Slash Chords

by Dennis Winge

A slash chord means a chord placed over a certain bass note that is not the root of the chord. The symbol F/G, for example, means an F chord with a *g* note in the bass. As you will see, this is really a type of G chord, whereas let's say F/C, which is an F chord with *c* in the bass, is really a 2nd inversion F chord.

The distinction lies in whether or not the note after the slash is in the chord or not. You must know how to construct major and minor scales in all 12 keys in order to be able to understand this. Let's take the key of E:

I	**II**	**III**	**IV**	**V**	**VI**	**VII**	**I**
Emaj	F#min	G#min	Amaj	Bmaj	C#m	D#dim	Emaj

An E chord is said to be in "root position" because the *e* note, the root of the chord is the lowest note, or "in the bass." If the chord is E/G#, that's considered "first inversion" and E/B is "second inversion." For triads (3-note chords) there are only 3 inversions – root position plus first and second inversions.

In 7th chords, such as:

I	**II**	**III**	**IV**	**V**	**VI**	**VII**	**I**
Emaj7	F#min7	G#min7	Amaj7	B7	C#m7	D#min7b5	Emaj7

…you could see E/D# which is "third inversion." The note *d#* is the major 7th of the key is in the bass, so the overall effect is turning the chord into an Emaj7 chord with the 7th in the bass.

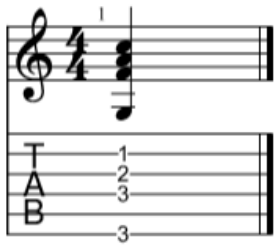
There are slash chords whose roots are not in the chord. If you saw E/A, that is really an Amaj9 chord. Why? Because the notes of an E triad are *e, g#* and *b* as we saw earlier. But now that the note *a* is the root, these notes become the 5th, 7th, and 9th (respectively) in the *key of A.* So you really have to know your music theory. It would make no sense to call E/A an E chord with the 4th in the bass. It doesn't sound like an E chord anymore anyway.

To summarize: when the note in the bass of the slash chord is in the chord (or changes it to a different chord with the same root as we saw in the case of Emaj7), it is in an inversion. When

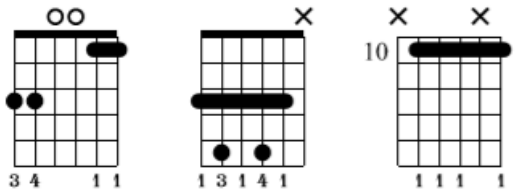
it is outside of that, the bass note becomes the root from which the other notes are to be analyzed.

Going back to our example of E/A, why might a chart use this symbol instead of “Amaj9.” Well, if you noticed, the intervals we came up with did not include the 3rd of the A chord, namely *c#.* So really the exact name of the chord would be “Amaj9 (no 3rd)” or “Amaj7sus2.” To me, “E/A” is a lot simpler and more user friendly.

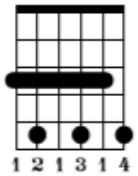
Sometimes certain symbols are used because the composer doesn’t want certain notes to be used. If the chord was “G9sus,” whose intervals are 1, 4, 5, b7, 9, or the notes *g, c, d, f, a,* an instrumentalist can choose, especially on guitar where we tend to leave certain notes out for convenience, to play the *d* note or not. Unlike the other notes in the chord, the *d* note doesn’t do much to ‘define’ the chord. You’ll hear what I mean if you play the following:



The symbol for this chord is F/G. The notes are *g, f, a,* and *c,* and there is no *d.* However if the composer wanted to make sure you played the *d* he or she might write Dm7/G. Let’s take a look at some possibilities for this voicing:



The first voicing is not very common, but the other two are. The middle one is very common *but* the note *a* is left out. This is because the 5th is commonly left out of more advanced guitar voicings. If it were just Dm7 on its own, the *a* note would hardly be missed, and in this case not playing it is not a big deal, but if you wanted to hear the 9th of the chord, you would have to play it like this:



To add to the potential confusion, this chord could also be called F6/G, or as we saw, G9sus. The point is to really study your music theory and know what the underlying function of a slash chord is so you can make decisions on what voicings you can comfortably grab in a realistic playing situation, even if it means leaving certain notes out.

Here is a very important point about what voicings to choose when it comes to slash chords: if you are playing with a good, strong bass player, you can leave out the note after the slash chord. In the example above, if the bassist is playing a *g* note solidly, then you can just play Dm7 and the overall tonality is achieved easily. It even sounds better most of the time when the guitarist is not clogging up the sound with low bass notes in slash chords. Experiment with this by playing a low *g* note into your looper and playing a Dm7 on the upper or middle strings, or even above the 12th fret. The separation between the two registers adds a nice bit of space.

To summarize what we have seen so far: simply determine whether the note in the bass is in the chord before the slash. If it is, treat it as an inversion (or ignore it completely if it's too inconvenient to play on the fly). If it isn't, and there is a good bass player, leave the bass note out and just play the chord before the slash. If there isn't a bassist, try to determine the intervals implied and decide on a convenient voicing that might leave certain intervals out.

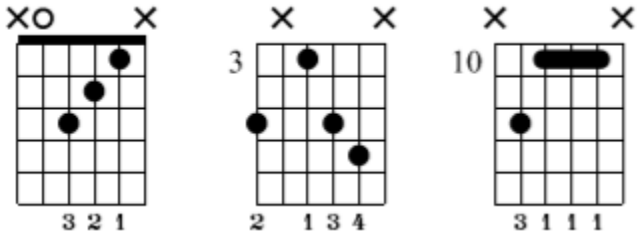
Let's explore some of the common slash chords and how they function harmonically. I am going to open a random fakebook (I chose "The Ultimate Pop/Rock Fake Book, 4th edition) and flip the pages until I see a song that uses slash chords (in this case, p. 319). The song "Little Jeannie" by Elton John is the example and it's in Bb.

It makes sense that the composer is a pianist because it is much easier for them to compose with slash chords than guitarists because they can simply play the bass note with the left hand and the chord with the right. It is very valuable for guitarists to learn about slash chords so they can make informed decisions about how to use them so can be as harmonically expressive as pianists.

I will deal with each of the slash chords used in this song individually:

Eb/Bb – This is an "second inversion" Eb chord. In other words, the 5th is in the bass. On guitar if you chose to leave the Bb out and just played the Eb chord, there would be no harm done, especially if there is a bass player playing with you. But the voicing is easy enough: play an Eb barre chord at the 6th fret and with the first finger, play the Bb underneath it on the 6th string.

F/A – This is a “first inversion” F chord, as the 3rd is in the bass. Again, if you just played an F chord, that wouldn’t be a big deal. Or, you could simply play the open 5th string underneath a 4-note open F chord, as in the first of these possibilities:



Ab/Eb – This is a “second inversion” Ab chord. If you play a barre chord at the 4th fret and don’t hit the 6th string root of *ab*, then your lowest note will be the *eb* and you’re in business.

Bb/F – “Second inversion” Bb chord, which could be played at the first fret adding a low *f* or at the 6th fret leaving out string 6. (These are similar to some of the previous voicings. Working it out for yourself is better than reading a chord diagram.)

C/G – Same thing here: a “second inversion” C chord. Work out the fingerings in open position, 3rd fret, and 8th frets.

Eb/F – This is the first chord we see whose bass note is not part of the chord. It functions as an F9sus because the *eb, g,* and *bb* notes of the Eb chord are the b7, 9, and 4th of the key of F, which we now have to analyze the intervals according to because that is the root note of the chord. Knowing this theory means that, if in a pinch you had to play F7sus, that would be fine. It wouldn’t have the 9th in it, but that’s ok. On the other hand, if there is a bassist playing *f* then you could just play the Eb and leave it at that.

Note: When you see a bass note that is a whole step up from a major chord, it functions as a 9sus chord to that bass root.

Another page (p. 254) that has “I Won’t Last a Day Without You” by Paul Williams and Roger Nichols shows an both Am/D and Am7/D. The Am has *a, c,* and *e* which is the 5th, b7th, and 9th to a D root. Thus, Am/D = D9 (no3rd) = D7sus2. The Am7 add the note *g* which is the 4th to the D root. Thus, Am7/D = D9sus. In reality you could most likely treat them both as Am7/D and sneak the *g* note in whether it’s technically in the chord name or not. Boiling down even further, playing D7sus or even Dsus would also work.

Note: When you see a bass note that is a fourth up from a minor chord, it functions as a 9sus chord to that bass root.

It is also possible to see a slash chord such as G/F. Don’t confuse this with F/G. They mean two completely different things. G/F means the chord is G7 with the 7th in the bass. If the chord was G/F# it would mean Gmaj7 with the 7th in the bass.

Note: When you see a bass note that is a whole or half step below a major chord, it turns that chord into a major or 7th chord.

The same is true for minor chords. Gm/F becomes Gm7 (3rd inversion), and Gm/F# becomes the 3rd inversion of a Gm(maj7), which simply means root, minor 3rd, 5th and major 7th.

Note: When you see a bass note that is a whole or half step below a minor chord, it turns that chord into a minor 7th or a minor-major 7th, respectively.

Other slash chords in this song are G(add9)/B, G(add9)/D which are the first and second inversions of a Gadd9, plus F/G and C/D which are similar to Eb/F we saw previously. So if this seems overwhelming, there are only a few common patterns to learn, and you'll see them over and over again.

Below is a summary of every possibility for slash chords after C and Cm. Some of them look complicated, and in certain cases I left the space blank because it was easier to conceive of the slash chord than think about the ambiguous function that is produced. Keep it simple: the ones to memorize are starred.

Example	Function
C/Db	Dbmin(maj7)b5
C/D*	D9sus (no 5th)
C/Eb	Eb6b9
C/E	C, first inversion
C/F*	Fmaj9(no 3rd)
C/Gb	
C/G	C, second inversion
C/Ab	Abmaj7#5
C/A	Am7
C/Bb*	C7, third inversion
C/B*	Cma7, third inversion
Cm/Db	Eb13, third inversion (Eb6 is same as Cm)
Cm/D	D7b9sus
Cm/Eb	Eb6 = Cm, first inversion
Cm/E	Cadd#9, first inversion
Cm/F*	F9sus(no 3rd) = F7sus2
Cm/Gb	
Cm/G	Cm, second inversion
Cm/Ab*	Abmaj7
Cm/A*	Am7b5
Cm/Bb*	Cm7, third inversion
Cm/B*	Cmin(maj7), third inversion