

# Tutorial 1J: Chords, Keys, and Progressions



Welcome! In this tutorial you'll learn how to:

1. Relate chords with keys
2. Use basic blues progressions & blues scales
3. Recognize and use ii-V-I progressions
4. Simplify chord progressions

Enjoy the learning, and see you at the arch ...

Other Level 1 Tutorials

- 1A: Virtual Practice
- 1B: Chords and Scales
- 1C: Melodic Color
- 1D: Rhythmic Variety
- 1E: Flexible Scale Levels
- 1F: Using Expression
- 1G: Develop Motifs/Phrases

- 
- With the foundation skills you've gained so far, you're ready to get a great start in understanding & using chord progressions. In time, your chord knowledge strengthens your melodies, and melodies aren't inhibited by the chords.

## Part 1 – Relating Chords with Keys

### A) What is a chord progression?

\*It's a series of chords, the harmonic backbone that runs through a tune. It can be divided into smaller parts, each of which is a smaller chord progression.

\*As you handle different chord progressions, you can apply what you've learned about melody, rhythm, expression, and development, no matter what the chords are.

\*Each key contains seven diatonic chords, one for each of the seven tones of the major scale.

\*To work with chord progressions you need to:

- Understand how Roman numerals work in a key.
- Recognize the chords in a key.
- Know how to simplify chords within a key.

### B) How do I label chords in progressions?

\*Label chords with *Roman numerals* to show how the chords relate to each other in the key.

\*For example, the chord built on the first note (root) of a major key is I, the chord built on the second degree is ii, etc., up to vii for the 7th degree.


\*Uppercase Roman numerals (such as I) are used for major or dominant chords, while lowercase Roman numerals (such as ii) are used for minor chords.

\*The vii chord is *diminished*, which means it is a 1 b3 b5 chord (the ° indicates diminished).

CMa7	Dmi7	Emi7	FMa7	G7	Am7	B°7
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°

or

CMa7	Am7	Dm7	G7	CMa7
(EMa7	C#m7	F#m7	B7	EMa7)
I	vi	ii	V	I

► **TRY IT** – Write Roman numerals for these progressions: #1 is in G Major; #2 is in E Major. (ANSWERS) 

1. GMa7 |Em7 |Am7 |D7 |Bm7
2. G#m7 |C#m7 |F#m7 |B7 |EMa7

## 2

### (Part 1 – Relating Chords with Keys)

#### C) What's the value of recognizing chords in keys?

\*It helps you simplify the progression and hear chord relationships. Sometimes it's easy to find the key in a progression. With more complicated chord progressions that modulate (change keys), there may be several keys.

#### D) How do I recognize chords in keys?

- Check the key signature in the tune, if any; it usually indicates the home key.
- Find a major chord and see if it's the I chord. If it's not, it may be the IV chord.
- Look for a minor chord to see if it's a ii chord. If it's not, it may be the vi chord.
- Remember that some chords have enharmonic equivalents: Cb = B, Db = C#, D# = Eb, Gb = F#, and G# = Ab. For example, Dbm – Gb7 – CbMaj7 is the same as C#m – F#7 – BMaj7. Learning to see enharmonic equivalents helps you recognize keys faster and simplify progressions more easily.

#### ► TRY IT – Name the likely key for each chord progression below. (ANSWERS)

1) Em7 Am7 |Dm7 G7 |CMA



2) BbMa7 |Gm7 Cm7 |F7

### Part 2 – Understanding the Blues

The 12-bar blues is one of the most common, essential chord progressions in jazz. To be a good improviser, you must master the basic blues and its variations.

#### A) What does a blues progression look like?

| C7    | F7    | C7    | C7    | (Section 1)

I        IV    I        I

| F7    | F7    | C7    | C7    | (Section 2)

IV     IV    I        I

| G7    | G7    | C7    | C7    | (Section 3)

V       V       I        I

## (Part 2 – Understanding the Blues)

\*The blues is divided into three sections of four bars each. In the example above, section 1 is mostly the root chord (I). Section 2 begins on the IV chord (F7 in C blues).

\*The IV chord is an important anchor point in the blues structure; almost all blues have a IV chord in bar 5. Section 3 begins on the V and resolves to the I.

\*Visualizing and memorizing these three sections of the basic blues helps you stay with the chords and create better solos. The blues form is 12 bars, not 16, so it may take you a while to adjust to the length if you're new to the blues.

- ▶ **TRY IT** – Write chord progressions for blues in each of these keys: Eb, Bb, F, C, and G. Medium: Use the keys of D, A, E, and B. Challenge: F#, C#, and Ab.

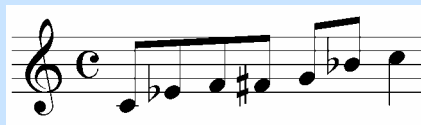
### B) How does the blues scale work?

\*The *blues scale* is useful in blues progressions as well as dominant or minor chords.

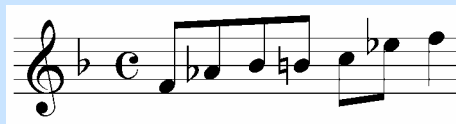
\*The same blues scale can be used for an *entire* blues progression; for example, a C blues scale works for all chords in a C blues progression.

\*Don't overuse the blues scale; some improvisers rely on it so much they can do little else. Use flexible, creative blues scales.

\*Compared to major, the blues scale pitches are 1, b3, 4, #4, 5, and b7 (6 different pitches).



1 b3 4 #4 5 b7 8



1 b3 4 #4 5 b7 8

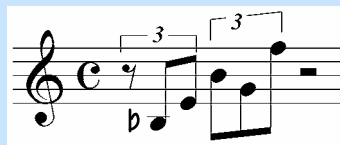
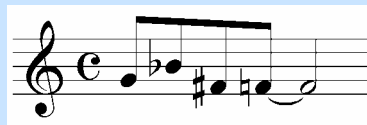
- ▶ **TRY IT** – Basic: Spell the pitches for the C Blues scale, then for the other blues scales around the circle of fourths. Medium: Spell the pitches for all 12 blues scales, from *top to bottom* of each scale.

### C) What about flexible blues scales?

\*Add your own skips and rhythmic variations to flexible blues scales; that will greatly increase the variety of what you can play in a blues tune.

## 4

## (Part 2 – Understanding the Blues)



- ▶ **TRY IT** – Hum/finger eighth-notes for all 12 flexible blues scales, around the circle of 4ths, quarter-note = 100. Medium: Start with the notes directly from bottom to top, and add flexible scale variations.

D) What blues scales problems should I avoid? 

\*Don't overuse the blues scale in dominant chords; use Mixolydian and pentatonic, too.

\*Don't hold out the natural 4 too often; resolve it to the b3 or go up to the #4.

\*Don't emphasize the following *home key* notes: #4 against the IV or V (F# against F7 or G7); 1 against the V (C against G7); and b7 against the IV (Bb against F7).

## Part 3 – Using ii-V-I Progressions

A) Why should I learn ii-V-I progressions?

\*The ii-V-I progression is one of the most important chord progressions. When you hear and master ii-V-I progressions, you unlock the door to soloing over many standard jazz tunes, such as the 300 Standards.

\*When you use a ii-V-I, the chords move up by a fourth (a strong movement) *twice* – from the ii to the V, and from the V to the I (such as Dmi to G7 to CMa7 in the key of C).

B) What ii-V-I progressions am I likely to see in tunes?

- One bar per chord, such as: |Dm7 |G7 |CMa7
- The ii and V in one bar : |Dm7 G7 |CMa7

## 5

## (Part 3 – Using ii-V-I Progressions)

- The ii and V in one bar: |Dm7 G7 |CMa7

The ii is often a minor 7 chord, so it's really a ii7 (we'll just call it a ii). Sometimes the ii is a II7 (dominant 7); then it works like the ii chord but with more energy.

## C) What is a prefaced ii-V-I progression?

\*You can insert a vi chord before a ii-V-I, making a vi-ii-V-I progression. The vi moves up to the ii by a fourth, so there are three 4th-movements in a row: vi-ii, ii-V, and V-I.

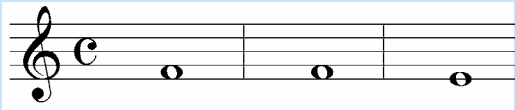
\*To make an even longer chain of 4ths, you can use a iii-vi-ii-v-I (3-6-2-5-1) or vii-iii-ii-V-I (7-3-6-2-5-1). That progression actually sounds better with every other chord as a dominant, such as:

CMa7	B7	Em7	A7	Dm7	G7	CMa7	
VII7		iii	VI7	ii	V	I	

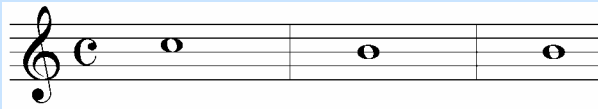
## D) Must I play all the arpeggios in ii-V-I's?

\*No. A good way to outline the chords in a ii-V-I without playing the complete arpeggios is to emphasize the 3 or 7 of the chords. The 3 defines the chord type (major or minor), and the 7 defines the chord quality. For example:

	Dm7 (ii)	G7 (V)	CMaj7 (I)
--	----------	--------	-----------



3	7	3
Dm7 (ii)	G7 (V)	CMaj7 (I)



3	7	3
---	---	---

\*Notice that the 3 and 7 pitches move from chord to chord by half-steps; you'll learn more about this in Chapter 3B: *Melodic Connections*. You can add your own rhythmic ideas, keeping the 3 or 7 as the first note of each measure.

## 6

- **TRY IT – Basic:** Using the example above, write the 3,7,3 notes for each ii-V-I in the circle of 4ths.  
**Medium:** Write the 7,3,7 notes for each ii-V-I in the circle of 4ths.

### Part 4 – Simplifying Progressions

#### A) What's the value of simplifying progressions?

\*When you see several consecutive chords belonging to the *same* key, you can improvise on all of them with a *single scale*.

\*For example, Dm7 and CMa7 belong to the key of C Major, so they share notes. A C Major scale works for *both* the chords. This means fewer chords to worry about, so you navigate the progression more easily.

\*Simplifying progressions does have disadvantages. When you simplify, you miss some of the more colorful tones, like the raised 7th of the ii chord (C# in D minor), or the #4 of the I chord, or dominant alterations (see Tutorial 3K).

#### B) How do I simplify progressions?

\*In this example, all chords belong to the key of C, so you can play the notes of a C Major scale for the progression.

CMa7	Am7	Dm7	G7	CMa7
I	vi	ii	V	I

\*And in this example, all the chords belong to the key of E, so an E Major scale works for the entire progression.

EMa7	AMa7	F#m7	B7	EMa7
I	IV	ii	V	I

\*You can also play a single flexible scale across all three chords in a ii-V-I progression. For example, with Dmi to G7 to CMa7, you can play just C Major (the I chord scale), or just D Dorian (the ii chord scale), or just G Mixolydian (the V chord scale).

- **TRY IT – Basic:** Find a scale that fits these chords: CMa7 Dm7 G7 CMa7. **Medium:** Try AMa7, Bm7, C#m7, F#m7.



That's all for Tutorial 1J!

Next is the Quiz – to get started, go to the next page.

## QUIZ - 1J: Chords, Keys, and Progressions

Click on the letter for the best answer for each question. You'll hear a C Maj6 arpeggio if you're right. If you miss 2 or less, you pass the Tutorial!

Or, click **Back**  to review the Tutorial before taking the Quiz.

- 1) What key is this in: Bm7 – E7 – AMaj7 – F#m7?  
A) B B) E C) A D) D
- 2) The second section of a blues starts with the:  
A) I B) IV C) V D) II
- 3) What disadvantage does simplifying chord progressions have?  
A) fewer chords to learn B) fewer color tones C) fewer major chords D) harder to recognize keys
- 4) In a ii-V-I, what scale can you play across all three chords?  
A) the ii B) the V C) the I D) all of these
- 5) If you preface a ii-V-I in A with two chords, the first chord would be:  
A) C#m B) F#m C) Bm D) F#7
- 6) Two pitches that quickly define chord quality are:  
A) 5 and 7 B) 1 and 3 C) 3 and 7 D) 1 and 5
- 7) Which note does not belong to a B Blues scale?  
A) F B) D# C) F# D) they all do
- 8) Which scale would work best in the blues?  
A) Lydian B) major C) Mixolydian D) all of these





Landscape Arch, Moab UT

© 2003 Visual Jazz Publications