

The Nashville Number System

The Nashville Number System was developed for people who know basic chord shapes on their respective instruments, but who don't have an extensive knowledge of music theory. Instead of calling out or writing down actual chord names when playing with others, we call or write the "Nashville Numbers". Most of the singing songs in this booklet use this system. It takes a little getting used to, but once you get the hang of it, this system allows you to play pretty much any song at a jam, no matter what key it's called in.

The key of G is known as the "bluegrass key" because many of the "hallmark" licks on the fretted instruments (guitar, banjo, mandolin and dobro) are played using G position chords. To play in other keys, many well-known traditional musicians use a capo. Doc Watson called a capo a "cheater", but he wasn't afraid to use it! And you shouldn't be afraid, either!

Although most popular bluegrass and folk songs are written in the keys of G, C, and D, sometimes, in a jam, a vocalist will call a tune in a key that suits their voice. It might be E. Or B-flat. Or the dreaded F! What will you do?? Use the Nashville Number System!

In the chart on the next page, the chords shown in green are the only chords you'll need to know to play all the tunes in this booklet, in pretty much any key that I've ever heard anyone call at a jam session (in my 50+ years of playing). Here they are – 17 chords – G, C, D, D7, Dm, A, A7, Am, Bb, B7, Bm, E, E7, Em, F, F#7, F#m.

All the information in yellow is for those of you who don't want to use capos. You'll need to learn all those yellow chords!

So – how to use this chart! *Here's a snippet of one of the tunes from this booklet*

Gold Watch and Chain
A.P. Carter, 1933

IV	I	
Oh, how can I stay here without you		
V	I	
I have nothing to cheer my poor heart		
IV		I
This old world would seem sad, love, without you		
V	I	
Tell me now that we're never to part		

The roman numerals stand for the chords.

Using the chart, you can see that, --- if you get lucky and the jammer calls the tune in the key of G, the chords would be:

IV – C
I – G
V – D

But if the jammer calls the tune in the key of Bb, you have 2 choices – play with no capo, or with your capo on the 3rd fret:

No capo:	Capo 3, playing in G position
IV – Eb	IV – C
I – Bb	I – G
V – F	V – D

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Roman numerals are typically used when writing chords on a song sheet. In a jam session, however, when people “call out” chords, they will simply call the numbers shown in this chart. In other words, in the key of G, if someone calls out, “6 minor”, the chord will be an Em.

Key	Capo Options	I 1	IV 4	V 5	II 2	ii 2minor	III 3	iii 3minor	VI 6	vi 6minor	VII Flat 7
G	No Capo	G	C	D	A7	Am	B7	Bm	E7	Em	F
C	No Capo	C	F	G	D7	Dm	E7	Em	A7	Am	Bb
D	No Capo	D	G	A	E7	Em	F#7	F#m	B7	Bm	C
Bb	Capo – 3, Play G	<i>Bb</i>	<i>Eb</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>Cm</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>Dm</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>Gm</i>	<i>G#</i>
B	Capo – 4, Play G	<i>B</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F#</i>	<i>C#</i>	<i>C#m</i>	<i>D#</i>	<i>D#m</i>	<i>G#</i>	<i>G#m</i>	<i>A</i>
A	Capo – 2, Play G	<i>A</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Bm</i>	<i>C#</i>	<i>C#m</i>	<i>F#</i>	<i>F#m</i>	<i>G</i>
E	Capo – 2, Play D OR Capo – 4, Play C	<i>E</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>F#</i>	<i>F#m</i>	<i>G#</i>	<i>G#m</i>	<i>C#</i>	<i>C#m</i>	<i>D</i>
F	Capo – 3, Play D OR Capo – 5, Play C	<i>F</i>	<i>Bb</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>Gm</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Am</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>Dm</i>	<i>Eb</i>

This chart is designed to support folks attending jam sessions hosted by the Northern Nevada Bluegrass Association (www.nnba.org). This system was designed by country and bluegrass musicians back in the 1940s, and is still widely used today.