"The V-System Introduction"

By James Hober

Welcome to Ted Greene's revolutionary V-System!

In case you haven't noticed, there are a lot of guitar chords. Thousands and thousands of them. How do you organize them so that you don't just randomly memorize a gazillion chords? The V-System is a way to do that for a class of very important chords, namely four note chords. I can hear you saying already, "Wait a minute! There are lots of great three note, five note, and six note chords. What about those?" If you have studied some of Ted's wonderful chord melody arrangements, you know that he certainly used all kinds of chords, not just four note chords. The thing is, if you get command of four note chords, then you can enhance them, by doubling one of the four notes, adding another note, taking a note away, etc. By a certain way of thinking, four note chords are the foundation for jazz and other contemporary styles. So the V-System, which Ted called his "pet system," was developed by Ted to categorize and thoroughly understand four note chords.

Restrictions, Restrictions

Famously, Igor Stravinsky, in his *Poetics of Music* said, "My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit." So it's a strange thing that setting limits can free a person creatively. Apparently, Ted realized the importance of working within a carefully bounded area, too.

The V-System only deals with four note chords, where all four notes are distinct, no unison or octave doublings. Such chords can contain any four notes, can leave out the root, can contain any kind of chromatic alteration, can involve big stretches or not, as long as the four notes are all different. No doublings.

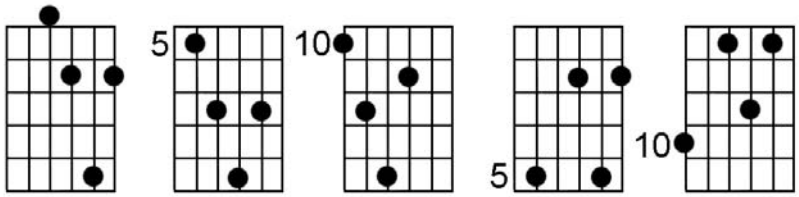
We're also restricting ourselves to reachable chords with normal guitar technique: no right hand on the fingerboard chords, no sneaking the left thumb around onto the fingerboard, and no special tunings. Yes, Ted played chords using all these tricks and more. But the system describes a core of chords that someone with an excellent left hand finger span can reach with normal technique and standard tuning. Or possibly standard tuning pitched down a half step, or a whole step, etc.

Voicing Group versus String Set

The V-System organizes chords by spacing. The "V" stands for "voicing" or "voicing group." Voicing and spacing are essentially the same thing. Are the notes of a chord tightly packed together or are they more spread out? If they are spread out, exactly how are they spread out? This is the organizing principle of the V-System.

One traditional way of organizing chords is by string set. In that tradition, you might study and memorize a bunch of chords on the top 4 strings. Remember that "top" refers to the skinniest strings. Ted (like most guitarists) always referred to strings and the neck by sound. So the "top four strings" always mean the thin strings. You could also say the "4-3-2-1 string set."

In Ted's books, *Chord Chemistry* and *Modern Chord Progressions*, he described string transfer, which he also called "string transference." You can move your chord on the top four strings over to the middle four. You can do this again and move your chord to the bottom four. Sometimes you can even just transfer one note of a chord and keep the rest of the chord on the same strings.



D/9 chord in V-4 spacing on various string sets

In this case, you haven't changed the notes of the chord at all. You're playing the exact same voicing. You're just placing that voicing on a different set of strings. This may change the tone but it doesn't change the notes. All of the above chords are V-4 chords. They are all the same voicing. The V-System pays attention to string set. But a chord is classified into a voicing group by its spacing, not by what strings it is played on.

As we will see, each voicing group naturally falls on certain string sets. For example, V-4 chords tend to comfortably fall on string sets 5-3-2-1 and 6-4-3-2. But as we've seen above, they can also be played on other string sets sometimes. So don't confuse voicing groups with string sets. The voicing groups are based on a chord's spacing, not which set of strings are used to play it.

Meet the Voicing Groups

There are fourteen voicing groups in the system.

V-1 contains chords where all four notes are as close as possible – no chord tone could fit between them. In traditional music theory, this kind of chord is said to be in "close position." Every V-1 chord spans less than an octave. That is to say, the interval from the bass, or lowest note in the chord, to the soprano, or highest note in the chord, is always less than an octave for all V-1 chords. V-1 chords are sometimes called "piano chords" because they are the kind of chords that are easily played with one hand by a pianist. On the guitar, however, they typically involve sometimes challenging left hand stretches.

Strictly speaking, "close position" can also refer to chords where only the top three notes are as tightly packed as possible but the bass is separated from them by a gap. In the V-System, these kinds of chords are called V-6. V-6 chords are V-1 chords with the bass down an octave.

All the other voicing groups, from V-2 to V-5 and from V-7 to V-14, are "open position" chords, chords where the notes are spread out. Exactly how they are spread out is what determines which voicing group they fall in.

V-2 and V-4 include many "stock" jazz chords, the kinds of chords that are comfortable to finger, sound good, and typically are learned first.

V-2s are great for comping, especially on the top four or middle four sets. Also known as "Wes chords," V-2s are the kind of chords that Wes Montgomery used in his solos, typically after first improvising in single notes and then octaves.

V-4s include "Freddy Green chords." They are the kind of rhythm chords used by guitarists playing in a big band situation. Many of the most common traditional jazz chords are V-4s.

V-3s bunch the bottom three notes together and the soprano is off on its own a bit, often separated by a string from the lower three notes. Historically, music has favored the opposite kinds of chords, with the upper three notes closer and the bass more set off, for good reason: They sound less muddy and the soprano sounds less isolated. But used carefully and especially higher up the neck, V-3s can add interest and variety. For example, Ted used some V-3s to excellent effect in some of his Approach Chord Blues.

As we move from V-5 to V-14 the general trend is toward bigger stretches and less commonly used chords. Still, Ted made considerable use of V-5 through V-10 chords and there are some wonderful discoveries to be found in them. I'm sure, had Ted been writing this instead of me, he would have had nice descriptions for each of these voicing groups, too. V-8s, for example, can be nice in the way they fairly evenly spread the notes wide across all six strings (leaving out two of the middle four strings, of course).

As we get to V-11 through V-14, we arrive at fairly obscure chords, mostly included for completeness. They can involve large, difficult stretches with little practical use.

Methods to the Madness

The methods are the real core of the V-System. There are three. As far as anyone knows, Ted did not reveal the methods to anyone while he was alive. Probably he intended to save them for a planned book on the V-System. Luckily, I created method 2 so I understand it. I have reconstructed methods 1 and 3 based on a few cryptic notes that Ted left, my own understanding, and a lot of deduction. Eventually, after I have fully presented the methods, we'll release Ted's very few personal pages that I have relied upon and you can decide for yourself whether I have done a good job or not.

The methods address two important and related issues: how to recognize and how to build. Given a four note chord, how do you recognize exactly in which voicing group it belongs? And, how do you build a chord so that it belongs in a particular voicing group?

Ted considered method 1 the most important and the fastest to use. It's the foundation of the V-System, created by Ted in the 1970s. It makes use of the letters B T A S to represent Bass, Tenor, Alto, and Soprano, the voices of a four note chord from lowest to highest. Exactly how the chord tones are placed in the voices determines the voicing group. I'll go into all the details in the next installment: Method 1 - How to Recognize. After that I'll cover Method 1 - How to Build.

Method 2 was created by me in the late 1980s. I was determined to find a way to categorize any four note chord into a voicing group. Perhaps since I've been influenced by Eastern philosophy, the thought occurred to me, "The space between the notes is as important as the notes." Method 2 is based on that idea. You count how many chord tones can fit in the gaps between each voice and that determines the voicing group. I'll have one or two upcoming articles on the details and insights of method 2.

Method 3 was created by Ted in the very late 1980s soon after I showed him my method 2. He left method 3 unfinished. His notes claim that he finished it but the table he wrote there was incomplete. I completed his table in March 2010 but it still doesn't funnel. By that I mean that there are chords that won't resolve to a single voicing group using only Ted's table, even completed. So I have resorted to computer programming and have created pages of tables that do resolve. Even as I write this in May 2012, I'm working on best way to present this data. I've spent by far the most time investigating method 3. It's quite complex.

Yet the idea Ted had for method 3 is quite simple. What is the interval between the outer voices of the chord? A major tenth? A minor seventh? If it's less than an octave, you have a V-1. If it's more than an octave, we use the interval between the bass and the tenor and the interval between the alto and the soprano to resolve the chord to a specific voicing group. Easy to say, quite hard to implement. And it takes more than one simple table, as Ted probably hoped. He may have abandoned method 3 when or if he realized that his table wouldn't funnel. But method 3 can funnel with my pages and pages of computer programmed tables. It's just the least practical method of the three to use. More on the intricacies of method 3 in an upcoming article.

Conversion

No, it's not about changing your religion. Conversion deals with changing a chord in one voicing group into a chord in another voicing group. Arrangers sometimes talk about "drop-2." That means take the second highest note, the alto, and drop it down an octave. If you do this to a V-1, you get a V-2.

We'll share all the conversion techniques that Ted wrote up on a personal page and also many others that I have discovered.

Conversion is very important because once you know some chords in one voicing group, you can use it to discover chords in another voicing group. And it helps you to see relationships between voicing groups. Ted created a number of "hook up" sheets that show how to convert from one specific voicing group to another.

If converting a chord changes its voicing group, what modifications do not change a chord's voicing group? They include string transfer, transposition, systematic inversion, and changing a chord's quality in a way that doesn't affect its spacing.

Quality of Life

What's a quality? Common qualities include maj7, 6, m7, etc. In other words, lop off the root from the front of a chord name and you have its quality. Out of the 43 possible four note chord qualities, some are really fundamental. Ted wrote sheets entitled "Seven Basic Qualities" for many of the voicing groups that you'll find in the other tabs of the V-System section of tedgreene.com. For those voicing groups that Ted didn't write a "Seven Basic Qualities" sheet, Paul and/or I will write one.

Note that the Seven Basic Qualities sheets contain homonyms, chords that sound the same but have different meanings (uses). For example, the m7 and 6 qualities contain the same fingerboard shapes but you think of them from different roots. So on the Seven Basic Qualities sheets, homonyms are treated as **different** qualities. But when Ted discovered that there are 43 different four note qualities, he counted homonyms as the **same** quality.

So Welcome to the V-System!

The reason the V-System is important is because it takes a simple idea in music, close position and open position chords, and systematically refines it. Ted took this basic idea of two kinds of chord spacing and created fourteen more precisely defined voicing groups. With the V-System, instead of being lost in a vast sea of chords, you navigate and find your way.

----James