

Dave Reiner's 20 Steps to Understanding Chords on the Fiddle

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1. Why play chords on the fiddle? To back up other instruments, play along with songs, add double stops, improvise lead breaks, work out harmony parts. Other instruments such as guitars, pianos, and banjos do it! Here's an example: Stone's Rag (Fiddle - Piano). We'll return to this tune later.

2. The starting point is to number the notes in a scale. Here we'll look at major scales only.

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	Key of C major	→	
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	I	Roman numerals are often used		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	"Nashville numbers" are easier		
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G	Key of G major	→	
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D	Key of D major	→	
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	A	Key of A major	→	

3. Next, name chords based on these numbers:

- The 1 chord in the key of C major is a C chord
- The 4 chord in the key of G major is a C chord
- The 5 chord in the key of D major is an A chord
- The 6 chord in the key of A major is an F# chord

How do you know which key you're in? It's usually the first or last note of tune - or ask a harmony player!

4. A chord progression is a sequence of chords matching the harmonic structure of the tune!

1 5 1 is a typical chord progression for a hoedown
 G D G = the chords for Sandhill Breakdown in the key of G (1st part)

5. It can be helpful to show the timing for a chord progression (two beats per chord symbol):

1 1 1 5 5 5 5 1 or...
 1 - - 5 - - - 1
 G - - D - - - G Sandhill Breakdown in the (1st part) key of G

6. Here's another common chord progression that matches many tunes:

1 4 5 1 is a typical chord progression for folk & country
 G C D G = chords for Wabash Cannonball in the key of G
 A D E A = chords for Wabash Cannonball in the key of A
 B E F# B = chords for Wabash Cannonball in the key of B

The numbers tell you the structure of the tune independent of the key!

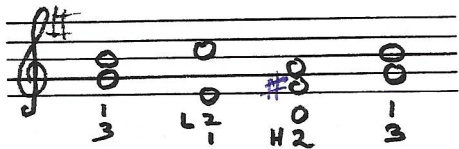
7. But what notes form a chord, such as a C? What are the recipes for chord construction?

Major chord: 1, 3, 5
 7th chord: 1, 3, 5, b7
 Minor chord: 1, b3, 5

8. But I can't play three notes at a time! What can I do to play a two-note chord? The sequence 1, 3, 5, 1, 3, 5, ... is called an arpeggio. On the fiddle, play any two notes from the arpeggio to form a major chord.

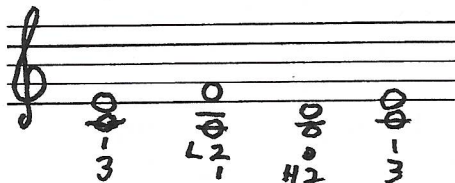
9. Example of fiddle chords for Wabash Cannonball in G, played on your two middle strings.

1	4	5	1	We already learned the progression
G	C	D	G	Here it is in the key of G



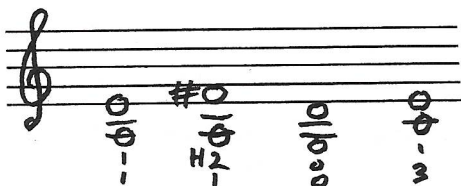
10. Example of fiddle chords for Stone's Rag in C (first part), played on your two lowest strings.

1	4	5	1	Where have we seen this before?
C	F	G	C	Here it is in the key of C



11. Here's a new progression, with the fiddle chords for Stone's Rag in C (second part).

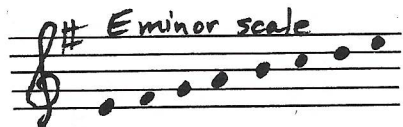
6	2	5	1	Ragtime progression
A	D	G	C	Here it is in the key of C



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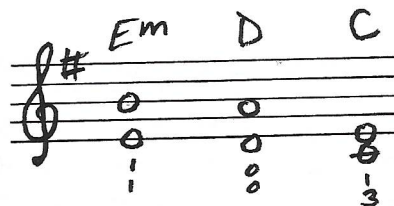
12. Here's a new progression, with the fiddle chords for Cooley's Reel in Em.

1m	-	7	-	1m	-	7	7/1
Em	-	D	-	Em	-	D	D/Em



A common Irish chord substitution is 6 instead of 1m:

1m	-	7	-	6	-	7	7/1
Em	-	D	-	C	-	D	D/Em



13. Apply our understanding of chords to double stops for Wabash Cannonball in G.

1	4	5	1	We already learned this progression
G	C	D	G	Double stops should fit the chords
G,D	G	D,A	G	These drone strings fit the chords

14. Apply our understanding of chords to double stops for Alabama Jubilee in C.

6	2	5	1	6	2m	1	3	4	1	2	5	1	First four look familiar
A	D	G	C	A	Dm	C	E	F	C	D	G	C	At least it ends on C!

Sandhill Breakdown in

15. Apply our understanding of chords to harmony playing for G (mostly a 3rd above).

1	5	1	1	4	5	1	1 st	and 2 nd	parts
G	D	G	G	C	D	G	Don't clash with chords		

16. Apply our understanding of chords to backup playing for *Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms* in G.
 1 - - - - - 5 - 1 - 4 - 5 - 1 - Typical bluegrass progression
 G - - - - - D - G - C - D - G - Play fills that fit chords

17. Apply our understanding of chords to lead playing for *Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms* in E.
 1 - - - - - 5 - 1 - 4 - 5 - 1 - The numbers don't change in E
 E - - - - - B - E - A - B - E - Play to match the chords

18. Here's a cool new chord recipe. Dominant 7th chords (or just 7th chords) create tension. The tension pulls to a chord down 5 notes (= up 4 notes).

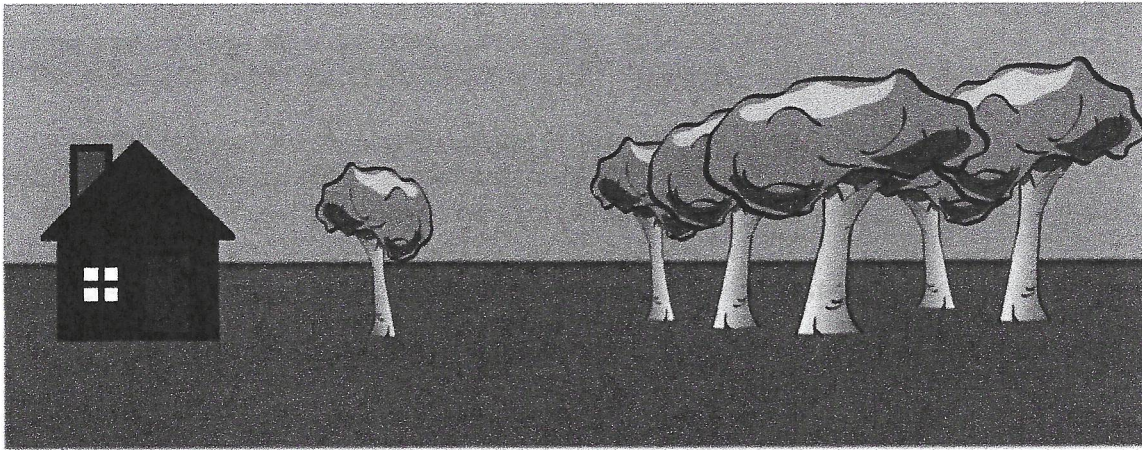
The recipe for a 7th chord is 1, 3, 5, b7. Let's add some 7th chords to *Wabash Cannonball* in G.
 1 1⁷ 4 5 5⁷ 1 Add 7th chords to pull 1 to 4, and 5 to 1
 G G⁷ C D D⁷ G Add an F note to a G chord for a G7 chord

19. Get a jump start from your fellow musicians.
 a. Learn to recognize) chords from guitars and other harmony instruments – visually or by ear.
 b. Listen for tip-offs of chord changes – bass runs, chromatic runs, 7th chords.

20. Final tips and tricks...
 a. Play around with different voicings (selection of notes) for fiddle chords. Stay away from the melody.
 b. Realize that chord progressions are not an exact science. Good musicians may have different sets of chords for the same tune, or may play around with chord substitutions. Some tunes are not meant to have harmony or are ambiguous by nature.
 c. Buy Dave's books! All the tunes include the chords. *Anthology of Fiddle Styles* has great finger charts for chords on the fiddle.

Easy version of *Wabash Cannonball*:

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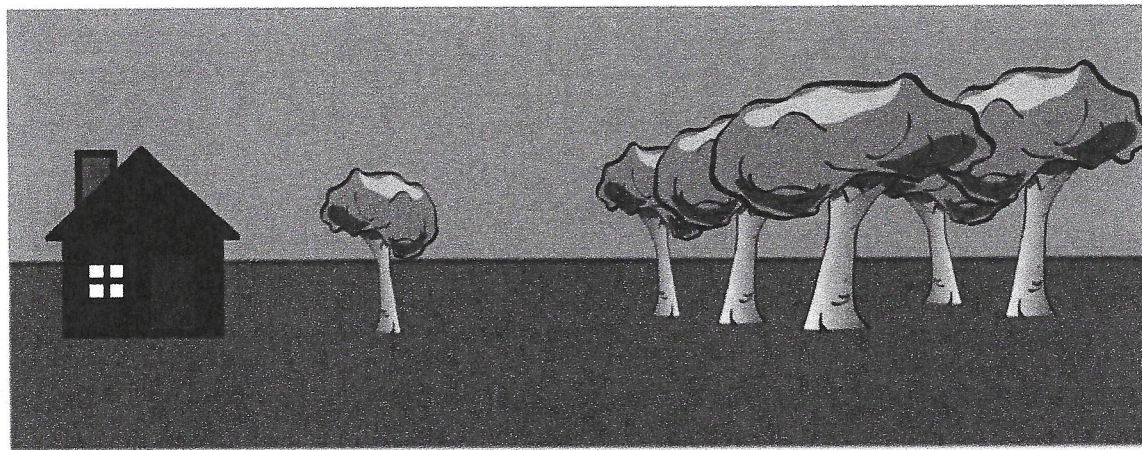
Yard

Woods

1

4

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