



Linear Leanings

Another look at spicing up bland chord progressions

by Ted Eschliman

Eliminating static cling...

In our efforts to unravel simple changes in our accompaniment chording, we backed down a bit from more complex **Tonal Centers** and worked with "**Diatonic Progressions**" in our last issue <http://mandolinsessions.com/oct06/Eschliman.html> . We took **7th chords** based on the scale and explored some fingerings to help us start thinking of ways to eliminate "static cling" in single-chord repetitive measures.

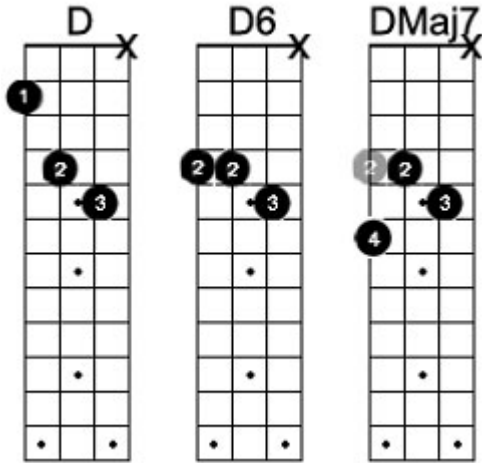
We avoided chromatic alterations and stayed within the key. This time we want to look at another way to add some sizzle to a song; instead of just chording "chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk" or "mmm, CHOP, mmm, CHOP," let's step away from a strictly vertical perception of chords and add a horizontal. Key to this (pun intended) is we want to change our approach from "chord, chord, chord, chord," to looking at notes that not only connect, but also give a sense of motion. It may involve striking 3 or 4 note chords consecutively, but your focus will be on the notes that change from one to the next.

There are three different variations we will explore here, chords that including **embellishing notes** (or extensions), chords that **change function**, and an **indefinable hybrid of both**.

Let's embellish

Don Stiernberg is a master at spicing chord progressions. I don't know if it's his early years of seasoning with mandolin master, **Jethro Burns**, the night after night stints as a "Tuxedo Musician," or perhaps the rigid conditioning of fighting the boredom watching his Cubs perpetually lose at home games, he has a keen way of adding imaginative harmonic zest, notes to a chord that don't always change what the chord does. He likes to add a **6th**, a **7th**, a **9th**, and in doing so, injects a magic counter-melody that at worst, puts some motion in a static progression, and at best, provides a counter melody to the song.

It's a simple idea, take a straight, unadulterated **Major** chord, each beat you add extensions from the rest of the scale. This doesn't change the function of the chord, how it moves the progression, but inserts a nice **linear motion**. Take for example a **D chord**. Spell out the notes of the scale from **1 to 8**, you go **D, E F#, G, A, B, C#,** and back to **D**. If you played a **D chord, D F# C**, you could move (or add) the **A to B**, then to **C#**, even bobble up to the **9th** note, **E**, and back to the **8th** note. Playing this in the place of a static **D** chord over a couple measures breathes some freshness into the music like this:



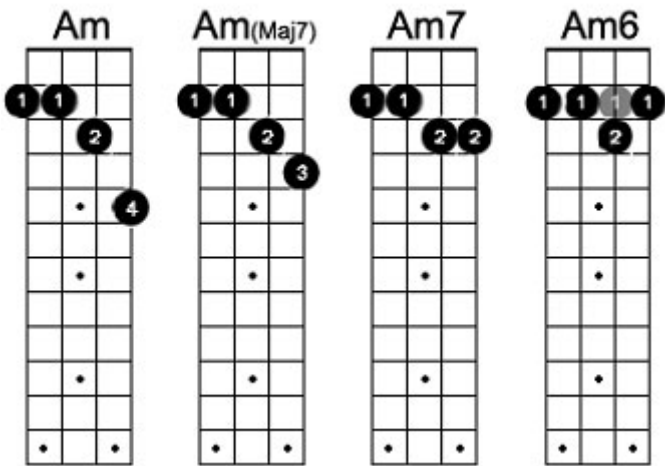
Simple, eh? Vamping behind someone with this progression, really in any key, adds flavor without disturbing the integrity of the music's inherent function.

Change function

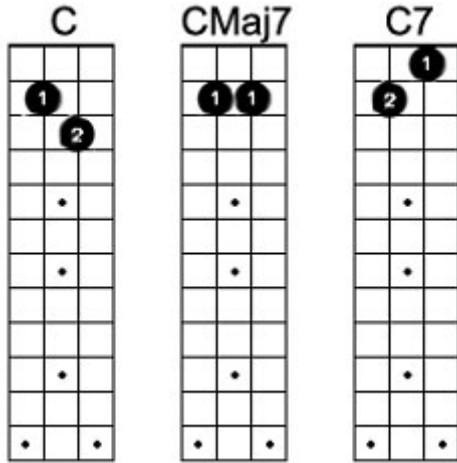
Another idea is to move chromatically, but keep in mind, any time you add chromaticism, or half-steps to the notes of the scale, you threaten changing the chord function. Nothing wrong with this, per se, but understand a half step infers some kind of harmonic "direction." Think of the schmaltzy romantic favorite, "Feelings," key of **A minor**. The first three chords utilize this half step motion: **Am, Am(Maj7), Am7, Am6**. That last chord, adding the **F#**, hints at a dominant function chord aurally. Notice the inversion of the **Am6** chord **A C E F#** becomes **F# A C E**. This is a half-diminished chord, and even though it doesn't resolve to a tonic, it's still a restless sound, arguably a (non-resolving) dominant function chord.

Feelings (Gemini)

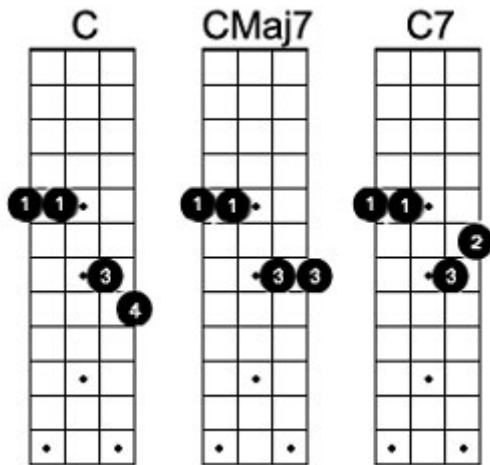
Mdn.



Let's not get too wrapped up in the theory here. If you are confused in this example, use your ear instead of your brain; we'll move on to something a little more analytically obvious in a major key, Burt Bacharach's "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head," **key of C**. The first three chords utilize this linear half-step motion, **C**, **CMaj7**, and **C7**. That last chord, adding the **Bb**, not in the **C** scale infers a dominant function, leading to the **IV** chord, **F**, which actually is the next chord.



A transposable closed fingering version of the above pattern:



We've said this before, anytime you see an accidental (# or b) from outside the key, this is a good clue you are changing keys. In the above progression we are preparing for a quick tonal center change in the **key of F**. (Brief, as it only lasts one measure, by the way...)

Ambiguous or Hybrid notes

You may have heard the term "passing notes." These linear embellishments are just this, only you are doing it in an accompaniment rather than a melody; you're adding it to a chord. Sometimes we really don't know if an accidental is changing a chord in preparation for a new key. In the case of the song "Brazil," we have an accidental that isn't really changing the chord. Think of the introduction, that lovely little riff that sets up the melody and becomes a consistent counter melody or rhythmic riff throughout the song.

Brazil (Russell/Barroso)

F

Intro

Mdn.

You can chord it this way.

Theory purists will argue the above example; is it an **F chord** with linear, passing tone embellishments? Is it an actual *function* change? Usually an **Augmented chord** will function as a **dominant** chord and resolve to a **tonic**, but we think the case could be argued either way. Our very point, too, as this functions as the third more nebulous category of "hybrid" progressions. In either case, what could have been a static four measures of **F** becomes interesting, especially when the accompanying rhythmic motif of "Brazil" is added. Is it the cake or the icing?

Who cares, it tastes good!

Ambiguity

"It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is..."

Grand Jury deposition, 1998, President William Jefferson Clinton

"The Scale IS the Chord, and the Chord IS the Scale"

Craig Schmoeller author of Mando ModExplorer, Groveland Software Labs

<http://www.grovelandsoftwarelabs.com>

Accompanying thoughts

Mom always said, "If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all." In accompanying, there's a similar thought, if you can't say anything *significant*, don't say anything. In other words, make use of your instrument's potential and your musical contributions making sounds that really mean something, or employing the "Golden of Silence," and sit out a few measures.

However, intersecting the world of the linear (notes, melody) with the vertical (chords, harmonic progression) is your chance to voice musical *significance*, rise above being an "auxiliary" instrument and an important part of the ensemble.



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