

STRIKING THE RIGHT CHORD

(OR HOW DO I KNOW WHAT CHORD TO PLAY NEXT?)

Past issues focused on how notes relate to other notes to form intervals. We saw that intervals can combine with other intervals to form triads and chords. We discovered several types of chords and found that their names followed from the intervals involved.

Well, there's more. Turns out that just as notes seek out other notes to keep them company as intervals and chords, chords seem to seek out other chords to keep them company as chord progressions. A chord progression is—as the name implies—a sequence of chords. When playing a particular song in a particular key, there are specific chords to be played in a specific order. That sequence is the chord progression.

There might be some confusion about the difference between the key of a chord and the key of a chord progression, and there may be a good reason for that. For example, we can play a G chord, which is a major chord that we would say is, "in the key of G." Or, we can accompany a song by playing a G chord, followed by a C chord, then a G chord, a D chord and another G chord, and that would be a chord progression that we would also say is, "in the key of G." So, each chord may be viewed as an independent unit that is built on the scale of the key of the same name as the chord itself, e.g. G. When all of the chords involved in a piece of music are taken together as a progression, they are related as a group to the key of the song. Stay with me, here.

When selecting chords to accompany a particular song you can build a chord on each and any note of the scale. Each chord still can be understood as being built on a note that names the key of that chord. For example the notes C-E-G taken together make a major chord "in the key of C." But you can also play a C chord as part of a chord progression for a song in the key of G. In this instance the C chord is part of the "G chord progression" because it is the major chord built on the fourth degree (or note) of the G scale.

In an earlier issue, you saw that major chords are built by using the 1st, 3rd and 5th notes of the major scale (you may find past articles at www.FolkWorks.org). In other words, every other note was used to form a major triad or chord. Look at **Figure 1** to see how the every-other-note concept can be expanded and applied to each degree of the scale. In **Figure 1**, pick a 1st note, say the C, look for the 3rd note (E) and the 5th note (G). If you play these three notes together, you have a major C chord. Try it with any of the other notes.

This type of rule also applies to chord progressions. Most of the songs you will encounter will use a chord progression built on the 1st, 4th and 5th notes of the scale. Musicians usually talk about this as a "one-four-five" progression. In the key of G these would be a G, a C and

a D chord. The more generic method of notation for chords uses Roman numerals to indicate the same thing. So this "one-four-five" progression would be written as I-IV-V. Once you are used to these numbers instead of note names for chords, you can talk about chord progressions regardless of the key you are in. This terminology is so commonly accepted that you might hear a conversation among musicians like the following. Question: "Is there anything weird about the chords in this tune?" Answer: "No, this is a simple 'one-four-five' in G." But wait, there's more.

Look at **Figure 2**. In **Figure 2**, all of the triads from **Figure 1** are lined up to show a comparison of the interval spacing in each one. Notice that all three of the I-IV-V chords are major. Look again at **Figure 2** and direct your attention to the chord built on D, the second degree of the C major scale. This triad contains a flatted 3rd interval, which makes it a minor chord. We see this flatted 3rd interval in the chords built on the 2nd, 3rd and 6th degree of the scale, as shown in **Figure 2**, so all three are minor chords.

When using the Roman numeral notation it is customary to write major chords using upper case Roman numerals and minor chords using lower case Roman numerals. These chords, then, would be noted as ii, iii, and vi. Since the first through sixth chords are accounted for, this leaves only the 7th degree of the scale to complete our list of chords. The chord built on the 7th degree of the scale has a flatted 3rd but it also has a flatted or 5th, which makes this a diminished chord (sound familiar?). Diminished chords are noted as "dim" or with a superscripted "o." So using the Roman numeral notation, the diminished chord built on the seventh degree of the scale would be written "vii^o."

Turns out that there are seven chords to choose from when accompanying a song or tune and they are the I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi and vii^o chords. In searching for that right chord to use, this knowledge should simplify your options. If it is a major chord that you want it will be a I, IV or V chord. If it is minor it will be a ii, iii or vi chord. Although you are least likely to need it, there is that seventh, diminished chord, the vii^o chord.

So, how do musicians know which chords to play? Basically you have your choice of seven chords once the key is set. Then your choices are limited to three once you know whether the chord is to be major or minor. There are three major, three minor and one diminished chords. And, as usual, there are, exceptions and many variations, but most chord progressions will follow these rules. Once again, we find that applying a little musical knowledge can instantly narrow the search from a seemingly infinite number of chords to the right one. So keep playing, keep chording and, of course, stay tuned.



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Figure 1 - Chords/Triads built on each degree of the diatonic C major scale

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	-	2	-	3	4	-	5	-	6	-
C	-	-	-	E	-	-	G	-	-	-
	D	-	-	F	-	-	A	-	-	-
		E	-	G	-	-	B	-	-	-
			F	-	-	-	A	-	-	C
				G	-	-	B	-	-	D
					A	-	-	C	-	-
						B	-	-	D	-
							E	-	-	F

Figure 2 - Resulting chord types from Figure 1

		I	1	b3	3	b5	5	I		
I	C	I	C	-	-	E	-	-	G	I
ii	Dm	I	D	-	-	F	-	-	A	I
iii	Em	I	E	-	-	G	-	-	B	I
IV	F	I	F	-	-	A	-	-	C	I
V	G	I	G	-	-	B	-	-	D	I
vi	A	I	A	-	-	C	-	-	E	I
vii ^o	B	I	B	-	-	D	-	-	F	I
										7
										Major
										minor
										minor
										Major
										Major
										minor
										diminished

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