How to SPEED READ Piano Chord Symbols

Written by Nathan Andersen -- Revised 6th Edition, -- Copyright 2005

HOW TO SPEED READ PIANO CHORD SYMBOLS

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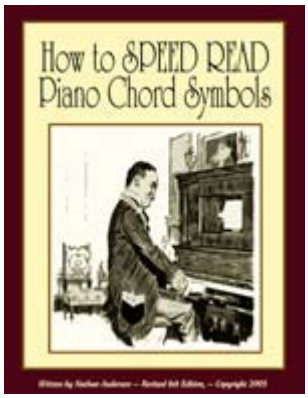

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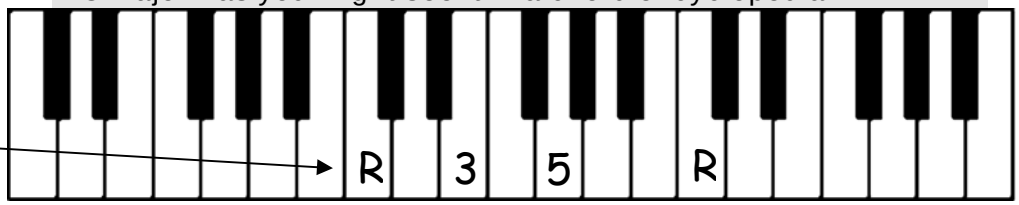
Introduction part 1: Breaking chords down to their essential elements

When people first start to learn to play piano chords, they probably learn a few of them either out of a chord encyclopedia or out of a general book on how to play piano. The problem with the way chords are taught in these books is that they demonstrate the chords in a way they are easy to understand, rather than in a way in which they'll sound the best. So, you'll learn a chord usually all in one octave starting around middle C.

C Major – as you might see it in a chord encyclopedia

Middle C



You'll notice that we have four notes here, the Root, the 3rd, the 5th and the octave of the Root.

The problem is, you'll hardly ever see a C chord in music used in this fashion. Usually, only part of the chord is used, and usually it's divided up between the left and the right hand.

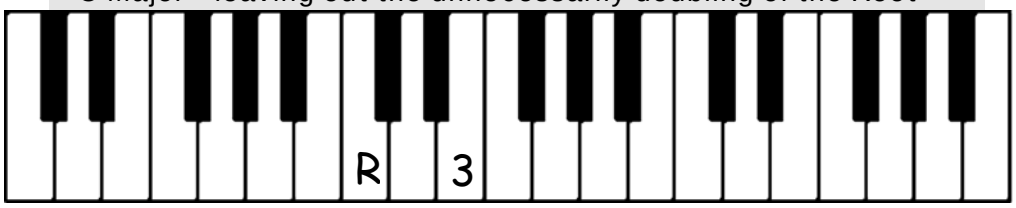
In this book, we'll learn how to structure your chords so that they sound great and are easy to find and play. Also, we'll learn how to move between chords in a way that sounds great – another thing a chord encyclopedia can't teach you.

Let's look again at the chord diagram of the C chord. First of all, the 5th is not necessary – so let's drop it for now. We want to simplify the chords and learn the most essential elements and leave out the extra stuff while we are learning the basics of the system. Later, you'll be very glad that we kept it simple. As my grandfather the circus clown always used to say, "learn to juggle three balls before trying to juggle six balls, a scimitar, and a flaming torch." So for now leave out the 5th. That will give us this:

C Major – leaving out the unnecessary fifth

Now another thing we're going to learn in the book is what notes in a chord you can double. While doubling the Root of the chord is perfectly fine and nice sounding thing to do when you want your chord to sound fuller, it is also unnecessary – so again, let's leave out the unnecessary elements. So take off the higher Root.

C Major – leaving out the unnecessarily doubling of the Root



Now we are down to the essential elements in a C chord: the Root and the 3rd.

Now we're going to do one more thing to the chord, which is we're going to drop the Root down the octave.

C Major – Root dropped down the octave

Play in left hand

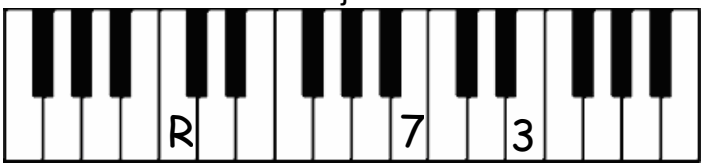
When you listen to music on the radio, there is usually a melody line (usually sung) and there are chords played on such instruments as a piano, keyboard or guitar, and there is usually a bass line. We want to imitate these three distinct voices when we play on the piano. By dropping the Root down an octave, we move it down into the bass range, where it might be played on a string bass or an electric bass.

Introduction part 2: Chord Quality

When you learn piano chords, it's better to understand how they are constructed than to memorize them one by one. This is because there are patterns in the way chords are constructed that will allow you remember them more easily.

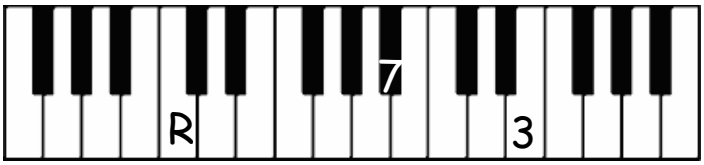
For example, many chords are one note away from being other chords. The chord:

C Major 7th



has only *one* note different from

C Dominant 7th



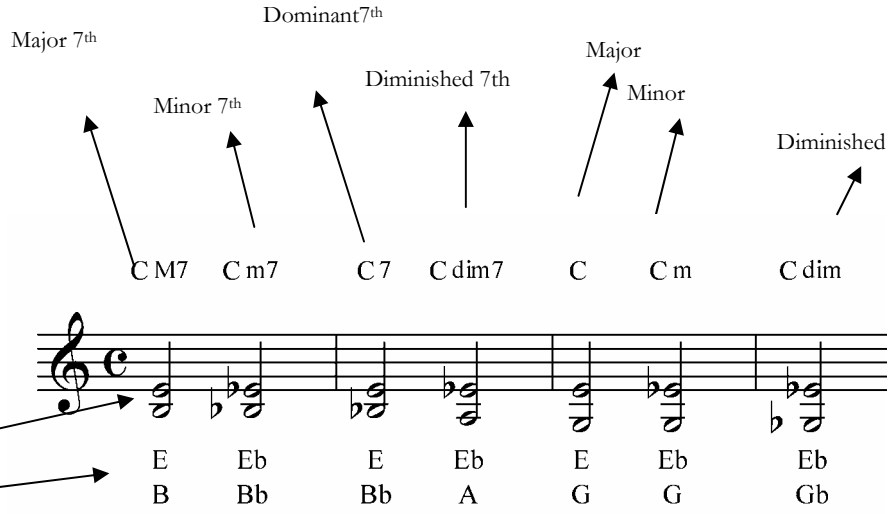
Do you see how only the middle note is different?

What if next time you wanted to figure out a chord, instead of looking in a chord encyclopedia, you said to yourself, "Oh, I'll just take the middle note down a key"?

Knowing how chords are constructed will keep you from having to always refer to chord encyclopedias.

Knowing how chords are constructed also will help you when you get into playing more creatively and improvising. Specifically, you'll know how to move from one chord more smoothly to the next, and you'll know which notes in a chord to choose depending on the melody note.

Chart 1: Seven Flavors of C chords

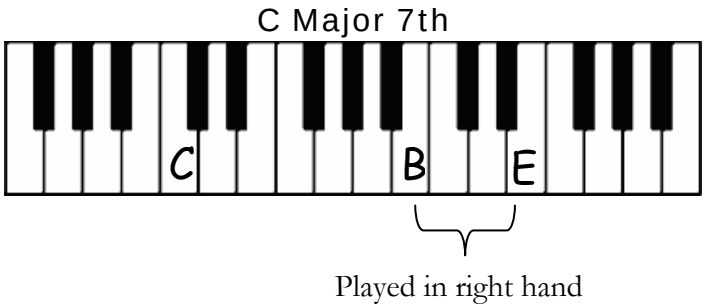


In this book, the notes played in the right hand are written in notation *AND* written below the staff, for those who don't read music

As you can see from the notes written underneath the staff, most of these chords are only a note or two different from the rest of the chords.

Learning the differences between these seven different qualities and how to find them quickly is the major focus of this book.

The first chord above in chart 1 would look like this on the keyboard.



Seventh Chords

All Seventh chords are made up of these three chord elements: The Root, the 3rd and the 7th. In fact, Seventh chords are so named because they contain the 7th. As you'll remember from above,

to make a simple C chord, all you needed was

- the Root

and

- the 3rd.

To Make a C major 7th chord, you would need

- the Root,
- the 3rd

and

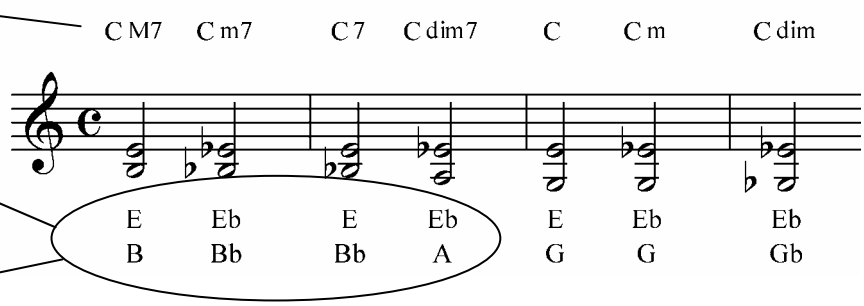
- the 7th.

The Root of the chord is in the name of the chord. The Root of all these chords is the note C.

The first four chords below are 7th chords.

The top row is the 3rd of these chords

The next row is the 7th of these chords

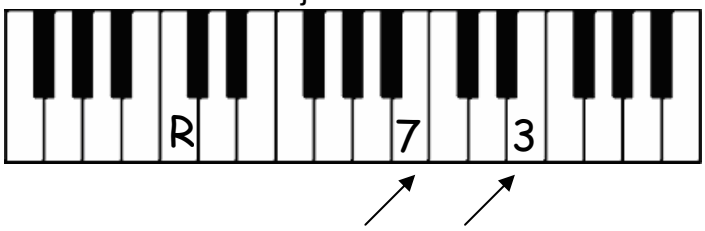


Both the 3rd of a Seventh chord and the 7th of a Seventh chord can either be Major or Minor. See in chart 1 how some of the notes have the note "E" and some have the note "Eb"? "E" is the Major 3rd above C. "Eb" is the minor 3rd of above C.

Depending on the pattern of 3rds and 7ths in the chord, it will be one of these qualities of 7th chords.

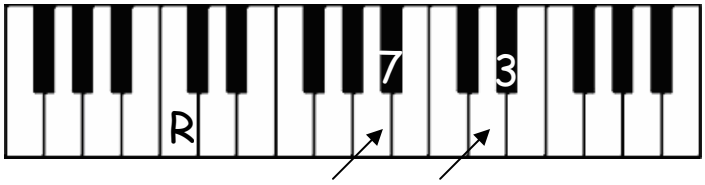
Here are the four seventh chords above put on a piano diagram for you. Play through them and notice how the Major and Minor 3rds and 7ths sound.

C Major Seventh



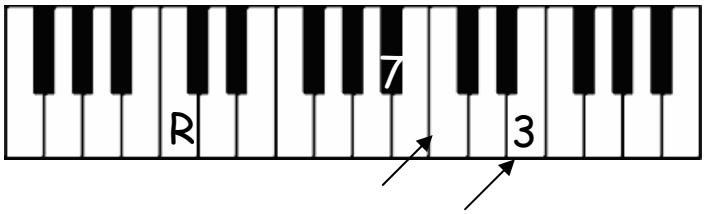
Major 7th and Major 3rd

C Minor Seventh



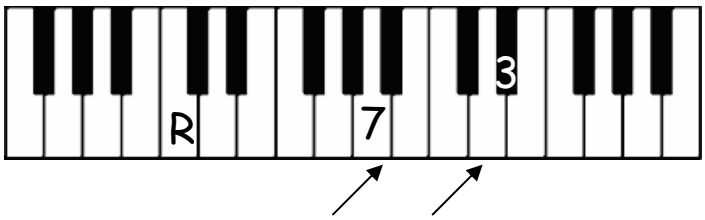
Minor 7th and Minor 3rd

C Dominant Seventh



Minor 7th *but* Major 3rd – creates Major vs. Minor clash!

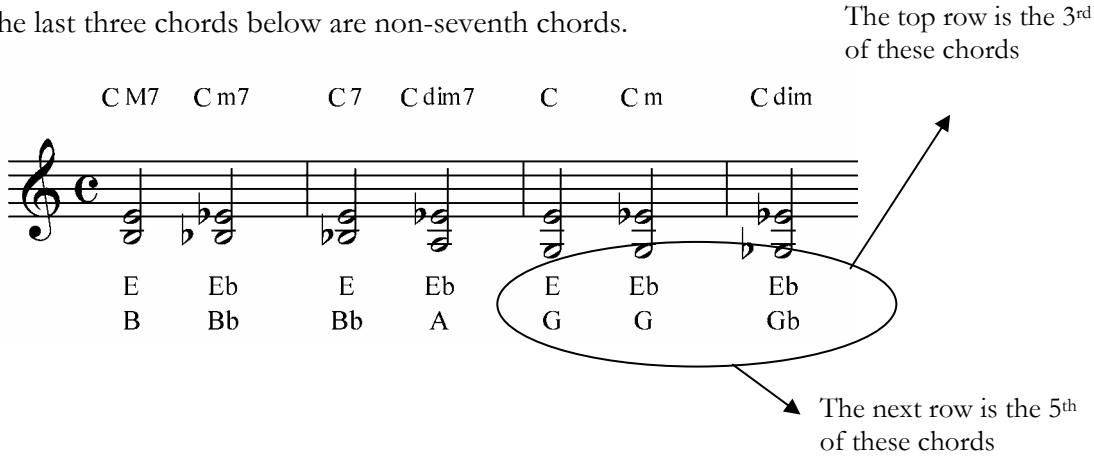
C Diminished Seventh



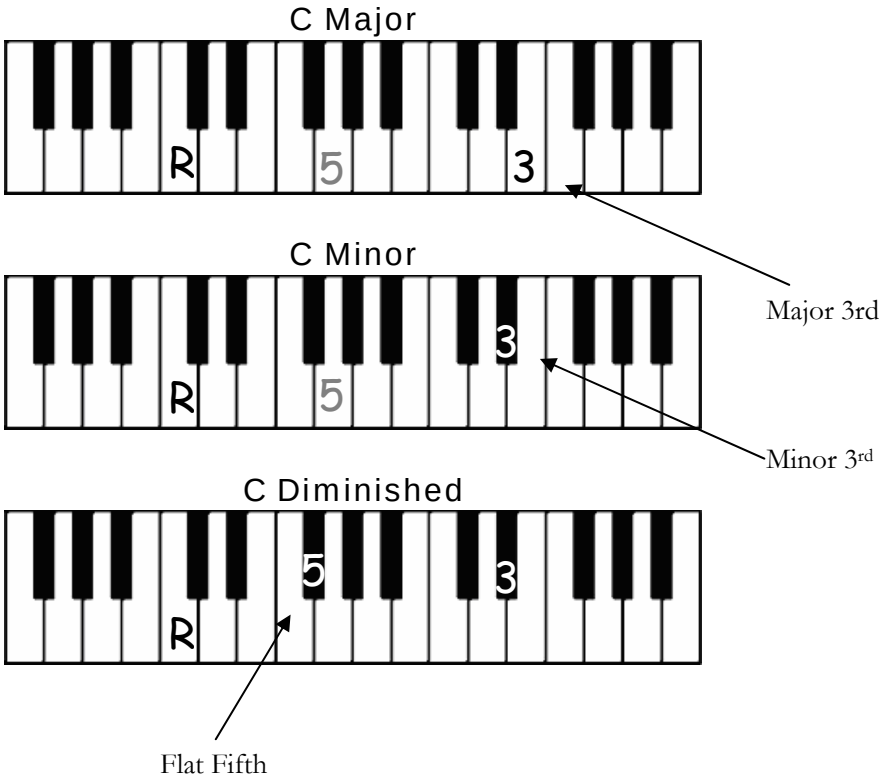
Diminished 7th and Minor 3rd (same clash as in Dominant, but with both 3rd and 7th down a half-step)

Non-Seventh Chords

The last three chords below are non-seventh chords.

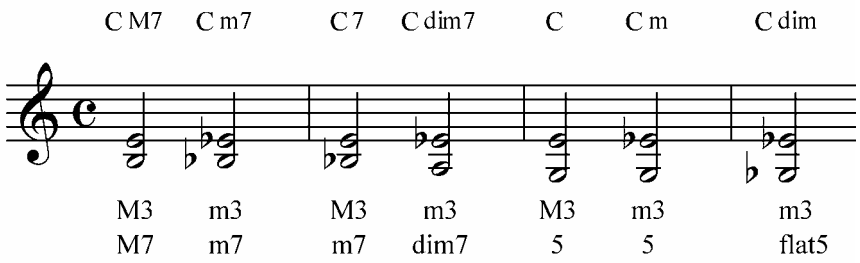


The non-seventh chords that you'll learn in this book are commonly called **triads**, because they traditionally use three notes, the Root, the 3rd and the fifth. But you don't need the fifth, you could simply play the Root and 3rd.



Introduction part 3: Chord Quality determined by 3rd and 7th of chord

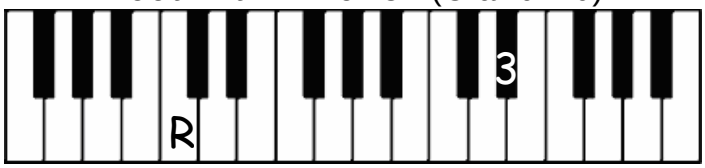
Look at the chart below. You'll see the same seven qualities of C chords we saw previously in chart 1, except that now the interval from the Root of the chord is written underneath the staff instead of the note name.



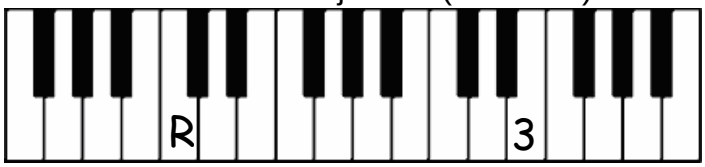
If a chord has a minor 3rd, it will have a mellower, sadder sound.	If a chord has a major 3rd, it will have a brighter more energetic sound.
Minor chord (m) **Diminished chord (dim)** **Minor 7th chord (m7)** **Diminished 7th chord (dim7)**	**Major chord (no symbol)** **Major 7th chord (M7)** **Dominant chord (7)**

These four chord qualities will contain at least the Root and the Minor 3rd.

Root with Minor 3rd (C and Eb)



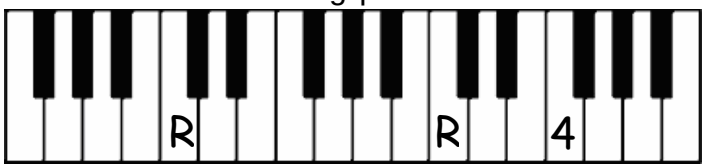
Root with Major 3rd (C and E)



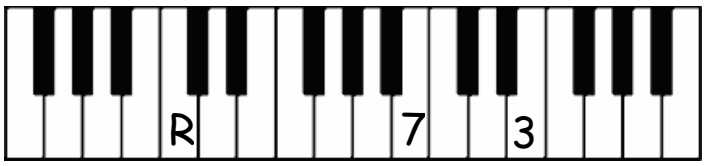
These three chord qualities will contain at least the Root and the Major 3rd

Using Nate's Three Finger Piano Method, you'll find the starting position for a chord, and then you'll learn how to move the fingers in order to reach the final chord. This is going to save a lot of time during the learning process.

Starting position



Actual Chord

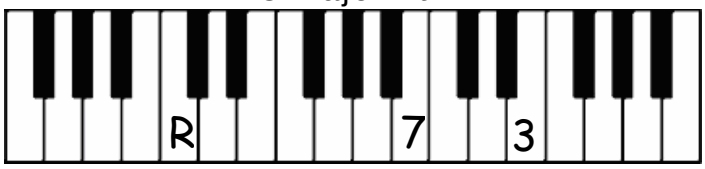


Do you see which notes moved between the Starting position above and the actual chord? *That's right, the top two notes both moved to the left.*

Learning the chords using this starting position will help you to see how different qualities of chords with the same root are related.

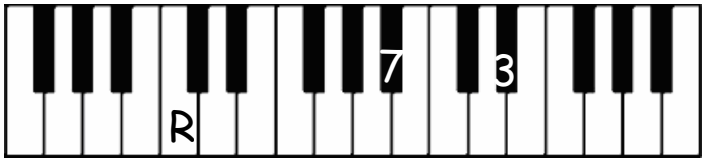
For example, how

C Major 7th



relates to

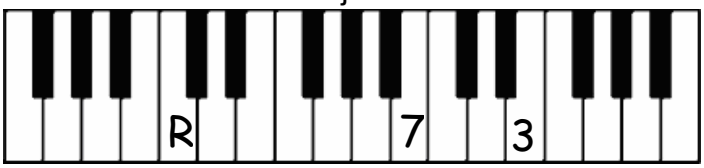
C Minor 7th



Do you notice how in the C Minor 7th chord the 7th and the 3rd are down one key from where they are in the C Major 7th chord?

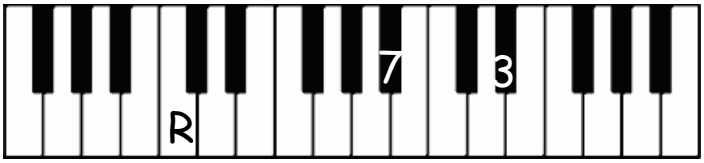
Here the 7th and 3rd are Major:

C Major 7th



And here the 7th and 3rd are Minor:

C Minor 7th



Since the quality of a chord is determined by the 3rd and 7th of the chord, all we need to make a great sounding chord is the root, the seventh and the third. There are many more notes you can add, but at first you'll want to keep it simple

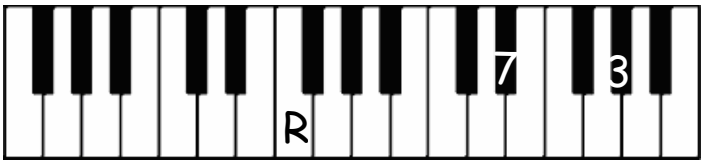
If the chord is a non-7th chord, all you'll is the Root and the 3rd

This relationship will be true for all Major 7th and Minor 7th chords. Once you know this logic, you'll know how to find chords you haven't memorized!

For example, if you need to find F Minor 7th from F Major 7th, you'll just lower the top two notes down a half-step each.

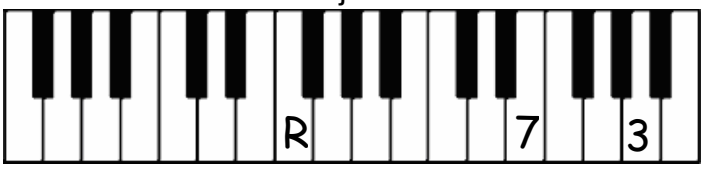
The top two keys of

F Minor 7th



are each down one key from the top two keys of

F Major 7th



.

Ok, well, how do we find the 7th and 3rd? From the reference point, from this **starting position**.

The starting position will put us close to the 3rd and 7th, but leave open whether they are major and minor.

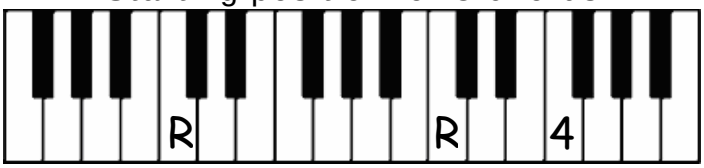
For example, the starting position for all C Chords will look like this:

C, C and F

or

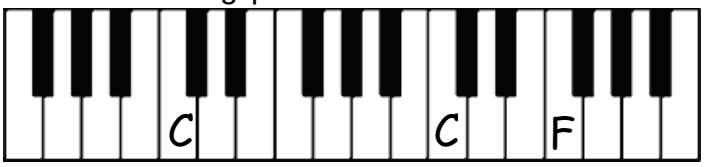
the Root, Root and 4th from the note C.

Starting position for C chords



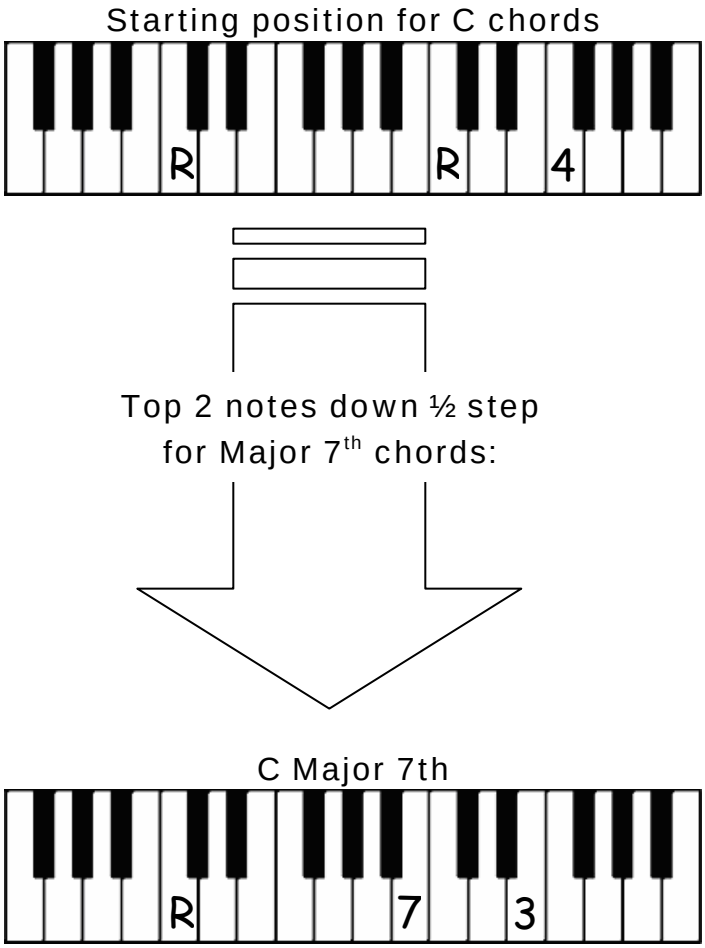
Here's the starting position written with the note names

Starting position for C chords



Well learn rules on how to arrive at the different qualities of chords from the starting position.

For example. To find C Major 7th, you would know to move the top two notes down a half-step from the starting position.



If you want to get into the nitty-gritty theory of it,

- The Major 3rd is down a half-step from the 4th

and the

- The Major 7th is down a half-step from the Root.

But instead of thinking of these pitches individually, the system will allow you to find them as a unit! Once you know how to find the starting position, and you

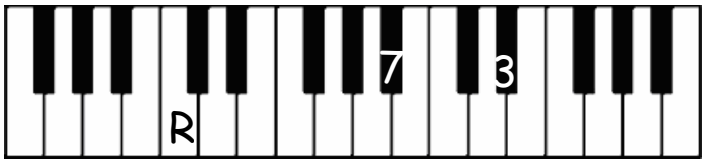
start to learn the rules on how to find certain qualities, you'll find you can read chord symbols very quickly. In fact, I taught one student who had played piano for years but didn't know how to read chord symbols. She learned the system and played very well with it after only 20 minutes! Now many of you it will take weeks to master because you don't have the foundation in theory that she had. But if you'll take the time to understand the logic, the system will fall into place for you very quickly!

The Essentials of Nate's Three Finger Piano Method

Here's a quick sketch of the system. If this doesn't make sense yet, don't worry, I'll work through this in more detail in the upcoming chapters.

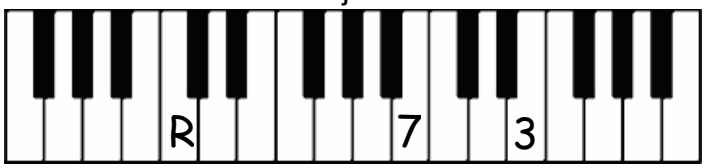
1. m7 chords. If the chord is a Minor seventh chord, move the top two notes down two keys (two half-steps) each from the starting position.

C Minor 7th



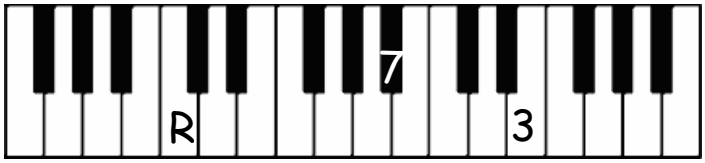
2. M7 chords. If the chord is a Major seventh chord, move the top two notes down one key (one half-steps) each from the starting position.

C Major 7th



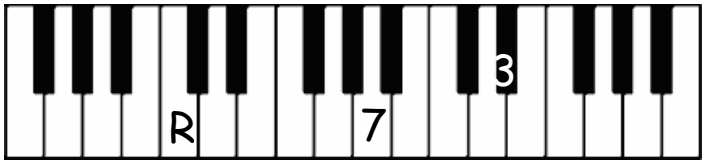
3. 7 chords. If the chord is a dominant seventh chord, move the top note down one key and the middle note down two.

C Dominant 7th



4. dim7 chords. If the chord is a diminished seventh, move the top note down two keys and the middle note down three.

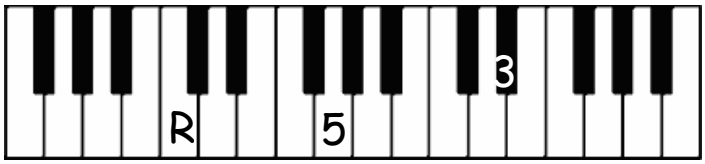
C Diminished 7th



The Essentials of Nate's Three Finger Piano Method for Non-Seventh Chords

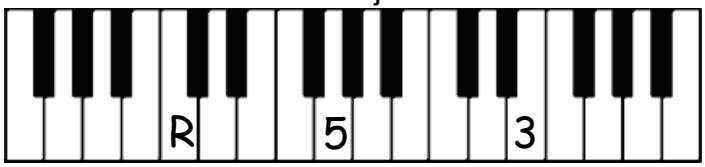
1. m chords. If the chord is a Minor chord, move the top note down two keys (two half-steps) from the starting position; then move the middle note down a 4th (I'll teach you fourths soon!)

C Minor



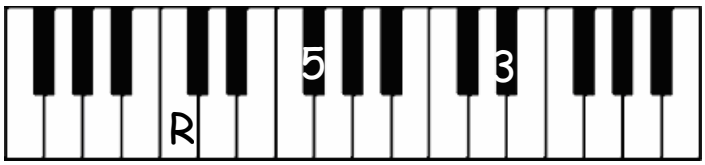
2. M chords. If the chord is a Major chord, move the top note down one key (one half-step) from the starting position; then move the middle note down a 4th.

C Major



3. dim chords. If the chord is a Diminished chord, move the top note down two keys (two half-steps) from the starting position; the move the middle note down a 4th, and then move the middle note down a half-step (so that it's the flat fifth!)

C Diminished



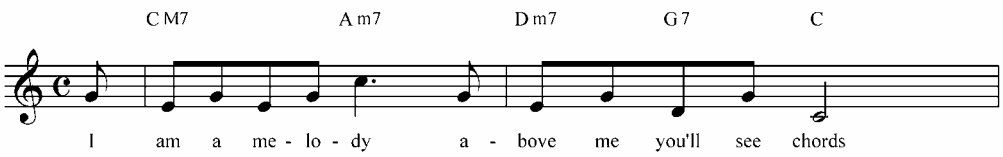
A Note on Fingering:

Depending on the melody note, you may use different fingering. Generally for now, play the root in the left and all the other notes in the right. This is how you would play if you're doing chord stabs in the right hand and a walking bass in the left.

A more advanced discussion of mixing the melody and the chords

The following discussion maybe too difficult for those who are very new to reading music, so if you find this too much to grasp, skip it for now and go on to chapter 1.

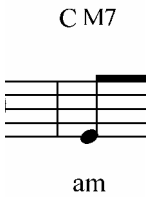
The first thing we're going to learn is how to find chords from the symbols written in popular fake books. Look at the example below. You'll see a written melody with chord symbols written above certain notes. You will hit the chords on those notes.



As you become more sophisticated in your playing, you may hit them *around* those notes. There are many ways to do this, and we will get into those in later chapters.

To understand the sort of thinking involved in playing the above example, I want to walk you through it. You obviously, don't know how to find the elements of the chords yet, so just pretend you do, for a minute so that you can understand where I'm taking you in the book, before you set out on the journey!

On the word "am" from "I am a melody", you'll see you have the note E in the melody and a CM7 chord written above. Using Nate's three finger piano method, you'll learn to find a CM7 chord quickly.

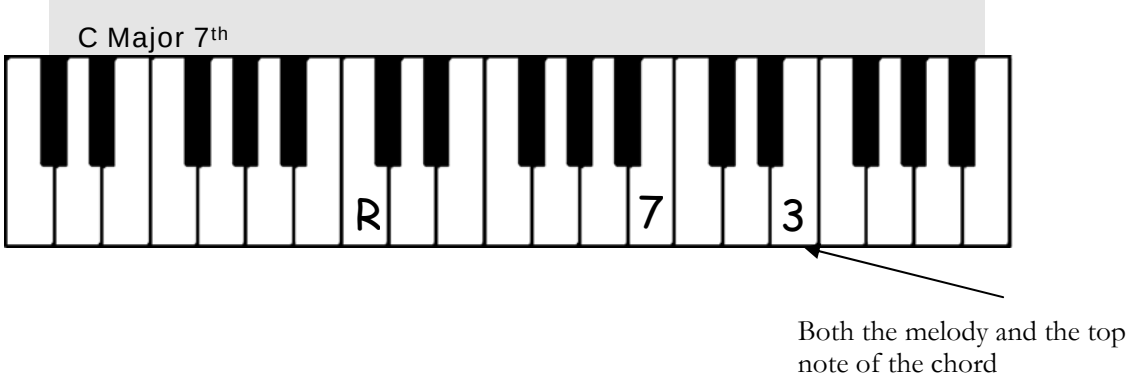


So assuming you already know this, you'll see that you'll need to play:

- C in the left hand (the Root)
- B and E in the right hand
- E in the melody (which always goes on top)

Now since E is both the top note of your chord, and the melody note (which should generally go on top), you see you have some overlap. This means, you'll only be playing 3 notes, instead of the four notes you would play if the melody note were different from the notes in the chord.

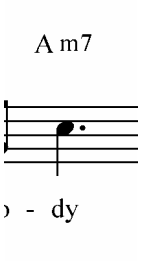
So it would look like this on the keyboard:



- The R stands for Root, which will be played in the left hand.
- The 7 stands for the 7th of the chord, and it will be middle note (for now)
- The 3 stands for the 3rd of the chord, and it will be the top note (for now)

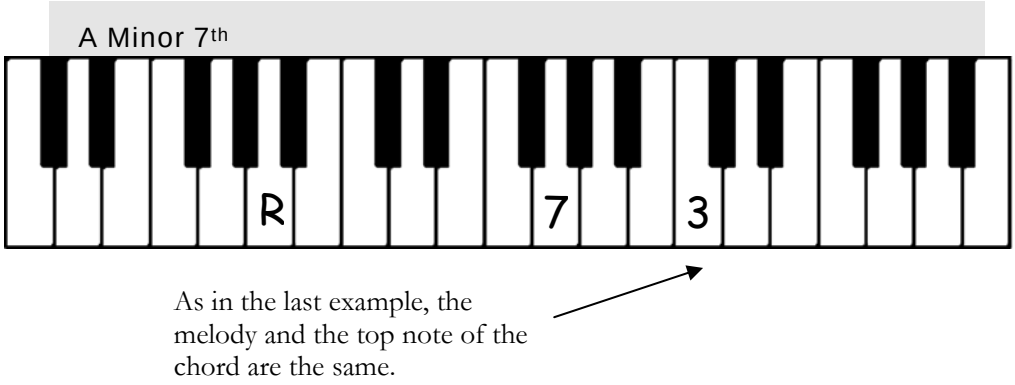
OK, so now let's look at the next part of this selection. On the "dy" of "melody", you'll see we have Am7 with C (an octave above middle C) in the melody.

So again assuming you already know the method, you'll see that you need:

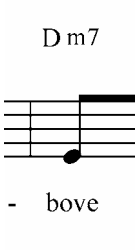


- A in the left hand (the Root)
- G and C in the right hand
- C in the melody (which always goes on top)

Now, again you'll see the the top note of your chord and the melody note are redundant, so again, you'll only play three notes.



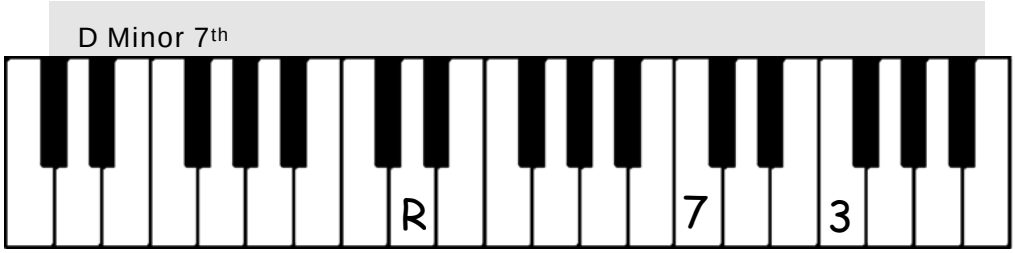
OK, let's look at the next part. Using Nate's Three Finger Piano Method, you'll see that you need:



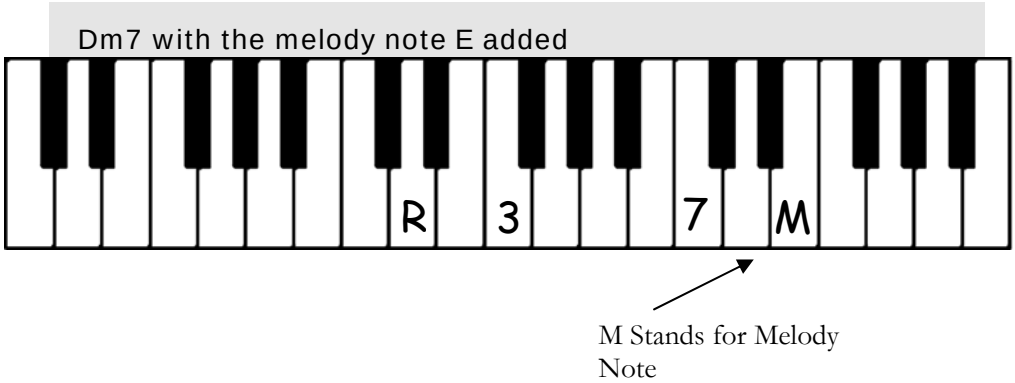
- D in the left hand (the Root)
- C and F in the right hand
- E in the melody (which always goes on top)

Now we have a problem. It's much easier when the melody and the top of the chord are the same note. So we need to put E on top, so take the F (the top note of the chord) down the octave and you'll have a decent solution:

This is how Dm7 usually looks:



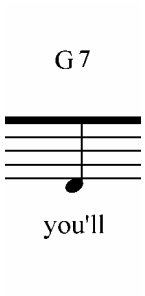
Now if you add the melody note on top, and take the top note of the chord down an octave, so as not to conflict with the melody note, you'll get this:



Now later on in this book, we'll learn that the note E is the 9th of the D chord, so you could call the above chord Dm9 instead of "Dm7 with the melody note E added".

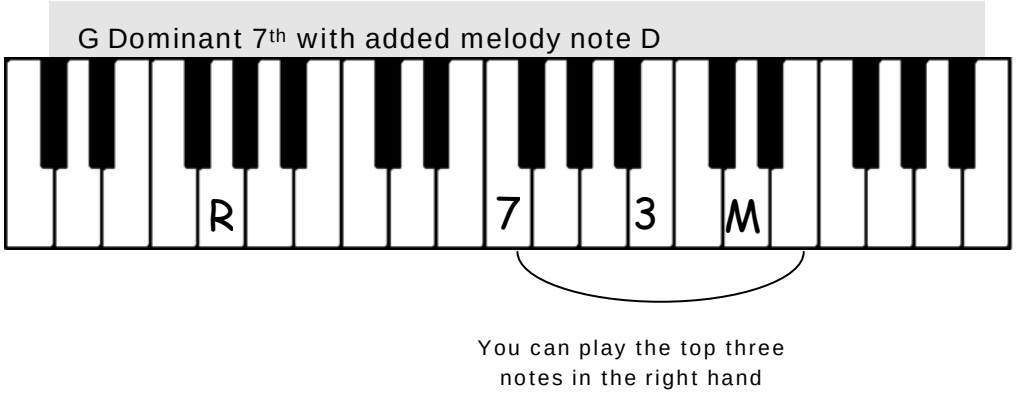
Many times in fake books such as the "Ultimate Jazz Fakebook C Edition", you'll see a 9th chord written, but it is the melody note as well, so you don't need to figure out the 9th. The 9th of the chord is always optional anyway, so while you're learning to read chords, you can just leave it out at first (Unless, of course, it's also the melody note!).

OK, now to the next part of the selection. Using Nate's Three Finger Piano Method, you'll find that you need to play:

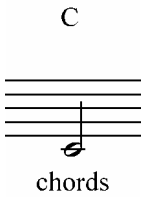


- G in the left hand (the Root)
- F and B in the right hand
- D in the melody (which always goes on top)

Now if you play your G7 chord so that all three notes fall below middle C, you can just add the D melody note on top, like this:



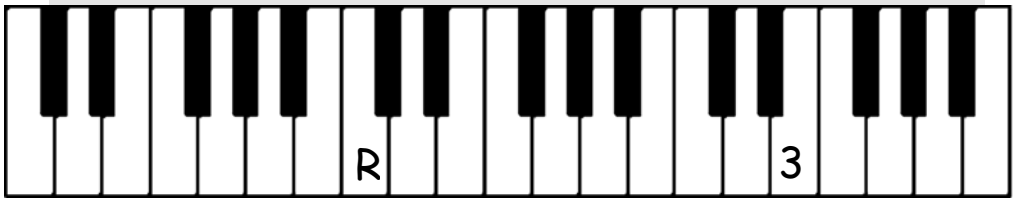
OK, now to our final part of this selection. You see you have a C chord, with C in the melody. Using Nate's Three Finger Piano Method, you see that all you need to make a C chord is the Root and the 3rd.



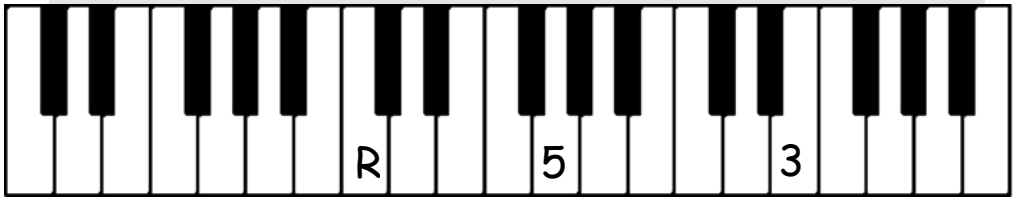
- C in the left hand (the Root)
- E in the right hand
- C in the melody (which always goes on top)

Now, you can always add the fifth to a chord to make it richer, and in this case, since you only have two distinct notes in your chord, I think it's a good idea, so add the fifth as well.

C



C with added 5th



C with added 5th and C in the melody

I took the 3rd down the octave,
so that the melody is on top