INSIDE THE HITS

The Music Theory Behind 10 Hit Songs

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hitmusictheory.com

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What's *Really* in a Hit Song?

Turns out it's a lot more than just pure songwriting talent. There's a reason why every hit song out there sounds so good and why we relate to them, and that's exactly what we're going to explore in this short book.

We're going to go through 10 hit songs one by one and explore what it is from a music theory perspective that just makes them work so well. Because music theory isn't a set of rules to restrict your creativity. Instead, it's almost like a bunch of building blocks that you can use to get particular sounds and vibes out of your music - your creative toolset.

By the end of this book, you'll have a better understanding of what goes on inside the hit songs, and some ways you can start using the same concepts in your own writing.

We explore each of these 10 songs in much more detail in the Hit Music Theory online course. We invite you to check it out.

There you'll learn rhythm, subdivision, time signatures, notes, intervals, major and minor scales, key signatures, building major, minor and diminished chords, chromaticism, harmonic function and chord progressions, voice leading, parallel and contrary motion and much more. Hit Music Theory packs the equivalent of 2 college-level music theory courses into a powerful online program that you can take at your own pace, and use to become a better musician.

GET LUCKY

Artist: *Daft Punk*

Genre: *Pop, Dance / 70's Disco, Funk*

Key: *B Dorian*

Tempo: *116 BPM*

Chord Progression: *Bm7 - D - F#m7 - E (i - III - v - IV)*

Song Form: *A - B - A - B - B - B - C - B*

Get Lucky is a grammy award winning revolutionary song in modern dance music. The instantly recognizable throwback sound was probably a big factor in it's success.

Compositionally, the whole song is really driving to the chorus, which hangs around and is repeated in various forms many times to get the melody to stick.

Listen to the pre-chorus and notice how the ascending vocal line builds tension and anticipation and draws the ear to the chorus. The high B that's hit just before the chorus in the vocal part is the highest note in the song, creating further tension.

Another key point to notice in the composition and recording is how the momentum of the song stays pretty much the same. Many songs will build and dip in momentum, intensity, and volume to keep things engaging, but *Get Lucky* is a dance song and the point is to keep people dancing the whole time.

So if the momentum and intensity stays about the same throughout the song, how do Daft Punk and company add interest to keep the listener engaged?

You'll notice that there's A LOT of repetition in *Get Lucky*. The same chord progression repeats through the entire piece (Bm7 - D - F#m7 - E), and the simple chorus is played over and over.

To keep things fresh, each time the chorus comes around there are subtle differences. Chorus 1 and 2 are very similar but all ensuing choruses add things into the mix like claps, electric guitar, and piano with subtle compositional differences. This gets the chorus stuck in your head without becoming boring.

In your own writing, try adding subtle variations in repeating sections to add interest and make them stick in your head.

Learn more about Get Lucky here.

UPTOWN FUNK

Artist: *Mark Ronson, Bruno Mars*

Genre: *Pop, Funk*

Key: *D Dorian*

Tempo: *115 BPM*

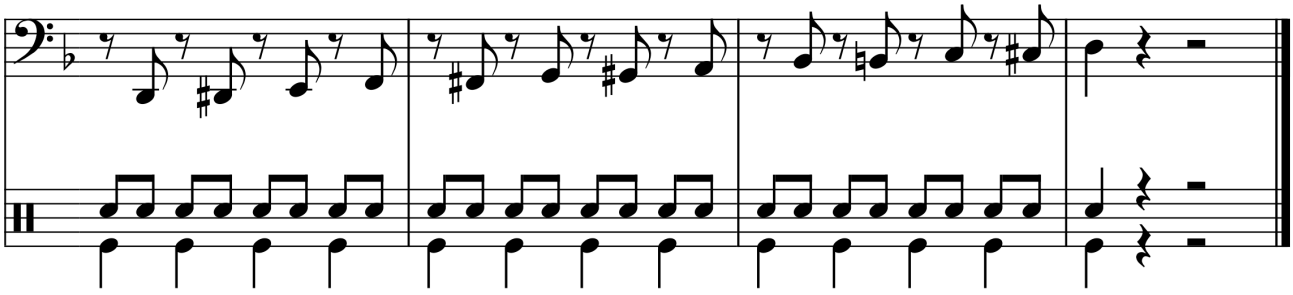
Chord Progression: *Dm7 - Gm6 (i7-iv6)*

Song Form: *A - B - A - B - C - B*

Uptown Funk is another hit song that uses a retro genre mixed with modern pop compositional techniques to create a truly memorable song. Looking at it from a basic level, it follows the A B A B C B song structure which is common in modern pop, but the elements from funk like the two-chord progression, and a couple of creative compositional techniques really make it stand apart.

Uptown Funk features a longer chorus than most pop songs and doesn't exactly fit with the mainstream choruses of today - it's much more of a throwback to 70's funk (where there often wasn't a defined "chorus" at all.) To keep things interesting, the chorus is broken into three distinct sections that build into each other. So the song form broken down would look something like this: A B^1 B^2 B^3 A B^1 B^2 B^3 C B^1 B^2 B^3

Part 1 of the chorus (B^1) starts around 50 seconds into the song ("Girls hit your hallelujah"). You'll notice at the end of this section the pitches played by the synth and bass ascends chromatically into part 2 to create tension and anticipation. That's coupled with a faster rhythm or subdivision, in the drums to really drive the momentum.



Part 2 (B^2)starts at around 1:07 and features the horn section and the "do do do" hook of the song. This delivers the payoff promised by the first section of the chorus.

Part 3 (B^3) starts around 1:24 with the “Don’t believe me just watch” lyric building up into the ascending vocal line “hey, hey, hey OW!”

Notice the compositional technique used to reflect what’s being said in the lyrics directly in the music itself. Right at the beginning of the second verse after they build up all that momentum in the chorus, the song comes to a full stop when Bruno Mars sings “Stop. Wait a minute.”

This compositional technique and the thoughtful use of silence can have a big effect. Try it out in your own music. Are there any lyric lines that could easily be portrayed through your rhythms or harmonies or breaks in the action?

Learn more about Uptown Funk here.

STAY

Artist: *Rihanna, Mikky Ekko*

Genre: *Pop, Ballad*

Key: *A Minor*

Tempo: *112 BPM*

Chord Progression:

Intro / verse: C - Dm - Am (III - iv - i)

Pre-chorus: F - Dm - Am - F - Dm - G (VI - iv - i - VI - iv - VII)

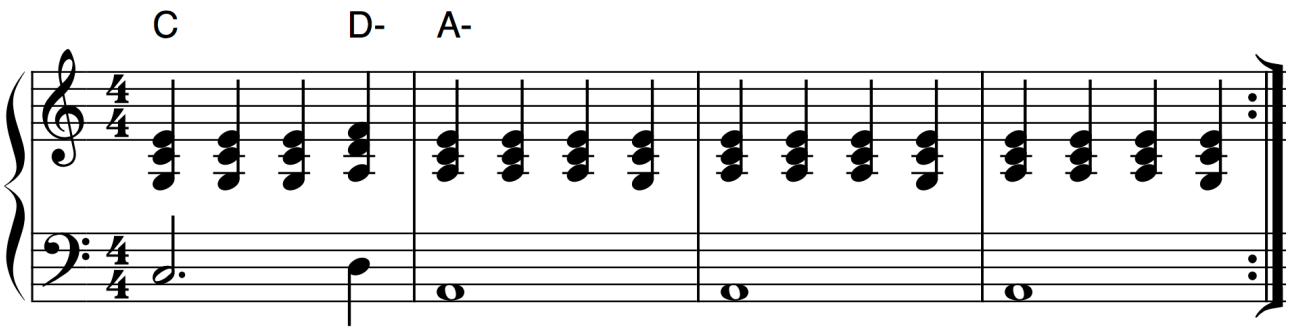
Chorus: C - Dm - Am - F (III - iv - i - VI)

Song Form: *A - B - A - B - C - B*

Stay is a ballad that follows the same traditional popular A B A B C B structure as many modern pop songs. But it uses a few theory techniques in really unique ways to convey the emotion behind the lyrics.

First up, let's look at the way the chords are played. Instead of playing everything straight in root position with the root of the chord in the bass, the chords are inverted and transition smoothly from one to the next through voice leading.

Voice leading is a way to move the pitches from one chord to the next to make chord changes sound smoother by using positions and inversions that require the least amount of hand movement on the instrument. It also can sometimes be used to group pitches closer together to create space in the mix for other instruments.



In this case, in the verse, the C chord is played in 2nd inversion with the 5th (G) in the bass, the Dm chord is also played in 2nd inversion with the 5th (A) in the bass, and the Am chord is played in root position with the A in the bass.

Another key point you should notice in the chord progression is how the major chords are used, specifically the G Major at the end of the pre-chorus. When that progression goes around the first time it ends on A minor. When it comes around again it uses a G Major (VII) variation to create some tension and really pull the ear into the chorus.

In your own music, rethink your chord voicing and try using voice leading in your progressions and riffs to smooth the way the chords change and create space in the arrangement that creates room for other other instruments to be heard.

Learn more about Stay here.

99 PROBLEMS

Artist: *Jay-Z*

Genre: *Hip Hop / Rap*

Key: *G ♭ Minor*

Tempo: *93 BPM*

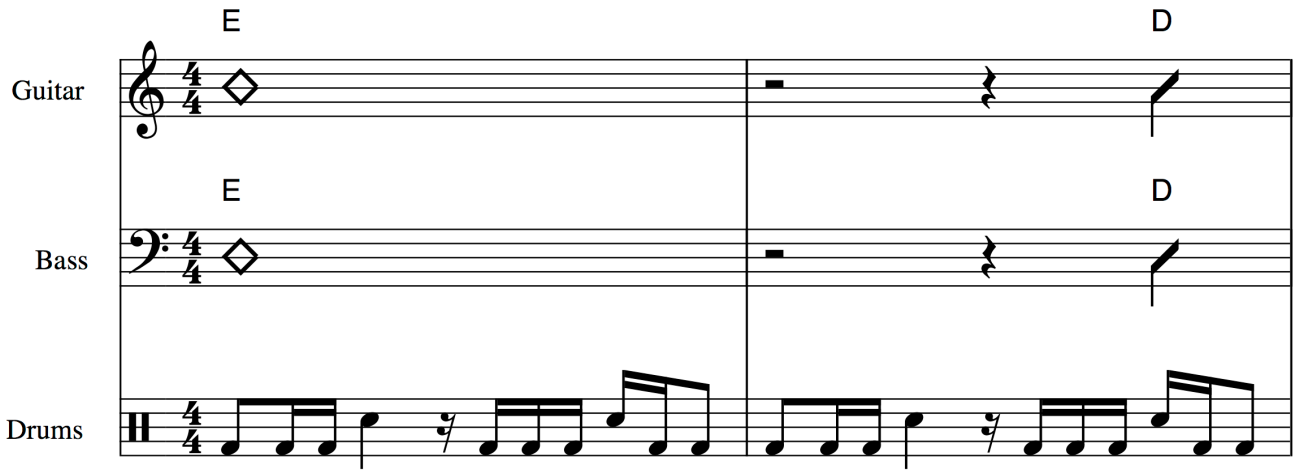
Chord Progression: *E - D (IV - V)*

Song Form: *A - B - A - B - A - B*

99 Problems is a song that seems really simple at first glance, but as you dive into it, you see how each individual element is working perfectly with the other elements to create that heavy and tense sound that characterizes the song.

Let's look at the rhythm first. This is what defines the feel and foundation for the song. The drum beat is created with a sixteenth note subdivision, but it's played with a slight swing, which means it's pushing and pulling the beat a little.

On top of that you have the cowbell part and the phrasing of the vocals that are played relatively straight but slight behind the beat. This creates a sort of subtle rhythmic tension that sets the tone for the entire song.



From a harmonic standpoint, you'll notice that the chord progression is really sparse. This leaves a lot of space between each chord and they're really allowed to ring out.

Compositionally, this is a really important technique when you're thinking about writing heavier chord progressions. If you give each chord space, when the next one comes around it will have that much more of an impact.

Next time you're writing a heavier groove in your own music, try thinking about what you'll leave out rather than what you'll add so you can make a bigger sonic impact.

Learn more about 99 Problems here.

VALERIE

Artist: *Mark Ronson, Amy Winehouse*

Genre: *R&B, Pop*

Key: *E ♭*

Tempo: *212 BPM*

Chord Progression:

Verse: E ♭ - Fm (I - ii)

Pre-chorus: A ♭ - Gm - A ♭ - Gm - A ♭ - Gm - B ♭ (IV - iii - IV - iii - IV - iii - V)

Chorus: E ♭ - Fm (I - ii)

Song Form: *A - B - A - A - B - A - B*

There are some very interesting rhythmic and groove vibes going on in the song *Valerie*, which really help pull the whole song together and add some interest and momentum.

At it's core, the rhythm is based on a subdivision of an eighth note, which you can clearly hear in the high hat of the drum part.

Then, to create that driving force in the rhythm section that keeps the momentum of the song moving forward, a rhythmic motif is used in the bass guitar part which is moved around to follow the chord progression.

You'll also notice that for the most part, the instrumentation of the song is played relatively straight and on the beat, while Amy Winehouse interprets the beat much looser with her vocal part. Simply interpreting the beat a little looser in a single part can be enough to add that extra bit of interest if your songs are sounding too straight or too rigid.

As you write music, try keeping these rhythmic ideas in mind. Try using a solid repeated rhythmic motif in the drums and bass to create a really driving foundation, and then experiment with what it would sound like to put a really straight, on-the-beat melody on top of it vs a looser melody that strays from the beat a little.

Valerie is another a great example of voice leading, which you can really hear in the horn parts during the pre-chorus. So instead of playing all the chords in root position with the root note in the bass, the horns are moving the notes around so no player has to make any big pitch leaps. This creates a smooth line for all the horn parts that ascend into the chorus, really pulling the ear of the listener along with them.

Learn more about Valerie here.

FOLSOM PRISON BLUES

Artist: *Johnny Cash*

Genre: *Country*

Key: *F Major*

Tempo: *100 BPM*

Chord Progression: *F - Bb - F - C (I - IV - I - V)*

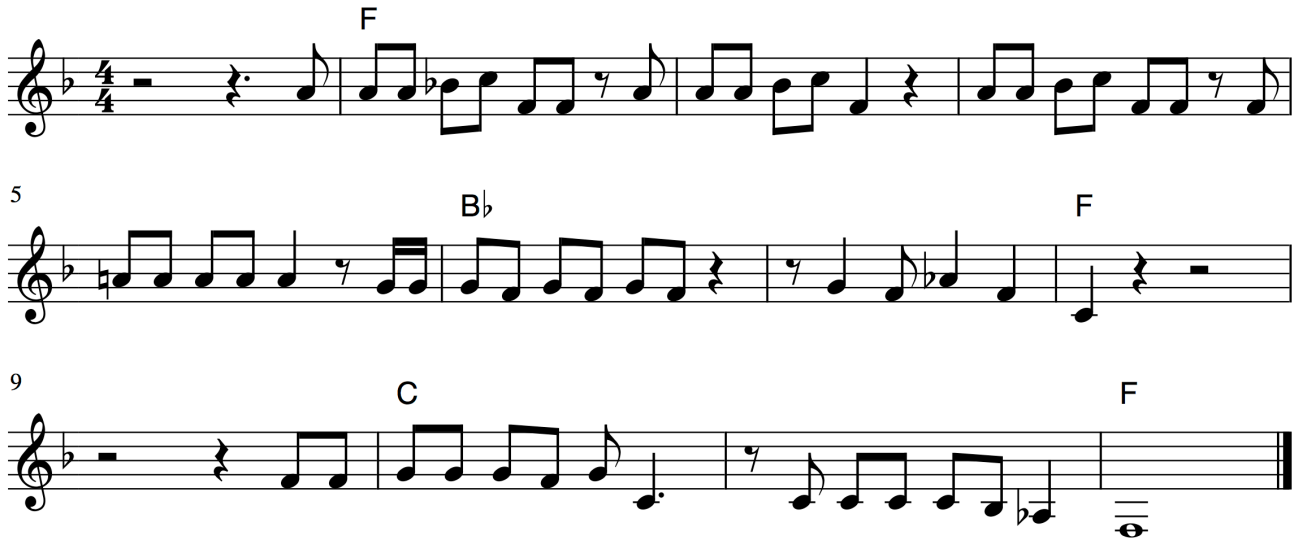
Song Form: *A - A - B - A - B - A*

Folsom Prison Blues is a great example of how an extremely simple motifs can really tie an entire piece together and make it feel more cohesive.

The first place you'll notice this motif is in the rhythm guitar part played with Johnny Cash's signature strumming style. It's built on a rhythm of an eighth note and two sixteenth notes repeated over and over through the chord changes.

That simple rhythmic motif influences just about everything else that's going on musically. Listen to the snare drum and bass part and you'll hear them complementing and sometimes imitating the eighth notes inside that rhythmic motif.

You can also clearly see how melodic motifs are used and developed in Johnny Cash's vocal part. You hear the first melodic motif in the first line of the lyrics, starting on A, going up to B ♭ and C, and then back down to F.



That motif is then repeated with slight variations to accommodate the lyrics twice before being answered by a second motif which becomes the base for the second half of the verse. Once again, that melodic motif is played with slight variations followed by a response.

As you write your own songs, keep this idea of a unifying motif in mind. Often the most cohesive sounding music is built off the simplest motifs. Come up with something simple - it could be a short rhythmic or melodic motif or even just two notes you think sound great together - and them play with it and manipulate it throughout the piece.

Learn more about Folsom Prison Blues here.

HIGHER GROUND

Artist: *Stevie Wonder - Cover by the Red Hot Chili Peppers*

Genre: *Rock, Funk*

Key: *E Minor*

Tempo: *138*

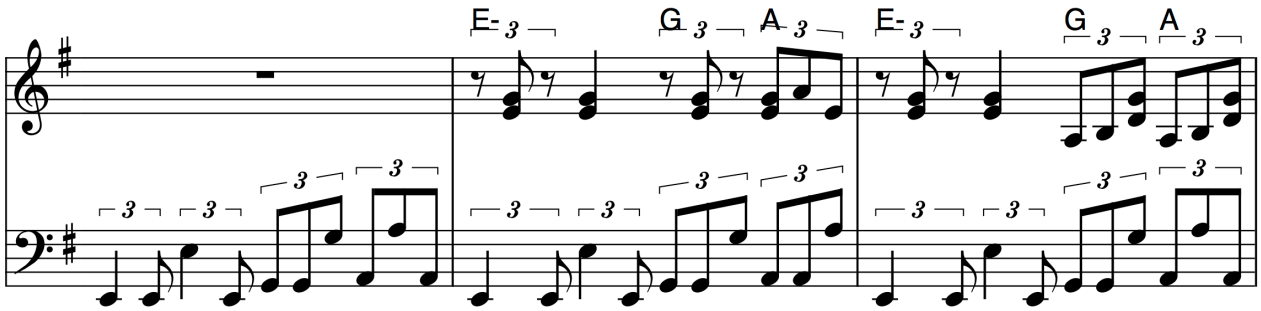
Chord Progression: *Em - G - A (i - III - IV)*

Song Form: *A - A - B - C - A - A - B - C*

One of the first things you'll notice about the Red Hot Chili Pepper's version of *Higher Ground* is that the rhythm is definitely not your typical quarter note / eighth note subdivision and groove. Instead, the song really focuses in on the triplet.

A triplet is a way of dividing up a beat into even thirds. So a quarter note would be divided into three eighth note triplets, counted "1-trip-let, 2-trip-let."

Check out the bass and guitar parts of *Higher Ground* to see these triplets in action.



If you look closer, you'll see that the different instruments are intentionally giving each other space and accenting different notes. The bass part always hits right on the downbeat of each bar (or beat 1), while the guitar part almost never does. This adds a lot of interest to the rhythm.

Another useful compositional technique in play here is the use of octaves in the bass part. Instead of just hitting the same note over and over, octaves are used to add a little more interest without competing too much with the guitar and vocal parts.

As you write your bass parts, try adding in a few octaves if things are starting to feel a little monotonous or boring and see how it brings up the momentum of your song and makes it pop.

Learn more about Higher Ground here.

HIPS DON'T LIE

Artist: *Shakira*

Genre: *Pop, Latin*

Key: *B ♭ Minor*

Tempo: *99 BPM*

Chord Progression:

Verse: B ♭ m - G ♭ - A ♭ - Fm - G ♭ - A ♭ - B ♭ m (i - VI - VII - v - VI - VII - i)

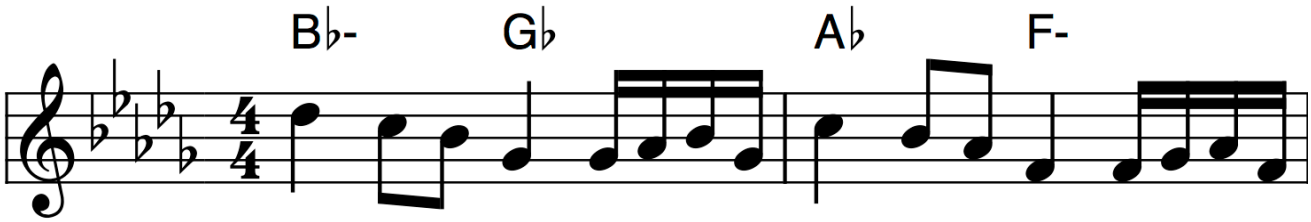
Song Form: *A - B - C - A - B - C - A - C - B*

Hips Don't Lie is a classic example of the use of sequences. This is a very powerful compositional techniques in music theory that can be used in a wide array of songs to great effect.

You create a motivic sequence by moving a short melody line around to follow the chords.

Keying in on patterns like that in music is almost second nature to us, so even without an understanding of music, a sequence creates a strong sense of anticipation as our ears guess what will happen next. When you use sequences you can choose to either follow through with the expectation or thwart it by breaking the pattern and playing something unexpected.

Hips Don't Lie follows through with the sequence and uses notes from each chord in the melody line to make everything sound much stronger and more cohesive.



Notice that during the B ♭ m chord in the verse, the melody plays D ♭ , C, B ♭ , outlining a B ♭ chord. During the G ♭ chord, the melody plays G ♭ , G ♭ , A ♭ , B ♭ , G ♭ , outlining a G ♭ chord. During the A ♭ chord, the melody plays C, B ♭ , A ♭ , outlining a A ♭ chord, and during the Fm chord, the melody plays F, F, G ♭ , A ♭ , F, outlining a Fm chord.

Using your melodies to drive home the key notes in your chord progressions can create an overall more cohesive sound and a much stronger composition.

Try it out in your own songs, and notice how the melodies you've already written fit with your chords. Chances are your ear may already be doing this automatically without you having to think about it. If not, try variations of your melodies against the chords to create a more coherent harmonic presentation.

Learn more about Hips Don't Lie here.

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Artist: *The Police*

Genre: *New Wave*

Key: *C# minor*

Tempo: *148 BPM*

Chord Progression: *C#m11 - AMaj7#11 - B7sus4 - F#m6add9 (i - VI - VII - iv)*

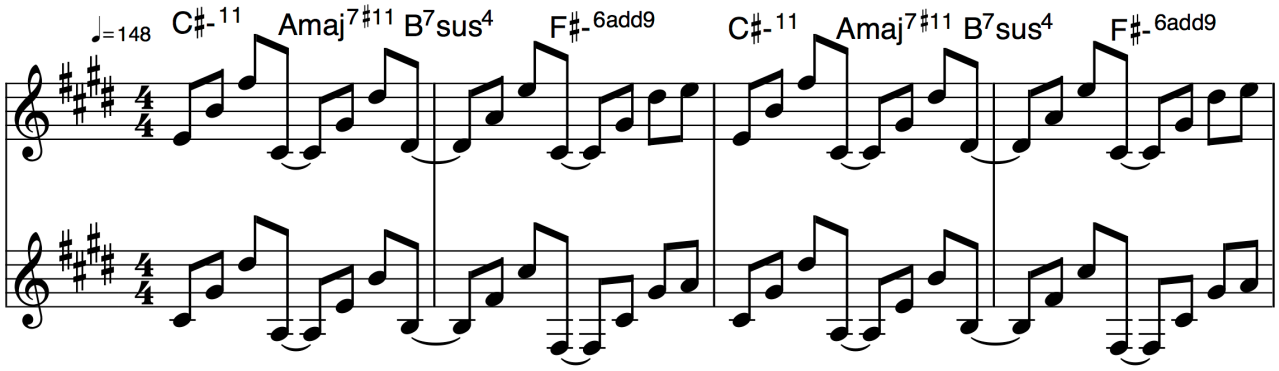
Song Form: *A - B - A - B - A - B - A*

There is a lot to explore in this great song, including its use of simple intervals to form harmonies between the guitar and bass parts.

But rhythmically, one of the first things you notice about *Message in a Bottle* is the crossover sound between the punk and reggae styles which were huge influences on New Wave music.

You'll notice that throughout the song, beat one is actually not the strongest beat of the measure. Instead, beat 4 is accented. In fact, the kick drum is removed from beat one entirely with the snare accenting beats 2 and 4 much like a traditional reggae beat.

On top of that, the guitar and bass parts are playing a syncopated rhythm that again, often skips beat one entirely, focusing instead on the eighth notes inside the beats.



As you write your own music, try seeing what happens when you accent beats other than beat one. How does it change the melody and momentum of the song?

Learn more about Message in a Bottle here.

TITANIUM

Artist: *David Guetta, Sia*

Genre: *Pop*

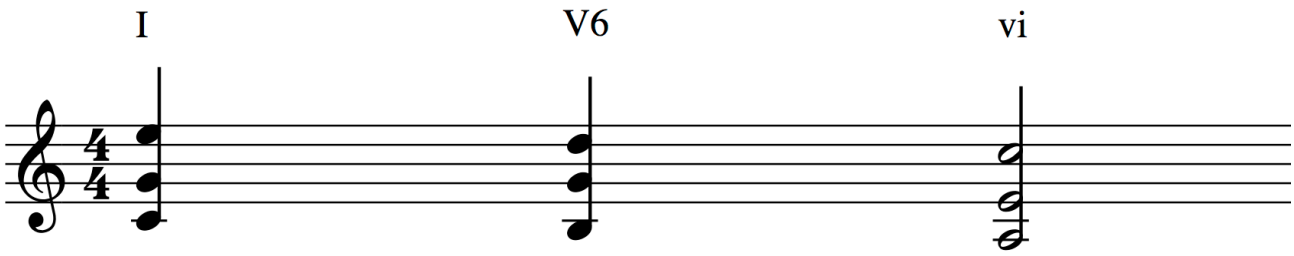
Key: *E ♭*

Tempo: *125 BPM*

Chord Progression: Verse: *E ♭ - B ♭ /D - Cm (I - V - vi)*

Song Form: *A - B - A - B - C - B*

This song is a great example of how voice leading can be used to create lines that pull the ear in different directions. Instead of just voice leading between chords to create smooth transition, *Titanium* organizes the notes in the chords in a way that the notes ascend together in the same direction. This is called parallel motion.



You'll notice that the highest note in each chord and the lowest note in each chord both descend through the progression. The ear automatically picks up on this pattern and anticipates where the chords are going.

For this reason, parallel motion can create a strong pull as you move into the chorus on a song, which is exactly what happens in *Titanium* as the chords in the verse move towards the chorus.

Think about how you can use the movement of your chords to create motion within your songs. How would a smooth transition sound vs a sudden leap between chords? What kind of an effect would an open position chord with the notes spaced out have vs a closed position chords with the notes right on top of each other? These little tweaks can give your songs that polish that can make them a hit.

Learn more about Titanium here.

LEARN THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

If you want to learn more about the music theory behind these 10 hit songs, check out the Hit Music Theory online course.

Hit Music Theory isn't your grade school theory class. It's specifically designed for **active musicians** - people who are already out there making great music.

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Folsom Prison Blues Johnny Cash

Words and Music by John R. Cash

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Higher Ground Stevie Wonder, Red Hot Chili Peppers

Words and Music by Stevie Wonder

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Hips Don't Lie Shakira

Lyrics by Shakira and Wyclef Jean

Music by Shakira, Wyclef Jean, Jerry Duplessis, Latavia Parker, Omar Alfanno and Luis Diaz

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Message in a Bottle The Police

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