

Jazz Chord Progressions

Learning partly from other people and partly from my own researches, I have identified fifteen patterns that appear in the opening bars of tunes played by the traditional jazz bands. The time has come to take stock of these various classifications. So here goes:

1. THE RED ROSES PATTERN

Definition:

Tune begins on the tonic (usually two bars) and then moves on to the 7th (also two bars), meaning that in the Key of F the first chord would be F major and the next E major (or E7th).

Note:

Rare but effective.

Examples:

Blue Turning Grey Over You, Dream, Mister Sandman, Red Roses For A Blue Lady, Some Day You'll Be Sorry, Sweet Emmalina, When Somebody Thinks You're Wonderful, Whispering, You Won't Find Another Fool Like Me,

2. THE SALTY DOG PATTERN

Definition:

The tune begins (usually two bars) on the chord of the 6th note in the scale (e.g., a tune in the key of G starting on the chord of E or E7th). This is normally followed by the chord on the 2nd note of the scale, and then on the 5th note of the scale, thus continuing the 'circle of fifths'.

Note:

Rare, but effective. Clever use of the 'circle of fifths'.

Examples

A Good Man Is Hard To Find, Alabamy Bound, Any Time, At The Jazz Band Ball [main strain], Balling The Jack, Friends and Neighbours, Good Time Flat Blues (also known as Farewell to Storyville) [chorus], Jazz Me Blues [main strain], Louis-i-a-ni-a, Rose of the Rio Grande, Salty Dog [the archetypal tune of this kind], Seems Like Old Times, Shine On Harvest Moon, Sweet Georgia Brown, Tailgate Ramble, There'll Be Some Changes Made, Up A Lazy River

3. THE GEORGIA PATTERN

Definition:

The tune starts on the tonic, proceeding to the chord of the 3rd and then on to the 6th. So in the key of C, this would mean C major, followed by E7th and then A7th (sometimes A minor).

Note:

Very common. Especially popular in 1920s. Frequent in Charleston-style tunes; but also works well in slower numbers.

Examples

All of Me, Barefoot Boy, Basin Street Blues [main theme], Black Bottom Stomp [introduction], Clarinet Marmalade. [main theme], Darkness On The Delta, Do Your Duty, Georgia, Give It Up, Has Anybody Seen My Girl?, If You Were The Only Girl In The World, I'm Alone Because I Love You, It's Only A Shanty, I've Heard That Song Before, Lover Come Back To Me, Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone, Taint Nobody's Business If I Do, That Da-Da Strain [second theme], Whenever You're Lonesome, We'll Meet Again, Who's Sorry Now, You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You,

4. THE SWEET SUE PATTERN

Definition:

Begins on the Dominant 7th, with the Tonic as the next chord. (Often this pattern is then repeated before further developments.) To put it simply, if you're in the key of C, you begin these tunes on G7th (usually two bars) and then move on to C.

Note:

Very useful when composers fancy bouncing back and forth between the dominant and the tonic. Simple and therefore popular with improvisers.

Examples

April Showers, Auf Wiedersehen, Avalon, Black Bottom Stomp [final strain,] Dallas Rag, Do What Ory Say, Gatemouth, Heebie Jeebies, His Eye Is On The Sparrow, I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate, Jealous, Louisiana, Memphis Blues (Verse), Miss Annabelle Lee, My Life Will Be Sweeter Some Day, Papa De-Da-Da (chorus), Pretty Baby, Say Si Si, Smiles, Smokey Mokes (main improvising theme), So Do I, South [second strain], Sweet Sue, That's A Plenty [final strain], Tom Cat Blues, Up Jumped the Devil, Way Down Yonder In New Orleans, We Just Couldn't Say Goodbye, Willy The Weeper [second strain], Winin' Boy Blues, You Were Meant For Me,

5. THE BYE BYE PATTERN

Definition:

Begins on the tonic. This is followed by the 6th flat major, then tonic again, and then 6th. So in the key of C this would be: C - Ab - C - A.

Note:

It is rare - a pity, because it has a lovely effect when a composer wants to inject something wistful very early on in the tune.

Examples

Bye Bye Blues, Out Of Nowhere, San

6. THE MAGNOLIA PATTERN

Definition:

The tune starts on the Tonic, then moves to the Tonic 7th; then the chord of the 4th note in the scale; and then the 4th minor (or sometimes diminished). So, in the Key of C, this would mean: C : C7 : F : Fm .

Notes:

It's known to jazzmen as The Magnolia Progression because it was used to begin the chorus of the famous 1928 Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields jazz tune Magnolia's Wedding Day. It is a super progression and deservedly popular. It is so natural and logical. The listener really feels the harmonies, so it's well suited to emotional ballads such as My Mother's Eyes. But it also works with up-tempo numbers.

Examples

After My Laughter Came Tears, Brown Skin Mamma, Carolina Moon, Cherry Red, 'Deed I Do, Does Jesus Care?, Girl of My Dreams, If I Had You, I May Be Wrong But I Think You're Wonderful, I'm Gonna Meet My Sweetie Now, I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket, In the Upper Garden, I Want a Little Girl to Call My Own, Lonesome Road, Louisiana Fairytale, Magnolia's Wedding Day, My Mother's Eyes, Old Rocking Chair, Stevedore Stomp [final strain]

7. THE MY OLD MAN PATTERN

Definition:

The tune starts on the Tonic chord and then follows this with the commonest chord progression of all - known to musicians as 2 - 5 - 1. So a tune beginning on the chord of C major, for example, would progress on to D major (the chord of the second note of the scale), followed by the chord of G7th (the dominant seventh - the fifth note of the scale) before returning to C major. A very satisfying 8-bar musical phrase can be built on two bars each of these four chords.

Notes:

Exceptionally simple. Very popular in the early part of the Twentieth Century. This is known to musicians as The My Old Man Progression because it is the basis of that song of the music hall era, My Old Man Said Follow The Van.

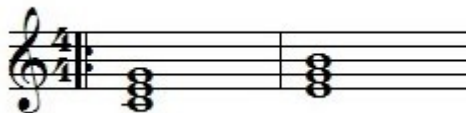
Examples

Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None Of My Jelly Roll, All By Myself in the Morning, Big Chief Battleaxe (Main Theme), Button Up Your Overcoat, By the Light of the Silvery Moon, Congratulations, Darktown Strutters Ball, Destination Moon, Don't Sweetheart Me, Down In Honky Tonk Town [with four bars on each of the chords], Down In Jungle Town, Exactly Like You, I Can't Escape, I Double Dare You, If You Were The Only Girl In The World, Jersey Bounce, I Like Bananas Because They Have No Bones, I'm Looking Over A Four-Leaf Clover, I'm Nobody's Baby, Kiss Me Sweet, Lulu's Back in Town [follows the pattern in half-bars], Ma, He's Making Eyes At Me, Memories, My Cutie's Due at Two to Two, Oh, You Beautiful Doll, On Treasure Island, Peg o' My Heart, Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet [the verse, not the refrain], Red Hot Mamma, Somebody Else Is Taking My Place, Toot Toot Tootsie, Underneath the Arches, Ory's Creole Trombone [main theme], You Made Me Love You

8. THE DRAGON PATTERN

Definition:

The tune starts on the chord of the Tonic and then follows this with the minor chord on the third note of the scale.



Note:

My friend John Burns taught me this one. Thanks, John. It is simple but distinctive. Just think of the openings of the tunes listed and you will see what I mean.

Examples

Home in Pasadena [chorus], I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter, In Apple Blossom Time, Puff, the Magic Dragon, Happy Days and Lonely Nights, The White Cliffs of Dover, When You're Smiling, You Always Hurt The One You Love

9. THE SAINTS PATTERN

Notes:

Everybody knows When the Saints. Its progression is instantly recognisable and fairly simple. But, as far as I know, it has not been widely used.

Definition:

Starts with (what could be easier?) six bars on the Tonic chord. Then briefly the Dominant 7th. Then it uses the Magnolia progression (see above 6.).

Examples

Livin' High (Chorus), When the Saints Go Marching In, I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You, Red River Valley, Reefer Man, We Shall Walk Through The Gates Of The City, Who Threw the Whisky in the Well? (Chorus)

10. THE APPLE TREE PATTERN

Definition:

Start on the chord of the Tonic; then move on to the chord of the 4th note of the scale; and then back to the Tonic. So in the key of C, the first three chords would be C - F - C.

Notes:

Very common. Gently rocks you away from the tonic and back on to it again.

Examples

After the Ball is Over, Amazing Grace, Blame It On The Blues [main theme], Bugle Boy March [main theme], Delia's Gone, Gettysburg March, I'm Sitting On Top Of The World, In The Sweet By and By, I Wish'T I Was in Peoria, Lady Be Good, Marching Through Georgia, My Gal Sal, My Old Kentucky Home, Precious Lord Lead Me On, Red Sails In The Sunset, Salutation March [main theme], Sometimes My Burden Is Too Hard To Bear, The Rose Room, Wait Till The Sun Shines Nellie, Way Down Upon The Swanee River (aka The Old Folks At Home), Walking the Dog, What A Friend We Have In Jesus, When You And I Were Young Maggie, Yearning

11. THE LOVE MY BABY PATTERN

Definition:

Begin with 4 bars on the Dominant 7th and then 4 bars on the sixth note of the scale. To put it simply, if you play the tune in the key of G, the first 4 bars will be on D^{7th} and the next 4 on E^{7th}.

Notes:

Surely it can't be unique to I Love My Baby? It seems like an unremarkable pattern and yet I have found only this one tune that uses this catchy sequence.

Examples
I Love My Baby

12. THE BILL BAILEY PATTERN

Definition:

First six bars on the Tonic, next eight on the Dominant 7th. Next two on the Tonic. Start second sixteen on the Tonic, etc. End 4 – 4 minor – 1 – 6 seventh – 2 seventh – 5 seventh – 1 - 1. The tunes listed below do not all stick to it 100%, but they do so as nearly as makes little difference.

Notes:

For 32-bar tunes, this is probably the best-known progression of all, very easy to improvise on. It is possible for jazzbands to 'invent' tunes on the spot, using this progression - I have witnessed several doing just that.

Examples

Amapola (for the first 24 bars), At The Mardi Gras, Baby Face, Beer Barrel Polka[main theme], Bourbon Street Parade, Don't Give Up the Ship, Ciri Ciri Bin, Golden Leaf Strut, Hiawatha Rag (final strain), Hotter Than That, Knee Drops, Merci Beaucoup, Milenbug Joys (main theme), My Little Girl, Over The Waves, Second Line, Spanish Eyes (almost all), Tiger Rag (final strain), Tulane Swing, Viper Mad, Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey?

13. THE TWELVE-BAR BLUES PATTERN

Definition:

Twelve bars, essentially:

1 1 1 1^{7th}
4 4 1 1
5^{7th} 4^{7th} 1 1

Subtle variations within that pattern are encouraged.

Notes:

The basis of so much jazz, not to mention Rock 'n' Roll.

Examples

Beale Street Blues, St. Louis Blues ...in fact all the 12-bar Blues! ...and note (interesting) that The Girls Go Crazy uses just the final eight bars of the 12-bar Blues Pattern.

14. THE FINAL EIGHT PATTERN (also known as THE SUNSHINE CHORD PROGRESSION)

Definition:

In the Key of C, the eight bars would be:

F major F minor C major A7 D7 (or D minor) G7 C major C major

In other words:

Chord on the 4th of the scale
Chord on the 4th Minor (or diminished)
Chord on the Tonic
Chord on the 6th seventh
Chord on the 2nd seventh
Chord on the 5th seventh
Major Chord on the Tonic
Major Chord on the Tonic

Notes:

This sequence makes a familiar (and often rousing) FINALE to so many tunes; but - interestingly - it is also used at the BEGINNING of a few tunes.

Examples:

This chord pattern is used at the FINALE of these tunes:

All of Me, Amapola, April Showers, At the Jazzband Ball (second theme), Baby Face, Beer Barrel Polka [main theme], Beneath Hawaiian Skies, Bill Bailey, Blame it on the Blues [final theme], Bourbon Street Parade, Bugle Boy March [main strain], Call Out March, China Town, Ciri Ciri Bin, Frogimore Rag [main strain], From Monday On, Golden Leaf Strut, Hiawatha Rag [main theme], I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover, If I Had a Talking Picture, It's a Sin to Tell a Lie, It's Only a Shanty, June Night, Knee Drops, Merci Beaucoup, Milenberg Joys, Mobile Stomp, My Little Girl, Over the Waves, Riverboat Shuffle, Running Wild, Salutation March, Shine, Slow Boat to China, Somebody Else is taking My Place, Spanish Eyes, Struttin' With Some Barbeque, Tell me Your Dreams, Tiger Rag, Tulane Swing

This chord pattern is used at the BEGINNING of these tunes:

After You've Gone, Glad Rag Doll, I Can't Believe That You're in Love With Me, Strut Miss Lizzie, That's My Home,

15. THE MINOR PATTERN

Definition:

Much of the tune (sometimes just the first part) is in a minor key.

Notes:

I am surprised there are not more tunes in the traditional jazz repertoire using minor keys. The effect of the minor is striking and unusual. For an obvious example of this, just hum St. James' Infirmary to yourself. Playing an occasional tune in a minor key gives variety to a concert programme. To improvise on it, you have to make a mental adjustment and 'think minor'.

Examples:

At the Jazz Band Ball (usually starts in G minor - part A), Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen, Big House Blues [final theme], Crying for the Carolines, Dark Eyes (though the opening chord is the the dominant seventh - not minor), Egyptian Ella, Hush-a-Bye, I'm Humming to Myself, I'm the King of the Swingers (part A), Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho, Midnight in Moscow, Minor Drag, New Orleans (the Hoagy Carmichael tune), Petite Fleur, Puttin' on the Ritz (Chorus), Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down, Shout 'Em, Aunt Tillie, Sing Sing Sing with a Swing, Steppin' Out With My Baby, St. James' Infirmary, Summertime, That Da Da Strain (usually starts in G minor - part A), Tight Like This

Middle Eights

Hundreds of the songs (not counting the 12-bar blues) played by traditional jazz bands are structured in 32 bars. Sometimes there is a pattern of two sets of sixteen bars – each of the sixteen starting with similar notes.

But many tunes have a ‘middle eight’ – so-called but not really *middle* because they are actually the third of four sets set of eight bars. The tunes often have an A – A – B – A structure, in which the three A sections (each of eight bars) are very similar in melody and harmonic progression, while the B section (sometimes called the ‘release’ or ‘bridge’) has a contrasting melody and harmonic structure.

For the musicians, it is a tough job learning all these chord progressions and the middle eights can be particularly tricky and easily forgotten.

Fortunately there are some recurring patterns and it helps a little to familiarise yourself with these. Here are three of them. Please note: **most tunes listed below have their own slight variations within these structures.**

1. Suzie Middle Eight Pattern

Based on these chords of the Home Key:

1 | 1^{7th} | 4 | 4 | 2^{7th} | 2^{7th} | 5^{7th} | 5^{7th}

Examples:

All Alone by the Telephone, Are You Lonesome Tonight, Big Butter and Egg Man, Coquette, Darkness on the Delta, Honeysuckle Rose, I Had Someone Else Before I Had You, I’m Alone Because I Love You, I’m Confessin’ That I Love You, If You Knew Suzie, Just Squeeze Me, Move the Body Over, Some Day Sweetheart, That Certain Party, The Best Things in Life and Free, We’ll Meet Again, When I Leave the World Behind, You Always Hurt the One You Love, You’re the Cream in My Coffee

2. Girl of My Dreams Middle Eight Pattern

Based on these chords of the Home Key:

3^{7th} | 3^{7th} | 6^{7th} | 6^{7th} | 2^{7th} | 2^{7th} | 5^{7th} | 5^{7th}

Examples:

Do Your Duty, Five Foot Two Eyes of Blue, Girl of My Dreams, Give it Up, Hometown, I Can’t Believe That You’re in Love with Me, Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall, Please Don’t Talk About Me, Side By Side, Stevedore Stomp

3. Ice Cream Middle Eight Pattern

Based on these chords of the Home Key:

4 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2^{7th} | 2^{7th} | 5^{7th} | 5^{7th}

Examples:

Blue Turning Grey, Don't Sweetheart Me, Exactly Like You, I Like Bananas Because They Have No Bones, Ice Cream, Monday Date, Painting the Clouds with Sunshine, Sentimental Journey, There's an Old Mill By the Stream, When the Moon Comes over the Mountain

The Four-Bar Phrases of Jazz

It seems to be the case that humans (in the Western world at least) like their popular music to be served in digestible phrases containing four bars, or multiples of four bars. This was almost invariably the case in the popular music written between 1850 and 1950 and still played by traditional jazz bands. There seems to be something in the DNA of composers and audiences that makes them expect little statements of music to fit perfectly into 4-bar or 8-bar shapes. Maybe it has something to do with the natural rhythms of walking (left-right-left-right).

It's amazing to think that about 80% of all the popular songs were written with precisely 32-bar choruses (i.e. 8 times four bars). The tune could take the form of a 16-bar statement followed by another similar 16-bar statement with a conclusive resolution. To see what I mean, just try humming *Indiana* or *Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey* or *Moonlight and Roses* or *From Monday On* or *It's a Sin to Tell a Lie* or *Marie*.

The very common alternative was to write 4 batches of 8-bars in which the first, second and fourth more or less used the same musical phrase, but with a 'middle eight' providing a contrast. This structure became known as A - A - B - A. The 'middle eight' bars (B) are often referred to as the 'bridge' or 'release'.

To get the feel of this type of tune, try humming *Making Whoopee* or *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* or *Lonesome Road* or *That's My Weakness Now*.

But what about the other possible multiples of 4?

I don't know of any tunes consisting of ONLY four bars but there are quite a few in the jazz repertoire that comprise only eight bars. *Sallee Dame* is a good one and uses only two chords. *Old-Time Religion* uses an eight-bar theme with a very simple chord structure. So is *Don't Worry, Be Happy*. Leroy Carr's *How Long, How Long Blues* has the feel of a 12-bar blues but in fact it comprises just eight bars. Similarly, *The Girls Go Crazy* is an eight-bar tune, using the harmonies of the final eight bars of a standard 12-bar blues structure. *Crow Jane* is playable as a striking and unusual 8-bar blues, though it sometimes has a tag - repeating the final two bars. *Postman's Lament* comprises a basic 8-bar block and chord progression that can be developed ad infinitum. The same is true of *Vine Street Drag*. These are all very effective tunes for traditional jazz bands.

[By the way, there are two tunes called *Vine Street Drag*. I am referring to the one by W. Howard Armstrong. The other (by J. Brown) is essentially the 32-bar main theme of *Tiger Rag*.]

I won't write here about the massive topic of the twelve-bar blues, other than to note that it too is built up of four-bar blocks.

There's a large repertoire of really good 16-bar tunes that bands don't play often enough, in my opinion. Some are particularly good for jazz effects, as they allow for 'breaks'. Think of *Do What Ory Say* or *Up Jumped the Devil* or *If It Don't Fit, Don't Force It* or *Don't Go Away, Nobody* or *How Come You Do Me Like You Do* or *Hot Nuts, Get 'Em from the Peanut Man* or *Winin' Boy Blues* or *You've Got To See Mamma Ev'ry Night* or *Oh Miss Hannah*, or *Satan Your Kingdom Must Come Down* or *Rip 'Em Up Joe* or *Jamaica March* or *Walking With The King*.

These are all terrific numbers to play and (because of their simple chord progressions) not too difficult to make sound exciting. And there are some more gentle 16-bar numbers - *Careless Love* and *Royal Telephone* and *Faraway Blues* and *Bye and Bye* and *My Life Will be Sweeter Some Day* with lovely but simple harmonies to be milked. *Early Hours*, composed in 1953 by Monty Sunshine and Lonnie Donegan for the Ken Colyer Jazzmen, is a touching 16-bar tune, lovely in its simplicity.

Some of the 16-bar tunes are given an additional two-bar tag at the end (virtually repeating the final two bars). This can happen on the final chorus only or (as in *I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate*) on every chorus.

During the years 1912-1928, some popular composers experimented with 20-bar tunes (yes - another multiple of four). Think of *After You've Gone*, *Hard-Hearted Hannah*, *I Guess I'll Have To Change My Plan*, *What-Cha Gonna Do When There Ain't No Jazz?* and *Papa De Da Da*. Here too there was usually an opportunity for 'breaks'. In *Papa Dip*, for example, the breaks come in bars 13, 14 and 15. In a later stage of traditional jazz development, we find Chris Barber in 1959 producing *Hush-a-Bye* - a delightful minor key tune of 20 bars.

I can also think of a couple of 28-bar tunes (yet another multiple of 4): *Way Down Yonder in New Orleans* allows for the inclusion of some hiccuping breaks starting at Bar 13; and the 1928 composition *I'll Get By As Long As I Have You*, with music by the prolific Fred Ahlert, cleverly uses two similar statements of 14 bars each to make up the full 28, and leaves you feeling that you have been listening to a 32-bar tune.

There was even in the same period a fashion for 40-bar tunes (essentially 5 groups of eight bars). Think of *Somebody Stole My Girl*, *Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye*, *Sailing Down the Chesapeake Bay* and *Cakewalking Babies from Home*.