

CHAPTER 1

Mastering Chords

CHORD TYPES

There are seven basic jazz chords.

Type	Major 6	Minor 6	Minor 7	Minor 7 ^b 5	Dominant 7	Diminished 7	Major 7
Symbol	6	-6	-7	-7 ^b 5	7	°7	Maj7
Formula	1, 3, 5, 6	1, \flat 3, 5, 6	1, \flat 3, 5, \flat 7	1, \flat 3, \flat 5, \flat 7	1, 3, 5, \flat 7	1, \flat 3, \flat 5, $\flat\flat$ 7	1, 3, 5, Maj7

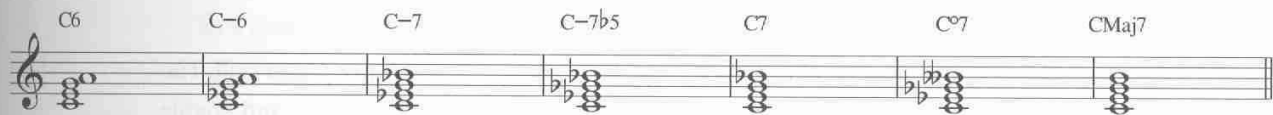


Fig. 1.1. Chord Types

On piano, these chords are generally played as 4-note voicings in *close position*, meaning that all notes are set within one octave (see figure 1.1). Whether harmonizing a melody or played as a *comping* part (chordal accompaniment), chords are most commonly played as 4-note close voicings.

These chords may appear in different *inversions*—note orders, defined by the voicing's bottom note. Choosing different inversions helps to create harmonic activity without changing chord identity.

- *Root position* means that the chord root is on the bottom.
- *First inversion* means that the third is on the bottom.
- *Second inversion* means that the fifth is on the bottom.
- *Third inversion* means that the sixth or seventh is on the bottom.

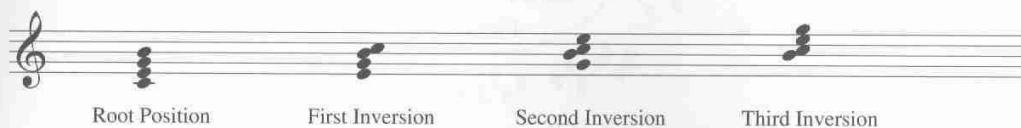


Fig. 1.2. Inversions

Chord notes may be played simultaneously or sequentially (“broken”).



Fig. 1.3. Simultaneous vs. Broken Chords

VOICE LEADING

By *voice leading* chords smoothly—choosing inversions that minimize note movement—your comping will sound more refined and be easier to play. In figure 1.4, note how using the second inversion of E7 allows you to keep two common tones going from B-7^b5 to E7, and one from E7 to B^b7.



Fig. 1.4. Voice Leading

PRACTICE

Learning to play all chords in all inversions is an essential jazz piano skill. The following types of exercises will help you to build muscle memory and enable you to call upon different inversions spontaneously.

Practice these exercises in two ways:

1. Use the circle of fifths, and practice all seven chord types for two roots per day. Proceed through the circle of fifths, practicing two more roots every day. You will cover all permutations of all basic chords every six days.

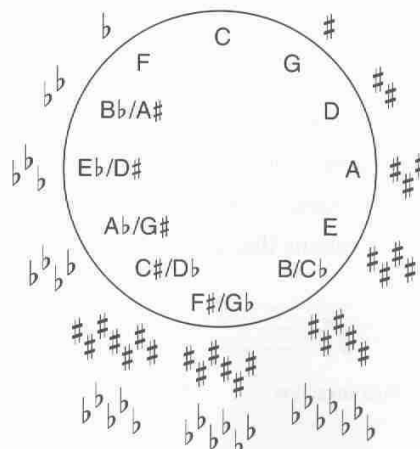


Fig. 1.5. Circle of Fifths

- Base these exercises on the chords from the new music you are learning, such as the lead sheets in appendix A. Though this doesn't ensure that you'll practice all permutations of all chords, it will directly help you learn your current material.

Examples for the following exercises are based on this lead sheet:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff contains four measures with chords B-7b5, Bb7, A-7, and Db7. The second staff contains four measures with chords D-7, Ab7, G7, and C6. The C6 chord is marked with a slur and a fermata.

Fig. 1.6. Sample Chord Progression

Exercise 1.1. Inversion Practice: Two Hands Parallel

This essential exercise will help you to build facility playing any chord. Keep your hands one octave apart, and begin with your left hand in the range about two octaves below middle C. Continue it for all chords you are studying, whether in a lead sheet or as you progress through the circle of fifths.

The image shows four systems of musical notation for Exercise 1.1, Inversion Practice: Two Hands Parallel. The exercise is in 4/4 time and features a B-7b5 chord. The first system shows the chord in Root Position, First Inversion, Second Inversion, and Third Inversion. The second system shows the chord in Root Position, First Inversion, and Second Inversion. The third system shows the chord in Root Position, First Inversion, and Second Inversion. The fourth system shows the chord in Root Position, First Inversion, and Second Inversion.

Exercise 1.2. Melodic Chord Tone Units

The right hand plays broken chords (also called *melodizing* the chords) in all inversions. The left hand plays one inversion throughout the entire exercise, and then the next inversion the second time through. Then voice lead the progression. Continue it for all chords you are studying.



TRACK 16

B-7b5 E7 Bb7

Root Position

simile

B-7b5 E7 Bb7

First Inversion

simile

B-7b5 E7 Bb7

Second Inversion

simile

B-7b5 E7 Bb7

Third Inversion

simile

Exercise 1.4. Varied Left-Hand Inversions

This is yet another variation of the Melodic Chord Tone Unit exercise (1.2). Here, in each bar, the left hand plays all the inversions. Continue it for all chords you are studying.

The musical score for Exercise 1.4 is in 4/4 time and consists of three measures. The right hand plays a melodic line of eighth notes. The left hand plays four different chord inversions per measure. The first measure is labeled **B-7^{b5}** and the second **E7**. The third measure is labeled **B^b7** and has a *simile* marking. The first measure has four chords: B-7^{b5} (root position), B-7^{b5} (first inversion), B-7^{b5} (second inversion), and B-7^{b5} (third inversion). The second measure has four chords: E7 (root position), E7 (first inversion), E7 (second inversion), and E7 (third inversion). The third measure has four chords: B^b7 (root position), B^b7 (first inversion), B^b7 (second inversion), and B^b7 (third inversion).

Exercise 1.5. Lead Sheet Practice

To gain a solid command of any lead sheet, use the following practice approach, based on the preceding exercises. You will be playing seventeen choruses of the lead sheet's chord progression, so this is a substantial exercise. Try this on the lead sheets in appendix A.

1. The left hand comps four quarter notes per measure, with a different inversion on each beat. The right hand plays the melody. Play one chorus.
2. The left hand comps the same inversion on each quarter note. The right hand plays 1-2-3-4 broken chords. Play one chorus for each inversion in the left hand.
3. Like (2), but the right hand plays 1-4-2-3 or another pattern.
4. Like (2), but use smooth voice leading in the left hand.
5. Like (2), but use smooth voice leading in the left hand and play the melody with the right hand.