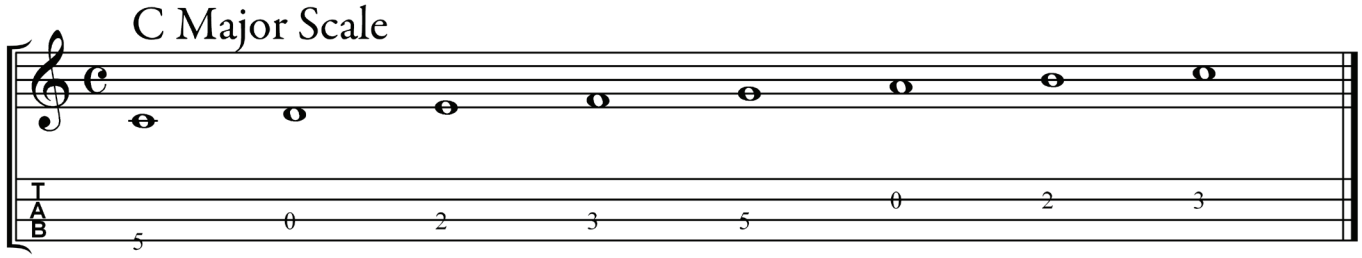
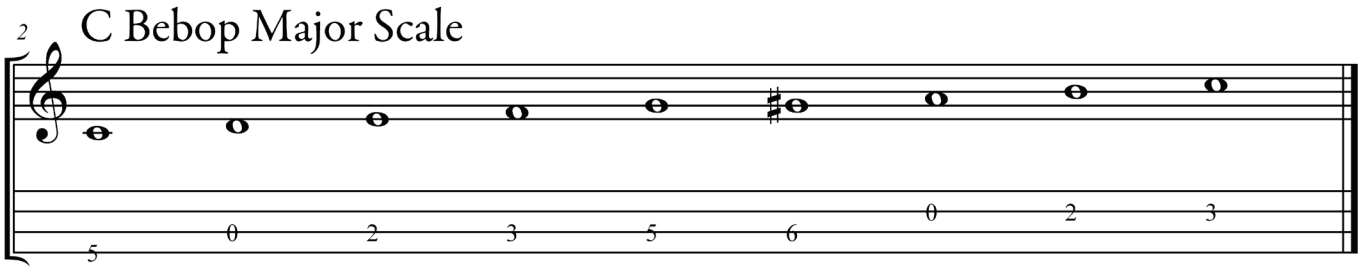
Introduction to Drop 2 chords for use in chord soloing

Chord melodies and chord soloing in Jazz are common to piano and guitar players. Mandolinists too can use the same ideas to play chord melodies and solos. The most common way to do this is by the use of what music theory folks call Drop 2 chord voicings.

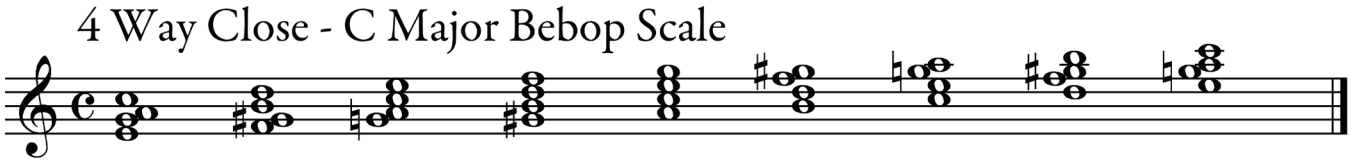
To understand the following it will help to know a bit of Jazz music theory, especially chord construction. It is helpful if you also have played Jazz for a period of time and understand basic chord progressions such as IIm7 V7 I. If you need some theory help, a good book I recommend is "Jazz Theory" by Mark Levine.

First a little background about Drop2 chord voicings. They are derived from what are called "bebop scales". These are common scales with one added chromatic note to make a chord tone every other note in the scale (for a complete study of bebop scales, check out my free pdf book on this subject, available at the "books" link). Here is a C major scale followed by a C bebop major scale. Notice the extra note (G#) in the C bebop major scale.

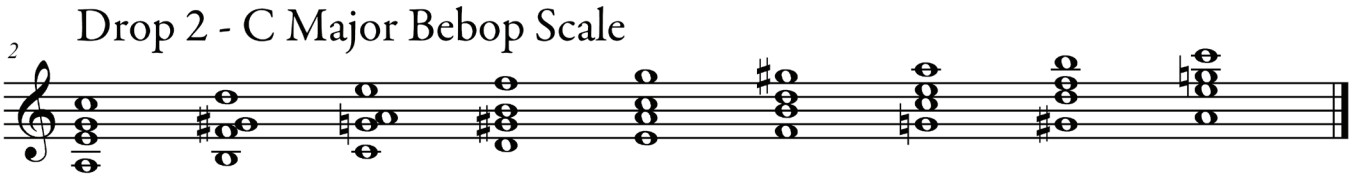




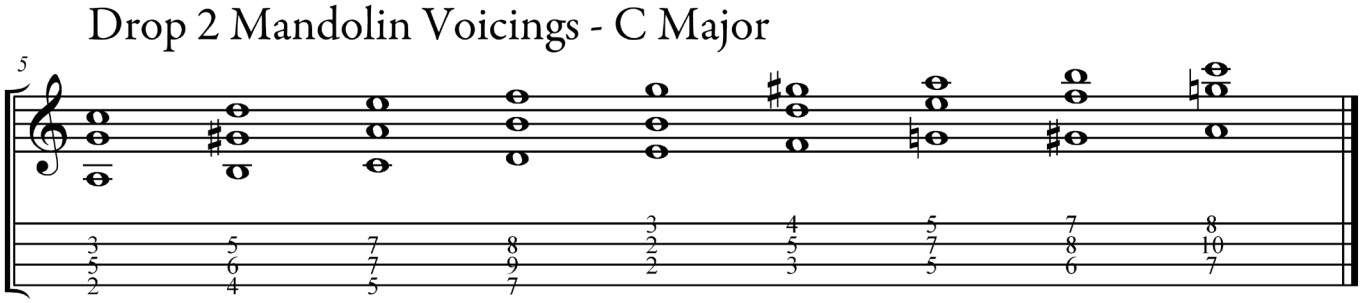
When band/vocal arrangers write for 4 parts, they often use these bebop scales as the basis of the harmony. They also use what is called "4 way close" harmony. This means all the notes of the chord are voiced close together. Below is a C major scale voiced in 4 way close harmony.



If we take 4 way close and drop the second note from the top one octave, we have "drop 2". Below is the same C major bebop scale in drop 2.



Because of where the notes are, along with the 5ths tuning, we can't play these voicings on the mandolin. HOWEVER, if we take out the 3rd note from the top, now we have very useable 3 note mandolin drop 2 type voicings. These are seen below.



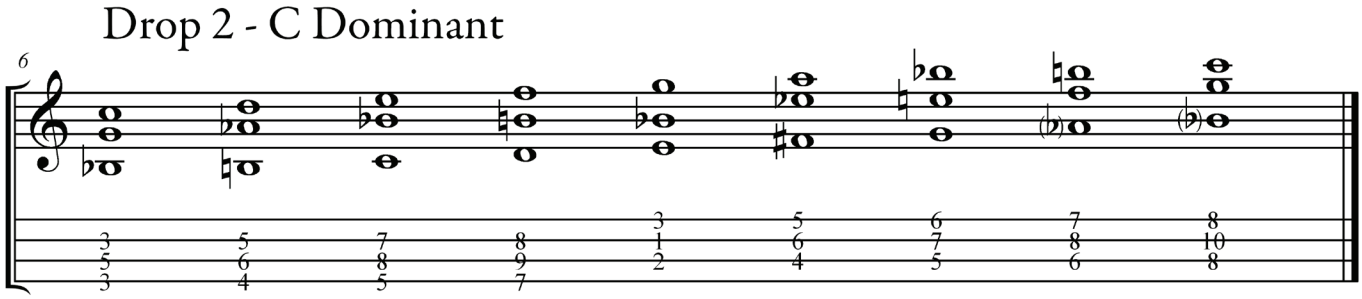
Anytime we want to make a chord melody or improvise a chord solo against a C major chord (remember jazz major chords are the 6th and major 7th), we can use these C major drop 2 voicings.

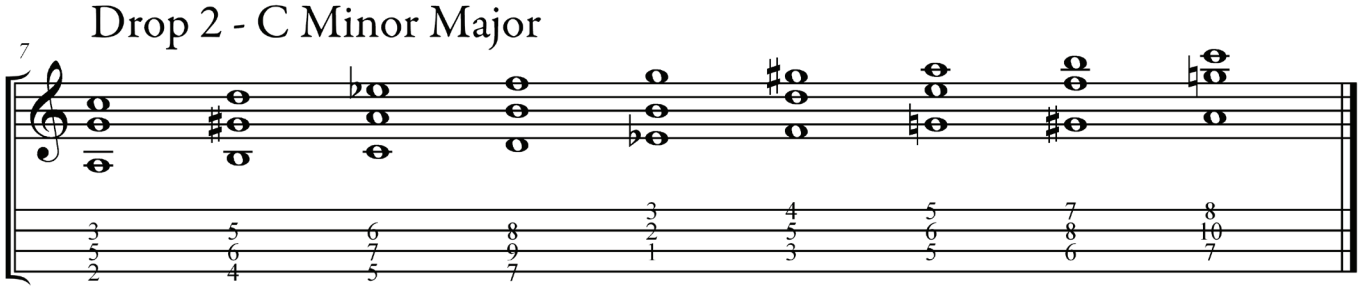
Go back and look at the 4 note drop 2 voicings at the top of this page. In the first chord we are using the notes C E G A which is a C6 chord. The notes in the second chord are G# B D F which is a G#dim chord. As you keep going, we are just alternating between those two chords (I made one change that sounds better to me, see if you can find it).

Since the notes of a C6 chord (C E G A) and an Am7 chord (A C E G) are the same, we can use this drop 2 chord set against an Am7 chord. Nice! We chords 2 chords with one set of voicings. So any time you have a minor seventh chord, use the major drop 2 voicings 3 half steps above.

I'm going to skip the how and why of the other drop two chord types. Suffice it to learn these and if you want to study why, a good book is pianist Mark Levine's Drop 2 book.

The dominant 7th and major minor chord drop 2 scales are as follows.





I made very small tweaks with a couple voicings here to sound better to my ears.

The notes in the minor major scale fit a Cm6 or a CmMaj7 chord. Since the notes in a Cm6 (C Eb G A) and the notes in a Am7b5 (A C Eb G) are the same, these voicings also work for m7b5 (also called "half diminished") chords .

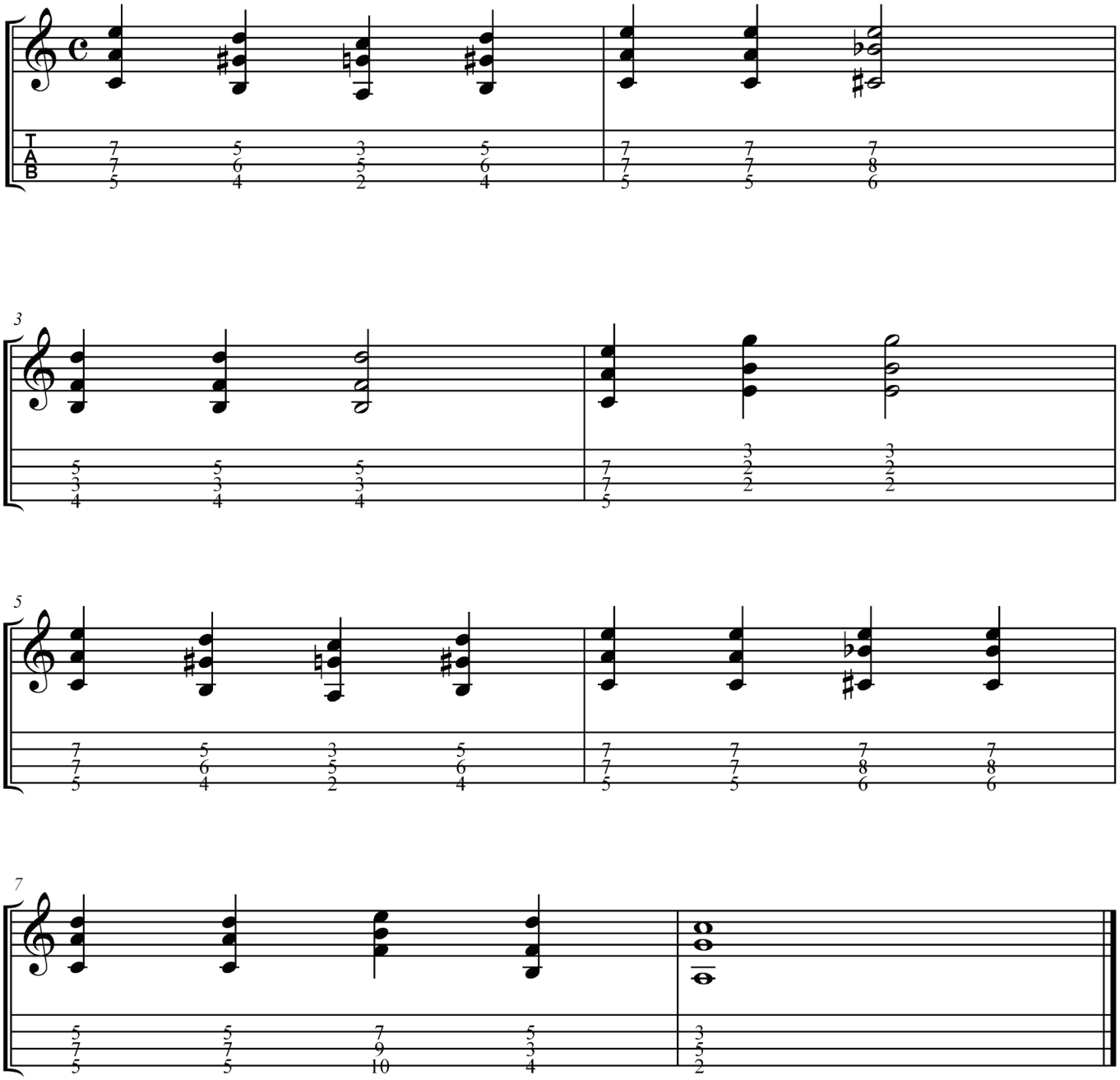
We now have drop two voicings for the following chord types:

Major
Minor 7
Dominant 7
Half Diminished
Minor Major

Now how about applying it to a tune. I'll keep it simple to see how it works and so I don't have problems breaking copyright laws. :-)

Here is Mary Had a Little Lamb in C. You should figure out the melody first (HINT: it is the top note in each chord voicing). I added a couple of things outside drop 2 I like as well. Have fun!

Mary Had a Little Lamb
Drop 2 Chord Voicings



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