



*Carl Verheyen - GJD Contributor*

Songwriting is the ultimate mystery, even to the people that do it really well! Sometimes it's there and sometimes it isn't, the inspiration is a fleeting thing. The main thing I have learned over the years is that there are really no rules for songwriting, but there are many "devices" that make it easier. Good songwriters have a catalog of these devices and they use them to back themselves out of the corners. A sure fire way to get better at the craft is to do a quick self-study of harmony.

On a piece of 12 stave music paper; write each key with its appropriate key signature (sharps and flats) down the page at the beginning of each stave. Use the circle of fifths starting with the flat keys first like this: C F Bb Eb Ab Db Gb B E A D G

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Write each 7-note scale out next to its name, then harmonize each note with 3 note chords built in 3rds. You'll find you get a sequence of chords that goes major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished, major. By adding a 4th note to each chord you find the IV chord to be a major7th and the V chord a dominant 7th. If this sounds like Greek to you, ask your teacher to explain it and run you through the process. After completing this exercise you'll instantly know that the VI chord in Db major is a Bbm7 and the IV chord in B is an E. Harmony will make sense to you and help to explain why what you do that sounds good.....is right! You'll have a huge head start in dealing with chord progressions and music.

The first concept I am always in touch with while writing is tension and resolution. The tension created by the tri-tone in a dominant chord like G7 will resolve (in the most obvious way) to C major and be a diatonic "relief" in the cadence. But there are many other cadences and many other resolutions. For instance the G7 can resolve to a Gb major because the tri-tone in G7 is the same as the tri-tone in Db7, which is the V chord of Gb. The G7 also sounds good resolving up a whole step to an A major due to the strong bass motion. So right away there are 3 strong ways to make tension and resolution in a chord progression. Jazz players use the II chord in front of the V chord to get these 3 possibilities:

Dm7 G7 C  
Dm7 G7 Gb  
Dm7 G7 A

Looking at it another way we can get to C these 3 ways using II V7 I progressions:

Dm7 G7 C  
Abm7 Db7 C  
Fm7 Bb7 C

Although many pop songwriters use it, the IIm7 V7 I major progression is, for the most part a traditional jazz device. But there are many other resolutions. Wayne Shorter uses Ebmajor7b5 and drops it nicely to Dmajor7 for a modern approach. C2/E sounds great going to G/D, even Bach used this one. One way to find these alternate resolutions in a chord progression is bass motion. With strong bass motion “any chord follows any chord”, to quote John McLaughlin.

I have analyzed many of the great songwriters over the years in a constant effort to improve the craft. People like Lennon and McCartney, Paul Simon, Cole Porter, Brian Wilson and Jerome Kern have written many of the “standards” in popular music. My theory is that a standard becomes a standard because it’s a great song, the people love it and it gives the musicians something they can sink their teeth into. The song “All the Things You Are” by Jerome Kern is a good example because every jazz musician in the world knows this harmony:

| Fm7 Bbm7 | Eb7 Abmaj7 | Dbmaj7 Dm7 G7 | Cmaj7 |  
| Cm7 Fm7 | Bb7 Ebmaj7 | Abmaj7 Am7 D7 | Gmaj7 |

I used this musical device while writing the song “Place for Me” from the SIX CD. In “All the Things” Kern takes the first 8 bar progression and transposes it down a 4th, melody and all. In “Place for Me” I use the verse progression down a minor 3rd for the organ solo, so from this:

||: Dm7 Bb | F A7 | G7/B | Bb7 A7 | Dm7 Bb | F A7 | Bb7 | Em7 A7 :||

I get this:

||: Bm7 G | D F#7 | E7/G# | G7 F#7 | Bm7 G | D F#7 | G7 | Bb7 A7 :||

The effect of going to a “sharp key” from the D minor tonality is, to my ears, the perfect release: a familiar progression but an entirely new tonality. I simply modified the last bar so it resolved back to Dm7.

Cole Porter likes to go up a 3rd for the bridge in many of his songs. “I Love You” written in F major modulates up a major 3rd to A major for the bridge, while “Night and Day” goes from C major to Eb major, up a minor 3rd. Brian Wilson does the reverse in “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” but drops down a minor 3rd from F to the bridge in D major. Stevie Wonder uses it in “You are the Sunshine of My Life.” These are the modern standards from the 60’s and 70’s generation, just as Jerome Kern songs and Cole Porter songs were the standards of the 40’s and 50’s.

While writing “Still Crazy After All These Years” Paul Simon actually wrote down all the notes he used in the verses and chorus and used a completely different set of notes for the bridge. The result is a “church” style progression in a bluesy G7 tonality going up a whole step to A major7. Not too many guys can pull that off but somehow he makes it feel natural. I believe his knowledge of harmony made him one of the heaviest songwriters of his era.

Lennon and McCartney had incredible harmonic and melodic intuition. To the ears of a 10 year old it all sounded great to me, but I can remember my parents being jarred by some of the primitive resolutions in their songs. A good example is "You're Gonna Lose That Girl" where the verses are in E major and the bridge goes up to G (like Cole Porter, up a minor 3rd). After going back and forth between G and C a few times for the bridge they use an F chord to drop down a half step back into E for another verse. I'm sure nobody taught them that half step bass motion was a brilliant way to resolve a progression.....they just had great ears (and a very musical upbringing in the case of Paul).

Most professional songwriters get up and go to work each day. They have a place and a time that they devote to nothing else. But with most of us performing musicians you have to grab it when you can. The road is never a good place to write music because you're always on the move and there is so little time. But since some of the most heartfelt inspiration comes from the experiences you have while traveling, I'm always looking for a quiet moment to sit and reflect with my guitar. Emotions are very high on tour because the heartache of missing your loved ones is juxtaposed against the ultimate high you get playing on stage. Playing every night raises the level of improvisation and musicality. Lyrics and melodies seem to come more freely than in the comfort of the home studio. Therefore I'm always looking for quiet backstage hideouts or hotel rooms with wooden floors to play acoustic guitar by myself.

This passion for playing the music and the heaviness of being away are in a constant balance with each other. I find my center as a person alone with a guitar, searching for chords and melodies....tension and resolution.