The Nashville Number System

"It's 1465!" shouted the bass player as the bandleader counted off the tune. I did my best to keep up and play the guitar part as we began the tune. On that bandstand many years ago was my crash course in the Nashville Number System. Since that time, I've seen, used, and written this notation numerous times.

The Nashville Number System is a musical shorthand that was developed in the studios in Nashville Tennessee in the 50s and 60s made famous by legendary studio musicians like Harold Bradley and Chet Atkins. It's a way of notating music using numbers associated with the function of a chord within a given key.

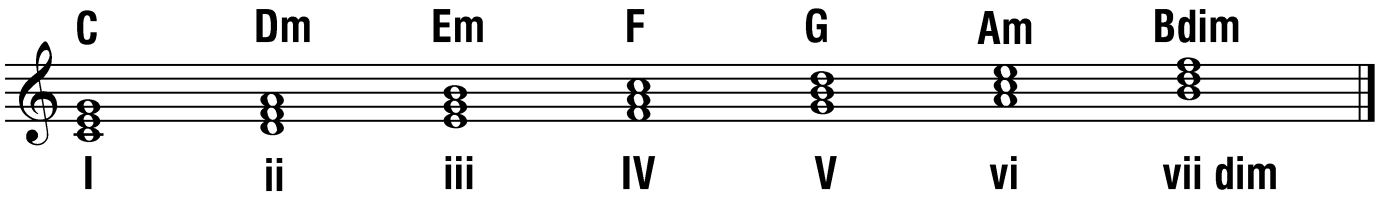
This lesson teaches the basics of reading and understanding the Nashville Number System notation and how you can use it to notate a lot of musical information quickly and effectively.

The Harmonized Major Scale

In order to understand the Nashville number system you need to understand the relationship of chords within a key.

A HARMONIZED MAJOR SCALE is a specific pattern of chords derived from the major scale. A triad is built on each note of the major scale. For example, in the key, start on 1-3-5 then move up a scale step for each note (ie. 1-3-5, 2-4-6, 3-5-7, 4-6-8 and so on). These combinations of notes form triads in the same predictable pattern for every key.

- The triads built on the 1st, 4th, and 5th scale steps are MAJOR CHORDS.
- The triads built on the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th scale steps are MINOR CHORDS.
- The triad built on the 7th scale step is a DIMINISHED CHORD.



MAJOR CHORDS
1st, 4th, 5th

Roman Numerals: I, IV, V
Nashville Numbers: 1, 4, 5

In any key, triads built off of the 1st, 4th, and 5th scale steps become MAJOR CHORDS.

MINOR CHORDS
2nd, 3rd, 6th

Roman Numerals: ii, iii, vi
Nashville Numbers: 2-, 3-, 6-

In any key, triads built off of the 2nd, 3rd, and 6th scale steps become MINOR CHORDS.

DIMINISHED CHORD
7th

Roman Numerals: vii°
Nashville Numbers: 7°

In any key, a triad built off of the 7th 5th scale step becomes a DIMINISHED CHORD.

Nashville Number System Examples

For example, here is a progression in the key of C and how it would be notated in Nashville numbers.

C	Am	Dm	G	1	6-	2-	5
Original Chord Progression				Nashville Numbers			

Here's another example in the key of G.

G9	C	Dsus	C	1^{9}	4	5sus	4
Original Chord Progression				Nashville Numbers			

Here is an example in the key of C using inversions and chords outside of a key.

C	C/E	F7	Gm/Bb	1	1/3	4^{7}	5-/b7
Original Chord Progression				Nashville Numbers			

The Nashville number system is a great way to notate chord progressions in music. It requires a bit of transposition skills by the player. But if the song is in multiple keys, the chord progression can be written out only one time with notations of the key changes.

Meter and Page Layout

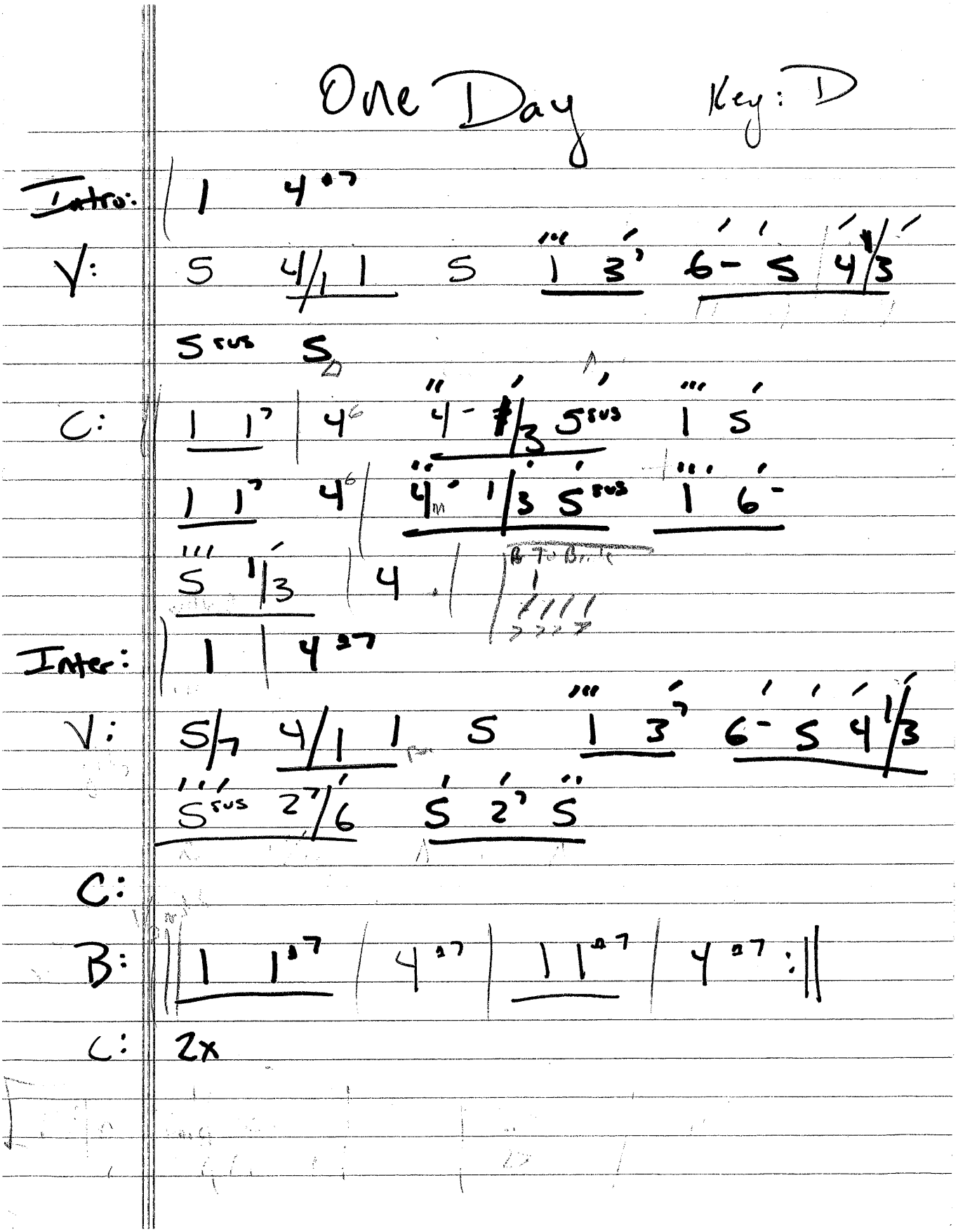
In Nashville numbers, a song is assumed to be in 4/4 with four beats in each measure unless otherwise notated. On the chart, if the chord numbers occur right after each other then each chord is good for an entire measure. For example, the two chords in the intro of "One Day" would each get one measure each.

If more than one chord occurs within a measure, then a line is drawn under all of the chords in a particular measure as in the second measure of the verse of "One Day". Each chord would get equal number of beats within the measure unless otherwise notated.

If the chords are not equal in their duration within a measure, then small slash marks will be written over the chords to indicate how many beats each chord should receive. For example, the fourth measure of the verse, would have the 1 chord for three beats and the 3 chord for one beat.

On the following page is the music written in the Nashville number system for a studio session that I played guitar on several months ago. The song is in the key of D. Look at the chart and try to figure out what chords are to be played.

"One Day"



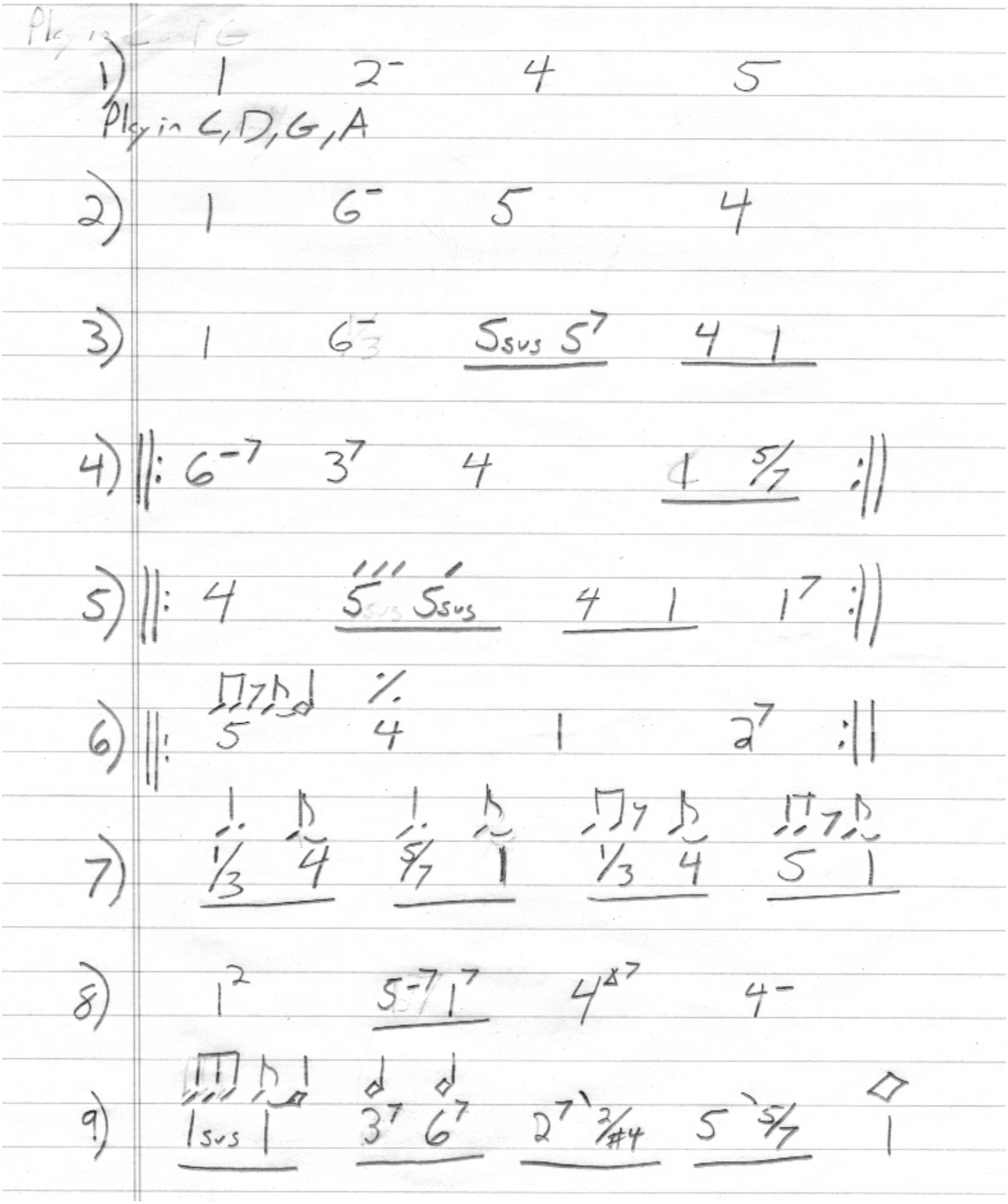
Chords in Every Key

Here is a helpful chart outlining the most common chords in every key.

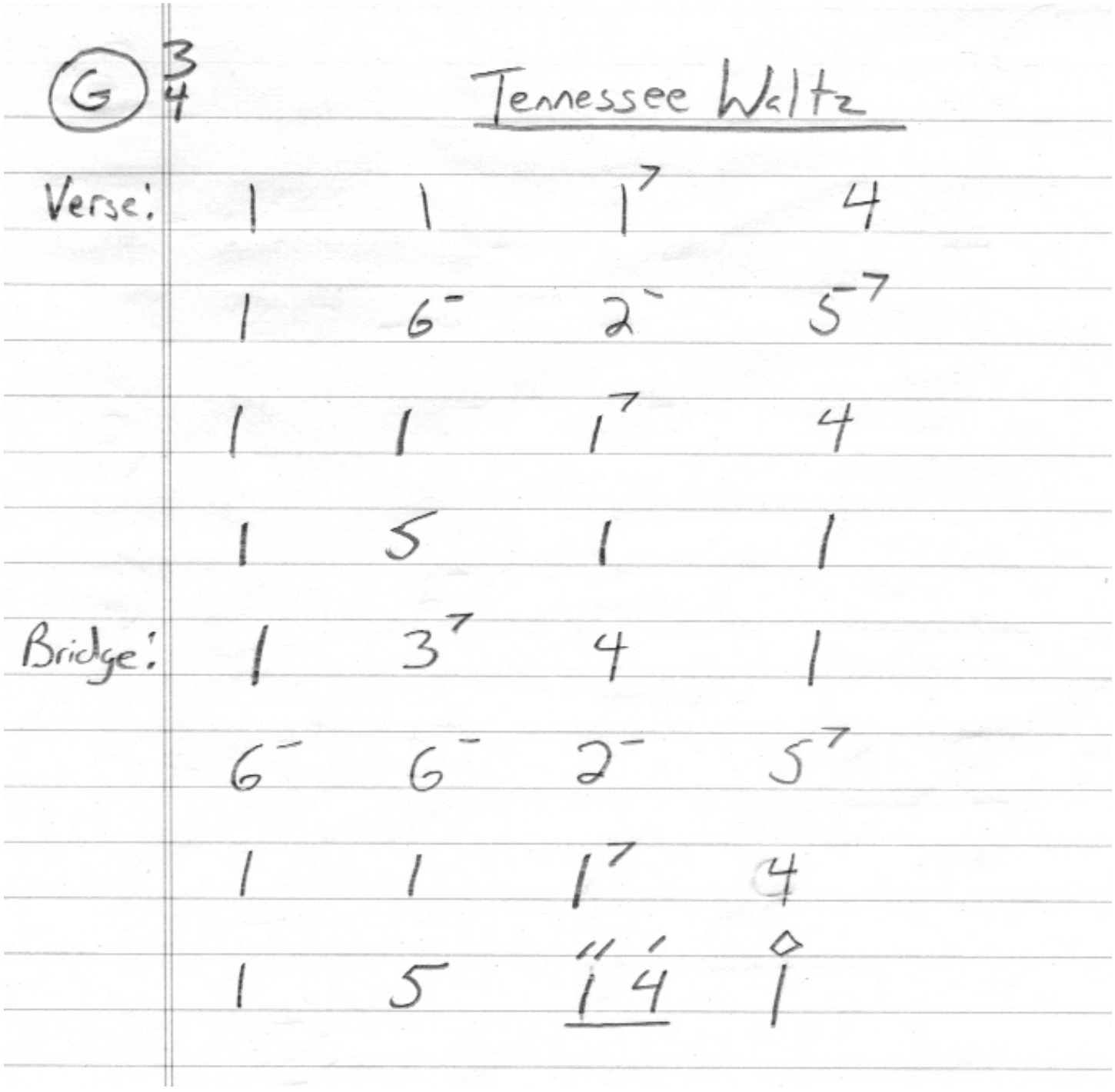
KEY OF SONG	COMMON CHORDS	*The common chords in any key.*				
	I	iim	iiim	IV	V	vim
Ab	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb	Fm
A	A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m
Bb	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm
B	B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m
C	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am
Db	Db	Ebm	Fm	Gb	Ab	Bbm
D	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm
Eb	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm
E	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m
F	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm
Gb	Gb	Abm	Bbm	Cb	Db	Ebm
G	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em

Nashville Number Progressions

Play the following exercises in a variety of keys.



Tennessee Waltz in Nashville Numbers



Song Example