

NASHVILLE STUDIO CHARTS

A Notational Shorthand

By John Knowles

GUITARIST/SONGWRITER/AUTHOR
John Knowles walks a thin line between the worlds of academic and commercial music. He coauthored with Chet Atkins [GP, Oct. '79] the book Chet Atkins: Note-For-Note [Music Sales Corp., Quick Fox Whse., Bellvale Rd., Chester, NY 10918] and recorded with him as a member of the First Nashville Guitar Quartet on RCA [AHLI-3302]. John is currently on the faculty of Nashville's Blair School Of Music, and has also written songs such as "Phantom of The Opry" [Jerry Reed Rides Again, RCA, AHLI-2346] for country singer/guitarist Jerry Reed [Mar. '71]. Knowles recently recorded a solo LP, Sittin' Back Pickin' [Sound Hole, (Box 120355, Nashville, TN 37212), NR-14061], which includes a tab book featuring his own compositions and arrangements. —GP

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NASHVILLE STUDIO and road musicians use a unique number system for rapid learning and notation of arrangements. Chord changes, bass lines, and rhythmic features of a tune are indicated on a number chart, but the players are left free to fill in the arrangement with their own ideas. It is also very easy to transpose using numbers because for a given song they are the same regardless of the key.

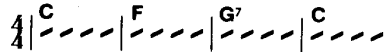
While the system has been in regular use since the mid-'50s, there remains a lack of standardization in notation among Nashville's musicians. In a learning situation, players write their own charts from listening to live or recorded musical performances. They then run through the tune, making adjustments as they go until the arrangement is more or less set. The better musicians can write a chart, run it down, and record the tune in an hour or so. Needless to say, it takes individual concentration and mutual cooperation among players to make it work.

Playing for scale. The numbers are assigned to notes in the scale of the key. For example, in the key of C, C is 1, F is 4, and G is 5.



The numbers are then used to represent chord names. A four-bar progression might look like this:

Chord notation:



Nashville numbers:

4x) 1 4 5 1

In Nashville, the pickers call, "fourteen, fifty-one" to check the chart.

Since many songs have four-bar phrases, a typical number chart might look like this:

4x) 1 4 5 1 Verse
 4 5 1 1
 4 4 5 5
 4 5 1 1
 4 5 1 1 Chorus
 2- 5 1 1
 4 5 1 1
 2- 5 1 1

The minus sign stands for minor, so 2- is Dm in the key of C. The 5 chord is typically a dominant seventh chord, so 5 would be played G7 in the key of C. [Ed. Note: For more on the harmonized scale, see Arnie Berle's feature in the March '78 issue of GP.] Any number of verses (V) and choruses (C) could be played from this chart. The sequence is usually written something like this: V C V C C Fade.

Are you still with me? Now let's try our hand at a tune that everyone knows, "Camptown Races." The number chart for Stephen Foster's classic is the following:

4x) 1 1 2⁷ 5 Verse
 1 1 5 1 (V C V C)
 1 1 4 1 Chorus
 1 1 5 1

Remember that in the key of C, C is 1, D is 2, F is 4, and G is 5. Now grab your guitar and play through the changes. If you're not sure of what you're doing, translate the numbers into chord names. Your chart should now look like this:

4x) C C D⁷ G⁷ Verse
 C C G⁷ C (V C V C)
 C C F C Chorus
 C C G⁷ C

Here's a case where the number system shines. What if we had rehearsed the band and the singer comes in and says, "Sorry, folks. I do 'Camptown Races' in G." (The singer owns the PA so you can't dump him/

her.) The chord chart has to be rewritten, but the number chart is already in the key of G; as a matter of fact, it is in every key. Let's see how it works:



We can use the G scale to translate our previous number chart into the key of G like this:

4x) G G A⁷ D⁷ Verse
 G G D⁷ G (V C V C)
 G G C G Chorus
 G G D⁷ G

If you're not convinced yet, pick a key, write down the scale, number the notes, and translate the chart. You'll see!

Will I need a computer? Before you get a numbers headache, let me assure you that you don't need to learn the scale position of every note in every key to take advantage of the system. Think of how many good songs there are that require only a few chords. And how many keys do you normally play in, anyhow (not counting when you're using a capo)? This means learning only a few numbers in several keys and building from there.

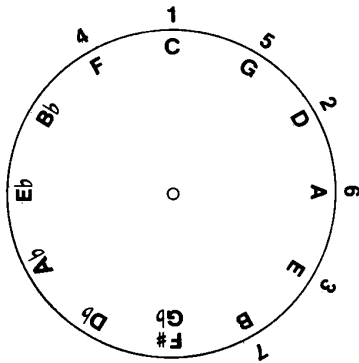
The most commonly used chords are 1, 2, 4, and 5. If you are just getting started on guitar (no barre chords yet), you might begin with the set of keys and chords shown here:

Key			
4	1	5	2
F	C	G	D
C	G	D	A
G	D	A	E
D	A	E	B

You pros can extend your chord/key set by using the circle of fifths. "Forty-one, fifty-two" lays on the circle as shown below; the remainder of the scale, "six, thirty-seven," is also shown:

Continued

NASHVILLE STUDIO CHARTS



You could make a number/chord transposer with the circle of fifths free to rotate relative to the numbers. All it takes is a piece of cardboard, a compass, and some scissors. By the time you finish making yours, you will have learned a lot about chord/key relationships.

Now try your hand at these well-known progressions in several keys:

- 1 4 5 1
- 1 2- 5 1
- 1 6- 2- 5

Real life. In real life, chord changes don't always come at the beginning of the

measure. For instance, "four-split-five" (written 4/5) means two beats on the 4 chord followed by two beats on the 5 chord. If the split is not even, make up your own notation such as:

///
4/5

This represents three beats on the 4 chord followed by one beat on the 5.

For bass lines, use the scale number of the bass note underneath the chord number. The following shows a descending scale played under a 1 chord:

3x) 1 $\frac{1}{7}$ $\frac{1}{6}$ $\frac{1}{5}$

So the bass lines are called, for example, "one-over-seven" ($\frac{1}{7}$) to distinguish them from "one-split-seven" ($\frac{1}{7}$).

You can throw in most of the other symbols that are common to chord notation: ° (diminished), + (augmented), Δ 7 (major seven), Ø (half-diminished), and the # and b symbols. [Ed. Note: For more on the subject of chord symbol notation, see Tommy Tedesco's column in the July '79 issue of GP.]

The "Big Time." Now you are ready to try your hand at a Nashville studio chart. I'll use singer/songwriter Kenny Rogers's version of "Lucille" [Ten Years Of Gold, United Artists, UA-LA 835-H]. Listen to it several times and try to zero in on the following:

- How many beats in a measure? (In most pop/rock/country/folk songs it will be three or four.)
- What key is the song in? (Which chord is the 1 chord? Often a song will end on 1, but sometimes it will begin on 1.)
- What is the overall structure of the song?
- How many measures are there in the intro? the verse? the chorus?
- What are the numbers for the chord progressions? (If you can't hear the changes in a particular part, leave room for them and go on.)

6. Are there any distinctive moves in the bass that are worth noting? (Bass lines alternate so much in country music that most players don't bother to write them down. However, see if you can hear these on your first try.)

7. Note the modulation (from Bb to C) after the first chorus.

Here are some of my observations concerning "Lucille":

1. I hear the classic Nashville *bass-chord-chord* (pick-strum-strum) from the beginning of the record.

2. The whole intro stays on the same chord. "Sounds like a 1." I keep listening and hear the same chord at the beginning and the ending of the verse and chorus.

3. I hear the structure as *Intro V V C; Modulate V C C Fade*.

4. I hear the intro as eight bars of 1. The verses are 32 bars each, with one extra measure in the last line of the first verse. The chorus is 21 measures long, and there is one extra measure in the second line.

5. I hear the progression in the verses as 1 5 2- 5 2- 5 1, 1 4 5 1. The chorus progression is 1 4 1 4 1 5 1.

6. I hear alternating bass like 1, $\frac{1}{5}$; 5, $\frac{3}{2}$; and 4, $\frac{3}{4}$. There is an occasional walk-up (1 2 3 4) and a couple of walk-downs (1 7 6 5).

Here's what "Lucille" looks like written in Nashville notation:

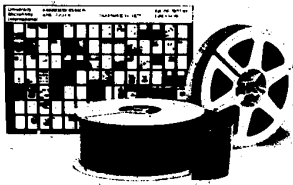
3x)				
Intro	1	1	1	1
	1	1	1	1
Verse	1	1	1	1
	1	1	5	5
	2-	2-	5	5
	2-	5	1	1
	1	1	1	1
	1	1	4	4
	5	5	5	5
1st Verse	[5	5	5	1] 1
Other verses	[5	5	1	1]
Chorus	1	1	4	4
	4	4	4	1
	4	4	4	4
	4	4	1	1
	5	5	1	1

Modulate up a [1 1]
whole step after 1st chorus

(Intro V V C; Mod V C C Fade)

I was told that this tune was put down in a hurry at the end of a late-night session: not a bad way to cap off the evening. Anyway, check yourself against me, but remember that because the system allows for individuality, your chart may not look exactly like mine. One more thing: If you want a real "Nashville" chart, write it on the back of an envelope. See you in the studio. ■

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