How to Read Chord Charts

Learning to read chord charts is fun, easy and it will open a new world of songs to you, as you will now be able to decipher the "code". As a teacher and studio guitarist, I use charts all the time – especially for songs that I am not familiar with, or don't have the time or need for memorizing. This method of playing music is not that different from preparing a speech and then reading it, or referring to your notes throughout the speech. Suffice it to say, if you can read charts, your repertoire of playable songs is practically endless!

...as long as you have the chart, of course!

There are many chart types, but only a few that you will see often. The types that we will be covering in this section are the most common and most useful; namely the "standard" and "number" charts. Now, I know you're REALLY EXCITED to just "jump into it", but before we can unlock these charts, there are a few things we need to go over...

Meter – Most songs begin and end with the same "meter". Meter is defined as: rhythm that continuously repeats a single basic pattern. About 99 percent of today's music is in "4", which means that the basic pattern repeats every 4 beats. Most other tunes are in 8 or 6, where the pattern repeats every 8 or 6 beats, respectively. Every now and then, you will find a song written in an "odd" time signature like 5 or 7. "Money" by Pink Floyd, for example, is in 7. If our chart says "in 4", that means that the basic pattern - for the most part – will repeat every 4 beats. If there is a strumming rhythm, it will typically repeat every 4 beats as well. If you have trouble counting to the music, here are some things that might help:

* Most songs emphasize the "1" beat. It's when most chords transition from one to another.

* The snare drum (the very loud "crack" you can easily hear on most recordings) is usually on the "2" and "4".

Capo and Feel – If the song needs a capo (which, you'll recall, is an easy means of transposing chords) it will typically be denoted as, "Capo2", "Capo3", etc. If the notation is "Capo3", this indicates that you should put the capo on the 3rd fret. Often times, charts won't mention what the "feel" of the song is. No problem! Just capo where indicated and act as if the capo is the nut of the guitar. If you move the capo to the 3rd fret, you will need to play your chords 3 frets higher than you would if you did not use the capo. I will often denote the feel of the song – especially if it's a number chart - so you know what chord to play for the number represented...

...more on that later.

Groupings– For the following examples, I will be referring to the sample charts following this section. Chords will be separated from each other when they represent a "measure". If a song is "in 4", you will see a chord sepa- rated by a space and then another chord, etc. For a song like "Big Cheater", each chord represents 4 beats. So, there would be a total of 16 beats for the following chord progression, E-, D, C, B7. If a measure has more than one chord in it, it's called a split measure and is denoted by an underline. For example, in "Hurray", the 10th mea- sure of the verse is split C D. Since this is still a measure of "6", C would get 3 beats and D would get 3 beats. In "Counting Song", the intro and verses are all split. Since that song is in 4, each chord would get 2 beats because they share the measure with another chord. Then in the chorus, it would be back to our normal full measure of 4 beats per chord. Sometimes you will see "hash" marks over chords if it's not an evenly split measure. In "Hurts" you will find an "uneven" measure in the 1st bar (measure) of the bridge. The C chord would normally be held out for 3 beats and the D for one beat, but we have yet another notation to consider. The "p" above the D means that you "push" the D chord. Basically, you just play it a little earlier than you would normally play it. To be exact, you play the D on the "and of 3", not the 4. If we count 1+2+3+4+, the C is held for 1+2+3 and the D is played on the + of the 3 and held out for +4+.

The last part is a bit complex, so if you don't get it, don't worry. Come back to it though; even though you won't run into it very often, you will hear a difference.

Inversions – Inversions are chords that have another note from that chord that is played in the bass instead of the "root". A C chord has a C in the root; a D chord has a D in the root, etc. Sometimes you will see a chord symbol like C/E as we see in the 3rd measure of the chorus of "Ellen". Simply put, this is a C chord with an E in the bass. Normally, when we play a C chord, we mute the low E string (6th or thickest string) with our thumb, or we don't strum it at all. That would produce a "sonically correct C". However, when a "/" chord is represented, that usually means that another instrument (usually the bass) is playing that low note, instead of the root of the chord (i.e. C). Other examples that you will see often times are G/B, which means a G chord with a B in the bass (2nd fret, fifth string). C/G is a C chord with a G in the bass (3rd fret, 6th string). D/F# is a D chord with an F# in the bass (2nd fret, 6th string). I like to reach my thumb around the neck and play that F# with my thumb (difficult for smaller hands). Often times you will have to change your fingering in order to produce this new inversion. Also, whenever you see a "/" chord, you can safely play the chord to the left of the slash. If it's a C/E, you just play the C. If it's a D/F#, you can just play the D. If you are playing with a bassist, he would usually play the lower note and your ear won't be searching for it. If you are playing by yourself (solo guitar), you might find something "missing" with the chord if you don't include the lower note.

If you don't quite get this section on inversions, don't worry! Learning is a process. Come back to it.....eventually, it will make sense.

Number charts – Studio musicians (especially in Nashville) who frequently need to transpose or change the key of a song they are recording, will often prefer to use a "number chart". These charts refer to numbers instead of letters and are very easy to transpose. In a nutshell, number charts substitute numbers instead of letters.

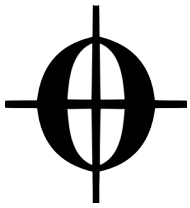
For the following examples, refer to the "Number System Chart"

For "Hurray (Number System)", the 1 represents the G and the 6 represents an E. Look closely and you'll notice a "-" sign after the 6 meaning you would actually play an E-, instead of an E. The fifth measure of the verse is a 4, which in the key of G is a C chord. The 6th measure is a 5, which in the key of G is a D. If we were in the studio and the singer wanted to try this in the key of C, instead

of G, we wouldn't have to rewrite our charts. We would just have to "think" in the key or feel of C. In this scenario, the 1 would be a C, the 6- would be an A-, the 4 would be an F and the 5 would be a G. Another reason that we might want to change keys (other than the singer's preference), is playing ease. This song is easier played with a G feel, so that our 5 chord is a D instead of an F (in the key of C). However, in the 14th measure of the 1st verse, we find a 3-. In C, that would be an E-, which is an easy chord to play. In G, the 3- would be a B-, which is a bar chord and a more difficult chord to play. Using the capo helps us to limit bar chords, but sometimes they are unavoidable. Everything else however is consistent between number charts and standard charts.

Symbols and Notation – Since charts are condensed versions of actual music, there is often much left to the imagination. We can't hear a piece of music. It is lifeless until a musician brings it to life! Like road signs aid drivers, symbols and notations help musicians get a better idea of what the composer or arranger wants and even where the music is headed. Additionally, charts are fairly impromptu and vary from each chart writer to the next; many times you just have to use your logic and common sense. For example, if a chorus is followed by "3x", you can assume that it is signifying you to play the chorus 3 times. However, you may also see these symbols"[:" and ":]", or something similar, fairly often. No, these are not "smiley's"! These denote a repeated section of the music. If you were to see "[: E- C G D :]", you would play E-, C, G and D and then repeat it. If the ":]" was followed by a "3x", you would play that chord progression for a total of 3 times.

Two other important symbols you'll encounter are:

The Segno -  and the Coda - 

In a chart, D.S. stands for "Dal Segno" , which translates to "from the sign". When you see this notation, find the "funny looking S" - the segno - and repeat from that symbol to the end of the song. If you see "D.S. al Coda", that means to go back to the segno and play until you reach the "to coda" notation. Then, jump ahead to the coda symbol and play to the end of the song.

In summary, charts will allow you to play music that you have never played before. At first your reading will be slow, just like when you first learned to read a book. But also like learning to read, as time passes, so will your ability to read charts! KEEP PRACTICING and sooner than later, you will be able to look at a chart and play it correctly for the first time – just like reading a book!

Remember... **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!** ...and **HAVE FUN!**

Counting Song

IN 4 CAPO 2(C feel)

INT:	C G/B	A- F	C G/B	A- F
VRS:	C G/B	A-F	C G/B	A-F
	C D-	A-F	A-F	A-F
CHR:	G	F	G	F
VRS:	C G/B	A-F	C G/B	A-F
	C D-	A-F	A-F	A-F
CHR:	G	F	G	F
VRS:	C G/B	A-F	C G/B	A-F
	C D-	A-F	A-F	A-F

Big Cheater

IN 4 Capo 2(G feel)

INT:	E	D	C	D
	E	D	C	B7
VRS:	E-	D	C	B7
	E-	D	C	B7
	E-	D	C	B7
	A-	A-	B7	B7
CHR:	C	E-	C	E-
	C	E-	B7	B7
	C	E-	C	E-
	C	B7		

VRS: AGAIN

CHR: AGAIN

BRG:	E-	E-	G	D
	C	C	A-	A-
	B7	B7		
TA:	E-	D	C	B7
	E-	D	C	B7

CHR: AGAIN

Big Cheater (Number System)

IN 4 Capo 2(G feel)

INT:	6-	5	4	5
	6-	5	4	3_7
VRS:	6-	5	4	3_7
	6-	5	4	3_7
	6-	5	4	3_7
	2-	2-	3_7	3_7
CHR:	4	6-	4	6-
	4	6-	3_7	3_7
	4	6-	4	6-
	4	3_7		
TA:	6-	5	4	3_7

VRS: AGAIN

CHR: AGAIN

BRG:	6-	6-	1	5
	4	4	2-	2-
	3_7	3_7		
TA:	6-	5	4	3_7
	6-	5	4	3_7

CHR: AGAIN

Hurray

IN 6 Capo 5(G feel)

INT:	G	E-	G	E-
VRS:	G	E-	G	E-
	C	D	G	D
	G	C__D	E-	C
	D	B-	E-	E-
CHR:	C	C	E-	E-
	C	C	G	D
	G	D		

Verse and chorus 3x total, then

VRS:	G	E-	G	E-
	C	D	G	D
	G	C__D	E-	C
	D	B-	E-	E-
CHR4:	C	C	E-	E-
	C	C	G	D
	C	C	E-	E-
	C	C	G	D
	G			

Hurray (Number System)

IN 6 Capo 5(G feel)

INT:	1	6-	1	6-
VRS:	1	6-	1	6-
	4	5	1	5
	1	4__5	6-	4
	5	3-	6-	6-
CHR:	4	4	6-	6-
	4	4	1	5
	1	5		

Verse and chorus 2x, then

VRS:	1	6-	1	6-
	4	5	1	5
	1	4__5	6-	4
	5	3-	6-	6-
CHR4:	4	4	6-	6-
	4	4	1	5
	4	4	6-	6-
	4	4	1	5
	1			

Ellen

IN 4

INT:	[:C	C	E-	E-:]
VRS:	E-	E-	E-	C
	C__E-	E-	E-	E-
	C	C__E-		
CHR:	[:E-7	E-6	C/E	E-:]
VRS:	E-	E-	E-	C
	C__E-	E-	E-	E-
	C	C__E-		
CHR:	[:E-7	E-6	C/E	E-:]

INT:	[:C	C	E-	E-:]
VRS:	E-	E-	E-	C
	C__E-	E-	E-	E-
	C	C__E-		
CHR:	[:E-7	E-6	C/E	E-:]

Hurts

IN 4 (CAPO 1 G feel)

INT:	[:E-	D	C	C:]
VRS:	E-	D	C	C
	E-	D	C	D
	C	C__D	E-	E-__D
	C	C	C	D
CRS :	E-	E-__D	C	C
	G	G	D	D
	E-	E-__D	C	C
	G	G	DSUS	D
INT:	E-	D	C	C

Verse and Chorus again, Then bridge

III p

BRG:	C__D	D	C	
SOLO:	E-	E-__D	C	C
	E-	D	C	C
CRS :	E-	E-__D	C	C
	G	G	D	D
	E-	E-__D	C	C
	G	G	DSUS	D
	C	C	DSUS	D