

Deck the Halls with Coltrane Changes
(Reharmonizing Christmas Carols using Giant Steps chord changes)
 by [Dennis Winge](#)

Coltrane changes are fun to play on. If you're intimidated by Giant Steps, it could simply be the tempo of the tune. Just because Trane's version is fast doesn't mean you can't enjoy using the changes at slower tempos, in smaller increments, and on generally easier tunes.

I. Definition

There are plenty of internet resources on what Coltrane changes are so we will only provide a short overview here.

The changes Bmaj7 - D7 - Gmaj7 - Bb7 - Ebmaj7 is the opening of Giant Steps. It spans 3 keys, B, G, and Eb. Those keys are a major third apart and they sit far away from each other on the Circle of Fifths, hence the title "Giant Steps."

In reharmonizing jazz standards, you can take any II - V - I progression and put these changes into it by going up a *half-step* from the II chord to begin the cycle.

Standard Changes - key of C

II (Key C)	V	I	%
Dm7	G7	Cmaj7	%

Standard II - V - I Reharmonized with Coltrane Changes

II (key C)	V (key Ab)	I	V (key E)	I	V (key C)	I
Dm7	Eb7	Abmaj7	B7	Emaj7	G7	Cmaj7

In the above example we have 3 keys: Ab, E, and C and they are a major third apart, which is the same relationship as in Giant Steps. Over each key change is the V chord to the I chord in that particular key, as indicated.

If you are not familiar with this type of rearm, it would be good to write them out in 12 keys, so I'll give you one more example:

Standard Changes - key of F

II (key F)	V	I	%
Gm7	C7	Fmaj7	%

Standard II - V - I Reharmonized with Coltrane Changes

II (key F)	V (key Db)	I	V (key A)	I	V (key F)	I
Gm7	Ab7	Dbmaj7	E7	Amaj7	C7	Fmaj7

II. Why Christmas Carols?

(Please note, I use a harmonic analysis system based on John Mehegan's classic book "Tonal and Rhythmic Principles" which doesn't lower case the Roman Numerals for minors, and uses the following symbols: Δ = major, x = dominant, - = minor, \emptyset = half-diminished or m7b5, and o = diminished,.)

So if the reharmonization technique can be used on any jazz standard, why an article specifically about Christmas Carols? Notice in the above examples that it takes 3 bars of *reharm* before the I chord comes in bar 4. This is fine if the I chord in the standard changes stays the same in bars 3 and 4. It'll also be fine if the chord in bar 4 is diatonic to the key (like Am in the key of C, as in a II - V - I - VI progression). But if bar 4 takes you somewhere else, you may have to be bit creative with how use the reharm.

For example, suppose you have:

II (key C)	V	I	VII	IIIx
Dm7	G7	Cmaj7	Bm7b7	E7

VI	IIx	II	V	I
Am7	D7	Dm7	G7	Cmaj7

In order to use Coltrane changes in the first 4 bars you might have to go:

II (key C)	V (key Ab)	I	V (key E)	I	V (key C)	I	VII	IIIx
Dm7	Eb7	Abmaj7	B7	Emaj7	G7	Cmaj7	/	Bm7b5 E7

VI	IIx	II	V	I
Am7	D7	Dm7	G7	Cmaj7

So notice that when you "resolve" to C, the underlying harmony **as written in the original version of the tune** is not really on C anymore, and you're, in a sense, shoving a round peg in a square hole. (And, as experienced guitarist know, if you're trying to pull off this reharm on the fly with a bass player who is not expecting them, it can sound quite unusual indeed, so a word to the wise: play it confidently and play it clearly if you're going to do it spontaneously or it will just sound wrong.)

Fortunately, in a lot of Christmas carols, there are many sections where *the I chord doesn't come until bar 4*. That makes them perfect for Coltrane reharmonizations.

III. Examples

Christmas Song

San - ta's on his way; he's load-ed lots of toys and good-ies on his sleigh. And ev-'ry

The reharm would go: | Bbm7 B7 | Emaj7 G7 | Cmaj7 Eb7 | Abmaj7 |

Let it Snow

since we've got no place to go Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow! Man it

The reharm is: | Gm7 Ab7 | Dbmaj7 E7 | Amaj7 C7 | Fmaj7 |

Winter Wonderland

sings a love song, as we go a - long. —
Wal - king in a win - ter won - der - land.

The reharm would be: | Dm7 Eb7 | Abmaj7 B7 | Emaj7 G7 | Cmaj7 |

IV. Contexts in which to use the Reharm

Of course you're not going to reharmonize while someone is singing or playing the melody unless you have worked out how to alter the melody in advance! There are examples of the melody being altered (such as in my wacky version of [Rudolph the Rednose Reindeer](#) on my [Holiday Album](#), but generally speaking you should reserve those reharm for solo sections only.

You can really go nuts with this device if you're so inclined, because sometimes whole tunes lend themselves to reharmonized changes such as in this version of [Happy Holidays](#). I look forward to hearing the results of your experiments, so don't be shy in sending them. :)

