

THE SEVEN DEADLY STRINGS

A LESSON IN 7-STRING COMPING

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Increasing the downward range of fretted instruments by tacking on extra strings is not a new idea. Sixteenth-century lutenists kept adding bass courses, and 21-string instruments were common by the Baroque era. This added-string ideology has occasionally resurfaced in the electric age. For example, jazz luminary George Van Eps coaxes rich, pianistic harmonies from a 7-string Gretsch, Steve Vai wields 7-string Ibanez models, and Charlie Hunter performed for years on a 7-string Ralph Novak instrument before moving to an 8-string.

Trying a 7-string for the first time is a disorienting experience, and not just because the neck is wider than usual. Most of us are used to calculating the distances between the strings at least partly in relation to the lowest string. When, for example, we reach for a *B*₂ on the 1st fret of the fifth string, we're accustomed to touching down on the string adjacent to the lowest. Encountering that note on the *third* string from the bottom can feel quite strange.

The following examples are designed to help you orient yourself on a 7-string tuned in the most common configuration: *B, E, A, D, G, B, E*, low to high. We're accustomed to having the sixth string sit two octaves below the open first string, but here we also have a two-octave interval between the seventh and second strings—a parallel underscored by **Ex. 1**.

Remembering that relationship can help you figure out 7-string chords. Think of voicings in which the root resides on the second string—a simple open-position *D* chord is a good example. The upper notes of the chords diagrammed in **Ex. 2** include many familiar

fingering configurations, except here they're placed above the low *D* of the seventh string's 3rd fret. Ironically, the simple *D* triad is one of the more difficult chords—notice how the jazzier-sounding *D6*, *Dm9*, and *D6/9* sit neatly beneath your hand.

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

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Ex. 3 features sustained chords over a syncopated, bossa-flavored bass line. The idea is to suggest a bass and guitarist playing simultaneously, with the “bass” taking an occasional fill beneath rests or sustained chords.

Ex. 4, a bluesy walking bass/chord figure, highlights another trick for orienting yourself to the low *B* string: Any chord fingering that works on the lowest four strings of a 6-string will also work on the lowest four strings of a

7-string because the intervallic relationships are the same. Be it *E, A, D, G* or *B, E, A, D*, it's just a stack of fourths. Note how bar 2 tags the blues IV7 chord simply by shifting bar 1's pattern over by a string.

Ex. 3

Jazz-bossa feel

Em9 Em6

T 7 7 5 3 3 2
A 7 7 5 4 4 4
B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 0 2 3

Ex. 4

Walking blues

C7 F7 C7 F7 etc.

E 2 2 2 7 5 3 2
B 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 1
G 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
D 1 3 4 5 1 3 4 5 1 3 4 5 1 6 5 2 1
A 1 3 4 5 1 3 4 5 1 3 4 5 1 6 5 2 1
B 1 3 4 5 1 3 4 5 1 3 4 5 1 6 5 2 1