

Chord Loops

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Rock songs often contain repeated sequences of two to four chords. These progressions are called *chord loops*. Chord loops go against the usual model of goal-directed harmonic progression in that they do not really “end,” instead simply circling repeatedly. The loop becomes part of the groove, more like a drumbeat than a chord progression.

Two-chord loops are often called *shuttles*. The chords generally last the same amount of time—usually a half or full measure each—and the back-and-forth happens at least twice in succession. Most chord shuttles alternate between I on strong beats and another chord on weak beats.

The Temptations, “Just My Imagination” (1971)

Verse

shuttle

I ii⁷ I ii⁷ I ii⁷ I ii⁷
C Dm7 C Dm7 C Dm7 C Dm7

8 Each day thru my window I watch her as she passes by I think to myself: I'm such a lucky guy

I ii⁷ I ii⁷ I ii⁷ I ii⁷
C Dm7 C Dm7 C Dm7 C Dm7

9 To have a girl like her is truly a dream come true Out of all the fellas in the world, she belongs to me But it was

Chorus

I ii⁷ I ii⁷ I ii⁷ I ii⁷
C Dm7 C Dm7 C Dm7 C Dm7

17 just my imagination runnin' away with me it was just my imagination runnin' away with me

Longer loops are divided into “closed loops,” which begin and end on I, and “open loops,” which begin and/or end on a chord other than I. The most common type of loop contains four equally spaced chords (a half or full measure each).

The Police, “Message in a Bottle” (1979): open four-chord loop

Verse

i \flat VI \flat VII iv i \flat VI \flat VII iv
C#m A B F#m C#m A B F#m

Just a cast - a-way, an is-land lost at sea oh! ...

The Rolling Stones, "Sympathy for the Devil" (1968): closed loop

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody is written in treble clef. Above the staff, a bracket groups four measures, with Roman numerals and chord names: I (E), bVII (D), IV (A), and I (E). The lyrics are: "Please al-low me to in - tro - duce my - self: ___ I'm a man _____ of wealth and taste." The staff ends with an ellipsis (...).

Some songs contain a single chord loop throughout. Since around 2005, this became the norm rather than the exception. Below are some examples:

- The Kingsmen, "Louie Louie" (1963): I-IV-V-IV loop throughout
- Tom Petty, "Free Fallin'" (1979): I-IV-I-V loop throughout
- Journey, "Any Way You Want It" (1980): I-V⁶-vi-IV loop throughout
- Carly Rae Jepsen, "Call Me Maybe" (2012): IV(-I)-V(-vi) loop throughout
- Taylor Swift, "Shake it Off" (2014): ii-IV-I loop throughout

Tonal Ambiguity

Because loops contain only a small number of chords with no cadences or other goal-directed trajectory, they often make the key of a song ambiguous. The classic example is Lynyrd Skynyrd's 1974 breakout hit "Sweet Home Alabama." This song loops the progression D-C-G for its entirety. Is the song in D or G? A more recent example is Daft Punk's 2013 hit "Get Lucky." This song's loop is Bm-D-F#m-E, and potential keys are B minor, F# minor, or even A major. To make a decision—or decide not to decide—we must rely on other factors such as rhythm and melody.

Schematic loops

For the most part, the specific chords in a loop are less important than the fact that they are looped. However, some specific loops are particularly common and become "schemas." Two of these are the "doo-wop" progression (I-vi-IV/ii-V) and the Four Chords (I-V-vi-IV). Both have Wikipedia articles listing songs that contain them.

The doo-wop progression was so common in late-50s/early-60s milksap recordings that its use in the decades sense is necessarily heard as a reference to that style.

The Four Chords progression is an attractive loop because it avoids traditionally cadential progressions (IV-V-I, e.g.). In the mid-90s, artists often rotated it to begin on vi (vi-IV-I-V), which adds the potential for tonal ambiguity if the first chord is interpreted as tonic (i-VI-III-VII)

Examples of the doo-wop loop in the 50s and early 60s:

The Penguins, "Earth Angel" (1954)
The Five Satins, "In the Still of the Night" (1956)
The Everly Brothers, "All I Have to Do Is Dream" (1958)
Sam Cooke, "(What a Wonderful World)" (1960)
Ben E King, "Stand By Me" (1961)
Gene Chandler, "The Duke of Earl" (1962)

Modern examples with specific reference to that style:

The Police, "Every Breath You Take" (1983)
Charlie Puth feat. Meghan Trainor, "Marvin Gaye" (2015)

Examples of the Four Chords beginning on I:

Bob Marley, "No Woman No Cry" (1975)
The Rolling Stones, "Beast of Burden" (1978)
Bruce Springsteen, "I'm Goin' Down" (1984)
Green Day, "When I Come Around" (1994)

Examples of the Four Chords beginning on vi (or i):

Boston, "Peace of Mind," chorus (1976)
The Cranberries, "Zombie" (1994)
The Offspring, "Self Esteem" (1994) and most of their other songs
Sarah McLachlin, "Building a Mystery" (1997)
Beyoncé, "If I Were A Boy" (2008)
Eminem feat. Rihanna, "Love the Way You Lie" (2010)
Luis Fonsi feat. Daddy Yankee, "Despacito" (2017)