
Jazz Piano Voicings

Materials compiled by

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Objective:

- Provide you as a music educator with a process for learning and teaching great Jazz Piano voicings and comping techniques to your students.
- Expand your jazz horizons and literature base
- Relieve fear associated with the word JAZZ
- Not intended, however, to address soloing or improvising techniques...sorry!

Supplemental Materials:

These are great additional resources to get and study too!

- ✓ “Jazz Keyboard Harmony” Phil DeGreg
Published by Jamey Aebersold
- ✓ “Voicings For Jazz” Frank Mantooth
- ✓ “Jazz Piano Voicings for the Non-Pianist” Mike Tracy
published by Jamey Aebersold
- ✓ “There Is No Such Thing As A Mistake”
Barney McClure published by McWorks
- ✓ “Standardized Chord Symbol Notation”
Brandt/Roemer published by Roerick Music Co.

Other Questions? Here’s how to get a hold of me.

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Prerequisite Knowledge

It is best if you prepare by making sure you know the following things about music theory before moving on:

- Basic music literacy
 - Know the names of notes in Treble and Bass clefs and where they are on the keyboard.
 - Accidentals and how they effect notes & staves
 - Know rhythmic values of notes, rests, and time signatures.
- Key signatures, Major & Minor, and the scales that go with them.
- An understanding of basic chord structure. At least simple triads in root position.
- Intervals. Beyond knowing major and minor triads, an ability to quickly find the Maj. 2nd, 4th, Maj. 6th, Maj. & min. 7th above any given root will be important. I'll help you understand these more as we work along, but a basic understanding will make things easier.

Other things that will help

- ❑ Practice & practice wisely
- ❑ Listen to jazz! I personally recommend recordings by Gene Harris, Benny Green, Harry Connick Jr., Diana Krall, The Ray Brown Trio, Count Basie, and Oscar Peterson.
- ❑ Access to fake books or other lead sheets to practice with. Sher Music, Hal Leonard Publications and the Jamey Aebersold series are excellent published sources for lead sheets. There are also many unpublished fake books out there at good prices.
- ❑ A good music theory text as a reference.
- ❑ Real situations in which to apply these concepts.

Basic Chord Structure

In Western music, source of jazz harmony; we deal with 5 basic chord types if we stack in 3rds up to the 7th:

1. **The Major⁷ chord.**

Root, Ma3, 5th, Ma7

Like the I and IV chords in a major key.

Symbol: Xma⁷ (X being whatever the root is). Cma⁷

Xma⁷ always has a Ma3 & Ma7 regardless of the key you're in.

2. **The Dominant⁷ chord**

Root, Ma3, 5th, mi7

Like the V chord in a major key.

Symbol: X⁷ G⁷

X⁷ always has a Ma3 & mi7 regardless of the key.

3. **The Minor⁷ chord**

Root, mi3, 5th, mi7

Like the II, III, VI chords in a major key.

Symbol: Xmi⁷ Dmi⁷

Xmi⁷ always has a mi3 & mi7 regardless of the key.

4. **The Half-diminished⁷ chord**

Root, mi3, b5, mi7

Like the VII chord in a major key or the II chord in a minor key.

Symbol: Xmi^{7(b5)} Bmi^{7(b5)}

Xmi^{7(b5)} always has a mi3, b5 & mi7 regardless of the key.

5. **The Fully-diminished⁷ chord**

Root, mi3, b5, bb7

Like the VII chord in a melodic minor key.

Symbol: Xdim⁷ or X^{O7} Bdim⁷ or B^{O7}

Xdim⁷ always has a mi3, b5 & bb7 regardless of the key.

Basic Tones and Qualifiers

The 5 chord types are made up of two types of notes: Basic Tones and Qualifiers. They each do special things for the ear within the context of the chord.

Qualifiers The 3rd and the 7th of each chord.

They do more than any other tones in establishing the working qualities or function of the chord. It's the alterations of the 3rd and 7th that differentiate or "qualify" the chord as being Major⁷, Dominant⁷, or Minor⁷.

Basic Tones The root and 5th of the chord.

The root gives the chord a name. The root and 5th both act as reference points for the ear against which to appreciate the changes in chord quality and function brought about by variations of the 3rd and 7th.

However, in the diminished chords the b5 begins to act as a qualifier instead of a basic tone.

Root position exercise for the 5 chord types.

1. Pick a key
2. Play the following as both chords and arpeggios

Xma:	1-3-5-8-5-3-1
Xma ⁷ :	1-3-5-7-5-3-1
X ⁷ :	1-3-5-b7-5-3-1
Xmi ⁷ :	1-b3-5-b7-5-b3-1
Xmi ^{7(b5)} :	1-b3-b5-b7-b5-b3-1
Xdim ⁷ :	1-b3-b5-bb7-5-b3-1
3. When ready, move to a new key, eventually through all keys
4. Isolate and play just one chord type through all keys, modulating by both step (whole & half) and circle of 5ths.
5. Do the above in writing as well.

Extensions 9th, 11th, 13th

They don't really change the function of the chords, like qualifiers do (3rd & 7th). They just "spice it up" by adding color or dissonance.

The enjoyment of dissonance through added extensions is a relative thing. However, to most trained "jazzers" (or jazz-ears) the colors brought on by extensions are seen as normal, enjoyable, and expected.

A Rose by any other name may be more than a Rose!

The 9th is the same as the 2nd, the 11th is the same as the 4th, and the 13th is the same as the 6th. "So why," you ask, "don't we just call them the 2nd, 4th and 6th?" The answer lies in the presence of the 7th: 9th implies the inclusion of the 7th, 2nd does not (2+7=9). Same with the 4th & 11th, and the 6th & 13th. It's simply a way of saving ink by notating two tones with one name. This doesn't mean however that the extension must always be positioned above the 7th.

Exercise:

Identify all the extensions for the Major, Dominant & Minor chords covered in the Root position exercise for the 5 chord types.

Drill: select random notes and name it's extensions.

Voicing the Chords

General Voicing Guidelines

- 1) Play the voicing with the left hand if you have a bass player and “fill”, solo or add extra chord tones with the right.
- 2) What, no Bass player? Voice the chord with the right hand and play bass lines with the left.
- 3) Position the chord with its lowest note between C3 & C4 on the keyboard.
- 4) 3rd & 7th need to be included. Add extensions to your liking.
- 5) Learn 2 positions/ inversions for each chord. One with the 3rd on the bottom & the other with the 7th on the bottom.
- 6) If the root of the next chord leaps by more than a 3rd, rotate the inversion as you change the chord. Example: a 3-7 voicing on a C⁷ chord should move to a 7-3 voicing if the next chord's root is F.
- 7) If the root of the next chord moves by step, keep the inversion as you change the chord. Example: a 3-7 voicing on a C⁷ chord should remain a 3-7 voicing if the next chord's root is D or B
- 8) Extensions are good! Add them according to the following:
 - a) Don't use the 11th if the 3rd is major, but the 9th & 13th are cool.
 - b) Avoid the 13th if the 3rd is minor, but the 9th & 11th are cool.
 - c) Don't add extensions on either of the diminished chords, they just confuse the function.

Left Hand Voicings Reference Sheet

General Guidelines:

1. If your joined by a bass player, play the voicing with your left hand & fill, solo with the right
2. If no Bass player, play the voicing with right hand and bassline with left.
3. Position voicing with lowest note between Mid C & the octave below
4. Addition of extensions is up to you. Follow the choices indicated for each chord type

Major7

Extensions: 9th & 13th - Good, 11th - bad, unless it's #

Great Left
hand voicings

Seen as Cma7, CM7, C 7

"4 stack"

Dominant7

Extensions: 9th & 13th - Good, 11th - bad, unless it's #

Great Left
hand voicings

Seen as C7

Minor7

Extensions: 9th & 11th - Good, 13th - bad,

Great Left
hand voicings

Seen as Cmi7, Cm7, C-7

"4stack"

Half Diminished7

No extensions beyond the 7th please. b5 is very important now

Great Left hand voicings
(any inversions of R, b3, b5, b7)

Seen as Cmi7(b5), C^o

Fully Diminished

No extensions beyond the 7th please. b5 & bb7 are very important

Only 3 dim7 chords in existence! Seen as Cdim7, Cdim, C^o

use the above for F#o or Gb, Ao, Co, Fbo
use the above for Go, Bb, Dbo or C#o, Eo
use the above for Fo, Ab, Cbo or Bo, Do

Learn & Practice Dominant⁷ chord voicings

Start with the blues! You can make a lot of music by just playing the blues!

Song list: These tunes use only or nearly only dominant chords in their progressions.

Blues in any key
Blues Backstage
C Jam Blues/ Duke's Place
Caravan
CRS Craft
Cousin Mary
Flat Foot Floogie
I'm Walkin'
Jazz Me Blues
Oop Pop A Dah
Red Top
Sack O' Woe
Time's A Waistin'
Well You Needn't
Swingin Til The Girls Come Home
Tenor Madness

Here is the formula for the Basic 12 Bar Blues.

Basic 12-Bar Blues

The diagram illustrates the Basic 12-Bar Blues chord progression in 4/4 time, divided into three staves of four bars each:

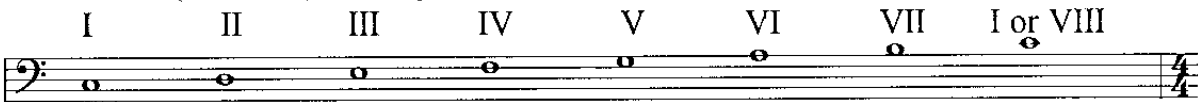
- Staff 1: I⁷ (Chord I7) for all four bars.
- Staff 2: IV⁷ (Chord IV7) for the first four bars, and I⁷ (Chord I7) for the last four bars.
- Staff 3: V⁷ (Chord V7) for the first four bars, IV⁷ (Chord IV7) for the next four bars, and I⁷ (Chord I7) for the final four bars.

Step 1 **Memorize it** so it will be easy to apply to different keys quickly.

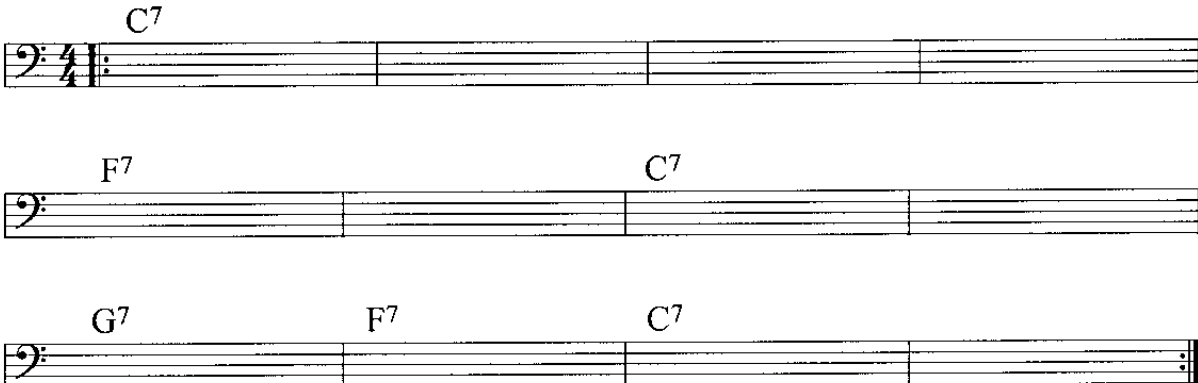
Step 2 Let's put it in a key. The key of C is a good starting place.

Key: C Major

Scale tones (chord roots) for C Maj



Basic Blues in C



Step 3 Figure out voicings for the 3 chords of the basic blues progression. Use the General Voicing Guidelines from page 7, the Left Hand Voicings Reference Sheet, and the included blues sheets to help.

Memorize these voicings and get used to playing them from seeing just the chord symbol and not the written notes themselves.

Start simple and grow: 3 & 7 only at first, then add another note (9th or 13th) and another until your comfortable with a 4 or 5 note voicing between the two hands.

Step 4 Add Time & Rhythm

Step 5 Now practice by changing the inversions you use.

Step 6 Move on to the next key, repeating steps 1-4. By circle of 5ths is best because you'll only be adding 1 new chord each new key.

Step 7 After several keys start working some of the tunes on the list.

Step 8 **Once you've gone through several keys, start trying some of the other blues progressions included.**

More "evolved" Dominant 12-Bar Blues

The first staff shows a 12-bar progression with chords: I⁷ (bars 1-4), IV⁷ (bars 5-8), and I⁷ (bars 9-12).

The second staff shows a 12-bar progression with chords: IV⁷ (bars 1-4), I⁷ (bars 5-6), VII⁷ (bars 7-8), bVII⁷ (bars 9-10), and VI⁷ (bars 11-12). A dotted line labeled "walk down" spans from bar 5 to bar 12.

The third staff shows a 12-bar progression with chords: II⁷ (bars 1-4), V⁷ (bars 5-8), I⁷ (bars 9-10), VI⁷ (bars 11-12), II⁷ (bars 1-4), and V⁷ (bars 5-8). A dotted line labeled "turn around" spans from bar 9 to bar 12.

Try "Montgomery Ward Changes"

They follow a "mega-form" equal to:

12 Bar Blues, 12 Bar Blues, Rhythm Changes Bridge, 12 Bar Blues

8-Bar Rhythm Changes Bridge

The first staff shows an 8-bar progression with chords: III⁷ (bars 1-4) and VI⁷ (bars 5-8).

The second staff shows an 8-bar progression with chords: II⁷ (bars 1-4) and V⁷ (bars 5-8).

Be Sure to Learn & memorize voicings for all the dominant chords!

Learn & Practice Minor⁷ chord voicings

Follow a similar process as before. Use the General Voicing Guidelines from page 7, the Left Hand Voicings Reference Sheet, and the following progression formulas to help.

This first one adds the IImi^7 chord as a variation of the blues you already know!
Take it through all the keys.

"Not-quite-Dominant" 12-Bar Blues

I^7 IV^7 I^7
 IV^7 I^7 VII^7 bVII^7 VI^7 "walk down"
 IImi^7 V^7 I^7 VI^7 II^7 V^7 "turn around"

The II-V progression is one of the most common in non-blues tunes. Use this exercise to practice it further.

II-V Exercise (circle of 5ths)

Dm^7 G^7 Gm^7 C^7
 Cm^7 F^7 Fm^7 $\text{B}^{\flat 7}$
 $\text{B}^{\flat m}7$ $\text{E}^{\flat 7}$ $\text{E}^{\flat m}7$ $\text{A}^{\flat 7}$
 $\text{A}^{\flat m}7$ $\text{D}^{\flat 7}$ $\text{D}^{\flat m}7$ $\text{G}^{\flat 7}$
 $\text{F}^{\sharp m}7$ B^7 Bm^7 E^7
 Em^7 A^7 Am^7 D^7

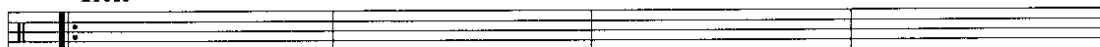
Song list: These tunes use mostly Minor and Dominant chords in their progressions, with a lot of II-V relationships.

Minor Blues in any key
Billie's Bounce
Blues In A Minute
Comes Love
Canteloupe Island
Footprints
Groove Merchant
Honey Suckle Rose
Impressions
Milestones
Mr. PC
Now's The Time
Satin Doll
Route 66
Scrapple From The Apple
So What
Summertime

Here's the formula for Minor Blues

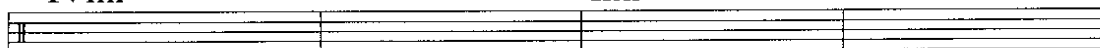
Minor 12-Bar Blues

Imi⁷



IVmi⁷

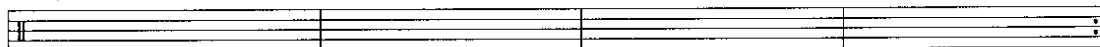
Imi⁷



V⁷

Imi⁷

V⁷



Learn and memorize voicings for all the minor chords!

Learn & Practice Major⁷ chord voicings

Follow a similar process as before. Use the General Voicing Guidelines from page 7, the Left Hand Voicings Reference Sheet, and the following progression formulas to help. This exercise adds the Ima⁷ chord to the II-V progression.

II^m7-V7-I^ma7 (by circle of 5ths)

D ^m 7	G ⁷	C ^{maj} 7
G ^m 7	C ⁷	F ^{maj} 7
C ^m 7	F ⁷	B ^b ^{maj} 7
F ^m 7	B ^b 7	E ^b ^{maj} 7
B ^b ^m 7	E ^b 7	A ^b ^{maj} 7
E ^b ^m 7	A ^b 7	D ^b ^{maj} 7
A ^b ^m 7	D ^b 7	G ^b ^{maj} 7
C [#] ^m 7	F [#] 7	B ^{maj} 7
F [#] ^m 7	B ⁷	E ^{maj} 7
B ^m 7	E ⁷	A ^{maj} 7
E ^m 7	A ⁷	D ^{maj} 7
A ^m 7	D ⁷	G ^{maj} 7

Here's a variation of the same

II mi7-V7-I ma7 Exercise (changing keys by step)

Dm ⁷	G ⁷	Cmaj ⁷
Cm ⁷	F ⁷	B ^b maj ⁷
B ^b m ⁷	E ^b 7	A ^b maj ⁷
A ^b m ⁷	D ^b 7	G ^b maj ⁷
F [#] m ⁷	B ⁷	Emaj ⁷
Em ⁷	A ⁷	Dmaj ⁷
E ^b m ⁷	A ^b 7	D ^b maj ⁷
D ^b m ⁷	G ^b 7	C ^b maj ⁷
Bm ⁷	E ⁷	Amaj ⁷
Am ⁷	D ⁷	Gmaj ⁷
Gm ⁷	C ⁷	Fmaj ⁷
Fm ⁷	B ^b 7	E ^b maj ⁷

Song list: These tunes use Major, Minor and Dominant chords in their progressions, with a lot of II-V-I relationships.

Rhythm Changes
A Beautiful Friendship
Avalon
Au Privave
I Can't Give You Anything But Love
I Can't Believe That You're In Love With Me
I Want To Be Happy
I Left My Heart In San Francisco
Love Is Just Around The Corner
Perdido
Oop Bop She Bam
Over The Rainbow
Too Late Now

Learn & Practice $Mi^{7(b5)}$ chord voicings

Follow a similar process as before. Use the General Voicing Guidelines from page 7, the Left Hand Voicings Reference Sheet, and the following exercises to help. Remember, no extensions on these chords!

Song list: These tunes use add the Half-diminished chord to their progressions.

Autumn Leaves
Hi-Fly
I Hear Music
I Remember You
Killer Joe
St Thomas
Sugar
Bird Blues

The following page has an exercise covering the 1st 8 bars of "Autumn Leaves". If you can master this then you can play every chord except the fully-diminished. But there are only three voicings for them that you'll need to learn!

Autumn Leaves?

1st 8 bars of Autumn Leaves in every key. Includes all basic chord types except fully diminished.

Am⁷ D⁷ Gmaj⁷ Cmaj⁷ F[♯]m⁷(^b5) B⁷ Em⁷

Em⁷ A⁷ Dmaj⁷ Gmaj⁷ C[♯]m⁷(^b5) F[♯] Bm⁷

Bm⁷ E⁷ Amaj⁷ Dmaj⁷ A^bm⁷(^b5) D^b7 G^bm⁷

F[♯]m⁷ B⁷ Emaj⁷ Amaj⁷ E^bm⁷(^b5) A^b7 D^bm⁷

C[♯]m⁷ F[♯] Bmaj⁷ Emaj⁷ B^bm⁷(^b5) E^b7 A^bm⁷

A^bm⁷ D^b7 G^bmaj⁷ C^bmaj⁷ Fm⁷(^b5) B^b7 E^bm⁷

E^bm⁷ A^b7 D^bmaj⁷ G^bmaj⁷ Cm⁷(^b5) F⁷ B^bm⁷

B^bm⁷ E^b7 A^bmaj⁷ D^bmaj⁷ Gm⁷(^b5) C⁷ Fm⁷

Fm⁷ B^b7 E^bmaj⁷ A^bmaj⁷ Dm⁷(^b5) G⁷ Cm⁷

Cm⁷ F⁷ B^bmaj⁷ E^bmaj⁷ Am⁷(^b5) D⁷ Gm⁷

Gm⁷ C⁷ Fmaj⁷ B^bmaj⁷ Em⁷(^b5) A⁷ Dm⁷

Dm⁷ G⁷ Cmaj⁷ Fmaj⁷ Bm⁷(^b5) E⁷ Am⁷

"Bird" Blues

Ima ⁷	VII ^{mi7(b5)} III ⁷	VI ^{mi7}	II ⁷	V ^{mi7}	I ⁷
IV ^{ma7}	IV ^{mi7}	III ^{mi7}	^b III ^{mi7}		
II ^{mi7}	V ⁷	III ^{mi7}	VI ⁷	II ^{mi7}	V ⁷

Learn & Practice dim⁷ chord voicings

As mentioned above, and on the Voicings Reference Sheet, there are only 3 fully diminished chords to learn! Because of the structure of this chord, every tone (1, b3, b5, bb7) can also act a substitute root, so for every dim⁷ chord you learn, you're covering positions for 4!

What's left?

Alterations

Notes of the chord that are intentionally raised or lowered to create even more color. This is only done to the Basic and Color tones, NOT the Qualifiers. Alterations are usually shown in parenthesis just to the right of the normal chord symbol. All you need to do is change that part of the chord as requested.

Typical alterations include:

- (#5) sometimes indicated as a plus sign in the chord symbol C+⁷ This means raise the 5th, not add the 7th.
- (b9) lower the 9th 1/2 step.
- (#9) You understand, right?
- (#11) the only way the 11th will work with a major 3rd. (must be a union guy!).

Adding Color without the 7th

Typically shown in () like alterations are. $Xma^{(add2)}$ gives the color of the 9th without the 7th. X^6 is a common way to request the color of the 13th without the 7th.

Slash chords or Compound Chords

Provide a way to indicate an alternate root for a chord. The symbol Cmi^7/Bb = C minor⁷ chord, but put a Bb in the bass.

Sus Chords $X7^{sus}$ or $X7^{sus4}$

Suspension, usually of the 3rd temporarily up 1/2 step to the 4th. This could also be written as a compound chord. G^{7sus} is the same as Dmi^7/G

Poly-Chords

More than one chord at a time! This is a different way of representing certain types of alterations. You'll see two chords, written like the two numbers of a fraction; one above the other with a horizontal line in between.

To play this chord, simply stack the upper chord on top the lower.

$\frac{C}{Bb^7}$ = play your usual voicing for a Bb^7 in the left hand and stack a C maj triad on top with the right. $Bb^{7(\#11)}$ would get the same thing.

You should be ready to tackle the changes of any tune from a fake book or chord chart. Live long, and swing hard!