



**ESSENTIAL
JAZZ
STANDARDS**

Solar

WITH

Gary Willis

COURSE BOOK

SCOTTSBASSLESSONS.COM



Solar

ESSENTIAL JAZZ STANDARDS

with Gary Willis



Introduction

Join Scott and Gary Willis as they guide you through the jazz standard “Solar”. Originally written by Chuck Wayne, it’s best known from an interpretation of the melody by Miles Davis on his 1954 album *Miles Davis Quintet*.

In Lesson 1, Scott and Gary analyze the structure of the chord sequences and their related key centers in the melody. In Lesson 2, explore Gary’s thought process as he deconstructs his solo playing over this must-know jazz tune.

Lesson 1 – Melody

“Solar” Chord Progression

“Solar” is short and simple, featuring a number of **ii–V–I** chord progressions across different key centers that keep the song fresh and exciting—making it a perfect piece to use as a framework to practice and improve your improvisational skills.

First, Let’s take a look at the basic melody and chord progressions in the piece:

(♩ = $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$)

Chord progression: Cm7, Gm7, C7, Fmaj7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, Ebm7, Ab7, Dbmaj7, Dm7b5, G7b9, Cm7.

Often times, it’s a good idea to look at the *end* of a piece to see if it reinforces the beginning. “Solar” is a perfect example: the last measure (Bar 12) reinforces the Cm7 in Bar 1—it’s a **ii–V–i** in C Minor:

Dm7b5 — G7b9 — Cm7.

Then at Bar 3, we start a series of **ii–V–I** progressions around three different key centers, before returning to the home key.

<u>ii–V–I</u>	<u>Key Center</u>	
Gm7 – C7 – Fmaj	F Major	Bars 3–6
Fm7 – Bb7 – Ebmaj7	Eb Major	Bars 7–9
Ebm7 – Ab7 – Dbmaj7	Db Major	Bars 10–11
Dm7b5 – G7b9 – Cm7	C Minor	Bars 12, 1–2

LESSON 1 (continued)

Finding Key Centers

Look for the **dominant** chord, then see if it gets reinforced on either side:

- Does it resolve *up* a fourth to a major chord? That's a **V–I**.
- Does it resolve *up* a fourth to a minor chord? That's a **V–i**.
- Is the chord before it a fourth *below* the dominant chord? That's the **ii** chord.
- The key center is the **I Major** or **i Minor**.

Harmonic Rhythm (4:06)

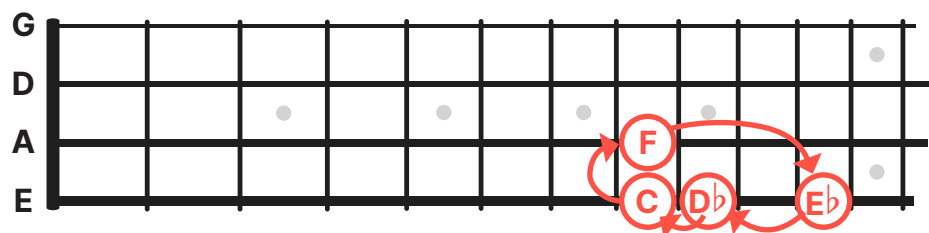
Note that the harmonic rhythm is *not* symmetric; it keeps getting “smaller” each time:

- 2 bars of a **i** chord in C Minor.
- 4 bars of a **ii–V–I** in F Major.
- 3 bars of a **ii–V–I** in E^b Major.
- 2 bars of a **ii–V–I** in D^b Major.
- 1 bar of a **ii–V** in C Minor.

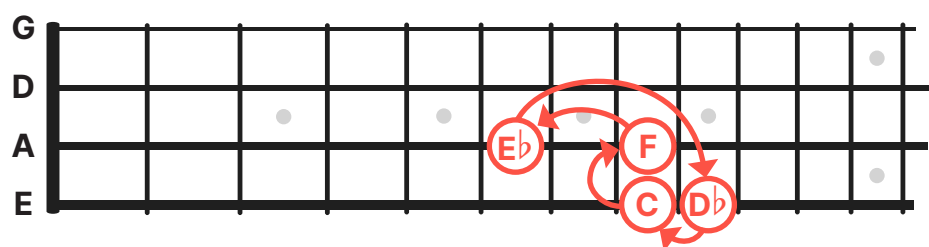
Understanding *when* these changes occur is paramount when memorizing a piece so that they do not feel uncomfortable. Learn the melody—the melody clues you in to when these changes happen.

Linking the Key Centers Together (5:17)

Economical movement of your fretting hand is always important. Notice how all four key centers are right under your fingers in one area of the fretboard:



Alternatively:



Starting fingers:

- 1 for C Minor
- 2 for F Major
- 4 for E^b Major
- 2 for D^b Major

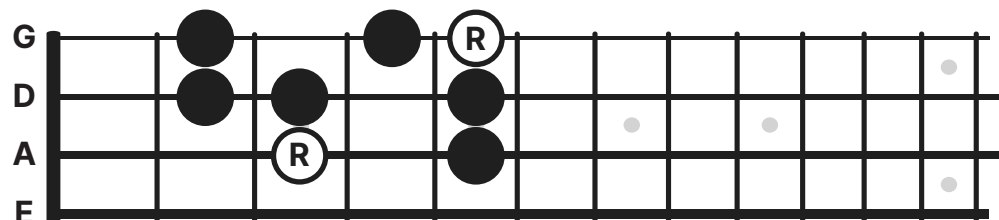
Starting fingers:

- 4 for C Minor
- 4 for F Major
- 2 for E^b Major
- 4 for D^b Major

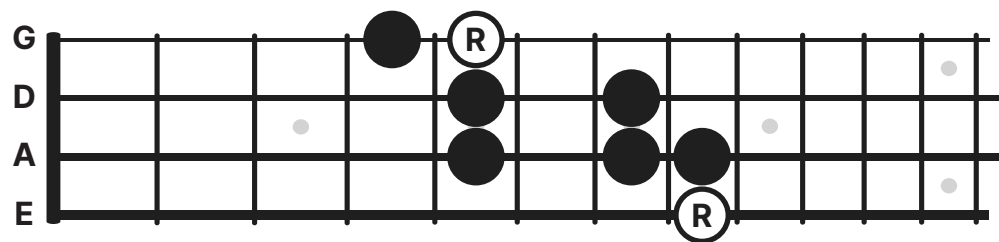
LESSON 1 (continued)

Connecting the 2nd & 4th Finger Major Scale Patterns (7:37)

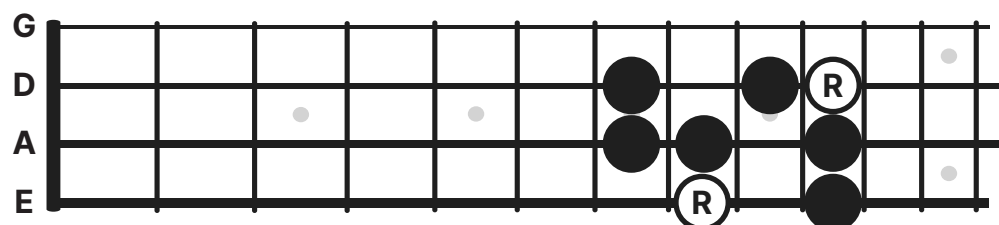
Notice how, as we move up the fretboard, we alternate between the second-finger and fourth-finger major scale patterns (using C Major as an example):



2nd-Finger Pattern



4th-Finger Pattern



2nd-Finger Pattern

This process continues up the fretboard. As noted—if you only know second-finger patterns, half the fretboard is a mystery! Knowing the fourth-finger patterns *completes the picture*.

Preparation (9:14)

When learning any piece, it's important to map out the scales you anticipate playing, and to try to stay in one position over the fretboard for economical fret-hand movement. Don't jump around to find the chords—everything is *always* available right under your fingers!

Take your time, slow things down, and play the arpeggios/chord tones first to find a position (or positions) that you're comfortable with. Have a gameplan.

Lesson 2–Improvisation

Gary's “Solar” Solo

1st Time Through

Let's take a look at Gary's improvisation/solo over the chord changes to “Solar” section by section*. The first eleven bars of the solo are just an outline of the melody. We'll pick things up at Bar 12, where we have a **ii–V** resolving back to the home key center of C Minor:

ii Dm7b5 V G7b9 i Cm7 (C Minor Key Center)

12

Bb Major Pentatonic

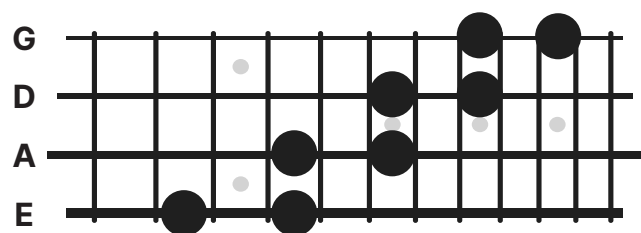
C Minor Pentatonic

T 12 13 15 17 14 16 19 17 17 15 14 15 13 13 11

A

B

Gary uses a mixed pentatonic pattern for the descending line that starts at Bar 13, using notes from both the B $\flat$ Major Pentatonic Scale and C Minor Pentatonic (E $\flat$ Major Pentatonic) Scales, moving down a fifth each time. This pattern will work over a variety of chords, and can be used in many different ways:



For example, these same notes work over an Fmaj chord—the initial D note is the 13th degree of the F scale and adds a some nice “color”.

*Please see pages 17–20 for the full transcription of Gary's solo, which appears in the Introduction video.

LESSON 2 (continued)

In Bars 15 and 16, the idea is to ascend in a similar way in the new key center of F Major over a new **ii-V**:

ii Gm7 V C7 I Fmaj7 (F Major Key Center)

15

7 R $\flat 9$ 3 5

T 13 15 13 15 16 14 17 17 21 19 17

A

B

Gary plays the $\flat 7$ and root of the Gm7, then jumps right into the C7 on the "&" of beat 3. Note how the **V** chord (C7) is modified on the way up by adding a $\flat 9$ (the $\flat 9$). Aside from that one note, it's just chord tones.

Why add the $\flat 9$? There's not much difference between C Minor and F Major, so the added $\flat 9$ helps distinguish that we're moving from one place and going to another. Here the $\flat 9$ ($\flat 9$) provides tension, and resolves itself an octave up at the major 7th of F, the C.



"That's one thing that's nice about this tune... the pentatonics are so close together—F Major, $\flat E$ Major, $\flat D$ Major—[they] blend, and mix and match really easily."

Play into a Chord

- Notice how the bass lines don't need to line up perfectly with the bar lines.
- Feel free to "push" and "pull" as you play!

LESSON 2 (continued)

Next, the idea is another descending pattern, similar to Bars 13 and 14, that goes straight to the root (F) in minor thirds:

17

Fmaj7

Fm7

m3 m3 m3

T 21 19 17 17 16 17 15 13

A

B

Then, a beautiful chromatic, bebop-ish line is played over the **ii–V–I** in E^b Major, ending on the 3rd of the E^b maj7. Again, notice where the target notes fall: the target note for the Fm7 (the $b7$, an E) gets played on the first beat of Bar 20, and the B^b root isn't played until beat 3 of the same measure:

19

Fm7

B^b7

E^b maj7

R $b7$ 3

T 13 x 12 15 13 12 15 14 13 12 11 9 10

A

B

In Bar 21 and 22, Gary plays a new idea, using two minor pentatonics going *up* a minor third, while the chords are going *down*. Then it's a straight "root" major pentatonic over the Dmaj7, playing the same basic pattern to give a sense of continuity:



"It's cool to go up when things are going down."

21

E^b maj7

Em7

A^b7

Dmaj7

G Minor Pentatonic B^b Minor Pentatonic D Major Pentatonic

T 10 13 10 12 10 13 11 13 10 13 11 13 10 13

A

B

LESSON 2 (continued)

Returning to the C Minor key center, we have the **ii-V** again, where Gary plays off some G dominant ideas. But Bar 24 can also be thought of as a C Harmonic Minor riff that resolves to the fifth (G) of C Minor:

24

Dm7^b5 G7^b9 Cm7

LESSON 2 (continued)

What goes up must come down again, and that's just where the line goes next, using something similar to walking-bass approach, all over F, and starting on the major 7th. Once again, the riff spans two harmonies:

28

C7 *tr* *8va* *loco* Fmaj7 Fm7

"Walking" line

T A B

(14)(15) 21 20 19 18 17 20 19 18 17 15 14 18 17 16 15 13 12 16 15 14 13 11 10 13

Bars 31–36 cover a lot of ground! Notice how each scale overlaps the next. We start by playing a simple F Minor Scale, and again push the B $\flat$ 7 chord by coming in early with the 9th of the B $\flat$ Major Pentatonic along with a change in rhythm, and a new idea—using triad shapes to outline the chords in Bars 32–35—then ending with a C Minor Blues lick:

31

Fm7 B $\flat$ 7 (9) (3) (13) Ebmaj7

F Minor Scale B $\flat$ Major Pentatonic Eb Major Triad Eb Minor Triad

T A B

13 11 10 13 10 11 13 10 12 12 10 11 12 14 15 11 13

34

Em7 A $\flat$ 7 D $\flat$ maj7 Dm7 $\flat$ 5 G7 $\flat$ 9 *loco*

8va *loco*

Db Major Scale C Minor Pentatonic

T A B

(13) 15 17 13 15 17 20 17 18 21 22 19 20 17 15 16 15 13

LESSON 2 (continued)

Keep your options open!

“Hey Gary! What do you play over a ii–V–I?”

“I don’t know! ... I have to ask ... ‘What did I just play?’
I would try to react to what I just played.”

3rd Time Through (19:12)

As Gary starts his third time through the “Solar” chord progression in Bar 37, the bluesy lick turns into another new idea—adding the #9:

Bar 37 musical notation in bass clef, key of B-flat major. The staff shows a sequence of notes with slurs and ties. Above the staff, a Cm7 chord is indicated. Red arrows point to specific notes: a red '9' points to the 9th of Cm7 (F), a red '#9' points to the #9th (F#), and a red '3' points to the 3rd (D). Green arrows point to the 7th (Bb) and b3rd (Ab) of the final chord. Below the staff, a fretboard diagram shows the fret numbers for the T, A, and B strings.

T	(13)	15	17	12	(12)	13	12	15	X	13	15	17	13	14	13	15	13
A																	
B																	

Anticipating the Gm7 on beat 4 of Bar 38, he returns to the familiar C7b9 idea over the ii–V in Bars 39 and 40:

Musical notation for Bars 39 and 40 in bass clef, key of B-flat major. Bar 39 starts with a Gm7 chord and a b9 (Ab) indicated by a red arrow. A dashed line labeled '8va' spans the first two measures of Bar 40. Bar 40 features a C7 chord and an Fmaj7 chord with a 'loco' marking. The fretboard diagram below shows fret numbers for the T, A, and B strings.

T																	
A	15	16	14	17	15	17	18	15	16	15	14	15	17	14	12	13	12
B																	

The last two beats of Bar 40 repeat the idea started in Bar 39, but because it’s in a different place rhythmically, it has a different feel and “flavor”.

LESSON 2 (continued)

The idea continues into Bar 42 with an added passing note:

41

Fmaj7 *loco* Fm7

Passing Note

Tension (b7 of Fm7)

Resolution (3 of Bb7)

T 12 13 12 15 14 15 17 12 13 12 15 15 15 13 12 15 13 12 15

A

B

Following a quick lick over the Fm7 in Bar 43, Gary again comes up with a new idea to finish things out—a three-note ascending idea over the chord changes beginning in Bar 44:

44

Bb7 Ebmaj7 Em7 Ab7

T 13 15 17 12 13 15 12 13 15 13 15 12 13 10 11 10 11 13 11

A

B

47

Dmaj7 Dm7b5 G7b9 Cm7

T (11) 13 10 8 10 11 11 9 12 12 10 13 10 8 10 8

A

B

LESSON 2 (continued)

Using Pentatonics over the “Solar” Progression (25:10)

When considering what to play over a *major ii–V–I* progression, one idea is to play the *major pentatonic* of the **V** of the key center over the **ii–V–I** to give you an easy way to navigate around the chords. “Care-free melody making” as Gary puts it.

But we start the song in *C Minor*, so playing a regular minor scale will work well. Note, though, that Gary plays the *major* 7th rather than the minor 7th of the scale in his solo—giving the line a “smokey, old-school jazz vibe.” (It’s also a featured note in the melody.)

But the remaining **ii–V–I**’s are all in major keys, and by mapping them out we can identify the appropriate major pentatonic scales to use:

The diagram illustrates the Solar progression in 4/4 time, divided into three systems of four bars each. Chords are indicated by Roman numerals (i, ii, V, I, ii, V) and specific chord names. Pentatonic scale mappings are shown with colored boxes and arrows.

System 1 (Bars 1-4):

- Bar 1: *Cm7* (i)
- Bar 2: *Gm7* (ii)
- Bar 3: *C7* (V)
- Bar 4: *C7* (V)

Mapping: A teal line labeled "C Minor Key Center" spans bars 1-2. A red line labeled "F Major Key Center C Major Pentatonic Scale" spans bars 3-4.

System 2 (Bars 5-8):

- Bar 5: *Fmaj7* (I)
- Bar 6: *Fm7* (ii)
- Bar 7: *Bb7* (V)
- Bar 8: *Bb7* (V)

Mapping: A teal line labeled "Eb Major Key Center Bb Major Pentatonic Scale" spans bars 6-8. A red line labeled "Eb Major Key Center Bb Major Pentatonic Scale" spans bars 5-6.

System 3 (Bars 9-12):

- Bar 9: *Ebmaj7* (I)
- Bar 10: *Ebm7* (ii)
- Bar 11: *Ab7* (V)
- Bar 12: *Dbmaj7* (I)

Mapping: A teal line labeled "C Minor Key Center" spans bars 9-10. A red line labeled "Db Major Key Center Ab Major Pentatonic Scale" spans bars 11-12.

System 4 (Bars 13-16):

- Bar 13: *Dm7b5* (ii)
- Bar 14: *G7b9* (V)
- Bar 15: *G7b9* (V)
- Bar 16: *G7b9* (V)

Mapping: A teal line labeled "C Minor Key Center" spans bars 13-14.

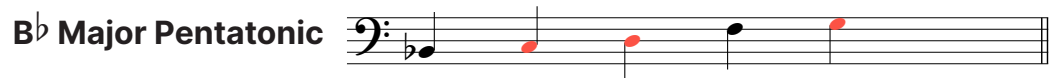
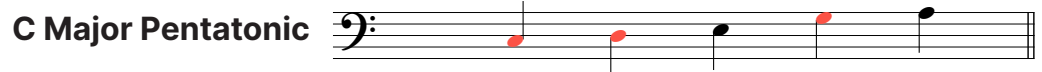


“It’s a little unsettling if you haven’t played something like this, where you have two bars of this, four bars of this, three bars of this, two bars of this. The harmonic rhythm is important to know so that your lines don’t feel like they’re stopped every time.”

LESSON 2 (continued)

The three major **ii-V-I** key centers appearing in “Solar”—F, E $\flat$ and D $\flat$ —indicate we can use the C Major, B $\flat$ Major, and A $\flat$ Major Pentatonic Scales, respectively.

It’s important to understand the relationship between each scale. As we move from one major key center to the next, each pentatonic scale has three notes in common. C Major Pentatonic and B $\flat$ Major pentatonic share the notes C, D and G:



Similarly, B $\flat$ Major Pentatonic and A $\flat$ Major Pentatonic share the notes B $\flat$, C, and F:



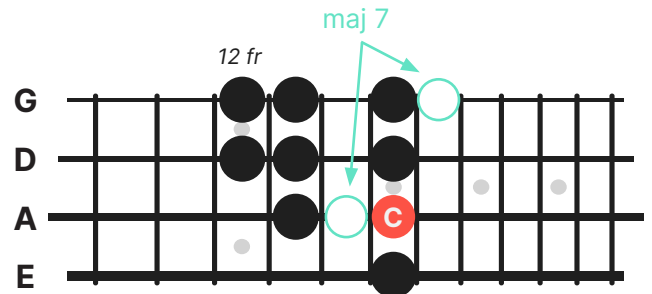
*“Knowing those common tones
lets you connect ideas easier.”*

LESSON 2 (continued)

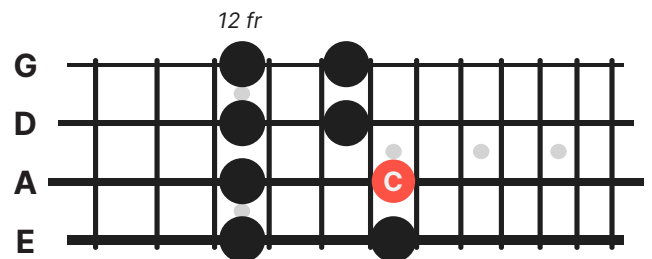
Everything Under Your Fingers (28:08)

Economy of movement with your fretting hand is always something to strive for. With that in mind, let's look at how each scale can be played all in one position:

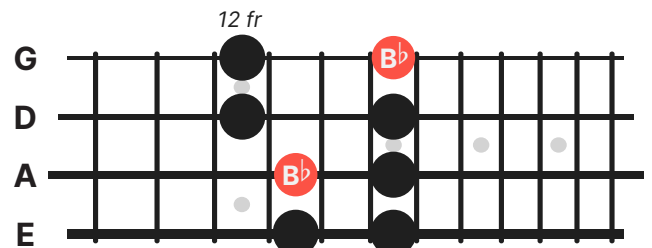
C Minor Scale



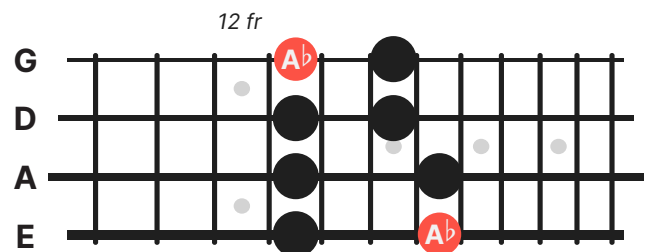
C Major Pentatonic Scale



Bb Major Pentatonic Scale



Ab Major Pentatonic Scale



"Any time you establish a position [on the fretboard], you shouldn't have to move more than a half step to get to a new place."

Lesson Summary

Closing Thoughts

- Take your time.
- Make sure you memorize the tune and the melody.
- Think of yourself as a painter: the harmony in time is your “canvas.” It’s there for you to “paint” over. If you don’t know where the canvas is, you can’t create!
- Learn the melody, and create solos with the melody in mind. The melody helps you learn the chord sequences, but also serves as a launch pad for creating solo ideas.
- Really take a deep dive into five standards. You will have prepared yourself well enough to just “consume” standards the rest of your life!



“You should know inside and out, without any doubt, how to play over five standards. Those five will allow you to learn and consume 100 more! ...

If you get five of them really strongly, then you add one more, everything you get in the next tunes you’ll have already seen.”

Continued Study

Searching for another jazz standard to dive into?
Look no further than the SBL Course Library:

Essential Jazz Standards with Gary Willis “All The Things You Are”

In this course, join Gary Willis as he breaks down the relationship between each section of “All The Things You Are.” We analyze Gary’s own interpretation of the melody AND his solo, together with a deeper look into the theory and technique aspects of Gary’s unique approach.



**Essential Jazz Standards
with Gary Willis:
All The Things You Are**

“Solar” Improvisation

Gary Willis

Half-time feel

$\text{♩} = 176$ ($\text{♩} = \text{♩}^3$)

Cm7

Gm7

8va -----

T
A
B

Fmaj7

4 8va -----

T
A
B

Fm7

Bb7

Ebmaj7

7 8va -----

T
A
B

Em7

Ab7

Dmaj7

Dm7b5

G7b9

10

T
A
B

13

Cm7 Gm7

T
A
B

16

C7 Fmaj7

T
A
B

19

Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7

T
A
B

22

Em7 Ab7 Dmaj7 Dm7b5 G7b9

T
A
B

25

Cm7

Gm7

8va

loco

T 10 10 10 12 12 9 9 12 12 12/17 17 16 17 17 18 18 14

A

B

28

C7

Fmaj7

tr

8va

loco

T (14)(15) 21 20 19 18 17 20 19 18 17 15 14 18 17 16 15 13 12 16 15 14

A

B

31

Fm7

Bb7

Ebmaj7

T 13 11 10 13 10 11 13 10 12 12 10 11 12 14 15 11 13

A

B

34

Em7

Ab7

Dbmaj7

Dm7b5

G7b9

8va

loco

T 13 15 17 13 15 17 20 17 18 21 22 19 20 17 15 16 15 13

A

B

37

Cm7

Gm7

8va -----

T
A
B

40

C7

Fmaj7

8va -----

loco

T
A
B

43

Fm7

Bb7

Ebmaj7

T
A
B

46

Em7

Ab7

Dmaj7

Dm7b5

G7b9

Cm7

T
A
B

