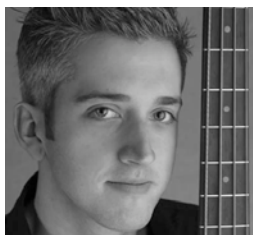


TUTION TIP: CHORD CHARTS



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Skill Level:

In BGM issue 35 I set out to dispel a few myths about reading music notation on bass. Hopefully this encouraged a few of you to take the plunge. On our diploma course at Guitar-X there are actually two reading lessons per week – one that deals with proper notation, and the other looks at how to read chord charts. The difference between the two is that for the most part, written notation is very specific and details exactly what you should play, and a chord chart is more of a general guide that leaves you to create the actual bass line yourself. In pop and jazz music, chord charts are probably more common than notation so learning a few principles will really help in the event that one lands on your music stand.

The advantage of chord charts is that they are quicker to prepare, and leave more in the hands of the performer, which in many cases is desirable. Imagine your guitarist gave you a chart for one of their songs. If they notated everything precisely it would take them ages to write out and you'd have to play their bass line note for note, including anything that they thought might be a decent bass fill – sometimes very wide of the mark! Alternatively they could outline what chords were used, include some rhythms and/or structure of the song, and then trust you to come up with a decent bass line and variations as you saw fit.

Chord charts can come in many different forms and the main variation is in the level of detail. Some are literally just a list of chord symbols and you have to figure out their timing and placement. If the symbols are placed over the lyrics to a song, this can make things much easier – you just need to listen to the singer/s and make an educated guess. When people want to insert more detail into their chart, they usually employ some elements of legitimate music notation, such as certain signs and symbols, rhythmic notation and even short sections of full notation. For the most detailed chord charts a high level of notation reading skill is required. Even so, there will still be a degree of flexibility, allowing you to personalise and develop the bass line during the performance.

ROOT NOTES

As a bass player our primary harmonic role is to provide the foundation to the harmony, which starts with playing the root note of the chord. Chords come in many varieties and all imply specific sets of notes, but before we start worrying about what all the notes are in a major 7 sharp 11 chord, the first thing we must do is just play the root. For many situations that is all we are required to do, so providing you can follow the letters of the chords, play them for the right durations and successfully navigate any other information on the chart, you will get a very long way indeed. For those situations when

more is required, or you are keen to know your options, you will need to understand the symbols that go with the letter names.

CHORD SYMBOLS

Chord symbols are a system of shorthand that can be applied to any key and almost every conceivable chord. Unfortunately these symbols aren't 100% standardised and you will have to get used to a few variants.

TABLE 1 shows some common chord types, their structure, symbol and a shape for playing them. The structures are the intervals the chords contain and can be worked out using the major scale. If the number has a flat or sharp next to it then it should be one semitone lower (flat) or higher (sharp) than it is in the major scale. Be aware that this may not always lead to the note being actually called a flat or sharp, e.g. a flat 3 from D is F, as the third note of the D major scale should be F sharp. The symbols are all using C as the example root, but they could be applied to any note. I've included some variations in symbol that you may see for some chord. The shape gives you the fingering pattern – there are alternatives, but these are good to start with.

Now that we know what notes are implied by the chord symbols, what do we do with that information? The root note is still the best place to start, but if we want to add notes to our bass line or play a fill, the other notes in the chord would be the next best choices. These aren't the only notes that will fit – there are sometimes numerous scale/pentatonic options for each chord that can take a lot of theory to explain. However, there is nothing wrong with messing about and trying things until you find something you like – at the end of the day, if it sounds good it is good. Sticking to the triads might sound a bit boring and safe, but many basslines do just this, particularly in styles such as reggae.

EXERCISE 1 is an example chord chart that you can create your own bass line for. If you play guitar or know a willing guitarist, try playing it together in any style you like, or as many styles as you can think of.

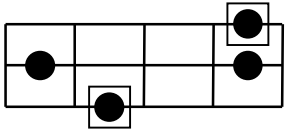
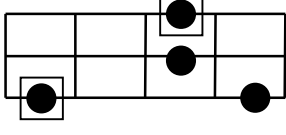
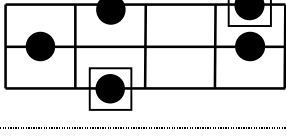
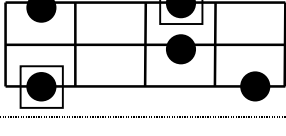
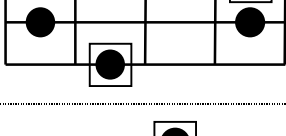
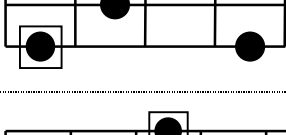
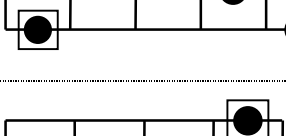
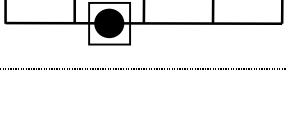
The first thing to try is just following the root notes and playing them for the correct duration. Using a metronome or drum loop as a reference will help you count the bars. Even by playing only the root notes you can get a lot of rhythmic variation and come up with some cool things.

The next thing to try is to play all of the notes in each chord, one at a time. It will be quite hard to negotiate all the changes to start with so turn the metronome off for now and treat it like an exercise. To start with you will have to locate each root note and then remember the shape that applies to the chord. As you get better at it, you'll start to 'see' the available notes in the chord quicker, even if you are only holding down the root.

Once you are familiar with all the shifts and changes, try using some of the chord notes to construct a bass line or add in some tasty fills. Have fun with it!

Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like to see, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk. See you next time!

TABLE OF CHORDS

NAME	STRUCTURE	SYMBOL	VARIATIONS	SHAPE
Major	R 3 5	C	C ^M C ^{ma}	
Minor	R b3 5	C ^m	C ⁻ C ^{mi}	
Dominant 7	R 3 5 b7	C ⁷		
Minor 7	R b3 5 b7	C ^{m7}	C ⁻⁷ C ^{mi7}	
Major 7	R 3 5 7	C ^Δ	C ^{ma7} C ^{Δ7}	
Diminished	R b3 b5	C ^o	C ^{dim}	
Augmented	R 3 #5	C ⁺	C ^{aug} C ^(#5)	
Power chord	R 5	C ⁵	C ⁵ (no 3 rd)	

R = Root

EXERCISE 1

