

Building a Solid “Jazz” Chord Foundation

by Curt Sheller

Chords can be grouped into four categories: Basic Open Position Chords, Barre Form Chords, 4-Part Contemporary, aka “Jazz” Chords and Free Form Chords.

Your Basic Open Position chords are the common, first chords that a beginning guitar student typically learns. Sometimes referred to as “cowboy” or “folk” chords. These include E Em E7 A Am A7 D Dm D7 C C7 G G7 and B7. The most common barre forms are movable versions of the E Em and E7 and the A Am A7 basic chords. Contemporary chords are 4-Part chords and the subject of this article. And finally Free Form chords where you know the notes of the chord and build chords not in the other three categories.

Beyond learning basic guitar chords, most guitar players struggle with advanced chords. These more sophisticated voicings, commonly called “jazz” chords, find a wide use in all forms of music and styles. These 4-part chords are the bread and butter of jazz guitar.

This article presents an organized and efficient approach to this mysterious subject of advanced chords. Chord dictionaries are not the answer. Even chord theory does not offer any insight into unraveling the complexity of advanced chords on guitar.

Building Chords

There are several ways to build chords - but the best way to build chords on a guitar is by using numeric formulas based on the scale degrees of the fifteen major scales. These numeric formulas are taken from the major scales by numbering each scale degree 1 through 13, skipping the octave (8), 10th and 12th scale degrees, as these are duplicates of the fundamental triad chord tones, the root or one, third and fifth and not used to create chords.

Example: **C Major Scale**

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	D	F	A
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

This can also be applied to any of the 15 major scales:

Example: **G Major Scale**

G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	A	C	E
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

Example: **F Major Scale**

F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	G	Bb	D
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

(See the Chord Building Chart for all fifteen major keys)

What is a Chord?

A chord is three or more notes sounded simultaneously. The minimum number of notes required for a chord is three. These three note chords are called *triads*. Two notes are usually referred to as an *interval* or *dyad*. Each note of a chord is called a *chord tone*.

Chords are categorized into one of four types: Major, Minor, Diminished or Augmented. Here is the formula for building each of these four basic triads.

Major Triads

A major triad is created using the **1**, **3** and **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C Major triad the notes would be C, E, and G. For F Major the notes F, A, and C would be used. For G Major the notes G, B and D, etc... Common notation for a major chord is a capital letter only or a capital letter and maj, MAJ, MA or Δ.

Minor Triads

A minor triad is created using the **1**, flat **3** and **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C Minor triad the notes would be C, Eb and G. Any minor triad can be created by lowering the third of a major triad one fret. Common notation for a minor chord is a capital letter and a lowercase m, mi, min or -.

Diminished Triads

A diminished triad is created using the **1**, flat **3** and flat **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C diminished triad the notes would be C, Eb and Gb. Any diminished triad can be created by lowering the fifth of a minor triad one fret. Common notation for a diminished chord is a capital letter and a lowercase dim or degree sign °.

Augmented Triads

An augmented triad is created using the **1**, **3** and sharp **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C augmented triad the notes would be C, E and G#. Any augmented triad can be created by raising the fifth of a major triad 1 fret. Common notation for an augmented chord is a capital letter and a lowercase aug or a plus sign +.

A Few Chord Building Rules

When lowering or raising a scale degree to create a chord tone the alphabetical name of the note can not change. Example C must remain C either C#, Cb Cx (double sharp) or Cbb (double flat). Lowering a sharp note removes the sharp, C# becomes C. Raising a sharp note becomes a double sharp, C# becomes Cx (double sharp). Raising a flat note removes the flat, Bb becomes B. Lowering a flat note becomes a double flat, Bb becomes Bbb (double flat). These double flats and double sharps are the theoretically correct spelling for the note. A notated note is different than the pitch a note produces. F# the note produces the same pitch as Gb the note.

Seventh Chords

There is one other chord beyond triads that can be considered a basic chord. This is a seventh chord, created by adding the flat seventh to a major triad giving us the formula **1, 3, 5** and flat **7**.

Example Using the Chord Building Chart (D7)

1. Find the Scale Degree Formula for the chord. Example D7 is a Major chord type and specifically a 7th chord. It's formula is 1 3 5 b7
2. Find the key of the chord based on the root or letter name of the chord. The root of a D7 chord is D.
3. Lookup the intervals 1 3 5 and 7 for the key of D (D F# A C#). Now flat the seventh as required for a 7th chord. This will make the C# a C. The notes of a D7 chord are D F# A C.

Chord Building Chart

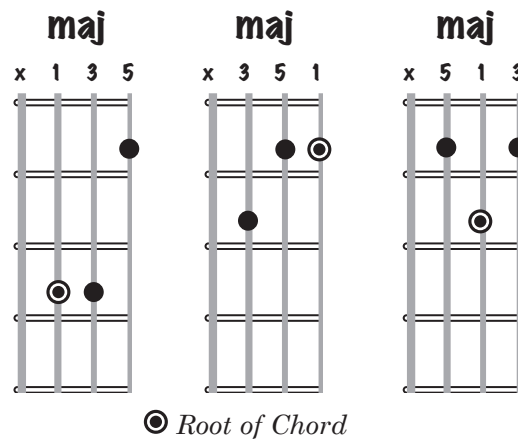
Column 1 is the Root or 1 of the key.

The Fifteen Major Scales (Keys)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	D	F	A
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	A	C	E
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	E	G	B
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	B	D	F#
E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	F#	A	C#
B	C#	D#	E	F#	G#	A#	C#	E	G#
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	E#	G#	B	D#
C#	D#	E#	F#	G#	A#	B#	D#	F#	A#
F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	G	Bb	D
Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	C	Eb	G
Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb	C	D	F	Ab	C
Ab	Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	G	Bb	Db	F
Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb	C	Eb	Gb	Bb
Gb	Ab	Bb	Cb	Db	Eb	F	Ab	Cb	Eb
Cb	Db	Eb	Fb	Gb	Ab	Bb	Db	Fb	Ab

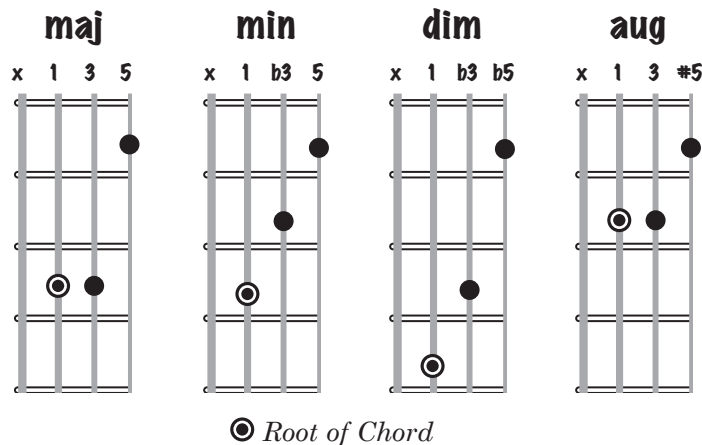
Creating the 4 Basic Chord Types

Here is an example of three possible voicings for a major triad using strings ①, ② and ③



Chords are shown voiced on the thin four strings of the guitar, strings ① ② ③ ④

Starting with the first major triad above, we can create a minor triad by lowering the third of the chord one fret. To create a diminished triad, lower the fifth of a minor triad one fret. To create an augmented triad, raise the fifth of a major triad one fret.



By keeping track of the location of the chord tones you can create other chords from known chords. This is the key to building a massive chord vocabulary. Being able to create chords on the fly from a solid foundation of basic chords.

Transposing Chords and Chord Progressions

The movement of each note of the chord up and down the neck the same number of frets is called transposition. This can be done using the *Transposition Chart* that follows.

- a) All chords and progressions can be transposed to any key.
- b) In order to transpose a progression, you must transpose each individual chord by the same distance, in the same direction.
- c) Following the Transposition Chart below, experiment with any chord or progression in any key.

Transposition Chart

Ascending Keys (Moving UP the neck)	Descending Keys (Moving DOWN the neck)
↑ B	C
A#, Bb	B
A	Bb, A#
G#, Ab	A
G	Ab, G#
F#, Gb	G
F	Gb, F#
E	F
D#, Eb	E
D	Eb, D#
C#, Db	D
C	Db, C#

How to Use the Transposition Chart

- Pick a chord.
- Find its root on either chart.
- To transpose upward, use the ascending keys chart.
To transpose downward, use the descending keys chart.
- Each new key is 1 fret above or below the original key.
- Don't forget to transpose each chord of a progression.
- Remember that the chord type remains the same for each chord. Example: m7 stays m7, 7 stays 7, etc...

Examples:

If you are in the key of C and move all chords down (lower) 3 frets, you are now the key of A.

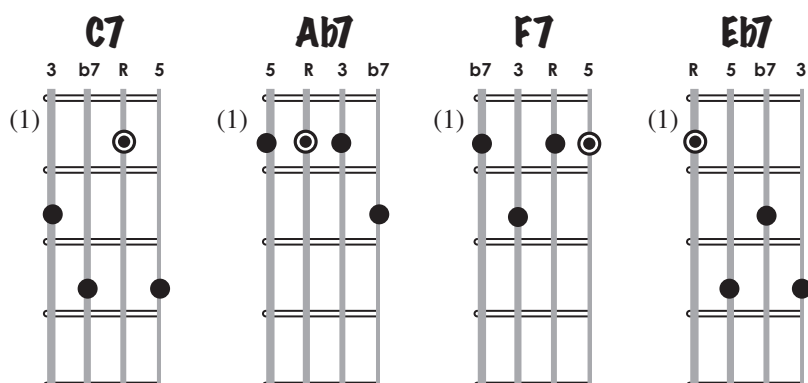
If you are in the key of E and move all chords up (higher) 3 frets, you are now in the key of G.

Building More Advanced Chords

Building more advanced 4-part chords can be accomplished using the same principles that were used to create the four basic triads. For these more advanced "jazz" chords, we will use a seventh chord as the starting point.

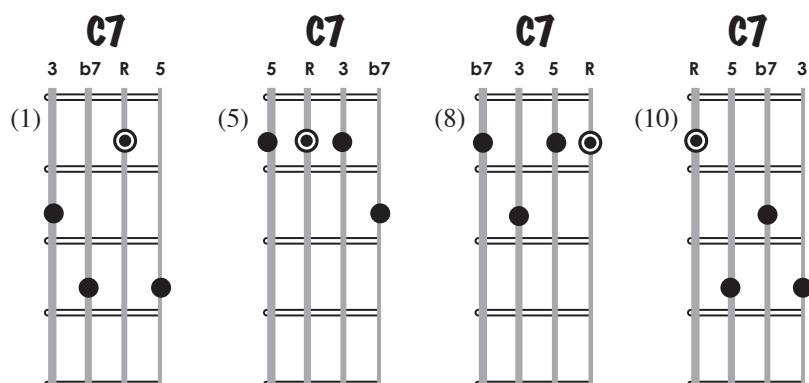
A 4-part chord, as the names implies, contains 4 notes on a standard tuned guitar. Four different voicings of this chord can be played on most combinations of four different strings.

Here are four seventh chords played at fret one.

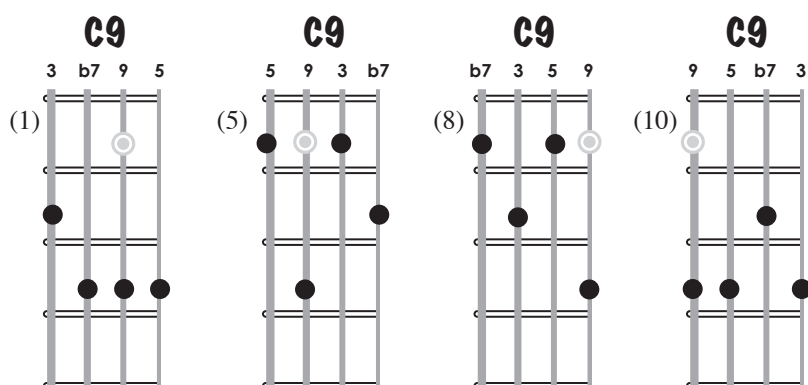


Chords are shown voiced on the thin four strings of the guitar, strings ① ② ③ ④

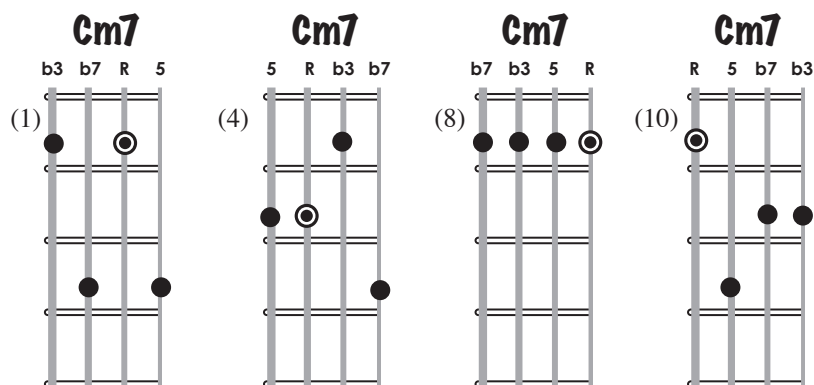
Here are the above four seventh chords transposed to C7 by raising each note the chord the same number of frets (based on the transposition chart).



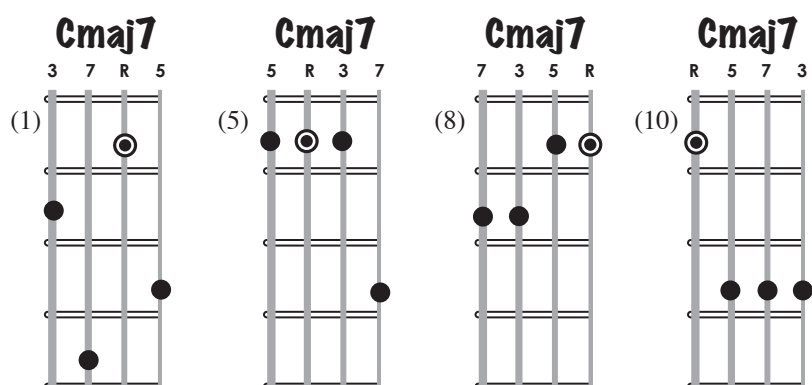
These seventh chords are major chords types, and the foundation for building the 4-part major chord types. Here are examples of creating four ninth chords by raising the root of each seventh chord two frets.



From the four seventh chords, we can create four minor seventh (m7) chords by lowering the third of each chord one fret. These minor seventh chords are minor chords types, and the foundation for building all 4-part minor chord types.



From the four seventh chords we can create four major seventh (maj7) chords by raising the seventh of each chord one fret. These major seventh chords are major chords types.



From these voicings of a 7, m7 and maj7 chord the common II V I progressions can be played. This progression, in various keys is found in a large majority of the standard jazz repertoire.

This same process can be used to create diminished and augmented chord types.

Scale Degree Formula Chart

Here are the scale degree formula to build the basic triads and 4-part chords and some of the common notations that you will encounter.

Major Chord Types

Major	Scale degree formula: Notation*:	1 3 5 Capital letter only or MAJ. maj, Δ
Dominant 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 5 b7 7, dom7
Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 5 7 maj7, MAJ7, MA7, Δ7
Major 6	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 5 6 6, maj6, MAJ6, MA6, 6

Minor Chord Types

Minor	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 5 m, mi, min, -
Minor 7	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 5 b7

Minor-Major 7	Notation:	m7, mi7, min7, -7
	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 5 7
Minor 6	Notation:	m ^(L7) , min ^(maj7) , m7, m ^{maj7} , -(7)
	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 5 6
	Notation:	m6, -6, mi6, min6

Diminished Chord Types

Diminished	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 b5
	Notation:	o, dim
Half-Diminished 7	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 b5 b7
	Notation:	Ø ⁷ , half dim ⁷
Diminished-Major 7	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 b5 7
	Notation:	o ^(L7) , dim ^(L7)
Diminished 7	Scale degree formula:	1 b3 b5 bb7
	Notation:	o ⁷ , dim ⁷

Augmented Chord Types

Augmented	Scale degree formula:	1 3 #5
	Notation:	+, aug
Augmented 7	Scale degree formula:	1 3 #5 b7
	Notation:	+7, aug7
Augmented-Major 7	Scale degree formula:	1 3 #5 7
	Notation:	+L7, aug ^{L7} , L7 ⁽⁺⁵⁾

* A root note is presumed to be in front of each notation.

Example: C, C7, Cm, Cm7, Cdim, Co7, C7+, Caug7

Building a Core Set of 4-part Chords

A *Core* set of voicings on guitar would meet the following, simple requirements.

- 1) Four voicings for each chord on a given set of four strings. This we can call a chord string family, such as *string family* ① ② ③ ④
- 2) A string family that has a top note of the chord on string ①, ② and ③. This would make a total of 4 chord voicings for each of the three string families for a grand total of twelve chords. An example would be twelve C7 chords.

A chord with a top note on string ③ can only be voiced using strings ③ ④ ⑤ and ⑥.

There are a few string families that can place a melody or top note of a chord on string ② and ①. For string ①, the string family ① ② ③ ④ would meet that requirements and for string ②, the string family ② ③ ④ ⑥ is a very useful chord voicing.

Here are all the possible combinations in order of possible mastery:

Core Set (12)

1 2 3 4

2 3 4 6

3 4 5 6

Optional Families to add to the core set for a total of 20

2 3 4 5

1 2 3 5

More optional Families...

1 2 4 5

1 2 3 6

1 2 4 6

1 2 5 6

1 3 4 5

1 3 5 6

1 4 5 6

2 3 5 6

2 4 5 6

Not all voicings of every chord are practical or possible but should be explore, especially the basic triads and eleven 4-part chords from the Scale Degree Formula Chart. These chords are the foundation for building more advanced chords using extensions and alterations.

Suggested Learning Order

Core Chords

7, m7, maj7, m7b5, dim7, aug7

Additional Core Chords

maj7 to 6th

m7 to m6

m7 to mL7

Diminished and Augmented Chords

m7b5 to dimL7 (*Rare*)

aug7 to augL7 (*Rare*)

Upper Partial-Extensions

9, 11 and 13

Alterations

b5, #5, b9, #9, #11, b13

At this point you should have the ability to voice ANY chord, numerous places on the guitar.

Here is an example using all four C7 voicings in a 12 measure blues in the key of C.

A 12 Measure Blues - Key of C

The following table summarizes the chord voicings and fret positions for each measure of the 12 Measure Blues in the Key of C:

Measure	Chord	Alterations	Right Hand Frets	Left Hand Frets
1	C7		3, 1, 3, 2	3, 1, 3, 2
2	F7		1, 1, 2, 1	1, 1, 2, 1
3	C7		3, 1, 3, 2	3, 1, 3, 2
4	C7		6, 5, 5, 5	6, 5, 5, 5
5	F7		5, 4, 5, 3	5, 4, 5, 3
6	F7		8, 6, 8, 7	8, 6, 8, 7
7	C7		8, 8, 8, 8	8, 8, 8, 8
8	C7		12, 11, 12, 10	12, 11, 12, 10
9	G7		10, 8, 10, 9	10, 8, 10, 9
10	F7		11, 10, 10, 10	11, 10, 10, 10
11	C7		8, 8, 8, 8	8, 8, 8, 8
12	G7		10, 8, 10, 12	10, 8, 10, 12

For more information on building 4-part chords, shameless plug coming, see my books *The Advance Guide to Guitar Chords vol 1 and 2*, and *The Advance Guide to Guitar Chords Volume 3* for seven string guitar, low “A” tuning. These books provide detailed information on voicing 4-part chords. They cover all major, minor, diminished and augmented chords types, their upper partials, alterations, add, sus and slash chords.. 🎸

Curt Sheller is a jazz guitarist performing in a variety of solo, duo and group settings and educator from Pottstown, PA. In 2002 Curt released his debut CD, Midnight At the Jazz Cafe - The Curt Sheller Trio

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