

July “7-string month”

by Collin Bay

There’s an old adage amongst bluegrass guitarists. It goes along the lines of “*All the money’s to be made in the first position.*”¹ All things considered, this saying holds a lot of truth; notes played with open strings are more resonant and carry more pronounced overtones than fretted notes, and the first position all but requires the use of open strings. It’s physics; open strings can be very useful—they tend to evoke a different timbre. Incorporating open strings into chords and lines can be a very subtle yet useful (and very ‘guitaristic’!) way to give emphasis to notes within a line or chord, effectively giving guitarists of any style more control over arranging and orchestration choices as well as tone issues. Regardless of whether you play a nylon-string or a steel-string guitar, acoustic or electric, nu metal or western swing, this concept will take your playing to a new level.

Pianists are notorious for bashing guitarists, often out of a lack of understanding of the guitar. This leads pianists and other non-guitarists to believe that guitarists can only play in ‘guitar-friendly keys’. Another common delusion about the guitar is that every key is the same, just played on a different fret. This wasn’t helped by the trend towards closed position chord voicings and lines that emerged (especially within the jazz and rock idioms) in the middle of the twentieth century. Sure, the guitarists responsible for that trend—Jim Hall for example—were (and are) innovators and excellent musicians; that said, they weren’t necessarily the most ‘guitaristic’ guitarists. Jim Hall went so far as to put a string damper on the nut of his guitar neck so as to deaden the overtones of open strings and in so doing achieve a more consistent tone between open and fretted notes. Those same twentieth century guitarists were able to play music on the guitar that was previously beyond the scope of what the guitar could play, that’s for sure; however, their work could only be strengthened by playing to the strengths of the instrument. One of the things I will touch on in this article is how to bring closed voicings that you already know into the 21st century by incorporating open strings. Thanks to the important innovations from the likes of Jim Hall and company, guitarists are now able to play the most challenging repertoire in almost every style and put their individual stamp on the music as well.

Hopefully this article will provide guitarists with ammo to return fire at guitar critics. Pianists certainly have certain inherent advantages over guitar due to the nature of their instrument, evenness of tone for example, but the idea that the guitar is inferior to the piano or that it doesn’t hold its own inherent advantages over the piano is a shibboleth. I encourage every guitarist to embrace the instrument’s natural strengths; don’t be afraid to sound ‘guitaristic’! To the *guitarded* critics, prepare for the next generation of guitar prowess—let the debunking begin!

Let’s start with some examples. First of all, every example I have provided is one of literally limitless possibilities in terms of voicing, fingerings, etc. Use the concepts behind them to create your own examples in every key. While I have included voicings for the 7-string guitar (I tune my low string to an A), the concepts and most of the voicings will work perfectly for 6-stringers as well.

Example 1

Example 1 displays two staves of guitar chords. The top staff shows four chords: C, A, G, and E. The bottom staff shows four chords: D, E-7, A-7, and D-. Each chord is represented by a guitar chord diagram above a musical staff with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The diagrams show the fretting of strings, with open strings indicated by circles with a dot.

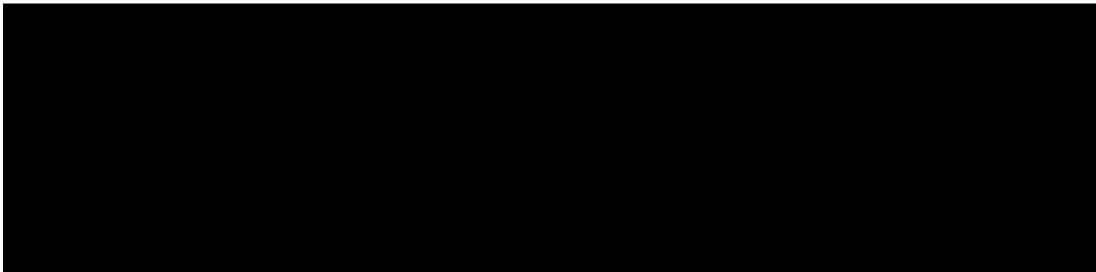
Every guitarist is probably familiar with traditional open voicings such as those found in Example 1. As these chord voicings are some of the most common and most identifiable with the sound of the guitar, they are very important as a foundation from which to work. We will revisit these later in the article. Again, open strings give the guitar tonal variations that are simply impossible to achieve on instruments such as the piano. Use them to your advantage!

Example 2a

Example 2a displays three guitar chords: D-9, G13, and C77. Each chord is represented by a guitar chord diagram above a musical staff with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The diagrams show the fretting of strings, with open strings indicated by circles with a dot.

Example 2b

Example 2b displays three guitar chords: D-9, G13, and C77. Each chord is represented by a guitar chord diagram above a musical staff with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The diagrams show the fretting of strings, with open strings indicated by circles with a dot.



With Example 2a we see some very common closed voicings. The examples I have provided are from 'guitaristic' keys. Example 2b shows ways to replace fretted notes with open-stringed ones. Example 2c doubles fretted pitches with open stringed pitches—this is a way to bring a specific voice even further into the foreground.

Example 2d

The image displays three guitaristic chord voicings on a treble clef staff in 4/4 time. Above the staff are three chord diagrams: D-9, G13, and C7(7). The D-9 voicing has notes D4 (open), F#4 (2), A4 (3), B4 (4), and D5 (5). The G13 voicing has notes G4 (open), B4 (2), D5 (3), F#5 (4), and G5 (5). The C7(7) voicing has notes C4 (open), E4 (2), G4 (3), Bb4 (4), and C5 (5). The staff shows the notes for each chord in a specific order: D4, F#4, A4, B4, D5 for D-9; G4, B4, D5, F#5, G5 for G13; and C4, E4, G4, Bb4, C5 for C7(7).

Example 2d shows ways to bring additional diatonic color tones into chords. It's important to note that sometimes, depending on which color tones you choose to use and which position and fingering you go with, you must adjust the order of notes so as to not lose the fundamental structure of your voicing; sometimes the foundation will remain fretted, sometimes part of the foundation will shift to an open string so that a fretted (or open) color tone can be added. This means that the pitches won't necessarily be ordered lowest to highest, even though the strings are. This is something to be aware of, especially when arpeggiating chords. Such a 'guitaristic' quirk can be a huge strength if used with command. When adding diatonic color tones, always explore different position and fingering possibilities—often more than one sound and feel good. Regardless of position, open strings can be substituted in for fretted notes or added in addition to fretted notes—this is huge—in essence, the concept of working more open strings into your playing can be used with chords in every position on the neck (see example 2e).

Example 3a

Example 3a shows four chords in a row on a single staff. Above the staff are four chord diagrams with their names: D-11, G13^b9, Csus11^b13, and C7#11. Below the diagrams is a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The staff contains four measures, each with a chord voicing. The first measure is D-11, the second is G13^b9, the third is Csus11^b13, and the fourth is C7#11. The notes are stacked vertically in each measure.

In Example 3a, we incorporate chromatic passing tones into our voicings. These sound the safest when used within a picking pattern (see Example 3b), although those of you who feel adventurous can play around with finding ways to insert the stacked chord, chromatic passing tones and all, into different musical contexts. Don't be afraid to let the notes ring into each other in Example 3b; a very cool harp-like effect is produced when they bleed into each other. Example 3c gives us another common closed voicing chord, but for a key less 'guitar-friendly'. Notice the difference between our 'guitar key' chords and our 'non-guitar key' chords—both have equal amounts of color and potential for chromaticism, but the chord tones that are fretted and the chord tones that are open strings often flip-flop depending on whether the open strings are in the key or outside of it.

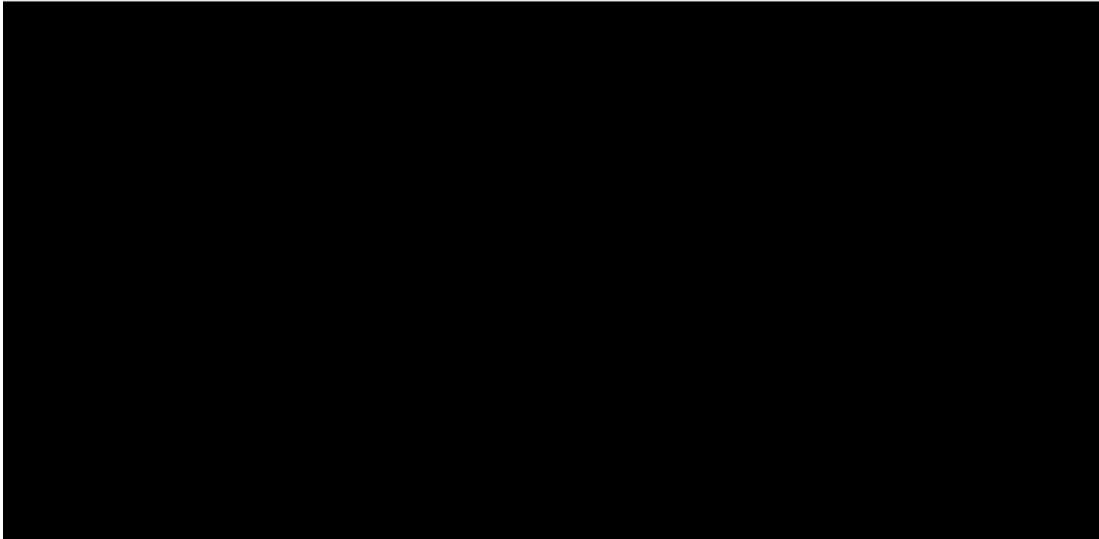
Example 3c

Example 3c shows three chords in a row on a single staff. Above the staff are three chord diagrams with their names: D^b9add#11, G7sus11^b13, and B7sus11^b13. Below the diagrams is a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (Bb). The staff contains three measures, each with a chord voicing. The first measure is D^b9add#11, the second is G7sus11^b13, and the third is B7sus11^b13. The notes are stacked vertically in each measure.

By the time you have mastered these concepts, you will probably have realized that you are finding some very interesting chordal things going on orchestrally and harmonically. The chords you come up with probably have sounds ranging from wide-open to dense and clustered; sometimes you will find chords that have both of those sounds occurring at the same time! Often I find a chord I like, only to hear it used in context by, say, Bill Evans or Keith Jarrett. If you have mastered a handful of these chords, no pianist will have anything on you, orchestrally-speaking. You will have the ability to play chords as interesting and innovative as those played by even the best pianists, *and* sound like a guitarist at the same time! All of a sudden you have the ability to play 'pianistic' chords on guitar, regardless of key, position, harmony or otherwise, in a 'guitaristic' way.

Example 4a

Example 4a shows three chords on a single staff in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The first chord is Ab7, the second is Db7, and the third is Gb7 7b13. Each chord is accompanied by a guitar chord diagram above it. The Ab7 diagram shows frets on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th strings. The Db7 diagram shows frets on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th strings. The Gb7 7b13 diagram shows frets on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th strings, with a '2fr.' label indicating a two-fret shift.



Example 4d

Example 4d shows three chords on a single staff in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The first chord is C-7 b13 b11, the second is B7 b13 (sus11), and the third is Bb7 6. Each chord is accompanied by a guitar chord diagram above it. The C-7 b13 b11 diagram shows frets on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th strings. The B7 b13 (sus11) diagram shows frets on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th strings, with a '2fr.' label indicating a two-fret shift. The Bb7 6 diagram shows frets on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th strings.

Examples show, respectively, our four concepts (replacing fretted pitches with their open-string equivalent, doubling fretted notes with open strings, adding diatonic color tones and chromatic passing tones) applied to keys traditionally thought of as less friendly to guitarists than to horn players or pianists or vocalists. Example 4b makes use of enharmonic spellings to show doubled notes. Again, it's imperative that you are aware of which chord (and non-chord) tones are voiced with open strings, because they will draw the ear's attention. If for example you want the highest pitch to stand out in a chord with fretted notes and open strings, and the highest note is fretted, you will want to adjust your picking or plucking to compensate for the variances in tone and dynamics between the open strings and fretted notes so as to emphasize the top note and achieve the desired balance.

Example 5

The image displays two staves of musical notation for guitar. The top staff contains four chords: C7#11 (fret 3), A7#11 (fret 4), G7#11 (fret 6), and E7 (open). The bottom staff contains five chords: D7 (fret 2), E7 (open), A-11 (fret 3), A-9 (fret 7), and D-11 (fret 6). Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram showing the fingerings and fret numbers.

Now let's return to our traditional open guitar voicings. In Example 5, I have demonstrated several ways to spice up the chords from Example 1 using our four concepts. Again, these are just several of many possible ways to apply the concepts; I encourage you to play around with the chords and concepts and find other new voicings and ways to apply the concepts.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of studying the traditional chord systems, specifically for chord voicings. Having a mastery of chord inversions and substitutions is the foundation for being able to design new open voicings for guitar. I strongly recommend Charles Chapman's book [Drop-2 Concept for Guitar](#) (MB# 98181), Vic Juris' [Modern Chords: Advanced Harmony for Guitar](#) (MB# 20440BCD) from Mel Bay's Private Lessons series, and William Bay's [Deluxe Chord Encyclopedia](#) (MB# 93283) as well as the [Guitar Journals: Chords](#) (MB# 20905) for guitarists looking not only for a chordal foundation but also as resources for finding chord voicings to apply our concepts to.

The low seventh string can be especially compatible and useful with our concepts. Another source for 7-string players specifically to build a chordal foundation and apply our concepts to is Chris Buzzelli's book Mel Bay's [Complete 7-String Guitar Method](#) (MB# 99988BCD). The only 7-string-specific pitfall is to watch out for muddiness—something that all 7-string guitarists have to be wary of anyway. If a chord voicing is sounding too muddy, sometimes the situation can be remedied by arpeggiating the chord; other times it might be best to simply abandon the muddy chord voicing in favor of a new, clearer one.

Now to really blow your mind—if you're already arpeggiating chords with the concepts applied, there's no reason you can't apply these same concepts to single-note lines! When used by the bluegrass and acoustic music worlds, the basic idea behind our four concepts is called "Crosspicking". It can do for lines the same exact things our four concepts have done for chords. It's definitely worth checking out. Tommy Flint wrote a great book exploring crosspicking called Mel Bay's [Fingerstyle Crosspicking Solos](#) (MB# 93806BCD), in the Value Line series. Another book, which I haven't worked through yet myself but takes a very in-depth look at crosspicking is

Mickey Cochran's [Guitar Crosspicking Technique](#) (MB# 97177). I plan to check it out myself as soon as possible.

The hardest (and predictably the most rewarding) part about applying open strings to your lines and chords is that each key and position, contrary to what non-guitarists might think, is not the same as every other key and position. That said, incorporation of open strings is a way to bring out the different characteristics of different keys. In the end, *every key* is a 'guitaristic' key, given a strong application of the open string concept.

To recap: substitute fretted notes for open strings. Double open fretted notes with open strings. Add diatonic color tones and/ or chromatic passing tones, making use of open strings. Be aware of how open strings can effect tone and dynamics and adjust accordingly. Lastly, I'd like to recommend two excellent examples of these concepts at work. Vic Juris' recording [A Second Look](#) (MB# 09782CD) is one of my favorite recordings of all time. He plays mostly electric guitar in the jazz vein, although he uses nylon and steel string guitars on this recording as well. Gene Bertocini, a consummate professional, almost exclusively plays nylon string acoustic guitar on his DVD [The Art of Solo Jazz Guitar](#) (MB# 21145DVD) and provides a first-rate example of our concepts in use.

I hope this article gets the wheels turning. It's pretty exciting how many possibilities there are with this stuff. If you're interested in checking out my own music, you can check out my myspace page (www.myspace.com/collinbay). I should also have my personal website up and running before the end of summer, so look up www.collinbay.com in late August or early September. Thanks!