

Quick Guide To Chord Charts

The term harmonic rhythm refers to the sequence of chords (harmonies) that governs a song or other musical work, and to the timing (rhythm) of the changes from each chord to the next. It is relatively easy to devise a rhythm guitar accompaniment once the harmonic rhythm of the music to be accompanied is known. In the standard form of notation for songs, called a lead sheet, the melody is given in staff notation. The harmonic rhythm is usually indicated by the placement of chord symbols, above the notation for the melody, at the points in time at which changes of chord must be made. Lead sheet notation would seem to suggest that harmonic rhythm is dependent on melody, but it is in fact dependent not on melody, but rather on the music's meter.

Harmonic rhythm can therefore be notated with the use of a chord chart that does not include the notation for the melody. Because the melody is omitted, chord chart notation is completely different from lead sheet notation. The omission of the melody allows for a greatly simplified notation of the harmonic rhythm, and is a sensible departure from the standard notational model for two important reasons. First, the easiest (and often also the best) way to learn a melody is to listen to it, and that learning process does not require any form of notation. Second, the specific notes of a song's melody are seldom of great importance in the matter of fashioning a rhythm guitar accompaniment to that song. In fashioning rhythm guitar accompaniments, the only consideration of overriding importance is conformance to the music's harmonic rhythm.

Chord charts are based on groupings of evenly spaced slash marks. The correct timing of chord changes is given by the exact placement of chord symbols in relation to these slash marks. Notice that this visual representation of rhythm is similar to the notation of rhythmic timing in

visualinear tablature. However, unlike the beats along a line of visualinear tablature, the slash marks in a chord chart seldom represent individual beats of the music's meter. Since changes of chord are normally made far less frequently than on every beat, the notation can usually be simplified by having the slash marks represent either full measures or half measures. The coordination of the chord chart with the music's meter, and with the beating of a metronome, is explained in the chord chart heading, an example of which is shown below.

MM = 120
in 4
/ = two beats (one half measure)

The top line of the heading gives the numerical metronome setting that establishes the tempo of the music. The middle line of the heading is the music's meter (in 3, in 4, etc.). The bottom line of the heading is more complicated, since it refers not only to beats of the metronome, but also to the music's meter, which consists of beats. To avoid confusion of the two different types of beats, the reference to the music's meter is made in terms of the portion of a measure represented by each slash mark. For example, the bottom line of the chord chart heading given above indicates that each slash mark in the chord chart represents two beats of the metronome, which is equivalent to one half measure of meter. In other words, the metronome beats out every beat of meter, and each slash mark represents two beats (one half measure).

In some cases, the beats of the metronome represent two or three beats of meter. For instance, fast-paced music in 4 is often counted out in 2 (this is called cut-time), which would result in the following bottom line of a chord chart heading : **/ = two beats (one full measure)** Music in 6 is often counted out in 2, which would result in the same bottom line of a chord

chart heading. Music in 9 is normally counted out in 3, which would result in the following bottom line of a chord chart heading :

/ = three beats (one full measure) Music in 12 is normally counted out in 4,

which would result in the following bottom line of a chord chart heading :

/ = four beats (one full measure)

In constructing a chord chart, once the metric and rhythmic framework for the harmonic rhythm has been established with the use of slash marks, all that remains is the placement of chord symbols at the required locations. Major chords, and chords based on the Major chord type, are expressed in chord symbol by upper case (capital) letters. Minor chords, and chords based on the minor chord type, are expressed in chord symbol by lower case (small) letters. The completed chord chart gives a concise and complete account of the harmonic rhythm of the music, and is in effect an abbreviated version of a visualinear tablature score for a rhythm guitar arrangement. The sole exception to this interconnection is the fact that barre chords are identified by their actual pitch in a chord chart. For example, if the A7II barre chord is called for in a rhythm guitar arrangement, the chord symbol B7 is used to represent that chord in the chord chart.

Chord charts can serve a number of useful purposes. They can provide a quick review of rhythm guitar music you have already learned. They are more useful than a visualinear tablature score in the matter of improvising variations of a known arrangement, or improvising an arrangement altogether, since they give a simpler and more condensed account of the required chord changes. They can be used as the basis for devising complementary rhythm guitar arrangements, either by transposing all the chords to another key of play and using a capo, or by translating all the chords to an alternate tuning. But perhaps most importantly, chord charts can facilitate people playing music together by

ensuring that everyone is literally on the same page in very short order. By removing the tedious and often time-consuming obstacle presented by the need for everyone to learn and memorize the required chord changes, chord charts can allow people to come together musically more productively and more enjoyably.