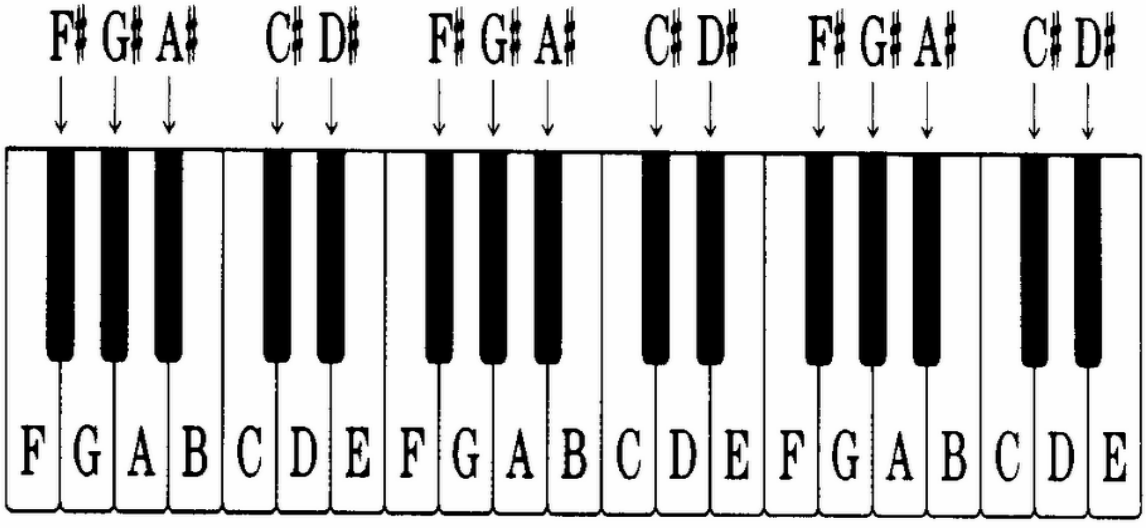
Music Theory for Cajun Accordionists

Right off the bat, I need to make clear that I'm no expert; far from it. I've had to piece together what little I know about music theory from here and there, mostly from trial-and-error over the years. I'm hoping the little I know can help you. When reading this through, don't get hung up on the piano stuff, or any of it for that matter. Start from what you recognize and go from there, if you like. I'm glad to answer questions, too, if you want to give me a call.

First, let's look at what's called a **Major Scale**, and for that we'll use a piano keyboard (see figure below). Notes are arranged in half-steps; in other words, the distance between C (a white key) and C# (a black key) is a half-step [BTW, the black key in-between can be referred to as either the note to the left's sharp or the note to the right's flat, so C# is the same as Db]. You'll notice the distance between E and F, and between B and C, are also a half-steps. When you make a scale, which is the Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Ti-Do sound that most everyone is familiar with, you start with one note, any note, and that is the name of the scale. You pick the next 7 notes this way: whole-step, whole-step, half-step, whole step, whole step, whole-step, half-step. So a C scale would look like this: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C ; a G scale would be G-A-B-C-D-E-F#-G; a D scale would be D-E-F#-G-A-B-C#-D; and an F would be F-G-A-A#(always written as Bb)-C-D-E-F.

Confused yet? Don't worry, you don't have to memorize this, or even understand it: the whole point is to make a scale so we can do something with it; two things,



actually. We're going to build chords, and we're going to show you which chords go together to make a song. Before we do, let's talk just a little more about scales.

You'll notice that each scale has eight notes. The first note is the note the scale is based on, and what the scale is referred to as. For example, the one that starts with C is a C scale. Simple, right? We refer to the other notes by their position. For example, in a C scale, the third note is an E, the fourth is an F, the fifth is a G and so on, so the E, F, and G are the third, fourth, and the fifth of the scale. Bored out of your skull? Stay with me just a little longer.

Building Chords

Now comes our first use of the scale. We're going to build a **chord**. A **major chord** is made up of the **first, third, and fifth of a scale**. A **blend** would be any two of these together, but I'm going to refer to pressing two or more buttons at a time, even an octave, as a chord for simplicity's sake. We're almost ready to build chords on the Cajun accordion. Let's take a look at the button board; we'll keep some scales next to it for later work. From top to bottom, these are the notes on a "C" Cajun Accordion:

(Fig. 1)

	Push	Pull
1)	**E**	**G**
2)	**G**	**B**
3)	**C**	**D**
4)	**E**	**F**
5)	**G**	**A**
6)	**C**	**B**
7)	**E**	**D**
8)	**G**	**F**
9)	**C**	**A**
10)	**E**	**B**

(Fig. 2)

Scale	**1st**	2nd	**3rd**	4th	**5th**	6th	7th	**8th**
C	**C**		**E**		**G**			**C**
G	**G**	A	**B**	C	**D**	E	F#	**G**
F	**F**	G	**A**	Bb	**C**	D	E	**F**
D	**D**	E	**F#**	G	**A**	B	C#	**D**

You'll notice that on the scales next to the buttonboard layout, I put the 1st, 3rd, and 5th 's of each scale in bold print. Now let's look at how to build some chords.

We'll start with the C scale. You can see from Fig. 2 that the 1st, 3rd, and 5th in any combination make a C chord, and if you look at Fig. 1, you'll see that these are all available on the **Push** side; therefore, **any combination of buttons on the Push will give you a C chord.** Easy, right? The rest of the chords we'll look at (for G, F, and D) will all be on the **Pull** side, with one special exception.

Now look at the G scale. The 1-3-5 in this case is G, B, and D. These correspond to the 1,2,3,6,7, and 10 buttons on the **Pull** side. So any combination of these on the **Pull** will give you a G chord. Now we come to our special exception: You can see that if you **Push** on the 2, 5, and 8, you will also get a G. The 5-8 **Push** is particularly handy for resolving (or ending) a melody line (a string of notes in a musical "phrase") in a **Pull** song.

You can probably figure out the D and F yourself. The 1-3-5 for a D is D, F#, and A. You can throw the F# out, because there's not one on the buttonboard, so you're left with D and A. You can see from the diagram these correspond to the 3, 5, 7, and 9 buttons on the **Pull**.

For F, the 1-3-5 is F, A, and C. Since the only F chords I have really come across are on the **Pull**, I'll throw out the C, so you're left with the 4, 5, 8, and 9 buttons on the **Pull** to make an F chord.

To summarize:
C chord = any buttons on the **Push**
G chord = 1,2,3,6,7, and 10 buttons on the **Pull** side. 2,5, 8 on the Push.
D chord = 3,5,7, and 9 buttons on the **Pull**
F chord = 4,5,8, and 9 buttons on the **Pull**

Finding the Chords in a Song

Now we come to our next important use of the scale: how to find what chords make up a song. I've saved the best for last, and this is probably what you really want and need to know.

Remember how we used certain notes of the C scale to make a C chord? Well, we can also use the knowledge of the notes in a scale to find out what chords are in a song. Most songs are made up of 2 or 3 chords. This means that if you play just the chord for several beats, or lines of singing, it will sound right; it will "make sense". Songs like "The Back Door" use 3 chords, while songs like "Les Flammes D'enfer" use only 2.

The main chord of a song is the one the song usually starts on and ends with. That main chord is said to be the "key" of a song. All push songs, or "1st position" songs, on a C accordion are in the key of C. All "pull" songs, or "2nd position" songs, are in the key of G. Here's how to find the other 1 or 2 chords of a song:

We'll start with a C scale:

Scale	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
C	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C

The chords making up most popular songs, not just in Cajun, but also in Country-Western, Rock 'n' Roll, and most Pop music, are based on **the 1, 4, and 5 of the scale of the main chord (**the Key**)**. So the main chords on a **Push** (first position) song with 3 chords on a C accordion will be C, F, and G. **If the song only has two chords, they will be the 1 and 5**; in this case, the C and G.

If you want to find the chords on a **Pull** (2nd position) song, look at the G scale:

Scale	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
G	G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G

You can see that the 1-4-5 in this case are the G, C, and D. So if your **Pull** song is a 3-chord song it will have these 3 chords in it; if it's a 2-chord song, it will have only the G and D.

You may be happy to know that once you have this all figured out, as a Cajun accordionist you won't really need to know the names of any of the notes! You'll only need to know what key your accordion is in: is it a C or a D accordion (the two most popular, though there are others); and you'll need to know if it's a 1st position or 2nd position song. That's because the buttons you use to make a 1, 4,

or 5 chord on a C accordion will be the same ones you'll use to make the 1, 4, or 5 chord on any other accordion.
To reiterate, and to forestall any confusion, let's summarize: We first learned how to use the scale to **build chords**. We then used the scale to find out **which chords to build**.

Now that we have learned how to use the scale to make chords, which buttons to use to make those chords, and how to find what chords will be in a song, we only have one thing left to figure out: where those chords are.

Let's take a simple song like "Les Flammes D'enfer". How do we figure out which chords are in it and where they are located? First, let's find the main chord of the song. Songs will usually start (and end) with the main chord, which, as you may remember, is also called the key. Since we're going to play the song on a C accordion, we know there's about a 99% chance the song is in the key of C or the key of G (a **Push** song or a **Pull** song). So put on a recording of "Les Flammes D'enfer" that you know is on a C box. When the singing starts, try tapping a C chord along with it. A good choice for tapping would be the 6-7 **Push** (always **Push** for C chords, remember?). Now start the song again, and try tapping the G chord. A good choice for this would be the 6-7 pull. Which sounds better? Probably the G chord. So now you've figured out the key of the song. Now that you know what key it's in, you know that it will very likely only contain one or two more chords, namely the D and maybe the C. Now keep tapping the G chord with the song, looking for places where the G doesn't sound right. Those will likely be places where the chord changes, and this is often at the last word of a phrase or line of the lyrics. I'll show you the changes in Les Flammes D'Enfer, by showing the lyrics with the chords over the top of the words where the chord changes.

G
Oh 'tite tante, priez pour moi,
D G
sauvez mon ame, des flames d'enfer.

Sauvez mon ame priez pour moi
D G
Priez pour moi, sauvez mon ame.

Ann Savoy uses this kind of demarcation in her book, which is where I took the above example from - but be careful: there are some places in my edition where she seems to get the key and the position mixed up. I'll be sure to cite only examples from her book that I know to be correct. Also, in some songs, like the example above, she starts the song with the G over "tante". I believe that's because she treats the first two words as an intro (but they're still in G).

Most of you have Ann's book, so I'm not going to bother writing out more examples. Take a look at "La Porte D'en Arriere in her book for a good example of a G song that has 3 chords. "Bayou Pon Pon" is an example of a C song with 2 chords, and "The Reno Waltz" is a good example of a C song with 3 chords. Trying tapping chords along with recordings of these songs if you have them, and see if it works.

You can also start listening to songs and trying to find the chords yourself, which is good training, both for your ear and for you to get a feel of how songs are structured. Remember, first figure out the first chord in the song; this is likely to be the main chord, aka the key. Once you figure out what key the song is in, you only have one or two more chords to find. You still have to figure out where they go, but the singing (if there is singing) will help. Listen carefully and see if you can spot the changes; I promise, you will get better and better at it.

Two warnings: if the accordion in the song is a D accordion (or any other accordion besides a C), and you are playing on a C, it's not going to work. You may match a chord or two – they have some in common – but it's not going to sound right and it will most likely prove difficult and confusing. The other caution is that most old recordings will be off because of the recording technology of the times. Iry Lejeune's are a notable example; nothing you play will sound right with his songs because they're off-key from standard pitch.

That's it for now. Please feel free to ask questions and offer feedback. I want to make this as understandable as possible. I may also make a video to give examples of how to chord with a song. Good luck!