The Use and Abuse of Fourths

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Some people are still using fourths of chords in their solos in ways that sound awkward. This is a review of the principles. (Of course, rules are made to be broken, but you want to do so consciously rather than accidentally.)

Rules:

Major chords (Major, Major 7, Major 6, …):

The fourth is an avoid-note. A fourth should not be held for more than half a beat, and ideally is not pronounced on the beat, except according to the next rule.

A fourth can be used as a passing note or as a dissonance to be shortly resolved to a major third.

Minor chords (Minor, Minor 7, Minor 7 flat 5, Minor 6, …):

The fourth is usable. It is an extension (11th) of a minor 7 chord, for example.

No special resolution is required.

Dominant chords (Dominant 7, 9, 13, …):

The fourth is generally an avoid note. However, when there is no third of the same chord below it, it can be used to achieve the “sus” (suspended) sound.

Dominant 7 sus 4 (Dominant 7 sus 4, Dominant 9 sus 4, Dominant 13 sus 4):

The third of the chord is omitted and the fourth is played. The third may be reintroduced above the fourth as a color tone, however.

The fourth may be resolved to a third, which changes the chord to an ordinary dominant, or it may be resolved to a third when the chord changes to a tonic a fifth below, for example.

Theory:

A fourth above a third forms a minor ninth, which is a very dissonant interval. Unlike the flat 9 in a dominant 7 flat 9, this interval does not seem to be masked by the other tones in the chord.
The name “suspension” derives from a IIIm7-V7-I progression. The seventh of the IIIm7 is carried over into the V7, being “suspended” over that chord. This tone is also the fourth of the V7.

Ordinary II-V-I:

II-V-I with sus 4:

Note that you can get a hint of the sus 4 sound by stacking two fourths, which is thus called “quartal” harmony, instead of “tertial” harmony, which is built on thirds.

The dominant 7 sus 4 chord is thus a hybrid of a IIIm7 and V7, carrying some qualities of both. It can often be played instead of a IIIm7-V7 for the special effect.

The following notations for G7sus 4 are also very common:

\[ \text{Dm7/G} \quad \text{F/G} \]

A song beginning with a sus 4 sound (“How Are Things in Glocca Mora?”):

Other songs with sus sounds: They Can’t Take That Away From Me, Maiden Voyage, Naima, Stolen Moments (intro), Passion Dance (bridge), Red Clay (intro)