

BASIC CHORD PROGRESSIONS

Many popular songs have fairly simple structures, usually three or four chords.

I – IV – V This is often the most common chord progression in rock, blues, country, and folk songs (most often, but not always appearing in that order)

examples:

Your Cheating Heart, Hank Williams

Pride & Joy, Stevie Ray Vaughn

Twist and Shout, Beatles

any 12 bar blues song

Folsom Prison Blues, Johnny Cash

Margaritaville, Jimmy Buffett

Old Time Rock & Roll, Bob Seger

and literally thousands of others...

When we say a I – IV – V chord progression, this is what we mean for the key of C:

The C is the “one” chord. Then count up to the fourth note – C, D, E, **F**. The “four” chord is F. And G is the “five” chord. Regardless of the key, the “one - four – five” chord progression has the same relative sounds between chords. Try these combinations:

	I	IV	V
For the key of C, this means:	C	F	G
For the key of D, this means:	D	G	A
For the key of E, this means:	E	A	B
For the key of G, this means:	G	C	D
For the key of A, this means:	A	D	E

Remember, the chords may not appear in quite this order, because that would quickly get boring. But the “I”, “IV” and “V” chord of the key will almost always be used somewhere in the song.

Beyond the basic I – IV – V chord structure, we most often add the *vi* (six chord). In the key of G, the *vi* chord is the Em. For the key of C, the *vi* chord is the Am.

Then we can add the *ii* (two chord) or the *iii* (three chord). These are normally minor chords, and are often referred to as the “relative minors”. When written, upper case = major chord, and lower case = minor chord.

Here is the fundamental chord alphabet, shown for the keys of G, C and D:

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii	I (octave)
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#m	G
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bm	C
D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#m	D

Two examples of common chord progressions that go beyond the basics are:

G	Em	C	Am	Bm	D
I	vi	IV	ii	iii	V
C	Am	F	Dm	Em	G

Just strum randomly through them and notice how these chords work together. They have a pleasing, complementary sound that just works well. You might even recognize pieces of familiar songs.

For example, there is a classic “50’s” chord progression, based on C – Am – F – G. This progression works for “Little Surfer Girl”, “Unchained Melody”, and about 4,000 other songs from that era and style. Using the number system, this is a “I – vi – IV – V” progression, which can be easily translated into any other key.

Practical hint: the last chord played in the song is almost always the key for the song (the first chord played may or may not be the song’s key)