

Writing Your Own Song Charts

As a songwriter, there will inevitably come a day on which you will want to collaborate with another songwriter, musician, producer, arranger, etc., to produce a live performance or studio recording of a song you've written, or to further develop your song in some other way. In order to do this, you'll first need to find an effective way to communicate your song ideas.

This brief guide is intended to make you comfortable preparing your own song charts.

Why Do I Need a Chart?

You might decide you want to communicate your song by simply playing and singing it to another person. After hearing it a few times, he/she can start to learn the song and play it with you, and this may be enough for him/her to begin sharing their musical ideas for the song. In the right context, this will work just fine. But consider the many possible "wrong" contexts:

- You're hiring a musician (or maybe several musicians) to perform the song on a recording, and paying by the hour for his/her time. Maybe you'll be recording several songs, taking time out before each one, to teach the song.
- You're working with a producer or arranger, or some similar musical partner who could benefit tremendously from having the "map" of the song in front of them as they listen to you playing it
- Your song has enough changes, or complexity, that it takes a bit of time to learn and remember. Every specific arrangement idea, time signature or tempo change, innovative chord change, etc. is one more thing for your collaborator(s) to remember (or one more thing to forget)
- You're on-stage with a backing band who hasn't learned the song, or with a last-minute replacement somewhere in your band, and the audience must wait while you teach the song to the band
- You're collaborating long-distance with another songwriter/musician, and have limited time/opportunity to communicate in real-time

It's easy to see that having a written version of your song idea can save time, money, and the quality of your live performance. Also, consider this: as you sit in a room with your collaborator(s) and teach them your song without a written chart, what will they likely do? Quite likely, they'll grab pen and paper, or a laptop, and create their own chart of the song, for their own use. At the very least, they'll surely scribble notes on a scrap of paper to remind them of the song's details. Imagine teaching your new song to the members of your band by playing it to them, as they each make their own chart for reference. Not only is that a waste of everybody's time, but I'd wager there's a good chance these charts may end up looking different from one another, even to the extent of one of them having mistakes in it...

Who is going to read my chart?

Once your song is mapped out, either on paper or in a printable or sharable computer document, it might be read by any number of people:

- Musician
- Producer/Engineer
- Songwriter
- Arranger
- Live Sound or Lighting Engineer
- Etc.

There is a huge potential audience for your song chart, all of whom can do better at collaborating with you if they can quickly grasp the design of your song.

Can I Hire Someone to Chart My Songs for Me?

Of course you can have someone else create your charts for you. Remember, though, that this will come at a cost:

- Money or other favours
- The very good chance that your chart will not contain the complete (or even correct) design of the song. Remember, it came from YOUR head, not from the head of the person you've hired to create the chart

The best reason NOT to hire someone to make your charts – it's quite easy for you to do by yourself!

Does my chart need to be in musical notation?

The vast majority of song charts are NOT presented in musical notation. Looking at the list of collaborators, above, you'll find that many of them will likely be unable to read (or at least, unable to *quickly* read) musical notation.

Song charts are prepared in a short-hand notation which tries to capture the essence of the song design with the minimum of written information.

What needs to be on the chart?

In order for the chart to be useful to your collaborators, it should attempt to concisely share the important designs of your song without including unimportant details.

Consider communicating the following within the chart:

- Structure (eg. Intro – Verse – Verse – Chorus – Bridge – Chorus – Outro)
- Key (eg. A Major)
- Tempo (eg. Slow, Mid, Fast, or 136 beats per minute)
- Groove (eg. 3/4 time Waltz, Shuffle, or by reference as in "Memphis Blues", "Reggae", etc.)
- Harmonies (what are the chord progressions throughout the song?)
- Arrangement Decisions: stops/starts/changes

- Melody line or Lyrics: ONLY if your collaborators will find them useful. This can be too much information if your band isn't singing, and doesn't need the lyrics to follow through the song

How much is enough, and how much is too much?

This depends entirely on the context, and on the nature of the information you wish to communicate. If you want your musicians to play the song a certain way, you'd better communicate that somehow, and the song chart is the place to do it.

A Simple Song Chart

My Song

Key of A Major. 4/4 time, mid-tempo Rock

Intro: A A Dm A

Verse 1: A E A A

 A E A A

Chorus 1: Dm Dm A A

 E E A A

Verse 2: (same as Verse 1)

Chorus 2: (same as Chorus 1)

Outtro: E Dm A

The chart shows the following information at a quick glance:

- The overall structure of the song (Intro – Verse – Chorus – Verse – Chorus – Outro)
- The meter (4/4) and a tempo suggestion
- The style (Rock), which will be useful information for the type of beat the drummer might choose, the tone of the guitars, and the accompaniment style for the bass

Notice that the formatting (section name on left, chords aligned on right) make the chart very easy to scan at a glance. The easier it is to read the chart, the more quickly your collaborator can get up-to-speed with your song.

In each section, the chart shows the chord changes in a manner that is very easy to read. In the absence of any other indicators, a single chord is understood to last one full bar. In this example, the Intro section is four bars in length; the verse and chorus sections are each 8 bars in length; the outro section is three bars in length.

Chords

All chords are indicated with an uppercase letter. The Major chords are indicated by letter only. Minor chords are indicated using a lowercase 'm' (Dm) or a '-' symbol (D-). The "m" is often preferred because it is easier to see.

Other chord variations are noted using superscripted symbols. For example:

Dominant Seventh	D ⁷
Minor Seventh	Dm ⁷
Suspended 2 or 4	D ^{sus2} or D ^{sus4}
Diminished	D ^{dim} or D ^o
Augmented	D ^{aug} or D ⁺

Additional chord modifications are usually added in parentheses. For example:

Dominant 7 with flat 5	D ^{7(b5)}
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In the absence of any other indicators, each chord is assumed to be in "root" position – that is, that the lowest note is typically the root of the chord. If you and your bass player are on friendly terms, he/she may improvise and try alternate bass notes, but this chart is not suggesting any alternate notes. If you want to communicate a suggested bass note other than the root note, this can be indicated on the chart as follows:

A Major using an E note in the bass	A/E or $\frac{A}{E}$
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When Chords Change Within the Bar

As mentioned above, a Chord on the chart is generally understood to be played for a full bar, unless otherwise indicated. So, how do you indicate something other than a full bar?

1. You could indicate multiple chords in a single bar by underlining the chords which make up the bar. This is visually appealing because it stands out from the bars which contain only a single chord.
2. You could include bar lines in your chart to indicate the start and end of every bar.

If most bars contain a single chord, the first option will be cleaner on the chart. If many bars have multiple changes, then the second option may be a better choice. Your call.

Examples:

Chorus I:	Dm	Dm	A	A
	E	E	<u>A Bm⁷</u>	<u>A/C# F#m⁷</u>

Chorus I:	Dm	Dm	A	A	
	E	E	A Bm ⁷	A/C# F#m ⁷	

Note that in both examples, it is understood that having two chords in the same bar means that each chord is played for half of the bar. **Since our sample chart is for a song in 4/4 time, the bar divides easily into 2 beats plus 2 beats.**

When Chords Change On A Different Beat

The examples above show the simple method for charting a chord for the full bar, or for two chords which each last half a bar. But what about a bar in 3/4 time with two chords? What about a bar in 4/4 with three chords? Suddenly, the simple list of chord symbols isn't enough to suggest the timing of these chords.

Dots are used to show the number of beats to be given to each chord, where more information is needed. Assuming we want to give a whole number of beats to a chord, the chart can indicate this with that number of dots above the chord, as in the following example:

Chorus I:	Dm	Dm	A	A		
	E	E	A	Bm ⁷	A/C#	F#m ⁷
		

The 2nd line of the example above shows that the **A** chord is held for three beats, followed by the **Bm⁷** for one beat. The **A/C#** is held for one beat, followed by the **F#m⁷** for three beats. **The dots are only used in bars where the timing is not evenly divided through the bar.**

When Chords Are Played Early (Pushed/Anticipated)

Sometimes you want your chord to “push” the beat, changing ahead of the new beat (on the “&” of the previous beat). This is charted with another symbol above the chord – a left-facing arrow.

Chorus I:	Dm	Dm	A	A
	<	<
	E	E	A	Bm ⁷ A/C# F#m ⁷

The E chords are “pushed”, changing on the “&” of beat 4 of the previous bar.

Stops, Starts, Pauses, Hits...

Here are a few other symbols used to indicate special behaviour inside your song:

Hit	Play a short chord followed by silence	^
Hold	Play and hold the chord for its full duration	◇
Pause	Play and hold the chord, pause before restarting	☾

Example:

	^	◇	☾
Outtro:	E	Dm	A

Note that the diamond symbol can also be drawn around the chord, as in:



When the Time Signature Changes

When you want to change the time signature within the song, show the new time signature within parenthesis at the location of the time signature change. If the time change is only for a bar or two, enclose those bars within the parentheses.

Example: Changing the time signature for all bars which follow:

Verse I:	A	E	A	A
	(³ / ₄)	A	E	A

Example: Changing the time signature for two bars only, after which the original time signature resumes:

<p>Verse 1: A E A A</p> <p style="padding-left: 100px;">($\frac{3}{4}$ A E) A A</p>

When Phrases Repeat

If your song uses a repeated chord progression, your chart can become dramatically simpler by listing the progression once, and wrapping it in repeat symbols.

Beginning of repeated section	:
End of repeated section	:

Example: Repeat the chord progression once (i.e. play the progression 2 times):

<p>Verse 1: : A E A A : </p>
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Example: Play the chord progression 4 times:

<p>Verse 1: : A E A A : x4</p>

Other Information

If there are other instructions you would like to give your collaborators, you can write them into the chart at the appropriate places. Instructions like “Guitar Only”, “Slow Down”, “Band Out”, “Band In”, and “Crazy Guitar Solo” are just the beginning. If you want something specific, try to describe it on the chart without sacrificing the readability of the chart.

What about The Nashville Number System?

You may be familiar with song charting using numbers instead of chord letters. This variation of song charting is very popular in studio sessions, where the decision is often made to try the song in alternate keys. All of the chords in the chart are represented by their relative "distance" from the root/tonic chord in the key of the song.

For example, the numbering of chords in the key of A Major:

1=A 2=B 3=C# 4=D 5=E 6=F# 7=G#

Chord types are indicated in the same way with numbers as with letters:

3- or 3m to indicate a minor chord

5⁷sus4 to indicate a dominant-seventh with suspended fourth, etc.

The Nashville Number System is NOT generally recommended outside of studio purposes, for several reasons:

- You generally won't need to change the key of your song
- Number charts are more difficult for many players to read and interpret quickly, especially for live performances

It is good practice, however, to learn to read and write charts in Nashville Number system.