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Wynton Marsalis, Artistic Director, Jazz at Lincoln Center

RIDING ON A BLUE NOTE

BY DUKE ELLINGTON

As performed by the Duke Ellington Orchestra

Transcribed by David Berger for Jazz at Lincoln Center

FULL SCORE

This transcription was made especially for Jazz at Lincoln Center's 2011-12
Seventeenth Annual *Essentially Ellington* High School Jazz Band Program.

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ESSENTIALLY
ELLINGTON

jazz

NOTES ON PLAYING ELLINGTON

At least 95% of modern-day large ensemble jazz playing comes out of three traditions: Count Basie's band, Duke Ellington's band, and the orchestrations of small groups. Those young players interested in jazz will be drawn to small groups for the opportunity to improvise and for practical reasons (it is much easier to organize 4 or 5 people than it is 15). Schools have taken over the task (formerly performed by dance bands) of training musicians to be ensemble players. Due to the Basie Band's popularity and its simplicity of style and emphasis on blues and swing, the better educators have almost exclusively adopted this tradition for teaching jazz ensemble playing. As wonderful as Count Basie's style is, it doesn't address many of the important styles developed under the great musical umbrella we call jazz. Duke Ellington's comprehensive and eclectic approach to music offers an alternative.

The stylistic richness of Ellington's music presents a great challenge to educators and performers alike. In Basie's music, the conventions are very nearly consistent. In Ellington's, there are many more exceptions to the rules. This calls for greater knowledge of the language of jazz. Clark Terry, who left Count Basie's band to join Duke Ellington, said, "Count Basie was college, but Duke Ellington was graduate school." Knowledge of Ellington's music prepares you to play any big band music.

The following is a list of performance conventions for the great majority of Ellington's music. Any deviations or additions will be spelled out in the individual performance notes which follow.

1. Listen carefully many times to the Ellington recording of these pieces. There are many subtleties that will elude even the most sophisticated listener at first. Although it was never Ellington's wish to have his recordings imitated, knowledge of these definitive versions will lead musicians to make more educated choices when creating new performances. Ellington's music, though written for specific individuals, is designed to inspire all musicians to express themselves. In addition, you will hear slight note differences in the recording and the transcriptions. This is intentional, as there are mistakes and alterations from the original intent of the music in the recording. You should have your players play what's in the score.

2. General use of swing phrasing. The triplet feel prevails except for ballads or where notations such as even eighths or Latin appear. In these cases, eighth notes are given equal value.

3. There is a chain of command in ensemble playing. The lead players in each section determine the phrasing and volume for their own section, and their section-mates must conform to the lead. When the saxes and / or trombones play with the trumpets, the lead trumpet is the boss. The lead alto and trombone must listen to the first trumpet and follow her. In turn, the other saxes and trombones must follow their lead players. When the clarinet leads the brass section, the brass should not overblow him. That means that the first trumpet is actually playing "second." If this is done effectively, there will be very little balancing work left for the conductor.

4. In Ellington's music, each player should express the individuality of his own line. He must find a musical balance of supporting and following the section leader and bringing out the character of the underpart. Each player should be encouraged to express his or her personality through the music. In this music, the underparts are played at the same volume and with the same conviction as the lead.

5. Blues inflection should permeate all parts at all times, not just when these opportunities occur in the lead.

6. Vibrato is used quite a bit to warm up the sound. Saxes (who most frequently represent the sensual side of things) usually employ a heavy vibrato on harmonized passages and a slight vibrato on unisons. Trumpets (who very often are used for heat and power) use a little vibrato on harmonized passages and no vibrato on unisons. Trombones (who are usually noble) do not use slide vibrato. A little lip vibrato is good at times. Try to match the speed of vibrato. Unisons are played with no vibrato.

7. Crescendo as you ascend and diminuendo as you descend. The upper notes of phrases receive a natural accent and the lower notes ore ghosted. Alto and tenor saxophones need to use sub-tone in the lower part of their range in order to blend properly with the rest of the section. This music was originally written with no dynamics. It pretty much follows the natural tendencies of the instruments; play loud in the loud part of the instrument and soft in the soft part of the instrument. For instance, a high C for a trumpet will be loud and a low C will be soft.

8. Quarter notes are generally played short unless otherwise notated. Long marks above or below a pitch indicate full value: not just long, but full value. Eighth notes ore played full value except when followed by a rest or otherwise notated. All notes longer than a quarter note are played full value, which means if it is followed by a rest, release the note where the rest appears. For example, a half note occurring on beat one of a measure would be released on beat three.

9. Unless they are part of a legato background figure, long notes should be played somewhat fp (forte-piano); accent then diminish the volume. This is important so that the moving parts can be heard over the sustained notes. Don't just hold out the long notes, but give them life and personality: that is, vibrato, inflection, crescendo, or diminuendo. There is a great deal of inflection in this music, and much of this is highly interpretive. Straight or curved lines imply non-pitched glisses, and wavy lines mean scalar (chromatic or diatonic) glisses. In general, all rhythmic figures need to be accented. Accents give the music life and swing. This is very important.

10. Ellington's music is about individuality: one person per part—do not double up because you have extra players or need more strength. More than one on a part makes it sound more like a concert band and less like a jazz band.

11. This is acoustic music. Keep amplification to an absolute minimum; in the best halls, almost no amplification should be necessary. Everyone needs to develop a big sound. It is the conductor's job to balance the band. When a guitar is used, it should be a hollow-body, unamplified rhythm guitar. Simple three-note voicings should be used throughout. An acoustic string bass is a must. In mediocre or poorly designed halls, the bass and piano may need a bit of a boost. I recommend miking them and putting them through the house sound system. This should provide a much better tone than an amplifier. Keep in mind that the rhythm section's primary function is to accompany. The bass should not be as loud as a trumpet. That is unnatural and leads to over-amplification, bad tone, and limited dynamics. Stay away from monitors. They provide a false sense of balance.

12. Solos and rhythm section parts without chord changes should be played as is or with a little embellishment. Solos and rhythm section parts with chord changes should be improvised. However, written passages should be learned because they are an important port of our jazz heritage and help the player understand the function of his particular solo or accompaniment. Soloists should learn the chord changes. Solos should not be approached as opportunities to show off technique, range, or volume, but should be looked at as a great opportunity to further develop the interesting thematic material that Ellington has provided.

13. The notation of plungers for the brass means a rubber toilet plunger bought in a hardware store. Kirkhill is a very good brand (especially if you can find one of their old rubber ones, like the one I loaned Wynton and he lost). Trumpets use 5" diameter and trombones use 6" diameter. Where Plunger/Mute is notated, insert a pixie mute in the bell and use the plunger over the mute. Pixies are available from Humes & Berg in Chicago. Tricky Sam Nanton and his successors in the Ellington plunger trombone chair did not use pixies. Rather, each of them employed a Nonpareil (that's the brand name) trumpet straight mute. Nonpareil has gone out of business, but the Tom Crown Nonpareil trumpet straight mute is very close to the same thing. These mutes create a wonderful sound (very close to the human voice), but they also create some intonation problems which must be corrected

by the lip only. It would be easier to move the tuning slide, but port of the sound is in the struggle to correct the pitch. If this proves too much, stick with the pixie—it's pretty close.

14. The drummer is the de facto leader of the band. He establishes the beat and controls the volume of the ensemble. For big band playing, the drummer needs to use a larger bass drum than he would for small group drumming. A 22" is preferred. The bass drum is played softly (nearly inaudible) on each beat. This is called feathering the bass drum. It provides a very important bottom to the band. The bass drum sound is not a boom and not a thud—it's in between. The larger size drum is necessary for the kicks; a smaller drum just won't be heard. The key to this style is to lust keep time. A rim knock on two and four (chopping wood) is used to lock in the swing. When it comes to playing fills, the fewer, the better.

15. The horn players should stand for their solos and solis. Brass players should come down front for moderate to long solos, surrounding rests permitting. The some applies to the pep section (two trumpets and one trombone in plunger/mutes).

16. Horns should pay close attention to attacks and releases. Everyone should hit together and end together.

17. Brass must be very precise when playing short notes. Notes must be stopped with the tongue, ala Louis Armstrong!!

18. Above all, everyone's focus should remain at all times on the swing. As the great bassist Chuck Israels says, "The three most important things in jazz are rhythm, rhythm, and rhythm, in that order." Or as Bubber Miley (Ellington's first star trumpeter) said, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

GLOSSARY

The following are terms which describe conventions of jazz performance, from traditional New Orleans to the present avant garde.

Break: within the context of an ongoing time feel, the rhythm section stops for one, two, or four bars. Very often a soloist will improvise during a break.

Call and response: repetitive pattern of contrasting exchanges (derived from the church procedure of the minister making a statement and the congregation answering with "amen"). Call-and-response patterns usually pit one group of instruments against another. Sometimes we call this "trading fours," "trading twos," etc., especially when it involves improvisation. The numbers denote the amount of measures each soloist or group plays. Another term frequently used is "swapping fours."

Coda: also known as the "outro." "Tags" or "tag endings" are outgrowths of vaudeville bows that are frequently used as codas. They most often use deceptive cadences that finally resolve to the tonic,2 or they go from the tonic to the sub-dominant and cycle back to the tonic: I V/IV IV #IV° I (second inversion) V/II V/V V I.

Comp: improvise accompaniment (for piano or guitar).

Groove: the composite rhythm. This generally refers to the combined repetitive rhythmic patterns of the drums, bass, piano, and guitar, but may also include repetitive patterns in the horns. Some grooves are standard (i.e., swing, bossa nova, samba), while others are manufactured (original combinations of rhythms).

Head: melody chorus.

Interlude: a different form (of relatively short length) sandwiched between two chorus forms. Interludes that set up a key change are simply called modulations.

Intro: short for introduction.

Ride pattern: the most common repetitive figure played by the drummer's right hand on the ride cymbal or hi-hat.

Riff: a repeated melodic figure. Very often, riffs repeat verbatim or with slight alterations while the harmonies change underneath them.

Shout chorus: also known as the "out chorus," the "sock chorus," or sometimes shortened to just "the shout." It is the final ensemble passage of most big band charts and where the max most often happens.

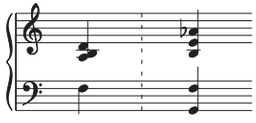
Soli: a harmonized passage for two or more instruments playing the same rhythm. It is customary for horn players to stand up or even move in front of the band when playing these passages. This is done so that the audience can hear them better and to provide the audience with some visual interest. A soli sound particular to Ellington's music combines two trumpets an trombone in plungers/mutes in triadic harmony. This is called the "pep section."

Stop time: a regular pattern of short breaks (usually filled in by a soloist).

Swing: the perfect confluence of rhythmic tension and relaxation in music creating a feeling euphoria and characterized by accented weak beats (a democratization of the beat) and eighth notes that are played as the first and third eighth notes of an eighth-note triplet. Duke Ellington's definition of swing: when the music feels like it is getting faster, but it isn't.

Vamp: a repeated two- or four-bar chord progression. Very often, there may be a riff or riffs played on the vamp.

Voicing: the specific spacing, inversion, and choice of notes that make up a chord. For instance, two voicings for G7 could be:



Note that the first voicing includes a 9th and the second voicing includes a 19 and a 1 3. The addition of 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, and alterations are up to the discretion of the pianist and soloist.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

The following are placed in their order of importance in jazz. We should never lose perspective on this order of priority.

Rhythm: meter, tempo, groove, and form, including both melodic rhythm and harmonic rhythm (the speed and regularity of the chord changes).

Melody: what players play: a tune or series of notes.

Harmony: chords and voicings.

Orchestration: instrumentation and tone colors.

— David Berger

RIDING ON A BLUE NOTE

INSTRUMENTATION

Reed 1 - Soprano Sax	Trumpet 1	Trombone 1	Guitar
Reed 2 - Alto Sax	Trumpet 2	Trombone 2	Piano
Reed 3 - Tenor Sax	Trumpet 3	Trombone 3	Bass
Reed 4 - Baritone Sax			Drums

ORIGINAL RECORDING INFORMATION

Composer: Duke Ellington
Arranger: Duke Ellington
Recorded: February 2, 1938 in New York City
Master Number: M-751-1
Original 78 rpm Issue: Brunswick 8083

Not Currently Available on CD or as digital download

Personnel: Duke Ellington (piano, arranger); Rex Stewart (cornet); Freddy Jenkins, Arthur Whetsel, Cootie Williams (trumpet); Lawrence Brown, Joe Nanton (trombone); Juan Tizol (valve trombone); Otto Hardwick (alto saxophone, soprano saxophone); Johnny Hodges (alto saxophone); Barney Bigard (tenor saxophone); Harry Carney (baritone saxophone, alto saxophone); Hayes Alvis, Billy Taylor (bass); Sonny Greer (drums).

Soloists: Cootie Williams (trumpet); Duke Ellington (piano)

REHEARSAL NOTES

1938 was one of Duke Ellington's most prolific years. Although he was still 2 years away from what many critics call his peak years, the 1930's was his decade with the most growth and experimentation. It is no coincidence that by the mid-thirties, swing had become a national obsession. Ellington's band returned to the Cotton Club, which by this time had moved from Harlem to mid-town Manhattan. With the band sitting down in New York City for the year, Ellington had plenty of time to write and record new music. Although some of the music was specific to acts in the show (Swingtime In Honolulu, The Skronch), almost all the new pieces were designed to suit the swing-dancing public. **Riding on a Blue Note** is a prime example. Simple and swinging.

The straight-forward form consists of an 8-bar introduction followed by 3 choruses of a 32-bar AABA song form. The trumpet plays call and response on the intro and then solos over the first 2 choruses. The piano solos over the final bridge.

The key to getting a great performance of this piece is to establish and maintain an infectious, relaxed, yet forward-moving swing from the rhythm section and all the horns.

With the drums on brushes and acoustic bass and guitar, the horns are free to play at a softer volume than usual. Don't confuse lack of volume with a decrease in energy and intensity. Nearly every note the horns play should be accented. We don't get loud until the shout chorus (the pickup to letter **I**). Everything comes together in this proud and exhilarating shout chorus.

If you want to open the chart up for solos, I suggest putting repeats around letters **E** through **H**. The written backgrounds can be played once or even twice depending on the number and length of solos. The chord changes are simple and pretty easy to hear and the tempo is not fast at all. This is a good piece to give inexperienced improvisers a chance to play at rehearsals.

Note the difference between the tied eighths in measures 2, 4 and 6 of the intro and the short eighths in measure 7. The tied eighths are not really full value. They are basically short but put a little extra puff of air at the end of them so they are not clipped and hang over ever so slightly. This is a subtle point, but will help make the music feel relaxed. Remember that quarter notes are short.

There is a tendency to rush syncopations and there are a lot of syncopations in this chart. Make sure you keep the tempo steady. Make each beat as fat as you can and still be in time. Feel the triplet subdivisions.

Be careful when playing over the seams (the last bar of a letter and the first bar of the next letter). Ideas in the arrangement tend to change in those spots and shifting gears can take our attention away from keep the beat steady. Special concentration and rehearsal of these problem areas will yield great results.

You will notice that the first reed part is on soprano saxophone for the entire piece and that the part is in the middle to low register. Ellington wrote this for Johnny Hodges. Hodges had a warm sound even on the lowest notes of the horn, so he blended perfectly with the ensemble. The soprano can sound more like a duck in the low register and tends to stand out. This will be a challenge for young players (and most older players too). If you don't have a soprano saxophone or this part is too difficult, you might transpose it up a perfect fifth and play on alto saxophone.

Don't be misled by the lack of high brass notes and sixteenth notes and think that this is an easy chart to play. Because of the simplicity, we need to be more expressive than we would on a piece with technical demands. And above all be swinging.

— David Berger

To view videos of Wynton Marsalis leading the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in rehearsals of the Essentially Ellington 2011-12 repertoire please visit: jalc.org/EssentiallyEllington.

CONDUCTOR

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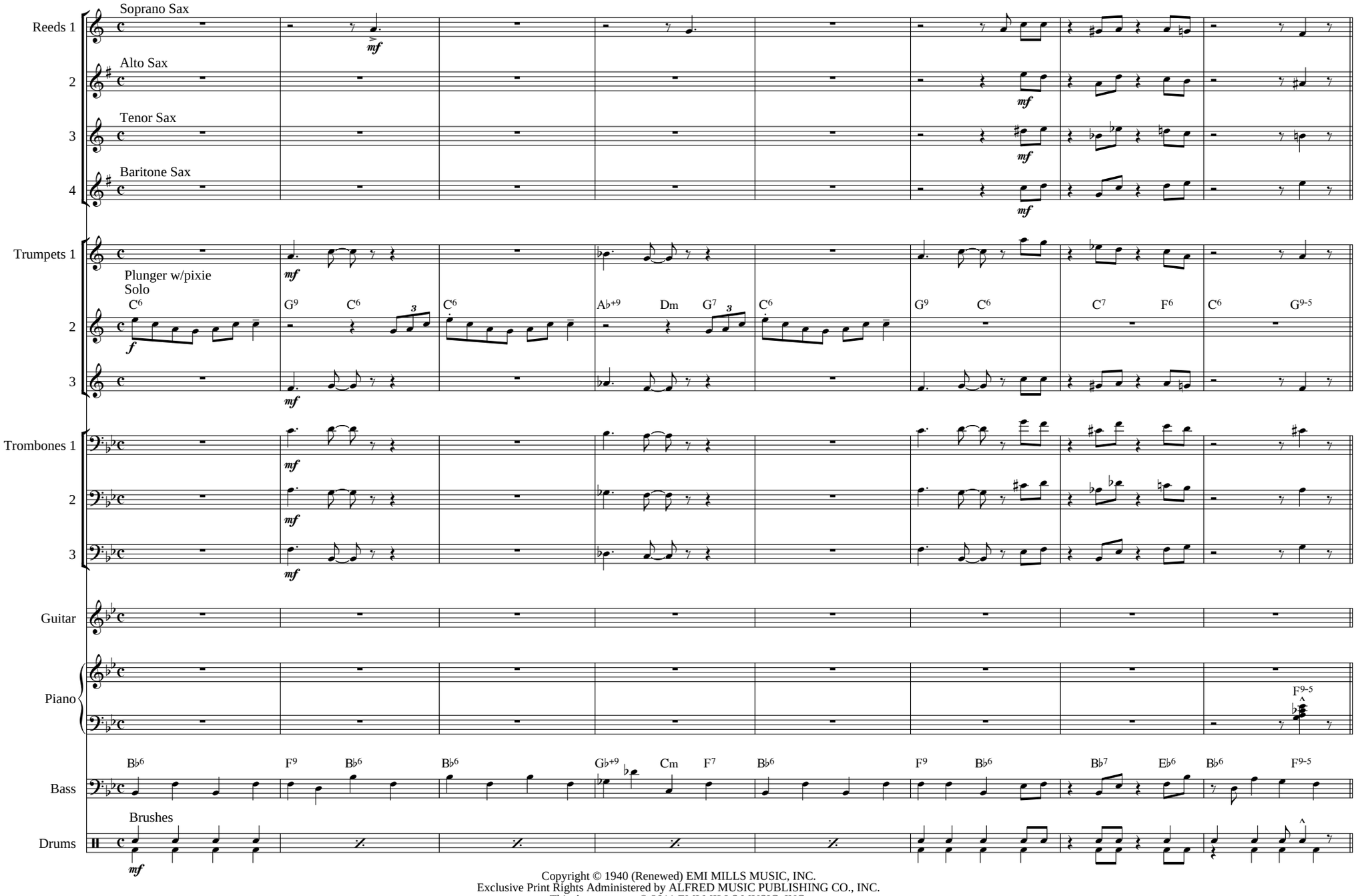
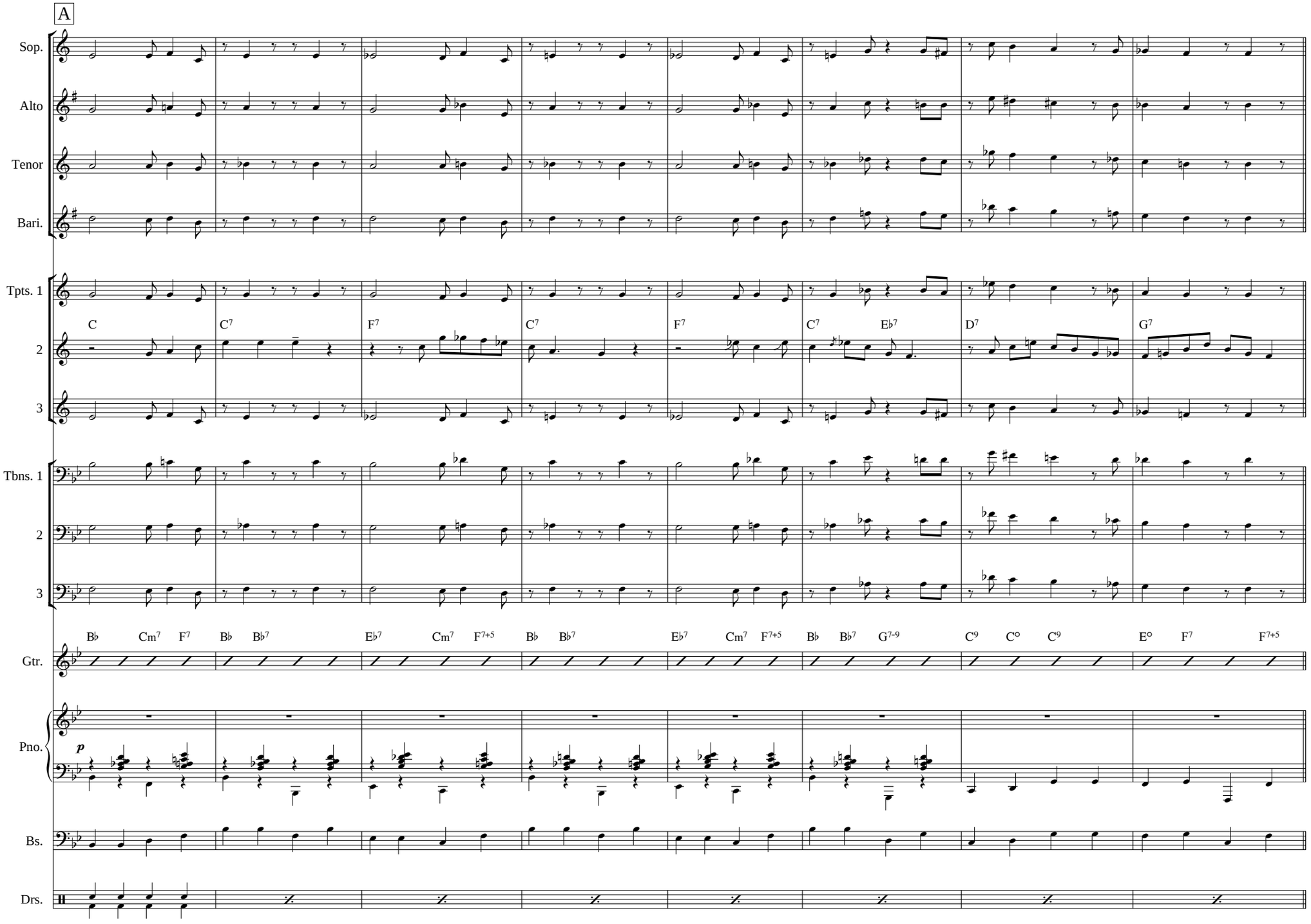
RIDING ON A BLUE NOTE

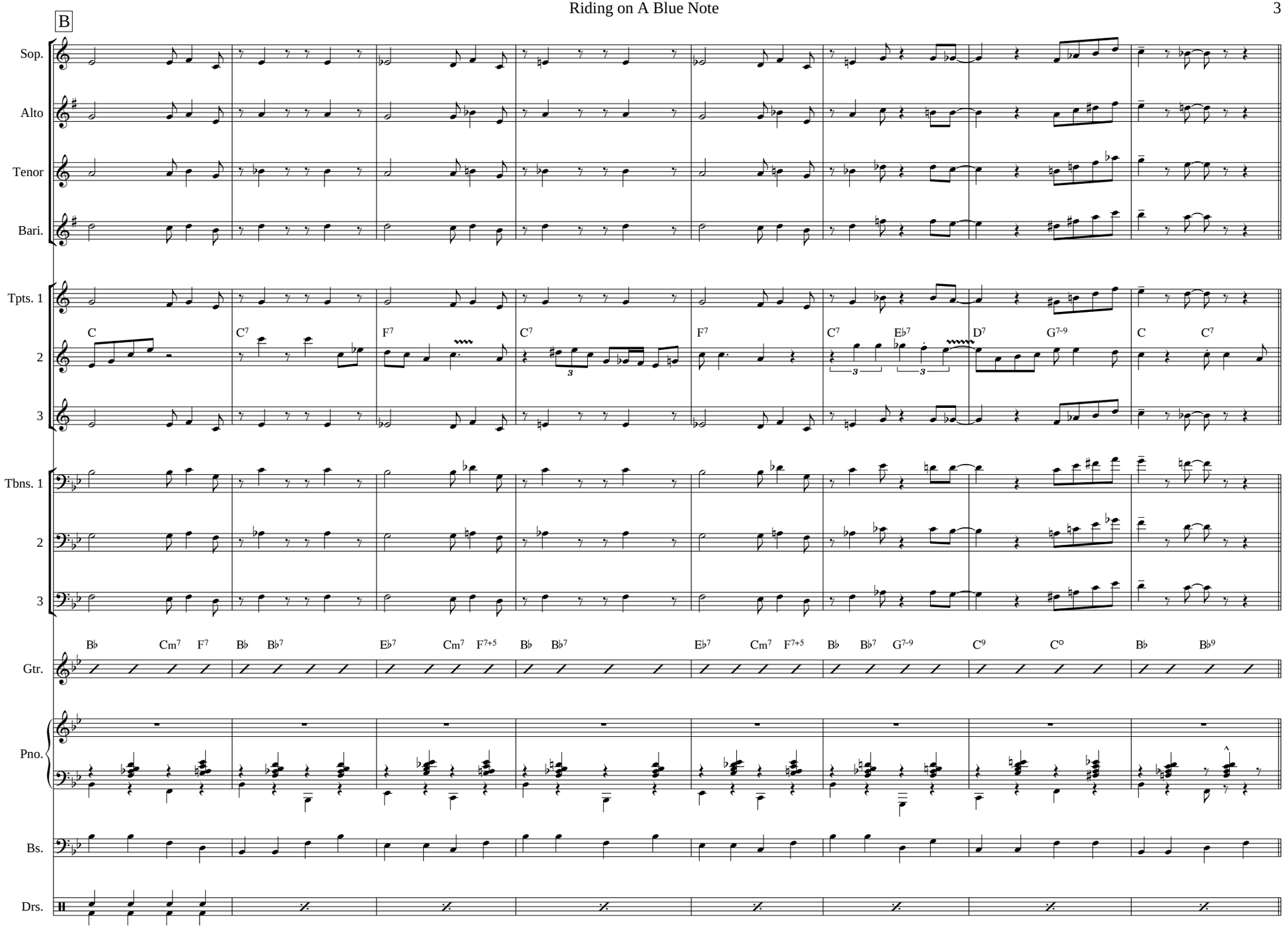
Composed by Duke Ellington
Transcribed by David Berger

Medium Swing ♩ = 146



Riding on A Blue Note




B
Sop.
Alto
Tenor
Bari.
Tpts. 1
2
3
C C7 F7 C7 F7 C7 E♭7 D7 G7-9 C C7
Tbns. 1
2
3
B♭ Cm7 F7 B♭ B♭7 E♭7 Cm7 F7+5 B♭ B♭7 E♭7 Cm7 F7+5 B♭ B♭7 G7-9 C9 C° B♭ B♭9
Gtr.
Pno.
Bs.
Drs.