

CHAPTER 6

CONTRASTS



In this chapter we will start with three elements of melody — phrase lengths, melodic rhythm (note lengths), and melodic contour — and hear how contrasts in these elements can highlight focal points. Then we will look at how contrasts in harmonic rhythm can be used in similar fashion.



On many pop songs a prominent change in melodic contour is used to mark the entrance of a chorus or song title. Our first example comes from Shawn Colvin and her 1997 song “Sunny Came Home.” The verse of this song features a relatively flat or gently rolling contour with small, step-wise motion between pitches. In contrast, the chorus is marked by dramatic leaps and a jagged contour, creating a more open and expansive mood. Also contributing to the change of emotion is a contrast in pitch (discussed in Chapter Five), where the verse has lower pitches and the chorus soars with higher notes. Start listening at **0:29**.

“Sunny Came Home” - Shawn Colvin - 1997

ver - B minor
chor - D major



For AUDIO, see the “Song Examples” playlist in the right sidebar, and click on track 1 song title. To navigate within the audio track, slide the progress bar to the desired starting point.

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key B min

I_m B_m ^bVII A ^bVI G V_m F#_m I_m B_m ^bVII A ^bIII D ^bVII A

Sunny came home to her

0:29 VERSE

^bVI_m7_{b5} G#_m7_{b5} ^bVII A ^bVI G V_m F#_m

She opened her book

FLATTER CONTOUR - stepwise motion

IV_m E_m I_m B_m ^bVI_maj7 G_maj7

She said days _

TENSION

new key D major

I D V A II_m7 E_m7 IV G

0:51 CHORUS JAGGED CONTOUR - dramatic leaps

RESOLUTION

A similar change in contour is found on The Turtles' song "Happy Together," where predominantly step-wise motion in the verse is followed by numerous leaps in the chorus. However, this time the leaps have a gentler flow, without the jagged edges of the previous example. Listen for several other focal point devices mentioned in previous chapters, including:

- **DRUM FILL** at end of verse
- **V to I TENSION - RESOLUTION**, verse to chorus
- **ASCENDING PITCH RANGE**, lower pitches in verse, higher in chorus
- **HIGHEST MELODY NOTE** at the chorus entrance

"Happy Together" — The Turtles — 1967

ver - F# minor,
chor - F# mixo



key F# min Im F#m bVII E

0:24 VERSE 2 If I should call you up

bVI D V C#

Imagine how the So happy to - gether ____

STEPWISE MOTION DRUM FILL TENSION

new key F# mix I F# Vm7 C#m7 I F# bIII A

I can't see me etc.

0:40 CHORUS **DRAMATIC LEAPS**

RESOLUTION

The 1978 song "Sentimental Lady" also combines several devices from previous chapters with the contrast in melodic contour to create a strong hook. Listen for the following, starting at **0:44**.

- **MELODIC PHRASE is REPEATED 4x** in pre-chorus
- **REPETITION OF SAME PITCH** in pre-chorus (melody pivots around B)
- **LEADING TONE** in melody creates tension at end of pre-chorus
- **V to I TENSION - RESOLUTION**, pre-chorus to chorus
- **I CHORD AVOIDED** leading up to the chorus
- **HIGHEST MELODY NOTE** at the chorus entrance

"Sentimental Lady" — Bob Welch — 1978

E major



III^{Im}7 G#m7 V7 B7 III^{Im}7 G#m7 V7 B7

0:44

All of the things that I said

PRE-CHORUS PHRASE repeated 4x - mainly **FLAT CONTOUR**

III^{Im}7 G#m7 V7 B7 III^{Im}7 G#m7 V7 B7 **LEADING TONE**

TENSION

I^{maj}7 Emaj7 II^{Im}7 F#m7 I^{maj}7 Emaj7 II^{Im}7 F#m7

0:57

Sent - i - mental gentle wind etc.

CHORUS **DRAMATIC CONTOUR w leaps**

RESOLUTION

The melodies of the last three songs had a relatively flat contour on the verse and a more jagged shape on the chorus. However, our next example by The Beatles is exactly the opposite. This song has a melody with a gentle, rolling contour on the verse, perhaps reflecting the lyrics (waves on the ocean). When the chorus enters, we rigidly march along with a much flatter chorus, featuring three distinct plateaus (shown below).

"Yellow Submarine" — The Beatles — 1966

F# major



Chord progression for the first line of the verse:

I F# V C# IV B I F# VIIm D#m IIIm G#m IV B

0:19 VERSE So we sailed in - to the sun

GENTLY ROLLING CONTOUR

Chord progression for the second line of the verse:

V C# I F# V C# IV B I F# VIIm D#m IIIm G#m IV B V C#

And we lived beneath the waves

TENSION

Chord progression for the first line of the chorus:

I F# V C# I F#

We all live in a yellow submarine yellow submarine yellow submarine

0:36 CHORUS FLATTER CONTOUR

RESOLUTION

MELODY device #6

CONTRAST in MELODIC RHYTHM
(Note Length)

The next device changes the note lengths in the melody, something referred to as “melodic rhythm.” On most pop songs, the contrast is between shorter note values in the verse or pre-chorus, and longer notes in the chorus.

Here’s an example from Sheryl Crow where the pre-chorus features a dense texture of choppy 8th notes, creating a tight, almost agitated feeling. In contrast, the chorus opens up and soars with expansive whole notes, highlighting the chorus entrance. Start listening at **2:03**.

“Soak Up the Sun” — Sheryl Crow — 2002

E major



Chord progression: I E, V/3 B/D#, bVII D, IV/3 A/C#, I E, V/3 B/D#, bIII G, IV A

Every time I turn around

2:03 PRE-CHORUS SHORTER 8TH NOTES TENSION

I'm gon- na soak up the sun

2:12 CHORUS LONGER WHOLE NOTES RESOLUTION

The next example establishes a predominantly 16th-note pulse in the verse, followed by longer, deliberate quarter notes in the chorus, emphasizing the song’s title words. Also notice these other devices that contribute to the strong focal point, starting at **0:35**.

- **REPETITION OF SAME PITCH** in pre-chorus (mostly F# with occasional dips to D#)
- **CONTOUR CHANGE** from generally flat pre-chorus to dramatic descent at chorus entrance.
- **HIGHEST MELODY NOTE** at the chorus entrance

"Why Can't I" — Liz Phair — 2003

B major



IVmaj7
Emaj7

0:35
PRE-CHORUS

What if this is just

V
F#

TENSION

VIIm
G#m

IV
E

0:42 CHORUS

RESOLUTION

Why can't I

LONGER NOTES

I
B

V
F#

breathe etc.

In the 1993 song “What’s Up,” the chorus starts with the exact same pitch order used several times in the verse — high C# descending through A, E, D, to low C#. However, the note lengths in the chorus are longer with a dramatic descent, creating a similar feeling to the hook on “Why Can’t I.” Listen at **1:13** and **1:26** for the two excerpts shown below.

"What's Up" — 4 Non Blondes — 1993

A major



1:13 VERSE

And so I wake in the morn- ing and I step out- side_

SHORTER NOTES

The musical notation for the verse shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: a quarter rest, a quarter note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C#5, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G#4, a quarter note F#4, a quarter note E4, a quarter note D4, and a quarter note C#4. Above the notes are the labels c#, a, e, d, c# in purple.

1:26 CHORUS

And I say Hey yeah yeah hey_

LONGER NOTES
same sequence

The musical notation for the chorus shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: a quarter rest, a quarter note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C#5, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G#4, a quarter note F#4, a quarter note E4, a quarter note D4, and a quarter note C#4. Above the notes are the labels c#, a, e, d, c# in purple. The notes C#5, A4, and G#4 are circled in blue.

Kelly Clarkson's song "Breakaway" presents a totally different dynamic from the previous examples, featuring a change to longer note values **before** the chorus. In the beginning, a predominantly 16th-note pulse is established, but the melodic rhythm then slows to dotted quarters and halves as we approach the chorus. This creates a suspended feeling, not unlike the suspension of the rhythmic groove discussed in Chapter Two. The tension builds as we wait for the melody to begin "moving" again. At the entrance of the chorus, the melody takes off, with soaring high notes gliding on a new 8th-note pulse. Also notice the extension of form at the end of the verse, with an extra 11th bar creating additional tension before the hook. Start listening at **0:45**.

"Breakaway" — Kelly Clarkson — 2004

C major



0:45 end of VERSE 2

wanted to be -long here

The musical notation for the end of Verse 2 shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: a quarter rest, a quarter note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C#5, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G#4, a quarter note F#4, a quarter note E4, a quarter note D4, and a quarter note C#4. Above the notes are the labels VIIm Am, V/3 G/B, I C, and IV F in blue.

LONGER NOTES

1:00 CHORUS

RESOLUTION



MELODY device #7 CONTRAST in MELODIC PHRASE LENGTHS

A focal point can also be created by contrasting melodic phrase lengths, as in the following 1965 hit “I Got You Babe.” On this song, the verse has long phrases with very little breathing room, but the chorus has just the opposite, with three very short phrases and lots of space in between, highlighting the song title. In fact the first phrase of the chorus is about as short as you can get - one word with one note. Start at **0:36**.

I F IV Bb I F IV Bb bVII Eb V C

They say our love

LONG PHRASE

0:36 VERSE 2

I F IV Bb I F IV Bb bVII Eb V C

Guess that's so, we don't **TENSION**

LONG PHRASE

I F IV Bb I F IV Bb I F IV Bb

Babe I got you babe I got you babe

0:56 CHORUS with 3 SHORT PHRASES

RESOLUTION

The following song by The Capitols features a contrast in phrase lengths much like “I Got You Babe” (longer in verse, shorter in chorus). Also notice the contrast in melodic rhythm, with three long notes on the third line emphasizing the song's title. Other focal point devices include stop time and the avoidance of the I chord before the song title. Start listening at **0:46**.

"Cool Jerk" — Capitols — 1966

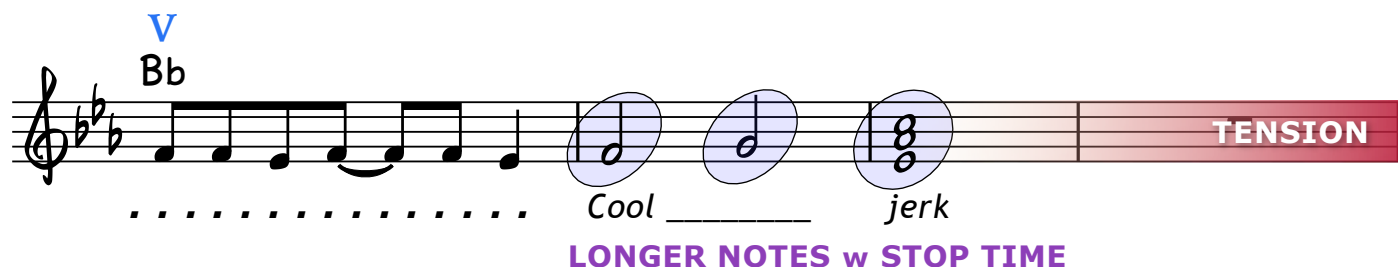
Eb blues



III^m Gm VI^m Cm III^m Gm

When they see me walkin'

0:46 PRE-CHORUS with LONG PHRASES



1:00 CHORUS with SHORT PHRASES

RESOLUTION

In the next example by Tim McGraw, repeated short phrases are used before the chorus to create tension leading up to the hook. When the chorus enters, there is a satisfying feeling as the melody starts flowing again with longer phrases like the verse. This song also has several other focal point devices that contribute to the strong emotion at the chorus entrance. Listen for the following, starting at **0:24**.

- **REPETITION of SAME PITCH** - repeated D and A notes (circled) create tension in pre-chorus
- **STOP TIME** highlights the title phrase (just before the chorus)
- **V to I TENSION - RESOLUTION**, pre-chorus to chorus
- The new **I CHORD (D)** is **AVOIDED** leading up to the chorus
- **HIGHEST MELODY NOTES** at the chorus entrance

key **B min:** **Im** **bIII**
Bm D

It's your night it's your weekend

0:24 END of VERSE with LONG PHRASES

Im **bVII** **bVI** **bVII**
Bm A G A

Your rain your sky

0:31 PRE-CHORUS with SHORT PHRASES

Im **bVII** **bVI** **bVII (V of new key)**
Bm A G A

It's your world **TENSION**

STOP TIME

new key **D major** **I** **VIIm**
D Bm

You leave your mark etc.

0:46 CHORUS with LONG PHRASES

RESOLUTION

Additional songs with CONTRAST in MELODIC PHRASE LENGTHS

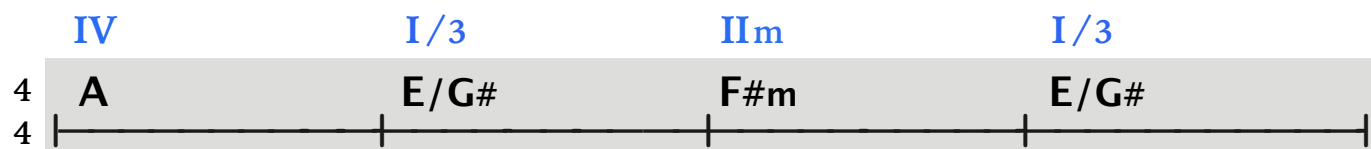
1966	<i>Homeward Bound</i>	Paul Simon
1969	<i>Sweet Caroline</i>	Neil Diamond
2010	<i>Firework</i>	Katy Perry
2014	<i>Burning Gold</i>	Christina Perri
2020	<i>Levitating</i>	Dua Lipa

HARMONY device # 8 CONTRAST in HARMONIC RHYTHM (Chord Changes)

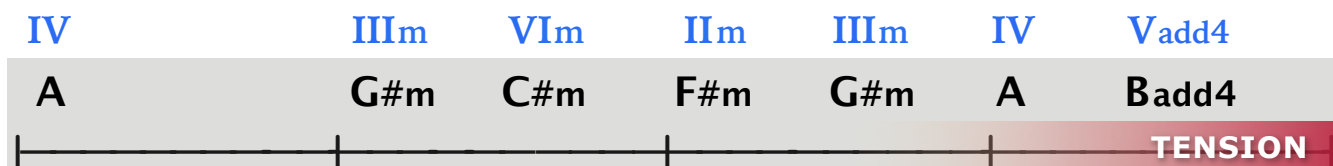
Earlier we discussed changing the melodic rhythm to create focal points by altering the note lengths in the melody. Here we will listen for contrasts in the harmonic rhythm. - ie., the rate or speed at which the chords change, measured in bars or beats. For example, a slow harmonic rhythm would be chords changing every four bars. A faster harmonic rhythm would be chords changing every bar, or every beat.

FASTER CHORD CHANGES

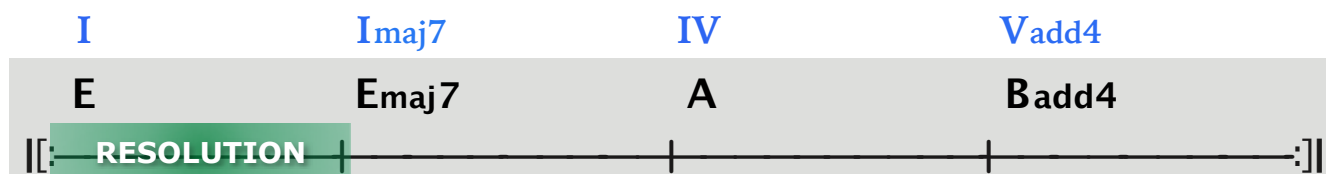
The following 2009 hit by Colbie Caillat provides an example of increased harmonic rhythm, building excitement as we approach the focal point. Start listening at 0:34.



0:34 PRE-CHORUS



FASTER CHORD CHANGES



0:51 CHORUS

On the next example, the harmonic rhythm is established in the verse at two bars per chord, alternating back and forth between C_b and D_b. In the pre-chorus the chords begin moving faster in a linear fashion, ascending through II_m - III_m - IV - V. Also serving to highlight the upcoming chorus are six chord hits (a series of quarter-note triplets) at the end of the pre-chorus.

"You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling" - The Righteous Brothers - 1965



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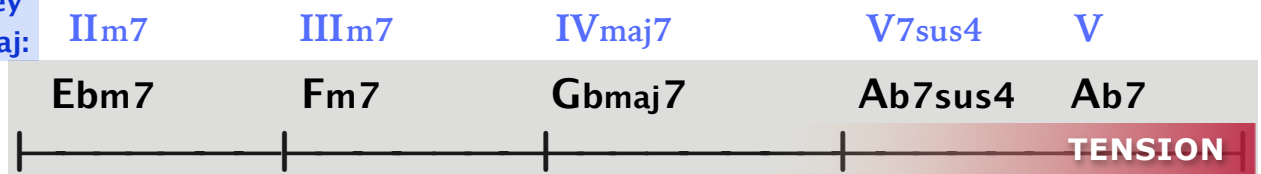
key
D_b mix:



0:01 VERSE

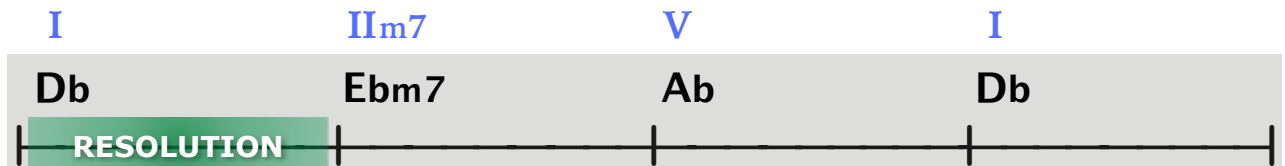
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new key
Db maj:



Ascending Progression w FASTER CHORD CHANGES

0:22 PRE-CHORUS



0:32 CHORUS with title

Additional songs with
CONTRAST in HARMONIC RHYTHM (faster chord changes)

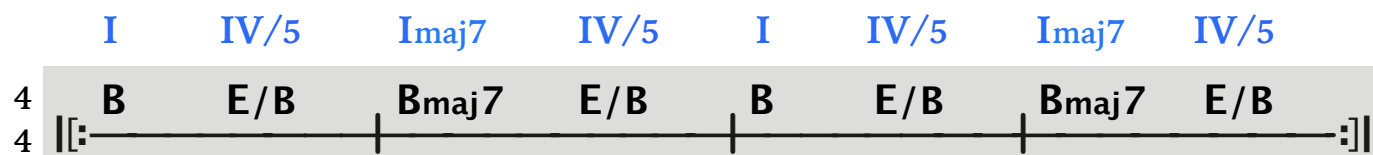
1984	<i>Footloose</i>	Kenny Loggins
1985	<i>I Want to Know What Love Is</i>	Foreigner
2002	<i>C'mon, C'mon</i>	Sheryl Crow

SLOWER CHORD CHANGES

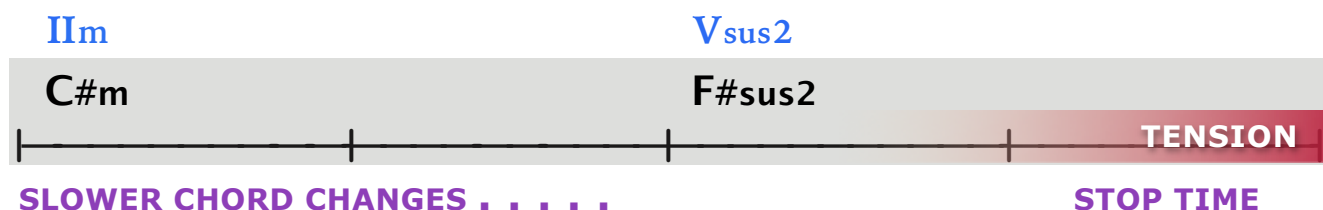
Focal points can also be accentuated by slower harmonic rhythm. When the chord changes slow down, tension is created as we anticipate the return to normal flow. The 2014 song “Scarecrow” by Alex & Sierra provides a good example of this. The verse features a circular progression that establishes a fast harmonic rhythm of two beats per chord. Then in the pre-chorus, the harmonic rhythm slows to eight beats per chord. This creates tension that is resolved at the entrance of the chorus, when the chords begin changing again every two beats. Also note the stop time at the focal point.

"Scarecrow" — Alex & Sierra — 2014

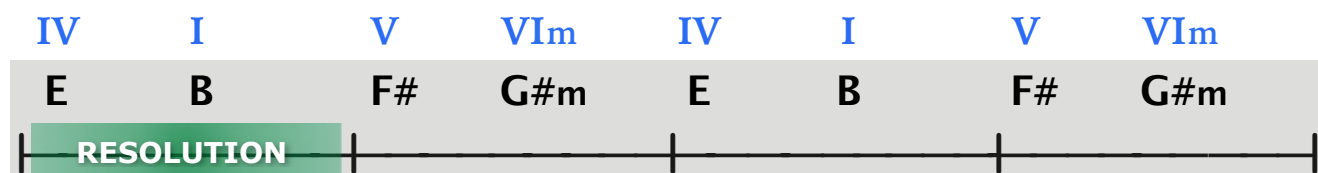
B major



0:24 VERSE 2



0:40 PRE-CHORUS



0:48 CHORUS

Earlier in Chapter Two we discussed the temporary suspension of the main rhythm groove as a very effective way to create tension. Some songs feature this suspension in combination with a slower harmonic rhythm - ie. when the rhythmic groove is suspended, the chord changes also slow down. This can be heard on the next example by Jack Johnson.

The song's main groove is established in the verse with chords changing every two beats. In the pre-chorus the main groove is suspended and the chords slow to every four beats (more deliberate whole notes). As the rhythm coasts, tension builds until the main groove and harmonic rhythm return at the chorus entrance. Also marking the chorus is the highest note of the melody along with the song title. Start at **0:37**.

"Crying Shame" — Jack Johnson — 2005

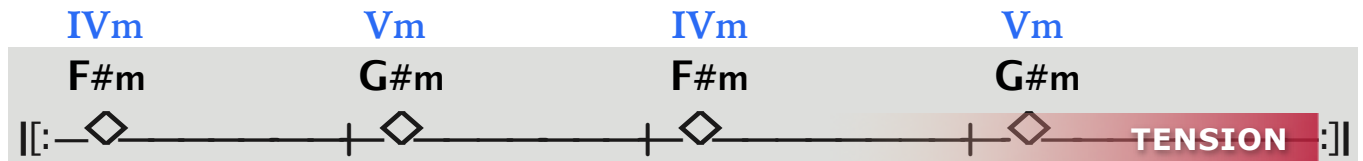
C# minor



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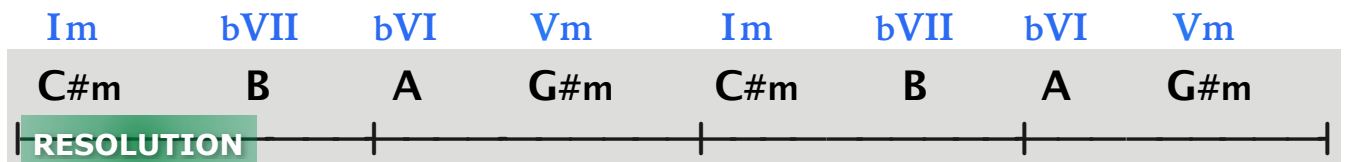


0:37 VERSE (2nd half)



SLOWER CHORD CHANGES w Instrumental Groove Suspended

0:48 PRE-CHORUS



1:09 CHORUS with title

Additional songs with
CONTRAST in HARMONIC RHYTHM (slower chord changes)

1965	<i>Like a Rolling Stone</i>	Bob Dylan
1983	<i>Heartbreaker</i>	Dionne Warwick
2008	<i>I Run to You</i>	Lady A
2011	<i>Let's Fight</i>	Thompson Square

"Giving It Up for Your Love" - Delbert McClinton - 1980

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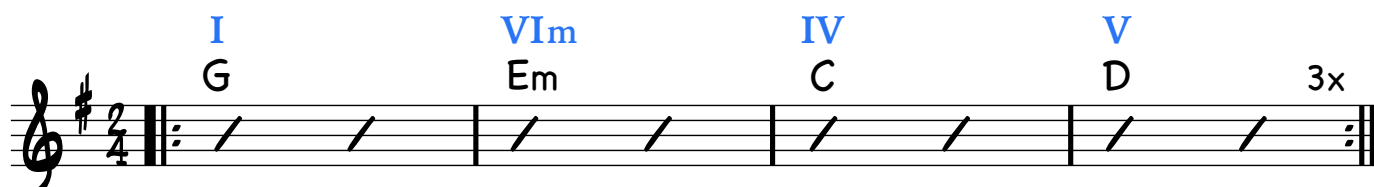
0:36 RELEASE

0:45 repeat CHORUS w title

RESOLUTION

"Blue Moon" – Marcells – 1961

 17



0:21 VERSE



EXTENDED V CHORD w STOP TIME

extra 13th bar

TENSION

DRUM FILL

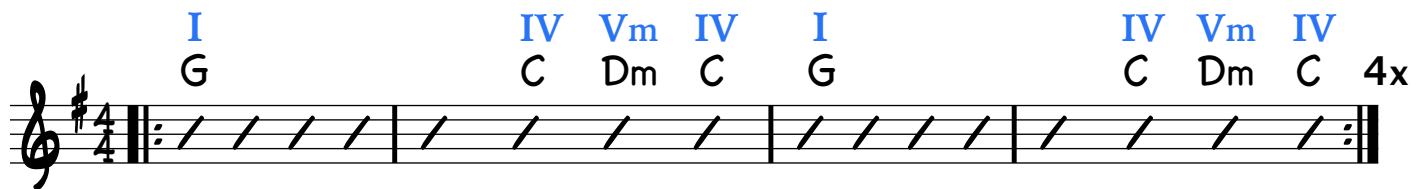
0:36 repeat VERSE w title

RESOLUTION

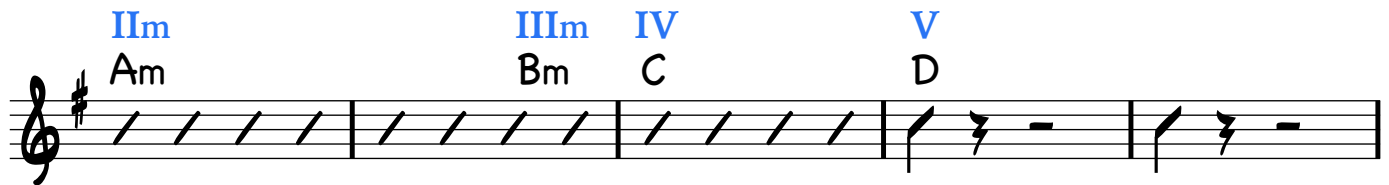
Aretha Franklin's "Freeway of Love" not only has an extended V chord, but five additional devices that all work together to create a very powerful hook. Listen for the following, starting at **0:23**.

- **ASCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION** leads up to V chord.
- **EXTENSION of FORM** pre-chorus has extra 7th bar on the V chord
- **V to I TENSION - RESOLUTION**, pre-chorus to chorus.
- **I CHORD is AVOIDED** for entire pre-chorus (7 bars).
- Several **STOP TIME** measures before chorus / title create extra tension.

If we refer to the lyrics, it's almost like the car on the freeway is sputtering and threatening to stall. Then the instrumental groove finally kicks in at the chorus entrance, and we are once again running smooth and cruising down the "Freeway of Love."



0:23 VERSE

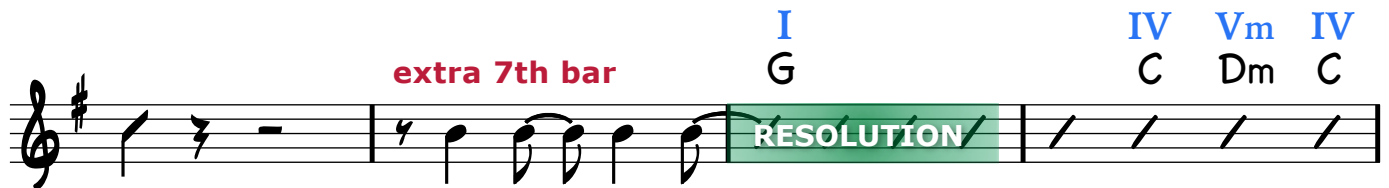


Ascending Progression

0:54 PRE-CHORUS

Extended V Chord

STOP TIME



1:07 CHORUS w title

Additional songs with CHORD CHANGES SUSPENDED

1966	<i>Do You Believe in Magic</i>	Lovin' Spoonful
1968	<i>Piece of My Heart</i>	Janis Joplin
1973	<i>Rosalita</i>	Bruce Springsteen
1975	<i>Rock and Roll All Nite</i>	Kiss
1977	<i>Don't Stop</i>	Fleetwood Mac
1986	<i>Take Me Home Tonight</i>	Eddie Money
2012	<i>Let's Go</i>	Calvin Harris feat. Ne-Yo
2014	<i>Stolen Dance</i>	Milky Chance
2015	<i>Cold, Cold, Cold</i>	Cage The Elephant