

## The Five Jazz Chord Types

Major7,  
Minor7,  
Dominant7,  
Minor7b5,  
Diminished 7



The ability to play the five jazz chord types is the necessary first step toward reading from fake books. A working knowledge of the chords is valuable for your overall musicianship and understanding of every kind of music, jazz, classical, pop, Broadway, Latin—virtually all forms of music.

No matter what kind of music you play, or with whom you study, learning the five basic jazz chords (four-note seventh chords) and understanding how to build them from any of their chord tones is a very powerful skill to have at your command. Once you understand how the chords are made, you can use them to harmonize melodies in various ways when reading from a fake book. Later, you will learn how to combine extended jazz color tones, the 9, 11 and 13, into these basic chords, but that is the subject for other lessons.\* The five basic jazz chords are our starting point.

**It is important to note, that while we learn five basic jazz chords in their root position, we do not use them that way when playing from a fake book.**

Beginning chord-concept students often make this mistake. They try to play the four-note chords in the left hand while adding a single melody note in the right. Playing in this manner creates a non-musical and amateurish sound. In order to create a pleasing, cocktail sound, you will want study the lessons on playing from fakebooks that follow this one. They will show you some fundamental ways to transform each of the five jazz chords so that you can begin to play simple, but effective cocktail-style piano arrangements. These root position chords provide the foundation for what comes next.

## **Why do we learn the five basic jazz chords in root position if we don't often use them that way in our playing?**

The reason we need to learn the five basic jazz chords (four-note seventh chords) in their basic, root position is because studying the chords from the root up, (root, 3<sup>rd</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) helps us learn the chord tones in an organized way. This keeps us from getting lost when we later manipulate the chord tones into inversions, or divide the notes between the left and right hand in order to harmonize melodies in a pleasing way. We can always refer back to root position so as not to lose track of the notes we are rearranging. As we progress in our playing, we will be constantly manipulating the notes of the chords to harmonize melodies, to add fills between phrases, to improvise solos and to create variety in our arrangements. Having a solid foundation and understanding of these basic chords is essential to making that possible.

### **The two common ways of using the basic chords to harmonize melody are:**

#### **1. Dividing the chords into open voicings and placing them under melodies.**

To use them to play standards, we split the chords into two hands: 1-5 in the left hand and 3-7 or 7-3 in the right hand, supporting the melody on top. This is one of the fundamental starting points for creating a pleasant cocktail sound when playing chords with melody from a fake book. Refer to the *Open Voicings Studies* on the website for lessons on how that is done.

#### **2. Matching the correct jazz chord inversions to melodies in the right hand.**

The other method for playing standards with the five basic chords is to play them in your right hand in inversions that fit under the melody in strategic places while the left hand provides a simple underpinning. Refer to the website for the *Matching Chord Inversions to Melody* lessons.

\* If you are unfamiliar with what *extended jazz color tones* are, see this link to a short YouTube video I made explaining them. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5sJbL6Eqdg>

## Learning the chords

After you get the idea for how to make the five jazz chord types in root position you will want to get to an automatic point where you don't have to think about them. After you study them here, and feel like you have them pretty well under your control, then challenge yourself to play the various chords types randomly starting from any note on the piano.

### Test yourself by using actual song charts.

A good test for yourself is to take chord chart of some popular standards and see how easily you can read through them. You can use any fake book or lead sheet for this, but you may get confused at first by the extended jazz-chord notations. (color tones) This is especially true on the dominant chords, where the color tones are used the most. (They are the 9,11 and 13 and sometimes have flats or sharps before them.) Ignore them for now and just play the correct basic jazz-chord type. These extended jazz tones get added on top of the basic chords (or more correctly, into the chords), but that is the subject of other lessons. (*Rootless Jazz Chords* - on the website). If you are unfamiliar with what *extended jazz color tones* are, see this link to a short *YouTube* video presentation I made that explains them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5sJbL6Eqdg>

### Practice charts...

For now, working with the goal of mastering the chords, take a look at the charts on the following pages and use the chords you are learning in this lesson as you play them. However, I want you to know that using the chords in their root positions to play the songs will not produce a very pleasing or satisfying piano arrangement. There are no melodies written and the chords won't progress smoothly from one to another, as they would typically in a good piano arrangement. That is not possible at this stage of learning because you are playing all the chords in their basic, root positions only. When you later learn how to invert the chords, they will smoothly connect together.

Even so, the exercise is a very valuable one. At this point, you are only trying to determine if you can make the various types of chords individually, in their fundamental, closed-chord positions. We are not yet making piano arrangements with them. However, after this lesson you can actually start working with the *Open Voicing Studies* to learn how to make good, beginning, cocktail-piano arrangements. (found on a separate page on the website:

<https://www.glenrosejazz.com/open-voicings-study.html> )

There, you will learn how to open up the chords, apply them to some of the same tunes that are used here, and begin creating nice sounding piano arrangements.

By familiarizing yourself with the basic, root-position chords with these song charts now, you will already be prepared for the information in those lessons. You will have already learned the first step, because for those beginning open-voicings studies, the first step is always to play through the song charts by playing the jazz chords in their fundamental positions.

### **About the chord charts - the irealpro app**

The chord charts come from the irealpro app. I recommend to all my students to get it for practice. The app works across all devices for your tablet, smart phone and computer for less than \$20 (irealpro.com). It is terrific for jazz standards charts. You can put them into any key at the touch of a button. Just chords, no melodies, because of copyright restrictions. There are also many other wonderful features in the app for to use. When practicing, you can, select various rhythm accompaniments, set tempos and much more. To get started, work with the irealpro chord charts I have copied and attached on the following pages.

As you look at the charts you will need to get used to these common jazz short-hand notations.

All jazz players use them.

### **Shorthand symbols for chart reading**

Here are the common jazz short-hand notations you will need for the following charts:

$\Delta 7$  or  $\Delta$  = major 7

-7 = minor 7 (sometimes a simple dash mark (-) indicates minor7 as well)

o7 or o = diminished 7

$\emptyset 7$  = minor7b5

7 = dominant 7

As you work through the songs, don't worry about rhythm, but simply play the chords to practice your ability to make them in root-position. If you hum the melodies as you play the chords it will help you feel like you are playing a song and not just doing an exercise.

## *Anecdotally yours...*

I remember back when I was a young hot-shot-wanna-be, jazz pianist just starting out with jazz in junior college. I was working along side my dad in the 20th Century Fox studios music department where he was in charge of editing and writing out by hand all the music for the studio, orchestra recording sessions. One of his colleagues with us there was a brilliant studio rehearsal pianist. One day I got up the nerve to ask him for some jazz piano pointers. He said sure and wrote out a lesson for me with all the 5 basic-jazz chords and told me to learn them in all inversions and to arpeggiate them in a few octaves. I was incredibly disappointed but was polite and thanked him. I couldn't believe how square this supposed great professional tip was. I thought, "Hey, this isn't jazz, this is just basic stuff anyone who has studied classical piano can do."

I pretty much ignored the advice and went back to my hot-shot playing pursuits. But it kept gnawing at me as time went by. Could I do this simple, basic square stuff he showed me? The answer was no. Well, I couldn't let that stand. I might as well learn the stupid stuff just to prove how useless it was. Well, I think you can guess the moral of this story.

There was never a more important lesson that I ever learned. My playing started to really blossom after I mastered them. (took a long, long time by the way) it filled in a tremendous gap in my musicianship. It's really like learning the alphabet. Once you have command over these basic chords everything evolves out of them for your playing, arranging/composition and overall musicianship.

Admittedly the 5 basic jazz-chords aren't very exciting sounding. The more hip, sophisticated sounding jazz chords that give you the formulas for making all your 9,11 and 13 chords with all their alteration possibilities and that real cool, jazz sound are what we call the "rootless" jazz chord voicings (often called the Bill Evans chords). They are studied in the Rootless Jazz Chords video. They literally extend beyond the 5-basic jazz chords. They can be learned concurrently anytime you want to get into them and I suggest not putting it off because you'll sound like you are really playing jazz immediately when you learn them in even one key. But the 5-basic jazz chords are the real common stuff you will need for your creative right-hand improvisations while you play those hip rootless chords in your left-hand.

The 5 basic jazz- chords are really the basic fundamentals of not only jazz chords but of all types of western music. Classical, show tunes, jazz, Rock, everything. But you will need to learn ways to make them sound more musical.

When you sit down to study and work on tunes, try to spend a little time running through them just like you do with the tunes you are working on. Eventually they will get easier and easier and you'll feel the power of them creeping into your playing.

## *Advancing with the five basic jazz chords...*

### **Invert...**

After you nail them all down in root positions the next step is to be able to invert the 4-note basic voicing into all four inversions easily. It all takes time but just keep working on them. They will give you so many things that will improve your overall musicianship and playing abilities.

Root position: 1-3-5-7

First inversion: 3-5-7-1

Second inversion: 5-7-1-3

Third inversion: 7-1-3-5

### **1. Improvisation.**

When you have command of all the inversions as chords and arpeggios up and down you can make fluid melodic lines in your improvisations. A good exercise in this direction is to improvise over a set of changes or an entire song and try to use only the basic 5 jazz-chords arpeggiated in some fashion. This is what jazz players call “chord outlining. You’ll sound very melodic. This is opposed to improvising with scales over chords.

### **2. Block chords – in all and any inversions**

You want ultimate flexibility for putting a melody on top of the basic chord anywhere, anytime. You always want to be able to make a four note block chord in your right hand for any and all of the 5 basic jazz chords in any and all inversions. Then, if you double the top note of the chord that is in right-hand at any time (the melody note) with your left hand, thusly playing it on top of the chord and on the bottom (an octave melody with chord in between) you have a basic “Shearing block” chord formula.

### **3. Arpeggios**

You want to be able to arpeggiate the chords in most inversions with just your right hand and with hand-over-hand arpeggios as well. I say most inversions because not all inversions (or root positions) fit under the hand well for making arpeggios. I talk a lot about this in the Cocktail Runs and Arpeggios video and give you as many professional tips and viewpoints that I know on making arpeggios and not have them sound square. (square being the opposite of hip!)

### **4. Composition and arranging**

If you get into composition and/or arranging for orchestra or big band you need to know the 5 basic-jazz chords just as well as you need to know your A-B-C’s if you are writing a novel. Your musical color palette will be full of possibilities if you have them all at your command effortlessly.

These very basic 5-jazz chords are the staples of jazz and cocktail playing. I hope you get into them and start making them work for you. ....Glen

## Video Lesson Contents

### The Five Jazz Chord Types

#### Introduction

#### **1:34 Building major 7 chords**

#### **3:03 The Five Basic Jazz Chord Types**

1. CMaj7
2. C dominant 7
3. Cm7
4. Cm7b5
5. Cdim7

#### **4:15 Practice by going down in whole steps**

A. This is a learning tool to organize your practice. If you want to study and learn all of the 60 chords this is a recommended method but not the only one. It's very easy to get lost and disoriented in the practice so going down in whole steps while helps keep your study organized helping to keep your place and remember which chords you have studied.

B. Explanation of what whole tone scales are.

C. Demonstration, playing thru all the 5 chord types descending thru the whole-tone scale. This covers half of the jazz chords.

D. Add rhythms to the exercise to make the practice more enjoyable

E. Arpeggiate the chords for practice. This creates a classical sound

#### **7:50 Musical exercise for practicing in whole step Practice with 6/8 rhythm in the right hand (or any rhythm)**

This creates a classical sound and make practice more interesting Practice while going down in whole steps. Use the pedal to make a smoother blending of the chords

#### **11:11 Practice with arpeggiated chords ( Classical sound)**

Another way to make practicing and learning the chords more enjoyable.

**13:00** Use the other whole tone scale to play the other six sets of chords

**15:13** Play the chords in both hands

practice playing the chords hand-over-hand. Helps to train both hands and creates a pleasant harp like effect

**15:36** Hand over hand arpeggios

**19:17** Why we are learning these chords.

Open-voices chords under melody.

**21:27** Excerpt from to Playing from a Fake book lessons. Danny Boy (Key of F).

### The Five Jazz Chord Types

**23:19** First goal: Learn all of the basic chords

**23:45** “Chords for chords sake: The enjoyment of the sound of chords by themselves.

**25:21** Recite the five jazz chord types. Learn to say all of the chord types in order

**Maj7 - Dom7 - m7 - m7b5 - dim**

**29:16** Maj 7 practice – Practice major 7 chords going down in whole steps.

**30:09** Look for chords with similar hand formations

**30:30** White note chords that that have the same hand formations

**Am7 – Dm7 – Em7**

**32:53** Cm7 and Fm7 are made with the same hand formations.

White-black-white-black. **Cm7– Fm7**

**33:47** C#m7 and F#m7 are made with the same hand formations.

White-black-white-black. **C#m7– F#m7**

**35:24** Roll the chords

**36:35 Ebm7**–All black notes

**37:16 Amaj7– Dmaj7– Emaj7** made with the same hand formations.

White-black-white-black.

Dominant chords (**C7– F7**) with the same hand formations

white– white– white– black

**38:40** Dominant chords (**A7– D7**) with the same hand formations

white– black– white – white

**40:36** Practice with the organization of descending whole steps

**44:00** Practice with the second set of descending whole steps

**46:21** The diminished chords

**52:31** Minor7b5 (m7b5) jazz shorthand=ø

**57:21** Once again... The purpose for learning these basic is to learn how to next use them for reading from a fakebook by making them in open voicings and playing the inversions under melodies. (See the lessons on the website

1. Matching Chord Inversions to Melodies

2. Open Voicings Lessons.

**57:48** End of lesson. Proceed to the *Open-Voicings* lessons or the “*Matching Inversions to Melody*” lessons to begin applying the five jazz types to playing from a fakebook.