Autumn Leaves: an introduction to playing jazz chords on the accordion

By Alan Zisman ©2011 - ideas based on notes from Katheryn Petersen

Many accordion players limit themselves to the standard chords on the bass side: Major, Minor, Dominant 7\textsuperscript{th}, and Diminished, along with the root note button and the counter-bass. That works fine for most sorts of folk music - English, Celtic, Cajun, Mexican, and much much more.

But it's harmonically impoverished when used playing jazz tunes and many 'standards' - pop tunes from the 1930s on. These tunes add extra notes to the basic chords. These are often written out something like: $B7 (b9)$ meaning to play a $B7$ chord with the addition of the 9\textsuperscript{th} tone of the B major scale, flatted (lowered a half-tone). Not only does this chord sound richer, it gives a hint of notes to play when improvising. On an instrument like a piano, it might be straightforward to add the b9 note to a chord, but not on an accordion!

It's possible to play these sorts of chords on the accordion making use of these ideas:

1) If you know what notes make up the desired chord, you can often play them with the accordion chord buttons by combining a different chord (or chords) with the given bass. For instance, an $A\text{min}\ 7$ chord is made up of the notes A, C, E, and G. C, E, and G are the notes of a C major chord, so playing an A bass note plus a C major chord will give you an $A\text{min}\ 7$

2) That could be a bit of a stretch. The next trick is make use of the notes in the counter-bass row (the one above the standard bass note row). These are the third note above the bass. For instance, on the F row, the counter-bass note is A - 3 notes about F (in an F major scale). Aha! Pressing the A (in the F row) along with the nearby C major chord gives you an easier way to play that $A\text{min}\ 7$ chord.

3) Once you've learned how to play a chord in one key (such as $A\text{min}\ 7$), the same fingering will work for that chord in all other keys - just find the appropriate bass note for the root of the chord. So $E\text{min}\ 7$ is just like the $A\text{min}\ 7$, but moved over one row - E is the counter-bass note above C; press that with the G major button for $E\text{min}\ 7$. (This is similar to how guitar players learn to move the same hand position up and down the neck).

4) There are often more than one way to play the same chord...

5) Tunes often use chords in the same order, called a progression... so once you've learned one tune, you'll find big pieces of it (perhaps in a different key) show up again and again, both in that tune and in other tunes. Bonus! In Autumn Leaves, you'll find the $A\text{min}\ 7$ is often followed by a $D7$ and then a $G\ maj\ 9$. F\# $\text{min}\ 7\ b5$ is followed by $B7\ b9$ and then $E\text{min}\ 7$. 
Before we get to the chords themselves, you need to know a bit about the shorthand you’ll often see reading jazz 'charts':

- **Most common**, a minus sign (-) indicates a minor chord: \( A-7 \) means \( A \) minor 7.
- **Often**: a triangle indicates a MAJ7 chord
- A small circle beside the chord makes it diminished
- A small circle with a vertical line through it makes it 'half-diminished', which is another way of writing a minor 7th chord with a flatted 5.
- **Chords within parentheses** are optional
- **A chord followed by a slash then a note name** means to play that last note as the bass note with the chord: \( A7/D \) would mean to play a D bass note with an A7 chord.

Ready for the chords in Autumn Leaves? (I'm not going to write out the standard chords - the \( D7 \) (etc) is played just the way you've always played it!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chord Name</th>
<th>Bass Note</th>
<th>Chords to Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( A ) minor 7 (A-7)</td>
<td>F row counter-bass (A)</td>
<td>C major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( G ) maj 9 (note: works for maj 7 as well)</td>
<td>G row bass</td>
<td>G major + D major together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( C ) maj 9 (note: works for maj 7 as well)</td>
<td>C row bass</td>
<td>C major + G major together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F#) min 7 b5 (F#-7b5)</td>
<td>D row counter-bass (F#)</td>
<td>A minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( B7 ) (b9)</td>
<td>G row counter-bass (B)</td>
<td>C diminished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( E ) minor 7 (E-7)</td>
<td>C row counter-bass (E)</td>
<td>G major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice how the A-7 and E-7 chords are the same pattern in different rows, as are the \( G \) maj 9 and \( C \) maj 9. You can (usually) use the maj9 pattern for maj7 chords.

Edward D. notes another way to play the B7b9 - by combining the B7 and Adim chord buttons.
BASS KEYBOARD
OF THE
12 AND 120
BASS ACCORDION

Counter Bass Row
Fundamental Bass Row
Major Chord Row
Minor Chord Row
7th Chord Row
Diminished Chord Row

Chord buttons are written as marked below:
- Major - M
- Minor - m
- Seventh - 7
- Diminished - d