Sing Us a Song, Piano Man:

A Breakdown of the Art of Playing Pop Music at the Piano

Danny Milan, Assistant Professor of Piano Pedagogy
Texas Woman's University, MTNA 2024

Pop Music for the Classical Musician

The Key Elements:

- **Rhythm**
- **Intuition**
- **Listening**
- **Don't be afraid to make mistakes!**

A Breakdown: The Basics

- **Ideally, no performance should be the same twice**
- **Let rhythmic variation be your first tool (i.e. syncopation)**
- **Then, experiment with merely thickening the harmonies**
- **Vary chord progressions with other tools such as arpeggiated figures and embellishments with scalar passages**
- **Play like a percussionist rather than a pianist most of the time, except for specific solos**

- **Experimenting and having fun are key components to success**

- **Let rhythm and intuition take the front seat**

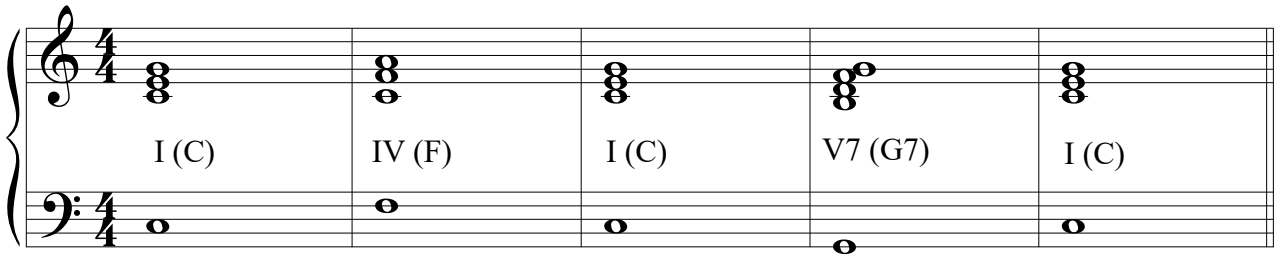
The Examples

- **See attached examples for written-out depictions of these rhythmic possibilities**
- **These examples are just a written-out *fraction* of the possibilities available**
- **These patterns and others can be applied to most any pop music available**

Style Sampler

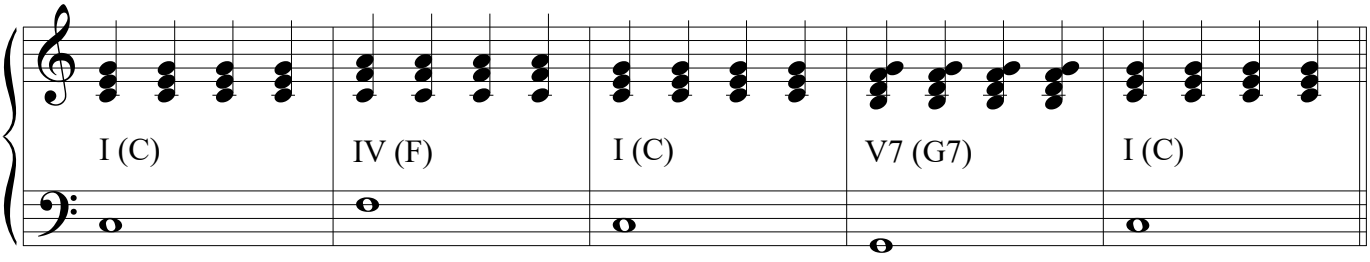
Danny Milan

No. 1: The Basic Progression



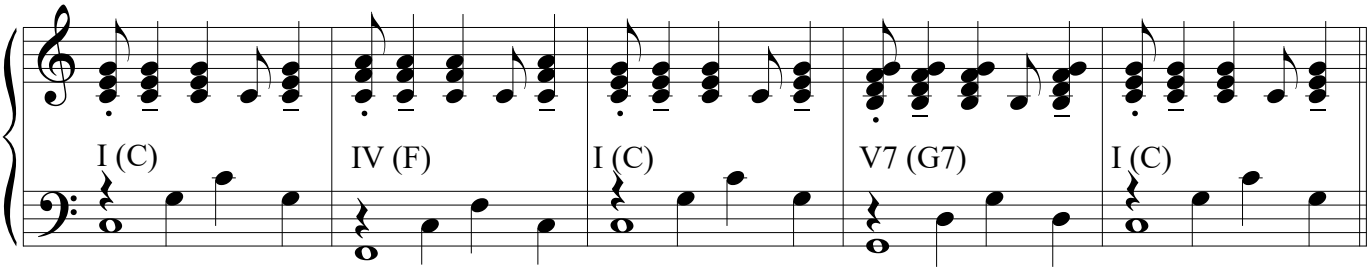
No. 2: Every Beat

Perhaps the most basic of pop variation technique, this can be further varied by register and inversion.



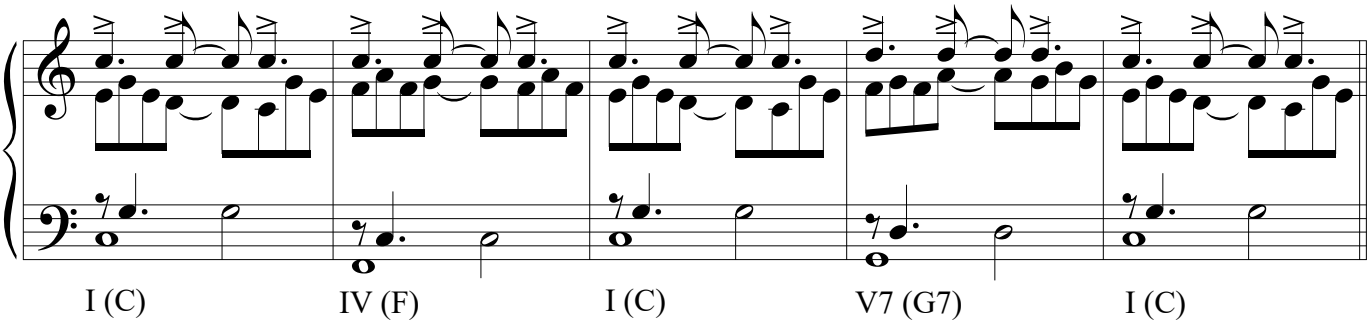
No. 3: Syncopation

If a simple change of register or inversion isn't enough, rhythmic variation and syncopation is most certainly the next trick in the book. This can also be done with varying registers and inversions. Also, pay special attention to the articulations; purposeful articulation can make rhythmic patterns much more effective.



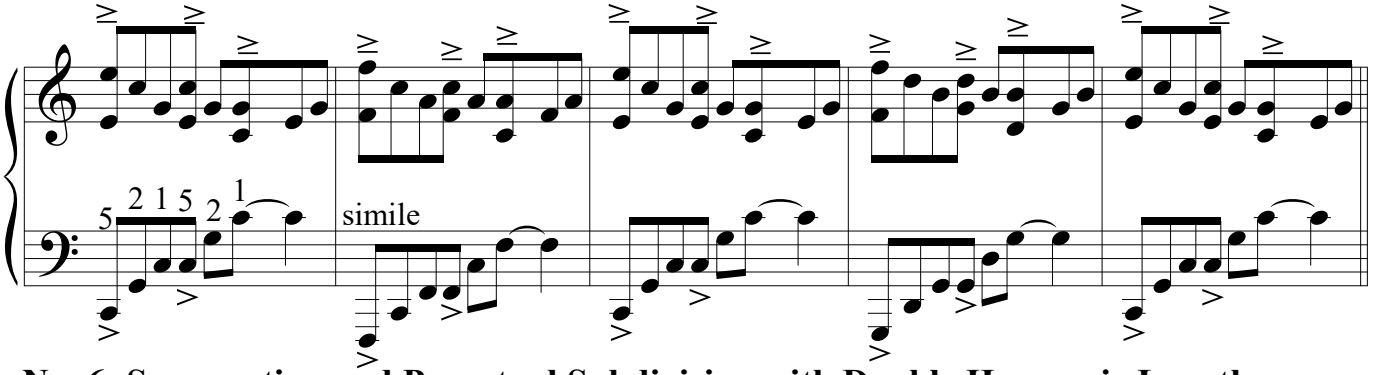
No. 4: Syncopation with Rhythmic Embellishment

Here, all of the previous ideas apply, but an independent and subdivided second voice in the right hand gets added to the texture. Keep in mind, it is only a representation; the subdivisions can and should be varied as it is meant to be an improvisatory figure that merely excites the pattern's effect.



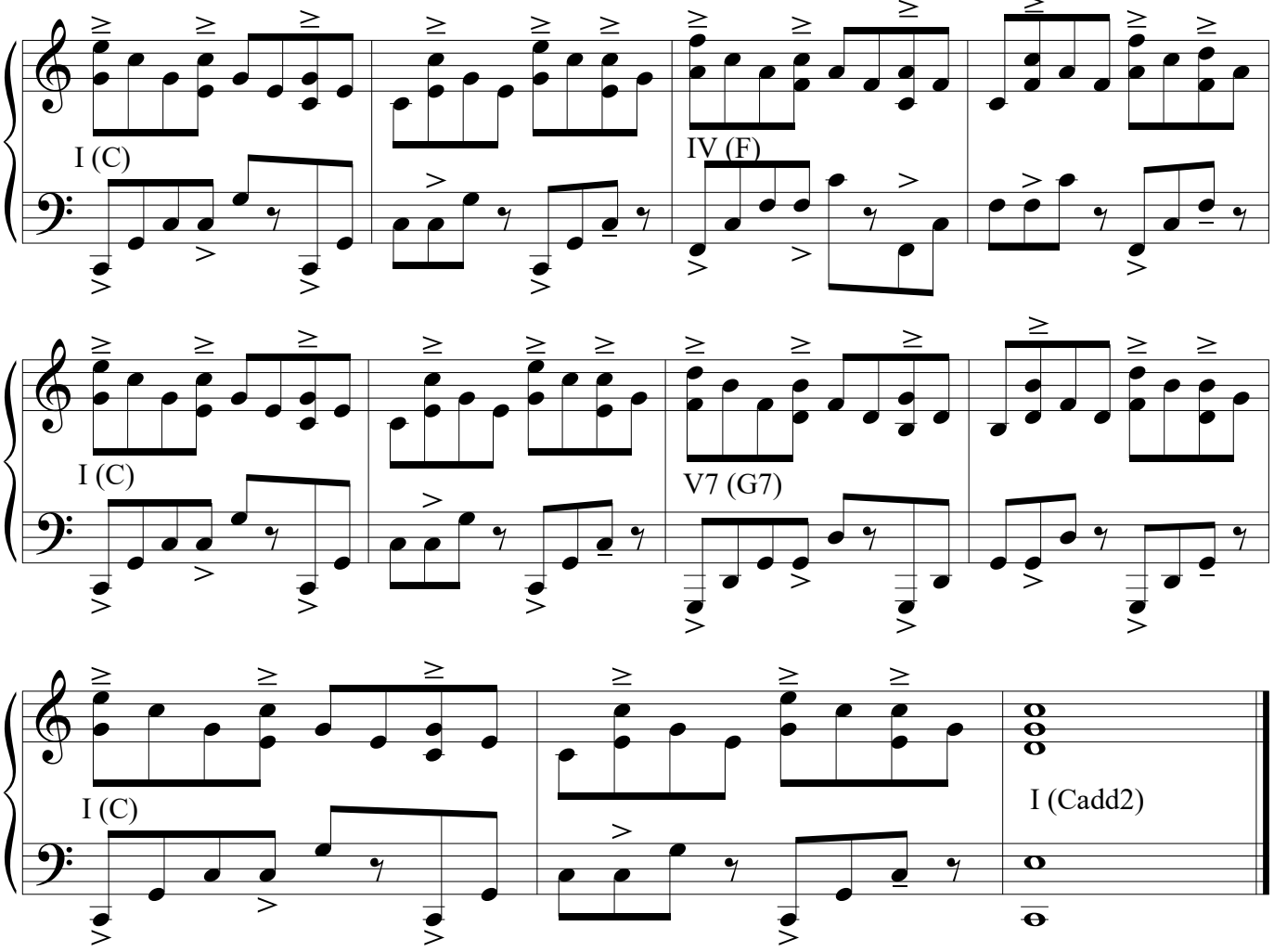
No. 5: Syncopation with Perpetual Subdivision

The constant eighth note subdivisions alongside the syncopations will give this sample a more driving and intense effect. Note again the specific articulations being indicated. For full effect, it is more important for the right hand to get both full value and emphasis, whereas, the left hand really only needs the emphasis. This can be further varied by register, inversion, or mix of both. Passing tones can also be used with this pattern. Note the added intensity of the left hand. The suggested fingering makes it more idiomatic than it appears too.



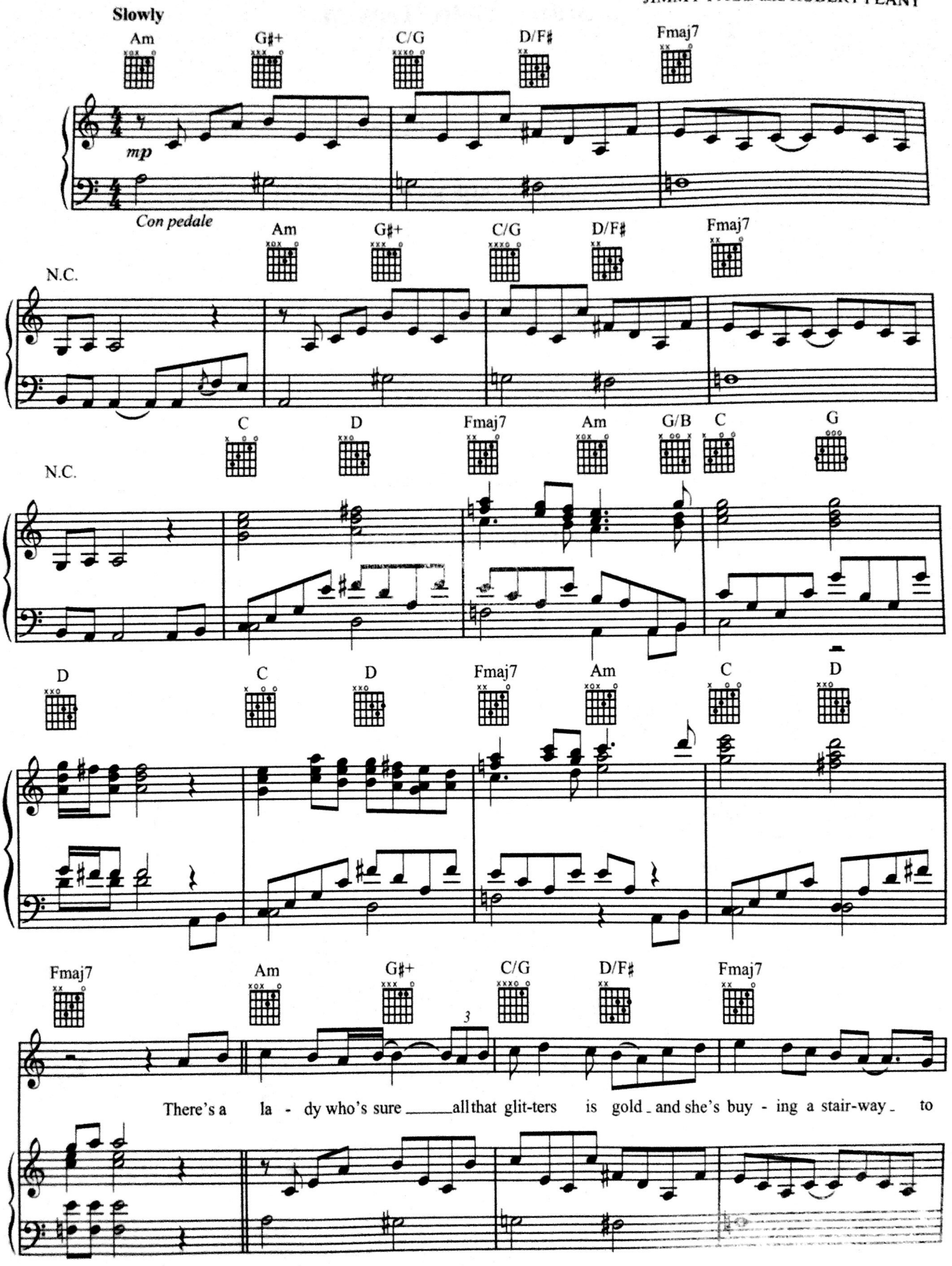
No. 6: Syncopation and Perpetual Subdivision with Double Harmonic Length

One of the major differences in this example as compared to the last one is that the chord lengths are doubled, meaning that each harmony now lasts for two measures instead of one. This example illustrates everything examined thus far but with an extended amount of time for pattern variation. The left hand pattern follows the lead of the last example with minor variations as does the right hand. Again, it is very important to note that these examples are representations; variations can and should occur and the performance should always be intuitive versus academic for full organic effect.



STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Words and Music by
JIMMY PAGE and ROBERT PLANT



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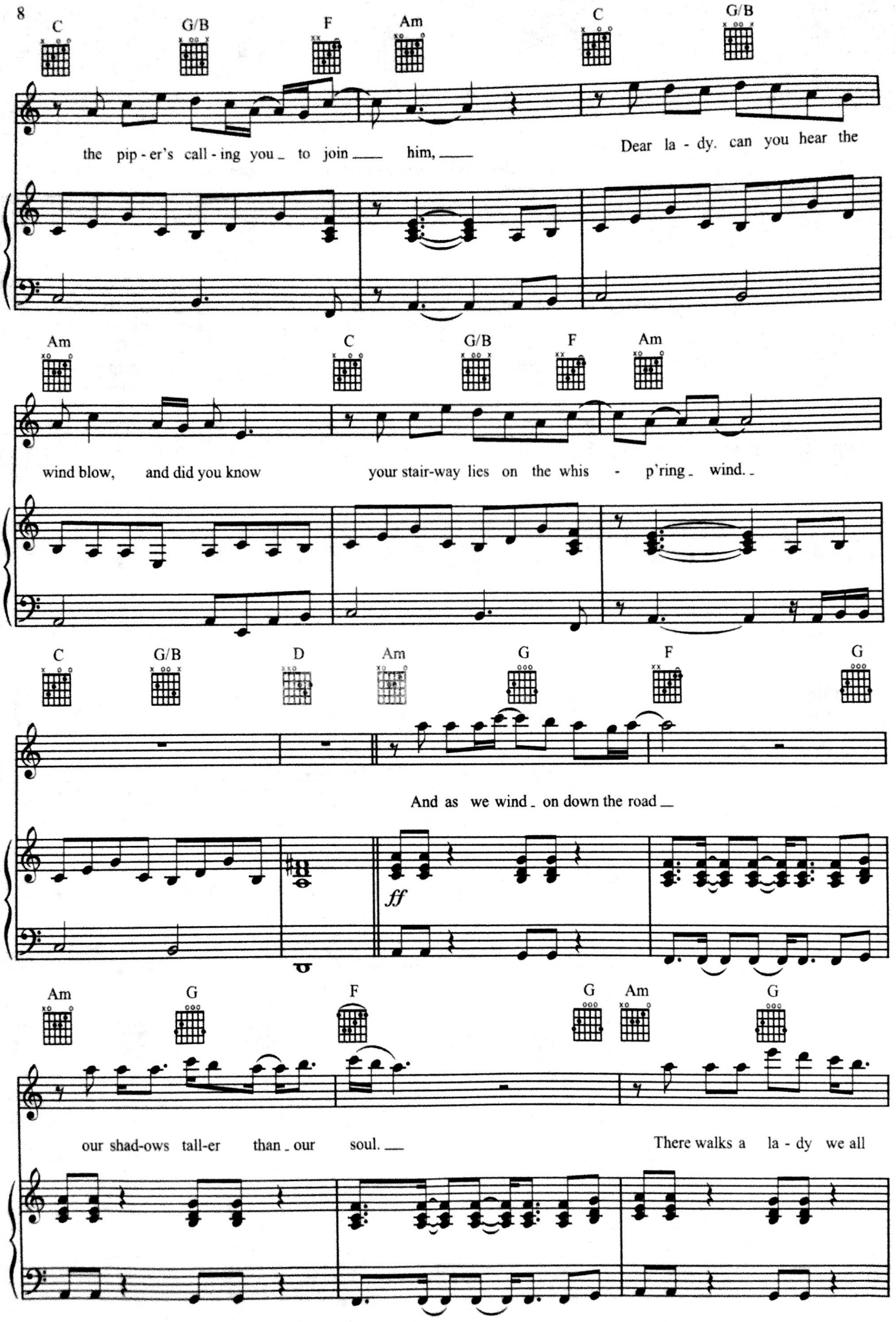

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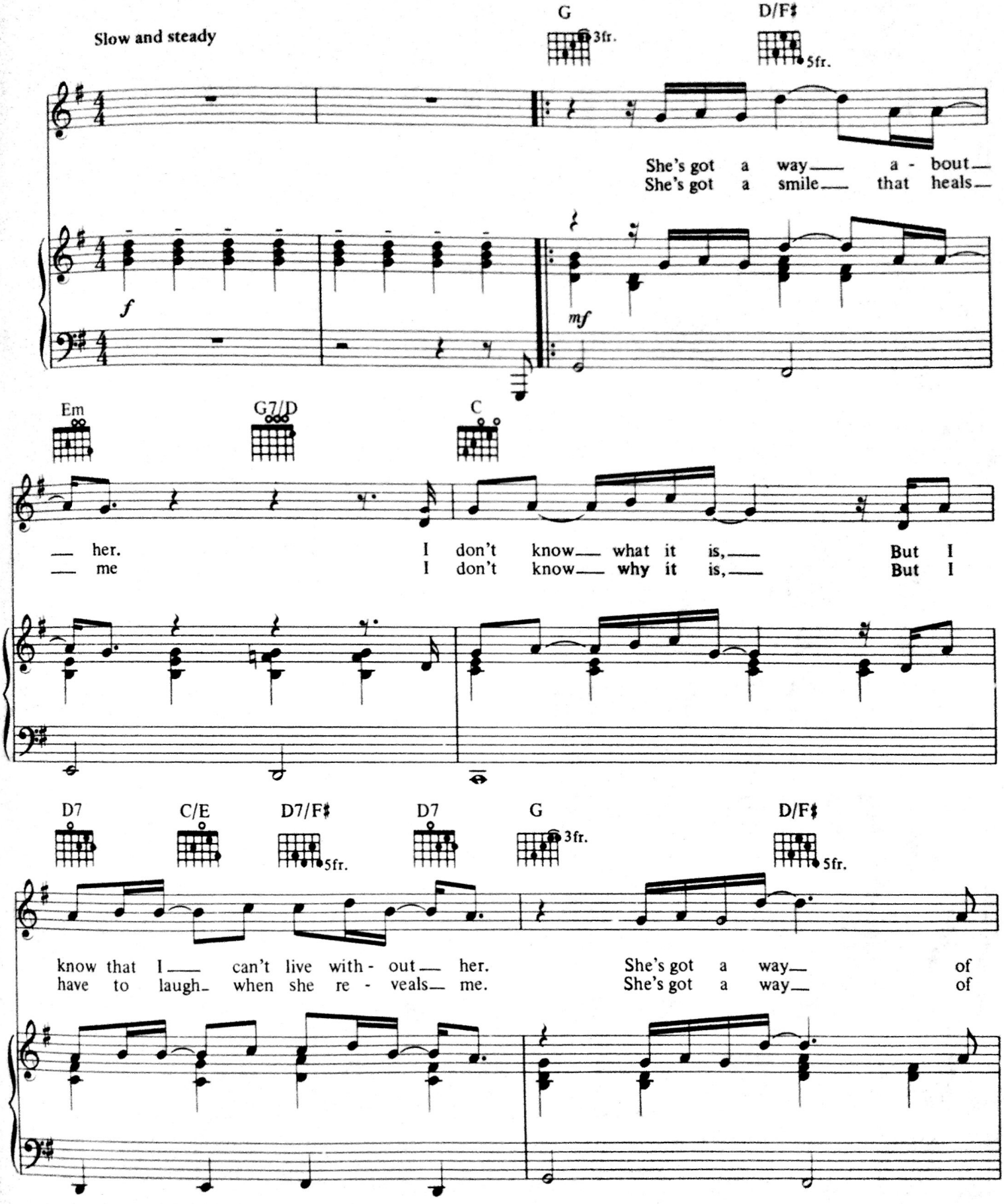
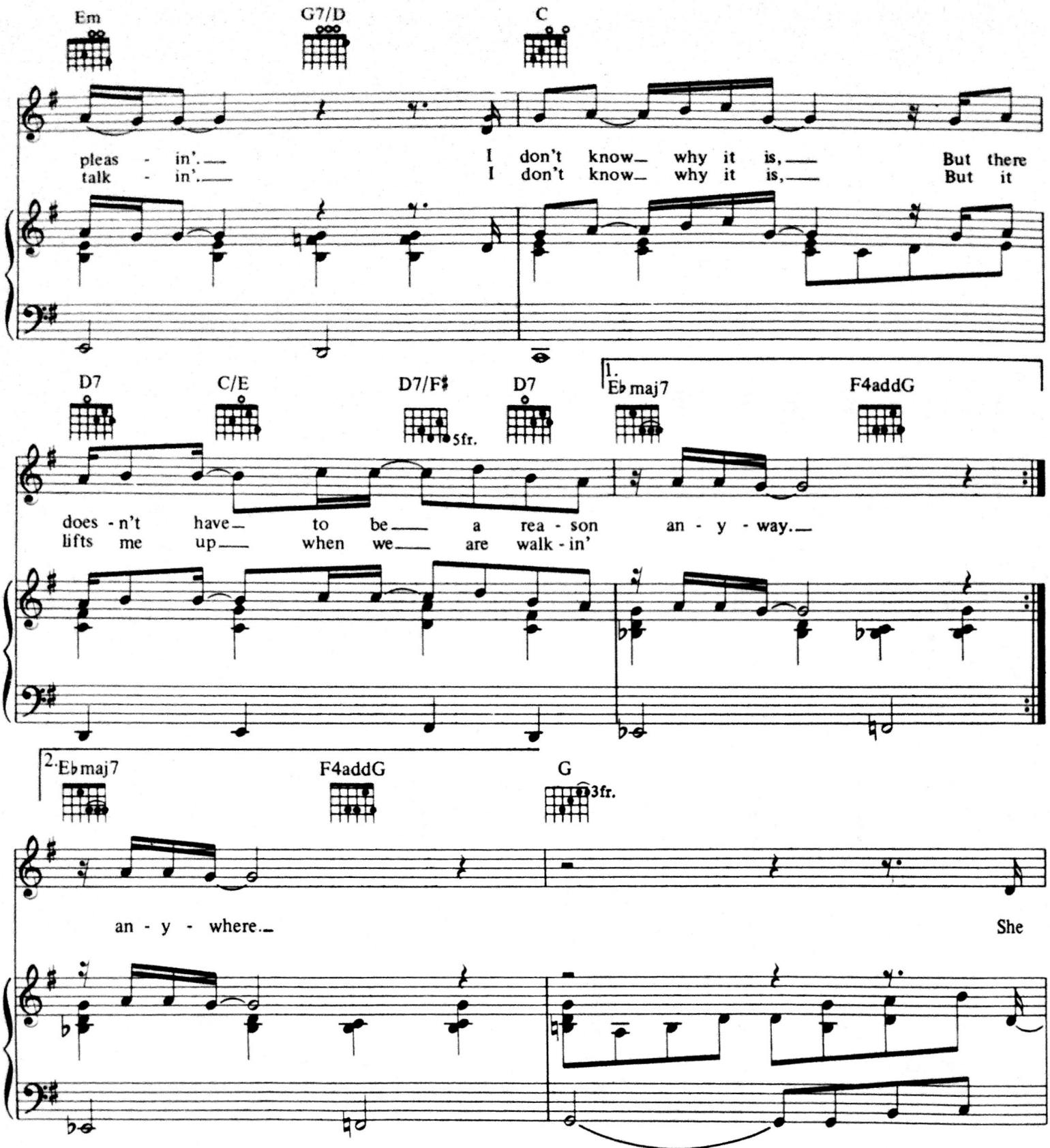
SHE'S GOT A WAY

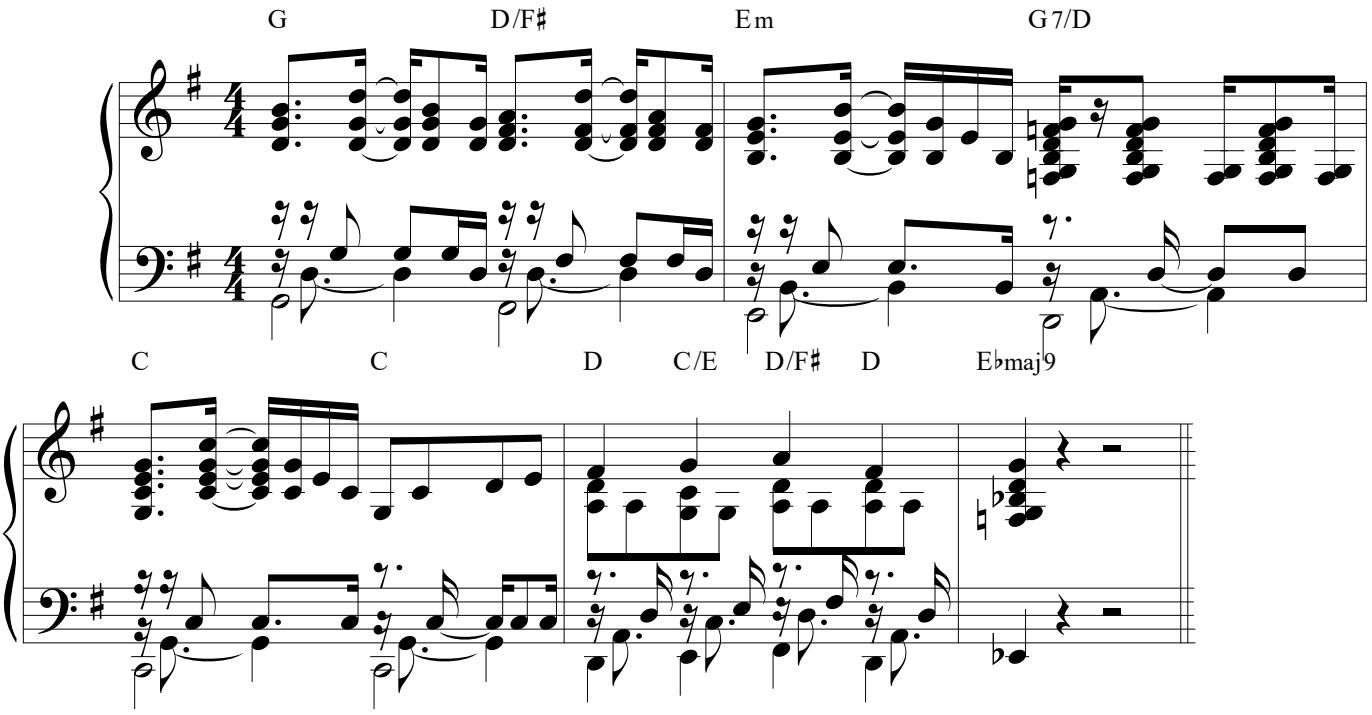
Words and Music by
BILLY JOEL



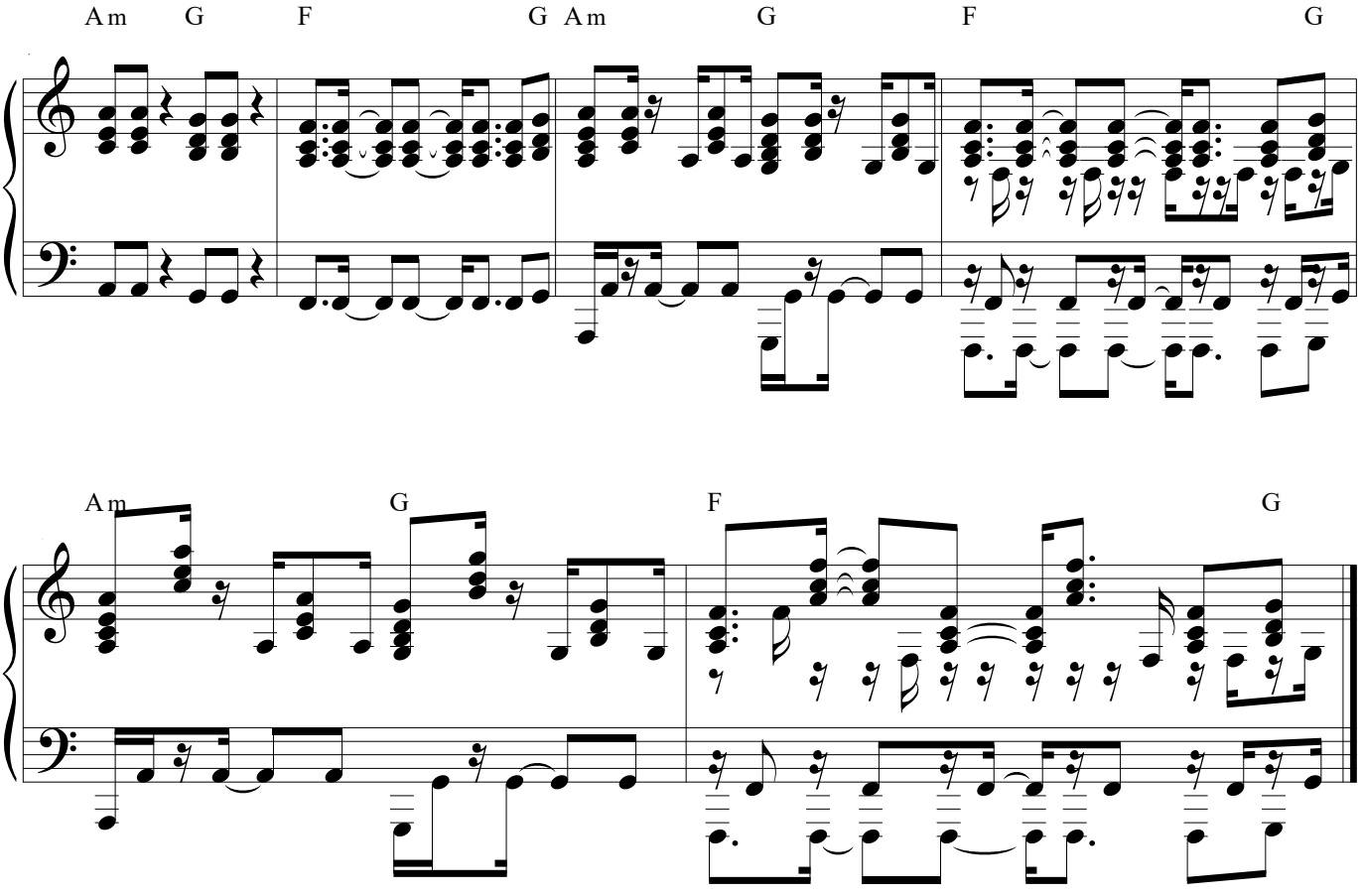

Em
G7/D
C
pleas - in'.
talk - in'.
I don't know why it is,
I don't know why it is,
But there
But it
D7
C/E
D7/F♯
5fr.
D7
1.
E♭maj7
F4addG
does - n't have to be a rea - son an - y - way.
lifts me up when we are walk - in'
2.
E♭maj7
F4addG
G
3fr.
an - y - where.
She

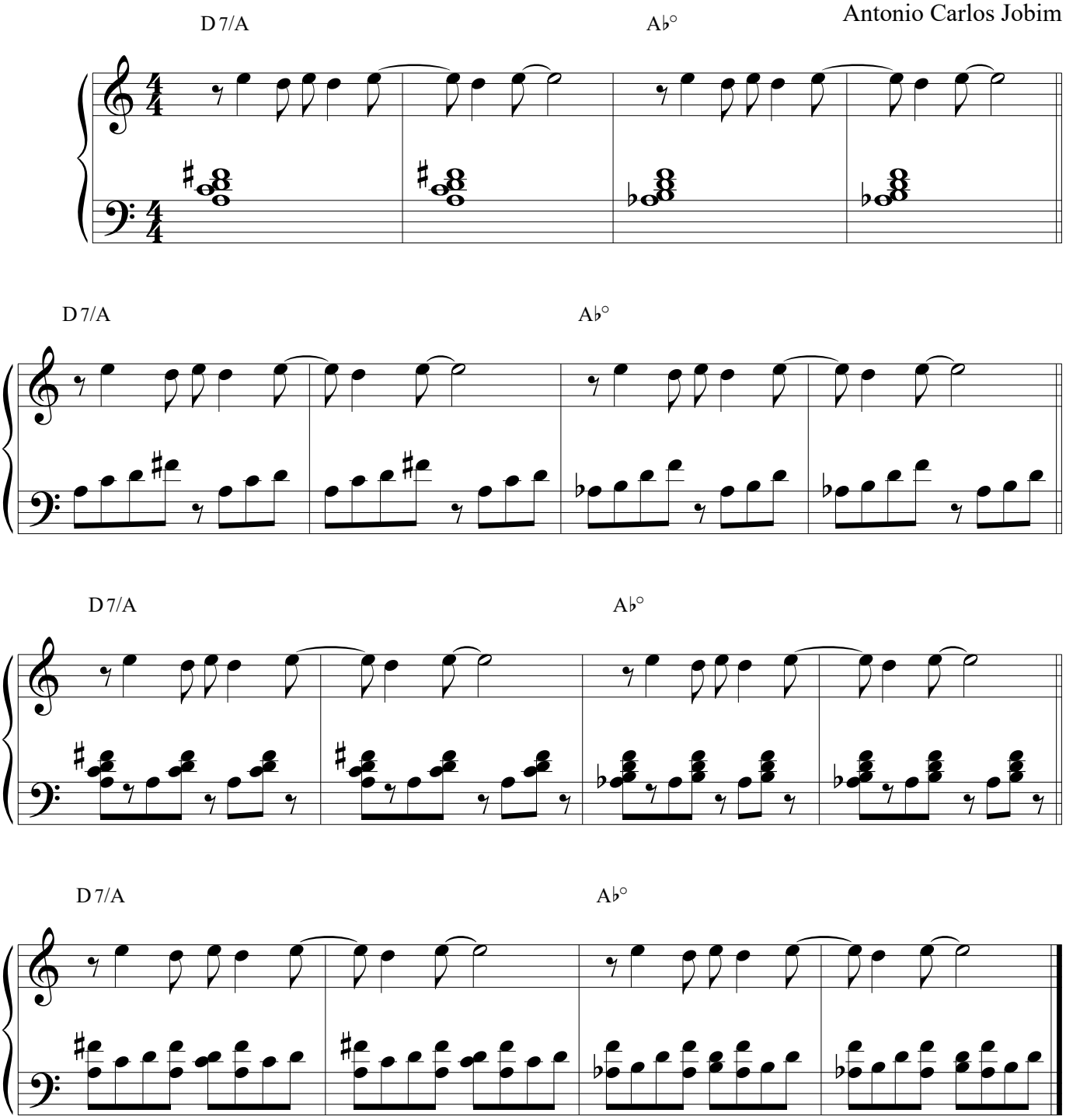
Song Examples

"She's Got a Way" by Billy Joel



"Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin



Corcovado

Antonio Carlos Jobim