

“Chord Progressions – What to Expect in Popular Music”

Ted Greene 1974-03-23

Major Keys:

1) Diatonic Chords

The Diatonic chords of major keys are mixed up in various combination. Some patterns such as I-vi-ii-V, and I-iii-IV-V are so well-liked that they appear over and over again in many different forms. As you learn more songs, this will become clear.

2) Secondary Dominants and Sub-Dominants

Any diatonic major or minor triad may be preceded with its own V(7) or ii(7)-V(7).

Example: In C the diatonic chords are Dm, Em, F, G, Am, B^o. Therefore, according to the above principle, in the key of C, you might expect to see:

C – A7 – Dm, C – Em7 – A7 – Dm

(m7b5's often replace m7's, especially when the m7 is functioning as a ii of a minor chord; thus you might see: C – Em7b5 – A7 – Dm)

C – B7 – Em, C – F#m7b5 – B7 – Em, C – C7 – F, C – Gm7 – C7 – F,
C – D7 – G, C – Am7 – D7 – G, C – E7 – Am, C – Bm7b5 – E7 – Am,

(The V7's of these triads are called *Secondary Dominants*; the ii7's or iim7b5's are called *Secondary Sub-Dominants*. Note that the original sub-dominant in traditional harmony is the IV. In popular music, iim7 or iim7b5 are more commonly used if the progression is of a more sophisticated nature).

When using the secondary dominants and sub-dominants, you are actually temporarily jumping into a new key. For instance, when you play C-D7-G, the D7 chord is in the key of G but not the diatonic key of C. However, many musicians find it more practical to think in the original key and accept the fact that the diatonic chords are not the only chords that can be played in a given key – hence, the C-D7-G-C progression could be referred to as I – II7 – V – I or I – V7ofV – V – I.

Likewise, C-Gm7-C7-F could be referred to as I – v7 – I7 – IV or I – ii7 – V – I.
|--- of IV ---|

There are advantages and disadvantages to both ways of thinking:

Suppose you saw the progression C – F – Bm7b5 – Em7 – Am7 – Dm7 – G7 – C.

These are all diatonic chords: I – IV – vii^o – iii – vi – ii – V – I.

Now suppose you saw:

C – F#m7b5 – B7 – E7 – A7 – D7 – G7 – C

The hard way to think here is to think:

I – |-- ii^o - Vof iii --| Vof vi – Vof ii – VofV – V – I

The easy way is:

I – #ivo – VII – III – VI – II – V – I

(More specifically written:)

I – #iv^o – VII7 – III7 – VI7 – II7 – V7 – I

However, suppose you saw the following progression:

Bm7 – E7 – Em7 – A7 – Am7 – D7 – Dm7 – G7 – C

It is just as easy, if
not more so, to think:

ii – V – ii – V – ii – V – ii – V – I
|---of vi ---| |--- of ii ---| |---of V ---| – ii – V – I

as it is to think:

vii7 – III7 – iii7 – VI7 – vi7 – II7 – ii7 – V7 – I

It will be up to you as far as thinking of everything in terms of one key or temporary key changes, but a modulation to a foreign key will usually be most easily grasped if thought of that way:

Example: C – F#m7 – B7 – E^A7 – A^A7 – B7 – E is definitely a change to the key of E, not all in C.

3) [Modulations]

As mentioned earlier, you can expect to see modulations (changes of keys); these can be very fleeting, such as the use of ii-V-I of a temporary new key (like the C-Em7-A7-Dm) or of a more permanent nature, such as the last example. (ii - V - i)

4) Borrowed Chords

Quite often in major keys, you will see chords of the *Parallel Minor* used (the parallel minor is the minor with the same tonic note as the major key to which it relates – like Am is the parallel minor of A; Cm is the parallel minor of C, etc. Enharmonics are used – like C#m is the parallel minor of Db)

Example: in C you might see C – (Fm – Ab) – C or C – Gm7 – C7 – F – (Fm7 – Bb7) – C.

The circled chords are “borrowed” from [the key of] Cm.

5) b5th or Cross-Cycle Substitutes

Occasionally you will see a chord that seems out of place in a song or progression. The chances are good that it is a chord whose root is a b5th above the chord which it replaces.

Example: F – F7 – Bb is a normal progression in the key of F (the F7 is a secondary dominant); instead of this you might see: F – B7 – Bb. The B7 is called a *b5th Substitute* or *Cross-Cycle Substitution*.

Likewise, F – Cm7 – F7 – Bb is normal. Instead you might see: F – F#m7 – B7 – Bb.

6) Diminished 7 (°7) or Diminished (°) Chords

°7 or ° chords can be converted into 7b9’s where appropriate – you will probably need some instruction in this area.

Minor Keys:

1) Diatonic Chords

Much more vast in minor keys, because the chords of the Natural, Harmonic, Melodic, Dorian, and Phrygian minors are all used.

2) Secondary Dominants and Sub-Dominants are used in relation to \flat II, \flat III, iv, v, V, \flat VI, and \flat VII. Example: in Am you could expect to see

F7 – B \flat – Cm – F7 – B \flat

G7 – C

Dm7 – G7 – C

A7 – Dm

Em7 – A7 – Dm

B7 – E or Em

F \sharp m7 – B7 – E or Em – C – F

Gm7 – C7 – F

D7 – G

Am7 \flat 5 – D7 – G7

By the way, if you didn't notice or it didn't occur to you earlier, you might see secondary dominants or sub-dominants strung together (see page 1 again if you don't follow this).

3) Modulations are used often in minor keys.

4) Borrowed Chords

The only borrowed chord that is widely used in minor keys is the tonic major at the beginning or end of phrases. See “Michelle” by The Beatles.

5) \flat 5th Substitutes are occasionally used.

In major and minor keys, you can expect to see extensions of basic chords (like C \wedge 7 for C, C7 \flat 9 for C7, etc.). This subject must be covered separately, due to the specifics involved.

CHORD PROGRESSIONS - WHAT TO EXPECT IN POPULAR MUSIC

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MAJOR KEYS:

① DIATONIC CHORDS - The diatonic chords of major keys are mixed up in various combinations. Some patterns such as I vi ii V, and I iii IV V are so well liked that they appear over & over again in many different forms. As you learn more songs, this will become clear.

② SECONDARY DOMINANTS + SUB-DOMINANTS - Any diatonic major or minor triad may be preceded with its own V(7) or ii(7) V(7).

EXAMPLE: In C the diatonic chords are Dm, Em, F, G, Am, B^o. Therefore, according to the above principle, in the key of C, you might expect to see: C (A7) Dm, C (Em7 A7) Dm (m7^{b5}'s often replace m7's, especially when the m7 is functioning as a ii of a minor chord; thus you might see C Em7^{b5} A7 Dm), C B7 Em, C F#m7^{b5} B7 Em, C C7 F, C Gm7 C7 F, C D7 G, C Am7 D7 G, C E7 Am, C Bm7^{b5} E7 Am. (The V7's of these triads are called

SECONDARY DOMINANTS - The ii⁷'s or ii^{m7^{b5}}'s are called SECONDARY SUB-DOMINANTS. Note that the original subdominant in traditional harmony is the IV. In popular music, ii^{m7} or ii^{m7^{b5}} are more commonly used if the progression is of a more sophisticated nature). When using these secondary dom's + sub-dom's, you are actually temporarily jumping into a new key - For instance, when you play C D7 G, the D7 chord is in the key of G but not the diatonic key of C - However many musicians find it more practical to think in the original key and accept the fact that diatonic chords are not the only chords that can be played in a given key - hence, the C D7 G C progression could be referred to as I II⁷ V I or I V⁷ of V V I.

Likewise C Gm7 C7 F could be referred to as I ^v I⁷ IV or I [ii⁷ V⁷ I] of ^v IV.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both ways of thinking: Suppose you saw the progression C F Bm7^{b5} Em7 Am7 Dm7 G7 C. These are all diatonic chords → I IV vii^o iii vi ii V I. Now suppose you saw C F#m7^{b5} B7 E7 A7 D7 G7 C → The hard way to think here is to think → I [ii^o V] V⁷ of vi V⁷ of ii V⁷ of V V I. The easy way is I #iv^o VII III VI II V I (More specifically written: I #iv^o VII⁷ III⁷ VI⁷ II⁷ V⁷ I).

However, suppose you saw the following progression: Bm7 E7 Em7 A7 Am7 D7 Dm7 G7 C. It is just as easy, if not more so, to think [ii⁷ V] [ii⁷ V] as it is to think vii⁷ III⁷ iii⁷ VI⁷ vi⁷ II⁷ ii⁷ V⁷ I.

It will keep to you as far as thinking of everything in terms of one key or temporary key changes, but a modulation to a foreign key will usually be most easily grasped if thought of that way: Example → C F#m7 B7 E7 A7 B7 E is definitely a change to the key of E, not all in C.

③ As mentioned earlier, you can expect to see modulations (changes of keys); these can be very fleeting such as the use of ii V I of a temporary new key (like the C Em7 A7 Dm) or of a more permanent nature such as the last example on the previous page.

④ BORROWED CHORDS - Quite often in major keys, you will see chords of the PARALLEL MINOR used (the PARALLEL MINOR is the minor with the same tonic note as the major key to which it relates - like Am is the parallel minor of A, Cm is the parallel minor of C etc. Enharmonics are used - like C#m is the parallel minor of D^b). Example: In C you might see C (Fm A^b) C or C Gm7 C7 F (Fm7 B^b) C. The circled chords are "borrowed" from Cm.

⑤ b5th or CROSS-CYCLE SUBSTITUTES - occasionally you will see a chord that seems out of place in a song or progression - the chances are good that is a chord whose root is a b5th above the chord which it replaces. Example: F F7 B^b is a normal progression in the key of F (the F7 is a sec. dom.); instead of this you might see F B7 B^b. The B7 is called a b5th substitution or cross-cycle substitution.

Likewise F Cm7 F7 B^b is normal - instead you might see F F#m7 B7 B^b.

⑥ 7 or ° chords can be converted into 7b9's - you will probably need some instruction in this area.

^{C where appropriate}

MINOR KEYS

① DIATONIC CHORDS - Much more vast in minor keys, because the chords of the natural, harmonic, melodic, dorian and phrygian minors are all used.

② SECONDARY DOMS & SUB-DOMS are used in relation to bII, bIII, IV, V, VI, bVI, and bVII. Example: in Am you could expect to see F7 B^b Cm7 F7 B^b, G7 C Dm7 G7 C, A7 Dm, Em7 A7 Dm, B7 E^b or Em, F#7 B7 E^b or Em, C7 F, Gm7 C7 F, D7 G, Am7 b5 D7 G. By the way, if you didn't notice or it didn't occur to you earlier, you might see secondary dominants or sub-dominants strung together (see page 1 again if you don't follow this).

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