



Shell Voicings for Jazz Guitar

Shell Voicings are the bare essentials that you need to spell chords in jazz. As 7th chords, they consist of a root, 3rd, and 7th. In 6th chords, they consist of a root, 3rd, and 6th. Note that the 5th of the chord is absent. Let's take a look at some examples.

C maj7 C7 C min7

T 9 9 8
 A 9 8 8
 B 8 8 8

Here are the basic three 7th chord shapes you need to know with the root on the low E string. Notice that the root of the chord is in the bass, the 7th is in the middle, and the 3rd is in the top voice. Below we can see what these chords look like when their roots are on the A string.

C maj7 C7 C min7

4 3 3
 2 2 1
 3 3 3

Note now the 3rd is in the middle, and the 7th is in the top voice.

You can also make 6th chords in a similar way as the chords above by replacing the 7th with a 6th.

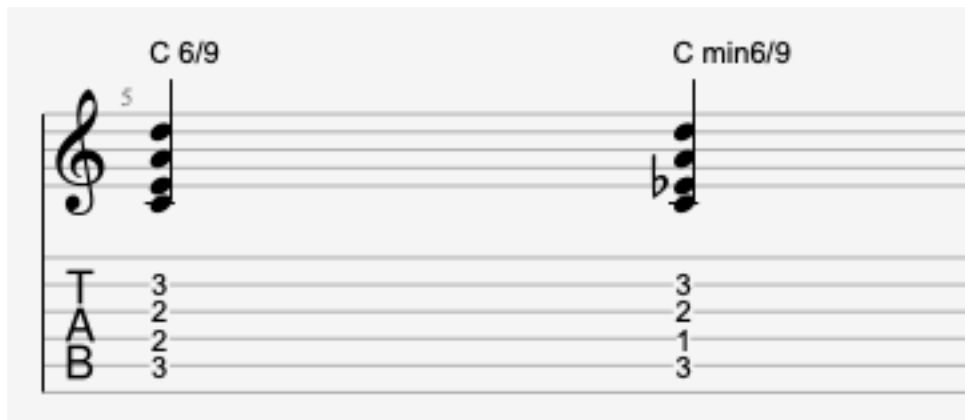
The image shows two musical examples side-by-side. The first is for a C6 chord in 2/4 time, with a treble clef. The notes are C4 (bass), E4 (middle), and G4 (top), with a '3' above the G4 note. Below the staff is a TAB with fret numbers 9, 7, and 8 for the strings from top to bottom. The second example is for a C min6 chord, also in 2/4 time, with a bass clef. The notes are C4 (bass), Bb3 (middle), and E4 (top). Below the staff is a TAB with fret numbers 8, 7, and 8 for the strings from top to bottom.

Above you see the root in the bass, 6th in the middle, and 3rd on top. In the next example, you can see what happens when the root moves to the A string.

The image shows two musical examples side-by-side. The first is for a C6 chord with the root on the A string. The notes are C4 (bass), E4 (middle), and G4 (top). Below the staff is a TAB with fret numbers 2, 2, and 3 for the strings from top to bottom. The second example is for a C min6 chord with the root on the A string. The notes are C4 (bass), Bb3 (middle), and E4 (top). Below the staff is a TAB with fret numbers 2, 1, and 3 for the strings from top to bottom.

Notice now the 3rd is in the middle and the 6th is on top.

Another common variation of 6th chords include 6/9 chords. This is when a 9th is added on top. They appear in major and minor forms.



Another important note is that you can use minor 6 voicings as substitutes for diminished 7 chords. You can substitute every 3 frets like the following example.

$Cdim7 = Cm6, Ebm6, F\#m6, \text{ or } Am6$

Also a $m7(b5)$, also known as a half diminished chord, can be substituted for a $m6$ 3 frets up or can be simply played as a $m7$ since shell voicing don't contain a root.

$Cm7(b5) = Ebm6 \text{ or } Cm7 \text{ (w/ shell voicing)}$

Also, major 6th chords can be substituted for minor 7th chords 3 frets below the root like the following example.

C6 = A min7

Now that we know the basics of shell voicings, practice and memorize the following three exercises to gain mastery.

Example 1 (Major 2-5-1)

Standard tuning
♩ = 60

1 C min7 F7 Bb maj7 Bb min7 Eb7 Ab maj7 Ab min7 Db7 Gb maj7

2

3

4 F# min7 B7 E maj7 E min7 A7 D maj7 D min7 G7 C maj7

5 6

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Example 2 (Major 2-5-1)

Standard tuning
♩ = 60

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1 C min7 F7 Bb 6 Bb min7 Eb7 Ab 6 Ab min7 Db7 Gb 6

2 F# min7 B7 E 6/9 E min7 A7 D 6/9 D min7 G7 C 6/9

T A B

8 8 7 6 6 5 5 4 4 4 3 3 1 2

8 8 6 6 6 4 4 4 2

9 8 7 7 6 5 5 5 4 4 3 2 3

7 7 7 7 5 5 5 3 3 3 3

Example 3 (minor 2-5-1)

Standard tuning
♩ = 60

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1 C min7 F7 Bb min6 Bb min7 Eb7 Ab min6 Ab min7 Db7 Gb min6

2 F# min7 B7 E min6/9 E min7 A7 D min6/9 D min7 G7 C min6/9

T A B

8 8 6 6 6 4 4 4 2

8 8 6 6 6 4 4 4 2

9 8 7 7 6 5 5 5 4 4 3 2 3

7 7 7 7 5 5 5 3 3 3 3