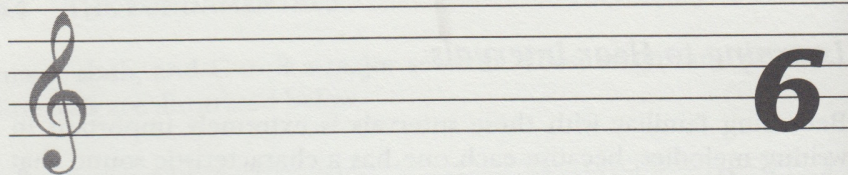




**Week 7:**

**Basic Chord Theory  
& Keys:  
Minor/Major Chords**



## Chords: The Featured Fourteen

**A**s we demonstrated in Chapter 1, harmony or chord progression is an essential part of a song's musical makeup. Indeed, many successful songwriters regularly begin their writing process by creating an interesting chord progression as a harmonic framework before adding lyrics or melody. Let's look at the fourteen types of chords from which these progressions are formed. With the exception of extensions and alterations such as ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths (which will be discussed at length in Chapter 12), virtually every part of the harmonic accompaniment of every song that has ever been recorded is derived from these fourteen chord types. In this chapter we'll be looking at how they are constructed so that we can explore how they work together to form chord progressions in subsequent chapters.

### **Triads**

The first four chords we're going to examine each contain three notes and hence are called *triads*. The most common of these is the

major triad, which is the first chord of the major scale of D (the first note of the D major scale), and is both the simplest and the most temporary musical chord, or an "F chord" which he or she

The second most frequent chord is the first, lowered third (Note: Whenever we lower a chord's third, we form a minor chord. Therefore, the first chord in the D-major scale is D major, and the second is D minor, a half-step lower). When lowering a chord's third, it is important to lower the third of an augmented triad, not the third of a G#. This practice forms the other half of the use of double

The remaining chords are more common than the major triad, built from the major scale of the root, the third, and lowered third, and lowered third, sharp, and the lowered third, sharp. These are D, F natural, and G natural, which we have just discussed.



As I've mentioned, study with what you've learned on the edge to your own chapter and a



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*major triad*, which is formed from the *first, third, and fifth notes in the major scale of the root*. Thus, for example, a D-major triad is composed of D (the first note in the D-major scale), F# (the third note in the D-major scale), and A (the fifth note in the D-major scale). This chord is both the simplest and the most common of all chords used in contemporary music. When a songwriter or musician speaks of a “D chord” or an “F chord,” the full theoretical name of the chord to which he or she is referring is a D-major triad or an F-major triad.

The second chord we’re going to look at, which is also the second most frequently used, is the *minor triad*. It is formed from the first, *lowered* third, and fifth notes in the major scale of the root. (*Note:* Whenever I use the terms “lowered” or “raised” in explaining chord construction, I mean raised or lowered by a half-step.) Therefore, the notes in a D-minor triad (Dm) are D (the first note in the D-major scale), F (the third note in the D-major scale lowered a half-step), and A (the fifth note in the D-major scale). Incidentally, when lowering the third note in the scale to form a minor chord, it is important to always maintain the same letter name. Thus, the lowered third of an F-minor (Fm) chord would be an A♭ rather than a G#. This practice also holds true for lowering or raising scale notes to form the other chords discussed in this chapter and may necessitate the use of double sharps (x) or double flats (bb).

The remaining two triads you need to be aware of are far less common than either the major or minor. They are the *augmented triad*, built from the first, third, and *raised* fifth notes in the major scale of the root, and the *diminished triad*, built from the first, *lowered* third, and *lowered* fifth notes in the major scale of the root. The notes in a D augmented triad (generally written D+) are D, F sharp, and A sharp, and the notes in a D diminished triad (generally written D°) are D, F natural, and A flat. Illustrated below are the four triads we have just discussed built on the root D.

D	Dm	Daug	Ddim
Major Triad	Minor Triad	Augmented Triad	Diminished Triad

As I’ve mentioned several times, the ability to connect what you *study* with what you *hear* is the key to successfully applying this knowledge to your songwriting. As I present the various chords in this chapter and as we discuss their application in chord progression in

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future chapters, be certain you are constantly connecting your theoretical understanding of them to their sound by playing them on your keyboard or guitar, or listening to the examples of their use in the hit songs I refer to.

### Triads in Action

Major triads have a brighter and happier quality than their minor counterparts. Think of the opening measures of two hits from Garth Brooks' multiplatinum *No Fences* album: "Unanswered Prayers" (major chord) and "The Thunder Rolls" (minor chord). Or listen to the first four measures of Bob Dylan's "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" (recorded by both the writer and by Guns N' Roses), illustrated below.

The musical notation shows two phrases in G major. The first phrase, "Ma - ma take this badge off of me", starts with a G major chord, moves to a D major chord, and ends with an A minor chord. The second phrase, "I can't use it an - y more", starts with a G major chord, moves to a D major chord, and ends with a C major chord. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words underlined.

As you play or listen to this excerpt, focus on the difference in sound between the A *minor* chord at the end of the first phrase ("Mama, take this badge off of me") and the C *major* chord at the end of the second ("I can't use it anymore").

Examples of the augmented and diminished triads are far less prevalent. The augmented triad has an unusual, almost eerie feeling and is used often in movie sound tracks to create tension. It is the second chord in both Eddie Money's "Baby Hold On" (co-written with Jimmy Lyon) and Michael Masser and Linda Creed's "The Greatest Love of All" (recorded by Whitney Houston as well as George Benson). The diminished triad, which has a classical sound and was quite popular in the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is rarely used in today's pop, rock, or country. It is, however, the building block upon which the *diminished seventh*, which we'll discuss later in this chapter, is constructed.

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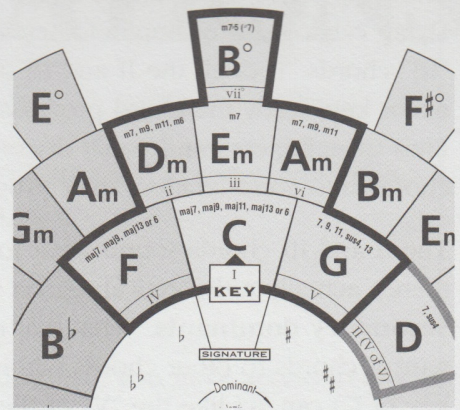
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## Typical Chords and Progressions

When writing or playing a song in the key of C, you can see that we can play the chords C, F, and G as a progression and expect them to sound solidly “in key.” In fact, the results sound very good; as if the chords belonged together. If you analyze C, F, and G with your Chord Wheel, you will find that they translate as the I chord, the IV chord, and the V chord in the key. Have you ever heard somebody mention a “one-four-five progression”? What they were really saying was “I-IV-V.” These are probably the three most common chords in all of music. For one thing, they’re the basis of the renowned “twelve-bar blues,” which in turn is the foundation of much rock and jazz.



### Primary Chords

**I**, **IV**, and **V** could be said to be the **primary chords** in any major key. The first chord, the I chord, is the defining chord of the key and is also called the **tonic**. It is consistently the most utilized chord, regardless of key, and most other chords in a key’s “family” will tend to make the listener’s ears ache to hear resolution to it. Use this expectation to pull listeners along as well as provide them with the comfortable resolution they desire.

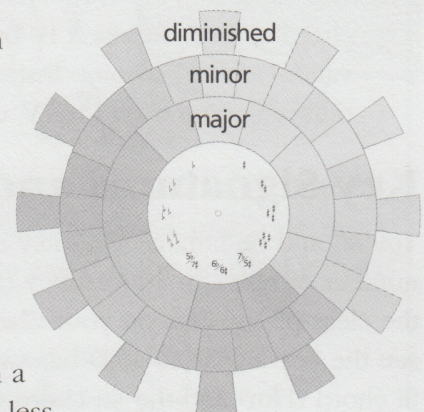
After the I chord, the most characteristic sound of a given key is the V chord, called the **dominant**. At the very center of the Chord Wheel, you’ll discover a clockwise arrow indicating the direction of the dominant. Among the strongest of listener tendencies recognized by music theorists is the “movement to dominant.” Simply stated, our ears seem to possess an inherent expectation that musical tones want to progress from a root, or tonic, to the note a “fifth” higher, which would be the root of the V chord. The V chord, in turn, makes the listener expect to hear resolution back to the I chord, particularly when it’s voiced as a dominant seventh (V7), a unique chord in the key.

The IV chord, called the **subdominant**, also works to draw the listener away from, and back to, the tonic. It’s a more relaxed sound but very effective. The counterclockwise arrow at the center of the Chord Wheel indicates the direction of the subdominant. One characteristic of the IV chord is that, like the tonic (I chord), it can be a major seventh (maj7) chord. Thus if you come across a major seventh chord in a progression, it can be functioning as the tonic (the I chord) or the subdominant (the IV chord), depending on context or interpretation.

### Secondary Chords

Notice that the innermost circle of the Chord Wheel consists of a given key’s major chords (I, IV, and V), while the middle circle contains the key’s minor chords (ii, iii, and vi) and the outer circle contains the key’s one diminished (vii°) chord.

Of course, keys have been settled upon because *all* the chords formed by their component notes sound good together—including the chords **ii**, **iii**, **vi**, and **vii°**. These could be considered the **secondary chords** of a major key; they’re not as crucial in establishing the key center, but they’re valuable nonetheless—they represent “somewhere else to go” in a major key. As you can see, most of them are minor. This means they’re less consonant but also more colorful.



A particularly common element of many jazz progressions is the “ii-V-I cadence.” Though it sounds complex, a ii-V-I in the key of C is simply Dm, G, and C. Likewise, a favorite progression of old time rock ‘n’ roll was I-vi-IV-V, which translates as C-Am-F-G in the key of C.