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At one point or another, you might have stumbled upon viral YouTube videos promising that you can play dozens of popular songs with just four chords. To your surprise I imagine, they weren't kidding. Clearly, there are chords and progressions that have become more popular in Western music than others. As a guitarist, you might be wondering what these chords are, and how you can use them to power up your playing ability. The 12 main chords on the guitar are C Major, D Minor, D Minor 7, E Minor, F Major, F Major 7, G Major, G7, A Minor, B Minor, Bm7b5, and B Diminished. These are the most important because of their importance in Western music theory and popularity in pop culture. One of the quickest ways to advance your learning journey is to not only know what these chords are but to know how they fit in with each other and where they have been popularly used. We'll go through all 12 chords in this article. If you're familiar with music theory, you might notice that all the chords listed below are in the key of C Major. The reason for that is simple and it's something I've discussed countless times before, including in this article on our other site, Producer Society. Essentially, the C Major scale is the foundation of western music theory in the sense that it is the frame of reference by which every other scale is compared and contrasted. The C Major Chord - the most basic, but also the most important, guitar chord Likely one of the first chords that any guitarist or pianist will learn, C Major is comprised of the notes C, E, and G. Some of the most popular modern and historic songs played in the C Major key are: Imagine by John Lennon, Stay by Rihanna featuring Mikky Ekko, and Someone Like You by Adele. Much to Rick Beato's chagrin, the I - V - vi - iv progression, starting on C Major in many cases, is considered to be among the most popular, and best-sounding chord progressions. There's probably an explanation for this but it's a possibility that it's largely subjective. In my view, the progression is so popular because it contains all of the major chords of a regular major scale, including the relative minor as well, which is the "iv." These chords, when played together, likely have a combination of intervals that are very easy and pleasant for the person to listen to. Additionally, a big part of its popularity, I imagine, has to do with the fact many people are just used to hearing it by this point. Moving on though, there are reasons beyond just guitar that have made the C Major scale the predominant scale in music. To understand more about this, you might want to refer to the complex story of the development of music theory. For the long answer, you can check out this informative, yet fairly complicated video by MusicCorner on Youtube. If you're serious about learning though, Punkademic's Music Theory Comprehensive Complete Course is dirt cheap, and you can access the entire thing with their All-Access Pass. Use the coupon code "producersociety". Essentially, the concept of a major key came long after we developed names for the notes. Thus, C Major being the main note - was a mere coincidence. Another part of the answer is that the C Major scale on the piano is the easiest to teach a new piano student because it contains no flats or sharps like what's shown down in the image here. I'm not the only person who feels this way considering the Cambridge History of Western Music Theory has said so as well. Moreover, it's the most commonly taught scale right at the beginning of most teachers' curricula. To play a C Major chord on the piano, you only have to look for the middle C and play 3 white notes. The C major scale also only consists of white notes. From the perspective of teaching a beginner their first chords and scales, this makes it much simpler and easier to grasp at first. On the guitar, it's a bit different. Even more challenging, in fact, but my chart below will be helpful to you. I've included the tablature and music for all of the 12 most important chords on the guitar, including their triad form. If you'll recall my article on why you should learn triads, you'll know that they are crucial for any serious guitarist to learn. I've also highlighted the root in the triads, which is important to know when learning them. The triads are the most important thing for you to learn. The 6 voicings on the right-hand side are just toys to fool around with. Know where the root is in the triads (C) Check out Justin Guitar's video to figure out how to play the C Major. The standard D Minor Chord - the Second Chord of C Major The start of many a sombre tune, D Minor consists of the notes D, F, and A. 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It is played with the notes D, F, A, and C. Minor and Minor 7th chords are generally good ways to evoke emotions of melancholy and malaise. This chord brings with it a sense of deep thought, maturity, and reflection. It should be no surprise then, that it's a very popular chord in the blues, but also jazz and R&B as well. Now that I think about though, it's used in every genre. If you're looking to chill out the progression you're playing, minor 7 chords, in general, are a good place to start. No matter the minor chord, you will always be able to create a Minor 7 chord by adding the seventh interval in the minor scale. Popular songs containing the D Minor 7 chord include "Just The Way You Are" by Bruno Mars and "Inner City Blues" by Marvin Gaye. Drake, the rapper, loves to use beats that employ a lot of minor 7 harmonies as well. Here are some Dmin7 voicings to play around with. Don't worry about the minor 7 chords in terms of triads, because they aren't triads. A triad means "three-note chord." Check out this video on how to play the Dmin7. What the first position E Minor looks like on the guitar - the pointer finger is not fretting the 1st fret by the way. The simplest beginner guitar chord that you can learn. E Minor consists of the notes E, G, and B. In Pauer's analysis of keys, he describes E Minor as conveying restlessness. This quintessential rock n roll chord, the scale underpins some of the most groundbreaking songs of the genre. "Come As You Are" by Nirvana, "Can't Stop by The Red Hot Chili Peppers" define the nature of this chord and key. Part of the popularity of the chord and its underlying scale has to do with how easy it is to play on the guitar. The key of E Minor and G Major, for instance, (the relative minor and major), are very easy to play on the guitar. I imagine that because of the dwindling popularity of guitar music over the last decade (even though there is somewhat of a resurgence happening now), we'll probably see less of E Minor in the future. The E Minor triads and some E Minor voicings that are nice to play with. Here's how to play the E Minor chord from Justin Guitar. What the F Major chord looks like on the guitar Some of the biggest rock songs in history start with F Major at the head of the progression. To play an F Major, you must include the notes F, A, and C. Popular songs in F Major? "Somebody That I Used to Know" by Goyte and "Yesterday" by The Beatles. According to Pauer's Analysis, F Major expresses a light, passing regret, or a mournful feeling. I'm not so sure about that because it sounds just like a major chord to me, however, in the context of the rest of the chords of C Major, it can sound hopeful or triumphant. Part of that has to do with the fact it has the #4 in it that makes it Lydian. Looking at the F Major scale, some of the most popular chord progressions that you can try out on guitar are I - vi - IV - V(F - Dm - Bb - C) and I - IV - V(F - Bb - C). F Major triads with the root highlighted and then some cool F Major voicings Another thing about F Major, particularly the scale and key signatures, is that its relative minor is D Minor, which is the 2nd chord we talked about earlier. D Minor is one of the most popularly used keys. Here's how to play the F Major chord from Justin Guitar. An extension of the F Major chord, FMaj7 only requires the addition of the E note on the original F Major chord. Strum it for a beautiful, airy sound that feels almost transcendental. I just used it on my latest TikTok post for a Ukulele track. You can use any guitar to learn what I'm teaching in this article. These days, I'm using an old Squier Telecaster which you can see here. It only cost me \$250. On the guitar, the open chord shape for this is similar to a C chord, which makes it a great chord to add to your toolkit as a beginner. It's also frequently played alongside a C chord, making for an easy transition between the two. One of the most popular songs to make use of the Fmaj7 chord is "Clocks" by Coldplay. Here you can find excellent use of the ethereal tension that can be elicited by this chord. And an example of that easy transition between F Major 7 and C can also be found in "Ho Hey" by the Lumineers. A bunch of F Major 7 voicings to use. The last one is the coolest because it's a first inversion. You could probably make the case that it's a different chord than F Major 7, but that sort of thing is beyond this article. How to play the F Major 7 chords on the guitar (video tutorial). How the G Major chord looks on the guitar Tender and calm, yet positive and bright, G Major consists of the notes G, B, and D. It is a statement-making chord, which carries its own sense of finality and completeness. My favorite songs in G Major, tend to carry potent messages with staying power. They can be thoughtful, but also fun - yet always impactful. Some examples are "I Got A Feeling" by Black Eyes Peas, "Gravity" by John Mayer, and "Welcome To The Black Parade" by MCR. If you're looking for progressions to try in the key of G Major, try out the I - IV - V (G - C - D) or the I - vi - IV - V (G - Em - C - D) or even I - V - vi - IV (G - D - Em - C). G Major triads with the root highlighted, alongside G Major voicings. If you'll recall what I said earlier, G Major is the relative major of E Minor. These two scales, keys, and their chords are related to one another and can be used interchangeably at times. The same thing goes for the minor 7 chords on this list, which is why they're the most important chords for you to learn on the guitar. Here's how to play the G chord from Justin Guitar. 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It's also an incredibly popular key to play in among progressive metal guitarists, who often use 7 and 8-string guitars that are tuned down to B and F respectively. Seven strings are tuned to B and 8-strings are tuned to B and F# respectively. This is the key for legendary songs like "Iris" by Goo Goo Dolls or "Hotel California" by Eagles. B Minor triads with the roots highlighted and some voicings to use along with them. Here's how to play a B Minor chord from Guitar Goddess. How the Bm7b5 looks on the 2nd fret of the A string. Also known as B half-diminished, this chord contains the notes B, D, F, and A. Not commonly taught as a beginner chord, this funky-sounding chord is found in the key of C major. It's the last chord of C Major, as a matter of fact. All the chords of C Major in the first position on the guitar. In the context of the B Major scale, the Bm7b5 chord can be played with the root note, flat 3rd, flat-5th (hence the name), and flat 7th. 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The reason for that is simple and it's something I've discussed countless times before, including in this article on our other site, Producer Society. Essentially, the C Major scale is the foundation of western music theory in the sense that it is the frame of reference by which every other scale is compared and contrasted. The C Major Chord - the most basic, but also the most important, guitar chord Likely one of the first chords that any guitarist or pianist will learn, C Major is comprised of the notes C, E, and G. Some of the most popular modern and historic songs played in the C Major key are: Imagine by John Lennon, Stay by Rihanna featuring Mikky Ekko, and Someone Like You by Adele. Much to Rick Beato's chagrin, the I - V - vi - iv progression, starting on C Major in many cases, is considered to be among the most popular, and best-sounding chord progressions. There's probably an explanation for this but it's a possibility that it's largely subjective. 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Essentially, the concept of a major key came long after we developed names for the notes. Thus, C Major being the main note - was a mere coincidence. Another part of the answer is that the C Major scale on the piano is the easiest to teach a new piano student because it contains no flats or sharps like what's shown down in the image here. I'm not the only person who feels this way considering the Cambridge History of Western Music Theory has said so as well. Moreover, it's the most commonly taught scale right at the beginning of most teachers' curricula. To play a C Major chord on the piano, you only have to look for the middle C and play 3 white notes. The C major scale also only consists of white notes. From the perspective of teaching a beginner their first chords and scales, this makes it much simpler and easier to grasp at first. On the guitar, it's a bit different. Even more challenging, in fact, but my chart below will be helpful to you. I've included the tablature and music for all of the 12 most important chords on the guitar, including their triad form. If you'll recall my article on why you should learn triads, you'll know that they are crucial for any serious guitarist to learn. I've also highlighted the root in the triads, which is important to know when learning them. The triads are the most important thing for you to learn. The 6 voicings on the right-hand side are just toys to fool around with. Know where the root is in the triads (C) Check out Justin Guitar's video to figure out how to play the C Major. The standard D Minor Chord - the Second Chord of C Major The start of many a sombre tune, D Minor consists of the notes D, F, and A. According to Ernst Pauer's The Elements of The Beautiful in Music, the key of D Minor represents a subdued feeling of melancholy as well as being solemn. Pink Floyd's "Another Brick In The Wall" and Green Day's era-defining "21 Guns" have to be on the list of some of the most important songs in D Minor. They encapsulate the abovementioned feelings perfectly. That said, it doesn't necessarily have to sound this way because it depends on what notes you've used and in what context. Here are great-sounding D Minor chord progressions that you can try right away. I - iv - v(Dm - Gm - C) and i - VI - III - VII(Dm - Bb - F - C). The D Minor Triads with the root highlighted in each one. I've also included some more voicings on the right-hand side which I think are pretty cool. Here's how to play the D Minor chord from Justin Guitar. How the D Minor 7 looks on the guitar D Minor 7 is an extension of the D Minor chord by way of adding the seventh interval. It is played with the notes D, F, A, and C. Minor and Minor 7th chords are generally good ways to evoke emotions of melancholy and malaise. This chord brings with it a sense of deep thought, maturity, and reflection. It should be no surprise then, that it's a very popular chord in the blues, but also jazz and R&B as well. Now that I think about though, it's used in every genre. If you're looking to chill out the progression you're playing, minor 7 chords, in general, are a good place to start. No matter the minor chord, you will always be able to create a Minor 7 chord by adding the seventh interval in the minor scale. Popular songs containing the D Minor 7 chord include "Just The Way You Are" by Bruno Mars and "Inner City Blues" by Marvin Gaye. Drake, the rapper, loves to use beats that employ a lot of minor 7 harmonies as well. Here are some Dmin7 voicings to play around with. Don't worry about the minor 7 chords in terms of triads, because they aren't triads. A triad means "three-note chord." Check out this video on how to play the Dmin7. What the first position E Minor looks like on the guitar - the pointer finger is not fretting the 1st fret by the way. The simplest beginner guitar chord that you can learn. E Minor consists of the notes E, G, and B. In Pauer's analysis of keys, he describes E Minor as conveying restlessness. This quintessential rock n roll chord, the scale underpins some of the most groundbreaking songs of the genre. "Come As You Are" by Nirvana, "Can't Stop by The Red Hot Chili Peppers" define the nature of this chord and key. Part of the popularity of the chord and its underlying scale has to do with how easy it is to play on the guitar. The key of E Minor and G Major, for instance, (the relative minor and major), are very easy to play on the guitar. I imagine that because of the dwindling popularity of guitar music over the last decade (even though there is somewhat of a resurgence happening now), we'll probably see less of E Minor in the future. The E Minor triads and some E Minor voicings that are nice to play with. Here's how to play the E Minor chord from Justin Guitar. What the F Major chord looks like on the guitar Some of the biggest rock songs in history start with F Major at the head of the progression. To play an F Major, you must include the notes F, A, and C. Popular songs in F Major? "Somebody That I Used to Know" by Goyte and "Yesterday" by The Beatles. According to Pauer's Analysis, F Major expresses a light, passing regret, or a mournful feeling. I'm not so sure about that because it sounds just like a major chord to me, however, in the context of the rest of the chords of C Major, it can sound hopeful or triumphant. Part of that has to do with the fact it has the #4 in it that makes it Lydian. Looking at the F Major scale, some of the most popular chord progressions that you can try out on guitar are I - vi - IV - V(F - Dm - Bb - C) and I - IV - V(F - Bb - C). F Major triads with the root highlighted and then some cool F Major voicings Another thing about F Major, particularly the scale and key signatures, is that its relative minor is D Minor, which is the 2nd chord we talked about earlier. D Minor is one of the most popularly used keys. Here's how to play the F Major chord from Justin Guitar. An extension of the F Major chord, FMaj7 only requires the addition of the E note on the original F Major chord. Strum it for a beautiful, airy sound that feels almost transcendental. I just used it on my latest TikTok post for a Ukulele track. You can use any guitar to learn what I'm teaching in this article. These days, I'm using an old Squier Telecaster which you can see here. It only cost me \$250. On the guitar, the open chord shape for this is similar to a C chord, which makes it a great chord to add to your toolkit as a beginner. It's also frequently played alongside a C chord, making for an easy transition between the two. One of the most popular songs to make use of the Fmaj7 chord is "Clocks" by Coldplay. Here you can find excellent use of the ethereal tension that can be elicited by this chord. And an example of that easy transition between F Major 7 and C can also be found in "Ho Hey" by the Lumineers. A bunch of F Major 7 voicings to use. The last one is the coolest because it's a first inversion. You could probably make the case that it's a different chord than F Major 7, but that sort of thing is beyond this article. How to play the F Major 7 chords on the guitar (video tutorial). How the G Major chord looks on the guitar Tender and calm, yet positive and bright, G Major consists of the notes G, B, and D. It is a statement-making chord, which carries its own sense of finality and completeness. My favorite songs in G Major, tend to carry potent messages with staying power. They can be thoughtful, but also fun - yet always impactful. Some examples are "I Got A Feeling" by Black Eyes Peas, "Gravity" by John Mayer, and "Welcome To The Black Parade" by MCR. If you're looking for progressions to try in the key of G Major, try out the I - IV - V (G - C - D) or the I - vi - IV - V (G - Em - C - D) or even I - V - vi - IV (G - D - Em - C). G Major triads with the root highlighted, alongside G Major voicings. If you'll recall what I said earlier, G Major is the relative major of E Minor. These two scales, keys, and their chords are related to one another and can be used interchangeably at times. The same thing goes for the minor 7 chords on this list, which is why they're the most important chords for you to learn on the guitar. Here's how to play the G chord from Justin Guitar. What the standard G7 looks like on the guitar Known as a dominant 7th chord, G7 consists of the notes G, B, D, and F. Played in the open position, the G7 chord can make a handy addition to your arsenal as the bridge between motifs. G7 is warm, bright, but slightly discordant due to the minor seventh interval in it. Dominant 7th chords are used a lot in funk music, for example. You can also find it in popular songs like "The Scientist" by Coldplay and "I Got You(I Feel Good)" by James Brown. Here are some cool voicings of the G7 chord for the guitar. Check the video tutorial here on YouTube for how to play the G7 chord. What the A Minor chord looks like on the guitar The A Minor triad is played with the notes A, C, and E. And it's the relative minor of C Major. This is partially why it's such an important chord (and scale) to learn. It's the 6th chord of C Major, so it has no accidentals either. One of the first lessons you'll learn in music theory when learning scales is that the A minor scale is known as the relative minor scale to C Major. This means that both scales contain the same notes. I talked about this too in my guide on finding the key on the guitar. The richness of the chord, sounding full of soul and presence, makes for a versatile list of songs drawing on it as a statement piece at the start. Some of the most popular songs in A Minor are "Hurt" by Jonny Cash, "Can't Feel My Face" by The Weekend, and "All of Me" by John Legend. The A Minor triads up and down the neck, plus some A Minor chord voicings. The last two are the best. Here's how to play the A Minor chord from Justin Guitar. What the B Minor chord looks like on the guitar B, D, and F# make up this minor chord. It's one of the chords that will come up the most in your guitar playing and is thus important to master. It's the relative minor of D Major, and it's also quite easy to play in as a key. It's also an incredibly popular key to play in among progressive metal guitarists, who often use 7 and 8-string guitars that are tuned down to B and F respectively. Seven strings are tuned to B and 8-strings are tuned to F#. This is the key for legendary songs like "Iris" by Goo Goo Dolls or "Hotel California" by Eagles. B Minor is an essential chord for your rock arsenal. Popular progressions in B Minor include the i - VI - VII(Bm - G - A) and i - iv - VII(Bm - Em - A). B Minor triads with the roots highlighted and some voicings to use along with them. Here's how to play a B Minor chord from Guitar Goddess. How the Bm7b5 looks on the 2nd fret of the A string. Also known as B half-diminished, this chord contains the notes B, D, F, and A. Not commonly taught as a beginner chord, this funky-sounding chord is found in the key of C major. It's the last chord of C Major, as a matter of fact. All the chords of C Major in the first position on the guitar. In the context of the B Major scale, the Bm7b5 chord can be played with the root note, flat 3rd, flat-5th (hence the name), and flat 7th. Diminished or half-diminished chords are interesting twists in the context of a progression. They can help with going from one place to the next. Some different voicings of the Bm7b5 chord Here's how to play a Bm7b5 chord from another guy on YouTube. What a B Diminished looks like on the guitar - this one's a little ham-fisted though. To round off our list, we have the B diminished chord, which contains the notes B, D, and F. "This Love" by Maroon 5, and "All I Want For Christmas" by Mariah Carey are some of the most popular songs containing this chord. Similar to Bm7b5, BDim might sound fairly disjointed and unpleasant on its own, but within the context of a progression, it makes for an interesting variation and helps the movement from one section of the music to another. Just look at the chords for This Love on Ultimate Guitar. Just a few cool B B-diminished chords. The second one and the 4th ones are probably my favorite. Here's how to play the B Diminished chord. How to Memorize Guitar Triads What Are The 3 Main Chords On Guitar Visually. It can be much easier to see which notes a chord uses when playing piano rather than guitar. The nice thing about the piano is that I find it deepens your understanding of other instruments too. This is one reason why I recommend people learn from PianoForAll - an online course that's pretty inexpensive considering what you get. Primarily thanks to the viewing angle, but also because a piano only has two rows of keys as opposed to a guitar's six strings. Additionally, the piano is much easier to learn because the keys repeat themselves up and down the keyboard. Even though there are beginner shapes that you will learn for most of the chords listed above, there are many different ways to play one chord. Thus, to unlock new ways of playing the same chord, you must know what notes are contained in the chord. The rules for extending chords are also universal and essentially applicable to all kinds of shapes. To turn C Major into C Major 7th, you add the seventh note in the scale. 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