Six Blues Bass Lines

Authentic ‘Plug-And-Play’ Formulas That Will Work Every Time

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The Blues

It really pays to know how to get through a blues. It's almost universally known! If you got together with 3 other random musicians, you may not all know the same exact songs, but most people will know how to get through a blues.

Just in case you're not sure how the 12-bar blues is structured, let's recap really quickly.

In it's most basic form, the blues has just 3 chords. A '1-chord', a '4-chord' and a '5-chord'.

For our examples, let's say we're playing a blues in the key of A. That means the 1-chord will be an A7, the 4-chord will be a D7, and the 5-chord will be an E7.

If you put all the chords in order, you'll get this:

|A7	|A7	|A7	|A7 |
|D7	|D7	|A7	|A7 |
|E7	|D7	|A7	|A7 |

I find it helpful to think of the blues in terms of 3 phrases that are 4 bars each.

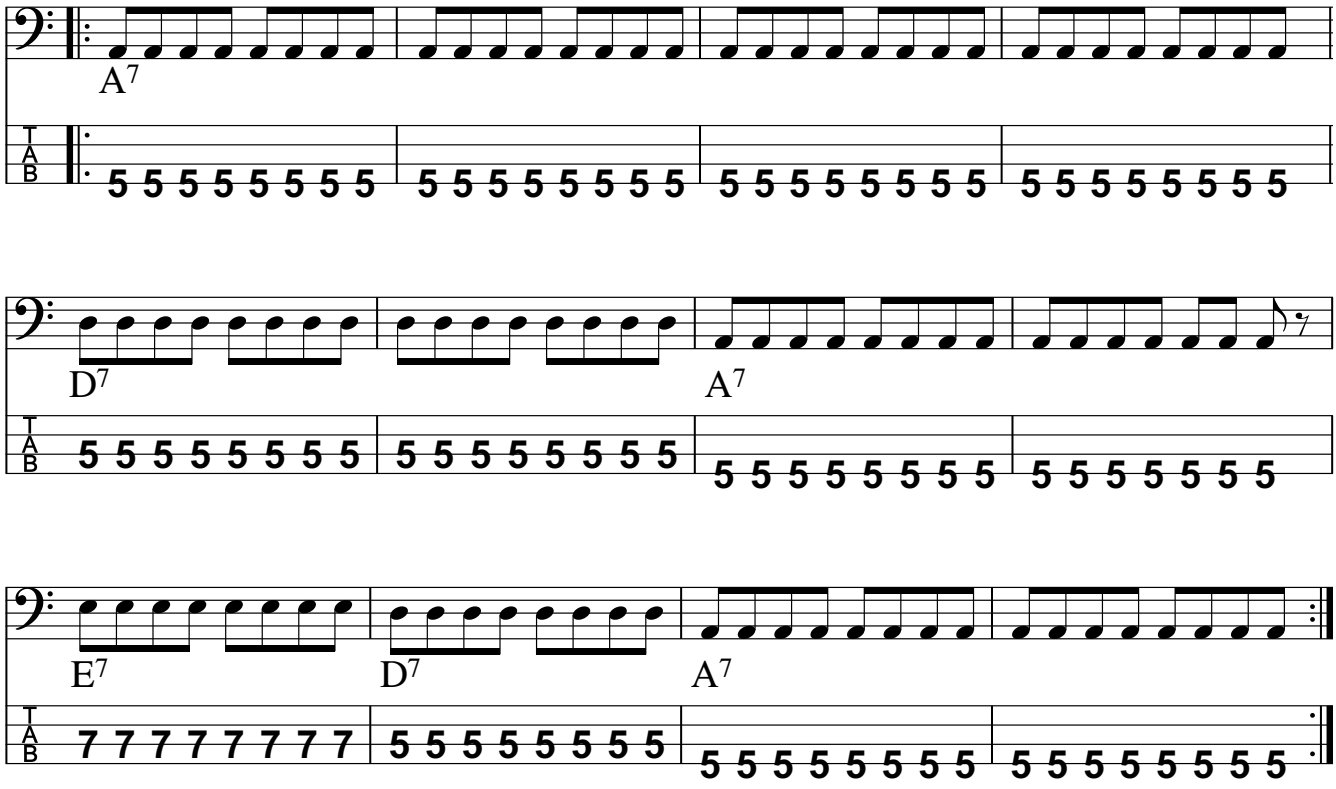
The first phrase just hangs out on the 1-chord – the A7. In our 2nd phrase, we get 2 bars of the 4-chord, then 2 bars of the 1-chord again. Finally, in our last 4 bars, we get a bar each of the 5-chord and the 4-chord before finally coming back again to the 1-chord.

The Formulas

Now that you know how the blues is structured, we can start playing around with some of these authentic blues bass lines.

Formula #1

The first is very simple. All we're going to do is play the roots of all of the chords in 8th notes. That means we'll play A over the A7 chords, D over the D7 chords and E over the E7 chord. It doesn't get much simpler than this.

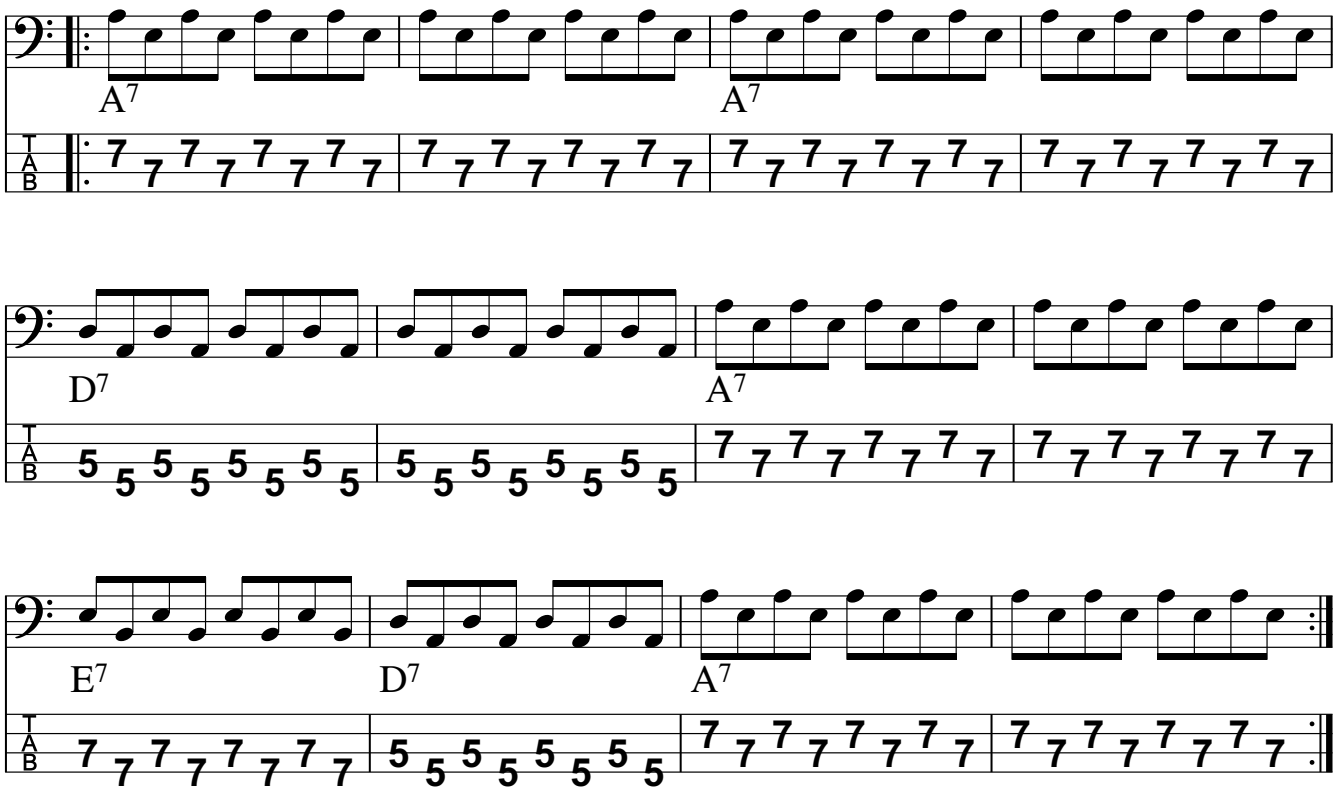


This will work whether the blues your playing is straight or swung. For some examples of this exact kind of bass line check out these tracks:

Led Zeppelin – Rock And Roll (Straight 8th Notes)
Lafayette Leake – Short Dressed Woman (Swung 8th Notes)

Formula #2

Next, we're going to add just one extra note to our first formula – the 5th of every chord.



It's a good idea to use the 5th **underneath** the roots of the chords. Do you notice how we started on the high A so we could use the E underneath it?

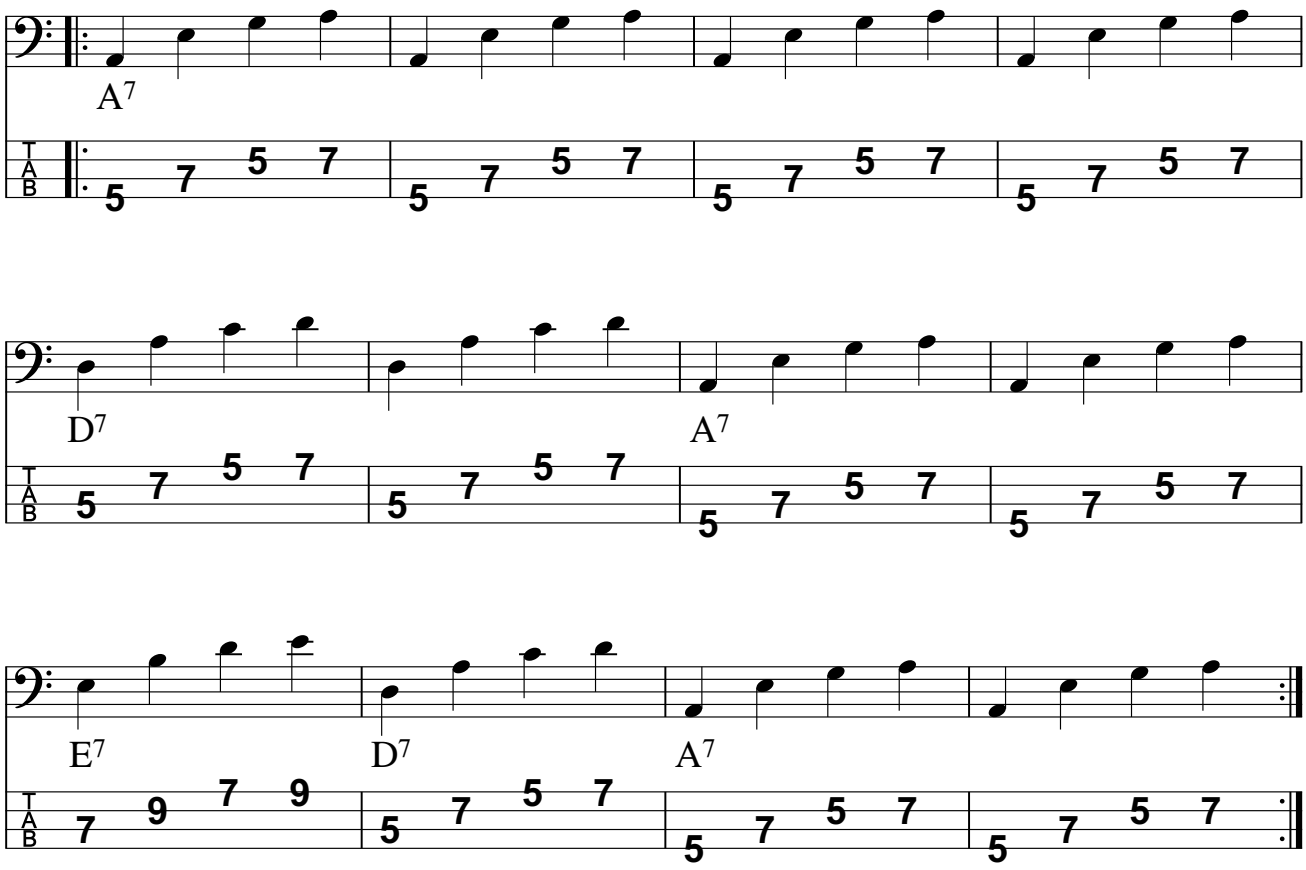
If you use the 5th **above** the roots, it sounds a bit strange – and not as strong. Also be sure to de-emphasize the 5th and keep the roots really strong on the down beats.

This kind of line works best at a slower tempo and with swung 8th notes. For a great example of this kind of bass line, check out the Pino Palladino line on John Mayer's version of *Every Day I Have The Blues.*

John Mayer – Every Day I Have The Blues

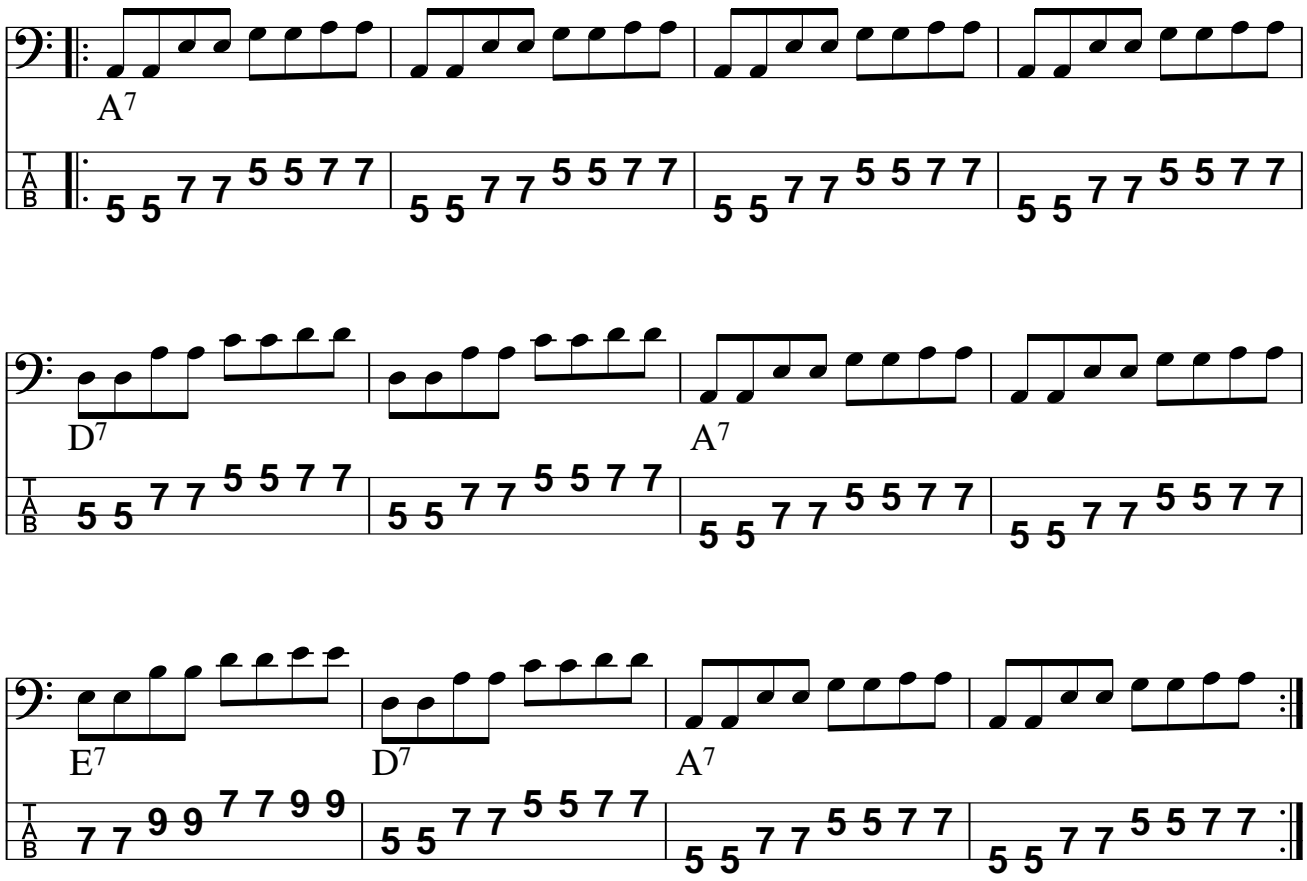
Formula #3

Let's keep adding more notes to these lines. We've used the root and 5th, now let's add the 7th. Our formula for this line is just 1 – 5 – 7 – 1. That final '1' of each chord will be an octave above our first 1 and to begin with, we'll just use quarter notes – almost like a classic walking bass line.



If it fits the song, you could also double every note – and this can work whether it's a song with straight 8th notes or swung 8th notes.

That would look like this:



If you want to hear this bass line in a real world song, check this out:

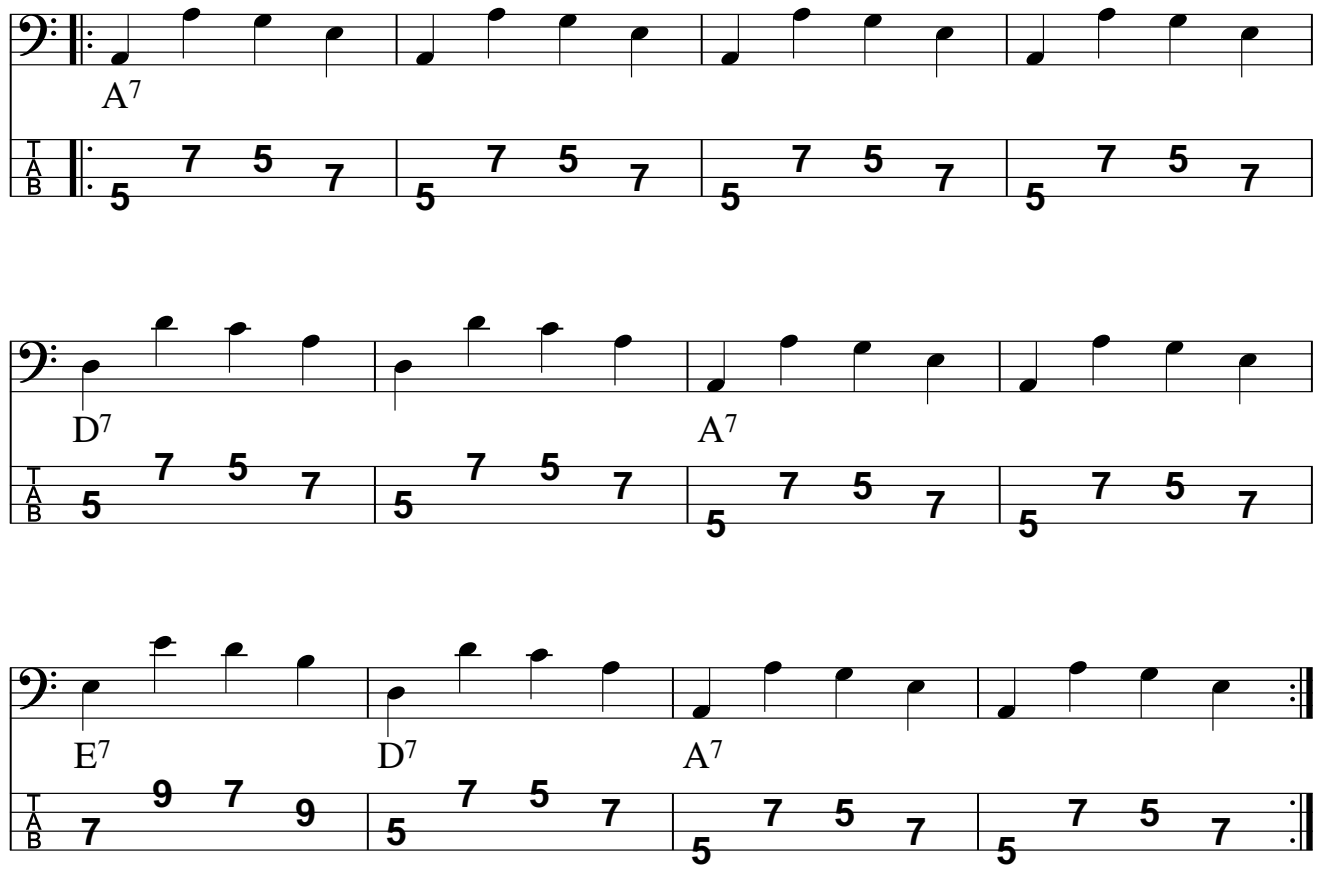
Buddy Guy – My Time After A While

Formula #4

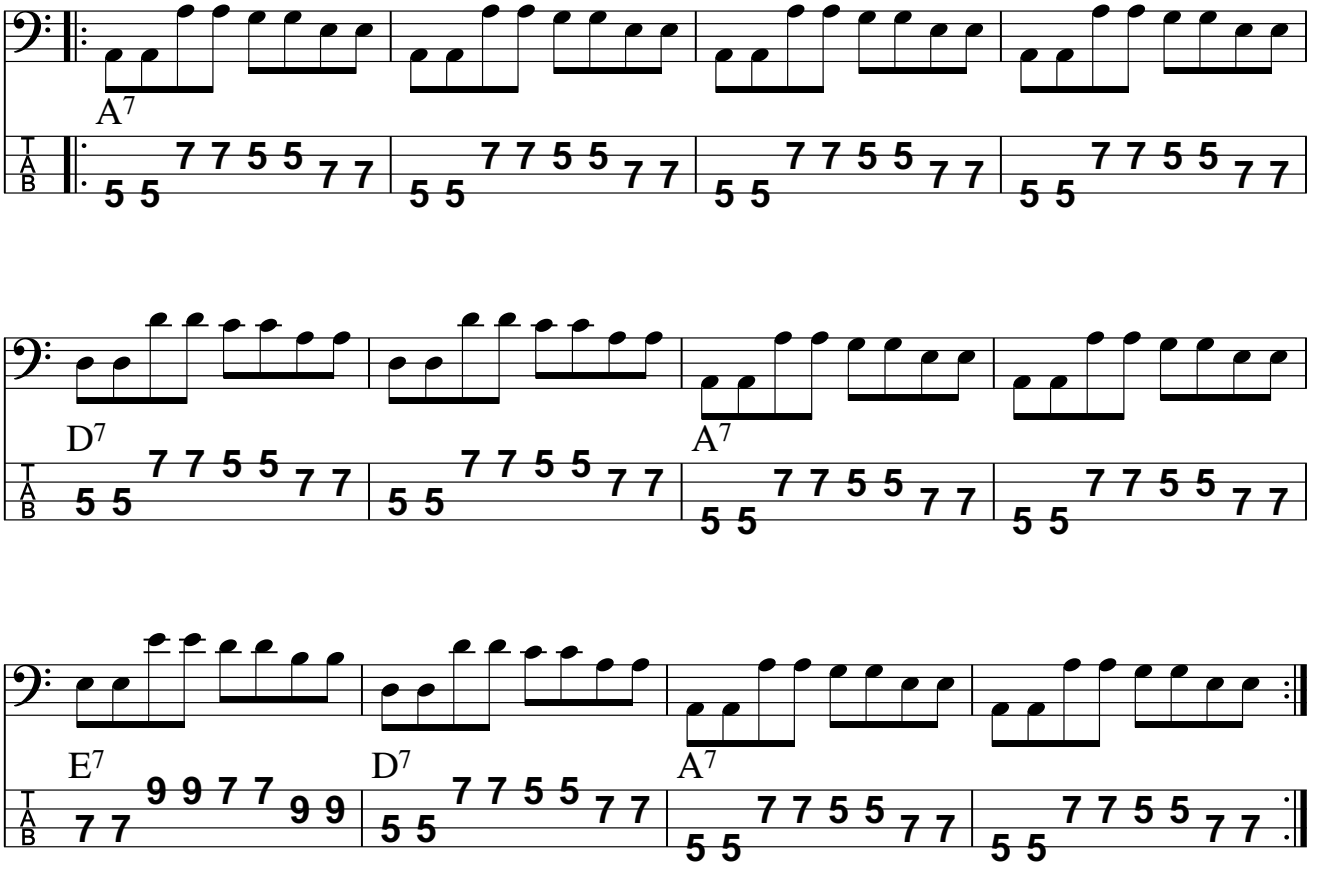
Next, we get a classic blues bass line. This is one that you may have heard on heaps of recordings and it's kind of like the descending version of Formula #3. Instead of mostly going up, this bass line 'falls'.

We're using the exact same notes, just in a slightly different order. Check out Jaco Pastorius' version of *Fannie Mae* to hear this line in action. You'll notice he embellishes the line with a lot of triplets:

Jaco Pastorius – Fannie Mae



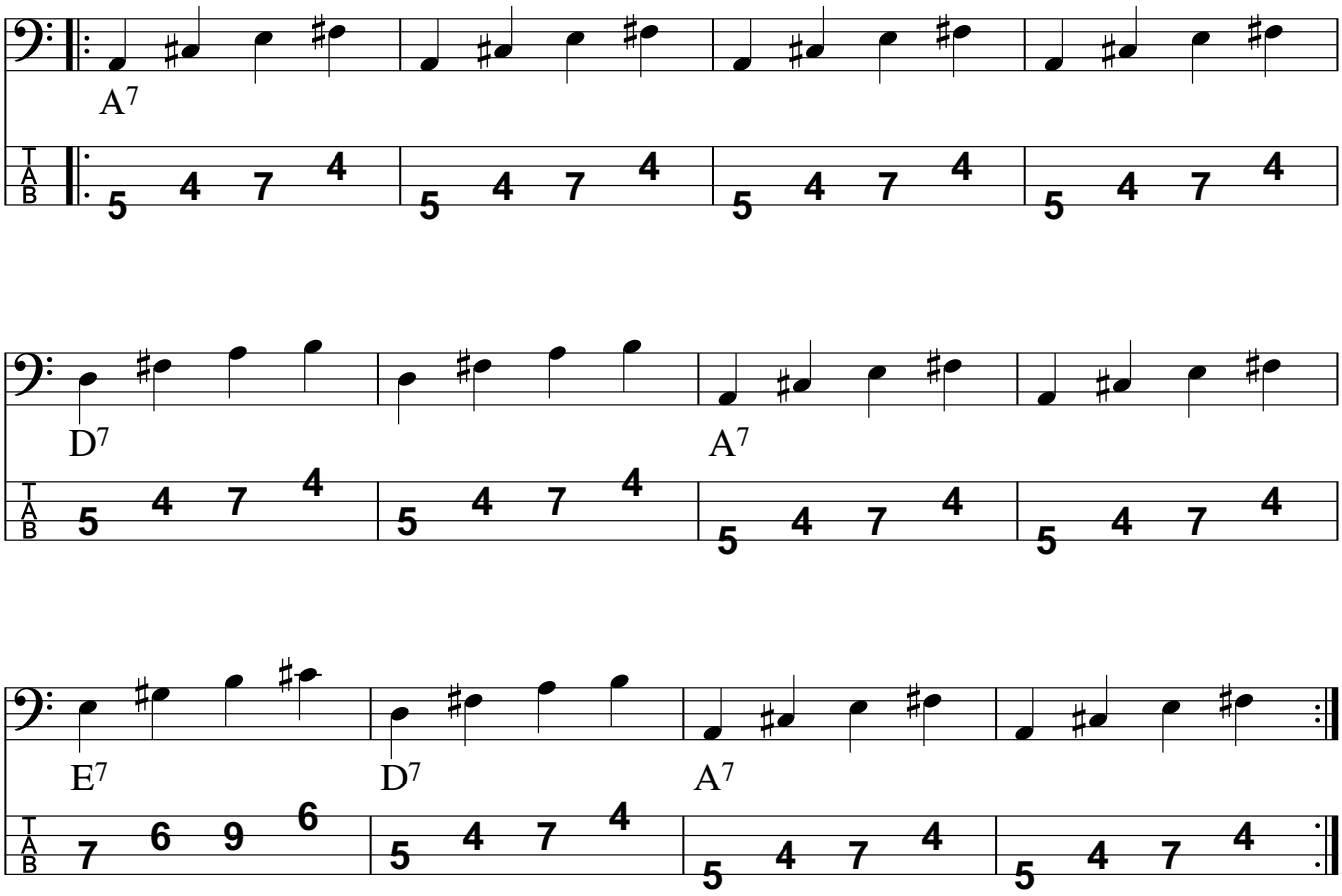
Again, you can play each note twice to make the line more active:



Formula #5

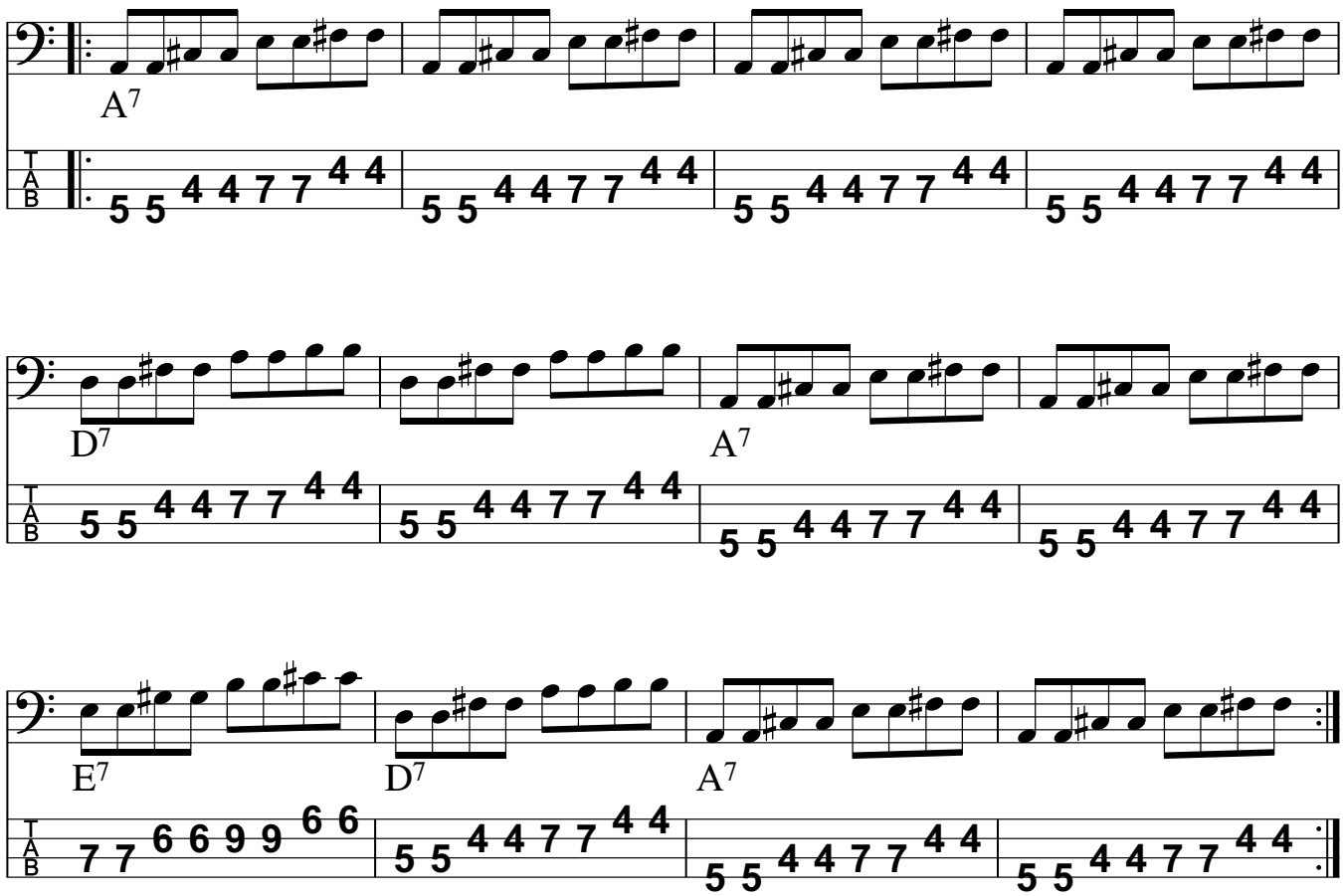
Next, we're going to swap out the 7th of every chord with the 6th instead. This is a very melodic note choice and it makes for and incredibly versatile bass line. That means over every A chord, we'll have A – C# – E – F#, over the D chords, we'll have D – F# – A – B, and finally over the E chord, E – G# – B – C#.

If we play all these as quarter notes, we'll get this:

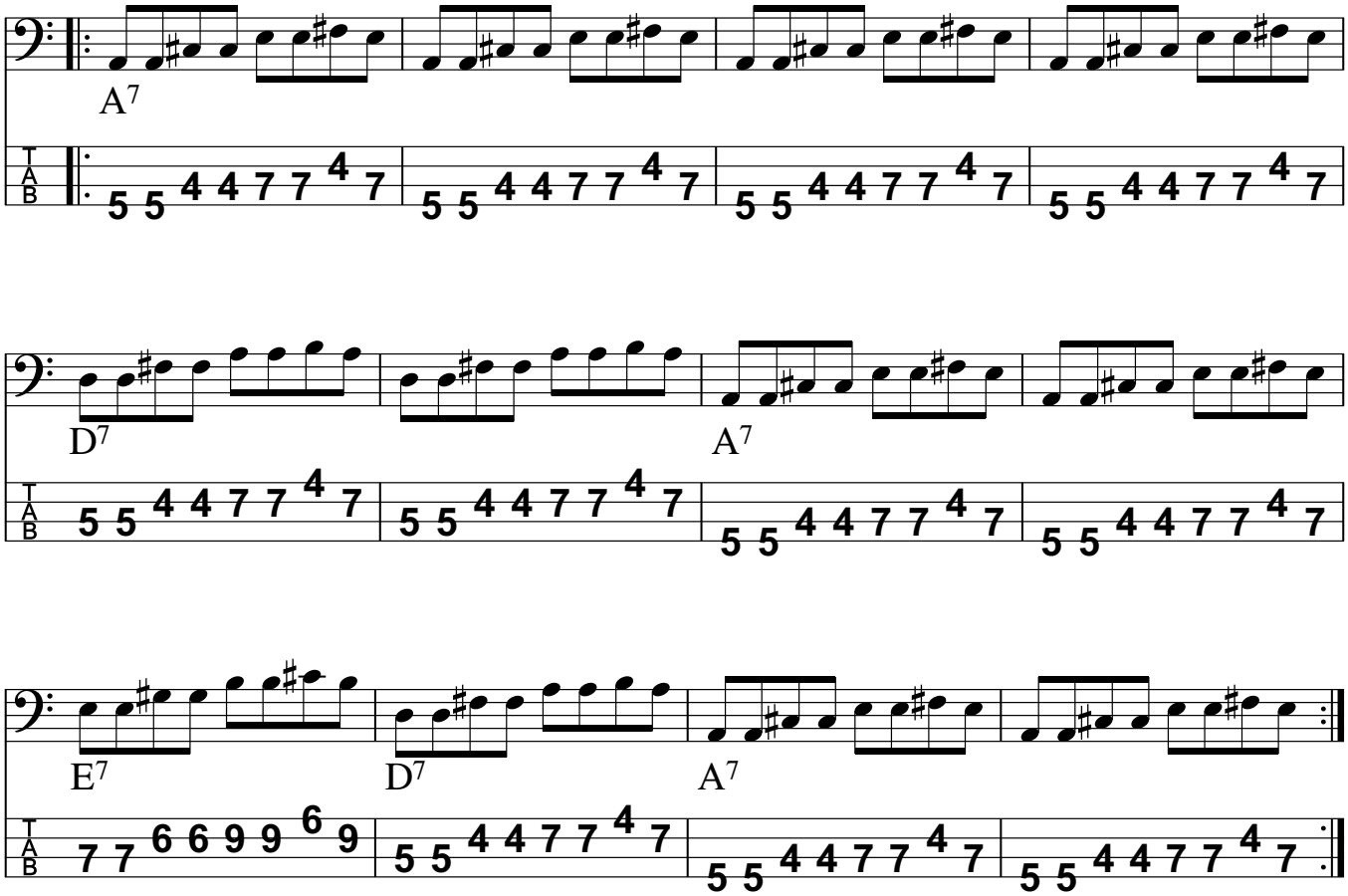


You could play this exact bass line over a swung blues with no issues at all. The best thing about this formula though is its versatility. You can do so much with it!

Of course, you can do the obvious things like doubling every note:



When you do this, you can also play around with bouncing back and forth between different notes like this:

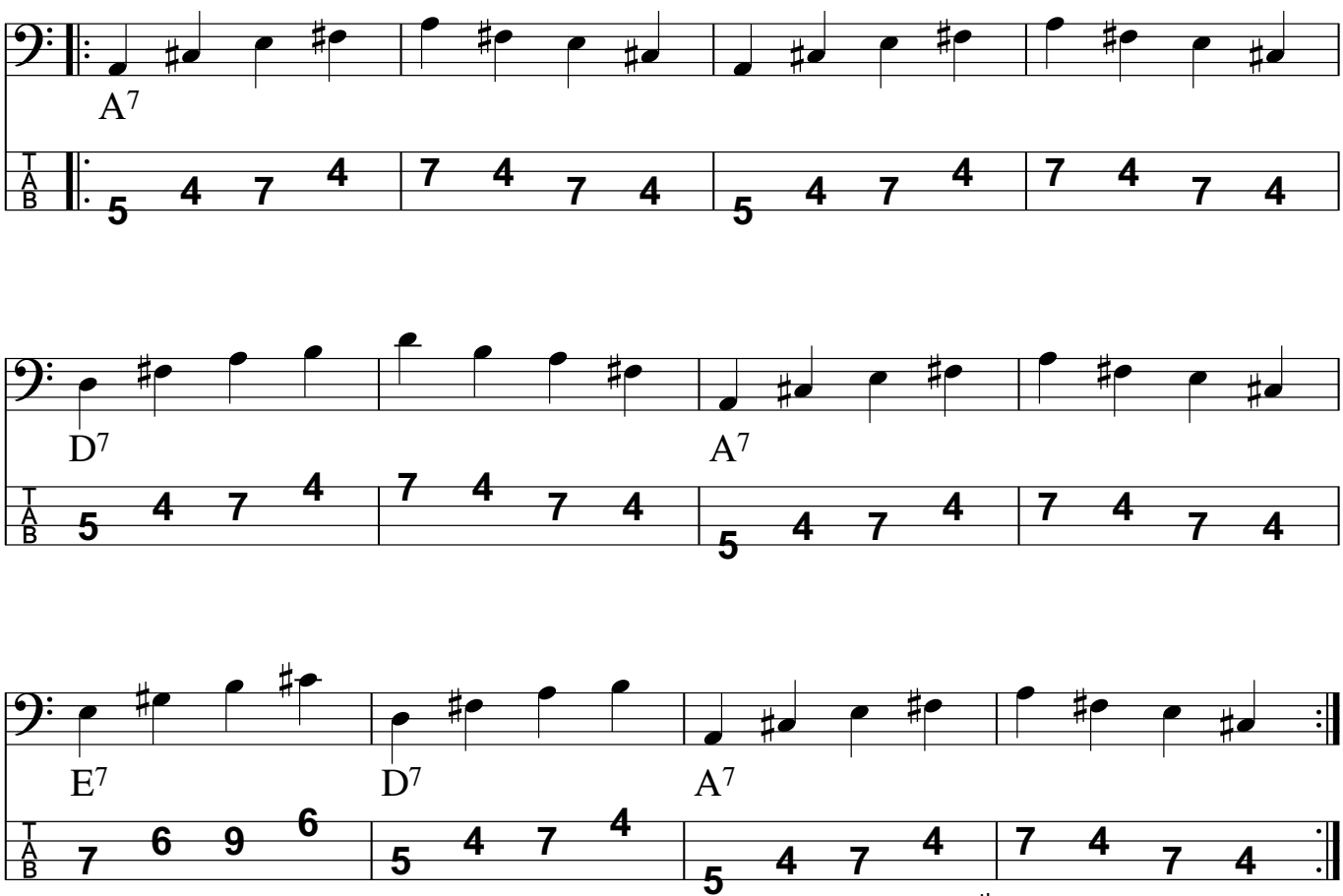


This is exactly the kind of line from the Elvis recording of Jailhouse Rock – a classic rock and roll track.

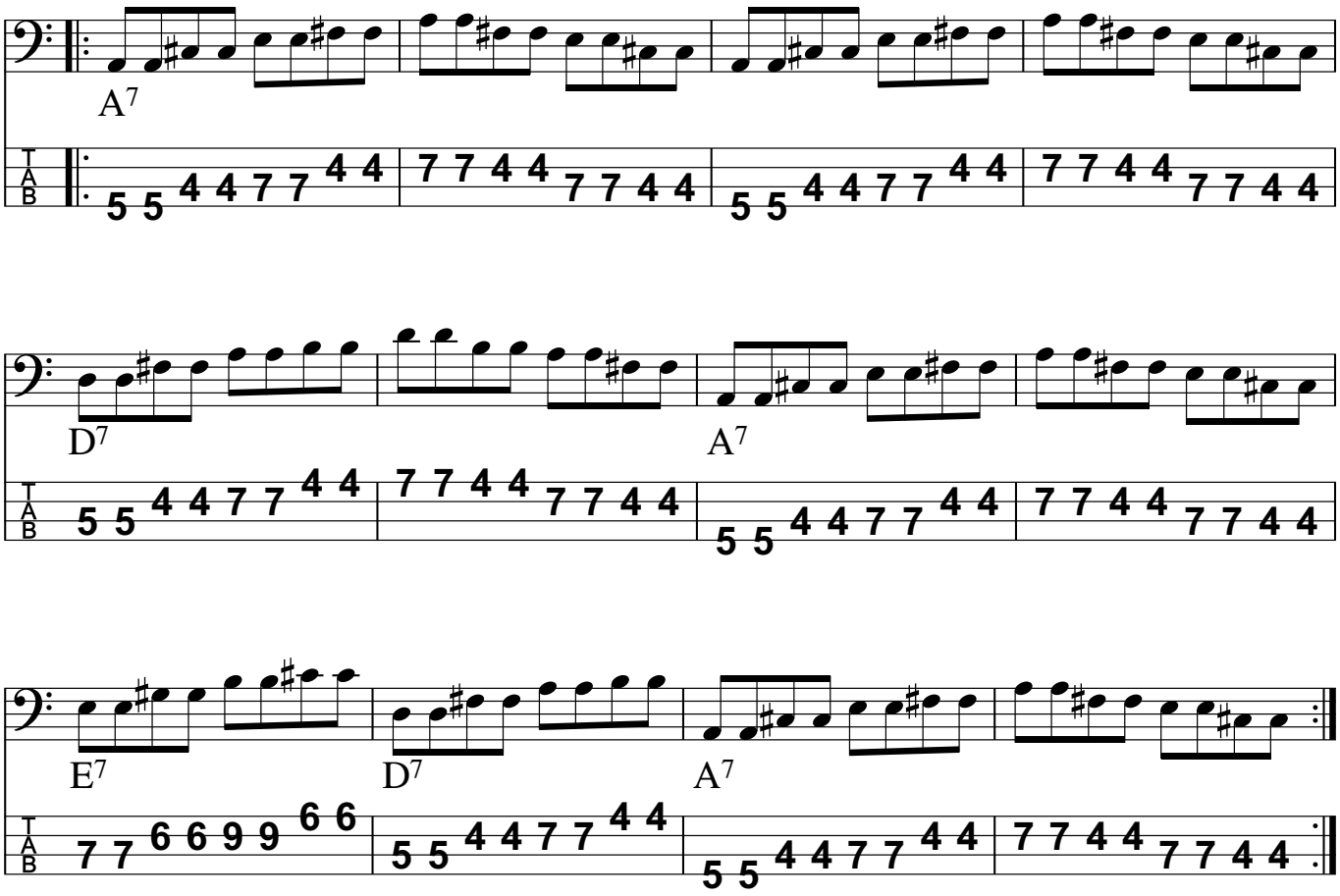
Elvis Presley – Jailhouse Rock

Instead of coming down from the 6th, you can also go up to the root of the chord, just like we did in Formula #3. Of course, then you have to come back down, but you can use the exact same notes you went up on.

This makes each phrase 2 bars though, which is fine, but you have to modify your approach when it comes to the 5-chord and the 4-chord in the last phrase. They're each only one bar long, so we have to revert to the original 1-3-5-6 formula for them:



As always you can double the notes and play swung 8th notes if you want to make a shuffle blues line out of it:



This kind of line is exactly what you'll find in the Jimmy Dawkins track, *Little Angel Child*.

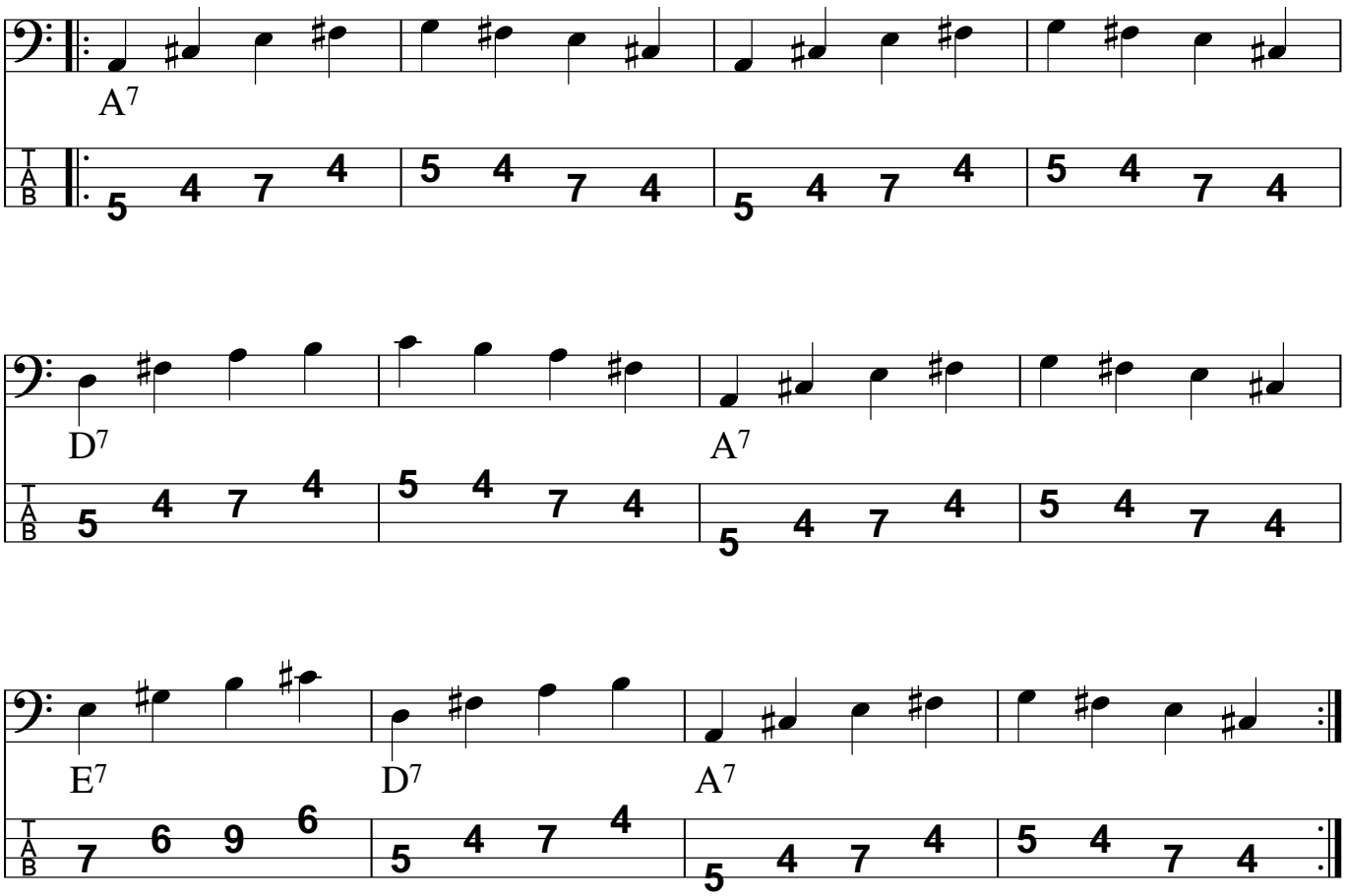
Jimmy Dawkins – Little Angel Child

Formula #6

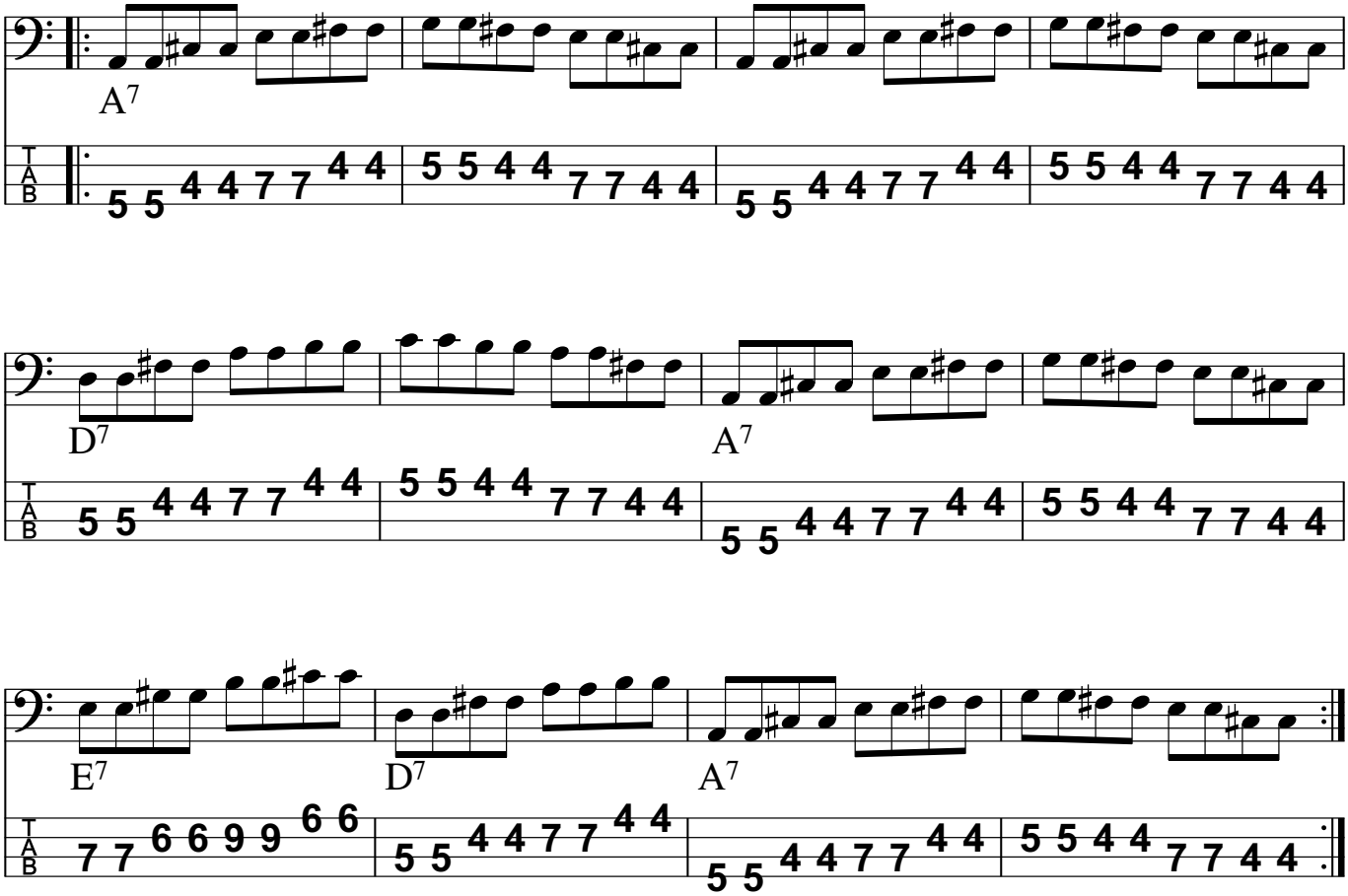
Our final formula uses elements from all the other bass lines we've talked about so far. Like the last variation of the last formula, it's a 2-bar phrase, and this is another one you've probably heard hundreds of times before.

The formula for this one is: 1-3-5-6-7-6-5-3-1

Again, you have to modify your approach when we get to the last phrase because each chord only lasts one bar. In this case, I've just put in the first half of the phrase.



If you doubled every note, you'd get this:



You can find this kind of line in tons of tunes, but perhaps the most famous is another Elvis recording, *Blue Suede Shoes*. This recording uses the simpler quarter note-based line:

Elvis Presley – Blue Suede Shoes

Notice how we went from relatively simple lines, just using the roots of the chords and went all the way to phrases played across multiple bars using 5 different notes over every chord?

These lines are varied enough that they can get you through a ton of different playing situations.

Are there other ways to get through the blues form?

Absolutely! But these are a great place to get started, and once you've mastered these, there's nothing stopping you from learning even more.

I highly encourage you to go through and check out the recording examples I've provided for you. It's one thing to read about these formulas and understand them intellectually, but it's another thing entirely to hear *how* they're played.

In some ways, *how* they are played is even more important that *what* is being played.

Of course if you have questions or need some clarification, just let me know – I'm only an email away.

Thanks so much for downloading this guide, and if it's helped you, send me an email letting me know how. I'd love to hear from you.

Cheers,

Luke

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