

The Notation of Bar Chords (or Barre Chords or Barré Chords)

Guitarists and editors use the terms bar chord, barre chord, and barré chord interchangeably. “Barré” is the original French spelling which is often printed as “barre” instead.

How to Notate Conventional Bars

As an example, at the most generic level, a bar chord at the 7th fret may be indicated as VII, CVII, BVII, C7, or B7. Example #1:

Example #1

General generic bar notation

	VII	CVII	BVII	C7	B7
T	7	7	7	7	7
A	7	7	7	7	7
B	7	7	7	7	7
G	7	7	7	7	7
D	7	7	7	7	7
E	7	7	7	7	7

Roman numerals are usually preferable to Arabic numerals since as in this example, it is easy to confuse the bar notation of C7 or B7 with the C7 chord or B7 chord. Nevertheless, some guitarists and editors use the Arabic number notation.

The letter “C” before the numeral stands for “cejilla” in Spanish or “capotasto” in Italian. The letter “B” before the numeral stands for “bar” in English or “barré” in French.

Some editors use this notation in the widest sense. In other words, any of these could indicate to bar six, five, four, three, or two strings.

To indicate the number of strings to bar with more specificity, some guitarists and editors use fractions before the generic indication. A five-string bar would be indicated with the fraction 5/6, a four-string bar with 2/3, a three-string bar with 1/2, and a two-string bar with 1/3.

In other words, to indicate a bar covering four strings at the 7th fret would be indicated as 2/3VII, 2/3CVII, 2/3BVII, 2/3C7, or 2/3B7. Example #2:

Example #2

Using fractions to indicate how many strings to bar

2/3VII 2/3CVII 2/3BVII 2/3C7 2/3B7

T 7 7 7 7 7
A 8 8 8 8 8
B 7 7 7 7 7

I should mention that some guitarists and editors use the fraction $\frac{1}{2}$ generically to mean anything EXCEPT a full bar. So, it could mean to bar two, three, four, or five strings!

Also, some guitarists and editors use the letters C or B with a line drawn through the center of the letters to indicate a half bar. Example #3:

Example #3

Using a vertical line through the letters "C" or "B" to indicate a half bar

C̄VII B̄VII

T 7 7 7 7
A 7 7 7 7
B 9 9 9 9

But once again, it could mean to literally bar three strings or be used to generically indicate to bar two, three, four, or five strings.

Fractions are a little cumbersome, so some guitarists and editors use a superscript Arabic number to the right of the generic indication to indicate how many strings to bar. A bar covering four strings at the 7th fret would be indicated as VII⁴ CVII⁴ BVII⁴ C7⁴ or B7⁴. Example #4:

Example #4

Using a superscript Arabic number to indicate how many strings to bar

Musical notation for Example #4 showing five chord diagrams: VII⁴, CVII⁴, BVII⁴, C7⁴, and B7⁴. Each diagram shows a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 7/8 time signature. Below the staff are guitar string diagrams for Treble (T), A, and Bass (B) strings, with fret numbers 7, 8, and 7 respectively for each string in each diagram.

Or, some guitarists and editors use a subscript Arabic number to the right of the generic indication to indicate how many strings to bar. Using this system, a bar covering four strings at the 7th fret would be indicated as VII₄ CVII₄ BVII₄ C7₄ or B7₄. Example #5:

Example #5

Using a subscript Arabic number to indicate how many strings to bar

Musical notation for Example #5 showing five chord diagrams: VII₄, CVII₄, BVII₄, C7₄, and B7₄. Each diagram shows a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 7/8 time signature. Below the staff are guitar string diagrams for Treble (T), A, and Bass (B) strings, with fret numbers 7, 8, and 7 respectively for each string in each diagram.

Or, guitarists and editors may use a superscript Arabic circled number to the right of the generic notation to indicate how many strings to bar. Using this system, a bar covering four strings at the 7th fret would be indicated as VII^④ CVII^④ BVII^④ C7^④ or B7^④. Example #6:

Example #6

Using a circled superscript Arabic number to indicate how many strings to bar

Musical notation for Example #6 showing five chord diagrams: VII^④, CVII^④, BVII^④, C7^④, and B7^④. Each diagram shows a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 7/8 time signature. Below the staff are guitar string diagrams for Treble (T), A, and Bass (B) strings, with fret numbers 7, 8, and 7 respectively for each string in each diagram.

Or, guitarists and editors may use a subscript Arabic circled number to the right of the generic notation to indicate how many strings to bar. Using this system, a bar covering four strings at the 7th fret would be indicated as VII_④, CVII_④, BVII_④, C7_④, or B7_④. Example #7:

Example #7

Using a circled subscript Arabic number to indicate how many strings to bar

The image shows five chord diagrams on a guitar staff, each with a circled subscript number indicating the number of strings to be barred. The chords are VII_④, CVII_④, BVII_④, C7_④, and B7_④. The diagrams are arranged in two rows. The top row shows the chord shapes with a circled subscript number above each. The bottom row shows the fret numbers for each string (T, A, B) for each chord.

Chord	T	A	B
VII _④	7	7	7
CVII _④	7	8	7
BVII _④	7	8	7
C7 _④	7	8	7
B7 _④	7	8	7

Finally, some guitarists and editors use a solid or dashed line with or without a descending hook end cap to indicate how long to hold the indicated bar. Example #8:

Example #8

Dashed line with a descending hook as the end cap

II-----IV-----

TAB: 5 2 2 4 | 4 4 6

Dashed line without no end cap

II-----IV-----

TAB: 5 2 2 4 | 4 4 6

Solid line with a descending hook as the end cap

II-----IV-----

TAB: 5 2 2 4 | 4 4 6

Solid line with no end cap

II-----IV-----

TAB: 5 2 2 4 | 4 4 6

Specialty Bars

How to Notate the Partial Bar

Some guitarists use the term partial bar to refer to a bar of 2, 3, 4, or 5 strings. That makes sense. But when I speak about a partial bar as a specialty bar, I'm talking about a different animal. My definition of a partial bar is when a finger bars two or three adjacent strings, NOT including the string behind it.

A partial bar can bar groups of two strings such as the 3rd and 4th; the 4th and 5th; or the 5th and 6th. Or it can bar groups of three strings such as the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th; the 3rd, 4th, and 5th; or the 4th, 5th, and 6th. And again, the partial bar must allow the string or strings behind it to ring freely.

The partial bar is most often done with the first finger. But if your joints are limber and strong enough, it can also be done with the second, third, or fourth finger.

Again, I use the term partial bar for a bar that covers two or three inner strings. For example, we use a partial bar to play a common A major chord fingered in folk-guitar style. The 1st finger bars only the 3rd and 4th strings. I like to notate these bars with superscript circled numbers indicating exactly which strings we must bar. Others indicate such bars with brackets around the fingers or notes.

Example #9:

Example #9

Two styles of notating the partial bar fingering
for a "folk-guitar" A major chord

II ^{③④} only

T	0
A	2
B	0

T	0
A	2
B	0

Using the superscript circled numbers is much clearer than only using brackets. In some pieces, there may be several ways to finger a bar chord. The next example shows the importance of clear notation to communicate to the performer how to play a given bar chord. Example #10:

Example #10

This measure from John Williams' arrangement of "Cavatina" by Stanley Myers demonstrates the many choices we often have in playing bar chords.

We could use a conventional flat bar which could bar four, five, or six strings:

The musical notation shows three measures of a bar chord in 3/4 time. The first measure is labeled 'I ④', the second 'I ⑤', and the third 'I'. Below the staff are three guitar tablature lines (T, A, B) with fret numbers: T (3, 3, 3), A (1, 1, 1), B (2, 2, 2).

Or we could use a partial bar which could bar the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th strings or the third, fourth, and 5th strings. The notation in the first two measures is very explicit. The notation in the third measure using a bracket is not specific.

The musical notation shows three measures of a partial bar chord in 3/4 time. The first measure is labeled 'I ②③④ only', the second 'I ③④⑤ only', and the third 'I'. Below the staff are three guitar tablature lines (T, A, B) with fret numbers: T (3, 3, 3), A (1, 1, 1), B (2, 2, 2).

How to Notate the Hinge Bar

To play a hinge bar, the first string (sometimes also the second string) is fretted by the first finger as if it were a full bar, but the tip of the finger is lifted off the bass strings.

As with other bars, there is no standard notation to indicate a hinge bar. Many guitarists use a lowercase letter "h" to the right of the basic bar notation, others use a small lowercase letter "h" at the upper left, upper right, or lower left or lower right of the basic bar notation. Finally, some guitarists simply write the words "hinge bar" above, to the left, or to the right of the basic bar notation. In these examples, I show the above options using the Roman numeral for the basic bar notation. Example #11:

Example #11

Here are several examples of different ways to notate a hinge bar:

II^h II

T	2	2		0			
A	3	3	5	3	2	4	2
B	0	4			2		
		4			0		

^hII II

T	2	2		0			
A	3	3	5	3	2	4	2
B	0	4			2		
		4			0		

II^h II

T	2	2		0			
A	3	3	5	3	2	4	2
B	0	4			2		
		4			0		

^hII II

T	2	2		0			
A	3	3	5	3	2	4	2
B	0	4			2		
		4			0		

II_h II

T	2	2		0			
A	3	3	5	3	2	4	2
B	0	4			2		
		4			0		

hinge bar
II II

T	2	2		0			
A	3	3	5	3	2	4	2
B	0	4			2		
		4			0		

How to Notate the Cross-Fret Bar, Split Bar, or Diagonal Bar

The cross-fret bar, split bar, or diagonal bar is the most rarely used of the specialty bars. The index finger bars across two consecutive frets simultaneously. Most commonly, the rear of the bar finger holds down the first string and the tip of the bar finger holds down the sixth or fifth string a fret higher.

Again, there is no conventional way to notate this type of bar. I think the most effective way to notate a cross-fret bar is to use two Roman numerals separated by a slash. The first numeral indicates the fret on the 1st string that the rear of the cross-fret bar holds, and the second numeral indicates the fret number of the 5th or 6th string that the tip of the cross-fret bar holds. For greater

clarity, it is a good idea to use a circled 5 or circled 6 to indicate which string the bar holds with its fingertip. Adding the words “Cross-Fret Bar,” “Split Bar,” or “Diagonal Bar” also provides greater clarity. Example #12:

Example #12

Various ways to notate a cross-fret, split, or diagonal bar

<p>II/III</p>	<p>Cross-fret bar II/III</p>
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Circled number
indicates which string
is held by the tip of the bar

<p>I/II^⑤</p>	<p>Cross-fret bar I/II</p>
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