

Jazz Theory: Analyzing Tunes

by Dennis Winge

The ability to analyze a song is an essential ingredient in being able to improvise over it well. This article assumes you understand how to construct harmonized scales for 12 major and 12 minor keys. For your reference, such charts are attached at the end of this article after all the exercises.

In analyzing tunes, we use the roman numeral system for each chord in the key that the tune is in. In C, I = Cmaj7; II = Dm7; III = Em7 etc. Instead of using the chart as a reference, you should intimately get to them by playing exercises forward and backward such as in examples 1 and 2. Make sure you do them in every key; they might be easy in C, but are they easy for you in B? This will enable you to instantly detect diatonic passages (those pertaining to a particular key) and cadences (ex: II V I) in a new tune you might be working or one that is called at a jam session. It will also be extremely useful if you play I VI II V patterns or II V I VI patterns in 12 keys, as in examples 3 and 4.

When chords are diatonic, they are easily spotted, plus they give you the option to play vertically (i.e. address each chord) or horizontally (i.e. just address the key only and play patterns, scales, fast runs, etc. all within that key with the confidence that they will work over the whole diatonic sequence).

If any chord is non-diatonic, we use the symbols according to example 5. There is also “figured bass” notation for inversions, but that is beyond the scope of the clinic. For more information, go to John Mehegan’s Tonal & Rhythmic Principles.

When analyzing a tune, always take the path of least resistance, i.e. the simplest and most direct way to understand it and remember it. For example, if you are in the key of C but the tune goes | Fm7 | Bb7 | Ebmaj7 | (ex: Green Dolphin Street) it is certainly not incorrect to call it | IVm | bVIIx | bIII maj7 | but you might find it simpler to label it “bIII becomes new I”: II V I). Also sometimes a chord has a dual function so you could analyze two different ways. See example 6 for the bridge to “Satin Doll,” where the 7th bar has “pivot chords” that could belong to the key they’re in, but probably better to call them by where you’re going.

That brings up an important point in analyzing. You always have to look at the chords as to how they serve the function of providing motion. The key words are “function” and “motion.” Sometimes you might even have to start from the last chord and go backwards in order to best analyze it in context.

Examples 7 and 8 are How High the Moon, and All the Things You Are analyzed. Keep on practicing this system with new tunes. Good luck & have fun.

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⑤ $C\Delta 7 \quad B^b-7 \quad A^b 7 \quad C\Delta 7 \quad / \quad G_m^{7b5} \quad C7 \quad F\Delta 7$
 (C) I $\flat VII-7$ $\flat VI^x$ I / $V\phi$ I^x \overline{IV}
 $F\#dim^7$ $\#IV^o$

major = Δ	7^x = x
minor = $-$	$7^b5 = \phi$
	dim = o

⑥ $G- C7 \quad / \quad F\Delta 7 \quad / \quad A- D7 \quad / \quad D-7 G7$
 $IV = 1444 \quad I: II^x \quad II^x \quad I \quad III \quad VI^x$ $\overline{VI} \quad II^x$
 $E-7 \quad A7$ orig. I: II \overline{V}
 $III \quad VI$

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⑦ How High the Moon

I % II V I % II V
 (down whole step = I) (down whole = I)

I II^b V I II V I # V III VI^x II V
 (orig I, minor) (I major)

2. II V I II V III VI^x II V I (II V)
 (orig. I)

⑧ All the Things You Are

VI II V I IV II V I %
 (III = new I)

VI II V I IV II V I %
 (V of orig. key = new I) (III of current key = new I)

II V I % II V I III^x avg
 (VI of current key = new I) (orig. key)

VI II V I IV IV⁻ III bIII^o II
 (bVII^x)

V I (VII III^x)

MAJOR Harmonized Scale – All Keys – triads

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	I
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim	C
F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Edim	F
Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm	Adim	Bb
Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm	Ddim	Eb
Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb	Fm	Gdim	Ab
Db	Ebm	Fm	Gb	Ab	Bbm	Cdim	Db
Gb	Abm	Bbm	Cb	Db	Ebm	Fdim	Gb
F#	G#m	A#m	B	C#	D#m	E#dim	F#
B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m	A#dim	B
E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim	E
A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#dim	A
D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim	D
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim	G

MINOR Harmonized Scale – All Keys – triads

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	I
Am	Bdim	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am
Dm	Edim	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm
Gm	Adim	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm
Cm	Ddim	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm
Fm	Gdim	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb	Fm
Bbm	Cdim	Db	Ebm	Fm	Gb	Ab	Bbm
Ebm	Fdim	Gb	Abm	Bbm	Cb	Db	Ebm
D#m	E#dim	F#	G#m	A#m	B	C#	D#m
G#m	A#dim	B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m
C#m	D#dim	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m
F#m	G#dim	A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m
Bm	C#dim	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm
Em	F#dim	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em

MAJOR Harmonized Scale – All Keys – 7th chords

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	I
Cmaj7	Dmin7	Emin7	Fmaj7	G7	Am7	Bm7b5	Cmaj7
Fmaj7	Gmin7	Amin7	Bbmaj7	C7	Dm7	Em7b5	Fmaj7
Bbmaj7	Cmin7	Dmin7	Ebmaj7	F7	Gm7	Am7b5	Bbmaj7
Ebmaj7	Fmin7	Gmin7	Abmaj7	Bb7	Cm7	Dm7b5	Ebmaj7
Abmaj7	Bbmin7	Cmin7	Dbmaj7	Eb7	Fm7	Gm7b5	Abmaj7
Dbmaj7	Ebmin7	Fmin7	Gbmaj7	Ab7	Bbm7	Cm7b5	Dbmaj7
Gbmaj7	Abmin7	Bbmin7	Cbmaj7	Db7	Ebm7	Fm7b5	Gbmaj7
F#maj7	G#min7	A#min7	Bmaj7	C#7	D#m7	E#m7b5	F#maj7
Bmaj7	C#min7	D#min7	Emaj7	F#7	G#m7	A#m7b5	Bmaj7
Emaj7	F#min7	G#min7	Amaj7	B7	C#m7	D#m7b5	Emaj7
Amaj7	Bmin7	C#min7	Dmaj7	E7	F#m7	G#m7b5	Amaj7
Dmaj7	Emin7	F#min7	Gmaj7	A7	Bm7	C#m7b5	Dmaj7
Gmaj7	Amin7	Bmin7	Cmaj7	D7	Em7	F#m7b5	Gmaj7

MINOR Harmonized Scale – All Keys – 7th chords

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	I
Am7	Bm7b5	Cmaj7	Dmin7	Emin7	Fmaj7	G7	Am7
Dm7	Em7b5	Fmaj7	Gmin7	Amin7	Bbmaj7	C7	Dm7
Gm7	Am7b5	Bbmaj7	Cmin7	Dmin7	Ebmaj7	F7	Gm7
Cm7	Dm7b5	Ebmaj7	Fmin7	Gmin7	Abmaj7	Bb7	Cm7
Fm7	Gm7b5	Abmaj7	Bbmin7	Cmin7	Dbmaj7	Eb7	Fm7
Bbm7	Cm7b5	Dbmaj7	Ebmin7	Fmin7	Gbmaj7	Ab7	Bbm7
Ebm7	Fm7b5	Gbmaj7	Abmin7	Bbmin7	Cbmaj7	Db7	Ebm7
D#m7	E#m7b5	F#maj7	G#min7	A#min7	Bmaj7	C#7	D#m7
G#m7	A#m7b5	Bmaj7	C#min7	D#min7	Emaj7	F#7	G#m7
C#m7	D#m7b5	Emaj7	F#min7	G#min7	Amaj7	B7	C#m7
F#m7	G#m7b5	Amaj7	Bmin7	C#min7	Dmaj7	E7	F#m7
Bm7	C#m7b5	Dmaj7	Emin7	F#min7	Gmaj7	A7	Bm7
Em7	F#m7b5	Gmaj7	Amin7	Bmin7	Cmaj7	D7	Em7