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What you can do with a V7 chord: Declaring Dominants

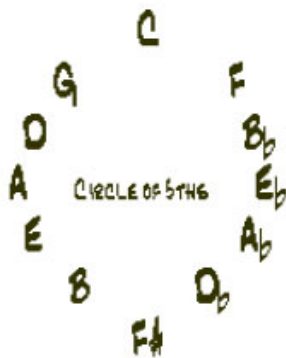
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By Ted Eschliman

Pleading the Fifth

Nearly five years ago, we looked at some ways of supercharging stagnant sections of music through a concept called “reharmonization.” In the article “[Reharmonization Secrets Pt. 1, Taking the ‘harm’ out of Reharm...](#)“, we explored five different ways to inject additional chords using some pretty advanced theory techniques, and this time we want to slow it down a little and just look at the first simple concept, the notion of dominant chords.



Your instrument is tuned in **5ths**, **GDAE**, **CGDA** for mandola as well. This is no coincidence, as the interval of a **5th** is an important one for Western European music. The 5th note of the scale is important as being a consistent chord tone; we’ve referred to the **Tonic/Dominant** relationship in chord progressions in the past. The chord based on the **5th** scale degree is commonly called the **Dominant**. We’ll go a step further and base a **7th** chord on this note and refer to this as a **V7**.

You can see from the above **Circle of Fifths** diagram we have a conceptual cycle where progressing clockwise, you go through all **12 keys**, and eventually start back where you started from, very much like a clock. In case you've questioned, this is not meant to be a "Circle of Fourths" as one might observe (C up a **4th** is **F**) going clockwise. What you have is a chord which is a **5th** of the next key. **C** is the **5th** to the **key of F**.

(Note: we've kept the diagram clean of the "enharmonic keys," where **B=Cb**, **F#=Gb**, and **Db=C#**. These are not unimportant keys, but we're trying to keep the circle as unintimidating as we can.)

Enhance a static progression.

Musical creation is laden with points of rest, and the tensions that want to drive toward those places. Roll a dominant **V7** chord on a piano such as a **G7**, it's not uncommon to get the urge to sing "**Happy Birthday**" in the **key of C**. It's an implied sonic directional force, and one to take advantage of by adding to long periods of music where the chord doesn't change. You can add it where it doesn't already exist. Take for example, 4 bars of a straight **C chord** could be enhanced quite naturally in these ways:

```

C
/// | /// | /// | ///
C          G7
/// | /// | /// | ///
C  G7  C  G7
/// | /// | /// | ///

```

Transition or transpose to another key

Awkward song key transitions if you were accompanying a melody, or just moving from one to the next quickly, can utilize the power of the **V7**. This is a "bigger picture" benefit, and you might have already been caught in circumstances where you wanted to merge one song into another in a different key, or even modulate to a new key in the same song.

This is where the visual of the **Circle of Fifths** can be of great benefit. If you don't necessarily want to count up to the fifth scale degree, you can look at the wheel and think the chord based on the preceding (counter clockwise) note. Even the most insane key change, especially those that dive into the "Netherworld" of multiple flats & sharps (**Ab**, **F#**, **Db**, etc.) will sound proper when you jump to the **V7** prior to its destination key. Try it; mess with keys that jump 3 to 7 keys away on their position in the circle, and ultimately, the new key will sound appropriate. Examples:

Current Key	V7	Destination Key
E Major	D7	G Major
Bb Major	C#7	F# Major
D Minor	Eb7	Ab Major

Tricks:

Moving clockwise add one flat for each step. Other way, subtract one flat.

Moving counter-clockwise add one sharp for each step. Other way, subtract one sharp

Secondary Dominant

You may have even heard “Circle of Fifths” called out at a jam, and not known its roots in theory (pun intended...). Someone hollering this phrase is probably referring to something we call a sequence of **Secondary Dominants**. For instance the bridge of any song based on **Rhythm Changes** would be:

D7 G7 C7 F7 (key of Bb)

B7 E7 A7 D7 (key of G)

Notice if you start with the key (**Bb** in the first example), the last **V7** is **F7**, the **V7** of that chord preceding is **C7**. The **V7** of **C7** is **G7**, and you guessed it, the **D7** is the **V7** of the **G7**.

Tritone Substitutions

We want to take the “wheel” concept deeper and get into the notion of substituting a **V7** chord with a chord based on its “**tritone**.” In frets and staff, this is either a **diminished 5th** or a **raised 4th** (same note aurally). In other words, the **tritone** partner of a **C7** is **F#7** (or **Gb7**). For an **Eb7**, its partner is an **A7**.

If you look at our **Circle of Fifths** diagram above, you’ll notice each chord’s partner is directly across, at the farthest point on the circle. Even cooler, of the 12 enharmonic keys, there are only six **tritone** combinations, because they start repeating themselves.

A7	Eb7		Eb7	A7
Bb7	E7		E7	Bb7
B7	F7		F7	B7
C7	Gb7		Gb7	C7
Db7 (C#7)	G7		G7	Db7 (C#7)
D7	Ab7 (G#7)		Ab7 (G#7)	D7

Why is it necessary to know this? You can have a lot of fun replacing any **V7** chord with its tritone partner. Try it. Use an **Eb7** instead of an **A7** playing in the **key of D**. Notice how easy this is, the chord is only a half step up, but it works!

Conclusion

V7 to I, (i.e. G7 to C) is the most basic harmonic “sentence” in music. Knowing the names of the **V7** of each and every key is like knowing the names of a spouse at a dinner party, if you have any hope of carrying on an intelligent, personal conversation through the night. Just like **Lucy and Ricky**, **Ethel and Fred**, **Homer and Marge**, **John and Yoko**, you know them as couples as well as you know them as inseparable individuals. This knowledge needs to be as intuitive as it is intellectual.

Develop your dominants!

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