Defining Chord Terms  by Scott Wilson

Chord: A combination of three or more notes sounded together.

Chord Quality: Refers to whether a chord sounds Major, Minor, Dominant, Half-Diminished, Fully Diminished or Suspended.

Chord Symbols: Letters, word abbreviations and/or Icons that represent a chord. (See the Chord = Scale Cheat Sheet for a detailed description of all chord symbols.)

Seventh Chords: A four note chord based on scale tones 1,3,5,and 7. There are FIVE basic types of seventh chords (Major, minor, Dominant, half-diminished & diminished). Seventh Chords are the building blocks of the more complex extended chords.

Extended Chords: If any other notes are added to a Seventh Chord it is considered to be an extended chord.

Chord Extensions: Numbers (for example: 9, #9, b9, #11, 13 or #5) added to a chord symbol. Also known as chord alterations, these numbers represent specific notes (or scale pitches) to be added to the chord. These extensions are often referred to as the color tones of the chord. Important: Some chord extensions (or color tones) are implied by the presence of other chord extensions.

Chord Changes:: Jazz slang referring to a chord or chord progression. This term is often shortened to just "Changes" (For example: What are the changes?)

Jazz Gem* A skilled jazz improvisor can look at a chord symbol (with its extensions) and instantly determine the appropriate scale to play. This may sound hard at first, but there are only so many chords and many chords symbols share the same exact scale (Note: By using flash cards you can learn all of them in a very short amount of time).

Chord Symbols: The four examples below represent common chord symbols.

Chord Extensions (usually numbers)

Seventh chord 1,3,5,7

C Maj7  Cmin13  C13(#11)  Csus4

Chord Quality: Major  Minor  Dominant  Suspended

Cmaj7 can also be notated as CMaj7 or CM7.

Since chord symbols may be notated several ways, make sure you review Identifying Basic Jazz Chord Symbols so you are familiar with the variety of chord symbols used by all composers, arrangers and publishers.

Jazz Gem* In this chord, the D natural and F natural are also chord extensions and color tones. Even though these numbers are not listed in the chord symbol, when 11th's or 13th's are listed by themselves, extensions below them (such as the 9th and 11th) are implied. If the composer only wanted the 13th and not the 9th or 11th, then the chord symbol would read Cmin7 (add 6).