

Play better with...

**Your  
Ultimate  
Practice  
Plan**

# Your Ultimate Practice Plan...



A lot of players gravitate towards the things they can already do, wasting time running around in circles whilst the things they can't do get further and further away. **John Wheatcroft** puts you back on track...

## ABILITY RATING



From 1 to 5

### Will improve your:

- Technical ability
- Theory knowledge
- Musical discipline

THE POPULAR VIEW is that to become a better player you should devote practice time to mastering things you can't do at present. Whilst this is fine in principle, in reality it's not much help when

attempting to organise yourself. You may be the most willing and eager guitar scholar, but more often you'll not be sure of the best place to start, potentially trying to do too much too soon and therefore forced to make a hasty retreat back to familiar musical pastures. The best approach is to see your learning and musical development as a progressive pathway, with each new piece of information a logical, conceptual and technical development of the things you already know. This allows you to grow at a steady rate and means that each time you attempt to learn something 'new' you don't have to start from scratch, as a huge

amount of the groundwork has already been put securely into place. Much better, I'm sure you'll agree.

One massive schoolboy error is to practise by the clock, thinking that simply the amount of hours you put in defines how good you are going to be. The reality is that it's more down to the level of intensity - far better to do 30 minutes a day of focused work that's designed to strengthen weak spots and turn the heat up progressively, than to have the guitar in your hands for five hours while watching TV or looking out of the window. This type of activity is only really useful for drilling motor skills, where you

can disengage the brain and keep going for longer periods. If you're working on a cognitive skill such as memorising a new chord sequence or analysing fingering choices, you need focus and total concentration. Intense concentration requires a lot of energy. If you're able to focus fully for more than 20 minutes without falter, then you're doing exceptionally well!

## BREAKING IT DOWN

It is a practical and physical impossibility to work on every single element of your playing every time you sit down to play (unless you are a complete beginner). To make any real progress you need to look at the individual component parts in isolation and in detail. Always plan what you're going to do before you even pick up the guitar and be realistic about what you can achieve in the timeframe provided.

Between 15-20 minutes on any one topic before taking a break is ideal. I generally pick four contrasting things every day. Choose a timeframe that is realistic and sustainable in the long-term, so that when you put the guitar down you feel a sense of achievement, not disappointment. Shorter and more intense sessions are more effective than the conservatoire type methodology of practising for eight hours a day non-stop. That's just going to give you RSI.

Create a log, mapping out short, mid and long-term goals and review monthly. This way, if there's anything missing (I'll put money on it being sight-reading!), you should be able to spot it and put your



“ Music's like dinner - you do it a bite at a time ” Phil Hilborne

## FURTHER STUDY

■ If you fancy a bit of light bedtime reading then try the following excellent and inspirational books: *Effortless Mastery* by Kenny Werner (Alfred 1996), *The Inner Game Of Music* by Barry Green (Doubleday 1986), and finally *Musical Excellence*, a collection of essays outlining strategies and techniques to enhance performance edited by Aaron Williamson (Oxford Press 2004).

practice pathway back on track.

Obviously this time does not include getting the guitar out of the case, finding a lead, plugging in the amp and setting up the music stand, or turning the CD player on.

Also, one hour playing with other people is worth ten in the practice room. It helps if the people you're playing with are just that little bit better/more experienced than you too. This also helps you to focus and structure your studies in the best way possible, as you'll quickly figure out what works and what doesn't. Don't put this off until you're 'good'. This is how you'll actually get to be good!

I'll leave you to ponder on this thought. It isn't about amassing as

much information as is humanly possible; it's about how you're going to use the skills creatively as a musician. I'll often tell students that if we both had to make a list of things we couldn't do on the guitar, then mine would definitely be longer, just because my experience means I'm more aware of the infinite possibilities music has to offer. It's a constant work in progress, so surrender to this marvellous piece of information and enjoy the journey...

## APPROACHING A NEW PIECE

When learning a new piece, often you need to break it down into small chunks. There's always a reason why you can't play something and it's usually not because you're incapable; it's because previous steps have been missed. If you want to achieve a specific goal there are a number of stages before you can get there. If I want to play like Steve Vai, that's too much of a jump in one go – you need to go through many other steps (often very small ones) to get to his level. So when you're trying to play a Steve Vai piece and you can't play a specific lick, maybe it's because something else has been

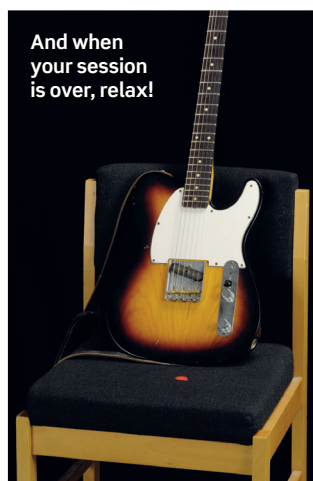
missed in your musical education up to this point. You need to isolate whatever that might be and find ways of reinforcing that element of your playing and establish what the problem is, then find some exercises to strengthen that area. This might mean learning some other musical examples in order to build that area up. You may have to go back a few stages. It can be a humbling experience, but you almost always have to go back before you can go on to the next stage.

The part of the brain that is associated with long-term memory

works best when information is re-entered periodically in small amounts, so once again the method of 'little and often' is best. Anyone who's crammed for an exam to find that two weeks later they can't remember a single thing knows this is true!

## WHEATCROFT'S WAY

My philosophy regarding practice breaks down into three main areas. The first deals with tackling new material, usually something I'll have to perform at some stage in the near future. The second deals with general musicianship; ear training, transcribing, reading, harmony, theory and so on. In terms of pure instrumental development, it's all about attaining/maintaining control of expression, clarity of tone, fluency, dynamic articulation, flexibility, stamina, consistency, aesthetic beauty etc. I tend more to think about musicality these days, rectifying technical problems as and when they occur. But this is only possible now because of the work put into just technique earlier on. Most work that is purely technical tends to be in the form of 'fire-fighting' - putting out any potentially disastrous 'flare-ups' as and when they occur. **GT**



A word on how this lesson works. The first five studies all take one specific technique or concept, selected in order to provide a balanced range of skills. We then work through five variations or developments

- the last of which is always a musical example. Studies 6 to 8 can be viewed as practical methods to drill specific disciplines in the minimum of time - with the maximum results. Ready? Then let's go!

## EXAMPLE 1 PICKING

ON THE CD Track 5

Two of the main technical challenges when picking all notes are what to do when crossing strings, and also when playing multiple notes on a single string. Our study here starts with the most basic combination of these elements and expands into something much more complex, but

in smooth progressive steps. Economy picking is the obvious choice here, but remember to always accent the notes that land on the beat, even when that happens to be an upstroke.

Fig 1.1: Initial cell

Fig 1.2: Developed Scale Fragment

Fig 1.3a: String crossing cell

Fig 1.3b: String crossing pentatonic line with double-stop rolls

## EXAMPLE 1 PICKING ...CONTINUED

ON THE CD Track 5

Fig 1.4a: Combined arpeggio/scale with economy picking

Chords: C, Dm7, Em7, Fmaj7

Chords: G7, Am7, Bm7 $\flat$ 5, C, Cmaj7, Bm7 $\flat$ 5

Fig 1.4b: Descending pattern

Fig 1.5: Be-bop jazz phrase (Dorian/Melodic minor)

Chord: Dm7

## EXAMPLE 2 PHRASING WITH CHORD TONES

ON THE CD Track 6

Our second study is more conceptual in nature, allowing you to develop the essential skill of chord-tone and melodic figure association. This skill allows players such as Eric Clapton to clearly outline harmonic changes whilst soloing, without the clutter

associated with learning lots of scales. All of our examples relate to the five CAGED dominant 7th chords, and culminate in a tasty blues turnaround idea that spells the chords out perfectly, logically and with great ease.

Fig 2.1: Moveable chord forms (Dominant 7th)

Tempo:  $\text{♩} = 100$

Chord: C7

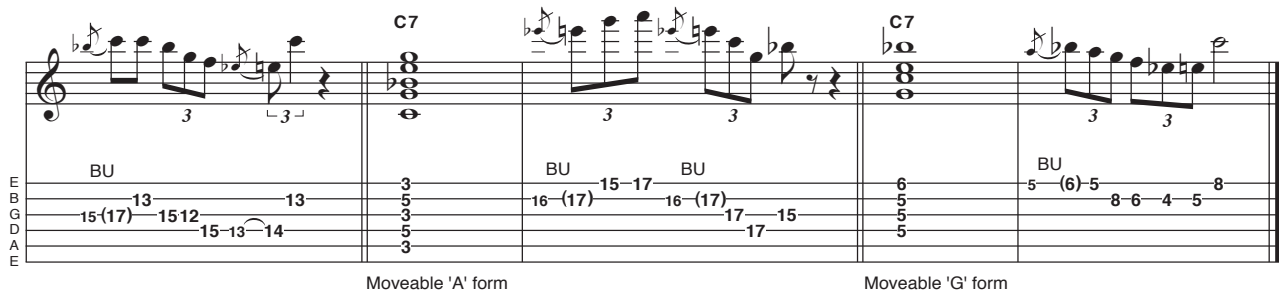
Forms: Moveable 'E' form, 'D' form, 'C' form, 'A' form, 'G' form

Fig 2.2: Moveable chord forms with associated phrase (1 key)

Chord: C7

Forms: Moveable 'E' form, Moveable 'D' form, Moveable 'C' form

EXAMPLE 2 PHRASING WITH CHORD TONES ...CONT. ON THE CD  Track 6



Moveable 'A' form

Moveable 'G' form

Fig 2.3: Moveable chord transposed to I IV V in each area

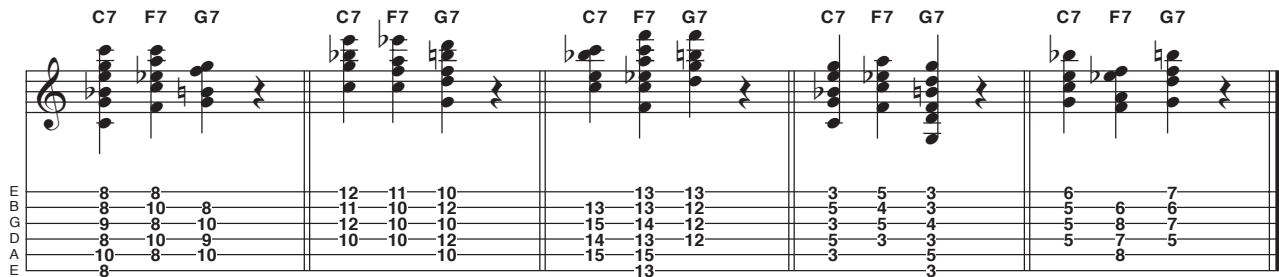
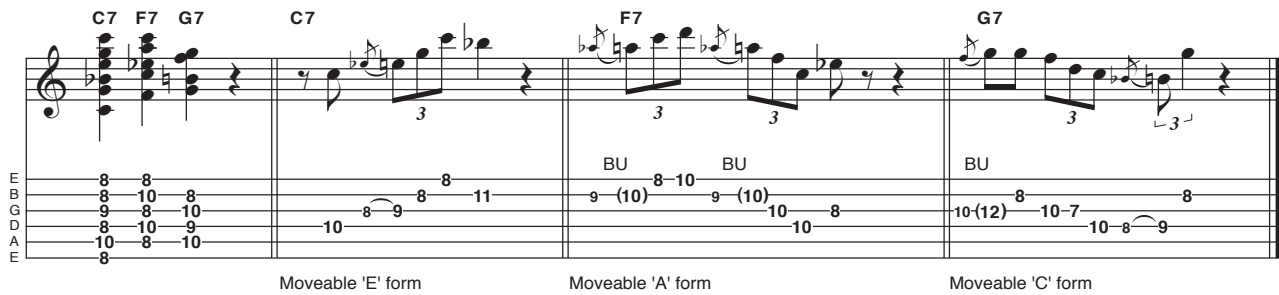


Fig 2.4: Moveable chords through I IV V with associated phrase (1 area)

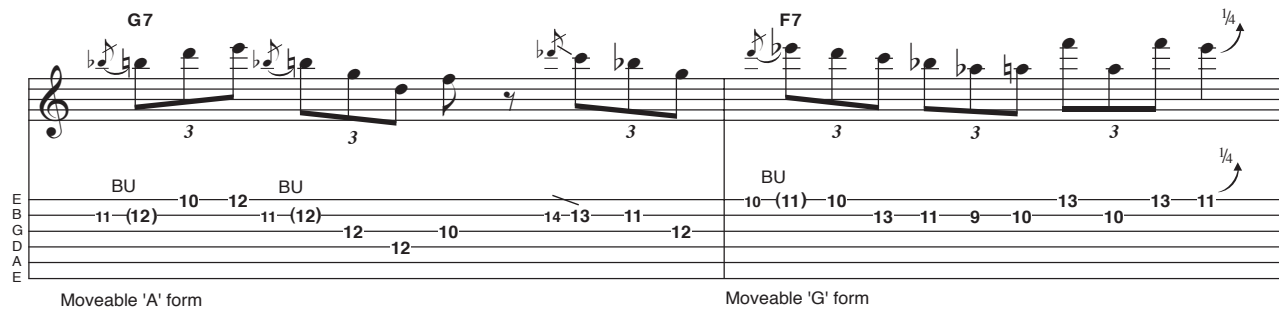


Moveable 'E' form

Moveable 'A' form

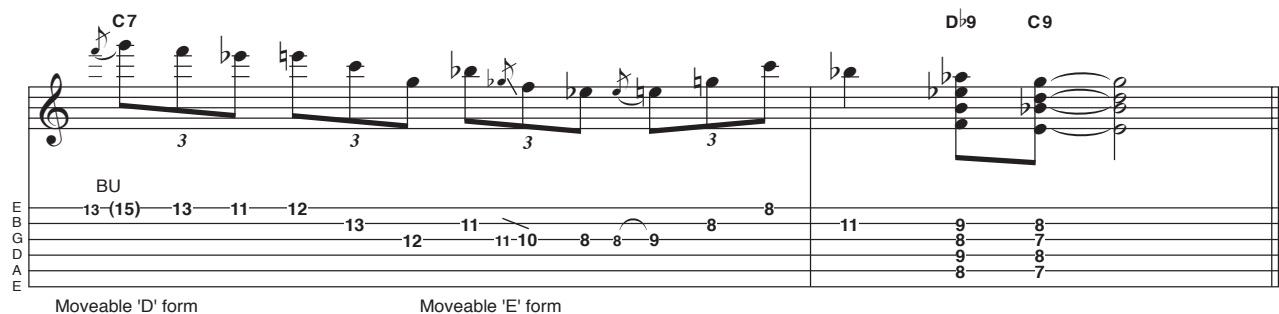
Moveable 'C' form

Fig 2.5: Blues V VI I ending lick



Moveable 'A' form

Moveable 'G' form



Moveable 'D' form

Moveable 'E' form

## EXAMPLE 3 HYBRID PICKING

ON THE CD  Track 7

It's country madness next with a five-point plan to develop your hybrid picking technique. By now you'll have figured out how things work; take a basic technique and expand gradually as your accuracy, stamina and consistency responds to the workload. I've squeezed a couple of

nifty rock-style arpeggios in here too. It's possible to get these up to frightening speed with not too much effort, so give them a go. From a country perspective, hybrid-picking and scales containing open strings go hand in hand, so I've integrated elements of both as we progress.

Fig 3.1a: Basic cell (1 finger)

Fig 3.1b: Basic cell (2 fingers)

Fig 3.1c: Fwd/Rvs (2 fingers)

$\text{♩} = 100$  C

E B G D A E

Fig 3.1a:  $\square$  m  $\square$  m  $\square$  m  $\square$  m

Fig 3.1b:  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a

Fig 3.1c:  $\square$  m a m  $\square$  m a m  $\square$  m a m  $\square$  m a m

Fig 3.2: Basic I IV V sequence plus hammer on

C Fadd9 G C

E B G D A E

Fig 3.2:  $\square$  m  $\square$  a  $\square$  m a etc

Fig 3.3: Scales with hybrid picking and open strings

C major scale G Mixolydian A Aeolian

E B G D A E

Fig 3.3:  $\square$  m  $\square$  m a  $\square$  a  $\square$   $\square$  m  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m

Fig 3.4a: Rock triad with hybrid picking

Fig 3.4b: Rock 7th triad with hybrid picking

C C

E B G D A E

Fig 3.4a:  $\square$  m a  $\square$  etc

Fig 3.4b:  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m  $\square$  etc

Fig 3.5: Country hybrid picked line with open strings

C BU

E B G D A E

Fig 3.5:  $\square$  m  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m a  $\square$  m  $\square$  m  $\square$  m

EXAMPLE 4 SLURS AND HAMMER-ONS

ON THE CD  Track 8

Hammer-ons and tapping are the order of the day for study number 4. Initially it's fretting-hand only, picking the first note on each new string. Before long though we're incorporating two picking-hand taps. Try using your 'm' and 'a' fingers so you keep the pick between

thumb and first finger. We're simplifying the tapping element for our final musical example but increasing the complexity both harmonically and in freboard movement. The crucial factor here is damping unused strings. Use the palm of your fretting hand to mute all idle bass strings.

Fig 4.1a: Basic legato cell

C/Am

Fig 4.1b: Basic cell moved across string

Fig 4.2: Basic cell with string skips

C/Am

Fig 4.3: Basic cell with second and third finger taps

C/Am

Fig 4.4: String skips in octaves

C/Am

Fig 4.5: Harmonised sequence with string skip tapping

Cmaj7 Dm7 Db7 Cmaj7

## EXAMPLE 5 THUMB PICK

ON THE CD  Track 9

Just for the record, I'm absolutely hopeless with a thumb-pick, but I resisted the temptation to just cheat and hybrid-pick and worked through these examples progressively for 15 minutes. By the end I was able to record the tracks on the GT CD, so this method obviously works. Our musical examples follow the now familiar pattern: start

simple, isolate any movement or idea, expand upon this in stages, and end with a musical application. This time we finish with a 12-bar study with combined root-5th bass and melody on the treble strings. This example might seem unusual, but consider that players as different as Freddie King, Johnny Marr and Brent Mason all use a thumbpick.

Fig 5.1a: Basic Pattern

♩ = 100 Swing

Fig 5.1b: Elementary melody

Fig 5.1c: Expanded melody

Fig 5.2a: Syncopated melody

Fig 5.2b: Melody in half-notes (minims)

Fig 5.3a-5.3c: Syncopated melody transposed over I IV V

Fig 5.4a-5.4c: Expanded melody examples

Fig 5.4d: Bass-line variation

Fig 5.5: 'Travis-style' complete 12-bar study over I IV V sequence



## EXAMPLE 6 THE IMPROVISATION ACID TEST

ON THE CD  Track 10

This example will test how well you have absorbed a musical device, concept or technique. We know the story: you've put the hours in and are feeling rather smug; you go out to gig or jam with friends and none of the stuff you've worked on comes out! Well, help is at hand. The trick is to make your practice and performance line up. Your task is simply to play on your own, establish a groove, feel, key and style, decide upon how long the soloing gap is going to be and go for it. If

you lose the rhythm, mess up or come back in the wrong place or key then more work is needed. If all goes well then put your new skills to the test by creating as many variations as you can, mixing techniques, fretboard positions etc. Next time you play for real you should have a far better command of vocabulary you know that you can actually get to it on demand. On the GTCD I played all the examples and just improvised a couple of things to show you how things may turn out.

**Fig 6.1: Blues-style vamp**

$\text{♩} = 100$  Shuffle  
G7

Possibly miss on repeats

Insert fill here (Mixolydian/Blues)

**Fig 6.2: Maiden-style rock vamp**

$\text{♩} = 100$  Straight  
A5 G5/A F5 G5

Insert fill here (Aeolian/Minor Pentatonic)

**Fig 6.3: Swing-style minor vamp**

$\text{♩} = 160$  Swing  
Dm11 Em11 Dm11 Em11 Dm11

Insert fill here (Dorian/Melodic minor)

**Fig 6.4: Reggae-style major vamp**

$\text{♩} = 80$  Straight  
C F G C F G

Insert fill here (Major scale/Triad arpeggios)

**Fig 6.5: Funk-style single note riff**

$\text{♩} = 88$  Straight  
C7

Insert fill here (Mixolydian/Blues/Extended dom chords)

## EXAMPLE 7 FRETBOARD FLUENCY

ON THE CD  Track 11

We all know our pentatonic scales, right? Well, just how well do you know them? This little beauty will put your knowledge to the test, leaving no stone unturned. The trick is in defining the octave points - the crucial landmarks of any scale, arpeggio or chord. Once you've worked through these examples repeat the procedure with any

scale/mode/chord/pentatonic that you know. Work in this area will be highly rewarded, I promise. If you're ever stuck for something to work on, this exercise has endless permutations - just think of any scale or mode etc that you feel is a little weaker than you'd like, and give it the 'Fretboard Fluency' treatment. The rewards will be immense!

Fig 7.1a: Basic octave definitions

$\text{♩} = 100$   
Am

Fig7.1b: Rvs cell

Am7/11

Fig7.1c: Fwd cell

Am7/11

Fig 7.2a-e: Octave definitions/Associated chord/Pentatonic cell

Am7

Fig 7.3: Continuous scale exercise

EXAMPLE 7 FRETBOARD FLUENCY ...CONTINUED

ON THE CD  Track 11

Fig 7.4a: 8ve defts in 5 keys/forms (1 Area: Ascending 4ths)

Moveable 'Am' form      Moveable 'Gm' form

Fig 7.4a: 8ve defts in 5 keys/forms (1 Area: Ascending 4ths)

E      A      D      G      C

(Transpose entire exercise up semitone for next 5 keys...etc)

Fig 7.4b: Complete shapes in 5 keys/forms (1 Area: Ascending 4ths)

Em7/11      Am7/11      Dm7/11

Moveable 'Cm' form      Moveable 'Em' form      Moveable 'Am' form

Gm7/11      Cm7/11

(Transpose entire exercise up semitone for next 5 keys...etc)

Fig 7.5: Fusion lines through non-diatonic modal progression Am7-Cm7

Am7      Cm7      Am7      Cm7

## EXAMPLE 8 SCALE DRILL

ON THE CD  Track 12

I thought I'd save the easy one until last! Fancy running through all of the most used scales, pentatonics, 7th arpeggios, triads and intervallic permutations in one minute and eight seconds? Well roll up and give this beast a go. Obviously, it's in one key and is limited to just one octave, so you could invent an alternative uber-scale drill that moves

through all keys and exploits a greater range of fretboard motion. But for now this should hit the spot. Notice how each structure morphs into the next by changing just one note, and remember that the best way to learn something you don't know is to relate it to and develop something you already do know. *Continued next page.*

Fig 8: Play as one continual study

$\text{♩} = 100$

**System 1 (Measures 1-3):**  
 Measure 1: Cmaj7, C Lydian (#4)  
 Measure 2: C Ionian  
 Measure 3: C7, C Mixolydian (b7)

**System 2 (Measures 4-6):**  
 Measure 4: Cm7, C Dorian (b3 b7)  
 Measure 5: Cm(maj7), C Melodic minor (b3)  
 Measure 6: Cm7, C Aeolian (b3 b6 b7)

**System 3 (Measures 7-9):**  
 Measure 7: Cm(maj7), C Harmonic minor (b3 b6)  
 Measure 8: Cm7, C Phrygian (b2 b3 b6 b7)  
 Measure 9: Cm7b5, C Locrian (b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7)

**System 4 (Measures 10-12):**  
 Measure 10: Cm7/C7, C Blues scale (R b3 4 b5 5 b7)  
 Measure 11: Cm7, C minor pentatonic (R b3 4 5 b7)  
 Measure 12: C, C major pentatonic (R 2 3 5 6)

**System 5 (Measures 13-15):**  
 Measure 13: Cmaj7, (1 3 5 7)  
 Measure 14: C7, (1 3 5 b7)  
 Measure 15: Cm7, Cm7b5, Cdim, (1 b3 b5 b7)

**EXAMPLE 8 SCALE DRILL ...CONTINUED**

**ON THE CD**  **Track 12**

Two good examples are the relationship between the Dorian mode and the melodic minor, and the parallel relationship between the Aeolian mode and harmonic minor. There are no prizes for how fast

you finish this, just how well you understand it, so take things one bar at a time if necessary. Right then, I'm off to do some practice myself - on the trumpet (think I'm joking?). Have fun!

**C** **Caug** **Cm** **Cdim**

(1 3 5) (1 3 #5) (1 b3 5) (1 b3 b5)

E  
B  
G  
D  
A  
E

16

**C**

3rds 4ths 5ths

E  
B  
G  
D  
A  
E

18

6ths 7ths 8ves

E  
B  
G  
D  
A  
E

21

**C** **Dm** **Em** **F** **G** **Am** **Bdim** **C**

Triads

E  
B  
G  
D  
A  
E

24

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