

Ramsey Castaneda  
MUJZ 443  
Dr. McCurdy  
Clinic Handout  
11/11/2014

# DJPW

Dr. McCurdy's Jazz Pedagogy Workshop  
University of Southern California  
MUS 213  
November 11, 2014

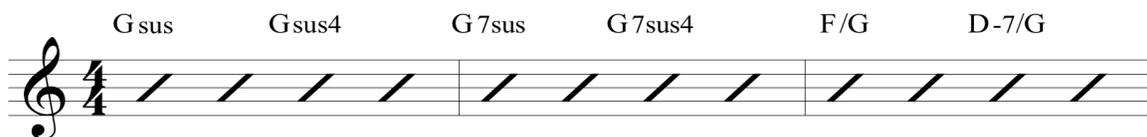
## Sussing out the Sus Chord!

Presented by  
Ramsey Castaneda

Contact: Ramsey Castaneda  
(916) 600-7564  
[ramseycastaneda@gmail.com](mailto:ramseycastaneda@gmail.com)

Ramsey Castaneda is a professional saxophonist living in the L.A., California area. He is currently completing a Doctorate of Musical Arts degree at the University of Southern California.

# Sussing out sus-chords



Sus-chords present some unique challenges the improviser, and as a teacher, a question I often hear is “What do I play over sus-chords”? The purpose of this handout is to help demystify the sus-chord and provide a set of tools that will enable an improviser to navigate the world of sus-chords.

## PART I: Demystifying the Sus Chord

### 1) *What exactly is a sus-chord, and how are they notated?*

Mark Levine, in his wonderful book, *The Jazz Theory Book*, defines “sus-chord” as follows:

- Sus Chord:
  - A dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord in which the 5<sup>th</sup> does not act like an “avoid note.” (Levine, 1995, xiii)

Here is an example of a simple sus-chord voicing:

Note that there is no third scale degree in the chord, but instead, a fourth.

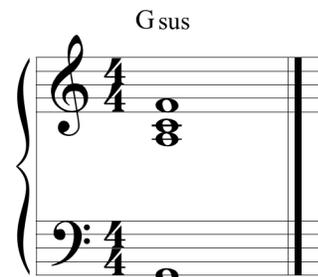


Figure 1: Simple voicing of a G7sus

Below are common ways sus-chords are notated:

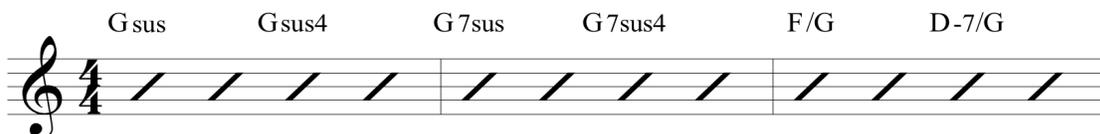


Figure 2: common sus-chord nomenclature

## 2) Why would a composers use a sus-chord?

There are two common ways of harmonically employing a sus-chord: 1) as a substitute for a V7 or ii chord and, 2) as a static harmony.

- a)** Bars six and seven of Duke Ellington's song, "Just Squeeze Me," is a great example of #1, using a sus chord as a substitute for a V7 or ii chord.



Figure 3 bars 7 and 8 of *Just Squeeze Me*

Here, the sus-chord is functioning simply as a V chord that resolves to I. This was the main function of sus-chords until about the 1960s, when jazz musicians started using the sus-chord as a sound of its own.

- b)** Herbie Hancock's tune, *Maiden Voyage* is good example of #2, a sus-chord functioning as a static harmony. The first eight bars (and more, later in the piece) are composed entirely of sus-chords:

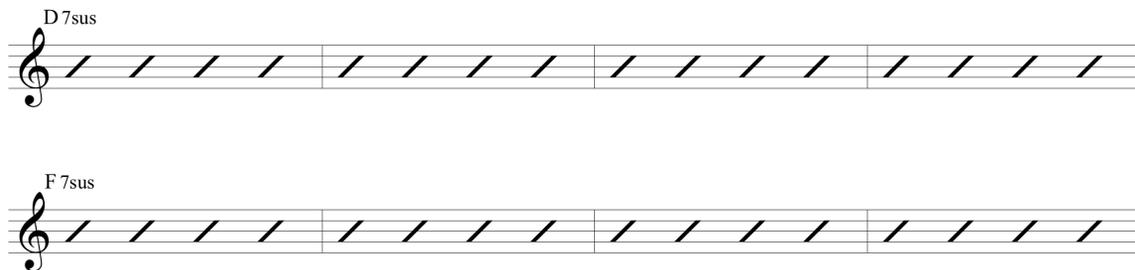


Figure 4: The first eight bars of *Maiden Voyage*

Because sus-chords emphasize the fourth scale degree, as opposed the third scale degree, there are **two perfect intervals in the chord**: the perfect fourth, and the perfect fifth. This combination of perfect intervals **creates a very open sound** that isn't easily achieved by traditional major, minor, or dominant chords.

## So, why all the fuss over sus-chords?

There are a few key issues as to why sus-chords seem to pose such a challenge:

1. Western harmony is based on a concept know as “**Tertian Harmony.**”
  - a. Tertian Harmony:
    - i. Harmony based on combinations of the interval of a third, such as characterizes Western tonal harmony. (Harvard Dictionary of Music, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, 2003, 875-876)

This explains why we cannot build a sus-chord in the normal way, by stacking thirds on top of each other, and why they can seem so weird to us.

2. As improvisers, we are often told to avoid the fourth scale degree on major and dominate chords, but with the sus-chord, the fourth scale degree is an important note. This can be a hard habit to break.

### The Challenge

So, herein lies the improviser’s challenge with sus-chords:

- 1) they aren’t structured like typical chords, and therefore aren’t rooted in scales like the other chords.
- 2) they require the improviser to use a note we have been told to avoid.

## PART II: the framework

### Taking a page from the classical theory playbook:

#### **Modal Mixture:**

In western harmony “Mode Mixture” is a concept used to explain the presence non-diatonic notes in a chord or melody. It is used to explain neapolitan chords, augmented 6 chords, and even a scale called “the acoustic scale,” (known to jazz musicians as the “Lydian-dominant” scale). Mode mixture is simply borrowing notes from another key and using them in a chord or melody that is primarily in a different key.

Below is a simple example of modal mixture:

in Major (from minor)                      in Minor (from major)

bIII      bVI      bVII                      biii      bvi      bvii<sup>0</sup>

Figure 5: Classical mode mixture

If we apply this thought process to the sus-chord we get a clearer picture of their function.

### The sus-chord as a combination of the ii and the V

Think of a sus-chord as a “chord mixture” that combines the ii and the V<sup>7</sup> chord of ii-V<sup>7</sup>-I.

D-7    G7    G7sus

Figure 6: G7sus comparison to D-7 and G7

As Mark Levine Explains in *The Jazz Theory Book*:

“D-7/G describes the *function* of a sus chord, because a sus chord is like a ii-V progression contained in one chord. The ii-V progression in the key of C is D-7, G7.” (Levine, 1995, 45)

Notice the similarities between the D-7, G7, and G7sus chords. In fact, the G7 is played using the same right hand voicing as the D-7.

Even when a sus-chord is used as a static harmony, like in *Maiden Voyage* (figure 5), the sound is still the same, and therefore you can improvise over it in the same way.

Now that we have a theoretical understanding of the *Why* and *How* of the sus-chord, lets look at ways to improvise over it.

## **PART III: the tools**

First off, lets get one thing out of the way:

“A persistent myth about sus chords is that ‘the fourth takes the place of the third.’ Jazz pianists, however, often voice the third with a sus chord...”  
(Levine, 1989) - Jazz Piano book

This means that the third is not a note that an improviser must avoid at all costs. It just means that the third must be treated differently than as you would in a major or dominate chord.

### **7 and 8 note scales from the ROOT**

- G Mixolydian



- G Dorian



- G Dominate bebop



- Dorian b9 (Phrygian-esque)



All of these scales work well, however, a challenge with thinking of scales from the root of a sus-chord means that we still have the third of the chord engrained as a target note. The solution? Think of the same scale, from a different starting note, this way, the third isn't dissonant. What starting (or root) note should we use, though? The root of the associated "ii" chord.

## 7 and 8 note scales from the FIFTH of the chord

- D Dorian



- D Minor Bebop



- D Aeolian



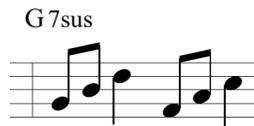
Thinking of the scales from the fifth means that we do not have to worry about emphasizing the third too often. This way we can have free reign of the scale, and the “third” of this scale is actually the 7<sup>th</sup>, so it produces a nice effect.

One of the unintended consequences of using 7 or 8 note scales as a starting point for sus-chords is that it can be difficult to stress the “open and floaty” quality of the chord. One way of highlighting this characteristic sound of the sus-chord is to use atypical scales.

## Triad Pairs/Hexatonic Scales

Triad pairs open up an entire realm of possibilities that is beyond the scope of this handout. However, sus-chords and triad pairs are a nice match. Below is the most common combination:

- Major triads from the root and the b7:
- As a hexatonic scale:



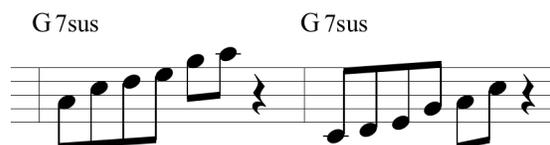
Further reading on triad pairs:

Weiskopf, Walk. (1995) *Intervallic Improvisation*. New Albany, In: Jamey Aebersold Jazz.

## Pentatonic Scales

Pentatonic scales only have 5 notes, and that means that there is less tension in the scale, and less tension means a more “open” sound, which is just what a sus-chord asks for. Here are a few options for utilizing pentatonic scales on sus-chords.

- Minor pentatonic from the 5<sup>th</sup>, or major pentatonic from the b7
- Minor pentatonic from the 2<sup>nd</sup>, or major pentatonic from the 4<sup>th</sup>



## Tritonic Scale (three note scale)

To further emphasize the unique structure of the sus-chord, and fourth option is the tritonic scale. This seemingly simple scale is actually a favorite of mine for sus-chords. The one caveat here is that its sound is so easily recognizable and predictable that it cannot be used too often.

- Tritonic scale from the root
- Tritonic scale from the 4<sup>th</sup>



These small scales are so effective because they highlight the “perfect intervals” that are present within a sus-chord, the perfect 4<sup>th</sup>, the perfect 5<sup>th</sup>, and the perfect octave.

An effective way to use these scales is as a fast flurry by playing the scale quickly up and down the full range of your instrument. You can even alternate between the two.

## - Summary -

- The sus-chord is a combination of a minor ii chord, and a dominant V7 chord.
- Most often a sus-chord is used in one of two ways:
  - As a substitute for a ii-V, or V7 chord
  - As a static harmony
- The third scale degree is not an “avoid” note, but still needs to be used consciously.
- Sus-chords have an “**open**” and “**floaty**” sound, and the most effect sus-chord improvisation will emphasize this sound.
- There are many tools for improvising over sus chords:
  - **7 or 8 note scales**
    - From the Root
      - Mixolydian
      - Dorian
      - Dominate Bebop
      - Dorian b9
    - From the Fifth
      - Dorian
      - Minor Bebop
      - Aeolian
  - **Triad Pairs/Hexatonic Scales**
    - From the Root and b7
  - **Pentatonic Scales**
    - Minor pentatonic from the 5
      - Or major pentatonic from the b7
    - Minor Pentatonic from the 2
      - Or major pentatonic from the 4
  - **Tritonic Scales**
    - From the Root
    - From the Fourth

## Some tunes that use sus-chords

- Milestones (The “new” version) (Miles Davis)
  - Mr. Day (John Coltrane)
  - Eight-One (Ron Carter)
- Maiden Voyage (Herbie Hancock)
- In Your Own Sweet Way (Dave Brubeck)
  - Naima (John Coltrane)
  - Dolphin Dance (Herbie Hancock)
  - Dearly Beloved (Jerome Kern)
  - Pee Wee (Tony Williams)
  - Passion Dance (McCoy Tyner)
  - Ana Maria (Wayne Shorter)
- Flamenco Sketches (Miles Davis and Bill Evans)

Ramsey Castaneda is a professional saxophonist living in the L.A., California area. He is currently completing a Doctorate of Musical Arts degree at the University of Southern California.

Phone: (916) 600-7564

E-mail: ramseycastaneda@gmail.com