

Understanding How Chords Work in a Key

We will learn about the Key of C Major to start. The major key has a happy sounding tonality.

First we must learn the major scale to learn how the notes relate to the chords and how the chords have a numeric value in the key.

C Major Scale

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E | | | | | | | |
| B | 4 | | | | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| A | 4 | | | | | | 1 |
| D | | 0 | 2 | 3 | | | |
| G | | | | | | | |
| F | | | | | | | |
| C | 3 | | | | | | |

The Notes: C D E F G A B C

For each of the notes in the major scale we have a corresponding chord. Each chord also takes a numeric value of its place in the key.

| | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| Triads | C | Dm | Em | F | G | Am | B ^o | C |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | 32 1 | 231 | 12 | 134211 | 21 34 | 231 | 1243 | 32 1 |
| | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| T | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| A | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| B | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| | 3 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| | | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | | | |
| Numeric Value | I | II | III | IV | V | VI | VII | I |
| | Major | Minor | Minor | Major | Major | Relative Minor | Diminished | Major |

Chord Quality

7 Chords

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|--------|----------|--------|
| | Cmaj7 | Dm7 | Em7 | Fmaj7 | G7 | Am7 | Bm7(b5) | Cmaj7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | 32 | 211 | 23 4 | 1 342 | 32 1 | 2 1 | 1324 | 32 |
| T | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| A | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| B | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| | | | 0 | 1 | 3 | | | |
| | I | II | III | IV | V | VI | VII | I |
| | Major7 | Minor7 | Minor7 | Major7 | Dominant7 | Minor7 | Minor7b5 | Major7 |

How do we know what key a song is in? Generally the first chord and last chord of a song is the key.

Example: The first chord of "Like A Rolling Stone" is a C chord. This song is in the key of C.

There are some songs that the first chord does not represent the key of the song but the majority of the time it does.

The I, IV and V chords in the key represent are major chords and are also referred to as our Primary Chords.

The II, III and VI chords are our minor chords in the key and are known as our Secondary Chords.

The VI chord is the Relative Minor.

The numeric system is used by musicians to explain what a chord progression in a song is. The chorus for "Like a Rolling Stone" by Bob Dylan is a I, IV, V progression in the key of C. This chord progression would be C, F and G.

One of the most common chord progressions in Jazz is the II, V, I these resulting chords in the key of C would be Dm, G and C. Blues and most popular music is based on the I, IV, V progression. A very common progression in R&B in the I, VI, II, V. In the key of C the resulting chords would be C, Am, Dm and G. Check out "At Last" by Etta James and this is the main progression you would hear in the song.