



# Chord Progressions: From Feeling the Blues to Mastering the Theory

## Part 1: Chord Progressions as Feelings and Stories

Imagine **music as a story** you can feel with your whole body. Each **chord** is like a big **warm vibration** – a group of notes that play together and make a mood. When we put one chord after another, we get a **chord progression**. A progression is like **moving through different rooms of a house** or stepping from one feeling to another. It's a journey in sound. Even if you can't hear the notes, you can **feel the vibrations change**. Some chords make the floor buzz gently, others rumble deeply in your tummy. Changing chords is like **changing emotions**: it's how music **tells a story without words**.

### What Is a Progression?

Think of a **chord progression** like walking along a path. Each chord is a **step**. If you stay on one chord forever, it's like standing still in one spot – the story doesn't go anywhere. By changing chords, the music **moves forward**. This movement is what we call a *progression*. It's as if the music says, "And then... and then..." with each new chord.

For example, in **blues music**, there's a very famous path many songs take. In the song "**Sweet Home Chicago**" (as performed by The Blues Brothers), the music follows a **pattern of 12 steps** (12 chords long) and then comes back home to start again. It's a happy, looping walk: imagine going around the block and ending up back at your door, over and over. This **12-bar blues** pattern uses three big chords that feel very solid. When you feel the music of "Sweet Home Chicago," you might notice a comfortable **cycle**: it **goes away from home and then comes back**, making you feel grounded each time <sup>1</sup>. This repeating journey makes blues music feel like a **heart beat** or a **dance in a circle** – reliable and comforting.

Now imagine a very different story: "**Stairway to Heaven**" by Led Zeppelin. This song's progression feels like **climbing a staircase**. It starts soft and low, like the gentle first step on a stair. Each chord change is another step upwards – you can almost *feel* the music rising higher and higher. The guitar's chords in the intro even slide **down a half-step at a time** (like moving your foot down each stair before stepping up again), which gives a **mysterious, storytelling feeling**. The vibrations you'd feel from those chords would change in tiny ways: a little lower, then a little lower, creating suspense. As the song goes on, the chords build in strength, like climbing to the top of a tall staircase where the sun is shining. By the end, when the band is loud and powerful, you've reached the **top of the stairs** and everything feels **bright and big**. We change chords here to create that sense of **rising emotion** – from a calm beginning to an **explosive, joyful climax**. The progression *feels* like **going on an adventure**: starting in a quiet place and ending in a place that's grand and full of light.

### How Chords Make Us Feel

Each chord in a progression has its own **feeling**, almost like each is a character in a story: - Some chords feel **happy** or safe (we often call major chords "happy"). They vibrate in a way that might tickle your chest softly, like a gentle hum. - Some chords feel **sad** or tense (minor chords can feel "sad"). Their vibration might feel a bit colder or heavier, like a gentle shake that makes you think of a cloudy day. -

Some chords even feel **hungry** or like they want to go somewhere – these chords create **tension** in your body's vibrations. They make you *expect* something next, like a question waiting for an answer.

Why do we change chords? Because it's how music **speaks to our feelings**. If one chord is like the color blue and feels calm, staying on it too long can make the story boring or make us feel stuck. So the music changes to a different chord – maybe bright yellow, feeling excited – and suddenly you perk up, sensing a new emotion. A **progression** is the music's way of saying “*now I feel something new.*”

Consider “**Maggot Brain**” by **Funkadelic**. This song mostly loops a small set of chords (a pattern like **E minor to D to B minor to C**, over and over). If you could feel those chords, it might be like **ocean waves**: the **E minor** is a deep, moody wave; then it gently moves to **D**, a slightly lighter wave; then to **B minor** and **C**, which lift you a bit, before **falling back** into the E minor wave. The progression doesn't rush – it **sways**. Even though it repeats the same loop, it creates a **dreamy, floating feeling**. Changing chords here is like **breathing** in and out; it gives the music life and motion. Each time the loop starts again, it's comforting, like **being rocked back and forth**. This progression shows how even a simple cycle of chords can carry a lot of **emotional weight** – in “Maggot Brain,” it feels soulful and a little sad, but also endless and spacey. The guitar floats on top of these chords, telling a bluesy story of emotion without words.

Sometimes chord changes surprise us to create special feelings. “**Move Your Body**” by **Marshall Jefferson**, one of the first house music hits to feature piano chords, uses a **short, punchy chord loop** that keeps repeating. This loop is like a **heartbeat or a trampoline** you keep bouncing on. The vibrations from the piano chords in a house track are very rhythmic – you'd feel them like **jumping up and landing down** in time. The chords change quickly in a small cycle, maybe something like **E minor to G to F and back to E minor**, again and again <sup>2</sup>. Why? In dance music like this, the repetition of the chord progression creates a **hypnotic, happy groove**. It's the musical version of **steady flashing lights** or a **heart steadily pumping**. Even a deaf child could sense the pattern: *boom* (one chord), *boom* (next chord), *boom* (next), *boom* (back home). The progression *feels* like **excitement** and **energy** because as each chord comes, it's like the music saying “keep moving, keep moving!” We change chords here not to tell a long story, but to make a **pattern that our bodies want to dance to**. The emotions it creates are **joy and excitement** – you can imagine people smiling and jumping as those chords cycle.

Chord progressions can also paint **sadness or longing**. In **Isaac Hayes' version of “Walk On By,”** the chords are slow, deep, and minor (minor chords often feel more sorrowful). It's as if each chord is a **big heavy step** forward. Picture an elephant walking slowly – each footstep shakes the ground a little. The music vibrates in a **slow thump**, and each new chord step feels like the elephant lifting its leg and then *boom*, stepping down with weight. This progression likely **stays in a minor key**, wandering through chords that feel cloudy or rainy. The reason the chords change here is to take us deeper into heartbreak. When the chord changes, it's like the **story's mood shifts** – maybe from “I'm sad” to “I'm *really* sad and remembering why.” Each chord in the progression adds a **layer of feeling** – one might feel like loneliness, the next like nostalgia, the next like a bit of hope, and then back to loneliness. Because Isaac Hayes stretches this song out to a long, slow jam, you really live in each chord change. It's *repetition with variation* – similar chords over and over, but played with so much feeling (with strings, brass, and voices joining) that it feels like **waves of emotion** washing over you repeatedly. A child feeling those vibrations might sense the **heaviness** and **warmth** in the low tones and know that this is a **sad story** being told.

Not all stories are gentle. “**So What**” by **Ministry** is a loud industrial metal song, and its chord progression (if we can even call it that) is like a machine **pounding away**. The music might just grind on one or two chords or even just one deep **power chord** (a simple, heavy chord with a rough vibration). Imagine a **giant robot stomping** with each beat. If you felt the vibrations of this song, they'd be very

*steady and relentless: thump, thump, thump...* often on the same low note or chord. Why hardly any chord changes? Because this song wants you to feel **trapped in a powerful moment**, like an engine revving without stopping. When the chords *do* change or when the guitar moves, it's like the robot lifting its other foot – a slight change that adds **tension or anger** – and then it stomps again. The sparse progression creates **intensity and suspense**. It makes you feel edgy and excited, maybe even a little scared, as if you're watching a storm roll in or a monster approach. This shows that sometimes *not* changing chords much also creates emotion: **repeating one dark chord** can build up a lot of **pressure**. And when eventually the chord shifts, it's like **lightning** – a sudden release of all that built-up energy.

Now let's spin to a completely different dance of chords: "**Valió la Pena**" by **Marc Anthony**. This salsa song is bright, fast, and **full of life**. Salsa music often uses **major chords** that feel happy or triumphant, and the chords might jump around to different keys to lift the energy. The progression in "**Valió la Pena**" makes you feel like **spinning in a dance**. The piano plays quick patterns (called montunos) that cycle through chords (common salsa patterns might be something like a **I-IV-V-IV** sequence in a major key <sup>3</sup>). Picture yourself in a big room with colorful lights: one chord is like the dancer taking a big step to the right (vibration shifts to a new spot), the next chord is a spin left (another quick shift), then a dip (another chord), then back up. These chord changes happen in a loop that **keeps circling**, making you feel the rhythm strongly. Salsa progressions often **repeat and then suddenly climb higher** – many salsa songs will shift the whole progression up a step near the end, like turning up the heat. In "**Valió la Pena**," after dancing through various chords that feel joyful and romantic, there's a moment where the music might **change key** (go to a higher set of chords) – it's like the dancers jumped onto a higher stage or the sun suddenly got brighter. You'd feel the vibrations lift in pitch – a kind of **key change** trick that gives your heart a jolt of excitement. We change chords (and keys) in this song to **keep the excitement growing**. It makes the celebration in the music even more ecstatic, so by the end you feel like **cheering** because the journey was "worth it" (as the title says). Even a small child feeling those quick, upbeat chord vibrations might giggle or want to move – the progression feels like **happiness, surprise, and celebration** all wrapped together.

Lastly, consider the **purple, emotional rainstorm of chords** in "**Purple Rain**" by **Prince**. This song's chord progression is very **gentle and circular**, like a **big hug** that keeps squeezing and releasing slightly. The chords (in the key of B♭ major) go **B♭ - Gm - F - E♭** and then back to **B♭**, over and over <sup>4</sup>. If we translate that: **B♭ major** (a warm, home chord) to **G minor** (a bittersweet chord), to **F major** (bright, a bit tense because it's about to resolve), to **E♭ major** (calm again), and back home to **B♭**. Feeling these chords change is like **watching the sky change colors during a sunset**: purple and orange clouds shifting slowly. The progression creates a feeling of **hope and sadness mixed together** – like crying happy tears. Each time Prince sings through the cycle, you feel the **yearning** in the minor chord and then the **comfort** when it resolves to the home chord. It's very much like how **gospel music** in a church might feel – those chords are common in soulful songs that make people sway and feel united. The reason we change chords here is to **trace an emotional arc**: the music starts on a strong loving chord (like saying "I love you"), then moves to a chord that feels like pain ("I'm hurt"), then to tension ("please don't leave"), then to a kind chord ("I forgive you"), and back to love. Over the course of the song, even though the chords repeat, Prince's passion builds – the **guitar solo and his voice get louder** – so the same progression feels more and more intense. By the end, when he holds the final chord, it's like the **storm has passed and you feel cleansed**. A young child might not know the words, but by sensing the rising strength of those chord vibrations, they'd know *something big and beautiful happened*. That's the magic of a chord progression: it **takes you somewhere**. In "**Purple Rain**," it takes you through **heartbreak and healing**, all in a few chords.

## Why Progressions Matter in Music

Chord progressions are the **heart of a song's emotion**. They explain *why* a song makes you feel a certain way. If we tell a story with only one feeling, it can be flat. By changing chords, music can **ask questions and answer them** (like when a tense chord leads to a calm chord), or **create excitement then give comfort**.

For someone new to music, especially a child who might feel vibrations more than hear tones, think of a chord progression as **colors of a rainbow**. One chord is red, then it shifts to orange, then yellow, and so on. If you run your hand through each color (or chord), each gives you a different sensation. Together, they make a **rainbow arc** – a full picture. Progressions let songs have a *beginning* (perhaps a calm chord at home base), a *middle* (chords that wander or build tension), and an *end* (a return to a home chord that makes you sigh with relief).

Even if you cannot hear, you can enjoy chord progressions by how they **vibrate your body and change the atmosphere around you**. Low chords might make the floor shake warmly; higher chords might tickle your fingers on the table. Fast changes can feel like a **thrill**, slow changes like a **massage** for your heart. Music uses these changes to speak to us.

So, *why do we change chords?* We change chords to **give music life**. It's how a song **breathes and moves**, how it **laughs and cries**. Each progression is a little journey – some are loops that comfort you with familiarity (like the blues or a dance groove), and some are one-way trips that take you someplace new (like a song that starts quiet and ends loud and different). By learning to sense these chord changes, even through vibration and repetition, you're learning the language of music. It's a language where instead of words, **feelings** are the sentences, and **chord progressions** are the paragraphs telling the tale.

*Examples Recap:* To sum up our little stories: - **Blues Progression (Sweet Home Chicago)**: Feels like coming *home* every few chords, a comfy cycle that makes you sway. - **Ascending Progression (Stairway to Heaven)**: Feels like climbing to *heaven*, each chord a step higher, growing brighter. - **Looping Groove (Move Your Body)**: Feels like bouncing on a *trampoline*, a steady loop that makes you dance. - **Soulful Minor Progression (Walk On By)**: Feels like walking through *sad rain*, slow steps that echo hurt and longing. - **Heavy Minimal Progression (So What by Ministry)**: Feels like a *giant's footsteps*, pounding the same spot, building tension. - **Salsa Progression (Valió la Pena)**: Feels like a *spinning dance*, lively chords twirling you around, maybe even lifting you higher at the end. - **Anthemic Pop Progression (Purple Rain)**: Feels like a *big hug under a purple sky*, looping through love and pain and back to love.

Each of these songs uses chord changes to **shape feelings**. By listening or feeling along, you start to predict: "Ah, the next chord will make things happy/sad/exciting." That's how even a child can grasp progressions – by the *emotions and physical sensations* they cause. Music theory might call it "tension and release" or "cadence" or other fancy words (which we'll learn later), but at heart, it's very simple: **chord progressions make music a journey**, and that journey can feel like anything from a gentle hug to a wild rollercoaster. Now that we've felt our way through chords, let's step behind the curtain and see *how and why* these progressions work from a more technical side.

## Part 2: Understanding Chord Progressions – Theory and Examples

Now that we've felt the story of chord progressions, let's **dig into the details** of how they work. We'll explore what chord progressions are in musical terms, why they matter, and how the blues – as a style

of music – influenced so many other genres through its chord patterns. We'll also break down different types of progressions (diatonic vs. non-diatonic), the classic 12-bar blues form, the ideas of tension and release (how chords create expectation and satisfaction), the difference between cyclical patterns and linear journeys, and some special tricks like cadences, turnarounds, and chromatic approaches. Along the way, we'll revisit our example songs ("Maggot Brain," "Stairway to Heaven," "Move Your Body," "Sweet Home Chicago," "Walk On By," "So What," "Valió la Pena," "Purple Rain") and see **how each illustrates a piece of music theory** in action. Let's get started!

## What Is a Chord Progression and Why Does It Matter?

In music theory terms, **a chord progression is a series of chords played in sequence** – basically one chord after another in a planned order. This sequence provides the **harmonic foundation** of a song and shapes its overall mood <sup>5</sup>. If a chord is like a single building block of harmony (usually made of at least three notes played together), a chord progression is like a **chain of those blocks** forming a path. It's what gives a song a sense of **direction and movement** <sup>6</sup>.

Most songs use a small collection of chords (often all from the same key, but not always) and repeat them in patterns for verses, choruses, etc. **Why is this important?** Because chord progressions **dictate the emotional and dramatic quality of a song**. They act as a **framework** that supports the melody and lyrics, guiding how the song feels at each moment. A well-chosen progression can make the difference between a song feeling happy or sad, tense or relaxed, resolved or unresolved. In short, progressions are **the story behind the tune**.

Think of a chord progression as an **emotional journey** from a musical starting point to an ending point. As one music guide puts it, "*A chord progression works by creating an emotional journey between its beginning and end. Much like a good book, it starts with an introduction, has an adventure in the middle, and resolves at the end.*" <sup>7</sup>. The first chord often establishes the "home" (tonic) – like the story's opening scene – and the final chord usually provides closure (ending the story). Everything in between – the middle chords – is up to the composer, and that's where the emotional nuance comes in. Changing just one chord in a sequence can **completely change the mood** of the music <sup>8</sup>. For instance, if you have a sequence that sounds happy and you swap one chord for a darker one, the progression might suddenly feel melancholy or spooky.

**Example:** The popular progression I-V-vi-IV (in a major key) is famously uplifting but a bit wistful. If you change it to I-iii-vi°-IV (making the middle chords minor and diminished), it becomes unsettled and tense even though it starts and ends on the same chords <sup>9</sup>. This demonstrates that *which chords* you choose and *how they follow each other* is crucial for the emotional outcome.

Chord progressions matter also because they provide **structure**. They often repeat in cycles, especially in popular music, creating a sense of stability and pattern that listeners can latch onto <sup>10</sup>. When you hear a verse and then a chorus, usually the chord progression of the verse repeats each verse, and the chorus progression repeats each chorus. This repetition helps listeners anticipate what's coming, giving the music a coherent form. At the same time, the progression also supports the melody: a great melody typically fits over a chord progression, and the way the melody's notes relate to the underlying chords is what creates harmony and depth.

In genres like blues and rock, mastering a few fundamental progressions lets you play many songs because the structure is reused widely (for example, the 12-bar blues progression is used in countless songs). Jazz has its own common progressions (like the ii-V-I cadence). Knowing these is like knowing classic **story frameworks** – you recognize the pattern, but each song/author gives it a unique twist.

To summarize, a chord progression is **the harmonic storyline** of music. It matters because it shapes the emotion, provides structure, and influences all other elements of the song (melody, rhythm, improvisation). Without progressions, music would lack a sense of travel or conversation – it would be stuck on one feeling. With a thoughtful progression, music can **take us places**: from tension to release, from sadness to hope, from calm to excitement, mirroring the arcs we experience in life.

## Diatonic vs. Non-Diatonic Progressions

When analyzing chord progressions, we often talk about whether they are **diatonic** or **non-diatonic**. These terms sound technical, but they're straightforward: - **Diatonic** means "within the key." A diatonic chord progression uses chords that all belong to the same parent scale or key. - **Non-diatonic** means "outside the key." A non-diatonic progression includes chords that contain notes *not* found in the parent scale of the key (these could be borrowed from other scales, or just unusual choices).

**Diatonic Progressions:** If a song is in the key of C major, the diatonic chords are those built off the notes of the C major scale (C D E F G A B). In this key, the basic diatonic triads would be: - I: C major (notes C-E-G) - ii: D minor (D-F-A) - iii: E minor (E-G-B) - IV: F major (F-A-C) - V: G major (G-B-D) - vi: A minor (A-C-E) - vii<sup>o</sup>: B° (B diminished, B-D-F)

A **diatonic chord progression** in C major would use only these chords (or their 7th-chord versions, etc.). For example, **I-IV-V** (C-F-G) or **I-vi-IV-V** (C-Am-F-G) are diatonic progressions. These chords sound like they naturally "belong together" because they all share the underlying seven notes of the C major scale <sup>5</sup> <sup>11</sup>. To our ears, diatonic progressions often feel *cohesive* or *smooth*. They create a strong sense of key center (tonality), and each chord has a clear relationship to the home chord (tonic). In fact, our earlier example "**Purple Rain**" by Prince is almost entirely diatonic: it's in B♭ major and uses the chords B♭ (I), Gm (vi), F (V), E♭ (IV) <sup>4</sup>. All these chords are part of the B♭ major scale. The result? The progression sounds **harmonious and resolving**. When Prince goes from F (the V) back to B♭ (the I), it feels satisfying because our ear expects that resolution within the key – this is a **perfect cadence** scenario (dominant to tonic) which is inherently diatonic.

**Non-Diatonic Progressions:** These occur when chords appear that **aren't naturally in the key**. This can create surprise, color, or tension in a progression. For example, in C major, a chord like E♭ major or A♭ 7 would be non-diatonic (because E♭ and A♭ are not in the C scale). Non-diatonic chords stand out – they often sound exotic, tense, or like a sudden change of scenery, because the notes clash a bit with the established key. As a guitar teacher's guide notes, non-diatonic chords have "a different sound and usually stick out quite dramatically" when they appear <sup>12</sup>.

One common reason to use non-diatonic chords is "**borrowing**" from parallel scales or modes (a practice called modal interchange) – for example, taking a chord from the minor key and using it in a major key song for effect. Another reason is **secondary dominants** – temporarily treating a chord other than the tonic as a new center and using its V chord to lead into it. Secondary dominants are by nature non-diatonic (except the actual V of the key). For instance, in C major, playing a D major chord (D-F♯-A) to lead into G (V) is using a V/V (the dominant of the dominant). D major has an F♯, which is outside C major, so it's non-diatonic – but it makes sense musically because it pulls strongly to G.

**Example – Major Blues:** The 12-bar blues progression is a classic case of non-diatonic chords being used systematically. In a **major key blues**, the chords on the I, IV, and V are all **dominant 7th chords** (I7, IV7, V7), which is something that doesn't happen in a purely diatonic major key. For instance, in a C major blues, the chords are C7, F7, and G7 <sup>13</sup>. Here, C7 and F7 are not diatonic to C major (they include B♭ and E♭ respectively, which are outside the C scale). Using three dominant seventh chords is a *non-*

*diatonic progression* in the strict sense, because normally in the key of C, you'd have C (I) and F (IV) as major triads or maybe major 7ths, not dominant 7ths. This is why the blues has that distinctive soulful tension: it *breaks the rules* of the major scale on purpose. As one source explains, "The three chords of a C blues thus become C7, F7, G7. This contradicts the rules of tonal music... This peculiarity of the blues can be explained by its hybrid nature: the blues began as modal music... and only later evolved towards tonal music." <sup>13</sup> In other words, blues mixes a different kind of scale (blues scale or mix of major/minor) with the idea of a major key, resulting in non-diatonic chords that nevertheless sound good together because of the blues tradition.

So when we look at "**Sweet Home Chicago**," as a blues in E, it uses E7, A7, and B7 (I7, IV7, V7 in E). Those E7 and A7 contain notes (D and G respectively) that are outside the E major scale. Yet the progression works and is a foundation of blues. It's an example of a deliberately non-diatonic progression that created an entire genre's sound. It's worth noting that these chords *sound* normal to us in context because we've culturally learned the blues language; but in classical theory terms, they're unusual. Blues is a great early example of how breaking out of diatonic constraints yields new emotional possibilities – here, a bluesy, gritty feel.

Another example of non-diatonic usage is "**Stairway to Heaven**." The song is primarily in A minor (which is a diatonic key in itself, A natural minor uses the notes of C major). The famous intro progression, however, includes a chord with F# in the bass (like D/F# or an Am6 chord) and then an Fmaj7 chord <sup>14</sup>. In A natural minor, F# is not diatonic (A minor's scale has F natural, not F#). What's happening is a **chromatic bass line** descending A-G#-G-F#-F, which introduces a non-diatonic passing chord on the F#. Jimmy Page essentially borrows a note outside the scale to make a smooth bass motion. The result is a very **captivating progression** that feels classical and exotic. When the progression hits Fmaj7 and then resolves to G and back to A minor <sup>15</sup>, that G chord is the "flat VII" chord in A minor – G major is actually diatonic to A natural minor (since A minor's relative major is C, and G is in C). But the way they approach it via F# was non-diatonic. This blend of diatonic and non-diatonic movement is what gives "Stairway" its unique color in the intro. So non-diatonic elements can add *spice or surprise* even in an otherwise diatonic context.

**In summary:** A diatonic progression stays "in the lanes" of one key, which tends to sound stable, unified, and expected (though not necessarily boring – beautiful music can be 100% diatonic). A non-diatonic progression veers out of those lanes to pick up interesting new chords, which can make the music feel adventurous, emotionally complex, or tense. Many songs use a mix: largely diatonic with a few non-diatonic chords for flavor.

A good teacher might say: use diatonic chords to **establish a strong home base**, and use non-diatonic chords to **add color or to pull the harmony in a new direction**. As musicians practice ear training, they learn to hear the difference – diatonic chords have a sense of belonging, non-diatonic ones often pop out as "colorful" or "weird" in a pleasing way. Recognizing this helps in songwriting and analysis: for instance, if something in a song suddenly gives you chills or grabs your attention, check if it was a non-diatonic chord – often it is!

## The Blues Form: 12-Bar Blues and Its Variations

When discussing chord progressions through the *lens of blues*, we must pay homage to the classic **12-bar blues form**. The 12-bar blues is **one of the most influential chord progressions in popular music** <sup>16</sup>. It's a structured progression that lays the foundation for countless blues, rock, and even jazz songs. Understanding it is key to seeing how blues influenced other genres.

**Basic 12-Bar Blues Progression:** In its simplest, most common form (often called the “shuffle” blues progression), the 12-bar blues uses three chords: the I, the IV, and the V of the key – typically all played as dominant 7ths in a blues context. The 12 bars (measures) are divided into three lines of four measures each: 1. **Bars 1–4:** Chord I (the tonic) for four measures. 2. **Bars 5–8:** Chord IV for two measures, then back to Chord I for two measures. 3. **Bars 9–12:** Chord V for one measure, Chord IV for one measure, Chord I for one measure, and then either **Chord I or Chord V in the last bar** depending on the style/turnaround.

So if we chart it in Roman numerals: - I - I - I - I - IV - IV - I - I - V - IV - I - **V** (the last V is often used if you’re going to repeat the cycle, acting as a **turnaround** chord leading back to I)

For example, in the **key of C**, a basic 12-bar would be: - C - C - C - C - F - F - C - C - G - F - C - G 17 18

The last measure being G (V) is the typical turnaround variant (often called the **V-IV-I-I** shuffle pattern in bars 9–12 <sup>19</sup>). Originally, early blues sometimes just stayed on the I in bar 12 (which gives a slightly more resolved feeling), but later it became standard to hit the V in bar 12 to propel the music forward into the next chorus of 12 bars <sup>20</sup>.

In practice, blues players throw in little variations and *licks*, but this is the **ground plan**. It’s a **cyclical progression** that repeats every 12 measures, aligning with the typical blues lyric pattern (AAB lyric form: a line, repeat line, then an answer line – each over 4 bars) <sup>21</sup>.

**Why is this important?** Because this progression influenced *so many songs and genres*. Early rock and roll was basically sped-up blues changes (e.g., Chuck Berry, early Elvis songs). Jazz musicians often took the 12-bar blues and added more sophisticated chords around it (like **Charlie Parker’s “Blues for Alice,”** which is a bebop blues with many chord substitutions, or **John Coltrane’s “Equinox,”** a minor blues). But underneath the fancy stuff, the skeleton is usually the I, IV, and V at heart. In gospel and soul, the feeling of the blues progression is often present too, especially in more up-tempo gospel shouts or R&B jams.

Let’s tie to our example: **“Sweet Home Chicago.”** This song follows the 12-bar blues progression *to the letter*. The Blues Brothers version (in the movie) is in **E blues**, so: - I = E7 - IV = A7 - V = B7

The pattern is E7 (4 bars), A7 (2 bars), E7 (2 bars), B7 (1 bar), A7 (1 bar), E7 (1 bar), **B7 (1 bar)** repeating <sup>1</sup>. This gives it that classic blues swing. You’ll notice if you listen (or play) that on the last line when they hit B7, then A7, then resolve to E7, it creates a satisfying arc: the V (B7) is tension, dropping to IV (A7) is a slight release, then I (E7) is back home, but *immediately* going to B7 again in bar 12 pushes you into the next round (tension again). This tension-release loop is a hallmark of blues. It keeps listeners engaged because the **progression never fully “rests” until the song ends** – every 12-bar cycle ends with a lead-in to the next cycle.

**Variations on 12-bar blues:** - **Quick Change (Quick to IV):** Instead of staying on I for the first 4 bars straight, the second bar goes to IV, then back to I. So bars 1–4 would be I - **IV** - I - I <sup>22</sup>. This adds a little variety/harmonic interest early on. Many blues songs do this (e.g., “Pride and Joy” by Stevie Ray Vaughan uses a quick change). - **Delayed (or Slow) Change:** The opposite – sometimes the IV is delayed until the second line completely. That’s less common; usually it’s either standard or quick change. - **Minor Blues:** Use i, iv, V (or V7) but often with some different turnaround. For example, a typical minor blues might use i - i - i - i, iv - iv - i - i, V - V (or  $\flat$  VI) - i - i. Minor blues might substitute a V chord with a V7 or even a  $\flat$  VI leading to V (e.g., in a minor key, a common trick is to use the V of the V, etc.). **“Walk On By”** (originally by Bacharach, but Isaac Hayes’ version) is actually not a blues in form, but it’s in a

minor key and features a repeating harmonic pattern akin to what you'd find in minor soul tunes (soul often extends beyond 12-bar form into more pop structures). - **Jazz Blues:** Jazz players add chords like ii-V progressions in measures 9-10 or turn the IV in bar 6 into a  $\#IV^\circ$  leading back to I (a common jazzy blues move). So you get things like I – IV – I – I, IV –  $\#IV^\circ$  – I – VI7 (turning the 8th bar into a dominant VI to drive to II), then II-V-I-(maybe turnaround). For instance, in B  $\flat$  : B  $\flat$  7 – E  $\flat$  7 – B  $\flat$  7 – B  $\flat$  7, E  $\flat$  7 – E $^\circ$  – B  $\flat$  7 – G7, C-7 – F7 – B  $\flat$  7 (then maybe a turnaround F7 or a cycle like III7-VI7-II7-V7). **Jazz blues** is a big topic, but this shows how far one can vary the simple form. - **Extended Forms:** Blues isn't always 12 bars. There are 8-bar blues (like "Key to the Highway"), 16-bar blues, etc., which tweak the formula. For example, **Ray Charles's "What'd I Say"** is a 12-bar blues; "**St. Louis Blues**" by W.C. Handy has a 12-bar section and a 16-bar section (mixing major and minor). Musicians have been quite creative with the form.

The key is: the 12-bar blues progression is *so ingrained* that even when artists modify it, you can often still hear the echoes of I, IV, V movement. **Rock, soul, and gospel** frequently borrow the feeling of the blues progression. Consider how many rock and roll songs use I-IV-V (even if not 12 bars). Or how gospel music might do a bluesy vamp on I with a IV chord thrown in (church musicians often play dominant chords on the I and IV for a bluesy effect).

**Blues Influence Examples:** - "**Maggot Brain**" – while not a strict blues form, the chord loop Em-D-Bm-C is i –  $\flat$  VII – v –  $\flat$  VI in E minor. This has a bluesy flavor because it's essentially using the  $\flat$  VII (D) and  $\flat$  VI (C), which are common scale tones in the **E minor pentatonic/blues scale**. Many rock progressions, even if not 12-bar, follow this idea of using  $\flat$  VII and  $\flat$  VI (borrowed from minor scale or mixolydian mode) – a legacy of blues tonality. That progression gives a modal, static feel that's great for soloing (which is exactly what "Maggot Brain" does: a long guitar solo). - "**Purple Rain**" – not a blues by form, but Prince's use of I, vi, V, IV in B  $\flat$  has a *gospel-blues* underpinning. Swap B  $\flat$  major for B  $\flat$  7, E  $\flat$  for E  $\flat$  7, F for F7, and Gm for Gm7, you'd get a sweet soulful bluesy loop (in fact, many R&B songs use I-vi-IV-V or variations, think "Stand By Me" but Prince slowed it into a power ballad). Prince also uses extended chords like sus2 (B  $\flat$  sus2) or add9 that give richer color; gospel often uses those kinds of voicings.

To wrap up blues: The 12-bar progression is a **cycle of tension and release** using the I, IV, V relationship. It created a platform for improvisation (in jazz and rock solos) and a familiar structure that listeners internalize quickly. When we hear a blues progression, even unconsciously, we anticipate the changes – that's why a good blues solo can play with those expectations (maybe delay a change or play a spicy note against a chord) and get a reaction.

The blues form also taught us about the concept of a **turnaround**: those last few chords (bars 9-12, especially bar 12 chord V) that *turn the cycle back to the start*. In a broader sense, a turnaround is a short sequence at the end of a progression that transitions back to the beginning (more on this in a moment under cadences/turnarounds).

## Tension and Release: How Progressions Pull and Settle

One of the most important aspects of any chord progression is how it handles **tension and release**. Music, at its core, often plays with our expectation: creating moments that feel unstable or "questioning" (tension) and then resolving to moments that feel stable or "answering" (release). This is analogous to narrative conflict and resolution in storytelling.

**Tension** in music is often created by chords that feel like they need to go somewhere. The most classic example is the **dominant (V) chord going to the tonic (I)**. In tonal music (Western music tradition), V to

I is a strong resolution: the V is tense, the I is resolution. You can think of the dominant chord as a **question mark** and the tonic as the **period (full stop)** at the end of a sentence. The pull from V to I is due to voice-leading (the leading tone, the 7th scale degree, in the V chord wants to move to the tonic note) and the harmony's structure (V contains notes that are dissonant or unstable relative to I).

A **cadence** is basically how a progression deals with tension and release at the end of a phrase. There are types of cadences: - **Authentic (Perfect) Cadence:** V → I (or V7 → I). This is the strongest resolution, giving complete release. In C major, G7 to C is authentic: the B in G7 resolves to C, the F resolves to E, etc. It feels **final** (like "The End" of a statement) <sup>23</sup>. - **Plagal Cadence:** IV → I. Also known as the "Amen" cadence (like how "Amen" is sung on IV-I in hymns). It's a softer resolution than V-I <sup>24</sup>. It sounds peaceful. In C, that's F to C. - **Half Cadence:** anything → V. It ends on V, so it's *all tension*, no resolution <sup>25</sup>. It's like a comma, not a period. It makes you expect continuation. Example: a phrase that ends on G7 in C major – your ear expects it to go to C next, so stopping there creates suspense. - **Deceptive Cadence:** V → vi (in major keys). This is a trick: you expect V to go to I, but it goes to vi (the relative minor), which shares two notes with I so it's a bit of a fake-out <sup>26</sup>. It provides a moderate release (vi is a stable chord, but not the true home chord, so it's like a *detour* resolution). In C, G to Am is deceptive – it "deceives" your expectation of G to C.

**Turnarounds** often involve tension chords to loop back. In blues, as mentioned, the V chord in bar 12 is basically a **half cadence** that pushes back to I at bar 1 (which is the release at the top of the next chorus). Turnarounds in jazz often use a **series of chords** that circle back to I. For example, a common turnaround in jazz is I-vi-ii-V (in C: C – Am – Dm – G7, leading back to C). This is essentially a **cycle of fifths** progression (each chord's root moves down a fifth: C to F (implied via Dm) to G to C). Jazz turnarounds can be ornamented with approach chords (more on chromatic approaches soon), but the idea is to create forward motion at the end of a section. Blues turnarounds might do something like I – VI7 – II7 – V7 (another variant of the same idea, where VI and II are dominant to push harder). The last two bars of a blues (bars 11–12) are typically referred to as "the turnaround." They often go V (bar 11) to *something* (bar 12). That something could be V again, or V-of-V, or a chromatic approach chord, etc., to lead to I. The simplest turnaround is just V (bar 11) → V (bar 12) if ending on tension, or V (bar 11) → I (bar 12) if ending fully (that would actually finalize the progression).

In our examples: - **"Stairway to Heaven"**: The intro progression creates tension by descending to Fmaj7 then to G (the G is functioning like a **b VII chord resolving to i**). When that G chord (which is a major chord built on the 7th scale degree of A minor scale) moves to **A minor**, it's a resolution but in a modal way (G to Am is not a traditional V-I, it's more of a modal cadence, sometimes called a **b VII-i plagal** sort of resolution). Still, it provides a sense of release. Throughout "Stairway," the **tension grows** as the song modulates and builds; by the time we get to the famous guitar solo and the "and as we wind on down the road" section, we have moved out of the intro's key and there's a lot of **energy (tension)** which finally resolves on the big final A minor chord when the song lyrics conclude. The progression of the solo section (in E minor) uses a **chromatic build** that is very tense, then the song concludes by resolving to a majestic chord (the song actually ends on a chord of E major, which is a *picardy third* kind of resolution or leading to ambiguity – an example of tension-release trick where he ends in major though the song was minor, giving a hopeful lift). - **"Sweet Home Chicago"**: Each 12-bar cycle has a clear tension and release. Bars 7–8 on I chord provide a little "rest" (release), then bar 9 on V7 is tension, bar 10 on IV7 is slightly less tension, bar 11 on I is release, bar 12 on V is tension again. So you see a wave: rest, tension, partial, rest, tension – then resolve when you loop to bar 1 (I chord) of next cycle. If they end the song, they usually skip the final V and just end on I for a full release. Blues lyrics often align their question/answer with this: line 1 (bars 1–4) states something (over I, stable), line 2 (bars 5–8) often restates (IV to I, a little movement but ends back stable), line 3 (bars 9–12) gives a punchline or twist (V–IV–I sequence, ends unresolved on V ready to loop) <sup>21</sup>. - **"Purple Rain"**: The four-chord loop I–vi–V–IV naturally has a tension and release flow. In B **b** : B **b** (I – very stable), Gm (vi – relative minor, introduces a

melancholy tension), F (V – strong tension, wants to resolve), E  $\flat$  (IV – a warm chord that acts like a partial resolution or a preparation). Then back to B  $\flat$  (I – resolution). Actually here, E  $\flat$  (IV) to B  $\flat$  (I) is a **plagal cadence** (IV-I) <sup>24</sup>, which has a gentle resolution. That loop repeating means every time the F chord (V) hits, you feel the peak of tension ("I want to resolve"), and when it goes to E  $\flat$  and then B  $\flat$ , it resolves. Prince uses this rising and falling emotional wave in every cycle, building intensity through arrangement but the harmonic tension-release is the same each time – and it's satisfying. The song's final resolution is drawn out, giving a cathartic feeling (often they'll hang on the I chord with the choir voices, fulfilling the expectation fully). - **House music** (e.g., "Move Your Body"): often uses very cyclic progressions that loop without a strong cadence for a long time (that creates a *trance-like* state). But usually, for example, if the loop is Em-G-F-Em, the tension is not in classical V-I sense; it's more modal (F is the  $\flat$  VII in G major or a borrowed chord in E natural minor – giving a *modal feeling* reminiscent of E phrygian if we consider F). The release in a dance track is often not harmonic but textural (like building up drums then breaking). But still, moving from F (which is a very tense chord against E minor because it's just a half-step away from E) back to Em is a kind of resolution: F (which could be thought of as a leading tone chord down to Em) resolves to Em by step (F down to E). That's a kind of **chromatic resolution** – definitely a tension (F major is outside Em's diatonic chords as noted) going to Em (release as it's the home chord). - **Gospel and Soul**: They heavily employ tension and release with richer chords. Gospel often uses **secondary dominants and diminished passing chords** (which are tense, dissonant chords) that resolve into their target chords. For instance, in a gospel song in C, they might go: C → A7 (that A7 is V/ii, contains C# which is tension) resolving to Dm (ii), then maybe Ab7 ( $\flat$  VI7, a borrowed dominant, very tense) resolving to G (V), then G7 resolving to C. This chain (known as a 3-6-2-5-1 or "36251" progression) is full of tension points that each release to the next chord <sup>27</sup>. **Isaac Hayes' "Walk On By"** arrangement likely has moments like that – for example, he might go from a Bb7 chord down to an Ab7 as a passing chord to Gbm, etc. (just hypothesizing given the complex arrangements he favored). The orchestration adds suspensions (notes that create dissonance that then resolve) – all part of tension/release. When those lush strings play a note that isn't in the chord, it clashes (tension) and then slides into a chord tone (release) – you feel that as emotional yearning resolving into contentment.

One special mention: **chromatic approach chords** also create tension and release. A **chromatic approach chord** is a chord one half-step away from the target chord <sup>28</sup>. It's thrown in quickly to intensify the arrival. For example, if you're going to an E minor chord, you might precede it with an F9 chord (because F is one half-step above E) <sup>29</sup>. That F9 is not diatonic, it's dissonant in context, but it lasts just a moment and then *bam* – it resolves into Em, which feels extra satisfying. This is common in blues, jazz, and gospel. In blues, you might hear a guitarist slide a chord shape down: for instance, in E blues, hitting F9 then immediately E9 (a classic blues piano move is to play a chord a semitone up and slide down). That's chromatic approach in action: tension (the wrong chord for a beat) -> release (the right chord). **Stairway's** descending bass line effectively uses chromatic approach on the bass: each step (A to G# to G to F# to F) creates expectation for the next step; particularly the F# bass was a semitone lead into F, making the F chord's arrival smoother and more inevitable <sup>14</sup>.

**Cadences in our examples:** - In "**Sweet Home Chicago**," each 12-bar section ends with a **half cadence** (on V) leading back to I <sup>1</sup>. If you ended the song, you'd probably do an **authentic cadence** (V → I, like B7 → E) and maybe even hit an E major (instead of E7) to really finalize (sometimes blues ends on the major I even if everything else was dom7, as a way to make a clear ending). - "**Purple Rain**" cycles mostly with plagal-style movement (IV to I). But at the very end, Prince extends the last chord instead of cycling. If I recall, the album version of "Purple Rain" ends with a big sustained I chord (B  $\flat$  add2 or something) – that's the final **release**. Throughout, the tension was moderate (V to IV moves) and the ending is just one big release with no more cycling. - "**Stairway**" ends on a very soft cadence. After the loud climax, the final line "And she's buying a stairway to heaven" resolves on a mellow acoustic chord (something like an A minor add9). That end chord is the tonic (I in A minor), giving closure. Interestingly, they preceded it with an E major chord (V of A minor – in minor key the V is usually made major for a

stronger pull). So that's a classic **V-i authentic cadence** in minor. - "**Valió la Pena**," like many salsa songs, likely ends with a big dominant->tonic movement but often layered with rhythm hits. Salsa arrangements often have a final cadence where the horns might play V -> I in a dramatic fashion, or they do a sudden stop on the dominant then hit the tonic together (common in big band endings). The key change (if present near the end) is itself a tension bump (modulating up often feels like unresolved until you acclimate to new key), then they settle in new key's groove and likely end on the I chord with a bang (authentic cadence or unison hit). - "**So What**" by Ministry – interestingly, it might not follow these traditional ideas much; it's more about a relentless groove, but even heavy metal uses tension/release in riffs (like building up on a dissonant interval then hitting a root note). If there's a chord change, it might be for a chorus or breakdown providing contrast (release) from the main riff (tension).

In sum, **tension and release** are the push and pull that make a chord progression a dynamic story rather than a flat line. Good songs balance these elements: too much tension without release feels chaotic or exhausting; too much release (all resolved, diatonic, stable chords) can feel boring or saccharine. The interplay – expecting a chord and either getting it (satisfying) or getting something else (surprising) – engages the listener. Every genre uses this principle, whether with simple three-chord tricks or complex modulations.

### Cyclical vs. Linear Progressions (Loops vs. Journeys)

We can categorize chord progressions based on whether they **loop cyclically** or whether they have a more **linear, through-composed path**.

**Cyclical Progressions:** These are progressions that **repeat in a cycle** throughout a song or a section of a song. The music effectively goes back to the starting chord and the pattern starts again (often with no strong sense of "ending" until the song actually stops). Most pop, rock, dance, and folk songs use cyclical progressions for verses and choruses. This creates a **sense of stability and continuity**, as mentioned earlier <sup>10</sup>. Listeners quickly catch the pattern and groove along; changes in the song then come from melodies, lyrics, or arrangement rather than new chords.

Examples of cyclical progressions: - **12-bar blues** is cyclical; it repeats every 12 bars as long as the song goes, only breaking the cycle when the song ends (maybe hitting the I chord once to finish). - "**Move Your Body**" (**Marshall Jefferson**) – being a house track, it likely uses a short loop of chords (like 2 or 4 chords) that repeat under the entire track, especially during instrumental sections. House music is built for dancing; the loop is hypnotic and can go on and on (with layers coming in/out). Many classic house songs are basically one or two chord vamps (very cyclic). "**Move Your Body**" introduced piano chord progression to house <sup>30</sup>, and while we don't have the exact original chords in text, it's safe to say it was a repeating pattern designed to be played "endlessly" in the club. The cycle gives it that **trance-like drive**. - "**Purple Rain**" – essentially, the I-vi-V-IV progression is cyclical. It repeats under verses and choruses without change. This gives the song a **pedaling emotional foundation** while Prince sings varied lines on top. Only towards the end does he break out of the cycle by holding the last chord and not cycling back, to signal the song's closure. - **Many pop songs** (e.g., those famous four-chord songs) use the same 4-chord loop for verse, chorus, etc. This is cyclic. It doesn't mean the song is monotonic – good songwriters make each iteration feel different by adding a pre-chorus or changing melody rhythm – but harmonically, it's repeating.

Cyclical progressions excel in **groove-based genres** (funk, dance, some rock) where the point is to set up a groove and let the vibe ride. Think of funk classics: James Brown's "**Sex Machine**" is basically one chord (dominant 9) vamp – an extreme cycle (the cycle being just I chord repeatedly, and the tension coming from rhythmic interplay, with maybe a quick IV hit occasionally). Afrobeat (Fela Kuti) often stays on a two-chord back-and-forth for 10+ minutes. Reggae might rock between I and V or I and IV back

and forth. These cycles create a **hypnotic effect** and make the music about rhythmic and lyrical development instead of chordal storytelling.

**Linear Progressions:** These progressions are more like a **one-way journey**. They don't simply loop back to the start in an identical way; instead, they keep evolving, often through key changes or new chords that appear as the song goes on. Linear progressions are common in classical music (where you might modulate through different keys in a sonata movement and only come back to the home key at specific structural points) and in some progressive rock or through-composed songs.

In a linear progression, you might *eventually* loop, but over a much longer span, or not perfectly. For example, a song might go through a chord sequence in the verse that leads into a different sequence for the chorus – when the second verse comes, it might repeat the verse sequence (so locally that's a cycle for verse), but the overall song chord chart is not just one repeating loop; it's verse, chorus, maybe bridge with different chords, etc. So the *song as a whole* isn't one loop but several sections. That's a linear design on the macro scale, though each section might have a loop.

A more pure linear approach is when a piece keeps introducing new material without much repetition. Some **metal** or **prog rock** songs do this – e.g., Dream Theater might have riffs A, B, C, D each with different chord patterns all in one song, rarely returning to A except maybe at the end. Or the song "**Bohemian Rhapsody**" by Queen – it has sections that never repeat (operatic section, etc.), so the chord progression is continuously unfolding in new ways (that's linear, through-composed).

Our examples: - "**Stairway to Heaven**" is somewhat linear *in structure*. It starts in one key/mode (A minor sort of/A Aeolian), later shifts to a higher tempo section in another key (I believe the "If there's a bustle in your hedgerow" is in a different mode, possibly shifting towards D major or something during the guitar solo which is in another key). It keeps intensifying and never really goes back to the gentleness of the intro – until the very end where it briefly nods at it. So it's not verse-chorus repeated; it's more like a story that **keeps progressing**. That's a linear approach to songwriting: each section leads to a new section. We can call it *through-composed* to a degree. The chord progression changes with the sections (though within each section, there might be repeats). For example, the intro progression repeats a few times, then there's a verse progression that repeats for verses, but then the famous "and it makes me wonder" section introduces a new chord feel (something like an F major to G to Am move), and so on. By the time of the solo, the song has modulated to E minor and is doing a driving linear climb. Finally it ends by returning to A minor softly, giving a bookend effect. Essentially, "Stairway" doesn't just loop one progression; it **evolves** from one progression to another, matching the narrative of the lyrics and intensification of arrangement. It's a great example of a linear journey in a rock context (which is one reason it's considered an epic song). - "**Valió la Pena**" – a salsa arrangement often goes through sections (verse, coro, montuno, mambo etc.). The main chorus might cycle I-IV-V-IV as per common salsa <sup>3</sup>, but a lot of salsa songs do a **gear shift modulation**: like after a solo or so, suddenly they go a half-step or whole-step up. When that happens, it's linear – you've moved to a new key and usually stay there. That provides a linear lift (because you're not going back to the old key). Salsa and many pop songs use this device near the end (Whitney Houston's key change in "I Will Always Love You" for instance). It's a linear progression element inserted into a cyclic form to elevate it. After the key change, they might cycle the new progression (cyclic in the new key) – so a mix of both. - "**So What**" (**Ministry**) – likely cyclical in terms of riff, but the way industrial songs build layers can impart a linear feel (intensity rises, maybe a breakdown, etc.). However, in terms of chords, metal often riffs on one tonal center. If it changes, it might go to a different riff in perhaps a related key or use a different mode for a bridge. Some metal songs have multiple riffs in different keys/modes (linear progression across sections). But others (especially repetitive industrial) might just vamp, focusing more on texture changes than chord changes (fully cyclic). - "**Maggot Brain**" – very cyclic chord loop (Em-D-Bm-C) repeating, but the *solo narrative* over it is linear (the guitar solo has a dramatic build). This shows you

can have a cyclic harmony but a linear emotional narrative via dynamics and melody. The progression itself doesn't need to change because the solo is telling the story over the repeating backdrop. - "**Walk On By**" (**Isaac Hayes**) - This is interesting: the Bacharach original uses a **20-bar form** (which is unusual, but Bacharach was known for odd phrase lengths) in minor. Isaac Hayes, in his 12-minute version, likely stretches sections and perhaps introduced an instrumental "bridge" or jam that modulates. He might treat it somewhat cyclically (the verse chord cycle repeats under extended solos by instruments like guitar or sax), but he also might do something linear like a key change or a big build. Many extended soul/funk jams (see Hayes' covers or something like The Temptations' "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone") ride one progression a long time (cyclic) but have an arrangement that slowly adds/removes layers (giving a linear shape in texture if not in chords). - "**Move Your Body**" - definitely cyclic chord-wise, as house music typically is. It's about maintaining a consistent groove (120 BPM 4-on-floor, etc.). There's structure (intro, breakdowns, drop), but the chords don't usually have a "bridge with new chords" like pop – they stick to the theme.

**In sum:** - Cyclical progressions are like **loops**. They are great for **dancing, jamming, or meditative vibes**, because they reinforce a stable ground. Many genres love loops: blues repeats, EDM repeats, folk songs often repeat a simple progression under every verse. - Linear progressions are like **journeys with a beginning, middle, end** (or multiple destinations). They are common in **narrative or experimental music**, and in any song where the story or emotion needed a change in key or mood. They keep the listener on their toes because you can't just predict the next chord based on a short loop; the form itself evolves. - Some songs combine both: perhaps a repeating chorus progression (cyclic for memorability) but a unique bridge progression (linear element to add surprise). This is a **songwriting strategy**: give familiarity with loops, but also give freshness with a new section.

Understanding whether a progression is cyclic or linear helps musicians know how to solo or arrange over it. If it's cyclic, your solos can reference the cycle and return to start confidently. If it's linear (like a changing chord each bar that never repeats the same sequence), the soloist has to follow along more carefully (common in jazz compositions with long forms or classical pieces). It's a bit like difference between being in a repeating roundabout vs. driving on a road that doesn't circle back – each calls for a different approach in navigation, or in music's case, composition and improvisation.

## Cadences, Turnarounds, and Chromatic Approaches

We touched on cadences earlier; let's formally define: - A **cadence** is a progression of at least two chords that concludes a phrase, section, or piece of music <sup>31</sup>. It's like punctuation in music. Strong cadences (like authentic) feel like a period; weak ones (like half cadence) feel like a comma. Cadences are important for signaling the end of musical ideas and for providing that crucial **release** or pause.

The main types of cadences and their roles we already outlined (authentic, plagal, half, deceptive) <sup>32</sup> <sup>25</sup>. In blues and jazz, a very common cadence is the **II-V-I**. In a major key, ii-V-I is diatonic (ii is minor, V is dom, then I). In a blues/jazz context, often they'll make the ii a dominant or half-diminished etc., but fundamentally, ii-V-I is the backbone of jazz harmony. A jazz blues often employs a ii-V leading to IV in bar 5, and one or more ii-V-I's in bars 9-12. Gospel and soul also use ii-V-I a lot (or rather ii-V to get to various chords).

**Turnarounds:** A turnaround is kind of like a specialized cadence at the **end of a chord cycle** (often at the end of a section or 12-bar blues) which **leads back to the beginning**. It's called a turnaround because it "turns the music around" back to the top. In jazz and blues, a turnaround often makes use of a quick sequence of chords.

For example, in jazz in key C, a common turnaround is: Cmaj7 – A7 – Dm7 – G7 → (back to C) This is I – VI7 – ii7 – V7. Note A7 and G7 are not diatonic to C major (A7 is secondary dominant of Dm; G7 is primary dominant). But this 1-6-2-5 circle progression is a staple <sup>28</sup>. Each chord “prepares” the next: - A7 leads to Dm (V of ii going to ii) - Dm (ii) leads to G7 (ii to V is a predominant to dominant motion) - G7 (V) leads to C (I)

Blues turnarounds sometimes simplify that concept: e.g., in key E: E – C7 – B7 – (maybe B7 again or turnaround riff) → back to E. Here E is I, C7 is a  $\flat$  VI7 (a funky unexpected chord, but in blues it often goes to B7 next), and B7 is V. The C7 in that context is a **chromatic approach dominant** (one half-step above B7, which is the V). Guitarists often walk down chromatically: E7 (I) -> D $\sharp$ 7 -> D7 -> C $\sharp$ 7 -> C7 -> B7 – this is like a descending line of dominant chords from I down to V, a fancy turnaround. Each one is a half-step drop, creating tension until it resolves on B7 which then resolves to E. (That's a known blues turnaround pattern in jazz-blues “Rainy Day Blues” or many others).

In “Sweet Home Chicago,” the turnaround is simply the last bar on V (B7) leading to the top (E7) <sup>1</sup>. Sometimes blues songs do a quick V-IV-I-V in the last two bars (bars 11-12 as G7 – F7 – C7 – G7 in a C blues) <sup>33</sup>. That's basically a turnaround too, injecting extra movement.

**Chromatic Approaches:** These are techniques where chords (or even single notes) approach their target by a half-step above or below <sup>28</sup>. We already discussed approach chords: one common one is the *diminished seventh chord* one half-step below the target dominant. For instance, in C, a common approach to G7 is to play G  $\flat$  dim7 right before it. G  $\flat$  dim7 shares a lot of notes with D7  $\flat$  9 actually (which would be a secondary dominant of G7's target, but anyway). Blues and gospel players often use dim7 chords as passing chords – they resolve by moving each note up a half-step into the next chord (that's how diminished chords function as leading-tone chords). For example: C – C $\sharp$ dim – Dm (here C $\sharp$ dim is essentially an approach to Dm from below, each note of the C $\sharp$ dim moves up to notes of Dm). That gives a nice voice-leading and tension.

Approach chords can be: - **Chromatic dominants:** e.g. if target is C, play D  $\flat$  7 → C (D  $\flat$  7 is a half-step above C, resolves downward). Or B7 → C (half-step below resolving up). - **Chromatic passing chords of same quality:** e.g. target chord is F major, you could do F $\sharp$  maj → F (or F  $\flat$  maj i.e. Emaj → F, either above or below half-step major chords). Or like I mentioned in guitar comping: if playing a C7 chord, you might play C $\sharp$ 7 for a beat then D7, if target was D7 (that's going above). - In jazz, the concept of **approach chord** often implies a quick insertion; sometimes not even a full measure, maybe two beats each.

The Wikipedia excerpt gave a concrete example: In G major, the standard 50s progression: | G Em | Am D7 || They showed filling it with approach chords: | G **F9** Em **A  $\flat$  m** | Am **D $\sharp$ 7** D7 **G  $\flat$  7** || (then presumably back to G) <sup>34</sup>. Here: - F9 is one half-step below Em (target Em). - A  $\flat$  m is half-step above Am (target Am). - D $\sharp$ 7 is half-step above D7 (target D7). - G  $\flat$  7 is half-step below G (target back to G). They basically chromaticized every change, making a series of approach chords. This creates a **walking** bass line and a very smooth (albeit busy) harmony. Each approach chord on a strong beat resolves to the target chord on the next beat <sup>35</sup>. This is common in jazz and gospel turnarounds (they love doing G – E7 – A7 – A  $\flat$  7 – G turnaround, etc., which is similar idea).

**How songs illustrate these:** - **“Sweet Home Chicago”** – Turnaround (last bar V) we talked about. Not much explicit chromatic chords in the simple version, but blues players might add a diminished chord between IV and I sometimes (like I – I7 leading to IV, where I7 has the diminished effect built-in, or a dim chord on  $\sharp$  IV leading to V). - **“Stairway to Heaven”** – The intro uses a **chromatically descending bass** which is a form of chromatic voice-leading approach (each step down is smooth) <sup>14</sup>. It also uses a

kind of deceptive cadence in the middle (Taurus vs Stairway difference: one goes to IVm, one goes to  $\flat$  VII to i) <sup>15</sup>. The song's structure is less about turnarounds and more about through-composed flow, but for example, the guitar solo section repeats a cycle and they do a turnaround figure to keep it going. - **"Move Your Body"** – House music often doesn't emphasize turnarounds or cadences strongly; it often just **loops** until a break. But one could think the break (where drums drop and filter sweep happens) is a kind of "pause" and then when the beat kicks in again, that *is* the release. In terms of chords, not much cadence since it might be the same loop. In DJ terms, tension and release come from filters and drop-outs, not chord changes. - **"Walk On By" (Isaac Hayes)** – likely contains some *deceptive cadence* feelings. Bacharach's songwriting is known for sometimes avoiding the expected resolution. The snippet from Billboard about the original says "two measures on an uneasy A minor chord, not shifting ..." <sup>36</sup> – implies Bacharach delayed cadence. In Hayes' version, he might vamp on the i chord (like Am) for a long time ("uneasy" tension) before the chords finally change (release when it goes to say F major or something). Also, Isaac Hayes being influenced by jazz likely had turnarounds in his arrangements; for instance, at the end of an instrumental break, the band might play something like a big **II-V-I back to the chorus**. If in minor, maybe a ii<sup>o</sup>-V-i. - **"So What" (Ministry)** – Title aside (unrelated to the jazz "So What"), it might not have any classical cadence. In heavy metal, a cadence is sometimes just hitting the root chord for a bar to signify end of a section. Some metal songs do classical-style cadences (especially power metal or neoclassical metal will do V-i in minor key etc.). Industrial though might just grind to a halt on the root or fade. If Ministry follows a blues-based rock approach at all (less likely, but early metal often used bluesy cadences), it could do something like flatten the VII (very metal move) – e.g. a riff in E might end on D chord ( $\flat$  VII) which gives a modal cadence feel, not fully resolved as an E would. That unresolved ending can be deliberate (leaves you unsettled). - **"Valió la Pena"** – Salsa often employs **turnarounds in the arrangements**. A common salsa turnaround: The end of a verse or chorus might have a **dominant pedal or cycle** to lead into a mambo (horn section) or into the next coro. Salsa pianists also often use chromatic approach chords in montunos (e.g., you hear them do a little chromatic climb in the piano left hand to lead from one chord to another). And in Latin jazz, the 2-5-1 is as common as in any jazz. In major-key salsa, a turnaround might be V → I or II-V-I. Since two common salsa progressions mentioned are I-IV-V-IV or I-V-V-I <sup>3</sup>, in the latter, the last line V-V-I is basically a drawn-out V to I cadence.

One interesting cadence type from Latin music: the **"Spanish cadence"** or Phrygian cadence: iv –  $\flat$  III –  $\flat$  II – I in a minor context (Andalusian cadence). Some salsa songs with minor key might use a variant of that as a vamp. That's a linear descending line cadence, not so relevant here maybe but shows how different cultures have different standard cadences.

Finally, **how each genre uses these concepts:**

- **Funk:** Often stays on one chord (tension is in rhythm), but when funk uses changes, it might go to IV or V for a bar to create a lift (like a small cadence). Funk turnarounds are often rhythmic rather than harmonic – e.g., band hits and stops to signal loop restart. If harmonic, maybe a chromatic move like sliding the chord up and back (as in approach chord usage).
- **House:** Minimal harmonic tension, heavy emphasis on the **drop** as release (all about arrangement rather than chord cadences). But classic house piano chords often use **sus chords** and **extensions** that resolve within the loop (like a suspended 4th resolving to 3rd, small tension-release on a single chord).
- **Salsa:** A lot of V→I motion, secondary dominants for the circle progressions, and often **montuno vamps** that cycle on two chords (I-V or I-IV) which creates a modal feeling, but then a big dominant push for the final "¡Azúcar!" moment into I. Turnarounds like **II-V-I** are very common in intros or endings of salsa arrangements.
- **Metal:** Uses cadences in an unconventional way. A very metal cadence is the **tritone resolution**: e.g., an E5 power chord riff might build to a B  $\flat$  5 power chord (tritone away) then resolve to E5.

That's not classical but in metal, moving by tritone or half-step can feel like resolution (because of voice leading in how guitar power chords move). Metal also uses **modal cadences** (like  $\flat$  VII to I in many metal songs gives a satisfying but open-ended feel, typical in mixolydian or dorian mode usage).

- **Soul/R&B:** Steeped in gospel, so lots of **2-5-1** and **chromatic passing chords**. Cadences might be decorated: e.g. a song in C might end not just G7->C, but A  $\flat$  7->G7->C (where A  $\flat$  7 is the approach chord to G7). Soul ballads often use **deceptive cadences** to prolong the emotion (like going to vi when you expect I, to keep the plea going in the lyrics). For example, many Motown songs do a deceptive cadence in the bridge to shift to a new section.
- **Gospel:** Known for the “**turnaround 7-3-6-2-5-1**” which is essentially: VII° (or V/III) -> III7 -> VI7 -> II7 -> V7 -> I. In C: B° -> E7 -> A7 -> D7 -> G7 -> C. This is chock full of non-diatonic sec. dominants and dim chords, basically hitting every possible tension until resolving. Gospel also has the **plagal “Amen”** cadence a lot (IV->I often with the IV as a IV6/4 or with a suspended feel).

Tying this to songs: - The chord breakdown for “**Purple Rain**” (I-vi-V-IV) actually includes an interesting **deceptive** element: Normally V (F) would go to I (B  $\flat$ ), but here it goes to IV (E  $\flat$ ) before I. It's like an extended resolution: F (tension) -> E  $\flat$  (almost there...) -> B  $\flat$  (now resolved). You could call that a plagal tag after a dominant, or just a pop progression. But live, Prince often would hang on the subdominant (IV) to build anticipation (“Purple Rain, Purple Rain...” on E  $\flat$ ) then finally hit the B  $\flat$  (“Hoooo!” moment). That's playing with delaying the final cadence for effect. - “**Sweet Home Chicago**” – uses the quick V at bar 12 as a **turnaround chord**, a textbook example of how a turnaround propels the cycle <sup>37</sup>. Also if you think lyrically, “Back to that same old place, sweet home Chicago” hits the I chord right on “Chicago,” giving resolution with the lyric resolution (they come “home” on the home chord). - “**Maggot Brain**” – no strong cadences since it loops Em-D-Bm-C. But one could view Em (i) to C (VI) at the end of loop as a sort of plagal-ish move (if we consider E natural minor, C is VI, not a real cadence, but it goes C -> (back to) Em; that's  $\flat$  VI to i, kind of modal resolution which doesn't have tension like a V-i would, so it keeps it dreamy). - “**Stairway**” – ends with a **plagal cadence** (in a sense, the final phrase ends on a IV (D) chord resolving to the I (Am) or something similar in how the arrangement feels; actually, let's recall the last word “heaven” is sung over an A minor chord with maybe a D in the bass as a suspension, which might be considered a plagal-ish Amen feel). But the big tension was the V (E major) before that, which gave an **authentic cadence** resolution to Am (since in A minor, E major to Am is V-i). So they combined a strong authentic resolution with a gentle plagal-like fade (as they let the chord ring with added notes). - “**Valió la Pena**” – after energetic cycles, likely ends on a big I chord. Perhaps a V-I in a bright major key, horns hitting the I in unison = clear authentic cadence. Or a salsa signature: hits on I, then a final stinger on I after a break. Latin music often uses **iv→I in major as a borrowed plagal** too (known as the “Spanish amen” in some bolero contexts: e.g., in major key, use minor iv to I for an emotional final cadence – common in Latin ballads).

In conclusion of this technical section, each of our example songs and genres demonstrates a facet of chord progression theory: - We saw what a progression is (a sequence making an emotional journey <sup>7</sup>). - We distinguished diatonic vs non-diatonic (e.g., “*Purple Rain*” diatonic vs. blues dominant chords non-diatonic <sup>13</sup>). - We examined the 12-bar blues form and how it underpins songs like “*Sweet Home Chicago*” <sup>1</sup>, as well as its variations and influence. - We explored tension/release: the role of cadences (V-I strong <sup>23</sup>, etc., and how songs use them). - We differentiated cyclic loops vs linear evolution in progressions (dance music loops vs Stairway's evolving structure). - We discussed cadences, turnarounds, and chromatic approach chords in depth, seeing how they add spice and direction to progressions <sup>28</sup>.

By looking at actual songs, we anchored these abstract concepts in reality: - “**Maggot Brain**” showed us a minor-mode loop that's great for soloing (cyclic, modal). - “**Stairway to Heaven**” showed how to use descending chromatic bass (non-diatonic passing chords) and how a song can gradually build to a

powerful cadence 14 15 . - “**Move Your Body**” highlighted the idea of a repetitive progression that creates a dance groove, introducing the concept of piano chords in house 30 . - “**Sweet Home Chicago**” practically defined the 12-bar blues for us and how turnarounds work 1 . - “**Walk On By**” (Isaac Hayes) let us consider extended minor progressions with soulful suspensions (complex, likely mixing diatonic minor with borrowed major bits, very soulful). - “**So What**” (Ministry) gave a contrasting example of minimal harmonic change but maximal rhythmic aggression – an outlier that proves progressions can be extremely simple in some music and still effective. - “**Valió la Pena**” illustrated common I-IV-V Latin progressions and the use of key changes to elevate excitement (a non-diatonic shift as a structural effect). - “**Purple Rain**” tied it together as a pop/blues/gospel hybrid progression (the emotional loop) that resolves beautifully and universally resonates.

By studying these, one can appreciate how **blues is a common thread** – many rock, soul, and even dance progressions have roots in that I-IV-V movement and the idea of tension (dominant) and release (tonic) that blues popularized. Blues taught music how to use **expressive chords (dominant 7ths, etc.) outside the strict classical rules** to convey raw emotion. That influence is heard whenever we hear a rock guitarist play a power chord progression or a gospel singer belt an “Amen” cadence or a DJ use a flattened seventh chord to add funkiness to a house track.

Chord progressions are indeed a rich topic – they are where **theory and feeling meet**. By knowing the theory (like we’ve broken down here), a musician can better understand what they’re hearing or playing, and thus make deliberate creative choices. By staying aware of the feeling (like in Part 1’s analogies), a musician never forgets that the ultimate goal is to make the listener *feel* something, not just to follow rules. Blues gave us a feeling; theory gives us a map. Together, they allow the endless variety of music we enjoy, from the simplest folk song to the wildest jazz solo to the hardest metal riff to the most danceable house beat – all made possible by the power of **chord progressions**.

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