

# Rootless Voicings for Jazz

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# Source

- I learned most of this (except for minor ii-V) from Chris Fitzgerald at the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Workshops. I am grateful to Chris for having worked out a simplified approach.
- They are similar to voicings written out in more detail in the book by Phil de Greg.
- Any mistakes are my own.

# What is a “Voicing”?

- Voicing means the way in which the notes of a chord are arranged “vertically” in playing.
- Typically one does not use only the “root position” voicings (1-3-5-7-...), for various reasons:
  - Using only root position means a lot of “parallel” fifths, which sound droning; also, root position, if used exclusively sounds kind of boring.
  - The hand has to move a lot, because the roots of chords often move by 5ths rather than linearly.
  - Using only root position chords does not “voice lead” well. Voice leading means the lines that are formed by harmony notes; with good voice leading, they progress smoothly.

# What are the types of voicings?

- **Rooted voicings:** these contain the root, usually as the lowest note.
  - In order to position these low enough and still sound good, one typically drops out notes, such as the 5th and maybe even the 3rd, leaving just the root and 7th.
- **Rootless voicings:** the main topic here; the root is not included:
  - Tertian voicings: using thirds as the predominant interval; these are discussed in this document.
  - Quartal voicings: using fourth as the predominant interval; these have a more “modern” sound. They are not discussed here however.

# Review of Chord Families

- The chords **within** in each line are *somewhat* interchangeable with each other:
  - Major 7, M9, M69, possibly M13#11
  - 7 (dominant), 9, 13, 13#11
  - m7, m9, m11, m13
  - minor with Major 7, minor 69
  - dominant with alterations, tri-tone substitutions
  - diminished, dominant b9 minor 3rd lower
  - m7b5, half-diminished (no equivalent)
  - dominant sus4(= m7 with root 4), e.g. Dm7/G for G7sus4

# Rootless Voicings

- Chord voicings that don't include the root.
- Actually physically **easier** than rooted voicings.
- Preferred when playing with a bass player, useable even without one.
- Can be played alone as well, although require some acclimation to the sound.
- To hear the effect if you don't have a bass player, play the bass note with the right hand crossed over, or play the voicing in the right hand and the bass note in the left.

# Range (“rules of thumb”)

- Keep the left pinky (lowest note) no lower than **D below** middle C.
- Keep the left thumb (highest note) no higher than **A above** middle C.
- This gives a 1.5 octave range in which to play the rootless voicings.
- Below this the voicings may sound “muddy”, and above “tinny”.

# Two-Voicing System

- Each chord will be presented in two voicings: Type A and Type B, depending on which scale degree is lower in the chord. These names are arbitrarily chosen to differentiate the two types.
- The choice of which type to use will be governed by range considerations for the progression containing the chords and by voice leading.
- Eventually this all becomes **automatic** and you don't have to think about types, etc.

# Note

- If a voicing is too harsh, or sounds muddy, on your piano, even if in recommended range, or is too hard to play, try *leaving out* some notes in this order:
  - 5 (or 6 for dominant)
  - 9
- Try to keep the 3 and 7 (or 6 if a 69 chord) in the voicing as much as possible. These give the chord most of its character.

# Replication

- We give the voicings in just one key.
- Ultimately you will want to learn them in **all 12 keys** for maximum proficiency.
- But you can **start** just by learning the ones needed for the tunes that you want to play.

# Learning

- The **finger movement patterns** are the same regardless of key.
- You need to learn these patterns more **on the keyboard** than on paper.
- It is not advisable to try to construct the voicings while performing; they need to be **learned** in advance.
- You will need most of your mental capacity for your **soloining** right hand.

# Notation

- I am writing the voicings in the treble clef, even though they are played in the left hand when soloing. They may need to be played down an octave to be in the proper range.
- When comping another player, the voicings may be split between the hands and/or opened up more. The current document does not cover two-handed voicings, nor does it cover quartal voicings (voicings based on fourths rather than thirds).

# Notes

- In studying voicings you will want to make up mnemonic patterns to help you remember how to construct the voicings.
- Example: Use the intervals between selected notes.
- Example: To get from A to B, move the bottom two notes up an octave.

# Rootless Voicings for Major

FMaj9

FMaj9

9

M7

5

3

5

3

9

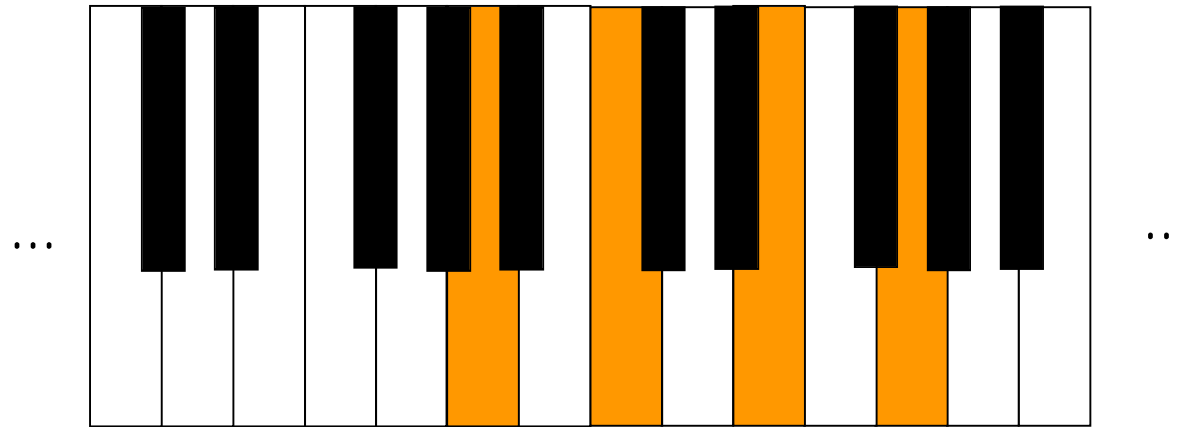
M7

Type A:  
3-5-7-9

Type B:  
7-9-3-5

# FM7 voicing, Type A

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#

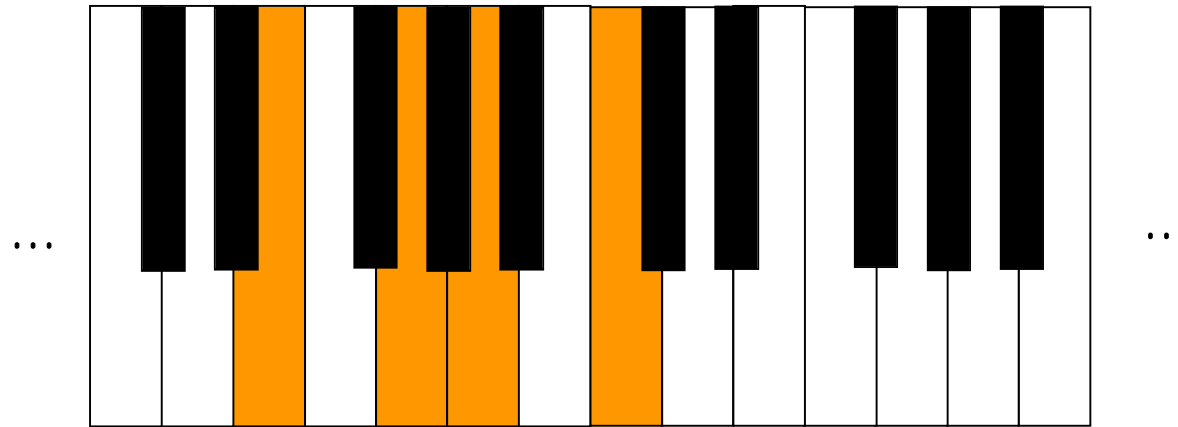


C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

3 5 M7 9

# FM7 voicing, Type B

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#



C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

7 9 3 5

# Rootless Voicings for Minor

The diagram illustrates two types of rootless voicings for the Fm9 chord on a five-line treble clef staff. A treble clef and a flat sign are positioned on the left side of the staff.

**Type A:** The notes are arranged vertically from top to bottom as follows:

- 9 (top line)
- b7 (second line)
- 5 (third line)
- b3 (bottom line)

**Type B:** The notes are arranged vertically from top to bottom as follows:

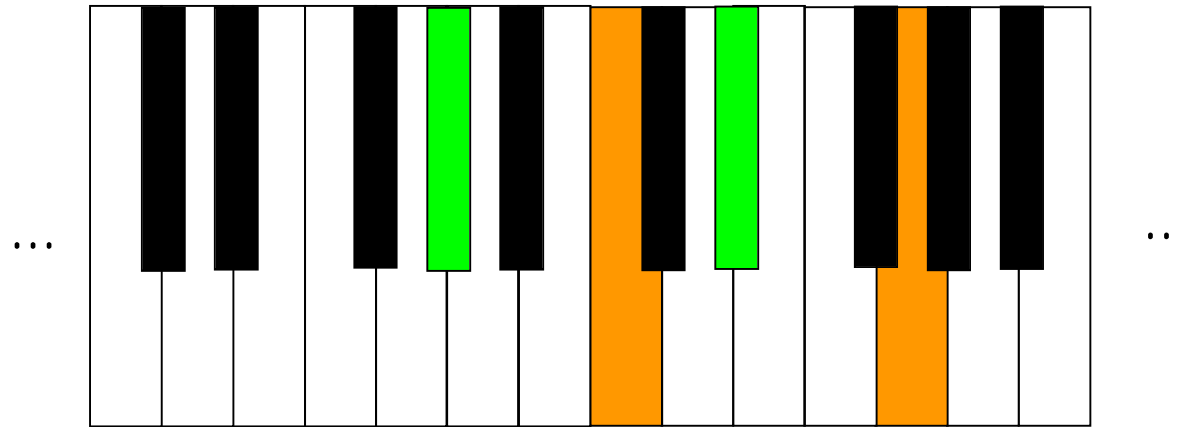
- 5 (third line)
- b3 (second line)
- 9 (first space)
- b7 (bottom line)

Type A:  
b3-5-b7-9

Type B:  
b7-9-b3-5

# Fm7 voicing, Type A

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#

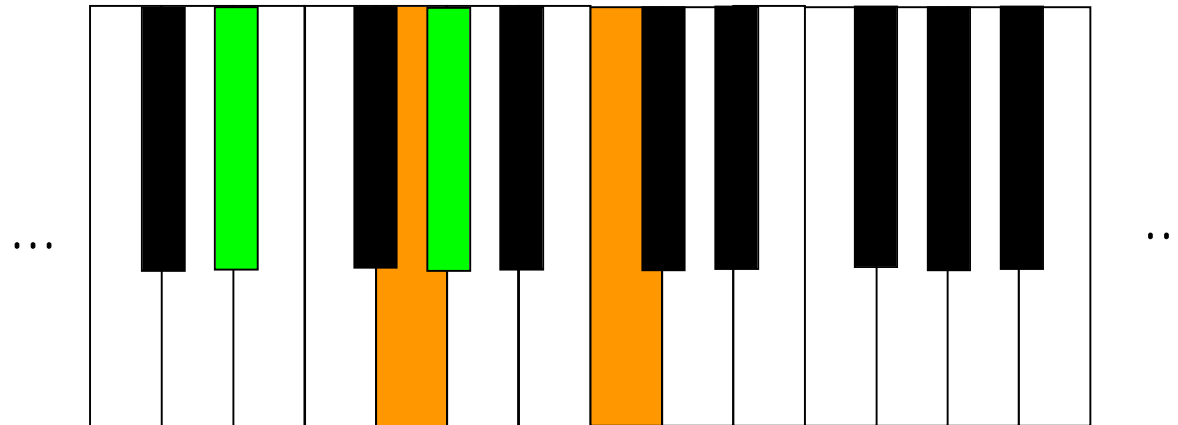


C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

b3 5 m7 9

# Fm7 voicing, Type B

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#



C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

b7

9 b3

5

# Rootless Voicings for Dominant

We substitute the 6 (i.e. 13) for the 5 for a *jazzier* sound.

F9 (or F13)

F9 (or F13)

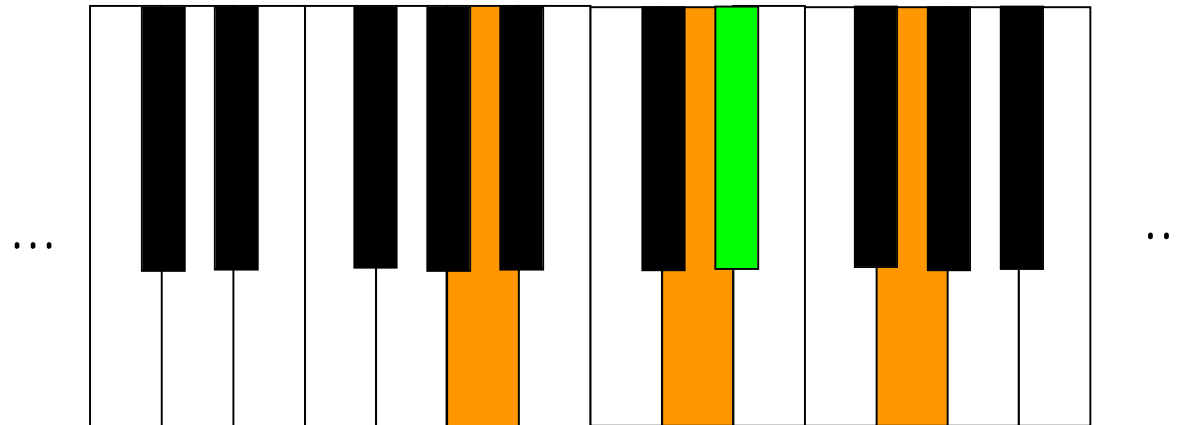
The diagram shows two types of rootless voicings for F9 (or F13) on a treble clef staff. A flat sign (b) is positioned to the left of the staff. Type A voicing consists of notes on the 3rd, 6th, 7th (flat), and 9th lines. Type B voicing consists of notes on the 7th (flat), 9th, 3rd, and 6th lines. The notes are represented by circles.

Type A:  
3-6-b7-9

Type B:  
b7-9-3-6

# F7 voicing, Type A

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#

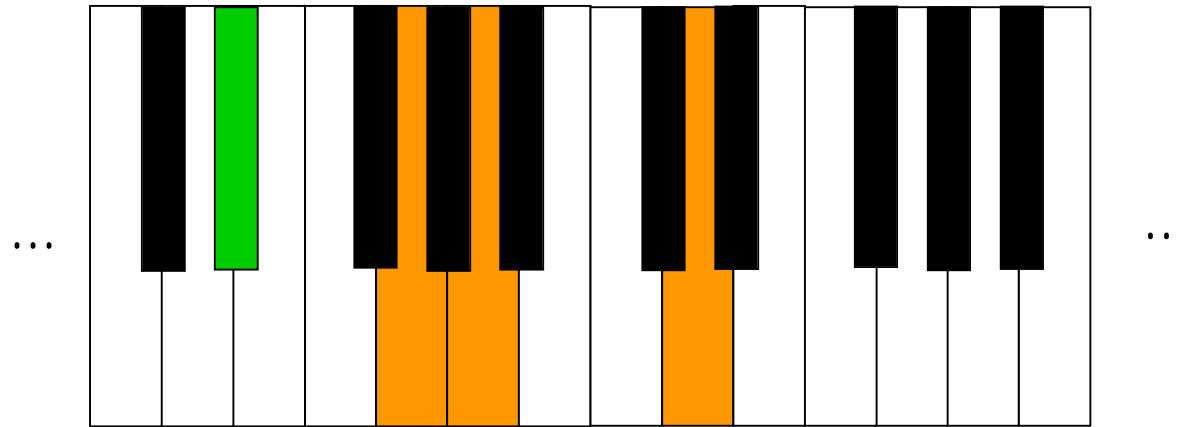


C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

3 13(6) b7 9

# F7 voicing, Type B

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#



C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

b7

9 3

13(6)

# Things to Notice

- When played in the left hand, the combination pinky & first finger is always either 3-7 or 7-3; the thumb will be 9, 5, or 6.
- Type A voicings have the more “open” sound for major and minor. Type B voicings have the more “open” sound for dominant.

(advanced topic)

## Bonus: Voicings for Altered Dominant

Every dominant *voicing* is also the *voicing* for an *altered* dominant having a different root, one a tritone away.

The diagram illustrates two types of altered dominant voicings on a treble clef staff. The notes are represented by circles, and accidentals are shown as 'b' for flat and '#' for sharp.

**Type B:** F9 = B7 alt. Notes: b7, #9, 3, #5.

**Type A:** F9 = B7 alt. Notes: 3, #5, b7, #9.

Type B:

b7 - #9 - 3 - #5

Type A:

3 - #5 - b7 - #9

# Another Bonus

- The voicings for a dominant are also those for a minor 69 chord (discussed later).
- So every one of the dominant voicings occurs 3 different ways, with 3 different roots.

(advanced topic)

## Uses of Altered Dominants

- The altered dominant is used as the V in a minor ii-V-i progression.
- Consequently, it is often seen used as a secondary dominant setting, such as in the I - VI<sup>7alt</sup> - ii - V progression (VI<sup>7alt</sup> = V of ii)

# Major ii-V Progression A-B

b7 resolves to 3. **Only one finger moves**, the one on the 7th. The type changes from A to B.

Fm9

Bb13

9

b7

5

b3

6

3

9

b7

Type A:  
b3-5-b7-9

Type B:  
b7-9-3-6



# Major V-I Progression, A-B

b7 resolves to 3. Three fingers move. The type changes.

The diagram illustrates a Major V-I progression in B-flat major on a treble clef staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The progression consists of two chords: F9 (or F13) and BbMaj9.

**F9 (or F13) Chord (Type A):** Shaped as 3-6-b7-9. The notes are Bb (3rd line), D (4th line), F (5th line), and Ab (6th line).

**BbMaj9 Chord (Type B):** Shaped as 7-9-3-6. The notes are Bb (4th line), D (5th line), F (6th line), and Ab (7th line).

Fingerings and resolutions are indicated by red arrows:

- The 9th of F9 (Ab) resolves to the 5th of BbMaj9 (Ab).
- The b7th of F9 (Bb) resolves to the 3rd of BbMaj9 (D).
- The 6th of F9 (D) resolves to the 9th of BbMaj9 (D).
- The 3rd of F9 (Bb) remains on the 3rd line as the 7th of BbMaj9.

Labels for the chords and their types are shown below the staff:

- Type A: 3-6-b7-9
- Type B: 7-9-3-6

# Major V-I Progression, B-A

b7 resolves to 3. Three fingers move. The type changes.

F9 (or F13)

BbMaj9

Type B:  
b7-9-3-6

Type A:  
3-5-7-9

# Major ii-V-I Progressions

- These simply combine ii-V and V-I with a common middle chord. So they will be type A-B-A or B-A-B.
- For many keys, only one of the two stays within range, so you only have to learn one voicing sequence for the progression.
- The table on the next page tells you which voicings work for which keys. If more than one works, the first one listed is preferred.

# Major ii-V-I Progression A-B-A

composite

The diagram illustrates a Major ii-V-I progression in F major (A-B-A) on a treble clef staff. The progression consists of three chords: Fm9, Bb13, and EbM9. Red arrows indicate voice leading between the chords. The interval structures for each chord type are listed below the staff.

**Fm9** (Type A): b3-5-b7-9

**Bb13** (Type B): b7-9-3-6

**EbM9** (Type A): 3-5-7-9

Interval structures for Fm9: 9, b7, 5, b3

Interval structures for EbM9: 9, M7, 5, 3

# Major ii-V-I Progression B-A-B

composite

Fm9

Bb13

EbM9

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The notes are represented by circles. The first chord, Fm9, is a Type B voicing with notes b7, 9, b3, and 6. The second chord, Bb13, is a Type A voicing with notes b3, 5, b7, and 9. The third chord, EbM9, is a Type B voicing with notes 7, 9, 3, and 6. Red arrows indicate voice leading: the b7 of Fm9 moves to the 3 of Bb13; the 9 of Fm9 moves to the b7 of Bb13; the b3 of Fm9 moves to the 9 of Bb13; the 6 of Fm9 moves to the 6 of Bb13. From Bb13, the 9 moves to the 9 of EbM9; the b7 moves to the b7 of EbM9; the 6 moves to the 6 of EbM9; and the 3 of Bb13 moves to the 3 of EbM9.

Type B:  
b7-9-b3-6

Type A:  
b3-5-b7-9

Type B:  
7-9-3-6

# Major ii-V-I Progressions

Key	Progression			Workable voicings
C	Dm	G7	C	A-B-A or B-A-B
D $\flat$	Ebm	A $\flat$ 7	D $\flat$	A-B-A
D	Em	A7	D	A-B-A
E $\flat$	Fm	B $\flat$ 7	E $\flat$	A-B-A or B-A-B
E	F $\sharp$ m	B7	E	B-A-B or A-B-A
F	Gm	C7	F	B-A-B or A-B-A
G $\flat$	A $\flat$ m	D $\flat$ 7	G $\flat$	B-A-B
G	Am	D7	G	B-A-B
A $\flat$	B $\flat$ m	E $\flat$ 7	A $\flat$	B-A-B
A	Bm	E7	A	B-A-B
B $\flat$	Cm	F7	B $\flat$	B-A-B or A-B-A
B	C $\sharp$ m	F $\sharp$ 7	B	B-A-B or A-B-A

# Other Progressions

- If the root steps a 4th or 5th, as in the preceding two progressions, the type of the chord changes.
- Otherwise the type can stay the same.
- For steps of a third, it is the player's discretion whether to change.

# Reference

- Chris Fitzgerald, *Basic Piano Voicings*, Unpublished handout from Jamey Aebersold Jazz Workshop, July 2000.
- Phil DeGreg, *Jazz Keyboard Harmony*, Jamey Aebersold Jazz, Inc.
- Randy Halberstadt, *Metaphors for the Musician*, Sher Music, Inc.
- Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book*, Sher Music, Inc.