Playing Cocktail Piano
First Steps

Beginning solo piano techniques for playing standards

How to get started playing Standards from a fake book with simple jazz chords and rhythm techniques

- Simple jazz chords for playing Standards
- The role of the left hand
- Adding jazz color to your chords
- Chords for comping

by GLEN ROSE

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What is cocktail piano music?

The term “cocktail music” conjures up a lot of images. Generally it is associated with that now bygone era of class, associated with high society from the 1920’s thru the early 1960’s. But cocktail still remains cool and enjoyed in certain social settings today. Cocktail piano means to play in a pleasant manor while people are enjoying evening cocktails and making conversation in a social setting anywhere, be it at a corner bar, cocktail lounge, private party, wedding, company event or restaurant. Playing for diners in a restaurant is also referred to as “dinner music’ and should be played quietly so as not to interfere with conversation or digestion. There are many ways to play cocktail style piano

The title of the book is, *Playing Cocktail Piano*, but actually what the study is about is how to play by chord concept when reading from fake books. We look at how to read the chord symbols in fakebooks and make good, simple jazz chords to go with the melodies. The end result is nice sounding piano arrangements appropriate for the genre of music we call “Standards.” The Standards are also sometimes referred to as *The Great American Songbook.*”

There are many facets to playing by chord concept but what I show here in this study is a way to begin. I have many video lessons on the website covering many of the various ways to play that can help you make creative arrangements when working with lead sheets in fake books that only give one a simple melody and chords.

Glen Rose

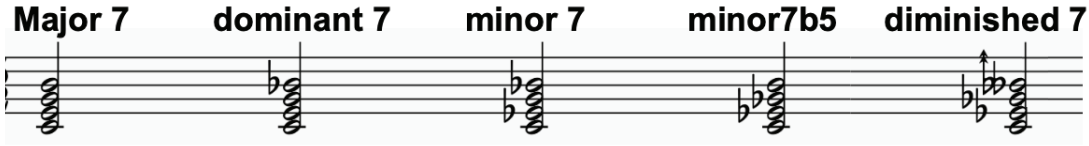
Building piano arrangements from fake book lead sheets with five chord types

Fake books are simply collections of lead sheets (charts) that present popular tunes in a condensed way, using an abbreviated form of musical notation. Lead sheets are much different from the typical, two-staff piano arrangements that classically trained pianists use to play popular songs, reading each note just as they would when working through a classical piano piece. Lead sheets only show melody line with a chord symbols written above the melody to indicate the chords that belong with the melody. How then, can we play from a fake book chart to get satisfying sounds and results? We actually only use five basic jazz chord types to play

The five chord types

There are five fundamental jazz chord types that we use when playing standards. These chords are the raw material we need for making our open-voicing chords. They are studied in the *Five Jazz Chord Types* lesson.

The five chord types in close voicings (Built from C note)



We need to be able to make all of the basic five jazz chord types from any note on the piano. If you don't already have a secure understanding of them, then you will want get The Five Jazz Chord Types lesson (on the website) before beginning this study. Once we understand the five jazz chord types then we can play them in different ways under melodies. We will be playing them split into two hands for our study here.

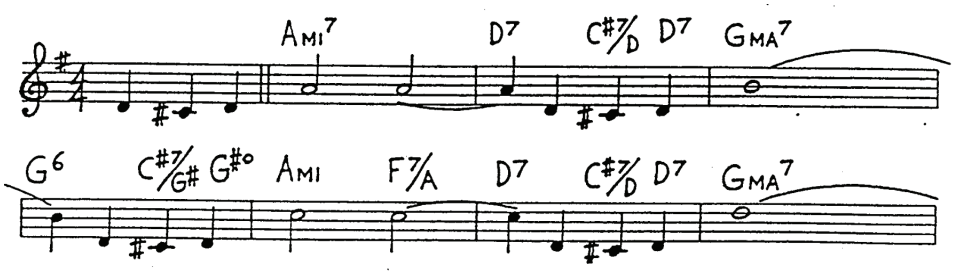
There are five common keys that pianists prefer when playing standards. C, F, Bb, Eb, and G. Most of the songs that you see in fakebooks are in those keys.

We will be working in those common keys in our studies but it's important to know that most standards migrate through what we call, temporary key changes during their course. Many beginning chord players imagine that they can play everything in C so they don't have to learn so many chords. It's a seemingly logical idea but it's a misconception because of the temporary key changes that most all standards go through. A song may start out and end in C but in the middle, it may shift to other, not common keys for a few bars, such as E, A or anywhere.

But as we play though standards we discover that the bulk of our chords are drawn from the pool of common chords and progressions in those keys. The keys of C, F, Bb, Eb, and G are favored by pianists simply because they fit the hand well for ease of movement and expression. Blues inflections are easily applied as well in those keys whereas E, A, B, F#, etc. don't lend themselves to easy blues inflections or comfortable hand movement as compared to the other keys. Guitarists have a different set of common keys because of the set-up of their instrument. E, A and D are preferred. But C, F, and G are fairly common for guitarist as well, so we pianist can find some common ground with them should we play together.

These favored keys have nothing to do with classical music, where all twelve keys are used all the time.

Interpreting the chords in fake books



To the uninitiated, trying to interpret the chord symbols in fake books can be daunting.

Fake book charts are written with a single line and chords only. The player is supposed to create or“fake” their own arrangement. This opens a lot of creative possibilities for the player depending on their expertise and chord knowledge. Starting back around the early 1900’s these charts were originally created by professional musicians and handed around amongst themselves to play club dates. Players would collect and organize them in books to suit their needs. These roughly thrown together books were called “fake books” and were technically illegal because they were passed around freely amongst players without paying any royalties to the publishers who owned the copyrights to the tunes. They were not available or sold in music stores.
Because these charts were written by professional players they were created with the player’s inherent insights about chords. It was important to make them as clear and logical as possible, with only essential chords and familiar jazz patterns so they could be sight read easily by other players on the bandstand. The quality of the chord arrangements depended on the musician writing them, they were often hand written and not easy to read but generally the chord choices and arrangements made good sense musically. These books aren’t around much anymore and some of their notation is not the same as today's fake books.

Beginning somewhere in the 1960s, publishers began assembling so-called legal versions of professional fake books and titling them such so as to attract music hobbyists with the allure of a professional book. But it was largely a marketing ploy. Some even use a font that looks like they are hand written by musicians just like the old days. The lion’s share of these books lack the professional, club playing musicians perspective. They are put together as commercial products with flashy names and covers but without any thought about savvy jazz chord progressions that make reading and playing the tunes easier and more tuneful. The chords and progressions are often nonsensical and difficult to comprehend even by professionals, let alone by amateur players. If you are trying to learn a song from a poorly written fake book you may get frustrated trying to make sense of the chords.

Interpreting the chords in fake books

In the 1980s a whole new era of fake books began appearing, beginning with "The Real Book." It was an underground fake book put together by Berkley Jazz students. It was an illegal book because it didn't have publishers' clearances but it circulated all over the world and was shared by beginning and advanced players everywhere. Those books were a combination of jazz tunes and Standards and there were no lyrics. Around the year 2000 Hal Leonard music publishers commandeered the book and improved it immensely. They turned it into a series of fake books with only Standards and included the lyrics .

The Real Vocal Book Series by Hal Leonard. There are four books in the series.
Get the "High Voice" versions, which means normal keys versions.

Now, there are quite a few good fake books written or edited by professional jazz musicians and students that are available for sale. But they are out numbered by ones that don't come from a professional perspective. If you are just starting out it's very important to get a good fake book. It will help you progress more easily and successfully.

Making open-voiced chords
Spreading the 7th chords into two hands

Open voicings

We will be using open-voiced chords throughout this study. The next pages will show how to make them. If you find it difficult to locate and separate the 3 and 7 on some chords look at the “Using alternatives to the open voicings” page just ahead.

Closed voicings vs open voicings

A closed voice chord means that all of the notes in the chord have been placed close together, not spread out. These are called block chords. We will turn them into open voiced chords by playing two of the chord tones in the left hand and the other two in the right hand. A simple definition of an open voiced chord is that the tones are spread out larger than the range of an octave. We can add more jazz tones to them later if we wish.

Closed voicing block chord

7
5
3
1

Move the 3 and 7 into the right hand and leave the 1 and 5 in the left.

Open voicing

7
3 **Right hand**

5
1 **Left hand**

Two ways to make the open voicings

We will make our open voiced chords in two ways. We need to invert the right hand notes also.

Open voicings played in two ways

7
3 **Right hand**

5
1 **Left hand**

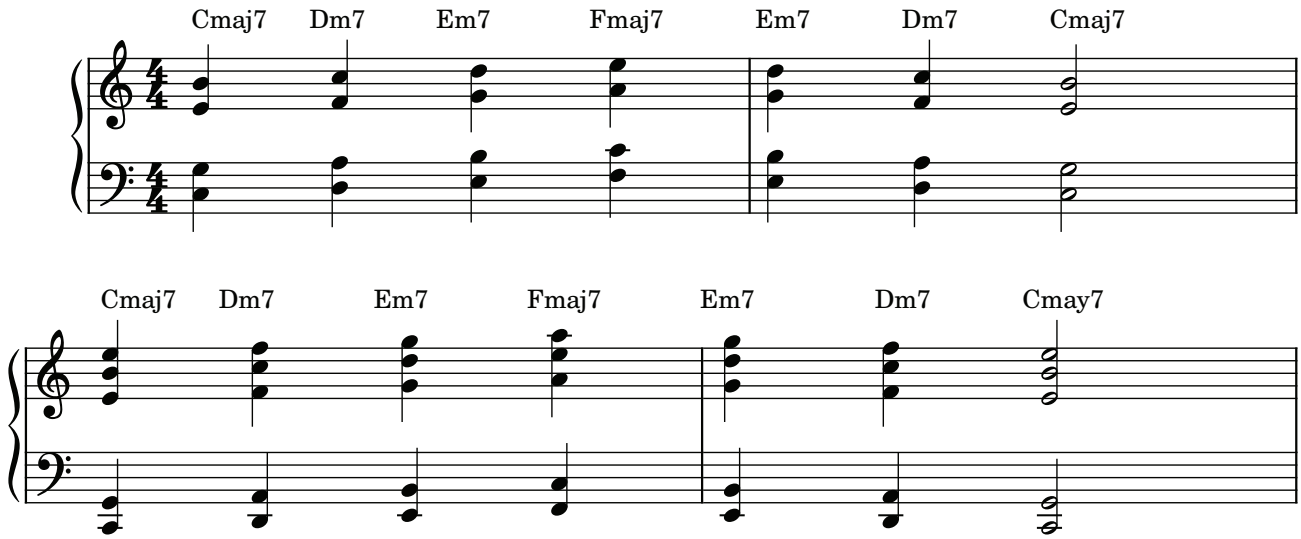
3
7 **Right hand**

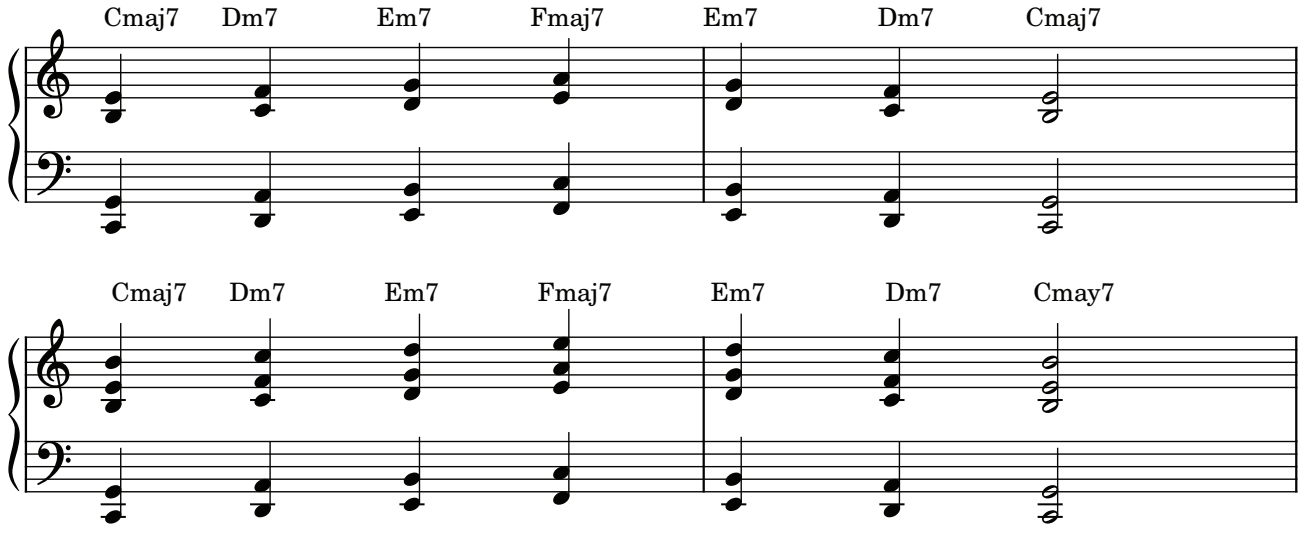
5
1 **Left hand**

We need to learn both ways, because when making the chords under the melodies, only one of the voicings will match up with a particular melody note (more about that later).

The sound of open voiced chords

If you're not familiar with the sound of the open-voiced chords, play these examples below. They're the first four scale steps of the major scale, up and down, harmonized in open voicings





See and hear more examples in the "Open Voicings Perspectives" section

Connecting the open-voiced chords to melodies

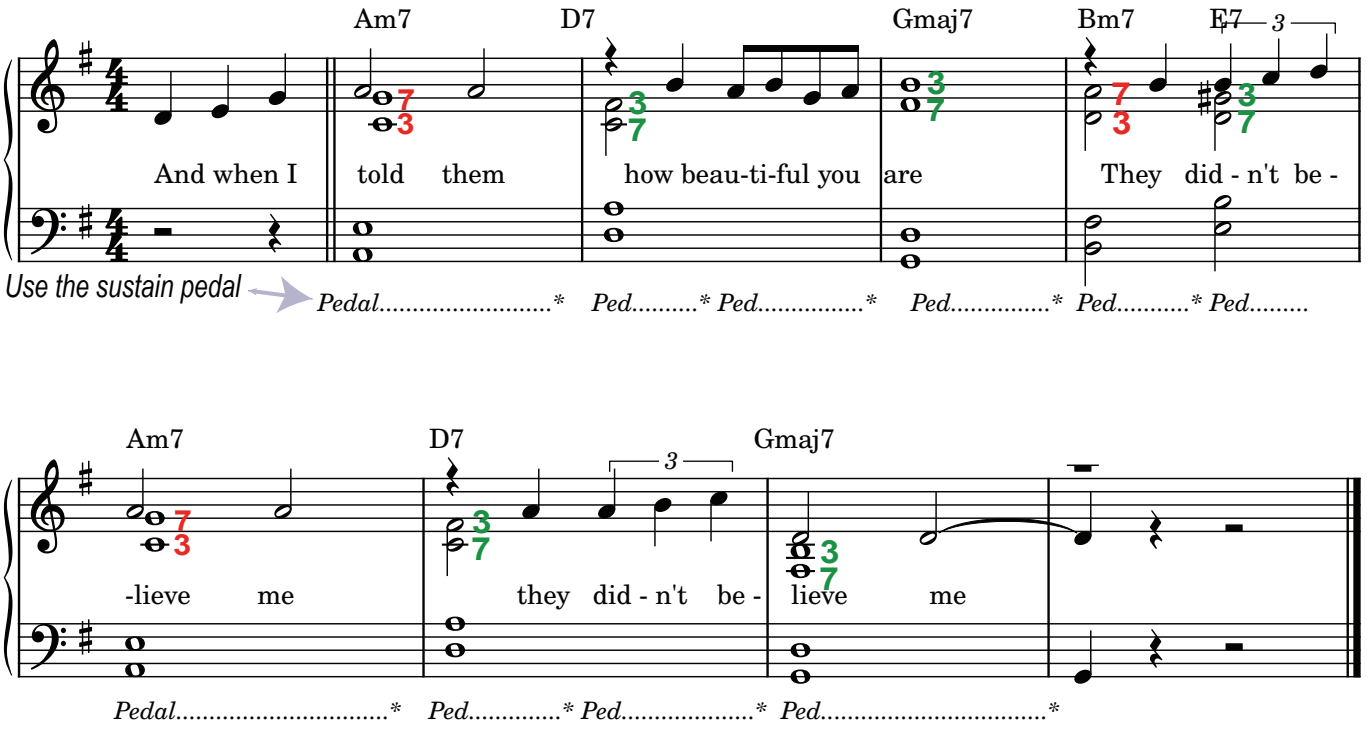
The right hand - The right hand will always play 3-7 or 7-3 and the melody will get added on top of those two notes. This will create a three-note chord in the right hand. If the 3 or 7 is the actual melody note, then you will only play the two notes.

The left hand - The left hand is easy and there will be no choices to make. For the purpose of learning the open-voice method we will always play 1-5 and it can be played in any octave. The only exception will be if the sound is too muddy because it is too low on the piano. In that case we can play a single root note. At first, playing the same 1-5 left hand voicing may seem quite uninteresting doing the same thing on every chord. But in the section that follows on basic left-hand piano accompaniment, you will see how the 1-5 combination puts us in an advantageous position for creating movement and rhythms.

They Didn't Believe

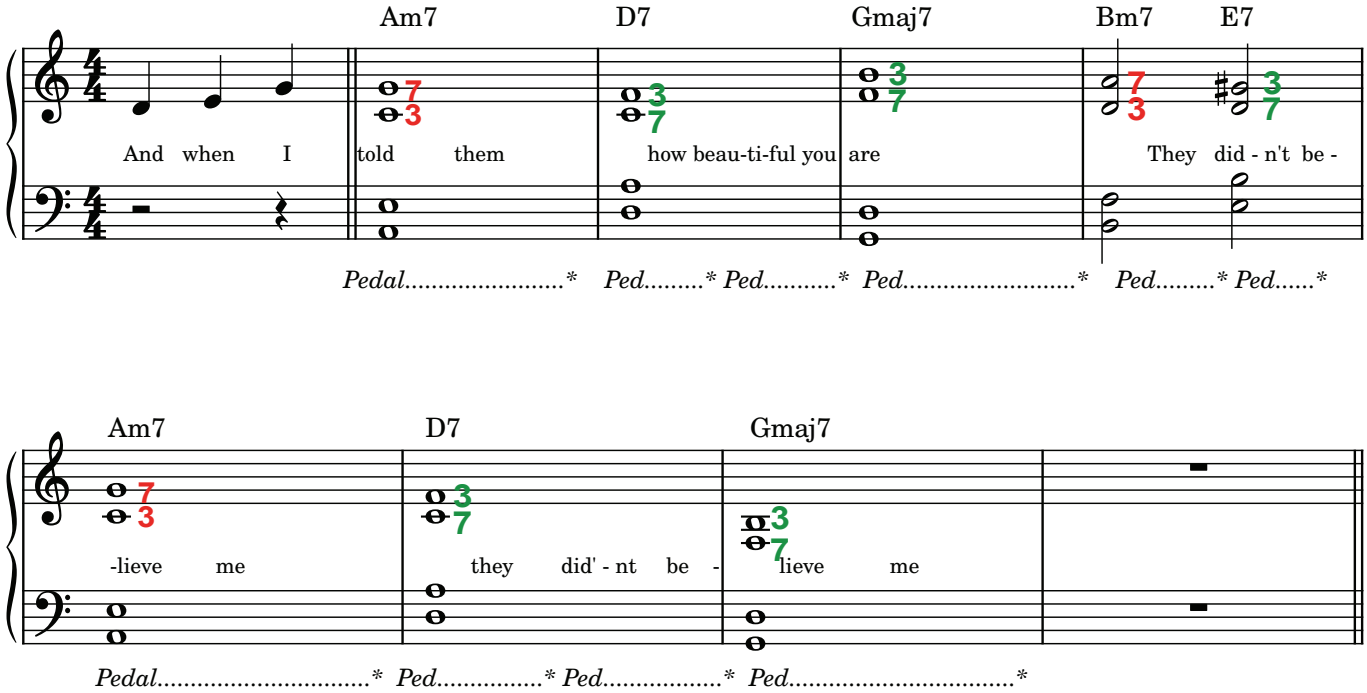
Melody harmonized with open voicings

Here are the first eight bars with the melody harmonized using the correct open-choices on the previous page. Use the sustain pedal for a smoother transition between chords.



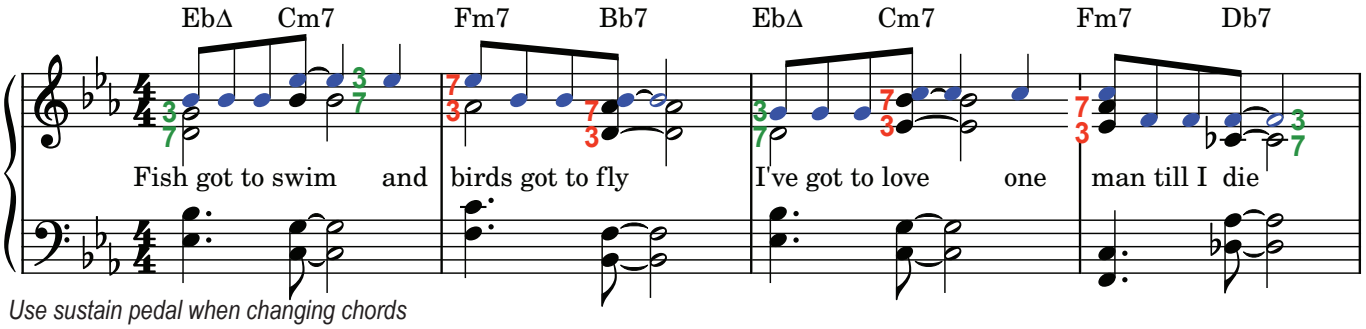
Open voicings only

Play the open voicing choices by themselves while singing or humming the melody

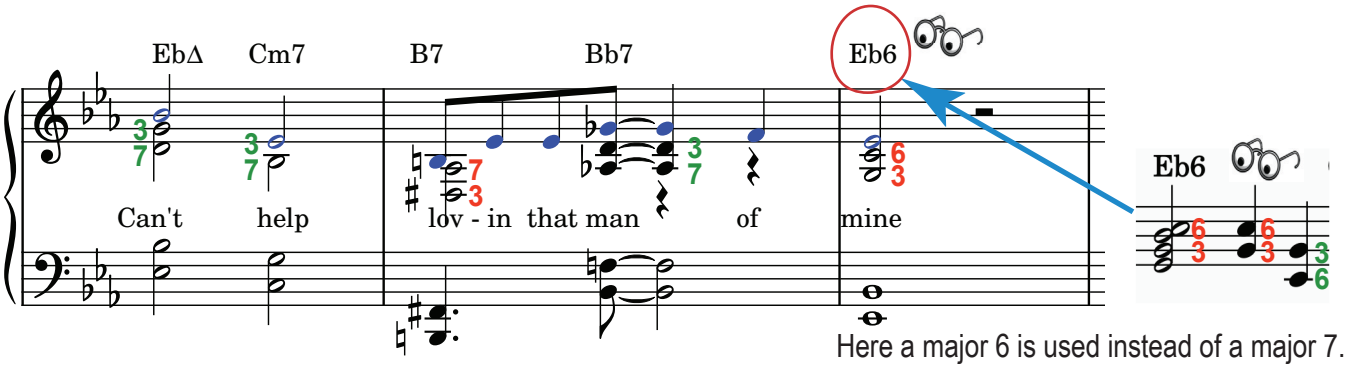


Can’t Help Lovin’ That Man

Here is the song again for you to play without all the arrows so it will be easier to play.

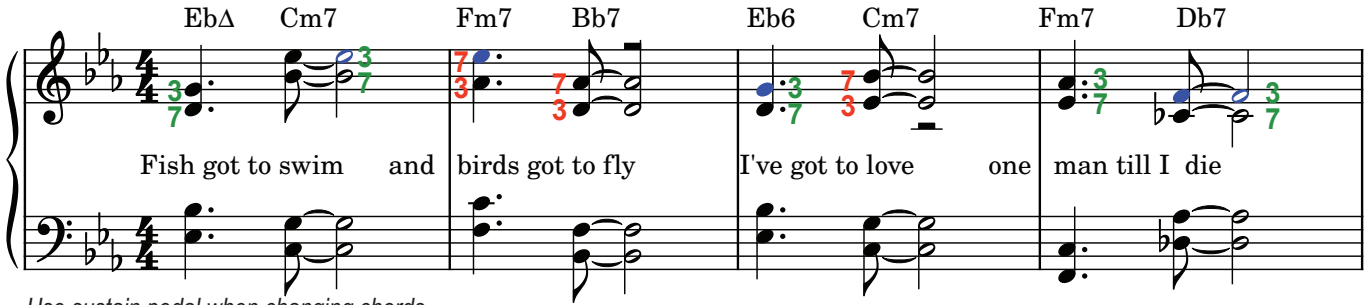


Use sustain pedal when changing chords

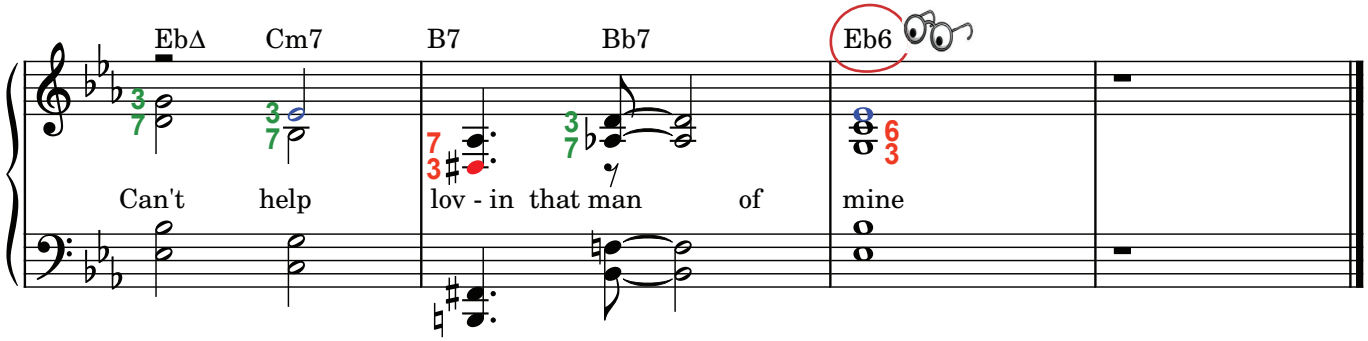


Here a major 6 is used instead of a major 7.
See the next page for the explanation.

Play the 3-7 and 7-3 open voicngs by themselves while humming or singing the melody.



Use sustain pedal when changing chords

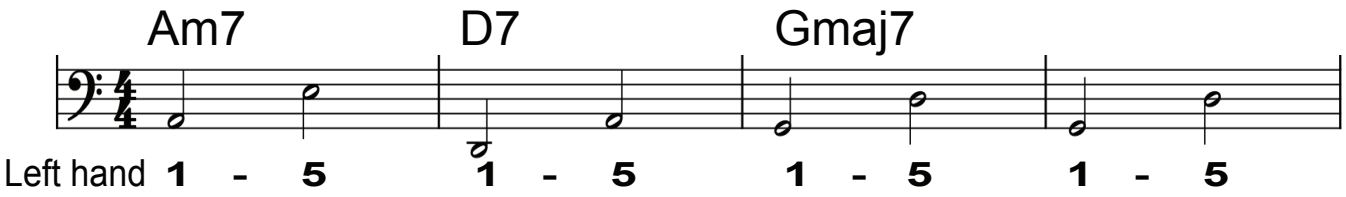


Basic left-hand accompaniment for playing cocktail-style piano

(Or any style of music!)

If you are just beginning to play piano by chord concept the first step is to learn how to make chords and then understand how to put them under melodies. As previosly said, there are two basic approaces to start with when learning your chords. Open-voiced chords and simple block chords in inversions so that they match up to melody notes. But then the next important element is to focus on the left hand working in coordination with the right hand chords to create a balanced sound or to create rhythm. Cocktail piano is often played without any type of dance or fast tempo rhythm but we need to see how to create a steady movement. We need a concept for the left hand to do that.

One of the most basic left-hand accompaniment techniques that is used in solo piano playing for all styles of music, in 4/4 time, is to play bass notes on beats one and three or on every beat. There are many different things the left hand can play on these beats but the most common and fundamental is to simply play root-five (1-5). Up to this point, we have been learning to make open-voiced chords with the left hand always playing the root and fifth together. (1-5) Now we separate the 1 and 5 instead of playing them together, playing them one at a time on beats one and three or on every beat. This1-5 left-hand accompaniment can set up a tempo or they can be played without tempo. They also fill the space where no notes are being played in the right hand. This easy left-hand technique can be used to provide a steady underpinning for all styles of music, swing, two-beat, slow ballads, country, rock and latin rhythms of all types.



Establishing a steady left-hand to coordinate with the right-hand, open-voiced chords.

We will work with the most basic of left-hand movements using the open-voiced chords studied in this book. But the left-hand movment can be applied to any types of chords you are playing. Block chords, open-voiced jazz chords or simple triad playing used in polkas, country music or rock. It's a basic left hand movement but it is used at every level of music from beginning to advanced.

Most music is written in 4/4 time. Our left hand plays on beats one and three to set our balanced feel with the music. We can play with or without tempo. The most simple thing we can do is play single notes on beats one and three but as you evolve with your abilities, there are other notes that can be added in the left hand.

Adding jazz color to our chords for cocktail-style piano playing

Dominant flat 9 chords

A must for playing cocktail piano and jazz.

About dominant b9 chords

When we look at Standards in fake books we see dominant b9 chords are frequently used with dominant chords in songs. (C7b9, F7b9, A7b9, etc,) The dominant b9 chords are dominant 7 chords that have a b9 added to them. When that tone is added we then call it a "dominant b9 chord." The b9 note may be the melody note itself, but more often it is used for expression and you will find it adds a lot to your cocktail piano playing.They have a certain emotional effect (an appealing jazz dissonance) that we want to be able to add into our playing at any time for expression.

It's fairly easy to add the b9 to your open-voiced chords, or any chord for that matter. But it can only be added to a dominant 7 chord and the 7th must be in the chord or it won't sound like a b9 chord. That's no problem with our open-voiced chords because the right hand is always playing 3-7 or 7-3. We simply add the b9 into the chord, keeping the left hand playing 1-5, or at least a root note.

Find a normal 9 first

Let's find a normal 9 first and add it to our dominant chords. It is also a welcome addition to any dominant chord at any time when you are playing Standards and jazz. Actually jazz players rarely play a simple dominant 7 chord. They will automatically add a 9 to all dominants to create more jazz color.

About extended jazz color tones.

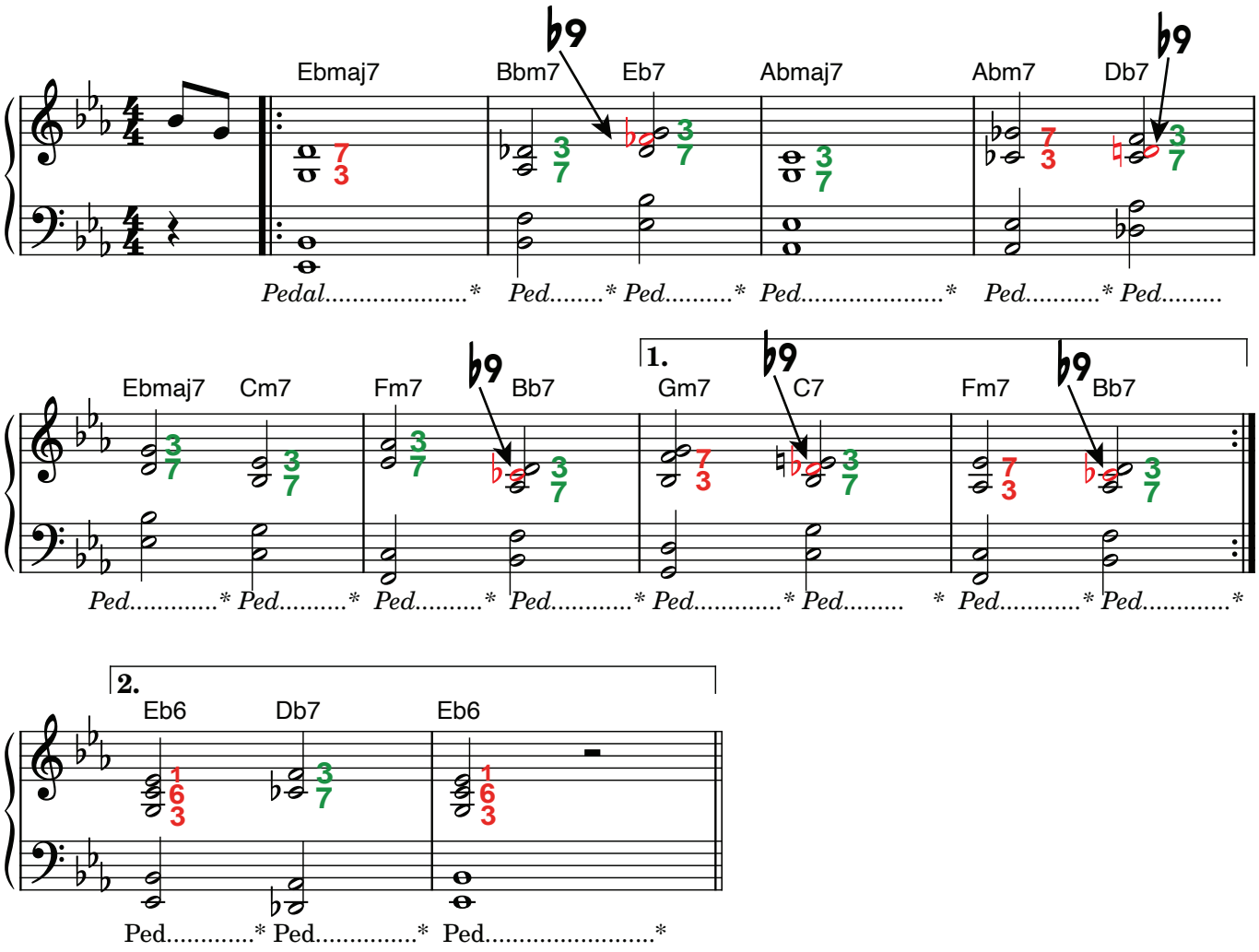
The tones 9,11 and 13 are added above our 1-3-5-7 basic jazz chords. They are called "chord extensions" because they extend past the normal 1-3-5-7*. The 9 can be added to any of our five jazz chord types to brings more color to the chords, but the 11 and 13 only fit with some of the chords. They are not covered in this open voicings study.

*For more explanation on chord extensions see this YouTube video:
https://youtu.be/Z5sJbL6Eqdg?si=XheY_VroE2izhIWV
YouTube Understanding rootless jazz color tones - Glen Rose

Misty

Adding the b9 into dominant chords

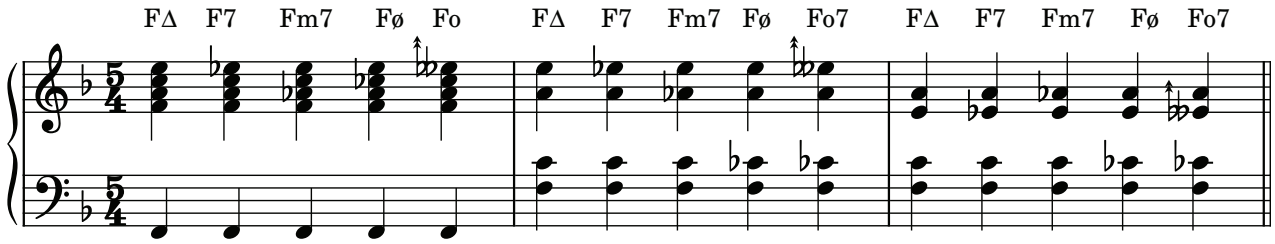
In this chart for Misty, the open voicing choices are exactliy the same as on the previous page, but the b9 is added **(in red)** into the dominant chords in several places so you can get the idea of where they might sound good. It is entirely up to you when and where to add it into a dominant chord.The b9 is especially effective in ballads. (slow songs)



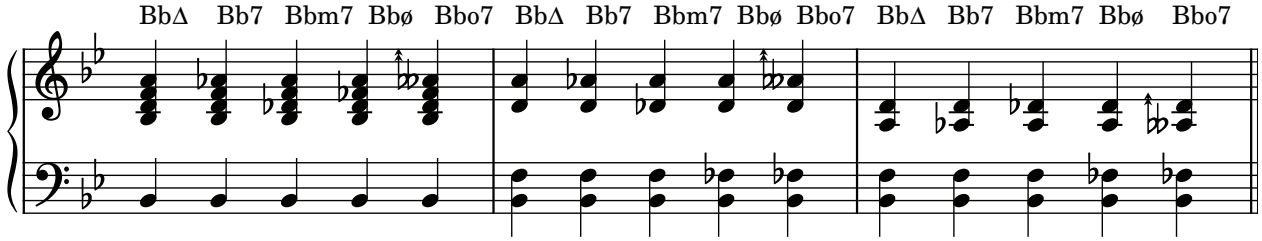
Five jazz chords

Here are four more starting notes with the five basic jazz chords written out. Play through them to get a feel for how the chords can be practiced and then proceed to other starting notes on the piano.

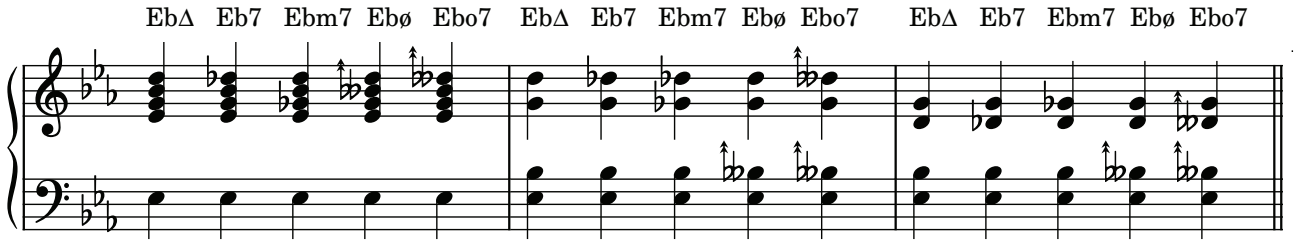
The five basic jazz chords starting from an F note



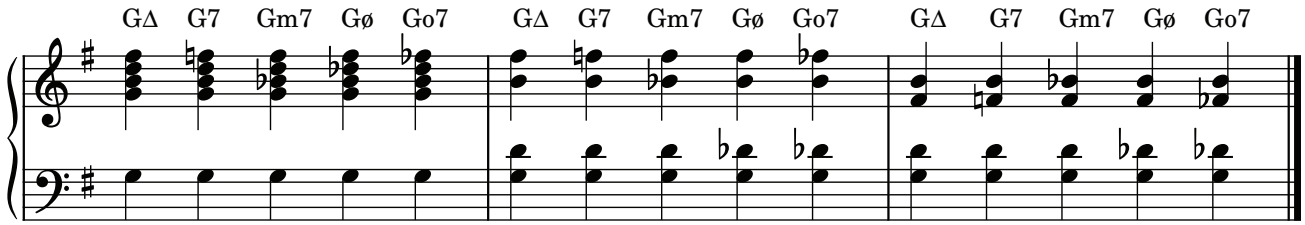
The five basic jazz chords starting from a Bb note



The five basic jazz chords starting from a Eb note



The five basic jazz chords starting from a G note



Glossary
Some common jazz terms used in this study

Altered jazz tones - When color tones 9-11-and 13 are sharped or flatted they are called altered color tones. Example: b9 - #9 - #11 – b13

Bridge - Generally speaking bridge means the middle eight bars of a song. Songs following the traditional 32 bar format will often have a “B” notated on the middle eight bar section and musicians will understand that “B” to mean bridge. This traditional song format of standards is usually in an A-A-B-A form. Each section consisting of eight bars. However, this form is not always adhered to. There may be more than four sections and they may get labeled “B”, “C” and so on. So “B” does not necessarily always mean bridge.

Chart - Generally a chart means the same things as lead sheet. Most jazz charts in a fakebook consist of one page, sometimes two. If the song is long.

Chord tones - Chord tones are the number of the scale tone corresponding to each chords.
1 = the root
3 = the third
5 = the fifth
7 = the 7th
By labeling the tones in chords is helps us identify them for our understanding of how each chord is built.

Color tones - The chords tones above 1-3-5-7 are referred to as jazz color tones, 9-11-13.

Fake book - A collection of lead sheets

Lead sheet - A lead sheet is also called a song sheet or chart. Songs written with the melody on a single staff line with the chords to the song written above the melody. Musicians “fake” an impromptu arrangement of the song based on the simple melody line and the chord notation.

Open voiced vs closed voiced chords - Chords that span over the distance of an octave are open voiced. If they are less than an octave then they are referred to as closed voiced or closed position chords.

Standards - Popular songs written from 1915-1960 that are still popular and played a public functions. They are also referred to as *The Great American Songbook.*

What Are Jazz Standards?

Jazz standards are that great body of outstanding popular songs that were mostly written from the 1920s to the 1950s. They are also referred to as, "evergreens" or simply, "standards." In recent years they have also become known as, “The Great American Song Book.” They are the favorites of jazz musicians. The form, chord changes and melodies make a strong and attractive backdrop for jazz improvisation. This is why musicians call them "jazz standards."

This body of music has been, and remains, permanently enjoyed by listeners and musicians, even through contemporary music is vastly more popular. The sign of a good jazz standard is that it has been recorded by many different artists in many different styles over the decades. A typical example is "Georgia On My Mind," written in 1930 by Hoagy Carmichael. Or “At Last”, written in 1947 by Harry Warren. Standards like these have been recorded over and over again in every decade since they were written, and in some cases for over 80 years! They are still known, loved, played and requested by people of all ages.

In the 21st century we hear this music in many places, such as high class social events, weddings, movies, and elevators! Jazz standards are often played quietly as background music in restaurants and hotels, and then wildly, with great abandon, in a night club setting.

This book offers an easy gateway into playing the jazz chords necessary for playing jazz standards. When you hear the classic standards being played, listen for the locked jazz patterns in the music, you’ll start to understand the logic of the sound.

About the author . . .

Glen Rose plays jazz piano, guitar, ukulele and has written beginning jazz method books and videos for all these instruments. He has principly made his living from his piano playing over the past 45 years. Guitar has always been his second instrument, playing in bands and solo for many years.

After studying classical music and music arranging privately while growing up, he began his music career fresh out of high school in the *Hollywood* motion picture music studios working along side his father in the music calligraphy and preparation department for the movie recording sessions. This work put him in contact with the likes of *John Williams, Lalo Schriffrin, Quincy Jones, Sammy Nestico, Billy May* and many other film composers of that era.

In the 1970s, Glen Rose was a music professor at *Cabrillo College* in Santa Cruz and musical director for local theater productions. For eight years, he toured as a pianist/guitarist entertainer, playing throughout Western Europe. in the 1980's, he started producing commercial music and composed over 100 on-air jingles in the central California area. Beginning in the 90's, he toured the U.S. for seventeen years with his novelty, piano stage-show act.

He was the author of a popular music notation textbook that was widely used in universities before computer software superseded that study. The book was endorsed by film composer and *Boston Pops* conductor, *John Williams* and *Sammy Nestico, Count Basie's* arranger.

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