

Chord Superimposition: Vertical Version

One of the greatest things about the lap steel guitar is how difficult it is to play. Not only does it force you to be creative in your choices when playing solo, it also forces you to learn to “play nice” with other musicians. This post is about being clever with the limited choices you have on the steel, and using these ideas in collaboration with other musicians. We’ll be focusing on chords and rhythm playing.

Let’s say you’re playing a D7 (D F# A C). Between the guitar and bass, those notes will be covered--no need for me to play them too. This creates an opportunity--I can add notes to the chord that will give it even more color and depth. These notes are called extensions--notes that are not actually members of the chord, but which fit harmonically with what’s happening in the melody, harmony, or the solo. In this case, I’ll add an E, making the chord D F# A C E (D9).

This isn’t a new idea in the slightest, but what makes it cool is how we can use the lap steel to generate these extensions. We can’t just add them--we can barely play that chord in the first place! What do we do? Add strings, levers, capos, retune in the middle of a song? Nope. All we need to do is be smart, be knowledgeable about harmony and our instrument, and be aware of what’s happening in the moment.

Think about that D9--we can’t possibly play that whole chord. And just playing one note, the E, doesn’t work; it will sound like we’re soloing and be very distracting to the actual soloist. So let’s just play a few notes. How about A C E? We can do that easily (in C6 tuning). And look--that’s an A minor chord. So now we have not only a solution, but also an idea: when someone plays a dominant 7th chord, we can play the minor triad starting on the third note of the chord.

But that solo is going on forever, and this D7 chord turns up every four bars! We can’t just keep doing the same thing every time, it becomes repetitive and distracting. Well, here are some more choices you can make. One: keep doing the same notes (A C E) but vary the order: (C E A, E A C). This is great because, as I said earlier, you can move in and out of the guitar’s voicings, sometimes creating really dense, complicated textures, and other times making wide open orchestral sounding chords.

Two: find different extensions that continue to build excitement while the soloist plays. See below for a few that you can play with. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Some of them are very subtle, others should be used with caution. (Those are marked in red.)

IF THE CHORD IS...	TRY SUPERIMPOSING (these are all voicings that you can grab straight across in C6, no slanting. Many of them can also be inverted, and you should experiment with that as well.)
D7 (D F# A C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A- • E • F#A • F#AB • F#C#B • CDF • F#B D# • FAB BB
D-7 (D F A C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABD • BDE • F MAJOR • A- (BEST DONE IN INVERSION) • E- (BEST DONE IN INVERSION) • B C# E • A MAJOR
Dmaj7 (D F# A C#)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A MAJOR • E MAJOR (BEST DONE IN INVERSION) • F#AB • C#- • G#- (EXTREME CAUTION!!)

A final note: First of all, none of these work if you're not listening very carefully to everyone else. Secondly, they don't work if you don't play them perfectly in tune. The register and inversion you choose (pretty much all of these can be inverted easily in C6 tuning) have a lot to do with whether these sound right or not also. And lastly if you don't play these like you mean it, they will just sound wrong.

Next: Chord Superimposition: Horizontal Version