Learning to Embellish Chords with the Open Add9 Chord

By Dennis Winge

The add9 chords make ordinary major chords more colorful. You can easily look up how to play common open add9 chords such as Cadd9, Eadd9 etc. with a simple internet search. This article will show you how to construct the chord and explore choices on your own, so that you can learn the very important process of thinking of chords as a collection of intervals. Learning this process will empower you to know how to alter and embellish all kinds of chords, way beyond the add9 chord, and do so in with any type of chord in any position, not just open chords. As a result of reading this article, you will know:

a) how to construct add9 chords
b) the most common add9 chords for open position
c) how to apply the process to other embellished chords such as D6, F#sus, etc.

Before we start, however, you will need some music theory background. You must know that chords are made up of triads, which are the intervals 1-3-5. You must also know how to decode a chord shape into its respective intervals.   This could require a whole other article to explain fully, but I will attempt to summarize. The open G chord, for example, is made up of the intervals 1, 3, 5, 1, 3, 1 as you move from 6th string to first string. These numbers are indicated above the notes below:


If this is new to you, you'll need to learn how to construct major scales so you can find the 1, 3, 5 of each scale. In the case of G, the 1, 3, and 5 are *g, b, d.*   Then you'll need to name each note played by the chord so you can assign numbers to it, as is done above. Alternatively, if your ear is trained and you recognize the sound of the intervals, you can decode open chords aurally without any music theory.

Once your chord is decoded into intervals, we can consider how to alter it or embellish it. The add9 chord is 1, 3, 5, 9. There is no 7th. A major 7 added to the mix would be called a major 9 chord, and a flat 7 would make it be called simply a 9th chord. It is important to understand that since a 1 moved up an octave could also be called 8, then a 2 moved up an octave is the same note as 9.

In the case of Gadd9, the notes are *g, b, d, a.* The note *a* is the 9 of the chord and also the 2 of the scale. The reason this is important is that in order to find a Gadd9 on the fretboard, you have to know that, since it's the same as 2, it can be found either by going up a whole step (two frets) from 1, or by going down a whole step from 3.

Look at the "G" row of the following table:
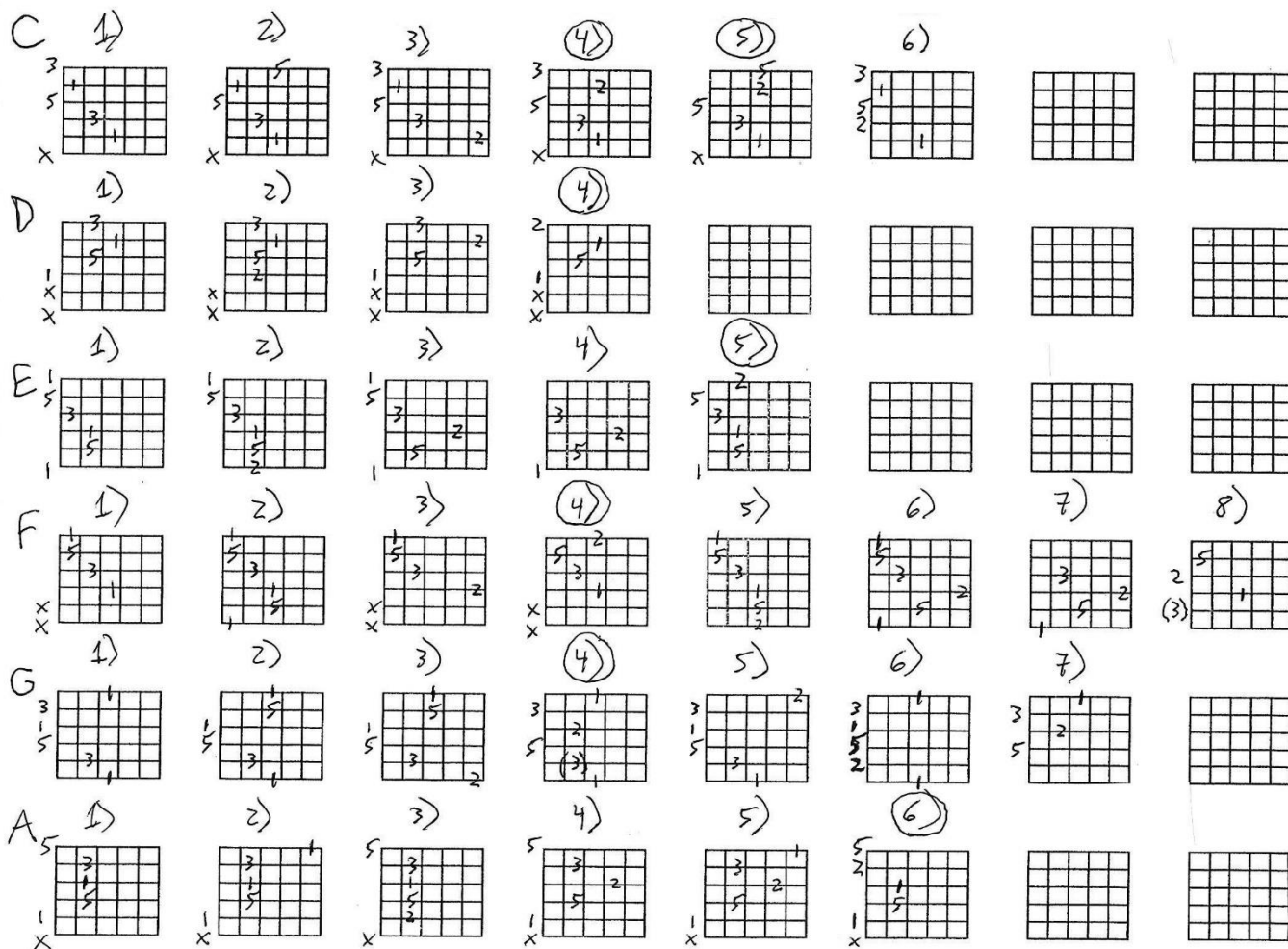
For the G row:

- diagram # 1 has the intervals spelled out

- diagram # 2 is an alternate way of playing the same chord

- diagram # 3 takes the lowest root and moves it up a whole step, which is virtually impossible to finger easily

- diagram # 4 takes the middle root and moves it up a whole step. Although trying to play all of the notes listed may be awkward to finger, this is still a good option for Gadd9 because, if you move finger 1 (which normally plays the 5th string) to the 3rd string, you can mute the 5th string (which finger 1 has now abandoned) to hit the "2" on the 3rd string, and use finger 2 (the one playing the 6th string) to mute the 5th string. This is why the "3" on the 5th string is in parentheses on the diagram: you can choose to play it or not.

- diagram # 5 is just as difficult as # 3.

- diagram # 6 takes a 3rd down to a 2nd, and this may be easy to play but sounds a bit muddy. Generally, the 'extensions' of a chord (anything beyond the octave such as the 9th) sound better when voiced higher.

- diagram # 7 is the same as # 4 except it only uses the top 4 strings. While this chord may not sound as full as # 4, it is relatively easy to play and could be used as an alternative to a regular open G chord because once the listener has heard the *g* root on the 6th string, number 7 can easily be thrown into the mix.

It may seem like after that exploration, there is no perfect solution to finding an open Gadd9 chord. My personal choice, which I have circled for each row, in this case is number 4. If you have a different favorite, that is fine; just memorize your favorite choice for each chord.

I will summarize the steps below so you can use them to explore the possibilities for open add9 chords on C, D, E, F and A and then choose your favorites without looking at my diagrams, and then going back to compare your results with mine.

A couple of side notes before I summarize the steps. Occasionally you may have a voicing that is 1, 2, 5. This is called a sus2 chord and is perfectly acceptable to play as a substitution for the add9 if leaving out the 3rd of the chord adds convenience. In addition, the 8th diagram of F has a "3" in parenthesis on the 5th string. This means you can play only the 1-2-5 on strings 4, 3, and 2, or you can play it as 3-1-2-5 (a personal favorite of mine) on strings 5, 4, 3, 2.

Here are the steps to find the other open add9 chords on your own:

1) write the chord out in intervals, either by music theory or by ear

2) raise the roots or lower the 3rds, each in turn, to the 2nd scale degree, which is the same as the 9th

3) determine which chord voicing(s) you like best for each chord

4) memorize your choices

For more advanced players, try taking some of these shapes out of open position for use in other keys. For example, G diagram # 7 taken to the key of C would be like this:

Cadd9
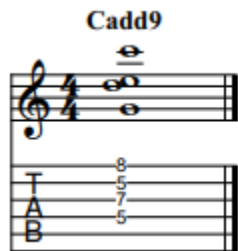
Once you understand how to think in intervals, the possibilities are endless. The important thing here is the process we used. Remember that going through this process is laying the foundation for constructing chord embellishments that will enrich your music for the rest of your life.