

Building a Solid “Jazz” Chord Foundation

Chords can be grouped into four categories. *Open position chords*, *basic movable form chords*, “jazz” chords, and *free form chords*.

Your Basic **Open Position** chords are the common first chords that a beginning ukulele player typically learns. These chords are played in the fret one, two, three, and four areas of the ukulele and include at least one open string in the chord. Often referred to as “cowboy” or “folk” chords, a core set of open position chords would include A, C, D, E, F, G, Am, Cm, Dm, Em, Fm, Gm, A7, B7, C7, D7, E7, F7, and G7.

The most common **Movable Form** chords, typically called *barre* chords, are movable versions of the basic open position chords. Contemporary chords, or “jazz” chords, are 4-part chords and the subject of this article. **Free Form** chords are where you know the notes of the chord and build chords, not in the other three categories. There is no real system for free form chords.

Beyond learning basic ukulele chords, most ukulele players struggle with advanced chords. These more sophisticated voicings, commonly called “jazz” chords, find wide use in all forms of music and styles. These 4-part chords are the bread and butter of jazz players.

This article presents an organized and efficient approach to this mysterious subject of these more advanced chords. Chord dictionaries are not the answer. Even chord theory does not offer any insight into unraveling the complexity of advanced chords the ukulele.

Building Chords

There are several ways to build chords, but the best way to build chords on a ukulele, or any instrument, is by using a numeric chord formula based on the scale degrees of the fifteen major scales. These numeric chord formulas are taken from the major scales by numbering each scale degree 1 through 13, skipping the octave (8th), 10th and 12th scale degrees, as these are duplicates of the fundamental triad chord tones—the root or one, third, and fifth.

Example: **C Major Scale**

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	D	F	A
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

This can also be applied to any of the 15 major scales:



**Example: G Major Scale**

G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	A	C	E
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

Example: F Major Scale

F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	G	Bb	D
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

(See the Chord Building Chart for all fifteen major keys)

What is a Chord?

A chord is three or more notes sounded together or almost together (arpeggios). The minimum number of notes required for a chord is three. These three note chords are called triads. Two notes are usually referred to as an interval or dyad. Each note of a chord is called a chord tone.

Traditional triads are categorized into one of four types: *Major*, *Minor*, *Diminished* or *Augmented*. Here is the formula for building each of these four basic triads.

Major Triads

A major triad is created using the **1**, **3** and **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C major triad the notes are C, E, and G. For F Major the notes are F, A, and C. For G Major the notes are G, B and D, etc. Common notation for a major chord is a capital letter only or a capital letter and maj, MAJ, MA or Δ.

Minor Triads

A minor triad is created using the **1**, **flat 3** and **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C minor triad the notes are C, Eb and G. Any minor triad can be created by lowering the third of a major triad one half step or one fret on the ukulele. Common notation for a minor chord is a capital letter and a lowercase m, mi, min or -.

Diminished Triads

A diminished triad is created using the **1**, **flat 3** and **flat 5** of a major scale. Example: for a C diminished triad the notes are C, Eb and Gb. Any diminished triad can be created by lowering the fifth of a minor triad one half step, one fret on the ukulele.

Common notation for a diminished chord is a capital letter and a lowercase dim or the degree sign °.





Augmented Triads

An augmented triad is created using the **1**, **3** and **sharp 5** of a major scale. Example: for a C augmented triad the notes are C, E and G#. Any augmented triad can be created by raising the fifth of a major triad 1 fret or one half step or one fret on the ukulele. Common notation for an augmented chord is a capital letter and a lowercase aug or a plus sign +.

A Few Chord Building Rules

When lowering or raising a scale degree to create a chord tone, the alphabetical name of the note cannot change. Example C must remain C either C#, Cb Cx (*double sharp**), or Cbb (*double flat*). Lowering a sharp note removes the sharp; C# becomes C. Raising a sharp note becomes a double sharp; C# becomes Cx (*double sharp*). Raising a flat note removes the flat; Bb becomes B. Lowering a flat note becomes a double flat; Bb becomes Bbb (*double flat*). These double flats and double sharps are the theoretically correct spelling for the note. A notated note is different from the pitch a note produces. F# the note produces the same pitch as Gb the note.

Seventh Chords

There is one other chord beyond triads that can be considered a basic chord. This is a seventh chord, a 4-part created by adding the flat seventh to a major triad, giving us the formula **1, 3, 5, and flat 7**. The seventh chord, the foundation chord, is used to derive or create all the 4-part chords.

Example Using the Chord Building Chart

1. Find the scale degree formula for the chord. Example D7 is a major chord type and specifically a 7th chord. Its formula is 1 3 5 b7.
2. Find the key of the chord based on the root or letter name of the chord. The root of a D7 chord is D.
3. Find the intervals 1 3 5 and 7 for the key of D (D F# A C#). Now flatten the seventh as required for a 7th chord. This will make the C# a C. The notes of a D7 chord are D F# A C.

* **NOTE:** Double Sharps and Double Flats are the theoretically correct chord spelling when dealing with chords built using traditional thirds and based on thirds. The letter name of the chord tone can not change - hence the more than one sharp or flat.





Chord Building Chart

The first column is the Root or 1 of the key.

The Fifteen Major Scales (Keys)

Upper Partial Chord Extensions

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	D	F	A
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	A	C	E
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	E	G	B
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	B	D	F#
E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	F#	A	C#
B	C#	D#	E	F#	G#	A#	C#	E	G#
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	E#	G#	B	D#
C#	D#	E#	F#	G#	A#	B#	D#	F#	A#
F	G	A	B#	C	D	E	G	Bb	D
Bb	C	D	C	F	G	A	C	Eb	G
Eb	F	G	A	Bb	C	D	F	Ab	C
Ab	Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	G	Bb	Db	F
Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb	C	Eb	Gb	Bb
Gb	Ab	Db	Cb	Db	Eb	F	Ab	Cb	Eb
Cb	Db	Eb	Fb	Gb	Ab	Bb	Db	Fb	Ab

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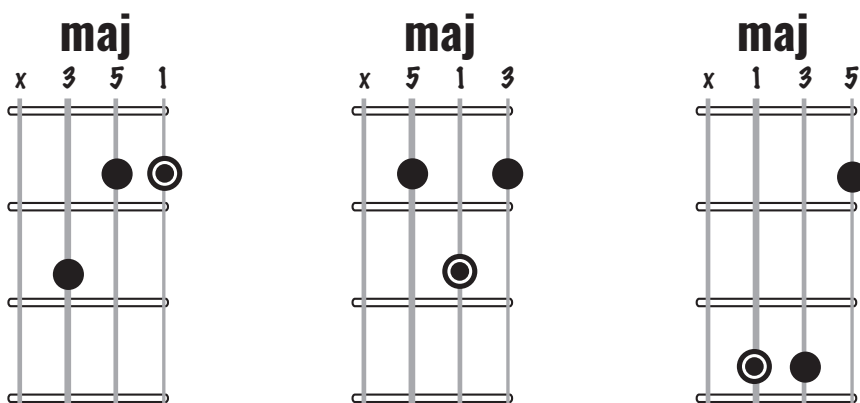




Creating the Four (4) Basic Chord Types

Here is an example of three possible voicings for a major triad using strings ①, ② and ③

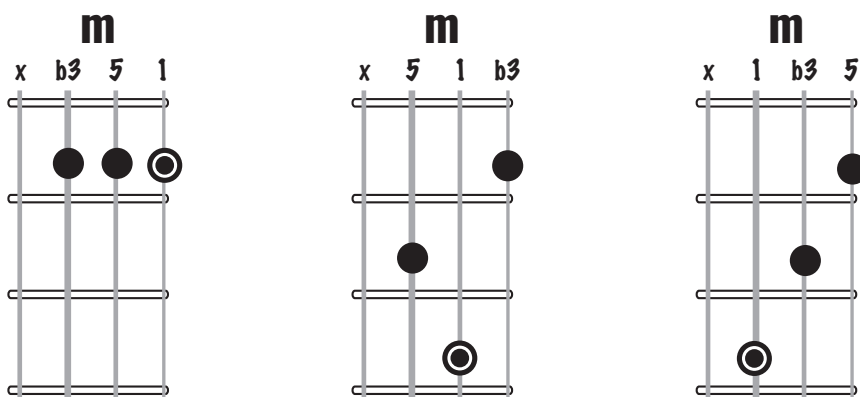
Major Triads



⊙ Root and letter name of chord

Minor Triads

Starting with the first major triad above, create a minor triad by lowering the third of the chord by one fret.



⊙ Root and letter name of chord

To create a diminished triad, lower the fifth of a minor triad by one fret. To create an augmented triad, raise the fifth of a major triad one fret.



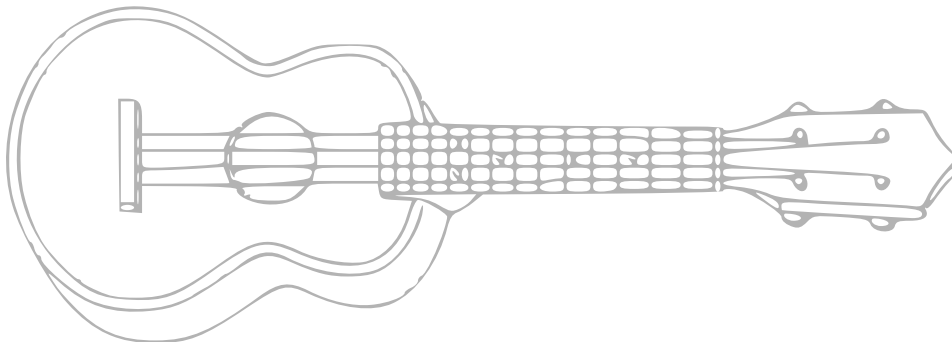
By keeping track of the location of the chord tones, you can create other chords from known chords. This is the key to building a massive chord vocabulary. Being able to create chords on the fly from a solid foundation of basic chords.

Transposing Chords and Chord Progressions

The movement of each note of the chord up and down the neck the same number of frets is called transposition.

This can be done using the Transposition Chart that follows.

- A) All chords and progressions can be transposed to any key.
- B) In order to transpose a progression, you must transpose each individual chord by the same distance, in the same direction.
- C) Following the Transposition Chart on page 7, experiment with any chord or progression in any key.





Transposition Chart

Ascending Keys (Moving UP the neck)

↑
B
A#, Bb
A
G#, Ab
G
F#, Gb
F
E
D#, Eb
D
C#, Db
C

Descending Keys (Moving DOWN the neck)

↓
C
B
Bb, A#
A
Ab, G#
G
Gb, F#
F
E
Eb, D#
D
Db, C#

How to Use the Transposition Chart

- Pick a chord.
- Find its root on either chart.
- To transpose upward, use the ascending keys chart.
To transpose downward, use the descending keys chart.
- Each new key is 1 fret above or below the original key.
- Don't forget to transpose each chord of a progression.
- Remember that the chord type remains the same for each chord. Example:
m7 stays m7, 7 stays 7,
etc...

Examples:

If you are in the key of C and move all chords down (lower) 3 frets, you are now the key of A.

If you are in the key of E and move all chords up (higher) 3 frets, you are now in the key of G.

NOTE: Ultimately knowing the notes of the fingerboard and the location of the root or perceived root of a chord is quicker for transposing a chord.

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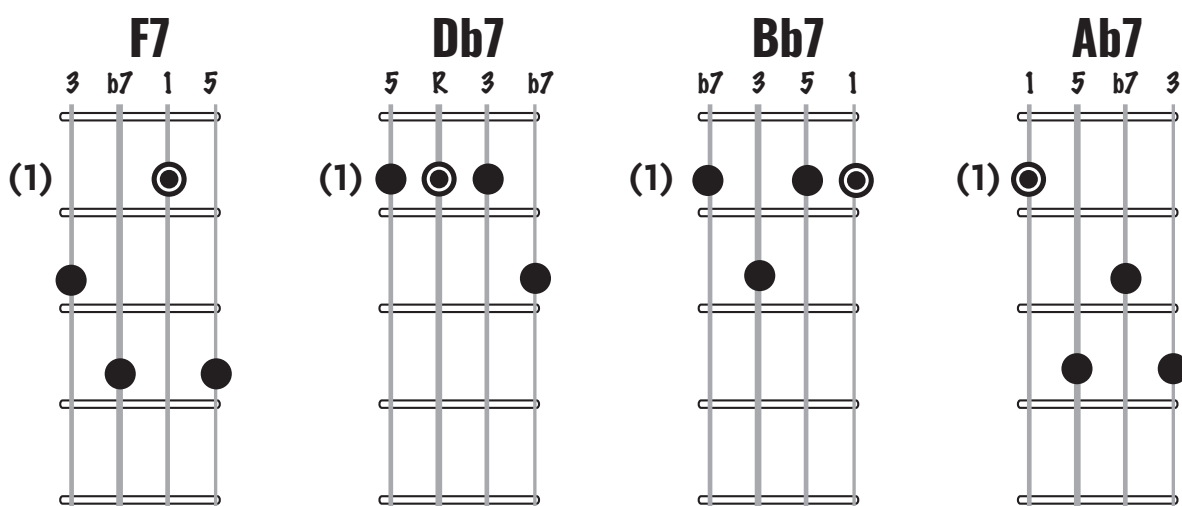


Building More Advanced Chords

Building more advanced 4-part chords can be accomplished using the same principles that were used to create the basic triads. For these more advanced “jazz” chords, the seventh chord is the starting point.

A 4-part chord, as the name implies, contains 4 notes. On a standard tuned ukulele, four different voicings of this chord can be played. All chords are shown in “C” tuning low or high G.

Here are four seventh chords played at fret one.

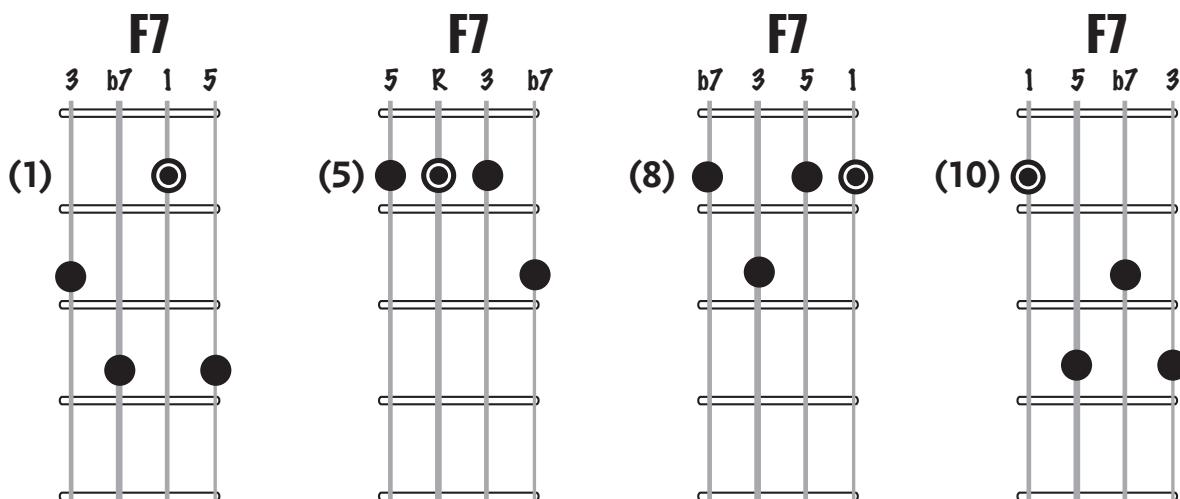


Chords are shown voiced on strings ④ ③ ② ①



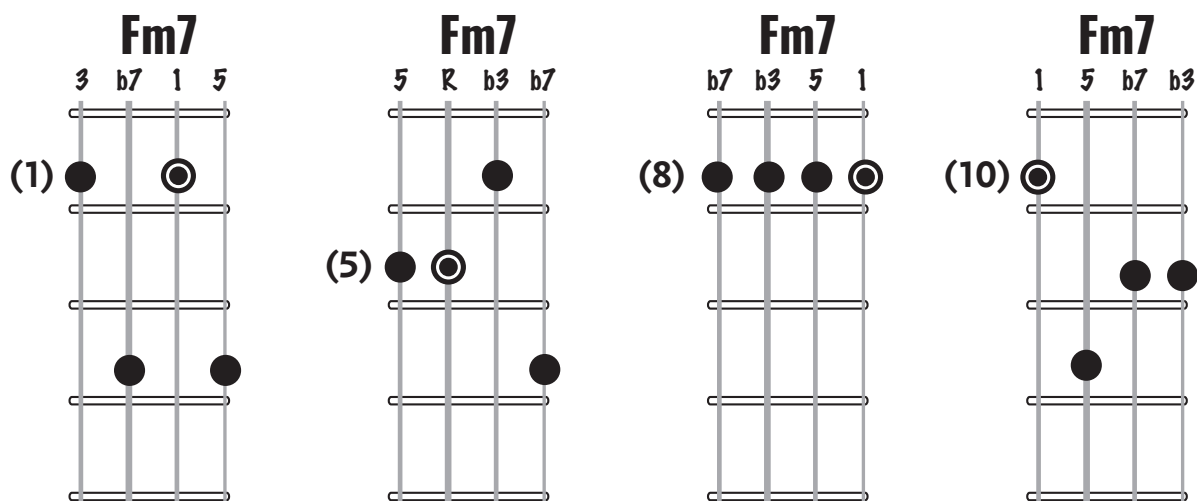


Here are the previous pages four seventh chords from page 8 transposed to C7 by raising each note of the chord the same number of frets (*based on the transposition chart, page 7*).



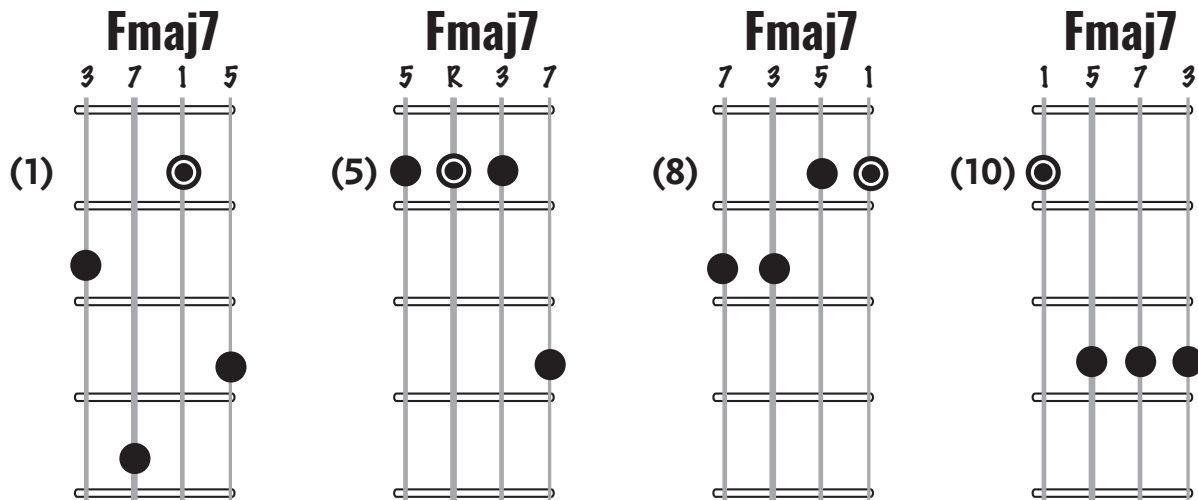
These seventh chords are major chords types, and the foundation for building the 4-part major chord types.

From the four-seventh chords, we can create four minor seventh (m7) chords by lowering the third of each chord one fret. These minor seventh chords are minor chord types and the foundation for building all 4-part minor chord types.



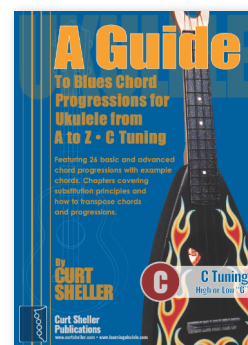
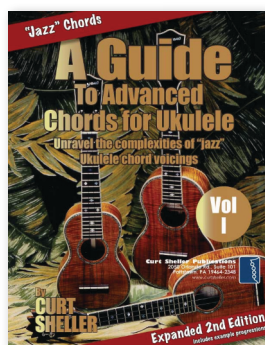
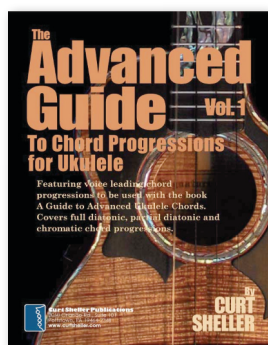


From the four seventh chords we can create four major seventh (maj7) chords by raising the seventh of each chord one fret. These major seventh chords are major chords types.



From these voicings of a 7, m7 and maj7 chord many common chord progressions can be played. The common blues and II V I chords progressions should be learned. These progressions, in various keys are found in a large majority of the standard jazz repertoire.

This same process can be used to create diminished and augmented chord types. See the author's books **A Guide to Advanced Chords for Ukulele**, **Exploring "Jazz" Chords on Ukulele**, and **A Guide to Blues Chord Progressions for Ukulele from A to Z** (available for C & G Tuning).



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Scale Degree Formula Chart

Here are the scale degree formula to build the basic triads and 4-part chords and some of the common notations that you will encounter.

Major Chord Types

Major	Scale degree formula: Notation
Dominant 7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Major 6	Scale degree formula: Notation

1 3 5	Capital letter only or MAJ. maj, Δ
1 3 5 b7	7, dom7
1 3 5 7	maj7, MAJ7, MA7, Δ7, 7
1 3 5 6	6, maj6, MAJ6, MA6, 6

Minor Chord Types

Major	Scale degree formula: Notation
Minor 7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Minor-Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Minor 6	Scale degree formula: Notation

1 b3 5	m, mi, min, -
1 b3 5 b7	m7, mi7, min7, -7
1 b3 5 7	m ^(L7) , min ^(maj7) , m7, m ^{maj7} , -(7)
1 b3 5 6	m6, -6, mi6, min6

Diminished Chord Types

Diminished	Scale degree formula: Notation
Diminished 7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Half-Diminished, Ø7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Diminished-Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation

1 b3 b5	(degree sign) °, dim
1 b3 b5 bb7	dim7, °7
1 b3 b5 b7	Ø7, half dim7
1 b3 b5 7	dim ^(L7) , o(maj7)

Augmented Chord Types

Augmented	Scale degree formula: Notation
Augmented 7	Scale degree formula: Notation
Augmented-Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation

1 3 #5	aug, +
1 3 #5 b7	aug7, +7, 7#5
1 3 #5 7	aug ^(L7) , + ^(L7) + ^(maj7) , L7#5, 7#5

*A root note is presumed to be in front of each notation: **C, C7, Cm, Cm7, Cdim, C°7, C7+, Caug7**, etc

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Building a Core Set of 4-part Chords

A Core set of voicings on ukulele should meet the following, simple requirement.

Four Voicings for Each Chord - Not all voicings of every chord are practical or possible but should be explored, especially the basic triads and the eleven 4-part chords from the **Scale Degree Formula Chart**. These chords are the foundation for building more advanced chords using extensions, alterations, note displacement and additions.

Suggested Learning Order

Core Chords

7, m7, maj7, m7b5, dim7, aug7

Additional Core Chords

maj7 to 6th

m7 to m6

m7 to mL7

Diminished and Augmented Chords

m7b5 to dimL7 (Rare)

aug7 to augL7 (Rare)

Upper Partial-Extensions **9, 11** and **13**

Alterations

b5, #5, b9, #9, #11, b13

At this point you should have the ability to voice **ANY** chord, numerous places on the ukulele.





A 12 Measure Blues - Key of C

Here is an example using all four C7 voicings in a 12 measure blues in the key of C.

Q C E A
TUNING

D G B E
TUNING

4/4

1 2 3 4

C7 F7 C7 Gm7 C7

C7 F7 C7 Gm7 C7

F7 C7 Em7 A7

F7 C7 Em7 A7

Dm7 G7 C7 A7 Dm7 G7

Dm7 G7 C7 A7 Dm7 G7

5fr 3fr 3fr 3fr 2fr

3fr 3fr 5fr 5fr 5fr

3fr 2fr 3fr 2fr 3fr 3fr

3fr 3fr 2fr 2fr 3fr 3fr

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