

## How to Simplify Complicated Chord Progressions

By Dennis Winge

Suppose you are in a jam session, on a gig, or in a recording studio and you are asked to play this on the fly:

	Ebmaj7 (Cmi7)	Fmi7 Bb7(b9)	Ebmaj7	(Cmi7)
F9	Bb7sus Bb7(b9)	Eb9	Bbmi7 Eb7sus4-3	
Ab<sup>O</sup>7 Ab6	Fmi7 Bb7(b9)	F#<sup>O</sup>7/Eb Eb6	Cmi7	
G<sup>O</sup>7/F Fmi7	Fmi7 C7(#5)	Fmi7	Bb7	
Ebma7(Cmi7)	Fmi7 Bb7(b9)	Ebmaj7	(Cmi7)	
F9	Bb7sus Bb7(b9)	Eb9	Bbmi7 Eb7sus4-3	
Ab<sup>O</sup>7 Ab6	Fmi7 Bb7(b9)	F#<sup>O</sup>7/Eb Eb6	G7(b9#5) C7(#5)	
Fmi9	Bb7(b9)	Eb6	(Fmi7 Bb7(b9))	

When you look at a chord chart that has a lot of chords, and you are in a situation where you didn't have time to prepare it, there are many ways in which you can simplify your part without compromising the musical integrity. This requires quite a bit of understanding of music theory, however, but this mental effort will pay off big time because it will prevent you from having to say "I can't do this."

Even if you may never care to play jazz in your entire life, taking an example from the jazz tradition will serve our purposes well. The changes above are those marked in the Sher Real Book for the jazz standard "But Not For Me". As you see, there are a lot of chord changes, and we are going to present options that are much simpler than those that are written.

If you are playing solo guitar, you may not even notice the other chords and extensions that we will leave out. However, if you are playing with a band, and particularly with a pianist who may know the voicings in full and thus not have to simplify his or her part, you may have to be somewhat tactful in how you use these shortcuts and simplifications.

In general, even though your part will be simplified, it is better to play along then not to play at all. On the flip side though, you don't want to play loud or forcefully in this context, which too many guitar players do because that is what they are used to. You might even lay out (meaning don't play) at times.

For example, we are going to look at the chord change Fm7 to Bb7 later in the article. If you choose to play only Bb7 for both chords, and you are playing with someone who will probably play the Fm7 first, then you could simply keep silent for 2 beats and play Bb7 for the other two.

At the very minimum, the process of boiling down chords will help you understand how even potentially crazy looking progressions can be sometimes quite simple and logical.

Look at the first 8 bars:

| Ebmaj7 (Cmi7) | Fmi7 Bb7(b9) | Ebmaj7 | (Cmi7) |  
| F9 | Bb7sus Bb7(b9) | Eb9 | Bbmi7 Eb7sus4-3 |

We are in the key of Eb, and we are going to simplify our part as follows:

| Eb | Bb7 | Eb | % | F7 | Bb7 | Eb7 | Eb7 |

Now let's discuss how we came up with this simplified version. We are in the key of Eb and the first two bars is a I VI II V. Since the VI chord, i.e. the Cm7, is in parentheses, we can leave that out.

The Fm7 to Bb7 is, as I eluded to earlier, is a II V in the key of Eb. You can substitute just a V chord for a II V, and therefore we play only Bb7 in the second bar.

Then back to Eb for 2 bars, again since the chord in bar 4 is in parentheses.

In bar 5, F9 can be simplified to F7.

In bar 6 the alterations and extensions of sus and flat 9 can be left out.

In bar 7, Eb7 can substitute for Eb9

In bar 8, Bbm7 to Eb7sus 4-3 as it says in the chart, is also a II V so you can play just Eb7. Generally, a II V is a minor 7 chord followed by a dominant 7 chord a fourth above. It may be hard to notice these on the fly, but especially if you play jazz, it will become easier and easier to recognize them, as they are very common.

The next eight bars would go like this.

| Ab<sup>O</sup>7 Ab6 | Fmi7 Bb7(b9) | F#<sup>O</sup>7/Eb Eb6 | Cmi7 |  
| G<sup>O</sup>7/F Fmi7 | Fmi7 C7(#5) | Fmi7 | Bb7 |

Our simplified version will look like this:

| Ab | Bb7 | Eb | Cm | Fm7 | % | % | Bb7 |

Now let's explore the simplification of the second set of eight bars.

Ab is the IV of Eb. The reason the first 2 beats are a diminished chord rather than the 4's natural quality which is major, is that there is a flattened sixth in the melody, and the diminished chord harmonizes well with it. If you don't know diminished chord you can simply play the Ab group for two beats, followed by the full Ab major chord for the other two. Once the melody has been played and an improvisation session ensues, which is typical for this style music, you can probably get away with playing Ab major over all four beats.

The next bar, bar 10 of the tune, is a II V which we have seen already, so we will only play Bb7 there.

The bar after that, we'll ignore what happens on the first two beats which has Eb in the bass anyway and treat it similarly to what we did earlier with the Ab two bars earlier. We'll be careful in the melody section, but in the solos we can play all Eb there.

The next bar will be C minor because that's straightforward.

In the next three bars we will leave out the extraneous information and just play F minor for three bars, followed by the final Bb7.

The second half of the tune is very similar to the first half, and we won't go into detail about it, except to point out one slight modification to the II V that we have been simplifying. It is in the 5<sup>th</sup> bar from the end, which goes G7(b9, #5) C7#5. This is a II V, even though the G chord is not a minor 7: it's been altered to add extra flavor. In the end, you could still play C7 there for that whole bar, just as you played only the V chord portion of the II Vs we saw previously.

This all may seem like a lot, but it's about to get even simpler. Let's analyze the simplified parts we have derived for the first 16 bars:

| Eb | Bb7 | Eb | % | F7 | Bb7 | Eb7 | Eb7 |

| Ab | Bb7 | Eb | Cm | Fm7 | % | % | Bb7 |

The harmonic analysis of this is:

| I | V | I | % | II7 | V | I7 | I7 |

| IV | V7 | I | VI | II | % | % | V |

Notice pattern: I V I then II V I in the first line; IV V I then II V in 2<sup>nd</sup> line. Here we begin to see that the harmony is actually very simple and the rest of it is just embellishing and adding passing chords. Perhaps if this was in a guitar friendly key, like D, you can better see the simplicity underneath the structure. In D, the simplified version would be:

| D | A7 | D | % | E7 | A7 | D7 | D7 |

| G | A7 | D | Bm | Em | % | % | A7 |

This could easily be a country song or a pop song. The chords are not hard; the harmony is simple and logical. This is what is happening in “But Not For Me,” it’s just in a less guitar-friendly key and there a lot of extraneous extensions and harmonic motion, which is idiomatic for jazz.

In conclusion, it obviously helps to analyze tunes and roman numerals and look for the overall structure by boiling down. Then, if you are in a high-pressure situation you can understand what is going on, and play something appropriate even if you don’t hit all the chords. Have fun looking deeper into tunes and coming up with a part that works for you.