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Major triads are the building blocks of major chords. If you're used to playing only full chords, triads will help expand your playing and allow you to create more unique voicings and tones. They're a great way to spice up your playing by allowing you to easily add little embellishments to your rhythms. In this lesson we'll dive into what triads are, what makes up the major triad, and how you can identify triad shapes on the guitar fretboard using string groupings and the CAGED system.

Triads Triads are a group of three notes comprised of the 1st (root), 3rd, and 5th degrees of a scale. Each degree is a 3rd apart. They can be of four qualities: Major, Minor, Augmented, Diminished. In this lesson, we're just focusing on the major triad.

Major Triads Major triads are built from the 1st (root), 3rd (major 3rd), and 5th (perfect 5th) degrees of the major scale. Each of these intervals is a third (3 notes) apart and the number of semitones between each interval will determine the quality of the triad. Major 3rd = 2 whole tones (4 semitones / 4 frets) Minor 3rd = 1 1/2 tones (3 semitones / 3 frets) Note that 1 semitone is equal to 1 fret. Quality Stacked 3rd Intervals Semitones 5th Quality Major Major 3rd + Minor 3rd Perfect Counting out the semitones of the first 3rd will give you the following: Root to major 2nd = 2 semitones Major 2nd to major 3rd = 2 semitones Total of 4 semitones (2 whole tones) Counting out the semitones of the second stacked 3rd will give you the following: Major 3rd to perfect 4th = 1 semitone Perfect 4th to perfect 5th = 2 semitones Total of 3 semitones (1 1/2 whole tones) Major Triad Shapes on the Fretboard Perhaps the easiest way to apply major triads to the guitar fretboard is by using string groupings. By using four groups of 3 strings (1-2-3, 2-3-4, 3-4-5, 4-5-6), you get three distinct triad patterns per group that repeat up and down the neck. When learning the triad shapes, it's important to make note of the root note location. This will allow you to quickly identify triad shapes across the neck. The examples below are G major triads, but the shapes and relative note positions will apply to all major triads.

Major Triad Shapes on Strings 1-2-3 On strings 1-2-3, you get the following note arrangements: Shape 1: 3rd on string 3, 5th on string 2, root on string 1 Shape 2: 5th on string 3, root on string 2, 3rd on string 1 Shape 3: root on string 3, 3rd on string 2, 5th on string 1 If you were to continue up the fretboard past shape 3, you would get back to shape 1 again. Likewise, if you dropped back from shape 1, you would get shape 3.

The following diagram and tab outlines all three triad shapes on strings 1, 2, and 3 on the guitar fretboard.

Major Triad Shapes on Strings 2-3-4 On strings 2, 3, and 4 you get the following note arrangements: Shape 1: root on string 4, 3rd on string 3, 5th on string 2 Shape 2: 3rd on string 4, 5th on string 3, root on string 2 Shape 3: 5th on string 4, root on string 3, 3rd on string 2 Like the shapes on strings 1, 2, and 3, these shapes repeat up/down the fretboard. The fretboard diagram and tab below outlines the three triad shapes on strings 2, 3, and 4.

Major Triad Shapes on Strings 3-4-5 On strings 3, 4, and 5, the note arrangements look like this: Shape 1: 5th on string 5, root on string 4, 3rd on string 3 Shape 2: root on string 5, 3rd on string 4, 5th on string 3 Shape 3: 3rd on string 5, 5th on string 4, root on string 3 Again, these shapes repeat up and down the fretboard.

Below is a diagram and tab for the three triad shapes on strings 3, 4, and 5.

Major Triads on Strings 4-5-6 On strings 4, 5, and 6, the note arrangements look like this: Shape 1: 3rd on string 6, 5th on string 5, root on string 4 Shape 2: 5th on string 6, root on string 5, 3rd on string 4 Shape 3: root on string 6, 3rd on string 5, 5th on string 4 Below is a full diagram and tab for the three triad shapes on strings 4, 5, and 6.

Learning Major Triads on Guitar with the CAGED System Another method of learning major triads on the guitar is using the CAGED system. If you're already familiar with the CAGED major chord shapes, learning the major triad shapes using the CAGED system will be a breeze. We can simply break apart the CAGED chord shapes into their smaller triad shapes. Note: In each set of triads, the first diagram represents the full chord and the subsequent diagrams are the triads that can be derived from that chord shape.

C Form The CAGED C form shape can be broken into four triads. The most commonly used triads shapes from the C form would be the last two in the diagram below.

A Form From the A form CAGED shape, you can get three triads, though the first one in the diagram below is more part of the C form than the A form. The most commonly used triad of this group is the second shape in the triad diagram.

G Form The G form shape also gives us three triads, which the most commonly used shapes are the second and third in the diagram.

E Form The CAGED E form shape also gives us three triads.

D Form The D form chord gives us three triads, two of which are shared with the CAGED chord forms above and below (E form and C form).

Using triads in your playing You can begin incorporating these triads into your playing by simply substituting them for full chords. For instance, take any of these easy songs and use triads in place of the full chords. Experiment with playing them in different positions outside of the original voicings. The basis of harmony in Western music is the triadic chord, a three-note harmony performed to be heard simultaneously. While endless other chord tones, extensions and alterations can be incorporated into a triad, ultimately, their defining structure is the triad from which any more complex chord is derived. The two most common triads, major and minor, are derived from their eponymous scale structure by selecting the first, third and fifth note of their respective scales. For instance a C major triad is extracted from a C major scale like so: C major C D E F G A B C Interval R M2 M3 P4 P5 M6 M7 P8 This results in the pitches of the C major triad: C, E, and G. Regardless of how these three notes are arranged, they always result in a C major triad. All of the following chords are C major triads.

Inversions That triads can arrange their pitches in any configuration brings us to our next topic: inversions. The lowest pitch in any harmony is called the "bass" and the highest is called the "soprano." When the root of a chord is the bass, it is referred to as being in "root position." The first, second, and fifth shapes in the diagrams above are in root position. We notate a chord in root position simply by writing the name of the chord, in this case "C." Note that a chord with no specified quality is assumed to be a major triad. When we "invert" a chord, we move the bass note up an octave or more, resulting in the next highest chord tone being in the bass. Inverting a root position major chord results in the major third being in the bass. This chord is referred to as being in "first inversion." Any time the third of a chord is the bass, it is in first inversion, regardless of the configuration of the chord tones above it. An inversion is notated in contemporary music by writing the name of the chord followed by a slash and the chord tone in the bass. Therefore, a first inversion C major triad is notated as C/E (pronounced "C over E"). As you can see, the third shape above is in first inversion. A triad in first inversion can be inverted a second time to produce a second inversion triad. With a major triad, this means moving the major third up an octave or more, leaving the perfect fifth in the bass. Any time the fifth of a chord is in the bass, it is in second inversion, regardless of the configuration of the chord tones above it. A chord in second inversion is notated using the same method as a first inversion triad. Therefore a C major triad in first inversion is notated as a C/G. As you can see, the fourth and sixth shapes depicted above are in second inversion. Using Inversions Inversions have a number of uses. One of the most common is creating smooth bass motion. Example 1 below has simple chord G-D-Em chord progression. Notice how the lowest note in each chord (the bass note) leaps dramatically between chords. By placing the D in first inversion, the bass motion becomes stepwise, "walking down" from G to Em. Another use for triad inversion is voice leading, the creation of smooth movement from one voicing to the next. Jumping from chord to chord in root position causes large leaps in some progressions, which can be jarring to the ear. A chord progression is said to be voice led when all pitches from one chord move to the next chord by an interval no greater than a minor third. In Example 2, the G-C-D-G progression moves by large leaps from G to C and D to G. By incorporating inversions, the motion between chords becomes smooth and remains in the same fretboard position. It is important to consider that when playing in a full band the guitar player does not decided what pitch is in the bass. That is decided by whomever is playing the lowest pitch, most often the bass player. This is very useful to the guitar player, as it frees them up to play whatever voicing best suits their needs. They can voice lead the triads or leap between voicings for effect.

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