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LESSON 4: YOUR FIRST CHORDS—“EASY” G, C, AND D7



This lesson will get you started playing chords you will use for the rest of your guitar-pickin' life. A *chord* is three or more notes sounded simultaneously. Each chord is named for the music-alphabet letter that serves as its *root* (the fundamental note on which a chord or scale is built). The chords in this lesson are known as *open chords* because they use a mixture of open (unfingered) strings and fretted notes. They also occur in the first three or four frets of the fretboard.

SECRETS OF THE MASTERS

During this phase of your learning, it is more important to practice often than to practice for long periods. (For more on practicing, see page 96.)

You will be building new pathways from your brain to your finger muscles. Like mountain trails, these paths need frequent clearing or they grow over and disappear. If you practice for 15–30 minutes every day, you will see improvement. On the other hand, if you wait several days between sessions, you will be starting at “ground zero” every time. It may take a while before these chords start to feel natural. As you work on them, you may want to begin Chapter 2 to add some variety to your practice.

GUITAR CHORD DIAGRAMS

Guitar chords are most often depicted in *chord diagrams*. A chord diagram is like a picture of the fretboard that shows which strings, fingers, and frets you will use to make your chord. Note that a circle (○) over a string means to strum that string open as part of your chord. An “X” over a string means to omit that string from the strum. Watch carefully for these symbols and make sure to follow them. Check out the following example of a chord diagram.

Chord symbol → **D**

Nut →

1 ← Left-hand fingering

2

3

4

5

6th 5th 4th 3rd 2nd 1st
Strings

○ = Play open string

× = Do not play this string

THREE EASY CHORDS

Below are three chords to start you off. Each one adds another left-hand finger. All are played on strings 1–4 (don't play strings 5 and 6). You can strum them using a rapid downward motion of your pick, finger, or thumb. Also, practice picking each string individually to make sure your finger position allows each note to ring out clearly.

G

X X O O O 3

C

X X 2 O 1 O

D7

X X O 2 1 3

LESSON 4: TRAVIS PICKING AND PINCH PATTERNS



One of the most well-known fingerstyle guitarists in country music was Merle Travis (1917–1983). Travis’s guitar playing was an influence on later masters like Chet Atkins, Leo Kottke, and Tommy Emmanuel. He used the alternating-bass style pioneered by early blues and ragtime guitarists, creating arrangements that had bass lines, harmony, and melody played at the same time. Sometimes this style of picking is referred to by his name.

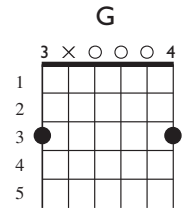
The patterns you learned in the previous lesson have separate notes on every eighth-note beat. An easy way to vary the rhythm is to *pinch* some notes (play the thumb and finger together on a downbeat.)

You do not have to actually pinch your finger and thumb together to do this, just play them simultaneously using the normal motion. Try pinching *p* and *m* while holding a C chord.

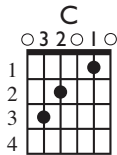
Below is a warm-up pattern to get you started alternating between a quarter-note pinch of *p* and *m*, and the eighth note *p-i* figure. Be sure to count aloud and let all the notes ring out for their proper durations!

A NEW G CHORD FINGERING

Sometimes, it helps the flow of chords to use an alternate fingering. This fingering of G uses just your 3rd and 4th fingers. The 5th string is muted by leaning the 3rd finger over a bit so that it touches the 5th string and keeps it from ringing. This fingering is great for quick switches between G and C.



PINCH PATTERN WARM-UP

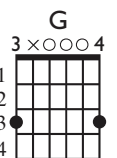
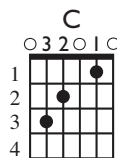


Count: | & 2 & 3 & 4 & etc.

T	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A		2		2		2		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The following four-beat pattern alternates between the two-beat pinch pattern above and the *p-m-p-i* pattern you learned in the previous lesson.

PINCH PATTERN I



Count: | & 2 & 3 & 4 & etc.

T	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A		2		2		2		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B	3	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0

LESSON 5: BEGINNING BLUES IMPROVISATION

EXPERIMENTING WITH THE SCALE

The first step to improvising a blues solo is learning to get around in the minor pentatonic scale. Try to make up melodies that use the minor pentatonic scale. Go up a few notes, go down a few notes. Play long and short notes. Skip around. Don't worry about whether it's "right" or "wrong"—just try to stick to the notes in the scale. Above all, have fun and aim for clean, clear tones. Let your ear be your guide. With patience, time, and experimentation, you will develop many ideas that you can use in improvising on the blues.

GET IN YOUR LICKS

A *lick* is a small idea or figure that can be used as a building block for a solo. A lick can be repeated, altered, or strung together with other licks. This lesson will show you a few ideas for licks you can incorporate into your improvisations.

EMPHASIZING THE TONAL CENTER

As discussed on page 63, a great way to give a sense of melody and structure to a solo is to emphasize the tonic. This note is also known as the *tonal center*. Blues players like B. B. King and Eric Clapton often play long, rich notes on the tonal center.

Here are some licks to try. They can be used at any point in the blues chord progression.

72 VIDEO EXAMPLE

Swing 8ths

The first example consists of two measures of music. The first measure contains a melody of eighth notes: F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. The second measure contains a melody of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for these notes on strings T, A, and B. The first measure has fret numbers 3, 1, 3, 3, 1, 3, 1, 3. The second measure has fret numbers 5, 8, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 7.

The second example consists of two measures of music. The first measure contains a melody of eighth notes: F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. The second measure contains a melody of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for these notes on strings T, A, and B. The first measure has fret numbers 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 7. The second measure has fret numbers 7, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 8, 5, 5.

VIDEO 1ST AND 2ND ENDINGS REVIEW

Often, when we repeat a section, we play the last part of it differently. In written music, this is shown with 1st and 2nd endings. 1. 2.

The first time through, play the music under the bracket with a “1” (the 1st ending). The second time, skip the 1st ending and play the music under the bracket marked “2” (the 2nd ending).

“Blue Noodles on an E Chord” uses hammer-ons and pull-offs surrounding the shape of an E chord. Go slowly and aim for clean notes. Try to make the slurred notes sound at the same volume as the picked notes. Also, try to incorporate slurs into your improvisations.

VIDEO *EXAMPLE* **BLUE NOODLES ON AN E CHORD**

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two endings. The first ending is marked "1." and the second "2.". The score includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tablature includes fret numbers (0-4) and technique markings (H for hammer-on, P for pull-off). The first ending starts with an E7 chord and includes a slurred sequence of notes: E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4. The second ending starts with an E7 chord and includes a slurred sequence of notes: E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4.

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Corey Harris is a scholar, practitioner, and evolver of the blues. He has recorded albums of traditional acoustic blues, collaborations with African master Ali Farka Touré, and fronts a reggae band. He weaves his own artistic voice as a songwriter with threads of tradition reaching around the world. In 2007, he was awarded a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship and has been featured in documentaries about blues and African music.