LESSON 3: CHORDS
all about chords + chord progressions

Today we're going to be talking about chords and chord progressions.

You're probably somewhat familiar with what chords are, but we're going to go over the specifics of how to build chords and label them relative to the key you're playing in.

This is probably the longest lesson of this course, but I honestly think it's the most important.

So take a deep breath, and let's dive in.

1. WHAT IS A CHORD?

A chord is a group of three (or more) notes played together.

Though the technical definition of a chord says the notes have to be "played together," a chord can be implied when you play the notes separately (think finger-picking a guitar.) This is called arpeggiation - when you outline a chord by playing the notes individually.

In this course, we're only going to deal with chords that have three notes. So we won't be covering 7th, 9th, 11th, add2, and add6 chords.

2. HOW TO BUILD A CHORD

If I told you to figure out the notes in a C chord, here's what you'd need to do:
Play a C.

(Skip D)

Play an E.

(Skip F)

Play a G.

Play the three notes together...and BAM. You've got a C chord. Every chord follows this pattern: play a note, skip one, play one, skip one, play one.

This is easiest to see on the keyboard, but if you know your scales on guitar you can easily figure out chords using this method on guitar as well.

3. CHORD QUALITY

Now once you've figured out that those are the notes in a C chord, you'll need to figure out what KIND of C chord it is, or what the chord quality is.

There are four different options:

Major
Minor
Diminished
Augmented

For now, we're only going to deal with major and minor chords. The only difference between a major and minor chord is where the middle note falls.

If the middle note is two whole steps above the bottom note, the chord is major.

If it's a whole step + half step above the bottom note, the chord is minor.

To summarize, lower middle note = minor, higher middle note = major.

Now let's get back to that C chord. Is it a minor chord or a major chord?

It's....a MAJOR chord! If we moved the middle note to E flat, it would be a minor chord. Make sense?
So any chord will ALWAYS include those three notes, but some of them may be sharp or flat. It’s up to the chord quality to determine which notes are sharp or flat.

*whew*

Okay, take a breath.

I know that was a lot of information to take in.

But the good news is, most of you can probably already tell the difference between a major and a minor chord just by listening to it, so don’t freak out if you’re not 100% clear on how to know which note to make sharp or flat.

4. ROMAN NUMERALS

If you only take one thing away from this lesson, I want it to be this section. Roman Numerals are a way of labeling chords relative to the key. And this is the most important thing to understand about chords.

A G chord will have a COMPLETELY different sound in the key of D than it will in the key of G. And that’s because it’s not the chord that matters it’s the function of that chord relative to the key.

I’ll explain what I mean by function on a second, but first let’s go over what these roman numerals are.

Let’s write out the scale a key. We’ll do G major.

G A B C D E F# G

Now if we use only the notes in the scale to build a chord on the FIRST note of the scale, it would be major.

If we build a chord on the SECOND note of the scale, it would be minor.

There’s actually a pattern that’s the same in every key.

major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished
If we were to write out that pattern using roman numerals, here's what it would look like:

I ii iii IV V vi vii°

Notice the uppercase roman numerals are major and the lowercase are minor. This (°) symbol means diminished. The diminished chord is pretty uncommon, so we aren't going to go over it in this course.

If you just memorize this pattern, choosing chords in ANY key will be SO SO SO much easier.

No more trial and error - Pick your key, and you'll have 7 chords to choose from. Of course you CAN use chords outside of the key, but I'd recommend waiting until you have a really solid understanding of these 7 chords before you try that.

I made a "chord finder" worksheet for you guys to help you figure out the 7 possible chords in your key. It basically walks you through these same steps - figure out the key, number of sharps or flats, write the scale, then use the roman numeral pattern to write out the 7 chords.

5. CHORD FUNCTION

Now I promise, the reason we use these roman numerals isn't just to make your life more confusing. The more you use these roman numerals, the more you'll start to notice that each chord has a unique sound. For some of them, it's hard to describe in words, but you'll start to recognize the distinct sound of each chord.

The I chord is the most stable sounding. It's the most common "ending" chord of a song.

The V chord is the most unstable sounding - it wants to resolve to the I chord. If you ended the song on a V chord, it would have kind of an "unfinished" sound.

The vi chord is the most common minor chord in the key. It's the most stable minor chord. If you ended a song on the vi chord, it would sound like an ending, but a kind of sad ending. It's probably call this one the "downer" chord.
II would describe the IV chord as a lift. It's unstable, but it has more of a positive sound than the vi chord.

Take a second to describe the chords for yourself. It's a pretty subjective thing, but hopefully you'll hear what I mean by the stability of the I chord, and how strongly the V chord wants to lead back to the I chord.

The more you work with these chords, the better you'll get at hearing them. You'll be able to listen to a song on the radio and hear exactly which roman numerals are being played throughout the song.

And the ultimate goal of this is being able to hear these chords in your head while you're writing a melody. I promise, it's possible!
Pick a few songs (original or cover) and play the chord progression through while saying the roman numerals out loud. ("one chord, minor six chord, four chord").

Print out the chord finder worksheet and use it to write a chord progression for your next song.

Try to identify the roman numerals of a song - just by listening!

Check yourself: grab your instrument or look up the chords and see what you got right.