

Chords 6-, 4, 1, 5D (reggae)

The next two jam tracks illustrate the most common uses of these chords in popular songs being composed right now. The first is a reggae track with the following chord progression:



This sequence of chords is not limited to reggae music, of course. In the last year alone I've heard at least ten different hit songs whose main section consists of exactly these four chords in exactly this order. Below is a map of the chord notes across all four chords:

7	7	⑦	⑦
⑥	⑥	6	6
⑤	5	⑤	⑤
4	④	4	④
③	③	③	3
2	2	2	②
①	①	①	1
6-	4	1	5D

Practice tips

Reggae is a style that many improvisers have trouble with initially, because the off-beat rhythms of reggae music put the chords on a somewhat secondary or more abstract plane. So if you're having trouble getting started with this jam track, don't worry. That's normal, and it's exactly why we included a reggae track in this collection. It's an opportunity to practice improvising in a real world situation where the chord progression is more subtle and perhaps difficult to perceive at first.

The first thing to realize is that chords change on the bar line, meaning that there is one chord per measure, exactly like most of the other tracks in this collection. But very often in reggae music, the instruments playing these chords only play on the off beats, so you don't actually hear the new chord until half a beat *after* the chord changes.

This is an example of something that is true generally in popular music: chords are present even when no one is playing them. This is always true, even in the earlier jam tracks that you've already mastered from this collection. In any one of those jam tracks, if all the other musicians in the band suddenly decided to remain silent on beat 1 and then resume playing on beat 2 of that measure, the chord on beat 1 would still be whatever the chord progression called for, even if nobody chooses to play it.

And actually there are styles of music that make much more playful use of silence than reggae music. The off-beat chords in reggae music is very mild compared to Cuban "son" music where the musicians almost never play on beat 1. And in flamenco and jazz music, there is an even more complex relationship between the underlying patterns and what the musicians actually play.

In all of these styles, there are two layers of experience taking place. One layer is imaginary, which is the underlying order in the measures and the chord progressions. The other layer is real, which are the notes that the musicians are actually playing. In the case of this reggae jam track, it's the imaginary layer that you need to perceive clearly in order to feel the chord progression and find your place in the music.

Start by just listening to the track, without your instrument. As you listen to the jam track, look at the drawing above of the measures and follow along in this drawing. Count the beats if you have to. (There are four beats in each measure.) Struggle with this problem until you're able to orient yourself in the measures and clearly recognize beats 1, 2, 3 and 4 of each measure. Then try saying the name of the chord at the beginning of each new measure, right on beat 1. Remember that on this first beat you'll be accompanied by the bass player but the guitar and piano won't play until half a beat later.

This is what makes the reggae beat hard for some improvisers to feel at first. We're so accustomed to hearing the first beat of every measure emphasized as a heavy downbeat. But here in this reggae track, all you hear on beat 1 is a sheepish note from the bass player. Keep listening to the music until you can clearly hear this soft note from the bass player as beat 1 of each new measure, and then everything else will snap into place and you'll the rhythm perfectly. Then from this place of rhythmic connection you can pick up your instrument and join in.

Note about transposing for wind instruments

Remember that not all instruments use the same names for the notes. In the tracks, the key listed for each jam track always refers to the concert key. If you play an instrument that is not in concert key, remember to transpose this key name to the corresponding key on your instrument. (If you're not sure how to do this for your instrument, a quick Google search will lead you to many clear explanations.)