

Welcome to another issue of the MandoUniversity Newsletter! If you enjoy this publication and find it useful to you please let me know. If you would rather not receive it let me know that too.

In this issue we start with an article on four useful barre chords. Next is an article that discusses an improved way to execute these chords using the advantage of leverage. And finally I offer up a tune called “Copperhead” which I hope you like. It is also a good place to try using some of those barre chords for backup.

I am not completely sure where the topics of future newsletters will go and I hope to be guided by your questions and comments. Much like my experience with teaching mandolin students in person, this newsletter is a learning experience for me too.

Bradley Laird

Four Related Barre Chords

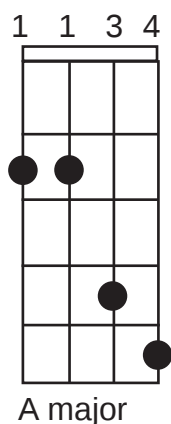
Here is a set of four chords that can be extremely useful in any mandolin players bag of tricks. One interesting feature of all of these chords is that the lowest note is always the tonic. That is to say that the 4th string produces a note that is the same name as the chord. If you play an A major barre chord the 4th string is an A note, etc. This feature makes the chords sound really full. It also helps because you can use the note on the fourth string to locate where to place the chord. If you learn the names of the notes going up the 4th string, just put your barre there and you will know the name of the chord.

There are 4 basic shapes that I think you should learn. Notice that only one note has changed to convert the major to the minor. One note was lowered by one fret. This means that that note has to be the 3rd

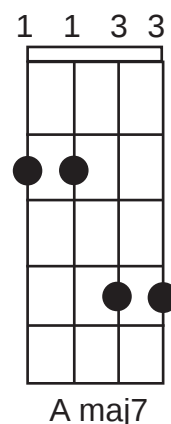
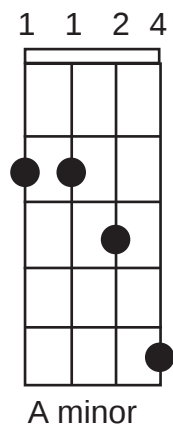
note of the scale because it is always the 3rd which is flatted to produce a minor chord. (If this is a little confusing to you you might want to consider reading “Mandolin Master Class” which has a full explanation of constructing chords and a lot more. Details at www.mandouniversity.com.

You can run that chord up and down the neck as far as you are able and produce lots of major and minor chords with just two chord shapes. Just know the name of the note on the 4th string and you know the name of the chord. For example: Play those shapes so the first finger plays a C note on the 4th string and you have C major and C minor. Etc.

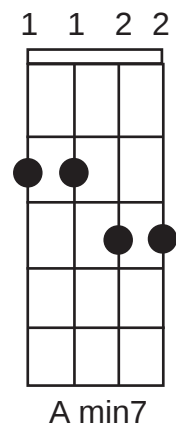
Here are 2 other variations that are used frequently in jazz and similar kinds of music:



If these seem difficult, read the article on Leverage...



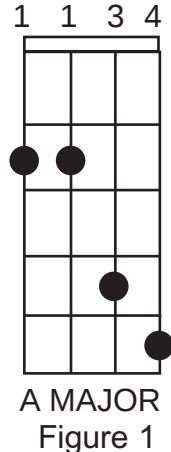
These 2 are formed with a “double barre” of sorts.



Applying Leverage to Barre Chords

Playing “barre chords” can be extremely useful on the mandolin in playing swing music, Dawg music, jazz standards and even bluegrass.

Some chords like the maj7th and min7th rely on the technique heavily. I even use barre chords chopping away in bluegrass sometimes--especially when I want the root (the I) to be the lowest note in the chord. Figure 1 shows a typical mandolin barre chord—an A major chord. The first finger plays both 2nd fret notes by laying flat across the strings and the 3rd and 4th finger play the other two notes.



A lot of players seem to have trouble with these chords. A common complaint is that they seem to require a huge amount of finger strength to play cleanly and clearly—especially for long periods of time. If your action is really, really low and you have pretty strong hands they aren’t as hard to play but bluegrassers like to have the action up a bit higher and that makes these chords more difficult to execute. But I think there is an easier way—a more mechanically efficient way—to play these barre chords. Follow along here and study the photos and try my method and see what you think.

Figure 2 is a photograph of the “normal” way most people attack barre chords on the mandolin. It is that sort of “Mel Bay hand photo” approach. (You’ve all seen those photos in chord books and it looks so perfect and also so contorted at the same time.) My hand in Figure 2 looks pretty relaxed but I can tell you that I am squeezing the life out of that neck with my thumb!



Figure 2-The Hard Way

My mandolin has a “V” shaped neck and the “V” is about to smash my thumb bone in the photo. Playing a barre chord in this so-called “correct way” makes the thumb and finger muscles to work like mad. I don’t like to work like mad and I don’t like my hand to cramp up so I fiddled around a long time ago and came up with a way that makes this physically much easier.

Take a look now at Figure 3. In this photo you can see that I have placed my index finger in the correct place for playing the 4th and 3rd strings. My thumb is not touching the neck at all so it is doing no work at the moment. The pressure (pretty light at the moment) exerted down on the strings is coming mostly from the weight of my entire left arm. It is like I am hanging my arm from the fingerboard.



Figure 3

Next, take a look at Figure 4. I have now rolled my thumb up and have just barely hooked it over the top of my index fingertip forming a “ring.” I am not really squeezing up with the base of the thumb at all. I have just formed the “ring” and am letting it hang from the neck by the weight of my arm.



Figure 4



Figure 5

In Figure 5 I have now brought my 3rd and 4th fingers down almost in contact with the strings. Next, instead of squeezing those two fingers down onto the strings I do something different.

Look at Figure 6. In the final photograph I have turned my wrist slightly outward. I have in fact moved my elbow slightly away from the side of my body. This turning of the hand makes use of the entire arm to bring the fingers down into contact (see next page)



Figure 6

Leverage continued

with the strings. The index finger/thumb “ring” is the fulcrum of a long lever that goes all the way back to the shoulder muscles! The shoulder muscle is much stronger than the muscle at the base of the thumb I can assure you! And it will not tire out. The finger muscles are doing some work but it is mostly just an effort that keeps the fingers in place. The real power comes from the leverage applied by the entire arm.

In the final photograph it may look like I have grabbed the neck in a fist and it gives the impression that I am using a lot of force but it is considerably easier than the way shown in figure 2! Let me state a few key points of this idea. 1) The thumb is helping keep the index finger solidly down on the 4th and 3rd strings. 2) The power which is fretting the 4th and 3rd strings is coming from the weight of the arm. 3) The downward force exerted by the 3rd and 4th fin-

gers is compounded by a very long lever originating at the shoulder. If the 3rd and 4th finger are held in place rigidly (not allowed to move) and they are then “cranked down” onto the strings by using the arm as a lever you can almost crack walnuts under those fingertips!

One final tip. Remember that the first finger does not need to apply any pressure to the 1st and 2nd strings. Don’t waste any energy trying to form a barre all the way across all four strings. You can and will touch those strings with your first finger, but they don’t have to be held down since the 3rd and 4th fingers are fretting them at a higher fret. The same idea applies to barre chords on a guitar. A lot of guitar players waste a lot of energy pressing all six strings down with their index finger when they could allow the center to relax and rise up a bit. ♦ ♦ ♦

Tune – “Copperhead”

Here is a tune I wrote that I named after a snake I found creeping around the piano shop one day. I nearly stepped on the thing! I am convinced he rode in inside an old piano that was delivered the day before. I don’t for sure if he arrived in the paino, but I am more careful poking around inside old pianos and it makes a far better story.

Copperhead

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