides are unsurpassed examples of Montgomery's artistry.

When Little Brother rejoined his family in Mississippi, he met several other pianists including Sunnyland Slim and Cooney Vaughn from Hattiesburg, a small town due east of Norfield. Apparently Little Brother's parents didn't approve of his blues cohorts for in *No Special Rider Blues* he comments: "Going to get up, get up in the morning, mama, and I ain't gon' say a word/ Going to eat my breakfast and sneak to Hattiesburg." Vaughn, a locally famous piano player who recorded with the Mississippi Jook Band, had developed a unique style combining New Orleans ragtime with the more emotional moaning blues associated with the delta region. Little Brother studied Vaughn's technique and adopted Vaughn's showpiece, *Tremblin' Blues*, into his own repertoire. The blues derives its name from the "trembling" sixteenth note figures in the right hand that contrast so brilliantly with the ragtime style left hand. *Tremblin' Blues* is currently available on Delmark's *Piano Blues Orgy* release.

Vicksburg Blues No. 2 (See page 46.)

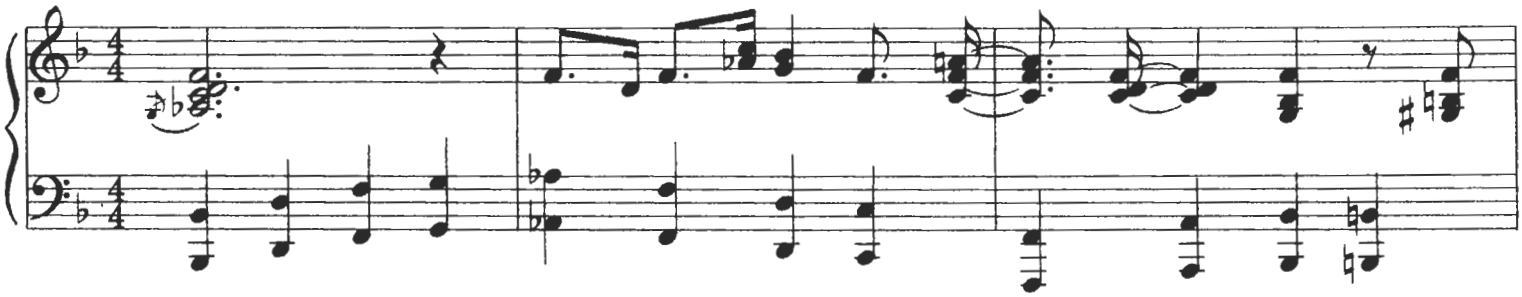
By the time Montgomery left Ferriday, Louisiana, he had developed his own masterpiece, *Vicksburg Blues,* from many melodic fragments. As he traveled and his blues became well known, other men picked up on his composition. In 1922 Little Brother met Lee "Porkchops" Green, and the two musicians traded blues. Green learned *Vicksburg Blues* and passed it on to Roosevelt Sykes around 1925. Sykes recorded the piece, renamed *44 Blues,* during his first recording session in 1929, and since that time it has become one of the most popular piano blues classics. In fact, knowing a version of the *Forty-Fours* became a prerequisite for employment in many rural jukes, just as many urban tavern owners demanded a version of the *Chicago Fives,* a Jimmy Yancey favorite. *Vicksburg Blues No. 2* has been reissued on Yazoo L-1028.

Bass Key Boogie (See page 52.)

Bass Key Boogie illustrates Little Brother's facility as a boogie-woogie piano player. The composition incorporates many St. Louis and Chicago boogie influences, a reflection of Montgomery's move to Chicago after World War II. Like all boogie numbers, the left hand provides the rhythmic drive, while the right hand adds an extra syncopated "kick." It is important to play without pounding on the piano. *Bass Key Boogie* has been issued on Delmark 626. Montgomery has recorded a similar version, entitled *West 46th Street Boogie,* available on Folkways FG 3527.

Bass Key Boogie may present technical problems in the coordination of the right and left hands. A helpful aid in mastering the boogie style is to "double up" the left hand as illustrated below:

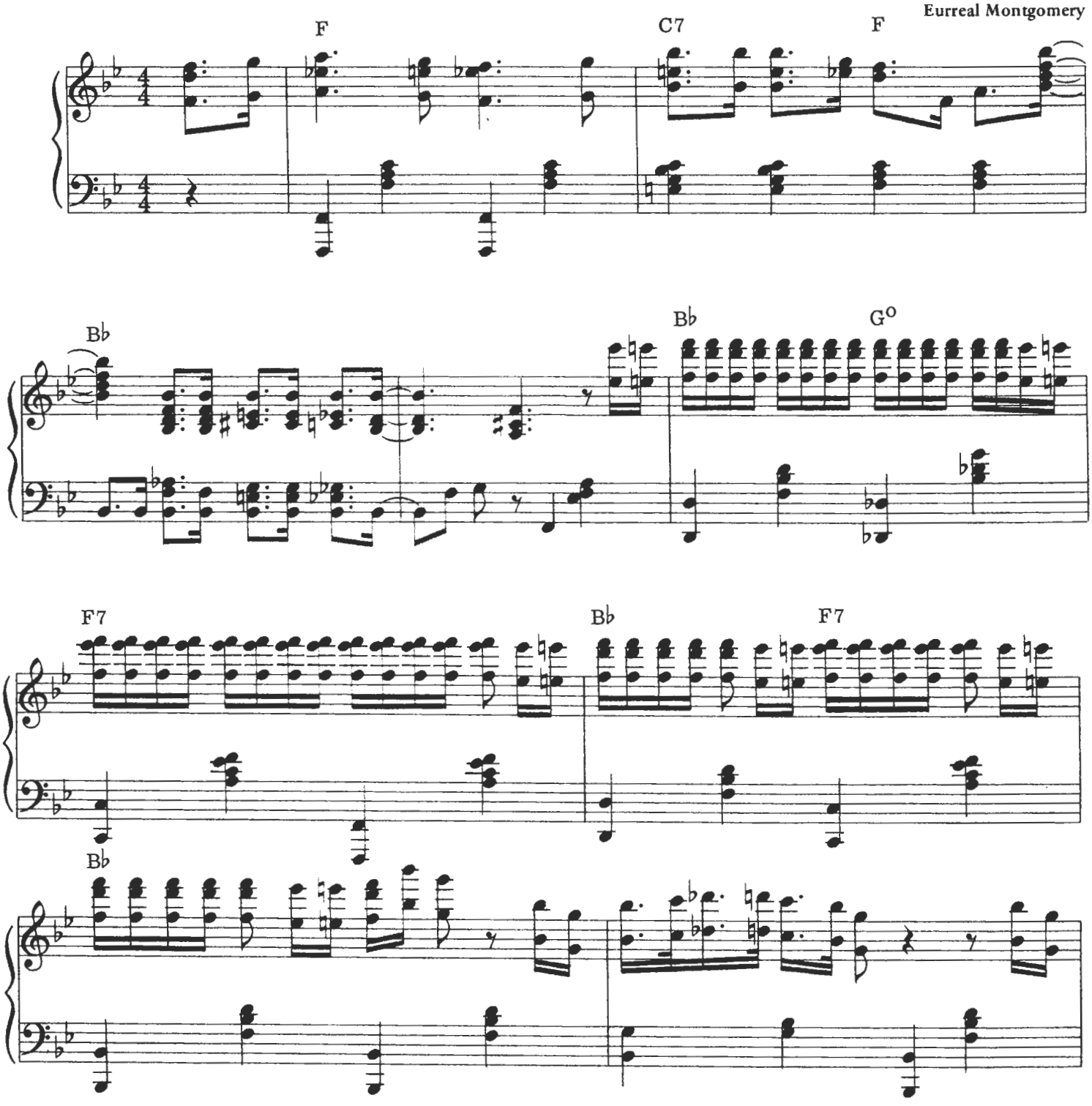
Exercises

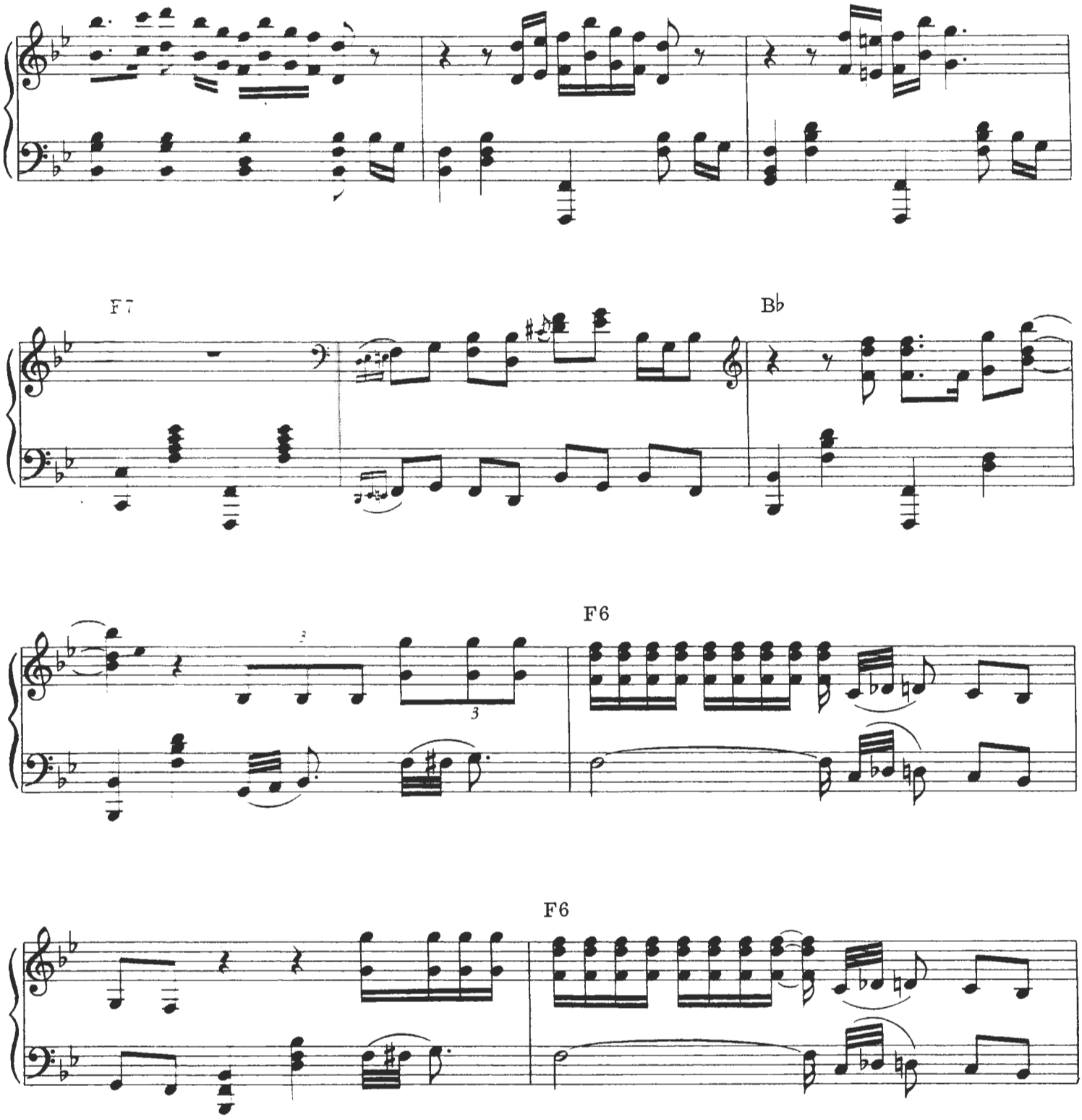


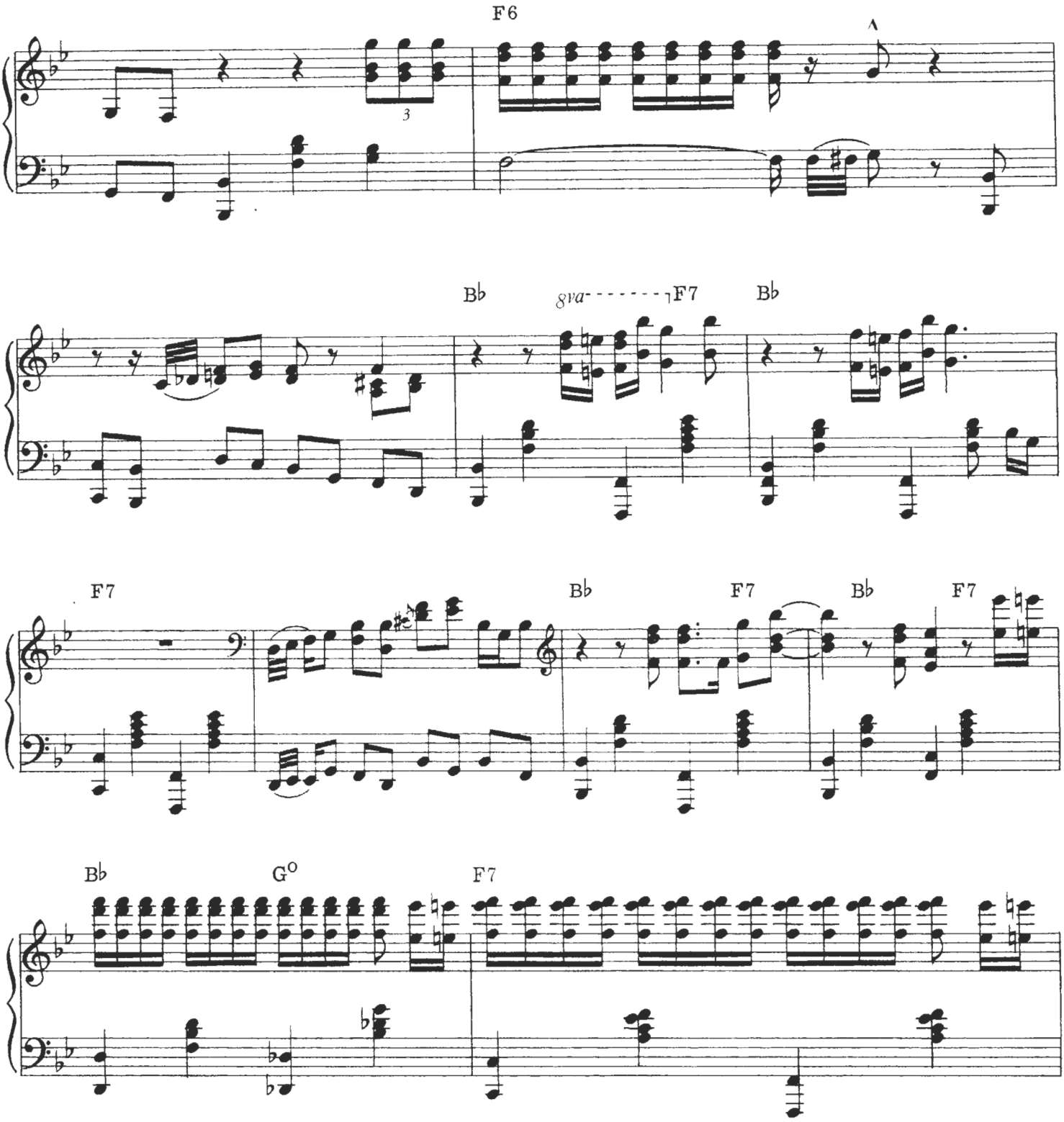
In this way, right hand syncopations may be practiced to a steady left hand without the added complexities of the full boogie bass. This technique will also aid in learning other boogies, including Roosevelt Sykes' *North Gulfport Boogie* and *Spann's Stomp,* also included in this book.

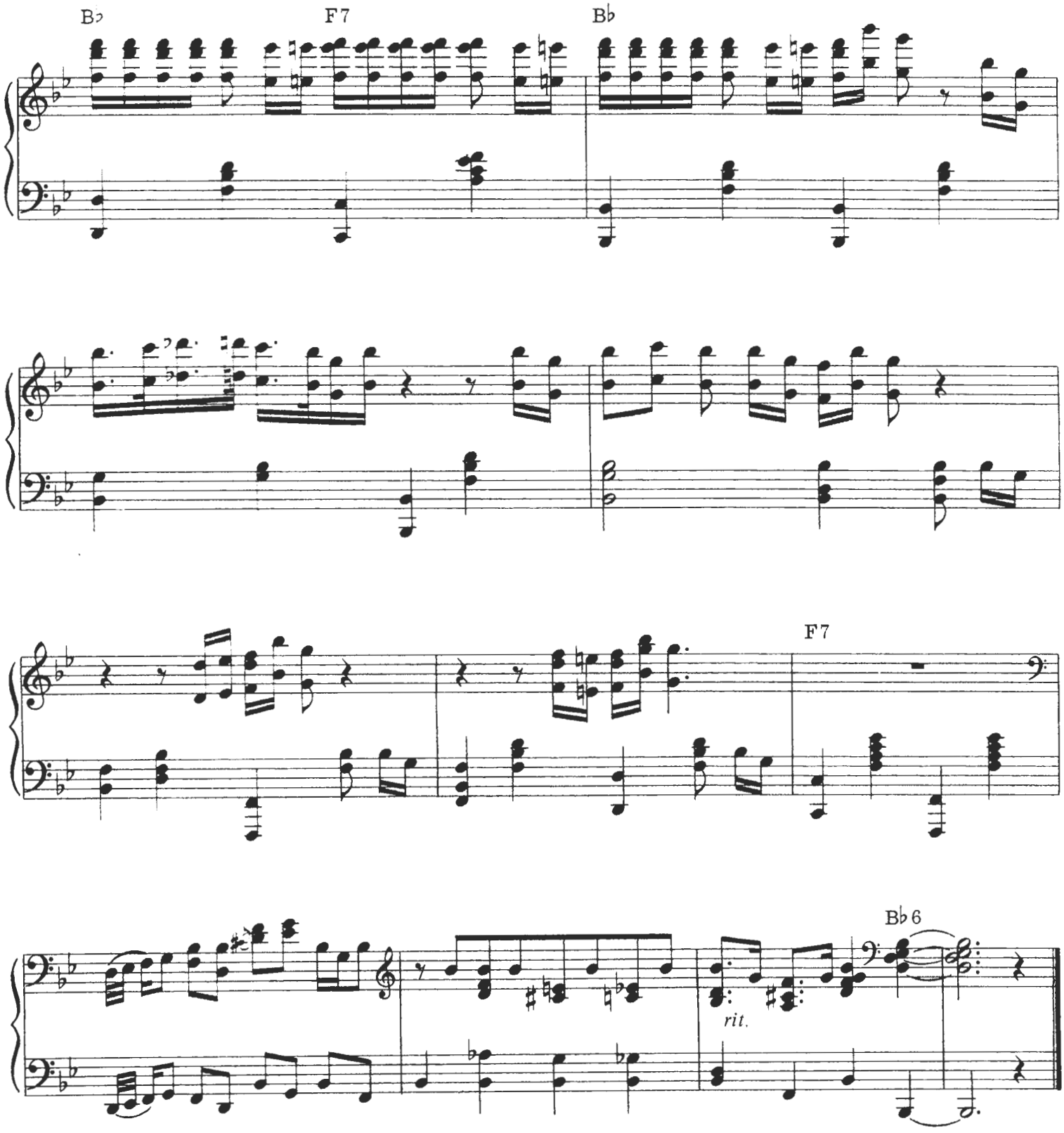
Tremblin' Blues

Eurreal Montgomery



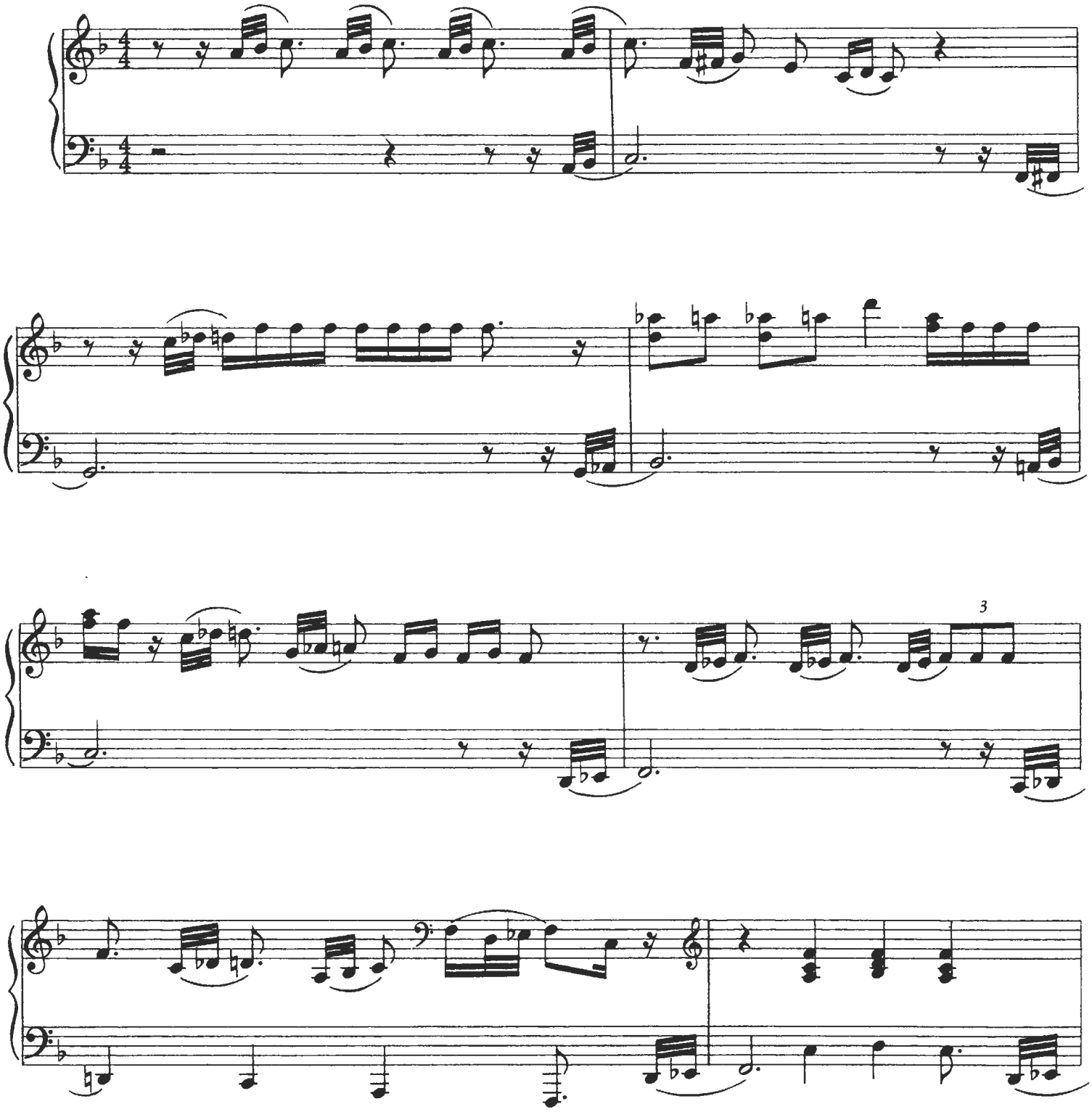

F7
Bb
F6
F6

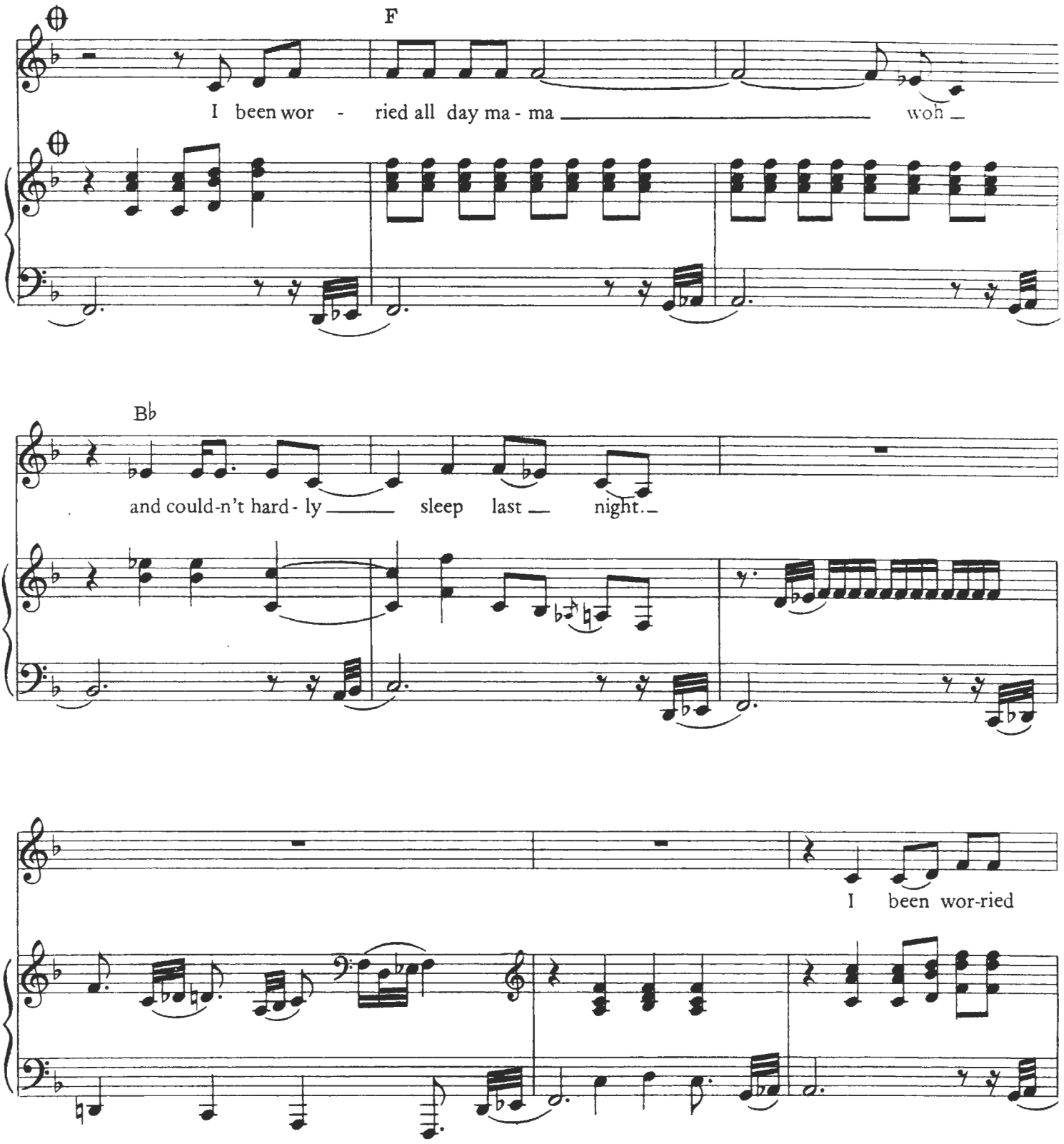

F6
3
B♭
8va
F7
B♭
F7
B♭
F7
B♭
F7
B♭
G°
F7

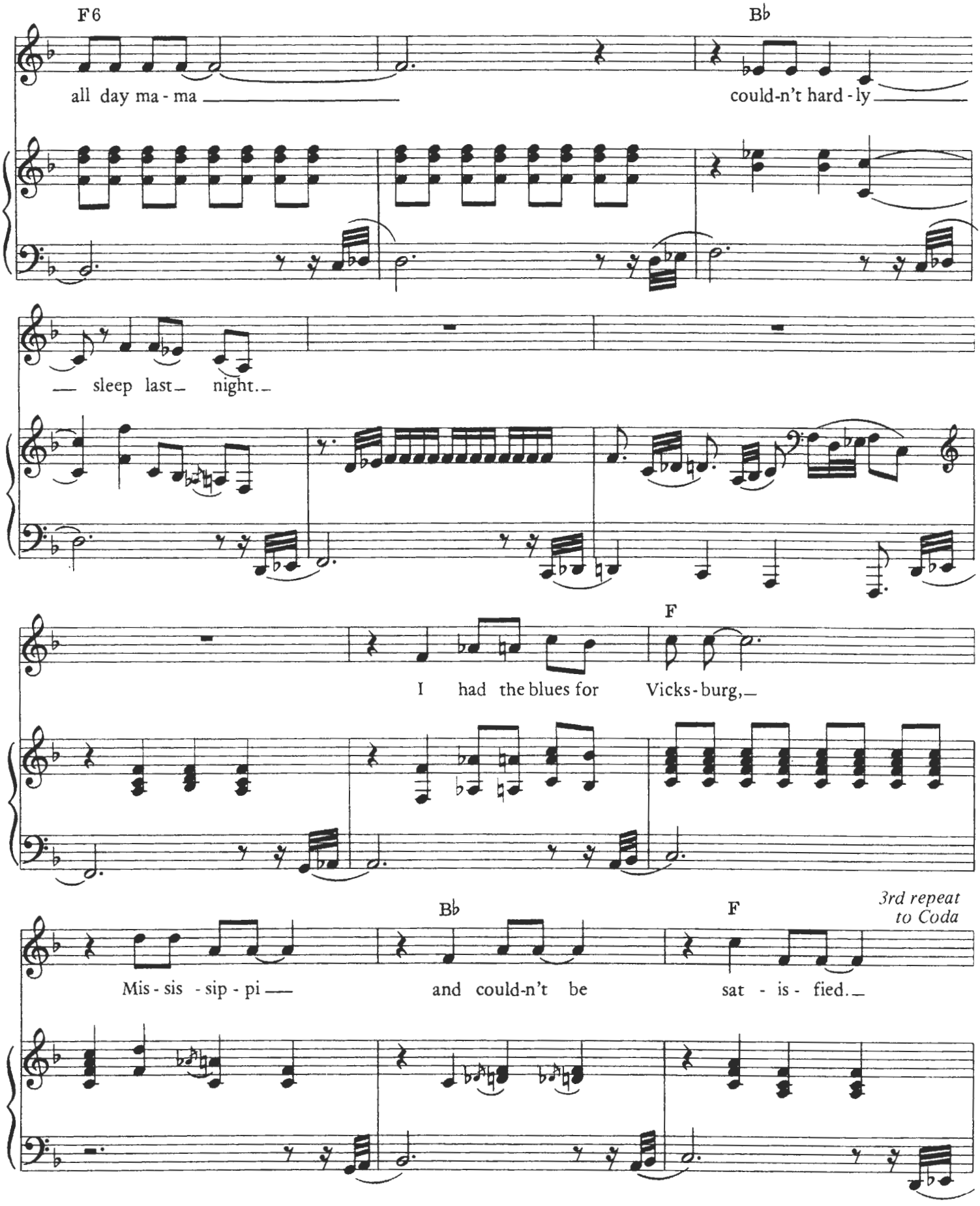

B♭
F7
B♭
F7
B♭6
rit.

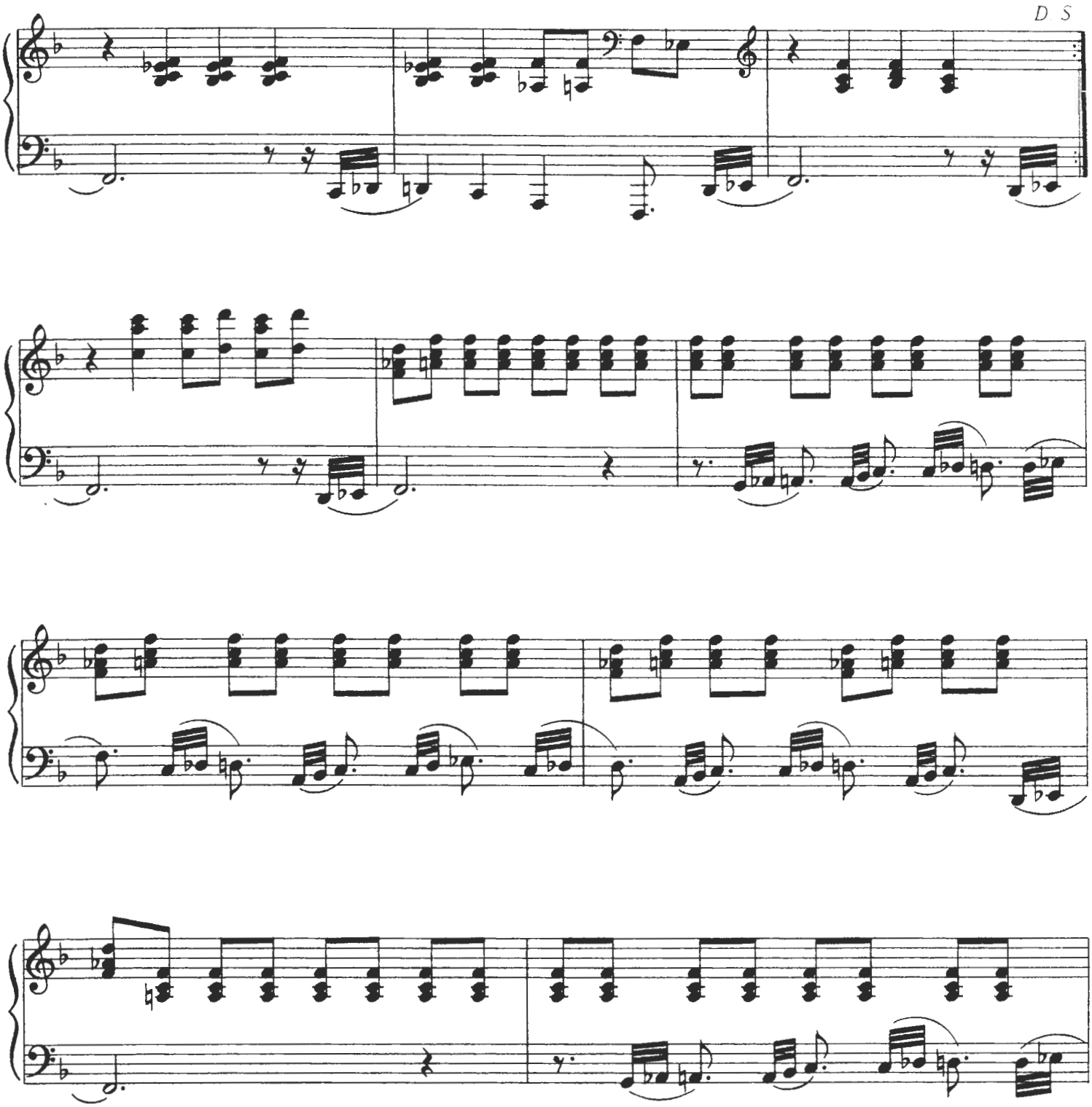
Vicksburg Blues No. 2

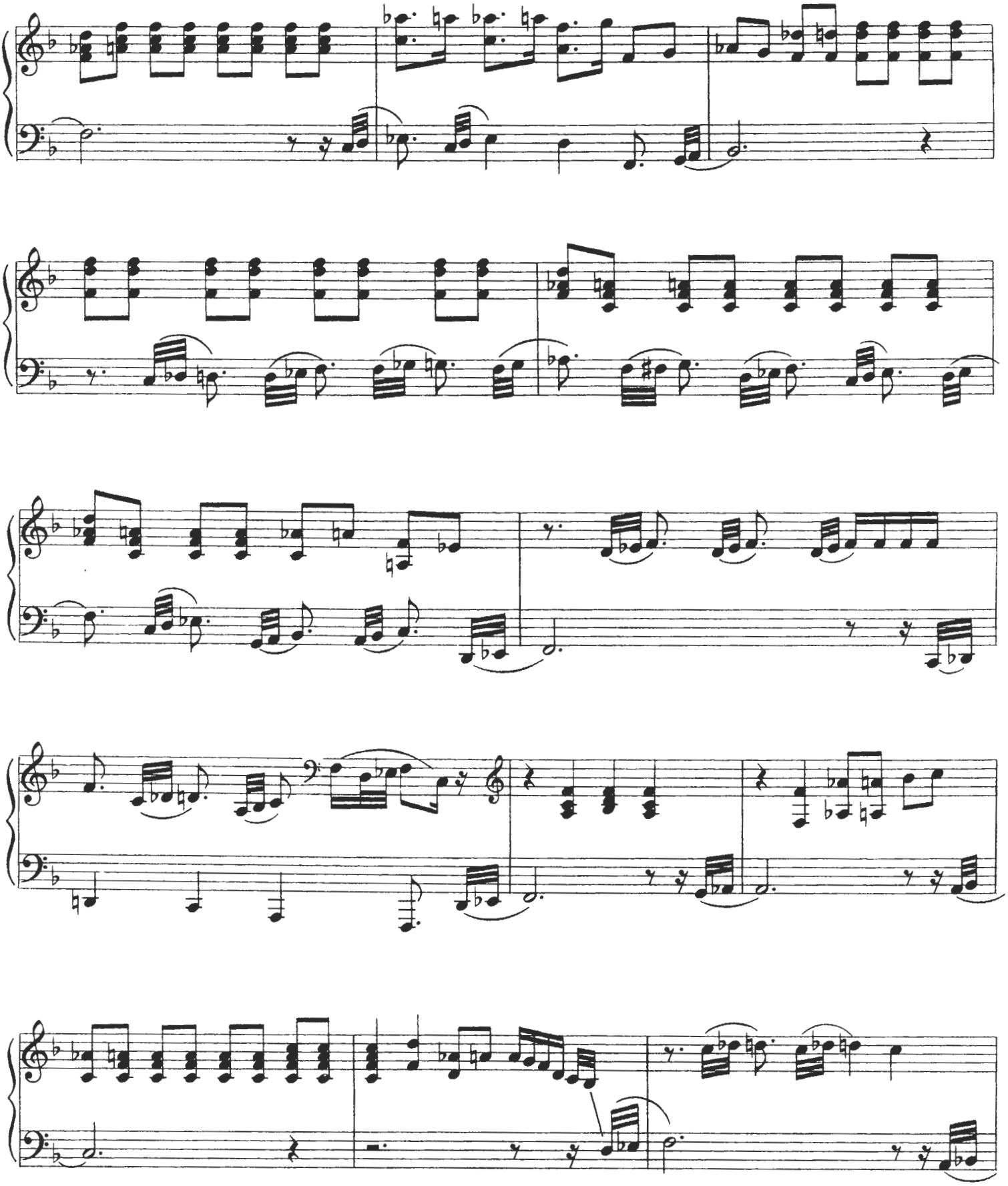
Eurreal Montgomery

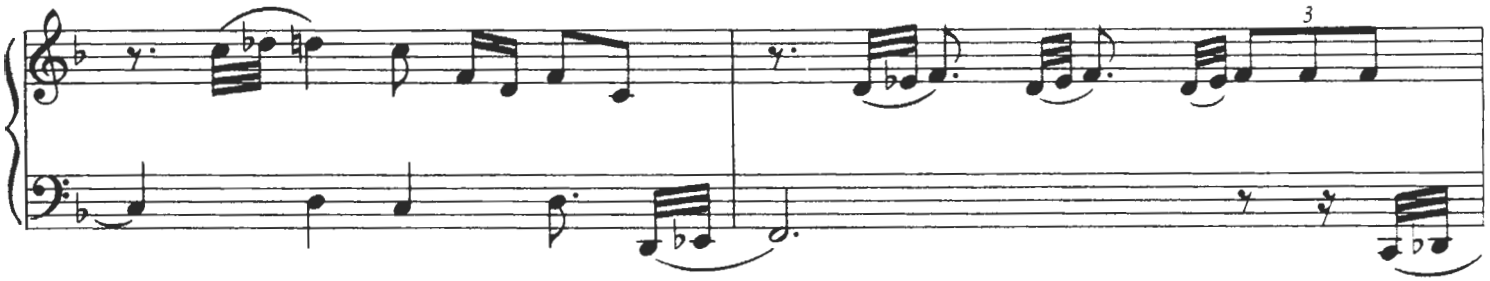


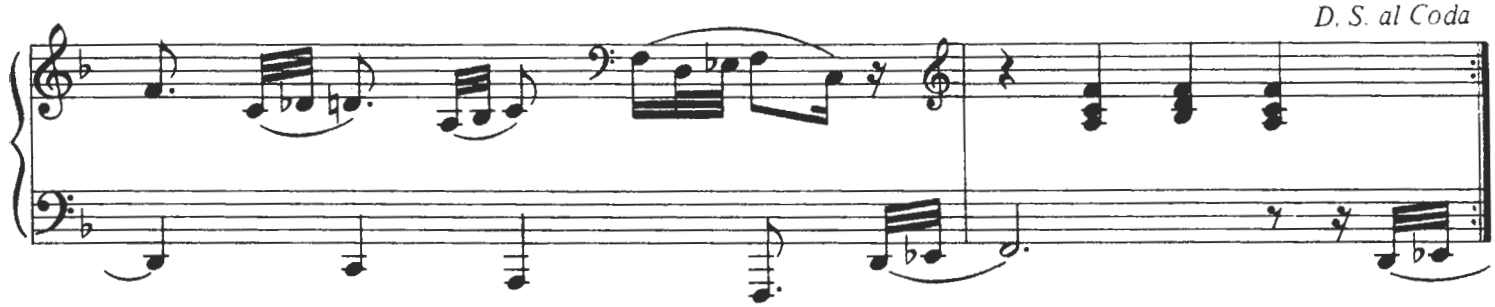

F
I been wor - ried all day ma - ma woh
B♭
and could-n't hard - ly sleep last night.
I been wor-ried


F6
B♭
all day ma - ma
could-n't hard - ly
— sleep last— night.—
F
I had the blues for Vicks - burg,—
B♭
F
3rd repeat to Coda
Mis - sis - sip - pi —
and could-n't be
sat - is - fied.—

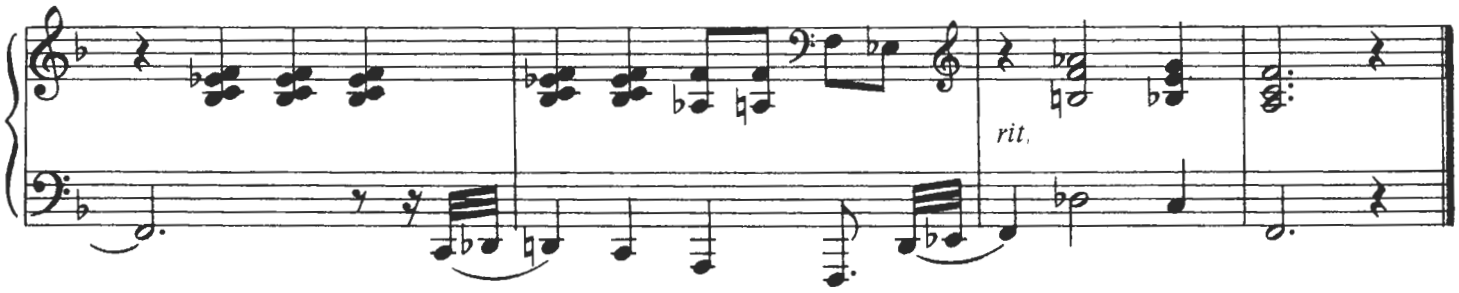

D S







Coda

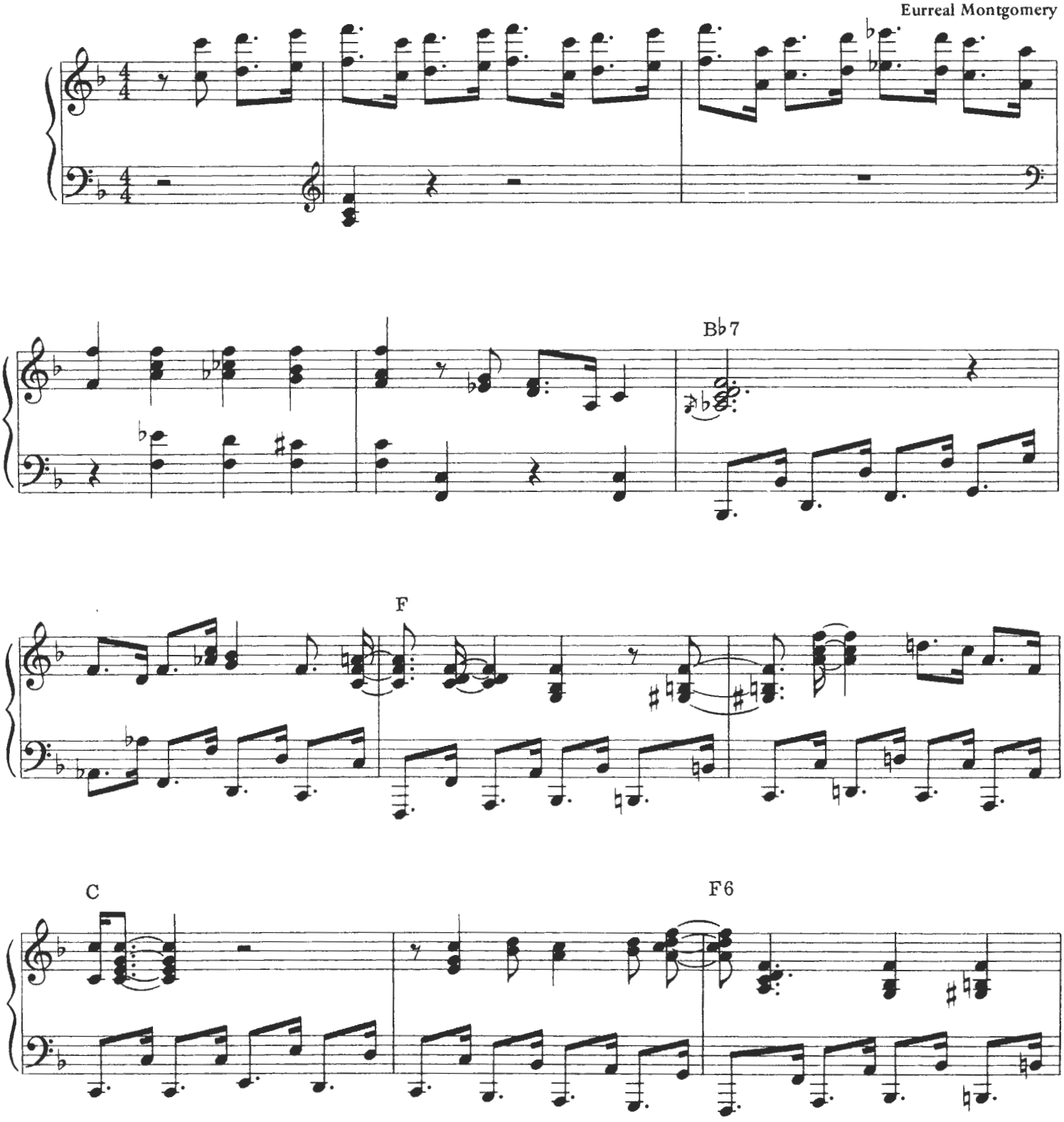


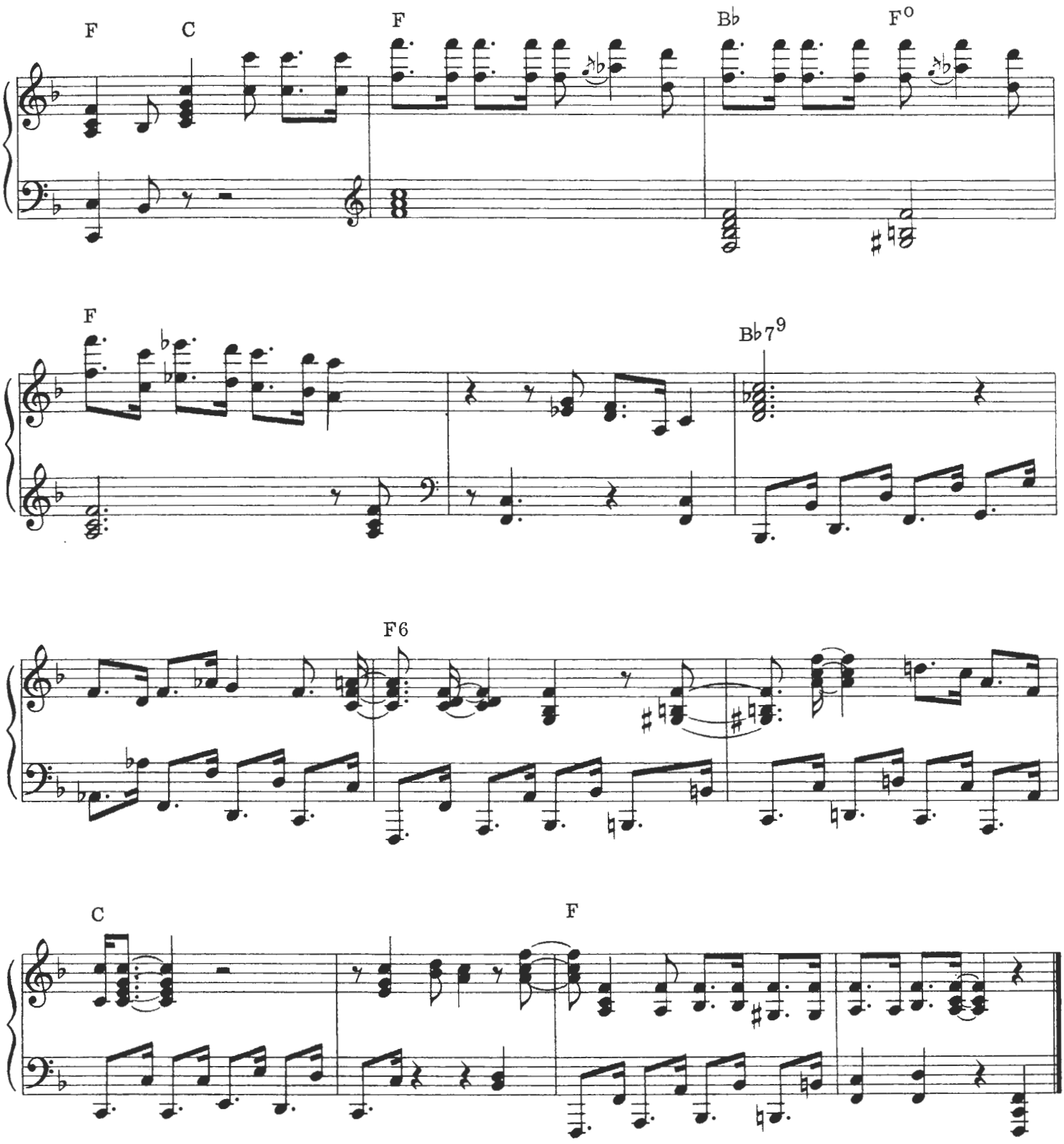
Down there is Vicksburg, Mississippi where I long to be
Down there is Vicksburg, Mississippi where I long to be
I've got a cool kind pretty mama waiting there for me.

Now there is nothing I can do, mama, or no more I can say
There is nothing I can do, mama, or no more I can say
All I know I due in Vicksburg, Lord, this very day.

Bass Key Boogie

Eurreal Montgomery




F
C
F
B♭
F°
F
B♭7⁹
F6
C
F

Speckled Red

Rufus Perryman, nicknamed Speckled Red because of his freckled albino skin, grew up in the rural areas of Louisiana and Georgia. In his mid-twenties, his large family (fifteen brothers and sisters) moved north to Detroit, where Red developed an interest in blues piano. A Detroit pianist named Paul Seminole was his first major influence, although Red was primarily a self-taught musician.

In Detroit, a constant stream of itinerant pianists provided Red with a rich blues education. He learned the rough barrelhouse style from lumber camp pianists, imitated Eastern ragtime numbers, and mastered the fast boogie blues of the Southwest. The urban clubs of the Midwest became Red's training ground where, like Champion Jack Dupree, he overcame a coarse environment with a powerfully distinctive style. By the twenties, Red had become a celebrated local performer in the barrelhouse tradition, known respectfully as "Detroit Red" in the tough back alley jukes.

Speckled Red, along with many blues musicians, went "underground" during the hard times of the 1930's, and remained in obscurity for over twenty years before his rediscovery in 1954. That year several blues fans found Red's trail, and a cooperative plainclothesman named Charlie O'Brien finally located the elusive pianist in St. Louis. O'Brien and an avid blues record collector, Robert Koester, accompanied Red down to a local tavern for an introductory session on December 14, 1954.

"It was astonishing to hear that kind of piano in person," Koester later recalled. "One so easily falls into a frame of mind whereby such sounds seem to exist only on old records. Red had arthritis and his voice was frequently hoarse; so it was no easy job to get him properly recorded. He also did not function well when this was combined with excessive booze, and at the informal recording sessions we used to do in those days, someone always seemed to come along who assumed that a musician can play better drunk."

Koester attempted several recording sessions for his then neoteric label, Delmark, but a combination of poor equipment, inferior pianos and unskilled labor delayed an adequate session until 1957. It was then that Koester obtained the services of Erwin Helfer, who recorded Red with an old Concertone machine. These tapes were eventually issued on Delmark DL-601; from that album I have transcribed *Cow Cow Blues* and *The Dirty Dozens* for this book.

Perhaps because he was self-taught, Speckled Red's piano style is highly idiosyncratic. In structure, his blues often depart from the standard progression. *The Dirty Dozens*, for example, begins with a 13 bar introduction followed by a 15 bar vocal chorus. Equally odd is the 23 bar chorus to *Cow Cow Blues*. While Red does make use of I-IV-V progressions, the chords are often arranged in new unique combinations. The chord progression to *The Dirty Dozens* is an illustration:

(13 bar introduction)
F/F/F/F/F/F/B♭/B♭/F/F/C/C/F
I/I/I/I/I/I/IV/IV/I/I/V/V/I

(15 bar vocal chorus)
F/F/F/F/F/F/F/F/B♭/B♭/F/F/C/C/F
I/I/I/I/I/I/I/I/IV/IV/I/I/V/V/I

Neither section follows the usual I-IV-V blues progression, and yet the song retains the feeling of the blues.

The musical scene in Detroit before World War I was heavily influenced by ragtime piano. Red's bass lines, introductory passages, chordal harmonies, and lack of strong syncopation are all adaptations from an older ragtime style. Red's song material, however, comes more from Afro-American folk blues. Thus, his playing blends folk traditions and an adapted ragtime style into an original piano music representative of those early barrelhouse musicians who worked the rural jukes and lumber camps.

The improvised solo, as such, does not really exist in Speckled Red's playing; he often repeats a familiar riff over and over again with only a few minor variations. Unlike Jimmy Yancey or Otis Spann, who both delighted in developing new right hand

melodic solos over a steady bass, Red limited himself to a tightly constructed song format. He conceived of his music as light-hearted entertainment in much the same way as the early generation of blues songsters.

Red collided briefly with the recording industry in Memphis, where he was located by Jim Jackson, the famous blues entertainer, in 1929. During a session at the Peabody Hotel, Red performed a bouncy, though censored, version of his own *Dirty Dozens.* The record put him momentarily in the spotlight; in fact, it was so popular that it was remade by other blues artists, including Leroy Carr, Kokomo Arnold and Tampa Red. For a while he was in demand as a recording artist, but when his commercial success faded during the Depression, Red went back to his nomadic wanderings through the Midwest.

The history of the dozens is a fascinating tale well worth summarizing. The dozens was originally a religious mnemonic device that enabled illiterate communities to transmit knowledge verbally to their young. Verses were something like "First, God made the earth in six whole days/ Second, He rested and it's good He says . . ." and so on. Gradually, along with a decline in religious fanaticism, the dozens took on a special secular meaning—they became a vehicle for insult and verbal abuse. Thus the "dirty dozens" was born as a folk game of traded vulgarisms that, more often than not, ended in violence. Usually the sport concentrated on infuriating one's opponent with dirty remarks about his mother. In a skillful dozens match, the twelfth repartee was seldom reached.

The Dirty Dozens (See page 56.)

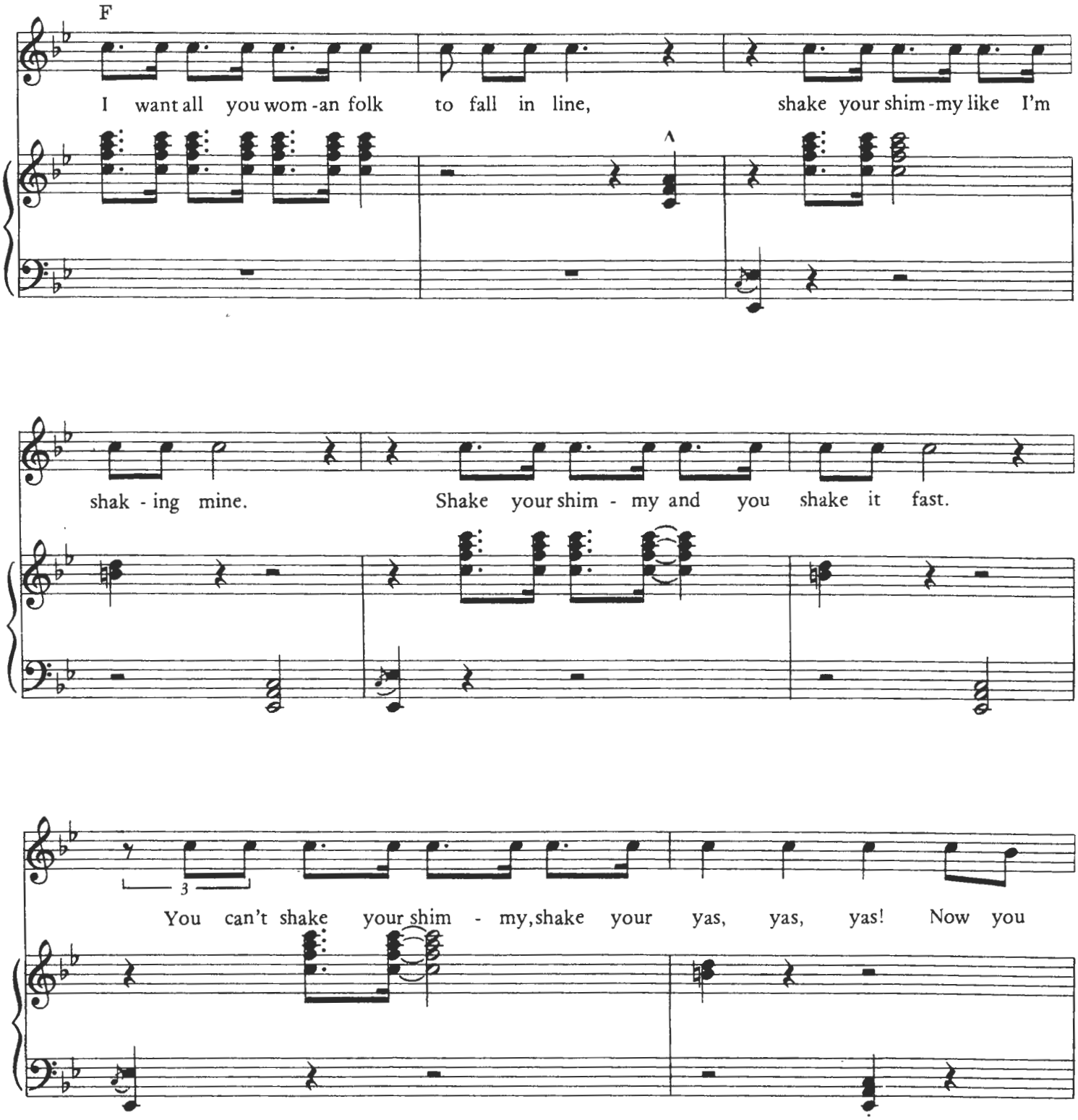
When Red recorded his first version of *The Dirty Dozens* in 1929, the record companies imposed a rigid censorship; so Red was obliged to clean up the lyrics, and the result is, by today's standards, pretty bland. However, Speckled Red later made an unexpurgated version for Bob Koester, and the words give a good indication of what was sung in the backwood jukes during the 1920's and '30's.

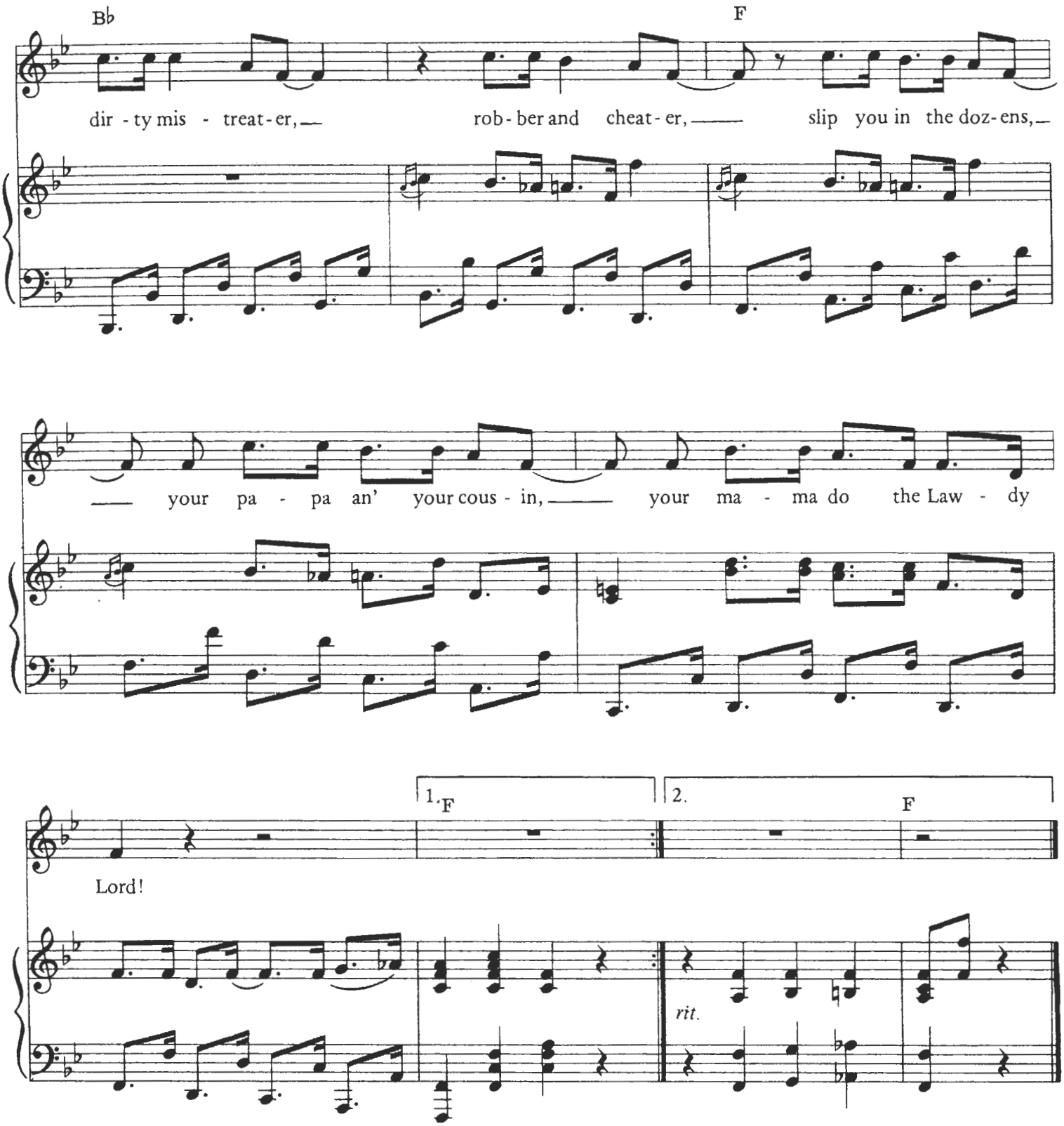
The Dirty Dozens was intended as musical entertainment, not as an introspective blues, and should be performed with this in mind.

Cow Cow Blues (See page 60.)

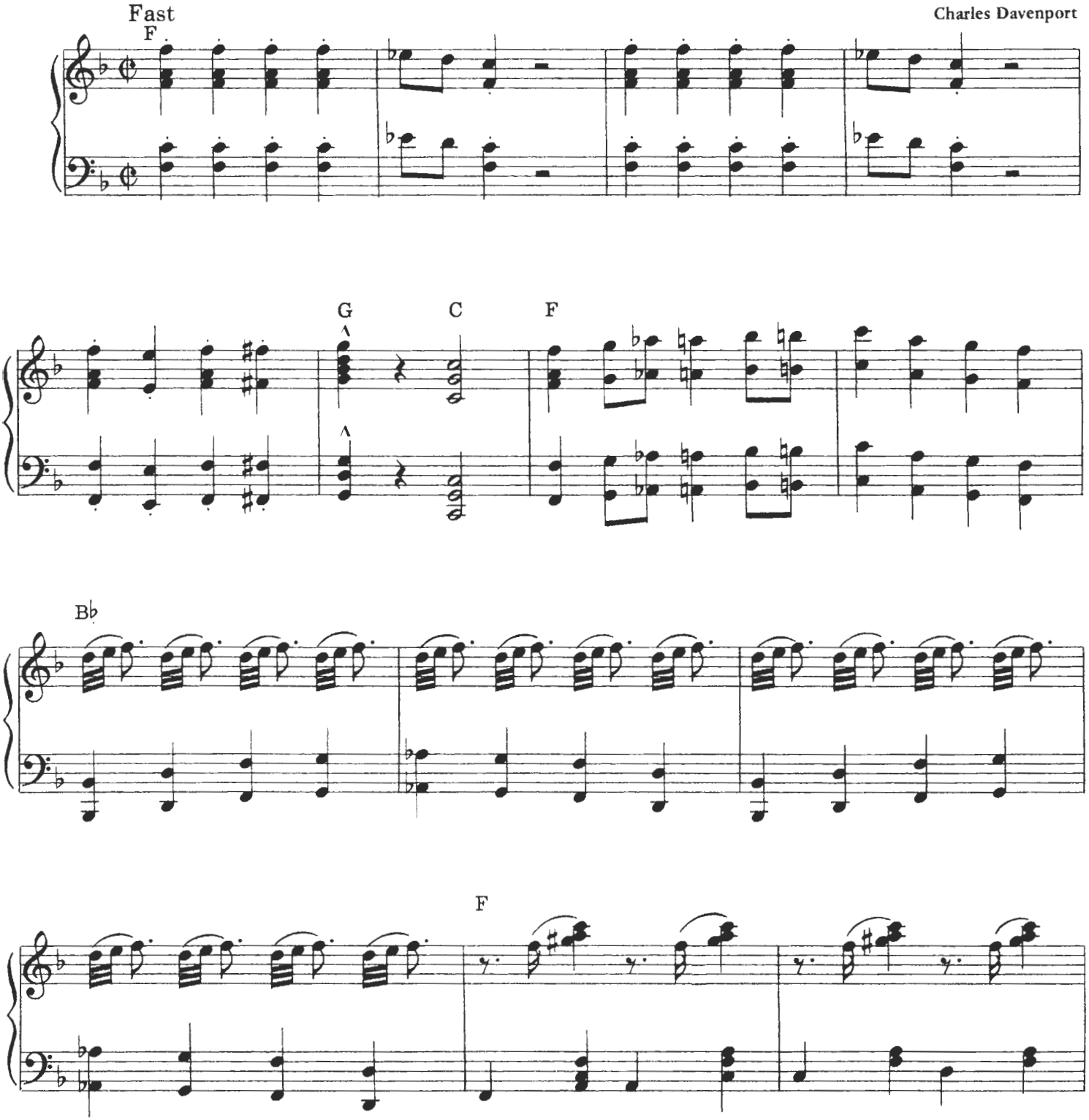
One of the many itinerant piano players to wander through Detroit was Charles Davenport, the son of an Alabama Baptist minister who spent a lot of his time performing in local brothels. During his travels Davenport picked up a theme called *The Cows* and remade it into a piano showpiece, *Cow Cow Blues,* that dealt with the oft-used symbolism of the railroad. When Speckled Red learned the piece, he transposed it down a fourth, to the key of F major, but otherwise his version hardly differs from the Davenport original. When played at a fast tempo, this blues is an impressive example of early barrelhouse piano. An alternate version of *Cow Cow Blues* is available on Folkways FG 3555.

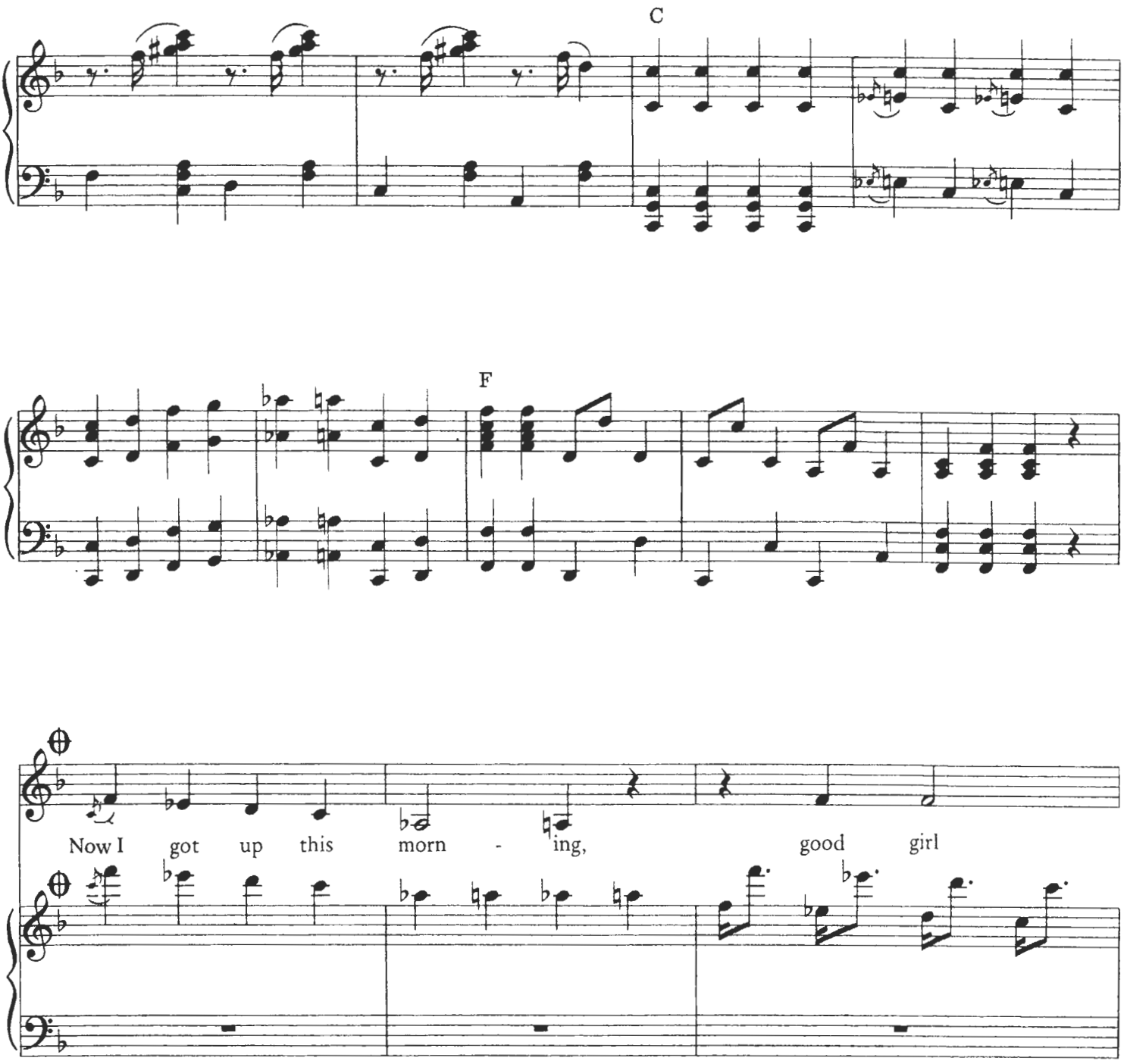
Speckled Red

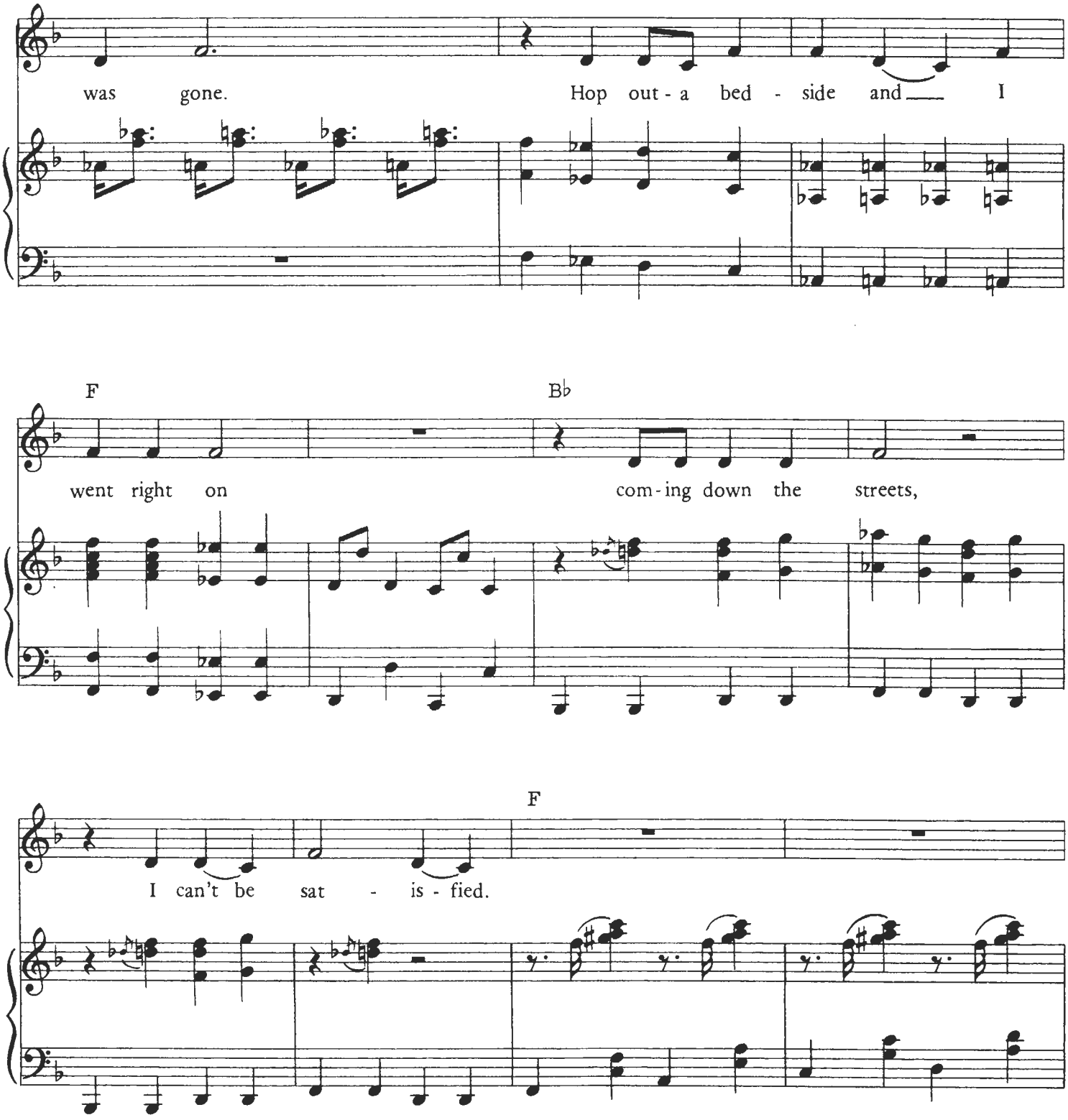

F
I want all you wom-an folk to fall in line, shake your shim-my like I'm
shak-ing mine. Shake your shim-my and you shake it fast.
3
You can't shake your shim-my, shake your yas, yas, yas! Now you

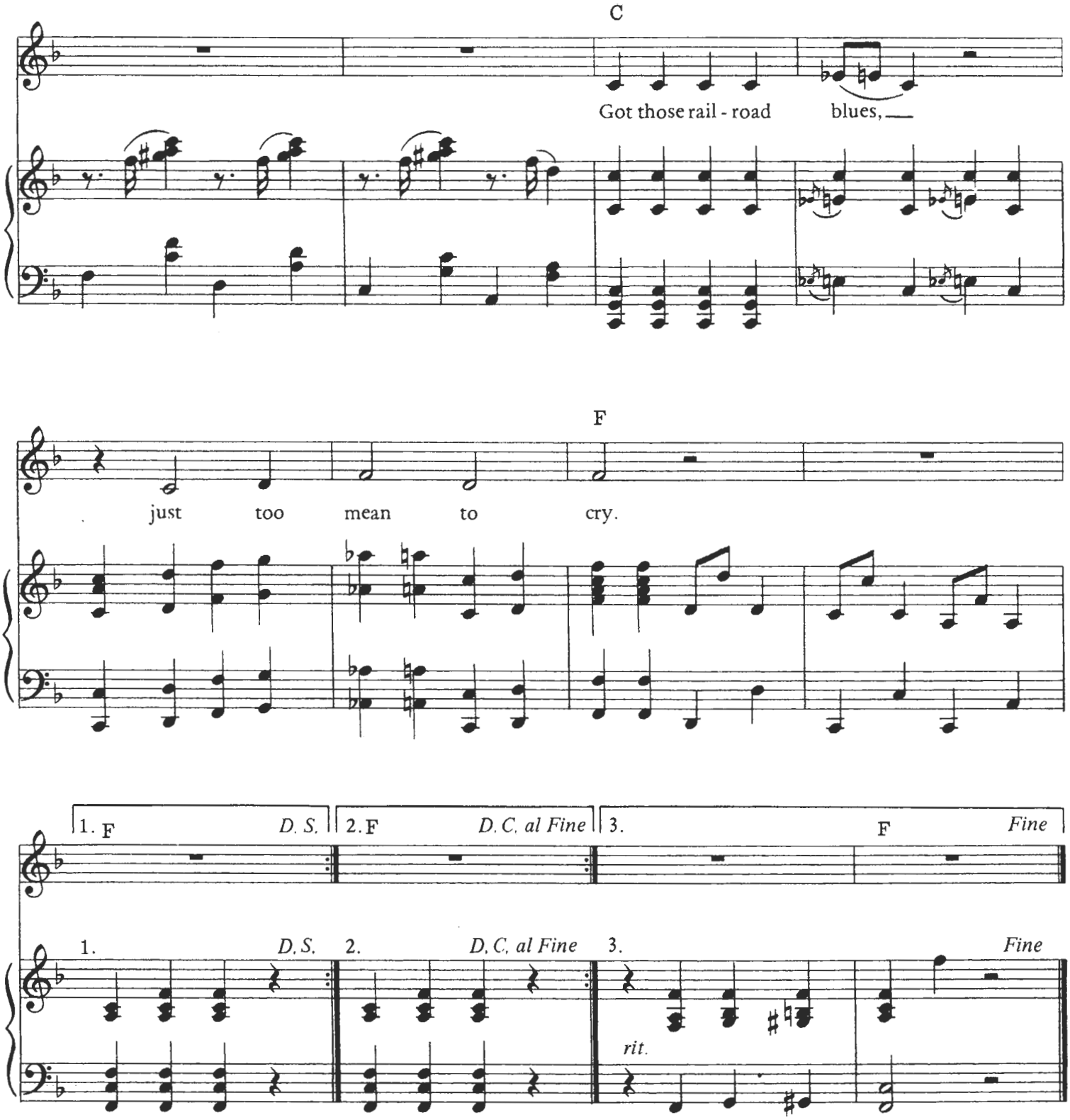

B♭
F
dir - ty mis - treat - er, — rob - ber and cheat - er, —— slip you in the doz - ens, —
—— your pa - pa an' your cous - in, —— your ma - ma do the Law - dy
1. F
2. F
Lord!
rit.

Cow Cow Blues




C
F
Now I got up this morn - ing, good girl


was gone.
Hop out - a bed - side and I
F
Bb
went right on
com - ing down the streets,
F
I can't be sat - is - fied.


C
Got those rail - road blues,
F
just too mean to cry.
1. F D. S.
2. F D. C. al Fine
3. F Fine
1. D. S.
2. D. C. al Fine
3. Fine
rit.

Roosevelt Sykes

Roosevelt Sykes has played and recorded steadily since 1929, the year he walked into Jesse Johnson's De Luxe Music Shop in St. Louis with a few of his blues pieces. Johnson quickly secured a recording date with OKeh in New York City, and Sykes has been going strong ever since. The fact that Sykes has done so well, considering the economic tribulations of blues musicians in general, is a testament to his ability and talent.

Sykes was born on January 31, sometime between 1901 and 1913, depending upon whom you believe or what Roosevelt happens to remember at any given time. Helena, Arkansas, his birthplace, was "just a little old sawmill town" with "not too much happening, you know." But the area was rich with the blues, and when Sykes met a local pianist named Jesse Bell, he decided to become a bluesman himself. Around 1909 Sykes and his family moved to St. Louis, but Roosevelt continued to spend his summers in Helena on his grandfather's cotton farm. "You know, I tell you the truth," Sykes is fond of quipping, "I just been pickin' a little cotton and pickin' a little piano."

The initial session for OKeh in 1929 included a version of Little Brother Montgomery's *Vicksburg Blues*, later renamed *44 Blues*. The record was so successful that Sykes was back in a studio a few months later in September, 1929, this time recording for the Paramount Record Company. Prior to World War II, it was common practice for bluesmen to record under assumed names, and presumably contract obligations prompted Sykes to use the pseudonym of "Dobby Bragg." Sykes had a knack for making the studio rounds, for in June, 1930, he became "Willie Kelly" for Victor, and a short time later, was "Easy Papa Johnson" for the Vocalion label. During his long career Sykes has accompanied hundreds of blues singers, including Walter Davis, Edith Johnson, Washboard Sam, Peetie Wheatstraw, Victoria Spivey, and St. Louis Jimmy.

Over the years, Roosevelt Sykes has developed a versatility that few bluesmen can surpass. He shifts easily from boogies to stomps, from slow drags to light entertainment, and from hard luck blues to good time rockers. Sykes' style has two fundamental elements: first, an unsyncopated single note bass; and second, a flamboyant single note right hand solo technique. Not all his compositions, however, incorporate these two elements, and any attempt to confine Sykes by artifical categories are doomed to failure.

Highway 61 Blues (See page 66.)

Highway 61 Blues has a hollow, minor sound comparable to the one-chord blues of many Mississippi delta guitarists. The chord progression, if it really can be called one, is outlined by parallel octaves and by the sparse bass notes that accompany the right hand solos. The blues is based loosely on a 12 bar form, although the 5 bar introduction does not fit into any standard pattern. *Highway 61 Blues,* available on Yazoo L-1033, captures the "primitive" feeling of early Afro-American blues chants and is a dramatic example of a piano adaptation to the blues idiom.

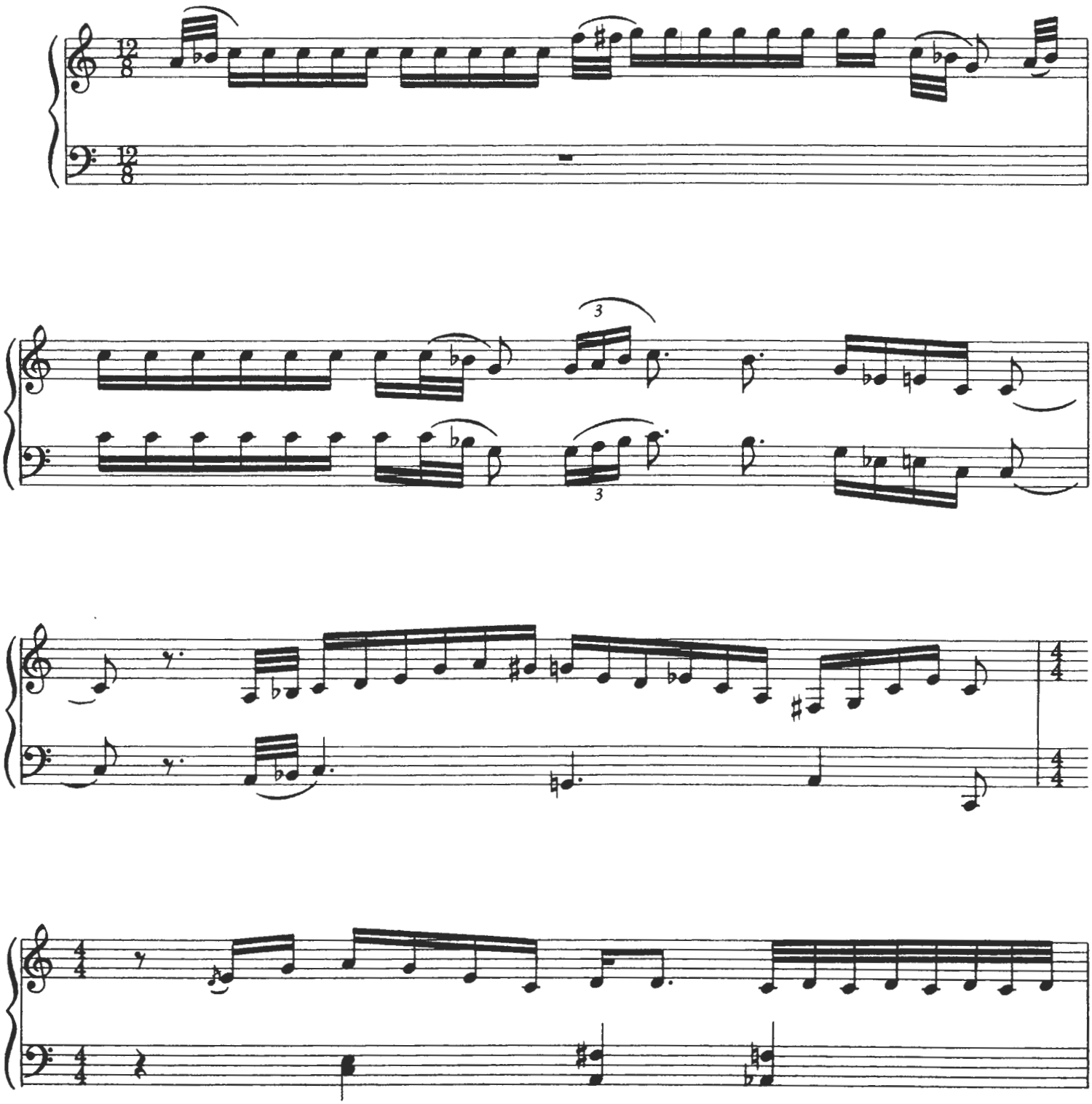
Gulfport Boogie (see page 70.)

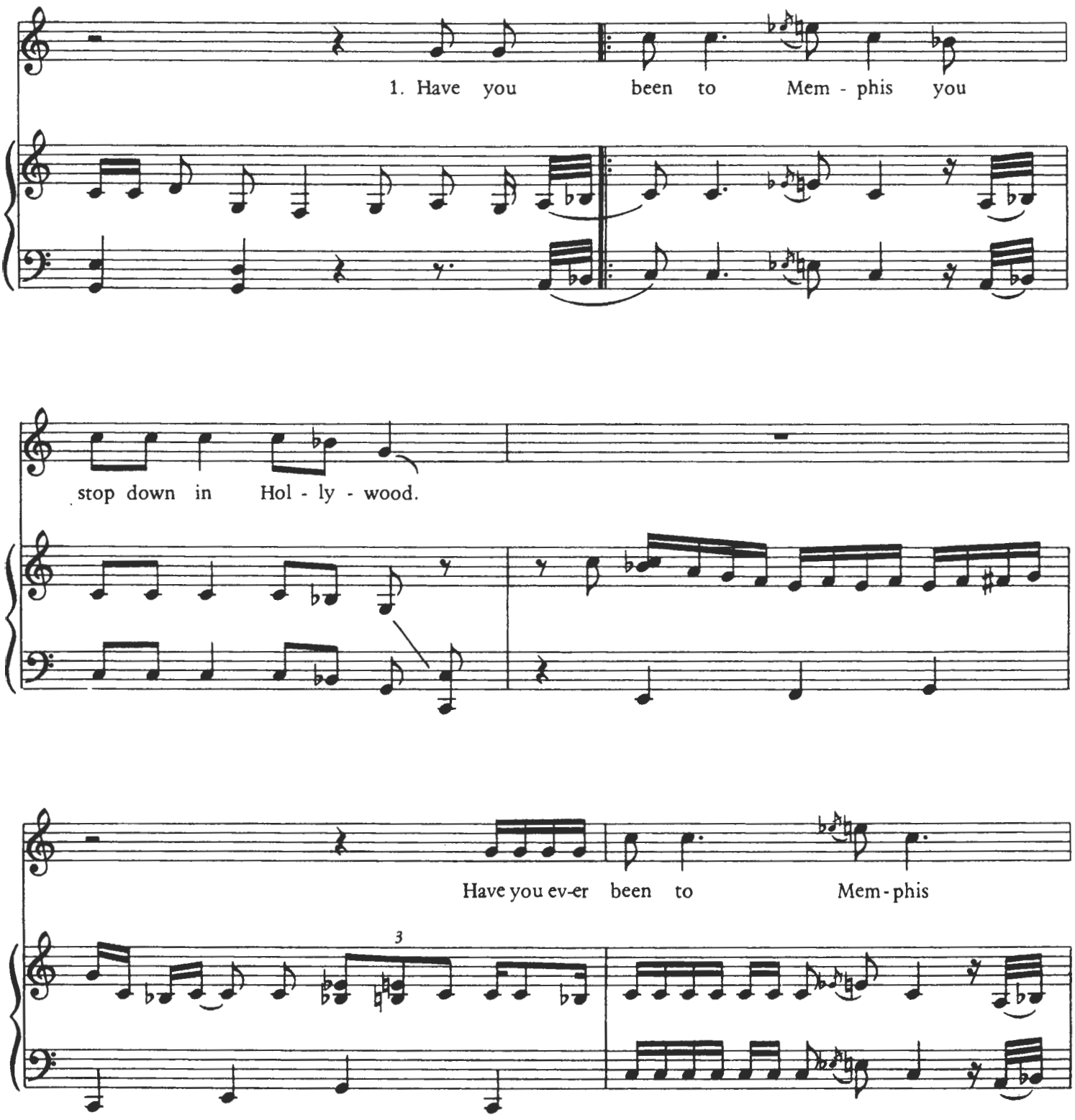
No traveling piano bluesman can find a job without knowing a few boogies. During the early 1960's, Sykes wandered through New York, Chicago, and Europe, but finally took a job in Gulfport, Mississippi at the Beverly Lounge. *Gulfport Boogie* represents the kind of music that the folks in Gulfport dance to. Stylistically, the boogie is similar to pieces played by Little Brother Montgomery and other Chicago piano players. The recording has been issued on Delmark DL-607.

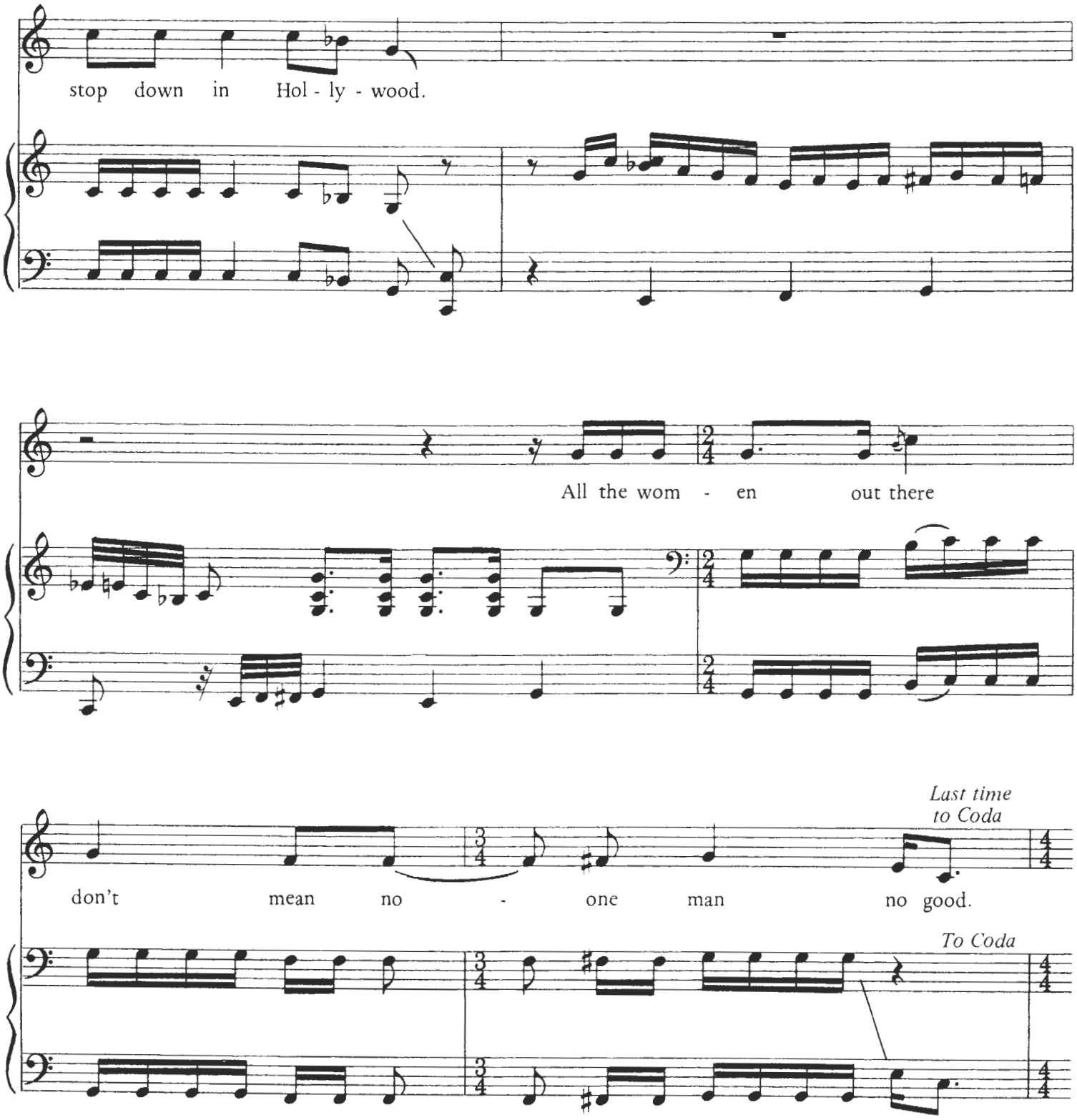
Red-Eye Jesse Bell (See page 76.)

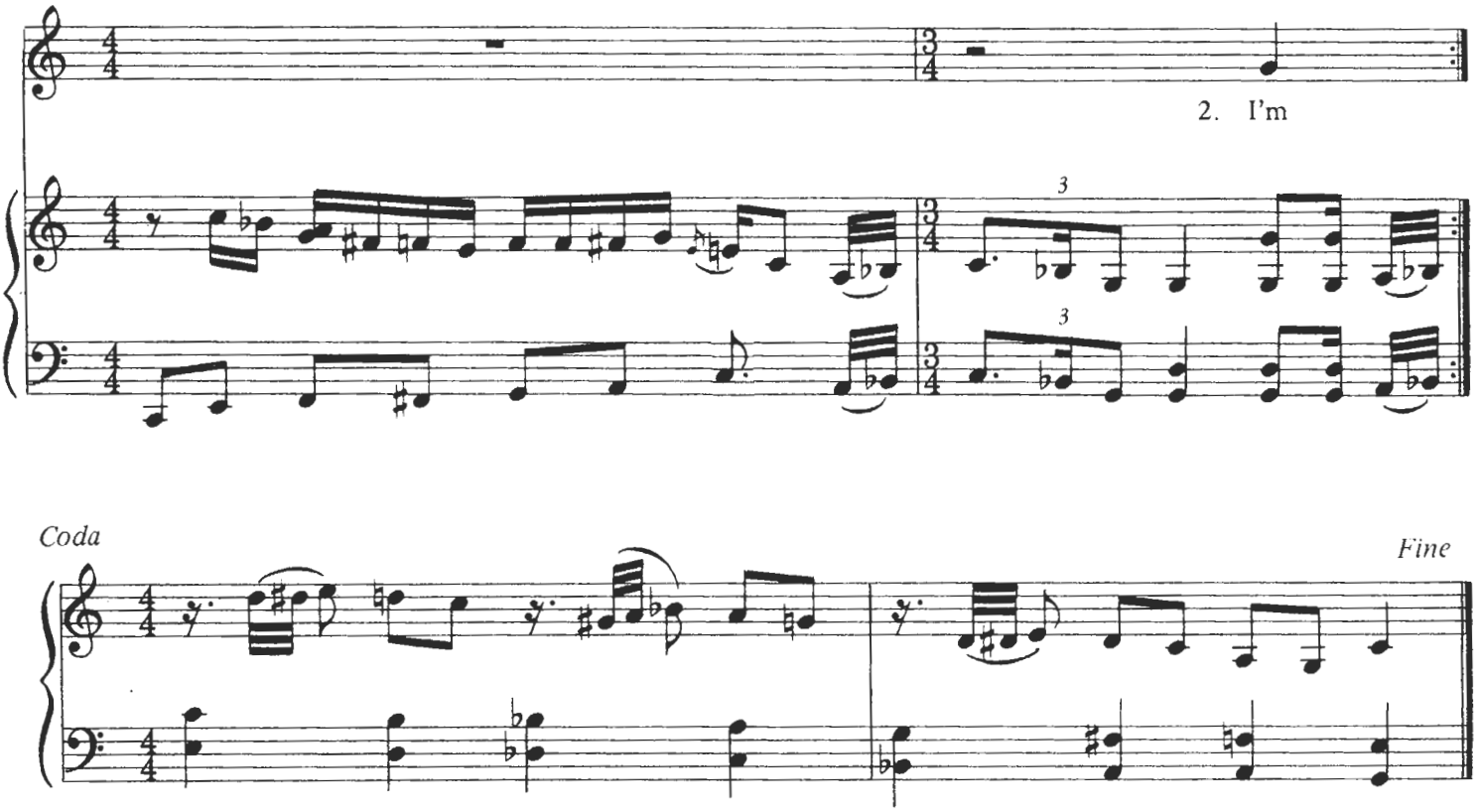
Sykes has always displayed a tendency to re-do old material in new ways. In 1961, for example, Sykes recorded *Woman In Helena, Arkansas* (issued on Folkways FS 3827) which bore a striking resemblance to his 1949 classic, *West Helena Blues* (reissued on Blues Classics 15). Then, in 1963, *Woman In Helena, Arkansas* was remade into *Red-Eye Jesse Bell* for Delmark Records (DL-607). *Red-Eye Jesse Bell* is a tribute to the piano player who first inspired Sykes to take up the blues. The piece is a fine illustration of sophisticated solo lines held together by an unsyncopated bass.

Highway 61 Blues




1. Have you been to Mem - phis you
stop down in Hol - ly - wood.
Have you ev-er been to Mem - phis
3


stop down in Hol - ly - wood.
All the wom - en out there
Last time to Coda
don't mean no - one man no good.
To Coda



I'm leaving St. Louis, I'm going out Grant Avenue
I'm leaving St. Louis, I'm going out Grant Avenue
I got to go down to Memphis, don't you know what's there that I want to do?

When I hit Grant, look like my troubles just begun
When I hit Grant Avenue, look like my troubles just begun
Oh, it break my heart to think about Highway 61.

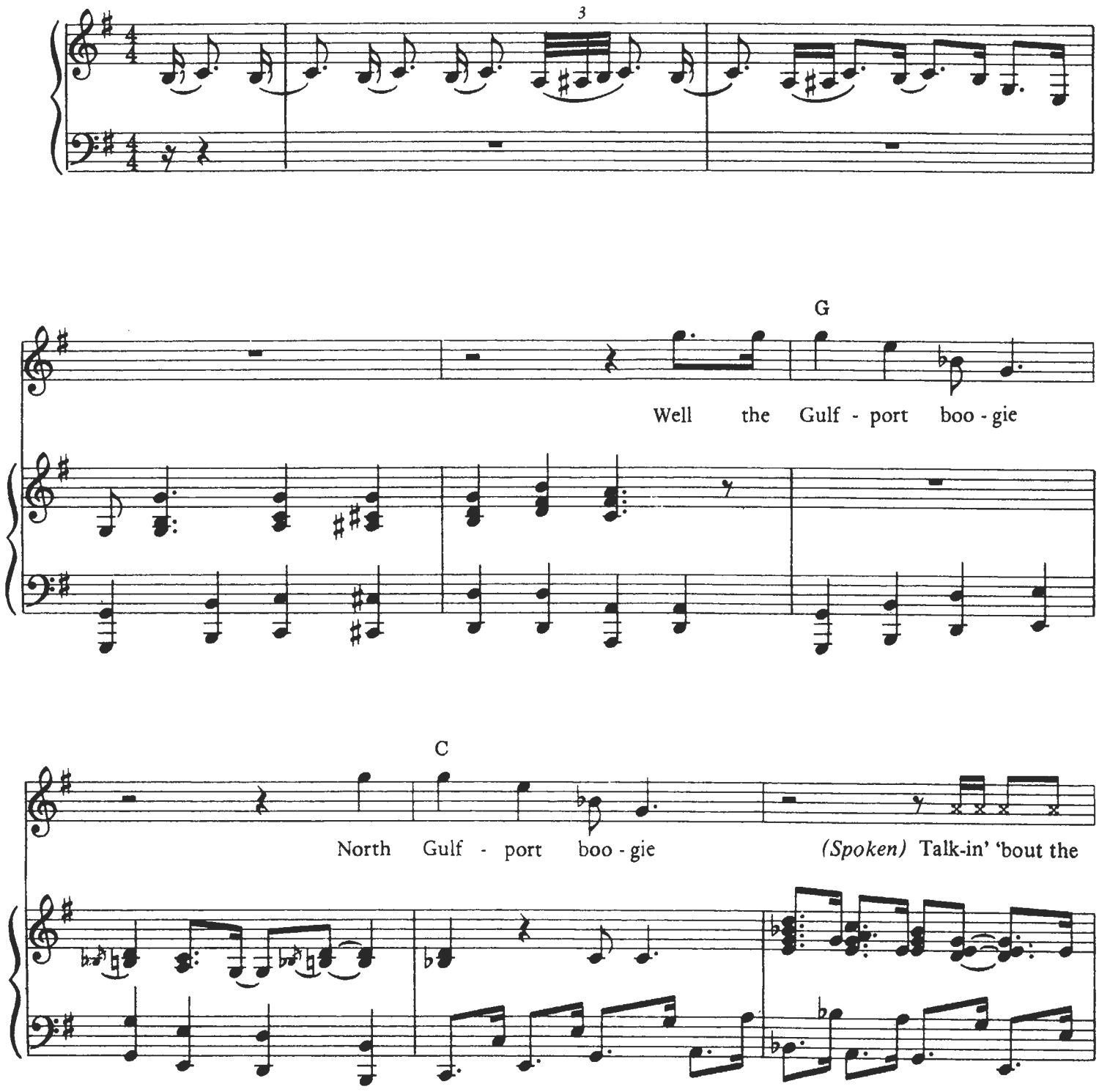
I felt so blue as I was out on that lonely highway
I felt so blue as I was out on that lonely highway
I felt riding down, but maybe my troubles will end some sweet day.

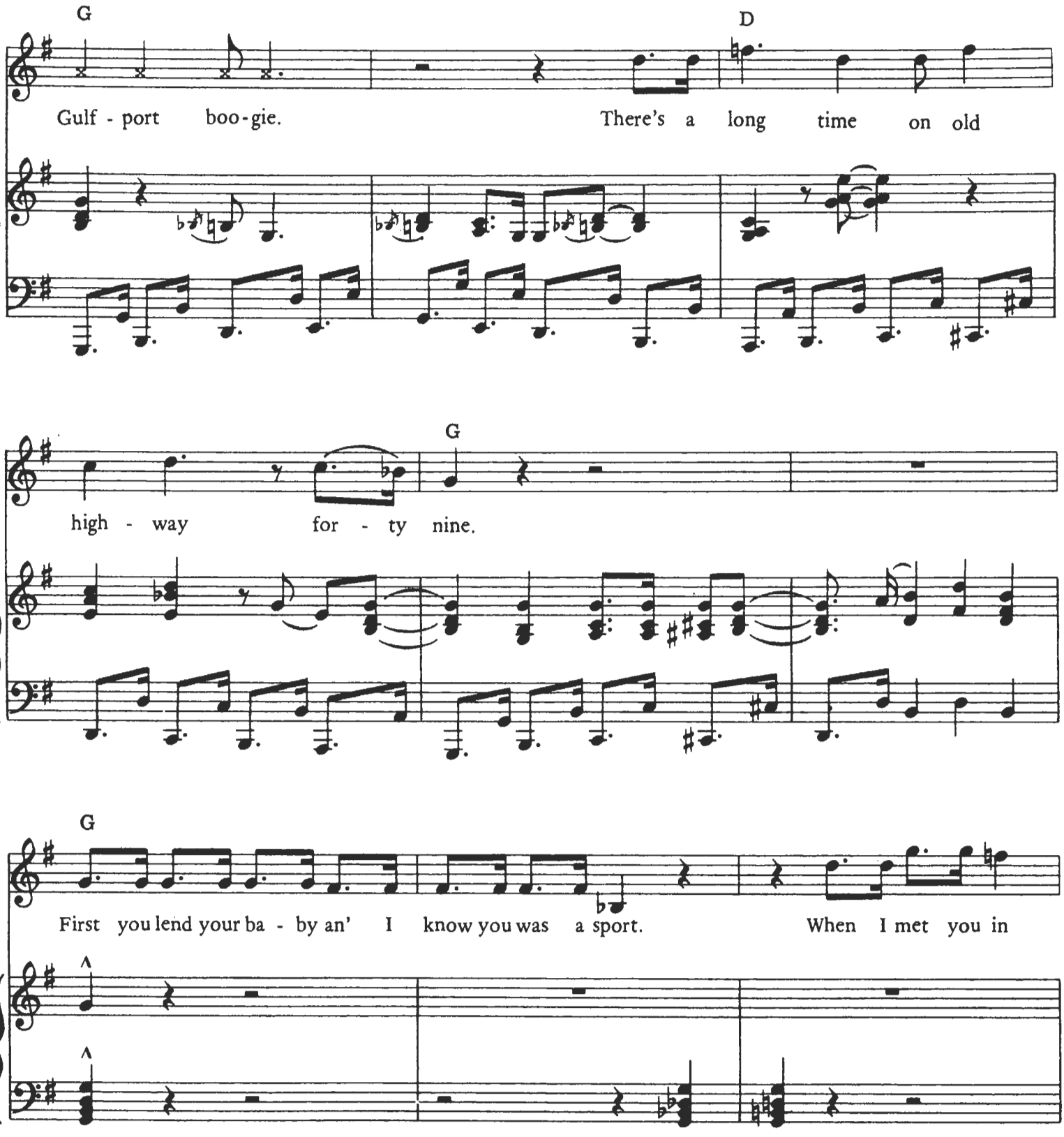
I can stand right here look on Beale Avenue
I can stand right here look out on Beale Avenue
I can see everything that pretty Miss Liza do.

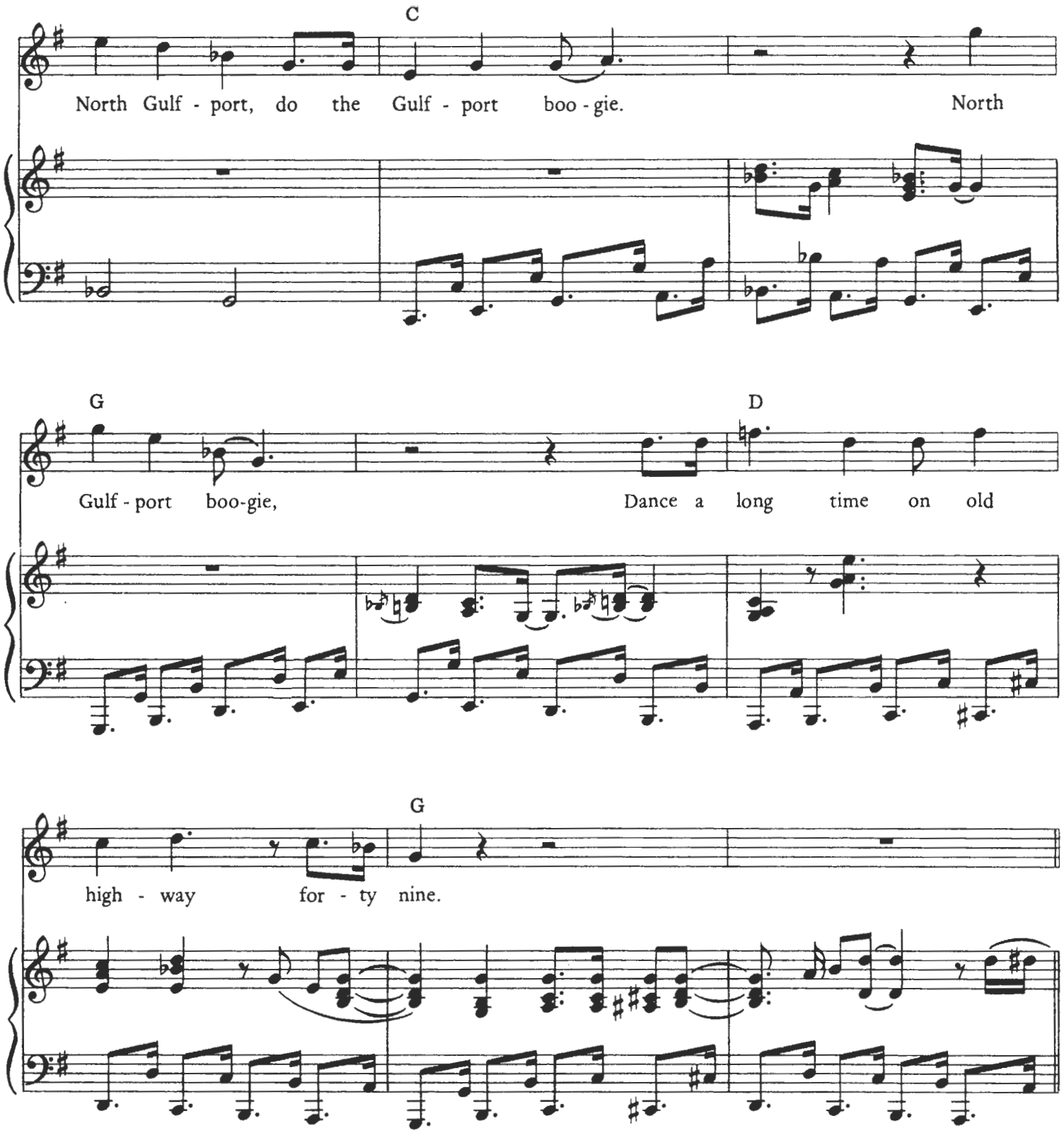
Now listen kind mama, don't worry about your dad when I'm gone
Now listen kind mama, don't worry about your dad when I'm gone
You know I'm wild about you kind mama, I ain't gonna do nothing wrong.

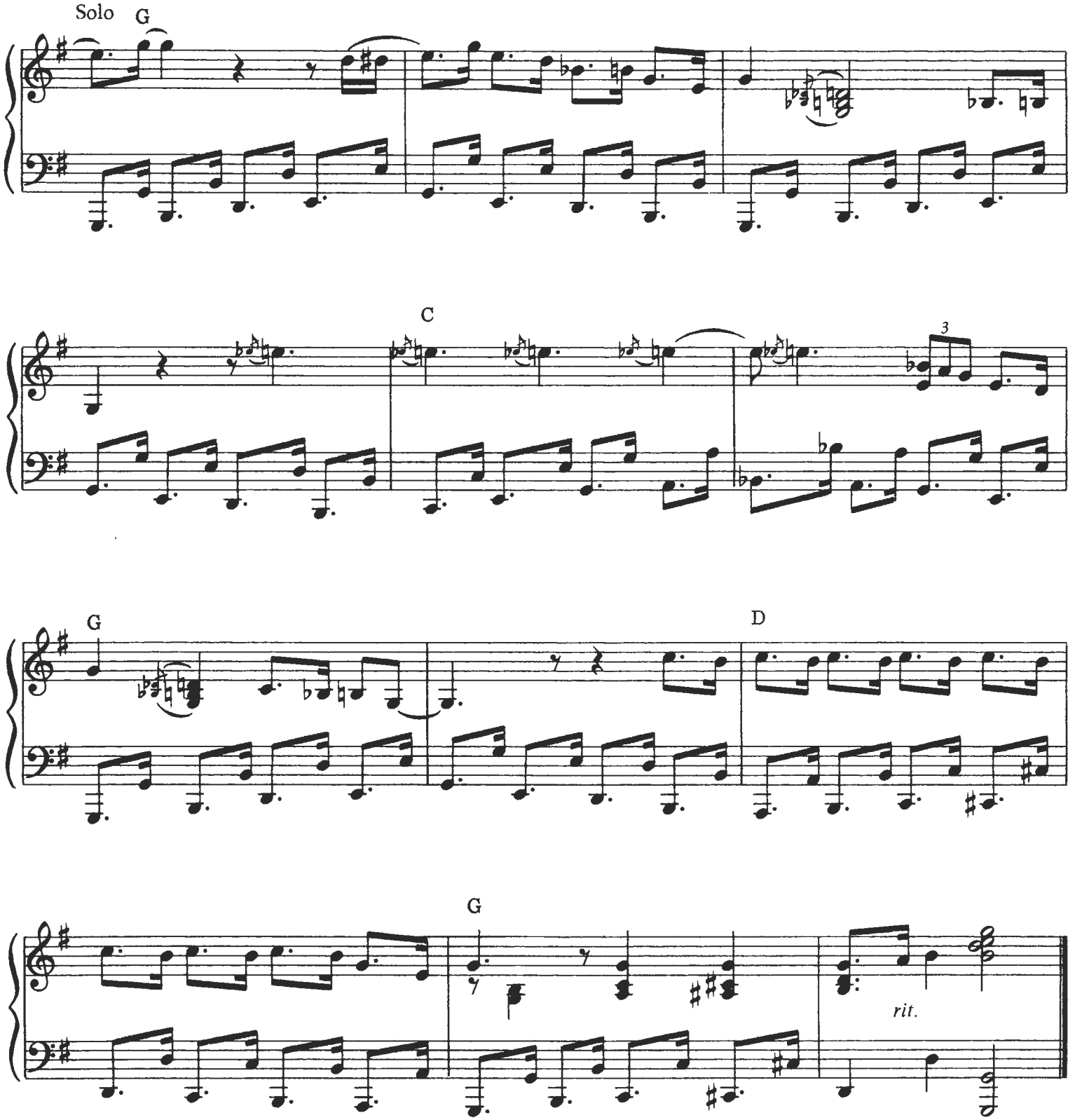
Gulfport Boogie

Roosevelt Sykes

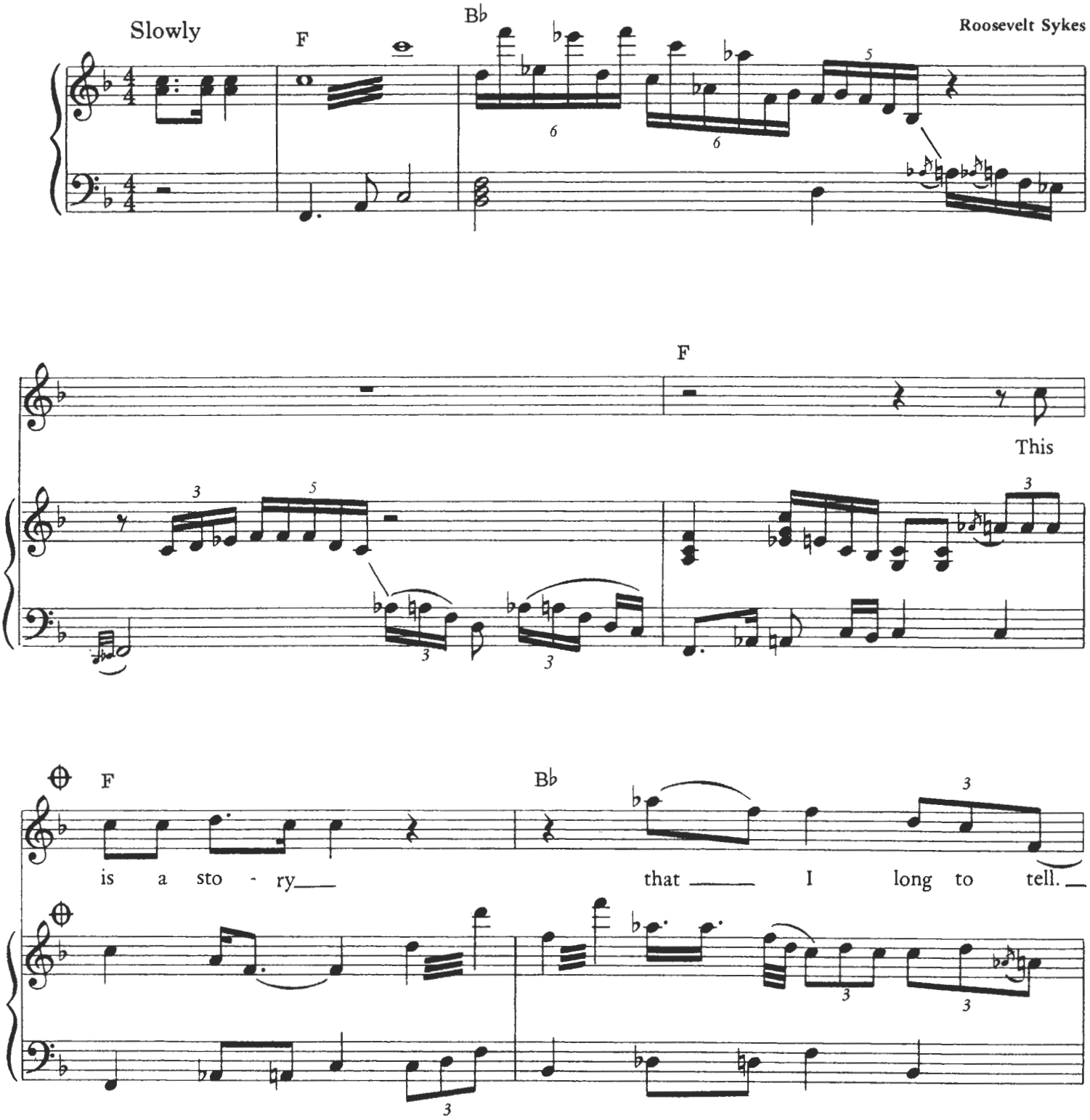


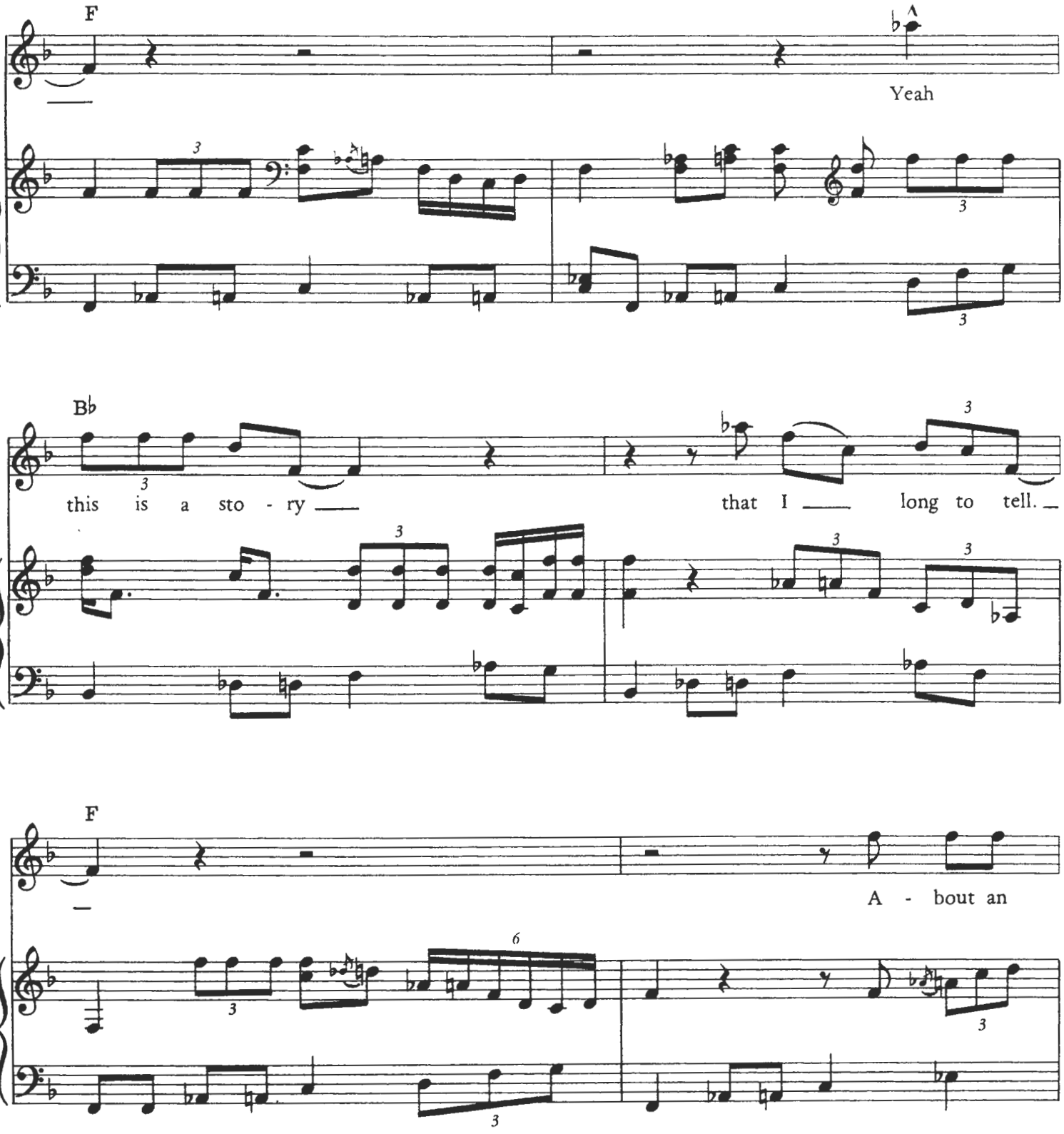

G
D
Gulf - port boo - gie.
There's a long time on old
G
high - way for - ty nine.
G
First you lend your ba - by an' I know you was a sport.
When I met you in

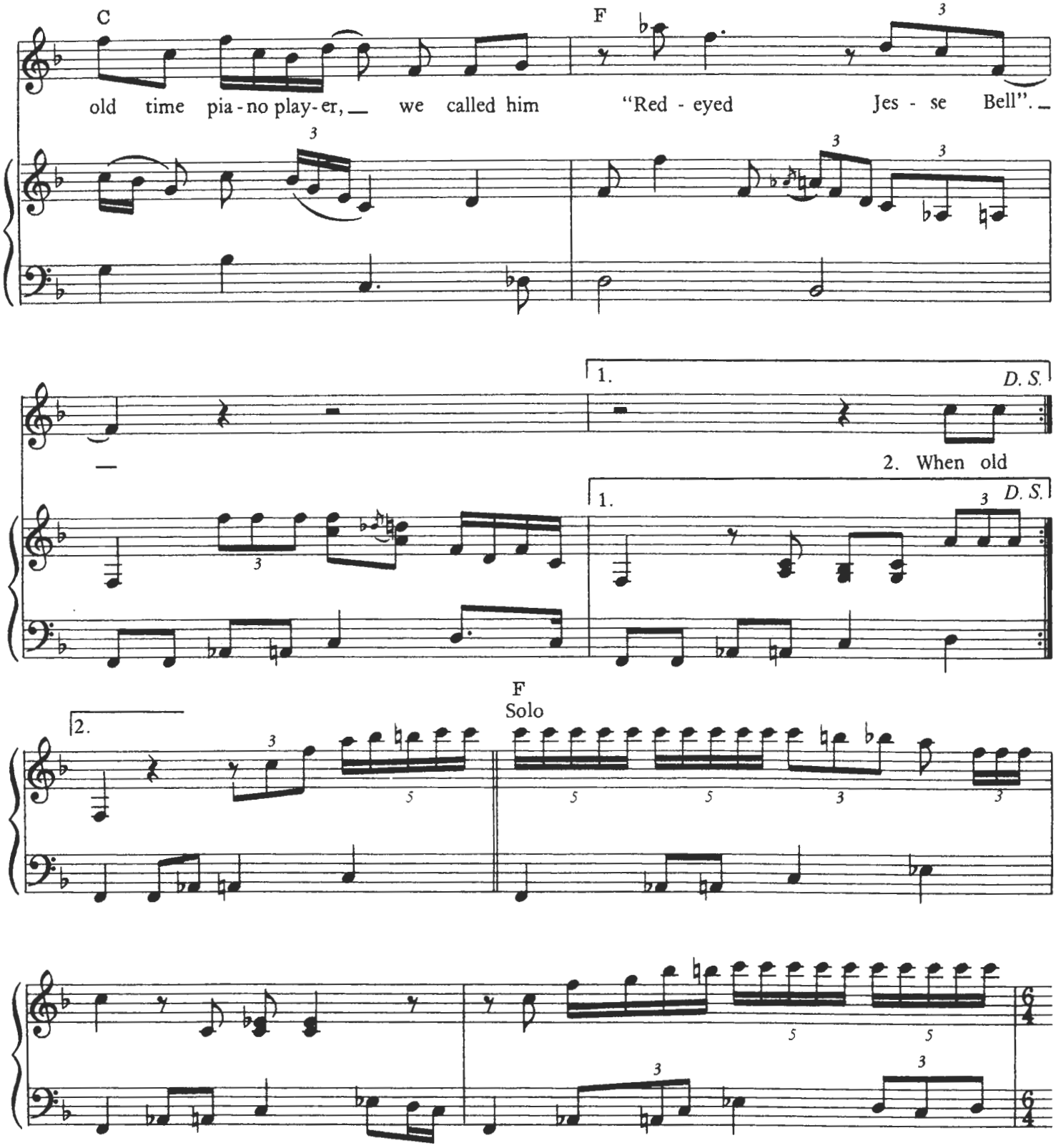

C
North Gulf - port, do the Gulf - port boo - gie. North
G
D
Gulf - port boo-gie, Dance a long time on old
G
high - way for - ty nine.

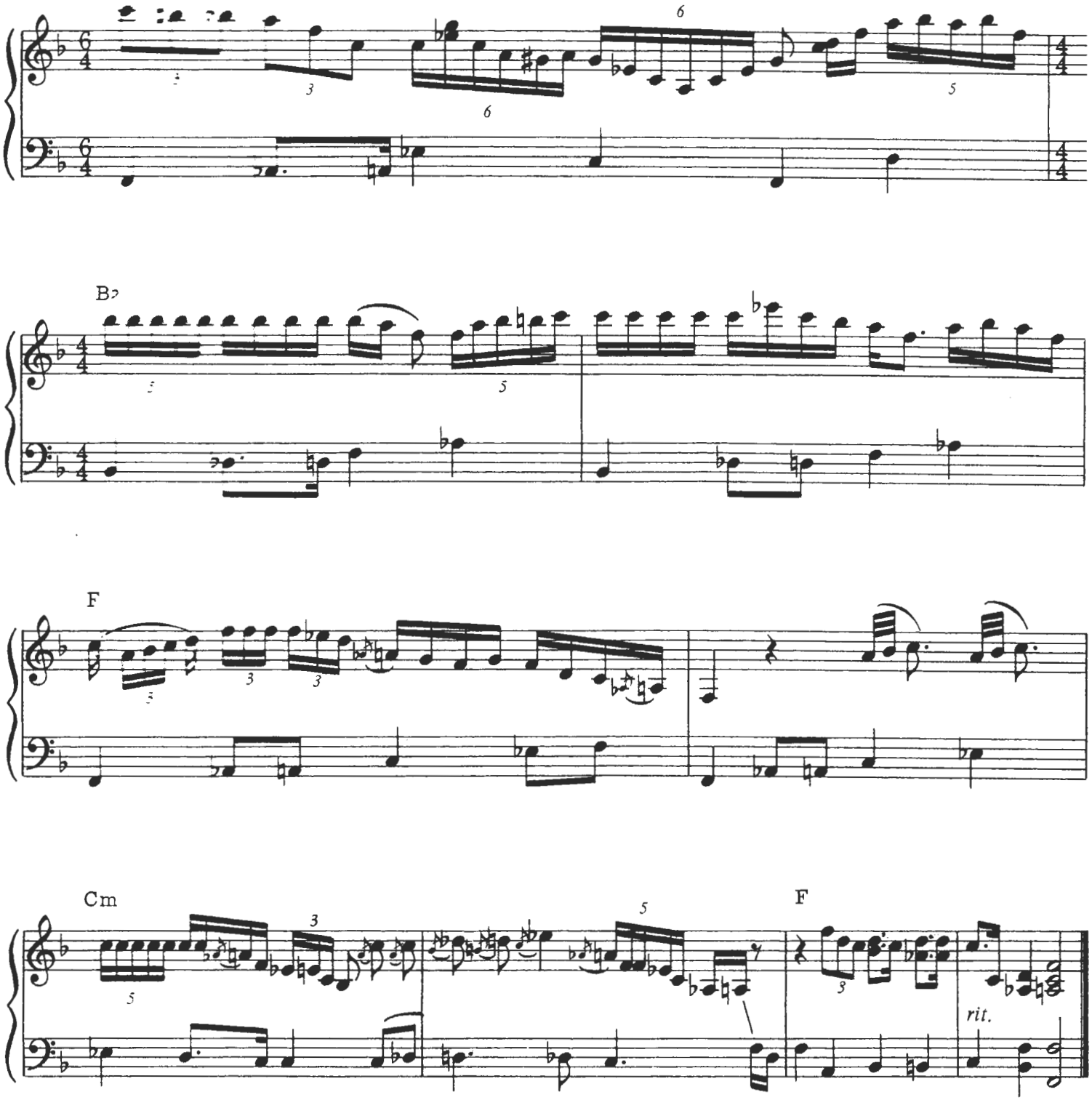

Solo
G
C
3
G
D
G
rit.

Red-Eye Jesse Bell




F
Yeah
B♭
this is a sto - ry
that I long to tell.
F
A - bout an


C
F
old time pia - no play - er, we called him "Red - eyed Jes - se Bell".
1.
D. S.
2. When old
1.
D. S.
2.
F
Solo



When old Jesse Bell play the blues, they all come from miles around
Every time he play the blues, they all come from miles around
But it wasn't no great big city, just a little old sawmill town.

Oh yeah, look like everything is going swell
Forty in the morning when everything is going swell
Everybody listen to that piano player called Red-Eye Jesse Bell.

Otis Spann

Otis Spann belongs to the post-war generation of bluesmen who introduced the electric blues to the urban scene. Along with artists such as Muddy Waters, Sunnyland Slim, Little Walter and Jimmy Rodgers, Spann pioneered a percussive, explosive blues that became known as "Chicago-style." Chicago blues has its roots in the Mississippi delta, where men like Robert Johnson developed a hard-edged sound that was later brought up North during the 1940's. For the last twenty years Chicago blues has exerted a powerful influence over American popular music, affecting such diverse markets as soul music, folk music, rock and roll, and commerical rhythm and blues.

Spann died tragically in 1970 at the height of his career, just as his blues was becoming widely accepted among a young white audience. Many rock musicians identified Spann as a vital influence in their music, and he is particularly credited for his masterful adaptation of the piano to the blues band. Spann left behind a superior legacy of recordings and worldwide respect for his musical genius. But life is not without its ironies: Spann's widow, Lucille, was declared ineligible for the $1000 Musicians Union death benefit because Spann was, according to Union officials, "behind in his dues."

By a bluesman's standards, Otis Spann came from a distinguished musical family in Mississippi. According to Little Brother Montgomery, Spann's father was Friday Ford, a respected pianist from Belzoni, Mississippi, who taught Otis the basics of the blues. Little Brother met Otis in Jackson, Mississippi when Otis was about ten years old, and gave him a few piano pointers at that time.

In the late 1940's Spann arrived in Chicago and was befriended by Sunnyland Slim, another great blues piano player. "Spann, he used to sleep in my Cadillac when he first come to Chicago," Sunnyland told me recently. "He would be in my car sleeping—summertime. I know at first Spann had a little job, and he stayed around there about two, three weeks. Otis Spann, he got to be bad with piano. I went to hear him, always sitting at the piano, with his voice—real good. And that's when Muddy (Waters) stole him."

"Stole" is perhaps a little misleading. Muddy and Otis had known each other for years: they were, in fact, half-brothers. When Spann got out of the army in 1952, he joined Muddy's band, and the two stayed together until Spann's death.

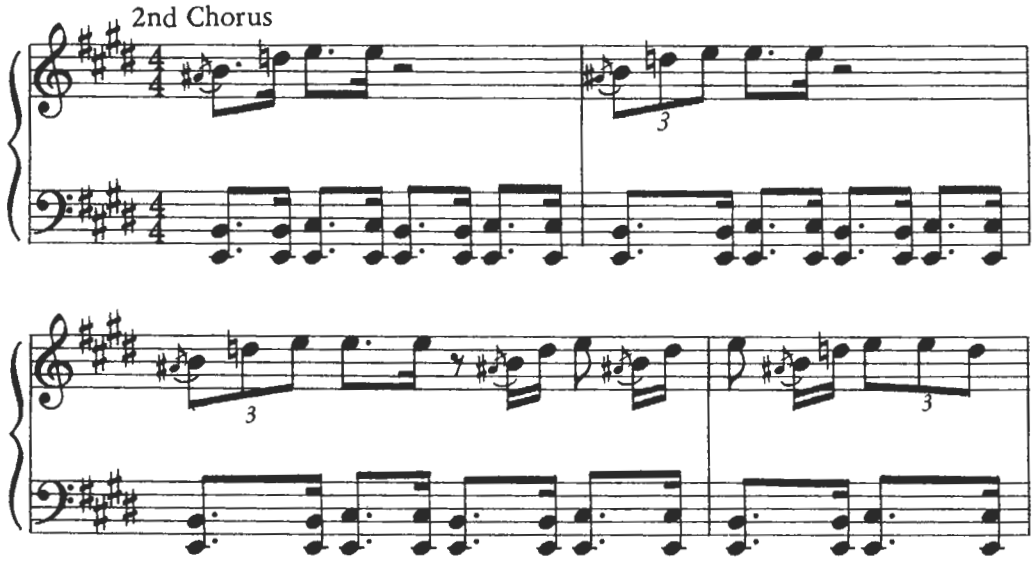
Spann's first recordings with the Muddy Waters Band were made for the Chess label around 1952. One blues from that first session, *Standing Around Crying,* has since become a classic. Spann continued to record with the band through the 1950's, but remained individually obscure. When Muddy toured England in 1958, for example, the tour promoters were so unfamiliar with Spann that they misspelled his name in the concert program.

Spann's first solo album was cut in 1960 for the Candid label in New York City. His solo style differed greatly from his ensemble playing with the Waters band. By himself, he displayed an introspective side that made his blues into moving emotional statements. In 1963 Spann recorded a second solo album for Storyville in Copenhagen, Denmark that has been reissued in the United States on the Archive of Folk Music label. Several solo efforts followed, including releases on Prestige, Vanguard, Bluesway and Testament.

The backbone of Spann's blues is the boogie—the same basic left hand technique that Roosevelt Sykes, Little Brother Montgomery and Speckled Red used to mesmerize rural juke joint crowds. The older pianists tended to improvise fills between the vocal lines, but Spann expanded the boogie into a vehicle for improvised blues solos. In this respect, he resembles Jimmy Yancey, although the two musicians used different left hand figures.

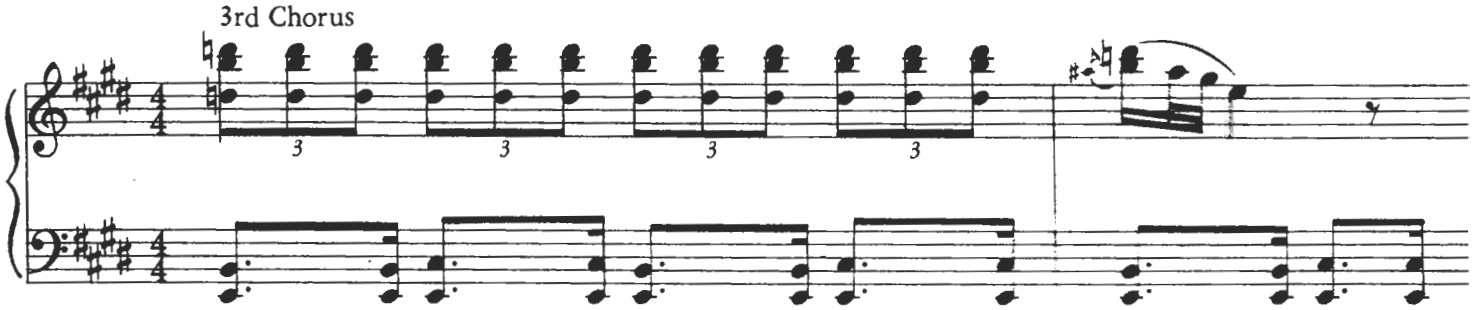
Otis In The Dark, released on Candid/Barnaby Z 30246, reveals Spann's genius for playing endless variations on a simple riff against the repetitious boogie pattern:

Excerpt from *Otis In The Dark*



The complex interplay between the left and right hand is also a trademark of his style. The third chorus of *Otis In The Dark*, for example, begins with right hand triplets played against the dotted eighth note left hand bass:

Excerpt from *Otis In The Dark* (3rd Chorus)

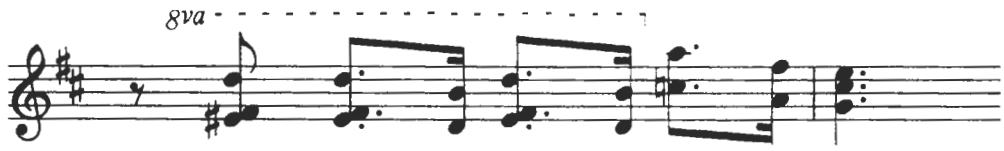


Spann's Stomp (See page 84.)

Spann's Stomp, released on Vanguard VSD 1/2, is a fast boogie duet with S.P. Leary on drums. The characteristic variations, the grace notes, and the inspired solo lines make it a memorable example of Spann's artistry.

Spann's harmonic ideas revolve around the minor and major thirds in the scale. He constantly plays grace notes and chromatic melodies to gain the greatest possible mixture and balance between major and minor sounds. More than other pianists, Spann explored the possibilities of voicing both major and minor thirds in the same chord. *Good Morning Mr. Blues*, on Archive of Folk Music FS-216, opens with a striking example:

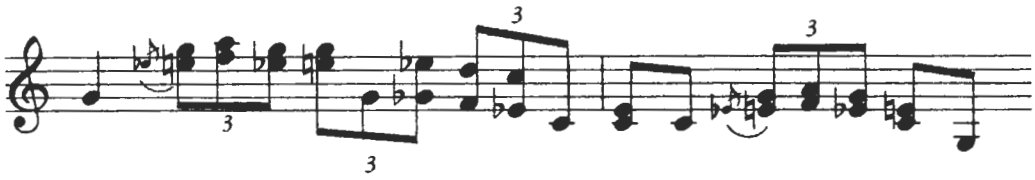
Excerpt from *Good Morning Mr. Blues*



The D chord contains both the major third (F) and the minor third (F$^{\#}$).

In the slower blues without the boogie bass, the right hand assumes the bulk of the harmonic structure. Spann's work is filled with chromatic thirds and sixths that highlight the blues tonality of the third and seventh degrees of the scale. *Don't You Know* incorporates a favorite Spann riff:

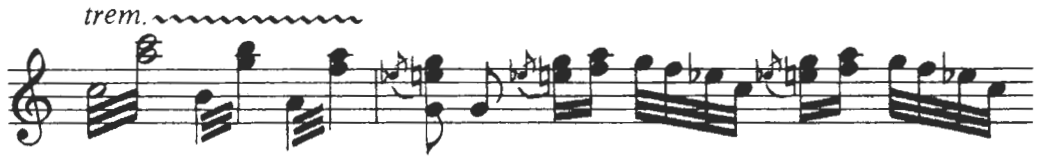
Excerpt from *Don't You Know*



The same riff, slightly modified, also appears in *Trouble In Mind.* For the slower blues Spann preferred a staccato left hand that provided a rhythmic bass without overshadowing the right hand. *Trouble In Mind* and *Don't You Know* both illustrate this.

Spann occasionally fills his solos with rapid single note figures. Sometimes he uses octave tremolos, sometimes slurred scales like this passage in *Don't You Know:*

Excerpt from *Don't You Know*



Trouble In Mind (See page 88.)

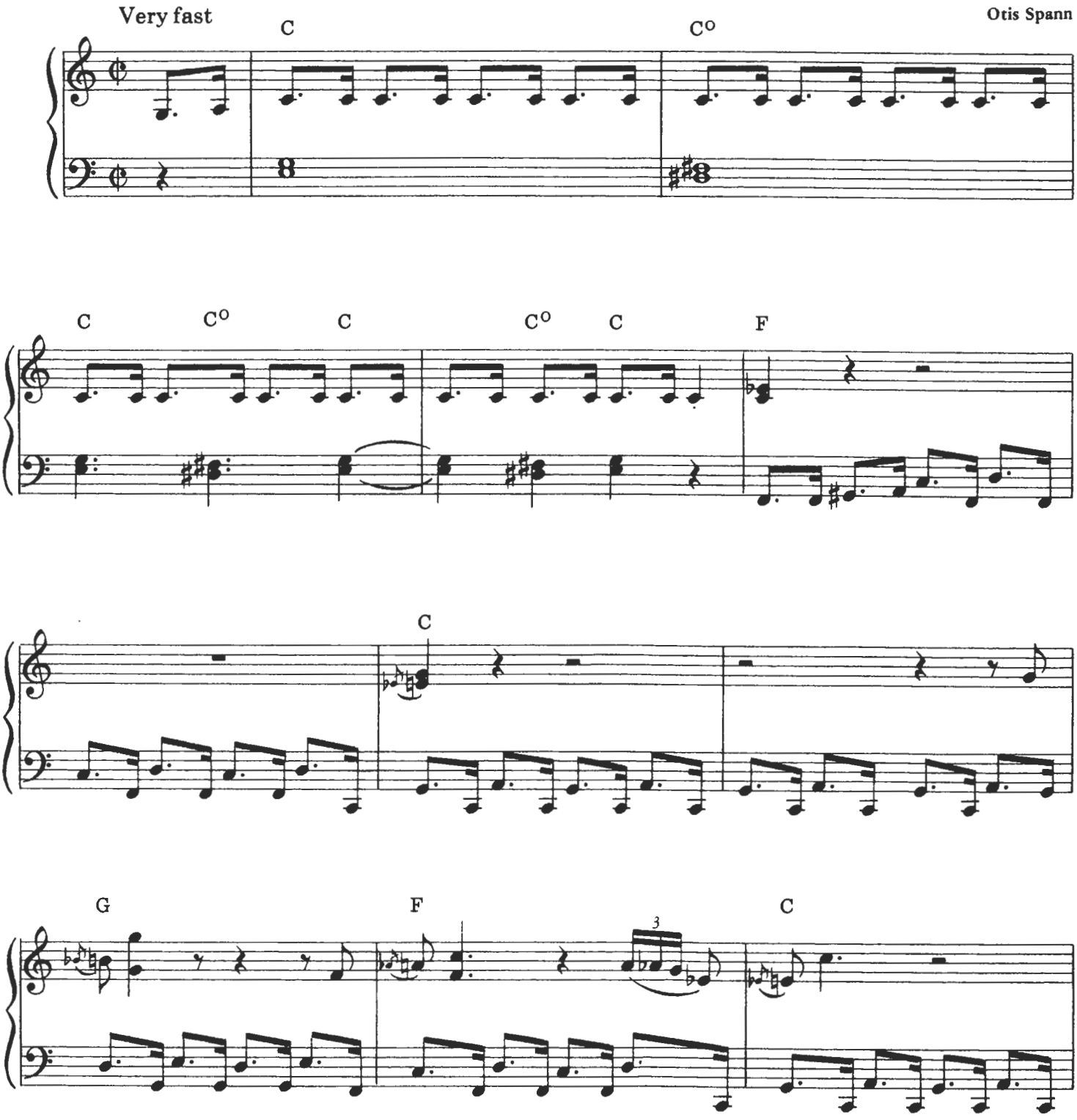
Trouble In Mind has become one of the most popular blues standards since the blues revival of the 1960's. Spann's version, transcribed from Archive of Folk Music FS-216, adds his own unique touch.

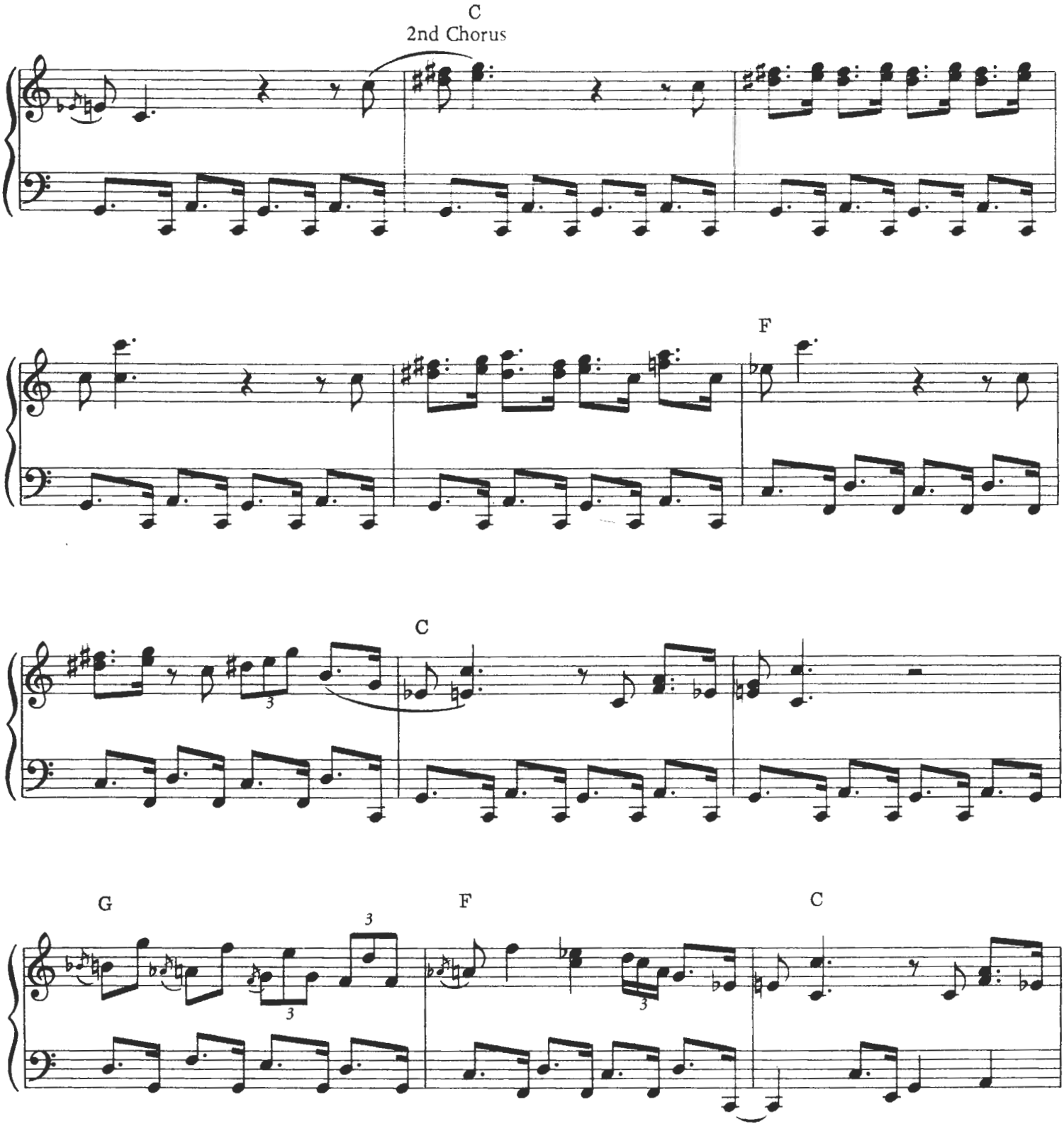
Don't You Know (See page 92.)

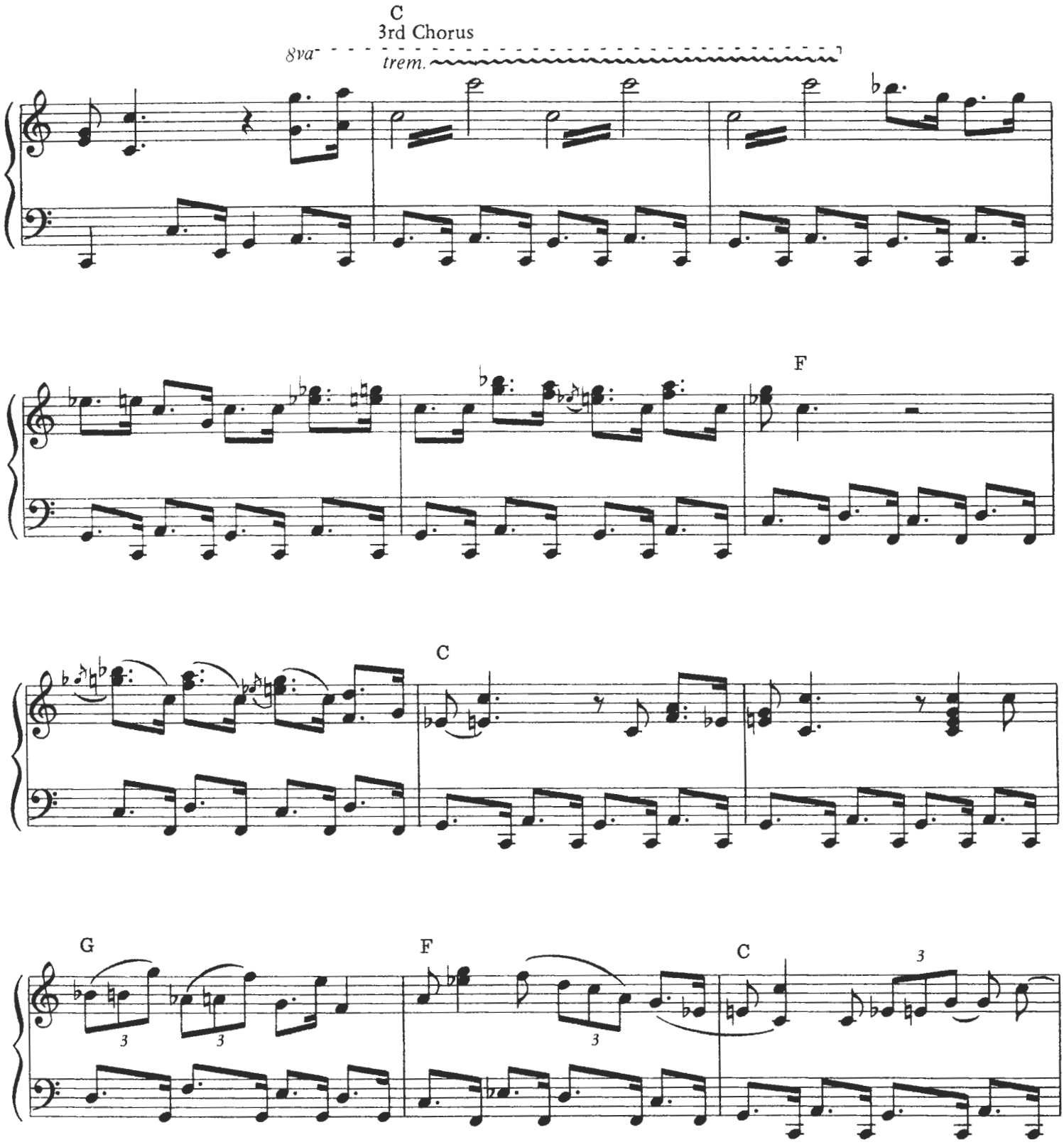
Don't You Know is a masterpiece combining many of the techniques described in this chapter. It is available on Archive of Folk Music FS-216.

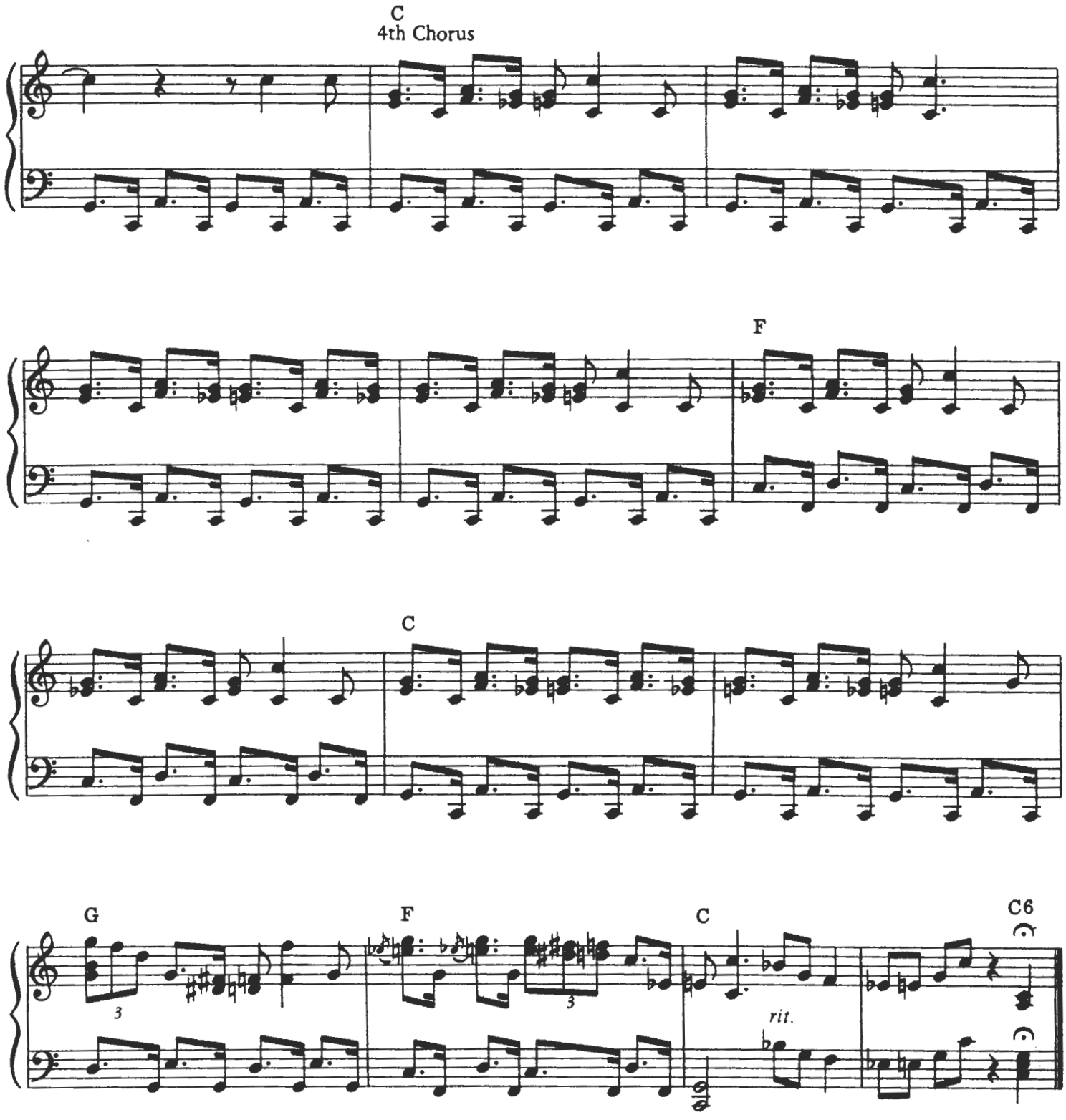
Otis Spann and James Cotton

Spann's Stomp

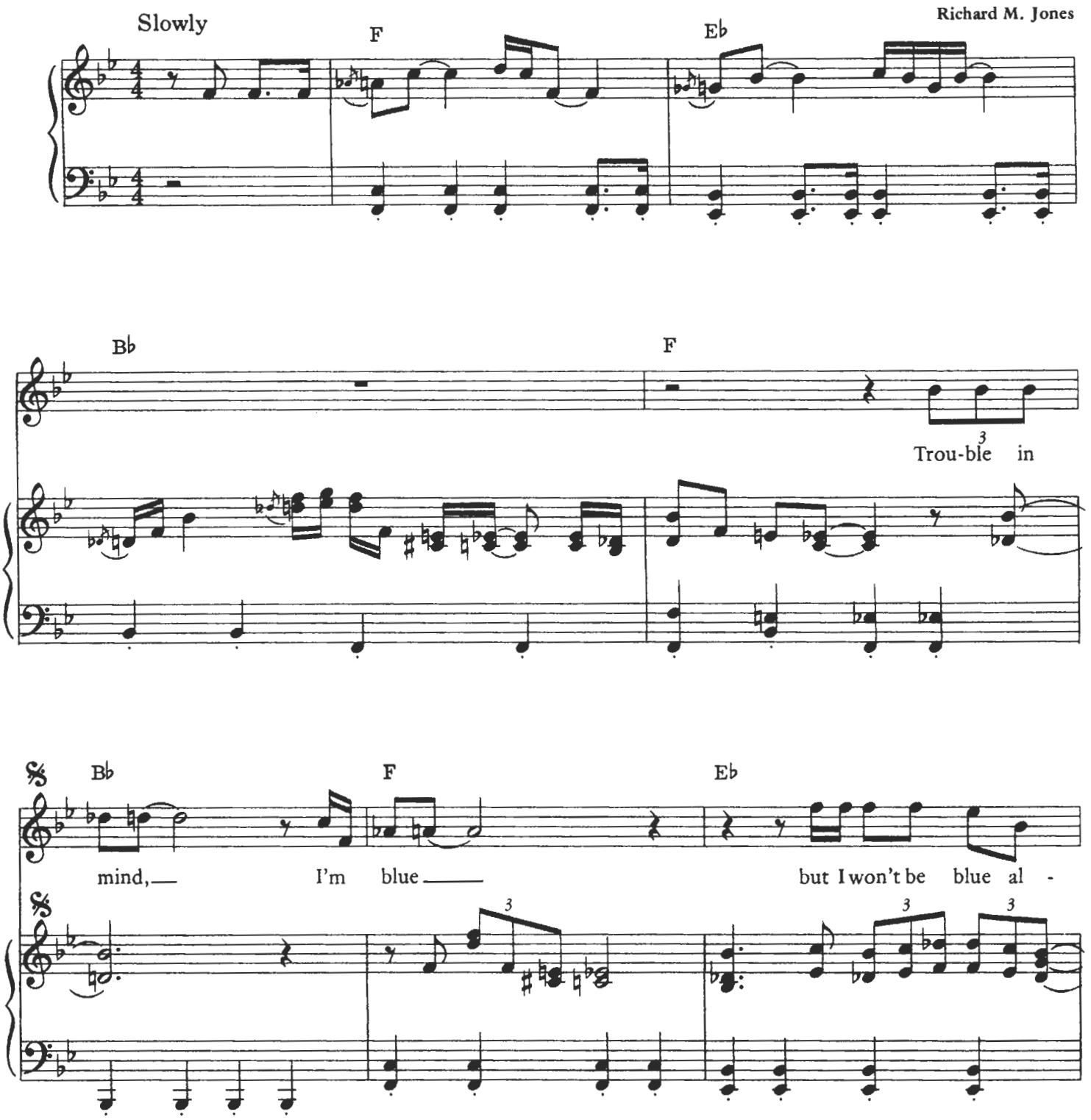


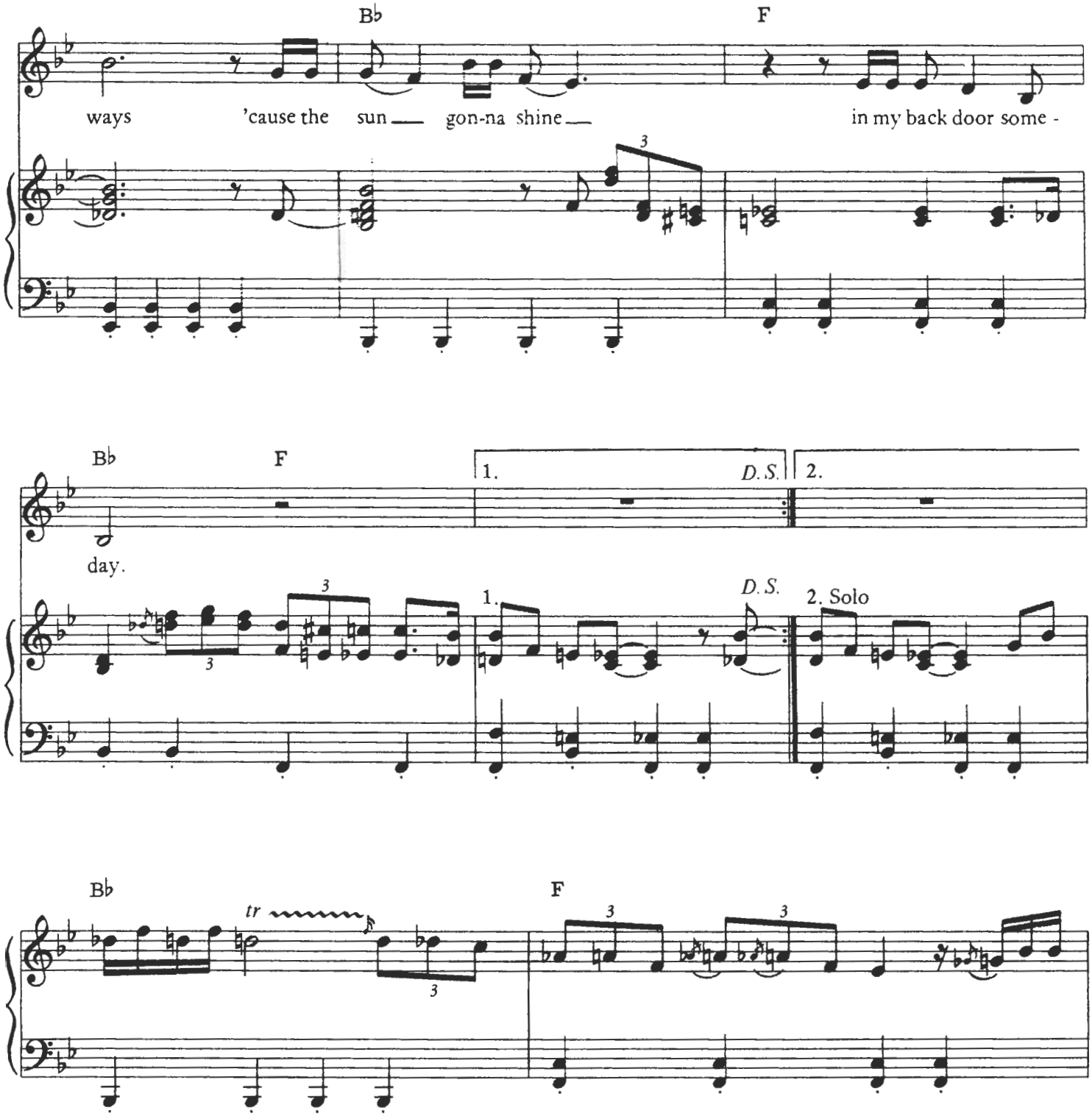

C
2nd Chorus
F
C
G
F
C

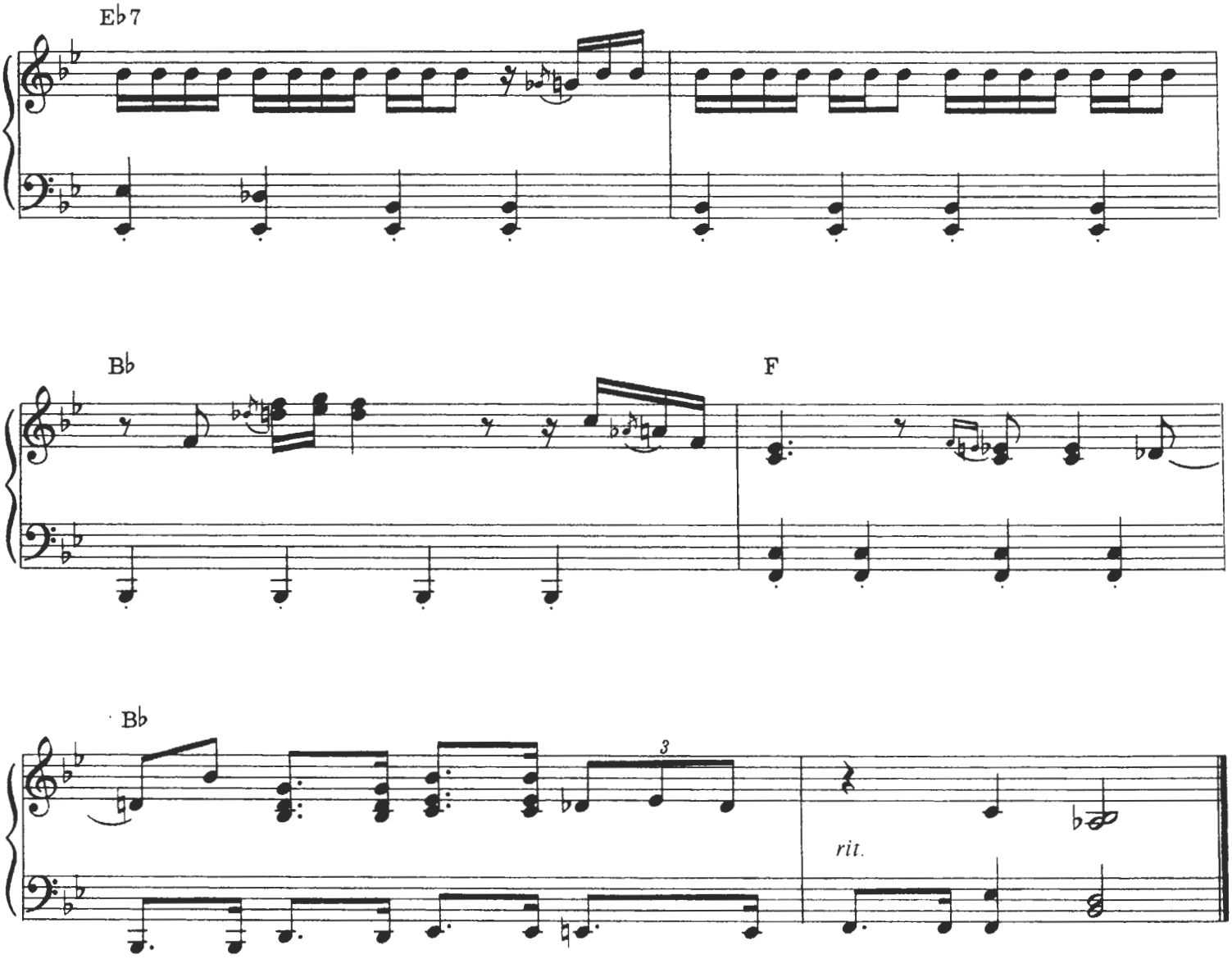

C
3rd Chorus
8va
trem.
F
C
G
F
C
3
3
3
3


C
4th Chorus
F
C
G
F
C
C6
3
3
rit.

Trouble In Mind




B♭
F
ways
'cause the
sun
gon-na shine
in my back door some -
B♭
F
1.
D.S.
2.
day.
1.
D.S.
2. Solo
B♭
tr
F



I'm gonna lay my head
On some lonesome railroad tie
And let the 219
Ease my troubled mind.

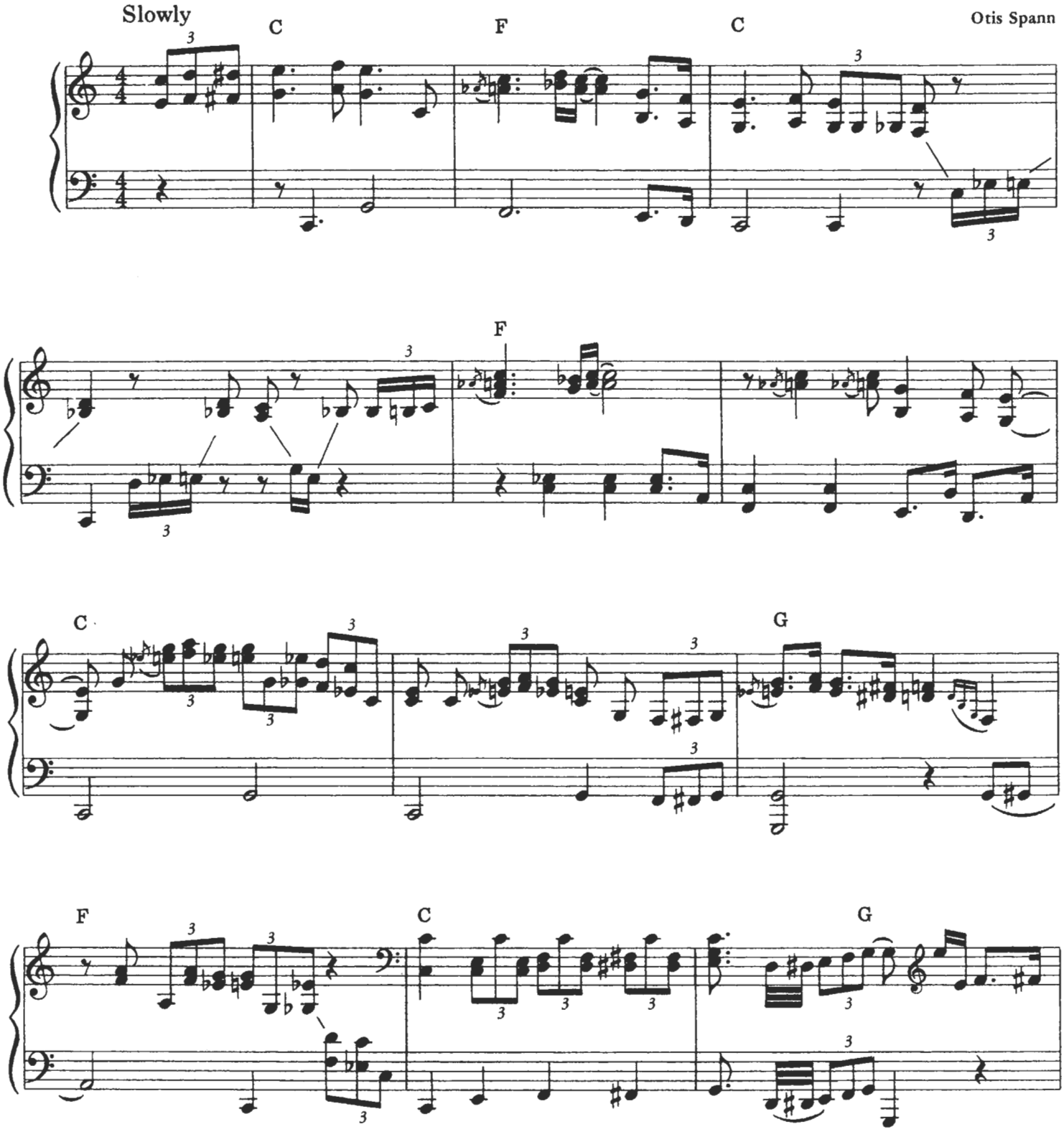
Well I'm going away to learn it
Lord I won't be back no more
You know I want to let the wind change now
Down in my back door.

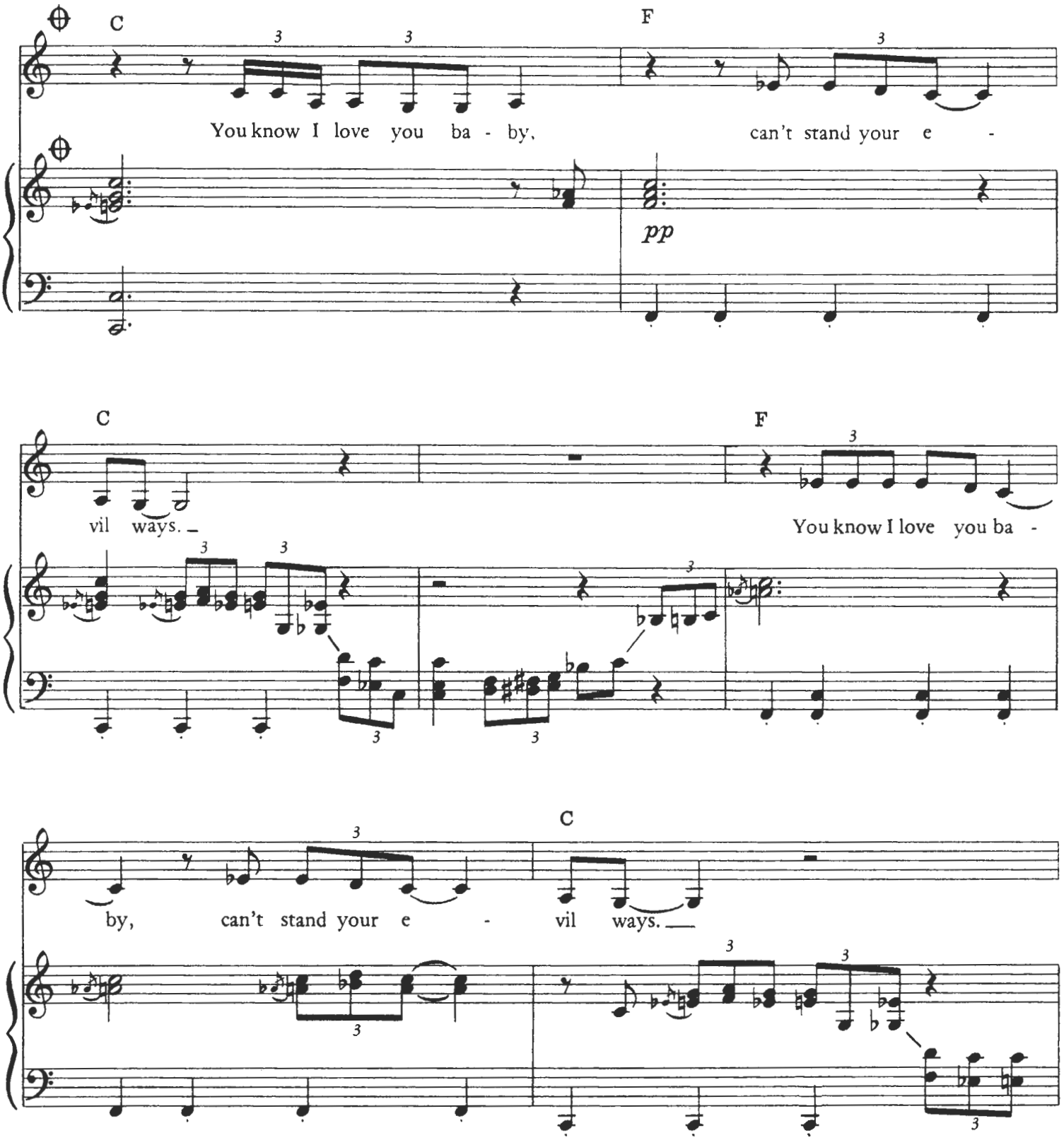
When you see me crying, babe
Crying out all night long
You know I been crying, baby,
"Won't my baby come home."

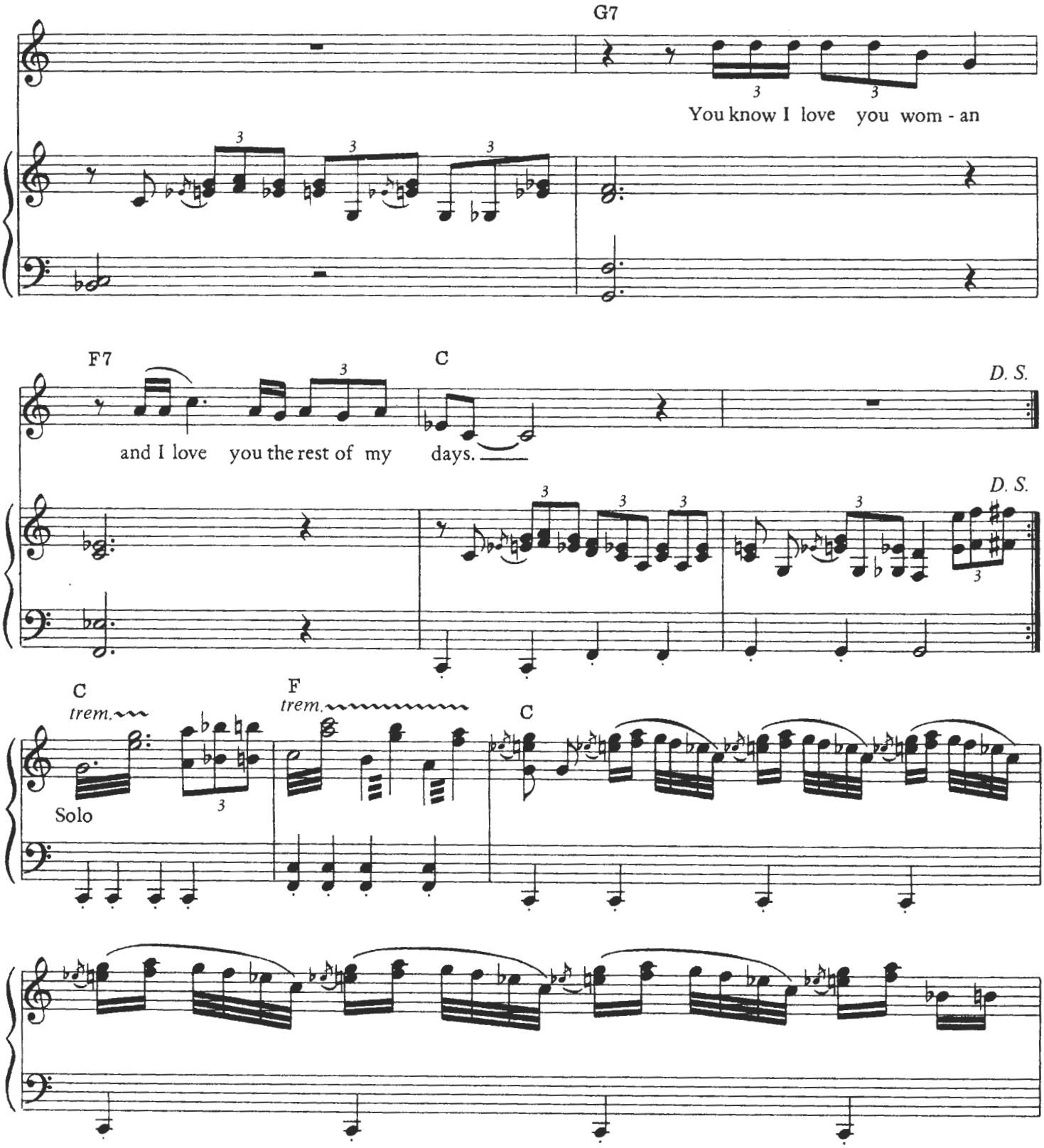
I'm gonna lay my head
On some lonesome railroad tie
And let the 219
Ease my troubled mind.

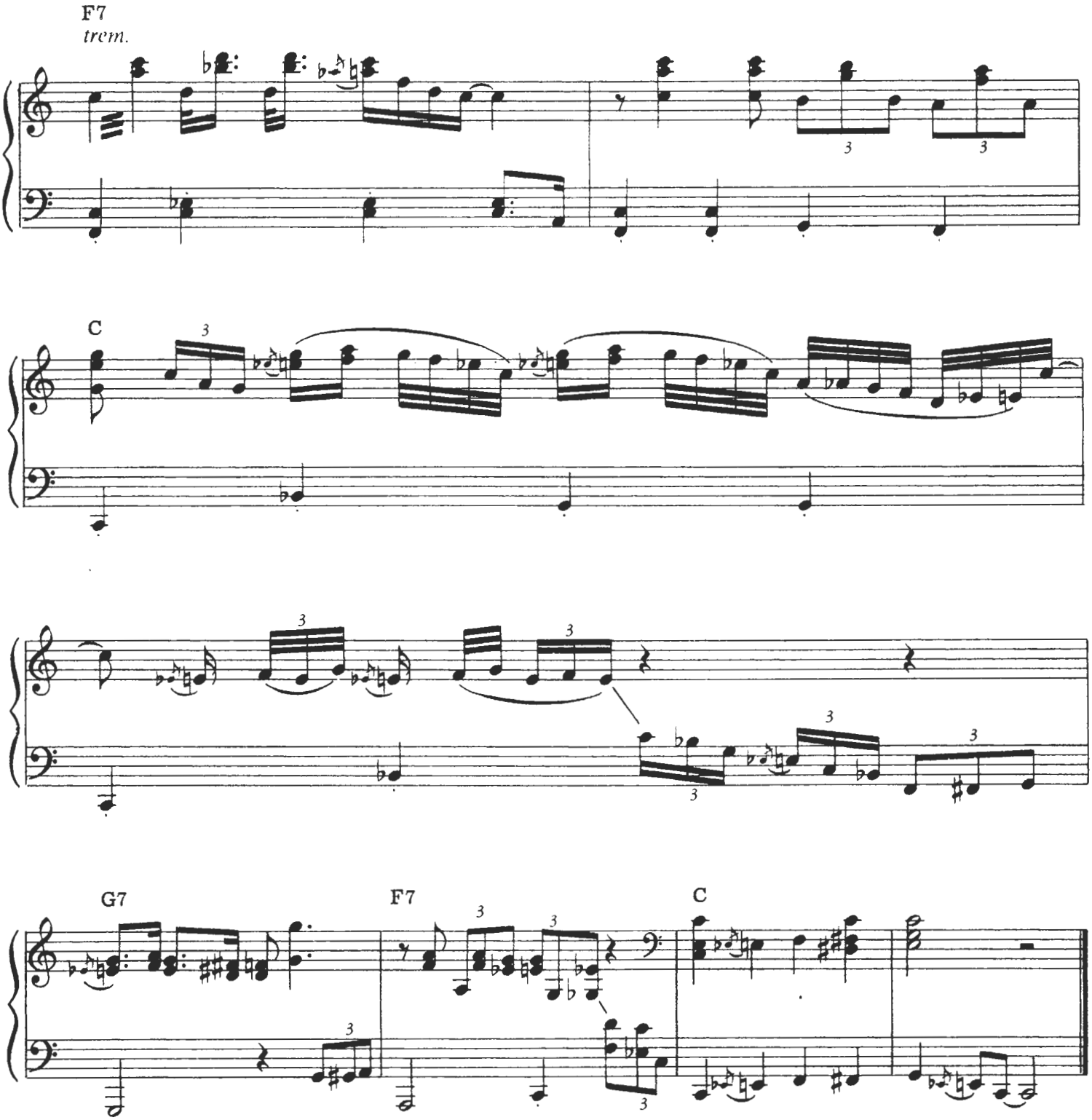
Trouble in mind, yeah, yeah I'm blue
But I won't be blue always
Think the wind's gonna change
Blow my blues away.

Don't You Know




C
F
You know I love you ba - by,
can't stand your e -
pp
C
F
vil ways.
You know I love you ba -
by, can't stand your e - vil ways.
C


G7
You know I love you wom - an
F7
C
D. S.
and I love you the rest of my days.
D. S.
C
trem.
F
trem.
C
Solo



Yes, yes you got to leave me, baby please set me free
Yes, you just got to leave me, little girl, please set me free
You know I'm all alone now, yes she be here on her knees.

Yes, baby everything gonna be alright
Yes, baby everything gonna be alright
I'm gonna love you baby, little girl every day and every night.