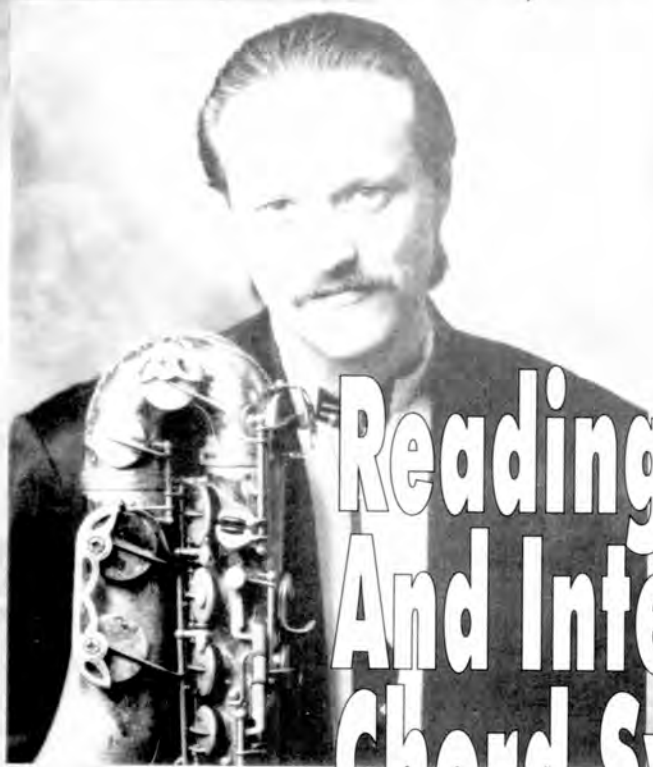


GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EVERY PRACTICE SESSION!



Reading And Interpreting Chord Symbols

By Gunnar Mossblad

It is vital for today's jazz musician to read and interpret chord symbols representing the harmony of a tune. With an ever increasing body of jazz literature, and so many new publications utilizing chord symbols, you would think a standard method of expressing the chords existed. There are some general principles that are followed by most publishers, but a true standard still does not exist to my knowledge. Although commercial lead sheets and jazz lead sheets follow the same basics for written chords, small differences occur. There are several ways to indicate the quality of the chords (major or minor), as well as upper partials of the chords. There can even be differences in the actual chord that expresses the harmony of any given tune. After all, the same four notes played simultaneously can be interpreted as completely different chords by different musicians. Some writers believe it is redundant to indicate alterations like a #5 or a b9 if the alteration is in the

melody. Others indicate all the alterations, even those that can be assumed, like a #11 on a major chord when it is functioning as a IV chord in a major key.

Further confusion can occur when playing with musicians from other countries. I can remember the first time I played with European musicians having some difficulty interpreting the chords as they were expressed in the music. For instance, in Europe the name for major and minor does not start with an "m," so you can imagine the potential difficulty at that time. With so many European musicians studying in the US, the differences in writing chord symbols are fewer today. Symbols however, rather than letters can be used to communicate to musicians all over the world.

There are some basic guidelines for writing chord symbols that may be considered standard. With a basic knowledge of chord construction you should be able to use the general concepts presented below in combina-

EXAMPLE 1)



EXAMPLE 2)



tion with the melody and your ears, to interpret most chord symbols with a degree of certainty.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The art of improvisation has been a part of music since the earliest times. Many of what the western world refers to as ethnic or Third world music is based in a tradition of improvisation. Both eastern and African musical styles were founded on improvisation, and to this day improvisation plays an important part of these styles. Because of this improvisational tradition, composers and musicians have developed sophisticated written languages to communicate the structures and even basic melodies of tunes.

Western music has a much shorter history, which is perhaps why chord symbols have not been completely standardized yet. The Earliest forms of western music were passed on through an aural tradition and had an improvisational aspect to it. As the music became more complex and paper became more cost effective the music became less improvisational, until the Baroque era.

During the Baroque era, improvisation enjoyed a resurgence. It became an important part of the music of this time and a rather simple but sophisticated system of indicating the harmony developed. This was called the figured bass. A performer would read the written melody and improvise the harmony and counter melodies based on the directions in the figured bass.

After the Baroque era, improvisation in western art music was non-existent until the development of jazz in the earlier part of 20th century America. Jazz music started in an aural tradition, and as the music developed and became more complex, a written language that expressed the improvised aspects of the music developed. The following basic guidelines serve as a foundation for interpreting most modern music that utilizes chord symbols.

PLACEMENT OF CHORDS

The position of chord symbols should always be above the staff, and the root of the chord placed directly above the beat in the measure where that harmony should begin to sound. Example 1 shows four bars of the improvised solo section in a chart or a rhythm section part.

The "slashes" in the part indicate each beat of a bar or a specific rhythm. The first two chords indicate the harmony changes on beat one of each bar. The third chord indicates the harmony changes on the "& of 4.". Example 2 shows the same harmonic motion as it would appear with a melody.

CHORD SYMBOL AREAS

Chord symbols can be broken down into five basic areas. As I've shown in my Example 3, with a simple drawing of five small boxes from left to right, each area (or box) provides information about a specific part of the harmony. Example 3 identifies the five box areas with a complex chord that utilizes all the possible areas. It should be noted that all the areas will not always appear in a given chord. Only those areas that are necessary to communicate the harmony will be present. Whenever one of the areas does not require anything to be written in it (like indicating a major 3rd in Area #2), all the areas to the right are shifted left, closer to the root of the chord.

Please note, in all the examples when several possibilities are offered, the most commonly used or recommended will appear first in each example. It should also be noted that while the triangle is used to indicate major, and the dash is used to indicate minor, is not as accepted by some as an major or minor respectively, but for our use here they are symbols that can be understood internationally.

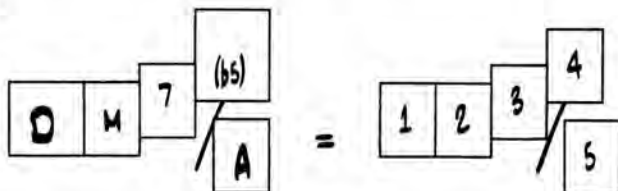
AREA 1 (the first box) indicates the root of the chord.

This is always the first thing the eye should see when reading a chord change and it should always be a capital letter. In Example 1 the roots of the three chords are 'D', followed by 'G' and finally 'C'.

AREA 2 (the second box)

Area #2 indicates the quality of the 3rd of the chord. When the 3rd of the chord is major one of the following possibilities will occur. The most common is to

EXAMPLE 3)



have nothing in the area. Other symbols that can be used are indicated in Example 4

When the third of the chord is minor, one of the following possibilities will occur (see example 5).

AREA 3 (the third box)

This area indicates the quality of the 7th of the chord as well as any other diatonic upper partial (9, 11, or 13) that may be a part of the chord. Unless otherwise indicated, the highest diatonic partial will be written on the chord, and it is assumed that all lower partials are also included in the chord. In other words, if a chord indicates a 9th, the presence of the 7th is assumed. Similarly, if a 13th is indicated, the 7th and 9th are assumed to be present.

When the 7th of the chord is major one of the symbols listed in the examples below will be utilized, however if the quality of the 7th is minor nothing will appear next to the 7, 9, 11, or 13. Note that this is in contrast to the function of the symbols indicating the quality of the third of the chord (Area #2)

- A major triad with a major 7th (9, 11, 13) will appear as shown in Example 6.
- A minor triad with a major 7th (9, 11, 13) will appear as

shown in Example 7.

- A major triad with a minor 7 (9,11,13) will appear as shown in Example 8.
- A minor triad with a minor 7 (9,11,13) will appear as shown in Example 9.
- Major and minor 6th (9,11,13) chords as shown in Example 10. (Please note the 6th is not affected by the quality of the 3rd)

AREA 4 (the fourth box)

Area #4 indicates all non-diatonic alterations to the chord affecting the 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11 or 13th of the chord. This area can indicate as many alterations as are needed. The symbols are clear. If one of the upper partials is to be lowered from its diatonic position, a flat sign appears just to the left of the number. If the partial is to be raised from its diatonic position, a sharp sign immediately precedes the number, and there is usually parenthesis around the alterations. This area may also be used to indicate special voicings or instructions. For instance the phrases "(no 3)" or "(add 2)" might be used to indicate some alteration to the basic chord type.

- Non-diatonic alterations for various chord types as shown in Example 11.

AREA 5 (the fifth box)

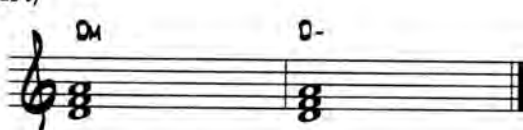
This area indicates the bass note when it is different from the root of the chord or it can indicate an entirely different chord (a polychord). When the indicated bass note is diatonic to the chord it does not usually affect the harmonic function of the chord. The use of a polychord however, does affect the function of the chord and requires an addition symbol to indicate it is a chord. One or more upper partial clearing defining it as a chord will be present or the symbol 'tr.' an abbreviation for triad will appear next to the root note.

- Chords with alternate bass notes and polychords as shown in Example 12.

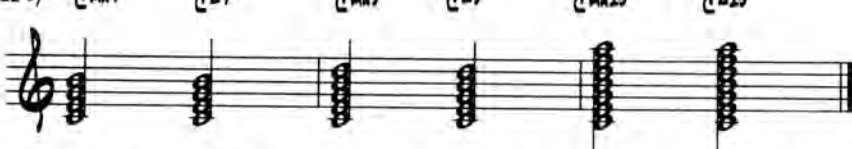
EXAMPLE 4)



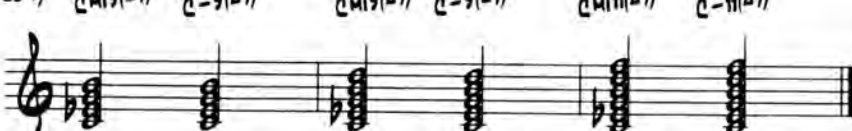
EXAMPLE 5)



EXAMPLE 6)



EXAMPLE 7)



EXAMPLE 8)



OTHER SYMBOLS AND NOTATION PRACTICES

It is possible to express almost any kind of chord using the concepts presented above. However, some commonly used chords like augmented and diminished chords can also be written in a simpler fashion using symbols. The following are chord types that utilize their own symbol.

DIMINISHED CHORDS

Example 13

a. Diminished triad,

EXAMPLE 9) Dm7 D-7 Dm9 D-9

EXAMPLE 10) D6 D6b Dm6 D-6

EXAMPLE 11) Gm7(b5) G-7(b5) G7(b9) G7(b13)

Cm9(#11) CΔ9(#11) C7(#9) C7(#9)

EXAMPLE 12) Gmi7/D G7(b9)/B

F#7 AbΔ7

Cre. Bre.

EXAMPLE 13) D0 Ddim D6 D67 D07 Ddim7

EXAMPLE 14) G+ GAUG G+7 GAUG7 G7(#5)

EXAMPLE 15) C6sus C7sus Gmi7/C

- b. Half diminished 7th (9,11,13) chords
- c. Fully diminished 7th (9, 11, 13) chords

AUGMENTED CHORDS

Example 14

- a. Augmented triads
- b. Augmented 7th chords

SUSPENDED CHORDS

Example 15

- a. Suspended triads
- b. Suspended 7th chords

The examples I've listed in no way include all the possible chords symbols that you will run into, but this should give you a guide to interpreting most things that you will see in music. §