

Chords tend to move from one to the next in 3 common ways.

1) CYCLE OF FOURTHS

Each chord moves up 4 scale tones.

For example a C chord would move 4 scale tones up to some type of F chord. D7 might go to G or Gmi.

Emi7 could go to A7.

Though the chord types are often mixed, it is very common, especially in older styles, for the cycle to be all dominant (7th) chords. You can see that in the following example:

“Ain’t She Sweet” goes G, D7, G, D7, G then jumps to B7. The B7 takes us away from key of G. In order to get back to G, we travel counter clockwise in the circle using the cycle of 4ths. So... B7 to E7 to A7 to D7 which goes up 4 to G.

“I’ve Got Rhythm” does the same thing. It starts with G, Ami7, D7, G, Emi7, Ami7, D7, G7, C, G, D7, G. This first section stays in the key of G. The next section jumps to B7 (just like the last song). We then cycle around... B7 to E7 to A7 to D7 until we’re back at G. “Over the Rainbow” is another example.

2) MOVE BY HALF-STEP (CHROMATIC)

A chord moves up or down one half step to the next chord.

In “Ain’t She Sweet” the first chords actually go:

G, Eb7 to D7. Notice how the Eb7 is one half step away from the D7. Our ears easily understand half steps. You will hear them all the time in Jazz. In popular music they are utilized also. Listen to “Change the World” by Clapton, or “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by George Harrison. Even “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana uses half steps to connect chords.

3) MELODIC BASS (DIATONIC)

Chords can flow smoothly from one to the next if the bass notes of each chord move scale-wise acting as a bridge and connecting the chords.

The chorus of “Fire and Rain” by James Taylor goes:

D, D/C#, Bmi7 then up a fourth to E7, up a fourth to A.

D/C# means you play a D chord, but instead of playing a “D” as the bottom note, you play a C#. Whatever is on the right of the slash /, is the bottom note. If you’re a bass player you play the note on the right.

Notice how the bass notes move backwards alphabetically, D, C#, B. That’s Melodic Bass. It can continue for many bars; D, D/C#, Bmi, Bmi/A, G, D/F#, Emi7, then up a fourth to A7 and back to D.

If your chord changes follow these 3 general “rules” your songs will sound more smooth and professional.

As we can’t always stick to the 3 rules, try not to break the rule more than one time without a rule in between. If you look back at the song examples on the first page, you’ll notice how G jumps to B7, breaking the rule. It is then followed by the cycle of fourths.

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