

Basic Barre Chords

by Jeff Foster

This is an introduction to the basic barre chords we use every day as we play our guitars (scroll down for diagrams showing the basic barre chords you'll want to master).

A "barre chord" refers to any chord wherein two or more strings are played with one finger, with the finger laying down across multiple strings like a "bar" (derived from the late 19th century French, literally 'barred', past participle of barrer). The strings so played are often adjacent, but can be non-adjacent strings, as well.



Barre chords, as commonly used, take full advantage of a unique characteristic of stringed instruments: they are movable. Most stringed instrument scales, arpeggios and chord forms can be repositioned on the fingerboard as-is, changing the tonic without having to alter the fingering.

Here's the rule: *Any scale, arpeggio, chord, etc, that does *not* contain open (unfretted) notes can be easily moved elsewhere on the fingerboard, allowing a single fingering to play in all keys.*

This movability of fingerings is one of the greatest practical advantages of stringed instruments, and a characteristic shared with no other class of instruments. For instance, to be able to play in all 12 keys on a keyboard, a horn, a woodwind, a percussion instrument such as marimba or vibes, or any other non-stringed instrument of which I'm aware, requires the musician to learn 12 distinctly different fingerings on their instrument. By contrast, a single fingering on a stringed instrument can simply be repositioned, unmodified, to play the same scale, arpeggio or chord in any other key or tonality.

And with a few minor modifications to fingering, even open, non-movable forms can be made movable, so in that respect it can be rightly said that ALL fingerings are ultimately movable.

Barre chords utilize this movability to great advantage, and so can be considered "meat and potatoes" chord forms that every guitarist will want to master. While the varieties of barre chords is a large topic, here we'll focus on the basic forms the guitarist will first learn, covering the following six chord categories and intervals:

Major (1, 3, 5)
Minor (1, b3, 5)
Dominant (1, 3, 5, b7)
Major 7th (1, 3, 5, 7)
Minor 7th (1, b3, 5, b7)

While it's possible to take a single fingering of each of these categories and cover any such chord, this would often require wide leaps in position on the fingerboard. To keep our movements more compact, we typically learn two forms of each category (two major chords, two minors, etc), rooted on our two bass strings, the 5th (A) and 6th (E).

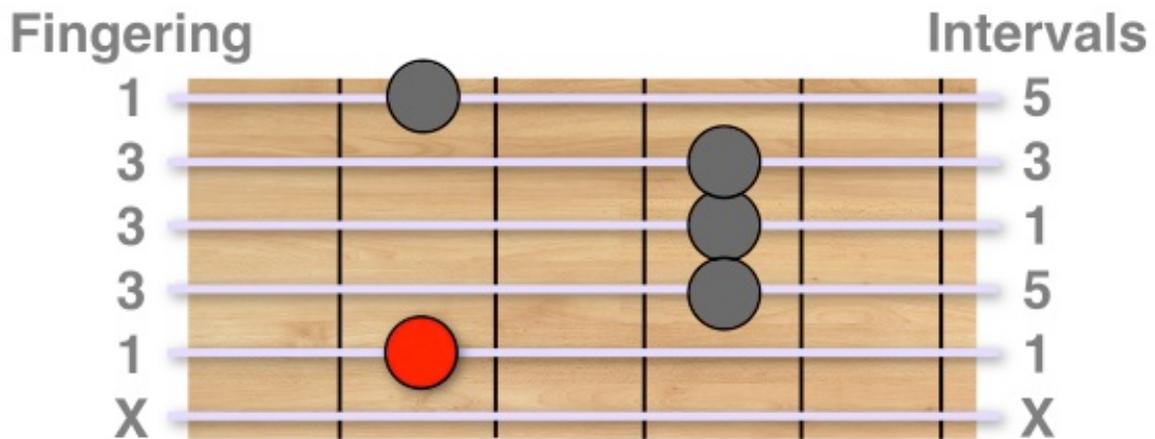
The following chord diagrams present common fingerings for these six categories of chords. To the left of each diagram is the fingering typically used for the chord, and to the right are the intervals of each note in the chord. The proper fingerings are fundamental to learning how to play the chords, and the intervallic relations become more useful to us once the chord has been mastered. Learning the intervals within a chord form makes extending or altering the chord much easier. For instance, if we need to modify a dominant chord to include a 9 or some kind, or a flatted 5th, knowing the intervals in our basic forms can help us figure out how the modified chords can be played, without resorting to looking up the possible fingerings in a chord book.

Major Barre Chords

Major chords consist of a root, a third, and a fifth. They remain "triadic" in nature, even if more than three notes are played. In our diatonic scale, the I and the IV chords are major. Major seventh chords (found below) can also function as I and IV chords.

Barre Chords

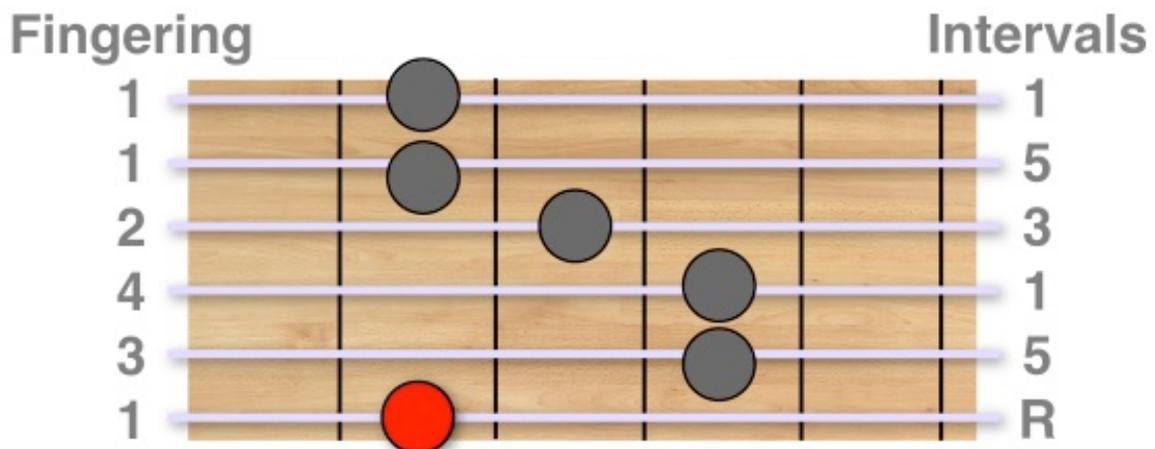
Major form, rooted on 5th-string



This is a sort of "double-barre" chord, played with both the 1st finger and the 3rd. Several alternative fingers are commonly used in place of the 3rd-finger barre.

Barre Chords

Major form, rooted on 6th-string

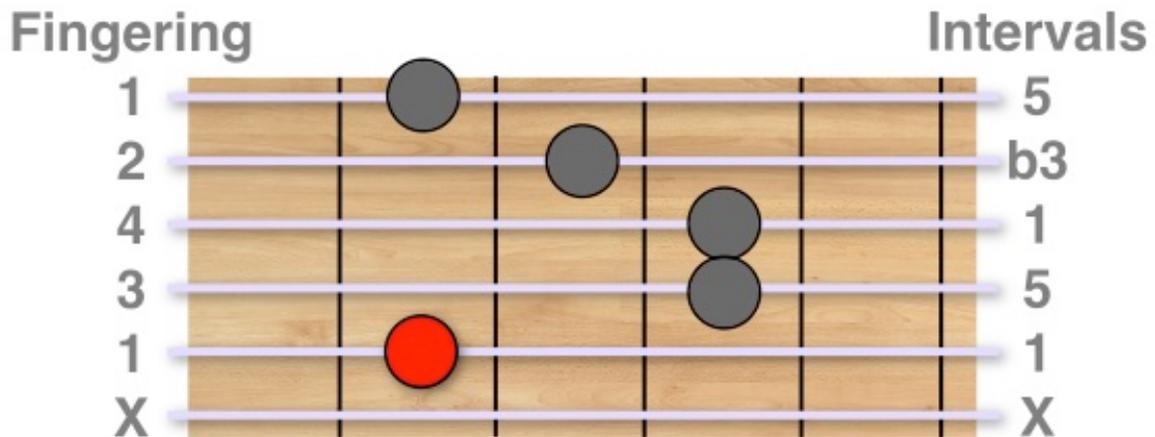


Minor Barre Chords

Minor chords consist of a root, a flattened third, and a fifth. They remain "triadic" in nature, even if more than three notes are played. In our diatonic scale, the II, the III and the VI chords are minor. Minor seventh chords (found below) can also function as II, III and VI chords.

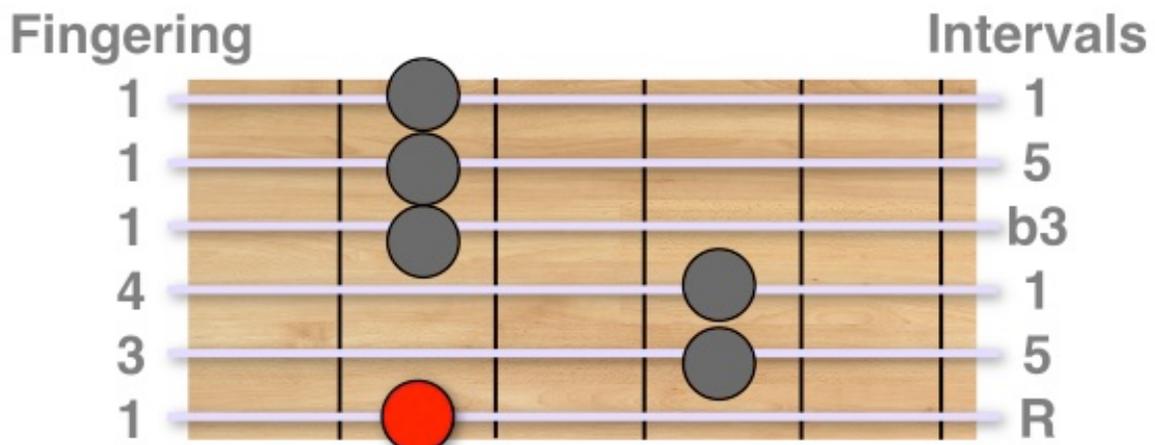
Barre Chords

Minor form, rooted on 5th-string



Barre Chords

Minor form, rooted on 6th-string



Dominant Barre Chords (aka 7th chords)

Dominant chords consist of a root, a third, a fifth, and a flatted seventh. They can be thought of as a major triad extended with a flatted seventh. In our diatonic scale, only the V chord is dominant.

Barre Chords

Dominant 7 form, rooted on 5th-string

Fingering		Intervals
1		5
4		3
1		b7
3		5
1		1
X		X

Barre Chords

Dominant 7 form, rooted on 6th-string

Fingering		Intervals
1		1
1		5
2		3
1		b7
3		5
1		1

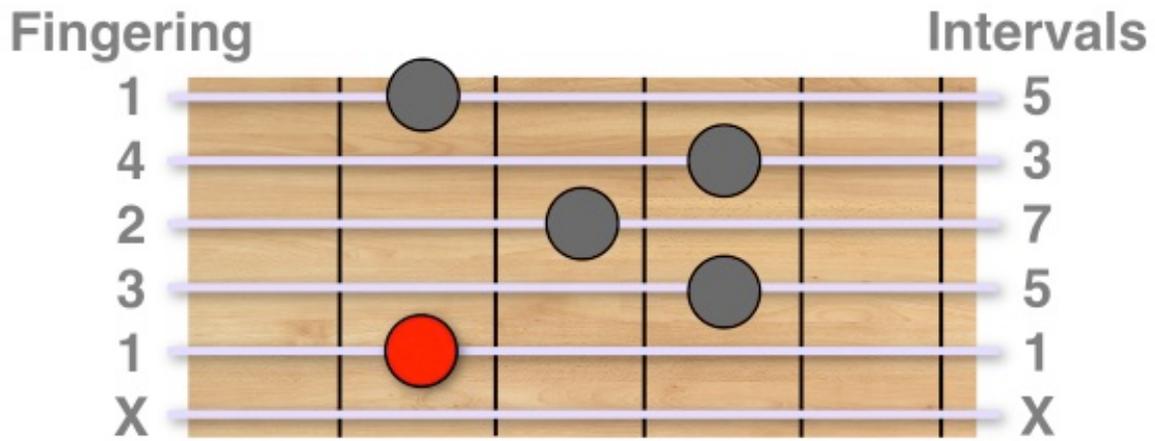
Note the optional b7 on the 2nd string, played with the 4th finger if desired.

Major 7th Barre Chords

Major 7th chords consist of a root, a third, a fifth, and a natural 7th. They are considered extended forms of the major, and diatonically can work well in place of a I or IV chord.

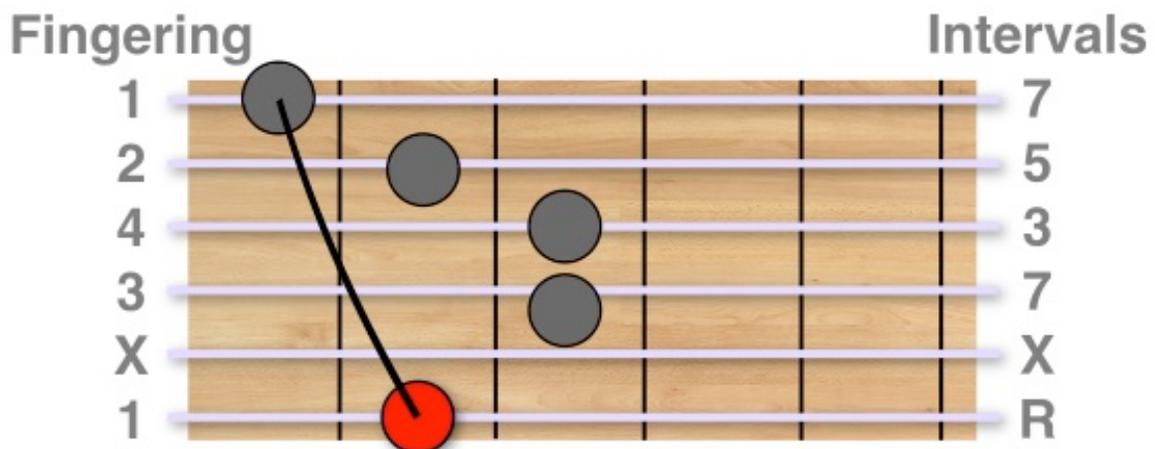
Barre Chords

Major 7 form, rooted on 5th-string



Barre Chords

Major 7 'cross-barre', rooted on 6th-string



This fingering looks more daunting than it actually is. We can call this a "cross-barre" chord in that we still play multiple notes with the 1st finger, but arch over a fret to hit both notes.

Minor 7th Barre Chords

Minor 7th chords consist of a root, a flatted third, a fifth, and a flatted 7th. They are considered extended forms of the minor, and diatonically can work well in place of a II, III or VI chord.

Barre Chords

Minor 7 form, rooted on 5th-string

Fingering		Intervals
1		5
2		b3
1		b7
3		5
1		1
X		X

Barre Chords

Minor 7 form, rooted on 6th-string

Fingering		Intervals
1		1
1		5
1		b3
1		b7
3		5
1		R

Note the optional b7 on the 2nd string, played with the 4th finger if desired.

There are, of course, many other barre chords you might want to learn, including:

- augmented (1, 3, #5)
- half-diminished *aka m7b5* (1, b3, b5, b7)
- diminished (1, b3, b5, bb7)
- and the large catch-all category, altered chords (eg: dominant 7 with a #9 and/or b5).

In addition, other movable chords can be found rooted on the 4th string, and there are several variations of the chords presented above (for instance, playing the root with something other than the 1st finger).

For the ambitious guitar student, familiarizing yourself not only with chord fingerings, but also the interval of every note within every chord, cannot be stressed enough. Knowing the actual construction of our chords allows us to not only play them, but to *understand* them, appreciate why they sound as they do, modify them as needed in varying musical contexts, develop our improvisational skills. etc.

Entire books have been written on the subject of chord theory and harmonic development, but hopefully this introduction to our movable barre chords will help beginning and intermediate guitarists better understand and appreciate the fundamental role of chords in the music we make.

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