



Jazz Mandology: Keeping in Suspense

A look at "Sus" chords and variations

by Ted Eschliman

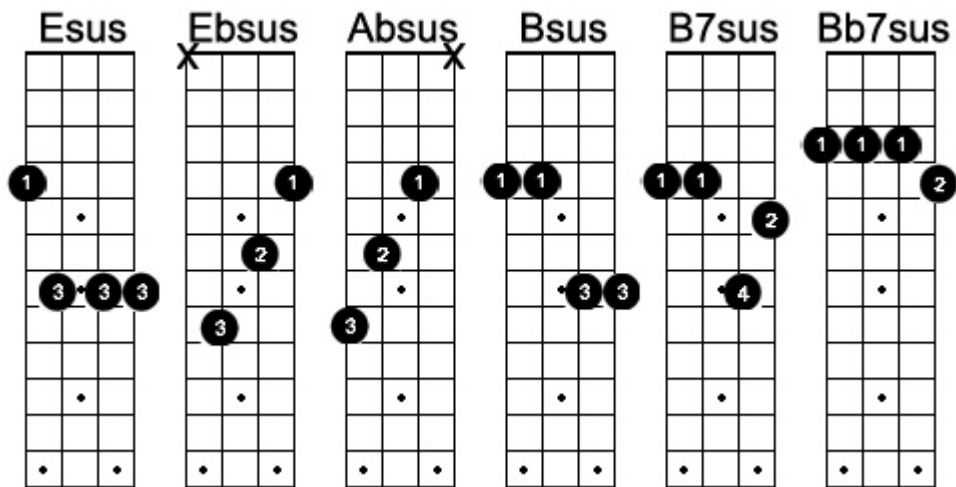
Jazz/Pop/Rock...

Most of our Jazz Mandology Articles have been very jazz specific, but the concept we want to explore this issue spreads out into other universal genres, as well, including **Popular**, **Folk** and **Rock Music**, and even some **Contemporary Praise Music**. Like jazz, these styles use a chord symbol "shorthand" that can be a bit vague, especially out of context. Even within the same genre, as music evolves from decade to decade, tastes change and a chord symbol that means one thing in the 50s can be interpreted differently in the 80s.

Take a straight **C Major** chord for example. In **Texas Swing**, a seasoned musician will know this implies the opportunity to add a **Major 6** or **6/9**, so nobody thinks twice about embellishing in this way. Take the same chord cymbal into the Bebop or Fusion era, and this sound is embarrassingly corny. You'd be much more likely to add a **+11** or **raised 4th** and improvise around a **Lydian** mode.

Riddled with Suspense

Perhaps the most confusing are the Suspended Chords, designated "**Sus**." You'll see **C7sus** in Pop music, or a straight **Csus** in contemporary Jazz. Occasionally, you'll encounter a **Csus4**, or **Csus2** in Folk, and context will always be the key. To an outsider to the style, confusion reigns, so let's take a look at some general guidelines and keep in mind there will always be a certain grace in liberty in how these should be interpreted.



The above chords should give you a healthy start on some fingering variations. These are fun to play and should lay out into your fingers comfortably. You can always move them up and down the fretboard within a several fret range. It's always good to learn multiple inversions, and if you're not good at doing this in your head yet, write them out. This would be a good exercise. We have a free chord template if you'd like something to document your chords on : <http://jazzmando.com/FretboardTemplate.pdf>

The 3rd Thing

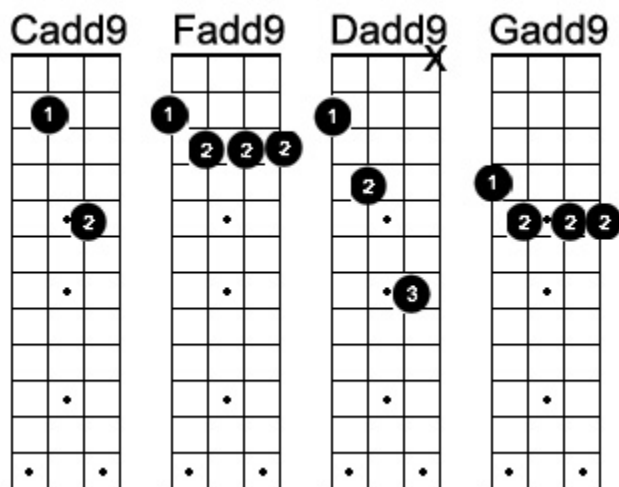
Now for a little obligatory music theory; a common question many will ask concerns the presence of the 3rd note of the chord. In **C major**, this would be the note **E**. Originally, the very idea of "suspend" in **Western European** music was to "detour" with the 4th scale degree, specifically waiting in tension to resolve to the 3rd. The **Csus4** would be **C F G**, and almost invariably followed by a **C E G**. Adding the 7th, **Csus7** is **C F G Bb**, likely leading to an F Major Chord, as the **Csus7** functions as a **Dominant (V)** Chord in the **key of F**.



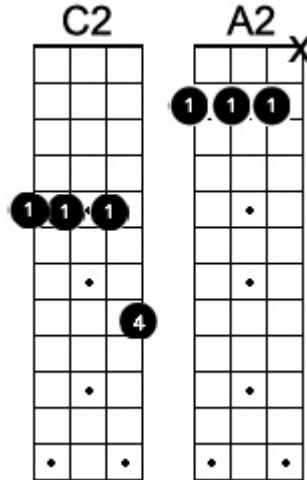
Perhaps "suspense" is almost as appropriate in thinking "Sus!" We go back to our **"Tonal Universe"** concept, the **Dominant Preparation**, **Dominant**, and **Tonic** to frame this. (If you haven't read our previous MandolinSessions discussion about this, now would be a good time to go back and review this subject: <http://mandolinsessions.com/dec03/ted.html>) The **Csus** functions as more of a passing chord, with the **F** as a passing tone. It likely is a **Tonic**. In the case of the Csus7 though, probability is this is functioning as a **Dominant**, which means it's leading to an **F** chord, if not the key, at least a tonal center.

Okay, hold on for a little deeper music theory concept... Jazz musicians, begging the ambiguity and blur of the two functions introduced the sound of blending the **Dominant Preparation** with the **Dominant**. If we were in the key of **F**, a **Dominant Prep** would be **G Bb D F** (ii7 in F), the **Dominant** would be **C E G Bb** (V7 in F). A common interpretation of a **Csus7** here would be **C (root) Bb D F**, likely omitting the **E** to keep it vague. **E** being the leading tone of **F** (tonic) would be much too "directional," and again "indistinct" is the objective within that particular style.

On 2nd Thought Now where do the **C2** or **C add9** come in? No doubt you've seen these chord symbols before in Popular sheet music. Understand, they generally are not thought of as **suspended** chords, but too often are mistakenly interpreted that way! The **C add 9** chord is a product of the 60s pop/folk music, and requires the persuasive defining of the 3rd scale degree. (Think the **Carpenters** song, "**Close to You**:" "*Why do birds...*") Spelled out this would be **C E G D**, but remember the **9** is the same as the **2**, so you can invert this anyway that sounds good.

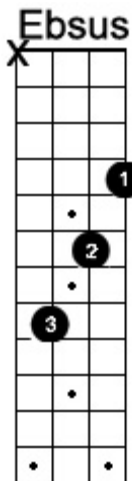


The **C2** is another issue. **Pop music** in the last couple decades experienced a reaction to this "happy sound" of the **Major 3**, and quite often avoided it all together. This omission creates a vagueness in whether the tonality is major or minor; this harmonic "rebellion" has its own deliberate character. Spelled out, you get **C D G**. This is one step away from the starkness of an **open 5th** chord, which some guitarists like to own as the "**Power Chord**." Claiming its invention in the 70's, we think some 8th Century Medieval Gregorian Monks might bet to differ about who came up with the open 5th first.



Four and three-note application A prevailing habit or preconception for many novice mandolinists, especially coming from a guitar background is the notion that all four voices (eight strings) need to be heard. We think in terms of four-note chords when we pick up the instrument at first. This is a very good habit to break; some of the best sounding chords we can play will only be three notes. That signature sparseness is something unique to our instrument and we need to exploit it rather than fear it. Not only is it liberating, but if you're voicing in the lower three strings, you can always add some very interesting linear fills with your fourth finger.

Inversions: Voicing in 4ths



Great jazz voicings in the post-swing and Bebop era grew when musicians started to spread their harmony from **3rds** to **4ths**. This occurs very naturally on the mandolin. With our open fifth tuning, chord voices are very natural spread openly. Pop piano players fight this, the urge to triads and seventh chords in **3rds**, rather than the more sophisticated sounding **4ths**. For our instrument, the wider intervals just come naturally.

If you'll notice how we spread our **Ebsus** chord in the first row, instead of spelling it in order, **Eb Ab Bb**, we have the same notes inverted **Bb Eb Ab**, which opens up the sound for a very contemporary, spacious sonic result. You can have a lot of fun moving this up and down the fretboard half-steps and whole-steps. To your ears, it *sounds* very complex, but your fingers don't think so!

Additionally, we only moved it over one string for the **Absus**, and you open a whole set of fingerings, without changing anything but where you start the chord. This speaks to the symmetrical beauty and simplicity of our instrument. Whatever you do though, don't tell your fellow musicians how easy this is on an instrument, or they will want to play mandolin, too!

Some of the best sounding chords we can play will only be three notes.

Vertical Harmonic Propriety Back to the whole "ambiguity" issue of **Sus** vs. **Add 9** vs. **Open 5th**, understand rarely will there be a simple answer. Jazz (and Pop music!) will depend on context. Ultimately it's your ear, and those of the rest of your ensemble within the playing style you all elect to play, and of course, the audience who chooses to hear you. Often there is not a "right" way to do it, and conversely there isn't a wrong way either. That's the beauty of music!



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