DIATONIC HARMONY

Ever wonder why particular chords sound good together and appear in many different songs, or why others sound dissonant and “not right”? Odds are its because these chords are DIATONIC to the key. In this context, DIATONIC means that the chords are made up exclusively of notes taken from the key of the song. In other words, if a song is in the key of C, a chord is DIATONIC to the key if all of the notes in the chord are contained in the C major scale. Diatonic chords sound good together because they come from the same scale. Many pop, rock, and folk tunes consist solely of chords that are Diatonic to the key they are in.

To build diatonic chords, all we have to do use the scale of the key. For example, in the key of C (C D E F G A B), we can use the first (C), third (E) and fifth (G) note of the scale to build a C major triad chord (a regular C major chord). Move each of these notes up to the next note in the C major scale and you get a new chord - D minor (D F A), which is the second chord in the Diatonic series for C major (see below). Proceed up through the whole C major scale and you come up with 7 different chords - each one built from notes that are in the key.

When we refer to chords which are Diatonic to the key, we use Roman numerals to identify the scale degree upon which the chord is built. Major chords are indicated by an upper case Roman numeral and minor by a lower case Roman numeral. A diminished chord is indicated by a lower case numeral with a “º” after it. For example, the D minor we’ve built in our example would be the ii chord.

Here's what happens when we build triads on every note of a C major scale:

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You can see that these chords form a pattern:
I Major - ii minor - iii minor - IV MAJOR - V MAJOR - vi minor - viiº diminished

Memorize this pattern. It is the same for all keys. These are the DIATONIC CHORDS in this key.
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THE 3 PRINCIPLE CHORDS

The 3 most important chords in Western music are the major chords built from the I, IV and V. We call them the THREE PRINCIPLE CHORDS. You will hear these chords repeated in many popular pieces of music. Many blues songs are composed of nothing but the I IV and V chords, and they are sometimes referred to as “I IV V Blues” songs. Most folk songs are made of these 3 chords, in whatever key the song is played in. Below are the notes of the E major scale with Roman numerals showing the chord types built on them, and the THREE PRINCIPAL CHORDS for the key of E:

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If you’ve ever played the blues on guitar you know that, in the key of E, the 3 chords most used are E A and B or some variation of them.

Knowing DIATONIC HARMONY allows us to recognize patterns in songs we are trying to learn, as well as put together chords in a more knowledgeable fashion when we are composing our own music. Learn the diatonic chords on the following pages, written out in barre chord form, and try the following exercise:

Pick a random number - your address or birthday will do - and plug in the diatonic chords for each of the digits. (You will have to eliminate the digits 0 and 9 of course). Play each chord for a measure or 2, using whatever rhythm you prefer. Then play the I chord of the key. See how these chords sound like they “belong” together?
DIATONIC BARRE CHORD SHAPES: TRIADIC CHORDS I

Each of these chords is built from notes in the F major scale. By using movable BARRE CHORDS, we establish a pattern which can be repeated in any key. The 2 most popular BARRE chord forms have their roots either on the 6th (E) string or the 5th (A) string. These we can refer to as ROOT 6 barre chords and ROOT 5 barre chords. The pattern shown here starts with a ROOT 6 barre chord as the I chord, and switches to a ROOT 5 barre chord when the series moves up to the IV chord. By doing so, we can play all the diatonic chords of this key without having to play all the way up the neck, where barre chords can be difficult to finger. Repeat this pattern like a scale, starting with F as the I chord as shown here, then moving up one fret to use F# as the I chord, then G, etc.

When played as shown here, we say these are the DIATONIC CHORDS in the KEY OF F MAJOR.
Here we see the pattern is different if we begin with a ROOT 5 chord as the I. The pattern shown here starts with a ROOT 5 barre chord as the I, and switches to a ROOT 6 barre chord when the series moves up to the IV chord. Again, we can play all the diatonic chords of this key without having to play all the way up the neck, where barre chords can be difficult to finger. Repeat this pattern like a scale, starting with C as the I chord as shown here, then moving up one fret to use C# as the I chord, then D, etc.
When played as shown here, we say these are the DIATONIC CHORDS in the KEY OF C MAJOR.
Every scale has a structure. The number of notes, the distance between them (intervals) and the order of these intervals are all specific to each scale and help us to define the scale (formula). Most Western music is based on the Major Scale. By staying within the structure of the Major scale and changing the note we start on (root), we can create new scales and new formulas. The Major scale has 7 modes, one for each note in the scale. Each one can be used as a scale in itself, with its own unique qualities and sound. All fingerings shown here can be connected to form one large pattern that covers the entire fretboard and allows us to play any mode in any position. Here are the 7 modes of the Major Scale:

- **I MAJOR 7 (F)**
- **ii minor 7 (G)**
- **iii minor 7 (A)**
- **IV MAJOR 7 (Bb)**
- **IV DOM 7 (C)**
- **vi minor 7 (D)**
- **vii minor 7 b5 (E) (=half-diminished)**
- **OCT MAJOR 7 (F)**
DIATONIC BARRE CHORD SHAPES: SEVENTH CHORDS II

Every scale has a structure. The number of notes, the distance between them (intervals) and the order of these intervals are all specific to each scale and help us to define the scale (formula). Most Western music is based on the Major Scale. By staying within the structure of the Major scale and changing the note we start on (root), we can create new scales and new formulas. The Major scale has 7 modes, one for each note in the scale. Each one can be used as a scale in itself, with its own unique qualities and sound. All fingerings shown here can be connected to form one large pattern that covers the entire fretboard and allows us to play any mode in any position. Here are the 7 modes of the Major Scale:

1 MAJOR 7 (C)

ii minor 7 (D)

iii minor 7 (E)

IV MAJOR 7 (F)

iv DOM 7 (G)

vi minor 7 (A)

vii minor 7 b5 (B)

(=half-diminished)

OCT MAJOR 7 (C)