

*the **thinking**
guitarist*

VOL. I • EDITION ONE

2026

BROOKLYN, NY

A METHOD FOR THE TOP THREE STRINGS

Triads in **G**, across the whole neck.

FOR THE PLAYER WHO SHOWS UP

*Stop fighting for sonic space. Learn the
small voicings that let you sit beside any
rhythm guitarist, keys player, or bassist
without stepping on a single toe.*

VOLUME

I

KEY OF G

— FOREWORD

Most guitarists learn a handful of chord shapes and stop *there*.

This book is about going further. About expanding the thinking guitarist's toolkit.

There is a moment every working guitarist knows. You're on stage with another guitarist, a keyboardist, a bassist. Everyone is playing. The song is full. And somewhere in that fullness you realize you don't know where you fit.

The fix isn't more gain or a different pedal. The fix is understanding what register you're playing in, and whether someone else is already there.

One great option to have in your toolkit: triads on the top three strings. Three notes at a time, up high, out of the way of the bass and the keyboard. A way to be specific, to occupy your own space rather than doubling what everyone else is already playing — and one of the most useful things a guitarist can learn for playing in a band.

This is the simplest possible introduction to that idea: **three triad types, one key, the entire neck.** G major. G minor. G7.

Learn these shapes, understand why they work, and you'll have one more way to find your place.

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A NOTE ON WHAT'S NEXT

This is Volume I of an ongoing series. Future volumes will expand into the other eleven keys, common progressions (ii—V—I, the blues, modal vamps), and string sets two/three/four. Short example videos will accompany each volume on TikTok — search [@thinkingguitar](https://www.tiktok.com/@thinkingguitar).

— READING THE DIAGRAMS

A quick legend.

Every diagram in this book reads the same way. Spend two minutes here and you'll move through the rest of the volume without friction.

ORIENTATION

Diagrams are drawn **horizontally**, like a guitar resting in your lap. The thickest line on the left is the nut. Frets run left to right. We only show strings **1, 2, and 3** (high E, B, G), because that's where this whole method lives.

NOTE LABELS

Inside every note marker you'll see **R, 3** (or **b3**), **5**, or **b7**. These tell you the note's *function* in the chord, not its letter name. Once you internalize the geometry of **R · 3 · 5**, you can move it to any key.

MARKER SHAPES



Root (square, green)

The home note.
The chord's letter name.



Third (circle, blue)

Major or minor. The chord's quality.



Fifth (circle, white)

The reinforcing tone. Sometimes optional.



Flat seven (red)

Adds the dominant-7 color. G7 only.



Roman numerals

Fret position labels along the bottom.



Color-coded enclosures

A tinted shape wraps the three notes of each voicing. Its color matches the italic chord label above it (*Gm*, *Cm*, *D7*), so you can see which notes belong to which chord.

TUNING CHECK

Standard tuning throughout. From low to high: **E A D G B E**. We work entirely on the top three: **G (3), B (2), E (1)**.

— THE SYSTEM

Three strings. Three notes. Endless geography.

A triad consists of only three notes: the root, the third, and the fifth. Put one on each of the top three strings and you have a complete chord that takes up almost no acoustic space.

WHY STRING SET 1-2-3?

High triads sit in the register of a piano's right hand or a horn section's stab. They cut through a mix without volume. They leave the midrange open for vocals. And they're physically small — you can comp on them with two fingers and a pick, or fingerstyle, or hybrid. This approach works across a multitude of genres.

WHY ONE KEY FIRST?

Building fluency in *one* key beats shallow familiarity with twelve. Once your hand finds G major, G minor, and G7 anywhere on the neck without thinking, the same shapes transpose. We'll move to other keys in later volumes; this volume is depth before breadth.

THE GEOMETRY

3 INVERSIONS × 3 CHORD TYPES

I

Major — $R \cdot 3 \cdot 5$

The default. No added tension, no color. Just the three notes that define the chord. The third determines everything: raise it one fret from minor and the whole character changes.

i

Minor — $R \cdot \flat 3 \cdot 5$

Same root, same fifth, one note different. That single semitone drop, from major to minor third, is responsible for most of what we call "emotional" in Western music.

I ⁷

Dom 7 — $R \cdot 3 \cdot \flat 7$

The only chord type that contains a tritone: the interval between the third and the flat seventh. That tritone is harmonically unstable by nature, which is why dominant 7 chords demand resolution. In the blues, that rule gets broken deliberately and repeatedly, which is part of what makes the blues sound like the blues. (*Fifth omitted on three strings.*)



The substitution rule for G7: a complete dominant 7 chord has four notes ($R \cdot 3 \cdot 5 \cdot \flat 7$). On three strings you must drop one. Almost always the 5. The result still functions as a 7 because the *tritone* between the 3 and $\flat 7$ is what defines the sound. Keep the 3 and the $\flat 7$. The rest is decoration.

I *The brightest, most stable triad in the key. The home base every progression returns to.*

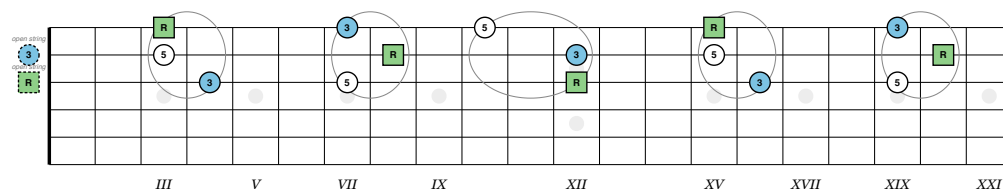
I • IV • V G • B • D

G Major triads & I—IV—V.

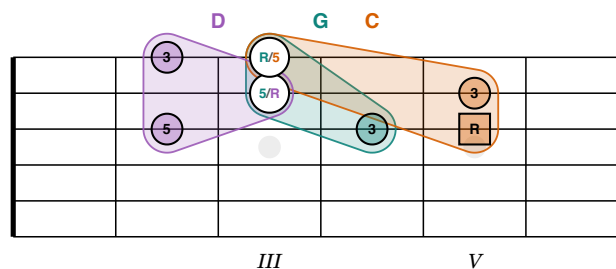
Three voicings across the neck above; below, the I—IV—V progression (G → C → D) shown in three positions. Same notes, three altitudes.

NOTES: G • B • D where R = root (G), 3 = third (B), 5 = fifth (D)

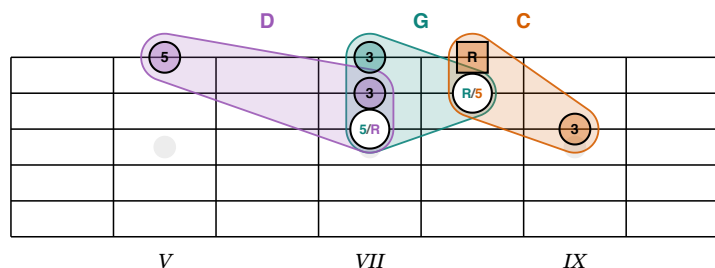
Overview
G
across
the neck



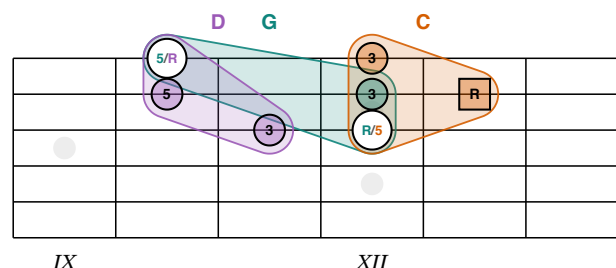
I • IV • V
Position
III



I • IV • V
Position
VII



I • IV • V
Position
X



PRACTICE

1. Play each shape cleanly. Pay attention to where the root is. This will eventually unlock the whole fretboard.
2. Loop I → IV → V at pos III, two bars each, 60 bpm.
3. Move up and down through the positions described in the diagrams. No stopping.

II One note moves. The third drops a half-step and the whole emotional center shifts.

i • iv • V7 G • B $\flat$ • D

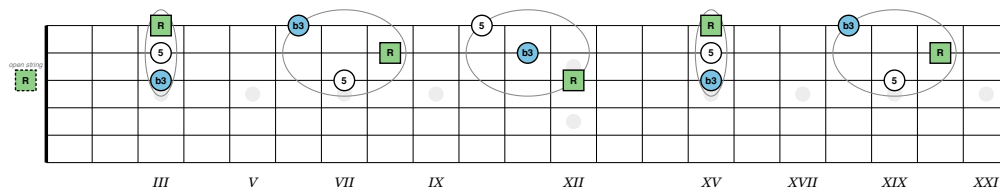
G Minor triads & i—iv—V.

Drop the third one fret. The major V (not v) returns home with extra pull. That's harmonic minor logic.

NOTES: G • B $\flat$ • D where R = root (G), $\flat 3$ = minor third (B $\flat$), 5 = fifth (D)

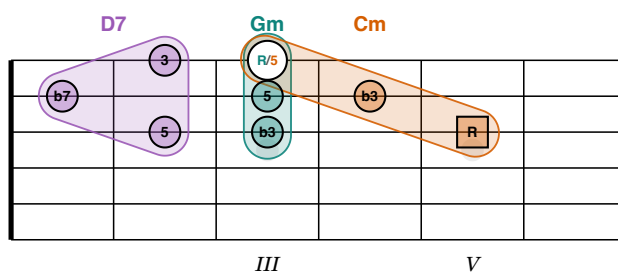
Overview

Gm
across
the neck



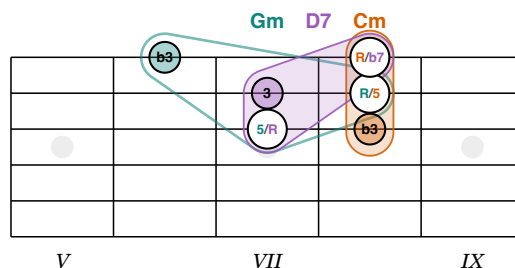
i • iv • V7

Position
III



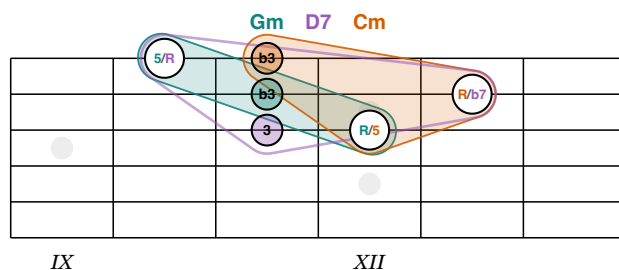
i • iv • V7

Position
VI



i • iv • V7

Position
X



PRACTICE

1. Play each shape cleanly. Pay attention to where the root is. This will eventually unlock the whole fretboard.
2. Loop i → iv → V7 at pos III, two bars each, 60 bpm.
3. Move up and down through the positions described in the diagrams. No stopping.

III *The blues, the funk, the turnaround. Drop the 5; keep R • 3 • ♭7.*

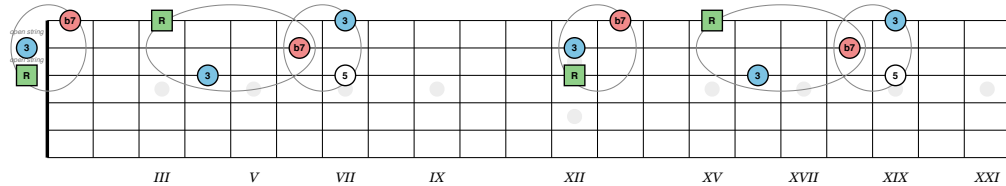
I⁷ • IV⁷ • V⁷ G • B • D • F

G7 voicings & I⁷—IV⁷—V⁷.

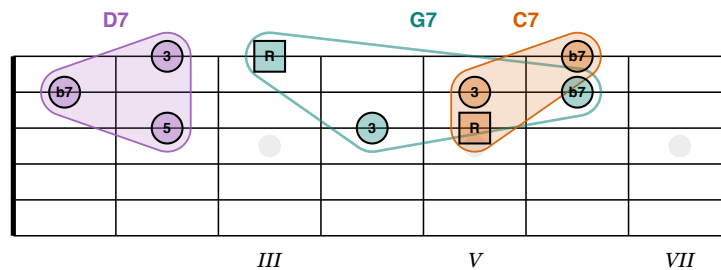
Three notes, three strings. The tritone between 3 and ♭7 carries the whole sound. The 5 isn't missed.

NOTES: G • B • D • F where R = root (G), 3 = third (B), 5 = fifth (D), ♭7 = flat seven (F)

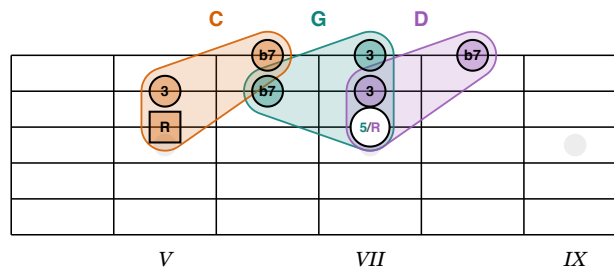
Overview
G7
across
the neck



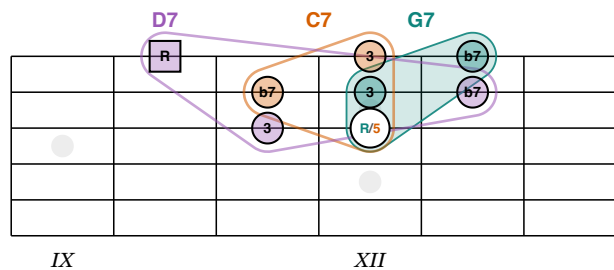
I⁷ • IV⁷ • V⁷
Position
III



I⁷ • IV⁷ • V⁷
Position
VI



I⁷ • IV⁷ • V⁷
Position
XII



PRACTICE

1. Play each shape cleanly. Pay attention to where the root is. This will eventually unlock the whole fretboard.
2. Loop I⁷ → IV⁷ → V⁷ at pos III, two bars each, 60 bpm.
3. Move up and down through the positions described in the diagrams. No stopping.

— SUGGESTED MODULES

How to actually learn this.

This suggested sequence has worked for many of my students. Move through the four modules at whatever pace fits your life. There is no clock on it.

One thing matters more than anything else: **10 minutes a day beats three hours on Saturday.**

Consistency is what writes this into your hands.

MODULE 1 • SHAPES

1. 10 minutes a day. One chord type only: G major.
2. All three positions. Learn them cold.
3. Goal: any voicing on demand, without looking.

MODULE 2 • MOVEMENT

1. Add G minor and G7. Same three positions.
2. Switch G → Gm → G7 in tempo. 60 bpm, two bars each.
3. Notice which fingers move and which stay.

MODULE 3 • PROGRESSIONS

1. I, IV, V in G major. All three positions.
2. i, iv, V in G minor. All three positions.
3. Play each progression for 4 minutes nonstop.

MODULE 4 • IN CONTEXT

1. Play along with any track in G. YouTube backing tracks work.
2. Comp on the top three strings only. Resist barre chords.
3. Record yourself once. Listen back honestly.

Don't rush to twelve keys. Master G first. The shapes will transpose themselves.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Pahlman.

Robin has played with bands all over the world, from tiny DIY spaces in Europe to Carnegie Hall in New York City, and has taught guitar to hundreds of students of all ages over several decades.

Based in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. *The Thinking Guitarist* is his ongoing series of method books for players who want to understand *why* the fretboard works.

LESSONS

lessons.
robinpahlman.com

EXAMPLES ON TIKTOK

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STUDIO

Crown Heights
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