B.B King

Blues Master

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FOREWORD

Today, the sky's the limit for learning to play guitar. You have videos, books, schools and CDs. The opportunities are endless to be the best player you can be.

Learn all you can. Learn to play the basics first, then expand your technique, but don't forget the little things that become so important: dynamics, note choice, phrasing. Sometimes what you *don't* play is just as important as what you *do* play. Listen to other players, and to as many different types of music as you can. You'll find it easier to understand other people's styles, and eventually you will start sounding like yourself. And in the long run, that's the goal of every musician.

Good luck, enjoy the book, and keep practicing!

B.B. King

Article on B.B. King's style appearing in the July 1992 issue of *Guitar World* magazine
(REPRINTED BY PERMISSION)

ROYAL BLUES

His majesty, **B.B. King,** demonstrates why he rules in this historic lesson in bends, scales and slides.

BY ASKOLD BUK

VERY FEW MUSICIANS have had as much impact on their peers as B.B. King. He has influenced generations of guitarists, and his playing continues to be fresh and vibrant. B.B.'s ideas are deceptively simple, yet upon analysis they stand up as sophisticated musical statements. He phrases impeccably, always hits the "right" notes, and is possessed of a vibrato that is like nothing else.

As the interviewer on B.B.'s instructional video series *B.B. King: Bluesmaster* (CPP Media Group), I was able to hang out with him and discuss practically every aspect of his unique style. B.B. proved to be a warm, funny and humble man, totally committed to music, and generous to a fault when it came to sharing his ideas. It was an unforgettable experience.

When you think of B.B. King, the first thing that comes to mind is *vibrato*. He says he developed it as a result of hearing his cousin, the legendary Delta bluesman Bukka White, play. "He used a bottleneck, and I tried to copy the sound, or get as close as possible, with my fingers," B.B. said before playing Figure 1. "I use the vibrato to make a point—to end an idea."

B.B. gets his vibrato started by hooking his thumb over the top of the fretboard. After that, the only point of contact between his left hand and the neck is that of his finger fretting the note he is playing. The vibrato comes from the wrist—B.B. shakes his whole hand rapidly and evenly. "The faster I shake my hand, the better it sounds to me," he said. "I want it to sound like the vibrato in a person's voice."

We next talked about scales, focusing on B.B.'s favorite blues pattern, a variation of the blues scale (Figure 2). Whereas the stock minor pentatonic "box" contains the root, flatted third, fourth, fifth and flatted seventh, B.B.'s pattern contains the root, second/ninth, flatted third, fourth,

FIGURE 1

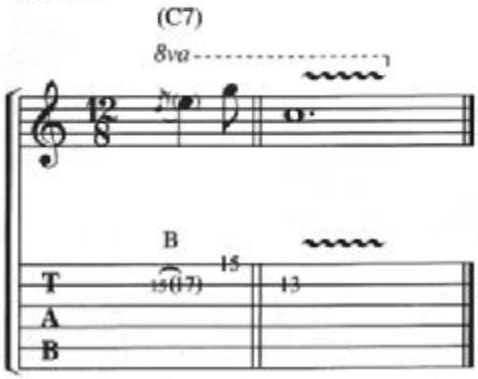


FIGURE 2 B.B.'S 13TH-POSITION BLUES PATTERN

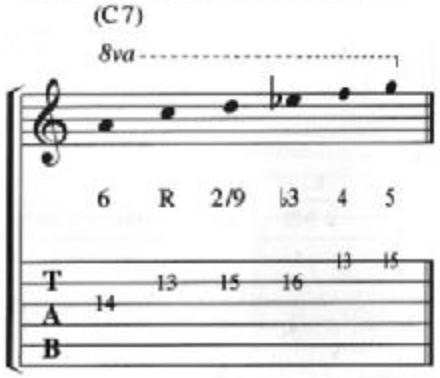
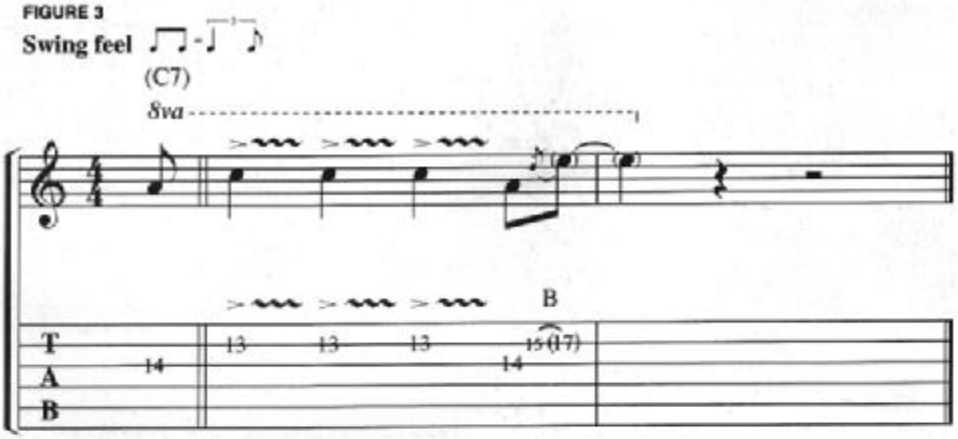


FIGURE 3



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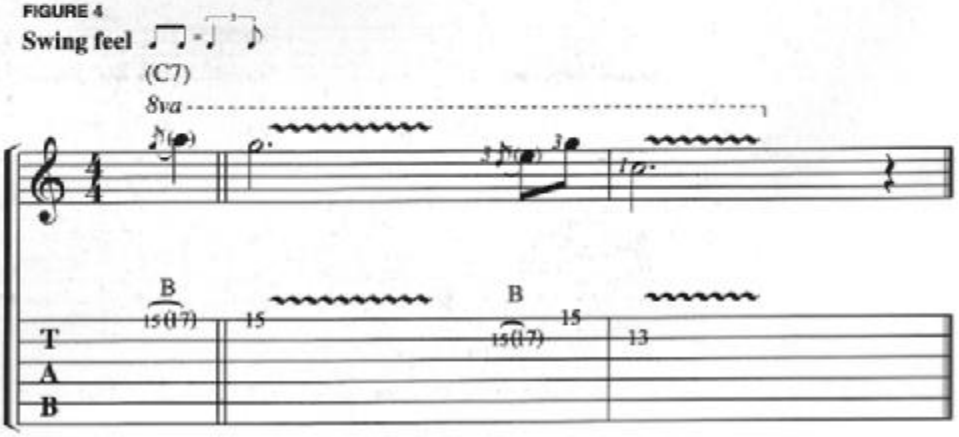

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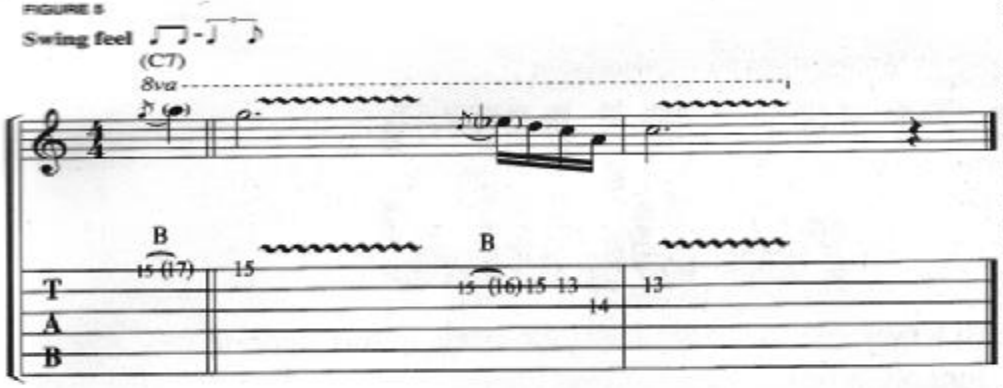


FIGURE 6

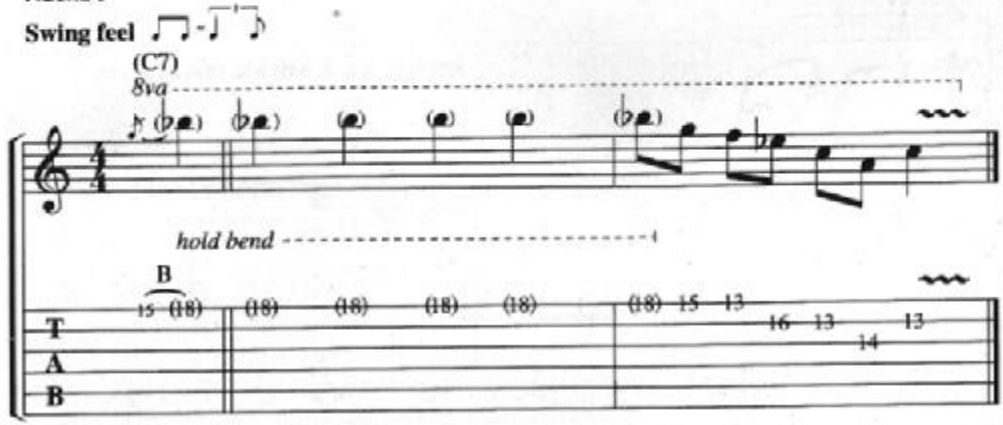


FIGURE 7

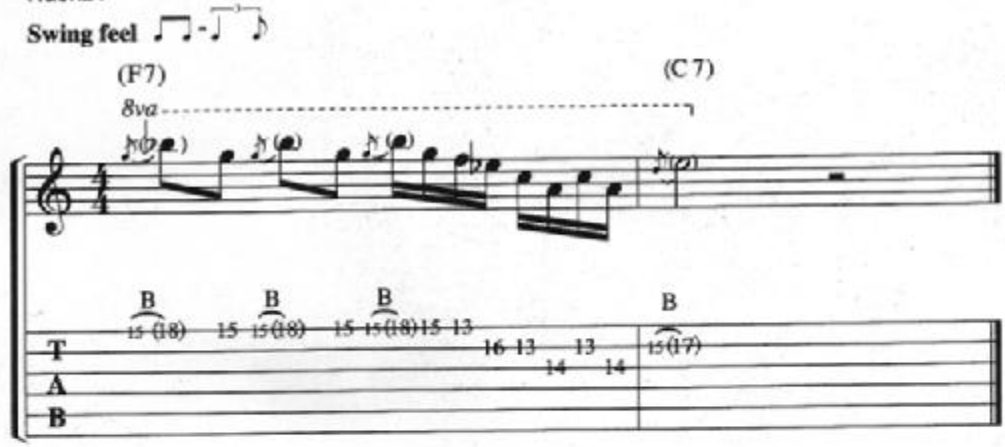
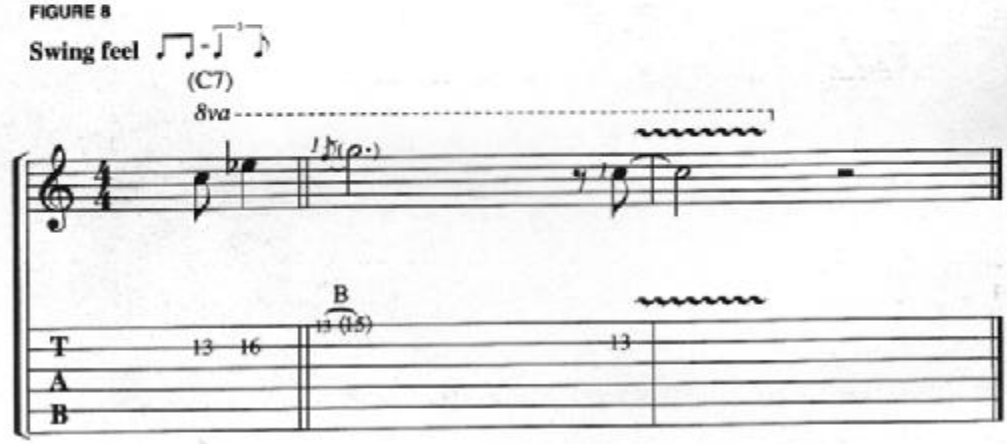


FIGURE 8



fifth and sixth. This is the scale of choice for contemporary blues and jazz artists such as Robben Ford and Larry Carlton, and hints at B.B.'s jazz influences.

He manages to create a wealth of music out of this position. Figure 3 shows a lick that B.B. often uses as an intro, or, as he said, "to kick the whole band in together." Figure 4 is an example of his soulful bending style. B.B. uses *reinforced string bending*, backing up the ring finger bend with the index and middle fingers of his left hand for more strength and support. Notice that he goes to an adjacent string with the same finger he bends with, a somewhat idiosyncratic maneuver, as most players would change fingers.

Figure 5 introduces the concept of *precision bending*, of which B.B. is a master. In this example he bends the D to an E♭ (half-step), whereas in the previous example, he bent the D up to an E (whole step). Depending on the harmony of the underlying chord, he will bend a note up a half-step, whole step, step-and-a-half or two steps. In Figure 6, B.B. bends the G up to a B♭ and holds it for over a measure. Keeping this in pitch and time requires tremendous hand strength.

B.B. talked about some of his jazz influences: "I got my phrasing from listening to horn players such as Lester Young, Bobby Hackett and Louis Jordan, but I never really sat down and thought about it—it's just something I hear." B.B.'s jazz leanings are evident in Figure 7, as he swings hard over the IV chord (F7) in a C blues. He hits all the right notes, from the upper extensions of F7 (B♭ [the eleventh] and G [the ninth]), to resolving to the major third (E♮) of C7.

So far in this position, we've seen B.B. bend from the second/ninth (D) to the flatted third (E♭) or natural third (E♮), and from the fifth (G) to the sixth (A) or the flatted seventh (B♭). In Figure 8, he bends the fourth (F) up to the fifth (G). Notice again the unorthodox fingering with which he keeps the bend within the pattern. Most guitarists would bend the F up with their ring finger (a la Albert King and Stevie Ray Vaughan), but B.B. uses his index finger. Pay attention to the left-hand fingering here—again, B.B. jumps strings with the same finger he used to bend the note. Figure 9 is a variation that has been adopted by many modern blues and fusion players. Notice how B.B. outlines the chord tones of F7 (F, A, C, E♭) descending chromatically to the flatted seventh (E♭).

Though this is hardly the only position B.B. uses, for all intents and purposes it is his home base. This pattern (including the bent notes) produces the following tones: C, D, E♭, E♮, F, G, A, B♭. In essence, you have a C mixolydian scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B♭) with an added minor third (E♭), which is a lot more sophisticated than the minor pentatonic scale most blues guitarists use.

Both Figures 10 and 11 start in this position but shift to others. Figure 10 is a C6 arpeggio (C, E, G, A), fingered in "pure B.B." style, which over a C7 chord produces a C13 sound. This is a classic lick B.B. uses to bridge the I chord (C7) to the IV chord (F7). Figure 11 is a typical cadenza, full of feeling and fire, that is similar to the endings of many of B.B.'s songs. Here we see position shifts, double-stops, chromaticism and minor-pentatonic ideas.

These ideas barely scratch the surface of B.B. King's multi-faceted style. I learned a lot from B.B., but it all hit home when he summarized the concepts. "Always use your ears and your taste," he said. "Learn all the positions, chords and scales—that's important—but play the ones that *sound* best to you." And that's advice any guitarist could use. ●

FIGURE 9

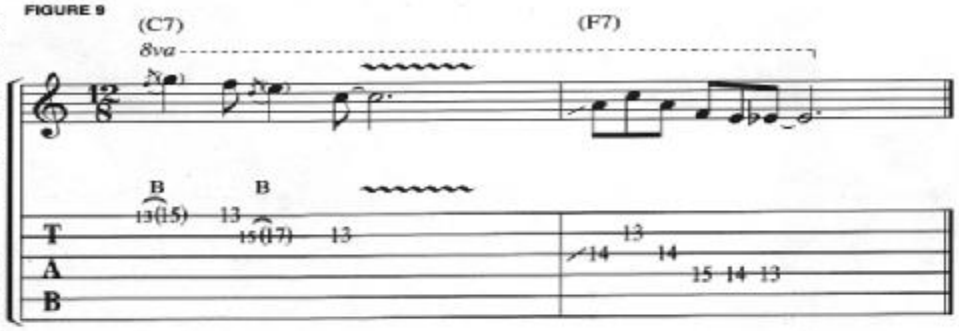


FIGURE 10

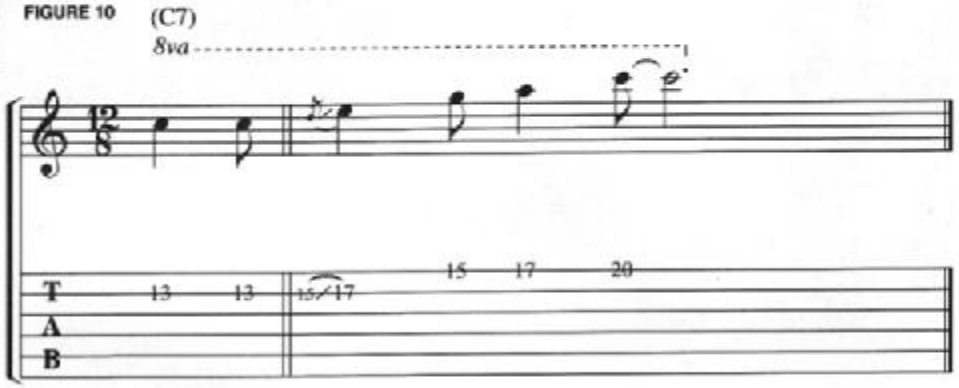
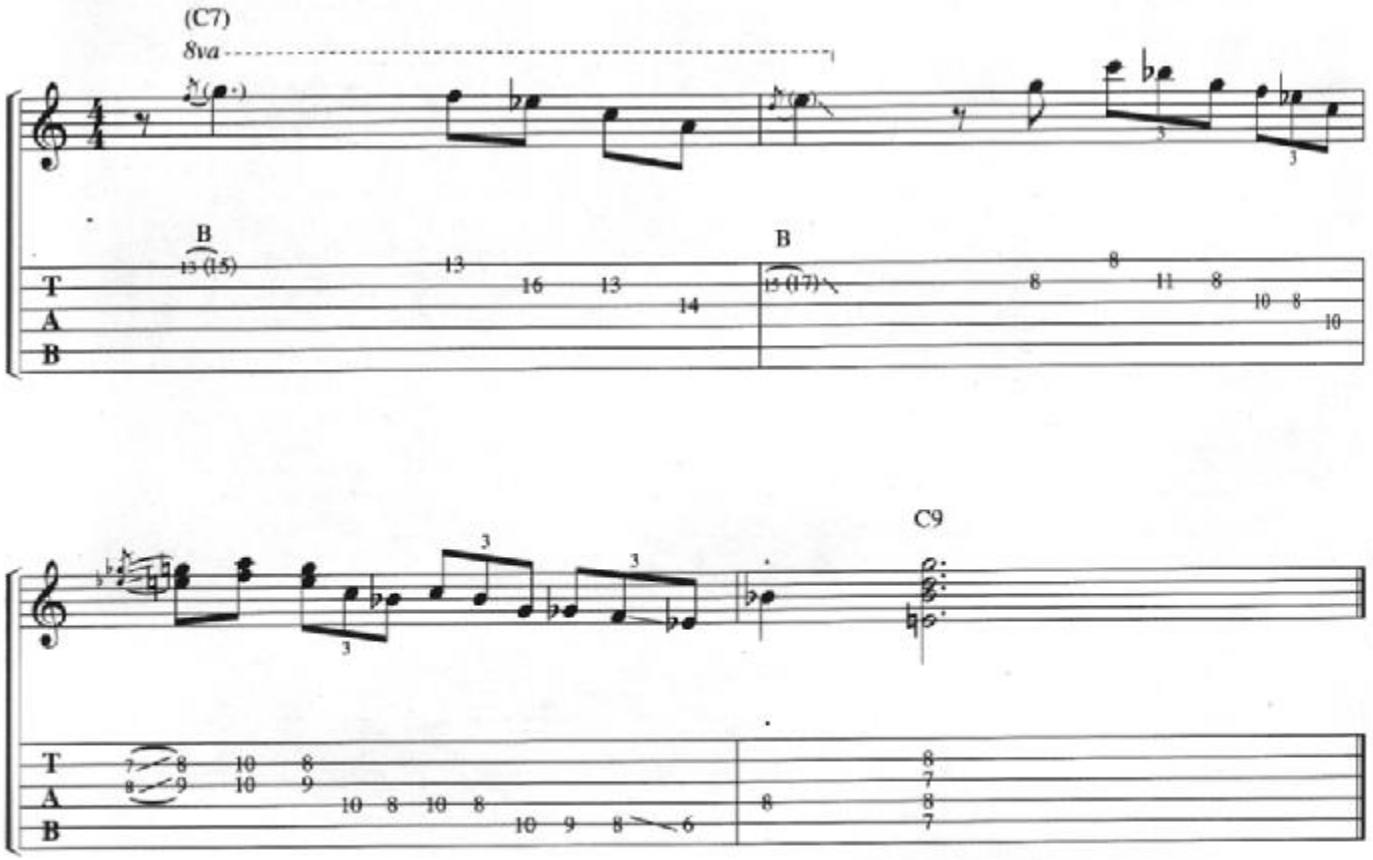
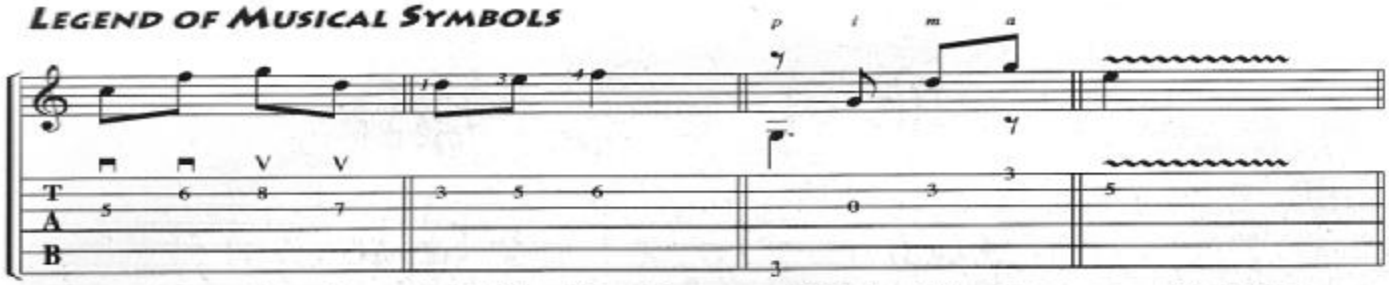


FIGURE 11

Swing feel

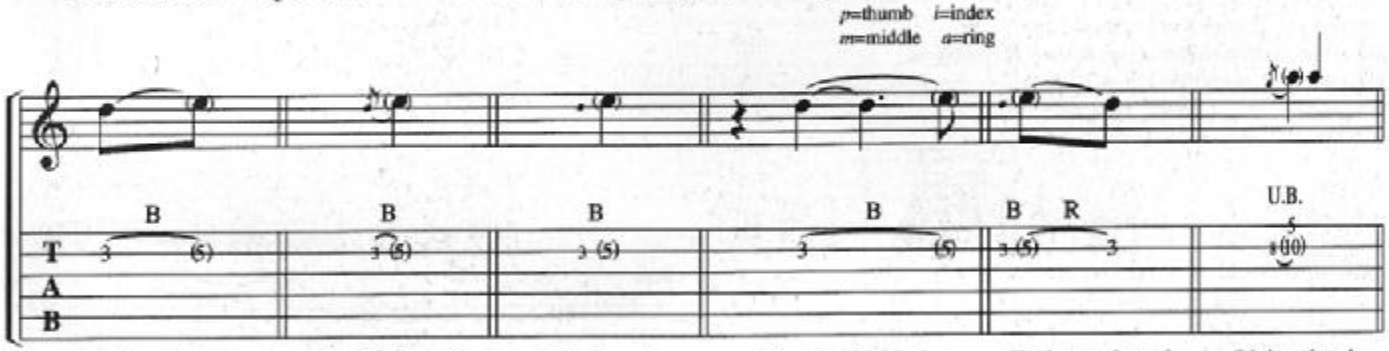


LEGEND OF MUSICAL SYMBOLS

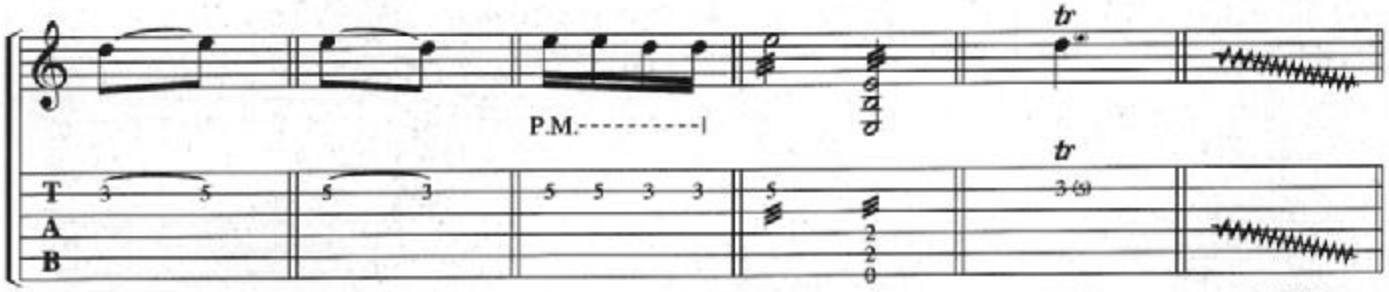


Downstrokes Upstrokes Left hand fingering Right hand fingering Hand vibrato

p=thumb *i*=index
m=middle *a*=ring

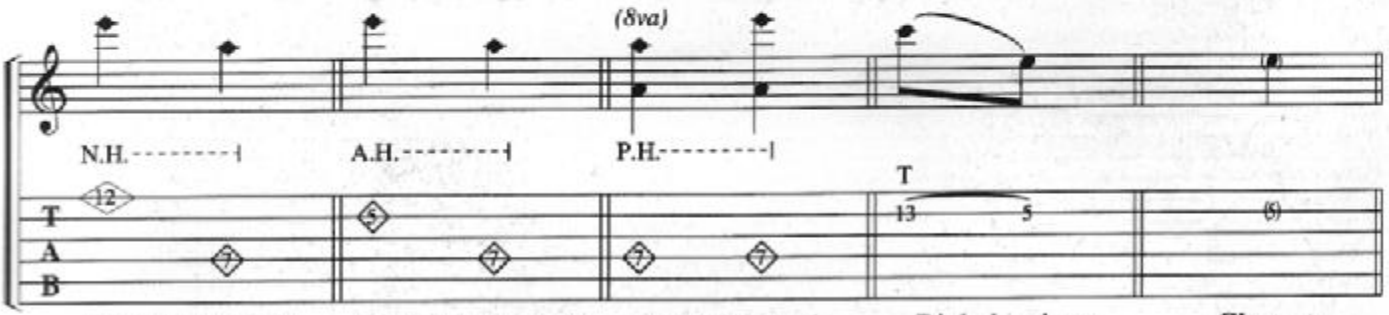


Bend Quick bend Pre-bend Gradual bend Release bend Unison bend



Hammeron Pulloff Palm mute Tremolo Trill Pick Slide

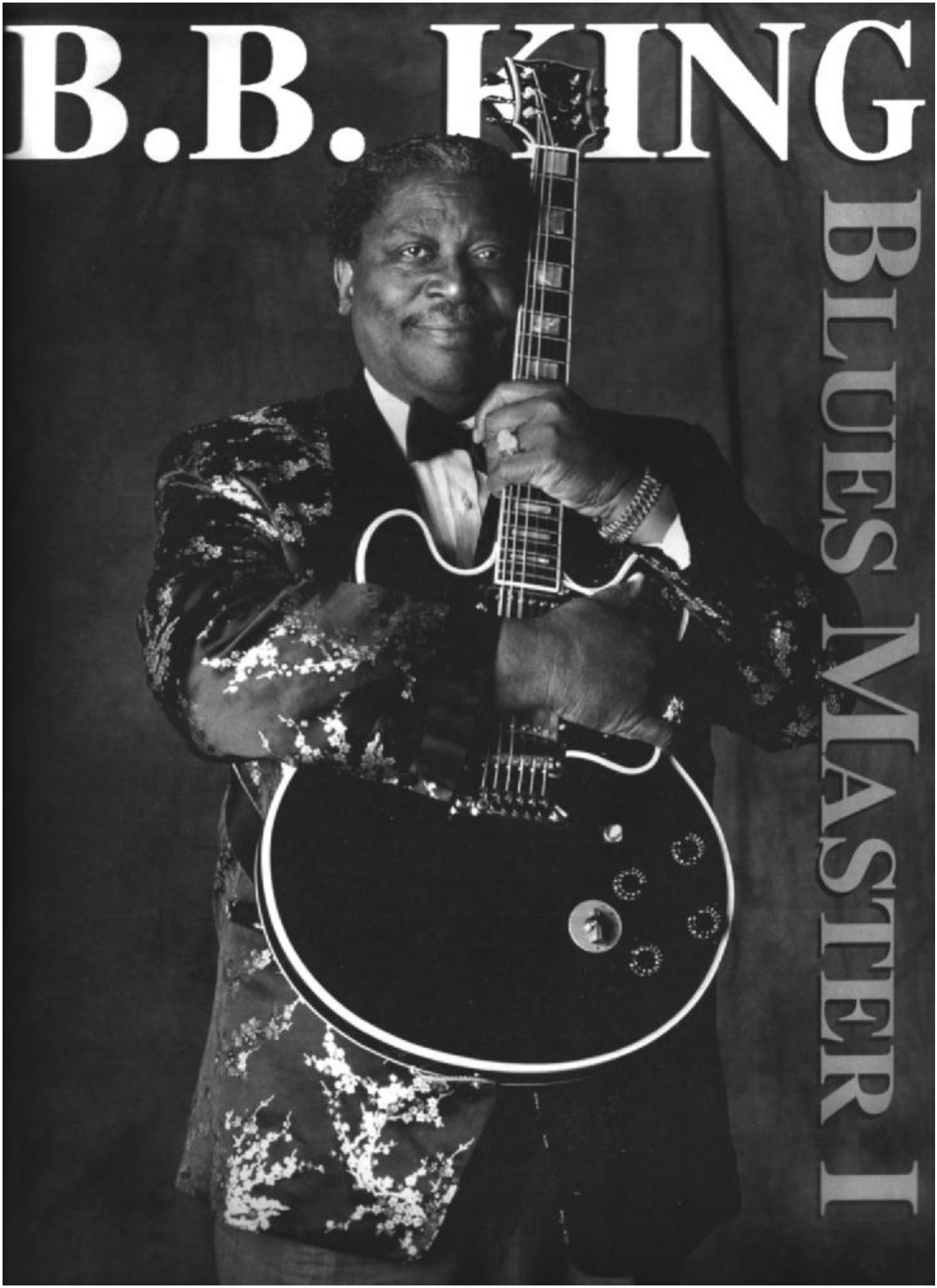
Picked slide Legato slide Short slide up and down Muffled strings

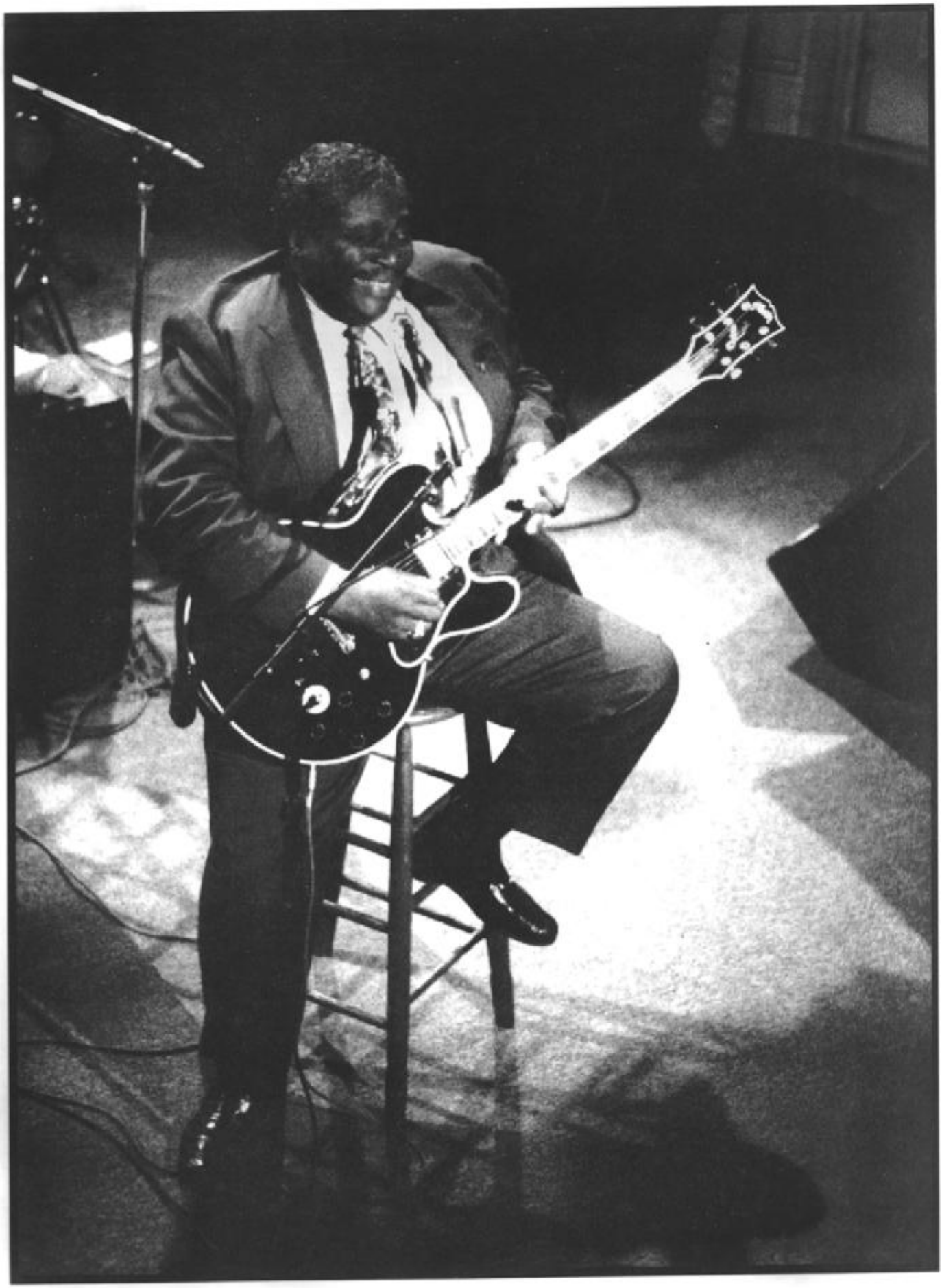


Natural harmonic Artificial harmonic Pinch harmonic Right hand tap Ghost note (partially implied)

B.B. KING

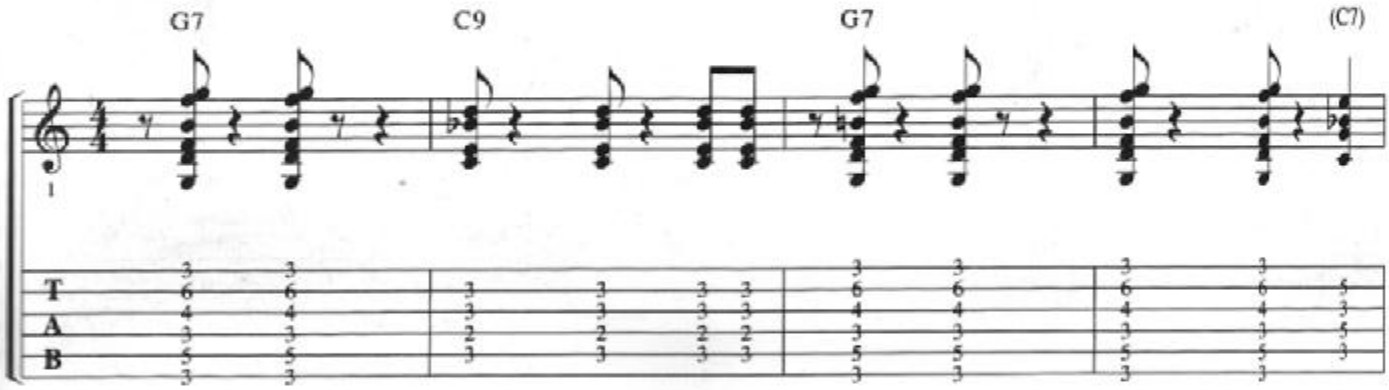
BLUES MASTER I

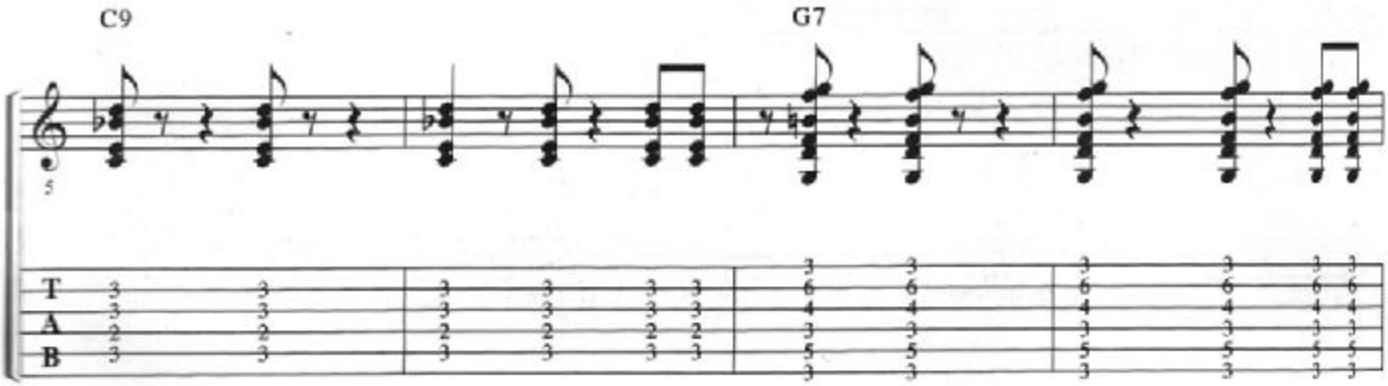


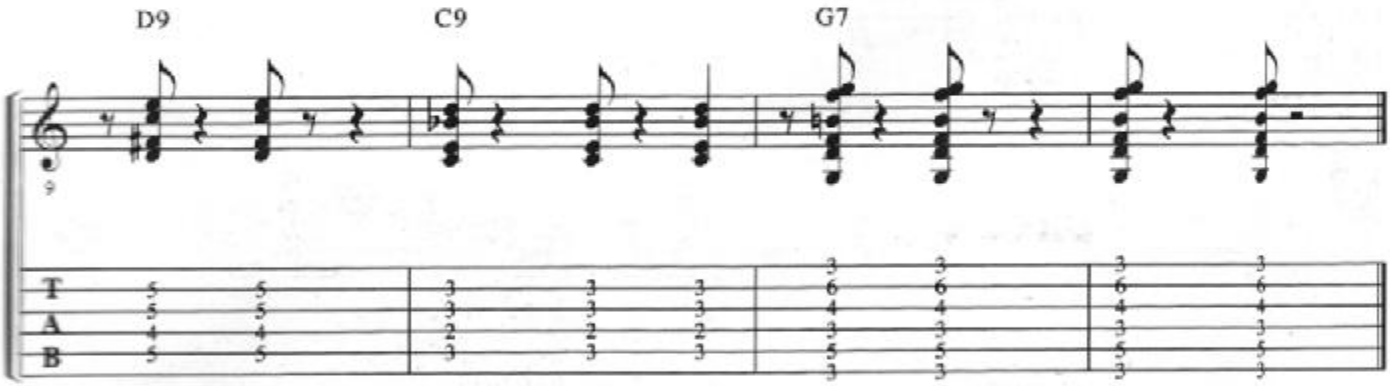


You Upset Me Baby/Rhythm Guitar

Here is a sample chord progression for "You Upset Me Baby." The voicings and rhythms are what B.B.'s rhythm guitarist might play on this tune. Keep in mind that you may substitute a ninth chord for a dominant seventh chord (e.g., G9 for G7) at any time.

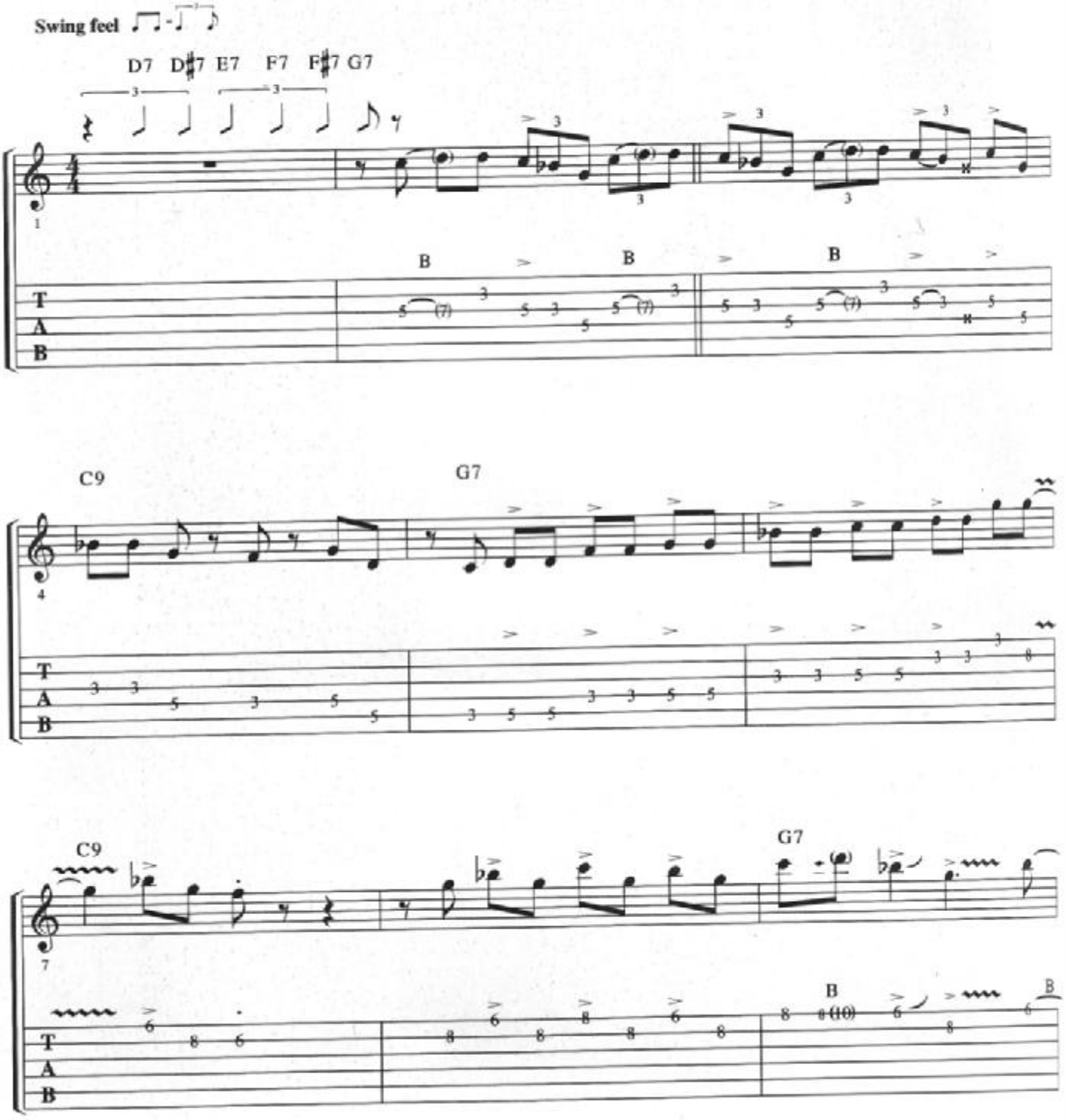


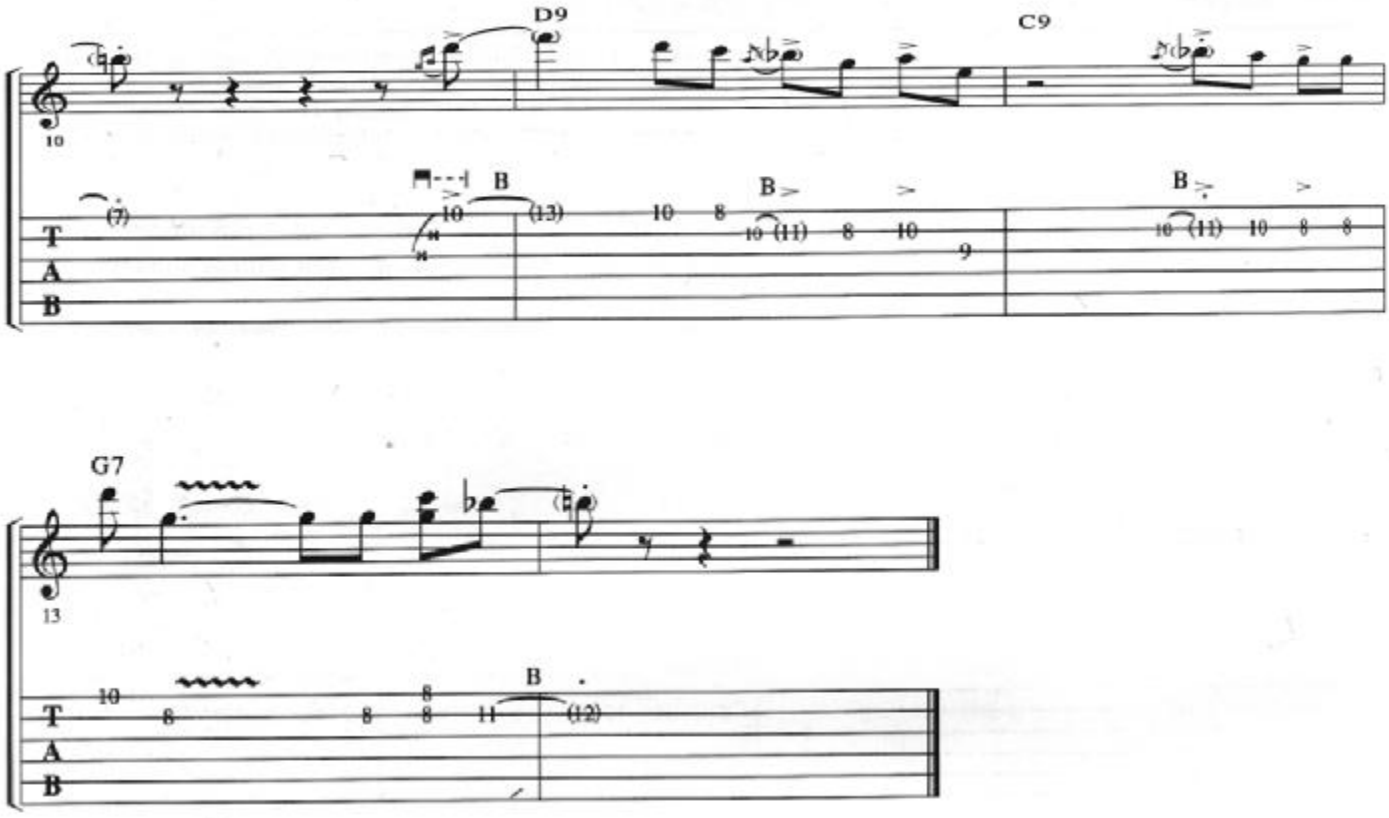




You Upset Me Baby/Intro

B.B. kicks off "You Upset Me Baby" with some T-Bone Walker-type ideas. In bars 2–9, he uses the G minor pentatonic scale exclusively. In bars 9–10 and 13–14, B.B. bends the ♭3 of the G7 chord (B♭), to the ♮3 (B♮).



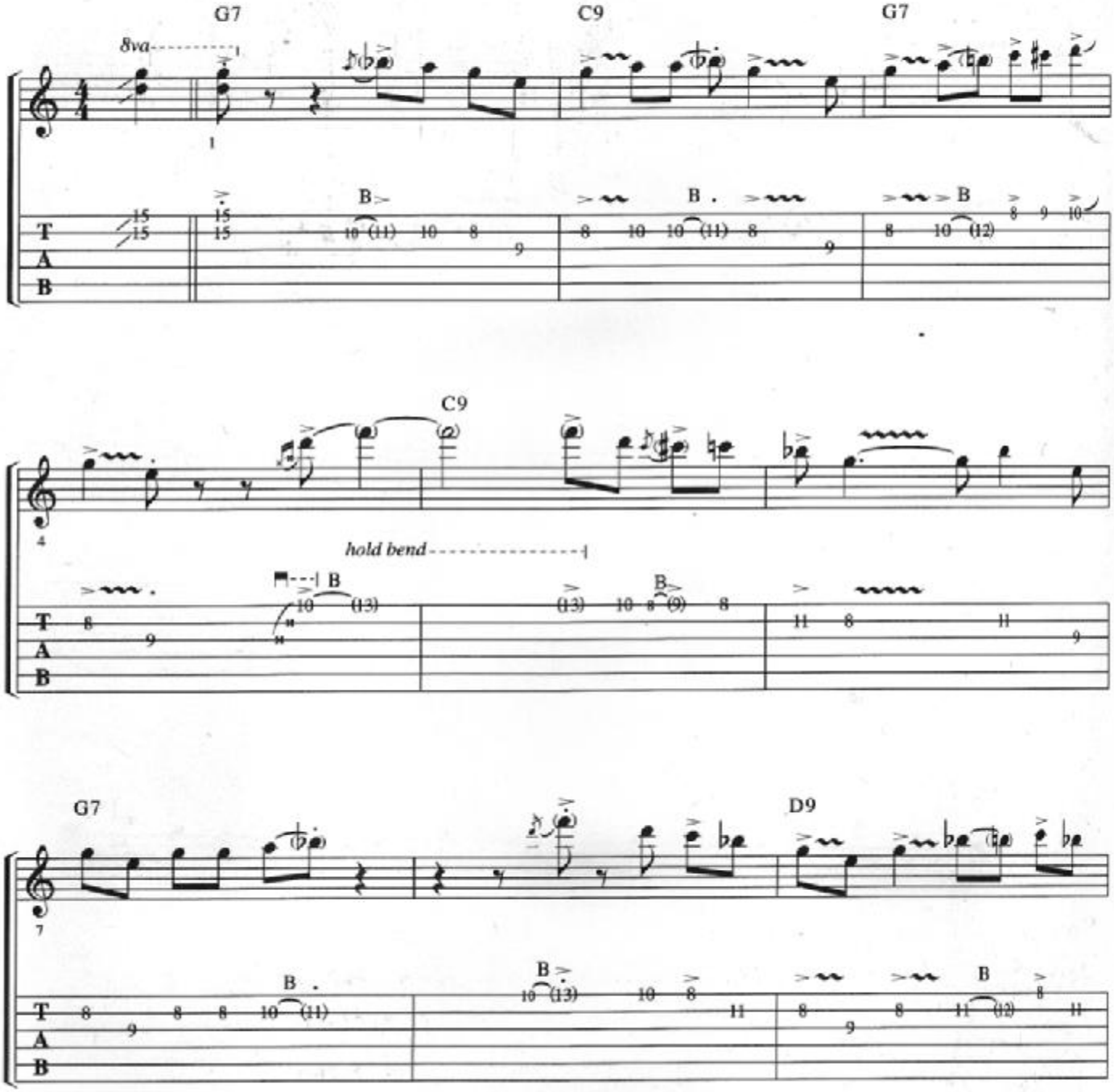

D9
C9
10
B
B
B
T
A
B

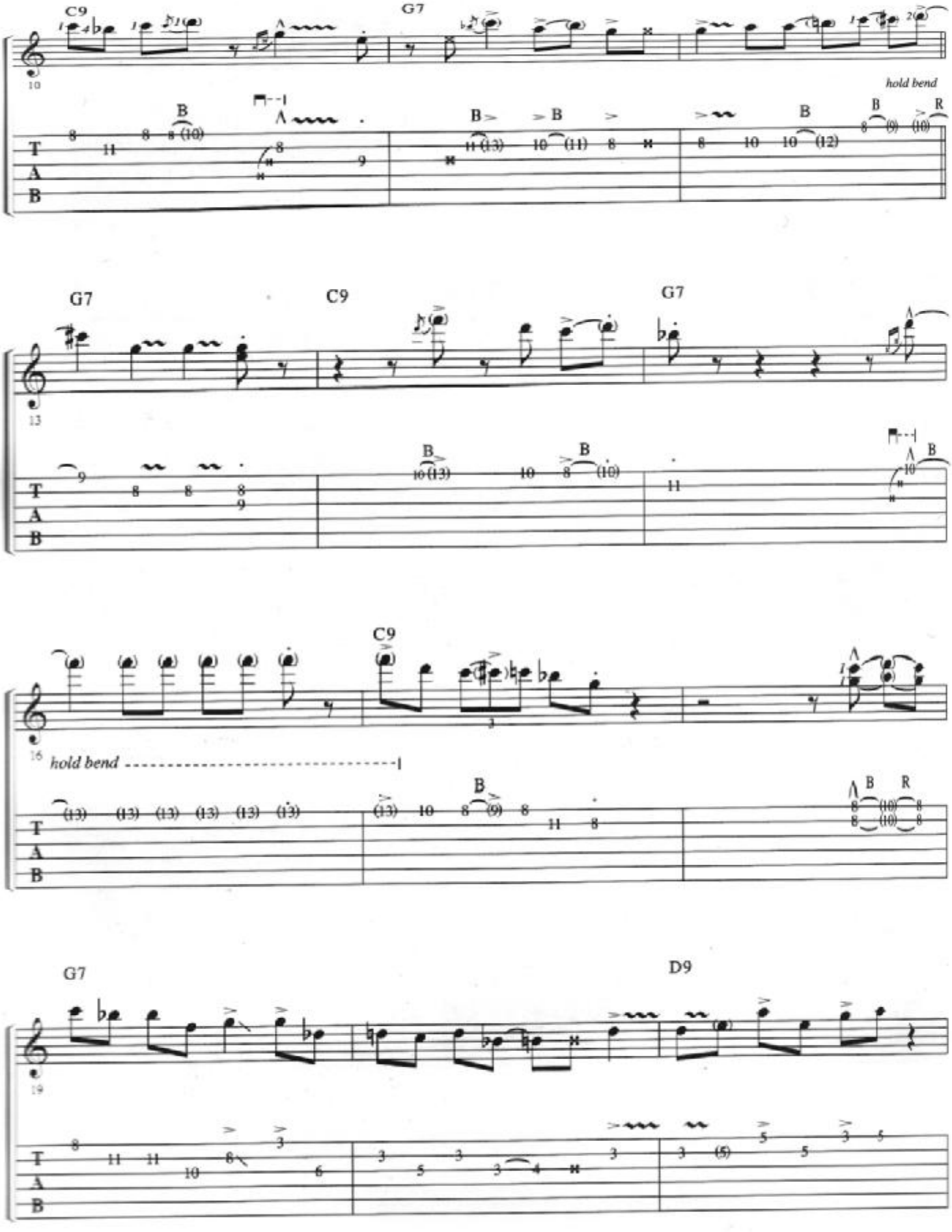
G7
13
B
T
A
B

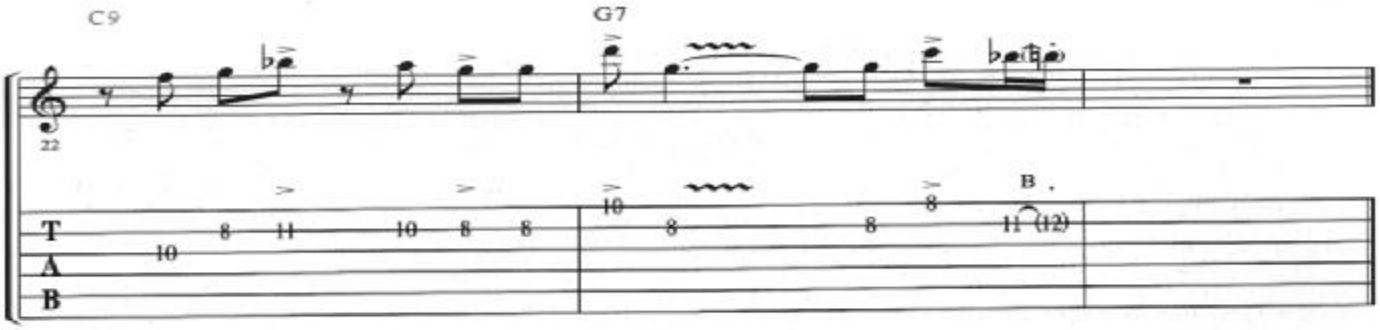
YOU UPSET ME BABY/FIRST SOLO

The first solo features some great eighth-position playing. Pay specific attention to the left-hand fingering in bars 10 and 12. Notice that B.B. bends the C to the C♯ or D on the first string with his *first* finger. This is an important element of his style, later incorporated by modern blues/fusion guitarists such as Larry Carlton and Robben Ford.

Bars 15–17 feature a wide bend of a step and a half. B.B. holds the bend while grooving hard. This is a classic B.B. King lick; it might require some practice on your part to keep it in pitch.



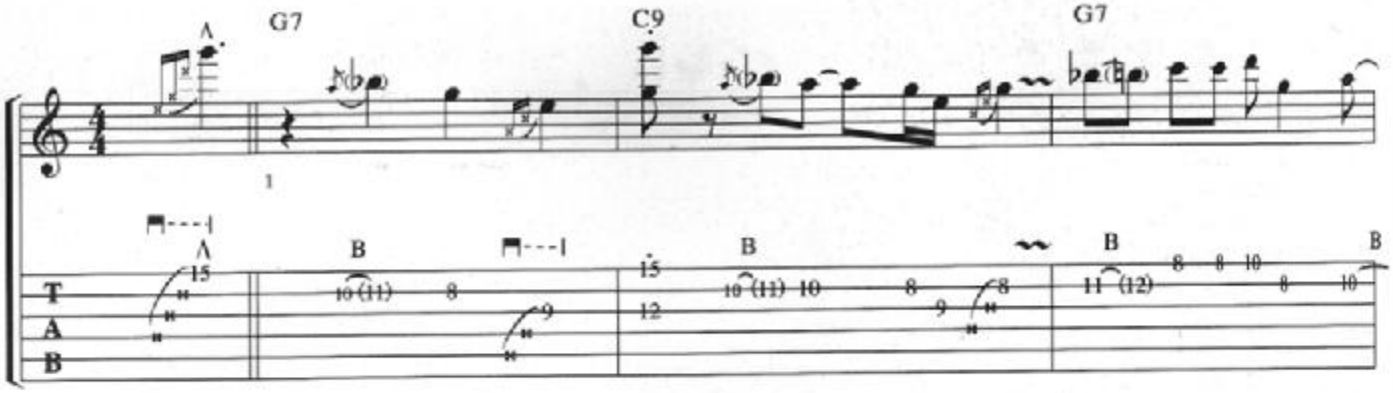

C9
G7
hold bend
G7
C9
G7
C9
hold bend
G7
D9

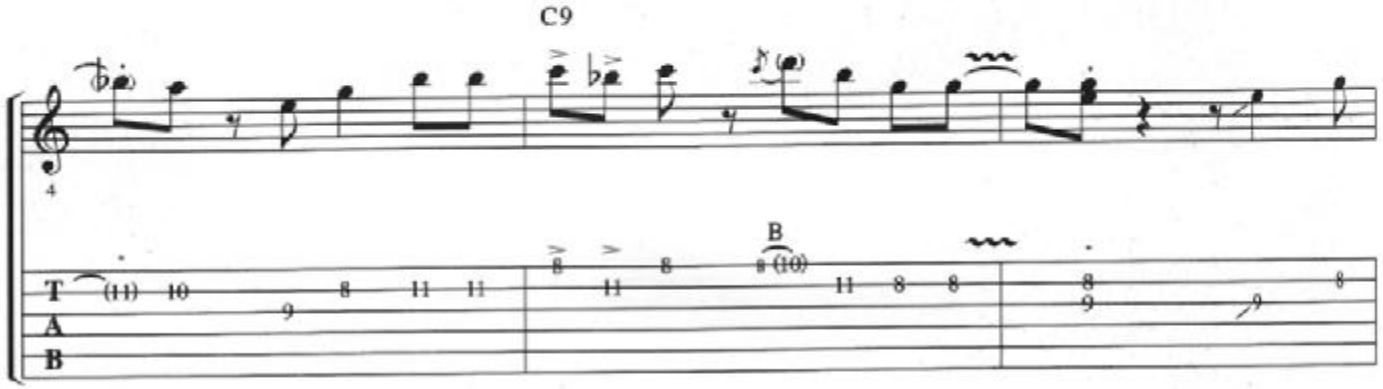


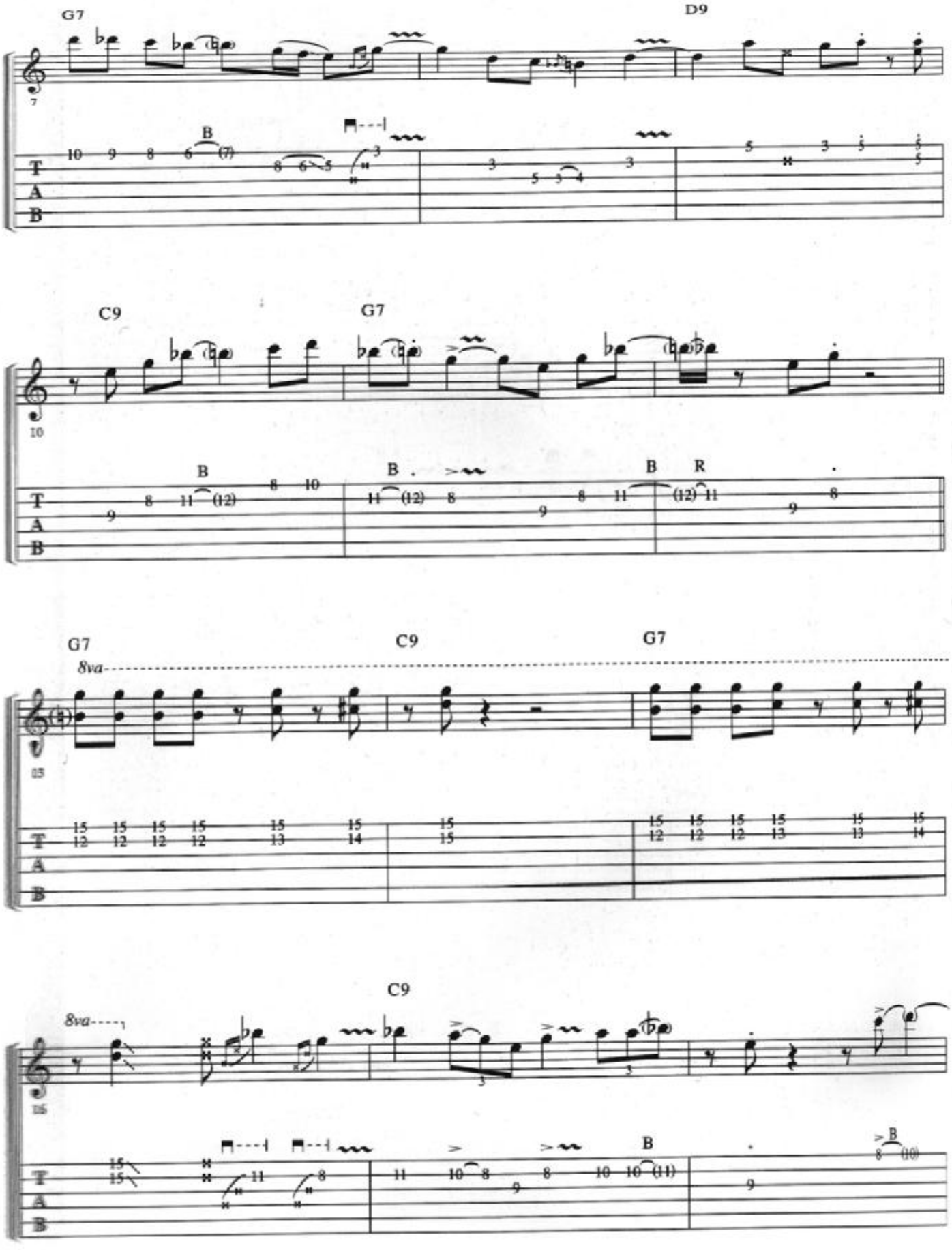
You Upset Me Baby/Second Solo

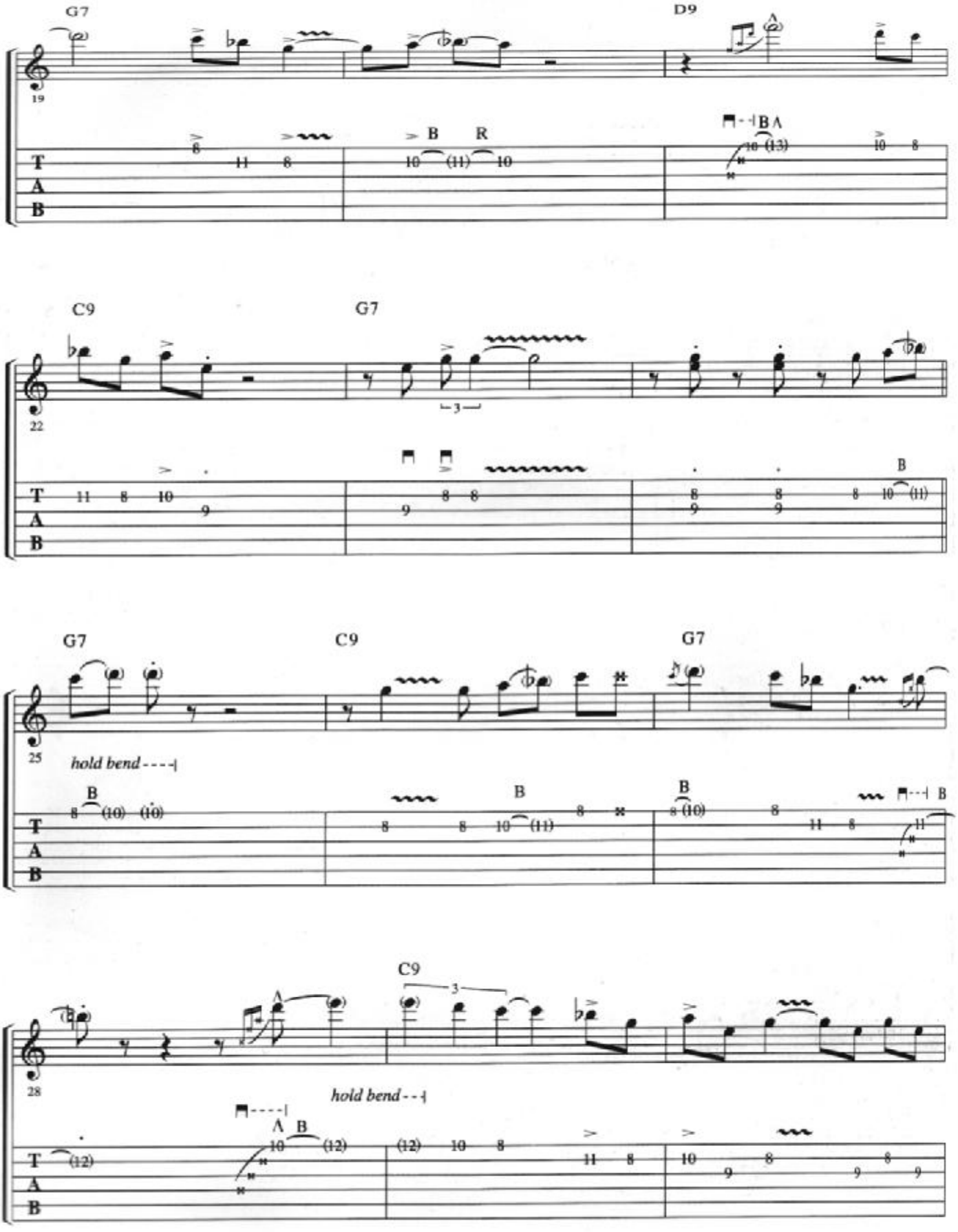
In bars 13–16 of the second solo, B.B. plays a double-stop (two notes at once) idea that pays tribute to his jazz roots. He pedals the root (G) on top while moving the third (B) up to the fifth (D) chromatically. It is an idea that can be heard in much of George Benson's playing, and which shows the depth of B.B. King's musical knowledge.

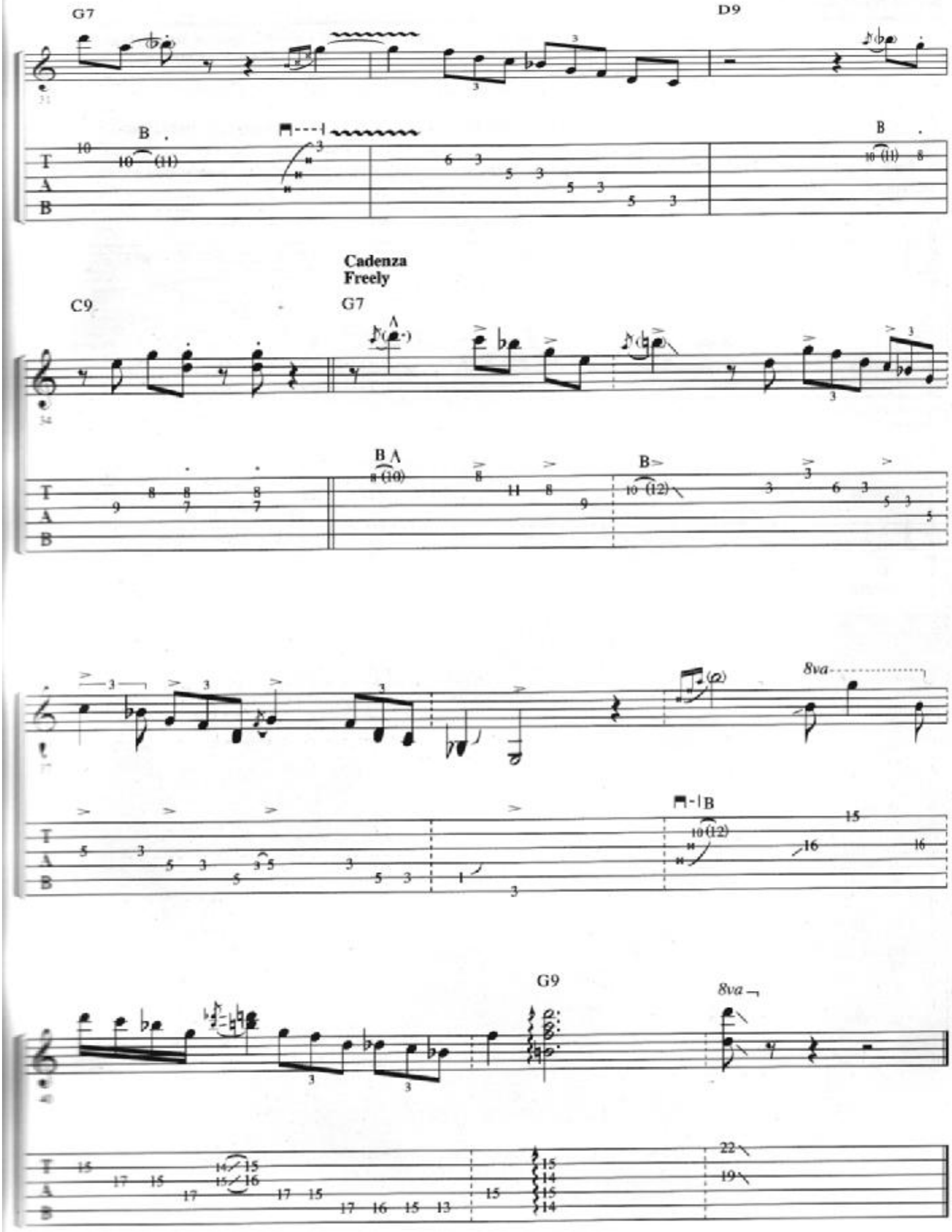
The ending cadenza is a great workout. It covers most of the neck and includes much of B.B.'s vocabulary: scalar runs, bends, chromaticism, double-stops and octaves.






G7
D9
C9
G7
G7
C9
G7
8va
C9
8va

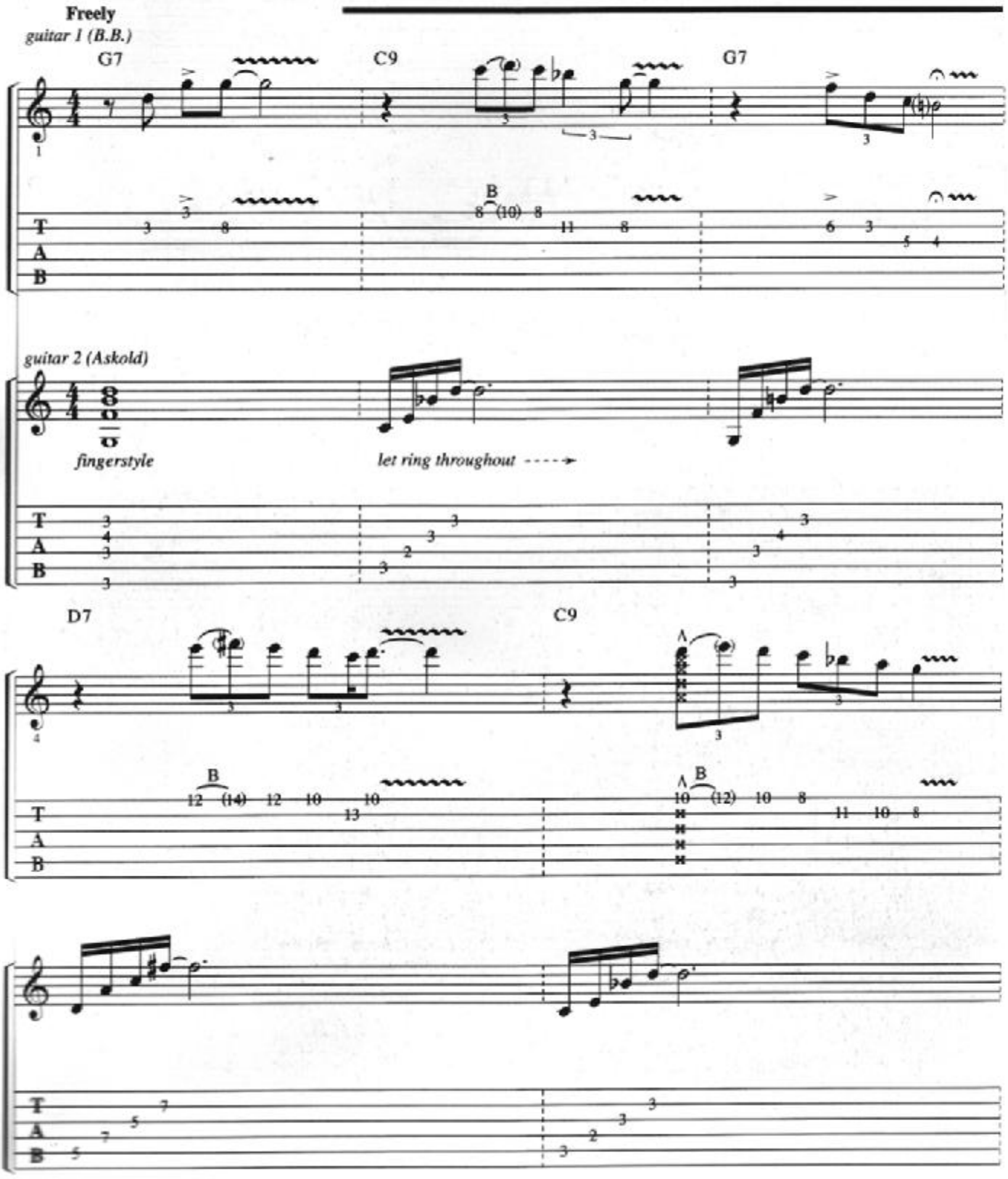

G7
D9
19
C9
G7
22
3
G7
C9
G7
25
hold bend
C9
28
3
hold bend
T
A
B

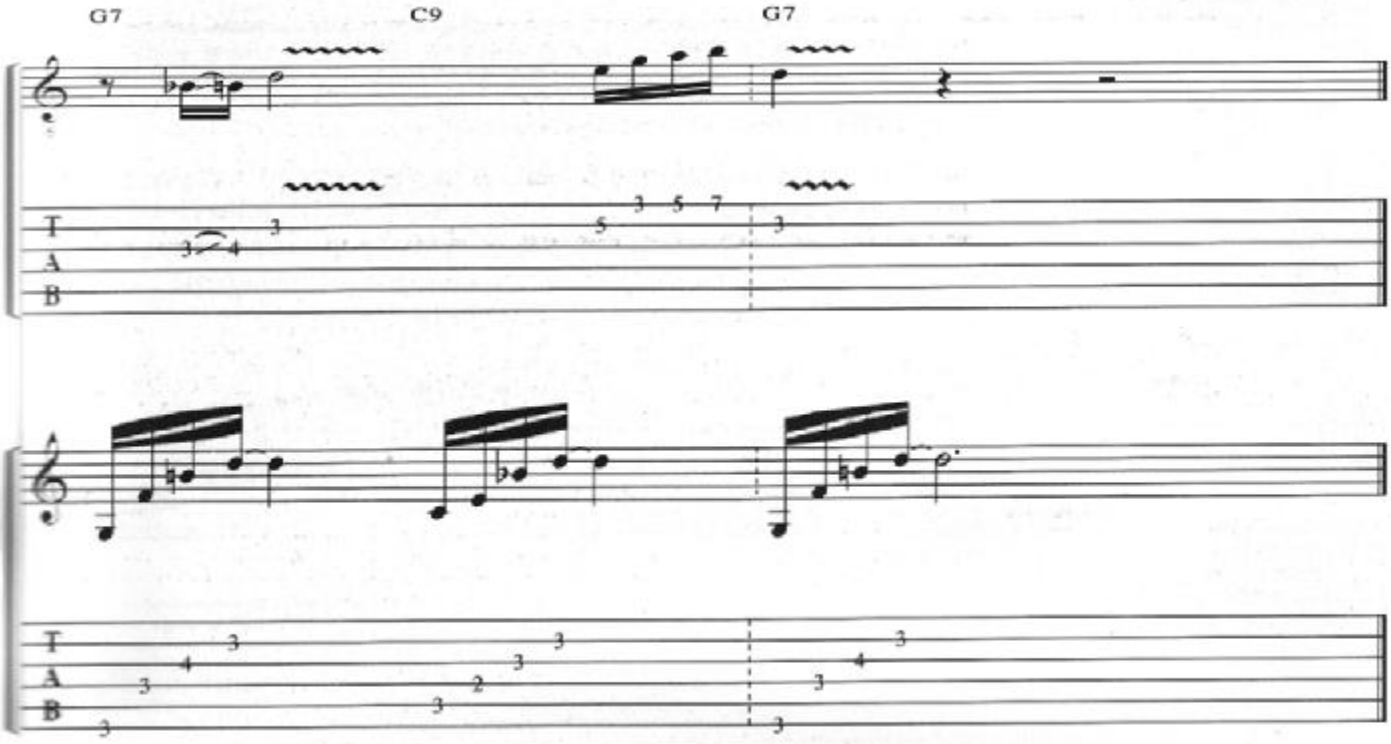

G7
D9
B
B
Cadenza
Freely
C9
G7
B
B
8va
B
G9
8va

EXAMPLE 1

B.B. bases a lot of his ideas around chord shapes. Rather than playing in one position, he moves up the neck to propel the solo. For example, in the key of G, B.B. goes up to the tenth position to play over the V chord (D7). He then moves down to the eighth position to play over the IV (C7).

In this example, notice how B.B. outlines the C9 chord in bars 2 and 5, and the D9 chord in bar 4.




G7
C9
G7
T
A
B

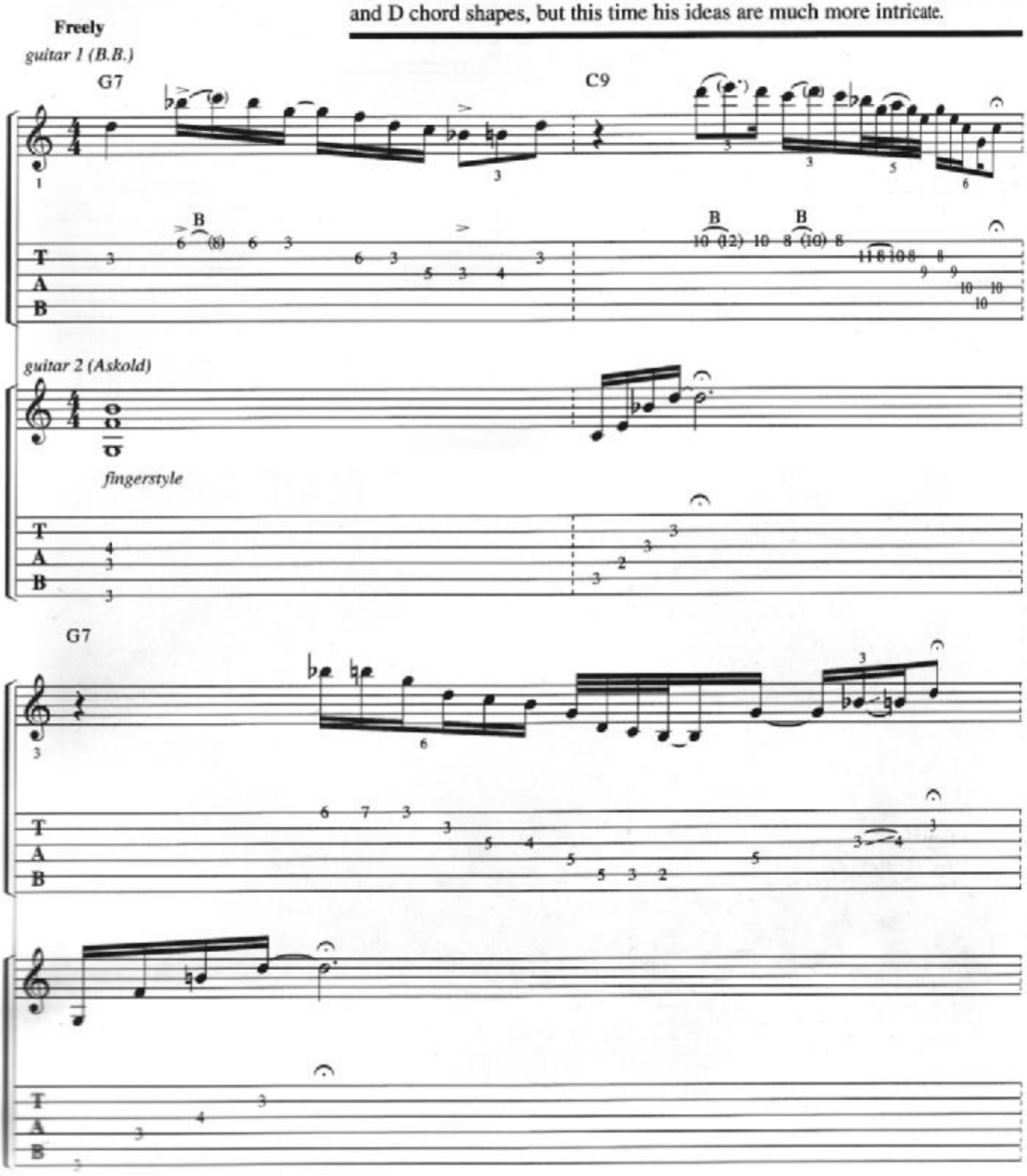
YAMAHA

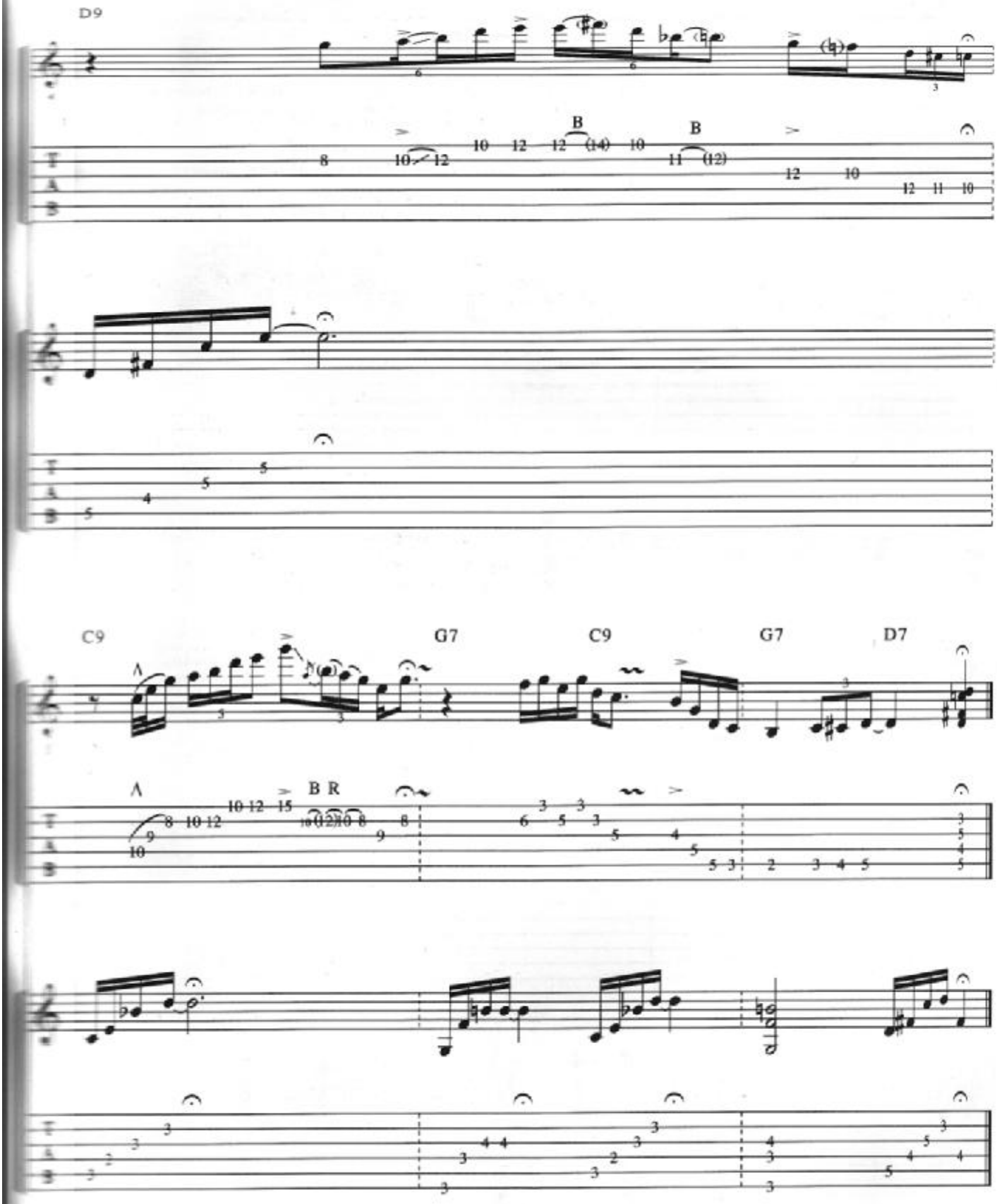
EXAMPLE 2

Askold: That was a beautiful lick you played over the D chord, going back to the C chord.

B.B.: Don't ask me to do it again! (*laughter*)

After that exchange, B.B. proceeds to play a more complex version of the previous example. Notice the jazz-like line in bar 3, which features a piano-like arpeggio over the G7 chord. Again, B.B. moves up the neck to play over the C and D chord shapes, but this time his ideas are much more intricate.



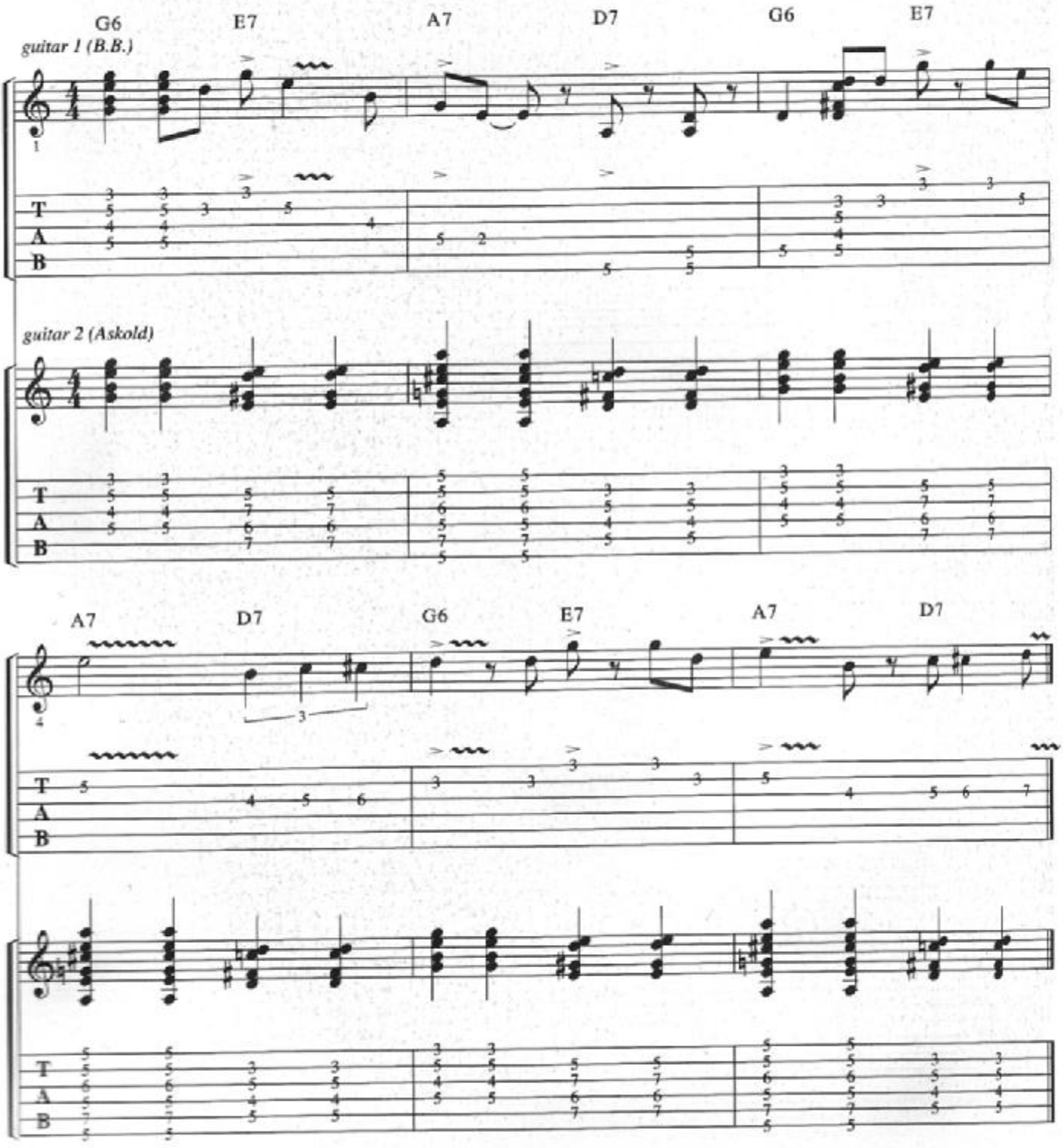

D9
B
B
C9
G7
C9
G7
D7
B R

EXAMPLE 3

B.B. finds that elements of country music, as well as jazz and gospel, creep into the overall blues feel. He says that if you play a tune with a lot of changes, you don't have to worry about playing a specific note because the lines are in the chords. Over a simple progression such as a I–IV–V blues, however, your choice of notes (and their placement) has to be more careful.

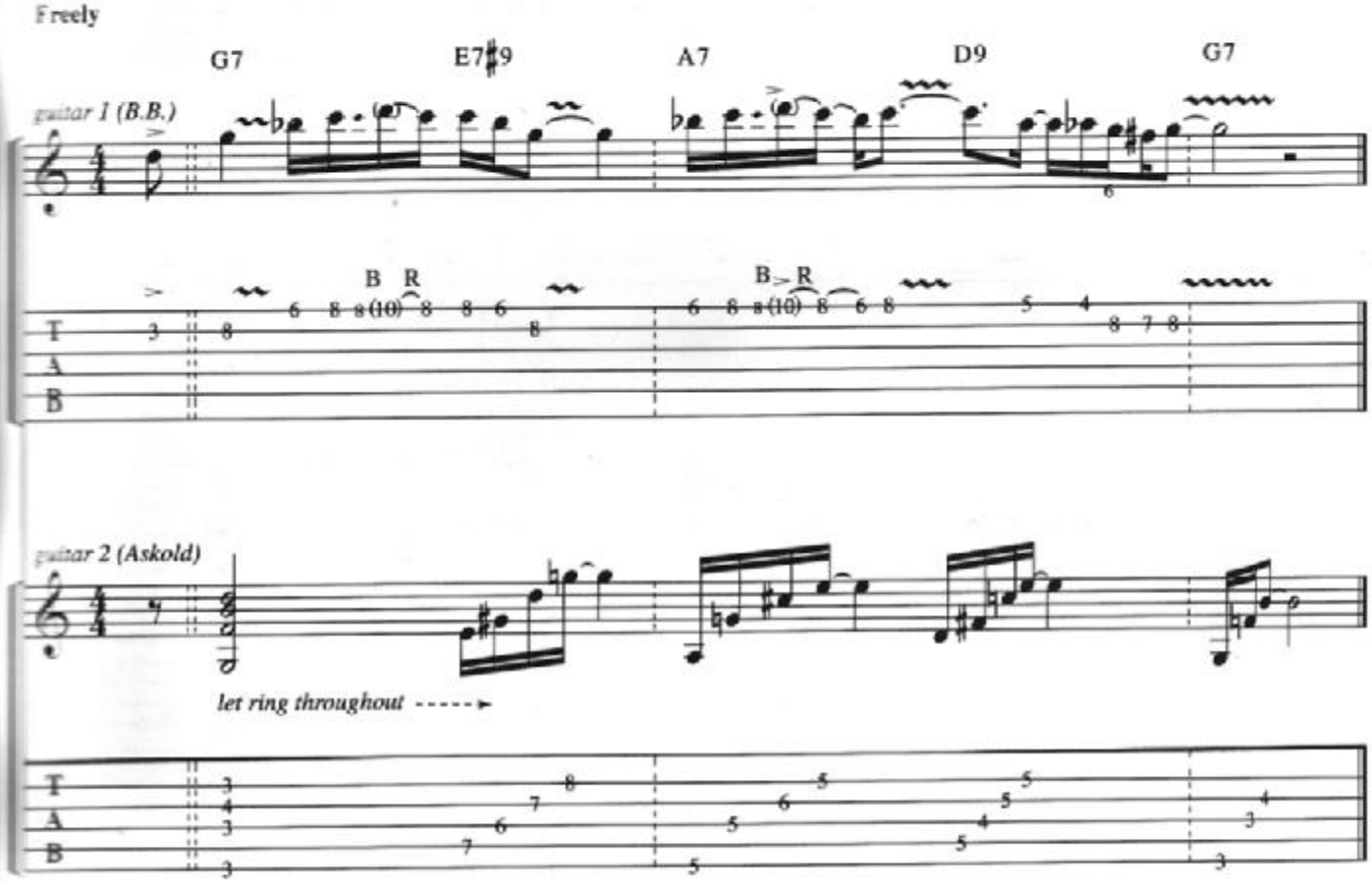
B.B. plays this example in a jazz vein:

Swing feel



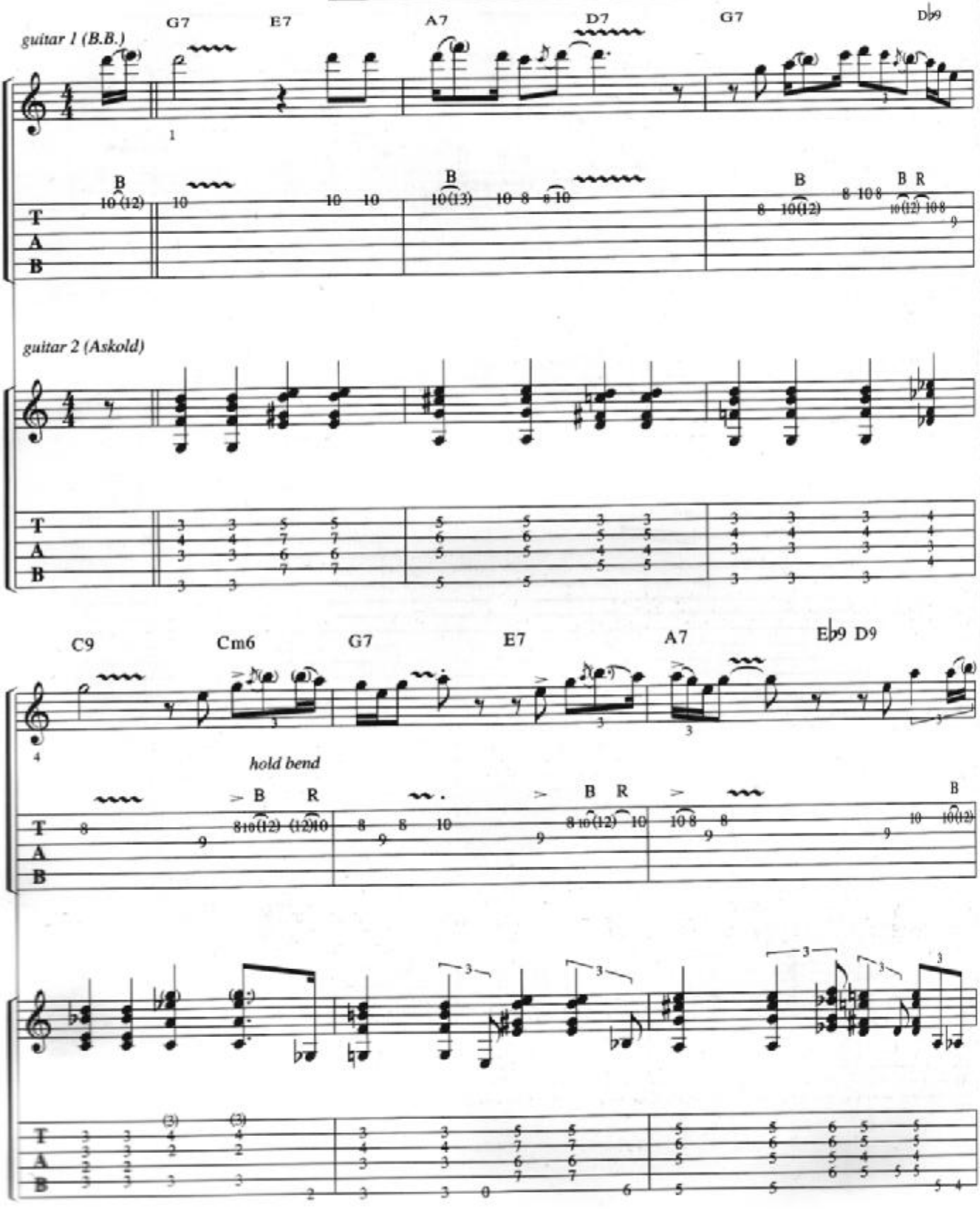
EXAMPLE 4

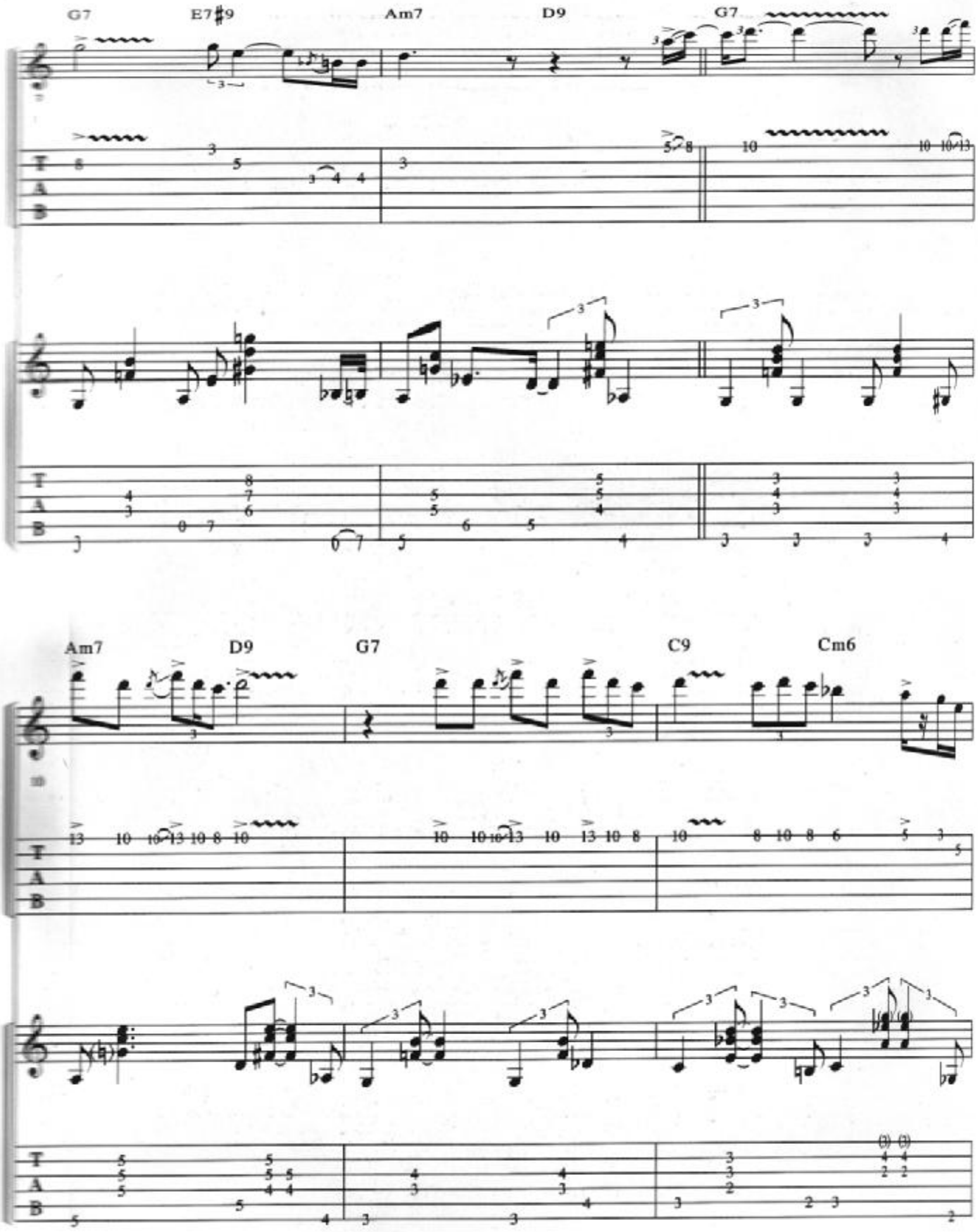
He then plays the same example in a blues style. "You really got to be placing them [the notes] in the right place," B.B. says. "People quite often say, 'Well, anybody can play the blues.' Yes, you can—anybody can do most anything, but would you *like* it?"

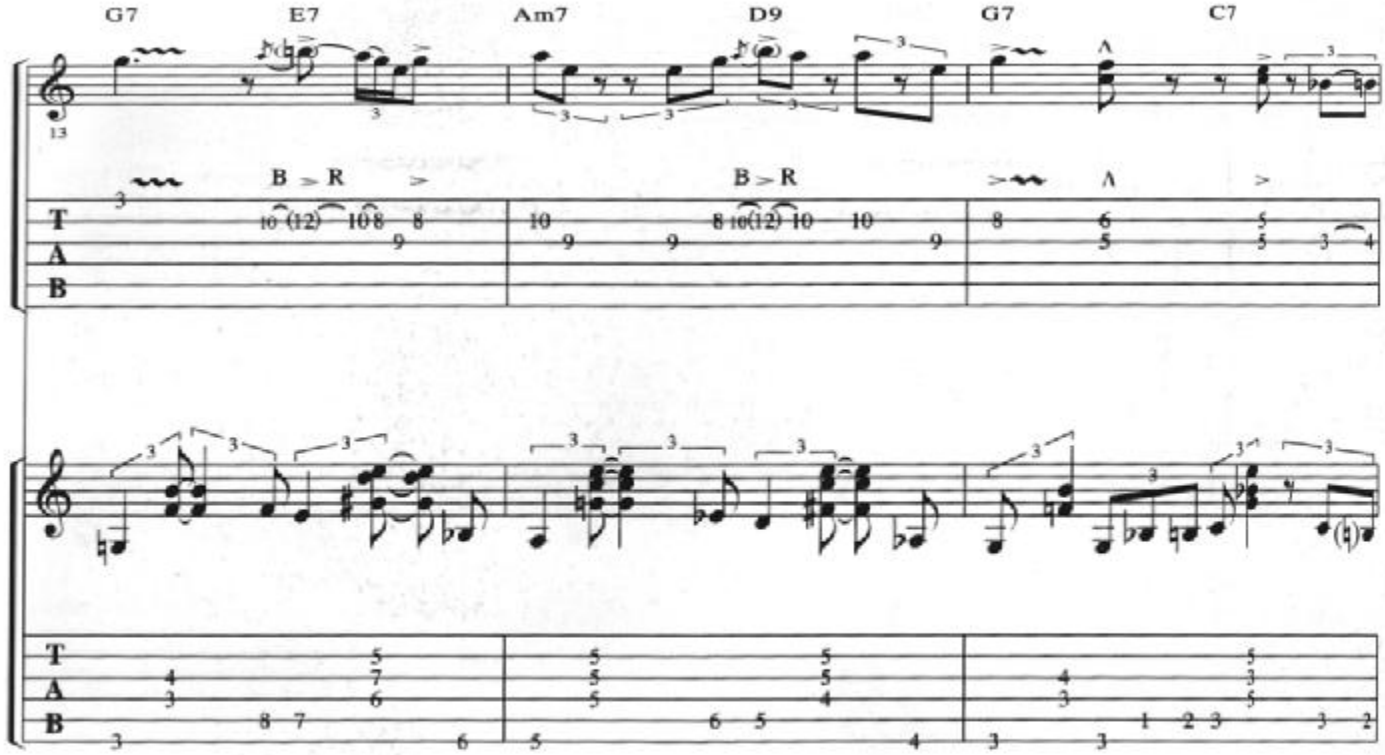


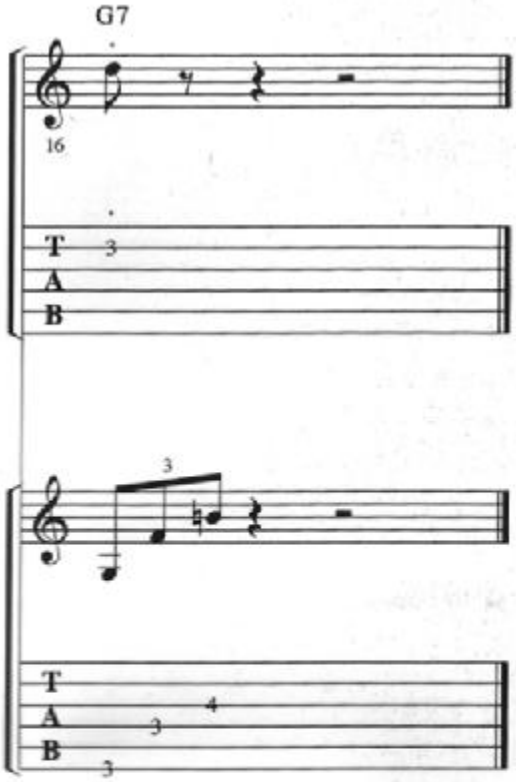
EXAMPLE 5

To illustrate the I–VI–II–V progression (G7–E7–A7–D7), B.B. plays this beautiful example. "There's a lot you can play over this progression," he says, "and you *can* make it bluesy!"




G7
E7♯9
Am7
D9
G7
Am7
D9
G7
C9
Cm6


G7
E7
Am7
D9
G7
C7
13
B > R
B > R
T
A
B

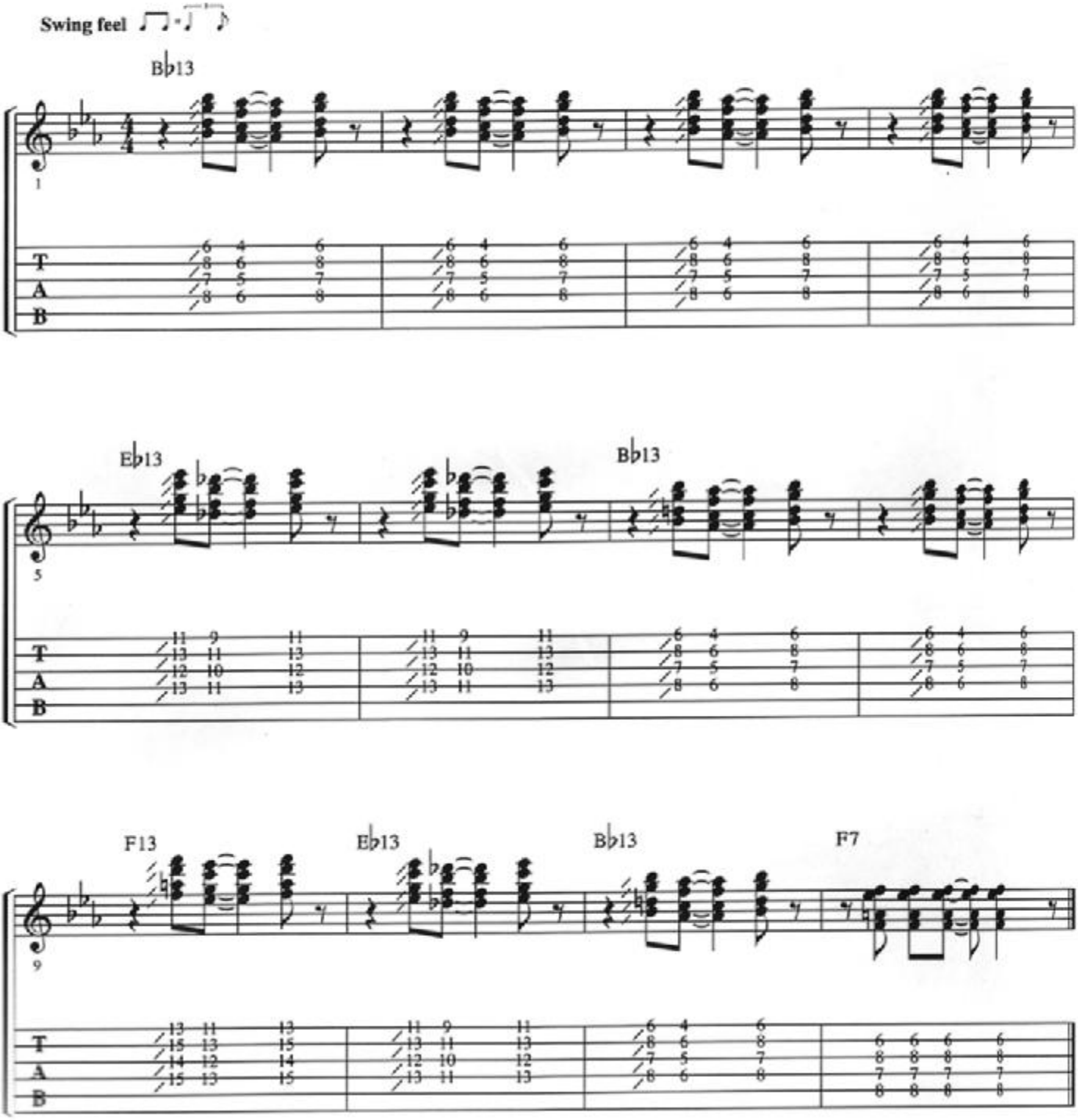

G7
16
T
A
B

Rock Me Baby/Rhythm Guitar

"Rock Me Baby" is a standard 12-bar blues which features an interesting rhythm pattern. Over the I chord (B♭), a B♭6 chord is played, moving to the A♭6 chord and back.

Analyzing the notes in relation to B♭, the B♭6 chord produces the root (B♭), third (D) and thirteenth (G), and the A♭6 gives us the flatted seventh (A♭), ninth (C), and fifth (F). Combining these notes results in a B♭13 sound.

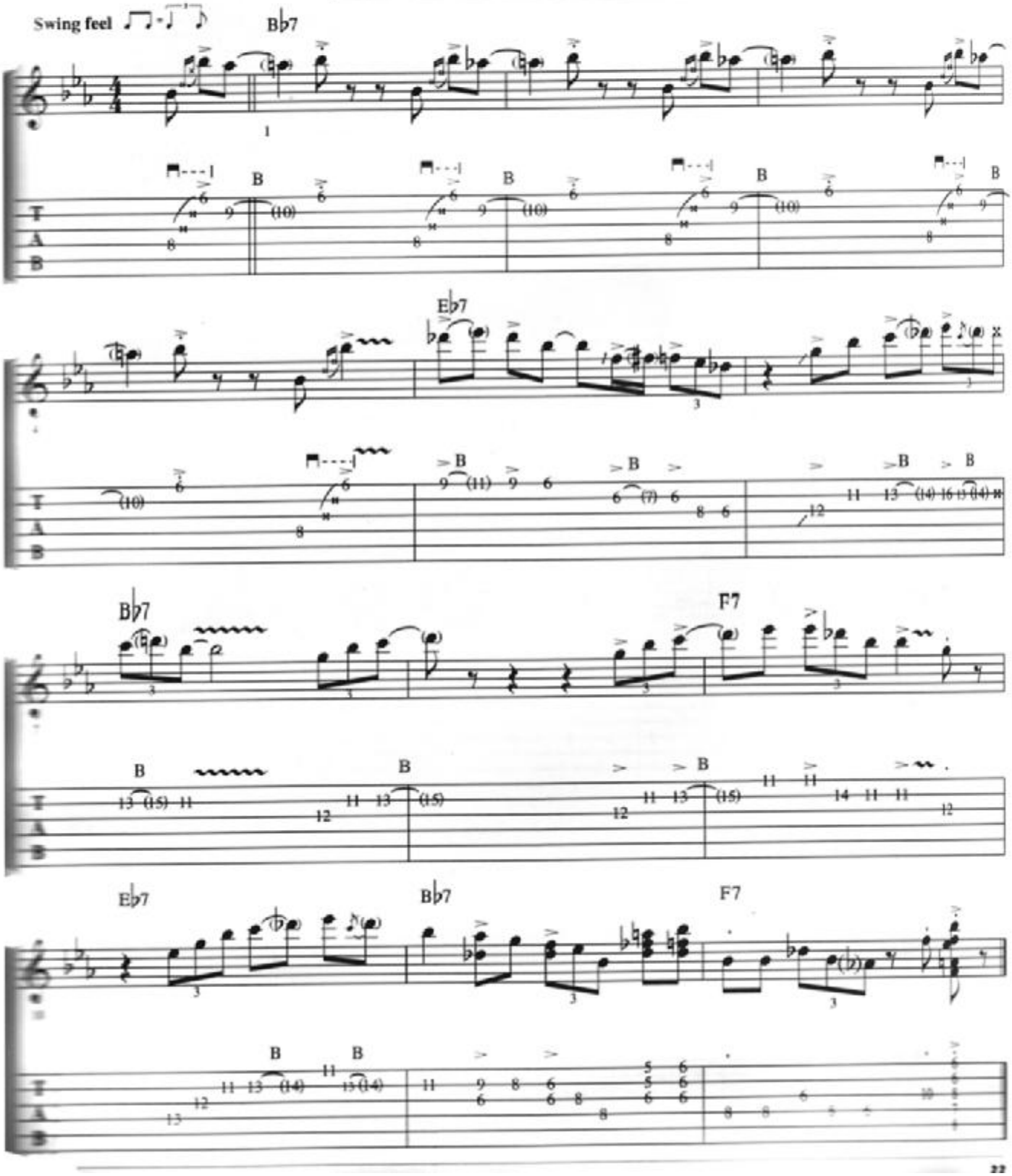
The same pattern is played over the IV chord (E♭) and V chord (F), producing E♭13 and F13 sounds, respectively.



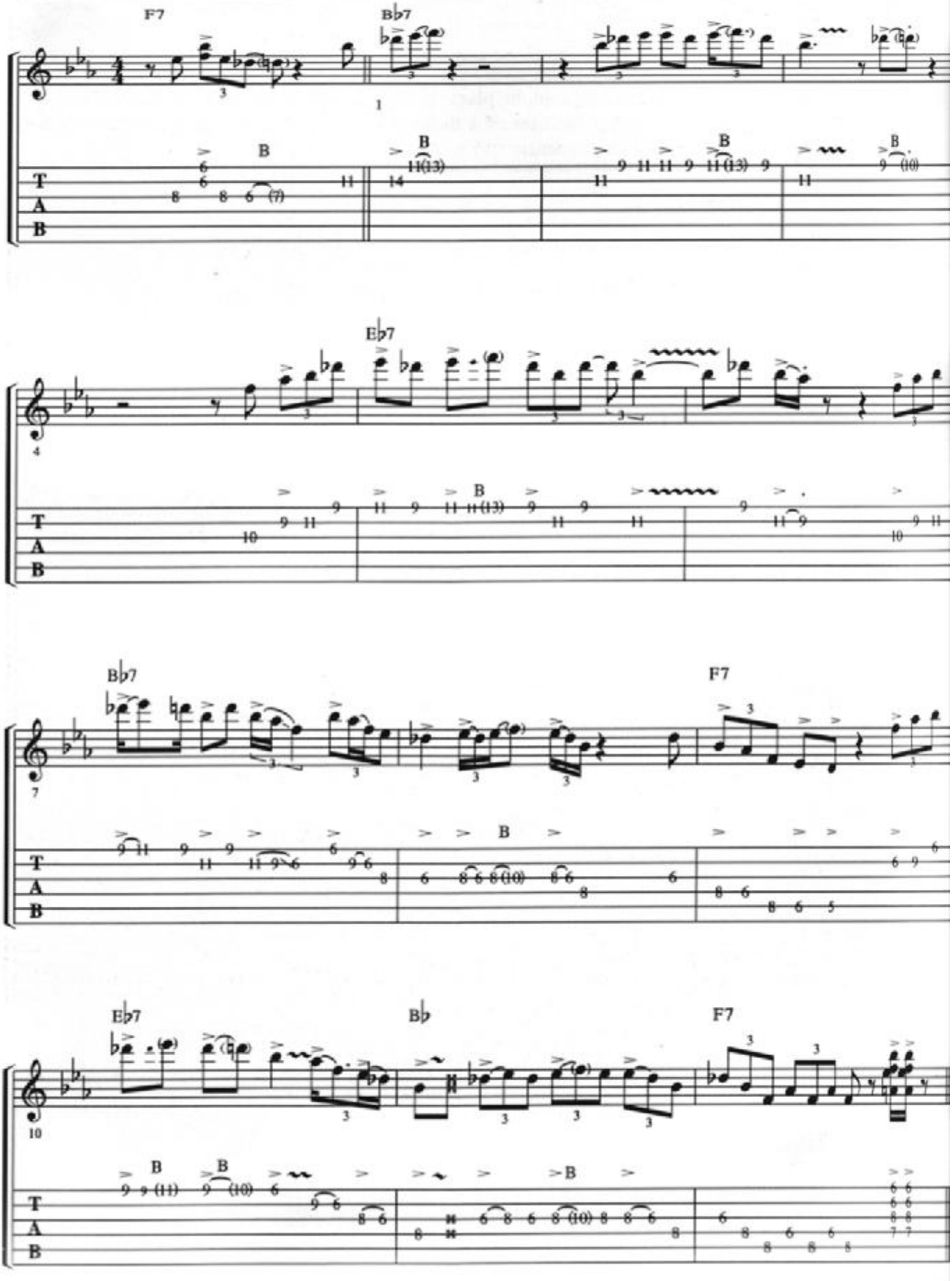
Rock Me Baby/Intro

The solo work on "Rock Me Baby" is textbook B.B. King. Notice his choice of notes throughout the tune.

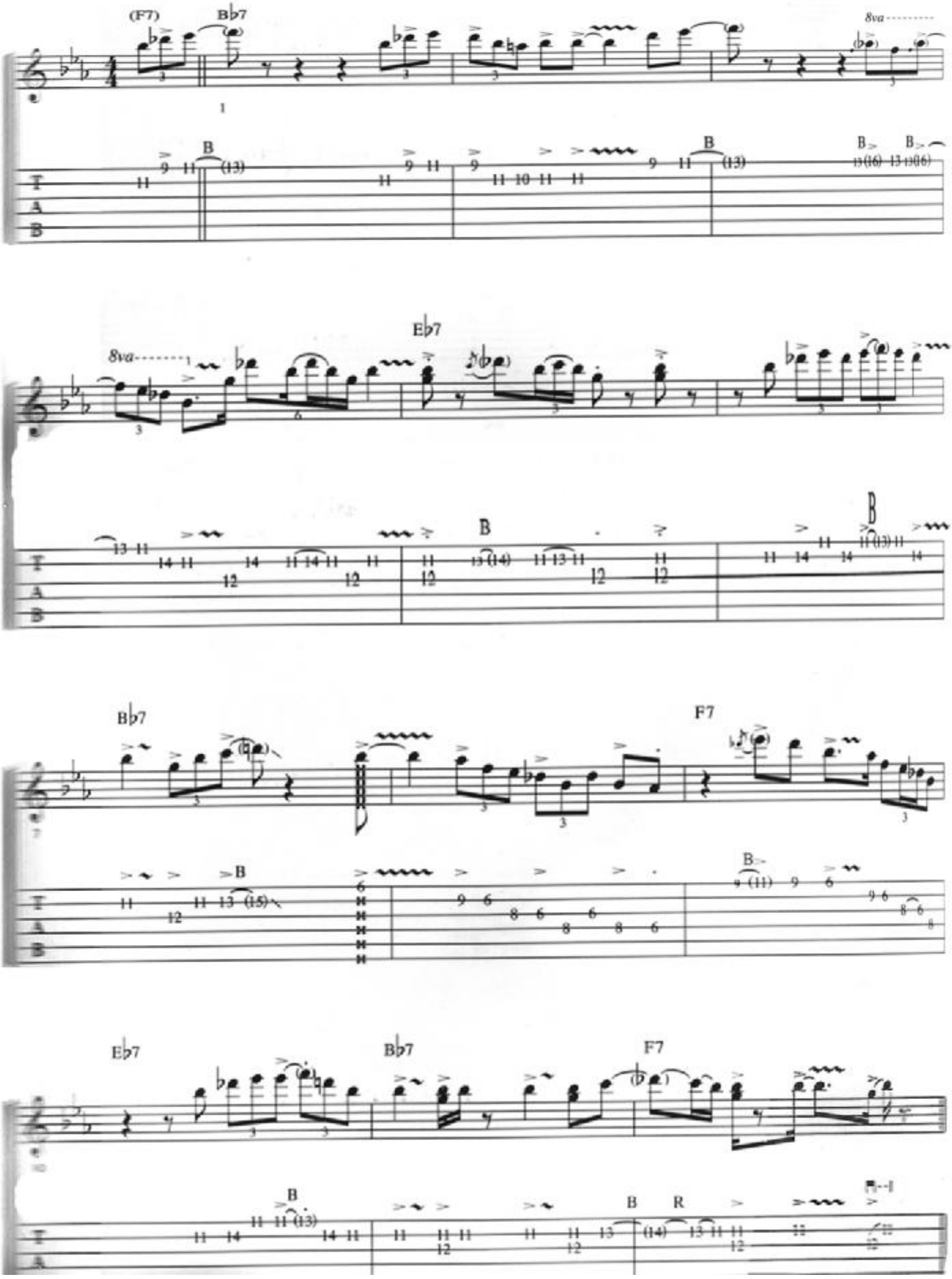
In bar 10 of the intro, and bar 6 of the second solo, B.B. outlines the E♭7 chord, bending the sixth of E♭7 (C) to the flatted seventh (D♭). In bars 14–15 of the second solo, he plays the high B♭ note with his pinky, answering each time with a variation of a theme started in bar 13. B.B. ends the tune with a typical fiery cadenza.

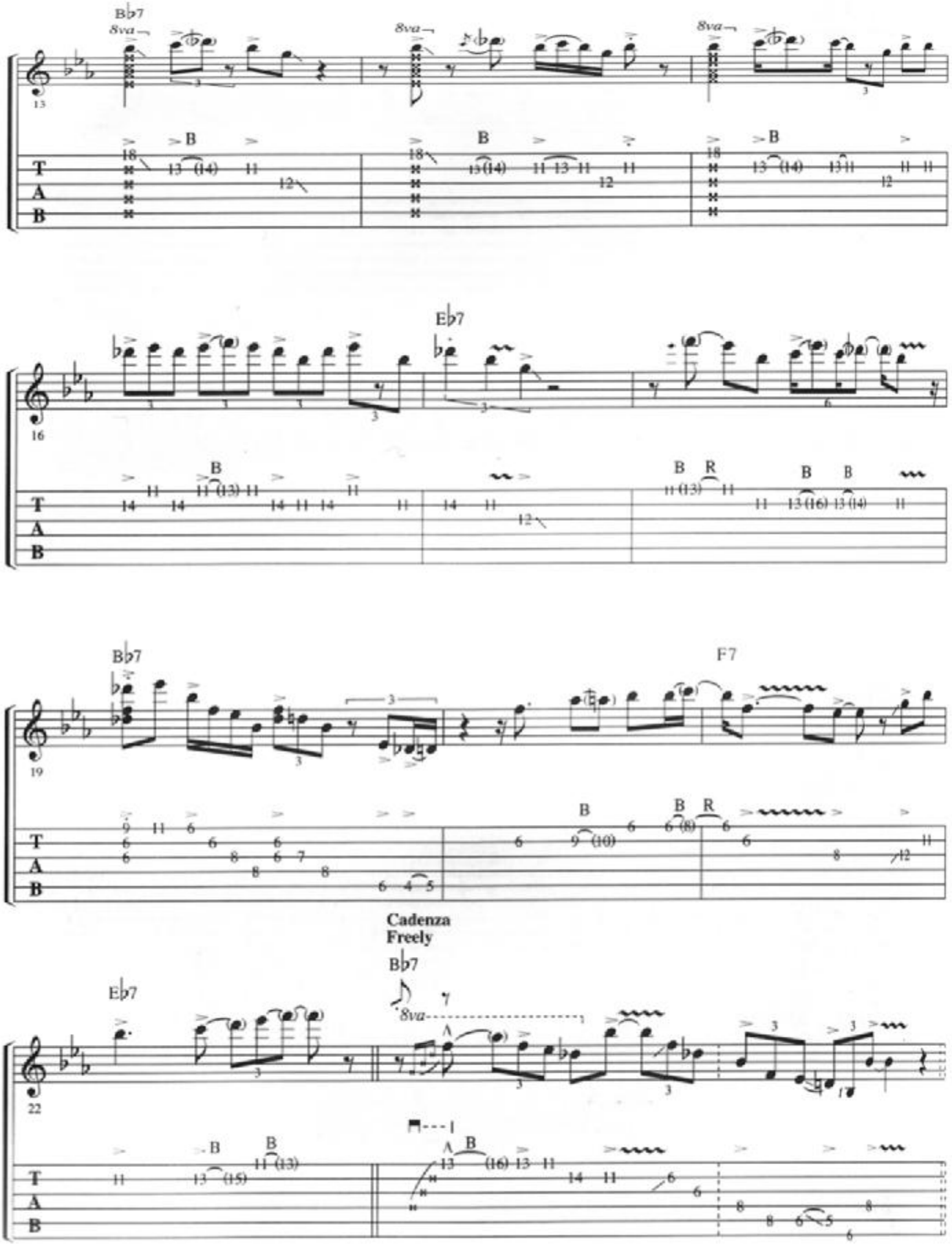


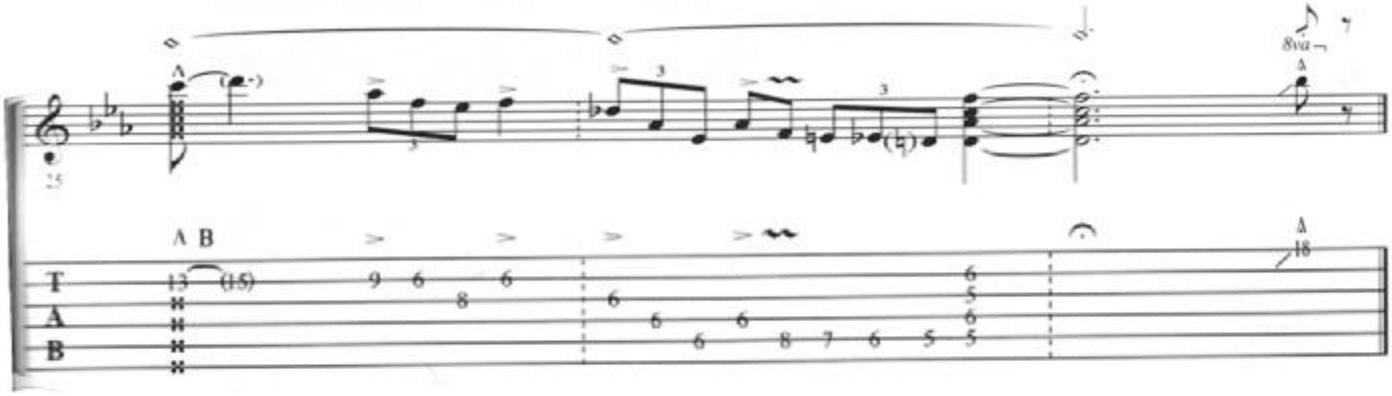
Rock Me Baby/First Solo



Rock Me Baby/Second Solo



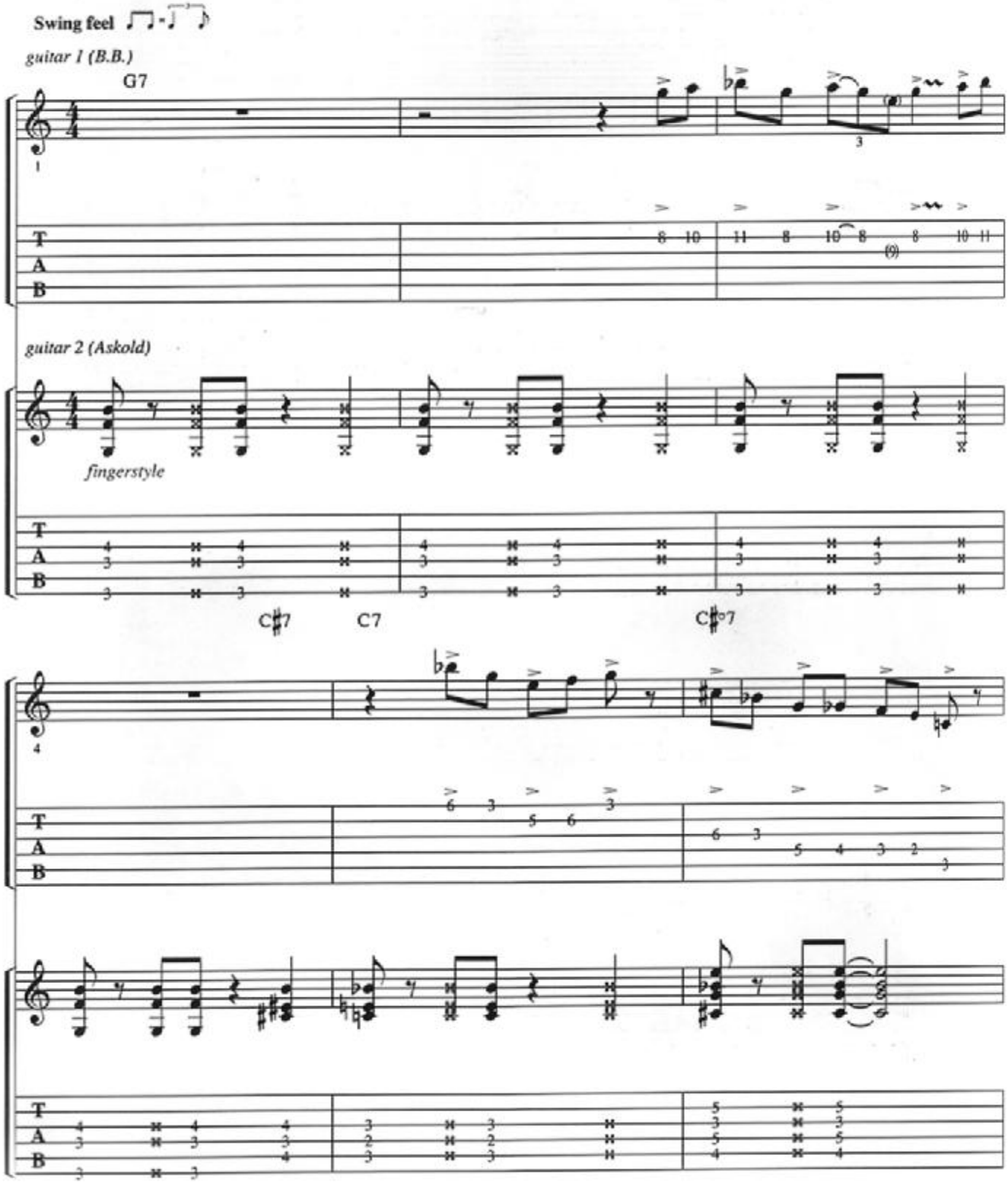

B♭7
8va
E♭7
F7
Cadenza
Freely

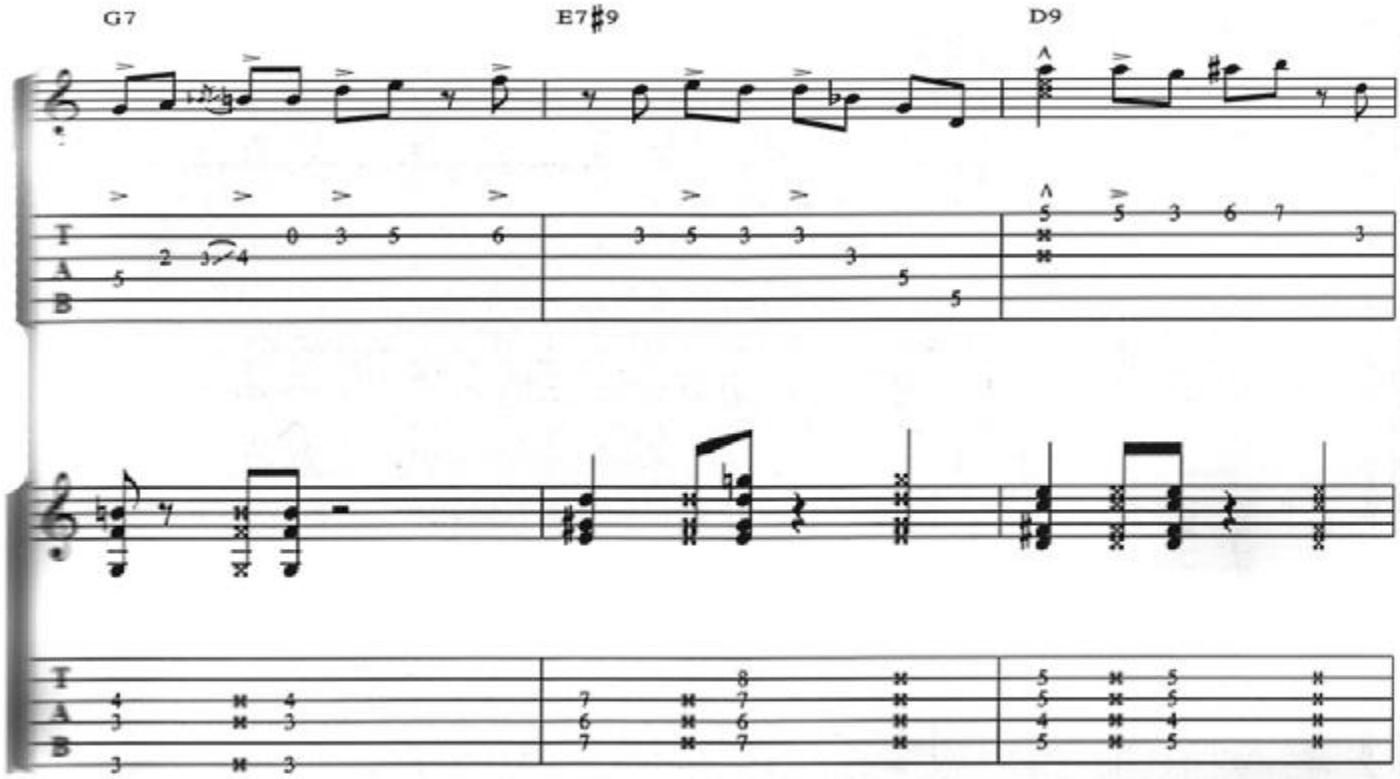

8va
A B
T
A
B
(15)
18

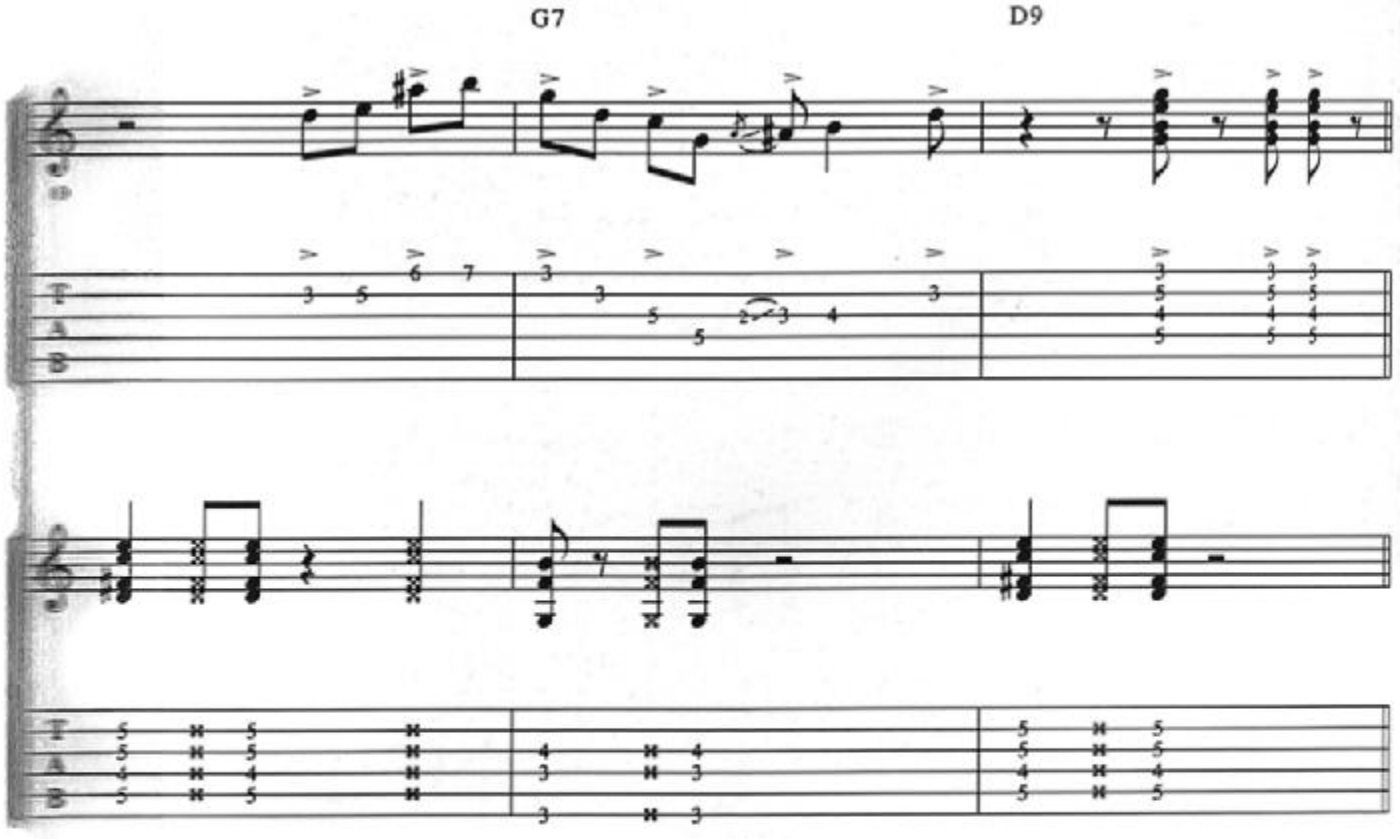
YAMAHA

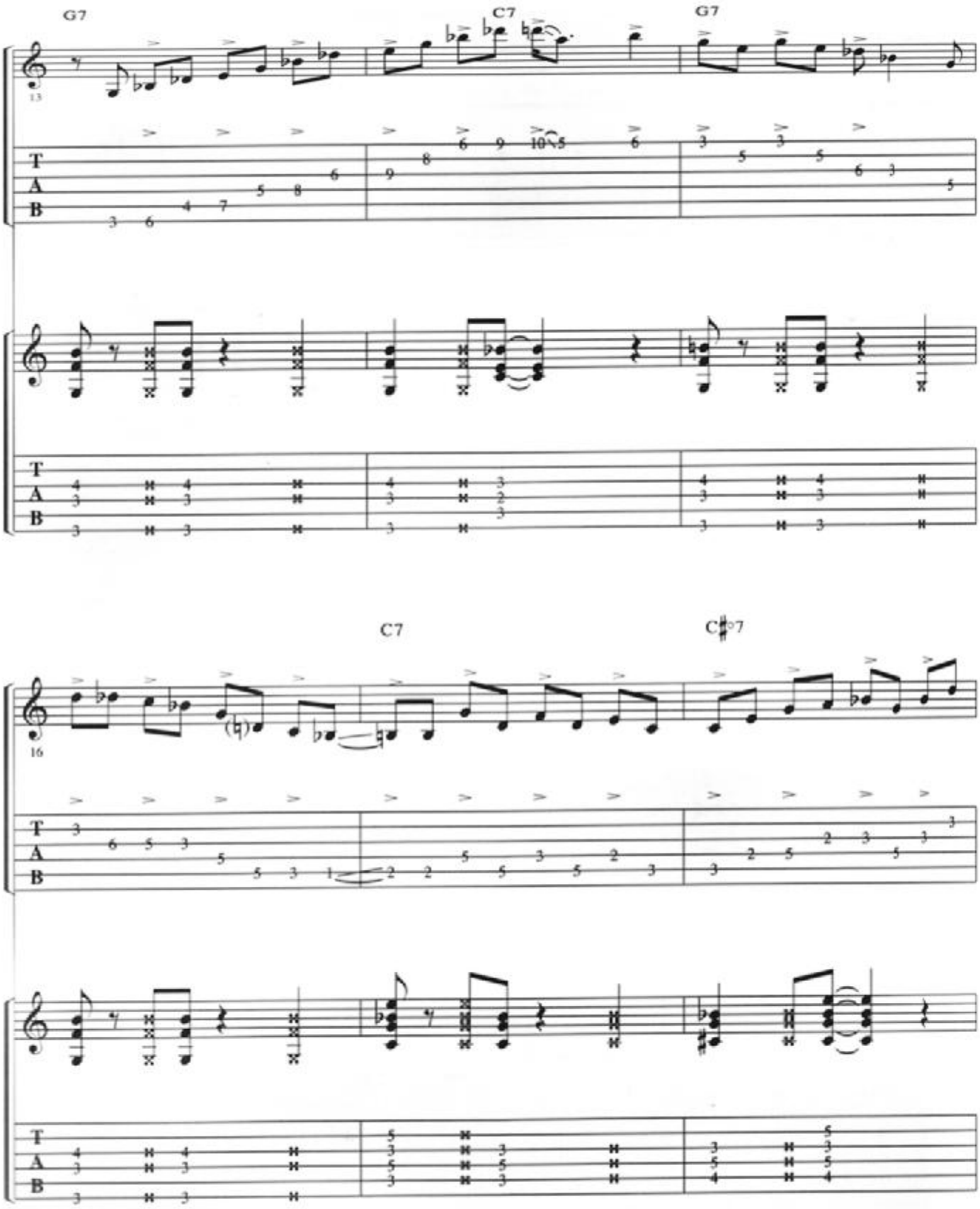
EXAMPLE 6

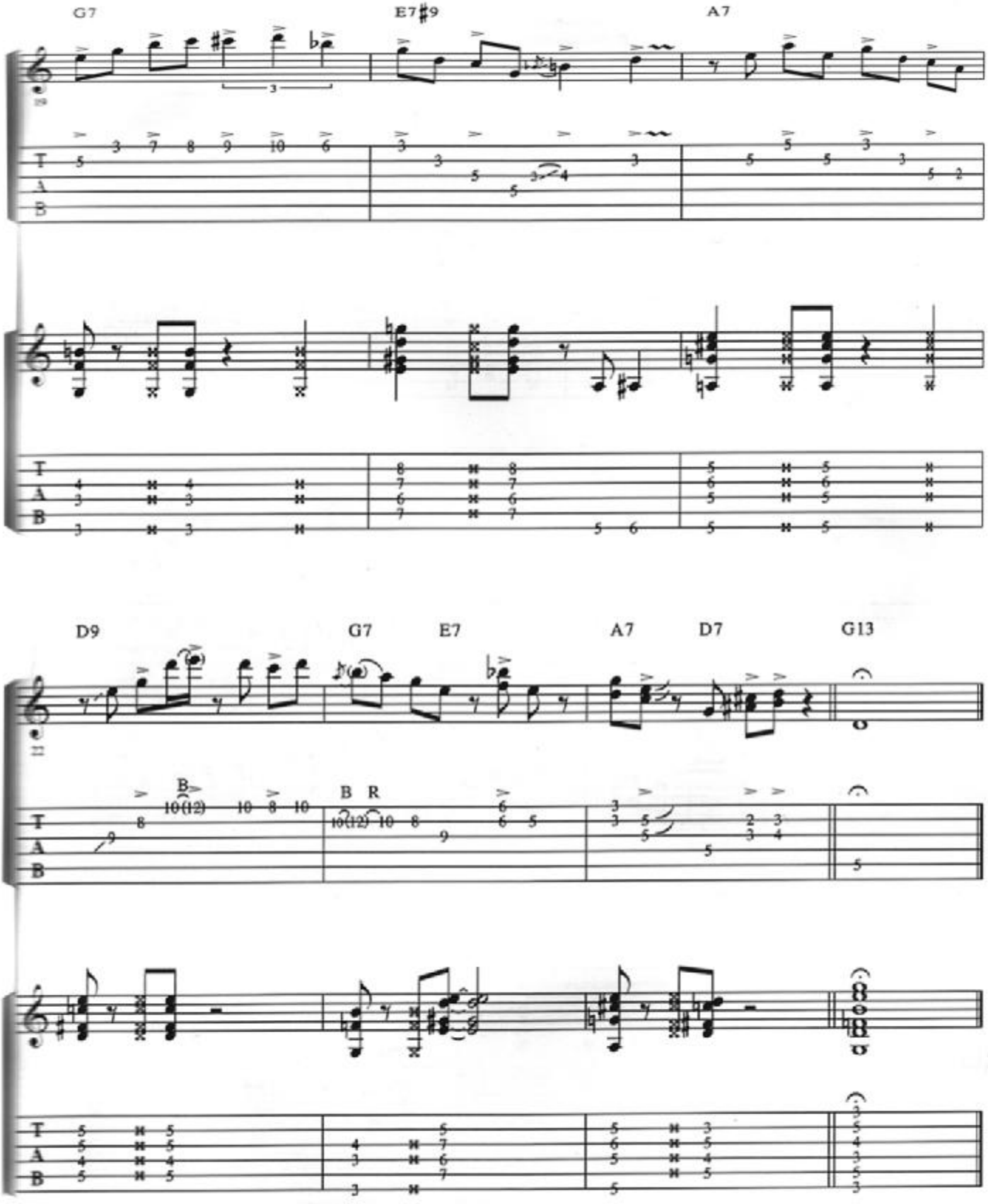
Charlie Christian was a big influence on B.B. King's style. B.B. observes that Christian's diminished scale ideas sometimes show up in his playing. To demonstrate, B.B. plays a "bounce" blues in G. Notice the G diminished arpeggio in bars 13–14 (G, B♭, D♭, E).




G7
E7♯9
D9

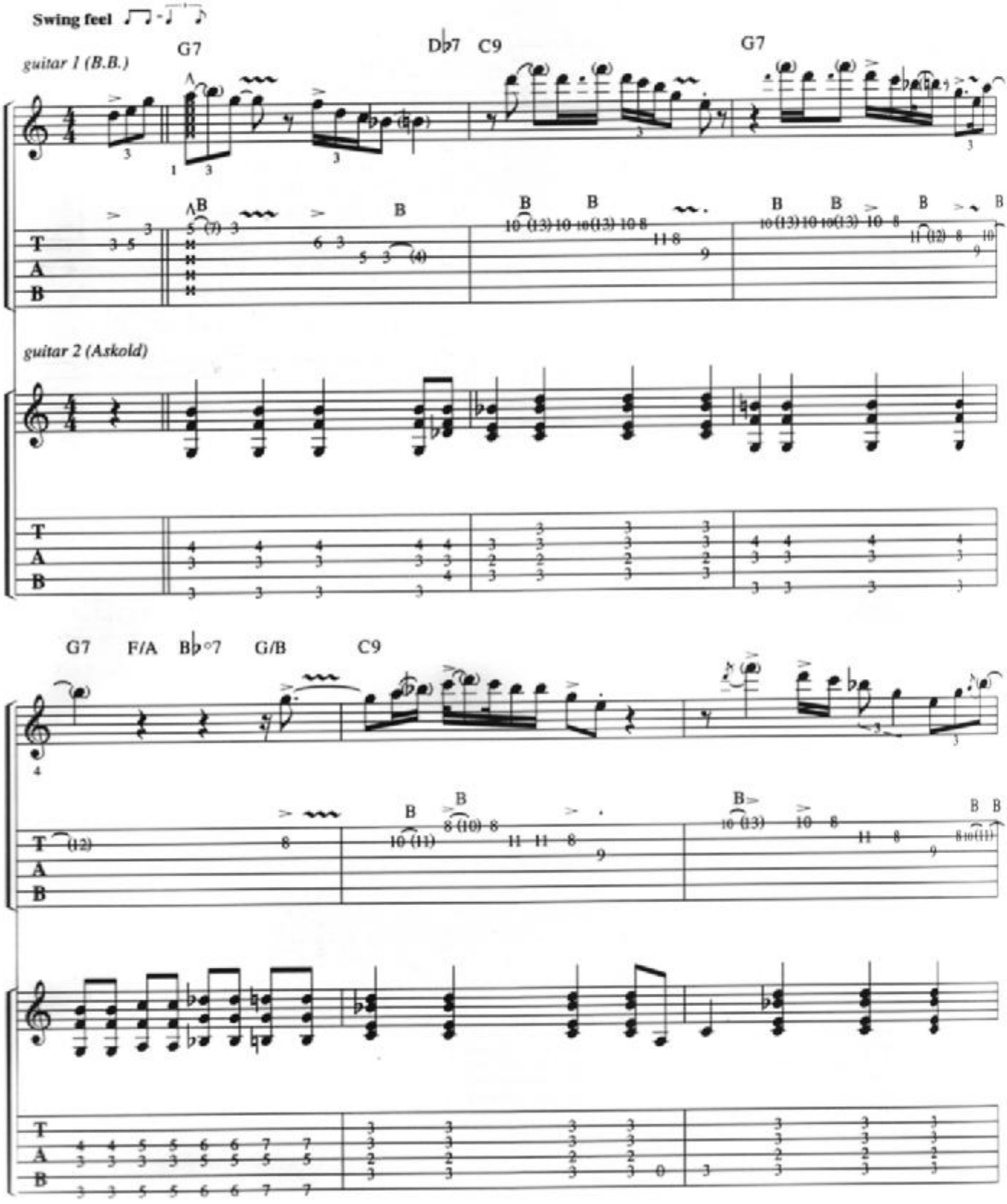

G7
D9

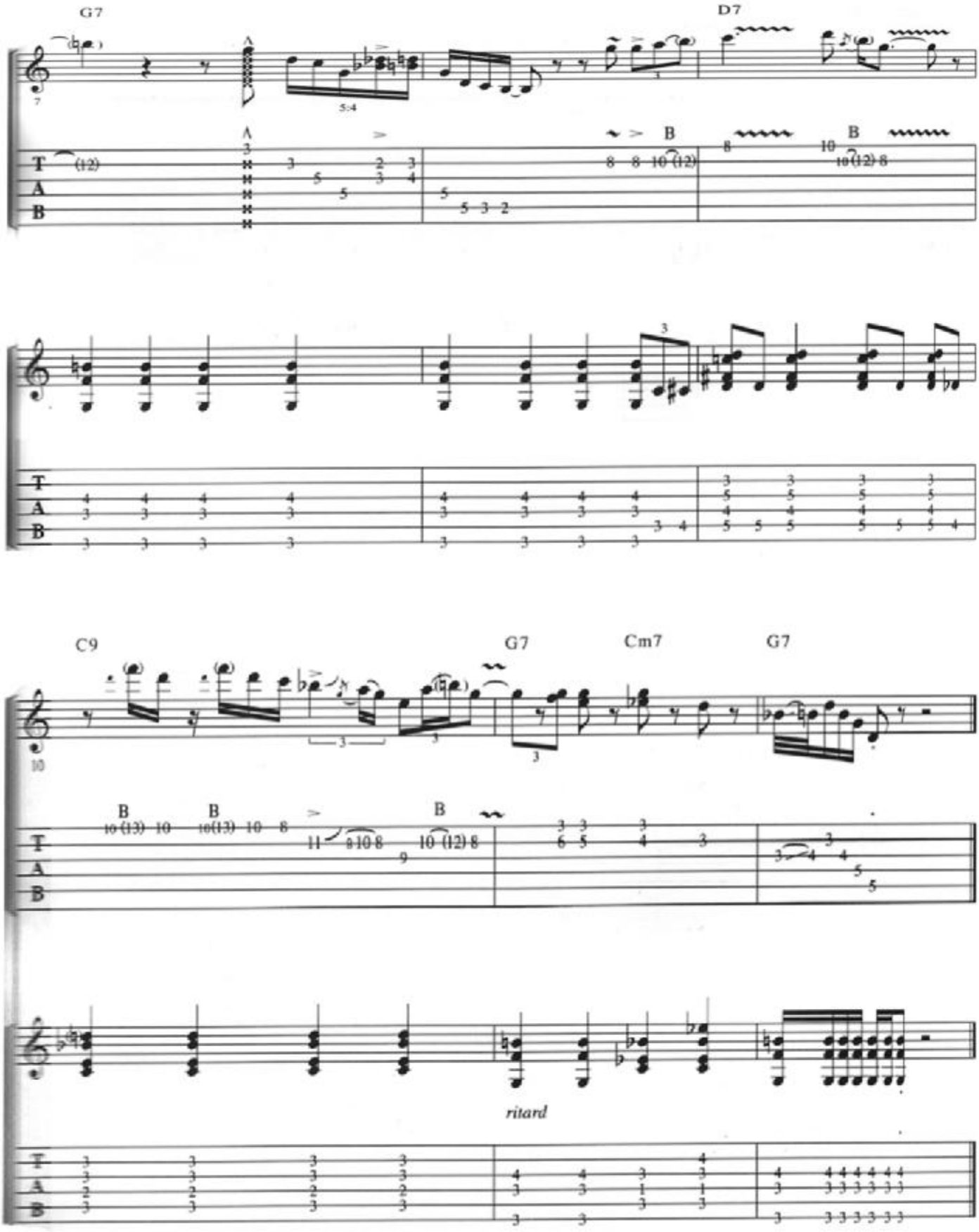

G7
C7
G7
13
T
A
B
C7
C♯°7
16
T
A
B


G7
E7#9
A7
D9
G7
E7
A7
D7
G13

EXAMPLE 7

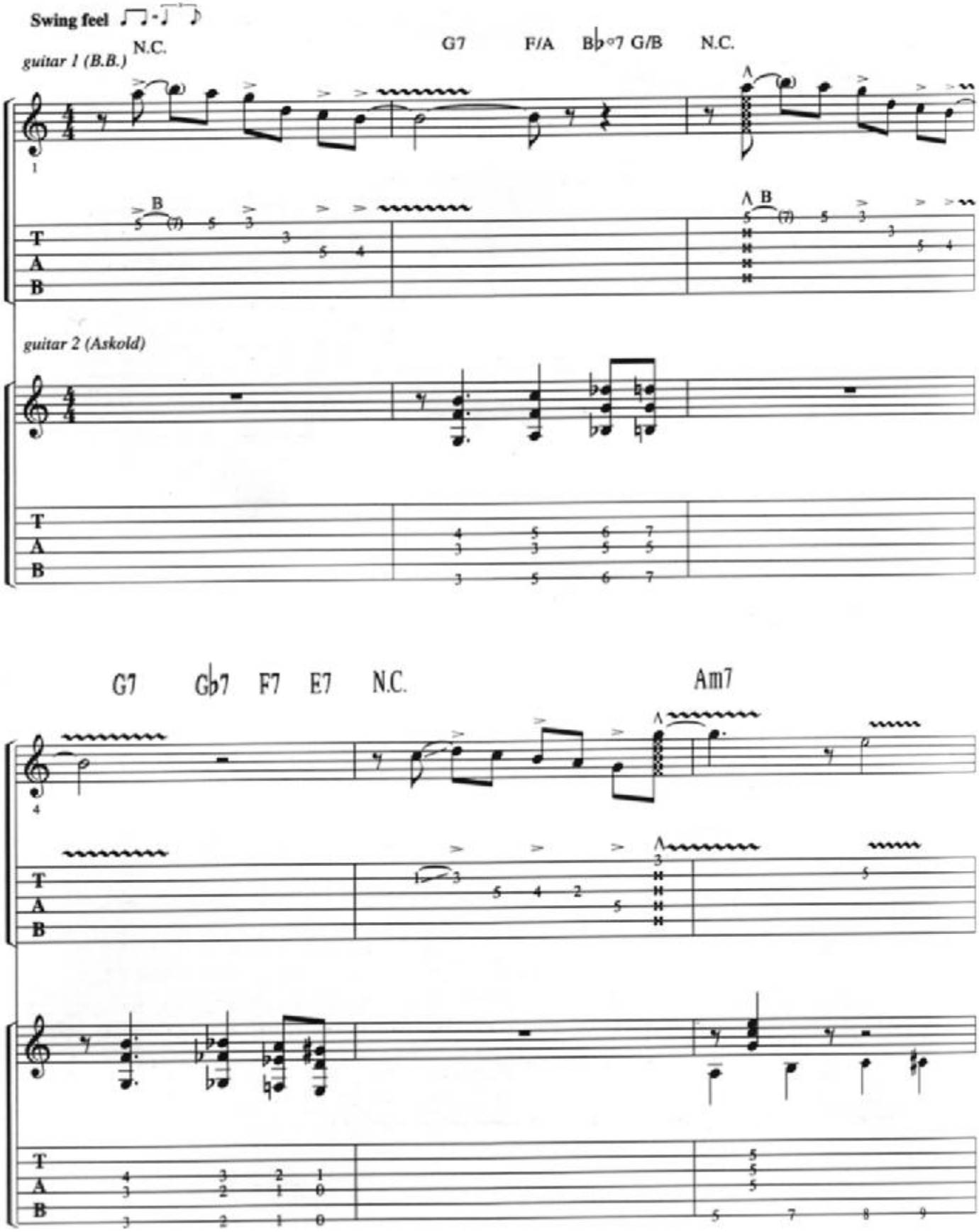
Horn players, particularly Louis Jordan, also influenced B.B., who would try to mimic the phrasing of the horn on the guitar. Here B.B. plays a slow blues and comments, "I'm still hearing the horn."




G7
D7
C9
G7
Cm7
G7
ritard

EXAMPLE 8

B.B. plays this example in the style of saxman Johnny Hodges, who would often sit on the perfect note. By bending a note and sustaining it, B.B. gets the same effect.

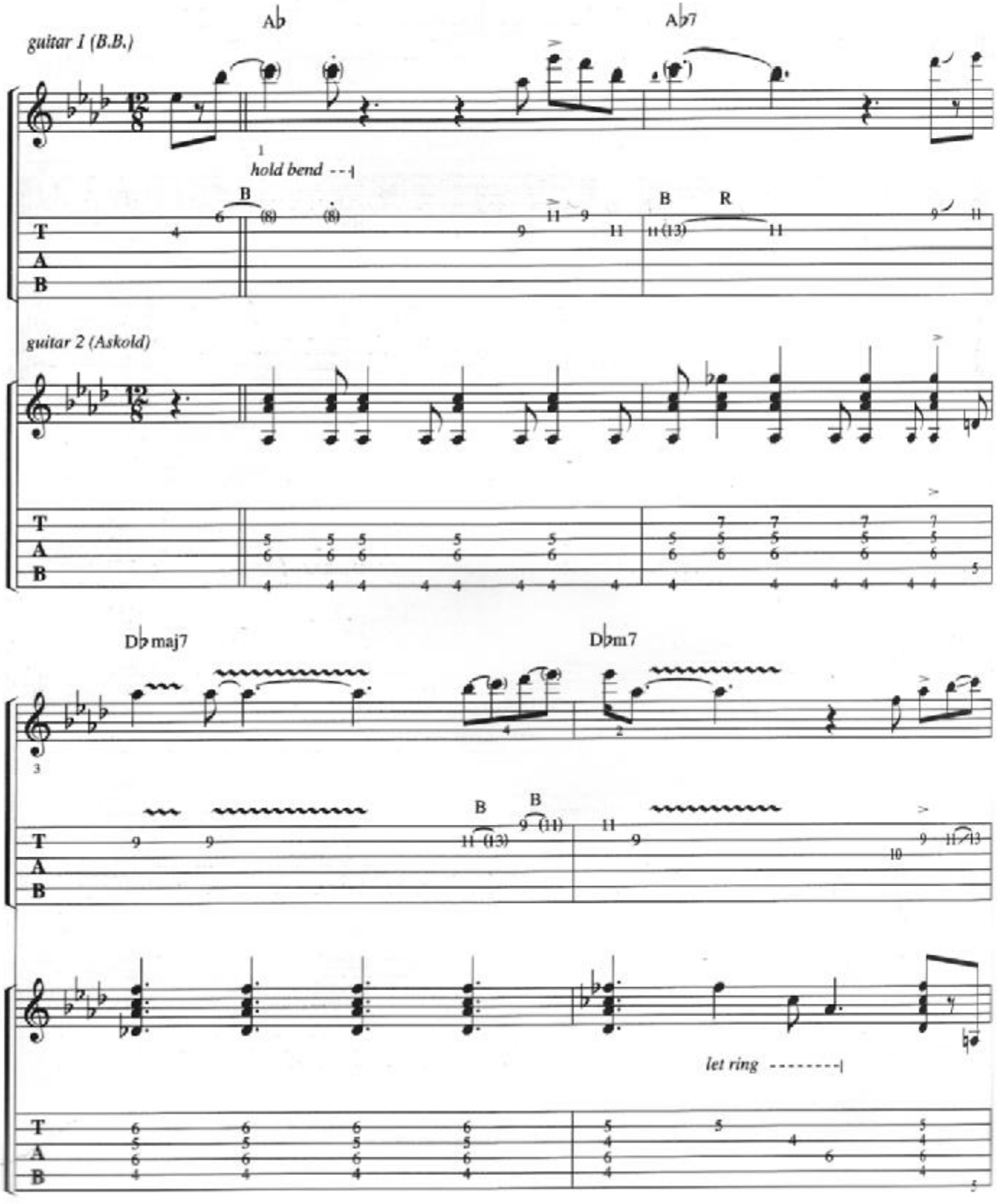


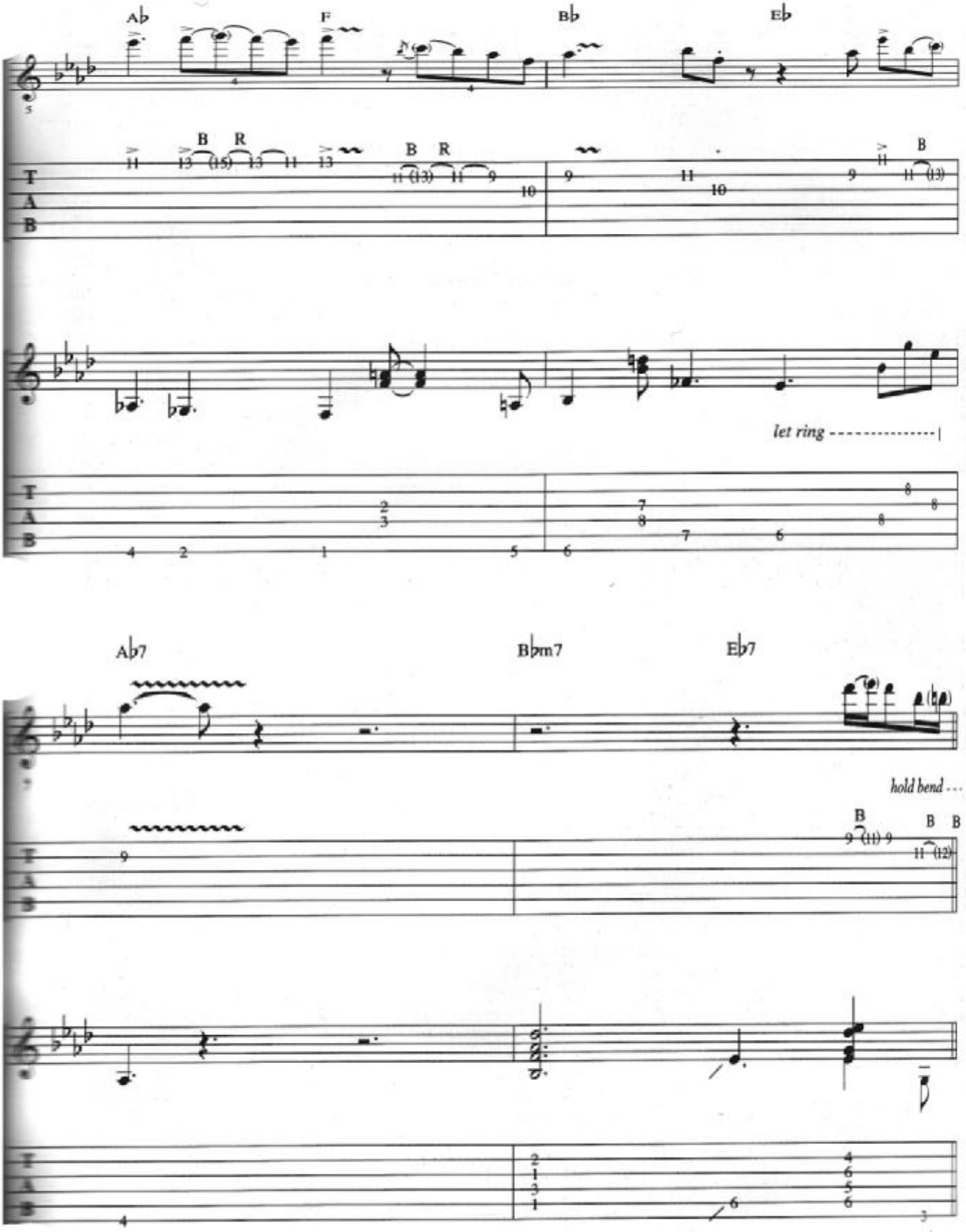
N.C. (D7)
(G7)
(E7)
Am7
(D7)

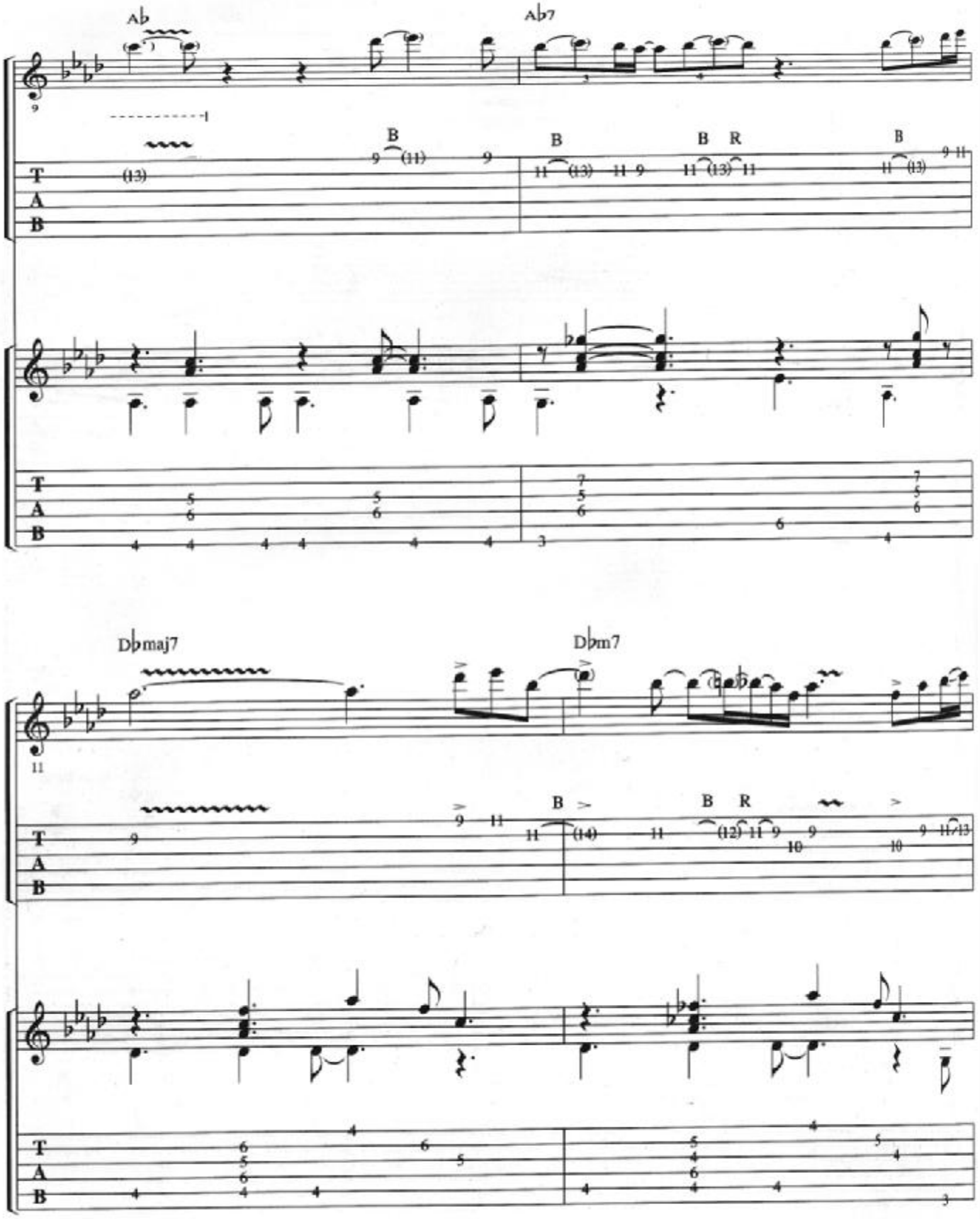
EXAMPLE 9

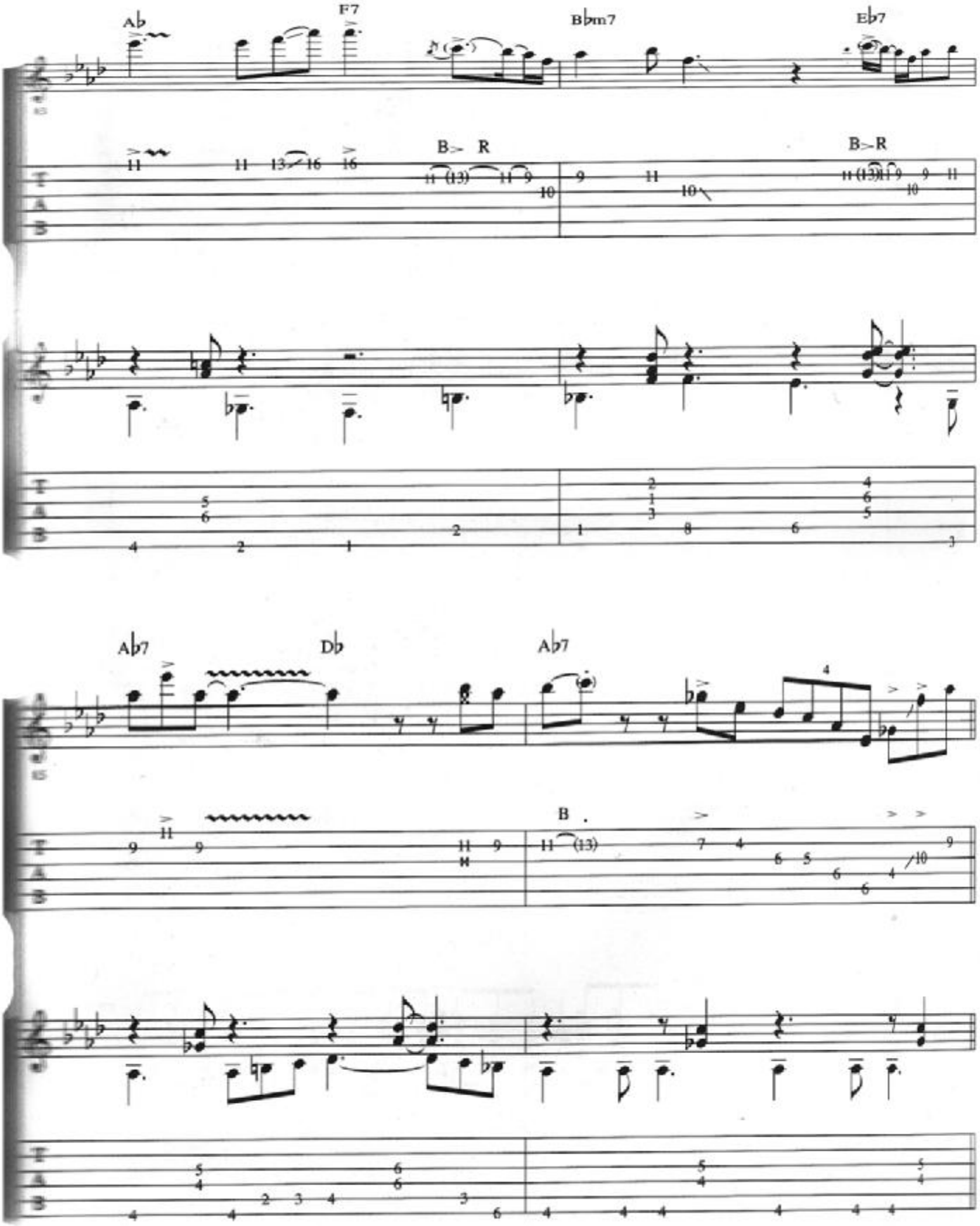
On this eight-bar blues, B.B. feels like he's "talking to a person." He believes that on a slow blues, the phrasing should be more laid-back and personal.

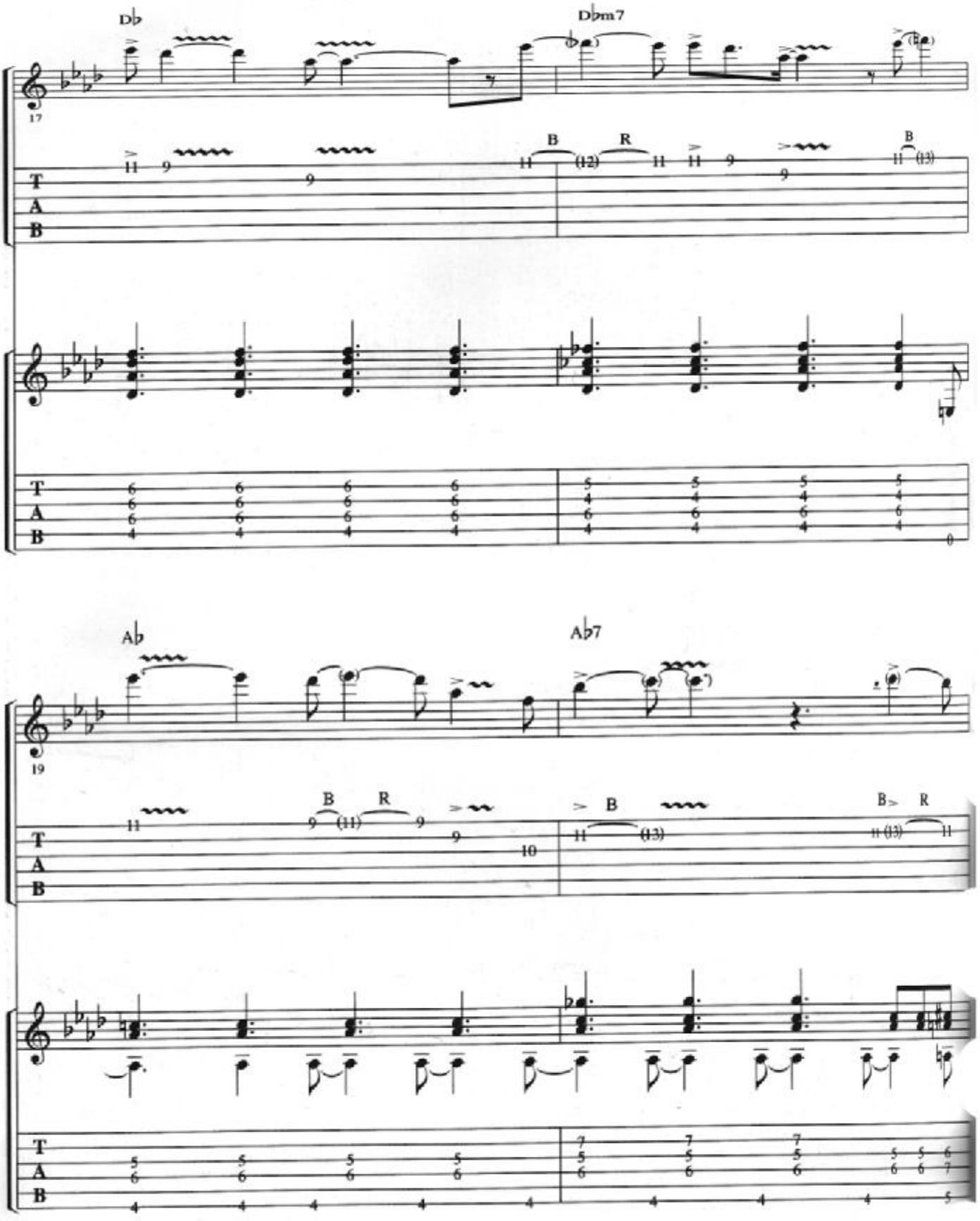
B.B. is always aware of the chord progression and consistently chooses his notes to fit the changes perfectly, as in bars 17–18 where he bends the second (E♭) to the flatted third (F♭) of the D♭m7 chord.

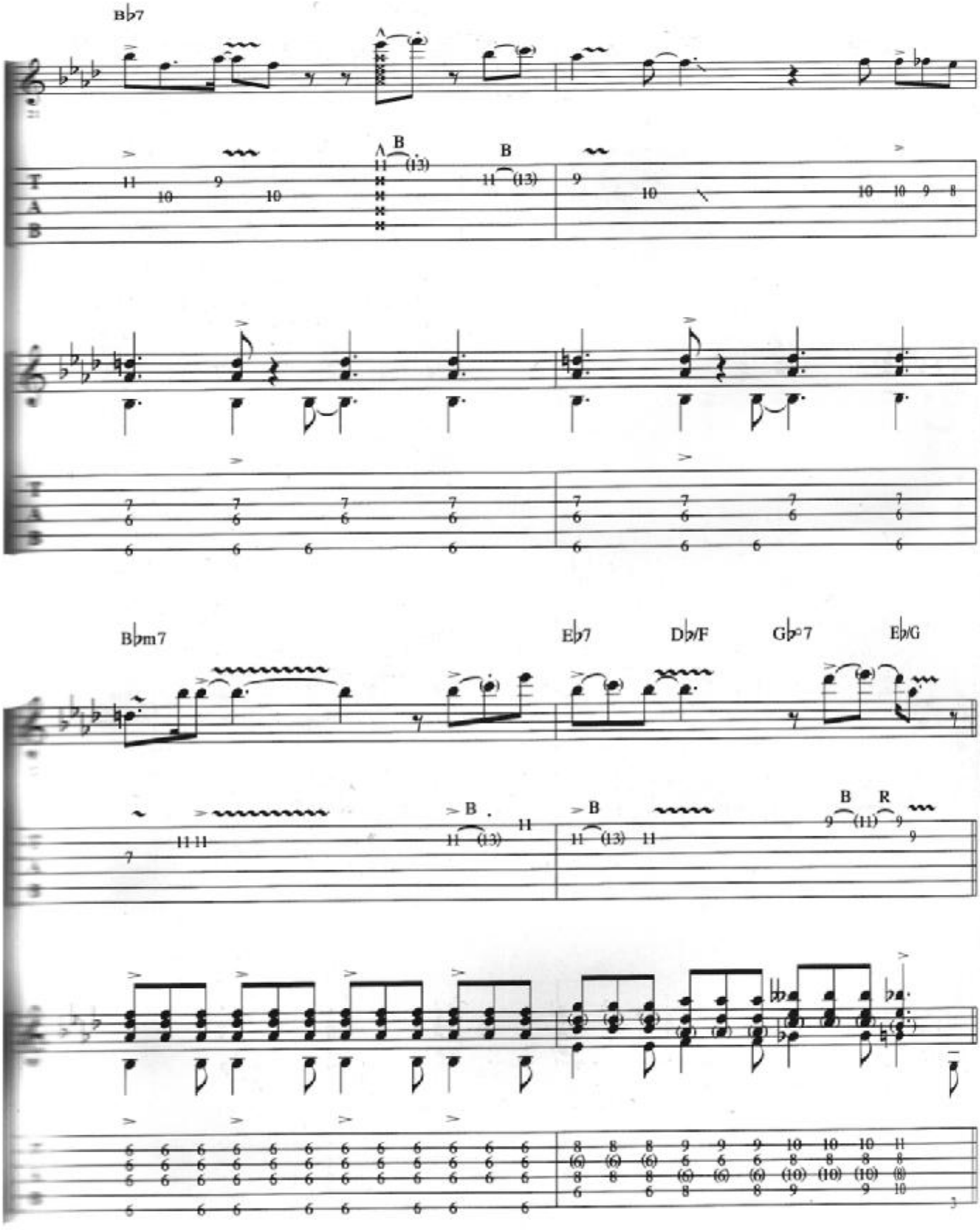


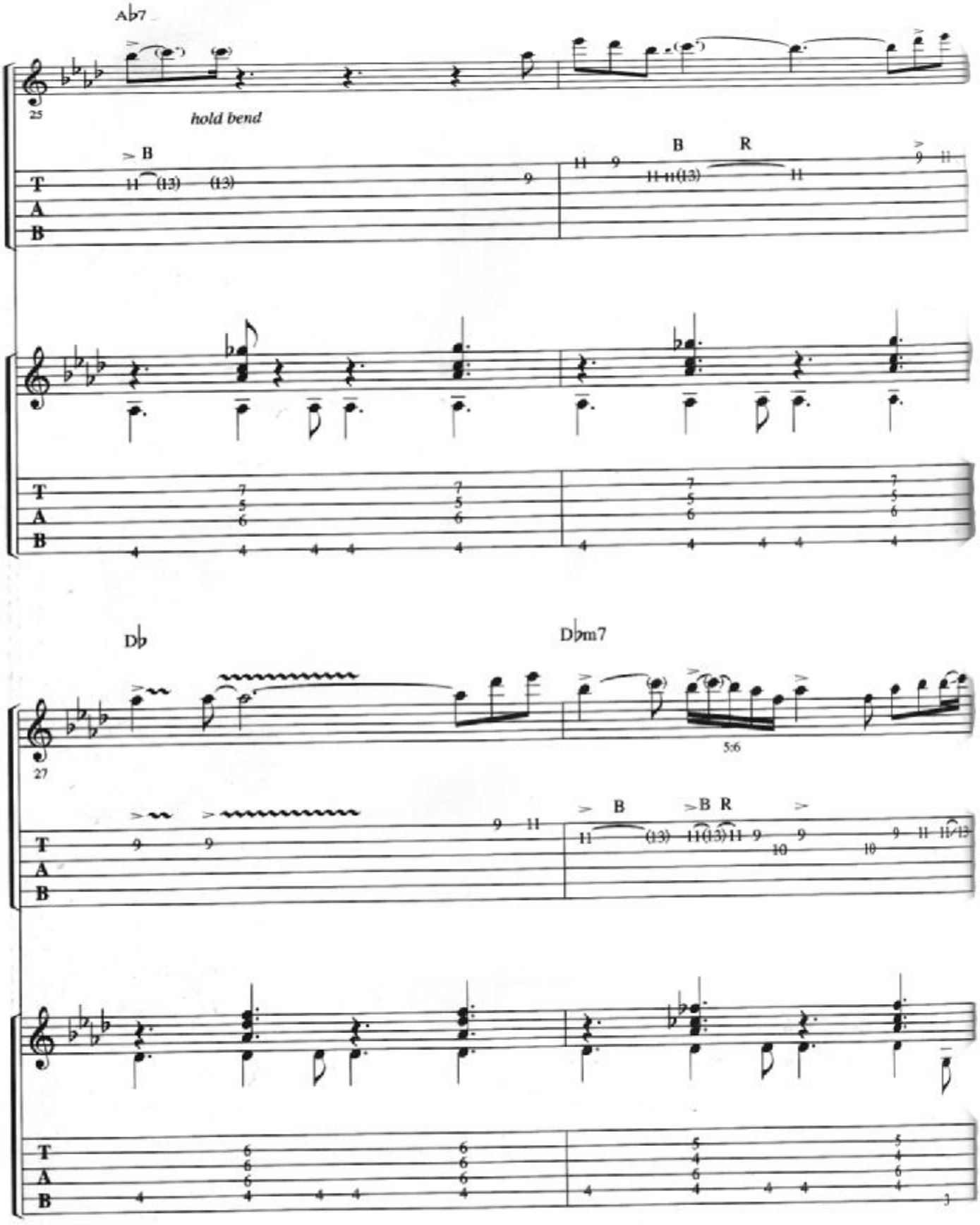

Ab
F
Bb
Eb
B R
B R
B
let ring
Ab7
Bbm7
Eb7
hold bend
B
B B

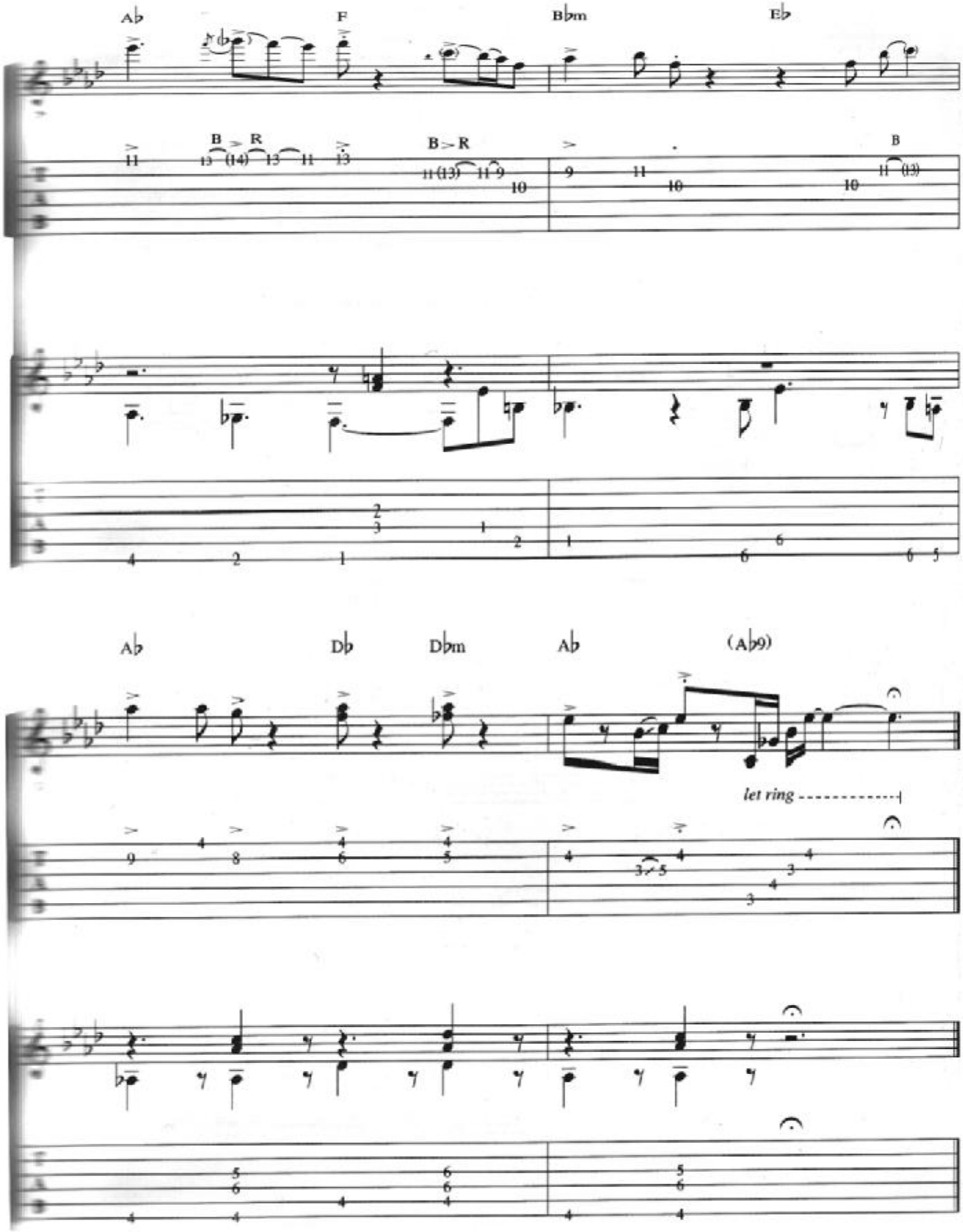

Ab
Ab7
Dbmaj7
Dbm7
T
A
B


Ab
F7
Bbm7
Eb7
B> R
B>R
Ab7
Db
Ab7
B


Db
Dbm7
17
B
R
B
T
A
B
Ab
Ab7
19
B
R
B
B
R
T
A
B


B♭7
B♭m7
E♭7
D♭/F
G♭7
E♭/G

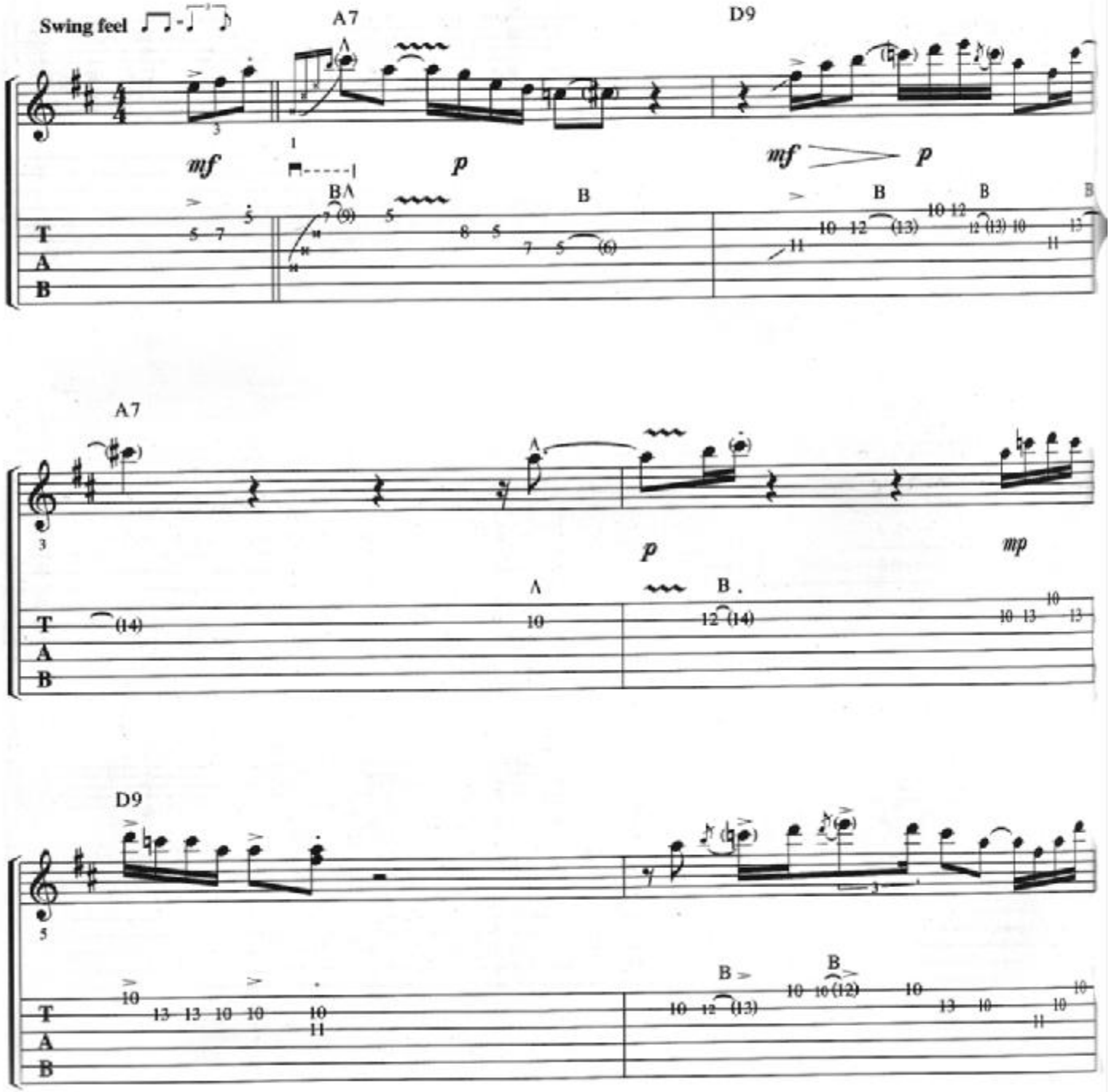

A♭7
25
hold bend
B
B
R
D♭
D♭m7
27
5:6

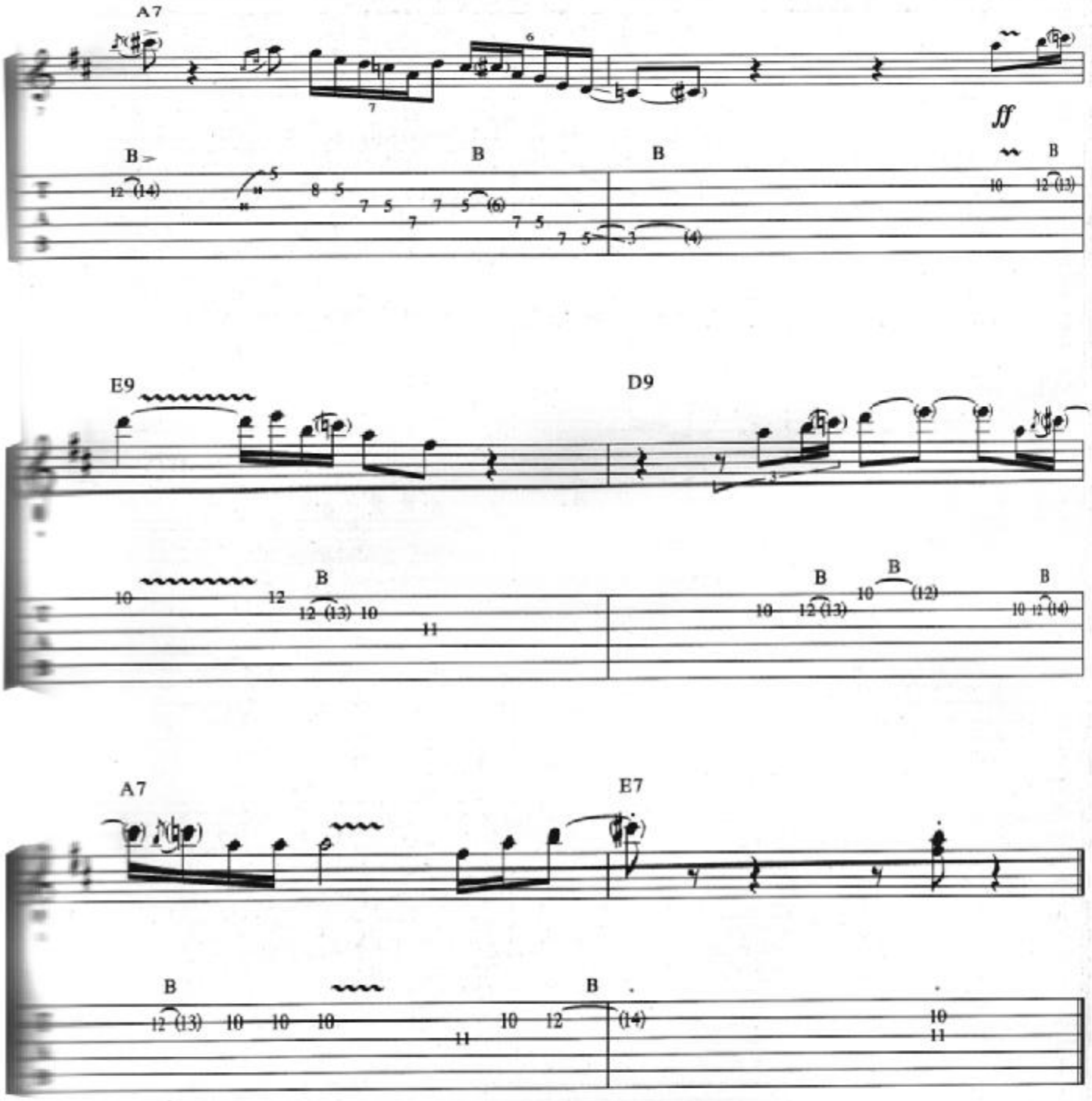

Ab
F
Bbm
Eb
B
R
B
R
B
Ab
Db
Dbm
Ab
(Ab9)
let ring

Nobody Loves Me But My Mother/Intro

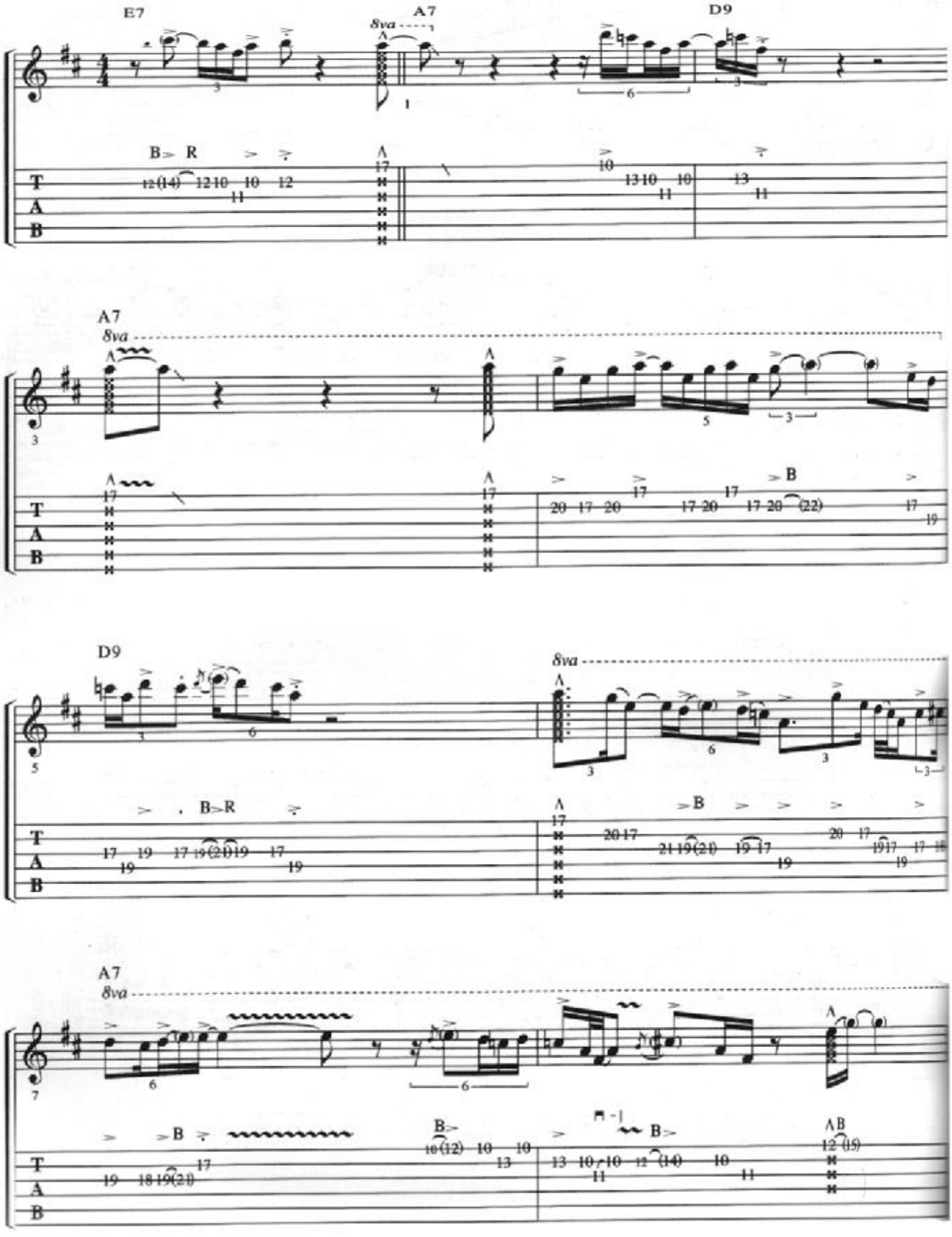
"Nobody Loves Me But My Mother" is a great example of a slow, soulful blues tune. B.B. plays it with an organ trio, and his performance is exceptional. Don't let the rhythms or the amount of notes intimidate you; the tempo is quite slow and if you listen to the tape, you'll feel the phrasing.

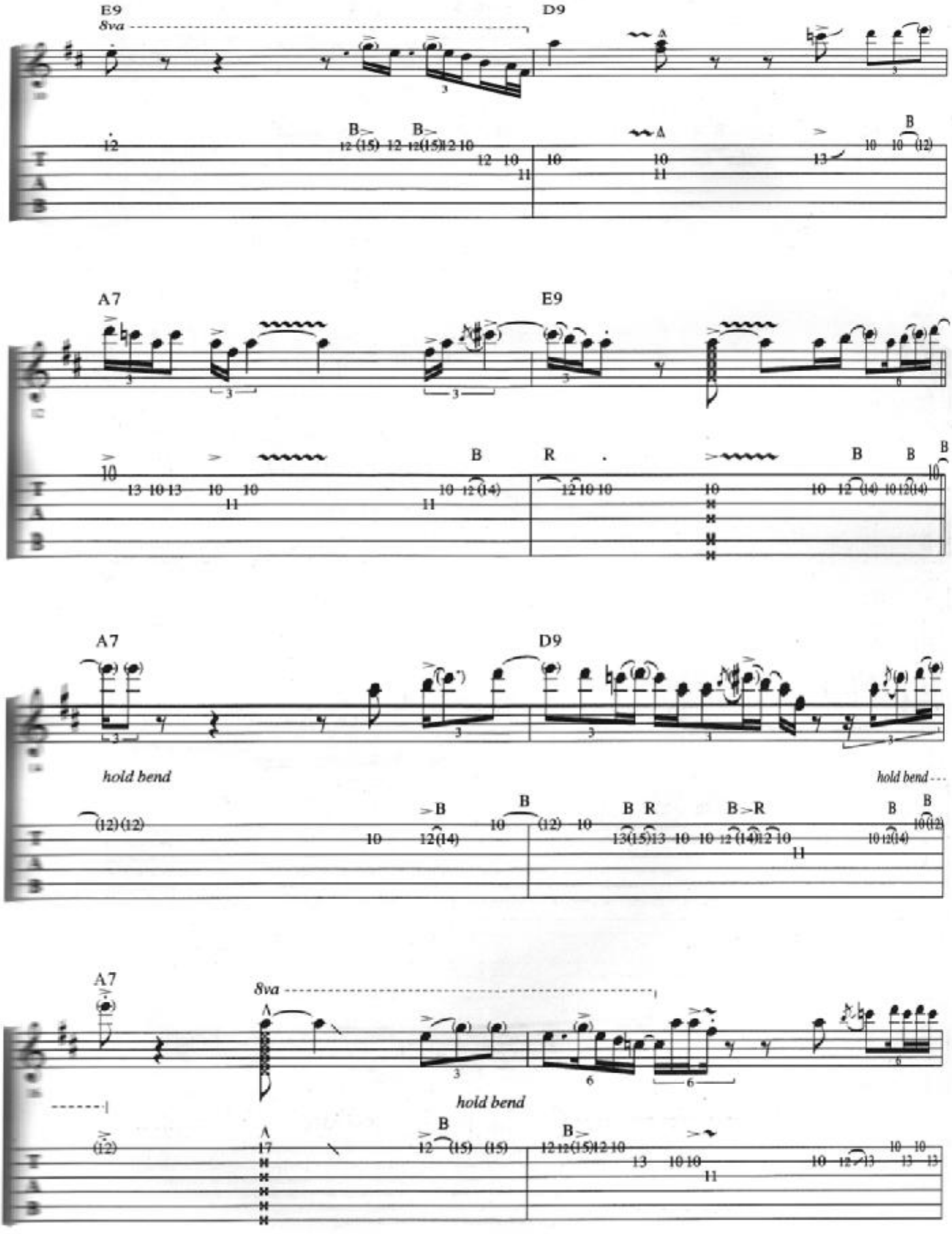
Notice how B.B. outlines the A7 chord in bars 1 and 7 and the D9 chord in bars 2 and 10 of the intro. This is a B.B. trademark—he never hits a "wrong" note. Bars 34–35 of the solo feature a sophisticated harmonic idea, as B.B. plays a descending Bm9 arpeggio (C♯, A, F♯, D, B) over the E9 chord. These notes give us the thirteenth, eleventh, ninth, flatted seventh and fifth of E, respectively.

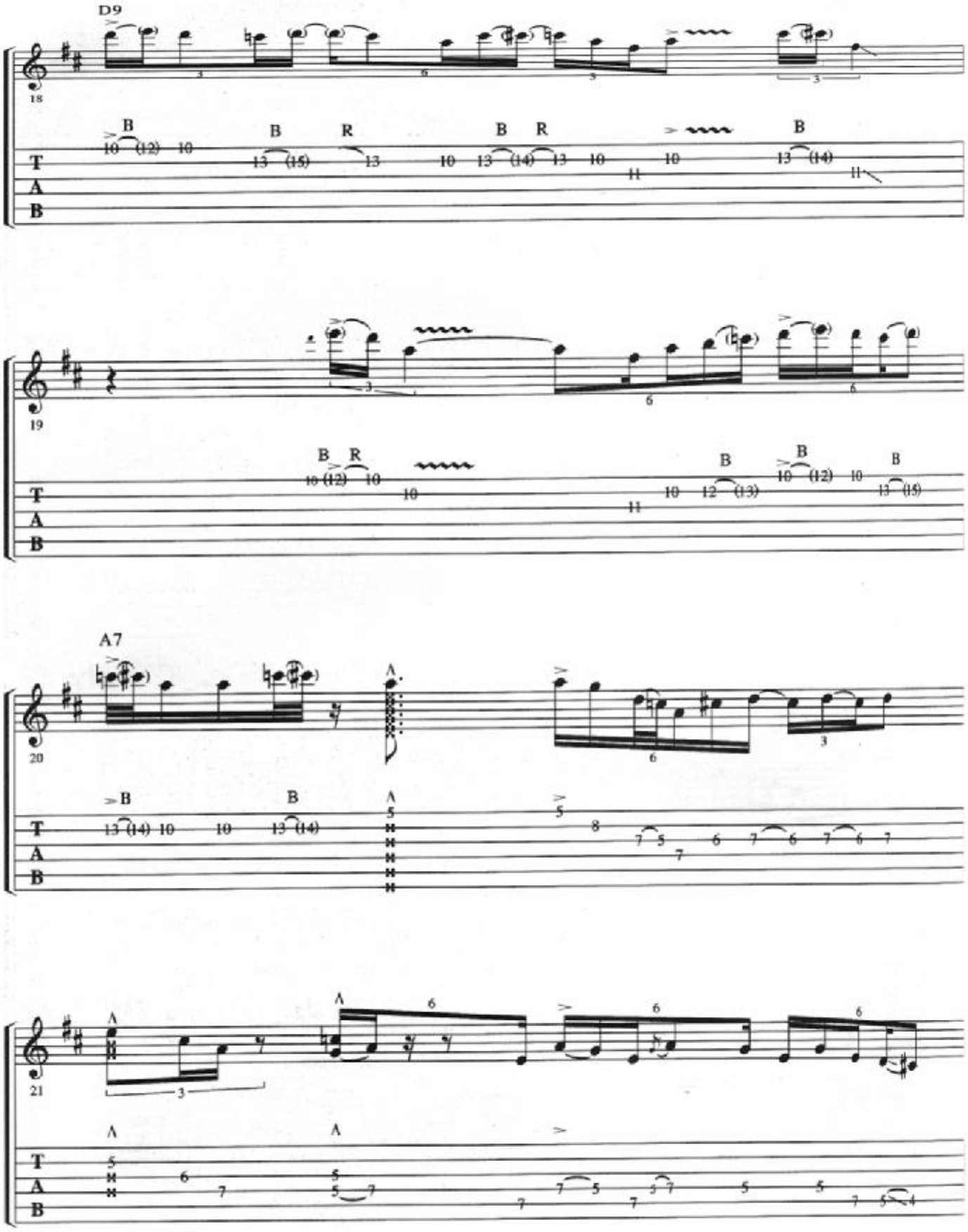


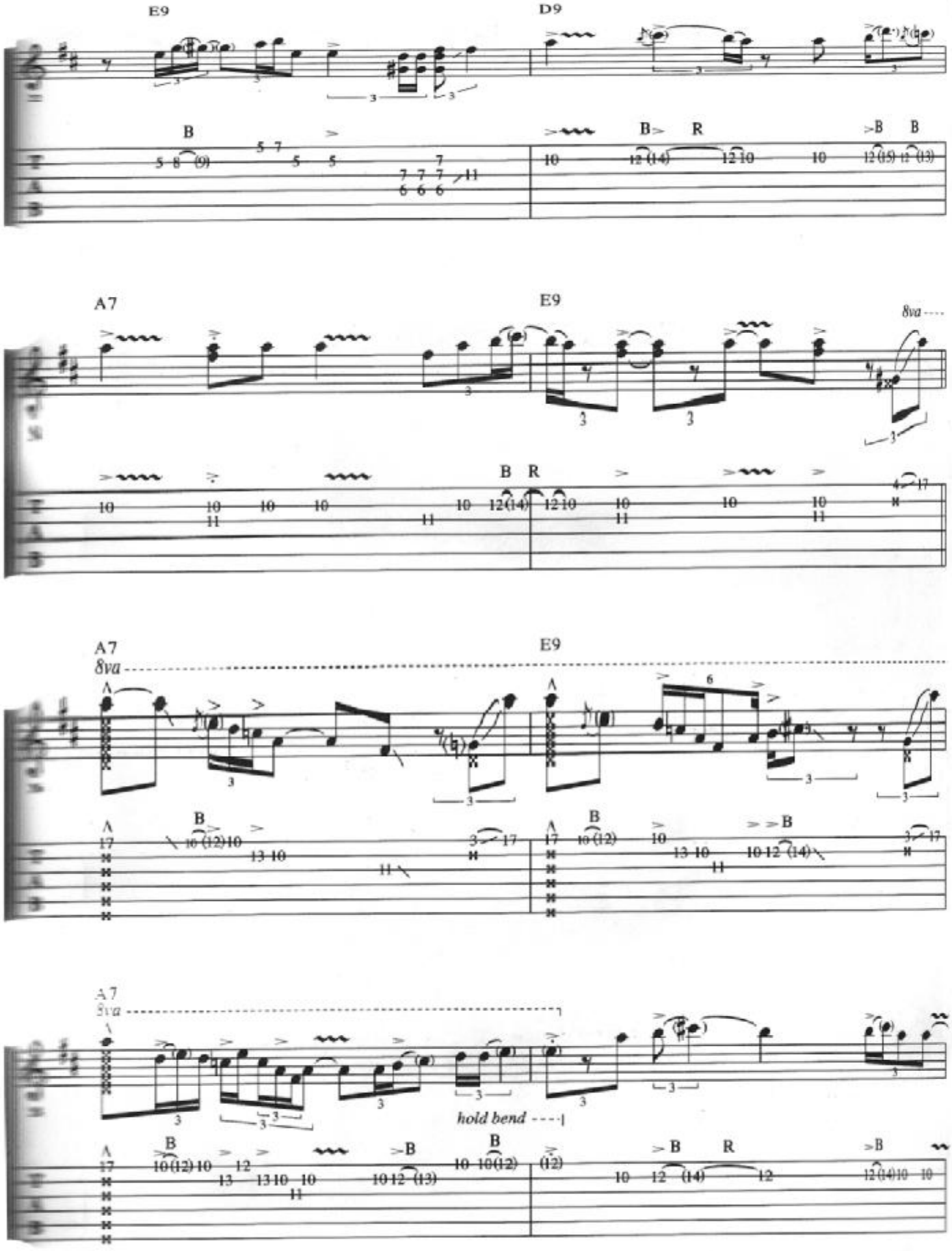

A7
B
B
B
ff
B
E9
D9
B
B
B
B
A7
E7
B
B

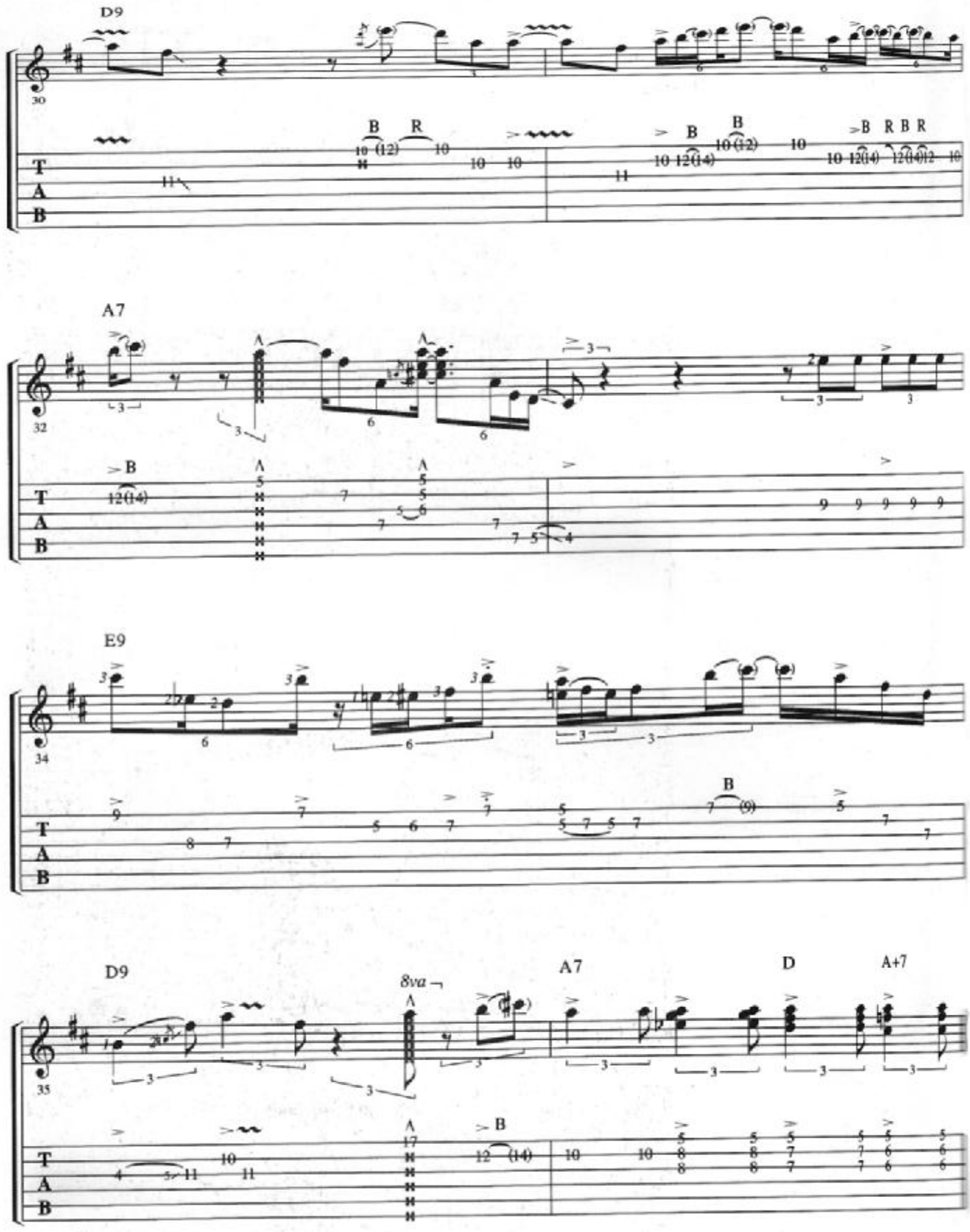
Nobody Loves Me But My Mother/Solo

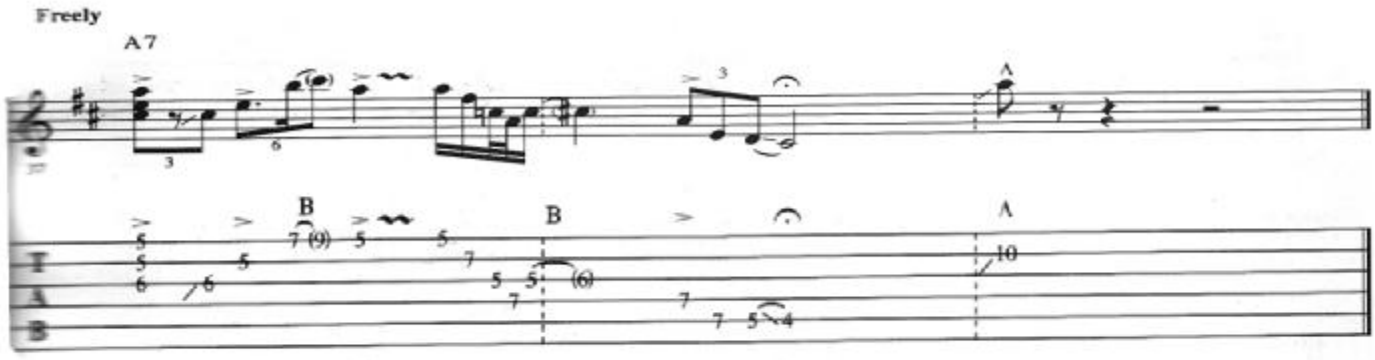



E9
8va
D9
A7
E9
A7
D9
hold bend
hold bend
A7
8va
hold bend


D9
18
T
A
B
19
A7
20
21

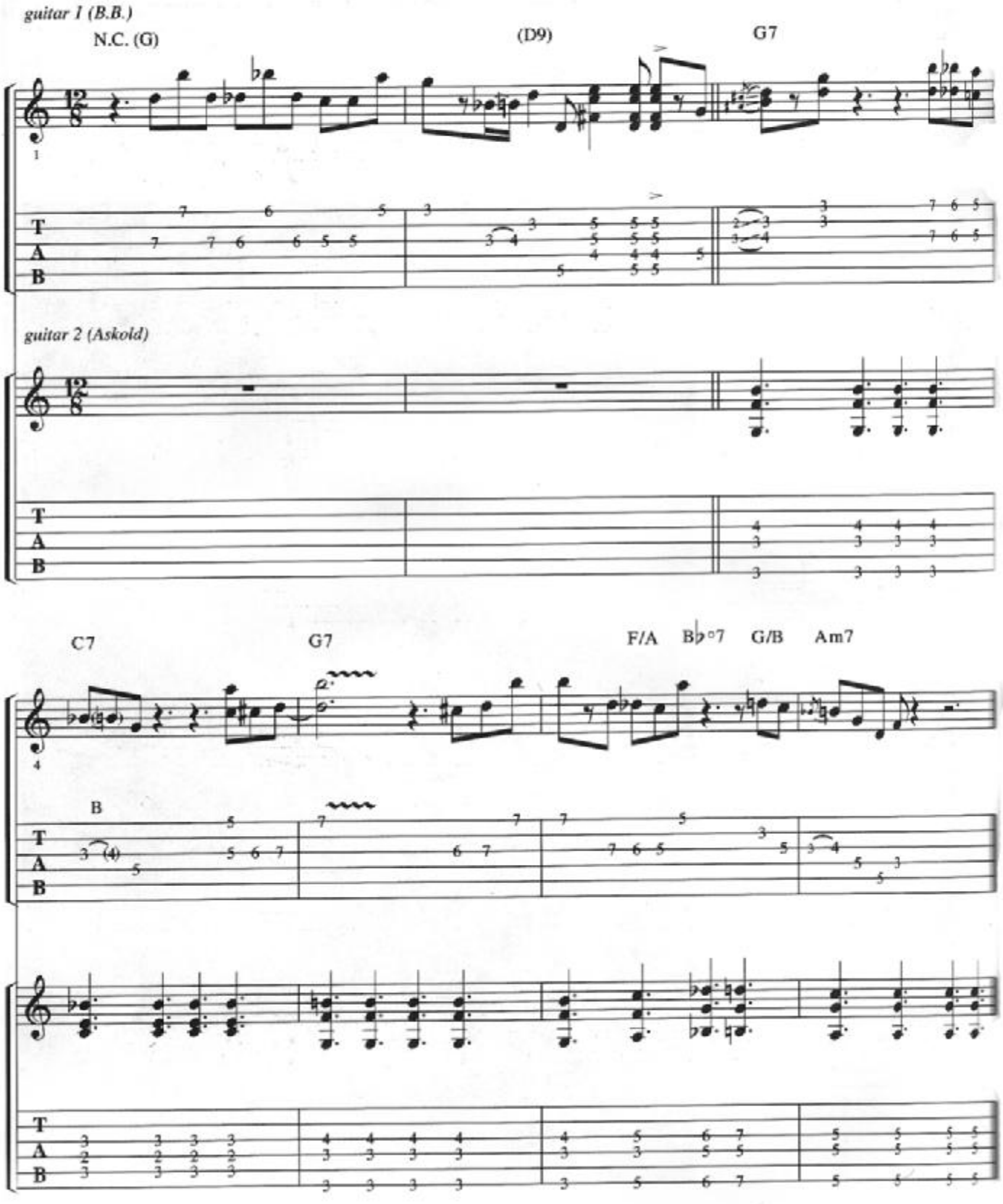

E9
D9
A7
E9
8va
A7
8va
E9
A7
8va
hold bend


D9
30
B
R
B
B
B R B R
T
A
B
A7
32
B
E9
34
B
D9
35
8va
A7
D
A+7
B


Freely
A7
B
B
A

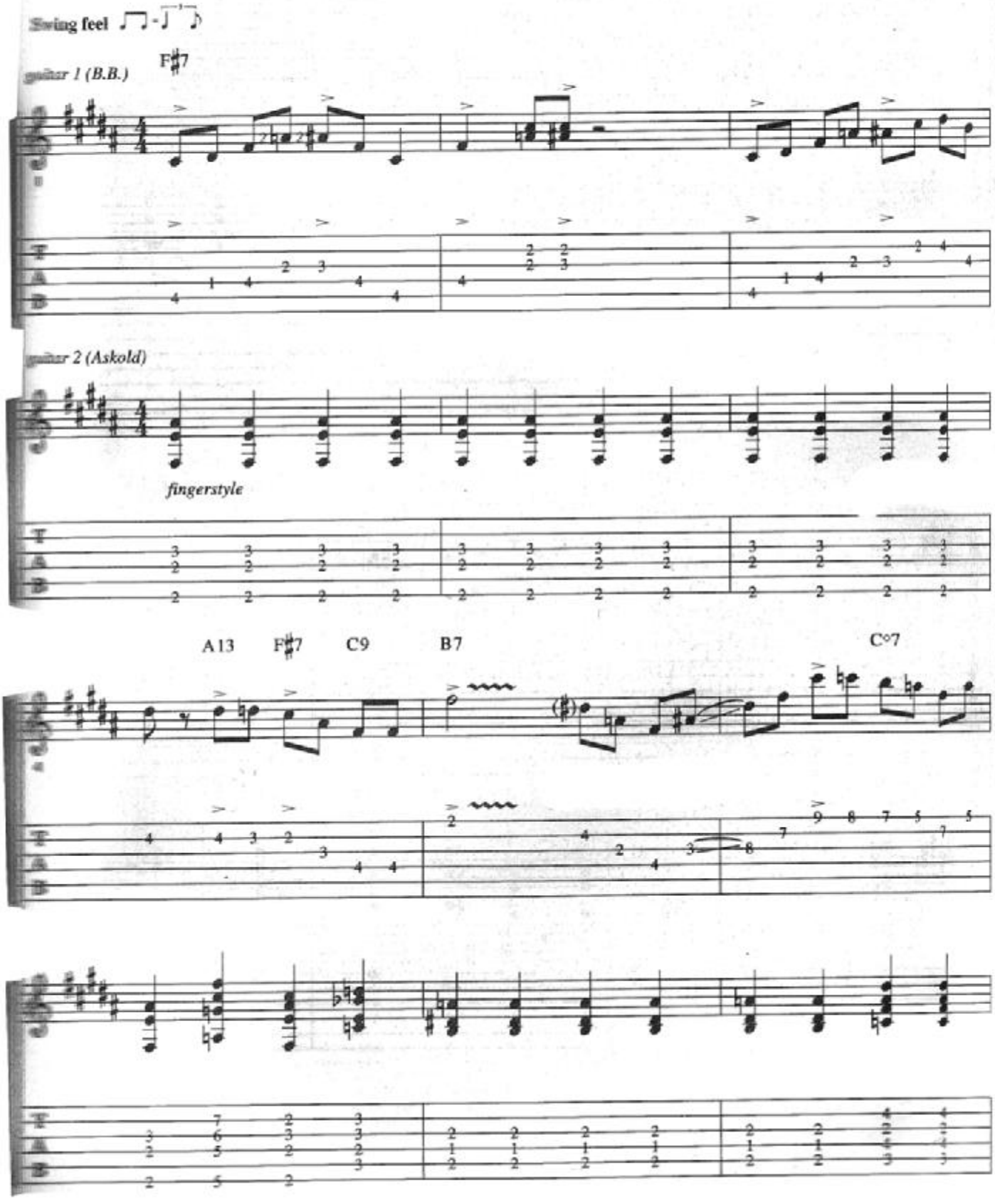
EXAMPLE 10

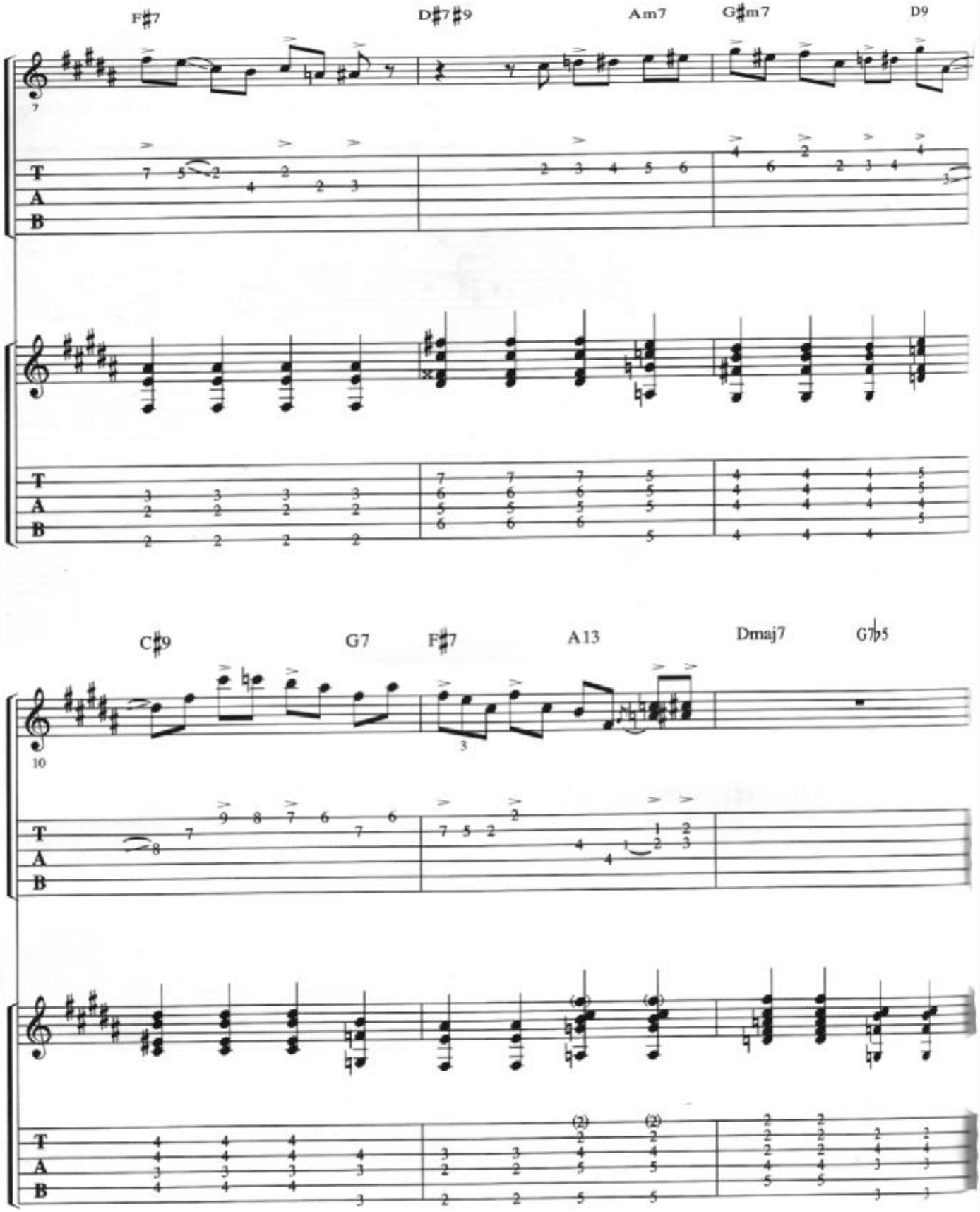
B.B. demonstrates the use of sixths in the blues idiom in this short example. Bars 1 and 2 feature a traditional turnaround which would be played over the last two bars of a 12-bar blues (over the I and V chords).

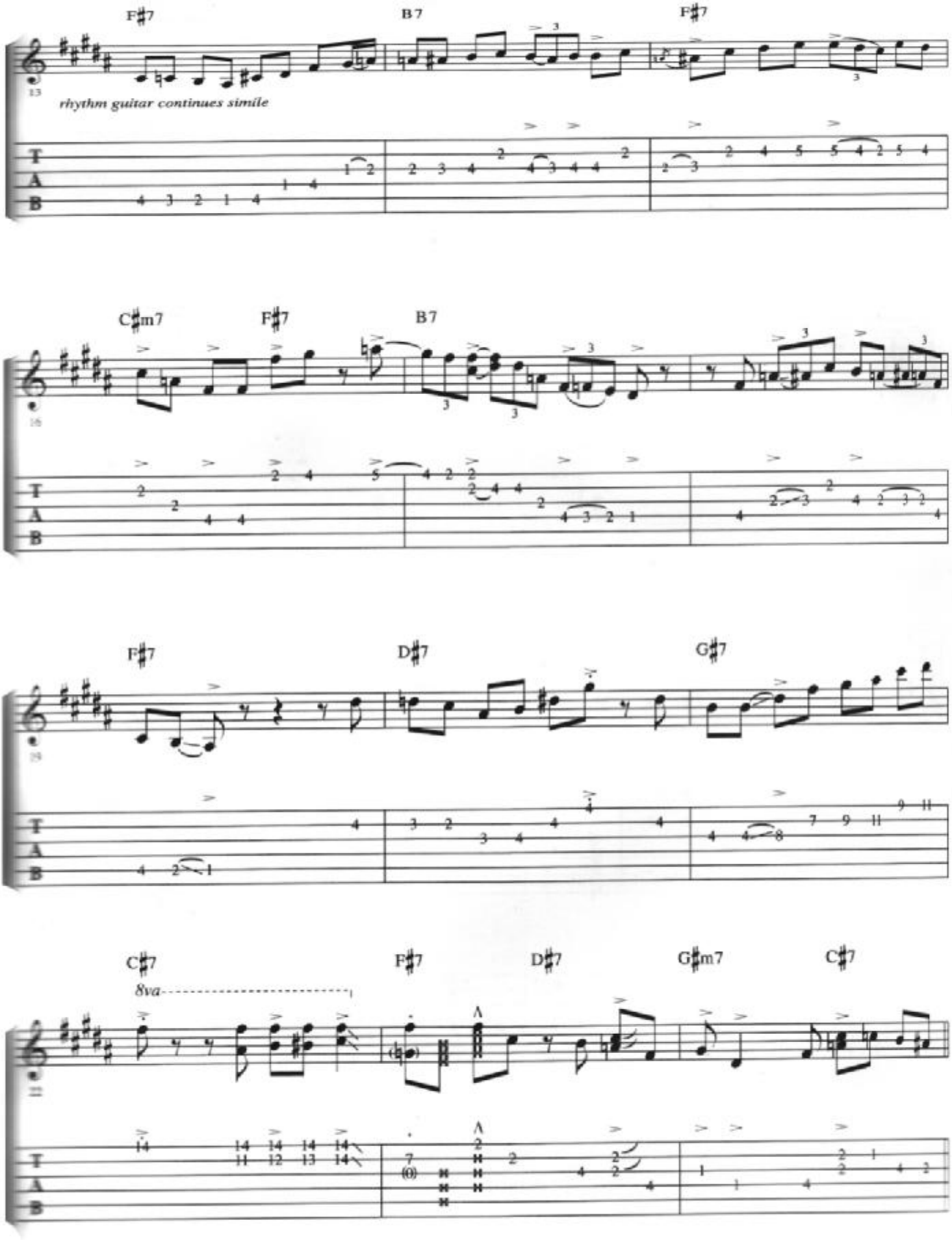


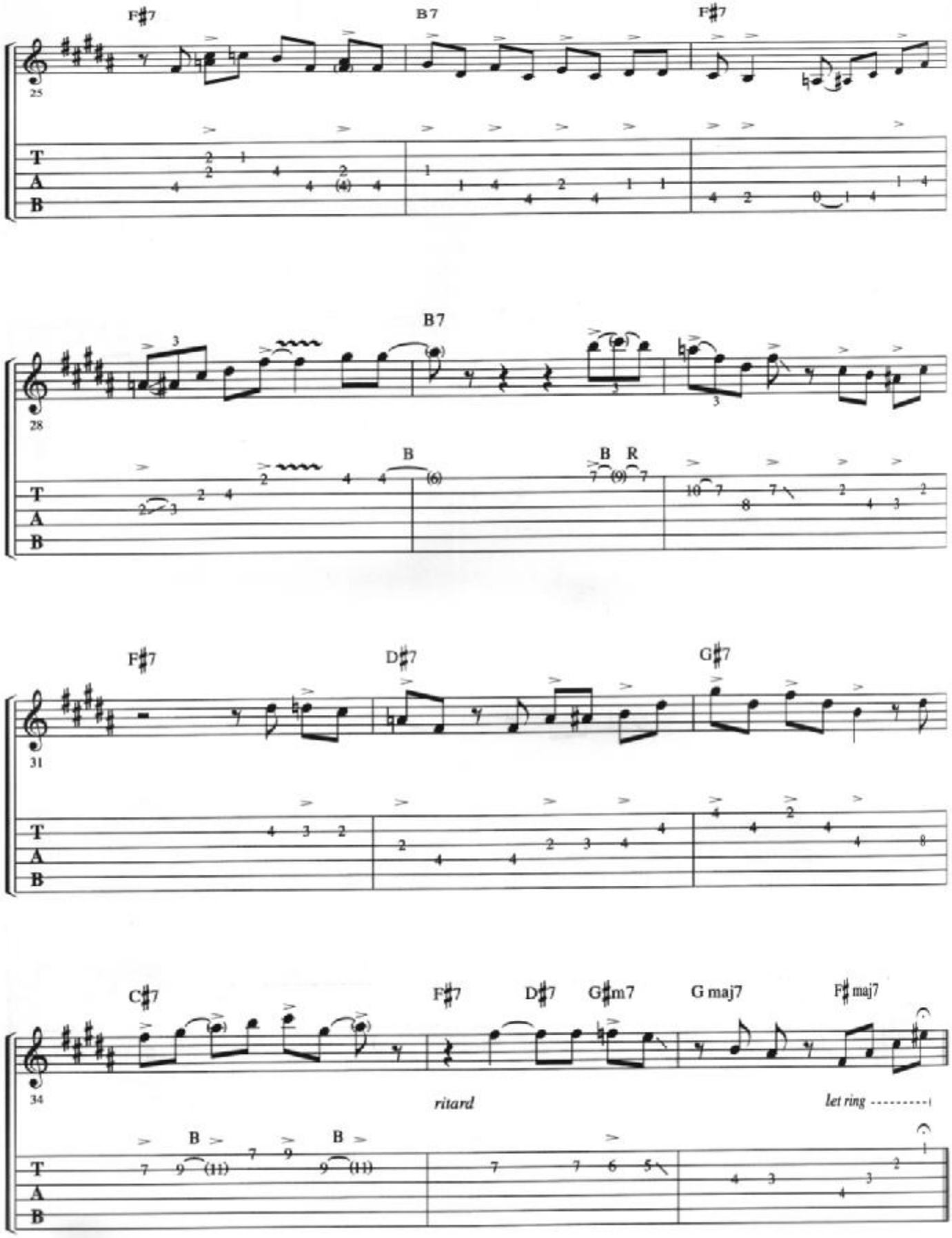
EXAMPLE 11

B.B. "stretches out" on a jump blues in F♯. For someone who is primarily known as a blues player, the amount of jazz chops B.B. exhibits is amazing. Check out the chromaticism in bars 8–9 and 13–15, and the great triplet idea over B7 in bars 17–18. Try taking bits and pieces of this solo and applying them to your own soloing style.



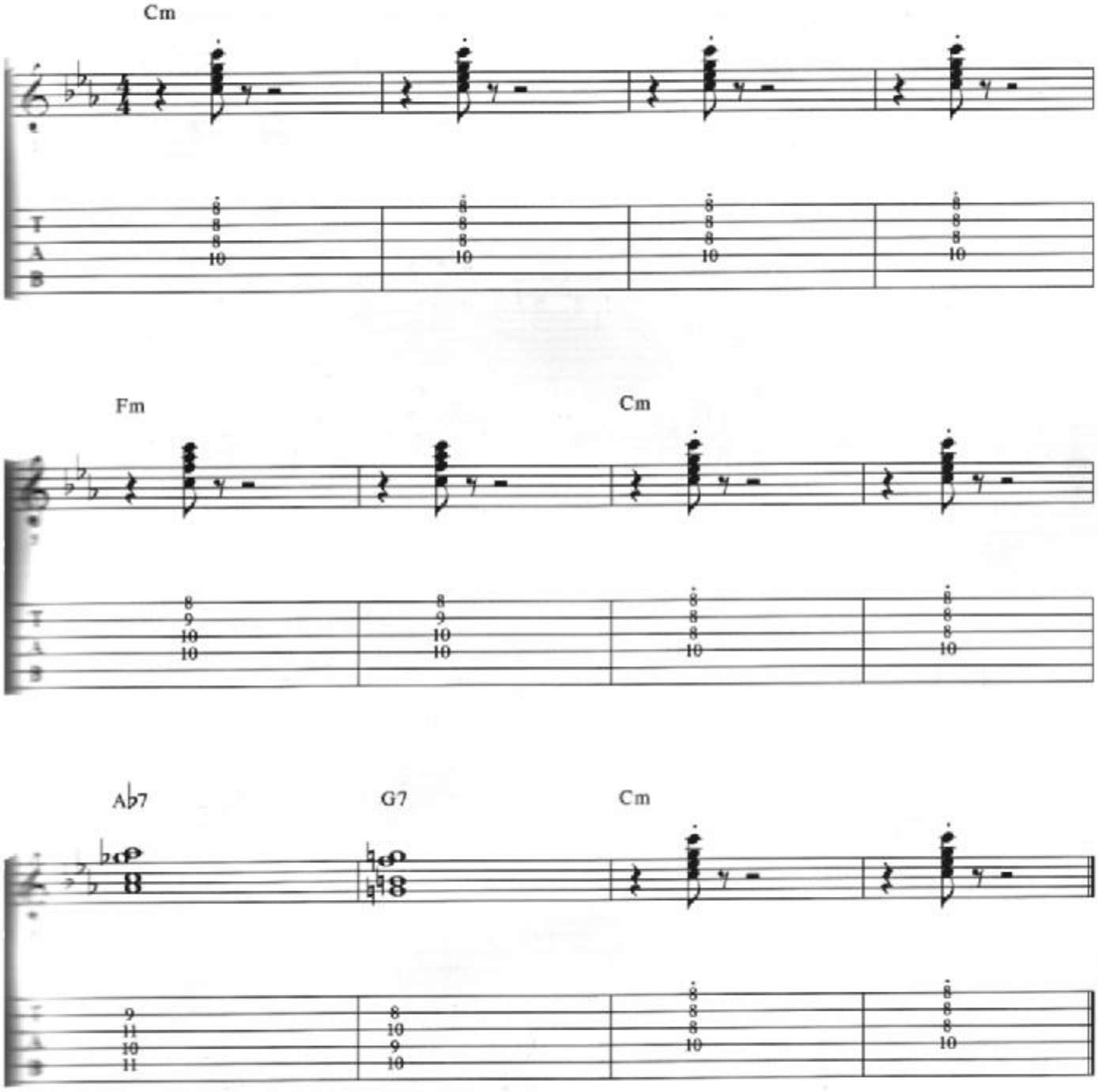

F♯7
D♯7♯9
Am7
G♯m7
D9
7
T
A
B
C♯9
G7
F♯7
A13
Dmaj7
G7♭5
10
T
A
B


F♯7
B7
F♯7
13
rhythm guitar continues simile
C♯m7
F♯7
B7
16
F♯7
D♯7
G♯7
19
C♯7
F♯7
D♯7
G♯m7
C♯7
22
8va


F♯7
B7
F♯7
25
T
A
B
B7
28
B
B R
F♯7
D♯7
G♯7
31
C♯7
F♯7
D♯7
G♯m7
G maj7
F♯maj7
34
ritard
let ring

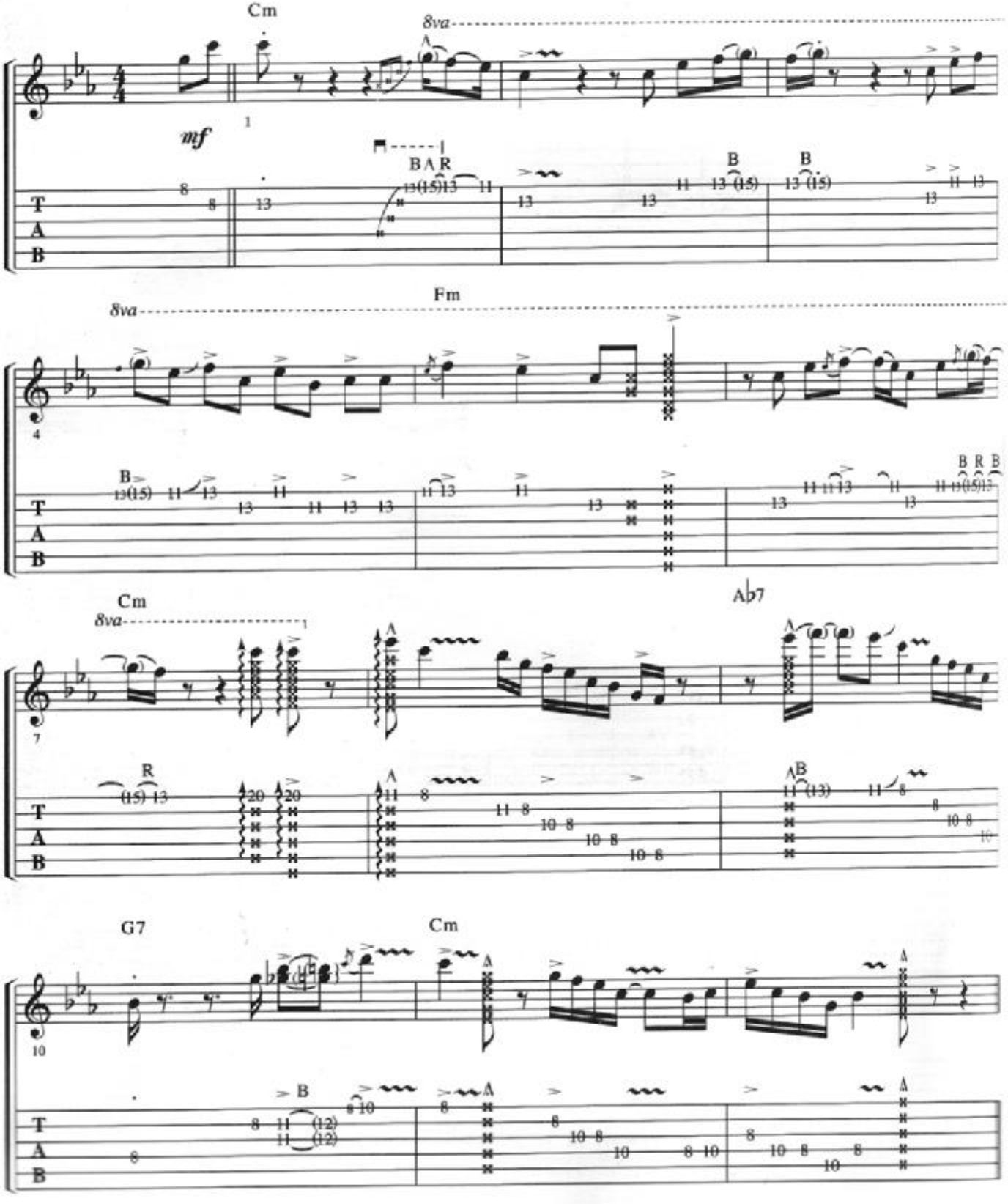
THE THRILL IS GONE/RHYTHM GUITAR

Here is a sample progression for B.B.'s all-time hit, "The Thrill Is Gone." This is a traditional 12-bar minor blues, with the V chord (G7) being approached by the ♭VI chord (A♭7) in bar 9.

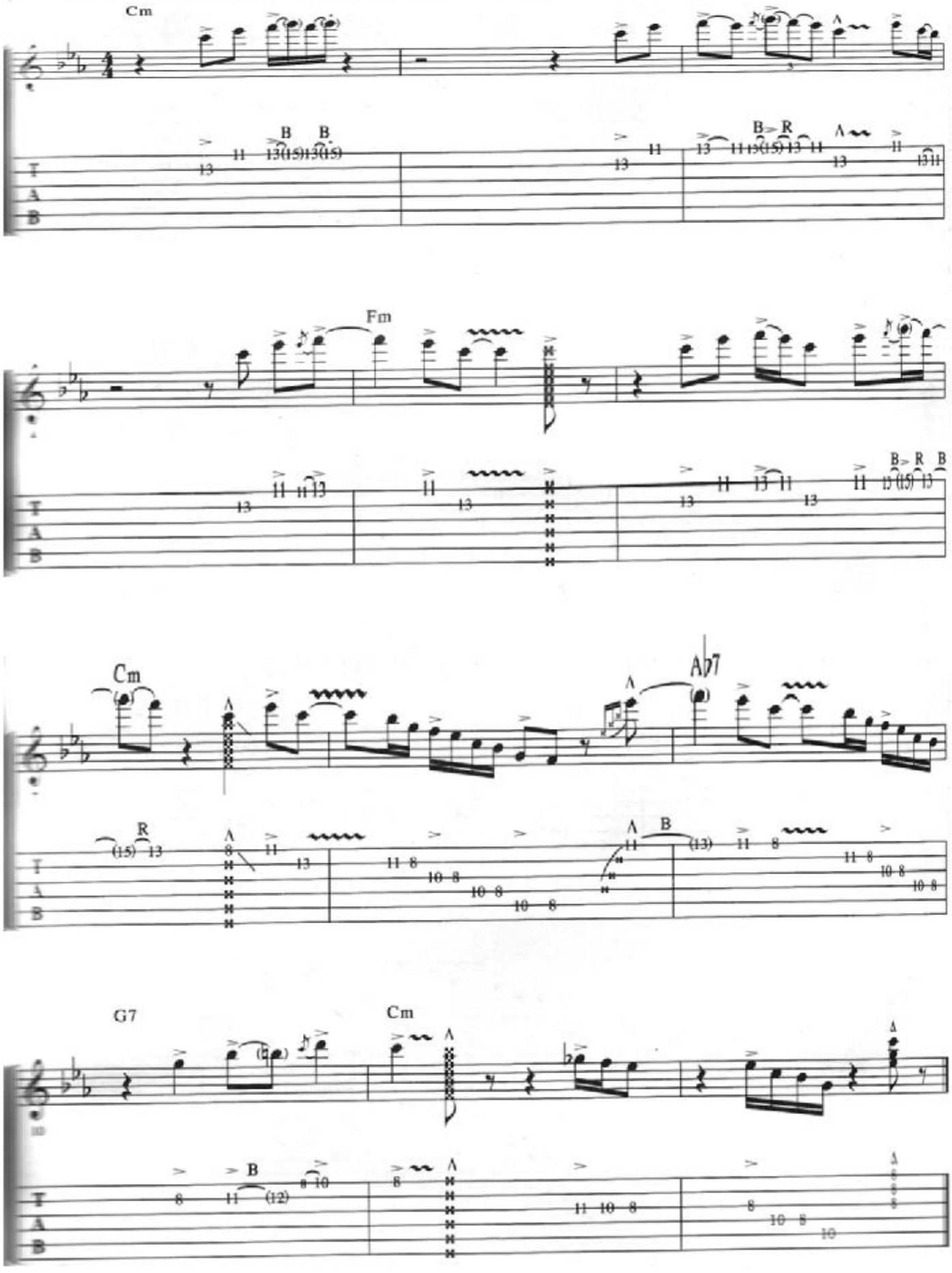


THE THRILL IS GONE/INTRO

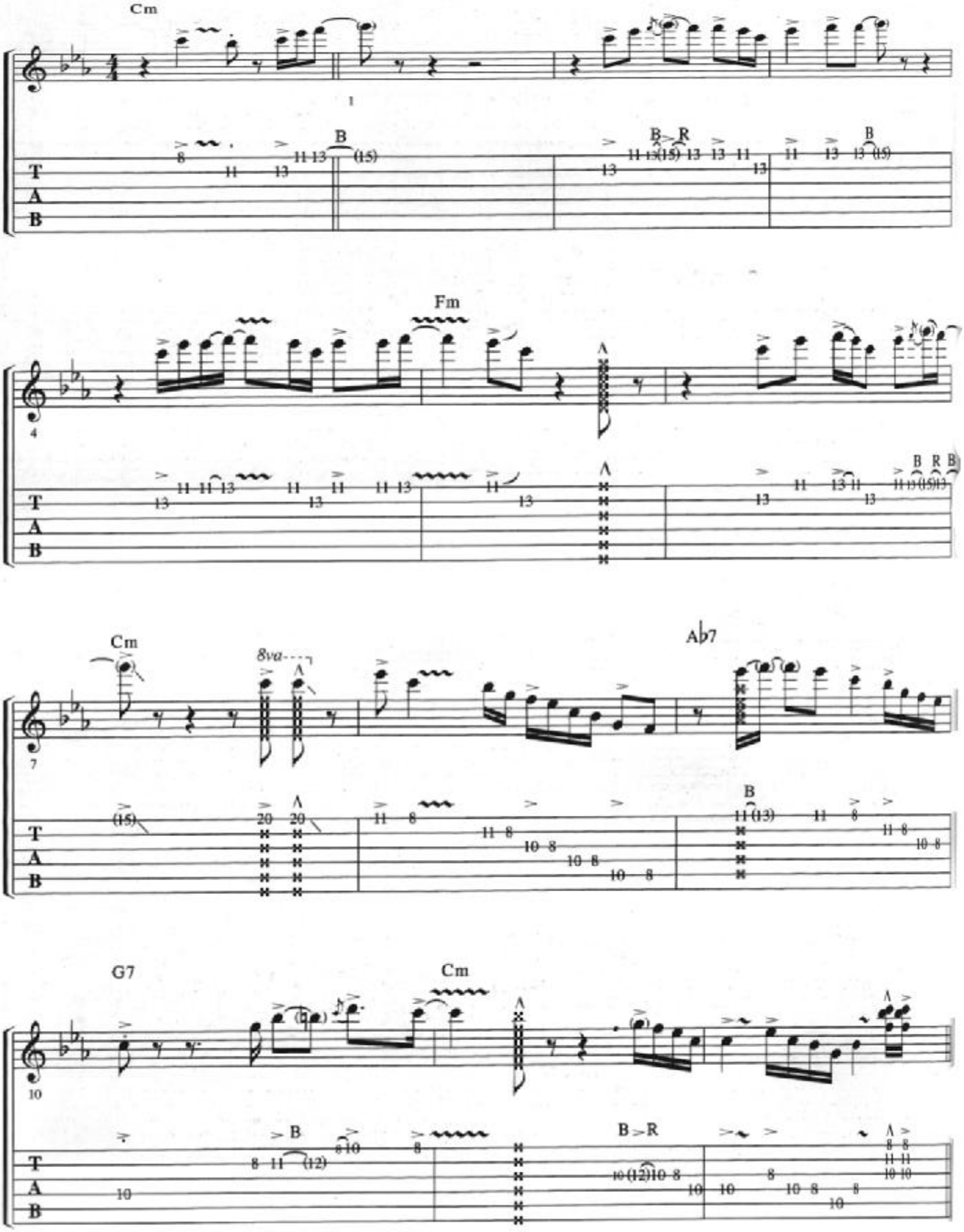
B.B. primarily uses the C minor pentatonic scale to solo over "The Thrill Is Gone." He adds the flatted fifth (G♭) in bar 11 of the first solo and bars 21, 26 and 30 of the second solo. He also uses the natural sixth (A♮) in bars 43–44, 47–49 and 53–54 of the second solo, thus hinting at the C dorian mode. Once again, B.B. displays his depth and natural musicianship.

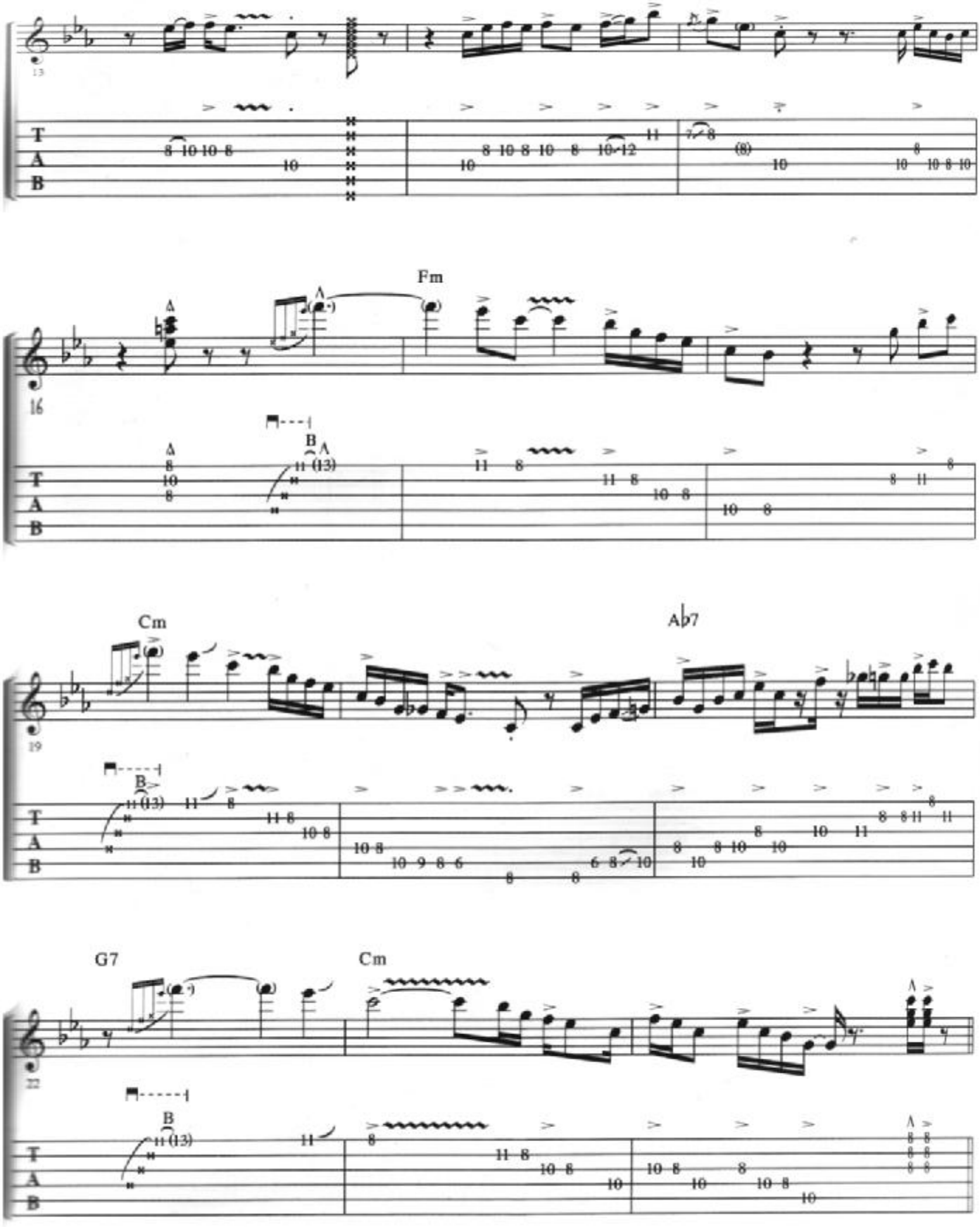


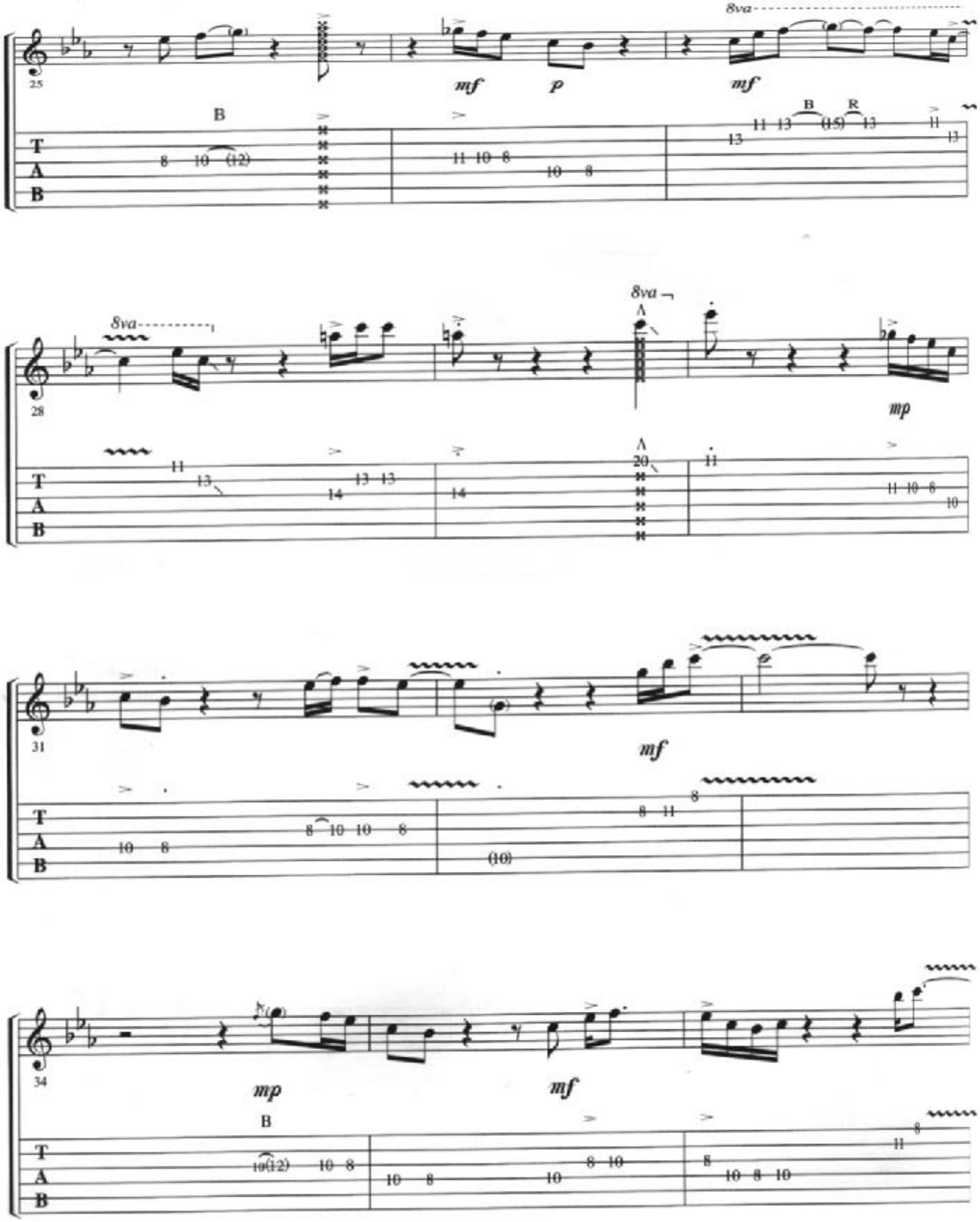
THE THRILL IS GONE/FIRST SOLO

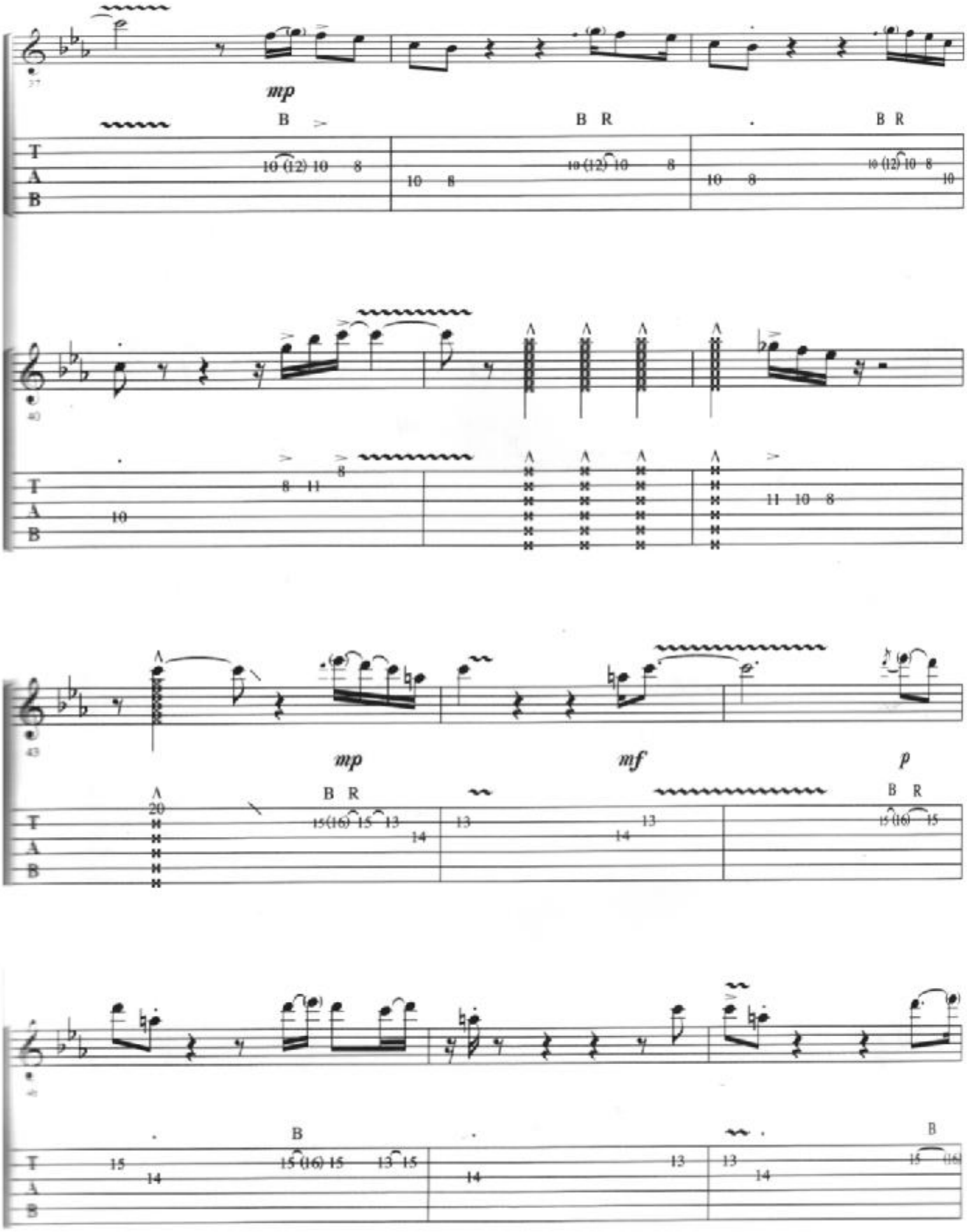


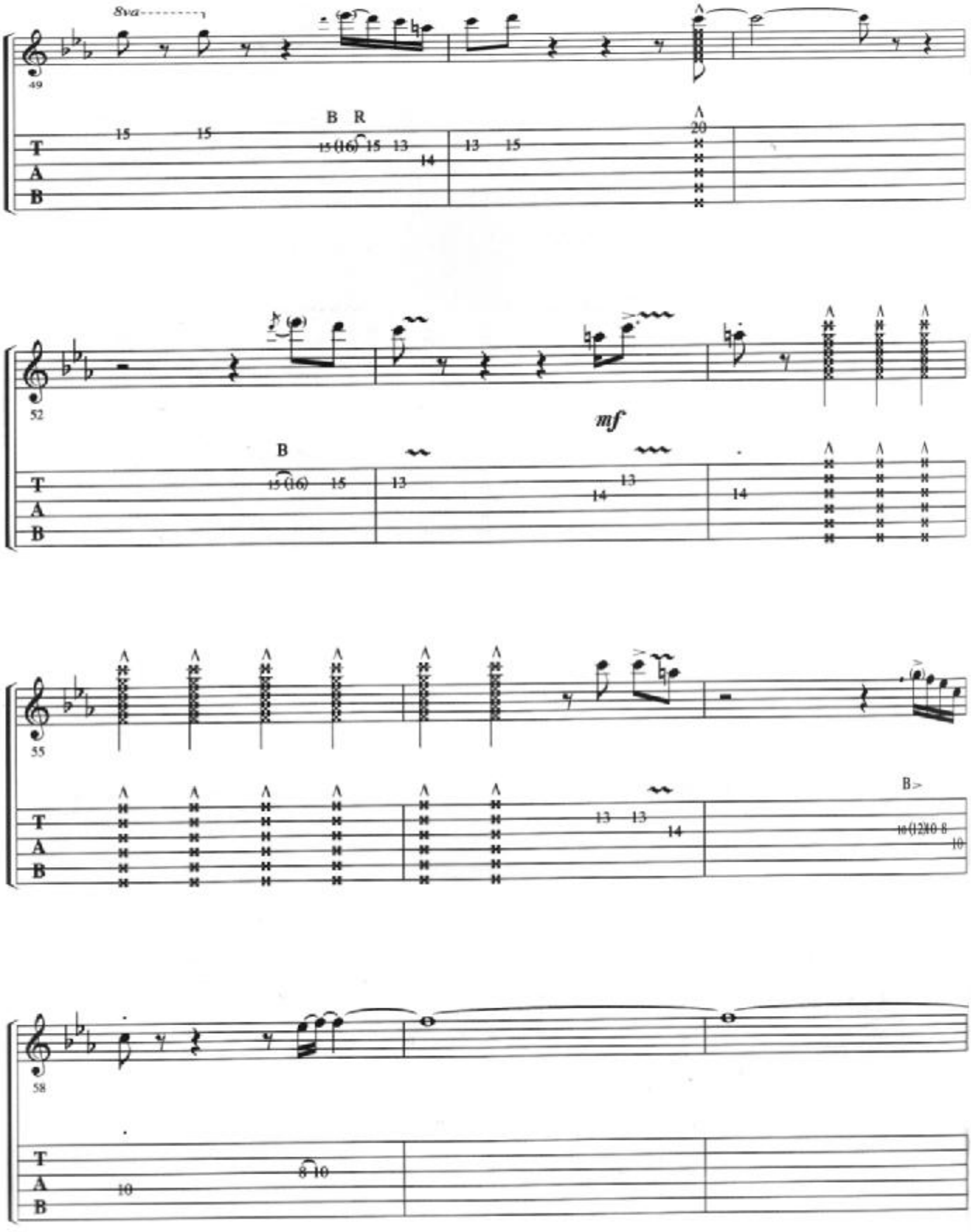
THE THRILL IS GONE/SECOND SOLO

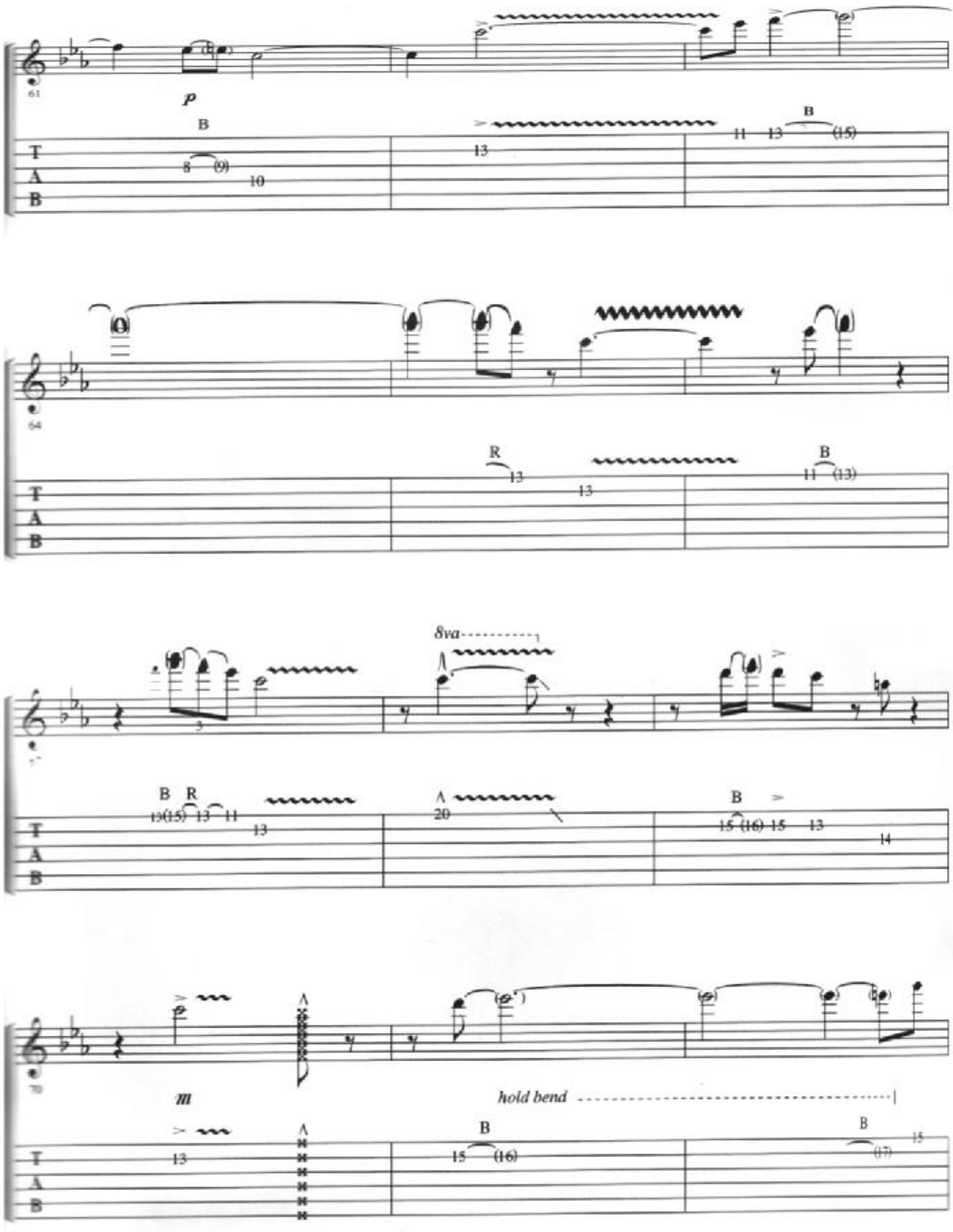


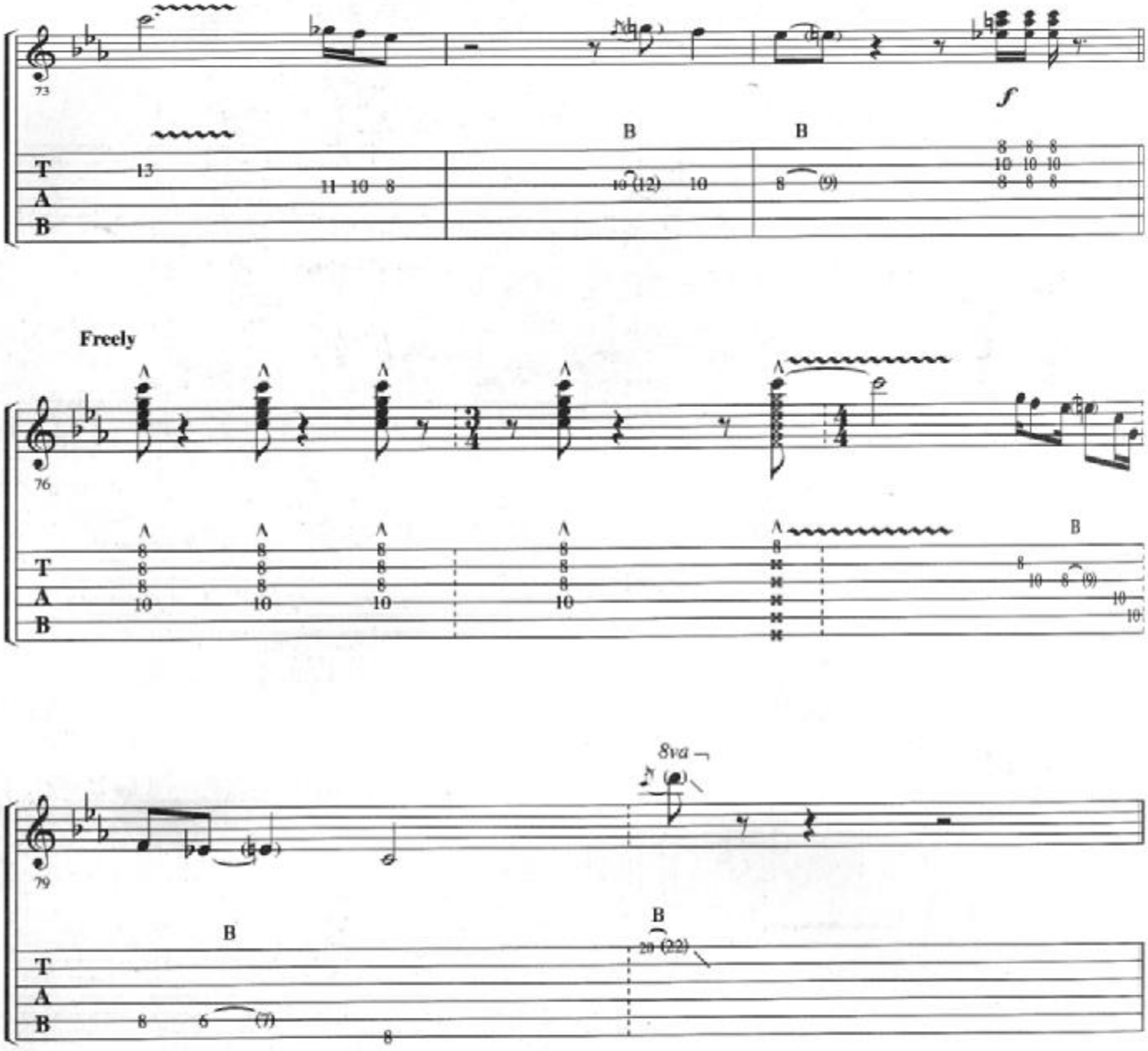

13
T
A
B
Fm
16
A
B
Cm
Ab7
19
G7
Cm
22


25
8va
mf
p
mf
B
R
28
8va
8va
mp
31
mf
34
mp
mf
B


mp
B
B R
B R
mp
mf
p
B R
B R
B
B


8va
49
B R
15 15 15 (16) 15 13 14 13 15 20
52
mf
B
15 (16) 15 13 13 14 14
55
B
13 13 14 10 (12) 10 8 10
58
8 10
10


61
p
B
8 (9) 10
13
11 13 (15)
64
R
13
13
B
11 (13)
8va
B R
13(15) 13 11
13
20
B
15 (16) 15 13
14
m
hold bend
13
15 (16)
B
(17)
15


73
f
B
B
T
A
B
13
11 10 8
10 (12) 10
8 (9)
Freely
76
79
8va
B
B
20 (22)
8 6 (7) 8