

BBJ - Explanation of the Handouts

The 'Main List' and 'Additional Songs' song lists are keyed to the 'Basic Chord Progressions' handout. For example, Prog. W8 refers to the progression that is located in row W, column 8 of the Basic Progressions chart.

Any progression in row W differs by only one measure from the progression directly above it in row V. In row V, the 13th measure (i.e., the first measure of the fourth, or last, line) of each progression has a '1' chord, whereas in row W the 13th measure of each progression has a '5' chord.

The two most common final 4 measures of a 16 measure progression are 1511 and 5511. The most common progressions in rows V and W are marked with an asterisk.

By thoroughly familiarizing oneself with all the progressions in rows V and W, one can learn to avoid making a very common mistake. Upon hearing the first 12 measures of a basic 16 measure progression, it is a good thing to make an educated guess about what the last 4 measures will be. The mistake is to assume one ending over another ending to the progression. This is why I have included in rows V and W even some progressions that are very uncommon (notably V8 and W6). And this is one of the reasons why the handout is titled 'Basic Chord Progressions' instead of 'Common Chord Progressions'.

The more uncommon a progression in either row V or row W is, the greater the temptation will be to automatically assume that one is dealing with the progression that is located in the same column of the other row. Although progressions like V8 and W6 are not encountered frequently, one should be prepared for them to show up in a straightforward and otherwise very predictable bluegrass song. For, other than the infrequency in which they occur, there is nothing odd about them; they conform to the 'pattern' just as much as the more common progressions do.

In a song in which the progression for the chorus differs from the progression for the verse, and verse progression is V1, V2, V6, or V7, it is then quite likely that the chorus progression will be the progression located in row X of the same column. A song with a V6 verse, for instance, will most likely have either a V6 or an X6 chorus. All other combinations involving a V6 verse are far less common. Any row X progression differs only in its first line (i.e., its first four measures) from the row V progression that shares its same column. The row X progressions begin with 4411; other than that, each is identical to the row V progression that is in its same column.

The progressions in rows Y and Z occur primarily in fiddle tunes. Like the progressions in row X, I have written out only the most common row Y and row Z progressions.

The progressions in row Y are closely related to the progressions in row V, and in the same way, the progressions in row Z are closely related to the progressions in row W. For example, in progression Y7, the order of the chord changes is identical to the order of the changes found in progression V7. Not only that, but also the relative locations of the changes within Y7 is identical to the relative locations

BBJ - Explanation of the Handouts

of the changes in V7. If, for instance, one divides both progressions into 8 equal parts, the first eighth of both progressions has a '1' chord, the second eighth of both progressions has a '4' chord, etc. The only thing that distinguishes progression Y7 from progression V7 is that in Y7, the chord changes occur twice as frequently than is the case in V7, which results in Y7 being an 8 measure progression instead of a 16 measure progression.

By observing how chord progressions are related to one another, you can develop the ability to predict with a fairly high degree of accuracy what is going to come next while playing a song in a jam that you have never played - or even heard - before. But, once again, such predicting is a matter of making educated guesses, not of making assumptions. Developing this ability is something that comes with experience in jamming and critical listening. But, one can speed up the process by thinking about these things during times when one is not jamming, and even when one is neither playing nor listening to music at all.

Concerning the key of a song:

All songs on the lists can be played in any of the 12 Major keys. However, only 8 of these keys are commonly used at bluegrass jams: G, A, Bb, B, C, D, E, and F. With the exception of the instrumentals on the song lists, the specifications for which key a song is to be played in on the 'Main List' refer to the key that the jam leader (yours truly) will almost always choose when he leads the singing on the song. Whoever leads the singing on a song should choose a key that suits their voice for bluegrass-style singing, rather than automatically defaulting to the key that is specified on the list. The key is chosen by the person who leads the singing on the song, regardless of who called the song.

On the 'Additional Songs' list, only a few songs have a key specified for them. These are fiddle tunes which are traditionally played at bluegrass jams as instrumentals, and most fiddle tunes have only one standard key. For instance, nearly all fiddle (and mandolin) players who play 'Old Joe Clark', learn to play it in the key of A. For this tune, 'A' is the key that best suits the fiddle (and the mandolin). 'Old Joe Clark' is an 'A' tune. Therefore, when there are fiddle or mandolin players at a jam, it is generally understood that if a guitar player or banjo player calls this tune, he should expect to play it in the key of A. For nearly all banjo and guitar players who play this tune, this will simply mean capoing to the 2nd fret, which is far more convenient than to expect the fiddle and mandolin players to figure out on the fly how to play the tune in the key of G, instead of the key of A. Asking a bluegrass or old-time fiddler to play a tune in the key of G that is traditionally played in the key of A is somewhat analogous to asking a classical pianist to play Mozart's 'Sonata in A Major' in the key of G instead of the key of A.

Time Signatures:

Unless specified otherwise, all songs on the lists are played in 'cut common' (C or 2/2) time: 2 beats per measure: one-(and)-two-(and); guitar rhythm:

BBJ - Explanation of the Handouts

boom-chuck-boom-chuck, or pick-strum-pick-strum.

3/4 time = three-four time (waltz time): 3 beats per measure: one-two-three; guitar rhythm: boom-chuck-chuck, or 'pick-strum-strum'.

Additional Markings:

Form: AABB. This refers to a tune that has 2 parts - traditionally called the A-Part and the B-Part - and in which each part is repeated before the next part is played. This is by far the most common form for a fiddle tune. In most AABB fiddle tunes, each part is 8 measures long; therefore, to go through the AABB form once involves playing 32 measures. In some AABB fiddle tunes (e.g., Cripple Creek), it takes only 16 measures to go through the form once, for in those tunes each part is only 4 measures long instead of 8. This is the second most common type of AABB fiddle tune. In some AABB tunes (e.g., Angeline The Baker, Shortnin' Bread), the chord progression is the same for both parts. However, in most AABB tunes, the chord progression for the B-Part is different than the chord progression for the A-Part.

Inst. = Instrumental. As used here, this marking does not mean that the song does not have lyrics, but only that it is played at the jam without any lyrics being sung. Most of the songs marked as instrumentals on the lists do have lyrics, but it is unusual at bluegrass jams to sing them. And, in the rare instances in which one might hear someone sing some lyrics at a bluegrass jam to a tune marked as an instrumental on the lists, it will almost always be in the same key that the tune is traditionally played in at bluegrass jams when played as an instrumental. (If the key does not suit your voice for the song, it is not a good idea to force yourself to sing the song in that key.)

Half measure: In cut common time, a half measure has one beat instead of two. One way of thinking about this is that the time signature has momentarily changed from 2/2 to 1/2. (In 1/2 time, a full measure has only one beat). When a full measure of cut common (2/2) time occurs after a half measure, the beat of the half measure is to be counted as 'one', and the two beats of the full measure are to be counted as 'one-two' (as opposed to 'two-one'). Observe that this involves there being two 'one' counts back to back. It is crucial in songs that contain half measures to avoid thinking about the half measure as though it were the first half of a full measure that is then completed by the first half of the full measure that comes after it. A full measure that comes after a half measure is to be thought of and played just like any other full measure. Failure to do this results in the beat getting flipped around: one will find oneself either one beat ahead or one beat behind those who played correctly through the part of the progression that contains the half measure.

1/5, 1/6m, 4/1, etc. These are split measures. In cut common time, this means that the first of the two chords is played for the first half of the measure (one beat), and the second chord is played for the second half of the measure.

m = minor (chord). E.g., 6m = 6 minor chord.