

GCD: Unlocking I, IV, V

Three-chord tunes are the most common in popular music because a melody may dwell on any note of the scale. Often the chords may be selected to fit a pre-conceived melody, but just as often it is the progression itself that gives rise to the melody.

The three-chord I, IV, V, progression, a particularly popular kind of circle progression, can be placed into a four-bar phrase in several ways that have been put to endless use in popular music.

- I – IV – V – V. (The Beatles’s “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds”)
- I – I – IV – V. (The Rolling Stones’ “Get Off Of My Cloud”)
- I – IV – I – V. (Solomon Linda’s “Mbube”/”Wimoweh”/”The Lion Sleeps Tonight”)
- I – IV – V – IV. (Chip Taylor/The Troggs’ “Wild Thing”)

Armed only with this information, you can pretty much play any blues, rock or traditional song in any key. In this lesson we’ll:

- Learn why we use Roman numerals to notate chord progressions
- Look deeper into progressions that use these “one, four, five” chords such as “Leaving On A Jet Plane”, “Sweet Home Alabama”, and “This Land Is Your Land”.

Roman Numerals

We can use Roman numerals to indicate a chord’s relationship to the key. In this lesson, we’ll talk mostly about the G, C, and D chord in the key of G.

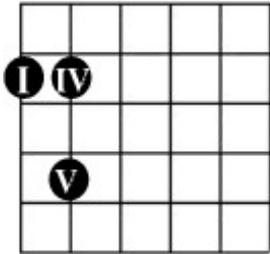
The “I” chord is the first chord in the key, “IV” is the fourth chord in the key, and “V” is the fifth chord in the key. Therefore, in the key of G, our I, IV, V chords are:

- I= G
- IV=C
- V= D

If you want to learn more about the Roman numeral system, please review **this lesson**. It’s an important lesson, but it’s a lot of information to take in. For the purpose of this lesson you really don’t need to know all the little details because we’re just going to talk about the I, IV, V chords or “one, four, five” chords. They are not a type of chord, but how the chord is related to the key signature.

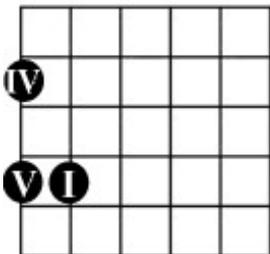
Diagram 1

The quickest way to find your I, IV, V chords for any key is to use a pattern such as in the following diagram:



The diagram shows us where the IV and V chords would be when the I chord falls on the low E string. On the same fret of the A string is the IV chord and 2 frets higher is the V chord. The I chord will always be the same as the name. For example, in the key of G the I chord is G. The G chord's root is a G note and we know that the 3rd fret is a G, so our I chord is on the 3rd fret of the low E string. That would make C the IV chord and D the V chord.

Diagram 2



Almost anything by Woody Guthrie, including "This Land Is Your Land." Just start out on the I chord and when you hear a chord shift, nine times out of ten it's either to the IV or V chord.

Here's an example:

G C G
 I IV I
 This land is your land, this land is my land
 D G
 V I
 From California to the New York islands
 IV I
 From the redwood forests to the gulf stream waters
 V I
 This land was made for you and me

What would “Leaving On A Jet Plane” look like if labeled with Roman numerals?

 I IV
 So kiss me and smile for me,
 I IV
 Tell me that you'll wait for me,
 I IV V
 Hold me like you'll never let me go.

What about “Sweet Home Alabama”? It’s one of those songs with a weird chord progression that begins on the V chord. That may cause some to wrongly accuse the song of being in the key of D, but that’s not so as it is, in fact, the key of G. For further proof you can look at the guitar solos which use the G pentatonic predominantly.

V IV I
 Sweet home Alabama
 V IV I
 Where the skies are so blue
 V IV I
 Sweet Home Alabama
 V IV V
 Lord, I'm coming home to you

In the song “Red Red Wine”, the lyrics “Red red” at the beginning of the verse is sung over the V chord then onto the “wine” over the I chord. The V chord and it’s lyrics serve as a pickup line going into the verse with full instrumentation (or where you would start a steady sense of time with your strumming).

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V      I  IV V
Red red wine,
           I  IV V
Go to my head
           I      IV  V
Make me forget that I
                   I  IV  V
Still need her so
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Things start to get cloudy on the song “Can’t You See”.

You may ask, “Can’t You See has the same chords as Sweet Home Alabama, which is in the key of G, so doesn’t that mean it is in the key of G, too?”

The answer is “no”. The song “Can’t You See”, is in fact, the key of D. This might lead to a series of questions...

“How can you tell?”

“How can this be?”

“If two songs have the same chord progression, how can they be in separate keys?”

“Why does my mind hurt?”

The biggest giveaway that the song is in the key of D is that the song’s melody uses the D major scale as do the soloists.