



# **An Introduction to Common Chord Progressions**

By Scott Blanchard

So, you know a lot about chords—how to build them, how to play them—but how do you make logical music out of them? Why do some chords work well together while others don't? If these questions are troubling you, read on and we'll demystify these concepts together. In this issue of the Theory Corner, we'll take a look at an excerpt from bass powerhouse Tracy Walton's book, *Musicianship for the Contemporary Bassist*, available through Alfred Publishing. Tracy will introduce the concept of *diatonic* chord progressions to you, as well as discuss some other common progressions found in most popular music. Diatonic harmony can be defined as the chords pertaining to a tonal center or key. In fact, I bet you're already familiar with diatonic chord progressions. Most of us have listened to Western music since birth, so the paradigms, conventions and tendencies of common chord progressions have been internalized. Let's dig them out and see what they are!

Tracy's accessible step-based teaching style along with definitive examples make this book a great addition to any bassist's collection. As a bonus, the book includes a CD so you can easily follow along with all the examples. Let's get started!

## **Chord Progressions**

A *chord progression* is a series of chords. When we speak of a chord progression, we are speaking of the movement of one chord to another. Typically, we use Roman numerals for such discussions. This is very handy, because once a progression is understood in these terms, it can be played in any key.

## **The Primary Chords: I, IV and V**

The most important chords in any key are I, IV and V. These are called the primary chords. Many rock and blues tunes are composed entirely of these three chords alone. In the key of C Major, these chords are C Major (I), F Major (IV) and G Major (V); in the key of G Major they are G Major (I), C Major (IV) and D Major (V).

Over thousands of years of musical and cultural development, the interval of a perfect 5th became deeply important to our musical structures. It is probably the relationship of a descending perfect 5th from I to IV, and an upward perfect 5th from I to V, that accounts for the predominance of the primary chords in our music. They most often appear in this order: IV–V–I. The sound of IV–V–I is so definitive for us that it, or one of its variants, is needed to firmly establish the sound of any key in our ears.

# Diatonic Chord Progressions in Major Keys

There are common chord progressions that surface time and again in popular music. This chapter will explore some of these progressions. Whether you are writing songs or working as a sub (substitute) on a gig, you will need to be able to recognize these chord patterns and supply complimenting bass lines to support them in a song.

*Diatonic chord progressions* are those in which all of the chords revolve around a tonal center or key. All of the chords in the song will eventually want to resolve back to the tonic. Saying “a diatonic progression in the key of C” is the same as saying “a song is in the key of C.” The following are some of the most common diatonic major chord progressions.

## I-IV-V-I

The three primary chords, I, IV and V, are used constantly in popular music. In a typical I-IV-V-I, they are played as all major chords. The song “Lay Down Sally” by Eric Clapton uses a I-IV-V-I progression. Let’s look at a I-IV-V-I progression in the key of G Major.



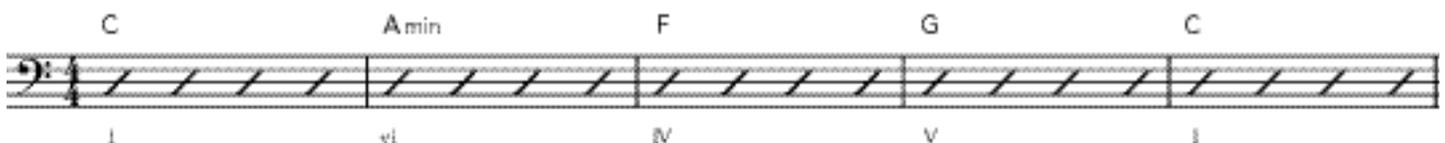
You will notice that the progression begins and ends on the I chord. When analyzing chord progressions, start with the first and last chord. If they are the same chord, check if all of the other chords fit in the key of that chord. If they all fit, you can be reasonably sure you have found the key.



Although this progression starts on F Major, it is still considered in the key of C. C is the only major key that contains all three of these chords, and C Major is also the only chord in this progression that sounds fully resolved. Since A Minor is the relative minor of C Major, all of these chords could be found in A Minor as well. The reason it is considered C Major and not A Minor is that the progression ends on C.

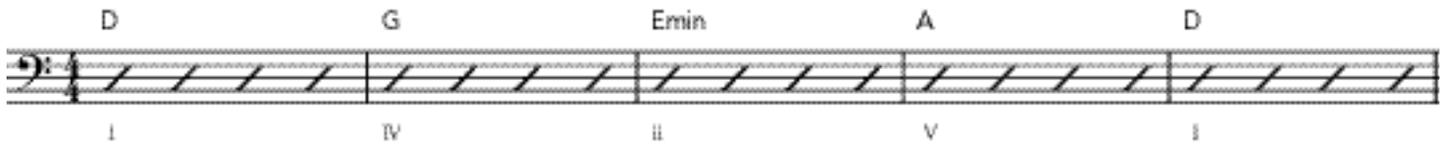
## I-vi-IV-V-I

The I-vi-IV-V-I is another extremely common progression. This progression has a very distinct sound and can be heard on the classic “Stand By Me,” made famous by Ben E. King. The following I-vi-IV-V-I progression is in the key of C Major. Again, since A Minor is the relative minor of C Major, all of these chords could be found in A Minor as well. The reason it is considered C Major and not A Minor is the fact that the progression starts, and usually ends, on C.



## I-IV-ii-V-I

The I-IV-ii-V-I progression can be heard in the song “Run Around” by Blues Traveler. This progression is easy to hear in that it is comprised of two sets of chords, a whole step apart, that move down a 5th (or up a 4th). Here is the progression in the key of D Major.



There are many other major chord progressions that are used in all styles of music. Starting to hear how chords move and work together will help your playing tremendously. The following is a list of a few major key progressions and songs that use them.

## Other Common Progressions

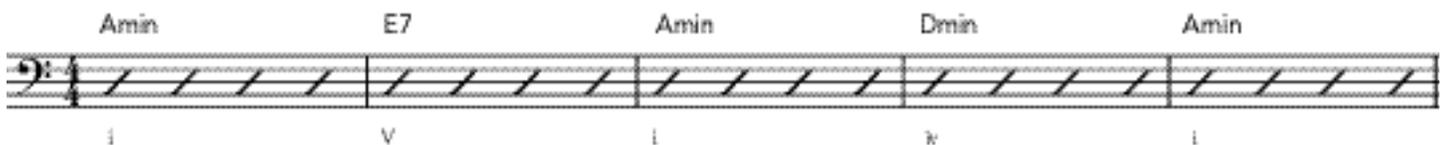
Progression	Song	Artist
I-IV-I-V	“Brown Eyed Girl”	Van Morrison
I-V-IV	“Blue Sky”	The Allman Brothers Band
I-iii-IV-I	“The Weight”	The Band
I-ii-iii-IV-V	“Like a Rolling Stone”	Bob Dylan
I-V-vi-IV-ii-V-ii-V-I-IV-I-V	“Oh! Darling”	The Beatles

## Diatonic Chord Progressions in Minor Keys

In a minor key chord progression, all of the chords will revolve around and want to eventually resolve to the minor i chord. Songs in minor keys normally have a somber, sad sound.

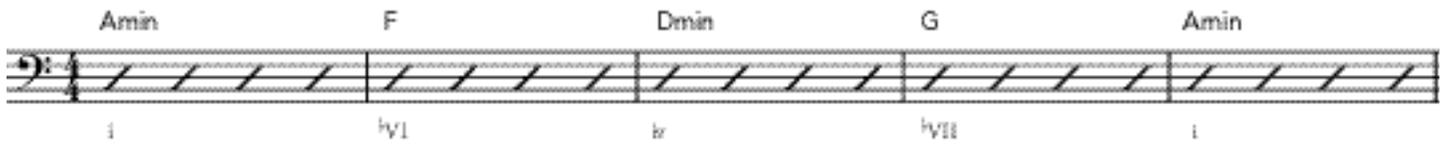
### i-V-i-iv-i

The i-V-i-iv-i is a very common progression and is the basis of the Santana classic, “Black Magic Woman.” Notice that the V chord is a dominant 7th rather than minor. The V7 chord of harmonic minor is often used in place of the minor v chord found in natural minor.



### i-♭VI-iv-♭VII-i

An example of the i-♭VI-iv-♭VII-i progression can be found in the verse to “Mr. Jones” by Counting Crows. The following progression is in the key of A Minor. Try arpeggiating each chord; this will help you hear the harmony.



Playing the following examples will help you hear how a progression wants to resolve. Notice how the first three examples sound unresolved. The final example ends on the i chord of the key, giving the progression the resolution we want to hear.



## Conclusion

For more information on chord progressions, be sure to check out the Licks and Tricks section of this newsletter for some fun playing examples.

If you liked this excerpt, order Tracy Walton's book, *Musicianship for the Contemporary Bassist*, at [www.alfred.com](http://www.alfred.com). In addition, be sure to check out his rock bass lessons on [www.WorkshopLive.com](http://www.WorkshopLive.com) today!

To learn more about chord progressions, guitarists, keyboardists and bassists will want to check out any lesson where the focus is chords. WorkshopLive has an endless number of lessons on chords, so dig in and have fun!

Have fun experimenting with new chord progressions—see you soon!