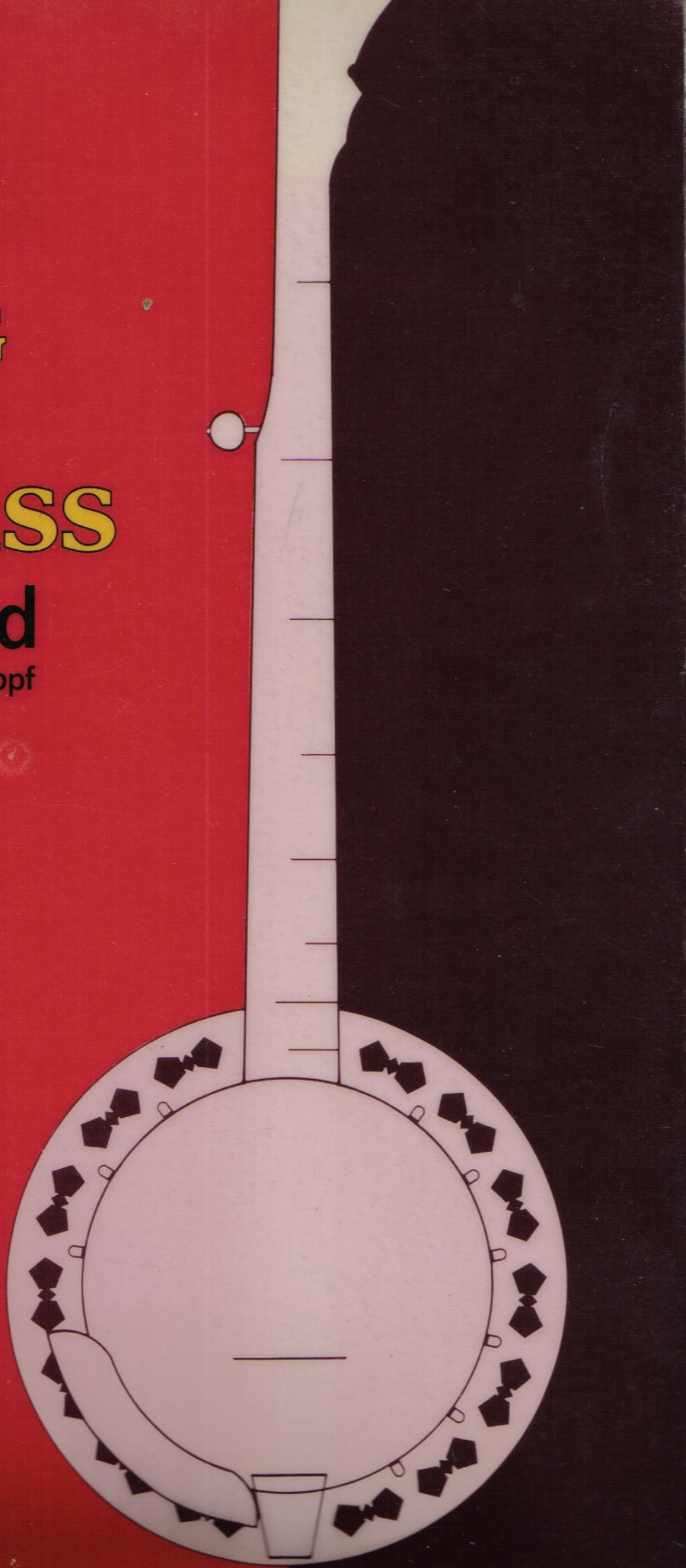
Bill Knopf's 5-STRING MELODIC BLUEGRASS Banjo Method

by Bill Knopf



Charles Anderson Publications

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Foreword

This book is a complete and comprehensive step-by-step Melodic Style method for the progressive bluegrass banjo player. It contains all the essential techniques, pertinent scales, scale patterns, and arpeggios necessary for masterful melodic bluegrass soloing. There is an abundance of licks utilizing each type of scale and arpeggio, and the section on improvisation demonstrates how to assemble licks to fit the chord progressions of many popular bluegrass songs. In addition, there are several arrangements of bluegrass instrumentals, songs and fiddle-tunes combining the techniques in this book.

EDITOR–CHARLES ANDERSON PRODUCTION–CATHYE LYNNE SMITHWICK COVER ILLUSTRATION–MIKE SMITHWICK

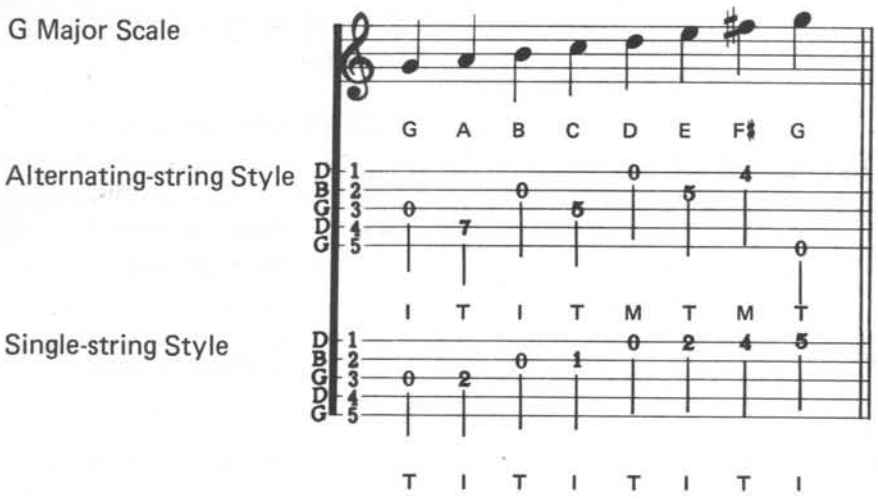
Introducing the Melodic Style

Back in the '40's and '50's, when Earl Scruggs developed his style of playing, he integrated melody notes with filler notes, which, though not a part of the melody, were usually a part of the chord. In effect he combined melody with harmony. Because of the efficient right-hand picking patterns that Scruggs developed called rolls, his music flows along smoothly. His driving style of playing will always be the backbone of Bluegrass music.

Don Reno, one of bluegrass banjo's greatest innovators, decided that roll patterns alone did not incorporate enough melody notes into his arrangements. He discovered that it was possible to use the thumb and index finger of the right hand to copy the down-and-up motion of a flatpick, and this enabled him to pick a string two or more times in a row. Sometimes he would use this technique for just a couple of notes, and other times he would play long single-string passages. This technique, although only one aspect of Don Reno's playing, is often referred to as "Reno Style".

In the late '50's and early '60's, the alternating-string style of melody playing began making its debut in bluegrass music. In this style, the object is to avoid picking a string twice in a row when playing scalular type passages. Fiddle-tunes were perhaps the most popular music utilizing this technique. In all probability, it was Bobby Thompson who first recorded in this style on the records of Carl Story and Jim and Jesse. It is, however, the name of Bill Keith, a veteran of Bill Monroe's bluegrass band and the recipient of much greater exposure, whose name has become synonymous with this style today. At present, this style of banjo picking is referred to as the Melodic, Keith or Chromatic style.

Before proceeding to work the lessons and arrangements in this book, the reader may find the following example to be useful in understanding the basic difference between the alternating-string and single-string approach to playing scalular licks and passages. The fundamental difference between the two styles is that in the alternating-string style one never plays the same string twice in a row. In the single-string style, however, a string may be played many times in a row.* To illustrate this, examine the G major scale and two ways it can be played:



*In the overall scope of melodic playing, it will sometimes be necessary, or else more practical, to play a string two or more times in succession.

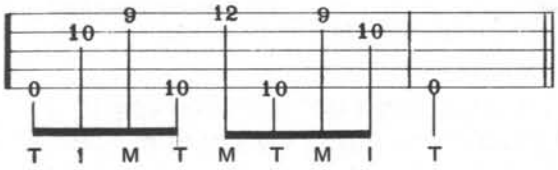
The Left Hand

The fingers of the fretting hand should be arched over the fingerboard so that only the tips are allowed to press the strings. This posture of the left hand will require that the fingernails be kept short. Long nails will often force the fingers to lean in the direction of the lower-numbered strings, possibly touching and muting them. The base of the thumb should rest against the center of the neck, approximately opposite the position of the first finger. Never grip or clutch the neck in the palm or inner part of the hand like you would a baseball bat.

When fretting, it is often desireable to cock the fingers slightly to the left, pressing with the left portion of the fingertips. The fingers should press as close to the frets as possible without actually touching them, or else the notes will be dampened. Firm pressure is required when pressing the strings, to avoid "buzzing" on the frets.

Fingers not in use should hover in a position directly over the fingerboard at a short distance from the strings. This posture allows the hand to perform with greater speed and accuracy. Whenever possible, try to finger a group of notes in advance of the right-hand picking pattern. As the notes are played, do not lift the fingers off the fingerboard immediately, but rather, allow them to overlap. This sustainment is the major characteristic of the alternating-string style of melodic banjo playing. If you anticipate returning to earlier played notes, try to continue holding them throughout the entire passage.

In this example, the first string, 9th fret and second string, 10th fret should be held during the entire phrase; in fact, these notes should be fingered as the first note is being played or slightly before. After the fifth string, 10th fret is fingered, continue to hold it until the open fifth string is needed again.

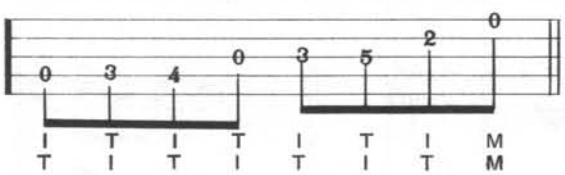


Right-hand Fingerings

In performing scale passages, one will have to determine the right-hand fingerings. With knowledge of double-thumbing, rolls, inside rolls, and crossover patterns, it should be fairly obvious — simply avoid using the same finger to play consecutive eighth-notes.

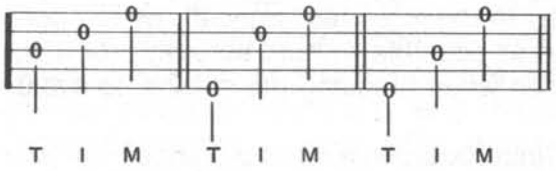
There are situations where there will be two right-hand fingering possibilities. For example, in the following scale, one must play the first six notes in the single-string style; however, consider this: if you were to begin with the index finger, by the time you come to the 2nd and 1st strings, they will fit into a forward roll instead of the more intricate crossover pattern.

Bb Pentatonic Plus ♯2 and ♯5



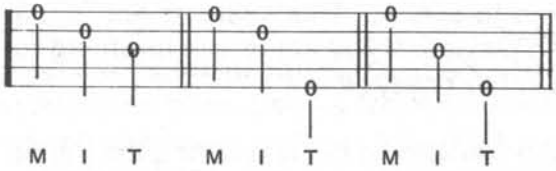
Right-hand Picking Patterns

Unlike Scruggs style, where most everything evolves around roll patterns, the melodic style is concerned with the order of notes. A melody, scale, or pattern will very seldom fit into established Scruggs rolls for any great length of time; therefore it is necessary to play the desired note sequence using whatever right-hand devices are required. The following will illustrate the types of patterns that will be needed.



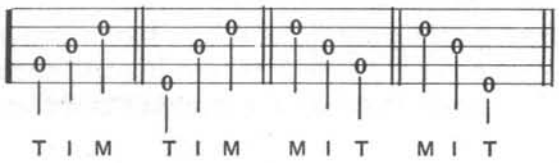
Forward Roll

This is where the thumb, index and middle fingers pick the strings in that order. (T-I-M).



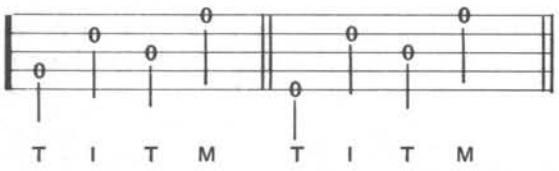
Backward Roll

This is simply the opposite of a forward roll. (M-I-T).



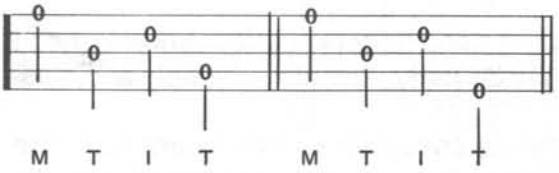
Inside Roll

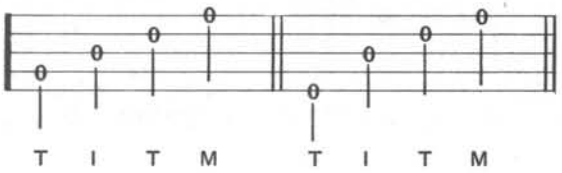
Here it is necessary to bring the middle finger "inside" to pick the second string. These rolls may be either forward or backward.



Double-thumbing

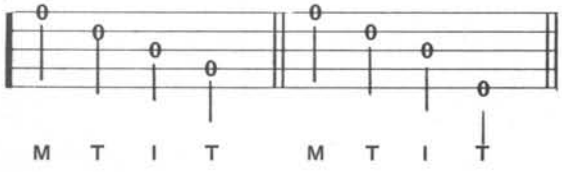
In this style of picking, the thumb alternates with the fingers, playing every other note.





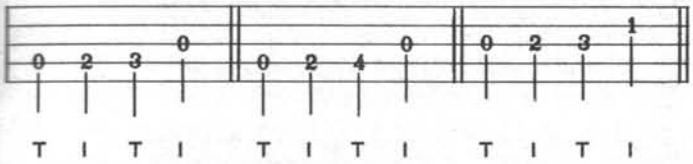
Cross-over Patterns

These patterns are a form of double-thumbing. By crossing the thumb over the index finger to pick the second string, it will be possible to play four different strings consecutively without using the same finger twice in a row. These patterns may also be either forward or backward.



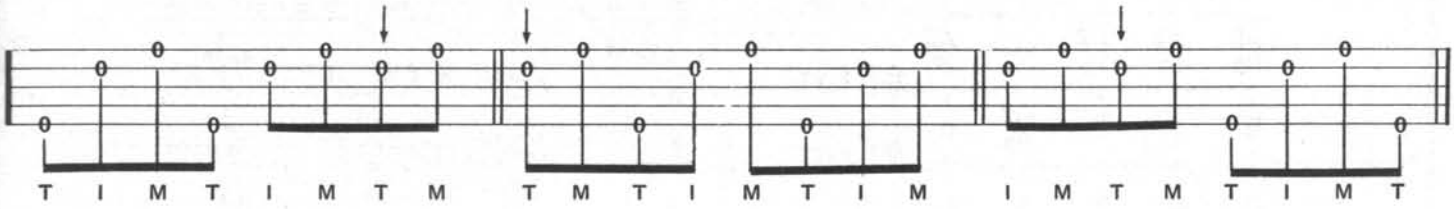
Single-string Technique

One aspect of the melodic style is that you don't pick the same string twice in a row. Since most notes are playable in more than one position, it is possible to execute scales by alternating strings; however, in the case of the notes on the fourth string, from the open string up to the 4th fret, there is only one way to play them, therefore it will be necessary to pick this string two or three times in a row, alternating between the thumb and index finger. This technique will occasionally apply to other situations, usually to avoid large reaches or leaps of the left hand.

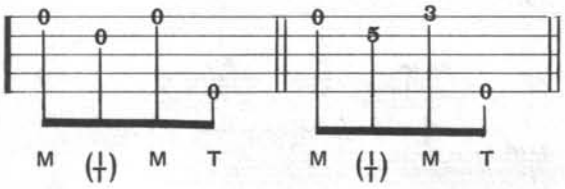


Drop-thumb (to Second String)

Many years ago when I was first learning to play banjo, I received some valuable pointers from Douglas Dillard. Among them was the use of the "drop-thumb" to the second string in some of Earl Scruggs' picking patterns.

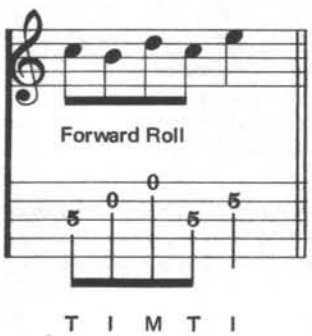


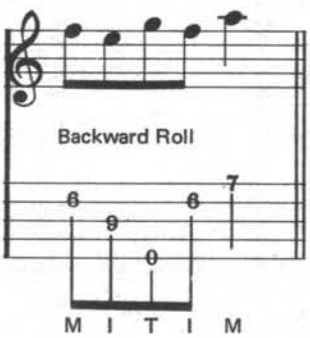
If you examine the three patterns above, you will notice they are exactly the same — the only difference is that they begin at different points. Once in awhile, one will encounter these patterns in the melodic style; more often, one will find isolated cases where he will have to play the 1st, 2nd, then 1st string again. When I first discovered this pattern, I chose to use the thumb to play the 2nd string, thinking it was an extension of the Scruggs drop-thumb principle. To this day I still use the thumb, even after learning that almost every prominent melodic-style player prefers the index finger. Therefore, I'm leaving the choice up to you.



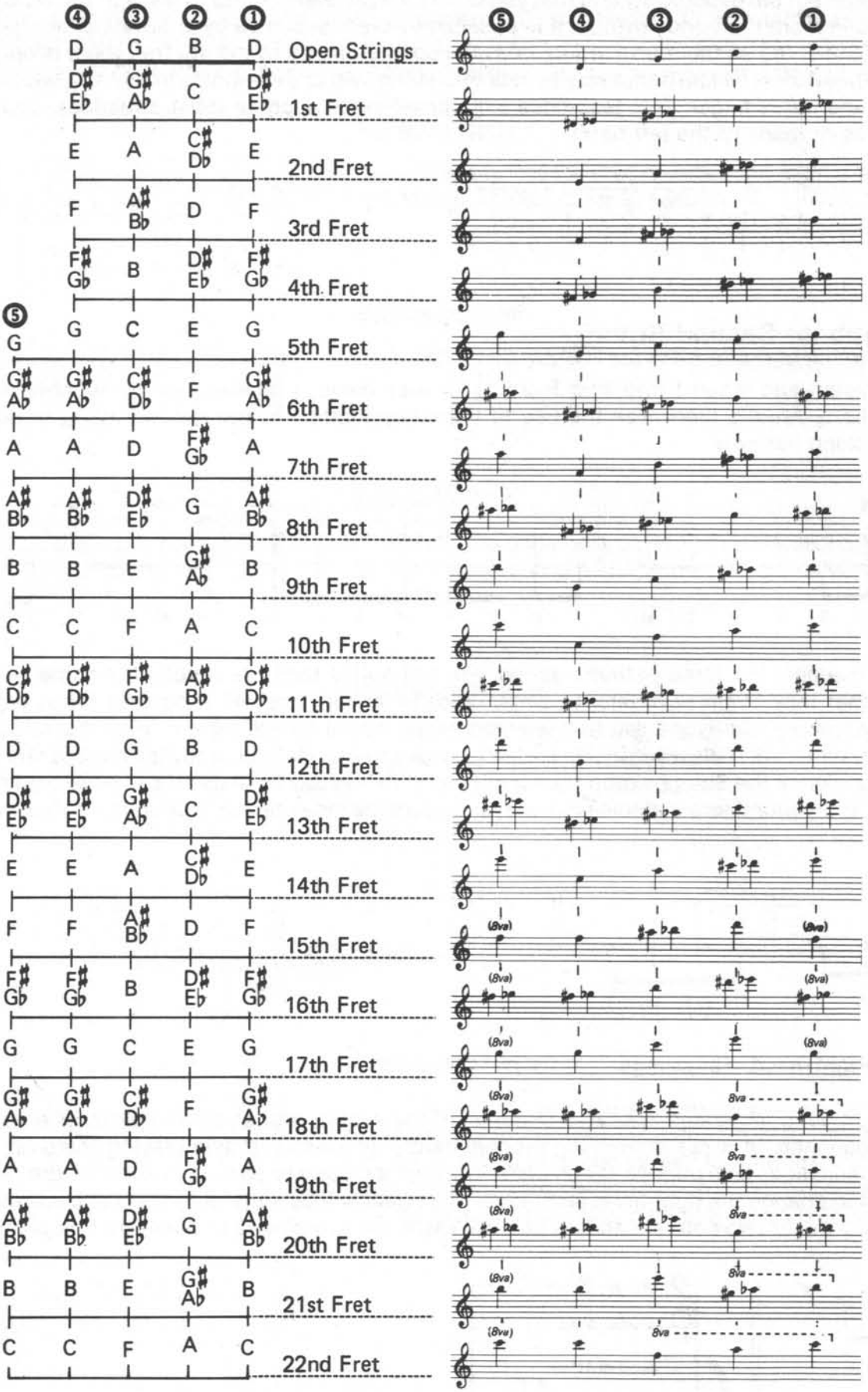
Alternate Right-hand Fingerings

The right-hand fingerings indicated under all of the scales, arpeggios and patterns are for executing an entire sequence. In areas containing predominantly single-string style playing there are usually two fingering possibilities (see page 5). When starting within a crossover pattern, usually on the second note, it is advisable to change the right-hand fingerings. The result will be either a forward or backward roll. In the case of the C major two-note ascending pattern, there are two places to illustrate this point.





Fingerboard Chart



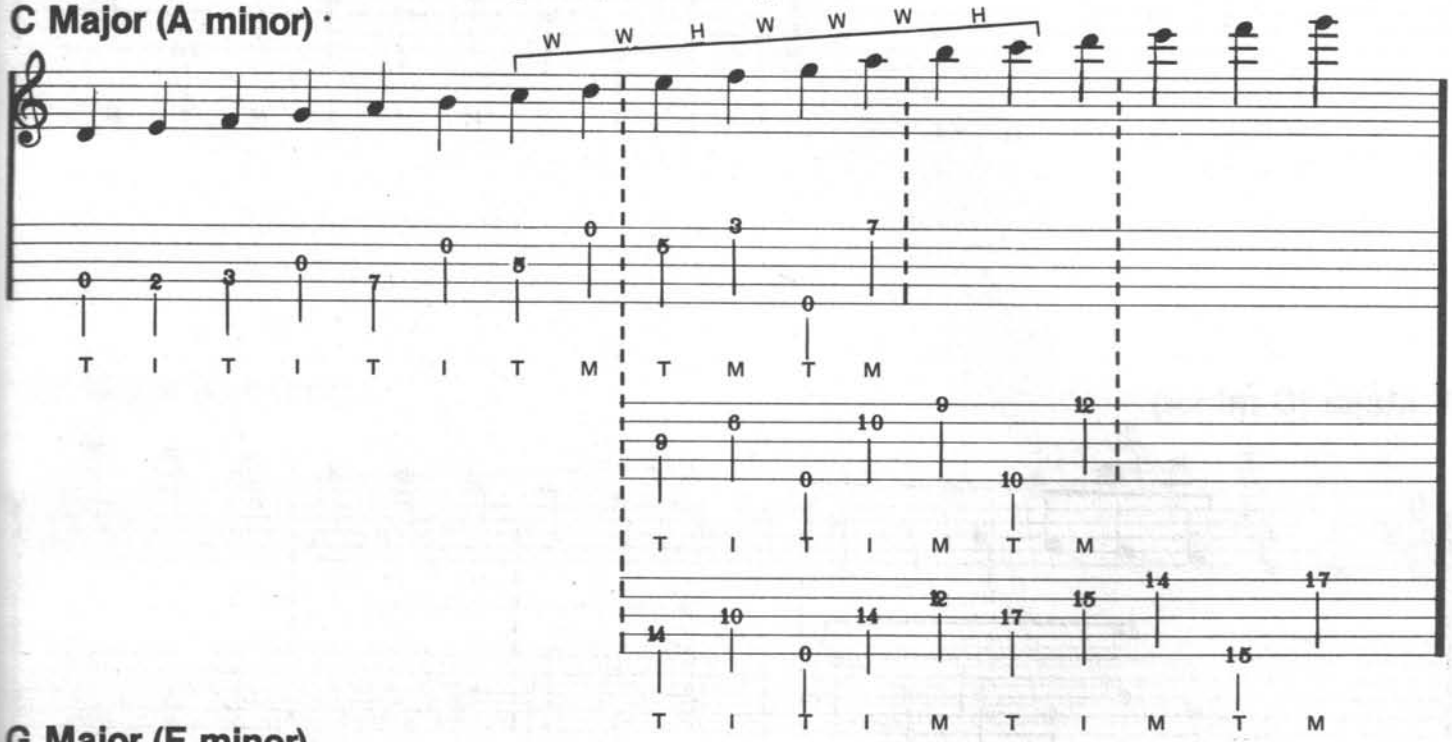
Major Scales

The following six major scales are presented in three ranges: low, medium and high. There are three routes — one for each range, and they are the same for each scale. The right-hand picking is identical also; the only difference occurs in the keys of F, Bb and Eb where the open B string is not playable. Instead, Bb must be played on the third string, 3rd fret. When this occurs it will be necessary to incorporate the single-string technique, just as it will be to play the first three notes on the 4th string. Since these notes are not playable on any other strings, it will be impossible to use the alternating string technique.

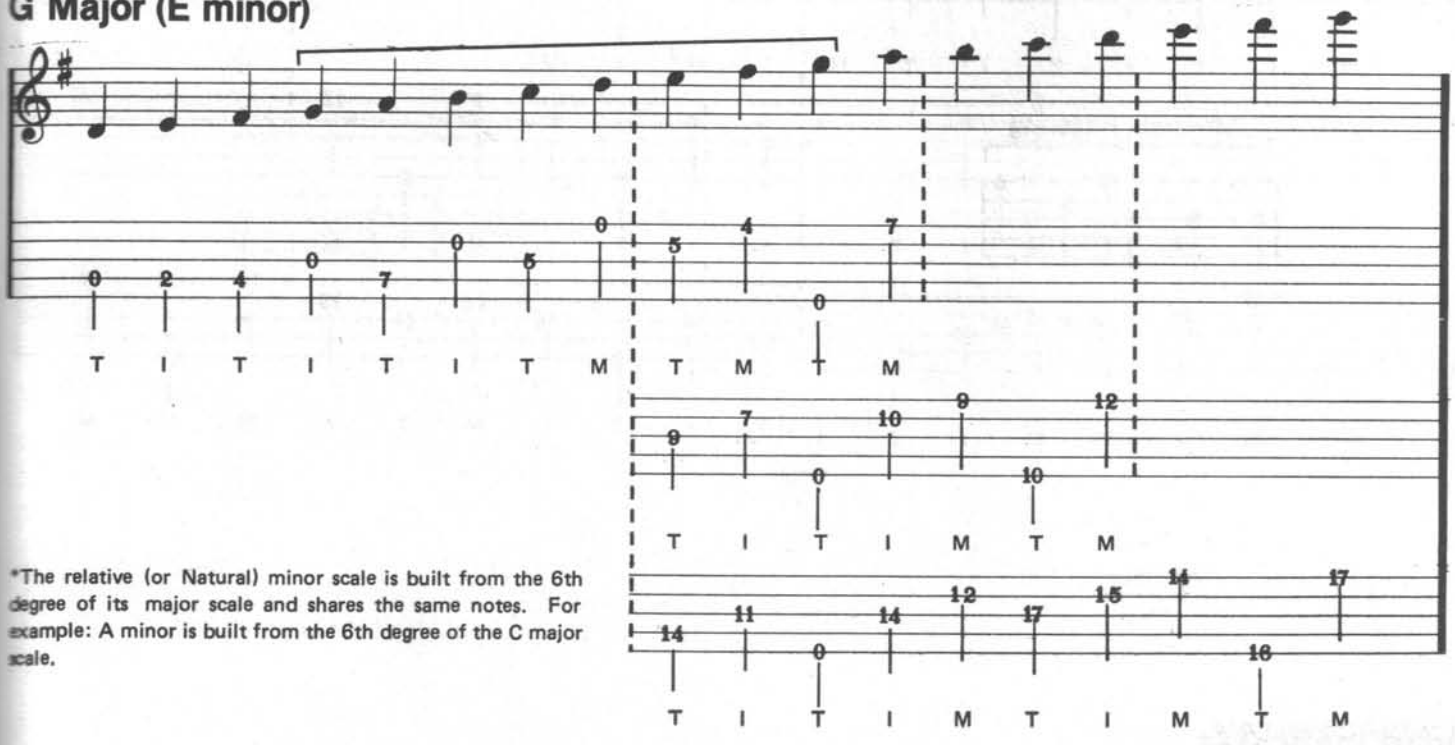
One important procedure a melodic-style player should observe; is to have an open string playable between left-hand fingerings. These open strings will "smooth-out" the fingering changes by having at least one note sustaining during the change. Pat Cloud appropriately calls this procedure "point-of-departure". There are times, however, when an open string will not be available — as in the third range between the notes B and C. In a situation like this, a player will have to "muscle" his way to the next fingering as quickly as possible.

All major scales are constructed using the following succession of intervals, or formula: whole-step, whole-step, half-step, whole, whole, whole, half. The first note of a scale (tonic), is also the letter name of the scale. Practice each scale by beginning and ending on the tonic.

C Major (A minor)*

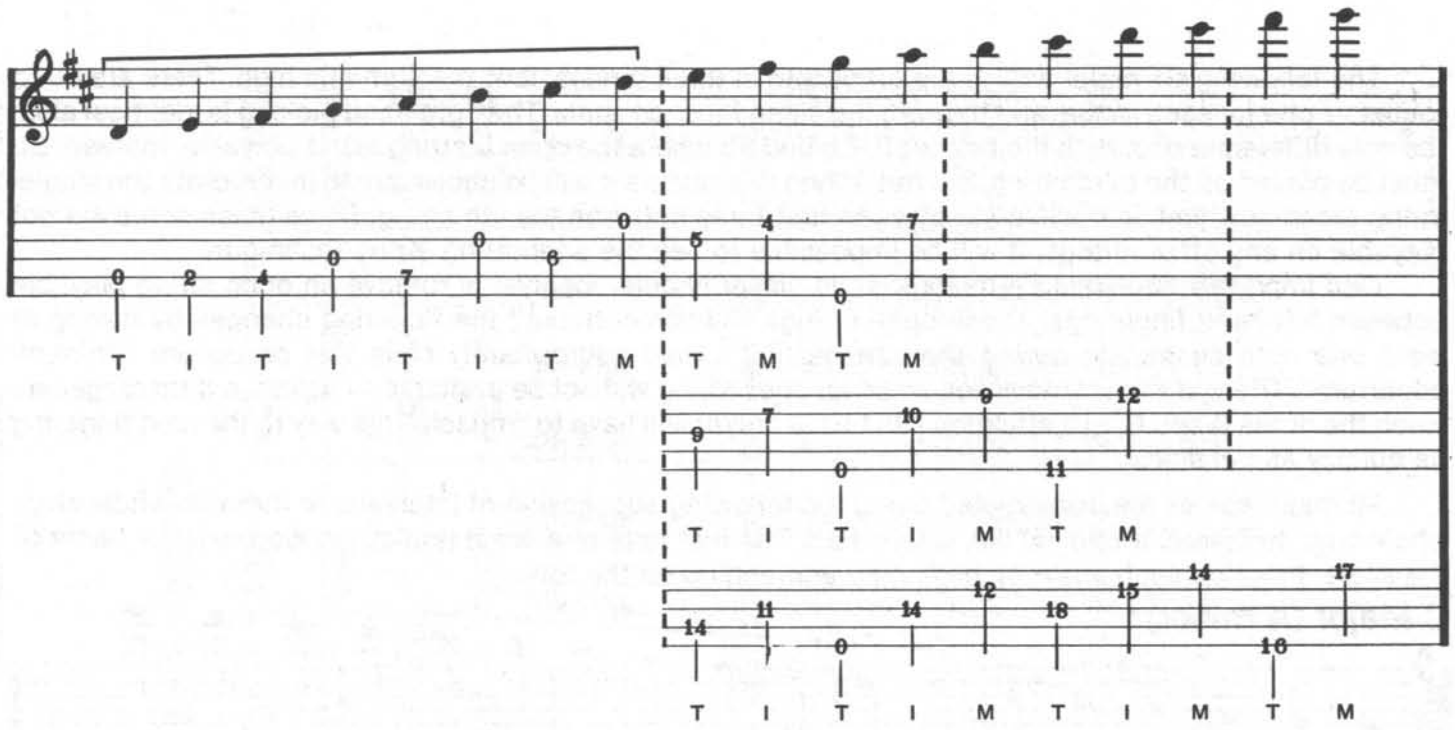


G Major (E minor)

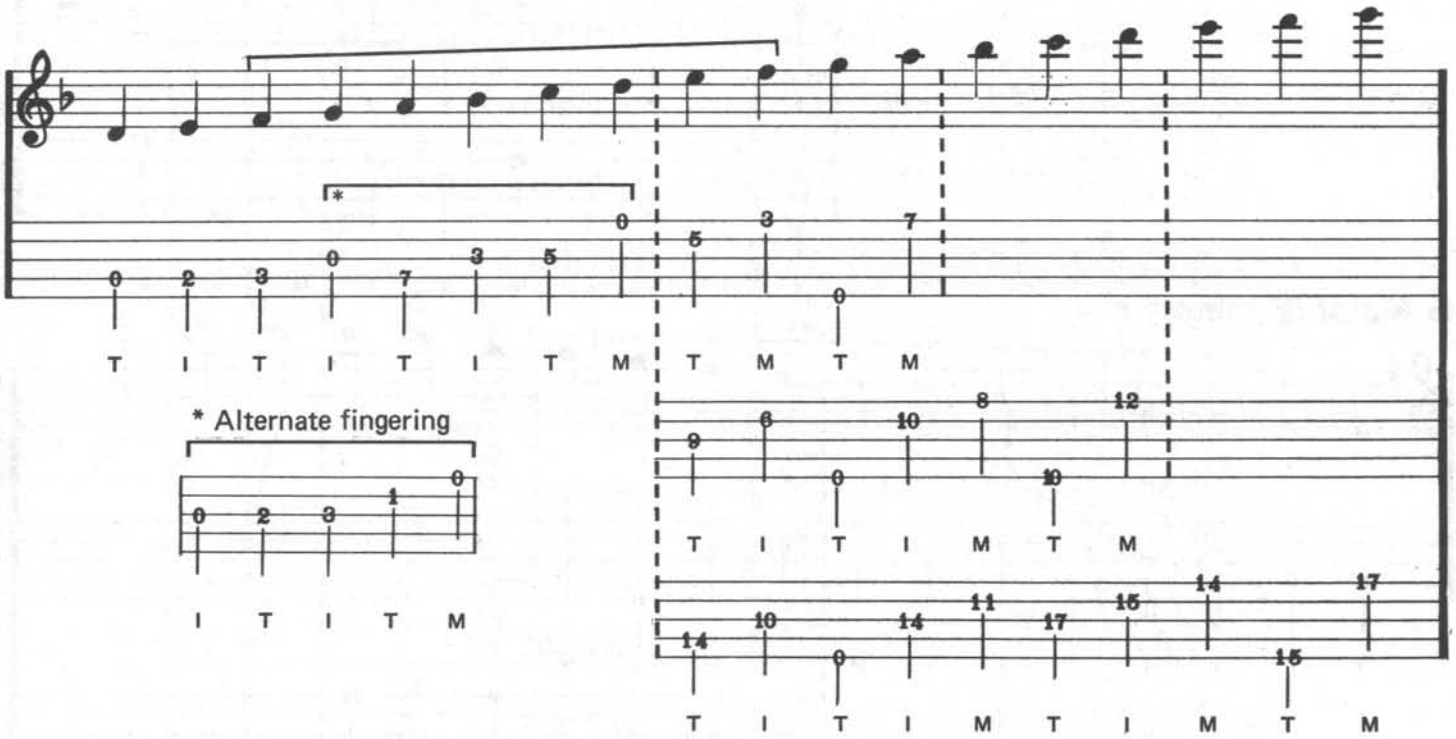


*The relative (or Natural) minor scale is built from the 6th degree of its major scale and shares the same notes. For example: A minor is built from the 6th degree of the C major scale.

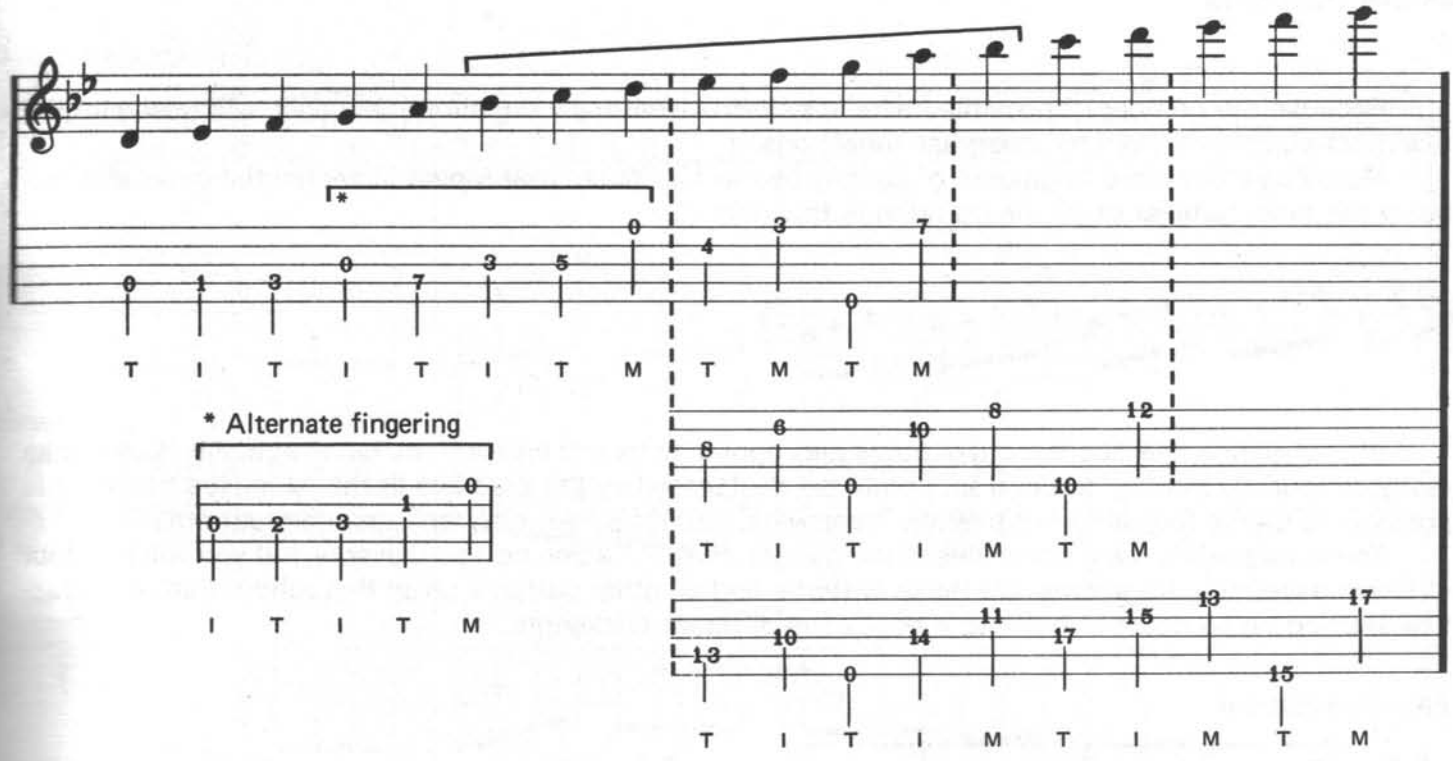
D Major (B minor)



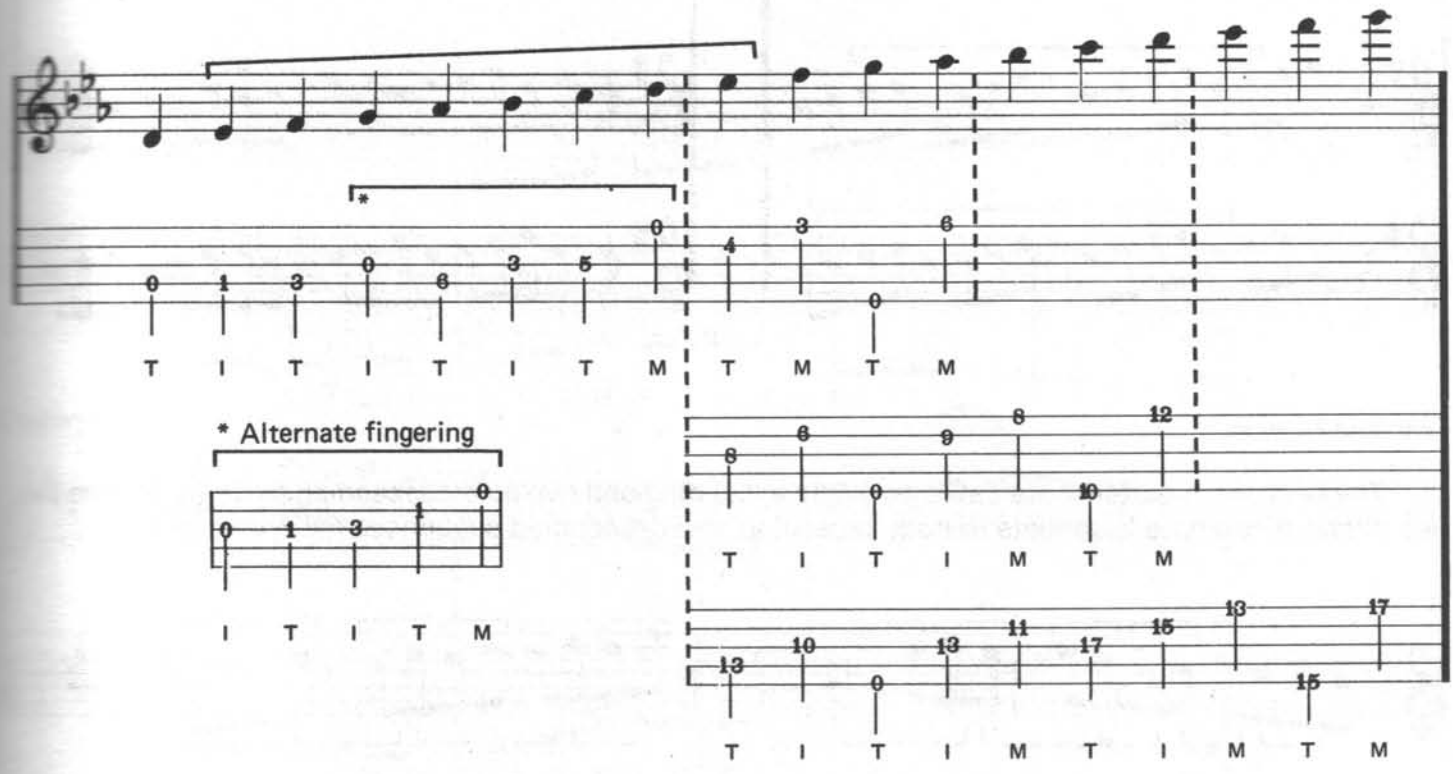
F Major (D minor)



Bb Major (G minor)



Eb Major (C minor)



Scale Patterns

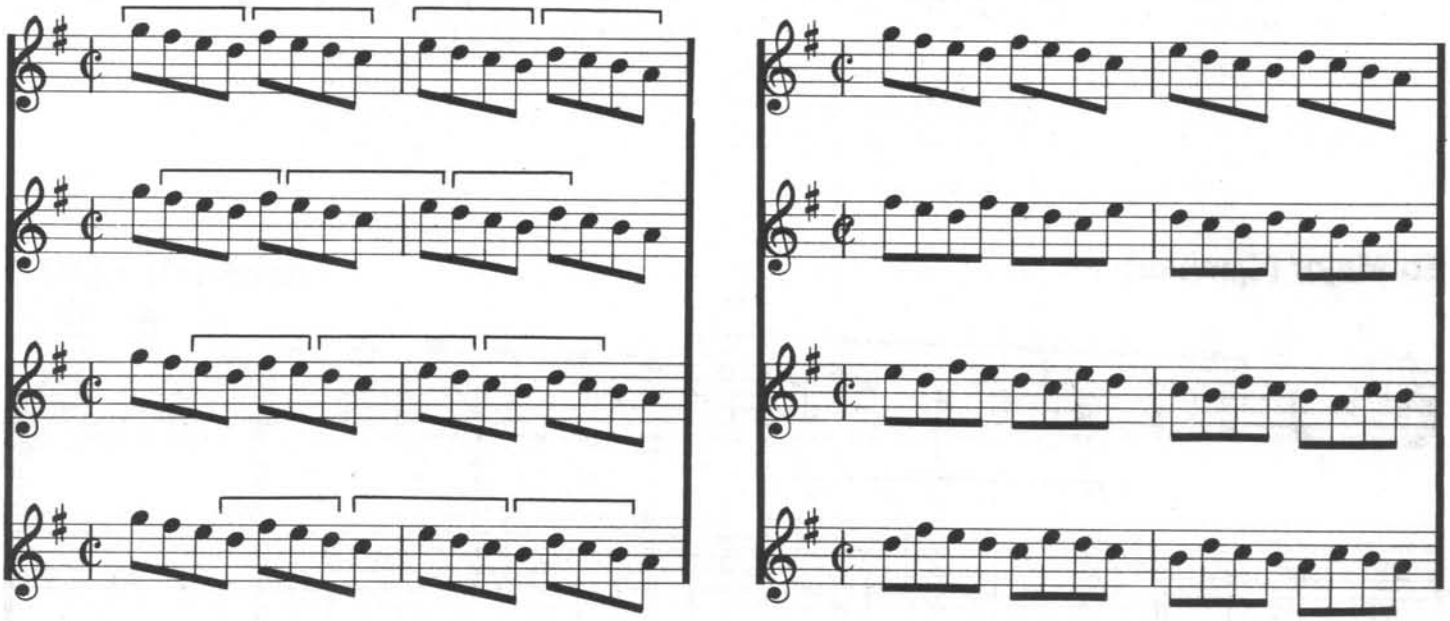
Because the number of possible melodic patterns is virtually unlimited, this book will deal with the few most commonly used by bluegrass musicians.

Melodic patterns are fragments of usually two to four notes that repeat in sequential order, and probably the most familiar of all the patterns is this one:

At first glance, this succession of notes may appear to be just one pattern, but in actuality it can be as many as four. By starting at different points (as designated by the brackets in the examples below), it is possible to create four different melodic fragments, and thus, four different sounding patterns.

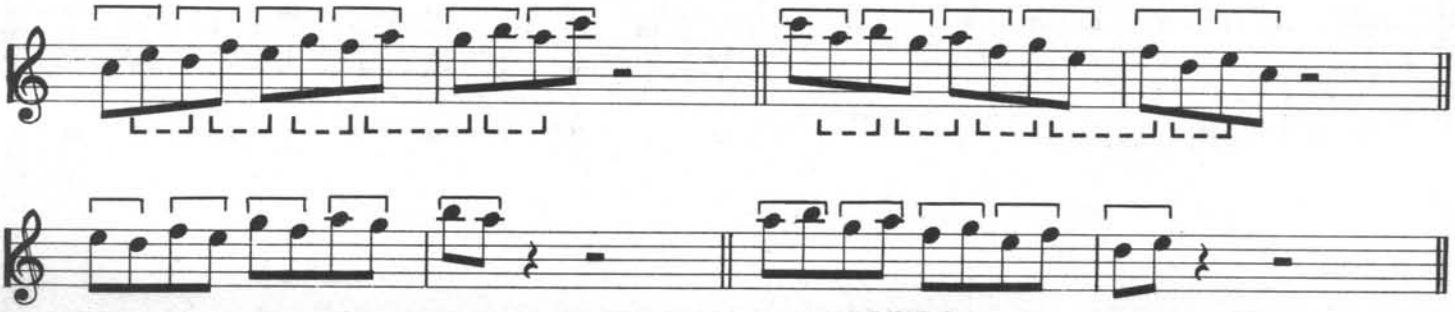
These fragments are given in descending order. Play the same notes in reverse and you will find four different ascending fragments. On these patterns and all other patterns given throughout this text, practice starting on all notes in order to produce the different fragments.

Four-note Patterns



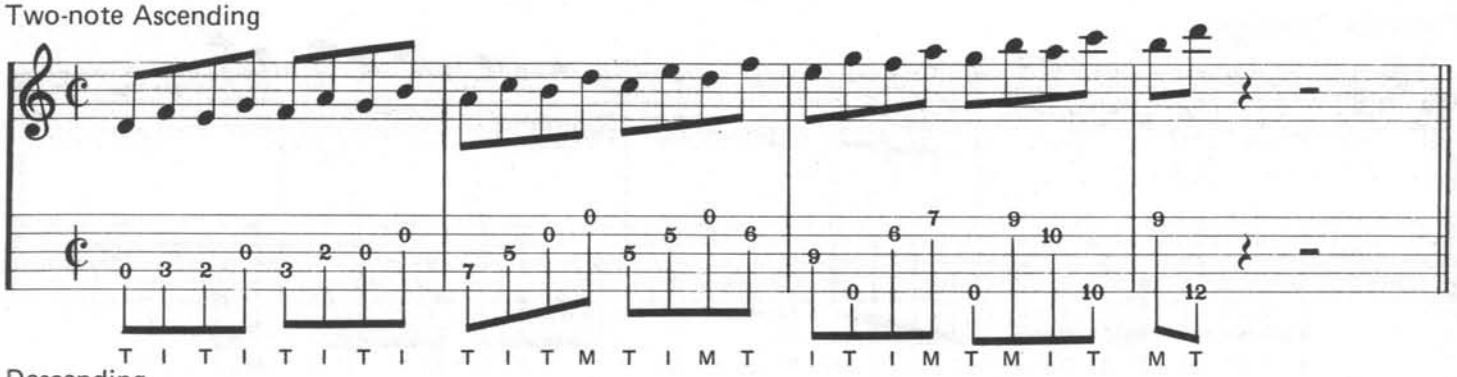
Two-note Patterns

The next set of patterns are called two-note ascending and two-note descending patterns. Notice the two different two-note fragments in both ascending and descending sequences illustrated below.

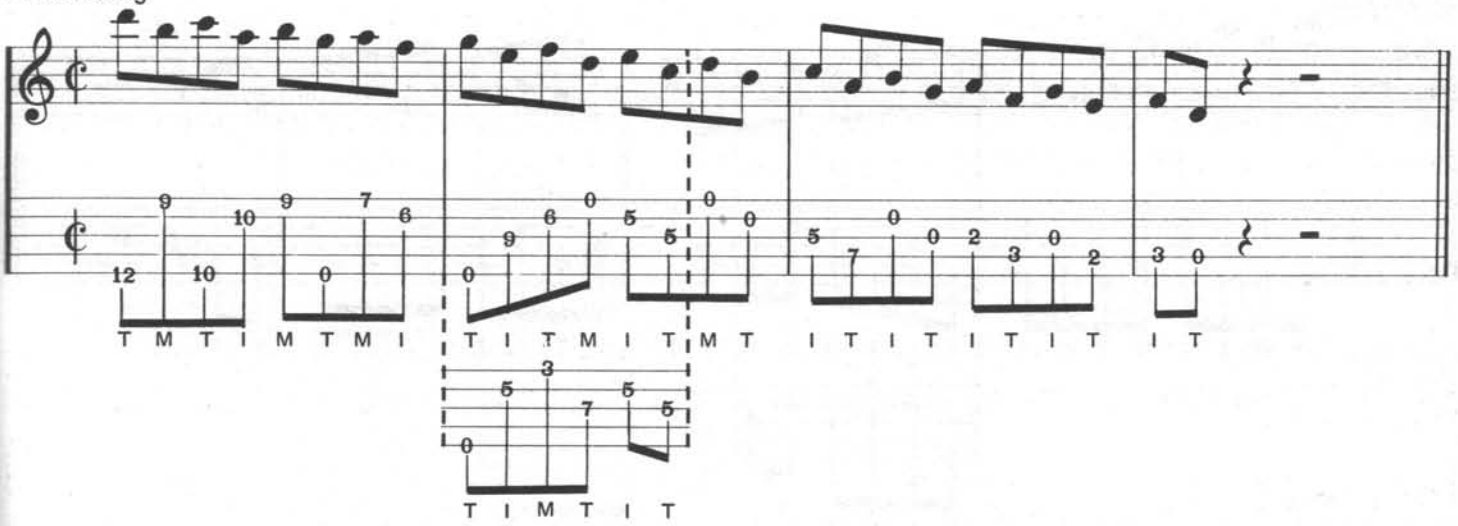


C Major (A minor) Patterns

Two-note Ascending

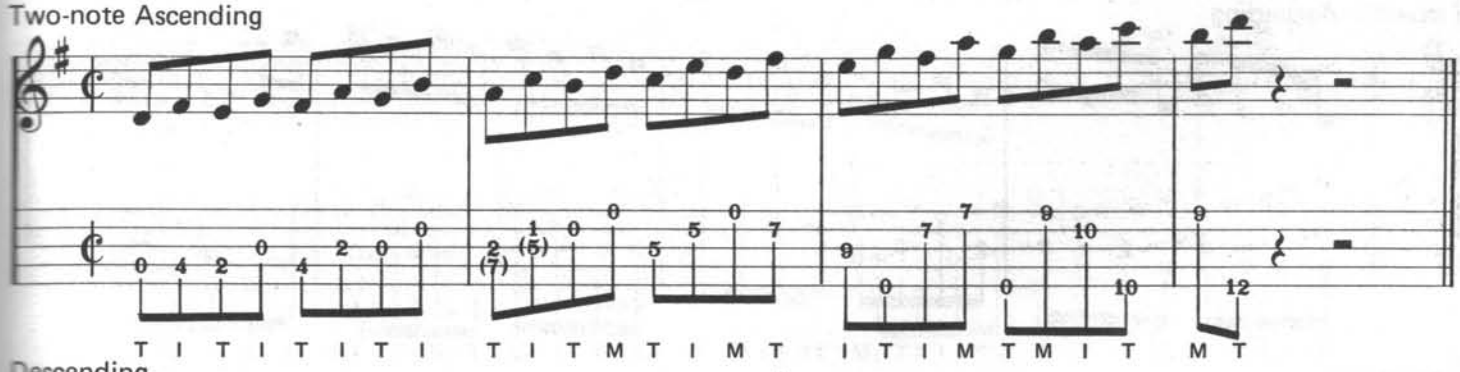


Descending

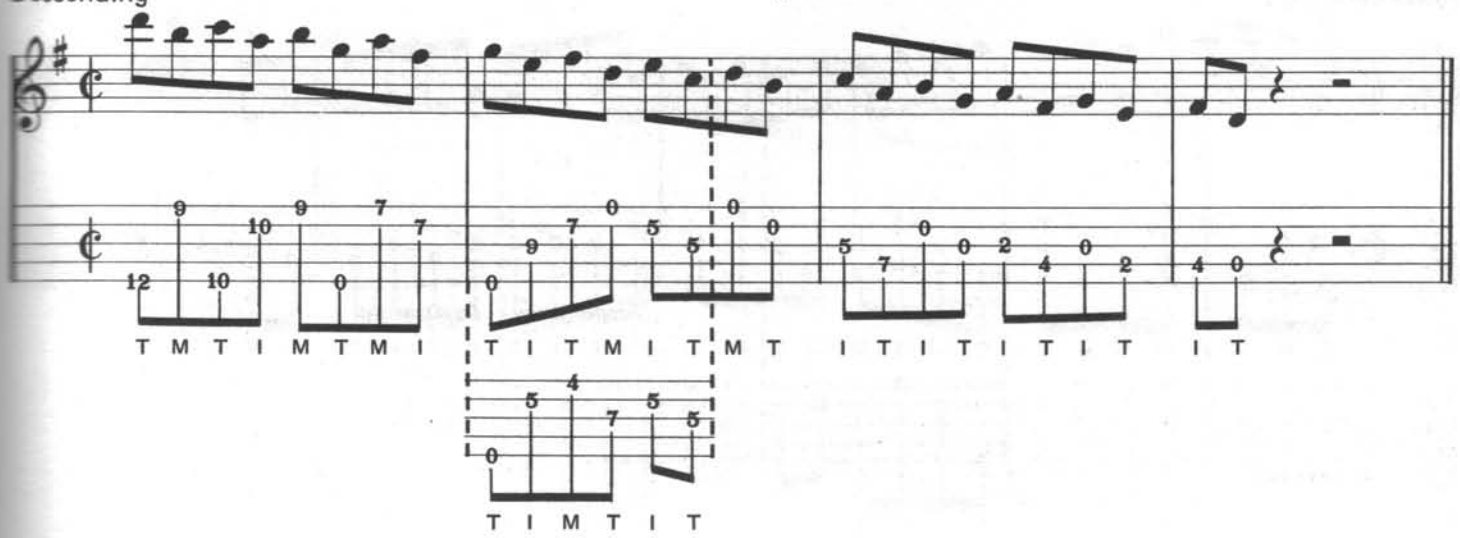


G Major (E minor) Patterns

Two-note Ascending

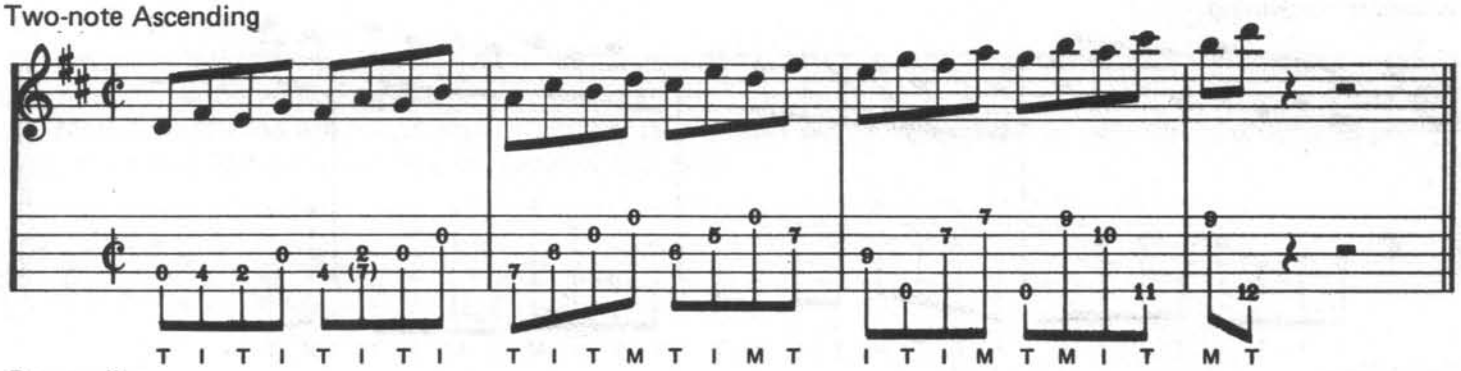


Descending

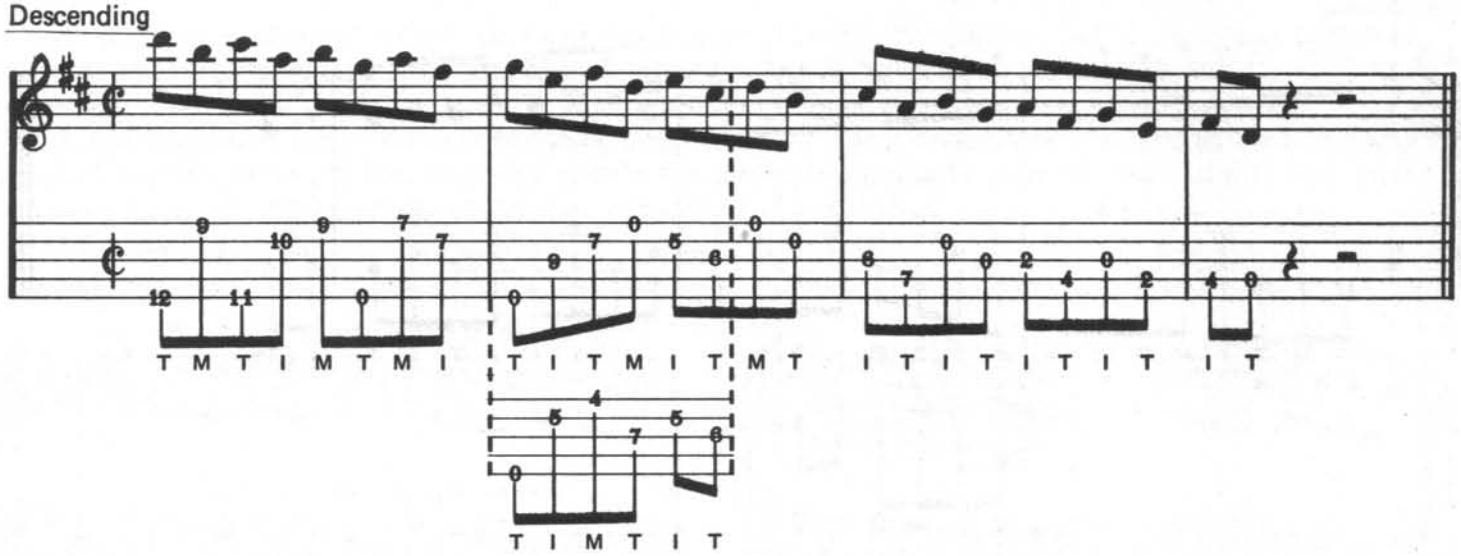


D Major (B minor) Patterns

Two-note Ascending

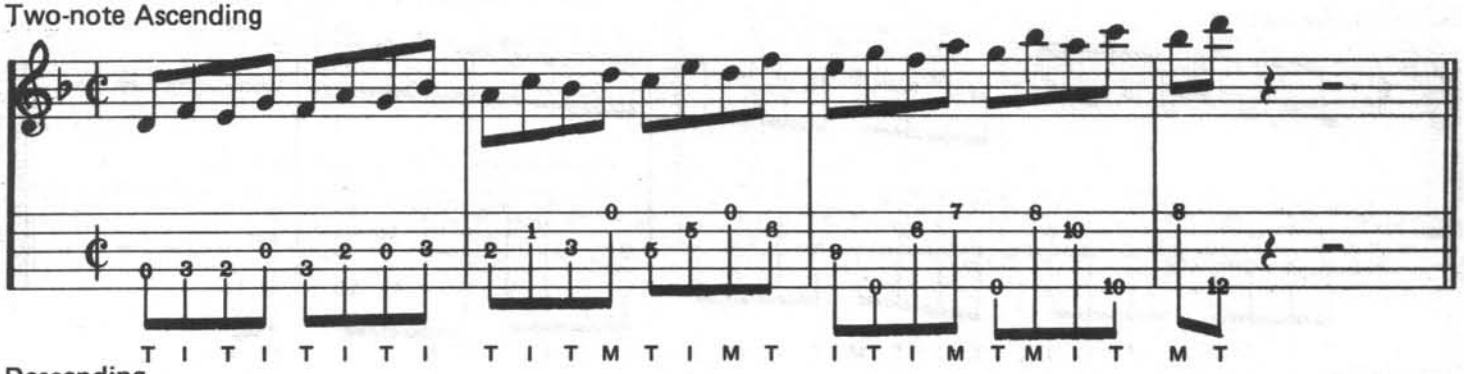


Descending

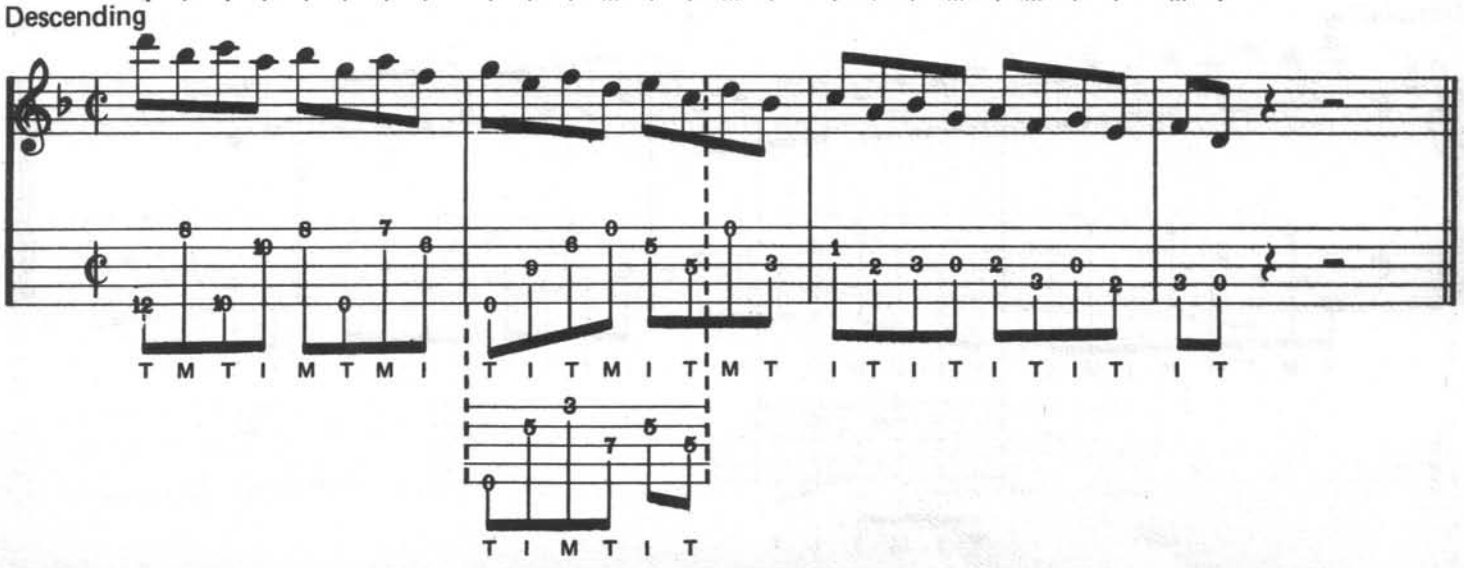


F Major (D minor) Patterns

Two-note Ascending

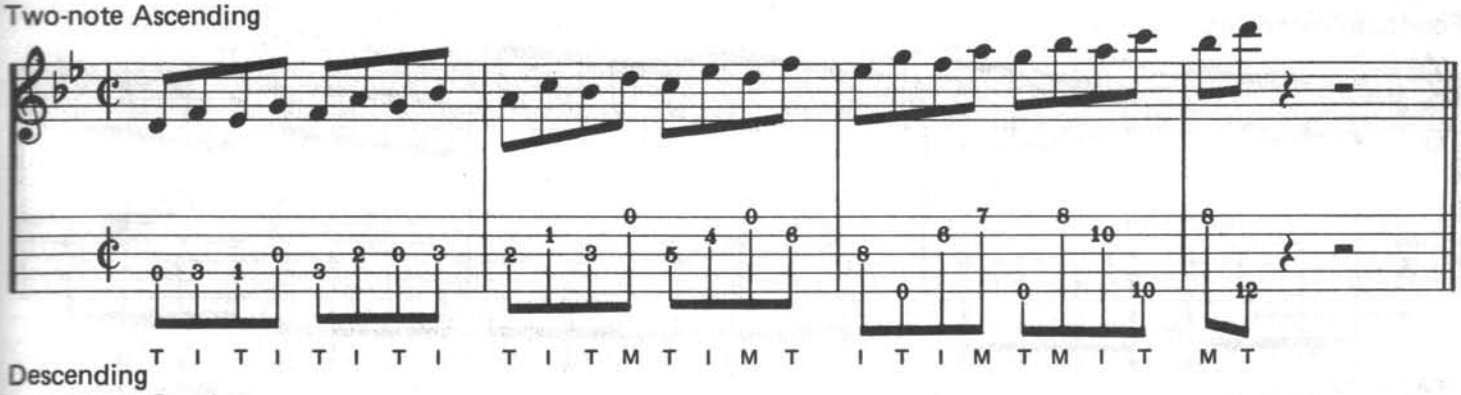


Descending



Bb Major (G minor) Patterns

Two-note Ascending



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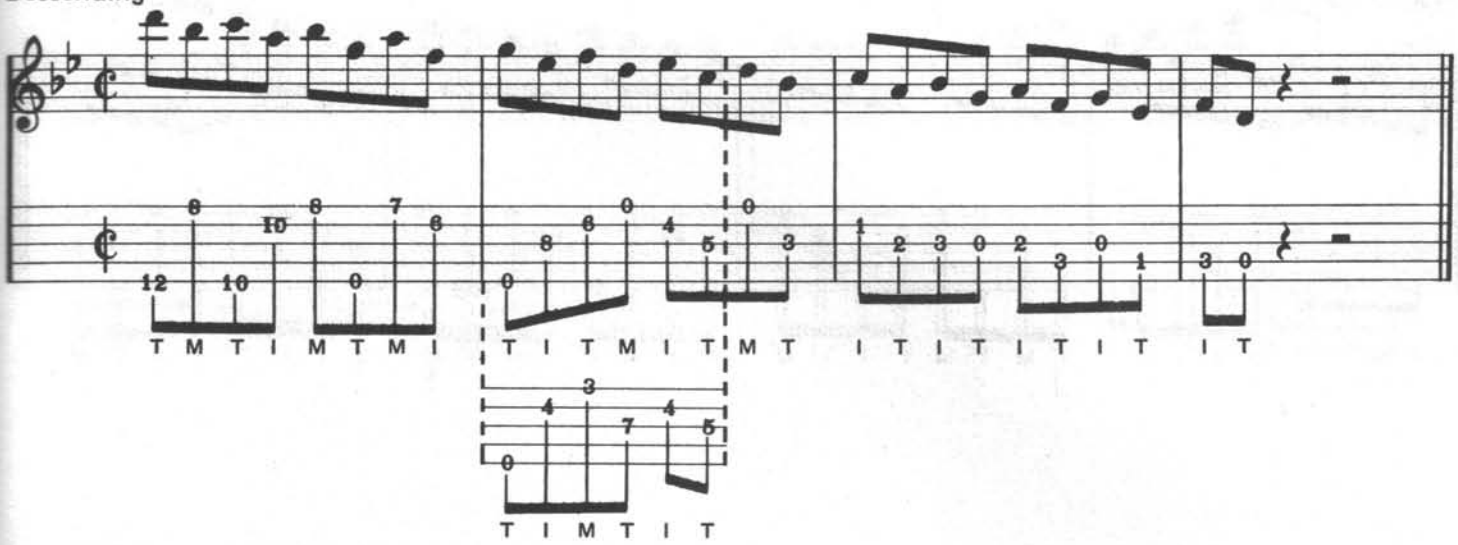
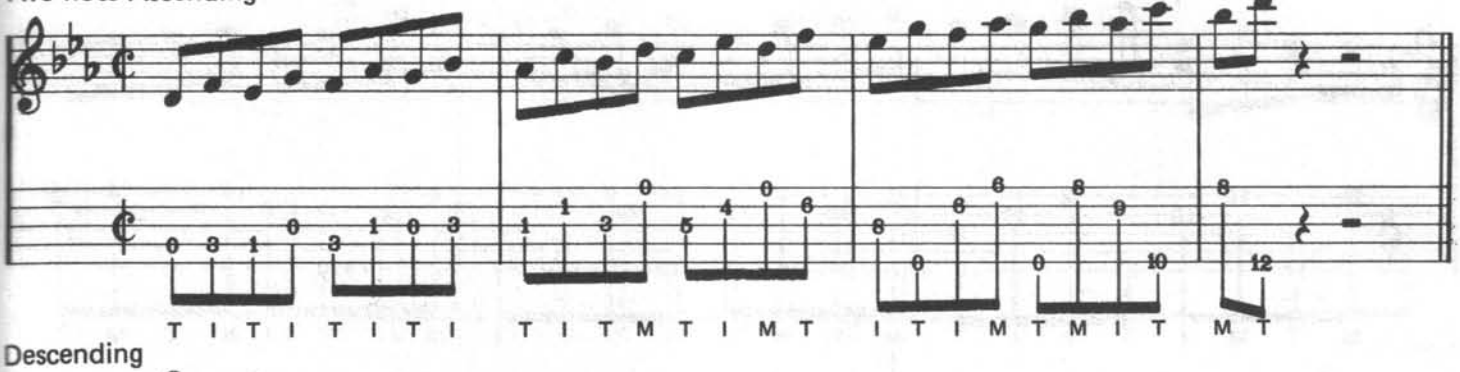


Eb Major (C minor) Patterns

Two-note Ascending



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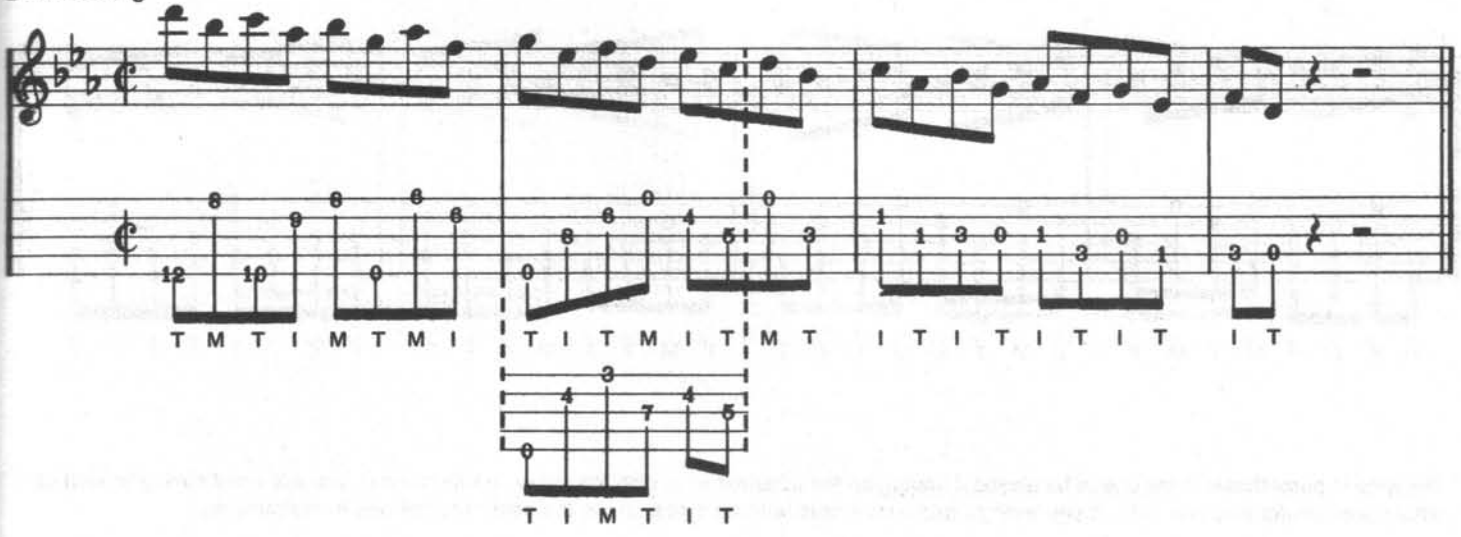
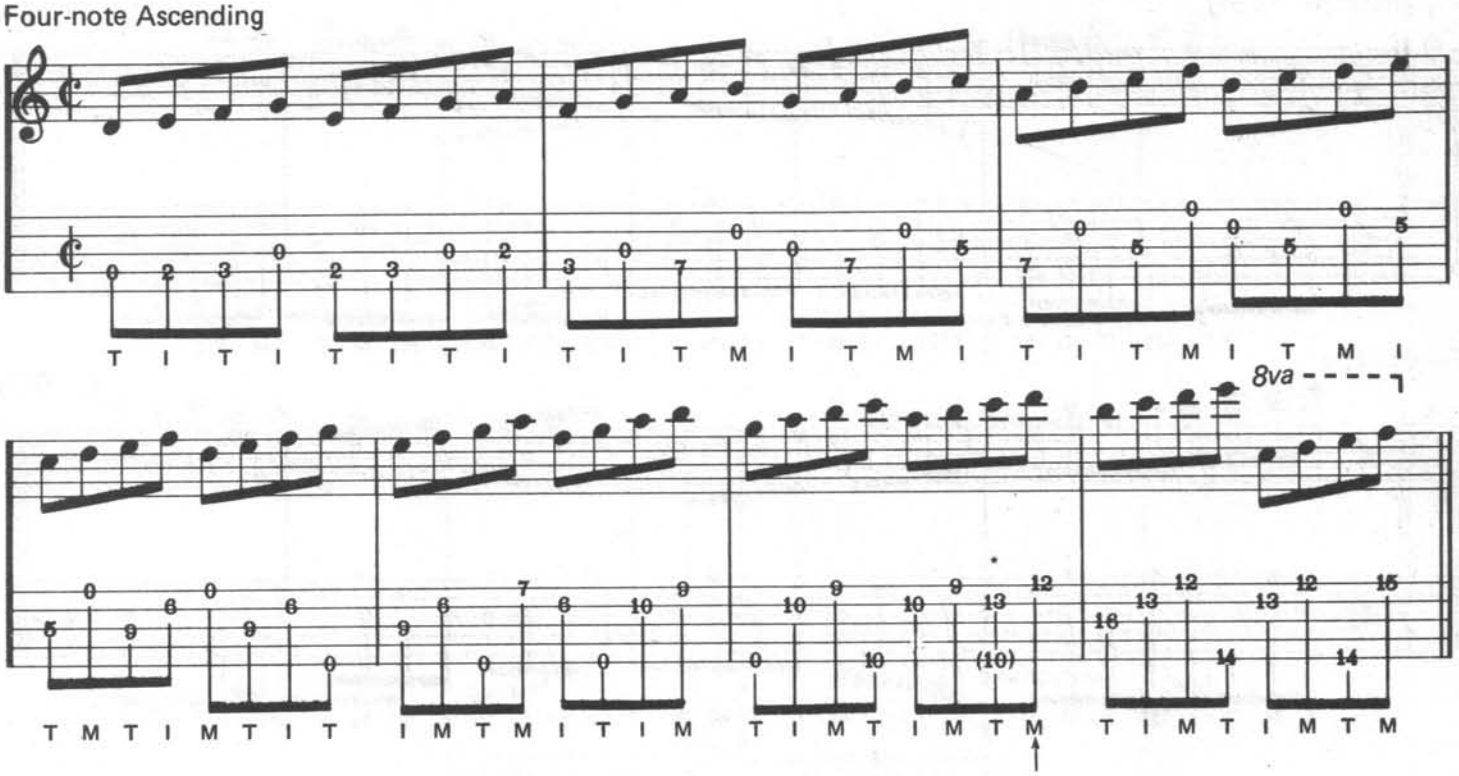


C Major (A minor) Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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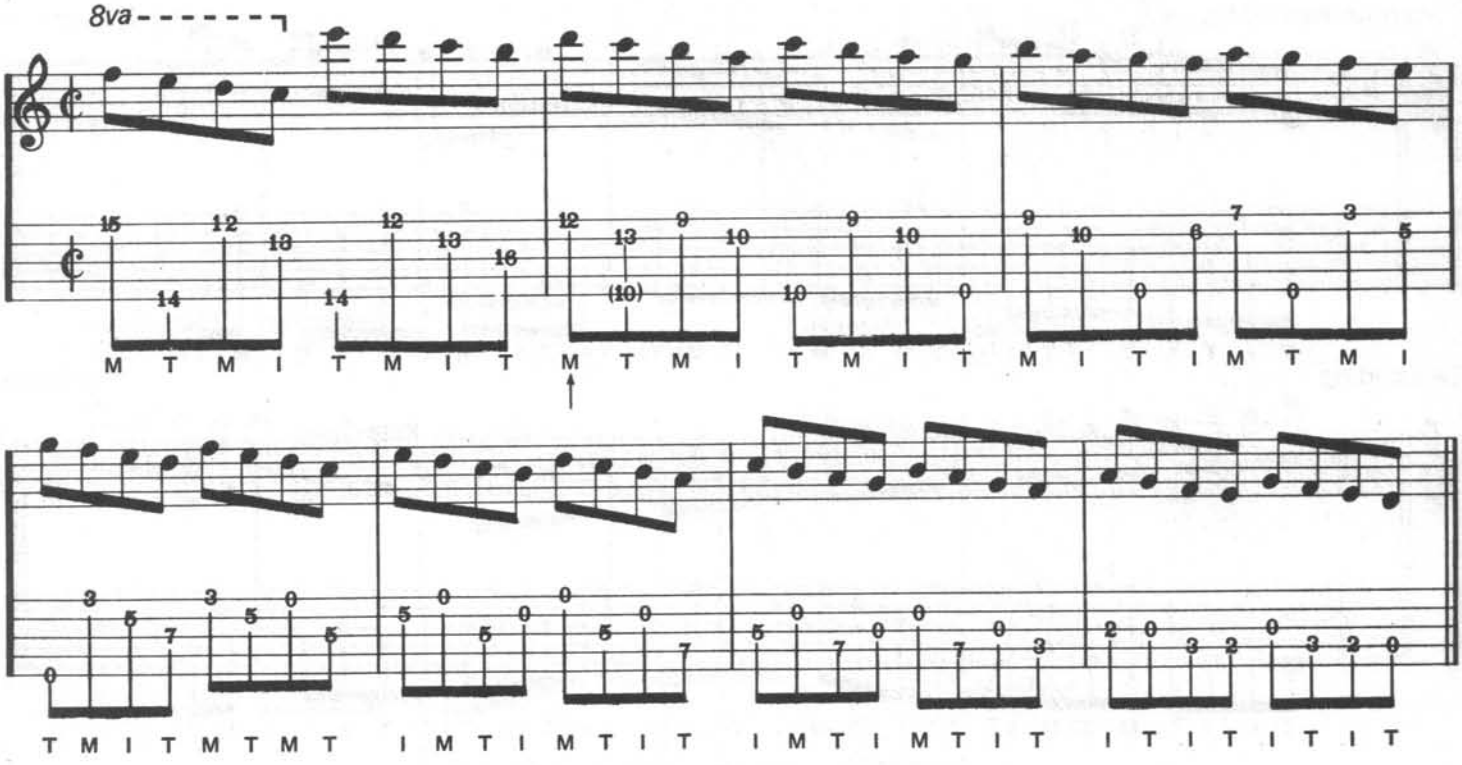
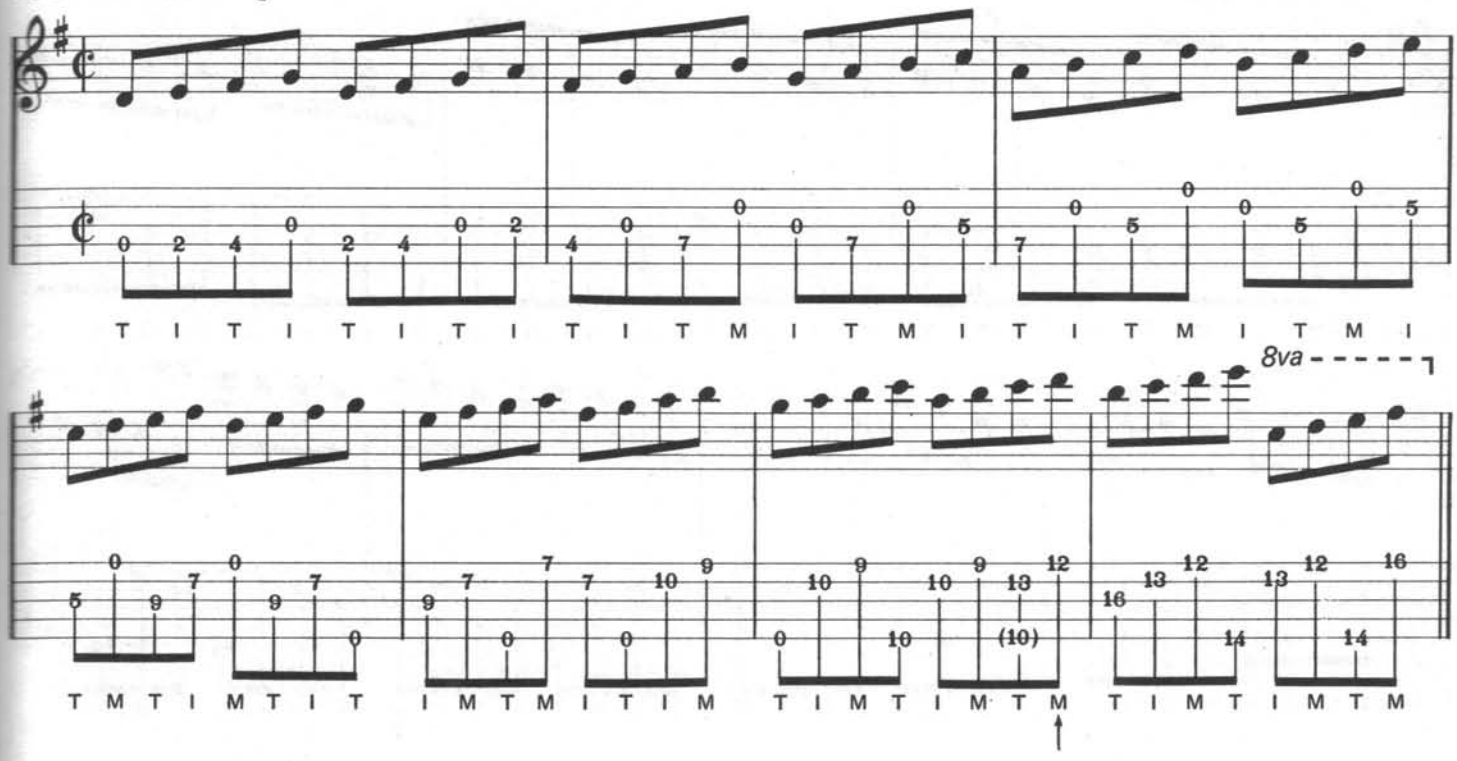


* The note in parenthesis is the one to be played if ending on the adjacent note with the arrow. In this manner, you will avoid having to shift up a whole position for just one note. If you wish to begin on a note with an arrow, make the next note the one in parenthesis.

G Major (E minor) Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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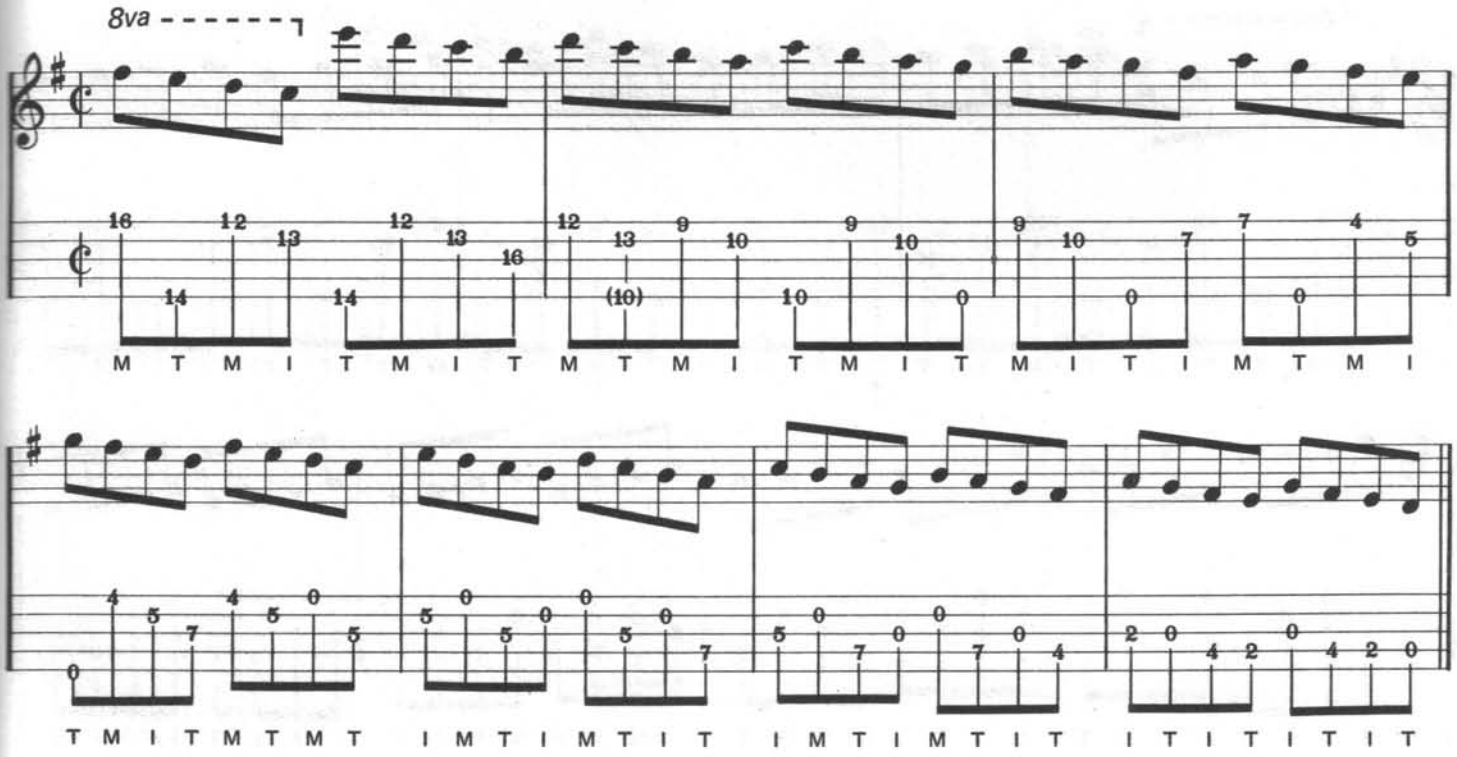
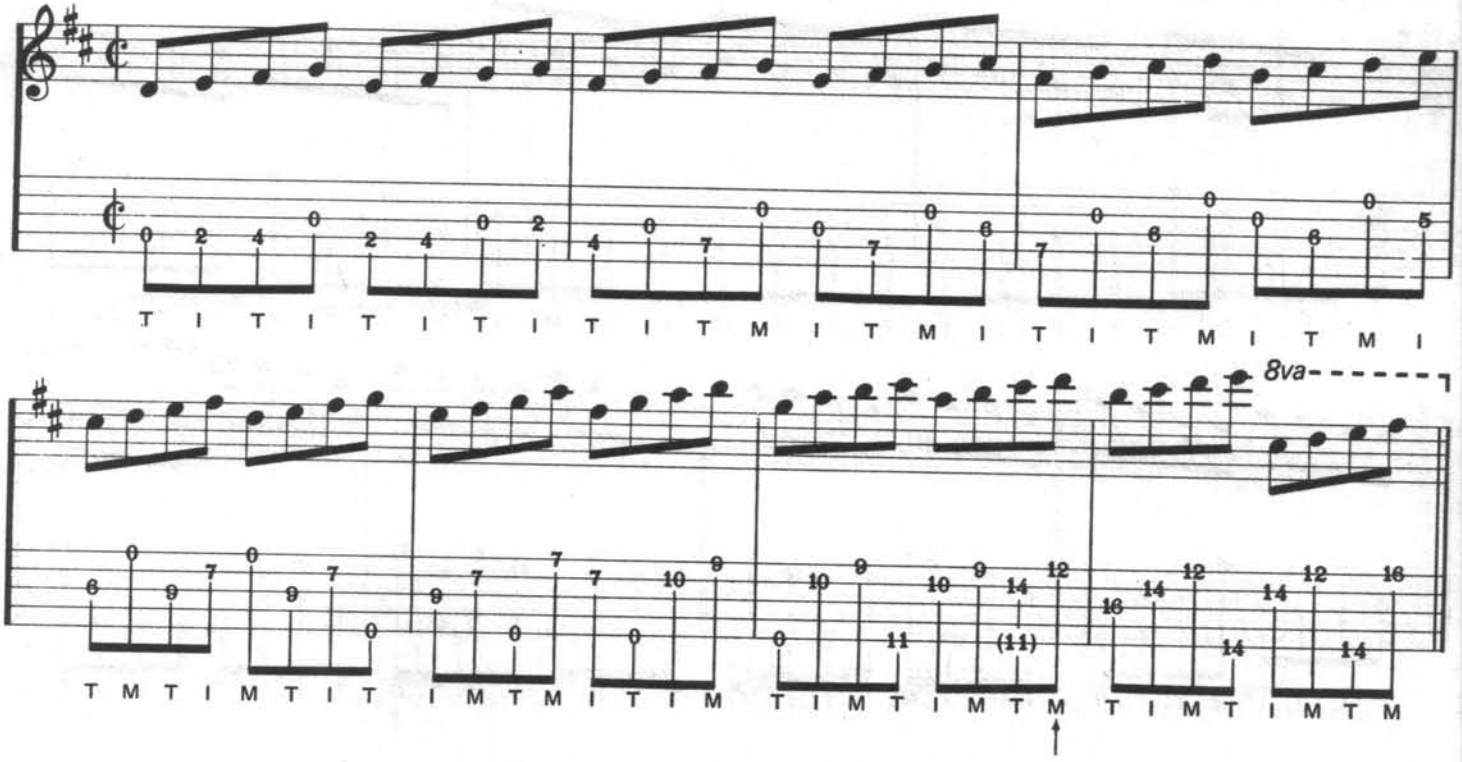


D Major (B minor) Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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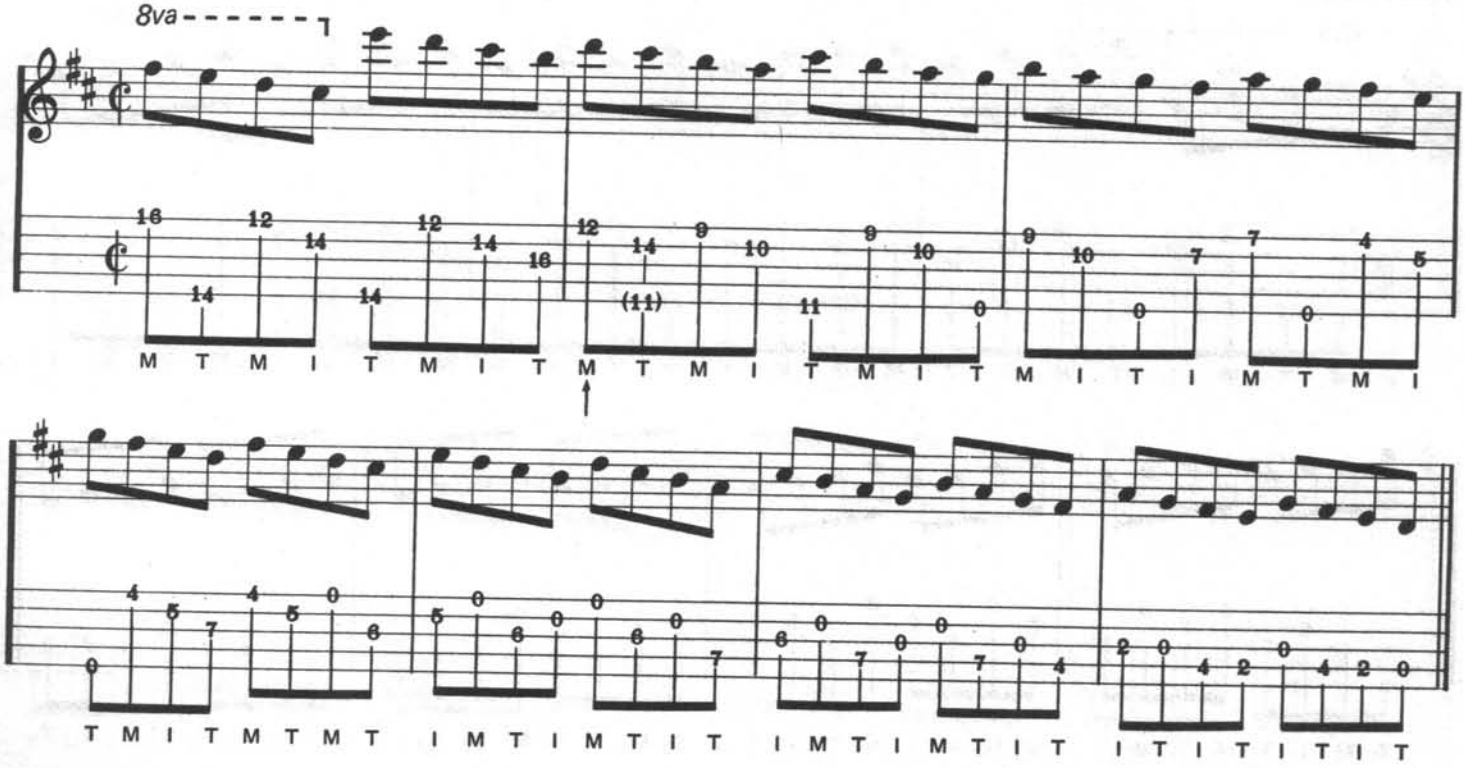
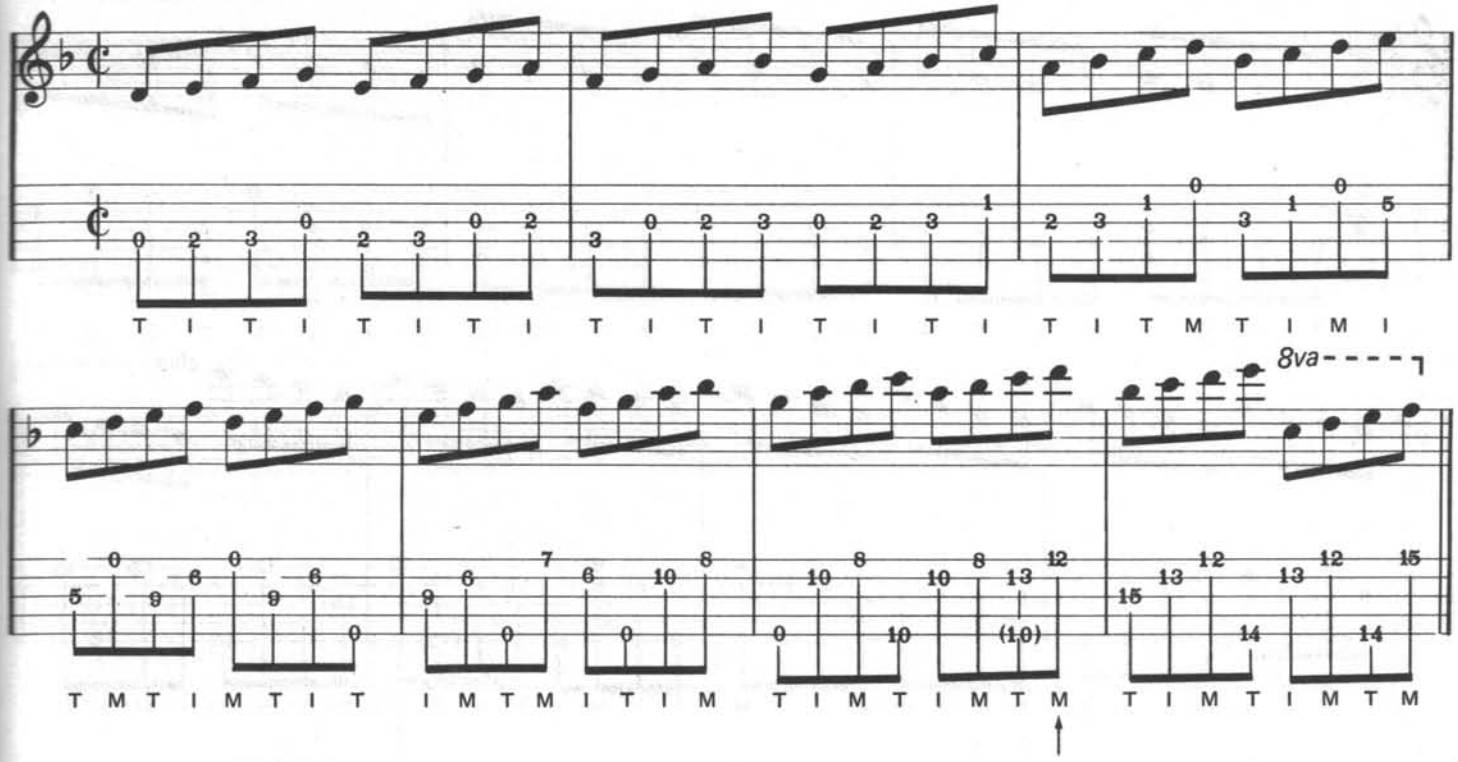


F Major (D minor) Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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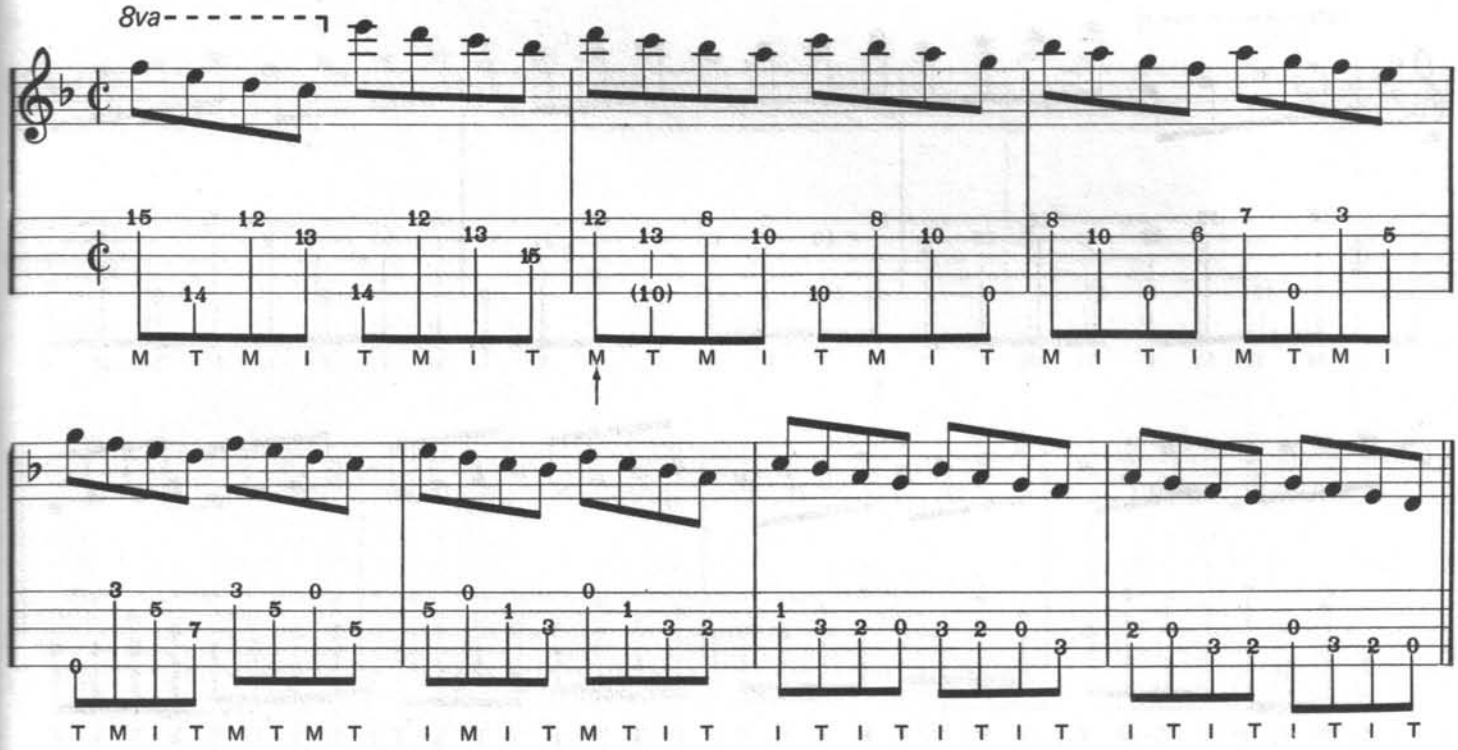
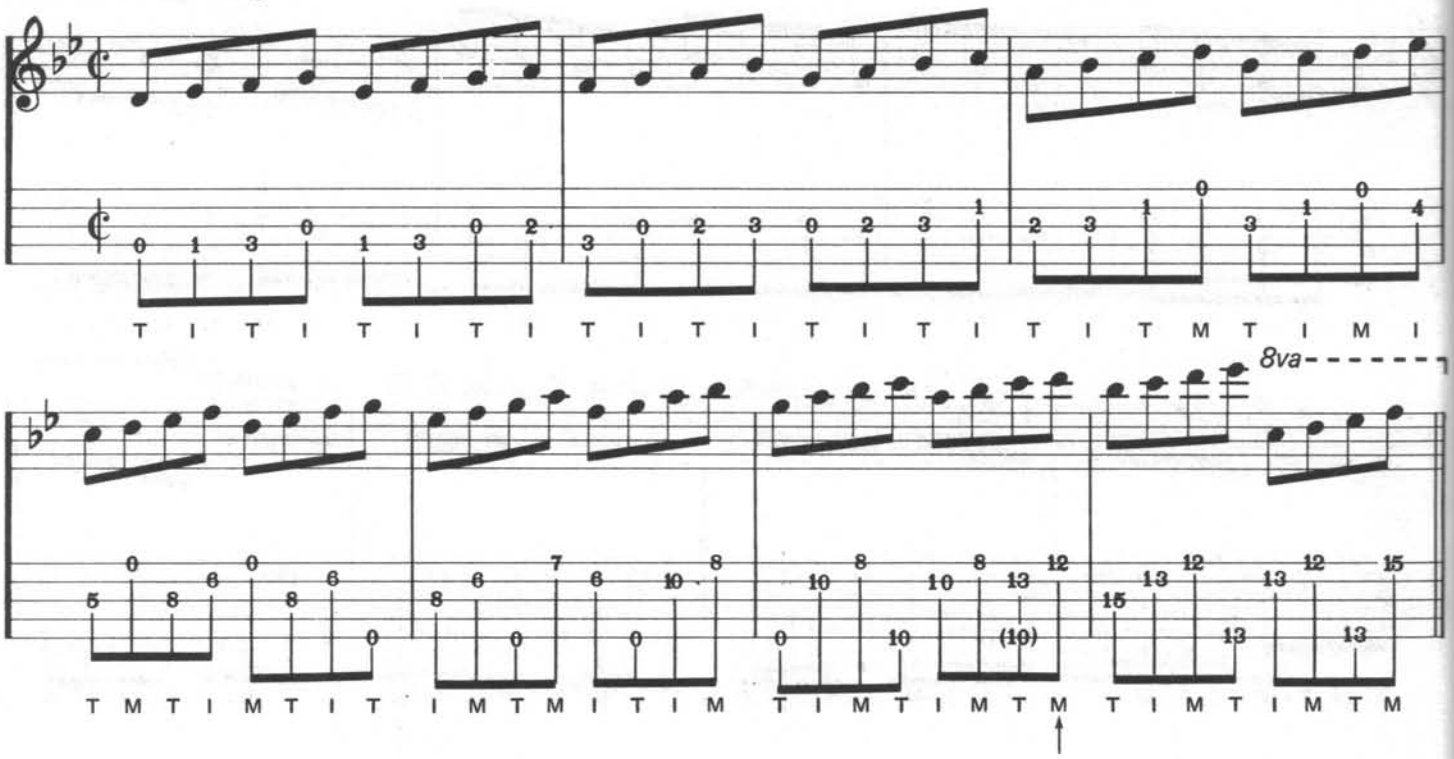


Bb Major (G minor) Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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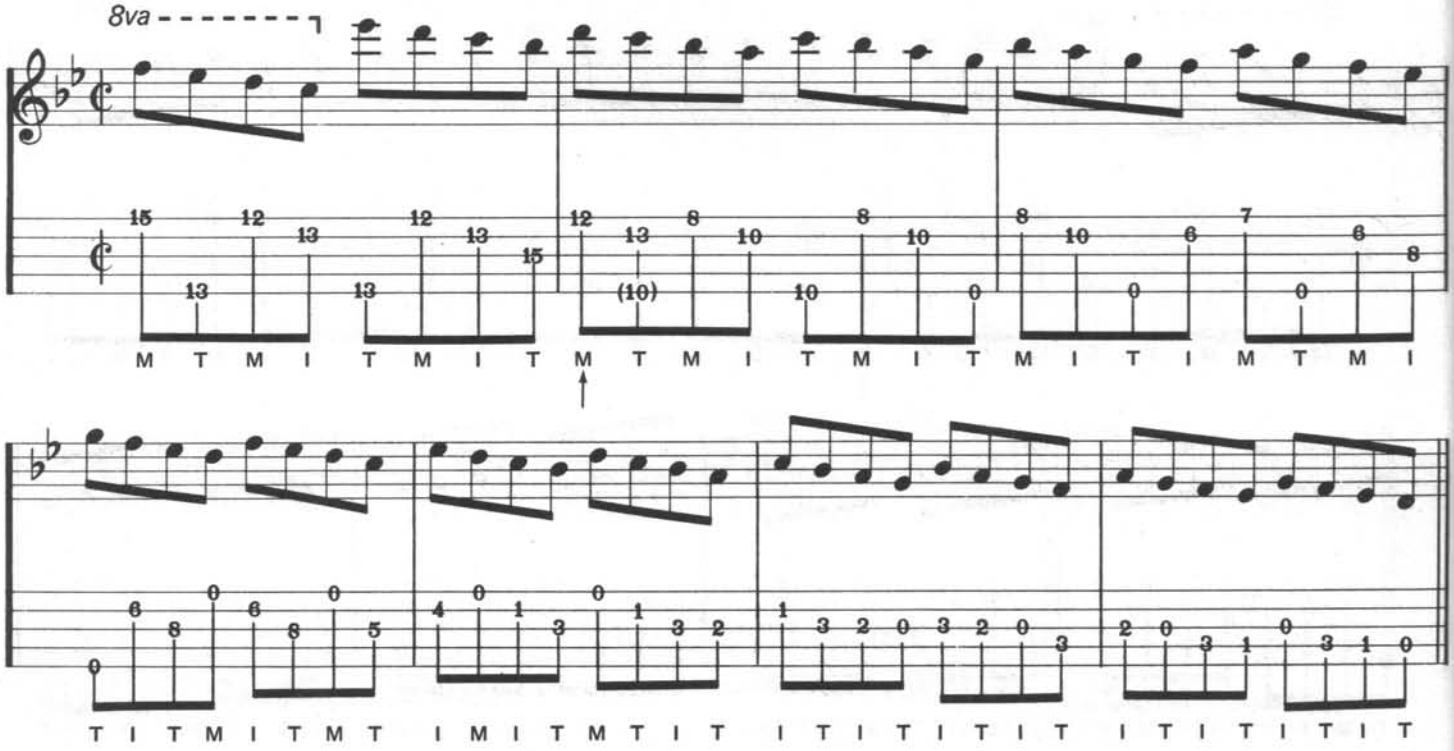
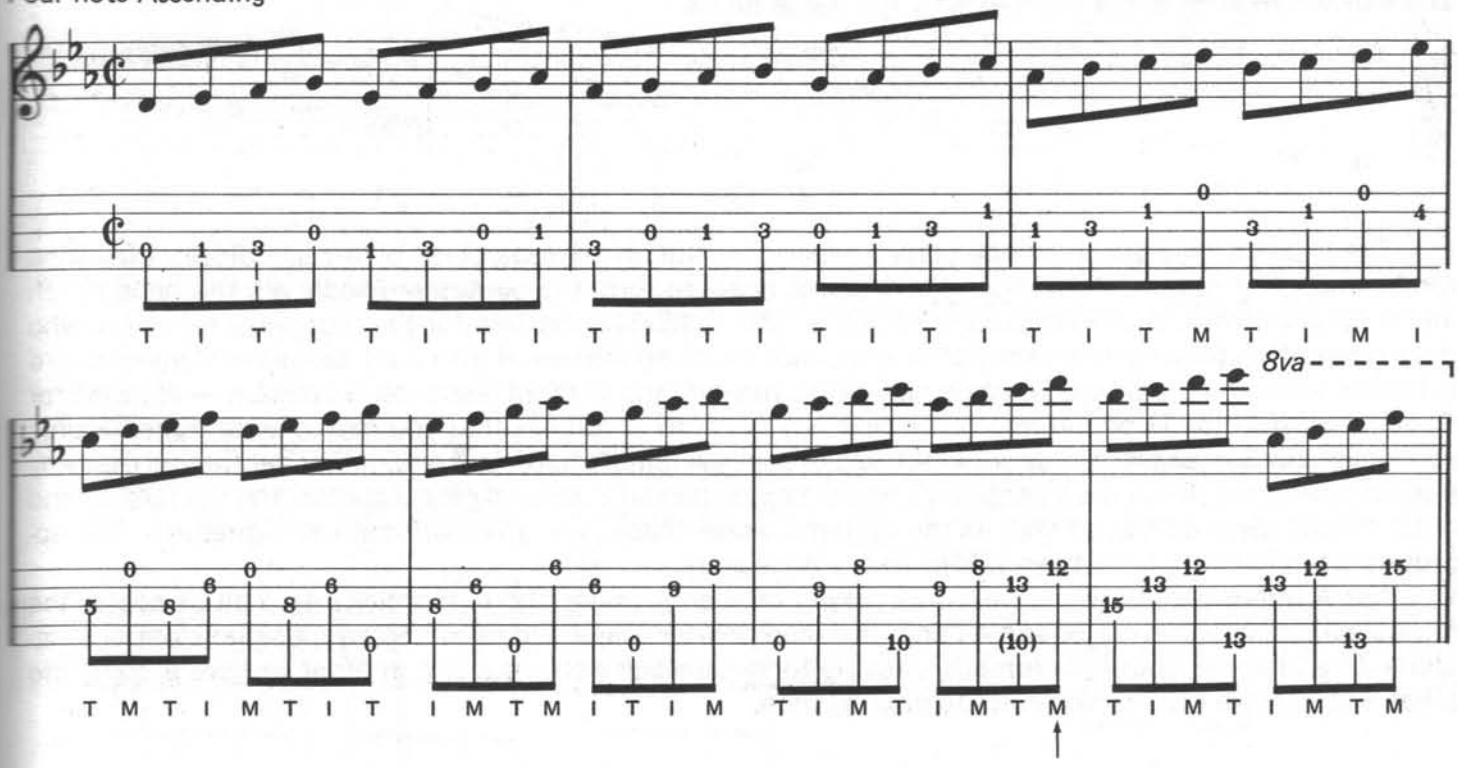


Eb Major (C minor) Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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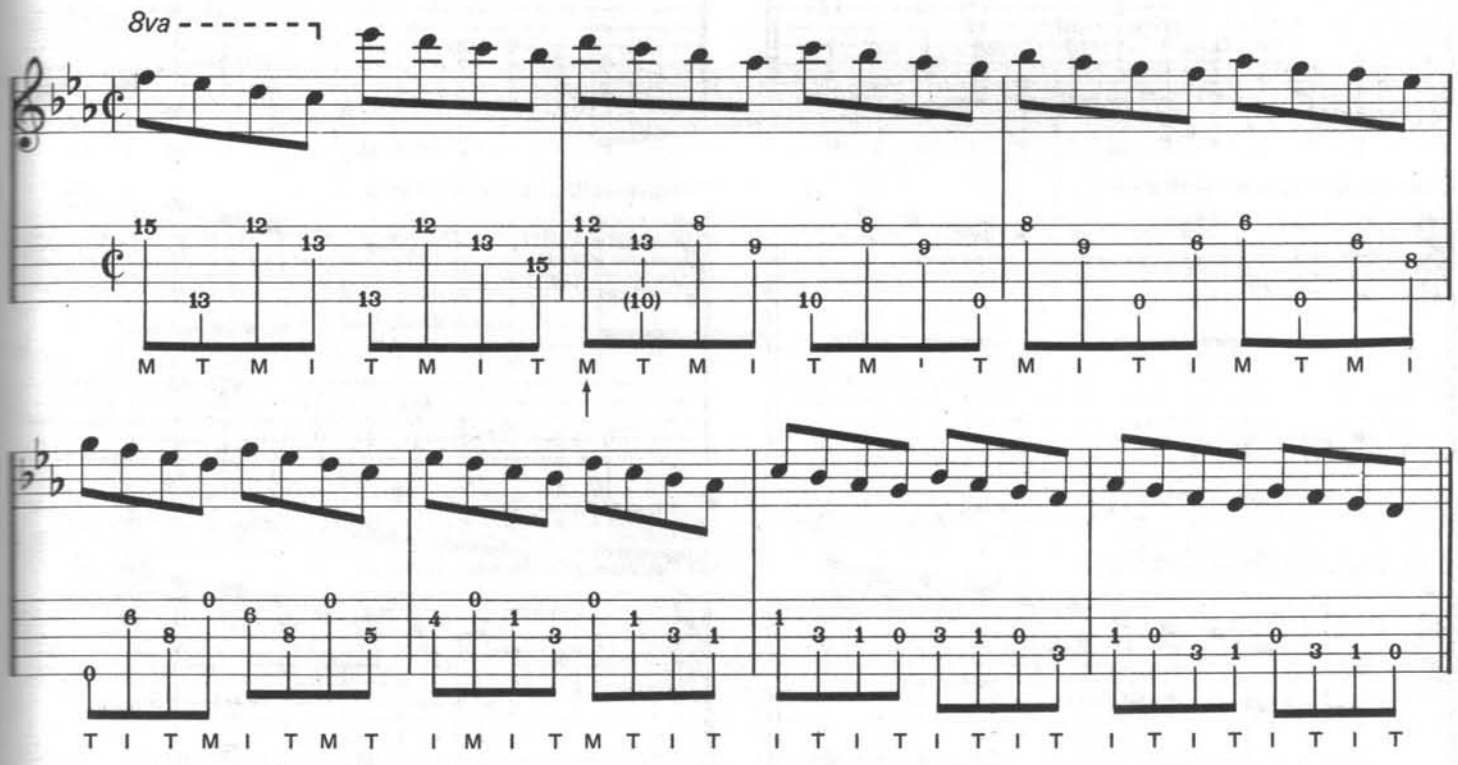
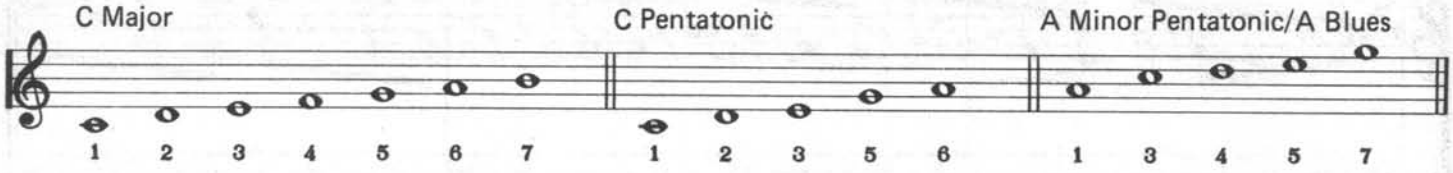


Pentatonic and Blues Scales

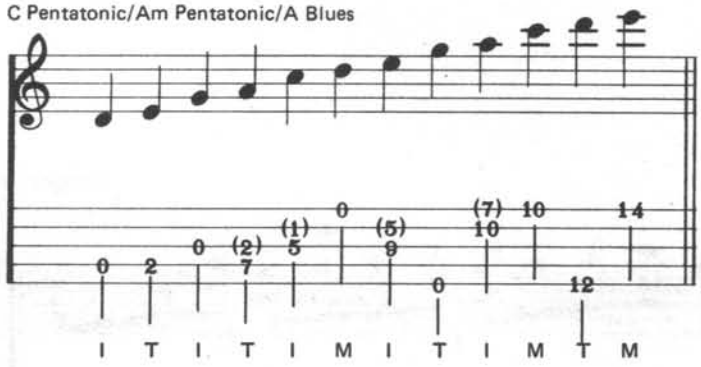
The pentatonic scale is derived by playing notes 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 of a major scale. The minor pentatonic scale of the relative minor uses exactly the same notes.



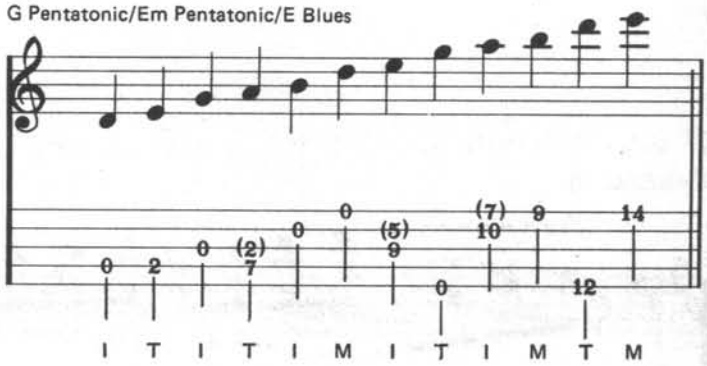
The C pentatonic scale may be played over a C major chord, regardless of key signature — likewise for A minor. The notes deleted from the C major scale to form the pentatonic scale are the ones which might conflict with certain notes of other keys. This simplifies matters for the bluegrass musician who does most of his playing in the keys of G and C (not counting the use of the capo). Since the C major chord is in both keys, the C pentatonic scale may be played over the C chord whenever it appears — likewise for G; you may play the G pentatonic scale over any G chord. It follows that you may play an F pentatonic scale over any F chord, an A minor pentatonic over any A minor chord, and an E minor pentatonic over any E minor chord, etc. Because a pentatonic scale may be played in several different keys, the pentatonic and blues scales given below, as well as the patterns which follow, are given without key signatures. The appropriate accidentals have been added where necessary.

The A minor pentatonic scale, when played over an A major chord, functions as a blues scale. The relationship between A major and A minor is called parallel major and minor. Many musicians prefer to include an additional note, a chromatic passing tone, between notes 4 and 5 in order to have a complete blues scale. More on this scale in the next section.

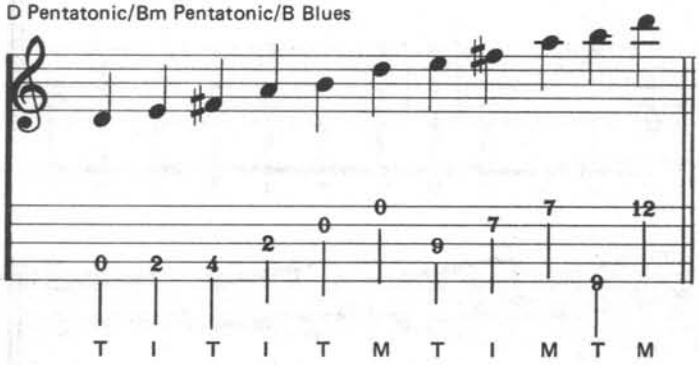
C Pentatonic/Am Pentatonic/A Blues



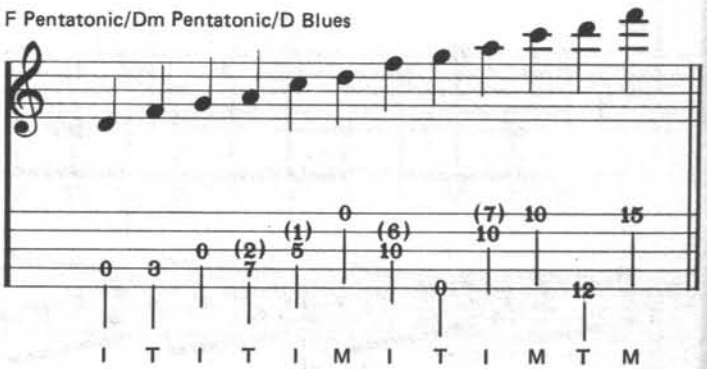
G Pentatonic/Em Pentatonic/E Blues



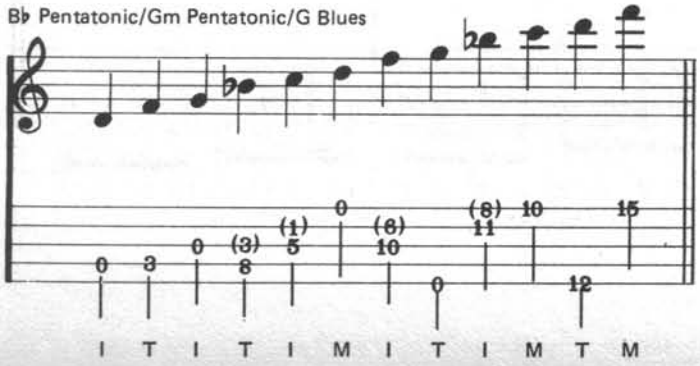
D Pentatonic/Bm Pentatonic/B Blues



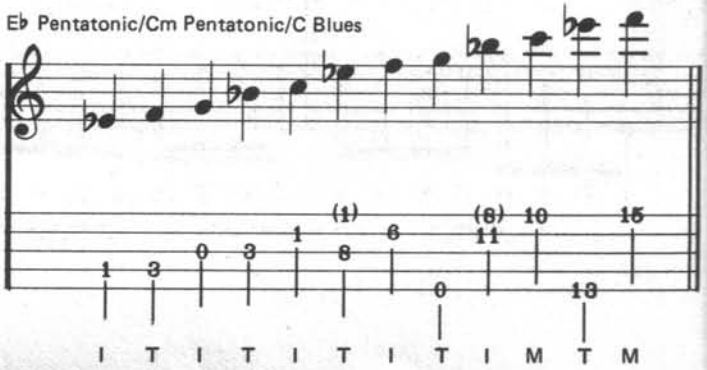
F Pentatonic/Dm Pentatonic/D Blues



B♭ Pentatonic/Gm Pentatonic/G Blues

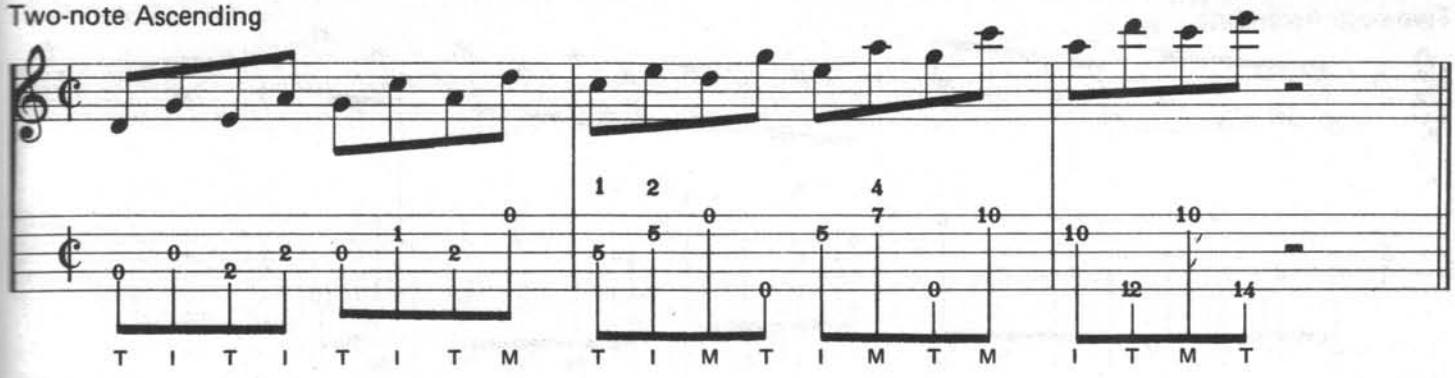


E♭ Pentatonic/Cm Pentatonic/C Blues



C Pentatonic/Am Pentatonic/A Blues Patterns

Two-note Ascending



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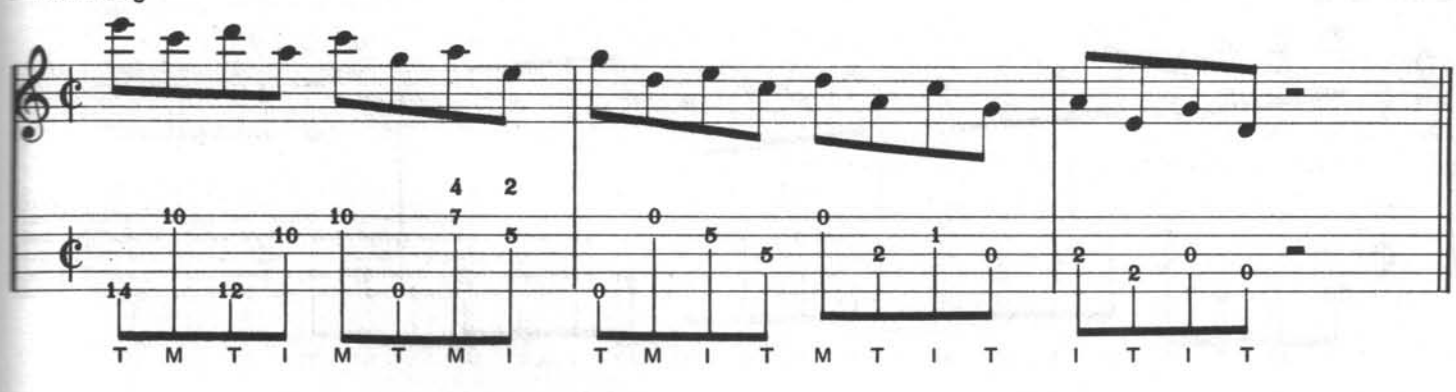
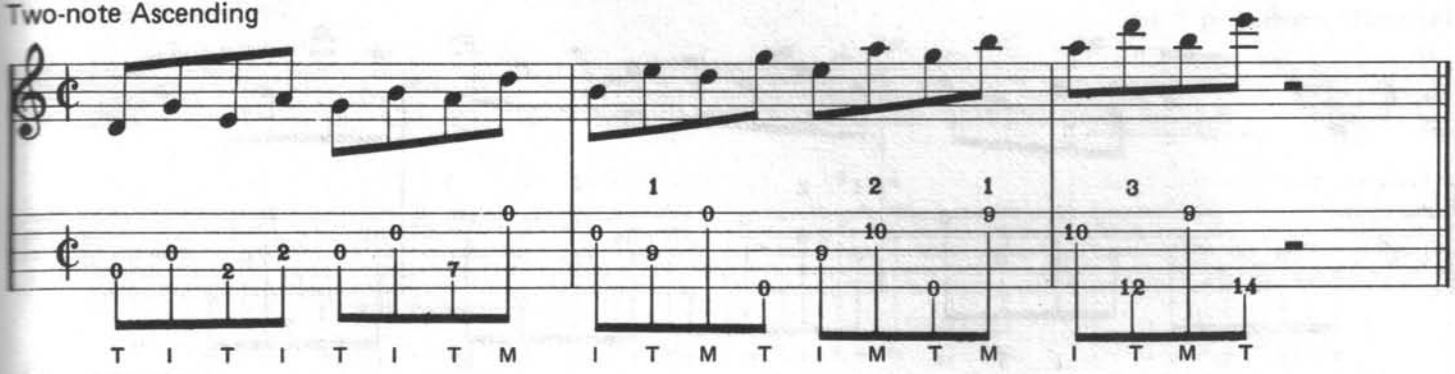
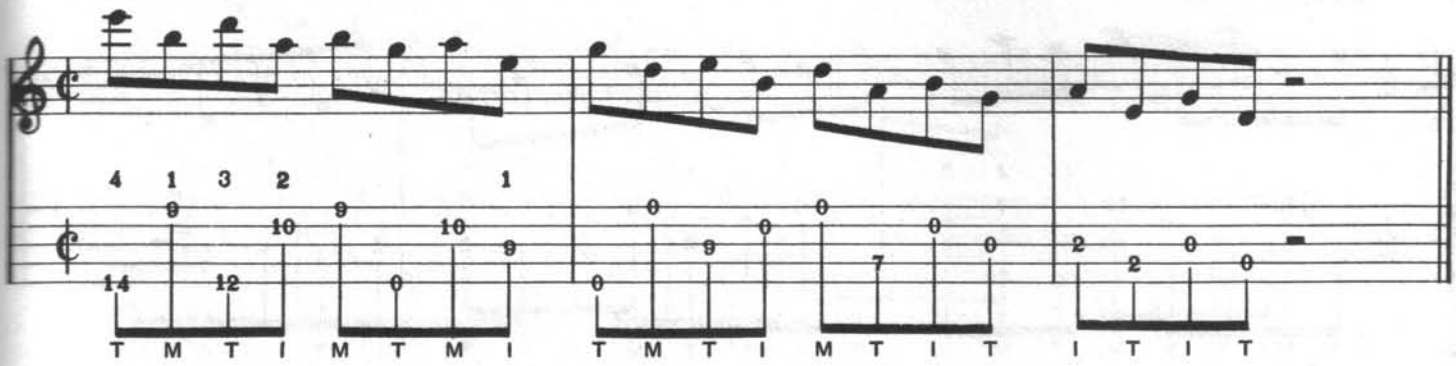


G Pentatonic/Em Pentatonic/E Blues Patterns

Two-note Ascending

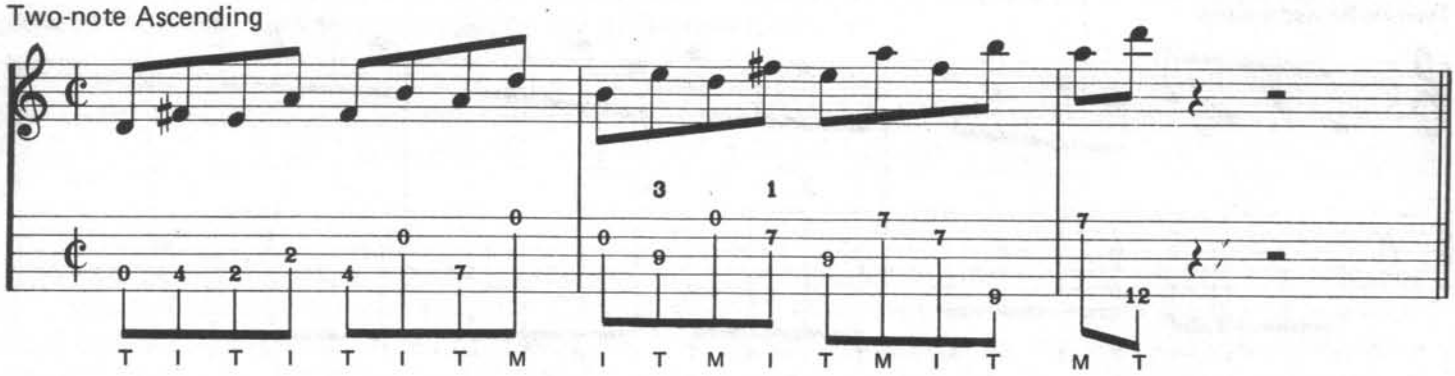


Descending



D Pentatonic/Bm Pentatonic/B Blues Patterns

Two-note Ascending



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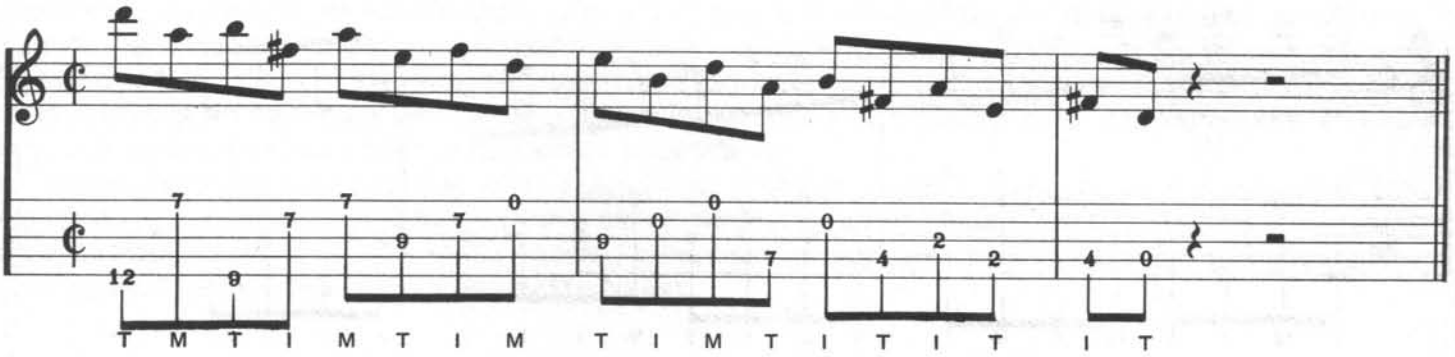
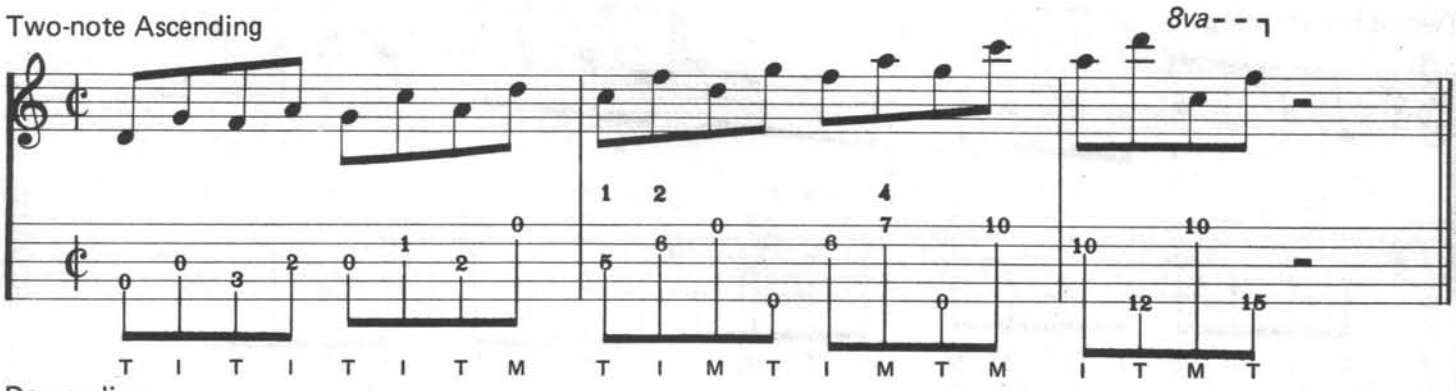


F Pentatonic/Dm Pentatonic/D Blues Patterns

Two-note Ascending



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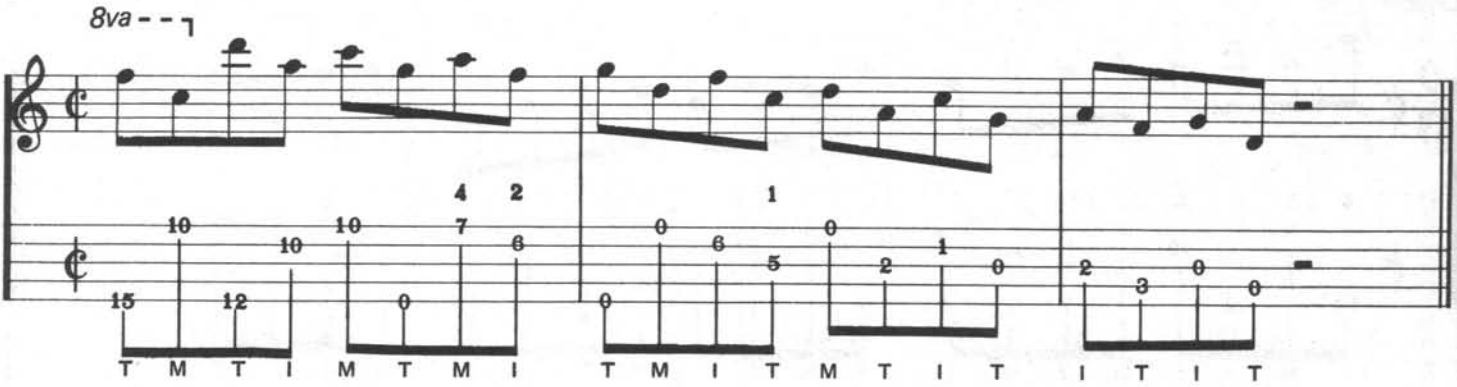
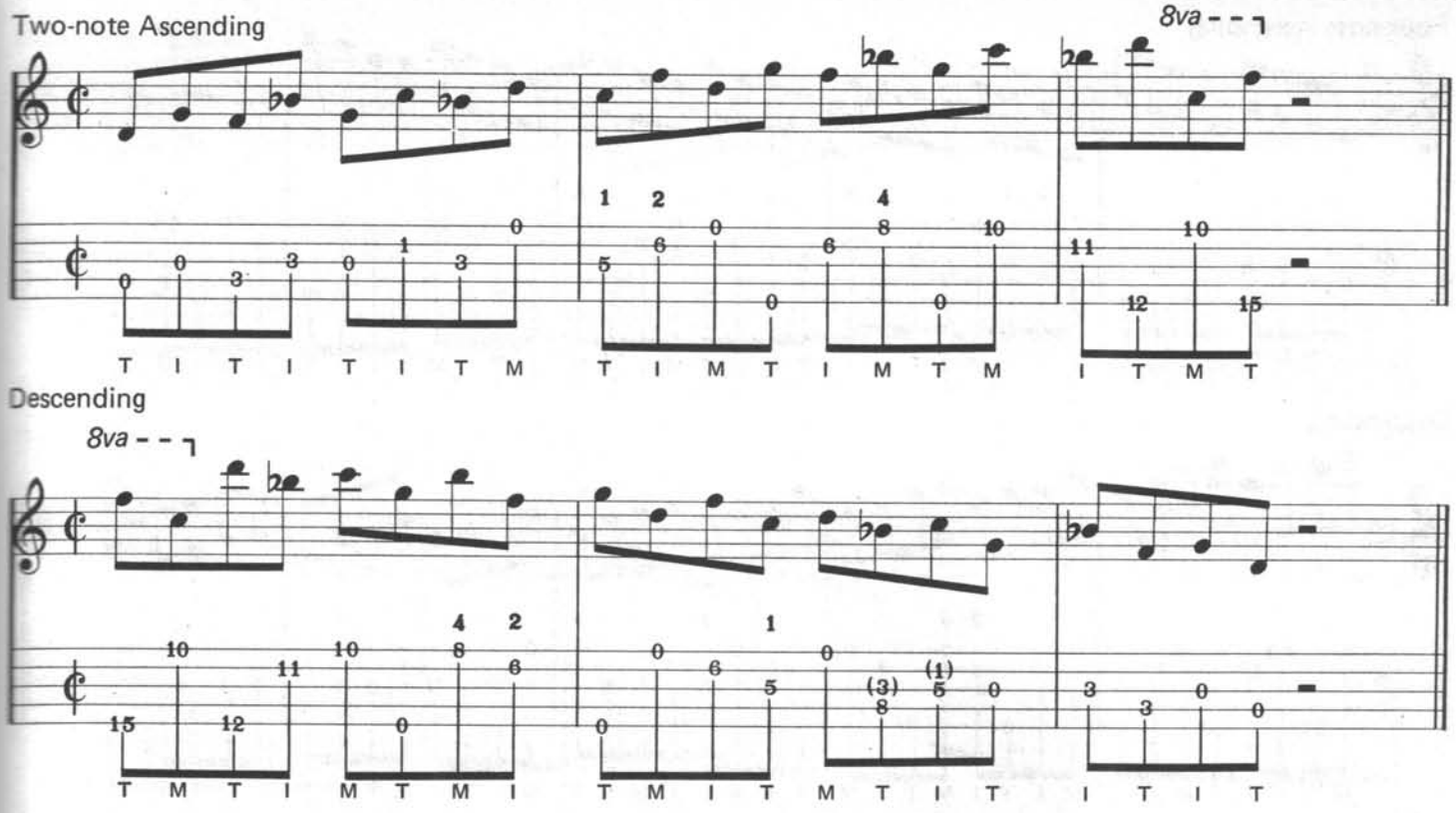
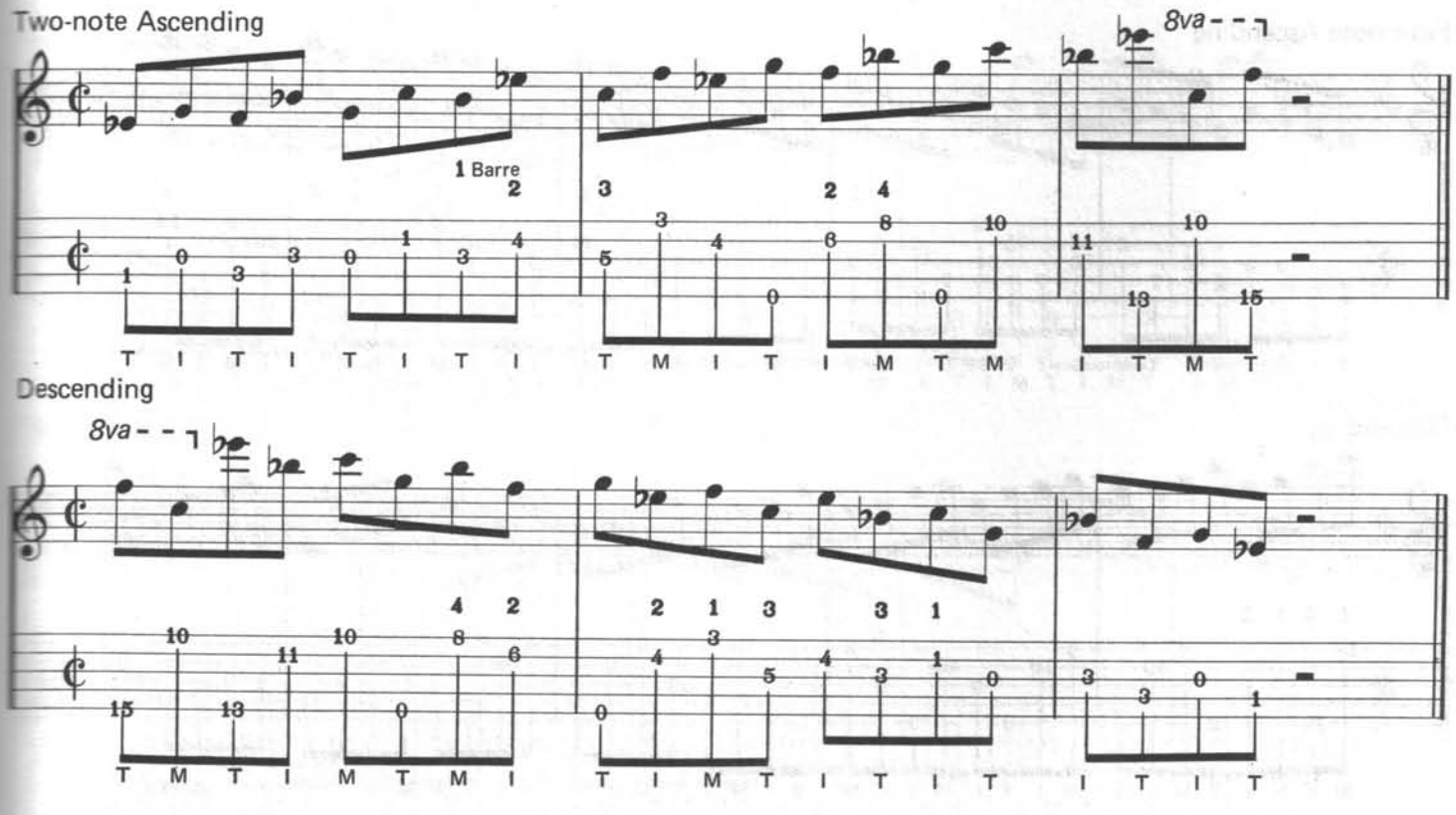


Bb Pentatonic/Gm Pentatonic/G Blues Patterns

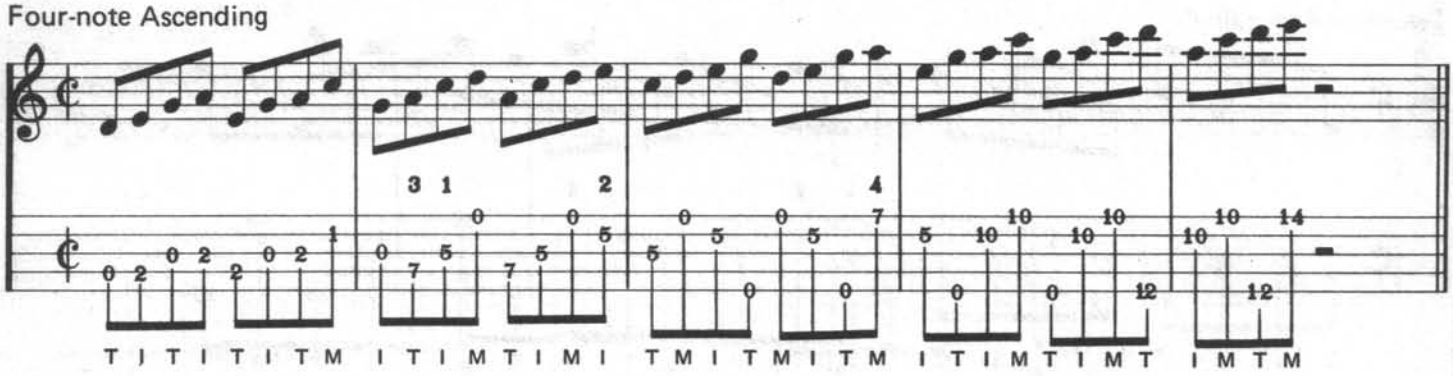


Eb Pentatonic/Cm Pentatonic/C Blues Patterns



C Pentatonic/Am Pentatonic/A Blues Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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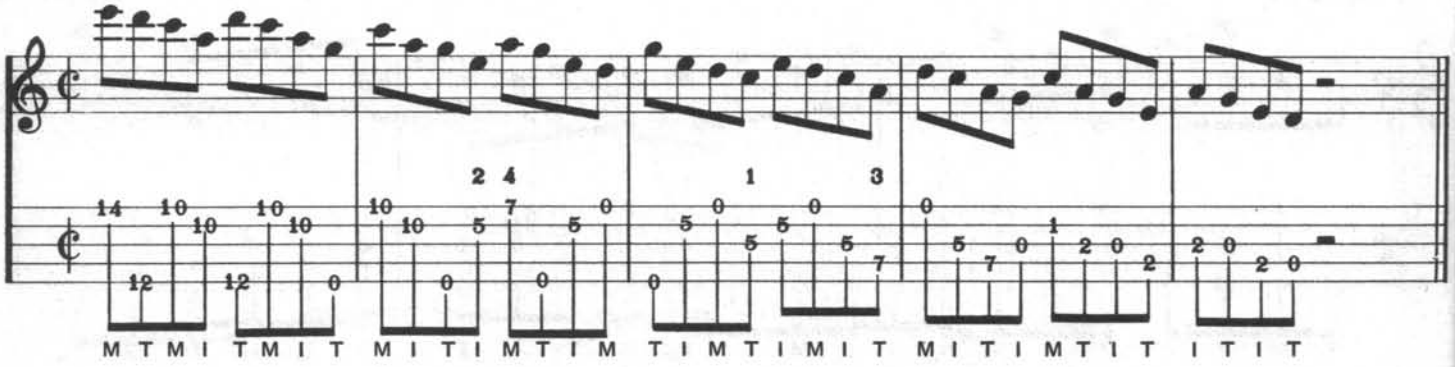
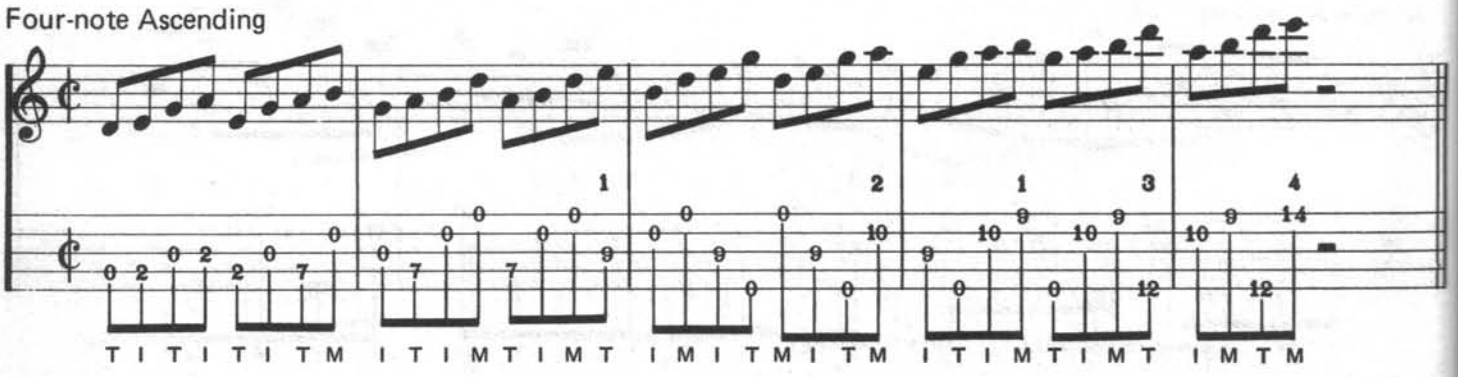


G Pentatonic/Em Pentatonic/E Blues Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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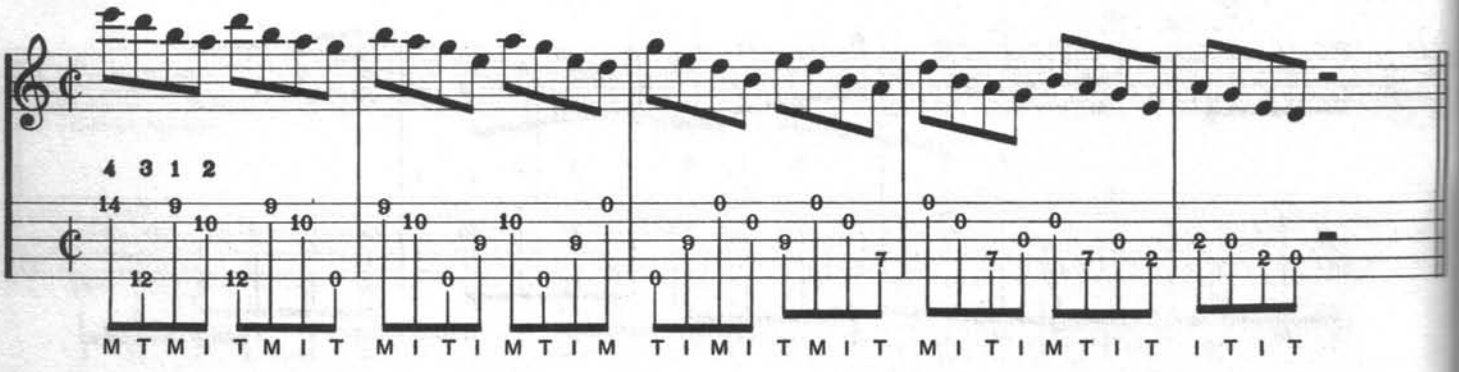
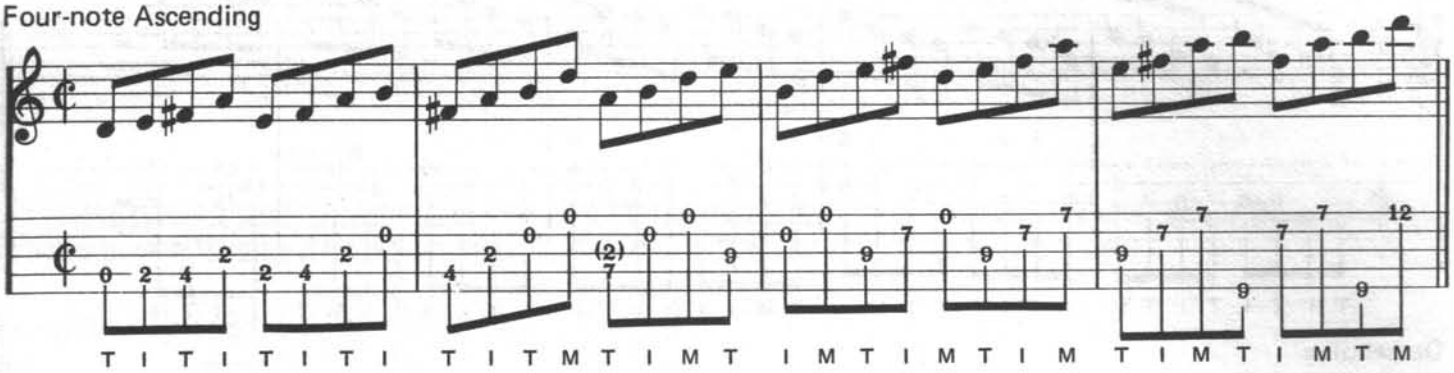


D Pentatonic/Bm Pentatonic/B Blues Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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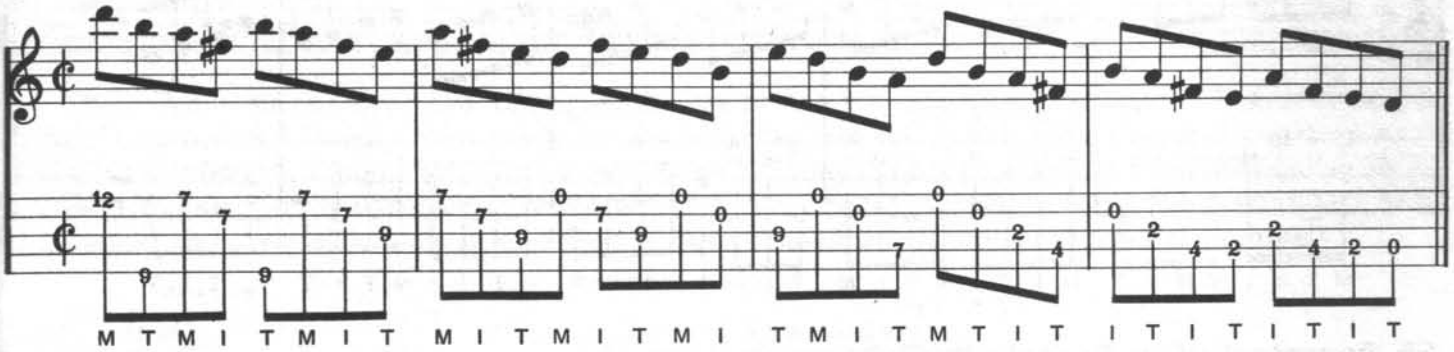
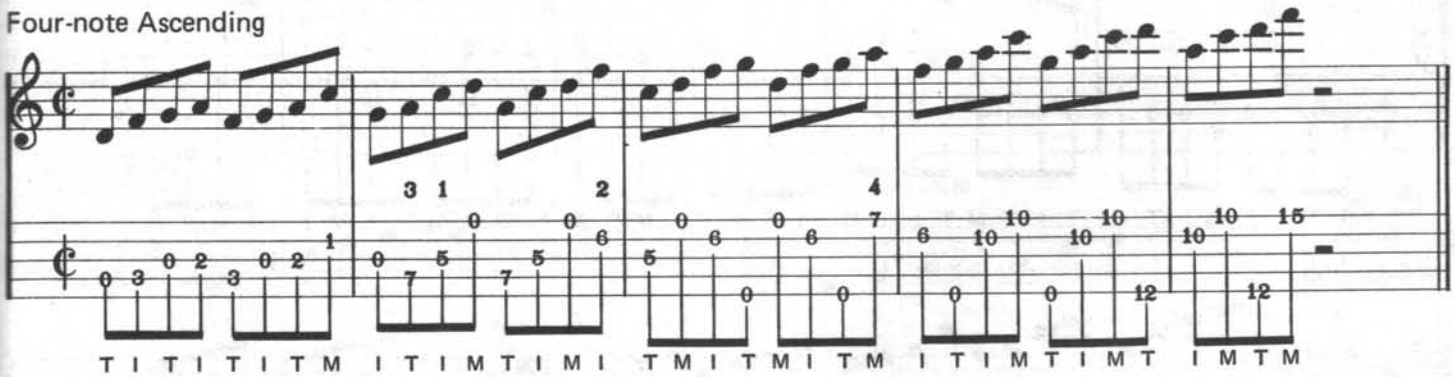


F Pentatonic/Dm Pentatonic/D Blues Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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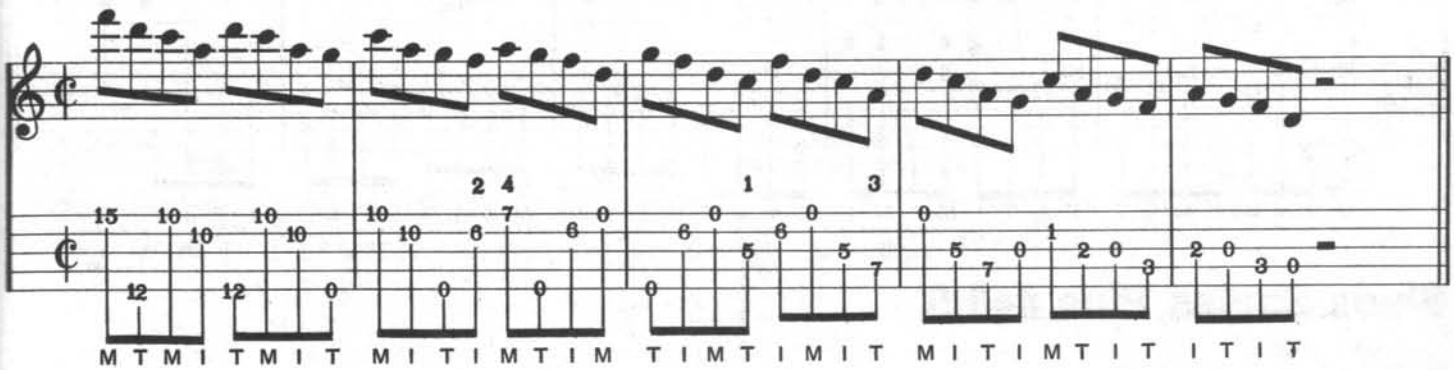
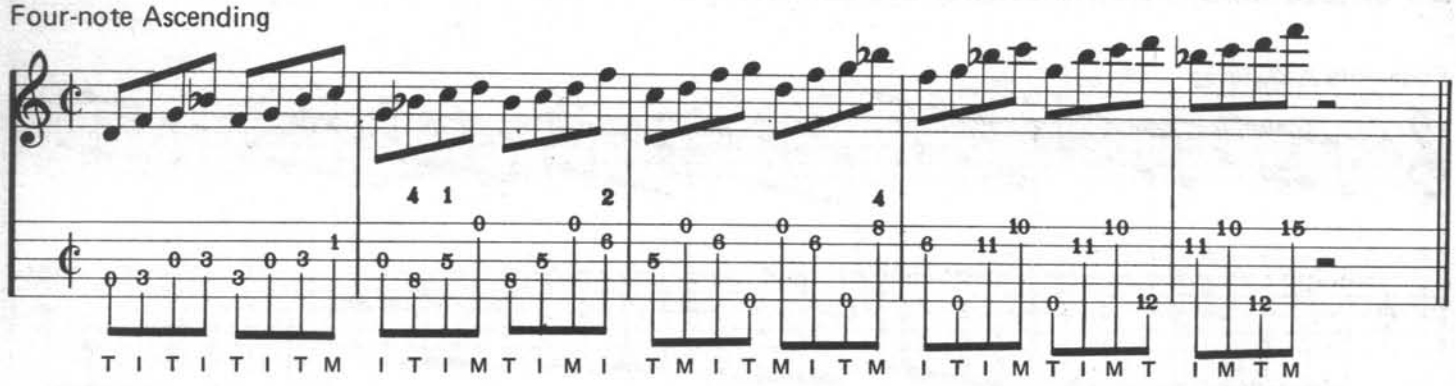


Bb Pentatonic/Gm Pentatonic/G Blues Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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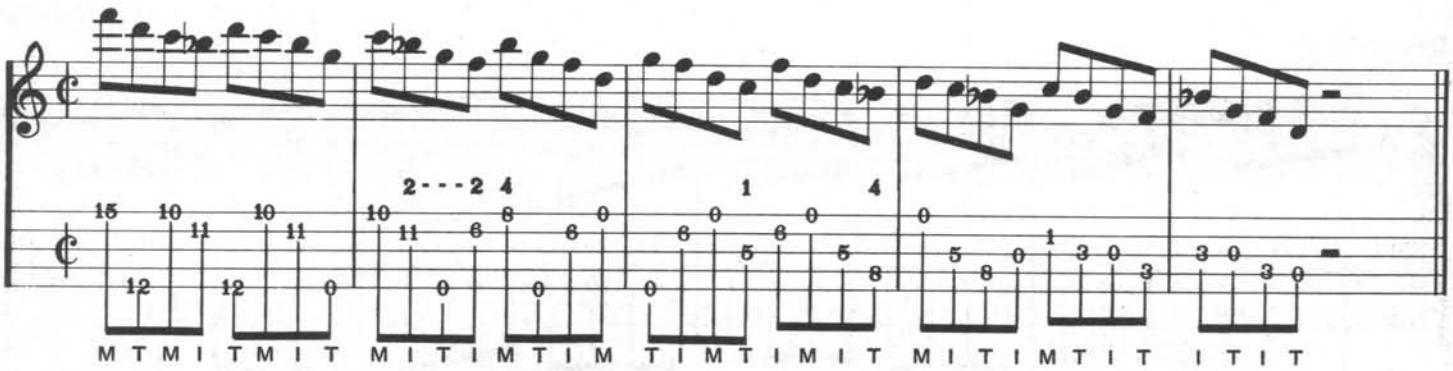
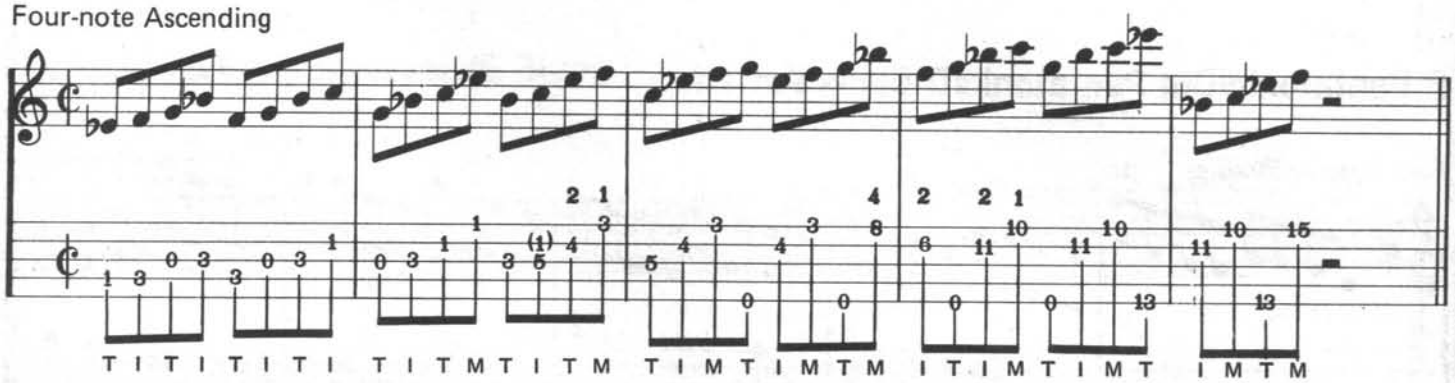


Eb Pentatonic/Cm Pentatonic/C Blues Patterns

Four-note Ascending



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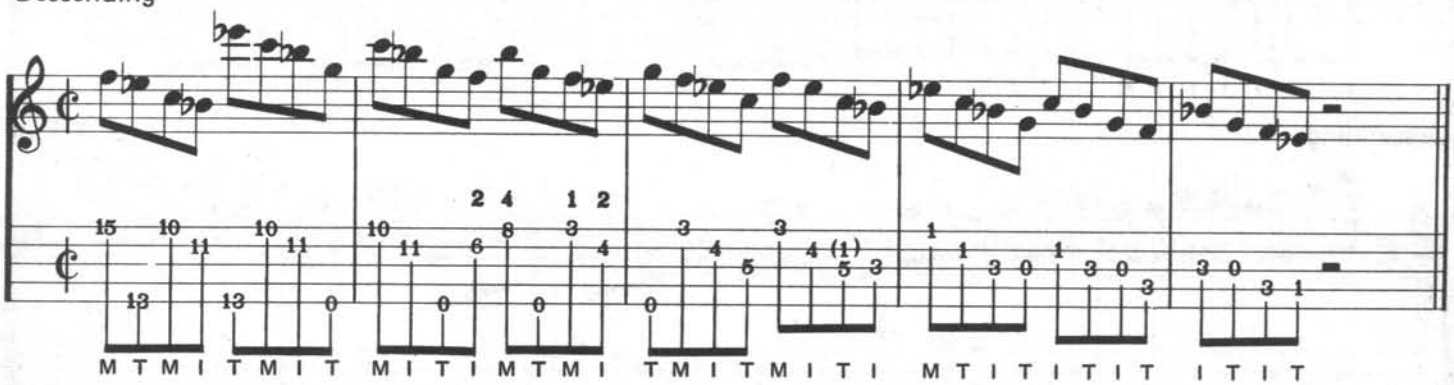
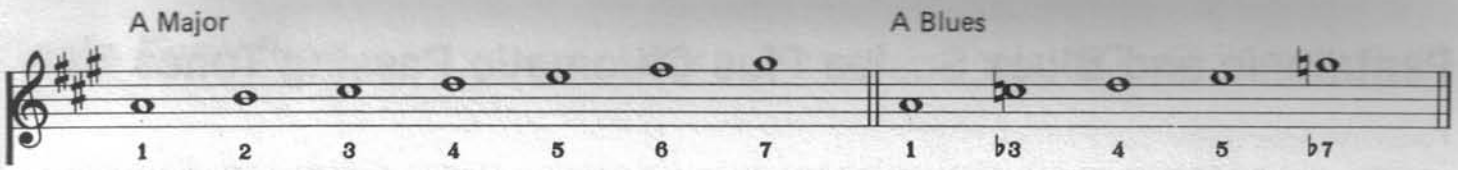
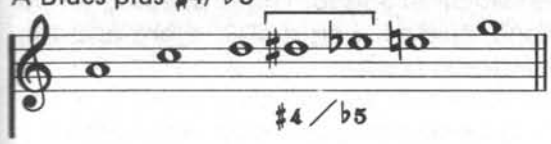


Blues Scales Plus #4/b5

In the preceding section, I referred to a blues scale as being the same as its parallel minor pentatonic scale (ie: A blues and A minor pentatonic). The blues scale is derived from a major scale by playing notes 1, lowered 3, 4, 5 and lowered 7.



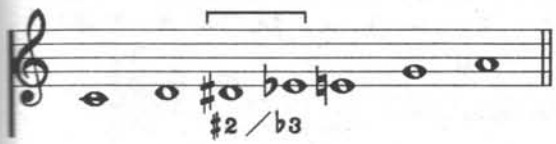
A Blues plus ♯4/ ♭5



According to many musicians, the blues scale should also contain the #4/b5.

This type of scale may be played over all three major chords in any key. For example, A blues may be played over A, D and E7; C blues over C, F and G7; G blues over G, C and D7, etc.

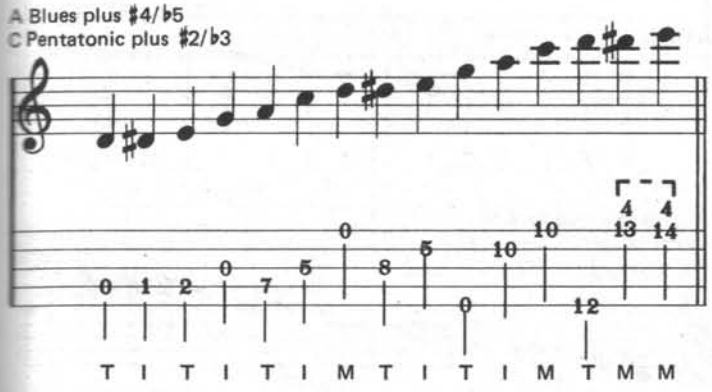
C Pentatonic plus ♯2/ ♭3



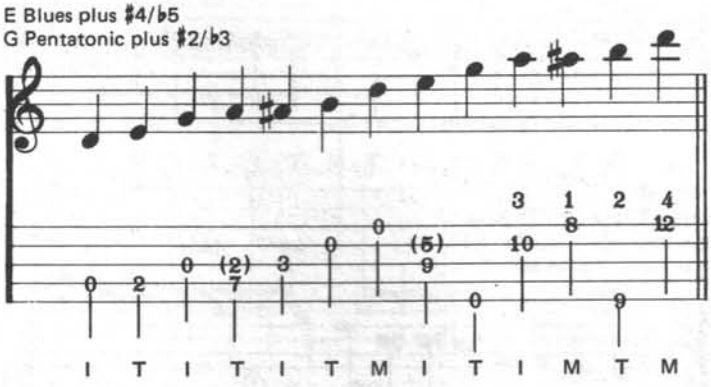
When added to the relative major's pentatonic scale, this same passing tone functions as a #2/b3.

When this scale is played over chords in the key of A, a funky-blues sound results. The same scale, when played over a C major chord, produces the jazzy ragtime sound found in swing and western-swing music. This sound is quite prevalent in the phrasings of todays' more progressive bluegrass guitar, mandolin and fiddle-players. I also use this scale over an A minor chord to produce some very pleasing sounds. Once again, because each scale can be used in several keys, key signatures have been omitted.

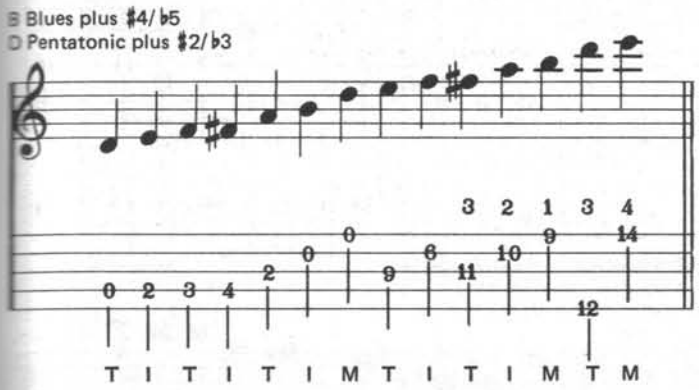
A Blues plus ♯4/♭5
C Pentatonic plus ♯2/♭3



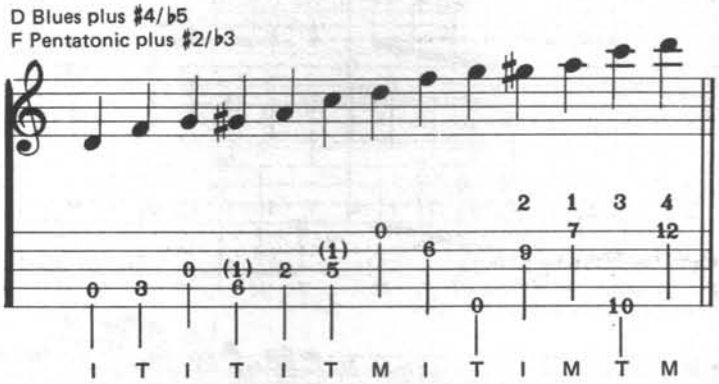
E Blues plus ♯4/♭5
G Pentatonic plus ♯2/♭3



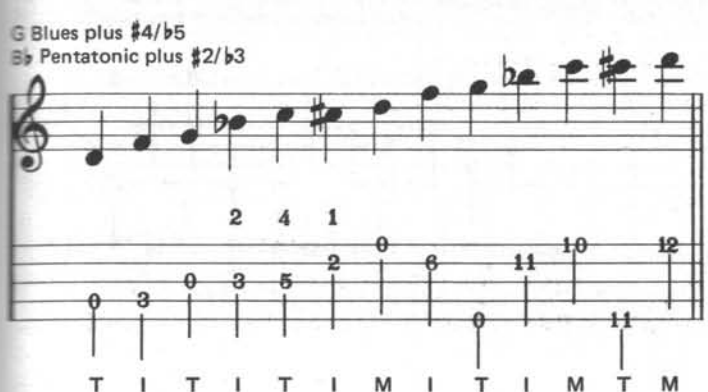
B Blues plus ♯4/♭5
D Pentatonic plus ♯2/♭3



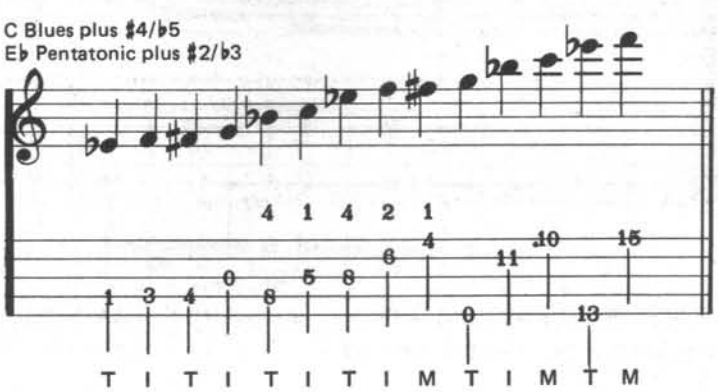
D Blues plus ♯4/♭5
F Pentatonic plus ♯2/♭3



G Blues plus ♯4/♭5
B♭ Pentatonic plus ♯2/♭3



C Blues plus ♯4/♭5
E♭ Pentatonic plus ♯2/♭3

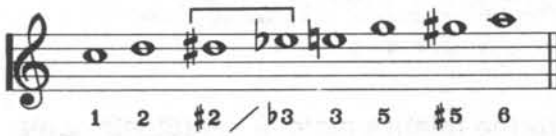


*Play either note

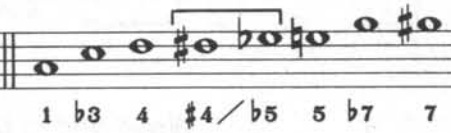
Pentatonic and Blues Scales Plus Chromatic Passing Tones

The #4/b5 in the blues scale and #2/b3 in the pentatonic scale function as chromatic passing-tones linking two notes. In the following scales, an additional passing-tone has been added. These passing-tones are derived from rock and blues phrasings. They make the pentatonic scale swing a little more and the blues scale a little blusier. Practice them like you would any conventional scale.

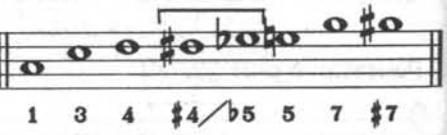
C Pentatonic plus ♯2 and ♯5



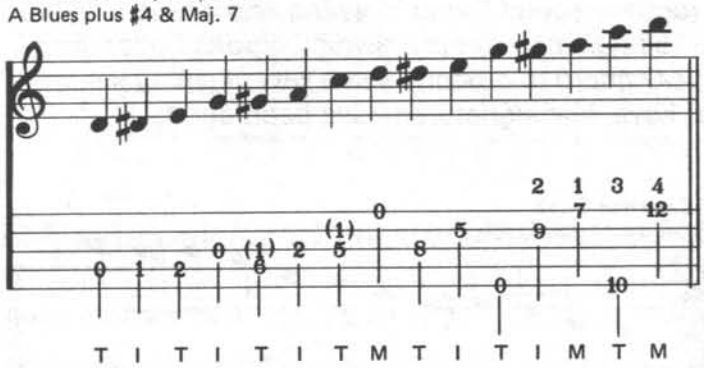
A Blues plus ♯4 and Maj. 7



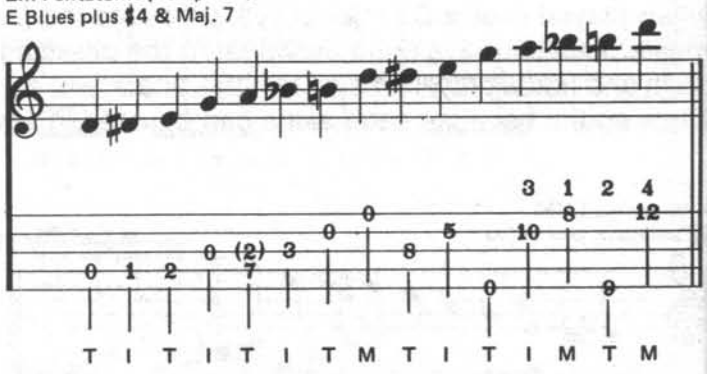
Am Pentatonic plus ♯4 and ♯7



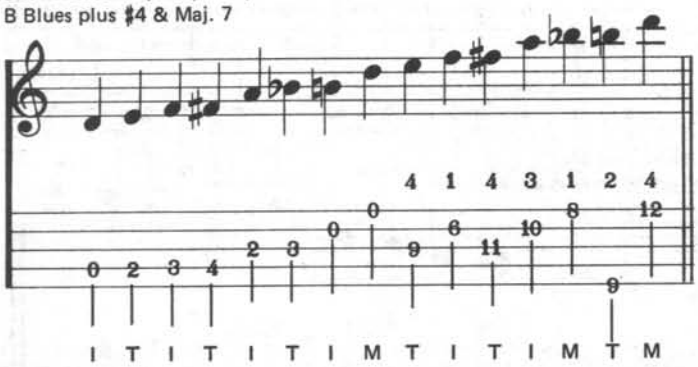
C Pentatonic plus ♯2 & ♯5
Am Pentatonic plus ♯4 & ♯7
A Blues plus ♯4 & Maj. 7



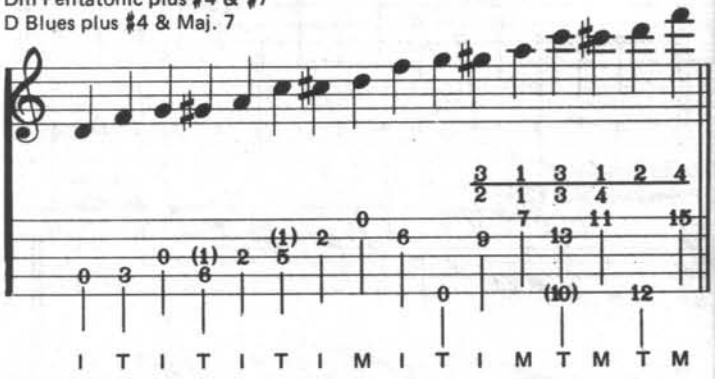
G Pentatonic plus ♯2 & ♯5
Em Pentatonic plus ♯4 & ♯7
E Blues plus ♯4 & Maj. 7



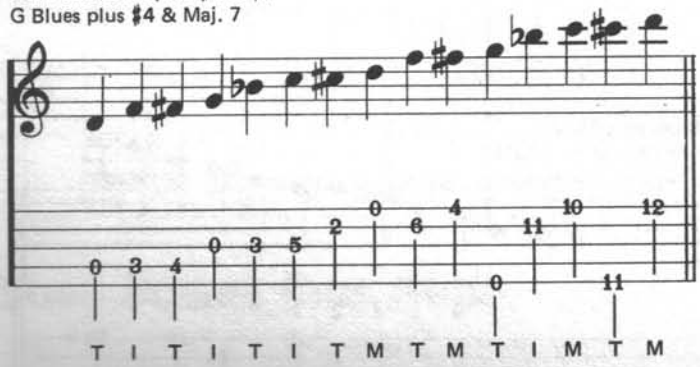
D Pentatonic plus ♯2 & ♯5
Bm Pentatonic plus ♯4 & ♯7
B Blues plus ♯4 & Maj. 7



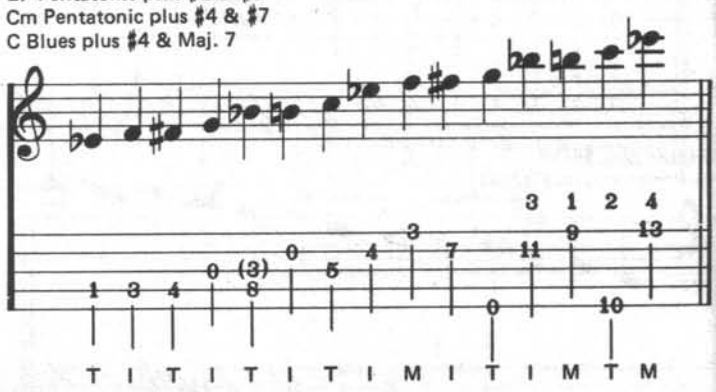
F Pentatonic plus ♯2 & ♯5
Dm Pentatonic plus ♯4 & ♯7
D Blues plus ♯4 & Maj. 7



B♭ Pentatonic plus ♯2 & ♯5
Gm Pentatonic plus ♯4 & ♯7
G Blues plus ♯4 & Maj. 7



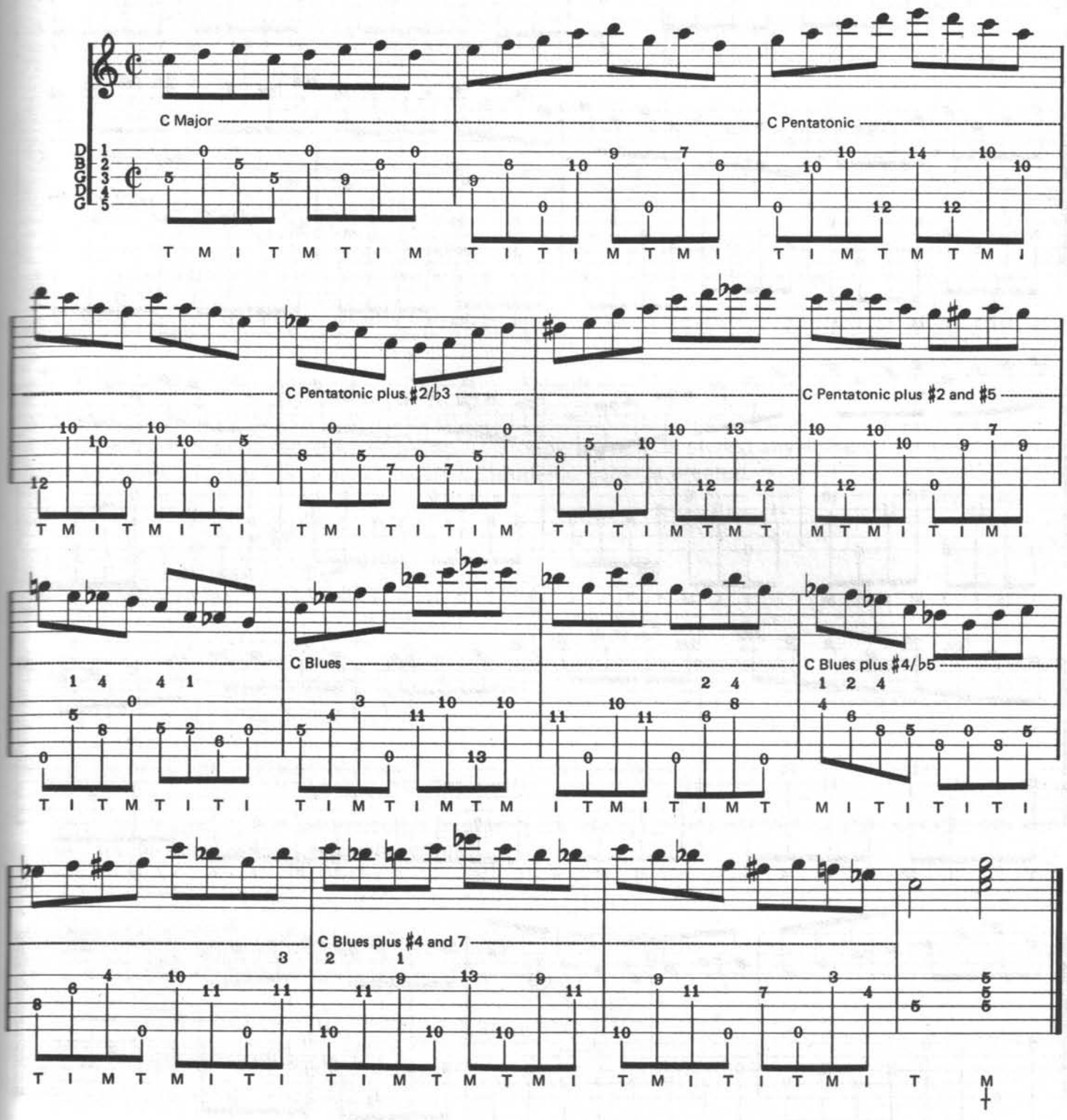
E♭ Pentatonic plus ♯2 & ♯5
Cm Pentatonic plus ♯4 & ♯7
C Blues plus ♯4 & Maj. 7



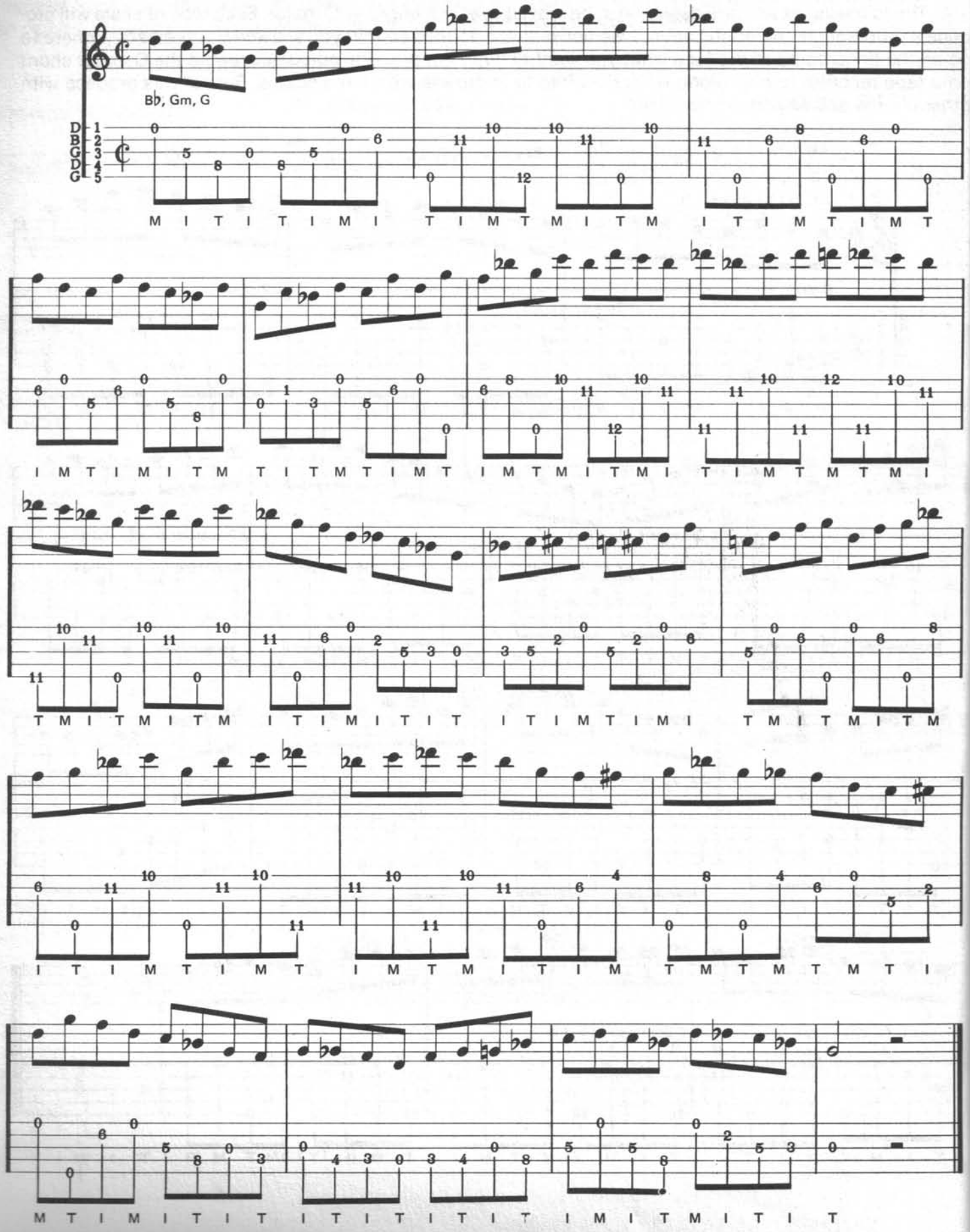
Scale Exercises

Besides being able to play a wide variety of scales and the patterns derived from them, a musician should be able to both identify them when he hears them, and be able to play what his mind wants to hear. This of course can only result after much extensive practice and ear-training.

The following exercise is designed to be played over one chord — C major. Each type of scale will produce a different characteristic sound. Memorize these sounds so that you will know immediately where to go on the fingerboard to produce what you want to hear. For practice purposes, record the C major chord on a tape recorder to play along with. Feel free to improvise within the scales. Repeat this process with other chords and scales.



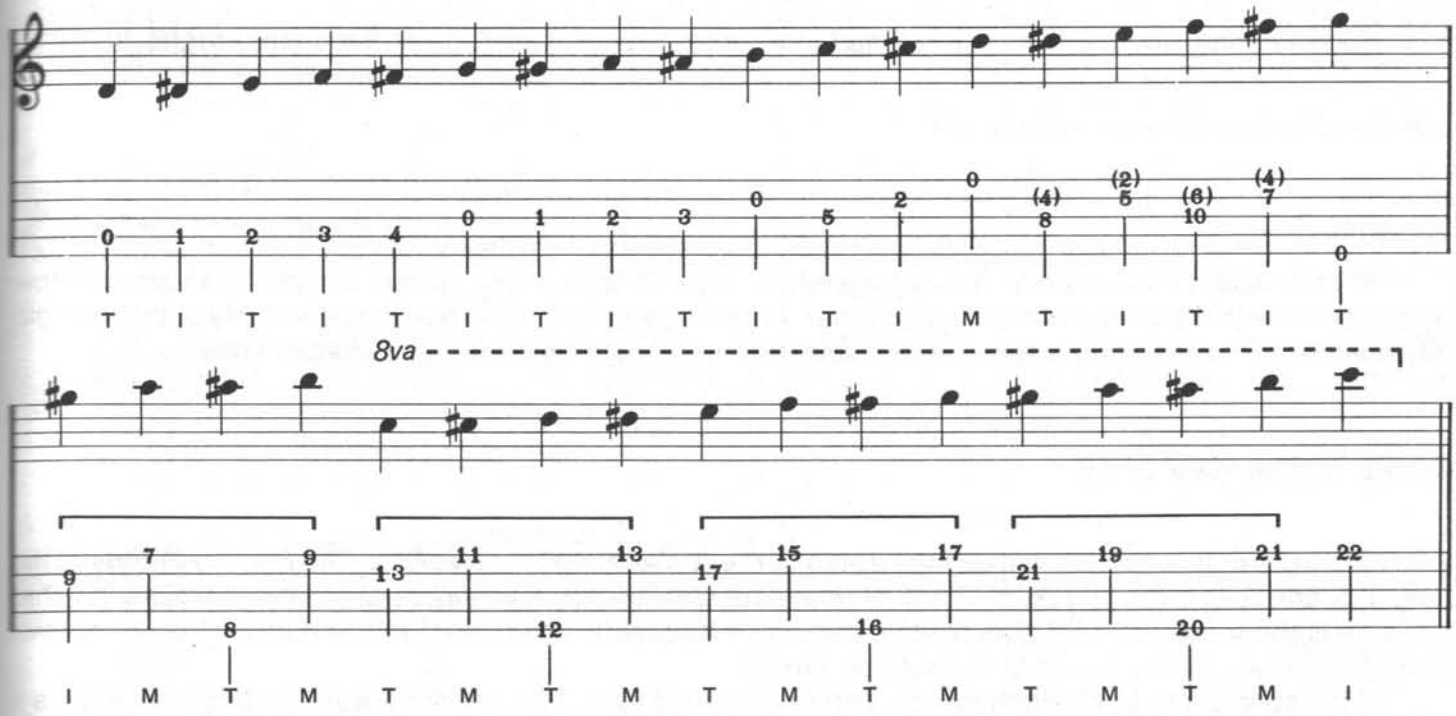
The next exercise uses one pentatonic/blues scale: Bb pentatonic/G minor pentatonic/G blues. It will be combined with the chromatic passing-tones, such as presented in the last two sections. This exercise should be practiced three ways — first over a Bb major chord, second over G minor, and finally over a G major. Try to remember how it sounds over each. Once again, feel free to improvise, and practice the other pentatonic/blues scales in the same manner.



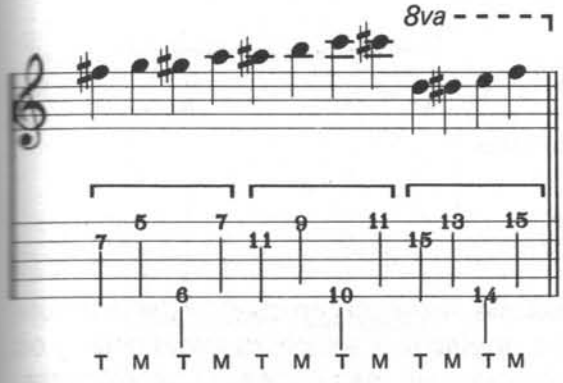
Chromatics

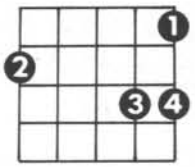
Chromatic tones are non-scale tones played in between scale tones. They lead to essential tones (either up or down) acting as connectors to "smooth-out" lines.

A complete chromatic scale (every half-step) can be built on any note. Here is the chromatic scale over the entire range of the banjo. Practice ascending and descending scales beginning on every note.

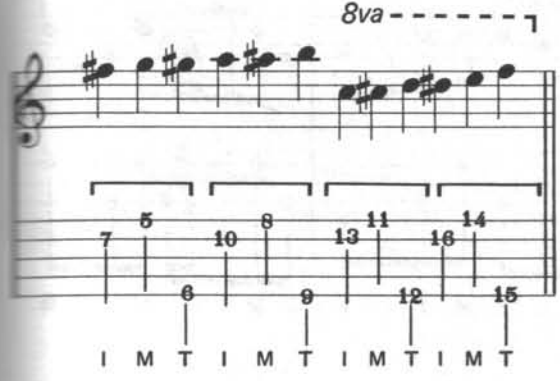


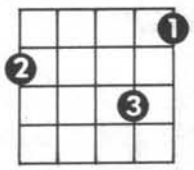
Notice the moveable four-note fingering. This fingering can be placed anywhere on the neck, and by repeating it every 4 frets (either up or down) a chromatic scale is created.





With this fingering it is also possible to start a chromatic scale anywhere on the neck (5th fret and above). The fingering repeats every three frets.





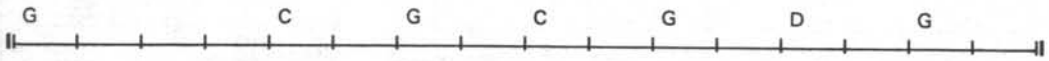
Melodic Licks

This section will explain how to compose melodic licks for use in arranging solos or for embellishing solos you already know. Some of the licks presented here will integrate the melodic style with the Scruggs style.

Note: If a capo is being used, the key will be raised one half-step for each fret the capo is placed above the nut.

To determine where a lick may be used in a tune you must first look at the chord progression.

LONESOME ROAD BLUES/EAST VIRGINIA BLUES

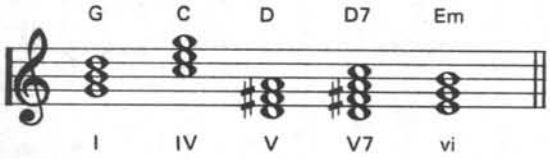


In this case, simply plug in the appropriate G, C or D licks of the correct length. Licks should flow together smoothly and compliment each other. An arrangement doesn't have to be entirely in the melodic style either — try inserting a few melodic licks into a Scruggs-style solo you already know.

Licks in the Key of G

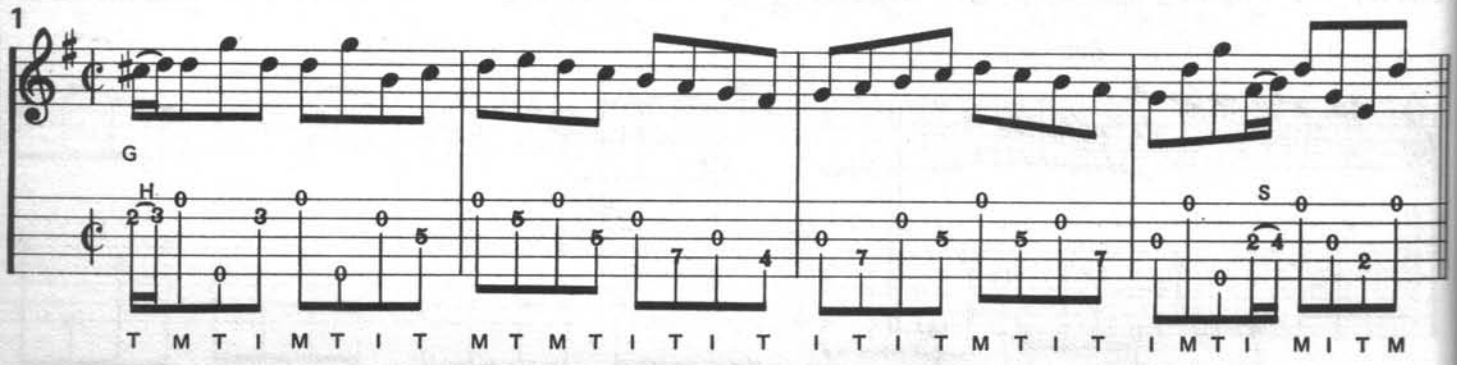
The licks in this section will use the notes of the G major scale exclusively. The primary chords in the key of G are: G (I), C (IV) and D (V). The V, or dominant chord in any key may be extended to include the 7th; thus, in G the V7 chord is D7. The relative minor is a frequently used chord and is built on the 6th note of the major scale. In the key of G it would be Em (vi).

It is important to begin each lick on a strategic chord tone. This will not always be possible, but it's a good rule of thumb. Since a note will appear in more than one chord in each key, it is often possible for a lick, or a portion thereof, to be played over more than one chord. When patterns are incorporated into licks, quite frequently a measure may begin on a non-chord tone; at this point it could imply another chord. Some of these possibilities will appear in parentheses.

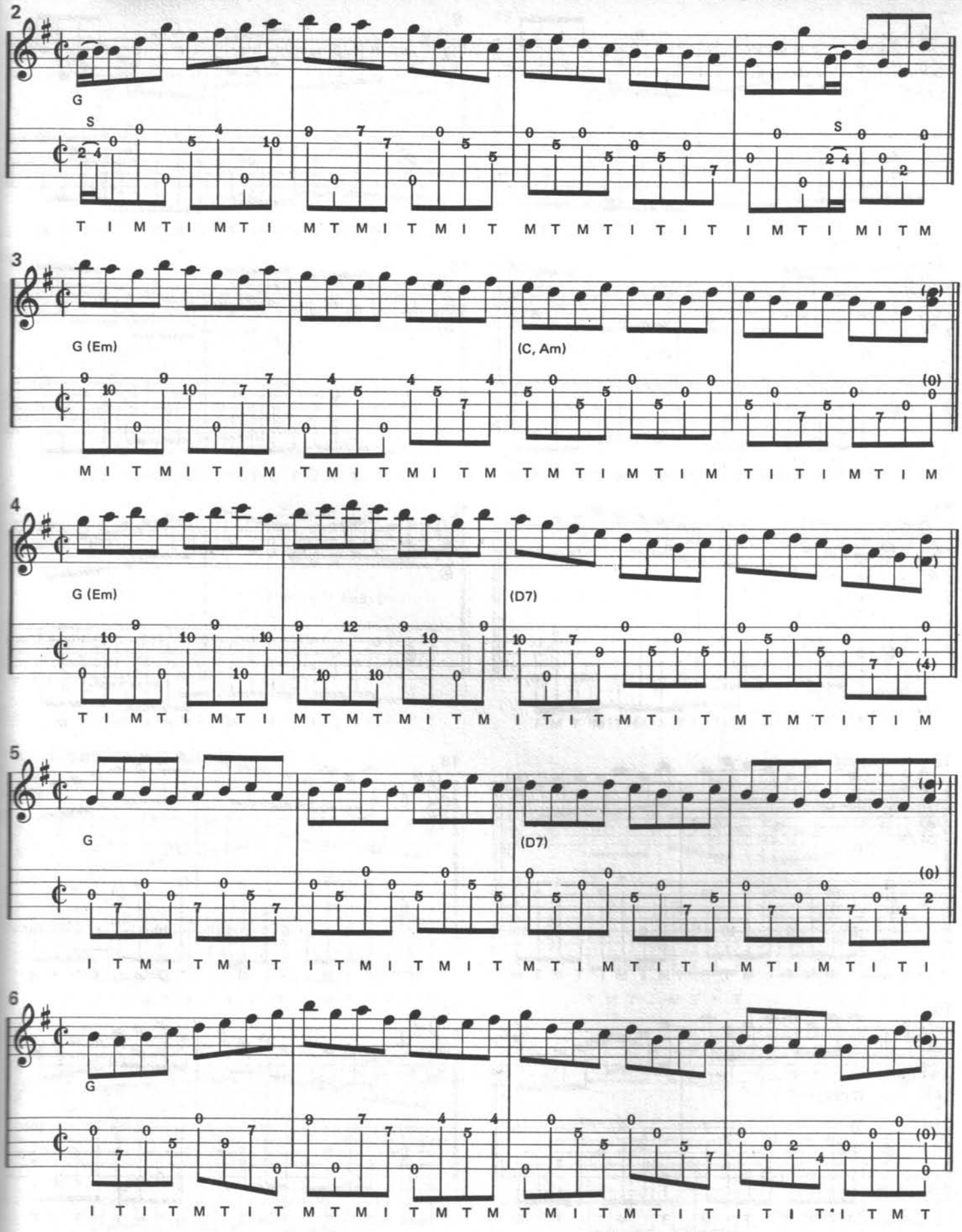


In order to arrive smoothly at the beginning of a lick it may become necessary to change the last note of the previous lick. Occasionally this is done for melodic reasons, or else it is simply to avoid ending on the string that the first note of the next lick is on. These alternate notes will also appear in parentheses.

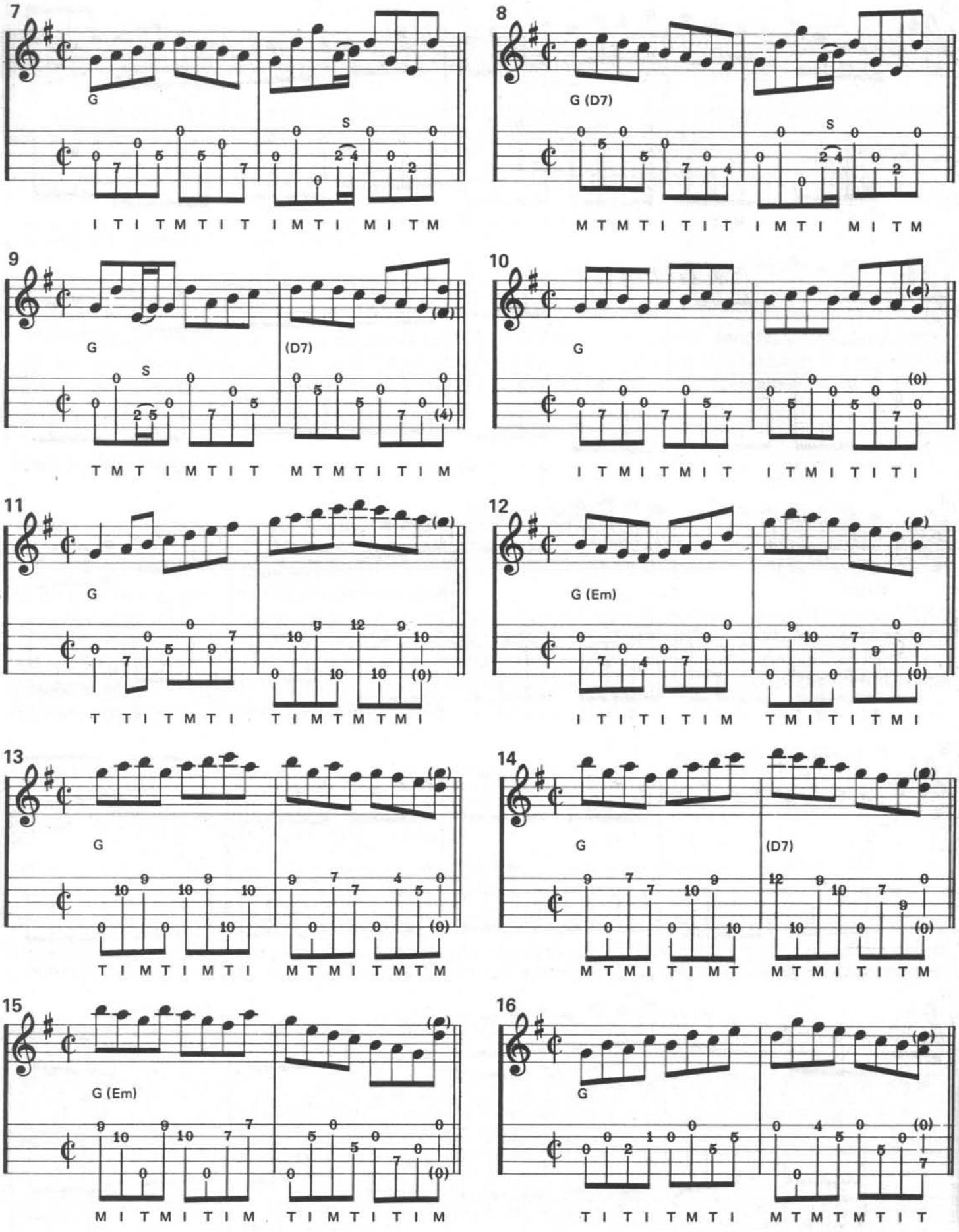
Four Measure G Licks



Four Measure G Licks, con't

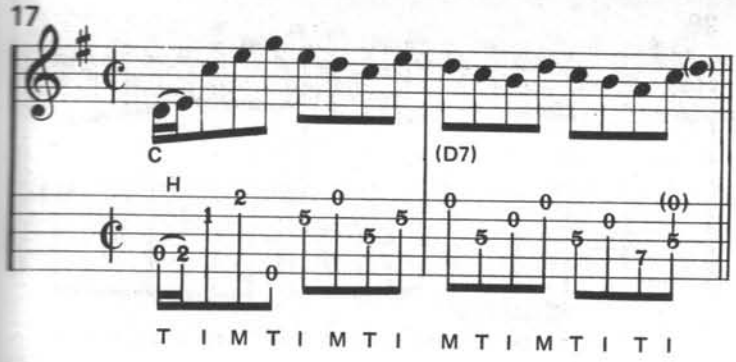


Two Measure G Licks



Two Measure C Licks

17



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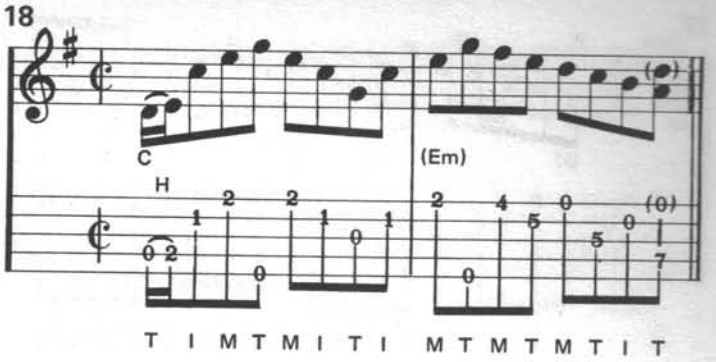

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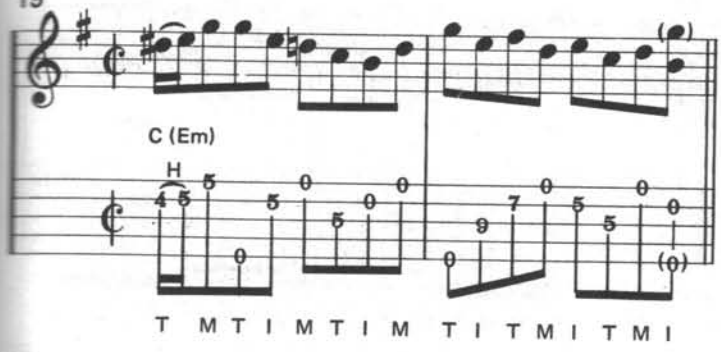

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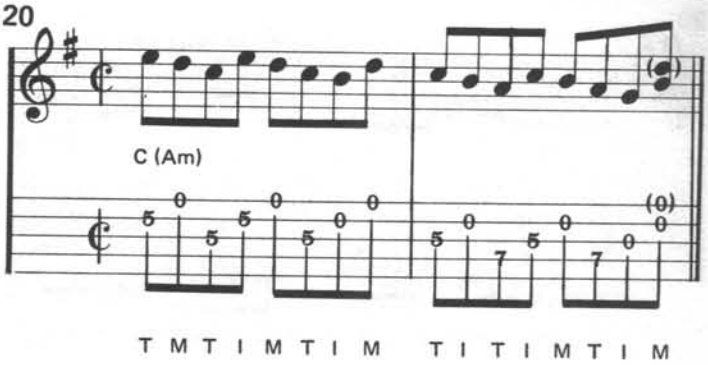

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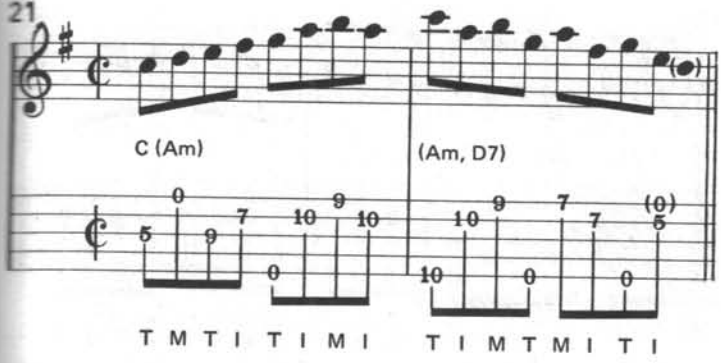

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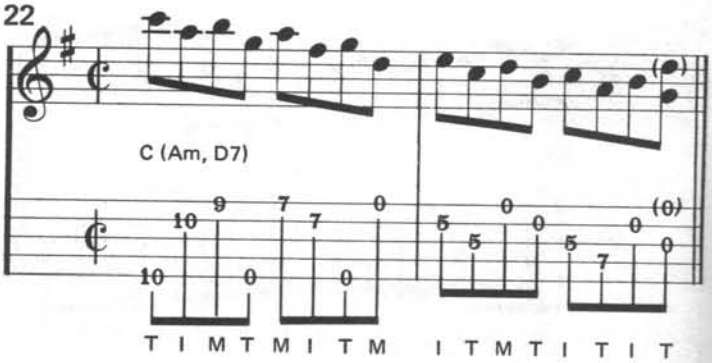
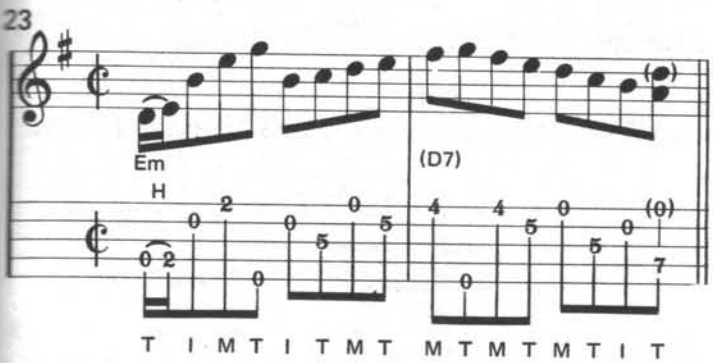


Two Measure Em Licks

23



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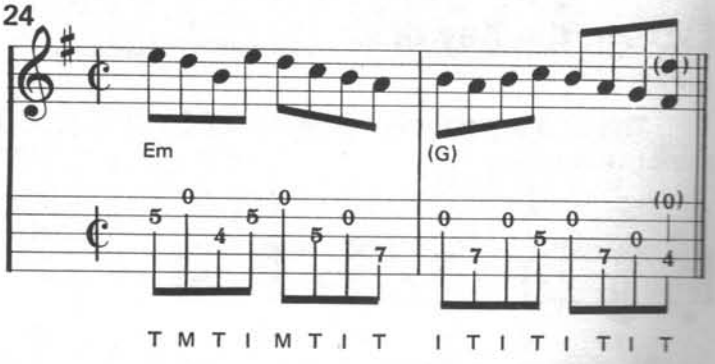

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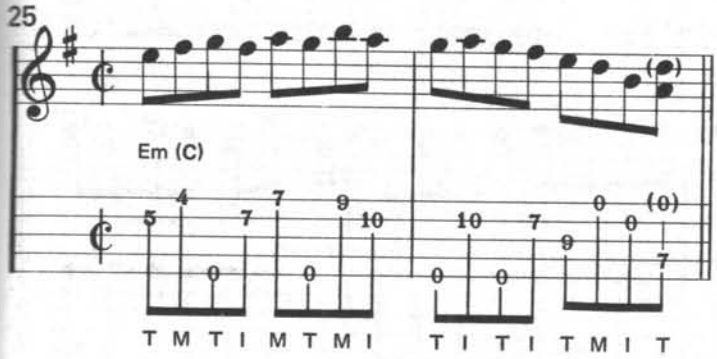

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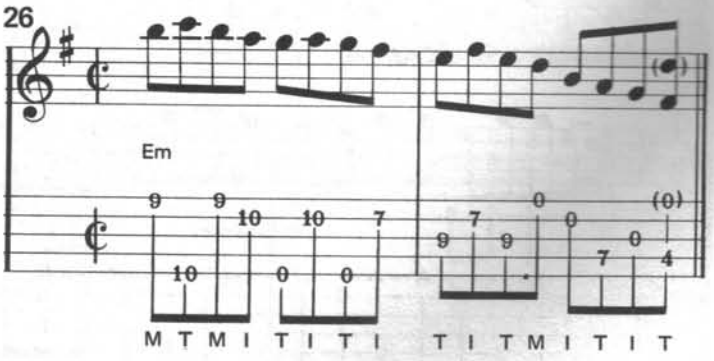
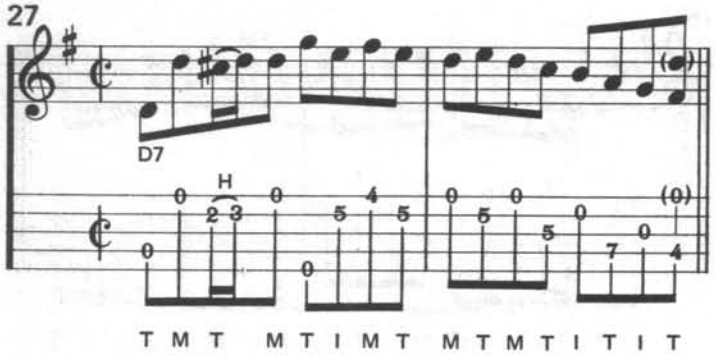


Two Measure D7 Licks

27



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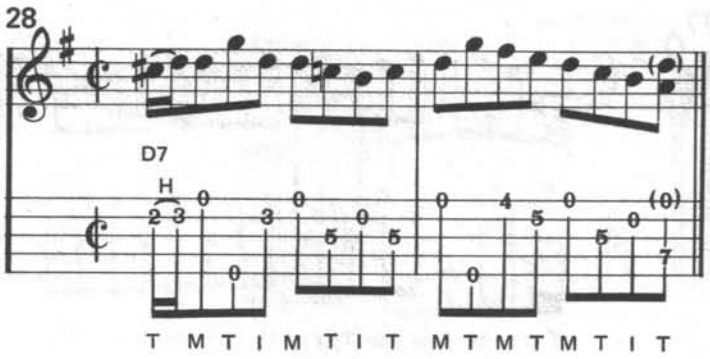

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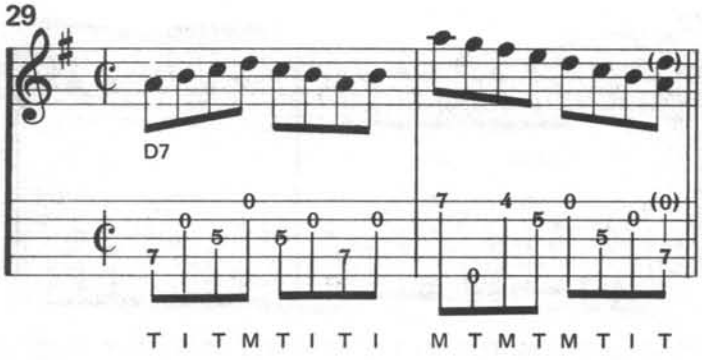

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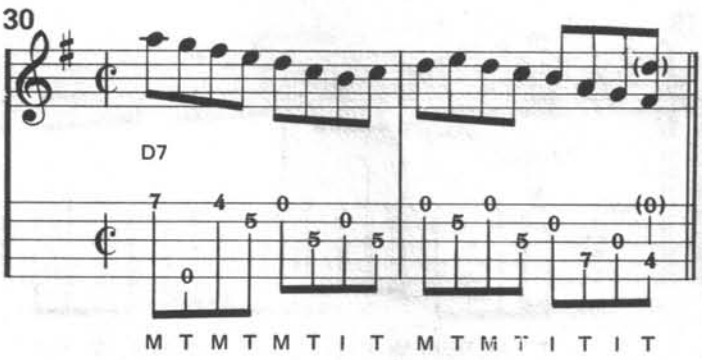

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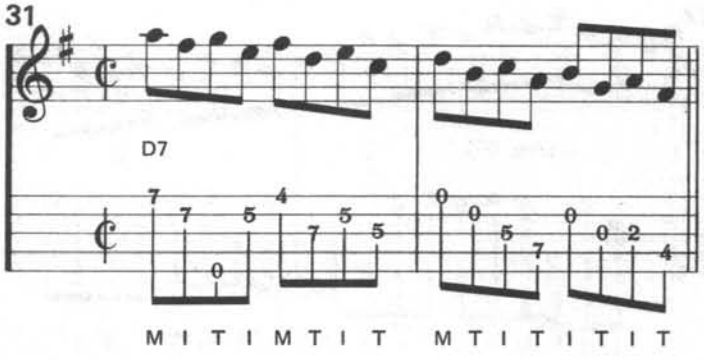

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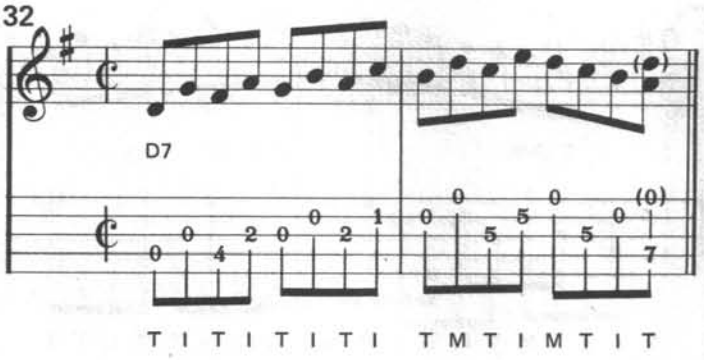
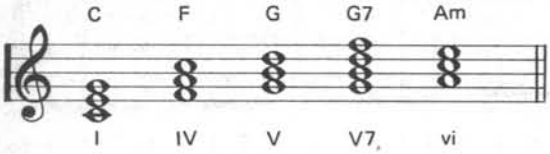


Licks in the Key of C

The primary chords in the key of C are: C (I), F (IV) and G (V). The dominant 7th is G7 and the relative minor is Am.



Four Measure C Licks

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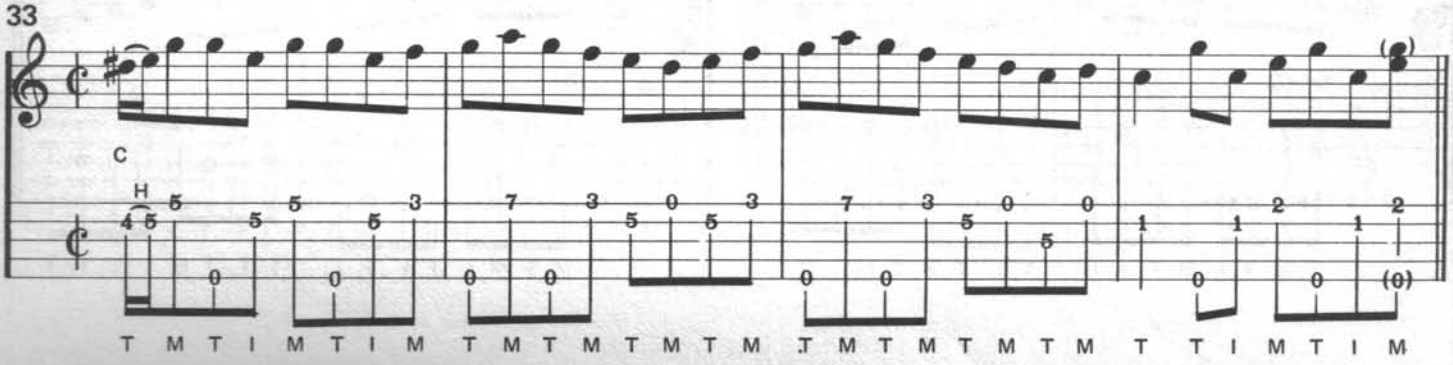
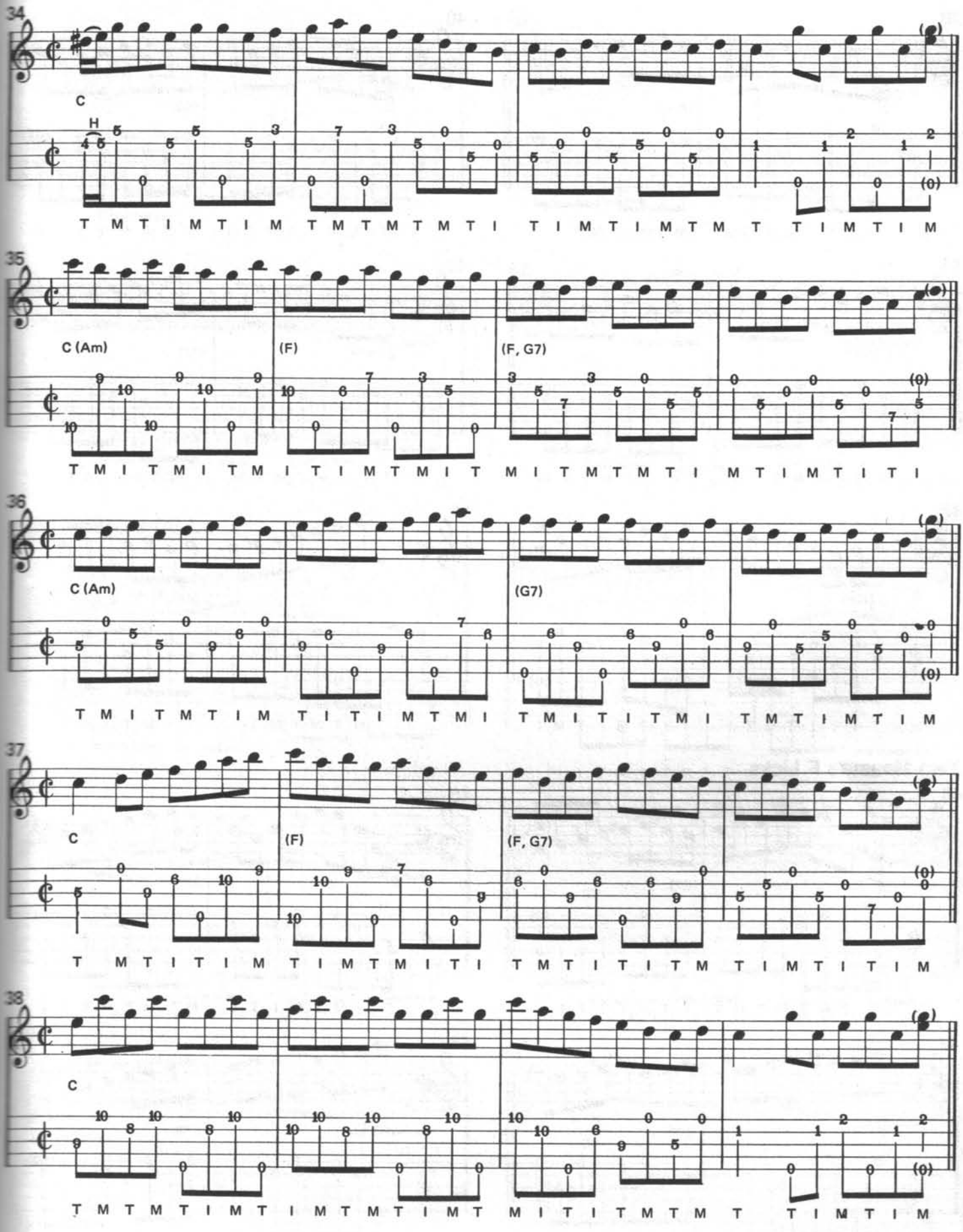


Four Measure C Licks, con't



Two Measure C Licks

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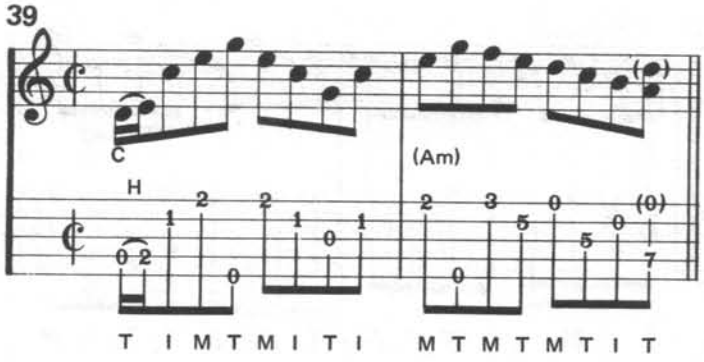

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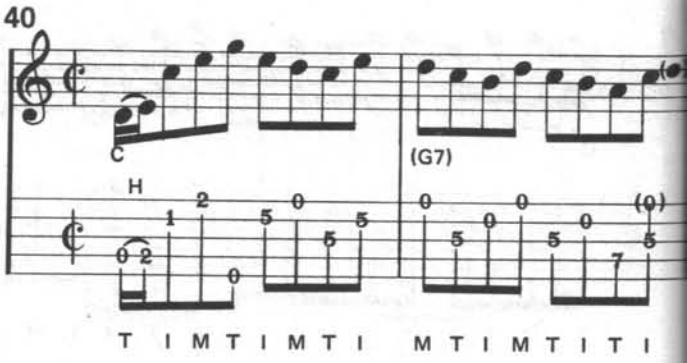

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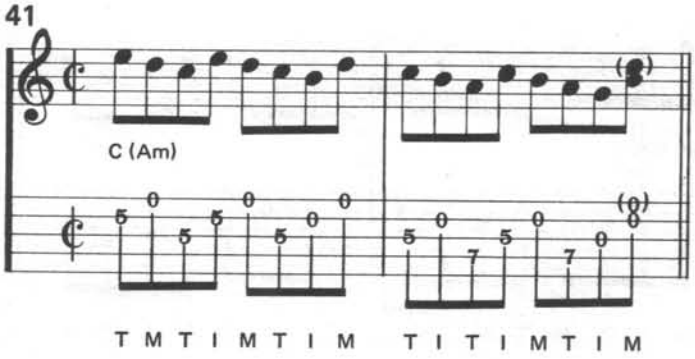

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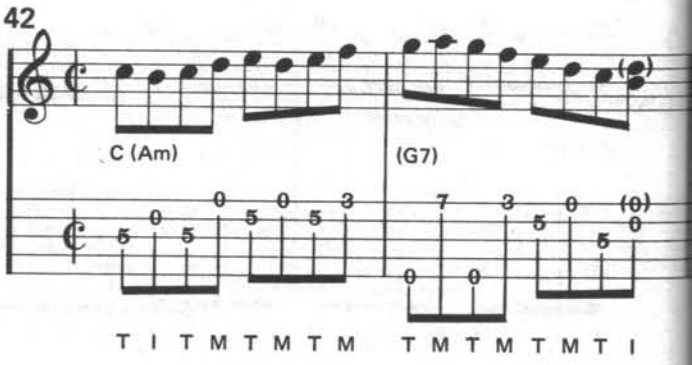

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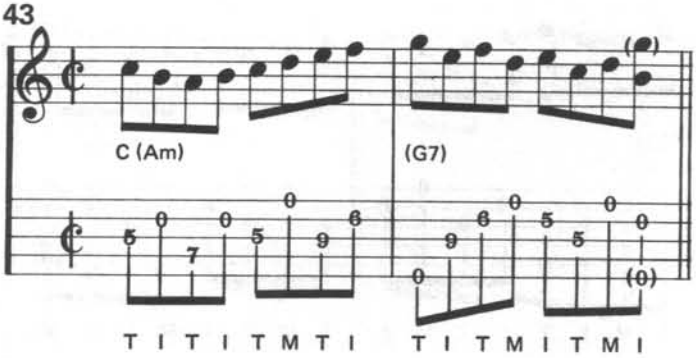

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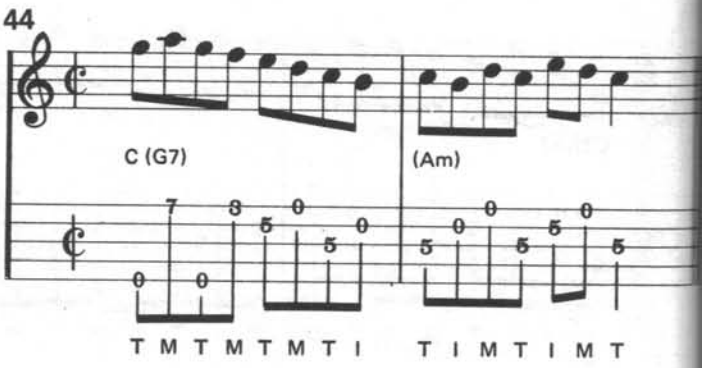

Two Measure F Licks

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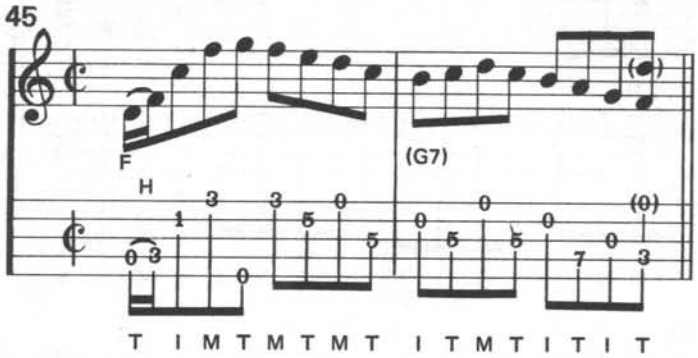

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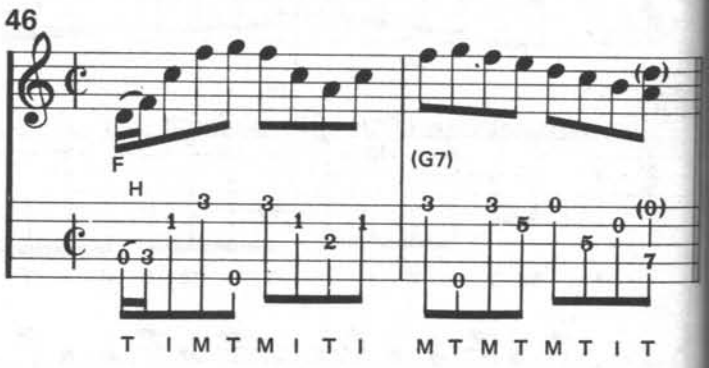

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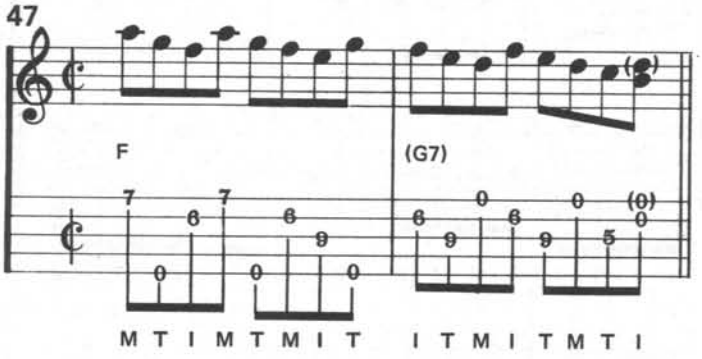

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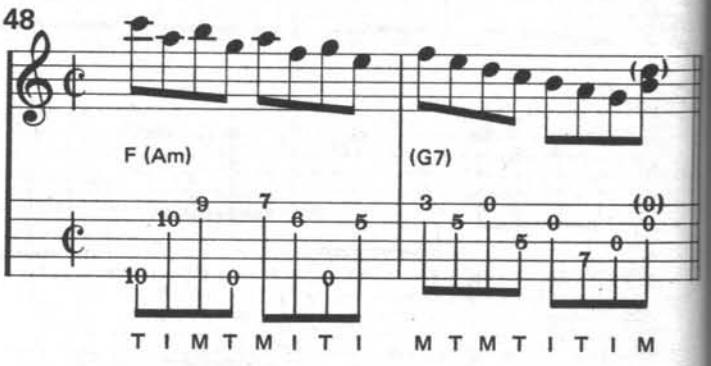

Two Measure Am Licks

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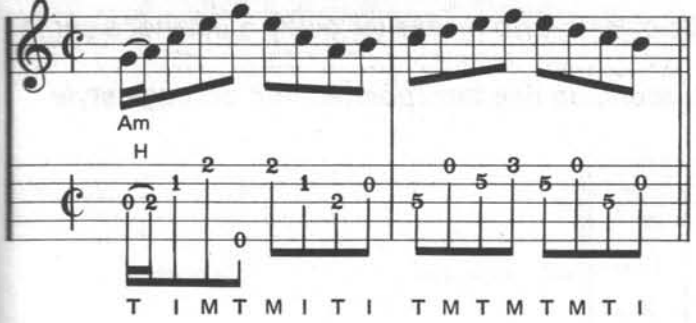

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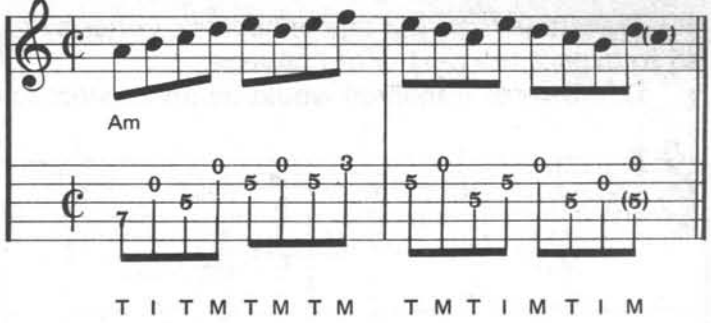

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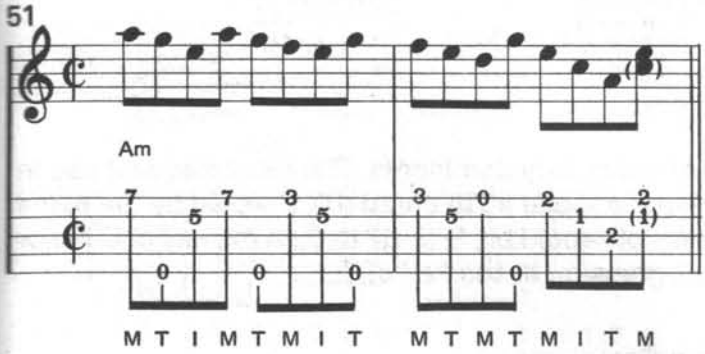

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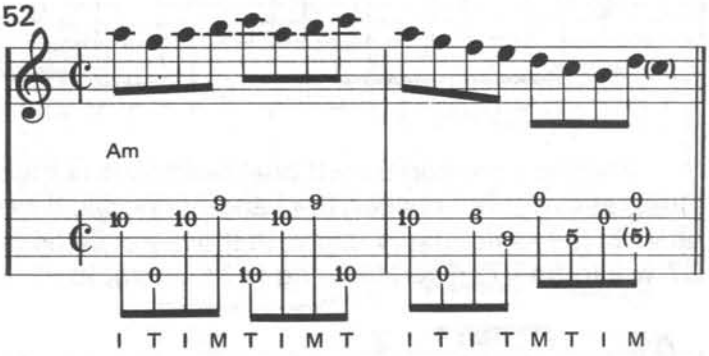

Two Measure G7 Licks

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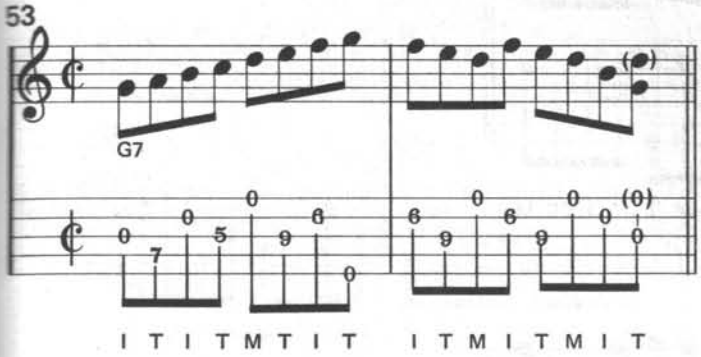

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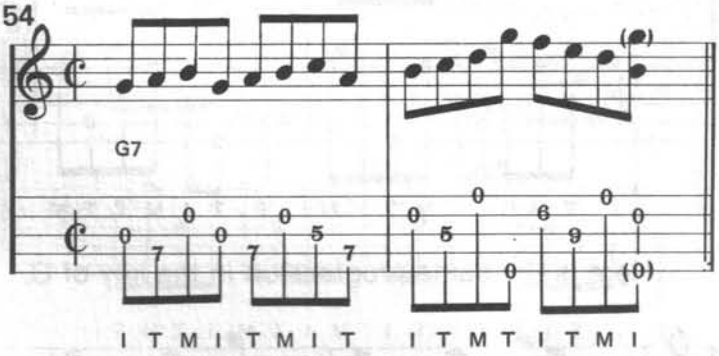

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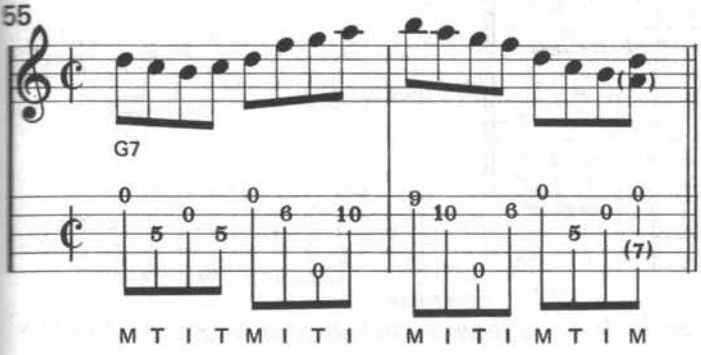

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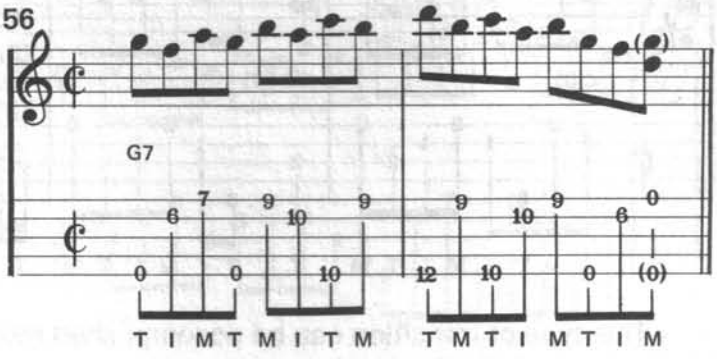

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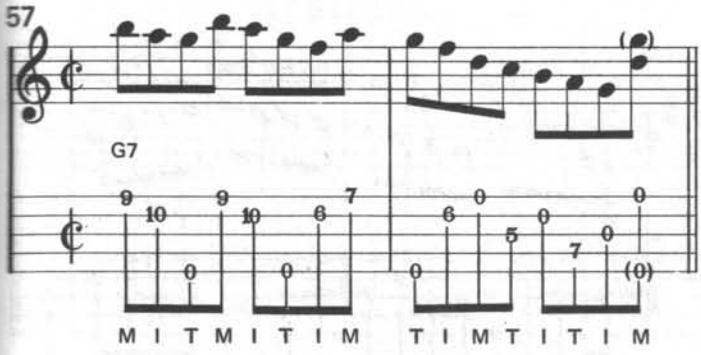

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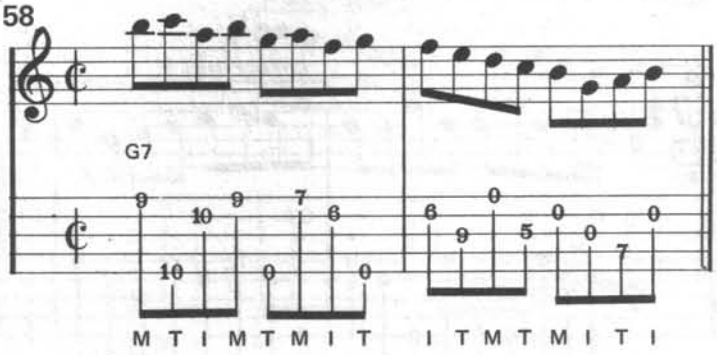
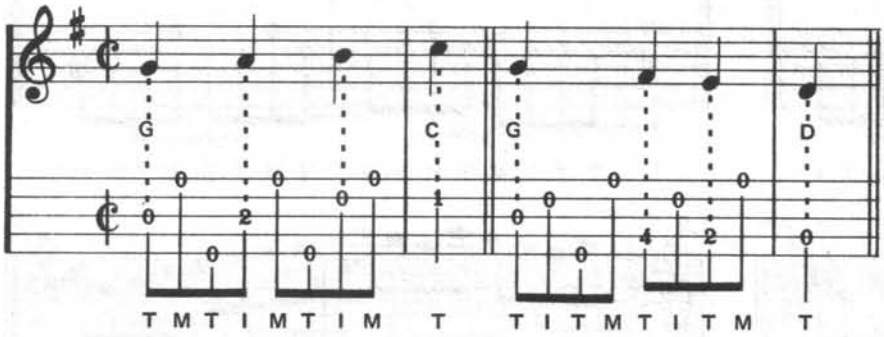


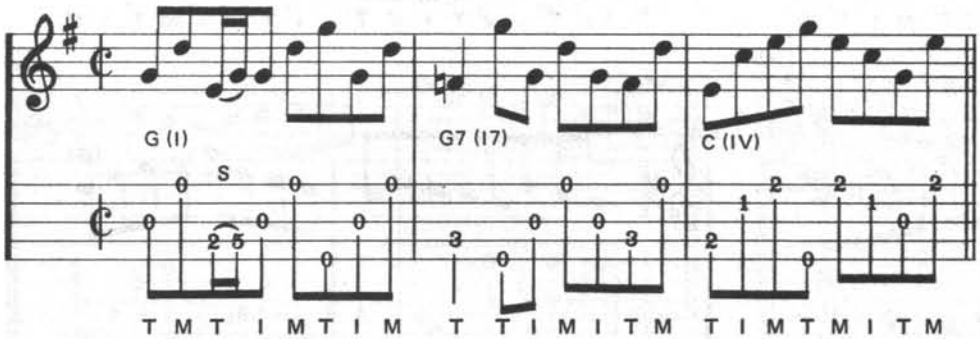
Transition Licks

Transition licks act as connectors. Either by melodic or harmonic means (or both), a listener's ear is led to expect the next chord change.

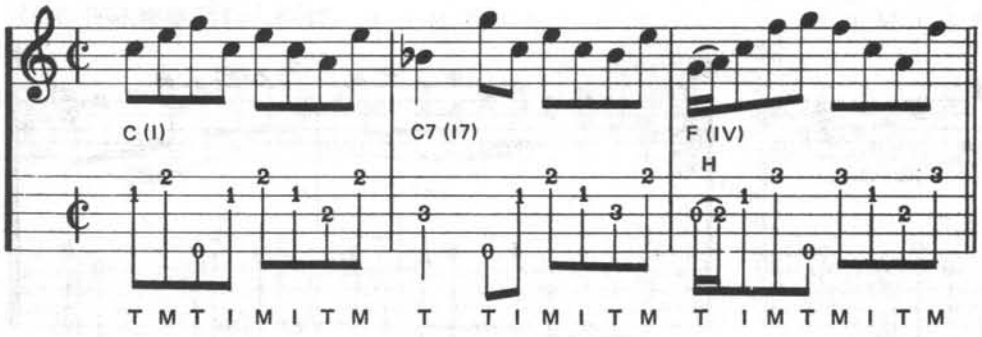
One type of transition would be an ascending or descending line incorporated into Scruggs style.



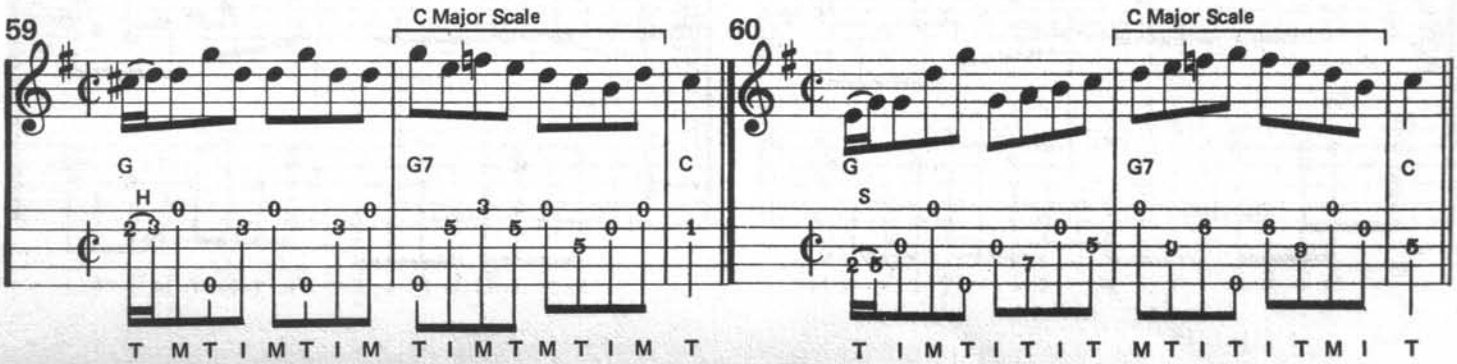
Another common transitional technique is the use of secondary dominants. The most frequent use in bluegrass occurs between the I and IV chords. If the I chord is made a 7th chord (I7), it would be the same as V7 in the key of the IV chord. In the key of G the progression would be: G to G7 to C (in the key of C major G7 would be V7). The following is an example of this progression in the key of G.



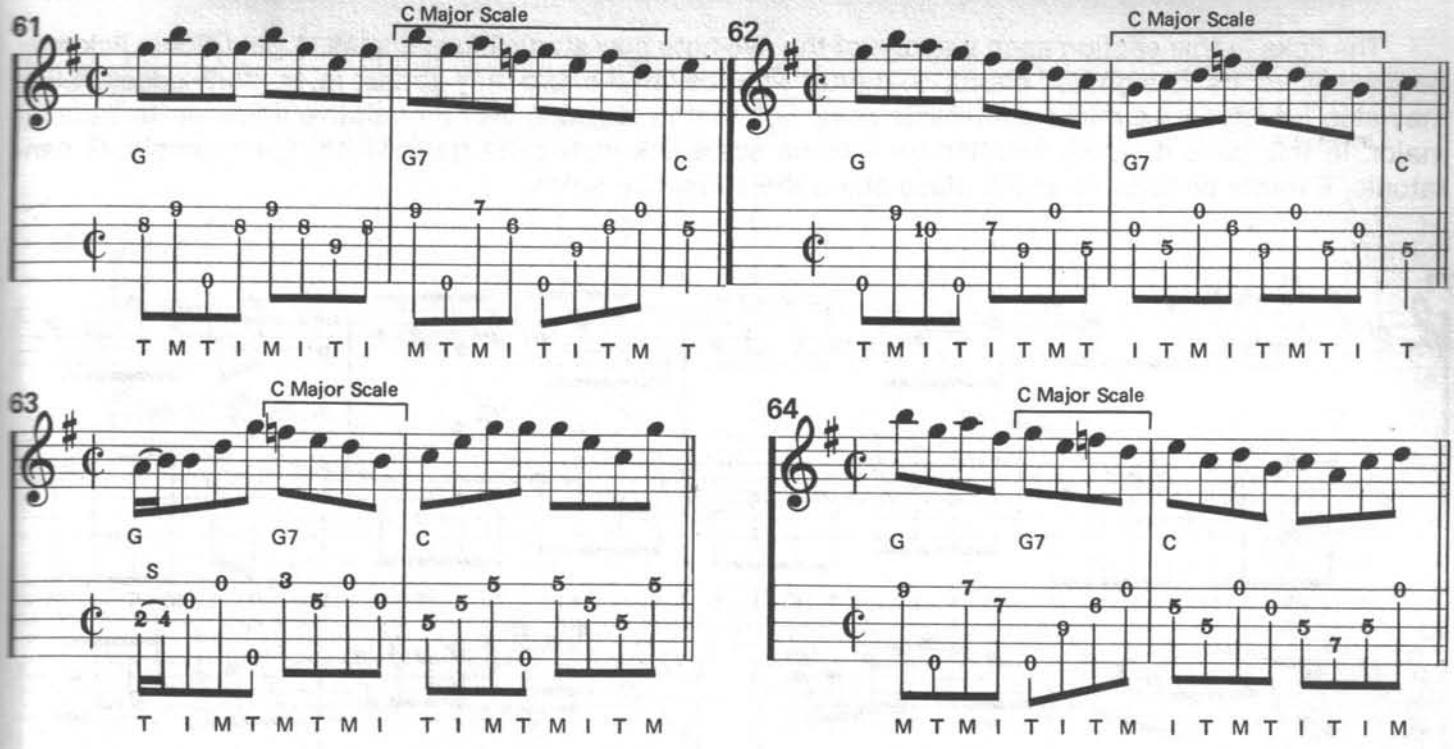
Here is the same progression in the key of C.



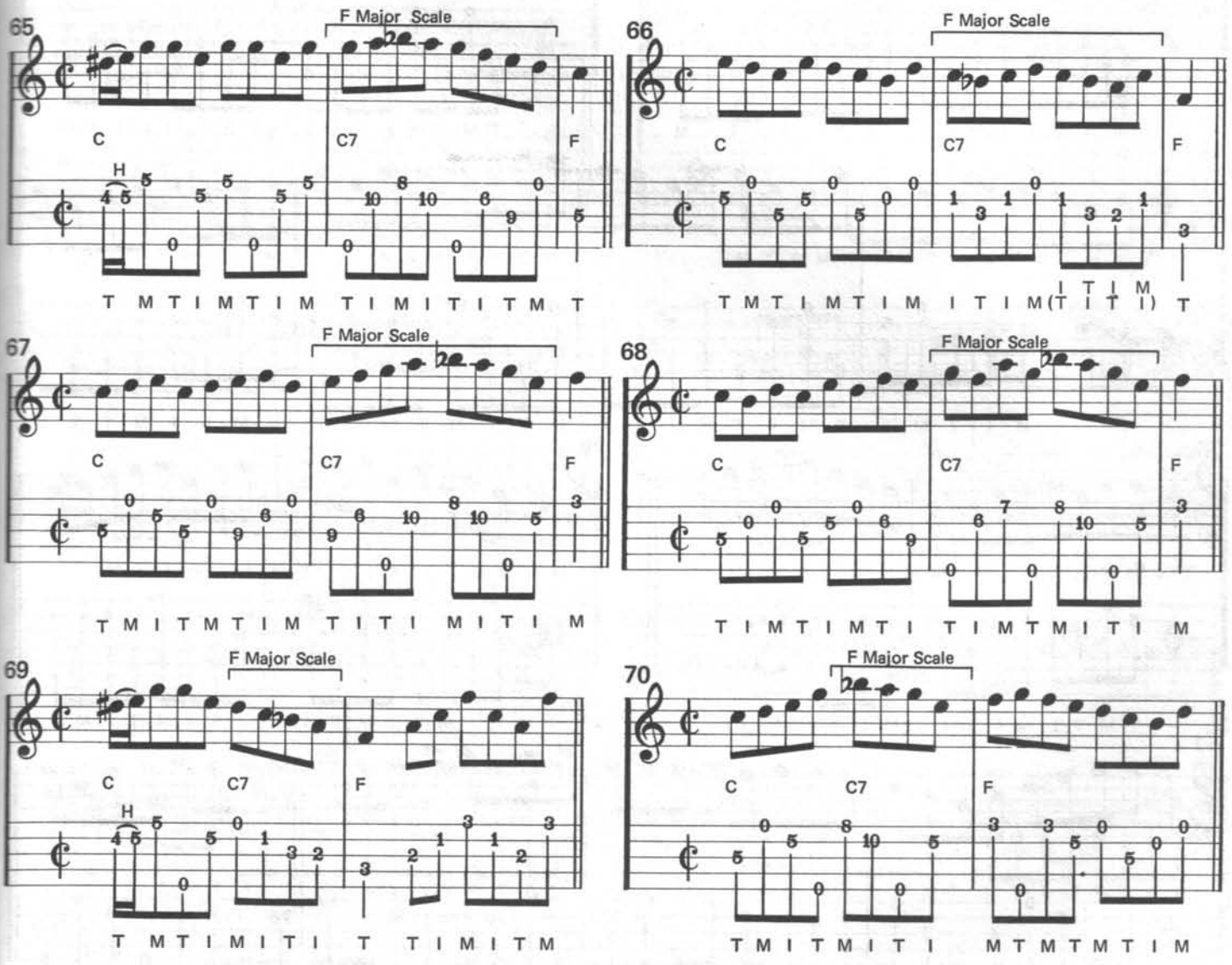
This type of transition can be accomplished melodically. In the measure before the IV chord, play the major scale of the IV chord.



Transition Licks in G

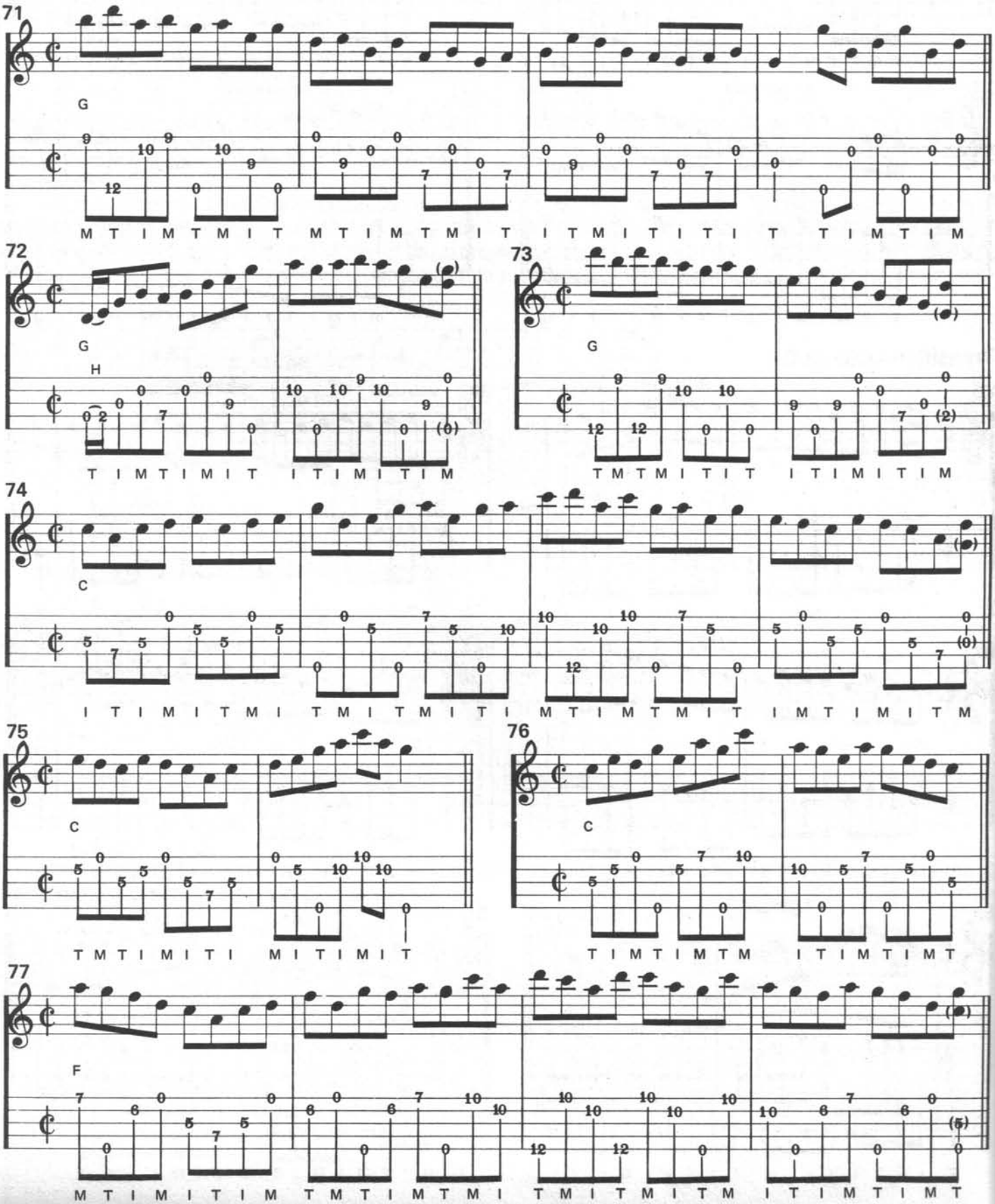


Transition Licks in C

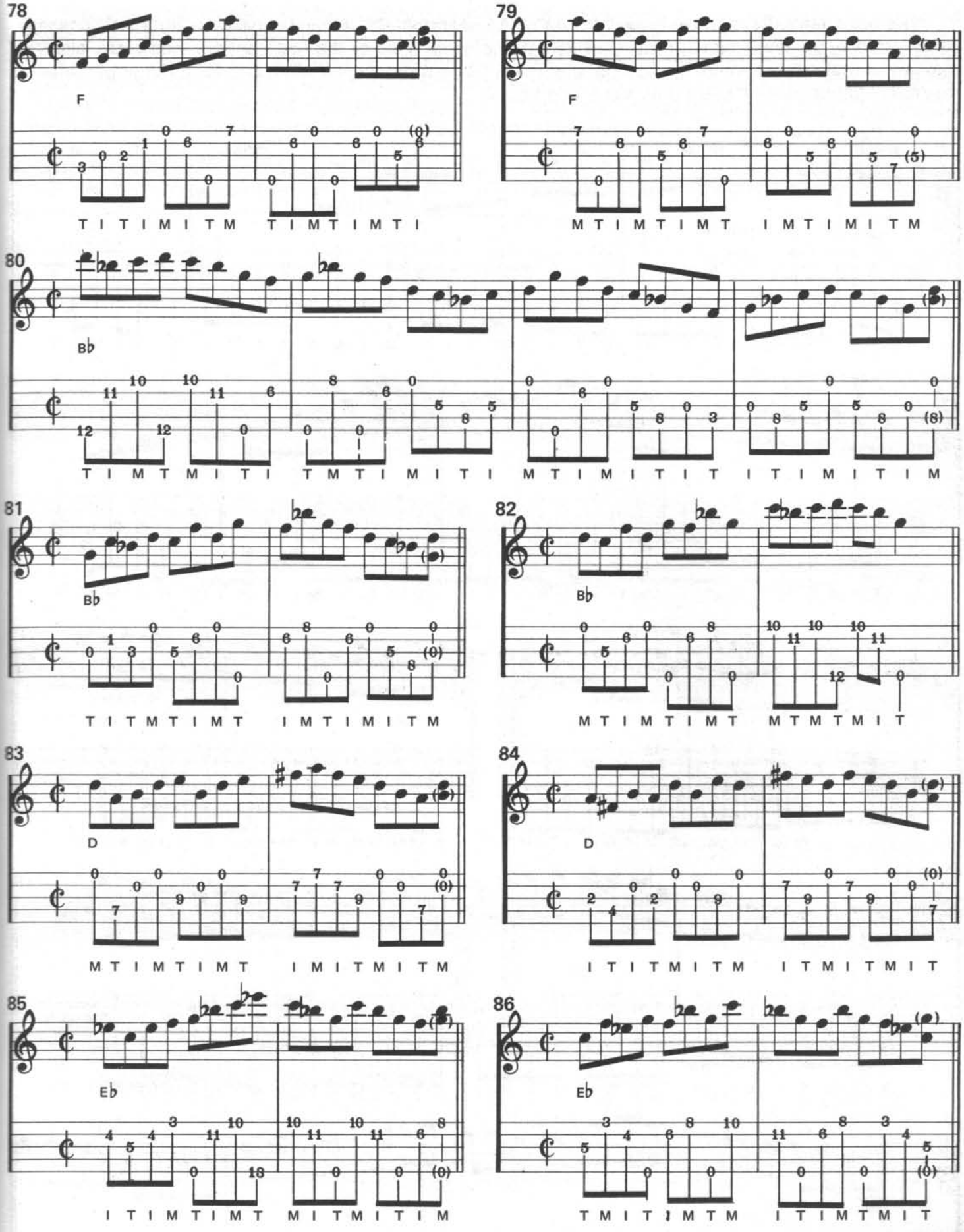


Pentatonic Scale Licks

The licks in this section each use one of the five-note pentatonic/blues scales. A pentatonic lick may be played over its designated chord, no matter what key that chord may appear in. In many cases, a lick may also function as a minor pentatonic scale lick that is playable over the relative minor or its parallel major. In this case it would function as a blues scale lick minus the flatted-fifth. For example: G pentatonic, E minor pentatonic and E blues share the same five notes.

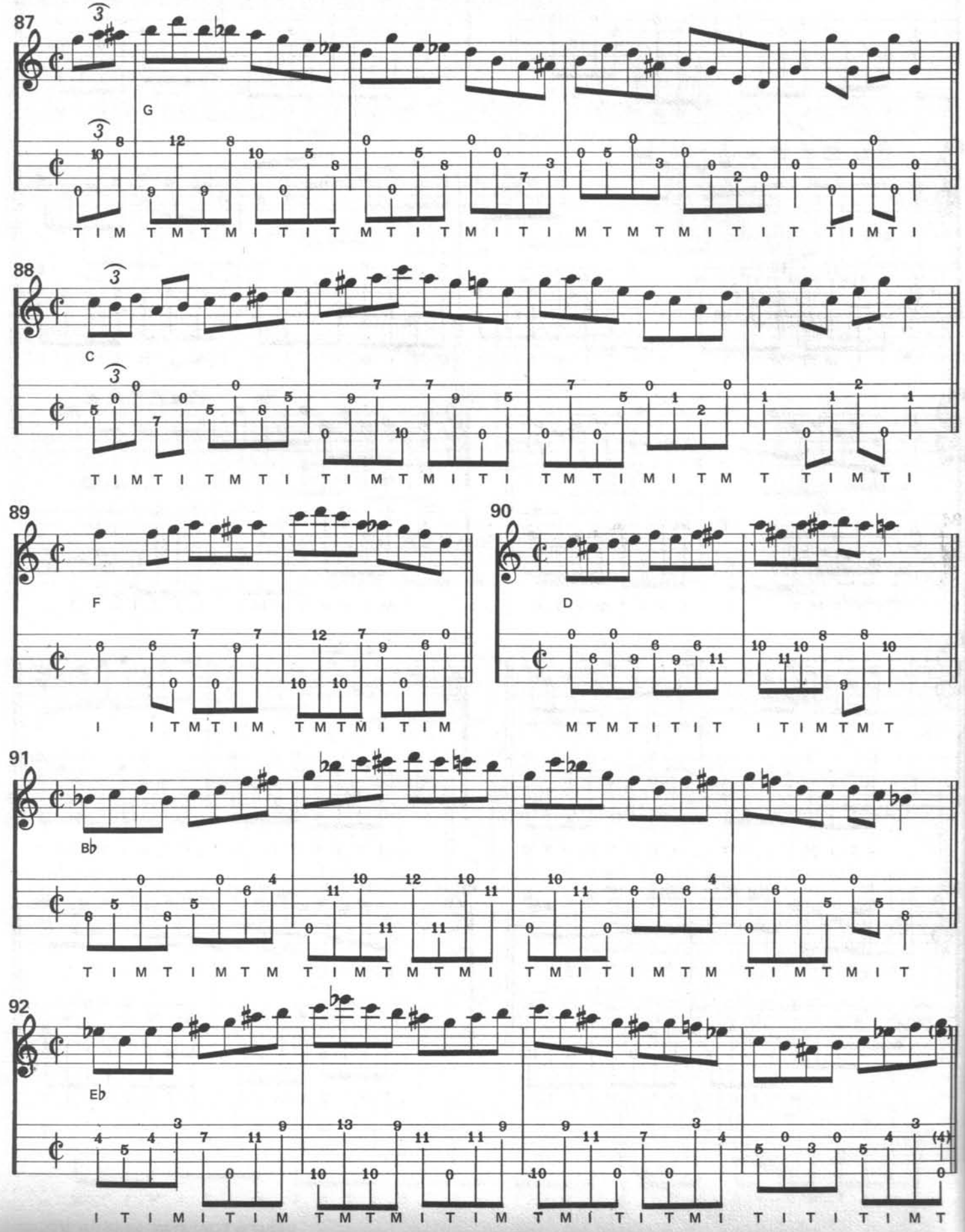


Pentatonic Scale Licks, con't



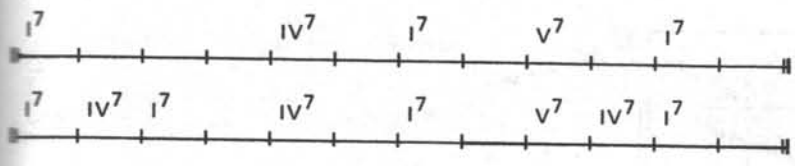
Pentatonic Scale Licks, con't

The following licks are each based on one of the pentatonic/blues scales plus the chromatic passing tones — #2/b3 and #5. As with the pure pentatonic scale licks of the last section, these may also be played over the relative minor and its parallel major (G pentatonic plus #2/b3 and #5, E minor pentatonic plus #4/b5 and #7, and E blues plus #4/b5 and Maj. 7).



Blues Scale Licks

The next five licks use the G blues scale plus #4/b5 (and occasionally 7) exclusively. This scale may be played over the I, IV and V chords. In a blues progression these chords are usually all dominant 7ths (I7, IV7, and V7). When played in the order as presented here, the licks will fit two of the most frequent types of 12-bar blues progressions. They may of course be used separately in other situations. The first progression is quite often used in bluegrass — it's the same as in Earl Scruggs' "Foggy Mountain Special", Don Reno's "Banjo Riff" and "Double Banjo Blues", and Red Allen's "Bluegrass Blues".



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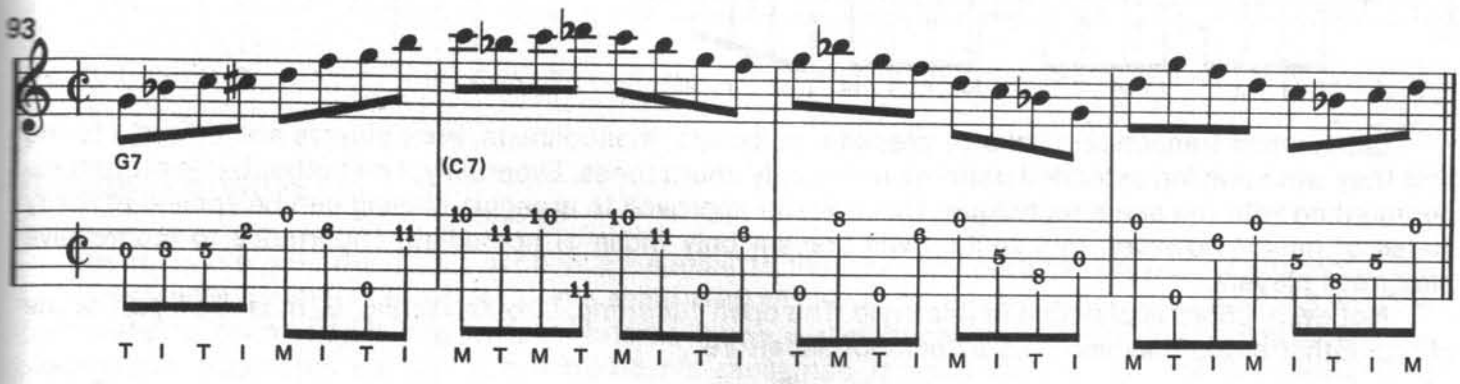

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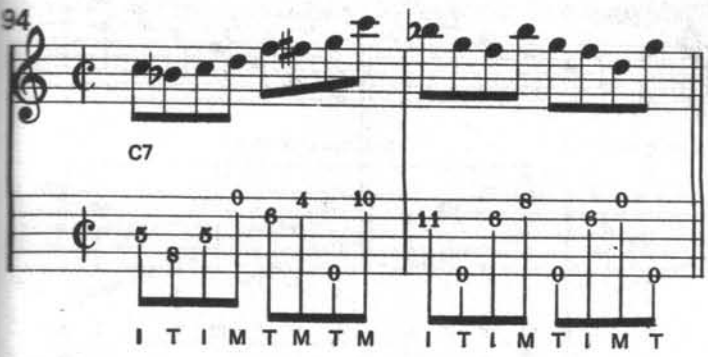

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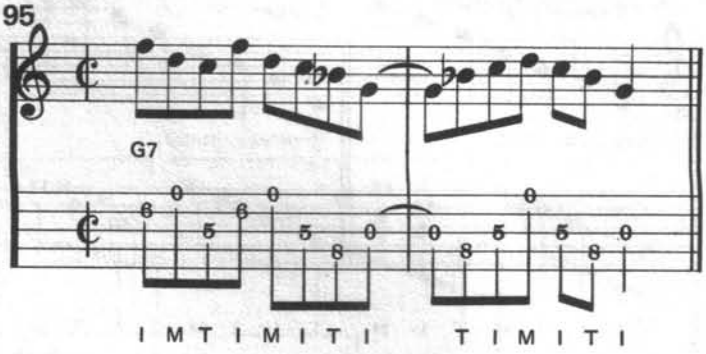

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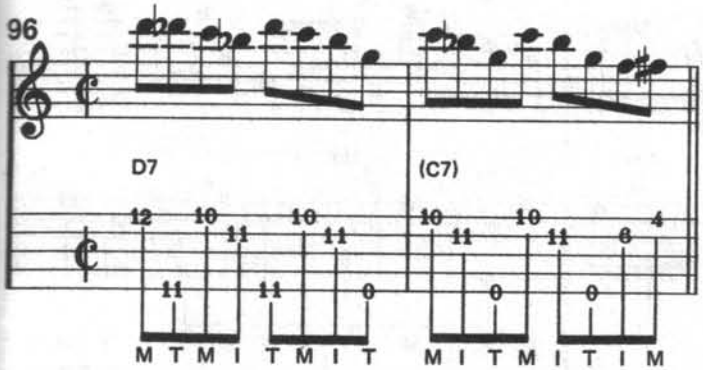

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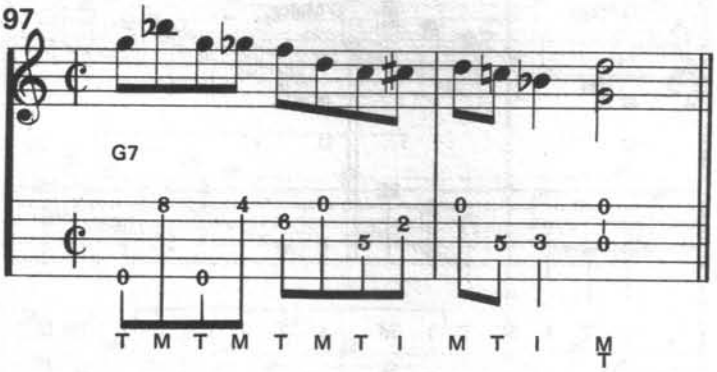
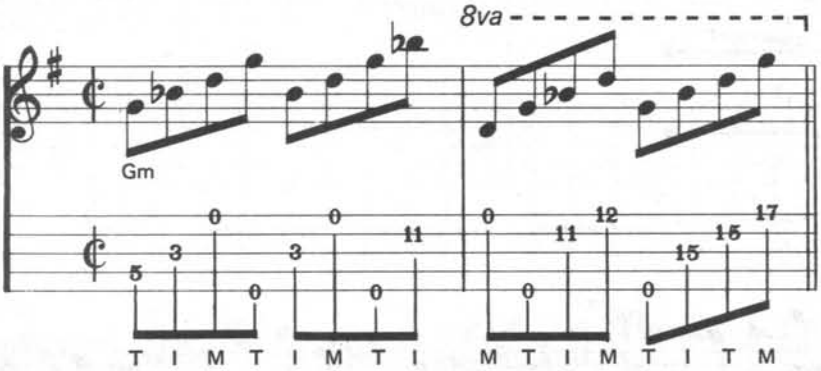


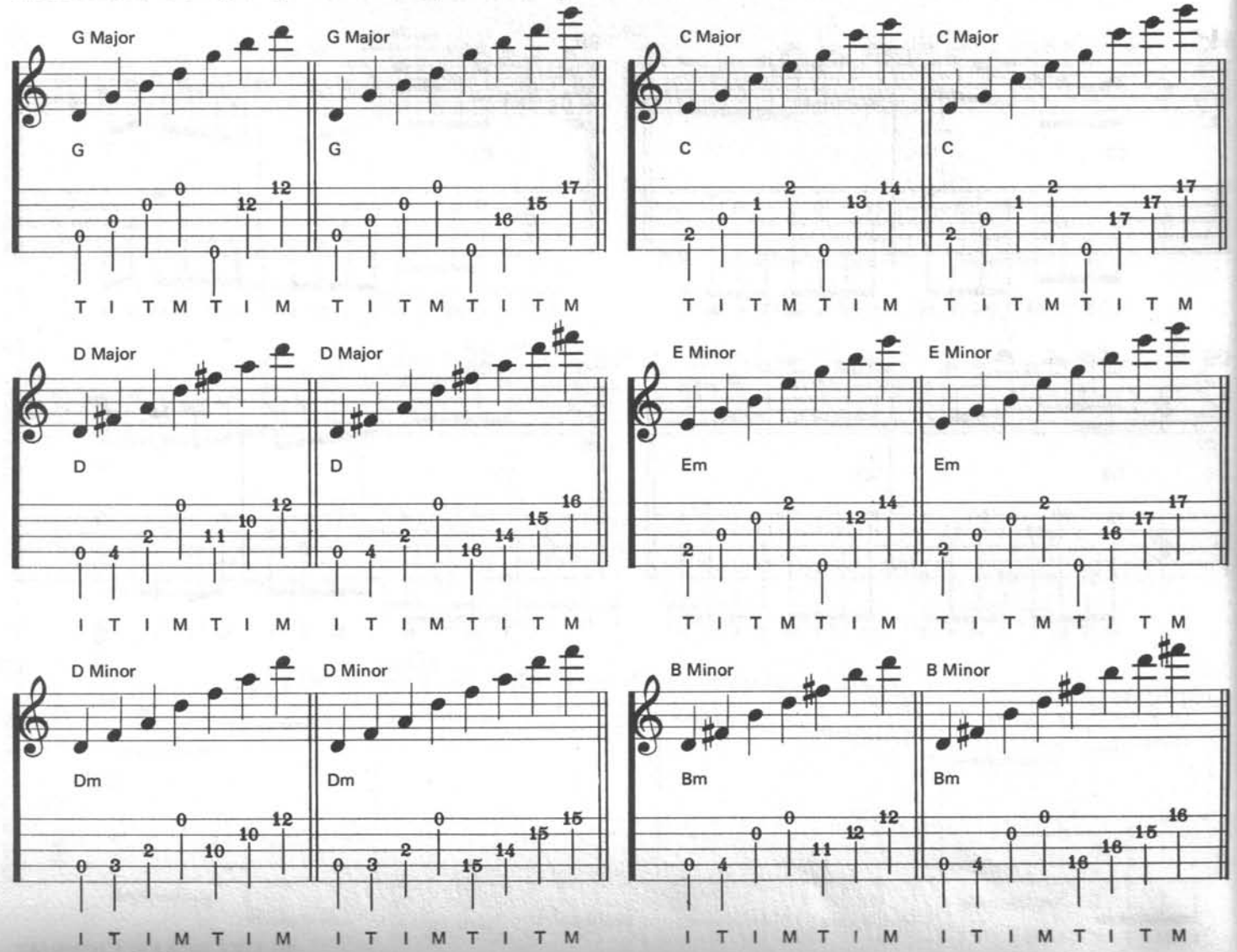
Arpeggios

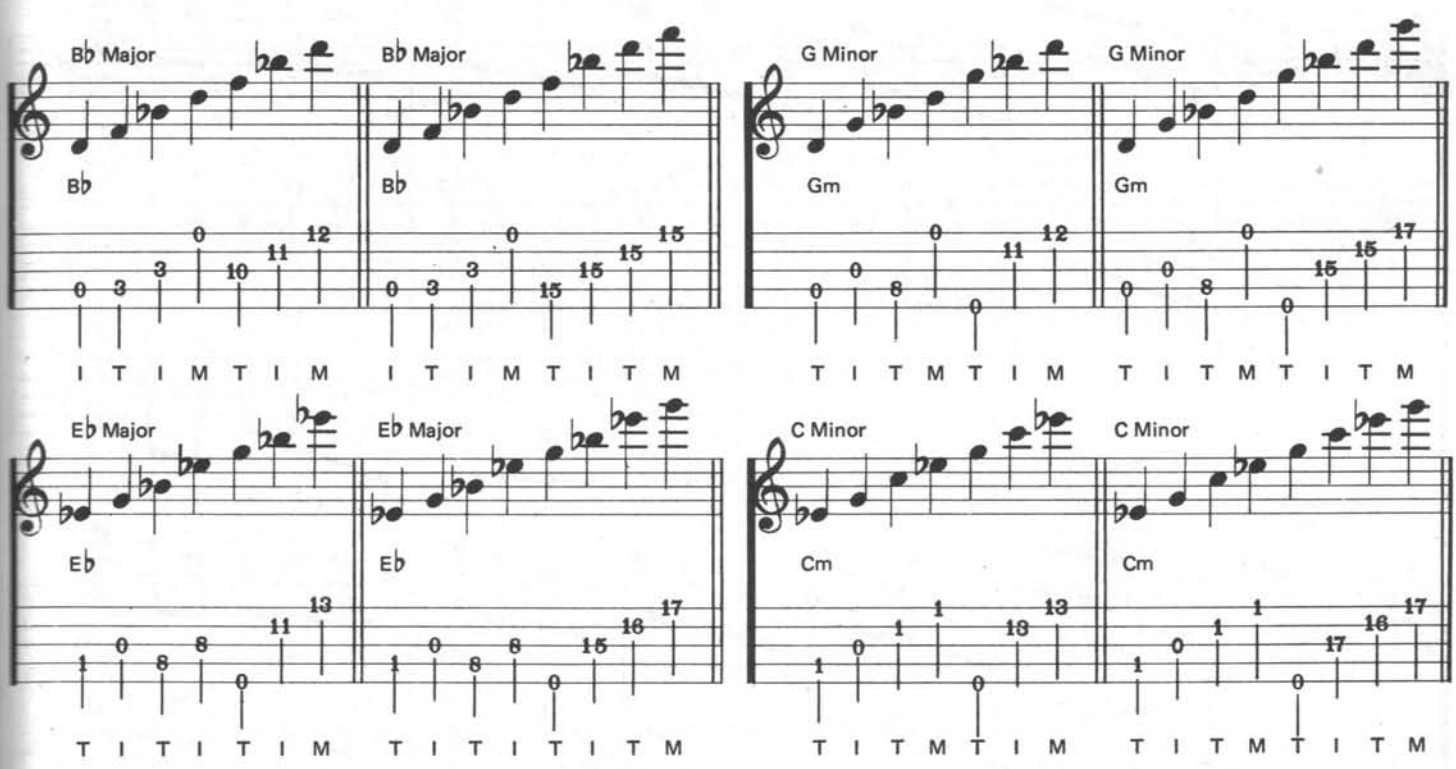
Back in the late '60's, when this writer first started arranging Scott Joplin ragtime for banjo, I tried to adhere strictly to the alternating-string principle of scale playing. I came across many arpeggio passages which would not always fit into a single left-hand chord fingering, so it was necessary to shift to others. By using an open string to smooth the way to the next fingering, I was incorporating a technique which my fellow picker, Pat Cloud, calls "point-of-departure". Many examples of this can be found in my book, "5-string Banjo Ragtime: Classic Rags of Scott Joplin" (Charles Anderson Music Publishing/Belwin-mills). The following excerpt is from "Maple Leaf Rag".



Later, while transcribing licks by pianists, guitarists, mandolinists, horn players and others, I found that they were playing extended patterns using only chord tones. Eventually, I met other banjo players experimenting with the same technique. This colorful approach to arpeggio playing can be applied to many styles of music; however, this section will present only those of immediate importance to progressive bluegrass players.

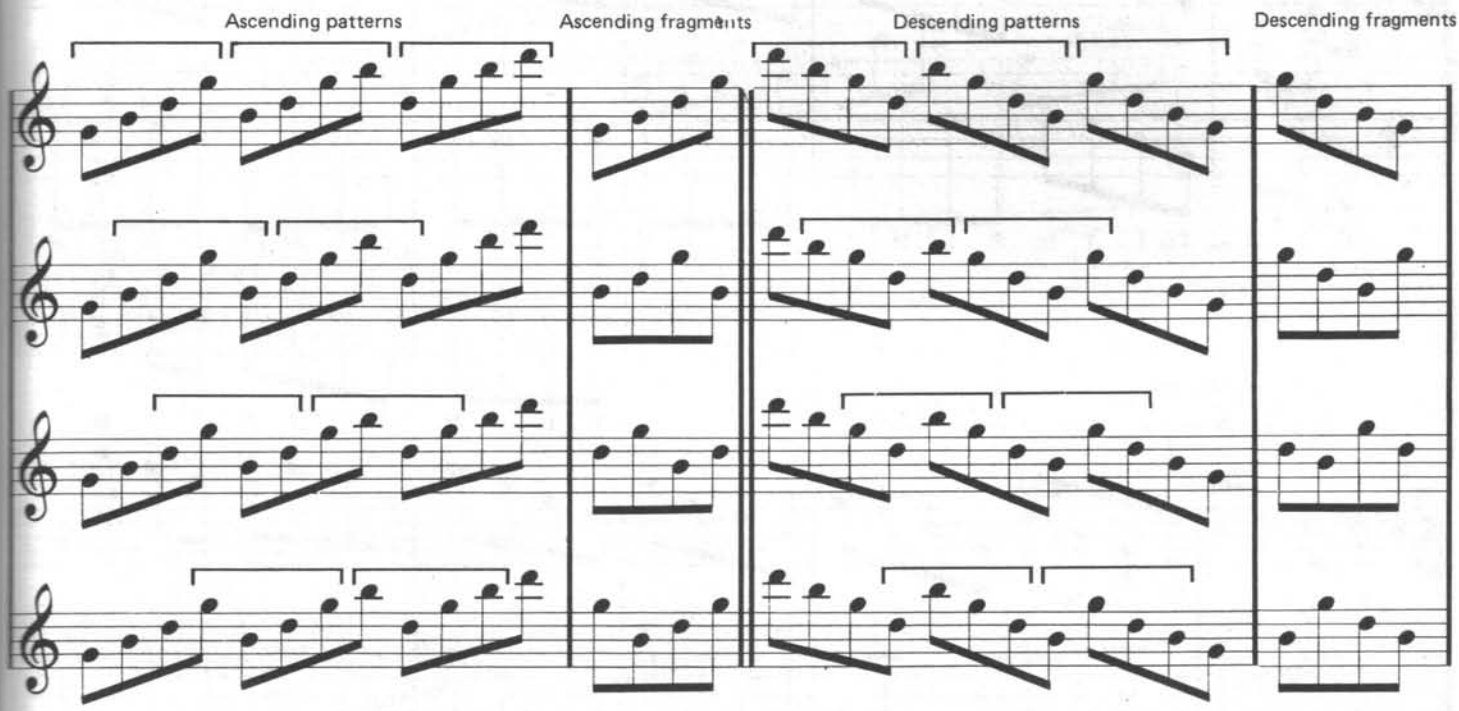
Not every chord is playable in this style. The open 1st string, D, or 5th string, G, must be a part of the chord. Either string may serve as a "point-of-departure".



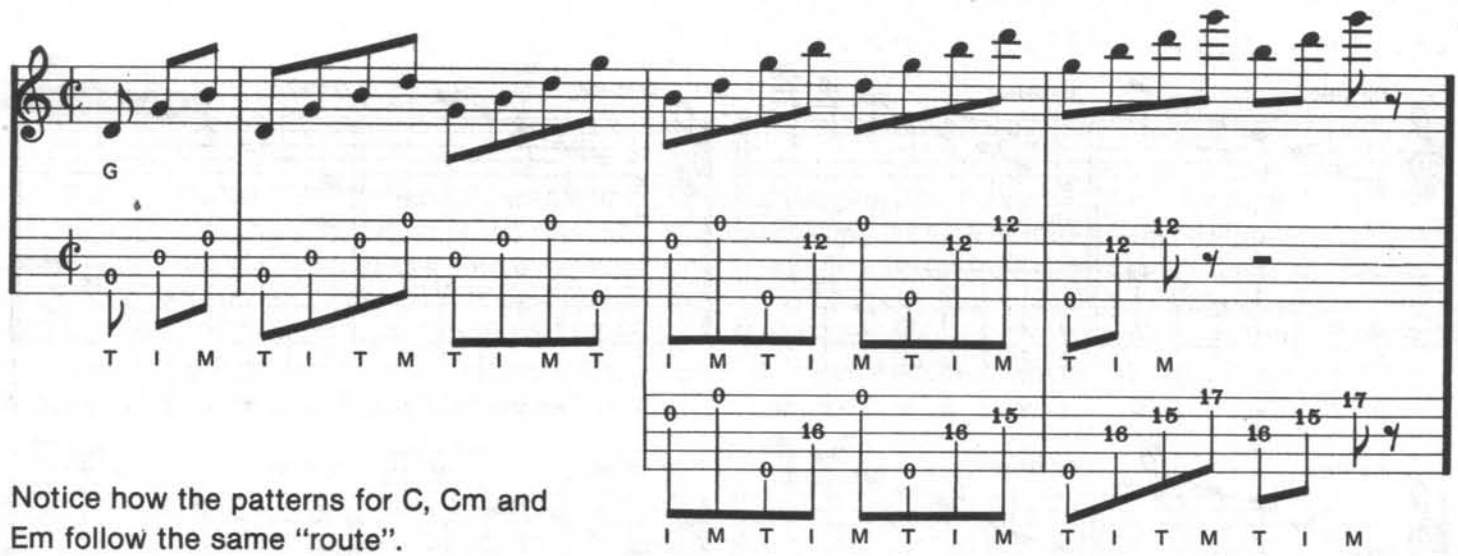


Arpeggio Patterns

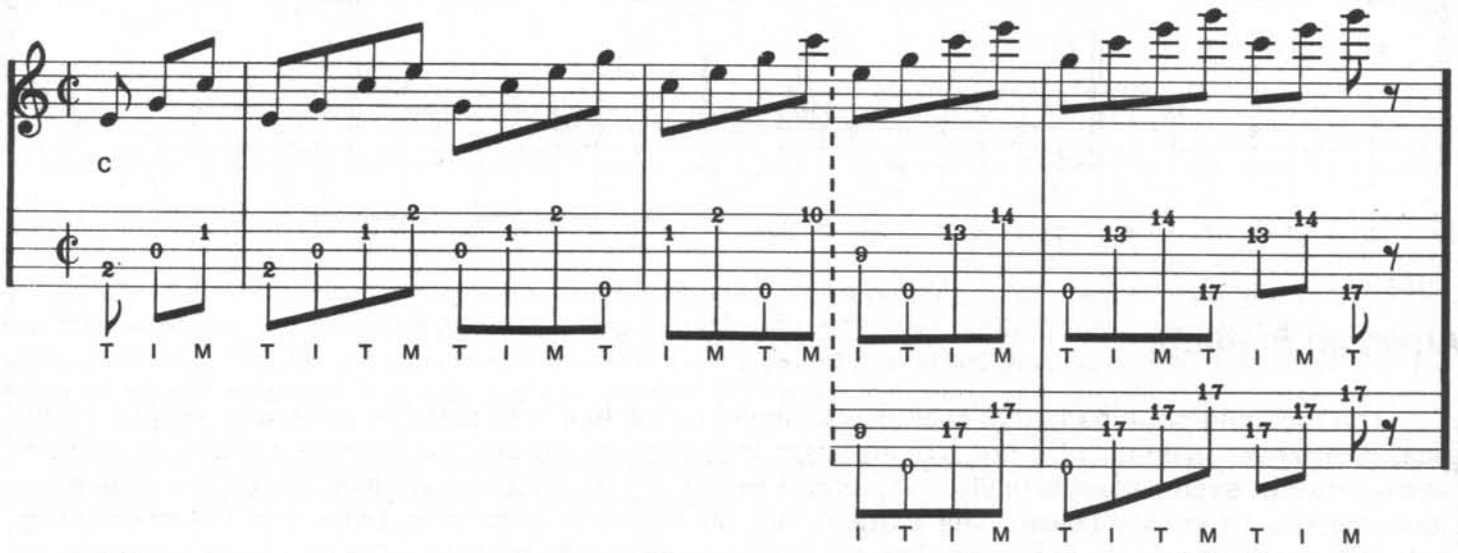
The four-note patterns in this section are similar to the four-note patterns previously applied to the scales. However, instead of the notes of the scale, they will now use only the notes of a chord. As with the scale patterns, each pattern is really four patterns in one — it all depends on where one begins (notice the four melodic fragments below). The patterns are presented in ascending order. For the descending patterns, simply play them in reverse. There will be four melodic fragments in the descending patterns as well.

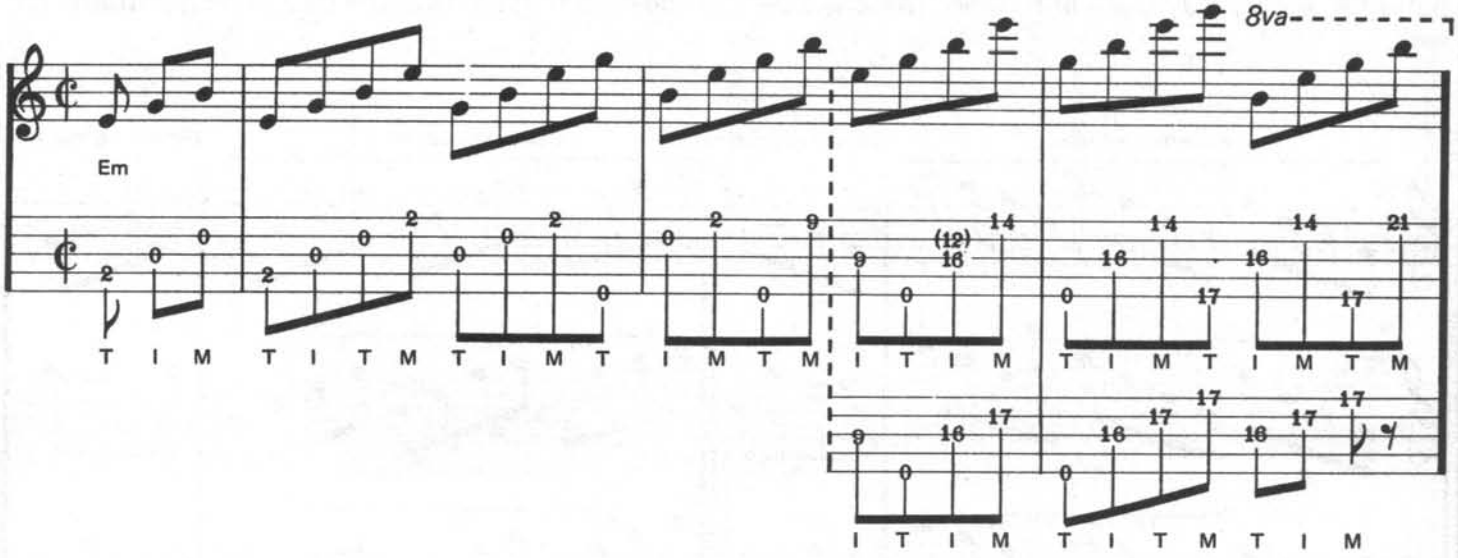


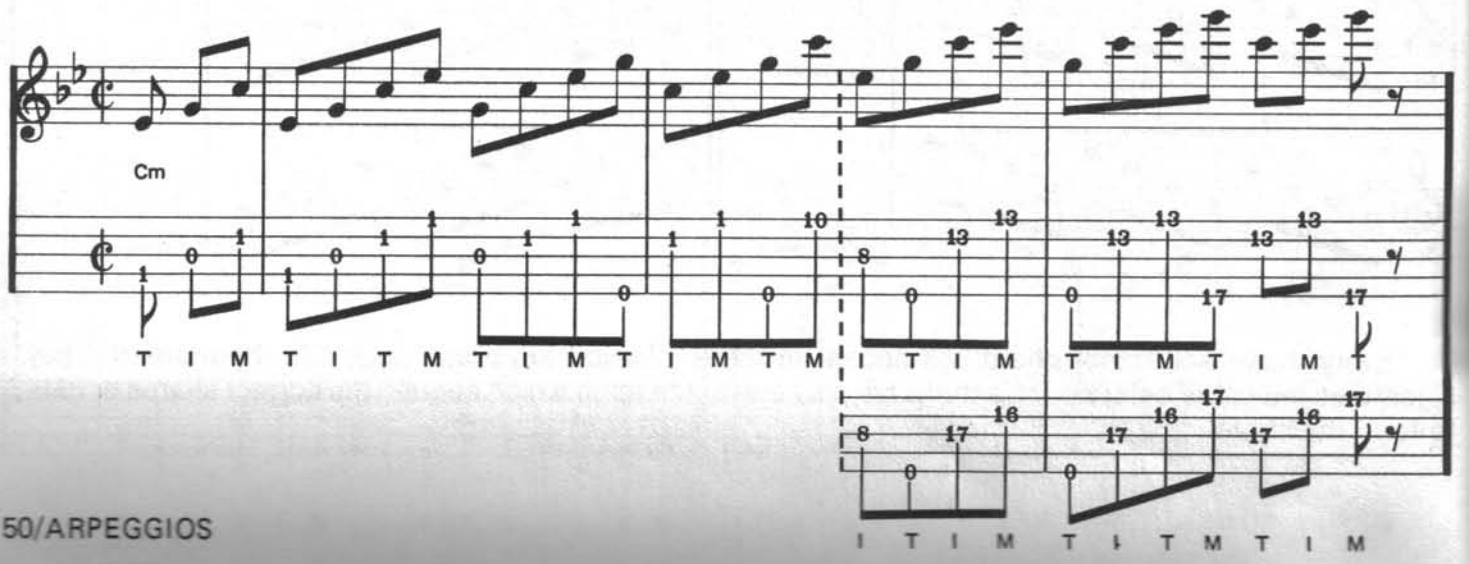
Every major and minor chord will appear in three different keys (see page 68); therefore, the key signatures indicated before each pattern are only one of the three which contain the correct sharps or flats to form the chord.



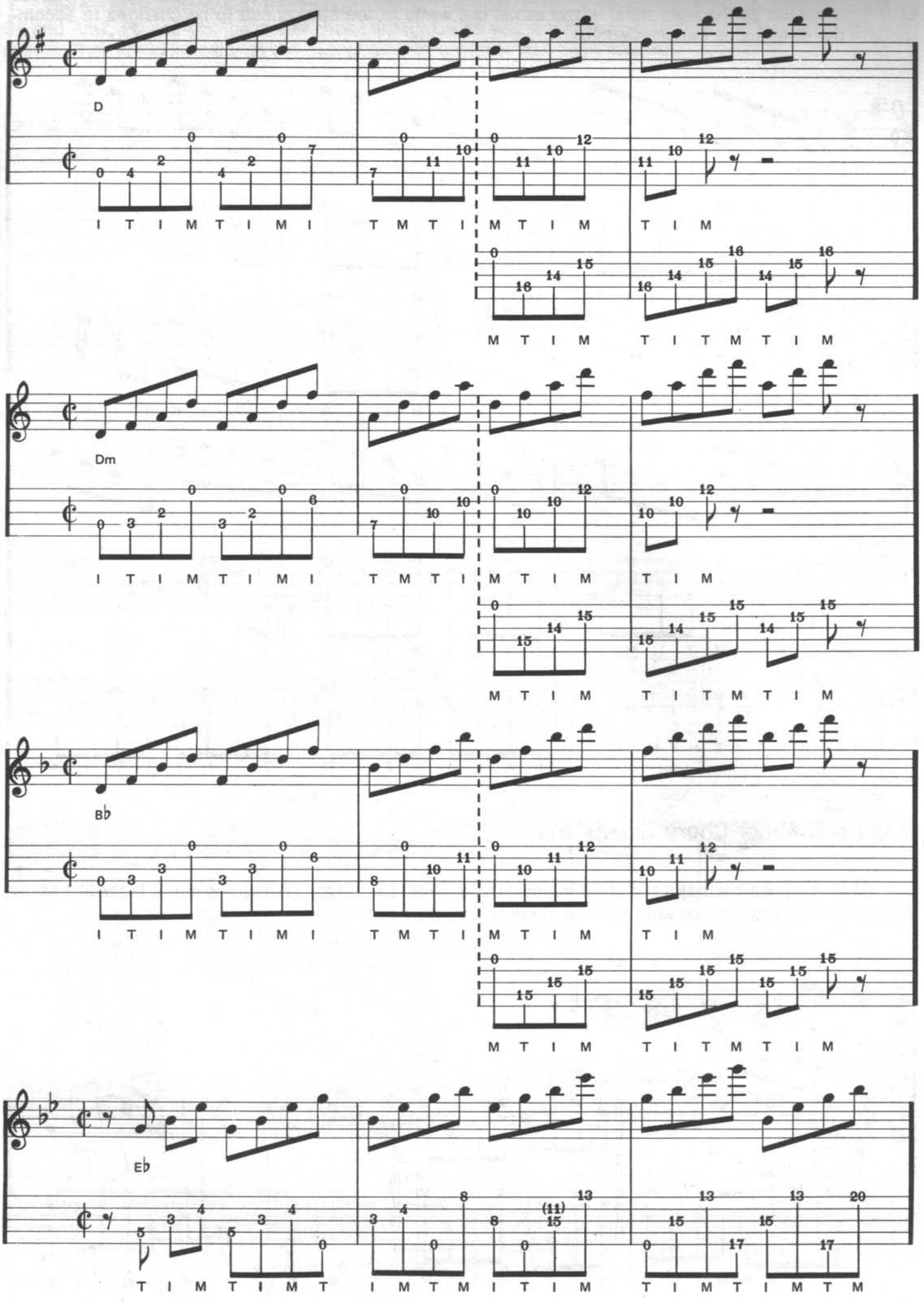
Notice how the patterns for C, Cm and Em follow the same "route".



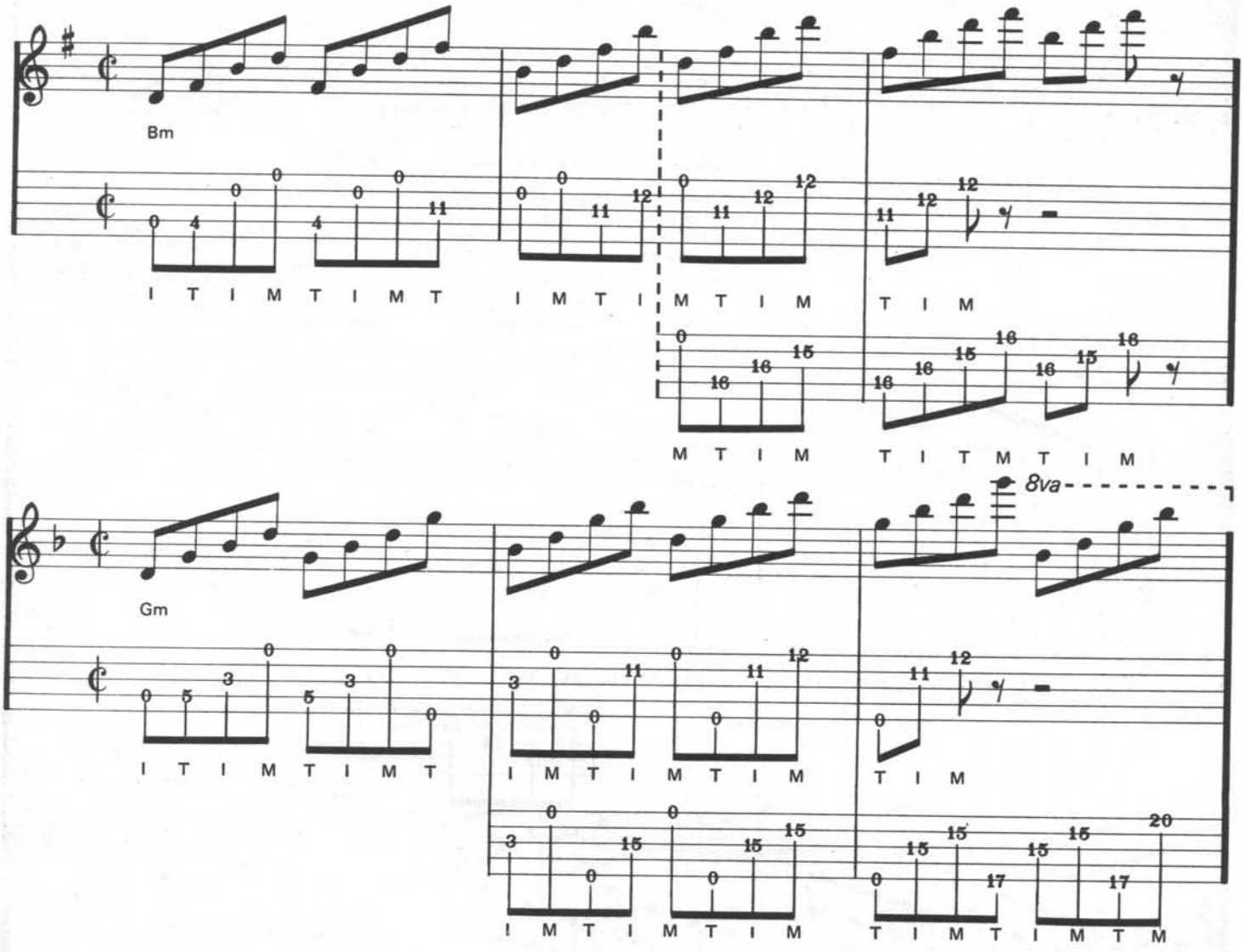




The patterns for D, Dm and Bb follow the same route.

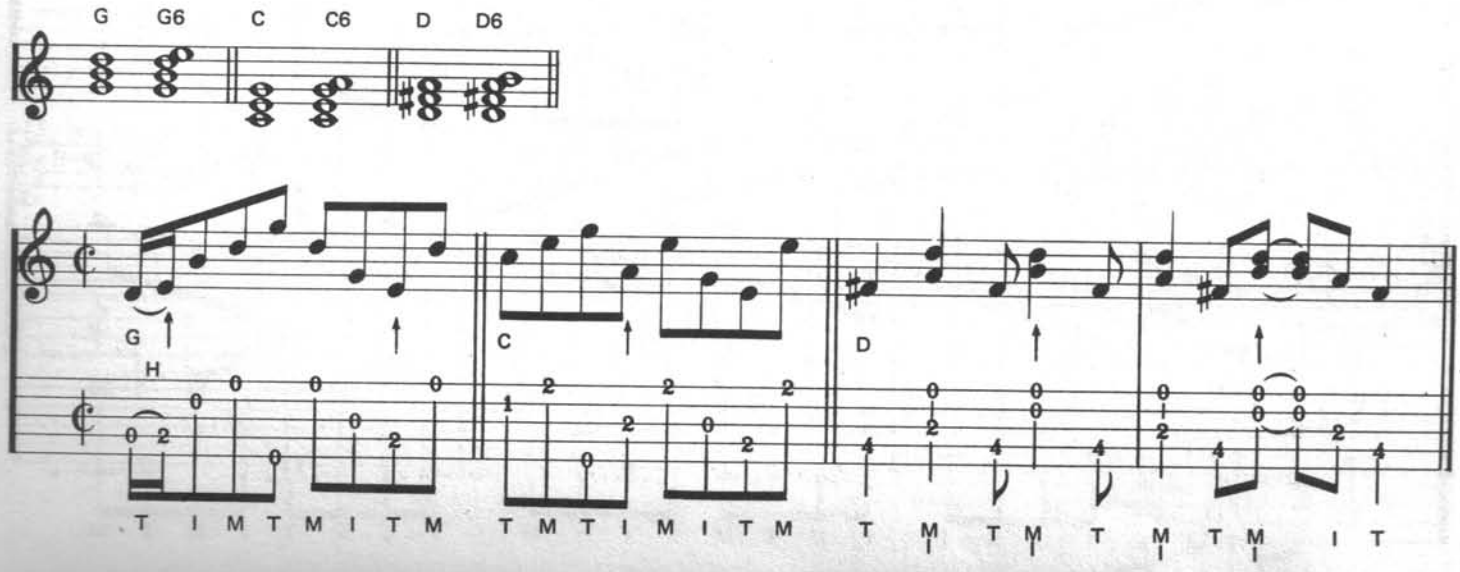


The routes for the Bm and Gm patterns (in the low range) are essentially the same as for G. The order of fingers played by the right hand is the same, but some of the strings had to be changed to accommodate the differences between chords.

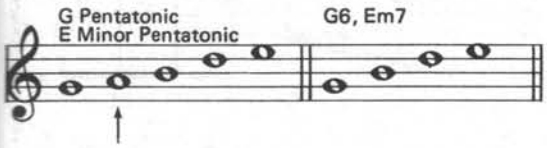


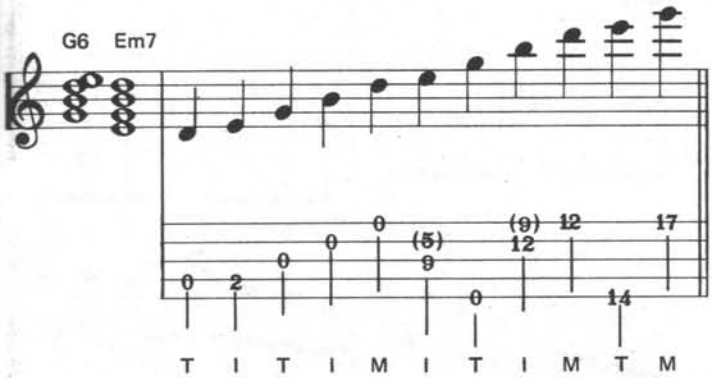
Major and Minor Chord Extensions

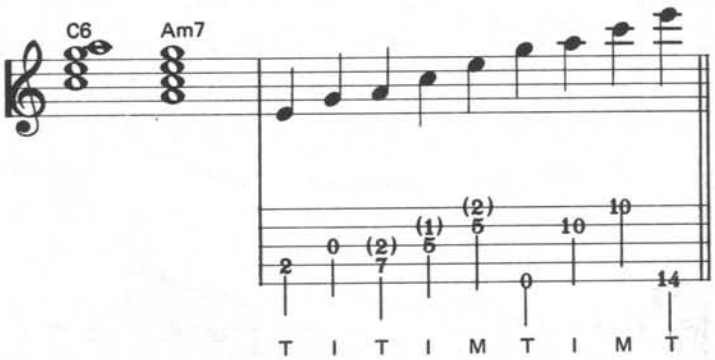
Of all the possible major chord extensions, the one most suitable to bluegrass music is the 6th. Many Scruggs-style licks incorporate this tone liberally.

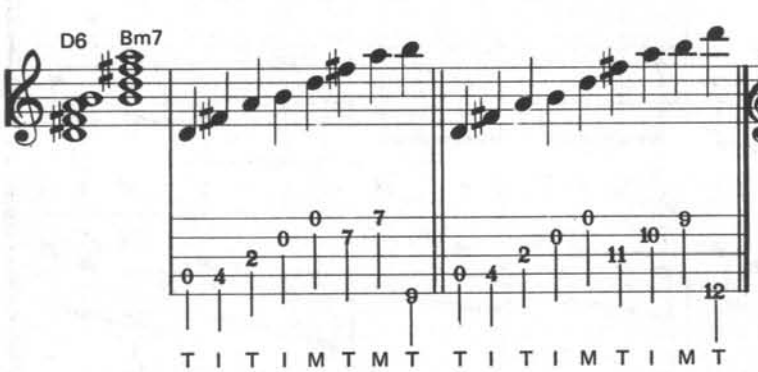


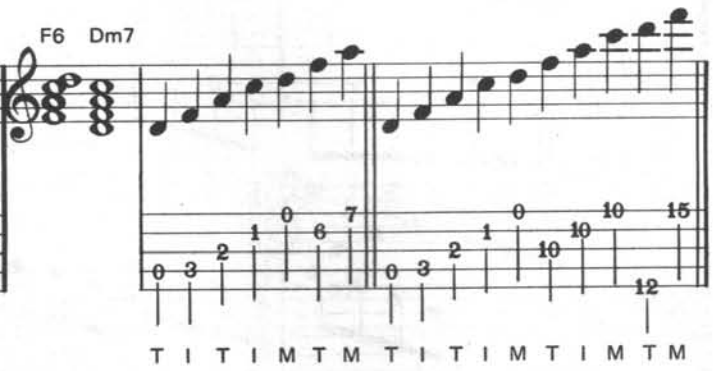
The notes of a major 6th chord also comprise the notes of its relative minor's 7th chord: G6 and Em7, C6 and Am7, F6 and Dm7, etc. Use these arpeggios as you would the pentatonic and minor pentatonic scales. They are identical with the exception that one note has been omitted.

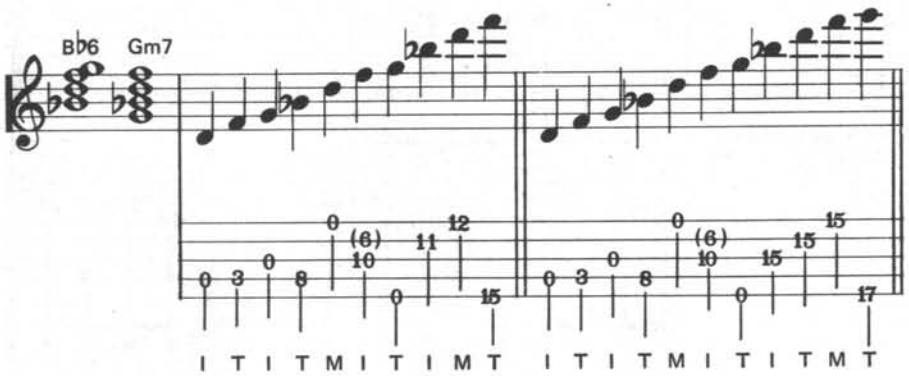


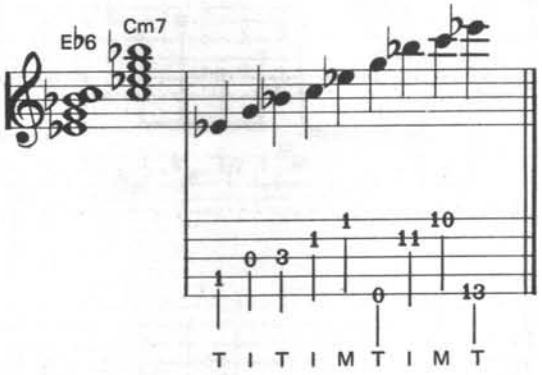


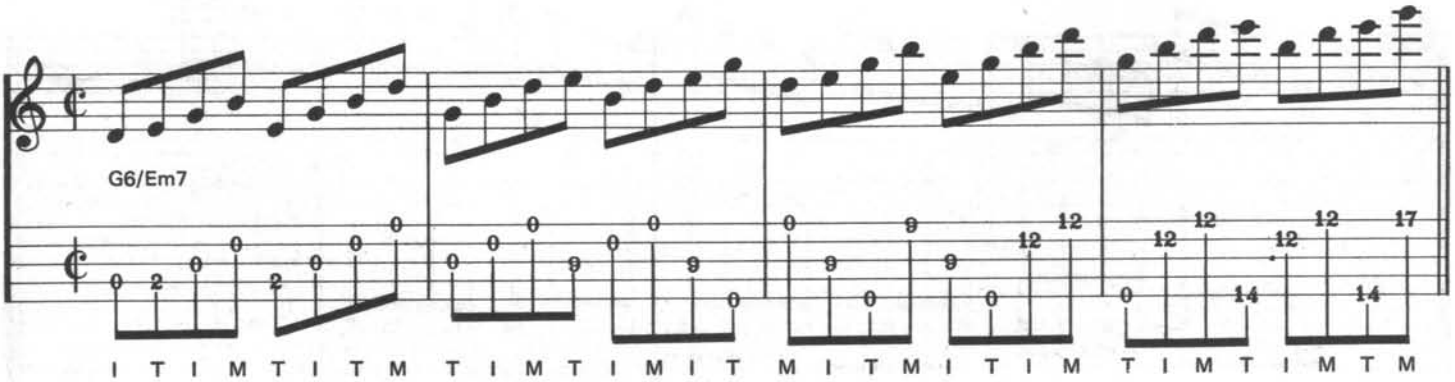


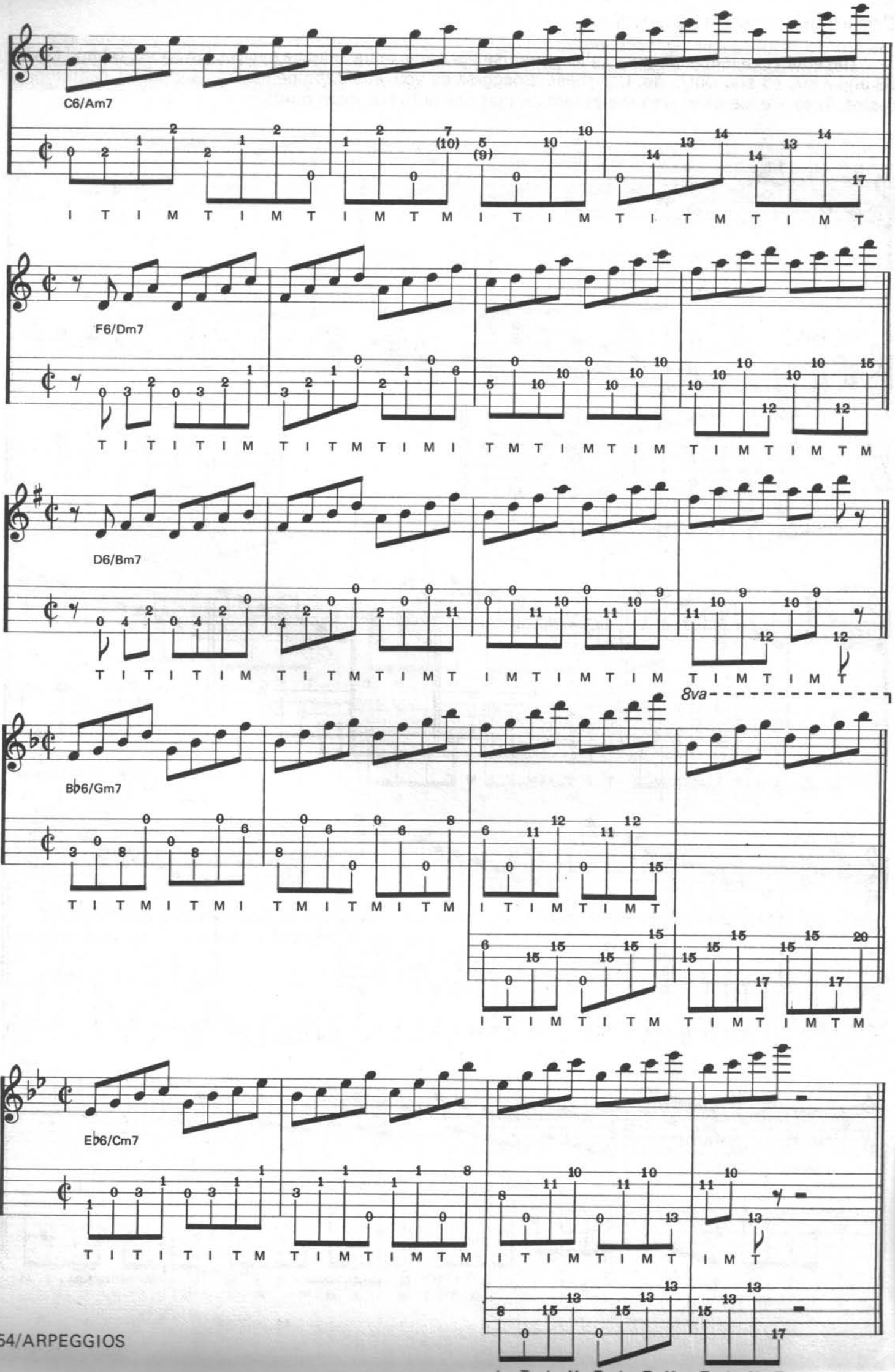










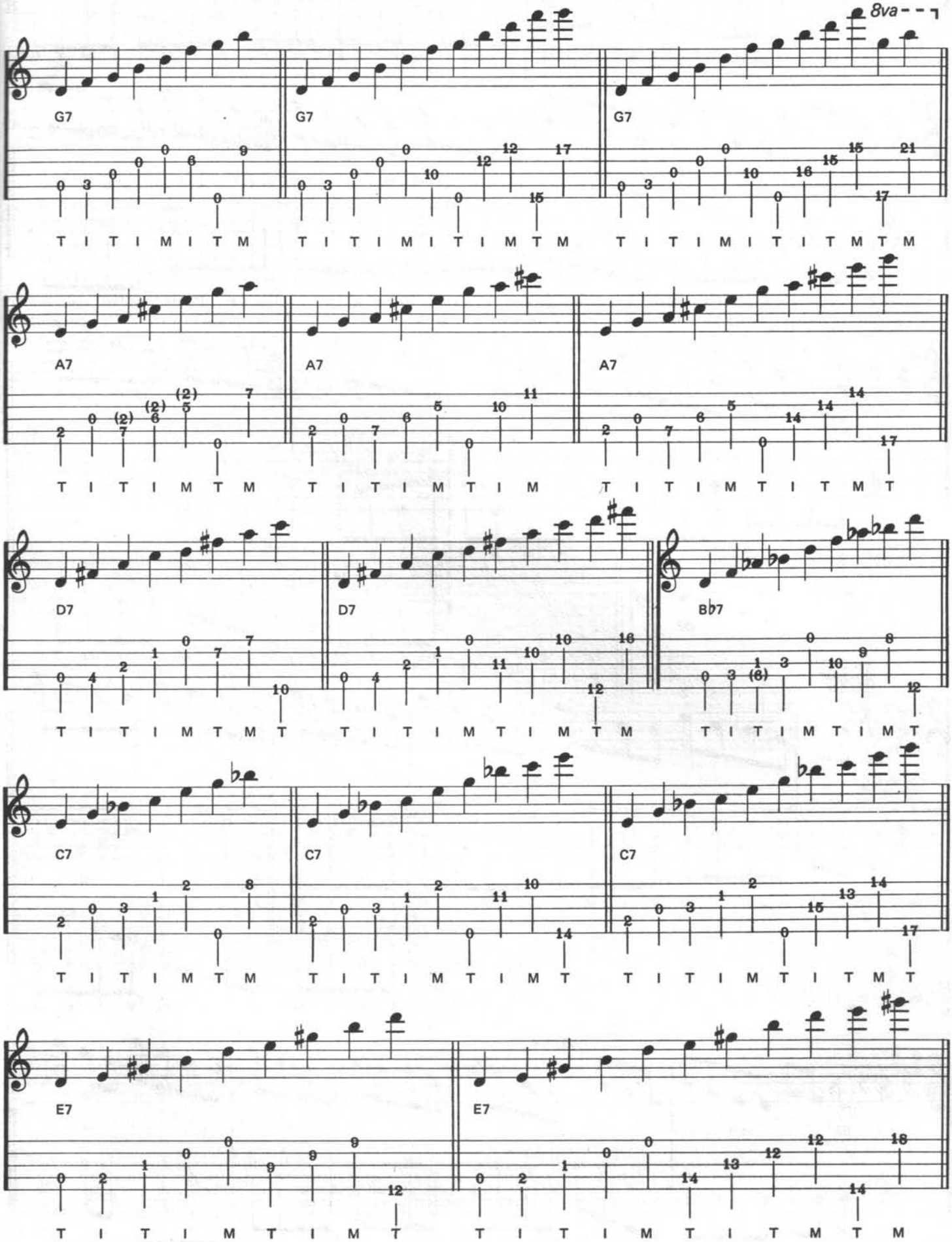

C6/Am7
F6/Dm7
D6/Bm7
8va
B♭6/Gm7
E♭6/Cm7

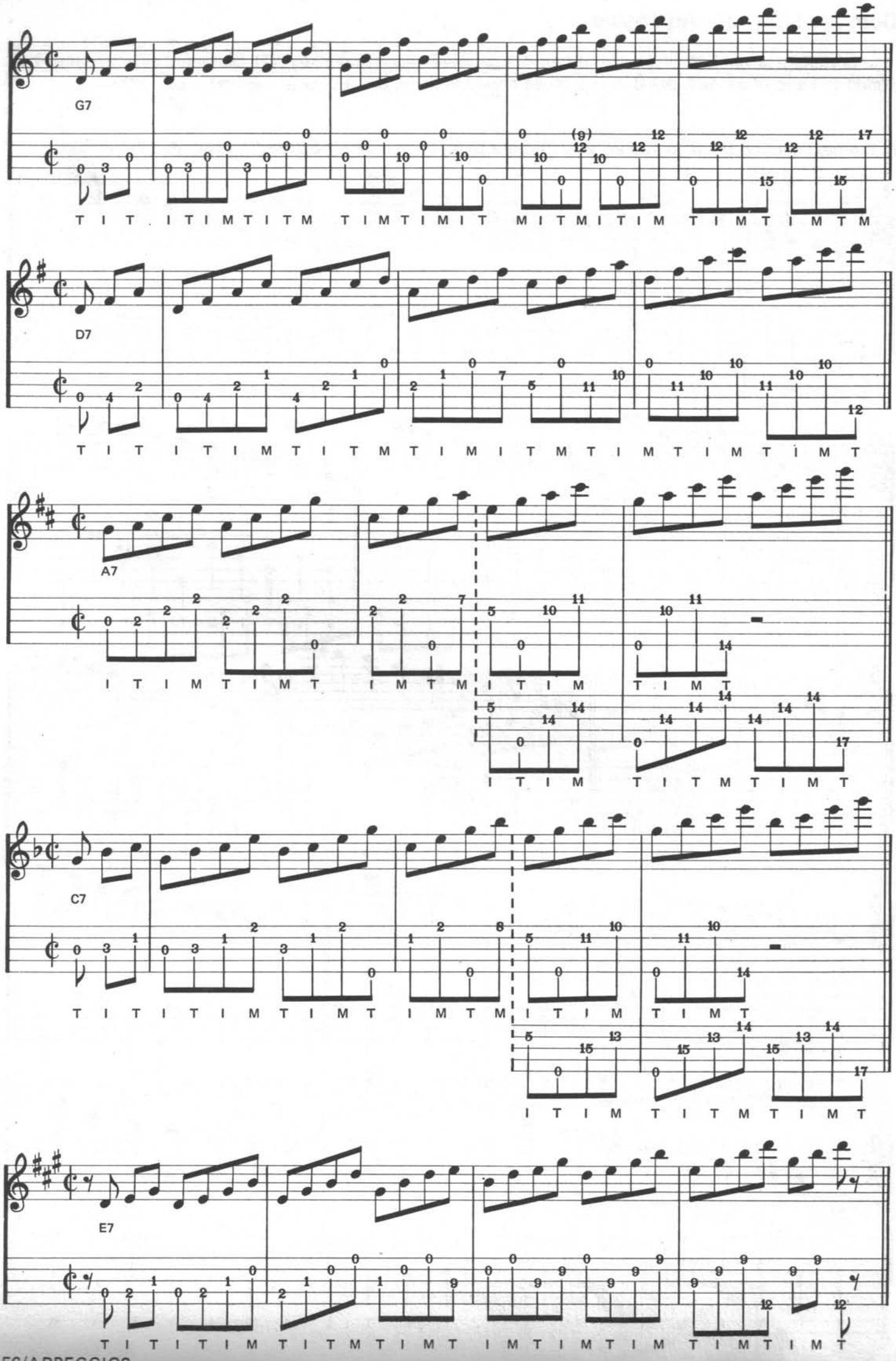
Dominant Seventh Arpeggios

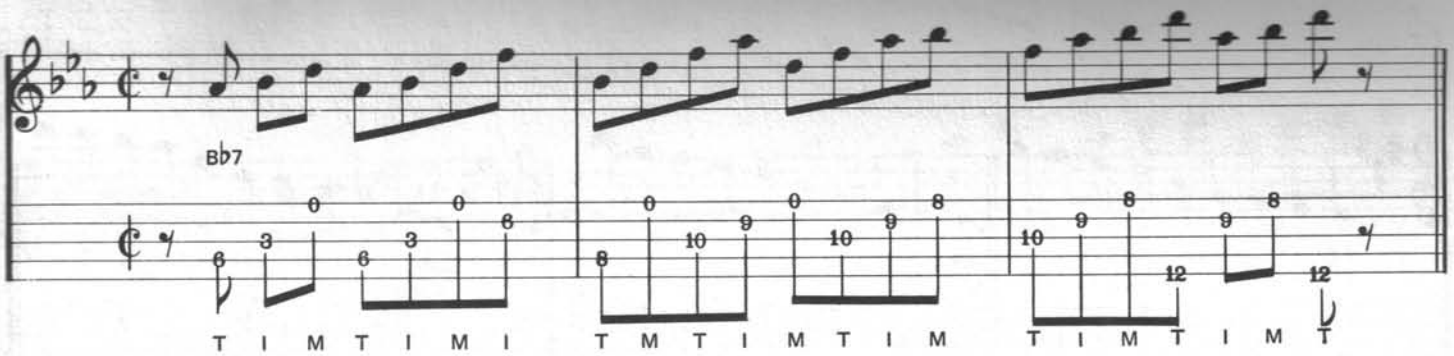
Dominant seventh chords occur on the 5th degree of each major key (V7). Dominant sevenths may be added to I and IV as well, but only if a blues sound is desired.

KEY OF G:	G7	C7	D7
	I^7	IV^7	V^7

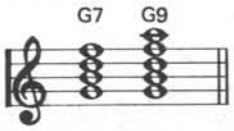
In the next section there will be an arrangement of a 12-bar blues progression using this technique.




G7
D7
A7
C7
E7

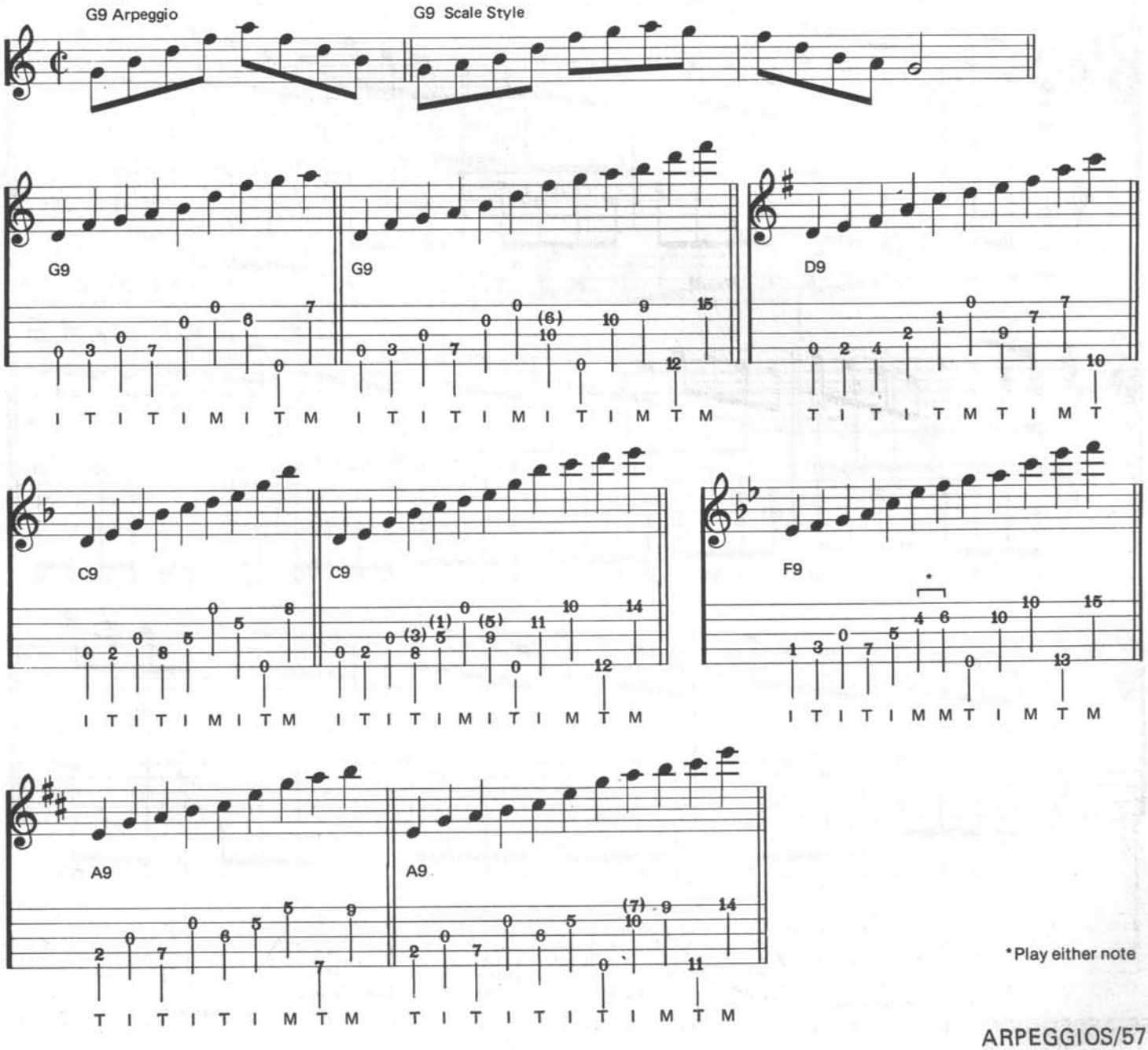


Dominant Ninth Arpeggios

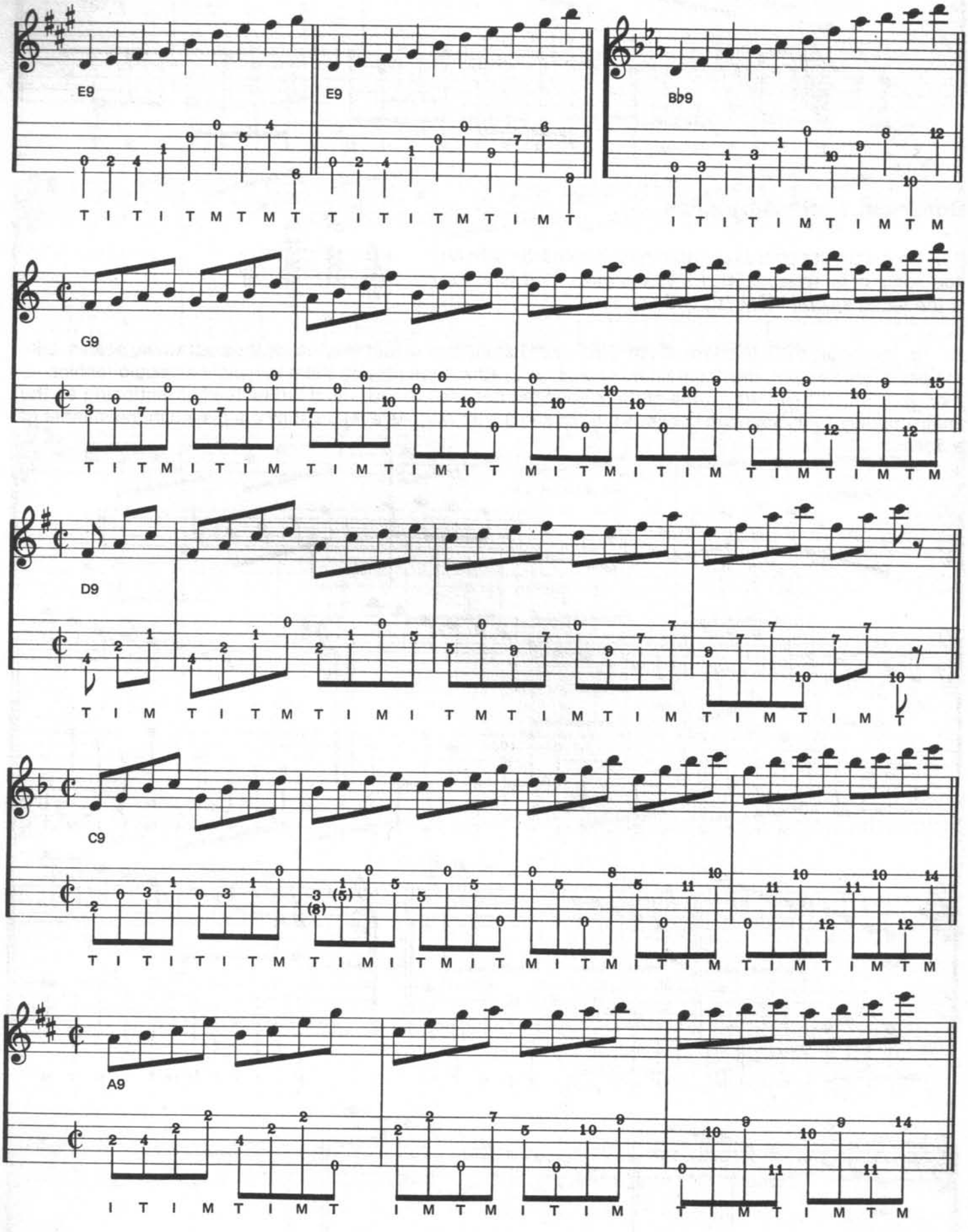


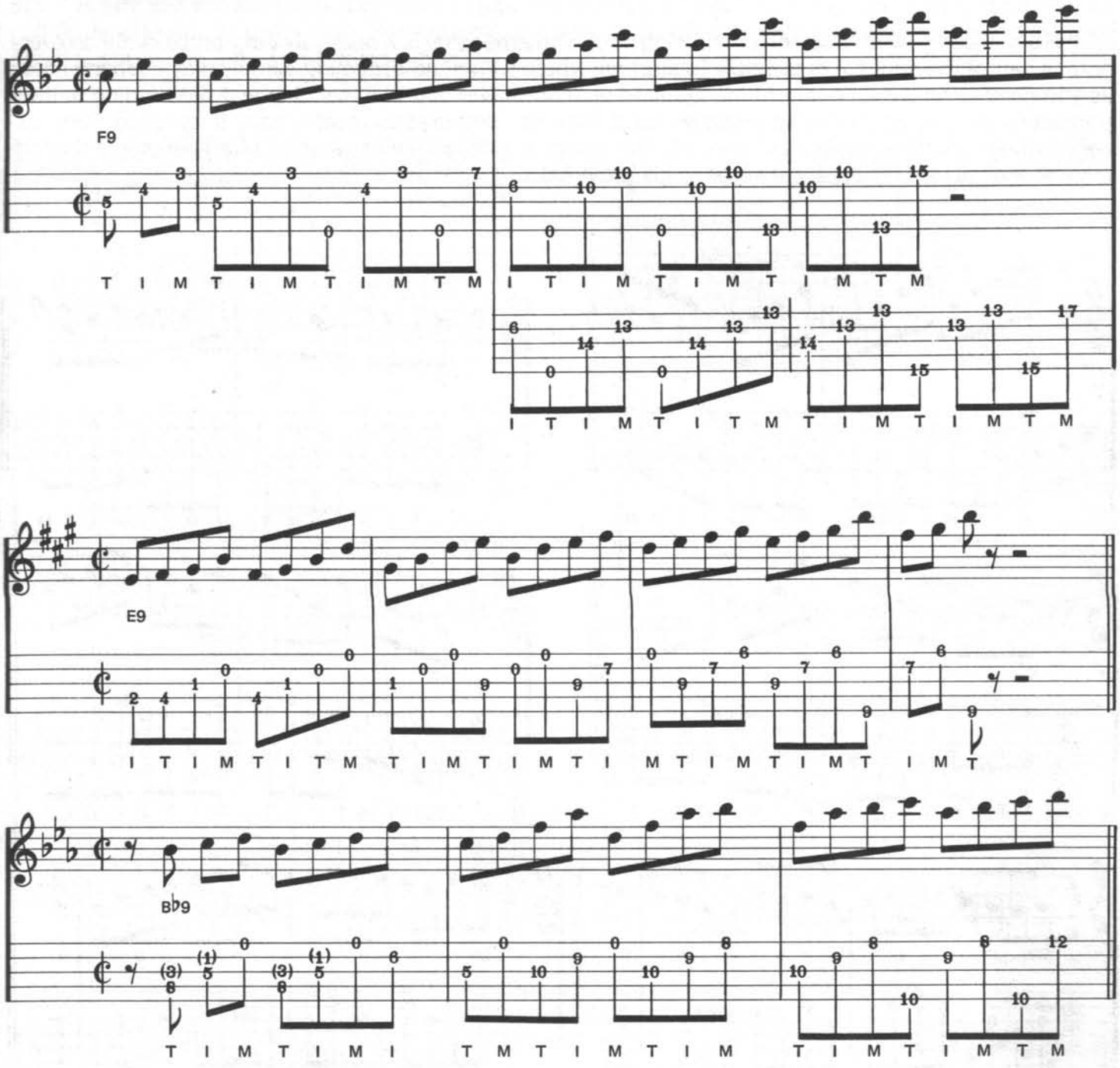
Dominant 9th chords are dominant 7th chords with an additional note added a 9th above the root. Their function is the same as dominant 7th chords.

In this book, the treatment of the ninth chord arpeggios is just like that of the pentatonic scales. Like the pentatonic scales, they contain five notes, and rather than playing them in typical arpeggio fashion — root, 3rd, 5th, 7th and 9th — the ninth is sounded between the root and 3rd (actually functioning as the 2nd), and the root is sounded between the 7th and 9th as well. As a result, they are played in the manner of a scale.



*Play either note


E9
E9
B♭9
G9
D9
C9
A9

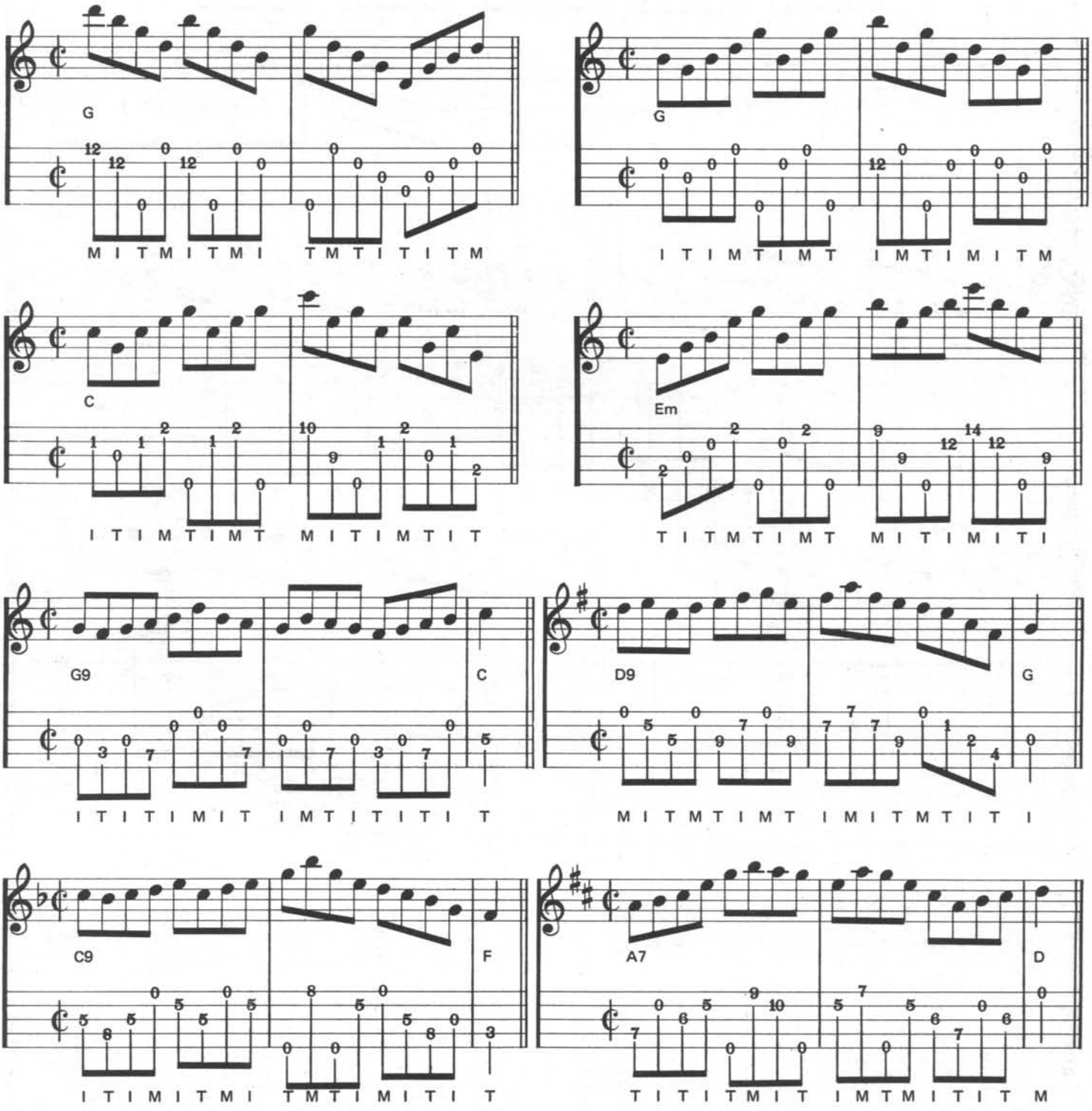

F9
T I M T I M T I M T M I T I M T I M T I M T M
I T I M T I T M T I M T I M T M

E9
I T I M T I T M T I M T I M T I M T I M T I M T

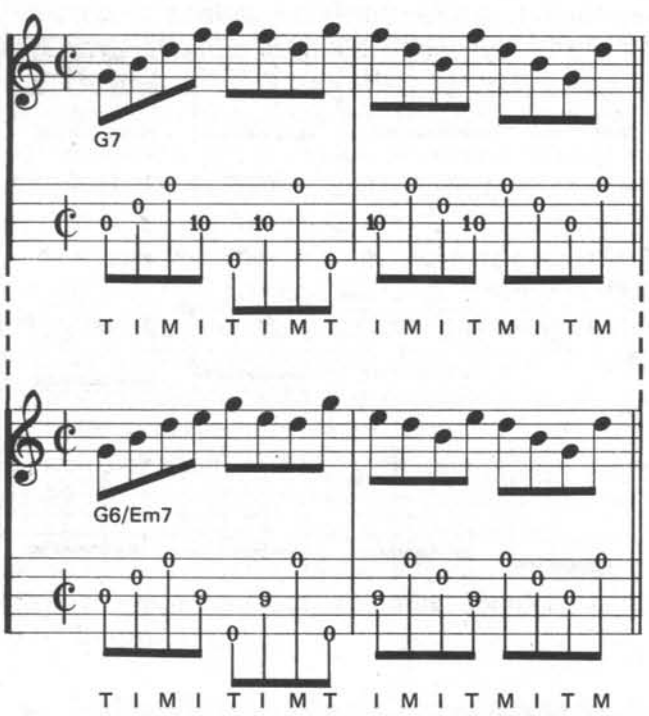
B♭9
T I M T I M I T M T I M T I M T I M T M

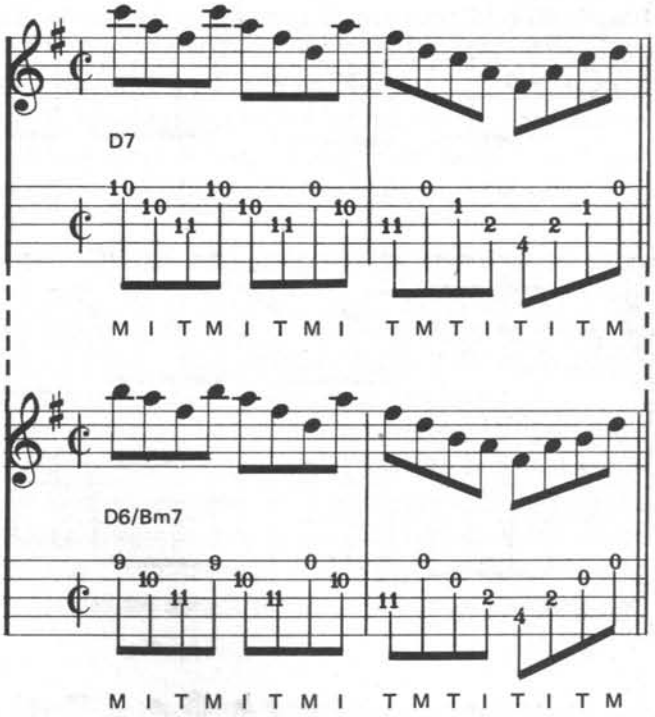
Arpeggio Licks

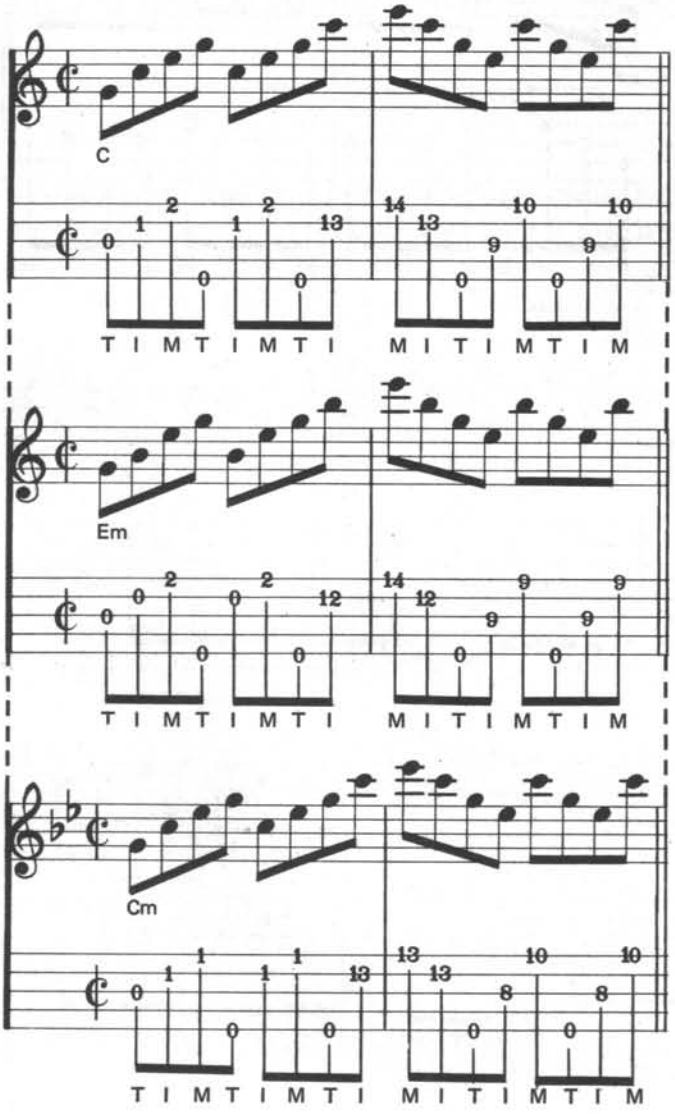
From a technical standpoint, composing licks with arpeggios is a relatively easy process. Since every note is part of the chord, it is possible to start anywhere within the sequence. Simply play as many notes as you need to fill the amount of time required on a particular chord. Ascending and descending pattern fragments, as well as the basic arpeggio itself, may be combined to create many interesting licks. Experimenting within the general framework of an arpeggio with broken patterns and fragments in a random manner may also produce some surprisingly great licks.

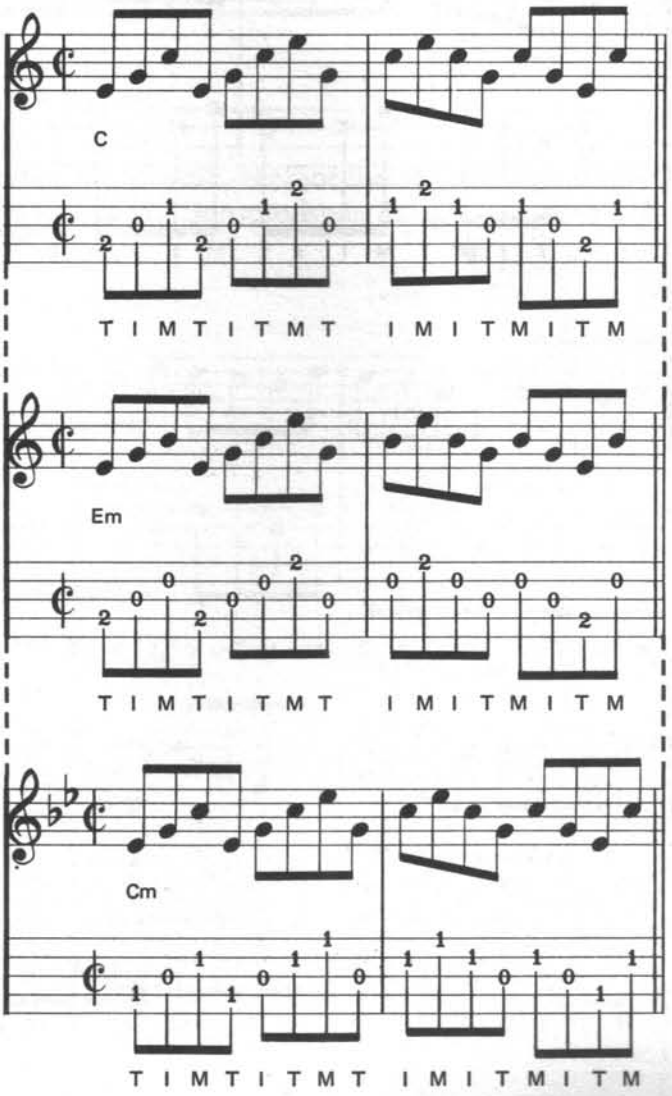


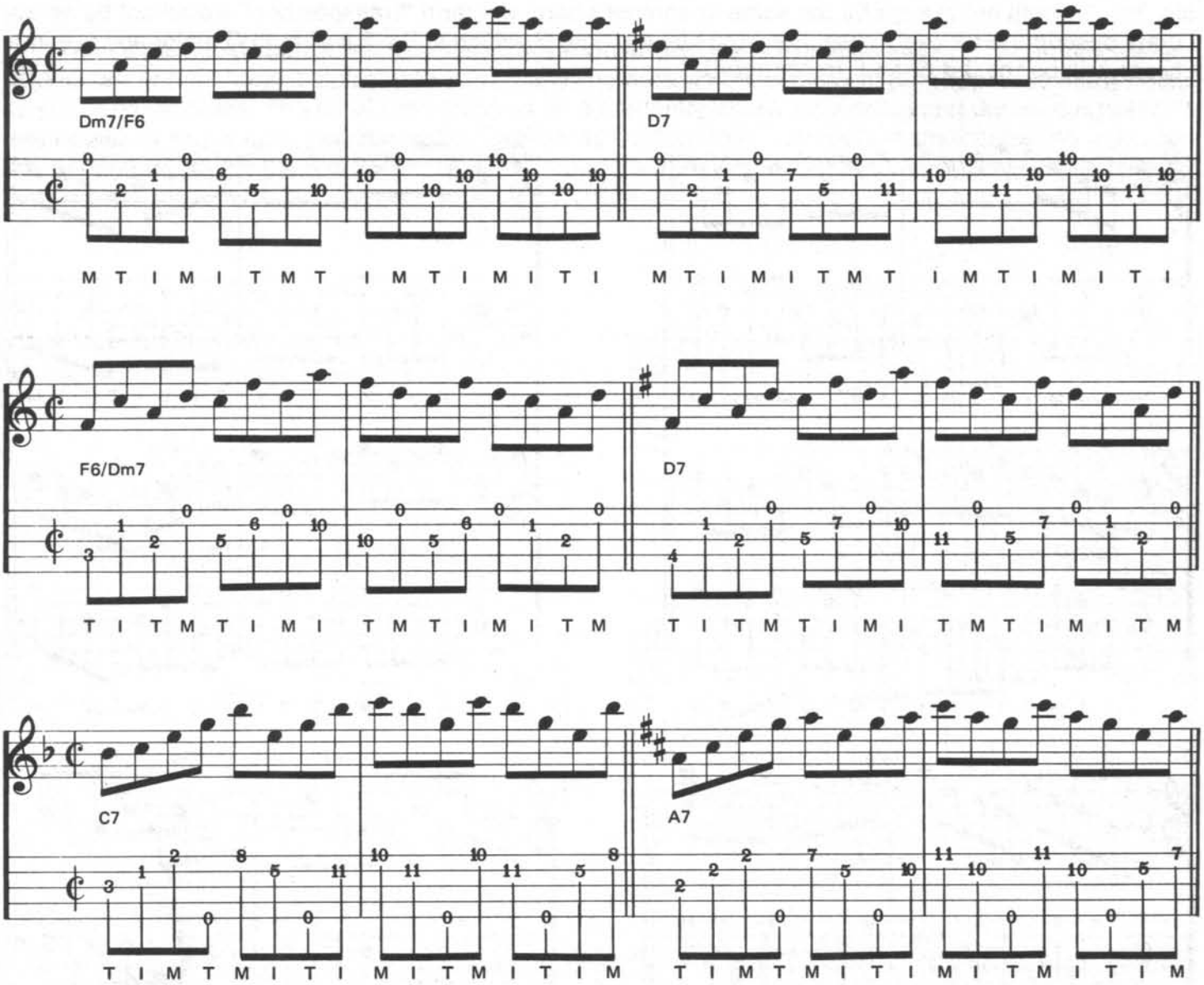
Licks built on chords that share the same "route" as other chords can be "transformed" to these chords by altering the differing notes. Since the numerical scale degree for a note in one chord (root, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th) will not always be the same in another chord, the term "transposition" would not be an accurate description for every case. For example, the note G, which is the 5th of both C major and C minor chords, will be the 3rd of an E minor chord.










Dm7/F6
D7
M T I M I T M T I M T I M I T I M T I M I T M T I M T I M I T I
F6/Dm7
D7
T I T M T I M I T M T I M I T M T I T M T I M I T M T I M I T M
C7
A7
T I M T M I T I M I T M I T I M T I M T M I T I M I T M I T I M

Improvisation

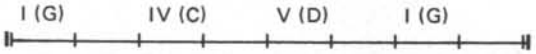
Improvising is the process of combining musical ideas spontaneously to fit the chord progression of a tune. Care must be taken to spend exactly the right amount of time on each chord (one bar, two bars, etc.). A skilled improvisor, be he a banjo, guitar, saxophone, or piano player, or whatever, has at his fingertips a reservoir of scales, patterns, licks and phrases that he has rehearsed countless times and knows where and how to use in many different situations.

On the path to this level of proficiency, one may take several approaches. First of all, achieve a mastery of a few scales and patterns. Since most bluegrass banjo players prefer to play in G and C — or out of G and C positions (using a capo to play in other keys), the logical scales to learn first would be G and C major, G and C blues, and the pentatonic scales based on the major chords appearing in the two keys: G, C, and D for the key of G, and C, F and G for the key of C.

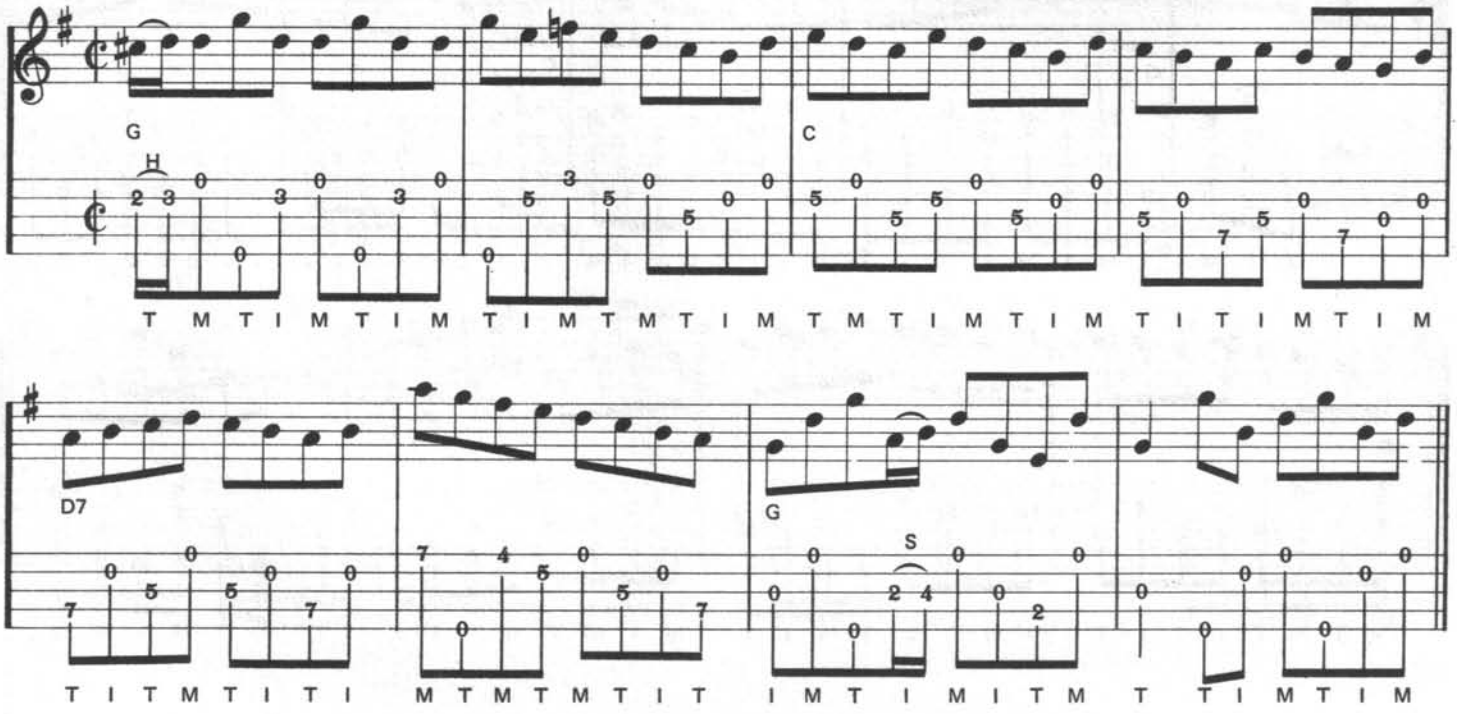
A tape recorder is a valuable tool for this learning process. Begin by taping several minutes of each chord, and then go back and practice the various scales and patterns over them. Try to assemble as many melodic fragments as possible. Any one pattern played too long will begin to sound more like an exercise than an interesting musical idea. It is also important to emphasize strategic chord-tones. When a player feels comfortable with this approach, he should then graduate to simple chord progressions.

Banjo players thrive on licks; therefore, another approach would be to learn a lick, master it, and then be able to "plug" it into every tune in one's repertoire where it might fit. In this manner the lick will eventually become second nature. For example, with just a few G, C, D and F licks, a player will be able to embellish previously learned solos of many standard bluegrass tunes in the keys of G and C. With these same licks, one may also arrange a complete solo to a tune. The ultimate goal in this style of playing is to perform a piece without planning the licks in advance. This would be the difference between "arranging" and "improvising".

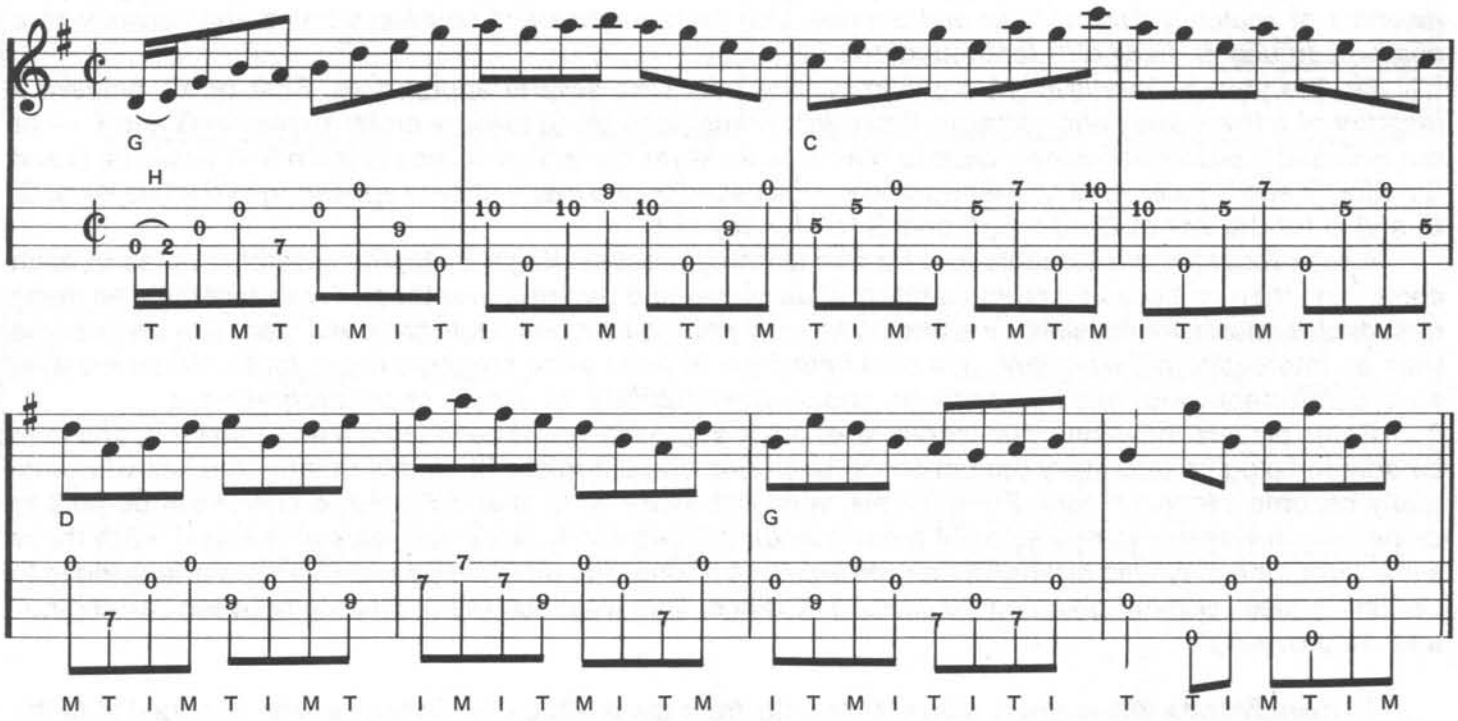
To demonstrate this method, many of the licks from the previous section have been arranged to fit the following standard chord progression in the key of G:



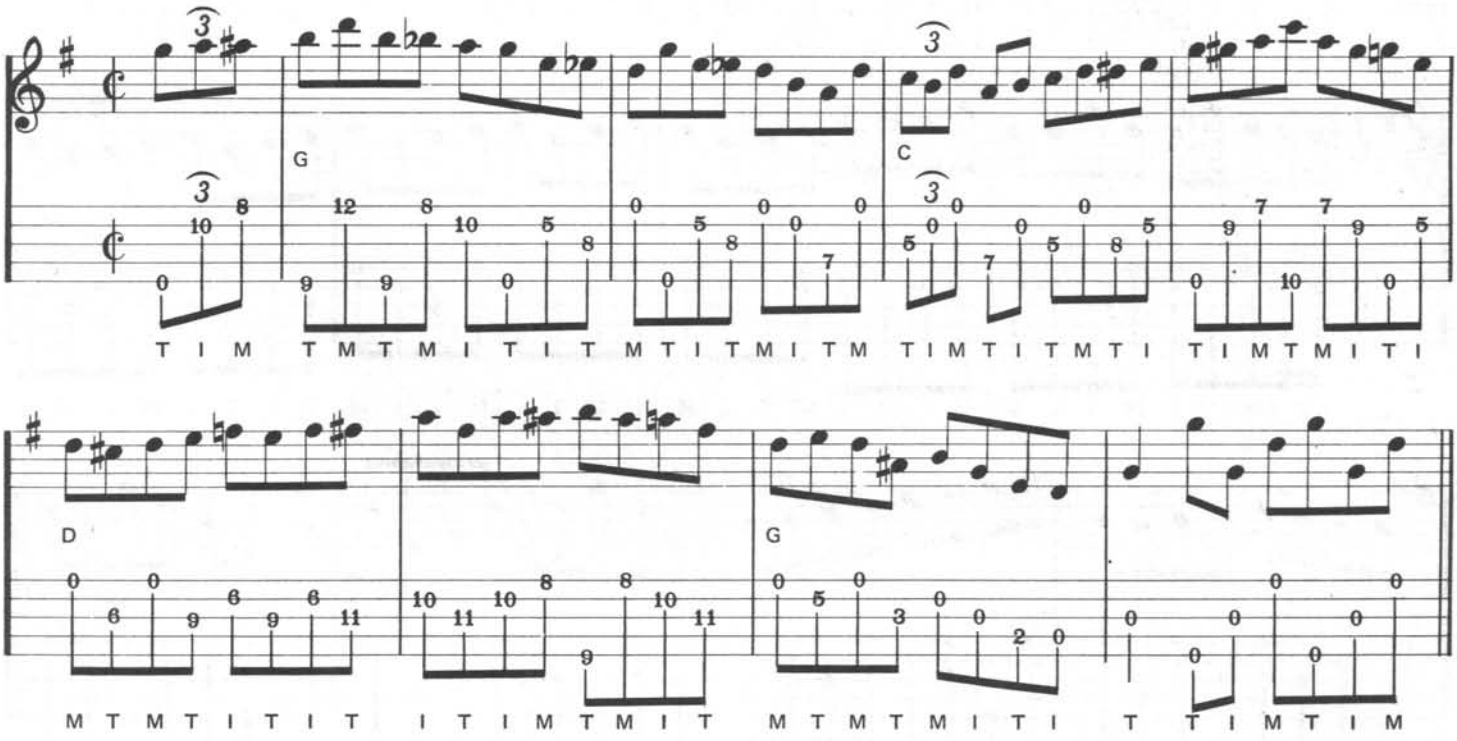
Although it is possible to integrate many types of scales into a solo, each of the following examples will use only one. The first will use only G major combined with a few Scruggs-style licks and a transition lick.



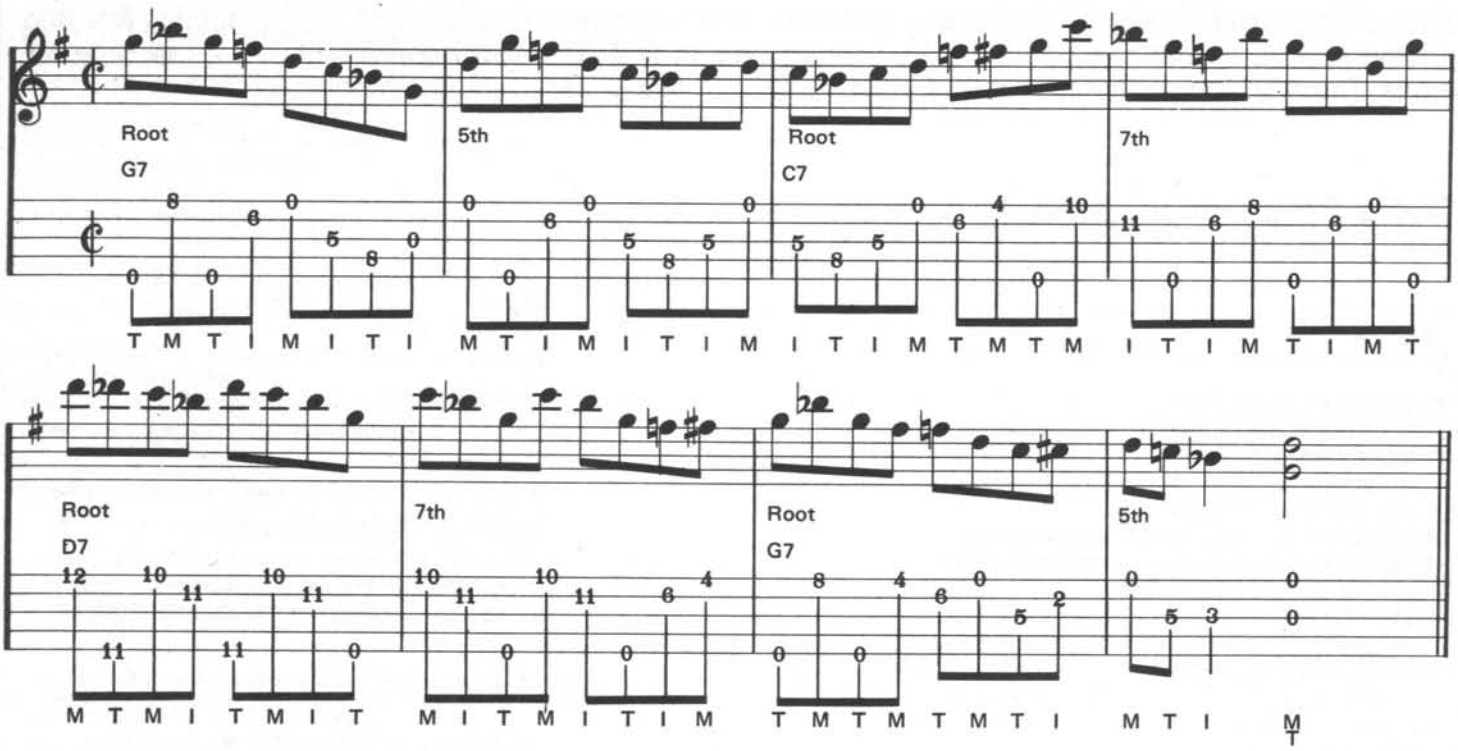
This example will use only pentatonic scale licks: G pentatonic over the G major chord, C pentatonic over the C chord, and D pentatonic over the D chord.



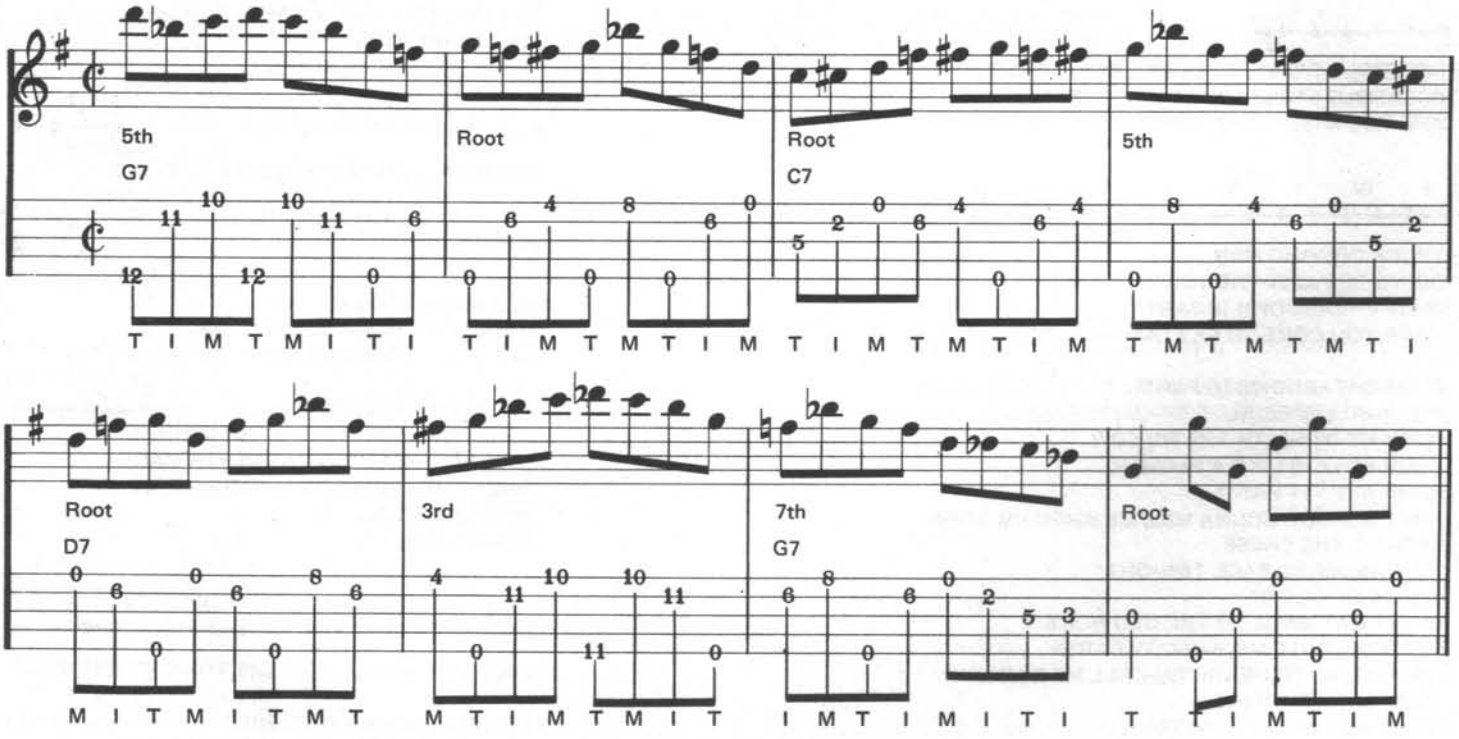
This arrangement uses the same three pentatonic scales as in the last example, however, the chromatic passing tones, #2/b3 and #5, have been added. Note how the ending of the first G lick, and the D lick, were altered to accommodate the beginning of the following licks.



All of the blues licks in the last section were presented in the order of a 12-bar blues progression. Here you will find most of them again, only rearranged to fit a different chord progression. As in the 12-bar blues progression, all of the chords will be dominant 7th chords.

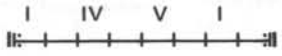


In the previous example, notice how each measure began on a chord tone. The following example also makes use of this technique — again using the G blues scale plus #4/b5 and 7.

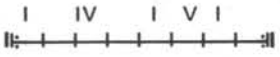


The chord progression used in the previous exercises contained on pages 63-65 is the foundation for quite a number of bluegrass songs and instrumentals. The following chart will list a few of these well-known tunes built from this chord progression, and then diagram several of the most common chord progressions used in bluegrass music. The player should look for "blocks-of-chords", usually in four-measure groups, which recur in many different progressions. A lick or phrase which is playable in one tune over such a block will probably be just as playable in another tune over the same block. The beginning four and ending four measures of most tunes are very significant and are usually consistent as to their progressions. The final four measures are the most consistent and usually take the form of V-V-I-I or I-V-I-I-.

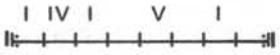
Chord Progression Chart



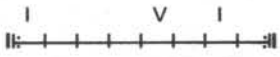
BLUERIDGE CABIN HOME
DON'T GIVE YOUR HEART TO A RAMBLER
PRISONER'S SONG
IS IT TOO LATE NOW
BLUEBIRDS ARE SINGING
SOMEDAY WE'LL MEET AGAIN SWEETHEART
I WONDER WHERE YOU ARE TONIGHT (VERSE)
I'D RATHER BE ALONE (VERSE)
HELEN (VERSE)
TEARDROPS IN MY EYES (VERSE)
RANDY LYNN RAG (A PART)



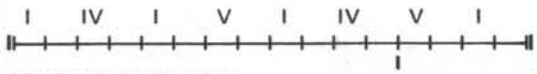
NINE POUND HAMMER



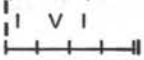
ARE YOU MISSING ME (VERSE)



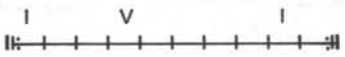
HOW MOUNTAIN GIRLS CAN LOVE (VERSE)
COLUMBUS STOCKADE BLUES (VERSE)
ARE YOU MISSING ME (CHORUS)



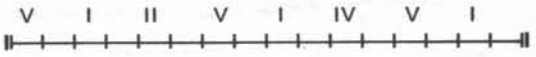
TRUCK DRIVING MAN
GOING TO PAINT THE TOWN
DIXIE BREAKDOWN (B PART)
HAVE YOU COME TO SAY GOODBYE (VERSE)



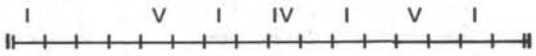
DIXIE BREAKDOWN (A PART)
FLINT HILL SPECIAL
BURY ME BENEATH THE WILLOW
YOUR LOVE IS LIKE A FLOWER
HARD AIN'T IT HARD
AIN'T NOBODY GONNA MISS ME WHEN I'M GONE
BACK TO THE CROSS
IF I WANDERED BACK TONIGHT
WRECK OF OLD 97
ON MY WAY BACK TO THE OLD HOME
NOBODY LOVES ME, NOBODY CARES
I'M WAITING TO HEAR YOU CALL ME DARLING
COME BACK DARLING
DON'T ASK ME WHY (CHORUS)
HE TOOK YOUR PLACE (VERSE)
NOBODY'S LOVE IS LIKE MINE



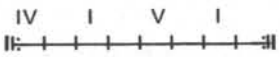
I'D RATHER BE ALONE (CHORUS)



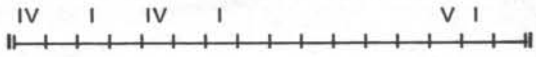
DON'T ASK ME WHY (VERSE)
HELEN (CHORUS)
TEARDROPS IN MY EYES (CHORUS)
HAVE YOU COME TO SAY GOODBYE (CHORUS)



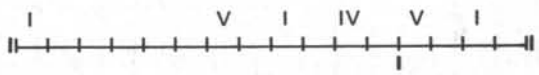
THINK OF WHAT YOU'VE DONE (VERSE)



THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND
BUGLE CALL RAG (SOLOS)
DUELIN' BANJO (SOLOS)
HOW MOUNTAIN GIRLS CAN LOVE (CHORUS)
THINK OF WHAT YOU'VE DONE (CHORUS)
RANDY LYNN RAG (B PART)
WAY DOWNTOWN

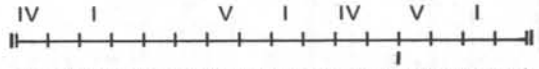


COLUMBUS STOCKADE BLUES (CHORUS)

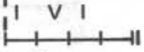


RED RIVER VALLEY
ROLL IN MY SWEET BABY'S ARMS
SHE'LL BE COMING 'ROUND THE MOUNTAIN

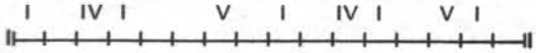
I'LL STAY AROUND (VERSE)
WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME SO (VERSE)
WILL YOU BE LOVING ANOTHER MAN
WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN
MAMA DON'T ALLOW
CRAWDAD SONG



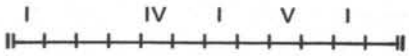
I WONDER WHERE YOU ARE TONIGHT (CHORUS)



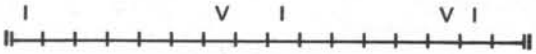
I'LL STAY AROUND (CHORUS)
WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME SO (CHORUS)
HE TOOK YOUR PLACE (CHORUS)



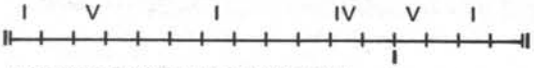
ON AND ON
I'LL NEVER SHED ANOTHER TEAR
LITTLE CABIN HOME ON THE HILL (VERSE)
MY LITTLE GIRL IN TENNESSEE (VERSE)
THAT WAS BEFORE I MET YOU (VERSE)
THAT OLD BOOK OF MINE (VERSE)
GONNA SETTLE DOWN (VERSE)
LOG CABIN IN THE LANE (VERSE)
CABIN IN CAROLINE (VERSE)
GOIN' UP (VERSE)
COUNTRY CHURCH (VERSE)



12-BAR BLUES
SHUCKIN' THE CORN
FOGGY MOUNTAIN SPECIAL
DON'T GET ABOVE YOUR RAISING (INSTRUMENTAL ONLY)

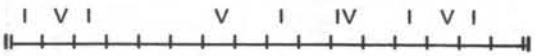


I SHALL BE AT HOME WITH JESUS
I'VE LOST YOU (VERSE)

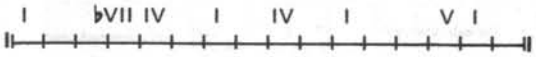


A HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW
PHILADELPHIA LAWYER
WILL YOU BE SATISFIED THAT WAY
CRYING MY HEART OUT OVER YOU

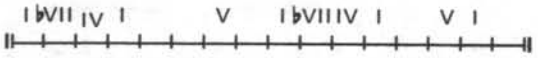
LOVE ME DARLING JUST TONIGHT
I WASHED MY HANDS IN THE MUDDY WATER



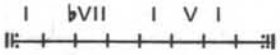
CARELESS LOVE



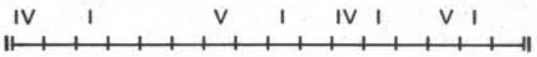
LOVE COME HOME



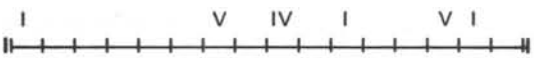
LIVE AND LET LIVE



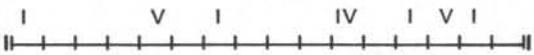
LITTLE MAGGIE



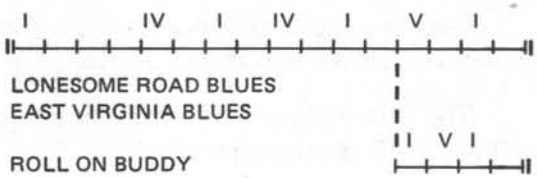
LITTLE CABIN HOME ON THE HILL (CHORUS)
MY LITTLE GIRL IN TENNESSEE (CHORUS)
THAT WAS BEFORE I MET YOU (CHORUS)
THAT OLD BOOK OF MINE (CHORUS)
GONNA SETTLE DOWN (CHORUS)
LOG CABIN IN THE LANE (CHORUS)
CABIN IN CAROLINE (CHORUS)



GOIN' UP (CHORUS)

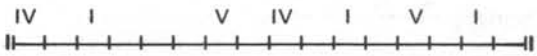


COUNTRY CHURCH (CHORUS)

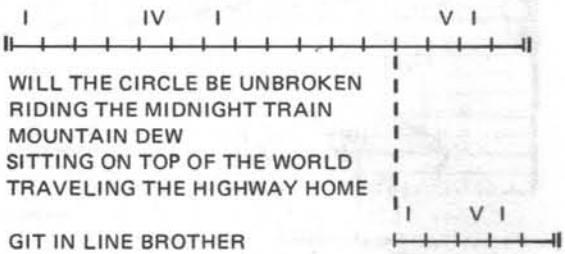


LONESOME ROAD BLUES
EAST VIRGINIA BLUES

ROLL ON BUDDY

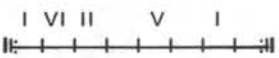


I'VE LOST YOU (CHORUS)

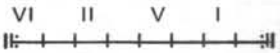


WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN
RIDING THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN
MOUNTAIN DEW
SITTING ON TOP OF THE WORLD
TRAVELING THE HIGHWAY HOME

GIT IN LINE BROTHER



SALTY DOG



DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN
I KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO BE LONESOME

Most of the progressions illustrated in the previous chart incorporated just chords I, IV and V; however, a few used "outside" chords — that is, chords that do not occur naturally in a major key. The major chord based on the lowered 7th degree appears in tunes of a bluesy or modal nature. When the major chords based on the 2nd and 6th degrees appear in tunes, they demonstrate one of the functions of the famous Circle-of-5ths. VI actually functions as V of II, II functions as V of V, and then V resolves to I. "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down" and "Salty Dog" are songs which demonstrate this relationship.

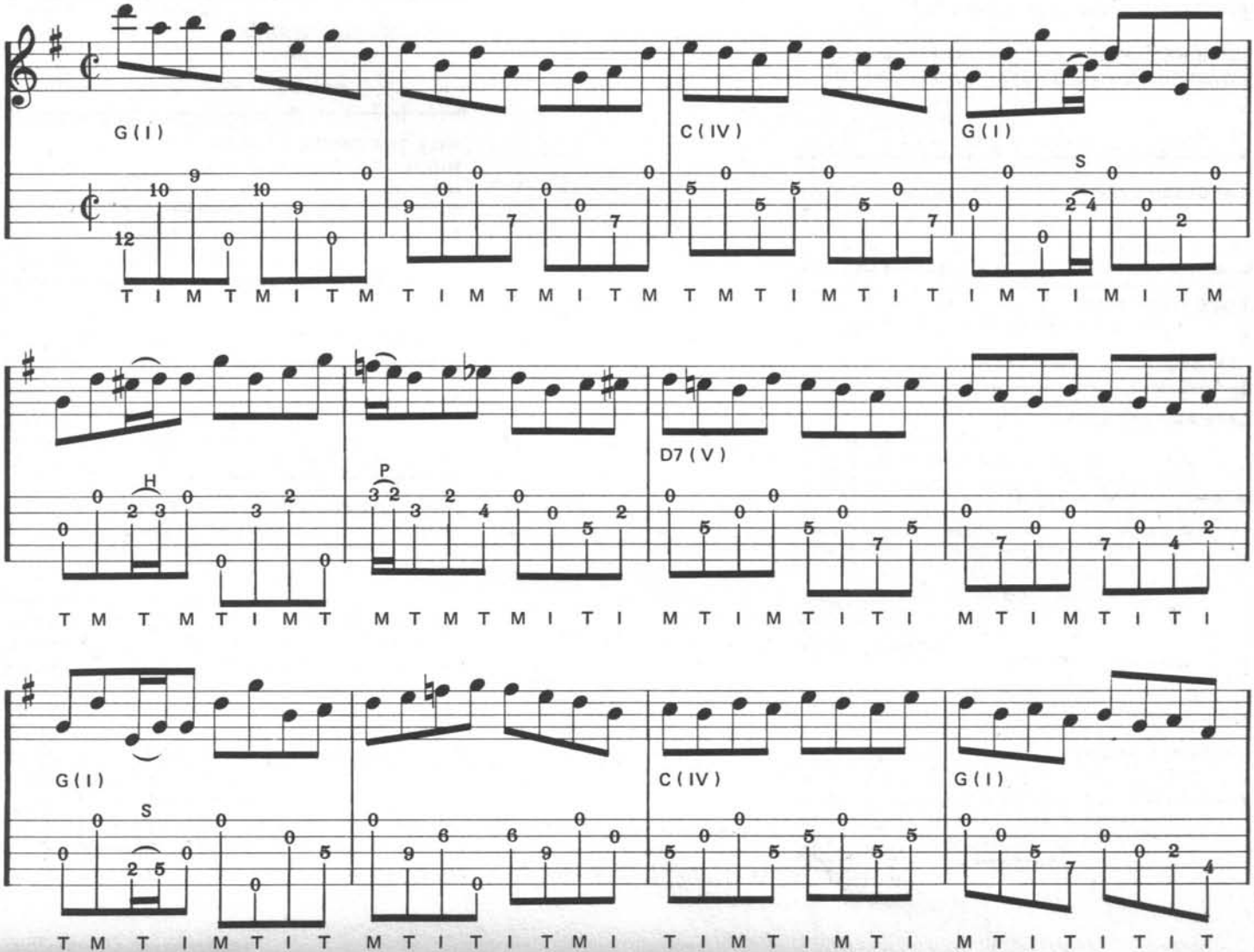
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°	II	VI	♭VII
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B°	D	A	B♭
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F♯°	A	E	F
D	Em	F♯m	G	A	Bm	C♯°	E	B	C
A	Bm	C♯m	D	E	F♯m	G♯°	B	F♯	G
E	F♯m	G♯m	A	B	C♯m	D♯°	F♯	C♯	D
B	C♯m	D♯m	E	F♯	G♯m	A♯°	C♯	G♯	A
F	Gm	Am	B♭	C	Dm	E°	G	D	E♭
B♭	Cm	Dm	E♭	F	Gm	A°	C	G	A♭
E♭	Fm	Gm	A♭	B♭	Cm	D°	F	C	D♭

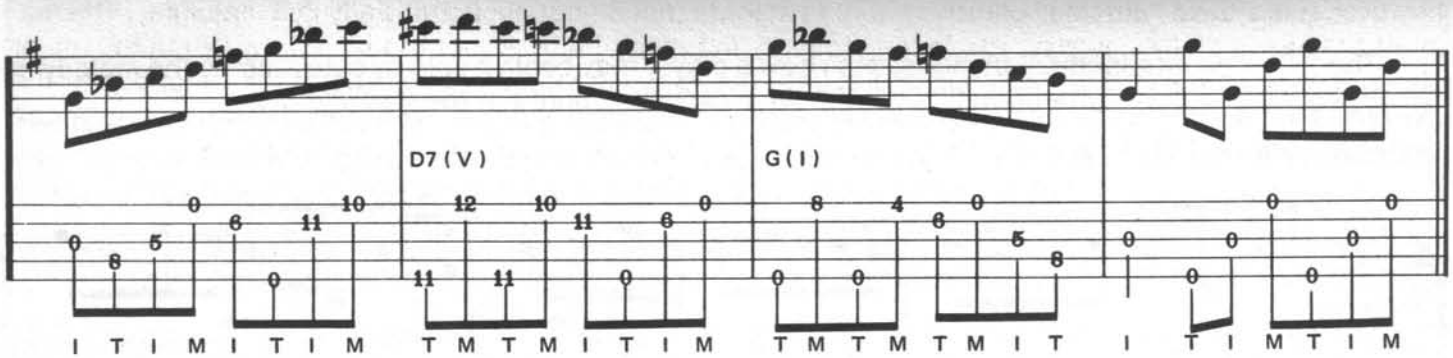
E (VI)	A (II)	D (V)	G (I)
V of A Major →	I of A Major ↓ V of D Major →	I of D Major ↓ V of G Major →	I of G Major

Over the E chord one should play an A major scale, over the A chord play a D major scale, and over the D and G chords, a G major scale.

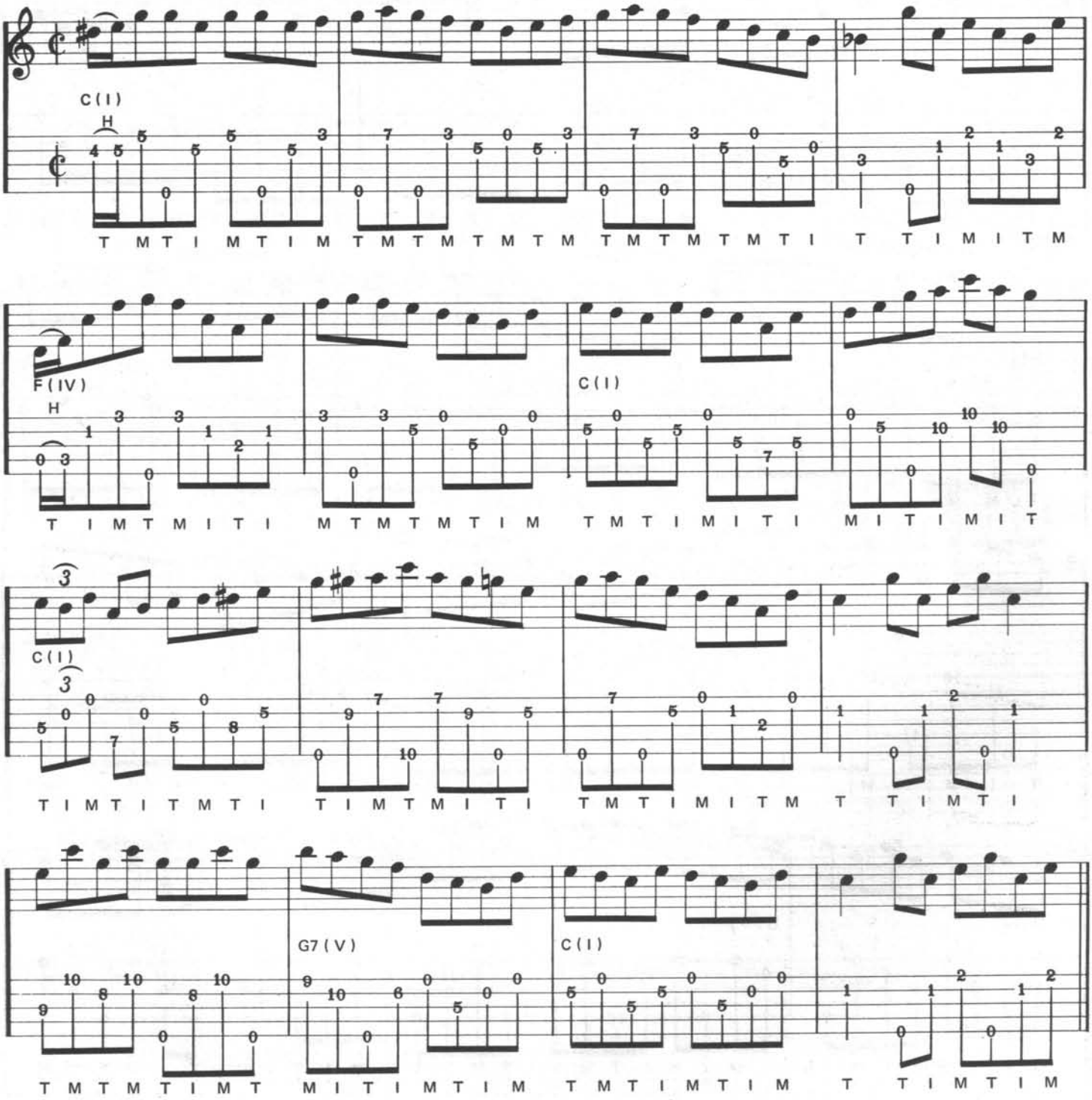
The following section will once again combine licks from the last section into arrangements of some of the chord progressions.

The following progression, written in G, is one used by some of bluegrass music's most popular songs.



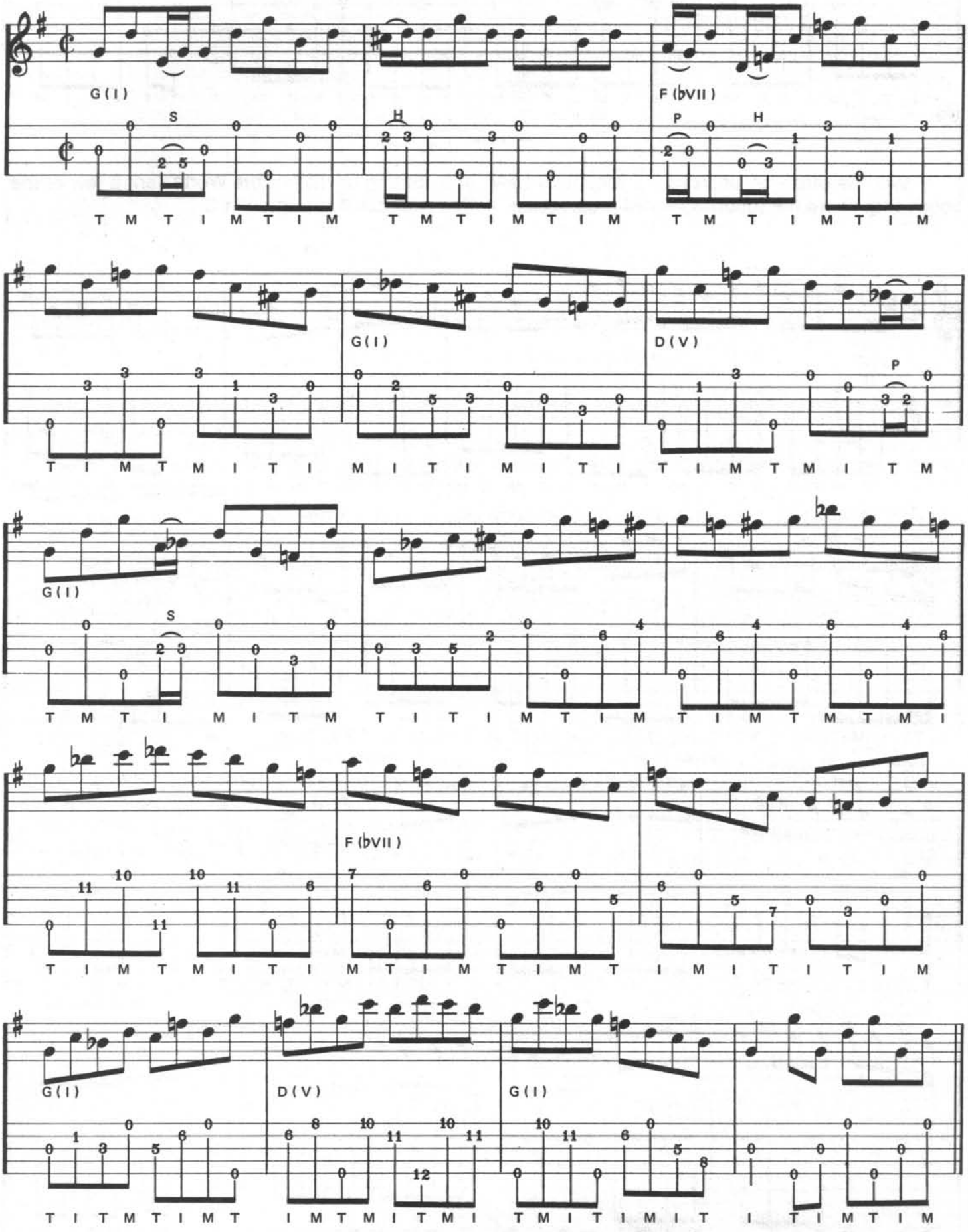


"Will the Circle be Unbroken", "Mountain Dew" and "Sitting on Top of the World" are a few of the songs that share the following chord progression. In this example it is written in C.

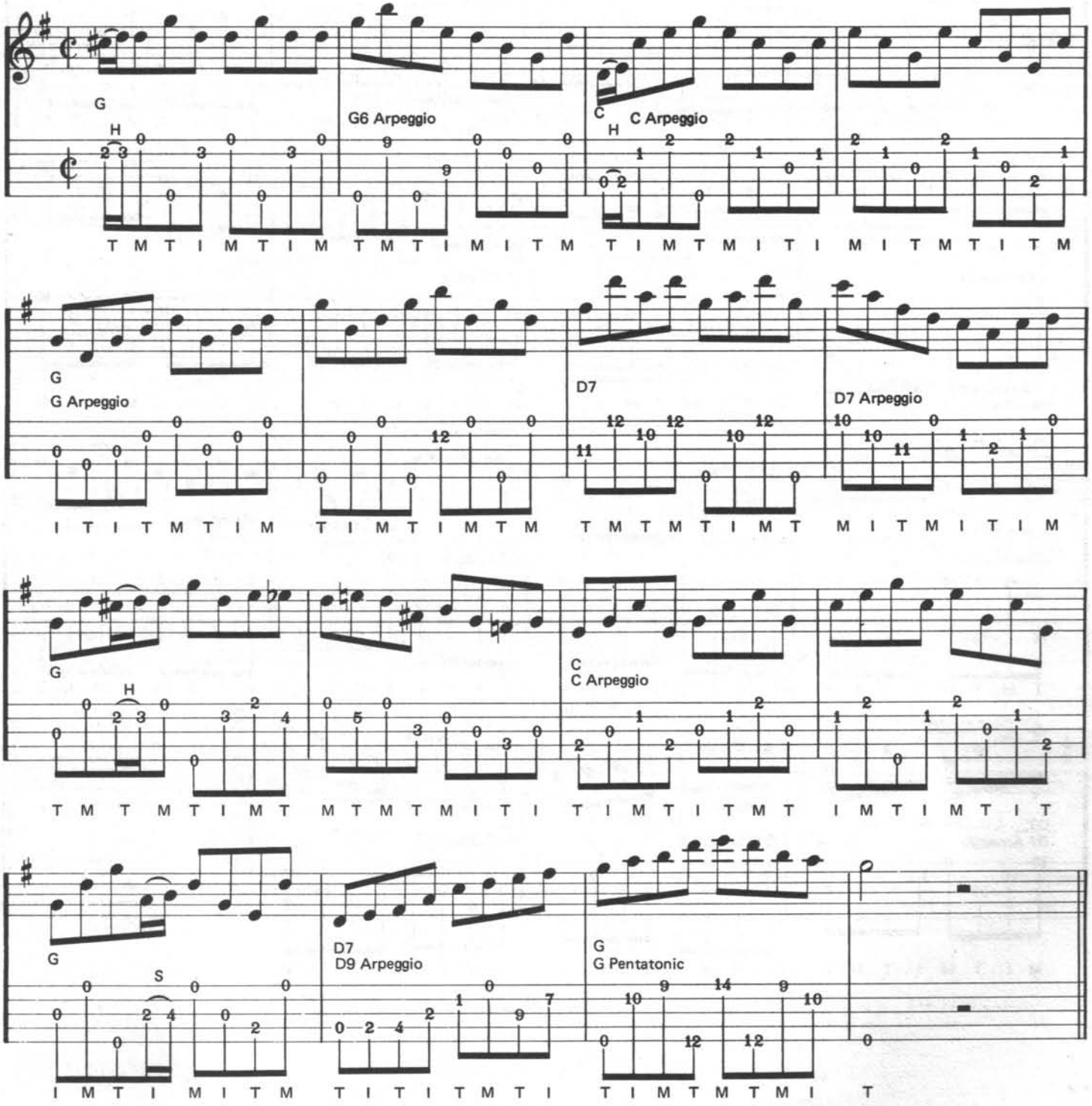


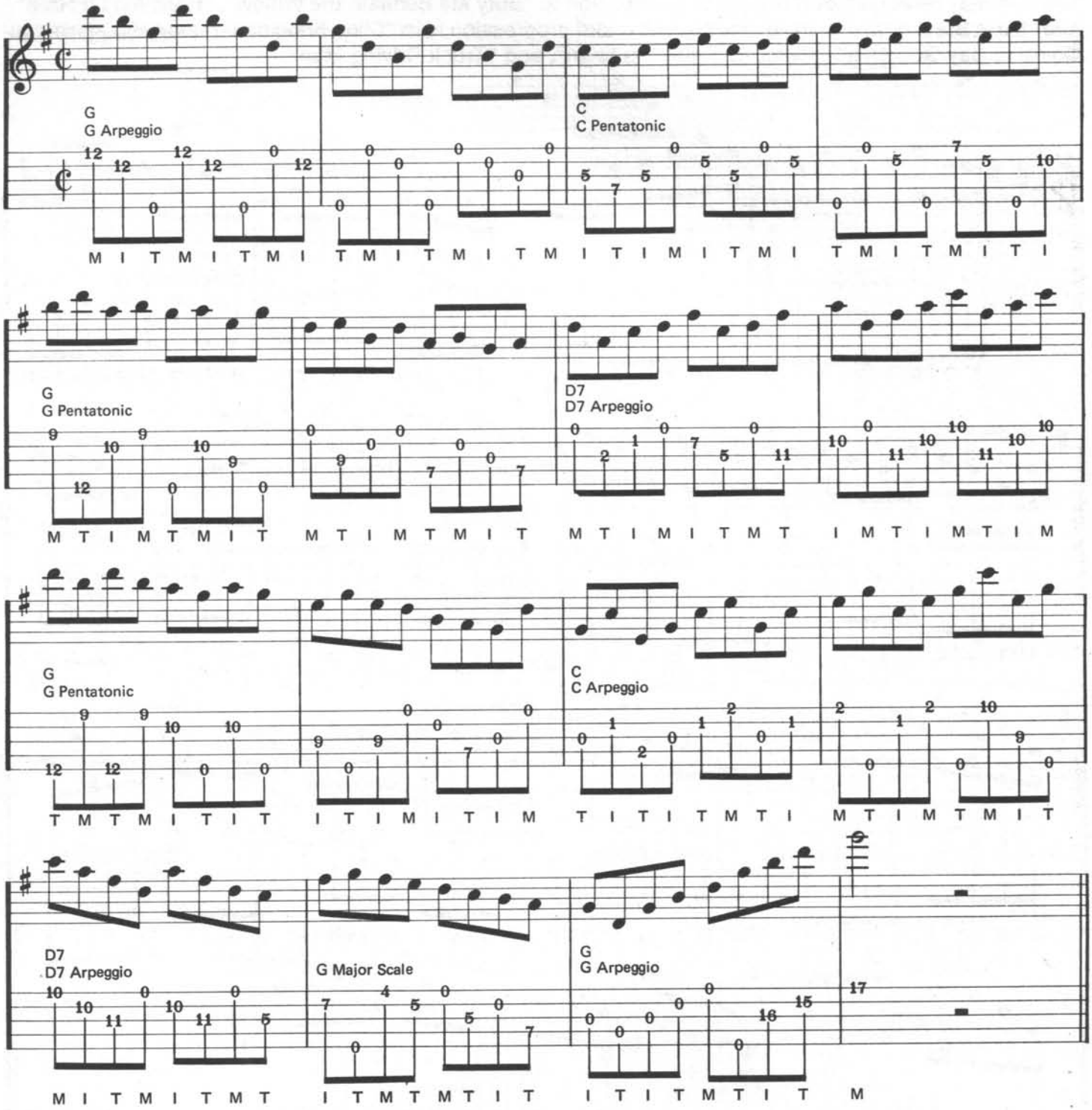
The following arrangement demonstrates how a player may begin a solo by establishing the melody in Scruggs-style and then "stretch-out" and improvise over the chords in the melodic style.

Little Maggie (key of G)

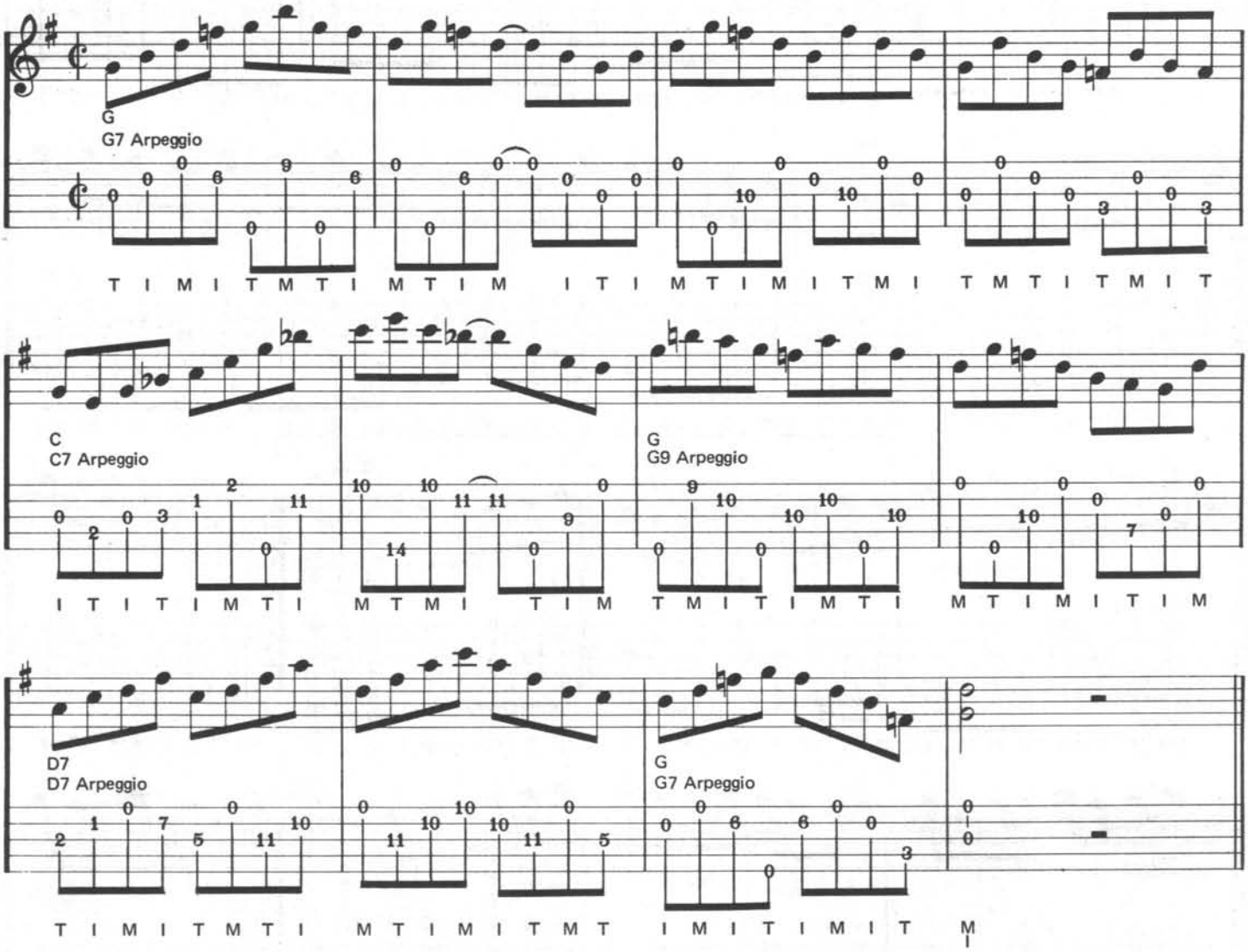


The next two arrangements combine arpeggio phrases with Scruggs-style licks and scale passages. The first may be played over the chord progression to "Bury Me Beneath the Willow", "Hard Ain't it Hard", and "Dixie Breakdown" (part A). The second chord progression is to "Dixie Breakdown" (part B), "Have You Come to Say Goodbye", "Going to Paint the town", and "Truck Driving Man".



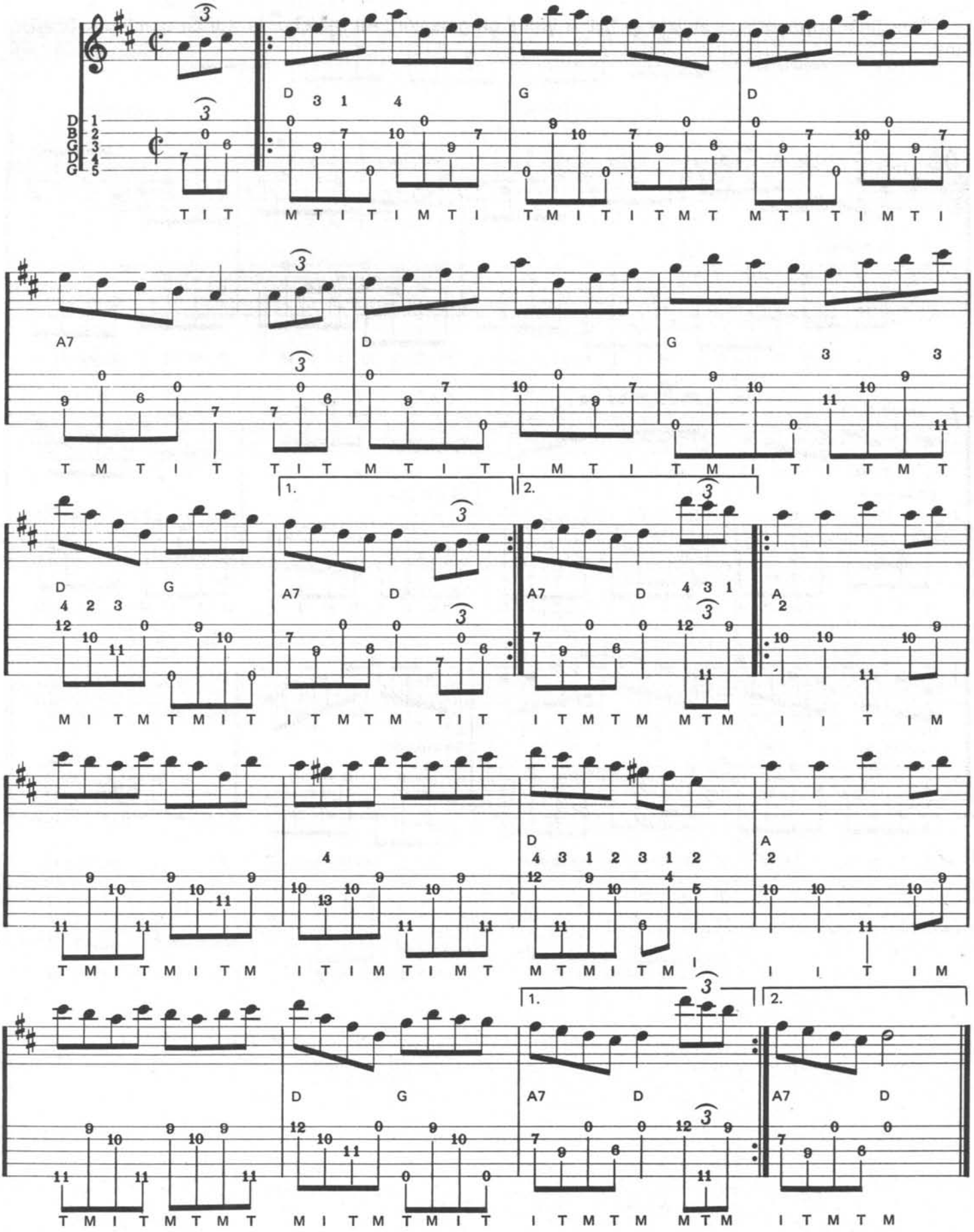

G
G Arpeggio
C
C Pentatonic
G
G Pentatonic
D7
D7 Arpeggio
G
G Pentatonic
C
C Arpeggio
D7
D7 Arpeggio
G Major Scale
G
G Arpeggio

This final arrangement utilizes a 12-bar blues progression. All the chords will be dominant 7ths or 9ths.



Forked Deer

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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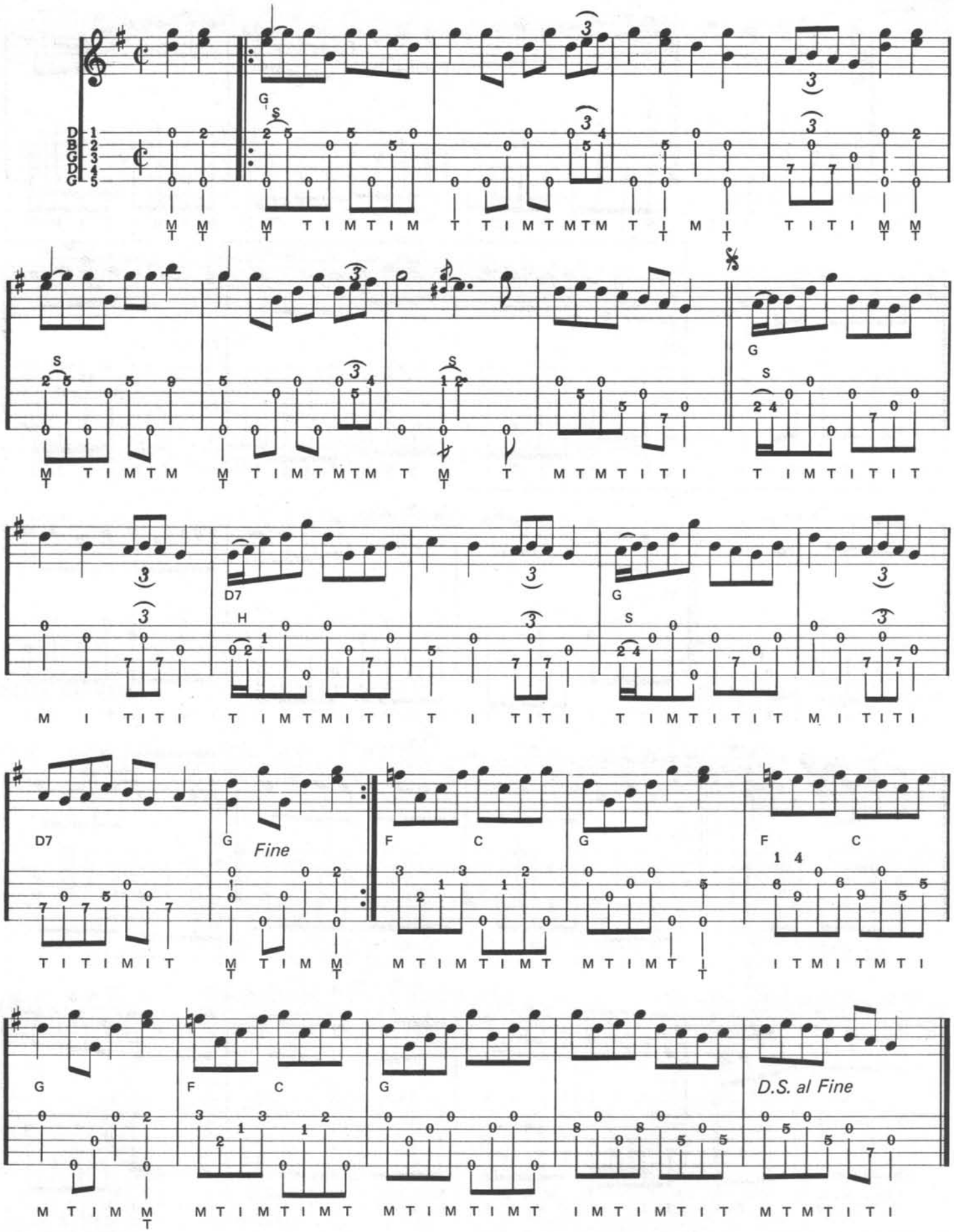
Bonaparte's Retreat

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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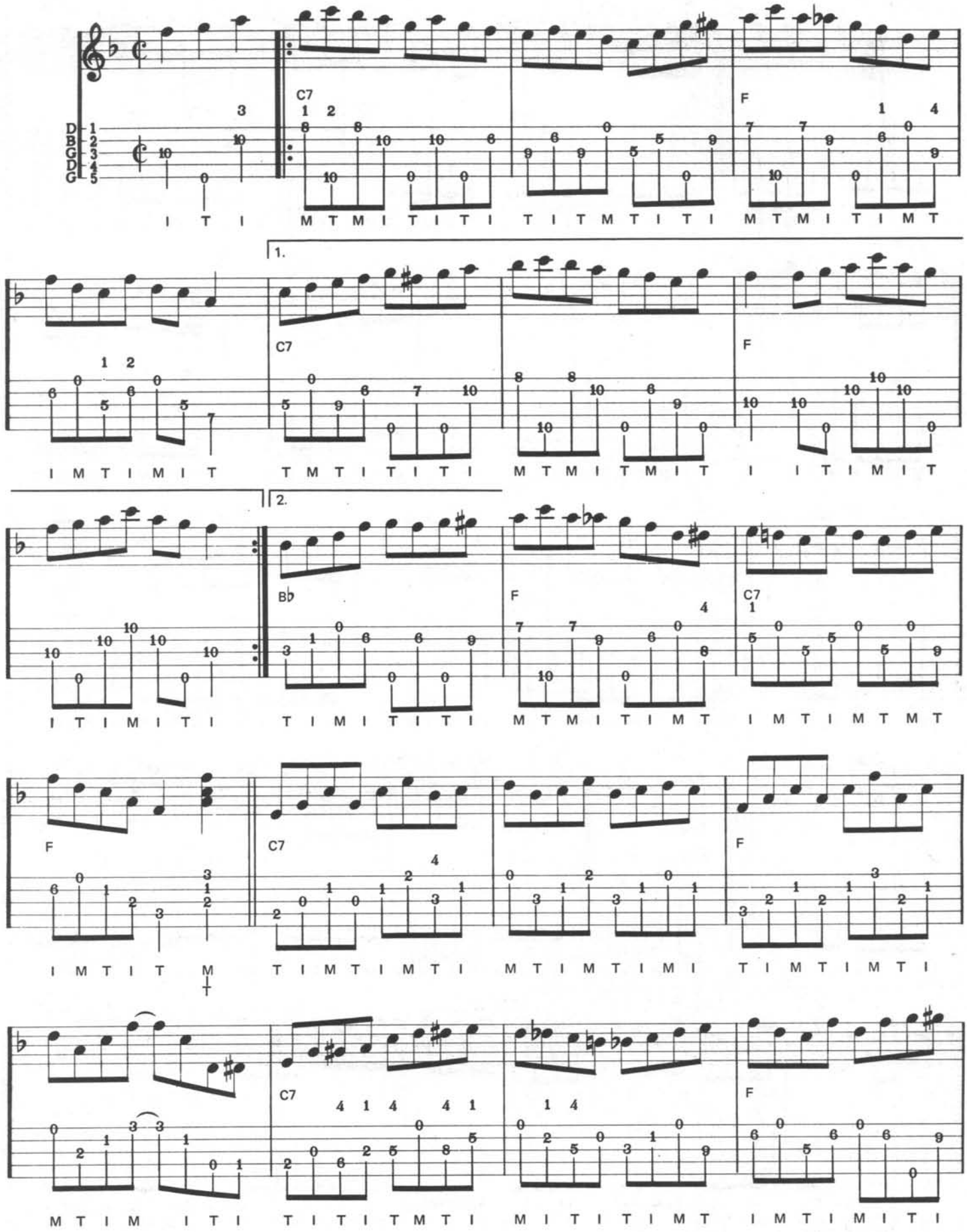
Beaumont Rag

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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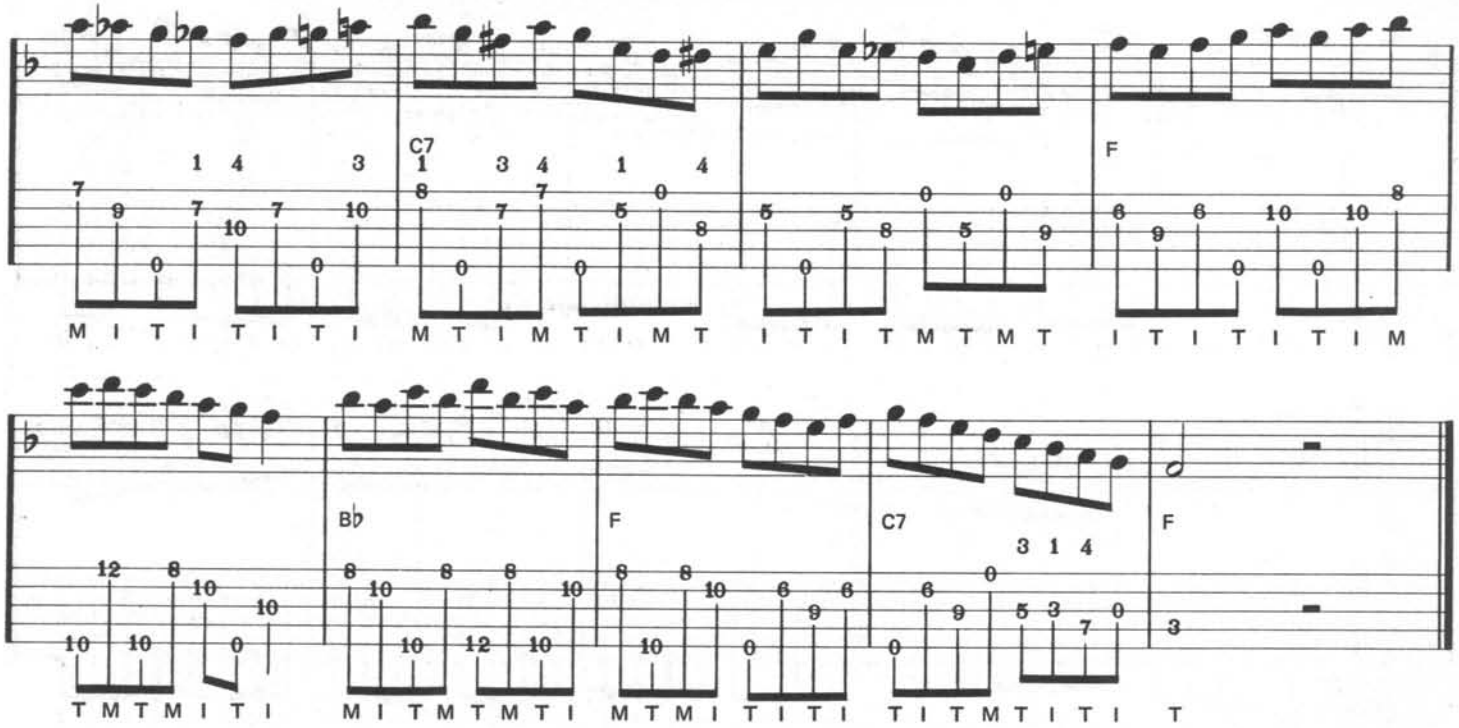
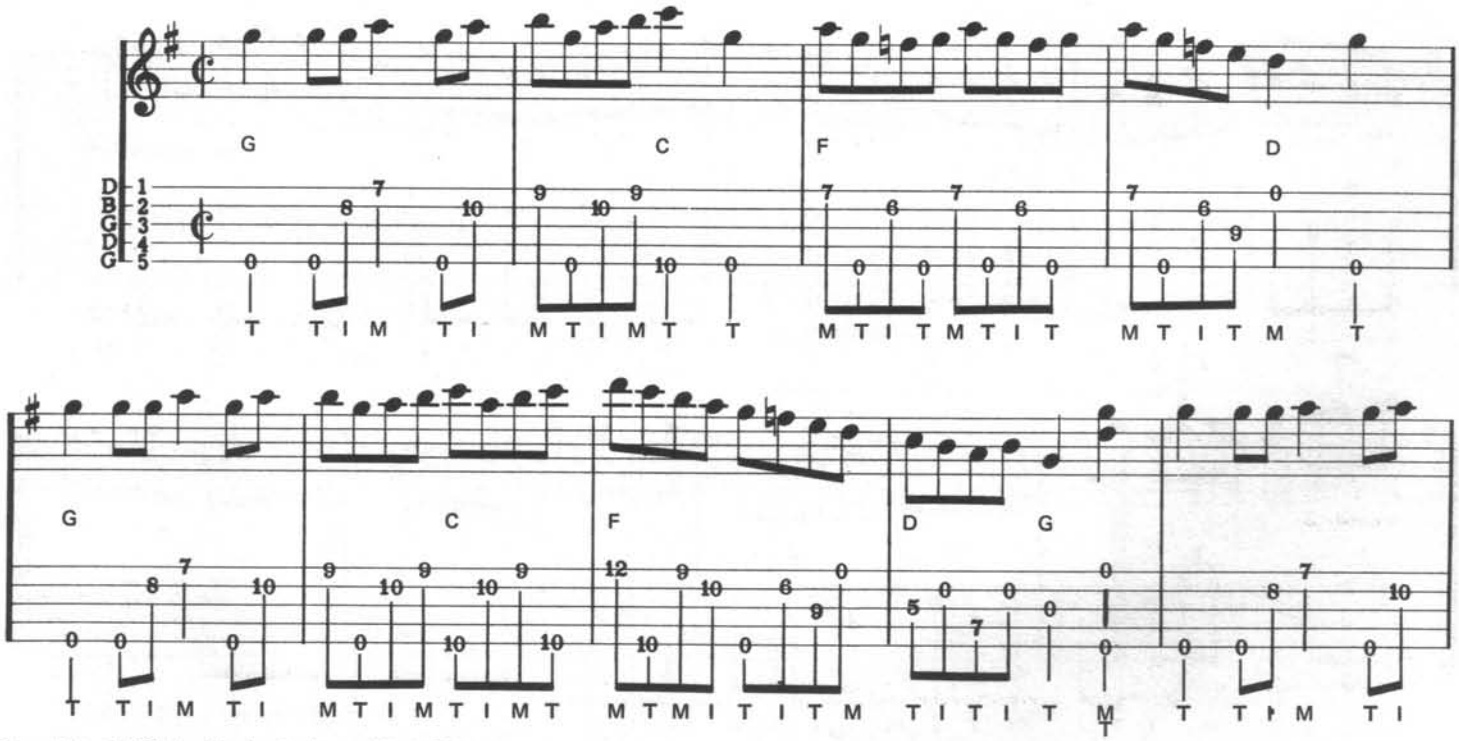


Salt River

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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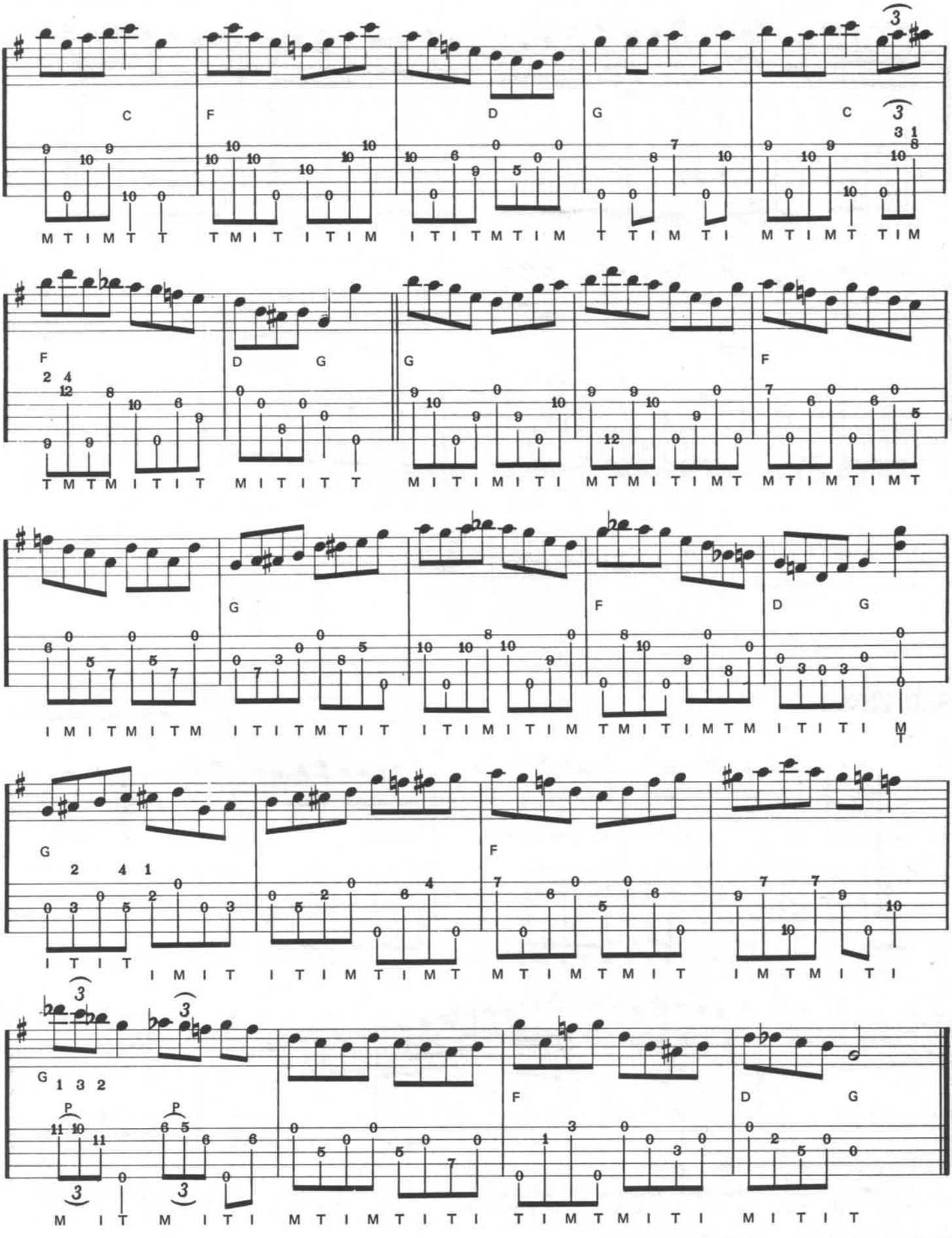
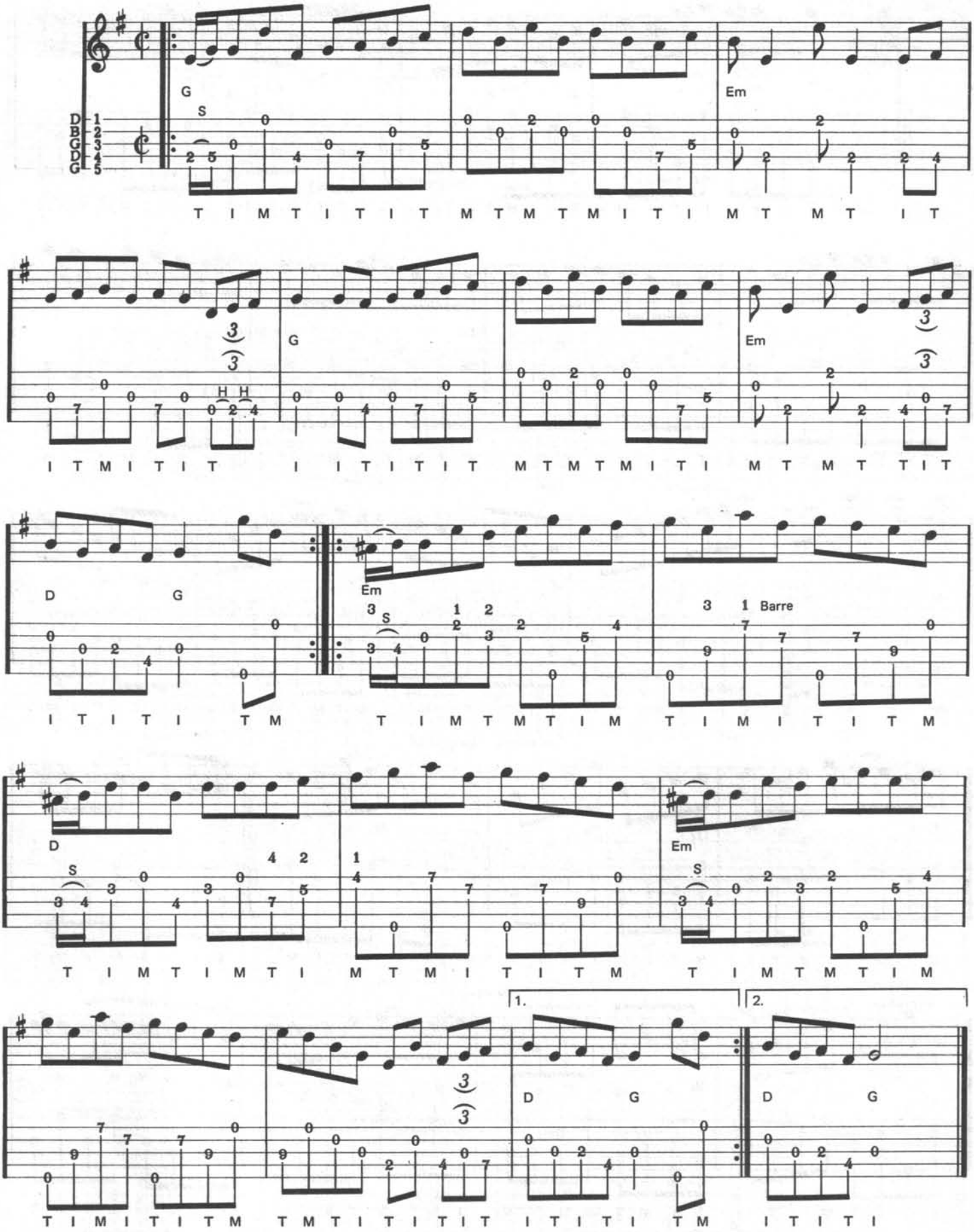

C F D G C
F D G G F
G F D G
G F D G
G

Temperance Reel

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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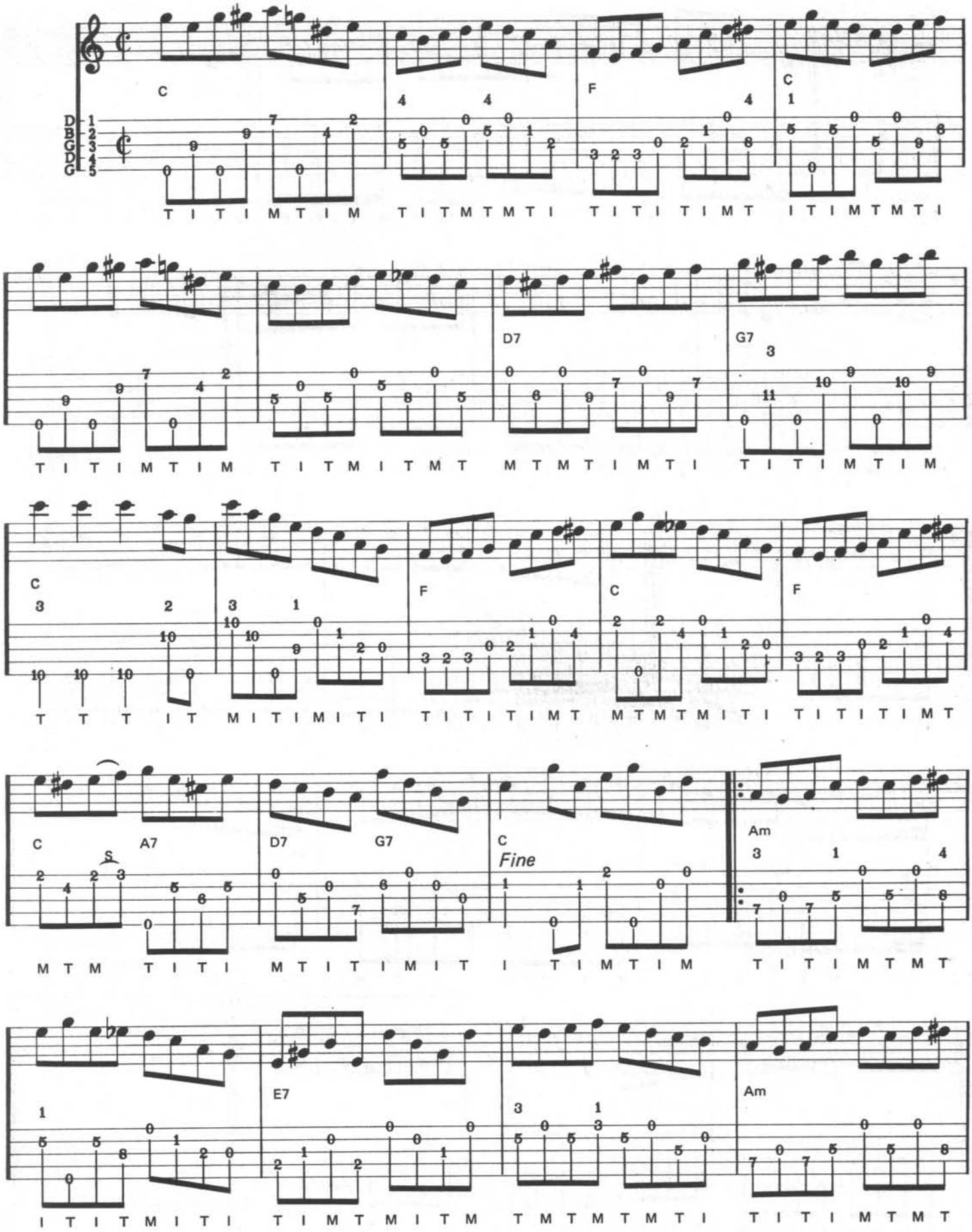
I Don't Love Nobody

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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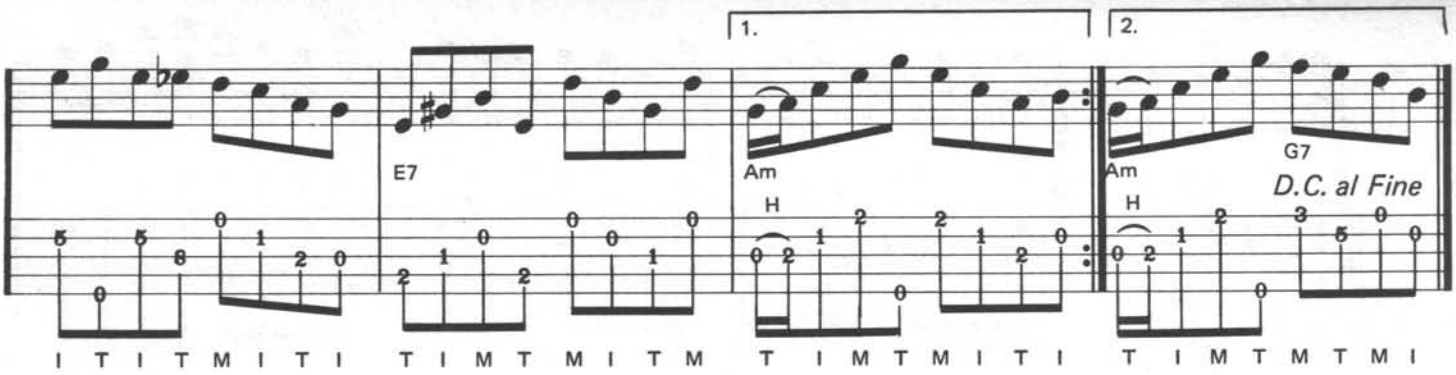
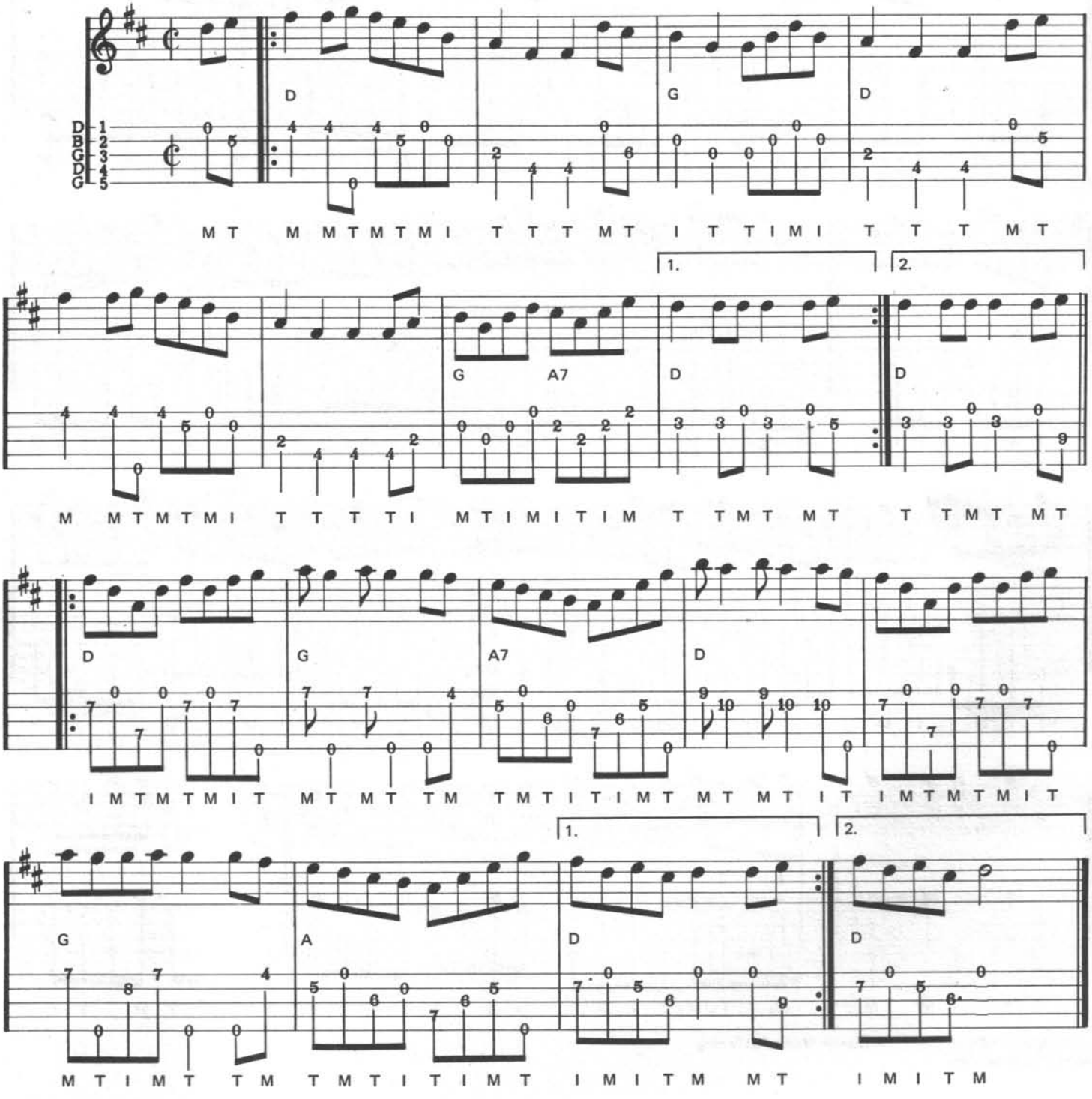


St. Anne's Reel

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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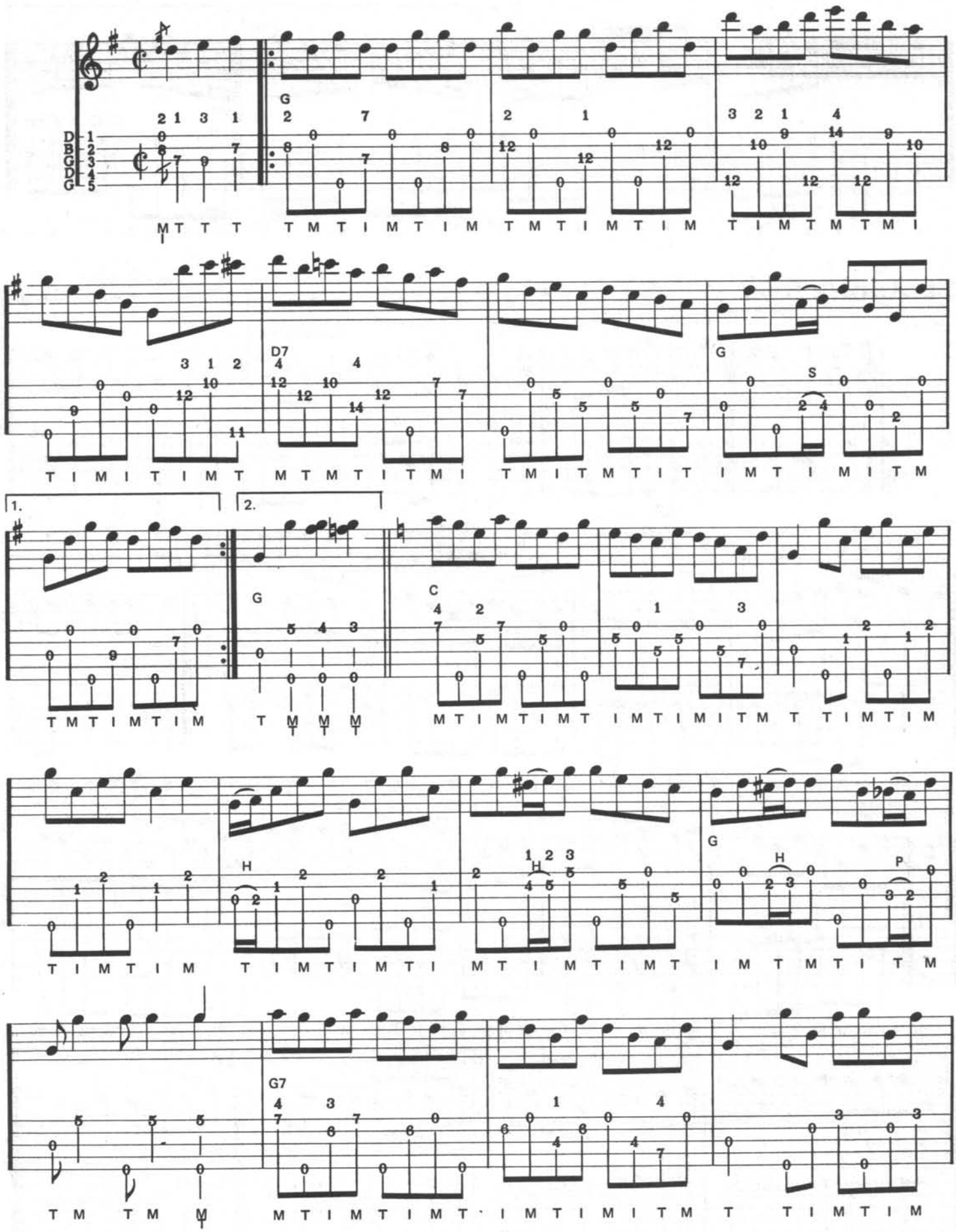
Under the Double Eagle

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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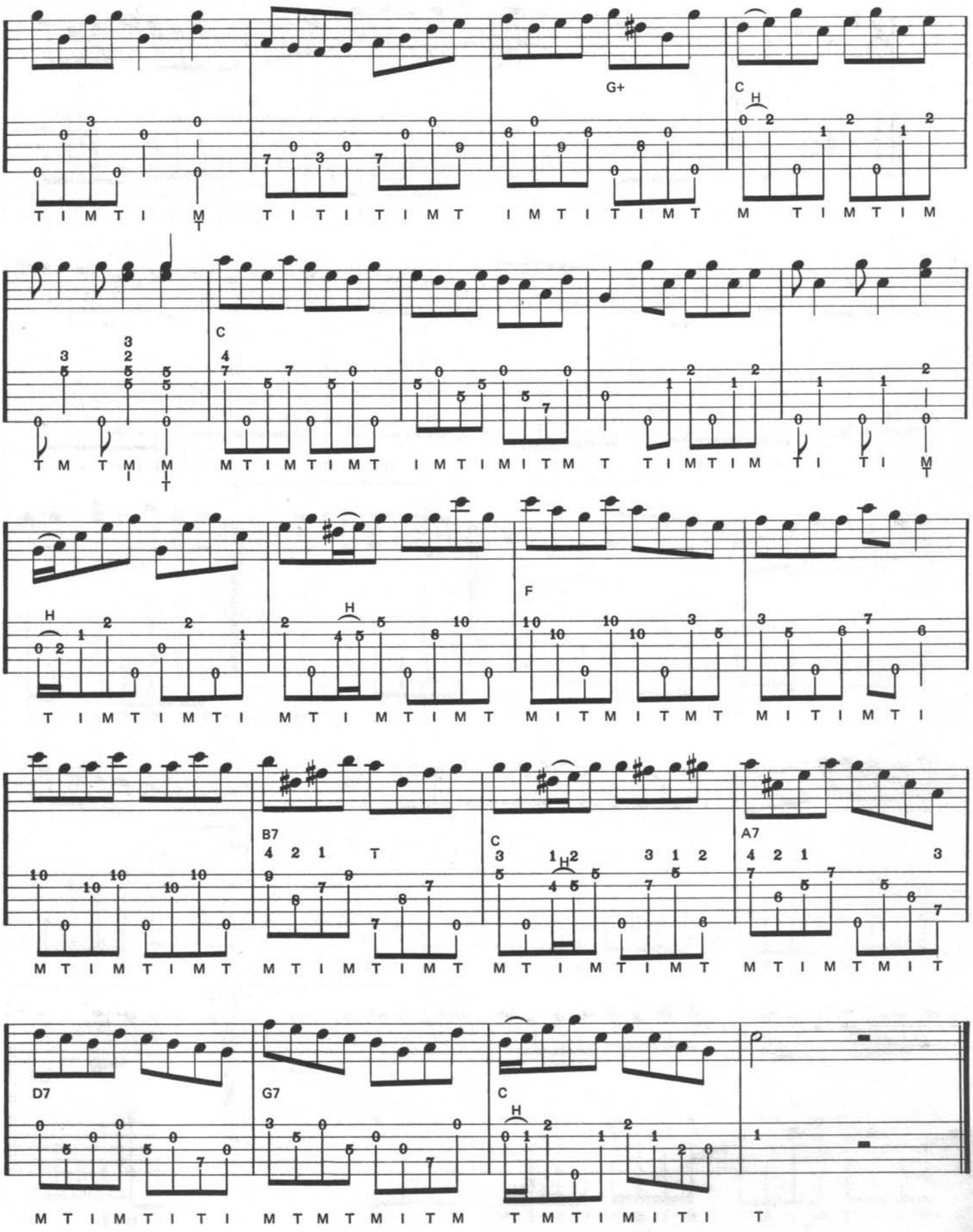
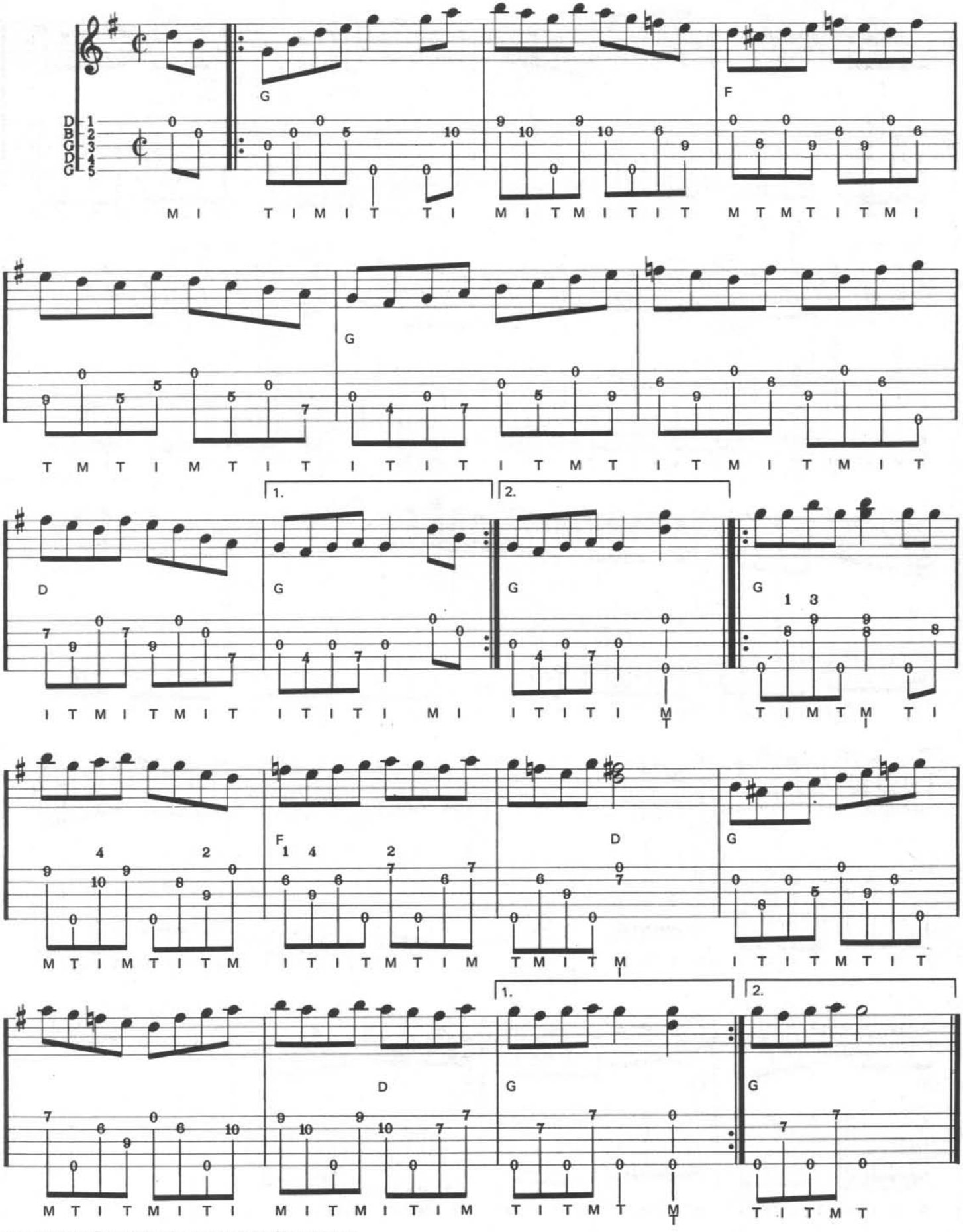

G+
C
H
C
F
B7
C
A7
D7
G7
C

Paddy on the Turnpike

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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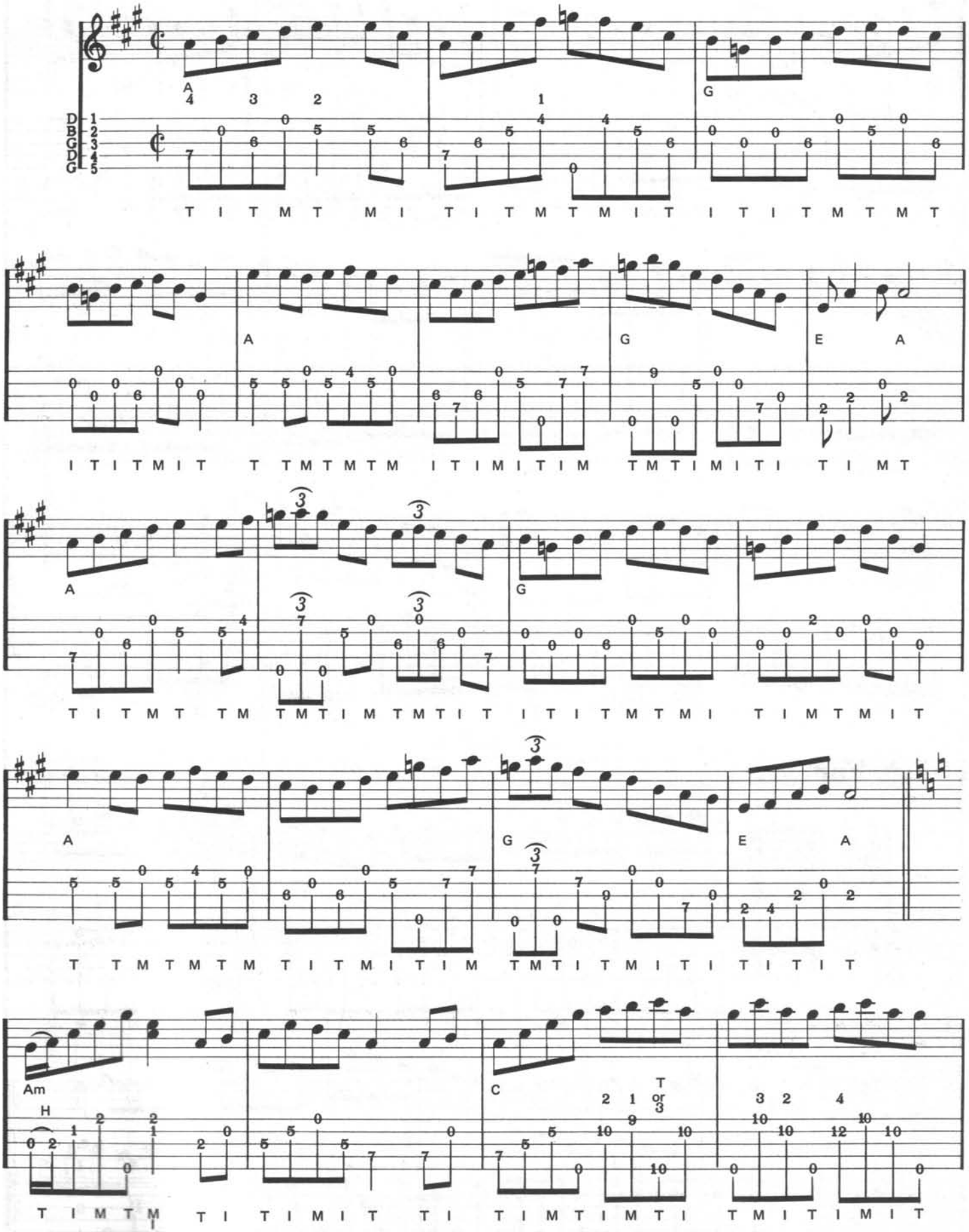
Cattle in the Cane

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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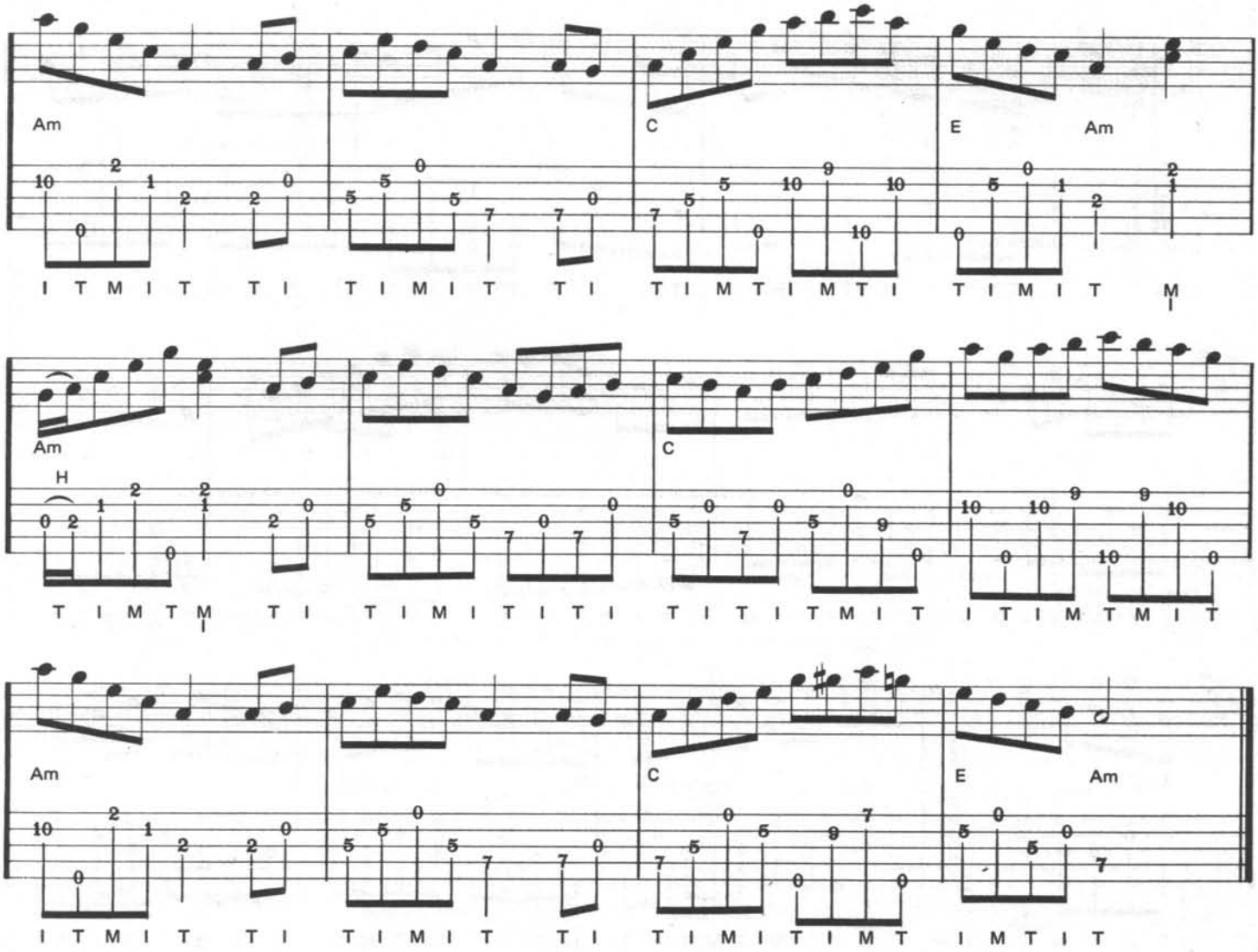
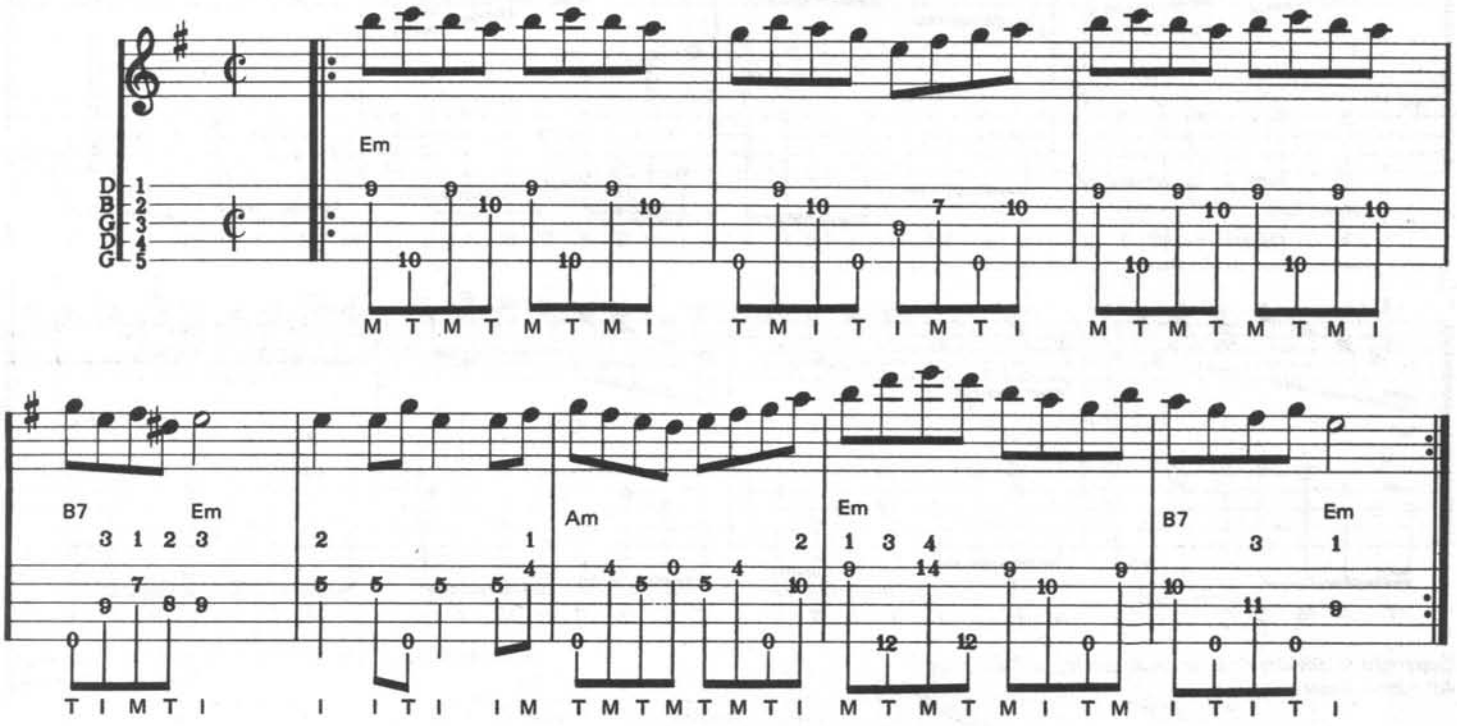


Lady's Fancy

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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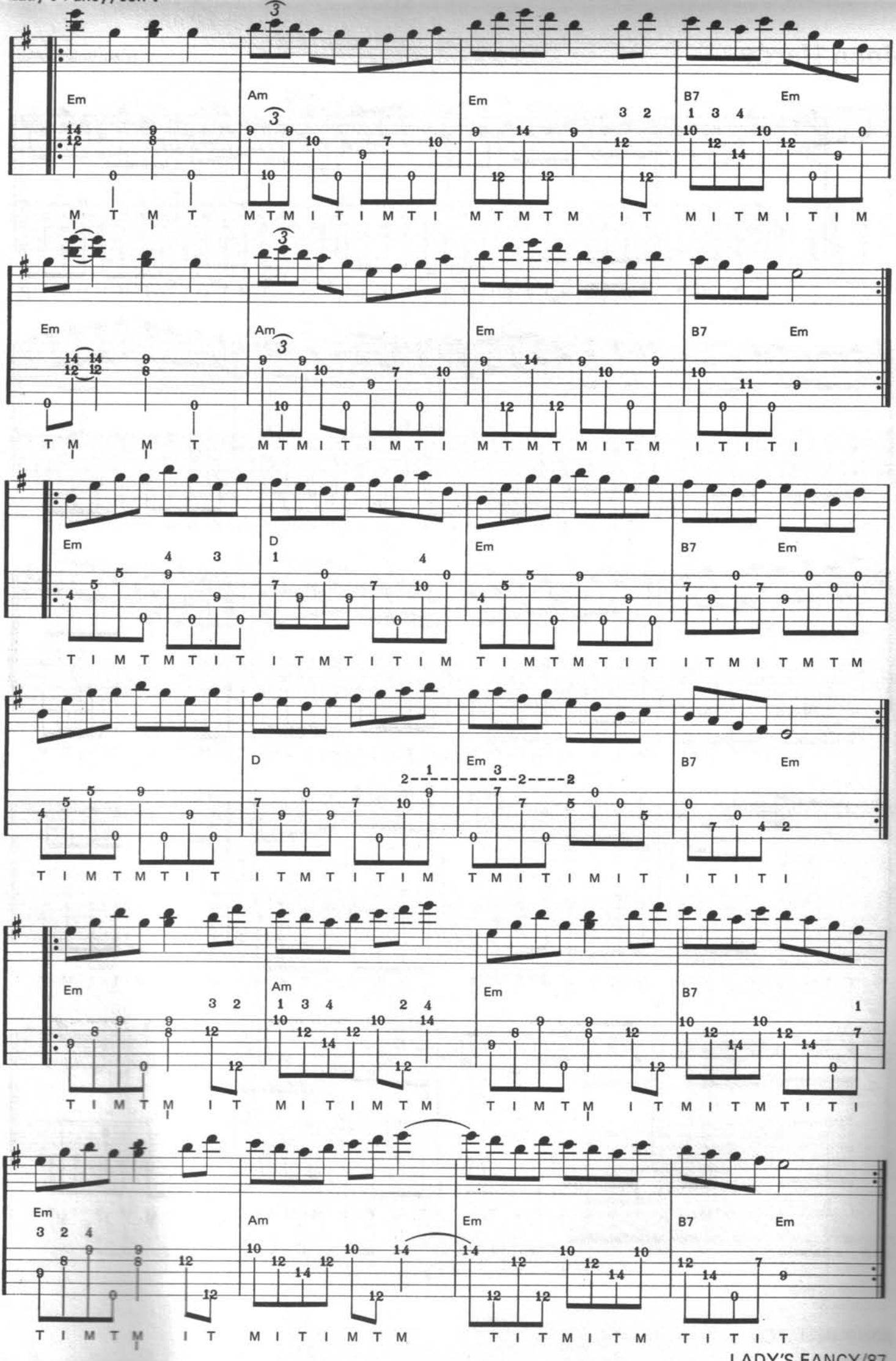
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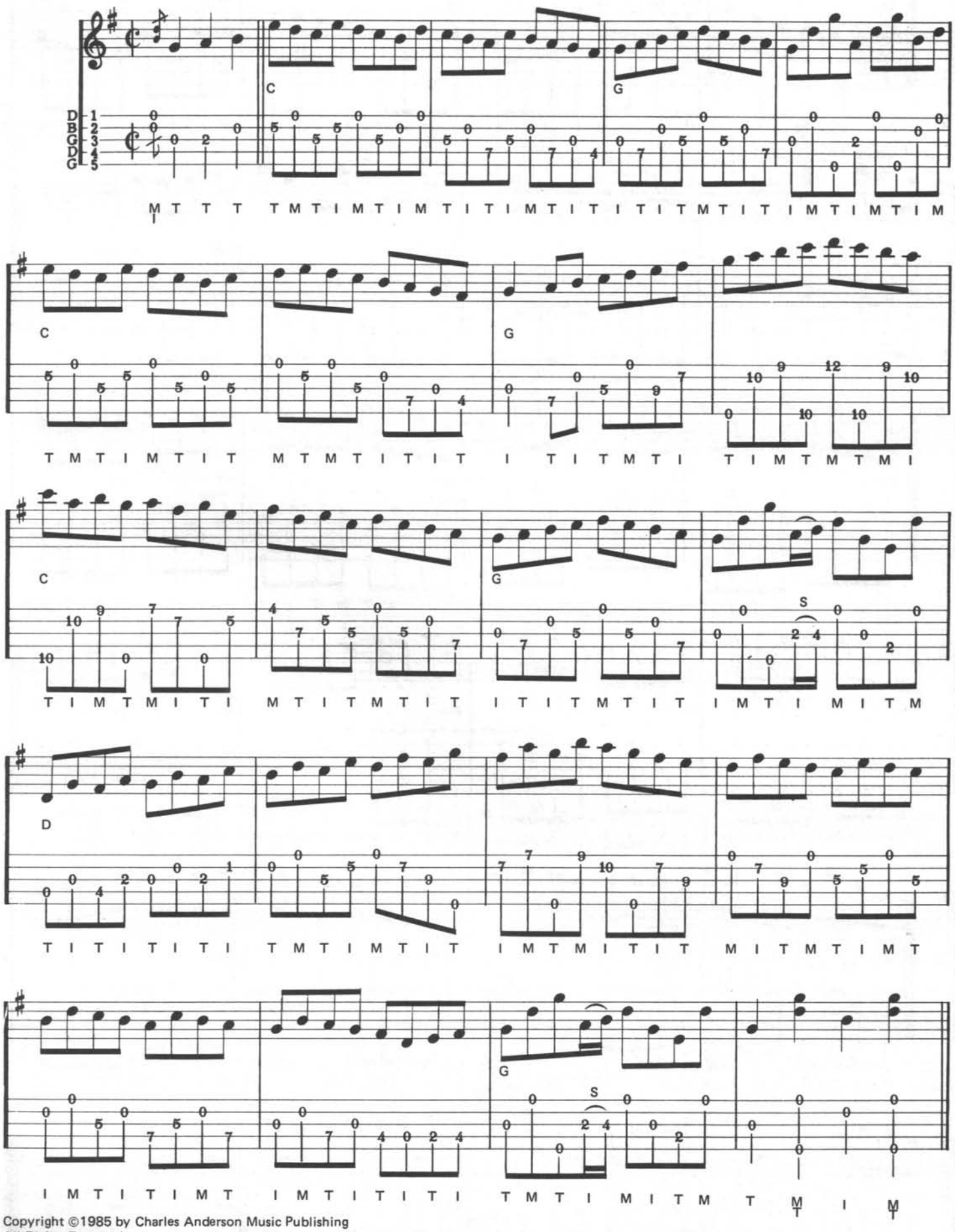
B7
Em

John Hardy

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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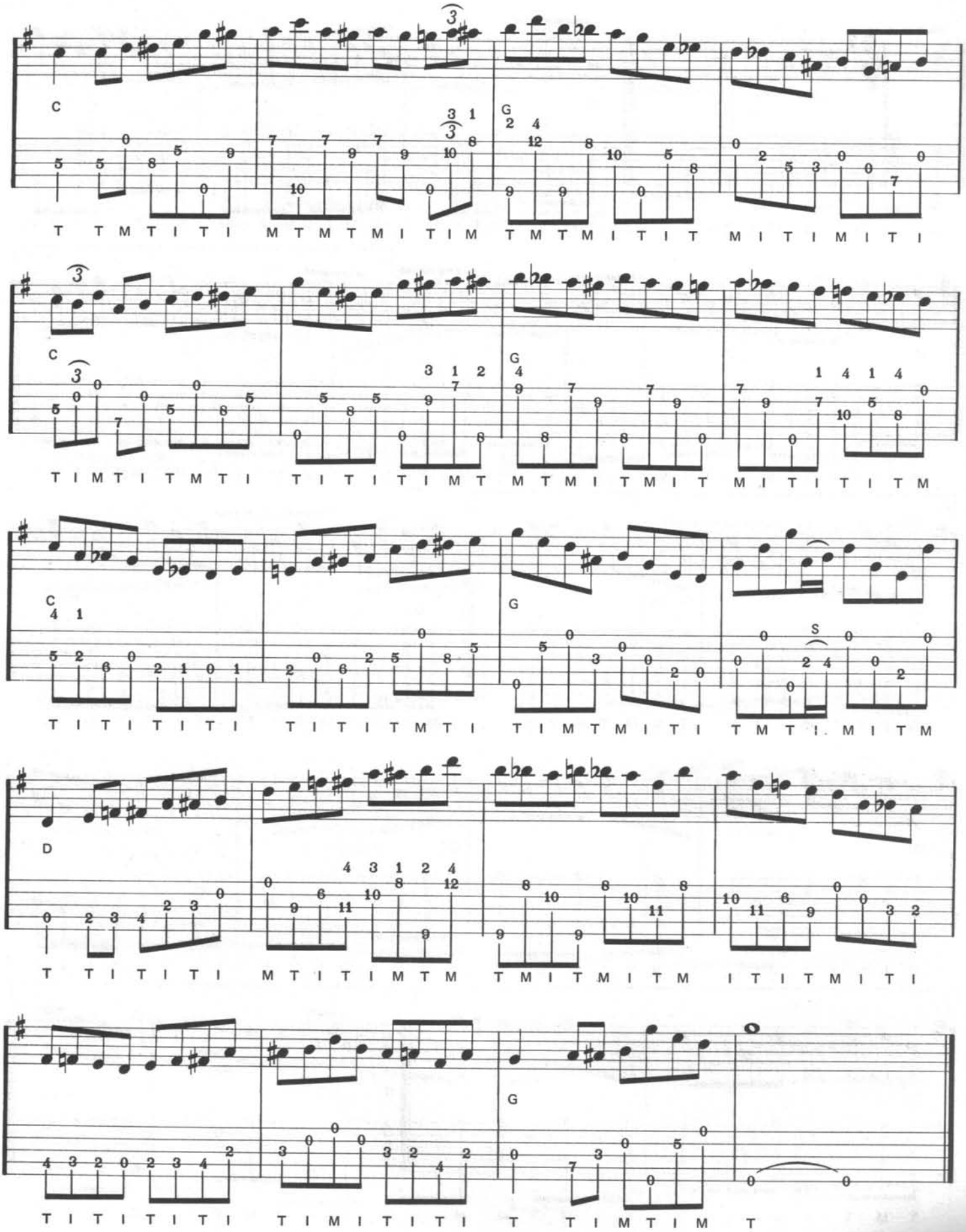
C
G
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D
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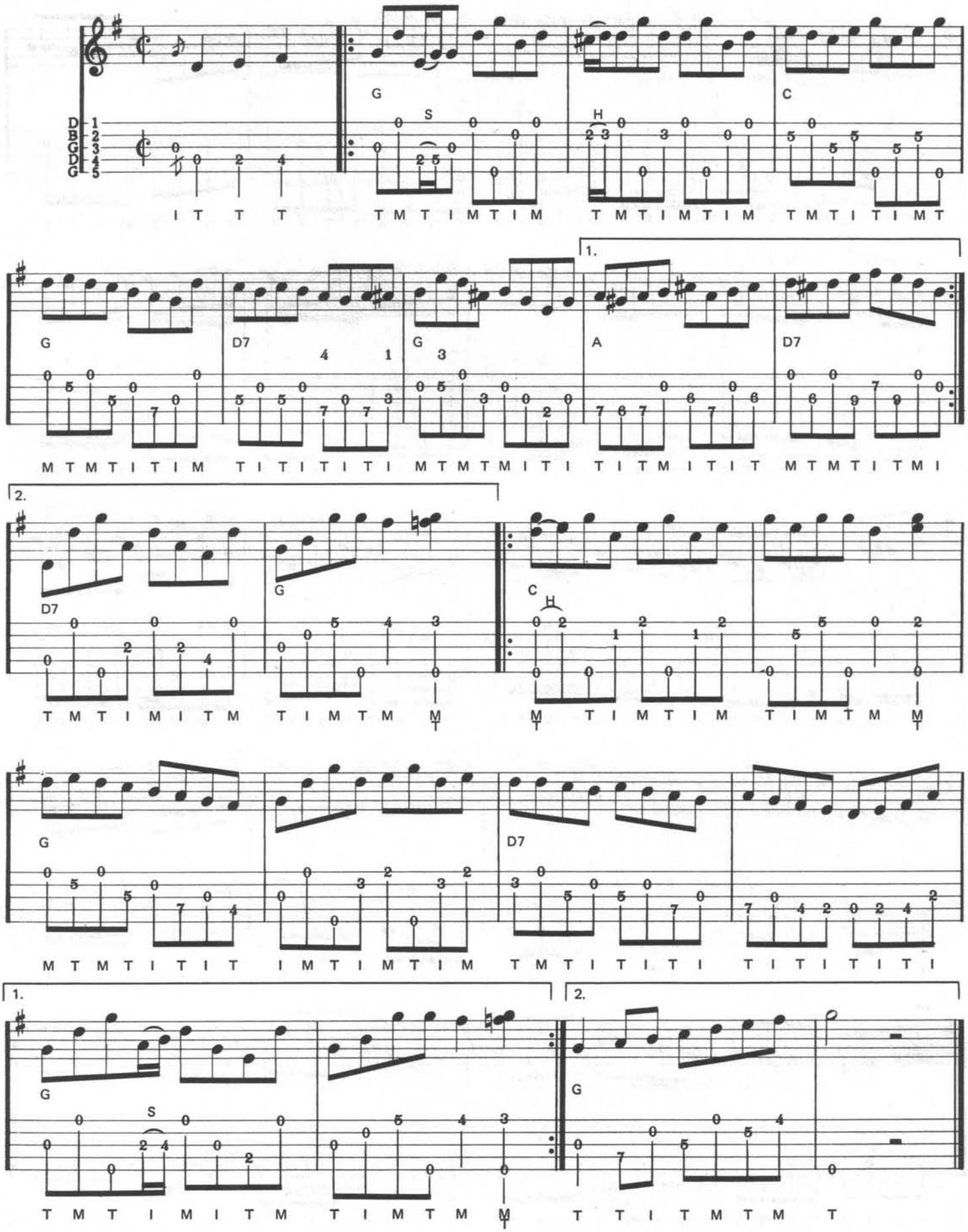
Redwing

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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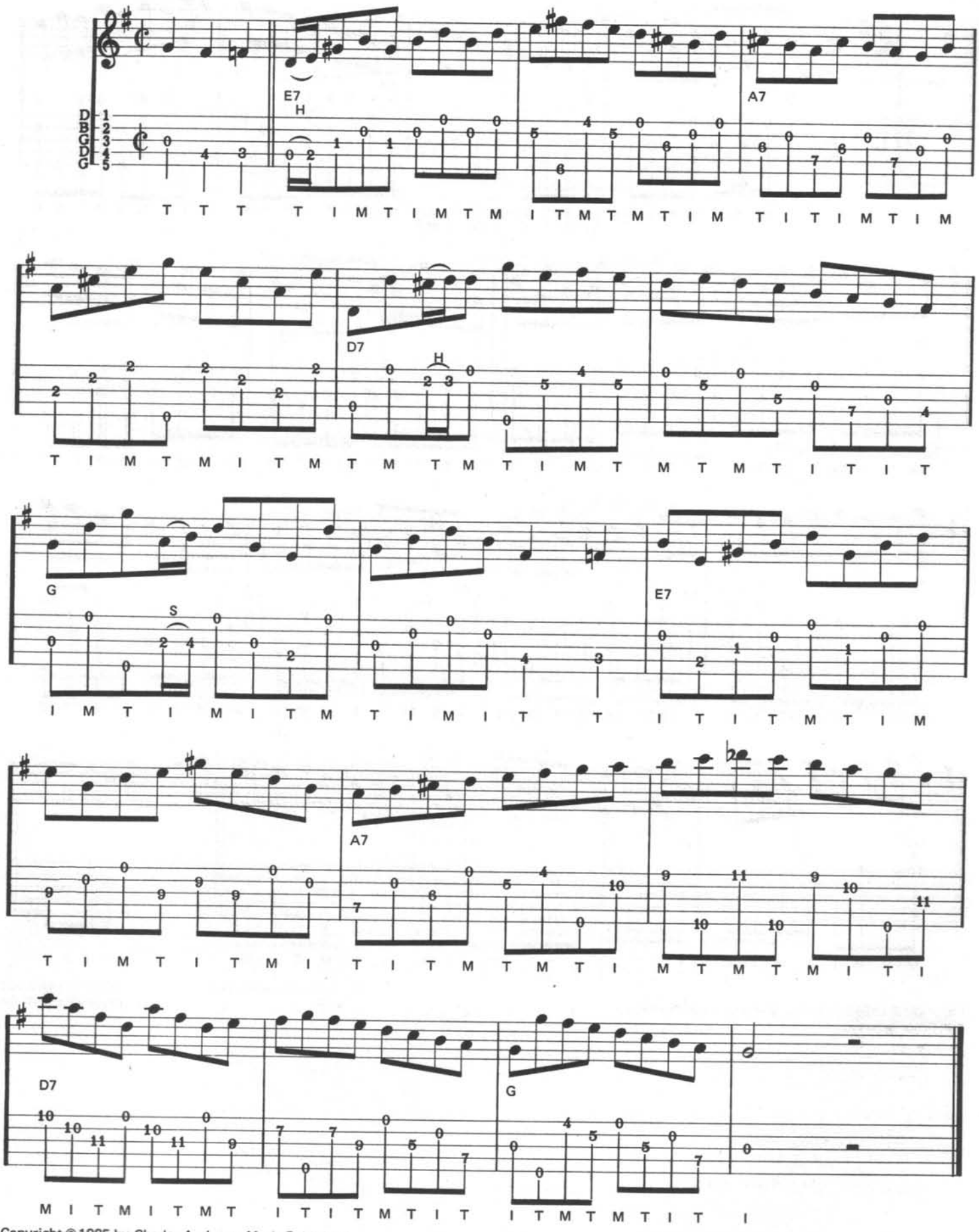
Don't Let Your Deal Go Down

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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Salty Dog

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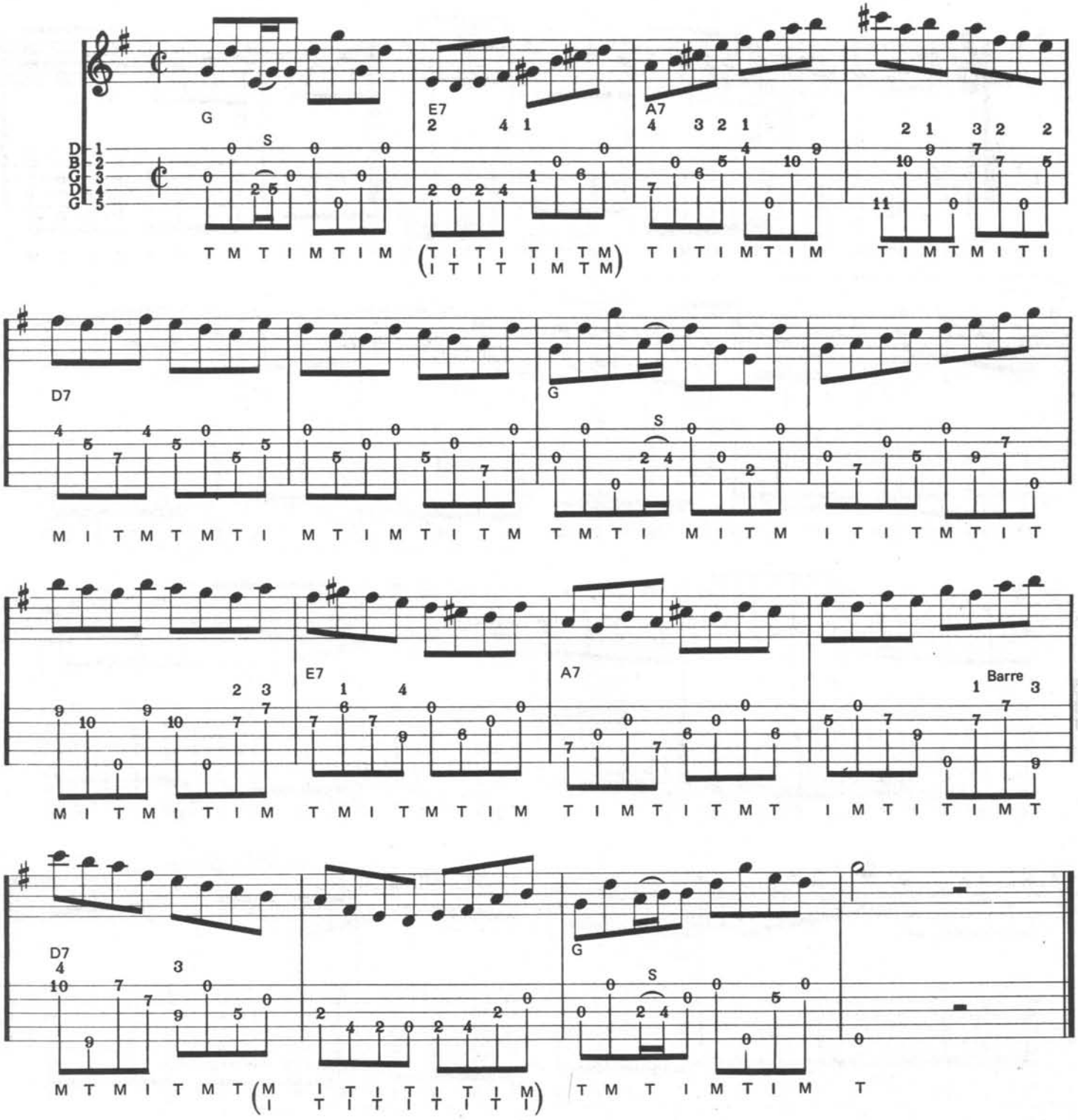

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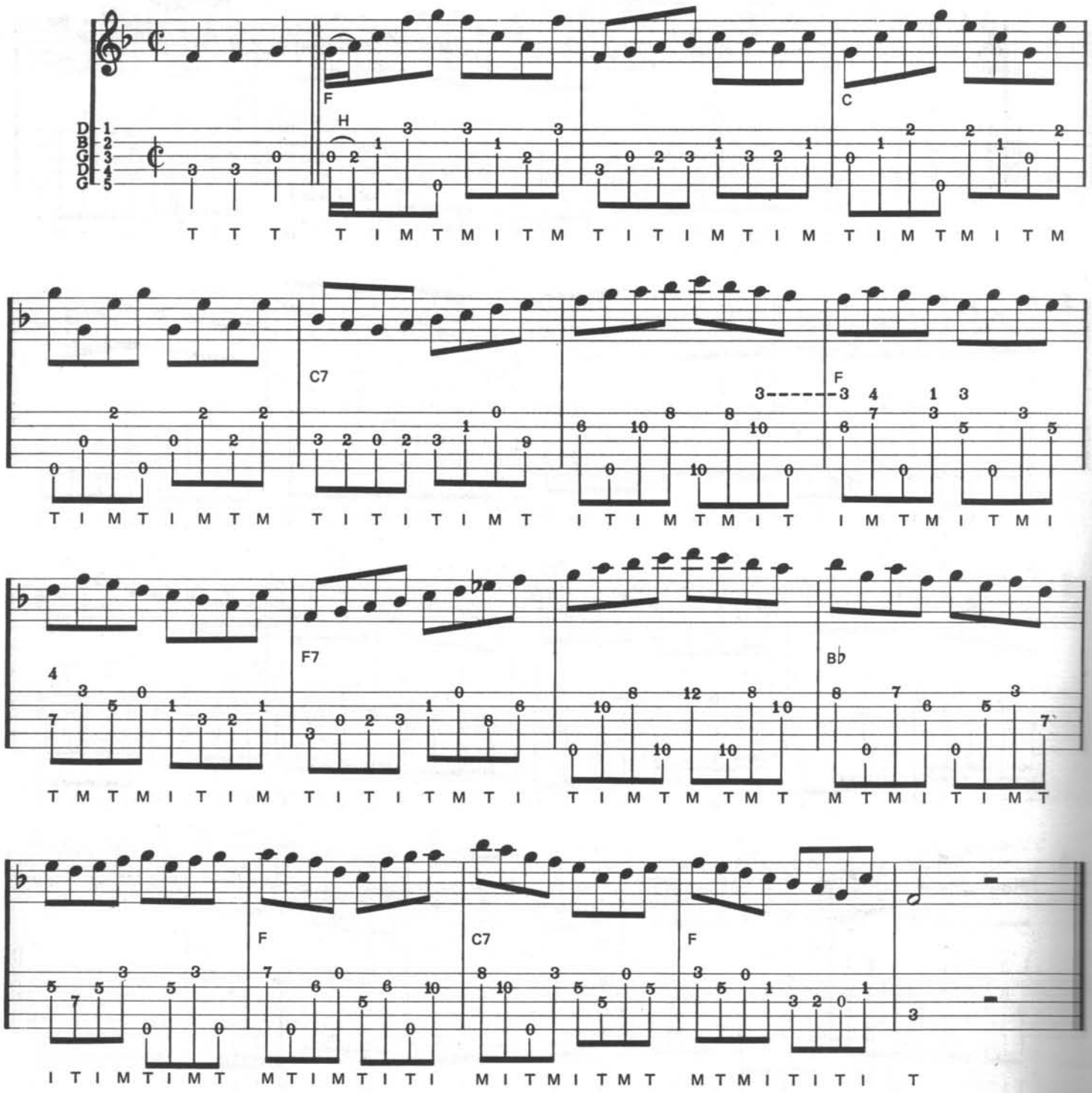
Banks of the Ohio

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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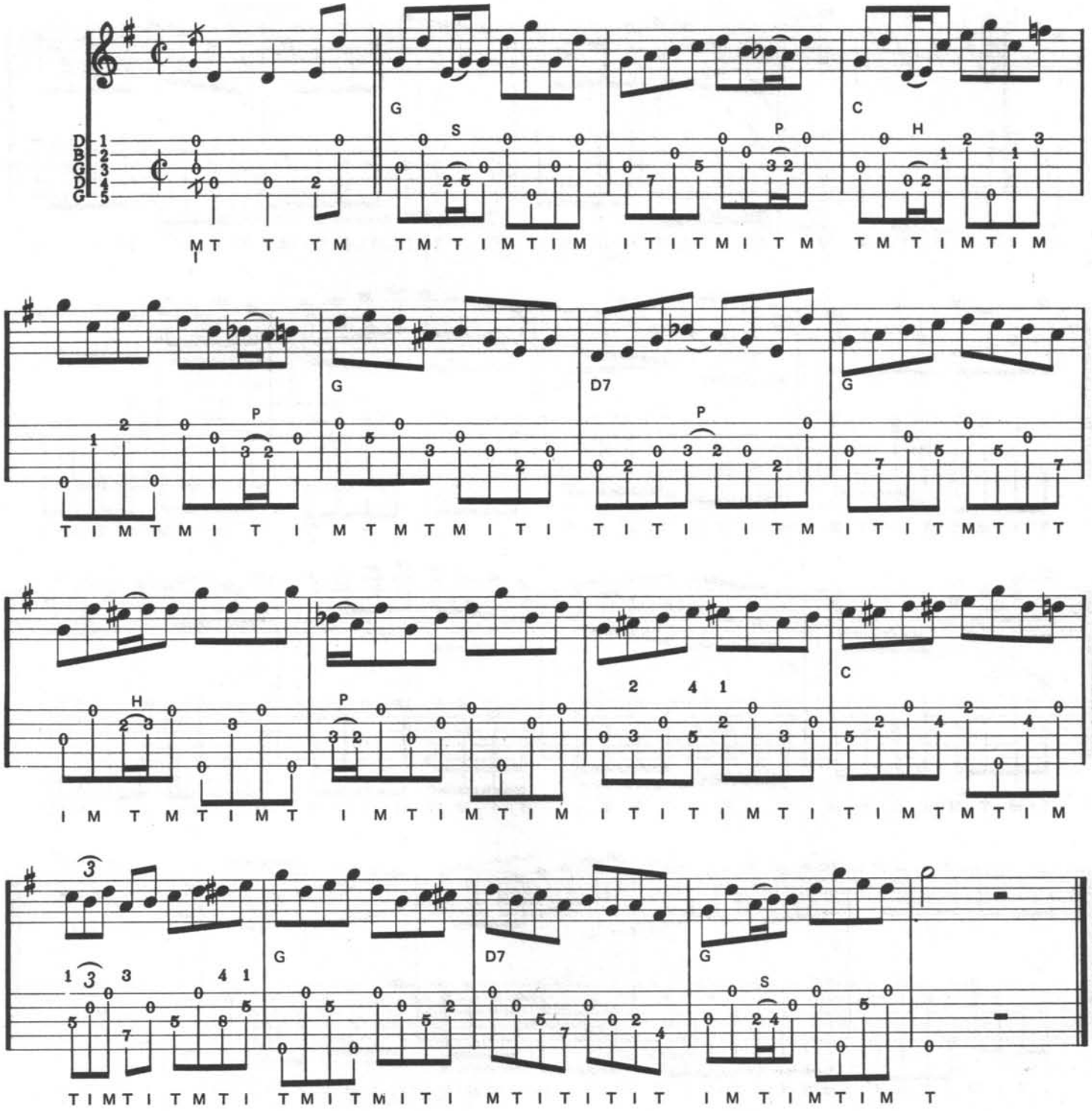
Nine Pound Hammer

Arranged by Bill Knopf



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Way Downtown (Late Last Night)

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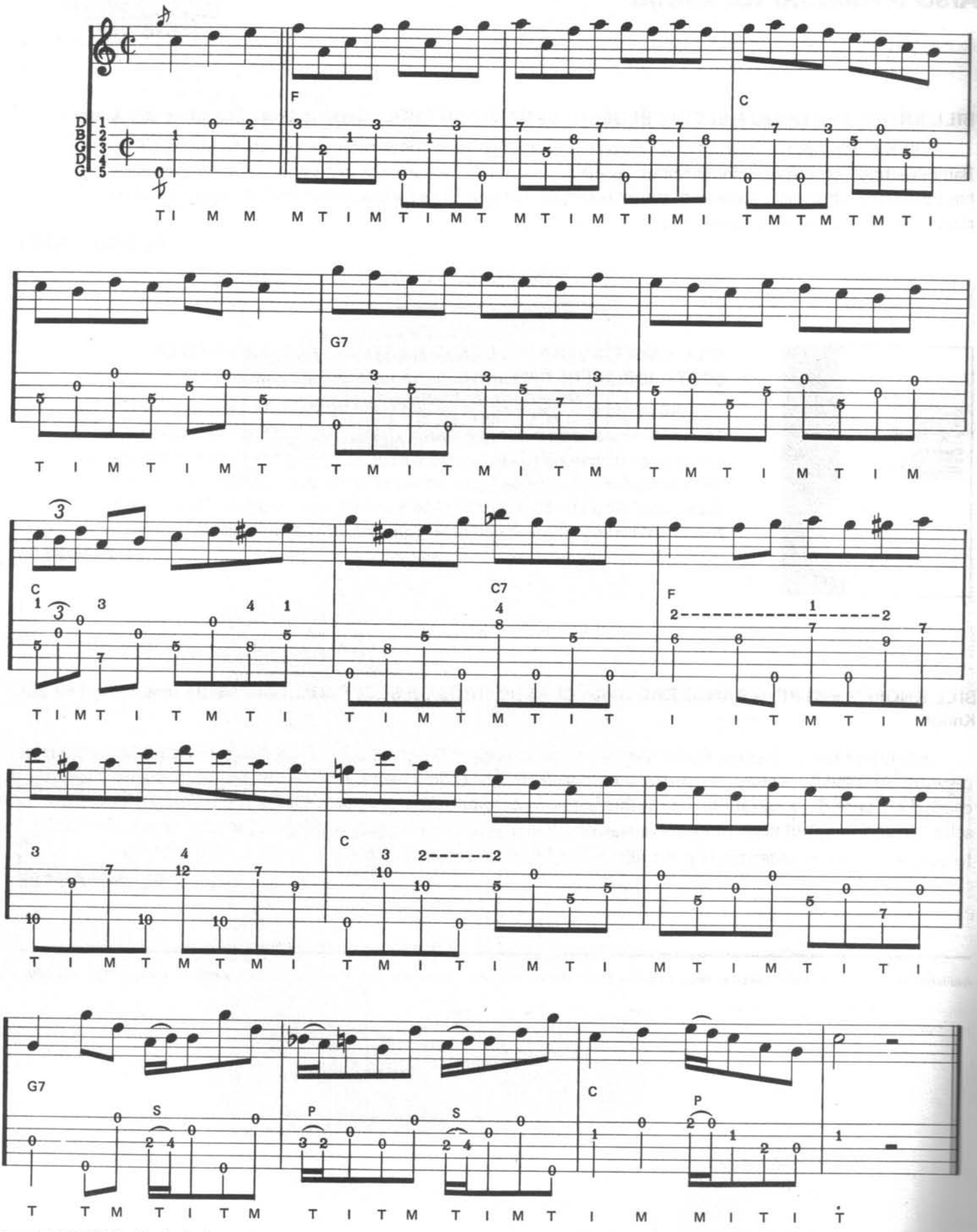

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