



The Basic Jazz Guitar Chord Book

By Dirk Laukens / January 25, 2005

Hello and welcome to the basic jazz guitar chord book, brought to you by www.jazzguitar.be.

How are guitar chords built? What makes a chord minor or major?
If you fail to answer these questions, read on...

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Jazz Guitar Chord Theory

In this tutorial I'll teach you how guitar chords are built and how this translates to the guitar.

Let's get started with the **C major scale** :

C Major Scale	C D E F G A B
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Triads (a chord that is built with 3 notes) and **seventh chords** (chords that are built with 4 or more notes) are based on **thirds**.

There are 2 kinds of thirds (or 3rds) :

minor third	interval of 3 half notes	symbol : b3
major third	interval of 4 half notes	symbol : 3

Let's start by stacking 2 thirds on the first note (1) of the C major scale :

C E G
1 3 5

The result is a C major triad or C.

From C to E is a major third and from E to G a minor third : every major chord has this structure.

The thing to remember here is what we call the **chord formula** for **major** chords: **1 3 5**

Another thing to remember : another name for the 1 of a chord is the **root**.

Let's do the same for note 2 of the C major scale :

D F A
1 b3 5

The result is a D minor triad or Dm.

From D to F is a minor third and from F to A is a major third : every minor chord has this structure.

Remember the **chord formula** for **minor** chords : **1 b3 5**

Let's skip a few notes and stack thirds on the 7 of the C major scale :

B D F
1 b3 b5

The result is a B diminished triad or Bdim.

From B to D is a minor third and from D to F is also a minor third : every diminished triad chord has this structure.

So the **chord formula** of **diminished** chords is : **1 b3 b5**

I'll summarize and complete the other notes of the C major scale :

	Notes	Formula	Chord Name	Symbol
1	C E G	1 3 5	C major	C
2	D F A	1 b3 5	D minor	Dm or D- or Dmin
3	E G B	1 b3 5	E minor	Em or E- or Emin
4	F A C	1 3 5	F major	F
5	G B D	1 3 5	G major	G
6	A C E	1 b3 5	A minor	Am or A- or Amin
7	B D F	1 b3 b5	B diminished	Bdim or B°

Now, there are 2 ways to construct **chords**

1. The first way starts from the **major scale**.

1. Find the **major scale** of a given key.

If you need to find for example the notes of a Gm chord then find the G major scale : G A B C D E F#

2. Construct the **major chord** : 1 3 5

In our G major example that would be : G B D

3. Apply the **chord formula** to the major chord.

The chord formula for minor chords is 1 b3 5.

This means the 3rd of the major chord has to be lowered half a note :
G Bb D

2. The second way involves some memorization and will be explained after we covered **seventh chords** and **tensions**.

Now let's have a look at seventh chords, chords that contain 4 or more different notes and that are used a lot in jazz music.

We start again with the **C major scale** :

C Major Scale	C D E F G A B
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

The construction of seventh chords follows the same principle as the construction of triads : stacking 3rds on top of each other. Triads were made by stacking 2 thirds on top of the root. Seventh chords are constructed by stacking 3 thirds on top of the root.

Let's stack 3 thirds on the 1 of the C major scale :

C	E	G	B
1	3	5	7

The result is a C major 7 chord or Cmaj7.

From C to E is a major third, from E to G is a minor third and from G to B is a major third : every major 7 chord has this structure.

So the **chord formula** for **major 7** chords is: **1 3 5 7**

Let's do the same for the 2nd note of the C major scale:

D	F	A	C
1	b3	5	b7

The result is a D minor chord or Dmin7.

From D to F is a minor third, from F to A is a major third and from A to C is a minor third: every minor 7 chord has this structure.

So the **chord formula** for **minor 7** chords is: **1 b3 5 b7**

Now let's skip some notes and stack 3 thirds on top of the 5th note of the C major scale :

G	B	D	F
1	3	5	b7

The result is a G dominant 7 chord or G7.

From G to B is a major third, from B to D is a minor third and from D to F is a minor third : every dominant 7 chord has this structure.

The **chord formula** for **dominant 7** chords is : **1 3 5 b7**

We'll skip some more notes and stack 3 thirds on top of the 7th note of the C major scale :

B	D	F	A
1	b3	b5	b7

The result is a B half diminished chord or Bm7b5.

From B to D is a minor third, from D to F is a minor third and from F to A is a major third : every half diminished 7 chord has this structure.

The **chord formula** for **half diminished** 7 chords is : **1 b3 b5 b7**

I'll summarize and complete the other notes of the C major scale :

	Notes	Formula	Chord Name	Symbol
1	C E G B	1 3 5 7	C major 7	Cmaj7
2	D F A C	1 b3 5 b7	D minor 7	Dm7 or D-7 or Dmin7
3	E G B D	1 b3 5 b7	E minor 7	Em7 or E-7 or Emin7
4	F A C E	1 3 5 7	F major 7	Fmaj7
5	G B D F	1 3 5 b7	G dominant	G7
6	A C E G	1 b3 5 b7	A minor 7	Am7 or A-7 or Amin7
7	B D F A	1 b3 b5 b7	B half diminished	Bm7b5 or Bmin7b5

Next we'll talk about a phenomenon called tensions.

Tensions are notes that are part of a chord, but are **not chord tones** (1 3 5 7).

Let's have a look again at the C major scale :

C Major Scale	C D E F G A B
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

If we construct a chord on C, we get a Cmaj7 :

C E G B
1 3 5 7

There are 3 notes left in the major scale that are **not chord tones** : **2, 4** and **6**.

If we add these tones to the chord, they become **tensions**.

Most of the time we play tensions an **octave higher** than the chord tones because else they might get in the way of the chord tones (the chord would sound 'muddy' most of the time).

That's also the way they are notated : 2 becomes 9 (2+7(one octave)=9), 4 becomes 11 and 6 becomes 13.

So if we add the 2 to Cmaj7 we get Cmaj9

C E G B D
1 3 5 7 9

The two other notes that are left, the **4** and **6**, are special cases in combination with a **major chord**.

There is something we call **avoid notes** : notes that are a half tone above a chord tone. Avoid notes sound **disharmonic** so they are almost never used.

If we have a look at the 4 of the C major scale we notice that it is a half note above the e, what is the 3rd of Cmaj7. So the 4 (f) is an **avoid note** for Cmaj7.

A solution for this is to raise the 4 half a note : f becomes f# and is no longer an avoid note and the basic scale is no longer C major, but C Lydian (see [jazz guitar modes](#)). This chord would be called Cmaj7(#11).

The 6 is also a special case in combination with major chords. Most of the times when we add a 6 to a major chord, the 7 is omitted and there is no octave added to the 6. This is because the 6 and 7 might get in each other's way.

So if we add the 6 to C major we get a C6 :

C	E	G	A
1	3	5	6

The same goes for **6** in combination with a **minor chord** : the 7 is omitted.

If we add the 6 to Dm7 we get Dm6 (Look out : the 6 is no longer A because the root of the chord changed to D. The six is now B (D E F# G A **B** C#) :

D	F	A	B
1	b3	5	6

The **4** is **not an avoid note** in combination with **minor chords** because it is two half tones above the b3 and not one half.

So we can safely add the 4 to Dm7 and we get Dm11 :

D	F	A	C	G
1	b3	5	b7	11

The **4** is also a special case in combination with **dominant chords**.
 When a 4 is added to a dominant chord, the 3 is omitted. Chords like these are called **sus4 chords**.

Chords like these often function as a delay for a dominant chord.

Sus4 chords often come with a 9 on the guitar :

G	C	D	F	A
1	4	5	b7	9

There's also a thing called altered tensions (b9, #9, b5, b13). This topic is covered later in another lesson.

The different chord types and their tensions :

Chord Type	Added Note	Symbol	
Major	2	Cmaj9	
	4 #4	/ Cmaj7#11	avoid note. #11 comes out of lydian scale
	6	C6	omitted 7
Minor	2	Cm9	
	4	Cm11	
	6	Cm6	omitted 7
Dominant	2 b2 #2	C9 C7(b9) C7#9	b2 and #2 come out of altered scale
	4	C7sus4	
	6 b6	C13 C7(b13)	b6 comes out of altered scale

Here's a summary of the **chord formulas** we covered until now + some additional chord types :

Chord Type	Chord Formula
Major Triad	1 3 5
Minor Triad	1 b3 5
Diminished Triad	1 b3 b5
Augmented Triad	1 3 #5
Major 7	1 3 5 7
Minor 7	1 b3 5 b7
Dominant 7	1 3 5 b7
Half Diminished 7	1 b3 b5 b7
Diminished 7	1 b3 b5 bb7
Augmented 7	1 3 #5 b7
Suspended 4	1 4 5 b7
minor/major 7	1 b3 5 7

Let's look at a shortcut for constructing chords:

The first step is memorizing the **chords** and **chord tones** of the **C major scale** and the **chord formula's**:

Cmaj7	C E G B
Dm7	D F A C
Em7	E G B D
Fmaj7	F A C E
G7	G B D F
Am7	A C E G
Bm7b5	B D F A

1. You must be able to picture the chord types and chord tones of C major without thinking.
2. Now that you know the chords of C major, it's easy to find chords of other keys.

For example : to find the chord tones of Cm7 :

1. You know the chord tones of Cmaj7 : C E G B
2. You know the chord formula of Cmaj7 : 1 3 5 7
3. You know the chord formula of minor 7 : 1 b3 5 b7
4. Adapt the chord tones of Cmaj7 to the formula of minor 7 : bring the 3 and the 7 a half note down
5. Conclusion : the chord tones of Cm7 are : C Eb G Bb

Example 2 : the chord tones of Ddim7 :

6. You know the chord tones of Dm7 : D F A C
7. You know the formula of Dm7 : 1 b3 5 b7
8. You know the formula of diminished 7 : 1 b3 b5 bb7
9. Adapt the chord tones of Dm7 to the formula of diminished 7 : bring the 5 and the 7 a half note down
10. Conclusion : the chord tones of Ddim7 are : D F Ab B

Example 3 : the chord tones of F#7 :

11. You know the chord tones of Fmaj7 : F A C E
12. To find the chord tones of F#maj7 you just have to raise each chord tone half a note : F# A# C# E#
13. You know the formula of major 7 : 1 3 5 7
14. You know the formula of dominant 7 : 1 3 5 b7
15. Adapt the chord tones of F#maj7 to the formula of dominant 7 : bring the 7 a half note down
16. Conclusion : the chord tones of F#7 are : F# A# C# E

Now you know how to find the notes of a chord, but how do you translate this to the **guitar**?

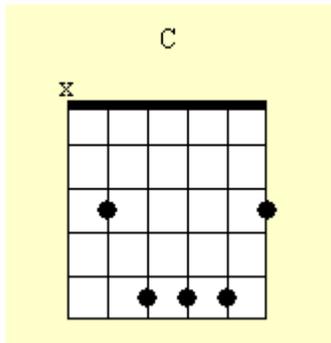
One thing you need to know is that not every chord tone is equally important :

- **3** and **7** are the **important** notes of a chord because they decide the kind of chord.
- The **1** is the **least important** note, because it is most of the time played by the **bass player**.
- The **5** is **not so important** either and can be disturbing sometimes.
- **Tensions** add **color** and **interest** to a chord, so it's preferable to use tensions instead of 1 and 5

Another thing you need to know is that **1 half note** equals **one fret** on the **guitar**.

Here's an example with guitar chord diagrams :

- We'll start with a C triad : C E G (1 3 5)
Let's have a look at the guitar chord diagram :



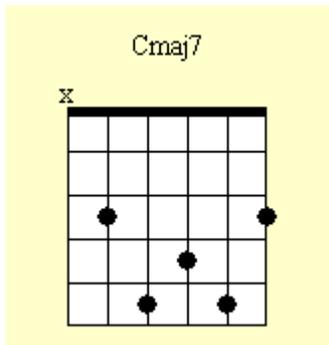
X15135 : C

from left to right (from low E string to high E string) we have here :

- X : the low E-string is not played
- 1 : the 1 or root of the chord is played on the A-string
- 5 : the 5th of the chord is played on the D-string
- 1 : again the root, but now on the G-string
- 3 : the third is played on the B-string
- 5 : the 5th is played again, but this time on the high E-string

You see that it is ok to duplicate chord tones, like the 1 and the 5 in our example, but this may sound a bit sluggish.

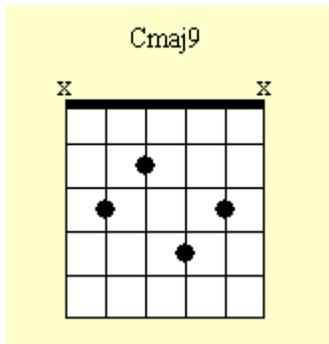
This chord doesn't sound very jazzy though, so let's spice it up a bit :



X15735 : Cmaj7

Instead of duplicating the root on the G-string, we exchanged it for the 7 of the chord.

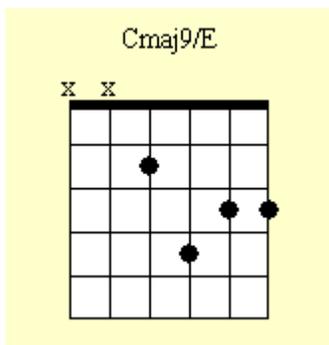
Now let's add some color :



X1379X : Cmaj9

We exchanged the 5th on the D-string for the 3rd and we changed the 3rd on the B-string to a 9.

This would be a nice chord if you're playing bossa nova, solo guitar or in duo setting, but if you play with a bass player and you don't want to get in his way, it's better to omit the root and to play on the higher strings only :



XX3795 : Cmaj9/E

Instead of playing the root of the chord, we now play the 5th on the high E-string.

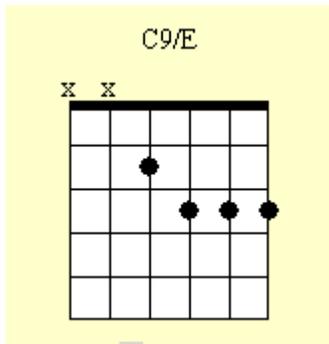
A **chord** like this is called a **chord inversion** : a chord that has a note other than the root in the bass.

There are three types of **chord inversions** : with the 3rd in the bass (**first inversion**), with the 5th in the bass (**second inversion**) or with the 7 in the bass (**third inversion**). In our example we have got a Cmaj9 chord with the 3rd (E) in the bass.

Now what needs to happen if we want to make this chord **dominant**?

Simple : the 7 has to go a half note down (major is 1 3 5 7, dominant is 1 3 5 b7).

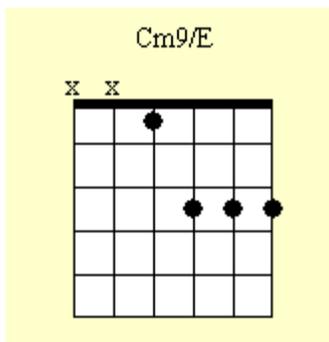
Have a look at the chord diagram:



XX3b795 : C9/E

And if we want to make this chord **minor**?

Starting from the dominant chord we have to lower the 3rd with half a note, as you can see here:



XXb3b795 : Cm9/E

Here's an exercise for you: I give you some chords and you need to find the chord notes (the solutions are on the next page) :

For example : Fm7 : F Ab C Eb

Now it's your turn :

Gm7 :

Abmaj7 :

C#maj7 :

A9sus4 :

B7 :

Edim7 :

Gdim7 :

D7b9 :

D#m7b5 :

Dmaj7 :

The solutions to the chord exercises:

Gm7 : G Bb D F
Abmaj7 : Ab C Eb G
C#maj7 : C# E# G# B#
A9sus4 : A D E G B
B7 : B D# F# A
Edim7 : E G Bb Db
Gdim7 : G Bb Db E
D7b9 : D F# A C Eb
D#m7b5 : D# F# A C#
Dmaj7 : D F# A C#

Did you pass the test? If not I suggest you reread the entire tutorial once again very slowly and make sure you understand all the parts.

That was it for the theoretical part. If you'd like to know more about jazz music theory, there's a book I can strongly recommend you (it's the jazz theory bible): [The Jazz Theory book](#) by **Mark Levine**

The next part is all about jazz chords on the guitar: the basic jazz guitar chord charts.

These charts are essential knowledge and a good starting point for beginning jazz guitarists.

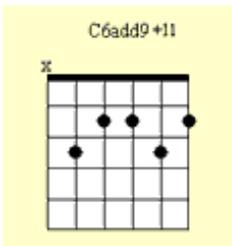
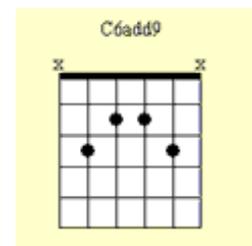
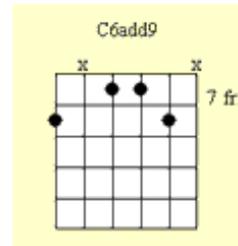
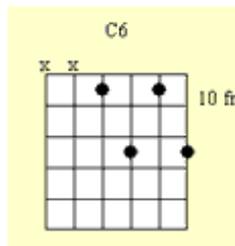
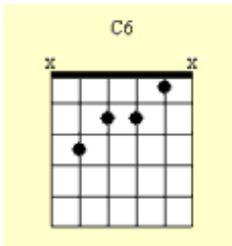
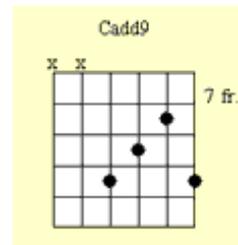
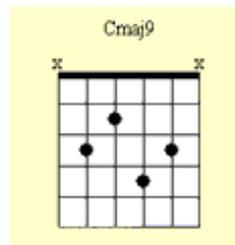
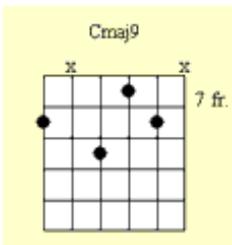
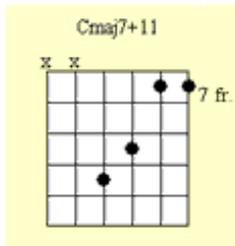
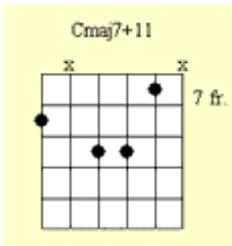
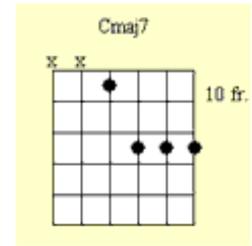
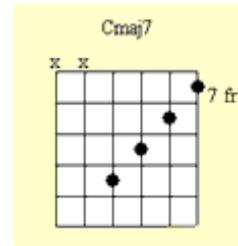
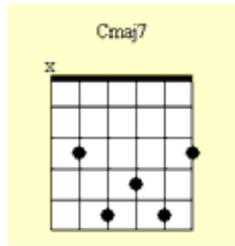
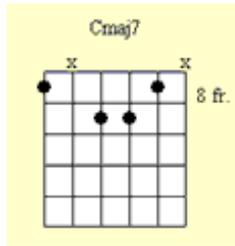
The best way to memorize them is by playing jazz chord progressions (for a list of the most popular jazz chord progressions, click [here](#)). Doing so you see the chords in relation to each other, what makes it easier to memorize them.

The next step would be playing the chord progressions of jazz standards. For the most popular and most played jazz standards you'll have to buy yourself the [Real book](#), the bible of every jazz musician.

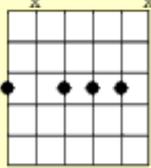
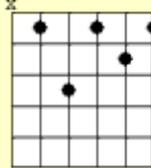
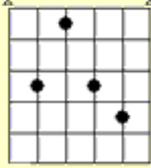
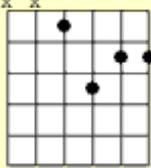
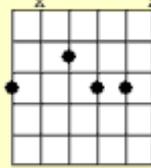
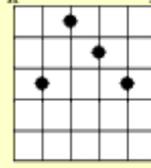
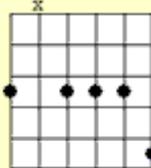
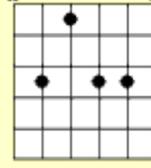
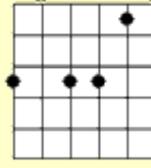
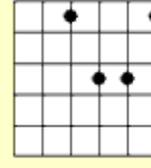
I suggest you flip the page and get your fingers going.

Enjoy!

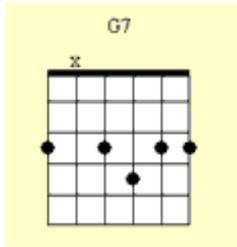
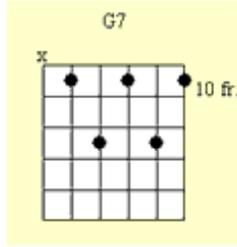
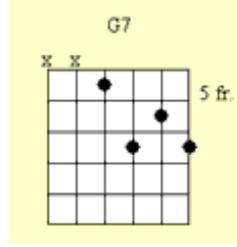
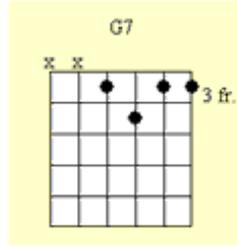
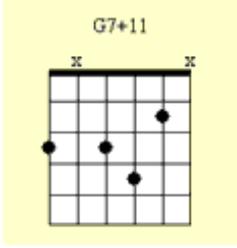
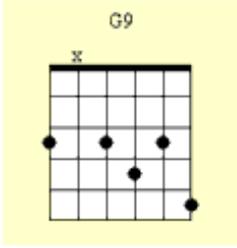
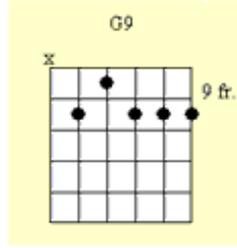
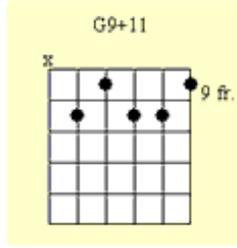
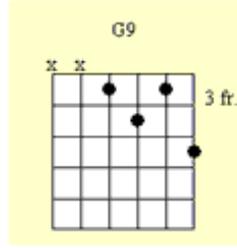
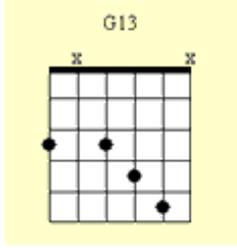
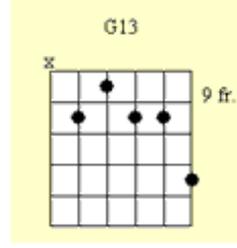
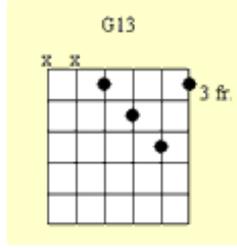
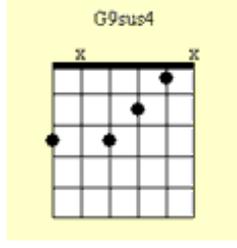
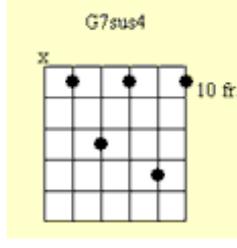
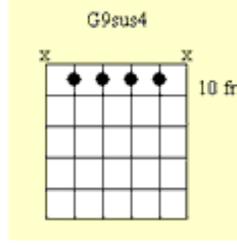
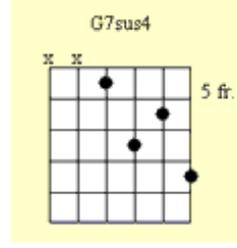
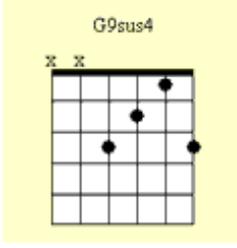
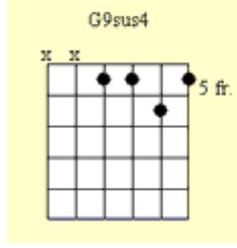
Major Chord Chart

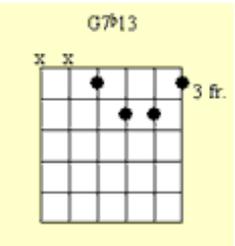
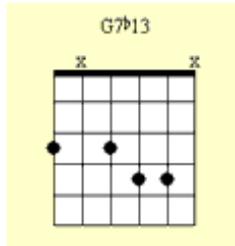
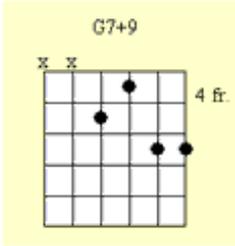
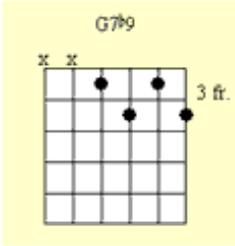
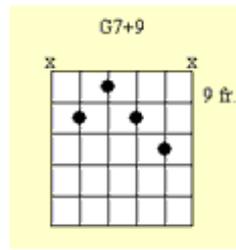
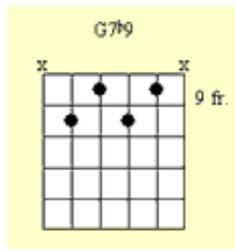
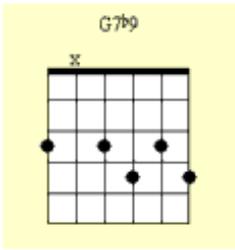


Minor Chord Chart

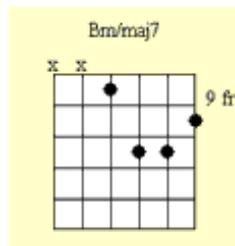
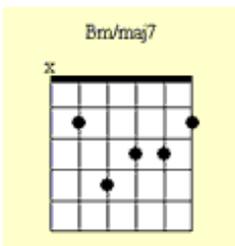
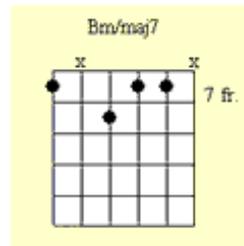
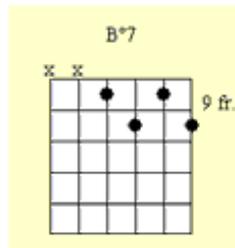
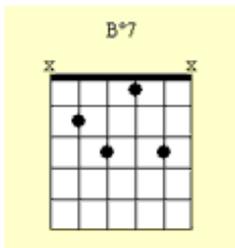
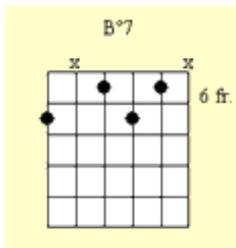
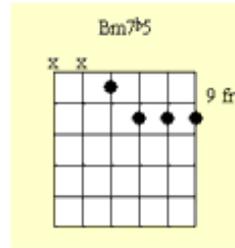
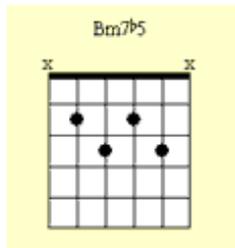
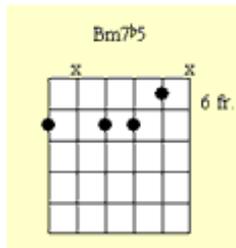
<p>Dm7</p>  <p>8 fr.</p>	<p>Dm7</p>  <p>5 fr.</p>	<p>Dm7</p>  <p>3 fr.</p>	<p>Dm7</p>  <p>12 fr.</p>
<p>Dm6</p>  <p>8 fr.</p>	<p>Dm6add9</p>  <p>3 fr.</p>		
<p>Dm9</p>  <p>8 fr.</p>	<p>Dm9</p>  <p>3 fr.</p>		
<p>Dm11</p>  <p>8 fr.</p>	<p>Dm11</p>  <p>3 fr.</p>		

Dominant Chord Chart

<p>G7</p> 	<p>G7</p> 	<p>G7</p> 	<p>G7</p> 	
<p>G7+11</p> 				
<p>G9</p> 	<p>G9</p> 	<p>G9+11</p> 	<p>G9</p> 	
<p>G13</p> 	<p>G13</p> 	<p>G13</p> 		
<p>G9sus4</p> 	<p>G7sus4</p> 	<p>G9sus4</p> 	<p>G7sus4</p> 	
<p>G9sus4</p> 	<p>G9sus4</p> 			



Diminished, Half Diminished & m/maj7



Useful Resources

Other Jazz Guitar Chord Tutorials at www.jazzguitar.be :

[Advanced Jazz Guitar Chords](#): chord charts of more complicated guitar voicings

[The Jazz Guitar Chord in Fourths](#): about the construction of quartal voicings

[Basic Chord Inversions](#): basic chord voicings & inversions

[Blues Chord Progressions & Variations](#): variations on the 12 bar blues

[Jazz Chord Progressions](#): the most popular chord progressions in jazz

Useful Books:

[Chords & Progressions for Jazz & Popular Guitar](#) by Arnie Berle

This book teaches guitar players of all levels how to construct and use chords for accompaniment and soloing. Practical examples and exercises take you from basic theory and simple accompaniment patterns to advanced chord soloing and comping. A complete survey of chord theory and technique.

[Joe Pass Guitar Chords](#) by Joe Pass

One of the finest books available on jazz guitar chords. Joe covers all the bases with two sections on chord forms and chord passages.

Chords are divided into six categories: Major, Seventh, Augmented, Minor, Diminished, and Minor Seventh Flat Fifth, each showing substitutions and inversions that Joe would play when confronted with "basic" chord symbols. The chord passage section is divided into nine categories, including such topics as Major Sounds, Diminished Sounds, Augmented Sounds, Standard Patter Chord Substitutions, and other chord progressions.

[Jazzing it Up](#) by Fred Sokolow

How to Improvise with Jazz Chords on Guitar.

A basic guide for learning to play jazz chord solos, chord backup, and improvising with jazz chords. Includes: 175 moveable chord shapes; chord construction; common chord progressions; and more. Complete with a dozen sample chord solos plus chord grids and a CD to help guitarists learn how to jazz up a chord solo.

[Jazz Rhythm Guitar](#) by Jack Grassel

This book/CD pack by award-winning guitarist and distinguished teacher Jack Grassel will help rhythm guitarists better understand: chord symbols and voicings; comping styles and patterns; equipment, accessories and set-up; the fingerboard; chord theory; and much more. The accompanying CD includes 74 full-band tracks.

[The Jazz Theory book](#) by Mark Levine

The most comprehensive Jazz Theory book ever published!. Over 500 pages of text and over 750 musical examples. Written in the language of the working jazz musician, this book is easy to read and user-friendly. At the same time, it is the most comprehensive study of jazz harmony and theory ever published. "The Jazz Theory Book" takes the student from the most basic techniques such as chord construction and the II-V-I progression through scale theory, the blues, "I've Got Rhythm" changes, slash chords, the bebop and pentatonic scales, how to read a lead sheet and memorize tunes and a study of reharmonization that is almost a book in itself.

[The New Real Book - Volume 1 \(C Edition\)](#) by Sher Music Company

Jazz classics, choice standards, pop-fusion classics! The only legal, corrected and updated version of the original Real Book. Now available in C, Bb, and Eb. All living composers have approved these charts; many of them are from the composer's own lead sheets. Charts for the standards were derived from a consensus of the best recorded jazz versions. Created by musicians, for musicians. The new standard in fake books!