

# "Sweet" Chords

Fresh chord voicings and their context

By Ted Eschliman

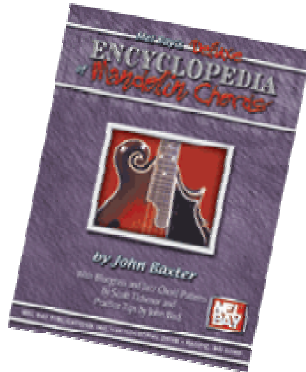


## Sounding our best

We start off simply when we first learn the mandolin. Three, four chords, and really, we're ready to rip off a number of **Folk**, **Rock**, and **Bluegrass** tunes, even some of today's **Pop**. Eventually though, we begin our quest for new chord vocabulary, picking up a chord here and there, adding it to our arsenal. If you are looking for something thorough, a particular favorite is **John Baxter's Encyclopedia of Mandolin Chords**,

<http://www.melbay.com/product.asp?ProductID=98354>, which truly lives up to its title and is readily available online or at your favorite **Mel Bay Dealer**.

<http://www.melbaydealers.com/>



You can also get something less extensive (and more elementary), like the **Mandolin Chord Chart**

<http://www.melbay.com/product.asp?ProductID=96337> or something to carry around in your case like Bill Bay's **Pocketbook Deluxe Series Mandolin chords**

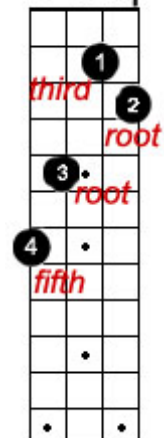
<http://www.melbay.com/product.asp?ProductID=21199> both terrific resources, but ultimately you'll want to integrate them into context, and your own "signature" playing style.

## Finding your voice

Most from the Bluegrass realm learn the necessary but elusive "**G-chop**" chord. No one told you why you had to use this; it was as simple as *"everyone else is using it."* That rationale doesn't pass for an eleven-year-old girl begging her folks for a navel ring, but it does in music, because it's true. You want to "fit," to sound like everyone else with the correct chord vocabulary of the genre.

Understand, there ARE technical (theoretical) reasons why this chord is so popular. First the four-note closed position allows a defining crunch, controlled by left hand mute/release, and "hi-hat" rhythmic timing with the picking hand. Simple percussion, this distinct driving soprano punch is one of the prominent characteristic sounds of Bluegrass, the band's

## G-chop

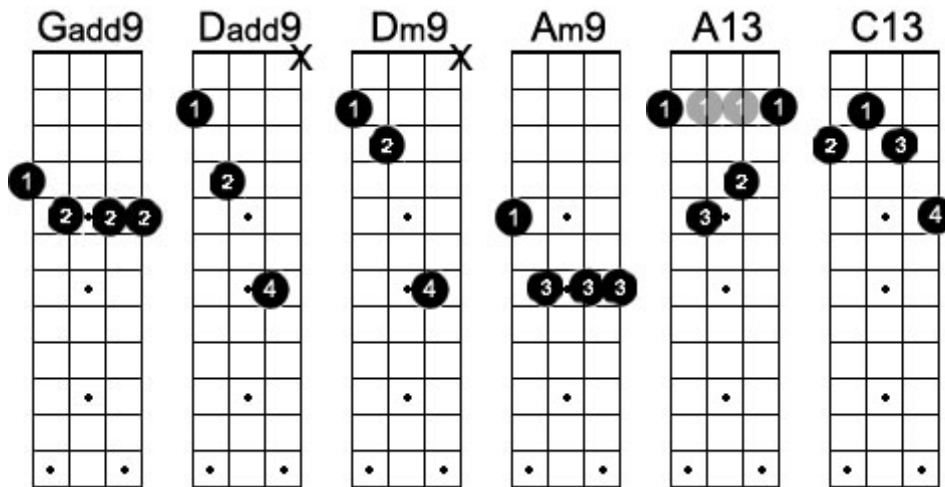


metronome. Harmonically, it also outlines distinctive **G major** tonality with its **DGBG** voicing, doubling the **tonic G** and prominent **Major 3rd** soprano **B**.

That said, this voicing is not particularly appropriate in the jazz world, where emphasis is shifted from the tonality and "**major-ness** and **minor-ness**" of a chord to its **7ths** or "color" **extensions** (-9, +11, 13, etc.). Out of sheer economy, you'll want to use chords that don't double the root or third for the most part, because we only have 4 voices, spread by strings tuned in 5ths. In general, a **3-note** chord construction is premium chord economics, with the **3rd** and **7th** voiced in the lower two and some kind of chord extension in the third voice.

## Jazz Voices

Let's look at some other voicings to inspire fresh ideas. We're going to add some extended notes to a simple **triad** or **7th chord**:



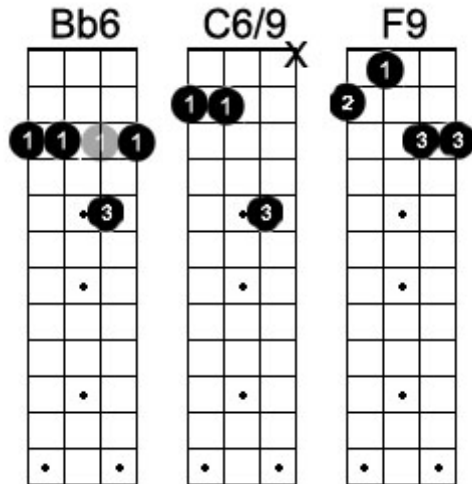
Note, the first two above chords are "**Add 9**," and many are confused about the differences between **Xadd9** and **X9**. We tapped into this at Jazz Mandology not too long ago; refer to "**Keeping in Suspense: A look at "Sus" chords and variations.**" <http://mandolinsessions.com/aug06/chord.html> . Bear in mind, the "**add9**" referred to above is a major chord with either a **Major 7th** inferred (or absent), but no **minor seventh** (X7) included.

These six chords are great sounding, even by themselves. In **Jazz**, if a **G** chord is written, even in some **Pop** music, you can insert the **9th** (2nd scale degree), and it's a pleasant little spice. We've shown a couple of inversions, and in these as in all others in this article, you have something moveable. You can transpose these all up and down the fretboard.

The **minor 9th** is a tasty spice extension for a minor chord. Use this freely with any **Dorian** mode song; it's a rich tension note. The final two chords add the **6th scale degree** (or 13th) to a **Dominant 7th** Chord. It is a terrific occasional substitution for a **V7**. Again, try moving these up the fretboard, and make them a part of your chord arsenal.

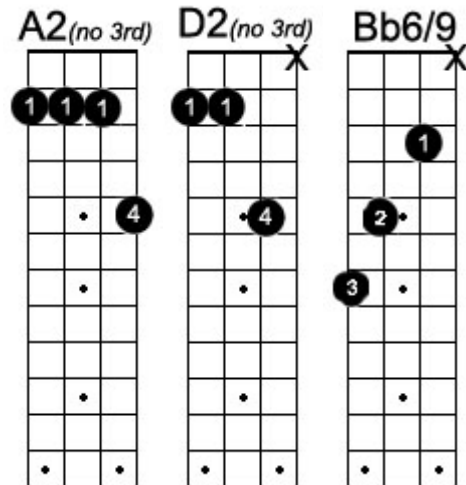
## Swing

Granted, "swing" is an integral part of jazz, some of the earlier swing chord voicings were far simpler to the ear than the later, more complex **Bebop** vocabulary. Adding a **6th** or **9th** (or both) to a straight major triad was a fairly common **Jethro Burns** trick; you hear it all over in **Texas Swing**, as well. We've included a nice little addition, the **9th** stacked on top of a **V7** chord, for a lovely **F9** chord. Again, move these up and down for other keys:



### New Acoustic/Cerebral Folk

A relatively recent sound that has embedded itself into a decade or two of **Pop Music**, **Contemporary Christian**, and what we refer to as "**Cerebral Folk**" (Modern Folk) is the sound of a chord without a **3rd**. Last year's **Keeping in Suspense** article included explanations on this, but a gentle reminder that in this context, we don't consider these "**Suspended**" chords. It is an austere, ambivalent sound, but if you're trying to get away from that 60's "campy" sound, these are great to play on the mandolin:

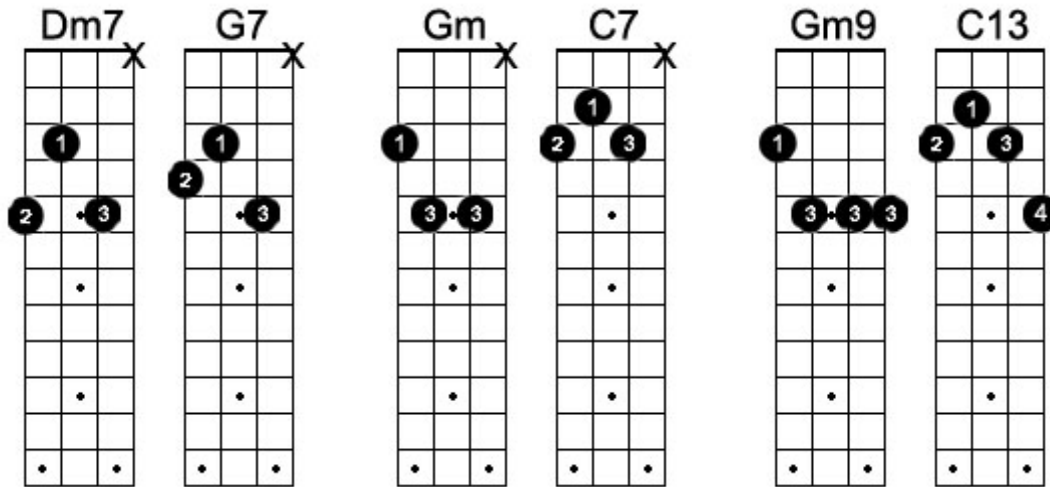


The above **3rd** chord, labeled a **6/9** may be a little out of context here, but we want to point out the versatility of voicing in **4ths**. If you look at the notes, **D G C**, you really have a **D7sus** chord. What we want to show though is in a jazz context, if the bass were to play a **Bb** under these chord tones, you have the crucial voicing for a (rootless) **Bb6/9** chord. It's a great chord to have under your fingers in any case. (We call it the **Matt Flinner** Chord, since we hear it in his music frequently). Spend some time moving this **3-note** chord up a string and up and down the fretboard. There are quite a number of uses, and it's a cool sound.

### 'ii V7'

We want to review some voicings we brought up in a very early **Mandolinsessions** article (actually, our very first!), "**Understanding the 'ii V7 I' Progression**" <http://mandolinsessions.com/dec03/ted.html> We

pushed hard on you to get these essential jazz nuggets into your repertoire. Let's take a look at just the first two chords, the 'ii V7' for some variations:



The first pair, **Dm7/G7** demonstrates a wonderful economy of motion; notice you move only one note, and yet still communicate a powerful chord progression. This is a very "easy" sound harmonically, too. (*Think "Mack the Knife," "Satin Doll."*) The next two pairs, variations of **Gm/C7** show how a **3-note** chord can be extended to a **4-note** by adding the pinky. Either voicings are simple to play and add a dash of variety, especially when you move them up and down the fretboard for other keys.

Notice all of these are "**functional**" variations on the '**ii V7**', regardless of extensions; whether or not they include the **7th**, **9th**, or **13th**, they still perform as **Dominant** preceded by a **Dominant Preparation**. The first pair would be in the **key of C**, the second and third pairs in the **key of F**. More on this in yet another back issue, **Understanding the 'ii V7 I': Tonal Micro-centers**.

<http://www.mandolinsessions.com/feb04/jazz.html>

We've mentioned the transposition potential in all these closed chords; it's very much intentional. Using chords with an occasional open string is okay once in a while but *extremely* limiting, if that's all you aspire to do (unless you're only into cowboy music). Also, if you don't easily transpose in your head, by all means, write these out for yourself! You can download the JazzMando fretboard template here: <http://jazzmando.com/FretboardTemplate.pdf> Eventually, these will become second nature, and this shouldn't be necessary.



Have you been enjoying the great resources at **Mel Bay's MandolinSessions.com**? If you're new here, be sure to click on the **Back Issues** button above. If you've been a regular, take the time to drop us a note with some feedback: a question for a future article, an observation about something that is helping your playing, or just let us know what part of the world you are. Some of you have already done this, and we treasure it when you take the time. Contact us at [http://jazzmando.com/contact\\_jazzmando.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/contact_jazzmando.shtml), and of course drop in on the [JazzMando.com](http://JazzMando.com) website, for the latest "Tips and Tricks" and jazz mandolin-related news! If you have an RSS Reader, take advantage of our **RSS** feed feature!