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Jazz Preparation Pack

Chord Progressions

How to Learn Chord Progressions and Why It's Important

As you probably know, in most jazz music melodies are harmonised with a set of 'chord changes' which repeat over and over again in chorus form and form the backdrop to our improvisations.

In most 'standards' (i.e. 'Great American Songbook' tunes written by composers like Cole Porter and George Gershwin), these chord changes move in a journey through various degrees of the key or scale as well as modulating to other keys, in a satisfying ebb and flow of tension and release.

Fortunately, there are a few very common ways in which these chord progressions are put together in jazz standards, and so learning a number of these progressions and how

How to Learn Chord Progressions

At first, a chord progression can seem like a bewildering array of unrelated root notes with unfamiliar symbols after them, and even when we painstakingly decode what these mean and extract arpeggios from them, and perhaps accompanying chord-scales, it still seems like a mammoth task to learn to improvise fluently on this set of chords, let alone memorise them.

However, something that will help a great deal with this is if you can learn to see the bigger picture in sets of chord changes, rather than looking at the different chords in isolation. This lets you see the function of each chord in serving the overall tension and release of the chord progression and how they are interacting with the chords around them, and allows you to see the similarities between different jazz standards.

Eventually you realise that there aren't that many different building blocks of chord changes to learn, and that most tunes just piece a limited number of these together in different orders and different keys.

In order to look at progressions in a functional way, we need to try and see the chords numerically in terms of the key(s) that we're in. Note that we use Roman numerals here. To understand how to do this, look at what happens when we build chords made up of the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th on each degree of the C major, staying 'diatonic' (in the key).

We get the following chords, and of course, this will give the same chord-types in any key:

DIATONIC CHORDS IN C MAJOR - REMEMBER THESE CAN BE EXTENDED UP TO 9, 11, 13 WITHOUT AFFECTING THIS FUNDAMENTAL 7TH SHAPE (E.G. G13 STILL CONTAINS G-B-D-F)

(Ib)

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii
C Δ	D-7	E-7	F Δ	G7	A-7	B \emptyset

We end up with only four different kinds of chords, all of which have accompanying chord symbols. These can be written in some different ways, and these are explained overleaf.

C Δ 7

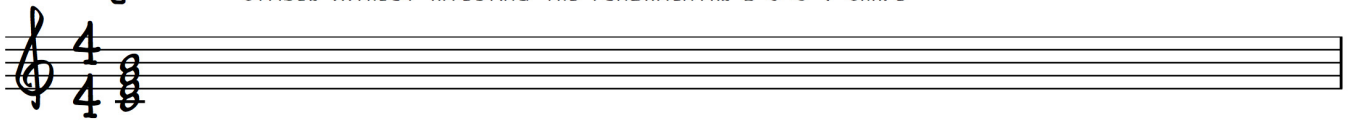
"C MAJOR 7" - A C MAJOR TRIAD WITH A MAJOR 7TH ON TOP

CMAJ7

FORMULA: 1 - MAJ3 - PERFECT 5 - MAJ7

C Δ

ALSO COMMONLY PLAYED WITH EXTENSIONS OF 9 AND 13 - THESE CAN BE INCLUDED IN THE CHORD SYMBOL WITHOUT AFFECTING THE FUNDAMENTAL 1-3-5-7 SHAPE

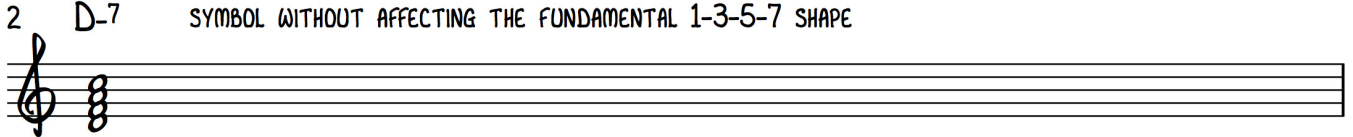


"D MINOR 7" - A D MINOR TRIAD WITH A MINOR 7TH ON TOP

FORMULA: 1 - MIN3 - PERFECT 5 - MIN7

Dm7

ALSO COMMONLY PLAYED WITH EXTENSIONS OF 9, 11 AND 13 - AGAIN, THEY CAN INCLUDED IN THE CHORD SYMBOL WITHOUT AFFECTING THE FUNDAMENTAL 1-3-5-7 SHAPE

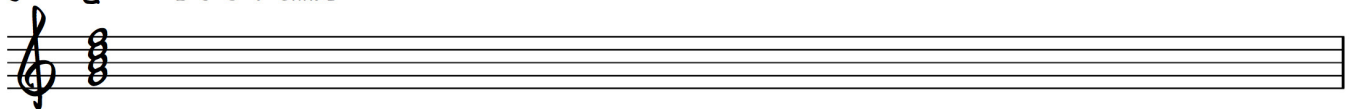


"G 7" OR "G DOMINANT 7" - A G MAJOR TRIAD WITH A MINOR 7TH ON TOP

FORMULA: 1 - MAJ3 - PERFECT 5 - MIN7

ALSO COMMONLY PLAYED WITH EXTENSIONS OF 9 AND 13 - AGAIN, THESE DON'T AFFECT THE FUNDAMENTAL 1-3-5-7 SHAPE

G7



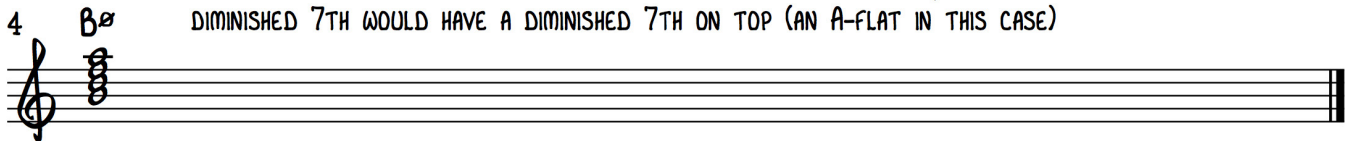
Bm7 \flat 5

"B HALF-DIMINISHED" OR "B MINOR 7 FLAT 5" - A B DIMINISHED TRIAD WITH A MINOR 7TH ON TOP

FORMULA: 1 - MIN3 - DIMINISHED 5TH - MIN7

B-7 \flat 5

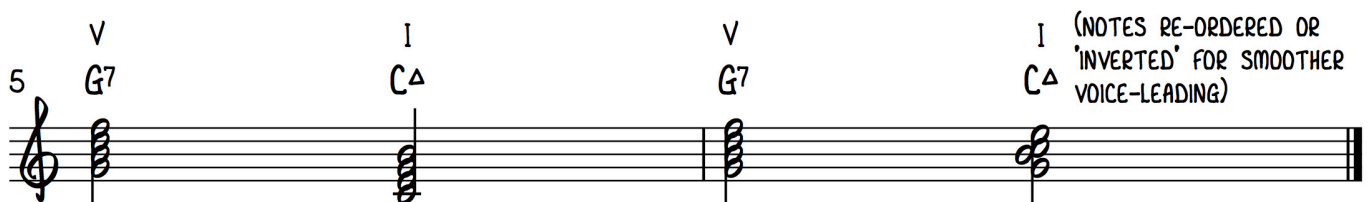
SOMETIMES CALLED HALF-DIMINISHED BECAUSE OF ITS DIMINISHED TRIAD, BUT WITH A MINOR 7TH. A FULLY DIMINISHED 7TH WOULD HAVE A DIMINISHED 7TH ON TOP (AN A-FLAT IN THIS CASE)



Therefore, if we stay with just 1-3-5-7 arpeggios, building a chord on the first and fourth degrees of a major scale always makes the same chord-type, a major 7th. The second, third and sixth degrees always make minor 7ths. The fifth (or dominant) degree always gives a '7' or 'dominant 7' chord. And finally, the seventh degree always gives a minor 7th with a flattened fifth, or half-diminished chord. Again, this is true no matter what major key we are in.

Cadences

We call the end of a chord progression a 'cadence'. You probably know about the perfect cadence, where chord V (a "dominant 7" build on the fifth degree of the scale) resolves to chord I (in most jazz, a "major 7th" chord built on the first or 'tonic' degree of the scale) - this is the classic tension (chord V) and release (chord I) chord movement, giving a resolved and finished feeling to the cadence:



In Jazz, chord V in a perfect cadence is often preceded by chord ii, creating the common building-block of a ii – V – I. So, whether you see Dm7 – G7 – Cmaj7, or Abm7 – Db7 – Gbmaj7, they are serving the same function of ii – V – I, just in different keys (C and Gb major). Learning to recognise ii – V – I's in different keys is an important step in seeing the functions in chord progressions.

Other important building blocks we find in many chord progressions include the I – vi – ii – V, iii – vi – ii – V and I – IV – iii – vi. Because they share almost the same notes, I and iii are interchangeable, and so the first two progressions (and variations on them) are both known as a 'turnaround'. This is because they 'turn you around' back into where you started, i.e. the home key – they're often found at the end of tunes.

See below, all written in C major with numerals above:

NOTE THAT THESE ARE WRITTEN WITH BASIC 1-3-5-7 SHAPES - IN REALITY, DIFFERENT INVERSIONS AND VOICINGS WOULD BE USED

7 I C Δ vi A-7 ii D-7 V G7 iii E-7 vi A-7 ii D-7 V G7

11 I C Δ IV F Δ iii E-7 vi A-7

Modulations

Of course, one feature of jazz standards is that they often 'modulate', or change key. This will usually happen via a ii – V – I in the new key. So, we have to be ready to switch our numeral system to describe a new key.

The keys we modulate to the most are the most closely related ones, so moving to the key of the sub-dominant (IV) or the relative minor are the most common. However, we can find ourselves doing 'jump modulations' to any key, even very distant ones.

Non-diatonic chords

Even when chords belong to an overall key centre, their chord-type is often changed, making them 'non-diatonic' (not strictly in the key). They are usually changed to dominant 7th chords to make brief perfect cadences (V-I's) to other degrees of the scale – this strengthens the pull of the resolution.

For example, in a I – vi – ii – V turnaround (Cmaj7 – Am7 – Dm7 – G7), chord vi (Am7 in C major) could become VI7 (A7), making I – VI – ii – V, or Cmaj – A7 – Dm7 – G7. This is because A7 is the V of Dm7, so it makes a mini V-I into that chord. The same thing can happen on any degree of the scale, as shown on the next page.

COMMON ALTERATIONS TO THESE DIATONIC CHORDS - THESE STRENGTHEN CADENTIAL MOVEMENT TO OTHER SCALE DEGREES BY CREATING V-I'S, OR IN THE CASE OF IV A MINOR-PLAGAL CADENCE. FLAT-9TH'S HAVE BEEN ADDED TO DOMINANTS WHEN RESOLVING TO A MINOR CHORD

	I7	II7	III7	iv	IV7	VI7	VII7
	(V of IV)	(V of V)	(V of vi)	(iv-I)	(tritone of VII7)	(V of ii)	(V of iii)
5	C7	D7	E7b9	F-Δ	F7	A7b9	B7b9

Applying this to tunes

Have a go at applying this technique of looking at chord progressions in terms of their function (i.e. in numerals) to any standards you might already know, and also to new ones that you learn.

Try singing the pitches of the root movement while saying their number in the key, while clapping on two and four to keep in time (e.g. “one... four... three... six as a dominant... two... five... one...”), then try playing the arpeggios on your instrument. There are some examples of tunes analysed in this way below, and some other suggested tunes for you to try this on are: I Want To Be Happy, I Hear A Rhapsody, There Is No Greater Love, In a Mellow Tone, Softly as in a Morning Sunrise, Pennies from Heaven.

Once you’ve learnt a standard numerically, put it into some different keys straight away. With a simple standard, this is not too difficult if you truly understand the function of all the chords and are thinking of them in numbers, and if you keep practicing this you’ll be able to transpose tunes into different keys with ease!

Why is this important?

Jazz standards are still a kind of universal currency between musicians – they are a common set of repertoire which you can use for casual plays, pick-up gigs, and are often the material on which musicians first encounter each other. They are thus a kind of benchmark, and it’s worth sounding as good as possible on them! Learning lots of these incredible tunes teaches you how to be melodic and lyrical in your own improvising and composing, as well as how strong harmonic progressions are put together.

Learning a tune and playing it from memory allows you to internalise it, freeing up your senses to concentrate on listening to what the rest of the band and yourself are playing. Having to read a chart takes up lots of your attention, and it also means you’ll take the harmony much more literally, probably playing in a much less ‘open’ way.

Learning standards with this approach will firstly help you remember them better and learn them more quickly, because you’ll recognise patterns. You’ll see the similarities between tunes and start to categorise them (“oh yeah, this is just a turnaround A section with a Honeysuckle Rose bridge”). Also, you’ll realise you don’t have to carry around all the extensions/alterations etc.

in your head when you learn a progression – just the numerals and a good knowledge of the melody will tell you all the chord-types.

If you know the function of a certain building block of the chord progression, it allows you to make substitutions and harmonic embellishments, giving flexibility with the harmony. Giving one example of many, a I – IV7 – iii – VI7 can often be substituted with #iv – VII7 – iii – VI7 (Cmaj7 – F7 – Em7 – A7 turning into F#m7b5 – B7 – Em7 – A7).

Another important way this will help you is by allowing you to play standards in different keys easily. This is an expected skill for any professional player to have, and is something you’ll find useful particularly when working with singers (who often change the keys of songs to suit their ranges), but also in varying the keys over a set of music and making old, familiar tunes sound a bit different and new.

Finally, practicing familiar tunes in all the keys will prepare you for those tunes or parts of tunes which are in “unusual” keys. For example, the bridges of ‘Prelude to a Kiss’ (E) and ‘Cherokee’ (B and A), or many contemporary compositions.

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