I M P R O V I S A T I O N

A METHOD LEADING TO FREEDOM AT THE PIANO

By

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Forward

Back in 1975 I was asked to teach "Brugsklaver" ("User piano") at the Conservatory in Odense, Denmark. The goal was to give the students an approach to accompanying and playing piano from a "lead sheet," that is a melody line with chord symbols above it. I said 'yes' and from that point on began a process ending in the book you have in your hands.

I had played in bands since high school—Dixieland, Jazz, and dance music. I could "take a solo" and even play satisfying solo piano on most popular tunes. But my education had been typical: I learned to decipher the written page, what one usually calls "classical piano." I had taught such at a community college for four years before moving to Denmark. But I had usually shied away from the teaching of "popular" piano as it was called in those days. I approached the challenge with fear and trembling. The concepts contained herein developed slowly and by trial and error. My gratitude goes out to the many students who have unwittingly served as my 'guinea pigs' underway. Truly, I have learned from them, while they from me.

This book contains concepts and methodology which will give you a satisfying, and liberating freedom at the piano. Apply its contents with diligence and patience, and a new world will open to you. You will be able to 'realize' a lead sheet. That is, you will be able to sit down and play, basically at sight, a complete arrangement at the piano, with enough bass, enough melody, and enough fill in between the two. You will be able to make small variations in the melody, add bass fills here and there, substitute harmonies to give a fresh sound, expand the often boring harmonies of the ending, and more. You will control a slew of 'accompaniment types,' which, in time, you will be able to fuse into your own style. Also in time, you will find yourself able to 'play by ear,' that is to sound out melodies you have heard on recordings, to find the chords which fit them, and to make your own piano version of them. Moreover you will assimilate gradually a theoretical knowledge which will give you insight and make it possible to communicate intelligently with serious musicians.

And, I add, have a lot of fun in the process.

I'm arranging the book in an order which should get you having fun at the piano immediately. The approach will not alienate college level music majors. But the level is also for those who have had only 2-3 years of piano

lessons. Generally lessons will begin with a theoretical topic, continue with discussion and suggested exercises, and conclude with a piece to be written and played, making use of the lesson's new material. Sometimes additional copies of the piece, in various states of completion, are required from the collection at the back of the book. But I advise you, the student, to follow my suggestions for exercises throughout. Everything must be tried on the piano. Listen critically to the sounds you are making. Actually *learn* the arrangements you make. This means *practice* them. Memorize some of them and play while focusing your eyes *on your hands* in action.

Begin with me now an ear-opening journey in self-discovery. Best wishes.

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Classical versus Popular: Significant Differences

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Classical versus Popular: Significant Differences

"Do you improvise?" is a typical question most of us pianists are confronted with at one time or another. I have concluded that what the questioner usually means is, "Can you play something that sounds half-way decent, without being dependent on written music?" "Can you play by ear?" is another one of these questions which seems to mean the same: can you make music without reading music. People, most musicians included, seem to stand in awe of the person who can "just sit down and play something."

And no wonder. Most—if not all—of our training in piano lessons, aims towards realization of precisely the information notated on the page. Indeed, books have been devoted to the interpretation of these written symbols—notes, ornaments, phrases, slurs, dynamic markings, rhythmic values—throughout history. Scholars spend much time and energy in the pursuit of accurate and authentic understanding of notation from various historical periods. Likewise, the serious pianist will spend years developing a technique capable of precisely reproducing what is on the page.

LEARNING & PLAYING MUSIC WHICH IS FULLY NOTATED

The chain of events of interpreting and playing a piece of written music—which I hereafter will refer to as "reading music," or "playing fully notated music"--might be summarized by the following sequence of steps.

1. Eyes on the page register visual impulses on the retina.
2. Interpret the information according to rules previously learned.
3. Make decisions about which finger/arm/body movements, degree of force, internal hand (finger to finger) stretches, and more.
4. Send nerve impulses, at the appropriate time, and in the proper order to the limbs chosen.

If the written page is fully notated, as in 'classical' music, then an immense amount of interpretation is involved, and is of the following sorts:

1. What? Is the information about a single note or several notes? Does it involve a pedal?

2. Where? What is the location of the notes? This isinvolves deciphering the treble and bass clef, and rules for finding corresponding locations on the keyboard. One learns the lines and spaces, and also octave symbols.

3. How? One is here concerned with indications regarding *manner* of playing: articulation (staccato dots, slur marks, accent marks) and dynamics (*ff, pp,* etc.)

4. When? Here one learns to interpret the meter symbols (4/4, ¾, etc.) and also the symbols for notes of differing rhythmic values—quarter notes, eighth notes, ties, dots after notes, etc. Also in this category are Italian words such as *ritardando, accelerando, morendo,* etc.

Becoming accomplished at making music from a fully notated page, whether the style be classical, jazz, musicals, country, or other, is a formidable task. Once one has learned to decipher the "code," the rules of notation, the job of carrying out the information on the page remains. Piano lessons weekly, and for 6-10 years, are not uncommon, to prepare adequately for performance of compositions by Beethoven, Bach, and the like.

LEARNING AND PLAYING MUSIC FROM A LEAD SHEET

When we consider, on the other hand, the sort of playing which is the subject of this book, which I have sub-titled "achieving freedom at the piano," the undertaking is significantly less intricate.

For one thing, the amount of information represented in a "lead sheet," is greatly reduced. Following the format above, our "interpretation" assignment involves:

1. What? Now, instead of several notes prescribed for the RH, and several for the LH, we find only two indications: First, a melody, made up of only one note at a time. Second, a chord symbol, representing usually a 3 or 4 note chord, *whose contents* one has learned previous to reading the page, and *whose location* is not predetermined or specified.

2. Where? Location of the melody notes is exponentially easier, since we are concerned with a single note, as opposed to many. Moreover, one has a *choice*, namely as to which octave of the instrument. And location of the chord is a bit of a misnomer, since one will use the contents to choose and administer the texture of the music, which

involves, simply stated, *enough bass* and *enough fill.* Once again here, the element of *choice* is introduced.

3. How? Once again, the "how" of the visual interpretation is a misnomer: There will be no indications in the lead-sheet of articulations, dynamics, or (usually) phrasing. The element of *choice and decision* resides with the pianist.

4. When? Here, the pianist is actually again in charge. EVEN THOUGH the rhythm of the melody is indicated, traditionally the pianist is only expected to *generally* follow the rhythmic indications. Once one has learned the rhythms indicated, one is free to "phrase" (assign rhythms) pretty much as one prefers. One is, however, required to follow the bar structure, and beat, precisely. Most often, one will have actually "learned" the timing of the melody from his favorite artist's recording, and will play only an approximation of the notated rhythms!

The most important and a central point I want to make is: Th task of playing of music from a lead-sheet, as compared to playing of music from a fully-notated piece of music, ***is significantly easier.***.

A major difference is the fact that one *quickly outgrows the need to focus the eyes on the page.* This is because the information represented is so reduced, and abbreviated.

A second difference is that one is usually playing a piece one has heard before, and probably loves—this often being the reason for a particular choice of song. When you love a song, you are motivated, and enjoy what you're hearing. And when you enjoy, you learn more rapidly.

And third, because the pianist is now the *decider,* not the *translator.* Being the decider is in part being the *creator¸* and as such, one taps into areas of his brain which have probably remained untouched in prior musical experience with note-reading.

Yet another difference has to do with one's relationship to the instrument. In the case of reading music, the fact that one's eyes are for the most part *cemented to the page*, means that most of our awareness of the keyboard is through our *sense of touch.* This being the case, we are less likely to move

our body freely, in order to avoid losing our sense of location (and play mistakes). This fact alone has a host of consequences. We are likely to create muscle spasms, especially in the shoulders and back which are attempting to remain motionless. With less visual orientation, we naturally play carefully, again to avoid risking errors, and our muscles remain somewhat on guard--the opposite of free…

Of course, I exaggerate. More accurately we DO use our eyes for orientation. Most trained musicians have experienced the eternal compromise between keeping track of our place in the music (on the page) and keeping track of our place on the keys. Our eyes dart back and forth, between our spot on the page, and our location on the keys, trying to maintain an awareness of <u>where we are</u> , both in following the written notes, and playing the corresponding keys (in the right way at the right time). Indeed, some teachers require their students to NEVER look down. Others want their students to memorize the music as soon as possible, in order ALWAYS to look down, following their hands on the keys.

My opinion is that ideally *one should look at what one is <u>doing</u>*--NOT at the instruction book (the written page). After all, the tennis player looks at the net, and the ball, and the court; football players follow the ball, the other players, the yard markings; hockey players follow the puck, and the other players—all of these performers have long since memorized the rules, and relate to the situation at hand. Free to watch what we are doing, we can be *totally present*, and the benefits are many. Aside from greater accuracy, our enjoyment is fuller, and opportunity for creativity richer.

Music is one of the few performing sports (along with theater and poetry reading) where we attempt to duplicate something previously created—sometimes centuries earlier. In these situations the written page is a necessary evil. The performer should, however, commit to memory the work to be enjoyed *as soon as possible*, precisely in order to enable the freedom which I speak of in the title to this book—a freedom which is infinitely more accessible when one plays from the starting point of a lead sheet.

l e s s o n 1

Chord Construction

Let's get started by learning how to make a chord on the piano. The following procedure requires no theoretical knowledge. It requires that you know the names of the notes (keys on the piano), that you can count, and that you are not missing any fingers on your LH. I have developed this procedure after years of teaching, both children and adults, and promise you it is both simple and effective. To construct a chord from the Chord Recipes table:

1. Check the formula for the desired chord type in the table and repeat the
numbers out loud: For example, for a m7 chord, you would say, "3 – 4 – 3."
2. Depress the LH 5th finger on the root of the chord (for an Fm7, on an F).
3. Using the RH pointer finger (nr. 2), counting out loud upwards from the F, sound each successive note, saying: "1" (F#), "2" (G), "3" (Ab). We stop here since "3" was the first number of our recipe in (1.) above.
4. "Remember" this last note (Ab) by depressing it with the LH 3rd finger.
5. Continue in like fashion from the Ab upwards fo find C ("4"), remembering by depressing with the LH 2nd finger, and Eb ("3") which you depress with the thumb.
6. Now the fingers of your left hand will be on an Fm7: F-Ab-C-Eb.

Chord Recipes:

LIVE CHORDS →		DEAD CHORDS ↓	
C7	_ 4 _ 3 _ 3 _	**C** (major)	_ 4 _ 3 _
Cm7	_ 3 _ 4 _ 3 _	**Cm** (minor)	_ 3 _ 4 _
C9	_ 4 _ 3 _ 3 _ 4 _	**C△**(maj. 7)	_ 4 _ 3 _ 4 _
Cm9	_ 3 _ 4 _ 3 _ 4 _	**C△9** (maj. 9)	_ 4 _ 3 _ 4 _ 3 _
C +	_ 4 _ 4 _	**C6**	_ 4 _ 3 _ 2 _
Co (dim.)	_ 3 _ 3 _ 3 _	**Cm6**	_ 3 _ 4 _ 2 _
C∅ (m7b5)	_ 3 _ 3 _ 4 _	**Cm△**	_ 3 _ 4 _ 4 _

Exercise: Construct the following chords according to the instructions above, and write your results (IN PENCIL) on the blanks. (Check your answers in the Glossary 1)

1. Fm7 F Ab C Eb

2. Gm7 ___ ___ ___ ___

3. E7 ___ ___ ___ ___

4. Cmaj7 ___ ___ ___ ___

5. Gm9 ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

6. Adim ___ ___ ___ ___

"Spelling" the Chord Correctly:

The 4-NOTE chords will be one of the following PROTOTYPES. The four letters in each prototype are called: Root – 3rd – 5th – 7th:

CEGB DFAC EGBD FACE GBDF ACEG BDFA

After you have found the right notes (on the piano) for the chord, choose the correct prototype above and "adapt" it by adding #'s or b's. Major, minor & augmented chords will be just the first 3 letters of the prototype; 9ths, (11ths, 13ths) require adding an additional letter from the series:

C E G B D F A

There are a few exceptions to the "prototype" rule above, namely in the case of the "sus" chord, and the "add T" chord (where T is a number). These are summarized in the "Alterations" table, later in this lesson.

Live Chords & Dead Chords

As is also indicated in the recipe table, chords fall into TWO general classifications: LIVE CHORDS and DEAD CHORDS, also called "tension chords" and "relaxation chords." A tension chord will seem to need to be followed—either by another tension chord, or by a relaxation chord. Indeed, a "Chord Progression" (series of chords) often consists of several

live chords interrupted by a dead chord, then followed by several more live chords, then a dead chord, and so on, until the final chord of the piece, which (understandably) is a dead chord. Perhaps you have heard the story about Beethoven's servant, who would awaken him each morning by playing only a 7^{th} chord on the piano. Beethoven simply couldn't remain in bed, but hustled down the stairs to play a relaxation chord which would resolve the tensions of the chord played by the servant!

Hereafter, a live chord's tension will be denoted by a horizontal arrow (→), and a dead chord's relaxed quality, by a vertical arrow (↓).

Alterations

In addition to the fairly basic chord types presented in the Recipe Table, we occasionally encounter "altered" versions of these chords, most often the 7^{th} chords, but also others. Alterations are changes performed on one of the chord members, most commonly on the 5^{th}, sometimes the 9^{th}. Usually it is a question of *raising* the member—indicated by a + or a # sign—or *lowering* the member—indicated by a - or a b sign.

These, and other alterations, are summarized in the following table:

ALTERATIONS:

sus – replace chord's 3rd with the 4th; example: **C7sus – C F G Bb**

#T, +T – raise tone (T) a half step; example: **C7#9 – C E G Bb D#**

bT, –T – lower tone (T) a half step; example: **C7b9 – C E G Bb Db**

+ – raise 5th of chord a half step; example: **C7+ – C E G# Bb**

add T – add tone based on step (T) to chord; example: **C add 9 – C E G D**

Examples:

C7#5 = CEG#Bb C7b5 = CEGbBb C7b9 = CEGBbDb

Exercise:

Fill in the blanks with the correct notes for the following chords; Check your answers in Glossary 1 at the end of this book.

A7#5 = _____ Bbm7-5 = _____ Abadd2 = _____ Gsus = ____

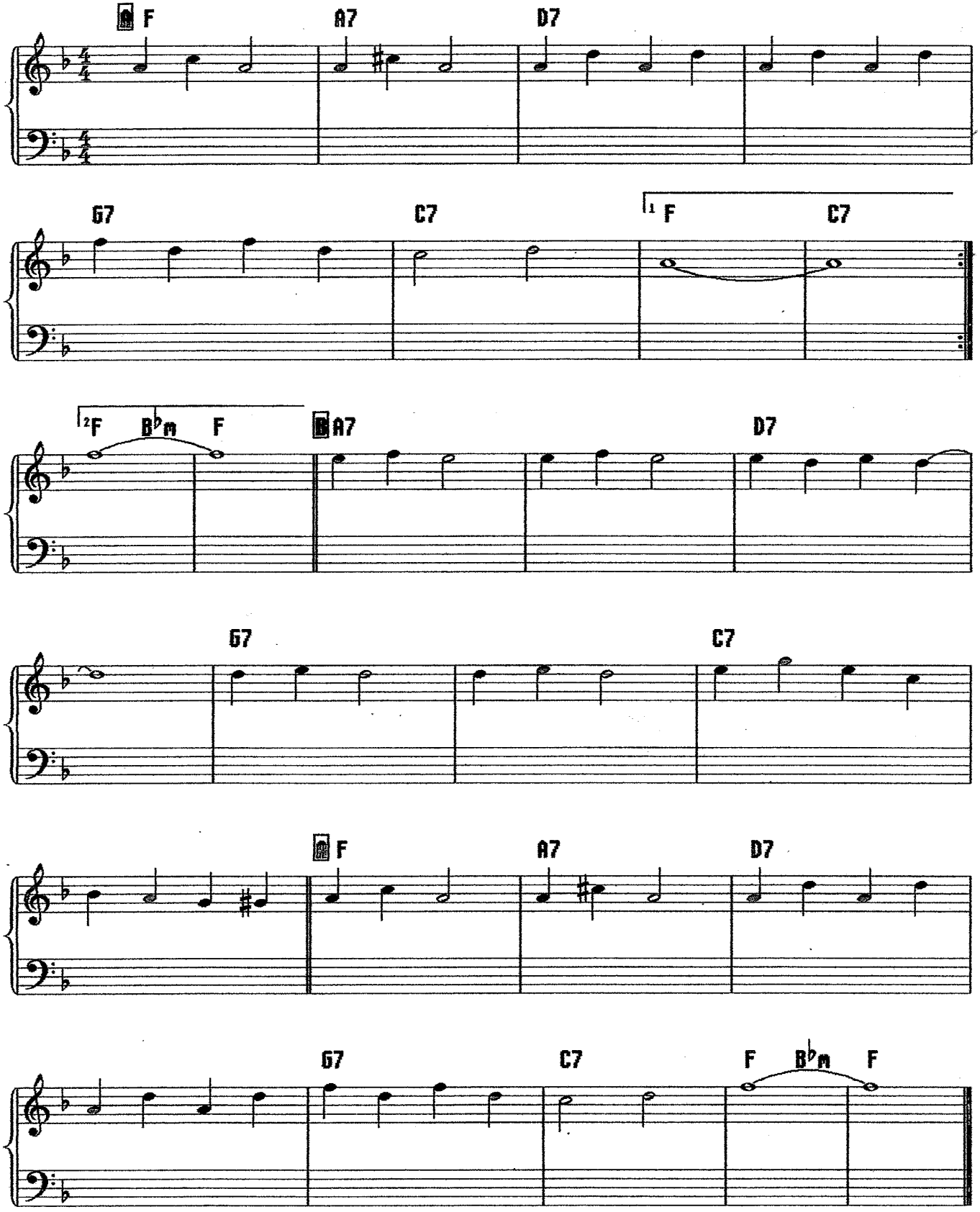
F9-9 = _____ C7b9 = _____ Bm7b5 = _____ F△#5 = _____

Exercise:
Without referring to the chord recipe table, construct the following chords and listen critically to each, guessing whether the chord is a live chord (needs to be followed) or a dead chord (complacent, could be used at the end of a piece.) Write a ✓in the proper column. Then write the proper symbol for the chord in the "chord" column, followed by the correct spelling in the "notes" column. When finished, compare the recipes to the table and correct your answers.

RECIPE	LIVE	DEAD	CHORD	NOTES
3-4-3	____	____	_____	_____
4-3-3	____	____	_____	_____
4-3-4	____	____	_____	_____
4-3	____	____	_____	_____
3-4	____	____	_____	_____
4-4	____	____	_____	_____
4-4-2	____	____	_____	_____

Exercise:
(Five Foot Two) Let's put some of this knowledge into application in the following tune by Ray Henderson from the time of the Charleston dance. Below is the lead sheet—melody line and chord symbols. Work out a fingering for the RH and write it in. Use pencil for all your work. Every chord symbol requires a corresponding LH chord of the proper rhythmic value—usually a whole note. Using the Chord Recipe table, write the chord notes in the bass clef, placing them such that the highest and lowest note fall in the area an octave and a half from middle C downwards. When you're done, check your work in Glossary 1. Alter your version in accordance, and learn to play the piece perfectly, with a medium speed on the metronome.

Five Foot Two



LESSON 7

A MYSTERY! ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE

I would like to share with you now a mysterious number of *coincidences* I have discovered in connection with the song, All The Things You Are, by Jerome Kern (1939). For this discussion, and the following analyses, refer to Ex. 1 at the end of this lesson.

We saw in the last lesson how the 3rd of the chord often occurred in the melody. Here is an analysis of the successive melody tones in 4-bar segments, showing the role of the melodic note, as a member of the chord of the moment (melodic role). The preponderance of thirds is striking:

3 3 7 3 3 3 3 7 3 7

3 3 3 3 7 3 7 3

3 3 7 3 3 3 3 7 3 7

3 3 3 3 7 1 b9 1 7 3 5 1 5

` 4 3 3 7 1 7 3 5 1 3

4 3 3 7 1 7 3 #5

3 3 7 3 3 3 3 7 3 7

3 3 3 3 9 1 3 3 3 2 3 9 1

3 3 5 7 9 3 1

I have added up the time-value represented by the third in the melody, and got 86 + 2/3 beats. Remember, as I discuss elsewhere ("Tunes, Tones, and Tension"}, the 'flavor' of the third is sweet, lyrical, and pleasingly interesting. Considering the total of beats (144) in the piece, and the percentage of time devoted to the third in the melody (60%+), it is not surprising that most find this piece very pleasant.

As it turns out, the number "3" turns up in many other interesting ways.

Consider for example, the succession of keys visited in the course of 36 measures:

BARS	KEY	RELATION
1-5	Ab	Main key
6-8	C	**3rd** up
9-13	Eb	**m3rd** up
14-20	G	**3rd** up
21-23	E	**3rd** down
24	C (w.t.) or Fm	**3rd** down

25-29	Ab	**3rd** down
30	Cb	**m3rd** up
31-32	Bb	m**2nd** down
33-36	Ab	**2nd** down

Other interesting relationships are present. The total number of measures in the piece is unusual: 36. Most standards from this era contain 32 measures. "36" is made up of a 3 and a 6. Added the numbers give 9 (the cupe of 3). Subtracted, the numbers also give 3. 36 can also be represented as the square of 3 plus the cube of 3: (9 + 27 = 36).

Notice also the title: "All The Things You Are," containing 18 letters: 3 + 3 + 6 + 3 + 3! And 1 + 8 = 9…

And, by the way, the song was listed as copyrighted in 1939…

Enough numerology! Perhaps you can discover other relationships involving the number '3' in this composition.

Let us now consider a few more relationships which may have played a role in making this tune creative, and popular.

A most curious happening occurs in the measure just preceding the return of the A section after the bridge—typically the most poignant harmony of a piece in the AABA form Here the chord C7+, consisting of C-E-G#-Bb, brings off a little miracle in its short duration of 4 beats. At this point we have been in the key of E and need to return to Ab, seven steps away following the flow of the circle of fifths. A modulation that distant is difficult to bring about in several bars, much less in four beats with one chord!! Kern chooses a chord from the whole tone scale, which is known for its lack of a sense of tonic. The chord contains two notes from the key of E (E & G#) and two from the key of Ab (C & Bb). Thus equal numbers of notes from each of our keys are present in a chord which itself leads by 5^{th} to the first chord of the new key (Fm7). That the G# of the chord is enharmonically Ab, our tonic, and also the first melody note of the new key, helps cement the feeling of correctness once we have entered bar 25.

Another analytical possibility for this chord, is as a member of the key of Fminor, since all of its note content are members of that key. C (fifth), E (raised seventh), G# (enharmonically Ab, third of the key), and Bb (fourth). This analysis portrays the C+7 chord as the dominant 7^{th}, with augmented 5^{th}, leading to a tonic, which here, is altered to a tonic seventh chord, this time with lowered (natural) seventh. Simultaneously this Fm7 chord is a member of the approaching key (Ab), as a vi7 chord. I prefer the "whole tone" analysis.

Listen carefully to the harmonic tensions as you play from bar 21 to 29. Do you feel that the modulation via C7+ is smooth and convincing?

Unusual also is the pattern and duration of the keys visited. Typically, key area durations are of 2 or 4 measures in length. In "All The Things You Are," this tendency is avoided, until the final 6 measures of the piece. The table below lists the durations of keys visited:
:

	Key	Duration
`	Ab	5 bars
	C	3 bars
	Eb	5 bars
	G	7 bars
	E	3 bars
	C whole tone	1 bar
	Ab	5 bars
	Cb	1 bar
	Bb	2 bars
	Ab	4 bars

This highly unusual pattern of key changes and durations is an extremely unusual occurrence in this type of music, as far as I can ascertain. Notice, moreover, the first four keys represented: Ab – C – Eb – G. This combination of tones spells an Abmaj7—our tonic dead chord!

Study of the melody reveals a surprising, but creative simplicity. In the A section, aside from an occasional lonely *higher* note (represented here with an "*"), the melody itself descends by steps, each 'level' lasting for two measures: Ab * Ab - G * G - F * F – E – Eb * Eb – D * D – C * C – B..

After the leaping pickups into the bridge, the melody once again outlines a descending series of steps: D – C * C - B * B – A * A - G#, interspersed with distant, this time *lower*, tones at the indicated "*." Indeed an unusual and yet consistent methodology, yet employed differently in the B section than the A section: lower instead of higher.

An analysis of the harmonies in the piece, and the harmonic connections as well, reveals once again surprising simplicity. The chords themselves, with a single exception, are minor sevenths, sevenths, or major sevenths. The exception is our earlier discussed "mystic" chord, the augmented 7 (whole tone related) chord. Of these chords 21 are *live chords*, and 9 are *dead chords.*

{I should here note that my research was unable to find agreement among publishers on the harmonic progression of this piece. I have chosen a solution often employed by jazz musicians.)

The harmonic connections—in all, 21 of them—involve 20 by fifth, .and 1 by half step. (Recall that I do not consider a movement from a dead chord to the following chord as a connection).

An analysis of the location and duration of dead chords in All The Things You Are, reveals anything but simplicity or predictability. The following table summarizes this information:

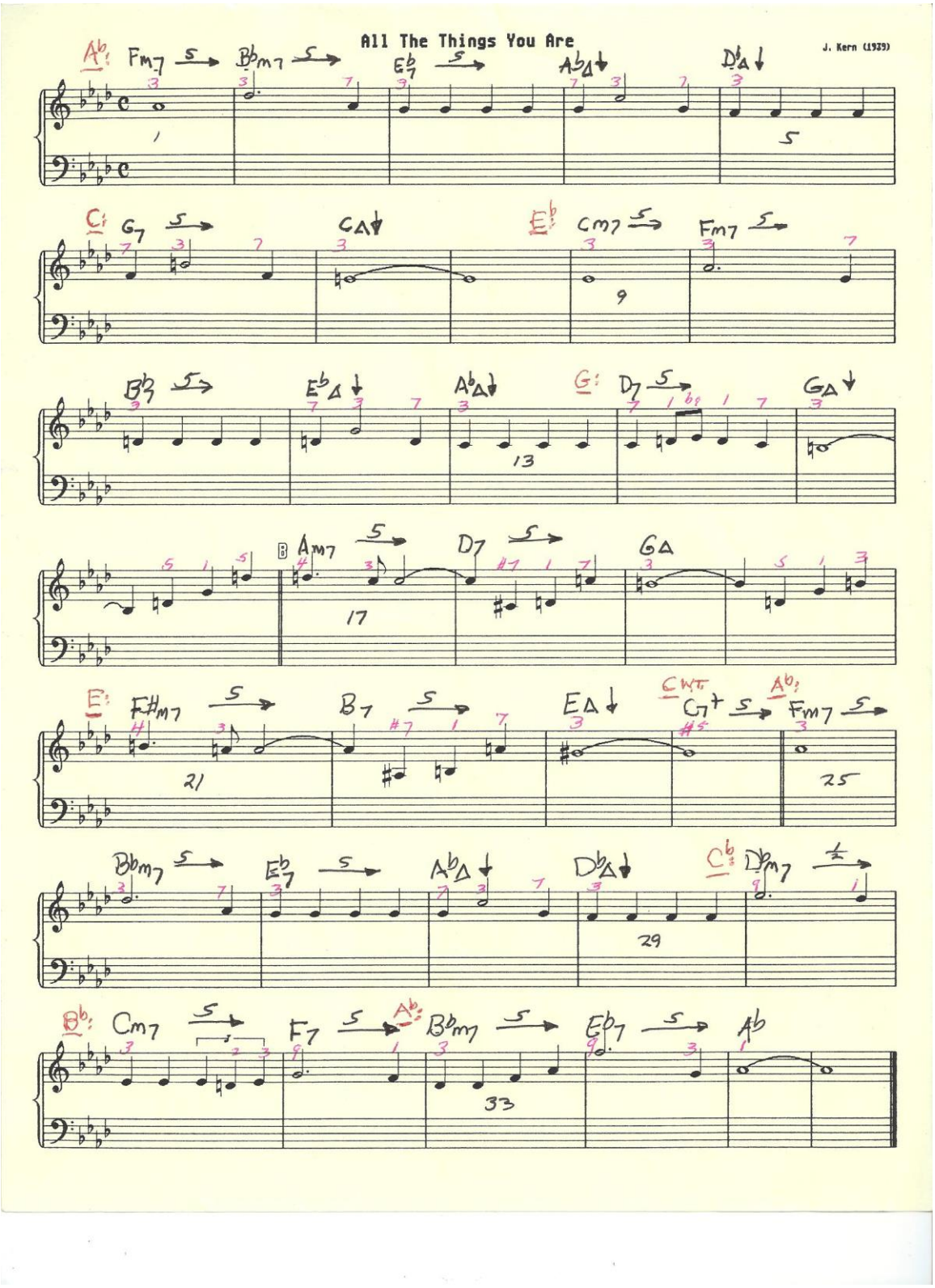
Dead Chord Measure(s)	Duration
4	1
5	1
7-8	2
12	1
13	1
15-16	2
19-20	2
23	1
28	1
29	1
35-36	2

Note that there is no simple recurring pattern of positioning of dead chords: some are in even-numbered bars, others in odd-numbered bars. Likewise as regards duration: some last a single measure, others two measures.

Finally, a word about the melodic rhythmic content. Here we find a wealth of variety, as indicated in the table below:

Note Value	Instances	Accumulative Time (Beats)
Eighth	4	2
Quarter	59	59
Quarter Note Triplets	1	2
Dotted Quarter	2	3
Half	4	8
Dotted Half	8	24
Whole	3	12
Whole + Quarter	2	10
Whole + Whole	3	24
		---
		144 (= 36 measures)

Compare this solution to our earlier analysis of “Blue Moon,” (Rodgers & Hart, 1934).



Ex. 1. All The Things You Are

Melodic Role in pink; Tonalities in Red; Horizontal arrow = live chord tension; Vertical arrow = dead chord; 5 = mvt . by 5th down; ½ = mvt. by half step down