

Introduction to Playing Chords on the Bass Guitar Part I - Basic Chord Construction

Traditionally the bass guitar isn't thought of as a chordal instrument, however it is possible to tread on your guitar players toes and join him with some chordal action. Not only can this lead to new creative possibilities on your instrument, but by learning how to play chords we gain a much better understanding of harmony and this can only improve our bass playing overall.

In order to start playing chords on the bass we need to first understand how to build the various chord symbols we come across. In this lesson we are going to look at 5 of the most common chord types in music:

Major
Minor
Major 7th
Minor 7th
Dominant 7th

Major and Minor chords are built using 3 basic intervals:

The root
The third
The fifth

Chords with a '7th' in them use the same 3 intervals but with the addition of the appropriate 7th note:

So how do we know which intervals to use, and what is an interval anyway??

Let's look at the most plain Jane, standard chord of them all: **C Major**.

As already mentioned we need 3 notes to play this chord, and luckily all the information we need to build this chord is given to us in the name.

The root is going to be a **C**

The third is going to be the interval of a **major third from the root** which gives us **E**

The fifth is the same regardless of major or minor tonality and results in the note **G**

We can find all these notes in the scale of C Major, which contains the notes:

NOTE:	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
INTERVAL:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8/1

Let's look at the chord of **C Minor**:

The root is going to be a **C**

The third is going to be the interval of a **minor third from the root** which gives us **E_b**

The fifth is once again **G**

Again we can find all these notes in the scale of C Minor, which contains the notes

NOTE:	C	D	E_b	F	G	A_b	B_b	C
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INTERVAL: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8/1

One of the great things about the bass is that it is very easy to transpose (change the key) of things once we have learned them. For example, if you were to play the pattern you learned for the C Major scale but starting on a D, you would then be playing the D Major scale. Same pattern, same fingering, just starting on a different fret. This is very useful as it means we don't need to learn a different pattern for all 12 keys like piano players or sax players need to.

So by following this line of thought we should be able to figure out how to construct our Major and Minor 7th chords:

C Major7:

The root is going to be a **C**

The third is going to be the interval of a **major third from the root** which gives us **E**

The fifth is the note **G**

The seventh is going to be a **B** as this is the 7th note in the scale.

C Minor 7:

The root is going to be a **C**

The third is going to be the interval of a **minor third from the root** which gives us **E^b**

The fifth is once again **G**

The Seventh is a **B^b** as this is the 7th note in the C Minor Scale.

And finally the construction of a C7 or C Dominant 7 chord:

The root is going to be a **C**

The third is going to be the interval of a **major third from the root** which gives us **E**

The fifth is the note **G**

The seventh is going to be a **B flat** resulting in that classic 'Beatles Chord' sound when they go 'ahhhhhhh ahhhhhh ahhhhh ahhhhh ahhhhh' etc.....

Now we know how to construct these chords let's look at Part II and how to play them on the bass guitar.

Introduction to Playing Chords on the Bass Guitar Part II - Placing chords on the neck

There are a few key factors we need to consider when playing chords on the bass:

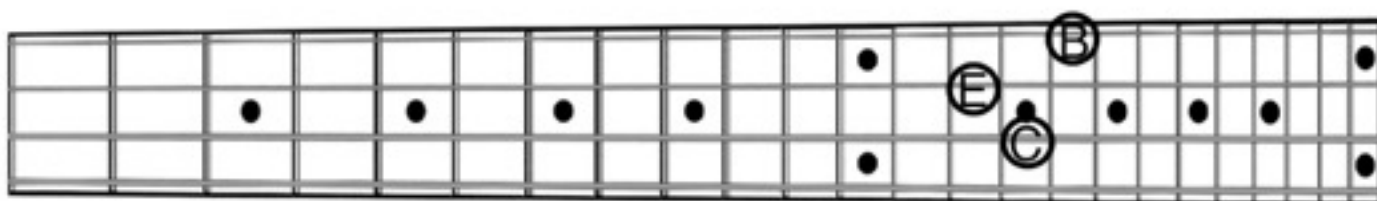
1. The key notes of the chord - Which notes are integral to conveying the chords tonality
2. Physical limitations - with basses generally having less strings than guitars we need to approach our fingering differently.
3. Register - The area of the neck we are playing the chords in

Let's take a Cmaj7 chord which has the 4 notes C E G B and think about where and how to play this as a chord on the neck.

We will quickly see that it's very difficult to be able to play all four notes on the bass without some fairly extreme finger gymnastics to make it work. As a consequence of this it's common practice to omit the 5th from chord when playing on the bass. The reason that we can leave the 5th out is because it holds relatively little information for the bulk of the chords we play. As we discussed the 5th is same in both major and minor chords and is also the same in a Dominant 7th chord, so we can say Adios to this chord tone safe in the knowledge that that the overall tonality of the chord will held together with the remaining notes. Omitting the G leaves us with C E and B, which will be a lot easier for us to play simultaneously on the bass.

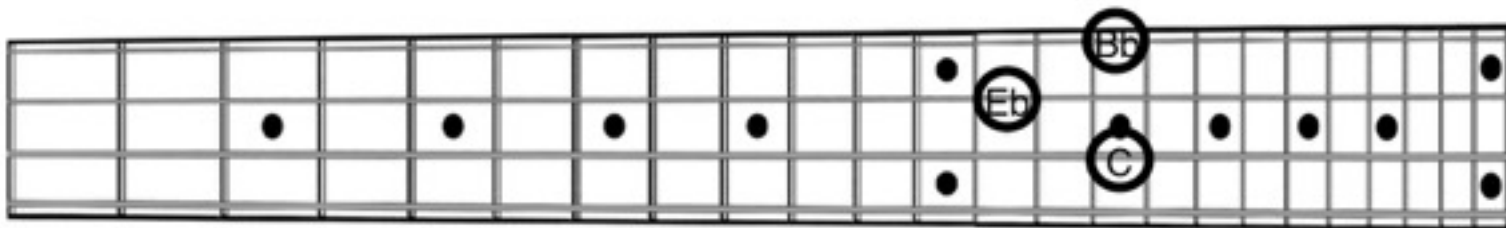
Having negotiated points 1. and 2. we must now consider point 3. Register, or where on the neck should we play chords. The bass is primarily a monophonic instrument, that is, it generally only plays 1 note at a time. In the 1st octave of the neck (frets 1-12) playing more than 2 notes at time will usually result in a muddy or indistinct sound due the low frequency and close proximity of the notes. Therefore, it's usually recommended to play chords from the 12 fret and above if possible.

Here we can see the 3 notes of the chord being played on the following strings and frets:



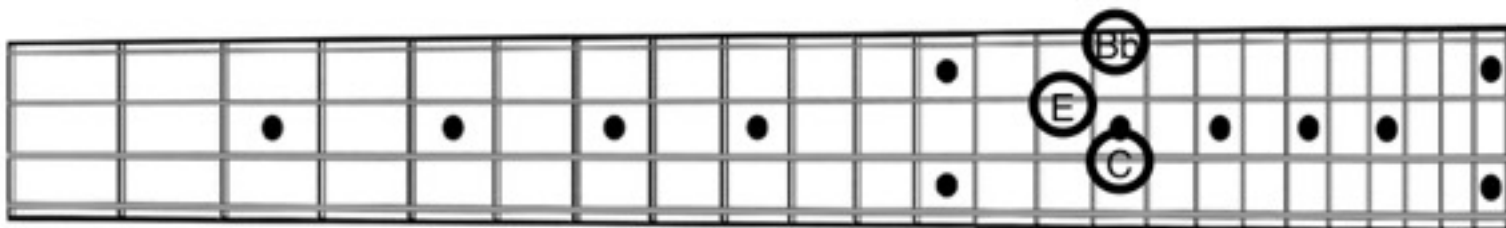
- C - Root note - 15th Fret A string - USE 2ND FINGER
- E - 3rd - 14th Fret D String - USE 1ST FINGER
- B - 7th - 16th Fret G String - USE 4TH FINGER

Let's have a look at a C Minor 7:



C - Root note - 15th Fret A string - USE 3RD FINGER
Eb - 3rd - 13th Fret D String - USE 1ST FINGER
Bb - 7th - 15th Fret G String - USE 4TH FINGER

And here is the diagram for C Dominant 7:



C - Root note - 15th Fret A string - USE 2ND FINGER
E - 3rd - 14th Fret D String - USE 1ST FINGER
Bb - 7th - 15th Fret G String - USE 3RD FINGER

Now that you know these 3 basic chord shapes trying playing them in other keys, or even along to a song you already know the chord changes for.

Next we will look at a slight different fingering for playing these chords to help us increase our ability to play in a more efficient and clear way.