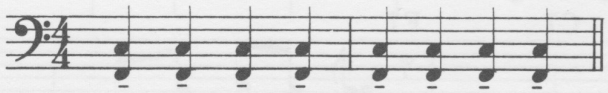
The Flat-Four Beat

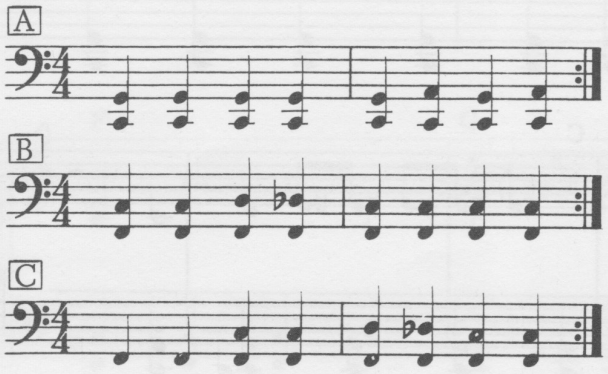
Many of the old blues pianists played in run-down shacks called barrelhouses. Often these buildings were literally constructed from beer kegs, and the term barrelhouse was not only an apt description of the shacks, but also a colorful name for the music played inside.

Few, if any, of the early blues pianists could read music; they simply made up their own songs or learned new material by ear as they traveled from barrelhouse to barrelhouse. Not being able to read music was a help in some ways, for these bluesmen never learned the so-called "right" way to use the left hand, nor were they influenced by classical keyboard composers like Bach, Beethoven or Chopin.

The result was the evolution of a new kind of piano playing, totally unlike the classical tradition, that relied upon a repetitious, steady bass line. In notation, the early barrelhouse bass lines look like this:



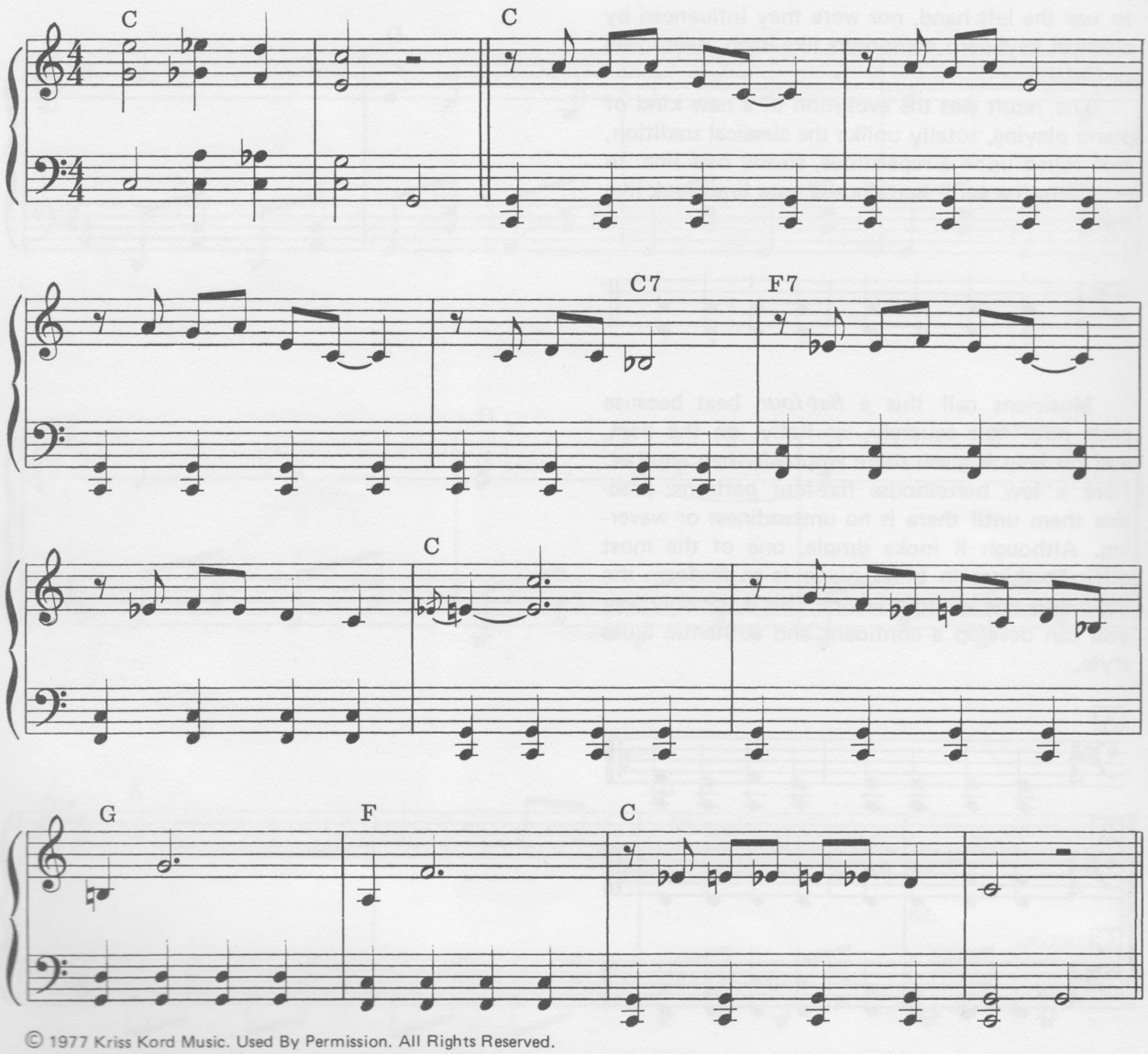
Musicians call this a *flat-four* beat because each note falls squarely, or flatly, on the beat, and no beat is given more emphasis than another. Here a few barrelhouse flat-four patterns; practice them until there is no unsteadiness or wavering. Although it looks simple, one of the most difficult things in blues piano is to perform the basic bass line without errors. This is the only way you can develop a confident and authentic blues style.



Hayfever Blues is arranged in the early barrelhouse style. Note the two-measure introduction, which leads directly into the barrelhouse flat-four bass line. In measure nine, a grace note, or slide, is used; I will discuss this technique further on page 36. Watch the offbeat anticipations carefully, and you will turn *Hayfever Blues* into an exciting, foot-stomping barrelhouse number.

Hayfever Blues

Eric Kriss



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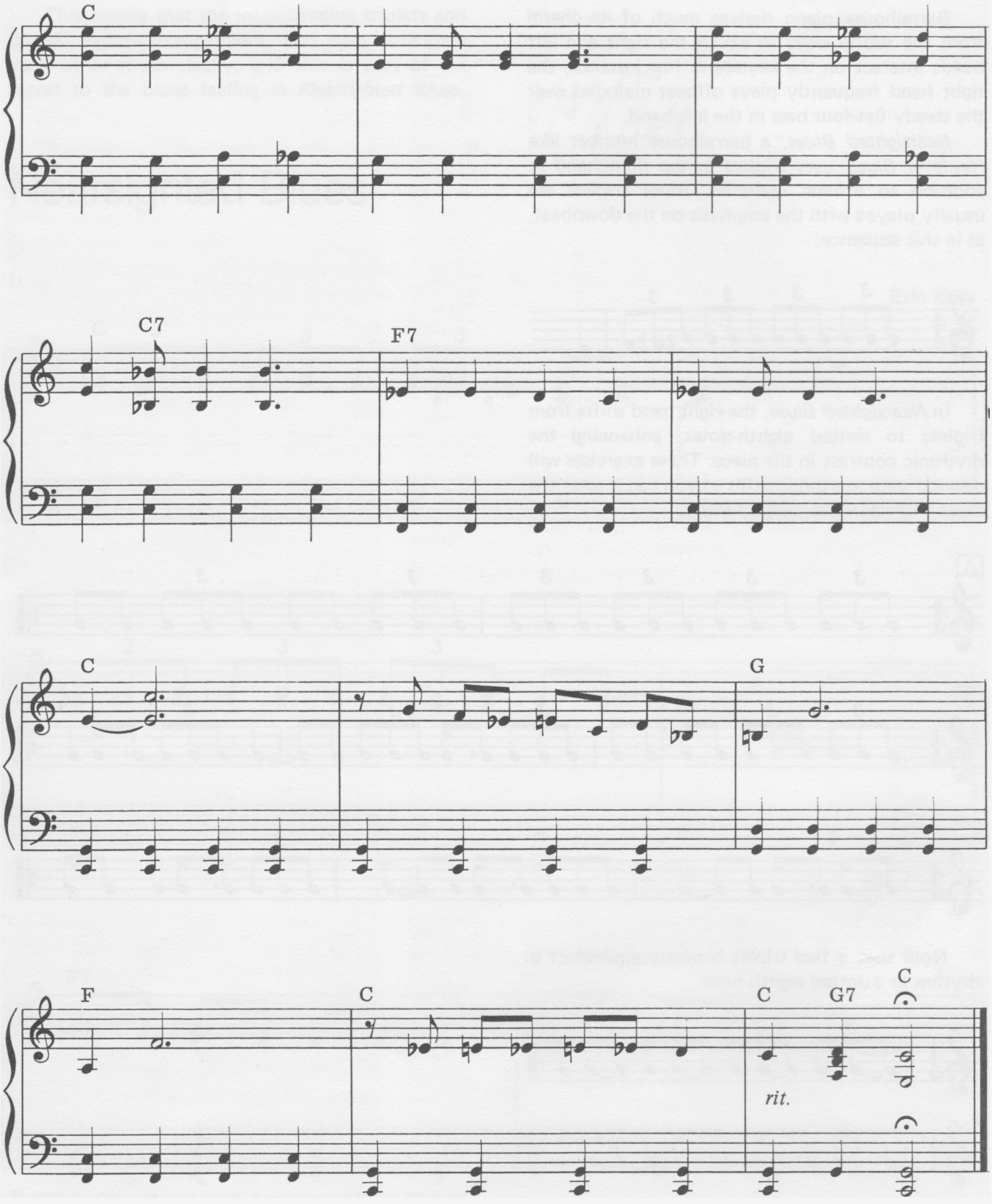
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