



Chord Theory as applied to Jazz Guitar

Functional Harmony by John Riemer

Part 1-Tonal Centers

Chord theory takes on special adaptations as applied to playing jazz guitar. The role of the guitar puts it in the midstream of tonalities so a bass could be assumed, there fore omitted. The general approach that I take is one of functional harmony, i.e., if a chord sounds appropriate I will use it. In the jazz player's arena "If it sounds right it is right!" This is assuming that you have good judgment and perception. Listening to good music is the key. Without listening to good examples of the music you are trying to play, you might as well try to reinvent the wheel.

Tonal Centers

When playing any piece of music you should know the underlying structure and chord movements involved. Knowing the key you are in is the start. Does this mean learning key signatures....YES! Other concepts to study...[Harmonized scale](#) and the [cycle of 5th](#)

Next, understand *tonal centers*. They are the temporary shifts to a scale outside of the key the song is in. Tonal centers are pointed to by dominant 7th chords.

In the following example, all the chords can be found in only tonal center.

The [harmonized scale](#) provides the standard from which we work. In the "C" harmonized scale we have these chords which are rooted and built upon each note of the scale;

Cmaj7	Dmi7	Emi7	Fmaj7	G7	Ami7	Bmi7-5
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII

In the following progression

Dm7	G7	Cmaj7	Fmaj7
II	V	I	IV

The Dm7 doesn't point to the tonal center (key) because Dm can be found in the harmonized scale of "C", "Bb", and "F". The Cmaj7 doesn't point to the center because Cmaj7 can be found in the key (tonal center) of "C" and "G". F maj7 doesn't do it either, it can be found in "C" and "F" tonal centers. 7 is the only chord found in one key..."C". All the other chords are found in "C" as well, so the entire phrase has the "C" scale as its tonal center.

Knowing the Tonal Center enables you to play one scale over several chords streamlining your technique and thought process. A more horizontal approach is the result. Instead of looking at each measure as a separate snapshot of a scale or arpeggio you will think in a

way that connects measures and playing across bar lines will be more evident in your playing.

The jazz standard by Miles Davis , **“Tune up”**, is in the key of “D” and moves through several tonal centers. The breakdown of the tune is: (see next page)

II -V –I- IV in D	II-V- I-IV in C	II- V- I-IV in Bb	II-V in D turnaround
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Study the tune until recognizing tonal centers is clear.



Handwritten guitar chord sheet for the first system. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is common time (C). The system contains five measures of music with the following chords: EM11, EM7, A7-5, A7, and Dma7. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each chord.

Handwritten guitar chord sheet for the second system. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is common time (C). The system contains five measures of music with the following chords: Dm11, Dm7, G7-5, G7, and Cma7. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each chord.

Handwritten guitar chord sheet for the third system. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is common time (C). The system contains six measures of music with the following chords: Cm7, F7, Bbma7, Ebma7, Cm7, and Ebma7. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each chord.

Handwritten guitar chord sheet for the fourth system. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is common time (C). The system contains four measures of music with the following chords: EM11, F7, Bbma7, and A7#5. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each chord.

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Part 2

Developing II / V combinations

As you play through “Tune up” you will see that it general descends and you can play II / V changes that are the same chord forms moved through the various tonal centers. Not all songs will present such a clear path.

For the moment easy song forms will suffice. Work on II/V changes descending through the keys by whole steps using these chord forms.

Put these at the 10th fret for Dm7/G7-9. Move down in whole steps.

Next try these forms.
Put them at the 10th fret
(as diagramed for Am9/D13-9)

Run through this sequence:

Am/D7	Dm/G7	Gm/C7	Cm/F7
Fm/Bb7	Bbm/Eb7	Ebm/Ab7	Abm/Db7
Dbm/Gb7	Gbm/B7	Bm/E7	Em/A7

Please be aware that the chord names are not literal. When the music requests an Am/D7; an Am7/D7-9 can be played as well as Am9/D13-9. The approach is to use a chord combination that functions as a II/V.

Am/D7	Dm/G7	Gm/C7	Cm/F7
Fm/Bb7	Bbm/Eb7	Ebm/Ab7	Abm/Db7
Dbm/Gb7	Gbm/B7	Bm/E7	Em/A7

Repeat the the sequence using these forms .

Am7 and D13 chords. The Am7 diagram shows a barre on the 2nd fret with an X on the 5th string. The D13 diagram shows a barre on the 2nd fret with an X on the 5th string. Below each diagram is a piano accompaniment showing the chord voicing on a grand staff.

Variations:

Am11, D9, Am11, and D75 chords. The Am11 diagram shows a barre on the 2nd fret with an X on the 5th string. The D9 diagram shows a barre on the 2nd fret with an X on the 5th string. Below each diagram is a piano accompaniment showing the chord voicing on a grand staff.

Work with these until you are proficient.

Next step...

Add I and IV chords where they don't exist.

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The harmonized scale

The harmonized scale is any scale in which each note of the scale serves as the root of a chord. The chords are created by stacking thirds on each root. Only notes of the scale are used. An easy way to view this is to think of every other note of the scale as the notes used in the chord. In the example C scale;

The notes are

C	D	E	F	G	A	B
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The notes in the chord rooted on C would be

B
G
E
C

This is C maj7

The entire scale harmonized in the same fashion.

B	C	D	E	F	G	A	C
G	A	D	C	D	E	F	G
E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
Cmaj7	Dm7	Em7	Fmaj7	G7	Am7	Bm7-5	Cmaj7

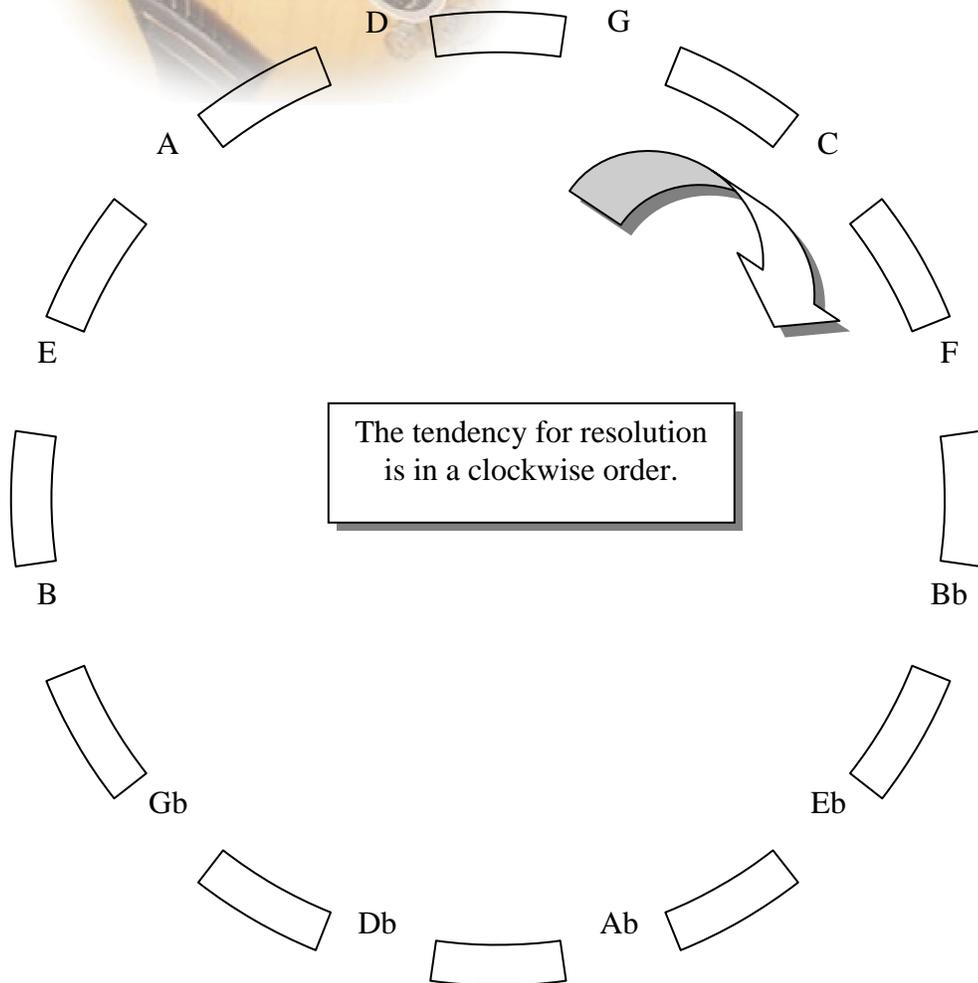
The harmonized scale determines the chords that are found naturally in a key/tonal center. The significant chord is root on the 5th degree of the scale (G7). It is the only dominant chord in the tonal center. When you encounter a dominant chord you can be relatively sure of the tonal center. The G7 points to the tonal center of C.
(See cycle of 5^{ths})

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Cycle of 5^{ths}

The cycle of 5ths is founded on the tendency of resolution. In the “Amen” cadence...G7 resolving to C, you find the basic tendency that drives the cycle. Carrying out this tendency further yields this sequence

G	C	F	Bb	Eb	Ab	Db	Gb	B	E	A	D
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Chord Theory as applied to Jazz Guitar

Adding II/V changes where they don't exist.

The heart of functional harmony is viewing a chord or group of chords as a function of the “Build-Tension-Release” or “Harmonic Forward Motion” principal. In this view a II chord is the *Build Chord*. The V chord is the *Tension Chord*, and the I chord is the *Release Chord*. The *build* section has a floating quality, the *tension* section is leading, wanting resolution, and the *release* section provides the resolution.



This moves in one direction...*Build- Tension- Release*...Forward

If you lose sight of this and interrupt the flow it will sound like you are wandering.



Keeping this in mind you will be able to substitute a II/V combination for a V chord. Study the blues progression. It is an exception to the rule. Each chord can be played as a dominant 7 or V type chord even though only the D7 in this example is the only true V chord. Each chord is then pushed into a slightly higher level of tension. This is good, that is what the “Blues” are all about. Once you are at ease with this idea, try substituting a II/V where each chord is. For example: where there is G7-play dm7/G7. For C7, play gm7/C7 and for D7use am7/D7.