

Rock 'n Roll Uke: Power Chords & More

Please bring a pencil to the workshop.

Craig McClelland
Craig@sonicabsurdities.com

What is a power chord?

A power chord is not really a chord at all. A chord is typically made up of three or more notes. A “power chord” only requires two notes so is more properly referred to as an interval, specifically a fifth, created by using the first and fifth note of the chords scale.



So isolated and played together you have a power chord like this. Pretty simple!



These “chords” are very useful for a couple of reasons. Most chords consist of the root, third, and fifth intervals of their respective scales. It is the third that gives a chord its characteristic major or minor sound. Power chords have no third giving them an ambiguous quality that is neither major nor minor.

Secondly, a great deal of rock and roll music utilizes distortion effects on the guitar, or in our case, uke. Distortion does not play well with harmonic complexity. The fewer note the better in most cases. The interval of the fifth, which is our power chord (or its inversion, the 4th), resonate in a way that works quite well with distortion.

Let’s look at our basic power chord shape over a simple blues in A.

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff features two chord diagrams: A⁵ (open A) and D⁵ (open D). Below each diagram is a rhythmic notation consisting of a series of diagonal slashes on a five-line staff. The bottom staff features four chord diagrams: A⁵, E⁵ (9fr), D⁵ (7fr), and A⁵. Each diagram is followed by a corresponding rhythmic notation of diagonal slashes.

Pretty cool, huh? This shape also works on the first two strings of your uke, like so:

A guitar chord diagram for G⁵. It shows a six-string guitar neck with two dots on the second and fourth strings, and two 'x' marks above the first and fifth strings.

The next shape lets you play power chords your middle two strings

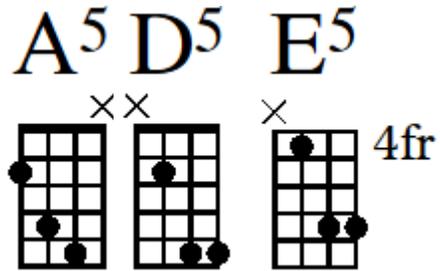
A guitar chord diagram for D⁵. It shows a six-string guitar neck with two dots on the second and fourth strings, and two 'x' marks above the first and fifth strings.

This can be useful for playing across the fretboard rather than constantly climbing up and down. Let's play our blues in A using these two shapes, as follows:

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff features two chord diagrams: A⁵ and D⁵. Below each diagram is a rhythmic notation consisting of a series of diagonal slashes on a five-line staff. The bottom staff features four chord diagrams: A⁵, E⁵ (4fr), D⁵, and A⁵. Each diagram is followed by a corresponding rhythmic notation of diagonal slashes.

Now let's look at some other power chord shapes and ways to use them.

Root-Fifth, 3 notes



Inverted Power Chord



Fifth on Bottom – 3 Notes



Fifth on the Bottom – 4 Notes



Bo Diddley Beat

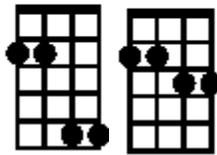
d u d u d u d u d u d u d u

D⁵ C⁵ D⁵ D⁵ C⁵ D⁵

G⁵ 6fr F⁵ 5fr G⁵ 6fr D⁵ C⁵ D⁵

Variation

D⁵

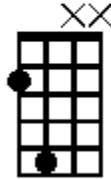


D⁵ D⁵ D⁵ D⁵

G⁵ 6fr G⁵ 6fr D⁵ D⁵

Minor 6th Power Chord (no 5)

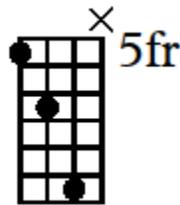
F(omit5)



Two musical staves illustrating the F(omit5) chord. The first staff shows a C⁵ chord (fretboard diagram: 00xx) followed by a whole rest, and then an F(omit5) chord (fretboard diagram: 1xx) followed by a whole rest. The second staff shows a sequence of chords: C⁵ (00xx), G(omit5) (1xx 4fr), F(omit5) (1xx), and C⁵ (00xx), each followed by a whole rest.

Add9 (sus2) Power Chord

Stacked Fifths



A musical staff illustrating the D(add9) chord with a sequence of stacked fifths. The notes are: D (2nd fret, 2nd string), G (2nd fret, 3rd string), Bb (3rd fret, 4th string), D (5th fret, 1st string), G (2nd fret, 2nd string), Bb (3rd fret, 4th string), D (5th fret, 1st string), G (2nd fret, 2nd string), Bb (3rd fret, 4th string), D (5th fret, 1st string), G (2nd fret, 2nd string), Bb (3rd fret, 4th string), D (5th fret, 1st string), G (2nd fret, 2nd string), Bb (3rd fret, 4th string), D (5th fret, 1st string). The fretboard diagrams for each chord are: D(add9) (2fr), Bb(add9) (3fr), C(add9) (5fr), G(add9) (2fr).

A⁵ C⁵ D⁵ F⁵ E⁵ F⁵ E⁵ F⁵ E⁵ C⁵ D⁵

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The staff contains a sequence of notes corresponding to the chords listed above: A5, C5, D5, F5, E5, F5, E5, F5, E5, C5, and D5. The notes are: A4, C4, D4, F#4, E4, F#4, E4, F#4, E4, C4, and D4. The rhythm consists of quarter notes for the first three chords, followed by eighth notes for the next six, and quarter notes for the last two.

D⁵ C⁵ D⁵ C⁵

E⁵ D⁵ E⁵ D⁵ E⁵ D⁵ E⁵ D⁵ A⁵ G⁵ A⁵ G⁵ A⁵ A⁵ G⁵

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The staff contains a sequence of notes corresponding to the chords listed above. The first part consists of a repeating pattern of D5, C5, D5, C5. The second part consists of E5, D5, E5, D5, E5, D5, E5, D5, A5, G5, A5, G5, A5, G5, A5, G5. The notes are: D4, C4, E4, D4, E4, D4, E4, D4, E4, D4, A4, G4, A4, G4, A4, G4, A4, G4. The rhythm consists of quarter notes for the first part, followed by eighth notes for the second part.

C⁵ E^{b5} F⁵ C⁵ E^{b5} G^{b5} F⁵ C⁵ E^{b5} F⁵ E^{b5} C⁵

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The staff contains a sequence of notes corresponding to the chords listed above: C5, Eb5, F5, C5, Eb5, Gb5, F5, C5, Eb5, F5, Eb5, and C5. The notes are: C4, Eb4, F#4, C4, Eb4, Gb4, F#4, C4, Eb4, F#4, Eb4, and C4. The rhythm consists of quarter notes for the first four chords, followed by eighth notes for the next six, and quarter notes for the last two.

B⁵ A⁵ D⁵ B⁵ A⁵

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The staff contains a sequence of notes corresponding to the chords listed above: B5, A5, D5, B5, and A5. The notes are: B4, A4, D4, B4, and A4. The rhythm consists of quarter notes for the first two chords, followed by eighth notes for the next three, and quarter notes for the last one.