CHORD SYMBOLS: CRACKING THE CHORD CODE
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A basic chord chart offers you the following information:

- Key and time signature
- Musical instructions (tempo, “feel”)
- Chord symbols
- Rhythm indications
- Occasional specific instructions or melody lines

A lead sheet (a collection of which is a “fake book”) has all of the above but adds in:

- Complete melody
- Lyrics

I. The First Step: Learn the most commonly-used chords, symbols, and inversions.
   a. Major triads - single note name (B, C#)
   b. Minor triads - sometimes lower case, sometimes Gm, sometimes G-
   c. Diminished triads – written “E dim” or “Eº”
   d. Augmented triads (not common, but one of the “basics”) – written “F aug” or “F+”
   e. Dominant Seventh chords – written G7, C7. (Major triad with a minor third on top.)
   f. The “sus 4” chord or plain “sus”: a triad where the third has been replaced by the fourth scale degree. (Csus=C, F, G) Very common in current worship music.
   g. A chord containing a horizontal or diagonal “slash,” e.g. G/D, shows the chord symbol on the left, and the desired bass note on the right. The bass note does not necessarily have to belong to the chord.

II. Second Step: Apply this basic information to a simple lead sheet. (See handout)
   a. First attempt: play melody in RH with a single LH bass note on changes.
   b. Second attempt: play melody in RH with a simple LH chord on each change.
   c. Another option: play bass in LH, add chords under melody in RH.
   d. Still another option: just play chords without melody (where appropriate).
III. Third Step: try other accompaniment patterns (without melody)
   a. LH bass, RH quarter note chords (chunk chunk)
   b. Oompah (alternating bass and chord)
   c. Rocking pattern (broken chord)
   d. Various arpeggiated patterns in either hand (Alberti bass, etc.)
   e. Listen to how other pianists accompany; analyze piano books.
      i. Buy books of transcriptions
      ii. Try a general book on style such as *The Pop Piano Book* by Mark Harrison

IV. The Fourth Step: Practice! - There is no way that a one-hour session is going to make you a proficient chord reader.
   a. Start with the basic triads and make sure you can play them correctly in all keys. (See handout about how to go through the inversions.)
   b. Once you are certain of the majors and minors, make flash cards, deal them randomly on your piano. Set a slow metronome and go from left to right in tempo, playing each chord in root position. Deal again and increase the tempo!
   c. Raise the stakes: rather than use only root position chords, choose inversions that require less movement from chord to chord. (See the handout for demonstrations of “common tones.”)
   d. Add in other chords, such as dominant 7ths, to your mix.
   e. Try a lead sheet, containing a melody and chords.
      i. First make an inventory of the chords used in the song; usually not many. Make sure you know each one.
      ii. Note where the chords change. When you see a symbol over a melody note, that’s the time to move to the next chord.
      iii. Try it slowly, but in tempo! Get used to making smooth transitions without stopping.
      iv. Check the “Playing from Chord Charts & Lead Sheets” handout for more hints on developing your skill with lead sheets.
V. Further words about chord charts (commonly seen in current choral music with orchestrations, and in praise band notation).
   a. No melody; mostly “slashes” which represent beats. You have artistic freedom!
   b. Simple approach: bass in LH, quarter note chords in RH.
   c. Sometimes rhythm is broken up in “rhythmic notation” (rather than “slashes”) to show specific patterns (see top line of handout)
   d. Sometimes a repeated pattern is suggested followed by “simile”
   e. When a melody or specific part is indicated, break your pattern. Listen for the melody to get a better idea of the “shape” of the piece.
   f. What style should I use?
      i. Listen to the demo
      ii. Look for any indications in the music
      iii. Listen to the other players
      iv. Don’t expect it all to come together during rehearsal; you need time alone
      v. When others are playing, the burden is lifted from you!

VI. How to play keyboard parts for 50% of today’s worship songs without music, by mastering one handout.
   a. Since the 1950s, most pop music has used only 3-4 chords.
   b. Since the late 1990s, this has been true of much worship music written by the “younger generation” of worship leaders, especially guitarists.
   c. The basic four chords in any key are:
      i. I – Tonic (major triad)
      ii. IV – Sub-dominant (major triad)
      iii. V – Dominant (major triad or dominant 7th chord)
      iv. vi – Sub-mediant: just call it “six”! This is the only minor triad in the group of four basic chords.
   d. Turn to “Dr. Shackley’s” secret shortcut and explain.
      i. These are the chords in various “inversions”
      ii. Note how you don’t need to move your hands far between chords
      iii. These are the four most common keys used by guitarists
   e. The “secret” applies to added keyboard parts such as strings, organ, etc. when a guitarist or other keyboard player is leading. Play simply.
   f. Samples of current top CCLI songs and how many rely only on these chords. Learn the ii chord in each key and you can add many more.