Functional Harmony

Lesson 1

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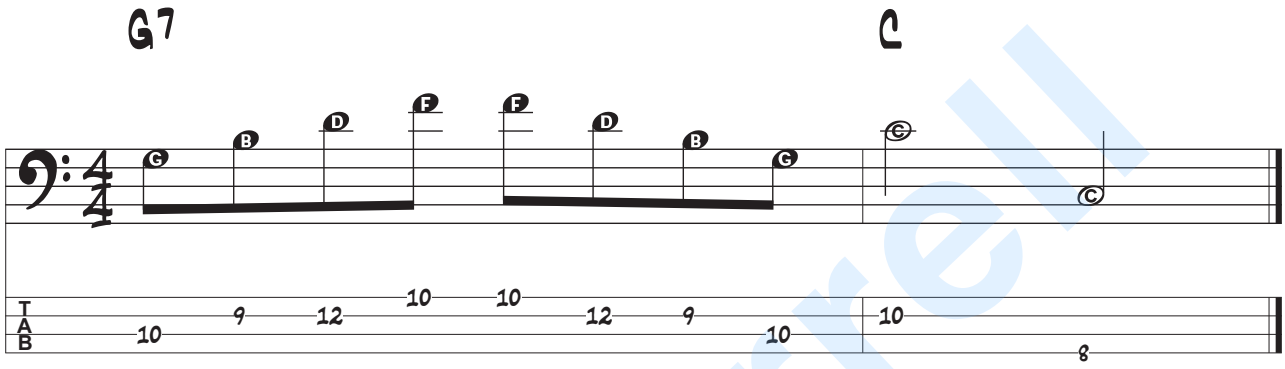
The V to I Chord Progression

Play the exercise below. Notice how the first chord sounds like it's *resolving* into the second chord? This is the sound of the V to I chord sequence. In a way this little sequence is responsible for hundreds of years of music, from Bach to the Beatles.



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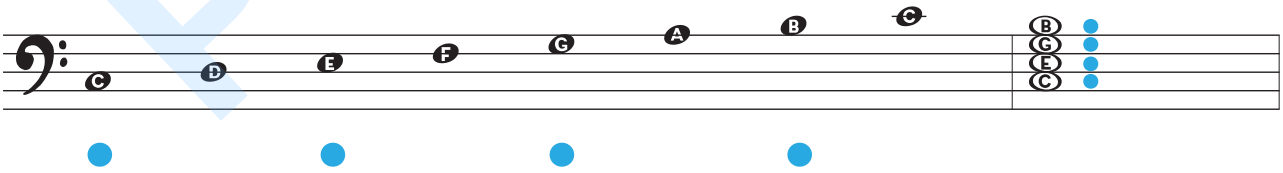
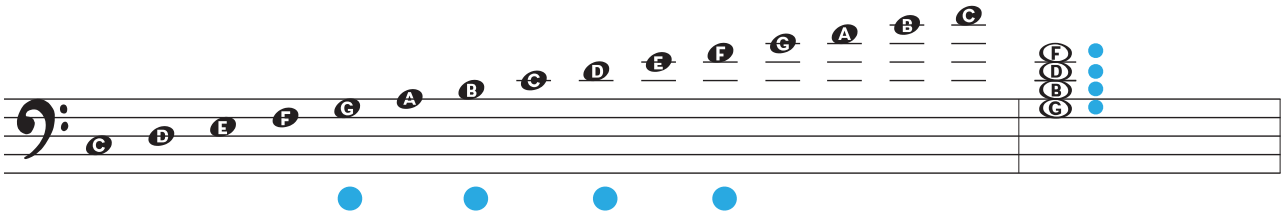
The V7 Chord

Chords are built from scales by harmonising every second note. If we harmonise the C major scale starting at C, the root, up to the seventh we will create a CΔ7 chord.



If we start at the fifth scale degree, G, and harmonise a four note chord the resulting chord is G7.



This chord type is called a *dominant chord*.

Dominant chords have a tendency to “want” to resolve down a fifth. That is to say - the strongest way to resolve the tension that is built into a dominant chord is to resolve it down a fifth.

Because dominant chords naturally happen at the fifth degree of major harmony and they naturally want to resolve down a fifth, dominant chords help establish and maintain the a sense of the major key signature.

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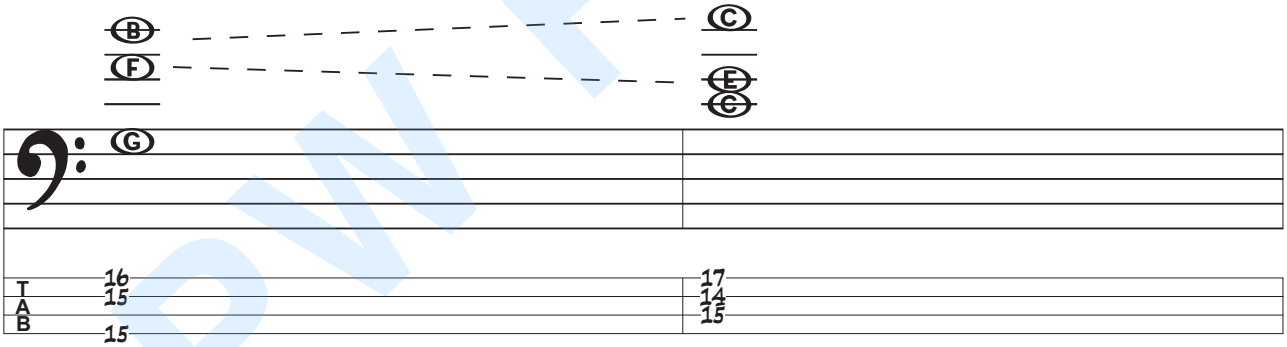
Voice Leading

The reason why V7 to I has such a strong sense of resolution is that the tension notes within the V7 chord seem to “relax” into more harmonious positions when the I chord arrives.

We can explore this sound by playing chords on bass.

NOTICE THAT THESE CHORDS DON’T CONTAIN ALL THEIR NOTES. PART OF THE ART OF PLAYING CHORDS, ESPECIALLY ON BASS, IS KNOWING WHICH NOTES TO LEAVE OUT.

See below how the seventh note in the G7 chord resolves down chromatically to become E, the third of C major. Also note how the third of G7, B, resolves up chromatically to become C, the root of C major. In all V7 to I sequences the seventh and third of the V7 chord leading chromatically to the third and root of the I chord.



This is called *voice leading*. The reason why certain chords sound good moving in sequence is often due to the voice leading that is taking place.

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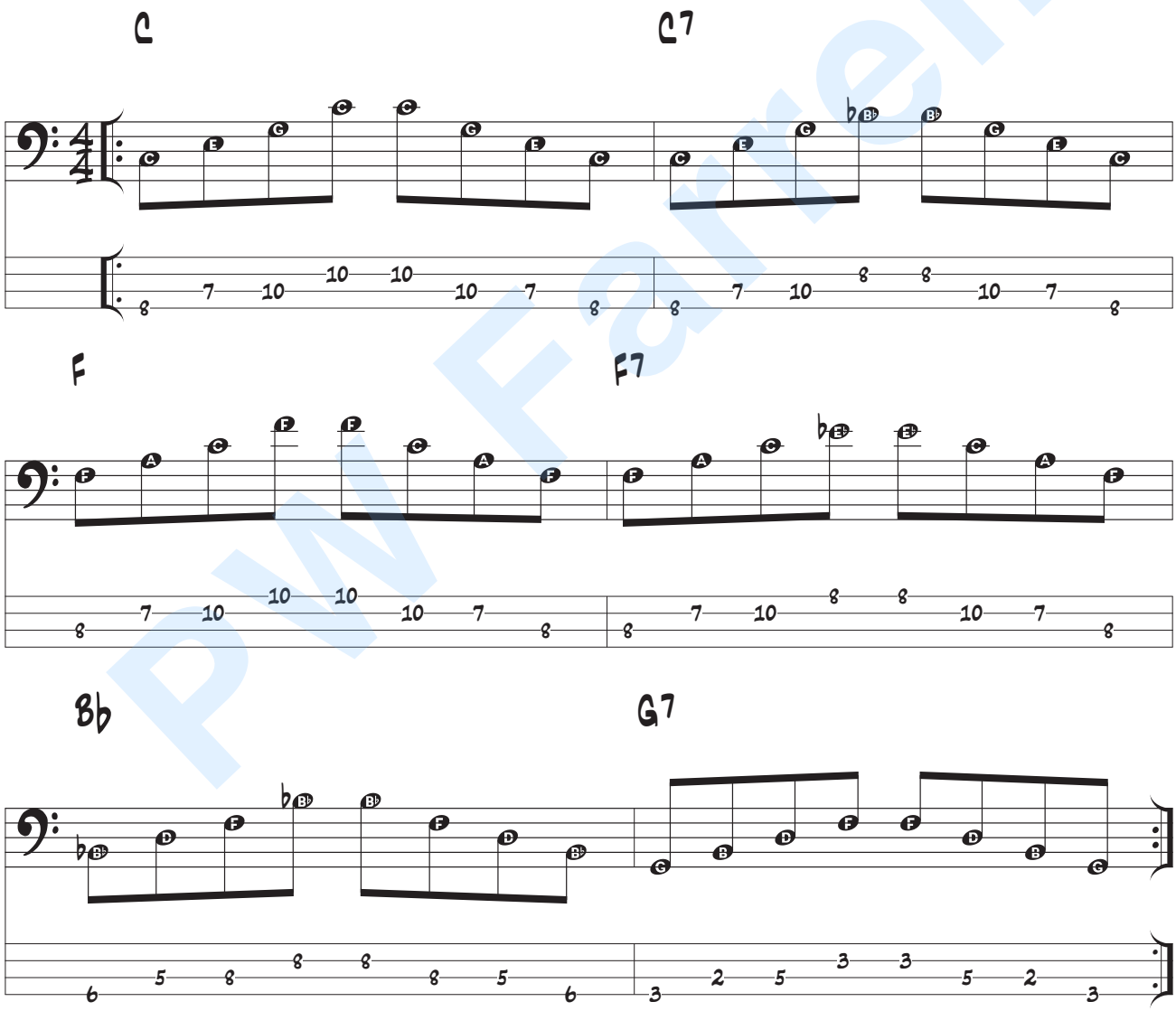
When dominant chords appear in other places, instead of at the fifth degree, they can be used to change keys signatures.

Play the exercise below to hear how V7 chords can create doorways to new key centres.



Notice how the chord immediately after each V7 chord sounds so “right”? JS Bach used this very technique to change key signatures. In his G Major Cello Suite Prelude he changes key from G major to D major using the A7 chord.

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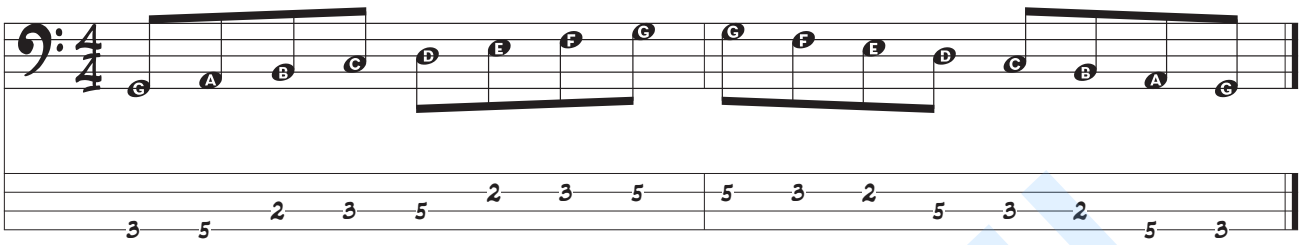
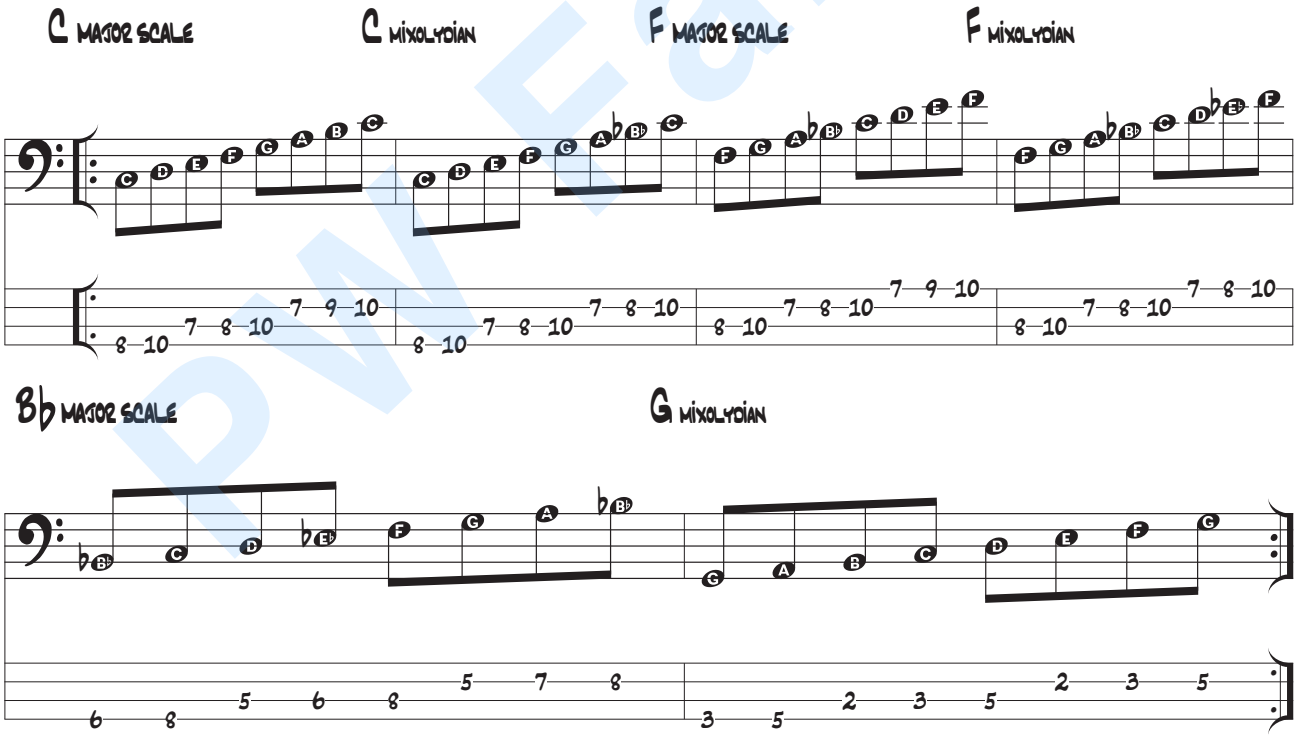
The Mixolydian Mode

Play the scale below to hear the sound of G mixolydian.



The G mixolydian mode is what you get when you play the C major scale from G to G. G mixolydian has the sound of G7 built into it.



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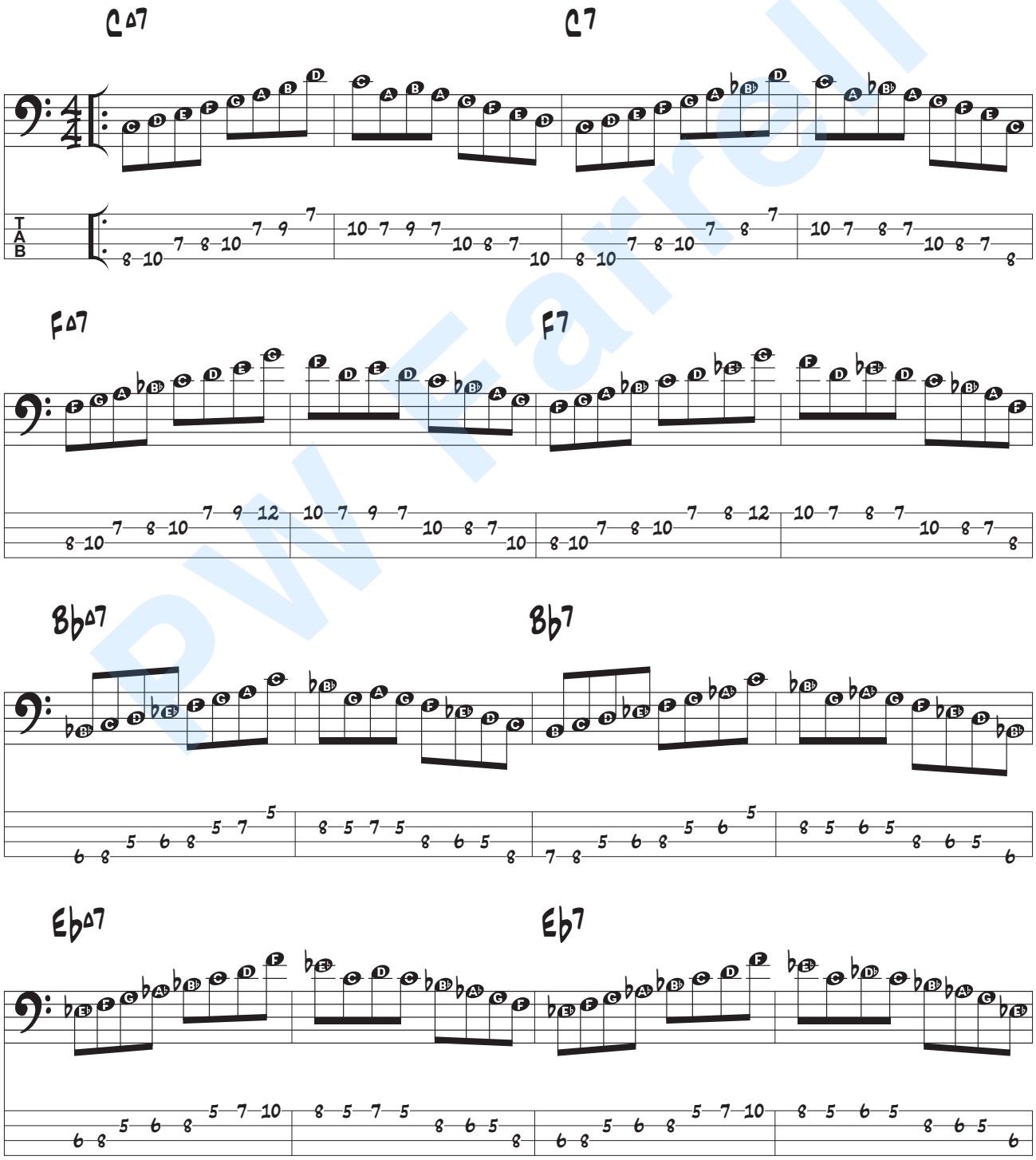
Technical Study

By playing primary chord tones (root, three, five, seven) on beats we can make the harmony really stand out using nothing but scales (no arpeggios or harmonised chords). This is an old jazz trick.

Play through the exercise below. It will take you through all twelve keys.



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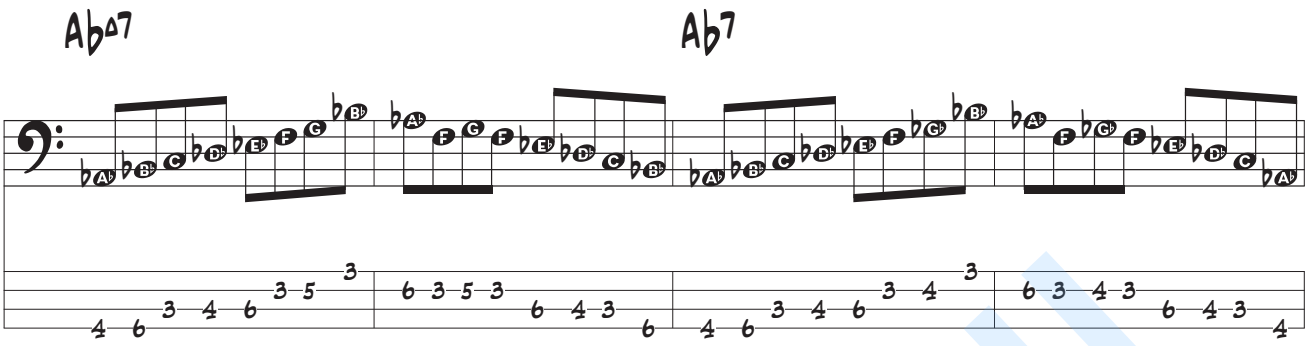

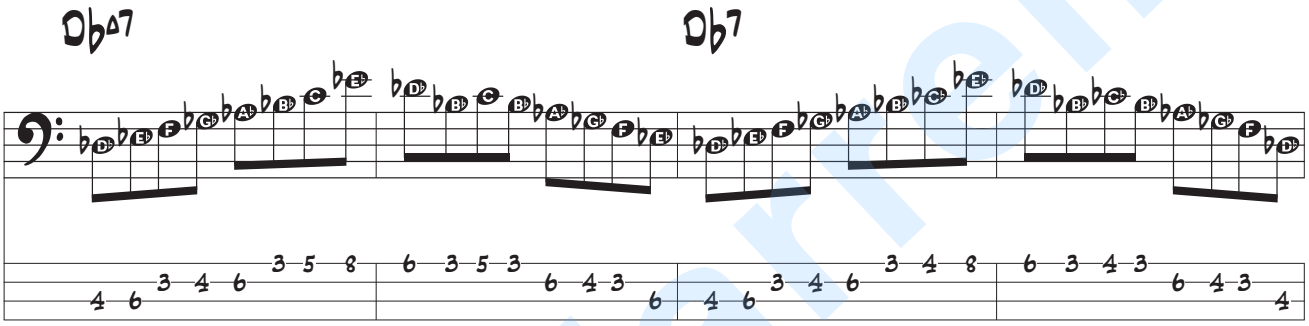

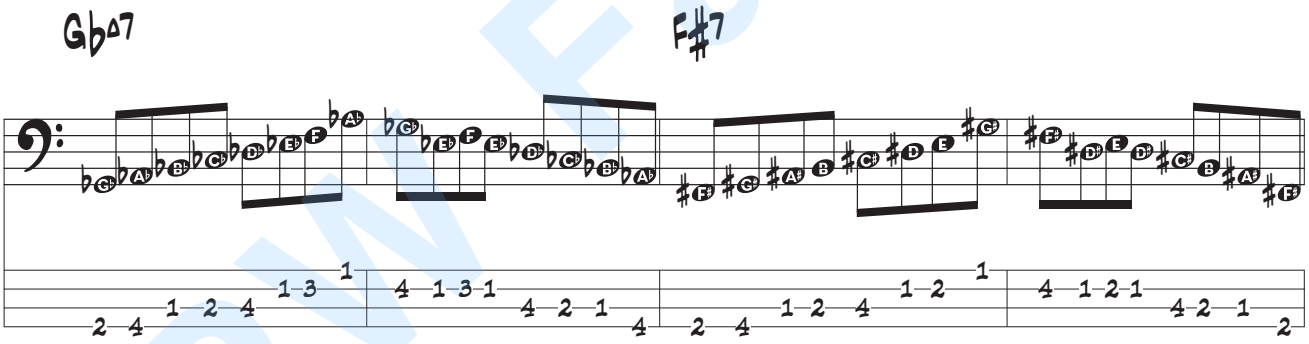

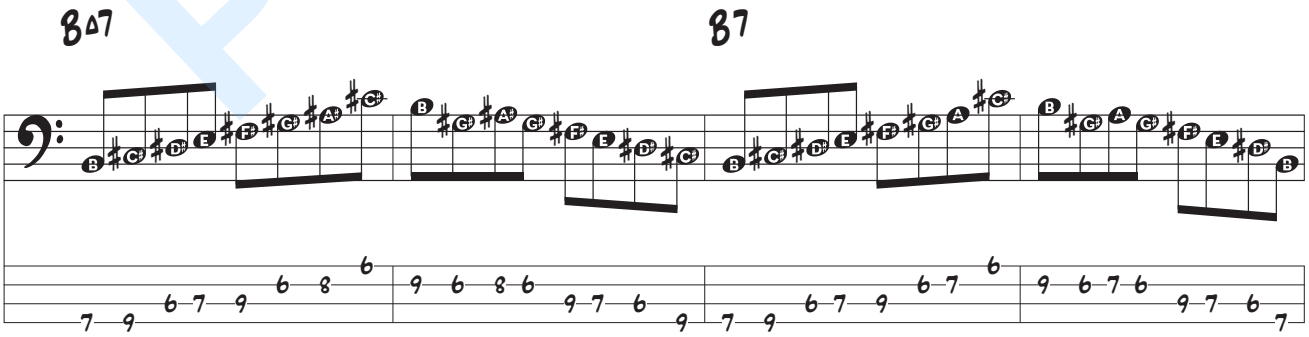

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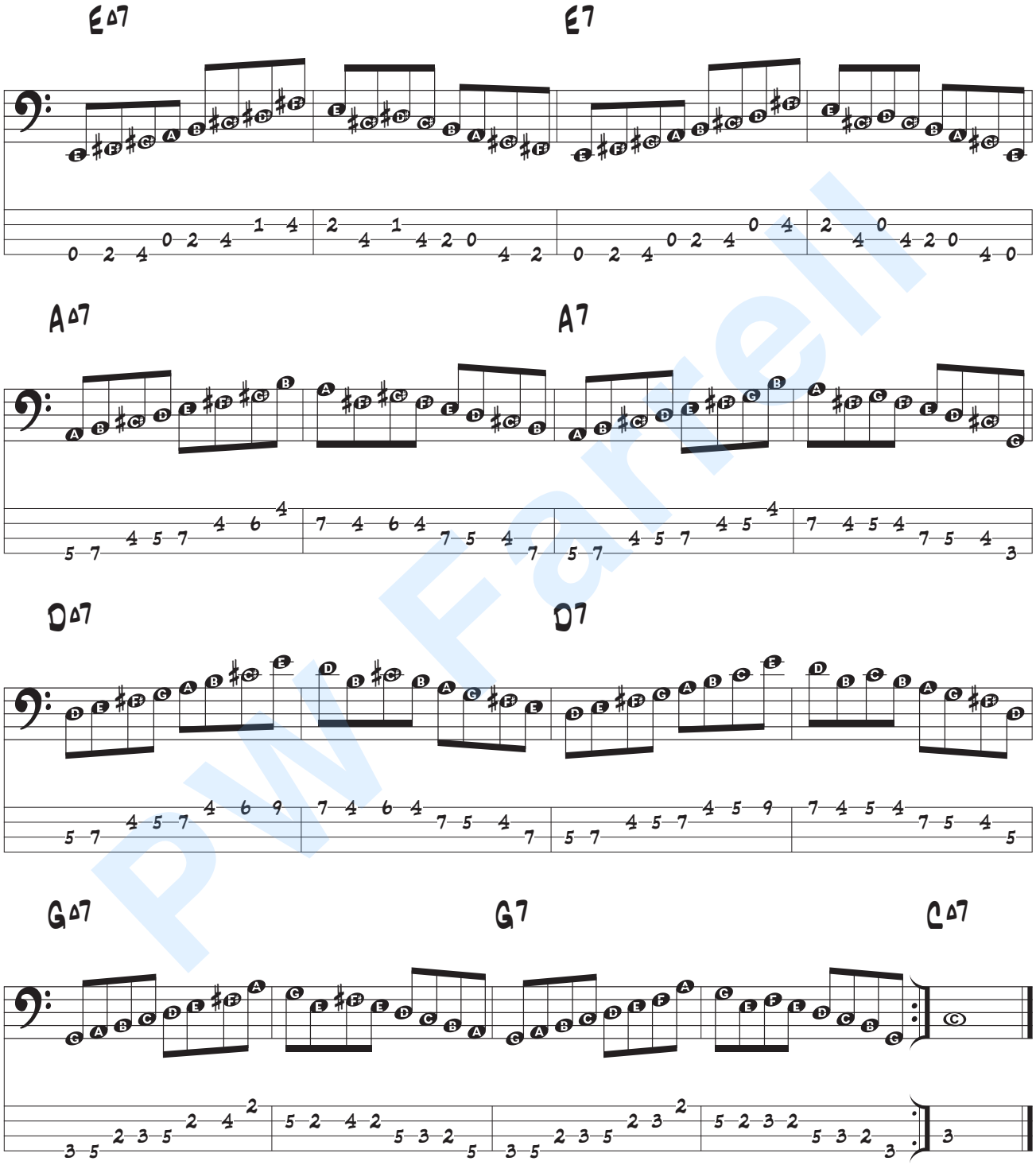

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Functional Harmony

Lesson 2

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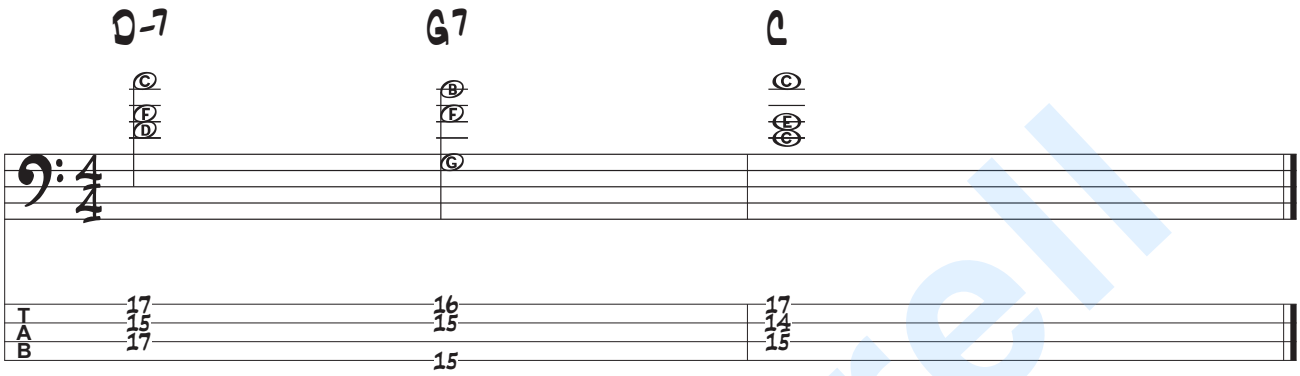
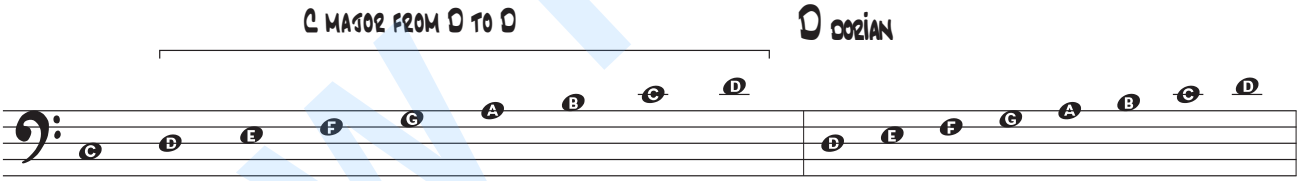
The ii V I Chord Progression

Play the chordal passage below. This is the sound of the ii V I progression.

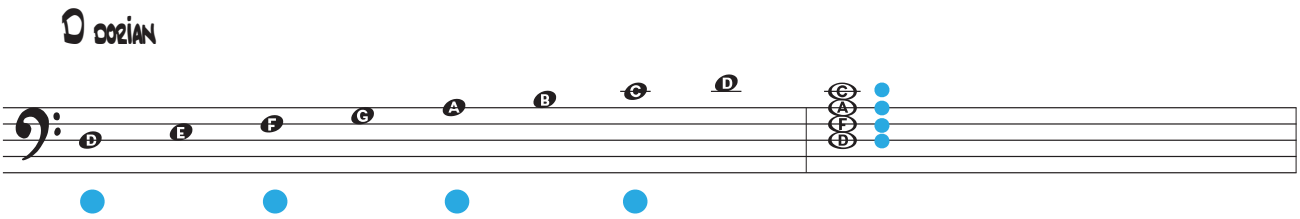


The Dorian Mode



Play C major from D to D. If we treat that series of notes like its own scale it becomes the D dorian mode.

If we harmonise the Dorian mode we get the ii chord. The ii chord is a minor seventh chord occurring at the second degree of major harmony.



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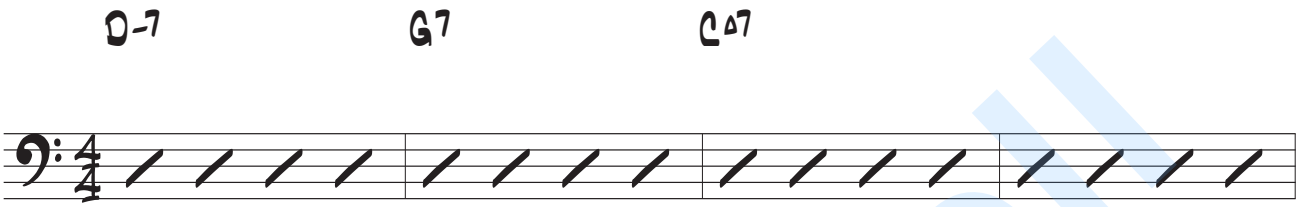
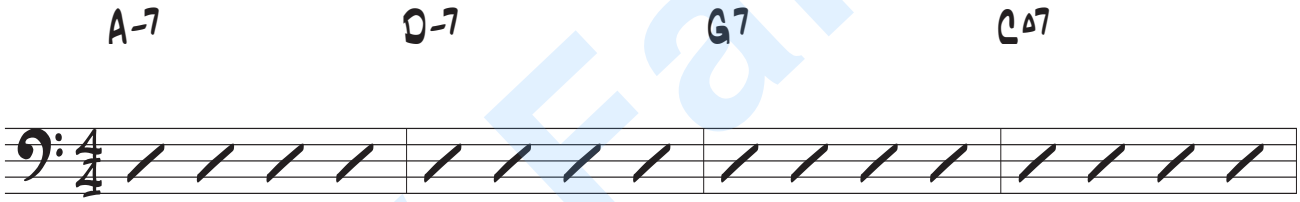
The ii Chord

The ii chord is known as a *pre-dominant* chord because it often leads to the *dominant* chord (the V7 chord).

Here are the first three chords of “Autumn Leaves”. This is a classic ii V I sequence.



Here are the first four chords of “All The Things You Are”.



Notice that there are two minor seventh chords. In this case A-7 is a vi chord and D-7 is the ii chord.

Use the key signature and/or the presence of any V7 chord to identify whether or not a minor seventh chord is a ii chord.

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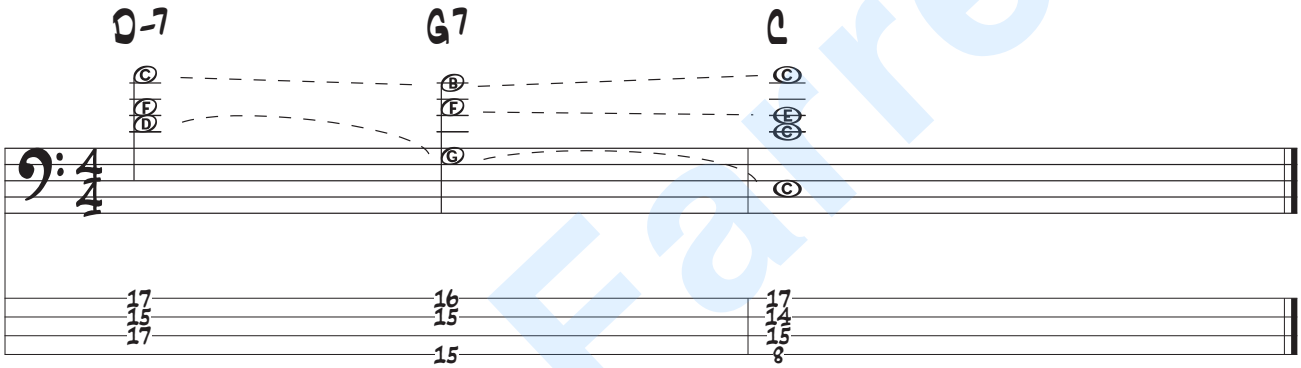
Voice Leading & Root Movement

In the ii V I progression several interesting things happen. All the chords flow into each other with descending fifths root movement. For example in the key C major the ii chord is D-7, the V7 chord is G7 and the I chord is C major.

The root is D-7 is D, which falls a fifth to the root of G7 which falls a fifth to the root of C major.

The voice leading also flows logically. The seventh of D-7 is C, which falls chromatically to become B, the third of G7. The third and seventh of G7, B and F, then resolve chromatically, becoming C and E, the root and third of C major.



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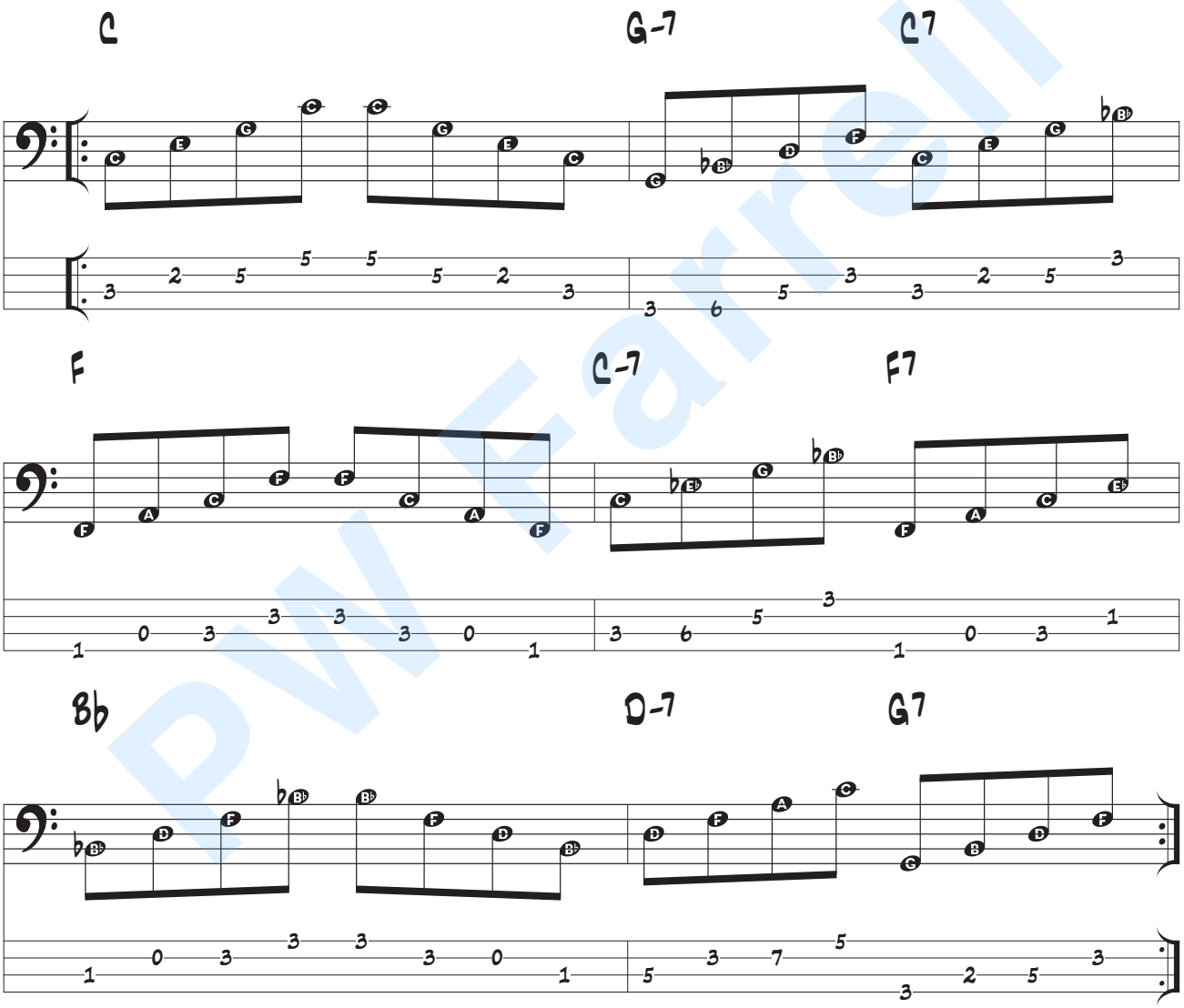
ii V I The Doorway to New Keys

Just as the V7 chord can be used to “normalise” new key centres, the ii V7 sequence can create smooth pathways through related key centres.

Play the exercise below to hear the sound of ii V I setting up new key signatures.



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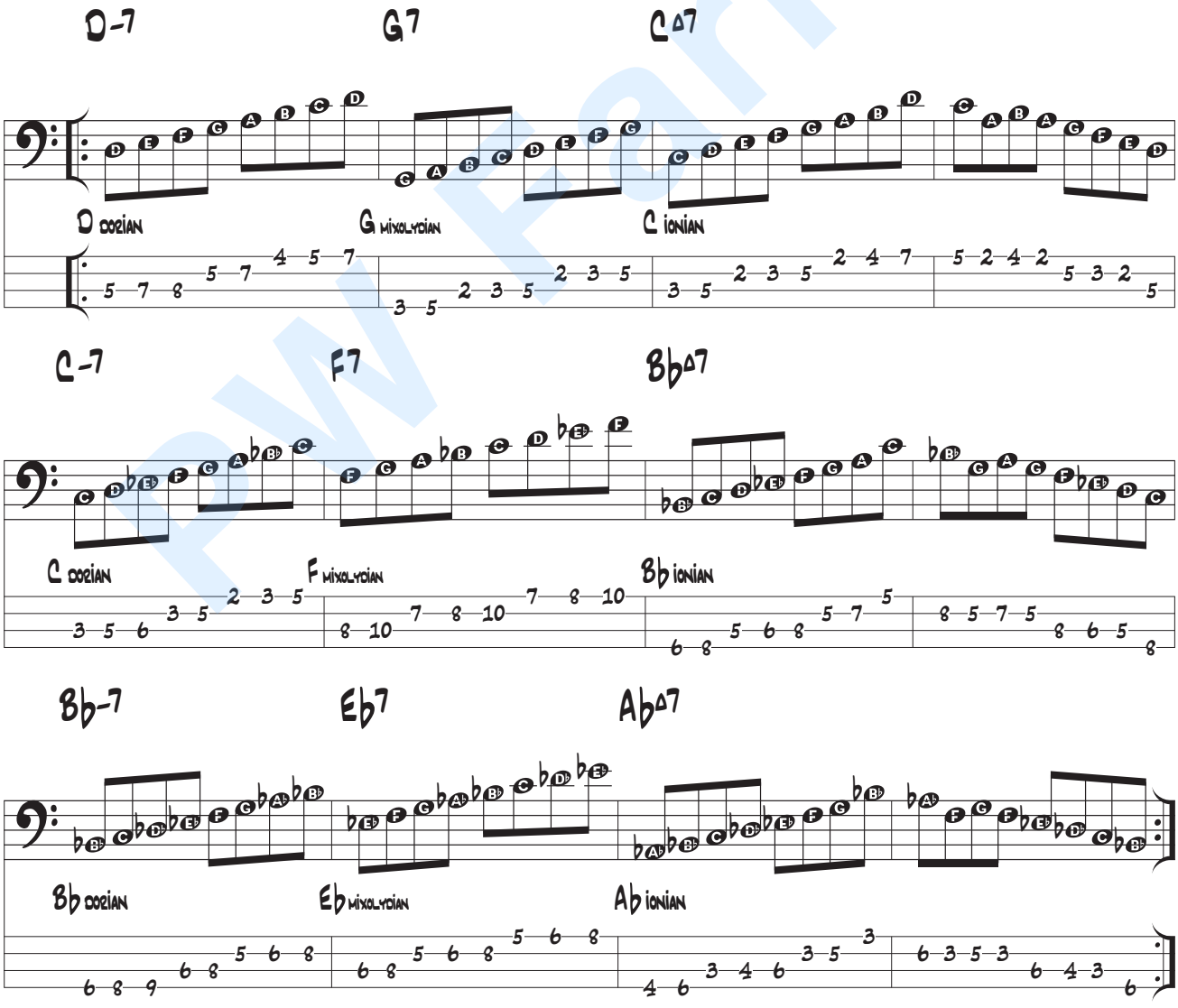
The Dorian, Mixolydian and Ionian Modes

So far in the *Functional Harmony* lesson series we have learned about the mixolydian and dorian modes. The major scale itself can be thought of as a mode: the ionian mode.

I use the traditional word “mode” to remind us that these scales first come from the major scale. Going forward I use the words “mode” and “scale” interchangeably. A mode is a type of scale.

Play the exercise below to hear how the ii V I progression can be sounded using the dorian, mixolydian and ionian modes.

NOTE HOW THE CHORD TONES ARE EMPHASISED USING A SPECIAL MELODIC SHAPE ON THE DESCENDING IONIAN LINES.



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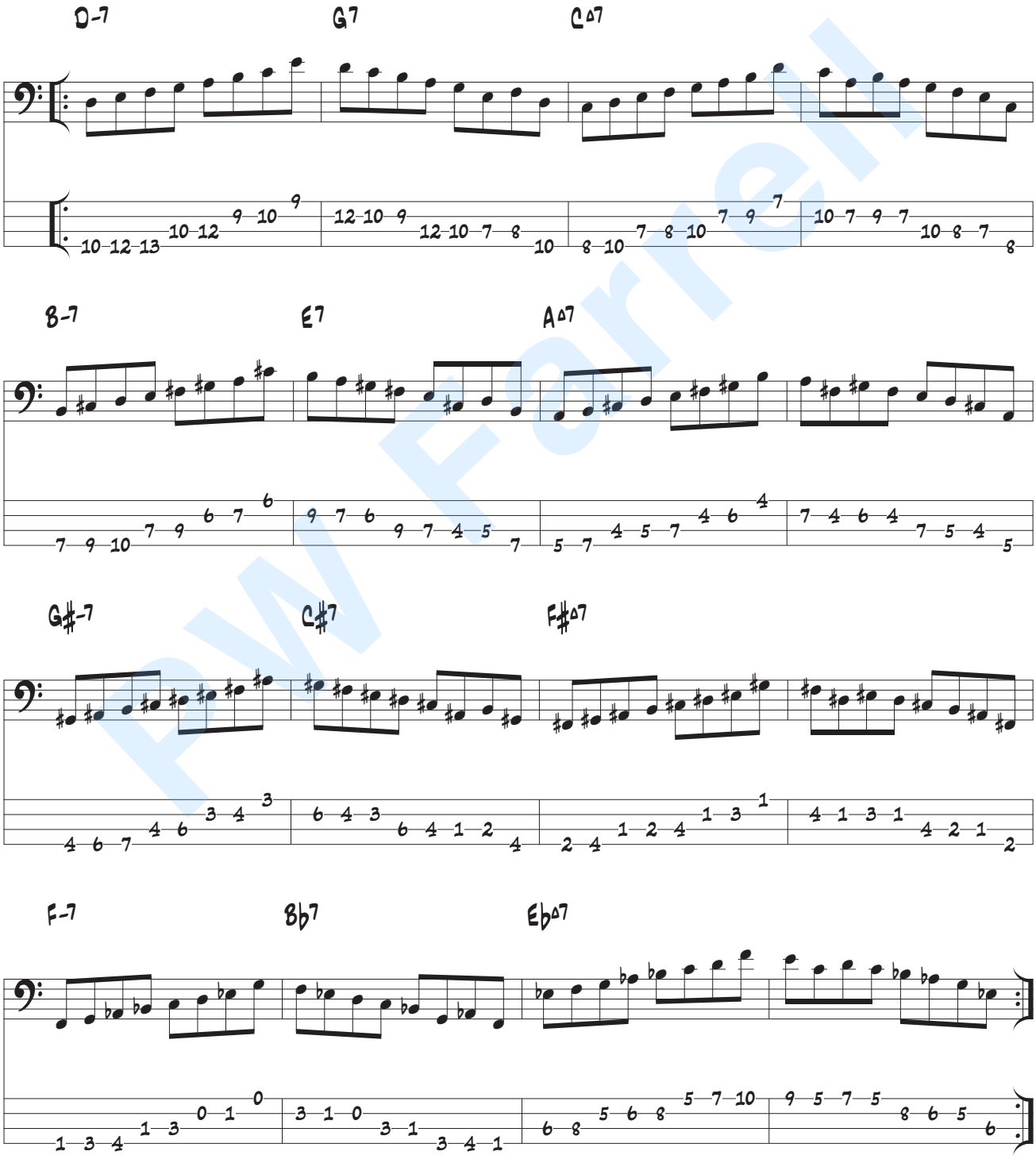
Technical Study

Play through the exercise below to hear how the chord tones of ii V7 I can be emphasised using the dorian, mixolydian and ionian modes.



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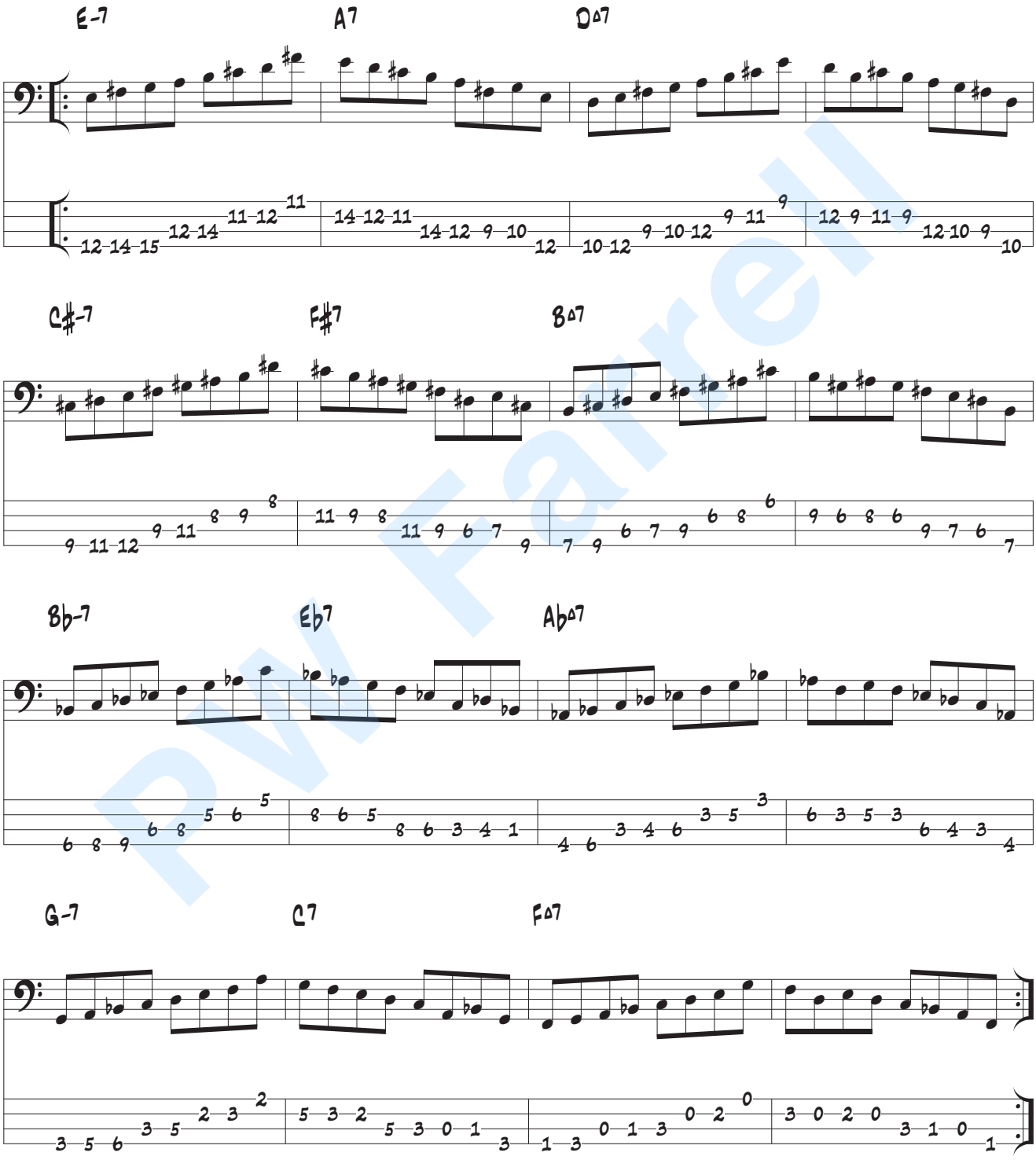

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