

Unusual Drop Voicing Formulations

When I was taught about Drop voicings in my arranging class at Berklee, it was presented as involving various norms as far as subbing out less essential chord tones for extensions, in order to achieve a 4-note voicing that implied a chord with more than 4 notes.

[If you allow yourself the leeway to use 5, 6 or 7 note chords, there is no need to omit anything in order to add an extension.

But if you limit yourself to 4-notes, these techniques become invaluable.]

As with the shell voicings concept, we can freely omit 5ths and roots from our voicings w/o causing too much harmonic ambiguity, assuming someone else, say, a bass player, is playing the root.

We usually want to retain the 3rd and the 7th, unless it's a sus4 or a 6th chord.

And these norms apply whether you're working with close, drop 2, drop 3, or whatever, types of 4-note voicings.

The norms are:

* 9 subs for 1

[Remember, that these techniques are predicated on the idea that someone else in the ensemble is playing the root on the bottom.

And when you've subbed 9 for 1, it's a good idea to sing the root, or play it on a keyboard, so you can fully hear the effect of that voicing.]

* 11 and/or 13 sub for 5

[The biggest limitation to this approach is that there is no way to have both an 11th and a 13th in the same voicing.]

But, there are also a few other 'norms' we can invoke that are just a bit less 'normal'.

* Sometimes 9 can sub for 3, in which case you've got a sus2 chord, and you should be aware that if the 3rd of that chord has not been previously sounded out, or will not be sounded out soon, the chord may sound more ambiguous than you expected it to.

* Sometimes 11 can sub for 3, in which case you've got a sus4 chord, and if the 3rd is has not sounded, the listener might get the wrong chord sound in their ears.

* Brief usage of 13 for 7 can occur as well, with the same type of caveat that if the 7th has not or will not soon be sounded out, the chord won't sound like a 7th chord anymore but will be heard as a 6th chord instead.

The main exceptions to this one are with maj7/maj6 and min(maj7)/min6 chords which are more or less interchangeable much of the time.

Especially on guitar, a grip for a maj13 voicing is often much harder to execute than that of a maj6 voicing. Etc.

But any chord that normally has a b7 in it will not sound like the same chord if that note is omitted for long.

* Sometimes on a 6th chord, it' can be cool to treat the 7th as if it's an extension (even though most theory texts will tell you that if the 7th and the 6th are both present, it's a 13th chord).

So, for example, if B is your melody on a C6 chord, you might get a more satisfying sound by starting with a C6 voicing that has C on top and just using B instead.

The above 'norms' are very flexible and can cover most situations more than adequately.

But these 'norms' also close a few harmonic doors that can be reopened with a little bit of novel thinking.

1. If 9 always subs for 1, then there's no way to have the root and the 9th both present in your voicing assuming that's what you want to hear for whatever reason you want it.

But, what if you started out the voicing process by using 1 2(aka 9) 3 and 7 instead of 1(or 9) 3 5 and 7?

That way, both the root and 9th will always be present, and the 3rd and the 7th will confirm the sound of the chord when played above the bass note/root.

Close voicings will be:

1 2 3 7, 2 3 7 1, 3 7 1 2, 7 1 2 3

Drop 2 will be:

3 1 2 7, 7 2 3 1, 1 3 7 2 (shell voicing with the 9th added), 2 7 1 3

Etc.

We could say that '9 is subbing for 5' even though it's counterintuitive to do so since 5 and 9 are not adjacent

tones.

But that's kind of what it is.

'9 for 5'.

2. Likewise, if 13 always subs for 5, then there's no way to have both notes in the same voicing, if for some reason that's what you want to hear.

In this case, the solution is to use '13 for 1', which are again, not adjacent tones, so it's weird.

But if you start the voicing process with 3 5 6(aka13) and 7, you can accomplish what you're trying to do.

Close voice:

3 5 6 7, 5 6 7 3, 6 7 3 5, 7 3 5 6

Drop 2:

6 3 5 7, 7 5 6 3, 3 6 7 5, 5 7 3 6

Etc., etc.

As with regular vanilla Close or Drop voicings, some of the resulting grips will not be playable on the guitar.

But the majority will be playable on guitar.

In cases where one drop voicing version of a grip for a melody note will be a drag, a different drop voicing might be easy peasy.

Or the same problematic voicing might be easier with a different grip using a different set of strings.

And you'll never know until you work them all out.

I think there may be a few other novel starting configurations for doing permutations of 4-note chords but I think this is enough to digest for now.

JG

Here's a few voicings/grips that have come out of my work with these oddballs.

G9 w/A in the lead, Drop 3:

X 8 9 12 10 X

G9 w/G in the lead, Drop 2&3:

7 8 7 X 8 X

G13 w/D in the lead, Drop 2:

X X 9 9 6 10

Etc.