

How To Understand And Write Major Key Chord Progressions

Why Do I Need To Know This Stuff?

I know what your thinking. Most popular musicians don't have a clue about how to analyze and write chord progressions, they just use their own intuition and ear and basically do what they already know from learning other guitar players chord progressions. But the truth will definitely set you free in this case and I think if you take the time to learn some of what makes up your favorite tunes, you will be much more inspired to take it and do your own thing with it. So give it a chance, it really is just pretty basic theory stuff that can completely change your understanding of music no matter what instrument you play. Also, even if you don't have dreams of writing hit songs and just want to be able to easily create nice chord progressions in any key that you can record and practice improvising over, this is how you do it. So lets get to it!!

Wait Not So Fast!!

Before you start reading this groovy little tutorial on chord progressions, you first need to make sure that **YOU CAN SPELL ALL OF YOUR MAJOR KEY SCALES EASILY!!** Don't worry if you don't have that down yet, just go to www.GuitarLessons365.com and do a search on "Understanding Keys", you will find a nice little PDF tutorial that will get you spelling you major keys before you know it. OK, now that we have that out of the way, let's get to work.

Getting To Know Your Thirds

For those who don't know what a "Third" or "3rd" is, let me explain. A 3rd in music is just a way of describing the distance between two notes. If we take a basic C Major Scale C D E F G A B, we will see that 7 notes make up the scale. No if we try to find out how far apart these notes are from one another we can first look at the first note in the scale C. C is going to be like home for us and every other note in the scale will be some sort of distance from home. We get the name for that distance by giving it a numerical name to represent the distance or "interval" between each note. So basically if we analyze every note in the scale from C, D would be the distance of a 2nd away and E would be the distance of a 3rd away and F would be the distance of a 4th away and so forth.

Now that is not all there is to it, each interval can have a different version like a Major 2nd and Minor 2nd or Major 3rd and Minor 3rd. But we don't need to concern ourselves to much with all of that write now, I will have a tutorial up on www.GuitarLessons365.com soon to help you spell all your intervals. Right now we just need to concentrate on knowing our 3rd's really well.

Why Are 3rd's So Important?

We are going to stick with just trying to understand 3rd intervals right now because practically 95% of the chords used in western harmony are just a combination of stacked 3rd intervals. So it is essential to understand what a 3rd is in order to build chords and then create chord progressions. In order to understand what type of a 3rd you are looking at I will need you to understand 2nds as well, but I think you will find that quite easy. OK, here we go.....

This Will Only Take A 2nd!!

The interval of a 2nd in music is just a way to describe the distance between any two adjacent tones in the musical alphabet. So A to B is a 2nd. And so is B to A. And B to C is a 2nd. And so is C to B and so forth. Now all we have to determine is WHAT type of second we are looking at. This is pretty easy to determine. What we are going to be dealing with here are Major and Minor 2nds. If you have ever looked at the white keys on a piano you will basically be looking at a bunch of keys that are a 2nd apart. But if you look more closely you will see that for every identical octave on the piano there are two sets of white keys that don't have a black key in between them. The white keys with a black key in between them are Major 2nd intervals and the white keys without a black key are Minor 2nd intervals. For those without access to a piano that just means that the only two sets of natural notes (ie. those without #'s or b's) that are a Minor 2nd apart are B to C and E to F. Every other set of 2nds in the natural musical scale are a Major 2nd apart. Let's break it down like this:

A B C D E F G A = All the natural notes in music.

A to B = Major 2nd
B to C = Minor 2nd
C to D = Major 2nd
D to E = Major 2nd
E to F = Minor 2nd
F to G = Major 2nd
G to A = Major 2nd

Just make sure that you remember these intervals even when they are altered. If you can visualize a Minor 2nd as just being the distance of one fret up or down on the guitar then you will know that we also call that interval a half-step. And a whole-step on the guitar is just 2 frets up or down. So another name for a Major 2nd is a whole-step and the name for a Minor 2nd is a half-step. Knowing that I am sure that you remember what a # or b does to a note. Just as a review a sharp(#) raises a note a half-step and a flat(b) lowers a note by a half-step.

So now that you know A to B is a whole-step you can see that if we flat the B we get a A to Bb. Since now the two notes are closer together they are now a half-step or Minor 2nd apart. And going in the opposite direction, B to C is a Minor 2nd or half-step apart, but if you raise the C to a C# then we have B to C# which makes the C farther from B and creates the interval of a whole step or Major 2nd. OK lets get to 3rds shall we.

How to Determine What Kind Of A 3rd We Are Looking At

Determining a 3rd interval type is quite easy after you understand 2nds. We have two types of 3rd intervals that we will be using and yes once again they will be Major and Minor 3rds. The differences between the two are really quite simple. A Major 3rd consists of **TWO WHOLE-STEPS**. And a Minor 3rd consists of **ONE WHOLE-STEP + ONE HALF-STEP**. So if we take a look at our C Major Scale again we can hopefully determine all of the 3rd intervals in it. You can easily find a 3rd by just skipping one letter name in the scale in either direction. So you can have A to C or C to A. And B to D or D to B etc.

If you take a look at what the distance of the natural notes are in each one of those intervals you will see something like this. A to C is a Minor 3rd because it contains one whole-step A to B and one half-step B to C. Lets try another. C to E is a Major 3rd because C to D is a whole-step and D to E is also a whole step, therefore two whole-steps equals a Major 3rd.

Constructing Chords (Triads)

Constructing triads is a very simple procedure. Lets now go back to our basic C Major Scale. If we take a look at it like this:

C D E F G A B

You can see all of the seven tones that make up the scale. Now we know that chords are built by stacking 3rd right, so what we will do is just stack up thirds off of every note in the scale. That will give us this.

I. C E G = C Major

ii. D F A = D Minor

iii. E G B = E Minor

IV. F A C = F Major

V. G B D = G Major

vi. A C E = A Minor

vii. B D F = B Diminished

Major Triad = A Major 3rd followed by a Minor 3rd

Minor Triad = A Minor 3rd followed by a Major 3rd

Diminished Triad = 2 Minor 3rds

Augmented Triad = 2 Major 3rds

What basically is happening here is that we are just starting on each note of the scale and skipping 3rds. So starting on C we skipped a 3rd to E then another 3rd up from E which gave us G. So those three notes (C E G) make up the first triad in the key. We know it is a Major Triad by looking at our triad formulas to the above right. A major triad must first consist of a Major 3rd **THEN** a Minor 3rd. So looking at our 3 notes you can see that C to E is a Major 3rd and E to G is a Minor 3rd. A minor triad works in the opposite way like in the second chord D Minor. D to F is a Minor 3rd and F to A is a Major 3rd giving us the formula for a minor triad since now the Minor 3rd happens first. The Diminished and Augmented triads are simply 2 Minor 3rd and 2 Major 3rd intervals respectively. There are no Augmented triads in major keys though, I just threw that in for completeness sake. We will be looking at them when we do minor keys.

This Is WAY To Much Thinking!!

Your right, it is, but the good thing is that you don't actually have to go through all of this every time you want to know the chords for a particular major key key. Yeah I know I fooled ya, there is an easier way but I just thought it would be healthy for you to know how to actually form all of the chords in a key manually, but now lets just remember a few quick little things for you to think of when trying to come up with the chords in a key.

If you look at the chords that we figured out in the key of C Major you will notice that the I Chord is a Major chord and the ii chord is a Minor chord and the iii chord is a Minor chord as so forth. That exact formula stays the same for **EVERY MAJOR KEY!!** So all you have to memorize is this sequence: Major, Minor, Minor, Major, Major, Minor, Diminished in that exact order. So if you look at that sequence you will know that the V chord in every major key is a major chord and the vii chord is a

diminished chord. By the way, in case you haven't noticed, you use upper case roman numerals for major type chords and lower case roman numerals for minor and diminished type chords.

Taking It To Other Keys

So lets quickly figure out all the basic triads in a few keys. When I said you need to know how to spell all of your major keys earlier, this is the part of the method where you will use that knowledge. All you have to do is spell any particular key you need say A Major. A B C# D E F# G#. Then we will take those seven tones and place them along side their particular chord type. Remember the chord built off of the first tone in a major key is always major so our I chord will be A Major. The second chord should always be minor so our ii chord built from the second tone in the scale will be B Minor. Here is a breakdown of a couple of major keys.

A Major

A Major is the I chord.

B Minor is the ii chord.

C# Minor is the iii chord.

D Major is the IV chord.

E Major is the V chord.

F# Minor is the vi chord.

G# Diminished is the vii chord.

E Major

E Major is the I chord.

F# Minor is the ii chord.

G# Minor is the iii chord.

A Major is the IV chord.

B Major is the V chord.

C# Minor is the vi chord.

D# Diminished is the vii chord.

So as you can see the order of the chords never changes in any major key, all you have to do is know your seven tones of the key that you want then just place them beside their appropriate chord type. Then boom, you have all the basic triads that are in that particular key. Do a few more keys yourself until you get used to this method.

OK So Now That I Know The Chords In A Key, What Is A Progression?

A chord progression can really be just any sequence of chords. However, if you want to write in a particular key you would generally try and stay within the chords of the key. Having said that, there are a few chord progressions that are used constantly in all forms of music and you should really become very familiar with them. When you here a musician say something like play a I IV V in G, that just means play the chord progression of the first, fourth and fifth chords found in the key of G Major. That would be G Major, C Major then D Major. The I IV V chord progression is used constantly in most styles of music. In reality you can use just about any combination of the chords within a key that you want as long as it sounds good to you. However, most of the time the chord progression starts with the I chord to establish a tonal center, then you just use your hear to figure out were you would like to

go next. So take these keys and start creating your own chord progressions and learn a chord progression from a song that you like that is in a major key and try to figure out the chord sequence and key. By the way, not all chord progressions stay completely diatonic to the key, but we will cover that later.

So let me know if this helps you with your theory and chord knowledge and be sure to watch the video lesson on the site where I show how to apply this knowledge to the guitar neck. See You Then!!

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