

Chord Combinations for the Lizard Ear

Chord progressions for the mandolin that just plain sound good.

By Ted Eschliman



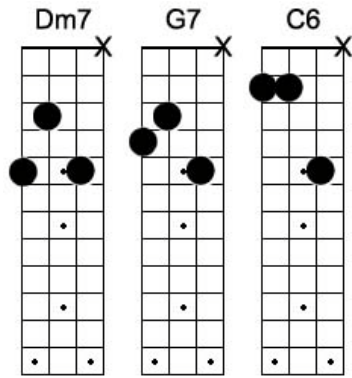
The Lizard Brain

Biologists will describe the physiology of the brain, using long, multiple-syllable words illustrating cortexes and regions of where processes occur, varying in degrees of motor and analytical complexity. You have the more complicated areas of thought and decision-making, and others more basic in life function, like keeping your heart going and breathing. There's a section that handles the most primitive of survival needs, informally called the "**Lizard Brain**." Those who study anthropology view it as the archaic section that houses nothing intricate or complex, in contrast to regions that get the deeply analytical or philosophical dimensions of thought. One says "Ice cream satisfy." The other observes the hot temperature of the air, the consistency of the ice cream on the tongue, the vanishing emptiness of the stomach, and concludes "Ice cream was the answer to my hunger, cooling me off, and that chocolate really tastes good. I wonder how many calories I just ate; maybe it wasn't such a good idea."

Our **Jazz Mandology** section of Mandolin Sessions is guilty of getting pretty cerebral. We don't just tell you what time it is, we instruct how to build a watch, and that can be intimidating for many. We want to depart for a while and just snag some great chord combinations and put them through your ear and on into the **Lizard Brain**. Sounds, simply because they are cool. We'll also cite references to previous **Mandolin Sessions** articles or (blatant self-promotion) resource pages out of the Mel Bay "**Getting into Jazz Mandolin**" book if you want to dig deeper into the harmonic construction of these sounds, but for now, just play them and enjoy with your **Lizard Ear**. At a minimum, try moving them up or down a few frets and get the benefit of some key transpositions, but as they are, enjoy some jazz mandolin sound. Play them over and over; get them into your fingers, and your subconscious **Lizard Brain**.

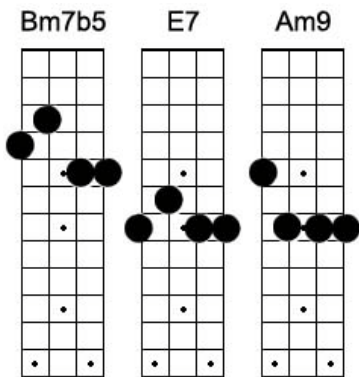
Major Key 'ii V7 I'

We'll credit mentor jazz mandolin **Don Stiernberg** with this first set; nothing like stealing material from the best! (We also introduced these in our Dec 2003 archive: <http://archive.mandolinsessions.com/dec03/ted.html>). They sound especially cool with another instrument playing the bass line:



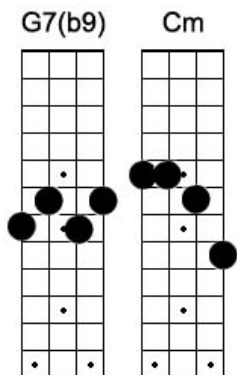
Minor Key 'ii**7** V**7** i'

You'll also need a minor version of this same progression when you play in minor modes. Again, move it up the fretboard, and enjoy the "lizardness" of one of the most basic harmonic sentences of major keys, now minor, in Western European music. You'll also find more about these chords and other fingerings in the "**Getting into Jazz Mandolin Book**" pages 58-9.



V**7**(b**9**) i

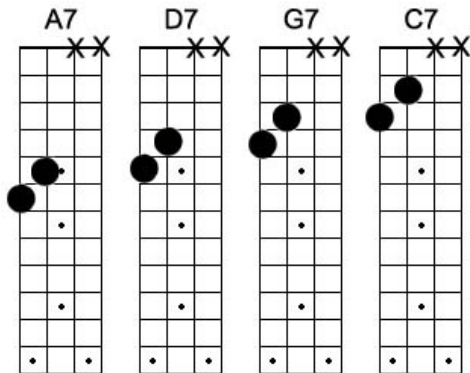
Speaking of minor, you can supercharge any of your songs in a minor key with a tasty little condiment on your **V7** chord, the **b9**. (*oops, a little theory there, sorry, didn't mean to engage that cortex ...*). We've got a slew of these on page 47 in the "**GiJM**," too. This is far more delicious than just your plain **V7 to I**, **G7 to Cm**. Notice with it being high up the fretboard, you have a lot of fret real estate to move this combination lower, too.



Two-note Circle of 5ths

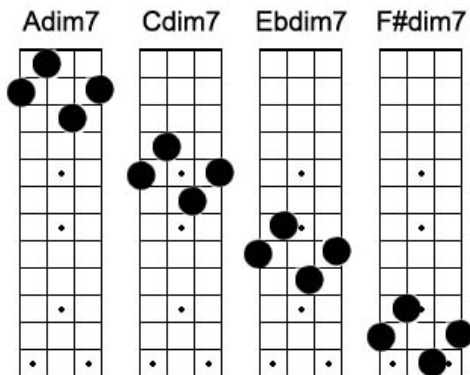
You may have heard this term bandied about in a jazz jam, and the notion is theoretically simple. You take a **V7** chord of a key, and go backwards, the **V7 of the V7** (a 5th higher or a 4th lower depending on your perspective).

The circle notion comes into play when you realize that going through **12 keys**, you end up back where you started. Here are handy two-note versions of 1/3 of all keys. (Page 86 in the "**GiJM**"). Notice how straightforward these are to play, but with two simple notes, you communicate the underlying harmonic complexity!



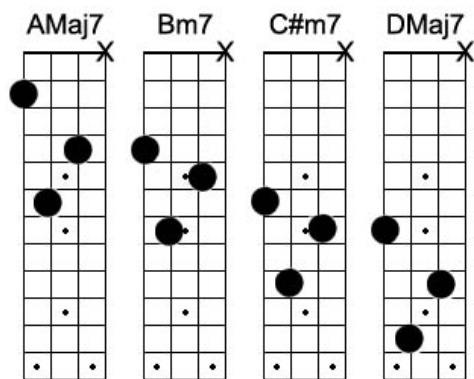
Diminishing Supplies.

One of the coolest trick progressions on the mandolin fretboard is the run of diminished 7th chords. These are great for substituting **dominant 7th** chords, and what's crazy is all four of these are simply inversions of the same chord. We've labeled them with different names, but they are still the same sound, and offer the same function in the music, even though spelled out as based on different roots. What's also amazing, learn this as written, move the whole sequence up a fret, then move it up two frets, and you've played every four-fingered **diminished 7th chord** possibility you can play. By the time you start three frets up, you're starting over with the first set of patterns again. It's like coming to the edge of the universe; you're done! (Also, more tricks on Page 100 in the "**GiJM**").



Staying in the same key.

We mentioned this next set in our October 2006 Mandolin Sessions article "Chords in Passing" (<http://archive.mandolinsessions.com/oct06/Eschliman.html>), and you can go back and uncover the mechanics of this for yourself if you want. What we have here is just a sequence of chords you can play when the music "vamps" on one major chord for an uncomfortably long period of time. You give the song harmonic stability, but because they are still diatonic chords within the same key, you remove stagnancy and inject motion. We like to call this "**static bling**." Imagine injecting the following in a song with 2-4 straight measures of an A major chord:



Try playing it in these combinations:

AMaj7, Bm7, C#m7, Bm7 (*repeat*)

AMaj7, Bm7, C#m7, DMaj7, C#m7, Bm7, AMaj7 (*repeat*)

More?

Do you like these Lizard Chord combinations? Weigh in on the comments below, and while you're at it, give us a five-star rating. Maybe we'll be back for some more.

By the way, if you ever want a title summary of all the JazzMandology topics (over three dozen, now!) here's a page that lists them: http://jazzmando.com/mandolin_sessions.shtml. There's a lot to uncover there, and Mel Bay Publishing has brought these all to you for free. Pretty generous, huh? Share them with your Facebook and Twitter friends.



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