

INTRODUCTION TO 4-note Chord Colors, Inversions, and Shapes

by: Christopher B. Collins

In my youth, I often heard great jazz musicians preparing for a concert by warming-up with various arpeggio exercises. I soon learned these exercises were chords and their inversions; one of the foundational elements of jazz improvisation and something I needed to practice and understand.

For my students, I have created several exercises that allow them to absorb the sound of chords and their inversions, and develop the necessary mental and physical technique to freely manipulate the basic chord tones. While these exercises may not always be fun, they will start the disciplined/patient student on the road to musical improvisation.

PREPARATION:

If you already know how to build and play major, minor, and dominant chords in all keys, skip to exercise 2 (Although, even intermediate players may find Ex. #1 a good review)

Know the three basic chord types in all keys:

CMaj7
C7
Cmin7

Root...3rd....5th.....7th
Root...3rd....5th.....7th
Root...3rd....5th.....7th

For these exercises Maj7 ths = I chords in some key
 dominant7 ths= V chords in some key
 min7 ths = ii chords in some key

So, in line A above,

CMaj7 is built from the C major scale starting on the first note (I) of the scale

CMaj7

ROOT.....3rd.....5th.....7th

C7 is built from the F major scale starting on the fifth note (V) of the scale

Musical notation for the C7 chord. The staff is in treble clef and begins with a treble clef and a '12' above it. The notes are: C4 (whole), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), and C5 (quarter). Above the staff, 'C7' is written. Below the staff, the notes are labeled: 'ROOT.....3rd.....5th.....7th'.

Cmin7 is built from the Bb major scale starting on the second note (ii) of the scale

Musical notation for the Cmin7 chord. The staff is in treble clef and begins with a treble clef and a '24' above it. The notes are: C4 (whole), Db4 (quarter), Eb4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), Ab4 (quarter), and C5 (quarter). Above the staff, 'Cmin7' is written. Below the staff, the notes are labeled: 'ROOT.....3rd.....5th.....7th'.

Exercise #1 should help you to learn all basic chords in root position. Start by writing the chords (if you have to). Eventually, do this exercise with your head, ears, and instrument (in other words, do not simply write the solutions down and read them off the page - Although it is often necessary to start at the notation level, eventually you **MUST** internalize the jazz vocabulary if you hope to become a proficient improviser). I have written out several chords to get you started followed by the starting note of the rest.