

## Spring 2012 Q&A

**Q:** What are color chords and how are they used?

**A:** This is a big subject with not many simple answers. Let's take it in pieces.

### Basic chords and color chords

The basic chords are majors, minors, and sevenths. Most songs can be played using only these chords. Typical chromatic autoharp setups have only these chords.

Color chords are essentially any chord that is not one of those basics. It is a term used mostly by autoharp players. Musicians with instruments that play single notes (trumpet, sax, flute, etc.) rely on others to play the notes needed to generate chords. Musicians playing instruments that can make any combination of notes that they need don't worry about unusual chords. Players with instruments that have buttons to make chords, such as autoharps and accordions, are different in that their instruments must be prepared ahead of time to make necessary note combinations.

### Some color chords don't work well on autoharp

There are lots of chords that one might see called out in sheet music that have limited usefulness on an autoharp because of its multiple octave range. For example, a major seventh (root, 3rd, 5th, 7th, written as CM7) can be a beautiful chord but if you make a chord bar that has the M7 in two octaves, the 7th tone in the lower octave is only ½ step from the root in the next octave. That makes a dissonance that can be OK in some circumstances but will often be undesirable.

Another example of a chord with limited usefulness would be a ninth chord (root, 3rd, 5th, flatted 7th, and 9th. A C 9th is written as C9). Again this can be a beautiful and useful chord until you try to put it into adjacent octaves. When you do that, you have the equivalent of root, 3rd, 5th, flatted 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th (the 8th and 10th are the root and 3rd in the next octave). The last four tones played together give you a sound that would be unpleasant in most situations.

### Color chords that do work well

Color chords that are complete within one octave so that they can be extended into the next octave without generating unwanted dissonance can provide opportunities to improve your arrangements in surprising ways. Some of the chords that fit this description are:

**Sixth (or Minor Seventh)** (root, 3rd, 5th, 6th). C sixth is written as C6 and is spelled C - E - G - A. Using the same notes, A minor 7th is written Am7 and is spelled A - C - E - G. The difference between them is simply which note you consider to be the root of the chord. On a chromatic it is common practice to label this chord Am7 but on a single key diatonic I would choose to label it C6.

**Suspended fourth (or Suspended Second)** (root, 4th, 5th). C suspended 4th is written as Csus4 and is spelled C - F - G. Using the same notes, F suspended second is written Fsus2 and is spelled F - G - C. Again the difference is simply which note you choose to consider the root. Chord bars making these chords are usually labeled as the suspended fourth.

**Diminished** (root, flatted 3rd, flatted 5th). A C diminished is sometimes written as Cdim but more often as C°. A diatonic autoharp only has the notes for one diminished chord (with its root at the seventh note of the scale) and it is not very useful because it shares notes with and sounds very much like a V7. Diminished chords become more desirable on a chromatic autoharp when you add the double flatted 7th



### **Example of standalone chords**

Sometimes the melody is an arpeggio on a color chord. Here are two instances of that.

From *The King And I*, "I Could Have Danced All Night."

**I**                      **IM7**                      **I6**  
I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night

From the classic Christmas song "Sleigh Ride":

**Isus4**  
We're riding along in a sleigh in a wintery wonderland

In either of these it is possible to substitute basic chords to get a passable arrangement but it certainly changes the character of the sound.