

How to Read Lead Sheet Chord Symbols

One of the most important lessons to learn when studying jazz comping is how to read lead sheet chord symbols.

Most players are surprised when they're told that just because a lead sheet says play chord x, that doesn't mean you have to play chord x.

Lead sheet chords are approximations and suggestions of what to play, but they're often simplified and it's up to you to make them interesting.

To do so, the first item to study is chord colors.

Chord colors are where you see C7 in a lead sheet for example, and you know your options are any version of that C7 chord in your comping.

This means you could play C9, C7#11, C13, C7b9, C7b13, etc. in place of that C7 chord.

As long as it's some sort of C dominant chord, or a related sub, it works.

But, there are two things you have to keep in mind, the melody if it's being played and the style of the soloist.

If the melody note is the 9th, and you play C7b9, ouch, you're going to have a bad time.

As well, if the soloist is playing super inside diatonic lines, and you play C7#9-C7b13-C7b9,b5 over C7, it could throw off the soloist.

So, the best approach to chord colors is to study your options, practice applying those options to tunes, then reacting on instinct in jams.

To get you started, this chapter gives you an example of chord coloring over the blues, plus a brief overview of common chord colors.