

Jazz Mandology with Ted Eschliman



Understanding the 'ii V7 I': Tonal Micro-centers

Last month, we touched on the simplicity and "completeness" of one of the most basic elements of Western (European) music, the 'ii V7 I' cadence. Let's plunge a little deeper into the concept and apply it to a higher level understanding of jazz music and the analysis of **Tonal Micro-centers**.

Most Folk and Bluegrass tunes contain one, maybe two keys, or **Tonal Centers**. Let's distinguish this from **key "signatures"** (sharps & flats) because in jazz, you quite often defy the key signature and jump out of the "printed" key for brief moments or measures into what we'll call "**Tonal Micro-centers**."

Always: Ear first!

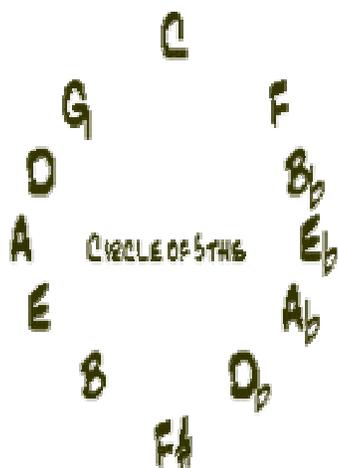
Again, I want to avoid the stodgy, fearful side of music theory analysis and ask you to use your ear first. Identifying "**tonic**" or the '**I**' of where you are in the music is best done aurally first. Understand that for the last century, "popular" music has drifted from the one key approach and in many cases attempted to "blur" a sense of **tonic**. What you have is a song that drifts in and out of the key, almost inevitably bringing you home, but taking you on a rich harmonic journey on the way. If you understand the "cadencing" ([see last month's article](#)) of the 'ii V7 I,' you will unlock the "secrets" of what melodic material (modes) to build your improvisation.

For this article, I've hijacked some chords from a popular Ellington tune and borrowed some other well known melodic ideas for this hybrid, "**Fascinatin' Doll**." This tune is relatively easy in that the 'ii V7s' are multiple measure, and quite clear. You'll find many "Standards," especially later 20th Century, that aren't as simple (*Round Midnight, Giant Steps, Joy Spring*), and have not only more keys, but relish in blurring the key identity. (*Not this one.*)

Look at the **key signature first**. Not always, but this is a good clue to what key the song is based in (key of C Major). Listen to the whole piece, and *generally* (!) look at the very last note and you'll find **tonic**. As you listen to everything before, let your ear tell you when you've temporarily left that "home base," and go back to look for clues, particularly accidentals (sharps & flats), to where this occurs.

Ahead: Looking back to understand 'now'.

Again, seek the temporary key center deviations first (aurally); listen to where the resting point of the shifts in tonality, and begin your analysis *<i>backwards</i>*. Inevitably, you will find a 'Dominant' functioning (or **V**) chord that leads you there, and sometimes a 'Preparation' chord. A little music theory will help you here--knowing the **Circle of Fifths** will clue you quickly to what the **V** chord is.



Notice in the diagram, the circle moves **clockwise**, the **V** preceding each chord, and becoming the V of the next. Know these well, and you'll instantly identify the chord which wants to "resolve" to the **tonic** or **T** in the **Tonal Micro-center**. Understand that in the music, you can have "Preparation" chords (**ii** or **vi**), but it is this relationship (**V - I**) that *defines* the key.

Side note: We will discuss in a future article, the role the **Circle of Fifths** plays in the harmonic voyage in jazz in more detail. It's a very important concept to understand!

First, get familiar with the song. I suggest printing off a copy of the PDF from your computer, and playing it a few times, both chords and melody. Especially get intimate with the chord structure, which will likely be recognizable.

Listen as you play the first two measures of the song | **Dm7 / G7** | | **Dm7 / G7** | , and compare them to the next two measures: | **Em7 / A7** | | **Em7 / A7** | :

A hint: they don't *resolve* (play and listen to them out of context). They *want* to, the first two yearn to settle in on the tonic key of C, but the next two would very much like to inhabit the **key of D**. *You have actually left the home key!*

Okay, NOW some music theory: The 'ii7' is **Dm7**, the 'V7' is **G7** in the **key of C**. In the **key of D**, 'ii7' is **Em7**, 'V7' is **A7**.

So, it's two measures of | **ii7 / V7** | | **ii7 / V7** | in C, followed by the same relationship up a step in **D**.

Now, **measure 5** is a unit of **ii7 / V7 / I** in yet another key **G** (**Am7 D7**), and **measure 7** descends a half step with a unit of **ii7 / V7 / I** in the key of **Gb** (**Abm7 Db7**).

*We actually changed keys **THREE** times before the bridge!*

Why is this important? It's the clue to what you are going to "feed" your improvisation! The first two measures are in your (**tonic**) **C major key**, so that's the scale you'll work from.

The next two are **D** major, followed by one measure of **G**, and one of **Gb**, and we finish the section back in our **tonic** key. So your melodic "fodder" is:

C Major Scale | % | **D Major Scale** | % | **G Major Scale** | **Gb Major Scale** | **C Major Scale** | % |

The next step: Making harmonic 'distinctions' melodically

It's important to identify the **scales** in the keys, but the next step is to know what distinguishes each scale, or more directly, what notes are different from the previous **Tonal Micro-center**. These will be what define the new center and convincingly lift you away from the home tonic key, translating the "horizontal" aspects (chord) into the vertical (melody).

In the following, each of the notes in red is not in the original tonic key of C.

Key of C: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C
Key of D: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D
Key of G: G, A, B, C (natural), D, E, F#, G
Key of Gb: Gb, Ab, Bb, Cb, Db, Eb, F, Gb

The first step in breaking the bonds of "pentatonic dependency" is using these notes to define or describe the "new" **tonal center**. They need to be thrown at the listener to demonstrate your credibility as an improviser, as well as complement the harmonic structure of the accompanying instruments in your ensemble.

Before we close this all too brief survey of **TMC** concept, take a look at the first three measures of the **Bridge** (meas. 11): | **Gm7 / C7** / | **Gm7 / C7** | **F** .

For the first time in the tune we actually resolve to a 'I' chord, but in yet *another* key, the key of **F**!

The next pattern at Measure 15 teases us by setting up the key of **G**, but uses a couple of “**Turnarounds**” (*a subject for yet another article*), moonlighting in the keys of **C & D**. The ambiguity is delicious, and makes the final restatement of the opening theme at Measure 19 all the more welcome.

An essential skill is identifying ‘**ii V7**’ chords in ALL 12 keys. The sooner you are able to do this quickly, the easier it will be to improvise on the spot. Don’t be discouraged if this takes you a while at first. The more you practice this, the more you engage your mind in real music, the easier it will get.

I would encourage you to (physically) mark the **Tonal Micro-centers** in pencil, even if you are just using a chord sheet. Find the harmonic “halts” of stability, work backward to see what leads them there (**Dominant, Dominant Preparation**). Remember, use your **ear** first; let your **brain** follow its lead. Through the ages, composers always wrote the song first; Music Theorists stepped in *afterward* to analyze. That’s the way you ALWAYS need to approach music.

Now your tune, but before I leave you, I want to thank many of you for the positive feedback you’ve emailed me. Continue to keep in touch through my email address, mandohack@aol.com, and my website. I intend to post an MP3 of the following tune on the site by the time this article is up, so look it up at www.jazzmando.com!

SWING ♩ = 152

FASCINATIN' DOLL

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Dm7 G7 Dm7 G7 Em7 A7 Em7 A7

5 Am7 D7 Abm7 Db7 C6 Em7(b9) A7(b9) C6 Dm7 D#dim7 Em7 Gm7 C7

12 Gm7 C7 F#m7 Gm7 G#dim7 F#9 Am7 D7 Am7 D7

17 Dm7 G7(b9) Em7 A7 Dm7 G7 Dm7 G7 Em7 A7

22 Em7 A7 Am7 D7 Abm7 Db7 C6 (Em7(b9) A7(b9))