

Reharmonization Secrets Part 1

Taking the “harm” out of Reharmon...

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Those who seek Harmony

The very fact that you’re reading this suggests you have an interest in making your music more interesting. What we want to explore in this issue is ways to add rich alternate harmonic progressions, or “reharmonization.”

The creative process: not so creative?

If you’ve ever listened to a piano bar musician or wedding reception solo guitarist, heck, even a really good street busker, you’ve probably marveled at the seemingly endless ability to take standard familiar tunes and create complex, perhaps flamboyant new music out of something simple. Let’s suggest that with a few music theory “tricks,” you can be adding some zest to your own performance. You can imitate the great musicians such as pianist Bill Evans who was known for taking Broadway and contemporary pop tunes and “converting” them to jazz standards in public perception. You won’t repeat the notes, but you can mimic some of the “process.

1. Add a preceding **Dominant** chord.
2. Add a preceding **Dominant**, precede that with a **Dominant Preparation** chord or chords.
3. Include a (Diatonic) **Turnaround**.
4. Include a **Circle of 5ths Turnaround**.
5. Embellish with **Tritone Substitution Turnaround**.

Don’t get intimidated by terminology here. Some of this we covered in previous articles, like our “**Understanding the ‘ii V7 I’ progression**” (link: <http://mandolinsessions.com/dec03/ted.html>) or the follow-up article “**Again the Tonal Centers: Understanding the ‘ii V7 I’**” (link: <http://www.mandolinsessions.com/oct04/mandology.html>). If you haven’t already read these, it’s worth a review. We adhere to the principle and practice of learning the **concept** first and slapping a **label** on it afterwards, so you can repeat the concept in another context. To accomplish this, we’ll take a popular ‘70s folk tune, Joni Mitchell’s “*Both Sides Now*” apply the above principles and give some intriguing new harmonic color.

Both Sides Now (Joni Mitchell)

Original G C G G C G

We begin

Take a look at this first line. Really, you could conceivably play the entire first 4 measures on just a G chord, but even the casual folk musician would usually add the **C (IV)** in **Meas 2**, and **D7 (V7)** in **Meas 4**. Not particularly jazzy, but it fits the melody and is familiar to even the unsophisticated ear.

Start from the “destination”

The most important thing we hope you take away from this whole article is the idea that you **always start with your destination and work backwards**. A great sculptor doesn't just start whacking away at a solid chunk of granite, there is an end result *conceived*. He/she may encounter a variation in the process of carving, but the final product is already mentally etched in stone. (Pun intended)

Listen to music this way: ask “where do we end up?” and then “how did we get there?” This is the dirty little secret of harmonic analysis and it's amazing how many students (young and old) fail to grasp this. We knew we wanted to end up in **G**, now we're working backward for options. Let's insert a V7 chord, the Dominant by adding a D7. In the following example, we will accomplish #1 “**Add a preceding Dominant chord.**”

Mdn.
Add a Preceding Dominant (V)

Get Prepped...

Another variation is to add a **Dominant Preparation (#2)** before the (you guessed it...) **Dominant**. Here we'll add an **Am** chord. Note we've stretched the rhythmic meter a bit by moving this chord to the very beginning of the measure. It works, because in essence, we've used a simple “**ii V7 I**” harmonic “sentence” to verify the key of G Major. (Again, it's all about the *destination*.)

Mdn.
Add a Preceding Dominant (V), precede with a Dominant Prep (ii7)

Turnaround, too.

Another favorite variation is #3, **Include a “Turnaround.”** You may have heard this phrase already; it's common for jazzers to refer to this at the end of a song as a way to “detour” and come back to the beginning of the song. You will hear Swing musicians use these regularly in the last 2 bars of a 12-bar blues progression. Generally it's a variation of the familiar Doo Wop “**I vi7 ii7 V7**” (G Em7 Am7 D7). Note: we don't leave the key at all (“Diatonic” for those of you keeping score), using no accidentals.

You aren't limited to the end of the song for the "Turnaround!" You can use it in any harmonically stagnant section, and we'll use it here in the very beginning of the song.

Add a "Turnaround"

Mdn.

Why is it okay to end this on the **Dominant** chord D7? Because the 3rd Measure is in **G Major**, and again, we've shuffled things up a bit, but will start the next measure appropriately. We're already nicely running down the path of "reharmonization."

Pleading the 5th ...

Speaking of accidentals, and working backwards, another common "Turnaround" is to take the **Dominant** of the **Dominant** (A7), and precede it with the **Dominant** of the **Dominant** of the **Dominant** (E7). (Yikes!) For the uninitiated, this is called the **Circle of Fifths** (E7, A7, D7). Though it may be a bit of a stretch to the ear, here we'll actually try it here in the first two measures. The G# of the E7 and the C# of the A7 chord clash with the melody; but the speed of the harmonic "motion" in these two measures (the chord progression to the destination), sets us for beginning of the 3rd measure, still in the key of G. (It does work, especially in improvising when you aren't necessary including the melody.) This is #4 **"Include a Circle of 5ths Turnaround."**

Mdn.

Circle of 5ths Turnaround

Call in the Substitute

We can also take this another step by substituting the **Turnaround** chords with chords that are a "**Tritone**" away: 6 frets, a raised 4th or a lowered 5th. We'll also inflict a jazz flavor by changing the chords to Major 7 instead of a **Dominant** chord for an "other worldly" sound. We're at our final tip #5, **Embellish with Tritone Substitution Turnaround**. Note we still maintain a progression of 5ths, starting with the BbMaj7.

Mdn.

Embellish Turnaround with a Tritone Substitution

Let's look at the next two measures for another trick and continue the principles. Again, rather than start with the traditional G chord, we're going to start "preparing" for the final G by inserting our **Dominant Prep** chord Am. Have some fun and add a jazz flavor by a lowering the 5th to an Am7(b5).

The next two beats are your **Dominant** (D7), but we're going to "delay gratification" by embellishing with the Gdim7 chord. This momentarily lowers the 3rd and 5th degrees of the chord, resolving to a lovely **Tonic** Gmaj7 chord.

G B♭Maj7 E♭Maj7 A♭Maj7 Am7(♭5) D7 Gdim7 G Maj7

The next four measures of the song are quite similar harmonically. You can play with these variations on this section, and we'll follow up in the next issue on ways to "recharm" the last half of the song. Meantime, have some fun with these four tricks.

Start with your destination and work backwards.

You can dig up some common Fiddle tunes, and have the same fun with them. If you're in a situation where you need to provide a lot of music, this is a great way to stretch things, as well maintain your sanity by keeping things fresh.

Again, it's about the *destination*. Like the children's game of musical chairs, it doesn't matter where you wander, just so long as you end up on a harmonic "seat" when the music stops. Find those moments of harmonic rest in the song, and think about working the tricks *backward* from there.



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