

Building a Solid "Jazz" Chord Foundation

4-Part Contemporary, aka "Jazz" 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 area of the ukulele and include at least one open string in the chord.

Sometimes referred to as "cowboy" or "folk" chords. These 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, sometimes call barre chords are movable versions of the basic open position chords. Contemporary chords are 4-Part chords and the subject of this article. And *Free Form* chords are where you know the notes of the chord and build chords not in the other three categories.

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

This article presents an organized and efficient approach to this mysterious subject of advanced chords. Chord dictionaries are not the answer. Even chord theory does not offer any insight into unraveling the complexity of advanced chords on 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 numeric formulas based on the scale degrees of the fifteen major scales. These numeric 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 and not used to create chords.

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 simultaneously. 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.

Chords 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 would be C, E, and G. For F Major the notes F, A, and C would be used. For G Major the notes 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 would be C, Eb and G. Any minor triad can be created by lowering the third of a major triad one fret. 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 would be C, Eb and Gb. Any diminished triad can be created by lowering the fifth of a minor triad one fret.

Common notation for a diminished chord is a capital letter and a lowercase dim or 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 would be C, E and G#. Any augmented triad can be created by raising the fifth of a major triad 1 fret. 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 can not 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 than 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, created by adding the flat seventh to a major triad giving us the formula **1, 3, 5 and flat 7**.

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. It's 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. Lookup the intervals 1 3 5 and 7 for the key of D (D F# A C#). Now flat 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.





Chord Building Chart

Column 1 is the Root or 1 of the key.

The Fifteen Major Scales (Keys)

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	Bb	C	D	E	G	Bb	
Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	C	Eb	G
Eb	F	G	Ab	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	Bb	Cb	Db	Eb	F	Ab	Cb	Eb
Cb	Db	Eb	Fb	Gb	Ab	Bb	Db	Fb	Ab

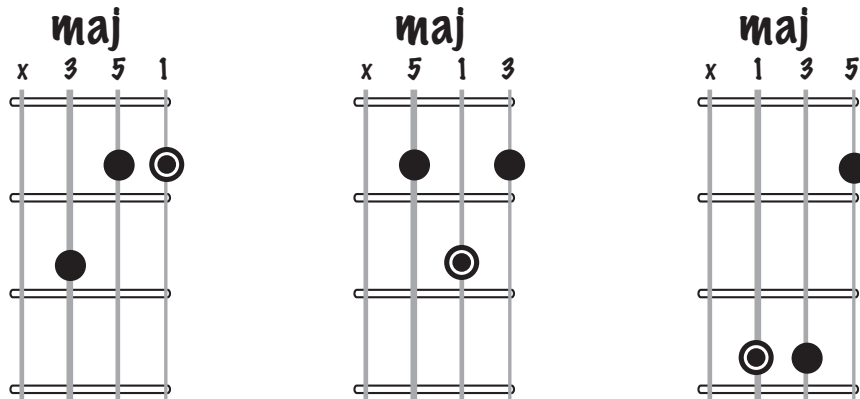




Creating the 4 Basic Chord Types

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

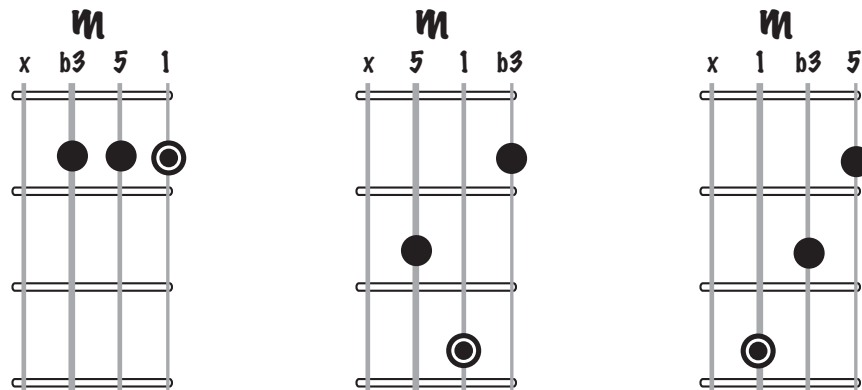
Major Triads



⊙ Root and letter name of chord

Minor Triads

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



⊙ Root and letter name of chord

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





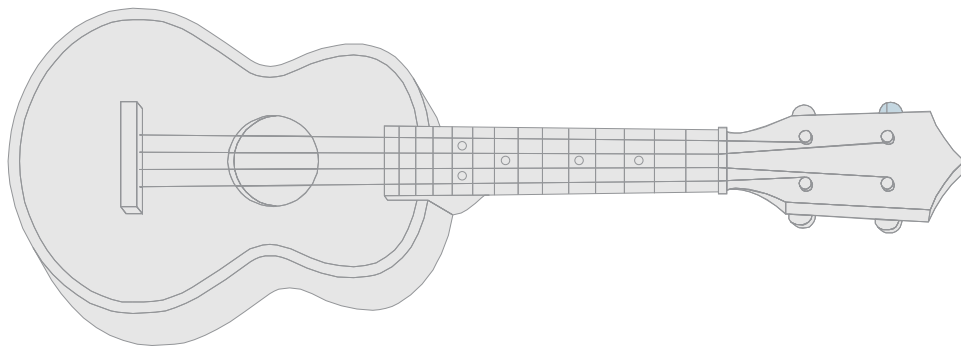
By keeping track of the location of the chord tones you can create other chords from known chords. This is the key to building a massive chord vocabulary. Being able to create chords on the fly from a solid foundation of basic chords.

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.





Building More Advanced Chords

Building more advanced 4-part chords can be accomplished using the same principles that were used to create the four basic triads. For these more advanced “jazz” chords, we will use a seventh chord as 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.*

Here are four seventh chords played at fret one.

F7	D^b7	B^b7	A^b7
3 b7 1 5	5 R 3 b7	b7 3 5 1	1 5 b7 3
(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)

Chords are shown voiced on strings ④ ③ ② ①

Here are the above four seventh chords transposed to C7 by raising each note the chord the same number of frets (based on the transposition chart).

F7	F7	F7	F7
3 b7 1 5	5 R 3 b7	b7 3 5 1	1 5 b7 3
(1)	(5)	(8)	(10)





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 chords types, and the foundation for building all 4-part minor chord types.

Fm7	Fm7	Fm7	Fm7
3 b7 1 5	5 R b3 b7	b7 b3 5 1	1 5 b7 b3
(1)	(5)	(8)	(10)

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.

Fmaj7	Fmaj7	Fmaj7	Fmaj7
3 7 1 5	5 R 3 7	7 3 5 1	1 5 7 3
(1)	(5)	(8)	(10)





From these voicings of a 7, m7 and maj7 chord the many common chord progressions can be played. The common vblues 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 my book **A Guide to Advanced Chords for Ukulele** and **Exploring “Jazz” Chords on Ukulele**.



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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*:	1 3 5 Capital letter only or MAJ. maj, Δ
Dominant 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 5 b7 7, dom7
Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 5 7 maj7, MAJ7, MA7, Δ7
Major 6	Scale degree formula: Notation:	3 5 6 6, maj6, MAJ6, MA6, 6

Minor Chord Types

Minor	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 5 m, mi, min, -
Minor 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 5 b7 m7, mi7, min7, -7
Minor-Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 5 7 m(L7), min(maj7), m7, mmaj7, -(7)
Minor 6	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 5 6 m6, -6, mi6, min6

Diminished Chord Types

Diminished	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 b5 o, dim
Half-Diminished 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 b5 b7 Ø7, half dim7
Diminished-Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 b5 7 o(L7), dim(L7)
Diminished 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 b3 b5 bb7 o7, dim7

Augmented Chord Types

Augmented	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 #5 +, aug
Augmented 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 #5 b7 +7, aug7
Augmented-Major 7	Scale degree formula: Notation:	1 3 #5 7 +L7, augL7, L7(+5)

*A root note is presumed to be in front of each notation.
Example: C, C7, Cm, Cm7, Cdim, Co7, C7+, Caug7





Building a Core Set of 4-part Chords

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

- 1) Four voicings for each chord. Not all voicings of every chord are practical or possible but should be explore, especially the basic triads and eleven 4-part chords from the Scale Degree Formula Chart. These chords are the foundation for building more advanced chords using extensions and alterations.

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.

Handwritten musical notation for a 12-measure blues in the key of C. The piece is in 4/4 time and uses two tunings: GCEA and DGBE.

Measures 1-4 (GCEA Tuning):

- Measure 1: C7 (open)
- Measure 2: F7
- Measure 3: C7 (3fr)
- Measure 4: Gm7 (3fr) and C7 (3fr)

Measures 5-8 (DGBE Tuning):

- Measure 5: F7 (5fr)
- Measure 6: C7 (3fr)
- Measure 7: C7 (5fr)
- Measure 8: Em7 (3fr) and A7 (2fr)

Measures 9-12 (DGBE Tuning):

- Measure 9: Dm7 (3fr)
- Measure 10: G7 (3fr)
- Measure 11: C7 (3fr) and A7 (2fr)
- Measure 12: Dm7 (3fr) and G7 (3fr)



