“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. 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, ii7 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.

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° – iii – vi – ii – V – I.

Now suppose you saw:
C – F#m7b5 – B7 – E7 – A7 – D7 – G7 – C
The hard was to think here is to think: I – ii° – Vof iii – Vof vi – Vof ii – VofV – V – I
The easy way is:

(More specifically written:)
I – #iv0 – VII – 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:

\[ \text{ii} \rightarrow \text{V} \rightarrow \text{ii} \rightarrow \text{V} \rightarrow \text{ii} \rightarrow \text{V} \rightarrow \text{I} \]

as it is to think:

\[ \text{vii7} \rightarrow \text{III7} \rightarrow \text{iii7} \rightarrow \text{VI7} \rightarrow \text{vi7} \rightarrow \text{II7} \rightarrow \text{ii7} \rightarrow \text{V7} \rightarrow \text{I} \]

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\(^{\flat}\)  
^7 – A\(^{\natural}\)  
7 – 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  
\[ C \rightarrow \text{Fm} \rightarrow \text{Ab} \rightarrow C \]  or  
\[ C \rightarrow \text{Gm7} \rightarrow \text{C7} \rightarrow F \rightarrow \text{Fm7} \rightarrow \text{Bb7} \rightarrow C. \]

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 (⁰7) or Diminished (⁰) Chords
⁰7 or ⁰ 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 bII, bIII, iv, v, V, bVI, and bVII. Example: in Am you could expect to see
   - F7 – Bb – Cm – F7 – Bb
   - G7 – C
   - Dm7 – G7 – C
   - A7 – Dm
   - Em7 – A7 – Dm
   - B7 – E or Em
   - F#m7 – B7 – E or Em – C – F
   - Gm7 – C7 – F
   - D7 – G
   - Am7b5 – 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) **b5th Substitutes** are occasionally used.

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

1. DIATONIC CHORDS - The diatonic chords of major keys are mixed up in various combinations. Some patterns, such as I vi ii i and I iii iv I, 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 + SUB-DOMINANTS - Any diatonic major or minor chord may be preceded with the own I (V) or ii (V). Example: in C, the diatonic chords are Dm, Em, F, G, Am, B. Therefore, according to the above principle, in the key of C, you might expect to see: C (A7) Dm, C Em7 A7 Dm (m7'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 Fm7 B5 B7 Em, C C7 F, C Gm7 C7 F, C D7 G, C Am7 D7 G, C F7 Am, C Bm7 B5 E7 Am (The I7's of these triads are called SECONDARY DOMINANTS - the ii7's or iii7's are called SECONDARY SUB-DOMINANTS. Note that the original subdominant in traditional harmony is the IV. Unpopular music, iim7 or iiim7's are more commonly used if the progression is of a more sophisticated nature). Whenever you use the 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 progression could be referred to as I II V I or I V7 V I. Likewise, C Gm7 C7 F could be referred to as I VI7 VII or II11 V7 I.

These are advantages and disadvantages to both ways of thinking:

Suppose you saw the progression C F Bm7 B5 Em7 Am7 Dm7 C. These are all diatonic chords - I IV VII III VI II I. Now suppose you saw C Fm7 B5 B7 A7 D7 G C - the hard way to think here is to think: I VII VI VII I. The easy way is I V7 VII III VI II I. (More specifically written: I IV7 VII III VI II I.)

However, suppose you saw the following progression: Bm7 E7 Em7 A7 Am7 D7 Dm7 C. It is just as easy, if not more so, to think: I II V7 VII III VI II I. as it is to think VII III VII VI II I II I.

It will help you so 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 Fm7 B7 E A7 B7 E is definitely a change to the key of E, not C.
3. As mentioned earlier, you can expect to see modulations (changes of key); these can be very fleeting such as the use of ii- V I or 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 Cm7 is the parallel minor of D♭. Example: C, Cm, C7 F (Fm7 B♭) C. The circled chords are "borrowed" from Cm.

5. 65th 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's a chord whose root is a 6th above the chord which it replaces. Example: F F7 B♭ is a normal progression in the key of F (the F7 is a sec. dom.) instead of this you might see F B♭ F7 B♭ where the B♭ is called a 65th substitution or cross-cycle substitution. Likewise Fm7 F7 B♭ is normal - instead you might see F Fm7 B♭ B♭.

6. ♯ or ♯ chords can be converted into 7♭9's - you will probably need some instruction in this area.

MINOR KEYS

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

2. SECONDARY DOMS & SUB-DOMS are used in relation to 6II, 5VII, 4, 3, 2, 1, 6VI, and 5VII. Example: in Am you could expect to see F7 B♭ Cm7 F7 B♭, G7 C, Dm7 G7 C, A7 Dm, Em7 A7 Dm, B♭ Fm7 B♭ E, C7 F, Gm7 C7 F, D7 G, Am7 B♭ D7 G. By the way, if you didn't notice, dominant sevenths almost always ring 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 majors at the beginning or endings of phrases - see "Michelle" by the Beatles.

5. 65th substitutions are occasionally used.

In Major and Minor Keys, you can expect to see extensions of basic chords (like C7 for C, C7♭9 for C7 etc.). This subject must be covered separately due to the specifics involved.