XV. Block Chords

A. Construction

The term "block chords" is used generally to describe chords where all the notes are sounded simultaneously, as opposed to chords that are arpeggiated, or to those that occur as a result of contrapuntal techniques where all the chord-tones are not sounded on the same beat.

In the jazz community the term "block chords" has come to mean an arranging technique from the Big Band era whereby a melody is harmonized with the other voices moving in strict similar motion (for the most part) and in locked rhythm with the melody. The technique was widely used by all the arrangers of the Big Band era and it continues to have its uses today. It differs from classical techniques of harmonization in the way that the voice-leading is handled. Parallel 5ths and 4ths abound, and 7ths resolving in voices other than the one they occur in is a matter of little concern. It is not contrapuntal in nature, as the 4-part chorale-texture voice-leading techniques taught at every conservatory are. It is really just a thickening of the melody in much the same way that playing a melody in parallel octaves is a thickening of the melody. Whether or not the other parts have any strong melodic logic is often a secondary consideration.

In many ways, block chording techniques are like painting by numbers. We simply fill in the remaining chord-tones *underneath* our melody note. It is a technique that is applied mostly to 7th-chords. It is less effective with music that is primarily triadic in nature. Note: We have very little control over what notes are in the bass with this technique. Consequently, it is less suitable for solo guitar arrangements. I.e. It works best when someone else is playing a bass line.

We start with "Close-Voiced" chords, where the 4 chord-tones are as closely packed together as possible underneath the melody note (aka the "Lead"). We then create "Spread-Voiced" voicings where the 2nd voice from the top is dropped down an octave ("Drop 2 Voicings"), where the 3rd voice from the top is dropped down an octave ("Drop 3 Voicings"), where the 4th voice from the top is dropped down an octave ("Drop 4 Voicings"), where the 2nd and 3rd voices from the top are dropped down an octave ("Drop 2 & 3 Voicings"), or where the 2nd and 4th voices from the top are dropped down an octave ("Drop 2 & 4 Voicings").

In a close voicing, if the chord's 7th is in the 1st (top) voice:

• the tone directly beneath it (the 2nd voice) will be the chord's 5th degree.

• the next note from the top (the 3rd voice) will be the chord's 3rd degree (or 4th degree, in the case of a Sus4 chord).

• the note on the bottom (the 4th voice) will be the chord's Root.

Etc.

Pay close attention to the voicings that place the Root on the bottom. They are by far the most commonly used voicings.

In a "Drop 2" voicing, if the chord's 7th is in the lead (aka the 1st voice):

• the tone directly beneath it will be the chord's 3rd (or 4th, in the case of a Sus4 chord) degree.

• the next note from the top will be the chord's Root.

• the note on the bottom will be the chord's 5th degree. It has been dropped an octave from where it was situated in the close voicing with the 7th in the lead. [I.e. 1 3 5 7 (bottom-to-top) has become 5 1 3 7.]

In a Drop 3 voicing, if the chord's 7th is in the lead:

• the tone directly beneath it will be the chord's 5th degree.

• the next note from the top will be the chord's Root.

• the note on the bottom will be the chord's 3rd degree. It has been dropped an octave from where it was situated in the close voicing with the 7th in the lead. [1 3 5 7 has become 3 1 5 7.]

Etc.

One thing that makes this whole concept/technique tricky is that we are now building our chord voicings from the top note (the melody) down, rather than from the bass note up - which is the first way we always learn to build chords. This is an important conceptual hurdle to get over.

• When the melody is a 9th in relation to the root, it will be used as if it were the Root. The terminology is:

<div align="center">"9 subs for 1".</div>

• When the melody is a 4th in relation to the root, and a Sus4 chord is not undesirable, it will be used as if it were the 3rd. The terminology is:

<div align="center">"4 subs for 3".</div>

• When the melody is an 11th in relation to the chord's root, it will be used as if it were the 5th. The terminology is:

<div align="center">"11 subs for 5".</div>

Note: Often times, on a chord where the 11th is an available tension, it will be used as a Sus4 anyway. [I.e. 11 can sub for 3 too, in which case it's really a sus4 chord because there is no 3rd present.]

• When the melody is a 6th in relation to the chord's root, and a 6th chord is desirable (i.e. no 7th), it will be used as if it were the 7th. The terminology is:

<div align="center">"6 subs for 7".</div>

Note: Any chord-type that normally has a ♭7 may lose its essential qualities if the ♭7 is not present in the voicing. So we don't usually sub 6 for ♭7.

• When the melody is a 13th in relation to the chord's root, it will used as if it were the 5th. The terminology is:

<div align="center">"13 subs for 5".</div>

Note: As we discovered with Shell-Voicings, for most 7th-chord-types the least essential note of the chord will be the 5th. Since the technique we're studying here usually involves a 4-note voicing, with *somebody else* handling the bass line, we can treat the root as being replaceable as well. But, we can run the risk of losing the chord's essence if we replace the 3rd or the 7th with some other note. Do this only with caution.

<div align="center">Close-Voiced</div>

| 7 or 6 in the Lead | Root or 9th in the Lead | 3rd or 4th in the Lead | 5th 13th or 11th in the Lead |

<div align="center">Drop 2</div>

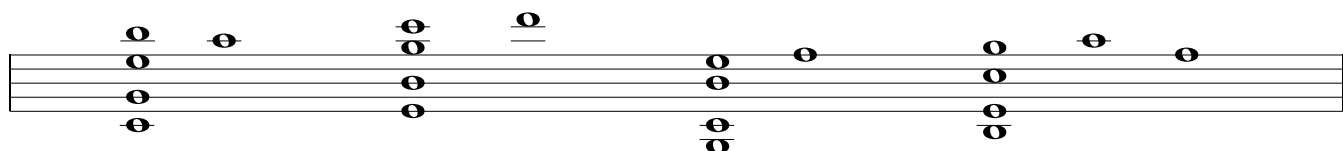| 7 or 6 in the Lead | Root or 9th in the Lead | 3rd or 4th in the Lead | 5th 13th or 11th in the Lead |

<div align="center">Drop 3</div>

| 7 or 6 in the Lead | Root or 9th in the Lead | 3rd or 4th in the Lead | 5th 13th or 11th in the Lead |

<div align="center">Drop 4</div>

| 7 or 6 in the Lead | Root or 9th in the Lead | 3rd or 4th in the Lead | 5th 13th or 11th in the Lead |

Drop 2 & 4

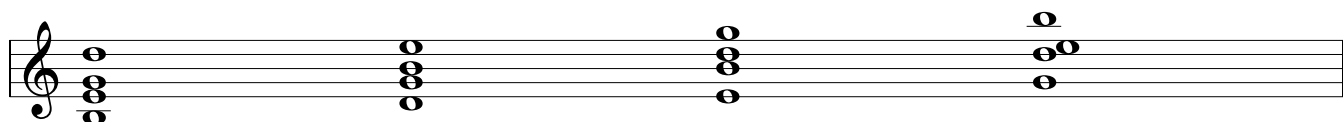| 7 or 6 in the Lead | Root or 9th in the Lead | 3rd or 4th in the Lead | 5th 13th or 11th in the Lead |

Drop 2 & 3

| 7 or 6 in the Lead | Root or 9th in the Lead | 3rd or 4th in the Lead | 5th 13th or 11th in the Lead |
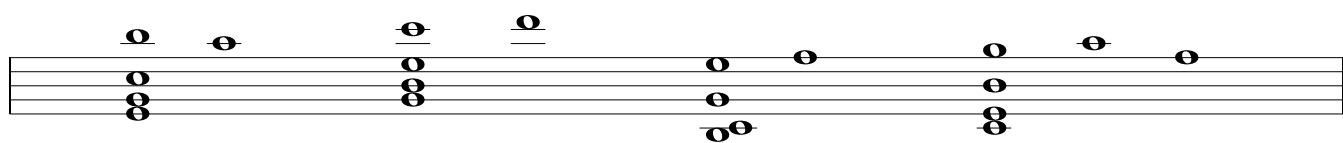
• Available tensions can be used in the other voices too, not just in the lead!
Eg. Cmaj9 - Drop 2 - 9 subs for 1

But, you need to be careful not to create any undesirable ♭9 intervals between the tension and the note in the lead, or between the tension and any other tones in the voicing. Eg. If your melody is E♭ on a Cm7 chord, you don't usually want to use the maj 9th, D, in a lower voice, because D-E♭ forms a ♭9 interval.

On guitar, the most common voicings, i.e. most of the chords you play everyday, are either Drop 2 voicings or Drop 3 voicings, or some type of shell-voicing.

Most close-voiced chords are impossible on guitar, by normal means, because they would require super-human abilities to stretch the fingers. But close voicings are the most common things you hear piano players doing, and you hear them in written arrangements for several instruments all the time. It is important that you study and attempt to play close-voiced chords on the guitar anyway. Most Drop 2 and Drop 3 voicings *are* playable on guitar, and that's why we guitarists concentrate so much on these two drop-voicing types.

• The vast majority of Drop 2 voicings can be fingered on 4 consecutive strings.
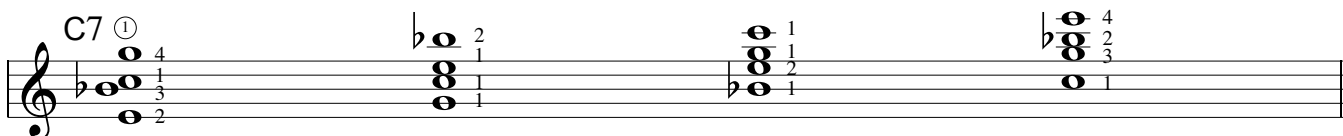
• Most fingerings for Drop 3 voicings will use 3 consecutive strings for the 3 highest notes, then skip a string for the bass note.
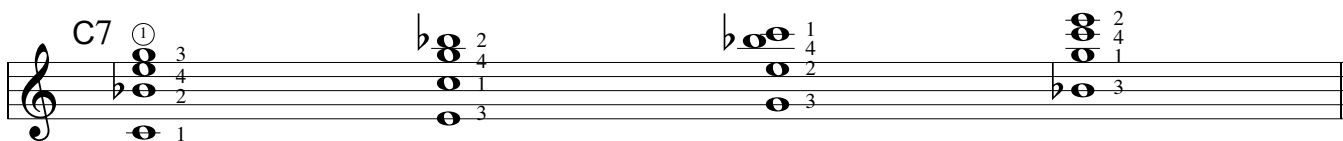
• The other types of drop voicings (eg. Drop 4, Drop 2 & 3, etc.) do not yield such predictable string groupings.

1. Learn all inversions of Cmaj7, Fmaj7, B♭maj7... thru Gmaj7, with Drop 2 voicings, using string groups:
1 2 3 4, 2 3 4 5, and 3 4 5 6.
Once you have worked out these fingerings, treat the playing of them as a technical exercise. Start at a slow tempo and go up and down the fretboard playing the Drop 2 inversions smoothly, cleanly and accurately. Most Drop 2 grips can be strummed with a pick. Wes Montgomery used to strum with his thumb. A high percentage of the voicings that Wes used in his chord-melody playing style are Drop 2 voicings.