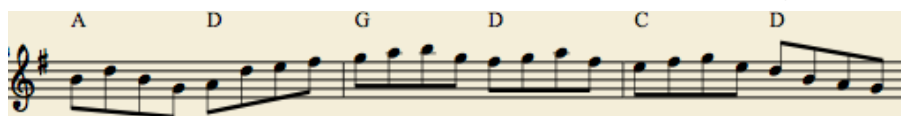


How Do I Know Which Chord to Play? - Part Two
by Kat Bula



If you read part one of this series (“Chords: What To Play When You Don’t Know What To Play” –August/September issue of Fiddle Sessions), you should have a general idea of which notes go in a given chord. That’s all fine and well, but how do you know which chord to play when? Here are a few strategies:

1. **Ask!** Chording instrumentalists (guitarists, pianists, etc.) can call chords out while the song is going on, or tell you what they are in advance so you can write them down.
 - ▲ If you’re practicing for a performance, write them down.
 - ▲ If it’s a casual jam, don’t make everyone wait. Just have your friend call out the chords as you play.
2. **Guess!** Can you find one note that works? Based on what you learned in the first section of this article, you should be able to eliminate as possibilities all but 3 or 4 of the remaining notes. Try them and see what sounds best. Listen carefully. It’s okay not to be good at this instantaneously—no one is! Practice alone with recordings, if you or your musician friends are impatient with your experimenting.
3. **Look at music or a chart!** If you have sheet music for the song you’re playing with chord names written above the exact spots where the changes are, you’re good to go.



But what if someone hands you a chart that is just a bunch of letters and numbers—something along these lines?:

A / D / A / E7 / A / D E7 A ///

or

|A |D |A |E7 |A |D E7|A |A |

4. “/” means “repeat the last chord.”
5. |A | means one measure of A chord. |D E7| means a measure that is half D chord, half E7 chord.
6. In the first two examples above, each chord name or slash *should* represent the same amount of time. (Mistakes are common. Trust your ears more than your eyes.)
7. Listen carefully (or ask, if necessary) to determine the length of each chord if the chart doesn’t have bar lines marked in. Often, in a 4/4 or 2/4 meter song, each letter or / represents two counts (or “boom-chuck”) and in a 3/4 song it represents three counts (“boom-chuck-chuck”).

What if the chart looks like this?

I / IV / I / V / I / IV V I ///

This is actually the same chart as the one in the previous example. The only difference

is that while the last example was specifically in the key of A, this chart will work in any key. The Roman numerals signify the scale degree (a fancy way of saying which note of the scale each chord is built on). So “I” means “the chord built on the first note of the scale”, i.e. the tonic. “IV” is the chord built on the fourth note of the scale, and so forth.

	<u>I / IV /</u>	<u>I / V /</u>	<u>I / IV V</u>	<u>I / / /</u>
Key A:	A / D /	A / E /	A / D E	A / / /
Key D:	D / G /	D / A /	D / G A	D / / /
Key Bb:	Bb / Eb /	Bb / F /	Bb / Eb F	Bb / / /

Two more methods for deciding which chords you should play:

8. **Learn to recognize guitar chords!** Learn to recognize the finger shapes guitar players make to form different chords. Then you'll be able to watch their hands and know what to play. If you don't have a guitarist friend willing to practice this with you, look up video guitar lessons on the internet. Focus on those that teach basic chord shapes, since that's what you're most likely to encounter in folk music situations. (While you're at it, you might learn how to play those guitar chords yourself!)
9. **Look at the melody!** If all else fails or if you're ready to deeply study music theory: look at the melody itself, measure-by-measure or phrase-by-phrase. Which notes seem the most important? Which chords contain those notes? If you've narrowed it down to two or three chords, try them all and see which one makes the most sense to your ear. Remember that I, IV and V are the most common chords in most types of folk music.

Lastly, keep in mind that **this will get more intuitive** as you do it more and begin to recognize the patterns that recur from tune to tune.

Stay tuned for part 3: “What can I do with these chords besides droning them?”

about the author

Kat Bula (kat@bellinghamfiddle.com) is a performing and teaching fiddler/multi-instrumentalist/music theory nerd living in Bellingham, WA. She helps adults and teens who want to have more fun playing music but feel stuck in their progress or don't know what to play when there's no sheet music in front of them. When not teaching, Kat practices being a beginner by learning to play the drums, which angers her cat, Audrey. For more information about Kat, visit [http:// bellinghamfiddle.com](http://bellinghamfiddle.com).